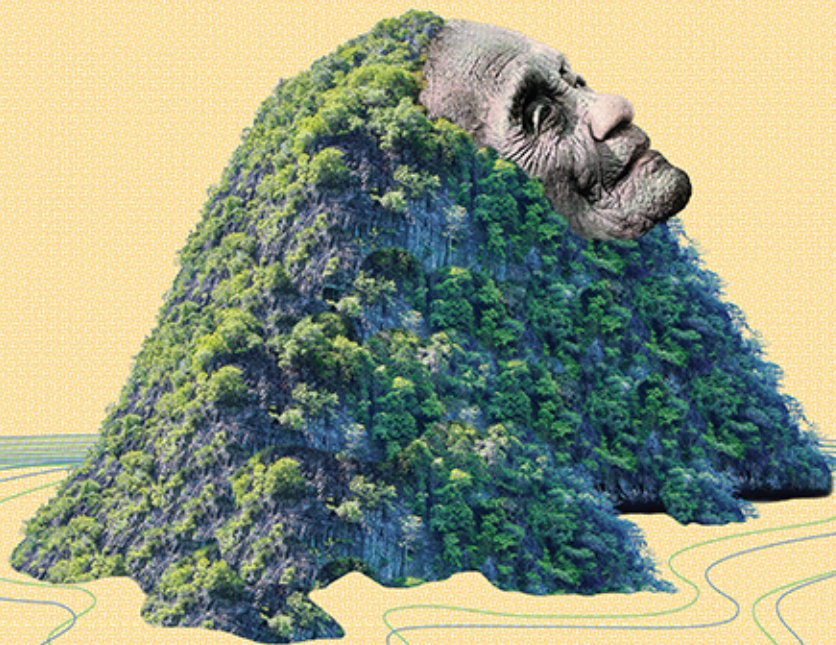


# LONTAR

THE  
JOURNAL OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN  
SPECULATIVE FICTION

#5



“A relatively new publication, *LONTAR* nonetheless publishes high-quality works by award-winning authors. Diverse and under-represented characters and settings are a mainstay of *LONTAR*’s fiction, opening the genre to fresh themes and voices, and introducing readers to the rich culture and atmosphere of Southeast Asia.” — *Tangent Online*

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*LONTAR* welcomes unsolicited fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and sequential art through our online portal located at [lontarjournal.com](http://lontarjournal.com). We accept submissions on a rolling basis.

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ISBN 978-981-4655-18-7 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-981-4655-19-4 (ebook)

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EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

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# EDITORIAL: FOR SUPPORT AND ILLUMINATION

Jason Erik Lundberg

In June 2015, I participated in a panel discussion on “Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy” along with *LONTAR* contributor JY Yang and Joyce Chng, organised by the Singapore Committee for UN Women. In addition to the spirited discussion of both women writers and characters in speculative fiction, I came prepared with statistics for the female contributors to *LONTAR*, my own internal VIDA count. In terms of percentages, here are the findings, including the issue in your hands: L1: 50%, L2: 40%, L3: 42%, L4: 20% and L5: 46%. It was humbling and disappointing to see the dip for our previous issue, but I’m happy to say that the figure has come back up to more respectable levels for this, our fifth issue. As it stands now, women make up nineteen out of forty-six of our total contributors to date, or 41%.

The question was also raised of the number of female submitters to the journal, regardless of whether or not we have published them. As of this writing (in early August), there have been a total of 292 unsolicited submissions (52.4% in fiction, 43.15% in poetry, 3.08% in non-fiction, and 1.37% in sequential art), 134 of them by writers identifying as female, or 46%. These figures were gleaned from our submissions portal at Submittable, and there will be a slight margin of error, as there were some names for which I had to make an educated guess on the gender of the author. (It was also interesting to note that the acceptance rate, without regard to genre or gender, is around 15%, so those of you whose writing has been rejected, please do take heart and try us again.)

As a point of comparison, *The Epigram Books Collection of Best New Singaporean Short Stories: Volume Two*, which I have also edited and will

launch in the same month as this issue, boasts 67% of female contributors. It's difficult to come to conclusions here, but make of these numbers what you will.

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In recent *LONTAR* news, issue #4 was featured in *The Straits Times* and *Singapore Poetry* (where Ng Yi-Sheng's story "No Other City" was also excerpted), and reviewed at *Tangent Online*. Weightless Books (which has sold the DRM-free ebook versions of the journal from the very beginning) is now offering a one-year subscription; it's one US dollar off the cover price, and you'll get an automatic email notification once a new issue is released (back issues are, of course, still available for purchase there as well). We've also revamped our website at [lontarjournal.com](http://lontarjournal.com), which was long overdue for an overhaul, and we hope you'll find that it's much easier to navigate.

We're very happy to welcome Adan Jimenez to the *LONTAR* staff as our Comics Editor, starting with this issue! I've wanted to include short sequential art stories since the founding of the journal in 2012, and Adan is incredibly knowledgeable about comics in general, and comics being produced in Southeast Asia specifically. We're really looking forward to seeing the graphic narratives he'll bring to our pages, and we've gotten off to a strong start with a piece by Singaporean artist Benjamin Chee.

As you can see on the imprints page, *LONTAR* is now a proud member of the Community (formerly Council) of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP), which was founded in 1967 to serve independent publishers of exceptional fiction, poetry and prose. I've had my eye on CLMP for a long time, and after a meeting at the 2015 AWP Conference in Minneapolis, I realised that it no longer made sense to not be a member. We're extremely jazzed to be part of an organisation that also boasts membership by *A Public Space*, *Black Clock*, *Tin House*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and a number of other respected journals.

In early July, US publisher Apex Publications announced their list of authors

for *The Apex Book of World SF 4* (published at the end of August, and edited by Pakistani author and radio host Mahvesh Murad), and I'm very happy to report that "Setting Up Home" by Sabrina Huang (translated by Jeremy Tiang), which originally appeared in *LONTAR* issue #3, is reprinted in the volume! Congratulations to Sabrina and Jeremy! Further congrats go to contributors Zen Cho (L1) and JY Yang (L3) for their inclusion as well! We've got some very talented voices in speculative fiction from this side of the world, and it's gratifying to see them continue to be recognised.

The shortlist for the 34th National Book Awards in the Philippines was announced in August, and three *LONTAR* contributors have made the cut: Eliza Victoria (L4) for her novel *Dwellers*, Paolo Chikiamco (L1) for his anthology *Alternative Alamat* and for his writing on the graphic novel series *Mythspace*, and Nikki Alfar (L3) for her short story collection *WonderLust*. In addition, congratulations to all of the announced authors for *Philippine Speculative Fiction X* (Volume 10), including contributors Victor Fernando R. Ocampo (L2), Eliza Victoria (L4) and Kate Osias (L1, L4); the anthology is edited by Dean Francis Alfar (L3) and Nikki Alfar (L3), and looks to be an especially strong volume in an already impressive annual series. Within Southeast Asia, the Philippines is leading the way in innovative and boundary-shattering speculative fiction, and we're lucky to count these writers among our own.

Congratulations must also go to our Poetry Editor, Kristine Ong Muslim: 1) her new short story collection, *Age of Blight* (scheduled for release in January 2016) is featured in Unnamed Press's winter line-up; 2) *Lightspeed Magazine* broke the news that she will be co-editing the upcoming special People of Colo(u)r Destroy Science Fiction! issue, along with celebrated novelist and anthologist Nalo Hopkinson; 3) her translation from the Filipino of Mesándel Virtusio Arguelles's poem "Curse" was published in *Circumference: Poetry in Translation* (and two more of her translations are forthcoming in *The Cossack Review*); and 4) her collection of ekphrastic flash fiction and prose poems, *We Bury the Landscape*, will be taught at Wake Forest University (in my home state of North Carolina).

This issue of *LONTAR* presents speculative writing from and about Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand. Inside these pages, you'll find: an ancient and fatal karmic reunion in Jakarta by award-winner Gord Sellar; the true origin of the Merlion by Singapore Literature Prize winner Amanda Lee Koe; a young man's literal transformation into an island by award-winner Ng Yi-Sheng; a far-future Malaysian fairy tale by Kawika Guillermo; a gentle aquatic apocalypse from novelist Erica Verrillo; an enlightening visit with a forest monk in northern Thailand by Italian journalist Massimo Morello; a comic on the price of technological hubris by Benjamin Chee; and speculative poetry from Tania De Rozario, Joel Donato Jacob, Lee Jing-Jing, Daryl WJ Lim, Christina Sng and Sokunthary Svay.

Once again, I must thank the National Arts Council for supporting us with a generous grant, without which the journal could not continue to exist. *LONTAR* remains the world's only biannual literary journal focusing on Southeast Asian speculative fiction.

## NO MAN IS

Ng Yi-Sheng

Ng Yi-Sheng (Singapore) is a poet, fictionist, playwright, journalist and activist. He is the second-youngest winner of the Singapore Literature Prize, which he received for his debut poetry collection, *last boy* (2006). His other publications include the bestselling non-fiction book, *SQ21: Singapore Queers in the 21st Century* (2006), and a novelisation of the Singapore gangster movie, *Eating Air* (2008). He also co-edited *GASPP: A Gay Anthology of Singapore Poetry and Prose* (2010) and *Eastern Heathens: An Anthology of Subverted Asian Folklore* (2013). He has recently completed his MA in the University of East Anglia's creative writing programme. His story "No Other City" appeared in *LONTAR* issue #4.

One day, I decided to be an island. I took off my clothes and walked into the sea, then floated there, bobbing along with the tide, suspended by my inflatable tube and water wings.

It was quite nice. The sun burned hot on my face but the water below was cool and lovely. Whenever I got bored, I just gazed up at the puffy white clouds, the sea birds weaving their aerial patterns, and the glinting green sparkle of the ocean itself.

Sometime around sunset, my grandmother found me. She paddled over in her kayak and just stared at me for a while, with a mixture of love and regret. "Ah Boy, what are you doing?" she finally asked, even though she knew the answer perfectly well.

"I'm being an island, Por Por. Please go away."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Islands must eat, you know," she said, and handed me a curry puff and a bottle of Newater. I was about to protest, but then I realised I was a little hungry and thirsty after all, so we had supper together. She'd even brought me a little piece of raffia string, so I could use the empty Newater bottle as a flotation device.

“Ah Boy, your skin so red. Come, I apply some sunblock.”

“Islands don’t get sunburn,” I told her, raising my forehead so the cream wouldn’t get in my eyes.

She unloaded the rest of her supplies. They included several Tupperware containers of home-cooked food, a cooler of canned drinks, a wetsuit, a set of family photos (laminated) and a waterproof mobile phone. She tied them all to my inflatable tube, and they fanned out from me like flower petals.

“I don’t need these, Por Por.”

“Aiyah, I kek sim only. Worry for you. You see shark, then how? Call me ah?”

She planted a kiss on my forehead and paddled off. It was getting dark, so I shut my eyes and let myself drift to sleep.

In the morning, I was gratified to find that a little hermit crab had crawled onto the ice cooler. There was also some seagull guano in my hair, which was good, since I wanted to increase my landmass.

Then around lunchtime, my grandmother came again.

“Hello, Por Por,” I said, my mouth full of chicken rice.

“You like? I never ask whether you want wing or drumstick.”

“I’m an island now. You don’t have to come and look after me every day like I’m a little kid. Also, I’ve told you a million times: I like drumsticks.”

“Aiyoh, boy, your hair so dirty.” She dove into her sports bag and retrieved a container of shampoo.

“Por Por! I don’t want!” I snapped. But it was too late. She’d washed the poo clean out of my hair. I sulked as she lathered it with her hands and rinsed it with bottled water.

“Your handphone how?” she asked.

“The battery’s dead.”

“So fast?”

I’d played the free Nokia games for a few hours that morning, when the cloud formations were particularly uninteresting. But I wasn’t going to tell her that.

“I want to call you, then how?” she fretted. “I never bring charger. I never bring generator.”

“It’ll be fine, Por Por.”

She had, however, brought a portable radio, so we spent most of the rest of the day listening to live coverage of the Malaysia Cup. This was quite enjoyable, although she kept doing little victory dances in her kayak whenever anyone scored a goal. It scared away the crabs and the sea birds, which went against my long-term interests. I was harbouring ambitions of becoming a biologically diverse habitat.

That night, before I went to sleep, I picked up some seaweed with my toes and draped it artistically around the crown of my head. Its scent, I thought, might attract some wandering gull towards me. Maybe she’d nestle in the crook of my elbow, cawing as I slept. Maybe she’d build a nest about my ears, laying her eggs and regurgitating semi-digested fish into the mouths of her chicks...

I woke at daybreak to the sound of a helicopter. It was bright yellow and about thirty centimetres long, with a tiny decal on its side in the shape of a smiley face. Dangling from its undercarriage was a plastic bag, bulging with boxes of pink and green kueh for breakfast. There was also a folded note attached, reading: *So sorry cannot visit today!!! Joint pain!!! Doctor says must avoid exercise. XOXO!!!*

I glanced at the coastline. My grandmother was standing there on the strand with a remote controller in her hands. She saw me turn and waved enthusiastically, making the helicopter wobble a little.

I didn’t wave back. I turned my back to the beach and stayed like that until the helicopter flew off for good.

Then I ate the kueh. They were delicious.



It rained that night. I wasn't prepared for this. The cold made my teeth chatter and my nose drip, and I had to hold my breath and grip my inflatable tube as the crashing waves swallowed me up and spat me across the water into the unknown. I tried to think of warm sun and swaying coconut palms; I tried to believe my feet were rooted to the bottom of the continental shelf. But this was difficult when my lungs were coughing up salt water and my belly had turned inside-out, and the surf was beating my face black and blue.

By the next morning, I had drifted out to the open sea, where the sun was hot and the waves were still and the horizon ended in water in all directions. Half my rations had been ripped away by the waves, and my eyelashes were completely crusted over with salt. I floated in the sun for a while, barely breathing, knowing only the echo of the thunder that still rang in my ears. Eventually, I became dimly aware of something cold and metallic, nudging the side of my head.

I raised my lids. In front of me, perched on the outboard motor of a boat, was a pirate. She was wearing a tank top and dark glasses, with a length of cloth wrapped around her face and neck to protect her from heatstroke. In her hands she held an AK-47, and she was prodding me gently with the tip.

"You're alive," she remarked.

"Yah."

"Are you hurt? Are you bleeding?"

"Not at all."

"*Alhamdulillah*. Thanks be to God."

She extended her hand, and I grasped it, clumsily. Her grip was strong, and I was floundering around in the wash, steadying myself to clamber on board with her when I remembered my mission.

"I'm sorry. I can't get on your boat. I'm an island."

She looked irritated, then confused.

"You're an island?"

"Yah."

"You don't look like an island."

"I'm new."

She mulled over this news for a while.

"If you're an island, who owns you?"

"Myself, I guess."

"So you are independent?"

This was an awkward question, so I chose to remain silent.

"You have no flag. You have no army. You are claimed by no nation. *Masha'Allah*, I could annex you," she mused.

"Sure." I was by no means sure of anything at this stage, but I wanted to hold my own against this invader. Of course, I was enjoying myself to a certain extent. This, I thought, was a very islandy thing to happen.

"How should I annex you?"

"I think you have to land on me first."

"Okay, how's this?" She clambered off her speedboat and teetered on the raft I'd woven out of spent Newater bottles.

"Very nice. And then you've got to say, *I annex thee for the kingdom of wherever*, you know."

"Done. I annex thee for the kingdom of... But I don't work for a kingdom. I'm a pirate."

"That's probably okay. I'm yours."

"What do I do with you now?"

"Mine me I suppose. Set up a government. Register me for the United Nations."

"You're not a sovereign nation. You're just a territory."

"Oh. Proceed." I considered her profession. "You could bury treasure on me. Gold would be nice, or pearls, or diamonds. You'll have to hide it inside a cave that looks like a skull. And then draw a treasure map in the shape of me, so you'll remember where you left me."

Clearly, she hadn't been listening. She'd instead been dandling her long legs in the water and removing all her clothing, piling it up into a neat little heap on the bottom of her speedboat.

“I think I ought to mark my territory,” she said, and she opened her legs and kissed me.

It was all very awkward and it didn’t take long, but it was a pleasant surprise, considering that I’d only been an island for less than a week. Of course, I considered, this was not what usually happened to islands. Or perhaps it was one of the less publicized aspects of geology. Cradling her in my arms, I decided I could probably forgive myself, and drifted off to sleep.

I woke again at sunset. The waters had grown cold again, and the air was still. I looked around me. The speedboat was gone, along with the other half of my rations.

I shut my eyes and tried to remember exactly what my lover had looked like, but I kept on drawing blanks.

I never saw the pirate again.

—————

About a week passed. I noticed that I was growing thin, which annoyed me, because as an island, you need all the bulk you can get. To sustain myself, I drank my fill of rainwater and munched on as much seaweed as I could glean, as well as—just once—a random, very lost fish. My skin had gone all scorched and raw, but I decided this was a net plus. I would never be able to lay a claim to being a geological feature if I had no texture.

I spent a lot of my time humming old tunes to myself, things like “Kokomo” by the Beach Boys and “Bali Hai” from *South Pacific*. Perhaps that was why it didn’t seem strange to me when I first heard the sound of singing in the distance. When it became apparent that it wasn’t my imagination, I theorised that it was mermaids, or perhaps even the bird-bodied sirens from my Ladybird book of Greek myths, or a cruise ship loaded with Italian opera performers, maybe.

It turned out all my guesses were wrong. It was another island, a Japanese

one by the looks of him. Also naked, but grey-haired, in his fifties or sixties. He was suspended by a bright orange lifesaver, the name of a ship printed on it in faded kanji.

“*Hajimemashite*,” I ventured.

He stopped singing and grinned. “*Doozo yoroshiku*.”

“I thought I was the only one.”

“Ha ha! No. We are many. Many, many!” He gestured with his hands.

To my dismay, I realised I could in fact hear other voices, still singing away. I propped myself up, resting my bum on my inflatable tube, and in the distance I could see them. An entire community of maybe a hundred, all shapes and ages and colours, floating on lifebuoys and life vests and dinghies and canoes and kickboards, gabbling along in something resembling a chorus.

“*Jaan!*” my Japanese associate announced proudly. “Welcome home. Now, you must meet the whole Archipelago.”

He tugged me along as he paddled. The other islands turned as we passed them, tittering behind their hands, all the while continuing with their idiotic song. After a while, my host joined in, turning back to me every now and then so I could copy the movements of his lips. In due course it became apparent that they were several verses into some version of “The Good Ship Venus”, filtered through an endless game of translingual telephone, sounding somewhat like:

*Friggy in da wiggy,*

*Wankee in da pankee,*

*Master bakey in da gakey,*

*Fuggle Ulster do!*

At the centre of the flotilla was a large rubber dinghy, filled with dirt and sand from which sprouted a scraggly coconut tree, presided over by a tall man in a grimy, guano-stained top hat and tattered tuxedo trousers.

“He is Sainte-Marie,” said my Japanese friend, who had tagged along with me. “He is very important. He is our capital city.”

“Good afternoon, your Capital Citiness,” I said begrudgingly. He did not meet my gaze, but remained standing, keeping his eye fixed on some distant point in the ocean, every now and then raising his telescope to investigate what lay beyond.

Motivated by a sense of decorum, I began stating my provenance, my professional history and where I envisioned myself in five years’ time. But Sainte-Marie dismissed my chattering with a wave of his hand.

“Silence. Without a name, you may not speak.”

“I have a name, actually.”

“An island has no name until it is discovered.”

“But I have been discovered. My founder was a beautiful pirate queen.”

“That is ancient history now. In any case, the word of a pirate has no value. You must wait for the Governor to give you a name.”

“The Governor?”

Suddenly, my Japanese friend grew excited and began splashing his arms up and down.

“The Governor! The Governor has arrived!”

The other islands clustered around him, twittering to each other, getting their lines from “The Good Ship Venus” mixed up.

Eventually, a tugboat appeared. At its helm was a fat little man in a mac and sou’wester, not unlike an off-season Santa Claus impersonator. Hidden in the midst of his grey beard and moustache was a tiny cigarette, which he puffed continuously, switching it from one side of his mouth to the other with his lips alone. The islands waved at him, their singing now turned to chanting, less tuneful and more urgent than before. He beamed back at us, radiating charm and munificence.

Then, in a single majestic motion, he lowered his body, picked up a sack and threw it at us. The islands dove for it in a rabid frenzy, and as I leapt in, I

saw that inside were bananas, pineapples, oranges, packets of tapioca crisps and plastic-wrapped loaves of bread, virtually all of which we managed to salvage before they sunk or floated out of reach. Another sack was full of bottled mineral water, labelled in Thai or maybe Khmer, I couldn’t tell. A third sack, which the islands fought the hardest over, was full of dirt.

“Your Grace,” Sainte-Marie proclaimed, after the initial squabbles had died down. “A new island has come to light.”

A further sequence of harrumphs and coughs followed. The Capital raised an eyebrow and then addressed me once again.

“The Governor is curious about your ancient history. What did the Pirate Queen call you?”

“Nothing.”

“Then what kind of biome do you support? Desert? Tundra? Taiga? Savannah or Grassland? Temperate Deciduous Forest or Tropical Rainforest?”

“Marine, mostly. But I’m aiming for Tropical Rainforest.”

“Any native populations?”

This was a tricky one. Should I count myself, or not? Does an island live upon itself? I went for the easiest option.

“None noteworthy.”

The Governor looked aggrieved, and paced about on deck for a while. Finally, he slapped his thigh and mumbled a few words to Sainte-Marie, who nodded soberly, then flung open his arms to announce the news.

“Young island! The Governor has spoken. From henceforth, you shall be known as...New Sainte-Marie!”

There was applause amongst the islands, but some discontented murmuring as well. “I thought I was called New Sainte-Marie,” my Japanese friend whispered, sadly.

That night, by the light of the moon, we feasted on the Governor's gifts. Being the newest member of the archipelago, I was served a special meal of rice and mango, which I gobbled up with relish.

As I bobbed near the tugboat, nodding off into a satisfied slumber, I wondered if the Archipelago might not be such a bad club to join after all. True, there was some loss of dignity involved. There was the small issue of my name, plus I was keenly aware that any culture I evolved hereon would be that much less unique. Yet on the upside, I now had friends, even mentors on my journey of islandhood. Together, we would build a collective identity, far greater than the sum of our individual selves.

In the midst of my reverie, I became vaguely aware of a series of grunts and splashes amidst our crew. I idly wondered if some game was afoot: if a few islands were playing water polo, perhaps, or making love.

Then there came a woman's scream, and the crack of a gunshot. My eyes flew open. I prodded the arm of my Japanese friend, who had apparently slept through the commotion.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Natural resources," he mumbled, keeping his eyes clenched shut.

"What?"

"The Governor runs an import-export business."

Now there was a noise above us, the thumping of a heavy object being lifted from the water and dragged across the deck of the tugboat. Then a sequence of deep, groaning breaths, interspersed with the dull *chunk, chunk, chunk* of an axe.

Frightened, I paddled away from the boat. I found myself bumping into Saint-Marie's dirt-filled dinghy, now abandoned. Resting on the edge, unprotected, was his telescope. I held it to my eye and peered at the tugboat's surface.

There I saw Saint-Marie and the Governor, kneeling over the body of a fellow island. At first I imagined they were fondling her, massaging her, perhaps carrying out an arcane ceremony of blessing. But then I noticed the sharp little

fish knives in their hands, and the pool of dark fluid spreading at their feet.

"She is export," spoke a voice behind me. It was my Japanese friend. "She will be soups and soaps and medicines. The Mainland has great hunger for our produce. She will make the Archipelago proud."

"I have to leave."

"You will not leave." He gripped my wrists, rendering my upper half immobile. I tried to kick his shins, but with a twist he had turned me upside-down, tearing loose all the bits of mud and plastic I'd affixed to myself to increase my mass. I found myself underwater, choking on seawater, half-screaming in agony as he wrenched the joints of my shoulders into crazy angles.

"You understand?" he told me, as he finally brought me back to the surface. "You must not go. Unity gives us strength."

For the next cycle of the moon, I was kept chained to Saint-Marie, my hands tied with raffia string. This wasn't as bad as it might sound. The other islands took pity on me, and took time to swim to my side and share stories about their lives, about the lore of the sea, and the proper care and maintenance of their lands. I soon learned how to catch shrimp with my toes, and even occasionally to trap passing fish between my knees.

They also took special care to commiserate with me over my imprisoned state. "But of course you were scared," they would say. "Everyone reacts strongly on the first night of the export. We all thought it was a little excessive. We just needed some time, some convincing before we understood that this is the only way the system can work."

One of the islands, an elderly Australian with cowries threaded through her blond-grey hair, proudly showed me the network of gouges her arm had suffered in her early attempts to break free. "This is normal," she assured me, in a perennially happy sing-song voice. "Now, let me tell you a little secret about barnacles."

Eventually, they unmoored me. I assumed a tenor role in their choruses of "The Good Ship Venus", and joined in the melee for new deliveries of bread

and fruit and soil. They knew, of course, that I was not quite resigned to a life in the colony—my Japanese friend kept a vigilant guard over me at night—but thoughts of escape gradually became less of an ambition and more a distant memory.

Then one morning, while I was weaving kelp with my comrades, I happened to raise my neck upwards and notice a dot of yellow in the sky. That's a strange sun, I thought to myself. But then it drew closer, and I recognised it for what it was.

It was my grandmother's yellow helicopter. Its smiley face decal was looking rather worse for wear, and there was no longer a bag of food dangling beneath it. Still, the sight of this familiar object brought a grin to my face. I waved at it, and laughed to see it change direction to face me, realising only as it descended to my face level that its undercarriage now held a newly installed piece of equipment.

It was a webcam.

The Governor came in the night. I was hauled up onto the tugboat's deck, on charges of high treason. I was stripped of my inflatable tube and water wings, and my hands and feet were bound to the mast with rope—a redundant measure, as I had spent so long in the water I had forgotten how to stand or walk. My erstwhile companions jeered at me from the waters. They had no pity for a spy like myself, caught signalling enemy drones in broad daylight.

"What shall the sentence for the traitor be?" Sainte-Marie cried out, as the Governor snuffled about with his cigarette.

"Death!" called the crowd. And so a sentence of death it was. My flotation devices were flung into the water, where they were ripped apart by the islands, who were glad to know that, finally, one actually deserving of butchery would be sent off for export.

I knelt miserably on the deck, waiting for the cold kiss of the Governor's fish knife on my throat. But instead, lights were extinguished on board, and the Archipelago's noise began to die down as they prepared for sleep.

I realised I was to be executed the next morning, in the full light of day, all the better to make an example of my sins. I dwelt on my sorrows. No city would ever be built on my hills, nor would any cartographer inscribe my shoreline on any map. I resolved to spend my last remaining hours gazing at the stars, believing that it might give me some solace if I, at least, knew something of where I lay under the sky.

Daybreak, however, never came. When the moon was at its highest, its brilliance was suddenly rivalled by two balls of flame, falling in our direction. A split-second before they hit the water, I understood what they were.

"Take cover!" I yelled. But even if I'd spoken those words an hour before, and had been their most trusted friend, there was nowhere for the islands to seek shelter in the open sea, and I could do nothing but watch, from my captive position at the mast, as the fireballs swallowed them up, ripping up their flimsy craft, scattering them, flesh and blood and earth and plastic, into a smoky cloud rising and raining down upon my face.

The next blast rocked the tugboat. We'd been hit. I saw a few bloodied survivors scramble on board, even as a yawning crack began to open at the centre of the deck. I watched Sainte-Marie and the Governor fight their subjects off with their knives, slipping in the blood and surf, falling with the volley of gunfire that followed a moment later.

As water flooded the ship, I vaguely pondered if there was in fact any means for my escape amidst the chaos. I tugged half-heartedly at the ropes that bound me, and decided no: I had made my peace with eternity, and any further struggle would be beneath my dignity.

Yet while my body sank inescapably into the depths, I managed to steal a glimpse of the invading navy that had decimated us so utterly. It was made up of colossal battleships, steel hulks mounted with gun turrets. We never had a chance, I thought, a little smugly.

I spied someone on the bridge of the nearest ship. A round little figure, looking decidedly out of place in her naval uniform, yet clearly in a position of

authority, issuing orders to the crewmen while peering occasionally outward.

It was my grandmother. In her hands, she held the yellow helicopter.

That was the last thing I saw before the waters closed over my head, and the oceans gushed into my lungs.

—————

A voice woke me. It was female and musical, and it spoke an utterly unfamiliar language. I stirred, and found that my body was resting on something rubbery; the air was cold and somehow jellylike. With some effort, I forced my eyes open.

I was in a grotto, lying on a mound of seaweed, and looming over me was a mermaid. She was turquoise-skinned, blue-haired and crowned with coral, her tail gracefully suspended a foot above the grotto floor. In her hand she held an anglerfish, whose glow lit up the entire chamber.

“You are well rested,” she said in halting English.

“Yes,” I replied. Tiny bubbles of air escaped my throat as I spoke; I was under the sea, which made perfect sense, and also that I was alive, which was completely unreasonable.

“Now, you must eat,” the mermaid told me, and opened her palm to reveal a thousand little balls of salmon roe, which she fed to me, one by one. They burst between my teeth as I chewed them, each one releasing a distinct flavour, rich and sweet and salty. The more I ate, the looser my heart became, and eventually I stopped to weep, my chest heaving as my eyes gifted the sea with invisible tears.

After the meal, I held the mermaid’s hands. “Thank you for saving me,” I told her.

“I did not save you,” she answered. “You have fallen.”

“Then I’m dead?”

“Islands cannot die. We may sink beneath the waves, but we do not perish.”

“Then you’re an island too?”

She laughed a little, then beckoned me to follow her. I half-swam, half-clambered through the cavern, and emerged with her through a crack in its roof. She seemed bigger now, out in the open water. With her hand, she gestured downwards, and I saw that we had in fact been hidden in the uppermost dome of a mighty basilica, and all around us was a ruin of citadels and pleasure gardens and arcades and hovels, sprawling as far as the eye could see.

“I am the first island,” she murmured, and I saw now that she was huge, and the edges of her body were fading. Her tail had melted completely into the ravaged city that lay below her. “Some call me Atlantis. Others: Lemuria, Mu, Lyonesse, Ys, Kumari Kandam, Cantre’r Gwaelod,. Before your civilisation rose, I was there, stellar, jewel-like, *nonpareil*. And one day I shall rise again.”

“Great mistress,” I cried, steadying myself on a broken angel statue. “How can I become like you?”

With her moonlike eyes, she looked back at me, with a strangely familiar expression of both love and regret.

“You already are, my child. You already are.”

At this, I realised my body was becoming lighter and more buoyant, pulling me upwards again. I clung to the statue below me, fearful of returning to the world above. Sensing my distress, the mermaid turned and gave me a comforting smile.

“Time passes differently here. Ten years go by above for every hour you stay below. Already, you have slept here seven days and seven nights, recovering from your hurt.”

My fingers had lost their grip now. I began rising rapidly into the pale light above.

“Do not be afraid, young one,” she called after me, her face now as vast as a continent. “Whatever you fear in the world above is long, long gone. What remains is only your destiny.”



I broke the surface, gasping. I no longer had my inflatable tube, so I had to tread water. Fortunately, the salmon roe had strengthened me considerably, and I stayed afloat with little effort.

To conserve energy, I lay on my back and let the currents push me wherever they would. Within an hour, I found myself within sight of a sandy beach. I decided to spend a night there, and oriented myself to wash up on the shore in as painless a fashion as possible.

It was strange to see a spot of land grow so large before my eyes, and stranger still to drift closer and closer, till I could bury my arms in its loamy sands. Gradually, inching forward on my hands and knees, I pulled myself out of the reach of the tide, then stumbled along the beach, teaching myself how to walk again.

I foraged as I limped. I picked up a fallen coconut, which I split against a rock so I could drink its clear water. To my annoyance, I also discovered several washed-up remains of Newater bottles and Tupperware containers in the grass. They were so decayed and worn that they resembled shards of ancient ceramics.

Strolling back out to the coast, I saw a kayak approaching. In it I thought I saw the beautiful pirate I had met so long ago, in my early days of independence. I windmilled my hands, signalling to her to come and join me on the sand. But as the craft drew nearer, I saw that it was a different person: a long-haired young fisherman.

"I'm sorry," I said as he disembarked. "I mistook you for someone else."

"Aiyah, don't sorry," he replied, and hauled a load of fish over his shoulder. "Come, help me carry these to my village."

As we walked along the forest track, I questioned him about my whereabouts.

"This place ah? This one is the island of Por Por. Funny name, right? Got story. You want to hear the story?"

"They say that many-many years ago, there was an old woman called Por Por. Her grandson ran away to the sea, so she followed him. One day, a storm separated them, so from that day on, she had to sail round and round the earth, searching for him, searching. She never gave up hope. But one day, she lost strength. She lay down, and her legs became rivers, and her arms became cliffs, and her head became a great mountain, over there." He pointed to a peak in the distance, its cap hidden in the clouds. I stared at it, trying to get a sense of its shape, but my eyes had filled with water. "She is still waiting, you know. Waiting for her boy to come back. And from that day, she will be his. She will feed him, protect him, and care for him forever."

By now, we had reached a small settlement of thatched wooden huts on stilts set in a jungle clearing, planted with fruit trees and dotted with chicken coops by the banks of a river. I cast my eyes over the inhabitants of these huts, and noticed an odd consistency in their looks. Each one of them, from the eldest patriarch to the youngest infant, bore a strong resemblance to my lost pirate queen in face and form and manner.

Then I passed a puddle in the path, which reflected my face, unseen by me for so long. And I realised the villagers didn't just look like the pirate. They also rather looked like me.

Finally, we reached the doorstep of the fisherman's hut. He threw down his heavy bundle of fish with an audible sigh of relief. Through the window, I saw a woman preparing chicken and rice, and small children stealing treats from platters of curry puffs and kueh.

"You can put it down here," the fisherman announced to me. "We're home."

"Yes," I told him. "Yes. I think we are."

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