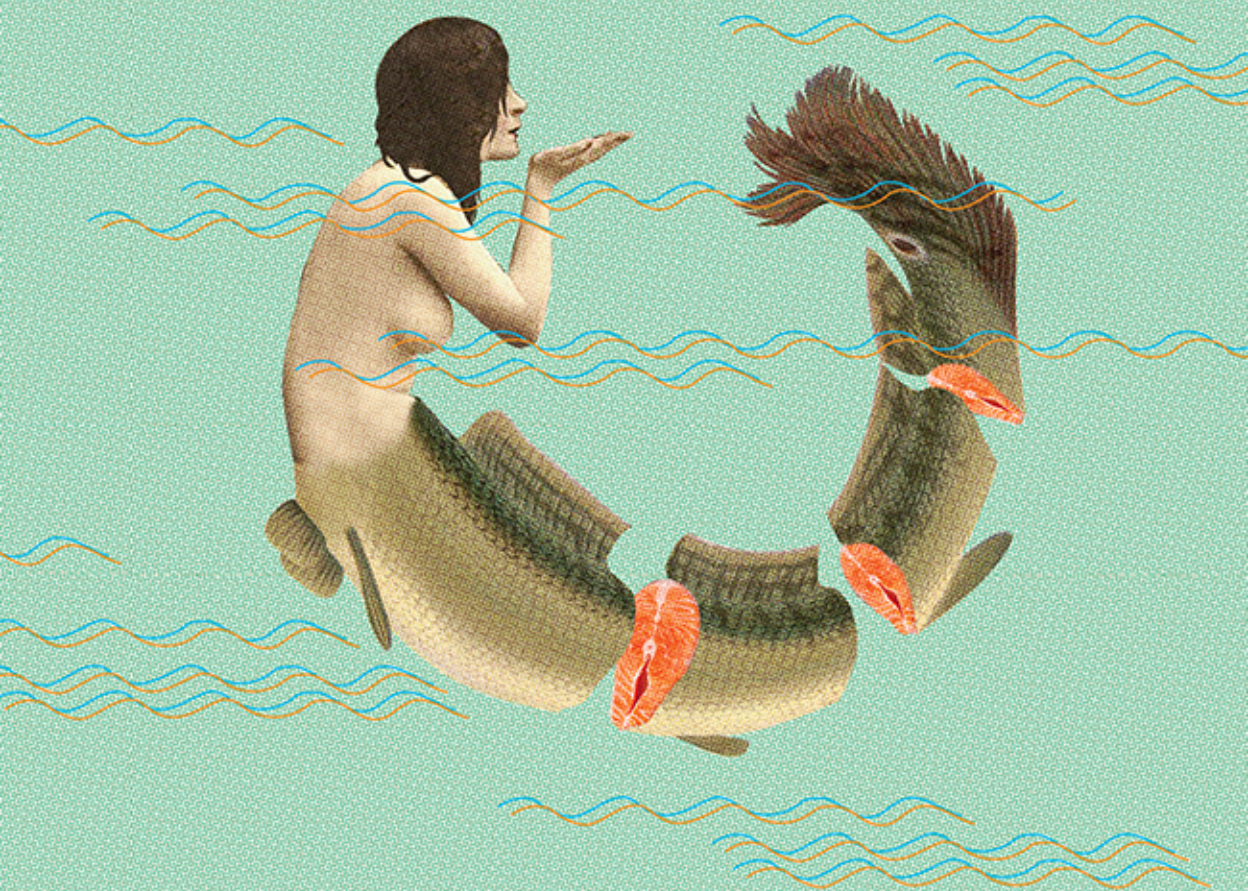


# LONTAR

THE  
JOURNAL OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN  
SPECULATIVE FICTION

#8



LONTAR

“I like to think of myself as tolerably well-read for an American. *LONTAR* reminds me how what we take for granted about ourselves in the West is actually based on ignorance and vanity. After reading the table of contents in that dusty galactic backwater known as the United States, my provincial prejudices were exposed by the editors rather painfully; each of the authors was new to me. In reading *LONTAR*, the greatest pleasure was the discovery that such an imaginative world exists in the universe: a place populated by fiction writers, poets and graphic artists of such a broad range of integuments, interests and talents.”

—Eric Thomas Norris, *Singapore Poetry*



**FOUNDING EDITOR**  
Jason Erik Lundberg  
(USA/Singapore)

**POETRY EDITOR**  
Kristine Ong Muslim  
(Philippines)

**COMICS EDITOR**  
Adan Jimenez  
(USA/Singapore)

**PUBLISHER**  
Edmund Wee  
(Singapore)

**COVER DESIGN  
AND LAYOUT**  
Lydia Wong  
(Singapore)

**SUBMISSIONS**

*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.

**CONTACT**

Please send any general queries to [jason@jasonlundberg.net](mailto:jason@jasonlundberg.net). Do not send submissions to this address as they will be deleted unread; please use our submissions portal instead.

**DISCLAIMER**

*LONTAR* is not associated in any form or fashion with the Lontar Foundation. While we admire their ongoing work to translate Indonesian literary works into English, our mission statement is very different from theirs. We wish them well in their endeavours.

**PUBLISHED WITH THE SUPPORT OF**



**LONTAR IS A PROUD MEMBER OF**



All pieces copyright © 2017 by their respective authors.

The cover art is a digitally manipulated composite of public domain images obtained through Wikimedia Commons ([commons.wikimedia.org](http://commons.wikimedia.org)) and artezine ([art-e-zine.co.uk](http://art-e-zine.co.uk)).

ISBN 978-981-4757-62-1 (paperback)

ISBN 978-981-4757-63-8 (ebook)

# LONTAR

THE  
JOURNAL OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN  
SPECULATIVE FICTION

#8



EPIGRAM BOOKS  
SINGAPORE · LONDON

## CONTENTS

### EDITORIAL

- Science Is Finally Catching Up to Buddhism** 1  
by Jason Erik Lundberg

### FICTION

- The Fisher Queen** 9  
by Alyssa Wong

### FICTION

- Superstations** 25  
by Wilfred Cabrera

### POETRY

- Two Poems** 40  
by Judith Huang

### POETRY

- Independence Day, 1898** 42  
by Bernise Carolino

### POETRY

- Two Poems** 44  
by David Wong Hsien Ming

### POETRY

- micro-commentaries** 46  
by Tilde Acuña

### POETRY

- Two Stories About Bloomsday** 50  
by Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé

### POETRY

- Two Poems** 57  
by Sharlene Teo

### POETRY

- Two Poems** 59  
by Christina Sng

### FICTION

- The Road to Burabod** 62  
by Michael Janairo

### FICTION

- Welcome, 265 Aggregate Scorers!** 79  
by Clara Chow

### SERIAL

- Salamanca – Part One** 96  
by Dean Francis Alfar

# **EDITORIAL: SCIENCE IS FINALLY CATCHING UP TO BUDDHISM**

Jason Erik Lundberg

It's remarkable that the genres of science fiction and fantasy ever got lumped together. Science fiction is all about the probable, exploring the human condition through the lens of technology or scientific principles not yet available or to be realised; fantasy is about the impossible, examining the lives of characters within a magical milieu, and actions or events that could not happen based on known physical laws of the universe. The former: rational cognition; the latter: non-rational faith or belief. These two approaches to fiction would seem to be diametrically opposed, yet it has been my experience that many, many readers of speculative fiction are open to both genres, generous in their reading tastes.

Which is why, as a Buddhist and a speculative fiction reader/writer/editor, I feel such a connection and affinity with the scientific rationality of Buddhism.

A (very) brief primer and history: Gautama Buddha (also known as Siddhartha Gautama, Shakyamuni Buddha, or simply the Buddha (meaning "The Awakened One")) was born 2500–2600 years ago (no one knows the exact date) in Lumbini (located in present-day Nepal), and raised in the Shakya capital of Kapilvastu. He lived essentially as a sheltered prince, enjoying all the perks his station had to offer (including an arranged marriage to a princess), until at the age of 29 he left his palace and discovered the sicknesses and mortality of the common people. He renounced his title and lived as a wandering ascetic, until realising that depriving himself to the point of starvation was not the path toward realising the truth of existence; he discovered instead the Middle Way,

which emphasises moderation in all things. At 35 years old, he seated himself underneath a bodhi tree, and meditated for 49 straight days until he attained enlightenment. After his awakening, he attracted disciples and followers, and to spread and safeguard his beliefs he formed the sangha: the community of Buddhist monastics and laity. He lived until the age of 80.

Buddhism, like any religion, is inordinately complicated; scholars and monks (including His Holiness the Dalai Lama) spend their entire lives studying the sutras and many other dharma teachings and interpretations. But for me, it boils down to three core concepts: compassion, connection and consequence. At root all sentient beings are the same—we all want happiness—and so it is vital to have compassion for others, and to see them as brothers and sisters in cyclic existence (or samsara) rather than as the Other who is only differentiated from ourselves by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. We are also all connected to each other by our collective karma, and no one person is independent of any other; in simple terms, we have gotten to where we are because of our family and friends, but also thanks to the construction workers who built the buildings we work in and the roads we drive on, the developers and factory workers who think up and then physically construct the technology that we use, the researchers and scientists and doctors who create and implement the vaccines that keep us healthy, etc.; we owe our existence to untold numbers of other people. And finally, any and all of our actions, both positive and negative, have effects on ourselves and others, which is manifested in karma (which means “action”); kindness and mindfulness toward both friend and enemy alike generate positive merit (which is realised in subsequent lives), and negative actions generate the opposite (which can lead to a bad rebirth, and also misery in this life).

Counter to many other organised religions, which offer unquestionable decrees from on high, Buddhism encourages rigorous debate. Any concept is up for discussion and examination, because it is through this practice that clarity of mind is achieved. This approach is both philosophical and scientific, as reasoning

and argumentation must stand up to intense scrutiny. The Dalai Lama himself has said that even if a most cherished belief is proven wrong by science, Buddhists must throw out the old belief and replace it with the new. For example, I personally have some difficulty with the idea of reincarnation; I’m a sceptic at heart, and so a philosophical concept that cannot be tested is hard for me to accept. But when I put this question to my guru (which means “teacher”) Venerable Thubten Chodron, she explained that reincarnation is tied intrinsically to karma, because all metaphysical effects have causes, including the instantiated form of the rebirth itself (human, animal, hungry ghost, etc.). I accept that good karma enables positive merit, so it only makes sense that, in order to have been born as a human in this life (and one with such privilege and advantage), I must have generated enough positive merit in the previous one. (I still sometimes struggle with this reasoning, but I’m not afraid to engage with and question it.)

As it turns out, science is now catching up to Buddhist ideas hundreds and thousands of years old. Following are just three. (And please note that this is an *incredibly* simplified and reduced discussion of these concepts, and nothing close to an academic paper on the subject. It is also plausible that I am inaccurate in my thinking here, despite my amateur research, and for that I beg your forgiveness; my email address can be found on the imprints page, and I invite correction.)

---

### **Ekpyrotic Universe Theory**

Time, for Buddhists, is beginningless; if karmic rebirth is taken to its logical conclusion, it means that we, as sentient beings, have always existed, because our karma has had to influence us from one lifetime to the next, and you can’t have karma if a karmically-neutral version of your consciousness just popped into existence. This thinking would seem to be contradicted by the Big Bang Theory, with the universe starting as infinitely small and infinitely dense, and then exploding outward in all directions and over billions of years forming the

universe as we know it; this theory naturally rests on the assumption that there was nothing before the Big Bang, no time or space or even laws of physics.

But M-theory (which unifies all consistent versions of superstring theory) postulates something that might reconcile these two ideas: branes. Short for “membranes”, the general notion is that a multi-dimensional universe can be represented on a two-dimensional field. Think of it like looking at an image of the universe on an infinitely thin movie screen; the image itself represents the three spatial dimensions (length, width, depth), the time dimension, and the seven higher dimensions hypothesised in string theory, but it’s all contained within the two-dimensional brane.

If you then add in Many-Worlds theory, wherein every possible choice (down to the atomic level) generates its own parallel universe, then that means there is not just one brane which contains our universe, but an infinite number of branes, all existing like an enormous stack of paper. It’s been theorised that if two branes were ever gravitationally attracted enough to touch, the resulting release of energy would cause an explosion that would annihilate all existing matter in the universe and start the whole thing over again. What we know as the Big Bang might not be this universe’s *first* Big Bang; it could be more like a cosmic reset button that has restarted our universe a countless number of times. This further means that it would be impossible to discern the actual beginning of the universe, and that existence is therefore beginningless.

---

### **Advances in Neurophenomenology**

The Buddhist concept of inherent emptiness is one that is very commonly misunderstood. Emptiness in this case doesn’t mean an absence or a void; instead it refers to “emptiness of essence”, meaning the lack of inherent objective phenomena. Basically it’s like the thought problem of “what makes a tree a tree”. We all know what a tree is; we can point at one easily and identify

it as such. But what happens when you remove all the leaves? Is it still a tree? What about when you remove all the branches? What about if you cut away sections from the top down? When does a tree stop being a tree and become something else: an assemblage of sticks, a log, a stump?

The point is that the concept of “tree”, or its “treeness”, is dependent on all of these things. There is no such thing as an objective tree, as long as I can cut one down and transform it into a chair or a bookcase or a picture frame. Its treeness depends on the relationship of the roots to the trunk to the branches to the leaves to the chlorophyll to the surrounding air, etc.

People are the same. You as a person do not exist as an objectively permanent being; you undergo constant change. Without change, you could not age, heal, grow, or even live at all without the continual movement of blood throughout your body. In the same manner, the way you perceive the world is not objective either: you take in different kinds of sensory information through your nervous system, and these assemble to create a representation of reality that is unique to only you; no two people see the world in exactly the same way.

Neuroscience confirms this assertion, which makes study of the mind a tricky thing; how can objective data be gathered on how human beings experience the world, when every single human being experiences the world in a different way? (Related to this is Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, in which one can measure the exact position of a particle or its momentum, but not both; the act of observing one changes the other.) We can only infer the properties of reality through observation, but even these observations are subjective (and, for those currently running the USA’s executive branch, highly variable). In 2012, Dr Dean Radin, chief researcher at the Institute of Noetic Sciences, conducted rigorous scientific experiments that showed to a high degree of probability that conscious intent can directly alter the results of the double slit experiment (which normally proves the wave-particle duality of light); if not even this fundamental physics experiment can be shown to be objective, then it casts doubt on the true objectivity of anything.



### Always Living in the Past

Similarly, the way that human beings experience the world is problematic. It takes our brains 80 milliseconds to interpret various sensory data and form a cohesive reaction to it, meaning that we're all actually living in the past. Someone shouts in your face, but you only realise it 80 milliseconds after the event. It's an incredibly minute amount of time, but this lag means that we're never experiencing reality exactly as it happens, only our interpretation of it. From this, we can infer that there is a conventional experiential reality, as well as an absolute reality.

This is called the "true truths" doctrine in Buddhism, where there are two ontological realities: the mundane truth of cyclic existence, experienced by the five aggregates (form/matter/body, received sensations/feelings, perceptions, mental activity/formations, and consciousness); and the ultimate truth that is only realised upon enlightenment. Plato illustrated this idea 500 years ago in his Allegory of the Cave, but the Buddha predated him by two millennia. To use a physics analogy, it like believing that solid matter is indeed completely solid, because you cannot observably walk through a wall; instead, the reason that one solid object cannot pass through another is because of the electromagnetic repulsion of electrons, so that the force of the wall's electrons pushes back against the electrons of your body.

This division of truths occurs because of the obscuration that arises due to the subjective way we perceive the physical world, and it drills down to nearly every Buddhist thought. Karma, rebirth, impermanence, inherent emptiness: these are highly counter-intuitive concepts. They run opposite to how we think the world should work based on the information we get through our senses, and this obscured thinking is a symptom of living in cyclic existence itself. We are born into this world suffering, not necessarily physically or emotionally or mentally, but existentially, because the very fact that we are here in samsara means that we are denied the ultimate truth. And

if we do not attempt to awaken, we will find ourselves stuck in the cycle again and again and again.

There are many resources if you want to find out more about Buddhism: books by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Venerable Thubten Chodron, and Ajahn Brahm are an excellent start, as is the comprehensive website BuddhaNet. I recommend two books just recently published: *Buddhism: One Teacher, Many Traditions* by the Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, and *Good Karma: How to Create the Causes of Happiness and Avoid the Causes of Suffering* by Thubten Chodron.

So, now that your head is aching with questions about the underlying nature of reality, it's time for some non-realist fiction and poetry!

This eighth issue of *LONTAR* presents speculative writing from and about Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand. Inside these pages, you'll find: fishing for mermaids in the Mekong River by Alyssa Wong; a tense and otherworldly ancestral homecoming by Michael Janairo; a rebellion against inevitable eugenics by Clara Chow; snapshots of the fantastic in the mundane by Wilfred Cabrera; and speculative poetry by Tilde Acuña, Bernise Carolino, Judith Huang, Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé, Christina Sng, Sharlene Teo and David Wong Hsien Ming.

Mention must be made of our kick-off story, Alyssa Wong's "The Fisher Queen"; it was originally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in 2014, and was then shortlisted for the Nebula, Shirley Jackson and World Fantasy Awards: a tremendous achievement. I also want to note the polyptych tale (a tetraptych, specifically) "Superstations", which is Filipino author Wilfred Cabrera's first published story; we're thrilled that Wilfred chose *LONTAR* as the venue to feature his debut work, one that is grounded spatially in the Manila Metro Rail Transit System and showcases the fantastical in the everyday.

Also included in this issue is a special supplement, something I'm really excited about: part one of Dean Francis Alfar's brilliant novel *Salamanca*, winner of the Palanca Award Grand Prize for the Novel and the Gintong Aklat Award for Literature, serialised here for the first time anywhere. I first met Dean when he was invited as a featured author for the 2013 Singapore Writers Festival (although we'd had an email correspondence going back at least five years before that), and he gave me a copy of the novel as part of a book swap. After I finally got around to reading it the following May, I was compelled to pen the following review:

"A luminously sensuous family chronicle that could easily sit next to the best of Gabriel García Márquez. The evolution of Gaudencio from lustful bisexual philanderer into content family man is filled with tragedy and wonder, and Alfar's light touch with the fantastic here elevates the narrative to mythic proportions. Simply put, I didn't want the book to end, but it does so on exactly the right note. Dean Francis Alfar is a wizard of prose, the possessor of a very special kind of narrative *salamanca*, and his voice deserves to be heard the world over."

The novel is being reissued this year by Anvil Publishing in Manila for its tenth anniversary; I wanted to do something additional to give it an added boost for readers outside of the Philippines, and Dean agreed to let me serialise it in the pages of *LONTAR* over three issues. We have modest exposure both within and outside of Singapore, where we are based, and I'm hoping that this novel will gain even more devoted fans around the world because of its inclusion here. An action such as this is why I founded *LONTAR* in the first place, to increase the exposure of the phenomenal writing being created in Southeast Asia; *Salamanca* is an important regional text, and I'm confident that you'll get as swept up in the world and words of Gaudencio Rivera as I have.

# THE FISHER QUEEN

Alyssa Wong

Alyssa Wong (USA) studies fiction in Raleigh, NC, and really, really likes crows. Her story, "Hungry Daughters of Starving Mothers", won the 2015 Nebula Award and 2016 World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story, and she was a finalist for the 2016 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. Her fiction has been shortlisted for the Pushcart Prize, the Bram Stoker Award, the Locus Award and the Shirley Jackson Award. Her work has been published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Strange Horizons*, *Nightmare Magazine*, *Black Static* and *Tor.com*, among others. She can be found on Twitter as @crashwong. "The Fisher Queen" was her first professional story sale, and was originally published in the May/June 2014 issue of *Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

---

My mother was a fish. That's why I can swim so well, according to my father, who is a plain fisherman with a fisherman's plain logic, but uncanny flair for the dramatic. And while it's true that I can cut through the water like a minnow, or a hand dipped over the edge of a speedboat, I personally think it's because no one can grow up along the Mekong without learning two things: how to swim, and how to avoid the mermaids.

Mermaids, like my father's favourite storytale version of my mother, are fish. They aren't people. They are stupid like fish, they eat your garbage like fish, they sell on the open market like fish. Keep your kids out of the water, keep your trash locked up, and if they come close to land, scream a lot and bang pots together until they startle away. They're pretty basic.

My sisters tried to talk to a mermaid once. It was caught up in one of Dad's trammel nets, and when they went to check the net out back behind the house, they found this mermaid tangled in it. It was a freshwater one, a bottom-feeder, with long, sparse hair whose colour my sisters still argue about to this day. Iris, the oldest, felt bad for it and made May splash some water on its fluttery gills with her red plastic pail. She asked the mermaid if it was okay, what its name

was. But it just stared at her with its stupid sideways fish eyes, mouth gaping open and closed with mud trickling out over its whiskers. Then Dad came home and yelled at Iris and May for bringing in the nets too early and touching the mermaid, which probably had sea lice and all kinds of other diseases.

I was just a kid then, but my sisters tell that story all the time. Iris is a marine biologist wannabe, almost done with high school but too dumb to go to university, who lectures us on fishes like we haven't been around them our whole lives. She sleeps with the biology textbook I stole from the senior honour kids' classroom under her pillow. May doesn't give a shit about school and will probably get married to one of the boys living along the dock so she doesn't have to repeat tenth grade again. The mermaid is one of those shared childhood memories they have, a little spark of magic from a time when they still believed that our mom really was a fish and maybe that mermaid was a cousin or something.

But I'm fifteen now, a full-fledged deckhand on a trawler, and too old to be duped by some story Dad made up so he wouldn't have to explain why our very human mom took off and dumped the three of us with him. I don't care about stories of kids touching a glorified catfish either. It actually makes me sad, to think that my sisters really believed that our mom could be a dumb animal like that mermaid.

---

I'm lacing up my boots and getting ready to leave for the boat when May flops down from the top bunk, her black hair tumbling over my face. "Here." She fumbles for her necklace and presses her carved-shell Buddha into my palm. "Come back safe, okay?"

I slip the waxed string over my head. It's still dark out; the sun won't be up for another few hours. "Yeah, of course. Go to sleep."

She gathers the sheets up around her, their folds cresting like the ocean's

breakers. "I mean it, Lily," she mutters. "Don't come back a ghost."

I tuck the dangling tail of her blanket under her belly. Iris, snoring on the bottom bunk, doesn't even stir. "Ghosts are silly," I tell May, grabbing my knapsack from where it hangs on the edge of the bed. Our little house is only two rooms, a blue tin roof over bedroom and kitchen, balancing on stilts above the river. Dad's bedroll is gone, so I figure he's aboard *Pakpao* already. "I'll see you in a few days."

I always check the nets out back for any fish that might have wandered in overnight, drawn by the ripe scent of trash. They're empty tonight, no silver tilapia or pacu with their human teeth. No spindly-armed mermaids, either. I let the nets slip back into the water and trot down the walkway that connects the neighbourhood of ramshackle houses above the river, wooden boards yawning underfoot. The green, thick smell of the river creeps up over the piers, rising into the night sky.

Our rickety trawler, *Pakpao*, waits at the edge of the docks, the crew drifting through the moonlight like spectres. *Pakpao* looks like a child's toy boat built out of scrap metal and blown up to the twentieth scale. Coloured flags flicker in the damp wind, and rust creeps up the ship's sides. My father's stout, compact figure crouches over the nets, winding them up.

"Hey, Lily," says Ahbe as I jog up the pier. At nineteen, he's the deckhand closest to my age. "Ready for another four days at sea?"

"You must be feeling lucky if you think we'll fill the hold and make it back home in four days," grumbles Sunan, hauling a crate of plastic floats past us. His shirt has wandered off somewhere. "Cook's looking for you, Ahbe. He wants to know what happened to the other batch of rice."

"Gan was supposed to bring it in," complains Ahbe, but he disappears downstairs anyway. Taking my cue, I follow Sunan to the nets.

Dad doesn't look up from his work, patting the deck beside him for Sunan to drop off the crate. I sink down next to it, crossing my legs and pulling the nets into my lap. When the light's better, it'll be my job to fix the floaters and the

heavy bobbins to the net's mouth, widening it to span the surface of the river and weighing the bottom layer down to skim the mud below.

"I tried to wake you but you were fast asleep," Dad says. He sounds apologetic. "Captain Tanawat wanted me here early to double-check the motor and our course to the ocean. Monsoon weather makes the fish finicky."

I glance at him. My dad's shoulders pump as he draws in the last of the nets. He's the strongest, slyest fisherman I know. Someday, I want to be just like him. "Even the deep-water species?"

"Even those." Dad sighs and lets the nets pool at his feet, kneeling beside me. His weathered hands coax the nylon strands out of their knots. "We might not find any mermaids for a week."

"I don't mind missing school," I say. "I'd rather be here with you." This is better than school, I figure; the algebra of the nets, the geometry of *Pakpao* out at sea, are more valuable lessons to me.

Dad smiles and ruffles my hair. "You're a good girl, Lily." Standing, he unclips his pocket flashlight from his belt and hands it to me. "I need to make sure we have enough ice in the hold, but you might as well start on the nets now."

As he walks toward the cabin, I twist the flashlight on and grip the metal handle between my teeth, working in the small circle of electric light. I tie on the plastic floats and metal bobbins until the sky lightens and Ahbe hurtles from the kitchen. "We're leaving! Are the nets ready?"

"Just about," I reply. "They'll be ready by the time we need 'em."

He grins, raking back his hair. "Awesome. I'll let Captain Tanawat know that we're all set!" He dashes off again, thin brown limbs flashing. I wonder if May will marry Ahbe out of all the fishing boys. I think he would be a good choice.

The motors roar, churning the green water below. Other ships are pulling into the docks, unloading their catches of basa, perch, and stingray for the fish market starting to construct itself on the shore. I don't see any mermaids on sale, not even the pesky local catfish ones. Maybe they're saving them for international markets.

*Pakpao* barely clears the heavy-limbed trees clustered by the riverside, their branches drenched with musky river-scent. I duck, keeping my attention on the nets. By the time I finish fixing on the last bobbin and remember to look up, our stork-legged village has disappeared from sight.

The monsoon rains catch us an hour into the journey downriver, so we don't end up letting out the nets until the next day, when we're almost at the delta that opens up into the sea. Dad, Sunan, Ahbe and I work together, feeding out the bottom nets with their bobbins first, then the large central net, and finally the top nets. The nylon stings my fingers as it's yanked through the water, but I won't complain, not in front of Dad and the others. I'd rather nurse my wounds in private.

It isn't long before the nets grow heavy. Pacu, carp, lots and lots of catfish. We pack them into coolers full of ice, where they'll stay until we return home, and send Ahbe and Sunan to cart them down to the hold. No mermaids yet; maybe they've been scared into deeper water by the storms.

"Fuckin' hell," mutters Sunan as we drop the nets back into the water. "Not even a fuckin' mud-eater. At this rate, everything in the hold's gonna spoil before we catch anything good."

"Be patient," hums my father. The river mouth is widening, and salt cuts through the thick, live smell of the water below. "There will be plenty in the open sea."

"The better kinds," adds Ahbe, as Sunan casts him a sour look. "Tigerfish, lionfish, yellowfin—"

"I know what brings in the money," Sunan snaps. I keep my head down and focus on the nets. "I don't need you to name all the fish in the sea, kid."

The two of them bicker as the river empties into the ocean, trees and thick foliage giving way to an expanse of open sky. It always scares me, how

exposed everything is at sea. At the same time, it thrills me. I find myself drawn to *Pakpao*'s rail, the sea winds tossing my hair free from its braids. The breakers roll against the trawler, and as we buck over the waves, the breath is torn from my lungs and replaced with sheer exhilaration.

When we pull the nets in the next morning, they are so heavy that we have to recruit the cook to help us haul them onto the ship. There are a few tuna, bass, and even a small shark, but the bulk of it is squirming, howling mermaids. As we yank the nets onto the deck, bobbins clattering over the planks, I realise that we've caught something strange.

Most of the mermaids tangled in the nets are pale, with silvery tails and lithe bodies. This one is dark brown, its lower body thick, blobby, and inelegant, tapering to a blunt point instead of a single fin. Its entire body is glazed with a slimy coating, covered in spines and frondlike appendages. Rounded, skeletal pods hang from its waist, each about the size of an infant.

Worse, this fish has an uncannily human face, with a real chin and defined neck. While all of the mermaids I'd seen before had wide-set eyes on either side of their heads, this one's eyes—huge and white, like sand dollars—are positioned on the front of its head. And unlike the other mermaids, gasping and thrashing and shrieking on the deck—there are few things worse than a mermaid's scream—this one lies still, gills slowly pulsing.

"We got a deep-sea one," breathes Sunan.

Ahbe crouches over the net, mouth agape. When he reaches his hand out, my father barks, "Don't touch it!" and yanks Ahbe's arm away. His body is tense, and when the mermaid smiles—it *smiles*, like a *person*—its jaws unhinge to reveal several rows of long, needlelike teeth.

I can't stop staring. The mermaid has a stunted torso with short, thin arms and slight curvature where a human woman would have breasts, but no nipples. This shocks me more than it should; why would a fish have nipples? Heat rises in my face. I feel exposed, somehow, fully clothed though I am.

"Wow," Ahbe says. His eyes are shining like he's never seen a deep-sea

mermaid before. Maybe he hasn't. I haven't either. "We're gonna make a lot of money off of this one, huh?"

"If you don't lose a hand to it," my father replies. The other mermaids are wailing still, the last of the seawater trickling from their gills in short, sharp gasps. "Let's bring them below. Do your best not to damage them; we need as much of the meat intact for the buyers as we can get."

We descend on the net with ropes and hooks. The brown mermaid's eyes are blind windows, like an anglerfish's, but her face follows me as we move around the deck, securing the mermaids, pinning their delicate arms to their torsos so they won't shatter their wrists in their panicked flailing. Once they're bound, Dad and Sunan lift them and carry them down to the hold. With Ahbe packing the other fish into coolers, I draw close to the deep-sea mermaid, rope in hand.

That mouth opens, and I swear—I swear to god, or gods, or whatever is out there—a word hisses out: "*Luksaw*."

I drop the rope and stumble away. Ahbe's at my side in an instant. "Shit! Lily, did it hurt you?" He grabs my hands, turning my arms over. "Did you get bitten?"

The pods at her waist clatter and air whistles between her teeth. She is laughing at me as they bind her and drag her down to the hold. "*Luksaw. Luksaw. Luksaw.*"

*Daughter.*

My belly burns. I can't stop shaking.

---

On *Pakpao*, we keep most of the catch frozen, but mermaids are a peculiar, temperamental meat. You have to keep them alive or the flesh goes bad. In fact, it goes bad so quickly that some places have created delicacies based on rotten mermaid because of how impossible it is to get fresh cuts in non-coastal towns. The Japanese traders who visit our village have great saltwater

tanks installed in their ships which they load up with live mermaids, carted straight from the holds of wet trawlers like ours. From there, they're shipped to restaurants, which take great pains to sustain them. Still, they rarely last more than two weeks in captivity, which means there's always a market for fishermen like us.

Mermaid is a cash crop. Iris, May and I wouldn't have been able to go to school if not for the ridiculous amounts of money people are willing to pay to eat certain cuts of mermaid species—not the catfish mermaids from the river, but the ones harvestable on the open sea. These are the people who say that the soft, fatty tissue of a deep-sea mermaid is the most succulent luxury meat you will ever taste: like *otero* but creamier, better. There are others who claim it's the thrill of the forbidden that makes mermaid taste so good. I had a classmate once who told me that eating mermaid, especially the torso, is the closest to eating human meat you'll ever get.

The truth is, I fucking hate mermaids. I can't stand them. I would never tell Iris or May this, but mermaids scare me. Their empty eyes, their parasite-ridden bodies, their almost-hands, almost-human faces...they are the most disgusting, terrifying fish I've ever seen. There is nothing about them that I like.

I can't even eat them. Once, for May's birthday, Dad brought home a thin slab of silver-scaled, Pla Kapong mer-tail for us to share. It was the most expensive food we'd ever had, and it tasted like plaster in my mouth. May and Iris wouldn't shut up about how delicious the white flesh was. I wadded mine in rice and choked it down, knowing that Dad had spent a large chunk of his last catch's salary on this special birthday feast. He liked to spoil us whenever he got the chance.

---

The mermaids in the hold won't stop whimpering. I can hear the high-pitched teakettle sounds through the walls of the ship as I lie in my hammock

with my hands over my ears, trying to sleep. It's a noise they make under stress, according to Iris. Something about air whistling through their gills and the vibrations deep in their bodies.

I don't fucking care why they're making the noise. I just want it to stop.

It's even harder to sleep because I keep thinking about that brown, spiny mermaid. Those blind, luminous, predatory eyes. The unhinged jaw, the tapered waist, the brief curves on her chest. The scent of her skin, salty and alien.

*Luksaw.*

I swallow.

Sunan and Ahbe are gone, taking the night shift on deck. Across the room, Cook and Dad are asleep. The electric lantern swaying overhead isn't doing anyone good, so I snag it and hop from my hammock, slipping quietly out of the cabin.

As I pad down the stairway to the hold, the whimpering gets louder until it's a fevered whine in my head. I imagine the brown mermaid laughing, floating in the water. Too soon, I'm on the landing at the bottom of the stairs, my sweaty palm on the metal door's cold handle. I pull it open.

The hold is full of seawater, coolers of frozen fish bobbing up and down with the outside waves. The mermaids swim in confused circles, making distressed cooing noises. They are tethered to metal rings on the wall, thick twine wrapped around their delicate baby wrists and hooked into the sides of their mouths. A mermaid whose body is mostly muscle, long and heavy like an arapaima, surfaces with a treble hook stabbed through its cheek and disappears back into the water without a ripple.

Sunan is kneeling by the wall, the rocking motion of *Pakpao* slopping fake waves up to his chest. At first I think he's hurt because there's blood in the water nearby; the mermaids keep circling closer, keening when the hooks and tethers prevent them from reaching him. Then I realise the pale crescent disappearing in and out of the water is his ass. His pants hang on a ring nearby, their ankles drenched in seawater, and he's holding something down as he



rocks back and forth, back and forth. It's not the ship rocking, it's him. A thin, clawed hand slashes over his shoulder; he swears, the sound echoing, and slaps whatever's underneath him. A heavy silver tail thrashes the water.

A hand grabs my shoulder from behind and I almost scream. I'm pulled backward, the door to the hold clicking shut in front of me.

"Don't watch, Lily," Dad says in that low voice he puts on whenever he wants to protect me. My blood boils, fear and anger and adrenaline roaring through my system. "Go back upstairs and pretend you never saw any of this."

"They're fish!" I snarl. "What the hell is Sunan doing? This is all kinds of wrong. They're not even people, they're just goddamn fish!"

"It happens on ships sometimes," Dad says, and I can't believe what I'm hearing. "It doesn't hurt the meat." He looks straight at me, those serene dark eyes unfamiliar for the first time in my life. "I didn't want you to know until you were older, but I suppose you were bound to find out sooner or later."

"You knew?" I whisper. "Does everyone on this ship know?"

My father sighs. "Go upstairs and don't think about it."

I have this horrible epiphany. Dad used to have his own boat too, long ago. Mermaids are common enough; even the big ones could fit in a bathtub. He could have kept them alive, feeding them, fucking them—is his story about Mom just that, a story? Or is it true that he kept a fish for himself, hurting it—raping it—until it gave him three daughters? Or was there more than one fish? I think of the dumb, mud-mouthed catfish mermaids that drift into our nets behind the house sometimes, and my stomach turns.

"Have you been fucking them, too?" The words spill out before I can stop them.

"Lily, go upstairs." His voice has gone cold and dangerous.

"This is really sick, Dad," I manage.

"I'm not going to tell you again," he says, and when he looks at me, I wish he hadn't.

I go.

My mother was not a fish. My mother was a warm, human woman. I am certain of this, even if I cannot remember her at all.

There was a story I heard once about a man who got his dick bitten off by a catfish. He was peeing in the water and the catfish followed the stream of urine straight to his dick, crunched it right off.

This was our second-favourite story growing up, after the story about our mom, and now that Iris is an almost-biologist, she likes to tell us smugly that it's the ammonia in pee that attracts fish, something about tracking prey through the ammonia leaking from their gills. I don't know if this is true. But I've felt the crushing power of a catfish's jaws, the bony plates on my arm while I wrestled them down to the hold. The catfish in the Mekong are huge, bigger than me. I am learning, as I get older, that many things are bigger than me.

In her second year of high school, Iris shut down. She stopped going to school, just staying curled up in bed all day, and at night she would cry in her sleep. She wouldn't talk about what had happened, but I found out from May, who knew some of Iris's friends, that one of the boys at her school had followed Iris into a broom closet when they were cleaning up the classroom together. He was a close friend, a big, heavysset guy with short hair and glasses, but Iris would flinch whenever someone mentioned his name.

As I lie in my hammock, I think about catfish. I think about crushing mouths, crushing holds. All the while, the brown mermaid's scent and voice sing in my blood, pulling it, tugging and setting it aflame.

I swing my legs over the side of my hammock and slip out of the sleeping quarters, taking the lantern with me.

Ahbe is making his way up the stairs as I descend, and he stops me with a laugh and a hand out against the wall. "What are you doing up so late, Lily?"

I look at him, that fire a cold burn in my chest. His shirt is hastily buttoned,

his knees damp with seawater. “I’m going to check on the fish,” I say. The words feel flat in the wet, stifling air.

“I just did that,” Ahbe says. “They’re fine. Nothing’s spoiled; we should be able to get them to the market by tomorrow.”

“No. I want to see the mermaids,” I tell him, deliberately, and his face changes.

“I didn’t know you knew about that,” he says. “You’re too young to go down to the hold by yourself.”

“I’m fifteen,” I say. I think about the way my dad talks, the rich, strong core of his voice, and I channel that as I add, “I’m old enough to decide what I want. And I want a mermaid.”

Ahbe stares at me in the lantern light, and I can see his resolve wavering. “I guess it’s all right,” he mutters. “I was fifteen too the first time I had a mermaid. Just be careful—they bite.” He sucks in his cheek. “I didn’t take you for a *thøom*, though.”

I knock his arm out of my way and he laughs. “Go to bed, Ahbe,” I snap. “You’re stupid. I’ll lock up the hold when I’m done.”

He tosses me the keys before he vanishes up the stairs, and I’m left alone in front of the heavy metal door to the hold.

It’s impossible to be a fish’s daughter. It’s almost as impossible as believing that your father is a monster.

I open the door and walk inside. Another set of stairs descends from the doorway, disappearing underwater after the third step. The mermaids appear to have calmed down a little, the surface of the water no longer choppy with tails. Only the slowly moving tethers stretching from the wall mark their presence beneath the waves.

I raise the lantern slowly across the room, searching for the brown mermaid. There: I catch a glimpse of her white eyes peeking just above the water. She is bound tight against the wall, tighter than any of the other fish. To get to her, I will need to wade across the hold.

I take a deep breath and shuck off my clothes before descending into the water. It’s freezing cold; the shock, the new weightlessness of my body, shoot thrills of adrenaline and terror through me. The mermaids dart away from my legs, smooth contact of scales against skin as they brush by. I walk faster, purposefully. I remember the fins and teeth on some of the tigerfish mermaids we caught earlier today. Maybe if I’m confident, they’ll think I’m a predator and stay away.

By the time I reach the brown mermaid, I’m shivering and my body is pebbled with goosebumps. The lantern wobbles in my hand, casting an orange glimmer over the rippling waves.

The mermaid surfaces, her chin just brushing the water. I can see her spines, the pods and fronds, and the rest of her soft, blobby body floating with the motion of the ship.

A sound hisses through her teeth, and it’s a moment before I can understand what she’s saying. “The girl-child.”

“I’m not a child,” I find myself saying through chattering teeth.

She smiles, blind eyes glowing silver in the darkness. “No, no child. What is your name, *Luksaw*?”

In all of those European myths we had to read in school, they made it clear that you should never give your name to a faerie. But this is just a fish.

“Lily,” I say. I wish I had pockets to put my hands in. “Why do you keep calling me *Luksaw*?” *Why can you talk?* I want to ask, but the breath is sucked back into my lungs. I am afraid of the answer.

Her arms are stick-thin, tipped with delicate toddler-hands and bound above her head. “Let me go and I’ll tell you.”

“Fat chance,” I say. “I didn’t come down here to get eaten by a fish.”

She clicks her jaws. “It is the other way around, no? You eat the fish.”

“Yeah,” I say. “That’s the way it’s supposed to be.”

The mermaid laughs at me. “And are you content with the way things are supposed to be, *Luksaw*?” Perhaps she smells my hesitation, hears my grip

tighten on the lantern, because she softens her voice to a deep hum. “I will not hurt you. Let me go and I will tell you everything you want to know.”

Maybe it’s because I want to believe her so badly, maybe it’s the fire singing deep in my body, maybe it’s the image of Sunan in the water on top of a mermaid; before I really know what I’m doing, my fingers are picking out the knots attaching her tethers to the ring above her head.

As soon as the last knot slips undone, her hand snaps out, lightning quick, snagging my chin. The twine tethers still attached to her wrists lash against my bare chest. The lantern bumps against her head as she draws close and licks my face, her tongue cold, alien and rubbery. Her teeth are inches from my eyes.

“Are you really my mother?” I whisper.

The mermaid’s tongue sweeps across my forehead, down my nose, and across my mouth before retracting. “Ah,” she sighs. “Not my brooding. No, I would remember one like you.” That childlike hand is nightmarishly strong. “But you are ours nonetheless. You taste like the ocean, not like the stinking land above.” She lets go of my chin, but I don’t back away. “I would grant you a boon, *Luksaw*, in place of your mother. But I must have a bite of your flesh to make it true.”

Dad used to tell us an old tale about a magic fish that granted wishes if you caught it and released it back into the sea. I don’t remember this part of the story.

Her baby-fingers trickle across my shoulder. “Right here. It will not hurt much.”

A hysterical laugh bubbles up inside me. I am standing naked in the hold surrounded by mermaids, talking to a magic fish. What am I afraid of? I have had worse injuries; I can handle a single bite. I am an adult now.

I open my mouth to ask her for enough money to get off this stinking boat, enough gold to drown a sailor in, to drown all of the sailors in. I open it to ask about my mother, if she knows her or can find her or bring her back. If my mother is alive or dead. Whether she was human or fish, truly.

But then I think of my sisters: Iris, shaking beneath her blankets and

clutching the biology textbook like a magic charm, and May, who had given me hers to protect me at sea. I remember that there are more important things. I think about the people who hurt my sisters, who could hurt them, about the boy in the broom closet and Sunan in the hold. About my father on the landing, his eyes bitter cold.

I tell the mermaid my real wish.

She grants it.

---

There are many versions of this story, each with a different ending.

In one, I swim away with the brown mermaid. The sun wavers in a jagged disk overhead, glinting in strange scintillations. The water is cold, the pressure enormous. It pushes in on my billowy body, still tender, pressing it into a tighter, sleeker shape. Our tiny, delicate hands are locked tight as we dive deeper into the ocean.

In another, a large storm scuttles *Pakpao*, along with all the other fishing boats in the area, on the reefs by Teluk Siam. The hold cracks, allowing the mermaids to escape. Everyone survives and is discovered days later. The rest of the story is fairly uneventful, equally implausible, and made up by people who care more for happy endings than truth.

But here is what really happens. The brown mermaid disappears and *Pakpao* makes it safely home with a hold full of live mermaids. If the crew looks a bit dazed and disoriented, if they are not quite themselves and walk as if they are not used to having two legs, it is just the result of sunstroke. If the mermaids in the hold swim in frantic circles, their eyes rolling wildly in their heads and their wails ricocheting through the hold, it is just what fish do. After all, mermaids are fish, not people. The Japanese traders find the catch acceptable and the mermaids are transported by tank to restaurants across Hokkaido. We make a huge profit.

With the exception of yours truly, every member of *Pakpao's* crew drowns within a week of returning home. Though I live, our family does not escape this tragedy unscathed; my father's body is found floating in the nets behind the house. A joint funeral is held. Sunan's widow speaks tearfully about how her late husband stopped talking after his last fishing trip and had spent the days before his death trying to walk into the river, a story that resonates with the families of the recently deceased.

My sisters weep, their futures secure. I weep, too, licking the salt from my tears. There is a bandage on my shoulder and a bite beneath that will not heal.

## SUPERSTATIONS

Wilfred Cabrera

Wilfred Cabrera (Philippines) graduated with a degree in Literature from De La Salle University, where he is currently an MFA Creative Writing candidate. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Every Day Fiction*, *Literary Orphans*, and *Philippine Speculative Fiction 11*. When he is not reading or writing, he enjoys playing video games, watching movies, and bingeing on fast food. He lives in Metro Manila and works as a copy editor. "Superstations" is his first published story.

### *North Avenue Station, Quezon City*

Anna Rozario could tell she was early. The living room reeked of disinfectant, and the centralised air-conditioning system had just been opened. Gifts were piled on a table, and the cooks were busy with the meals, a gaudy-looking variety made up of fried rice, miso soup, roasted chicken, *caldereta*, *pancit palabok*, and a few tins of gelatin. Within a minute of entering the house, she approached the set of steel boxes enclosed in bulletproof glass, vapour spurting out of an exhaust pipe wedged inside the three-inch base supporting the structure from the floor up.

Like in all reunions before this, Anna carefully approached the crystalline case, half-expecting it to shatter into a million pieces. The boxes within had increased in number—twelve compared to last year's eleven, which meant good news for most family members, considering how each reunion up to that point had seen an addition of at least two boxes. Yet as she gazed at the rightmost box, the newest among the batch, her mouth picked up a sour taste from something deep in her stomach.

A hand landed on her shoulder. She spun around and saw Tita Elaine wearing her usual smile.

"*Mano po,*" Anna said without hesitation, then took her aunt's wrinkled hand and pressed it to her own forehead.



**This issue of LONTAR presents speculative writing from and about Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand.**

**Inside these pages, you'll find:**

- **fishing for mermaids in the Mekong River by Alyssa Wong;**
- **an otherworldly ancestral homecoming by Michael Janairo;**
- **a rebellion against inevitable eugenics by Clara Chow;**
- **snapshots of the fantastic in the mundane by Wilfred Cabrera;**
- **and speculative poetry by Tilde Acuña, Bernise Carolino, Judith Huang, Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingde, Christina Sng, Sharlene Teo and David Wong Hsien Ming.**

**Also included is a special supplement: part one of Dean Francis Alfar's brilliant novel *Salamanca*, winner of the Palanca Award Grand Prize for the Novel and the Gintong Aklat Award for Literature, serialised here for the first time anywhere.**

**LONTAR is the world's only biannual literary journal focusing on Southeast Asian speculative fiction.**

