

# LONTAR

THE  
JOURNAL OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN  
SPECULATIVE FICTION

#9



LONTAR

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ISBN 978-981-478526-6 (paperback)

ISBN 978-981-478527-3 (ebook)

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EPIGRAM BOOKS  
SINGAPORE · LONDON

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# EDITORIAL: SHORT AND SWEET

Jason Erik Lundberg

Since last issue's editorial was a 2,700-word article on Buddhism and science, we're going to make this one short and sweet, so that you can get right to the fantastic stories and poems we have for you.

I do want to mention one thing: I announced in July 2017 on the *LONTAR* blog that the next issue will be our last. There are a number of reasons why, related to funding and sales and waning enthusiasm, but most of all it's because I want to end things on a high note. I've seen too many magazines and journals get cancelled prematurely, or totally alter their focus and tone with a change in editorial staff, and I didn't want to see either of those things happen with *LONTAR*. We've had a solid run, and published some phenomenal writing, and I'm very proud of what we've accomplished.

So issue #10 will be our final one, released in April 2018. It'll be a double-sized issue so that we go out with a bang, and it's shaping up into something quite wonderful.

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This ninth issue of *LONTAR* presents speculative writing from and about Vietnam, Brunei, Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia. Inside these pages, you'll find: treachery and exploitation in colonial Indochina by Alette de Bodard; the rediscovery of statuary gods by Victor Fernando R. Ocampo; communicable scarification during Lunar New Year by Philip Holden; volcanic dragons in post-apocalyptic Indonesia by Sean Jones; a simian revolution in Brunei by KH Lim; and speculative poetry by Mariel Annarose Nicole Alonzo, Melvin Chen, Russ Hoe, DA Xiaolin Spires, Inez Tan and Lakan Umali.

Also included is the continuing serialisation 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. Read on to continue the epic love story of Gaudencio Rivera and Jacinta Cordova.

# THE MOON OVER RED TREES

Aliette de Bodard

Aliette de Bodard (France) is the author of the critically acclaimed *Obsidian and Blood* trilogy of Aztec noir fantasies, as well as numerous short stories which have garnered her two Nebula Awards, a Locus Award and two British Science Fiction Association Awards. Her space opera books include *The Citadel of Weeping Pearls*, set in the same universe as her Vietnamese science fiction, *On a Red Station Drifting*. Recent works include *The House of Shattered Wings* (winner of the 2015 BSFA Award for Best Novel), a novel set in a turn-of-the-century Paris devastated by a magical war, and its standalone sequel, *The House of Binding Thorns*. "The Moon Over Red Trees" was originally published in the sixth anniversary double-issue (October 2014) of *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*.

Night over the Red Trees. Clarisse rises from the bed, casting a glance at the moonlight that slowly seeps into the room. Raoul, asleep in his bed with his arms outstretched towards her, groans and shifts, looking for her, but he does not wake up. He used to, when she first came here months ago; but he soon got used to her wandering through the house every night—and tonight of all nights, he knows she won't be able to sleep.

Within her, the magic pulses—a steady beat like the waves of the sea, like the call of a drum—but she's been listening to it for months, and she knows that this night is its last night. After all, nothing lasts forever, not even the spirits' gifts.

Tonight is a time for endings.

In her cotton gown, she pads down the stairs—the tiles under her feet are still warm from the sweltering sun, and the air itself has that heavy, dense quality of Cochinchina before the monsoon. Everything is silent; the servants have been given their leave already, and the bookcases stand tall and dark, waiting for the movers to begin their work on the morrow. In the living room, the Louis XV chairs exude a faint odour of rot—the humidity of the region has not

been kind to them—and the ropes of the huge model ship creak on the table, as if yearning for a fair wind.

The secretary desk is at the far end, behind one of the potted plants Raoul takes such pride in exhibiting to his guests—talking about the wonderful way things bloom and grow here; about the wonderful new life one can make here, away from the Métropole—about how the indigenous population only needs firm guidance to exhibit its typical traits of courage and adaptability, how quickly they have soaked in French history and culture, how they can speak the language almost as well as native Frenchmen...

At that point he'd look at her, beaming with that dimple in his cheek and his whole heart in his eyes—and her own treacherous heart would give a stutter and stop in her chest, as if an icy hand had squeezed it. The magic would swirl and stutter, too, as if there was something she ought to remember, something that would make her angry if she paused for long enough—but the feeling would go away, leaving only that pleasant numbness of being with Raoul.

Tonight...tonight, however, she's not numb, or frozen. The tatters of the magic are pulsing through her, but they're no longer enough to hold back everything—there's an urgency in her she can't fully understand, a sense of purpose that feels alien to her.

The top part of the mahogany secretary is a glass-front case, in which Raoul keeps the curios that he has gathered from his years in Tonkin and Cochinchina: yellowed ivory statues of the Daoist Immortals from Chinese temples, porcelain dishes said to be exact replicas of the ones used at the Imperial Court in Hue, and a white statue of the bodhisattva Quan Am—and it's an odd thing, because she's seen that statue for months and never even thought of it, but tonight she finds herself mouthing a prayer in a language she's almost forgotten, a simple sentence asking Quan Am to relieve the suffering of mortals, and she doesn't quite know which well the words come bubbling out of—a feeling of standing on the edge of a dark abyss that frightens her. What else has she forgotten, when she was here with Raoul?

There is a sword in one of the middle shelves—a curved, single-edged weapon that looks...brand new, almost gaudy, with a simple straight hilt, and a grey blade—except that the blade is covered with intricate etchings, patterns that swirl and dance even as she watches—coalescing into the hints of familiar shapes, then breaking apart again as soon as her eye focuses on them. It...it ought to remind her of something, but the memories elude her—there's anger and a crushing emptiness, and she can't hold on to the feelings for long.

The magic pulses again—draws her gaze to the bottom shelf of the case, the one nearest the desk. Behind the jade ornaments and the alignment of ornate hairpins are two scroll-sheaths, ornate copper cylinders with sculpted dragons, their snouts meeting lightly, as if for a kiss; their eyes tiny beads of black stone, their moustaches flowing twisting twigs of metal.

It's not the sheaths that matter, she knows—with that same absolute certainty that put the words of the prayer to Quan Am in her mouth.

She reaches out. The case opens with a creak that must have been heard all the way to Ha Noi—for a moment, she stands still, her heart hammering against her ribs. If Raoul should discover she's stealing from him, that she's no better than the workers he derides for their dishonesty—that she's linked to the sword, though that last thought surfaces for only a moment before it disappears back into the morass of magic within her—

But nothing happens; there is only the merciless light of the room; and her hand slips between the wooden shelves, with a grace and fluidity that seems to come from a faraway place.

She puts her hand into the pockets of her gown and pulls out rice papers covered with ornate, flowing calligraphy—though she knows they're not the work of a master but merely the handwriting of...of someone else, who was kind to her once, someone whose name and face elude her no matter how hard she tries to remember.

To Raoul, one set of papers will look much like another. Working quickly, almost without thought, she trades the papers; slips the ones she just took into

her pockets, wrapping them in enough cloth to protect them—just as the door to the study opens.

“Clarisse?”

Slowly, carefully—*breathe breathe do not panic*—Clarisse closes the case, and turns around, to face Raoul.

Like her, he wears a gown—a silk one with five-clawed dragons crawling along its length, the latest fad in Indochinese design. His skin, the colour of washed-out red peony blooms, shines in the moonlight. His eyes shift to the open case, and then back to her—and narrow, in the beginnings of suspicion. “An odd time to look at my curios,” he says.

The magic churns within Clarisse—whispering words from the French classics, from poets and novelists and politicians, the words she used to catch Raoul’s attention in the beginning—all equally useless. It’s not common ground that she needs, but a way to charm herself out of a situation that has no good way out.

She settles for the closest thing to the truth she can think of. “I’ve always wondered what the jade bracelets would look like on me.”

Her voice breaks, a little, thinking of Mother’s litany of loss—of all the precious things they were forced to sell because of the declining family fortunes—the loss of scholar influence in the wake of the arrival of the French; the desperate, doomed attempts to trade against state monopolies; the death of her father, an embittered man old before his time. Normally the magic should be there to blunt it, to give credence to her tale of growing up steeped in the worship of French culture; but it’s fraying, its potency almost gone. “We never had anything so fine when I was growing up.”

The suspicion does not leave Raoul’s face, but it abates a fraction. “You could have asked.”

“You only open that cabinet for important guests.” No need to act to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

Raoul walks closer to her, wraps his hands around her shoulders. He’s looking at the contents of the case, his eyes softer than they were a

moment ago—infinately distant, as if he were already looking at the shores of the Métropole.

“You could come with me,” he says, at last.

“Back to Brest?” Clarisse crushes the flutters of her treacherous heart. “You’ve never asked before.”

“No,” Raoul says. “I wasn’t sure.” His hand reaches into the cabinet—settles on one of the bracelets, a beautiful snow-on-moss, flecked with dabs of pale green, like a watercolour from a master.

“You have a wife.”

Raoul’s smile is bitter, as he turns the bracelet in his hands. “At home? She died three months ago, Clarisse. I learnt yesterday.” He smiles again—an expression that doesn’t reach his pale eyes. “I don’t have much to go home to, it seems.”

*Stay here*, she wants to say. Stay here and be with me, and have everything as it always was—let us be happy together—but the magic is within her, shrivelling the words before they can bloom on her lips; and her love for Raoul feels...old, papered over, like the golden-tinted memories of a childhood that she can’t reach anymore.

She remembers the time when they rode side by side in the red dust of the jungle; when he pointed at pepper vines and their grapes of green fruit with the simple delight of a child; their long conversations about families and the constraints of their expectations for their members—remembers the warm, happy feeling of being with him, but it’s as if it all belonged to a stranger.

Raoul slips the bracelet over her wrist—she feels its icy cold on her skin; the gradual warming as it adjusts to the temperature of her body. His agents—the ones that scour the countryside, spending the money he earns here as a planter—have been more skilled than usual; it’s jade fit for the daughter of an official of the first rank, perhaps even for the wife of an Emperor.

“Come with me,” Raoul whispers, his hands on her shoulders, on her breasts, on her hips—and again there is that same flutter within her, that vision

of a future where she goes to France, lifts herself above the genteel poverty she's always known; where she might well always be the jumped-up little Annamite to other Frenchmen—but what does it matter, if she has Raoul's love, and lives in the luxury he brings back home?

Her eyes, inexorably, are drawn to the sword in the case, rest on the swirling patterns; and, with a sinking feeling she knows it to be a gift of the spirits, the same as her foggy memories, as her uncanny mastery of French and the French classics, all the things she never studied as a young girl. "I've never noticed that sword," she says, because it's the only thing she can think of.

Raoul's hands pause. "That sword?" His tone says this is not the moment; but nevertheless he humours her. "That's hardly something you'd enjoy handling. It came from a criminal. They imprisoned her for—" he pauses then, searches his memory for something that never seems to come— "for some theft or another."

Not a theft, she thinks, but she wouldn't be able to say why. The magic surges again, and everything feels...numb, pleasant again.

One last time. Surely one last time cannot hurt?

"Come with me," Raoul says; and she turns and kisses him, and leads him back to the bedroom, to make love with the fury of the desperate and the lost.

---

Later, she rises—the light of the moon, cold and merciless, falls on Raoul, who sleeps content, with a smile on his face, smug with the assurance of his happiness. In the pale light, he suddenly seems alien to her, with skin that is too white, too reddened by the sun; with his hair the colour of maple leaves in autumn. And there is another face in her mind, dark and quick to smile; and a name in the language of her ancestors.

Vinh, who is lost to her, who will never see the wedding candles burn bright; who will never again celebrate New Year's Eve with her kin; who will never have

descendants to honour her name on the ancestral altar.

She has to work quickly.

In the secretary desk of the living room is paper, and a fountain nib and ink. She gets all three out, and stares at the blank surface, fighting the beginnings of panic. The magic within her is fraying; it's not the French that is going—that was part of the bargain she made with the spirits, part of the price—but it's her memories, her real ones, that are returning; and even as they return, her anger unwraps itself from layers of cotton wool, devouring any kind words she might have had for Raoul.

Vinh, who is gone—who might as well be dead, sent to wither away in the tiger cages of Poulo Condor. Vinh, who was her elder sister, and who had sworn to retrieve the scrolls from Raoul's house; whom the magistrate imprisoned on a technicality, because no native Annamite—and especially not a woman—should be allowed to wear a weapon this fine, this beautiful.

The nib scratches against the paper. She aligns the words one after the other, groping for something that she can write to him—should it be words of comfort, or of anger? *I am sorry, but we cannot be together. You live in one world and I another. My people have a saying about a red thread wrapped around the limbs of lovers. Ours stretches from one country to another—from a vast sea to a vast desert—too spread out and too long to be ever wound tight. It's none of your fault.*

But it is; it is his fault; it is his men who visited the family estate, who bullied Mother into parting with everything that interested them for a handful of piastres—from vases to hairpins to sculptures.

Most of what they took—of what they stole—can be replaced; just as most losses can be endured. But the scrolls are Great-grandmother's calligraphy; the flowing, effortless handwriting of a scholar's daughter in the days the Nguyen dynasty was still strong, treasured for generations on the ancestral altar—to think of it in a glass case, subjected to the scrutiny of Frenchmen with no regard for its true value....

*I wish you happiness in the Métropole. I will miss you more than you can possibly know, but we weren't meant to be.*

She would add something about rebirth; about how they might be closer in other lives, unbound by the threads of mingled love and hatred; but Raoul is Catholic, and would only dismiss that as indigenous nonsense. So instead she simply signs the letter “Clarisse”—which she now remembers isn't the name her grandparents gave her, but it's the only one Raoul knows her by.

On top of it, she lays the snow-on-moss jade bracelet; because she's not a thief; she was never a thief, and neither was Vinh. She gazes at the sword for a moment, wondering if that should be taken away as well; but it's the gift of the spirits to her dead sister, and it is not her place to retrieve it. Let the spirits weave as they will, and take back what is theirs, if such is their desire.

She leaves the Red Trees much as she came to them; empty-handed, nothing on her back but the traditional garment of a noblewoman—and the scrolls she came for, tucked in the folds of her blouse.

As she walks, the magic slowly ebbs—frays off like the tatters of fog at sunrise. The last of her disguise falls away—no longer the pale-skinned, sharp-featured beauty that Raoul fell in love with; the one who effortlessly flirted with him in French, smiling and simpering like the beauties of Paris and Marseille.

He will look for her, of course, but he won't find her. Everything she told him about her family was a lie, and he won't recognise her if he sees her now: smaller and darker-skinned, wide lips and large teeth, indistinguishable from the squat women he derided as throwbacks to primitive times—and she's not sure anymore how she should deal with that thought; if it should make her feel justified, or sad and drained.

Ahead, dawn is breaking, the pink sunlight slowly washing away the shape of the moon; she wonders if the myth is true, if Cuoi is still up there in his banyan tree, waiting for a chance to get back to Earth, still gazing longingly at everything he has lost.

Everything seems to blur away from her, even the veil over her memory;

and abruptly she remembers standing on the shores of a lake at dawn, shivering—waiting for her prayer to be acknowledged. She remembers the waters heaving, and the tortoise, a darker, sleeker shape beneath the waves—remembers the tortoise's voice, booming like the thunder of the storm, asking her what she desired.

Vinh had asked for a weapon to get back what was theirs—had asked for the sword, which had doomed her in the end.

Clarisse, too, had asked for a weapon, but for a different kind—for French words and French poets; and the ability to smile and lie and seduce, and everything that Vinh, with her unbending sense of honour, would never have thought of.

*Will you pay the price?* the spirit had asked, and she'd said yes, because what else could she answer?

She'll walk back to her family's decrepit house, where her brothers and sisters are taking care of Mother; she'll put the scrolls back on the ancestral altar, ignoring the gazes they'll throw her, the mingled pity and contempt; for surely they know, they must know what she had to do to get them back. She has what she bargained for; she has regained the family's treasures, and that is all that matters.

But she'll still remember the French and the French verses, and the words of love—and Raoul's touch on her shoulders and her hips, and the way her heart missed a beat whenever he smiled at her. It was the magic, of course; it was as false as her appearance, as her identity; but she can't erase the memories; the sweet rush of them, the happiness from other simpler times, a feeling she cannot afford anymore. Her future in Cochinchina will be made of whispers and frowns and speculations, and of a hasty marriage to a man who will prize an alliance with her family above the rumours about her virginity.

*Will you pay the price?* the spirit had asked, and she'd said yes, because she hadn't known, because she hadn't realised.

*I will miss you more than you can possibly know,* she wrote Raoul; and

now—too late, much too late—she realises how biting a truth she wrote him; how she'll always be tainted by the memory of their love—and walk haunted by bittersweet, alien memories and impossible dreams, all the way to her grave.

# WAR OF THE MACAQUES

KH Lim

KH Lim (Brunei/Singapore) attended medical school in the UK and qualified in 2008. When he isn't pretending to be an author, he works as a doctor in Singapore, where he currently resides. His first novel, *Written in Black*, was published in 2014 after almost three years' worth of toiling; thankfully, he has since come to his senses and now realises that short story writing is a far more efficient and far less soul-destroying enterprise.

This is an account of a war long since forgotten by history, its mark on the lives of the people now nothing more than jetsam floating down that great river to the rumble of a gusty monsoon squall that rushes in ahead of the rolling clouds to blow the roofs off those unfortunate houses at the village's edge, and is then gone right before the rains set in, like it never existed in the first place.

I was but a child when the macaques declared war. We were at school, being taught what we understood to be the knowledge pure and true; knowledge that was guaranteed to lead each of us to a blissful, contented adulthood, directly into the open arms of overpaid and underqualified employment. But that was all to be ruined on that fateful day.

They came in like a puff of an agitated rain god's breath, a raiding party at least fortyfold, maybe more if one counted the infants clinging suspended to the bellies of the females. Adil saw them first, being the unfortunate sole member of our class who was outside at the time, serving his penalty for carving a face into the surface of his desk with a compass.

There! he cried. There! They're coming on the roofs, and we all thought he meant raindrops for the telltale pitter-patter began to ring out around us, gaining steadily in volume before the invaders marauded their way in from all sides, through all the windows, leaving not a few shattered panes, and through the door as well, engulfing poor Adil before he could pre-empt us with what we'd already figured out, now lost in that mass of wails, nails and non-prehensile tails.

Why had they come here? The jungle was a fair distance from the village, let alone the school, meaning they'd have had to traverse roads, businesses and then the boardwalks between the innumerable stilt houses, like a steady flotilla blockading our island of a school from the shoreline. Thus, it could only be surmised that the macaques had targeted us, this very classroom, specifically. For there wasn't any other classroom in an uproar, was there?

Maybe it was somebody in particular they were after. Someone with a history of antagonising the macaques, or their close primate relatives, the langurs and the gibbons, members of whom I could spot in and among the hooting throng. Could it have been the hapless land-based Adil, who'd boasted of slingshotting one or two when they swooped by his garden to steal a few mangoes? Or maybe Eddy, who loved to mark the new year by firing rockets into their trees with his brother. Or maybe it was me. Was I guilty of an act of instigation? Heaven knows the macaques had enough justification for this pre-emptive strike, but how complicit was I? I wracked my brains...what should I have to fear, when I didn't even like bananas...

And then it struck me. How could I not have thought of it sooner? Yes, we were probably being targeted because here, in this very room, was the greatest collection of simian nemeses ever known to exist, but what made us even more despicable to the invaders was me. The most atrocious individual of all: he who is completely innocent, shining out like a beacon among a horde of the guilty, my very presence here amplifying my company's nefariousness a million fold and giving it a sheen akin to those distant stars plastered in the heavens, so brilliant when bolstered in negative relief by a backing void.

And doubly provocative for who was I really to say I was that much better than my contemporaries? Oh no, they were going to take me down, take me down and bare my monkey-hating heart for what it was, for just because I never had the opportunity to commit any of those afore-mentioned infractions didn't mean I was going to get off scot free, when my thoughts and desires spoke otherwise.

So there they were now, conducting their purging. They'd got hold of chalks and markers, missiles for use against those who had survived, barricaded with me at the rear of the class, two rows of chairs shielded by a wall of heaped up desks, using our bags and books to fend off their dreaded projectiles, and watching in vain as they had their way with their captives.

It was almost too much to bear. There Eddy was, being chased in a circle by a macaque piggy backing on another macaque, sending rockets and swirlers straight into his rump, the seat of his pants singed off to show his bare buttocks, as red and raw now as those of his chasers. Elsewhere, a group of girls and boys screamed as they were pinned down by a platoon of proboscises, busy pounding them with the chalk dusters until all that could be seen in that corner of the class was a cloud of grey whose particles would soon disseminate through the air of the rest of the room, obscuring much of what I could see through my bespectacled eyes.

Of the teacher, nowhere was he to be found... Oh, wait, no, there he was, on a speedboat jetting it out of there like he was late for a flight to catch. We all knew he had his own boat but never had I seen him using it myself until now. And he was about to get away, get away and bring help from the outside because help from the inside was certainly not coming. Help all by himself too, because he was unaccompanied. Unaccompanied save for those three little crimson-tufted gibbons who'd managed to grab on to a loose length of string that was being dragged by the boat, pulling themselves along it until they boarded the vessel in which our teacher was piloting, relief most ecstatic oozing out of his every pore with the thought of sweet freedom achieved by the breadth of that fishing line he'd forgotten to untether.

Oh dear, how short lived that was; they sprung on him from the sides after flanking him delicately along the gunwales, fangs bared as he found himself reacting all too late and all too wrongly, sending his boat into a sharp portwise bend with a strangled cry. Soon to be muffled by a gleeful paw, and then down that lurching, overbalanced conglomerate of man and monkey went, into the water.

And that... that marked the turning point for me. Because up until then, I'd been a participant of this war, doing my part to fend off the attackers while fear drove the mechanisms that powered my ongoing resolve; namely fear of the possibility that I might never make it out of this classroom. But, after seeing the teacher fail in his escape attempt, somehow, this perception of mine changed. No longer was I a participant...suddenly, I had transformed into a mere observer, by both choice and necessity. An observer of a most fascinating altercation, between man and macaque. Of course, I still had to keep myself intact to continue with my observing, and so I silently slinked away, into the cupboard at the back, closing it in on myself and huddling with the spare textbooks, over the brown patch that marked the stains left by the corpse of a mother rat we found huddling with its decomposed brood a year ago. I nestled in, and kept on watching through the slats in the door.

I kept watching as the macaques claimed victory, and then set about their re-education of the prisoners of their war, forced to cower underneath their desks to the probes of compasses and dividers while the biggest and meanest member of the invaders took it upon itself to amend the falsehoods that had been fed to my classmates.

It would not be an arduous task; as with any of our usual lessons, all the children had to do was to repeat what they were dictated in perfect mimicry. That, yes, one plus one is eleven, water flows from the sea to the land, the sun goes round the earth, and so on. And one could see, the change in my peers' voices and faces, as the dawning of a new kind of truth lit up their eyes; that to steal was actually to give, to harm was actually to heal, to destroy was actually to mend. Even I failed to stay fully impartial, as the running mantra awakened in me an epiphany, like the sweet unfolding of a spring blossom. For what good did cold, hard logic do us, when to see the world in terms of one plus one equals eleven offered so much more. Why should facts get in the way of such magnificent potential, the union of a singular with another singular producing an amplified effect that far outweighed the raw sum of its parts. Why should

we hold ourselves back with this form of thinking when we could be soaring to new heights, guided by our new masters, sending our minds into avenues never before crossed because nobody, least of all those so-called adults, had ever dared. And now we were seeing the light; we could make the world into whatever we wanted it to be, so long as we knew the path, and followed. Yes, even pitiful old me, crouched in that cupboard, nibbling from a decade-old bag of neglected raisins, fingers having to squeeze through a hole a ratling had chewed through at the top.

Mind you, I was still merely a half-convert, and hadn't gone so bold enough as to leave my sanctuary and openly join their side yet, not when a sliver of caution remained to stay my feet.

External intervention came only at nightfall, but by then it was too late. The class, save myself, had been completely indoctrinated, and as the authorities converged on us, the macaques were in the process of leading them through a frenzied dance around a bonfire in a tin can dustbin, its flames rather tantalisingly licking the thirsty, desiccated boards of the floor. Now encircled by the police and our parents, in their boats and crowded along the walkways, I began to hear their megaphonic pleas through the cupboard door, pleas that were responded to by flaming projectiles launched through the windows. They didn't know it yet, because they could not see what I could, that their efforts were futile. For the children had not only been converted in their minds, but also physically. Even through those wafer-thin slats in the cupboard's door, I was certain that my eyes were not deceiving me when I could no longer distinguish between who was man and who was macaque. Gazing at the invaders and their recruits now turned into a new-formed tribe that was entrenched with me in this makeshift bastion was like attempting to decipher an alien language; not one of my classmates could I tell apart from any of the rest, aside from the form of our teacher, bundled to the side, the eraser stubs at the hind ends of many-a-pencil jutting out of his ears and nostrils quite visible from my cell.

But, what was very clear to me was the intent of these primitives: to serve

their god of chaos roiling away in that dustbin, presenting excreted offerings and igniting them in their very palms before flinging them out at those would-be ruiners of their rebellion. And then, when not satisfied with that, they began flinging their fire-loving missiles at each other and the walls that held the artwork that we'd so meticulously drawn for our midterm tests: deformed fishes and happy stick families suspended over blue expanses, eyeing each other with much concern as foul-fuelled fire started to eat away at their feet. The multiplication tables were the next to go, and then the star board which had my name placed third from the top. Such a good boy I'd been all year, carrying not a small hope of getting a few more to pip my closest competitors to the runner's up spot from which, who knows, I might just have had a fighting chance of finding a second wind and springboarding my leap to the very peak. Or, failing that, perhaps engineering the fall of grace of the first-placed? Not that it mattered anymore, and not only because the competition clearly could not continue, but because whatever that secret prize was couldn't have been all that great in the first place. Who could seriously believe that the school would fork out hundreds of dollars for an X-Box in exchange for twelve gold stars worth of good deeds? They probably couldn't even afford the anti-X-Box from my nightmares, moulded exactly like the real one but instead of discs you put blank papers into the slot and it would stamp random maths questions for you to complete while on the TV screen the Devil would cackle as he rearranged the numbers every time you went back to check your workings, so having to redo the whole thing again and again and again...

Obviously, like so many bursts of instinct, like so many unleasings of the animal inside, what seemed to work so well at first came undone at the hands of its unrestrained originators. The conflagration spread, engulfing the entirety of the classroom, and if there were any lingering doubts that macaque and pupil had become one and the same, it was now that these were finally removed, for those flailing finger-like shadows cast by the light of the flames danced to the same tune of mindless chaos, fleeing every which way they could, some

through the door, some out of the windows and into the deep dark river.

And that was what broke the spell. The fire boats arrived to blast away the blaze with their pumps before the police and the parents moved in to fish the stragglers out of the water and reunite them with the others now milling aimlessly about on the singed walkways, hunched shoulders bearing heads as hollow as the stares they were giving to the ruins of the classroom and the glimmer of the evening stars, borne of the dying away of the smoke.

In one major respect, though, the spell had not been broken. For the children and the macaques were still one and the same, and neither the parents nor the authorities could tell which ones were theirs originally and who were the invaders who had caused this whole ruckus in the first place. So, in a gesture of tremendous grace, they adopted the lot of them, each parent taking the equivalent of one extra head compared to what they'd possessed in the morning, going hand in hand with two little bestial paws instead of the hairless one they'd birthed. Was there a better solution? The question didn't seem to matter anymore, for they did seem fairly satisfied with the outcome, and when the principal was reassured that the costs of the repairs would be covered by the community, it seemed that everything had ended as satisfactorily as it could have for as many of the players as was possible, for a war.

So here, I can leave you with a relatively happy ending to this brief war waged by the macaques. But what's that? What of your fearless narrator? Well, let me enlighten you.

The fire was extinguished swiftly enough to spare much of the rear end of the classroom, and so I was unharmed by smoke or flame, safe in my sanctuary of a closet. But to my misfortune, my parents, upon arriving at the scene, mistakenly assumed that I had turned into a macaque like the rest of my classmates, and went home with two howling specimens as compensation for their loss, an exchange savvy enough to put smiles of satisfaction on the faces of mother and father as they skipped off back to the car with their new children in tow.

And that was it. Whether by the heat of the fire or the nefarious actions of a macaque, the door was jammed when I attempted to leave the cupboard, shutting me in that space barely large enough to shift into a cross-legged sitting position, with only a packet of rancid raisins for nutrition. My cries for help went unanswered, and when the renovators finally arrived to rebuild the classroom, I no longer had the strength to call out to them. Despite this, I anticipated that they'd surely remove and then break open the cupboard so as to replace it, but sadly for me they did not, choosing instead to build around what was still standing.

Thus, trapped was I in that chamber of a past life's detritus, forced to gaze upon the world through those narrow slits, the world recreated in the spirit of this new age of man-macaque, for the streams of pupils that would pass across my boxed-in line of vision would all be indistinguishable, not only between the two sides of the hyphen, but between each individual from one face to the next. In some way I felt relief to be a mere watcher now; it was not quite a world that I felt I would be welcome, let alone able to survive in.

For over a hundred years I remained there, with nought to do but to engross my decrepit eyeballs with these creatures breaking down those barriers of civilisation and logic, in their classes where the fire was worshipped (leading to the requiring of another 10 subsequent reconstructions), faecal matter was made the weapon (and sometimes snack) of choice, Adil's graffiti was gifted renaissance status, and the sacred mantra was deemed so: one plus one is eleven.

However, as with all eras and empires, this was to face its own downfall. Just when I had resigned myself to anticipating a millennium here, the class faced a repeat invasion, similar to that of the macaques all those years ago. Except this time, it was one of purely human endeavour. Oh how my heart soared as those upright figures in matching imitation-cashmere suits and vinyl shoes marched in, each right hand clutching a rolled up tabloid to swat those macaques away and each left hand tapping simultaneously into the screen of

a brand new phone, perhaps relaying to those last vestiges of humanity that, yes, they had finally breached the cradle of a century-long insurrection.

Unlike the last time though, these liberators did search the classroom, for further evidence of the macaques' crimes, and there was no end of material to choose from. In the process, these heroes came across, at the far end, a door. A locked door, one that looked out of place from the rest of the room, paint faded, wood worn and its slanted frame almost falling off its hinges; those horizontal slats like the lines and cracks of history, drawn across an ancient papyrus.

And when they broke the door down, what did they find? Nothing but an empty raisin bag, stacks of textbooks written in a now-forgotten language, and a stain that held the last remaining scraps of genetic material of a long-deceased common rat.

And all was silent, save the familiar sound of a gusty breeze picking up, as it carried a forgotten dream over the waters of the river.

# AFTER THE THAW

Sean Jones

Sean Jones (USA) teaches, snowboards and builds hot rods in Colorado. He has ventured to Thailand, Tahiti, Canada and Europe. If he settles on a career, it will build on a hitch in the US Army as a Persian translator, a term as a city councilman and twenty years of information systems work. His writing has appeared at *Anak Sastra*, a journal of southeast Asian literature, at *Every Day Fiction*, and in the web pages of the Lakewood Historical Society.

Before she could reach the island with its jagged brown peaks covered in clumps of green trees, before she could walk on the beach of pink sand, before she could find the dragons she knew only from her animated books, Buana knew she would have to overcome the riptide tugging her tiny yellow sailboat out to sea. She wished the antique laser range-finder mounted to the black carbon-fibre mast worked, might tell her how far from shore her boat bobbed. She couldn't read the English printed on its case but its numbers read 2018, nearly five decades ago.

She lowered the ragged white Tyvek jib and swung the vessel's aluminium-alloy boom to tack into the breeze. If she could jig the sun-bleached *perahu* back and forth, she could pass into the inlet before the wind stiffened and pushed her offshore. Another night at sea would finish off her three remaining goats, she worried, and, as thirst squeezed her throat, she sucked on the collar of her pink gauze shirt.

She steered to starboard and glanced over her left shoulder, seeing crimson rays straining through clouds of the great fire dragon's smoky breath, breath drifting ever eastward, breath that smelled like hot ashes and scorched stone and burnt metal. If the desperate prayers and chanted mantras and *Allah-u Akbars* of millions of land-dwelling Indonesians believing in the Five Faiths could not ground him, how could she, "a fishing spear of a girl", becalm the blazing beast? Even precisely following Sapta's mystical guidance?

Calm yourself, she thought; one step of Sapta's plan at a time. She inhaled,

faced west, bent at the waist, touched her palms to the tops of her feet and stood again, exhaling slowly.

From a pocket of her green, canvas shorts, she took a black metal box. Pointing Sapta's GPS north toward the equator, holding it high over the sailboat's blue DriFibre canopy, she hoped for a signal, hoped the batteries had held. Her billy goat bleated when the GPS beeped and Buana gazed at the hazy readout: eight degrees, thirty-seven minutes south, one-hundred and nineteen degrees east but the minutes of latitude always read zero and she hoped shaman Sapta's ritual would prove more reliable than his equipment. She pocketed the black GPS.

A soft splash sounded to her port side. On the journey from her raft village, she had seen dragonflights, streaks of fire slashing the heavens, and she'd been startled as one flaming gout had sizzled into the sea, raising a plume of caustic, white vapour high into the moonlit sky.

A dark shape now marred the water's shining surface and she saw the brown head and neck of a creature bobbing in the waves. The swimming animal had horns but they were wrong for a goat, were more like splayed sticks. The head dipped and she lost it.

Should she help? She needed to navigate the riptide and Sapta had said seven animals in the *perahu*; this would make eight. Preserve the ritual, she thought. Sapta's solo ritual from thirty years before had saved millions of Indonesians from a cyclone, according to tales told by elders of Buana's raft town. With only three goats alive, though, the ritual had changed. "I have to help," she said.

Bracing herself with her knees, shoving the *perahu*'s aluminium boom hard to port, Buana heaved the tattered, white mainsail into the wind and slammed the yellow-and-blue sailboat toward the ripple, making her four dead goats roll against their lashings and her three live ones scrabble for footing against their bindings.

The creature popped up its head and she leaned over the splintered oak

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ISBN-13: 978-981-478526-6



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