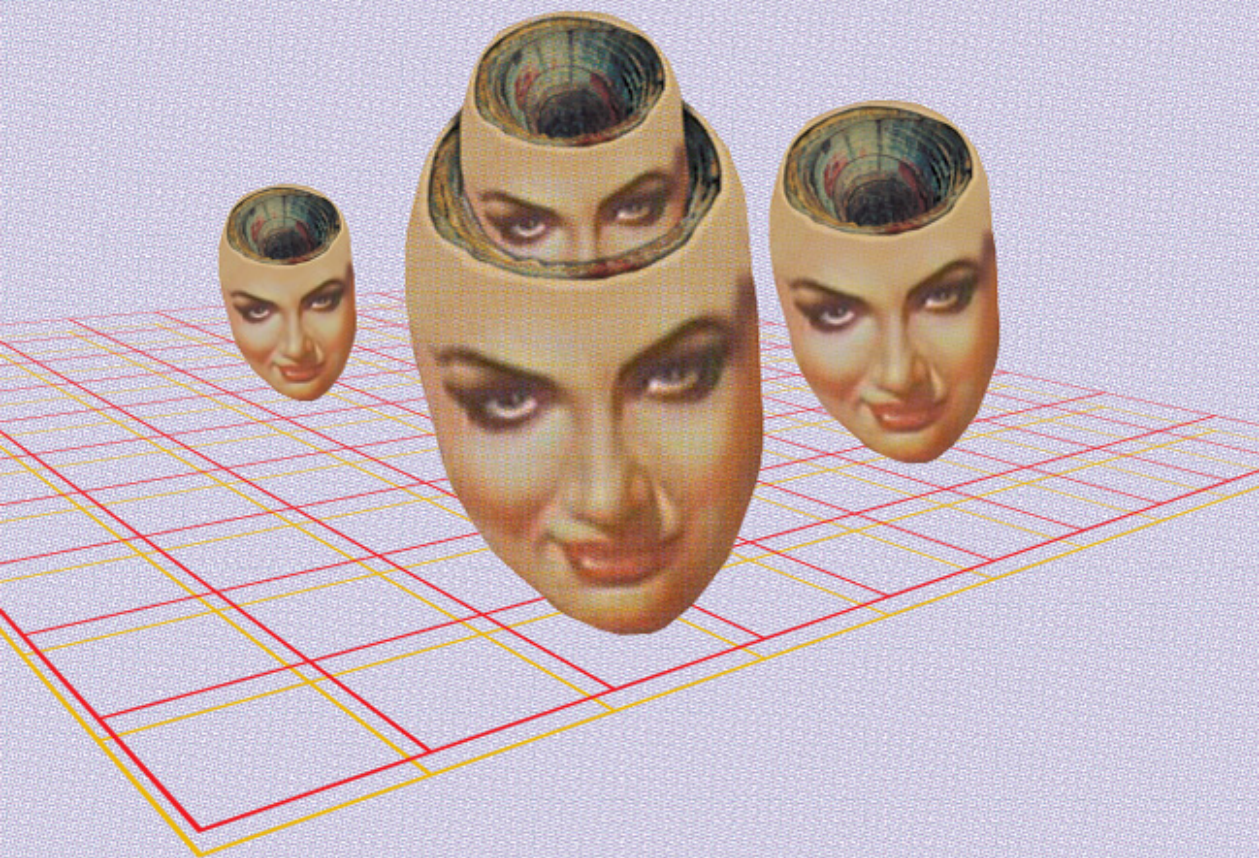


LONTAR

THE
JOURNAL OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN
SPECULATIVE FICTION

#3



“All the writing is surprising and fascinating. As a reader, some knowledge of the region helps, but is not necessary. The great thing about *LONTAR* is the broad range of speculative fiction showcased here with a guaranteed burst of Southeast Asian culture. [...] *LONTAR* has produced quality, intricate and original work that entertains and distils a yearning in the reader for more.”

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EDITORIAL: THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

Jason Erik Lundberg

You may notice some slight changes around here for this issue. Although aesthetically it remains consistent with our first two issues, thanks once again to the art direction of design studio Sarah and Schooling, *LONTAR* is now being published by Epigram Books. We had a great time working with Math Paper Press for the first two issues, and I appreciate the support and enthusiasm of publisher Kenny Leck, but it was a mutual agreement to part ways. However, I'm very much looking forward to bringing *LONTAR* into the fiction stable at Epigram Books (where, it should be noted, I am the literary fiction editor), which includes work of the literary fantastic such as *Ministry of Moral Panic* by Amanda Lee Koe, *The Space Between the Raindrops* by Justin Ker, *The Wayang at Eight Milestone* by Gregory Nalpon, *The Tower* by Isa Kamari, and *The Epigram Books Collection of Best New Singaporean Short Stories: Volume One*. Epigram Books is epitomised by high quality and beautiful design, which makes *LONTAR* a perfect fit.

Issue #3 also marks the first of our issues to be supported by a generous grant from the National Arts Council. NAC's official mission statement is "to nurture the arts and make it an integral part of the lives of the people of Singapore," and they do this by promoting artistic passion, creativity, professionalism, and boldness in the five forms of theatre, dance, music, visual arts and literature. I thank NAC for their support of *LONTAR*, and hope that this relationship will carry on for many years to come.

This issue of *LONTAR* presents speculative writing from and about Singapore, the Philippines, Cambodia and Taiwan. Inside these pages, you'll find: the evocation of an alternate ancient Cambodia from multiple award-

winner Geoff Ryman; an investigative automotive revenge tale from Palanca Grand Prize winner Dean Francis Alfar; the mystery of magically appearing furniture from Taiwanese short fiction *wunderkind* Sabrina Huang (deftly translated by PEN/Heim grant recipient Jeremy Tiang); an uneasy exploration of marital discord on the road from Manila Critics' Circle National Book Award winner Nikki Alfar; a quasi-Ballardian take on beach resort culture from Ben Slater; the uniquely Singaporean response to a viral outbreak from JY Yang; and speculative poetry from Anne Carly Abad, Arlene Ang, Tse Hao Guang, Cyril Wong, David Wong Hsien Ming and Daryl Yam.

I believe that this is our strongest issue yet, and I'm terrifically proud of it. Six contributors have won major literary awards in Singapore, Taiwan, USA, UK, and the Philippines, and I'm especially excited to be publishing work by Geoff Ryman (who was one of my instructors at the 2002 Clarion Writers Workshop, and who's won just about every major award in science fiction and fantasy) and Dean Francis Alfar (who has done more in the Philippines to promote speculative fiction than anyone else there, and whose 2007 novel *Salamanca* was one of the best books I read this year), whose stories bookend the issue. Once again, you're in for a treat, so turn the page and enjoy the ride.

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE ROADS OF MANILA

Dean Francis Alfar

Dean Francis Alfar (Philippines) is a playwright, an anthologist, and the author of the novel *Salamanca* (2006) and two collections of short fiction—*The Kite of Stars and Other Stories* (2007) and *How to Traverse Terra Incognita* (2012). His literary awards include ten Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature—including the Grand Prize for the Novel for *Salamanca*—as well as the Manila Critics' Circle National Book Awards for the graphic novels *Siglo: Freedom* (2003) and *Siglo: Passion* (2005), the Philippines Free Press Literary Award, and the Gintong Aklat Award. He lives in Manila with his wife, award-winning fictionist Nikki Alfar, and their daughters Sage and Rowan, and is currently working on his third short fiction collection. "A Field Guide to the Roads of Manila" was originally published in the November 2012 issue of *Esquire* (Philippines).

Aurora Boulevard

She's framed by the stark concrete pillars of the Betty Go-Belmonte Station of the LRT Purple Line when I finally find her, smoking a slender cigarette in exactly the way the majority of reports I appropriated suggested she would be, exhaling equally thin wisps of grey from her thin lips. The train stopped moving hours ago, but there is an echo of motion surrounding her like a phantom embrace. At first sight, she is a disappointment, haggard skin and bones covered by loose clothing old enough to have become fashionable again. She is slim in a way that is not flattering, and her hair is cropped, jagged darkness. Against the backdrop of the elevated train's supports, she is as small as a child, dwarfed and reduced in context to just another background detail. It is only when I'm close enough to almost touch her that she looks up at me and I am caught in the intensity of her eyes. Between the shadows of lampposts, she resembles the beloved First Lady she was named for, and for a heartbeat I believe she is who she seems to be.

“It’s fifty pesos for a handjob, a hundred for a blowjob, and three hundred for a fuck.” The spell is broken. The words exit her mouth in a dull cadence, soldiers performing the same pointless manoeuvres, practised, polished and fatigued beyond expectation. “Midnight special. There’s a Sogo nearby. Or we can do it in your car.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, turning away. “I did not come for any of that.” I feel my face flush, my embarrassment at being mistaken for a john quite evident in the redness of my cheek and neck. Despite the fact that I could never feel attraction for her, I remind myself that she is not what she appears to be. I remind myself of why I sought her out. I think of Mara.

“For five hundred, we can do anything you want,” she says, producing a wan smile. “Come on, what do you say?”

“No, no. Listen, I—”

“You won’t find any cheaper around here,” she says, leaning over to scratch the backside of her knee. “Except for the Doña, but there’s a difference between those who do it to live and those who do it out of desperation. And that withered slut is nowhere near right now, anyway. And she’s sick, sicker than you can imagine.” Perhaps consigning me a lost cause, she puts on a look of indifference.

“Aurora?”

At my question, she stiffens, pulls herself up to her full height, which could be no more than a few inches past five feet. The tremulous expression on her face transforms into a scowl.

“Are you Aurora?”

“Who wants to know?”

Our eyes meet again, the ennui in hers replaced by suspicion and fear; I try to hide the excitement in mine behind a veneer of professionalism. There are questions that need answers. I believe the Roads know.

“No one to fear,” I tell her, keeping my voice even and colourless. I need her cooperative. My fervid research in recent days drilled into my head an

important dictum—never give them a reason to run. Because Roads, when they run, are very difficult to catch.

I flash her my badge. It’s a custom replica of a Metropolitan Command 1st Investigator’s shield, identical to the real thing, down to blinking security LED parsers. The man who sold it to me assured me that it would be generally rare for anyone to ask to inspect it at close proximity; that it stood a good chance of deceiving even the most observant eyes. I hope it’s good enough for a Road.

“Fuck off.” She averts her gaze. “I have nothing to say.”

“Please,” I say, pocketing my bogus badge then extending an empty hand toward her. “I just want to talk, to ask a few questions. There have been murders—”

“I said fuck off,” she snarls, inadvertently drawing attention to the needle marks on her arms she tries to hide as she pulls down the long sleeves of her garment. “You have no jurisdiction over me.”

“I’m neither vice nor narc. Please, have you—”

She runs. Her form blurs and for an instant becomes a wraith, like the notion of something not quite there but with enough detail to cause doubt. Then she is gone, leaving behind shimmering afterimages that dissolve into the night air split seconds behind her trail.

I focus my thoughts, activate my black-market racers by squeezing my toes together in the manner the seller taught me, and feel the immediate hum of power. I let my feet move, stomping my right foot heel first then my left, the prescribed initial dance steps of pursuit. Roads on the run may be difficult to catch, but not impossible, not anymore. Racers were initially developed for the use of government iterologists, to enable them to observe the roads in motion. Six design generations later, the footwear is available if you know where to look.

As buildings twist around me, I am visited again by the nausea provoked by the change of perspective, having barely practised use of the racers since I

acquired them a few days ago. I swallow the sourness, blink my eyes thrice to viz my eyes against the onrush of wind, and run after her.

I'm chasing Aurora. I'm pursuing a Boulevard. My heart pounds in staccato. If it were any other time, I would be having the time of my life.

Around me, the distortion field grows. Buildings, lampposts and vehicles buckle then fade, replaced by swaths of light and colour. Where Roads travel is confusing, hazardous and barely comprehensible. I blink my eyes again and focus on her undeniable trail, words already composing and arranging themselves into questions in my head, as if I had already caught up with her.

I do not notice the direction she is running toward, caught up in my fantasy of triumphant hope. Too late I realize that she's racing to another Road.

"Ed!" I hear her shout. "Help me!"

I curse under my breath, realizing the inevitable intersection she's tearing toward. There is no love lost between cruel EDSA and myself. During our first and only encounter he made short work of me.

I notice him too late, taller and broader than any man I've seen. In one fluid motion he takes her to one side with an arm corded with muscle and strikes at my face with a fist that seems larger than the moon. I feel my nose break and I scream. I manage to twitch my toes and deactivate my second-hand racers as I fall to the ground in pain.

"Hello, Ed," I gasp, trying to stand. "I just want to ask about the murders. Maybe Aurora saw something—"

"*Leave us alone,*" EDSA roars, the sound of his voice the *basso profundo* of a thousand engines thrumming deep and with malice. His heavysset figure, dense with muscle and reeking of smoke, tenses as he pounds me again. I taste blood in my mouth. I try to remember the protocols of physical altercation from the various websites I consumed whole, but the thoughts fail to cohere in my head. I want to fight back, even though I know I can't defeat him, but an act of will is still a conscious choice and I find myself unable to make any. I lose count of the times I'm struck, curling myself into a ball in a vain effort to

protect the rest of my face from his fists. He is relentless. I think I'm dying. He is moving so fast and I'm thinking too slow.

"Stop, Ed!" I hear Aurora's voice through the red haze. "Enough. Enough!"

He finally listens to her and I am left to my spasms. I hear them talking but cannot make out anything they're saying. Then I feel EDSA's presence, physical and powerful, beside me, the thick hair around his mouth brushing against my ear.

"*The third time we meet will be the last.*" His voice is vast and true, invading my mind before I give in to unconsciousness. "*Do you understand? You have no authority over us. Leave us alone. We know nothing.*"

It is dawn when I come to. I struggle to stand and take an inventory of the throbbing mass of my face. My nose is a node of pain and my left eye cannot stop twitching. Miraculously, save for some painful bruises and tenderness around my ribs, my body is intact. Part of me cannot believe two things: first, that I survived encountering EDSA once again. EDSA, one of the Circumferentials. And second, that no one took anything from me in the hours while I lay helpless along Aurora Boulevard. It is odd that I am impressed more by the lack of the second occurrence rather than the existence of the first.

I sit at a curb and fight the urge to touch my face again. My eye feels like it wants to surrender and just shut down. I begin marshalling the strength to get to a medcen, or at least find a librecel to call for a ride to one. I may need medical attention. It hurts to even think about moving but I need to plan what to do next.

"Hey," a voice interrupts my slow thoughts. "I'm glad you're all right. Or sort of all right."

I look upwards and see Aurora standing across the street, smoking a cigarette, her face impassive in the gathering light. I will my body to stand but it doesn't respond.

"I'm sorry about Ed, but you spooked me. And he has a temper." She shrugs, her bony shoulders struggling against her ill-fitting blouse. "Anyway, I

don't know anything about those dead people. I didn't see anything."

I try to say something. How I meant her no harm. How she didn't have to run. How I knew she wasn't guilty of what I was investigating. How what she possibly saw less than a week ago could be the key to ending the violent murders. I make it as far as opening my mouth and producing the shape of an unborn word.

"Go ask Balete, maybe she will help you." Rail-thin, she exhales the words as smoke then walks away.

Balete Drive

It's night-time and I'm walking where spirits tread because Roads only manifest when the sun goes down.

By virtue of a host of ghost stories about a woman haunting a lonely stretch of motorway where a giant tree once stood, Balete Drive is conventionally considered one of the oldest Roads of Manila; its gruesome origins purportedly traceable back to the time of Spanish rule, when the tree was the site of an unnamed woman's tragic fate. Modern tellings would have us think that the Woman-in-White is the spirit of a young girl raped by a taxi driver way before the Marcos years in the previous century. I think about how salacious lore and folk wisdom often trump facts as I walk down the shady street. We believe what we want to believe. Or we believe what we are told to believe, without bothering to question. Even today, when there is so little that science cannot answer. Sometimes, I think this country deliberately remains partially mired in its past, where it can admire its imagined zenith.

The data I've analysed strongly supports the idea that Balete, like the other Roads, became sentient when her length and breadth were first completed. What's fascinating is that the Roads—at least as far as the government papers I downloaded are concerned, given their poor digital security systems—share certain commonalities but are as unique as the people they manifest as. And some, like Balete, claim much longer memories than they should be able to,

spanning centuries.

From my liberation of the data network at the University of the Philippines, I know that a number of iterologists have theorized that these memories are somehow accretions, accumulated layers of various people and events that interacted or occurred on the physical thoroughfares. Each manifested Road is the aggregate of all of those things, with an evolving system of variously originated personality traits held together by a dominant persona that is most associated with the street. Aurora, in the first years of her expression, looked exactly like Aurora Aragon Quezon, the assassinated wife of President Manuel Quezon. But she changed fairly quickly when the street expanded as the population in the city grew. With growth came drugs dens and prostitution joints, dotting Aurora Boulevard.

Balete has always manifested as the ghost of a victim of horrible violation. City ordinances from decades ago protect the area around the street, declaring it a purely residential zone. There is little change. Only houses and ghosts and ghosts of houses.

I don't know about real ghosts. I don't believe in those things. Part of me wishes I did. The specious thought makes me laugh but I force it back. My nose and parts of my face, as well as a few ribs, while having benefitted from a few hours at the medcen, are still tender. The skin and bone buds still need a bit of time to completely take. Until they do, I need to be more careful.

I find myself staring at one of the preserved houses on the street, anachronistic throwbacks to a time when the first level of homes were reserved for livestock and storage, and when windows actually opened. The construction looks dubious, but I've never been a fan of the past. The past only brings sorrow.

"The owners of that house were childless," a susurrant voice whispers from behind me. "Rather than risk the property falling into the hands of the poor, they gave it away to their wealthy friends."

I turn around and see a woman walking toward me, her presence distorting

the evening air around her. It's the ghost.

"And when those people were near death, they passed it on to another rich friend. And so on and so on."

The vidcaps—the latest set of which I saw by means of a slave link in the MetroCom's evidence aggregator the other night—do not do her justice. She is almost as tall as I am; her slender face framed by straight long hair the colour of night. She's dressed in a pristine white t-shirt and blue jeans, with a white knit shawl wrapped around her shoulders. To my shock, I find my eyes surreptitiously glancing at the place where her legs meet, looking for bloodstains. Thankfully, my unintended act is interrupted when I'm nearly overwhelmed by the scent of her, a mingling of dead leaves and gasoline. But even her scent is trumped by the invisible aura around her: a sinking feeling of dread, a projected sense of helplessness. Knowing I would encounter Balete, this afternoon's specific research makes me mentally prepared. Or at least I'm betting I am, assuming the sequestered documents and accounts I read are true.

"One night the house got tired of not having a true family to watch over the generations. All the members of the last family were found dead the next morning. It's been empty ever since."

She continues murmuring without looking directly at me. I do my best to keep calm, stay rational. I notice that her pale feet are bare. For some reason, I find this more disturbing than anything else about her so far.

"Aren't you afraid?" When she looks at me I feel cold but manage a small grin.

"No."

"You are the man with questions. Aurora told me you were coming."

"Yes," I reply, controlling a shiver. I show her my counterfeit badge "My name is—"

"I am Balete," she responds softly with a curt nod, dismissing my offers of name and handshake. "I do not often talk to people. I prefer it that way."

"I'm grateful." Like Aurora, she doesn't give my badge a second look.

"Why should I help you?" The words come out of her blue-tinged lips like a moan. "What makes you think you, or what you represent, mean anything to me?"

Her directness catches me off-guard. I feel my body shaking. I sense fear taking hold of me. I remind myself that despite appearances, she is a Road, not some creature of collective Filipino nightmares. My research warned me of this effect. I steel myself and recall my purpose. I think of Mara, poor Mara.

"There have been murders," I begin. I tell her about the six dead bodies found within high-rise offices and condominiums. Of how the cause of death for each victim was ruled by the coroner to be vehicular trauma. Of how four of them could barely be identified except for tell-tale vehicle tracks on portions of their remains. Of how the smell of exhaust smoke lingered. Of how the murders all occurred in this general area of the city. Of how it all needed to stop.

Through my long narrative she keeps still, her eyes fixed on a point far away. Her soft breaths sound like the wind weaving through distant trees. When I have spoken all I can say, she permits the silence to settle in the cold night air.

"You think it's one of us." The whisper is an accusation, a statement of fact. She turns in a slow semi-circle until her eyes meet mine. "You think a Road did all of what you said?" Her question is a pained moan.

"It is unusual for car crash victims to be found high up in buildings, often within minutes of their death. Evidence would lead me to think that—"

"No." She turns away. "What you say is impossible."

Around us the cool breezes begin to twist and turn, collecting a small eddy of fallen leaves and refuse at its edges. Alarmed by the winds, I take a step back, readying my racers. I do not want to engage her but I also need answers.

"Please," I say, fighting the sudden chattering of my teeth. "I looked for Aurora because one of the buildings where the victims were found was near

her course. And, as you know, she pointed me to you. I want to ask some questions, if you've seen or heard or know of—"

The rest of my request is lost in a flash of startlingly icy crosscurrents. My heart is beating so fast. I shield my healing face with my crossed arms and beg her to listen. I hear her moan all around me, the swirling winds playing havoc with my sense of space. I lower my hands to look for her.

"*How dare you.*"

She is before me, her shawl fluttering behind and above her outstretched arms. She is an apparition, the Woman-in-White, the ghost of Balete Drive. I feel myself succumbing to her presence. My body tells me to run, to flee, to get far, far away but I stay. I focus on the fact that she is a Road. A powerful one, yes, but still a Road. Hunched over, I stand my ground as cold air coils around me. I refuse to let her win. I repeat three words over and over again until at last my shouts reach her ears: "You're killing me!"

Abruptly, there is stillness. Leaves float down to the ground. My skin stings from the sudden loss of pressure. My throat is sore and dry. I'm shuddering with all the adrenaline coursing through my system.

Balete lowers her arms, an agonized expression on her face. "We never kill."

"Maybe *you* don't." I straighten my back, controlling the quivering in my legs. "But one of you does."

"No." She looks away.

"If, for a moment, you choose not to believe what you believe—"

"No."

I feel frustration building up inside me but keep my tone measured. "A Road is killing people."

"People die all the time."

"Not in this way. Please." I hold my breath then continue. "I know it's not you. Not Aurora. Multiple eyewitnesses saw or vided both of you separately

in the hours before, during and immediately after the murders. You don't kill. But perhaps you know who does."

Her face is turned down. "Even if it were possible, it is not something you wish to be involved in."

I walk toward her, keeping my pace deliberate and steady. "I already am. Please."

"There's a Road who knows more than I do. A Road who hears many things. If there is such a thing as a broken Road, he would know."

Into the disquieting silence between us, she whispers a name.

N. Domingo St.

It is the eve of *Basaan*, the feast day of Saint John the Baptist, and despite my water-protective gear I am almost completely soaked. People are out in droves, lining the entirety of N. Domingo on both sides, armed with buckets, bottles and toy guns filled with water, waiting to inflict a re-enactment of their patron saint's most famous deed upon anyone or anything that passes by. From the jam-packed sidewalk where I've stopped to shake the water out of my ears, I see slow-moving cars, their glass windows most definitely rolled up, assaulted by cascades of water, their frowning riders exasperated by the lengthy traffic. A nearby jeepney and its travellers are less fortunate, as the open-air design of the vehicle offers no protection against the aquatic assaults. Over and over again, young shirtless men rush to the unmoving jeepney and drench the people inside. A middle-aged woman, obviously having had enough, gets off and attempts to leave the street, pushing her way through the laughing throng of opportunistic teenagers who liberally pour water over her head. The crowd cheers when, in the distance, a fire engine siren keens and wails before the firemen aim their pulsing hoses directly upward, creating a sudden night rain. It is in and through this mad celebration in San Juan del Monte where I need to find the manifestation of N. Domingo. I wish it were any other night but I cannot afford to wait. If he knows who is involved in the

murders, I need him to tell me. If he is involved in the crimes himself, he must be brought to justice.

As I push and nudge my way through the press of the unruly crowd, I keep an eye on where I'm going while I deliberate on how I'll approach the Road if, no, *when* I find him. My last couple of encounters erupted in violence and I do not want to risk anyone else's safety, but would N. Domingo truly harm the people who live and work and carouse on his stretch? My rational mind tells me that he would, if he were a murderer. If he is, then I'm done and he'll pay for his crimes. I know I've skipped the part about proving his guilt, but there will be time for that. Regardless, it falls to me to consider the welfare of the civs.

I begin to ask the people around me if they've seen him.

It's an hour later when I finally locate him. He's sitting on a dirty white monobloc chair on the sidewalk, sharing beer with several other men. Behind them is an open door leading to a building from which loud K-Pop blares. Next to them is a fried food stall, *Karding's*, its placard proclaims, its front and sides covered by transparent sheets permitting the smoke of the frying oil to escape only in the direction of the coughing cook. Surrounding them is a mix of music, floating curses and conversations, sprays of water and the scent of deep-fried chicken feet and fish balls.

N. Domingo is brown-skinned and dark-haired, like the vast majority of Filipinos. He sports a thin moustache and a few days growth of beard. His wiry physique, boxer-like and covered by tattoos, is exposed by his lack of a shirt. Unlike Balete, he exudes no presence, at least none that I can sense as I approach where he sits. He sees me and in one motion casually picks up a pail of water near his feet and douses me before I can duck. His companions break into laughter. I offer a frown and stand in front of him.

"N. Domingo?" I liberate my badge from its protective sheath and display it for him and his friends to see. I invest my next words with all the respect I can muster. "Is there a place we can talk?"

He narrows his eyes and looks from my badge to me to his friends and then

back to me. One of his drinking companions begins to stand, but N. Domingo gestures for him to remain seated. A press of people passes beside us, wet and laughing. He does not stand. I do not move. Korean pop music thrums away as the food stall vendor fights to breathe.

"Of course, sir," N. Domingo says, breaking into a smile. When he stands, I realize that he's a head shorter than I am. But the presence that I thought was lacking comes at me in full force. "I'm a friend to everyone."

He is a friend. We are old friends. And old friends don't fight. Don't argue. Don't bring up uncomfortable subjects. Instead, old friends share a drink. Share stories. Share an evening lost in the company of free-flowing drinks and genial camaraderie.

It is a sudden splash of water from behind me that breaks his hold on me. Capitalizing on my good fortune, I force myself backwards, away from him.

"What's the matter, my friend?" N. Domingo is false geniality personified, empty hands stretched out from his sides. "Fuck, I thought you wanted to talk. Come sit with us. There's always room for one more."

He's dangerous. Perhaps even more dangerous than EDSA. I did not expect this effect. He can charm the people who walk his length. There was nothing about this in my hurried research about him. Perhaps the liberal amounts of alcohol and the euphoria of the feast's celebration have made him careless, and so he displays his secret. Or I was just careless in my inquiry.

I find myself unable to move back any further. I glance behind me and see that I'm against a wall of men, all smiling, shoulder-to-shoulder. There's no way to get away. The density of the crowd denies the clear space my racers need to work.

"N. Domingo wants to talk to you," one of them tells me, his breath a cocktail of garlic, tobacco and cheap gin. "Don't disrespect our Road."

The only other avenue of escape is the street itself. But N. Domingo is the physical embodiment of that street. It's no less hazardous. I decide that at least I could possibly reason with him instead of meeting my death on the

road. Besides, he's a friend.

I close my eyes for a second and centre myself. He is not a friend. He is a suspect. Perhaps even the murderer. I need to talk to him. Even if I am aware of what he's doing, I am concerned that I am ill-equipped and unprepared to engage. My only hope is that he continues to be civil in public. As he is right now. Because friends look after each other. Friends do not harm each other.

"Come, now," N. Domingo gestures to a collection of beer bottles on the monobloc table. "Have a drink. Tell me what's on your mind, my friend."

I come closer. Two of his companions stand up. One of them offers me his seat. I sit. The other offers me a cold beer. As I raise the frosted bottle to my lips, the K-Pop blasting from the building behind us is replaced by dance music. I watch people gambolling on the street as a deluge rains down, courtesy of the trio of fire engines swarmed by wet children.

N. Domingo shifts his chair next to mine. He leans backwards, extends a slender arm behind him. The vendor places a cardboard container with four fish balls topped with sweet sauce into his hand. N. Domingo leans forward and puts the food on top of the table before taking one with his fingers and popping it into his mouth.

"It's fucking *good*," he shouts against the cacophony of music and human voices.

"Thank you," I manage to say, biting into one. The savouries and sugar mix in my mouth.

We watch the people dance and throw water at each other for a few minutes. I'm happy to be with friends. Then I am reminded of a special friend. A friend I loved. A friend I married. A friend who was found with her body crushed as if she were run over, on the 31st floor of our apartment. I remember Mara. Once again she saves me.

I stare at N. Domingo. He responds with an inquisitive look.

"Release me," I tell him. "Do you really want to interfere with an official investigation?"

"My friend," he says, rubbing his damp stubble. "I assure you I have powerful friends. The mayor and his sons, their entire fucking clan, are my friends. Are your friends as powerful as me and mine?"

I look him in the eye and take a gamble. I cannot lose the opportunity to question him. I choose my next words with care and deliver them with casual disregard.

"I would say EDSA is powerful, wouldn't you?" I watch his amusement dissipate. "He knows I'm asking around. Now you tell me. Are you threatening *my* friend?"

I feel his presence relax. Immediately, my head clears.

"What do you want to know?" he asks, his eyes darkening.

"Not here," I say, standing up. "Somewhere where we can really talk."

He signals his friends away and begins to walk, with me directly behind him. The sea of people parts and creates a path for the Road, the momentary looks of concerns in their eyes assuaged by the wide smile on his lips. There is no doubt that he is known. What I doubt is that the adoration the people of San Juan del Monte exhibit to N. Domingo is sincere.

Eventually, we reach a store that has bicycles of various models and colours behind its glass display. The people in front suspend their merriment and move away to give him access to the door.

"We can talk inside." He gestures me within.

He leans against an aluminium counter on his elbows. I shut the door behind me.

"My friends call me Nico," he says with a grin. "So, what can I do for Ed?"

"First, I am not *your* friend." I need to move fast. I need to get him talking. Even if I managed to persuade him into believing that I was there with EDSA's sanction, it did little to undermine the fact that I was alone with a Mara's possible murderer.

"Fine," he says, his fingers tracing the shape of his moustache. "Whatever."

"Second, where were you on these past six nights, beginning with the

18th?” I ease my weapon out, giving him a glimpse of the vintage Heckler & Koch USP Compact, chambered for .40 bullets. It’s old but proven. And though I have no illusion of being able to truly stop a Road with it, I know I can hurt him if it comes to that.

“No need to show me that.” His grin is all teeth. “Now tell me, why does Ed—”

“Where were you on the nights from the 18th of this month until last night?” I interrupt him forcefully. “I’m asking the questions here.”

“Hey, hey,” he leans back a bit further. “No need for that tone. I was here, like I’m always, from sunset to sunrise. The feast is all week long and many people can vouch for my blips. From sundown, I’m with the mayor. We part ways at 9pm. Then I party with my people. You want vids? Or pics?” He makes to take an object out of his pocket.

“Slowly,” I tell him, gun at the ready by my side.

“Easy, friend. It’s just my cell.” He follows my instructions and raises a chrome-plated mobile phone. “I take lots of pics and vids. All of them time-stamped. You can even requisition everyone’s that I’ve been with. We like to keep memories of the feast. It’s all uploaded to our site.”

I maintain my composure and signal with my chin for him to put it down.

He places the cell on the counter. “You can take this as long as you promise to return it. I like the features. A friend gave it to me. A gift.”

“I will.” I nod without relaxing the ready grip on my weapon. “And if I find that you lied to me, you can be sure I will return.”

“Just who are you?”

“Not your friend.” I tilt my head to my badge as a reminder.

“Whatever,” N. Domingo laughs. The sound is the whine of old diesel engines. “Now, you tell me just what is it that you’re looking into. Maybe I can be persuaded to help. After all, the sooner you get what you’re looking for, the sooner you’re out of here. The sooner I can get back to the party.”

I start to tell him about the murders. If he alibis out, he might still have some

useful intel. If he is involved, I’ve just given him details he already knows.

“Very mysterious.” N. Domingo’s face is a study in contemplation. “A classic locked room mystery, straight from the movs. But I don’t see how I blipped on your scan. To state the obvious, I’m a Road. I’ve been here all along. Where the fuck else am I supposed to be?”

I tell him about the causes of death and let him come to his own conclusions. It’s partly a test, and partly to see his reaction.

“It’s a Road,” he says softly. “Fuck. So it’s true. He’s gone and done what he said he’d do.”

“Who?” I watch his face. “Who did?”

“Are you fucking with me?” His expression changes to outrage.

“Why? What are you saying?” My eyes flick to the three possible exits.

“Are you *fucking* with me? Are you even really his friend?” His voice rises, the drone of motorcycles. “Because he’s gone fucking insane. He has to be stopped!”

“No, I’m not.” When he questions my friendship, I realize whom he’s referring to. My body aches with the memory of the recent beating. “I’m not EDSA’s friend.”

“You lied to me, you *fuck!*”

“Stay right where you are.” An image of Mara, bloody, broken and barely recognizable, invades my head.

N. Domingo scowls at me. Then he lowers his head. When he next speaks, the tears on his face surprise me.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says quietly. “What matters are those people. Their lives lost. It’s terrible, unimaginable.” He moves slowly to the glass display and looks outside at the celebration. “All your lives are brief. In the instance of your existence, you know hurt and pain but you all rise up, get up again. And all too soon you are gone. All my people have gone, all those outside will be gone. We are here because of you. We are here to protect you, to give you safe passage when we can.”

He stops talking. I move beside him. Outside, people raise their hands at the artificial rain of the fire hoses. The shadows of errant drops of water on the window fall on both of us.

“We’re your friends.”

“N. Domingo, you need to tell me why EDSA is doing this.”

He reaches out a hand and trails it against the smooth glass. “He’s always been angry at all of you. Furious that the Roads are not considered people. But I know that isn’t true. Not with me. We are Roads. We don’t need to be anything or anybody else.”

“But why kill all these people?” Why Mara?

“To punish you. To frighten you. Because he boasted he’d find a way. He told us he’d been looking for a way. That while he could not do harm to anyone in his stretch, he was sure the rule would not apply if he were elsewhere.”

“Are you saying EDSA found a way to leave his stretch?” My head is throbbing with the implications.

N. Domingo nods mutely.

“How?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he grew stronger. I don’t know.”

“How do you know?”

He turns to me, his eyes bright with anger. “There are over a hundred Roads that intersect with him: Caloocan, Quezon City, Mandaluyong, San Juan del Monte, Makati, Pasig, Taguig, Parañaque and Pasay! I assure you that all will bear witness against him—every Road will. We all know his threats. We all know his rage. And what he’s done is fucking *wrong*. He’s transgressed against the Code of Roads. It’s bad enough that he terrorises most of us. But now he’s killed people. And found a way to leave his stretch. None of us will take his side. From Taft and Ayala and Buendia to Shaw and Ortigas. Katipunan, Santolan, Aurora, Timog, Mother Ignacia—”

I stop him from rattling off all the names of the Roads with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Listen,” N. Domingo says. “Even if he is one of the six Circumferentials, they are all still answerable to the Council of Radials. You cannot take him. He’s beyond your laws. He’s one of us. This needs to be elevated.”

I think of Mara, alone in our condo unit. Mara, whose daily commute to and from work in Makati made her one of the millions of commuters along EDSA. I think of the horror she was subjected to, the fourth random victim of a broken Road, and I feel my heart shatter once again, this time not by sorrow. My regret and guilt, from being away at work at one of the government agencies testing security systems that night, is trumped by wrath.

“You do that,” I tell him, pocketing my weapon as I make my way to the front door. “You tell whatever council or authorities you Roads have. You make sure of it.”

“And what about you?”

“Nothing changes the fact that people were killed.” I open the door to the jam-packed street. The boisterous crowd continues to dance with wet abandon. “I’m going to make sure justice is served.”

Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA)

My first encounter with EDSA did not go well. When I realized that MetroCom, the real investigators, were stumped and could not tell me who brutally killed Mara in our condo, I separated all my grief and locked it away. I applied my mind, which Mara always insisted my government agency employer was lucky to have, to the horror. I transformed it from something personal to what N. Domingo referred to as a mystery. Between cold logic and intuitive leaps I latched on to the notion that Roads were involved. Truthfully, I thought they were used as a means rather than being perpetrators themselves. Forty-eight hours after the MetroCom told me they had no leads and that the investigation could take a long time, I began my research and tried to find everything I could about the Roads. Using my position, experience and imagination, I infiltrated many secure servers chasing data, trying to find what I could. I chose to begin

with EDSA, thinking he would know the most. I sourced the racers and my grandfather's gun, and went to talk to him. It took over six hours to attract his attention and fewer than thirty seconds for him to disregard my questions and drop me like I was nothing. I remember thinking that I had approached him incorrectly, that I had offended him, that I had missed something in the protocols I hastily researched. Now I know that it was none of those things.

It was guilt. And fear of discovery.

I am aware that I do not have evidence against him. Only what I've put together. Only the word of another Road speaking on behalf of the Roads.

I do not believe their council, if it even truly exists, will do anything to the most important Road in Manila. I do subscribe to a phantom separation of justice. I do not consider the Roads to be people.

I know that many of us accept them. I understand that some agitate for the Roads to be granted the status of citizens and to be granted rights equal to what we possess. I am aware that there certainly must be some sort of process for situations similar to this. That a brain trust somewhere sometime must have developed a methodology. But I do not think they considered what Balete calls a broken Road. I do not think any Filipino wants to think that the Roads, our Roads, paid for by our taxes and birthed by our efforts, could possibly turn against us like ungrateful children. It is in this gap, created by our naïveté, where I currently exist.

What I do next will be equivalent to a declaration of war on the Roads. Because they will take his side. Because despite all of N. Domingo's talk of friendship, they are not what we think they are. They are not what we want to believe them to be. They are evolving. Like I evolved into someone else the night Mara died.

Other paths are waking up. I think EDSA got the cooperation of the corridors of our condo. That's how he was able to move into our unit. To Mara.

None of us are safe outside. None of us are safe inside any building. Add to the sentient Roads the awakening of all our streets, bridges,

tunnels, walkways and hallways, and our communal vulnerability becomes appallingly transparent.

EDSA must pay for what he did to Mara. I will make of him an example. He will be a deterrent.

This is the end.

Because I am on EDSA. Because I have set into motion something that will attract his attention. Then I will deal with him. Yes, one Filipino engineer with expertise in systems security against a crazed, unnatural and murderous manifestation.

At 4am I send override commands via the enslaved traffic module I took over a few hours ago, rerouting early morning traffic from the entirety of the Magallanes Interchange and the South Luzon Expressway to the network of lesser streets and thoroughfares. Over three million vehicles travel the fifteen-mile expanse of EDSA every day, but I do not need to deal with that number thanks to the contingencies programmed by the Greater Metropolitan Traffic Commission for emergencies. I trigger eight scenarios and put the exigencies into motion. In less than an hour, I have the clear course I want. No people will be hurt.

I perform the rest of my plan in sequence, taking advantage of all the trapdoors my sixteen years of experience affords: depowering the grid in the area by spoofing instructions to the Meralco switches; shutting down the support interface for intelligent lane assignments by giving counterfeit commands to the three main systems; and cutting off access to all intersections from Balintawak to Pasay by falsifying the credentials of the GMTC to trigger the lowering of concrete bulwarks. EDSA is effectively isolated, and the core of the problem is where I am located.

He arrives from the north, rising from the ground as he runs, gaining mass with every step. He looks confused and angry. My multi-pronged assault is too much for him to handle. I doubt he can even begin to comprehend the complexity of my initial attack.

This issue of LONTAR presents speculative writing from and about Singapore, the Philippines, Cambodia and Taiwan.

Inside these pages, you'll find:

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- **an investigative automotive revenge tale from Palanca Grand Prize winner Dean Francis Alfar;**
- **the mystery of magically appearing furniture from Taiwanese short fiction *wunderkind* Sabrina Huang (deftly translated by PEN/Heim grant recipient Jeremy Tiang);**
- **an uneasy exploration of marital discord on the road from Manila Critics' Circle National Book Award winner Nikki Alfar;**
- **a quasi-Ballardian take on beach resort culture from Ben Slater;**
- **the uniquely Singaporean response to a viral outbreak from JY Yang;**
- **and speculative poetry from Anne Carly Abad, Arlene Ang, Tse Hao Guang, Cyril Wong, David Wong Hsien Ming and Daryl Yam.**

