



# **Contemporary Subjects**

**Edgar Backhouse**

**Maria Gulina**

**Colm O'Shea**

**Karina Dwipayana**



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Spread the Word Book Publisher  
England, United Kingdom



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# Editors' Note

Dear Readers,

We are in the privileged position of introducing you to the first of hopefully many editions published by Spread the Word Book Publisher. Over the last year, we have managed to provide constructive feedback to every writer that has submitted their work—a principle that is at the heart of our aim to recognise every writer that finds the courage to share their voice on our platform. This book is a chance to showcase the work which we have particularly admired over the past year.

As writers who have attempted to publish their own work, we can empathise with the self-doubt that comes with the prospect of having your work read by others. For us, it is an ongoing fear of rejection—and with any fear, it is far easier to justify running away than confronting it head-on. It is here that we should exact praise on to all the writers that have summoned the courage to submit their work for us; they have all confronted the obstacle of self-doubt and have readily accepted feedback from our team of editors. Without the courage of its literary contributors, this book would not have been possible.

But now we would like to direct our attention

onto you, the reader. While our platform focuses on encouraging new writing, we are also a publisher that looks to motivate the often overlooked art of new reading. Reading is a practice that cultivates the discipline of openness and patience. It is important to take into account that there are contexts and ways of reading that are more suitable for different types of books—it would seem intuitive that your perspective of reading John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* would change as to whether you studied it at school or knew it as the book that changed your mother's life.

As the following is a short story collection, it is worth noting that the medium of the short story lends itself to being self-contained; perhaps deferring to the articulatory power of Edgar Allan Poe, this passage from *The Philosophy of Composition* will explain this point as best as I can:

*"If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity—for if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed"*

With each of the following stories, it is our simple recommendation that they are each read in one sitting so that they are experienced in totality and that the ‘affairs of the world’ don’t interfere with the carefully constructed atmosphere that the featured writers of this book have cultivated.

Ultimately, there is no way to reason someone into liking something that just isn’t for them. For us, a ‘good’ story is whether it solicits a second reading; whether it warrants a return. Our simple way of working out whether the story speaks to us is always answered by the question: ‘Do I want to read this again?’. That is how the contents of this book have been chosen by our editors—through an unarticulated quality—the mere fact that the story was not exhausted in a single reading.

Before we hand you over to the capable hands of Maria, Colm, Edgar, and Karina, we would like to give special thanks to Alfonso Buhigas, Beatriz de Castro, Christopher Millis, Cristobal Echevarria, Kai Scotney, Katerina Roka, Laura Molloy, Martin Pearce, Mayara Zucheli, Nicholas Iyamabo, Nisha Patel, Raja Khan, Sam Morgan, Sukhpreet Chana, Yutong Liu, and Zori Nencheva for their many efforts to make this book a reality.

**Happy Reading!**

**Marcos Echevarria and Peter Barrett.**



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# The Last Train to Aldersham

· Edgar Backhouse

*Edgar Backhouse is a prose writer from Luton, United Kingdom. With a background in film production and scriptwriting, his work unsurprisingly takes its form through imagistic inspiration. Edgar brings together his own experience and his empathetic curiosity in his creative process; *The Last Train to Aldersham* is not only an examination into the paradoxical expression of an author writing about their incapacity to vocalise original thought, but a mild disgust at dealing with the impossibility of bureaucratic guidelines. Edgar's charm comes from a wonderful ability not to take himself too seriously, and his intuitive and open approach to his own writing. *The Last Train to Aldersham* was the winner of Spread the Word's UoS Writing Contest, and is his first published short story.*

—

Amber flecks of rain dotted the glass, lit by the platform lights of the station. Across the monitor strip above her read the time ‘02:30’ in white pixels on a blue background. The destination beside it read in the same hazy font, ‘Aldersham.’

Beyond that, the stops between her and her destination were a string of digital nowheres. ‘Lumlow, Hatswitch, Encrest’ the list continued with even more nondescript names of far-off hamlets no one wanted to visit.

Outside, a pair of girls walked past the window done up in ruffled cocktail dresses and once-immaculate hair, now messed by the evening’s passing. Their heels hung from their hands casually, they tittered across the concrete platform and out of the rain, smiles sprung from ear to ear, hands brush-

ing on skin in small pets and touches. Friends? she thought, maybe more?

They leaned into each other and laughed, faces inches apart. She could feel the hot flush in her cheeks like their breath on her face. She hoped for a moment they'd look through that crystal pane, the shield of dripping beads, and see her, smile at her. Her stomach churned fiercely as her feet dug into the soles of her trainers. Her hands gripped the package she was holding far too tightly. She ached.

'Another late night?' scratched a voice from next to her.

Ruby swiveled around to see an older face staring at her, a soft smile curled on her lips, a lively pair of eyes set in a face too old for them. Michelle spoke again.

'Got you on the early mornings again? I don't know how you tolerate it.'

'I think I prefer it actually,' Ruby croaked, tugging herself inwards at the warble of her voice. She spun quickly to see the angels beyond the window were gone. Michelle laughed a sound like old scotch and cigarettes, harsh and hard on the throat.

'I don't think I could manage it,' she yawned and reached her arms out, swinging them slowly upwards, huffing and stretching them before dropping them

down beside her. The package in her lap was smaller than Ruby's and sat comfortably on her legs. Ruby clutched her own perilously.

Michelle never seemed to care for little things like damaged parcels and failed deliveries, each citation rolling off her like rainwater. Ruby could never be so lax, her body a bundle of nerves at the slightest jolt or waver. It was her first job and the thought of being fired played hell on her nerves and flipped her stomach in circles. Michelle was older, perhaps not wiser, but certainly just as haggard as the younger woman.

'Where's your stop?' Michelle cooed harshly, leaning back in her seat as the train hummed to life and the doors of the carriage clamped shut. The empty old machine began to trundle along, the grating of metal against metal now heavy in the background. 'Mine's in Eledan. Some old bag in a bungalow decided she just needed chocolate cake at 2 am, and off I go.'

Ruby looked around at the vacant seats. Michelle, graceful as she was, had chosen the one right beside her, trapping them together in some social nightmare, all water cooler conversations and workplace courtesy.

She kept her eyes desperately fixed on the window

as the train pulled out from the station, the lights of far away buildings bright past the frames of red-brick shells that obscured her view. She remembered stories of her granddad working here, in those old storehouses and postal depots, zipping from town to town by train on some high-speed-express-package-odyssey that kept all the little places connected. She mourned the fact he'd worked there all his life, and now here she was too.

Her eyes drifted to the parcel sat awkwardly in her lap.

'Aldersham,' she said, reading the label aloud.

'Aldersham?' the older woman squawked, almost fluttering her feathers like a riled-up bird. 'What the hell are they thinking taking an order from Aldersham at this time of morning? Sending a sweet girl like you out with some parcel to who knows where. To some bloody pervert, I'll bet!' Michelle spat as she spoke.

'Delivery privileges will extend to all customers, in all places.' Ruby quoted the regulations handbook to the letter. She turned to meet Michelle's gaze and found her looking at her queerly. 'What?'

Michelle shook her head in disbelief.

'Can't believe you read that stuff. Just make sure you get some sleep when you get home, you hear?'

Ruby said nothing, her eyes fixed on the window again as the lights of the passing city bled into strips of warped and wavering gold, mottled and shaped by the hammering rain against the train windows, like treasures showering down on her. Minimum wage and no unsocial hours, aren't we so truly blessed, she thought to herself.

She closed her eyes and sucked air in through her nostrils quietly, trying to keep herself from making any sound, her lungs struggling to inflate at the trickling intake of breath. She didn't want to sigh or gasp or choke or do anything to incite Michelle to speak. She didn't care for the older woman's 'thoughts' or 'opinions' or 'helpful tidbits'. Michelle was nice enough, but nice enough never seemed nice enough to Ruby. Courteous? Maybe. Nice? No. Definitely aggravating at times though.

The sooner the journey was over, the sooner she'd hand over her parcel and be home. The sooner she was home, the sooner she'd be in bed. The sooner she was in bed...

'You wanna know what scares me?' Michelle chimed in.

'Are you just going to tell me anyway?' Ruby sighed.  
I'm scared that I've left the kids with Graham for another night and he's not going to do any of the

bloody cleaning I've asked him to do. I'll come home to the lazy bastard asleep in front of the telly and the dishes still in the sink.'

Michelle huffed and retrieved from her coat pocket a cereal bar. She pried apart its wrapper to find it obliterated within its shell, likely from her stuffing it in there carelessly some hours ago.

What I'd give to escape you like it has, thought Ruby sourly. She imagined shedding her skin like a chocolate wrapper, or some tinfoil snake, though stopped when she found it upset her.

Outside she heard the hellish sounds of churning and groaning. She'd thought the tracks beneath them had buckled and whirled around in a panic.

It was just Michelle, thank God, chewing with her mouth open.

'Do you want to know what scares me, Michelle?'

'Mm,' the older woman hummed and smacked her lips as cereal churned in her teeth at the back of her mouth.

'Well...' Ruby took another careful, wobbling breath. I used to be afraid of sleeping with my curtains open. I was afraid the sun would swallow me up, just scoop me right out of my bed. It'd see me there and think I was the best snack going.' Her voice wavered with an unsure chuckle. 'And it'd just take

me away.'

The train rattled stronger now, the walls shuddering as the tracks beneath them weaved to-and-fro out of the urban skyline and into the go-between country, that patch of green you find between towns and cities.

'So I never see it. I sleep all day to come to this awful job and deliver parcels at God knows what time to whoever the hell cares. And then I go back to bed. And I wake up. And it goes on over and over.'

The warped metal of the tracks was almost screaming now, the carriage leaning wildly as it turned round the bend, the speed continuing to pick up. Ruby's stomach ground against her insides as the world lurched around her.

'Sometimes I wonder if I leave my curtains open, maybe it'll take me away and I'll go to heaven or hell or some place where people know me. Maybe they'll hate me, or love me or... God, I hope they love me. I haven't been loved in so long Michelle, I haven't been touched or kissed or held.' Her chest squeezed in on her heart and lungs, tears beading in her eyes. 'I just need someone to listen to me or I think I'll open my curtains and just slip right out of the atmosphere, you know? I'll just go away and nobody will care. I feel so cold. Do you know what that feels like?'

She stared at Michelle still for some time, the older woman still chewing the last of her cereal bar, eyes trained on the glass of the windows.

'Rain's getting rougher, isn't it?' The old bitch wasn't even listening.

Ruby choked back the urge to scream. The rain was thrashing the cab now, so strongly you could barely see beyond the glass, pounding so loudly that Ruby hoped it might drown out any sound within.

Michelle turned her head towards her, eyes still fixed on the rain outside.

'You know what you need to do, love? Find yourself a better job. They've got all these job sites these days, loads of work out there for pretty girls like yourself. While you do that, find a nice man and hold onto him. Graham might do my head in, but he's company at least.'

Michelle didn't stop nattering until her stop, though Ruby was far from listening. She felt like she needed to vomit.

Her package eventually got to Aldersham, though she handed it off with no pleasantries. She couldn't say anything. She could barely move, save for handing over the parcel in her hands. The girl who answered the door was pretty. Tired, sure, but pretty. She joked about the contents, something risqué,

something new and adventurous and different. Ruby thought she may even have been hitting on her, with a sweet comment here and a warm smile there, but she couldn't bring herself to say anything. She got home around 4:30 that morning.

—

The sun poured in through open curtains and flooded the room with light thick and warm enough to swim in, churning through the air and setting the world at ease. All around the city, the buildings swam in that brilliant glow, preserved in that briny pool of splendid momentality. Everything was that second, that brief glinting moment in time. Everything was perfect, though the bed it lit was empty, the sleeper long gone and drifting far away.

In some other place, some other time, the dishes were clean, the children were happy, and a girl had found comfort in the arms of her friend after a night out. It all worked out, in the end.

\*

# Dear Diary

· Maria Gulina

*Maria Gulina is a writer, editor, collagist, journalist, and photographer from Minsk, Belarus. Over the last ten years, she has worked with independent media and environmental NGOs developing programs around education in sustainability and protecting cultural heritage. Maria is primarily a non-fiction writer who uses her writing to not only shine a light on the uniqueness of subjectivity and the beauty of the quotidian, but to authorise her own voice as a woman. In April 2022, two months into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, she posted extracts from her own diary (in Belarusian) on Facebook.*

*Originally for friends and family, she developed and translated these entries into English to be published.*

—

# Dear Diary,

It seems unimaginable even whilst I'm typing these words: war is a contemporaneous subject. It's too close to me, affecting the people I know and love. I'm from Belarus, and my dear homeland is ripped apart in political fights over power. My friends and colleagues fled from Belarus to Ukraine in 2020, after great political protests and even greater repressions. Now they have to flee from war. My friends and colleagues in Ukraine have to leave their homes. Some of them would hate Belarus and Belarusians, because the territory of my country is de facto used for Russia's attacks on Ukraine. The monstrous impossibility of war happening at the exact same time as I live my life leaves me completely numb for the

first month, although there are so many things I want to say.

They say that even if you feel numb, you still need to write and keep diaries, because feelings get blurred, memories become layered, and fixation of the moment is necessary. So here it is, my war diary.

## 24.02

My brother is eighteen years old. He studies in Moscow. We had a great talk just yesterday, speaking about how we happen to live through a bad historical time, but still we are so lucky to share the same values in our little family and to have support for each other. We talked about how important it is to invest in your own development and education.

The first thing I read the next morning, the morning of the twenty-fourth of February, was a message from him: “That’s it. The war has begun.”

It is the scariest thing I’ve ever read in my entire life, even though I was safe at the time. Despite all the horrors that I would see later, it still is the scariest thing I’ve ever read in my entire life.

## 25.02 – 27.02

For the next three days I read the news literally

around the clock. I don't do that anymore and I don't advise anyone to.

I drew a poster for the local antiwar protest in Lancaster. That's not what I had brought my pencils for, but you never know.

I wrote, signed and distributed open antiwar letters.

Convinced pacifist, for the first time in my life I donated money to the army.

I am so angry about the stolen life. About the simple everyday things that bring joy disappearing: beautiful dishes, delicious food, favourite books, colourful dresses. Bombs destroy everything.

28.02

Belarus.

When I got to know that the land of my country is used for war, I felt disgust, despair, anger, shame. And it is an honor that the people of my country came out to protest again, knowing that they are now facing torture in prison.

Oh, how much I want to say in answer to the accusations of Belarusians! How angry I am at the comments saying "you only know how to take off your shoes and stand with flowers," referring to the

protests that we had after the fraudulent presidential elections. I know only too well how much more we did: from direct resistance to strikes, from self-organization of parallel government agencies to exposing criminals and helping victims. What did we not do? Well, we just did not go unarmed to fight the army. I don't know how many people would have been willing to die. But I know how many did die regardless of their desire.

How much I want to say! About liquidated organizations, about repressions, about decade-long prison terms, about torture. About my colleagues and friends behind bars too. Russian and Ukrainian media do not write a single line about a thousand people arrested at anti-war protests in Belarus, but any tweet from any celebrity becomes a newsbreak for a few days. I want to say how no one helped us during our protests in 2020. I want to say that if it were not for political, military and propaganda assistance from the Russian leadership, everything would have been so much different now for Belarus.

How much I want to say! About all the things my colleagues and friends have been doing since the first few hours of the war. They find homes for refugees, organise evacuations, fundraise, quickly develop online assistance services, track the movement of mili-

tary equipment, protest, spread information, and go into direct armed resistance on the side of Ukraine. I know they don't sleep for days. Then I read the comments with accusations and hate for all the Belarusians. And I can't say anything to people who are fighting in the war. There's nothing that can undermine their righteousness.

I'm still not sure if I should write this. Honestly, just win. You can think and talk whatever you want about me, just win.

1.03.

You are here: pestilence | war | must write a dissertation.

2.03.

Are we responsible for the war, too? In 2020, I figured out a solid moral principle: the one who was torturing is guilty, not the one who broke down under the torture. As my Ukrainian friend Olya points out, Putin would be very happy if we accept the concept of collective guilt. He would very much like to blame not those who gave and carried out orders, created and disseminated propaganda, but the whole nation. No, all those people have names. They should be named, and they are to be blamed.

The responsibility, of course, is still there. For me, it is our collective responsibility that our 2020 protests happened with this scale only in 2020, not ten years earlier.

### 3.03

As people in Russia and Belarus get prosecuted for peaceful protests or as much as an antiwar Instagram post, I understand that it is now my privilege to call war a war.

### 4.03

My first education was in medical studies, although I understood quite quickly that I'm not built for that profession and never actually worked as a doctor. But today I found out that there is no such thing as useless knowledge. Today I proofread and edit the translation from Ukrainian to English: list of necessary items for military field surgery.

### 5.03

How do you define the greatness of the state? I know that many people in Russia and Belarus believe that it lies within military power. As I went out for a long walk, I stopped for a coffee in a small village cafe.

Inside I saw an old-fashion man reading a magazine, a family with a dog, a father with a baby in a stroller, a family and their son with a mental illness. I'm not making it up, these were the people in one village café on one spring afternoon. It's hard for me to imagine such a picture in a Russian or Belarusian village right now. The places are just not welcoming or even accessible in the first place for parents with children, for people with disabilities, for elderly people, for animals (if there would be any café in the village at all). I know the UK is not perfect, but this small café depicts the greatness of the state for me.

### 6.03

Today we had an unplanned communal dinner with flatmates from Ukraine and Qatar. I felt an unexpected warmth to share food at one table with other people. Together with the flatmate from Ukraine we taught our flatmate from Qatar to say the three most important phrases in Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian: Glory to Ukraine, Long live Belarus, Russian military ship go fuck yourself.

### 7.03

I don't know what to write to my friends from Ukraine. I'm reading on Facebook how my friend

Asya from Kharkiv hides in the basement, bakes bread, looks for evacuation transport. She is in Lviv. She is on the border. She is in Krakow. Now I can breathe. At least one person unfriended me. She is from Chernihiv.

My Belarusian friend Sanya wrote: “Among all the people that I know only my grandfather was supporting Lukashenko. Now that he died I do not know whom I should stop from going to war. It’s true, I don’t know anyone who would go to fight against Ukraine. So to whom should I send all these videos in which Ukrainian people are addressing Belarusian people, demanding them to not go to war? My Ukrainian friends ask to spread these videos, but those who really could go to war—young soldiers serving their obligatory duty—won’t be able to watch them. They don’t have access to the internet. They won’t be asked for their opinion in case they do get sent to war.”

At a conference a few days ago I talked to Ukrainian girls: I was speaking Belarusian, they were speaking Ukrainian. I explained to them the situation in Belarus, struggling to find words. They said: “We know, we understand.” They said: “We like the sound of your voice when you speak Belarusian.”

8.03

I do not have an opinion on sanctions. I understand the need for them. But it is one thing to shut down the streaming service in Russia, and another to preserve most of the privileges of oligarchs and politicians. To cut off Visa and Mastercard, so that people cannot donate even to the few remaining charities, and to endlessly express concerns, and buy oil from Russia, and to sell military equipment to Russia. Do they really have no expert on Eastern Europe who would explain that people will not overthrow Putin, because they can no longer listen to Pink Floyd? That the propaganda will only be pleased with the new argument: see how the evil West wants to destroy Great Russia? That the political elites will unite even stronger, knowing that they have nothing to lose?

Ah well, but you will put a Ukrainian flag over every building in the UK. Switch the lighting to yellow and blue.

Choices.

15.03 – 22.03

My relatives came to visit me. I spent a week full of life, joy, art and creativity. I understand what a privilege it is, but I'm so glad I had this week when I could just sit in the city square in the morning, drink coffee

and watch the people living life without war.

23.03

It's my birthday.

24.03

I found my perfect volunteering opportunity: editing and fact-checking the links and texts on the website, made to help people from Ukraine. The whole day of fact-checking brought me peace. This is something that I'm good at. This is something that I know how to do.

27.03

I didn't break down over the military photos, but I did break down over a video of ice-skaters from Kharkiv. I watched it over and over again, feeling the unbearable joy of life and the immense pain.

28.03

All my acquaintances and friends from Russia are against the war. They are all people working in art, media, environmental and cultural NGOs. They are devastated, trying to do something. I understand them very well.

I think a lot about the urgent need of postcolonialism for post-soviet territories.

I am mostly Russian-speaking. I write texts in Russian, and my texts are the main thing that I have. Putin doesn't own my texts just because they are written in Russian; or my friends just because they speak Russian; or my favourite books just because they are by Russian authors. I'm not going to give them to him.

But I am glad that I have my secret, my shelter, the Belarusian language. You will not get me, you will not colonise me, you will not access my thoughts.

### 31.03

The last day of the term. I hardly remember any of it. I need to write a dissertation proposal. It's sorted out with the poetry, but is there science after Auschwitz? Need to consult Adorno.

### 3.04

My reaction to stress is craving something salty. The poor human body has not yet evolved enough to know the difference between physical and psychological stress. The poor human body thinks that I've been running and sweating, although in fact I've been sitting and watching the photos of genocide in

Butcha all day. Should have been running.

Salty food gave little help. What did actually help? Reaching out to another human being (even if only through the internet, my gesture of despair, my SOS-message). Learning that someone else also struggled to survive through this day. Knowing that someone was also angry, crying, doing everyday things. Being heard.

When I read the news I only turn to stone. When I read a warm message I can finally cry.

And then the next day comes. The war continues.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author includes a link here in case the reader wants to support the Ukrainian struggle through this charity: <https://napryamok.org/en>



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# On the Subject of Bedroom Ceilings

· Colm O’Shea

*Colm O’Shea is a prolific short-fiction writer and novelist from Dublin, Ireland. His oeuvre draws from a variety of media to forge a distinct style of writing; his work can be identified by his character-driven narratives and a focus on transporting the written word into images. Citing Ernest Hemingway’s *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* and the opening of Aaron Sorkin’s 2008 film *The Social Network* as influences,*

*On the Subject of Bedroom Ceilings is the study of an unsympathetic character; the stimulus for this idea came from his tutor at University College Dublin. He has an authority when speaking about his process that correlates with his productiveness and vision as a writer. On the Subject of Bedroom Ceilings is his first published short story.*

—

Did I tell you about the time I was called something like a “protastitute” online? True story. It was from a guy I was dating. It seemed like it came out of nowhere for someone like him. He never did wrong by his parents, let alone me. And it was all because I dumped him after five years of armchair calls every night.

Pretty sure one of his friends got him drunk but either way he starts getting all mad online and before I could even bother to care about how he felt, I found out that he was hounded down by the women of the web. He was promptly eaten raw and savoured by everyone before they went on their next high.

Anyway, I know what you’re thinking. Successful woman like myself in her mid-thirties, who owns a massive apartment in Rathmines that literally hangs

over the rest of the town below, why would I have an interest in the subject of bedroom ceilings?

Well, believe you me, when each board meeting blends into the next, the very least you want is some actual time away from the sterile office blocks, the muted colour schemes and the constant temptation to slit your neck and everyone else's in the building.

That's why I'm always very grateful when I can just casually drift away on a cold November evening like the one I had last year, spread out on my pearly puked quilt.

On that occasion I had missed an email sent at least 13 hours ago by a Mohammed-something-or-other working for Dopamine Ltd., asking if he could pitch whatever new tech could lure the minds of the masses without violating any laws set by the government, the UN or human nature. That meant I needed to get more tea.

I nearly stretched my cream beanie thin and almost punched a hole in my patchy jacket, the kind that once cost enough to pay for heart surgery. Very poor heart surgery mind you, but why complain with a deal like that?

The town outside was about as dull as when it was first conceived. There was a chill in the smog that would have strangled your neck if you were feeling

stupid enough to stay out long. Maybe that's why the crowds along the street I was on were trying their best to just hurry about, politely shoving past everyone near them so they could get to a coffee shop or the college inside the bell tower for current LC students and its former pupils. I.e, schmucks like me.

As I strolled my way onto the cold, cold streets outside, I spoke on the phone with my new assistant for the week:

“Can’t you push back the meeting till next week?” I sighed, moving along the street as several kind motorcycles honked at me in some attempt to rile me up.

“They were very persistent,” my slave told me.

“But what if I don’t want to go?”

“Passing up on a €500 million deal? Might not be the right thing.”

When I forced him to hang up, I didn’t think of cursing. This wasn’t the time for it.

November is my month. The only time in the year when I absolutely want to stay in my glass observatory of a bedroom, because then I can make the excuse that the chill weather and days getting shorter are perfectly good reasons to not get up.

On most days when I’m working, my routine barely changes. Sending mail, getting groceries, sending

groceries with the mail if I'm really lucky. Getting tea wasn't something I had much of an issue with. It was leaving the house that was the issue.

Inside the local Aldi, it was cavern quiet. There was Christmas tinsel already up, tied around the various aisles. If I didn't know any better I would have suspected that the red and green sparkles were secretly being held up at gunpoint unless they acted as merry and festive as they could.

I found the choco biscuits and tea that had made themselves at home in my bloodstream.

"That'll be €3," the spotty shop assistant told me.

I fished out the only note in my tattered coat.

"Is €200 enough?"

Straggling back, I'm cornered by a cult member on the streets trying to sweet talk her way into forcing me to stay for a little while longer. She told me about her ideal version of Jehovah, our lord and saviour Keanu, who will forgive us for all of our sins and allow us to join him in the great big CGI palace in the heavens.

I didn't listen to her. Maybe because I never liked his crappy films anyway.

Regardless, on the street I walked towards an incarnation of:

*A Play!  
by an Author!*

Which was squealing its name to the uninterested masses. I forgot its name only three seconds slower than I usually would.

The door behind me slammed loudly when I got home. My beanie and jacket were all thrown onto the floor, my turtleneck shortly thereafter, as I went back to scheming.

I don't know how to explain it, but I always find being in my bedroom to be so remedial, even though HR tells me it's not supposed to be.

But why couldn't I? Was there anything bad about me having a safe space? Just letting my brain drift away like when Moses parted the fish in Egypt's waters?

Most of my life I've used bedroom ceilings as that ocean. A vast swell of waves that only I can see. Dreams that would stretch from the lightbulb in the centre of the ceiling to each corner and crevice I could spot. Every one of them brought into the world like a tadpole that once grown mooches off of other dreamy little fishes and lays eggs for new thoughts.

For example, when my cat died the moment I

turned 11, I didn't even go outside to the funeral my family had arranged. I stayed in my room for the rest of the summer that year. Never whining, never crying, just letting all of the memories of him swim their way out of my brain, linking with each other into a massive school of times now lost.

The same happened when my first internship was cancelled. I stuck to my ocean in the sky, contemplating the tens of reasons why I wasn't picked. Same when I was musing on Elon Musk's speech about how we're all dolls to some unforeseen deity to be used and thrown away.

It was 5 am when I chose to get up the following morning. I slunk my way off of the safe waves reluctantly like a dying dog and leisurely put my disguise back on before going out once again.

When I returned home, the dreams of another startup company slashed to pieces, I meteored back to my sheets and went back into stasis.

The ocean above my head never felt so packed.



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# Mirrors of Infinite and a Day

· Karina Dwipayana

*Karina Dwipayana is a writer, translator, and visual artist from Jakarta, Indonesia. Over the last three years, she has forged a distinctive style of writing that threads elements of Western realism with Indonesian folklore. Flickering and blending familial love and liminal horror, Karina's work structures and frames a unique understanding of the supernatural. In conversation, Karina is perceptive, unassuming, and profoundly articulate. Her aim is to diversify the literary culture in Indonesia; Mirrors of Infinite and a Day opposes the normative standards of Indonesian literature. This will be her first published short story.*

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## **1. In Memory of Hope**

The mirror wished for a lot of things.

Not for itself, but for you. All of you. Maybe not wished—hoped.

You don't get to live for yourself if you were made like him. You don't get to live at all. You just simply, be. 'Because you were born to have a big heart,' this old lady used to say. To all of them. She was the reason he was here. For the boy. Nenek, she called herself.

He used to sit in this little grey room with one half-working bulb, and buildings of cardboard boxes housing the new-born mirrors. Sometimes he'd wonder if they'll make it out at all. If only they knew what life would be like, the mirror thought pitifully

to himself.

Two other mirrors were with him in the store-room. Oval and Rectangle. Every day they'd cough at each other's dust, till their faces were clean from those smudging little flying things, hoping someone would buy them that day. Staring and sitting by each other. And that's when the mirror saw its shape. He was a little wider, and often felt bad for taking up more space than the others. So the mirror told everyone to call it, Circle. This room was already too crammed to hold all of us in, Circle thought with so much guilt. He used to crave for that pile of sand-paper on the top deck, wishing it had hands to sand its sides, till it was frail enough to just take one tile of space. He wasn't as tall nor as slim, but Rectangle once said more people would fit his face. She said it like it was his strength, she said that would make him more wanted.

(I'm wanted.)

'Is that true, Nenek?' He echoed Rectangle's words as she took him out for cleaning. He almost thought she'd leave Circle here forever, 'Is that why you gave me my shape?' She had the most transparent face, the kind where her eyes are glossed with emotions, hundreds of them at once. 'Glassy eyes,' her customers would say. You could never read if she was truly

happy, truly sad, or truly anything. Maybe she was truly everything.

Her hair was thinning, becoming the colours of a zebra, face started pruning with chocolate spots, ones you'd see in a banana's peel after leaving it out for days. Everyday she would look into Circle and bun her hair as if she had a collection of wigs. She was always one against time. 'Beautiful,' the mirror always tells her.

'Maybe,' her lips quivered and curved, they couldn't decide whether to cry or laugh, 'I don't know. I wish you never heard that. Wh-who told you?'

'Rectangle! Why?' Circle asked. He couldn't really see her at this point, everything was foamy, big, and bubbly. She dripped more of that green liquid on his head, sprayed water, and let that sponge waltz across his face. Until there was a little cRRrracccKk on the edge of my face. 'That Italian Rectangle,' she hissed.

'Nek, you're hurting me!'

He felt her palms tightening on his face, whilst her grip firmed. Her tender fingers pressed hard against Circle's back, as if it were an energy she collected and kept in store for days, synchronising the pressure from her thumbs. CrrraCkkkk, CccrraCkkKk, 'Because they'd want you.'

'Isn't that the whole point? Of making this store?

Of making me? Hoping that one day I'd get adopted?’

‘No. Not you. You, stay.’

‘For what?’ Circle could hear his own voice drowning.

She dipped him into the bucket of dirty soap water. ‘Because you still make me feel young. Only you would say that. You’re growing up, of course you want to see what’s out there. But once you meet those people outside; your owners, they will ruin you. Their faces will show you the scary world out there, they’ll come home to you with long faces and even bruises, just staring at you. You wouldn’t want to see it.’

‘But I see you.’

‘Astaghfirullah. Enough. Time for rest.’

‘Then why did you make me at all? Do you regret making me? Why did you let all my other friends get taken by them? Why do I get to stay here, don’t you feel sorry for me having to lose friends everyday? I want to live!’ Whirls of red started firing through Circle’s voice. It slowly made cracks across his face.

She rushed him back into the room

‘ENOUGH!’ She slammed the door. ‘I said, not you!’

It was like the more Circle knew, the less of Nenek

she became.

Circle got put back on the cold tile, all cleaned up just to get dirty again. Barely any light beamed onto Oval and Rectangle's faces. The bulb is going to die soon.

'What happened?' Oval worried.

'You're a little crrracked up, mio caro. Did she hurrrrrt you?' Rectangle said, with rough R's, sounding breathless. She was tired all the time.

'I'm sure she didn't mean it like that. She's just probably getting old,' Circle said. 'Come here, sit in front of me. Let me look at you.' Oval took the remaining light from the buzzing bulb, reflecting upon my face. 'Oh...that's pretty bad, I really do hope people will still buy you.'

'No. She doesn't want me to go.'

'Apa! What?' Both of them were shocked.

'What if we're both gone? You're gonna be here alone?' Oval said, more concerned. The rounded mirror stayed silent and looked up at Oval, with cracks on Circle's face, chips of mirror running down the tiles, revealing cemented skin.

'Hey, don't cry. It's okay, it's okay. Shh, shh, don't ruin your pure face, you've been through enough. I'll shatter with you, how about that? Right, Rectangle? Why don't we all cry together, eh?'

'Not today,' Rectangle sighed. 'I'm too tired.'

Both Circle and Oval copied her sigh, and continued to stare into each other's endless reflection. Some days they'd get sick of it. They'd get sick of just sitting on this thick-tiled hospital-coloured floor, white with wet dark clay in between each tile.

Pretending would be their happiness. Pretending would be their only hope.

Oval and Circle continued passing each other the little spark of light from the bulb; it bounced on top of their heads, like little galaxy rubber balls kids would play with across the store. They bounced and bounced the light. Then waited for that white spark to look sharp, till it was enough to pretend they were little laser toys this one boy bought with his mother, when they were still on sale.

'Yo Circle, cheer up. Main yuk, let's play. Who's Obi-Wan today? Wait, Kenobi? Obi Kenobi? What's the name of that character the boy dressed up as?' Oval said with light beaming off his face. That's a smile in human language. You can tell he was growing tired of it, but he continued to beam and beam till one day, he couldn't anymore.

'Obi-Wan Kenobi,' Circle said with pride. Moments like these always made him proud of his memories. 'Fine, I'll be the bad guy today, Darth Vader.'

Hey Rectangle, how 'bout you?' Silence. Rectangle just sat. She sat and sat, reflecting the blank chipping wall. She never wanted to face us; they assumed she was tired again or bored of children's games. But today she wanted something different. Longed for something more. Knew something brighter. Before Nenek placed her in this room she had the most illuminating golden frame, every inch of it had Renaissance twists and twirls, with bits of rust indicating she has lived through centuries beyond Oval and Circle. Rectangle, an Italian princess. She held herself with elegance, her face always tipping the light as fair as the sun. Until her frame was removed. No one thought she'd reach a day where she'd join the rest of them in this room. She never told us why as she refused to, Circle thought. She looked different without her frame, like she was one of them.

'Rectangle?' Oval whispered, with a chill of anxiety.

'Listen,' her voice was rough with sharp edges. 'It will come. Just you wait, both of you still have a long life ahead. Patience, I've learnt from Umberto. The King, my old owner. The more you wait, the more you have patience, the more hope there is.'

'But me—' for the first time in months, she tipped her face to the flickering bulb.

Oval and Circle gasped. Her face dusty, barely a mirror—stale, ivory, she looked like the wall.

'Just listen.' Her breathing heightened, it was echoing the pace of the approaching footsteps. 'Keep listening,' she repeated, as the footsteps grew louder, 'You told her it was me, right, Circle?'

'I'm sorry—'

'Don't you worry. My time needs to come anyway.'

'For what?' Oval cried, challenging the heeled-sounding footsteps, 'Rectangle, no. Please.'

The door slammed open, revealing Nenek with a blood-boiling face. It was Rectangle's day to be cleaned. But she didn't want to be cleaned anymore.

Rectangle leaned forward, and used her remaining strength to take one last breath. She closed her eyes, putting her weight facing front. Shattered. Shattered. Shattered.

Her face, gone.

Her shape, gone.

Her, gone.

She has now broken into hundreds of pieces of herself.

That was the last of Rectangle. That was the last of all of them. After that day, Nenek couldn't hold up her store. She was feeling too much, too much

of everything, yet so little time. She decided to give Oval and Circle away, and built her own little stand amongst those street stalls.

The market was busier than usual, there were lots of young faces—Circle assumed that school kids were infatuated with the bright international goods recently imported here. He always wished he could play with them. The air smelled like the melted butter you would soak in those fried bananas, coated with sticky milk. Plucks of guitar strings roared life into the colours of the market. Nenek used to play this song in the store on repeat, till one of her loyal customers complained.

*Kau jadi bagian hidupku  
(Takkan pernah berhenti untuk s'lalu percaya)  
Walau harus menunggu, s'ribu tahun lamanya  
Biarkanlah terjadi, wajar apa adanya  
Walau harus menunggu, s'ribu tahun lamanya'*  
*'You've become a part of my life  
(I will never stop to always believe that)*

*Even though I have to wait, for as long as a thousand years  
Allow what has happened, whatever it may be  
Even though I have to wait, for as long as a thousand years'*

‘Can I get this one?’ The boy had plump cheeks

that blossomed with his youth. His head was bobbing back and forth to the music. Nenek stared into Circle, with so little hope and so much sadness. Her face tilted up to the sun, burning her thin saggy skin.

‘Only because I don’t have much time,’ she sighed.

(You held me, with so much excitement and fragility—like you knew how to take care of me. And then you smiled. Like I made you happy. I make you happy? Maybe that’s my life. To live for your happiness.

And that’s how I met you.

Sometimes I think Rectangle knew what she was doing. She wanted us to be free. To live what she lived. Thank you, Rectangle. Your highness. Tell me what it’s like, wherever you are, will you?)

## **2. Kupu-Kupu Raja, The Monarch Butterfly**

I have no idea where I am.

My feet slide weightlessly across the large marbled floor. Slipperily black as shoe polish, cold, and glossy, it’d fit a perfect coat on Lucifer’s wife’s horns. Not that he has a wife. I mean, Asep and I wouldn’t know—we just like making our own stuff up in class,

it's a good escape. I could barely breathe in such unfriendly air rotting through my nostrils, similar to the texture of my face. This almond ice cream and a mix of everything in your freezer kind of aroma, swishes in different cuisines as I delve deeper into this dark room. It smelled like a full course meal, but uncooked. No life, no sound. Just the frosty whispers of my own footsteps hardening my cheeks. Tap, tap, tap. I was just feeding the room noises only to be swallowed by this blackening, endless space.

Something felt off. But it told me to stay.

'Ini tempat apa?' I asked myself: What is this place? For once, hearing my own voice was calming and fulfilling, it kept me company. At the end of the day, you're on your own, Mama once said.

I glanced down and saw a reflection of myself looking seven years younger. Shorter-noodle curls were sprouting my hair like they were freshly gelled and trimmed—no bald patches from my own yanking, legs were shorter and stubby with white socks up to my knees. A smile was instantly plastered onto my face.

I looked clean. I looked untouched.

Stones of sadness crowded my chest, I wanted to embrace the boy in my reflection so terribly. I almost forgot he lived my life. I almost wished he never got

to grow up. My father used to style me this way. Hair combed with a strong tint of aloe vera gel, ‘Lidah Buaya, Crocodile’s Tongue’ we call it here. Strictly ironed shirt tucked in so tightly it creates little baggy folds on the sides, long socks to protect me from the vicious mosquito bites. Lastly, I would get a peck on the forehead before I could run and play with the other school kids. It was like a stamp that says, you’re good to go. My favourite person. It would’ve tormented him so much to know what kids in school did to me, yet he would still treat me like the boldest tulip in the garden.

I was lucky to have a father like him. It’s really not common to find a man in this kampoeng who doesn’t think holding feelings is a taboo. I wish he was still here to show my friends’ fathers or any kampoeng man how to melt the frost around their heart—because deep down inside, I know, and I can see it especially in Asep’s father’s eyes, that they wanted to break free. And sometimes I think it hurts too much, to be a prisoner in your own heart and mind. Anger becomes the note in their voice. But because of the shield and fire they constantly have to light in order to shelter their family, everyone thinks fathers are strong enough to handle everything, to the point where they can’t say anything. Until they’re a passenger to their own emotions.

If only the world was more forgiving and understanding. If only, Papa was always in love with that phrase. He spoke it as if it were filled with every glossary of hope and a better life. If only he was able to live that better life. At least now he was. In a much better world. I miss you, Papa.

A force dragged me into the middle of the room. I was strictly positioned in the center of what looked like a formal meal gathering. Warm spotlights from above shone onto me. I felt like a stiff leather puppet on stage, about to perform Wayang Kulit for the Dutch back in the day. The ambience began to tinkle the grandeur of Ella Fitzgerald's Misty, which harmonised into this music of old happiness, overlapping roars of stereo-sounding laughters from mysterious audiences. Suddenly, I recognized these voices.

I scanned the room and let my eyes trail the source of sound. The sound of what once lived. It was from above. I lifted my head up and saw my late aunts and great-aunts in flowered tunics and brocade, hugging their waists with their late partners, whilst sitting on sky-floating chairs. I noticed a woman with her large framed-glasses. I often see her in old family album photos, except at this very moment, she didn't look a day older than fifty. I was often told by Papa she had the most gentle voice like the ripples of a lake, dates

would be her favourite fruit, relatives would often visit her for her prophetic life lessons.

This woman was my great grandmother.

Papa said I sometimes reminded him of her. He once said, ‘You are very sensitive to peoples feelings. Just like my Oma. Everyone would come to her and confess all the terrible things they’d done, and in some magical way, she always made them feel kinder. Less sinful of what they’ve sinned.’ He’d also often laugh in between his conversations, especially when he realised that I was probably too young to understand what he meant. ‘And that’s one of the things I wish my father told me it was great to have, to be sensitive. Because it is rare. Very rare, especially for us boys around here to even know what feeling sad is like. You should be proud of being close to your heart and others’ hearts too. I think my Oma might have whispered to you a few of her secret powers in heaven, before you entered Mama’s tummy. Please remember to carry your heart, wherever you go.’

‘Okay, Pa,’ was all I could say. I always felt like I had everything to say in my mind and heart, but my tongue aged slower than both of them. Or it was either my heart and mind that aged a lot faster than I actually should.

Even though ‘magical’ was probably the only word

that drew me to listen while he unpacked his whole mind, that itself, my own Papa being able to place his hand on his heart and let it speak, was magical. I somehow knew what magic felt like. It was like having your heart stuffed with pillows and fluffy blankets, carrying the bloodstream with warmth to be spread across the rest of your body. And that's when I knew the human heart could speak more than life could give.

I continued to stare up, as if I'd never seen a sky before. There were also little kids running around between round stumps at the tables where everyone sat, but how were there sounds if they stood on nothing? A groundless floor maybe? It was as if there was an invisible barrier to where I and they stood. An invisible barrier to our worlds.

I was in between, I thought to myself.

Aunt Tuli was on the left-wing above, she was able to smile with both corners of her mouth now. I remembered that the left side of her entire system was paralyzed the last time I saw her, and it almost seemed as if she had never endured a day of pain. A chiffon maroon cloth hugged her heart-shaped face, and effortlessly slung around her slender neck. My version of modern hijab, she used to always say. She was so proud of her creation of styles. Eid would

be her most awaited day where she could go on and on with pure excitement, that she never finished her chicken satay soup. She made sure every member of our family knew she built it all herself. It was powerful. Her daughter had now taken over her hijab boutique.

Everyone else was chewing nothing, but continued to place their hands into their mouths as if it carried flavour. Their eyes looked vacant and weightless, but their faces were younger, happier, and oddly alive. It was almost as if they were projected by some virtual screen, animated through memories of what their lives once were. Maybe the Qur'an was right, the afterlife was worth waiting for.

يَكَمَنُ الْأَحْوَىٰ رِلَالًا خَرَّةَ خَلْقٍ

*Walal-aakhiratu khairun laka minal aula*

“And the afterlife is better than the one before”

With a slow gradual move, everyone from above was pulled down and sat in the very room where I was—like our worlds were finally joined. And like the ocean that was parted by Moses, the crowd split in half and slowly faded beneath the spotlights. Except for one. The space revealed a man facing back, sitting at the end of the room. His finger swayed

right and left in the air, as if he was composing Misty.

I walked towards their direction and noticed his dark hair slightly balding as I stepped closer. I turned myself around to the chair and stood face-to-face with the man. He had a pencil sharp nose, lightly-painted taupe skin, white-rooted lashes, and a full set of teeth grinning at an empty view behind me. His skin smelled like jasmine petals spilled across the ocean blue Batik shirt he was wearing, the ones you'd usually flower on someone's grave. I carefully held his tenderly loose and warm arms, as if they were fragile as crystalised sugar. This can't be real.

'Papa, it's you...', I said with so much disbelief.

His eyes finally set on mine, with pristine shine over them. They were full and clear, like newly polished leather shoes. He smiled with so much warmth, it probably rayed all the cosy heat in this room.

'Papa, why can't you stay?' I asked, sounding as young as the age I last saw him. His lips curved wider but stiff, I was worried his cheekbones would break. His stone-grey eyes crystalised with tears and his fingers finally curled around my arms. They always felt softer than Mama's, Papa will be in too much pain, sayangku, my darling. I'm sorry I couldn't say goodbye properly when we last hugged. I truly hope you can forgive me one day.' His voice was delicate and

careful, he spoke like poetry.

'Please don't be sorry, Pa. You were in a coma for so long. All that mattered to me was that you were still breathing and in good care. Before you left, I even sang your favourite song from—'

'I heard you,' he smiled. 'I heard you. I felt you. That was the very moment when you set my last minutes here with peace and ease. I've been waiting and wanting to get the chance to thank you, for making the last few minutes of this great life with you easier for me, my son.'

'But how?'

'My eyes and body may be asleep, but I could still hear you. And I always will. Even from here. The way your mother cried crushed my heart more than it already was, when the doctor said there's not much left to do, and when you held my hand. I heard everything. All I wanted was to be with you. And even if I was far away from my body, where I could see myself on the hospital bed, I hugged you from behind while you held my hand. If only there was a way where you could feel the touch of my soul, every time I get the chance to visit you. If only there was an easier way. But a touch of love and words from you made me feel a lasting warmth, even though I was already fading with coldness. Even from here, whenever you

think about me, I would know. And my body would feel like a garden of baby flowers about to grow.'

'I'm so sorry, Pa,' I bursted out, and sobbed till I choked on my own breath. 'I'm sorry I couldn't do much. I wish—I wish I could've helped more, or been old enough to drive the car and take you to the hospital myself, when you had that thing. Instead we all just waited for that slow ambulance to come. If I knew it was going to be the last, I would—I just—I don't know. I just wish I knew a lot more and understood a lot more, because maybe that way, maybe we could have talked about all the cool and fun stuff that you've planned for us to do, when I was a little older. But now, you're never going to see me get older, you're never going to be able to see when I can do all the cool things you did. You're never going to see how much more I can be, to make you proud.'

A tear finally fell down his cheek, with a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Then he was caressing my curls. 'Every moment we had together, I loved it till the very end, sayangku. Even though it wasn't for many years, just having you as my son is more than enough for me. You getting out of bed every single day was always my proudest moment. You are the best gift I could ever ask for. Can I tell you a secret?'

'Please do,' I nodded and crouched on the floor, with my head laid on his lap. For some reason, my tears didn't pierce through his clothes—they dried immediately under my cheek as if I never cried. It was as if everyone in this after world stayed clean, protected and perfect. It was a life of an infinite miracle.

'Your mother was always afraid I loved you too much.'

'Really?'

'I asked myself the same thing,' he chuckled. 'She always said, "Aren't you afraid you're going to spoil him? Don't you need to toughen him up a bit more?"' And I always say, "He is perfect. Our son is exactly the way he needs to be. There is no such thing as loving your child too much." Too much is never enough. Too much love is exactly what every child needs. It is the easiest and greatest way to introduce them to the world. I wanted to give everything to you, everything that I had. Every market and food stall we stopped in, I wanted to take each and every one of them home for you. Even on the days where the big boss had nothing to pay me, I wanted to use every last coin I had for you. Something was always telling me to give you everything, as if everyday were the last day with you. Papa sayang banget sama kamu,

Papa loves you so much.' He pulled me up on his lap and his jasmine aroma became a lot more poignant. 'Exactly the way I did your hair. They listened to me.'

'Who?' My eyes had run out of tears, but my sadness stayed.

'The Angels. Before they let you in here.' He hugged me into a tight embrace and sighed. 'I've been saving five years worth of sunlight that was supposed to grow more grass on my grave, just so I could feel my super son in my arms again. For a longer time, for a longer dream. And I finally am! I knew it was worth it.'

'I miss you, Papa. I miss you. I miss you. I miss you,' I started sobbing heavily again. This time with all the expired sadness that grew numb over the flooded years. 'When will I be able to see you again?'

'You have been seeing me, sayang. Just pay attention to the things around you. The very small things. You will just know,' he sniffled his nose, and held my shoulders. He looked at me up and down, as if he were memorising every detail of my features, 'I miss you too, too much sometimes. But too much is never enough. Never. Now you must go, sunrise is almost up! Get your day going, my super son!'

'Wait, not yet!'

'I'll be there. Always, my son,' his voice, fading and

echoing till there was none.

My bed was drenched in this wet paste that felt like cold butter glazing my back—the sunlight pierced directly onto my bed. And my shirt, my shirt smelt like jasmine.

I caught myself smiling and wiped the tears off my cheeks. I glanced at the wooden-framed photograph of Papa and I that rested on the bedside table. It was us fishing at an olive-green lake in Pelabuhan Ratu, our heads towered with pointed woven bamboo hats. I had mine largely covering half of my face. You could see Papa laughing in the photo. I always loved it when he laughed. I could almost hear it.

A monarch butterfly elegantly sat on the frame.

It was almost seven and I was running late to go to the market before school to grab a few new things before all the kids here spotted all of them. I threw some pencils and scraps of paper into my bag, jumped into my uniform that clung onto my sweaty skin, that my old cracked mirror could barely reveal. The butterfly was still there.

I ran while squishing small leftover red-bean bapaos in my palm, only to find out the gate was locked. I didn't want to wake Mama yet, plus she'd get upset at how late I was. I just couldn't—I couldn't have her mad, I don't like mad, I never like mad, mad is the

scariest shade of red when it spills across her face. Because, who knows. Who knows what she'll do to me—again. Like that one time she did that thing, that thing she did to me... that thing...she...did...to me...to... me...

RING! RING! RING! The shock of a bicycle bell across the neighbourhood pulled me back onto the ground. Then a KOMPAS newspaper was thrown over the gate. It was the newspaper man. I sat on the coarse ground which imprinted bits of rocky bristles on my thighs, and allowed myself to feel.

All I wanted was to be able to see my mother smile when I stood in front of her. But I couldn't help but feel that as long as I'm breathing, awake—here, wrinkles of disappointment would bridge her brows, an extra layer of fold would curl on her forehead, an extra muscle would grow and help her frown more. I'm tired of making things more difficult for her. Sometimes I just think it would be easier if I could borrow someone else's skin and live in it. Because that way, as long as I'm here, there would be no remembrance of Papa for her—and it doesn't help that everything about my face is a clone of his.

Mama lost everything that was colourful in her life, ever since Papa let out his last breath. It was all sucked by this small darkness that has now become

all of her. I love you, she'd always say until this very day. But every night would be different, every night Mama would change. Mama wouldn't be Mama anymore. As long as the sun was gone, she would be breaking plates and glasses over and over again, until something shifted in her body to make her run towards the door to my room. She started banging on the door as if I was the next plate she'd want to break. The next morning would be my duty to clean up the mess. The next morning she would forget about the night before. The next morning she would say, I love you, again. Every morning I would believe it less and less. Until those words were empty. And the coming night would be the same thing again.

The bapao popped nicely into my mouth with this warm melting sweet paste, balanced out by the milky dough. I dozed as I thought of other things to do, if I had to wait for Mama to unlock the gate. Suddenly something tingly and light latched onto my forehead. I screamed and scratched my face, and saw something fluttering towards the side of the gate.

'What the—' It was the monarch butterfly again.

I stared and stared and it just sat there, almost too human to just sit still. It was watching me chew down my breakfast, with its black veined orange wings batting here and there. 'Want some?' I offered and

popped more into my mouth.

The sun grew hotter and my visions had white blotches. I sat on the grass and waited for a clever idea that'll probably never come.

The butterfly finally freed itself and everlastingingly disappeared off to the neighbourhood. If only I had wings, I thought to myself. I walked towards the side of the gate, and touched the top end, reminiscing where it sat. I let my hands fiddle till the very end of the gate, until I heard a rattle. I followed the sound and it came from under the gate, right below where the butterfly sat. Something was attached tightly with a rod, small enough to be hugged by the width under the gate. The key.

Papa was right. I would just know.

'Thank you, Papa,' I smiled in disbelief, swallowing the lump of sadness down my throat. I tipped my face to the direction of the butterfly's disappearance.

The market was celebrated with chants of bargains and promotions. There were lots of new imported goods on the stalls here. We haven't had fresh stocks of any goods for a few months now. Our teacher said it's because of the economic re-ce-ss-i-on or something, whatever that means. On my right were variations of comic stalls ranging from Manga, Marvel, and DC. I took out my small NOKIA and texted

Asep, he would love it here—no one was more obsessed with comics than he was. He even knew which panel to read first, even when they were scattered throughout the pages.

ME (7:40): ‘SEP, BANGUN! YOU HAVE TO COME HERE. PULAU MARKET. CEPETAN! BEFORE THOSE SCHOOL JACK ASSES ROB WHAT COULD BE YOUR NEW SHELF COLLECTION.’

ME (7:42): ‘P.S. THEY HAVE YOUR FAVOURITE. NARUTO VOL.6 IS OUT!! HURRY.’

A breeze of garlic and shrimp paste drowned in boiled soya sauce. It clung onto my shirt and hair, in a way that made me want to lick the air—this must be that little stall decorated with bamboo. The crunches and slurps from the customers were almost enough to provoke my appetite. I continued to walk and walk and stopped, at a strong pinch of sweetness that rushed waters in my mouth. It smelt like bananas or something, bathed in sweet milk sauce—maybe it was the susu kental manis.

I rushed through the crowd, bumping shoulders here and there. I headed towards the seafood section thinking maybe Mama might need some for din-

ner, when a blinding light spiced my sight. It came from the right. I could hear Tulus' song, 1000 Tahun Lamanya, As long as 1000 years, streaming through the speaker. Papa's favourite. The very last song that entered Papa's ears. The coincidences, I thought to myself. It was playing the last few lyrics I sang to him before he went:

*Kau jadi bagian hidupku  
(Takkan pernah berhenti untuk s'lalu percaya)  
Walau harus menunggu, s'ribu tahun lamanya  
Biarkanlah terjadi, wajar apa adanya  
Walau harus menunggu, s'ribu tahun lamanya  
'You've become a part of my life  
(I will never stop to always believe that)  
Even though I have to wait, for as long as a thousand years  
Allow what has happened, whatever it may be  
Even though I have to wait, for as long as a thousand years'*

A seventy-something year old lady sat in her stall. She looked restless with piles of mirrors on her table, reflecting the crowds' faces as they passed by. There was every colour of sadness hanging under her eyes with green-ish veins. I wondered how she carried them all here. I forced a smile, I felt sorry for her.

'Can I get this one? The circle shape gravitated me,

it looked just like Papa's just a lot larger. I thought I'd never had a rounded mirror, and it was probably good to replace my boring cracked rectangle one.

She looked at me with a shift of hesitation, then softened and took a deep sigh, 'Only because I don't have much time.'

I wondered what she meant. I wondered why she looked so sad.

I gave her double the price, and offered to place the mirror into the box myself, 'Terima kasih, Bu.' Thank you, maam, I said.

'Take good care of it,' she said, like a secret. 'That one is special. Very special.'

—

It was Friday.

We had Friday prayers before lunch. The neighbourhood was orchestrated by the Adzan, whilst trails of men in white and plaited sarongs headed towards the mosque. I dropped off the boxed mirror and goods from the market in my room, and rushed to put on my black peci hat, and placed the prayer rug on my shoulder.

As I walked out of the house, I passed trails of banana trees. I almost thought I saw a chilling face

swinging its head between the tall leaves.

She smiled as if she learnt it following the instructions.

She smiled as if she wanted to convince me she was kind.

And then she was gone.

### **3. Halo, Hello**

‘Biarkanlah terjadi, wajar apa adanya. Walau harus menunggu, s’ribu tahun lamanya.’ I sang to myself as I laid the mirror against the wall.

‘Apaan itu? The heck are you singing?’ Asep chuckled as he sat down and dangled those chopstick legs off the bed, their sways matched the rhythm of his fingers tapping on the wooden footboard. Weird. I sometimes wonder if they’d grow long enough to touch the floor.

I took the mirror out of its cardboard box. I let my fingers press and slide under the scarlet cloth, down through its dustless face. It let out a squeak! squeak! squeal! That’s how you know it’s clean, Papa’s delicate voice echoed memories like threads of silk.

‘Long ago it was his favourite song. My Papa’s, I

mean.' I was shocked at the sudden block of lump rising in my throat, 'He had one mirror, just like that.'

Wrinkles bridged between Asep's thin brows. The bright whites of his eyes darkened with sudden sympathy against the glaring sun, matching mine. I'm sorry, he mouthed. There was a sudden change in the atmosphere of the room. It felt obscurely cool and hollow like the stone-cold colour of Papa's skin.

Asep jumped off the bed and walked towards the new standing mirror, revealing a splash of mud on the back of his cream trousers. I assumed he helped his mother with the field work today. He does it almost every morning, and would come to class with sweat beads on his forehead, there was enough to make a hot drink out of it.

Not to mention some missing buttons on his uniform tee. Sometimes he'd come to class late and during recess he told me that, 'I have to sew it every morning. It's impossible to put the thread through the needle.' On some days, he wouldn't even have the time. He almost couldn't join us for school this year, because his mother was getting old and needed more hands with the field.

He was never one to complain about the burdens he had to carry, burdens that were beyond his age. Papa liked that about him, he thought that one day

I could learn from Asep. Gratitude. Perseverance. If only I could help Mama the way Asep does with his mother. If only I had a relationship like they did.

If only someone knew. Because no one knows, the thing Mama once did to me. That thing...

'Hey, can I take this off?'

Thing...

'Hello?'

I can't. I can't have Mama mad. I don't like her mad. Because if she's mad, it means she's gonna—

'HEY!' Asep shook my soul back. 'Kamu kenapa? What's going on with you?'

'Y-yeah, sorry.'

'May I?' He touched the edge of the woollen cloth, still covering the mirror.

'Wait. I'm scared.'

'Why?' He fiddled with the cloth impatiently. 'It's just a mirror.'

'The old lady told me, like she warned me about something. She said, 'It's very special.' What if she meant something—'

'Aghh, you know what adults here like to do to kids like us. These Javanese myths will never age. They'd tell us we'd get kidnapped by some giant demon if we didn't come home by six, just so we'd listen and

make it on time for dinner, how long are they gonna keep telling us for?’ He raised his hands. ‘Remember that one time in a retreat back in sixth grade? When we all stayed in one classroom and they told us if we don’t close our eyes till three, we would see old spirits flying around the ceiling with droopy faces? Then it turned out to be Pak Rahmad with a stupid mask and sarong, scaring everyone to death. C’mon, we’re thirteen now. Nothing about this could—’

‘Asep, don’t.’

He pulled the cloth down, and an instant regret overcame him. It was an accident. It’s okay, I assured him. The cloth revealed a reflective surface appearing almost too clear to be a mirror. I know what you’re thinking, of course a mirror is clear. But you have to believe me, it was like the mirror was a transparent portal of life. Or another. Like a door leading to the same room. My room, but different. It had a wooden frame around it with soft swirly carvings, some parts were chipping and they could cause splinters. I took a leftover varnish from the drawer, and started sanding its frame with one hand, while the other supported its back. A sudden hot spot popped under my palm, spreading to the rest of the mirror’s back. It stared at me as if it was saying, you’ve found me, I’m yours now. Like a lost child warming up to their

new parents.

‘Whoa... did you see that?’ Asep spoke with a sudden frost in his voice. It wasn’t like Asep to say stuff like that...

‘See what?’

‘I-I-I don’t know, I thought I might’ve seen a girl—woman, standing behind you. B-but she wasn’t here,’ he tapped frantically onto the mirror. ‘I literally just saw her through that mirror. I swear.’ He raised his arms up, with peace signs on both hands. It was our people’s way of sticking to their promises.

‘There’s noth—’

‘How did you not see—don’t mess around with me. This isn’t funny. I don’t like this,’ he panicked.

‘Asep, you’re scaring me.’ I walked towards him.

‘THERE SHE IS AGAIN! LOOK!’ He pressed his eyes in frustration. ‘You missed it again. Her face was covered with a bunch of black hair, except for one part of her face.’

‘What—’

‘Her lips. Slit. She was smiling. At you.’ His eyes did not lift from the mirror and his Javanese accent started thickening. This was a sign of Asep getting really nervous. And not in a good way.

‘There’s nothing, Sep. Don’t play with me.’ I knew

he was being serious, but my feet were growing cold and damp, my knees—weak. Every hair on my body stood up, inviting my ingrowns to stand beneath my skin as well.

‘Yu know I don’t usually belif dis tings. But I’m serious, I saw it.’ I know you did. Because I saw it too. By the tree, before Friday prayers. So I wasn’t hallucinating! His eyes grew wide, and his lips straightened like a stiff wire. ‘Hey uhm, I tink I’m going to head back soon. My Ibu is going to start looking for me, it’s almost six. Dinner, yu know?’

I played along and nodded. Asep jumped out of my window which led straight to the backyard. ‘Wait, Sep! Did you go to the market?’ I yelled as he headed closer to the gate. ‘Later, bro!’ He yelled without looking back.

I sat in front of the mirror, and calculated every inch of its roundness. Where are you? I thought to myself.

My forehead was suddenly pressed hard against the mirror. What’s happening? ‘Hello?’

The more I tried to lift my forehead, the closer my veins would pop. Something pulled me into the mirror, as if I held a magnet with something the mirror had. It was as if I had been given control of the moon and the tides.

Something pulled me closer. Something sinister. It spoke.

'THING, THING, THING... That thing SHE did to you. Thing, thing, thing...' Not again. Stop it! Stop it!

'Remember that thing?' The voice sounded like a woman that hadn't spoken in decades. She croaked whenever she spoke, and wheezed whenever she took another breath.

PLEASE STOP. GET OFF ME.

'You were nine, so innocent. All you wanted was to have fun and suddenly you felt the burn. It was your own MOTHER! Let me in, or YOU come in and I'll show you. Now, I will be THE mother YOU should have had...'

Suddenly another voice chimed in. It was softer, smaller, lighter like a child's. It sounded straight from the mirror to my mind. As if it were me. I could tell it was nervous, (I'm sorry, she couldn't hold it in anymore! I told her to wait! But she said she felt sorry for you. About the way your mother did that—)

'THING.'

(Don't scare him, Kuntilanak. He's not ready yet.)

My wailing wasn't enough to crack the mirror or at least take my head off it, the force was too strong. Streams of hot tears dampened my skin, and made

their way to my mouth, juicing the saltiest taste. That thing she did. That thing. It was a summer vacation in Sumatera where Papa was from. The houses there were traditionally known for their fang-like roofs on opposite edges, except they hooked upwards. I always thought they were like horns to scare the jins off. I mean, who knows right? At the end of each neighbourhood, little stalls called warong would serve sweets, shrimp crackers, and these colourful iced drinks you'd have in a small plastic bag tied with a knot. And then for lunch, you'd have warm coconut milk mixed with coriander and minced chicken, springing this golden deliciousness onto your rice. Best of all, this is probably the only Indonesian island where the women are known for their dominance.

Papa was staying at Oma and Opa's at that time—it was our last ever trip with him too, before everything had happened. I had seen a pack of his cigarettes and had lit one of them. I felt both sadness and nostalgia whilst inhaling the strong tobacco aroma, as it spread nicely across my chest. I imagined the way farmers must feel with that first sip of fresh iced coconut, and a smoke of cigs after a long day. It felt cool. Halfway through the cigarette, the room filled with smoke. I heard a sudden rattle from the door knob. 'Hey, it's getting late. Have you turned off all the lam-

pu?’ Lamp. I had begun to wave hysterically at the smoke knowing I was caught, knowing this would be more than getting hurt.

It really would be more than slapping this time.

Mama barged in, and took a good sniff of the room. I froze. I had the lit up cigs in my hand. She snatched a cig and pressed its lit edge onto my thighs, it pursed and hissed with burns, till smoke was all that was left behind.

‘Stop, please!’ I begged the mysterious two voices. The unwanted memories crashed into my head over and over again. ‘I’ve had enough, please!’

A palm rested onto my shoulders warm at first, until I recognized whose it was. I flinched, it was enough to break a door through. I saw the reflection of the woman behind me. I couldn’t recognize her. She looked nothing like Mama. Her eyes were pale and drooped with no life, her hands clawed with black fingertips, and her skinny head tilted to the side—broken maybe. I flinched again and looked behind me. Wait...it is Mama.

‘Ma?’ I was avoiding her touch. It made my skin cold.

‘Makan yuk. Let’s eat.’ That smile was stapled on her face ever since the incident, like it would make up for it. She sighed at my stillness, and signalled that

she'd be waiting outside. I looked back at the mirror.

The woman was standing there. Still. Behind me. She looked more sinister than I remembered, and there was a delicacy to all the scars on her face. They were experienced and painful marks. She was a victim, I could tell.

'Kuntilanak,' her knifed nails pointed to her chest.

'K-Kuntilanak?' I mumbled, 'Why are you—'

'Youuu...will...thaaaank... me...'





\*

*It should be mentioned that the theme of ‘contemporary subjects’ was an editorial after-thought; some of the contributors were not directly responding to this theme at the time of writing. Yet, whether the writer was directly responding to something at the time is irrelevant; their stories are as much yours as they are theirs now. Themes, as I understand them in this context, are an interpretative process and a way of easing the reader into making connections.*

Strange journeys to deliver undisclosed packages through 'non-descript names of far-off hamlets no one wants', war diaries, oppressive loneliness and abhorrence for other people, or the depths of intergenerational trauma, all form part of what are indeed contemporary subjects. Take part in this collection of short stories and explore these themes through the prose of our newly published writers

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