Adam Aitken  Stolen Valour
Michael Armstrong  A Hijab by Any Other Name
Jane Downing  Living in the Seventies
Natasha Garrett  In Translation
Suzanne Kamata  The Woman Who Loved Insects
Shao-Pin Luo  The Doctor's Daughter
Lesley Synge  Punting in Paradise: Kerala Backwaters
Stolen Valour

Adam Aitken

It is now a corporate business, this inheritance business, the ancestor game. I am getting better at it, digging up the dead, especially the victims. When I look for photographs of my ancestors I find that almost all the images are those of men killed in action and donated to libraries by their families. Through luck and persistence I have tracked down the odd military portrait of my great-grandfather—a vague, blurry shot of Light Horse cavalrymen parading in front of the pyramids. Although both my grandfather and great grandfather survived their wars, almost nothing was written by them or about them, and their letters home have not, alas, come into my possession. If their letters had been saved, they are lost to my father and me. Those kinds of documents do not now belong to us, or to be more correct, the full archive is never going to come down to us.

The last bit of family memorabilia my father ever owned was a digger’s hat he took to Asia. It was possibly his grandfather’s. A sister-in-law I have never met probably owns it now. She is, unfortunately, someone my father did not impress, when at his brother’s funeral in Melbourne my father charged her—her ex-husband—with being a racist. All this in front of her relatives.

‘I had a bit too much to drink, you see,’ said my father, when we recalled the event.

‘A racist who married a Sri Lankan?’ I queried, but felt I didn’t want to push it too far.

No wonder she hates my father. I want to make light of it so in a last gasp of paternalistic chauvinism I affirm that we are the legitimate heirs and last of the Aitken-Strong line, not her! (Well, not quite; there is another relative in Western Australia who will survive us, of whom little is known.) My father’s sister-in-law is the executor of his brother’s estate and she won’t give any of it to my father in a thousand years. But God knows what she wants with all that memorabilia. It isn’t lost, she hasn’t burnt the lot, none of it gone to compost. But it is not in our hands.

We joke about it now, that my uncle inherited my father’s Bradman-signed cricket bat when my father didn’t come home in ’58. Surely he has a right to that! Even though I’m keen to get my hands on memorabilia I haven’t had the courage to phone her. What would I say? ‘I am the son of your brother-in-law. He says he’s sorry he was a little impolite at the funeral and wants to make up.’

So I must begin where I can and work with the cards I’m dealt. Luckily some interesting facts have recently been revealed to me through the magic of digital technology. These are revelations about my Australian grandfather, my father’s father. I discovered he was a decorated soldier and had gone to occupied Japan. He’d witnessed the aftermath of the Hiroshima nuclear bombing and he’d been decorated in the military. I was surprised to feel a sense of pride about him, a man I never knew and whom my father despised.

As far as I know my father never inherited anything from his father except a propensity for hernias, the aforementioned digger’s hat and the cricket bat he left behind in Melbourne, and none of his father’s medals or other war memorabilia. After the war my grandfather Clive was unable or unwilling to return to his pre-war life. He abandoned his wife and three sons and eloped with an ANZAC nurse we believe he met in Japan. He died of pulmonary obstruction in the mid-80s. His legacy is all but lost to me, except for a couple of photographs my stepmother took when she visited him in Rotorua in 1981 or thereabouts. They show an elderly man with his wife standing...
on a verandah with a view of treeless hills and glacial lakes. He looks very much like my father, but is clearly a man of another time and generation, an unmistakable Australian of the 1960s and 70s. His portliness is enhanced by shorts, good shoes, and long socks. King of all he surveys, he seems happy to be showing off his property, his new life, and his second wife.

I had thought I would not learn more than this about my grandfather, but recently I found a website called medalsgonemissing.com. I discovered that someone called I.S. Wrights or Rights (it was spelled both ways on the webpage) had attempted to sell my grandfather’s Pacific War medals on Ebay: these included a 1939-1945 Star, a Pacific Star, a 1939-1945 war medal, and a 1939-1945 Australia Service Medal – for sale, all up, for $194.99. The advertisement was accompanied by some odd biographical details, no doubt inserted to add authenticity to the items on sale. I later confirmed these details with my father, and through some research conducted via the Australian War Memorial library. The war records show there was only ever one Major Clive Aitken, and that he had indeed served in New Guinea and Japan. My grandfather had enlisted late in the war, and had been sent to New Guinea after most of the worst fighting had ended. In the Directorate of Organisation and ‘Movement Control’ he’d been sent from an office in Melbourne to oversee the logistics of surrender in Rabaul. Then he’d gone to Japan as part of the Commonwealth Occupation Force; his New Guinea posting had furnished him with some expertise in the processing of Japanese prisoners-of-war. In Japan he would learn the business of occupying a foreign land.

Surely he had witnessed the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? He’d served there from November 1946 to March 1949, but was it possible to learn any more? There are so many questions I want answers to. Was it possible that he had hated the Japanese and looked down on Asians? Did he decide to leave three sons and a wife because patriotism demanded it? Was he unhappy in his family life?

On I.S. Wright’s website the image of the war medal set was captioned ‘Court Mounted in July 1956 by F.W. Bedford of Wellington, New Zealand’. My father had already told me that Clive had ‘pissed off’ to New Zealand’, and the website’s biographical notes confirmed that my grandfather had emigrated there after the Australian occupation forces had been de-mobbed. It was satisfying to know that I had found a link to the old man. After my research and the discovery of his medals I began to sympathise with my father; I knew what it felt like to be abandoned, though I now know my father never cast me aside the way his father had abandoned him. But I struggled to feel sympathy for Clive, because he had ended the relationship with his wife and sons, having been out of the country for over five years.

By 1958 the old man was all but invisible. At that time my father returned to Melbourne from Bangkok, and was looking into bringing over his Asian fiancée, my mother. He called Clive to tell him he intended to marry an Asian. There was a terrible argument, my father hung up on Clive, and that was that. My father would never meet or speak to his father again, and as it turned out, he never did succeed in bringing my mother to Melbourne. Instead they headed for London and married there in 1960.

I spent some time looking at the image of the medals, and wondered what they could possibly mean to me now. But it was a flat two dimensional image: I could not touch the medals, smell them, or weigh them in my hands. Like a bowerbird I was attracted to the bright colours in the ribbons. I tried to ignore my urge to own them, my disgust for military rituals and mass-produced heraldry, but at the same time there was something seductive about the idea that I was descended from a participant and survivor of World War II, even though he was probably a racist and a fascist. I felt that he’d done his onerous duty and had come out with body and mind intact, and that was something. After all the horror of his war, he had a right to do and go as he pleased.

‘Stolen Valour.’ Adam Aitken.
Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.
And New Zealand was just across the ditch and not exactly inaccessible to his children. Who was I to judge?

In an era of nostalgia about ‘roots’ I struggle with the concept of being a descendant of a ‘warrior class’. It seems an absurdly anachronistic concept. After all, Clive’s father Alfred (my great-grandfather) was a Gallipoli hero, or what I call an agent of destruction, training men to fight on the Western Front. I imagine he had saved lives too. As for my grandfather, I have no idea if he had ever killed a man.

All this was on my mind as I searched the archives of the National War Memorial library in Canberra. Later I read books on the Occupation Force, which suggested a soldier like him might have been involved in surveillance, charged with sniffing out hidden arms caches and suppressing Japanese rebellion. He would have had a policeman’s eye for suspicious goings-on. He’d been a non-combatant and very good with office protocol due his accounting background. He’d been with the Directorate of Organisation. That was true, but was that all? He kept meticulous Army records. He was a record-keeper, an accountant, not a killer.

I speculated that he might have tried to learn Japanese. I wondered if his time in New Guinea had left him with an undying hatred of all things Japanese, if he was infected with an urge to commit some revenge on the old enemy. He’d suffered a hernia, chronic dermatitis and malaria, yet that was nothing compared to the victims of the A-bomb. But perhaps on his reconnaissance missions in search of resisters, hard-core Japanese nationalists and future anti-occupation terrorists, he had seen the orphans in the open-air schoolrooms of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and his attitude had softened. There was a chance that after all that suffering, he’d become an agent of healing and reconciliation.

One thing I will never understand is why he abandoned contact with my father and I don’t know if he ever did keep in touch with his two other sons. A smoker until the end, my grandfather died from lack of breath.

Recently I have been returning to the medal website and I think of hitting the link ‘Contact Seller’, but I always stop myself. Is the website authentic? Do I really want to buy the medals? Am I just being nostalgic? Is there more than a residual sentimentality, or do I finally need a memento to connect me with the grandfather I never met, a family deserter who’d cut ties with my father sixty years ago? But he had made a new beginning after so much horror, and for that so much was permissible. I dream of a new connection with him, even an indirect one.

I think about the name I.S. Wrights or Rights, and how fake it sounds, and the price seems absurdly cheap. Yet I have found a link. It has waited there on some server for years, along with a small jpeg of the medals. Hovering my cursor over ‘contact seller’, I imagine I might recover the stories my grandfather never told his son, and those stories my father has never told me. There are perhaps volumes of anecdotes, yarns, tall-tales, and more lies and half-truths. There would be biographies of uncles and aunts living on after war, living without anticipation of another terror to come. There, somewhere in the virtual world, is a key to a past that will grant me a thousand and one narratives. Stolen Valour. Living links and links to the dead. Perhaps that is all we need.
My great-grandfather (second on the left) at the Pyramids, 1916 (Australian War Memorial Library).

Adam Aitken is a poet and lecturer at University of Technology Sydney.
When Australians arrive in the Gulf for the first time, they notice the intense heat and the alien sounds. The dust, if it’s the season, makes them wish they were somewhere else, but what hits them most is what they see: the abayas – black robes, a burqa by another name; and dishdashers – the (usually) white robes worn by men and topped-off with a white or checkered ghutra. But most Australians visit only Dubai or Doha airports, or the tourist areas of the Emirates, where the concentration of abayas and dishdashers is diluted by foreigners and Arabs in Western clothing. If you live in the Gulf and get off the tourist track, the effect on your eyes is more acute, although it does not last.

Living in the Gulf, you will jostle with ten or more women wearing abayas in the fruit and vegetable department at the supermarket. At a department store, you will stand in a line with so much black and white you will think you are at the MCG with the Collingwood cheer squad, except for the language. You might walk down a dusty side street into a men’s hairdresser – called ‘saloons’ without a hint of teetotal irony – and be confronted with a half-dozen men in dishdashers waiting for a haircut. You might stand in an elevator and see the doors open to three or four veiled women. You can’t see their faces, can’t see them at all. But they will get in, maybe say ‘Assalaam alaykum’, and when the elevator gets to your floor you will get out and go about your business.

I was once at the transport department with a used car dealer – who wore the dishdasher and spoke limited English – and as we waited to transfer my newly purchased vehicle into my name, I saw a group of men in dishdashers staring at my feet, wry smiles on their faces. My lime green socks, worn under a blue suit, had become visible after I sat down. You feel the culture shock when a group of men wearing dishdashers silently mock your socks.

There is a lot of anxiety in Australia about the clothing worn by Muslim men and women, and I have had many conversations with Arab friends about the abaya and the dishdasher. While modesty is a consideration when wearing the abaya, the hijab (headscarf) or the niqab (the veil), the choice of attire is as much about culture as it is about religion. Some say women wear abayas because they want to wear them. Others say, ‘A girl’s father will decide whether she wears the abaya or the veil’. Still others say that, after marriage, husbands ask their wives to be ‘covered’. Whatever the reason, it is untrue to say that all women who wear the abaya are meek or submissive.

I once asked a female student why she was wearing an abaya as I’d never seen her wearing one before. She said, ‘I had to take my sister to school this morning and I couldn’t be bothered getting dressed, so I just put on an abaya.’ During a discussion in class, I asked a dishdasher-clad student if he would wear it should he ever take a holiday in Australia – all the male students want to go to the Gold Coast. He said he would not because he knew he would be treated differently if he did. Someone in the class called out, ‘Terrorist!’ , and they all laughed. Sometimes you realise that Gulf Arabs know much more about us than we know about them.

I have done surreptitious ad-hoc surveys in class to gauge abaya conformity. A little less than one quarter of my students wear only Western clothes. Another quarter wears the abaya (including hijab) and the other half wears a hijab with Western clothes. A very small percentage – none in my current classes – wears the veil. So, I don’t see many abayas in class, but I don’t
see much hair either. Other than their religion and the social limitations imposed by it, none of my students have attitudes very different from students in the West. They care about getting a good job, travelling, marrying and having a family, and posting on social media.

Part of the reason for my living and working in the Gulf is to experience a culture that is so foreign to me. It is not easy at times because there is so much to understand and remember. Once, when I sat down in class and put my feet on a desk to feign boredom because a group of students who were supposed to make a presentation couldn’t get their PowerPoint to work, the (all male) class gasped. I had known that showing the soles of your feet is disrespectful, but I’d forgotten. And anyone who has worked with me knows that I love to put my feet on my desk. But I know that most Arabs expect me to make mistakes, expect me to be ignorant, expect me to misunderstand and want to help me understand. Most of them are thrilled that I am interested enough to want to be put straight.

Although the dishdasher seems the male equivalent of the abaya, it has no religious connotation at all. If you see a Gulf Arab wearing a dishdasher, he is not necessarily a fundamentalist, probably not pious, nor is he likely to be a sheikh. At formal occasions, most male Arabs wear a dishdasher. Gulf citizens mostly wear dishdashers with a ghutra and egal – the black rope that sits atop the head to keep the ghutra in place. Dishdashers are often made from expensive designer cloth, tailored, and optioned with concealed pockets or buttons, fancy collars or French cuffs. There are many regional variations. In the Gulf, wearing a dishdasher is no more usual or unusual than a Westerner wearing a business suit.

In the western media, there is too much focus on the cultural differences, particularly clothing, between Westerners and Muslims. The attention is counterproductive, often misrepresented by ignorant politicians or the media, the attacks serving no purpose other than to alienate individuals or divide communities. It is true that in some countries the abaya has a powerful religious connotation. In Turkey, a secular state consisting mostly of Muslims, university lecturers are not allowed to wear a hijab in class. ‘Religious’ clothing – but not the hijab – is banned in public. Many progressive Turkish Muslims argue that the hijab should not be worn by any employee of a government organisation in order to protect the secular orientation of the state; they say a government employee wearing a hijab undermines Attaturk’s secular vision. These are left-wing, bleeding-heart Muslims. Many Australians hold a similar philosophy about religious clothing in their country, but it is a slippery slope argument that does not, at least in Australia, stand up to scrutiny. Ask an Arab from the Gulf and most would say they wear an abaya or a dishdasher for cultural not religious reasons. Does it make some Muslims feel closer to Allah? Perhaps, as a cross might for a Catholic. And I’ve never met anyone in the Gulf who has told me that women should be covered. Are there people here who think that way? I’m sure there are, just as there are Australians who don’t think their daughters should wear tank-tops and boob-tubes.

The ‘ban the burqa’ brigade in the West does not see how similar their attitudes are to fundamentalist Muslims who want to force their beliefs upon others. It is a striking irony that many Muslims who flee persecution and war to come to the West are met with the same attitudes that made them flee in the first place. If only Kafka were still alive.

At first, it is confronting, to use former Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s phraseology, to walk into a room and see abayas or dishdashers. You get a shock when you have a conversation with a woman at some government department and can’t see her face. But after a while, abayas and dishdashers become so normal that you stop thinking about them. You don’t feel embarrassed to ask a veiled woman to repeat what she said because her veil has muffled her words. I know some of my veiled students so well that I can recognise them by their voices. I’ll enter an elevator and...
say: ‘Hello, Sara/Zainab/Maryam,’ after being greeted. I’ve known some of them for years and never seen their faces.

And here comes the importance – as they are fond of saying in the Gulf – of allowing men and women to wear what they want: the more we see it, the less confronting it becomes. It becomes normal, in the same way that the unadorned head or above-the-knee skirt in the West became normal. Is there a boundary? Who decides where to place the boundary? Is it moving? Which way is it going? Maybe the boundary in the West goes in both directions: you can’t cover-up and you can’t reveal too much, as though someone is saying: ‘Let’s put it in the middle somewhere so we’ll all be comfortable and relaxed’.

Clothes do say something about us. We tell a story about ourselves every time we choose our clothes for the day. A leisure suit and Ugg boots: there’s a story. A blue suit, white shirt, red tie: another story. A little black dress. A muscle shirt. Patches on the elbows of your jacket.

Some days you simply want to say, ‘I couldn’t be bothered today and just put on an abaya.’

Michael Armstrong holds a PhD from Edith Cowan University in Western Australia and lives in the Middle East where he teaches English and writing.
Living in the Seventies

Jane Downing

The air conditioning was sluggish, shifting hot air between a few pockets of ice. Jenny stood in a slither of cold and watched her mother’s legs disappear up the wide staircase of Sarinah’s, Jakarta’s only department store. By the time she looked down her father too had gone, lost to the lure of hardware up the back.

Jenny was wearing her favourite brown t-shirt, soft with over-washing, sleeves ironed into sharp points by their conscientious house-girl. She was aware her breasts were getting bigger and that the t-shirt was too old. She walked over to the electronics section, aware that she was the only white girl shopping there on this slow Saturday afternoon.

*Living in the 70s* hummed through her head as she bent to have a closer look at the portable radios. She didn’t get to hear much pop music from home but Kathy was recently back from leave with her parents and had two enviable LPs: Skyhooks and Sherbet.

‘We’re living in the 70s,’ Jenny breathed audibly as she set her glasses back on her sweat-slippery nose. She’d have to save up a lot of pocket money to afford one of these new radios. She dusted the length of the dial on a Japanese model, past the frequency for Radio Australia and on to the Voice of America. Would it be any better than her dad’s old thing? Most Sunday nights she had to crouch in the back room, antenna propped against the exposed pipes, if she had any hope of getting Casey Kasem’s Top 40.

‘We’re living in the 70s, la la la da, da, disease.’

‘If you don’t mind me saying, you are very beautiful.’

Jenny’s head jerked up as if she’d been stung by her nemesis, the flying cockroach. In front of her was a tall man, his voice deep and melodic and his accent hard to pin down. Obviously not an Indonesian she could practise her Bahasa on. Before she could say anything in any language, he was speaking again.

‘You remind me very much of my German girlfriend, a lovely young woman, when we were both studying at university in Berlin.’

Her mother’s standard response to anything unexpected – *that’s interesting* – didn’t seem to cover this. Jenny cast a wild look across the tables of boxy hi-fi systems and imported whatnots. Where in the hell are you, Dad?, her brain shouted.

And there he was, by a small miracle, coming down the centre aisle, encumbered by an armload of light bulbs.

‘That’s my father,’ Jenny told the stranger.

‘Excellent.’ He smiled ‘You are from which country? Not Germany?’

‘Dad!’

Her solid, dependable father in his weekend shorts and batik shirt held out his free hand to shake that of the man in the dark suit, Mr Ali from the Iraqi Embassy. Once they were talking, Jenny felt safe to look at his face: dark hair, dark eyes, a trimmed moustache over fleshy lips. Old. He must be close to thirty. He and her father acted the urbane diplomats they were, all affability on a Saturday afternoon. Jenny wondered if there really was someone in Berlin who looked like her. A plain, freckled, redhead. She blushed at the idea she could be beautiful.

‘Living in the Seventies.’ Jane Downing
Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.
Jenny saw her little brother’s shape move behind the blinds as she got out of the car to close the high gates. The Mercedes spurted gravel as it took off around to the back of the house. She locked the gate and went into the house through the front door where Peter was lurking.

‘They didn’t see me, did they?’

Jenny didn’t need to smell the whiskey on his breath to know he’d been bent over the liquor cabinet when they drove in.

‘No, they were arguing about whether to go to the party at the Swedes tonight.’

Peter did an idiotic gambol.

‘But they’ll notice if they get anywhere near you.’ Jenny wasn’t going to dob him in, but she wasn’t sure she wanted to protect him either. He took off up the stairs as their parents came in through the kitchen, still discussing dinner. Achid was behind them; he couldn’t start cooking until there was a decision.

‘And to think you could be having dinner with Jamail Ali,’ her dad teased Jenny.

‘Who’s Jamail Ali?’ Peter called from the top of the stairs.

‘Jenny’s new beau from Iraq.’

‘Oooh! Jamail and Jenny sitting in a tree, K. L. S. L. N. G.’

Jenny practised disdain and watched her mother straighten the Arthur Streeton print, which Achid would tilt again later so no evil spirits could perch on top of the frame.

‘Stop it, Peter,’ their mother said after her brother’s third rendition of the smoochy refrain.

‘Do you want to go to the pool after lunch?’ she asked. As if this wasn’t something they did every Saturday afternoon.

It didn’t occur to Jenny that there’d be anything more to tease her about, but that following Monday, her father arrived home with a heavy box of dates.

‘So you got your date after all,’ he said as he dropped the box beside Jenny. She was lying on her belly on her bed upstairs, school books spread around her and the paper lifting and settling, lifting and settling, on the fan’s slow turn.

‘What?’ She eased herself up from a battered school copy of *Sons and Lovers*.

‘These arrived at the Embassy for you,’ he said, before clattering back down the stairs.

Everyone knew where the Australian Embassy was, so she wouldn’t have been hard to find, though why Jamail would want to, was beyond Jenny. She sat on her bed and carefully opened the brown box decorated with a darker brown camel, a palm tree and beautiful decorative writing. A smell escaped, the scent of the Arabian Nights. She dipped her hand into the inner plastic wrapping and pretended she was Scheherazade. The date she plucked out was fat and firm, its slightly brittle shell cracking against her teeth, releasing a soft, warm, sweet, decadent flavour.

In the following weeks the dates arrived with other presents: a double album of Iraqi music that evoked belly dancers writhing at flame-lit oases, as well as postcards and guidebooks selling the beauties of Jamail Ali’s home. Exotic print danced about next to funny photographs: ziggurats and souk and mosque, names like Ur, Nineveh, Babylon, Samarra; the modernity of Baghdad and women smiling in skull hugging swimming caps and one-piece togs while knee deep in placid lakes. Always with requests to see her again, always with a box of dates. She really liked the dates.

At the next film night at the Embassy, while they waited for the second reel of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* to be threaded into the projector, the Ambassador’s secretary lent forward and joked, for the benefit of just about everyone in the wide front hall, ‘So you’ll be joining a harem’.
soon? ’ The woman pronounced ‘harem’ to rhyme with ‘scare ’em’. Jenny blushed between her freckles and demurred. She hated her dad for making this into a hilarious story and wanted the lights to go off so she could disappear into the darkness. But when the film did recommence, in the dark, and the young girls in white wandered off at their fateful picnic and the music surged, she felt a little flutter in her chest. It took a while to identify it. Was the flutter something to do with the flattery of the gifts. And did the flattery seed a little pride in her?

Maybe the flattery of it went to her cheeks. If someone found her attractive, maybe she was.

A Dutch boy asked her to meet him at the basketball finals at school. They sat at the top of the bleachers, silent, and then he invited her to the school play. Torsten was a senior. He shouldn’t have even noticed a sophomore.

He arrived in a chauffeur-driven Honda Civic. Peter followed her out of the house, asking if he could come with them. He had friends in the play too, and of course he didn’t want to be seen with their parents.

‘I’m coming anyway. We’ll be right behind you, as soon as the wrinklies get their faces on. Please, I won’t watch while you kiss.’

Torsten gave him a mock clobber across the head and Peter laughed, but carried on with his please, please, please, like a Beatles song. Jenny slipped into the back of the two-door car. She didn’t know what to say, not with the chauffeur in front and that word ‘kiss’ in the back with them. Torsten talked about his last trip to Singapore. She knew he’d been: any boy at school got his hair cut to above his shirt collar and it was obvious where he was going. He’d seen Saturday Night Fever while he was there. He loved the Bee Gees.

‘My mum grew up near them outside Brisbane. Went to the same school,’ Jenny said, and felt her stocks rise.

He kissed her as they waited for the car after the play, bending down to her face and edging in slowly until the smell of popcorn warmed her lips and then the sweat on her upper lip met the wetness of his and she had to close her eyes. His lips seemed to harden then, and push, and she imagined it wasn’t some smooth-faced boy trying to ease his tongue into her mouth, but Jamail, experienced Jamail Ali, who had a harem to choose from but still wanted her. Who would know where to put his hands. Whose chest would be solid as he crushed her breasts against him.

Block M wasn’t far to walk to in the afternoons after school. Peter came with her sometimes but mostly Jenny went alone. She was getting used to the old men stroking her white arms as she walked through the markets, and she was good at bargaining for the best price. Her mother, unable to haggle herself, always took Jenny along if she needed something and wanted it at a good price.

On this long afternoon, with both parents at work, Peter gluing Airfix planes and being obnoxious, and Achid shooing her out of the kitchen because he wanted to get on with his special coconut pie, Jenny walked down and searched the racks of pirated Perina brand cassettes full of her Casey Kasem’s favourites: Queen, Barry Manilow, Elton John, Boney M. She walked in a cocoon of music, suddenly hearing the sex in the lyrics and aware of the way her hips moved as she negotiated the dirt aisles between the cubbyhole shops. She felt the tide of her seashell necklace across the rise of her breasts as she walked and bent in and straightened again. She was on the lookout for a particular song: Run to Me. Perina put together eclectic compilation tapes; it would just take time to search through each list of contents. She’d heard the song at a barbecue the weekend before. She’d been the shy, awkward girl amongst the drinking adults, drifting to the back fence under the shadow of a frangipani tree and watching spaghetti straps fall off the shoulders of married women, and married men’s faces go beetroot with grog.
and other teenagers sneaking Bir Bintang out of the tubs of ice. The soundtrack of the party crooned across the grass. More Bee Gees. *Run to Me.*

Jenny did feel lonely, as the lyrics in this song said. Not alone, lonely. Yearning for something. She wanted to run to someone and lean on them. That shoulder in the song, *Now and then you need someone older.* The older shoulder. She’d had glimpses of understanding when her English teacher blathered on about D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot.

Block M seethed with people as she searched in the second and then the third stall without finding what she wanted. It was hot back on the road. The light was sharp and heavy. The hairs on her arms collected grit and dirt on the walk home. Dinner was already on the table. Australian lamb, imported, and frozen vegetables, barely warmed.

‘Dinner will be a damn sight better at the Mandarin,’ her dad announced through a mouth full of dimpled peas and wooden carrot.

Jenny tuned out of her mother’s enthusiasm. The five star hotel was new and expensive so no doubt she and Peter would be at home with chips and Fanta as compensation. The sound of his name jerked her back into the dinner table conversation.

‘You’re going to dinner with Jamail Ali?’
‘We are going.’
‘Me too?’ She blushed. Would they notice the trace of his imagined hands on her?
‘So you’re finally selling her to the harem,’ Peter crowed.

Jenny dressed carefully. At Sarinah’s she’d been wearing jeans and a thin brown t-shirt and had still caught his eye, but she had to be five-star smarter now. She held up wraparound skirts and bright batik dresses and wished she was old enough for a black dress; only a funeral would get her mother to buy her one of those. In the end she went for a belted apple green dress with full sleeves – not mutton chop, she didn’t like the sound of those words. She regretted plucking her eyebrows and hoped the lighting would be subdued. It certainly wasn’t in the elevator up to the top of the Mandarin Oriental.

Her mum, in earrings and raw silk which whispered with each step, and her dad, in cufflinks and tie, looked smart, even if she didn’t. Jenny felt her fear and excitement rising with each ping of the lift as it passed each floor, but her parents appeared oblivious to her suffering. She could see herself from all sides in the mirror-lined walls. A cruel start: was her head really so flat at the back, and why hadn’t she conditioned her hair more after the harshness of the Embassy pool?

She closed her eyes. This was what it was like to stand on a threshold. The future was so huge and alarming and thrilling. All things were possible and something, anything, would come to pass.

*Ping.* The lift doors were not yet entirely open when Jenny realised Jamail Ali was not the man of her dreams. More precisely, Jamail Ali was the man of her dreams only in her dreams. It was something in the way he got up from the large leather armchair in the reception area: Jamail Ali had short legs and a wide neck. He shook her father’s hand, and kissed her mother’s, and then took hers and she thought this is how it would feel to have a slug slithering across her skin.

She could not look into his eyes and instead joined her mother in gasps of appreciation over the views.

Jakarta was laid out at their feet. The roads were strings of light leading off into the distance. She could make out the Embassy and the Welcome Monument in the middle of the roundabout on Jalan Thamrin, and imagined the slight shimmer was the two statues on top with their arms raised. The kampongs were patches of black, as was the horizon where the land met the Java Sea. It was unreal and beautiful from so far above. She watched the lights of the cars escaping.

‘Living in the Seventies.’ Jane Downing
Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.
And while she watched her fantasies plummeted the ten storeys, were run over by a becak and a construction truck and drowned in the Java Sea. She could feel her heart breaking. Then she had to sit next to Jamail Ali at the table.

‘Come and have a cold drink out here,’ her mother called when Jenny got home from school the next Friday. The porch was late afternoon cool in the shade, and pleasant before the dusk mosquitoes got too bad. The corner of Peter’s lips were already sticky with a mixture of coke and Fanta. Her mother’s feet were up on the glass-topped table, her feet carrying the imprint of her sandals in the flesh.

Jenny collapsed onto the last cane chair and let her school bag tip onto the slate floor.

‘Good day?’ her dad asked.

They didn’t really want to know details, surely, of her boring life. ‘Fine.’

Ice clinked in the bottom of glasses.

‘Not so good for your friend Jamail,’ he sighed.

‘We’re almost finished Macbeth,’ she interrupted, to avoid another discussion of the dinner at the Mandarin and how gallant Jamail had been in following her menu selections.

She’d studied the menu with inordinate interest as conversation, surprisingly, failed to falter without any contribution from her. Her parents and her suitor seemed to have got on. They only stopped talking when the waiter came over. At Jamail’s turn, he’d ordered exactly what Jenny had, minutes before: frogs’ legs in garlic and Chicken Kiev. Jenny hoped she hadn’t actually looked up in consternation. The repetition of her words was too intimate, and intimidating, and such a weight of responsibility. What if the dishes she’d chosen wasn’t as good as it sounded?

As it turned out, the food was the highlight of the evening. Which didn’t say much; there was too much looking at that white tablecloth. Now she didn’t want to be told again how her awkward shyness – which looked so like modesty – must have driven him wild. She’d washed her hands thoroughly on getting home, especially the spot on the inside of her wrist. He’d turned her hand over and planted the kiss right there. It was her mother’s habit to pat her Chanel No. 5 on that exact spot, and there was something too sexy about perfume. She’d stopped eating dates after dinner every night. Losing weight for the prom was her excuse, though she hadn’t decided yet whether to say yes to Torsten.

Her father swatted a mosquito on his ankle, undistracted by Macbeth.

‘He won’t be going to Canberra after all,’ he continued.

That had been the low point of the dinner. The two men had talked about embassy things. Australia had opened its first embassy in Baghdad only a couple of years before, and Iraq was planning to open one in Canberra soon.

‘Canberra is a small city, obviously, but it has a lot to offer.’ Her dad had sounded like the tourism board.

Then her mum had chopped in. ‘The autumns are particularly beautiful...in fact, all four seasons, being so distinct…’

Parents were too embarrassing. And his shoulder had been too close to hers. Under the table, she’d felt the heat radiating off his knee. Whenever she turned her head and looked up, his eyes were on her.

Now, on the porch in the Jakarta dusk, Jenny brightened. This had to be good news. She could be generous now Jamail wasn’t going to Australia: she decided it wasn’t the man’s fault that he wasn’t something out of the Arabian Nights. Not Sinbad – such a provocative alignment of English words: sin and bad. She knew she was a bad person for being relieved that she wasn’t going to be haunted by his attentions in her home town, but she didn’t care.
‘Are they all going to be recalled?’ her mother asked.
‘Not sure. The situation with Iran doesn’t look good. He’s needed in Baghdad.’
‘War?’
‘The region is more and more volatile.’
An image leaked into Jenny’s mind, then flowed. The cascade of red wine into Jamail’s glass, the drops that fell on the tablecloth. The red stain. She suddenly realised the dinner might not have been all about her. Her father had not succumbed to the courtship. But there was to be no new embassy after all.
Her parents knew a lot more about Iraq than Jenny did. They’d listened to Jamail. Jenny could only picture the photographs in the guidebook he’d sent. Ziggurats, souks, mosques, names from the Bible and the ancient past.
Achid appeared and clicked the doorframe with his long fingernail to indicate dinner was on the table. Jenny slid the fly screen shut behind her.
After dinner she went up to her room and put on the LP of Iraqi music. Peter came in and shook his hips in a provocative mock belly dance. She didn’t rise to the bait. There were no lyrics to get caught in her head, but the music stayed with her for a long time after.

Jane Downing lives in Albury, NSW, and is the author of two novels, The Trickster and The Lost Tribe. Her short stories have been published in various Australian journals.
I am not a stranger to translation. Every dinner involving my husband’s and my own family tends to be an intense linguistic experience – translation as an exercise in endurance. I should know better by now and have a quick bite before every meal because once the din of clanking silverware and the deluge of Macedonian and English begins I hardly get a chance to eat. My parents’ English is as good as my in-laws’ Macedonian, rudimentary at best, but their discussions spare no topics: history, travel, cooking, family gossip, politics. I switch back and forth, English to Macedonian, Macedonian to English, inserting explanations and verbal footnotes as I go. By the time the last piece of bread mops the bottom of a plate, I am exhausted. Alternating between two different languages demands quick thinking and plenty of improvisation; it also puts a physical strain on one’s voice apparatus – spoken Macedonian engages the back of the mouth and throat; English is all lips and teeth. I’m resigned to the reality that my actual participation in these family conversations is minimal. Eliot Weinberger, a writer and a translator, has written that translators are invisible people. I’m developing a fondness for Weinberger.

I moved to Pittsburgh from Macedonia in the early nineties as an undergraduate student. I had been living in Pittsburgh for a few years when I stumbled upon my first translation/interpretation assignment. A local company was hosting a group of Macedonian engineers and they desperately needed a translator. I knew very little about engineering river dams but I was a Macedonian fluent in English, and that was good enough for them. I continued to sporadically translate medical documents, birth certificates, occasional university transcripts. At first, I approached these assignments as simple transactions; I provided a service and got paid for it, rarely dwelling on these projects after they were completed. Once in a while, reading someone’s medical history or high school grades made me feel like an intruder. I remember a physician’s report on the treatment of someone who had just suffered a heart attack. The document was only a paragraph long. As I was translating each sentence, looking up technical terms as I went, I hesitated to finish, as if my not getting to the end of the translation would somehow prevent the patient’s death. What right did I have to witness, although indirectly, the most intimate of events – this person’s departure from the world of the living?

In most situations, it is easier to have a casual detachment from written documents than from actual people. For example, I interpreted for a Bosnian woman and her teenage son who were evicted from their apartment for not paying their rent. They weren’t paying it because the repairs promised months ago hadn’t been made. I walked into the tiny office of the magistrate, cluttered with seventies’ furniture. I shook hands with the representative from the real estate agency that managed the apartments. I extended my hand to greet the Bosnian lady, but she ignored it and instead gave me a big hug. She was a tall, grey-haired woman dressed in black from head-to-toe (a widow, I correctly assumed). She told me her name and proceeded to shower me with the typical migrant questions: Where are you from? How long have you lived in Pittsburgh? Married yet? You got citizenship then? The woman, my mother’s age, was practically weeping. Finally someone could understand what she was saying. The landlord was fed up with all the Bosnian refugees and their broken English, she told me, and he kept saying he would get the leak fixed and the carpet cleaned, but it had been four months and...
nothing had been done.

This woman had been already evicted from her own house, her own country and her native language due to a civil war. Now she was being evicted from her shabby apartment in the South Hills of Pittsburgh. It was hard for me to remain indifferent. For this woman, I was a part of the establishment, a person with authority; I was also, by virtue of being born in the same country (at the time), of speaking her language and knowing her history, not a perfect stranger. I already knew too much of her personal affairs. I wanted to argue for the woman’s right to have her apartment repaired. I wanted to tell the real estate representative that just because this woman didn’t speak good English, she knew that somebody was taking advantage of her. I had chosen a side. Would it show in the tone of my voice, in the way I look at her landlord? It is somewhat of a consolation to be able to at least translate the woman’s words, her version of the events.

My venture into poetry translation began as a casual conversation between my father, a poetry enthusiast and a former language teacher, and my mother-in-law, Nola Garrett, a working poet. Eating dinner on my in-laws’ patio in Florida, the two of them made a plan (with my assistance, since they don’t speak each other’s language, but without my input, as I was busy translating) for me to send Nola a poem or two by Radovan Pavlovski, a prominent Macedonian poet. Of course, I had to translate the poems first. As soon as we returned to Pittsburgh, I e-mailed Nola a rather basic line-by-line translation of Pavlovski’s poem ‘Big Man, Small Country’. Within an hour, she responded by thanking me and offering a more polished version of the translation. The back and forth went on for a few months. By the end of the summer, after numerous e-mails and only one physical meeting, we had translated the whole collection by Pavlovski, God of the Morning.¹

In my ignorance, I felt quite confident I had all the qualifications to do a reasonable poetry translation: I know both languages well, I have a degree in literature, I read and love poetry, and I am on good terms with my mother-in-law, a potentially crucial component of this new venture. Translating Pavlovski’s poems required not only a knowledge of the languages – arguably the easiest part – but also attentiveness to subtleties of meaning, historical allusions, nature/rural references, imagery, metaphors. The strength of Pavlovski’s poetry lies both in his poetics and in his role as a national poet. Weinberger asserts that ‘good translations are always a form of advocacy criticism: here is a writer one ought to be reading and here is the proof’. ² As a young country in what seems like a permanent process of affirming its identity, Macedonia takes its literature, poetry in particular, very seriously. Pavlovski is truly a national Macedonian poet. Translating Pavlovski’s poetry bestowed on me a new sense of responsibility. The poet became the country. The translations were making an argument: here is a country one ought to recognise, and here is the proof.

While translating, I began to think of myself as a translation. As someone living across two languages and cultures, I see translation as a vital transnational activity, for it creates a bridge between the original work (home country) and the translation (host country). The connection between language and identity is more than a theoretical question for me. It emerges during my routine activities, such as interactions with the people closest to me: my husband, my son, my American friends, my Macedonian friends, my in-laws. When do I get to be my authentic self? Is it when I speak English or Macedonian? Is a translated poem a new poem? Does the host language ever become a home for the translation? Can I claim English as my language?

Joshua Fishman uses the term ‘beloved language’ for one’s mother tongue, the language that

¹ Radovan Pavlovski, Bog na utroto [God of the morning] (Skopje: Misla, 1991).

In Translation.’ Natasha Garrett.
Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.
represents ‘the throbbing link to one’s own formative cognitive and affective experience of “being at home”.’ The beloved language is both a link to personal origins – mother or father metaphors dominate descriptions of native languages – and a link among generations. The beloved language, Fishman argues, is deeply personal and emotional, because, among other things, ‘we dream in it.’ Ah, the dream question. What language do I dream in? I disappoint with the answer: In my dreams, I speak English to Americans and Macedonian to Macedonians.

When I moved to the States, steeping my daily life in a second language was like entering a very cold pool on a hot day – a bit shocking. The fundamentals were there; I could read and write in English very well, and I thought my conversation skills were acceptable. I soon found out that I wasn’t as nearly as fluent as I wanted to be. It took me a while to be funny in English. I couldn’t pick up the cultural references. I met Henry Winkler at an event but had no idea who Fonzie was. Since I had been taught British English in school, everyone around me sounded like they had just stepped out of a Western movie set; I had a hard time taking them seriously. Conducting my daily life in English shook up my relationship with Macedonian; I used to have an unquestioned loyalty to my native language. I had grown so accustomed to it, I hardly ever noticed it, like the colour of my eyes. In the States, I grew more aware of it; it felt new and fresh and pleasant on my tongue, giving me respite from the foreignness of daily English. It also revealed its limitations, its lack of certain words or phrases, its excess of consonants. My husband finds the vowel-less words particularly amusing, so much so that he has memorized a string of them: srp, prst, vrv, smrt, krv!

Translation awakened a new attentiveness to my own language. From a translator’s vantage point, I recognised the language as my own, but the words somehow became less precious. Translation allowed for a more hopeful revelation that languages may have different words for what is essentially the same human experience. For example, Nola and I spent some time on translating Pavlovski’s poem ‘Green Market’. We began with the literal translation of the original title as ‘Market people’ or, ‘People who go to the market.’ We also considered: ‘People going to the market’ but we found it too long and too descriptive. Finally, we settled upon ‘Green Market’. The colour green is abundant at the open air markets in Macedonia. Not only there are plenty of fresh (green) vegetables, but the actual metal booths and shelves upon which they are displayed are painted green. Perhaps Farmer’s Market may be more of an equivalent term, but ‘Green Market’ preserved some of the original flavour while sounding natural, we hoped, for the American reader.

These types of negotiations were the essence of our translation process. Literary translation is often charged with the task of answering the unjust question of whether such an act is even possible. Edith Grossman suggests that a more appropriate question would be whether it could be done well. Conscientious translators make decisions as to how close to the original text they need to stay, and to what aspects of the text – the form, the tone, the meaning, or some combination of those. Depending on those choices, we speak of different versions of the translation. Weinberger suggests that translation is often wrongly considered a failure when it departs from exact equivalence. This misjudgment of the quality of the translation, Weinberger argues, misses the purpose of a translation, which is ‘not, as it is usually said, to give the foreign poet a voice in the translation language. It is to allow the poem to be heard in the translation language, ideally in many of the same ways it is heard in the original language’. 

---

4 Fishman 50.
Benjamin maintains that fidelity and freedom in translation are not conflicting tendencies. A good translation, according to Benjamin, lies in the capacity of the translator to find and release the meaning within the target language, thus creating new spaces and new meanings in the language.6 Therein lies the originality and creativity in the work of the translator.

Poetry translators often work in pairs, one person a native speaker of the original, the other of the target language. The reason for that practice became obvious to Nola and me early on in the translation process. In the beginning, we thought that I ought to be in charge of ‘fidelity’ while Nola was striving for ‘freedom’. Ultimately, we learned to trust the poem. We became less territorial. Like concerned parents, we began thinking in terms of making decisions that would allow the poem to thrive in the new language environment. I developed a sense, however subjective, of how much improvisation the poem could handle. I accepted that not every departure from the literal translation compromised the original. A more creative, less literal translation could bring the poem to life more elegantly; it released the poem into the new language.

To move the translation from a rudimentary to a more refined stage, to carry the poem over from one language into another, to play with language, are some of the pleasures of translating. It can be very liberating. As Weinberger observes: ‘Because a translation will always be read as a translation, as something foreign, it is freed from many of the constraints of the currently accepted norms and conventions in the national literature’.7 Readers are more open to the strangeness, to the foreign quality in a translated work, because they are prepared to accept a departure from the literary standards to which they are accustomed. People similarly are more likely to embrace the strangeness or difference in other people, if they are prepared to encounter it. Once, when I was hesitant to buy a pair of shoes for fear they were too avant-garde, my friend Julie assured me, ‘You speak with an accent, Natasha. You can wear whatever you want.’ My foreignness makes it easier for Julie to accept my unconventional footwear choices. Other little freedoms become easier to achieve. Speaking a foreign language sometimes provides me with a subtle detachment from the content of what I am saying. I find it easier to say things in English I may not dare say in my own language, like someone permitting herself an oversized margarita and a loud print shirt only while on vacation.

Am I the same person in Macedonian as I am in English? Am I merely impersonating an English speaker? Can a person be translated into a new language, and a new culture? Poetry translation is to a great extent a dialogue between two translators about where to position the poem so that it conveys the original ideas, imagery, rhythm, or feelings to the reader of English. The translated poem is a version of the original, but it is not the original. The translation enjoys a level of independence by the sheer fact that it is written in another language, directed towards a different audience, and frequently presented on its own.

When I speak Macedonian, I sit differently; I make plenty of hand gestures; I turn up the volume (what my husband calls ‘getting my paprika up’). For Weinberger, translation means change – and things do change when I switch mediums. My English-language persona makes longer pauses between sentences; she uses less irony, more sarcasm; she uses phrases like: ‘give him some space’ and ‘I don’t want to talk about it’ (as the Macedonian inside me rolls her eyes), she doesn’t yell at the phone when talking to relatives. If people always think that we Macedonians always fight when we talk to each other, it is because we do. We get chatty and argumentative and impatient. Every language has a sort of physical rhetoric attached to it. These

---

7 Weinberger 18.
may be changes on the periphery, but they ripple deep down. Even writing this essay makes me feel like an imposter. I worry that my choice of words, the cadence and the rhythm of my sentences is contrived, an imitation of other English sentences I have read. Each language guides me to frame my thoughts differently, even though they may be the same thoughts. I am a version of myself in each language; the essence is still the same, but the contexts are different. Like a poem, I depend on my readership. My audiences differ in Macedonian and English; their existing frame of reference will direct the way they read me. For multilinguals, languages become locations with their own geographies, populated with people and emotions. Babak Elahi, an American-Iranian, writes about how, for his family, language has become a sort of sanctuary, ‘the andaruni (inner, private quarters) of Persian, intimate rooms of conversation.’ As if reading my mind, Elahi poses the question, ‘which one is the truer indication of who I am, the language I first spoke in childhood or the language I most commonly use in my daily life as an adult? ... To what extent are our identities liminal, and to what extent is this liminality a function of language?’

In ‘Translating the Self: Language and Identity in Iranian-American Women’s Memoirs’, Elahi draws attention to the women’s use of metaphor as a way of making meaning out of their bilingualism and biculturalism. One of the authors understands the travel between the States and Iran as an oscillation; another writer compares bilingualism to a seesaw. As Elahi observes, the languages’ ‘access to truth and the richness of their texture can only be experienced in the alteration between one and another tongue, not in the space between or on one side alone’. I can’t look to a single language for a strong source of identity. If my second language is not exactly a home, it has certainly become a very comfortable indefinite lease. On occasion, I write a clumsy sentence or fail to summon the right word for a concept I know so well in Macedonian. I am reminded that I’m still a tenant. Otherwise, I feel settled in.

I mostly speak Macedonian to my son Oliver. When he was a baby, I sang him the same lullabies my parents sang to me when I was a child. To my amazement and horror, I use the same lines my parents used on me when they disciplined me. Keeping up with Macedonian is tough, and it is getting tougher. I am the only one at home who speaks it to him, while his father, teachers, friends, books, television shows, all stubbornly insist on English. I can’t translate in Macedonian many of the terms that are such a staple of his daily life; there are no Macedonian terms for play date, granola bar or Lego Monster Fighters. Conversing in Macedonian with him around other people often seems isolating, separating us from the group and the potential collective discussion that could take place instead.

Sometimes I feel plain selfish, imposing my language on my boy, making him my accomplice in my efforts to maintain my own culture. Rhina P. Espaillat warns about nostalgia as ‘confusion of identity’, a fear that if we lose the native language, we lose parts of the self. I know what she is speaking of; I feel that if my son doesn’t speak Macedonian, much will be lost. He would not be able to speak to his Macedonian grandparents, would not be able to read my recipe notebook, or the legal documents that entitle him to an apartment at Lake Ohrid. With his blonde hair, light complexion and blue eyes, Oliver stands in sharp contrast to my darker Mediterranean appearance. With the exception of his chin line under a certain light, he has inherited none of my physical features. My friends, the Macedonians in particular, tease me that I have produced a

9 Elahi 462.
10 Elahi 470.

‘In Translation.’ Natasha Garrett.
Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.
unique to us. It makes him more a part of me.

Oliver cooperates – up to a point. He is fine listening to me in Macedonian, but he tends to reply in English:

Natasha: Здраво!
Oliver: Hi, mommy.
Natasha: Како помина денес?
Oliver: I had a good day.

The seesaw/oscillation of our daily conversations.

Natasha Garrett works in international education and writes poetry and personal essays. Originally from Macedonia, she lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with her family.
The Woman Who Loved Insects

Suzanne Kamata

Izumi had spent an hour waxing poetic about dragonflies. She’d told her students how they could migrate on gossamer wings across oceans, and how the males had a row of spines on their front legs just for cleaning their eyes. She told them how dragonflies formed a heart as they mated in mid-air, and how they symbolized pure water to the Navajo. In Japan, of course, they represented happiness. Now, she stepped into her office and went to the window. She peered out, trying to find some dragonflies flitting through the warm afternoon air.

Students milled about in the courtyard, sipping cold canned tea and punching out text messages on their cell phones. She could easily pick out the ones engaged in mating dances – the girls who giggled from behind their hands and glanced up from under fringes, the boys who affected indifference but flexed their muscles all the same. And this was odd – a lone foreign man sitting on a bench with a book. He was too old to be a student. Perhaps he was a visiting professor whom she hadn’t yet met. He’d probably turn up at a faculty meeting.

Izumi leaned out the window and took a deep breath. It was getting to be her favorite time of the year. Soon the air would be buzzing with the sound of insects. Crickets would chirp. Bees would hum. Mosquitoes and cicadas would add to the orchestral mix.

Ahh, summer! Izumi glanced over to the calendar on the wall. She had blocked out a week for a trip to the mountains where she hoped to find a rhinoceros beetle for her studies. These days you could just walk into a department store and buy a stag beetle or a kuwagata – you could order them on the Internet! – but how could you learn about the creatures’ habits from that?

No, there was nothing like tramping through the woods, net propped against her shoulder, the scent of pine and grass filling her nostrils. Sometimes she invited students along. It was a joy to watch the faces of those who shared her passion when they finally found a black-lacquered beetle clinging to the bark of a sawtooth oak. On occasion, she’d made the mistake of inviting the less enthusiastic, the posers, who slapped away at flies and gnats as they hiked, grumbling all the while.

Someday, Izumi would bring her own daughter into the mountains to search for insects. Maybe they’d go on a bug safari to Brazil to hunt down the magnificent Hercules, the largest beetle of all, or to the Congo Gorilla Forest in pursuit of the Goliath beetle.

‘Chirrup! Chirrup!’ Izumi reached into her totebag and fished out her cell phone. She could tell with a glance that it was her mother.

Moshi moshi.

‘Izumi-chan, we have found the perfect man for you!’

Izumi rolled her eyes. ‘Is that so?’ How many times had her mother called, claiming the exact same thing?

She remembered the last time this had happened. The matchmaker had arranged a meeting in the lobby of a fashionable hotel. Beforehand, she coached Izumi in how to dress and what to say. Following the older woman’s instructions, Izumi had worn her best silk dress, a simple light blue sleeveless sheath with a matching jacket. She had put on make-up and styled her hair, and then gone with her mother and the matchmaker to the hotel.

Her date, a serious-looking young man with cropped hair and black-rimmed glasses, was already waiting with his mother. His conservative navy suit was probably in accordance with the

Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.
matchmaker’s instructions as well. Looking at this nondescript specimen, Izumi couldn’t help thinking of the insect world where males attracted mates with flash and color. They’d bowed to each other and mumbled introductions, but they hadn’t exchanged name cards. ‘No meishi,’ the matchmaker had warned. ‘And no talking about bugs!’ Here, she had shuddered. ‘Wait until he has been taken in by your charms. Maybe on the third date, you could mention your … special interest.’

Izumi had nodded. This was her fifth date, and not one had gone beyond the first meeting. She was afraid that the matchmaker was about to give up on her. She’d vowed to keep an open mind. So, sitting on the plush sofa, she’d politely sipped coffee, nibbled cake, and chatted with this man and his mother. His name was Taro.

They talked about the weather, about the taste of the cake, the painting of Mt. Fuji on the wall. They struggled to find some common ground. Finally, Taro said, ‘I’ve heard you are a teacher. What is it that you teach?’

Izumi looked over at the matchmaker, who was shaking her head ever so slightly. ‘Dame!’ she mouthed. No! ‘Science,’ Izumi said, and before she could stop herself, added, ‘The science of insects.’

The matchmaker dropped her head into her hands, but Taro perked up. ‘Really? I’m interested in insects myself!’

And then they’d talked for almost thirty minutes about the habits of various six-legged creatures while their mothers kept checking their watches.

‘Perhaps we’ll go off and leave you two to get to know each other better,’ the matchmaker said during a break in the conversation. The mothers made their exit and Taro and Izumi ordered another cup of coffee.

Now that they were alone, they could discuss whatever they wanted. Izumi shook a packet of sugar into her cup and leaned forward. ‘I’m told that you have your own company. May I ask what kind of business you run?’

Taro had hesitated for just a moment. He glanced at the empty cushion beside him and remembered that the matchmaker was no longer monitoring their conversation. He puffed his chest up and declared, ‘I’m an exterminator.’

Naturally, the matchmaker and her mother had been a bit mystified when Izumi had declined a second date. After all, when they’d left, the two had been getting along so well.

For a while, her mother had been so exasperated that she’d left her alone. But now here she was, calling again.

‘The matchmaker said that this man has a great job with a high salary and he’s very handsome. You’ll be having dinner with him Saturday night.’

‘Fine.’ She had no plans other than watering her plants and trimming her toenails. To tell the truth, she was hoping that just once, one of these perfect men would live up to his billing. She truly did want to get married and start a family. After all, without a husband, how would the little girl of her daydreams come into being?

‘Don’t forget,’ her mother said. ‘Don’t tell him about your, er, interest in bugs.’

‘I won’t.’

Throughout her girlhood, Izumi’s mother had nudged her toward piano, ballet and tea ceremony. Nothing, however, had captivated her as much as the six-legged creatures she found in the field. On Girl’s Day, she had helped her mother to set up the tiers of kimono-clad dolls representing the Emperor and Empress and court, but she had always been impatient to stow them away again.

‘I need to put my ant farm here,’ she’d said. The dolls didn’t move, but the ants were endlessly industrious. She loved watching the worker ants as they tunneled, carrying bits of food twenty times greater in weight than their tiny glossy bodies.

Izumi and Haruki, her Saturday night date, exchanged a few text messages, and set up a meeting. They were modern people; they didn’t need to be chaperoned by parents or the matchmaker. They arranged to meet in front of a popular Italian restaurant.

Izumi told him that she would be wearing a red dress with black dots – her ladybug dress. He told her that he would be holding a rose – a bit of a cliché, but he would be easy to find.

On Saturday night, she donned the silk dress which reminded her of worms munching mulberry leaves, made up her face, and took a taxi to the restaurant. Several people were milling about the entrance, but she spotted him right away. He was taller than the others. His hair was a little long and pulled back into a stubby ponytail. She liked the hair immediately, and the cricket-black leather jacket that he wore. He was obviously different from the guys she usually encountered, who always arrived in suits and ties.

‘Izumi-san,’ he said, bowing slightly, as she came near. ‘Your dress is lovely.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, accepting the rose he held out to her. She brought it to her nose.

‘And here is another gift,’ he said, handing over a small package.

Izumi couldn’t help thinking of praying mantises. During courtship, the male presented the female with a ‘nuptial gift,’ a morsel of food. If the female did not find it to her liking, she was apt to devour her suitor.

‘Shall we?’ Haruki ushered her into the restaurant.

They were shown to a back booth, dimly lit by a wall sconce. It was all very romantic, Izumi thought, and the scent of garlic and basil from the kitchen made her mouth water.

At the table, Izumi opened her gift. It was a thin, cotton handkerchief printed with a profusion of purple blossoms. Hydrangea, Izumi thought. She could just about hear bees buzzing around the summer flower. The gift was lovely, but useful. Also, it was not so expensive as to make her feel any obligation.

‘How perfect!’ she said.

They ordered plates of spaghetti and a bottle of wine.

‘Please tell me, what it is you do again?’ Izumi asked, twirling noodles on her fork.

‘I design computer software,’ Haruki said. ‘I have my own company. And you? I heard you’re a science teacher?’

‘A professor,’ Izumi said. She couldn’t help herself. She was pleased to note, however, that he didn’t bat an eyelid. Emboldened, she decided to tell him more. ‘I teach courses in Entymology.’

‘Ahh, the study of insects,’ he said, pouring more wine into her glass. ‘I had a kuwagata beetle when I was a boy. I remember brushing its back to get rid of the mites. It lived for almost three years.’

‘I had a kuwagata, too,’ Izumi said excitedly. ‘And a lot of other bugs. One time, my ant farm spilled out all over the tatami. My mother was furious.’

They both laughed.

This was the best date she’d ever been on. Haruki was successful, handsome, and interesting. And he wasn’t afraid of smart women, or women who loved bugs. Izumi allowed herself a brief fantasy of a second date, an engagement, a wedding. She saw them on their honeymoon in a rain forest, tracking down exotic species.

Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.
But then, Haruki accidentally dropped his cloth napkin. Instead of calling the waiter for a new one, he leaned down to pick it up.

‘Arghhhh!’ He jerked back and pulled his feet up onto the banquet.

‘What is it?’ Izumi thought he was having a heart attack

‘Waiter!’

Some nearby diners looked over in alarm as a waiter rushed to their table. With a trembling finger, Haruki pointed under the table. ‘Th-there’s a c-c-cockroach!’

Izumi sighed.

The following Monday, she sat at her desk and drew the handkerchief out of her purse. She used it to pat her hands dry after washing them, but the thin cotton was unabsorbent and so it wasn’t even a particularly useful gift. It was simply pretty. She remembered a recent article about nuptial gifts. She grabbed the latest copy of *Insects of the World* and flipped through the pages till she found it. Ah, yes:

In experiments reported this week, researchers Natasha LeBas and Leon Hockham from the University of St. Andrews removed the valuable (i.e., edible) nuptial gift that male empidid dance flies normally provide their female partner and replaced the gift with either a large edible gift or an inedible cotton ball token that resembles tokens given by other empidid fly species. The researchers found that although pairs copulated longest after presentation of a large edible gift, the females receiving the worthless cotton ball token were sufficiently tricked to allow males to copulate for as long as when the males provided a small nutritious gift. Males who substitute highly visible, but easily obtainable and worthless gifts may thus be able to invade a population of genuine gift-giving males.

The research demonstrates that, at least in some cases, females are susceptible to the invasion of so-called male cheating behavior, and it suggests that the evolution of worthless gift-giving may arise though males’ sensory exploitation of female preferences for nutritious gifts.

Izumi shuddered a little. She had almost been taken in like the female empidid dance fly. She had almost fallen for a piece of worthless cloth.

Her mother called. ‘Izumi-chan, the poor man thinks you won’t go out with him again because he took you to a dirty restaurant.’

‘Okaasan, how can I think of marrying a man who is afraid of cockroaches? Did you know, by the way, that a cockroach can survive for up to nine days without its head? Or that they have teeth in their stomach?’

‘I’m about ready to give up on you,’ her mother said. I guess I’ll never have any grandchildren. Our bloodline will disappear with you.’

Here’s another interesting fact. During the war in Vietnam, the U.S. Army used cockroaches to root out guerillas. They sprinkled the guerillas’ hideouts with synthetic roach pheromones and then made suspects walk past cages in which there were male roaches. Then they watched to see how the insects reacted.

‘I’m hanging up now, Izumi. I hope you will consider giving that nice young man a second chance.’

Click.

She paced her office a few times, trying to dispel her irritation. A fly had somehow become trapped in her office and now bumped against the window glass. She swiftly moved to set it free.


*Transnational Literature* Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.

The fly zoomed out, and the plaintive sound of insect legs rubbing together wound its way into the room. Or no, not an insect. A violin. The same foreign man she’d seen before was sitting on the bench in the courtyard, but this time he was wielding a bow.

Maybe I’ll just go say hello, Izumi thought. The man seemed lonely. Perhaps he didn’t have any friends.

She locked her office and trotted down the stairs. He looked up when she appeared. His eyes, behind the thick lenses of his glasses, were protuberant, but he had a nice smile and a head of thick dark curls. She felt something sizzle between them. Pheromones, no doubt.

‘Hello. I’m Dr. Izumi Tanaka, Professor of Entymology,’ she said in English, holding out her hand.

‘Greg Samsa.’ His fingers closed around hers. ‘I used to be in sales, but I’m more of a bug man myself.’

‘You’re not American.’ She moved to sit down beside him, slowly, so he wouldn’t scare and scuttle away.

‘No. I’m from Prague. I’m afraid I don’t speak much Japanese.’

‘Well, if you need someone to show you around…’

‘Thank you.’ He rested the violin on his knee. ‘Actually, would you happen to know of any good climbing walls nearby?’

Her heartbeat quickened. ‘I’ll find one and let you know. Where can I reach you?’

They chatted a bit more, then she went back to her office to do a web search. She found several climbing walls within driving distance. If he didn’t have a car, she would offer to drive him herself.

As it turned out, Greg had the use of an aging hatchback discarded by a fellow professor. He invited Izumi to join him, and promised to pick her up at her apartment.

She dressed in sneakers and lycra, thought about applying fake eyelashes, then decided not to. Greg seemed like someone who’d prefer the natural look. In the mirror, she noted that her cheeks were flushed, her pupils dilated. As a scientist, she understood that attraction was a chemical reaction. Desire was transformative.

A buzz indicated Greg’s arrival. Izumi rushed to open the door.

‘Hello,’ he said. ‘This is for you.’ In the bowl of his hand was an apple.

‘Oh!’ She might have expected flowers or cake, but not this. She picked it up by its stem, noted the small bruise at the bottom of the fruit, and brought it to her mouth. Her eyes sought out Greg’s behind his glasses as her teeth punctured the skin. She didn’t bother to wipe away the juice that ran down her chin. She imagined his tongue shooting out like a proboscis, licking the sweetness from her skin, but he didn’t touch her. Not yet.

‘Shall we go?’

Later, after she had marveled at the way Greg moved from hold to hold, clinging to the wall as if his fingers had hooks, she made a preemptive call to her mother. ‘I met someone,’ she said.

‘Oh, that’s wonderful!’

Izumi could imagine her flapping her apron in delight.

‘Tell me about him! Where is he from? What does he do?’

‘He’s a professor,’ Izumi began.

‘That’s perfect!’ No doubt she was already planning the wedding and pondering names for grandchildren.

‘And he’s Czech.’
Her mother did not reply. She had not been prepared for a foreigner. Izumi suspected that she would eventually come around, however. She was desperate for her daughter to settle down. A Caucasian would be better than no man at all.

The next few months were a whirlwind of climbing and concerts. They went to movies (foreign, with subtitles), and had dinner in elegant restaurants. At night, Izumi dreamed of their limbs forming a heart in mid-air.

In mid-summer, when the semester had finally ended, Greg invited her to go on a picnic.

‘I’ll prepare rice balls,’ Izumi promised in a rare moment of behavior that her mother would deem gender-appropriate.

‘I’ll bring the nectar,’ Greg rejoined. ‘Shall we take the tram?’

This is it, Izumi thought. He’s going to ask me to marry him.

They met at the station. Izumi carried their lunch in a wrapping cloth. Greg had a backpack with a blanket and a bottle of wine tucked inside. When he saw her, he held out his hand. They stepped onto the tram together.

Izumi was hardly aware of the city as it flashed by. She ignored the other passengers, fixating on Greg instead. She couldn’t help herself; the pheromones were so powerful.

The scent of diesel and garbage gave way to that of grass and cedar. The horizon was smudged with green. When they finally reached their stop, they descended into a field of wildflowers. A forest was just beyond. As they walked toward the trees, the flowers seemed to grow taller and taller until they were past Izumi’s knees, past her waist, past her chest. She still gripped Greg’s hand, but it felt different somehow. His fingers had narrowed and lengthened. When she turned to look at his face, she suddenly saw him as if through a kaleidoscope.

‘Are you ready?’ His voice when it came to her was not English or Japanese or any language that she’d known until now, but she understood him completely.

‘Yes,’ she replied.

She felt the tickle of grass on her toes, and then her feet were no longer touching the ground. As she rose above her shoes, now as large as ships, now growing ever smaller, she reminded herself that desire is transformative. Catching a draft of air, she glided toward the sun. Gregor was right beside her.

Suzanne Kamata is an American living in Japan. She is a lecturer at Tokushima University and the author of three novels and an award-winning short story collection.
You won’t find a new country, won’t find another shore.
This city will always pursue you. You will walk
the same streets, grow old in the same neighborhoods,
will turn gray in these same houses.
You will always end up in this city.

– Constantine Cavafy, ‘The City’

The hospital of this provincial southern city sat right on the bank of the Xiang River, the largest tributary of the mighty Yangtze.

‘It’s a dare!’ he said. ‘I dare you to go in there!’

The door was a black hole, through which one could glimpse a white sheet glinting in the darkness. She stared into the void, held her breath, and walked in. It was eerily quiet, unlike the night before, when the wailing went on all night.

Her friend Fatty, who was really thin as a rail, had come with her to the morgue, only metres away from her house, and built like a pavilion with a curved rooftop and green tiles. Indeed, in the local Hunan dialect, it was called a luojitou, breath-dropping pavilion. It had become a ritual now: every time a patient died in the hospital, they went the next day. Last week, it was an old woman. Today, a young boy: She did not know how he had died, or of what cause; his face was translucent even against the pale sheet that covered the rest of his small body.

‘Are you all right?’ Fatty called anxiously from outside. ‘Xiao Ling! Are you coming out?’

There was nothing to be frightened about really. She was quite used to cadavers, bones, and blood. Intensely curious about the mysteries of the human body, its tissues and tendons underneath the skin, she frequently followed her father to his laboratory where he demonstrated to his medical students the art of suture and dissection. Fatty had been one of the stranger cases. His mother, a nurse in the hospital, had been pregnant with twins, but somehow one fetus grew attached to the other, and the baby was born with his twin inside him. Children had made merciless fun of the boy with a baby in his belly, and called him Fatty. Her father had to operate on him to take out the grotesque tumour with tiny teeth and black hair.

It was cool and peaceful in the morgue. She wondered how it would feel to touch the soles of the boy’s small feet.

It was odd growing up in a hospital, where her father was a surgeon and her mother an obstetrician. All the nurses and doctors lived in provided housing in the residential compound adjacent to the infirmary buildings. This was the largest western medicine hospital in the city, although there was a separate Chinese medicine department with its own pharmacy where the herbal medicines were kept in a hundred little drawers. The foremost surgeon in the city since his twenties, her tall, slim, and handsome father was given a rather austere and awesome nickname ‘First Knife’ by his colleagues and patients. He had long, graceful fingers like a pianist’s, nimble at the operating table, but he would not kill a chicken for food. He always brought home for her the used, tiny surgical scalpels, and she would be the envy of her
schoolmates with her beautiful paper cuts done with the precision of those knives.

The family was allotted only a three-bedroom apartment on the top floor of one of the many identical grey-looking four-storey residential buildings, albeit with a sizable balcony overlooking the river. Mother filled the balcony with spider plants and morning glory flowers, while she spent many hours looking dreamily across the river, trying to discern the misty hills in the distance. Sometimes, when it was too hot to sleep indoors, they placed bamboo beds on the balcony and slept under the stars, with a cool breeze from the river. She would stay wide awake, listening intently to her mother singing Russian folk songs or reading her Pushkin’s fairytale-inverse of the greedy fisher wife making incessant demands on her poor husband who caught a golden fish in the sea. People always slept on balconies or roofs on warm summer nights, and it felt almost like a communal pyjama party.

A subtropical city, it was so swelteringly hot and humid that water oozed through the ground and seeped from walls. Walking was more like swimming through heavy moist air: one emerged drenched in sweat. Then, there was the incessant rain. She liked watching the thin silvery lines streaming down from the sky, the sound of rain chiming the sound of time, drip drop, drip drop. Many years later, remembering the rain of her childhood, she would point out to her students that Yeats used the verb ‘drop’ to describe how peace descended, like rain, ‘dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings.’

Outside the boundary of the hospital was the long, narrow, cobble-stoned Wenxi Jie, or West of the Temple Street, on which was an elegant Confucius temple with a green-tiled roof and red-painted doors. It had been converted into a Teacher’s College, and she often wandered inside its perfumed gardens and cherry orchards. She became best friends with the son of an English professor, who was transferred or ‘exiled’ to this provincial town from the Foreign Languages Institute in the capital Beijing because of something or other that he had written or said or simply taught. He was very fond of his son’s little companion. Every time she came to visit, he would teach her English phrases and praise her flawless pronunciation, and there would be sweet little French pastry cakes that could be found nowhere in the shops. His wife, a professor of French literature, would read to the children short stories by Guy de Maupassant or Flaubert’s Madame Bovary. The children understood only vaguely the professors’ longing to escape the boredom and banalities of provincial life.

On hot summer days everyone loved to swim in the river. Her father and brother were strong swimmers who could effortlessly swim from one side to the other. She would watch in delight as her father skipped stones on the river bank, and excitedly count the swirling, widening rings in the water. But she was inexplicably afraid of the water. Her father tried again and again to teach her to swim – every other child in the hospital knew how, but she stubbornly refused to learn, claiming that she would get nasty cramps in her legs and without a doubt drown if she ventured into the water. All she would ever do was to sit on the bamboo river rafts and dip her toes gingerly in the water, watching the fishing boats and commercial ferries sail by. But she loved going on boat trips, sometimes to the provincial capital Changsha – Long Sand, a hundred miles up the river, and occasionally her parents took her and her brother on the ferry across the river for picnics in the cool green hills.

The river was quiet and picturesque until it ran wild and wicked. It flooded annually: in early summer the rushing waters would swell, overwhelming the riverbank. The city built a dyke but people living along the riverbank were reluctant to move. It was cool and convenient to be right on the water; when the river rose they simply moved upstairs.

Every village had its idiot and every street its lunatic; in her city there was the madwoman on the river. She had a haggard face and dirty, matted long hair and lived alone at the very end of...
the row of houses on the riverbank. Every day she sat by her house on the river singing in her high-pitched voice, and sometimes she tried to harm herself by poking and stabbing herself violently with a metal coat hanger. Then there was the portly janitor who stood guard at the main gate to the hospital and exchanged banter with passersby, yet something sinister seemed to lurk beneath his jocular manner. Suddenly one day, he was dead, his body sunk deep under the river rafts. It was a monstrous sight when his body, now a bloated mess, was finally brought up on a stretcher. Everybody flocked to the riverbank to watch. Years later, she would ask her parents what had happened to him that night. Her father told her that it was a suicide. Long ago in his youth, he had belonged to a national youth group that opposed the Communists. The threat of exposure and humiliation, and sheer terror, had driven him into the dark waters. Her mother asked how she could have remembered such an event, since she was barely five or six years old, but how could she ever have forgotten?

Another privilege of being the surgeon’s daughter was that she could tag along for a ride in an ambulance, no matter that she suffered from terrible motion sickness. She vomited after each ride, miserable tears flowing down her small flushed cheeks. But time after time, she answered the siren’s beguiling calls, and went racing through the city streets with her father, in darkness or daylight.

Her father had lost his father to illness when he was only seven years old, and had been raised by a granduncle, a bishop in a Catholic church which also ran a hospital. That was where her father had first become interested in medicine. Sometimes, he operated for many hours without any break, swallowing liquid food while at the operating table and coming home with legs completely swollen from standing for long periods of time. In the evenings, father would let her sit on his lap, guide her small fingers along the anatomical contours of various human organs in his thick medical books, and mesmerize her with the story of the remarkable Madame Curie. She knew then that she wanted to go to university and become a scientist.

Both parents worked long shifts and were on call all the time, so domestic hours were erratic. She did not mind. On hot and hazy afternoons after school she would doze languidly, occasionally reminding children playing outside to be quiet because her mother had worked a long night shift, and always, always listening to the incessant chorus of the cicadas. There were all sorts of creatures for company, especially the laboratory white mice and red-eyed rabbits. There were also snakes. Once, a nurse had come home to her apartment on the second floor to discover a huge snake coiled in the middle of the living room, having climbed up along a tree branch to slither through her window. Terrified, the nurse screamed for help and two men had come to kill it. She had stood there watching, transfixed, and when one of the men told her that snake gall would give her bright eyes, she looked at the tiny pale green thing like a piece of jade in his hand, squeezed her eyes shut, and swallowed it whole!

What she loved most of all was taking care of her silkworms. Friends gave her sheets of black dots of eggs that looked like sesame seeds, from which larvae emerged after only days. The girls gathered mulberry leaves and watched fascinated the worms burrow through the leaves, eating continuously without stop and at breath-taking speed. After a while, the fattened caterpillars spun thin silky threads and curled into little balls of cocoon. Finally, from a hole in the cocoon emerged the silkworm moth, *Bombyx mori*, its wings ashen white, with pale brown stripes. The children were however less interested in the resultant raw silk than in the metamorphosis in the life cycle of the silkworm from egg to larvae to pupa, to cocoon to moth, all in a matter of weeks.

Mostly she was a rather introverted child, painfully shy and inexplicably weepy: the smallest irritant, the slightest reprimand, would trigger a torrent of tears, cascading down her small round
face. Yet her mother had given her a name that meant Sans Souci, with a character from the Chinese classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* so complicated and rarely used that most people did not recognise it. She was tiny when born, no bigger than a little kitten, and as if reluctant to enter the world, she did not open her eyes until a whole week later. Fragile and sickly, she suffered through one health calamity after another. Being sick meant that she did not have to go to school; her father always said that she spent ‘three days fishing, two days sunning the fishnet.’ But she was perfectly happy not being outside and retreating into her own imaginary world of stories. Or she would pester her mother with endless questions: where did the sun rise from, where did the moon go to, where did I come from, where did the river flow to?

Her happiest times were the summers spent at her grandmother’s village, oddly named Jiangxia, or Down the River, since the village was nestled in the land-locked mountainous region of western Jiangxi province, with no water in sight. Even more peculiar, all her country uncles, aunts, and cousins had names associated with water: the males, Haisheng (born upon the sea) and Shuijing (gold in the water); the females, Shuilian (water lily) and Shuixiu (pretty water). But she was allergic to the water from the village well. As soon as she arrived, a rash flared up, and her small body was instantly covered head to toe in little red itchy bumps. But she was her grandmother’s favourite grandchild, and in turn she loved her dearly. While her parents worked all shifts day and night at the hospital, it was grandmother who fed her milk and porridge spoonful by spoonful, rocking her cradle and singing in her country dialect lullabies that only she could understand.

Grandmother had bound feet, and could not walk very fast. When young she had had a private tutor and had learned to read, and she loved the Peking opera. She knew all the intricate plot lines of the classical operas, and when in the mood, she would put on an embroidered dress and an elaborate hairpin and launch into the famous aria from *The Drunken Concubine*. Under her influence, the whole family loved going to the theatre and singing together. She was fond of smoking her silvery water pipe even though smoking made her cough and was probably what killed her in the end. But she was stubborn and had a fiery temper. When she became ill, she refused to stay in the city, terrified that her physician son and daughter-in-law, instead of giving her a proper burial, would have her cremated, which horrified her as a Catholic. It was then that grandmother returned to her country home, and she started visiting her during her summer vacations.

It was an eight-hour train journey, and her granduncle would meet her at the remote small train station, still a very long way from the village. He put her like a little kitten in the basket on one side of his shoulder pole, with her luggage on the other side, and carried them all the way to the river, where they caught a ferry. Being cooped up like an animal in a cage made her uncomfortable, and she squirmed and screamed to be let out, insisting that she was old enough to walk on her own legs. Sometimes, she screwed up her face and fibbed to granduncle that she urgently needed to pee and if she were not let out that very instant she would surely wet her pants. But most of the time granduncle ignored her futile protests: how could he let a city girl walk on a dirt road like this and soil her nice leather shoes?

When they finally arrived at the village after the long trek, she struggled free from grandmother’s suffocating kisses and embraces and ran like wild up the nearby hill until she was completely out of breath. She lay down on the grassy slope and watched the clouds go by and the country boys with their enormous bundles of firewood on their backs march in a line back to the village, until she could see smoke rising from the chimneys and knew it would be supper time. Happy and content beyond words, she jumped to her feet, gathering a bunch of wild flowers, and returned to her grandmother and a sumptuous dinner with fresh greens from the

‘The Doctor’s Daughter’ Shao-Pin Luo.
Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.
vegetable garden and fish from the pond.

Sometimes, a married aunt came to take her to her house in a bamboo grove, some distance away from grandmother’s village. They walked for hours, passing chilli pepper fields and rest pavilions. Upon their arrival, dogs barked excitedly and, sensing her nervousness, her aunt put her high up on the bed, away from them. Steaming bowls of noodles then appeared on the table, tucked underneath eggs freshly laid by the chickens, clucking and milling about her. Sometimes her uncle would let her taste the rice wine that he himself brewed. Every three days, there was an enormous country market fair and she would hang on tightly to her aunt's sleeve for fear of getting lost in the crowds. People bartered and exchanged for everything under the sun: vegetables, livestock, pretty blouses for the young women, tools for the men, and assorted knick-knacks for the household.

The Spring Festival was an especially exciting time. Grandmother was revered in the village because she had been educated, had been married in the provincial capital, and had a renowned surgeon for a son. She had seen the outside world and could talk about it. At any festival feast, she was always given an honoured seat, and she of course got to sit right next to grandmother. All the children were given new clothes, colourful padded clothing for the winter, pretty kerchiefs and skirts for the summer, and hand-sewn shoes. And there was always such a lot of food, rice wine and rice cakes, roasted pork and chicken, and varied vegetables. At night, the whole village gathered at the Great Hall around a long burning log. Every two hours the bell was struck, while a group of young men walked around the village, beating on drums and gongs and setting fireworks ablaze, to chase away evil spirits and welcome the New Year and the coming of spring. Warm and snug, she stared in fascination at the dancing flames and fell asleep at her grandmother’s lap.

She was already in university when her grandmother died and after that she had left the country altogether and had never seen her gravesite. But in her heart, it was as if she were still her grandmother’s little girl.

During the evenings, she spent long hours doing homework in her mother’s medical office. She preferred the long, cool white corridors with apple-green borders of the hospital wards to the humid heat and fetid air outside. Sometimes there was a lull in mother’s work, so she would sit with her and read Alice in Wonderland. Mother put on a solemn face and did an imitation of the Queen with a wave of her hand – ‘Off with her head’ – while her daughter intoned ‘curiouser and curiouser,’ and they both burst out laughing. Then, suddenly, a scream from the maternity ward would disrupt their reading, and mother would dash to the delivery room. After a long while, mother would finally emerge through the doors, covered in her white cap and mask. She could see only her tired eyes and beads of sweat on her forehead. ‘It’s time you went home. It’s getting very late,’ mother would say. ‘But I want to see the baby …’

Outside, the warm night air was full of the sound of crickets.

Every morning, on her way to school, she had to walk through the whole length of the hospital to reach the main gate. She hurried by the main infirmary building, the tallest in the city built by German missionaries, passing rows of gaping windows of the wards, each to her a grotesque picture of disease and death, of bodies in varying degrees of decay, but the patients’ moans and groans inevitably floated after her. She had seen his ghastly face all this week, twisted in agony, his tormented eyes staring at her longingly, as if she could somehow save him from pain and misery. The horror! Shuddering, she quickened her steps, but she could feel those eyes following her, long after she was out of sight. The next time she went by, she stole a glance at him, in his bed by the window. He seemed to be asleep, although a rasping sound escaped from his throat, as he gasped for air, but his weary face looked almost handsome. She began to
dream about him, almost with tenderness. In those dreams, he always appeared cheerful, never in pain, and even whistled at her on her way to school. One day, she brought an azalea branch for him, but he had disappeared from that window, now only an empty space. What did he see from that window, day after day and night after night, as the seasons passed him by? Was he waiting for a sign, a gesture, from her to show that, even in her childish innocence, she saw, felt, and understood his pain and suffering? He seemed utterly alone; no one ever visited him. Did he ever love someone, and did that someone love him in return? She never knew who he was, what he did for a living, where he had come from, or how he had become so ill and from what unforgiving disease he died. She only thought about him with sadness. She was never afraid of him, yet the look from his sunken eyes haunted her even to this day, forever a reminder of decay and of death.

Now she looked carefully, almost lovingly, at this little boy’s pale small face, and brushed her fingers softly against the cool soles of his feet. Life and death: so ordinary, so natural, at the hospital. Every day, babies were born; every night, someone died. Tomorrow, she and Fatty, hand-in-hand, would watch his small body being taken away, and the mourning procession slowly flow through the spring mist and rain of the city’s winding streets, its funereal dirge too solemn for a fragile, tiny life.

Shao-Pin Luo teaches in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada. Her research interests are in postcolonial and diaspora studies.
Punting in Paradise

Lesley Synge

Most tourists bound for Kerala arrive directly from Europe. But we two Australians, an aid worker and a writer-activist, start our holiday in northeast India. By mid-January, we’ve worked our way south to the tea and coffee plantations of the Western Ghats where we catch an overnight bus down to the Arabian Sea to tropical Kerala, land of legendary beauty. We’re here to experience the whole landscape. Neither of us has expertise in birdwatching or any other specialty; we’re here to take the opportunity of getting to know this part of our small blue planet.

Kerala is surging with holidaymakers. It’s high tourist season and European and Indians alike are taking advantage of the pleasant mid-winter climate. The tourist trade is worth billions annually to Kerala. The Indian media gloats almost daily about the nation’s ‘fantastic strides’ in tourism, and Kerala is largely responsible. Over eight million tourists spent up big here in 2013, more than seven million of them foreigners, and the annual growth rate is rising dramatically.

We head for Old Kochi, once known as Fort Cochin. From here, the Portuguese, Dutch and British by turn controlled the lucrative East Indian spice trade. Westerners generally find Kerala easy to visit: it leads the Indian nation in its high standards of education and health care; its people are sophisticated and globally aware. Old Kochi offers a brand of hedonism particularly popular with Westerners: Ayurvedic therapies; ‘fusion’ food; kathakali and other classical forms of entertainment; stylish shopping; Arabian Sea sunsets; and – de rigueur – a cruise through the nearby backwaters, the kaayals. Cosmopolitan includes a backwater cruise in its list of top ten Indian Love Nests.

The rational description of the Keralan Wetland eco-system is this: 41 rivers from the Western Ghats feed a labyrinthine network of brackish lakes, canals and lagoons behind the Malabar coastline. Others know it as the work of the gods.

In Old Kochi we find the Keralan backwater cruise industry is booming. Touts try to sign us up, and the choice is clearly between a big noisy houseboat powered by diesel and capable of an extensive tour, or a slow ‘eco-friendly’ boat.

I’m dazed from travel – by taxi, train, plane, rickshaw and auto-rickshaw, on government buses and by foot. All I care to know at this point is that kera is the word for coconut palms. But my travelling companion, Mozzie, is prepared and books with an agent who promises to deliver paradise for a day using manpower alone. The craft is an ex-rice boat, a kettavallum, given a new lease of life as a floating cottage.

A taxi driver collects us at 9am from our room in Old Kochi – reportedly the very room in which the Portuguese maritime hero, Vasco da Gama, breathed his last. (It’s far from the only establishment that dates back to 1524.) We head south to an inland lagoon where our kettavallum-turned-houseboat is moored in front of a small hotel. ‘The most peaceful place in the world,’ the driver says. ‘You will love the next 24 hours of your lives.’

Two barefoot men dressed in white singlets and orange dhotis – a kind of boatman ‘uniform’ – say Namesté and welcome us aboard their long boat. The cook arrives and settles us into the ‘Sir and Madam’ cane armchairs on the bow under a thatched roof.

The boatmen pull anchor and take up long bamboo poles. Butterflies, like the thoughts of joyful four-year-olds, wave us off. Using a combination of muscle strength and the subtle influence of the tides, the moustachioed boatemans – the captain fore, his older mate aft – push...
their poles into the earth beneath the water and propel us across the lagoon. Nothing is required of us now except to enjoy. This is Kerala’s contract with us: five thousand rupees (about $90) in exchange for a day in kera paradise.

It’s steamy and green. And quiet. My senses, after a dizzying schedule of Buddhist sites, Hindu temples, ashrams, burning ghats, rajahs’ palaces and more, are so overloaded with India’s famous ‘colour’ and holy and unholy noise that the memory of The God of Small Things, Arundhati Roy’s 1997 novel, which is set here, doesn’t enter my mind. (That exquisite and dazzling pleasure awaits me on return home.)

Sir is dressed for sun worship in only a pair of shorts; Madam is avoiding the sun in a long-sleeved Indian shirt and Ghandi-style handloom pants. We stretch out our legs and savour the journey which, as Mozzie’s compass indicates, is going west. Seawards.

‘Too bad about these clumps of water hyacinth,’ I complain, looking around. ‘It’s a weed, isn’t it? Oh good, we’re leaving them behind.’

‘Look ahead,’ says Mozzie, pointing out a cottage with picturesque Chinese-style fishing nets suspended from bamboo poles. The lagoon has narrowed to a canal. ‘Imagine – go fishing without leaving home.’

Trips such as these are designed to avoid the urban landscape but villages, towns and cities belong to the backwaters as surely as the birdlife. After all, rice farmers and fishermen have lived here, sustainably, for millennia. We glide past a village. After a railway bridge, the canal transforms into natural landscape.

‘Wow!’ we exclaim, as we enter a vista of mirrors as far as the eye can see. The aerial coconut palms – hundreds of them lining each side of the glassy way – repeat their perfect designs in still water. Surreal symmetry. It’s as if we’re receiving a lesson from the sages: See: the material world and the illusory world are united as one.

This is why the backwaters are so beloved.

We cut through peacefully, almost soundlessly, the poles entering the khaki waters with barely a splash. The captain aft calls over his dark brown shoulder to his mate in Malayalam. ‘Ha,’ comes the agreeable response. Yes.
Their world is practical, but we are catapulted smack-bang into the transcendental. (We have, after all, been meditating a lot.)

We sit awed by the visual evidence that, at a philosophical level, there are no dichotomies, no dualities. ‘Now we know why Indian spirituality leads the world,’ Mozzie says philosophically. In a mime of agreement, I extend an arm and curl the perfection into a fist-sized circle, as if my enigmatic gesture explains everything.

Mozzie smiles back, equally enigmatic. And we’re not even stoned.

A startled egret lifts away – a flash of white.

‘Imagine being foolish enough to use drugs here.’ I giggle. ‘The hallucinations would send you over the edge. You’d never cope with the ordinary world again.’

Other kettavallums appear ahead. The boatmen keep discreet distances from each other. Their unspoken agreement: tourists must not be troubled by other touristy presences. Having paid for the privilege of a cook and two boatmen to tend them, they must also feel unique.

The sight of other boats, however, does jolt us out of our transcendental domain into the mundane. ‘The backwaters are silting up,’ Mozzie announces, troubled. ‘They’ve gotta stop the pollution, the reclamation, the construction. The backwaters are shrinking.’

‘Yeah? Where’s this coming from?’

He points to the closest houseboat. One of the young women on board is reading the *Lonely Planet Guide to India*. ‘I read it in *Lonely Planet*.’

‘Yes,’ agrees the cook, who has left lunch preparations to bring us glasses of chai. ‘The canal is becoming less.’

Ahead – another village. Or is it a town? Usually, one would ask what village? what town? and turn on Google Maps, but the backwaters experience invites dislocation and dreaminess. It insists on our surrender to enchantment, and encourages the fantasy that we instantly ‘belong’ to this idyll.

We hear snatches of Bollywood and then devotional songs in Sanskrit, presumably from the village temple.

This village straddles the canal and we see an old man in a battered canoe approaching from the far side of a looming bridge. The canals and waterways have been used for millennia for
transportation, not only for the rice crop but for coir from coconut husks for mattress manufacture. The old man with a bunch of bananas at his feet misjudges the space and finds his craft pinned between kettavallum and bridge pillar. Our captain upbraids him in Malayalam, the language of the Keralite people, sounding, to our ears, like a fast train headed for derailment.

The old man says nothing. Released, he paddles on.

Three men, their bodies submerged to armpit level, exchange greetings with the crew. In English they invite us, ‘Hello, are you swimming?’ I’m keen but the cook quashes the idea. ‘The water … some problems. Not so clean.’ It’s the first indication that the backwaters are not as pristine as they appear.

‘Looks like the bird stretch now,’ Mozzie observes, as we see in quick succession a tree full of crows; a lordly black kite; a wheeling sea eagle; and a line of ducklings, paddling into their futures.

The boatmen decide to pull over. They shove their poles onto the houseboat roof and jump to land with lengths of rope. They twist these over their muscular shoulders and start to pull. It must be easier to tow in this section.

It’s another stretch of surreal symmetry. Again, in our Sir and Madam chairs, we are gobsmacked by the beauty. A kingfisher chirps as it flashes by. Kites and eagles ride invisible thermals.

When they’ve had enough, the men resume punting to cross yet another lagoon. Near the next village they moor. The cook indicates that it’s time for a stroll and the older boatman with the handlebar moustache indicates that he’ll take over in the galley. Perplexed, we trail after the cook and the captain. They’re being deliberatively elusive – it enhances the impact of the next vista. The sea! We should have guessed by the muted roar of surf.

The cook smiles and utters the word Lakshadweep in Malayalam. Lakshadweep mimics the music of the shifting waters on the sand; its majestic onomatopoeia banishes the harsher duo of ‘Arabian Sea’.

Unlike many Indian shorelines which are polluted with the confetti of plastic-bags, this stretch of the Malabar Coast with its light blue waters and pale sand is pristine and enlivened by the technicolour of a fishing fleet. Their daily work is done and the fishermen are selling their catches by the basketful. Overhead, from clanking masts, crows stage raids and wheel off with morsels of silver in their curved beaks. While the captain purchases an ocean fish as a treat for his wife, Mozzie and I wade into the sea. Mozzie’s work in the international aid sector has brought him to the western side of the subcontinent before, but it’s my first glimpse of the Arabian Sea, long-promised since reading the Tales of the Arabian Nights, a childhood favourite. Its slap-slap-slap is pure romance, delivered, ankle-deep.

We return to the kettavallum and the boatmen take up their poles once more. As we head back to the lagoon we’ve not long left, the aromas of lunch are titillating.

We anchor discreetly near the three other houseboats we’ve played tag with all morning. Here we’re isolated from big boats packed with tourists chugging around and round, never still, never out of sight, spewing tourist garbage and leaving diesel film on the water’s surface.

Keralan home cuisine is indeed as delicious as its legendary status would suggest. As the boat lolls, we enjoy two fish dishes, two vegetable dishes and rice. After fruit salad and glasses of tea, we lounge in our deck chairs while the crew eats. Then, as the boat drifts at anchor and the water sparkles, tourists and transport workers alike nap.

‘That’s it,’ Mozzie announces. ‘We’re heading back east, the same way we came.’

‘So soon? It’s – what? Twoish?’

‘The others are too.’
On the return trip, the boatmen grunt with effort. But they also laugh, sing snatches of songs, and exchange greetings with other boatmen. With single words of English, they point out kingfishers and eagles. We don’t want to burden them with questions or conversation; in the high season they meet new tourists every day, and we’re aware that we’re merely hiring them, not consuming them.

Terns, darters and cormorants seem to have vanished to take siestas but the pushy crows haven’t. Before a canal-dwelling householder can haul up his net, one dives from a coconut palm to snatch up a fish.

Again and again, our eyes are drawn to the boatmen. They’re dignified and manly with outstanding physiques. When they pull over to use their ropes to tow the boat, there’s no hint that they find their work humiliating. Why should they? It’s the noble work of millennia. When they call to each other, they may even be saying, What sort of a poor life would it be without the kaayals?

A canoe piled with sand easily overtakes us but no-one uses motors here; no-one’s in that much of a hurry. A brown and white puppy on the towpath takes a liking to the captain and he mischievously encourages it to waddle after him. Whenever it loses focus and tumbles backwards, he urges it to keep following. When it comes to its senses and turns back for home, the boatman chuckles with pleasure.

The men leap aboard, retrieving their poles from the roof. They plunge them deep into the tricky mud to find contact. And we move. Slow as ever. We’re soon floating through the beautiful glassy place of transcendent reality and bright green kera fronds in duplicate. The neat black shape of a swallow floats back and forth on one frond (on one-yet-two fronds). Semi-hypnotised, I note the swallow’s shape (its one-yet-two) and the colours of the nuts. They reflect to infinity: some green, some khaki, some golden. In five days’ time, when we cross to the opposite side of the Indian peninsula, ready to fly home from Chennai, we’ll meet a mock-glamorous transvestite (hijra) in a cheap yellow sari at a beachside coconut drink stall. For fun, she’ll sensuously fondle the stall’s kera nuts. For now, in Kerala, there’s no narrative – neither past, present or future. My mind’s in a zone of neutral perception: black swallow; oval nuts of green, khaki and gold. Black. Green. Khaki. Gold. In mirrored duplication.

Perception: pure and simple.

From boatman to boatman – long quavered riffs of Malayalam.

The mid-afternoon torpor lifts and a late afternoon zest sashays in. A kingfisher on a wire preens. A fifteen-duck family crosses the canal. In an untidy nest of random sticks, two crows mate.

‘Did you know crows mate for life, Mozzie?’
‘Hmmm,’ he returns, still sleepy.

‘Tiffin!’ we echo, smitten by this marvellous Anglo-Indian word for snacks. Today it’s French fries and chai. On the bank, a tethered goat munches weeds.

In ‘the bird stretch’ we see crakes and cormorants. Then three men with lines; a man on a bike ringing his bell; a woman walking on the tow path in a sparkling red sari – the village with the railway bridge is coming.

Before we slip under it, we pass a hall with a red flag with hammer and sickle flying. It’s said that Kerala has four religions: Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Marxism-Leninism. Certainly, whatever other objections might be raised – and Arundhati Roy does so with gusto – the democratically-elected Marxist state government of Kerala has helped to eradicate the grossest
inequalities that a rigid Hindu caste system usually leaves unchallenged. The populous underclass of beggars and outcasts, so obvious elsewhere, is not to be seen in Kerala. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) claims credit.

‘The hyacinth again,’ I say resentfully as we enter the home lagoon. The cook tells us that the weed washes back and forth with the tide, chased by the salt. It’s a metaphor for the world we must return to: unsatisfying, problematic, unmanageable, obtuse and oblivious.

‘It’s silting up, all the time,’ Mozzie worries again. ‘These backwaters. Reducing all the time.’

We anchor, mid-lagoon, because our day in paradise is not over yet. It’s hot, but how can it be otherwise ten degrees north of the equator? Across the glaring water, we observe the small resort and the jetty from where we departed this morning. The captain invites us to have a go at punting.

Mozzie good-naturedly gives it a shot, almost losing his shorts in the effort. The boatman’s expertise clearly eclipses that of any white guy who chooses to play along. You’d have to wonder if the boatman is entertaining the tourists, or the other way round.

The sunlight dances and the water is silver and the hyacinth comes floating in black clumps on the tide. It’s bright, too bright, as the sun departs for Madagascar. But it’s peaceful enough and whenever a breeze wafts our way, it brings temple music.

The captain calls it a day in Malayalam and pulls anchor. I want to whine like a child, Oh noooooo. A lone cormorant on its small floating hyacinth island abandons it as we pass. We tie up, Mozzie tips the crew and they depart. (In the morning we learn that the captain has slept on the stern of the boat to protect it. It’s not his, it’s his master’s, but he considers it his.) We move our chairs further forward to the wooden planking of the prow to watch the night fall. Except to eat and to use the Western-style toilet in the bedroom, we’ve barely moved from our chairs all day.

‘We’ve done some work today: the work of resting,’ I say to justify our indulgence. ‘Resting. Don’t discount it. Who knows what power this day will unleash … when the time comes.’

I could go on – we need this beauty, this absence of mobile phones, this womb-like, parasitic nurturing – but Mozzie’s on a different train of thought. ‘If no action is taken, this place will go the same way of Lake Dal in Srinagar.’ He’s holidayed twice on Kashmiri houseboats. The degradation of that body of water haunts him.

The lagoon quietens further except for some men in canoes who row out to unfurl their nets. A great flock of birds flies over in a waving motion, its shape also mimicking the wings of a bird. A bird body in the body of a bird, heading east into moonrise. Their flight is strange and
beautiful, an aerial Arabic cuneiform. The sight underlines the uniqueness of the eco-system we’re privileged to be in because such a sight – once so common all over the globe – is now rare. The magic of our small planet is still alive here.

Unknown birds call and a cuckoo intones 000 000 000 000 as the khaki water turns slate. A short-lived breeze blows lines of silver ripples across the smooth dark surface. Loudspeaker devotional music lifts up simultaneously, as if on cue: sacred soundtrack.

Sun’s gone. A flock of cormorants fly south. A fisherman lights his torches.

The small hotel we’re moored near provides a candlelit dinner of prawns masala, bindi, potato, dhal and coriander, and rice... as delicious as the midday lunch. As we eat, the breeze delivers an insistent percussion. ‘Festival night,’ explains the waiter. ‘Local temple.’

My eyebrows arch meaningfully at Mozzie: up anchor and punt on over?

‘Don’t even think about it,’ Mozzie says lazily.

The practical versus the poetic.

The balance between us.

The hidden moon sends messages: nothing doing little humans, enjoy the dark. Then all of a sudden the night’s not dark. Sneaky orange moon. Jumping up like a fish. Not just any moon – full moon. All night there’ll be two of them, one bobbing in grey cloud, one mocking it from the dark water. Orange moon. Orange moon.

We read a little. Fall asleep with the gentlest of rocking, and temple music. If the moon turns silver before it too flies to Madagascar, we don’t see it.

It’s eight. How did we sleep in? After doing nothing?

During the night, the tango of freshwater and seawater has caused an influx of water hyacinth. Methodical, determined, eerily silent, it’s colonised the lagoon and surrounded the boat.

‘Don’t worry, it will move across to the other side,’ the waiter from the small hotel soothes when he brings breakfast.

While we eat, we hear a mosque summoning its faithful to prayer. Then – Baaaaang! Gunshot. Armed conflict? But it can’t be. Not here. The waiter who is removing the breakfast plates again reassures us: ‘Temple festival finished. Firecrackers, ha!’

‘Double-bangers, eh,’ observes Mozzie. ‘Not the revolution, but Shiva worship.’

We don’t want to leave the backwaters but we must. The next couple is booked in for Dreamboat Therapy and we know the jazz: tourists must feel an exclusive ownership of paradise for a day. The bicep-blessed boatmen with their black moustaches and orange dhotis liked us and we liked them, but they’ve got two new tourists to prepare for now. Their pair and ours smile; the eight palms of our hands fold and we intone Namasté. Then Sir and Madam are whisked off.

At home in Brisbane I rediscover on a bookshelf The God of Small Things. I remember now: it’s one of the most furious novels ever written. Roy is famous for her lacerating criticisms of ‘Mother India’, especially about caste. In more recent times, on the internet, it’s more about destruction of environment. By night I reread the novel; by day I google ‘Kerala backwaters’. Can’t let the magic go

Buried behind marketing sites aimed at tourists, I discover scientific papers and warnings: on the verge of an environmental catastrophe: drastic restoration needed. The government of India has signed an international convention that obliges it to protect these fragile Wetlands and the state government of Kerala has appointed a Wetland Management Committee. There’s work to do but grass-root activists appear to be grinding their teeth about the slowness of the pace.

For millennia, they point out, farmers, fishermen and boatmen have managed this environment. Between the tenth and twentieth centuries, despite the brutality of European power...
play (in which Vasco da Gama played his part), the backwater eco-system flourished. The ecosystem people, as one writer dubs the humble denizens of the backwaters, tended it as the politics of the day ebbed and flowed. Tended. Activists say that caste-ridden Indian society is not consulting with such people as it should. It could learn from them.

Here in the southern hemisphere, I’m suddenly anxious. Will the backwaters survive?

The Rough Guide to Kerala, that other ‘tourist Bible’, notes that there are four Malayalam words in the English language: catamaran, coir, copra and teak. I wonder if the ecosystem people will add any new words during the complex political struggle which is enveloping them now like a perfect storm. Perhaps one word is Nikkoo! (Stop!). Stop the diesel-powered boats. Nikkoo!

Within my anxiety I feel a moment of intense relief: by choosing a kettavallum, we did not add to the urgent work of conservation; we did no harm.

Lesley Synge is a Brisbane writer whose most recent books are the novel Cry Ma Ma to the Moon and the poetry collection Mountains Belong to the People Who Love Them: Slow Journeys in South Korea and Eastern Australia.