

■ Sample Chapters of Pyr Books

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2008

Fast Forward 2: Paolo Bacigalupi's "The Gambler"

Fast Forward 2 is an anthology of all original, unthemed science fiction works, edited by Lou Anders, published by [Pyr](#), and featuring stories from such names as Benjamin Rosenbaum & Cory Doctorow, Ian McDonald, Mike Resnick & Pat Cadigan, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, and Karl Schroeder & Tobias S. Buckell. In October, we provided its opening story, Paul Cornell's "[Catherine Drewe](#)," as a sample of the book's wonderful contents. Now, we are pleased to present, in its entirety, the story that closes out the anthology, Paolo Bacigalupi's "The Gambler," a tale that strikes to the heart of SF's purpose and importance, even as it lays bare our world's immediate future.

Paolo Bacigalupi is one of the most exciting of the new breed of short story writers, one whose ecological focus, unflinching penchant for hard truth, and exacting prose is garnering attention inside and outside of the genre. Speaking of "The Gambler," he says, "Given the unfavorable market forces currently swamping the print news industry, it seems like an opportune moment to consider what a new media landscape might feel like if/when its technologies become completely ascendant. 'The Gambler' was partly inspired by my work as an online editor at *High Country News*, where one of my jobs was to plan for a digital future. The promises and perils of the technologies I was working with turned out to be fertile ground for a story."

THE GAMBLER

PAOLO BACIGALUPI

My father was a gambler. He believed in the workings of karma and luck. He hunted for lucky numbers on license plates and bet on lotteries and fighting roosters. Looking back, I think perhaps he was not a large man, but when he took me to the *muy thai* fights, I thought him so. He would bet and he would win and laugh and drink *laolao* with his friends, and they all seemed so large. In the heat drip of Vientiane, he was a lucky ghost, walking the mirror-sheen streets in the darkness.

Everything for my father was a gamble: roulette and blackjack, new rice variants and the arrival of the monsoons. When the pretender monarch Khamsing announced his New Lao Kingdom, my father gambled on civil disobedience. He bet on the teachings of Mr. Henry David Thoreau and on whisper sheets posted on lampposts. He bet on saffron-robed monks marching in protest and on the hidden humanity of the soldiers with their well-oiled AK-47s and their mirrored helmets.

My father was a gambler, but my mother was not. While he wrote letters to the editor that brought the secret police to our door, she made plans for escape. The old Lao Democratic Republic collapsed, and the New Lao Kingdom blossomed with tanks on the avenues and tuk-tuks burning on the street corners. Pha That Luang's shining gold *chedi* collapsed under shelling, and I rode away on a UN evacuation helicopter under the care of kind Mrs. Yamaguchi.

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From the open doors of the helicopter, we watched smoke columns rise over the city like nagas coiling. We crossed the brown ribbon of the Mekong with its jeweled belt of burning cars on the Friendship Bridge. I remember a Mercedes floating in the water like a paper boat on Loi Kratong, burning despite the water all around.

Afterward, there was silence from the land of a million elephants, a void into which light and Skype calls and e-mail disappeared. The roads were blocked. The telecoms died. A black hole opened where my country had once stood.

Sometimes, when I wake in the night to the swish and honk of Los Angeles traffic, the confusing polyglot of dozens of countries and cultures all pressed together in this American melting pot, I stand at my window and look down a boulevard full of red lights, where it is not safe to walk alone at night, and yet everyone obeys the traffic signals. I look down on the brash and noisy Americans in their many hues, and remember my

parents: my father who cared too much to let me live under the self-declared monarchy, and my mother who would not let me die as a consequence. I lean against the window and cry with relief and loss.

Every week I go to temple and pray for them, light incense and make a triple bow to Buddha, Damma, and Sangha, and pray that they may have a good rebirth, and then I step into the light and noise and vibrancy of America.

* * *

My colleagues' faces flicker gray and pale in the light of their computers and tablets. The tap of their keyboards fills

the newsroom as they pass content down the workflow chain and then, with a final keystroke and an obeisance to the “publish” button, they hurl it onto the net.

In the maelstrom, their work flares, tagged with site location, content tags, and social poke data. Blooms of color, codes for media conglomerates: shades of blue and Mickey Mouse ears for Disney-Bertelsmann. A red-rimmed pair of rainbow O’s for Google’s AOL

News. Fox News Corp. in pinstripes gray and white. Green for us: Milestone Media—a combination of NTT DoCoMo, the Korean gaming consortium Hyundai-Kubu, and the smoking remains of the New York Times Company. There

are others, smaller stars, Crayola shades flaring and brightening, but we are the most important. The monarchs of this universe of light and color.

New content blossoms on the screen, bathing us all in the bloody glow of a Google News content flare, off their WhisperTech feed. They've scooped us. The posting says that new ear bud devices will be released by Frontal Lobe before Christmas: terabyte storage with Pin-Line connectivity for the Oakley microresponse glasses. The technology is next-gen, allowing personal data control via Pin-Line scans of a user's iris. Analysts predict that everything from cell phones to digital

cameras will become obsolete as the full range of Oakley features becomes available. The news flare brightens and migrates toward the center of the maelstrom as visitors flock to Google and view stolen photos of the iris-scanning glasses.

Janice Mbutu, our managing editor, stands at the door to her office, watching with a frown. The maelstrom's red bath dominates the newsroom, a pressing reminder that Google is beating us, sucking away traffic. Behind glass walls, Bob and Casey, the heads of the Burning Wire, our own consumer technology feed, are screaming at their reporters, demanding they do better.

Bob's face has turned almost as red as the maelstrom. The maelstrom's true name is LiveTrack IV. If you were to go downstairs to the fifth floor and pry open the server racks, you would find a sniper sight logo and the words SCRY GLASS—KNOWLEDGE IS POWER stamped on their chips in metallic orange,

which would tell you that even though Bloomberg rents us the machines, it is a Google-Neilsen partnership that provides the proprietary algorithms for analyzing the net flows—which means we pay a competitor to tell us what is happening with our own content.

LiveTrack IV tracks media user data—Web site, feed, VOD, audiostream, TV

broadcast—with Google's own net statistics gathering programs, aided by Nielsen hardware in personal data devices ranging from TVs to tablets to ear buds to handsets to car radios. To say that the maelstrom keeps a finger on the pulse of media is an understatement. Like calling the monsoon a little wet. The maelstrom is the pulse, the pressure, the blood-oxygen mix; the count of red cells and white, of T-cells and BAC, the screening for AIDS and hepatitis G.???.?It is reality.

Our service version of the maelstrom displays the performance of our own content and compares it to the top one

hundred user-traffic events in real-time. My own latest news story is up in the maelstrom, glittering near the edge of the screen, a tale of government incompetence: the harvested DNA of the checkerspot butterfly, already extinct, has been destroyed through mismanagement at the California Federal Biological Preserve Facility. The butterfly—along with sixty-two other species—was subjected to improper storage protocols, and now there is nothing except a little dust in vials. The samples literally blew away. My coverage of the story opens with federal workers down on their knees in a two-billion-dollar climate--controlled vault, with a dozen crime scene vacuums that

they've borrowed from LAPD, trying to suck up a speck of butterfly that they might be able to reconstitute at some future time.

In the maelstrom, the story is a pinprick beside the suns and pulsing moons of traffic that represent other reporters' content. It doesn't compete well with news of Frontal Lobe devices, or reviews of Armored Total Combat, or live feeds of the Binge-Purge championships. It seems that the only people who are reading my story are the biologists I interviewed. This is not surprising. When I wrote about bribes for subdivision approvals, the only people who read the story were county

planners. When I wrote about cronyism in the selection of city water recycling technologies, the only people who read were water engineers. Still, even though no one seems to care about these stories, I am drawn to them, as though poking at the tiger of the American government will somehow make up for not being able to poke at the little cub of New Divine Monarch Khamsing. It is a foolish thing, a sort of Don Quixote crusade. As a consequence, my salary is the smallest in the office.

“Whoooo!”

Heads swivel from terminals, look for the noise: Marty Mackley, grinning.

“You can thank me?..?” He leans down and taps a button on his keyboard. “Now.”

A new post appears in the maelstrom, a small green orb announcing itself on the Glamour Report, Scandal Monkey blog, and Marty’s byline feeds. As we watch, the post absorbs pings from software clients around the world, notifying the millions of people who follow his byline that he has launched a new story.

I flick my tablet open, check the tags:

Double DP,

Redneck HipHop,

Music News,

Schadenfreude,

underage,

pedophilia?..?..

According to Mackley's story, Double DP the Russian mafia cowboy rapper—who, in my opinion, is not as good as the Asian pop sensation Kulaap, but whom half the planet likes very much—is accused of impregnating the fourteen-year-old daughter of his face sculptor. Readers are starting to notice, and with their attention Marty's green-glowing news story begins to muscle for space in the maelstrom. The content star pulses,

expands, and then, as though someone has thrown gasoline on it, it explodes.
Double DP

hits the social sites, starts getting recommended, sucks in more readers, more links, more clicks?..?..?and more ad dollars.

Marty does a pelvic grind of victory, then waves at everyone for their attention. “And that’s not all, folks.” He hits his keyboard again, and another story posts: live feeds of Double’s house, where?..?..?it looks as though the man who popularized Redneck Russians is heading out the door in a hurry. It is a surprise to see video of the house, streaming live. Most freelance paparazzi

are not patient enough to sit and hope that maybe, perhaps, something interesting will happen. This looks as though Marty has stationed his own exclusive papcams at the house, to watch for something like this.

We all watch as Double DP locks the door behind himself. Marty says, “I thought DP

deserved the courtesy of notification that the story was going live.”

“Is he fleeing?” Mikela Plaa asks.

Marty shrugs. “We’ll see.”

And indeed, it does look as if Double is

about to do what Americans have popularized as an “OJ.” He is into his red Hummer. Pulling out.

Under the green glow of his growing story, Marty smiles. The story is getting bigger, and Marty has stationed himself perfectly for the development. Other news agencies and blogs are playing catch-up. Follow-on posts wink into existence in the maelstrom, gathering a momentum of their own as newsrooms scramble to hook our traffic.

“Do we have a helicopter?” Janice asks. She has come out of her glass office to watch the show.

Marty nods. “We’re moving it into

position. I just bought exclusive angel view with the cops, too, so everyone's going to have to license our footage."

"Did you let *Long Arm of the Law* know about the cross-content?"

"Yeah. They're kicking in from their budget for the helicopter."

Marty sits down again, begins tapping at his keyboard, a machine-gun of data entry. A low murmur comes from the tech pit, Cindy C. calling our telecom providers, locking down trunklines to handle an anticipated data surge. She knows something that we don't, something that Marty has prepared her for. She's bringing up mirrored server

farms. Marty seems unaware of the audience around him. He stops typing. Stares up at the maelstrom, watching his glowing ball of content. He is the maestro of a symphony. The cluster of competing stories are growing as Gawker and Newsweek and Throb all organize themselves and respond. Our readers are clicking away from us, trying to see if there's anything new in our competitor's coverage. Marty smiles, hits his "publish" key, and dumps a new bucket of meat into the shark tank of public interest: a video interview with the fourteen-year-old. On-screen, she looks very young, shockingly so. She has a teddy bear.

“I swear I didn’t plant the bear,” Marty comments. “She had it on her own.”

The girl’s accusations are being mixed over Double’s run for the border, a kind of synth loop of accusations:

“And then he???.”

“And I said???.”

“He’s the only one I’ve ever???.”

It sounds as if Marty has licensed some of Double’s own beats for the coverage of his fleeing Humvee. The video outtakes are already bouncing around YouTube and MotionSwallow like Ping-Pong balls. The maelstrom has moved

Double DP to the center of the display as more and more feeds and sites point to the content. Not only is traffic up, but the post is gaining in social rank as the numbers of links and social pokes increase.

“How’s the stock?” someone calls out.

Marty shakes his head. “They locked me out from showing the display.”

This, because whenever he drops an important story, we all beg him to show us the big picture. We all turn to Janice. She rolls her eyes, but she gives the nod. When Cindy finishes buying bandwidth, she unlocks the view. The maelstrom slides aside as a second window opens,

all bar graphs and financial landscape: our stock price as affected by the story's expanding traffic—and expanding ad revenue.

The stock bots have their own version of the maelstrom; they've picked up the reader traffic shift. Buy and sell decisions roll across the screen, responding to the popularity of Mackley's byline. As he feeds the story, the beast grows. More feeds pick us up, more people recommend the story to their friends, and every one of them is being subjected to our advertisers' messages, which means more revenue for us and less for everyone else. At this point, Mackley is bigger than the Super

Bowl. Given that the story is tagged with Double DP, it will have a targetable demographic: thirteen-to twenty-four-year-olds who buy lifestyle gadgets, new music, edge clothes, first-run games, boxed hairstyles, tablet skins, and ringtones: not only a large demographic, a valuable one.

Our stock ticks up a point. Holds. Ticks up another. We've got four different screens running now. The papcam of Double DP, chase cycles with views of the cops streaking after him, the chopper lifting off, and the window with the fourteen-year-old interviewing. The girl is saying, "I really feel for him. We have a connection. We're going to get

married,” and there’s his Hummer screaming down Santa Monica Boulevard with his song

“Cowboy Banger” on the audio overlay.

A new wave of social pokes hits the story. Our stock price ticks up again. Daily bonus territory. The clicks are pouring in. It’s got the right combination of content, what Mackley calls the “Three S’s”: sex, stupidity, and schadenfreude. The stock ticks up again. Everyone cheers. Mackley takes a bow. We all love him. He is half the reason I can pay my rent. Even a small newsroom bonus from his work is enough for me to live. I’m not sure how much he makes for himself when he creates an event like

this. Cindy tells me that it is “solid seven, baby.” His byline feed is so big he could probably go independent, but then he would not have the resources to scramble a helicopter for a chase toward Mexico. It is a symbiotic relationship. He does what he does best, and Milestone pays him like a celebrity.

Janice claps her hands. “All right, everyone. You’ve got your bonus. Now back to work.”

A general groan rises. Cindy cuts the big monitor away from stocks and bonuses and back to the work at hand: generating more content to light the maelstrom, to keep the newsroom glowing green with

flares of Milestone coverage—everything from reviews of Mitsubishi's 100 mpg Road Cruiser to how to choose a perfect turkey for Thanksgiving. Mackley's story pulses over us as we work. He spins off smaller additional stories, updates, interactivity features, encouraging his vast audience to ping back just one more time.

Marty will spend the entire day in conversation with this elephant of a story that he has created. Encouraging his visitors to return for just one more click. He'll give them chances to poll each other, discuss how they'd like to see DP punished, ask whether you can actually fall in love with a fourteen-

year-old. This one will have a long life, and he will raise it like a proud father, feeding and nurturing it, helping it make its way in the rough world of the maelstrom.

My own little green speck of content has disappeared. It seems that even government biologists feel for Double DP.

* * *

When my father was not placing foolish bets on revolution, he taught agronomy at the National Lao University. Perhaps our lives would have been different if he had been a rice farmer in the paddies of the capital's suburbs, instead of surrounded

by intellectuals and ideas. But his karma was to be a teacher and a researcher, and so while he was increasing Lao rice production by 30 percent, he was also filling himself with gambler's fancies: Thoreau, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Sakharov, Mandela, Aung Sung Kyi. True gamblers, all. He would say that if white South Africans could be made to feel shame, then the pretender monarch must right his ways. He claimed that Thoreau must have been Lao, the way he protested so politely.

In my father's description, Thoreau was a forest monk, gone into the jungle for enlightenment. To live amongst the banyan and the climbing vines of

Massachusetts and to meditate on the nature of suffering. My father believed he was undoubtedly some arhat reborn. He often talked of Mr. Henry David, and in my imagination this *falang*, too, was a large man like my father.

When my father's friends visited in the dark—after the coup and the countercoup, and after the march of Khamsing's Chinese-supported insurgency—they would often speak of Mr. Henry David. My father would sit with his friends and students and drink black Lao coffee and smoke cigarettes, and then he would write carefully worded complaints against the government that his students would then

copy and leave in public places, distribute into gutters, and stick onto walls in the dead of night.

His guerrilla complaints would ask where his friends had gone, and why their families were so alone. He would ask why monks were beaten on their heads by Chinese soldiers when they sat in hunger strike before the palace. Sometimes, when he was drunk and when these small gambles did not satisfy his risk-taking nature, he would send editorials to the newspapers.

None of these were ever printed, but he was possessed with some spirit that made him think that perhaps the papers would change. That his stature as a

father of Lao agriculture might somehow sway the editors to commit suicide and print his complaints. It ended with my mother serving coffee to a secret police captain while two more policemen waited outside our door. The captain was very polite: he offered my father a 555 cigarette—a brand that already had become rare and contraband—and lit it for him. Then he spread the whisper sheet onto the coffee table, gently pushing aside the coffee cups and their saucers to make room for it. It was rumpled and torn, stained with mud. Full of accusations against Khamsing. Unmistakable as one of my father's.

My father and the policeman both sat and

smoked, studying the paper silently. Finally, the captain asked, "Will you stop?"

My father drew on his cigarette and let the smoke out slowly as he studied the whisper sheet between them. The captain said, "We all respect what you have done for the Lao kingdom. I myself have family who would have starved if not for your work in the villages." He leaned forward. "If you promise to stop writing these whispers and complaints, everything can be forgotten. Everything."

Still, my father didn't say anything. He finished his cigarette. Stubbed it out. "It would be difficult to make that sort of promise," he said.

The captain was surprised. “You have friends who have spoken on your behalf. Perhaps you would reconsider. For their sake.”

My father made a little shrug. The captain spread the rumpled whisper sheet, flattening it out more completely. Read it over. “These sheets do nothing,” he said. “Khamsing’s dynasty will not collapse because you print a few complaints. Most of these are torn down before anyone reads them. They do nothing. They are pointless.” He was almost begging. He looked over and saw me watching at the door. “Give this up. For your family, if not your friends.”

I would like to say that my father said something grand. Something honorable about speaking against tyranny. Perhaps invoked one of his idols. Aung Sung Kyi or Sakharov, or Mr. Henry David and his penchant for polite protest. But he didn't say anything. He just sat with his hands on his knees, looking down at the torn whisper sheet. I think now that he must have been very afraid. Words always came easily to him, before. Instead, all he did was repeat himself. "It would be difficult."

The captain waited. When it became apparent that my father had nothing else to say, he put down his coffee cup and motioned for his men to come inside.

They were all very polite. I think the captain even apologized to my mother as they led him out the door.

* * *

We are into day three of the Double DP bonanza, and the green sun glows brightly over all of us, bathing us in its soothing, profitable glow. I am working on my newest story with my Frontal Lobe ear buds in, shutting out everything except the work at hand. It is always a little difficult to write in one's third language, but I have my favorite singer and fellow countryperson Kulaap whispering in my ear that "Love is a Bird," and the work is going well. With Kulaap singing to me in our childhood

language, I feel very much at home.

A tap on my shoulder interrupts me. I pull out my ear buds and look around. Janice, standing over me. “Ong, I need to talk to you.” She motions me to follow.

In her office, she closes the door behind me and goes to her desk. “Sit down, Ong.” She keys her tablet, scrolls through data. “How are things going for you?”

“Very well. Thank you.” I’m not sure if there is more that she wants me to say, but it is likely that she will tell me. Americans do not leave much to guesswork.

“What are you working on for your next story?” she asks.

I smile. I like this story; it reminds me of my father. And with Kulaap’s soothing voice in my ears I have finished almost all of my research. The bluet, a flower made famous in Mr. Henry David Thoreau’s journals, is blooming too early to be pollinated. Bees do not seem to find it when it blooms in March. The scientists I interviewed blame global warming, and now the flower is in danger of extinction. I have interviewed biologists and local naturalists, and now I would like to go to Walden Pond on a pilgrimage for this bluet that may soon also be bottled in a federal reserve

laboratory with its techs in clean suits and their crime scene vacuums.

When I finish describing the story, Janice looks at me as if I am crazy. I can tell that she thinks I am crazy, because I can see it on her face. And also because she tells me.

“You’re fucking crazy!”

Americans are very direct. It’s difficult to keep face when they yell at you. Sometimes, I think that I have adapted to America. I have been here for five years now, ever since I came from Thailand on a scholarship, but at times like this, all I can do is smile and try not to cringe as they lose their face and yell and rant. My

father was once struck in the face with an official's shoe, and he did not show his anger. But Janice is American, and she is very angry.

“There's no way I'm going to authorize a junket like that!”

I try to smile past her anger, and then remember that the Americans don't see an apologetic smile in the same way that a Lao would. I stop smiling and make my face look?..?

..?..?something. Earnest, I hope.

“The story is very important,” I say. “The ecosystem isn't adapting correctly to the changing climate. Instead, it has

lost?..?..?” I grope for the word. “Synchronicity. These scientists think that the flower can be saved, but only if they import a bee that is available in Turkey. They think it can replace the function of the native bee population, and they think that it will not be too disruptive.”

“Flowers and Turkish bees.”

“Yes. It is an important story. Do they let the flower go extinct? Or try to keep the famous flower, but alter the environment of Walden Pond? I think your readers will think it is very interesting.”

“More interesting than that?” She points through her glass wall at the maelstrom,

at the throbbing green sun of Double DP, who has now barricaded himself in a Mexican hotel and has taken a pair of fans hostage.

“You know how many clicks we’re getting?” she asks. “We’re exclusive. Marty’s got Double’s trust and is going in for an interview tomorrow, assuming the Mexicans don’t just raid it with commandos. We’ve got people clicking back every couple minutes just to look at Marty’s blog about his preparations to go in.”

The glowing globe not only dominates the maelstrom’s screen, it washes everything else out. If we look at the stock bots, everyone who doesn’t have

protection under our corporate umbrella has been hurt by the loss of eyeballs. Even the Frontal Lobe/Oakley story has been swallowed. Three days of completely dominating the maelstrom has been very profitable for us. Now Marty's showing his viewers how he will wear a flak jacket in case the Mexican commandos attack while he is discussing the nature of true love with DP. And he has another exclusive interview with the mother ready to post as well. Cindy has been editing the footage and telling us all how disgusted she is with the whole thing. The woman apparently drove her daughter to DP's mansion for a midnight pool party, alone.

“Perhaps some people are tired of DP and wish to see something else,” I suggest.

“Don’t shoot yourself in the foot with a flower story, Ong. Even Pradeep’s cooking journey through Ladakh gets more viewers than this stuff you’re writing.”

She looks as though she will say more, but then she simply stops. It seems as if she is considering her words. It is uncharacteristic. She normally speaks before her thoughts are arranged.

“Ong, I like you,” she says. I make myself smile at this, but she continues. “I hired you because I had a good feeling

about you. I didn't have a problem with clearing the visas to let you stay in the country. You're a good person. You write well. But you're averaging less than a thousand pings on your byline feed." She looks down at her tablet, then back up at me. "You need to up your average. You've got almost no readers selecting you for Page One. And even when they do subscribe to your feed, they're putting it in the third tier."

"Spinach reading," I supply.

"What?"

"Mr. Mackley calls it spinach reading. When people feel like they should do something with virtue, like eat their

spinach, they click to me. Or else read Shakespeare.”

I blush, suddenly embarrassed. I do not mean to imply that my work is of the same caliber as a great poet. I want to correct myself, but I’m too embarrassed. So instead I shut up, and sit in front of her, blushing.

She regards me. “Yes. Well, that’s a problem. Look, I respect what you do. You’re obviously very smart.” Her eyes scan her tablet. “The butterfly thing you wrote was actually pretty interesting.”

“Yes?” I make myself smile again.

“It’s just that no one wants to read these

stories.”

I try to protest. “But you hired me to write the important stories. The stories about politics and the government, to continue the traditions of the old newspapers. I remember what you said when you hired me.”

“Yeah, well.” She looks away. “I was thinking more about a good scandal.”

“The checkerspot is a scandal. That butterfly is now gone.”

She sighs. “No, it’s not a scandal. It’s just a depressing story. No one reads a depressing story, at least, not more than once. And no one subscribes to a

depressing byline feed.”

“A thousand people do.”

“A thousand people.” She laughs. “We aren’t some Laotian community weblog, we’re Milestone, and we’re competing for clicks with them.” She waves outside, indicating the maelstrom. “Your stories don’t last longer than half a day; they never get social-poked by anyone except a fringe.” She shakes her head. “Christ, I don’t even know who your demographic is. Centenarian hippies? Some federal bureaucrats? The numbers just don’t justify the amount of time you spend on stories.”

“What stories do you wish me to write?”

“I don’t know. Anything. Product reviews. News you can use. Just not any more of this

‘we regret to inform you of bad news’ stuff. If there isn’t something a reader can do about the damn butterfly, then there’s no point in telling them about it. It just depresses people, and it depresses your numbers.”

“We don’t have enough numbers from Marty?”

She laughs at that. “You remind me of my mother. Look, I don’t want to cut you, but if you can’t start pulling at least a fifty thousand daily average, I won’t have any choice. Our group median is

way down in comparison to other teams, and when evaluations come around, we look bad. I'm up against Nguyen in the Tech and Toys pool, and Penn in Yoga and Spirituality, and no one wants to read about how the world's going to shit. Go find me some stories that people want to read.”

She says a few more things, words that I think are meant to make me feel inspired and eager, and then I am standing outside the door, once again facing the maelstrom. The truth is that I have never written popular stories. I am not a popular story writer. I am earnest. I am slow. I do not move at the speed these Americans seem to love. *Find a story*

that people want to read. I can write some follow-up to Mackley, to Double DP, perhaps assist with sidebars to his main piece, but somehow, I suspect that the readers will know that I am faking it.

Marty sees me standing outside of Janice's office. He comes over.

"She giving you a hard time about your numbers?"

"I do not write the correct sort of stories."

"Yeah. You're an idealist."

We both stand there for a moment, meditating on the nature of idealism.

Even though he is very American, I like him because he is sensitive to people's hearts. People trust him. Even Double DP trusts him, though Marty blew his name over every news tablet's front page. Marty has a good heart. *Jai dee*. I like him. I think that he is genuine.

“Look, Ong,” he says. “I like what you do.” He puts his hand around my shoulder. For a moment, I think he's about to try to rub my head with affection and I have to force myself not to wince, but he's sensitive and instead takes his hand away. “Look, Ong. We both know you're terrible at this kind of work. We're in the news business, here. And you're just not cut out for it.”

“My visa says I have to remain employed.”

“Yeah. Janice is a bitch for that. Look.”
He pauses. “I’ve got this thing with Double DP

going down in Mexico. But I’ve got another story brewing. An exclusive. I’ve already got my bonus, anyway. And it should push up your average.”

“I do not think that I can write Double DP sidebars.”

He grins. “It’s not that. And it’s not charity; you’re actually a perfect match.”

“It is about government

mismanagement?”

He laughs, but I think he's not really laughing at me. “No.” He pauses, smiles. “It's Kulaap. An interview.”

I suck in my breath. My fellow countryperson, here in America. She came out during the purge as well. She was doing a movie in Singapore when the tanks moved, and so she was not trapped. She was already very popular all over Asia, and when Khamsing turned our country into a black hole, the world took note. Now she is popular here in America as well. Very beautiful. And she remembers our country before it went into darkness. My heart is pounding.

Marty goes on. “She’s agreed to do an exclusive with me. But you even speak her language, so I think she’d agree to switch off.” He pauses, looks serious. “I’ve got a good history with Kulaap. She doesn’t give interviews to just anyone. I did a lot of exposure stories about her when Laos was going to hell. Got her a lot of good press. This is a special favor already, so don’t fuck it up.”

I shake my head. “No. I will not.” I press my palms together and touch them to my forehead in a *nop* of appreciation. “I will not fuck it up.” I make another *nop*. He laughs. “Don’t bother with that polite

stuff. Janice will cut off your balls to increase the stock price, but we're the guys in the trenches. We stick together, right?"

* * *

In the morning, I make a pot of strong coffee with condensed milk; I boil rice noodle soup and add bean sprouts and chiles and vinegar, and warm a loaf of French bread that I buy from a Vietnamese bakery a few blocks away. With a new mix of Kulaap's music from DJ

Dao streaming in over my stereo, I sit down at my little kitchen table, pour my coffee from its press pot, and open my

tablet.

The tablet is a wondrous creation. In Laos, the paper was still a paper, physical, static, and empty of anything except the official news. Real news in our New Divine Kingdom did not come from newspapers, or from television, or from handsets or ear buds. It did not come from the net or feeds unless you trusted your neighbor not to look over your shoulder at an Internet cafe and if you knew that there were no secret police sitting beside you, or an owner who would be able to identify you when they came around asking about the person who used that workstation over there to communicate with the outside

world.

Real news came from whispered rumor, rated according to the trust you accorded the whisperer. Were they family? Did they have long history with you? Did they have anything to gain by the sharing? My father and his old classmates trusted one another. He trusted some of his students, as well. I think this is why the security police came for him in the end. One of his trusted friends or students also whispered news to official friends. Perhaps Mr. Intha-chak, or Som Vang. Perhaps another. It is impossible to peer into the blackness of that history and guess at who told true stories and in

which direction.

In any case, it was my father's karma to be taken, so perhaps it does not matter who did the whispering. But before then—before the news of my father flowed up to official ears—none of the real news flowed toward Lao TV or the *Vientiane Times*. Which meant that when the protests happened and my father came through the door with blood on his face from baton blows, we could read as much as we wanted about the three thousand schoolchildren who had sung the national anthem to our new divine monarch. While my father lay in bed, delirious with pain, the papers told us that China had signed a rubber contract

that would triple revenue for Luang Namtha province and that Nam Theun Dam was now earning BT 22.5 billion per year in electricity fees to Thailand. But there were no bloody batons, and there were no dead monks, and there was no Mercedes-Benz burning in the river as it floated toward Cambodia.

Real news came on the wings of rumor, stole into our house at midnight, sat with us and sipped coffee and fled before the call of roosters could break the stillness. It was in the dark, over a burning cigarette that you learned Vilaphon had disappeared or that Mr. Saeng's wife had been beaten as a warning. Real news was too valuable to risk in public.

Here in America, my page glows with many news feeds, flickers at me in video windows, pours in at me over broadband. It is a waterfall of information. As my personal news page opens, my feeds arrange themselves, sorting according to the priorities and tag categories that I've set, a mix of Meung Lao news, Lao refugee blogs, and the chatting of a few close friends from Thailand and the American college where I attended on a human relief scholarship.

On my second page and my third, I keep the general news, the arrangements of Milestone, the *Bangkok Post*, the *Phnom Penh Express*—the news chosen by

editors. But by the time I've finished with my own selections, I don't often have time to click through the headlines that these earnest news editors select for the mythical general reader. In any case, I know far better than they what I want to read, and with my keyword and tag scans, I can unearth stories and discussions that a news agency would never think to provide. Even if I cannot see into the black hole itself, I can slip along its edges, divine news from its fringe.

I search for tags like Vientiane, Laos, Lao, Khamsing, China-Lao friendship, Korat, Golden Triangle, Hmong independence, Lao PDR, my father's

name.????.?Only those of us who are Lao exiles from the March Purge really read these blogs. It is much as when we lived in the capital. The blogs are the rumors that we used to whisper to one another. Now we publish our whispers over the net and join mailing lists instead of secret coffee groups, but it is the same. It is family, as much as any of us now have.

On the maelstrom, the tags for Laos don't even register. Our tags bloomed brightly for a little while, while there were still guerrilla students uploading content from their handsets, and the images were lurid and shocking. But then the phone lines went down and the

country fell into its black hole and now it is just us, this small network that functions outside the country.

A headline from Jumbo Blog catches my eye. I open the site, and my tablet fills with the colorful image of the three-wheeled taxi of my childhood. I often come here. It is a node of comfort.

Laofriend posts that some people, maybe a whole family, have swum the Mekong and made it into Thailand. He isn't sure if they were accepted as refugees or if they were sent back.

It is not an official news piece. More, the idea of a news piece. *SomPaBoy* doesn't believe it, but *Khamchanh*

contends that the rumor is true, heard from someone who has a sister married to an Isaan border guard in the Thai army. So we cling to it. Wonder about it. Guess where these people came from, wonder if, against all odds, it could be one of ours: a brother, a sister, a cousin, a father.???.

After an hour, I close the tablet. It's foolish to read any more. It only brings up memories. Worrying about the past is foolish. Lao PDR is gone. To wish otherwise is suffering.

* * *

The clerk at Novotel's front desk is expecting me. A hotel staffer with a key

guides me to a private elevator bank that whisks us up into the smog and heights. The elevator doors open to a small entryway with a thick mahogany door. The staffer steps back into the elevator and disappears, leaving me standing in this strange airlock. Presumably, I am being examined by Kulaap's security.

The mahogany door opens, and a smiling black man who is forty centimeters taller than I and who has muscles that ripple like snakes smiles and motions me inside. He guides me through Kulaap's sanctuary. She keeps the heat high, almost tropical, and fountains rush everywhere around. The flat is musical with water. I unbutton my collar in the

humidity. I was expecting air-conditioning, and instead I am sweltering. It's almost like home. And then she's in front of me, and I can hardly speak. She is beautiful, and more. It is intimidating to stand before someone who exists in film and in music but has never existed before you in the flesh. She's not as stunning as she is in the movies, but there's more life, more presence; the movies lose that quality about her. I make a *nop* of greeting, pressing my hands together, touching my forehead.

She laughs at this, takes my hand and shakes it American-style. "You're lucky Marty likes you so much," she says. "I

don't like interviews.”

I can barely find my voice. “Yes. I only have a few questions.”

“Oh no. Don't be shy.” She laughs again, and doesn't release my hand, pulls me toward her living room. “Marty told me about you. You need help with your ratings. He helped me once, too.”

She's frightening. She is of my people, but she has adapted better to this place than I have. She seems comfortable here. She walks differently, smiles differently; she is an American, with perhaps some flavor of our country, but nothing of our roots. It's obvious. And strangely disappointing. In her movies, she holds

herself so well, and now she sits down on her couch and sprawls with her feet kicked out in front of her. Not caring at all. I'm embarrassed for her, and I'm glad I don't have my camera set up yet. She kicks her feet up on the couch. I can't help but be shocked. She catches my expression and smiles.

“You're worse than my parents. Fresh off the boat.”

“I am sorry.”

She shrugs. “Don't worry about it. I spent half my life here, growing up; different country, different rules.”

I'm embarrassed. I try not to laugh with

the tension I feel. “I just have some interview questions,” I say.

“Go ahead.” She sits up and arranges herself for the video stand that I set up. I begin. “When the March Purge happened, you were in Singapore.”

She nods. “That’s right. We were finishing *The Tiger and the Ghost*.”

“What was your first thought when it happened? Did you want to go back? Were you surprised?”

She frowns. “Turn off the camera.”

When it’s off she looks at me with pity. “This isn’t the way to get clicks. No one

cares about an old revolution. Not even my fans.” She stands abruptly and calls through the green jungle of her flat. “Terrell?”

The big black man appears. Smiling and lethal. Looming over me. He is very frightening. The movies I grew up with had *falang* like him. Terrifying large black men whom our heroes had to overcome. Later, when I arrived in America, it was different, and I found out that the *falang* and the black people don't like the way we show them in our movies. Much like when I watch their Vietnam movies, and see the ugly way the Lao freedom fighters behave. Not real at all, portrayed like animals. But

still, I cannot help but cringe when Terrell looks at me.

Kulaap says, “We’re going out, Terrell. Make sure you tip off some of the papcams. We’re going to give them a show.”

“I don’t understand,” I say.

“You want clicks, don’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

She smiles. “You don’t need an interview. You need an event.” She looks me over. “And better clothes.” She nods to her security man. “Terrell, dress him up.”

* * *

A flashbulb frenzy greets us as we come out of the tower. Papcams everywhere. Chase cycles revving, and Terrell and three others of his people guiding us through the press to the limousine, shoving cameras aside with a violence and power that are utterly unlike the careful pity he showed when he selected a Gucci suit for me to wear.

Kulaap looks properly surprised at the crowd and the shouting reporters, but not nearly as surprised as I am, and then we're in the limo, speeding out of the tower's roundabout as papcams follow us.

Kulaap crouches before the car's onboard tablet, keying in pass codes. She is very pretty, wearing a black dress that brushes her thighs and thin straps that caress her smooth bare shoulders. I feel as if I am in a movie. She taps more keys. A screen glows, showing the taillights of our car: the view from pursuing papcams.

“You know I haven't dated anyone in three years?” she asks.

“Yes. I know from your Web site biography.”

She grins. “And now it looks like I've found one of my countrymen.”

“But we’re not on a date,” I protest.

“Of course we are.” She smiles again. “I’m going out on a supposedly secret date with a cute and mysterious Lao boy. And look at all those papcams chasing after us, wondering where we’re going and what we’re going to do.” She keys in another code, and now we can see live footage of the paparazzi, as viewed from the tail of her limo. She grins. “My fans like to see what life is like for me.”

I can almost imagine what the maelstrom looks like right now: there will still be Marty’s story, but now a dozen other sites will be lighting up, and in the center of that, Kulaap’s own view of the excitement, pulling in her fans, who will

want to know, direct from her, what's going on. She holds up a mirror, checks herself, and then she smiles into her smartphone's camera.

“Hi everyone. It looks like my cover's blown. Just thought I should let you know that I'm on a lovely date with a lovely man. I'll let you all know how it goes. Promise.” She points the camera at me. I stare at it stupidly. She laughs. “Say hi and good-bye, Ong.”

“Hi and good-bye.”

She laughs again, waves into the camera. “Love you all. Hope you have as good a night as I'm going to have.” And then she cuts the clip and punches a code to

launch the video to her Web site.

It is a bit of nothing. Not a news story, not a scoop even, and yet, when she opens another window on her tablet, showing her own miniversion of the maelstrom, I can see her site lighting up with traffic. Her version of the maelstrom isn't as powerful as what we have at Milestone, but still, it is an impressive window into the data that is relevant to Kulaap's tags.

“What's your feed's byline?” she asks. “Let's see if we can get your traffic bumped up.”

“Are you serious?”

“Marty Mackley did more than this for me. I told him I’d help.” She laughs. “Besides, we wouldn’t want you to get sent back to the black hole, would we?”

“You know about the black hole?” I can’t help doing a double-take.

Her smile is almost sad. “You think just because I put my feet up on the furniture that I don’t care about my aunts and uncles back home? That I don’t worry about what’s happening?”

“I—”

She shakes her head. “You’re so fresh off the boat.”

“Do you use the Jumbo Cafe—” I break off. It seems too unlikely.

She leans close. “My handle is *Laofriend*. What’s yours?”

“*Littlexang*. I thought *Laofriend* was a boy—”

She just laughs.

I lean forward. “Is it true that the family made it out?”

She nods. “For certain. A general in the Thai army is a fan. He tells me everything. They have a listening post. And sometimes they send scouts across.”

It's almost as if I am home.

* * *

We go to a tiny Laotian restaurant where everyone recognizes her and falls over her and the owners simply lock out the paparazzi when they become too intrusive. We spend the evening unearthing memories of Vientiane. We discover that we both favored the same rice noodle cart on Kaem Khong. That she used to sit on the banks of the Mekong and wish that she were a fisherman. That we went to the same waterfalls outside the city on the weekends. That it is impossible to find good *dum mak hoong* anywhere outside of the country. She is a good companion,

very alive. Strange in her American ways, but still, with a good heart. Periodically, we click photos of one another and post them to her site, feeding the voyeurs. And then we are in the limo again and the paparazzi are all around us. I have the strange feeling of fame. Flashbulbs everywhere. Shouted questions. I feel proud to be beside this beautiful intelligent woman who knows so much more than any of us about the situation inside our homeland.

Back in the car, she has me open a bottle of champagne and pour two glasses while she opens the maelstrom and studies the results of our date. She has reprogrammed it to watch my byline

feed ranking as well.

“You’ve got twenty thousand more readers than you did yesterday,” she says. I beam. She keeps reading the results. “Someone already did a scan on your face.” She toasts me with her glass. “You’re famous.”

We clink glasses. I am flushed with wine and happiness. I will have Janice’s average clicks. It’s as though a bodhisattva has come down from heaven to save my job. In my mind, I offer thanks to Marty for arranging this, for his generous nature. Kulaap leans close to her screen, watching the flaring content. She opens another window, starts to read. She frowns.

“What the fuck do you write about?”

I draw back, surprised. “Government stories, mostly.” I shrug. “Sometimes environment stories.”

“Like what?”

“I am working on a story right now about global warming and Henry David Thoreau.”

“Aren’t we done with that?”

I’m confused. “Done with what?”

The limo jostles us as it makes a turn, moves down Hollywood Boulevard,

letting the cycles rev around us like schools of fish. They're snapping pictures at the side of the limo, snapping at us. Through the tinting, they're like fireflies, smaller flares than even my stories in the maelstrom.

"I mean, isn't that an old story?" She sips her champagne. "Even America is reducing emissions now. Everyone knows it's a problem." She taps her couch's armrest. "The carbon tax on my limo has tripled, even with the hybrid engine. Everyone agrees it's a problem. We're going to fix it. What's there to write about?"

She is an American. Everything that is good about them: their optimism, their

willingness to charge ahead, to make their own future. And everything that is bad about them: their strange ignorance, their unwillingness to believe that they must behave as other than children.

“No. It’s not done,” I say. “It is worse. Worse every day. And the changes we make seem to have little effect. Maybe too little, or maybe too late. It is getting worse.”

She shrugs. “That’s not what I read.”

I try not to show my exasperation. “Of course it’s not what you read.” I wave at the screen. “Look at the clicks on my feed. People want happy stories. Want fun stories. Not stories like I write. So

instead, we all write what you will read, which is nothing.”

“Still—”

“No.” I make a chopping motion with my hand. “We newspeople are very smart monkeys. If you will give us your so lovely eyeballs and your click-throughs we will do whatever you like. We will write good news, and news you can use, news you can shop to, news with the ‘Three S’s.’ We will tell you how to have better sex or eat better or look more beautiful or feel happier and or how to meditate—yes, so enlightened.” I make a face. “If you want a walking meditation and Double DP, we will give it to you.”

She starts to laugh.

“Why are you laughing at me?” I snap. “I am not joking!”

She waves a hand. “I know, I know, but what you just said ‘double’—” She shakes her head, still laughing. “Never mind.”

I lapse into silence. I want to go on, to tell her of my frustrations. But now I am embarrassed at my loss of composure. I have no face. I didn't used to be like this. I used to control my emotions, but now I am an American, as childish and unruly as Janice. And Kulaap laughs at me.

I control my anger. “I think I want to go home,” I say. “I don’t wish to be on a date anymore.”

She smiles and reaches over to touch my shoulder. “Don’t be that way.”

A part of me is telling me that I am a fool. That I am reckless and foolish for walking away from this opportunity. But there is something else, something about this frenzied hunt for page views and click-throughs and ad revenue that suddenly feels unclean. As if my father is with us in the car, disapproving. Asking if he posted his complaints about his missing friends for the sake of clicks.

“I want to get out,” I hear myself say. “I

do not wish to have your clicks.”

“But—”

I look up at her. “I want to get out. Now.”

“Here?” She makes a face of exasperation, then shrugs. “It’s your choice.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

She tells her driver to pull over. We sit in stiff silence.

“I will send your suit back to you,” I say.

She gives me a sad smile. “It’s all right.

It's a gift."

This makes me feel worse, even more humiliated for refusing her generosity, but still, I get out of the limo. Cameras are clicking at me from all around. This is my fifteen minutes of fame, this moment when all of Kulaap's fans focus on me for a few seconds, their flashbulbs popping.

I begin to walk home as paparazzi shout questions.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later I am indeed alone. I consider calling a cab, but then decide I prefer the night. Prefer to walk by myself

through this city that never walks anywhere. On a street corner, I buy a *pupusa* and gamble on the Mexican Lottery because I like the tickets' laser images of their Day of the Dead. It seems an echo of the Buddha's urging to remember that we all become corpses.

I buy three tickets, and one of them is a winner: one hundred dollars that I can redeem at any TelMex kiosk. I take this as a good sign. Even if my luck is obviously gone with my work, and even if the girl Kulaap was not the bodhisattva that I thought, still, I feel lucky. As though my father is walking with me down this cool Los Angeles street in the middle of the night, the two

of us together again, me with a *pupusa* and a winning lottery ticket, him with an Ah Daeng cigarette and his quiet gambler's smile. In a strange way, I feel that he is blessing me.

And so instead of going home, I go back to the newsroom.

My hits are up when I arrive. Even now, in the middle of the night, a tiny slice of Kulaap's fan base is reading about checkerspot butterflies and American government

incompetence. In my country, this story would not exist. A censor would kill it instantly. Here, it glows green; increasing and decreasing in size as

people click. A lonely thing, flickering amongst the much larger content flares of Intel processor releases, guides to low-fat recipes, photos of lol-cats, and episodes of *Survivor! Antarctica*. The wash of light and color is very beautiful.

In the center of the maelstrom, the green sun of the Double DP story glows—surges larger. DP is doing something. Maybe he's surrendering, maybe he's murdering his hostages, maybe his fans have thrown up a human wall to protect him. My story snuffs out as reader attention shifts.

I watch the maelstrom a little longer, then go to my desk and make a phone call. A rumpled hairy man answers,

rubbing at a sleep-puffy face. I apologize for the late hour, and then pepper him with questions while I record the interview.

He is silly looking and wild-eyed. He has spent his life living as if he were Thoreau, thinking deeply on the forest monk and following the man's careful paths through what woods remain, walking amongst birch and maple and bluets. He is a fool, but an earnest one.

"I can't find a single one," he tells me. "Thoreau could find thousands at this time of year; there were so many he didn't even have to look for them."

He says, "I'm so glad you called. I tried

sending out press releases, but?..?..?” He shrugs.

“I’m glad you’ll cover it. Otherwise, it’s just us hobbyists talking to each other.”

I smile and nod and take notes of his sincerity, this strange wild creature, the sort that everyone will dismiss. His image is bad for video; his words are not good for text. He has no quotes that encapsulate what he sees. It is all couched in the jargon of naturalists and biology. With time, I could find another, someone who looks attractive or who can speak well, but all I have is this one hairy man, disheveled and foolish, senile with passion over a flower that no longer exists.

I work through the night, polishing the story. When my colleagues pour through the door at 8 a.m. it is almost done. Before I can even tell Janice about it, she comes to me. She fingers my clothing and grins. “Nice suit.” She pulls up a chair and sits beside me. “We all saw you with Kulaap. Your hits went way up.” She nods at my screen. “Writing up what happened?”

“No. It was a private conversation.”

“But everyone wants to know why you got out of the car. I had someone from the *Financial Times* call me about splitting the hits for a tell-all, if you’ll be interviewed. You wouldn’t even need

to write up the piece.”

It's a tempting thought. Easy hits. Many click-throughs. Ad-revenue bonuses. Still, I shake my head. “We did not talk about things that are important for others to hear.”

Janice stares at me as if I am crazy. “You're not in the position to bargain, Ong. Something happened between the two of you. Something people want to know about. And you need the clicks. Just tell us what happened on your date.”

“I was not on a date. It was an interview.”

“Well then publish the fucking interview

and get your average up!”

“No. That is for Kulaap to post, if she wishes. I have something else.”

I show Janice my screen. She leans forward. Her mouth tightens as she reads. For once, her anger is cold. Not the explosion of noise and rage that I expect. “Bluets.” She looks at me. “You need hits and you give them flowers and Walden Pond.”

“I would like to publish this story.”

“No! Hell, no! This is just another story like your butterfly story, and your road contracts story, and your congressional budget story. You won’t get a damn

click. It's pointless. No one will even read it."

"This is news."

"Marty went out on a limb for you—" She presses her lips together, reining in her anger.

"Fine. It's up to you, Ong. If you want to destroy your life over Thoreau and flowers, it's your funeral. We can't help you if you won't help yourself. Bottom line, you need fifty thousand readers or I'm sending you back to the third world."

We look at each other. Two gamblers evaluating one another. Deciding who is

betting, and who is bluffing.

I click the “publish” button.

The story launches itself onto the net, announcing itself to the feeds. A minute later a tiny new sun glows in the maelstrom.

Together, Janice and I watch the green spark as it flickers on the screen. Readers turn to the story. Start to ping it and share it amongst themselves, start to register hits on the page. The post grows slightly.

My father gambled on Thoreau. I am my father's son.

"The Gambler" © Paolo Bacigalupi