

Excerpt from Kyo Maclear, *Unearthing*, 288-289:

In my residency room, the phone rings through the night, every few hours or minutes. Twenty-two straight calls. My mother is unanchored by my absence. Her voice tumbles into the quiet in the form of random questions and statements. Wake up. At 4 a.m., unable to settle back to sleep, I blurrily scroll through my phone—a whiplash of content that does nothing to soothe my twitching mind. The salty chocolate pudding is very good. Australia is burning ...

Blood-orange skies and pink Martian suns. Blazing forests and trees reduced to charcoal poles. It is an otherworldly scene. *Omnicide* will be the word used by Danielle Celermajer, a professor of sociology at the University of Sydney, to describe the previously unwitnessed horror of Australia's 2019-2020 bushfire season. "[Humans, animals, trees, insects, fungi, ecosystems, forests, rivers (and on and on) being killed ... in recent years, environmentalists have coined the term ecocide, the killing of ecosystems—but this is something more. This is the killing of everything." *Wake up*.

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"IT'S THE DETACHMENT," my photographer uncle A. says, when he emails me old pictures of my parents and me. He has an eye and notices things like the hint of intimacy or aloofness in a gap between two bodies. The mini proofs of affection and distance.

"Note the cool demeanor," Uncle A. writes. "Her shoulder turned slightly away, barely perceptible. Her eyes elsewhere ... not upon him, or even you. The odd sense of mutual alienation..."

My mother continues to leave voicemails through the night: *Wake up, Kyo-chan / Honest is very important / That's what Oscar Wilde said a long time ago / I don't*

know what to say / English is my second language / Kawaii Kyo-chan / I know you were a sweetie-pie / I brought you up almost by myself / And daddy he loved you Nou know I mean Michael / I think you believe friends and students are more important than family / But I have a big question mark about that / I try to do my best / Okay desu / Please call mummy. Arigatou / Im getting crazy about these things / Why don't you call / Why do you have to speak in English? / Don't you remember who I am?

I return home to find my mother has jerry-rigged a complicated scaffold for our amaryllis with chopsticks and twist ties. The full moon tampers with our hearts. Across the city, the moon gleams over the greenhouse and somewhere inside it, pressed to glass, are five amaryllis keening for their cousins in Australia. All those plants down under are gobbling up the poison in the sky. Amaryllis can survive fire but how much fire and for how long?

It will be months before plant shoots begin to push out of the scorched ground and from charred trunks, tiny tendrils of growth.

Wake up.

“In the Archive of Waterfalls” from Nina Mingya Powles, *Small Bodies of Water* (2021), excerpts:

1. cloud-forest white

This is the closest I've been to the summit of the mountain. I'm surrounded by clouds so thick that my parents' outlines grow hazy as they step ahead of me towards the lookout. Beyond them, I can make out the faint edges of a rocky landscape. Tree branches curl out of the whiteness. Here, there's almost no difference between precipitation and cloud, between liquid and air. I walk into the mist and it dampens my skin.

The rainforest looms all around us, vines and pitcher plants spilling over the road. Up here, rain falls persistently all year round. A layer of low cloud touches the treetops, creating a forest canopy heavy with water. Moisture condenses on the leaves and drips down onto everything that lives below, nourishing the wet undergrowth. This type of tropical montane forest is also known as *cloud forest*, *water forest* or *mossy forest*, named for the epiphytes that flourish here: mosses, orchids, algae and ferns, all organisms that feed and grow off the surfaces of other plants.

We are about halfway up Mount Kinabalu, the highest peak in the Malay Archipelago. This is one of the highest points accessible by road, a starting point for climbers to begin their slow ascent to the summit. In the distance, small waterfalls flow from steep heights down into the valleys below like strips of white ribbon stitched onto a dark backdrop. From where I stand, I can see thick clouds of mist at the point where water flows over a rocky cliff edge, altering the speed and shape of the moving body of water, turning a narrow stream into a waterfall. The place where the waterfall begins is somewhere out of sight, high

above the cloudline. As the car winds its way up towards the mountain, I trace the thin silvery lines with my eyes until they disappear.

When I was little, I conducted raindrop races from the back seat of the car during long journeys. I'd pick two fat drops falling side by side and trace their progress with my fingertip as they slid down the glass. I stuck my face right up to the window, eagerly awaiting the moment at the end of the race when one raindrop would touch the other and, as if by magic, the two would become one: a tiny waterfall pouring into the crack between the car door and the glass.

We aren't climbers today, only day trippers. We're on a drive organised by Michael, one of Mum's old friends from school. Our itinerary whenever we're in Kota Kinabalu is always dictated by activities planned by my mother's former classmates: an array of chatty aunties and uncles who greet me like we really are family. Michael passes us paper bags of nuts to feed the mountain squirrels. I glance around: no mountain squirrels to be found in the surrounding rocks and trees, which are eerily quiet in the mist. But someone rustles their paper bag and sure enough, small creatures begin to emerge like little long-tailed ghosts. They hop and dangle between the branches of the trees on the other side of the railings as if performing for us tourists.

On the way back home, we take a detour into the mountain foothills to see the Rafflesia, the largest flower in the world. Rafflesia flowers for only one week of its nine-month life cycle, and only during the rainy season. It begins blooming at night, which also marks the beginning of its death. Almost as soon as it blooms the flower starts to decompose, giving off the rotting scent that earns the plant its other name: corpse flower. The smell attracts the insects that will disperse its pollen.

We traipse single file down a raised walkway beneath the dripping canopy. Dad taps my shoulder and points to a mound on the forest floor beside the walkway. I step closer: what looks like a chunk of darkened flesh is really a giant flower, peach-pink, shiny and unreal like a sci-fi movie prop made of plaster. There's no stench but I detect a sulphurous scent, bittersweet, like liquorice and old cheese. I can just make out the spongelike skin of its petals, rippling and porous, more reptile than flower.

2. National Geographic yellow

We spent so many Christmases at the old house in Kota Kinabalu when we were small. On days when it rained non-stop and we couldn't go to the pool on the hill overlooking the valley, we'd rummage through the boxes and shelves of old books, magazines and photographs that sat untouched in all the upstairs rooms. Mum unearthed an ancient Monopoly set, one she and my aunt remembered playing when they were kids. My cousin Sara brushed the dust off the box and set it on the floor between us.

We sat cross-legged in the bedroom that used to belong to my mum, one of two rooms in the old house that has air-conditioning. The humming AC unit blew icy wind down on our necks as we gently opened the cardboard box, which had begun to fall apart at the edges. Inside, though, all the pieces were still there: the little red dice, the pink and yellow slips of paper money which we stacked in neat piles on the floor. We played all afternoon and for hours the next day while the sound of geckoes chirping and dogs barking floated in the air.

When we'd finally had too many days in a row of Monopoly, we lay on the cool varnished floor and flipped through Gong Gong's huge stacks of old National Geographics. Gong Gong has a lifelong subscription; every month they keep on

coming, fifty years since his first issue. The pages of the oldest copies felt rough and papery, not glossy like those from the last two decades. The signature yellow of their spines had faded to a pale buttery colour. Inside, the pictures were dreamlike and super-saturated: bright blue skies above a sparkling fjord, an erupting volcano covered in fiery lava, a glowing city seen from space. We turned to the bottom shelf, where Gong Gong kept copies of the books he had published himself. I can see the cover in my mind: a school of colourful fish, gold and silver and mottled red, all swimming towards the book's spine, underneath a title in bold lettering: *The Fresh-Water Fishes of North Borneo* by Robert Inger and Chin Phui Kong. I pulled it from the shelf and held it on my lap, along with a stack of other books with titles like *Marine Invertebrates of Malaysia* and *A Field Guide to Shells and Molluses of Borneo*. I loved the way these books resembled shopping catalogues, every picture of every species neatly hand-drawn in black-and-white lines, named and labelled underneath. I turned straight to the six or so pages of thick glossy paper in the very middle of the book, where fish with fluorescent yellow spines and blue flowing tails shone in colour photographs.

Chin Phui Kong is Gong Gong, my grandfather, an ichthyologist - a marine biologist who specialises in fish. He was born in Sandakan, Sabah, in 1923. His father and grandfather migrated together to Malaysia from Guangdong in southern China before he was born. He went to secondary school in China, where in 1944 he was recruited to join the army to fight in the resistance movement against the Japanese alongside the British and the Kuomintang as part of Force 136. After the war, he went back to China to study marine biology at Xiamen University, then worked at the Sabah Fisheries Department in Malaysia for the rest of his career.

[...]

I made plans to follow in his footsteps on the mountain, to write about the waterfalls and other small bodies of water that Gong Gong studied, and to bring with me Lilian S. Gibbs' botanical notes. I booked a climbing permit and reserved a room at the lodge near the summit, where we would stay overnight and rise before dawn to reach Low's Peak at sunrise. I bought a waterproof parka, thermal leggings, a nylon backpack cover. As the news steadily unravelled, and so did our travel plans, I found myself clinging for as long as I could to the idea of walking up into the mist, spotting orchids, touching the cold granite summit and then, afterwards, sitting at the table with Gong Gong to tell him about the journey.

The news headlines repeat themselves in my head. For months I've been collecting them like field notes. 16th March: *'Malaysia will shut its borders to travellers, restrict internal movement, close schools and universities.* 9th May: *'Malaysian borders remain closed to foreigners.'* 11th September: *'The government has decided to allow permanent residents, as well as foreign spouses of Malaysian citizens, to enter Malaysia, provided it is a one-way journey.'*

5. formalin gold

According to MountKinabalu.com, the climb takes a day and a half and is possible for 'anyone that is reasonably fit and healthy', even someone without any mountain-climbing experience, like me. I thought that if I could summit the mountain, I might come away with a deeper connection to the place where my mother was born. I couldn't let go of the mountain, even if I couldn't fathom how to write about it without being able to set foot on it or touch it. I reached for my copy of *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd, a book unique in that it is not about reaching a summit, but instead closely traces the contours and colours of a mountain, its light, its air.

A line from Robert Macfarlane's introduction leapt out at me: 'to aim for the highest point is not the only way to climb a mountain'.

One way to climb a mountain, when travel is not possible, is to enter the archive. At the top of the steps of the Linnean Society of London, I ring a brass bell next to the door and hear its buzzing echo on the other side. The door is so heavy that I have to heave it open with my whole body. I tell the receptionist I have an appointment at the library and she waves me upstairs. Gold-framed portraits of distinguished white men line the walls above the carpeted stairs, along with cabinets displaying old pressed flowers.

I haven't set foot in a library in six months. Before the pandemic altered the shape of our daily lives, I spent half the week working in a library and archive dedicated to poetry. I breathlessly tell this to the young librarian, who has already set my stack of requested items on the table in front of me. I have just entered the most beautiful library I've ever seen, though I don't say this to the librarian, who probably hears it several times a day. He retreats to his office, leaving me with my shaky hands, my sharpened pencils and my pile of books. I look around slowly, trying to take it all in. The walls are painted a soothing shade of mossy green, the colour of flax leaves from back home. Rickety ladders are fixed to the bookshelves, both down here and up on the mezzanine floor, where fluted columns with ornately curled tops touch the high ceilings. Soft sunlight filters through the floral-patterned skylights. I am alone in this intricate room, apart from several busts of old men and an enormous python skin coiled inside a glass case behind me.

It's quiet apart from distant sounds of the city outside the arched windows. I can feel my heartbeat thumping in my ears. Titles of books, old and new, catch my

eye: *Ancient Oaks of the English Landscape*; *AMERICAN SNAKES*; *The Flower of Empire*.

Earlier, I had waited with a small group of keen gallery visitors outside the gates of the Royal Academy. A woman with wispy white hair had seen me peering impatiently through the iron bars. She told me the gates would open at exactly quarter to eleven, in ten minutes time. I'd been about to ask her if she had come for the Gauguin exhibition, when she said: 'I've just seen a bird of prey.'

I followed the line of her gaze through the gates towards the courtyard. It's gone, she murmured. She said she'd seen the large dark-winged bird perch momentarily on the arm of a statue. She straightened her shoulders and held out her arm, mimicking the statue's pose, gesturing with her other hand to show me just where the bird had been. She laughed in amazement. I laughed with her and we looked up at the clear sky above the ornate rooftops, the blue so brilliant and cloudless we shielded our eyes.

With most of the city inaccessible to me until recently, it's been so long since I've set foot in an institution like this; one established almost solely for the cataloguing and archiving of Empire. In London, as with other European cities, I can feel the weight of a city built on the spoils of slavery and colonial violence. The Linnean Society is housed inside Burlington House, along with the Royal Academy of Arts and the Royal Astronomical Society, among other scientific institutions. Burlington House was owned by Lord Burlington, who purchased it in 1667, while he was Lord Treasurer of Ireland. Now, of course, the Linnean Society's focus has shifted to presenting and collecting important research on conservation and climate change. Libraries and archives may intend to exist outside of politics, with purely academic or research-related aims, but the

archive is an institution and is therefore political. As the American writer and scholar Saidiya Hartman writes, when I step into this room, I must confront the authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters'. This room is beautiful, but I feel the weight of its history.

The church bells chime softly to signal eleven o'clock. Noises of Piccadilly Circus fade into the background as I take out my notebook and place it on the desk next to two books pulled from the stack in front of me: *The Fresh-Water Fishes of North Borneo* by Robert F. Inger and Chin Phui Kong, my grandfather; and a volume of the Linnean Society Journal from 1914, bound in dark green leather with gold lettering stamped on the spine.

I open the blue book and there he is, sitting front and centre in a photograph of the Borneo Zoological Expedition team, from 1956, the same year my mum was born. I don't remember seeing this picture before; I've never seen him so young. Yet the shape of his face is just the same. I take a picture of the page with my phone and send it to Mum on WeChat. She responds minutes later to say she knows this picture well. She says the man seated next to Gong Gong - Dr Robert Inger, a herpetologist from Chicago - was Uncle Bob.

I've always known Gong Gong was an expert on fish in the North Borneo region, but I never knew what this really meant. I didn't know what he actually did. When I looked at this book when I was a girl, I only looked at the pictures. This time, I read slowly through Gong Gong's detailed accounts of Sabah's smallest bodies of water: streams, pools, waterfalls. In the book, each body of water is separated into its composite layers: the surface layer, upper strata, mid-water and low layer. And every fish specimen is described in minute detail, from the tip of the snout to the end of the opercular flap, the depth of the body,

the diameter of the eye, the number of scales, the tiny distance between each fin. A series of black-and-white photographs show various riverbanks, pools and streams that served as the scientists' main collection sites. One photo shows vines and leaves tangled above a stream caught in a ray of sunlight, causing the surface of the water to shimmer. I can almost see the light vibrating.

The Fresh-Water Fishes of North Borneo was originally published in 1964; this printing from 1990 includes a new chapter written by my grandfather, listing further new fish species collected from Kinabalu National Park: 'A big room in the Department's headquarters [...] was set aside for storage and display of fish specimens, preserved in formalin, in candy jars.' I think of the bedroom in the old house where I always slept as a child, with its sets of shelves dotted with golden jars and the tiny pink and silver fish suspended inside.

6. mountain rhododendron red

Alone in the empty library, I am submerged in the flora and waterways of Mount Kinabalu. It's strange to think that if my trip hadn't been cancelled, if borders around the world hadn't been closed, I never would have spent so much time with my grandfather's book, here in this quiet archive dedicated to science.

***This too is a glistening* excerpts, by Pratyusha, Jessica J. Lee, Alycia Pirmohamed, Nina Mingya Powles (2024):**

[09:05 30.03.24 Brandenburg, Germany]

Capsule (seed; spore; time)

I. First spring

And here is what I remember: soil drier than the last time, except where it wasn't. Light at soft angles, slipping through still-bare trees as the sun cut low in the sky. Evening approaching, but the air still carrying warmth. I was carrying little, a bag and a bit of food, some names to return with: lesser celandine, snowdrop anemone, a wind-wrought beech, a twisted pine.

The date was a problem. It was still March, and the cherry blossoms near home had come and gone. My hayfever had arrived in the form of weeping eyes, itching corneas. I had checked the weather app and seen the yellow bar creep into red — still, warm days approaching. But you had been delayed by the wind.

I turned instead to the details: touching my fingertips to pincushion moss the texture of a stiff horsehair brush. To star moss, inching towards green translucence. If I could not show you then, I would notice it, create a record. The fallen pine that we'd leapt from nearly ten years ago had now rotted into the lakebed. Only its curved back remained above water. I knew that everything was changing — slowly if I thought in days and months, but too quickly as the years slipped past.

II. Seven minutes

Eurasian Blue Tit. Common Chaffinch. Eurasian Linnet (perhaps). Great Tit. Common Wood-Pigeon. Eurasian Wren. Eurasian Kestrel. Carrion Crow (definitely not). Hooded Crow (definitely). European Robin. European Goldfinch. European Starling. Hawfinch.

And us listening at the kitchen window.

III. Two rooms

I am not accustomed to writing in proximity. To sharing at all. I am possessive with my words, even when they feed me.

I am a feeder, I tell my friends. I will host. I will cook. But still I am hungry.

IV. Seven hours

Waning gibbous and cotton-wool cloud. Night in the countryside is so dark, even half-lit by the moon. I wait for sleep, imagining you scuttling towards me through a midday sky. I worry selfishly about the weather; if it will bring you to me.

F points out every airplane that crosses the sky, their cloudtrails long after they've gone. 'We had fun on the airplane,' she told me upon waking last Tuesday. She held my cheeks, kissed my nose. It had been fun, being in the sky. Had it been fun making the weather?

The mattress is soft and the bedframe creaks every time I move. I wake each time, until eventually it is light and I think I have slept through the morning, that you will soon be here. But it is only 5:10. 5:23. 6:13. At 6:35 I decide to make us coffee. To open the attic windows. To lean out and to listen.

[10:27 31.03.24]

Seven questions I have saved up in my head to ask J when I next see her:

1. What are those leafy clusters high up in the bare trees?
2. Why does rainwater collect in some parts of the forest and not in others?
3. Did you always know you wanted to be a mother?
4. Was that a heron that we saw out the window above the trees, or was it a swan?
5. When do you feel most at home in yourself and in your body?
6. Why do I only see black swans back home in the river inlet near the bridge, and only white swans here in this country? (The sound of them taking off in flight, their white wings flapping furiously against the surface, makes everyone around stop and stare in wonder and fear).
7. What happens if the ponds keep flooding like they have this past winter?

Seven days of high winds

Laminated documents and long-stemmed roses are carried on the swollen river.

The stem of the narcissus can no longer support the weight of its pretty double-petalled head.

I take a picture of the plate in front of me, six segments of blood orange on a scallop shell.

I notice pale marks on the shell where smaller creatures have clung to it.

Clouds of pale blossom are becoming more visible at night.

I cup my cheeks with both hands when the wind moves through me.

Somewhere you are standing in a flooded field in bright sunlight.

***Everything in the Forest is the Forest*, Clare Hewitt (text by Kerri ní Dochartaigh, Marchelle Farrell, Jessica J. Lee) (2025):**

On a forest floor dappled with acorns, I watch her little steps. Her crouch as she bends to pluck one from the ground: a small green thimble of possibility. She squeezes it in her pudgy hand, presses it into the pocket of her coat. 'Acorn,' I say, letting each syllable stretch into the air between us. 'Acorn?' She returns it as a question.

Acorn.

Walking home from school, my daughter answers that we must be the dominant species on earth because we are the most clever.

I offer her an acorn as we pass the oak tree by the church. Millennia of wisdom clasped in her fist.

Her eyes widen in understanding. 'They have so much to teach us.'

We have so much to learn. It is a beginning.

I think about beginnings, what they mean; what they hold.

I think about holding, too – the how, the why, the when, the where, the who
– and I remember an old phrase from long back.

From when I was her age, maybe even –

From tiny acorns, mighty oaks are born

– and her hand feels, suddenly, so small again, so green; so *everything*.