

The Anchored World

Every night before bed, Ma runs Samsara through a battery of Thai tongue twisters.

Samsara stumbles through the squawking maze of “Who sells chicken eggs?” Ma wrings a nipple for every inverted word, every warbling tone, but Samsara sings like Mariah Carey through “the big monster chases the little monster,” and for that Ma kisses the sting from Samsara’s chest.

“Remember,” Ma says, walking her fingers slow down Samsara’s belly. “Yak yai always gets yak lek.”

The big monster always gets the little monster.

In Grammy’s stories, giants are slain because the heroes are so quick and clever, and the giants are so slow and stupid. A giant might die by plummeting from a beanstalk, or three might die at once, tricked into clobbering each other with hands big as boulders. The earth always shakes when their bodies fall.

In Khun Yai’s stories, the yaks disguise themselves as beautiful women who ensnare human men or adopt human daughters. They can pretend for a long time, but at the first scent of betrayal, the yaks unhinge their jaws and devour those who love them before the phra-aek arrives to save the day.

Samsara’s Ma is very beautiful. This was her first clue. The second is the flicker of Ma’s disguise, which only Samsara can see.

“My mom is a yak,” Samsara tells the teacher, who scolds her for speaking gibberish instead of English. “My mom is a yak,” she tells the neighbor, who reminds her to listen to her mama. “My mom is a yak,” she tells the mailman, who waves as he

passes from her house to the next. “My mom is a yak,” she tells her best friend Teeny Tina’s mom, Leslie, who shoos them into the yard.

Only Teeny Tina believes her.

“How do you kill a yuck?” Teeny Tina asks.

“Same as any monster,” Samsara says. “With your wits.”

But Samsara knows Jack had an axe. The valiant little tailor had a slingshot. Rotasen had his magic staff. By the looks of Teeny Tina, who peers at her with one eye puckered like the butt end of a lemon, she’s heard the stories, too.

“Maybe something sharp and heavy,” Samsara adds.

“Jakey Doyle down the street’s got a sword I bet we can borrow,” Teeny Tina says.

This is how a plastic sword, chewed by Whistler the beagle and every Doyle kid in town, comes to hide under Samsara’s pillow.

After her bath, Ma bundles Samsara in a towel and deposits her in bed. Samsara gropes for the sword, but Ma sits on her hand and slaps it away before gathering her into the hills and hollows of her body. Ma strokes her wet hair, rubs her clean earlobe.

“Who sells chicken eggs?” Ma sing-songs.

Samsara’s rabbit heart sends the words out in a garbled stutter: “Who eggs near far?”

There: a pinch and a wrench. No phra-aeek would ever cry, so Samsara swallows past the bloom of pain.

“Who sells chicken eggs?”

“Who—who—eggs—far!”

“You haven’t been practicing,” Ma says, and plunges a finger into Samsara’s belly button. “Who sells chicken eggs?”

In the stories, the rock or mallet or sword always strikes true. The yak tries to take the phra-aeek down with it, but the phra-aeek prevails. In the anchored world of Samsara’s bed, Ma shifts and grunts and says, “What’s this?”

She releases Samsara to rummage underneath herself. The sword emerges from beneath Samsara's pillows like Excalibur from the lake.

The bed quakes. Behind her mask, Ma's eyes flash.

"Yak yai!" Samsara cries. Her fists do not fly into her mother's nose; her feet do not launch into her mother's chest. With the only body part that works, she spits the tongue twister at her mother the wrong way around: the little monster chases away the big monster.

As if the big monster isn't gnashing teeth and empty gullet. As if the little monster isn't one perfect mouthful.