

THE NEW CHILD

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The children of a nearby town called Bambang took to the river on summer afternoons, right after lunch, when the day threatened to be as hot as a rising fever. In this heat the sun deepened the brownness of their skin as it coppered their hair; the water wrinkled the pads of their fingers and toes, each one mimicking the texture and appearance of a tiny exposed brain.

Bambang was just another word for pampang, or riverbank, and away from it was where each of the children swam. They kept going to the centre, where speedboats skipped like stones on the surface of the water, where heavy motorised outrigger boats—sometimes alone, sometimes in long linked lines and carrying fish, bamboo, sand—moved slowly, lingering like the heat of the day.

The game was a dare: one had to wait for the sound of an oncoming boat, swim to where they thought it would pass, and, when there was only a metre—often less; it must be less—between one's nose and the boat's prow, one dove underwater, a hand raised to feel the boat's hull, keel, rudder, stern. Only when one finally lost grip of the stern should one go up for air.

If what passed was a speedboat, one must be able to dive fast enough to avoid being hit; if what passed was a long braid of slow outriggers, one shouldn't go up for air until all the boats had passed.

One day they found a new child with them in the river. No one had seen him before, or noticed him arrive. He was just there, treading murky, briny water, silently observing them.

Soon came the sound of a rumbling, and one of the children volunteered himself for the game, swimming to the middle. The sound grew louder; the nose of a rivercraft showed itself around the bend. Everyone laughed when what came into view was a small outrigger, dragging a fishing net behind it. When the boat and the child were nose to nose, the child gave the fisherman the finger before the water swallowed him up.

The rest of the children were seized with fits of laughter. The angry fisherman cursed each one of them by name, each one of their parents by name; his boat was gone before he even addressed half of them.

As laughter died down the new child just swam to the centre of the river. The others tried to keep quiet, baffled by this stranger, this showoff. They made fun of him, under their breaths, letting loose a stream of mumbled insults. Each new insult was meant to be funnier, nastier, cleverer than the earlier one; it took a lot of effort for them to restrain their giggles.

They were shocked to see it before hearing it: a speedboat foaming up the salty water, disturbing it into a simmer.

The children of Bambang watched the new child nervously, but they masked their anxiety with silence. To their minds, such was the way of adults: to know that danger was coming, to visualise it, to witness it dispassionately; then, when it was all over, to compare how closely the actual danger resembled what they had imagined.

He submerged his body into the water, hiding himself under the swelling waves. Then when the boat was a few inches from where he was, he jumped up.

The boat's pointed bow gored him squarely in the chest, and he disappeared behind vertical sheets of water that shattered and splintered as soon as they were formed. The boat rushed on, its passengers oblivious of what it had hit, or that it had hit anything at all. Only two children, the youngest among the boys, screamed. Realising they were the only ones, they quickly swallowed back their voices. Everyone stayed where they were for a very long time.

None of the children knew where the new child had gone, if he had survived, or if the force of the impact had thrown him toward the other side of the river, or if he had been caught in the boat's propeller, his flesh incrementally gouged out by the propeller blades. Neither did they know, or ever know, or ever confess, that each of them, except the two youngest boys who'd screamed, had closed his eyes before the boat hit the new child. And at that moment, when they refused to look, when they rejected that the imagined and the real could merge, they became adults.
