

# HERE, WHERE WE CAN BE HONEST

Winner: The Robert Day Award for Fiction

Selected by Emily Nemens

*Richard Hermes*

MY DEAR MAHADEE,

What Rasmee said is true. But do not be angry with Rasmee, my son, and do not feel ashamed of your mother. You must understand that I have good reasons for the choices I have made. I will try to answer your questions with the honesty you request and a cooler heart than you showed to me in your letter.

No, I do not always sleep alone in our house. Many nights, I ask the neighbor children to sleep here because I am lonely and afraid. The children like it here and their mothers are happy to let them stay, because here they do not have to share a bed with two or three brothers or sisters. They can stretch their arms and legs. They spread them out like water bugs, and when they laugh to each other into their pillows it does not keep me awake. It pushes away the night and helps me fall asleep.

And yes, there is a man who comes to check on me because I am alone. He is a policeman from the north. Sometimes he brings me something from the city, though I tell him I have no use for fancy gifts. But he also helps me to repair the things I cannot fix myself. He does these things and is not bothered when Rasmee's brother and the other neighbor men all leave when he drives up in his pickup truck, even though he does not dress like a policeman and his truck is not painted brown and white. They may say I

should not trust him, but what way do I have of knowing? They say they do not believe he is really a Muslim because he has a large mole on his cheek with several lucky whiskers but no beard. Who but God can know the real content of his prayers? Perhaps if you do choose to come home for a visit you will decide for yourself. But it is not so easy for me to say no to his help. And so, yes, on several nights I have allowed him to sleep in the sitting room when he is working late and too tired to drive the long distance home.

You have always been a boy who asks questions, so it should not surprise me that you push me with so many questions now. I can see that university is good for your mind and it makes me happy to know that you are progressing in your studies and learning about, as you say, history and justice. But I would prefer you learn a skill you can use when you graduate. Abidin was always so tired from his labor when he came back from Malaysia. Still, he helped with the housework, with the rubber tapping and rice planting. He was a slow mover, quiet and obedient. You are not quiet like him, but I pray you will continue to listen to your mother and trust that although I do not always make you proud, I have some idea about what path is good for you. Perhaps you were too young to remember how your brother used to say that the engineers who gave the orders on the construction sites in Malaysia were no smarter than he and not nearly as skilled at fixing things as your father. You are as smart as Abidin and you can be an engineer if you do not think too much or let your mind fill with too many questions that do not have to do with your studies.

Yet you ask me to tell you what I remember from the day of the demonstration. I would refuse, as I have refused in the past. I have prayed every night for years to be relieved of these memories, and God does not listen. Or, at least, that is what I used

to believe. I have read your letter again and again since I opened it three days ago, and this morning while getting out some nasi pulo' kayaw for the neighbor children, I had a change of heart.

Because my nasi pulo' kayaw is their favorite, and they never get it in their house, I do not show the children how much it hurts me to taste it, even to smell the sweet custard as I stir it in the bowl, to feel the soft weight of the sticky rice as I press it, still warm, into the pan. Doing so puts me back in that day you ask me to tell you about, at the morning meal when it was still dark out, when the cows and the chickens were still asleep but the cicadas and crickets were making their calls and the moon was so bright I did not even need the electric light to see. Now, when I feed the children the custard they love so much, I may as well be feeding it to your father, so clearly can I see his thick eyebrows rise to greet the piece I set before him that morning after we had finished the rest of our suhoor. He always woke at the same time on Ramadan, but he woke more easily when he knew there was nasi pulo' kayaw to be served. And so I match my smile to the children's smiles when I serve them and I turn away until they are finished.

Why, my son, does it hurt you to hear about my loneliness? Because I know that it does, even if I cannot see your face, so many provinces away in Bangkok. With such noise, so many people all around you, you too may feel alone in a way that even I cannot understand. I hope this is not true. You have Rasmee. Keep him as a friend if only because he is someone you have known from childhood who understands what it was like to grow up in Tak Bai. I hope that the crowds and roads and tall city buildings also help to distract you from your anger. For you say that you are angry with Rasmee for what he said about my life here, but I know that you are angry with me. There may be little I can do to calm your heart and so I will try to leave nothing out, as you have requested, instead.

What came to me this morning while serving the custard was that I am wrong to think that God is not listening. He must want me to remember that day. Why else would my memories of that morning you ask about be so clear, and disturb my mind so often? I can only think that for reasons I do not understand He wants you to know that day through me. It saddens me to think that you must receive your mother's pain, but if it can help you with your studies, if it can help you to stop asking questions about history and justice and bring you closer to God and practical life, to sciences that will keep you thinking about the future rather than the past, then I am willing to keep nothing hidden, as you say. But you must forgive me if I do not go straight to the most difficult parts. When I think about the events they lead to others that came before them, until I find I have traveled much further back in time for reasons that are not always clear to me at first.

For instance, I continue to think about how difficult it was when you refused to masuk Jawi. I knew that even if you did it the next year, it would be harder for you to marry the best girls in the village, to get respect when you went to the market to buy things for me, to keep your group of friends. I was also afraid it would set you back in ways I could not anticipate. Still, my heart was too soft to insist.

I know Abidin told you stories that made you frightened about circumcision, but in this you were no different than any other boy in the village. As adults we do not always know what stories children tell each other, but we were once children too, and the stories do not change much from year to year. Beyond the immediate fear of the pain and of whatever other silly dangers you were warned of, you were always a modest boy. Do you remember, I wonder, the time that Aunt Hanisah and I wanted to give you and Amay a bath in her kitchen? Amay accepted his bath with joy. He loved being the center of attention of your aunts and

cousins. Though you were hardly old enough to speak, you cried before I could even put you in the basin. You clung to my kurung, buried your face in it, and would not let go. You made such a fuss that your cousin became upset too. Your aunts and cousins left the room, and only then did you allow me to wash you in the basin. Later, when you were seven or eight, you asked me while I was preparing dinner if the imam could come to our home and perform the circumcision in private, rather than together in the same room at the school with the other boys in the village.

You will not remember these things as clearly as I do. But though you were stubborn, I understood that you had my soft heart, too. Even before I had sons I always imagined that it would be humiliating to be a boy in our religion. Your father disagreed. He said that becoming a man was a proud moment for any boy. I do not know why I should have such sympathy for boys when the evidence of a girl's womanhood is so much more conspicuous. But a girl will speak more with her mother, sister, cousins, or aunts. When she becomes a woman, she is less alone with her frightening new body. A boy could keep secret his nighttime emission for many months without anyone noticing. When you insisted on washing your own clothes, your father wanted me to pick through them first for the evidence that you had passed into maturity. He said that your time was better spent collecting rubber sap and repairing the collection bowls than washing clothes "like a woman." I refused, and what is more I forbade him to go through your clothes himself. This is why, long after other boys your age had already begun to take their place as adults beside their fathers at the mosque, you remained at home, a diligent and welcome help to me, but an embarrassment to your father, who had prayed your fondness for the singing doves was a sign that you would one day follow him as one of the muezzins at the mosque. He never encouraged Abidin to learn to sing the call to prayer, but

he was eager for the day when you would have your masuk Jawi ceremony and begin to join him in this way.

If your father was harder on you—and you are right, he was harder, despite what I have said all these years—if he was harder on you it was—

I must begin again. I crossed out those words because I am not sure if they are right. That is one problem with trying to answer questions like yours. In writing I grab for an answer to put one thing in front of another, to make the past more clear to you, or to us both, but I could just as easily have grabbed something else. I can tell you I will speak the truth, but I am not sure if this is the thing that is true or if it is the opposite. I may be simply choosing the explanations that I think will make you feel you have gained something from me that I did not want to give you, that you have gotten something from me, so that I can satisfy your curiosity and bring it to an end.

You expect me to say he was harder on you because he saw more potential in you. It was partly this, but not only this. I often wonder if I made a mistake in protecting you from pain all these years, so I will tell you that he was harder on you because he saw in you weaknesses that were not present in Abidin.

You were a serious boy who wanted to know why the Qur'an said what it did, but you had no patience for memorizing it. Your father could have brought you to the haji at the ponoh to be sure that you received the most correct answers to your questions, but what you did not know—so how could you understand—is that it was the simple memorizing of the Qur'an that gave your father his steadiness and clear mind. Everything one needed to know about your father could be heard in the music of his deep voice. He surrendered to each whole verse, not breaking them up into pieces or making them an idea. In the morning, while you dreamt the elaborate dreams that you would recount to me in the

kitchen, he had long ago been the first person to wake, always within five minutes of the time he intended. You ignored him when he told you to recite the duas twenty-one times before sleep, the basmallah forty-one times, after asking God to wake you up at the proper hour. You saw it as yet more empty advice. Lying in bed, he would tell me in a low voice that it was not exactly correct to say that he asked God to help him wake up. Rather, he made a promise to God that he would. He put himself under scrutiny, made himself accountable.

When he said the twenty-one duas he went into a kind of trance. I could not take him out of it if I tried. Upon reaching the final one he would stop halfway, and his sleep as I felt it next to me was so sewn through with a sense of peace, like a solid thing I could touch, that I believed him when he told me that he continued to repeat the passage in his sleeping mind through the night, and in the moments the next morning when he was coming out of sleep, his mind, not even fully aware yet, would continue the recitation of the dua at the very word where he had left off the night before. Upon reciting the final word of the passage he was fully awake, awake as he had been at the height of the day before, and it would always be within five minutes of the time he had promised to rise. He would put on his watch, but he never had to look at it. He already knew the time.

You did not live your life as wakefully as your father. Abidin moved slowly but he, too, was more awake to the truest essence of things, an awareness that can only come from the difficult work of remaining completely alone with God and your thoughts, of surrendering to Him and recognizing the many ways that our own minds betray us. Abidin accepted his dependence on God like a fisherman casting heavy things over the side of a full boat. You may roll your eyes at my comparisons. The fervor of my language may seem uneducated to you. What I am trying to say is

that though you were quick to speak and always very clever, you were content to remain only half-committed to your life.

If you feel I go too far with my honesty, you have my permission to tear this letter and throw it away. You say your father was more of a friend to Abidin than to you, and again, I admit that you may be right. Though I cannot speak for your father now, I can choose to believe that as you got older your relationship would have grown to include more of the familiarity of equals. But you must not forget how you were. Or perhaps you never saw it. Your father was afraid for you. Without him to make you focus, what kind of man would you have become? You did not need another friend. You needed a man to show you where to devote your attention and will. Abidin's job was building houses, and he always came back with enough money to pay for extra things: uniforms, your zebra doves, even repairs to our home. Your father's job was being your father, making sure that you could take care of yourself.

That is why he became so angry the day he caught you opening the refrigerator on Ramadan. You acted injured. "I am only reminding myself of what I have to look forward to at sunset," you argued, before he whipped you with the stick. Or perhaps you did not say that then. Perhaps you said it when I found you in your room sobbing into your pillow, rocking from side to side as if you were lying on very hot stone. Perhaps—I think this is more likely now—you simply stared at your father with that look of yours. Perhaps he was not going to beat you until he saw you looking at him like that, without fear. My son, if you tell me that you did not intend to let any food pass your lips I believe you, but you must admit that you knew you should not have been near the pantry, that even if you did not feed your body you were feeding your curiosity and imagination, that the refrigerator, closed for the whole day, must have surrendered



the strong smells of budu and stirred fish cakes it had kept since the early hours of the morning when we put those dishes away. You must have taken those scents into your nose and let them linger in your throat. Even if you were doing all of this for no other reason than to make the discomfort of fasting more acute than it already was, if you were making your mouth water not to wet your dry throat but to stoke your hunger and increase your sacrifice, you must have known what an affront this was to your father's ways. He stood guard at the gates of his mind—no, that is not right. If I must make another comparison, I will say that he conditioned his mind so that it remained like the surface of a calm pond, flat and unbroken. This kind of mind did not come easily to him. He worked at it in his daily prayers. At night after iftar when the building of the neighbor's house would again commence, even then, holding a hammer or a saw in the light cast by a motor scooter's headlamp, his movements remained within himself. Does what I describe make sense to you? Do you know what it means to remain within yourself? How, then, was your father to handle your habit of making things more difficult than necessary? The way you let your mind pull you along like being dragged by a stubborn animal? You may have believed that your mind was taking you in good directions. You may well have been correct. But you should have known that in our house, in our part of this country, we do not have that luxury. Those who want to flee Patani are trapped inside their own doors. Those who want to stay can never be at ease. This is where the history and justice come in, my son. Even before your courses you learned enough here at home to know that the two groups I describe above, those who want to stay and those who want to flee, are one in the same. This is what it means to be Jawi.

Because a mother knows her son I was not surprised when you refused to join the masuk Jawi ceremony with the other boys

your age that year. But it never occurred to your father that a son could disobey him in this way, and you should have told him yourself. Instead, you left it to me. It was not enough to stare into your breakfast that morning and tell me only that you “were not ready,” to sneak off and take the kaetaw namae to your cousin’s in Yarang while your father was helping your uncle to press and hang his rubber. By running away, you did not even give him a chance to shout at you when he was most angry. It was his responsibility as a father to whip you, and you prevented him from performing that obligation.

Waiting for your father to come home on the day you ran away, I was too nervous to watch TV, so I took up the broom and re-swept the clean floor. I started to sing an old lullaby to distract myself when I heard him come in. He bathed and said his evening prayers before asking where you were. “How long does it take to carry water to two old cows?” he asked. He must have felt that something wasn’t right, seen it in my own face, though I tried my very best to keep a calm and soothing expression.

He asked me why I was singing such a strange song. As a joke, he asked if I was pregnant again. Of course it would have been impossible at that time, I was too old, and the idea should have made me laugh, but something tired in his voice made the comment sound harsh to me. Abidin had been gone for nearly three months; it was his first time away, and we both worried about him though we never used that word. I blurted out to him that you did not want to masuk Jawi. I tried to make it seem natural, nothing to be concerned about, but we both knew that you had refused your father’s command.

How can I forget the combination of vulnerability and fury in his eyes when he asked me what I meant? Repeating it, I felt I was betraying someone—you or him or God, I do not know. After what felt like a very long time, he looked at the calendar we kept

on the wall and let out a laugh. “Not ready,” he said, laughing again with no real happiness in it. “A boy does not choose when he is ready. Where is he?”

You should have told him yourself. Instead, I watched in sorrow as he took the rattan stick to the field and tied the cow that had wandered too far and beat its hide until it bled. The exclamations your father made with each stroke carried across the field, as if he was receiving his own blows.

We ate in silence that night. After, your father went immediately to his bed. By the time your uncle brought you back on his moto the next morning, a dove cage in each of your hands and a small bag of clothes, your father had decided that the best path was to ignore you, at least until his temper cooled enough to speak. As you know, it never did.

I regret not doing something more to prevent your decision not to masuk Jawi, even though I would be blind to not acknowledge that it may have saved your life.

You were so young, and I did not fully understand what your decision would mean for you and your father, both. As other boys rode on the backs of their fathers’ motor scooters on Fridays, as your father and Abidin went off without you, you sat silently digging in the garden for grubs, tending to your doves. Neighbors asked what was wrong with you, as if you had caught some disease by drinking from a bad well.

You ask me to tell you about the day of the protest. Abidin had come home from Malaysia. Your father woke at 2:00 a.m., as he always did during Ramadan. Then he woke me, sounding as alert as if he hadn’t even slept. As I did every day, I shuffled to the kitchen to begin making the *suhoor*. He disappeared outside. I never knew what he did out there in the dark. When I asked him, he would say he was “checking on things,” but there was nothing to check on but a few yard chickens, a cat, and the rabbits. Your

birds, like you and your brother, were still asleep. If you didn't wake from my noise in the kitchen, your father woke you by turning on the light. When you were young he would grab your feet, but by that time all the playfulness between you had gone and you spoke even less than usual in the mornings before and during suhoor. I remember everything we ate that day. I set out su'ayae from the night before, I boiled vegetables and made budu with spicy shrimp. I did not know it yet, but it would be my last meal for several days.

At 5:00 a.m. he prepared to go to the mosque. As he was putting on his baju and songkok he told you to take the cows to the field. Abidin was wearing his baju melayu too, and they looked so handsome together, father and son dressed in their good clothes, that it broke my heart to see you still in your T-shirt and shorts.

Son, do you remember the morning as clearly as I do? The air thick with the smell of rain? I don't know why I can see it so well and not recall how I spent the time that your father and Abidin were in town. I do remember your face when they left you washing your clothes in my plastic tub in front of the house: curiosity, sadness perhaps, but also relief to be left for another day. In your own way, you had come to enjoy being alone.

I wasn't worried at 7:00 p.m. when I went into town myself to pray. You and I shared vegetable soup before I left. But I knew something was wrong even before I reached the mosque, by the way people were driving on the road. Teens were more reckless than usual, a look of panic on their faces mixed with a strange giddiness, an unnerving kind of excitement that I will not forget. It may be in our nature to feel excitement when terrible things happen, but it is not our best nature.

I stopped at Ma-daw's shop but found only her young daughter behind the counter. She was barely tall enough to see

over it. "Where are your mother and father?" I asked, and she told me that there were loud noises like firecrackers, and soldiers had made all the men take off their shirts and lie on the ground. The poor little girl could not have been older than six or seven. Standing up straight behind the counter, she seemed frightened, but less so than I. She did not know when Ma-daw would be back. I wanted to ask her if she had seen your father or Abidin, but instead I left, so that my fear would not take hold of her too.

Outside the mosque, people were making wild claims about how many men had died. The protest happened in front of the district police station, where people gathered to call for the release of the Chaw Raw Baw Six. "The river is full of bodies," one man told me. At the district station I found a crowd of women still lingering where they had waited off to the side for hours and watched their husbands and brothers and sons stripped and laid out on the cement. The women talked in circles, to themselves as much as each other, repeating over and over what they'd witnessed. How many trucks, what time they pulled away. There was tear gas, they said. Real bullets, not rubber. A dozen or so had been killed at the spot, but many were beaten and kicked by the soldiers as they attempted to lie down or walk to where the soldiers were pushing them. I stood there a while, listening to the same accounts repeated until eventually I was telling those accounts to others as if I had actually seen them myself, all the while terrified at not knowing where your father and Abidin might be, at not having seen anything at all.

The relatives and neighbors who gathered in our home that evening stayed until about midnight. They had more information: how most people at the protest had merely stopped to look at what the activity was about, how, by 10:30 a.m. or so, the soldiers and police and rangers were telling everyone to leave but the streets leading from the police station were blocked, and people were

hemmed in between the gates of the station in front, the river in back, the wall of the property to the left and the playground to the right, where the women and children took shelter. In the early afternoon the soldiers and police sprayed water hoses. At 3:00 p.m. the shooting started. Some tried to escape into the river but there was nowhere to go. There were not enough trucks for all the men, so they piled them in on top of each other, in layers five or six high, like bags of rice, or swine.

After our visitors had all gone home that night, I lay down for two hours but did not sleep. You were quiet in your room. I always assumed you were able to sleep that night despite your anxiety. I was glad for that. It told me that you might live to be unhurt and unchanged if the worst came to pass. But it occurs to me now, as I write this, that I may have been wrong. You may have been lying there in the next room awake all night too, wondering how your mother could sleep at such a time.

In the morning your uncle Sa-im came from Yarang in a pickup truck with an old, rolled-up rug in the back, orange and brown and frayed. I did not ask him what it was for. I pretended not to see it. We hardly spoke on the ride to the military camp at Inkayut. This was better for Sa-im, I think, because I am sure that someone had called him from the camp that morning to tell him that your father's face was posted on the board among the photos of the dead. Because he is kind, Sa-im never hinted that he knew what we would find there. Meanwhile, the rug with its dirty edges sat squat and lifeless behind us, swaying only when we took a curve. When we arrived at the camp and saw the wall papered with the photos of a hundred swollen faces, we realized that we had been fools. We had one old rug, but we needed two—another for my sweet Abidin.

I do not know what it was like in the trucks that day. Most of the men who were there do not talk about it. I have spoken to

some wives. Sadan was shot in the stomach before being loaded on, and does not remember anything of the long journey—over six hours that should have taken two to cover that distance, according to the men. So Sadan is not only lucky to survive, he is lucky not to remember. I do not know if your father and Abidin were placed in the same truck, but no one talks of being there with them, despite the fact that many people knew him because he was a muezzin.

I asked your aunt to take you away from our house the night we brought the bodies home because I did not want you to have to see your father and brother before they had been prepared by the imam. Your uncle helped me lay out a sheet on the tile and set them both on it. I refused to leave. Instead, I sat down and looked closely at them both under the electric light. I could hardly recognize your father's face. He wore no clothes, his body had many deep bruises, and in some places his skin was already coming apart like wet bread. Only his hands and feet looked the same. Above his wrists and knees his limbs were purple-black, but his hands I held until it was time for them to be washed as if he was about to enter the minaret.

My Abidin, however, remained unblemished. They said he suffocated in the truck. Aside from the bruises on the back of his head and neck, his skin was as soft and smooth as it had always been. I held him, and he did not smell. I closed his eyes and sat with them for nearly an hour until the imam arrived and purified them for the next life.

That, my Mahadee, is what I remember. I must also give you recent news. I am sorry to tell you that your albino dove died last week. When I found her in her cage her heart was still beating but she had been badly bitten by a rat. On the night it happened I heard her unmistakable song more clearly and insistently than

ever before. I assumed that this was because she had found new happiness, that she had been moved by the changing of the season or some other thing that only the birds can know. It troubled me the next morning to discover that what I had understood to be the sound of her joy may have actually been the terror in her cry for help.

This is the sad news. At the same time, the female zebra dove has hatched two chicks. It took almost three weeks for them to hatch, the mother and father taking turns on top of the eggs. I watched them every day, taking care not to disturb them any more than necessary while giving them seeds and water. The chicks are pale and dull but they already look strong. I would not be surprised if they leave their nest in little more than a week.

I have asked the policeman from the north to build a screen to protect this family and the other doves. He says he can do it easily. Your cousins say his hands are unclean, that he is not as kind or as gentle as he tries to appear. And, as I have said, they say he is no Muslim. I admit that there is something in this man that I, too, find unsettling, something unseeable in his soul that, on some days, makes his presence uneasy for me. I catch him glancing around at the inside of our house with a strange mix of pity and pleasure. I do not encourage his visits, and yet he persists. I do not even smile when he appears at my door. But I am afraid. There are nights I tremble with it. The worst part is that I do not know if I fear the possibility of his unwelcome advance one day when we are alone and I am unable to protect myself, or if I fear that I might surrender to his persistence and let him live with me here, to quiet the thoughts of being alone with my other fears and with my own memories. I do not know which it is, and it torments me.

For you must continue with your studies, Mahadee, and build yourself an independent life. You may want to write with assurances that you will be here for me, that you will come back



often to make me feel less alone. But you should not. I ask you not to. Instead, I must thank you, because your letter has done something important for me. Your request has forced me to see how your refusal to become a Jawi man not only saved your life by keeping you away from the protest that day, but also cost the lives of your father and your brother. What I mean is this: it is clear to me now that if you had gone with your father to the mosque he would have been more careful about going to a protest. More importantly, he would not have felt it to be his first duty all that year to show you through his actions what it means to be a Muslim, a Jawi, a man. He would have come back home that day and tended to the hole in the fence where the cow had wandered off, to the rubber pressing, to the extra rice field he agreed to help plant in order to make enough money that year to buy a field of our own. You may have never considered this possibility before, and in truth I did not see it this way until I wrote this letter. Now, I make this request: Do not tell me you will come back. In every return there is the shadow of its brother, the departure. In every spoken word there is the reminder of the silence to which we are all abandoned. No, better that you remain where you are, that we keep our thoughts on paper, here where we can weigh the true meaning of words like history and justice. Here on paper, turning them over like carved objects, we can see how they hold opposite ideas together at once. Here, my son, where we can be honest.

May you have peace,

Mother