

Excerpt from *The Majesties* (Atria Books, 2020) by Tiffany Tsao

(Available in English and translated into Indonesian by Norman Erikson Pasaribu as part of InterSastra's literature series *Unrepressed*)

The assault on Estella began in full force shortly after our second semester at Berkeley had started, and immediately after Leonard resumed his own classes at USC. He began calling her all the time, and before I knew it, my sister and Leonard were talking for hours every night. Pyramids of roses and sunflowers, lilies and gladiolas greeted us on our doorsteps when we returned from campus. Sometimes the arrangements came accompanied by chocolates, stuffed animals, or foil balloons.

Leonard was the first guy who'd ever pursued Estella, and he did so with such aggression that she had no choice but to believe it was love. We had learned from the movies and our disappointed mother that love was the opposite of the watered-down stuff our father had to offer. Love was forceful and obsessive, extravagant and jealous. It never took no for an answer. Instead, it wore its object down until said object realized the right answer was yes. So when the first warning signs came, Estella merely thought them part and parcel of what should happen in a romance: Leonard grilling her about an outing with the Asian Students Association crowd and expressing his irritation that she'd spoken to other guys; his annoyance when she cut short their phone conversation because she had to go to class. Once, he mentioned how pretty she looked with her hair down, then began asking how she was wearing it whenever they spoke (the wrong answer was "up"). The slightest hint that she wasn't paying close attention would spawn a suffocating cloud of sarcasm.

There is only so much room in a person's life, and none if someone else insists that he take up all of it. And though Estella tried to keep Leonard and me in separate compartments, my allotted space shrank until I found myself out in the cold.

Toward the end of our first year in college, their relationship reached the inevitable next stage: a series of back-to-back weekend visits, sometimes extending to the surrounding Thursdays and Fridays, Mondays and Tuesdays. Initially Leonard was the one who would fly up from Los Angeles. He stayed in the guest room at first, and then one night he didn't. Her class attendance dwindled. Her grades went into a nosedive.

Estella kept me updated whenever she had the chance. And what she was too embarrassed to tell me, my imagination filled in. I charted the progress of their relationship—its budding, its blossoming, its quick overflowing into sweet decay—as if it were running through my own nerves, insinuating its way into the chambers of my own heart. Estella's soul could not be ripped from mine so easily—not yet. It is when a part of your body is being bruised, seared, sliced, that you are most alive to its existence. It was when Leonard was engaged in tearing Estella from me that I could sense her every tremor with an intensity that I could hardly bear.

The first kiss. It happened during Leonard's second visit, after they went to Yoshi's in Oakland for a romantic night of sushi and jazz. Leonard insisted on driving (he always did) even though the car belonged to Estella and me, even though he'd had four sake cocktails in the space of two hours, even though it was pouring sheets. He turned the wrong way onto a one-way street, nearly hit an oncoming car, and swerved to a stop by the side of the road. The sound of the other car's horn, monotonic and urgent, rang in their ears. Estella didn't move, didn't speak, sat there trembling to the rat-a-tat-tat of the rain pelleting down so hard and fast on the roof and windshield that it felt like the whole world was being washed away.

Then, without any warning, came Leonard's mouth. No lips. Only a mouth and its resident tongue, aroused and muscular and hot.

The first fumbblings? The first strokings and squeezings? It is impossible to pinpoint their beginning; I can only imagine where and how: always at night, after dinner, after drinks, after a movie, after a concert—always after, when fatigue awakens lust and stirs it to languorous action in the plush, muffling seats of a movie theater, the recesses of our sofa, the back seat of our parked car, the carpet of Estella's room, then the yielding surface of Estella's bed.

The first sex. Probably not that first night he stayed in Estella's room, nor the second. Maybe the fourth or fifth, amid the dead of sleep. A rolling toward and a rolling on top. Hands slipping buttons free, sliding under elastic, rubbing gently, then more firmly. Sleepy half protestations giving way to sleepy submission.

The more Estella gave Leonard, the more he required, like a monstrous houseplant spilling out of its pot. I hoped against hope that the physical separation imposed by the summer break would slow him down. He spent most of his vacation period doing an internship his father had arranged for him at Goldman Sachs in New York. Estella and I split our time between Jakarta and an extended stay with our parents at Tante Margaret's then-husband's holiday home near Salzburg. But the commencement of our sophomore year only brought a fresh and frightening demand. Why, he asked, was it always he who had to come up to Berkeley to see Estella? Wasn't it only fair that she travel to LA equally often to see him? She flew down immediately for the sake of appeasing him, and continued her migrations from then on, alternating them with his fortnightly trips to the Bay Area.

Then: Why limit their visits just to weekends? He couldn't bear to be away from her, how could she take being apart from him? How could she be so loveless, so cold? Who needed to go to classes anyway? Alternating weekends turned into alternating weeks—six to eight days during which I had to endure Leonard's presence followed by six to eight lonely days in an empty house.

By this point, our parents knew about Leonard and Estella. Our mother was beyond ecstatic. Who wouldn't be, to have a daughter in a serious relationship with a son from the Angsono family—the Angsono family? In those days the success of Leonard's family was at its peak. They were the owners of vast and lucrative holdings in timber, telecommunications, banking, real estate, and cigarettes (those were the main ones; they were a large family with countless fingers in countless pies). Perhaps most crucially, Leonard's father and uncles were on an amicable footing with high-ranking government and military officials, including President Suharto himself.

A marriage alliance with the Angsonos would benefit our fortunes. It would pave the way for joint ventures and favorable partnerships with Leonard's clan, and give us access by association to the powerful inhabitants of the sphere just above ours. Estella told Ma about Leonard once he'd started visiting on weekends (though she didn't mention that Leonard was staying with us, nor did Ma ever ask). Our mother immediately relayed the information to Opa, who responded with an approving nod. Ma then told our aunts and uncles, who greeted the news with delight.

But no one was more excited than Ma, and in all fairness, I don't think it was just because Leonard was an Angsono. The courtship gave her a chance to escape the flaccidity that was her marriage, to forget the colorless man that the love of her own life had morphed into. Our mother's self-absorption didn't mean she didn't love us—but it did affect how she expressed that love. Her views on what would serve us best were always tinted by what would serve her,

and what she believed she would want if she were in our shoes. From our mother's point of view, Estella couldn't ask for a better catch: a scion of the Sono Jaya empire who showered his girlfriend with gifts and couldn't bear to have her out of his sight; who, for her birthday, booked out an entire French restaurant so they could dine alone and presented her at the night's end with seven tiny sky blue boxes from Tiffany's—a pair of earrings for each day of the week.

Our mother was head over heels. Even more so when Leonard's mother called to say hello and thus discreetly confirm that her son's interest in Estella was family-sanctioned. The two women began exchanging gifts: gourmet mooncakes in autumn; hotel-bakery Christmas treats in December; Japanese peaches, Ibérico ham, and jars of XO sauce just because.

From our father we heard not so much as a peep about the whole affair. "Everything all right?" he'd ask whenever our mother put him on the phone, and upon receiving an answer in the affirmative, he'd pass the phone back to her with a faint and receding "Good."

In the meantime, despite Leonard's lavish presents and gestures, his behavior continued to worsen. He demanded to know what she was doing at all times. Whenever she tried to get back on track with her studies, he accused her of not paying attention to him. Still, Estella made no attempt at flight. How could she? With every concern that sprang up, our mother did too, like a vigilant nursemaid, to lay it gently, maternally to rest. Leonard's obsession with always having Estella at his side, Ma explained, was a healthy jealousy, an indication of his complete devotion. "Would you rather he didn't care at all about where you went, who you were with?" Ma asked. Similarly, Leonard's rage over Estella getting her hair cut short into a bob without his permission signaled his knowledge of fashion and style: "Darling, you're so lucky. It's so rare to find a man who cares about such things. Your father wouldn't notice if I decided to cut off my head." Ma wasn't even fazed by Leonard's destruction of Estella's textbook after Estella had dared to open it while they were watching TV. "I wish your father worried half as much about me overworking myself," Ma sighed.

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I still remember the night I knew it was all over for Estella. It was toward the end of our sophomore year, and one of the rare times when she and I were alone together. Leonard's ridiculousness had reached the point where he refused to let Estella do anything without him—not that she had that many other options. His constant demand for her undivided attention had strangled what little social life she'd had. But that night, Leonard had drunk a tad too much and fallen asleep on our sofa, his baby cheeks quivering with every snore, his slack body bathed in the light of the end credits from the Bruce Willis movie he'd been watching.

Estella had muted the television and crept to the kitchen, where I was studying, as usual.

"He's asleep," she'd explained, putting her finger to lips. And she made us hot, sugary ginger drinks from sachets we'd purchased at an Asian grocery store.

Lowering herself into a chair, she shifted my microeconomics textbook toward her and began flipping through it.

"I'm taking this class, aren't I?" she asked.

"I suppose so," I said with a disconsolate shrug. "You know, the final exam is next week."

She sighed as she scanned one page after another. “I’m so behind, I have no idea what’s going on.”

I averted my eyes and shrugged again.

When I looked up, I saw that Estella was weeping—quietly, almost hastily, as if she were trying to get through it as quickly as possible. The table where we sat was next to the window, and she pressed her cheek flush against the cool of the glass. Tears slid across her face, following gravity’s tilt.

“Oh Stell,” I whispered. “Can’t you leave him?”

Slowly, she shook her head, rolling it against the glass back and forth as if she didn’t have the energy to lift it even for a moment. And I began to cry too.

“Why do you love him?” I asked, mad at her, at him, at myself. And when she didn’t answer right away, I rephrased the question, voice vibrating with fury. “Look what he’s done to you, Stell. And think about what he’ll do later. This is only the start. How can you let this happen?”

She cast a weary glance in the direction of the doorway, beyond which Leonard dozed. “Because he loves me,” she said finally. “He loves me so much. You can’t take love like that for granted. You can’t just throw it away.”

A shiver ran through me. She didn’t really believe that, did she?

“It’s not real love, Stell. It can’t be.”

She was looking out at the garden now, and in the glass I saw a rueful smile flicker across her lips. “What choice do we have about the form love takes?”

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Estella and Leonard tied the knot in July of 1993, in a mid-morning ceremony for close relatives and friends at Leonard’s family church—an enormous three-spired cathedral in central Jakarta. A traditional Chinese tea ceremony was conducted for both families in the early evening, followed by a dinner reception for a thousand guests—nothing in comparison to the over-the-top weddings of this day and age, but more than respectable by early-nineties standards.

Two scenes from that night stand out in my mind. The first, to my embarrassment, is a portrait of self-indulgence: Me standing in the bathroom of a hotel room just after the tea ceremony, crying myself completely dry so I will be bankrupt of tears for the remainder of the night. My face is a mess and my eyes look like they’re hemorrhaging ink, but I’ll wash up and ring the professional makeup artist we’re keeping on call for an emergency redo. In the meantime, the salt water running down my cheeks feels good. Refreshing, even though my foundation is caked on so thick I’m surprised I can sense anything at all on the surface of my skin.

The second scene is more sinister, sparked by a bloodcurdling scream from the garden beyond the ballroom’s glass doors. There’s a flurry of activity: security guards and waitstaff flocking to the area, along with the bolder and more curious of the guests. I surprise myself by trotting outside to take a look before anyone can stop me. It’s by the footpath on the far side of the lawn, and not so much “it,” but “they.” Many pieces. Chunks of meat, slimy and

bloody and plumaged in iridescent blue. The victim's tail feathers are strewn around and on top of the pile of flesh, as are the organs—a riot of violated beauty. To cap it all off, a very long, fine-looking feather has been skewered erect into the center of the heap, its gold-rimmed iris of indigo and turquoise gleaming in the dim garden lights like an incongruously merry eye, its delicate green hairs waving back and forth like a baby palm frond in the night breeze. In the distance are two running figures, looming closer, holding a plastic tarp stretched between them, as if the peacock is still alive and they're trying to bring it into captivity. Only as the tarp descends over the heap do I catch a glimpse of the message propped at its base, scrawled on cardboard in marker, or possibly blood.

POTONG ORANG CINA MASAK DI KUALI

Someone escorts me back into the ballroom.

An extract from “Joshua Karabish” by Budi Darma, translated by Tiffany Tsao

(This story is part of Budi Darma's short-story collection *People from Bloomington*, published in English by Penguin Classics in 2022. The following excerpt originally appeared in *InTranslation* in 2020.)

I received a letter from his mother stating that he was dead. When and where Joshua had died, it didn't mention, and the letter itself came by regular mail, not express courier. It did, however, contain a request: if I had the time or money to spare, would I be willing to pack up his belongings and send them to her by third-class economy mail? If I didn't have the money, continued Joshua's mother, would I be so kind as to donate the items to Opportunity House, a charity that helped people in need?

And if Opportunity House was too far away and I didn't have the time, means, or funds to bring the items over, then I should just head to the closest garbage dump and dispose of Joshua's belongings there. In short, wrote Joshua's mother, I should get rid of his things as quickly as possible in order to avoid inconveniencing either myself or the owner of the house in which I rented a room.

Then, after expressing her humblest regrets that Joshua had been nothing but a failure and a fool, his mother said she was sorry if her son had done anything in life to cause me offense or harm. These last sentiments, read the letter, were to be conveyed to Mrs. Seifert as well, the woman in whose house I lived and where Joshua had also stayed when he was alive.

When I conveyed the news to Mrs. Seifert, she said she'd long suspected that Joshua had been unhealthy, and perhaps not quite right in the head.

“That's why I kept telling you not to associate with him,” she said.

Indeed, in the initial stages of my acquaintance with Joshua, Mrs. Seifert had warned me outright to keep my distance. But whenever he visited me at the house—always giving this excuse or that, before staying to chat at length—I never turned him away. And afterward, when for one reason or another, he didn't want to leave, he would end up staying over in my room. For my part, I just never had the heart to turn him down.

Joshua had a bulbous head. And eyes that seemed on the verge of taking flight from the sockets where they nested. And a mouth that was perpetually agape. Add to these features his manner of speech and the things he would say, and I felt guilty about keeping him at arm's length. Even Mrs. Seifert never responded with a "no" or "don't" whenever Joshua approached her about something. In the end, after several conversations with me, as well as Mrs. Seifert, he officially became my roommate and we agreed to split the rent. He and I would each make monthly payments directly to Mrs. Seifert—such were the terms that Joshua, myself, and Mrs. Seifert settled on.

When I helped him move his belongings from his old apartment to my room, the other people he lived with seemed pleased. I wasn't too surprised. He'd stated baldly that they weren't fond of him, and through subtle and not-so-subtle means had tried to eject him several times. This was one of the reasons he'd stayed over in my room so often before he moved in. He didn't get along with any of them. He was the odd one out, he said.

They were rough fellows. They enjoyed football and boxing, watching violent movies on TV, and listening to hard rock. In contrast, Joshua was refined and gentle. He preferred poetry, classical music, opera, and other things they couldn't stand. I saw for myself how they would put on loud rock music, play ball indoors, and bellow loudly while watching sports on TV. At least, such was my impression the four or five times Joshua had invited me over. And I knew firsthand how much he loved poetry. I'd met him at an evening poetry reading, in fact. He came only to sit in the audience, and it was clear from his body language that he wanted to avoid interacting with anyone.

Unlike the other people reading that night, I'd gone up to the podium to recite not my own poetry, but that of Keats. I explained that I wasn't a poet and therefore felt capable only of reading poems written by someone else. At this, Joshua's face lit up and his mannerisms expressed a desire to get to know me. Thus began our acquaintance. He declared he held me in high esteem. Unlike those self-proclaimed poets reading their own poems despite their work being lousy, I wasn't a phony, he'd said.

It was only after he became my roommate when I surmised that the people from his old apartment disliked him for reasons other than their differences in taste. Rather—and this was far from trivial—their dislike was due to the disease he suffered from. The shape of his head and the abnormality of his other features weren't simply traits he'd been born with; they'd been caused by this illness he'd long had, whatever it was. I also finally knew why, back then, he'd fail to show up at my place from time to time. Most likely, he'd become so familiar with his condition that every time he felt a severe attack coming on, he'd recognize the symptoms beforehand and know if he'd be able to visit or if he should shut himself away in his apartment.

Once he became my roommate, I learned, whether I wanted to or not, that this illness had tormented him secretly all the while. Using his poetry writing as a pretext, he would always urge me to go to bed before him. Eventually, I found out that as he slept, he would often moan in pain. He was likely aware of this problem and didn't want me to witness him groaning in his sleep. In fact, before he officially became my roommate, when he'd stay over, he'd also refuse to turn in first. After he moved in, he must have suspected I knew about his clandestine groaning because he then told me that he was frequently plagued by bad dreams.

He was finally forced to reveal everything when his ears began oozing a mucus that stank like a rotting mouse carcass, and his nose began dripping a foul, fishy-smelling blood. This happened several times. He tried, initially, to give the impression that he'd eaten something that disagreed with him, or that he'd caught a chill.

“To be honest, I’ve been sick for a while,” he told me in the dark early hours, just before dawn. I’d caught him mopping up blood from the floor—it had spilled from his nostrils as he’d rushed to the bathroom. “It’s why I’ve always been afraid of being alone. But I know there isn’t a single soul who’d ever truly try to understand me. No one, that is, but you.”

He implored me not to tell anyone, especially not Mrs. Seifert. He said he’d been planning for some time to confess everything to me.

“I need a friend who’s willing to accept me, despite my condition,” he said.

Fear had always stood in the way of his desire to tell me all—maybe I wouldn’t want to keep living with him, and maybe I wouldn’t want to be his friend anymore. So he’d kept putting it off, until that fateful night when I’d caught him cleaning up all that blood.

“You’d have found out somehow, one way or another,” he said, pleading, “so allow me to make the most of the present circumstances to ask for your kind understanding.”

I granted his request. Naturally, Mrs. Seifert didn’t know that much about Joshua because he and I lived in the attic, while she lived below. And due to her old age, it was fair to say that Mrs. Seifert never ventured into the attic anymore. According to the agreement we made when I began renting the attic room—the terms of which were extended when Joshua officially moved in—I was responsible for keeping the entire floor clean. This included the room where I stayed, my bathroom, and an old storage room no longer in use. Since Mrs. Seifert trusted that I was doing a good job, she left it all up to me.

But inevitably, Joshua became a nuisance after a while. After coming clean about his condition, he never feigned nightmares or an upset stomach again. And whenever he felt a severe attack coming, he’d let me know. And when the attack came, he’d writhe and moan all night. And more often than not, that mucus would ooze from his ears again, and that blood would drip from his nose.