

Amplitude

Fiction by **Lee Ee Leen**

Waves are disturbances in a common medium, such as air or water. When you travel to the northern coast, you see waves from the South China Sea hurling themselves against the sea walls, propped up with boulders from an inland quarry.

Last year you witnessed the front section of the village pier collapsing into the sea. The walkway and struts floated away like a shipwrecked raft, while the supporting sand crumbled into the warm water like brown sugar into the local coffee.

Now only timber houses teeter on crooked stilts and faded batik flutters on laundry lines. The ribs of fishing boats jut out of the sand like the remains of beached whales.

You step up onto the remains of the pier and light a cigarette. The truncated structure is still sturdy, but you feel the wood creak when a teenage girl follows you onto the walkway. You flick ash into the sea and walk past her to finish your smoke away from the pier.

She angles her head down towards the splintered slats, and yet, she keeps looking at the packet of cigarettes in your shirt pocket. After making sure no one is near the pier, you offer her a cigarette.

"Are you waiting for someone?" you ask after you light her cigarette. You stay on the opposite side of the walkway to maintain a discreet distance from her.

"No one will miss me," the girl replies. She shakes her head, adjusts the hood of her sports jacket and continues staring at the waves through a square gap in the walkway.

From this position, the foam ripples like static interference on a TV screen. These low-amplitude waves will never appear on the news, not big enough to be tsunamis; they belong in a



child's wading pool.

You make out the shape of a large bottle concealed under the bulky folds of her jacket. When she begins to talk you look away and consider returning to the ruined beach. As a tourist, you don't want to be seen with her.

Too late, she traps you on the pier. Her lilting local dialect lends rhythm and cadence to her rambling monologue about the stars. But she stuns you with flashes of lucidity when she reels off scientific facts. The light from the moon is reflected from the sun as electromagnetic waves travelling through space. The constellation above the beach is called Orion. The sun is a star like many others in our galaxy.

Glowing orange ash from her cigarette plummets into the sea.

The girl takes a detour from listing facts to expressing a series of statements. She had dreams of becoming an astronaut. But she cannot leave the village and go to college. Her family has shunned her since they knew about her problems.

Which teenager doesn't have any problems? You just nod and mumble something about the global recession and how too many young people are moving away from villages to the big cities.

"You're leaving?" she asks when you toss the butt of your cigarette through the hole in the walkway.

"Soon," you mumble as you check your watch. Buses back to town are scarce after sunset.

The girl staggers to the end of the ruined pier and unzips her jacket. You glimpse her rounded belly. The child inside her already practises space walking, just like an astronaut tethered to the side of a craft. The pregnancy explains her awkward gait. But not why she was concealing the large blue and white plastic bottle.

She counts down from ten to zero as you walk away from her. You think she's still lost in astronaut dreams until she upends the bottle over her open mouth.

The acrid tang of bleach leaps at you across the walkway and you run towards her. Mouth dry, you yell at her to put down the bottle. Instead, she drops it and falls backwards off the pier. Ripples disperse as they mark the spot where she landed. You inhale and jump in after her. Mother and child have crossed the boundary between air and water. Although sound waves travel faster through water, your screams will not summon her back.