

A circular logo with a sunburst pattern behind the word "STELLA".

STELLA

2018
SHORTLIST

A circular logo with a stylized fish illustration and the text "WINNER OF THE 2017 SEIZURE VIVA LA NOVELLA PRIZE".

WINNER OF THE 2017 SEIZURE VIVA LA NOVELLA PRIZE

A stylized illustration featuring a large blue fish with white spots and a large eye, swimming in a blue sea. The background is a collage of red and white patterns, including hibiscus flowers and abstract shapes. The title "the fish girl" is written in a large, bold, black font, and the author's name "Mirandi Riwoe" is in a smaller, blue font below it.

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I

In the darkness before dawn the village men row out in their boats that are shaped like the half-pods from the criollo tree, and in the heat of the day the women scale, clean and smoke the fish the men bring home.

When Junius comes from town in search of cheap labour for the Dutch Resident's kitchen, he calls out to the villagers in their Sunda dialect.

An older, leathery fisherman steps forward. 'My daughter is good with the scaling knife.' His voice grates, as if a fish bone jags his throat.

'How old is she?' Junius asks.

The fisherman stares at him for a few moments and then shakes his head. 'She comes to here,'

he says, holding his fingers level with the bottom of his earlobe.

Junius's eyebrow lifts. Although he has only a quarter Dutch blood, he is paler than the crowd of under-dressed men before him, and knows how to wear trousers and a necktie. 'Bring her to me. I'll have to look at her first.'

The fisherman disappears in search of his daughter, while the others press the virtues of their family members on the man from town. Two women, still clutching the baskets they are weaving, babies nestled close to their chests in batik *slendangs*, cry out to him, urge him to take their older daughters. A group of men approaches from the beach, tying their sarongs tight about their hips, bare feet shuffling along the sandy earth. Some of them ignore Junius, return to their shacks clustered in neat rows behind the ceremonial hut, but three younger ones stay on, push to the front of the crowd.

Soon the older fisherman returns, followed by a slight girl, her midriff and legs wrapped in a roughly woven sarong. Her straight hair hangs over her face so that only a glimpse of her eyes and nose is visible. Her feet are bare and her shoulders, rounded forward, accentuate her small, pubescent breasts.

She is jostled on either side by young men and

women, hopeful to gain work in the Dutch quarters. The young men call out to Junius, grinning and joking, but the girl keeps her head bowed.

Junius nods to one lean man and then another, gesturing for them to join him, before stopping in front of the girl. 'Pull your hair back.'

The girl, eyes still trained upon the ground, parts her hair with the backs of her hands, so that the shiny tresses arc like the wings of a black bird.

'What is her name?' Junius asks the fisherman.

'Mina.'

Junius's eyes linger on her high cheekbones and fine mouth and he nods. 'She will do. Have her ready to leave in the morning.'

A sob of dismay rises in the girl's chest but lodges in her throat like a frog in a tree hollow, for she knows better than to cry out. She has never roamed far from the edges of the tiny village, no further than a few metres into the forest that backs onto the beach. Even when the other children disappear deep into the shadowy folds of the casuarina trees to play, she stays behind to help her mother sweep the house or scrape the fish. How will she bear to be so far away from everything she knows?

Following her father the short distance to their home, she keeps her face lowered, away from the gaze of curious villagers. They reach their hut,

elevated on short stilts, the walls a medley of bark and timber with a shaggy, thatched roof. Her mother is standing on the narrow landing.

‘What have you done?’ she asks, her chapped fingers clutching at her sarong. Her eyes switch from her husband to her daughter and then back to her husband. ‘What have you done?’

The old fisherman simply stares at his wife. His eyes are bloodshot — are always bloodshot — as if the glittering sun has saturated him with its heat. He eventually shrugs past her into the darkness of the hut.

Mina doesn’t enter as there is only the one room. She can already hear her mother’s voice, soft and plaintive, working at her father, and his low grunts in response. They very rarely exchange harsh words, the last time being two years before when her father wanted Mina to wed. Her mother succeeded in dissuading him then, saying she was too young. Would she succeed this time?

Mina walks down to the beach and contemplates the small triangles of silver fish arrayed on the nets. Her mother has laid them out to dry but it is becoming dark, so Mina wraps them in spare netting and pulls the lot up to the side of the hut, away from night-time predators. She knows that tomorrow there will be more fish, damp and fleshy, ready to be scaled and gutted. And that the

next day there will be even more. She stares at her feet, at the sand and strands of grass, and for the first time feels a flicker of curiosity. What will be expected of her at the Dutch house? More fish?

Standing at the corner of the hut, next to a cluster of freshly salted sardines strung to the end of a rod, she listens for her parents, but all is quiet now. Her father comes out and sits on the end of the landing and lights a *rokok*, the aura of clove and tobacco smoke rising above his head. A metallic clatter of cooking echoes out from the back and she joins her mother at the fire. She's frying chilli and fish paste and despite herself, Mina feels hunger stir in her stomach. She squats down and begins to break apart some salted fish to add to the pot.

'Do I have to go?' she asks.

Her mother wipes the side of her nose with the heel of her hand as if to brush away tears, although she's not crying. She nods. 'Yes.'

'But why? Have I done wrong?'

There are creases between the older woman's brows from when she frowns against the glare of the sun and privation. These lines have become deeper with time, and now resemble keen, inch-long slices in her forehead. She shakes her head, chopping *kangkung* to add to the fish. 'No. No, it's not that, Tak-tak.' Mina knows she's not in

trouble when her mother uses her nickname, starfish. Her mother tosses the greens into the pan and stirs them about, and then wipes sweat from her upper lip. 'Your father thinks you will be better off there. You can work, and maybe even send us things sometimes.'

'What things?'

Her mother shrugs. 'Food? Maybe clothing.'

'But how?'

'Your father says you will exchange your hours of work for things we need, like more spice and tobacco.'

'But how will I do this?'

'I am not sure,' her mother answers, shaking her head slowly. 'Your father thinks your Dutch master will allow you to visit us once in a while, so maybe then you could bring us back some goods.'

Mina rests back onto her haunches, and sniffs at the salty fish crumbled against her fingers.

'What work will I do there?'

'What you do here, I expect. Cooking, sweeping, washing.' Her strong, bony hand squeezes Mina's knee. 'But you must behave yourself. Remember where you come from. Remember your father and me. Remember one day you must return to us, Tak-tak.' Her voice is quivering now, and Mina feels the force of tears against the back of her eyes. 'And never let anyone see this,'

her mother adds, folding back a corner of the girl's sarong.

They stare at the scaly, red rash that covers her inner thighs.

Mina swiftly re-covers her mottled skin, conscious of the fire's heat upon the weeping sores.

The three of them have their meal seated around the fire. They eat the rice and fish from banana leaves with their fingers, and Mina asks, licking the seasoning from her shiny fingertips, 'What will I eat there?'

'Food,' her mother says.

'Yes, but what kind of food? Will it be the same as here?'

Her mother glances at her father, and she knows her mother is trying to gauge how long until he loses his temper and slopes off to smoke. 'I'm not sure, Tak-tak. Shh, now.'

And what will she wear? What is the town like? Who will she work with? She asks herself these questions, a tremor of excitement finally mingling with the dread in her stomach, making her feel pleasantly sick like when she eats too much *sirsak*, the sweetness of the custard apple curdling in her stomach.

The evening sun sets as they clear away the pots, food and drying fish, and they retire to their rattan mats in the hut. Mina wonders where she will sleep in the Dutch house. She has only ever seen a white man once. He was tall, as willowy as a kanari sapling, and he wore strange clothes like the man from town. He'd trod through their village, peering into their huts, as curious as the villagers were as they gazed upon him.

Through a gap in the wall next to where she sleeps, Mina watches the swaying, frayed leaves of the coconut trees on the beach. The waves roll and clap further out to sea, and she hears the familiar hum of the ocean calling to her. Her father snores softly, but she knows her mother is lying awake too.



There is a damp breeze from the water as the sun rises. Mina's father strides onto the beach and glares out at the fishing boats already bobbing on the waves, fidgeting old netting between his hands. Moving back to the landing, he cracks pumpkin seeds between his teeth, making a slight whooshing sound with his lips as he spits the shells to the ground. Her mother stirs coconut milk and palm sugar into Mina's breakfast rice,

a sure treat, but Mina is afraid again and almost unable to eat. She forces the meal down, gagging, determined to not waste the food that her mother would never allow herself. Finally she stands and her mother carefully wraps her own good sarong around her daughter's hips. The patterned batik is still stiff from the wax stamping, the colours earthy, with streaks of ocean blue. Mina tries to protest, for this is her mother's special sarong for ceremonial days, but the older woman clicks her tongue and ignores her. They are both weeping now, as her mother tucks and pats down the edges of the fabric, and tucks a little more, until her father grumbles that it is time to go.

Mina trails behind her father to the centre of the village, wiping snot and tears onto the back of her hand. When her father leaves her with Junius, the man from town, he squeezes her upper arm — reassuring or cautioning, she's not sure. He doesn't look at her. He glances above her head for a few moments, as if contemplating the branches of the mango trees, and then turns and leaves. She watches his sinewy, dark legs from behind and she feels a fissure of hatred for him. Fear slices through her anger. Oh, the gods will have something terrible in store for her for thinking such things.

'I hope you have eaten and drunk well this

morning,' says Junius, as he swings up onto his pony. 'It's a long walk to Wijnkoopsbaai.'

There are two brown ponies. One is fat and carries Junius's gear on one side of its saddle and two baskets of fish on the other. Junius's own pony is taller, yet his feet dangle only a foot from the ground as he sways along. Mina falls in behind the two young men — Yati and Ajat. Yati is short, as squat as an eggplant, but Ajat, one of the chief's sons, stands tall, has the broad shoulders and trim waist of a fine fisherman. They walk slowly from the village. A few friends clap the men on the shoulders, grinning, demanding they bring back some cinnamon or nutmeg. One even calls for them to bring back prospective wives, and he's slapped playfully across the top of the head by his companions. It becomes awkward, for the young men don't know when to stop their cajoling, when to stop following, but finally Junius frowns down upon them and they pause under the fragrant kenanga tree that marks the edge of the village. After a few seconds one of the young men left behind calls out to his friends to bring back a *peci* to replace his straw hat, but the ribaldry is done with.

The first part of their journey is pleasant enough as they walk in the shade of row upon row of India rubber trees. The sun is still low and not

yet punishing, and the ground is damp and cool. But by mid-morning the girl, who is not used to such long periods of trudging, is weary and hot. She sees glistening perspiration ring the necklines of the young men ahead of her, and her mother's sarong is damp around her waist. The mountainous terrain becomes dusty, the straggle of bushes offering little shade. Her feet are sore, and the tip of her right big toe bleeds from where she jabbed it on a rock. By the time they reach Wijnkoopsbaai she is wilting, her skin greasy with sweat.

Here the roads are wider, no longer single tracks, arcing a path through a verdant patchwork of tea plantations. Small houses, square and neat with sloped roofs, line the roads next to large plots of rice paddies. Clothing is cast over shrubs to dry, and children and chickens watch them as they walk past. Mina marvels at the never-ending stream of houses.

They come to a crossroad, where the boulevard widens, leading down to the seafront. Oxen laden with baskets plod past white men on horseback. Junius pulls his pony up in front of a gate at the top of the road, and a boy runs out to open the latch. The girl stands on tip-toe but cannot see over the orderly hedges that surround the property. She is the last through, lagging behind the others. She can't resist staring at the creamy

orchids or reaching for a fallen *bunga raya*, its happy red petals having narrowly escaped the heavy tread of the ponies. The road is steep but finally they see the house. It's much larger than even the ceremonial hut back in the village. It is stark white, with timber shutters, columns and wrought iron balustrades. Even Yati and Ajat are struck dumb by its majesty.

Junius hustles them around to the back of the house. Kneeling in the shade of a frangipani tree are two kitchen maids, dark and slim, grinding seeds in a mortar and pestle. They lean into each other and watch as the young men from the village take water from a pail. The maids each wear plain white *kebayas* over matching brown and black sarongs, and have their shiny black hair pulled into low ponytails. They look so smart Mina is glad she's wearing her mother's good sarong after all.

Once the soggy baskets of fish are unloaded from the horses, Junius tells her to stay in the courtyard until she is collected, and he leads the village men and ponies away to the stables. Her legs feel heavy so she squats down onto her haunches, and watches the servant girls go about their work. They finish with the seeds, and start slicing chillies and lemongrass on a wooden board on the ground before them. They talk to each

other, but they do not talk to her. One of them rises to lug the heavy baskets up the back stairs to the kitchen verandah, her back arched with the weight of the fish.

An older woman comes from the kitchen to inspect the fish and, noticing Mina, descends the stairs with crablike steps to allow for the girth of her stomach. She stands in front of the girl and looks her over, like she is a piece of fruit at the market. She makes Mina turn, and even squeezes her upper arms, feeling for muscle tone.

‘You will call me Ibu Tana,’ the woman says. ‘I am the master’s head cook. You will work for me in the kitchen, but if you are no good, you will have to be one of the cleaning maids. Do you understand?’

Ibu Tana is shorter than Mina. Her hair, black with wires of grey sprouting at the hairline, is pulled into a severe bun, and her skin is saggy and lumpy. She reminds Mina of a toad.

‘Do you understand?’ the cook repeats. ‘Pray to the gods, they didn’t send me someone who doesn’t speak the language, did they?’ she then says, exasperated, to the other kitchen maids.

Mina nods. ‘I understand.’ Her mother was born in a village on the outskirts of Wijnkoopsbaai where this language of trade was used often. As they knelt in the shallows together,

scooping the muck and worm-like innards from the fish, she'd taught Mina many of these words, and told her of bold women like this Ibu Tana.

The cook wraps her steel fingers around Mina's arm again and pulls her to a hut at the back of the courtyard. Inside is the servants' *mandi*, the tub filled with clean water. Ibu Tana grasps the end of Mina's sarong and unravels it from her body, her gnarled fingers rasping the girl's skin. Mina covers the rash on her thighs with her hands, but Ibu Tana pushes her towards the *mandi* and tells her to wash with the sandalwood oil, to change into the servant's sarong and *kebaya* neatly folded next to the wash bucket. The *mandi* door slams shut behind her. Mina has never washed like this before, for a modest sunset soak in the sea is considered ample cleansing in the village. She picks up the small bucket by the *mandi* and dips it in the water. Lifting the bucket above her head she lets the cool water sluice over her body. She repeats this three times, until she is shivering.

Looking around, she can't find anything to dry herself with. Ibu Tana has taken her mother's sarong and all that is left are the servant clothes. She feels a flutter of panic; she doesn't want to keep Ibu Tana waiting. Quickly she wraps the new sarong around her wet hips. It is the same as those worn by the other servant girls. The

pattern is far fancier than any she has ever seen before; a shower of black tadpoles in symmetrical russet swirls. The *kebaya* feels strange as she gingerly pokes her hands into the sleeves and pulls the blouse onto her body, for she's not used to the feel of fabric against her back, rubbing against her shoulders and breasts. She's not sure how she'll ever become used to the confinement.

She climbs the back steps to the kitchen slowly, but once there, her trepidation turns to amazement as she gazes around the huge room at the number of stoves and pots. She's never seen an oven built into a fireplace before. There are glass-front cabinets, bowls and plates stacked high. One of the kitchen maids is washing crockery in a large tub while the other one stands in front of a bubbling pot of oil. A houseboy pauses in his sweeping and grins at her.

Ibu Tana turns from the oven to look at her. A slow smile curls the side of her mouth. 'The fish girl has brought the smell of the sea with her,' she says. 'You'd better be careful or we'll accidentally fry you up with the crabs.'

The kitchen maids titter when Mina bends her head to sniff her arm, but Ibu Tana shakes her head and tells her to shell the beans.

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Ibu Tana tries to teach her to cook other dishes besides fried fish with sambal. The cook grumbles that nobody can live on fried fish alone. Of course, Mina knows this to be untrue. She is aghast at the variety of food the master and his guests insist upon, that even the servants enjoy. Only on very special occasions is a chicken or goat slaughtered in her village. And only the men eat their fill; women and children busily clear the cooking pots, douse the fire, sweep the hearth while waiting for what rice or meat might remain. But in the Dutch house Mina eats well, tastes sauces and sweets she never knew existed. She wishes her mother could try these wonderments, and vows to take her some food wrapped in banana leaves when she returns to the village for a visit, even if she has to steal morsels from behind Ibu Tana's back.

One of the first things she learns to cook is *pisang epe*. Ibu Tana teaches her to fry the banana with palm sugar until it is brittle and sweet, how to recognise when to take it from the pan. Mina learns to knead dough for Dutch desserts and Chinese dumplings, how to slice the shallots and garlic so finely that, when fried, they become as wispy as wood shavings.

Once the day's cooking has been done and all the dishes washed and sorted, Mina stands on

the kitchen balcony and breathes in the traces of spice left on her fingertips — the peppery coriander, the tang of the lime leaves. She smells the night air, searching for the salt of the sea on the evening breeze. She closes her eyes and strains to hear the ocean's whisper, which is occasionally disrupted by a dog barking or the night call of an owl. It's in these closing moments of each night, when she feels the ocean's presence, Mina remembers who she is. But the memory has weight, sinks in her chest like a pebble in the sea. She misses her mother. She misses the silence of plaiting the netting with her, she misses their rhythm of scaling the fish. She misses falling asleep besides her mother's soft breathing, while the ocean whispers to her through the gap in the wall.

Each night at the Dutch house the kitchen maids sleep on bamboo mats on the kitchen floor. If the room is stuffy from the day's cooking and the others are already quietly snoring, Mina pulls her mat outside onto the verandah and braves the mosquitos by hiding under her mother's sarong. The morning after she had arrived at the master's house she was horrified to see the sarong cast on the ground, bunches of washed spinach arranged in rows upon it. She was too scared to say anything. All day she waited and watched between the tasks Ibu Tana had set for her. She waited

until the kitchen maids cleared away the greens, their bare, flat feet treading across the sarong as they went. Then Mina flicked the sarong into her grasp, rolled it into a ball, hid it away under a bush until nightfall. That first night when she brought it out from its hiding place, when she lay with the sarong across her mat, her skin cringed, waiting for Ibu Tana's sharp words, a clip to the ear. But nothing happened. Maybe they didn't notice. Maybe they didn't care.

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Although she works alongside the other two kitchen maids in the small, hot kitchen every day, they are locked together in their own dialect and their own history, for they are sisters come all the way from Aceh. The houseboy is friendlier, younger, so young he still doesn't have any down on his cheeks, or across his upper lip. His name is Pepen and he's small with a thin face and ears that stick out from his head. He has been with the master for so long he can barely remember his parents and doesn't know what village he is from. All he has left from that time is a small *kris*, fastened to his waist, its wavy, sharp blade sheathed in leather.

The first story Pepen ever tells her, while they

roast cacao beans over the fire, is how he watched a man in the market have a fit; how the man just collapsed to the ground and shivered, how his spit frothed like waves on a windy day.

‘And there was this terrible smell. It seemed to seep from his skin, a frightened smell, a rotten smell,’ he says. ‘And he swallowed his tongue.’ Pepen blinks a few times, and the tips of his large ears become red.

Pepen’s job is to sweep the floors and polish the timber, fill the *mandis* and bring in wood for the fires. Sometimes, when Ibu Tana gets irritated and shoves her aside, Mina helps Pepen with his chores. One morning she follows him into the dining room, for she’d spilt the cooking fat, been banished from the kitchen. The main section of the house is vast and airy. Palm fronds nod in the dulcet breeze that drifts through the open doors, and the heavy furniture from the master’s homeland seems to overwhelm the delicate teak pieces.

She’s sweeping the floor, the spidery straw of the broom wafting ash and dust against her ankles, when she notices Ajat, one of the young men who’d accompanied her from the fishing village, standing in the doorway.

‘What are you doing?’ She doesn’t know him very well. Growing up, her shyness had bound her

close to her mother and home, and she'd always been extra bashful of Ajat, the son of the head fisherman. But she yearns to feel the language of their village upon her tongue, wants to feel she is still a part of something.

'Waiting for Master,' he says. His skin is as smooth as polished ebony, dark and tight, and his wiry hair is tucked into a batik headwrap. 'I've brought his horse.'

He doesn't offer any more information, just stands patiently on his right foot, the other one tucked against his right ankle. Mina resumes her sweeping but feels his eyes upon her and becomes self-conscious, all elbows and shuffling feet. She doesn't notice the master of the house enter the room upon a cloud of tobacco smoke.

'Be more careful, girl,' he snaps at her, as he squashes the cigarette beneath his shoe. He watches Mina for a few moments through his pale crow's eyes and then says, his tone less harsh, 'You're making more mess than there was before.' He walks onto the verandah and leans over the rail to the pond. Bringing up the phlegm in his throat, he hocks into its green depths.

Mina sees Ajat's mouth twitch as she sweeps the ash towards the corner of the room. She's forgotten to bring the dustpan with her and is unsure what to do with the debris. Conscious of Ajat's gaze, she

tucks the broom under her arm and returns to the back of the house in search of Pepen.

‘What do you mean he wants the fish girl to serve?’ demands Ibu Tana. ‘She can barely hold a pot without spilling *lodeh* down her front.’

It’s true. The girl fingers the stiff yellowish soup stain that has dried upon her *kebaya*. She thinks she will never become used to the cook’s abrupt ways. It’s as though her hands aren’t her own when Ibu Tana is near and her heart jitters high in her throat. Sometimes when Ibu Tana scolds, a crystalline blind spot nudges at the corner of her vision.

Pepen shrugs. ‘The master said he wants her to wait table from now on. He said when she’s not working for you during the day, she is to help me in the house.’

Ibu Tana stares at the girl for a moment, her mouth twisted to the side, eyes narrowed. ‘Well, you’d better change your *kebaya*.’ She reaches out, pinching the fabric between her fingers, catching the tiniest bit of flesh.

Later that day Mina returns a spittoon to the sitting room. She pauses, hearing Ibu Tana's voice, high-pitched. She hides behind the doorway, for she doesn't want to anger the cook.

'She has leprosy, I tell you,' Ibu Tana is saying. 'I've seen it. It's disgusting.'

Penyakit kusta. Leprosy. The girl's hand twitches at her sarong and she feels her ears burn red. Was Ibu Tana talking about her? Please don't let it be so. Her family had taken much care over the years to hide the offensive flesh. Who knew what the other village families would have done to her if they thought she could contaminate them too? And her father had traded much fish and shells for herbs to alleviate the itchiness, the pain. But somehow she'd been careless enough for Ibu Tana to notice.

'Rubbish.' The master's voice is low and clipped. 'It would be obvious if she had this sickness.'

'But she does,' the cook insists. 'I have seen it myself upon her legs. What if she passes it to all of us? What then? It would not be good if it is known that this sickness is in the house. Who will visit you then?'

'That is my concern, not yours.' Mina hears him strike a match to light his cigarette. 'Bring her to me.'

It doesn't occur to the girl to run, she has been brought up to be obedient, after all. Ibu Tana almost collides with her as she bustles around the corner and grabs her by the arm. 'Were you listening, you sly thing?'

The girl nods. Her face is hot as she's dragged to the master, worse than on the day her father gave her to Junius. She won't look up at him, just stares at his richly polished brogues.

'Show me your legs, girl,' he says. His tone is abrupt, but softens when he repeats, 'Show me your legs. There's nothing to be scared of. Ibu Tana is here. We just want to be certain you are not sickly.'

Her breath won't come as she slowly parts her sarong at the front. Averting her face to the left, Mina squeezes her eyes shut and can almost feel her skin bloom fresh red welts under the others' gaze.

'That is nothing more than a rash, you foolish woman,' the master says eventually.

'You won't send her away?' asks Ibu Tana.

The girl's eyes lift to meet the master's. She would walk into the sea rather than disgrace her father. Her mother.

'Of course not.'

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Mina can't sleep listening to Ibu Tana's cranky snore. Any wariness she felt for the woman has been replaced with a sullen dislike, as unyielding as the twin shells of a fresh clam. Just the memory of her words to the master pulses heat through the girl's body, making the sores on her thighs flare and sting. She wants to rake her fingernails through the welts, really dig at the itch, but knows the lacerating damage is not worth the momentary relief.

If she were at home her mother would soak cabbage leaves, drape them over the sores. She would mash papaya, chew betel nut, smear the paste across the rash. But here, in Ibu Tana's kitchen, the girl lies in agony, too embarrassed to tend to the sores. If she were home in her village she would wade into the water, let its salt balm the pain. The warm water would lap at her legs, dissipate the burn.

Mina longs to hear the ocean but cannot over the others' sleeping breaths. Tip-toeing onto the verandah, she leans over the railing, but can only hear the lowest murmur from the sea. She wants it to be louder, loud enough to drown out the high pitch of pain that hums through her body. She steals down the steps, across the master's land, until she reaches the gate. It's locked, so she scrambles through the hedges, the branches

snagging her *kebaya*, scratching her arms, until she reaches the road. The clammy sea breeze draws her forth, and she's not afraid when there's a rustle in the bushes and a gecko clucks from inside a tree trunk, for her need to be in the ocean clamours through her body. She ignores the rocks and prickles that pierce the soft soles of her feet, the burrs that cling to the bottom of her sarong.

Thin reeds whip her shins as she runs onto the beach, the sand still warm from the heat of the day. The full moon shines across the slate surface of the sea. The waves rush up the wet sand towards her, their frothy white fingers greedily beckoning to her as they retreat. She sheds her sarong and clambers into the cool water. Sinks to her knees. Feels a flash of pain as the water licks at the sores on her thighs, but then, the relief. A sigh catches in her throat as she leans back, digging her palms into the sand behind her. She lengthens her legs, and the salt water lolls against her tortured skin. Her whole body gently rolls back and forth with the rhythm of the sea.

She stands and steps a few feet further into the water. She's careful because she's never learnt to swim. Too many of their village men and children had drowned for Mina to be careless. But the sea pulls her further until the chill water reaches her hips. The current is strong, tugging at her body so

that she sways on the spot, and her feet seep into the sand. The sea's roar, hollow, familiar, rushes through her, talks to her, matches its cadence to hers. It reaches around her, velvet soft, draws her in, draws her further until the water is at her waist. Its arms are so soft, softer than the white underbelly of the stingray, and she can hear it whispering to her. *Putri*. Princess. *Putri*. Its arms are dark and long, gently sucking, kissing at her damaged skin, until the agony of flesh melts away, leaving a faint tingle in its place.

Mina shivers, for a breeze has picked up. She backs out of the water and, once on the beach again, drops into a low curtsy, murmurs her thanks to Nyai Loro Kidul, apologises that she didn't bring a flower or shell as an offering. She feels heavy, restful. She's so relaxed she could fall asleep on the sand, but knows that the Ocean Queen cannot protect her there, so she slips back to the hot kitchen, back to her bamboo mat.

Mirandi Riwoe is a Brisbane-based writer. She has been shortlisted for the *Overland* Neilma Sidney Short Story Prize, the Josephine Ulrick Short Story Prize and the Luke Bitmead Bursary. She has also been longlisted for the *ABR* Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize and CWA (UK) dagger awards. Her work has appeared in *Review of Australian Fiction*, *Rex*, *Peril and Shibboleth and Other Stories*. Her first novel, *She be Damned*, will be released by Legend Press (UK) and Pantera (Aus) in 2017. Mirandi has a PhD in Creative Writing and Literary Studies (QUT).

Reprinted 2021
First published by in 2017

Published in Australia and New Zealand by Brio Books,
an imprint of Booktopia Group Ltd
Unit E1, 3-29 Birnie Avenue, Lidcombe, NSW 2141, Australia

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ISBN 978-1-925589-06-1 (print)
ISBN 978-1-925589-07-8 (digital)

Cataloguing-in-publication data is available from the National Library of Australia

Internal design and typesetting © Brio Books 2017

Cover illustration and design by Sam Paine, www.sampaine.com
Printed in Australia

Edited by Alice Grundy

'A beautifully written story, fresh yet powerful,'
Inga Simpson



Inspired by the 'Malay trollope' in W. Somerset Maugham's story, 'The Four Dutchmen', Mirandi Riwoe's novella, *The Fish Girl* tells of an Indonesian girl whose life is changed irrevocably when she moves from a small fishing village to work in the house of a Dutch merchant. There she finds both hardship and tenderness as her traditional past and colonial present collide.

ISBN 978-1-925589-06-1



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