

## The Man in the Mountains

By Cerise Phiv

The morning quiet is only troubled by the strong heat hitting on the iron roof of the shelter. He stretches his limbs and jumps on his feet. He can feel the accrued stiffness of his body week after week. That's a bad sign- it means that the water is still rising. Like people who live in extreme territories, he is prematurely old and at the same time, ageless. He doesn't know when he was born; in fact, he doesn't remember anything that happened before the catastrophe. He goes out and feels the sun on his face. He ritually commences the day by making a tour around his "estate", a complex of old sheds and buildings that seem to stand together only by the trash piled all around. He closes his eyes and tries to reassemble the puzzle of sensations and recollections: a great tumbling that sounds like a crash, a shrilling noise that drilled



his eardrums and left him deaf ever since. Did he really feel the warm dashes of blood spilling inside his head before slipping into nothingness or has his mind made them real after dreaming of them so many times?

He realises suddenly the insistent presence in front of him: at his feet, the cat fixes him with its green eyes, asking for its daily ration of food. The cat is the only living

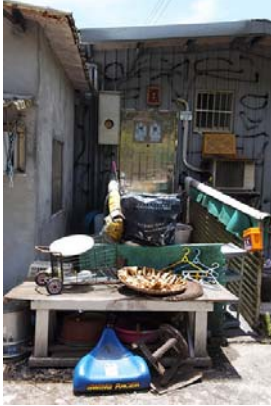
being he has seen around for months and maybe years, he cannot be sure anymore as it's been a while since he has completely lost track of time. "Old man," the cat seems to say, "Stop brooding on the thoughts of the past that would not feed either of us."

"Alright, smart pal, let's see what's fishy today..." the old man says while readjusting his straw hat on his head.



Together they follow the brook downstream, a brook that is formed like a gutter on concrete ground. Despite its muddy colour, the water is clean and fresh and it even tastes sweet. He can hear his heartbeat, following the rhythm of his rapid walk and the strong thumping just brings back other memories: a terrifying rumble and the sea thrashing the city like a gigantic whip. He has to stop for a moment; his head has started to hurt. He massages his temples to get rid of the salty after-taste in his mouth. During the first weeks, the plains were like a big hot pot: houses, cars, trees, animals and bodies were floating in a dense liquid made of tar and sea water. And the mixture was slowly being boiled by an

unexplainable heat. Then the island started to sink and the few survivors had to reach higher heights in the mountains. The cat and the old man have arrived at the pond; the old man looks satisfied, two of the fishtraps are full. In one of them, there is a flat plastic box spotted with hardened tar.



Once back home, he cleans out the catch, sticks the frogs on picks and puts everything on the grill. Then he shares his meal with the cat who eats the fish heads delicately before leaving as soon as it has finished. Usually, the old man would take a nap but he wants to examine his find, the flat plastic box, and he takes it to his "workshop": a makeshift shelter where he stores all kinds of objects he found in the mountain- his treasures. Many of them are still piled randomly here and there, waiting to be washed, sometimes repaired and then classified. In a rather short period of time, he has built up a real museum but only a few shelves actually display some carefully chosen items. His favourite objects are well conserved lucky charms with a shiny golden colour. He likes to think that some other people before him hung these knickknacks in the entrances of their home,

in front of their window, as the shadow of the magical and entangled character would dance on the walls like a crazy spirit. He himself carries one around his neck and tried some time ago to tie one to the cat who resisted with claws before escaping. Most of the things are strange to him and doesn't trigger any memory; still, by cleaning them, repairing them and classifying them, he ends up by creating a familiar bond and he convinces himself that these objects must have been made to be used that way. Somehow, these altars are meant to be catalogues of the past civilization he used to belong to.



He scrapes carefully the tar on the plastic box and a photograph of faded colours appears. He reads aloud the characters: "Aguirre, the Wrath of God". It's the cover of a movie from the past century. A man with insane eyes looks over his right shoulder, his iron helmet contrasts with his blonde straggling locks. On his lap a young girl, also blonde, looks toward the same mysterious direction, she has an arrow stuck in her chest. On the other side of the box, he deciphers the text, scratching with his nail the remains of tar: "Lope de Aguirre, a Spanish soldier, leads a group of conquistadores down the Amazon River in the deep jungle of Peru but his search of the legendary city of gold, El Dorado, only leads him to madness and death". The old man reads several times these few lines as if the repetition could unveil their mysterious signification. He feels strangely upset by Aguirre's futile quest as it fails to arouse some forgotten

memories but still moves something deep inside his mind. He can easily imagine these men struggling to open their paths into the thick tropical jungle of another world, but similar to the one that surrounds him now. He can experience in his own flesh the madness and the frailty of an existence lead by imagination.

He raises his head suddenly, the sun is high, burning his tired eyelids and stinging his wrinkled neck. His ears are buzzing again, he goes back to his shelter to lie down and he dreams of men with iron clothes, setting foot for the first time on this forgotten island.

*Photos provided by Roy Berman*

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/mutantfrog/>

