



Mara Coson

# The Wondrous Mountain

*Abstract: Do straight lines exist in nature? On the cold, hard line where human logic, posture, and ambition might reach perfection, do we shrivel?*

\*\*\*

A straight line...

The longest a person has stood for: 93 hours. The longest person: 272cm—wait, straightest, tallest, the tallest living person: 251cm. The longest person standing on a column: pillar hermit Simeon the Stylite stood on a platform fifty feet high for most of his life, closer to the cloudy finger of God, away from it all, a static and yet constant, maybe symbolic, ascent. And me, standing in a government queue waiting for the sign next to be raised, next, handwritten in Pentel pen on a sign wrapped in shiny plastic stuck high on a large wooden stick. I crouch down into an egg shape and relieve my tight hamstrings and cradle the baby inside me, but only in my mind, because I have remained standing for unpredictable, nearly syncopated minutes the line keeps moving with our queue numbers freshly handwritten that morning and distributed to us I am number twenty-five while the line before me is the line behind me and beside me and I begin to dwell on the natural order of the line, or the Line, and the official with the Lacoste shirt and the floor-length ponytail announced raising both hands with all his eleven fingers to contain us in our snake lines, “do not let anybody between you or before you”, but through us, excuse, on a pushcart, excuse, balding potted topiary with exposed mesh ribs and nothing inside.

I live in a place where rulers are not straight and to prove this was not wrong I examined the painted lines on all the rulers including the ones I learned math with and I saw the gaps between millimeters were not all the same but how have all the answers come together so far? I went to my high school reunion last year carrying this question and it's been twenty years and a few months maybe and I went up to my teacher whose surname written in Pentel pen in English means shooting star with her curved spine which made her all three-and-a-half feet tall she went up the stairs with the help of her wooden meter stick, and she said: “Well, there are no straight lines in nature...”



An old artist who taught me how to draw circles in the afternoons with a big sheet of paper it took me both arms to flip said the same thing. She had a boat that could sail around the world but she only ever went as far as I could see her from the shore, and when she was bored by the open water, she made circles on her spiral notepad, over and over again, shading them so that they would pop out of the page, roll away and swim into the water, and then she would dream again, and her useless son, nostrils wide, would yank the motor, toss the notebook out to sea, and cut straight to the shore. By the groyne gathered the sea urchins, locally called the tuyum, hiding in wait for my clumsy tomato heel, itself a bursting pin cushion pointing all needles. It has given me a fear of the open sea and ever swimming again, and I nearly lost my eyeballs in the water.

Come on think... the only straight line in nature, nearly, maybe the narwhal tusk, a formation of twirled buck teeth, of great medieval imagination, carried as a tourist souvenir then used as a spear that saved the day on London Bridge, the honor of civilian gallantry. Underwater narwhals we have found use their tusks to slap their fish. Also in London, Bill Nighy on stage and the lights are on his solo form with only two straight fingers like Jesus, human and divine, and as he does his monologue, somebody asks aloud, does his character also have arthritis?

When the old artist died she was so stiff inside her coffin she appeared to be pointing somewhere, about to be sucked into a pneumatic tubular afterlife. Upwards, then, to the sky, I try to dissuade myself from my memory of the straight line to heaven, I swear I saw it, I saw souls climbing up a long cloud escalator while we were all playing badminton with skirts and our mouths open to the sun dodging shuttlecocks.

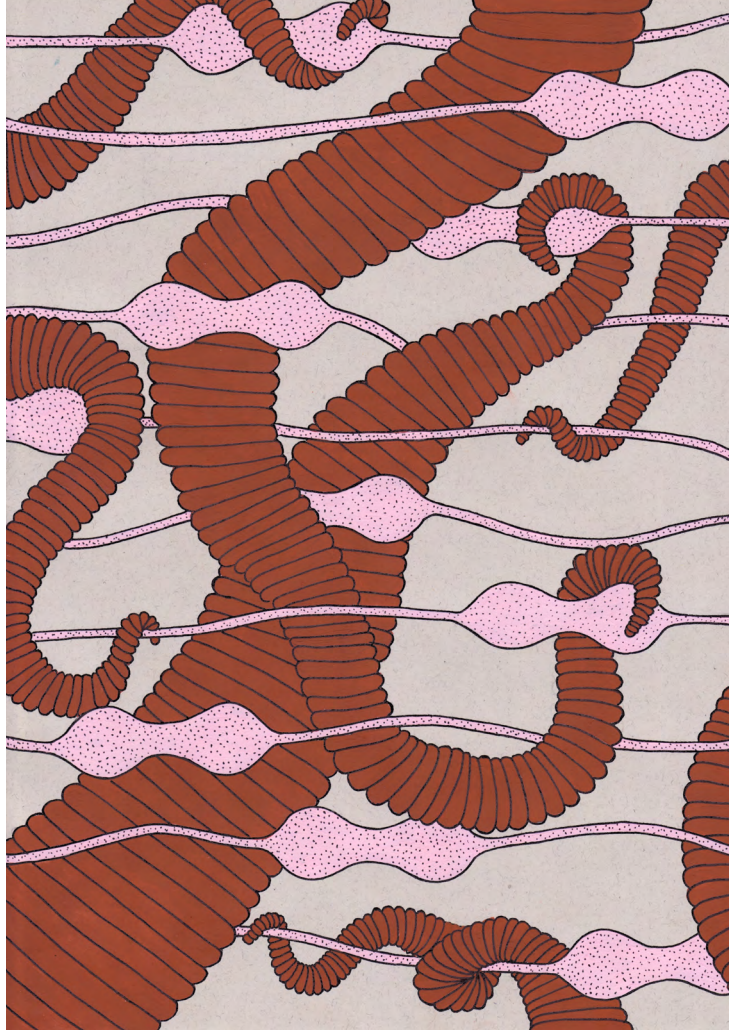
A single vine with even leaves coming towards the road, maybe to cross it...

We all marveled at the new cement pillar in our school. A single cement pillar that was a sign of progress or a tiny sky-scraping phallus in the pedestrian rotunda with a wig of itchy worms. We noticed it was pregnant in the middle from bursting formwork, but never mind, we just need to kiss-kiss its belly and by rubbing our hands every time we pass for good luck it will straighten. What thoughts return to the nitinol wire when it curves back into its remembered shape?

Lightning struck the cement pillar when the rains came, they always come, and its tattered tarpaulin flags lay on its feet and its steel rebars at the top looked like the arms of a tube man begging to stay straight and upon its short memory we left a bed of picked flowers while the weeds popping out of the open pavement popped out in its honor more. That night we watched The Twilight Zone on cable television and the rocket ship disappeared upon launch. The man in a NASA office looked out



at the empty sky and recited a version of “I shot an arrow into the air...” He looked out the window and recited uncertainly, “it landed I know not where... a nursery rhyme for the age of space.” Meanwhile in a location unknown, one lost astronaut tried to kill another for a drink from his water canteen, and the weaker, dying, etched in the sand the letter H, what could it mean in this alien desert? The killer climbed the wondrous mountain and saw a billboard of Nevada. Telephone poles! “That’s what you were trying to say! We’re still on earth, what have I done!”



I have tried every brace-looking thing to straighten my back and yet my shoulders curve and my head sinks down again so I try everything again to straighten my back. I went on a date using one such brace and it lifted my areolas up to the heavens and we went to Cowboy Grill watching cover singers scream a ballad and with such a performance the singer’s toes clung on the metal rail at the edge of the stage like talons. Later at the end of the show, they pointed their arms straight upwards—to God? “Studies have shown that there is no proven benefit to improving your posture,” my friend said as I lay my ice cream cone on a plate and let it melt. I said, “Joey, you have really nice curly hair.” He said, “Thank you but my hair used to be straight until I had a blood transfusion when I got dengue fever.”



Still in line, I clawed at my thighs, my uncut fingernails raging mad circles attacking just an itch then a whole constellation of red pregnant pustules warm to the touch. “Bed bugs.” The doctor shot her magnifying glass at me last week with a light on my legs and confirmed it through the HEPA filter of her missing bottom teeth. “Bed bugs eat you like a-one-two-three, like a-breakfast-lunch-and-dinner. The last time I wrote a prescription for bed bugs it was for political candidates and prisoners.” Orion’s Belt welts all over my body. Close enough straight lines, attacked in stealth. “But if you don’t see straight lines on your skin, look for a zigzag, if you don’t see a zigzag, look for a cluster. If you don’t see anything on your seams, don’t call them, pest controllers, they will bring in pests, so then they come back, then always they come back, the pest controllers...” Three applications of scabicide from my neck to my toes spaced a day apart, a brand called Kwell that rhymes with well and hell, that’s dangerous! And still on the side of my elbow, a new constellation of hot red stars after all thought eradicated.

“Compress, compress,” said the man with the floor-length pony tail as I am still in the line that is not a line and somehow we all know what to do. Contract, compress, contract! Down my legs, my amniotic fluid. “The baby is on the way,” said the panicked stranger queue number thirty-two on the phone to his family. “But it is in breech position!” An ambulance was carrying a man who had fallen off his balcony planking. “My dear,” said the midwife to the stranger, queue number eight. “You either say ‘on our way’ or ‘on way’. Never ‘on the way’ unless the child really is on the way.” A young woman in elephant pants looked at the scene and whispered to her Android, “Cyclops in X-Men had the most tragic mutation.”

“What is straight until it’s wet?” The emcee queue number forty-eight said to the crowd watching me, and we all raised our hands and covered one mouth. “Spaghetti!!!” Calm down, calm down. “I have a Hello Kitty panty, and I’m selling it for one peso only,” the emcee went on. “Why so cheap?” replied the audience. “Because it scratches!”

The cats close to the back fence were going crazy! Entering from the creek into our large broken PVC pipe was a seven meter long, blue marlin steak-thick reticulated python, fat and unusual in the middle of the city, and it disappeared into the night. Two days ago, I saw our neighbor’s old, arthritic Chihuahua, the one with a tutu, coughing and yawning with its tongue curling sharply inwards, and that was the last time I saw him.

Think happy thoughts. Drawing freehand. The point vanishing. Fangs. My dog’s ingrown dewclaws. Botticelli’s horny penis. Dowager’s humps. T-rex arms. Fingers in rest. TV commercials for senior calcium supplements. Lack of moisture. Wilted celery. Most double arm hula hoops with a human belt in thirty seconds. Fastest ten meters walking on the hands with legs behind the



head: 12.52 seconds. Fastest time to put six eggs in cups in a contortion head stand: 7.88 seconds, and in the end they flash to sunny side up eggs in a pan. Three pairs of buttocks entering a curling cornucopia. A tongue with a bad accent. Maybe all long lines are a loop and it boggles. A python in the news for curling its big body at the top of the stair rail of the MRT station. General relativity. Ants playing dead. The grip of a baby slow loris. Bending spoons. Buckling under the strain. Limping phalluses. Mistaking my friend's pig for a boulder, but rocks don't have high heels.

I tried to look everywhere for the bed bugs which did occur in real life, as the baby in breech did not and there was no evidence that they ever existed, except in my skin and yet I had all the confidence that they would, in the end, take over the world because no matter how many of their eggs you kill with a steamer, they are in your floorboards, in your furniture, in your wardrobe and how much do you have to steam, how much do you have to burn, and what straight lines do they commit to the skins of my family and everybody I know? My itching has not stopped, however, unfortunately, and therefore, in spite of my stiffening body I dream of contorting myself permanently like a stapler so that my upper teeth can graze my thighs and I no longer aspire as in the painted diagram of the four-stage evolution from cavemen to remain upright. In this position I can also remove the ingrown dewclaw of my dog as it presses into the raw flesh of her left paw pad.

The rains were so heavy early in the morning we found the python swimming out of the women's toilet with a flashlight, it was us with the flashlight, and nobody wanted to wade on the six-inch deep water and we spun it around like a spaghetti on chopsticks and covered it with a drum—just kidding, I wasn't there—but the next day I waited for it to get picked up by animal welfare, and we couldn't believe we were in the middle of the city wondering what to do with a python! And maybe the python thought the same and wondered what to do with the city, and we both sat together in the guardhouse me hunched over in galoshes and my *imagine perversa* in a sack full of holes smelling like rotten fish. And while I waited, on Wikipedia I read about a jeweler hiding from the rain under a tree who was eaten by a python the size of the one beside me and was swallowed feet first, "perhaps the easiest way for a snake to actually swallow a human." And then as the truck came and the thought left, the rains started to stop. That for all the invisible bed bugs that have hounded me it was an allergy to an egg.



## BIO

Mara Coson is a writer based in Manila, Philippines. She is the publisher of Exploding Galaxies, a press focused on publishing out-of-print Filipino fiction, and was the co-founder of The *Manila Review*. Her novel, *Aliasing*, was published by Book Works in 2018.

