

# BLACK WINGS

## 黑色的翅膀

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*Black Wings* is a story about an island and the sea, and about the dreams and friendship of four Tao youths. As kids, they eagerly anticipate the adults' return from fishing, longing to begin their own voyage someday. Now the time has come. *Black Wings* is also a story about a clash of cultures between the Tao and the Han Chinese, about what to do with our childhood dreams when we really grow up, and most essentially, about how much knowledge the ocean can offer.

### Syaman Rapongan 夏曼·藍波安

Born in 1957, Syaman Rapongan is a writer from the indigenous Tao tribe of Taiwan's Orchid Island, one of the country's remotest locations. After spending over ten years studying and working in Taipei, he returned in 1989 to his home and the sea he loved so much to rediscover his identity. The 1980s in Taiwan marked the start of public discussions on socioeconomic and political concerns, including aboriginal rights, and his mother challenged him to prove himself a man in the Tao sense by going diving and spear-fishing. Thus reconnected to his roots, he turned to writing about the world he had grown up in, expressing himself in a natural and simple style suggestive of his native Tao tongue. His books draw on materials from legends narrated by the tribal elders of his parents' generation. Syaman Rapongan's published works include *Black Wings*, *Memory of the Ocean Waves*, *The Face of a Sea Voyager*, and *Old Ama Divers*.



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# BLACK WINGS

By Syaman Rapongan. Translated by Pamela Hunt.

The flying fish come, one school after another, densely packed, dying the surface of the ocean an inky black. The schools—each holding hundreds of fish, each reaching fifty, sixty metres in length—stretch across a nautical mile. Like a mighty regiment entering into battle, they swim the ancient shipping routes that follow the Kuroshio current, gradually advancing on Philippine waters.

But such a vast number of flying fish will also attract its predators. Now come the swordfish, marlins, barracudas, mahi mahi, giant kingfish, and little tunny... They follow close behind the schools, rolling their eyes, awaiting the perfect moment to begin their massacre. The flying fish tremble in anticipation. Drawing closer together, they are too nervous to look at their enemies at their tails.

The flying fish with the black wings are the largest navigators in the shoal. Sensing an imminent disaster, they begin to nimbly herd the small schools into one larger mass. Soon enough the smaller fish, once scattered in countless groups, have now joined into five large shoals.

The sun will soon sink below the horizon. The black-winged flying fish are ever more troubled, and some begin to swim outside of the school perimeter, fearing that the smaller fish—such as the *Lok Lok* or the *Kalawaw*—will fall behind and become their predators' evening meal. Looking down on this scene from above, the flying fish look like thick plates of coral reef, floating on the surface of the sea.

The flying fish swim three nautical miles, then four, until they reach the northeast waters of the Batanes Islands. Their hunters cannot much longer bear to swim against the current; they have travelled on empty stomachs for too long, and besides, night is beginning to fall. A disturbance occurs on the school perimeter. The swimmers begin to twist and turn; now slow, now fast, they sink towards the ocean floor or flash up to the surface, tails flicking, fins spreading. Soon the largest predators reach the shoal's outer edges. They are two metres away, now one. For the flying fish, this is a bad omen, one that spells out an impending catastrophe. They draw closer together, fin to fin, but this will not be enough to overcome a universal rule: the strong prey on the weak.

The impetuous mahi mahi are the first to break through the perimeter from behind, pupils dilated, bodies steeled in preparation, eyes fixed on their prey. In a flash, the vanguard swoops in and swallows a handful of fish whole; seeing the chaos, the rest of the predators also join in the frenzied massacre. The hunting season has begun.

Suddenly, flying fish burst through the ocean surface. The glow of the setting sun illuminates their escape, and they glide across the sea like low flying iridescent clouds drifting over a mountain range, painting the waters a dazzling silver. They glide sixty or seventy metres and then disappear into the sea; but an instant later they spread their fins and fly again, rising and falling with the waves. Their translucent wings reveal a determined will to survive.

Now the mahi mahi in their hundreds, still behind the terrified schools, leap out of the sea, three, four times. They pierce through the ocean surface, striking a heroic pose a few metres above the water, as if to show the pride they feel at swallowing their prey. They fling back their heads and flick their tails, a picture of triumph and an affirmation that the law is indeed immutable. The strong conquer the weak.

Now that the curtain has been raised on the annual hunting season, the flying fish have only a brief respite from the bloody chase. From this moment on, their dread deepens rapidly, in direct proportion to the speed it takes for a mahi mahi to digest one of their own.

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The moon slowly sets in the West as the soft light gradually changes from pure silver to a soft rippling yellow. As he lay on the beach, basking in the colours, Kaswal was intoxicated by dreams that may or may not become a reality one day. Dreams are the force that propels ambitions.

In such a way these blueprints for a dream floated along the pathways of his brain, until his skull was filled with them. He thought of school, and how he was made to stand facing a world map on the wall of his teacher's office as a punishment. He didn't know if the teacher, who had come from the mainland, had set this punishment in order to make him look closely at the image of Mainland China, or if his intention was for Kaswal to understand that their own island, Pongso no Tao, their Orchid Island, was not even drawn on, let alone the Mountain People like him.

Looking up to the sky, Kaswal smiled. 'May my dreams come true.'

*Kaswal, woyto rana syamamo. kwana ni Kaswal ipasarai nasyai.*

Seeing that Kaswal was in a listless mood, Ngalolog called out in an attempt to cheer him up. 'Kaswal, your father's back.'

*Yama! 'Dad!'*

*Heng! Kamango moka tongiyanan do taw ya. 'Huh. What are you still doing out here?'*

*Ko panalahren imo mo yama. maharek o cireng na. 'Waiting for you, Yama.'* Kaswal spoke in a low voice.

*Heng! 'Huh.'*

*Miratateng am, manireng pa am: Jikakaha si mangay ka do gakko.* After a pause, Yama spoke again. 'You'll be too tired for school.'

*Kakaha ko. 'No I won't.'*

Kaswal knew that his father was not very good at catching flying fish. If others caught a hundred, his Yama would only get fifty; if the others caught three hundred, he would only have a hundred. Still he came back to shore after everybody else. If Kas could help his father out just a little, then it might lessen his Yama's weariness. He had been sat out of reach of the waves, somewhere between the low and high tide marks, watching the boats returning to harbour under the moonlight. Such a beautiful scene was enough to make him forget the humiliation he had endured at school, and deepened still more his love for the ocean. He hadn't felt a bit tired as he waited for Yama to return, scraping the scales off fish with his right hand, and thinking more of his dreams, newly composed. He was ready to tell them to Ngalolog and to Jyavehai. Still better if Gigimit could come too, he thought to himself.

*Kaswal, namen moli rana. Kwana ni Ngalolog. 'Kaswal, we're going home,'* Ngalolog said. Jyavehai and Gigimit walked back with him to the village.

*Cita hen nyopa o mata-no-angit tam, jyata mangai ko do vahai no si maraw. 'OK. I'm going to watch the stars for a while. I'll come round to yours early tomorrow.'*

*No...wan. 'Oh... Alright.'*

The world map... Kaswal had a sudden urge to go back to school to look at it again, this time on his own. He had nearly finished descaling the fish. The soft yellow light of the moon hung above the horizon. It was about ten people high. He knew that day would soon break.

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*Itkeh rana manga-nako.*

'Go to bed, son.' His mother spoke.

*Sya.*

'No.'

*Jikangay do gakko si pezak!*

'You have to be in school early tomorrow!'

*Ori jiko ngitkeh i mo ina.*

'So there's no point in sleeping now, is there Ina?'

*Cyata, imo yajingitkeh an.*

'Fine. It's up to you.'

*Ko katengan mo ina. Yama yokai rana si wari, mo ina.*

'I know, Ina. Ina, Sis has just woken up.'

*Apei si warmo, kangai nyo do tagakal miwalam.*

'Then take her up to the roof terrace for a rest.'

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Later, Kaswal climbed down from the terrace. Turning to Yama, he asked,

*Yana in Mazaneg rana o yakan ta?*

'Are the flying fish cooked?'

*Ala yana mazaneg.*

'They're nearly ready.'

*Mikopa do gakko, cyata makeikayi ko mayi an?*

'I'm going to school, but I'll be back soon. All right?'

Yama nodded in agreement, and so Kaswal dashed off, as fast as a pig that had escaped its pen.

*Kas, kamangai jino? Miyavit so praranom si Gigimit tomawag jya.*

'Kaswal, where are you going?' Gigimit, carrying an earthenware pot, called out to him.

*To neiked si Kaswal a kwanam, keiyanong.*

'Come with me!' Kaswal shouted in reply.

*Nowon, iseiked mopa yaken.*

'OK! Hold on.'

By the time Kaswal had reached the school office, Gigimit had caught up with him.

*Jikwangai do gakko, si cyaraw kwan mo?*

'Weren't you going to skip school today?'

*Nan, mo galagal.*

'Yes - now shut it.'

A banyan tree grew beside the school, extending out over its iron sheet roof. Kaswal scaled it swiftly and stepped out onto one of its branches. Gripping it tightly with both hands, he lowered himself down so

that he dangled in mid-air. The top window had been left part open. He swung his feet towards it, squeezing his toes and then his instep into the gap, pushing until it was completely ajar. Balancing his feet on the wooden frame, his left hand grabbed for another tree branch nearer the window. His right slowly released its grip and then, as nimble as a monkey, he swung himself again, so that he was sitting on the frame. Pushing his hands against the outer wall, he dropped himself into the room. He immediately started unscrewing the window lock.

*Asdepei.*  
'Come on.'

*Ka mango yai.*  
'What are you doing?'

*Keiyanong.*  
'Hurry up!'

Gigimit couldn't resist this order, given with such conviction. He jumped into the room.

*Ka mango ya.*  
'What are you doing? You...'

Kaswal took in a long, long breath. He walked to the world map, said:

*Gimit toranei jyaken o cya-pi no sinsi ta.*  
'Gigimit. Go get me teacher's pencil.'

*A...Pei.*  
'Oh... Here.'

Kaswal made a tiny black dot on the map to the Southeast of Taiwan. He said:

'This is Orchid Island. This is Taiwan. Below it is the Philippines.'

The pencil moved steadily towards a group of islands, countless in number.  
'O—cean—ia. Melanesia. Polynesia.'

'Huh,' said Gigimit.

Kaswal picked up the pencil again and pointed towards Orchid Island. Taiwan. Polynesia. South America.

His expression didn't change but his pencil hovered at the southern tip of South America. It didn't move on again. He thought for a while. He said:

*Tana, Gimit.*  
'Let's go, Gigimit.'

Gigimit didn't understand what Kaswal was up to. He thought some more and then with a confused expression he said,

*Kas, ikongo mo naknakmen ya!*  
'Kas. What are you thinking?'

*Tanam yam! Kwana pa a!*  
'Aiya! Let's go.' Then he said:

*Si macieza ka jyken nam, ori pancyan ko nya sawnam.*  
'I'll tell you if you skip school with me tomorrow.'

*Ikongo o vazai mo?*  
'What? What's going on?'

*Si jika ngayim, ta panic ko jimo.*  
'If you don't come, I'm not telling.'

As they left the school and went back down the gravel road towards the village, Gigimit watched Kaswal closely. Still he gave nothing away.

*Gimit, mayi ka yan jika ngayi ya.*  
'Gigimit. Are you coming or not.'

Gigimit pretended he hadn't heard. He walked behind Kaswal and looked at the sky. He looked at the sea. He looked at the people passing by.

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For Gigimit, the allure of the mahi mahi and the quiet pride of the men who brought them home was no longer enough for him; his own father was the best fisherman in the village, and he never returned with an empty boat. He thought instead of Kaswal's discovery. It must be something really interesting.

In all their time at school, they had never before paid any attention to that world map, yellowing with age and stuck on the office wall. But early that morning he and Kaswal had crept in to the school office like thieves, not even thinking of the beating they would get if they had been caught. Reading from the map, Kaswal had said Guava instead of Java. Gigimit laughed to himself; but still he was waiting impatiently for Kas to explain himself fully. It must be coming soon. His excitement whirled ceaselessly inside him, like the spray that would burst up from the ocean during the monsoon season.

*Kas, kwan mo syo am, amyan so cireng mo jyamwn kwanmo syo. Pangayin na o lima na do pisagatan na ni Kaswal.*

Gigimit placed his hand on Kaswal's shoulder. 'Kas, didn't you say you had something you wanted to talk about?'

*Amizngen nyo mo Ngalolog mo Jyavehai.*  
'Ngalog and Jyavehai, you want to hear the story too, right?'

*Ikongo o mo panci jyamen. Maharek o cireng na ni Lolog.*  
'What story?' asked Ngalolog quietly.

*Ko i...ilamdamen na ni Kaswal sira.*

'My...' Kaswal paused, wanting to see how the others would react.

*Tomo ngononongi ranam! Kwan na ni Ngalolog.*

'Come on! Tell us!' Ngalolog cried.

*Amizngen nyo.*

'Do you want to hear it?'

*To ngononongi.*

'Yes. Come on.'

And so the four of them sat in a line facing out to sea; Kaswal and Gigimit in the middle, Ngalolog and Jyavehai on either side. Kas had decided they should sit like this so that Ngalolog and Jyavehai wouldn't get distracted and start talking about mahi mahi again. Assuming the expression of a village elder telling a story, he began:

'It's like this. The day before I skipped school, on Wednesday, I had to go stand the school office as a punishment. I was made to face the wall, which had a map of the world on it, and it didn't even have our island on it, so I had to look it up in our social studies textbook to even find out where it is compared with Taiwan. We are to the southeast.

'Then early this morning, even before the janitor had woken up, Gigimit and I climbed in through the school window so we could look at the map a bit more carefully. We made a circle next to Taiwan where our island is, to show that we do exist. But this isn't the new thing I want to talk to you about.

'Last time we talked, all of us except for Gigimit said that we wanted to grow up and have children. When we have become fathers and can truly be called Syaman, then we want to become heroes of the ocean, rowing between our village and Little Orchid Island, our little Jimagawud island. We would show the bravery of real men on the waves. We'd support our families, we'd strengthen our bodies, we'd know the honour of bringing in a good harvest. We'd be called masters of the mahi mahi. We would make our children proud.'

Kaswal looked into the faces of his three closest friends. Satisfied that they were listening intently, he continued.

*Ko pancim, si komaro do ko-chong am, koykakza mangay do hai-chin.*

'What I want to say is that after middle school, I want to join the navy.'

'Join the navy to fight the Communist traitors?' asked Gigimit in a mocking tone.

*Ori rana, si mateika ko do hai-cin nam, mangai ko...*

'No, after I've left the navy I'll...'

Kaswal looked again at his friends, checking their expressions.

*Ori o mo panci, Kas. Kwana ni Gigimit.*

'You'll what, Kas?' prompted Gigimit.

*Ka took do atawan do...wawa.*

'I'll just... I'll just drift.'

*Mangai ka jino!*  
'Drift where, then?'

*Ma...oya oyako panci jinyo.*  
'Just drift... That's my new dream.'

'Rowing a boat is drifting, isn't it? You can drift wherever you want anyway, and here there are mahi mahi! Isn't that right Jyavehai?' Ngalolog deliberately tried to provoke Kaswal, thinking that he wouldn't really do it.

*Aiya, kalya hen-pen mo Ngalolog.*  
'Aiya, Ngalolog, you idiot.'

*Mo katengan, si matei ka ko mi tang-pin nam, mikala ko so vazai, a rakwa avang a omlivon so se-ci ya.*  
'Don't you see, after leaving the Navy I'll find a job on one of those ships that fish all over the world!'

Gigimit remembered the care with which Kaswal had drawn those lines along the world map early that morning; he now understood something of what Kas's new ambition was. He turned his head to study Kaswal's face. His friend really did seem to be serious about his new plan.

'Earlier this morning when you were reading the map, you thought that people from Java were called the 'Guavanese'. You want to travel the world, but you can't speak any languages apart from our own. Your Mandarin is no good. What about the language they speak in England. You don't know that either, do you?'

*Aiya, simi tang-pin kom, jiko macinanawo?*  
'Aiya, I'll be able to study when I'm in the navy, won't I?'

*Aiya, kami hai-lwan-syang ya, ta ipanci pyaw-lai-pyaw-ci ri. Ikong a ipanci syo mo Jyavehai syo. Kwana ni Ngalalog.*

Ngalalog broke in. 'Aiya, you're not thinking straight at all. That wouldn't be 'drifting', that would be... what's the word, Jyavehai?'

*Panci ri yan-yang, mitang shui-sow. Kawana ni Jyavehai.*  
'That's called being a sailor, sailing to far-flung places,' replied Jyavehai.

*Ori mitang shui-sow, mangai do se-ci keti! Kwana ni Kaswal a masarai. Osi sui-sow mitang sui-sow, kangai do se-ci keti...*

'Yes! I'll be a sailor, I'll sail all around the world!' Kaswal cried out happily. 'A sailor! A sailor, who sails all around the world...'

*Manireng pa si Kaswal am:*  
Kaswal continued:

'On that map of the world there was a huge sea called Oceania, hey, Gigimit. There were hundreds and hundreds of tiny islands. Some of them must be even more beautiful than our own. If my dreams come true, I'll be able to piss on every single one. Hey, Gigimit, isn't that right?'

*Ha..Ha...Ha...tosira mimina mamyng.*  
As one, the four friends burst out laughing.

Kaswal knew that his family was large, with his three older brothers, three younger brothers, and two sisters. With each flying fish season his Yama spent more time than anyone else on the ocean, hoping to catch a little more, hoping that his children could eat their fill. But he always caught fewer flying fish than anyone else. It was the same with mahi mahi: say Ngalalog's father had caught thirty fish; then Kaswal's Yama would have ten, at the most. It was because of this that Kaswal felt sad when Ngalalog teased him. Should I beat him up? he wondered. No. He still hadn't told his friends the entirety of his new dreams, inspired by the map of the world. Oceania. All those little islands, hundreds and hundreds of them. At least some of them must be more beautiful than Orchid Island, he thought to himself.