

Anak Sastra

Issue 38

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Contributor Bios

[Lo Sin Yee](#) is a teacher in Sarawak, whose interest is writing about underdogs in society.

S. Mubashir Noor is a media professional situated in Ipoh, Malaysia. He writes pithy summaries by day and cooks up farcical short fiction when the sun goes beddy bye.

Selena Yap (Twitter: [@cynical_tacos](#))'s short fiction has won and been published informally as part of the Swinburne Sarawak Creative Writing Competition.

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Pon Muthu Ramiah is a retiree, 73 years of age. He has been writing for the past few years. This is his first story to be published.

[Gonzalinho da Costa](#)—a pen name—is a management, communication, research, statistics, and machine learning consultant. A lover of world literature, he has completed graduate degrees in the humanities, management, communication, and statistics, and writes poetry as a hobby.

Sara Luisa Kirk is part poet, part early childhood educator, part budding musician. A graduate of the University of Denver and Colorado native, she now lives and works in Chiang Mai, Thailand. When she isn't writing in her garden, Sara co-curates Magic Theatre, a monthly poetry series.

Bryan Repha was born in Bantul, Yogyakarta, on August 20, 1997. He studies French language education at Yogyakarta State University.

Michael Mintrom is an Australian poet and a frequent visitor to countries in Southeast Asia. He has published his work in many literary journals, including *Ekphrastic Review*, *Meniscus*, *Rabbit Poetry*, *Quadrant*, and *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*.

[John C. Mannone](#) has recent work in *The Rye Whiskey Review*, *Bold + Italic*, *Nadwah: Poetry in Translation*, *Setu*, *Better than Starbucks* and others. He won the Jean Ritchie Fellowship in Appalachian literature (2017), served as Celebrity Judge for the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (2018), and nominated for Pushcart, Rhysling, Dwarf Star and Best of the Net awards. He has three poetry collections and edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex* and other venues. He's a retired nuclear consultant and university professor of physics. He lives between Knoxville and Chattanooga, Tennessee.

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"My Father"

by Lo Sin Yee

Papa used to be a moody, churlish person. He could not get over the pain of his bankruptcy in the late 1970s. Many of our friends and relatives treated him with scorn and contempt. To support our family, he learned how to make steamed Chinese buns and sold them at the night market. Whenever he returned home with a beaming face, I knew that his buns had sold well. If he returned home sombre-faced, my mother would warn my siblings and me not to make him angry. We would watch in silence as he morosely threw away all of the unsold buns. Throughout my childhood and early adulthood, there was a strong antagonism between Papa and me. I always provoked him, either carelessly or deliberately, with my stubbornness, lack of masculinity, and pickiness about food.

The day Papa received Christ as his saviour, he became a changed person. He no longer scolded me with harsh words or smacked me with his pain-inflicting palm. He started guiding me with the word of God, but the pride in me refused to make amends with him. One night, my mother dreamed of a choir of angels chanting the verse 'Renounce your old self, renounce your old self' repeatedly above a kneeling Papa. The moment she woke up, she could still hear the song until it trailed off into silence.

During the first few months of this year, Papa was bothered by gallstone pain, and he was reduced to skin and bone. One afternoon in mid-April, we took him to the hospital, and on Aunt Becky's insistence, the doctor put him on a drip. 'Without that,' exclaimed Aunt Becky, 'he may die of malnutrition!'

Despite Papa's obvious suffering, we were told that his condition was stable and that there should be no haste in getting his gallstones removed. Only painkillers were prescribed.

Over the next two days, Papa's gallstone pain was reduced, and his appetite recovered a little. One day, upon reaching home after taking me to school, Mama and Ah Hui were shocked to find that Papa was delirious with pain on the floor. They called an ambulance, which came after forty minutes due to some confusion with directions.

Upon arrival at the emergency unit, Papa lost consciousness, and to the horror of both Mama and Ah Hui, his heartbeat stopped. CPR was immediately performed on him. When I arrived at the hospital, Papa had been revived twice, but was still not out of danger. He was on life support, with many wires dangling from his body. A young female doctor told us that her team might not perform CPR on him again should his heartbeat stop a third time: 'Even if he were to make it,' she explained, 'his mind would be seriously damaged from the lack of oxygen.'

When Papa's heartbeat stopped for the third time, the doctors surprised us by performing another round of CPR. I could not describe how devastated we were at the time. My tears fell at the sight of the doctors trying to revive Papa. Ah Hui and Mama kept praying, and the only thing I could beseech God was 'Lord, have mercy on Papa.'

In the midst of the chaos, a doctor came to us asking if we wanted them to continue rescuing Papa. 'Even if he survives,' stressed the doctor, 'he won't be the father you knew before.' Getting her drift, and without batting an eyelid, Ah Hui told the doctor very firmly to her face that she wanted them to revive Papa the best way they could.

Looking at how Papa's body shook and jerked from the use of a defibrillator, many memories of Papa and me flashed before my eyes. We had quarreled so many times in the past. Was this the last of him? Hiding my face behind a door, I burst into fitful sobs.

At this very critical hour, the old man next to Papa finally breathed his last. All of his family members broke into wails. Ah Hui and Mama patted their backs, consoling them.

The next few hours were full of waiting, waiting, and waiting.

Suddenly, we heard shouts of jubilation from the medical team. I dried my tears and rushed to Papa's bed. Breathing had been restored back to Papa. I exchanged hugs with Mama and Ah Hui. But, anger was not over yet.

Papa was in a coma for eight days while in ICU. Just as the doctors had started to show signs of giving up on him, he came around. We found out that he had had a stroke, the outcome of the strenuous rounds of CPR and defibrillation. Upon learning that the left side of his body could no longer move like normal, Papa was crestfallen, but we managed to reassure him that he would recover. Many friends and relatives visited, giving him hope.

We took turns taking care of Papa. Dominic, my younger brother, and his family flew in from Kuala Lumpur to help with the job of looking after Papa at night. We sponged Papa, cleaned his faeces, and dressed the bedsores he developed during his coma. The day Papa was discharged, he smiled, a very weak smile at the sight of our house and his ten cats.

Two months passed and Papa was slowly regaining his strength. Regular massages and exercise were able to help restore mobility to his left arm and leg. He could now walk around and defecate on his own. But, he had not fully recovered his ability to swallow, and he had to be fed Ensure milk and porridge with a tube inserted through his nose.

One evening, Papa told us that he had seen our grandparents during his coma. 'They smiled at me in a bright light,' he recalled, 'welcoming me with open arms.'

'Did you hear us speaking to you at that moment?' asked Mama and Ah Hui.

'No, but then Jesus appeared,' he continued, 'and told me to return to all of you, because my time on earth was not over yet.'

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“The Coffee Crusader”

by S. Mubashir Noor

“Sir, could you repeat that?” The female voice on the phone asked.

“Are you deaf?” Mr. Holliday said. Without caffeine his patience was wearing thin with every passing second.

“I said there’s a huge fire. F-I-R-E. The old warehouse downtown. There’s enough fabric there to burn Ipoh twice over.”

“Okay, okay, got it. First responders will be there in ten minutes. Tell everyone to stay calm. And you are?”

Mr. Holliday considered the question.

“I am a champion. The Chinpo Coffee champion.”

* * *

Earlier in the day, Mr. Holliday sat in an open-air eatery tapping Morse code onto his temple. He wanted to tear out the throbbing vein and chop it into pieces so his head would stop pounding.

His body spasmed and ached from the lack of coffee. Chinpo Coffee. There was none at home and none at the supermarket. He was at his third cafe of the morning hoping someone, anyone still had a spoonful of the magic powder left.

Should he start invading nearby houses next? Some paranoid old lady must have a pack or two stashed about. Why did bad luck have to follow him around like a tomcat in heat?

It was a miracle he had managed to pull his pants up the right way this morning without coffee. But, miracles by definition are one-offs. Any more waiting and he was liable to go on a mass shooting spree.

He shaped his lips into a sucked-out mango and whistled as was customary in such places. A bored-looking server with a hanging jaw strode toward him in slow motion.

“Got Chinpo?”

The server shook his head.

“Why not?”

He shrugged, “Out of stock, boss.”

Mr. Holliday glared at him. “Why aren’t you out of stock?”

The server stared back as if waiting for some profound answer.

“Warm lime water then, on the double.” The forty-something crossing guard ran a hand through his thinning gray hair. The world was all wrong today. He wished it would burn.

He suddenly felt uneasy. Was someone watching him? Looking around, he spotted his sometime lawyer. A real weasel who would sell his own mother to a pimp if the price was right.

The lawyer sat a few rows away wearing a pleasant smile. He waved and then walked over.

“How’s it going, bro?”

“To hell in a rickshaw.”

“Oh?”

“I need my Chinpo. They don’t have it. Nobody has it. It’s like the earth swallowed the whole damn company!” Mr. Holliday’s voice shook like a leaf tacked to a jetliner.

The lawyer nodded with a masterful command of fake concern. “Relax, relax,” he said. “Tell you what, I was planning to cancel on a fun little meeting where I know there will be tanks full of Chinpo. You want to go instead?”

The clouds parted from Mr. Holliday’s face. “No kidding?”

“Of course, what are friends for?”

Desperate, his mind blanked out the last time this man had turned him into a laughing stock in town.

An hour later, Mr. Holliday wore the ragged look of a man waiting to hear his death sentence. Or, about to pronounce it for someone else.

An eerie silence cloaked the dark hall. The packed crowd sat motionless and held thin black candles. They all wore dark hooded robes. He wasn’t sure if the satanic vibe was by accident or design.

They also wore a silly plastic mask with a thin curling moustache and creepy smile. The one that was all the rage with aspiring felons. People seemed to cherish it like the membership of an exclusive club. The kind that lands you in jail without parole.

His own mask made his face itch every few minutes. Given how it looked fifth-hand, the bloody thing could be housing enough germs to spawn a new killer bug.

Suddenly, there was an uptick in murmurs. He saw a white-robed man holding a wireless microphone limp up onto the stage as if he were scaling the Twin Towers.

“Friends and countrymen, we all know why we’re here today. We tire of the corporate elites that fleece us year after year. No more, I say! It’s time to reclaim our dignity!” He pumped his fists with all the vigor of a retired librarian.

The audience let out a huge cheer. This was without a doubt an angry blue-collar bunch. After a few very long minutes of Social Justice 101, he asked the crowd to welcome their savior.

The hall began bouncing with loud rock music and colorful spotlights. They reminded Mr. Holliday of professional wrestling on TV. Any second now, a seven-foot tall giant would emerge and suplex the boob onstage. Fingers crossed.

Instead, to his great disappointment, a dwarf in a pink suit with hair gelled high like a surf wave crawled up. He raised his arms in a V, grabbed the microphone, and strutted to the center.

“Friends, congratulations! Without you, we could not have ruined the evil corporation that is Chinpo Coffee.” Cue more mindless cheering.

Wait, what?! Was this the lawyer’s idea of a cruel joke? Goddamn it, no wonder the weasel was sniggering on his way out.

“I am also here to offer you a new deal. A reason to love your new jobs. Once we kick Chinpo out of town, I promise that you will all get joining bonuses!”

Who are these people? Sour Chinpo employees? Should he call the cops? He slipped to the back exit but found it locked. Crap, he would have to wait.

The hall had hushed up when he returned. The white-robed man wheeled a cart onstage that was holding some chunky contraption. The dwarf kept grinning like he’d won two first-class tickets to the moon. He pointed at the cart.

"Welcome to the future! This machine here will rid us of Chinpo once and for all. And, one of you fine folk will come up and do the honors today!"

They all gasped, anticipating a real blockbuster. The two men on stage conferred for what seemed like forever. What's the damn holdup? It's not like they were naming a new space station.

The people seated nearby began clapping in his direction. Now what?

Someone whispered to him that the dwarf had called out his seat number. He didn't know there *was* a seat number until he checked the back. The dwarf shouted it again.

Mr. Holliday floated to the stage trailed by wild applause. He could get used to this. Best enjoy the few breaks life sends his way. The cops can wait.

Minutes later, the hall erupted in panic. The white-robed man had caught fire and was running around screaming. A few brave souls tried to help him, only to fall prey to the flames themselves.

Mr. Holliday and the dwarf stood speechless beside the machine, or what remained of it. The machine had gone kaput as soon as he had hit the switch. The wrong switch it appears, seeing as how the dwarf had leapt up with a loud cry to stop him. He had in fact been too busy soaking up the glory to focus on his instructions. Then again, why did the damn thing have a self-destruct mode?

What followed was both scary and beautiful. Arcs of lightning lit up the dark hall, but nature had nothing to do with it. The infernal contraption had short-circuited the entire compound.

Power outlets first sizzled and then leaked flames. They ate through anything dry and fibrous. And as they sped through the hall, so too did the stampeding crowd.

Masked figures ran for dear life, but kept tripping up and falling on their faces. Their robes forbid any cardio workout besides gentle strolling.

Mr. Holliday was no fool. The first thing he did after the fire broke out was to dump his mask and robes. But as he was about to escape, a series of high-pitched snarls cut through the chaotic soundscape.

The dwarf was rushing at him full-tilt with a demon's face! Mr. Holliday tried dodging, but got caught in his python grip. The dwarf then began shrieking that he had ruined everything.

Mr. Holliday tried shaking him off and then dragging him along without any success. Pain shot up his leg as the dwarf bit him deep in the flesh. He started tearing up. How did this runt have the jaw strength of a gorilla?

As the blaze widened, Mr. Holliday wondered if this was the end. A sad, pathetic end to a life of woulda, coulda, shoulda. Well at least he was taking the pint-sized scourge with him. Would anyone remember this final act of heroism?

Mr. Holliday waited for his life to flash before his eyes and for all his pains, past and present to vanish forever. And then, he waited some more. But, all that tore through the commotion around him was a croaky voice shouting, "Boss! Your suit!"

This had a chilling effect on the dwarf. He jumped off and scurried away spitting choice swearwords.

Praise the heavens! Mr. Holliday's first instinct was a mental high-five. Then the pessimist in him wondered if life hadn't punished him enough yet.

He flew to the back exit with a small coffee tank that lay rocking on the floor. Battered door and broken lock? Must have been the terrified horde from earlier. Well done!

* * *

After calling emergency services, Mr. Holliday found a quiet sidewalk and attended to the coffee tank. Being a good Samaritan was a real pain. No wonder so few cared.

He began gulping down its contents from the tap like holy nectar. In the distance, he could hear the strains of police sirens closing in. And then, the dwarf appeared. The fancy suit was now charred in places and he smelled like a drag race of dying cars.

His surf wave hair had also parted right down the middle to reveal a giant bald spot. More a sad stray than a high-powered CEO, really.

Mr. Holliday gave him a cold stare and went back to his coffee. The dwarf sighed and then asked, "Hey, can I have some?" Mr. Holliday hesitated, but then passed the tank. And, with his other hand, he gripped a small pointy rock idling on the road. Better safe than sorry. The dwarf sipped long and hard. He then smacked his lips, satisfied.

Mr. Holliday gawked at him. "You like Chinpo?"

"Who doesn't? I'm evil, not an idiot."

"Then why the hell are you trying to destroy it? Either way the cops are here. Your little plan is poof."

A stern-faced beat cop was marching toward them in long strides. The dwarf bit his lower lip.

“A year’s supply of Chinpo?”

Mr. Holliday was not one to let grudges get in the way of profit.

“Deal.”

They sat cross-legged on the patch of green next to the sidewalk deep in conversation.

“So, what are you gents up to?”

Mr. Holliday lifted his head up and beamed at the officer.

“Waiting to snare a monitor lizard so we can satay it. You want in, boss?”

* * * * *

“Anna”

by Selena Yap

I'm anxious. My old friend from college, Anna, is coming back to town. Correction, Anna from primary school, middle school, high school, AND, college is coming back to town. I haven't seen Anna in a while. I bet she still has long shimmering hair and that scar from when she fell off the stage. We were seven during the annual school recital. Unfortunately, it didn't feel like we were seven. Anna and I have always been a few years mentally ahead of our peers, or we would like to think so, at least. Some kids want to be astronauts, because it's cool. We wanted to be world-famous nutritionists. We wanted to end famine in the world and lead the revolution against obesity.

I'm meeting her at a cafe. It's a lovely cafe with an aesthetic theme that tries desperately to adapt to the millennial expectation. I sat down and ordered a Caesar Salad with no dressing. Next to the counter was a propped-up poster of Jamie Oliver. The paragraph next to him boasted about the 10th anniversary of his food program in the United Kingdom. The objective was simple, replace junk foods in public schools with healthy foods to combat obesity at an early age. As I paid, I experienced a flashback to when I was six. It was a rainy morning. Everyone in class was shivering wildly, like we were merely made of bare bones. It was 'Idol Day' at school, hence we were all obligated to present a speech in front of the class about who inspired us most. Anna and I had practiced weeks beforehand. We brought a cooking pan each and wore matching aprons. To our surprise, we received nothing but mocking laughter when we told the class our idol was Jamie Oliver. Apparently, he was less fabulous than Beyoncé and Bob the builder. What had to have been even more insulting was George's speech, which came immediately after ours. George was a chubby kid, he could barely fit in his clothes. If you were lucky, you would get to witness the flesh of his abdomen, seeping through his clothes, clinging on to

dear life. His attitude wasn't anywhere near as nice as his loud burps were during break time. He could burp the alphabet, but he couldn't whisper a word of politeness if his life depended on it. Anna and I drew to the end of our terribly embarrassing speech just as George came up front. He stood directly between us and the class.

"Move, skinny monkeys."

Appalled, we sat down and never spoke of that moment again.

"It's 5:00pm. She should be here by now, shouldn't she?" I repeatedly thought to myself as I watched the hands of the clock pass slowly. My last memory of Anna was from our first year in college together. This was months after our huge argument. I saw her one last time before she dropped out of college, leaving nothing but the simple memory of her. I don't remember what the argument was about. As I sit, I begin to develop a list of possibilities. It couldn't have been about how she used to steal my large comfy t-shirts. However, that would leave only two other possibilities. It was between my weight gain during the beginning of the semester, or how she didn't like my new friends at the time. You see, Anna and I are like biological twins. We write the same way, we order the same dishes, and we stir the frying pan with our left hand. No sugar with our coffee, no cigarettes without each other, and no nights without fluffy jackets. All in all, Anna was neat, but also overly-protective. I remember making conversation with Phil, our local mailman, and how afterward she stared him down every morning for a whole semester without fail. Nonetheless, she had good intentions. Her intentions just tended to get misconstrued somewhere down along the lines. Yet, we would always find a way to rekindle our sisterly love. There was never an obstacle too big for us to tear down. That is, up to that point.

To this day, I have heard my fair share of rumours about where she had disappeared to. Some say she joined the circus as an acrobat. Some say they have seen her working as a lifeguard at a beach in Ohio. Others say they had spotted her as an accountant in a suburban area. Whispers down at the local coffee shops get hushed when some people claim that she had been in a horrid car accident.

The bell on the cafe door rings as it swings open. A young woman with white hair swiftly walks in. As she turns to scan the room, her elegant head stops as she registers my face. You would think I could construct acceptable sentences, after writing several papers on nutritional research, but I couldn't. What could I have possibly said? "Hey, I heard you

joined the circus, became a lifeguard, an accountant, and died in a car crash,” I morbidly thought to myself. We nodded at each other and sat quietly for two minutes before she broke the silence. We started off describing our lives and how they had played out in the past few years. It took around two hours, but we scraped off the rust on this ancient friendship. It wasn’t hard to talk to her. We became inseparable, once more. All was as it should have been.

-Three years later-

It’s been three years since I met Anna again. Three years of doctors telling me to stay away from her. Urging me to see how unhealthy she was for me. I would pick up the phone and we would talk for hours on end about simple things. We could have nothing to chat about, but a conversation about food could span hours. Hours spent on calorie counting, like there would be a quiz about it tomorrow. Hours of describing how the local barista seemed to be gaining weight. When I would put down the phone, I felt like a new person. There is something raw and impactful about having such honest conversations, where you can pour your heart out to someone without fear of judgment. In a society that is able to grow and sustain an entire industry by feeding on judgment, these moments were precious gems. There is something about being raw in a friendship, something about Anna.

* * * * *

“Christmas Early”

by C.A. Yin

Ducking under the branch, she scrambled out of the way. The baubles blinked red, yellow, and green like a confused traffic light. On the tree top, a twenty-foot-tall plastic Santa Claus with a beer belly straining over his belt had been so overblown that his smile was etched in a grimace. A streamer fastened to his waist fluttered in the breeze proclaiming “Ho Ho Ho!”

“Right,” Jo-Lin said. “Ho ho ho.”

The whole of Kuching city seemed to be in a festive mood. No one seemed to mind that Christmas was here three months early. In fact, when the United Nations Security Council decided that the calendar had to be modified due to the inescapable conditions wrought by climate change, not a single country rejected the proposal. The only ones who might have, had all been submerged when the polar ice caps finally melted, and everyone was too busy struggling to find new ways to eke food out of land that could no longer support old crops and farm animals.

Christmas early was supposed to help people keep up the good cheer and it would support the flagging economies, so even the Vatican City and the Orthodox churches didn’t murmur a protest. And, it seemed that other religious leaders also had too many suffering faithful to tend to, so there wasn’t even the suggestion of a debate at the United Nations over the proposal to change the calendar. Here in Kuching, the authorities finally woke up when the bearded pigs, proboscis monkeys, silver langurs, and long-tailed macaques started to flee the rising waters at Bako National Park by jumping onto tourist boats or even trying to swim to the mainland. When the National Parks and Wildlife Office had finally translocated the last of the monitor lizards and the botanists from the Forest Department had carefully removed and replanted the rare pitcher plants at the Semenggoh

arboretum, the authorities turned their concern to the low-lying areas alongside the great Sarawak River and the crocodiles that were emerging from the new shallows.

Now, Jo-Lin dashed across Padang Merdeka towards the old building that had once housed the Anti-Tuberculosis Association of Sarawak on Jalan Masjid India. She held three limp old football socks and a packet containing an assortment of European dark and white chocolates. Her mother had asked her to trade some Christmas-seasonal candy for the European chocolates that their father had saved for Halloween (that had never come this year, though the schools had prepared a ghoulish-themed celebration to cheer the youngsters up and some of the optimistic supermarkets had still imported some Halloween goodies).

At the basement carpark opposite the old building, a young man in a traditional Penan haircut and tattoos with underground connections nodded at Jo-Lin as she squeezed past the motorbikes next to the parking ticket machine.

“European dark and white chocolates?” he asked in a posh accent. He sounded more like Henry Golding in *Crazy Rich Asians*, than a Penan from the interior.

“Christmas candy?” Jo-Lin asked.

Silently, they exchanged the goods and then the black marketer-Penan-impersonator disappeared. Jo-Lin stuffed the candy into the yellowed football socks that were to hang like Christmas stockings at the end of her sisters’ beds. There were only three Santa-shaped chocolates, five Christmas trees, and a Santa in a sleigh which was pulled by reindeer whose antlers had been bitten off. It was too bad, but that would have to be the centre piece to go on the dining table. The rest could be divided between her three sisters’ stockings and one each to her parents.

She admitted that it was peculiar, but it was Christmas early this year after all, and it was better to have no Halloween and early Christmas, than to have Halloween and no Christmas at all.

* * * * *

“This Thing about Rings”

by Pon Muthu Ramiah

Peri came to school wearing a big gold ring. Like me, he was only eleven years old. We were in Standard Five in Klang High School. The ring looked like one that could be worn by even a grown-up person. Peri was plump, had chubby cheeks, spiky hair wet with oil, and a hawk nose. The very opposite of me. And now, the ring made him very distinct in class, maybe even in the whole school. As far as I knew no one else was wearing a gold ring on their ring-finger, or any other finger. I saw other boys looking at it. I was stealing glances. I don't know whether I was jealous or not. He was my good friend.

In our house appa had an old, gold ring, but he hardly wore it. Mother wore a mookuti on the nose and thodu with white stones on the ears. She wore her gold thali on a yellow string. She had a long, gold sanggili, but she only wore it on special occasions like weddings and Deepavali. It looked nice on her chest and she looked rich wearing it around her neck. Kamal wore tiny thodu on her ear lobes all the time. When I asked mother why only she was wearing gold all the time, amma said if she didn't wear them, the tiny holes in her ears would close and we would have to take her to the goldsmith to pierce her ears again. Amma's sanggili and father's ring mostly stayed safe inside the small, flat Cadbury chocolate tin.

I don't know how that tin with pictures of chocolates like sea shells on it happened to be in our house. I don't remember eating any chocolates from that tin box. They looked so real, the small pieces of chocolates on the tin. The tin was kept in the alamari along with dresses and other clothes. The other clothes were amma's saylai, ravikai, batik Kailee; Kamala's pavadai, ravikai, and one or two skirts and blouses; and appa's trousers, short-sleeved shirts, and elephant-brand kailee. All of our birth certificates, appa and amma's identity cards, and other papers were also kept in that alamari. I don't remember if any of my shirts and trousers were kept there in that simple, wooden alamari. Appa had bought

the planks and gotten the Malayalee man with the big, long nose to build it. The alamari and all the things inside smelled of mothballs when mother opened it to take out anything. The door was kept locked with a tiny padlock. Mother kept the keys where we couldn't be able to find them. Those were the gold things in our house. I was the only one in the house who had no gold to wear. So, I liked to look at Peri's gold ring.

The girls in the third house played ring-a-ring-a-roses on the flat grass in front of their house all the time. It was as though they knew what was on my mind.

Peri's new gold ring glittered in the sun when we were out of the classroom during recess and PT class on the dew covered padang in the morning. While talking he would dab at his nose with a clean, neatly folded, and well ironed handkerchief every now and then. I felt he was showing off his new ring. In the classroom he sat at the table next to me, on my right, and he moved his left hand a lot so I couldn't avoid looking. His ring was bigger, newer, and shinier than appa's old ring.

His actual name was Periakaruppan, but he introduced himself as Peri. Peri like the Perry sweets from India. He did have a sweet smile, his rows of teeth so even and white. Many years later when we had the black and white television in the country, the Black and White Minstrel Show would remind me of him and his set of white teeth when he smiled. But, that was much later. Mr. Joseph, our class teacher, used to call him by his full name, especially if he was unhappy with him for some reason.

When we were in Form One, he came to class wearing an even bigger gold ring, with his initials on it. He had grown a little fatter. The old ring might have gotten tight, I thought. I really liked the new ring, especially his initials embossed on it in a blue colour. Sometimes he would blow on the ring and rub it on his trousers and then look at it. He was really getting the rich boy's look. I began to wonder how he his parents could afford to give him these rings.

"You really don't know *ah?* Come on *lah!*" Sundram said, his eyes big.

We were talking about Peri and his big gold ring during recess. Sundram's father owned the Annaletchumy Restaurant in town. Sundram and Peri were not on speaking terms with each other.

"His father is a moneylender *lah*. The richest Indian in town! He is a Chetti boy. His father is a Chettiar *lah*. Big moneylender! His father also does money-transfers to and from

India for a fee, a commission. How come you don't know *ah?* His family owns a whole village in their *oor!* In the evening you can see his father wearing a veshti and baniyan, sitting on the grass on the small roundabout in front of the Chartered Bank.”

The next year when we all went to Form Two, Peri didn't turn up. He didn't attend class the whole of January and February. His chair remained vacant. Like he had booked it for the year. He turned up in early March, looking plumper, his complexion shiner. He was wearing a different ring. It was bigger than the last one, like a tailless gold fish. Only, this fish was made of real, solid gold. There was the image of the elephant god, Vinayager, on it. A few days later I glimpsed a thick chain around his neck as he bent down to pick up a coin he had dropped. I couldn't help thinking he had done it purposely. I also thought he had left his top shirt button undone on purpose. I had come to consider the goldfish ring and the thick chain as normal for him being a Chetti boy, but why didn't he attend class for more than two months? During recess I cornered Peri alone munching kacang putih by the fence, under the shade of raintree.

He said he had been to India. To his *oor* by the Rajullah steam ship. Took five days and nights to cross the Bay of Bengal from Port Swettenham to Madras. He had travelled first class with his father. He had relatives there, including his grandparents on his father's and his mother's sides. His father and mother were from there; and he had been born there.

This again was something I found unbelievable, travelling over the vast ocean in a steam ship. But, for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to ask him about the new ring and the thick chain. And, he didn't say a word. He continued to behave as though wearing a gold ring was nothing. I turned to Sundram once more. He helped fill in the blanks.

Peri had gone to India to get married. He had married his cousin in the Thamil month of Thai which fell in the second half of January and first half of February. After his wedding he and his wife had gone on a tour or honeymoon, he didn't know which or where they went.

I really couldn't believe what I was hearing. This was like the discovery of the eighth wonder of the world. How could a school boy the same age as I get married? I wondered how he was going to be a husband to her and how he was going to take care of her.

Although I didn't understand many things about marriage and being so rich to be able to own a whole village, I began to look at Peri differently from then on. With more respect and a little envy, but the other boys were tormenting him. I only passed the information I

had learned on to one boy, and soon the whole class, and eventually, the whole school knew about it. The boys began to make fun of him. They would snigger and wink at him. Some boys were very direct and vulgar in their remarks. They even went to the extent of using sign language. I found it very offensive. I also felt a little guilty for having passed on the news.

Peri endured all the suggestive remarks and the sniggering with resignation, sometimes shaking his head and looking away. It must have been too much for him to bear. The next year he didn't come back to school at all. I turned to Sundram again to fill in the blanks.

He said Peri had gone to a private school in Kuala Lumpur where nobody would know him. I missed him and his big ring.

Strangely, a few years later when I started working, it didn't occur to me to buy a ring for myself. Every payday I gave my pay-packet to my mother and asked for ten Ringgits for myself. Later, I increased my allowances to twenty Ringgits, until it gradually reached seventy Ringgits. The seventy Ringgits were what I earned as overtime payment for working twenty-one hours. It was paid separately in the middle of each month. Now I gave my entire pay-packet unopened to my mother and never asked for a sen back. I also didn't tell her I was taking the seventy ringgits for myself. She was very happy with the unopened pay-pack. Why spoil her happiness? Now that I had the money, the fascination with gold rings and even chains, no longer interested me. But, there was always someone who reminded me of Peri.

A colleague of mine, much senior to me, was always wearing a gold ring and a gold chain. He had the habit of not buttoning up his shirt at the top. All you could see was the chain. He also liked to rotate the ring on his finger, as though it was tight or something. Especially, when anybody was around. People began to call him *orang kaya* instead of his name. He seemed to like it. He didn't know they were laughing at him behind his back.

My turn to wear a ring came with my engagement. During the parusam I slipped a ring with my initials onto my future wife's finger. She was already wearing the new parusa saylayi, ravikkai, and the neckless our family had presented to her. She slipped a ring with her initials onto my finger and we were engaged. It was one day before the wedding. I liked the ring and the feeling of wearing it. I was twenty-nine years old then. Peri must have been a father to a few children by then, I thought, turning the ring around with my thumb.

Time was flying fast. Two years later I found the ring had become tight on my finger. I could not remove it. It got stuck at the knuckle. I, like most happily married men, had put on a little weight. Afraid that it might get even tighter if I didn't remove it straight away, I used a lot of soapy water and tried to yank it off at home. It didn't budge. At work, I rubbed a little grease on my finger and yanked off the ring with pliers. My knuckle was tender for many days.

My wife was aghast when I gave her back the buckled ring. She looked as though I was calling off the engagement and had mangled our married life. For her it was a bad omen. I said sorry and to strengthen my case, showed her the dark ring-like mark that the ring had left on my finger. I also showed her how difficult it was to slip the ring on again, even after almost restoring it to its original shape. She was not consoled. She kept looking at the ring.

"It's all because of your cooking *lah*. I eat everything you place on my plate. And you keep increasing the portions. I have put on weight, don't you see?"

That was my way of easing her pain, cheering her up.

"I will buy another ring for you. A bigger one. I really feel very unhappy, you know. A married man's ring-finger shouldn't be bare like this."

"I am so sorry," I said holding her hands.

"I feel one kind *lah*," she said, turning the ring in her hand and looking at it.

I held her hands firmly. I didn't know what to say.

She not only gave me a new bigger ring, but also a long gold chain. The new ring fit onto my finger well, and the chain felt nice and cool around my neck over my hairy chest. But, after a few months I noticed that the chain and the ring had left dark shadows of themselves on my neck, chest, and finger. I took off the chain and showed the marks to my wife.

"Gold really doesn't seem to suit my skin," I said.

She peered at the shadow of the chain on my chest and at me, sadly. She took the chain and put it around her neck, smiling mischievously. I began to remove the ring, but she held my hands.

"Mark or no mark, you wear it. It is not biting you *lah!* It must be on your ring-finger as long as I am alive and living with you."

The ring stayed on my finger for the next twenty-nine, thirty years.

Then I lost it.

After my retirement I had begun to lose weight, very gradually. It began to show on my face first, then my chest and arms, and lastly on my waistline. The tea-breaks between breakfast and lunch, and between lunch and late dinner were no more. We were eating our dinner by seven-thirty. I was not hanging out with friends after work anymore. And, I always returned home after jogging, because she did her brisk walks, so that didn't make any difference. More importantly, there were no more seminars and conferences in outstation hotels, where eating and drinking five times a day were obligatory rituals. The ring became loose, and I developed the habit of rolling it on my finger.

One day while walking out of a bookshop on Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman after buying a pocket-sized book of a translation of the Koran, I suddenly realized the ring was not on my finger. I checked my pockets. The pockets didn't have any holes and the ring was not in any one of them. I even checked my shirt pocket. Of course, it had no business being there. I went back into the bookshop, retracing my footsteps. No sign of the ring anywhere. I asked the salesmen who were dressed up in their sarongs, long-sleeved shirts, and black songkoks who had been eyeing me critically as I browsed through the books, whether they had seen a gold ring. They said no and looked at their own brass rings that were crowned with semi-precious stones. I realized they were suitably dressed as Muslim men. Almost fully covered and no gold ornaments.

I went out and started walking with my eyes on the ground, looking everywhere, from the cracks in the cement-walkways to the drains and the rubbish here and there. No sign of the ring anywhere. Then I realized I was groping like I was blind. I stood in one spot and looked around casually. Still no sign of my ring.

Now the foremost thought on my mind was not about losing the ring, but how I was going to tell my wife. It was like the thaali that I had tied around her neck at our wedding in the presence of the fire, all of the gods and goddesses, family, friends, and relatives. After much soul-searching thoughts on the five-foot path of Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, I realized I wouldn't be able to tell her.

I walked over to Jalan Masjid India through one of the side-lanes and started looking for a ring. It had to fit my finger snugly and have the same pattern on it. I went from one shop to another. There were many rings like the one I had lost, but the patterns on them were

different. After much searching and comparing of patterns with the pattern on my lost ring, which was now embossed on my mind, I bought a ring with a pattern that was as close to the one I had lost.

At home my wife didn't notice anything amiss. For all I knew I could have gone home without the ring on my finger, but sooner or later she would notice. I was sure of that. She always took the ring off my finger and washed it with a toothbrush in soapy water, along with her own jewels every few months.

Although I had covered myself well, my heart was not at ease every time I looked at the second replacement ring. What if she remembered the pattern and found out I was wearing a ring with a different pattern? How did I get it? Who gave it to me? A different ring with a different pattern from a different lady? Then what happened to the ring she gave me, and worse, what was she doing in the house of a man who was wearing a different ring from a different woman? And, who was this other woman? But she did not notice.

A few months later, one week before Naw Ruz, she brought the jewellery box down and sat before me. Now I was sure she had noticed. From inside the box she took out a leather pouch. She started to pick out all the small items like the rings, earrings, studs, and nose studs from it, and then placed them on the coffee-table and started to look at each item. She didn't say anything. Then she looked at me.

I thought that was it. She had either already found out and was now waiting for me to confess, or she was going ask for the ring I was wearing to soak it in soapy water along with the other items on the table. They had to be cleaned, so that they would look clean and new for the Naw Ruz dinner. I didn't say anything. I was not sure what her next move was going to be.

"I am going to trade-in all of these for a chain and pendent," she said. "They are all very old *lah*. See, all out of fashion now. So old even you won't remember when you bought them for me. The designs are all out of date. Nobody wears these kinds of designs now *lah*."

That's how she moved. Now she looked at me from under her eyebrows. I could see a few of her teeth.

"We may have to top up a little money, I think," she said followed by a purpose-driven pause.

I still kept my mouth shut, my eyes on her.

"I saw a nice gold chain with a pearl pendent the other day. The chain, not too thick, not too thin. Just nice. The pearl was so beautiful. Flawless *lah*. It was in one of the jewellery shops in the mall. The one near the escalator. The one for going down *lah*. It looked very nice. Simply alluring *lah*."

I would have jumped out of the old sinking cushion and hugged her, but I stayed put. Just then an idea came to mind. I removed the ring on my finger and placed it among the other ornaments on the table.

"Take this also. It has become very loose. I am afraid it might slip off one of these days and get lost. And look at my finger. It has left its dark mark on the skin. Gold really doesn't suit me *lah*."

She looked at the mark on the skin of my ring-finger, and she sighed as though I was breaking her heart. I scooped up all of the pieces and placed them in the leather pouch.

"Maybe, I will buy a platinum ring for you."

"Please no *lah*. I prefer not to wear any ring or chain. They are only symbolic. What matters is what is in our hearts. Use the money that you are going to use to buy the platinum ring to buy something for yourself."

She regarded me a while.

"Is it nice that I wear all the jewels, and you don't even wear a ring on your finger? It looks so bare *lah*. Wouldn't people say things? I don't want to buy a thick chain. A thick chain won't go well with that beautiful pearl pendent."

"Do as you please. Only, don't ask me to wear a ring again."

"Can't talk with you *lah*," she said as she placed the leather pouch in the jewellery box. "Hope nobody has bought it. They will have many of that model, won't they? The pearl is expensive. We will go to the shop this Wednesday. Good day to buy jewellery. But remember, *we* may have to top up some money for the chain and pendent. Don't come and then tell me that I didn't tell you at the last moment!"

I knew every time she said *we*, it actually meant *you*.

I almost wanted to laugh at the turn of events. I thought of old Peri and wondered how many more rings and chains he would be wearing now. And old Orang Kaya? Still turning that old ring on his old finger?

* * * * *

“The Clock Has Come”

by Gonzalinho da Costa

The clock has come
To tell the time.
He chimes to close
A line with rhyme,

End a stanza,
Chop chapters short—
A rifle volley,
A loud report,

Rushing winds,
Wistful bells,
Sacrificial flames,
Paper farewells.

So hasten to scatter
Blossoms of love—
Fading below,
Unforgotten above.

“Time Is No More”

by Gonzalinho da Costa

The sun dwells in darkness.

The moon lives in light.

The owl hunts at daytime.

The falcon prowls at night.

The dead dines with the living.

The living dreams, awake.

The eternal is not the future.

The river of time is a lake.

* * * * *

“Chevrons & Bars”

by Selena Yap

I still buy flowers on the 13th each month.
I still let my fingers graze the surface of leathered books.
I still wake up to the sound of Taps blasting into the airwaves.

One star, two stars, three stars, four.
I kept the journal you wrote before you left.
I can't imagine what for.
Your handwriting draws me into every word written.
Like a siren luring for a special kind of addiction.

I planted flowers where you last stood, hoping it would help.
I knew I couldn't recover the week after that.
After they died in the place they were birthed,

Nylon weave fabric pressed against my skin.
They expect me to take it to the place you once lived.
They expect me to feel the sympathy in all their salutes.
I'm expected to not to break,
I'm expected to forgive.

One star, two stars, three stars, four.
This is the tale,
Of the wives of men who go to war.

“Coca”

by Selena Yap

Only the mighty fall.

Oh, how there was little warning.

Oh, how there were no stop signs around.

Oh, how quick are we to fall.

I fell in love with her within 3.5 minutes.

I fell in love with the way light bounced off her skin.

I fell in love with the way her eyes screamed purity.

I fell for the nights with her company and the hours without it.

It was like being shot in the dark or ramming into an ice truck.

I couldn't hold my tongue; she gave me much to say.

She was unpredictable.

Some days, she would spike effusive enthusiasm in me.

On others days, her touch meant chill to the bone.

We slept so little, staying up nightly.

In spite of the backlash, our privacy was inviting.

My friends tease me about how I had a nosebleed when I first met her.

I remember the warmth in my cheeks that very day.

I remember my lips being set on fire.

I remember the clanking paraphernalia.

I remember feeling like Bill Gates on payday.

I remember how the sun stung when she entered the room.

Oh, how the mighty fall in love.

* * * * *

“Viet Hai”

by Sara Luisa Kirk

We walk
jungle-through
jungle most profuse
jungle rife with jungle
branches bursting
buds, shoots, blooms
through which we walk
walk off these lives
we're living

Lives startled by sound
sound of pink
pellucid crab
itself startled
by our bodies, towers of threat
bodies awkward walking
awkward stopping
stooping, straining
straining to see

What to make of us
you side-walker
you jungle pearl
claws poised midair
boxer raising triumphant gloves

Delight we make of you
you bit of jungle breathing
tiny voice in this cacophony
of sound

Sound unearthly
and of the earth
unperturbed

Sound we never quite
Ascertain
only pause

every
pause
a
question

“Receive”

by Sara Luisa Kirk

receive the charcoal river
its muddy lips
bruised beyond recognition

mud that coats
the chicken’s reptilian feet
and cakes the shoes
on which we wander through

through this altar
of tire tracks
and ice-cream wrappers

of sodden piles
rusting

receive
the flattened finch
its half-moon head a frame
for red jam insides come out

take in the gross loss
the change in form
exit residue
tar, spine, and gravel

kindred, their prone limbs sprawled

in impact's prayer
their muted curve of torso
ghost of eye and mouth

gather up their grace
take the bridge over blackwater
to somewhere blighted
somewhere primitive

* * * * *

“My Room”

by Bryan Repha

From my bedroom

I saw the White Pole Monument

From my bedroom

I saw the street

From my bedroom

I saw the woman

From my bedroom

I saw she was crying

From my bedroom

I saw desperation

And here, in Jogja, in this room, I feel free

* * * * *

“Crosstown, Jakarta”

by Michael Mintrom

1/ Oud Batavia

Friday evening rush hour. Darkness.
A stranger, Pak Ade, drives me.
Heat, heavy rain. Everywhere, a thousand
headlights. We're inching to the airport
where I'll take a midnight flight. At traffic lights,
I roll down my window. Steam crowds in.
Through the deluge, I can clearly make out
a storefront, brightly lit, clothes piled on tables.
Next I see a barracks from centuries back.
Soldiers in blue tunics, with gold braid,
stockings, swords, and feathered caps
sitting at ease. A flag is draped over a coffin.
A woman in black, grey hair in a bun,
dabs at her eyes, remembering Amsterdam.

2/ The Ten Thousand Things

As acrid smoke from forest fires
clogs the atmosphere, slowing everything,
so the years of Dutch rule, of Japanese rule,
of more Dutch rule, of Suharto,

Kurupsi, Kolusi, nepotisme
have left their stink. Stink piled on stink.
The car drives me through Kebayoran Baru,
luxuriant streets where trees form arches,
where sparkling lights shine through bronze gates,
where the nouveau riche take their rest.
The fragrance of incense engulfs the night,
but the woodsmoke of history lingers still.
I think of Maria Doumout's magic novel.
The dead among the living, chuckling, choking.

3/ Octora

Soon we will reach the highway, soon
enormous video screens will confront us,
presenting perfumes, jewellery, watches
and cigars as measures of our success.
But we're stalled in traffic now, outside
D Gallerie. Gazing between parked cars,
I observe new art, an installation
assembled by Octora Permana Chan:
'Rice, Beasts, Provisions and Women'.
She dresses in garments screen printed
with colonial portraits. She returns our stare.
Lightning strikes in the neighbourhood
and for an instant Indonesia is Octora.
Old ideas shatter. We fly everywhere.

* * * * *

“After the Courtship”

by John C. Mannone

When I walk into your humble house—bamboo
and timber—on stilts, a sacred place, I am greeted
by rich aromas from your mother’s kitchen:
stir-fry steam infused with crushed red pepper

and lemongrass, galangal root and kaffir leaves,
a flash of fish sauce and lime—paste for the broth
with shrimp from the Chao Phraya River,
conjoined with garlic and straw mushrooms.

Your father sitting in his chair nods in approval
of my arrival. The testing of my character
already done. He follows tradition, loves his wife
making this soup.

She ladles the tom yum goong into bowls
after the gold-giving ceremony and blessings.
We dance and sing and consummate our love.
Hot spice still on our lips.