

# *Anak Sastra*

## Issue 39

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## Contributor Bios

[Lee Yong Jin](#) is an undergraduate student from Bukit Mertajam, Penang, majoring in English literature at the University of Malaya. Always drawn to the unconventional and the postmodern, he is currently researching and exploring themes in science fiction.

[Barbara Kuessner Hughes](#) was born in Malaysia and grew up there and in Singapore. She has previously won the Flash 500 competition and had work published by *Reflex Fiction*, *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, *Mojave Heart Review*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, and in an anthology of women's writing.

[Rowan W](#) was born and raised in Melaka. Her day job in Singapore requires daily communication with aliens on Planet Earth mainly via e-mails. She has published two short stories (“The World Champion” and “Manis”) in *Eksentrika*. Her bucket list includes writing a contemporary English language romance novel with Southeast Asian sensibilities.

**Pon Muthu Ramiah** is a retiree, 73 years of age. He has been writing for the past few years. He has been previously published in *Anak Sastra*.

[Sumitra Selvaraj](#) is a writer and media professional, who lives in Malaysia. She has spent the last 19 years working in various aspects of the field of communications, including television and radio broadcasting, publishing, and public relations. She began writing creative fiction in 2016; her work has been published in Malaysian short story anthologies, and she won the 2018 Short Story Prize at the Asian Women Writers Festival in Singapore. On Instagram, she writes about her love for saree weaving craft traditions.

[Kai Valya](#) (Twitter: [@kvalyawrites](#)) is an Indonesian currently living abroad. She is a female survivor of intimate partner violence. In the past she used to write short stories, but her first novel is in the editing process with a publishing house.

**Herbert Herrero** is a Filipino currently working and staying in Jakarta with his wife and two kids. He was given the opportunity to be a fellow at the 2019 University of Sto. Tomas National Writers Workshop. He tries to write about moments and experiences that move him.

[Richard Rose](#) is a British writer, university professor, and children's rights advocate. In addition to more than 100 academic publications his fiction, essays and poetry has been published in many countries. His most recent poetry has appeared in *The Cannon's Mouth*, *Runcible Spoon*, *Taj Mahal Review*, and *Better than Starbucks*. His play, *Letters to Lucia*, written with James Vollmar and celebrating the life of James Joyce's daughter, was first performed in 2018 by the Triskellion Irish Theatre Company.

**Salman Akhtar** currently lives in—and carries spiritually everywhere he is displaced—Kuala Lumpur, where he masquerades as a teacher in the day, and various other beings at other times.

**Richard Oyama's** work has appeared in *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry*, *The NuyorAsian Anthology*, *Breaking Silence*, *Dissident Song*, *A Gift of Tongues*, *Malpais Review*, *Mas Tequila Review*, and other literary journals. He has a M.A. in English: Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Oyama taught at California College of Arts in Oakland, University of California at Berkeley, and University of New Mexico. His first novel in a trilogy, *A Riot Goin' On*, is forthcoming.

[Ira Amiruddin](#) is a writer born and raised in Malaysia, who recently completed her Bachelor of Commerce degree in Canada. With English as her second language, her writing journey began in her early teens, where she wrote cliché love letters for a version of a boy who never existed. Her poetry has evolved into a more cultural, political, and personal approach. She hopes to change the way people, especially Malaysian society, perceive depression, anxiety, and mental health issues.

**Josua D. Quiniquito** is an English teacher in the Philippines who teaches literature and creative writing.

Prize-winning poet **Lawrence Pettener** survived a Siege City (Liverpool) upbringing starting in the mid-sixties, together with later local conflicts known as The Troubles. Having dodged bullets in Liverpool, Turkey, and Pakistan's Swat Valley, he went on to endure the everyday confrontations of Israeli workcamps, cave life, intentional communities, deserts, London squats, volunteering, ashrams and meditation centres, relationships, shared houses, care work, call centres and language teaching, before being trained as Malaysia's first Western assistant cifu (teacher) of the peaceful pursuit of qigong. He is now celebrating parenthood plus editing, reviewing, and interviewing authors in Subang Jaya.

**Farid Hamka** has a predilection for the unaccustomed earth and is an avid believer of the redeeming power of literature. He graduated with a B.Sc. in Government and Economics from the London School of Economics and Political Science and worked as a management consultant. He believes in how things can be improved by taking an interdisciplinary lens. His prose and poetry have been published in *Anak Sastra* and his essays and reviews have been published in *Magdalene* and LSE's *The Beaver*.

**Anuradha Chelliah** is a teacher who enjoys teaching and being with her students. She loves reading non-fiction and has an interest in writing.

[John C. Mannone](#) has poems appearing/accepted in the *2020 Antarctic Poetry Exhibition*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Menteur*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Poetry South*, *Baltimore Review*, and others. His poetry won the Impressions of Appalachia Creative Arts Contest (2020). He was awarded a Jean Ritchie Fellowship (2017) in Appalachian literature and served as celebrity judge for the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (2018). His latest of three collections, *Flux Lines: The Intersection of Science, Love and Poetry*, is forthcoming from Linnet's Wings Press (2020). He edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex* and other journals. A retired physics professor, he lives near Knoxville, Tennessee.

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## **“Adagio”**

by Lee Yong Jin

Wandering along the shoreline of Tanjung Aru, an elderly man with a wispy patch of white bangs places his hand over his chest to reassure himself. ‘I will be fine. If the climate doesn’t kill me first, age will anyway,’ he thinks. He observes the destruction of the beach. The wind is cool, but bare.

On the grains of the yellow sand, he sees a grand piano. The wood is moulded by machinery, a great musical strength of civilization, standing stoically and sturdily on its own through the disaster. It is ravaged, drenched by the wrath of Mother Nature.

‘Hello there,’ says the man. ‘Can I hear your sound?’

The wind blows gently toward his face, signalling its approval.

The man drifts his hand across the instrument, pressing his fingers to the white keys. He casually plays *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*.

Like the corpse of a piano that had drowned, it sounded rather unhinged and divorced from its conventional tune. To him the instrument was not damaged, but merely returning to its natural state.

‘What an incredible sound, what an incredible sound,’ he exclaims repeatedly.

‘Music needs peace,’ he thinks to himself, as he contemplates bringing the piano back to his studio, rather than leaving it behind.

‘I do not know how many years I have left,’ he says softly. ‘But, what I do know is that it will not be shameful to create scores with you.’

He resumes fingering the white keys, acknowledging that the piano is haunted.

And beautiful.

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## **“The Beloved”**

by Barbara Kuessner Hughes

Just as Catherine is struggling to manoeuvre her rucksack through the mass of passengers on the platform and board the train from Kuala Lumpur to Penang, the haunter strikes. One of the supernatural beings which have plagued her all her life performs a pirouette in front of her, spraying putrescence through the air, and pushes its malevolent little face up into hers.

Catherine yelps out, ‘Leave me alone!’ and swears, visibly shocking the rest of the crowd – she has already noticed that people don’t swear publicly in Malaysia, or at least not in English.

‘Do you need help?’ The voice comes from behind her. Male. English. ‘Is somebody bothering you? Has somebody –’

‘Touched me?’ Her natural aggression is ready to surge ahead of her like the blades on a combine harvester, but she takes a deep breath. As offensive as her usual mode of engagement with the world might be, she isn’t going to take things out on innocent bystanders. ‘No. Nobody here has done anything to me.’

‘Let me help you,’ the man suggests, and a large hand reaches around her and seems about to land on her rucksack.

‘Leave my rucksack alone!’ Catherine barks out.

‘I’m sorry! I only –’

‘I don’t need any help! Why do you even think –’. But then she turns, and seeing her would-be rescuer for the first time, it’s as if she’s been hit over the head by a giant metal bucket full of stars. She has never been so instantly attracted to anyone in her life, never even imagined that she could be. In a daze, feeling like intoxicated mush, she follows him as he uses his bulk to clear a path towards the train door.

It turns out that they’re sitting in the same carriage, and his seat is opposite hers.

'It's so hot,' he says. 'Are you sure you're all right?'

But she's too busy gazing at him to answer, taking in the smooth film-star symmetry of his face, his hefty build, his smooth, tanned skin. She has rarely been in the presence of so much physical magnificence. *No wonder people use the term "hunk",* she thinks. *He's like one large piece of delicious meat. Prime rib. So virile...*

'I think I've seen you before somewhere,' he says, scrutinising her, and his large tropical-sea eyes are no disappointment, either. 'Are you a model?' An undignified snort bursts out of her nose, a mixture of incredulity, instinctive scorn, and squirming delight. Catherine's birth mother Janice was hooked on celebrity ideals of attractiveness, the more artificial the better, and programmed Catherine to think of herself as awkward and lanky, with unstylish, stringy hair. *It's a pity you're so plain,* she said to her regularly. Try as she might to improve her self-image, Catherine has never succeeded.

'You're so tall and graceful,' the man says. 'I could see you on a catwalk. You are English, aren't you?'

Catherine may still be dazzled, but some of her true nature reasserted itself. 'What if I am?'

He gazes at her with amused puzzlement. 'Sorry! I just thought it might be nice to talk to another English person for a little while.'

'Why?' But then she considers and shrugs. 'Fair enough.'

'I'm Ted. From Surrey.'

'Well, Ted from Surrey, I'm Catherine from Kent.' It's impossible for her not to be faintly mocking; he talks like a Conservative politician. But he doesn't seem to notice.

Ted stretches out in his seat, somehow managing to occupy even more space through sheer force of ease. She recognises that air of entitlement from certain students at her university, people who might or might not have merited the privilege of being there, but who'd been moulded and coached to fit. But Ted's charm is winning her over, melting her instinctive antagonism away. *Call me a sucker for a pretty face.*

'Are you travelling,' Ted asks, 'Or just on holiday?'

'Travelling.' Somehow, he's managed to unlock her tongue. 'This is my second country. I started off in Singapore. I've never been abroad before.'

'Never? Not even to France?' He looks incredulous.



*Sneer, why don't you*, she thinks, but he isn't, really. He can't help it if it isn't what he's used to. *Well*, she thinks, *I could explain that my birth mother hardly ever left her bedroom, and we didn't have any money anyway. We lived on benefits. My adoptive mother could afford it, but didn't like travelling... And I've never developed the habit. Till now.*

'And you're all on your own?' Ted says. 'I always think that's quite brave of people. I wouldn't fancy it.'

*I've always been on my own*, Catherine thinks. *I've been on my own all my life*. But she manages not to say it. Somehow, she knows that this big, glowing, upbeat-looking man would probably be repulsed by such an utterance. At best, he would greet it with incomprehension.

Her adoptive mother Chrissie was an extremely successful writer of romances. Single and childless, she'd decided that adoption was the best way of acquiring an heir. Catherine, by then aged twelve, had already been through several foster placements. Chrissie must have seemed plausible to the social workers, but Catherine had found her to be a capricious woman who zigzagged between making her feel like a nuisance and focussing intense, even intrusive attention on her. Despite the nice house, dog and pony, the relationship had never coalesced properly, and by the time Catherine had gone to university, communication had been minimal. Chrissie had died of cancer shortly after Catherine's graduation. The message from Chrissie's executor, read in a letter and repeated down a scratchy telephone line, had seemed incomprehensible at first.

'My adoptive mum left me everything when she died, so I decided to do a training course to teach English and go travelling.'

'Your adoptive mum?' Ted's eyebrows twitch with surprise, as though an unfamiliar insect has landed on them and then flown away again. 'My mum and dad didn't want me to come out here. They're still hoping I'll go into the family business.'

'Oh! What kind of business?' Catherine tries not to sound envious; anything family-oriented which functions holds great allure.

'My dad's in antiques and restoration. Not really my scene.'

Catherine's brain gets stuck on the word "dad". When she was eight, her stepfather was left so out of sorts by his favourite football team's defeat in a championship that he

beat bruises like squashed plums onto her skinny arms and legs, and she was taken away by the state.

She pictures Ted's parents, two wholesome middle-aged people perched on Chippendale chairs, sipping tea and reminiscing adoringly about their absent son. It must be amazing to have parents who want you around. No wonder Ted looks so well assembled.

'What do you do for a living?' Catherine asks.

'I'm the deputy head at an international school in Penang. I've been out here for a year.'

Catherine's impressed in spite of herself. She's interested in hearing more, but the heat and a backlog of tiredness make her eyes close for a moment.

'Are you all right?' Ted asks solicitously.

'I will be. I'm just really tired, that's all.'

The train halts to wait for a signal and Catherine reopens her eyes to take in the sight of a large grey water buffalo lumbering along through a grove of coconut palms. And across from her is this gleaming man, who's gazing at *her*, plain old pale-faced her, with her slightly crooked, watery-mud-coloured eyes. Suddenly, unexpectedly, she feels a surge of joy.

As soon as they reach Penang, Ted takes charge of the situation. 'I've enjoyed our chat. Are you famished? I know I am.' He takes her arm.

'What the –,' Catherine starts, and only just manages to stop herself from swearing at him and hitting his hand away. She doesn't like being touched by anyone, and especially not strangers. Except that where this stranger's concerned...

'Let's get something to eat, shall we? What do you fancy? Do you like spicy food? There's a food court down that street. Unless...you don't want to?'

*You like him, Catherine tells herself. You really like him. Why fight this – whatever this is?*

'I can't eat anything very spicy,' she says, trying to hide how out of her depth she is. The humidity, sun, unfamiliar odours: suddenly she's feeling extremely far from home, and it's a comfort to feel his hand on her arm. Miss Maudsley, her favourite teacher, and the only adult to show her any real understanding, told her she had "inner resources, to use an

old-fashioned expression”, but at moments like these, she doesn’t feel in possession of many resources at all.

Ted leads her around a cluster of food stalls. Sizzling oil, ingredients being lashed around in woks, aromatic brown and yellow concoctions being stirred in pots, roast red ducks hanging up: Catherine lets it all shower in upon her senses.

‘Too spicy for a beginner,’ Ted mutters. ‘Chicken feet – I don’t think so. Fish head curry?’ He casts a sceptical glance at her, feeding her self-consciousness. ‘Satay and fried rice? That’s more like it. Let’s break you in gently, shall we?’

He orders a host of dishes whose names she doesn’t understand, and just for a moment, she’s actually glad to have one of her harmless haunters sail across her field of vision, as usual seemingly oblivious to everything around him. He’s the one aspect of the scene which anchors her a little.

It’s a relief to find that she likes the food. She begins to be buoyed by an unfamiliar sense of wellbeing. And then she’s struggling with her chopsticks, and Ted’s large, warm hand is over hers, rearranging it into the most efficient grip, and she finds every morsel which comes to her lips delectable, and Ted is being so attentive for reasons which she still can’t fathom, and tendrils of delicate new emotions are beginning to spread through her. *This is what life is like from day one for many other people, she reflects. People who are wanted before they’re born, then cherished and protected, and mourned if they’re no longer around.*

‘I thought you needed something to eat and drink!’ Ted says. ‘I was afraid you might pass out on me back in the train.’

*And why would you have cared,* Catherine wonders, but instead of speaking the thought aloud, she dips another skewer of beef satay into some peanut sauce.

‘You know,’ Ted says, when they’ve finished eating, ‘It’s been nice to talk about English rain and television programmes to somebody who’s got the same terms of reference!’

Catherine wants to laugh out loud. She keeps forgetting that she has left her original background behind, that she’s educated and affluent now. ‘Have you been lonely, then?’

‘Occasionally. The locals tend to be friendly. I’ve found friends to eat out with and have a laugh with. You expect them to have a different culture, so you’re prepared. It’s

other white people who can be a problem. You look at other white people who come from different places, and you assume you'll be on the same page, but I've realised that quite often you aren't at all.'

Catherine doesn't know what to say to this. She watches the colourful multitude pass their table, Malaysians and tourists alike.

Perhaps Ted feels that he's been talking too revealingly. She senses an inner retraction. He jumps up, and a few minutes later, another dish lands on their table. 'You've got to try this! Oyster omelette.'

She takes a mouthful and nods. 'I like it.'

'A colleague of mine introduced me to oyster omelette.' He sighs. It seems to Catherine that there's a sadness in his face, and what's he doing with his drinking straw? His fingers are sliding up and down, caressing it in a way which borders on... embarrassing. 'Oh well,' he says, releasing the straw and turning his handsome face towards her. 'Onwards and upwards, eh?'

At that point Catherine becomes distracted: at the periphery of her vision, a vile-smelling, puffy body is pouncing about, leering at her loathsomely.

*Oh, go away*, she thinks, and begins to recite her special, silent incantation. She sees two types of being bumping about on the other side of a veil: the nasty haunters and the harmless haunters. The harmless haunters are elongated black beings of a masculine bent, seemingly drifting about in the world with no particular intent, unobservant and rather inert in their manner. She isn't sure what their purpose is apart from acting as a physical barrier to the movements of the nasty ones. Now that she's come to Malaysia, she'll think of them as chopstick men. The other beings are of more concern: short, floating, overflowing beings like wicked cushions, with malicious smiles. They appear to be feminine. So far, they have never enacted any harm in her world that she's aware of, but there always seems to be a sinister potential.

'Is something wrong?' Ted asks, looking at her curiously. 'You look...'

Scared? Queasy? Catherine is both.

'I see things,' she once confessed to Miss Maudsley. 'I don't even know what they are, really, but I see them, and I wish I didn't have to.'

Miss Maudsley smiled reassuringly. 'The most talented human beings tend to have an original view of life.'

'It's not that – Catherine had said, then stopped, realising that not even intelligent, sensitive Miss Maudsley would ever understand.

'I'm so glad we've met,' Ted says when it's time for them to part, and she feels a forlorn plunging of the spirit at the thought of never seeing him again. If he asked her to follow him anywhere in the world, she'd be insane enough to consider it. She wants to feel his body, the full weight and length and strength of it, she wants to hear his posh boy's voice murmuring in her ear, she wants to know everything he knows, to eat every morsel he brings her. She wants to burnish his beauty by making him fresh vegetable soup every day, to bring him tea in bed, to hold his head if ever he should vomit. She would even consider bringing his baby into the world. And that's when she knows: in the space of an afternoon, she has fallen in love.

In the end, because of Ted, Catherine travels no further than Penang, which she quickly takes to for its warm sea and many-hued temples, its night markets, street life and tasty cuisine. She moves into a backpackers' hostel and finds work at a language school in George Town, and when Ted proposes to her a few months later, on the deck of a ferry from Pulau Tioman to Mersing, with his eyes fixed on the sea, she accepts immediately, laughing at herself as she does so: this just isn't like her.

She thinks about her past as little as she can, and Malaysia expands her personality like feet on a hot day. The friendliness of local people, the vibrancy of the colours and smells, the sun's heat sinking into the very core of her bones; all of it makes her unwind, explore and like everything, including herself, better.

She and Ted share a small ground-floor apartment on the edge of the city. One particular night when the air-conditioning has broken down, she goes onto the terrace in search of cooler air and listens to the rhythmic rising and falling song of crickets. Somewhere in the distance, something is sparking and flashing. A firefly? Or light reflecting off a metal surface? For some reason it makes her think of people signalling with Morse code by torchlight in old movies.

'I'm waiting for you,' Ted calls from the bedroom.

Feeling the familiar lurch of desire, she goes to join him.

Afterwards, he lights a cigarette and reaches over to ruffle her hair. Catherine always enjoys looking at him in these moments, at his dreamy eyes and soft brown hair. She feels renewed by happiness, every molecule alight with well-being. So, when she rolls over and catches sight of the cloud crossing his face, she's taken aback. And it isn't the first time this has happened after they've made love.

'What's wrong, Ted?'

'Nothing.'

'Something is.' She just manages to stop herself from sounding accusing. And to her dismay, one of the horrible flouncing pillow women performs a taunting swoop at her from the ceiling, as though hanging from a length of elastic. She bears pointed yellow teeth at Catherine and lunges so close, giving off her fetid stench that Catherine twitches involuntarily. She closes her eyes. *Dear God, make her go away...* When she opens her eyes again, the haunter is gone.

'What's wrong?' she asks Ted again.

'Nothing. I told you. I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?' But there's a tension in his voice, and a withdrawal in his face.

When Catherine was four, her birth mother Janice had declared herself an invalid, retreating into a world of crisp-eating and daytime television behind a locked bedroom door, although Catherine was often puzzled to hear scurrying on the other side. It didn't matter what kind of prank she played, how plaintively she called out, the door hardly ever opened.

*If only, Catherine thinks, I wasn't so naturally pasty-faced, if only my hair wasn't so thin and do-nothing, if only I had the self-belief of people like Ted. If only I could make him feel about me the way I feel about him.*

Ted rolls onto his side with his back to her. Yet as Catherine is about to fall asleep, she experiences a strange sensation: a pressure of being looked at. How does she know that's what the feeling is? She gazes at the ceiling above her head and feels as exposed as if she were in the open air, as if a pair of eyes were looking at her through the plasterwork.

*You're imagining things,* she tells herself. But the strange thought is still in her head when she falls asleep.

The next time Ted looks miserable after they've been intimate, Catherine's mind begins to replay a film of half-ignored moments, peculiar instances in her short life with him where something hasn't been quite right, but she hasn't been able to work out what it was. Encountering his colleagues, a strange shiver of foreknowledge shooting across the room, glances which she hadn't wanted to interpret as pitying.

'People are whispering behind my back,' she'd complained to Ted one day.

'You're imagining it.'

'I don't think so.'

He'd shrugged. 'Oh well, even if you're right, they all talk about each other, and you're new on the scene.' He'd bounced up from the bed and walked away. 'Time for a cold beer, I think.'

Catherine has already accepted that the expatriate community around her is no worse than any other. For the most part, its members are hard-working and well-intentioned. But it hasn't taken her long either to realise that rather than socialising, she prefers to be at the *padang*, admiring Ted in his cricket whites, or sitting in the cool stone church which she's found, where most people at least pretend to be their best selves. Like literature, religion has often helped her. Unlike Ted, she doesn't enjoy going around in a gregarious crowd: all she really wants is his company. Until she lived with her adoptive mother, there was very little social interaction between her so-called home and the world.

Whenever she has a wave of self-doubt or melancholy, a train of spiteful-looking pillow women pops up in front of her. If she's lucky, a couple of chopstick men will materialise and edge them out, but sometimes she's stuck with the awful apparitions for a good half hour or more.

'Uh-oh,' Ted will say, as though delivering a spoof racing commentary.

'And...she's off! Catherine's just gone into her own funny little world again, she's seeing something really, really interesting, she's starting to forget where she is...'

'Oh, I'm so sorry, Ted!'

Then comes the day when he introduces Catherine to one of his bosses, the vivacious Australian Mrs. Hall, who runs the school where he works in tandem with her husband. Mrs. Hall has immaculate hair and make-up, a generous bust, nicely contoured

legs, and a face composed of pleasing planes, remarkably unlined for a woman in her forties who has spent her life in the sun. Catherine takes in Mrs. Hall's glamorous lipstick and swaying hips, her combination of sexiness, motherly charm and self-assurance, the way the older woman makes other females beam and males stand straighter. *She's the kind of woman who could run a country, she thinks, not just a school.*

'My wife,' Ted says, motioning towards Catherine, and it seems to Catherine that he gives the words a strange emphasis.

Mrs. Hall shows Catherine a flawless smile. 'Welcome to Penang, darl. You're going to love it here, just love it. The food's to die for – if you haven't already found that out!'

Catherine can't help smiling. Being with Ted is making her softer and more amenable in general, and she feels warmed by the small sun of the other woman's face. 'Ted introduced me to some of the local dishes the first time we met!'

'Oh, that sounds like Ted!'

Is there something patronising in the way Mrs. Hall is looking at her? Catherine dismisses the notion, feeling irritated with herself.

'I'll help Ted here turn you into an honorary Malaysian!' Mrs. Hall gives her own hip a playful pat. 'I can vouch for where you'll get the best oyster omelette!' Ted looks bashful, and Catherine feels the base of her stomach plummet like a lift. 'Watch out for the sun,' Mrs. Hall goes on. 'You've got that beautiful dewdrop English skin. You don't want to end up looking like my auntie's old crocodile handbag, do you? Now, anything you want to know, just come and knock on my door, all right?'

Mrs. Hall lays a perfectly manicured hand on Ted's arm, and a redness almost as intense as that of her nail polish shoots across his face. Then she walks away. The further away she walks, the more Ted droops, down to the corners of his eyes.

'Incredible, isn't she?' he murmurs. 'I've never met anybody like her before. She's got it *all*. Isn't she beautiful?'

'Yes, and you're –' Catherine wants to tear at his face. But then she tells herself to keep her inner beast under control; it will rampage through her life and destroy it if she lets it. *Why shouldn't he appreciate an extremely attractive and charismatic woman like Mrs. Hall? And why wouldn't he have eaten out with his colleagues, especially since they're all living together in a foreign country? I'm being ridiculous, I'm being paranoid, I'm*



*exaggerating*, and just to apologise, she threads her arm through his and gives him a kiss on the cheek.

Catherine develops the habit of going for strolls in the evenings when Ted's at the gym or out drinking with his male colleagues. It starts when she's alone one late afternoon and notices a particularly tantalising sunset. Her job at the language school is part-time. Once she has shopped, cleaned the apartment and exercised, she often finds herself at a loose end.

On an impulse she arms herself with a large umbrella and sets off along a dirt track leading off the main road, the red soil dimming beneath her feet as the light fades, branches full of invisible life animated above her head. The vegetation is a mass of merging forms. It has rained, and she makes a point of inhaling the jungle smells which she has noticed before on her brief, timid forays into the forest. Rotting vegetation. Strong, but not unpleasant.

Somewhere ahead of her comes a cracking of branches. Catherine slows down, beset by a feeling that there's something she can't see, but which can see *her*. There are probably a hundred pairs of eyes fixed on her: birds, insects, monkeys, snakes. She even imagines elephants and tigers, although it's unlikely that such creatures would live so close to a suburb. She wonders whether one of her haunters is about to make an appearance, but somehow... This feels different.

A mosquito buzzes violently next to her ear, and it strikes Catherine that she hasn't applied any insect repellent. She doesn't know whether there's any risk of malaria or dengue fever, but no sooner has she formulated the thought than the mosquito jerks in the air and plummets, dead, onto her shoe.

*Strange*, she thinks. *It looks squashed, like it's been swatted.*

Then there's another breaking sound in the shadowy foliage ahead of her and a sudden glint. Her instinct is always to attack first, but she reminds herself that it wouldn't be wise. Her heart rate accelerating, she spins around and walks swiftly home.

At the entrance to the garden which surrounds the apartment block, she passes beneath a frangipani tree laden with heavily-scented white and gold flowers. A branch jerks abruptly, sending a shower of fragrant, floppy-petalled blossoms cascading onto her

head and shoulders. It feels like a strange intrusion, but of exactly the opposite kind to the incursions of the grinning, evil-spirited pillow women.

*It's like a snow of love.* She sometimes tries to write poetry. The softer, largely submerged side of her nature has always poked through the surface when she listens to verse. *I must use that line.* But where on earth has the notion come from?

Half a year into their marriage, Catherine and Ted have developed a workable pattern of living together. More than friends, they're allies in a foreign land. She doesn't want to acknowledge to herself that the relationship is not what she'd hoped it would be, that Ted is often emotionally and physically absent. She loves him so much, and she'd never expected to love anybody. Her life is better than she ever expected it to be. For now, the pauper is willing to accept crumbs. There's nothing for it but to carry on.

She has always enjoyed reading about nature and history, and now she uses her spare hours to immerse herself in the flora and fauna of South East Asia, the history of the Straits Settlements and the Federation of Malaysia. She begins to familiarise herself with Malay culture, listening to the traditional music and learning to cook the spicy food. It's refreshing to be able to distance herself from her origins. From there, it's a natural development to begin learning the language. Catherine relishes the challenge of memorising verbs and numeral coefficients. She even thinks she may attempt to learn Jawi, the Arabic script often used for writing Malay, which looks so elegant to her eyes.

'Basic market Malay'd do for you, surely?' Ted says. 'No need to bother with the fancy stuff.'

'But I like it! I'm surprised how much I like it!'

'Oh well, each to their own!'

A big difference between them is becoming clear: Ted sees himself as passing through, whereas she thinks she might want to stay. Ted's job is a stepping-stone on the way to a higher position in England, or so he thinks, but that course of life doesn't hold any attraction for Catherine. Chrissie's house, car, and bank account are waiting for her in England, but even they hold little allure. Contact to any relative has long since withered away, and apart from a handful of university friends, she has no-one left there to return to.

Amongst Catherine's students are two Malay women, Sabrina and Noor, who are keen to raise the level of the English they acquired in school.

'I went to Kelantan last weekend, to see a kite-flying festival,' Catherine tells them one day.

'Your husband didn't follow you to Kelantan?' Noor asks with curious surprise.

'No. He isn't interested in that kind of thing. Have you ever been there?'

'No, never been,' Sabrina says.

'It's old-fashioned *lah*,' Noor adds. 'Did you enjoy it?'

'Yes. I really like the traditional handicrafts and games here. Silverwork, top-spinning... And I think the *wau* look fantastic when they're in the air!'

'Nice,' Sabrina says politely. 'But I prefer modern things *lah*.'

Catherine's students are unfailingly friendly, and indulgent towards what they evidently see as her quirks, but she has to accept that her interests aren't shared by everyone.

One day, rummaging through some old books at a stall, she finds a volume about Malay folklore and *hantu*, supernatural beings embodying various levels of threat. As she reads, she experiences a sense of recognition. There are stories of alluring vampires who prey on men on remote roads, frightening hags, entities of trees and water, a jungle spirit as giant as a tree, beings enslaved to the will of human masters. Various *hantu* take the form of animals. There's *pontianak*, the ghost of a pregnant woman. *Toyol*, baby-like goblins, the spirits of dead children. *Hantu Bungkus*, a ghost seen in the countryside at night, wrapped in its death shroud. Catherine is intrigued and unsettled by turns. And yet none of these beings are any stranger than her own haunters. It occurs to her that she could even give her haunters Malay names, *Hantu Bantal* – pillow *hantu*, and *Hantu Penyepit* – chopstick *hantu*. It would be quite fitting.

'Listen to this,' Catherine says to Ted, showing him her book. "'*Orang Minyak*: a male demon coated in a slippery substance which makes him impossible to grasp or capture, who spirits himself into young women's chambers and violates them.'"

'Nice! I don't know why you like all that creepy stuff so much.'

'It's intriguing.' She reads out snippets. 'There's *Hantu Galah*, a ghost with limbs as long and thin as bamboo poles. *Hantu Bisa*, a demon who spreads disease. *Hantu Batu*,

mischievous stone-throwing spirits...Don't you think that's interesting? There's a whole body of folklore in this country which most Westerners have no idea about.'

'Spoken like an English graduate! Personally, I'm quite happy not to know about slippery, spooky rapists.'

'Yes, but you need to know about these things. You can tell a lot about a country from the beings that live in it.'

""The beings that live in it"?!

'Well, obviously they live on another level...'

'Don't tell me you actually believe in these things?!

She swallows. *How stupid of me.* 'No, well...And they're not *all* creepy. My favourite one is *Hantu Apu* - a harmless shapeshifter. It's sociable, and it wants to hang out with people, so it pretends to be a woven floormat at weddings and parties! I think that's pretty sweet!'

'You're so weird!' Ted says. He prides himself on coming from a long line of sensible, down-to-earth country people. She reminds herself that it's not his fault that he's an ordinary human being, and where at one time she would have lashed out, now she tries to hide any hurt she feels. 'I've never known anybody else who could go for a walk and imagine faces in leaves and water the way you do.' One little promenade with him, when she pointed out what looked like a nose on the bark of a tree, seems to have made an indelible impression on him. 'You think there's life in everything - just like some old pagan or - what do they call them? - animist.'

'You're exaggerating.'

'One day you'll tell me you've been seeing supernatural beings.'

*I've had to live with them all my life. And lately there seems to be a new type in my life, something which I can't see, but it's definitely been watching me.* The weight of scrutiny is growing heavier by the day, although, strangely enough, it only comes at select moments, and doesn't feel prurient or threatening. If anything, it feels restrained and respectful, affectionate, even.

The apartment complex has a gardener to look after the compound, but Catherine enjoys working outdoors, so early one morning when the temperature is still comfortable, she sets about trimming a poinsettia bush which is overshadowing the living room window.

She's gathering up the cut scarlet leaves when she hears rustling and glimpses a dark, coiled object a few feet away from her. At first, she thinks it's a hosepipe. But then, cold shock flashing along her spine, she understands that a long, hooded brown snake has emerged from the base of the bush and turned its flattened head to regard her with eyes as blank as beads. Her heart jolts, her vision stars.

Trying not to tremble, she stiffens every muscle in her body and fixes her gaze away from the snake. Several endless seconds pass as she waits for the cobra to retreat. Then, speared by utter horror, she realises that it's slithering closer.

A moment later, a head-splitting white light flashes, blinding her into closing her eyes, and when she opens them again, the reptile has vanished.

Deeply shaken, she flees into the apartment, locks the door, and searches beneath every piece of furniture.

Only later, when she finally sits down with a cup of tea and tries to compose herself does understanding sink in. She waits for the hideous pillow women to appear, as they always do in her vulnerable moments, but to her surprise they don't. She hears her voice speaking to the empty room. 'I know you're here and that you're looking out for me. Thank you.'

Suddenly every reflective surface around her, the television screen, the mirror on the wall, even the glasses in the sideboard, begins to emit spangles of soft, shimmering white light. Catherine watches in childlike delight as circles of silver spin across the ceiling. Then Ted's key is turning in the front door, and the exchange is over.

'A cobra? Really?' he says. 'A flash of light scared it away? And you don't know where the light came from? Look outside, love. We're in the Tropics!'

'You don't understand.'

'You could be right...' He touches her forehead. 'Your brain's overheating. You need to drink more water.' And then he's on his way out to the gym. No sooner has the door slammed than she experiences a subtle zooming sensation, as though one aspect of the universe were focussing in on her and paying scrupulous attention.

A few days later, Catherine happens to pass the open door of the bathroom and see Ted shaving for the second time that morning. He inspects his face closely, splashes on extra aftershave and bares his lovely teeth, checking the gaps.

'I don't see any scrambled egg,' Catherine says. 'Is something special going on?'

'It's sports day at the school. I've got to take part in a parent-and-staff race.'

Suddenly Catherine feels a poke of suspicion. 'You're competing with Amelia Hall, aren't you?'

Was that a flash of a pillow woman at the corner of her eye? Perhaps, but only for a split second, for, as though a giant vacuum cleaner has been switched on, she deflates and is sucked out of the range of Catherine's vision.

'Amelia and I are on the same team. I can hardly refuse to compete with her, can I? She's my boss!'

'Well, better put on extra deodorant. Don't forget how much you stink when you sweat.'

Catherine leaves the room, sits down at the dining table with her head in her hands, and tells herself that she's being stupid and absurd. It's simply not justified that she wants to weep. She berates herself. *It's a race that's being run in front of a hundred little kids and their parents. And how could Ted refuse to run on the same team as one of his employers, anyway?* 'Good luck,' she says, trying to sound light-hearted and generous.

'Thanks.' And then he has vanished as swiftly as if he were already running the race.

The same vicious pillow woman as before protrudes into the border of Catherine's vision, but strangely, as before, it seems she can't assert herself. With a grimace of dismay, she's sucked into a void. Catherine looks around. There's no-one to be seen. Yet something or someone is fighting her corner. 'Thank you,' she murmurs. 'I've always been able to see them, but not control them. But I don't mind if you let the chopstick men stay.'

No sooner is her thank-you finished than a chopstick man floats across the ceiling with a hint of bemusement on his face, as though he has suddenly, unexpectedly been granted entry to a forbidden sanctum.

Missing objects, a hairbrush, a necklace, begin turning up on Catherine's bedside table with purple orchids threaded around them.

Catherine tells herself that the flowers are presents from Ted, but when he comes home from work and throws himself onto the living room sofa, exuding unapproachability, she feels a draining sadness. Why does she even try to kid herself?

'Something's wrong at school, isn't it?' she asks.

'People mean politics,' Ted grunts.

'Is Mr. Hall getting fed up with the way you sniff around his wife all the time?' She regrets the words the instant they've left her mouth.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Ted said, but she can see she has hit the mark. 'You're so peculiar, with your fixations on Malay verbs and kites and ghosts and spinning tops.'

'I'm taking an interest in the country I'm living in. You should try it sometime!'

He storms off and slams the bedroom door behind him. Catherine feels a new list of adjectives nudge at her brain. Words which she would never have dreamt she'd associate with Ted. And then she cries.

When she goes into the bathroom, the tub has been filled to the brim with steaming jasmine-scented water, a sensual, silky delight. She submerges herself gladly. '*Terima kasih*,' she says. She likes the feeling of the Malay words in her mouth. 'Thank you. If you were trying to cheer me up, it's worked.'

That night, the single palm tree which crowns the lawn outside the apartment building is outlined by a low full moon. Catherine still feels too shaken by the memory of the snake to sit on the terrace, so she sits by the living room window instead. Suddenly, she sees a lithe male figure circle the trunk of the palm tree. As though a vast coin has been turned to catch the light from the stars, a glittering circle the size of a car tyre appears alongside the moon in the sky. It has the same silvery shimmer as the moon, but a differently textured surface. Catherine thinks she can discern a hazy pair of eyes set in a male face of astonishing handsomeness.

It's too much for her to deal with. She slips into the bed where Ted is already snoring and tries to force herself to sleep. She's comforted by the presence of one of her chopstick men sluggishly wafting around the room, one of the soothing dullards of the alternative universe.

A few days later, her bath water is perfumed again. 'Back off a bit, will you?' she finds herself saying. 'I believe you mean well. But it's all a bit much.'

She has no idea what to do. Should she try to reject these offerings, or simply accept them as she might any other unusual occurrence?

'I know it's a funny question,' she says to Sabrina and Noor. 'But have you ever heard of a kind of *hantu* that looks after people? Or a *hantu* which has got something to do with light, or silver? Or that looks like the moon? A *Hantu Bulan*, maybe?' Moon Hantu. She has cobbled the name together using her Malay dictionary.

'No, never heard,' Noor says. 'But maybe people in another part of Malaysia believe in *Hantu Bulan*.'

'Have you ever heard any stories about *hantus* falling in love with human beings?'

'No...Never heard *lah*. But I'm not an expert!'

They watch her, waiting, their faces perplexed, but Catherine says no more. They'll probably be wary of her from now on, but at least they haven't fled the language school with their colourful *baju kurung* flapping.

On the morning of her birthday, she awakes to find Ted, who is usually an early riser, still lying beside her, his face sheepish. 'Erm, look,' he blurts. 'I'm sorry - I forgot it's your birthday. I'll take you out for dinner tonight, OK?'

Catherine shrugs. She feels like a slapped child, but a self-protective numbness, the kind which has borne her through her life up to this point, takes over. She could explain that birthdays are especially important because her birthday was one of the only days of the year when her birth mother Janice got dressed, left the bedroom and talked to her. But she doesn't want Ted's pity. She wants his love. 'I bet you wouldn't forget Amelia Hall's birthday!'

'Oh, don't bloody well start that again!' Ted says.

She stalks away into the living room. A pretty little Kelantan kite trimmed with pink paper streamers is lying on the sofa. Suddenly her heart is as airborne as a sunny breeze.

'I see you've bought yourself a present,' Ted says. 'It does look quite nice. We can hang it on the wall, if you like.'



'Thank you for understanding me,' she says to the living room, when she's alone again. 'Nobody else has ever tried to before.'

Tributes keep appearing: a plate of *kuih bahulu* left on the dining table when she's hungry, a drink of turmeric boiled with milk and sugar when she's suffering from a cold.

Meanwhile Ted's presence in her days seems to decline in inverse correlation to the number of gestures made by her invisible friend. Late in the evenings, just as Catherine is falling asleep, Ted will fall into their bed smelling of hawker food and beer.

Catherine intensifies her Malay studies as a way of keeping loneliness at bay. One day, taking her folder of notes out of the bookcase where she keeps it, she accidentally drops it. Kneeling down to pick it up, she spots another folder, wedged between the sideboard and the wall on the other side of the room.

Internal memos from Ted's school, covering every conceivable subject from a pupil's injured knee to skirt lengths to food shortages in the school canteen. 'How is it possible to run out of bananas,' Amelia Hall wrote, 'In the Tropics, for Pete's sake?' Every note has been signed by Amelia and scribbled on in red ink: love hearts alternating with erotic graffiti which makes Catherine's face flare.

She laughs aloud, a short, bitter burst. Ted can't be getting very far with Mrs. Hall, judging by the desperation which jumps from the ink. Suddenly she finds it all heartbreakingly pathetic - his fixation on Amelia Hall, her own infatuation with him.

There are so many mysteries in her life. Why did Ted choose to enter into an arrangement as supposedly permanent as marriage? Why is a supernatural being interested in her? What on earth possessed her to marry a man she scarcely knew? And how long can things go on like this? She's going to have to find a way out of the situation.

When Ted comes home, she only just manages not to throw the folder at him. 'You promised to love and honour *me*, not Amelia Hall! But you've been obsessed with her the whole time, haven't you? Why did you marry me? Was it just an impulse? Or an attempt to distract yourself?'

Ted's denials are as bodiless as a punctured tyre, and before she knows it, he has left the flat.

She goes for a distraught walk and returns to find a gleaming silver bowl standing on the kitchen counter, overflowing with mangoes, pineapple, papaya, and her favourite, rambutans. The flavours are ambrosial, the flesh perfectly ripe. There's a ravenous void within her, and not only for food.

'I know you're trying to show me that life can be sweet,' she says. 'I believe that if I told you to go away and leave me alone, you would. But I want to see you. I want to know who you really are.'

That night she dreams. A stranger slowly and courteously walks towards her. No moon-like aura surrounds him. He's dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and has the slim physique of most young Malay men. His face is so beautiful that she can't think of adequate adjectives to describe it. He addresses her in Malay.

*- I know about the difficulties you've encountered in your life. You have a choice whether to continue this conversation. You can banish me from your dreams at will.*

Her Malay is still far from fluent, but she grasps his meaning, and when he recites some ancient Malay poetry, she appreciates the beauty of the unfamiliar syllables.

They stroll through a garden. The vegetation is typical of Malaysia, but the outlines are brighter, the colours heightened.

*- I've had a few female companions during my long lifetime, but they've passed away, as humans do. Suitable women are rare. I'm one of many guardians of the human world. My lover needs to be able to perceive supernatural threats.*

*- It must be lonely, living like a moon but not being one.*

*- Yes. I understand loneliness. Any lover of mine must be willing to make sacrifices. They can return to normal human life for a few hours at a time, wander through a market, enjoy a meal or a swim, but then they must return. If they want to give up their life with me and return to earth, they must accept that the world may have moved on without them, and their time on earth may be short. And they must accept that to their family and friends, they will be dead.*

*- That's not a problem for me. Catherine can't help sounding bitter.*

*- Your husband's unworthy of you. I offer you the chance to explore infinity. I offer you my heart.*

He holds up a hand and as though his palm were a mirror, Catherine sees herself as he does: her crooked eyes, lifeless hair and narrow form transform and glow. Her body is statuesque, her bearing wise and dignified. Catherine gazes into the *hantu's* eyes and sees the care and gentleness which she has longed for all her life. The question hangs in the air between them. And then he's gone.

'This mockery of a marriage is over,' Catherine announces the next morning. 'It's no use pretending any longer.'

She can see injured pride in Ted's expression, more than anything else. And he's genuinely startled. He'd thought he'd be the one to exercise the options.

'But what are you going to do? Where are you going to go?'

'Oh, that's not a problem! I'm going to zoom about and play among the stars with the man in the moon, who just so happens to be drop-dead gorgeous...'

'You can't be serious?!'

'I'm perfectly serious! What have I got to lose? Given a choice between living with you and giving things a go with him, it's no contest. And if it doesn't work out, well... At least it won't be a boring, conventional human break-up!'

Ted gapes at her. His mouth opens and closes. Several times. His eyes are full of the loathing born of fear. 'You're insane, you know that? You're actually clinically insane! You need to get yourself some help.'

He has packed up his things and departed from her life within an hour.

As soon as he's gone, Catherine puts on a pretty nightgown, sprays herself with perfume, and brushes her hair.

Shortly before midnight, the crystalline warbling of an unfamiliar night bird sounds in the garden. The moon is full, large and low like a platter of Kelantan silver. The birdsong grows louder. Catherine blinks: a second moon has appeared beside the first one and is zooming towards her, gaining in size and definition with every millisecond. At last it halts outside the window, scintillating and sparkling, blocking the night's blackness from her view, and holding her breath, Catherine watches as its surface resolves into the exquisite countenance of a Malay male.

The eyes glow, seeming to reach towards her, large with longing. The lips move, murmuring incantations of comfort. Catherine gazes back in ecstasy. The pains and traumas of a lifetime are slipping away. A gentle, tentative hand is extended through the window. It waits for her to take it. When she does, her new lover tenderly envelops her hand in both of his. They're smooth, strong hands, and their touch fills her with rapture and hope.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Angel and Damon”**

by Rowan W

Our Little Red Dot is (or will soon be) on fire.

The siren on the Public Warning System blares loudly throughout the island, another drill conducted by the government to prepare the nation for an imminent crisis. Strangely, only Singapore is afflicted by this fiery heat wave.

It all started one starry night when a flaming fireball crashed onto Pulau Tekong. Naturally, the boys serving National Service (NS) at the military training base thought they were being bombed until they sighted unworldly incandescent fragments.

Next, the Pollutant Standard Index level shattered the previous record, exceeding 500 at one point. The skies were spewing smoke intermittently. Neighbouring countries stopped short of finger-pointing during the regional ASEAN meeting, simply because they knew this could also happen to them.

Then came the bizarre Bloody Sun phenomenon. Plants were dying, to the extent the Botanic Gardens risked being stripped of its UNESCO World Heritage status. Water supply in reservoirs fell to an all-time low. The million-dollar-question arose – would our neighbouring countries offer their assistance?

*Jialat.* Singapore is doomed, said naysayers when Merlion was caught on camera spouting not water, but fire!

Here comes my story.

Business is badly affected in the colourful red-light district cum happening neighbourhood of Geylang. Yes, we do have world-class professionals in the oldest profession in the world. On second thought, perhaps I don't qualify to use the word 'we' as I am not a born-and-bred Singaporean. I left my hometown in Johor Bahru, Malaysia to pursue the Singapore Dream. Both locals and non-locals resent my presence because I am a

threat to their rice bowls. Nobody likes it if one's territory is encroached. Nevertheless, I often remind myself to keep my head down and work twice as hard as everyone else.

Some of the younger boys lavished more attention on me. I played along with them, as long as they were generous to me. However, because of this scorching weather, rashes popped out on my body, including the unmentionables. Itching all over, I scratched myself until blood and pus oozed out, emanating a foul smell. Everyone ostracized me for fear of contracting an infectious disease. I started questioning myself – whose dream am I living? I was sick and tired of everything. Most of all, I was desperate to get out of this rut.

It was approaching the Devil's Hour when I found myself wandering aimlessly in front of the majestic Fullerton Hotel. Nearby was the Singapore River that seemed to beckon to me. As I edged closer to the dark, bottomless waters, a deep voice boomed behind me.

“Don't do it!”

Turning left and right, I failed to locate the source of the voice.

“Up, up, look up.”

Realisation dawned upon me when I saw a pair of red eyes flashing some eight metres above me.

“Um, is that you, Merlion?”

“*Yalah*, who else?” came the exasperated answer.

This was totally unexpected. The mighty Merlion famed all over the world as the icon of Singapore was indeed staring down at puny me, with undisguised pity.

“I was also once like you. Actually, not once, but twice.”

“*Hah?* What do you mean?”

“Twice I tried taking my life. After my botched attempts, I concluded that my time is not up yet. When it's time to go, only then do you go. If your time hasn't come yet, *die die* also won't die,” he sighed.

“Really? When did you try to commit suicide?” This was shocking news to me.

“Several years ago, remember I was struck by lightning? I planned every minute detail with the Lightning God. My head snapped, and my last thought was phew, mission accomplished. Alas, my people efficiently operated on me and stitched me up *sumore*. See, no stitch marks at all. Singapore standard *sia*.”

I nodded in agreement as I admired his beautiful body from head to toe. Not a single scar could be spotted. I could not recall ever hearing about Merlion being struck by lightning, but that could have happened before my arrival in Singapore. The question 'When was Merlion struck by lightning?' wouldn't appear in the citizenship interview, would it?

"Then what happened the second time?" I was intrigued.

"I'm sure you've heard about the fireball incident."

To which I nodded again.

"It was meant to hit me, engulf me in flames. However, the Meteor God miscalculated and look where it ended. *Heng*, no one was injured. After that, I *think think*. Since euthanasia is illegal here, I just have to wait for my time to come."

"But why do you want to die? You have everything. And everyone loves you." This part confused me to no end.

"Have you heard of Akon's most popular song?" he replied.

I scratched my head as I thought long and hard.

"Lonely?" It was absurd. The image of Merlion lip-syncing that song tickled me a little.

Merlion gave me a forlorn nod.

"Are you out of your mind? You want to die because you can't bear being alone?" I almost shouted at him.

"Don't you think loneliness is a disease?" Again, he looked at me with those doleful eyes.

"But you are surrounded by so many tourists every day! You're Singapore's most famous celebrity."

"What's so bad about being ordinary? Have you ever been in a celebrity's shoes? We look glam and all, but nobody knows when we cry inside. *Buay tahan* when I see those tourists pretending to cup water from me. I can't help feeling envious when I see lovey-dovey couples taking wefies. When the city goes to sleep, I yearn for my other half too. I suppose I will either die of old age, loneliness, or depression. Who knows? I may even be ... murdered," he ended his sentence dramatically.

“There are CCTVs everywhere, no one will dare to kill you. By the way, what’s with the fire coming out from you?”

“Oh, I have a sore throat because of the smoky weather.” He answered with a nonchalant shrug.

“People are worried you may set Singapore on fire.” I hoped I did not put the wrong idea into his head.

“*Aiyah*, I’m facing the Singapore River. How to set Singapore on fire? Not as if I can turn my body 180 degrees. Even if I can do so, why would I set my own son on fire? Use your head *lah!*”

For the first time, I noticed the cub a few feet behind him. “So, you’re a single dad.”

“Unfortunately, yes. Don’t worry, Ah Boy sleeps like a log. I did my best to raise him as my successor, maybe too strict with him. I wish he had a mother to spoil him occasionally,” he lamented.

“Before you decided to take your own life, didn’t you think of Ah Boy? He could have been an orphan.”

Merlion remained silent for a while.

“No one is irreplaceable. They might even give him a mother.” There was a tinge of melancholy in his voice.

I felt I had to do something to cheer him up a little.

“If you don’t mind me asking, do you have any specific requirements for your merlioness?”

“Ahem, must be *sui*. Good enough if she looks presentable, but of course I don’t mind if she has a voluptuous body.” He gave what I would call a lionish grin before continuing, “Age-wise, ideally younger than me. She must have some class so that people will respect us. Lion pride thingy. Not too *atas* though. Can mingle around and not look down on others. Not too rigid or unfeeling like a cold fish. Independent. Oh, she must have a heart of gold. Plus a sense of humour. That’s about it. The rest, negotiable.”

“*Wah*. Have you ever looked at yourself in the river?”

“I am the Mighty Merlion.” Merlion looked indignant.

I rolled my eyes at him. Males and their ego!



“If I fall, Singapore falls too. That’s the prophecy. Sometimes I wonder, I look after the people here, but who will look after me when I am old and no longer able to perform my duties?”

“I am sure they will provide for you some way or other.”

“You think they will?” Merlion scoffed. “Seriously, I don’t expect anything, not even from my own son. Must be realistic. Otherwise, bound to get disappointed.”

“You are absolutely right. Zero expectations, zero disappointment.” Since he was in a chatty mood, I pressed my luck further. “What about the current hot spell? Do you have any idea what’s happening?”

He hesitated for a second. “Can you be trusted to keep a secret?”

“Of course. If I tell anybody, I will be struck by lightning.”

Merlion lowered his voice. “It’s a form of punishment from Big Boss, things will be back to normal eventually. When, I can’t say.”

“Why only Singapore?”

“You think the rest will be let off the hook?” he sneered.

“*Alamak*. But, I still don’t buy your sore throat explanation. You are not a dragon. Is there something else you are not telling me?”

“So damn *kaypoh*! Fine, I just wanted attention. Nobody likes being taken for granted,” he finally admitted.

“Say so earlier *lah*. Beat around the bush for what. I also have a confession to make. I wasn’t thinking of killing myself. What doesn’t kill me ...”

“... only makes you stronger?” Merlion interrupted.

“Can’t you listen to what I say without butting in?” Obviously, this *yaya papaya* Merlion thought he knew everything.

“*Paiseh*. Please continue.” He had the cheek to throw me an apologetic look.

“What doesn’t kill me only scars me. I can live with the scars, because they are a reminder that I survived and will continue to survive no matter what happens in the future. Just now, I was thinking of taking a dip in the water, hoping for a miracle cure for my rashes.”

“*Wah-lao-eh!* Waste my saliva only. Talk so much until I used up my entire social quota for the year.” Merlion grunted his displeasure.

As I mulled over our conversation, I lost my footing on the viewing deck. "Help!" I managed before strong currents swept me away, pulling me down into a vortex of whirling water.

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"How's he doing?" The police officer asked as he whipped out his notebook.

"I think it's a she ... she *merlion* just now ... water's out from her body. Should be fine," Damon panted.

"You saved the poor dog, which was very brave of you." The police officer patted his back.

"I'm with the Navy in NS," Damon answered quietly.

"No wonder. How did you spot her in there?"

"I ... I ... saw fire coming out from the Merlion. When I reached, the fire went out already. That's when I saw her struggling in the water."

Nobody would know that he had contemplated suicide just moments ago. Everything was going downhill in his life. Being tormented by his NS comrades was torturous. He had been and would always remain an outcast. He hated it when they jeered at him for not wanting to join them on their sex jaunts. He had endured everything in silence, not saying a word to his parents who were going through a divorce. Worst of all, his girlfriend had just dumped him. She didn't even have the courage to tell him face-to-face – she had texted him to end their relationship. That final insult hurt. He felt like the greatest loser in the world after finding out about her new boyfriend on Instagram.

"Good job, young man. Can you send her to a vet?"

"Sure." For once in his life, Damon felt like a man.

\*\*\*

And that's how I found a new lease of life. Damon named me Angel for saving him from himself. I no longer need to return to Geylang to scavenge for scraps of food. Thank you, dear Merlion for looking after both of us. I pray and hope that someday, someone will take care of you too.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“The Red Eyes”**

by Pon Muthu Ramiah

The bus was supposed to have arrived at eleven o'clock. It was past one in the morning when it finally rattled and jerked to a stop at the bus station under the pine trees. Some of the passengers hopped on to motorcycles. The two old taxis were on their way home or to hotels.

He was the last to alight. He had been sleeping most of the way and could hardly open his heavy eyelids, feeling groggy. He could smell the beer on his breath. He had had a few beers before getting on the bus and had drunk one on the bus. He had kept the bottle wrapped in a red plastic bag. Now he stood looking around, trying to clear his head, and get his bearing right.

The bus station was a shed with a rusty tin roof and no walls. A lone bulb attached to the beam under the tin sheet was throwing yellow light onto the sandy ground. There were three wooden benches forming an incomplete rectangle. The legs of the benches were planted into the earth. A square folding table and two plastic chairs were chained and padlocked together to one of the benches. The roof was rattling in the wind.

Some Europeans, looking bedraggled and lost, now hunched under the weight of their backpacks, began to trudge up the coastal road looking at the signboards of souvenir shops, restaurants, and cheap two-story hotels in the two rows of shop houses facing the sea. They were all closed: shuttered and their lights switched off. In a gap between the two rows of shop houses there was a narrow, partly washed-out road that led to what looked like an old two-story bungalow on a small hill, away from the dusty road. They walked up that narrow road. Realizing that he was standing alone in front of the shed, he followed them. He had made no reservations.

The lighted signboard over the gate read Ole Tudor Hotel and Restaurant. As he neared the steps, he could read the words *Refuge to the British Planters (1947)* over the

wide timber door. The building stood on a raised platform of red bricks and concrete. He put down his back-pack and sat down on one of the wide steps leading up to the landing and door. Even from there he couldn't see the sea, in spite of the glowing moon in the sky. The dim lights from the streetlamps along the narrow, coastal road that looked like halos, didn't reach the beach. He couldn't hear the waves. The beach and the sea were only a stale smell in the dying wind.

"We are closing."

He looked behind himself. An old Chinese man, in a white short-sleeved shirt and black pants, was standing at the door.

"I need a room," he said, getting up and walking up the remaining steps. The other guests were already going to their rooms.

"Single person?" the old man asked, looking behind the white man. "You are lucky. There is only one room left. Double-bed with balcony." The old man realized he was making a mistake. He didn't like single white men to stay in his place. He should have said there was no vacant room. He inflated the rate, as a last resort to discourage the man.

"Two hundred per night with breakfast. But there are cheaper rooms in the hotels by the road. The beach is just across, good view. You could go and knock on the doors. They will open."

The white man thought for a moment and said he would take the room. He had to think of the cameras, new laptop, and more importantly, his passport. The old Chinese man regarded him for a moment before stepping aside. The white man walked in, almost dragging his backpack on the polished timber floor. The old man closed the door behind him, latched it and went behind the front desk.

The white man gave his passport and asked for two nights. The old man looked at the British passport. Name, James Hutton, born in 1973. The old man regarded the white man standing in front of him. Forty years old, unkempt, in a checkered short-sleeved shirt and khaki shorts, shabby, long hair over his ears, unshaven, lanky and slightly suntanned. He wrote down the particulars, collected the deposit, and gave back the passport. He called aloud to someone. James waited, looking at the old clock on the wall behind the man. No one came.

“The boy busy with other guest. Please take seat. He will come soon.”

James peered at the old rattan settee by the front wall. Above the settee were framed black and white, yellowing photos of white-men in white shirts and khaki shorts, their stockings almost touching their knees. He decided not to wait. He wanted to continue his interrupted sleep. He asked for a beer. The old man got a bottle and a beer glass. James paid for it and asked for the key to the room. The old man told him to take the stairs to room No. 14 upstairs. Breakfast was between seven and nine o'clock. James hooked the backpack onto his shoulders, took the beer bottle and glass, and climbed up the staircase.

A woman was standing on the landing. She looked down at him until he reached the landing and then walked towards the room, like leading him. He followed her, his eyes on her grinding hips. She pushed open the door and walked in. He followed her in. She switched on all the lights inside, the air-conditioner, and the water-heater. The air-conditioner in the hole on the wall began to hum. The room was big and well-kept, the bathroom floor dry. The yellow light from the electric bulbs was like artificial moonlight. She leaned her behind against the four-poster bed in that artificial moonlight and regarded him. He placed the beer bottle and glass on the table and removed the backpack and left it leaning against the wall. He winked at her.

“This room got balcony. Morning can see beach and island from balcony,” she said, smiling and added like an afterthought. “This bed from England. Old but very good.”

She hopped onto the bed, her legs dangling. He looked at the gentle depression between her thighs and then at her mouth. She looked young, tall and voluptuously endowed, with straight hair that reached her hips. Her mouth was full and her cheeks and cheek-bones, smooth. The only thing out of place was her eyes. They were bloodshot like someone had squeezed onion juice onto them. But she looked pale. She was wearing a calf-length, pink Cheongsam with tiny white flowers over the breast and flat-soled black shoes. He wondered if she would pose for him, both in the room and on the island. Especially on the island. In her birthday suit.

“Staying two nights?” she asked.

“Yes, but I might stay longer. Depending on how interesting it gets.” He winked at her again.

"You photographer? From England?"

"Yes. I also write. Travel writer. Is this hotel, by any chance, owned by a British?"

"Long time ago, British owner. He got sell to Chinese when he go to England. After Merdeka."

"That's long ago. Very interesting. Have you been to England?" He sat on the edge of the bed beside her, his fingers almost touching the split in the Cheongsam that was exposing a wedge of her pale thigh.

"I like England. It my dream go England but..."

"You could go with me. After visiting one or two more places I am going back. You can stay with me in my place. I live in London."

She smiled, raising her sparse eyebrows. "Really, I go England?"

"Why not? I mean, you can go with me. What's with your eyes?" he asked.

"Sand, I think. Swimming just now. I like swimming night-time. Don't like hot sun. No good for skin."

His eyes nibbled at her pale, smooth skin, trying to make it blushing pink.

"You tired. Now you drink beer and sleep. I see you morning. Good night." She hopped down from bed and left, leaving the door ajar, dashing his high hopes. He followed her out of the room and looked. She was not there. He looked down the stairs. A young man was walking up with mineral water bottles, towels, and soap.

"Sorry sir, I late. I busy with other guest."

"It's okay. There was this gorgeous girl helping me out."

"Ho!" The young man stood still on the stairs and looked behind James, his eyes wide open. He then walked up the stairs slowly and into the room. He placed the bottles on the table, placed the towels and soap on the bed, and left without a word. Downstairs, he told the old man behind the counter what James had said. The old man sighed, waved him away, and closed his sleepy eyes. There is going to be trouble again, he thought.

He remembered the time when only white people, the planters, their families and guests, came to the hotel. It was like their private club. He was the chief cook then. They loved his cooking. The place used to resound with their laughter, incessant chatter, and singing. Saturday nights were long. The nights didn't end on Christmas. They drank and

danced, some with their wives, and others with the local village girls. Occasionally Chinese men brought young girls, both Chinese and Malays, with them to entertain the white men. It was to smooth business. She was one of them, from the New Village. After the first time she began to visit the hotel by herself. She became fond of a young planter. One night, he got her a little drunk and took her to the room with the balcony. After that night she became his keep. She rarely went back to the New Village. She helped out in the hotel when he was not around but avoided the other men. He visited her frequently and spent weekends with her in the room with the balcony, sometimes going out to swim under the moonlight. She soon found she was carrying his baby. She wanted him to marry her and take her to England to have the baby there. He was not happy. There were frequent quarrels in the room, but after some time everything appeared smooth between them. There was talk in the hotel that she was going to go to England with him and have the baby there.

One night they went swimming and didn't return to the hotel. At first it was assumed they were spending the night on the island. Many visiting couples did that, especially on moonlit nights. But they didn't return the next day. After that no one saw them again. Nobody from the New Village came looking for her. More than a month later some fishermen found a skeleton and woman's clothing entangled in their net. The skeleton was taken away in a canvas sack by the police immediately. The matter of the disappearance of the white man and the village girl ended there.

Sunlight was streaming into the room under the curtains when James woke up but the room was cool. The air-conditioner was humming. He wrapped a towel around his waist, pulled open the curtains, unlatched the folding wooden-doors, and stepped out on the balcony, rubbing his eyes. He could see part of the beach. It looked deserted. The island stood far away in the shimmering, blue waters.

He had his shower and went downstairs. The smell of scrambled eggs and butter on toast was strong in the dining area. The other guests were eating their breakfast. She was sitting at a table away from them. He carried his breakfast tray and went and sat opposite her.

The old man at the counter had his eyes on James. He hoped *it* was not there with him but soon James was talking and laughing as he ate. *It* was with James. The other guests, those who had checked in the previous night, began to look at James and then at the old man behind the counter. They looked embarrassed. There was nothing he could do if James didn't free himself from *it*.

The last time he interfered, the kitchen mysteriously caught fire in the night when it was closed and burnt down to the ground. Luckily for him, the kitchen had always been in a separate building at the back, linked to the main building by covered steps. And the foolish white man, instead of drowning off the island like the others before him, had died on the dusty road, run over by a sand-laden lorry as he was hurrying to the bus station, talking aloud, gesticulating. Eyewitnesses said it looked like someone had pushed him in the path of the lorry. But they didn't see anybody push him.

James was at the table for a long time, drinking more tea and talking and chuckling. Once or twice he made as though he was touching someone across the table.

"They are going to the island already?" he asked, turning and looking at some of the guests who were leaving, dressed in shorts, t-shirts and slippers, cameras hanging from their necks.

"Yes. They follow water when it going out. Spend little time on island and run back when water come back. Only brave peoples go when water coming to beach. They walk, also run and then swim to island. Stay night there. Swim, catch fish, and make sex. They come back in morning. Local peoples very frighten. Don't go night time. This night got full-moon. You go to island this night, you can take many good picture."

"Wouldn't it be frightening to be alone on the island the whole night?"

"Nobody got go alone nighttime. You like, I go with you. I like swimming around island. Night time I swim, I no wear nothing."

"Why, that would be great. What time should we leave?"

"Not now. The water start come to beach seven o'clock in evening. We go after that. The water go up here when we go beach island." She touched her chest.

"Wow!"

"You must try. Water very warm. You swim also no wear nothing. In moonlight all the fish also swim with you."



“Unbelievable! I can’t wait!”

The old man behind the counter continued to watch James. He was at the table for a long time, talking, laughing and listening, all by himself. Then he walked up the stairs. A while later he left for the beach with his camera. He was not talking. He returned in the early afternoon looking a little sweaty and even more suntanned, carrying a fishing rod and a plastic bag, his camera around his neck. He had lunch, drank a few beers as he talked and laughed and then he went upstairs.

It was a sultry afternoon, windless and humid. The lunch crowd had left except for two men who continued to drink, talk loudly, while their faces turned red. The old man, after watching them for sometimes shifted to the easy-chair by the wall behind the counter. There was nothing much to do at that time of the day. It took him some time to make himself comfortable, like a cat following its tail before settling down. He closed his eyes. But even after a long time he couldn’t nap. His heart began to pound. *It* was around. He felt *its* heat. He could almost see *it*, standing before him, staring down at him.

“I won’t interfere,” he whispered, his eyes still closed, his heart pounding. “I won’t.” A while later he felt the heat pass and a chilly wind sweep over him. He opened his eyes. Everything was still, no wind was blowing under the blistering sun. Goose pimples sprouted on his bare arms. He rubbed the wrinkled skins on his arms and looked at the altar on the low dais by the wall.

James came down at six o’clock, ordered a beer and waited for his dinner. He was not talking. The dinner crowd was trickling in. He eyed them as he sipped the beer. The people who had come with him in the bus came down from their rooms. They kept their distance, but watched him, waiting to see when he would start talking by himself. He didn’t. After dinner he drank another beer and went upstairs. Just before seven-thirty he came down with a bag slung over his shoulder, the fishing rod in his hand. He ordered another beer and sat at another table, facing the sea. As he drank the beer, he took out the cameras from the bag and looked them over and then put them back. A little later he began to talk and laugh. The other guests threw furtive glances at him, as though they were afraid to be caught looking. At eight o’clock he left with the bag and the fishing rod, talking as he walked down the steps. The old man behind the desk closed his eyes and whispered a prayer.

It was getting dark on the beach. There were some men walking about with carbide lamps burning on their forehead, sticks in their hands, looking for crabs. They paused and looked at James as he walked by, talking excitedly. The horizon was a neat, thin purple pencil line, separating the pinkish sky and the grey-blue sea. There were not many people about. James couldn't see the water but heard it, swirling around his feet. Then he was walking in water. It was warm. The island stood far away in the sea, shrinking in the dying glow of the sun that had already set. A wind was blowing in from the sea. He took off his slippers and started wading in the knee-deep water, still talking, trying to keep up with her. Walking ahead of him as though she couldn't resist the call of the island. He started to hop over the waves as they came in but soon the water was above his waist and still rising. He held the bag and fishing rod above the water and continued to wade deeper into the water. The waves were pushing him backwards. Soon the sand gave way to mudflats. His feet began to sink in at every step. Now he had to walk slowly, calling at her to slow down. She kept wading effortlessly ahead of him, like she was floating. Laughing, she waved him on. By the time he was at a touching distance from the island, the water was splashing on his face and flowing strongly past him.

She paused, grabbed his hand and led him carefully up a path between some bushes. He felt the dry sand getting in between his toes. Standing on the dry sand, he turned and looked at the shore. The streetlights and the lights from the shop houses looked very far away, blinking in the misty wind. Now that he was out of the water, he began to feel cold. She was standing away from him. In the darkness he couldn't see her eyes. He looked around. The island looked dark. A strong wind was whistling in the trees and the dry leaves were rustling on the ground. He walked towards her.

"The moon come soon," she said. "Don't worry darkness. Island very bright when moon in sky."

She led him by the hand further up the path to a spot at the summit of the island. There was a tin shed with an old tree-trunk underneath. She sat on it. He stood looking at the waves, dark and choppy from there, like they were lugging at the island. Then he sat by her.

"From here moon very beautiful. The sky bright. Where camera? Get camera ready. Take picture first."

He kept looking at her wet body under the white, loose, cotton blouse and shorts that hugged her hips like another skin. She was not wearing anything under the blouse. He tried to hug her. She stood up and pointed at his bag. He turned his attention to the cameras. He set the video camera and switched it on, catching the brightening sky behind the hotel, behind the hill, far away. He had hardly done anything when the full golden moon began to peep above the trees, and then slowly rise, escaping the clutches of the earth.

He began to snap with the other camera: behind this bush, out in the open, squatting above the rock, and adjusting the video camera. Awhile later, the moon rose in the sky and looked like it was floating on the dark choppy waves in sliced pieces. He looked behind himself. She was sitting on the tree trunk, waving him on. He moved his video camera about, at one point standing behind her and placing it on her shoulder playfully. She laughed. He kept working, listening to the waves, looking at the moon, excited about the long night ahead. His imagination was running wild. Then he realized she was standing close behind, almost touching.

He turned around. She was standing nude, glowing in the wet, golden moonlight, her eyes like two tiny, red half-moons. He switched off the video and put the cameras in the bag as though he had been caught napping. It was getting close to midnight. The wind had calmed down and its whistling in the trees and bushes were now whispers. The swollen sea had reached its momentary calm, a tentative stillness. It was the hour of the calm before the ebbing storm.

He tried to hug her. She told him to wait. Her swimming came first. She had to swim when she was still clean, she said. The sea would be happy with her that way. She handed him the fishing rod and the pouch and led him down a different path that led to the other side of the island, facing the endless, open sea. She led him down into the cold water and told him to catch a lot of fish. They would be hungry afterwards. Standing in the waist-deep water, his feet sinking in the mudflat, he hugged her from behind. She threw back her head and laughed as she turned around and faced him. The moonlight was on her hair, her face, her shoulders and chest. Her teeth were bluish-white and her eyes, ripe red. Still laughing, she hugged him with her arms around his neck and kissed him on the mouth. It was so unexpected, so passionate, he almost fell backwards.

Recovering his footing, he responded in kind, famished. Still kissing him, her tongue in his mouth, she lifted her legs up out of the water and intertwined him around his waist, like a snake. He could feel the strength of her thighs as he sank deeper into the mud, almost to his knees, with her added weight. The passion and urgency of her lips and tongue surprised him. She was sucking his breath away, squeezing away his breath, slurping his tongue in. He struggled, gasping, trying to match her ardor. She went on, the grip of her legs and arms tightening, the encirclement of him complete. He felt he was having difficulty breathing. She was bursting with a passion that he had not known in any woman. The island and its privacy were driving her wild. He moaned, struggling to give back what she was giving him, but he was losing, panting. Then suddenly she removed her legs and arms from around him and slithered into the water.

He struggled to breathe, one hand holding the fishing rod and the other reaching out to her. She chuckled as she flipped backwards and went flat on her back on the placid water, as though it was a waterbed, gently flapping her pale feet like two playful fish. He tried to reach out to her. He wanted to follow her but couldn't. She laughed, her teeth so wet and white and her red eyes shining in the moonlight. Even as he struggled to breathe, to swim after her, she waved at him, floating further away, face up on the water. Even as she was waving, she was changing into something else that was not a woman. He could only see the red eyes. Everything else was turning into part of the sea water.

The red eyes and the pale skin that had unnerved him the first night in the room with the balcony. The other guests and the old man behind the counter looking at him furtively, flashed before his eyes. They must have seen him talking all by himself. He struggled harder to free himself, but his legs were already firmly planted in the mud. His hand was gripping the fishing rod even harder as though he was clutching at a branch. And he was struggling to breathe. The breaths wouldn't come.

The red eyes floated away in the water, glimmering. Then the eyes went under the surface, searching for the baby that had been lost many years ago in these waters. The baby was crying.

At dawn when the fishermen from the fishing village came to the island in their motorboats to see what they had caught in their nets they found a shirtless *mat salleh*

standing in hip-deep water. He was holding a fishing rod in one hand. His eyes were wide opened. Dried blood was in his mouth and on his bare chest. He was freezing-cold and stiff.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“People Will Talk”**

by Sumitra Selvaraj

### ***Part 1***

I'm unhappy.

What does that even mean? Unhappy? Did the thosai batter not rise properly overnight?

The thosai batter is fine. I'm not

I don't understand.

I'm unhappy with my life.

Oh God. Did you lose your job? I told you writing that email would be a bad idea.

No Amma, don't worry my job is secure, I'm drawing a respectable monthly wage, and I'm paying my taxes. The Inland Revenue is happy with me... I'm not happy with me.

You know this whole happy-shappy business is something invented by the Americans, their TV shows and their psychiatrists. Everyone there needs to be happy, otherwise they have to take medicines to be happy. Wait, is THAT what is wrong? You're depressed?

I don't know if I'm depressed. I'm just unhappy.

Did you make curry leaf chutney or tomato chutney?

Curry leaf.

I would have preferred tomato. Look, if you're depressed, you should just get over it. Lose some weight, exercise. And then you'll be happy.

Thanks Amma, that's incredibly insightful and encouraging.

I'm serious. Come to my spinning class with me.

No thank you. I think I just need to talk to someone.

I hope you're not thinking of going to a psychiatrist. People will talk. They might recognise you in the waiting room.

So if I'm depressed and want to see a shrink, you think it's a bad idea because people you know will find out.

Yes. Can you put the kettle on? And get the Bru coffee out.

I think we're heading towards a divorce.

Are you mad?

No. I'm not mad. I told you. I am unhappy.

Unhappy because of relationship problems?

Yes.

What did you do wrong?

I didn't do anything wrong.

Then why does he want a divorce?

HE doesn't want a divorce. I do.

Why? Is he beating you?

Don't be silly. He's not beating me. You know he's not that sort.

Then why do you want to divorce him?

Because I'm unhappy.

But the kitchen has just been renovated, and he put those teak floorboards in your study. Isn't that enough?

## ***Part 2***

I'm fine.

What does that even mean? You know we agreed...

Yes, yes I know. It's not allowed.

Let's start over. How are you feeling today?

I'm hungry.

Good. That's a good start. Did you skip breakfast?

No, I happily wolfed down the cold toast and the water flavoured with Milo. I'm just used to a more substantial breakfast.

I'm sorry breakfast was insufficient. Would you like me to say something to them?

No, I could do with losing a couple of pounds anyway.

Are you unhappy with the way you look?

I wouldn't know. I have not seen my reflection in weeks. But I tend towards pleasantly filled out anyway. Someone once told me, my saree blouse-clad arms look like they were juicy grilled bratwursts trying to escape their casing. It was meant to be a compliment, I think. But I'd really rather not talk about me.

But we have to talk about you. We've established that you're hungry, that's physical. What about emotional... how are you *feeling* today?

I'm unhappy that I'm hungry.

Are you unhappy about anything else?

I'm a little unhappy that I'm here.

Good. No, I don't mean good that you're unhappy. Good, that's a good expression of your feelings. Do you understand? I'm not happy that you're unhappy.

Well, I'm happy to hear that.

Why does being here make you unhappy?

For a start, the breakfast blows. But you knew that already. More importantly, or perhaps equally as importantly, I don't know what I'm doing here.

Do you remember what you did?

You know, his aunt bought that Henckels knife at a garage sale in New Jersey in 1973. She gave it to me as a gift after he unveiled our newly renovated kitchen. My mother was



horrified of course. Giving a knife as a housewarming present... what more an old knife? She didn't see the value of the gift.

Do you remember what you did with the knife?

I slid it past his clavicle just at the point of the costal tuberosity, until I found the apical segment of his right lung. The clavicle is the only long bone in the human body to lie horizontal. But you knew that already.

You collapsed his lung.

He's a smoker. It could have happened anyway.

But in this case, it was caused by a knife you were holding.

It's so important to keep kitchen knives sharp. Most home cooks overlook this simple fact. Sharp knives save you a whole load of effort. I get really annoyed when I see people hacking away at a chicken, when really, all it takes is 12 clean cuts to yield 12 clean pieces.

You wielded the knife that killed your husband. Do you understand what that means?

Yes, of course I do.

Why did you do it?

I was unhappy.

You could have told him. You could have talked to someone. You could have left him.

I could have. But I didn't.

Do you miss him?

You know what I miss? Crisp thosais, curry leaf chutney, and Bru coffee for breakfast.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Writing Trauma, an Act of Hiding”**

by Kai Valya

A well-known Indonesian publishing house will publish my novel manuscript, and it is still in the editing process.

I have been ecstatic since the day I received the email from the editor, but when I wrote that novel, I had to be connected to the trauma again.

According to Susanne Oliver Armstrong in her 2018 article “Method Writing: A Creative Methodology for Enabling Post-traumatic Growth” in *New Writing*, when the story of trauma is written through the perspective of the characters in the story, it “could provide a secure vehicle of psychological containment; a safe venue for intense emotional expression and exploration, to investigate the multiple manifestations of one’s own traumatic experiences through the dissonant lenses of others.”

For me, other than the reasons provided above, I wrote my upcoming novel as an act of closure. To remind myself that the story I have written is a story from a lifetime ago, something that has happened, is valid, and has molded me to the person I am today.

Here is a short backstory: half a decade ago, I was trapped in a toxic relationship. I was abused—verbally, mentally, even sexually. I was lucky the perpetrator left me after almost three years. Although I was ‘freed,’ I was not free from the psychological damage, yet.

### **It Was a Long and Winding Road**

Several trips to a psychologist. Restless nights even I needed soothing music to drift off to sleep. Not to mention nausea and sudden panic attacks, even in public places. Threw myself recklessly to the dating pool just to have fun with as many guys as possible.

It was tiring, until one time, I decided that I had had enough. I did whatever my psychologist had said because I was so sick of being sick. However, each experience is unique, and this has worked for me, but perhaps not for others.

My psychologist had asked me to reread my old diaries to get the answer to why I got panic attacks and felt afraid of the perpetrator, even long after we broke up and were living on different continents. Luckily, I always kept journals from the time during our relationship. I reread them, got panic attacks, threw up—rinse, and repeat.

Then, I decided to try something that I had not tried for years: go back to the fandoms I was in when I was a teenager more than a decade ago, learned to play a new musical instrument, and—the most important part was—started writing again. Before that toxic relationship, I was a short story writer and had published in dozens of anthologies. After the trauma, I could not even think straight, let alone write a new story.

My last trip to the psychologist was in early 2018. I was declared recovered, and a few months later, I began writing my novel for a closure. There was a piece of advice I had heard for beginner writers—I was considering myself still as a beginner since it was my first time writing a novel—not to write an autobiographical story. However, since the goal was closure, I decided to give it a go. Around the same time, I involved myself in many activities related to raising awareness about dating abuse and mental health issues. I even initiated a community for the survivors of dating abuse to speak in a support group led by psychologists. Then I asked myself, what if I sent it to publishers to raise awareness about the matter? I sent the draft under a pen name to several publishing houses. Only one accepted it.

### **The Act of Hiding**

The story about sexual and dating abuse is narrated from a male perspective about someone he knows. This is the first act of hiding. I will not tell that story from a female's perspective in her late 20s, for example, because it feels like I will reveal myself.

To write that story, I had to reread my old diaries again. But at that time, I was not asked by anyone. It was eventually fine. During the writing process, however, it was still uncomfortable for me. Sometimes I found myself questioning whether it really happened or not. Sometimes I felt that it happened years ago; why did it matter now? Or was it just in

my imagination? But if it was only in my imagination, why did I write the experience in detail in my diary? For example, once I described his boarding room where I was sexually abused several times. To rewrite what happened in that room was still a traumatizing experience. Glad I did not get another panic attack.

The second act of hiding is publishing the novel under a pen name, which is what I am using now. It is a name that is generic enough, can be anyone because first, I am hiding to protect my family AND the perpetrator's family. Second, for selfish reasons, I want to protect myself. I do not mind telling people I trust that I was abused and have gone through a lengthy process to recover. But I do not have any reasons to tell that story to my co-workers and especially my family.

And the last one, it happened in the past. I acknowledge it as a part of me, but I do not want to drag my identity everywhere as *the* writer of *that* novel. I fear the consequences. Not only because I do not want people to know my story as a victim-turned-survivor of dating abuse and about the psychological trauma that follows, but also the Indonesian parliament has not passed the anti-sexual violence bill. Survivors will not be safe because we are not protected by the law.

I remember an interesting article in *Slate* written by Meghan O'Rourke in 2010, where several female writers refused to be interviewed. One stated because "it was too stressful to be on camera," while none of their male counterparts refused. I wondered, did they do that because they wrote their works as a way to hide as well?

I am happy that, recently, I have seen a growing interest in mental health issues and its relation to art, such as with InterSastra's forum House of the Unsilenced held in 2018 and 2019. I am also glad more people are brave enough to talk about sexual abuse and its relation to mental health issues, although some still prefer anonymity.

I feel relieved to have finished writing this novel, and it will be read by people. But the road is still long for the fear of the consequences to be conquered.

Maybe one day, I will be brave enough to expose myself to many people as a survivor of dating violence and mental health issues. But for me, writing trauma to be consumed by the public is still an act of hiding.



\* \* \* \* \*

## **“I Need to See It to Believe”**

by Herbert Herrero

I stood where the vantage of the morning landscape is unobstructed. On this side of the city, there are those who show up earlier than the sun. I was born nearby but grew up near the valley instead, where the sun barely reveals its true beauty. There is no other direction to face as the senses are naturally drawn toward the direction of the horizon, a frameless canvass where projections change as the day unfolds. I usually stare beyond, as far as sight can reach, at outlines of images in the distance. The impressions comfort those who visit, calm those whose minds are restless, uplift those whose spirits are troubled, and console those whose hearts are healing.

I sat on the cold concrete, my feet dangling, barely touching the boulders beneath. Passers-by leaned over and wanted to see for themselves, eager, as if witnessing an event happening for the first time. The view elicited smiles reserved only for new discoveries, a budding flower, a hatching egg, a breaking cocoon. It was real. An unleashed mutt strutting with its master, boys picking up pebbles, a girl sketching her name on the ground, and a toddler getting his little toes wet. The scene looks familiar, but not to those who frequently visit.

An onlooker stepped down the rocks and joined those who were unable to resist the invite of the sands, which are now exposed, scraped of its grime, peeled of its dead skin. There were a few in gloves, squatting near the edge of the shoreline, removing pieces which clearly do not belong, like surgeons administering to patients, extracting them of infection that has almost become part of their bodies. Piles of collected items, unrecognizable in black muck, are taken away in sacks.

The whiff I caught carries a different smell. The acridness of sewage which pervaded the air here no longer overpowers the soothing scent of the sea. The swallows appeared freer, extending their glides, and touching playfully the surface of the water, as if kissing the

face of an enchantress, urging her to arise from her slumber, letting her know that her people have not forgotten, and have finally admitted to their faults. All rivers culminate to the sea, ours, to the Bay, which personifies us, unresentful to those who offend, tolerant to those who abuse, and gracious to those who admire. The Bay unwillingly collected the sins of our waterways, a blemish to an incomparable sunset. Ridding it of trash will cleanse and absolve us, the erring generation, and those before us.

A family took my place on the breakwater. The movements around did not seem to disturb the newborn. To the surprise of the father, the mother gestured that she wanted to get closer too. He took their photo with the ocean as their backdrop and the strip of sand as their stage. I am unable to tell if they live nearby, or if they visit often, but I can tell that, like me and the others who have come, they too would like to seize the chance, the experience of a clean Bay.

I crossed to the other side of the boulevard. The vendors, street sweepers, and homeless transients stayed behind, so do the stretch of coconut trees, the moored yachts, and the metal heroes facing westward. I was uncertain of my next visit, but I was certain though that lovers, families, tourists, joggers, cyclists, the young, and the aging, will be forever drawn to the charm of the Bay. Like me, they too, will wait until the true sparkle of its waters, the freshness of its air, and the fineness of its sands are restored.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Ta Prohm”**

by Richard Rose

*Angkor Archaeological Park, Cambodia*

Nature wrestles history  
as angry roots and branches strangle stone.  
This conflict neither would have chosen,  
destined to end badly for them both.

Prajñāpāramitā, ‘reflection of wisdom’,  
knows that even she must yield to time.  
Acknowledging that deities no more than mortal man  
can push back against such strong incoming tides.

Argenteous barked silk cotton trees  
invade crevices in sandstone,  
thrusting, searching fingers deep in crannies,  
scratching, clawing, wheedling their way.

The strangler fig, oh how aptly named?  
meets resistance from irrepressible stones,  
here grounded for a thousand years or more,  
yet knowing that there can be but one victor.

And here the bitter irony is clear,  
that when each towering tree has run its course,  
its mighty trunk and branches die



and crumble into so much dust,  
then will the blocks of Ta Prohm note,  
the release of the stranglehold  
and so, will fall apart.

Even in death the trees will have their victory.

# **“Mekong”**

by Richard Rose

*Kampong Cham, Cambodia*

## I

Today, though mighty Mekong ambles,  
she asserts her proud authority.  
Cambodia bows down low before her majesty,  
a grateful people cede to her command.  
They know that she is the artery through which  
a slowly healing nation's life blood flows.

## II

As Mekong winds, she bears ten thousand secrets,  
that many pray will never be revealed.  
Some for fear their guilt will be discovered,  
whilst others long for memories to be veiled.

Listen to the lapping of the waters,  
that wash the banks caressing sacred soil.  
How terrible the history she's witnessed?  
How many stories may she still conceal?

Bitter tears have merged with Mekong waters,  
but cannot serve to dull the gnawing pain.  
Cambodia will be a long-time healing,

Until her saddened people rise again.

### III

Deftly manoeuvring line and oar,  
the fisherman's balance undisturbed  
upon the prow appears assured.  
A lifetime's practice sees the task is ordered,  
generations gone before, marked fishing on their genes,  
so now imbued with all that may be needed  
he does not over think his set routine.  
Each limb plays its own part to perfection,  
coordinated, rhythmic, practiced and compact.  
A hand to saw the line through river surface,  
to tempt his quarry with a moving lure.  
One foot to push an oar just-so gently,  
enough to keep the boat straight in the tide.  
A swivel of the hips is all that's needed  
to change direction or defy the wind.  
And now at last I see him brace and snatch,  
feeding line back quickly through his hands,  
until a flash of silver breaks the surface  
and with one simple rehearsed shake of wrist,  
this latest writhing, gasping catch  
joins others in the belly of the boat.

### IV

The sun begins descent towards the horizon,  
as idling against the rail, I look down to the waters  
that flow lugubrious beneath the bamboo bridge.

And here I see the glistening splattered bodies  
of children from the fishing village dive and splash,  
their game of come-and-catch-me if you can.

The innocence and joy of youth will surely be disturbed,  
when once their bodies harden and puppy fat  
gives way to tell-tale muscles indicating time is up.  
And now they too will have to take their place,  
hauling lines, mending nets, seeking shoals,  
as childish games give way to early manhood.

And with brief years of childhood left behind,  
there will be no more time for idle pleasures.  
Hard schooling over centuries has defined  
the pattern that each Cham fisherman must follow.  
Each day that breaks he knows will bring more toil,  
if his family must not go hungry to their beds.

Through Kampong Cham the glinting Mekong glides  
and with each rise and fall, the floating dwellings  
of hard laboured fishermen and women,  
gently rock and settle, as it flows and courses  
through a land both nourished and defined,  
by waters that give life to all that live along its path.

\* \* \* \* \*

**“truly asia”**

by Salman Akhtar

spearhead

peninsula

adieu

lost is

the balm

of your

air

the tarik

of your

teh, the

harimau

menangis -

your

coconut scent

lingers still

on cold

mornings

sinewy

with dew

your precise  
twelve hour

day  
its drab  
exactitude

rhythmical  
undisplacing -  
I step

into the  
forgotten  
chaos

of seasons  
alternating  
temperatures

rapt  
in knowing  
your ways

and whims -  
the deepdark  
world now

I stumble  
into I  
boleh tahan

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Night Fishing”**

by Richard Oyama

The fisherman works alone on the island,  
Miner’s lamp sweeping the waters,  
Oval of light skating across green ice, casting

A triangular net inside a necklace of buoys  
Like a constellation that infers a guild.

He sloughs to shore, greeting me in his language of alms.  
This feels like poetry, a guild,

A casting after a nameless catch for  
the hunger within.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“wrong ways to listen”**

by Ira Amiruddin

1. when i tell you i am depressed, it is not an accusing finger for not catching the stiffness in my body when you went for a hug, for not noticing the way my chair remained vacant after the third week of classes. this is not a blame game you play when you break your mother’s favorite vase. my life is not a sentence, you are not the judge;
2. when i tell you i am depressed, it is not an open invitation for you to say: lol me too, finger-gunning your way through this conversation, and treat this sickness like one of your funny memes. depression is not a fan club you join for 10 seconds of popularity;
3. when i tell you i am depressed, i am not asking for store bought sunflowers or good morning texts to wake me from my insomniac slumber. i am not bored and looking for 100 ways to gain instagram followers or someone to play with on sundays;

when i tell you i am depressed, i am gritting my teeth so hard i hope my jaw breaks. my fingers have grown tired from scrolling down the list of therapists online and failing each time to make an appointment. this is a call for help, and i apologize for making you pick up the phone.



\* \* \* \* \*

## **“I Don’t Love You”**

by Josua D. Quiniquito

*This is reverse poetry. Read the poem from the 1st line to the last, then vice versa.*

I don't love you  
So don't you ever think that  
You complete my day,  
You hurdle my heart with joy  
Every time I see your rosy cheeks  
Every time you sweetly smile at me  
Every time you teasingly call my name  
Every time you timidly talk to me.  
And that  
You have a space in my heart & it grows bigger & bigger  
Because the truth is:  
You're not special  
You're not the love of my life  
You're not my sunshine  
You're not my moon  
You're not my star  
You're not the one I dream of  
You're not my perfect match.  
Please don't believe when I tell you  
I love you!

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“The Life Sentence”**

by Lawrence Pettener

A food court is where cuisine is on trial.  
In foodie Malaysia, it really has  
to embody innocence in no sense.  
They pop up almost everywhere, in base-  
ments; low-priced hawker food, my sort of thing.  
In Kuching, Chinese; Iban; Malay; Indian;

Bidayu, mix like distinct ingredients  
in the same slow, patient meal.  
Everywhere, you’ll be sure to find cats to feed.  
The first food court I found was called Parking,  
a car park behind the National Gallery –  
just six stalls, with scant signage or effort  
to appease Westerners. That was its charm:  
you have to merge in. Garlic and shallots  
in rendang – slowly, lah. I come back  
to this dish, predictably; always.  
The first time I tried it – at a food court –  
I went for the life sentence.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Two Boys Kissing in Jakarta”**

by Farid Hamka

Two boys kissing in Jakarta  
Will attract dirty stares, hushed animadversion, and inspire disgust  
They prefer that the obscene scene of two lips colliding  
Be confined behind the curtains of a cheap motel  
Or the inside of a car with tinted windows, almost black  
Because somehow men loving men is more terrifying  
Than the slasher films plaguing the cinemas of this city

Two boys kissing in Jakarta  
Used to mean rebellion in my limited understanding of things  
Oh, the thrill of radical self-expression, a declaration of who you are  
Just like donning a bright indigo scarf in a room filled with plain white tees  
Gestures that scream to be noticed, and remembered, and remembered  
An iconoclast’s dream, a jaded act of being different  
Yet it never masks the loneliness behind. It persists

Two boys kissing in Jakarta  
Is what remained of last Friday in a seedy Falatehan bar  
Amid the disembodied voices from easy reggae tunes:  
*Let me see the sunset in your eyes.*  
*I don’t wanna wait in vain for your love*  
*A pimper’s paradise, that’s all she was.*  
*Hepi hepi ajalah*  
The neon lights embraced us like moonlight

Stolen kisses resuscitate. Heartbeats and rhythms blurred as one

Two boys kissing in Jakarta

Feels as natural as leaves sprouting again at winter's cadence

As the blossoms mid spring, aromatic colours on every street

As petals dying gracefully after showing their immaculate dance

Or the pleasant surprise of double rainbows after the rain

Everything in creation happens for a reason

Even how your lips on mine inspires these verses

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Beside You”**

by Anuradha Chelliah

Beside you,  
I feel secure, I feel safe  
I feel your broad shoulders,  
They are the best comfort for me,  
I feel the calmness in you,  
I feel the softness in you,  
I could feel your feelings,  
Your feelings show the love,  
The love that you shower,  
Beside you is the best place,  
Secure, safe and sound,  
The company that you give,  
It's always the best,  
I never realised the time passing,  
Always waiting to be beside you,  
Then, now and forever,  
Always dreaming to be beside you,  
Beside you, walking along a beach is a journey never ending,  
Beside you, sitting on a bench is a timeless comfort,  
Beside you, watching a movie is an endless story,  
Beside you, my life is complete.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **“Saksak”**

by John C. Mannone

I return to my flat in Port Moresby  
from a field trip to the Wahgi Valley  
where a treasure of banana diversity  
might be unearthed at the plantation.  
The view of the harbor takes on gold  
hues of the setting sun. The fingers  
on a hand of chlorophylled bananas  
laying on the counter had already  
grabbed the yellow xanthophylls.

The outside already mottled  
yields its leathery texture as  
I peel back the banana skin  
exposing the sumptuous fruit  
and scents of isoamyl acetate  
and a host of other esters.

I'm aware of its long history,  
maybe ten thousand years  
originally cultivated right here  
in Papua New Guinea from  
*Musa ingens* growing at Kuk.  
I know the prehistory, analyzed  
the biogenic silica—phytolith  
assemblages clarifying some  
of the paleo-environmental

questions in archaeology.

I slice the starchy fruit (a berry!)  
place the discs on banana leaves  
(softened over a flame)  
with sago from the spongy center  
of a tropical palm stem.  
As I fold and cradle the dumpling  
and place it in the bamboo steamer,

I think about plant genetics.

Wild bananas are diploid  
having duplicate copies of each  
gene-bearing chromosome,  
one from each parent. Some  
plants had predispositions  
to produce fruit without  
pollination, just like these  
seedless cultivars, but oh so  
sweet.

I unwrap the bright green  
banana leaf, the succulence infuses  
the steam, and a constellation  
of translucent sago pearls adorn  
creamy-textured pieces of banana  
now ready for the coconut milk.