

A n a k S a s t r a

Issue 30

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Contributor Bios

Timothy Yam is a 29-year-old civil servant from Singapore. He is the 3rd place winner of the National Arts Council Golden Point Award 2017 (English Short Story). He aims to write literature that is challenging and invigorating, and hopes to be a contributor to the rise of Singapore literature.

Sonya Chyu studies business and English at Cornell University and hopes to chronicle the Asian and Asian-American experience by blurring genres, geographies, and identities. Her previous work has been published in *Rainy Day* and received honorable mention in *Glimmer Train's* Short Story Award for New Writers.

CA Yin lives in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo with her husband and two German Shepherd-Labrador mixed-breed dogs, Dana and Scully. She celebrates life teaching and interacting with her students in the classroom and in creative writing, debate and green activities. Apart from reading and writing, she enjoys Skyping with her children who are studying in Kuala Lumpur and Glasgow.

After working as a research scientist for ten years in UK and Australia, **Daniel Emlyn-Jones** is now teaching privately in Oxford, UK. When not teaching, he loves visiting Singapore and writing. He has several short stories published in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Anak Sastra* and *Eastlit*.

Zhui Ning Chang (Twitter: [@witchywanderer](https://twitter.com/witchywanderer)) is a Malaysian writer, stage director, and all-around storyteller. Too politically charged for her own good, she has worked primarily as an editor the last few years and is now turning towards original writing in both fiction and nonfiction. Currently, she is based in London, where she is majoring in comparative literature at King's College London.

John C. Mannone has work in *Artemis*, *Poetry South*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Peacock Journal*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pedestal*, *Pirene's Fountain*, and others. He's the winner of the 2017 Jean Ritchie Fellowship in Appalachian literature and the recipient of two Weymouth writing residencies. He has three poetry collections: [*Apocalypse*](#) (Alban Lake Publishing) won 3rd place for the 2017 Elgin Book Award; [*Disabled Monsters*](#) (The Linnet's Wings Press) featured at the 2016 Southern Festival of Books; and *Flux Lines* (Celtic Cat Publishing) —love-related poems using science

metaphors due out in 2018. He's been awarded the 2017 Horror Writers Association Scholarship, two Joy Margrave Awards for Nonfiction, and nominated for several Pushcart, Rhysling, and Best of the Net awards. He edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex*, *Silver Blade*, and *Liquid Imagination*. He's a professor of physics near Knoxville, TN.

[Stephanie V. Sears](#) is a French and American ethnologist (Ph.D. 1993 Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales), freelance journalist, essayist, fiction writer and poet whose poetry appeared recently in *The Comstock Review*, *The Legendary*, *The Rufous City*, *All roads will lead you home*, *Literary Orphans*, and *Burning Word*.

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"You Know the Rules, and So Do I"

by Timothy Yam

This is the boy.

The boy's name is Wei Qiang. He checks his watch. 11.52 pm. He glances at it not just because he is acutely aware that the time crawls closer to 12.15 am, but also because it gives him something to do. He is conscious of the weight of the watch. It is a Tag. His father's. The Tag's strap is crafted with metal links. They look like chains. They smell like old coins. They clasp together with a satisfying click. The sound hangs in his ears, rich and aged. It lingers so clearly that he feels he can reach out and touch it.

The boy is waiting outside a club, alone. There is a black river beneath him. His feet are clad in ill fitting brown shoes. He should not have bought this pair, but they looked pleasing and they were the only ones left in the store. His scalp sweats. This worries him. He spent half an hour on his hair, and he fears the sweat will wash away the delicately sculpted wax to reveal the centre parting beneath. This is the second time he has tried to style his hair. The first time went badly. Neither he nor his classmates forgot it.

The boy checks his watch. 11.53 pm. He knows that the song "Never Gonna Give You Up" drops in the club at a fifteen to twenty minute window after 12.15 am. He has been told by his older brother and cousins that it is a rite of passage. A shared moment of camaraderie where the club moves as one in clockwork with the music. The boy is not foolish enough to expect to be part of this perfect harmony. He just wants to see it for himself. He wants to feel it the same camaraderie that will find him at the end of a ferry terminal on Pulau Tekong.

The boy checks his phone. The people he is supposed to meet are not his friends. The only reason he is here is because of the vagaries of fate and the Ministry of Defence. The boy did not expect that when he responded to the Facebook status proclaiming "EH WHO ELSE KENA U COY 1500 ON 8 APRIL AH?" that he would be the only one of Thomas's 1,007 friends who would

enlist at the same time in the same company. Perhaps due to this newly created bond, Thomas of the 1,007 friends messaged Wei Qiang of the 191 friends, to meet him and 'his buds' outside Zouk at midnight to go for one last Mambo night before "the army takes our fucking lives away."

11.55 pm. The boy allows himself to call Thomas. Thomas is a rugby captain. Thomas has a perfect haircut. It is shaved close to the sides with a long, angular fringe that has fallen over his forehead at the same exact angle for two years. Thomas answers the call. His voice sounds like it comes from somewhere happy. Thomas tells the boy that his friend Melinda or Belinda is already there and will call him ASAP to meet up. He hangs up. The boy's phone rings again: an unknown number. He answers, and it is Belinda or Melinda, telling him to come over to the bridge, the one near Furama hotel, and please god she hopes he has some booze.

The boy walks over to the bridge, bathed in the glow of streetlights and red faces. Melinda not Belinda welcomes him to a ring of people finishing up the last of the rum. A cheer rattles the air as Melinda not Belinda announces that the boy came with Jack and Coke. He is welcomed, and a flush surges through his body. He recognises them all by sight, especially Melinda of course not Belinda the dancer, the girlfriend of the hockey captain who is noticeably absent. The ring asks the boy if he's the dude who's going to be *tekaned* by the same sergeant as Thomas. He says yes. The ring informs him he looks familiar. He says he is in Anyi's class. His chest rises with the pride of knowing the Yale-bound vice-head councillor. She sat two seats away from him in class. The ring tells him that she never mentioned him before. They do not mean to be cruel. This only makes it worse.

Fifteen minutes later, a swell of sound arises as the king arrives. The boy waits his turn to pay court. Eventually, Thomas reaches the boy, and greets him sagely with 'crazy shit, huh?' The boy affirms that shit is indeed crazy. Thomas pulls a cigarette out of a pack and bestows one. The boy hesitates, then refuses. Thomas nods before lighting up and states that if not now that confirm will start in the army because that's what happens. The boy refuses again. He knows he is not 'a smoker', unlike his elder brother and Thomas.

Three drags later and Thomas is talking to sequin-dressed twins with dyed hair and stories of NUS law interviews. People are lining up to shake his hand, like that first scene in that

gangster movie the boy saw, which he liked but said he didn't because everyone else in his class said it was 'fucking boring'. The line to pay tribute cuts through the detritus of plastic cups and empty bottles. The boy finishes his drink and checks his watch. 12.21 am. He feels the pull of the club, but knows that what is a pilgrimage to him is only another night to Thomas, Melinda not Belinda, and the ring. He looks at them with awe. The girls are poured into tiny dresses. The boys are moulded in tight t-shirts. They all exist with the intense casualness of youth. They just *are*.

Then, Melinda not Belinda stands up unsteadily and declares in a ringing voice that she did not pay good fucking money to stand on a fucking bridge and sweat her fucking tits off on a fucking hot night, and wasn't it about high fucking time that they went in? There is a roar of approval. The ring morphs into a wave, carrying the boy on its outskirts. The rest of the Jack, his Jack, is swept around the wave. Finally, it lands back in his hands with one and a half swigs left. The boy slams it down to approval, enjoying the back slaps as much as the scorching heat of the alcohol.

The entrance to Zouk is a yawning neon-lit maw. Two muscular men plucked right from the army recruitment posters flank the approach. They are led by a woman in a mini-dress. She looks like she has come out of one of the boy's less savoury dreams. All three are armed with an expression of concentrated boredom. Immediately, the faces of the ring mirror this look. It is a practiced expression honed from years of deigning to acknowledge lesser beings passing them on school corridors. Nervousness seeps out of the boy's armpits. This is the point where he will be uncovered as an interloper. He can see it. They will look at his IC. They will look at him. The mini-dressed woman will shake her head. The boy will turn around and scuttle away. The rest of the wave will not even notice.

The boy reaches the front of the queue, just behind Thomas. He fumbles for his ID. This further outs himself as an outsider to this fantastical world that has barred him from entry since puberty. Unlike him, the rest don't bother with identification. They know they have been identified. Thomas is waved through, as a look of recognition passes through him and the mini-dressed woman. It is a look of fraternity. An understanding that they are of the same species. The look smears off her face when the boy reaches the front of the line. His body begins to

crumble and he starts to turn back. Then, he hears Thomas bellowing three magical words from out of the yawning maw.

“He’s with me.”

Inside the club, it is a different world. A blast of air-conditioning casts off the sweat. He allows himself to be steered towards the maelstrom of sound and vision in the centre. He is guided by the current of bodies down the throbbing canal towards the light. His body senses it before he does. A shudder passes through his nerves. The wave surges into the middle of the dance floor, crashing against a pedestal of dancers moving in perfect synchronisation to the music. Someone, possibly Belinda or was it Melinda pulls him up onto the platform, as the triumphant synths of “Never Gonna Give You Up” play.

Muscle memory takes over as he sings the first two lines of the song in perfect unison with Rick Astley. We’re no strangers to love. You know the rules, and so do I. Two weeks of intense memorisation and practice of each dance move flows through him. He dances each step to unerring precision. At one point, the boy and the entire floor clap once in unison, and it feels like he has conjured a sound of thunder. The ring has reformed with him and Thomas in the epicentre. Even in his reverie, he can see the boredom melt away, to be replaced by admiration.

One song ends. Another begins. This one he knows too. He is lost in the music. The song builds to a crescendo, and he finds himself tearing up as he mouths to Al Corley’s ‘oh-oh-ohs’. He too knows the feeling of being in square rooms which neither listen nor care if a man is in despair. Song after song after song come and go, and he feels each one so deeply that his heart aches. The music utters truth. Only you can set me free. We’ll always be together in electric dreams. Life is indeed peaceful out west.

The trance is snapped when Thomas puts his arm around his shoulder and shouts something in his ear. The boy knows not what Thomas is saying, but understands that he is beckoning him to follow. The pulsing throng seems to part for them as they weave their way through. Thomas pushes open a fire door and the music is snuffed out, replaced by a squawk of voices and a fume of cigarette smoke. A cigarette is proffered. He takes it. Thomas asks if this is his first. The boy nods. Thomas explains to him to breathe in through his mouth when he lights

it. Hold the smoke in his mouth and take another breath to get it into his lungs. See. Just like that. He is a natural.

Halfway in and the boy Wei Qiang is lightheaded. He has said nothing but 'yes' and 'sure' so far. The alcohol has made Thomas sentimental, and he is fast-talking about how he's glad there is someone to go in with him, someone he knows who can support him in BMT, someone he considers a friend. The boy coughs out a lungful of smoke, and Thomas throws his head back in an easy laugh. This is the crest of the wave. It does not get any better than this.

The fire door swings open behind him as Melinda saunters in. Through the haze, the boy can detect a change in Thomas's chiselled features. She glides over to Thomas and demands a fucking cigarette. After a moment's hesitation, Thomas offers it to her. A murmur passes through them. She lights up, and throws a glance at the boy. Her hair is pulled back tight into a high ponytail. Her skin glows with youth and alcohol. Her lips are crimson. Her eyes are veiled with the colour of the dusk sun emerging after a thunderstorm. She is wreathed in smoke. She sees his admiration, and turns up the corners of her lips as a boon.

Thomas grips the boy's shoulders and says that they should go in. Melinda says that she does not want to smoke alone. Nothing is said. The boy can hear the sizzle of her cigarette. Thomas relents and pulls another out of the pack. He places it in the boy's hand like a royal token. Looking slightly above the boy's right shoulder at the shroud of smoke, Thomas tells him to be careful with it. Do not go too far.

The fire door slams shut.

"What is your name?"

He tells her.

"Oh. So you're from school, yeah?"

He confirms her statement.

"Fuck, I'm sorry if you said all this earlier, but I was drunk as hell just now, finally sweated most of it out on the floor."

He nods.

"Looking forward to it? The army I mean."

He says no.

“Yeah, it’s shit. I dated an army guy last year. The training made him pretty cut, but he was so fucking boring. Everything was sergeants this and SAR that. Better make sure you don’t end up like him.”

He wishes to say something clever, like how he wouldn’t mind ending up like him if it meant being with her. Instead, he just says ‘ok’.

“Where did you learn how to dance like that? I’ve never seen you here before. I’ve been here since I was underage and I still don’t know half the damn moves. Guess that’s what you get when you try to dance after flaming lambos.”

He lies.

“No shit? You got all of that after coming here twice? Man, you must be some kind of dance genius. You move really good, I mean, for a guy. Why didn’t you try out for dance back then?”

He lies again.

“Ah, don’t bluff. I know why. It’s because you scared they say you gay right? Seriously, if only the fucking homophobes knew. Most of the assholes in dance were straight, and had no problem proving it aggressively when they performed with you. Shitheads.”

He agrees.

She takes a long pull of her cigarette. “Men, no, fuck, boys, cause that’s what they are. Boys are such goddamn retards. I’m done dating boys. Done as of yesterday.”

He asks what happened.

“What do you think? Broke up with Kaven. You know what he did?”

He does not know.

“The fucker, the stupid fucker, slipped off the condom just before going in. Said he wanted to ‘try’. Could have asked, right? I mean, I would have said no, because I’m not going to be pregnant in uni, but ...”

He sympathises.

“Aw, that’s sweet of you. You’re sweet. Really. You’re not like them with their fucking ‘bro code’. Bro code my ass. Thomas still called me along even after he knew. Heard Kave threw a bitch fit and refused to come if I turned up. All the more I want to be here. Serves him right.”

Melinda stabs the cigarette into a wall.

“Let’s go in. I want more.”

They go back into the rush of flesh and sound. Melinda takes the boy’s hand to prevent them from getting separated in the throng. He fears she can feel his pulse quickening. They catch up with the rest of the ring at the lower bar. Thomas shoots a glance at the interlaced hands. Melinda does not let go. Thomas gets up, unsteady, but before he can say anything, he is interrupted by a procession of waitresses bearing tequila shots. The ring drinks to Thomas, who will be lost to them for three months of basic training. With regal grace, Thomas yells out that they should toast the boy Wei Qiang as well. The ring duly obliges. Half of them mangle his name. The boy does not care. Melinda takes a shot off the tray and puts it to his lips. The alcohol is bitter burning. The boy does not care.

The ring goes back onto the floor, led by Thomas. Melinda guides the boy as they follow at the rear. Halfway, she leads him by the hand in a different direction into a smaller room. Red and blue lights swirl around them. The people here dance differently. There is no synchronicity or coordination, only randomness and chaos. Girls alone or in pairs sway unsteadily, as packs of guys surround them. Occasionally one lunges in, crotch first, until he is pushed away or the girl sways somewhere else. Couples making out dot the floor, lone stars in the inky black.

The beats are harder here. They make the boy’s teeth rattle. There is barely enough space to breathe, let alone dance. A blast of mist is fired upon the heaving mass. When it clears, Melinda is facing him. She takes his hand and places it on the small of her back. Instinct takes over and he pulls her tight into him. This gesture of dominance scares away the marauding packs who had been slowly sniffing closer since they sensed her presence.

Even in the confines of the throng, she moves with liquid grace. He is grateful for the dark, the mist, the crush of people, the bone thumping four by four beats, the disembodied voice telling him that she wants him to make her feel like she’s the only girl in the world, for they disguise his awkwardness and give him a reason to push his erection closer to her body. Her hair smells like lavender and tobacco smoke.

He does not know how long they dance. Every song sounds the same. Unlike the Mambo songs with their warm synths and soaring choruses, these songs consist of different permutations of grunts and thuds. From time to time, a loud voice yells the word ‘bitch’.

Melinda leans over and shouts something into his ear. He cannot hear her over the grunts and thuds and bitches. Instinct takes over and he nods. She smiles. She kisses him. This is his first kiss. He does not know how to kiss back, so he just accepts it in a way that he hopes portrays the same lackadaisical insouciance that she seems to exude with every breath.

His crotch buzzes, and the boy is plunged into panic. It is merely Melinda's phone. She checks it, holding it in front of her face while the boy keeps his hands on her hips like he is carrying a valuable vase. She cocks her head and shouts something that he cannot hear. She takes his hand, not noticing the Pavlovian puckering of his lips, and guides him back out the club into the wet hot breath of the Singapore night. The rest are on the bridge, she says. Some shit's gone down.

On the bridge, shit indeed appears to have gone down. A girl he recognises from the ring is clutching a railing and crying. A plastic cup with a trickle of black liquid lies next to her. Another boy lies curled up in a foetal position next to a puddle of vomit. Two boys and a girl sit, their legs dangling over the bridge. The girl is missing a shoe. They are having three different conversations. The sequin-dressed twins are checking their phones. In the ghostly blue light, the boy Wei Qiang can see their makeup is smeared. Bottles lie on the ground, and dark sticky stains pimple the bridge. The boy hears howls and shrieks and cries and whispers and recriminations and has to squat down, head in hands, for it has become too much.

When he looks up, Melinda is talking to someone who he realises is the ex-hockey captain Kaven, the one who thought it would be a good idea to slip off the condom before going in. Behind them, looking sheepish, stands Thomas. His fringe is no longer at the usual precise angle. His face is flushed and blotchy. The sweat stains on his armpits are spreading like some virulent plague. Kaven, whose perfectly coiffed hair and unscuffed shoes betray the fact that he has just arrived to the party, marches over to the boy and hollers at him just like the boy imagines a sergeant would. Except a sergeant would probably not be screaming why the fuck were you hitting on my girlfriend you pathetic loser.

The boy gets to his feet and Kaven shoves him in the chest. The boy totters backward. Kaven takes a step closer and snarls the same question again. Before the boy can even reply, Kaven pushes him back once more. Melinda screams at him to stop, and Kaven calls her a

fucking slut. The boy looks at Thomas, standing by the side. He is turning his phone in his hands. Not using it or typing, just rotating the phone mechanically with his fingers. The rest of him is still. He is looking determinedly at a point somewhere in the distance. Kaven turns to shove the boy again, but before he can do so, the boy Wei Qiang, soon to be a man, punches him square on the jaw.

Melinda screams. Pain shoots up his fist into his heart into his brain. Kaven staggers back and steps into the pool of vomit. Thomas does not react. He just flips his phone, slower this time. Kaven shouts, not at the boy but at the world, shouts what the fuck just happened. The fucking loser just hit him. Upon hearing that, the fucking loser hits him again. This time, the boy hears something crack in his fist. There is no more pain. Kaven stumbles and lands flat on his back. Melinda grabs the boy's arm and asks him what are you doing you fucking psycho. Thomas says nothing. Melinda rushes over to Kaven and places a hand on his cheek, causing him to whimper in pain.

The boy Wei Qiang looks down at his fist. It is swelling, turning plum purple. There is no feeling in it except the weight of the Tag. He breathes in and can taste the tang of blood and metal links. The word 'loser' rings in his ears. The sequin-dressed, makeup-smearing twins look up to consider the scene. They go back to typing on their phones. The boy feels himself grabbed and pulled away from Kaven, Kaven who slipped off the condom whose face is being cradled by Melinda. The remaining members of the ring drag him from the bridge onto solid ground. In a haze, he hears their voice come and go, and he feels each one so deeply his heart aches. They utter truth. Go home, you fucking loser. We knew you were a weirdo. Why the hell would Thomas be friends with someone like you. He sees Thomas, still frozen solid on the bridge, a look of uncertainty stamped on his face, as though it had always been there and the layers over it had been scraped away. It is the look you have when classmates snigger about your hair behind your back. The look when you hear that the person you sat two seats away from had barely acknowledged your existence. It is the look of a lost, sad, scared boy. Wei Qiang recognises that look.

Wei Qiang shakes off the hands of the ring and turns from them. He walks down the riverbank, following its flowing current. He walks through the swarm of children drinking and

smoking and kissing and screaming and singing and swearing and puking and crying. They part before his step. He reaches the path leading from the river to the main road and walks down it, alone, bathed in the warm hue of streetlights. Motes of water and dust glow amber before him. He enlists today. At 1500 hours, he will walk onto a ferry and ride it to U Company, Pulau Tekong, to be shaven bald and do push-ups and be shouted at by sergeants. Today, he becomes a man.

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“The Soda’s Lament”

by Sonya Chyu

Those were the days of faith, overly zealous and wholly unfounded. But still they believed. It wasn’t that they had nowhere else to turn, but that they had nowhere else they wanted to look. And why would they? This was the shrine of legends, the house of dreams.

In reality, the structure itself wasn’t particularly ornate or awe-inspiring, but it wasn’t without taste, either. As far as spirit houses went, this one quite literally paled in comparison to the massive monuments aggregating at every street corner in Bangkok. A mere two-foot-long rectangular prism atop four slender wooden stilts, the shrine showcased gold and red paint alternating in their peelings. Floral wreaths hung nonchalantly in the house’s entrance, and urban legend rumored that the gabled roof’s broken curve was the result of a particularly clumsy house cat (who, shortly after, fell to her death). The shrine’s location was obscure and hard to find on a good day, but perhaps the arduous search made the destination all the more worthwhile. Visitors had to traverse not one but three narrow alleyways that weaved amongst some of Thailand’s most dangerous triad neighborhoods, not to mention the murky western river that some say is not a natural river at all but the result of centuries of wastewater pollution. And because the shrine’s powers were thought to be most potent at night; believers tended to flock monthly when the moon rounded out, if only to better view its path.

What was most striking to the eye, what hopefuls were told to look for, were the hundreds of glass bottles of strawberry soda, each with a perfectly-bent straw sticking through the opening, safeguarding the shrine: every flat surface of the altar, every corner of the house, as well as dotting the ground below in a massive unrestrained sprawl imitating the countryside’s red devil ants. The universally-acknowledged drink of choice of the spirits, red soda was the bestselling soft drink in Thailand for this very purpose, its brilliant

hue like mental reminders of an ancient faith. Anywhere else in the world, soda was soda, but here, soda was sacred.

By night, the structure was revered and praised, sought by the devout and curious alike as vindication of sin or confirmation of divinity. Others merely wanted signs from the universe as guidance. One lady sought the healthy deliverance of her grandson, another to avoid a second miscarriage, and yet another to someday love her husband. Children wished for better marks in class, if only to get more spending allowance and fewer punishments, while men bartered with offerings of durian and rose apple for both his wife and mistress to remain oblivious to the other's existence. Ultimately, everyone wanted happiness, but had wildly dissonant visions of what they thought were conducive to it. Money, career, house, spouse. These wishes they clutched to desperately until they had rendered themselves in their hearts.

If someone had been keeping track, perhaps tallying the number of times each visitor had called upon the shrine, they would know that its most fervent worshipper was not a grown-up, nor a child, for that matter. Rather, a girl at the cusp of womanhood had been coming once a month every month for the past seven years. Since her first visit, every skin cell in her body was different from the ones that composed her now. But still she wished for the same thing.

What she sought was something so frustratingly simple one would wonder whether or not she was mad. Every prayer began and ended identically, spoken in the same elementary jargon of her thirteen-year old self: Dear Spirit, Forgive me, for I have an odd request: I want to feel sadness. Not for forever, but my problem is that I just can't seem to feel it at all. It's not that my life is perfect—I always want things I can't have. And it's not that I don't get angry or jealous or happy. Actually, it seems as if I have experienced every emotion in the world but sadness. So just once, I would like to be sad. Thank you.

The phenomenon began, or rather, existed, since her birth. Indeed, she didn't even realize it was a cause for concern until the class koi fish died in primary school and everyone cried but her. Why are they all sobbing? She wondered. The koi fish had simply reached an age for it to pass on to the afterlife. It could be quite happy there, maybe even happier than it was in this life, stuck in a tank constantly harassed by the sticky fingers of first graders.

She had never fully comprehended sadness as a concept. More than anything, she wanted to know how others felt when they cried, why mother would appear with bruised puffy eyes at 8 o'clock in the morning, why her best friend came to school with that sad shuffle of a walk every Thursday, why father stopped looking her in the eye when he spoke to her. But crying itself wasn't sufficient indication of sadness, because people also cried when they were happy or scared or stressed.

She couldn't feel sadness, and this terrified her most of all, so much so that almost all of her fears were related to sadness. And naturally, what she couldn't know eventually drove her to the edge of a muted delirium. She became obsessed, researching the many different types of sadness, asking the bedraggled beggar at the corner mart entrance to describe sadness—but the only thing he quipped was that sadness was a social construct, that after one year, a lottery winner and paraplegic converge at the same level of happiness. She interviewed eight-year olds and septuagenarians, school headmasters and ascetic monks, businesswomen and the owners of a deeply respectable beef noodle shop.

She began compiling a list of sadnesses that began with the mundane, like the sadness that comes with knowing the movie you're watching is dubbed, or the sadness of burning your birthday cake in the oven, or the sadness of complimenting someone out of politeness, even if you don't really believe they lost a lot of weight. Then there were what she labeled the Complex Hybrids, the sadness from the realization that everything you have is too perfect, your life is too good, someone else works just as hard yet has maybe half your life; or a sadness magnified by anger, because it is directed at someone whom you love more than you love yourself. Lastly, there was her own special sadness—or lack thereof. The only one in the universe that belonged solely to her, the sadness that comes from the inability to experience sadness.

Part of her was scared that once she gained sadness she would lose happiness, like having half a stuffy nose and sleeping on your other side to relieve it, only to find the other nostril stuffed. Her self-consuming search for sadness wasn't an act of privilege, nor did she believe it to be punishment from divinity. But still, when the first faint whispers of rumor drifted by her one day at school, tales of an immensely powerful spirit house, indecipherable in its origins, eerily accurate in its wish-granting, she sprinted out of the school grounds to find it that afternoon.

Her first encounter was nothing special, probably because she had come in with extraordinarily high hopes. She became desperate, distraught. She lost sleep and half her mind daydreaming about watching a dog die and being able to cry with conviction. But between these spells of anxiety, she lived her life just as anyone her age would have—school dances, monthly exams, weekend tutoring, sleepovers. As the moon waxed and waned, and the tides began yet another cycle in their quest to kiss the moon, she learned to subdue her worries and fears during the day, as if it were as simple as stopping a leaky vessel with a piece of moldable rubber.

Still, she visited the spirit house every month without fail. Occasionally she would whisper to herself that this trip would be her last, that she would be cured and it was all just an adolescent phase. Once, she sensed another being, a creature perhaps, in the bushes, observing her harmlessly with a cautious curiosity. She was certain it would approach her with enlightened words, or bestow upon her a tale so heart-wrenchingly beautiful that she would collapse by the soda bottles and cry until dawn. But it never did.

On the night of her 100th visit, three days before her twenty-first birthday, everything was as usual. The man-made river gurgled enigmatically, as if lamenting its accidental creation. Stray cats sauntered with the breeze, and somewhere beyond the bushes there were the first summer stirrings of cicadas.

Moonlight bounced off the shrine's gold paint, which bounced off a glass bottle placed haphazardly near the altar's edge. In this luminous energy, the soda looked freshly opened, strangely thick, nourishing. Maybe the answer had been there all along. Maybe sadness had merely been disguised as the thing that remained after regret had shed its burden of the past. Sadness was the realization that she had devoted seven years to a problem whose solution had offered itself to her day in and day out, if only she would notice. She brought the bottle to her quivering lips in anticipation, priming her heart with images of her mother's bruised face.

Suddenly her life's central quandary experienced a cataclysmic shift from why me? to why mother?

She became trapped in a blinding, brilliant crimson that was the tears of past, present, and future, and something close to sadness swelled from deep within.

She closed her eyes and drank.

* * * * *

“Noodles, Barley Water and Smart Phones”

by CA Yin

The hawker pulled a handful of thin vermicelli noodles from the basket, nodding as Mother gave her order. “Two bowls of bee-hoon fish ball soup and one kolo mee to eat here, and one kolo mee to take away,” she said, holding Younger Brother’s hand and her shopping basket in the other. The hawker nodded as she dropped the noodles into a wire sieve with a long wooden handle and dipped it into the large pot of boiling water, swirling the bee-hoon rapidly, separating the strands with a long pair of wooden cooking chopsticks. Steam rose from the boiling water; the hawker lowered the flame at the stove and hooked the wire sieve against the side of pot. She poured a little sesame oil into a ceramic bowl and added black soya sauce and a sprinkle of pepper.

Mother stepped away with Younger Brother in search of a vacant table. All around, families sat together, chatting, chopsticks clicking. Friends hailed one another and gossiped over steaming dumplings and curry noodles while others slouched over their smart phones, thumbs pressing urgently. A few young men sat and ate while openly staring at foreign football players chasing a ball on the huge TV screen suspended overhead. Jing-Ni’s fringe was damp against her forehead as the sweat trickled down her neck. She stepped back from the hawker’s stove and the steam that was curling up in the humid air. Off on the right at a table, the hawker’s teenaged daughter was cutting little strips of wantan skins. Her brother was filling the strips with minced meat and bunching them into wantans while he nodded in time to the music playing in his ear buds, his eyes darting from the YouTube video playing on his smart phone and the wantan skin and spoon of meat in his hands.

Jing-Ni shifted her weight from left to right. She was already holding two bags full of the morning’s purchases from the wet market, and she wriggled her fingers, wondering when

she would get to sit down. A loud sizzle sounded as a hawker slid a chicken drumstick covered in batter into a deep wok filled with hot oil. A waft of fried chicken mixed with the pungent spices from the Indian stall further down the row drifted past and Jing-Ni wrinkled her nose. She was not fond of curry.

Mother had finally found a recently vacated table, and she called Jing-Ni over to sit. She lifted Younger Brother onto a chair and helped Jing-Ni to place her shopping bags onto a free chair. Jing-Ni rubbed her sore fingers and looked around eagerly for a drinks boy or girl to come around. Mother beckoned a young boy in the signature green shirt with the food court's name etched on it in bold letters. "Drinks?" The drinks boy stacked the previous diners' bowls and cups, then wiped off the table with a damp, off-white rag. "One iced black coffee, one iced barley water and one iced Milo, please," Mother told him. Jing-Ni sighed with relief. She couldn't wait to feel the cool liquid filling her mouth and trickling down her throat.

While Mother sorted the purchases on the spare chair at their table, Jing-Ni turned to look at the families seated at the tables nearby. One caught her eye. A little girl no more than two, smaller even than Younger Brother, was sitting on three chairs stacked on top of each other. She was perched on the chairs just level to have her meal. All the grown-ups were eating and talking; it seemed as if no one was paying any attention to the little girl, but she didn't fidget. She was staring at something; her little dimpled hands clenched on the table. Then her mother nudged her mouth open with a spoon and tipped a fish ball into her mouth. The little girl chewed automatically, her eyes never moving. Jing-Ni shifted in her chair and peeked around a stout man talking loudly as he helped himself to a prawn dumpling. The little girl was staring at a smart phone propped up against a can of chrysanthemum tea. A video was playing. Little figures darted here and there, colours shimmered and moved. Jing-Ni looked up at the adults at the table. They were chatting, laughing, chewing, their chopsticks reaching and spoons dipping.

Their drinks finally arrived. Mother fished for the change in her purse while Jing-Ni held Younger Brother's glass steady for him. He took a long sip of iced Milo from his straw while

Jing-Ni drew in deeply from her glass; the iced barley water was perfect. Waiting for the noodles to arrive, Jing-Ni scooped up the barley pearls in her glass with the long thin spoon. They helped to soothe her hunger pangs. Then the hawker's helper was on her way carrying a tin tray with their bowls of noodles on it. Deftly, she placed the bowls onto the table; kolo mee for Younger Brother and bee-hoon fish ball soup for Mother and Jing-Ni, and one packet of kolo mee to take away for Father. Mother paid while Jing-Ni handed Younger Brother a pair of chopsticks. He could handle them quite well already and started digging eagerly into his noodles. But just as Jing-Ni pushed her little saucer of cut chillies to Mother, she heard a sharp shriek.

It was the little girl at the next table. Someone had taken away the can of chrysanthemum tea and the smart phone had fallen over. The little girl was trying to reach the phone, but it was too far away. Her mother picked it up, but although the can was replaced, it was empty now and too light to support the phone. The little girl started kicking her legs and thumping the table with her little fists while her mother tried to prop up the phone on her glass of iced coffee. The little girl stopped shrieking when her mother gave her the phone and she swiped and touched the screen with her little fingers.

"Eat up," Mother said. "We have to meet Father soon."

Jing-Ni turned obediently back to her bowl of steaming soup noodles. She picked up a fish ball and blew on it. Mother was wiping Younger Brother's chin where a strand of kolo mee shone on his oily chin. She knew what Jing-Ni was thinking. "Nope," Mother said. "No smart phone for you till after your PT3 exams." Jing-Ni looked down at her noodles. There was nothing she could say about it. She had already brought up her classmates with phones, her cousins with phones, the little kids at coffee shops with phones. She was the only pupil in the whole Primary 5 who didn't have a smart phone of her own.

Younger Brother was asking Mother about going for a swim at the indoor aquatic centre. "A swim or a visit to the state library?" Mother asked. "Or maybe both?" Jing-Ni suggested. The library was across river and a bit of a drive, but there were the books and the computer

centre which made it worth it. Younger Brother was a big fan of Pandelega Rinong, though, and was determined to become a champion diver just like her. Maybe a swim at the Youth and Sports Complex would be the best after this sweaty trip to the market and the food court.

She had just finished her last fish ball and Younger Brother had swallowed his last noodle when the big group at the next table started to get up to leave. The little girl was hoisted up by her mother and, as if it were in slow motion, Jing-Ni saw the smart phone slip from her fingers and fall hard onto the floor. Struggling to get down from her mother's grasp, the little girl continued to shriek. An instant later, the stout man in the group stepped on the phone and Jing-Ni heard a crunch as his foot drove it into the ground. The stout man jumped back, too late, and everyone stared at the crushed phone on the food court floor. By now, most of the people at the tables nearby were watching to see what would happen next. Even Mother was looking. The little girl's cries continued until her father gave her his phone. She was still sniffing as the parents carried her and the pieces of the broken phone away.

"That's why you're not getting a phone till you're 16," Mother said as they finished the last of their drinks. "That and being addicted to videos and games even during meal times!" Jing-Ni rolled her eyes up but that brought her back to the huge TV screen up above showing 20 foreign men chasing a ball. Her eyes dropped down to see the people glued to the TV screen. Those who were not watching the game were socialising with their friends on smart phones while their family members or friends sat next to them eating their meals. Old or young, it was hard to tell who was more connected to the people around them or to the people at the other end of the Internet line. She sighed.

Mother and Younger Brother were making their way between the tables and chairs. Jing-Ni walked behind them with the purchases from the morning's shopping. At the end of the food court, right on time, Father appeared. He waved with a big smile on his face. "We got your lunch!" Younger Brother said, thrusting the packet of noodles at Father. Coming forward and taking the heavier bags from Mother and Jing-Ni, he said, "Thanks, little man!

Come on. Time to go home, and time for me to have my bowl of noodles!” Jing-Ni followed him obediently. The good thing was that it was Saturday, so Mother wouldn’t hurry her to do her housework. The swim at the aquatic centre or the visit to the state library could still happen later in the afternoon or even tomorrow. While Father ate his noodles, she could ask him about work. Maybe he would tell her about the latest app that he was designing for his new client or about the game that had kids and grown-ups alike screaming for more. And maybe, just maybe, he would show her on his smart phone.

* * * * *

“Singapore Sling”

by Daniel Emlyn-Jones

Vanessa spots me as she approaches the Bayfront MRT turnstiles, waves and smiles. As she draws near to me, I see that time has not been kind to the woman. The brunette waterfall of hair she had at school thirty years ago is now a definite bottle brunette waterfall; if her roots get any longer, her head will look like a liquorice allsort. If her crow’s feet get any deeper, she’ll look like she’s had some altercation with an angry gypsy. She doesn’t kiss me, but elaborately kisses the air next to each of my cheeks and says ‘mwah’ very loudly, the ‘ah’ a long drawn out affair which sirens down in sympathy like some Cantonese particle. “Mwaaaaah! David Darling! How long has it been? Thirty years?”

Her voice has deteriorated too. “Probably. I’ve lost count.”

She grabs my hand. Hers are like ice. “But you’re looking so tired darling,” I say. Tired is a euphemism for old. I’m such a bitch. I didn’t want to see her. I’d have been quite happy never seeing her again. It was she who emailed me out of the blue practically begging to visit me. After some more small talk, we reach Gardens by the Bay. The two greenhouses, the Cloud Forest and the Flower Dome glint like glass boobs in the sun, and Vanessa’s hazel eyes rove over the grand spectacle of super-trees, high rises, and gorgeous islands of graceful nibong palms. If there’s any doubt left, Marina Bay Sands towers over everything, a great ship out of water giving a great big ‘fuck you’ to anyone who thinks Singapore isn’t pretty damn amazing.

“It’s so extraordinary! Haven’t they done well!” she cries. It’s her first visit to Singapore.

What did she expect? A rickety attap hut built on the ruins of British colonialism? I just smile and nod.

She puts her arm though mine and squeezes up to me. “So, tell me what you’ve been up to.” She makes it sound like our school days were last week. I remove my arm from hers

and distance myself slightly. She winces. I then go through all my achievements since school. My bachelor's degree, my PhD, ten years as a research scientist, a Diploma of Education and now my position as schoolteacher in Singapore. They bow to me each morning now. They call me sir.

"Gosh, haven't you done well!" she says.

What did she think I'd do with my life? Join a circus? All I do is smile.

"And what have you been up to?" I ask in the same melodramatic tone she used with me.

"Oh, nothing spectacular. I'm just someone's personal assistant," she laughs.

"Oh, so you didn't become a lawyer?" I remember at school she had her clique of successful girls with their briefcases and their smart skirts. They were all destined to be lawyers and solve difficult cases. "Poor David" they'd say to each other over coffee, shaking their heads, and pouting their painted lips. I can imagine her aging willowy figure now adorning some over-perfumed pink-carpeted reception somewhere, her sloppy attempts to cheat Father Time leading to an eventual state of mummification.

We tour the gardens and she wows at everything. When not wowing she tells me about her ex-husband, the devil incarnate apparently, and enumerates his various cruelties. Eventually in the Flower Dome she stops under a baobab tree and waits for a group of people to pass so we'll be alone. She sighs as if resolving to do something, and then clasps her hands together and steadies herself, like a tree trying to establish roots. She clears her throat. "I want to say something David," she says.

"Go ahead," I reply casually.

"I just want to say that...all those years ago when we were at school...I'm sorry...I feel terrible..." She shakes her head and puts a hand on her forehead. "I practised what to say but now that I'm here I've forgotten it all."

There are tears in her eyes. I know she is trying to be kind, but how can I tell her the truth? How can I tell her that every second she's standing under that tree looking at me with those eyes, I'm feeling like that fat, sweating, cringing boy again? How can I tell her that I hate her for it?

She swallows and leans against a wall. The colour has disappeared from her face. A baobab flower blooms behind her, in perspective appearing to decorate her hair. According to legend, if you pluck a Baobab flower you will be killed by a lion.

She begins to cry. I stand motionless, like a scientist observing some natural process. "One of the reasons I came David... is..." Her thin body trembles. She suppresses a sob and her voice suddenly becomes clear and objective. "I have cancer. Pancreatic cancer. It's inoperable...terminal...a year to live at best... That's why I came to visit you."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that," I say, with a warmth I don't feel. I feel nothing. "Haven't you got family you need to visit too?" I ask.

"Not really. My parents are dead, my husband is gone. We never had any children. I tried but..."

She wants me to draw close to her, to comfort her, but I don't. I can't. I leave the baobab tree and continue walking, and she is forced to follow me. We talk about her medical treatments and the cost of her travel insurance. We then admire the poinsettia display set out for Christmas.

We have a late breakfast at Satay by the Bay, a hawker style food centre in the gardens. I have Kopi C with Set A breakfast. The Kopi C is strong Malaysian coffee with condensed milk, and beats the hell out of British coffee. The Set A breakfast consists of two eggs and two pieces of toast with kaya butter. My only gripe is that in Singapore the eggs are almost raw, but when I ask for cooked eggs I get eggs so hard they taste like rubber. I've solved this dilemma by getting them to put the eggs in a little pot of boiling water. I wait for seven minutes by which time they're perfectly soft-boiled. While I'm waiting for my eggs to cook, Vanessa breaks through the small talk and reaches her gnarled hand with painted nails across the table.

"It wasn't fair what they did to you," she says, forcing me with a jolt into the past again.

"It was so long ago. Why are you going on about it?" I say, irritated. "I can hardly remember what happened," I lie.

You see, I'm one of those men who's always had an issue with breast development. These days it really doesn't bother me. Everyone comes in different shapes and with different protuberances, and I think we all should be proud of our bodies, even if they don't

conform to gender clichés. When I sleep with a guy, it doesn't always send him screaming from the room. Rather like durian, it's simply a question of taste, or maybe acquired taste. At school, of course, it was quite different. Vanessa never saw the worst of the bullying in the showers after PE, but she saw everything else. In class she just sat there, her hazel eyes wallowing in sorrow, like a medieval queen watching a starving peasant through the window of her palace on the hill. She was quick to try to console me under the ancient oak at the extremity of the playground, dispensing sympathy like a swan white empress casting pearls in the mud.

"I'm sorry David," she says. "I should have said something. I could have said something."

"Well you didn't, did you!" I finally shout, slicing the air with my hand. She begins to cry. "Look," I say, wanting to inject warmth into my voice, but finding it almost impossible, "it's thirty years ago now. It's the past. It's done with. Forget about it." I don't know if I'm talking to her or to myself.

"The thing is," she says, "as I get closer to...closer to..." she can't say the word, so she stops and finds that clear objective voice again. "The closer I get to my death, the more I remember the past."

I say nothing, but remove the eggs from their pot of boiling water. I break one into the dish, pile it onto the kaya toast and bite into it. I then wash it down with copious amounts of Kopi C and look into Vanessa's ashen face. She has completely ruined my breakfast.

* * *

On her last day in Singapore Vanessa wants to go to Raffles Hotel Long Bar for a Singapore Sling. It's a must do apparently, though I can't think why. We've arranged to meet in the bar at 1pm, so at about 12:40pm I exit City Hall MRT and walk along North Bridge Road in the direction of the hotel. The darkened sky is beginning to grumble, and the breeze is quickening into gusts, darting like a fish around an ever-smaller pool. I cross the road, but the hotel is obscured by giant boards. I follow these boards down Bras Basah Road, trying to find an entrance, but there is nothing. Through a window I see the dissected carcass of the hotel. Indian workmen hack at the walls, the gilded plasterwork crumbling, falling, dissolving into billows of dust, exposing the raw masonry beneath. They chat in Tamil as

they work, that sublime language of the most ancient of poetry. The foreman yells at them to shut up.

I finally turn into St. Andrews Road and reach the front of the hotel. I see the trademark traveller's palms sticking out from the dust and the din with British stiff-upper-lip fortitude. They needed that on 15th February 1942. I approach a cheerful Indian man.

"What's happening?" I say. I cringe as I listen to myself. It sounds like: "Look here, I'm British, and I want my Raffles Hotel!"

"Closed for renovations sir," says the man with a big white-toothed smile and an Indian jerk of his head. He's obviously used to saying it.

It's 12:50pm. There's a distant growl and rain begins to fall in spats, in slops and then in big cup-sized plops. I hurry back down St. Andrews road, hugging the wall to avoid getting soaked.

I feel tears in my eyes, washing with the rain down my cheeks.

I get on the MRT at City Hall and let the train carry me away. Vanessa sends me twenty WhatsApp messages asking me what's happened, but I ignore them.

I never hear from her again.

* * * * *

“Tanah Air Kita: Our Earth and Water”

by Zhui Ning Chang

Some time ago, I was appointed scriptwriter for our annual Malaysian Society performance, MNight. It's a musical made with the aim of allowing Malaysians in my university to pull off a production together, meant to be a reminder of home for our audience.

In the process of planning and writing the script, I came to realise that I don't actually know my country. I love it, unquestionably, but I don't *know* it.

What does it mean to be Malaysian? I have spent most of my formative years circling the idea, acknowledging the fact without exploring the nuances. In all my years in Singapore, I have always insisted on my Malaysian-ness, but somehow I never quite stopped to think about what that even meant.

The fabric of my country's makeup makes it difficult to define, but it's not impossible. I'm stretched thin across the different cultures I am part of, but this isn't a solo search.

Partially, it's the fact that my country has never quite managed to articulate itself properly. My Malaysian friends will easily name their favourite aspects of our country, but I don't believe we can bring a singular, coherent identity together. Singaporeans go through a standardised system where they emerge with shared ideas and ideals about what their country is and what it represents. It's rather vaguer for me, when our system flip-flops as it fancies and pins nothing down as truth.

It's easy for some people to say: I'm Indian. I'm Chinese. I'm American. I'm French. There are layers and depths and subsets to that too, but the overarching idea of a nation does exist, binding a community together on an international platform.

Sometimes you have to contend with more. To say I am Malaysian is never quite enough, isn't it? It means, in full: "I'm Malaysian Chinese, but no, I'm not from China, I've never been, I don't identify with China and China most certainly does not identify with me."

What is an ethnic minority? By Malaysian definition, I am part of the three major races in my country, and yet we are a 'minority' and discriminated against by the majority Malays. In Singapore, I become part of the majority and receive what has been loosely termed as 'Chinese privilege', a payoff on the Western white privilege. In the West, I am too often mistaken for China Chinese. In Britain in particular, I am again part of an ethnic minority, this time with the additional weight of history from a Commonwealth country. In the US, I would be part of a 'model minority', but a minority nonetheless. In China I would be an outsider, never quite enough.

What does ethnic Chinese even mean? You could say we are Han Chinese, but even among Han Chinese there are multiple subcategories - Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, etc. I am of Hakka descent, and recently I found out that Hakka people were nomads, wandering across the mainland without any real roots. Unlike Hokkien people, who would be from the Fujian province, or Cantonese people, who would usually be from Guangdong, my history traces back to a people who never stay still, who leave no traces.

It is a strange habit of my family that my sister and I were not told stories of my parents' or grandparents' younger days. I can't help but wonder. My grandmother would have been a child at the start of World War II, and she lived through the Japanese Occupation. She saw the triumph of *merdeka* and the fallout with Singapore. My parents and their siblings were children during the May 13th racial riots. They grew up in the shadow of the Cold War. They were *there*. And beyond all these historically significant events, there is the *kampung* life that raised them, a reality of childhood so removed from anything I know.

Look ahead to the bright future, my grandmother used to say. Don't look back at the past. That's over and done with.

But I want to know. I always want to know. I can't say exactly *why* it's important, but I know that it's important that someone remembers. For someone to tell me and for me to tell others how I got here, the choices other people have made to put me where I am today, where I will make more choices that ripple out in a million different ways. I don't believe in

wallowing in the past or reviving old glories, but someone ought to make sure this isn't forgotten.

A lot of what I watch and read in entertainment and education isn't for me. It's removed. It's seen through the lens of Western media, an immigrant filter, a left-wing approach - I'm part of that, and yet, *not*. I haven't seen much that comes from a perspective where I can say, "yes, that's exactly what I was thinking". I find it hard to relate to the way queerness is depicted and celebrated in the West; not that I don't agree with it, but that it doesn't quite resonate the same. This is uncharted territory. These are waters we have to navigate. The only way forward is the one we make ourselves. Black scholars have done much in this regard, but I am not black, and my narrative is not theirs.

What does ethnic Chinese mean when you are Southeast Asian and watching the rise of the dragon? China does not claim the diaspora for its own. We do not claim China for our own either, no reminiscences of our homeland even though it is the originator, the cultural motherland. My PRC friends and I share a common culture and language, but I am not of them, and they know they are not of me.

What happens when China's might grows ever stronger? What happens to us, the ethnic Chinese who are and yet can never measure up to the 'real' Chinese of the mainland? There are over one billion of them. In my country, we barely number a third of the population. Will we be sidelined to act as intermediates between China and ASEAN? What kind of role can we play when we claim ourselves fully Malaysian and yet our country does not recognise or value us on an equal level?

What happens to a diaspora that's not really a diaspora? China may be the historical, cultural motherland, but there is no longing to return, no sense of homecoming the way Jews have dreamed of a lost Israel or immigrants in the West think of India or Hong Kong. It is not the homeland. China's presence creeps into our countries, in architecture and economic deals and political influence, and where do the local ethnic Chinese go when we cannot compete with them?

In the West, Black people have cultures of their own, bound by a history of slavery and the pain that echoes down the generations. I think Chinese people don't quite have that yet, or at least, the diaspora does not. Chinese immigrants, whose parents fled west during the long turmoil of the 20th century, have an entirely different experience compared to us,

my family and those of most people I know, who trace back at least five generations in Southeast Asia. We sunk our roots in the soil here long before the axis of the world spun east. This is our earth and water.

I know the Hamilton movement meant well when they claimed that we are all immigrants, but the truth is: we are not. I am not an immigrant. I was born and raised here, and I am as much a part of this country as any other, even if the government does not think so. Even if I don't quite understand what it means to be Malaysian yet. To claim immigrant status is to weaken what we have fought for in this country, to concede that we are *pendatang*, visitors only, new arrivals, and *less*.

I don't claim the immigrant experience. I don't claim the experience of the mainland. I am somewhere in between, and I haven't quite figured out what that means yet.

When I speak Hokkien, the way I have learned at my mother's knee, words like *tapi*, *pulut*, *suka* trip out of my mouth. I say these words in the lilting accent of our northern island Penang, whose Hokkien is so different from the coarser southern version in Johor and Singapore. These are Malay words that have sneaked into the language, a mixture of dialects and customs that have found their place here. I can't tell you what the proper Hokkien equivalent of *kahwin* (marriage) is, how to pronounce it as it's written in proper Chinese (结婚), I only know it as *kahwin* - its inflection changed, but retaining essentially the same base word as the one in Malay. Our habits and languages have washed over and integrated with each other and become a shared, living thing.

As Benedict Anderson says, what is a nation but a group of people who imagine themselves a community? People have died for this. I have refused, quite ridiculously, citizenship in better countries in favour of holding true to this singular, imagined concept. Wars have been waged over this fiction of geographic borders, of lines drawn on a map. What is it but ink and paper?

The snobby academic in me sniffs and says that nationhood is an arbitrary human concept and not something that lasts, but emotion doesn't care about academic superiority.

It seems so trivial, but it also means something. It *matters*. It matters to people who have been run out of their homes. It matters to people who made the practical choice and left to make better lives. It matters, even if I still don't have the words to articulate precisely

why. Maybe it's propaganda, maybe it's conditioning, but it's sunk its teeth in me and I can't tear it out.

I became aware of it at age twelve, I think. When I first left. It's a fragmentation, a fracturing of self. And you realise that no place or nation can love you back, no matter how much blood and tears you spill in its name. No matter what you burn, it will not burn for you. You are but a drop in the ocean and what does the ocean care about that single drop? It's not capable of love, not like that. That's how the idea of nationhood keeps you in its grip: it makes you fall in love with an ideal that can never return the force of your loyalty, can make no promises to stay and be steadfast.

It's so arbitrary. Just a passport. Just paperwork. The name of a country, one that didn't even exist a hundred years ago.

It's also blood soaked in the soil; poetry and song, weapons and war. It is every Olympic medal and flag raised over exultant faces. It is schoolchildren singing anthems and mouthing oaths. It is strangers gathering at coffee shops to drink and cheer. It is bumping into other people oceans away from the homeland, who speak as you do, who laugh at the same jokes, who ask the same questions. The community of people who imagine this truth are scattered, spider-webbed across the world.

Perhaps the most bittersweet part is that the potential of our country is stunning. We have the people, the natural resources, the foundations of a history built on the ashes of an empire. And we waste it.

The West still remains under the sway of an enduring Judeo-Christian worldview and Greco-Roman philosophy, and that is unlikely to change anytime soon. For all their efforts at diversity and inclusion, most Americans have no idea what true diversity can look like, when it is not seeped in a narrative of apology and damage control.

In my childhood, I took for granted the balance we enjoy. Public holidays for Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Haji, and Deepavali; mother tongues integrated into school curriculum alongside Malay as the national language and English as our international tool; to be actively taught the history and significance of festivals from different cultures. I'm too used to our multiplicity, too naive in assuming that different cultures can mix and match, and that a compromise can be found in the cacophony.

We could have set a global example as a country with a moderate Islamic government and a multi-ethnic, multilingual society, one that lives tradition and progress apace.

I suppose this is the tragedy of it: corruption, laziness, confusion, a lack of education, censorship, power plays, fear, ignorance, the race card, and sometimes plain stupidity from all quarters.

We live a reality that has not been fully explored, because there are those who choose dogmatism over a critical evaluation and acceptance of both our triumphs and our flaws. This waffling about our own history has impeded the shaping of a collective memory, and in turn has affected our ability to imagine ourselves a nation. Perhaps it is not for us to imagine a single, fixed, unmoving identity for our countrymen and -women. Perhaps we should embrace our heterogeneity more openly, and define ourselves by the constant shift and flow. That is still a long time coming.

Sometimes I think we have forgotten the worth of our democracy. It's been just over half a century and already we seem to have lost touch with what it means to rule ourselves, rather than let ourselves be ruled from afar. We have forgotten what freedom tastes like.

I see no easy solution here, only years of toiling against an embedded system that refuses to give. It's a fight that will take more vision and moral courage than anyone in the game has right now. One must dream higher than that. Perhaps in another world I would give myself over to that, but not in this one. Not today.

I live all the contradictions and paradoxes of my life. I am living in London, but I am not English. I am ethnic Chinese but am not of China. I studied in Singapore without being Singaporean. I hold a Malaysian passport but am not *bumiputera*. I am none of these things, but I am a part of them, as they are a part of me. And this is the identity I have carved out for myself in this postcolonial, post-globalised world: that I am a part of everything but am none of it at the same time. There is no traditional ideal to live up to, no solidity beneath my feet. I must lay down the bricks one at a time, because there is no other path like mine, and only I can walk it. Home is not a place, a country, a person - it's the memory of something you hope to keep coming back to. It's not only what you make of it, but also what it makes of you.

Happy 60th, Malaysia.

* * *

Translations:

tanah air kita = our homeland. 'tanah air' literally translates to 'earth and water'.

merdeka = freedom/independence. Malaysia's Independence Day is often referred to as Merdeka Day.

tapi = but/however, derived from the Malay word 'tetapi'

pulut = glutinous rice

suka = like/enjoy, shares the same spelling as the Malay word

kahwin = marriage

bumiputera = a socio-political construct of Malays and peoples considered indigenous to Malaysia

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“Just East of the Philippines”

by John C. Mannone

Tropical water
Scuba diver's paradise
Long bottom time

O Micronesia
Sapphire blue emerald green
Jewel studded ocean

Below Chuuk Lagoon
Trigger fish cruise fire coral
Fourth Japanese fleet

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“Brought Back”

by Stephanie V. Sears

What’s left of a shawl
once the wrap of dawn shoulders
of a child goddess or
broad sash wound around the waist
of a boy ordained to rule.

Left on a chair in dire need of a plot.
Curio on display, beauty slighted
by the forces of estrangement.
Ruined rapture, reptile digesting
self of pointless splendor.
A remnant with a death wish.

Say you still belong to tropical penumbra
atrium to the exquisite night
of barefoot mahogany floors
where you first unraveled.
Say you are made of the silvery twine
of rain’s torrents and drizzles,
of gardenia oil, the celadon poison
of a bloom-drugged snake,
of the cerulean pool snug in fern,
dyed with vibrissa and fallen feather,
of knotted rainbow threads.

I wish you back to the saffron dust
of wide eastern avenues chiming
with bells of resurrection,
to the gold-leaf layering of entreaty.

You undulate through the room
driven by shadow and sunlight
toward the plea in my skull's *stupa*.
You slip and slide away from ruin,
black stitching scented with opium,
silk pocket to a star,
river to hot sandbanks of desire,
weaving yourself into my footstep and caress.

Take your chance.

“Illumination on the Tatai”

by Stephanie V. Sears

Muscled spirits of the jungle night
 Made us faint with darkness
On the thin-hipped deck
 With a baldachin of raffia
Boundless with adventure
 That purred high over the swarthy
Leaf-stamped tressing and wrestling of the river.
 The Cardamoms heavily made up
With Mount Mehru mystery
 Locked us inside perplexity.
In this sandy gullet of savagery
 Proclaiming *not far from the sea*
The excitable pulse of romance
 Revealed a constellated obscurity
Flashing with options
 Life, death and all
That dressed to kill in between.
 Three sister trees blinked
 Up a chatter
 Of tiny fairies in their bows.
The small dexterous hand
 Of the Khmer hunter
Picked off the Tinks
 That glowed in expectant palms
Rewarded with magic.

“Over Bangkok”

by Stephanie V. Sears

A sheet of glass suspends me
in the sodden air.

A rain dragon stormed in
a fever of wind and mist
to wipe out Bangkok.
I was looking for a different forecast.

A flock of birds flee,
shaving off high cornices.
Tarped long boats, double-deckers
still barter their river fate,
the cable bridge now an unfinished sentence.
Buried in wet chill
contrived by the air con at my back,
all disappears without a fight,
absconded by fog.

Beyond the water lily rug,
the embossed velvet,
I am blind.
Jazz tries to sedate the room.
The wood panels hum
with a spiritual diction.
No evidence of reality.
Where have I gone?

Within the invisible,
inside the Temple of Dawn.

“Pacificus”

by Stephanie V. Sears

Trees dishevelled and tall,
their foliage sings and scuttles
in animal ways.

Nuts drop
with blunt wisdom
appointing leisure to the day.

The ocean steadies its roar
driving over coral
what was lost
or promised.

The sky cruises
puffing cheroots.

At disputed boundaries
do palms lean on the stars,
are stars upheld by the fronds?

Is it wake or trance?

"The Forgotten Temple"

by Stephanie V. Sears

Far from the scrapes of life,
 a bald patina

of clayed buffalos deep
 in squelching grooves

made of the effort and imprecations
 that is man's common tale

recounted with the million punctuations
 of round head palms

spawned by a jaundiced sun
 rapt with a soggy horizon of toil.

Far from this flat rice storage
 other lives have petrified

except my own possessed
 by abstraction or aberration

from before the Apsara
 their hour-glass gesture

from before
 the trick of history

a temple of python and cobra
looped into foundations

grown out of the motion of trees
chambers revisited

in utmost silence
by monumental spirits.

Entrails of stone
digesting chaos.

I place a bold foot
between apprehension

and oblivion,
to pass the elaborate threshold

where the reign of wilderness
beguiles with a bygone spell.