

Anak Sastra

Issue 44

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Contributor Bios

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[Nur Ayuni Zainal Abidin](#) (Twitter: [@Ayuniza83](#)) has worked as a civil servant since December 2005 in various roles and functions in Malaysia's public service sector. She works mostly on policy formulation, strategic planning and analysis, but is currently on secondment at the national oil company, PETRONAS. Writing has been a hobby since high school, and her op-ed pieces on a range of public policies affecting the people have been published in various newspapers in Malaysia. As a writer, she wishes to connect and give voice to the struggles, especially by those who have been living on the margins. She wants for her writing to help those people be seen and be heard because they have the right to live a dignified life just like everyone else.

[Jeal May Gelogo](#) began writing poetry when she was in high school as a means of coping with her thoughts and emotions. She has since turned to writing short stories.

[Ruby](#) is a Malaysian teacher and student of literature. She sometimes reviews books on Instagram.

Tran Quynh Nguyen is a junior at Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted in Hanoi, Vietnam. Her work is not forthcoming anywhere since she is a newbie to this publishing thing, but she has written poetry for most of her life and is an upcoming participant in Sewanee Young Writer's Conference.

Amrita V. Naira (Twitter: [@amritanairv](#))'s first collection of poetry, *Yours Affectionately*, was published in 2009. Her poetry has been published in *Indian Literature*, *Kritya*, *Vayavya*, *Kitaab*, and *The Nervous Breakdown*.

Peter W. Morris has been a photojournalist/international photojournalist for 50 years, working on newspapers and magazines. He is also a widely published writer and has served all over the world on six continents and 75 countries. His heart has always been firmly planted in Asia, where he has repeatedly visited Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, South Korea, China, India and other countries.

Matthew Jerome van Huizen is a 27-year-old Kuala Lumpur-based maritime lawyer who grew up in Seremban and studied law in Malacca, where he began writing. His poem, "A Kampong Scene on Raya Day," has appeared in the *Anak Sastra* literary magazine among other poems. In 2017 he was invited to judge UCSI University's Faculty of Social Science and Liberal Arts's Act It Out English Drama Competition. He loves to write Malaysian/South East Asian-themed poetry.

For [Hana Ghani](#), writing has been a way to understand herself and the world around her. Her poetry has served as a liminal passage, between private pages to public domains, and between her personal meanings and public interpretation.

[Noel Christian A. Moratilla](#) currently teaches at the University of the Philippines, where he handles courses in Asian Studies and Philippine Studies. Some of his poems have appeared in *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia*, *Philippine Humanities Review*, *Diliman Review*, and *Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine*. His academic papers have also been published online. His research interests include postcolonial studies, critical pedagogies, and cultural studies.

[John C. Mannone](#) has poems in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Foreign Literary Review*, *Le Menteur*, *Poetry South*, and others. His short speculative work won the Dwarf Stars Award (2020). He also won the Impressions of Appalachia Creative Arts Contest in poetry (2020), the Carol Oen Memorial Fiction Prize (2020), and the Joy Margrave Award in nonfiction (2015, 2017). He was awarded a Jean Ritchie Fellowship (2017) in Appalachian literature and served as the celebrity judge for the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (2018). His latest collection, *Flux Lines: The Intersection of Science, Love, and Poetry*, is forthcoming from Linnet's Wings Press (2021). He edits poetry for *Abyss & Apex* and other journals. A retired physics professor, Mannone lives near Knoxville, Tennessee.

Paulin L, 25, found a haven in the arts and literature when she was a child living in Brunei and Sarawak, and has since then aspired to share her own creations with others. She currently works in the IT consulting industry.

Lauren Tupaj (Twitter: [@agasramirez](#); [@herstoryseapod](#)) is an unpublished college student at Niagara University studying luxury hospitality operations. She grew up living in different

countries across Southeast Asia and the Pacific before moving to the US. her inspiration comes from her hobbies of illustration, painting, fashion design, learning new languages, travelling, volunteer work, and her love of flowers and horror movies. She also gains great interest and inspiration through her life experiences in being born in Singapore and being raised in immersing herself in different cultures.

* * * * *

“Fallen”

by Ken Lye

Nadiah has twenty minutes to see if she can figure out the intended recipient of the text message.

Parking her ample bottom against the edge of the teacher’s table, she scrutinises the five students in front of her. They are crouched over their desks, scribbling frantically, as if the harder they press into their examination papers, the better their literature class grade will be. If she rubs her fingers across the surface of their desks, she will be able to read the inverted braille they have carved into the melamine finish.

A panicky head bobs up, like someone drowning, desperately breaking the surface of the water. Just a single lungful of air, though, and then Melissa plunges back down. Is she the one the message was meant for? Nadiah hopes not. Melissa has the best chance of all her O-level students this year to secure a place in one of Singapore’s top five junior colleges, maybe even get a government scholarship to study overseas. Melissa’s long hair is always tied back in a neat ponytail, her pinafore the perfect length, three fingers above the knee. She is the president of the Chinese Orchestra and volunteers on weekends at the neighbourhood Family Service Centre. Then again, isn’t it precisely these girls who are the most unpredictable? *Air yang tenang jangan disangka tiada buaya.* Still waters and all that.

Perhaps the phone message was for Janice, perpetually scowling, who usually sits leaning against the noticeboard at the back of the classroom, the front legs of her chair raised belligerently in the air as if declaring war against all her teachers. Or was the text directed at one of Janice’s two servants-in-waiting who mindlessly follow her everywhere, drawn to her false glamour? She can rule Rajesh out at least. He will never have to worry about receiving such a message. Just six little words, but among the hardest for any teenage girl to bear: “I’m sorry I got you pregnant.”

Nadiah glances at the handphones placed in a tidy row on her table. Mute, inert pieces of metal. One sparked to life a few minutes ago but lies dormant now. As she trains her eyes back on her students, she marvels at the composure of the girl, whoever she may be. Somehow, with her life unravelling before her, she still manages to muster the force of will to pull herself together, and complete a three-hour examination.

But girls are tough. We make do. We have to.

Nadiah's hand floats towards the mid-section of her *baju kurung*. She had always wanted a large family. Yet, Hasif never seemed interested in sex. He was always too busy, too tired, sometimes even too hungry. 'Let's go for *sup kambing* at Adam Road instead.' At first, she feared he was keeping another woman. She asked her younger brother to follow him, but it turned out that whenever he was not with his family, her *abang* was simply spending time with his students, conducting extra lessons, accompanying them on class outings. She is not without her dark suspicions, something about the way he looks at other men when he thinks she is not paying attention to him. Still, she will not allow herself to give words to something so shameful. What can she do anyway? Ask for a divorce? *Tak akan*. Not in this community. He doesn't smoke, gamble or drink, and has never raised a hand to her in anger. He is an affectionate husband who provides for his wife. Yes, she has her needs, but better to tuck them into the little corners of her heart. Every once in a while, though, she remembers the sons and daughters she has been denied and curses her husband.

A cough from outside. On her left, through the interior windows facing the corridor, she notices a student lumbering into view, a square-shouldered young man with bed head, un-ironed chalk-white shirt half-tucked into his trousers. He stops just before her classroom, perhaps not wanting to be seen while he waits. Leaning against the parapet, he looks out over the parade square four storeys below, kicking the wall of dirty grey stone, fingers drumming its surface. His face is ashen, clenched with worry, but, even from where she is sitting, she can tell he is a good-looking boy.

Aren't they always?

A swell of irritation. "Got you pregnant." His choice of words reveals an arrogance that is no less galling because he is unconscious of it. The body which carries the child is the girl's, but he claims credit.

He reaches into the pocket of his trousers, eyes still staring blankly ahead, hand moving as if on its own accord, belonging to someone else. He pulls out his phone, and his thumb begins to jab at the screen, an eddy of small, quick movements. Beside her, one of the phones jolts awake, the same one as before. (So, it *is* him.) This time the message reads: "I'm sorry I'm not strong like you."

Is he saying he doesn't support the girl's decision to keep the baby? Or is he insisting she have the child when she doesn't intend to? Either way, no. Of course, he isn't as strong as her. What does he have to be strong about anyway? Women have always had to pay the price for the foolish actions of men. It is the girl who now has to suffer the shame and indignity of being labelled as cheap or loose. It is the girl who now has to endure the trauma of giving birth to a child – or having an abortion – at age sixteen.

Through the corner of her eye, Nadiah notices a blur of movement in the corridor. A scrambling of arms and legs up onto the ledge, a flutter of white cloth against the sky. She turns, but the boy has vanished. All she sees is his handphone on the parapet, her gasped "oh" of shock, the only hiccup of sound.

* * * * *

“When Life Gives You Lemons”

by A.K. Tolentino

The parents stood beside the patient’s bed when the doctor delivered the news. The doctor calmly waited for the coming reaction, but the room stayed silent for a while. Husband and wife glanced at their daughter who sat frozen on the hospital bed clutching the *pasalubong* of sugar cookies.

Oh, God, she thought, I’m gonna die. I’m in the best hospital in California, and I’m still gonna die.

She lost her grip on the pack of flakey, sugary Otap cookies which fell on the tiled floor. The sound snapped the mother out of her stupefied state. “So, what are you saying?” enunciated the mother, whose voice became louder by the second. “Are you telling us to just—”

“Angie, kumalma ka muna,” says the father.

“Sweetheart, don’t tell me to calm down.”

“Anghelina, let the doctor speak.”

* * *

I would be laughing my ass off right now if my future hadn’t just crumbled to dust. This is only the fourth time I’ve seen my mother get hysterical. The first was when I was ten. It was our first Thanksgiving, and everyone on my dad’s side of the family came. We were at the table woohoo-ing as my dad came in behind my mom. Then he tripped and dropped the turkey. The second was when I caved and went to a tanning salon with my *then* girlfriends at fourteen. She absolutely flipped when I came home five shades darker and more than a little orangey. And the third was on spring break, when I tagged along with my mom at her

clinic. It was a humdrum kind of day until my cousin, Eric, pulled the wrong darned tooth out.

I have a feeling my mom's only having a fit because she feels guilty she survived and I haven't.

Would it have been different if I had just stayed in the Philippines with my Lola Pru? The Arts Program closed within four years, so it wouldn't have mattered much. I suppose I still would have gotten the Big C.

Great. The nurse finally got them out. That took a while. I give a thumbs up and mouth a "thank you." *Finally*, alone with my thoughts.

I'm not crying. Why the heck am I not crying? I must be all dried up or something. If Eric were me, he would be bawling: "*Nooo!* So many women I haven't boinked yet. *Nooooo!*" And if my cousin Krysta were in my shoes, she'd be wailing: "After everything I did to get my position. I mean *everything*. *Why?*"

I've asked 'why' so many times; I still don't have an answer. Of all the dela Cruz grandkids, I was the last to be born. So, it's ironic that *I'd* be the first to croak. Considering I've been losing this battle for two years, one would think I'd be better prepared for the end.

I'm not.

The doctor said I still have some time. Time to what, enjoy my remaining days? How can anyone enjoy anything when the clock is ticking? Oh, *God*. Why me? *Why* me? Why not Eric? Not that I wish he'd get sick, but why not my whore-ish cousin who'd knocked up nearly every one of his girlfriends and married *none* of them because he wasn't ready? The *prick*.

Or, why not Krysta? Not that I'd rather she be the one dying instead of me. But why not my manipulative, bully of a cousin who loves telling me and her friends about how and what she'd done—including married men—to get to the top? *Narcissistic twit*.

And what is up with my mother's hair again? Since we migrated, it's gone from shiny ebony to trailer park blonde, all in the name of "blending in." Well, at least she's past the yellow corn blonde phase. I still pat myself on the back for managing to not retch in her presence.

Ugh. My mom's unmistakable tap, tap, tapping on the door is a little too— "*WHAT?*"

"Your grandma's here."

"Okay, but *just Lola*."

My grandmother walks in wearing her blue-green floral dress with her white, thinning hair twisted into a bun. She wraps her arms around me, and I hug her right back.

“Have you cried yet?” she says.

I shake my head.

“You have time. You’re Uncle Peter wasn’t as lucky. I’m sure he would have liked to have had a few more days or even hours to say goodbye *and* fix their cupboard as his wife had asked. I imagine he would’ve wanted to finish the tree house he promised Krysta. If he had, maybe she wouldn’t be so...”

I hear my grandmother sigh as she releases me. My bed dips. I scoot over to the right so we’re hip to hip. *Lola’s* warmth reminds me of a big warm bowl of garlicky thyme chicken soup with a dash of oregano powder.

“When your grandfather was dying, he told me he was glad he had a whole week in the hospital. Our children were all busy with work and their own families, while our grandchildren were busy with school and their friends. And when the whole family did get together, sometimes the cell phones or the Internet got in the way. At least, he said, when he was confined to the bed, he got to spend some quality time with each of his children and his grandkids.”

“*Lola.*” She looks at me expectantly. “I had hoped. What kept me going through the nausea, the vomiting, the losing hair, and sallow skin thing, was the thought that I’d eventually have what you had. A great marriage, good husband, wonderful kids.”

“Well, you won’t be missing out much.”

“*Lola!*”

“It wasn’t all roses for me, you know. Nothing is. That’s just life. Love *is* wonderful when it’s genuine, when you have nothing to worry about, and when it’s uncomplicated. But sometimes, love hurts—It can hurt just remembering. Imagine people my age who have nothing but their memories to pass the time.”

I pout a little. “You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“Of course, I am. I’m your grandmother.”

I can feel my throat closing up a little.

“You know, your grandfather and I were married, but he never even proposed to me.”

“Wha-at?” I goggle at *Lola* in horror and disbelief with multiple scenarios running amok in my head.

“We were neighbors, and our parents were good friends. When World War II reached the Philippines, I suppose someone suggested to worried parents that they marry off their unmarried girls before Japanese soldiers came marching in. I was eighteen, and he was ten years older than me. I had a crush on him for a long time, and he never seemed to notice me.”

“So, did he?” I ask smiling. “Notice you?” I wink at my *lola* making her laugh.

“He said he did, but he thought I was too young for him. It was wonderful. *He* was wonderful. A year later, I was pregnant with our first child. When I heard Bataan fell and USAFFE scouts were included in the Death March, I lost the baby. I can still remember the racking pain, the smell of blood, and the fear. Time doesn’t lessen the pain of losing a child.”

I bite my lip and take her hand in mine. “I’m sorry, *Lola*.”

“And I’m sorry, my dear *bunso*.”

I smile a little, if not sadly. I haven’t been called that since I went to college.

“What?” says *Lola*, “You’ll always be my youngest grandchild. You could be covered in wrinkles, and you’d still be my little *bunso*.”

I feel my lungs seize at the mental image, and the first drops of sadness come trickling down. I wrap my arms around my *Lola*, heaving and shaking, and she hugs me right back.

* * *

“Shall I bolt the door today?” says my dad.

I’m guessing that’s a joke. “Huh?”

“Your cousins have been texting me. You barred everyone except your grandma yesterday. Are we letting other people in today?”

“They’re not really other people, Dad.”

“Okay, just checking.”

I hear a familiar clickety-clack on the cream hospital floors. I’m guessing I won’t have to wait long for my ball-busting cousin and her outrageously priced heels.

“Hey, Uncle Jude.”

“Hi, Krysta. Thanks for coming.”

"Can I tell her? Please let me tell her."

Dad nods.

"Oh, Aunt Angie just parked behind me. Can you help her with the—" She chortles. "Your dad moves fast for an old guy. *Hey*, I got you the beach house!"

"Oh, wow. How many arms did you twist this time?"

Krysta laughs. "Just one. But I twisted really hard," she says grinning. "You better get there ASAP. There's chocolate mousse in the fridge and boxes of Otap and chocolate covered *polvoron*. Boxes."

I really can't help but smile.

"Thanks, Krys. What's the cost?"

Krysta shakes her head.

"How much? I know Dad wants to go all out since I'm dying and all, but I don't want them swimming in debt. *How much?*"

"*Wala*, okay."

"What do you mean nothing?"

"Consider it my advanced contribution."

I hurl my pillow at her. She runs out of the room in a fit of giggles.

When Mom comes in she looks much chipper and more *everything* than usual. She should have used more concealer though. "Hi, Sweetie. Eric and the girls will be here in fifteen minutes."

"That's great."

"I called Father James. Is that...alright?"

"It's okay, Mom," I say nodding. "Um...Ma, is that a new shade of blonde?"

"Yeah. This one makes me look more American, don't you think?"

"Mm, Ma can you dye it chestnut or medium brown? Or mahogany, maybe? Just while I'm around?"

Mom chuckles, her eyes alarmingly wet. "Of course, baby," she kisses then presses her cheek on my crown, "I will."

* * * * *

“Hibiscus Nation”

by Nur Ayuni Zainal Abidin

The Nation, 2050

Dahlia Zari, 47, unemployed, suicidal because no purpose in life

It was 10 in the morning on the second day of the working week. Dr. Lailatul Mariam, or Laila was reading her patient’s file before flipping the page to an attached photo of Dahlia Zari. Pretty, she murmured to herself. She picked up the phone to inform her assistant that they would leave in 10 minutes. She put the file down and quickly grabbed her coffee, sipping in the aroma and taste of the roasted beans to start her day.

Laila is one of the front-liners serving at the Psychology and Wellness Office (PWO) that reports directly to the Primary Leader of the Nation. PWO was established in 2030, ten years after the worst pandemic to hit the international community in modern history. Ruined lives and new normal drove many to mental breakdown and suicides. PWO’s main task was to prolong the lives of the People who had given up hope and the will to live. The Nation wants her people to live, and PWO would deliver no matter what. And today, Laila’s work would take her to meet one of the People who wants to end her life against the Nation’s will.

When the Nation was battling the pandemic, Laila’s *ibu* was one of the front-liners who had worked day and night tirelessly under the stewardship of the revered Director General, who has since been imprinted as one of the national heroes in history textbooks. *Ayah* succumbed to Covid-19 that he had contracted during one of his grocery runs due to people who refused to adhere to SOPs. *Ibu* was strong, and not only because she was pregnant with Laila at the time. She also had to endure the pain of separation from *Ayah* without a proper send-off. Laila never asked more than what she was told, and *ibu* never

dished anything further. Everything that ends is both painful and beautiful, like the spring, morning and new beginning that comes after. Life lives forward.

PWO's establishment was possible only after the elder generation of power players fully retired, paving the way for younger leaders to rise—leaders who debated about health, education, social security, sports, creative content, technology, and other issues affecting the People. This was an era of political rivalry marked by intense focus on and solutions to issues rather than the gutter politics that was normal during *ibu's* time in the old Nation. Thanks to that, PWO became the utmost priority given the soaring number of cases of suicide and mental breakdowns among the People.

“Laila, ready when you are,” her wondering mind was interjected by Nina's voice. Nina has been her assistant since she started work eight years ago. Another notable change in the Nation was a reduced power gap. Colleagues are now on a first name basis without forsaking respect for the chain of command. *Ibu* said back then that the VVIPs had longer salutations than their real names.

After knocking a few times, Laila and Nina entered since the door was already ajar. The 600m² studio unit perched atop the Nation's urban jungle. The place is small but neat, a little unkempt but not run down. The white walls are clean, a twin bed in the middle, a desk with a calendar on it, sliding closets opposite the bed and thin yellow carpet at the living underneath a black leather sofa where a figure was lying calmly with her eyes fixed on the TV attached to the wall.

The screen showed a guy pointing a gun at a group of diners in a restaurant that Laila instantly recognized as Korean. Dahlia watched intently, unaware of the visitors' arrival. Once the gunshots were fired, she flinched to the side, and the ladies entered her sight. She appeared dazed and nervous, signs of someone who has been struggling and living a hard life. The face above her slim body was pale, her little hands as delicate as a sparrow's claws. The way she had her hair ponytailed made her look like she was in her 30s instead of 40s.

Breaking the sea of silence, Laila first said that *The Man Standing Next*, which Dahlia was watching, was an excellent movie starring Lee Byung-Hun, the Korean actor who was also *ibu's* favourite. *Ibu* said he is funny and romantic just like *Ayah*, though Laila was not sure if he had ever serenaded *ibu* with sweet songs and love letters to qualify as romantic. Dahlia smirked and replied, "you are too young to know him," to which Laila swiftly replied, "you are too young to die." Silence resumed, so Laila invited herself to sit and began their consultation for the day.

"PWO treats suicidal thoughts very seriously and will do our best to help you navigate this situation," Laila's voice dropped an octave when explaining the reason for their presence. Experience made her able to see and recognize the struggle in Dahlia's eyes. The bright sparks of life were almost non-existent, replaced with sights of sorrow and pain that further ignited the suicidal thoughts in her. The desperation tugged strongly at Laila's heartstrings. How lonely it must have been to have hit rock bottom, abandoned and dejected.

As if sensing that Laila was unearthing her innermost soul, Dahlia turned away to avoid eye contact. There was nothing scarier than feeling a person's emotions. "I don't have money, no big dreams to achieve, and no one to love. This has been my life for a long time." The crack in her voice when mentioning the word love was hard to ignore.

"How about family?" softly, Laila was trying to gain ground and understand her patient better. Dahlia looked straight into the window opposite where she was seated, deep in thought. Searching for the right words to describe her predicament she finally spoke, "I was a product of rape. My mother has never accepted me. I was an outsider. We never spoke warmly. I did drugs to forget, went for counselling, but nothing changed. I'm tired of fighting. I want the world to end so those who struggle like me will be free from pain. I want to sleep and never wake up," she gradually opened up when realizing that a cold shoulder stood no chance against Laila's piercing glance.

Quietly in her head, Laila pictured Dalia standing on a platform waiting for trains to arrive. As an empty train pulls up, another stopped on the opposite side. Out came the crowd, hurrying to leave to where they came from or where they want to go. A sure destination. The door of the empty train opens, Dahlia went in with no destination in mind. She wandered around with an empty heart searching for a place to be. A home to go to or a person to belong with. And what happened when she found neither? She chose simply to cease to exist.

“I want my miserable life to end,” she declared, as if ordering take-out. Dahlia may be done with her life but not Laila. She made a living through the Nation’s tax paid by the People. She was deeply committed to prolonging lives, not to ending them.

“Death is neither freedom nor the end of misery,” Laila softly replied. She believed that the People should live either as a taxpayer or as one of its beneficiaries. Save lives, pay tax, be considerate, love one another. Die as fated, not by choice. Live as citizens of the Nation where everyone belongs. Loving oneself is hard work but losing oneself is easy, especially when a soul feels abandoned, unloved, and unwanted.

Nina was busy scribbling notes that will be the input to assist Dahlia’s decision in curating an appropriate intervention and treatment to help elongate Dahlia’s life. One day at a time. Laila’s mission was to add another day to her life, then another and another until she discarded the thought of death and began embracing life—fully experiencing the wide range of a human’s emotions and life’s turmoil.

To love, be loved and live with dignity. These were the great promises made by the Primary Leader when she assumed national leadership. Rather than pledging with heavily laden words in the form of a manifesto, she vowed to dedicate her life to the service of healing the wounds and traumas of the People still reeling from the destruction caused by the pandemic. A commitment to rebuild.

Thirty years after, the People have never truly moved on. They merely exist and are not living. The Nation may have survived, but the People still feel like they are dancing with

death. How can they not be, when generations were ripped violently by the lockdowns, deaths, and devastation? The pandemic even wiped out every ounce of growth made by all other countries. Nobody was spared. Everybody suffered together.

Hibiscus Nation rose through years of evolution and revolution. A democracy built on the ideals that the Nation has responsibility, the Power has accountability, and the People have dignity. Hibiscus was more than a Nation. It was a home to stay, a place to go, and a person to belong with—a place where each person can grow and realize their truest potential inclusively rather than just a select few. Prosperity, inclusivity, and wellbeing were the new economic principles after the collapse of so many livelihoods because of the penchant for capitalism during the pre-pandemic period.

“There are close to ten billion people living in the world today. You are not alone. Please let me help you get through this,” Laila pleaded in the hope that Dahlia would have a change of heart. Failure meant Dahlia would be handed over to the Religious Office (RO) to be dealt with “spiritually.” While many things have changed in the last thirty years, RO remains tricky because some working there are too absorbed in finding faults and seeing a collection of flaws committed by the People. They would even label them as sinners or saints. The holier-than-thou attitude would never go away, *ibu* would quip.

When Dahlia remained silent, Laila sought her approval to let PWO curate a solution named “Dahlia’s Life in Review,” where they both would travel back in time to rediscover Dahlia’s purpose of life. “Based on your personal file, we will design an Augmented Reality (AR) tour to revisit your favourite places, recreate the memories of eating your favourite food and dancing to your favourite tunes. How does that sound?” Still, Dahlia was unmoved, and her expression was unreadable. The afternoon sun was beginning to make its presence felt. The heat was on. The clock was ticking.

AR has been one of Laila’s favourite tools to track the “aha moment” in her patients’ lives. She has an innate belief that humans aren’t afraid of things they can’t see such as death.

They think of death as a convenient way to escape. Laila likes showing her patients the beautiful lives they have had so they would continue breathing. And live.

Dahlia was mentally calculating and drawing lines on her imagined walls. The possibilities. What ifs and why nots. Reconsidering. And then she stopped. She looked at herself, at the lines she'd drawn. She began imagining, contemplating, and then from out of nowhere, inspiration hit. An image starts to form in her head. The AR version of Dahlia looking at the skyscrapers in the Nation's capital, walking on the walkways to her favourite cafes. Food. She tried remembering faces who remind her of warmth, love, and affection. Someone's face appeared, the one who stood by her when the going got tough. The sound of her favourite tune, the person's voice. *Should I live?* Her self-monologue raged from within.

Just as they were about to leave, Dahlia clasped Laila's shoulders to stop her. In a low voice she said that Lee Byung Hun was her late mother's favourite. "I love him in *Mr. Sunshine*. I always dreamed of finding my own sunshine. Nobody has ever talked to me about him because nobody knows him. He is a from the distant past, where I was stuck with the memories of my late mother." Laila, sensing the change in Dahlia's tone, sat her down while signaling for Nina to let them be.

"My mum died during the pandemic. She may not have wanted me, but she was still my mother. We were poor. She cleaned homes. I never knew who my dad was. One day, hospital told me that she had been buried because she was brought in dead. I was seventeen. Life was already hard, but her death sank me. Didn't even sit for SPM," she was overcome by emotions and started tearing up. Luckily someone whose face came to her mind earlier had kindly supported and helped her find odd jobs to make a living. Cikgu Ainah, one of her teachers.

"I read about PWO in the newspaper. I wrote to you thinking that nobody would bother to read the letter, let alone to offer help. Living in the margins taught us not to depend on the system to avoid getting our hearts broken," she said with a broken smile on her face. A cry for help. A moment of lift.

“Thank you for coming and proving that the Nation’s promise to help the People is real. I am not ready to die, yet. I still want to watch Lee Byung Hun.” Elated and relieved for successfully halting another attempt to end a life, Laila extended her hands in the exact manner Mr. Sunshine extended his to Go Aeshin on the bridge in Dahlia’s favourite drama. “Stay alive, you have me,” their hands locked firmly, but Dahlia’s eyes were already teary and red.

“Thank you for making the effort to help even when you don’t know me. I promise to live. Let’s talk more at the next consultation.” They were quiet for a moment, turning slowly to look away from each other before Laila finally said, “take care, see you again. Come on Nina, let’s go.”

Laila’s job for the day came to an end. Tomorrow would be a new beginning. Everywhere in the Nation, many people like Dahlia are still waiting to be heard, seen, and loved. *The beginning of life, what I am born to do*, Laila thought as she made her way out of Dahlia’s place. Happily, Nina joined her as they walked to the car. Dahlia watched them leave from her window as the TV credits were rolling. The scorching sun caused her eyes to flinch, but she let the bright light shatter the long and dark slumber she was in for so long.

She grabbed the calendar on the table to mark the date for her next consultation. Glimpsing the end of her long journey, she muttered under her breath, *I forgive you Mum. It wasn’t your fault that I was born. I’m not unwanted. I’m just a human who is searching for her place and peace of mind. I’m not perfect, but I’ll be fine.*

* * * * *

“SS1: One-way Ticket”

by Jeal May Gelogo

Writing. Thinking. Crumpling a piece of paper. Writing again. This is what has been going on for hours. She didn't know where to start. It would be great if she reached out to them. Typing. Deleting. She couldn't make up her mind. At last, she decided. She didn't need help – she was sure of it, or was it only a thought she was forcing through her mind?

Midnight came and she prayed - asking for a sign. Seconds, minutes, hours passed. A light blinded her slightly, it was daytime. She had fallen asleep, again. *I will try again later*, she thinks to herself.

Like other normal days, she proceeds with her routine. She can't believe that she's come across this unexpected routine. She looks at her phone. Nothing. "Ah, must have been busy", she says to herself. An hour passes and her phone vibrates – yes, she always sets it to vibrate mode even though she loves the sound the virtual keyboard on her device makes. A message greets her. She replies and keeps the conversation as normal as possible.

Later that night she prepares again. There will be no going back, she knows. She's written everything for everyone. Tomorrow she'll be at the post office sending out her letters. Not knowing when her recipients will receive their letters, she's already prepared everything she needs. Deactivating her social media accounts, even the private ones, has never been easy, but it's for the best. *At least they won't know what's been happening*, she thinks to herself. She wanted to blame somebody, but she can't. Everything has been her choice.

Finally, the letters have been sent. It'll be a matter of time for those to be read. She's already booked a one-way ticket. Soon, she walks in her favorite place. She's always been fascinated by trains, especially the old ones – not that she wasn't fond of the modern ones. Even though there are faster ways to get home, she never missed a day without riding them. Wanting to

savor the moment, she waits until the last trip, where there are almost no passengers except for those that are desperate to catch the last train to go home and rest after a long day. She loves the silence and focuses on hearing only the sound of the train as it approaches the station.

Now, there's only one thing she needs to accomplish. She steps forward, and the last thing she sees is the blinding light of the lead car of the train.

* * * * *

“Confessions of a Malay Daughter”

by Ruby

Dear Abah,

I am glad that you have passed away. I have since attained my freedom.

I am not glad that you have passed away. I have since realized my freedom came with a cost.

Our country has been under lockdown – strict, lax and many other versions of it – for more than a year now. Always, I think of what you would’ve done, what you would’ve said. I imagine situations in which my siblings and I would have to help you set up your work-from-home office. Reminders would be needed about the Wi-Fi password and Zoom meetings and the strain of looking at the computer screen all day long. Most likely, though, you’d remain a stubborn bank officer, insisting on going to the office as usual, disregarding the rules. You’d make sure the exception applies to you, for bank services are essential and necessary for citizens of this country. You’d worry about the case numbers and how, as a heart patient, you’d be in one of the vulnerable groups, yet you’d show up with a brave face. You’d convince others that everything is under control and this too shall pass. You’d reach home and sigh by the corner of your bed, confiding in ummi about the challenges of the days ahead.

But of course, my imagination remains as such. The silver lining of your early death is that you do not have to live through the pandemic. You do not have to watch as the shops close down, people lose jobs, families get separated and our lives stand still. You have left this world, and I am glad you are spared from the continuous familial devotion that had bound you throughout your entire life.

The standstill allows for big moments of reflection for your daughter. I wish to tell you so many things. I am here, and I am free. For that, I am grateful. However, each day arrives with a realization that I owe my freedom to you. It is both a blessing and a curse. My ideal self

would like to believe that humans are born free. Rights are universal and natural. However, reality is a wake-up call. I look around, and I see freedom chipping away. People are subdued by the variety of oppressors in their life – a husband, a wife, children, money, place, authorities, the law, hopelessness and entrapment. I wonder how I manage to successfully navigate my existence and retain control over my life. Yes, I owe it all to you.

To be a Malay daughter in Malaysia is to exist in a body of contradictions. I am privileged yet oppressed. I am made of strength and fear. I am of freedom and limitations. For the first twenty years of my life, I was what you decided and allowed me to be. Upon your death, it took me a while to unchain myself from that existence, and it was not easy. However, it was gratifying. I loved you, and I worshiped you. I love you now, yet I realise no one is ever absolutely responsible for someone else's life. My culture would disagree with me. They would tell me a daughter would be bound by her parents and then her husband post-marriage. They would tell me my life does not belong to me and me alone, and I should always think of serving and benefitting others.

Yet deep inside, there is a conviction that it is not true. I am who I want to be. I am what I am working towards. My decisiveness is me being visionary, not stubborn. My independence is me being driven, not selfish. I have the power in me to direct where I want to go in life. And I believe that no one gets to do that for me. The only person who could was you. And that was it. Stop. I am my own captain now.

Perhaps people get uncomfortable with the notion of a powerful daughter.

Hence, I wake up each morning thanking you for my independence. Thank you for living in my heart and not in my life. I'd give everything to have you with me physically, but I know that would end up with me being a happy daughter, not a happy woman. Your death grieved me and freed me to no end. I have to die and come alive a few times. Therein lies my guilt. Is love still a valid love when it's fuelled by obligations and imposed expectations?

Is that the reality of being a daughter? I became a feminist when I was 19 years old. You supported me despite not understanding what it was about. You knew I was into women's rights and suspected that my mother's suffering due to your infidelity, in a way, inspired me in my path. You see, my siblings and I have long accepted that you were a wonderful father

but a flawed husband. I witnessed how devotion infused by patriarchal ideas of love and marriage suffocated my mother. And I swore to God I would never end up like her. I hated myself for using her as a lesson learnt. That was very anti-feminist of me. Years later, I discovered that the devotion was beyond you, Abah. You were a participant of a far bigger system. There was culture. There was religion. There was an institutionalised belief on how hierarchy – no matter how much suffering it inflicts on people – should not be changed. However, I am a mere servant of God. I make the choice every day to not be a servant of those who claim to interpret and enforce his Words.

Change is a must. Progress is crucial. A life lived in fear of those two is a life not worth living. It got me thinking about power structure and how it gets built up and dismantled. And for a Muslim daughter, no power is more absolute than that of her father.

You see, I was not worried about you exercising power over me. You'd never, I know. What concerned me was that you could. You had the capability to decide on my everything. When I was in college, I was told that the father and the paternal grandfather are able to marry their daughter off without her consent. The first thing that came to my mind was how grateful I am that I no longer have those two individuals in my life. I need not worry about people having a say in the matters of my marital status. But the fear I have for girls who are subjected to this is immense. I wonder what it does to someone's sense of self-worth once their life is deprived of agency.

Freedom is a fickle thing, depending on your background.

I can taste it most days. And I have no fear of you coming back to take it away.

I am thankful that you did exercise power over me on matters that do not deprive me of my pride. We had to have certain kinds of jobs, earn a certain way and to make a livelihood in a manner that you deemed respectable. I appreciate that character and ability were two elements you found most important in determining someone's worth. A part of me theorises that you push your daughters too far as you knew how the world would be treating us. It does get a little unfair at times. You knew I'd have to work twice as hard to be recognised for my abilities. You knew that people would be concerned about my appearance and status no

matter how far I go. You knew that my life would not be considered my own. You knew I would struggle and choose to struggle alone.

I used to think that decisiveness is an essential aspect of everyone's existence. Now, I know that I am one of the privileged few. Not all can make decisions for they know not if they should. So many things hold them back. Their family, mostly. Obligations. Things they have signed up for. Things that would stop them from getting what they want but they proceeded anyway. I wonder why. And people asked me, "how can you be so clear with what you want?" One must. I live in a society that glorifies telling a woman how to be and what to do. If I do not decide, someone will do that for me. What a horror story that'd be! I make mistakes, yes, but I do not hesitate. I cannot afford to. Once I do, I will succumb to other people's wishes. Once I give in, I will crave for other people's approval. It is a slippery slope, and I must be careful.

And I realise my freedom, though existing, is fragile and hard-earned.

Why do I have to feel guilty being a free woman, Abah? Is it because I see lack of freedom around me? Is it because it does its jobs remarkably well in the world right now? Is it because I bask in the privileged security that you had provided? Is it because my freedom was bought by your money? Or is it because it was purely a matter of luck that I had you as my father? That you chose to uplift me instead of clipping my wings? That you saw potential in me and was not threatened? That you instilled in me a solid sense of belief in myself? That the journey is more important than the destination? And that my intelligence is my greatest asset?

Looking back, it all depended on you, did it not? You had the power. I had none. With you gone, your power was passed down to me.

I hate the irony in that. And I wonder about the big system enabling that. I saw it as fatherly love, but I am sure there is a way for such a love to not be so power-obsessed. A daughter's worth and sense of being should never be subsumed under the dominance of her parents.

I am a free woman, Abah. I no longer wish to feel guilty for that. I miss you, and I love you. And nothing in our past can ever change that.

Your daughter,

Ruby

* * * * *

“Tattered Lines”

by Tran Quynh Nguyen

ten, twelve, fourteen - on every even year, my mom bought me
cherry red jeans, their tight crotches like hands punching upwards.

on my sixteenth birthday, she thrust in my hands, behind closed doors
a red cocktail dress that barely touched my knees,

its sleeves like butterfly wings fluttering in the air, my pubic hair its antenna,
soaring through the sky before it gets dark and i would have to change into:

the blouse stitched by my dad's will, folding between creases were his well-wishes
for me to marry and iron silk clothes for a strangerman,

but i always grow out of it - in my dreams i tatter its wool lines, one
that leads to another, but mom is always kind enough to patch them up-

even when under closed wool, my open wounds
are still watered and pruned, they turn into scars.

* * * * *

“Santubong”

by Amrita V. Naira

What does it mean
To fall from the sky
Your body turning to rock and stone
Your limbs to seeds, to herbs, to trees
Your hair to winding rivers
That flow out to the sea
To have clouds drape you in white
And as waves play on your lap,
What does it mean
To laugh at them in flowers
To have poets look at you
In awe
And find themselves without words
And all they can say
When I ask them
What do you look like,
What must you feel,
What does your story mean –
All they can say
is
"Mother."
"Mother."
"Mother."

* * * * *

“Thai Cave”

by Peter W. Morris

Twelve boys and a man
Trapped within a water-filled cavern
Two-and-a-half miles deep
Within a Thai cave
Hovered over by a limestone canopy
Stalactites, dripping like icicles
From above
Stalagmites, rising like worn nails
From below
Rushing water threaten
Always, the water
Ink-like blackness
Sights unseen
Touch, words, prayers
The only communication
From within
From without
Entrapment
Shoes, walking sticks, backpacks
Only within reach
“Does anyone know we’re here?”
All question...
Yes, rescue days away
Days without light

Days without food
Days without...hope?
Water a two-edged sword
Teams of divers prepare
Bringing food, sustenance
The warmth of human companionship
“It will take many days, perhaps weeks,
If we can get them out.”
A big, a very big if?
One Thai rescue diver succumbs
To a lack of oxygen
Can these souls be saved?
Children who cannot swim
They grab onto wetsuits
As SCUBA-clad Seals lead
Front and back
Through darkness, mud-filled blackness
Cave-holes, barely allowing passage
By boys, slight men
The world watches, responds, prays
Miracles!
First four boys make the passage
Four more the next day
Five more the last
All helicoptered to hospitals
To many gods the world has prayed
I prayed, too, as did those I know
Young and old, boys and girls
And, to be sure, parents...
Miracles happened
I give God the credit.

* * * * *

“Tiroi”

by Matthew Jerome van Huizen

Yes. I remember Tiroi—
Its syllables, one of music, the other regal,
Late one evening, where the KTM halted.
Irritatingly. In twilight’s warm purple.

The tannoy bleeped. *Teeroooy... Teeroooy...*
Not a soul came in. Not a soul got up,
There beyond the empty platform,
and rusty fence, Lay Tiroi - our own Adlestrop.

Nestled in the dying sun’s final glare,
Were boys chasing an errant football;
In that snapshot- *lalang* and humid air,
As *Magrib's* azan dropped its first note.

The *cengkeriks* chimed in with their evensong
And nearby, slithered Pak Sawa,
Swoosh closed the door. The KTM trudged along,
into darkness as evening surrendered.

* * * * *

“anti body”

by Hana Ghani

i left your warmth
wailing and afraid
of the life
i have yet to live
i am yours
before i am mine
you made me such
gathered from soil and dust
i am yellow brown black and blue
marked and moulded by your hands
and yet
you spit me out
you deny me
i am the fate you wrote

* * * * *

“ina/mother”

by Noel Christian A. Moratilla

she knows how to dissemble pain
with words that sound like novenas
in a heartless world
no matter the grief, no matter
the impoverishment.
courage drowns out the tears streaming
from the eyes of one
who has mastered suffering.

in the sanctum, it always starts the same way:
check for blood pressure,
check for oxygen level,
check for the perseverance to stare
illness in the face.
seated, she no longer
winces when they insert the catheter
that seems to tunnel through the soul.

depending on the mood, she may
nap, exchange stories,
pensively relish
memories of those who once
occupied the now empty
chairs close by.

when done, she walks down
the plank & into manila's moonless
streets, happily reaching home
for a new lease on life.

but at midnight, she wakes up
& calls out names—

 germaine abbie ali
 sophia zak

her muffled sobs
reaching *apos*
in lands both distant
& near—
they whose
embrace
she still longs
to feel.

* * * * *

“River Waking Mountains”

by John C. Mannone

The cock-of-the-walk hill in the shadows
of the mountains, roosts over farmland.
Its comb of purple-veined trees filter dawn:
soft, keratin yellow, bloodred translucence,
glory orange.

It's stoneheart wrestles awake to the voice
of many waters dappled with the swish
of hope. No matter the accent of the streams
merging into one, they shout with the sun.

Author's Note: (1) Thinking about the longest river in Indonesia, the Kapuas (710 miles) in the island of Borneo. It originates in the Müller Mountains, and traverses westerly through rich farmland before emptying as a marshy delta into the South China Sea. (2) *Cock of the walk* is an American idiom, which, when applied to a person, means someone who acts more important than others in a group, like a strutting rooster. In the poem, it applies to a hill or a smaller mountain amidst others in the mountain range, which is favored with morning sunshine, so it is used as a pathetic fallacy.

* * * * *

“Family History”

by Paulin L

I met them in my grandmother’s house,
Where the blue pea boards, painted by callused hands,
Joined the portraits and the toothy smiles of ‘95
In a gallery that has witnessed every rise and fall.
The lines on the dusky wood were broad,
Like the wrinkles that lined my grandmother’s head.
I see them in her daughter’s sixty-year-old face.
I see them in her son - my father,
Darkening, trembling, lying in wait.

I met them in my grandmother’s house -
As if listening to a vinyl record play,
I heard your children laugh at the movies in grey
As you welcomed grandpa at the end of his day.
You beamed as bright as the February sun,
Yet you always clutched onto that curtain
That would stain your nails, the corners of your eyes,
Trickling into every child’s unknowing embrace.

I see it, soundless on the ceiling -
A misshapen lump of the years past,
Moulded by your hummingbird heart
And what was flung over their little heads,
Before the thunder gave away to rain.

I bade farewell to my grandmother's house
And the remnants of tall tales and reunion dinners,
Knowing that one day, long after tomorrow
I would wake up, trembling, with the same.

* * * * *

“It”

by Lauren Tupaj

you are being hunted, haunted, beware
its unseen, unbearable, uncaring
it creeps in the night, searching and seeking

it hunts you down with no hesitation
it does not falter, only flows, pierces
it comes after you when you are alone

it seeps into your core, leaves you trembling
ravishes, overwhelms, your limit
does your limit exist? it does not care
its scrapes and pricks at your brain, gut, heart

sometimes it lurks or sticks with you, torment
brings you to your knees, its screams in your ears
no one hears it, makes you cry like a child

you're trapped, a shame, it still hunts, it can kill
so, what am I? and what is it? and why?
it always finds you in the end, pity.

* * * * *

“Pain is Art, Art is Pain”

by Lauren Tupaj

Once,
I believed
that life
was about healing your heart
now convinced,
pain is art

daily, nightly
i breathe
ever so slightly

my body,
collapses
can't sleep
my mind,
relapses
can't wake up

in my heart,
i always knew

unfair,
forever yearning
for things

in this life
i may never earn

whatever i touch
see
meet

in the end,
i remember
my soul
has to part
and forever
lie,

how unfair,
pain is art

* * * * *

“Ode to Flora”

by Lauren Tupaj

How could one not adore a simple flower?
Each truly holds a certain, special power.

Carnations, roses, bring a deep-felt love
Their sentiment, designs, scents, and colors,
Make me feel like a dove, soaring above.
All these flowers, to show her you love her.

Sunflowers bring devotion by the hour,
Rising, standing strong, a golden tower.
Their scents, they seek to overpower
All these wonderful, beautiful flowers.