



# **TO DANCE ALONG THE WIND**

Poetry on migration, borders,  
and new futures

Enbah Nilah

# நீங்கள் எதை இழந்தீர்கள்? What did you lose?

*To my great-grandfather, Munusamy, who was among the Malayan Tamil labourers pronounced missing during the construction of the Death Railway (Burma-Siam Railway). It is rumoured that he was tortured to death by Japanese soldiers for faking an attendance on behalf of a fellow labourer who had contracted Cholera.*

If memory is the only casket accorded to you  
and I may well be the last bearer,  
then tell me, how would you like this story told?  
Shall I soften the tragedy?

Perhaps the sky pouted  
with the arrival of indolent dusk  
while the wind whistled an aching lullaby;  
when your eyes glazed over,  
the last glint on the track bed  
looked like கோலிக்குண்டு<sup>1</sup>  
and you could almost hear  
<sup>1</sup>the marbles your children flicked  
clang and clatter in the distance.

For a moment, you could forget  
the pale greys of jutting quarried stones,  
and how blood seeps and dries  
into ugly browns between the incisors.  
For a moment, your world was green again,  
shaded by high branching limbs,  
and tree bark that bled  
milky white like a new mother.

உங்கள் இழப்புகளால்  
இந்த நிலம் என்ன பெற்றது?<sup>2</sup>  
பயிர் விதைப்பதற்குப் பதிலாக  
ரயில் விதைத்தீர்கள்.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>What was born of this land  
from your losses?

<sup>3</sup>Instead of seeds,  
you sowed railway tracks.

---

<sup>1</sup> Goli gundu – a traditional Indian street game of flicking marbles into a hole

The steel you carried on your back  
in place of the daughters you couldn't —  
did they also whimper  
through the nightmare of your absence?  
Perhaps somewhere in Siam, even today,  
when the bolts unclench to rest,  
they still taste the rust of your blood  
between their molars.

Did you know you'd never make it home?  
Shall I write that you cried  
into the water there for months  
and hoped the salt turned into sea elsewhere?  
And how that very hope mothered you  
through the smothering heat and disease?  
Or will running water break  
the suspension of disbelief?

Perhaps death was a courteous guest  
who didn't overstay his welcome;  
a hammer to the head,  
a bayonet to the chest,  
or simply thrown half-alive  
into a pit of fire.

If no bodies were recovered,  
you are a nobody.  
If thousands of bodies were recovered,  
you are *still* a nobody.  
Who are you amongst a hundred thousand?  
Just a sheaf of grass uprooted  
and cast aside by a careless fist.  
But here we are, the rest of you,  
seeds sprouted from the same weed  
scattered across lands.

உங்கள் இழப்புகளால்  
நாங்கள் என்ன அடைந்தோம்?<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>What did we gain  
from your losses?

After a better part of a century,  
my tongue is still swollen  
from the sorrows you swallowed.

---

Blistered and forever unquenched,  
my throat struggles against the chokehold  
of your stories.

The roof of my mouth tries to house you,  
to beckon you home.  
You, whom I've never met,  
you, whom my mother has never met,  
you, whom my mother's mother could only bury  
in the back of her mind.  
Who's going to console your motherland  
when she demands answers about her missing sons?  
Has she always known you'll never make it home?

If memory is the only casket accorded to you,  
and I'm the last remaining bearer,  
then tell me, how shall I lay you down?

# Breaking News

***Malaysian Nagaenthran executed on drugs charges in Singapore.***

*Execution comes the morning after mother's last-ditch effort to save her intellectually disabled son was dismissed.*

- Al Jazeera headline, Wednesday, 27th April 2022

"So, miss — " he starts,  
eight minutes late and picking up  
the conversation in medias res  
like a rope in his hands -  
a mooring line underneath the water's surface.

"Did you see the breaking news?  
What are your thoughts on Nagaenthran's execution?"

A. There it is, the hook snags the line  
an anchor dropped  
in my belly,  
salt and bile rising  
in waves...

This could be a teaching moment.  
Did you know sounds in the ocean  
can travel for generations?  
This is to say that the screams  
of my ancestors who drowned  
while looking for a safe passage,  
to make a living among the living,  
still remain in the bodies of water  
that surround the continent to this day.

And if our bodies are at least 50% water,  
does it honestly surprise you  
that centuries after, my people are still  
fighting for breath?

B. This could be a teaching moment.  
I could reach out and grab  
the other end of the rope,  
traverse the distance between  
the clay of his soil ————— and ————— the gravel of my sea.

But a rope in careless hands  
can turn into a knot  
and a knot can turn into a noose  
and a noose often turns into lynching.  
I thread the tightrope instead.

C.

"Miss, we really want to hear what you have to say! Don't hold back."

- A. Most days, hearing the enthusiasm in his voice  
makes me grateful for my job.  
Today, it grates my nerves.  
Doesn't my body speak for itself?  
My body doesn't have the privilege  
of silence and caution,  
or chances beyond  
the first impression.
- B. Every other day, bodies like mine  
trickle into government institutions  
where we're underrep(resented),  
and are flushed out of history  
or misrep(resented),  
and flooded into prison cells,  
where we are overrep(resented).

C. **"If you don't already know,  
you haven't been paying attention."**

I watch the expectant eyes, twelve pairs,  
an intrigued jury, nodding for me to proceed.

- A. Nagaenthran and his grieving sister  
are the same age as my elder siblings.  
A weathered scream  
from an ancient source  
swells in my windpipe.  
I swallow it down  
and send it to a watery grave.

Nagaenthran *was* the same age as my sister.

B. This could be a teaching moment.

There are many ways to define an execution:  
a completion of a plan or a killing.  
Sometimes, it's both.

Kugan Ananthan  
Sugumar Chelladury  
Karuna Nithi Palani Velu  
Dharmendran Narayanasamy  
Balamurugan Suppiah  
V. Mugilarasu  
A. Ganapathy  
Surendran Shanker  
Sivabalan Subramaniam  
Nagaenthran Dharmalingam

Each name  
a resounding shriek  
echoing  
endlessly  
in an ocean  
of anguish,  
rattling  
the bones  
that are resting  
on the seabed.

**C. "It's only breaking news if it's new."**



# Hand-me-downs

*In 2002, international journalists were invited to report on the ceasefire agreement between Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan state after almost two decades of war. The peace was short-lived.*

1999

I am six;  
my brother practises The Undertaker<sup>5</sup> moves on me -  
    Tombstone Piledriver,  
        Chokeslam,  
            Hell's Gate...

I cry, but still, I crawl  
into the makeshift ring, shrieking,  
    *Do you smell what The Rock is cookin'!*<sup>6</sup>  
only to land face-first onto the mattress.

It knows each of us intimately  
by the growth of our spines  
and the stench of our morning breaths.  
The spring-worn bed is thrice my age  
and far more resilient.

My brother's eyes roll back  
like a soothsayer, he intones,  
    *You will...rest in peace.*

2002

I am nine;  
I learn ratio by measuring my body weight  
against that of a loaded AK-47,  
1:3, I know this  
because my father, hollow-eyed and haunted,  
carries me to bed and mutters,  
    *had you been born halfway across the sea,*  
    *you would have to carry one by now,*

---

<sup>5</sup> The Undertaker - an American professional wrestler. His catchphrase is "Rest in Peace."

<sup>6</sup> The catchphrase of The Rock - an American professional wrestler.

*and I would have sent you to war.*

Did he take home something that isn't his  
from the depths of the Vanni<sup>7</sup> forest?  
Had he learnt nothing about keeping  
what belongs to the jungle  
in the jungle?

I try to eat for three  
because not too far from here,  
children who looked like me  
were losing limbs on a good day,  
their lives on a bad one.  
I have to be prepared.

2007

I am fourteen;  
I press my nose into the freshly printed pages  
of my father's war reportage;  
he presses the bridge of his nose,  
watching the televised press conference.  
The author of his book's foreword,  
pronounced Tha-mil-sel-van<sup>8</sup>,  
matches the name on the news-ticker,  
pronounced dead.  
The weather is cloudy  
from the smoke of incendiaries  
with no chance of peace.  
The newscaster announces that  
all hope has died with the right-hand man.  
The irony is lost on me,  
but not on my father.

2019

I am twenty-six;  
my father lays in a white casket  
in the middle of the living room.  
It is bad omen to place the pictures

---

<sup>7</sup> Vanni- the Northern province of Sri Lanka devastated by the civil war.

<sup>8</sup> S.P. Thamilselvan, the political wing leader and main interlocutor of LTTE who brokered the peace talks in 2002, was killed by the Sri Lankan air force on Nov 2, 2007. The Sri Lankan state officially pulled out of the ceasefire agreement two months later.

of the living alongside the dead,  
but we can't find many of my father  
alone for his funeral.

My mother unpacks an old stack of photos  
of my father reporting from Sencholai<sup>9</sup>.  
She tacks one onto the memorial board —  
in it, he is animatedly talking  
to three young Tamil girls.

I say,  
*They can't be that much older than me.*  
She replies without flinching,  
*They're gone.*  
*The orphanage was bombed.*

Did she inherit this detachment from her mother —  
the sole survivor of a bomb blast  
by the Japanese?  
She sifts through the stack again,  
convinced she could find more of the dead.  
She doesn't have to look too hard.

A week after, my brother takes apart  
the wooden frame of our old bed with an axe  
to make room for new things.  
My mother screams bloody murder  
and asks if he'd split her in half too,  
if memories count for nothing in this world?

The anger and grief polluting the air  
smell old and familiar,  
at least thrice her age  
and far more resilient.  
I don't know where it came from,  
but I know where it's going.  
I have to be prepared.

2022

I am twenty-nine.  
I was born emaciated to make room

---

<sup>9</sup> In 2006, the Sri Lankan state dropped 16 aerial bombs on Sencholai Children's Home, killing 61 Tamil children and 3 teachers. Over 100 children were wounded, some with loss of limbs, some with head and shrapnel injuries.

for the leftovers of lives that ceased before my time.

I come from a lineage of hand-me-downs.

My superstitions

are hand-me-downs.

My illnesses

are hand-me-downs.

My resentments

are hand-me-downs.

But this line of descent

ends

with

me.

This is my undertaking;

I will crawl out

of the layers and layers of dirt,

out

of

this

six

feet

hole

of someone else's grave.

I will hand down nothing

but all the love once deflected,

the dreams set aside,

and the joys overlooked.

Because if I grieve for all of us,

then it is only logical

that when I heal,

I heal for all of us.

## A Fine Li(n)e

What are  
borders  
but  
barriers li(n)es routes  
to prevent to punish to police to violate  
the arrival of the scourge of the exodus of the rights of the dignity of  
illegal foreign war-torn devastated desperate  
people children families humans  
dying for hoping for praying for  
a place a land  
that promises  
home?

Can the sons of soil  
point out a document more  
legitimate honest unimpeachable  
than the scars borne from  
building carrying fleeing with  
a country  
on your back?

Can the patriots  
point out a democracy more  
equalising autonomous unwavering  
than that of  
a virus a famine a flood a drought?

Can a passport and a visa  
adequately explain what it's like to  
live with move between raise a child in  
split

tongues        souls        worlds?

If life on Earth  
began        evolved        will end  
in the depths of the ocean,  
what power do the sons of soil have  
to declare us  
aliens?

# Bethany Balan

## Poem 1: Daleh\* by Bethany Balan

*\*Daleh is a Kayan word meaning place/locality/country/homeland*

What do you call it when  
you belong to your parents  
and nobody else  
when pulang kampung<sup>1</sup> feels less like a reunion  
and more like a journey into a foreign land  
blue above, blue below  
Sky and water, water and sky  
Tanah air, asal tapi asing<sup>2</sup>  
an alien landscape you visited once in a dream  
where the locals speak like waves  
crashing on the sandy shore  
you don't understand what they're saying  
but the words sound familiar

what do you call it when  
your name is a collection of borders  
a venn diagram of invisible lines  
waves lapping and overlapping  
blue above, blue below  
A sea of uncertainty underneath a sky of doubt  
I love swimming  
but I can't tread water forever  
What do you call it when  
The only solid thing you own in this place with no horizon  
is your father's name  
And so you latch onto it so tightly  
That you can feel the splinters  
pressing into your fingertips  
My father's name is Balan  
It means edge:  
edge of the river, edge of the map, edge of the world  
A word in a language I've forgotten how to speak  
my name is a collection of borders  
and I walk through immigration every day  
smuggling contraband convictions  
and bootleg bonafides  
tucked into pockets  
Hidden under folds of fabric and flesh  
Hanging from the notch in my sternum  
A twin tattoo beating right next to my heart

what do you call it when  
in order to be claimed  
you first need to learn to lay claim  
But how do you take up space  
when you don't fit in anywhere

How do you learn to take up space  
 And to do it on purpose  
 when nobody ever taught you how  
 what do you call it when  
 guilt grows like mushrooms after rain  
 when the landscape of your identity  
 is fertile ground for coulda-shoulda-wouldas  
 When I speak I sound like a toddler  
 Or worse, a tourist  
 Notes in the margins of my Kayan-English dictionary  
 Overlapping lines  
 that I trace and erase and redraw  
 But the coiling branches of Kayo' Urip<sup>3</sup>  
 Are hard to follow if ika' jan jam dahun Kayan<sup>4</sup>  
 blue above, blue below  
 Sky and water, water and sky  
 only with age do you realise that  
 floating feels a lot like flying  
 and the only things keeping you from your birthright  
 are those invisible lines  
 drawn by old men who thought they knew everything  
 enforced by young men who should know better  
 Traced and erased and redrawn by you  
 You do know better but old habits die hard  
 And nobody taught you that belonging and fitting in  
 Aren't mutually exclusive  
 Blue above, blue below  
 Sky and water and land  
 Tanah airku, Asal dan asing<sup>5</sup>  
 diaspora in my own homeland  
 dia spora<sup>6</sup>: floating on the breeze  
 maybe that's why I love swimming so much  
 because I've been adrift and floating for so long  
 that drifting feels like home

Translation:

1. pulang kampung: returning home (to the village) - Malay
2. Tanah air, asal tapi asing: Homeland, original but foreign - Malay
  - a. *Note: Tanah means land and air means water*
3. Kayo' Urip: Tree of Life - traditional motif, Kayan
4. ika' jan jam dahun Kayan: you don't know how to speak Kayan - Kayan
5. Tanah airku, Asal dan asing: My homeland, original (Indigenous) and foreign - Malay
  - a. *Note: the capitalisation in "Asal" is a nod to Orang Asal, the Malay phrase for Indigenous people*
6. dia spora: they are a spore - Malay



## Poem 2: Torch Ginger by Bethany Balan

Feathers in place of fur  
I am a creature leaving my comforts behind  
they say familiarity breeds contempt  
but something tells me they  
never had to deal with international travel in a post covid world  
    (but what is home anyway  
    except four walls and a door you can lock)  
I sleep beside you in this tiny Singaporean apartment  
with the monsoon rain beating at the window  
I close my eyes and dream of Sungai Asap  
of beads and riverbanks and trees so tall it hurts to look at them  
there is a pocket square of green in the courtyard  
where a handful of bunga kantan grow  
management warned off would-be chefs  
with raffia string and laminated posters saying “do not touch”  
leave it to Singaporeans  
to make decorations out of ingredients  
purely ornamental, purely useless  
I walk by it on the way back from grocery shopping  
and the smell reminds me of my father tongue  
how I don't know how to cook with it  
but I'd recognise that aroma anywhere  
This Kayan and that kantan share similarities  
purely ornamental, purely useless  
    (but what is a garden anyway  
    except a patch of earth  
    you grow pretty things from)

I can't decide if I like it yet  
Singapore is quite pretty in a clean type of way  
but there's a prettiness to dirty things, too  
and I don't know if the people here would agree  
This place feels small and big at the same time  
foreign yet familiar  
Intimidatingly vast and frustratingly narrow  
and whiter than Kuching in July  
Maybe it's because all the streets are named after colonizers  
they feel right at home here.  
There is a Carpenter Street in Singapore  
but unlike the one in Kuching  
there are co-working spaces in place of actual carpenters  
    (but what is a freelancer anyway  
    except a digital carpenter,  
    hunched over their work for hours on end,  
    carving and whittling and nailing down concepts in  
    place of wood)  
It's a melancholy comfort to know  
that people are the same  
anywhere you go

In our tiny Singaporean apartment

I am content  
Because although my homeland is across the ocean  
There is bunga kantan in the courtyard  
And it smells just the same  
    (I will try to be a garden  
    a patch of earth  
    where pretty things grow)  
Even with the monsoon rain beating at our window  
I don't feel cold  
Because although my homeland is 728 km away  
My home is sleeping right beside me  
Feathers and fur and fuzzy blankets  
I am a creature making my own comforts  
    (but what is home anyway  
    except four walls, a door you can lock  
    and the love of your life, sleeping an arms' length  
    away)

### Poem 3: Liminal

By Bethany Balan

I am a portal  
A semipermeable membrane  
Water and laughter and words in foreign languages  
Pass right through me  
But some things still get caught in the cracks  
Like glares so sharp it's a wonder  
their eyelids aren't bleeding  
Like words so blunt it's a wonder  
their mouths aren't bruised  
They wrap their judgements and preconceived notions  
In tissues and plastic bags  
and stuff them into the gaps in my chain link  
fence.

My body is a crossroads  
Place-names inked into my skin on both forearms  
The better to point you in the right direction  
The right direction being me, left behind  
And just like a signboard  
I stand alone and unmoving  
As a sea of human traffic  
Flows steadily around  
Some will pause to read  
But I am not their destination  
Not the end, but merely a means to it  
So I stand alone and unmoving  
As they all eventually  
leave.

My mouth is a river  
Sometimes I am a meeting place  
And other times, the scene of a tragic accident  
I can be bubbly and full of life  
Or drought-dry and low  
Depending on what flows into me  
And what flows from me feels ancient  
Yet it's never the same twice  
I am the cradle of civilisation  
That your mother warned you about  
Didn't she tell you not to play near the river late at night  
Something slippery is hiding beneath the surface  
Something dangerous might lash out  
Be careful or you might trip and fall  
in.

My heart is a bus terminal  
A jumbled cacophony of diesel fumes, anxiety, and excitement  
Of reunions and departures, tears to and tears from  
Of luggage and eye bags  
Did you know that asphalt smells different at night  
And different again in the early morning  
The scent changes with the sun  
Unrelenting heat baking into the tar  
Only to be sucked back out by the cold evening air  
The horizon shimmers and sweats

Then darkens to pitch black  
Nothing feels quite real  
And we've still got a long way to  
go.

I am a portal  
Here, but only because you are  
If home is a full stop, then I am a run-on sentence  
Filled with commas, conjunctions, and prepositions  
A liminal space  
Empty  
And full  
At the same time.

Joan Santillan Amurao

## **A HOPE I HOLD**

(By Joan Santillan Amurao)

I hold the hope that I built in bold  
Made of toiled sweat and blooded ink.  
Sometimes it prompts from hot to cold  
To flow against the rules and shrink.

At times, the emotions lose the grips  
While trials whirl up to catch my breath.  
A paper, a page, a line of no regrets  
Living and loving verses gem to beset.

A hope I hold, a tidal wave of words  
A limited edition of a blueprint book.  
I hope it sheds light for the world to see  
That the hope I clasp is not solely for me

For we are all holding a universal property  
to unravel the mystery of possibility.  
Targeting to shoot a resilient heart  
and flare the soul with unbordered hope.

A hope I hold is endless and free,  
It is meant to keep by you and me.

# END OF THE BORDERLI(n)E

(By Joan Santillan Amurao)

I am lost in between  
My identity--- myself.  
My heart was cuffed  
in the world that looks  
round but clearly  
a huge box of deceit.

To be or not to be is  
out of the question,  
but how could this be?  
Where is the so-called  
humanity?

Does it lies on the raised brows,  
eyeing from head to foot  
with a smirk?

Or is it hidden in the frosty  
shoulders that bounce  
back and forth?

Was it a shame to be real?  
Or a sin to show my real skin?  
Or to disguise under a mask  
is how we will feel secure?

My voice was mopped  
and sealed,  
yearning to be shredded  
and powdered;  
to dance along the wind  
and slay with the sun rays  
and evaporate on its border  
to catch the elusive answer  
in every drop of the rain.

The 'opened arms' society  
and its attribution  
has a different definition.  
Thus, the only valid motion  
Is to turn left and be wrong.  
And there's no way---  
there's no way  
you can make it right.  
There's no escape either,  
but to jump  
into the hay of needles.  
Stitching the gaps  
Hemming the lines  
Trimming the edges  
and embrace diversity.

Then, cut---  
cut the square off  
tipped tongues,  
and give a chance  
to change  
the lie into line,  
a straight and fair line  
to flatten and break  
the chains of limitation,  
and its filtered implication.

Let's all end...  
Let's all end the battle  
of sourgraping traits  
and bittersweet dreams  
to triumphant reality  
of UNITY... of all colors.

# VOYAGE OF THE BAJAU

(By Joan Santillan Amurao)

Life has taken on the guise of a bluish day.  
The drifting time is pushing through the fragile sail.  
Chiming Gondwanan voices beneath the sea.  
And the air gouges the junk's sides carrying a whiff of history.

Their crow's feet eyes reflect heaven and happiness  
And the tight-lipped that sealed hell and anxiousness.  
The insensitive cycle of existence continues to trail behind  
'Cause the treaties of authorities were misaligned.

Along the corals and weeds are flourishing flowers and fruits.  
But they grieve in silence for their decayed floating roots.  
Sea gypsies, keeper of culture and tradition.  
Living in contentment in a discontent nation.



# ARDENT

(By Joan Santillan Amurao)

"Crossing the border of ugliness or darkness  
Takes you to the land of beauty and light."  
(A couplet from Masuma )

And though, the strait of trials will stay surging to contrite  
Yet, It holds the key to open doors of opportunities.

A step back to bash out hesitation and doubts  
Then, move ahead to drench the chamber of droughts.  
For border can constraints our talent if we prefer to be  
It's best to use it to enhance and master our ability.

May we exhibit ourselves in promoting equality and harmony  
Let's emphasize kindness for the advantage of greater humanity.  
Set forth a worthwhile pilgrimage of faith and dream  
And amplify the power of our voices as one ardent team.

# Shameera Nair Lin

## Moments I Was Reminded About the *Post* in Post-colonial Being a Lie

1. When an old white man proudly exclaimed that *we* (his white English ancestors to whom he must have felt a deep connection, to have used a collective pronoun) *built your* (that is to say, the area that existed long before the country on my passport did) *railways*.

This great act of British Benevolence was meant to have contributed immensely to the improvement of *my* (and let us be clear, I am referring to what is allegedly *my* country but will never be truly *mine* in any meaningful way, because what is a country but a falsely demarcated slice of land) country.

He had no idea that *my country* – not the one that has routinely told half my existence to go back to China, but a prior iteration of it where I would not have existed anyway because my grandparents were about to be born in China or India -- had supported the wealth and prosperity of *his great nation*. A bit awkward to explain to him that his great nation had similarly plundered the resources from one part of my cultural heritage while waging not one, but two Opium wars against the other.

Another time.

2. When, in the South Asian exhibition room at the V&A, I stood in the proximity of two South Asian teenagers, as one of them exclaimed: *I'm so fucking tired of this shit. Who do they think they are?*

It occurred to me that they spoke of their frustration in the present tense. I turned towards them and nodded silently, as if to say *yes, we are tired*.

3. When a friend and I discussed the importance of learning languages beyond those in our cultural orbit and froze in silence as we realised we had been discussing Romance languages all along.
4. When another friend told me about her decision to learn French because of its rich cultural history and I replied with a quip about how that richness of culture exists thanks to stolen cultures, and we laughed because it was the best response out of all the inadequate responses we could have offered.
5. When I travel past the city centre in Kuala Lumpur every morning and stare at the architectural remnants of Empire while stuck in present-day traffic.
6. When the Queen died.
7. When, asked in a seminar on postcolonial literature about how the postcolonial could be defined, those of us from 'postcolonial' nations remained silent with a shared understanding: how could there have been any way to neatly define what we were living through each day?

## Real

Once a year, I pluck our conversation  
from a shelf of unwanted memories  
and insert it into the player.

Click *play* to proceed through lines  
I have inevitably memorised.

You once said we were all  
brown in some way.

I have a question:

What does it mean to be brown  
in a world that wants to erase your own shade?

\*

I guess we were both brown  
in *some* way.

I did not know what colour  
I was meant to assign  
to the other part of my identity.

There were no books or  
contrarian think pieces in Malaysiakini  
or songs to help me  
solve this mystery.

After all, I was neither Indian  
nor Chinese enough  
to be thought about in greater detail.

I almost admired the way you could  
believe in something I  
would never be allowed to.

\*

I sat on the parquet floor & proceeded to  
draw lines and shapes  
in living colour.

Splattered across the parqueted surface,  
nothing about the picture before me  
made sense.

\*

Every time I rewind the tape  
I must remind myself:

The hum in my body  
when I move to Boogie Wonderland  
& shake my head disapprovingly while watching  
exhausting representations of my people

(Which of my people, I will let you decide this time)

That is what makes life real.

## these words of mine

*'I saw a demon on my shoulder, it's looking like patriarchy' – noname, Song 33*

Generating rebellion from that noname synergy,  
the cipher to decipher your inadequacies.

Little man going on & on entering my space:  
time to put you in your place.

Preoccupied with my thoughts on fundamental rights.  
Got none of your own, is that right?

Choked my nascent vowels by the throat,  
nouns to identify myself, half-said.

This education did wonders for my soul  
turning me against you whole.

Built a dictionary of your favourite adjectives,  
those you would wield to describe my worth.

Rewriting definitions to these negatives,  
now's the time to accentuate the positives –

assertive                I know

decisive                afraid so

arrogant                you know

aggressive              damn straight

you would prefer for me to leave things unsaid,  
though all that is said stays said.

I'm the reigning champion in this game,  
wrestling syllables from your stranglehold.

If these walls surrounding us could close in on a demon,  
I would not waste space crushing your mediocrity.

Get the hell out of my way, for  
mum's the word  
all the way.

## **Yesterday I Noticed How**

The grooves on my hands have steadily deepened from a lack of care. Just the other day, I asked my friend what the best non-capitalist self-preservation routine was, & they said they had been counting on me to find an answer for us both. Maybe it is not the most empowering step to take, wanting to be reliant rather than reliable. But years ago, I was also told it is an act of courage to know when you need help. There may be a deeper truth I have yet to untangle. Up ahead, the dog lifts his well-groomed leg off the burning concrete and pees with a lack of concern I hope to someday have. Isn't it absurd how uncomplicated life can sometimes be? Someday could be today.

روح در دیار رهایی خلق می شود

ولی برای رشد و جاودانگی  
باید  
ترک وطن کند

روح آواره  
اکنون  
در کالبد جسم  
باید  
لباس تعلق بر تن کند

چون فقط اینگونه  
هستی اش را اهالی دنیا  
باور دارند

روح حالا همان جسم است و ترکیب این دو  
همان آدمی

آدمی  
ترکیب عجیبی است!

روح هستی و بقایش را در رهایی می پندارد و  
جسم  
در تعلق ها

و آدمی اینچنین سرگردان  
در مرز رهایی و  
تعلق

در پی جاودانگی!

The spirit is created in the land of liberation

for growth and immortality however,  
it must  
leave the homeland

The displaced spirit  
now  
In the shell of body

must  
wear the cloth of belonging

As only in this way  
its existence is believed  
By the people of the world

The spirit is now the body itself and the combination these two  
is the human being

The human being,  
what a strange combination!

The spirit assumes its existence and survival in liberation and  
the body  
in belongings

And the human being in this way, wandering  
in the border of liberty and,  
belonging

In search of immortality!

۲

تعلقات جسمی آدمی  
درون مرزها  
هستی‌اش را به اسارت می‌کشد.

من یک زن افغان هستم..  
من شاعر هستم..

روح آدمی اما ،  
رها در جسم  
فرا‌تر از مرزها  
هستی‌اش را باور دارد

من یک انسان هستم...  
من عاشق هستم...

جسم آدمی  
در رهایی از تعلقات  
به نیستی می‌رسد.

این نیستی جسم را در روح حل می‌کند  
و آدمی را به جاودانگی نزدیک.

Dependencies of the body of human



In between the borders,  
Capture her being in captivity

I am an Afghan woman  
I am a poet

The spirit of human however,  
liberated inside a body  
beyond the borders  
believes in its existence

I am a human  
I am a lover

The body of human  
escaping from the dependencies  
reaches nothingness.

This nothingness dissolves the body in the spirit  
and brings human closer to immortality

۳

روح

وطنی ساخته است

درون جسم

بار هستی وطن، بر دوش روح

با وابستگی جسم به تعلقات

سنگین میشود.

روح توان سنگینی

و اسارت ندارد.

وطن

با اسارت روح،

خود با نیستی قرین میشود

این هستی در نیستی

ملال آور و زوال پذیر است

3

The spirit  
has built a homeland  
inside the body

The homeland's weight of being, on the shoulder of spirit  
with body's dependency on belongings  
gets heavier.

The spirit is not able to bear heaviness  
and captivity.

The homeland  
with captivity of the spirit,  
conjoin with nothingness  
This being in nothingness  
is unbearable and deteriorating  
and in this way, immortality is a stranger

۴

جسم

خالی از وابستگی و تعلق

بار هستی اش سبک

در روح

عاشقانه ادغام میشود

و روح

رهاتر از رها

با تمام هستی

به سوی جاودانگی

پر میکشد

حیات بخش آدمی

در اوج زیبایی و دانایی

این نیستی در هستی ست !

Body  
 detached from dependency and belonging  
 and its weight of being light  
 merge affectionately  
 in spirit  
 and spirit  
 more liberated than liberty  
 with its whole being  
 fly  
 towards immortality

life-giver of human  
 in the climax of beauty and wisdom  
 is this nothingness in being

داستان یک مهاجر

روایت همان نیستی در هستی ست.

انسان در وطنی که  
 به آن تعلق ندارد،  
 هستی اش به یغما میرود.

انگاه با درد نیستی  
 محکوم به هجرت هست

مهاجر در جستجوی هستی برباد رفته

زندگی را تنها در  
 گرمای آغوش مهربانان عالم می یابد.

مهربانانی که نیستی جسم شان در هستی روح شان  
 جان گرفته

و همانگونه

معنا میگیرد  
 نیستی یک مهاجر  
 در هستی آنها.

Story of a migrant  
 Is the narrative of the nothingness of being.

Humans in a homeland  
 where they don't belong  
 their being is ravaged

The migrant in search of the lost being  
Finds life  
Only within the warm hugs of the kind people of the world.

The kind people whose nothingness of their body  
is revived in the being of their spirits

and in that way  
nothingness of a migrant  
in their being  
finds meaning.

# Khadra Khalif

**Witness me,**

Here I am  
A wound wreathed by war,  
A breath between borders,  
A bird with a broken spirit.

Here I am  
A letter from a city in ruin,  
The verses of a refugee  
The grief of an exile.

Here I am  
In the garden of refugees,  
The flower the wind forgot,  
A memory of a memory,  
Lost in the limbo of uncertainty.

Here I am  
Leaning on the shadows of hope,  
The holes defeat burrowed in me  
like a flute bereft of a tune .

Here I am  
My last prayer buried  
Under the shade  
Of a be headed minaret  
With nothing in my keep  
But the reveries of home.

Here I am  
Seeking a sanctuary  
Perhaps that's my only sin  
Do not betray me  
Do not betray me.

Wreath me,wreath me  
Not with the crown of prejudice  
But the flowers of freedom  
Like a guest of your heart  
At the gates of your mercy

Undress me,  
Not from my rights  
Nor divorce me from humanity  
Undress me,  
from the garments of your barriers.

Free me,  
From the shackles of shame,  
From criminalising me,  
The centres I am detained .

Hearken unto me,  
Refugee is not my identity,  
But the reality I live in,  
That I am more than the name.

Remember me,  
Lest I perish  
in the prison of your silence  
Lest you bury me  
In the grave of forgetfulness.

Witness me,  
For you deem me invisible,  
That perhaps you may see,  
I am, I am , I am  
A human too.

### **A lesson in projection.**

They say if I'm a refugee  
Then I am an embalmed burden,  
A shadow between epochs,  
An anachronism,

They say if I'm a refugee,  
Then I must be a colourless language,  
A forgotten dialect,  
An artefact unveiled,  
In a distant necropolis,

They say if I'm a refugee,  
Then I'm a border within a border,  
A conundrum to behold,  
An enigma without a name,

They say if I'm a refugee  
I must be tainted history,  
Made of fences and facades,  
That I am a living superstition,

They say if I'm a refugee  
Then I'm an exile of an exile,  
Crafting chaos wherever I reside,  
A pestilence,  
A social illness,

They say if I'm a refugee  
Then I must be a spectacle,  
A museum of tragedies,  
A dichotomy of a paradox,  
An irony in the flesh,

They say if I'm a refugee  
Then I am the lost gazelle  
From a wounded herd,  
Seeking the miracle of rain,  
As though I'm on the verge of extinction,

And I ask,  
"Whose story have I inherited?"  
And they persist,  
"This is not your home,  
Where do you belong?"  
I pause and answer,

"I belong in.,  
The bridges between languages,  
The distances between stars,  
In the hearts of the songbirds  
and the houses of the zephyrs  
In every song of the fallen  
And anthem of the flowers,  
In the isles of laughters  
And every archived smile,  
In the portraits of history  
and the nectars of nostalgia".

### **The season of the phoenixes**

They rose, they rose  
From the ashes of war  
Like phoenixes exiled  
From the afterlife

They rose and rose  
Like monoliths of rebirth  
From the horizon of another border  
Like exiles of heaven  
Seeking Elysium on earth

Scarred eyes  
Skins seasoned by sun  
Barefoot, boat bound  
Broken and bloodied

They thronged to the cold shores,  
The same shores that shunned  
Many to early graves,  
Drowned, dead, defeated

Vestiges of plundered lands,  
Who carry grief like passports,  
From border to border  
Their voices became

Embalmed shadows,  
Disfigured by despair

Rust in their hearts,  
Rust in their hands,  
Their world is all  
But sand and dust.

Go back !  
Go back !  
Alien!  
Illegal !  
Go back to the belly of  
Your burning country.

They found fences,  
Fences everywhere,  
In job listings  
In marriage licenses  
They were bound and bordered

They did not dream,  
They dared not hope,  
To be a dialogue  
Of shame and shadow

Etched into the bone the night,  
Nibbled by prejudice,  
In dim corners they write  
Elysium's elegy  
In pillars of defeat,  
Their flesh bound  
But their spirit free

So they rise and rise  
Above the fogs of fear,  
And the dialogue of ignorance ,  
Beyond the borders of prejudice

They rise and rise  
Grieving in verses  
Singing in sonnets  
Dignified in their exile

If the fire could not burn them  
In decimated cities,  
If the bullets could not pierce  
Their sacred bodies,  
If they escaped the fangs of death,  
Then surely words won't kill,  
Words won't kill.

**The scandal of silence.**



That night,  
A stanza for stanza,  
We planted a poem  
In the prison cell,  
To bathe in the glory of its harvest.

\*

1. "These are the musings of men  
The merchants of words  
Trading lines and verses  
In dark walls where time has forgotten"  
I read, as though I was threading thorns into words.

2. "Once, We were nomads,  
Well versed in reading the stars,  
Traversing the land  
Like pilgrims of peace  
Before we were prisoners  
Before we became ghost stars  
Scattered across the world"  
My fellow inmate continues.

3. "It is possible to die  
A thousand deaths  
In these grey walls,  
Somewhere between  
Exile and memory,  
Hope and glory  
I've buried myself." A young prisoner croons from the corner.

4. "A nightingale's mourning,  
knifes the nocturnal breeze,  
Into a veil of longing,  
and a shroud of grief,  
Behind partitioned shadows,  
beyond divided soil,  
A voice bleeds,  
Wrung, wrung free from bruised lips"  
An old Syrian hums as he fiddles with his harmonica

5. "I hear the wailing of widows  
the weepings of youth,  
the groaning of old men,  
tears of prisoners corroding  
the burnished bars,  
hibiscuses bleeding the song,  
of corpses beneath the clay,  
the face of the moon crumbling,  
Stardusts on these roofs,

It's raining grief tonight,  
It's raining grief tonight"  
The Yemeni inmate weeps .

6. "Habibi,I did not fathom  
to risk the seething sea  
had I only known  
She'll be a mass grave for my family..."  
The Libyan prisoner mourns

7."Here, in this fate of four walls,  
The faces of freedom are grey,  
Here, in this theatre of illusions,  
Stories are many but dreams betray"  
The teenage prisoner interrupts.

8." My mother named me freedom,  
Here, I am but a vestige of a man  
to him who misfortune has sired,  
This night, the violins of freedom  
Are weeping in their dark coffins,  
As I scorn at my fate,  
I, a Greek tragedy  
In a Malaysian border,  
I, a scandal of silence  
In the cacophony of injustice"  
A young Somali prisoner proceeds.

9. "And I tore all the silences  
Within these withering walls  
My nails singing against their flesh,  
Carving the voices of memory,  
The testimony of this captivity,  
My vestiges,my memoirs,  
Remember me,remember me  
Lest I perish within these walls"  
A Rohingya inmate replies.

10. "Console us,console us  
Dearest God,console us,  
Lest sorrow drags us asunder,  
And wrings the violins of our prayers,  
Plucks the flowers in our wounds,  
and torches the minarets in our hearts,"  
The Prison's Imam prays as he cups his hands to his face.

11. " Grey walls and silver chains,  
Lacquered eyes and silent prayers  
Make a saint out of a man"  
Mocks the prison guard.

And Alas!  
Like the anthem of angels,  
The adhan clawed  
the walls of dawn  
with piercing blues,  
“Open the windows  
Open windows” I say,  
“Let the adhan pour in,  
Let it quench our souls,  
drench these walls,  
and cleanse us,  
from the embers of sorrow.”

# Lily Jamaludin

## Elegy for Alias and Ima

Above us, stars. Glimmering in the city  
like diamonds slow-catching the light,

slow-catching the loss  
of everything below. Because down here

in this country, we forget with ease.  
With willingness. But all memory

must eventually come back  
to the surface. Isn't that what haunting is?

Shadow reminding body  
not to forget. Echo demanding

voice remember how far it carries.  
When you look closely enough,

you'll see how far it's carried. The skyline looks  
like small gravestones, ghosts echoing

back and forth against the walls  
of the country they built

and were buried under.  
Haunt us. Every time I enter

another parking lot, I'll remember.  
Another tunnel, I'll remember. City of concrete.

City of sin and success. City of god  
disfigured underneath the light,

underneath the concrete rubble  
of another collapsed building.

City of migrants. City built by  
migrant labour, city that needs but

won't see the hands that make it,  
city where people came with names

and songs and a history of living  
and are turned into ghosts, bought and sold.

In the news article, they said they found  
Alias and Ima folded into each other.

Hands forming small shelters  
against one another, eyes closed

because once they were somewhere  
else – not here. In another timeline,

Alias and Ima reached the top of that building,  
his hands clasped on the small of her back,

promising that tomorrow  
could be different. *The stars look like how they did*

*when I was younger, she said. They look like diamonds  
slow-catching the light.* Once you had a name

a mother called you and sang a lullaby towards.  
Once, the future was ahead of you

and god slept soundly above. In this city,  
memory should haunt us,

should hunt us. I can't stop hearing  
names buried underneath the earth,

like a choir. The dark hymn of a thousand glowing halos  
and our city of tombs angled towards the sky.

*Alias and Ima were a married Indonesian couple who died as migrant workers in Malaysia, when a building under construction  
near the Gombak LRT station at Taman Melati collapsed in 2019.*

## God at the Malaysian Border

Mosquito coil burning  
in the room behind me. Ocean  
line spread across my field  
of vision. Not your country

But mine. So full  
of fruit the air is sometimes  
thick with sweetness. The  
land so drunk with spirit  
it feels like promise.

And you made me a promise.

*[Here, God walks to the border  
and touches the earth.]*

Not to draw lines where  
there aren't any. You told me  
you understood. That the country  
must open the way breath  
rushes into the body

and you live.

Instead, you've drawn lines  
in the dirt

*[God proceeds to cut the border  
like a ribbon.]*

You've drawn lines inside  
bodies and between them.

*[God's voice, rising now,  
rising to a tenor that rings  
and vibrates in the chest.]*

Your lines made my country  
a murderer:

bodies left stranded  
for weeks at sea with nowhere  
to dock, bodies buried under skyscrapers,  
bodies thrown into cages and left  
to decay and rot

And for what?

For what?

*[God's voice, it softens.  
Almost tender.  
Almost mocking.]*

For this?

*[God picks up the flag. Feels the fabric.  
There's a beat. And then God  
laughs, and laughs, and laughs.]*

Don't be a fool.  
Don't mistake men for your  
God, or laws for what is holy.

*[God is now tearing the flag down the middle.]*

No, don't mistake fabric for the nest  
of your loyalty.

*[God crushes the yellow crescent  
into a boat, braids the red and white  
lines into a rope ladder.]*

Do you see what I mean?

*[God stretches the fourteen-point star  
into a bridge.]*

All of these can open  
and open.

Don't you understand?  
To leave a home  
is to believe in the promise

of strangers.  
You are a stranger.

*[God points at you  
and you surrender and bow.]*

You are a creation,  
like everything else.

*[God says, pointing at you,  
and you are disarmed.]*

You are  
my message.

*[God says,*

*and you become part of a whole.]*

You were not meant  
to divide  
or kill.

You were meant  
for all things to meet.

*[What remains of the flag  
is the blue canton.  
God rips a whole through it and says:]*

Now, walk through.

(This poem borrows a line from *Complaint of Rio Grande* by Richard Blanco: “I was meant for all things to meet.”)



### Notes on patriotism

The border / is not a line / it is a lie / we swallowed / here in this country we say we love / god and those who worship him / but we're liars / we don't love our sisters / and our brothers / our love is conditional / and stuttered / our love is bordered / and caged / it is clear, who we love / and accept / it is good to know when people lie / when countries lie / it is good to know that violence / wears many masks / that patriotism can feel like love / and both can be used to disguise danger / national love doesn't stretch / far and wide / doesn't resist or shake / the shape of who we love / it shrinks and bends / serves and obeys / the lines / and haven't we learned by now / after a line / comes a division / after a division / a category / first "inside" / then "out" / then "us" / and then "them" / and then "good" / and "bad" / "deserving" / and not / and each word is flooded / with new histories / and fears / a line is never just a line / it is a tool in a hand / for years / water and earth / were once wild and indivisible / there are sacred words for that / kind of oneness / but we've forgotten them now / a line / governs our bodies / and bodies of water / now / so many categories / a line creates and defends / "Malaysian" / "citizen" / "migrant" / "refugee" / "legal" / "illegal" / "legitimate" / "illegitimate" / "stateless" / "alien" / but what kind of god / is a border / there are more beautiful things / to worship / so come with me / to the edge / with an axe / and a lighter / to see the new world / in between the cracks / what color / what holy / connection / what music it is / to hear the snapping / and fracture / of what once divided us / as a new world waited / for us / we huddled / in the dark / and learned / it was a circle / not a line / that created warmth

## **WIKIPEDIA ENTRY:**

### ***Malaysian Immigration Detention Centre (Exhibit)***

The remaining fragments from the long-demolished Malaysian immigration detention centres are now exhibited at the People's Museum of Malaysian History, as part of a permanent exhibit on Malaysian anti-migrant violence, installed since 2122. These institutions of violence were once described as “torture-like” by the national human rights commission, while their abusive conditions and violations were documented by international media and NGOs.

Upon entering the exhibit, visitors are given a copy of a passport or identity card of a real person who had been detained in an immigration detention centre, and follow their testimony through the installations. As visitors proceed through the exhibition, they bear witness to the horrific conditions of the detention centres through archived photo and video footage. Archival audio recordings from survivors of detention—including children and pregnant women who were fleeing genocide and war—accompany the exhibition. In the recordings, survivors recount horrific experiences of physical abuse and beatings, widespread disease, being made to eat rotten food and drink toilet water, and witnessing the deaths of other detained people. “They made it clear to us,” according to one recording, “that there was no other purpose for us to be here, than to die.”

The final portion of the exhibit focuses on the ten decades of relentless activism, persistent and creative civil disobedience, and legal action that slowly dismantled these institutions. The historic video of the closure of the last-standing detention centre at KLIA and the resignation of the then-Director General of Immigration replays over and over again. At the end of the exhibit, a banner from the demolition hangs in a glass casing. It says “TIDAK AKAN LAGI.”

Never again.