



TO DANCE ALONG THE WIND

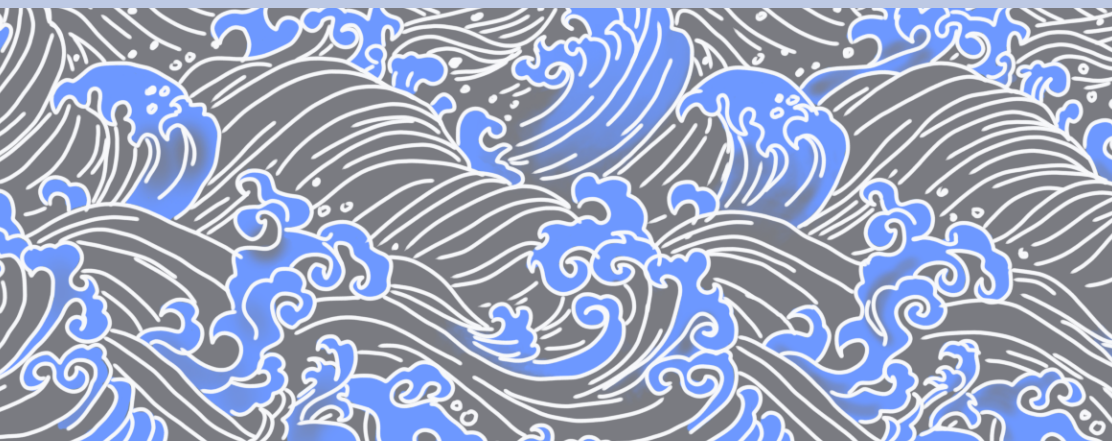
**Poetry on migration, borders,
and new futures**

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

Masuma Tavakoli

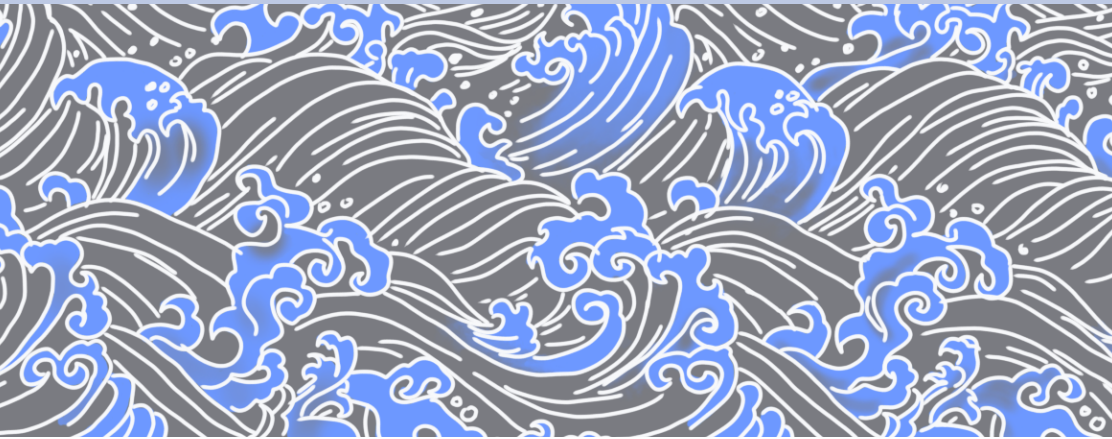


THE PROJECT

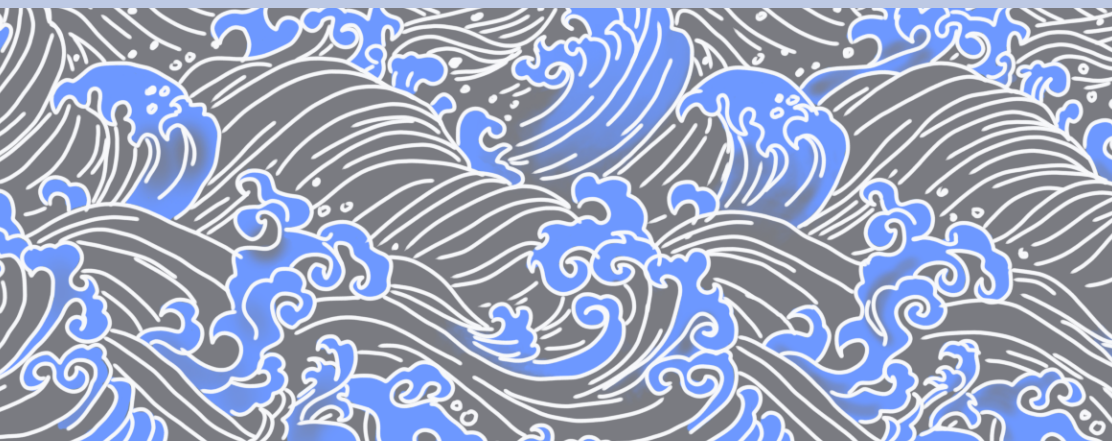
Language is one of the most powerful tools of the border, constructing violent conceptions of an "other" and an "us."

Language is used to categorise, to homogenise, to humiliate, to degrade, to decide who is fluent, and who is not.

Poetry, then, becomes a powerful antidote to the violent ways language can be wielded. The medium itself is predisposed to allow writers to play with words, to shift meaning, to turn what is seen as solid into something more fluid and malleable. Poetry, in this way, is alchemy. It is power.



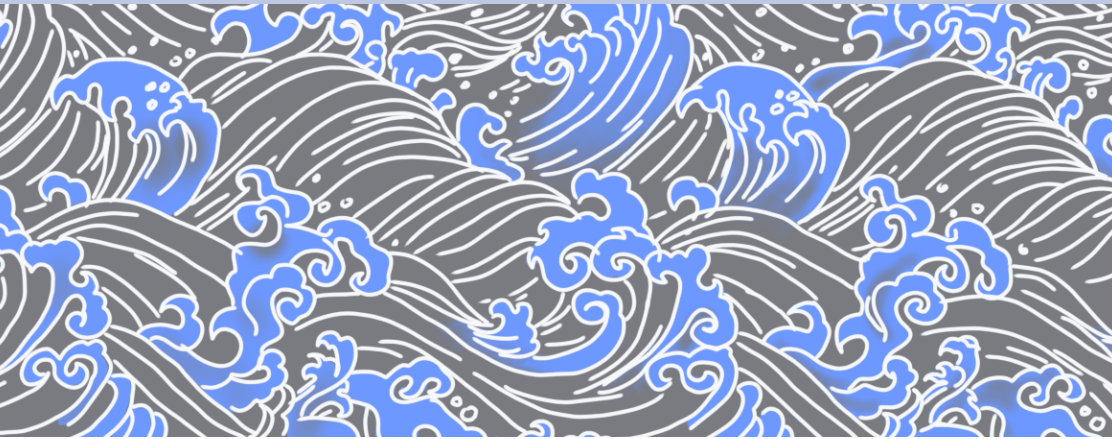
This collection of poetry was conceived in that spirit: through a series of poetry workshops on borders, nationalism, and imagining new futures. How could we resist xenophobic and racist language through poetry? How could poetry uniquely respond to these themes and reimagine new ways of being? As opposed to the often dehumanising discourse of migration, how could poetry honour and centre the writer's human experiences: losses, memories, desires, joys?

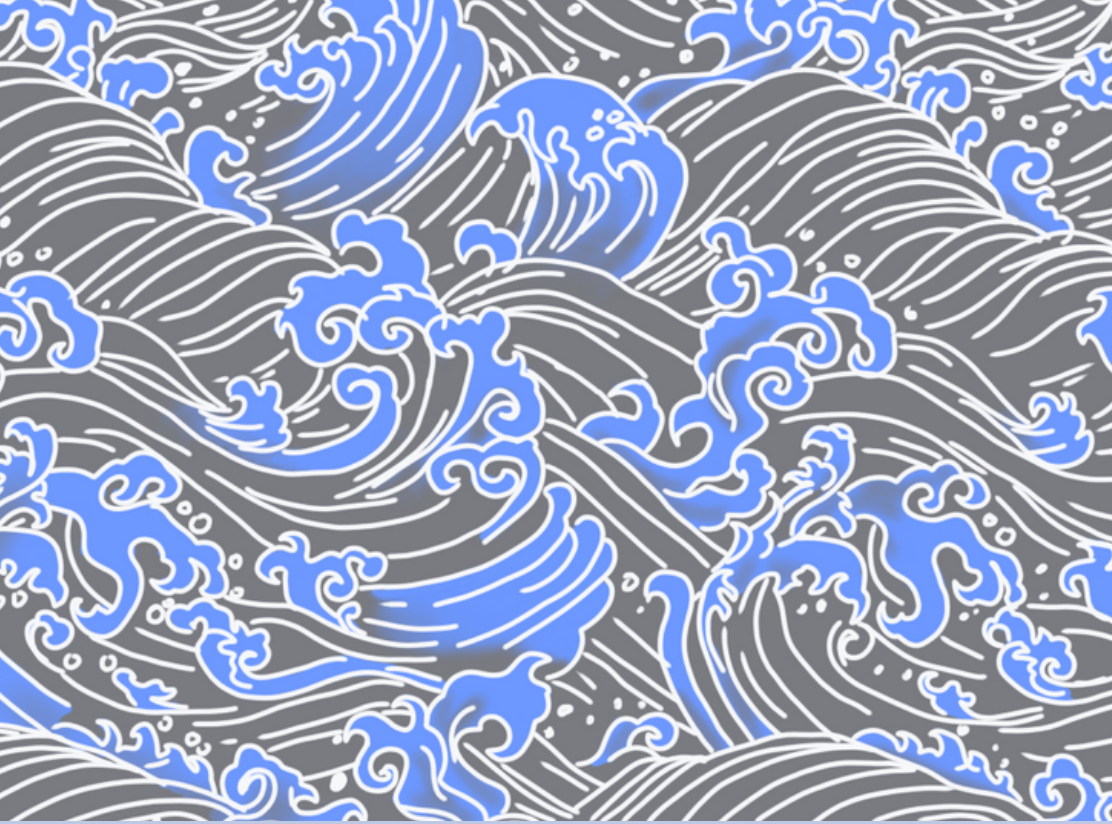


Reflecting on how borders have impacted and changed their own lives, these writers bravely use poetry to remember, interrogate, mourn, resist, and dream.

They remind us that in the face of the machine, our power can be found in the ways we re-assert our humanity. In poetry. In the space between the pen and the paper. And, as one poet writes, in the dance along the wind.

- Lily Jamaludin, editor

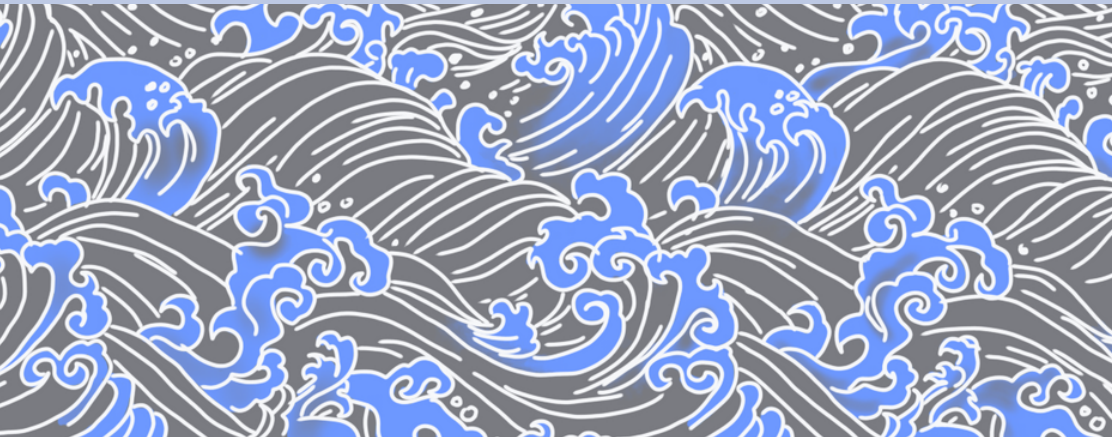




POETRY

Because if I grieve for all of us,
then it is only logical
that when I heal,
I heal for all of us.

Enbah Nilah



நீங்கள் எதை இழந்தீர்கள்?

What did you lose?

Enbah Nilah

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 கோலிக்குண்டு¹
and you could almost hear
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?
பயிர் விதைப்பதற்குப் பதிலாக
ரயில் விதைத்தீர்கள்.

What was born of this land
from your losses?
Instead of seeds,
you sowed railway tracks.

[1] 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?

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?

Hand-me-downs

Enbah Nilah

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 Undertaker¹ 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'!*²
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,
and I would have sent you to war.*

[1] The Undertaker - an American professional wrestler. His catchphrase is "Rest in Peace."

[2] The catchphrase of The Rock - an American professional wrestler.

Did he take home something that isn't his
from the depths of the Vanni 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,
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

[3] Vanni- the Northern province of Sri Lanka devastated by the civil war.

[4] 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.⁵
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.

[5] 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.

2022

I am twenty-nine.

I was born emaciated to make room
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.

Breaking News

Enbah Nilah

Malaysian Nagaenthran executed on drug 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.

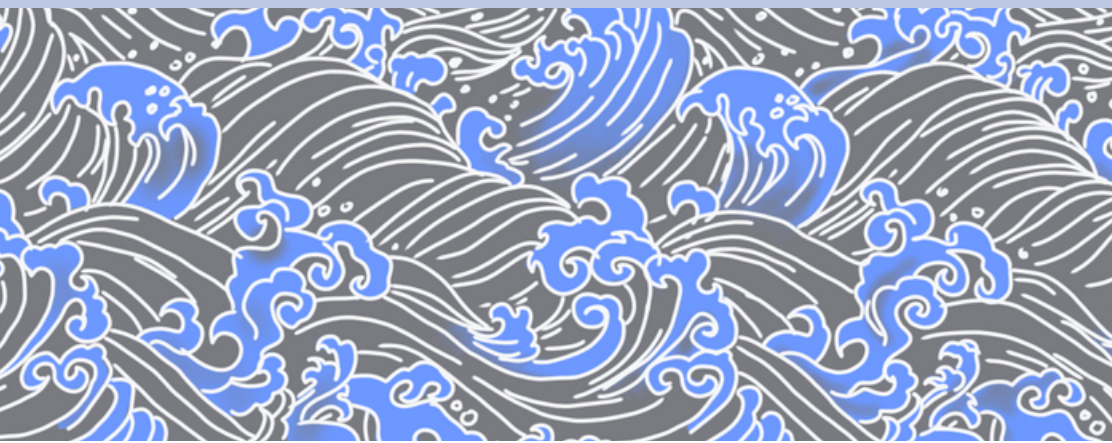
C. **"It's only breaking news if it's new."**

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.

Masuma Tavakoli



(Untitled)

Original by M. T.

Translated from Persian by Amin Kamrani

1

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!

2

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

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

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

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.



Artwork attribution: "Courage" by Masuma Tavakoli.

(Untitled)

Masuma Tavakoli

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
هستی‌اش را اهای دنیا
باور دارند

روح حالا همان جسم است و ترکیب این دو
همان آدمی

آدمی
! ترکیب عجیبی ست

روح هستی و بقایش را در رهایی می‌پندارد و
جسم
در تعلق‌ها

و آدمی اینچنین سرگردان
در مرز رهایی و
تعلق

! در پی جاودانگی

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

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

و این چنین جاودانگی غریب!!!

۴

جسم

خالی از وابستگی و تعلق

بار هستی اش سبک

در روح

عاشقانه ادغام میشود

و روح

رها تر از رها

با تمام هستی

به سوی جاودانگی

پر میکشد

حیات بخش آدمی

در اوج زیبایی و دانایی

این نیستی در هستی ست !

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 بر باد رفته

زندگی را تنها در
گرمای آغوش مهربانان عالم می‌یابد.

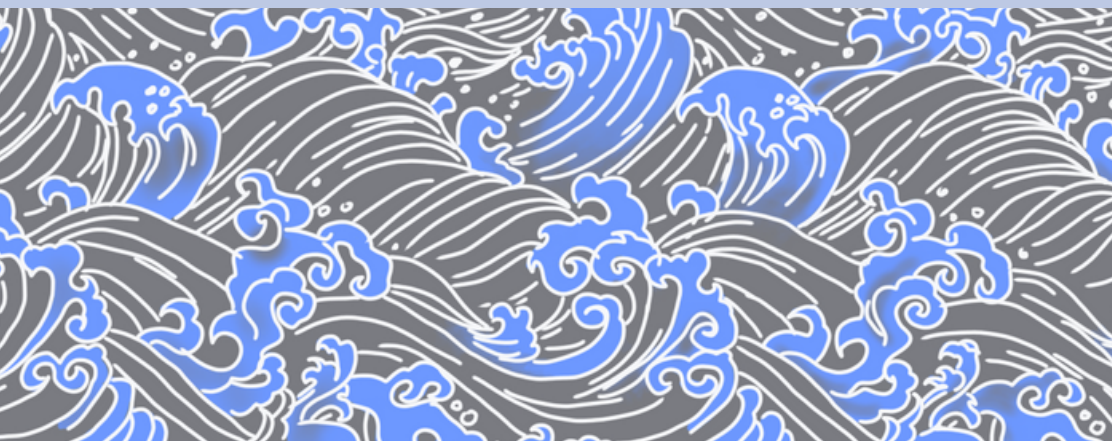
مهربانانی که نیستی جسم شان در هستی روح شان
جان گرفته

و همانگونه

معنا می‌گیرد
نستی یک مهاجر
در هستی آنها.

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

Lily Jamaludin



Elegy for Alias and Ima

Lily Jamaludin

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.

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 reminds us of body.
Echo demands us to remember voice.

The skyline reminds me of small gravestones.
Ghosts echoing back and forth against

the walls demand me to remember
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.

Notes on Patriotism

Lily Jamaludin

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 / "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

Monologue of God at the Border

Lily Jamaludin

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:]*

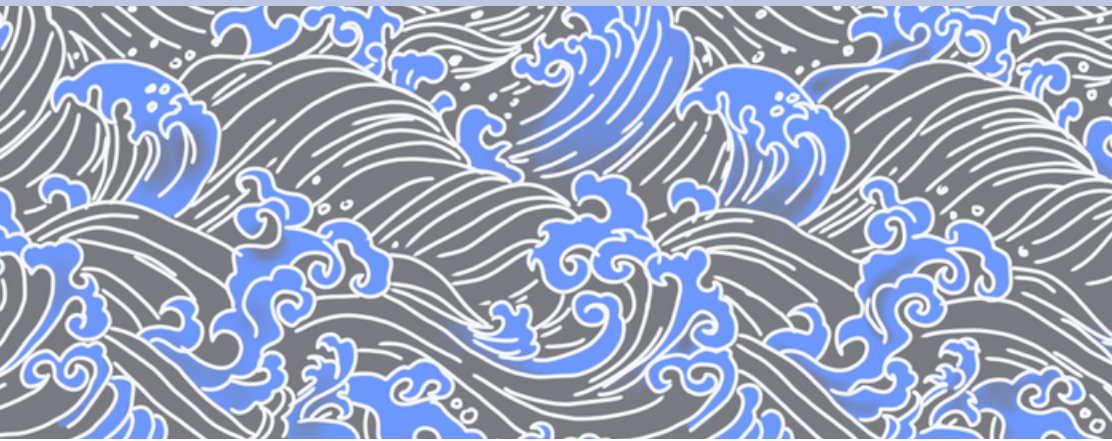
Now, walk through.

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

“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”.

K.K.



Witness me,

K. K.

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 beheaded 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

K. K.

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

K. K.

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

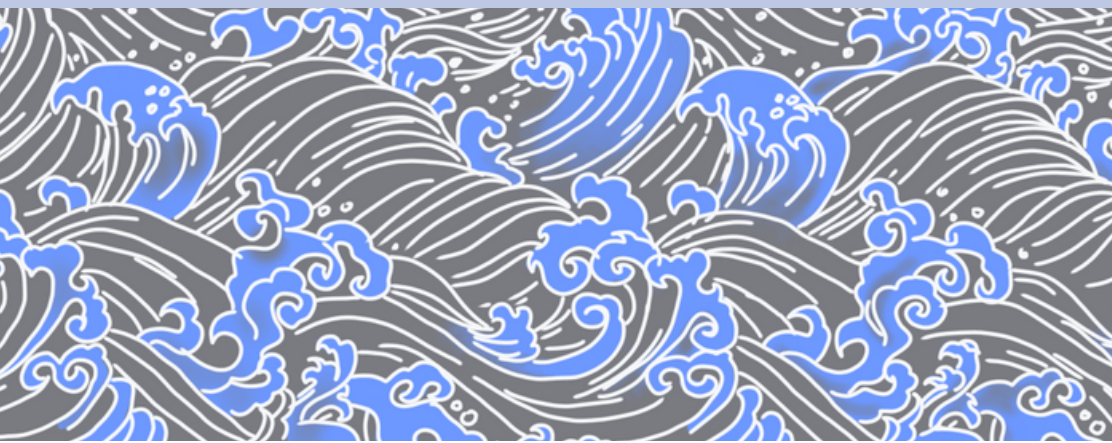
So they rise and rise
Above the fogs of fear,
And the dialogue of ignorance,
Beyond the borders of prejudice

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.

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.

P. J.



A Hope I Hold

P.J.

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 be kept by you and me.

Voyage of the Bajau

P.J.

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.

End of the Borderli(n)e

P.J.

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 lie 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.

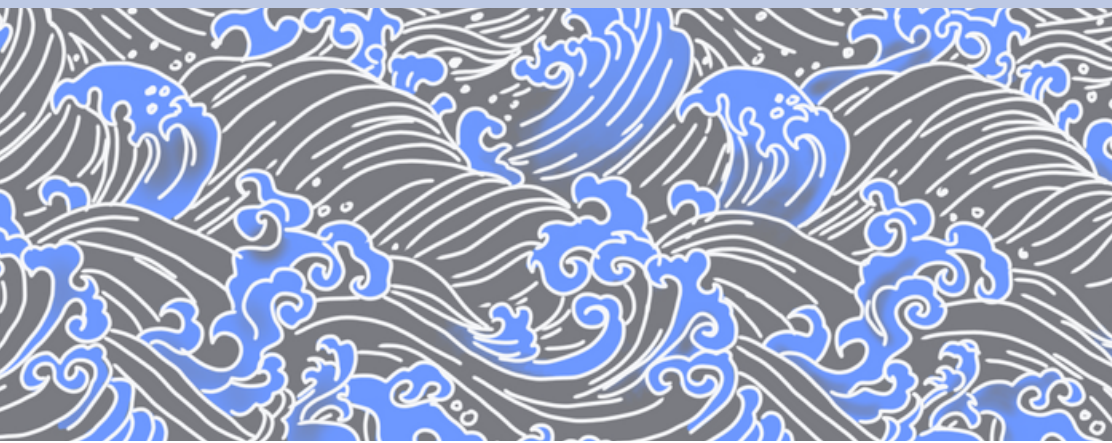
Thus, the only valid motion
Is to turn left and be wrong.
And there's no way---
there's no way
you can make it right.
There's no escape either,
but to jump
into the hay of needles.
Stitching the gaps
Hemming the lines
Trimming the edges
and embrace diversity.

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.

Blue above, blue below
Sky and water and land
Tanah airku, Asal dan asing
diaspora in my own homeland
dia spora: floating on the breeze

Bethany Luhong Balan



Daleh

Bethany Luhong 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 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
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
Are hard to follow if ika' jan jam dahun Kayan
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
diaspora in my own homeland
dia spora: 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

Translations:

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

Torch Ginger

Bethany Luhong 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

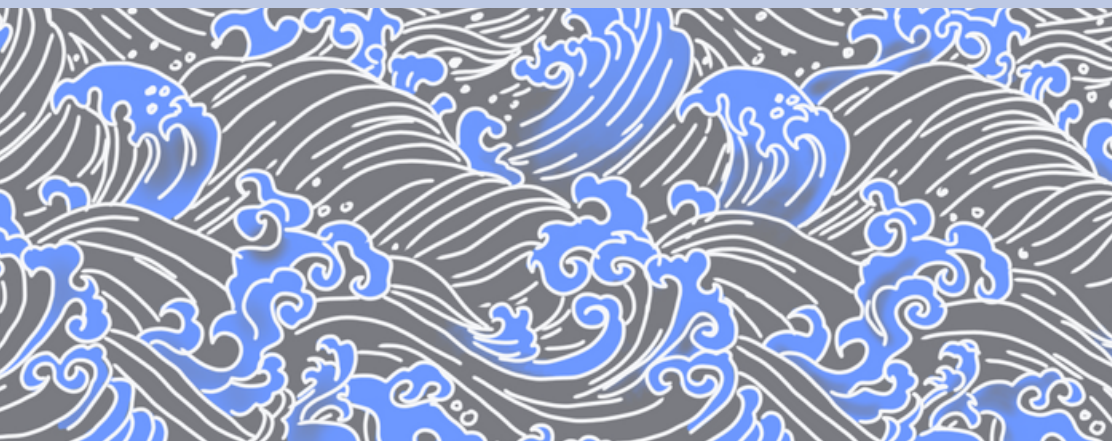
(but what is home anyway

except four walls, a door you can lock

and the love of your life, sleeping an arms' length
away)

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?

Shameera Nair Lin



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

Shameera Nair Lin

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

Shameera Nair Lin

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.

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This work was commissioned by

Innovation for Change - East Asia and published

on <https://eastasia.innovationforchange.net> in

November 2022.

