



# HEALING IN VERSE

*Essay Poems of Pain, Power, and Perseverance*

FOREWORD: MONICA JR & DENNY JR

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Easy Poems Of Pain, Power, And Perseverance

### **Foreword:**

Monica JR & Denny JA

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# FOREWORD



## REAL TALK: OUR STORIES, OUR STRUGGLES, OUR STRENGTH

*Monica JR*

**A**s millennials, we've come to see poetry as more than mere words on a page. For us, poetry has evolved into a powerful outlet for expressing personal struggles and examining complex issues that shape our lives.

Together with our Gen Z counterparts, we've created a safe space to discuss previously taboo topics, especially mental health. This openness has paved the way for destigmatizing mental health challenges, making it easier for individuals to share their stories and find support. In a recent report by McKinsey Health Institute, Gen Z respondents were notably more likely to use digital wellness tools than other generations, underscoring a proactive approach to managing emotional well-being.

I'm Monica JR, an essay-poem "activist" who began this English poetry project with ASEAN friends last year. While that first anthology was predominantly contributed by writers from Singapore, I'm even happier this year because our voices have broadened.

In this collection, we are honoured to include 10 writers not only from Singapore but also from Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and even as far as Iran. This diversity has enriched the anthology with varied perspectives, showing how these shared themes of resilience, mental

health, and social justice resonate across borders.

Each poem in this anthology is a testament to this shift, offering glimpses into both personal and collective pain, and the resilience that keeps us moving forward. Some of these poems, like “IF ONLY YOU COULD SEE THROUGH HIS EYES” by Ali Mirghafouri, explore the often misunderstood experiences of those on the autism spectrum. Poems like these remind us of the emotional toll of feeling invisible or misunderstood, a shared experience that many can relate to, especially as societal pressures rise.

This anthology doesn’t shy away from the larger issues that weigh on us: climate change, racial violence, and systemic injustices. “WHO DOES A CLIMATE REFUGEE BLAME?” by Heng Jia Min is a heartbreaking look at climate change’s impact on those who contribute least to the crisis yet suffer most. Through verses capturing displaced Somali families, this poem brings to light the deep injustice and desperation that many face worldwide due to the environmental choices of others.

One of the most impactful pieces in this collection is “I JUST WANTED PEACE...” by Pham Hoang Khang, a raw depiction of sexual abuse and its destructive effects on young lives. In vivid, poignant verses, Khang captures the haunting trauma that survivors carry, alongside a call for accountability and empathy. Such poems are critical as they reflect our commitment to breaking the silence around abuse and advocating for justice.

This anthology captures those feelings of longing and resilience that have become all too familiar to our generations. In this collection, I’ve included my own poem, *The Childless Dog Lady*, which speaks to the choices many women today are making to lead lives of purpose and care, even if it means defying traditional expectations. It’s a reflection on finding strength in independence, on healing after heartbreak, and on redefining life in a world that’s constantly evolving.

In naming this anthology “*Healing in Verse: Essay Poems of Pain, Power, and Perseverance*,” I hoped to capture poetry’s role as both

mirror and medicine, a way to reflect on our struggles and find solace in them. This collection is more than a gathering of words; it's a testament to the resilience that defines our generation.

Let's use this anthology as a bridge, a connection that brings our shared experiences into the open, so none of us has to feel alone.



AN INTRODUCTION  
**DENNY JA**

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**WHEN 180 MILLENNIAL AND GEN Z  
CREATORS FROM ACEH TO PAPUA TESTIFY  
THROUGH ESSAY POETRY**

“Writing is a way to hear the unheard, to embrace the untouchable, and to see what lies hidden amidst the crowd.”

In silence, as words weave together, a bridge is built. This bridge connects us with our deepest selves, with others, and with a world that is ever-changing.

This quote invites us into the realm of literature that transcends mere writing; it becomes a soul’s voice for silence, fears, hopes, and dreams.

For millennials and Gen Z, writing is a way to document their thoughts amidst the fast-moving currents of the digital era.

In an age often dominated by flashes of rapid information and instant imagery, essay poetry emerges as a profound medium. It urges them to pause, reflect, and voice their stories from their unique perspectives.

This reflection was at the forefront of my mind as I helped manage approximately 180 creators, all under 25 years old, from Aceh to Papua, and even from Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Cairo. They expressed their testimonies on humanitarian issues and true stories through essay poetry.

To celebrate the second Jakarta Essay Poetry Festival in December 2024, they crafted essay poems compiled into 18 books. (1)

This initiative brings solace as writing literature increasingly becomes a paradox. Research shows that readers of literature tend to exhibit higher social solidarity, yet interest in reading literature continues to decline.

According to the National Endowment for the Arts (2015), only 43% of adults in the U.S. read literature, down from 56% in 1982.

Meanwhile, data from LSI Denny JA in 2024 revealed that only 16% of Indonesians read at least one book of literature in the past year.

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## Why Literature? Why Essay Poetry?

Literature has been the breath of history, enriching culture and bearing witness to the ages. For millennials and Gen Z, literature is more than a personal expression; it is a means to carve out identity and understand the world.

In this context, there are three compelling reasons to encourage them to write literature, particularly essay poetry, which serves as a creative space blending poetry and prose, addressing social issues with aesthetics and contemplation.

### **First: Cultivating Social Awareness**

Millennials and Gen Z live in a complex era where global issues are increasingly tangible.

Human rights violations, injustice, climate change, social inequality, and mental health crises are issues close to their lives. Yet, an overwhelming flow of information often dulls their sensitivity to these problems.

Essay poetry becomes a space for them to voice this social concern in a deep and personal manner.



When writing essay poetry, they do not merely express views or opinions. They also bring to life real stories that are often overlooked.

For instance, a young man from Aceh wrote about memories of the Free Aceh Movement. Meanwhile, a girl from Papua voiced hopes for better education.

Through essay poetry, they learn to not only see these issues on the surface but also to dive deeper, understanding the roots of problems and empathizing with those involved.

Like a tree growing from strong roots, social sensitivity flourishes from deep understanding.

Literature helps them not just to observe problems but to feel them. In writing, they learn to embrace the stories of others, making them part of themselves and growing into individuals more attuned to the world around them.

## **Second: Developing Self and Identity**

Amid the swift currents of globalization and digitalization, millennials and Gen Z often feel adrift without a firm anchor. Identity becomes fragile and easily influenced.

Literature, particularly essay poetry, provides a medium for exploring and discovering their sense of self. Writing compels them to reflect, digging into the deepest layers of thoughts and feelings.

Essay poetry offers them a space to blend personal reflection with larger societal narratives. They are prompted to ask questions: “Who am I in this rapidly changing world? What truly matters to me? How can I bring about change through my writing?”

Through the writing process, they learn not to merely follow the currents but to be part of the change they aspire to see.

For example, a millennial raised in Jakarta wrote about the dynamics of urban life, its noise and chaos, yet yearning for simplicity and serenity. Meanwhile, a young man from a remote village explored life seemingly far from the world’s glitter but fascinated with the metropolitan dream often seen on social media.

Their identities are formed through the words they choose and the stories they tell. Through writing, they find their voices and values, free from being swept away by the same tides.

### **Third: Preserving Cultural Heritage and Writing New History**

Indonesia is a land rich in cultural diversity, from Aceh to Papua. In this era of globalization, such wealth faces growing threats from cultural homogenization.

When millennials and Gen Z write essay poetry, they do not just write for themselves. They also preserve and rewrite history, traditions, and local values. They become witnesses of the era, documenting events, stories, and changes from their own perspectives.

Essay poetry allows them to blend local stories with global issues, creating a unique fusion that reflects their identity as today's generation.

For instance, a young person from Bali wrote about the challenges of modernization amidst efforts to uphold spiritual values. Or a youth from Sumatra recounted the fading oral traditions of their ancestors.

Through writing, they become guardians and successors of culture. They record changes and uphold valuable local traditions.

Over time, their writings become silent witnesses to social, economic, and cultural shifts, aiding future generations in understanding the nation's journey.

Like carvings on stone, their words become historical imprints, capturing the world they see and feel.

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### **Building the Future Through Words**

In an increasingly complex world, writing literature is a way for millennials and Gen Z to embrace themselves, understand the world, and give meaning to change.

They do not write merely to express themselves but to voice their generation—rich in diversity, challenges, and dreams.

Through essay poetry, they learn to become witnesses and future leaders—more sensitive, wiser, and stronger in understanding and influencing the world around them.

Through writing, they leave marks in the rapidly passing digital tide. They show that even as the world keeps moving, peace, meaning, and identity can still be found through literature.

Writing is not merely about filling blank pages; it is a journey inward, towards a deeper understanding of the world and the self.

In the hands of 180 millennial and Gen Z creators from Aceh to Papua, essay poetry is more than just words. It is the voice of a generation, echoing hopes, concerns, and love through their testimonies.

The 18 books of essay poetry by millennials and Gen Z will soon be available online.

Even in small steps, this is part of increasing interest in literature by integrating it into digital media. It leverages popular platforms and interactive formats, making literature more accessible and relevant to young generations.

Like a gentle echo in a silent canyon, their essay poetry speaks of injustice, human rights, and humanity, touching hearts with fictionalized truths born from real lives.\*

*Jakarta, November 14, 2024*

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**Note:**

1. To celebrate the second Jakarta Essay Poetry Festival in 2024, a total of 39 essay poetry books will be published both in Indonesia and internationally.

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# IF ONLY YOU COULD SEE THROUGH HIS EYES



Ali Mirghafouri

*Autism, despite becoming a subject that has gained much more exposure in recent years, is still something of a 'side show' in reality, especially for children in school. For children on the spectrum, navigating the overwhelming chaos of high school can be an isolating and alienating experience that most peers simply cannot comprehend.*

---

I was that kid, that stupid child  
Who 'knew' but didn't, well, I supposed I really didn't.  
I meant no harm, I promise, for real.  
He was just another kid, a strange one, a little surreal (1).

He'd stare off into the distance, we'd stare only at him  
He'd hum his little silly tunes, we sung only insults, so very mean.  
It was hard enough to be a teenager, to look 'cool' and to be proud.  
But for this I really cannot, not in a million years, no doubt.

The smallest little infractions, the strangest little laughs,  
The meanest ways to treat a person, that was all he earned.  
We were told to be nicer, to let him have his way,  
And that only made us bolder, the bullies had their day.

At least I wasn't one of them, the ones that took him aside.  
For hours they would disappear, and he's come back a less of a fight.

For fight he would, with all of us, or none of us, it didn't matter.  
Everything was too much, too little, too bright, too loud, too...

I was told that he would struggle, for even the basic of things.  
It was funny at first, then a little, and later on it was just 'him'.  
And slowly I would notice, that a certain crowd would be around.  
Not friends, by no means, I reckon, but I didn't stick around.

It was just another cold morning, when the thing happened, happened.  
I was just trying to wake up, and suddenly awake I was.  
He came into the classroom screaming, something in his hands.  
The girls would scream alongside, and I could barely stand.

Apparently one of those kids, they took it a little too far.  
He brought along his soft toy, the one he had since young.  
They made him give it to them, and tore into with glee.  
He screamed and yelled and shouted, even when we told them to let  
him be.

But that was when he 'lost it', he made a beeline home.  
But they were there to stop him, and told him in the meanest tones.  
This was just a soft toy, why would you act so glum.  
They laughed and made it seem like he was just a miserable chum.

But little did they notice, the pen that he would hold,  
He swung with wild abandon, and hit one on his hand.  
The moment he started bleeding, it made him go more mad.  
So, he would start swinging even harder, tears in his eyes, still sad.

It took only a minute, but by the time it was done.  
Three idiot bullies laid bleeding, arms, and backs and (funnily enough) bums.  
Our boy did not discriminate, he did whatever he could.  
He stabbed and swung and made his mark, for the toy they broke.



But this was the day they broke him, really now for good.  
He never came back to the class, nor really, he should.  
I could have said something, acted better then.  
But only if I could see, through his eyes, I know I am bad.

\*\*\*

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**Note:**

1. Why Is School So Challenging for Autistic Children? 8 Reasons Most People Aren't Aware of. Link: <https://www.verywellhealth.com/why-school-is-so-challenging-4000048>

# IT'S MORE THAN JUST A TV SHOW



Ali Mirghafouri

*Iran remains to be a relatively isolated state, where young adults are not usually given the opportunity to expose themselves to things 'outside'. Despite this, there is still an ever growing 'hunger' for many young Iranians to explore (and sometimes, rebel) against 'the norm'. The best way to 'see the world' was through TV shows – and that was how this young Iranian boy saw his world.*

---

In those days when I was but a boy,  
The television was more than just a toy.  
My window to another world, my own Narnia, my secret.  
Where I could be 'someone', not just what I saw with my young eyes.

In it, things were prettier, the grass, the cities, the glitter.  
In it, I could do anything, and everything – I could surrender.  
There would be no need to fight, for what little change I begged for,  
In it, I have all the things I need, or so I imagined, how wrong I was oh.

The skies looked the same, but yet in reality, something dreary.  
Is this what they called 'yearning', I couldn't tell, I was barely 12, not 20.  
When I look around, the children and the elders,  
They don't think about tomorrow, what could've, should've, no real wonder.

We sneak, and we snuck, we watched our shows.  
They may be a little dated, but that was a life I wanted to 'know'.

One day, I too, will be out there, I'm sure of it, I know.  
One day, I won't need to shudder, at the thought of just another tomorrow

And then it happened, a random thing in September (1)  
I was just a year old; I couldn't even remember.  
For you see, for us, our TV shows were outdated.  
As far as I know, America was a fantasy, not related – not to me  
anyways, not really, no.

In blissful ignorance, I went on with my days.  
I still imagined my TV shows, to live them some day.  
Little did I know that reality would be so much more 'real',  
No TV show could have prepared me for the things that I now feel.

It started with my father, he said one day so suddenly,  
'Son, we need to leave this place, it is becoming too much, this reality'.  
I was just excited, that I finally got to leave.  
My 12-year-old self, oh, I was so very pleased.

Those TV shows were becoming, a little real to me.  
I'm going to be out 'there', where anything, I could be.  
To see with my own eyes, to taste, to explore.  
All I really wanted, but it was just, so much more.

I didn't quite 'get it', when we finally left for good.  
First it was at the airport, and then everywhere else and more.  
People spoke to me funny, looked me in the eye,  
They told I was 'born in terror', but truly, I was 'fine' (2).

When I told my parents, of all these things they meant,  
They told just to 'let it be', and nothing more was said.  
We went about our own ways, and back to school I'd go,

But every day I realised; it's more than just a TV show.

And so I learned, little by little, that I had to grow.

The dreams I had were beautiful, but this was life, I'd come to know.

And as I walked through crowded streets and unfamiliar places,  
I found that life was richer than TV shows, with its real, human faces.

No screen could have prepared me for the richness and the pain,  
Of living in a place where I could walk under the rain.

Where choices weren't scripted, and life was full and bold,  
But still, I missed my home, though it felt so cold.

For even in a world of freedom, I still carried that part,  
Of Iran inside my memories, embedded in my heart.  
Though TV let me dream of a world so vast and free,  
It couldn't erase the boy from Iran that still lived in me (3).

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**Note:**

1. September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Link: <https://www.britannica.com/event/September-11-attacks>
2. US Muslim students face high levels of Islamophobic bullying. Link: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-muslim-students-face-high-levels-of-islamophobic-bullying-report/2565521>
3. Nayeri, one of the Iranian migrants said in an interview with Nondoc, "I still hope I can go back someday – though, at this point, it would only be to visit." Link: <https://nondoc.com/2023/07/18/everything-sad-is-untrue-an-iranian-refugee-in-edmond/>

## Biography:

Ali Mirghafouri | 22 Years Old | Iranian  
Currently lives in Dublin, Ireland

---



There was a time when Ali had no comprehension of who he is, was, or will be. To be fair, he still doesn't – but at least, nowadays, he is trying. Being born in Iran, and then having to scurry the heck out of there (seeing how as it is, you know, Iran), Ali has been thrown into the unknown, more times than he'd have liked. And every time it happened, a little bit inside of him dims, and his excitement for life fades just a little. This is where poetry comes along, as a saving grace, an escape to solace, to pacify the unending waves of thoughts and fears that has built over the years – and there are so many. Life is uncertainty, words reassures Ali.

# HALVED

— — —  
Anna Ong

*Divorce is not a subject that is normally discussed in Asian communities, especially in countries like Malaysia. But the reality of the trauma of it all, remains just as true, especially for children.*

---

It was just another day for me, the day that I become halved.  
Not for nothing, but to me, I only needed, wanted, love.  
But love was just the problem, for they had none left to give.  
And I was the rock that held them down, but even a rock could crack,  
bit by bit.

And crack I did, I don't even remember when.  
Was it the day I lashed out at the teachers, or my friends?  
Or was it much later, when I decided I needed to be numb.  
To get away from all of this, to get away, to run.

Of course, I know, it's not my fault, or that's what they would say.  
They told me in so many reassuring words, this was just another day.  
To them it was a thing, that needed to be done.  
To me it was a thing, that was done to me in turn.

I knew I was being petty, a little stubborn too.  
I knew it all along, I know, but was it all just only wrong?  
Can I not have a say in this? Can I make them stop?  
Could I not request for just some normalcy, nothing of divorce (1).

It's weird even now as I, a 22-year-old to say.  
The word just feels so foreign, like it happened to someone else, some day.  
I cannot quite remember, the day it happened to me.  
All I know is that for years, it's all a fog of my memory.

There were times I would wander, off into some place.  
With people that I didn't know, to arrive somewhere in haste.  
To do the things that I did, I didn't even know.  
If I wanted it or not, but who cares, or that's what I told.

Every day seemed the same to me, a teenager on strike.  
The one thing that remained constant, was my torn insides.  
I cannot just let him go, even when I could.  
He was still my dad to me, my go-to escape from the cold.

She would say that he's quite gone, and I should really stop.  
No more of this wild behaviour, time won't wait for me to sort it out.  
And mad I got, so very much, almost every day.  
For she was the reason I lost my dad, and my mum the same way.

Nothing seemed the same to me, it felt so very forced.  
I was a kid of half and half, a family of...divorce.

But what they didn't say out loud was the part that hurt the most,  
That families like mine were never meant to be the host.  
So, I kept quiet, I buried it deep,  
Pretended like I was fine, when at night I couldn't sleep.  
I would look for answers, in books, in shows, in dreams,  
Hoping that somewhere I'd find what this brokenness means.

The word 'divorce' in my world, never really fit,  
It didn't belong in our conversations, it was avoided, bit by bit.

But the pain of it stayed, no matter how we tried to hide,  
For the trauma of it all lingers, somewhere deep inside.

I wish someone had spoken, told me it was okay.  
That being a child of divorce didn't mean I'd lost my way.  
But instead, we stayed silent, letting the pain remain,  
Until one day, I realized, I had to carry my own pain.

Nothing seemed the same to me, it felt so very forced.  
I was a kid of half and half, a family of...divorce.

\*\*\*

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**Note:**

1. 10 Effects of Divorce on Children — and Helping Them Cope. Link: <https://www.healthline.com/health/parenting/effects-of-divorce-on-children>



# WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT?

— — —  
Anna Ong

*Interracial couples in Malaysia, while not uncommon, often face unique challenges, with the greatest resistance coming from family and friends. Cultural traditions and deep-rooted expectations can turn love into a delicate balancing act, where navigating stereotypes and maintaining identity become part of the relationship's journey.*

---

He was just another boy, I barely even noticed.  
One day, he came and said, 'I needed a new perspective'.  
That was right after he asked me on a date that day.  
I said no of course, who would have thought, with him? No way.

But for some reason, I would think about it that night.  
And think I did, for so long, until the morning light.  
So when I went back to class, the very next day,  
He told me again, one more time, 'so how about today?'

This went on and on, for at least a couple of weeks.  
It got a little tiring, and a little sweet.  
My friends thought it was stupid, a guy that looked like him.  
That should have been my first clue, of the trouble I was in.

But that aside, and one fine day, I'd finally relent.  
A date we did, a date we went, and it was just so swell.

The sweetest guy, the funniest lines, all what he said was true.  
I had a warped perspective, of him, of me, of us, it's true.

And in that joy I tried to share, my newest wonder glee.  
First to my friends, and to my mum, but trouble won't let me be.  
The utter shock and weirded looks, the unnecessary jabs.  
Of who he was, and what I was, and how it should just end.

I never knew, of how much hate, a person could receive.  
Just for being, a different kind, from the ones we'd meet.  
The spiteful cues, the lack of faith, even just his clothes,  
Were somehow wrong, and never right, nothing we could do.

I thought I'd wait, a little more, so they would understand  
That this is true, and not of lust, or whatever disgusting thoughts they had.  
But it never came, after all these years, and slowly I would lose  
My best of friends, my mum, my heart, my everything else – who knew?

In Malaysia, love like ours isn't new, but it's still misunderstood.  
The deepest wounds come not from strangers, but those we thought would.  
Family, friends, those we held dear, often resist the most,  
Rooted in old traditions, they cannot see past their cultural ghosts.

For love like ours comes with expectations, unspoken but loud,  
Navigating through their stares, we carry this heavy shroud.  
They asked me if I could 'keep my culture,' if my 'identity' would remain,  
But why is love a balancing act, between two worlds that feel the same?

Of all the things, that I could have done,  
This was not on my list.  
Of disappointments and unjust ways,  
Of losing one's own kin.

But I can say, with all my heart,  
That this was not all wrong.  
For he would show me, endless love,  
Today, we still go strong.

And yes, it's true, we still get stares, and sometimes even jibes  
From random questions, that aren't really questions,  
To admiration of somehow my admission  
Of apparent charity of my own inhibitions.

Forget them all, and let's do own thing,  
Are some of what he's say.  
And change my mind, my perception,  
Of people, every day.

And that is why, I said yes, even though you're, you.  
And every day, I regret, not saying yes earlier too.

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**Note:**

1. 6 interracial couples share the struggles that they face & how they make things work. Link: <https://discoverkl.com/2017/06/28/malaysian-interracial-couple-struggles-conflicts/>

## Biography:

Anna Ong | 21 Years Old | Malaysian Chinese  
Currently lives in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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Anna is a creative, thru-and-thru. In her free time, she draws and designs 2-d/3-d artwork that has been commissioned regularly in the last year or so. And whenever she has the time for it (and the patience), she pens down her thoughts, incoherent as they may be – to be untangled and put together, into ‘prettier’ words. Anna is not so much a people person, as she is a watching-people-person. She thrives in observing (some would dare to call it lurking, but some do not know better) others, life, and every once in a while, inside herself, a claim to self-reflection.

# THE DISQUIET IS A SIGN



(ISABEL) Sobitha Kondana

*Set against the backdrop of the People's Representative Council of Indonesia (DPR RI) building in Jakarta on August 22, 2024, during a mass protest. The protest is sparked by public outrage over the government's and DPR RI's attempts to reverse recent Constitutional Court rulings regarding regional election laws. As the poem unfolds, it questions the motives behind the government's decision to hastily move the capital, suggesting it might be a distraction to divert attention from the erosion of democratic principles. The poem emphasizes the collective power of the people to protect the Constitution, contrasting their resistance against the shadowy dealings within the governing body.*

---

The glaring August sun beats down like heavy steps  
of a march

The air is thick with sounds blaring across the square  
Each person's shadows follow them all faithful  
and sharp  
Until the flame that licks the sky turns day into night

Tucked away in  
a room,  
A page lies open

Ink still fresh, following a decision that are made in whispers By those  
who wield power but never listens

A crowd brave, battered, and bold  
Gathered for the soul of a nation,  
a promise once told

They pound at the gates, fists raw and sore  
Knowing that to give in would be  
to ignore  
The theft of rights, the breaking of law  
In a land where justice now hangs by a claw

Cause in a distance, a leader still stands tall  
With a putrid smile and intention to twist  
and bent it all  
To appease a game that's only being played by few Where corruption  
and ties decide who gets their due A constitution reshaped to  
whatever draws in the tide Cowering behind the curtains of a  
shameful line Behind muted walls that all wish could talk  
Conversations spoken remembered only by spaces so dark

They say things like  
*"We'll move the capital!"*  
A fresh beginning in a new city  
But the masses have to wonder  
Greater than feeling of skepticism or plain fascination  
Is it just a distraction?  
A sleight of hand to steer the gaze Away from  
the crumbling foundation

Of this nation's trust, of its people's faith  
Is it their way to carve distance from the murmurs of people?  
Craving stillness from the voices that rise and question how they govern  
Perhaps hinges of doors that would know more

the taste of disgust

And blackened corners that would shut its eyes and hide their  
shameful past

What they're forgetting is that there is power here too.

Not just in the halls of the mighty  
But in the spaces where people breathe  
The gaps between their words  
The pauses between their steps  
A quiet strength like the heat that seeps into the earth  
Persistent, enduring, haunting.

The people are not gonna blindly follow the scripts  
of those who rule

The weight of history that cannot be uprooted so easily  
The constitution may be paper  
But more than words,  
it is the pulse of a nation.

Lines can be drawn and not just across paper  
But in the hearts of the people  
and that matters

For a democracy,  
A chorus of the disillusioned is the testament of that  
the people do care  
The heartbeat of many who refuse to be silenced

So the questions remains,  
Will the roar of the people soar  
once more  
Or be grounded by the weight of betrayal?

As beneath the red and white that sways at the top of the pole  
The people's power is unyielding, the force no one can control  
Although this fight is far from over,  
a suffocating power still hover  
As we have our voice then this is our fight  
Which is why we'll stand, we'll march,  
we'll make it known  
That the power is ours and always be ours.

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**Note:**

1. Power Struggle Between Indonesia's Court and Parliament: The power struggle between Indonesia's Constitutional Court and Parliament has ignited widespread protests, as the government attempts to reverse court rulings on regional election laws. Link: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/power-struggle-between-indonesia-s-court-parliament-sparks-protests-2024-08-22/>
2. Mass Protests in Indonesia: Public outrage over the government's actions in revising regional election laws has led to mass protests across Jakarta and other major cities, reflecting concerns over the erosion of constitutional integrity. Link: <https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2024/08/22/090000765/ada-aksi-demo-dan-peringatan-darurat-indonesia-apa-yang-sebenarnya-terjadi?page=all>
3. Indonesia's Political Crisis: The ongoing protests highlight the public's distrust of the government's motives, with questions arising over the decision to move the capital as a possible distraction from political turmoil. Link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8er13zy1gxo>



# WHY THE MOUNTAIN CRIES AND WOULDN'T SLEEP



(ISABEL) Sobitha Kondana

*In the Himalayas, a mother and child endure the harsh realities of the Kashmir conflict—a protracted and violent territorial dispute between India and Pakistan that has caused widespread destruction and displacement since 1947. Their struggle highlights the ongoing impact of this enduring conflict, marked by military violence and severe humanitarian crises. (1)*

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The moonlight gleamed pale blue, casting long shadows over the mountains  
The sky weeps into the earth as a mother whisper in short,  
gentle breath to her child's ears, (2)

*“Sleep, my love, as sleep will bring us dreams,  
And dreams, perhaps, will bring us wings.”*

But the night is a thief, stealing warmth from their skin  
Leaving them only with chilled memories of the past  
That has long passed and won't ever take them back

A life once theirs,

That are now just a ghostly echo in the wind that grazes  
through the blades of the grass

The fire that burns, the fire that takes,  
The fire that marks the end of their past lives,

The smoke that paints the sky in shades of despair,  
The smoke that clings to their lungs and the last breath of their kin,  
The smoke that fuels and process their stages of grief,  
The smoke that burns their eyes to shed tears for all those lives lost. (3)

Her child's hand, once small and curious  
Now clutches with a grip that's speaking in language  
that's nothing but fear  
From all those waking hours running, knees deep in motion and feet  
wet in sweat Hiding from monsters who wore the faces of men.

The sun above became their greatest witness but sets each evening  
The stars above them, indifferent, blink out one by one  
As if ashamed of the world below.  
In this darkness, her voice cracks like the parched earth beneath  
*"Sleep, my love, sleep,  
For in dreams, we are free,  
To roam the fields of our home,  
Where the river runs clear,  
And the sun is a friend still."*

But the child, who bore strokes of lines under his eyes,  
A token sign of those sleepless nights,  
That by force probably pressed better wisdom for his years, asked,  
*"Why, Amma? Why must we only dream to be free?  
Why must our home live only in the shadow of our mind?"*

She pauses, heart heavy with truth  
A truth she wishes she could bury with her beloved husband, his  
father To protect their child from the cruelty (4)  
But what kind of fierce love or mercy can ever really protect someone  
from the truth? Of the world's unkind ways, of the bite of hunger, of

the sting of loss?  
Is there ever a truth in violence?  
Has everything ever been enough?

*“The world is a broken place, my love,  
And we are the pieces scattered by the storm. But even in broken  
things, there’s still beauty  
In the way the flowers still bloom,  
The horizon still holds its line,  
The rain still pours and washes over us,  
The way I still have your love,  
And you have mine,  
Even when we watch everything around us up in flames  
You are still here present in this broken land  
And I still get to be your mother, close to you, until my time comes.”*

The child’s eyes pooled with unshed tears  
His mother’s voice sounds fragile  
Even when trying to commit to a thread of hope  
*“We’ll build more beauty from the fragments of our dreams,  
From the ashes of what’s left  
We’ll find ways to carve our wish upon a star to the stones of the earth  
So that even when we’re gone,  
The rain that kisses the earth can still resonate and play the  
beat of our name The soil can remember the taste of our desire  
And the snow can preserve our precious memories  
This world will remember us  
The remains of what we were like,  
The us as warriors that fight with nothing  
but the aspirations we boldly hold  
and told each other  
The us that survives when monsters try so hard to tear the will of our*

*hearts apart Amma wants you to fight, my love!"*

As the night deepens, the wind carried with them their stories  
Long way from the mountains, to the other world that may never hear  
their cries But tremble at their resilience  
For in the heart of darkness, A flame still burns,  
Flickering, fragile, but alive all the same.

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### **Note:**

1. The Kashmir Conflict: The Kashmir conflict is a protracted territorial dispute between India and Pakistan, resulting in significant violence and displacement. Link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/10537286>
2. Impact on Children: The ongoing conflict has deeply affected children in the region, leaving lasting scars on their lives. Link: <https://www.weavenews.org/stories/2019/03/26/2019-3-20-scarred-childhoods-of-the-kashmir-conflict>
3. Mass Graves in Kashmir: Reports of mass graves discovered in Kashmir, allegedly containing the bodies of those who "disappeared" over the years. Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/09/mass-graves-of-kashmir>
4. The Line of Control (LoC): The LoC separates Indian-administered and Pakistan-administered Kashmir and is one of the most militarized borders in the world. Daily life near the LoC is marked by cross-border shelling, and civilians often get caught in the crossfire which results in the constant threat of violence hovering over families. Link: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/07/in-the-line-of-fire-along-kashmirs-line-of-control/2>.

## Biography:

(ISABEL) Sobitha Kondana | Thailand

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In their free time, ISABEL finds joy in writing poetry, using it as a way to explore thoughts and ideas that don't always fit into the everyday. Creative writing has become their main outlet for self-expression, allowing them to experiment and play with words.

What started as just a hobby, is now where they feel most at ease and diving into new projects keep their imagination active. It's all about putting thoughts into the world and finding new ways to connect with the world around them through writing.

# A SLAVE AT SEA AND ON LAND

— — —  
Heng Jia Min

*Out of a need for income, young men are taken captive to fishing boats, forced to work for up to 20 hours a day without sleep, and physically punished or even killed for not obeying captains. This is modern day slave trafficking, enabled by a network of corrupt officials, legal institutions and employees.*

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We think that slavery is a thing of the past  
But it is here and now.  
The poor are exploited,  
Told they would be given a job,  
Then sold to fishing vessels that never go ashore.

Fishing vessels with forced labour fish more,  
They travel further away from the shore.  
They have fewer and longer voyages, that's how  
They are not caught and instead do more.

At sea you have to depend on the captain  
For food, for shelter, for life (1).  
If they leave you to die  
in the middle of the ocean  
Your chances of survival are none.

So captains have free reign.  
They use stingray tails as a cane (2).  
They behead you in front of your fellow slaves,  
A scare tactic so you behave.  
They confiscate your passports and ID,  
pull you back if you escape.  
They leave you blind or crippled without treatment (3)  
When the fishing line or frostbite damages your state.

Prum wanted to earn money for his child  
Growing in his wife's womb.  
He looked for a job to no avail,  
Before agreeing to what would be his doom.

He had already said no at first, but now  
He had no choice but to  
Work for twenty hours a day,  
Sleepless nights without being paid dues.

After he saw land one day in three years,  
He decided to jump.  
He made it to shore with containers as buoys,  
But was sold to a plantation when he arrived.

When he eventually went to a hospital,  
The police were no enforcers of justice.  
Instead they forced him to say he illegally immigrated,  
Silencing the police's own slave trafficking crime.

Only after 10 months of jail and lock-ups  
Did Prum finally return.  
Home to his beautiful daughter who served as  
His hope to keep brave and stay alive.

The fishing industry earns massive profits  
But the owners of slave boats only benefit (4).  
The laws don't facilitate their being punished,  
For the slavery of over one hundred thousand.

There are gaps in identifying the culprits,  
The taxes and the slaves both unpaid.  
Why do countries refuse to sign conventions  
Like the Work in Fishing Convention?

The vessels are plying the waters of Southeast Asia and South America,  
But the companies are flagged under China, Russia and Korea.  
These companies own 1 in 9 of the involved vessels (5),  
Who should we hold accountable?

The system is rigged, intertwined with corruption,  
The hands that should protect instead fuel the destruction.  
Officials turn a blind eye or even take their share,  
Letting human lives be traded for profits without a care.  
Legal institutions remain silent, unwilling to act,  
While young men, desperate for income, fall into this trap.

From as far back as five thousand years ago  
Human civilisation has had slaves.  
But one would have thought by now,  
We wouldn't expect such forced labour:

One would expect by now,  
We should have zero modern slaves.  
Yet the chains remain invisible, the pain still raw,  
And justice evades those who break the law.

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**Note:**

1. In 2015, exposés revealed the exploitation of thousands of fishers aboard Thai fishing vessels in Indonesian waters, which in some cases had been going on for years. Link: <https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/findings/spotlights/forced-labour-at-sea/>
2. Vannak Prum, a Cambodian man was forced into slavery on a Thai fishing boat where he endured torture, starvation and the constant threat of death. Link: <https://www.endslaverynow.org/blog/articles/vannak-prum>
3. In one case, a worker was blinded in one eye after a fishing line snapped. He said the ship's captain forced him to carry on working instead of seeking medical help. Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/mar/13/fishing-industry-worker-abuse>
4. Migrant workers in particular are vulnerable to being deceived and coerced by brokers and recruitment agencies and forced to work on board vessels under the threat of force or by means of debt bondage. Link: <https://www.ilo.org/topics/forced-labour-modern-slavery-and-trafficking-persons/sectors-and-topics/forced-labour-and-human-trafficking-fisheries>
5. In 2014, the Guardian reported that shrimp sold in major US and UK retail stores was fed with fish caught on the high seas by Thai-flagged fishing vessels whose unidentified owners subjected migrant workers from Myanmar and Cambodia to forced labour. Link: [https://financialtransparency.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/FTC\\_2023-Report\\_Dark-webs\\_EN.pdf](https://financialtransparency.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/FTC_2023-Report_Dark-webs_EN.pdf)

# WHO DOES A CLIMATE REFUGEE BLAME?

— — —  
Heng Jia Min

*As a result of consumerist lifestyles and corporate exploitation of the environment, climate change has worsened and caused extensive displacement all over the world, even if the places affected are not the places contributing the greatest amount of greenhouse gas emissions. In Somalia, more frequent cyclones, floods and drought have led to the famine and displacement of over 1.3 million Somalis, worsening the lasting effects of their civil war.*

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My home is beautiful.

We have arid deserts,  
ten centimetres' rain a year,  
we have cold and warm steppes,  
mountain ranges with deer.  
We have elephants, giraffes, baboons,  
Gazelles, zebras, antelopes.  
We have cliffs and valleys and rivers:  
The Jubba and Shabelle.

But we have floods and droughts too,  
Now worsening with each year.  
My people and cultures whom I so love,  
Living in fear and hunger.

I learnt in school today about  
human-induced climate change.  
My ancestors tell me there are cycles to the earth,  
But now all the cycles, we can't tame.  
I don't understand what my teacher says  
About all the carbon emissions.  
She spoke of industry and planes and fuels,  
But all I see every day are animals.

Our emissions are 0.00%,  
But we have missed a rainy season five times.  
We have not had this bad a drought for 40 years (1),  
And 3 millions of us have had to leave our homes.  
My childhood friends are now in Yemen,  
My neighbours in Kenya and Ethiopia (2),  
And us, we don't know anyone there,  
So we move from place to place here,  
We move whenever we are evicted.

My parents tell stories of a childhood spent fishing,  
My grandparents taught them to farm.  
There's no more land for our cattle to graze,  
And where I used to walk to school, there is now a lake (3).

I miss the feeling of home.  
Of having a place to call my own.  
Everyone in this town now has welcomed us,  
But still I miss where I was born.

I hear my parents ask on the phone:  
"Where are you now?" "Are you alright?" (4)  
They ask my cousins and aunties and uncles

Who moved to another camp from ours.

There a strange thing happened:

An unprecedented flood (5).

Why did the rain that came answer

Only one half of their prayer?

Yes, they'd prayed for water but more than that,

What they wanted was hope, something stable.

Somehow every cycle has been broken.

It's not just the weather that has.

We have no money to support the business that runs,

What business can run today?

We have no money to buy seeds to plant again,

In hopes there is no more drought.

We used to trust each other and share,

But everything is dwindling little by little.

If you choose to be a little selfish

For a day you wanted to eat or drink more,

Everyone sharing our crowded house can see you.

No one who's hungry can share all his food forever (6).

But why, I wonder, do we suffer like this?

We contribute so little to the world's harm,

Yet we bear the brunt of others' greed.

Far away, people live lives of excess,

Corporations burn and extract, taking more,

While the earth weakens under their demand.

Our skies are clear, but their pollution chokes our rain.

Their factories hum, and yet here, it is our fields that remain barren.

Sometimes I see something I think is a plane,  
Flying high among the clouds.  
I wish one day there can be all the water we need to drink,  
And I can fly like a bird in the sky.  
But what will be left when I land?  
A home I cannot recognize, a land dried up?  
Will the world care for our story, or will we be forgotten,  
Like the raindrops that once kissed our soil?

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### Note:

1. The worst drought in 40 years has left millions at risk of starvation, forced to migrate and at heightened risk to exploitation by smugglers. Link: <https://www.climate-refugees.org/perspectives/2022/6/8/somalia>
2. Today, there are 714,390 Somali refugees and asylum seekers living in neighbouring countries like Kenya (308,367) and Ethiopia (276,412). Link: <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/somalia-refugee-crisis-explained/>
3. Formerly residents of 10 villages surrounding Lake Baringo, their homes were submerged in 2020 when Lake Baringo waters swelled past human habitability. Link: <https://bit.ly/3Z2DqKN>
4. Amina Jamaa Hussein fires off a flurry of questions on the phone, worried about her family in the city of Las Anod, capital of the Sool region in nearby Somaliland. Link: <https://bit.ly/415uPJY>
5. In 2020, cyclones and floods displaced more than 1.3 million Somalis, according to UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, outnumbering those displaced by drought or conflict. Link: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/displaced-somalis-and-refugees-struggle-recover-climate-change-brings-new-threats>

6. The situation in the refugee camp was explained by what one of my informants called *taba'an* – a time of crisis. The people overcrowded small huts, sharing their already scarce resources (e.g., food and water). Link: <https://bit.ly/3Zn6sWE>

## Biography:

Heng Jia Min | Singapore

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Jia Min is an adventurous and curious researcher of life. She hopes to use her explorations in facilitation, environmental studies, and theatre to create spaces for communities in Southeast Asia to conduct dialogue and take ownership over realising the community's aspirations and

addressing problems and injustices.

She has published on Critics Circle Blog and The Second Link: An Anthology of Malaysian and Singaporean Writing. Currently she is working on a semi-autobiographical monodrama about a girl who wants to do everything but also wants to be a Buddha. In her free time, she enjoys learning new things like archery, pottery, pro-wrestling, dance and various languages, as well as walking amongst trees and forests.

# COLD



Hannah Kwok

*Between January 2020 and April 2022, at least a quarter of health and care workers worldwide reported suffering from anxiety, depression and burnout symptoms. The causes of poor mental health among healthcare workers are "manifold and complex," including exposure to death, human suffering, violence, and traumatic situations.*

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I saw the men run in, the many mangled  
Bodies on the gurney; heard the harried cries for  
Blood, more blood, push harder, no pulse.  
It didn't stop, not for a minute or ten:  
The men, the bodies, the blood.

Then they trickled in: heavy footsteps  
And their desperate cries. A child breaking  
Free from his mother's hands and beyond  
The nurses' barricades. I do not know what he saw.  
I do not hope that he saw at all.  
Gloved hands reach to push him out. He screamed.

The cacophony went on:  
Blood and machines in endless parade  
She would leave the room and speak in hushed whispers  
To the two or three loved ones from the foyer.  
Later, you can see him later  
When we've cleaned him up.

And they would leave or stand,  
Rooted. And she would turn back.  
Then cry.

I saw you, in green uniform that must have once  
Been neatly pressed; you come to me now and say  
You're sorry, but there is no more space  
And it simply isn't ideal with a place so hot  
But they've put up tentage, if I would allow...?

So I go in my gurney, run by men, run by you  
Out into the evening night on the tarmac, parked  
Beside someone bandaged and sleeping.  
You apologise once more and I say no, it is relief –  
My legs have swelled and my lungs are wet  
But my heart has failed before;  
I have only one death but you have many every hour,  
Each day praying that your heart stay soft and beating  
Enough to carry you through the day;  
Enough to hide the children's eyes;  
Enough to cry;  
Enough to say sorry to this old man for making him wait;  
That I bit my tongue and shivered under the central cooling.  
How could I ask for blankets when you were bringing a pall?

I watched you the next day, your steps slower.  
A heaviness in your eyes that no sleep could wash away.  
The toll of so many lives hanging on your chest,  
Like stones, dragging your shoulders low.  
You were here again, weren't you? Every day, without pause,  
Because this was more than just a job. It had become a battlefield  
Of broken bones, broken hearts, and broken minds.



You knew the pain, you saw the death.  
The bodies, the cries, the endless grief.  
Each day, it etched deeper into your soul,  
A scar that no one outside these walls could see.  
They say you chose this life, that this was the path you walked,  
But how could anyone choose to bear this weight alone?

Your colleagues, too, are not the same.  
The smiles they once wore have faded into shadows.  
Their hands tremble as they hold the scalpel,  
Their hearts race as the beeping machine echoes through the hall.  
What you see here every day,  
It isn't just the blood, the wounds, the pain.  
It is the endless parade of faces,  
The families torn apart, the prayers unanswered.

The statistics don't capture the sighs you let out at night,  
Or the silent tears you wipe away when no one is looking.  
They don't tell the story of the days you feel like you can't  
Do this anymore, that the weight of the world is too much.  
Yet still, you rise. Still, you come back.  
Because how could you not? The world needs you.

But who sees you? Who listens when you cry?  
When you walk out of these doors, does anyone ask  
How you're doing, if you're okay?  
Or do they just expect you to keep moving,  
To keep healing, to keep saving,  
Without ever offering you a hand to hold?

Each shift is another battle, another piece of you lost.  
You are asked to give more than you have,  
And no one notices when there is nothing left.

The burn in your chest isn't just exhaustion,  
It's the pain of a heart that has seen too much,  
And a soul that has carried too many burdens.

I see you, I see the cracks forming.  
And I wish I could tell you to rest,  
To lay down your armour and just breathe.  
But you are here, still fighting, still pushing through.  
A soldier in a war against time and death,  
In a world that takes but rarely gives back.

So when you say sorry for the wait,  
For the tent, for the heat, for the lack of space,  
I say no, don't apologize.  
You have done more than anyone could ever ask.  
And when the world finally sees you,  
I hope they see the hero you are.

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### **Note:**

1. Compassion fatigue is cited as a major cause of distress among health workers. Link: <https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/feature-stories/item/why-are-so-many-health-and-care-workers-suffering-poor-mental-health-and-what-can-be-done-about-it---perspectives-from-finland>
2. In 2022, 40% of doctors and 49% of nurses reported experiencing burnout, with 32% of nurses planning to leave their profession within the next year. Link: <https://www.techtarget.com/revcyclemanagement/news/366600141/Easing-Administrative-Burdens-Staffing-and-Burnout-Challenges>

# HOW TO WRITE POETRY?

— — —  
Hannah Kwok

*Many renowned artists throughout history have created powerful works inspired by personal suffering and tragedy. Writing about tragedies can be a way for authors to process their emotions and find inner peace or understanding.*

---

Pick a topic, any topic will do  
So long as it's real and it's a problem  
Then inspiration pools -  
And words will emerge -  
And we will call it poetry.  
Poetry: we have moved past aesthetics  
For its own sake.

We refer to the inspiring: war  
All around: 'the invasion'  
An Moscow man once remarked  
With which to bookend his days.  
Geopolitics and Myanmar  
Trump and the Gaza  
Civilians running, swimming,  
Desperate, dead.

Now pick one.

Go on, whichever  
Makes your blood boil most, that you  
Through the screen have educated yourself  
On, you'll know it when you  
Feel it in your gut pooling, like blood  
Softly kept.

Be inspired. Words emerge:

Like rainwater reaching the tree root  
Over a soil pregnant with the rain -  
I do not know how to feel nor  
How to write;  
Pain begets pain, the body  
Programmed down to the cell  
To pass a shudder at the sight of blood as it  
Keeps  
Pooling -

We will call it poetry.

But what of the poets who came before?  
The ones who took their tragedy and  
Made something lasting,  
Who pulled from grief and loss  
To leave behind verses of power and truth?

Think of Van Gogh,  
Who painted his pain in swirls of color,  
Each brushstroke a cry for understanding.  
Or Sylvia Plath, whose words cut deep,  
Her tragedy woven into every line,  
A confession, a lament, a search for peace.

They too, picked their tragedies,  
Their suffering, and shaped it into art  
That still speaks to us,  
Even from the depths of their despair.

Now pick another tragedy.  
One you cannot escape, one that  
Follows you like a shadow,  
Whispering its presence when you try to sleep.  
Is it war? Is it loss? Is it the slow erosion of love,  
Or the absence of hope?

Be inspired. Words emerge:  
The body remembers pain,  
Even long after the wounds have healed.  
The artist, the writer, the poet—  
They take that pain,  
And transform it.  
Through their craft, they make the intangible  
Tangible.  
They give it form,  
They give it voice.

These words on a train, my labour  
Is not expansive. Scar tissue hurts once  
Then every day after. Who am I to reveal your scars?  
Perhaps these layers are deserving of their own song.  
In my act of writing  
On this train, expensive  
If I am poet or future muse.

Every poet is searching for something,  
An answer to the question that haunts them.

For some, it is peace; for others, understanding.  
Yet for all, it is a way to make sense of the senseless,  
To take tragedy and give it meaning.

So we write. We take the pain, the suffering,  
The tragedies that shape our lives,  
And we mold them into verses,  
Hoping that in doing so,  
We might find some solace,  
Some relief from the weight of it all.

And still, we call it poetry.

For art has always been born from suffering.  
From the ashes of despair rise the most  
Powerful expressions of the human soul.  
And so we create, because we must,  
Because it is the only way to survive the storms  
That rage within us.

Pick a topic, any topic will do.  
Pick a tragedy, any tragedy that has shaped you.  
And let the words flow,  
Like blood, like rainwater, like tears,  
Pooling in the corners of your heart,  
Until they overflow,  
Until they become something greater than pain.

We will call it poetry.

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## Note:

1. If you're a writer you're going to write about your own personal real-life experiences, even if what you are writing is fiction. Link: <https://kimerskine.wordpress.com/2013/06/16/how-to-write-about-real-life-tragedies-for-your-novel/>
2. From Tragedy to Inspiration: How Writing a Memoir Can Be Healing. Link: <https://www.clairitage.com/2020/02/18/from-tragedy-to-inspiration-how-writing-a-memoir-can-be-healing/>

## Biography:

Hannah Kwok | Singapore

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To balance out her studies in STEM fields, Hannah turns back to her first love - words. She has been writing since young and has taken part in multiple writing competitions such as the Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition, receiving Gold in 2017. She has also paid tribute to her country of

Singapore in 2014 through the 50 Words for 50 Years competition in 2014. Poetry is solace and comfort, a revelation into the softer aspects of humanity that science cannot probe. Through her writing she hopes to better understand the world around her and the people who make up its fabric.

# “I JUST WANTED PEACE...”

— — —  
Pham Hoang Khang

*Carol Higgins, who endured her 35-year battle to bring her sexual abuse case against her father to light, ceaselessly advocates for other people, fully aware of how tough it is to be heard.*

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**2024**

“I just wanted peace...”

echoed the exultant shout through the closing court doors,  
waking me up to the bleary puffy eyes.

“I thought it’s over...,” I whine.

The scar might just be healed.  
yet the ache – will just be still.

I grew up with a bizarre dad  
to kill mom, he desired  
a shotgun to her head, she shivered.  
I was his favourite,  
for what I received was only leather belts  
when I said no to what he would tell.  
He let me fight with my brother  
on a rug, as two Rottweilers  
His fetish, looking at us battering each other.  
cried, I never.



## **1980**

I was his favourite,  
over my fair cheek he yanked his rank lips.  
“You’re so beautiful,” he quavered.  
“It’s normal,” he said.  
“My friends live as husbands with their daughters.”  
“It’s normal,” he said.  
Kicked or screamed, I neither.

He tattooed a rose on my gossamer back, yet would call me slag,  
slipped mom’s ring on my finger, and kept my images by bed.  
“It’s normal,” he said.

## **1984**

I was his favourite.  
I ran to find mom, who told me to tell the police.  
“It was love, not criminal,” drilled into my head for long.  
But I know there’s something wrong.  
I wrote a 17-page statement, followed by an agonizing examination:  
“You’ve no evidence!”  
And your brother’s witness! He’s a kid.  
“On the news, your name will hit”  
True, I couldn’t handle it.

I left my mom from whom I couldn’t find peace, but I met Julie  
who later made my tattoo covered, and accompanied me to a  
counsellor.  
I’d just enter and not speak for the whole hour.  
For years, I’d not been let to answer.

## **2005, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015**

I never stopped getting the case around.  
“It was lost,” they announced.

“...or just hasn’t been found.”

“It was destroyed.” – I let out a howl.

They gave me a rookie guy, albeit my request for a woman to stand by.  
I ran thousands of errands, but not a time it got acceptance.

## 2017

But not a time it got acceptance.

until 2017, after I appealed for 3 months.

I chose to be in person, to face who made me no longer a human.

“You’re a fantasist,” they claimed.

How about 20 witnesses? I could name.

## 2019

He stood trial, ultimately.

Within an hour it took the jury to find him guilty  
of 15 sexual offences, sentenced to 20 years.

I burst into tears.

“It took too long, our apologies!”

“I just wanted peace”

echoed the exultant shout through the closing court doors.

Looking back

In nightmares all this still eat me up.

A smell like him, a shape like him, a voice like him.

- I’ll get hammered, trembly, and choked-up.

Survivors of sexual abuse have come around.

Speaking out is paramount.

They say it’s a taboo. I say it’s what I’m meant to do.

But more than anyone else I know.

The scar might just be healed.

yet the ache – will just be still.

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**Note:**

1. This poem is inspired by Carol Higgins. She was 15 when she first reported her father's abuse to the police. They told her he wouldn't be charged. But she refused to let it rest until he finally stood trial. Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/article/2024/aug/20/carol-higgins-father-abuse-how-we-survive>.

# “TO SPEAK OR NOT TO SPEAK”

— — —  
Pham Hoang Khang

*Antonia Bernath, an actor who grew up suffering from relentless violence from her abusive father, believes it is speaking up that can end injustice.*

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## **Childhood**

Only the wearer knows where the shoes pinches.  
The admiring neighbours' eyes ain't outshine the devil's offenses.  
My dad wanted to kill me:  
(either when sober or drunk as a sailor)  
shot over my head, almost beat me to death,  
pushes and slaps and sticks a night, be doubled ever I dared to cry,  
locked me alone, outside when it's chilling to bone,  
roared till the morning: "You are disgusting!"  
"Things used to be fine, until you came to life."  
He said it's because he loved me.  
And mom was also a victim, however I begged her to leave him,  
cut her off from friends and wrenched her no matter when.  
He's never hesitant to say that he would kill us one day.  
At school I was an outsider, struggling to make friends with others.  
Though I was never bullied, still confused what love is.

## **On the run**

On one occasion, mom took us to Al-Anon,  
which made him see red. He's going to do what he said, we're distressed.  
He was forcing himself on me sexually. The last straw for us, it is.

Us or the drink: we made him decide, and he began to lose his mind.  
He took up the chase after our car at breakneck pace – tires  
screeching and engine roaring,  
He's coming...he's coming...  
as if our life depended on every twist of the wheel, a reckless abandon  
from who hot on his heels.  
He's coming...he's coming...  
We skid down a bridge and turned off the lights.  
He's coming...he's coming...  
His car like a raging rocket tearing up the night.  
He passed by without noticing. My heart was just thumping.  
Tomorrow is a new beginning.

### **Recovery**

Grandmom welcomed us to England where we first time lived as humans.  
Mom passed away, long after he forbade her to seek a treatment.  
I continued my studies, though he threatened to kidnap me.  
To have a dad – it's lifelong wild dream –  
sometimes I would reach out to him.  
“Perhaps he's changed,” I think.  
only to hear him roar while calling: “You are disgusting!”  
One day God finally took him out of my sight, leaving every chance  
of confrontation behind.  
Since then, my life has nothing but light.

### **In hindsight**

“Children will bounce back,” they say.  
But no, we are just deforming at the end of the day.  
Once abused in childhood, might carry it into adulthood.  
But once an adult, the choice is entirely in my hands.  
It's my perseverance which is unnegotiable that can end this vicious cycle.  
I tried to be perfect for him to love me, but it's all my coping strategy.  
To feel happy is to feel safe.

Now I embrace emotions of every shape:  
fear, anger, and sadness; self-listening, opposition, and re-connectedness.  
Shame can make us silent, yet be it a solution?  
Compliance: empowerment; compromise: validation.  
Your choice  
to speak or not to speak: That is the question.

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### Note:

1. The poem is inspired by Antonia Bernath. She feared for her safety every day. When she was 10, she and her mother escaped, but there was more tragedy to come. Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/jun/20/how-we-survive-my-father-beat-starved-and-belittled-me>.

### Biography:

Pham Hoang Khang | Vietnam

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Pham Hoang Khang (Eric) has been working as a teacher of English for more than four years. He is into exploring how languages can facilitate the intercultural communication between individuals from diverse backgrounds. Eric is also passionate about youth exchanges, where he discovers how youth dialogues and actions can translate into a more resilient future of places where sustainable development is still hindered by rampant societal issues. He participated The ASEAN-Japan Youth Forum: Take Actions for Social Change (TASC) 2023 in Tokyo, Japan to represent Vietnam and his campus, Viet Nam National University Ho Chi Minh City. This is among the first times Eric embarks on conveying meaningful messages of injustices and social ills by means of poems.

# A WORKING DAY

Phan Hoang Lan

*Tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka, descendants of the Tamil Nadu who were brought by the British in the 19th and 20th centuries, have endured generations of hardship. They have faced squalid living and working conditions, limited educational opportunities, and constrained career prospects, among other serious issues.*

---

the sun yet to rise  
I turn on the light  
amid the house of the barrack style  
many colours, no furniture  
dusky and damp, stuffy and cramped  
family of two can barely move  
no running water, sometimes it just leaks from the upper  
must relieve oneself in the rivers  
snakes come quite often, but men die from pollution  
they'll provide amenities; of course, deductions from the money.  
"we'll also build facilities"; we don't expect to see any.  
people come and investigate.  
they say we have loads of holidays  
leave, bonus, allowance; rice, medicine, vaccination  
lest they lose funding from organizations

dawn starts to break  
the basket on my back  
waist cloth as an apron, bare feet to plantation (1)  
walk uphill where they grow good tea

but got floods and landslides recently  
200 years, since forefathers set foot on here  
no identity, they call us 'hill country'  
bottommost in the nation  
life as sub-humans

darkness has now faded  
as usual as daily target  
18kg of tea leaves  
to earn a thousand rupees  
we barely got the full amount  
good the leaves we pick no matter how  
they act up usually: like up the quantity, (2)  
and down the working days, so they won't have to pay  
*"We're doing as we're told, so why don't you do as you're told?"*  
even when the economy is down, they never help us out  
price of stocks all grows, just our wage plateaus  
State raised pay upon request; owners immediately protest

midday under a scorching sun  
as always, I skip my lunch  
at times sneak out for a bit, can't stand watching people eat  
starving, now I'm tired  
my hands them all calloused  
spraying without protective kit  
leeches on my feet, yet no time to watch out  
stop means a kilo down  
someone's legs once infected, yet never went to a clinic  
why? she couldn't afford a ride  
tigers and leopards, once in a while  
at times I feel suicidal  
the wildlife threat; the verbal abuse; the time stress.



sun now leaves a twilight  
my head held high, carry the sacks of leaves  
I make some weary strides  
trudging home with dragging feet  
my kids curl up on a thin mat, hungry  
today got eggs only, unlike those in the city (3)  
taking out loans is normal; or I just stop sanitary towels  
they used to walk to school which was a great distance  
where teachers had no qualifications (4)  
no takeaways for future professions  
less half of them finish primary education  
they'll soon migrate  
to where they get a better rate  
for menial jobs they risk their lives  
and harshly abused because of their bloodline.

clouds hang low in the sky  
is night time for rest? why am I thinking about debt?  
my entire life shackled to this village  
still can't pay back what I owe for daughter's marriage  
will our people only work on tea plantations?  
poverty breeds violence and alcohol addiction  
we give our blood so they live in comfort  
Ceylon tea for everyone, not just for us.

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**Note:**

1. Many Sri Lankan tea plantation workers are barefoot as they mingle with the tea plants and begin to pluck the most tender leaves. Link: <https://www.dw.com/en/sri-lanka-tea-workers-and-a-legacy-of-exploitation/a-55006963>

2. The tea workers have no specific work hours, but continue until they collect the required quantity of leaves to earn the wages. Link: <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/women-congregations-empower-sri-lankas-exploited-tea-plantation-workers>
3. Top tea firms investigate as plantation workers say they have to pick 18kg a day but still skip meals and make their children work. Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/may/23/we-give-our-blood-so-they-live-comfortably-sri-lankas-tea-pickers-say-they-go-hungry-and-live-in-squalor>
4. Education on the tea estates is characterised by its lack of resources, its lack of qualified teachers and poor teaching facilities. Link: <https://tealeaftrust.com/beginnings-estate/>

# I REMEMBER WHEN I WAS 13

— — —  
Phan Hoang Lan

*Early marriage has haunted Zambia with more than 1.7 million child brides (2020) (1). The phenomenon leaves the girls with tremendous health consequences, forces them out of school, and deprives the country of significant development opportunities. That being said, there is reason to believe that a future exists where people have started to take action.*

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## **I remember when I was 13**

dad's tears streaming down  
the face: woeful and tanned-brown  
deep-set wrinkles  
that survive a life of struggle.  
"Why did you cry?" I asked.  
– "If only we weren't poor" (2):  
a house of four whose walls  
long slanted from the storms at night.  
– "If only he didn't want you":  
a man whose grizzled hair  
could triple my days in life (3).  
– "If only you were a boy":  
a girl whose bountiful curves  
now spoke louder than the inside (4).

## **I remember when I was 13**

watching mom knotting tight

a cow the man left behind  
“*Why is it me?*” I asked.  
“*The lobola (5) could do 9 weeks...*”  
against the pain she endured in 9 months...  
What about my brother?  
“*He could grow up and earn a living.*”  
as if I would never  
grow up and take care of my everything.

### **I remember when I was 13**

crept into a hut: cramped, dingy, unusual.  
alangizi said it’s a secretive ritual (6).  
“*Why am I here?*” I asked.  
– learning to obey him, answering his taste,  
while showing me how to move my waist.  
A wife? A maid.  
An early husband is better  
than a non-marital child;  
an early marriage is better  
than a virus that counts the end your life.  
A threat or savior  
it’s left for me to decide.

### **I remember when I was 13**

songs and dances sending off the bride  
lonely out of mind,  
to the new home out of sight.  
“*Can I go to school?*” I asked.  
nostalgia, I think of the months  
when I would read to the children.  
– “*Future is husband, not education.*”  
True, when I tended the lady being bedridden.  
Days, sweats down my back

for the household chores;  
Nights, strikes down my back  
for the money I asked him for (7)

### **I remember when I was 13**

lightning crotch in the pelvis, labor minutes away.

“Is she ok?” I asked.

A baby cried. The moment she opened eyes.

whose battered mom just came to rest in peace  
from early pregnancy.

A woman wailed. 13 years old, hours from the clinic by boat.

Her tiny treasure, leaving her for a gentle departure.

A doctor sighed.

– “She’s fine.” Well, I guess luck is not for everyone alike.

### **I remember when I was 13**

looking through the window, a host of people,

biking around the village, spreading the message

“Women for Change!”

talked both the men and women around,

arrested drunken brutes who beaten their spouse,

hugged the school girls refusing to drop out,

aired Inge Wina who is willing to speak out.

“It is time,” I said.

There is a future

for the little kids whose life

doomed at dad having more than a wife;

There is a future

for the millions of women whose child

not lucky enough to be hospitalized;

There is a future

for the country whose destiny

depends on how we all want it to be.

There is a future,

for you and me.

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### Note:

1. UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage. 2020 Zambia Country Profile. Link: <https://www.unicef.org/media/111416/file/Child-marriage-country-profile-Zambia-2021.pdf>.
2. Early marriage among girls in Zambia can be attributed to a variety of factors, including generational poverty. Child brides are prone to negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Link: <https://zambia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Child%20Marriage%20in%20Zambia.pdf>.
3. This link provides information on various aspects of how a child marriage is conducted, from the initial proposal to the associated rituals, as well as on how the issue has been addressed by the government and local communities. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRiAnrfX3Io>.
4. Among the communities which support early marriage, a girl's biological age is not necessarily more important than her puberty state. Link: <https://www.wvi.org/zambia/ending-child-marriage>.
5. Lobola is a traditional practice, primarily found in many Southern African cultures, where a groom or his family pays a bride price to the family of the bride. The payment is typically made in the form of cattle, cash, or other valuable items.
6. Alangizi are traditional marriage counselors or advisors, primarily found in Zambia and parts of Malawi. They play a significant role in preparing young women (and sometimes men) for marriage. Alangizi are often older, experienced women from the community

who impart knowledge, cultural traditions, and guidance on various aspects of marital life.

7. Child brides are susceptible to physical attacks from their husbands. Link: <https://www.wvi.org/stories/zambia/former-child-bride-future-nurse>.

## Biography:

Phan Hoang Lan | Vietnam

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Lan is an open-minded and cheerful person who loves arts, especially literature and music. He enjoys observing the world around him, finding inspiration in everyday life. He believe in the power of connections and loves sharing experiences with others.

He joined Mùa hè xanh, a volunteer program in Vietnam, primarily involving university students participating in social, environmental, and educational projects during the summer.

# THE SCAMMER WAS SCAMMED TOO



Rizky Adinda Putri

*In various countries such as in Cambodia, Malaysia and Philippines, Individuals are being kidnapped or sometimes scammed to work in scam call centres, which then scam individuals of their life savings. Both the scammer and the scammed lose their freedom and their mental health, while the higher-ups in the syndicates benefit without guilt, with hands “clean”.*

---

Two men, one knife, took away  
his flight ticket home, his freedom, his hope.  
They tortured and threatened, forced him to scam  
Against his will, he had to scam to live.(1)

He needed his phone so he worked for Boss's trust.  
Attended training, pretended to be slow,  
Accepted the beatings, so they didn't know  
His plan was to get his phone to get out  
And the phone he did get, a charity helped him out.

But then he had no money  
to book a flight home  
He had to stay in a guesthouse  
Afraid to go out and roam

The memory of the kidnapping haunts  
His young and persistent mind



Despite his bravery he cannot forget  
That dark and lonely time.

In Cambodia, in Malaysia, in the Philippines,  
The story is the same—  
Young men and women tricked, abducted,  
Taken to scam call centers, never to leave.  
They are told to make a living by deceit,  
But what kind of life is built on lies and grief?

On the other end of the line,  
A woman is intrigued:  
*“Finally someone notices me,  
After years of being unseen.”*  
A man had sent a message saying  
She reminded him of his teacher.  
Her heart fluttered with the beginnings  
Of a romance she always yearned for. (2)

But all the sweet talking was for a bitter end  
That would taste of regret and self-blame:  
The man chatted with her every day  
For the sake of sucking her life’s money.

He listened to her complaints,  
He reminded her to eat.  
He gave her all his attention, so much  
Her heart and mind skipped a beat.

Bit by bit he convinced her  
To input small amounts  
on platforms run by the scam sites  
He won trust with quick results.

Then one day her money disappeared.  
He too disappeared like the wind.  
Her trust in others, her trust in herself,  
Her love, her heart, her joy.

The scammer sits in the call center, trapped,  
Knowing the pain he's causing but unable to act.  
His freedom was stolen the moment they took him,  
Now he plays the game, trying to survive,  
But inside he's broken, barely alive.

If only the solution were as simple  
As identifying the scammer men.  
But they are just the middle,  
Equally tortured as the scammed.

When he was first kidnapped,  
He refused to do such a thing.  
He knew the pain of earning money.  
He did not want to harm anybody.

But he was beaten and cuffed like a prisoner,  
Electrocuted, starved, at risk of death.  
How could he, a slave, refuse,  
How do we blame him for her loss?

In offices far removed from the pain,  
The real masterminds watch their profits gain.  
Their hands are clean, untouched by the mess,  
The weight of their cruelty is nothing they confess.  
They profit from broken lives,  
From scams that destroy,  
Yet they walk free, their pockets full,

Unburdened by guilt or remorse.

How can we arrest those responsible  
for these lose-lose situations?  
Hundreds are rescued in occasional raids (3),  
But then thousands more remain.

In countries like Cambodia, Malaysia, and the Philippines,  
Where these call centers hide their sins,  
Both the scammer and scammed lose their hope,  
Caught in a vicious cycle with no rope.  
The mental toll is unbearable, deep—  
Sleepless nights, hearts that weep.

While the victims suffer,  
The syndicate heads live in luxury,  
Guilt-free, distant from the harm,  
Unfazed by the pain they've spread like wildfire,  
Safe in their mansions, watching empires grow.

Both the scammed and the scammer are trapped.  
Both have lost their dignity,  
Yet only one profits,  
Leaving the rest in misery.

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**Note:**

1. Chinese national Lee was walking down the street in Cambodia when he was bundled into a van. He ended up in scam syndicates where he was compelled by threats, beatings, even torture, to do

their bidding. Link: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cna-insider/i-was-kidnapped-tortured-and-trained-be-scammer-my-story-3080371>

2. 'Pig-butcher' or love-and-investment scam victims report being groomed over weeks. Link: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cna-insider/online-love-investment-crypto-scam-victim-why-effective-psychology-3018926>
3. Hundreds of people have been rescued from a scam centre in the Philippines that made them pose as lovers online. South East Asia has become a hub for scam centres where the scammers themselves are often entrapped and forced into criminal activity. Link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68562643>

# WHEN BRITISH BOYS BEHAVE BADLY

— — —  
Rizky Adinda Putri

*Even though there have been at least 2187 reported cases of rape by male British soldiers training in Kenya from 1963 to 2008, none of the men have been punished or their offences acknowledged. The children born from rape of women by British men, who face discrimination from appearing mixed, are also abandoned and left without support.*

---

British boys behaving badly  
Sounds like a nursery rhyme.  
But underneath the alliteration  
Lies the cover up of crime.

Ever since the British army trained in Kenya,  
As early as 1965,  
There have been over two thousand cases of rape,  
But no UK investigation officer assigned.

Some were propositioned but raped upon refusal,  
Some were gang raped when gathering firewood,  
One was chased for over a kilometre,  
raped when heavily pregnant – leading to a stillbirth the next day (1).

One was thrown onto the ground,  
hair tangled in shrub's branches.

One lost her two upper teeth, has headaches;  
They are attacked even in groups, what more alone.

Every woman who's been through the trauma,  
Still must pay to prove her story true.  
Before going to the hospital to pay for evidence,  
First she must recount to the police her ordeal.

Some will question her innocence,  
Blame her as if she were wrong,  
Laugh at her story as if it were false  
Call her a prostitute for no fault of her own (2).

No longer can the women feel safe  
Doing the jobs that gave them their income  
Even their husbands who were once their home  
Were so angered they beat their wives.

The worst part, everyone knows.  
On their faces, their actions, it shows.  
She walks around like a ghost.  
A shell of herself, left on the shelf,  
No one treats her or her child as a self.

The children of these rapes  
Are easily identified because of their skin  
Their mixed race parentage renders them vulnerable  
To bullying in schools, a result of British sin

The children are told "you will never belong".  
*"You have your own people to go to."*  
But the supposed "own people" they mean – the White men –  
Had abandoned them and their education. (3)

These children, reminders of shame, are left in the cold.  
No father to acknowledge their name,  
No system to care, no one to hold  
Their hands as they navigate a world  
That treats them as mistakes from a war untold.

Even when a soldier admitted to killing a woman  
Leaving her in a septic tank (4)  
No action was taken against him  
What more can we expect of these men?

There is no excuse, the British boys cannot be called boys.  
They are men, they know what they are doing  
and they know they won't be investigated,  
which is why they do what they do.

How can there be 2,187 allegations from brave women  
but "*no reliable evidence to support any single allegation?*" (5)  
So much pain swept under the carpet,  
But everyone pretends not to see the bump in the rug.

The soldiers return to their lives, unscathed,  
While the women and children are left to bear the weight.  
The children, a living reminder of colonial scars,  
Grow up ostracized, their futures marred.  
No justice for the women, no support for the young—  
These are the true legacies of the British tongue.

The crimes have spanned decades, but nothing is done.  
No trials, no reckoning, no punishment for some.  
The mothers are forgotten, the children ignored,  
While the UK government remains unbothered and bored.

And as these children grow, without identity or place,  
They face a world that only sees the colour of their face.  
Their fathers never looked back,  
Leaving them to carry the burden  
Of a crime that should never have been—  
But whose justice was never served.

This isn't just a story of men behaving badly;  
It's the story of a system that turns a blind eye.  
To the trauma inflicted on generations,  
To the scars that never heal, and the cries unanswered.

These women deserve more, their children deserve peace,  
Yet their lives remain shattered, with no justice or release.  
No apology, no reparations, no acknowledgment of sin—  
Just silence from those whose guilt begins from within.

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### **Note:**

1. Some Kenyan women, who were pregnant at the time, reportedly miscarried immediately after being raped. Link: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/eur450142003en.pdf>
2. Women who had been raped were generally blamed for it, and that people were suspicious of girls who had been to school and would often regard them as prostitutes. Link: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/eur450142003en.pdf>
3. A victim explained that she is a woman raising a "white" child, emphasizing the difficulties her family faces, particularly because raising a child is expensive. Link: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/17/africa/british-army-abandoned-children-kenya-intl/index.html>



4. Among the crimes the British soldiers are implicated in include the 2012 murder of Agnes Wanjiru. Her body was found in a septic tank two months after she disappeared. Link: <https://www.theafricareport.com/340030/kenya-british-army-faces-allegations-of-murder-rape-assault/>
5. British soldiers cleared of Kenya rapes. Kenyans reacted angrily to a report by Britain's Defence Ministry which said there was no reliable evidence to support charges its soldiers raped hundreds of women in the east African country. Link: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/uk/british-soldiers-cleared-of-kenya-rapes-idUSL15835287/>

## Biography:

Rizky Adinda Putri | Indonesia

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Adinda is a recent graduate of International Relations from UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta and has worked in translation and education, given her ability to capture nuances in Bahasa Indonesia and English. She finds joy in playing with language to communicate the beauty she sees and the hope she has for the world, and in connecting with others of all ages, fellow human to fellow human.

# THIS IS HOW WE GREW APART (1)

— — —  
Roshan Ganesh

*The experience of many young adults today, reflecting the phenomenon described in Gen Y's trend about making and keeping friends as an adult is tougher than they thought. When someone becomes close to you, you think of a lifetime with them. But if you love them too much, what happens? And if you love them more than they love you, what happens? And if they decide to drift, and one day come back like you hoped, what happens?*

---

( I )

if you had asked me about it some time before,  
I would have said we were part of a lore -  
that if they asked me about my first memories of you,  
I would think about two kids running around with joy  
and how it felt like kindergarten with the boys:

my galleries were too small to save our moments of youth,  
but since you promised to stay for good,  
I framed you up high in my memory galore -  
holding tight to that cinematic enlargement of sorts,  
I played them again and again and again and again:  
that was till I was locked in a vault.

did you feel the wind drift through the space between us?  
maybe — or maybe it was too fast to feel anything  
when you ran behind me in the club in circles

or chased me down to talk about your new adventures;  
with a visible smile that got lost within the distance in the darkness

so I stopped running to see if you would come around;  
if I would feel a wistful rub on my shoulder  
for a feeling I would not have second-guessed,  
I waited and waited and waited and waited:  
that was till I realised you stopped running so long before.

In those moments of stillness, I felt the weight of my love,  
Heavy and consuming, a tide that threatened to drown me.  
I imagined a lifetime with you, our futures intertwined,  
But as I reached out, you seemed to recede like the horizon.  
Was I loving too much? Was I loving alone?

The imbalance of our affections became a chasm,  
Growing wider with each passing day.  
I poured my heart into yours, but it seemed to overflow,  
Spilling onto the ground, unnoticed and unappreciated.  
The more I loved, the more I lost myself in the process.

( II )

in a month or two

I started reeling back to an unimaginable feeling of disappointment  
wherein, being disappointed is way worse than being in anger —  
for you can only disappoint one who loves you and anger a stranger

and it is sad to say — that now,  
the excitement of seeing you will wear off  
just like the smile on your face that day  
and if you asked for me again,  
I might leave the room with things unsaid:

for the words of one who speaks like a poet  
will set ablaze a new wave of emotions;  
that if were to be set in motion,  
will be enough to engulf your whole existence  
leaving nothing but your regrets

and lord knows,  
by the time you try to speak back,  
the air in your lungs will be filled with soot  
and even then,  
if your words make me want to run back to you,  
I will not come back home to something dead.

As you drifted away, I felt the earth shift beneath my feet,  
The future I had envisioned crumbling like sand castles.  
I watched you fade into the distance, a silhouette against the setting  
sun,  
And I wondered if you ever looked back, if you ever felt the void.  
The space you left behind echoed with unspoken words and  
unfulfilled promises.

Days turned to weeks, weeks to months, and still I waited,  
Hoping against hope that you'd realize what we had lost.  
I imagined your return, rehearsed the words I'd say,  
But as time passed, those imaginary conversations grew bitter,  
Tainted by the pain of your absence and the weight of my unanswered  
love.

( III )  
after all, it takes a special kind of absence  
to have come to this stage of sadness  
and the blame will still be on me  
for doing too much or feeling too much

but as I lose the vocabulary to tell you how I feel,

I'll think of our moments as short-lived for now,  
and as I let it be, I'll find myself falling through the ranks of your life  
lost in your vault; hiding between these closed passages of time  
until you realise that the distance between these words and you, the  
reader,  
is what took you away from being friends for a lifetime

And then, one day, like a ghost from the past,  
You appeared, your familiar silhouette a bittersweet sight.  
I felt the old pull, the yearning I thought I'd buried,  
But beneath it, a new emotion stirred - caution, perhaps wisdom.  
For how does one welcome back a heart that chose to leave?

In your eyes, I saw regret, or was it merely a reflection of my own?  
Your words, once so dear, now felt like pebbles skipping across a  
frozen lake.  
I wanted to run to you, to bridge the chasm time had carved between us,  
But my feet remained rooted, my heart a battlefield  
of love and self-preservation.  
In that moment, I realized - sometimes, coming back  
doesn't mean coming home.

The love I once felt, so all-consuming and bright,  
Had transformed, tempered by time and distance.  
It was no longer a raging fire, but a steady, cautious flame,  
Illuminating not just you, but the person I had become in your absence.  
And I wondered, as we stood there, suspended between past and future,  
If this new version of us could find a way to coexist,  
Or if some doors, once closed, are better left unopened.

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**Note:**

1. John Lim, "Gen Y Speaks: Making and Keeping Friends as an Adult Is Tougher Than I Thought. Here's What Helped," TODAY, December 17, 2023. Lim's article writes about why friendships fade. He attributes this to growing up, where adolescent friends drift when faced with the challenges of adulthood, being too pre-occupied with work to put in any effort into friendships. Link: <https://www.todayonline.com/gen-y-speaks/gen-y-speaks-making-and-keeping-friends-adult-tougher-i-thought-heres-what-helped-2323851>

# A POETIC VOYAGE THROUGH TWILIGHT



Roshan Ganesh

*A study conducted in 2023 revealed an in-depth understanding of unstable emotional relationships (including romantic relationships) as a prominent cause for suicide attempts. Here, we should learn to find ways to help reduce the emotional stress the people in our society face.*

---

the romantic sky in its pinkish-orange hue  
looked over the dolphins  
that spurred out of the water against the sunset view  
to meet at the centre of the setting circle

from the shore,  
it is only a movement of silhouettes  
with a tactical degree of evasion —  
a masked encounter feigned with fondness

the darkness of the shadow imprints itself  
onto the momentary backdrop of the dimming light;  
a dimming light empathetic enough to last longer than it should —  
almost re-creating a lost summer solstice in June

where when the summer solstice was once lost,  
the Tropic of Cancer (1) was left without purpose for the North;  
each forbidden the unification of light and the longest day;

sacrificed at nature's wrathful destiny which desires to betray  
and upon that sacrifice, death sat inside the opaque  
waters right below this bridge where it flows  
strong underneath, hitting the rocks like a tambourine  
if anything, it was so inviting

that the poet took with him his papers inked with blood,  
against the backdrop of a moonlit sky,  
purportedly plunged in search of another life,  
to rest this mind after screaming the last line:  
*"I want to die."* (2)

But there, in the plunge, were thoughts once dormant,  
Emotions buried under calm waves, now swirling, resurfacing—  
Moments remembered, of warmth and love once real,  
The laughter of friends, promises shared, yet unfulfilled.

How could these fleeting glimpses of joy fade so fast,  
When once they lit up the heart's dark corridors?  
It's the instability, the sudden shift—  
The rising tide of love followed by the crashing wave of  
abandonment—  
That pulls the young soul to this precipice,  
To dance with shadows beneath the night's sky.  
A 2023 study (2) speaks to this void in the heart,  
Where unstable love twists and turns,  
Leaving young hearts trapped between the promise of hope  
And the despair that fills their every waking thought.

It's not just the end of a romance, nor love itself,  
But the pain of empty promises, the feeling of less,  
That haunts like ghosts in the mind's silent hall,



Adding weight to a heart already so fragile and small.

Standing on this bridge, looking down below,  
What can this young soul find, if not the sorrow  
Of an unsteady, uncaring world?  
Where is the peace for a heart so swirled?

The poet remembers whispered words, once shared,  
Vows once spoken, a love once cared.  
Yet here they stand, weighed down by the lies,  
The deceit of words that were merely disguised.

The youth today, caught in this dance,  
Hopes to break free but seldom gets the chance.  
The toll of love that feels like a snare,  
Pulling them into the depths of despair.

And we, as a society, are merely spectators,  
Watching as these young hearts shatter.  
Shouldn't we extend a hand, offer more light,  
So they need not plunge alone into this night?

But even as the world turns, we fail to see  
The mounting pain that fills our society,  
The weight of promises broken and dreams torn,  
Leaving these souls feeling so forlorn.

The poet, though frail, remembers a time  
When a simple smile felt like a rhyme,  
When love was real and not a fleeting phase,  
Yet now, it fades under life's harsh gaze.

And so, under the twilight's shadowy spell,  
The poet dives deep, but not to quell,  
A life, but instead to understand  
The endless grief that haunts this land.

Beneath the bridge, the water roars,  
A witness to these silent wars.  
The battle of a heart, torn and weak,  
Yearning for the peace it seeks.

If only someone had reached out,  
Pulled them back from the edge of doubt.  
If only society's eyes had seen  
The depth of pain in this tragic scene.

The poet sinks but does not disappear,  
For somewhere within, a voice still clear,  
Whispers of hope, a gentle sound,  
A reminder that light can still be found.

As dawn breaks over the horizon's line,  
The poet emerges, grasping for time.  
A reminder that love, though it cuts deep,  
Can heal, if only we're willing to leap—

To reach out to the broken, the lost, the scarred,  
To be the light when life feels too hard.  
For in a world of darkness, we hold the key  
To save a heart, to set it free.

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**Note:**

1. “The Tropic of Cancer lies at 23d 26’ 22” (23.4394 degrees) north of the Equator and marks the most northerly latitude at which the sun can appear directly overhead at noon. This event occurs at the June solstice when the northern hemisphere is tilted towards the sun to its maximum extent.” Source: “Tropic of Cancer,” n.d. Link: [https://www.pacioos.hawaii.edu/metadata/world\\_tropic\\_of\\_cancer.html?format=fgdc#:~:text=The%20Tropic%20of%20Cancer%20lies,sun%20to%20its%20maximum%20extent](https://www.pacioos.hawaii.edu/metadata/world_tropic_of_cancer.html?format=fgdc#:~:text=The%20Tropic%20of%20Cancer%20lies,sun%20to%20its%20maximum%20extent)
2. “Instability of Emotional Relationships and Suicide Among Youth: A Qualitative Study | BMC Psychiatry,” n.d. Link: <https://rdcu.be/dVgFX>

**Biography:**

Roshan Ganesh | Singapore

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Roshan is a young writer from Singapore. He is currently in his second year of studies at the National University of Singapore, pursuing English Literature and Political Science. Hoping to give shape to his emotions through words, Roshan turns to poetry and songwriting. He aspires to delve deep into the world of performance poetry and hopes to perform his poems with the inclusion of strong visual elements to a large audience one day.

# OCEAN CITY

— — —  
Stephanie Peck

*Orang Laut are the indigenous peoples in Singapore and are known for living nomadic lifestyles on the sea. Today, this community exists in fragments, made into relics of history by our colonial past and our nation's crusade for modernity and development. The Orang Laut were relocated to public housing inland, far from the water.*

---

from the sea we were born,  
and to the sea we will return.

once upon a time  
there was an island  
who the ocean loved  
like it was her own.  
every day her waves  
would kiss the shore  
with the affection  
of a mother's arms.  
in return the land  
raised children who would  
make boats that would  
skim on the surface,  
tickling the ocean's cheeks  
as she rippled with  
wobbling laughter.  
these children—  
let's call them humans—

adored the ocean  
and the kiss she left  
on their salt-stained skin.  
they built their houses  
and raised their families  
on the beaches, close by  
so that they could see her  
every sunrise and every night.

new boats came one day,  
one by one, then by  
the thousands.  
the ocean was so happy that  
so many people  
wanted to come to  
her beloved island.  
there were so many  
more children to love.  
but her joy faded  
when the people  
turned their eyes away  
and beat their hands on  
the ground, scattering dust  
with the sole goal  
to be masters over  
the sands and the sea,  
to rule each other  
with iron chain and load.  
they built high their towers  
to touch the sky and  
loom over smaller others. (1)  
they had all forgotten who

had brought them to the shore.  
even the islanders,  
the first children who  
once shared their days  
by the ocean's side  
were told to head inland  
for sparkling houses  
and the dignity  
of a modern life.  
though some stayed,  
they did not last.  
the ocean found herself  
all alone.

to lose love is cause  
for days of mourning  
but to be stricken  
is reason for revenge.  
the people who ruled  
over all the others  
turned mastering hands  
to the grieving ocean. (2)  
they dammed her veins  
and poured their waste  
and oil into her chest  
and warmed the world  
with a steady boil.  
her waters stank with  
the reek of decay.  
the ocean burned with  
fever and fury,  
choking on the scraps

the people thought fit  
for her to swallow.  
enough was enough.  
a storm was brewing.

when the ocean rages,  
the wise man builds his house  
upon the sand taken  
from his neighbours  
to reinforce his shores.  
he believes he can defeat  
the sea's reckless tide.  
she rumbles and swells,  
churning, burning,  
creeping up the shores,  
swallowing cities whole.  
with her storms, she strikes  
the tallest towers  
and beats her rains down  
on concrete roads.  
let it not be forgotten  
that the ocean is known  
for her drownings.

there will be no peace  
until we make peace  
with the love that we lost.  
beg for forgiveness.  
run from the towers.  
so we reach to the past,  
remembering ourselves.  
learn to build boats again.

wait to taste the salt wind.  
swim and find your soul.  
let the water take us back.  
and if that happens  
maybe then we will realise  
how far we had searched  
when we had the answers  
all along.

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### **Note:**

1. The forgotten first people of Singapore. Over time, the Orang Laut have been assimilated into Malay culture and have lost their language. But descendants of the seafaring nomads are reviving their culture through food. Link: <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20210824-the-forgotten-first-people-of-singapore>
2. Orang Laut occupied the maritime zone surrounding the Strait of Melaka. During the period when the British thought Singapore was uninhabited, the Orang Laut had been using the island as one of the places to live in. Link: <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuiid=e586ffef-6277-4c3d-b463-bd14eefc914f>



# POWER TO THE PEOPLE

— — —  
Stephanie Peck

*At time of writing, the Gaza-Israel conflict is still raging. In June 2024, more than 37,000 Gazans have been killed, yet many governments have been hesitant to intervene, including my own country's. Palestinians have taken to social media to broadcast the destruction of their home, with many setting up GoFundMe campaigns to fund their escape from the Gaza strip. In ignoring the crisis, governments have relinquished their responsibility to the ordinary citizen.*

---

"There's nothing we can do," say the Suits.

"The situation is too precarious.

Too delicate. We cannot intervene.

Our hands are tied.

We will give the power to the people to decide."

I go online and  
there are fingers clawing through the screen.  
fathers picking up the pieces of their children.  
children crying for their mothers.  
mothers begging to be seen.  
between videos of pampered pets  
and Hollywood's best dressed  
bombs fall for livestream eyes.  
families submit themselves to cameras

to show that they are real. they attempt  
a smile for their salvation. they show me  
the razed bodies, the wails of grief, a  
burning ground, the bloodstains.  
the plastic sheets they call their shelter.  
every story is a different shade of tragedy.  
please help us. we don't want to die.

they pour into my inbox.  
I want to weep in my helplessness.  
I want to I give what i can. it's not enough.  
they tell me their story  
to show that they are worthy.  
with 5 dollars I have become an executioner.  
I give one and damn the other.  
I pray everyone will live  
knowing they will not.  
tell me who deserves to live more:  
the boy in the wheelchair  
or the mother heavy with her first child?  
or the doctor toiling through sweat and blood?  
the girl with the dream to study somewhere  
where there are still schools?  
the father grieving the children  
he buried in plastic bags?  
something tells me  
that I was never meant to bear this burden.

but if I don't do it, who will?

I am half a world away.  
this is the only way

that I can reach them.  
so I go online  
and I make myself look.  
I give what I can give up.  
I ignore the gut-twist and guilt.  
there is no other way.

and if I look a little further  
I see the man in Japan  
protesting on the streets alone.  
I see the oranges tossed  
from the street into aid trucks.  
poppies pinned on designer clothes.  
I see the thousands of nameless others  
raising their voices  
pouring into the streets  
giving everything they can  
doing everything in their power  
because silence is a death sentence.  
I follow their lead  
and take heart in knowing  
that I am not alone.  
I hope the children from seas away  
can see what I see  
and the manifold hands  
that reach out to them.  
we see you. you are not alone.

and all the while  
as newborns are buried nameless  
and grandmothers are shot by snipers  
the suits and the powers

up in gilded courts  
gaze on impassively.  
they turn away bills and aid  
washing their hands  
of all the trouble  
and tell the world  
that there's nothing they can do.

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**Note:**

1. By June 19, 2024, the Palestinian Health Ministry in Gaza reported that 37,396 people had been killed in Gaza since last October, according to a report by the prestigious medical journal The Lancet. Link: <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/death-toll-in-gaza-could-exceed-186000-the-lancet-18181205>
2. More Palestinians have increasingly turned to online crowdfunding platforms such as GoFundMe or JustGiving. A GoFundMe spokesperson told TIME that the platform has seen more than 12,000 active fundraisers for Palestinians in Gaza launched since Oct. 7, collectively raising \$77 million to date. Link: <https://time.com/6960367/gaza-gofundme-justgiving-crowdfunding-israel-war/>

## Biography:

Stephanie Peck | Singapore

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Stephanie Peck (Speck) is a dynamic final-year Psychology student at the National University of Singapore, with a Minor in English Literature. Her passion for mental health is matched only by her love for creative expression through writing and music. An avid singer and performer, Stephanie lends her voice to a band, while also finding joy in dancing, reading, and writing poetry. As a dedicated advocate for the power of words, she teaches a poetry writing class, where she shares her creativity and inspires others to explore their inner voices.



THE FOSTER SISTER'S  
**ESSAY POEM**

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# THE CHILDLESS DOG LADY



Monica JR

*Worldwide, more women are opting out of marriage, reflecting significant societal shifts and personal choices shaped by various factors. Research also shows that Millennials and Gen Z are increasingly favouring pets over children.*

---

JD Vance, the Republican vice-presidential nominee,  
In 2021 declared, “We’re effectively run,  
By Democrats, by corporate oligarchs,  
By childless cat ladies, miserable in their lives,  
Their choices haunt them, they wish  
To spread their misery, to all.” (1)

Aika, a young woman in her early thirties,  
Shook her head, bewildered by Vance’s lines.  
Though uttered in 2021’s shadowed time,  
As the US race began to unwind,  
Skeletons slipped from closets,  
Revealing the secrets of all candidates.

With a gentle sigh,  
Aika closed her laptop,  
lifted her Bichon Frisé, Janggi  
Strolled to the balcony,  
Where August winds in New York swirled.

On the 11th floor, she sat,  
reflecting quietly.

"Janggi," Aika asked her lap dog,  
"How could Vance deride  
Women's careful choices  
Not to marry, not to bear?  
Yet we still strive to shape this earth,  
Perhaps with more mindful worth  
Than those who parent without heed!"

Janggi tilted his head, sweet and curious,  
Wondering with innocent eyes,  
Why his owner shared her sighs,  
Complaining of her cruel world,  
As his ears and tail curled.

Aika's mind wandering  
Back a year, before she chose  
To be "The Childless Dog Lady." (2)

### **May 2023**

A year ago,  
Aika lived her golden days  
in Jakarta's vibrant embrace:  
A rising career,  
a dream fiancé,  
and a wedding carefully planned.  
But life, like a river, sways,  
bringing joy and sorrow in unexpected ways.  
"C'est la vie," they whispered,  
as fate's winds blew.  
A week before the vows,



She uncovered a painful betrayal.  
The wedding collapsed, depression set in,  
Work slipped away, leaving her adrift,  
Her family's comfort unable to heal.

Aika became a different person.

One day, strolling through Kwitang's old lanes,  
She found a well-worn, wise book,  
"Trauma and Recovery" by Judith Herman, (3)  
A guide to mend her fractured heart,  
Teaching her the art of healing and rising again.

The stages were steep,  
Yet she pressed on, her resolve deep.  
To mourn the wounds, the hardest part,  
But crucial to alchemize her heart,  
Turning pain into wisdom profound.

Bit by bit, she healed.

One day, her brother brought hope,  
With news of a job in New York.  
The pay was modest but opened doors,  
Reviving her studies, a dream now ready to bloom.

With resolve in her heart,  
Aika knew she must depart.

### **August 2024:**

New York,  
A world away from Jakarta's shore,  
Aika met volunteers, mostly women,

With a fire deep inside,  
Helping those whose hopes had died,  
Victims of abuse, women in need.

In America,  
She saw young girls, taught to be brave,  
To chase their dreams, defy the wave.  
Equal to men in every domain,  
They could be queen and also dean.

In Japan, she read how youth depart  
From marriage's ties, embracing instead  
Friendship nuptials,  
where mutual love and respect may start. (4)

Aika smiled with calm grace,  
She had redefined herself, found her place.  
A woman who braved the storm,  
Now a beacon, helping others transform.

She found joy within,  
Cherishing her Bichon, loyal and kind,  
Offering love without judgment.

Aika paused her thoughts,  
She petted Janggi,  
Then, lifting her eyes to the vast sky,  
She whispered,  
"To all childless cat-dog ladies,  
let's rise and lead,  
Together, we'll run this world,  
planting strength like a seed!"

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## Note:

1. JD Vance's 2021 interview with Fox News host Tucker Carlson is sparking backlash from many women across the United States. Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/30/opinion/jd-vance-childless-cat-ladies.html>
2. Seventy percent of child-free women view their pet as their child. Link: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/canine-corner/202108/millennial-women-are-dogs-and-cats-stand-in-kids>
3. When *Trauma and Recovery* was first published in 1992, it was hailed as a groundbreaking work. Link: [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/542700.Trauma\\_and\\_Recovery](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/542700.Trauma_and_Recovery)
4. Increasing numbers of young people in Japan are adopting a new type of marital relationship that requires neither love nor sex, in a trend called "friendship marriage". Link: <https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/gender-diversity/article/3260278/what-friendship-marriage-pals-platonic-partners-japanese-couples-embrace-unions-without-romance-or>

## Biography:

Monica JR | Indonesia

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Monica JR is a creative entrepreneur. She holds a Master of Business Administration degree from the Bandung Institute of Technology in Indonesia and Financial Technology from Said Business School, Oxford University.

In the arts and literature sector, she founded *Cerah Budaya International, LLC*, a publishing company based in Wyoming, USA. Monica is also actively involved in various initiatives, including serving as the Chairwoman and Representative of the Indonesian

Essay Poetry Community and as the Coordinator for Industry Affairs at the Indonesian Writers Guild (SATUPENA).

In addition, she is a translator and book editor. Her latest translation into English is *The Era When Religion Became a Shared Cultural Heritage* (2023), authored by Ahmad Gaus.

