

UNSEALED

The Southeast Asian Zine of Columbia University

ISSUE ONE | FALL 2018

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south-east-asian (adj):

souTH/ ēst/ āZHEN

hailing from countries in the South Eastern tip of Asia, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Laos, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Burma, and more.

“unSEAled,” Columbia University’s first Southeast Asian Zine has been created to provide an open space for Southeast Asian voices to be heard. The goal of the zine is two-fold: culture and representation. Students who come from a Southeast Asian background are welcomed to submit pieces that relate to their own personal experiences or culture. This can take on any form of media, from essays, to poems, music, paintings, films, or photography. This project was created in collaboration with numerous on campus organizations, including but not limited to the Vietnamese Students Association, Liga Filipina, the Singapore Students Association, Thai Club, Malaysian Club, and the Queer & Asian Club.

There is no requirement on what type of works are submitted, as long as you come from a Southeast Asian background. Through this zine, we ultimately hope to elevate Southeast Asian and Southeast Asian American voices while bringing together and showcasing our diverse communities.

With that said, we are so excited to finally get to share with you all our first printed issue of unSEAled! Thank you to all our contributors and our production team for bringing this zine into fruition. We hope you enjoy the works presented in the following pages.



photograph by Wan Yit Lee

The following poem and its translation was written by Tyler Nguyen in response to the alteration of the Vietnamese language, caused by a new education curriculum being tested in Vietnam; that seeks to revolutionize the way children learn to read and write in Vietnamese. “I have never seen another country try to revolutionize its own language in the way it reads and the way it writes, so I just think that since it’s happening to my own country, I might as well make other people know about it and its effects.”

Quốc Ngữ¹

“Ví dầu cầu ván đóng đinh
Cầu tre lắc lẻo gập ghềnh khó đi”
Ai ơi ai nhớ câu chi?
Khi mình còn bé đã ghi trong lòng.

Hãy xem những sách giáo khoa
Nào là “gà qué” nào là “quyện nhau”
Tròn vuông tam giác tròn vuông,
Học vẹt như thế uống công hư người.

Sáu tuổi học chữ thuộc lòng,
Đâu là các dấu đừng hòng mà quên.
Càng ngày bé học càng lên,
Học văn học lễ hệ trên truyền về.

Chẳng may Giáo Dục Việt Nam
Phá làng phá xóm xì xàm mà thôi.
Việc nước chưa hết lôi thôi,
Bia thì con hôi, nói chi việc học.

Mai đây sinh sống có hên
Sinh con dạy dỗ cho nên thành người.
Đi tìm quyển sách nào đây?
Để dạy quốc ngữ như thầy hôm xưa.

Thiên tài khó kiếm gần xa
Ngờ đâu ta vớt thằng cha Bùi Hiền².
Giáo sư chỉ mong làm tiền,
Chỉ mong bán sách làm phiền muôn dân.

Nỡ sao các bé còn thơ
Mà Cô giấu chữ không cho bé nhìn.
Thay vào mặt chữ là hình,
Từ hai mươi chín xuống còn có ba.

Ai ơi học tiếng Việt Nam,
Truyền lại cho trẻ để làm mà nên.
Ai ơi quốc ngữ đừng quên,
Để sau còn nhớ cái tên Lạc Hồng³.

Our Mother Tongue¹

"Those planks nailed on the bridge:

Shaky bamboo; unsound to cross"

Who remembers this line?

When babes were us, our mothers sung.

Just look at the textbooks,

There are strange words that I can't read!

From squares to triangles,

What is this language you call "New"?

Age six, the words we learned.

These are the accents; don't forget!

Each day we all improved:

Language, manners taught by elders.

Shame is the Vietnamese.

Their education's now worth beans.

Our country: full of thieves.

They rob our books, our words, our tongue.

Our children who have grown,

We shall raise them as best we can.

But what book should we use

To teach our speech that we once knew?

Viet talent's hard to find.

O woe, why do we get Ngoc Dai?

They style as Professors,

But they just want to sell their work!

Our offspring in their youth,

Can't see the words hidden from them.

You change our words to shapes.

From twenty-nine down unto three.

Please learn our Mother Tongue,

Please pass it on to your own kin.

Lest we seal tight our mouths,

So we can keep the name Lac Hong³.



photograph by Wan Yee Lee



photograph by Abigail Clemente

THIS NEW FASHION

by Monica Chan

Introducing the new fashion of the Delta:

You don't have to stare hard at all.
Amidst the once-green patch of land
and the once-turquoise composed ocean
and the once-azure carefree sky,
a gloomy black viscous scene slithers soundlessly like a serpent into your view.
Plumes of dark grey smoke billow;
Here, silence is so loud – you won't even hear a fowl call.

Introducing the new fashion of Nigerian girls:

Hey, look at the fancy sparkling belt-strap!
It wraps around the body this way and that.
This belt boasts a string of 122-gram metallic cylinders,
cold to the touch but piercing bright under the tropical sun.
These girls trudge in ragged garments;
perhaps their newest accessory must be
the longest, sleek AK-47 bound to their backs.

Of course you wouldn't catch a birdie's call
because this place is an empty hall.
Empty hearts, empty goals;
Still, international investors flock to this place in shoals.
But once you feel the penetrating gunshot stab,
and pain infiltrates your body in an electrocuted zap,
The terms "GREED" and "CORRUPTION" scream, creating tornadoes in your mind,
You'll be left sprawled on the ground – alone and blind.

At this stage, there's nothing more than compromise.
You reach out to me, I reach out to you;
You glance at my arm's fresh, bloodstained wounds,
I gaze at your visage of sorrows and woes;
Sister, we try with all our might to eradicate this new fashion, but what more can we do?

by Just Kraprayoon

Spring. In Southern Thailand my family vacations in the categorically sorted debris of the 2004 tsunami. I raise my hand to measure the width between thumb and pinky against a human-height chess piece lodged within the fronds of a palm tree. Bishop #3 was the lone survivor of an army that had been washed into the ocean. They say that when the second set of waves came, only the sacred found safety; a dog named Deejai, a child who picks coconuts, and an oversized ivory-colored bishop were floated into the arms of a tree. The hotel will file it as insurance covered redeemable damages.

Twelve years later it's June in the park and we've walked around the reservoir several hundred times over. Perhaps we're infatuated, an Annie Hall type of ordeal where I'll type up a play about us and make it melodramatic. We learn to love each other more than once, on and off, a flawed orbit of two flawed humans fervently hoping that come mid-july there won't be a stranger tangled in the sheets. The opposite is also true. We learn to hate each other, constant and unyielding, praying for summer to end. In hindsight, I'll self-diagnose our time as a period of heat-induced psychosis.

Tum Kwam Sa-ad. To clean. To cleanse. I walk along the white sand and pick up the remains of an island. As the Indian tectonic plate was subducted by the Burma plate, the Andaman sea floor was muddled in the wake of gigantic waves. Eighty foot rollers broke on the shore and flipped the small island of Koh Phi Pi. Buildings sank underwater while chess pieces rose higher and higher in the palms of a cruel God. It was confusing at that age, to search for seashells and find two Dutch children, my age, cold and silent. When we go back to the hotel, I'll file them as irredeemable damages.

Our language is different. For example, *I'm going away*. What grammatical manipulations can I use to respond to that, to say in three words that I'll be waiting, but only for an indefinite amount of time. Perhaps it's *I love you*, jotted down with closed eyes and a slight tremor in the fingers of my writing hand. The water is constant, lapping the shore as a reminder of what lay beneath the soft white sand. Water rinses and scours, and sometimes it'll even tum kwam sa-ad. To clean. To cleanse. A younger me would label it as simply damages, simply as in only, damages as in broken. Today, if I'm optimistic, I'll call it 'inconclusive.'

It took the hotel eight years before they chopped down the tree with the chess piece. Meanwhile, I've left Thailand for boarding school. By the time I come back the debris has been cleared, categorically cleaned, cleansed, and sorted. Redeemable damages here, irredeemable damages over there, a neat separation of hope and despair. The lone bishop is stored in a room underneath the hotel in a box amongst a maze of boxes; a clerk slaps on a sticker that reads "of no further use." As for me, I'm stuck in limbo, waiting and thinking about that spring in southern Thailand and our summer in Central Park. Thinking of how the waves break upon the island as we break and are broken upon each other.

A photograph of a coastal landscape. In the foreground, a rocky beach covered in small, light-colored pebbles meets the ocean. Waves are crashing against the rocks on the right. To the left, a steep, lush green cliff rises from the sea. The sky is overcast with grey clouds.

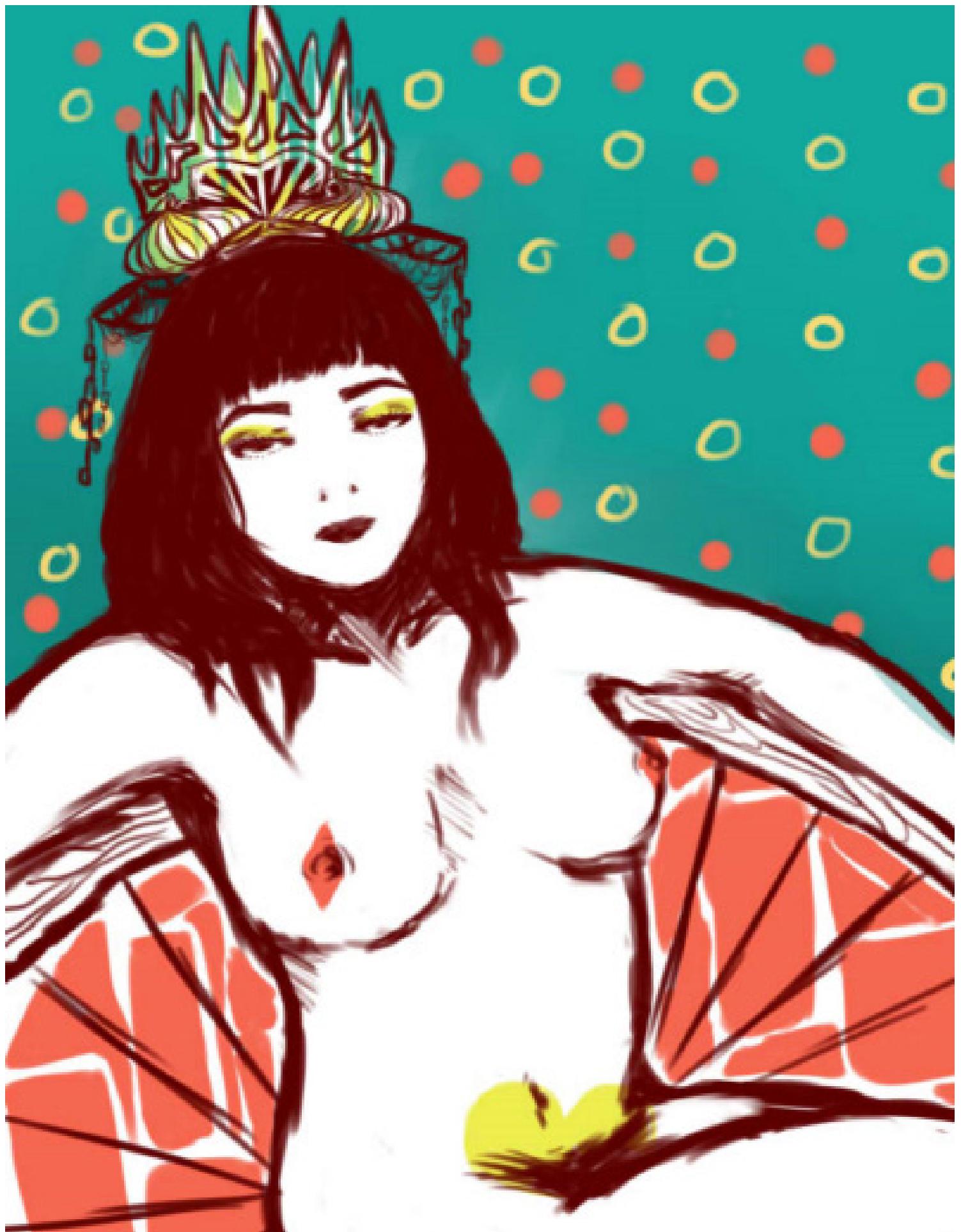
What to
do with
b r o k e n
things.

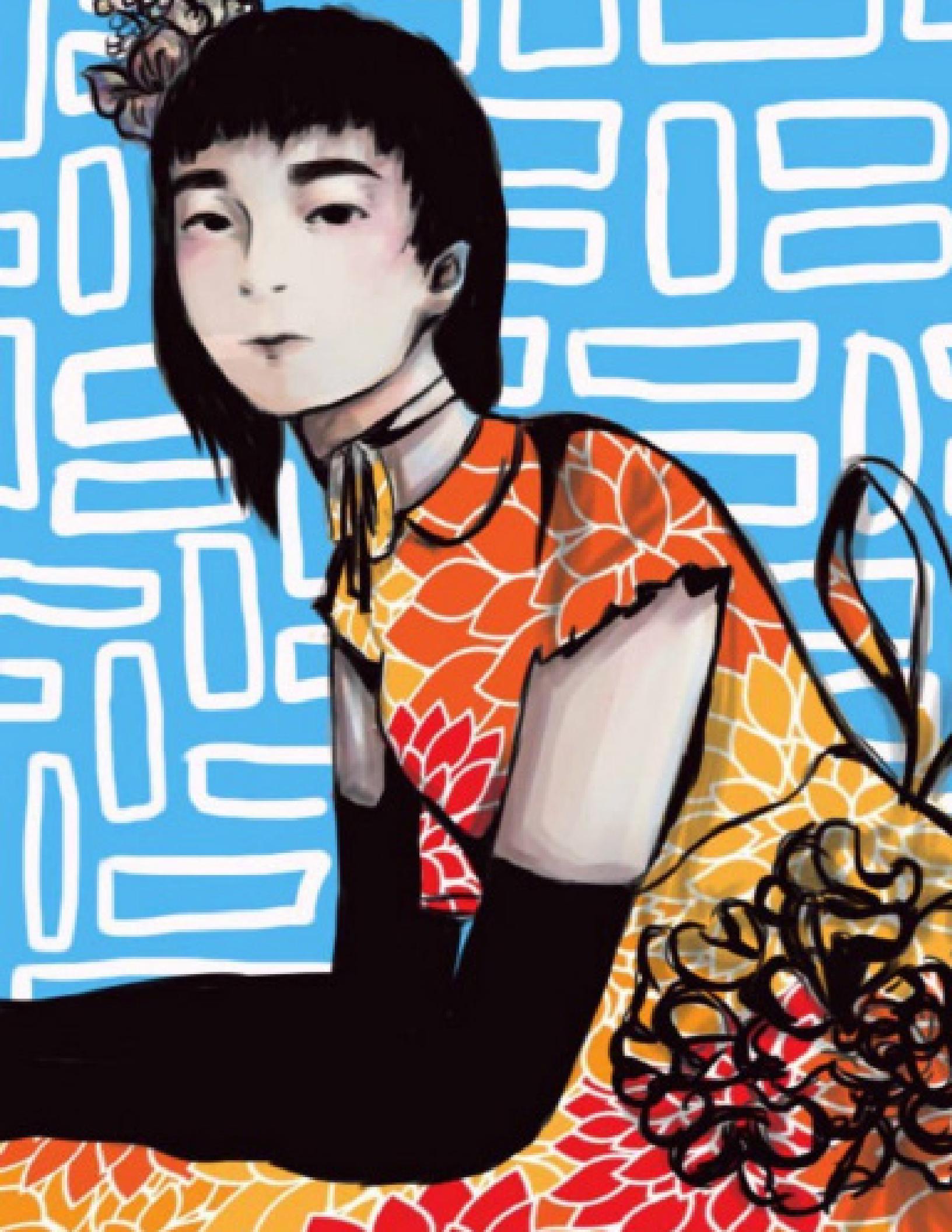
photograph by Abigail Clemente



Celia Bui Le (Columbia College '22) is a first-year student initially from Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) but who immigrated to Mississippi. She is interested in linguistics and is an avid painter. Celia's art works are her form of expressing her identity, as a queer and Asian woman. After moving to Mississippi, she felt she experienced much more homogeneity here in comparison to Saigon. Through painting, she has found a way to exercise her individuality and creativity.

on left: painting of "Trang" by Celia Bui Le





ພມວັກຄຸນ

by Claire Nanthayapirom

Trigger Warning: The following op-ed contains information about sexual assault, and/or violence which may be triggering to survivors.

It's not okay for a man to rape. Unless he's drop-dead gorgeous, angsty and appears every night at 8pm sharp, right? Yossinee Nanakorn, a Thai producer, certainly thinks so. She told the Bangkok Post, "If it helps drive the story, then we keep it."

For there to be such a supply of these rape scenes disguised as love scenes, there has to be a demand. And there is. This demand is concerning, but more alarming is its fuel: the silent justification of rape. Why? Because justification of rape begets victim-blaming, which robs Thai society, as a whole, of agency.

One monumental cause in the justification of rape lies within Thai language: It absolves the perpetrator and blames the victim. Semantically, Thai language is complicit in the justification of sexual violence that occurs on-screen in the country. In Thai, there are two words used to label rape: khom khuen and blum. The former gives an indisputable connotation of crime. The latter, however, enables one to enter into a murky area. Although "blum" does denote forced sex, shockingly, the connotations of this word are not as harsh as that of "khom khuen."

The word "blum" lends itself to conflation with other concepts such as love, lust, and even seduction. This conflation undermines the non-consensual sex that forms the basis of "blum." The danger in such conflation is illustrated by Arunosha Bhanupan, producer of the soap opera The Power of Shadows. She defines the word "blum" in "theatrical terms" as "an act of love," or so she said in an interview. In a discussion of a rape scene on her show — one that has run for years and is known for such scenes — she calls the act "blum" instead of "khom khuen." She views the act as "not rape [because] it was more romantic [and] they were in love." In this way, the use of the word "blum" provides the opportunity for absolving the perpetrator and blaming the victim.

Bhanupan's definition of "blum" leads to the not-so-surprising fact that women are the first to have their agency removed by victim-blaming. More specifically, they lose their "good-girl" personas and, thus, their credibility on these shows. Either submissiveness or purity is often evoked as a factor that leads to her rape because she cannot initiate sexual contact without shattering her sweet image. Conversely, the ubiquitous "whore" on each show has also had her agency removed for common reasons such as her malicious attitude, promiscuity, or clothing. She is portrayed as sexually confident and dressed to match the part in revealing clothes. In both binaries, the inherent factors defining each woman robs them of the ability to self-advocate when their rapes are justified and they are blamed.

Unfortunately, the lack of female power goes beyond the self. When women are perceived as one of two binaries and stripped of the ability to self-advocate, female solidarity comes under threat.

When women are seen as simply one of two possible types, they become a cookie-cutter version of a certain trope. They are stripped of the ability to self-advocate because they lose the right to define who they are. Thus, when the female population is divided in this way, female solidarity comes under threat.

As a woman, I have witnessed the tension between women who feel they have been forced into a role. We often fail to empathize with our sisters and become overly critical of our own gender. To some, this might not seem like such an urgent problem, but to me, it's a constant reinforcement of a tension that may prevent us from showing solidarity in important situations such as rape, teen pregnancy, and prostitution.

Although it seems as though women are the only gender that are robbed of power through victim blaming, I believe men also experience a loss. This loss was publicly revealed by none other than Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha in September 2014. In response to the notorious murder of Briton Hannah Witheridge, he stated: "Tourists think that [they] can put on their bikinis and go anywhere they want. I ask, can you get away with wearing bikinis in Thailand?" In a later statement, he apologized, saying that he "just wanted to warn tourists that we have different traditions and they have to stay on their toes."

Therein lies an interesting irony in the prime minister's statement. Men seem to lack the power to control their unparalleled sexual needs. It is not necessarily "bikinis" or revealing clothes that rob men of their senses, but a subscription to victim-blaming. In order to prevent culpability, men are deemed incapable of controlling their sexual urges. In this chain of logic, men become reduced to beings that cannot fight a primal urge. The wider societal implication is men receiving the message that they are not expected to uphold responsibility because their lack of control over lust is anticipated and excused. In this way, I wonder if we are setting our Thai men up to fail.

In any discussion of sexuality in Thai media, especially Thai soap operas, I am very aware of our conservative culture. I accept that certain people are not comfortable with overt displays of sexuality, especially those that include women who do not conform to Thai values. What I cannot accept, however, is them being comfortable with depictions of sexual assault illustrated as a form of love as if this is the only form of union that can function under our conservative culture, because it certainly is not. Despite the endless number of rape scenes, I have seen portrayals of covert consensual interactions that were not preceded with sexual harassment. Ultimately, whether or not we choose to display interactions as consensual is the important question.

As a kid, I was told not to watch "sex" scenes because "I was too young." But I am older now, and I fear that age has not made "sex" scenes in Thai soap operas any more acceptable than they were 10 years ago. We cannot continue to have such low expectations of men, women, and ourselves. We need to reject justified rape of all women, regardless of how the woman in questions defines or expresses her sexuality. We need to do this in order to reinstate female power and solidarity. We need to reject justified rape by men to reinstate their responsibility for their actions. Because when we reject the justification of rape, we reclaim our ability to define Thai culture and not let victim-blaming define us.

THE RELINQUISHMENT OF THE YELLOW MYXO CELL

by Nguyen Túy Đoan Trang

Any moment now, the fate of thousands of *Myxococcus xanthus* cells will be determined by my little hands in blue surgical gloves as I begin to mercilessly starve them in order to observe their behavior. Myxo as we like to say in the lab, is a gram-negative bacteria that exhibits an exquisite characteristic of aggregating into fruiting bodies when they are starved, allowing sporulation to happen. The process of sporulation is rather cynical as only a few cells in thousands of cells survive and those who do not, in a sacrificial way, burst to give whatever remaining nutrients they have to the few cells that will survive. It is an evolutionary advantage of ensuring that the species will survive even if it means the death of most of the cells. As I trudged down the dimly lit hallways after I finished my lab work, I pondered about this seemingly sadistic predicament that I'd placed the cells in. Reaching the end of the corridor, I walked out into the snowy evening of Syracuse and saw my mom waiting in the car, my melodramatic approach regarding the fate of the cells became eerily reminiscent of the fate of my parents and the fate of my own.

"Four times eight is—" "Thirty-two!" This was our nightly routine. I would lay by my mother under the mesh mosquito net as she recited the multiplication table and I would eagerly reply until I drifted off to the humid night of Vietnam. At a young age, I had a fiery ardor for enlightenment as my parents carefully cultivated my attitude towards learning through their irrepressible love. The quest for my knowledge was not without the expense of my parents as they scrambled in the Vietnamese society to give their daughter all possible opportunities. However, as my dad has told me, he knew that it was not enough and eventually, my thirst would not be quenched. That was when my parents took the leap.

The move from Vietnam to the United States in 2007 marked the death of my parents' livelihood as the sunny weather was replaced by harsh winters, familiarity by isolation. Though I was only six, I understood my parents' sacrifices and crafted a subconscious mindset of achieving greatness. This mindset aided me in the annihilation of all things that blocked my end goal of repaying my parents' love. However, it soon became more than just the obliteration of menial things like language barriers, but things like my true identity. I rejected parts of me that I'd garnered from the American society where I'd spent half of my life. Despite the gradual manifestation of my misery, I hid behind my alter ego: a diligent first generation immigrant fulfilling her family's American dream. My unhappiness was a justified sacrifice that was humble compared to my parents' sacrifices. With my unhappiness growing, my resentment towards my parents grew and I began to question my parents' sacrifice, the very ideal I'd lived by my whole life.

Relinquishments are multifaceted yet more often than not they are reduced down to a single facet of glorification. My parents did not voluntarily choose to sacrifice themselves but were placed in a predicament where they had to relinquish in order for their children to succeed. Though it took me longer than it should have, I now know that the ultimate sacrifice I must make to repay my parents' love is to not make sacrifices at all. I must fulfill my desire for knowledge instead of depriving myself through the abstract construction of sacrifice. Unlike my parents, I have a choice and I must seize it. I have enriched my mind throughout these years and will continue to do so. With the clarity of my purpose, I will carry on the efforts of my parents, just like how the very few myxo will carry on the efforts of those that died for it.

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photograph by Wan Yee Lee

Grandfather Died Today

by Jing Hwan Khoo

Grandfather died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I couldn't be sure.

I sat by the front door of grandma's house, a steel basin of blazing fire in front of me. One by one, I dropped pieces of joss paper into the fire. The front door was open. From time to time, my relatives filed in in fours or fives.

The joss paper was supposed to be for my grandfather. It was believed to be the currency of the afterlife. There was also a pile of paper items in the front yard: a three-story paper bungalow the height of an average person, two paper dolls, a paper mini-BMW, a few sets of paper clothes and even a paper iPhone. At some point, all these would be burnt as offerings to grandfather. It was believed that he would receive them in the afterlife. Even the Buddhist afterlife was a consumerist one.

Grandfather had been sick for quite a few months. He got one of the classics—lung cancer—two years after he quit smoking, no less. But then again, he had been smoking for almost sixty years so it shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone. There was nothing we could do. At the age of 73, he was too old and frail for a surgery. The anesthesia would've, to quote my cousin, "put him to sleep forever." So we watched him shrivel. His pot belly caved in. His limbs dried up like twigs. We all watched as he slowly died. Except for grandmother. The adults decided not to tell her. They thought it best to spare her the months of agonizing wait for the eventual tragedy. The price, of course, was the heartbreak to wake up one morning and see your husband for over fifty years dead. But then again, she must've known. With grandfather bedridden and weak, it was impossible not to notice.

The doctor had given my mother a tip: Place a steel spoon under my grandfather's nose, and if the spoon fogged up, then he was still breathing. That morning, there was no fog, my mother told me.

My mind had simply registered that information like I registered any other bad news about grandfather. It's getting worse, was what I had thought. But I didn't realize that it was so bad it couldn't have gotten any worse. My mind had simply refused to make the connection that the absence of breathing meant death. It wasn't until two hours later that it dawned on me, when we went to my grandfather's house.

That slab of a wooden coffin in the living room was hard to miss.

It sat in the middle of the living room, facing the open front door towards the street. As per custom, the funeral would be held for seven days. The front door would be left open. All the lights in the house would be kept on. People would take turns keeping vigil over the funeral. A tent had been set up in the front yard over a few tables and dozens of chairs laid out à la restaurant. A caterer had set up her pots and pans in the backyard. It would be her task for the rest of the week to feed all the visitors who came to pay their last respects.

The coffin was elevated on a rack and surrounded by incense, offerings and flowers. Right behind the coffin, looking over it, was the altar of the deity Guan Gong. The coffin's lid was on, but on the lid was a small hatch that was left open. Within it laid a face. Eyes closed, serene. A sharp nose. A jutting chin. High cheekbones. A bald, egg-shaped head. Growing up, I had always thought that my grandfather looked like Professor X on TV.

Two days before my grandfather passed away, my cousin and I visited him. It was the single day when he looked the most healthy. His face looked less like a wax replica. He ate more than half of a bowl of porridge. Out of nowhere, he started telling us his life working in a factory as a kid. He told us about his job folding cardboard into boxes, about how he had later turned to selling drinks, then to rearing livestock, how he met my grandmother, how people then survived on sweet potatoes and nothing else, and how he once hid in a drain to escape Japanese soldiers.

But now, the consciousness that once hosted these memories was gone. That person was gone. Within the coffin laid a body, but it was no one's body in particular. The title 'grandfather' now only referred to an absence. The man in the coffin was no longer my grandfather. He was no longer the man who rolled his own cigarettes, blasted Hokkien songs on his radio, roamed the town on his old rickety bike, filled the fridge with ingredients for hot pot during Chinese New Year, and called me Pan instead of Hwan because he was missing all his teeth. Now, he was nothing, a negation that any talk about him could not avoid. From today onwards, he existed only by his absence.

The coffin was the center of the universe for the week. The living room, flanked by the bedrooms and the kitchen, was usually wide and open. The couch, the coffee table and the TV took up only half of it. The other half was where people hung out and where kids played tag. But now, that other half was occupied by a gigantic block of wood. To navigate around the house, one always had to go around it. To be anywhere in the room was to see it in the periphery of one's vision. To do anything was to see it in the periphery of one's thoughts. Everything we did, ate, or said came with a tinge of death.

The first time somebody around me actually died was when my best friend lost his father. We were nine years old. His father had had a heart attack, which led to a car accident. I didn't know which one killed him, but it didn't really matter. We knew his father. He was a good man. The kind of man that makes people go, "He was a good man." Just a week before that, a few of us had been over at his house, playing his Playstation 1 and eating his mother's soybean pudding. His father had bombarded us with jokes that had us rolling on the floor. He was an insurance agent, but there are some things you can never insure against.

The news found us in our math class. By then, he'd left. For the rest of the class, fractions and decimals seemed like the most trivial of things in the world. Everyone was quiet. People cried. I don't remember if I did. I do remember how I recovered from the experience the next day. "So a man died," I told myself. "It's going to happen to the rest of us eventually."

Before his father's, death was only a hypothetical. Death was only the what-if. Everyone dies; that includes actual people that I talk to, I realized. I often found myself wondering how that would happen. How will death come about for the people I love the most? How will it come about for me?

Death is the only truly democratic institution. Death will come at the end of the line for everyone, but until then, in the meantime, there are things to do. Schools to go to, jobs to be done, people to hate. Death is always at the furthest horizon. *I know it will happen to me one day, but today is not the day.* Today is never the day.

Death is always only a future possibility. One never directly encounters one's own death. The Epicurean formulation tells us that death is nothing to us. When one is alive, death is absent; when death is present, one is already absent. Death, the impossibility of all possibilities, is also the only possibility that will never ever be actualized. It can only be encountered through the passing away of others.

Consequently, the way we experience death is not by a heart attack nor a freak accident that happen to ourselves. One only ever experiences death indirectly by the passing away of others. Death is a funeral to attend, a gathering of relatives and friends. Death is the caterer serving greasy chow mein to people, the trivial conversations as people stick around long enough so that they don't appear irreverent by leaving too early, and the peanuts people chew on absent-mindedly when there's nobody to talk to. Death is a coffin to walk around when you have to go make pee-pee in the bathroom.

"Look away! Quick!" My mother would say when we rounded a corner and a white tent came into view. It was supposed to be bad luck to lay eyes on a funeral, especially for young people. I suppose I could look away, although not without a quick peek. But I rarely caught anything. Just a blur of whites and a heightened jolt of adrenaline at having broken a rule. *It's just superstition. Nothing's gonna happen.* But there was always that exhilarating possibility. *What if something does?*

Somehow, the bad luck didn't matter anymore when it was your grandfather who died (though in such a situation, one would say one is already having quite a bad luck). Everyone was here. Relatives that I only saw once a year, relatives that I'd never seen, cousins that I only got to play with during the Chinese New Year. No one was crying their heart out like the people on TV. Indeed, the notable lack of tears and snot came as a surprise for me.

Instead, people were talking about schools and jobs and relationships. It was almost as if grandfather wasn't dead, he just didn't exist in the first place. What was in the coffin was not just a dead husband, a dead father, a dead friend or a dead grandfather. Whatever one called this thing in the coffin, it was simultaneously the not-me. Not yet. My turn will come. But not yet. But death will always only remain that. A not-yet. It will eventually happen to me, but let's not talk about that yet. It's a taboo; it's of bad taste; it's disrespectful. Let's talk about that bitch across the street instead, or the principal who embezzled funds from the school, or the girl that the steel tycoon's son just wedded. Eventually, we'll all be dead and these won't matter anyway but let's not talk about that now. Let's forget that there's a dead man in the house.

A motivational speaker once had us go through this cheesy exercise in school. On a piece of paper, draw what you wanted your gravestone to look like and to say when you die. Lacking any artistic talent whatsoever and being just a little rebellious, I handled the task with my own cheese. On my paper, I drew only one horizontal line. A non-existent gravestone. An empty plot of land. The implication of the question is clear. We do not actually fear death. In fact, people seemed to be planning it really well. What we fear is the anxiety that the knowledge of death brings about. The scariest thing about death is not that it will happen, but that it might happen before one ever does anything substantial with one's life.

"Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance," Sartre wrote.

The tragedy of existence is not simply death; it is that we exist out of contingency in a world that cannot promise anything but suffering, and behind all these there is no guarantee of meaning in our lives.

If it seems like we have made any progress with this monologue on death, this progress is an illusion. I am nowhere closer to understanding death than when I started writing this. But it might be plausible for one to say that the hope is not to strip death naked of its phenomenological mysteriousness, but to understand how to live in the face of it.





photograph by Wan Yii Lee





by Neil Pedreira





KNOWING

by Milaine Thia

You need to know this: A man made a Very Serious Complaint the other day. He was at Lake Wichita, and he saw a group of people who had dressed themselves up as terrorists having some kind of celebration with a defaced American flag.

“They’re all in Muslim garb,” he whispered into the phone. “It’s ISIS, you know? I can see the Stars and Stripes being waved around like—like some kind of challenge, they took out all the stars and put in this Muslim iconography. It looks like some kind of crescent moon and this pointy star. I don’t know what sick point they’re trying to make but I know they’re planning something. They want to convert all of us and take over the United States of America and rape all our women and you need to come and stop them now and STOP THEM –”

Jokes.

He didn’t actually say that.

(At least, I would hope not.)

But what you need to know is that the FBI brought in a Malaysian man for questioning because of this Very Serious Complaint about Muslim celebration and defaced American flags.

I imagine the conversation going like this: There is a dimly lit room, with a two-way mirror on one wall. A brown man sits in a chair while two white male (because you know they are men) agents circle him like sharks.

“Did you, or did you not, deface the American flag, Mr. Moo-neer?” The one with a moustache (because you know one of them has a moustache) asks. You must imagine some kind of good cop/bad cop situation happening here.

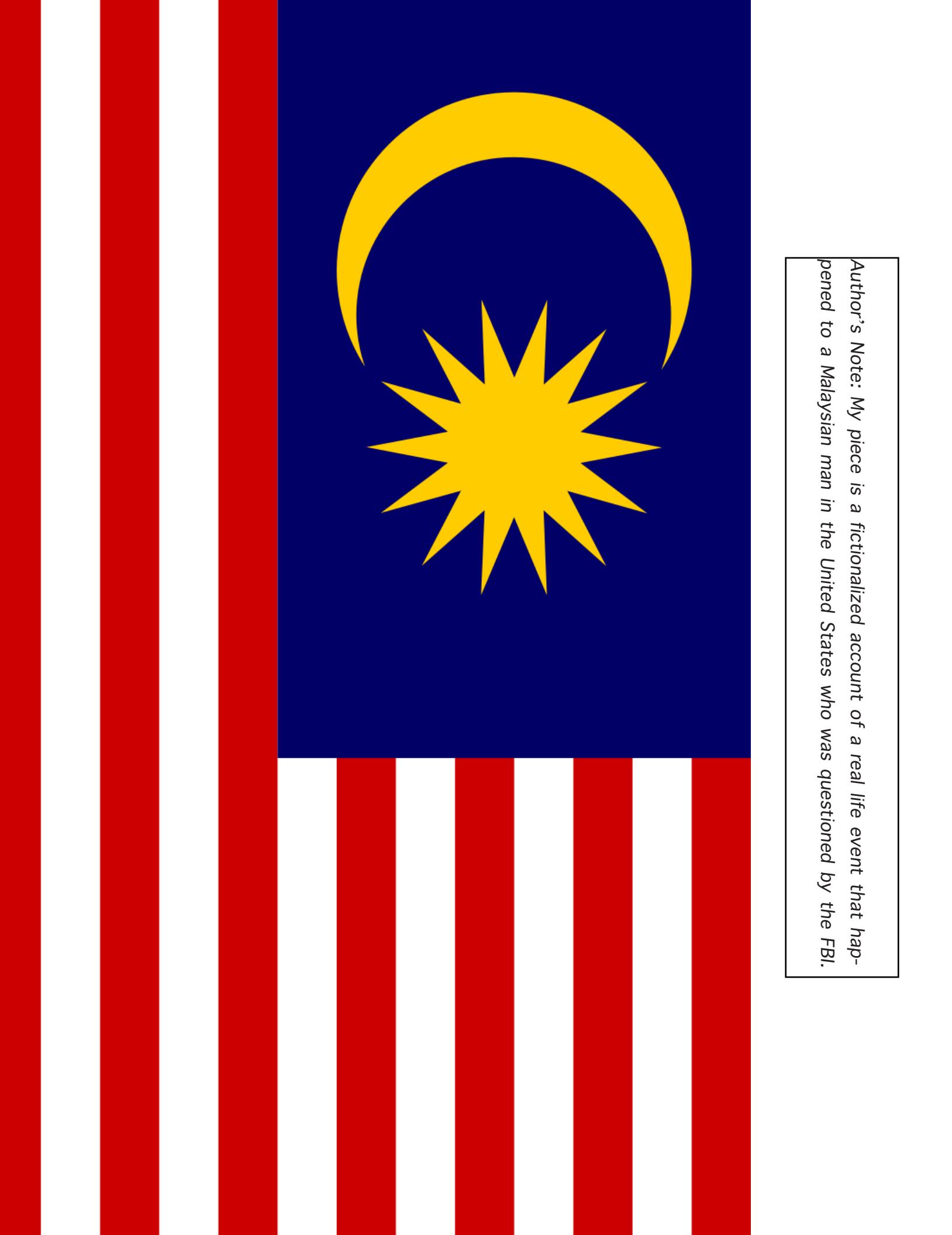
“Of course not!” I see my countryman saying. His name is Munir. He’s probably thinking, I’m fucked.

“How do you explain this?!?!?”

If this was a movie, there would be some kind of ominous background music, and the agents would throw a stack of photos into his face. They’re probably all of Munir looking happy, carrying a red, white, and blue flag—maybe a shot of him holding the Quran for dramatic effect.

“Um. That’s my country’s flag,” Munir says, cursing the day he decided to come to America. “It’s not the American flag. It’s the Malaysian flag. They just... Look alike, I guess. We were celebrating the end of Ramadan. I apologize if our happiness looked like terrorism.”

In case you were wondering, this is what the Malaysian flag looks like. Our bad. Sorry we were copycats, America. We’re really, really sorry.



Author's Note: My piece is a fictionalized account of a real life event that happened to a Malaysian man in the United States who was questioned by the FBI.

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