

ROHAN AND JUI LIAT

1. Kuala Lumpur

It starts with soup:

A cauldron compounded of

*Dongquai* and red jujube

Which she drinks once a month

A tonic for her female wiles.

Fueled by *Tongkat Ali*

He dreams of flying

A wound catapult sailing through the air:

The cruise of a joyous crescendo,

The coast of an inevitable crash: Nature loading its dice.

*“Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!”*

Three times the call is issued;

Three times echoed multitudinously.

Malay, Chinese, Indian

A triangle of imported interests.

Gyring to coalescence:

In the year Nineteen Hundred and Fifty-Seven,

(At the tail end of the Baby Boom)

That Thirty First Day of August,

The birth of a nation, in the middle,

Splitting those of Rohan and Jui Liat: June/Dec.

(His Gemini to her Sagittarius, the Virgin between them.)

The first time ever they lay eyes on each other,

Is the night a city goes amuck.

That fateful 13<sup>th</sup> of May, 'Sixty-Nine,

The outbreak of race riots.

Is not twelve a coming-of-age? A feast of fires?

She was the girl who came to do her homework and stayed to play.

Jui Liat, the school-friend of his sister, Aziza.

Also the student of his father, the *Munshi*.

A Chow Kit girl in Kampung Baru

In the throng of the mob brewing at the house of a big shot.

She had had to be concealed by the family. Stayed overnight.

How, at the break of dawn, he'd had to walk her to Campbell Road

To a portico where, shaded by a pillar, with Rohan keeping watch,

Behind his back, Jui Liat lifted her arms in a strip tease predicated on the shedding of *baju* and *sarung*  
(borrowed from his sib)

To be revealed in the tie-dye blouse and bell-bottoms of her own creation.

Once, for the briefest second, glances are crossed

At the Odeon Theatre on School Concession Day;

Romeo and Juliet on the big screen,

Shakespeare and on the Eng Lit syllabus, making it a must- see for all Secondary schoolboys and girls,

Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting, *alamak*, so very cool.

The next time Fate threw them together

Was in the umbrous vales of the Pantai campus, University of Malaya.

Assigned, for Orientation, to the same Residential College, the Fifth,

Jui Liat and Rohan sitting together in the cafeteria

Splitting a conspiratorial cigarette.

She rises to the Economics Faculty,

(Whereat much is made of the NEP, New Economic Policy.)

He is a Science super-freshie.

Hand to hand in palmer's kiss, late nights in the Main Library together, they study.

Flirting outrageously to stay within the bounds of friendship.

Love is *halal* lunching on fishballs sold by the *yong tau fu* man from the back of a motorcycle.

Unwilling to trust the polar opposite, each,

It comes to Nothing.

She fence-sits. Hems and haws. What good could come of asking for it?

About her, delicately, he smells the pork. It keeps him at bay.

So close, yet so far.

One night, on the verge of finals fever,

(The night at the Paramount, Saturday Night Fever playing, John Travolta strutting on the disco floor,  
*aiya*, those hips, those lips, so, so very hot)

Rohan and Jui Liat kissing in the dark. Making out in the cosmic ut.

The morning- after, falling over each other with unspoken apology.

The divide is so great they may as well not be in the same Land.

The day is hot, the caplets abroad. The night is young, the Moon in its full Monty.

The year of work following graduation

Is honed to the mutual tending of a scholarship application.

He pulls off the incredible: a Rhodes on the heels of his First Class Honours.

She inveigles a grant to Hawaii.

Paths divergent, they become dead to each other.

## 2. NEW YORK

“Rohan ...”

“Jui Liat...”

“What in heaven’s name....”

“...are you doing here at the Consulate?”

Into each other’s arms, they swoon: cocooned.

How is it possible?

That fey synchronicity of old

Falling, just like that, into groove.

The two of them getting a new passport concurrently,

How is it conceivable?

And she there only for two weeks, how freaky.

Primarily to attend her daughter’s graduation from Sarah Lawrence,

At the same time profiting from the timing to benefit from the services of a consulate.

In highland Guatemala, she lives, on the shores of magical, mystical Lake Atitlan.

Foodie, clean-eater, artist, practitioner of the healing arts, seer, crone,

A yogi on MWF, Qigong on Tues, Bhajans at New Moon and Full.

He takes her to *Muafakat*,

This hip new restaurant in the East Village

That he just happens to own.

Undulating her lips around the quadra-syllable --

Suggestive, erotic –

She is disarmed.

Consensus is, well, consensual.

*Muafakat* is a song playing in her head in all its multitudinous variations.

It starts with soup:

All of it umami.

Whether

Bitter-sweet or hot and sour;

Bone broth chock full of glutamine,

Extract of Tongkat Ali, (Longjack)

Decoctions of dongquai (*angelica sinensis*) and red jujube (*zizyphus jujuba*) slow-simmered in a double vessel,

Fortified with shitake or miso,

The gold of turmeric its antibacterial seal,

Garlic twinned with star anise in a braise of soysauce,

Coconut milk laced with screwpine (embraced by chia)

*Sambals* redolent with shrimp paste,

Anti-oxidant, detoxifying, carotenoid, tonic , aphrodisiac: alchemical all.

Triggering the gates that flood the system: serotonin chased with dopamine.

Deadly infallible.

Indefatigable,

A primal brew deft with budding promise.

What's in a name?

Everything.

## GLOSSARY (by order of appearance)

ROHAN: translates from the Sanskrit as Ascendant; from the Arabic as Spirit. I think of Rohan as a Chthonic/Vegetative Spirit springing from the matriarchal tradition.

JUI LIAT: translates from the Fujianese as Fortune in Staying. I think of Jui Liat as representing Will, she comes from a people known for frugality and industry.

AMOK: from the Malay language, defined in Wikipedia as "an episode of sudden mass assault against people or objects usually by a single individual following a period of brooding that has traditionally been regarded as occurring especially in Malay culture but is now increasingly viewed as psychopathological behavior occurring worldwide in numerous countries and cultures."

AZIZA: (Arabic) beloved, precious

MUNSHI: An allusion to the fact that Rohan's father is of Indian Muslim descent. Rohan's mother, on the other hand, is undoubtedly Malay; that accounts for his Malaysian citizenship despite his birth in June, before Merdeka. (Jui Liat, born after Merdeka, is an automatic citizen.)

DONGQUAI (ANGELICA SINENSIS): The dried root is used in Chinese traditional medicine for women's health. It has a pungent, pervasive and unmistakable aroma, particularly when it is being brewed. The Chinese describe dongquai as having a "metallic" taste (qin in Mandarin, kam in Cantonese) which has to do with its umami factor.

RED JUJUBE (Zizyphus jujuba): said to alleviate stress; also known for its anti-fungal, anti-bacterial, anti-ulcer, anti-inflammatory, and sedation properties.

TONGKAT ALI (EURYCOMA LONGIFOLIA): A shrub native to Malaysia and Indonesia, known as Longjack in the USA. Its name is synonymous with its efficacy as an aphrodisiac for the male. Tongkat translates as Walking Stick. Also known for its properties as anti-malarial, anti-diabetic, anti-microbial, anti-pyretic.

31<sup>st</sup> AUGUST, 1957: Malaya (comprising 11 States in the Malay Peninsula) got its independence from Great Britain. As the Union Jack was lowered, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the new Prime Minister of the Country, led a crowd in front of the Padang (in what is now known as Dataran Merdeka, or Independence Square) in three cries of "Merdeka," a prelude to the raising of the new flag of the Federation of Malaya. In September 1963, Malaya became Malaysia with the inclusion of the territories of Sabah (formerly British North Borneo) and Sarawak, as well as Singapore. Short of two years later, Singapore withdrew from the Federation.

13<sup>th</sup> MAY, 1969: On this date, sectarian violence broke out in Kuala Lumpur two days after the General Election of 1969. There were additional skirmishes, the result of which was the declaration of a State of



Emergency and the suspension of Parliament. From 1969-1971, the country was run by decree from the National Operations Council, led by the new Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak (and father of the present Prime Minister.)

May 13<sup>th</sup> is significant in that it resulted in a change in government policy that favored the Malays, designated as “bumiputras” (princes/sons of the soil), by the same token creating also a class of non-Bumiputras.

CHOW KIT ROAD, KAMPUNG BARU, CAMPBELL STREET: Chow Kit Road, a predominantly Chinese quarter, was the epicenter of the first riots, given its proximity to Kampung Baru, a predominantly Malay area where a mob had gathered at the house of the then Chief Minister of Selangor. Bridging the two sectors was Campbell Street (now renamed Jalan Dang Wangi), which was at the time a sparsely developed street mostly known for its old time, small commercial houses. Campbell Street represented a buffer zone between the first two.

UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA: also known as the Pantai campus. The Faculty of Economics had a staircase of many steps separating the main lecture theatres from the offices. Rohan, a super-freshie gaining admission into second year Science, graduates at the same time as Jui Liat, on a three-year degree course.

THE YONG TAU FU MAN: There was a *yong tau fu* (stuffed tofu) man who sold his wares from the back of a motorbike at the University of Malaya. From that humble start, this Chinese man got the concession for the Engineering Faculty (known to be heavily Chinese dominated). With the implementation of the New Economic Policy, he was disqualified. For a while, he went back to selling *yong tau fu* from his motorcycle. Then the Malay concessionaire of the Economics Faculty cafeteria, hard pressed to handle all that business, invited the *yong tau fu* man to sub-let part of the space. This Chinese man, from the beginning, served HALAL (according to Moslem dietary law) food.

MUAFAKAT (MOO-AH-FAA-KAAT): from the Arabic, meaning Consensus. Malay Culture places great value on the principle of Consensus, implicit to which is talk and consultation.

SHITAKE MUSHROOM: Known for its immune boosting qualities, may help fight cancer, also a cholesterol inhibitor, the dried form is filled with vitamins and minerals. Source of umami flavor.

MISO: soybean fermented with salt and a fungus. Full of vitamins and minerals, good source of umami. The Chinese analogue is doujiang.

TURMERIC(CURCUMA LONGA): Has bioactive compounds (chief of which is curcumin) with powerful medicinal benefits. Anti-inflammatory, increases BDNF (Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor), lowers risk of heart disease, prevents and may treat cancer, is good against Alzheimer, arthritis and depression, also delays aging.

GARLIC : Active ingredient Allicin. Combats sickness, such as common cold. Lowers blood pressure, improves cholesterol levels, has potent anti-oxidants, may help prevent Alzheimer and dementia, is good for detoxification of heavy metals, boosts athletic performance, improves bone health, promotes

longevity.

STAR ANISE(*Illicium Verum*): Named for its 8-point star shaped seed pod and the flavor. Anti-oxidant, anti-bacterial, antifungal, antiviral. Used to alleviate premenstrual syndrome. Said to boost libido. Carminative (aids digestion)

COCONUT MILK: Antibacterial, antifungal, antiviral. Improves heart health by lowering blood pressure and cholesterol. Builds muscle and helps lose weight, provides electrolytes, prevents fatigue, relieves constipation, helpful for controlling diabetes.

SCREWPINE (*PANDANUS*): For lowering blood pressure, Eliminating skin fungus, eliminate dandruff, good for hair loss, to fortify nervous weakness, for relieving rheumatism, for pain relief. Is an aromatic (has a lot of essential oils) and appetite stimulant . Often prescribed for premature ejaculation or impotence in man.

CHIA (*SALVIA HISPANICA*): Excellent source of fibre, antioxidants, calcium, proteins and plant-based Omega 3 Fatty Acids

SAMBAL: A spicy condiment traditionally made in a mortar and pestle by pounding chilies with a variety of secondary ingredients such as garlic, ginger, scallions, palm sugar, lime (often calamansi – *Citrofortunella microcarpa*) juice, shrimp paste, fish sauce. Chilies, with their active ingredient capsaicin, is high in Vitamin C, B6, K1, potassium, copper, antioxidant carotenoids. Eating sambal raises core temperature, inducing sweating: a very useful attribute in the humid tropics. The most popular Sambal in Malaysia is Sambal Belachan.

SHRIMP PASTE (Belachan): Made from salted krill left to ferment to mush, which is then sun-dried and cut into rectangular blocks. Belachan is full of MK-7 vitamin K-2 producing bacterium that prevent dental erosion and hardens softened enamel caused by acidic food. Belachan brings the benefit of thousands and thousands of mineral and chitosan-rich shrimp shells degraded for your full absorption. Shrimp is good for bone and brain health, for weight management and lowered risk of cardiovascular disease. It can bring relief from menstrual pain and promote anti-aging. Shrimp is a high-benefit option for increasing overall health.

Author's Statement:

I wanted to write a Malaysian poem.

"It starts with soup..."

This idea that we all started in the same primal soup

Born from the One Mother

So we're really all the same.

To be Malaysian

Is to know food

Intimately, multi-culturally, cross-fertilized,

Hybridized:

Oral fixation in its maximum expression.

In the East Village of the Big Apple,

Is a "Lucky Peach"

By name of Momofuku:

Chosen in no small part for its association with Motherf\*cker.

One evening, eating there, hearing the story...

"Muafakat" popped into my mind.

"Rohan" and "Jui Liat" came later.

In my twenties, I knew a girl by the name,

Whom, after I had called her "Juliet" many times,

One day corrected me.

I was born of that effervescent of year

Of 'Fifty-Seven.

Making the trauma of May 13<sup>th</sup>

Our coming-of-age.

The loss of innocence,

The expulsion from the Tribe.

The ones on Whom

Kismet, Karma, Destiny,

Call it what you will,

Played a trick.

A moment of madness

Spawned a

Declaration of Emergency,

The suspension of Parliament;

Replaced by the NOC (National Operations Council)

That Spawned a New Economic Policy.

The knee-jerk reaction to a dark moment of the reptilian brain:

The drawing of lines.

The enshrinement of the Negative

Entrapping us to dwell cyclical in those depths.

Ergo:

Instead of Talk:

(Who's right, who's wrong,

Your way, my way),

Let's Make Multicultural.

Chakras all lined up

Lizard, Mammalian, Neocortical,

In a swirl of Ascencion.

Drink soup and

Make Muafakat.

"In New York City, there is a rather successful hip restaurant called Momofuku.

"Momofuku" means Lucky Peach but the restaurant lore has it that the owner also picked it for its closeness to Motherf\*cker. When I heard the story, post a visit to said restaurant, I heard myself thinking, "I know a word just like that." And "Muafakat" popped into my head.

"I am privileged to be in that cohort of people born in 1957. Looking back to the May 13th incident, I see it as the loss of innocence. The hardening of lines. The New Economic Policy and the Rukunegara were essentially knee-jerk reactions to what was essentially an extreme act of polarization. This had the long-term effect of an enshrinement of the negative. The Sedition Act criminalized talking. As a result ever since, we've been reeling from knee-jerk reaction to severe over-correction ever since. The present state of affairs is the legacy of drawing lines and fitting people on either one side or the other.

"Muafakat is based on talk and consensus. That's what we need to do as Malaysians. Consensus recognizes the legitimacy of the other side and an agreement to meet in the middle. Consensus comes through a process of positive communication, of support and reinforcement.

"Me, I want some of that soup from Muafakat."

so

WRITER'S STATEMENT:

Malaysian – that meant food.

Rohan and Jui Liat:

Will and Spirit United in Heart. Rohan is Will, Jui Liat is spirit.

10 Fortune Cookie Sayings

Given that we're in the same soup together, let's accept each other. Forget the past, acknowledge the present, create the future.

How can it change if you don't say anything?