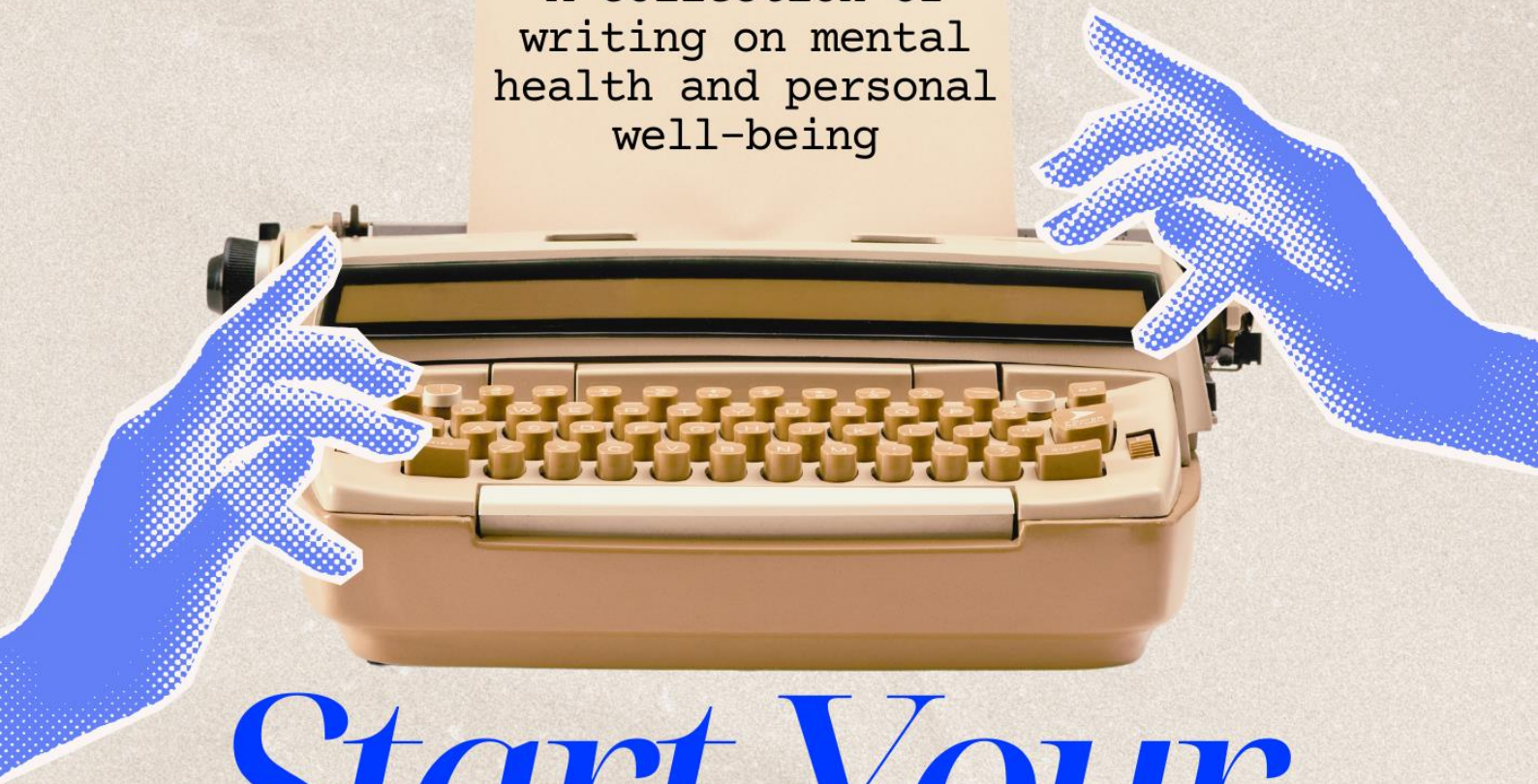


# WRITING THERAPY

A collection of  
writing on mental  
health and personal  
well-being



## *Start Your First Chapter*

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### **Editor's Note**

*Develop some writing workshops.* That was my first order of business when I joined the National Library Board's literary arts team. And so I did. I decided on the topic of "mental health and personal well-being", and engaged author [Mahita Vas](#) to hold a three-session writing programme for beginners. In the sessions, participants learnt about narrative therapy, and how to write their own memoirs by mapping their memories and structuring story arcs. Thanks to [@annaonni](#) for capturing such beautiful visual notes of our workshop sessions. You can view them at the back of the zine.

*Everyone has a story to tell*, right? Unbeknownst to me, I would come to be surprised at the truth of this maxim over the next few weeks. For three hours, three Sundays in a row in July 2024, I observed and felt a kind of magic transpire. Here were 26 adults, strangers to one another, with busy schedules, showing up week after week to do something a little scary and quite vulnerable. I decided that their stories needed to be shared. This zine that you now behold onscreen is the product of their cumulative efforts. The images are digital and physical collages they created as a visual accompaniment to their words. Some works are recollections, others current thoughts and feelings. Some funny, some sad. All are true, in the sense that they are real and reflect the selves of the writers.

I hope you, dear reader, will enjoy these stories as much as I did. To the writers of these stories: I luxuriated in your company and warm regard. You're truly a special bunch and I loved getting to know you. Now that you've started your first chapter, keep writing, and be surprised at the places you'll go! I am ever in your corner.

*Christabella Lim*

**Trigger warning:** as this compendium focuses on the topics of mental health and personal well-being, there is mention of death of a loved one, self-harm, violence, fat shaming, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts. Please read at your own discretion. If you are in a crisis, please call Samaritans of Singapore at 1767 for their 24-hour hotline or reach them at 9151 1767 via WhatsApp  
For their 24-hour CareText.

**Untitled, by Karine**

To me, writing is the deepest, most authentic way of putting across the deepest emotions within my soul. I am grateful for the gift of the pen, and I hope to continue writing for myself and, hopefully, for others too.

I do not recall when it was that my view of my mother shifted in my mind—from a benign, loving, motherly figure to one who repelled, even scared me. It must have been at least a decade ago, for that was when the frightening scars of emotional abuse and volatility started. Before that, the aggressor in the family was my father: alcoholic, frequently drunk and maniacal, always boorish and unlikeable. Back then, my mother was the protector. She would plead, in quiet stifled cries, for my father to stop his tyrannical outbursts. She would whisper to us, “Daddy drank six cans of beer today,” or send us furtive texts in the middle of the night after another one of my father’s drunken stupors, “This is why I want you all to study hard. You cannot rely on your daddy.”

In those days, my mother had no say. She could not fight back or challenge my father. Peace was more important to her; her pride wasn't. It took a series of divine orchestration to change things. My father had been seeing a physician because his liver was becoming severely damaged with all that drinking. Somehow, the doctor had also diagnosed him with bipolar disorder and sent him to the Institute of Mental Health. He was admitted for a week or two. The diagnosis was the life-saving spark we didn't even know we needed. Because with diagnosis, came treatment. My father got prescribed medication—antipsychotics, perhaps—which had an immediate, noticeable effect on him. He was banned from drinking. His mood mellowed overnight. His behaviours were subdued. No longer were there frequent,

angry outbursts of a violent, frightening man; the man himself seemed to become frightened and cower into a shell of a personality. My father changed.

But as my father changed, so, too, did my mother. Looking back, it seemed like my father's health intervention and subsequent recovery unlocked something in my mother. With the original aggressor subdued, her inner tyrant could be unleashed. No longer did she have to remain shrouded under the battered wife cloak. She could emerge from the cocoon and be her own. She had permission. She could terrorise.

Soon, episode after episode of sour moods and inexplicable outbursts became commonplace. We had to tiptoe around her. Anything could set her off. We each suffered verbal, psychological abuse every now and then. We had to learn to take it in our stride. It was our lot in life, our cross to bear. Ever since my oldest sister, a doctor, told us that my mother most definitely had borderline personality disorder, it came almost as a relief to us. That she's not being intentionally cruel or malicious; she's ill. She cannot be rational; she cannot regulate her emotions; she cannot respond in an emotionally proportionate way without desecrating every single person whom she loves. There was now an explanation. But an explanation is not an excuse. And, in any case, what good is an explanation, if the perpetrator herself remained blissfully unaware?

∞



**a rotten echo, by Elfarina**

If I'm not cuddling with my cats, I am reading a book or  
just talking about how to build a whole new world.

'Finally,' I thought. I was not sorry when mother died.

*"God has washed away all her sins, Ina"*, a voice whispered into my ear. What a load of rubbish—Mama 0: Cancer 1, that is it.

-----

My feet were grounded to the floor as my hands gripped my Ma's tightly. My eyes were transfixed on her face, as I traced it starting from the top of her forehead down the sockets of her eyes, her angular nose and gaping mouth, down to her chin. 'So that's what a dead face is. Just unmoving.'

Then I heard everything—my two younger brothers sobbing uncontrollably beside me, one of them shouting, *"Kakak! Kakak! Call baba lah, kak!"* So I did. I sprang up and scrambled for my Samsung. The words crumbled out of my mouth as I spat it all out: *"Mama dah meninggal ba, please come back home!"*

My ears were fuming, and my hands trembled as the world darkened around me. I did not know what time it was.

Next thing I knew, our house was filled with guests. There was just so much noise from kids running to adults crying. Just everywhere around me. I kept being held tightly by floating hands and warm bodies (some were cold). Then, I was instructed

to cleanse her body—part of the ritual, they said, since I was/am her only daughter—and I could not move when we reached the rotting flesh. What a smell. Her body was skeletal apart from that beating pound of pus: a gooey mix of yellow and green. It was staring hard at me, taunting me, screaming at me to come closer. I had never thought boobs could be unsightly, displeasing and revolting.

I threw up inside my mouth. Someone brought me to the kitchen sink while a random aunt took over cleansing her body and a few others helped to carry it out afterwards.

I could not touch her anymore.

-----

*"Allah hu'akbar, Allah hu'akbar..."* The imam began the funeral prayer, the *Solat al-Jenazah*, with the men all lined up in front. I spotted my Baba and *adik-adik* in front, lips trembling as they echoed the supplications. I wondered what they were feeling. Was there remorse? Or guilt? Or a huge sense of relief?

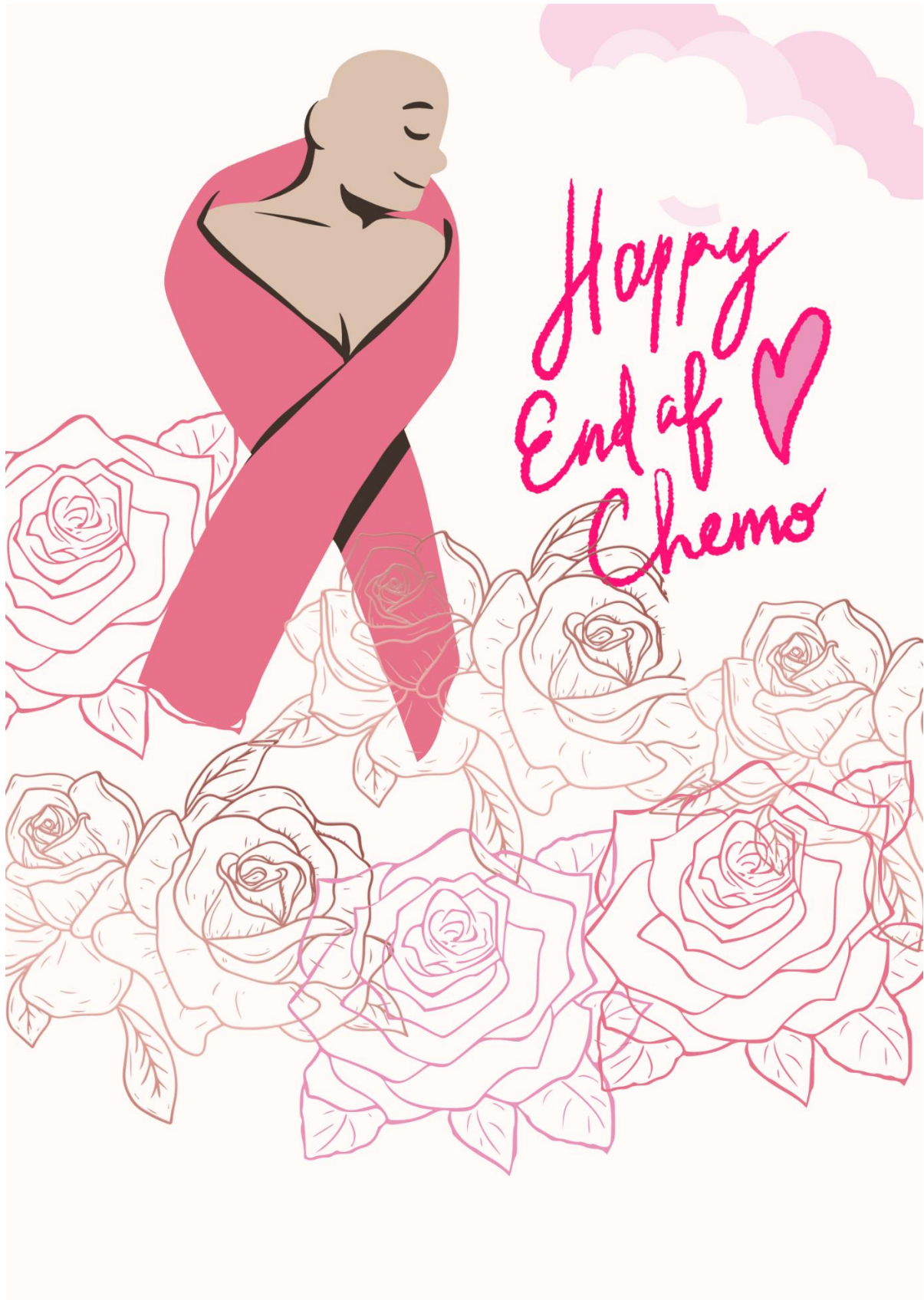
Sitting right at the back, my lips could not move. I sat in silence and stared at the unmoving body in front of me that is shrouded in white *kain kapan*. After ten years, this is it. Why don't I feel anything but lightness?

An hour later, we reached the burial site. I was pushed to the front and handed a small plastic bag filled with flower petals. Red roses, to be exact—Mama's favourite

flowers. How nice. After pouring it all out in one go, my knees gave way. I too, fell to the ground.

At that moment I realised that I had lost my best friend. My hands trembled as the world darkened around me.

∞



**Untitled, by evq**

An eldest daughter from your typical Chinese household—  
waiting to be seen, waiting to be loved.

*"I think it's time, Dad."*

*"Time for what?", his brows crease, his tone curious.*

*"Time to give my room an update".*

*"Ah, that. Just do it—you've said so many times already", he says in a mocking tone.*

*"Remember when we first moved in, the very first night?" I quizzed him.*

*"Ya, you were so scared to sleep alone in your own room. Made me sleep next to you on the floor mattress," he says as he repeatedly points his finger to the floor.*

*"Ya! And you snuck out in the middle of the night, went back to your own bed."*

*"You knew? I thought you were dead asleep!" And we laugh, recounting that night.*

This conversation never happened; I wished it had. What did happen during the first night in our new home some 25 years ago was I woke up alone in my own room, next to me the mattress empty, along with the promise my father made to stay by my side. I cried silently to sleep and never recounted this memory to anyone. My father is not dead, he is very much alive. No doubt that his life is sustained by a basket of pills he takes each night for a whole range of health conditions that is befitting of an elderly Chinese man approaching 70.

The actual conversation, which happened rather recently, went more like this: "A perfectly fine room, why is there a need to change anything about it?" It was a

condescending tone that I struggled to find the right words to describe. I felt denied. I felt silenced. Similar to learned helplessness, I learned silence.

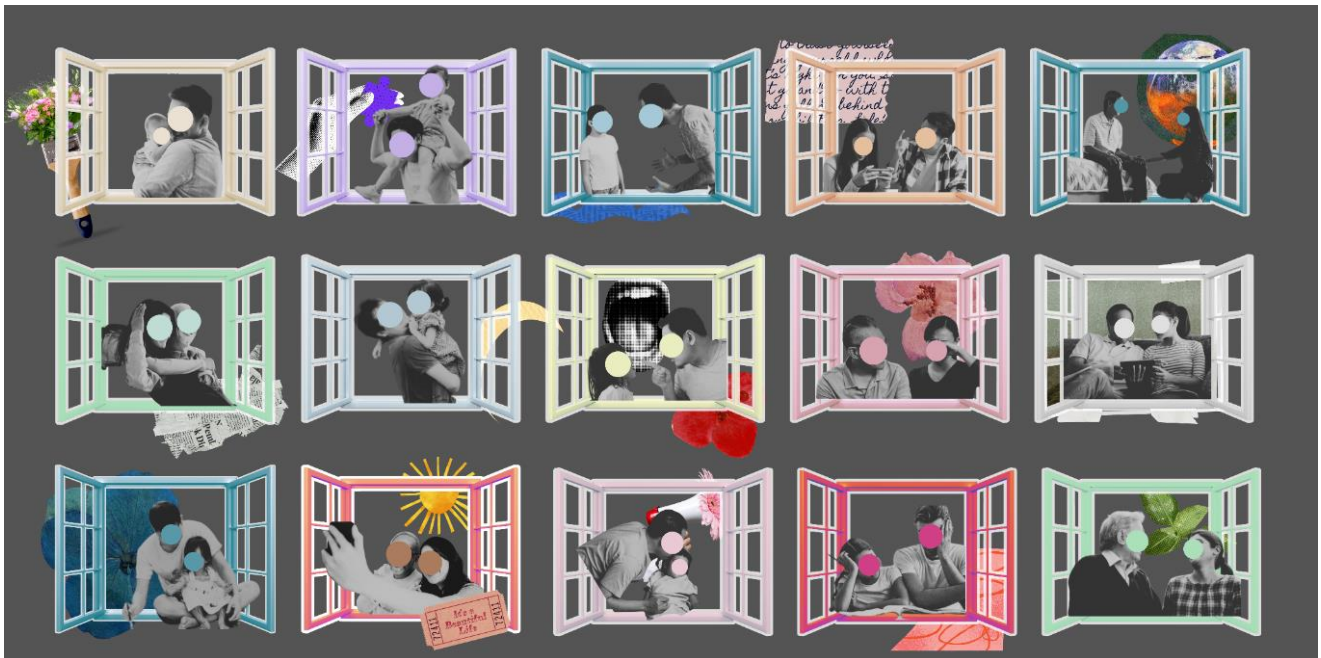
Silence when he tried to kick my mum while being held back in front of my aunts and grandma. I was about 5.

Silence when our family met him overseas, months after he left home to escape debt collectors. I was 14 then.

Silence when he snapped at me after I teared uncontrollably at dinner from a rough day at work. I was 25.

The decades were filled with pieces of memories that never fail to bring a dip in my chest and a burn to the back of my eyes with tears. Memories that creep into consciousness, unannounced and uninvited, walking down a grocery aisle, during a flight, or when I'm outdoors hiking. I can't recall exactly how we got here—a relationship of senseless duty and reluctant obligation. No matter what I say, my father and I seem to have reached a point where I play no part in any conversation. I learned not to provoke more hurtful words by staying silent.

I don't always succeed. He said something one time and I remarked that it sounded stupid. What followed was a barrage of curse words, something about how it would be a joke to rely on me in his old age. How undependable I was, how all his children are. I no longer yearn for a better relationship with my father, though I sometimes indulge in make-believe dialogues I wished happened in my head. But the feelings of anger intensified through unspoken words. ∞



**Being Moved and Unmoved, by Ganapathi Saravanakannan**

Kannan loves learning with people through stories and believes every day offers opportunities to practice compassion.

My father has lived a nomadic life in pursuit of education and work ever since he left his village when he was eight. This has continued even after marriage and two kids. And he achieved extraordinary upward social mobility through discipline and diligence. But as with most things in life, it came at a cost. I had stayed in five different houses by the time I turned eleven. Then we migrated to Singapore but the moving around continued. We were living at our third house in Singapore by the time I turned sixteen. Packing up, uprooting, moving, unpacking, changing schools, and losing friends had become normalised disruptions in my life.

I tried to find some continuity amidst the changes and hang on to friendships. I was visiting my good friend from my first secondary school in Singapore during the Chinese New Year. We had been very close before I changed schools and I used to spend a lot of time at his house. It was not unusual for me to stay longer than planned nor for my mother to call his house to remind me to return. So when the call came I did not think anything was amiss. My mother asked me to come back immediately as my father had admitted himself to the hospital. I did not know then, but my adolescence ended prematurely that day.

The diagnosis was Non-Hodgkins' Lymphoma, and the biopsy indicated that it was malignant. I was told the information first, maybe because I was the eldest son, and told to convey the news to my mother. I was told, explicitly and implicitly, that I had

to be brave and strong. I had to be stoic and bury my emotions. I internalised this belief and soldiered on. Every round of chemotherapy was a battle in my father's body and in my mind. The cocktail of chemicals would devastate his white blood cells along with the targeted cancer cells. At this stage, even a minor infection could be deadly.

Hypervigilance was the norm in the days after each chemo round. The mental battle was the fight to be stoic in the face of fear and uncertainty. Even as my mother became emotionally drained with anxiety, I became battle-hardened. Some days I would keep him company at night in the ward and go to school in the morning. That year was also when I took my A-level exams. But no one except one tutor knew what I was going through. I kept most of it away from even my closest friends. So, they may have seen me as distracted, playful, and underperforming. Over the next four years, diagnosis-treatment-remission-relapse-repeat was a roller coaster journey. He passed on two days before my twenty-second birthday. At the time I was staying in my eleventh house. While I did inherit his nomadic spirit in some areas of my life, I have only moved house once in the thirty-two years since.

∞



**Singled Out, by Goh Qiu Ting**

Her mind often brings her to places her heart yearns to go—daydreamer, or wanderer?

I walk past my sister's room to get a glass of water from the kitchen. The hallway is dark. The house feels oddly unfamiliar. The birds are sound asleep with blankets draped over their cages. Her room is almost empty save for some items intentionally left behind.

A few days ago, my sister had hauled bags of her belongings to her matrimonial home in Punggol, leaving me behind with my parents and five love birds.

I had long prepared myself for this—I thought I would be okay. Another transition, another passing phase of life. It's what all of us go through at different points in time.

*I will come back every now and then to visit you all and see the birds.*

Was that why my mother insisted on keeping the birds at home even when they belonged to my sister?

It didn't make sense to me.

*Mum is afraid that our neighbours will complain about the noise.*

*Why isn't she afraid that our neighbours will complain then?* I remarked.

*We just moved in.*

What warped logic is that? Why do I have to suffer and deal with the din in the morning just because my mum wants her to come home more often to see the birds?

*What on earth are you talking about? They are your birds!*

*I also think they want some sort of companionship.*

*Because you have left the nest—and I am also thinking of leaving, is that it?*

*You were away for two years in Japan, remember?*

*So? What are you trying to say?*

*I was with them when you weren't around.*

*It's not the same, ok?*

*The roles have reversed. It's your turn.*

*Yes, it's now my turn, and I do not like it at all.*

Why should I only move out when I am married? What's wrong with choosing to stay single? Then again, why must I get married just to own a house?

Am I envious that my sister has her own flat to live in, and I don't? Am I envious that she's married to the love of her life, and I haven't found a soul?

Yes, and no. I don't know. I am still trying to figure this out.

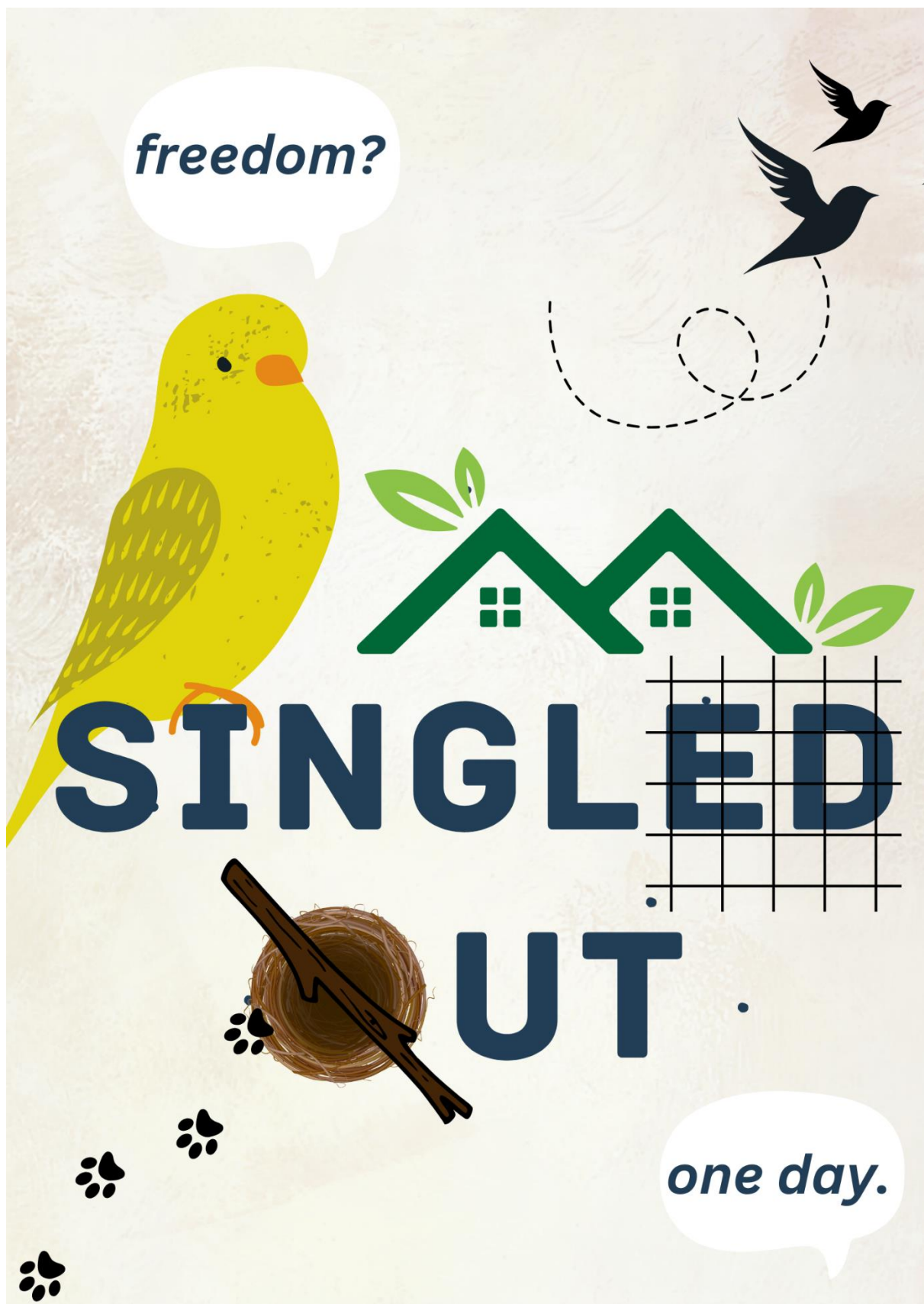
I don't hate being single. I hate being single in Singapore, trapped and bound by such discriminatory public housing policy constraints. There is an age limit—God, 35!—before one is deemed eligible to purchase and own a flat, coupled with an income ceiling and the limited public housing options available.

Yes, I know housing policies are designed to fulfil the nation's interests of promoting healthy families and to cope with an increasing population. Public housing needs to serve the majority—not the minority—so who am I to demand changes in my favour?

In any case, it hurts to feel like I am an outlier on a data plot, an eyesore for policymakers and researchers.

I just want a place to call my own. Is that so difficult?

∞



### **The \$35 Fate, by Liangs**

Now blocked by my husband on all social media platforms, I turned to the one platform that could help—the marketplace app Carousell.

Well, specifically, a tarot card reader on Carousell named 'virgo\_x\_oracle', who was highly recommended by a close friend. She had paid \$200 for virgo\_x\_oracle to prepare a 50-page pdf file detailing her future, but I didn't really need that, so I decided to pay \$35 to find out *just* about the future of my relationship.

Isn't it both comforting and infuriating? To know that higher powers are watching and trying to steer you to whatever you decide to—in the words of the many TikTok videos— "manifest"? I certainly did not manifest the destruction of my relationship, or the weekly crying that I had been doing, and I did not appreciate that these higher powers had just been chilling out while I struggled to get out of bed every morning to get to work.

But I had been watching lots of TikTok tarot card readers on my feed, and they had accurately indicated my current stage of life ("torment", "suffering", "pain" being common words). Plus, throughout the day I would notice lots of 11:11, 4:44 and other repeating numbers— 'angel numbers', they called it, or signs that the angels are looking out for you. Something is in the air, the Google search result promised me, and your fates are changing for the better.

So \$35 seemed like a paltry sum to pay to find out what these ‘fates’ had in store for me. Something to look forward to. I dutifully provided my husband’s and my full names to virgo\_x\_oracle, sent over a screenshot of my payment transfer, and waited patiently for the result of my fate.

Their message came in about 13 minutes later, and it was grim. I mean, it said lots of things, some not so grim (“maybe you should go on a second honeymoon, to reignite the relationship”), but mostly very grim: “You have two options. If you want to try and salvage things, you need a period of separation and space to heal, then come back and communicate with each other afresh—”

“Or confront him amicably and the relationship will come to an end (likely deep down you already know it).”

Do I?

No, no, no, no, no—the only words bubbling up. Tears swelled up and I started crying softly into my pillow, more hurt than earlier when I was blocked. I don’t want it to come to an end. Do I?

No. I don’t want it. I don’t claim this bullshit fate.

As though the higher powers heard me snap out of it, it sent me a follow-up message to affirm– “Do leave me a 5-star review :)”–the smiley face taunting me like it had not just broken my spirit.

I don’t leave a 5-star review–or any review at all–but I leave a message to my husband that he eventually reads in the morning, allowing us to intertwine our fates once more.

∞



**Fishbowl, by Jeanilyn Kwan**

Jeanilyn Kwan is a Nigeria-born Singaporean-Filipino editor and writer, currently pursuing her teenage goal of studying psychology.

“你一个人吗?” (“*Nǐ yī gè rén ma?*”) [“Are you all by yourself?”]

I nodded yes to the waitress who subsequently took my order of 黄鱼面 (*huáng yú miàn*).

Yellow croaker noodles. I had rehearsed its *pinyin* so many times that I momentarily forgot what it meant in English.

The lady led me to a seat and yelled my order to the kitchen. It was a hole in the wall—the kind that got Michelin awards, where mealtime queues snaked round street corners and everything was printed solely in *Hanzi*.

Prior to this meal, I had never traveled domestically nor dined out in China all by myself, largely due to COVID-19 restrictions and partly due to social anxiety.

“还有一瓶水 (*Háiyǒu yī píng shuǐ*) [And a bottle of water],” I told the waitress with a sense of quiet confidence, as she brought my food.

“嗯, 好的 (*Ēn, hǎo de*) [Okay].”



*Parts of this collage feature artwork by Shanghainese artist Sui Yao.*

Such interactions, simple yet successful, were soothing. Two years in Beijing, during a pandemic, easily taught me that timid yet correct Mandarin can be as half-useless as leaving home with a wallet and no cell phone.

But there I was in a different Chinese city, in a juxtaposed mental landscape, reminding myself of the empowering nature of discoveries from solo voyages and the confronting reality of crowds after the norm of social distancing.

I shared a table with a middle-aged man. We sat silently across each other, occupied with our bowls of alkaline noodles and flaky white fish meat, inside a room full of zealous servers and diners. I felt calm. There is, after all, a meditateness to being in crammed, busy spaces. The door to the restaurant was left wide open to expedite the come-and-go of people. In the same rhythm, my mind wandered before fixating on a conversation with someone I had met the night before.

"It's going to creep up on us, all this time indoors," he had said as we traded stories of the past year—the 2020 experience, so to speak.

"I've stopped eating at holes in the wall," he added.

He had lived in Shanghai for nearly a decade and was moving south the next day.

"Can I get you anything? Ice cream?" I asked in a bid to somewhat celebrate a send-off.

He declined.

"I'll probably cycle around to see the last of the city before I leave," he said before we parted ways.

"Hey, if you can kill it in Beijing, you can kill it anywhere else."

The arbitrary affirmation struck a chord. I had heard something similar not too long ago—from my uncle, my father's second brother, who died from the virus months after our last meeting. I wanted to retort that my years in Lagos and Manila likely prepared me for Beijing. But I didn't. None of those years prepared me for life on my own amid a global health emergency.

"Good luck in Shenzhen. Let me know how it goes," I said instead, even though I felt we would likely never hear from each other again.

The man across me left just before I finished my noodles. I put the bottle of water in my bag and paid my bill. I stepped out into the pleasant warmth and wind of spring's tail end. I spent the rest of the day cycling around to see more of the city all by myself.

∞

### **My Undulating Path, by Kalki**

I see myself as a bird flitting about looking to land in a utopian wonderland.

I sat with my "Leisurely Deathbed Box" reminiscing about a life lived. I created the box and over the years, I tossed in photos, letters, clippings from articles, and scribbled notes to look at during the evening of my life. I thought I would have so much leisurely time to reflect, roar with laughter, howl, split my sides and be in stitches rummaging through that box, but...

The first note I pulled out was a quote, "People settle for a level of despair they can tolerate and call it happiness." by Soren Kierkegaard and asked myself, "Did I settle for a level of despair and call it a formidable sense of duty and responsibility?"

The answers were neither easy nor straightforward. My undulating path with its waves and troughs played truant with me.

Next, I pulled out my grandmother's photo, where she is clad in a white saree mandated for widows. Pictures were black and white in those days, in any case. She was the second wife of an old man and one day after creating four kids, he died. Grandma stood there staring blankly at her 11-, 9-, 7-, and 3-year-olds. That 11-year-old was my father.

Next, I pulled out an aunt's photo, married at 12 and in her late thirties she lost her husband in a gruesome road accident; she was left screaming like a banshee to

handle four kids alone, one of whom was polio-stricken. Her well-meaning mother said to her, "Stop eating onions now that you are a widow."

I looked on incredulously trying to make sense of it all. I was 13.

Unendingly I seemed to be pulling out photo after photo of lives gone awry –all because of human folly, fear and fallacy.

So easily and readily we dismissed it as fate.

All that girls are taught is subservience. Fast, pray, appease the Gods and Goddesses for a comfortable life. Then if things go awry, blame fate.

From the day I became conscious, if not fully, then at least to some extent, I began witnessing, observing, questioning all such practices. So much importance is placed on all the external attributes donned by a girl, but none to what should matter.

A red dot on the forehead, vermillion in the partition, bangles, toe rings, nose ring, some convoluted beads and baubles and figurines around the neck. The list is endless.

I was on the threshold of youth; a free-spirited human suddenly being chained to the mundane by virtue of a wedding. I screamed, I felt trapped with the fetters on me. It was as though I was sitting inside a pressure cooker permanently.

First time, first time, eight months into that trap, I thought of ending it all! What next...?

∞



*Untitled, by Jo Lee*

Jo grew up a soldier and maintainer of peace. She knows no other way to live.

When I was 10, the Gulf War was playing out in the Middle East. But it felt like the same conflict was happening at home as well.

Mum had finally moved back home, but the tension was palpable. My father would say two words, and a hail of bullets would take him down. Within our flat, there were demarcated zones. The kitchen and bedroom were Mum's, and my brother's bedroom, where Dad had set up camp, was his. My bedroom was right in the middle—in no man's land.

My brother and I became seasoned conflict negotiators. We passed messages and groceries from one zone to the other. Yet, no matter how well we behaved, my mother still seemed unhappy. I was sure she was going to leave again, and anxiety carved a perpetual hollow in my gut.

I started sleeping outside her bedroom. Every night, after she closed her door, I parked myself outside with my pillow. Just before the alarm rang for school, I would leave my post, head back to bed, and pretend to stir when she came in to wake me.

I became more diligent at school. I thought, the less trouble I gave her, the less troubled she would be. I thought, if she saw how good I was, she wouldn't leave again.

I slept outside that door till I was 19, when I had to stay at the university dormitory. Even though the two factions had settled into an uneasy truce by then, I still behaved like I was on guard duty outside her room. I called her every day, listening carefully for nuances that she was leaving again.

I was in my 30s when the Hallyu Wave hit us. We were watching a Korean drama about a mother who rented a room to have some peace from her family.

“This is like when you left home because of Jay and me,” I said.

“When did I leave home because of you two?” she asked.

I told her what my father had said that morning before he drove us to where she had been staying. That she wasn’t really on a holiday. That she had left because we were bad kids. That we had to beg on our knees to ask her to come home. That we had to promise to be good kids when we saw her.

Mum paused the show. “I left because of him. I came back for you two.”

While her words felt like the permission I had needed to step down from where I had stood guard for over 20 years, I felt also like a soldier who was told that the war he had been valiantly fighting was over, 20 years too late.

I could not tell if my tears were from relief or anger, or from the sum of all the nights I had spent sleeping outside my mother's room, or from the price I had paid to make

her happy, or from the hollow feeling in my gut that still remained, or because I no longer knew who I was, if I wasn't that girl sleeping outside her door anymore.

∞



*Untitled, by Jerry Lim*

Human After All

I am a software engineer. I write programs for a living. And that saved my life.

To anyone reading this. I am okay now. But I wasn't. I was a long fucking way from okay.

I wanted to end myself.

I had it all ready. I analysed it. I studied it.

Flinging myself from a building was messy, and ultimately not entirely painless.

Sleeping pills wasn't an option, because I happen to metabolise them faster than normal. I had a lot more calculations to do there, and that wasn't guaranteed.

Helium asphyxiation was the best way. I was living alone. I had the materials all procured, a gigantic helium tank (thank you, party supplies store) enough to kill myself three times over, a one-way valve, and a nice suicide bag.

It was the cleanest solution. I could stop it all. I was tired of feeling depressed.

Anxious. Angry. Guilty. I could end this never-ending purgatory of self-flagellation.

Fuck that. Breathe it in, deal with the Donald Duck voice for 15 minutes, and I was off, away from all this fucking mess.

It was fucking perfect.

The occupational hazard of being a software engineer is whenever we write solutions, it is okay if it fails. The problem is when the solution runs perfectly on the first try. It means that the bugs are far more insidious and subtle.

Suicide. Was too elegant. Too easy. Too perfect. And if it was so goddamned fucking perfect, why didn't everyone smarter than me off themselves?

I was missing something. I could not see it in my current state. But I was missing the bugs.

So, I switched off the nozzle on the helium tank. I was that close.

I am a software engineer. I write programs for a living. And that saved my life.

∞



**My Father, by Fleurie**

Let us not forget we were once children.

As a daughter, I had always thought of my father as the greatest artist on earth.

And as his daughter, so proudly believed it was inherent that I would be able to draw like him when I grow up.

I had always wanted to see his artworks when brought home from the office, to be completed or for refining details, but my requests were not always granted.

Then came this fateful Sunday, I was 6. The entire family was home.

My dad wasn't in his best moods, and we didn't know why. He kept himself in his room, presumably on his drawing board, working all morning.

My younger sister and I were watching our weekly entertainment, Sesame Street, with our favourite character, Animal, banging away on his drums.

My father emerged from his hermit kingdom, asked if we would like chicken rice for lunch.

We sprung up with a unanimous *Yes!*

As my father stepped out, I turned away from the television towards his room and found the door left ajar.

I jumped at the opportunity to take a peek at what he was working on all morning.

I carefully ascended the adjustable stool, with both hands holding securely on both sides of the drawing table.

Slowly and steadily, I finally mounted myself on top of the stool, and as I raised my head to what's in front of me, my eyes met with another pair, what seemed to belong to a lion. A pencil-sketch draft with only the grandeur of its mane painted in golden yellow.

I was in awe, scrutinising every stroke, when suddenly I heard the rattling of my father's keys.

I reacted with a quick breath, and began to descend from the stool, this time with one hand reaching for the ledge at the bottom end of the drawing board to keep my balance without realising the presence of a bottle of ink.

As my hand swiped across the ledge, I sent the entire bottle tumbling down to a shatter with sprays of ink all over the floor.

I heard his quick and heavy footsteps; my hands began to tremble.

His eyes were fury and there were 5 seconds of the worst silence I received from him.

Tears were welling up in my eyes, I was so frightened I couldn't even utter the word sorry.

There were shards of glass around me, and he carried me away from there and dropped me in the living area.

He then reached for that dreadful cane, behind the door of me and my sister's room, and marched towards me.

I cowered in fear, trying to protect my body with arms around and came to a squat.

The whips slashed relentlessly over my arms and back.

It was searing, and the marks were swelling. I pleaded for him to stop, and he did when he realised it caused some tears on my skin.

He then went into the bathroom to fill up a plastic tub with lukewarm water.

He took my hand, which I shook off, not in retaliation but in fear.

He told me to take a bath, which would soothe the throbbing pain, or so he thought.

The contact of water on my skin only exacerbated the injury but I could only be quiet.

After this incident, my relationship with my father altered, my admiration shifted.

The memory of the above never left.

My adulthood and job require me to work closely with children, which has helped develop great empathy and understanding for them.

Very often I feel for every child that crosses my path, being misunderstood, being chided for not being able to keep up with parents' or schoolteachers' expectations, being blamed for things they didn't know were right or wrong, etc.

The world needs more kindness and patience.

∞



### *Death of a Friend, by Miranda Pohlen*

Miranda is an emotional being; you can say she is Sadness from the movie *Inside Out*. Through her 3 years in theatre school, she experienced extreme depression and anxiety. Great for her because now, all these emotions are real in her acting. Grief as an addition for her loss of a close friend.

*'Our beloved son, Mario has lived a beautiful and fabulous life. He left us today; we will miss him as we celebrate who he is in our lives. Wake is at...from Friday, 5 August to Sunday 7 August.'*

I dropped onto the floor in disbelief as I read the Facebook post on Mario's page after our WhatsApp group chat shared this. *It must be a joke, right?* I asked in the group chat. I went to his Facebook page as fast as my fingers could tap onto my phone and there it was, an actual post by his mother with a picture of his familiar headshot, smiling at me.

*Tell me this is a joke please, Mario?*

I started texting and calling him on his phone but *no answer*. But I just saw him two days ago at our musical preview show and chatted with him the night before. We joked and talked about the sleazy underwear we needed as props for our musical and he found three for \$5 at Lucky Plaza. *Cheap deal!* And in less than 12 hours, my friend was gone. It can't be *real*, right?

The dates of his first original musical show are now the dates of his wake. How ridiculous. He was the director, producer, choreographer, and composer of his first

musical called "Tissue Aunty", and I was one of the cast members, and costume, props, and set designer for him. He was also working on a musical for the blind and deaf community. He was at the peak of his career.

Before I could even think further, I started getting calls from friends. People that I don't talk to often started calling me and interrogating me.

*Have you heard? Is it real?*

*How are you? Are you ok?*

*Do you know what happened?*

**"I DON'T KNOW!"** I felt like shouting at them.

I never thought that losing a friend would bring me so much grief. Mario was suddenly gone in one night. I had dealt with death before, but this was the worst I ever felt. It was so sudden, without any clue. It was sadness, anger, and confusion all at once.

The next time I saw him was at his funeral. I really braced myself because of that familiar walkway at Bishan. Crossing the bridge to his house; all the memories came flooding back. I was about 100m away from his house when I saw the white tent. I fell onto the floor and cried. Because now, I had to believe it was real. I would never hear his voice again.

In the white coffin, he was in his signature colourful top, the one he was wearing on our official preview show, the one he was photographed in and had so much joy and pride in announcing his work during our curtain call, but only this time, he was lying there lifeless and motionless.

The *sudden rage* in me rose.

*What the hell, Mario? How could you do this to me?*

∞



**Untitled, by Kaira**

I have never understood the concept of keeping one's contacts "warm". My stance may be radical—cordial means transactional. To keep a parted friend an acquaintance by a Facebook-triggered birthday wish, when your paths have diverted too much to sustain an exchange of more than 5 texts, seems as genuine as heating up a cup of cold tea using the microwave. To do that to friends who used to be dear but were torn away feels like defiling the tombstone of the friendship that I failed to keep alive.

That's why I could not bring myself to speak to them, for more than a decade.

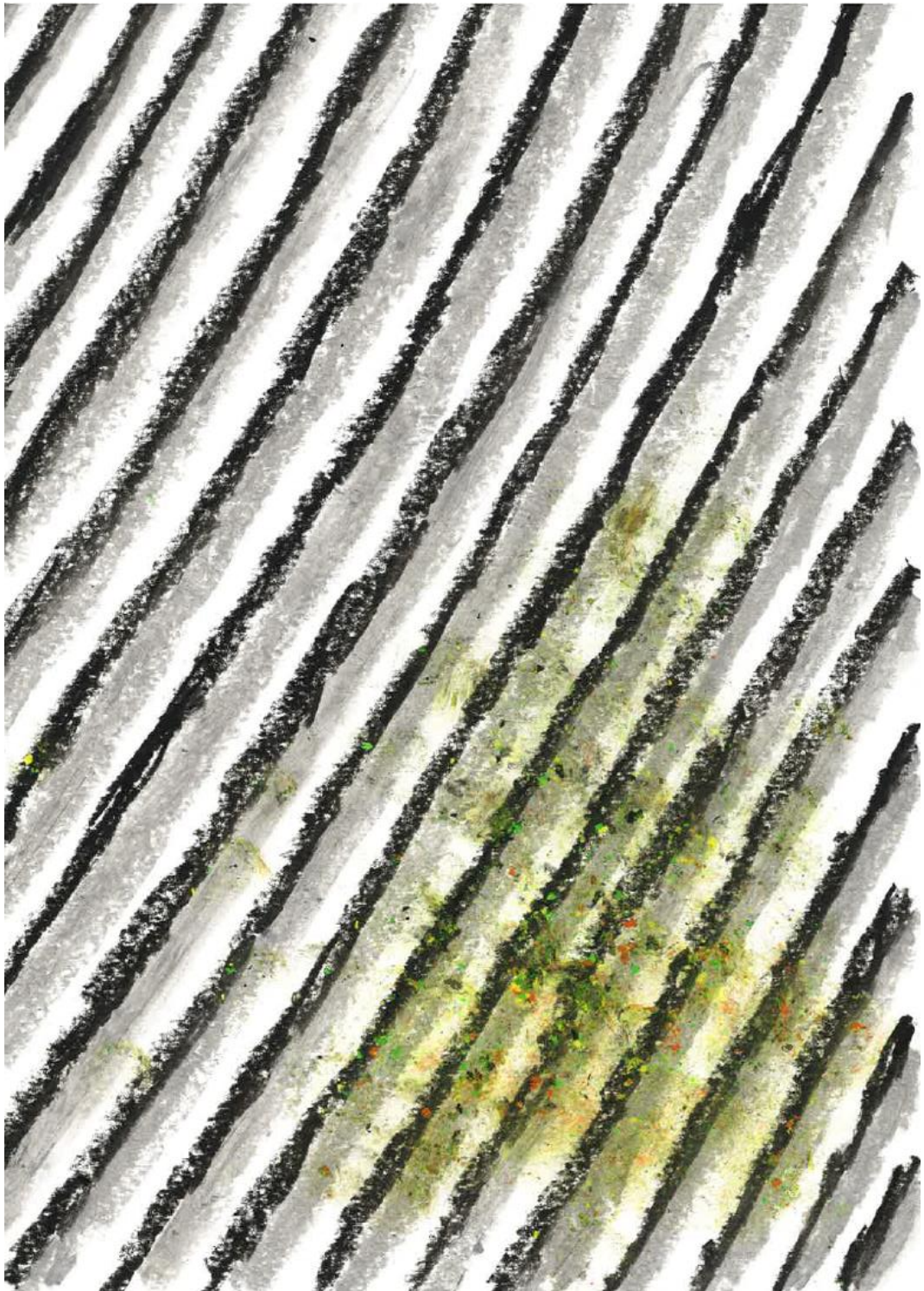
There was, of course, no need for keeping anything warm during the 3 years in secondary school, for the bond was as lively and noisy as the darkest green in summer. Each of the four of us were trouble of a kind. Wade could have been handsome if not for his idiotic grin constantly parading his yellow teeth. Louder than all cicadas in the school put together, he couldn't stop making fun of everything and laughed rowdily even when the jokes were on him. That uncensored big mouth would cause less harm if he were not the son of our school master.

David was nicknamed "winter melon" not just for the pun with his Chinese name, but also for the soft airiness inside the sturdy appearance. Despite his formidable build and decent grades, he couldn't answer any questions in class without stuttering unintelligibly while scratching his head; once he stood in prolonged silence and received a stroke of the ruler for draining the teacher's patience.

Serene had a short-bob haircut, walked with shoulders swinging and legs apart like a boy, replied to questions curtly and bluntly like a boy and frowned deeply with eyes squinted when in disagreement, like a boy. A dutiful form teacher in China like ours would advise parents of ungirly girls to seek medical opinions on gender correction treatment. I knew because my mom was advised too. And there was me, who preferred sticking my neck out for the not-so-good kids over joining the good kids' league, which was not encouraged for a class monitor democratically elected every semester.

Serene and I sat behind Wade and David in class. During breaks, David would open Wade's bag for our regular entertainment, treasure hunt for squashed snacks – Mentos rolled into flat sheets or smashed chocolate caked dry. As class resumed, Serene would click her mechanical pencil frantically on Wade's back to rescue whatever she lent him—eraser, homework, or her only other pencil—before they disappeared into the blackhole of his bag forever. At times David would turn around to me for hints, always right when his name was called. When classes finally ended, boys headed for the soccer field while girls jogged or played badminton, until the dusk embraced the playground with a soft yellow-brown glow.

Those days seem to have no end. Even if they had to end, they could have taken a new life in friendship for grown-ups. Not the way it is now, void of sound and warmth, the silence of a graveyard in winter.



***It's a Jungle Out There, by Priscilla Tan***

Priscilla is a freelance content writer, bookstagrammer, and golden retriever fan.

At 24, she overcame agoraphobia during a solo trip to France.

What hurts more?

Gasping for air in the middle of a panic attack or getting run over by a car?

I steadied my breath, feeling the rise and fall of my chest as this grim question tormented my anxious mind.

Who would have thought my panic attacks in school were child's play? Nausea, sweaty palms, and unnerving palpitations... That's all they were: momentary despair. These fits of terror erupted during P.E. and presentations—places I could easily escape.

Never mind the eyes on me. Or the teacher's unkind remarks. Or even the troublemakers' hurtful jeers when I stumbled or stuttered. All I had to do was follow my escape protocol:

Extract myself from the situation.

Lock myself in the toilet cubicle.

Breathe.

Just breathe.

And rejoin the group when I'm ready.

How I wished I could go back to those moments, because on this very night, as we drove to fetch my brother from the police academy, the volcanic fear of being away from home overflowed our family car, hijacking my every sense.

I was trapped with no way out.

To make matters worse, my chest tightness and dizzy spells clouded my judgement. As cars whizzed past our run-down Nissan March, I fantasised about unplugging my seat belt and throwing myself out of the moving vehicle.

Yes, I wouldn't survive the collision.

But at least the panic would stop.

My rapid breathing failed to convince my parents of the severity of the situation.

*"Huh? Again?"*

*"What's the matter with you?"*

*"Aiyoh, why are you always like this?!"*

*"I feel bad enough as it is," I pleaded. "Please stop."*

Tears were forbidden in the Tan family. Not at funerals. Not when you're a kid frightened by *The Incredible Tales*. And definitely not when you're a nineteen-year-old who just dropped out of school because of agoraphobia.

I held back my tears and wished I had different parents. I punched pause on my Spotify playlist. *Time* by Jungle. So much for thinking this was a song I could relax to. I wouldn't be able to listen to it for the next ten years.

From a distance, my eyes spotted a pack of young men with field bags. This told me one thing: we'd reached the Police Kins Training Camp.

The second my brother entered the car, the unmistakable scent of sweat and tropical rainstorm danced in the air.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

We were finally heading home.

No one said a word—not even my brother. A rarity. He'd usually share his bunkmates' antics. He must have felt the tension between us, I deduced.

Papa was the first to break the silence when we reached home.

"Make ah girl a warm honey," he instructed Mummy as I limped to my room.

I changed my sweat-soaked clothes into fresh PJs and tucked myself into bed. Staring at the ceiling while waiting for the warm cup of honey to soothe my frazzled nerves, I wondered if this was what my life would be like from now on.

∞



**Wearing A Tongue That Speaks Red, by Rashini D Selvasgaran**

Rashini is a final-year Literature Student, a freelance book content creator and an aspiring writer.

It felt wrong to be called an Indian. The guilt squirmed inside my veins every time strangers would ask about my culture.

*I didn't know if I was allowed to be called an Indian.*

I was told that my hardcore devotional Hindu parents became Freethinkers after they got married. To this day, I never got a clear answer as to why Amma and Appa decided not to be Hindus. I thought childbirth had something to do with it; the traumatic ordeal of raising two blobs of uncertainty amidst a developing Singapore could have messed up their minds.

In the early 2000s, explaining what a Freethinker was as a 7-year-old Indian girl came out as "I love all religions, but I do not have one." Adding to childhood trauma, scathing remarks were directed at me, often branding me as an atheist. As if that wasn't enough, my brother and I were enrolled to a Buddhist primary school and our parents appealed for us to study Chinese instead of Tamil as our Second Language.

If you are already confused, imagine 7-year-old me.

Growing up, I was so confused about my identity. My birth certificate states that I'm Hindu, but growing up I was never involved in the religion. I am an Indian, but I know nothing of my culture. I can't speak my language and I don't feel like I am welcome in the Indian community. I ace all my Chinese language examinations. Yet, I never felt proud of it. In school I often felt guilty for learning Chinese, for remaining in class when my Malay and Indian classmates went for their language courses. The repeated questioning from relief teachers on why I was not leaving the classroom. Furthermore, the racist remarks made towards minority groups were often shrugged off when I confronted them. *"Oh, but you are not Indian what, you also don't speak Indian."* I felt ashamed of myself, for there was truth to that statement, but a part of me could not accept it.

I felt that I was sneakily borrowing someone's tongue to wear an identity that sets me apart from my race. To be viewed differently, to be viewed as *better*. By speaking the language of the majority, I thought I was one of them.

I was wearing a tongue that speaks red.

That spews intellect and understanding about my culture when I learnt it like everyone else. Through television, social studies and my *favourite* of all; Racial Harmony Day.

For 24 years, I was discriminating against myself.

Till today, attempts at conversing in Tamil immediately pull out the Imposter Hat and snugly place it on my head. As though signaling—*This person wants you to think she is bilingual, but she isn't. She only knows 5 phrases in Tamil.*

Slowly unlearning my teaching, I stand against the mirror stark. No longer confused but still that scared Indian girl trying to order *thosai* in Tamil.

∞



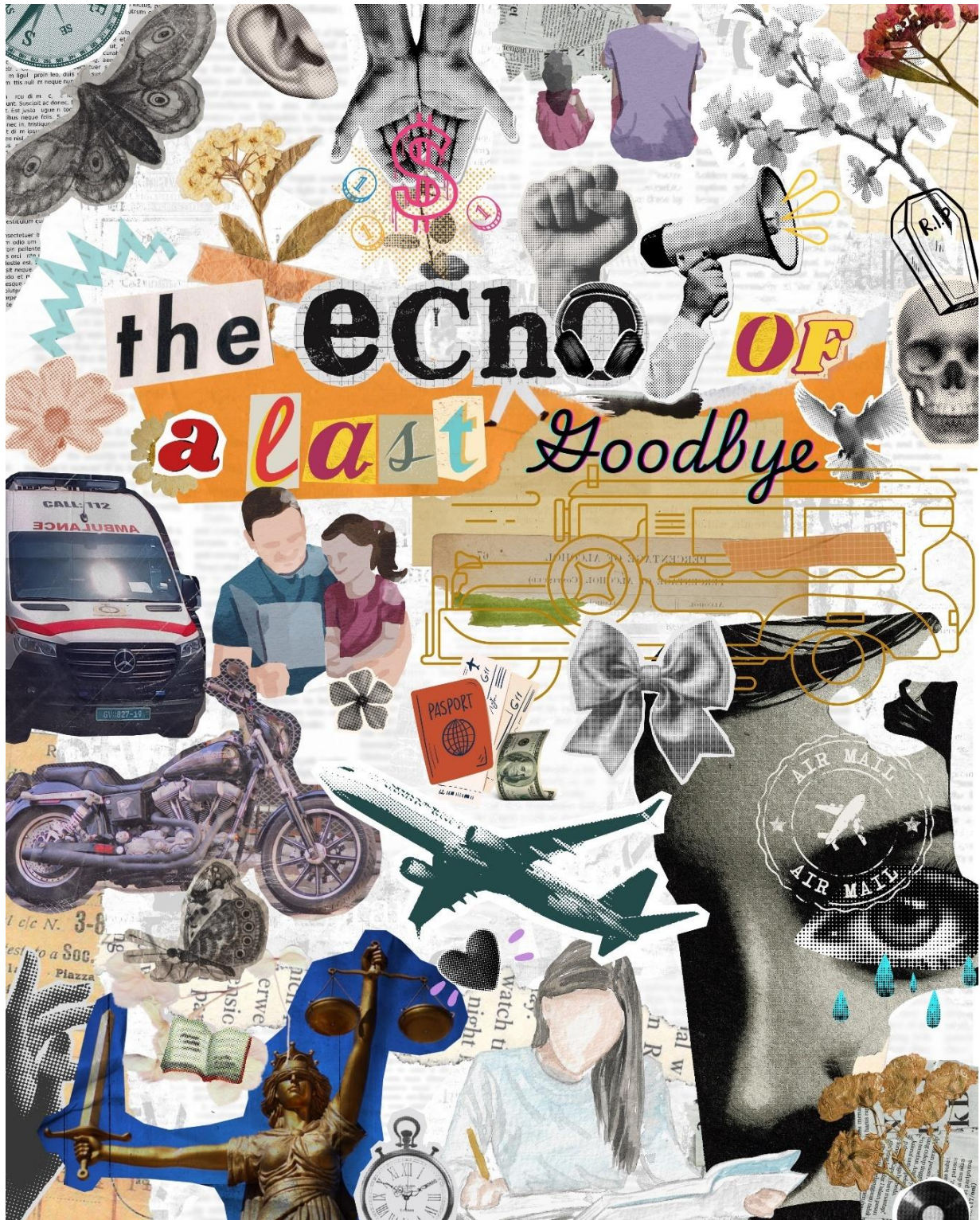
### **The Echo of a Last Goodbye, by Reanne Guycoa**

A Filipina breadwinner in Singapore, chasing adventures, knowledge, and new horizons while making ends meet and living life to the fullest.

"Ba-bye, papa," I called out with an enthusiastic wave. I was on my way to school after lunch, bound for an encampment, riding the *tri-sikad*—a bicycle with a sidecar commonly found in rural areas of the Philippines. Little did I know, those casual words of farewell would mark the last time I would speak to him in the flesh.

My father was caught in a catastrophic event that irrevocably altered our lives. In an ironic twist of fate, he was sandwiched between a hurrying ambulance—transporting the mother of a local politician with a "*little under the weather*" ailment—and a *jeepney* unloading its passengers. The collision, powerful enough to hurl him a hundred metres, cracked both his helmet and his head. After a week of battling in the ICU, which left us drowning in debt up to this day, he departed this life on October 17, 2009.

Nearly 15 years have passed, yet the void left by his absence continues to echo in our daily struggles. As the eldest in a typical Filipino household, I was expected to be the breadwinner—the next in line to make critical decisions for the family's survival. At just 12 years old, I already embraced the adult world. I lived with my senior citizen grandparents, an uncle with Down's syndrome, a mother with postpartum depression, a 3-month-old baby sister who never saw our father, a 5-year-old sister who bore an uncanny resemblance to him, and another sister who shared the burden of our loss.



Life was far from easy. My second sister and I earned highly coveted scholarships, driven by a strong desire to complete our education. We knew life was challenging and believed it would be even more difficult without an education. We worked during our free time as tutors, call centre agents, research assistants, student assistants, and government aides. I watched my passions and skills fade, as pursuing them meant spending money we barely had. My best friend often shared her allowance so I could just eat decently. My poverty even gave brunch a new twist – *bruncher*—a single meal covering breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I struggled to keep up with my classes, failing some exams because I was too exhausted and often too hungry to even open my notes. Despite it all, I graduated on time.

Today, I am in Singapore, navigating an unfamiliar land alone in pursuit of better opportunities. I have not yet reached my definition of success—something more than just acquiring money. Adversities still shadow every phase of my life. I succumbed to Major Depressive Disorder and Panic Disorder but have since recovered from the symptoms and am now free from medications. I continue psychotherapy to heal from the world's inflicted wounds beyond my control. Most of my dreams remain on the back seat, some requiring a youthfulness I no longer possess.

The echoes of that farewell have softened over the years, but I wonder if I am even nearing the last decibel.

∞

**Growing up Fat!, by Sanali Ramesh Lotankar**

Sanali is a marketing and content specialist with a penchant for words. She joined the workshop by Mahita to get a peek into writing personal stories and anecdotes, and thoroughly enjoyed the three sessions.

At 12, I was convinced I was fat, and nothing could change it.

Most girls in my class were skinny. In primary school, everyone adored my “baby fat” and wished they had it.

By the time secondary school started, the adoration vanished. Uncles, aunts, friends, cousins, cousins’ friends and even friends’ cousins had pointed out either my ‘fat arms’ or ‘heavy bum.’

On the recommendation of her sister, my mother made me follow 20 minutes of neck and arm exercises for months when I turned 14. Despite my yearning for sweets, I didn’t eat sugar for an entire year.

I was so embarrassed by my arms that I barely ever looked at them in the mirror. I wore a jacket on the hottest days to cover them up. Once in a blue moon, I’d wear a dress without sleeves and then spend the entire day making assumptions about others’ judgements of me. I ate three light meals including only two egg whites for breakfast at that time.

D was my best friend in school and continued to be one for a decade after. At an after-class party in JC, I wore a fitted top. She said nonchalantly, "You dress up like you are malnourished." I ate no more than 2 meals a day then.

I stopped wearing fitted clothes. I bought clothes that were at least one size too big from then on. At a friend's house, her sister asked her with a hearty laugh, "Is she pregnant?" I was surviving on coffee, skipping lunch on most days back then.

When I finally conceived my child, I was 29. A few months after the birth of my child, my parents visited us. My father made a passing remark to my mother, "Sanu has put on some weight." Rage overcame me like never before. I could feel heat passing through my ears, cheeks, and choking me at the throat. Before I knew it, I snapped at him. Told him I was five months postpartum. I was sick and tired of discussions about my weight. That night, I devoured a piece of chocolate cake.

At that point, I weighed the most I ever had in my life.

Tired, sleepless, and angry, I was bitter with the world. I pulled up old picture albums and peered at my pictures. As I turned the pages, a switch went off in my head.

I wept that night. A particular kind of sadness that I'd suppressed for years engulfed me.

At 12, I stood tall at 160cm. My height didn't increase after that. I weighed 48 kgs back then. Most people around me called me fat.

At 30 with a five-month-old baby in tow, I weighed 66 kgs.

I took a deep breath and whispered to my younger self: "You are not fat, and you'll never be."

∞



**Untitled, by Sathappan Uma Maheswari**

I'm a wandering soul, juggling a swirl of feelings. I always chase the light, even when the darkness lingers. I'm just trying to heal and find some peace in this wild ride.

Since I was a little girl, I have heard people say things like, "Oh, you are so fat, try to reduce your weight or no one will want to marry you." These are not even the most hurtful remarks. I have heard many hurtful things even worse than this. Being obese, you are not only physically hurt but also mentally, emotionally, and socially hurt. You would constantly be advised and teased. You would be excluded from physical games and dances. You cannot eat anything you want to without feeling guilty. You are unable to dress or look as you would like. You envy slim people. Your mental peace is always put to the test.

I have been an overweight person for as long as I can remember. I grew up in a village where it was common for people to make fun of other people. When I was about seven years old, there was a girl called Thenu in our village who was a teenager. She was also an obese person. She was known to me as Thenu akka. In Tamil, akka means "big sister". People used to tease me by comparing me with her by saying, "You are the next Thenu; you will be fat like her." In those days I was not aware of how mean and hurtful those words were. I replied angrily, "do not call me that, I will never be like her." I understand how this feels now that I have experienced the same incident.

My eleven-year-old niece is also a bit overweight. When we were in a group call, my uncle told her, "You are the next Uma." She replied the same as I did, "Do not call

me that." I get hurt when I hear those words. However, I did not want to show anything. I scolded my uncle in my mind. I dealt with my feelings by acknowledging that some individuals are just going to make fun of other people without taking their feelings into account. I try to calm my niece by advising her not to mind those words, but it does not work, I think. I stop bothering. When she is older, I am sure she will understand. There were several incidents like these that made me feel insecure about my weight and life.

Apart from external events, there are moments when you turn into your own bully. There are moments when I tell myself that I am capable of nothing. I remember one time, I said to myself, "Uma, you are worthless, you are fat, you are dumb, no good things will ever happen in your life." I cried many times for being myself. Sometimes, I thought of killing myself and starting a fresh life with all the perfect things. The good thing is, my logic and consciousness always remind me that there is only one life, which keeps me going even if the worst of the worst happens to me. I navigate between optimism and pessimism, trying to balance the two in my life.

∞



**Benefactor, by SL**

Someone who enjoys the sound of silence.

My parents were your typical law-abiding working-class people who led their lives with traditional values while brainwashing their children with dogmatic beliefs such as study hard, get a degree, then get a good job and you will have a good life thereafter.

They did not impart anything significant that aided me to become what I am today.

My character and outlook on life are largely moulded by my own life experiences. This also means that I had to go through many unnecessary hurdles and hard knocks that could possibly have been avoided if I had “wiser” parents to advise and guide me along as I grew up while threading through puberty and adulthood.

One important lesson that I have learned from the school of hard knocks is that the types of relationships or friendships you have with people will likely determine the outcome of your life. I knew my late business partner through mutual friends while she was working in Singapore many years ago. We hit it off very naturally despite our differences in nationalities and age. She was about ten years older than me, so I treated her as an elder sister. We continued to keep in touch after she went back to her country to start her own tour agency.

A few years later, when she was in Singapore on a work visit, she tried to convince me to join her in her tour business after I shared with her about my work problems. She didn't have to do that as I had no experience in the field, and she already had established contacts in Singapore to do the coordination work for her. I still remember the joyous look on her face when I finally agreed to work for her.

I left my previous job shortly after and took over the coordination work in Singapore. The learning curve was steep, and I made quite a few bad judgement calls along the way that caused us to earn less, but she was patient and supportive of me throughout.

There was one time when I was still new to the trade, I attended to an all-female VIP group from overseas whose group leader asked me to arrange something "inappropriate" for them later in the evening. I was at a loss back then as I did not even know such a place existed in Singapore and I had to get everything arranged for them immediately. I texted my business partner about the group's request, and she provided me with an address and booking number shortly after. As I was about to make the booking, she called and apologised for having put me on the spot. In reality, it wasn't a big deal to me even though I had written in my earlier text to her about my discomfort in doing this. That event showed that she cared about my feelings and valued me very much. Because of this, I became more mindful about how I told her things, so as not to make her worry for me unnecessarily.

∞

**Untitled, by Sherwinderjit Kaur**

Never a caged bird, but always looking for flight.

The months that followed her passing were odd. Without my day anchored around her, there was nothing much for me to do. I remember not being able to cry for the first three months. At first, I was relieved that she had been freed. But months later, my grief turned into something else.

Even at her funeral, I had a hard time trying to cry. I focused on how her face had changed. The soft lines on her face had creased and her jagged teeth seemed to protrude more. She was a big, strong-bodied Punjabi lady, who used to do just about as much work in the fields as a man would back in the day. In death, however, her bones were sticking out. Her cheekbones were so hollow. I remember telling myself to look at her fully, but the truth was, I really wanted to turn away.

It was difficult for me to get adjusted to sleeping without her in my room. I never knew what it was like to have my own space. The room felt wider than before. The walls seemed taller, and somehow more distant from each other. I would spend my nights tossing and turning, or staring blankly at the ceiling. Once, when I couldn't get any shut-eye in the middle of the night, I got up and just looked at her queen-size bed. All her pillows were laid out exactly the way she used to set them. Four large, rectangular head pillows, one tall bolster and one tiny *bantal busuk*—all in their regular spots. I didn't know if she had left them behind this way.

When she was alive, it was a clear routine during bedtime—roll her to the washroom, change her pampers, tuck her in with her red velvet blanket and give her a soft kiss good night. Sometimes, before she fell asleep, she would trail off to tell me stories of her childhood. She would tell me about her time in Punjab, the games she played with her neighbours, and how everything changed when her brother went missing during Partition. On other days, she would tell me what was bothering her. More often than not, it was almost always about her out-of-job daughter who was harassing her for money. I would always listen more intently when she spoke about these things.

I became desperate then to see a doctor. I went to the polyclinic, and the doctor referred me to a sleep psychologist. After I told her that I hadn't slept for three months, the sleep psychologist asked, "Did anything different happen to you of late? Has anything significant changed in your life?"

That was it. It didn't take me more than ten seconds. I was bawling uncontrollably for the first time in months. I remember going to work one day, groggy, cursing myself for taking so many panadol the night before. Suddenly my chest felt heavy and I would break down in the bus, with people around me staring. I would be talking to a colleague in the office regarding a work-related thing and the next thing I knew, I would be sniffling away, distracted by my own thoughts. At a good friend's baby shower, I was not able to have a conversation without bringing up my grandmother's death. Everywhere I went, she followed me.



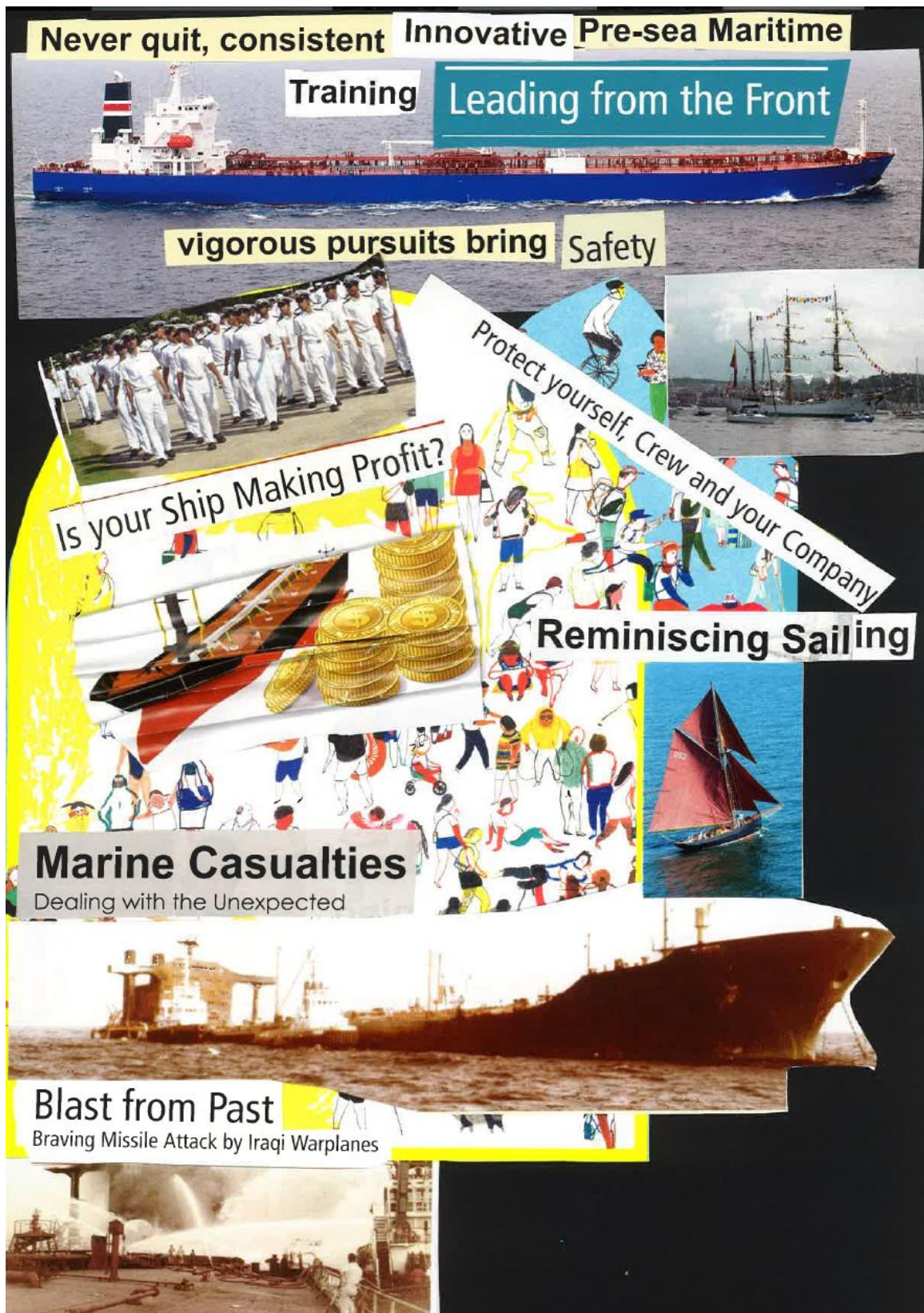
### **Joining the Magnificent Training Ship, by Ancient Mariner**

A perennially wandering seafarer who swallowed the anchor to settle ashore,  
but learnt that wandering is unending.

I entered the dining area with joy and expectations for a sumptuous lunch on the first day at my training ship. I had arrived at Mazagon pier, Mumbai that morning, where I waited with 79 of my batchmates enjoying the morning drizzle. I felt exuberant spotting the elegant and majestic-looking Training Ship "D", which beckoned us from about 2 miles offshore. A British Navy Troop Carrier in service from February 1905 had been converted into a naval training ship in November 1927. It had the distinction of training famous naval officers until 1971, and I was there from 1970 -1971.

I felt so proud to be ascending the gangway of this hallowed training ship. It was going to be my home for the next two years. I was also very hungry by then and looked forward to lunch.

Sitting at the dining table in the hall with my batchmates, I felt ravenous and involuntarily dug my hand into the food instead of using a fork and knife. A senior cadet captain snarled at me from the head of the table, "You, fucking son of a syphilicated whore! Want to eat like a shitty ape?" I turned crimson with embarrassment, and I quickly pulled my hand back. A friendly cadet on my left kicked me and then guided me gently to use the cutlery. I wolfed down my lunch without looking up again.



After lunch, we were taken to the bottom of a cavernous hold, which would be my living quarters. I unpacked my steel trunk and laid out my clothes neatly into the tiny wooden locker provided and hung my uniform. At 4pm I went down again to the dining area, looking forward to having a cup of tea. The tea was piping hot, and the embarrassment from my lunchtime still lingered, so I used the saucer to pour the hot tea so I could gulp it quickly and leave. Just as I was about to take a sip from the saucer, the same senior cadet manifested himself and the next thing I heard was, "You bloody cunt! This is not your village shop to drink tea!" I learnt some useful lessons in dining etiquette that day.

I hoped my sleep would be blissful, but it was not meant to be. I quickly changed into my pajamas. A senior cadet on duty came hollering from nowhere and began beating me with a wooden hanger, which finally broke on me. Bruised and hurt, I followed the other cadets to the deck with my mattress and pillow. I dozed off within minutes, but soon I was rudely awoken as the pillow was whisked off from under my head. I cursed and let the matter rest as I was petrified of the creative punishment I would be subjected to yet again.

Such nightmarish activities became commonplace during my junior year. However, the thought of fees already paid, the time lost and the ignominy of not having stood up to the adversity faced, like so many others who had come before me there, kept me going.

∞

**Comma, by frostyautumn**

Jack of all trades, master of none.

Doing my best to help one step at a time.

I am immersed in sadness as I face another rejection from a crush after confessing. I decide to end it all and leave this world. There is no reason for me to stay any longer. Nobody cares. I am useless, worthless, and unlovable.

The next thing I know, I've drunk some shampoo from a travel-sized bottle. Then I call the group of friends that I last met. They rush over to my house. They tell me to try vomiting out the shampoo that I swallowed earlier. After a few attempts, it seems like nothing works.

We then went to A&E and I got myself checked. The doctor certified that I was fine and did not need to get my stomach pumped. I was then referred to the Institute of Mental Health (IMH). My friends and I went to get my parents before heading to IMH.

I saw the worried look on my parents' faces, and the seriousness of the matter finally sank in. "What have I done?" I thought to myself. "I have made my parents worry so much, and it is the middle of the night. They should not be here. None of us should be."

So I went through a doctor's assessment at IMH and I was not diagnosed with any mental illness. By the time we went home, it was already two o'clock in the morning.

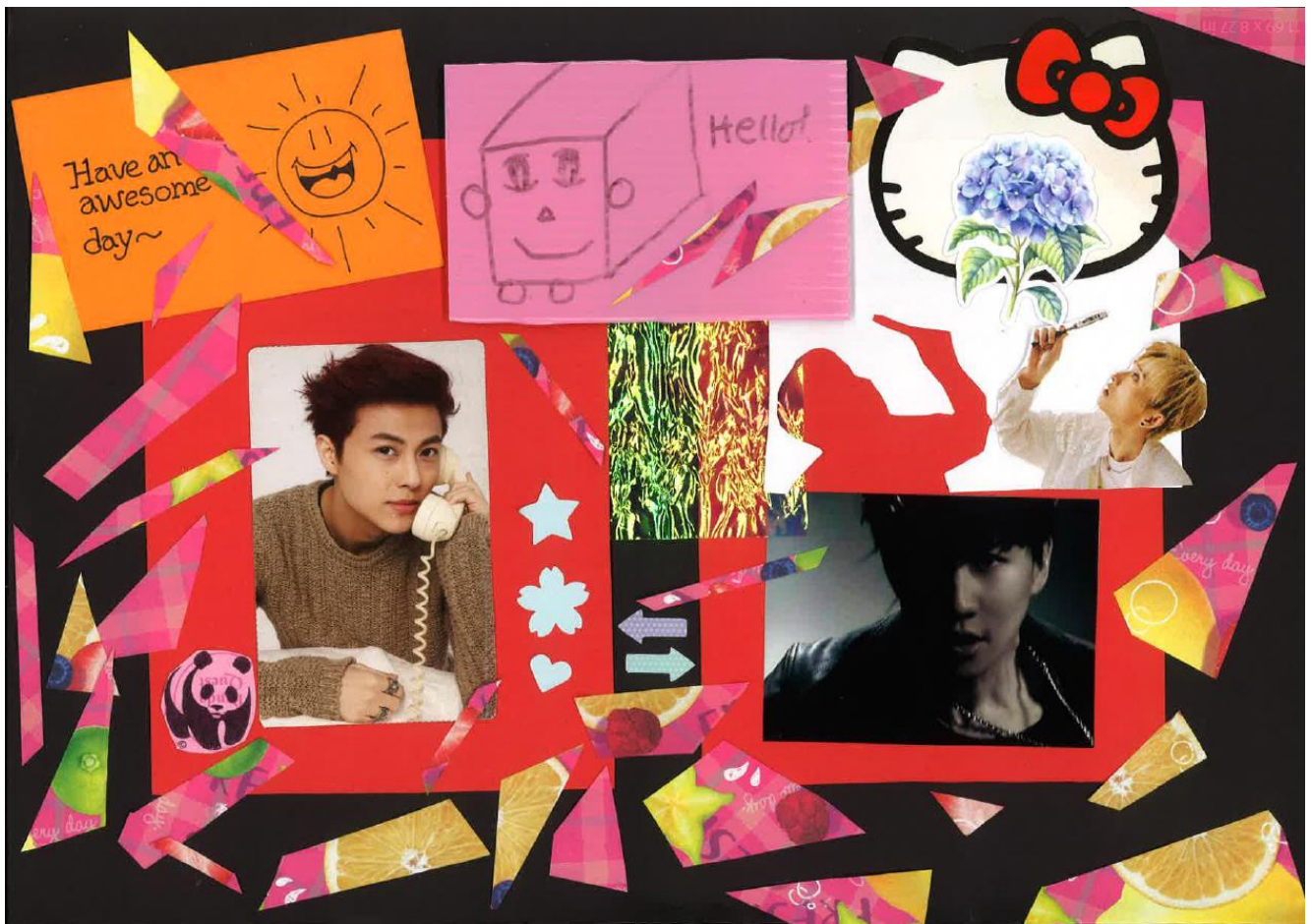
I got called to my dad's room for the same matter the next day, and he wanted to know why I did what I did. "Because you and mummy are having a cold war, and I am stressed about school," I said. I was 16 and having my 'O' Levels that year, but saying that the main trigger was confessing to boys and getting rejected just sounds awkward.

My parents were having a cold war because my dad cheated. My mum did not know how to face him, and I was the messenger who passed messages to and fro between them. Why? Simply because I had the best relationship with my parents among my siblings.

I took sick leave from school for two days because of this incident. My mum did not want to blow this matter up, so she told me to lie to my form teacher. Me, being the honest kid, told the truth.

This got me into a counseling session with the school counsellor and one of my form teachers. You can bet on how angry my mum was when she got notified by the teacher.

This was my first and last suicide attempt, though it was not my last attempt at self-harm. But fret not, because I am at peace with myself now.



**Untitled, by Tan Lin-Li Jaime**

Mid-forties woman with a passion for animals, especially pugs.

My therapist suddenly cut me off halfway and said, "Why are you so hard on yourself?"

I was stunned. Nobody had ever told me this.

He continued, "Someone must have been hard on you; that's why you are so hard on yourself. Maybe a parent or a teacher was hard on you when you were young?"

In my mind, a scene from my childhood started to appear. I was just six years old and was about to enter Primary One in about a month's time. I vaguely remember that in my kindergarten days, all we ever did was play, drink Milo, sleep and sing songs. It was such carefree and happy times. I learnt nothing academically and could not even speak a single word of English. My mom was worried because my new Primary One teacher was Malay, and I had no idea how to tell the teacher I needed to go to the toilet in English.

My dad, who probably feared that I could not catch up in school, started forcing me to memorise the multiplication table. "No dinner for you tonight if you cannot memorise it by today!" I vaguely remember learning my 2x3, 2x4, etc. one day and moving on to 3x3, 3x4, the next day. He would scold and cane me whenever I could not remember, and I was crying every day while being forced to memorise the

multiplication tables. I remember doing something in my desperation for the first time. I cheated. I scribbled the answers onto a small piece of paper, crumpled it, and hid it under the chair. It was scary but I had no choice.

In the end, I did eventually memorise the entire multiplication table in a month before school started. Looking back, I was always in the best class and also among the top ten students in class. I would constantly push myself to work hard and get the best results, and I did. I got a few Edusave bursary awards in my secondary school days, scoring 7 As in my 'O' levels and a few other academic awards during my student days. Despite all these achievements, I do not remember my parents ever praising me or giving me any single compliment. Nay, nil, nothing. Maybe that is the way Asian parents behave, being stingy about giving praises and always comparing you to other children, making you feel inadequate or inferior about yourself. Somehow, fast forward to the present day, my parents and my in-laws who were so harsh to their own children, were totally different when it came to their grandchildren.

"Oh, so clever..." or "good job!" is what they would often say whenever the kid did or said anything. Even a trivial thing like tying their shoelaces, singing the National Anthem or drawing a picture would earn them heaps of praises and encouragement. Honestly, I find that disgusting.

Being hard on myself was not something I was even aware of. To me, it was just a natural instinct to survive. ∞



### **The Scare, by Suzanne Ng**

Suzanne Ng; mom, wife, wellpreneur and student of life.

The insurance rejection letter arrived on a Tuesday, sandwiched between a grocery store flyer and a coupon for discounted walking aids. "Declined", it declared with bureaucratic coldness. Declined because of what, exactly, it didn't specify, but the implication was clear: I was a walking time bomb, ticking down to oblivion.

Panic set in. Was I going to die? Just as I was about to start the best years of my life with a gorgeous two-year-old and a cranky but wonderful husband? Granted, I wasn't exactly a picture of health. Every month, the dreaded three days of suffering began, and as a result, my iron reserves were about as robust as a wet napkin. But death? Really? At this point, the most dangerous thing about me was my questionable taste in K-dramas and short clips.

Then there was Nikky. My two-year-old whirlwind of love who, at the moment, was attempting the Barney dance and diligently going through her must-read eleven books a day, not to mention the daily redecoration of the living room with her army of toys.

Suddenly, "Declined" didn't just sound bureaucratic; it sounded terrifying. Panic gnawed at me like a particularly enthusiastic hamster. So, I did what any sensible, slightly hysterical new mother would do: I started making farewell videos and drafting long letters for her to read.

The first one featured me, sporting impressive dark circles and a strained smile, wishing Nikky a happy second birthday. Carrying her in my arms and looking into the mirror, I said, "Remember, honey,"—choking back a sob—"even if I'm not here... Mommy loves you more than all the sparkly unicorns in the world combined." And I proceeded to record it, just in case.

"Dramatic, isn't it?" my husband, Chi, teased, leaning against the doorway. "Come on, you'll outlive us all with your sheer stubbornness."

"Maybe," I muttered, "but better safe than sorry." And I continued to record every aspect of our lives together. Just in case.

Years blurred into a montage of birthday messages, meticulously crafted photo albums, and a will that read more like a rambling love letter to Nikky. My best friend, Ida, endured my theatrics with saintly patience, promising to be Nikky's guardian upon my death (an angel nevertheless, with slightly less glitter and a whole lot more sense).

"Ida, if something happens to me, you'll take care of Nikky, right?" I asked one day.

Ida laughed and said, "Of course, but stop talking like that. You're not going anywhere."

Now, at fifty-six, with Nikky a flourishing young lady at 15, I laugh at the memory of my insurance-fuelled meltdown. It was a brush with death, all right—a brush that taught me to live, to love fiercely, and to never underestimate the power of a good scare to jumpstart your appreciation for a well-lived life.

The fear of death didn't vanish entirely, but it became a background hum, drowned out by the symphony of Nikky's laughter and the chaos of everyday life.

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### **A Passage into Myself, by Uma Melarcode**

Uma is a dreamer, storyteller, mother, and passionate educator who has embarked on a journey of exploring writing and self-discovery. She loves the libraries in Singapore, which are her sanctuaries, and has been volunteering as a children's storyteller for almost two decades. Her favourite comic is *Peanuts* by Charles Schulz.

The air smelt of coffee, toast, curried potatoes, and steaming hot basmati rice. I storm out of the shimmering heat of the kitchen with packed lunch boxes to the table. The morning rush to school has always been a whirlwind. Finally, I settle down with my cuppa, inhaling the aroma, and just as I take a sip, my alarm jolts me from my reverie.

"Oh no, not the same dream again!" I mutter, turning off the alarm and waking up to begin another day. Well, my days are typically the same as a homemaker, but now I no longer have to race against time to cook, serve, or pack lunchboxes. My maternal duties have been reduced since my only daughter moved overseas to study.

I felt like a part of me was missing with only myself and my husband at home. The emptiness and silence felt strange. A loss of purpose and anxiety engulfed me. I waited edgily for my daughter's text messages and calls.

I broke down when my sister called me. "I feel listless..." my dreary voice dwindled.

My husband's career brought us to Singapore, our home now for over two decades. As a new migrant, with no family support, it was a struggle. I chose to be a

homemaker. Being a trailing spouse, I had to give up my job in India. Adapting to the new culture and experiences here, embracing motherhood, and trying to build a community was daunting. For years I was invested in creating a home and a sense of belonging here while striving to keep up my traditional values. I identified myself totally as a homemaker, giving most of my time with little for myself or my interests. And now I was again thrown out of my comfort zone that I had built.

Although I had heard from friends and read about it, the empty nest felt like a new world to navigate. I had made sense of Singapore's education system as my daughter schooled. The rites of passage—the PSLE, A levels, umpteen visits to Popular bookstore, kiosks selling top 10 past year exam papers, *kiasu* parents, enrichment, and tuition—were all part of the jigsaw puzzle that I put together to make sense of the world around us.

But as days turned into weeks and months, I gathered strength and embarked on a journey of self-discovery, a passage into myself. I returned to hobbies I loved but that had taken a back seat due to time constraints. I found joy in volunteering as a storyteller for children at the libraries. The nurturer in me found solace in gardening. Yoga, spiritual practice, music, writing, reading, and talking to my friends and extended family in India helped me tide over this phase.

Now, I do not feel the emptiness echoing. The silence of my nest feels like a calm zone for me to refocus on myself and explore new things: a new chapter of life, rediscovering my passions and my purpose. ∞



**Burn Baby Burn, by Trishnu Kaur**

Trishnu, despite it all, still believes in the healing power of love and chai and words.

It is an ungodly hour, dark outside. My partner's asleep. Slowly, I slip my hand between my legs. I move my fingers along the inside of my right thigh in rhythm to the shadows dancing across the ceiling: twine-jab-prong-stroke-twine-jab-prong-stroke

The shadows dance faster. My fingers move faster, harder.

My partner mumbles in his sleep. I freeze. He turns away from me. I remove my fingers from my thigh. They come away wet, sticky, smelling of rust. My body burns with shame. I kiss his shoulder, a coward's apology. He doesn't stir. I creep out of bed.

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In the kitchen, I grab a fork and light the stove. I move my fingers along the fork in rhythm to the orange-blue flames dancing like lovers: twine-jab-prong-stroke-twine-jab-prong-stroke

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My mother holds a fork over the dancing flames.

"You know Auntie Kamala's a nurse, right?" She says this as if she's about to tell me a secret. Nobody's mother tells them adult-secrets the way mine does. I'm only nine years old but my mother tells me everything. We're best friends.

I nod.

She turns off the gas. "She said the tongue heals the fastest because our saliva is antiseptic. So I can burn you there but you won't be able to talk or eat for a few days. Then your teacher and classmates will ask why, and I'll have to tell them the truth about you."

I start to cry. "Ma, please don't. I'm so sorry, Ma. I promise I'll come straight home after sch-"

She points the fork at me. "Stop these crocodile tears! If you don't stop crying, I'll jump out the window!"

I scream as she lunges towards the window, pressing her body over the ledge.

"Shut your mouth," she hisses.

I clasp my hands over my mouth, tears streaming down my face. I want to pull her to me, but I'm scared to go near her.

"Or I can burn you where no one sees." She turns around and sighs as if the fight has left her body. "I'm doing this for your own good, you know. Even when you make me angry, I just want to protect you so no one will know what a bad child you are. That's how much I love you."

I wipe my tears away, hating myself for being evil when my kind, beautiful mother is so merciful. I don't deserve her.

"Where no one sees," I whisper. She nods approvingly and lights the stove again.

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Where-No-One-Sees is an island on the inside of my right thigh and becomes Where-No-One-Touches for the next two decades. My scar becomes my scarlet letter.

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I hold the fork over the flame, count to 10, then turn off the gas. I press the fork against the fabric of my shorts and feel the heat against my skin. Immediately, I drop the fork into the sink and leave the kitchen.

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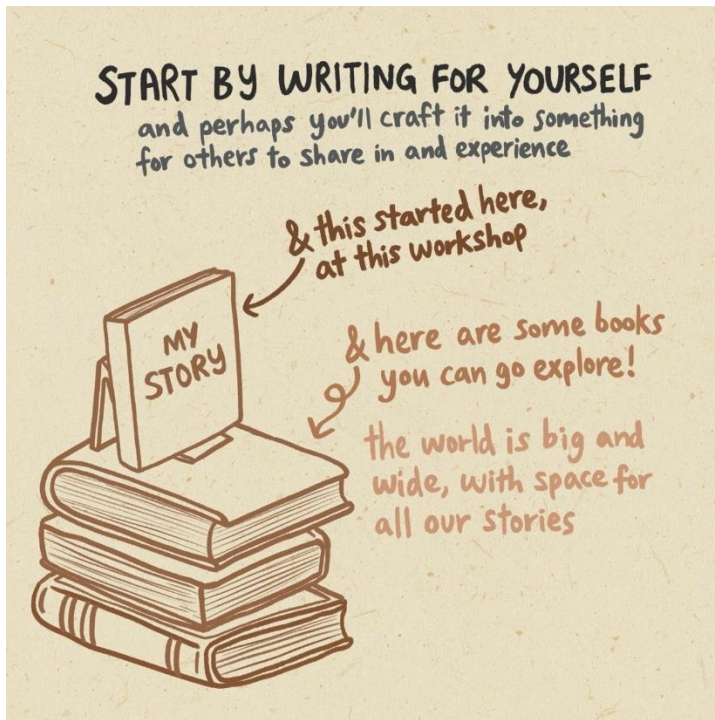
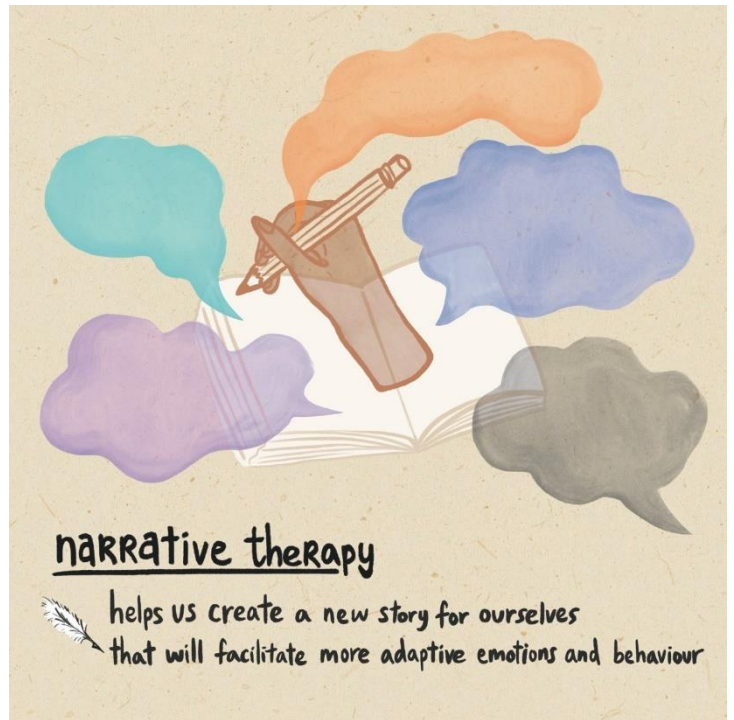
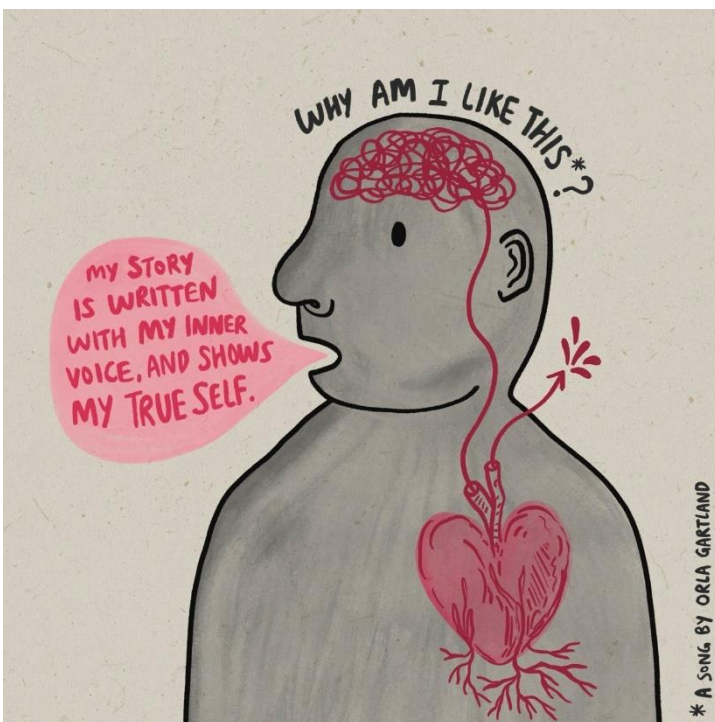
I sit on the toilet and wash the dried blood from my thigh. The skin there has been clawed apart by an animal in the night. I let the water run until the burning stops.

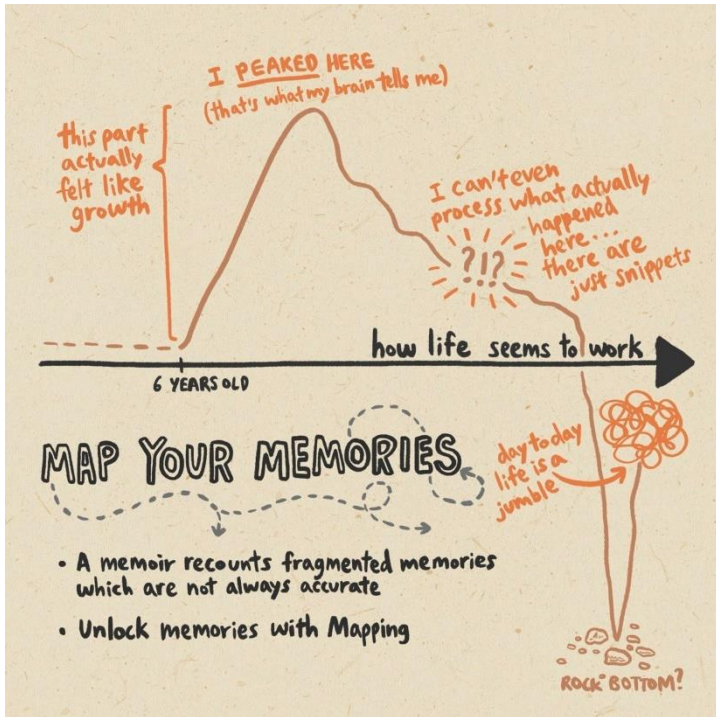
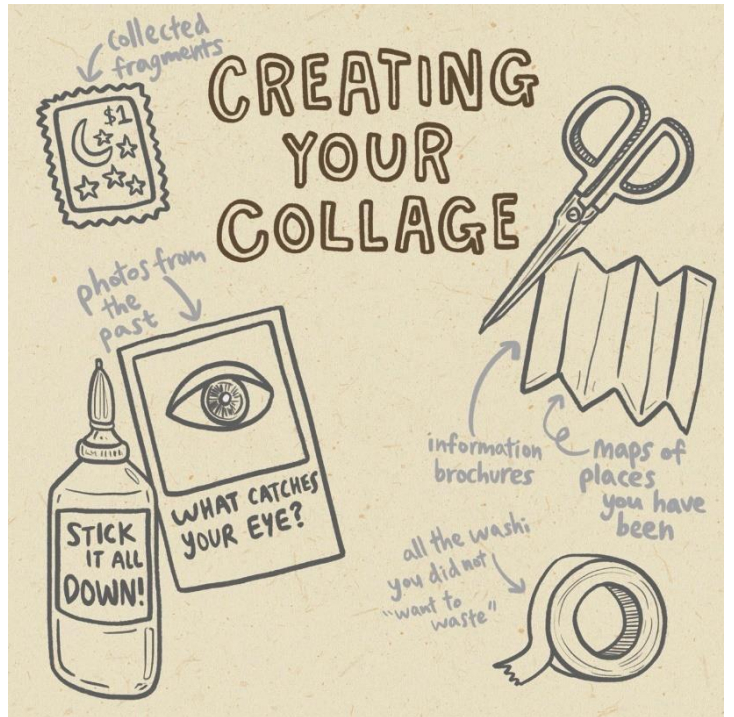
It is a godly hour, light outside. Now I know with certainty: I could never hurt anyone the way she hurt me.

∞



## Visual Notes of the Workshop Sessions by @annaonni





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