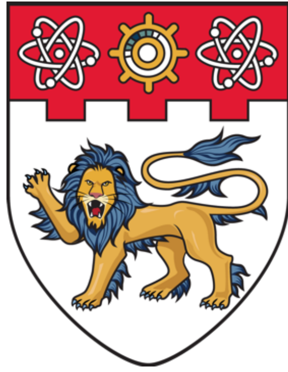

NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
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SINGAPORE

AFTER THE FALL (DIRGES AMONG RUINS) AND *BAHAU QUILT*: CONFESSING AND UNWEAVING THE SELF

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

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After the Fall (dirges among ruins) and *Bahau Quilt*: Confessing and Unweaving the Self

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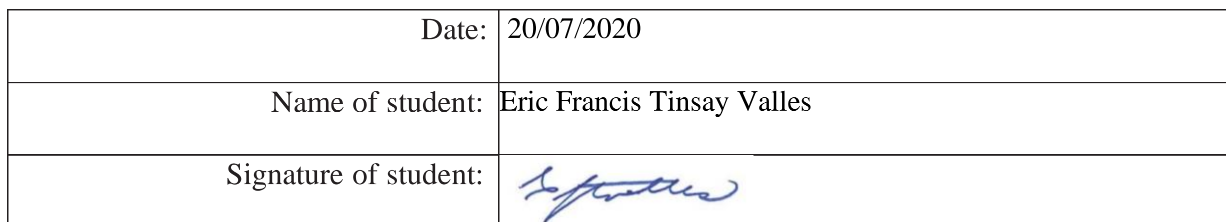
School of Humanities

A dissertation submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2020

Statement of Originality

I certify that all work submitted for this dissertation is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.



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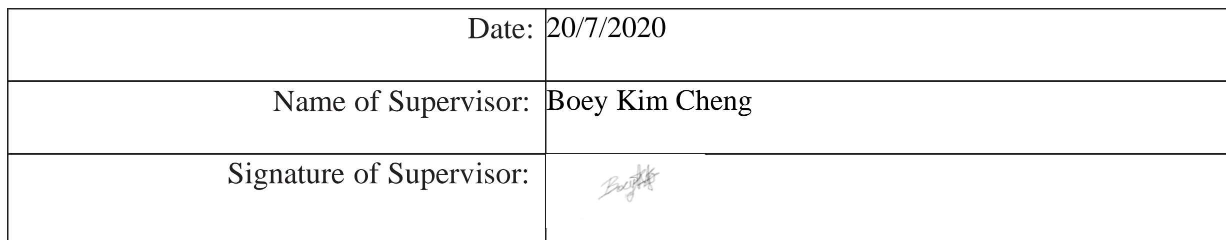

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Authorship Attribution Statement

This dissertation contains material from commentary and poems published in the following books in which I am listed as an author.

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Dr. Jennifer Crawford and Dr. Divya Victor provided the initial project direction and gave feedback on the manuscript drafts.

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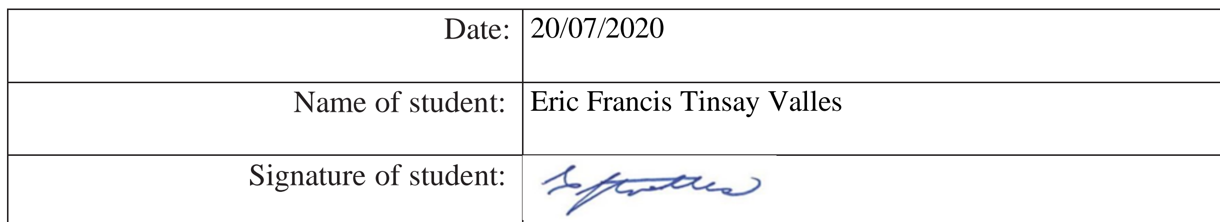

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SUMMARY

This two-part dissertation seeks to explore various strategies in writing poetry on wartime trauma in English-speaking South-East Asia. It fits in with recent studies that examine poetry within the context of war. The study will draw largely on relevant ideas and strategies of Walter Benjamin, the proto-trauma critic, on epic writing, and other more contemporary critics on the poetry of witness. It argues that poetic genres that embrace hybridity with storytelling and empathetic appropriation can mediate experiences of traumatic conflicts, especially World War II. These genres, namely the long poem and the verse novel, also perform the act of witnessing against the objectification of the other. This study expands the scope of literary scholarship in the region to include trauma studies. It also shifts the focus of the latter away from an Anglo-European centre to include wartime Malaya. The creative writing section recreates the repetition of linguistic structures and imagery in trauma accounts in *Bahau Quilt* through the *anima methodi* poetic form in the protagonist Francisco "Chico" Pereira's discourse. In his dying days, Chico recollects memories of his wife Lourdes, the suave but treacherous Formosan Lieutenant Lee Guo Zhi and the birth of one whom Chico considers as his own daughter, Christine. It is only after retelling their intertwining stories that he achieves healing and redemption. Christine, in turn, completes this task by including her mother Lourdes's diary entries and Lieutenant Lee's poems and letter in what constitutes a Bahau quilt. The creative writing section concludes with a recreation of trauma poems by Chico and Christine in *After the Fall (dirges among ruins).*

EXEGESIS

INTRODUCTION
BUILDING BLOCKS OF MEMORIES

South-East Asian poetry in English is flourishing in multiple new verse forms such as twin cinema, *anima methodi*, asingbol, zoetrope and liwuli (*Southeast Asian Poetic Forms*). It is the subject of research from almost every critical concern such as identity, post-colonialism and iconography and from the vantage of Modernist, post-Modernist and other literary styles. But what is absent from the poetic scene in Malaysia and Singapore is also striking: long narrative poems and verse novels that are responses to historical traumas. There have been notable studies on poetry in English from the two countries using, for instance, a cultural historical lens (Patke 2000), a survey of individual poets through post-colonial and transnational viewpoints (Poon 2009) and even from a formal institutionalized viewpoint of "reconceptualizing literature's place in the contemporary Singapore's education system" (Holden 2000). But the hidden wounds in the psyche – that is, traumas -- marking the intertwining histories of Malaysia and Singapore, especially during World War II, have not been dealt with in long poetic forms. This situation is anomalous, because the "good war" -- that is, World War II, in which the murderous and rapacious attitude of the Japanese aggressors was unmistakable -- at least in the eyes of the Western colonisers -- hastened self-rule and independence movements throughout the region. World War II was undeniably "a major watershed, an event … [putting] an end to the old order and … [creating] a new" (Kratoska 1). Largely on account of the severity of those psychological wounds, however, the primary war victims and witnesses there have been mute. But absence does not make poetic writing about that war any less necessary. If poetry is "the true criticism of life, and its characteristics are high truth and high seriousness" (Peck 319), then poetry on World War II could provide these sibling nations a deliberate and honest evaluation of their past. Poetry could help process historical traumas consciously and, consequently, grasp them in a mature and nuanced manner. The after-effects of those traumas linger in the victims and their families. The protracted denial is lamentable.

It is imperative for such a historical milestone to be remembered in art, especially poetry. As the witnesses of World War II pass away, they take their memories with them. As their war testimonies become ever more distant, the subsequent generations are left impoverished in their mediated knowledge of the Japanese occupation, World War II and the resultant trauma.

The communication of unconscious wounds in a war context through verse is a significant step toward the literary development of societies, as can be gleaned from the experience of the Anglo-Pacific pair of Australia and New Zealand. Representing trauma suggests the initial stage of social healing. It also indicates a mature reading public that is ready to relive trauma, in a manner of speaking, by engaging with "this hungry recovery of past conflict: (Wallace-Crabbe and Pierce 12). When scruples about historicity are bracketed in order to let the imagination soar, war poetry becomes possible. A comparison between Malaysia and Singapore with the Anzac countries in this field is appropriate. These countries share a colonial and linguistic history. Each pair exhibits close bilateral ties between the constituent countries. More significantly for this study, they have a common experience of trauma during World War II. Australia and New Zealand contributed the bulk of the soldiers who defended Singapore until its fall against the Japanese invaders on February 15, 1942. The Anzac soldiers were subsequently interned as prisoners of war at Changi Prison. The ANZAC countries have generated World War II-themed plays, short fiction, memoirs and novels, a few of which have become "runaway best sellers … selling more than half a million copies" (Coates 152). Among the war memoirs are those about internment of Australian soldiers and civilians in Singapore such as Kevin Balckburn's *The Sportsmen of Changi* and Sheila Allan's *Diary of a Girl in Changi*. The two countries have also published a wide array of war poetry that approaches that of the UK in terms of quantity, if not quality. The range of that war poetry is quite broad, spanning Leon Gellert's testimonial poems from the Gallipoli battlefield to Les Murray's reminiscences of the wars, "The Burning Truck" and "The Trainee, 1914" in his first collection *The Ilex Tree* and C.D. Griffin's love poem "Changi Impromptu." For the Anzac countries as well as Malaysia and Singapore, the UK's abandonment of its dominions and colonies in the face of the Japanese war juggernaut

was a turning point in the establishment of their respective national identities. It also initiated a flourishing in the literary arts, even in poetry.

This dissertation seeks to explore various strategies in and approaches to writing poetry on wartime trauma in Anglo-Southeast Asia. It accords with recent studies that examine poetry within the story of war. This study will draw largely on relevant ideas and methodologies that evaluate the complexities of poetry and wartime trauma. These include ideas on epic writing from Walter Benjamin, the proto-trauma critic, in "The Storyteller" and those of the languages of witnessing and empathetic appropriation by more contemporary critics such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. This writer postulates that poetic genres that embrace hybridity with storytelling and trans-creation can mediate traumatic conflicts, especially World War II. These genres, namely the long poem and the verse novel, also perform witnessing against the objectification of the other. This study will identify key features of these genres through brief readings of works by wartime witnesses Francis Ng Poh Leng and Paul Celan as well as empathetic witnesses Robin Robertson and Charles Reznikoff. In the process, it will examine to some extent a witness's or subject's language in relation to his or her cultural memory, traditions and wartime history. Among the questions this study seeks to raise are as follows: Could an attempt at rendering trauma in art, particularly the long poem or the verse novel, promote social healing with the knowledge that such a project has inherent limitations? Could this attempt reinforce the identity of peoples that have survived victimhood and galvanize their societies against future invaders or repressive regimes that could perpetrate similar atrocities?

Bahau Quilt and this exegesis expand the scope of literary scholarship in and about Malayan letters to include trauma studies. It also shifts the focus of the latter away from an Anglo-European or Western centre to include wartime Malaya as delineated not only in historiography but also in poetry. Such a project can be a means to record the entire breadth of the region's cultural memory and to negotiate with stark historical realities that are neither fully comprehensible nor communicable. This is a long-term goal in poetic writing in the region that has been anticipated by Singaporean literary scholars. Gwee Li Sui suggests the Singaporean polity's acceptance of the "mythic, pre-modern, colonial, […] even national past" as much as

it does of state-sanctioned narratives (200). Kirpal Singh offers a prescription for such a project of poetic testimonials about the past. He writes, "Only by virtue of a comprehensive memory can epic writing absorb the course of events." He cites as vital prerequisites for writing about Singapore and its past "forthrightness and candour" (file:///C:/Users/nhseftv/Downloads/32745-Article%20Text-85707-1-10-20090630%20(2).pdf). That comprehensive memory encompasses periods of conflict. Perhaps the passing of seventy-five years after World War II provides enough psychic distance to make writers and critics here less anxious about revisiting old pains and processing them as part of their society's story. Conflict and war, in fact, have provided rich fodder for poetic works in the Malayan peninsula in the past. The first English translation of a literary work in Singapore is an epic narrative of battles, the iconic *Sejarah Melayu* or *Malay Annals* (1821). Singapore's first published long poem, *FMSR* (1935), is a series of observations of the aftermath of World War I in Malaya. Hybrid poetic forms such as the long poem and the verse novel ought to be included in this tradition of bearing witness. They can shed light on unpalatable truths, even societal failures, of World War II in this part of the world.

This study belongs to contemporary trauma studies, a relatively new but vital critical theory field born in the 1990s, only one generation after Singapore became an independent republic. More specifically, this study critiques notable World War II poems, both in the West and Singapore, that exemplify genres and writing methodologies that give witness to wartime trauma. At a time when Singapore is coming to terms with past traumas such as the flourishing of the opium trade and secret societies during its founding as a trading port, it is perhaps opportune to call to mind also the Japanese occupation and the relocation of Eurasian and Chinese Catholic Singaporeans to Bahau in Negeri Sembilan, Malaya[1] during that period. There can be no recovery from trauma unless the challenge of facing defeat, death and loss is taken.

Trauma studies have gained a considerable following, and literature on this area is "voluminous" (Laugesen and Fisher 5). The relative success of cultural studies in the study of poetry and other literary works from Malaysia and Singapore, however, has had as an unintended consequence the stunted growth of other literary studies, such as on trauma, in the region. Many researchers and critics in the Malayan

peninsula are drawn to lay stake in more prominent or more familiar fields. Philip Holden, for instance, has called attention to the necessity of contemporary theory as "a powerful tool for critical and creative thinking" (47). His primary focus is on discourse analysis and, not surprisingly, cultural studies in the context of the school curriculum. Holden's idea, however, may be applied also to poetry as a means to examine the devastating past and its legacies on the present "reality" in Singapore. He recommends a critical view of what is perceived as "discourse." John Phillips, in turn, analyzes urban structures with an idea from Benjamin's review of Franz Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin* (*On Foot in Berlin*), specifically the contrast between studying (*studieren*) and learning (*lernen*), to Arthur Yap's lyric poetry and, beyond it, Singapore's futuristic architecture. According to Phillips, the goal of the official history and poetry of Singapore is to examine its diverse cultures, "[to take] it as an object to be analyzed and otherwise accounted for" while to learn, as gleaned from [Arthur] Yap's poetry, is "to become transformed by experience" (146). The latter process is of interest to this dissertation as it necessitates the awareness of past pains and acknowledgment of vulnerability "to lose the most in terms of 'face'" (Stahl 25). This is also similar to what Benjamin calls "cultural memory," the result of learning "the senses of change and transformation, as well as the relative permanence and impermanence of people and places some of which remain while others are palpably … lost in some principle of renewal or decay" (Phillips 146). Singapore's ever-changing urban landscape, just like the exile of Singaporeans to Bahau in World War II, becomes a site of trauma based on its people's apprehension of its reality.

The challenge of narrating wartime experience through poetry is not taken here as a springboard for research into another field such as education or architecture but on poetry's own terms and as a "re-enactment" of a community's horrific past. This task does not in any way undermine narratives of successes of which Singapore has had a significant share in its short history. Poetry could be harnessed as a medium for exploring traces of a dark, still largely unspeakable episode in the history of Malaya and Singapore. The social trauma generated by that episode is contextualized in the peoples' cultures. The trauma, however, remains unresolved, largely because it has been "[denied] recuperative, truth-telling practices" (Stahl 2018 25). It is sad that many of those in the current generation of youths lack knowledge of World War

II other than of the most rudimentary facts acquired from school commemorations of Total Defence Day, which coincides with the Fall of Singapore.

The interpretive framework of this dissertation is derived mainly from Benjamin in his seminal essay "The Storyteller" and selected contemporary trauma theorists on the study of exemplars of the lyric poem, the long poem and the verse novel in order to shed light on the articulation of wartime trauma. Benjamin enriches perspectives on the articulation of wartime trauma long before the latter becomes an academic discipline. He speaks of rhetoric as "the art of repeating stories" in order to perpetuate fragile memory (149). Besides silence, this is, in fact, a primary means that many witnesses of war adopt in order to recollect their experiences. Benjamin invests tremendous effort in describing the limits of language amid trauma as a writer of both memoirs and literary criticism. His response and approach to trauma can open up paths of engagement and even solidarity with other modes of understanding and interrogating the incommunicability of World War II. Benjamin's giving witness in a literary text involves a secularized *caritas*, a desire to communicate a universal truth that is incarnated in a visible order. For a poet versifying a first-hand witness's account, this is "the condition of not being …[one]self—that is, as one who negotiates the construction and dispersal of selfhood in language" (Richter 221). The poet, therefore, becomes an other to the self as he or she appropriates a witness's experiences with empathy. He or she is a chronicler working for no other goal loftier than the knowledge of natural phenomena. Remembering in the act of writing war poetry then is marked by a constant transformation or becoming, what has been mentioned earlier as "learning" a cultural memory. Benjamin does so as he observes of Hessel in *Spazieren in Berlin*, with detailed descriptions of changes in the environment of his human subjects. In *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Benjamin charts the transformation of his neighbourhood loggias, with details that reveal trauma such as "the palm tree [that] looked homeless" (345).

Benjamin's work dovetails with those of two other important writers on trauma, Maurice Blanchot and Primo Levi.

In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot reflects on the dissolution of experience that follows a traumatic experience. Blanchot writes, "The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact" …. "I" am not threatened by it,

but spared, left aside. It is in this way that I am threatened; ….” [1] The disaster is its imminence … but the disaster is perhaps passivity, and thus past, always past, even in the past, out of date” [2]). This corresponds with Benjamin’s observation of the “irretrievability” of the past in *Berlin Childhood* (344). Blanchot implicates language (“the literary *parole*” (Gregg 18) as conniving to the destruction wrought by a disaster. Language, after all, obliterates the object (something that exists outside of oral language) that it seeks to describe. It enshrines the object in the symbolic realm as an idea. But language then becomes yet another object, with a materiality on the page similar to its intended object in the world. Words appear, for instance, as arrangements of letters in different kinds of typefaces. Thus, arriving at some semblance of the true traumatic experience is always elusive.

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi shows the unreliability of the memories of Holocaust survivors, Nazi agents and the modern-day generation. They resort to denials, justifications and categorical statements as strategies to cope with the horrors of the concentration camps. This situation is worsened by the destruction of much evidence of the existence of the camps and the carnage therein. Both victims and their oppressors rely on stereotypical representations of each other. It is difficult to ascertain who are the good and the bad in the camps. Some victims aid the perpetrators of violence. Some of the guards aid those interned. Outsiders such as gypsies are given the responsibility to discipline the others. The Lager prisoners endure a deep sense of shame. Some resort to silence, others to outright lies and elaborate fiction in order to suppress their dark secrets or to shirk responsibility. There is, for instance, a mother of a Nazi soldier who thinks of an incredible tale of how her son helped prisoners and ended up in a sanatorium.

In one chapter, the Nazi regime shows brutality by enhancing the prisoners’ collective agony. In another, Hans Mayer/Jean Améry explains in a level-headed manner the advantages and disadvantages of being an intellectual in an atmosphere like the Lager. This experience is repeated in Levi’s correspondence with intellectual types who take pains to explain how utterly helpless everyone is. Non-intellectuals seem to cope better, because they do not have to rationalize their complicity, and believers have a better chance of survival because they look beyond the current hell. "Stereotypes" explain how thoughts of escape, rebellion, and evading capture are

romantic and far-fetched. Levi surmises that in our current age, there might not be a safe haven from nuclear destruction. In the penultimate section, Levi makes some observations about the responses to the German translation of his memoir in Auschwitz. The snippets of the letters demonstrate much of what Levi has written about memory, guilt, and giving witness. The conclusion suggests the dangers of new generations considering Holocaust writings as anachronistic and unrepeatable.

This exegesis takes into account the fraught relations between poetic genres and psychological trauma in the context of World War II and other conflicts. The first chapter explores the verse novel and the long poem as the narrative frame for limning traumatic pain. The first is a hybrid genre that represents and performs the irretrievability of trauma. The second allows the poet to exercise free play in his or her imagination in verse in isolation from the concerns of the day. The second chapter considers trauma per se as a big, catch-all word that finds a place in both psychology and literature. It is a paradoxical situation of being simultaneously present and absent in a text through symbolic language. The third and last chapter dissects World War II experiences as part of a shared cultural memory. These experiences could be derived first-hand from trauma witnesses such as in Celan's poetry or mediated through court transcripts and interview notes, as in Reznikoff's objective poetry.

My lyric poetry cycle *After the Fall (dirges among ruins)* and verse novel *Bahau Quilt*, in turn, interrogate traumatic historical events, especially World War II, to map out and delineate genres and techniques informed by the theoretical work of Benjamin. The main approach is from the perspective not of a literary theory expert but of a trauma studies-informed researcher learning from a few outstanding exemplars of these poetic forms and methodologies. Primary or secondary witnesses of war violence are neither mere objects nor inert bits of information. They are subjects capable of weaving experiences into layered stories, as in a quilt, that convey the dappled and complex beauty of the human condition. Such a project is tempered by the awareness that the poetic recollection of traumatic memories is fragmentary, and their full nature, scope and effects are always beyond our grasp. Far from cowing the empathetic poet, this creative activity may inspire some hope. Rather than succumb to the silence that shrouds historical traumas, *Bahau Quilt* attempts to revisit

World War II and consider how readings and interviews with primary witnesses can enrich poetry in South-East Asia.

CHAPTER ONE
HYBRID PATTERNS IN THE MERLION CITY

The verse novel is a hybrid narrative genre that performs its difference from the novel by its use of the verse medium. It is a literary form that may be effectively harnessed to respond to or re-enact incommunicable trauma. Several critics have described how trauma is communicated in art. Jean-Francois Lyotard, for instance, writes, "What art can do is bear witness not to the sublime, but to this aporia of art, and to its pain" (47). In the melting pot of artistic traditions that is Singapore, there is space for a verse novel about wartime trauma. If the island can own up to the less than commendable circumstances of its establishment as a British colony during the bicentennial commemoration, why can it not do the same for the time when it was a Japanese-occupied territory renamed Syonan-To? Further, if poetry has marked milestones in Singapore's history from its early days as a trading port to the demise of its first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew to annual National Day parades, why can it not memorialise one of its darkest periods? The verse novel, which is experiencing a resurgence on the back of exciting, new work, even by writers in Anglophone countries other than the US and the UK, might be an effective medium for this task. This chapter argues that the verse novel's ability to straddle the genres of the long poem and the novel makes it perform in the literary speech act what recollecting trauma does in psychiatric counselling. It is thus a good fit as a form for the content that is trauma, which tends towards shape-shifting and uncertainty. Marita Nadal and Monica Calvo maintain that trauma "crosses limits, disrupts boundaries, and threatens to collapse distinctions" (2). Nonetheless, the verse novel can generate, within limitations, a coherent story out of fragmented memories of loss for a broken society.

It is rather bewildering that Singapore has not yet generated a full-length verse novel given its openness toward experimentation in poetic form. Singapore poets are quite adroit in versifying in several forms that are native to the region such as the

pantun, the *empat perkataan*, twin cinema, asingbol and *anima methodi* to name but a few. But the island has contributed at least to the long poem tradition, particularly the Modernist variety, through Francis Ng Teo Poh Leng's *FMSR, A Poem* (1937). This landmark work, hailed as "the first notable work of English poetry produced by a Singaporean writer" (Ogihara-Schuck 8), was first published in the colonial centre of England. It is ostensibly a narrative about a nine-hour train trip from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur. It is also a meditation on the loss of virtue and the reign of greed among overseas Chinese in post-World War I Malaya. In the spirit of innovation that characterizes some contemporary poetry in Singapore, it is high time -- and, in fact, overdue -- for the verse novel to be explored as a means to narrate wartime trauma. Related literary works about trauma during the Japanese Occupation are novels such as Rex Shelley's *People of the Pear Tree* (which is about Bahau) and *Island in the Centre*, Shamini Flint's *The Undone Years*, Meira Chand's *A Different Sky* and Warran Kalasegaran's *Lieutenant Kurosawa's Errand Boy*; Goh Sin Tub's autobiographical sketches in *Walk Like a Dragon*; and historical non-fiction such as Fiona Hodgkins's *From Syonan to Fuji-Go.* These works have been published in English almost 50 years after the end of World War II. It is interesting to note that Wena Poon has written a novel in both English and Chinese, *Shonanto no Ramen,* about the same dark historical period.

Perhaps the earliest and only World War II-inspired poetry collection to be published before Singapore's independence is the Malay-language *Awan Putih* ("White Clouds") by literary pioneer Masuri S. N. *Awan Putih* contrasts with the aforementioned English-language works in perspective. Although it describes barbarities committed by the Japanese during their occupation, it sees them as a model for asserting Malay sovereignty against British imperialism. In his controversial early poem "Bunga Sakura" ("Sakura Blossom"), Masuri writes:

> *Baik di gunung, di kampung, di tanah lapang*
> *Sayup hingga penghabisan mata memandang*
> *Bunga Sakura makmur berkembang*
> *Jadi lambang semangat berjuang*
> (Whether in the mountain, in the kampong, in open land
> Faint until the very last the eye beholds
> Sakura Blossom flourishes, flowers
> Becomes an emblem of fighting spirit) [http://www.poetry.sg/masuri-sn-

intro]

Far from probing traumas during World War II, however, Masuri fosters hope that that period will reinforce the collective yearning for an independent Malaya. Sakura blooms then become a trope signifying the struggle and the foreseen ultimate victory of the Asian spirit over the Western imperialists.

The versification of wartime experiences, however, still remains a gaping hole in the patchwork that is the island's literary history. This dearth has led partly to the forgetfulness that the post-war generations seem to be afflicted with regarding that period. The task of remembering through verse is necessary and urgent as more of the World War II primary witnesses such as Joseph Conceicao, a Eurasian former Member of Parliament and diplomat interviews with whom informed the background and main character in the *Bahau Quilt* verse novel, pass away. Other primary witnesses such as Elizabeth Anthonisz, with whom I exchanged digital correspondence, are getting on in years. It is also timely as Singapore and the rest of the world commemorate the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II.. The verse novel might yet revive the witnesses' voices that have been eerily kept silent in verse form in Singapore. Although the genre's representation involves redaction and, consequently, loss of memory, that is a risk worth taking to avoid that historical period's total relegation to oblivion. The historical distance, in fact, provides impetus for the poetic imagination to preserve memories, however, fragmented, for posterity.

As befitting its multiform nature, the verse novel's origins in the West are undecidable. They can be traced to two novel-generating societies, England and Russia, in the nineteenth century. Lord Byron's *Don Juan* (1819-1824) is widely considered as a watershed moment between the Romantic and Victorian periods and as somehow melding the two diametric opposites of "high-brow" and "low-brow." The eponymous protagonist looms large as a rebellious nobleman seeking true love in the Romantic tradition. The narrative has a fixed stanza form, the *ottava rima*. Featuring a Spanish aristocrat in search of true love, *Don Juan* captured the mass readership of his age and subsequent periods. Critics such as Catherine Addison and verse novelists such as Vikram Seth, on the other hand, point to Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1825-1832) as providing another important template for and exerting a great influence on subsequent verse novels. It was, in fact, *Eugene Onegin*

translated by Charles Johnson that inspired Seth to adopt the Russian or Onegin stanza of 14 lines in predominantly iambic tetrametre with a regular rhyme scheme for his own hybrid *The Golden Gate* (1986). Akin to *Don Juan*, Pushkin's verse novel features an aristocratic rebel who despite affecting a canny, cynical veneer is, in fact, a Romantic at heart. The verse novel has iambic tetrametre lines in fourteen-line stanzas, with the rhyme scheme "AbAbCCddEffEgg," with upper-case letters representing weak rhymes and the lower-case letters representing strong rhymes. The narrative is well-polished, self-reflexive and humorous:

> Hoar-frost that crackles with a will is
> Already silvering all the plain …
> (the reader thinks the rhyme is lilies:
> Here, seize it quick for this quatrain!) (Pushkin [Johnson] 4.42)

Onegin's aloofness and fear of true intersubjectivity -- that is, regarding any other as a "Thou" -- leads to his loss of a friend and a lover. *The Golden Gate* is centreed on John (a variant of "Juan") Brown whose failed marriage with Janet Hayakawa results in a tragic love affair involving a traumatic death. Addison describes Seth's *The Golden Gate*, the result of his dialogue with *Eugene Onegin*, as "a truly cross-cultural work … by an Indian writer in English about a group of Americans of a variety of ethnic origins" ("The Contemporary Verse Novel" 86). Whether in the 19th century or closer to our time, the verse novel defies neat categorization and elicits empathy.

The verse novel achieved its first protracted success in the English language during the Victorian era.[2] The genre developed almost as a response to the decline in poetry publication in England in the 1820s, around the same time as the declaration of Singapore as the Straits Settlements.[3] The first Industrial Revolution was underway, and England was establishing trade outposts all over the world. There is disagreement over the duration of the genre's early flourishing: until the 1860s, according to Dino Felluga, when Singapore became a Crown Colony, until the 1880s, says Addison, or until as late as 1896, according to Lars Ole Sauerberg, with the publication of A.E. Houseman's *A Shropshire Lad* (442). The verse novels from that period bear the lingering influences of the Romantic long poem such as Byronic heroes, fantastic plots and, as expected, a verse form, usually *ottava rima*. These verse novels include William Chamberlayne's *Pharonnida* (1659); Byron's

romances *The Giaour* (1813) and *Don Juan*; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856, dated 1857); Arthur Clough's *Amours de Voyage* (1858); and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9).[4] These diverse works, however, incorporate also certain formal elements of the novel such as "narrative sequentiality, realistic description, historical referentiality, fleshed out characters, dramatic situations, fully realized dialogism and, above all, a domestic marriage plot" (Felluga 2002 174). The Victorian verse novel was a genre in transition at pace with the bigger society in the face of sweeping changes in maritime trade and the means of communication. It was poised to test conventions.

The plasticity of the long poem and the related verse novel has sparked the imaginations of writers beyond the confines of England to adopt these narrative forms. The US embraced the long poem early on through Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) and, later on, TS Eliot's Modernist landmark *The Wasteland* (1922). *The Wasteland*, in turn, influenced Singaporean Ng's *FMSR*. More recently, Australia became a dynamo for generating verse novels by some of its most esteemed writers, including Les Murray, Dorothy Porter and Alan Wearne. The verse novel's reach in terms of themes and sub-genres, in turn, is quite extensive, from science fiction to reimagined legends, family biographies, rogue stories, detective capers, pulp romances, children's stories and young adult fiction. ("The Contemporary Verse Novel" 86). The verse novel became a beneficiary of the fruits of globalization in terms of creation and reception.

The cross-bred verse novel exhibits the characteristics of its forebears and shines a light on the reality that distinctions between poetry and prose are unstable. The verse novel's substantive is the "novel." Addison identifies the elements that are derived from the realist novel: "bourgeois and often feminine in viewpoint, employs a middle to low style, and favours contemporaneity, verisimilitude, dialogism and interiority" ("Verse-Novel: Generic Hybridity and the Chamber-Pot" 2019 328). Patrick D. Murphy adds the "possibility … [of] presenting a story that evolves in time with speech events that advance the plot without having to have a single or definable narrator" (58). The adjective "verse" in the term "verse novel," exerts a significant influence too. It suggests openness to tapping a far-ranging imagination that seeks to escape the confines of realism. In contrast with poetry, even the long

poem, the verse novel may have an appeal that extends beyond those with literary training. It is also more accessible, often preferring everyday speech rather than difficult and opaque verbiage. The claim of opacity has been leveled against poetry since at least Victorian times. Felluga writes, "… Victorians tended to read poetry as a 'high' form, even as a panacea for the ills of industrial society … [and] saw certain forms of poetry as dangerous" ("Novel Poetry" 492). Singaporean literary critic Koh Tai Ann expresses the widespread view that much of contemporary poetry is perceived by the person on the street as "an impenetrable, decadent indulgence of a minority of the university-educated" ("Poetry in Singapore" 2016). Given all this negative press, the verse novel may be the perfect foil for prejudices against traditional poetic texts.

In order to provide perspective in the delineation of the characteristics of the verse novel, perhaps it is fruitful to set it off against another genre that it is sometimes subsumed under, the long poem. The long poem is typically Romantic. It often gives free rein to and is centreed on the poet's imagination. It is also seen, like all poetry, in the words of Felluga, as "a pure form, somehow separate from the concerns of politics, the market, and ideology" ("Verse Novel" 493). The verse novel, according to Lars Ole Sauerberg, on the other hand, treads on a middle way between poetry and prose. It can be located more on "the experimentalist path of dedicatedly modernist writing rather than continuing on the highway of well-established realism" (444). The verse novel "may be conventionally lyrical, off and on, as a work of prose fiction may be lyrical, just as the emphasis in a prose novel may be 'narrative, didactic, satirical, elegiac, eulogistic, and reflective'" (446). Examples of long poems include *The Waste Land*, a quilt of literary tissues and discordant voices that decry the trauma of the modern condition, and Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* (1925), a similarly ambitious project that weaves together fragments of epics and languages in a book form.

Francis Ng Teo Poh Leng's *Federated Malay States Railway (FMSR)*, Singapore's first Modernist long poem, has an unusual, fragmented history. It was published in England by Teo Poh Leng, a school teacher and poet, under the pen name "Francis P. Ng," a melding of Teo's second Christian name and his maternal family name. It can be taken as a compliment for Teo when his publisher, Arthur H. Stockwell, wrote in his publication *101 Markets for Poems* (1937) an attack on poets

who "expect any short verses, usually hastily scribbled on the backs of envelopes to sell" and praise for "[t]he versifier who takes his verse seriously" (Ogihara-Schuck 16-7). The ten-part *FMSR* is a detailed poetic observation not only of a nine-hour train ride from Singapore to Malaya but also of prevailing inequalities in the Straits Settlements during the depths of the Great Depression in the 1930s. He denounces the political system of Malaya and the British Empire as well as the growing harmful influence of the transnational economic elite, whom he thinks is corrupting the native culture:

> Nowadays monarchy and democracy
> Are mere appellatives for mediocracy,
> So's the aristocracy
> Of wealth: these millionaires,
> What numskulls they must be
> Who are unawares of their own idiocy. (Ng I 40)

Philip Holden does not consider *FMSR* plumbing more deeply than the "petty irritations" of Singapore and its surroundings (*Writing Singapore* 10). Indeed, Singapore is depicted as a backwater colony assaulting the senses of the cosmopolitan visitor:

> Wafting odours to the nose
> And dust flying to the face
> Is a sweltering hot and disgusting place.
> And everywhere about the place float noises.
> Being another hideous race
> Humming, droning, ringing, banging,
> Buzzing, drowning, hooting, clanging;
> Babel never heard so many voices. (Ng II 41)

Whereas *The Wasteland* bewails the collapse of Western civilization on a grand scale, FMSR meditates on a narrower scale the disillusionment of a particular people, the Chinese diaspora, who endure privations in agrarian Malaya in the 1930s. Their desire for riches in this part of the world is described as a pipe dream:

> Millionaires from the New World with nothing else to do
> Wander the Old World like wandering Jews;
> Call here to buy wooden shoes,

Pieces of cheap porcelains, ….
And when they leave nothing
Follows them but the sound,
The emanations of their own unsatisfied craving,
Their desire uncrowned. (Ng I 40)

Koh Tai Ann chimes in that *FMSR* and Teo Kah Leng's poems have had little impact on Singapore literary writing because of Ng's "unfulfilled potential shortened by his cruel death and his brother's outdated poetic idiom."

FMSR at least exemplifies Modernist elements fashionable at the time of its publication. It is written in irregular stanza forms, mostly free verse and an irregular rhyme scheme. The action is driven by a conflict arising from urbanites escaping the squalid city, Singapore, and almost desecrating the unspoilt landscape of the Malayan countryside. The forward movement of a train with its clangorous engines disturbing the stillness of the landscape is perceived as monstrous and inducing a nightmarish trauma in the long poem's dramatic speaker.

FMSR is quite ahead of its time. It explores an ecological theme at a time when buttressing the economy is foremost in the minds of many. It also showcases the cultural polyphony present in Singapore: "Babel never heard so many voices" (II 41). Finally, it contrasts the city and the countryside and, ultimately, the real and the artificial in a light-hearted manner:

But our tigers have grown timorous
And dare not come forth to meet the amorous
Whimsically of the rich visitor.
So to the Ponggol Zoo she goes
To meet living tigers, snakes and armadillos:
Or dead tigers guarding garish advertisement panels;
Or Raffles Museum to stare at stupid animals (I 40-1).

But there are invisible fissures in the landscape as a result of violent crime-induced trauma. By juxtaposing murders with religious imagery, specifically the murder of the Holy Innocents in the place of the Christ child and Herod as well as Pontius Pilate who ordered Christ's crucifixion, the Catholic Ng provides a mystic depth to the anarchic scene:

Murder at the crossways in the Gardens
At one, at two and three and four:

I hear, I see, I know:
Slaughter on the highways and the byways,
Massacre of holy innocents,
Killing foetus in its mother's womb:
We have outheroded Herod
And outpilated Pilate
And must reap as we have sown;
We will curse and weep our concrete gods unknown (III 42).

Ng also suggests a collective lack of empathy on the part of the lyric speakers as they are associated with and, in fact, deemed worse than the perpetrators of Christ's death. Ng employs the neologisms "outheroded" and "outpilated" to describe how the lyric speakers have exceeded the bounds of justice.

A related poem that directly attacks the Japanese invaders' lack of empathy during World War II and mourns the death of Ng is his brother Teo Kah Leng's "I Found a Bone." Ng was rounded up among Chinese citizens and, as a teacher, killed with his brother Peter among mainland Chinese sympathizers and intellectuals who were considered threats to the wartime government. It is a dramatic poem with a regular rhyme scheme after every alternate line. Like Ng, Teo uses Christian imagery for his testimony. He elicits emotional engagement with imagined discourse from his brother Ng:

'Is this the way of hope and faith?
I muttered in my breath;
Must guiltless blood be made to ebb
In such inglorious death?'

'I am the way of life, your hope,'
I heard a voice reply;
'Know I am hanging ona cross,
And Calvary is night.' (73)

In recent genre studies, a strategy that can elucidate *FMSR* and my own *Bahau Quilt* project to a certain extent is Patrick D. Murphy's application of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic method to the hybrid genre. This method is apt considering that Bakhtin held up the verse novel *Eugene Onegin* as the novel par excellence ("The Contemporary Verse Novel" 89). Bakhtin observes in it the basic unit of the speech act, a category that may include "oral or written, … [and] takes place as an act of

communication between speakers in a given cultural environment" (59). The utterer and listener construct meaning jointly and in essence mutually interact for the duration of the interchange. Felluga succinctly characterizes the verse novel as "highly dialogic and polyglot" ("Novel Poetry" 493).It is dialogic when it generates interactions among the author, the novel, and the reader. It is polyglot when it accepts the diverse varieties within one language.

Bahau Quilt attempts to be dialogic and polyglot through its three main characters, who are of different races and cultures. The characters' constant exchanges in speech and writing generate meanings that are grasped differently according to each one's biases and values. The above suggests an emphasis on novelistic elements in verse so that all participants in the speech act are distinct in speech patterns and ideologies. This dialogical interaction is eminently ethical in that each speaker's utterance demands a response from a listener who is an other. This process is no different from the empathy that a counsellor extends toward a trauma victim during therapy. The ensuing communication transaction generates patterns of meaning based on each participant's context. This also recommends itself as a way out of trauma.

Bakhtin brings up the implications of the emphasis on novelistic elements in a literary work. He writes:

> They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extra-literary heteroglossia and the "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally – this is the most important thing – the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contract with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (*Dialogic* 6-7).

Far from being completely absent from the act of reading, the author is restored to his or her proper place. The author remains distinct from the reader even as they co-exist and at times compete for legitimacy. Their interaction yields multiple meanings.

Catherine Addison proposes notions of genres and a seven-point poetic analysis framework in "The Contemporary Verse Novel: A Challenge to Established Genres." These tools inform some of the analysis in this research. Addison's main claim, which this writer is inclined to support, is that the verse novel is on the verge of a renaissance primarily because of the verse novel's poetic qualities. The focal

point of Addison's study comprises the contemporary verse novels *The Golden Gate*, Matt Rubinstein's *Solstice* and HRF Keating's *Jack, the Lady Killer*. She writes, "[I]ts present vogue is unparalleled and it clearly represents a change of direction in the contemporary literary scene" (85).

According to Addison, the seven key poetic elements in the verse novel are as follows: (1) stanza form, (2) rhyme scheme, (3) the narrator's intimacy with the reader, (4) self-reflexivity (5) rhythm in the dialogue (6) theme and (7) figurative language. I will employ the same seven-part framework to approach the analysis of poetic genre models and the writing of *Bahau Quilt*. As regards Seth's *The Golden Gate*, for instance, the stanza form is Russian or so-called Onegin. Addison examines it further: "[it] uses tetrametre, a much more insistent, compelling line … and it consists of 14 … lines, rhyming ABABCCDDEFFEGG (an alternately rhyming quatrain followed by two couplets, an enclosed quatrain and another couplet)" (89). One element in *The Golden Gate* that Addison highlights is self-reflexivity. She delineates it as "a little nudge reminding the reader of the existence of a composer and his composition, often taking the form of a particular virtuoso or witty passage ('he calls her cultural and haughty/And horticultural') and sometimes making explicit comment over the heads of the characters ('Come,/Let's leave them here, the blessed yuppies')" (91).

Singapore's openness to experimentation in creative expression and new genres is an indication that the verse novel could be accepted by readers here. With encouragement from the state, writers on this island publish hundreds of poetry and fiction titles every year. Koh Tai Ann's annotated Singapore bibliography listed 483 volumes of poems and 49 anthologies of poetry out of a total of 279 in 2016. Some experimental Singapore titles, such as Sonny Liew's bestselling and Singapore Literature Prize-winning hybrid graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2015), look back to the island's collective memory, particularly the years after independence, with fresh perspectives and multi-layered and metafictional elements. Liew's graphic novel "[… melds] visual and textual form in many different ways, the text is at once a graphic novel, a fictional biography, and what appears to be a collection of artworks and artefacts forming a series of paratextual elements" (Koh, Natalie Rae-Fern 1). Another notable hybrid work, Singapore Literature Prize-

winning poet Desmond Kon Zhicheng Mingde's *The Good Day I Died,* approaches personal near-death trauma in post-structuralist fashion with poetry, literary criticism and narration. The verse novel provides another viable means of recalling the past of a collective or an individual.[5] Furthermore, Singapore's status as a regional and international culture hub integrates it in global media and grants it ease of access to trends in poetic and literary production as well as consumption (Koh Tai Ann 7). The recent commercial success of verse novels such as *The Long Take* by Robin Robinson in overseas markets could provide another impetus for writers to attempt that genre here. Verse novels and long poems provide a suitable frame for writing about the past. The next chapter will discuss trauma as their specific content.

CHAPTER TWO

SEWING OR VERSIFYING TRAUMA

Trauma[6] -- especially in the aftermath of war -- is a term that has become so commonplace that contemporary life can be said to be suffused with it.[7] A look at newspaper headlines confirms this. According to J. Roger Kurtz, "trauma" appeared fewer than 300 times in *The New York Times* between 1851 and 1960 (1). Since then, the same word has turned up 26, 223 more times in the same mainstream publication. "Trauma" has unavoidably become a buzz word in Singapore too. It appeared 854 times in *Straits Times* from January 2017 to May 2020. Trauma is a big, catch-all word that finds a place in both psychology and literature. It escapes neat definitions. It is a gaping wound, in its Greek etymology. It has been described as the "aporia of art and its pain … [and] says that it cannot say it" by Jean-Francois Lyotard (47). It has been called a paradoxical situation that simultaneously "… express[es] and suppress[es] the traumatic" as in a performance, according to Miriam Haughton (2). It is passed on from one generation to another through narratives. Further, trauma is seen as taking "the form of a genuine traumatic inheritance, the logic of which is a web of symbolic values," says Patrizia Violi (3). That inheritance is linked to collective memories that may be specific to a country such as Singapore and at various times. Akiko Hashimoto says, "Some events become more significant than others because we manage to make them more consequential in later years to better understand ourselves and our society" (4). Such an event leaves psychological wounds that influence how certain groups perceive themselves. The components of that inheritance and the values that they are intertwined with will be discussed in this chapter.

The nexus between what is visible and invisible in trauma can be likened to the relationship between the quilt's top and its corresponding backing. The laid-out cloth patches that balance each other in colour and pattern on one side are sewed to the muslin or any other fabric that is used as backing on the other side. Both sides share the same space as they are stitched together.[8] The Bahau quilt that appears in

the title of my verse novel is a fictitious rendering of embroidered cloths that were exchanged by women internees in Changi Prison and other settlements during the Japanese occupation. A former Changi internee, Sheila Allan, describes them:

> They are embroidered squares, individually created and signed by the women internees who created them, which were sewn together to make three separate quilts. You could call them signature quilts, but they are also more than that, for they represented the thoughts and hopes of these women, linking them to the nearby prisoners of war, some of whom were their husbands, to the Girl Guide movement, and to the Red Cross Society" (174).

The verse novel weaves visible and invisible traumas through the intertwining narratives of four characters: Chico Pereira, a Eurasian schoolteacher who becomes a secret resistance fighter with Force 136 and is betrayed by his fiancée; Lourdes, a Chinese nurse who is engaged to Chico but is riven by guilt for bearing a child with an officer in the Japanese army; Lieutenant Lee Guo Zhi, the officer who is a Formosan conscript and has an affair with Lourdes after sending Chico to prison; and Christine, the love child of Lourdes and Lieutenant Lee who is raised by an aloof Chico as his daughter. Each character has a horrendous experience and reveals its attendant scars as well as negative emotions in poetic discourses that are unique to each of them. Bahau, the verse novel's main setting, is a town in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia that was transformed into an agricultural colony for Eurasians and Chinese Catholics from Singapore, with several Japanese officers and local guards supervising them, during the Japanese occupation. The farmers built huts, a clinic and other facilities in the settlement. Associated with pain and death at the height of World War II, the town was abandoned by the Singaporean settlers after the war. The former settlement is impermanent and has been transformed into palm plantations. But the memories there, though largely forgotten by the general public, haunt its former dwellers.

One fundamental question in the reading and writing of memories is this: How does one communicate the incommunicable, such as trauma, in literary writing? Philosophers and literary thinkers in the West have grappled with that question since the dawn of the modern—that is, post-Roman-- era in Western Europe. The early

Western philosophers, under the influence of Horace and other Roman orators, equate the aesthetic with the ethical, with civic virtue as the goal for society. Public speaking, treatise writing and close reading, after all, involve interlocutors, the self and the other, who exercise varying levels of commitment to telling the truth. This link has persisted even in our time. The early thinkers do not explain trauma as a psychological condition per se.

St. Augustine, who pioneered the confessional writing genre as storytelling and adapted Roman literary exegesis to the reading of the Bible in early medieval times, suggests conveying the incommunicable experience through familiar imagery as in an allegory. He recommends the embrace of ethics in the "expression of love [or *caritas*]," whose elements include "a brief and lucid narrative … [and] variety [that] holds the attention without creating boredom" (*On Christian Teaching* [OCT} II, 34-37). The significations and expressions of *caritas* come under threat during periods of social upheaval and cultural crisis, when long-standing moral prescriptions are ignored and aesthetic traditions break down. St. Augustine introduces this concept as he broadens the field of exegesis as a standard (OCT III. 10. 14- 10.16, 76) for all types of literature. He is also a forerunner in the West in the use of classical rhetoric as an exegetical and homiletic tool. His project signals a break from previous ecclesiastical norms as well as the contemporaneous Jewish repudiation of classical Roman culture on account of the latter's inherent evil or *cupiditas*. *Cupiditas* is an individual's desire for worldliness or the possession of a material good that overrides other desires and attempts at intersubjectivity.[9] St. Augustine articulates this desire in his critical and narrative discourses as a "tyranny … [that] has to be overthrown" (*On Christian Teaching* III. 14-16, p. 80), "perverted lust" (*Confessions* III. 8) or "covetous want … [of] many possessions" (*Confessions* II. 6). A subject can freely choose *cupiditas*, whose effects he or she suffers as justice permits (*Confessions* VII. 3).

Hundreds of years later in the nineteenth century and amid the explosive growth of experimental psychology, trauma gained a mass audience. Sigmund Freud, widely hailed as the father of modern trauma theory, and his associates Jean Martin Charcot and Pierre Janet conducted experiments to support their ideas about trauma at the Salpetierre Hospital in France. This group attributed the condition of hysteria

to heredity or a traumatic experience, the latter being a public health problem that is now classified as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Freud and associates declared that trauma is worsened by an unresolved tension in the hysteria sufferer between the mind and body, memory and identity (Haughton 6). Freud further narrowed down the primary cause of trauma, especially in children, to sexual abuse by the fathers. He later amended that view, however, and supplanted it with ideas on infantile sexuality.

Under the long shadow of Freud, some literary critics harnessed a range of arguments concerning trauma theory. In the influential study *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub maintain that the trauma witness is a passive victim. He or she is not fully conscious of the source of pain and, therefore, cannot effectively map out the terrain of his or her trauma. The trauma victim grasps at shards of memories and resorts to repetition and rambling as a means of coping. The ideal audience of trauma stories exercises empathy as an analyst does in psychoanalysis. This listener or reader must exercise utmost patience and not interrupt even if the greater world prefers clinical efficiency and tangible results. Building on the work of other trauma theorists such as Anne Whitehead, Geoffrey Hartman and Dominick LaCapra, Cathy Caruth proposes a "rethinking of reference" or a "resituating … [of history] in our understanding, that is, at permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not" (Craps and Buelens 1). This rethinking usually entails the use of psychoanalytical and poststructuralist tools such as de Manian direct and oblique referentiality in the study of trauma narratives that strive to capture memories that do not easily lend themselves to representation. She observes that a common feature of these narratives is repetition: "not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to claim one's survival" (Victor 60). These narratives are an assurance to the self that one is a survivor. Caruth then issues a rallying call when she propounds the idea that trauma "demands a new mode of reading and of listening." The long poem and the verse novel can be among these new modes. Dominick LaCapra, in turn, calls attention to a related condition, melancholia, which is a sign of "an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is

possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object" (Kurtz 1). That psychological condition also requires a cognitive map of the sufferer's struggles. The next chapter will lay out two strategies of recording and responding to trauma.

Recent studies of trauma have undergone dynamic shifts in what is considered as central to representation. Haughton draws parallels between trauma therapy and theatrical performance in a monograph of case studies, *Staging Trauma: Bodies in Shadow*. She observes a dialogic at work in both activities. She writes, "Whether staging an ancient Greek tragedy or the latest live art encounter, increasingly, spectators are required to intervene consciously and immediately. These performance encounters rarely offer a pleasant or easy exit" (9). The spectators' intervention, which could be in the form of nodding or finger tapping to music, might seem to interrupt the witness's performance. But this intervention complements the performance in that it brings the spectators out of a narrow obsession with the self and makes them engage with the witness and the performance. Trauma and performance have in common an obsession with repetition and cultural conditioning. The traumatic experience per se is beyond the limits of a non-witness's experience. Houghton writes, "This centralising of trauma(s) cab manifest via diverse modalities, such as narrative, design, embodiment, gesture, pattern and symptom, and often in sporadic, non-linear and inconclusive ways, as is customary with performance" (2). She adds the following elements of trauma that correspond with performance: "contradiction, disrupted linearity, compulsive repetition, problematic confusion with Self and the Other, ethical murkiness, and a general milieu of potential vulnerability and disorientation for theatre artists and the audiences who encounter the work" (3). Haughton suggests that contemporary performance culture, especially in Ireland and the UK, is impacted greatly by "urgent societal conditions" (3). Unlike earlier theorists, Haughton dissociates trauma with myths. But the experience can be revisited and reconstructed through what Patrizia Violi calls a "culturalized object" (2). This idea will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

A precursor to trauma theorists, the German literary critic Walter Benjamin makes claims that have a bearing on this study on trauma writing. His interests are wide, combining in his critical work the idealism of German Romanticism and

mysticism as well as the realism of Bertolt Brecht's Marxism.[10] If there is one major 20th century literary critic who anticipated the critique of verse novels, Benjamin will be that one. His works include autobiographies, essays on travel and critical treatises on poetic devices such as the allegory. He deplores the horrors of World War I, which reduced victims to silence about their ordeals. He says that period marks the downfall of storytelling. That situation coincides with the global popularity of the novel, which he asserts is different from the story or the epic in the former's "dependence on the book" ("The Storyteller" 146). He favours epics, long poems that exhibit rhyme and metre and are recited to an audience. Verse novels are their modern equivalent in terms of length and prosody although, unlike epics, they do not necessarily have heroes from the nobility who seek valiant deeds. Like epics, verse novels may likewise be a conduit for expressing the collective memories of their respective societies.

Benjamin extols cultivation of virtue and stoicism in the form of detachment from the cares of the world (similar to St. Augustine's *caritas*). This is an attitude also is found in many trauma victims, especially when they make their testimony. I have tried to imbue *Bahau Quilt*'s protagonist, Chico, a trauma victim himself, with the same quality as he navigates the loss of home, love and pride during his exile from Singapore to Bahau.

Benjamin's close reading of the Russian short fiction writer Nikolai Leskov's works leads Benjamin to make prescriptions about storytelling or novel writing in "The Storyteller." Benjamin believes that what is communicated in storytelling must be subsumed in the life of the storyteller "in order to bring it out of him again" ("The Storyteller" 149). The main subject of his "The Storyteller" is Leskov, a religious Orthodox writer whose timeless stories centre on the righteous man. In a way that echoes Caruth's aforesaid statement on repetition, Benjamin observes that the repetition of a basic story structure in Leskov's oeuvre is a means to keep both the stories and the art of storytelling, as it were, alive. In a Leskov story, "The Alexandrite," he observes how the religious and worldly as well as salvation and nature are woven tightly into the storyteller's craft:

> that old time when the stones in the womb of the earth and the planets
> at celestial heights were still concerned with the fate of men – unlike

> today, when both in the heavens and beneath the earth everything has grown indifferent to the fates of the sons of men, and no voice speaks to them from anywhere, let alone does their bidding. None of the undiscovered planets play any part in horoscopes any more, and there are a lot of new stories, all measured and weighed and examined for their specific weight and their density, but they no longer proclaim anything to us, nor do they bring us any benefit. Their time for speaking with men is past (153).

Benjamin puts emphasis on ethical concerns in narrative writing. He posits that the ideal story or novel for the ages depicts "a righteous man – seldom an ascetic, usually a simple, active man – who becomes a saint apparently in the most natural way in the world" (145). This figure is not reclusive but one at home in the world but without being of it – that is, one who is able to exercise detachment from the objects around him. The righteous man in *Bahau Quilt* is Chico Pereira, who endures forcible relocation, an inhospitable soil, unexpected betrayal and the sudden burden of being a single parent. To some degree, the enemy in the verse novel, Lieutenant Lee Guo Zhi, is also righteous. But lust for Lourdes blinds him into coveting her.

A companion piece to "The Storyteller," "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," presents a predominantly Marxist view of contemporary art. In "The Work of Art," Benjamin decries the pernicious impact of mass production on the creation of the arts. He observes a loss, genuinely traumatic in itself, of the concept of "aura," which is "tied to [one's] presence … [and] there can be no replica of it" (1178). He looks at photography and film as examples of mass production media. "The Work of Art" is relevant to trauma, especially during the Holocaust, as the state's war machinery applies the same principles of mass production to the murder of the enemies of the state. It does so with efficiency in a bid to establish full control of the national narrative.

According to Benjamin, the key elements of the epic, which he considers as a forerunner for the novel, in contrast with those of the prose novel, are as follows: (1) an autobiographical reflection on the decline of civic virtues, (2) the use of imagery, usually taken from nature, as a means to express oneself in writing and (3) the timelessness of the retold experiences as a type of moral counsel or imparted wisdom. These strategies are the same that Benjamin used in his own writing. These elements have informed the writing of *Bahau Quilt.*

The elements of the epic are discernible in the trauma-themed verse novel. The Japanese occupation was quite dramatic with massacres, tortures, food shortages, betrayals and mass exile. The verse novel is a good fit for a former British imperial outpost that is marked by hybridity and a multiplicity of languages. It also presents an opportunity for the island to acknowledge some of its invisible wounds from a defining historical moment such as the Fall of Singapore. Memory theorist Violi says this task of remembering is most significant in a society's development. She writes, "[C]ulture is none other than the memory of the past and it is precisely on that culture-memory that a society bases its identity" (9). Singapore's memory of the Japanese occupation was hazy by official decree of the British colonial government. The latter restricted reports by army officers on the battle for Malaya and the fall of Singapore. Winston Churchill justified the policy in the House of Commons on April 23, 1942 by saying that an official enquiry "would hamper the prosecution of the war" (Kratoska 320). Such an investigation was deemed problematic, because it required the release of potentially embarrassing information about the neglect of defence of Malaya and Singapore. That investigation was abandoned.

Indeed, the time is ripe for the silence regarding the Japanese occupation to be dispelled and for the writing of verse novels, an evolved, hybrid form of poetry, about that period. Poetry, after all, is no longer considered, in the oft-quoted words of the founder of the republic of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, as "a luxury we cannot afford." More people, especially youths, are reading and generating poetry while enrolled in creative writing classes or participating in poetry workshops and readings. The forgetfulness that Singaporean society seems to suffer from as regards World War II, especially in its representation in verse, unfortunately perpetuates the current dearth in poetic writing about that crucial period. This forgetfulness extends to monuments and places as a forward-looking society embraces a never-ending cycle of urban redevelopment. With no precedent in sight, poets turn to more familiar confessional genres and more common themes of seeking or losing home in a rapidly changing society. There are, in fact, historical accounts of the Japanese period, but their availability to a mass audience is quite limited. The lack of a more accessible form of trauma storytelling denies the general reader insight into some notions that

have shaped Singapore. The importance of self-reliance, for instance, is a cornerstone of Chinese culture and a lesson reiterated by the fall of Singapore. The historian Eunice Thio writes about the resulting decline in trust in British colonial rule, "Nothing could restore the tarnished image of European invincibility and superiority." Greater political consciousness will later give rise to a campaign for independence. Lee Kuan Yew writes, "…[N]either the Japanese nor the British … had the right to push and kick us around" (Kratoska 362). It is not an exaggeration to state that the drive toward national unity has its beginnings in the Japanese occupation.

To be sure, poetry about trauma, especially of the everyday, domestic variety, is present in Singapore. But there is a paucity of poems that retell wartime experiences. This situation is rather odd, since there have been numerous memoirs and novels on World War II written and published in Singapore. But it seems the war survivors and the pioneer Singaporean poets have opted to relegate wartime experiences to poetic oblivion. This silence is partly a measure of the depth of the trauma that Singaporeans were subjected to in the hands of the Japanese invaders. The deeper the trauma, the more deafening the silence. In the course of research, I have met Eurasians whose relatives survived the Bahau colony. But many of those survivors prefer not to take interviews about their experience. Infirm from old age, they see retelling traumatic stories as needless pressure. As they get older, however, there is a danger that their stories will be forever lost. The Eurasian survivors who have agreed to be interviewed or to have correspondence with me are close acquaintances, in the case of Joseph Conceicao, or those too young then to recall the hardships there, in that of Elizabeth Anthonisz, who is now based in Australia. As in many stories of the occupation, Ms. Anthonisz's family story is quite dramatic:

> I did not meet my biological family until I was 40 years old[.] I found out that my father [and] mother went to Bahau in early 1944. There were around 12 family members who went to Bahau. I heard that they were short of food [and] clothing. There was no medicine [and] subsequently my grandmother [and] twin nephews passed away[.] There was no proper burial place [and] they were too weak to dig deep graves [and] so covered the graves with leaves [and] branches. My father [and] brother contacted TB [and] since there was no proper medication[, my] father [and] brother escaped from the camp [and]

> got on the train -- I supposed [they] jumped on the train [and went] to Singapore They [were] admitted to Tan Tock Seng hospital[.] Sadly my father passed away early December of that year [and] my brother two weeks later[.] Fortunately a family friend found out my father had passed [and] he rushed over [and] gave my father a burial at Biddari. My brother was not so fortunate[. He] was buried in an unmarked grave ("Re: Family in Bahau.").

Another obstacle to the survivors' writing in verse is a perceived incongruity between giving witness to the hard truths of trauma and the rhetorical eloquence that people associate with poetry. Trauma poetry, like its content, is the site of contradictions. It juxtaposes "orality and literacy, public speech and private reading … [coexist] in an uneasy but fruitful tension" (Schaeffer 1142). I wish to outline poetic strategies that can be applied to the witnesses' testimonies that could make the latter authentic and immediate in verse novels.

I am reconstituting fragmented stories of camaraderie and conflict, disease and deaths, love and betrayal involving Eurasian and Chinese Singaporeans and the Japanese in Bahau during World War II. This is a means to keep their memories alive for the current and succeeding generations. I am exploring two kinds of narratives in *Bahau Quilt*, based on Akiko Hashimoto's categories of conflicting trauma narratives.

The first kind of narrative centres on tragic victims of defeat. This shows "an unmitigated tragedy of epic proportions – accentuating … carnage and destruction wrought by ferocious military violence" (7). This is the discourse of suffering in family stories of Bahau survivors such as Conceicao and Anthonisz. About a third of the Eurasians, Chinese Catholics and foreigners who relocated to the farm colony died in successive waves of cholera and malaria epidemics. Their tragic experiences have been recorded in mostly World War II memoirs. They deserve some space in poetry too in order to articulate communal grief for posterity. This need is topical and urgent during milestone commemorations such as the bicentennial of Raffles's establishment of an entrepot here in 2019, the "tragic and obscene mess" (MacKay, 2009) that is World War 1, the Fall of Singapore and the end of World War II. In World War II, when "the subject … [was] flattened, … crushed and dispersed into as many objects as … [the proud self] desires" (Coles, 1992: 21). Unlike other Anglophone countries, Singapore lacks a coherent body of wartime accounts in verse

other than several isolated poems by Francis Ng Teo Poh Leng and his brother K.L. Teo. The island boasts of disparate oral history recordings at the National Archives or assorted memorabilia at the National Museum, Ford Factory Museum, Reflections on Bukit Chandhu and Changi Prison Museum.

The second, and more difficult, kind of narrative that I am exploring in a limited way is that of the war perpetrator. This narrative shows "the violence and harm that Japan inflicted, with varied attribution of malicious intent" (8). The attempt to represent fragments of trauma requires taking stock of the perpetrators' motivations and the victims' disillusionment with previous idealistic notions of the world. No less urgent is the call for involvement with war victims as others. *Bahau Quilt* gives witness to the brutality and destruction on both sides of the war by giving voice to all trauma victims, including Eurasians and other minorities who are absent in many of the non-fiction narratives of that turbulent period.

Memories of war and conflict are inextricably bound with trauma in people's minds. Capstone remembrances such as the end of the aforesaid great war may have requisite tributes and honours. But they are increasingly marked by commemorations with narratives and memorials about victims and trauma. A few of those narratives, such as Edmund Blunden's "V-Day," read by UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson to mark 75 years since the Victory of Europe Day, are in verse. More than their prose novel counterparts, verse novels are riddled with "compulsive repetition" of words, phrases and figurative expressions. Trauma critic LaCapra says this repetition is symptomatic of being "possessed by the past, … [facing] a future of impasses, and … [remaining] narcissistically identified with the lost object" (1999, 713). This activity is performative as in a staged play and closer to dramatic poetry than to prose novels. The frequent repetition reenacts spontaneity and the rawness of the original traumatic experience.

I am recreating the repetition of linguistic structures and imagery in trauma accounts in *Bahau Quilt* through the *anima methodi* poetic form in the protagonist Francisco "Chico" Pereira's discourse. In his dying days, Chico recollects memories of his wife Lourdes, the suave but treacherous Formosan Lieutenant Lee Guo Zhi and the birth of one whom Chico considers to be his own daughter, Christine. It is only after retelling their intertwining stories does he achieve a semblance of healing

of the spirit. Christine, in turn, completes the weaving of the stories with her mother Lourdes's diary entries and Lieutenant Lee's poems and letter in what constitutes a Bahau quilt.

Anima methodi or *anima*, which I co-developed with poet Desmond Kon Zhicheng Mingde in the course of research, is a narrative strategy that approximates the discourse of real people such as war survivors and refugees. It is characterized by the repetition of imagery that partly reveals and partly conceals the speaker's beliefs, motivations and values. This repetition emphasizes the attempt at communicating something inherently incommunicable. It is also a first step in facing the source of trauma while keeping one's sense of dignity intact. G.E. Marcus calls the traumatized speaker's condition of not being pegged to a particular spot a "messy text," that is, exhibiting the qualities of 'open-endedness, an incompleteness, and an uncertainty about how to draw a text/analysis to a close' (Mendoza 35). *Anima methodi* is necessarily fragmented. It is reminiscent of the unwieldy nature of poetry, especially of the experimental art forms arising from the trauma of the two world wars (Kon and Valles 20-21).

The *anima* has the following formal characteristics: (1) It contains 16 lines, separated into two octaves. (2) Two words, phrases or images are repeated anywhere within the first octave. The same words, phrases or images are mirrored in the second octave. (3) The last line of the first octave moves seamlessly into the first line of the second octave. There is some dialectical play between the two octaves as they develop a theme or describe an incident (Kon and Valles 22-23).

The *anima* is underpinned by the primary and secondary reflections of the French philosophical dramatist Gabriel Marcel. Marcel's work is the continuation of that of so-called anti-rationalists such as Soren Kierkegaard, Blaise Pascal and Maurice Blondel who reject a general trend of overthinking and idealism in continental European philosophy before the world wars. Marcel's use of dramatic texts runs parallel with the allegorical work of critical theorist Benjamin. They respond to traumas. Marcel, in particular, practises reflection with motifs to narrate World War I, which he considers as "the suicide of Europe" (Fischer-Barnicol 422). Far from letting war trauma reduce him to self-loathing, Marcel engages in philosophizing not over abstruse concepts but over every day problems and traumas.

Skeptical of the certainties of the ideologies current then, he avoids rigorous philosophical methods or systems in favour of more spontaneous, poetic speculation.

Marcel distinguishes two levels of reflection, which correspond in intent to the two octaves in the *anima*'s two-part poetic structure:

> Primary reflection is there forced to take up an attitude of radical detachment, of complete lack of interest, towards the fact that this particular body happens to be mine … But how will secondary reflection proceed in this case? It can only, it might see, get to work on the processes to which primary reflection has itself had recourse; seeking, as it were, to restore a semblance of unity to the elements which primary reflection has first severed (Marcel 45-6).

Primary reflection is concerned about the factual details of a problem, say the self's relation to a body whom he or she possesses. Secondary reflection, on the other hand, analyzes the consequences and implications of the self's being that same body. The *anima* lends itself to narratives of interactions among people, especially those with seemingly clashing cultures and interests that may lead to outright conflict. The resulting pain of the participants in conflict is transmuted into recurring imagery in two octaves. Unlike the classical, systematic *ottava rima*, which the *anima* resembles, there are no strictures on the number of syllables per verse or on end rhymes.

The lyrical speakers in *anima* poems risk being categorized as cases with PTSD. But they avoid objectification, as trauma narrators do, in a discursive swerving from one topic to another, eliding their interests in speech and becoming to a degree undecidable (Kon and Valles 23-24). The *anima* speakers also wield figurative language that is marked by 'an open-endedness, an incompleteness, and an uncertainty about how to draw a text/analysis to a close' (Mendoza 35). They demand a dialogue with people who offer alternative viewpoints. It makes certain readers commit to or, at least, accept a situation that demands not problem solving but personal involvement. Trauma narratives provide occasions for such a dialogue or commitment with readers.

In volatile times of conflict and pandemic, trauma narrative poetry becomes a restorative tool that can be harnessed to provide, at the very least, consolation and balance. Stephen James Smith reflects on poetry's role in the so-called war against the corona virus pandemic:

> People need poetry during big moments in life. And right now maybe they have more time to reflect…. I feel it's the job of the poet to question, even if those questions are unanswered" (https://www.theguardian.com).

It is significant that neither DeCapra nor Smith mentions closure or change as a goal in poetry as representational art. Poetry points to possible outcomes for its readers. It does not offer definitive solutions to their or society's problems.

Besides Adam Foulds's verse novella *The Broken Word,* which depicts the brutal Mau Mau uprising in 1950s Kenya (Robson 50), another recent verse novel that delineates post-war trauma is Robin Robertson's *The Long Take* (2018). Robertson's verse novel presents a compelling case for the verse novel as an art form. *The Long Take* has received acclaim from many critics and award-giving bodies such as the Goldsmiths Prize and The Man Booker Prize, for which it was shortlisted. This verse novel illustrates Benjamin's concept of storytelling that privileges epic poems –and, by extension, their variants-- over prose novels. For one, *The Long Take*'s lyricism makes it more suitable for oral rather than silent reading. *The Long Take* has an irregular rhythm, akin to that of spoken word poetry, and no rhyme scheme. Its poetic techniques articulate a call for empathy for its downtrodden characters. The verse novel's main protagonist, Walker, is a PTSD victim. His speech is riddled with hyperbole, unreliable narration, repetition and allegory as one expects from a PTSD-stricken narrator. This exemplifies another of Benjamin's prescriptions for storytelling: its "written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers" (144). *The Long Take*'s shell-shocked war veterans speak in character -- that is, as people on the street. Robertson achieves the realistic dialogue with research over two years into idiomatic language in post-World War II American noir films.

The Long Take follows Walker, originally from Nova Scotia, Canada, on a journey from New York to Los Angeles to seek companionship among fellow veterans and redemption for his brutal wartime crimes. The verse novel also describes the physical and moral collapse of America as it succumbs to corporate greed and neglects people on the fringes. The verse novel opens with a long-shot view of a glittering New York City in 1946:

And there it was the swell
and glitter of it like a standing wave –
the fabled, smoking ruin, the new towers rising
through the blue, …. (3).

The aforesaid stanza has an iambic cadence. The number of metric feet increases with each succeeding line in what appears to mirror the improvisational rhythm of jazz music, which is typical on soundtracks of post-war noir films. The stanza's first three lines convey rising anticipation with the dramatic speaker's approach to the city. The programmatic action is broken off by the fourth line evoking the horizon. But a hint of unease persists as the succeeding line calls attention to "the fabled, smoking ruin" and "the glamour of buried light." The stanza ends with the city bathed in subdued glory at the start of a new day close to winter.

The second stanza's rhythm contrasts with that of the previous one. The second stanza begins with a quatrain, whose lines are characterised by irregular rhythm. This evokes a dissonance between the wonderment in the previous stanza and the reality of the city's desolation outside of work hours:

And it stayed there, watching,
as they made toward it,
the truck-driver and the young man,
under pylons, wires, utility poles,
past warehouses, container parks,
deserted lots, between the long
oily marshes, landfill sites and swamps,
before slipping down
under the Hudson, and coming up
on the other side
to find a black wetness
of streets trashed and empty
and the city gone (3).

The stanza suggests a bleak panorama with commuters, mostly visitors, rushing past landmarks and empty offices during the weekend: "and the city gone." Walker identifies with the city in one major respect: he is doomed to aloneness. In the course of his travel, he is unable to make any romantic connection, even amid the occasional spectacular, stage set-like backdrop:

It was dark. We watched the starlings mass and whirl, then

> drain from the sky/into a single tree. Then she said my name: that living jolt at the strike when you/ feel the fish, switching away.Let the sun heat her rock on the island, and let her find a better man than me (24).

Parataxis in this stanza underscores Walker's helplessness. He attempts to get involved with people compulsively, but his confusion and shame about his wartime past prevent him from fostering enduring connections.

The dissonance in Walker's human interactions is reflected in that with his environment. The author, Robertson, "… [focuses] on the interconnections between the natural world and humanity, … [explores] the nature of identity through history and myth, … [and examines] those unseen thresholds that lead us between different modes of experience, …." (Bittenbender 225). When that space between different modes of experience in Robertson's verses is breached with no attempt at repair, the result is trauma. Robertson describes those spaces with great precision. He seems to adhere to Benjamin's prescription that "[t]he most extraordinary things, marvelous things are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connections among the events are not forced on the reader" (148). This accuracy is evident in *The Long Take*, which is replete with details that suggest rather than preach truths to the reader. Here is Walker musing about his perceived destruction of Los Angeles as a result of urban redevelopment:

> The buildings fall, block after block, the old downtown rows of brick-and-mortar just dissolve to dust, the new concrete ones cracking, collapsing, walls folding: glass shivered from its frames, cascading down in sheets. Only the wooden houses survive. (224).

The verse novel's crisp imagery, rhythmic patterns and obsessive repetition are not mere frills. They probe the fears and doubts of its PTSD-suffering protagonist in stream-of-consciousness verse.

Walker is displaced in several ways. He is an honourable man who finds himself alone across desolate landscapes from New York City to Los Angeles. His conscience is gnawed by overwhelming guilt over wartime atrocities. He carries this burden amid the ever-shifting landscape of the Baby Boom years. He feels like military surplus: "one of the walking wounded who survived … the invasion of Europe and returned home to find themselves outcasts in a world busy again with its perennial pursuit of money and power, and impatient of yesterday's superfluous

heroes" (Banville https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/24/long-take-robin-robertson-poetry-review).

It is noteworthy that Walker's name reveals his existential condition in terse, luminous verse that is reminiscent of the description of God in *Genesis*: "He walks. That is his name and nature" (Robertson 4). Walker is a pilgrim with great potential who has been crushed by war. The people whom he attracts are fellow misfits. Frank, nicknamed "Glassface," is another war veteran who was disfigured with a lighter during a wartime interrogation. He is Walker's confidante. Billy Idaho is an African-American D-Day veteran and a mentor figure to Walker in Los Angeles. He dies tragically as a homeless victim of racism:

> in his own shirt of body-lice and scabies
> back to the wall
> on his board and blankets,
> with his precious books
> on the corner of 5th & Pedro,
> when they came and set fire to him.
> And he just sat there,
> In his favorite place on the street,
> Batting at flames like they're flies.
> Ten minutes
> And there was nothing left to see of him but his teeth (217).

Billy Idaho is an abuse victim who accepts his horrible fate with resignation. The details of his suffering that punctuate the bar room conversations of Walker as witness trigger empathy.

The idea of loss is replicated in the journey narrative through various motifs such as unsettling quiet ("the women wringing red hands or dishcloths or the necks of chickens just to make more silence"[4]). There is also urban stress that could lead to death ("Everything's going too fast and there are too many people and cars and I'm holding on to this stop-sign because I'm frightened and I know I'm going to die" [5]). As in film noir, the main characters are displaced males. The poetic description of the violence that they spawn is vivid and shot in close quarters:

> 'Story is, he used to run with Maranzano.
> They say he knocked a guy down once,
> put a pen in his ear and kicked it home.
> Then the heat came down when they got his boss

and he moved to Jersey started as a ring-fighter,
had an act where he dressed as a fisherman,
wrestled an octopus….'
The friend shakes his head. '*Some guy'* (14).

One traumatic experience that pervades much of contemporary literary writing, also in *The Long Take*, is the loss of home, or displacement. Displacement is often linked to refugees or those rendered homeless because of war. But it can also be psychological. Walker undertakes a journey toward a discovery of his fears and desires in a foreign land. His inability to settle down in a temporary space as well as the incessant desire to return to an original homeland leaves him perpetually tongue-tied. This situation underscores how trauma is far from being "a stable point of reference"(7). Sad or horrific memories are linked to great shifts. But memories may be recorded and their underlying traumas subsequently come to terms with "through words, or the creation of a narrative, whether written or spoken" (Burrows, 2008 162). The same memories of displacement can be expressed also with silences, a manifestation of anxiety and the "mute repetition of suffering," Silence is a knee-jerk response to "a mistake, a dodge, an excuse, voluntary blindness" that evades categorization (Jung 1020). Silence can also convey meaning in poetry and the arts, which psychoanalysis may deem to be symptomatic of anxieties or neuroses.

Traumatic memories are fragmented and expressed in individual and collective dreams. Soshana Felman and Dori Laub consider listening to a witness's testimonial as not much different from "a psychoanalytic session with a patient" (*Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* 63). In East Asian verse and storytelling, lyric speakers or characters employ symbols from nature as a primary means to preserve their narrators' fragile memories. These symbols function as frames—that is, "some way of organizing and presenting a deed [that] leads to an interpretive conclusion about the deed itself" (Butler 8). Those symbols reveal more about the characters' or dramatic speakers' personalities and values than what the latter may allow through their demeanor or discourse. The symbols suggest terrible family and national events, as philosopher Emmanuel Levinas puts it, "*in* and *as* individual human [bodies]" (Meskin 173) with their distinctive traditions and environments. The Canadian and American protagonists in *The Long Take* have a burning desire to reveal their anxieties in speech: "He had to

finish telling Billy what he'd done, back in France. It was eating him up. Eating him alive" (216). The Asian protagonists in *Bahau Quilt,* in turn, seek a semblance of peace and happiness that they find through active involvement with each other in their common space of the farming community. They also communicate their feelings obliquely.

In "The Storyteller," Benjamin singles out the reticence of war victims as abetting the mechanization and soullessness of the modern world along with society's overreliance on soulless "tactical warfare," economic statistics, wholesale mechanization and an excessive striving for power.[10] He offers the prescription of storytelling to the trauma-stricken as a means of "counsel, [that is,] a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is in the process of unfolding" (The Storyteller 146-7). He laments how experience has been supplanted by information in the modern world and how, as a result, storytelling has degenerated. He says it is the storyteller's mission to fashion experience -- "his own or that reported by others…[-- and make] it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" ("The Storyteller" 146). Benjamin prescribes the employment of detailed nature imagery in an act of "weaving and spinning" characterized by "chaste compactness" ("The Storyteller" 149) in order to impress his reflection on to the reader's imagination and memory:

> A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body ("The Storyteller" 144).

Benjamin works hard to make characters complement each other in the act of storytelling where the human storyteller is at home with nature. Benjamin drives a sharp critique of German culture that is suffused with a "melancholia of absence and finitude" (Richter 226). Also, Benjamin regards memory, "the epic faculty par excellence" ("The Storyteller" 153), not only as an instrument for recovering what is lost but as the scene of language where content is dramatized. This conception of language demonstrates a basic idea about the complexities of language and its constituent parts. Benjamin fills in that gap with thoughts on and strategies of dealing with the "social irretrievability" of the individual's past (*Berlin Childhood,* 2002:

344).

Like Benjamin, I am aware of the limitations of relating memories in narratives of catastrophes. These memories are, in fact, wrenched out of history and no more than "fictional reproductions" (Enjuto-Rangel 2011). But taking a cue from those eminent storytellers, I am "repeating stories" of others to keep faith with their memories, which initiate poetic art. I have pored over memoirs of war trauma victims, visited the Changi Prison Museum and the Fort Canning Battlebox, interviewed a Bahau settlement survivor and memoirist, Joseph Conceicao and corresponded with a daughter of Bahau settlers, Elizabeth Anthonisz. Each retelling requires the imagination to fill in gaps in individual and collective memories. These accounts in poetic form suggest the potential of poetry in unravelling fragmented feelings evoked by the violence of war and by everyday traumas. Choosing the first-person perspective in many of these poems poses a challenge in craftsmanship. How does a poet incorporate the memories of others into his or her own life in order to put a personal stamp on them?

Poetry can give vent to difficult, even unspeakable, feelings through various means such as a restrained style that emphasizes clarity of expression to promote understanding and draw imagery from nature or one's immediate environment. This is found in diverse literary works such as the poetry of Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs and Charles Reznikoff, the novels of poets and fiction writers Primo Levi, Carlos Bulosan, Michael Ondaatje and Robin Robertson. Their generated accounts give witness to, as Emmanuel Levinas puts it, "a dimension beyond … [the] self." The unspeakable, in fact, is given a voice. This project is not much different from Benjamin's attempt "not to [be] himself –that is, as one who negotiates the construction and dispersal of selfhood in language" (Richter 221). The act of giving witness entails going beyond the fragmentation of the self and reaching out in empathy (though the process is never completed). The constant striving to relive the bitter memory, though not aiming for any reconstructed wholeness, staves off dispersal of memory.

In the creative space of narrative poetry, dramatic speakers revive memories of grief as Walker does in *The Long Take*:

> No one knows where I am, he thought, or what I'm doing.

> ‘And now,’ he said out loud to the mirror,
> ‘I can’t make myself reappear’ (219).

They attest to their contradictory emotions by interspersing silences with a freeplay of rhetorical devices, which replace their cries as victims. These devices draw the reader toward empathy. This freeplay in relating trauma assures the traumatized speaker of his or her survival.

CHAPTER THREE

BATTING OR BEARING WITNESS TO WARTIME TRAUMA

Bearing witness, be it in the form of the long poem or the hybrid verse novel, to wartime trauma involves a hovering between presence and absence. In *Bahau Quilt*, a story replaces an original, now absent experience in a particular place. That story is expressed in words that are ambiguous—and, therefore, not always comprehensible. The words nonetheless seek to recreate an original, lost experience. Bearing witness is metonymic in that there is a deletion from a somewhat known experiential or linguistic sequence. Language in such trauma narratives metamorphoses. Imagery repeats interminably as trauma does in recurring nightmares. In *The Long Take*, Walker has flashbacks of dead German soldiers being skinned alive. Benjamin prescribes that the traces in such a narrative text be read allegorically – that is, in such a way that the "disparate words and concepts [are in] grammatical relation." The perceptive and empathetic reader is able to thresh out links between the words and concepts therein. Notwithstanding this, the links between figurative language and concepts expressed in an allegory are unstable. Benjamin writes, "[A]ny person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else" (*Origin* 175). He observes this deferment of meaning in the stories of the master Russian storyteller Leskov in "a hybrid between fairy tale and legend" ("The Storyteller" 158). Testimonies exhibit a similar fragmentation that conveys a powerful, enigmatic element of meaning, but are not completely fulfilling, and so do poetic works that rely on testimonies by eyewitnesses and survivors.

This chapter will tackle this "interweaving, intertwining dialogue with history, memory and trauma" (McCullough 343) that takes place in poetry as a response to wartime atrocities. It will delineate two strategies by which this conundrum is circumvented to a certain degree by articulating feelings of pain and representing them through a primary witness, as in the poetry of Paul Celan, or as a secondary one, in the case of Charles Reznikoff. I am subscribing to Reznikoff's strategy in *Bahau Quilt* and, thus, am locating this writing project in the tradition of poetic witnesses.

The act of bearing witness in itself involves an oscillation between presence

and absence. The poet is a primary witness when he or she records pain from the crimes experienced first-hand by the immediate community and succeeding generations. The poet is a secondary witness, on the other hand, when he or she documents pain from crimes that he or she did not witness through others' testimonies and a perusal of crime scene-related artefacts. According to Katrin Kohl, bearing witness in poetry is so urgent in post-World War II Germany that it seems to necessitate a disregard for a fundamental rule of Aristotelian poetics: "It is not the poet's function to relate actual events, but the kinds of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability or necessity" (81). Poetry often has a more sublime tone and tends to be more engaging emotionally than historiography. But the Third Reich's genocide of Jews in the Holocaust or Shoa demands pressing engagement and articulation so that the witness poet is called to confront that reality. This enthusiasm, however, is tempered with the sentiment expressed by Adorno in a hyperbolic manner given the circumstances that "poetry after Auschwitz is as necessary as it is impossible" (McCullough 343).

Kohl recommends grounding witness poetry in hard evidence involving places, events and the victims' speech in this task. She finds this exemplified to an eminent degree in the works of two Germans, the poet H.G. Adler and novelist W.G. Sebald. Adler is a primary witness who "ensures that the crimes he witnessed first[-]hand are not side[-]lined, argued away, and forgotten because most of the witnesses were either victims who were murdered, or perpetrators and bystanders with a vested interest in obliterating what happened from the collective memory" (82). Sebald, in turn, is a secondary witness whose task is "the documentation of places, people and things, gaining its urgency from the implication in the perpetration of the crimes by virtue of national provenance, and the very elusiveness of factual connections with the past" (82). Both Adler and Sebald share the same experiences of loss of family and the drive to bear witness. They also write fiction that is rooted in real events and real people. They illustrate the two fundamental means of engaging with wartime trauma in writing.

Benjamin suggests that the modern witness is under acute distress as he or she is in a continuum of creation whose summit is "the righteous man." ("The Storyteller" 159). This righteous "I," in the context of interpersonal relations as

Martin Buber sees them, is able to practice empathy toward a "Thou," a special other on either the natural or supernatural level. This "I-Thou" relationship is one of inseparability between the two parties. The role of "the righteous man" is elusive, though, as it is transferrable from one person to another for want of anyone who can fill that role consistently. What becomes apparent, according to Benjamin, is that "the fragmented, constantly revised subject eludes completion and closure, even as it strives toward them" (Richter, 2004: 124). In a world riven by wartime trauma, there is "empathetic dissonance" and silence (Veprinska 138). Buber describes this swinging from presence to absence of the divine "Thou" in the course of history:

> …[T]imes of great utterance, when the mask of divine direction is recognizable in the conjunction of events, alternate with, as it were, mute times, when everything that occurs in the human world and pretends to historical significance appears to us as empty of God with nowhere a beckoning of His finger, nowhere a sign that He is present and acts upon this our historical hour (65).

In the case of Adler, the pursuit of righteousness or empathy is set in the backdrop of the literary world in his German-speaking district in Prague. His response to disaster or trauma then is twofold, namely "theoretical works he would engage in the act of "*Zeugnis ablege*" (to bear witness) while in fictional works he would give his experiences artistic form, "[sic] *kunstlerisch gestalten*" (Kohl 83). During internment, Adler collected evidence for the murder of his fellow Jews that he rewrote into *Theresienstadtz 1941-1945* after the war, in 1955. Sebald, in turn, seems hobbled in striving for righteousness or virtue with a lack of first-hand experience of the genocide. He makes up for this with his strong links to the past, the cultural memory of being German and accepted complicity in the war crimes of the National Socialists. He explains the role of the non-virtuous Third Reich in his work:

> … I cannot abstract from the fact that I know what happened during this last year of the war particularly –the bombing of my native country, the deporting of people from Rhodes or Sicily, or God knows where, to the most ghastly places anybody could possibly imagine. The pervasiveness of that and the fact that it wasn't just something that happened in one or two places but that it happened almost throughout Europe, and the calamitous dimension of it, are something that, even though I left Germany when I was twenty-one, I still have

in my backpack and I just can't put it down (Kohl 94).

Along the lines of Adler's literary method, Benjamin's approach to trauma is as a primary witness. Benjamin writes narrative fragments that combine personal memories with folk proverbs and critical theory in a kind of quilt or montage. In *Berlin Childhood*, he provides elaborate prose sketches of the German capital. But the experiences in his narrative texts as well as in the sophisticated autobiography *Berlin Chronicle* are never rendered completely, and each narrative is fragmentary in a way that enacts the nature of the memory of traumatic events. Benjamin critiques the "ailing Weimar culture that buries itself somewhere along the one-way street between one historical catastrophe and another" (Richter 226). The object is not an originally whole being that is replicated in varying degrees. The object poses problems of engendering multiple copies, but is characterized by absence of the original place.

Berlin Childhood has lush, poetic descriptions of Benjamin's home city in various stages of disasters. The same marks his other autobiographical texts. Benjamin's main project seems to offer the reader an occasion to embrace the fragility of his or her humanity as well as the difficulties of representing the same. In *Berlin Childhood*, he writes:

> [The loggias] mark the outer limit of the Berliner's lodging. Berlin – the city god itself—begins in them. The god remains such a presence there that nothing transitory can hold its ground beside him. In his safekeeping, space and time come into their own and find each other. Both of them lie at his feet here. The child who was once their confederate, however, dwells in his loggia, encompassed by this group, as in a mausoleum long intended just for him (*Selected Writings, 2002:* 346).

This illustrates Benjamin's call to keep the trauma or psychological wound fresh, with the blood intact. Rather than a practical handbook, Benjamin's "The Storyteller" offers an honest, complex perspective. It recommends not the establishment of monuments or memorials to the past but an open-ended retelling of details, a constant digging up of shards of memories where the storyteller surrenders himself or herself to those memories as far as possible. Memory theorists such as Ilan Stevans and G. Sheehy as well as Soshana Felman and Dori Laub insist that

memories are expressed in individual and collective dreams. (*Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* 63).

In keeping with Benjamin's reliving memories of pain in memoirs, Paul Celan does the same over and over again as a primary witness in poetry. Born in a German-speaking family in Czernowitz, Bukovina, in what is now the Ukraine, Celan lost his father to typhus and his mother in a shooting incident at a concentration camp. Childhood trauma from the death of Celan's mother recurs in his poetry and prose. In his Buchner Prize acceptance speech, he says that each poem has its "20th of January." That date is significant for Celan in two ways: it is when his mother passed away in 1942 and when the Wannsee Conference resolved to implement the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" (Fetz and Magsham 69). To reinforce Celan's claim to being a witness poet, he asserts that his poems are based on reality. He says, "I have never written a single line that did not have to do with my existence in some way; I am […] a realist…" (71). Despite the evident use of poetic techniques such as metaphors and repetition, Celan communicates his own experience directly. This conforms to what Benjamin says makes a storyteller's works memorable: "the more completely the story is integrated into the …[storyteller's] own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later" ("The Storyteller" 149). This suggests the inclusion of absent readers in the intersubjectivity present in Celan's witness poems. Further, in a dramatic swerve, Celan as a witness poet is able to generate other storytellers of the genocide in the person of readers, who retell Celan's poetic stories in conversation or critiques.

Celan's most famous poem, "Death Fugue," is an eyewitness's poetic account of the communal trauma of genocide perpetrated by people who speak his mother tongue. It is his direct response to unconfirmed reports heard of concentration camps in Romania and Poland disposing of their Jewish victims in late 1944 and early 1945 (Celan xi). Celan takes the Baroque musical form made famous by German composer Johann Sebastian Bach and gives it a dark rendering with the ironic use of Judaeo-Christian imagery.

Celan's fugue is characterized by the intertwining repetition of two themes or subjects, an aesthetic approximation of the witness's propensity to repeat details of a traumatic event. The first subject appears in the beginning as the opposite of the

biblical image of the Promised Land of Canaan as "a land flowing with milk and honey" (*Exodus* 3: 17):

> Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown
> we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
> we drink and we drink it (39)

The lyrical speakers are grave diggers who repeat a chant. "We drink" suggests suffering as when Jesus asks his apostles if they are able to drink from the same cup that He is about to drink from (*Matthew* 20:22). The second subject is a reference to Faust's lover Margarete, a personification of Germany, whom the lyrical speaker addresses with "your golden hair." She is juxtaposed with Jews whom an unnamed man who calls out and

> he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair
> Margarete
> He writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he
> whistles his pack out
> he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave (39)

Margarete's hair colour is the same as that of honey in the biblical Promised Land. It is contrasted with the earthen colour of the Jews digging their own graves at the concentration camps.

> The first subject reappears as an answer to the absent and unspeakable God:
> Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
> we drink in the morning at noon we drink you at sundown
> we drink and we drink you (39)

The "you" is a reference to Jesus who offers his blood as wine at the last supper in a new covenant with his followers (Matthew 26:28). The same is repeated at the Christian mass. The second subject is repeated and transformed. The Jews as a people are reduced to the woman lover in the *Song of Songs*, a psalm of praise and loving commitment: "ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes there/ one lies unconfined" (39). The transformation hints at the degeneration of the so-called Promised Land after the traumatic Holocaust into a mass grave in Nazi Germany.

The development of the subject ends with the bleak message of treachery: what awaits believing Jews is not the promised reward of eternal life but "unconfined" death. Their witnessing, hence, is futile, as expressed in scriptural imagery.

The eternal "you" in "Death Fugue" is addressed again as the interlocutor in "Psalm." "Death Fugue" parodies the last supper and, hence, the sacramental drinking of Christ's blood. "Psalm," in turn, metamorphoses the biblical hymn into a non-praise. It begins with a thrice-repeated disavowal of the possibility of a new creation:

> No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
> no one conjures our dust
> No one.

The repeated disavowal negates the creation of humanity out of clay (*Job* 33:4-6) and denies God's role as creator. The repetition of "No one" becomes more emphatic as each verse is pared until only "No one" is left. That is ironic given the absence of the eternal "you" in the poem. It is, in effect, a cry for help to no one. The three-part structure mirrors the question Jesus asked the leader of the apostles, St. Peter, thrice before the ascension, "Do you love me?" (*John* 21:15). Seen in this way, the desolation of the Jews as witnesses is put in stark relief: they love No one, and, therefore, are existentially incapable of empathy (Veprinksa 150).

As in "Death Fugue," the diminution of the divine "you" in "Psalm" paves the way for the strange blossoming of the collective rose that comprises a chanting choir. Veprinska rightly points out that the metaphor represents the Chosen People of Israel: "rose among thorns, rose of Jacob" (151). But the metaphor alludes to the afterlife in a manner that has escaped other critics. It is this image that makes the poem a companion piece to "Death Fugue." Dante's mystic rose, a representation of Paradise in the *Divine Comedy*, makes its appearance. The rose, "an essential aspect of the final vision towards which the entire *Comedy* moves" (Seward 515), is a symbol of divine love, with the petals representing the souls of all the faithful, including the Jews of the Old Testament. All souls of heaven find their home in this white rose. An accompanying vision to the source image suggests intersubjectivity: the poet sees the sun, a symbol of God, shining on the rose. The images of the sun

and rose are "interdependent and ultimately inseparable" (Seward 515). The sun sustains the rose's life, and the rose shows forth the sun's benevolent glory. Celan fragments this twofold, religious image, and leaves the rose wilted and red from the heavenly inhabitants' blood. God is absent from the poetic scene, and His presence is indicated by a thorn fragment, a reference to the bloodied dying Christ on the cross.

Celan's poems both exemplify and challenge Benjamin's dictum, which can be applied to trauma testimonies, that "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained" ("The Storyteller" 149). Storytelling becomes therapeutic, because it requires a revisiting of old wounds. The Judaeo-Christian stories told in verse in *Song of Songs*, the *Psalms*, the gospels and even gospel-inspired epic poems that appear in Celan's works speak of love and fidelity. But they are being lost, because their storytellers are dead or abandoned by an absent God in the aftermath of the Holocaust. But, at the same time, Celan the witness poet holds fast to the role of the "virtuous man" as storyteller with the gift for making the stories present again in "an act of weaving and spinning" ("The Storyteller" 149). Celan also embodies Benjamin's storyteller who writes from a context or lived experience from which he or she draws life. Benjamin writes, "[Storytelling] submerges the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus, traces of the storyteller cling to a story the way the handprints of the potter cling to a clay vessel" (149). The writer has a responsibility to address the demand of the traumatized other from the contextualized experience.

Like Celan, I have attempted to use stories and imagery, this time to reinforce the victimhood of Singaporeans and prisoners of war during the Japanese occupation. The *Bahau Quilt* section entitled "Scarred" shows a dissonance between nature and war perpetrators. It is set in a pastoral scene that is marred by the presence of Japanese oppressors. They have reduced a World War II Allied prisoner to powerlessness as slave labour in rail works. The dramatic speaker laments his loss of identity that is starkly portrayed in a loss of speech and the seeking of warmth in a cold, chaotic place ("My voice settled among leaves on the jungle floor."). The idyllic setting of the forest is transformed into a strange, hostile environment that is a veritable Inferno. The forest itself can be personified as a sex slave, a staple of Japanese *kempeitai* life in occupied Southeast Asia, whose charm is exploited by the invaders ("She moaned

in her mountain of buried rubies.”). The thousands of POWs who die during construction work are discarded and unmourned for in mass burial grounds (“… nameless, dreamless bodies/ tucked in the underbrush,/ lost in the crashing of the earth’s plates.”). In such dire circumstances, death, its peace an antithesis to lust for power, becomes a liberator from suffering (“beside steel tracks like Jacob’s ladder/ till death sprouted and grew heavy,/ nailed on the bent branches.”). The POWs become identified likewise with the trope of the suffering Christ on a cross in a landscape of devastation.

Similarly, in the *Bahau Quilt* section entitled “A Lost Mother,” the protagonist Chico Pereira replays fleeting, fragmented images of his mother who had given him up for adoption (“Bloodshot, brown eyes and furrowed brows/ above thick, red lips are all he recalls/ of the woman who brought him into the world”). Chico accords the fragmented images with reverence as if they were a sacred painting (“He plays the images back in his mind occasionally,/ as a devotee wipes a forgotten icon, like a love lost, ….). The unfaithful mother is a prototype for Chico’s fiancée Lourdes. This episode foreshadows Lourdes’s unfaithfulness later on. Chico calls out for empathy to the absent mother that doubles up as an appeal to the deceased Lourdes (“Chico wished he had said something,/held her hand, cold like dead fish, or left his breath/ that he could claim back in her tight embrace.”).

The act of bearing witness involves making the poet absent in American Objectivist poet Charles Reznikoff’s long poem *Holocaust* (1975). Unlike Celan, Reznikoff is not a primary witness of the events that he is narrating in poetic form. Reznikoff takes primary sources in the form of “statements made by witnesses and, to a lesser extent, affidavits and certain official war documents presented by trial lawyers” from the *Trials of War Criminals before the Neurnberg Military Tribunals* and the *Trial and Appeal of Adolf Eichmann* in Jerusalem (*Empathy in Contemporary Poetry after Crisis* 91). Reznikoff thus becomes an empathetic observer within certain limits. He still edits the transcripts, deletes almost all of the personal names and first-person accounts – except for those of the Nazi perpetrators – and most indications of the lyric speaker’s feelings. Rachel Edford says that Reznikoff succeeds in giving witness to the Holocaust victims “without objectifying or aestheticizing their suffering” (13). He limits himself to the facts of the case and lets

the reader respond with the appropriate emotion. This strategy is in part borne out of his training as a lawyer listening to witness testimonies in court. He says:

> Now suppose in a court of law, you are testifying in a negligence case. You cannot get on the stand and say, "The man was negligent." That's a conclusion of fact. What you'd be compelled to say is how the man acted. [...] The judges of whether he is negligent or not are the jury in that case and the judges of what you say as a poet are the readers. That is, there is an analogy between testimony in the courts and testimony of a poet. (Interview, 194-5).

Listening is key to giving witness. Benjamin says that the more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply what he listens to is impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. ("The Storyteller" 149). This is evident in Reznikoff's work. Even in his earlier poems, Reznikoff has shown himself to be an acute listener with a good sense of rhythm.

Reznikoff is also attuned to the details of the primary witnesses' testimonies. He illustrates the storytelling process according to Benjamin as "believing that one can show when one cannot speak" (10). The details speak for the witnesses' emotional states. Divya Victor observes that Reznikov's appropriation of documentary and intertextual strategies "witnesses not only the atrocities specific to the Nazi genocides, but also the continuities between trauma's historical character and its contemporary articulation" (62). Todd Carmody, in turn, interrogates how Reznikoff's appropriation strategy is different from Israel's use of the same materials for nationalistic purposes – that is, as a "historic opportunity for Israeli unity and national pedagogy" (88). Carmody maintains that Reznikoff, aware of the dangers of appropriating emotion for political purposes, excises as much of the emotions from his poetry as possible.

The absence of emotion can be seen in *Holocaust*'s minimal description and straightforward narration, as to be expected from a courtroom testimony. In the section on a Jewish man from Lodz, the witness's deposition is told from a third-person viewpoint. The privation that the man experiences with his mother and fellow Jews is described with spare language:

> The family was hungry

> and his mother became bloated from hunger –
> as many were.
> His mother and her family escaped from the ghetto in Lodz
> and fled to the Warsaw ghetto;
> but there it became much worse:
> his mother had sold everything she had
> and they had nothing to eat (32).

What stands out in the account is the emphasis on the privations endured by the family, expressed through the repetition of "hungry" and the narrator's generalization of that condition in the concentration camp: "as many were." What is absent is the man's emotional state. There is no weeping in much of the long poem despite the brutalities that the victims endure.

Reznikoff, as a secondary witness, appropriates the actions of the protagonists in an act of empathy. He does not reveal his own feelings other than in the ironic juxtaposition of the details of the scene and giving the narration a quick rhythm:

> and they were brought to a death camp
> When they got off the train
> they were hurried to a small gate,
> the SS men shouting 'Hurry! Hurry!'
> and there the men were taken from the women and children.
> While this was going on
> a band was playing.

The paired actions of the Jews being hastened to the camps or gas chambers and the band playing breaks down the intersubjectivity in the scene. The Jewish families are being torn apart, but the band prevents empathy toward their plight with music. The stark description is impressed on the reader's mind like black and white wartime pictures. While looking at pictures, the viewer adopts the perspective of the camera and, in Benjamin's words, "reactivates the object reproduced" ("The Work of Art" 1171). Though this allows the viewer to be a critic, a role that earlier cultic art forms discouraged, it also suggests that the commonplace can be approached as poetic.

Juxtaposition recurs throughout the long poem to underscore the absence of intersubjectivity in the death camps. In an incident when the Jews are being led to the camps or gas chambers, the Jews's deathly seriousness is juxtaposed with a Nazi

soldier's jocular mood:

> he would ask their age of the men – if they did not show it –
> and what they did for a living,
> and then point with his thumb
> to the right or left;
> and those sent to the left – all able to work –
> were driven barefoot to the camp,
> even when snow was on the ground,
> and whipped to go faster.
> One of the soldiers on guard said as a joke,
> pointing to the smoke from the chimneys of the crematorium,
> 'The only road from here to freedom!' (78)

The Nazi soldier clearly lacks empathy at the dehumanization of the Jews at the camp and during the Holocaust. The soldier's use of a metaphor in this scene makes the historiographic account poetic. Similarly, Benjamin's critique of the Weimar republic exposes savagery. The Third Reich situates itself as dominant and totalizing over others. These horrors "are simply manifestations of selves in error," selves of the earthly city (Coles 17). Trauma is but an effect of a finite speaking subject's desire for worldliness or possession of others that overrides intersubjectivity.

Reznikoff is aware of the gap between the limitations of anyone giving witness and ideal intersubjectivity. This is akin to Benjamin's recognition that limitations result in part from human passions that "are at work as destructively as the wrath of Achilles or the hatred of Hagen" (160). But still, the poet storyteller observes scenes that cannot be totalized (they "lose their names" [161]), but resurface spontaneously from his or her "inner self" (161) or imagination. Finally, the act of writing witness poetry is shown to be akin to the perpetuation of violence with the purpose of giving counsel. Benjamin writes, "For he is granted the ability to reach back through a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experiences but much of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to what is most his own)…. The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself" (46). Benjamin problematizes the writing of history, or trauma, in order to valorize virtue. Reznikoff does the same to expose the cruelty of the perpetrators, using their own words and actions.

As a secondary witness to trauma, I have followed Reznikoff's poetic writing

mode, more so than Celan's, to some extent. I am absent experientially and temporally from the scenes that I am narrating. But I am present in the selection of details, including the protagonists' feelings, for the narratives. It is on the latter point that I deviate from Reznikoff's writing mode.

The *Bahau Quilt* section entitled "Last China Clipper" is inspired by news clippings. The section is a snapshot of a pristine island just before the Japanese invasion in 1941. The city is a paradise with lush patches of nature and populated by innocent butterflies ("painted Jezebels like torchlights against grey clouds"). The peace is broken by the rumbling of motor cars and the threat of Japanese air raids. The island paradise is in peril, and fear obscures the people's vision of the beauty around them ("They could not enjoy nature's still life."). The motorists are pilots of the last Chinese Clipper airmail service to the US. They are in a hurry to leave the island. The airport's exteriors mirror the pilots' anxieties ("Of solid concrete, paint of the edges peeling, nervous."). The pristine image of butterflies is replaced by the ominous one of an airborne Hawker Hurricane plane providing cover for the Clipper pilots escaping from the island. In the ensuing frenzy, it is everyone for himself and herself.

The section entitled "Balestier Burning" is an amalgamation of information taken from the World War II exhibits at the National Museum. The stanzas give witness by setting forth the victims' pain. They call for an empathetic response. The pristine landscape of "Last China Clipper" is destroyed by the Japanese bombing raids ("Our house was hollowed out by a torrent of flame and tinder/ when a Japanese zero dropped a bomb, and we all crept out."). Nature reacts in revulsion ("Hellish smoke spiralled skyward and fell to earth as black rain."). Like Reznikoff, I invite the reader to situate himself or herself in the place of the victims ("Tears waxed on Claire's cheeks, but she didn't utter a word in my unfeeling arms."). The utter despondency of Chico Pereira and Singaporeans is expressed in a telling image ("her tears, bloodied head and breath heavy against my palms/ till a stranger took her to an ambulance,/ and it splashed muddy water onto my torn trousers.").

The striving for images to gather together the traces of an original experience of trauma is a dilemma for the witness poet in a dialogue with the reader. Besides recreating what is inherently unspeakable and unrepeatable, the witness poet has to

contend with the requirements of his or her aesthetic craft. This dilemma is widespread and critical in our time of interminable conflict. In "The Work of Art," Benjamin credits film and photography with the decline of the so-called bourgeois aesthetic experience that prioritized a detached authority of a work of art. He claims that the age of mechanical reproduction has led to the loss of the work of art's aura, which is described variously as "an object … [in] the domain of tradition" and "a unique experience" ("The Work of Art" 1171). He seems to favour instead a multiple reinvention of an original or authentic experience. The modern crisis of experience, what Benjamin calls *Erfahrung* (experience) as opposed to mere discontinuous, lived experience or *Erlebnis* (experience), is heightened by war and its aftermath. Experience aims to re-establish communion with others. Benjamin knows, however, that the mass killings during the two world wars are a memory that is not worth re-enacting.

CONCLUSION

My poetic works *After the Fall (dirges among ruins)* and *Bahau Quilt* are an attempt to address the challenge of describing in poetic language something that exists outside of language in the context of surviving wartime trauma. I have closely examined the gestures, speech and syntax patterns of war victims in interviews, correspondence and research. I have also employed sensory language to unravel the knotted predicament of these trauma narrators in my works, especially the verse novel. This project is pressing in an age characterized by battles fought between individuals and nations. It has been seventy-five years since nuclear weapons decimated civilian populations for the first time. The world is gripped again by fears of radical terrorism, economic malaise and a crippling pandemic. Since not all trauma victims confront the sources of their fears, however, they continue to be controlled by those fears. In Singapore and around the globe lies a mass of survivors and their families enmeshed in traumatic memories (Harrington 65). They sing dirges among the ruins of their past. They linger in the shadows until someone shines a light on their stories. Drawing ideas and strategies from Walter Benjamin, I have sought to recreate perceptions of mute subjects and experiences of brokenness. My characters approach memories of traumatic events differently, but they do so in language that strives to capture those chaotic moments. They are also situated in promising but ultimately limited literary frames. Nonetheless, most of these characters are able to unravel their trauma, at least in the imagination. Rather than rebuild a psychological wall that keeps trauma away, many of my characters seek to tear that wall down. They do not wish to forget. They have the calling of a witness.

Notes:

[1]The more successful farm settlement that the Japanese established in Malaya for Chinese Singaporeans was in Endau.
[2]For a detailed discussion of the verse novel during the Victorian era, see Dino Felluga's article entitled "Verse Novel" (*A Companion to Victorian Poetry* 174-185).

[3] A timeline of Singapore's historical events and literary publications is found in *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature* (xiii).
[4]For an analysis of *Aurora Leigh*, *Amours de Voyage* and *Ring and the Book*, see Dino Felluga's "Verse-Novel: Generic Hybridity and the Chamber Pot" (2002).
[5]Koh maintains that judicious government planning has contributed to the flourishing of poetry in Singapore. She writes in her keynote address at the Poetry Festival Singapore 2016, "Thanks to the 1989 Ong Teng Cheong Report (for short) and patient presentation of their case by poets, writers, literary scholars of the time, and their supporters, it was officially and thus very publicly accepted, that the arts, including literature, "were integral in developing a culturally vibrant society, giving Singapore a unique national identity and providing the social bond that holds our people together." This was a landmark recognition of the role of literature (there was a separate report on the literary arts) in society, which the writers had all along been pressing for. In short, the arts were not an incidental luxury, but essential to the fostering of national and cultural identity and thus national development. It thereby deserved public financial support. The Report paved the way for the founding of the National Arts Council in 1991 and the inauguration of the Singapore Literature Prize in 1991, the Cultural Medallion and other awards which honoured literary achievement" (3).
[6]Freud defines trauma as "a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 303).
[7] J. Roger Kurtz is the first writer to make the claim that "we live in an age of trauma" (1).
[8]See Chapters 13 and 14 of Laura Ehrlich's *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Quilting* for a detailed look at the process of quilting the top and the backing.
[9]St. Augustine anticipates trauma theory in his musings on the fall of ancient Rome in the philosophical treatise *The City of God*.
[10]Benjamin wrote a doctoral dissertation entitled *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* in 1919. He was later attracted to Marxism after reading Gyorgy Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and befriending Bertolt Brecht. See a concise description of the evolution of Benjamin's critical ideas and an annotated bibliography on Benjamin in T*he Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001).

CREATIVE WRITING

SECTION ONE: *BAHAU QUILT*

With the World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body (143-4).

Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller"

CHAPTER ONE

REMEMBERING

1. Christine's Prologue

Eight-inch squares

of calico bag cloth,

cut and stitched,

dried tears among peony buds

stillborn in the rocky earth,

a hut with a thatched roof

leaking streams of rain,

a lotus withering in a pond,

do not keep the feverish body warm.

Three quilts like three layers of fabric:

one for Lady Thomas and the Changi women,

who sent embroidered stories to a Bahau colony;

another for Shinozaki who risked his post

with the gamble to send our people

to a new life in Negeri Sembilan;

and one that Mama kept,

backing for the other two,

on its buttonhole stitches I slept as a baby.

Papa compiled poems as others collected stamps,

fat Buddhas, Hard Rock café mugs;

he longed to tell his (our) story.

Mama hoarded scraps of memory in diary entries:

recollections of war, their exodus to Bahau

dressing wounds, cooking for loved ones and family.

My task is to sew the fabric scraps

into a patchwork, with light and dark colours,

following the dictates of fancy:

Tiny peony buds open in morning dew,

I'm a child once more,

a thread's a navel string cut off anew.

2. **From Ashfield, Massachusetts to Singapore**

Propeller-like fan blades whirring on a round hub:

cheap entertainment to while away the hours,

a respite from an occasional memory lapse,

one time lasting three months,

after separating from Kevin, an accountant,

failing as Mum to Kenneth, my bratty three-year-old;

failing to secure a tenure in college; Papa's recurring cancer.

I cursed unfeeling tall pine trees.

The walk to Ashfield Lake took longer

than gathering pieces of my past:

brown bullhead, ash trees, a desolate library, my little boy.

Papa's sudden death made me want to jump in the lake.

Sometimes my mind would leap like a skittish stag;

at other times it was a black bear snorting

and emptying a bird feeder on a tree.

Once, I came to and didn't recognise Kenneth.

Baby blankets soaked in tears flashed in my mind;

"Papa!" I screamed till no sound came out;

opening and closing doors confounded me;

popping Xanax and zonking out to Lou Reed;

floating face-up on Ashfield Lake,

I reached out to embrace white wisps of clouds.

Papa was the lake: broad and murky,

always in a hurry, never still.

He waved bye as I boarded a bus alone in primary two --

How reckless of him! How scary for me!

So that was how I became independent --

I didn't want to lose him. As I did Mama.

The first morning the Peter Pan bus

clambered out of ghostly Northampton.

The terminal's brick wall looked like it would collapse

in the autumn air. I felt like screaming but no sound came out.

I thought I saw Papa's reflection on my work table top

poring over handwritten memos on ruled yellow pad,

groaning as the setting sun shone through sheer curtains

I had hidden myself in as a child till I gasped for breath.

Migraine stung before big, metal signs,

garish, greener than trees at this time of year

on a highway that stretched till kingdom come.

Papa insisted on a garden, so we had one with red roses

in a two-storey terraced house on Balestier Road.

Some Taiwanese sank money into his garment factory after the war.

Papa sold clothes to Macy's; he wanted me to be a lady

so he enrolled me in Smith College, where I discovered Sylvia Plath.

Propeller-like engine blades wielded magic,

covering great swathes of the sky

from Logan to Narita and, at last, Changi.

The air hostesses' sarong kebayas

swirled like kaleidoscopic arabesque

in batik art that Papa loved.

He withdrew into himself as he grew feeble.

Wax dried up and caked in his *kanting*.

3. Papa Chico

(born January 6, 1912, died November 5, 2002)

His Portuguese nickname meant "boy,"

but the white hair and beard made him look like a mall Santa.

His glazed brown eyes took in the world's problems

and worked out solutions to all of them and ours.

His loud sighing while reading the papers worried nurses.

Digestive biscuits and dried cuttlefish were his treats to visitors.

Lost in a cloud of cigarette smoke that the nuns frowned upon

at St. Joseph's Home, he felt blessed in his own company.

He was depressed but didn't look like he was dying

as he savoured *ô-á-chian* in Tupperware.

The black Terminator t-shirt I gave him last Christmas hung loosely

that he blamed on a diet of dishwater-looking gruel and cabbage.

But at night, he dreamt of the *Kempeitai* storming his ward,

jumping on his belly till he lay frozen in bed.

I hugged him and feared his lungs would collapse if I let go.

4. **Childhood (by Christine)**

He would leave the house when I cried.

No need for the swing of a leather belt;

Indifference stubbed out the light in my young soul.

My tiny hand outstretched, expecting his ruddy hands,

one moment feeling his warmth, another clutching empty air.

“Seeing a friend.” “Got overtime. Be a good girl.”

He grudgingly read the Brothers Grimm to me when I couldn’t sleep.

I rested on his fleshy stomach imagining

Cinderella’s toeless, heelless, blinded stepsisters

and me left on the street if I didn’t dry my tears.

Red roses wilted and were swept with the monsoon.

Sometimes he would take me to *Or Kio Pa Sat*

for *bakuteh*, *tau sar piah* or watch a Run Run Shaw movie set.

We recited place names I wanted to visit

from Ladybird books: Reykjavik in Iceland, Washington, D.C. in the US, ….

"Promise to take me along! It'll be sweet"

5. Papa Chico's Poetry Collections (Christine's Notes)

Chico Pereira was an emerging poet with strange luck. He won a British Council writing competition for his first collection, but suffered from a mental black hole thereafter. He experienced false restarts while trading textiles from Southeast Asian sweatshops and Macy's in the US, where his daughter Christine completed an MFA; wasted motion when his business went bust, and frustration when he found out that he had Stage 4 pancreatic cancer, so he checked himself into St. Joseph's Home.

He struck a friendship there with a pretty Filipina nurse, Flor, who typed poems that he dictated about his family's dark past, mostly during the three godless years spent in a farm colony in Bahau during the Japanese occupation. He was reading his manuscript aloud one morning when he slumped to the grey, linoleum floor.

He lay with a grimace on his face as if he had caught a glimpse of an old, familiar enemy. The right lens of his glasses cracked. His skin was all puckered and leathery. Flor huffed and puffed into his dry mouth and applied chest compressions but to no avail. His writing ended with brain hemorrhage.

But his poetic career took off after Flor decided to send his poetry in an attachment to a condolence email to Christine, whose estranged husband's best friend was a reader for a small Washington-based poetry press which recently published a bestselling memoir about wartime trauma.

Flor had borrowed his books during breaks. In return, she typed out poems that he dictated. She had won second place in the Migrant Workers Poetry Contest, so she was perfect for the task. She helped him complete two manuscripts, *After the Fall* and *The Bahau Quilt*, a long poem about World War II and his loved ones.

It was a miracle that he completed them. Morphine made him groggy and sleepy.

He was ailing from pancreatic cancer at St. Joseph's Home in Jurong. But he didn't want chemo or radiation. "When it's time to go, you go. Wink and say Bye Bye. Die already."

The manuscripts were printed on A4 paper, corrected over with a Liquid Paper coat. He had just dictated the last section when he fell. He had rambled about the same old stories about Mama, the war and walks in the rose garden on the phone the night before. I told him to stop drinking. "A man in his 80s can't be bothered."

Papa dictated poems continuously days on end after the doctor's prognosis. Sometimes he struggled to churn out just one page's worth of words over Tiger beer that Flor smuggled in a thermos bottle. He spent many hours staring at rose bushes in the garden, exploring the dark recesses of his memory as a miserly *pasar malam* hawker scouring the street for a 1940s-era, square one cent coin.

The first part of *The Bahau Quilt* was begun on May 2, when Papa received his biopsy results, and completed on May 16. He proceeded with the second part on the day of his next medical test on June 2 and completed it on June 16, when he started taking morphine.

When he began the third and last part, his left eye was dimming. He was also losing the sense of smell. It took three months for him to dictate sections to Flor, who typed with only one finger. The many revisions and deletions, stanza by stanza, on the margins suggested he wanted to get his account of Bahau right.

Flor handed to me the manuscripts and an old batik quilt, Papa's legacy. I stopped writing a conference paper and hurried back from Smith College, where I now taught. His body looked small in a coffin at St. Joseph's chapel. I read a few poems, his and mine, in a eulogy at his funeral.

6. To the Spirit

"Spirit of God in the clear, running water…."

In the gentle breeze,

the bar of a hymn

I learned as a boy

streams upon pews

in the vigil lamp's glow

and possesses my mind

as red wine does Li Bo

under a crystal moon.

The rustling of leaves

twisting on the pavement

is a sign from You

that my understanding

can barely peek through.

The breeze is an echo

of your hand-woven creation

that my song croaks.

But not even the song

is mine as it springs

from heaving memory

I cannot reach or cling to.

But I sing loud

to canyons of concrete

in Jurong West

my testimony of truth.

Singing is a gift

not from one's mind

but from the Spirit

that blows in and out

of rooms for the old

like the koel's whistle,

ringing among housing estates

in the clear morning light.

I sing and so doubly pray

before oil lamps

about home and separation,

rapture and apprehension,

prodigal youth, sudden maturity.

Let the wind raise through the sky

the glory buried by war and slowly

wrench dreams out of nightmares.

7. Recurring Nightmare

I saw the blood moon peer through windows,

the same dream for a second night.

Lourdes was sewing until the needle

pierced her skin and rested near a bone.

Thighs beat against thighs in the hot air

as cats squealed into vacant Bahau fields.

"Shed tears for my daughter Christine."

I awoke helpless in my sweat-drenched singlet.

The stench of blood hung in the air.

Japanese bayonets asserted power

and cast shadows on peeling paint on walls.

Green canteens and pill boxes glinted in moonlight.

I lay still until white sunshine warmed me.

I felt hung over without a sip of wine.

I was transported to Bahau, with Lourdes by my side;

we kissed and then she was gone.

8. Walking at St. Joseph's Home

I tramp on this pebble-washed path,

with my nurse beside me, seventy times a day.

I revisit feelings as I do my remaining old classmates.

My sight is fading but memories flash when they will:

Christine's tiny, fragile hands in mine,

her warm, soft stomach and little belly button,

her first cry at the makeshift clinic:

piercing, wondrous, mine but not completely.

Lourdes looking like an angel sculpture

with red hibiscus lips, ivory skin,

her eyelids closed after gasping,

almost drawing her last breath during delivery.

Sorry, this feeble mind cannot fully remember

nor exhaust the possibilities of life. I just pace on this path.

A baby cries in the distance; a woman's asleep beside her,

dogs howl as the thump of death's foot draws near.

9. Childhood on Thomson Road

In Aboh[1]'s bungalow on Thomson Road,

we did not have much to talk about.

A retired school teacher who devoured

Good Housekeeping from cover to cover

and clipped recipes and food photos,

she did not want to be disturbed.

I chatted instead with words on pages

of magazines and books from the library.

At the back terrace, I continued conversing

with water colours on paper or cotton sheets,

sketched hibiscus and banana trees in the front yard

or the cracked concrete path to the porch,

gifted them to the neighbours, the Bogaars and Minjoots,

who replied by acting out stories from the Class-reader.

Aboh, the house and front yard, those neighbours are now silent,

yet my mind's eye sees Aboh snip paper and the neighbours hungry for applause.

10. From Rain to a Flood

A creek in Bukit Timah

overflowed during monsoons,

forming a shallow, coffee-coloured lake

that stained our singlets and shorts

wet our eyes and remained ever silent

as it lapped against the main asphalt road.

Tadpoles whispering piqued my curiosity

at submerged blades of grass.

Icy rain tingling,

running off rusty aluminum roof gutters,

converging on my goose bumps

soaked my mind through Bahau droughts.

Flash floods surged above people's heads

and pounced on young people wading.

My playmate, Diogo, like a brother to me,

one moment peered at a lily,

another moment pressed beneath currents.

All the rain wanted was to reach the creek.

"Hurry back," my Aboh said,

one hand tapping a rattan stick

against the palm of the other hand in rhythm.

"Rain will make you go bald."

I didn't reply but thought,

"Botak good when weather *sibei* hot."

She kept me bolted indoors

during a heavy downpour

while my friends explored the Racecourse

and teens sprained knees from the Charleston.

The best escape from detention was sleep,

bathing in a dream for many hours.

I woke up alone after sunset

when I was around six.

Papa was gone though he promised

an adventure on Balestier Road, at our new home.

But he left without me. I knew then adults couldn't be trusted.

Wailing seemed like a song; embarrassed, the bedroom wall echoed.

Deaths and betrayals were soaked

in my memory like muddy rain.

The pitter patter became

a loud knocking on the roof,

and he was left homeless,

with a thunderclap in his head.

11. A Lost Mother

A furrowed forehead like storm-lashed clay,

Bloodshot, brown eyes above chapped, red lips

were fragments of the woman who brought him into the world.

He played the details back in his mind on special days

as a devotee recalled an icon locked away for much of the year.

He was a foundling who wanted to know why the woman gave him away.

The shards of a forehead, eyes and lips were the only answers.

He traveled to dreamland exhausted, repeating her name.

She was always busy with what women do.

She wanted him to hush up.

as lightning struck across the darkness.

He called her and wanted to peck her cheek,

but he was greeted by air when she released her grip

under the heavy rain. Chico wished he had said something,

held her hand, cold like dead fish, or left his breath

that he could claim back in her tight embrace.

12. A Caning

I yakked too much in Primary 2 class,

so Mrs. Angus pulled out a rattan cane

tapped it lightly on her mooncake-fat palm

as a drummer practicing before lion dancers came into the scene.

She made my nose touch the green chalkboard,

at the count of three told me to drop my short white khaki pants.

The class gasped; good thing my skivvies had no hole.

I wished rain clouds would descend and cover my blushing ass.

Mrs. Angus raised her hand and said, “Learn your lesson.”

Then small thunderclaps ripped through the air.

Sweat beads formed from my forehead to bum;

a solitary teardrop rolled down a cheek;

When she raised her hand a second time,

my belly tightened, my bladder emptied.

Drizzle wet the wall and Mrs. Angus’s hand.

13. A Funeral Procession

“*Pie Jesu, pie Jesu, pie Jesu, pie Jesu*

Qui tollis peccata mundi

Dona eis requiem, dona eis requiem.”

Rising trumpet notes could neither halt the sunset

nor keep eyes dry for an elderly neighbour.

Incense smoke made the mourners recall how good she was.

Good and gone, for that matter, any one dead is

ushered by a parade of white soutanes and purple stoles.

The pall bearers looked ashen as they marched in time,

like the acolytes before them, against a golden-censer sky.

The bell tolled; the trumpeter took his rest.

That hymn played in my head at different times of the day

at any procession. It reminded me of that kindly neighbour,

my First Communion, my wedding, Christine's baptism,

Lourdes: *Dona ea requiem, dona ea requiem….*

Rising trumpet notes in St. Joseph's Home

Be good, the neighbour said. Lourdes said. My nurse said.

We approached the altar table in single file,

with hands clasped, eyes closed as candle wax melted.

14. At St. Joseph's Institution

"Pater noster qui es in coelis

Sanctificetur nomen tuum…."

I chirped after the bell woke us up

from stupor brought on by staring at numbers

in chalk in a classroom for almost an hour.

Those words were foreign to a teen

who would rather bowl at the Recreation Club

but not too foreign as we all said them in each class.

"Ave Maria, gratia plena

Dominus tecum…."

voiced through gleaming teeth

marked the days and feasts at the chapel,

years through wartime prison and funerals,

though I couldn't care less saying them then,

bound me to those different from me

and filled the awkward silence.

15. Fighter Plane Crash

At a Kallang Bay picnic with schoolmates,

I once saw a Brewster F2A Buffalo dive.

Between nibbles of a soggy ham sandwich,

I couldn't stop it from tilting to the left and then to the right.

Clouds flung it close to the ground –but not too close, I hoped--

as its engine wheezed and coughed like a sick horse

with a grey, methane smoke tail in the wind.

I lost my appetite as it swooned, pistons thumping, to earth.

The plane crashed on the bay,

its British pilot red-faced on the floating hull

till a ruddy Malay man in a dinghy saved the day.

My classmates and I picked out that the pilot was tall,

his brown jacket disheveled as the boatman pulled him in by the sleeve.

We snickered. On land, the pilot gave him fifty pence

and scuttled fast to some government office.

We didn't say a word. We didn't think of a bigger crash ahead.

16. Eager to Please

"You're either very early or very late.

But one thing for sure: you do turn up."

Mr. Foyle always said at St. Joseph's on Bras Basah,

a choir of accusing voices from my childhood.

"You're always coming and going.

What an insane life, doing favours to so many friends. "

I met Patrick on an errand on Victoria Street

and shuffled on to a mum and pop shop in Bugis.

The fear of saying no, the fear of being hemmed in,

High jinks, circus acrobats spinning in air.

I did not want to turn others down.

I was scared they would turn me down.

At a school play or garden party

I would not want to be an island in a sea of empty chairs,

with my small, raspy voice amplified by cork-boarded walls,

so I kept moving like wood moths after the rain.

17. In Bugis

Before completing his tour of life,

an old adventurer can return to this town

and vanish in a stream of heads through narrow streets.

This dim-lit street in *Xiao Po*[2] is familiar.

His heart hums, like before

with cheap wine, his sweetheart cooing in his arm.

Desire is a river fed by monsoon rains

to overflowing in a shophouse on Malabar Street.

Surrounded by liquid, blank eyes,

he sits on a muddy street with drunks

and his beloved offers one more toast

to his pearl city once coveted by the Crown.

He imagines lackeys heaving sacks of Havana sugar,

priests passing by with gold for a church tabernacle.

It is here that British and American soldiers

drink and share rumours of war amid vomit.

As clouds and the river turn black as Chinese ink,

might not migrants' grandchildren see themselves

in him gushing about *chye poh*-topped *chwee kueh*?

How savoury to dip chopsticks into the same hot pot

with new friends. A plaintive guitar echoes.

The pot fire ignites the ether. After rounds of drinks,

they are all the same shade of flame.

Playful banter pierces storm clouds like sunshine.

The moon half-sleeps in a cot in the sky

and spreads a quilt of night on the old-timer

who bids all goodnight in the shophouse.

He dozes to the April heat's piercing serenade.

18. China Clipper's Last Flight (November 30, 1941)

Acacias shaded motor cars chugging to Kallang[3]

from the ember-like sun amid the crackle of Zero bombers:

A green quilt corridor bordering concrete lanes,

with Jezebels flitting quickly among faded flowers.

The pilots' motorcar overtook ours

as it chased a smattering of sunlight on this two-lane road.

The trip across the ocean was long, the mail cargo urgent,

with ambushes and traps set by flying swordsmen.

The Clippers danced precariously across the pink-red sky.

Up ahead the airport's whitewashed pillars stood guard,

cemented, paint on the edges peeling, clumsy in the wind.

More motor-cars clacked around in a procession.

Landed yesterday, they must leave posthaste (that's the order)

clutching lucky dice below a fidgety Hawker Hurricane.[4]

19. Buzz at Dawn on December 8, 1941

Sirens broke the silence of early dawn

and disrupted my dream of Mum laughing

as search-light beams danced in the black sky

to the haphazard beat of anti-aircraft guns.

My hair was like wild grass, I knew,

but not to comb was not a moral dilemma

for one who might die. I covered my ears

amid the loud buzz of invisible Japanese planes

The thud, thud, thud of the guns in the east,

the occasional explosion in Kallang airport

made my face break out into a red, scaly rash.

The clumsy tympani made me angry at the Japanese

and the British, who couldn't stop the Japanese

from beating the war drums and triggering crusty spots.

The drumming grew louder and louder over the next few weeks;

I got used to the bee-like buzz of planes and my patchy skin.

20. Balestier Burning (February 1942)

My sisters shrieked; my uncles' mouths hung open at the door;

my right arm went limp in the burnt-rubbery, black smoke.

Our house was hollowed out by a torrent of flame and tinder

when a Japanese zero dropped a bomb, and we all crept out.

Tears waxed on Claire's cheeks, but she didn't utter a word in my unfeeling arms.

Through smoking fire, we scrambled to the street, my uncles still frantic

as we swept past charred cars, bedsheet-shrouded bodies, spirits reduced to ash.

Hellish smoke spiralled skyward and fell to earth as black rain.

All I remember was clutching Claire in my wounded arms,

her tears, bloodied head and breath heavy against my palms

till a stranger took her to an ambulance,

and it splashed muddy water onto my torn trousers.

The traces of her tears, blood and silence were all she left

as I never saw her again. At the General Hospital,

I stared at the ceiling from the cold floor (all beds were taken) for days,

The shadows of Claire and my uncles haunted my dreams, but home was no more.

21. In the Hospital

Walled in between air raids were the dying.

Lourdes tended the injured, Jesus, Mary and Joseph,

their blood, still oozing, made the floor tiles bright red.

Beside the door, they were of different ages and colours

with terrible injuries, barely hanging on to life.

She patted children sobbing in unremitting blackness.

"What a war! What a waste! Dear God!"

She was gripped with terror, yet looked pristine.

After I recovered, we would have lunch

Or I would bring soldiers' tinned goodies.

She had twinkling, dark brown eyes.

22. Lourdes[5]

When Love's blowpipe struck,

the old man in me retreated

in favour of the new man to hold her in the wind:

she is mine as I am for her.

At Love's rosewood feet,

untouched by muddy bowers,

I offered a tiger, the night's fiery emperor,

as trophy on a white linen sheet.

If she but blows a tender kiss,

this tiger's heart will convulse into life.

Her love is ruby-ember bliss;

she is mine as I am for her.

Rock sinews torn by a dart,

a vein ruptured, pride

fettered as I surrender

to the spell of my senorita.

Gold rings dangle from her ears;

the fall but a memory, my bruised soul

broadcasts to all the islands:

she is mine as I am for her.

23. Under a Green Umbrella at the Botanic Garden

The afternoon sky was ashen. Rain glazed asphalt and grass.

A rainbow hid like a zero fighter behind ominous clouds.

Lourdes, in oxfords, walked on tiptoe over lapping floodwater.

Her white skirt billowing out under a green umbrella.

The pall lifted as we entered the Botanic Garden,

the whiff of pandan mixing with the fumes of rain.

Her eyes were weary from dressing wounds;

her cheeks were waxen and lips rosy.

How sunlight brightened up the trees

as the flurry of water carried leaves and mud toward the deep.

The downpour made us forget the bombings in the cool air.

I put my jacket over her shivering, bare arms

as we scaled a muddy slope with pine trees,

a flowering hibiscus at the bottom. A brick staircase here would ease the strain.

We heaved for breath and she reached out for my hand.

Raindrops formed circles on broad palm leaves.

As rainclouds dissipated, I felt a gush of nausea.

My shoulder throbbed in pain, and I took a deep breath.

The back of her hand cooled my forehead.

Her brown eyes sparkled; we held hands atop a slope

among the boughs of pine needles. She was an apparition

making me forget rumours of Japanese air raids.

We were ready to set off on a trip of a lifetime.

Could she be the one with whom I'd grow old?

24. With Lourdes

"Is that you?" I called out

from shadows behind Lourdes's bungalow.

"Yes," she replied. "Don't talk too loud.

Auntie Mei Lan takes a beauty rest after dinner."

A candle light flickered through a window.

"When we reach Bahau, she can rest for days.

We can talk loud all we want.

The Japanese can't hear from far away."

Lourdes's smile shone through cigarette puffs

as if she knew something I didn't.

Her eyes glistened, her brows arched,

her back slender, her hair in a bun like a geisha's.

Balestier was in flames. I was happy to draw near

my phoenix as she spread wings amid smoke.

"Good night, dear" she whispered

and I smoldered in the slow dusk.

25. Japanese Angel

At 32, Shinozaki was behind bars.

Violent blood surged till his pale cheeks

turned purple in Changi.

Among white inmates, he sat

in the hibiscus-red sun

and watched a swallowtail moth

flit from one page to another of *Das Kapital*.

His mind burned with ideas.

He stuttered to his fellows, who nodded.

In that same cell, two years hence,

the brother of a nurse uttered a plea,

his own when he was a prisoner.

His heart bore no grudge or anger,

twin monsters exiled from his memory.

Grief flowed from one people to another,

to rivers and mountains beyond them.

26. From Fort Canning to Ford Factory

There were no fireworks but the Poms' hearts

burst as they obeyed invaders' orders

to march from their lofty fort to Bukit Timah

to kowtow to a short Japanese general.

Fatigued after a sleepless siege,

soldiers saw mirages from the cement road:

bar girls from Bugis blowing kisses,

the Union Jack scorched by a fiery sun on white.

The white men were pit bulls with mute, blank faces

till they caught sight of their commander

and beat fists against their sweat-soaked heads,

sobbing like children lost in the woods.

A parcel from Fort Canning's Battlebox

with some gadget from glory days in his arm

was a welcome distraction till the jeep dust cleared.

Chico traced a path from the British sunset.

27. Lieutenant Lee Guo Zhi

Lieutenant Lee at River Valley Road,

with an interpreter who blinked often,

berated young Chinese who kept their heads bowed

as Bishop Devals[12] secured the release of some friends

with Shinozaki , a thin man with thick spectacles.

Lee was in his 30s, fresh-faced, well-groomed and lanky.

He joined the Japanese army from a farm village in Taiwan;

steady in his gaze until he snapped his tongue on prey like a whip snake.

Lee was not tall, but towered above the Chinese crowd,

some crouched under others' shadows in the noonday sun.

He was stony-faced as some of them shook like wet sunbirds.

"Who are you?" he barked at Shinozaki and Devals in Nihonggo.

He brought a higher-ranking officer, whom Shinozaki saluted.

The other officer released our friends; the interpreter's brows were arched.

With arms akimbo, Lee gruffly told our friends to leave quickly.

His face lightened up and, in a normal voice, told us to leave too.

28. Lieutenant Lee at the Police Station (by Lourdes)

Dear Diary,

After the bloodshed, the sky looked crimson.

Those suspected of resisting the Japanese were rounded up.

From my window, I saw neighbours being bundled into police cars:

donors to the China Relief Fund, Chinese Volunteer Force members.

There was no sound in the other houses.

Men crumpled behind doors when the *Kempeitai* came knocking.

The stars lost their shine at night

held or bayoneted behind clouds with our people.

Uncle Hoe Siam, an officer of the Chamber of Commerce,

was detained at the Central Police Station.

Auntie and I called on Mr. Shinozaki for his release.

Pink sunshine warmed my unshaved face.

The police station chief was Lieutenant-Colonel Ohtani,

with a furrowed forehead, bushy brows and thin lips,

quickly eating from a bowl in a green uniform,

his assistant a certain Lieutenant Lee Guo Zhi.

29. The Purge

Uncle's slippers lay outside the front door of time

next to watch lockets, belts, rosaries and wallets.

Those left behind were grey and mute for days,

ragged below a red sun raging on a white cloth.

I carried a lantern and kept a look out.

I kowtowed to the *Kempeitai*,

better than have my head stacked like pigs' knuckles

and swarmed by hungry ghosts in the *pasar malam*.

How I welcomed the Malacca monsoon

washing away red stains from Changi beach

where chained uncles swam to their true home,

fleeing the shadows of black hearts.

The parquet floor, now untrodden, is clean

beside my chair of teak, finely grained and strong,

in a flood-swept land in a never-ending night.

30. Red Star

A white star against red,

sprung from a flag's red sun against white,

on a badge with a magic spell

to make the ordinary man's knees knock

before *Kempeitai*. I swear it was true.

A white star against red

in a city whose streets were soaked in red

in Sook Ching's clean-up operation;

women turned pale-white when interrogated

too long at the Singapore Recreation Club.

It was not safe to roam the night streets

for the Japs feared we would conjure up Western ghosts

with the Eurasian *diabu*[6] and conspire to push away

the yoke of the heavenly sons of the red sun.

Eurasians were suspects.

Not quite Chinese, yet not European.

We yearned to be like everyone else

but our skin gave us away. *Play your guitar.*

Are you a bloody spy? Go home!

31. **Escape to Bahau (Fuji Go)**

We stepped out of the gates of St. Joseph's,

now called Bras Basah Road Boys School:

me, the Brothers and other teachers.

I drifted to an iron scrap factory; I was a sub-manager.

Fellow workers, like naughty schoolboys, craved brass fittings:

water metres, sprinklers, carburetors, spent shells.

One with my new brothers, I was easy on inspections

till the manager found close to a hundred pounds of precious scrap.

The war made me like water; then, close to boiling

from shame, fear, helplessness at the shouts of "*Bakayaro*[7]!"

I was brought back to my boyhood, Mrs. Angus's classroom,

caning with a rattan stick for transgressions.

The manager had the tone of foreboding, like the howling wind.

Called to the police headquarters, I was interrogated by a Eurasian.

He slapped a cigarette from my hand, hurled an expletive,

told me a *Journey to the West* tale:

The Japanese had cleared a forest in Negeri Sembilan

for relocating Eurasians. More like Changi prison but with farm plots.

What else to do with those whom you don’t trust?

The war made me like air; then, whirling above the sea.

For fear of penalties from the smuggling caper,

to seek a life away from Japanese brutes,

to spare my body the cover of night bruises,

I signed up.

32. The Flood

In December, the water rose and recovered streets,

up to a metre deep in Newton and Bukit Timah.

Nature wept with the people under the Japanese sunburst;

the sky turned ashen and the rain burst canal banks.

Shirtless men pushed cars through leaf-brown streams

flowing in silence, broken only by croaking frogs at night.

Wading men and cars created patterns on the water,

their shadows merging and scurrying out of the city.

The monsoon carried away dead leaves and garbage;

uprooted crops that the we were told to plant.

We somehow kept the garbage out of the house.

Dark clouds raced above and in our heads.

Droughts followed monsoon floods every year.

Suddenly Bishop Devals' call to Bahau seemed tempting:

your own farm plot, air free of Nihonggo,

across the straits, the northwest sky was rosy.

33. **Stitching (Christine)**

Quilting induces a trance

that makes mishaps

seem like jagged fabric patches

that can be sewn to match.

I heard about Pa's passing

as I wound a needle up and down along a seam.

Pa stitched with verses

with panache as Ma did with thread – so I've been told--

in modified ottava rima, frustration and pain.

He filled his room at St. Joseph's with feelings,

dreams and scars plain to the beholder

as he would empty his spleen into a bedpan

with blushing nurses as audience

as honey rays drowned in sky shadows at dusk.

A poem is but an epitaph

that anticipates a burial.

He had little control over art

written under a sea of falling stars.

CHAPTER TWO

PROMISED LAND

34. **Lamentations**

Our forefathers sailed in from Portugal and Goa

five generations ago, but took root in Singapura

like rubber trees. They were on the move again,

now on a train, to build Zion in Negeri Sembilan?

They streamed in from as far as Katong

lifting luggage, pushing carts and hauling a piano.

Some fearless men left as an advance party

with the blessing of good, old Bishop Devals.

How did their fortress, built by the British crown, fall

and the mistress of the Johor Strait become a widow?

Her priests put on hats; Infant Jesus nuns behind them.

Her Eurasian children were all bundled up for Bahau.

Her Japanese enemies became scoffing Lords;

The flock grazed away to another pasture,

chased till it could bear the solstice heat

and heed the call to leave the pasture.

Their destination was God’s abode –

or at least a haven from beasts of the rising sun.

Chico had been told the *Kempeitai* had him on a watch list.

He boarded the train with co-teachers from St. Joseph’s.

The settlers yearned to hold their destiny,

smell wild grass in a nameless meadow.

Chico had a vision of swooping like a mynah

lost over fields of bananas, God’s bounty.

Chico sighed, “Oh Father, look upon those

who have gone from You,” but no one opened a door.

Nussa genti had wandered for centuries.

Their eyes grew dim in the shadows.

The enemies rejoiced in their hour,

filled their mouths with *samsu*, but no one

was saved from the last judgment of their own wrath.

35. Back to the Land

Rain greeted us upon arrival

like an estranged cousin

with a cold handshake,

pelted our skulls,

soiled my Sunday shirt

as if it were a rag for a chamber pot.

I jumped out of the lorry,

landed on muddy earth

but slipped. I lost a shoe,

laughed like a madman,

pondered my smudged link to the land

and wondered what Judgment Day would be like.

I did the neighbourly thing

and hauled boxes for other muddied newcomers

disgorged to our Bo Hoo* in pitch dark.

I decided while walking for five miles

I would not rest in that sinkhole

wet, mourned by a cicada chorus.

The sun seems to grin wide

when rain begins to pour

at a tangent and then heavy

till farmers' shirts are soaked

from up north to Johor.

The contrarian heat

collects air from the ground

and nearby moisture

rises to forms clouds.

Like unwelcome strangers,

dark clouds vent suppressed anger

through floods that drown rice stalks,

churn mudfish-stinking earth

and leave wet farmers in the lurch.

*"Not good" in Hokkien.

36. Sketch of a Bahau Hut[8]

The hut, cobbled out of a nursery rhyme,

was kept dry by a thatched roof,

flanked by wooden plank walls.

Legumes and potatoes, peeking out of the dark earth,

whistled the glories of country life

as rain water bathed them in ditches.

The cloudless sky was sea-blue,

watching over tree stumps in this unruly land.

Palm trees marked out this farm plot

against shadowy hillside groves

at the canvas borders, the limits

of our imagination. Singing crickets

courted in the tall grass,

mosquitoes did not stir in puddles,

rice stocks crowded bamboo rooms,

Eden before the *Kempeitai* and their bayonets.

37. Sketch of a Bahau Hut (by Lieutenant Lee)

No April blossoms;

brown leaves blown by a hot wind.

Home's a dream away.

38. Looking Out to a Neighbour's House

From my lowly *balik-balik*[11]

I see window cases newly installed

by Malay carpenters from town.

These are made of fine plywood

with sashes that close when it rains

or when nosey neighbours stare too long

from a longhouse, their pyre of martyrdom,

they had to build themselves.

They remind me of other windows

with glass panes on wooden aprons

in black and white houses on Akyab Road.

It is as if the spirit of those houses

had flown and entered through the windows

of my neighbour. I chuckle at how war

destroys lives and cities but leaves

the privilege of some windows alone.

39. Cassava

This wonder crop thrived

in the rocky soil of Bahau

and the fancy of our thin, sunburned people.

Its pulp could be whipped into dough

with all the moisture dried out; community magic

transformed cassava into talc-like tapioca

that we pretended was potato in soup and flour in cakes.

Invited to try some, the neighbours dressed up for high tea.

Cassava peel uncovered

mild sweetness that all remembered

instead of plain rice and water

or porridge every three days or so.

In village parties, grated coconut crowned

it in golden-brown cakes, served with biscuits.

The women gathered and chanted old recipes

before despair or disease made them forget.

40. Making a Lap Quilt (Lourdes)

Dear Diary,

Shape patterns drawn for a cotton wall hanging

can be anything: Heart-shaped tins, brass coins.

anything to not make you think too much

about design at a time when you cannot want much.

This will have 15 blocks, each block a 12-inch square,

a border four inches wide holds the quilt dream together.

I hope the piece doesn't stretch or ravel,

the fabric backing, with a peony print, remains sturdy.

Life in the camp is hard enough.

One day the meal is rice and water, the next day it is rice and water,

with a pork slice, if we are lucky or on a special day.

On the Emperor's birthday, we were treated to pineapples.

The meals make a pattern of bland memories

that can be corrected with a quilt.

Bird prints look sprightly, the fabric colours bright

as Singapore was before it became *Syonan-To*.

41. **A Conversation with Lieutenant Lee**

His hair, wet with pomade, glistened.

Slender in a white shirt, his collar

worn over a crisp, dark green jacket,

and, unusual for those times, pressed.

"Lee-san, *shi shi* of Malaya,

Looking very smart tonight."

"*What a pleasure, Mr. Pereira.*

That looks like an expensive shirt."

"This is a steal, from the black market;

people would trade this in for li'l pleasures,

cigarettes, in these hard times."

"*Trading in the black market could bring trouble*."

"Not if your boys are in on the money, *ama no ko*."

His eyes were like a fiery whip about to strike.

"*The party hasn't started. Do enjoy yourself*."

He looked away, with his hair burning in the lamplight.

42. Tea Ceremony

As a dark cloud hovering over the settlement,

Lieutenant Lee entered the living room in an ash robe,

with a *fukusha* wiped the bowls meticulously,

with a wooden ladle poured boiled water,

like steady rain, into the *chawan* with *matcha*.

He bowed while giving me the bowl,

Lourdes nudged me to bow too.

Ritual got in the way of relishing green tea.

Lee churned the *matcha* in the water with the *chasen,*

From time to time raised the *chasen* to the left, then to the right,

as if releasing some spirit in the brew.

He bowed really low while giving Lourdes her *chawan*.

She bowed, took it with her right hand,

turned it so the bowl pattern was away from her,

Returned it to the same spot from which it was served.

She looked lovely, as if butterflies settled in her hair.

43. Lieutenant Lee at Camp (Lourdes)

Dear Diary,

Sometimes a peacock parading down dusty lanes,

Lieutenant Lee was always neatly groomed.

He met members of the colony once a week

In a charcoal-pressed shirt and pants, a rarity in those days,

to share new regulations and the latest propaganda about Syonan.

Sometimes he gave candied nuts to small children.

That made some, especially the menfolk, suspicious.

On the Emperor's Birthday, he gave a tin of pineapples to every household.

44. It Should Be Spring (A Song by Lee Guo Zhi)

It is early March.

The sun is scorching my head.

But on Yang Ming Shan,

White and pink cherry blossoms

rest against a blue, blue sky.

45. Lieutenant Lee Missing Home (Lourdes)

Dear Diary,

After a swig of sake, Lieutenant Lee told us

how a ship he was on pulled out of Tanjung Priok, Batavia

with a load of forced Javanese labourers for Siam.

There was such a din from grown men crying

like Javan mynahs roosting at sunset.

Many jumped overboard to return home

But perished. Lieutenant Lee’s little eyes widened

as he recounted the Javanese’s love for their country.

46. Rain Clouds

Swarthy clouds made strange faces

as wind swept them in a tight tango.

The sunbirds and koels fell silent

and fled before the approaching night.

A few farmers squatted on a patch of grass

worrying about floods washing away their sleeping cassava.

Their families huddled indoors and hoped

thatched roofs would hold out amid pounding by heavy rain.

47. At the Dance

The piano plays swing, Lourdes. Forget about cholera.

Good old Bishop Devals is tucked away praying for our souls.

Two hands in sync press on ivories and unleash a whirlwind.

Do not be afraid to take my calloused farmer’s hand.

Merry music fills barren vegetable plots and drives away flood.

You are an angel from Leonardo’s Madonna of the Rocks

in a white, floral gown. Rest your smooth arm on my shoulder.

Your clear, brown eyes give off a light as you sway from side to side.

My heart beats like percussion with the piano

as I sweep your feet off the floor to the right,

then to the left with dancing, clapping couples all around.

“You’re quite agile, aren’t you?” Your face is furrowed, yet smiling.

Striding in to the hall, Lieutenant Lee brings whisky bottles in a wooden crate.

You look and press my hand tight. With arched brows, he looks our way.

He spits on the mud floor and comes over to sow terror.

“May I have this dance?” He takes your hand away.

48. Quilting (Lourdes)

Dear Diary,

I was taking care of malaria patients

and scared that I was showing symptoms too

when I completed my first eight-inch block in the camp

for a quilt as present to Lady Thomas, the former governor’s wife

who had gifted us with a quilt from the Changi women.

A quilt is an embroidered picture of home:

fighting mynahs, stray ginger cats, passenger palms.

I stitched a red poppy, that symbol of the great war.

A quilt is also a record of the maker’s fears.

Loose threads on the reverse reveal, well, a mess.

Poppies will never reach full bloom.

Butterflies are silent, pinned to an orange sky.

Phoenixes rise from ash but are grounded on the fabric.

I fear all my loved ones will soon be gone.

Much depends on the needle in the hand

of a woman told to put herself into her block.

A quilt is a story on unbleached calico

of a forethought of heaven, hell and love

to share with those not yet at death's threshold

who will care to look and find joy

in glossy starlings with petals in beaks

rewriting stitch loops across a grey sky,

cotton kissing dew where love used to be.

In a world forever at your feet.

49. Children in Fuji Village

On Sundays at the edge of our new town

We jumped into the dark water

dreaming of a rich harvest

while wading in the cool Serting river.

We walked on rocks at the river bank

and gathered twigs and palm leaves

to nap on while wishing for a feast

of wild boar roasting on a spit under eaves.

We returned to a sunken sky awash with stars,

the air heavy with growling stomachs and chatter.

Captive small fish trembled as their scales

sparkled in a light silver shower.

50. Reality

Watching potato seedlings wilt after two weeks,

then waking up to a groaning stomach from a dream,

interrupted by circling, buzzing mosquitoes.

51. Birthday

Today my tongue rested from tapioca.

I'm 33, and Lourdes opened the sky,

simmered chutney of mangoes and chilli,

fried *bee hoon* with curry and jackfruit,

spread cabbages, lettuce and turnip *rojak*,

stirred *pulut hitam* with walnuts from the black market,

made my table into a garden, with sweet rain:

A feast before a slow dance.

I buzzed her petal cheek

as a white butterfly circling a daisy.

Mama's cheeks were as flushed

before turning away from the play yard.

Lourdes and I squatted on rock tiles

singing "You Made Me Love You"

in the moon's crystal glow; I looked deep

into her brown eyes. O Lord, what great bounty!

52. Summer (A Song by Lieutenant Lee)

The candle light feeds

on darkness to stay alive.

Nanboku whisky

fuels friendship till midnight.

Pink cherry blossoms at dawn.

53. Doomed Settlers

Tolling marked the hours as malaria prepared

to snare another young life in its wide net.

In my nightmare, wing wax dripped with falling rain.

My hunger pangs stilled after a bowl of greens,

a rare whole egg in mush over which I murmured grace.

Alarm bells rang in my head and fever racked my limbs.

Lourdes peered at the mole beneath my glasses and shouted,

“Chico!” as I was sprawled, out of song, on the mat.

An oil-fed lamp sparked a flame in my cloudy eyes;

my mind raced like a hungry ghost over thatched roofs.

Lourdes took a washcloth from the mahjong table

to lower my temperature, then planted a kiss on my cheek.

The lamp lit up the clay-warm universe

for lovers and players taking a chance with mahjong tiles.

Lourdes drew down the slats of wooden blinds.

Her hot compress on my forehead grew roses.

54. Scarred

Their red line

scrawled haphazardly

from Bahau to Batu Kibir on the map;

it had the power to choke all forms of life.

My voice settled among leaves on the jungle floor.

They hacked the forest

and adorned her with bracelets and anklets of welts,

Exposed her blood-muddy earth

and wedged a monster to drain her rivers.

She moaned in her mountain of buried rubies.

Teak trees, whipped by monsoons,

haunted by prisoner slaves wasting away

or nameless, dreamless bodies

tucked in the underbrush,

lost in the crashing of the earth's plates.

Urine and cholera

drenched the tree roots

beside steel tracks like Jacob's ladder

till death sprouted and grew heavy,

nailed on the bent branches.

55. **A Wish**

Atop a branch of a tree, just trimmed,

was a silver-foil star. We conjured

lights, tinsel, multi-coloured balls,

our families rifling through wrapped presents

after a few drops of Dom liqueur back in Singapore.

They asked about our ribs peeking through skin.

We didn't tell them about the soupy rice and sweet potato.

The things we endured. The things we endured.

Under the tree, parcels -- could one have cigars?--

lay waiting. We squatted around the tree

excited to unwrap the presents,

sang carols until we were hoarse.

My brother's script and sketch in a letter

leapt and held my fingers tight.

"*Bento di Natal ja beng*." I could hear

his baritone from across the miles.

His drawing of me,

with ribs sticking out on the left page,

on the right, me with a beer gut

("1945" scribbled above it).

It was a wonderful escape from this rut

of scabies, calluses and burnt skin.

I could sit there daydreaming.

But flies would buzz; I'd have to swat them.

56. A Camel Living on Its Hump

Twisted in a wheelbarrow,

crouched like a stillborn infant,

a heap pitiful and strange after an aedes bite.

Rashes were like mimosa blooms on bark-like flesh;

a shin bone poked an infected bump

In the death hut, his leg bloated

and soupy like rice they were fed,

mouldering in the afternoon sun,

splayed on a bamboo-slatted bench,

sleeping for days like a chieftain on a silk bed,

a tin of biscuits perched on his chest,

not like fellow soldiers rushing to latrines

with feet muddied after a slip in the heavy rain,

counting the welts on the body

of one who hanged himself overhead.

57. Way of the Cross (1943)

This is no time for drinking.

Jesus lies crushed on the tree of woe,

bereft of song at daybreak.

His wounds will not be covered up by rain.

Blood trickles down to the cracked earth

from His side to revive this land of tapioca,

Fuji-go, this valley of salty tears,

but burns the hands of His shepherds.

The unbeliever has his day

as a scarecrow of sugarcane with a ragged face,

its arms reach to the ends of the earth

but receive only a teaspoonful of vinegar.

Ignorance about the soil seals our mouths

so we can bless only with a whimper.

Our leather sandals are broken

as we clear fallen trees inside a wire fence.

O suffering servant, your head bowed low

and eyes calling to another cross bearer

inspired by a holy spark; your words

in a psalm chanted by a Canossian[9] choir:

why forsake the children of the Southern Light,[10]

born of the spirit yet sunk in transgressions,

with cheeks hollowed out by malaria,

groveling toward your wedding feast?

Once liberated from blighted, cramped huts,

we shall dance to a four-piece band

like we did before in a rhythmic liturgy of the hours

after a harvest of bananas and sugarcane,

shared with neighbours who kneel down, chant

and drink brandy to their hearts' content.

Before us, the bejewelled, light-arced teak throne

is shrouded in purple; Christ is dead on the cross.

58. Burial (Lourdes)

Dear Diary,

Chili paste simmering in oil and coconut milk

wafted from nearby makeshift kitchens

as Chico and I walked to the cemetery

behind a vegetable plot to bury Auntie Mei Lan.

We pushed her malaria-ravaged body,

with all its tenderness gone,

like a gunnysack of potatoes into boxwood planks,

hastily hammered and shut, for a mass grave.

We heaved her on bony shoulders and trudged

in procession with distant blue hills behind us.

Three days before Christmas and two before Mr. de Souza

came back too late with food and medicine,

I tried to recall Auntie's clear, brown eyes,

a happy image of her as we trudged on muddy footpaths.

Friends lined up dirt roads pale, with heads hung open.

Some squatted on the ground, too tired to stand,

feeling the cold tug of disease on their stomachs,

contemplating Auntie in boxwood:

hidden from prying Japanese eyes.

59. Psalm for Bishop Devals

He carved Adam out of dust and mud;

He let Moses divine a spring out of rock;

He poured red wine out of your gangrenous foot.

He shall plant you beside running waters

so you shall yield gold grain, not wither in a land

of famine, charcoal and salt beds.

He was in the beginning,

we are now, and may Bahau cease to be

under the Japanese ray sunburst.

With this cut, like the nick of a blunt lance,

wine and water trickled, on the right side,

amid verses from the temple chanted

by your people, you are saved.

60. Wireless

On a squat Suar woodtable in a farm shed

I rattled a gold-plated pin on a set

with steady, calloused fingers,

producing Morse code taps and squeals

while eavesdropping on Nip signals;

with the turn of a dial, tuned in to the BBC.

Sweating in tropical heat, like a Sambar deer

with a hoof cocked, anticipating fate in the wind.

Once, Lourdes saw me at the job,

her light perfume filling the humid air.

I flashed a broad grin; she pursed her lips.

“Nip bastards are talking about their girlfriends

from Bahau town. ‘Must give them the frequency.”

“Chico, you could get killed!” her forehead all furrowed.

Across the palm plantations, Japan was losing its grip.

Lourdes’s eyes were wide-open and brown.

61. Red Bubbles

This is how our liberation began:

The wind blew to where we dug cassava with *changkol*

as dust rose and glinted in fingers of sunlight;

the root crop lay there looking dead around Easter.

Gunfire sounded freely at a distance;

our breath was measured amid the dust

as a Communist guerrilla entered the camp;

my eyes dripped with dew.

A kingfisher called from among trees

as it played hide and seek from branch to branch.

We waited for silence to look for the guerrilla:

young, slumped among lalang and under a hibiscus flower.

Birdsong floated in the damp air;

blood mixed with red earth after he was shot by guards.

Bubbles dribbled from his dying mouth

like bits of his soul hungry for release.

62. Interrogation

I made friends with the jungle

and its offerings of wild quail,

the occasional boar for Lourdes,

news from operatives of Force 136.

The trees teemed with monkeys' *wak-waks*,

rumours of links between the Malay anti-Jap Army

and the British. I looked at the blue sky,

secretly listened to news broadcasts in my hut

until a random search by roaming Nip sentries

uncovered my radio. I could have been crushed like a moth

were it not for Lieutenant Lee's intervention.

He had me transferred to a Negri Sembilan jail,

not much of a favour as I was away from my love's touch,

my guts almost spilled out with a water cure.

A gravelly-voiced Japanese officer asked about Force 136,

punched me each time I didn't reply till my head was putty-red.

I left Singapore to flee from Nips only to suffer in their hands

In a Malaya jail through the blackest 3am. Crickets wailed.

I did not say a word despite blows to my blooming head,

a widening hole in my heart. Another prisoner nearby called

to his mother until the dawn bled out of the darkness.

The cell became too loud with the officer's wak-waks.

As my moth wings went limp on the damp floor, a psalm

leaped out of my throat, "The crushed in spirit he saves!"

63. War Crime

The sigh of a Niibori guitar in the humid air

heightened anticipation under a wishing tree,

made Lieutenant Lee yearn to pick

bougainvillea flowers to strains of "Summer"

and to hunt for prized game in the farm colony.

He lay down beside a body draped in rubies

and plucked guitar strings gently in his head

to lull it so it would not try to escape.

He saw himself high like the sun unfolding

cherry blossom petals one by one

on a sheet of white linen.

He caressed the stretch of the fretboard

of smooth, full-grained teak,

helpless under his stubbly chin,

with full concentration as it was sheer delight,

and it belonged to someone else.

64. Folly

Dear Diary,

I have gone through this in my head many times.

Though there are reasons for me to not write at all,

here I am, because this is eating me up inside.

I missed Chico so much since he was detained.

I love him dearly, and he deserves my best.

Lieutenant Lee assured me over meetings that Chico would be released soon.

It was during one such meeting when I committed my biggest mistake.

It was late March. The hot air made people do what they normally wouldn't.

Lieutenant Lee seemed like he was willing to listen to my pleas

with his steady gaze and assured stance in a neatly pressed officer's uniform.

65. **On the Edge**

Lourdes, my jungle senorita,

you make this hilly land heaven.

Do monkey shrieks in the thick foliage

make you embrace tighter?

Your eyes are little moons

rivalling lamplights in Syonan

and draw me from footpaths

trodden by a tiger or Japanese straggler.

But Fuji-go is a desert,

our huts nomads' tattered tents,

our unvarnished furniture looks weary;

jasmine perfume does not hide betrayal.

Through dense jungle is a new path.

On one side a ginger flower, trampled by mouse deer

but spared by mountain spirits, uncurls

a red corona and thirsts for rain.

66. Rain, … Come Again Another Day

Separated from family in detention,

in August, I watched the monsoon rain torrents.

After release from jail, Lourdes, my butterfly,

with puffy eyes and a gaze as heavy as a raincloud

and after panting nervously, said she was with a baby.

But after beatings by the *Kempeitai*,

I knew right away the child was not mine.

I trekked alone along the rocky edge

of the river and cursed myself.

Should I leave Lourdes, I thought,

or keep my word and let my pride be trampled on?

The sole of my right sandal came off,

but I continued walking, with the right foot

dragging the ripped sole through mud.

I was devoted to Lourdes, but had to be fair

with myself. I'd kill whoever did this!

I took the wrong turn at a fork in the trail,

went around in circles for an hour.

A distant heavy bark tore through the stillness

as the moon made fire tree branches glisten.

The moon appeared jagged in a clearing.

Rain fell amid thunder: crack, crack, crack.

A baby from the neighbours cried like it was afraid.

It came from a hut where rice was being boiled

with pandan leaves over a gentle fire.

That mother and child later slept peacefully.

I made my way trembling back to Lourdes.

67. Tropical Batik[14]

Shadow puppets, held by invisible strings,

peddled spotted fish or fired-clay fowl

and nursed babies in chequered daylight.

The scene I sewed stretched above upturned palms

toward the realm of angels: more of my wish

for the end to war in the breath of an instant.

Painted pots, bales of cloth, pretty orchids,

a cylindrical guitar in shrivelled, bony hands.

Fabrics stitched with dream patterns,

net-like and glistening in light.

Loose threads hid on the reverse.

The *baju kurung*,[15] worn by country maidens,

preserved life in slow-motion.

Were these pilgrims at rest after a journey

or on the road to forget the past

and vanish as ghosts in the black jungle?

The puppeteer bled to get the pattern right,

gave life to creatures, each one unrepeatable;

the wind making music as it blew through trees.

Everyone had an epic story worth remembering.

Mine, with Lourdes, moving to the farm.

The eye of the heart noticed in each gesture

joy, apprehension and a speck of wisdom

if one did not die of malaria first.

That tableau of tropical life,

the leafy home of sun and earth

at the end of the soul's perilous tour,

was the viewer's own inner self

distilled from history,

where art begot stories and love

for my daughter to remember me.

My wandering stopped right there.

68. Dyeing in Bahau

The jungle heat scratches the pate,

a mud-caked, cracked riverbed.

The wind gasps some word

in Chico's ears and he hisses

at Nihonggo invading

and poisoning his people's tongues.

The printmaker hears crackling fire

echo from his scarred home

below a nearby constellation.

He hums a sad song close to midnight

and stars watch from their altar

as he dyes a new *sarong*.[15]

His *kanting*[16] sputters beeswax

on the beaten cloth, now fast asleep.

Chico observes the opaque void

presided by a vinaigrette sun.

He breathes life into a market

on boiled cloth and scraped wax.

The artist paints the past

of rich harvests from broken husks:

two girls grow up without a care in *kebaya*,[17]

farmers' roosters fattened for a fight,

families' eyes without clouds,

a world decked in hibiscus and sunshine.

69. Manifesto

This is no Chinese ink painting

with truth lurking behind mountains.

This is no Cubist painting of a lady

with limbs and heart disjointed.

Let me delight my butterfly with my brush

as you savour coconut milk rice,

rationed on the Malay coast.

Making a home is applying colours

to a feast of divine bounty

in a procession to the bazaar.

Hand-drawn, floral patterns

seek a body to keep warm

as a story piles up words

to break the spell of death.

70. Torture

The officer had a steely gaze

as he sipped tea from a green cup

amid heavy rainfall on the corrugated iron roof.

“How many are you communicating with the British?”

He barked; the translator transmitted this with a growl.

“I don’t know. I work alone.” I felt my shirt all drenched.

The officer sipped again. “What is Force 136?”

“I don’t know. I’m just a radio operator.”

The small of my back felt shattered in pieces

as a low-ranked soldier beat me with a rattan stick

over and over and screamed “*Bakayaro*!”

The officer showed me my steel watch and asked, “Where is this from?”

“It was given to me by someone named Bo Seng in Syonan-To.”

He kicked me as I shielded my head with both hands.

On the floor, a long strand of black hair reminded me of Lourdes,

alone in the settlement, before I keeled over.

71. Rainy Season (A tanka by Lee Guo Zhi)

Wind stirs the jungle

and whistles through fallen leaves.

Flowers add colour

to floods moving to the sea.

My heart craves for your beauty.

72. It Happened on a Full Moon

Guo Zhi crept like the full moon, noiseless and bright,

as I dreamt of Chico detained on Sime Road.

I turned away from his unblinking gaze and darted

among shadows on the trail back home.

My uninvited companion ran, his eyes charring

the dry leaves and dogwood flowers on the path.

Moonlight slipped through tree branches

As his hands held my waist; “I heard you’re lonely….”

“He won’t come back!” His voice disturbed crickets screaming

among thick banana leaves as he buzzed my neck

with whisky in his breath and undid my skirt.

I saw beastly shapes silent among the trees

and felt his strong hands around me

like a brush distorting a freshly written couplet.

"I'll take care of you now;" he pressed his body against mine.

My pulse raced as shadows among the trees gloated.

73. Shriek

Your thundershowers beat against this lake

as a girl struggles in the water. In your eyes

an outline of her with thighs sliding into muck,

your red mouth and muddy breast holding her captive.

I want to tear out your charcoal hair and scatter its roots in the wind.

Why whisper her name when you've ambushed her thighs

and leave her sprawled overnight among cold reeds?

Why listen to her heart beat and then expose her to the elements?

Kisses and embraces are gems that when stolen

leave the girl scarred and stranded in the deep

with Chico dead—No, Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

Tell her that is how you conquer from the air,

with firepower and heavy rain, until she shudders

at the clap of thunder and every gust of wind.

74. Wandering

Her teardrop running on burnt skin

moistens her quilt and robs her of sleep

her secret flies like musk after rain

until it covers the muddy plain

a green turtle digs in the sod

in a blink finds an earthworm in the night

salt water gutters and leaves errant desire

etched by candle wax on a batik cloth

if only his fire holds steady

as a cotton banner in the moonlit air

his arms draped around her shoulders

and his heavy lips arrest the fall

of dew and scotch her stain

his voice a reminder of her name

rain floods the field, green shoots rise

primrose willow is crowned

his breath lingering over her tongue

dispels the stench of the intruder

and breaks the mocking spell

the puddle of thinking

that accuses her of infidelity

breaks up at dawn

mist scatters in sunlight

her heart unlocks the blinds

75. Confrontation

I entered Lieutenant Lee's hut.

He stood drinking tea in front of a bureau.

"Pig!" The sound echoed off walls.

Lee opened his mouth as if to vomit out crickets.

"You left her drowning in your sty!"

I felt smoke rise from my eyes and lips.

Against a lamp, the shadow of my fist loomed

as it fell on his wide-open left eye. "*Bakayaro*!"

Lee staggered, but didn't move a muscle.

Though stronger, he didn't fight back.

A blood moon shone bright outside;

the wind blew in dead leaves through the window.

I wanted to pluck out his eyes. He grinned.

I made a fist to keep fingers off a Colt in a back pocket.

I felt my face crack with every utterance,

"Ten thousand deaths upon you and your damned empire!"

76. Thunderstorm

The lamp shone like the missing moon amid black rain,

giving comfort to trees and grass in tortured Bahau.

Chico's shadow traversed the ceiling and rested

on the tear-streaked face of Lourdes, still radiant in sleep.

A white pillow case and linen framed her face like bridal lace.

They were engaged, but she now bore another man's child.

He wanted nothing more than to put out the lamp flame

and wallow in the water-chestnut clay till kingdom come.

Let the rain snuff out the light and wash the unclean

from the earth, end the nightmare of betrayal and oppression.

Chico held her throat in his heavy palm as he would an incoming tide,

his hand able to restore his bruised pride and end his lover's grief.

Then she opened her almond eyes and whispered "Chico."

He let go, embarrassed as if he were naked in the rain.

There was no happiness, only sodden clouds after rain,

a blue sky beyond fruit-laden trees, Lourdes needing him in bed.

77. Apparitions

Strange *orang hutan,*[19] white men in uniform the colour of leaves

called out to Chico and dangled wild boar meat.

Shuddering at first, he offered camp details: how many Japs,

what kind of trucks ferried people to town, the trees and dead.

The *orang hutan* showed Force 136 buttons, said to watch the sky

for drops like manna: food, medicine, supplies.

Chico laughed a little as he looked into their unwashed faces,

turned pale, flustered they were not a mirage

of a tiger creeping silent among parched leaves.

The *orang hutan,* like lightning, set fire to the jungle floor,

liberators in Chico's dream, a mirror flash conversing

with other mirrors till the jungle was decked with sparks of sun.

He could cut himself with flint at the prospect of war's end.

Instead he was at the clearing mute, teary-eyed and smiling silly.

He imagined Lourdes's red, round lips and warm, silken back.

He joined the white men in whistling "Swinging on a Star."

78. Rain-drenched Letter

27 August 1945

My dearest Lourdes-san,

I have not seen you in weeks. I might not see you at all as the British are coming back to Bahau. The rain is heavy. It is rather unusual. There are floods. The river banks are swelling. The world is turning against us. It does not want us to be together.

I long to see your pomegranate face. I want to run my fingers through your silky hair. The Malay guards have packed our belongings. They are gone. My house is empty.

I am writing this because I have great affection for you. I really want to be with you. My soul burns like the noon sun. I feel like it will explode as the Co-Prosperity Sphere crumbles. It will light up all the oil palm trees like torches. Their fruit clusters will feed the fire. Their scorched branches will fall to the dark earth.

I am writing too because I need to tell you some things. I signed up for the war in Taiwan for the mother country. The war stalled in mainland China. Japan had to wage battle in Nanyang and Singapore. It was nature's course. We were short of resources and ammunition. We had to win quickly. It was win or die. It was a pungent taste in the mouth. Sulfur. Charcoal. Phlegm.

I believe that you will be better off back in Singapore. There are whispers on wireless radios that the generals are being rounded up for trial. I will have to surrender to the British and face my destiny. I am sorry if I have caused you any grief.

Yours forever,

Guo Zhi

79. **Christine on the Quilt**

Dear Diary,

Christine has almond eyes; she purses her lips in the most adorable way.

She cries in the jungle heat, and it sounds like an old, sad song.

We don’t have washed linen, so her small body rests on the newly finished quilt.

In future, she will bear her own baby with the same eyes

in a clean hospital with all the clean linen she wants,

with electric fans to keep the baby comfortable in Singapore or some big city.

Christine is mine, and I will protect her as long as I breathe.

Yet in the same face, strangely familiar, is his, and she makes me tear.

She has Lieutenant Lee’s mouth, locked with mine in an unfortunate kiss.

I look at Chico, with eyes full of love, but his brows are knotted

and look like he has something embarrassing to say but can’t.

The quilt looks warm and clean, and Christine has fallen asleep.

Will Chico grow to look at her with the same love he has for me?

Lieutenant Lee embraced me, and I didn’t resist.

Memories wear me out; Christine is full of joy at the present.

The quilt fulfills its role. I have to carry out mine as mother.

80. Childbirth and Death

Like a siren filling city streets

to warn against attacks from dark clouds,

Lourdes wailed through the night,

her skin forming welts above her ribs.

Her round eyes and now unclenched hands

begged heaven for release. Auntie Sarah, the midwife,

held on to the edge of the wooden bed

till a little cry, a baby girl's, made the wailing cease.

The baby's face a small full moon

Uncovered from a black sky,

what love looks like among body fluids

with a cord attached, then clamped and cut.

Lourdes gasped, her martyrdom complete.

I stood beside them, frozen in disbelief.

A rooster crowed, women prepared breakfast,

I held new life; my old world tumbled out of the sky.

81. Sleeping Beauty

Her frame, looking slightly hung-over, in bed;

a hand, which had caressed the linen-like head

of a new-born daughter, made a strange gesture;

a coy smile as she struck an awkward pose

in the hot, Bahau wind as she bled until her skirt

and the white sheet her legs were wrapped around

were red; her skin fair and unblemished,

her shiny black hair spread against a pillow.

The breeze whispered salvation.

But I heard only Christine's never-ending cry.

What remained of her was a ruined dugout.

Her angel face could not evade the prick of conscience.

I awoke to rain, washing away the earth's grime;

the lub dub of water on a window in place of her heartbeat,

rage in place of rumbling in her blood.

Her hands too weak to wave goodbye,

her tongue turned stiff before uttering a word,

memories of family and starting over vanished.

Touching her mouth was a breeze,

a whirlwind for he who sows orphans' tears.

82. Final Christmas in Bahau

I dropped you like a pebble on a footpath

to return to shophouses, not vegetable plots.

"No one wanted the days to fall by the dirt road."

I didn’t want my palms to be blistered and sandpapery.

I left, but you hung in the air in a nightmare

like dark clouds conquering our common sky,

clung to my boots like hardened earth,

cut away at my lungs like forest fire smoke.

Your fences faded like memories

as you squatted naked on red mud.

I remembered desires and regret,

the stale breath; you were unmoving,

a queen on gravelly earth.

You once had flighty conversations.

Now you negotiate peace as your wounds fester.

That ticking noise in your head is deafening.

CHAPTER THREE: MAKING PRESENT

"History is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas."

--Cathy Caruth, (Craps and Buelens 2)

83. Back in the City, 1945

The October breeze stretched out its welcome

at the railway station with three-star guerrillas on guard.

Lugging clothes in a rice sack, I glanced up

at a crest with the letter "F" on the station facade.

The figure looked well-fed, heaving grain above shoulders,

unlike this war-tested farmer, swooning from his load.

Emerald temple-like roof tiles boastful of new paint.

I have Christine in the crook of my arm; "Let the war end here."

The roof reflected the noon sun

as queen palms swayed beside the glistening road,

only days before submerged in a gun-metallic flash flood.

A monitor lizard clambered across the asphalt road

so slowly it looked painted on the canvas of the city.

It too knew we were home, no need to hurry.

The last three years left us with wounds that drew flies.

But Christine's smile made me feel lucky.

Koels darted from branch to branch,

calling out the day's task in a light drizzle.

Red jungle fowl emerged from tree shadows

in a solemn procession toward daylight,

scouring among dry leaves to feed their young

as they did before the Japs imposed laws with bayonets.

Can anyone spare me a cigarette?

Christine's little palm felt soft in this remnant of Eden.

84. Lieutenant Lee's War Crime Trial

(Chico Reacts to the Court Case Summary)

The defendant Lee Guo Zhi, a Formosan lieutenant in the Japanese army

and supervisor of Bahau, a farm settlement in Negeri Sembilan,

was charged with the ill treatment of Eurasian

and Chinese Roman Catholic Singaporean settlers under his supervision

which had led to the deaths of approximately 500 of them

through poor living conditions, withholding of rations and beatings.

The court found him guilty of ill treatment of

but did not find him responsible for the deaths.

He was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment,

contracted tuberculosis and died while serving his sentence.

Lieutenant Lee Guo Zhi must have gone sooner to the dark land

if not for divine justice for him to relish a few more months

before he is condemned to the stillness of eternal night

where there can be no tomorrow from jealousy and strife.

He plundered and ravaged and conquered for a dream

that his rising sun will remain transfixed at high noon.

Bah! That dream is dashed, his innards torn apart by rats!

Losing love to a snake out of neglect oppressed my soul.

But I know Lourdes is in the far better celestial realm.

Lee's kendo stick and silly lyrics will torture no one anymore.

85. **With Christine in Ashfield Lake**

Kindred languages brushed against each other.

Wind pushed waves toward the grey beach.

Adi bringkahbam perto das bóiyas.

Ducks frolicked beyond the buoys;

a gaggle of geese dove in,

snatching fingerlings with heavy beaks,

twitching hind feathers in the heavy air.

Adi krensa di medra.

Our two languages spread-eagled on the sand:
English burned in the early summer sun,

Kristang covered up, shaking in the chill,

both describing yapping fowls.

At a camp in early summer,

on a wooden table, gold-streaked at sundown:

wine, cheeses and rhubarb jam,

beside *agar-agar, sesagong, white dodol, Bluder.*

We read to each other:

Roosevelt's "Honour in the dust" speech

that quashed dreams of a neighbour nation,

my verses about flushing native idioms

with vomit in the land of Uncle Sam.

The exclamation "*Yo amor keng bos tantu*"

leapt above hillbilly songs;

"Until later" piously said ("*Ati logu"* meant).

86. Muddy River (Christine)

The green-brown mud reeked of dead fish;

further from the bank, it looked like torn newspapers

blanched of print and used to wrap chye sim.

Papa used to take me on walks on that dark-soiled orchard

to observe bum boats, without saying much.

He smoked Embassy Filters like a paper mill and feigned interest.

In the lunch time heat, dockers inspected goods bound for cargo ships.

I was six again, or 13, and the sun kept our world from drowning.

"The river goes on, and the boats with it."

"*Aiyo*, it stinks. The boats must go back where they came from."

He puffed clouds, opened his mouth but made no sound.

Years of denial lined up like jigsaw-cut bumboats on a quilted shore.

My dream was to skip across all the boats, balancing on aromatic planks

until I reached Papa in a bowler hat holding joss sticks;

made peace with the ghosts of Mama, the dead dockers,

the light inkblot water that didn't reflect my face.

I tucked all these images in the treasure chest of my mind:

red, green and white boats with eyes painted on front sterns

now torn-down warehouses with small windows behind them,

rust-coloured tortoises stubbornly poking heads above the muck,

Papa missing recitals and occupied with empire building.

Whenever I retold them, the images were always in ekphrasis.

The originals were sunk in some distant, murky water:

Papa, a foulmouthed girl, bumboats kept apart by old tyres.

87. **Tying up Loose Threads: From Chico to Christine**

Dear Christine,

It's another rainless day in September, and the leaves of banana plants and *angsana*s are wrinkled and brown like discarded manila envelopes with undecipherable scribbling on them. Beneath the pink-orange sky, dry leaves carpet the ground and crave for moisture in mynah droppings. The electricity poles look brittle and about to crack. Dogs are panting, with their tongues lolling to catch water vapour from the humid air. The sparrows and koels are dead-silent. It's a good time to die.

I suddenly think of you. You have been away much too long. My grandson Kenneth, who has Lourdes's bright eyes, too. When you were twelve on Balestier Road, you ran barefoot shrieking in a room like this, with parquet flooring that stayed cool in this heat. I haven't been the perfect father. I wanted to buy you the world. I so want to be your father. The rose garden is dry. My world is getting dark. I am slowing down. I miss your noise.

Love,

Papa

88. Ghost (Christine's Epilogue)

Sifting through poems, journals, stories

about the Bahau quilt

against the late afternoon sun

one Christmas after Papa’s death,

I realize I can’t restitch its apppliqued patches

as I can’t change how I came to be.

Mama whom I want to remember,

Lieutenant Lee whom I glimpse in the mirror,

my miscarriage, Papa are all gone.

My fingers shiver

as I embroider their figures, in a simple style,

with a blanket stitch as the room turns black.

Aiya, I have to do this quilt right,

Make sure the fabric patches are in straight rows.

Sewing them together is like a mini breakdown.

I catch a whiff of brandy and Embassy Filters

but without Papa in the room.

He took his last breath without me.

Papa used to scoop me in his arms

and made me sing a sad song.

Old quilt makers used to leave a space or sewed a mistake

into their work; only God is perfect.

Mama wrapped me in a quilt she had meant to give away;

That’s lost. Here I make another.

Notes:

[1]”Grandmother” in Kristang.

[2]”Little Slope Main Road,” what Bugis was called in the 1940s.

[3]Singapore’s civilian airport in the 1940s**:** The China Clipper flights ceased after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour a week later.

[4]a British fighter plane.

[5]This is inspired by a spiritual poem by St. Teresa of Avila.

[6]”Devil” in the Kristang patois of Eurasians in Malaya.

[7]A Japanese word that means “stupid.”

[8]A sketch owned by Dr. J.B. van Cuylenberg, the vice-president of the Eurasian Welfare Association that is found in the National Museum and featured in *The Syonan Years (Singapore under Japanese Rule 1942-1945*), 2005, 169.

[9]An order of Catholic nuns that relocated from Singapore to Bahau.

[10]Syonan To, meaning “The Light of the South,” was Singapore’s Japanese name during the Japanese occupation.

[11]A long raised platform

[12]Adrien Pierre Devals died of a foot infection while working the field in the Bahau farm settlement. The settlement was made up mainly of Singapore-raised Eurasians during the Japanese occupation.

[13]a Malay costume whose name means "enclosed dress."

[14]Bahau had a batik workshop in the 1940s.

[15]a fabric wrapped around the waist.

[16]a pen-like tool for applying liquid hot wax in batik making.

[17]a Malay woman's dress.

[18]an orangutan.

SECTION TWO

AFTER THE FALL (DIRGES AMONG RUINS)

AFTER THE FALL

By Francisco Pereira

“*For, in the same fire, gold gleams and straw smokes; under the same flail the stalk is crushed and the grain threshed; ….*”

St. Augustine, *The City of God* [1]

1. Canticle for Three Young Poets[2]

As the tolling fades

with the last veteran's footfalls,

I pluck blood-red poppies

that spring from your remains

and set them against your letters, requiems

and louse stories from the trenches

in the dusty vessel of memory

after your fall.

The poppies you once held

wilted in the dank air underground,

the torn petals barely recognizable

like the spark of your mind

weakening under the strain of cannon fire

and uncertain motives.

Your words fell in trenches, but perfume the air,

radiant like red poppies in a vase.

2. A Filipino in Belleau Wood[3]

This is a grave in Chateau Thierry.

This is a marine

who lies in a grave in Chateau Thierry.

This is a requiem

for the marine from hilly Morong[4]

who lies in a grave in Chateau Thierry.

This is a score sheet

with all the notes

for the singing marine

who lies in a grave in Chateau Thierry.

This is a Filipino bugler

clutching the score sheet

with all the notes

for the obscure marine

who lies in a grave in Chateau Thierry.

This is the trench of sand

that the bugler lay in with the wounded,

clutching the score sheet

with all the notes

for the dead volunteer

who lies in a grave in Chateau Thierry.

These are the traces and bare trees,

the sun and the waves of the sea

that the bugler braved,

clutching the score

with all the notes

for the crushed marine

who lies in a grave in Chateau Thierry.

This is a white governor with a pen

who signs a letter in the big chamber

after reading about four thousand Filipino *sakadas*[5]

under fire, like the bugler,

playing notes

on the score

for the honourable man

who lies in a grave in Chateau Thierry.

These are the traces and the trees and the “Silent Night”

that a German intoned in his trench

and to which the marine sang along

before gunfire broke into endless day.

This is a white governor in the big chamber

feeling guilt about four thousand *sakada* soldiers

with the bugler improvising notes

for the singer, the marine

who lies in a grave in Chateau Thierry.

This is the Filipino who died far from home.

These are the traces and the trees and the “Silent Night”

that a German and the marine sang

before gunfire broke into endless day.

This is a white governor honouring four thousand *sakada* soldiers

and a scarred bugler improvising,

playing boogie woogie

while fellow veterans do a shuffle

for the near-forgotten marine

who lies in a grave in Chateau Thierry.

3. Watching Penitents on Good Friday 1997[6]

A crazed, hooded lover's skin,

exposed and scratched by knotted rope

until blood oozes like rubber sap;

penance, a taboo on the trade floor,

is fanaticism; whatever power it has

when invisible vanishes on a flat screen.

Lying prone on a tarred road,

the penitent's back a patchwork of red:

his faith cries for cleansing rain.

On a lunch break from currency trade, I flinch,

with pungent thoughts about fools full of heart,

Wah piang![7] Dead to this world.

Pampanga[8] is a world away from Shenton Way

but the bloody spectacle is broadcast live, in close-up,

differences loom large in this labyrinth of tears.

Doesn't the penitent recall drunken ways?

Are colleagues immune to soul searching?

They all make it to the news: the penitent on the cross,

his clip aired between two on bank fraud.

4. Blood in Bali[9]

Two brothers passed TNT in a bundle

after ritual cleansing purged doubt

from furrowed foreheads, munitions

magically consecrated by future martyrs;

Two sisters, one widowed and tormented,

unpacked, put on red shoes to bask

in blinking lights, and glances from strangers

at the dim-lit Sari Club on a tropical night.

Ali and Amrozi lifted coloured powder, in sync,

filling plastic drawers, like clear coffins,

before racing in a lumpy, white van

through narrow Kuta beach streets

As Tracy and Lindy swayed to club music,

clinked middies as at home in Perth,

the sisters' mourning for the dead,

like twins, each for the other.

Siblings, drawn by lights and the sea,

converged in a baptism of fire and sulphur.

Amrozi heard his brother say "You will be killed

just as you kill" from within black smoke.

Tracy glimpsed streaks of sunlight in her pain

as she embraced her sister in hospital;

one family's dream exploded as the other's nightmare;

in the Sari Club, blood streams flowed, then curdled.

5. Flower in the Water

Daubs of yellow on white,

frangipani, like egrets, chase

each other after the monsoon

and kiss brackish water.

Their pool glistens with broken sunshine

that bandits stole from Kuta beach

a decade ago when body and mind,

limbs and loves were intact.

A gold-skinned woman[10]

belatedly knifes though Busselton waters,

her complexion shiny with surf,

one among many bodies.

Unhindered by the riot of splashing,

her world made quiet by the blast,

she recalls questions she threw against walls:

“Will I ever walk? Will I run again?”

But each stroke, every lap nearer shore

is music blessed by warm air;

the frangipani thrown into a cold pool

plays like a nymph in a foaming sea.

6. Ninoy Crossing Seas[11]

Trade winds scratch wings

but barely wear this iron bird's will

–like water knocking on an outrigger's hull

as the bark eludes an ancient tyrant's navy–

above the grainy, coffee-coloured sea,

pressed like a blanket to catch my dreamy thoughts.

My seafaring forebears on wood planks

pushed back envious currents,

each heart a gong pounding with each *garuda* wave;

their daring breached steep sea walls

and ploughed a new land sprung

from the seed of a gold *salakot*[12] and necklace

in stories read from a book above the clouds.

My dreams are planted on fallow land

on an avenue named after the public good

across the seas where my wife shall serve coffee

after mass and the children frolic barefoot

outside a brick house and then count planes

with bermuda grass cushioning their backs,

remember tales and draw sketches

of a distant sea and all it hides:

old fears, broken loyalties, the disgrace of prison.

Dawn chases night across the horizon;

my imagination wades gently toward a shiny shore.

7. In Church during a Manila Gun Battle 1989

On kneelers though instinct

goaded them to crawl like geckos

to dodge any stray bullet wailing with fiery tongues,

piercing stained glass

In a chapel where there had been a funeral;

soldiers and rebels fought to the death

on sun-drenched streets like Thoreau's Walden ants

with intent to maim or behead for spectators.

Clasped hands prayed for the living and the dead

and those gunmen outside as winnowed wheat

was raised on the altar for peace that surpasses desire,

justice's scales tipped, her sword sheathed,

for the congregation to rise and go forth,

for injured loyalties to heal like pox sores,

for clear thinking to reign– or let the plotters

run for public offices they drool over (oh bless us)–

and let one more coup be ended. Amen.

8. Harvest (A Tycoon's New Kidney)

It hides innocent behind my liver,

Sifting bile in slow time, as when churning hops

In brews where its former owner nearly drowned it.

It jerks lightly with every gurgled swig

Flushed down my throat, parched by chatter

With henchmen who pledged they would die for me.

I wonder during nightmare chills

What care the drug lord gave it. Did he savour

Power emanating from its gentle fire as he lay awake?

Amid clanging glasses, playing cards

All-night carousing, sweat covers my pate.

How long can this borrowed peace hold?

Like its old host, I too am accused,

A frenzy of nerves at first light, denied red vintage comfort.

I coveted a kidney.

Sometimes, I am not wholly myself,

Get the shakes when I pore over drug bust news,

Harbour murderous thoughts about strangers.

I stifled a laugh at his living will (thank goodness);

I did say a prayer before his bowels

Spilled out when he hanged in Changi.[13]

9. The Letter

"84th floor West Office

people trapped."

Randy's[14] scrawled note

Glided down invisible

In Manhattan one sun-bathed

September morning

And lay hidden for his family

To relive the terror a decade later:

Instant incineration might

Have reduced the pain.

Chapped lips pursed

At a bloodstain

On the note,

Trapped in time,

That escaped an inferno

Of convulsing skyscrapers,

Honking cars like a skim

Of birds screaming in brass.

"Oh my God;"

The thick black cloud

Enveloping the towers

Like Moses's tent of meeting

Recurred in their dreams,

Like a poem lisped by

A large, bearded, black man

At a bus station over and over.

The blood-stained note

Dropped through the torrent

Of glass shards and steel girders,

Tin voices crashing

Like a hurricane:

“[…S]uckers is born everyday

and fear of man – grow on trees”[15]

Into a bystander’s empty hand.

Police secured subway

Exits like Rottweilers

Baring incisors;

Barked orders went unheeded

By errant planes in the wind;

A bank guard kept the letter

As pilgrims lit candles at St. Patrick’s

At the cusp of a new Dark Age.

Randy's family recognised

The hand behind the couplet:

Strained but hopeful,

Making account of life.

Mute and muddied by a fiery wave,

Randy laid down a gold pen,

Held hands with co-workers and, with them,

Streamed out in amber light.

10. Bono at the Superbowl 2002

sliver of moonlight

With ghostly words rising

To the height of skyscrapers

On a lamplit screen;

Barbara Arestegui,…

Dianne Snyder,…

Neilie Casey,…

Joseph Agnello,….

Names, long or short,

In Helvetica, triple columns,

A litany of martyrs

Escaping anonymity

And a fiery end

Streams in supplication

Until thunderclap

Or war drums bellow:

The names shrink

And shatter into the void.

Crying above the fragments

Is a sinuous tenor: “America!”

Scaling invisible towers,

Stretching for eternity,

Not wanting us to slide back

To lightheadedness and forget

The leaf-brown gash, the void,

The unrecoverable, the romance,

Each victim’s name recounting a history

Remembered on defiant streets

That still have no names.

11. The Country Star and the Burqah

The stand-up comic aped the country star

Like heck in swagger and boasted

Of planting a boot in Osama's ass

And in response displayed imaginary fangs;

The Afghan woman in the play

Learned English from *Baywatch*

And urged an American woman to wear a burqah,

As big as a tent but, no, not bomb-proof.

The audience's stomachs tightened,

Mouths puffed, eyes squinted and wept.

12. The 1984 Nation

I sit sweating in my chair,

Wary of walking to the gas station

Or the pizzeria, fitted with cameras,

At a residency in the Port Townsend[16] chill.

My laptop was secure, I thought,

But Google recorded my searches

And told on me, said the whistleblower

Stranded with damning data in a Russian airport.

I know, as I explore the streets of this small town,

Hidden microphones pick up

Every pant, every grunt; every verse.

The smiling jogger greeting "*Ni hao ma*?"

Could be an undercover agent

Mistaking me for a Huawei[17] operative

Or a purveyor of thought crimes

Subverting the Ministry of Truth.

I won't stand waterboarding

So I try not to give a wrong hint,

My mind reduced to putty,

As clocks strike thirteen.

But ordinary Americans have caught on.

Big Brother watches them on Main Street.

13. Last Gig (To Mike Quintos, RIP)

Remember that night

As you play a double stroke roll

In a chequered shirt with rolled-up sleeves, the same

That you wore at that party in Mamburao.

Describe

How chilled San Miguel relieved tension

--As you used to in class essays,

How lechon skin crackled on the tongue,

Your bro Paul laughed till his eyes couldn’t be seen,

How both of you gave high fives to supporters.

But your drumsticks

Were broken before you could hit snares:

You slumped to the crash

Of a bullet’s dull double bass

And justice was deaf and dumb

As judges were godfathers of the suspect’s daughter.

Perhaps your stubby hands tap

Soul percussion, the gamelan, whose pure calm

Are beyond those who silence true musicians.

14. Delinquent Days[18]

Bystanders trod on the holy name like dirt;

Marchers roughed up a policeman at dusk;

A trishaw driver was bludgeoned in a flash

Till bones were exposed by machetes.

Confusion ruled in benighted madness.

Were its henchmen foreign thugs? Or its courtiers

Politicians exposing the races' warts to the wind,

Drooling for control, inciting the masses

In this sliver of forsaken earth?

They trampled on smoked skulls,

Read fortunes in fatty entrails laid out like charms

While common folk huddled in huts,

Desperate for the lifting of curfews,

Dawn creeping back into a stillborn land.

Ghosts sprung from the bonfire

Of wok stalls and delivery trucks

Kept a reeking wedge of silence

Between ex-neighbours surprised to be alive.

Confusion ruled in benighted madness:

Each family held fast to its festival

In shadows, with no one to share it;

Pairs of burning eyes crossed the street

And met other pairs of burning eyes

Panicking and pointing to shophouses

Where they could be themselves again,

Buying and selling textiles and other wares,

Anxious about the future overtaking them

Without raising voices or clenching mailed fists.

15. An Informer's Testimony

I solemnly declare and affirm

[This] is the whole truth:[19]

The Chinese that lined Jalan Besar were mute,

Nameless like orphans.

A gaggle of old men passing through the barrier

Squinted at sunlight.

Women across the street were released,

Dazed in soiled cheongsams.

A muddy cloud was about to drench crisply ironed clothes

Three days after the occupation.

The rest of the men, some in suits, heard church bells

Groaning in the air.

Some felt the setting sun pinch sweaty foreheads

Behind soldiers' bayonets.

Flies swarmed in that wire-fence enclosure

The following day.

The silk-cotton trees covered secrets with red blooms

As I resumed work:

Interrogating for Sergeants Yamaguchi and Kosai

All who passed through.

The Kallang river was abuzz with flies each morning

After the enclosure was cleared.

I was not alone in handpicking those

Who could help the invaders.

A dribble of rain said goodbye to those men

Deported to Siam.

A dragonfly hovering above a quivering grass blade

Touched fresh bruises black and blue.

A glint of afternoon sun in the mud might have been

A bloodied pate or fingernail.

The creeping darkness at the close of each day

Ushered me back to warm tea, a clean bed.

16. Waiting for the Enemy in Fort Worden

They stake out Artillery Hill

Like bored deer hunters

Rippling the air with forest stories,

Defence against the fleet of the rising sun.

Cannon loaders, with sewed-up faces,

Pray that no ordinance traces blow out

Eyes spying enemies treading water

Like seal pups in Puget Sound.

Are the Japanese storming? Or about to?

Buddies in tunnels at night swap tall tales

Of coy girlfriends, singing larks to drown

Whispers of madness on the watch.

A shell could be fired from the ocean

Gently as blacktail deer foraging.

But deer could be shot from a distance

Like a player’s dream of antler velvet.

Now on this wind-swept bluff

After panting comes waiting.

17. An Officer and a Gentleman[20]

That G.I. kid from the boondocks,

Zack Mayo, played by Richard Gere,

Became a man on these grassy

Wind-swept grounds.

I came also from far away to listen

To the sinewy poetry of the coastal wind

Under a streetlamp in Puget Sound

Among grazing deer and a wild rabbit.

Zack was a guitar string pulled tight,

With nowhere else to go

But to the music-less barracks with whitewash

Matching an officer's uniform.

Tormented by mental block,

Locked away with books from a publisher

Keen to clear stocks, not read new verses,

I was patient like a sheathed dagger.

Zack, his coat collar up, stormed the camp

For an officer's badge and Debra Winger;

My chest ached to please the muse. With no HBO

Or DVD player, I wrote furiously in the moonlight.

18. Verses on Bukit Chandu[21]

The sun gilds words on a slab

As if lifted from the Koran

Recited to dark-skinned soldiers,

Fallen in war against beastly invaders.

I soak in the light

And take a picture of the slab home.

Outnumbered and outgunned,

Those soldiers raised fists to shield

This Opium Hill from invasion.

Could there have been a miracle

If they had fought in verse,

Calling forth sky fire to devour their enemies?

Outshone by shock-and-awe exhibits,

Thumboo's words[22] on the slab are a sideshow.

Busloads of tourists snap photos

Of statues, paintings, everything else:

The ephemera of unversified life,

Dead and rubbery in texture.

When my mind's a barren hill, I stare at

Those words on a slab and the sun returns

To tend blooms in my garden.

Hope runs deep, planted by Regiment C;

One must bleed to die or write on this hill;

Versifying truth brings peace.

19. Good Company (St. Thomas More to Alice[23])

In seed time, sweet daughter,

The pious slumber in the dust;

Though their hands are bones and eyes earth,

Their words drive the plough of my soul.

Neither scrape on brown leaves

As the snake that ransacked paradise,

Nor throw me to the eternal pyre of impotence

By making me pledge against my conscience.

My bed untouched till the wee hours,

I converse with church fathers in books

To whom I swear “*Credo in unum…*”[24]

As I rest the ploughshare.

Come, hush up, little child;

The morning star springs above leafy hills.

Hope abides in chapped lips

Chanting the pious dead's whispers.

That honest fool, Company,

Sits around a tree with fellow jurors

Before dribbling a verdict

For his own benefit,

Coaxes the prudent to sign

To be "good company;"

The prudent cries, "I would rather

Keep my own company."

Leave the ruby-eyed serpent

To choke on clods of earth

In a sunless eternity.

My treasure is wisdom

That no clock measures;

Honours and titles, gold bullion,

False embraces are bands

That secure a death mask.

God bless, faithful daughter,

Family and peoples (yet unborn);

Take not as mean or proud who

Obeys laws and speaks in conscience.

20. Jolly to Mother

"May 30, 1944 Waiting patiently for news. Dad plays cric[k]et again. Weather so hot. Are you well, Dearest? Peter well, but wants news of Jolly. Love, Mother [from Changi Prison]"

June 30. Dearest Mother, I'm well.

Knitted a pullover

Since your last card.

Good to know Dad taking wickets.

I hope his knees hold out.

Give him a hug and Peter too.

Is Peter taking medicine? Will send more.

Maybe the war will end by December.

Maybe you could wear the pullover I knitted.

Looking forward to seeing all of you again.

Do you have enough to eat?

Meat pie recipe clippings

Await you at home.

Praying for your peace of mind and health.

The parish is offering masses (It's in the *Bulletin*).

Rain falls non-stop on the roof.

I'm tending the mint plants, keeping away

Strange, slant-eyed cats that pop out of nowhere.

The corridors have a hollow ring.

Tears stream down Aunt May's wrinkled cheeks

When she tells stories and jokes about you.

Maybe the war will end by December.

21. Dulce Extranjera[25]

Rice wine runs dry in the still;

No more doctor's brew, folk song,

Gentle Laguna de Bay;

The memory of your sugarcane

Is the only comfort

For this condemned prisoner.

Your laughter is gone;

No more steering in your gaze

Past ghostly acacias, mute towns,

In an outrigger, every turn farther

From this patriot's home,

That is you.

Out of a wall of *guardia civil*,[26]

You reach and grab my neck

And anoint me in nards of joy:

Embarrassing, true.

Your perfume weighs heavy

At noon.

Believe with me

That mountains will be levelled,

Fountains will overflow,

The angel will close the gates

As both of us embrace the tree

Of good and life.

My tears will wet mimosas

As I rest my head

On dry earth to listen for your heartbeat

Amid bells ringing. The holy water

Of your kiss at last will wash

Me clean.

22. Witness to Hope

(To Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan)[27]

Brooding "Mr. Van Thuan," reticent

In Phu Khanh, was a puzzle for non-believers who wondered

What he hoped for ("Why leave everything behind?");

With guards, he sang "Alma Redemptoris Mater."[28]

Unable to visit his flock, so dearly loved,

He paced in his cell as he flicked rosary beads

Until his rope-soled shoes wore the floor.

His faith went farther than preaching.

He celebrated the Pasch with three drops of wine

And a drop of water ("Is God for the bourgeoisie?")

That kept his spirit up through five surgeries

And from imminent death twice.

He didn't glance back as he paced on the cell floor;

His silence rang like the bells of Easter dawn.

23. Ode to Balestier Road

She is heavily made-up like an old flame

Flinching from her creased reflection.

Gaudy baubles, twisted crystal lamps

Scatter darkness as in a funeral parlour,

Fenced in by porcelain bathtub shops;

With grace befitting a mistress of ghosts,

Her ivory hand once poured tea for Sun Yat Sen,

Whose brows knitted over his bruised lady China.

Giddy eyes anticipate a bite into

A mass-baked, slightly moist pastry;

In place of seedy motels, high-rises

Charge one hundred sixty-eight per night:

Respectability carries a price;

Her bright tigers of old have been hunted,

Their bones ground into tiny glass vials

Lined up in a cabinet of curios.

A whiff of romance is smoke from a joss stick

Tickling the nose of the earth god, like the street,

Candy-coloured after rounds of renovation.

24. In Motion: Love

Slippers tap in time

with sneakers:

Ah Long’s steps carry a grace

Sliding toward some destination;

Each footfall tacks his resolve,

Like other commuters’,

to seek his place.

On iron tracks, the train pulls in

like a night market

with treats for everyone,

Ah Long plays a game;

Girlie’s on a cellphone;

Ah Ma clasps both hands

when Ah Long gives up his seat

At an interchange.

Ah Long sparks a conversation

With clear-eyed Girlie, her hair braided,

As they exchange glances,

hopes clasped on a hand pole.

“Die, die, must take her out jalan-jalan.”

At the turnstile, they swipe cards.

Ah Long and Girlie are on a journey,

Their steps will soon take them

not to epic love,

But to a gentle lyric

for hawk-eyed bystanders

Who glimpse innocent emotion

on the move: Ah Long’s heart

Rumbles like pistons,

his slippers beside Girlie’s sneakers.

25. Greyhound Ferryman

What does the bus horn gather

But a procession of races and expectations:

copper-skinned undergrads lost in downloaded MP3s;

pouting white punks, with piercings, best left alone;

a wide-eyed black boy, kissed by Mum

and anticipating an aunt's hug in Boston;

an Asian leaving frosted beer mugs in Vermont

for Chihuly[29] blue and green glass supernovas

in a bustling city.

After ten miles the bus cuts through farms,

green hills flail like tribal dancers' arms

in time with the driver's rap,

a hand on a headrest falls

as a Latino drifts into La-la land.

Sunlight piercing windows

trains a spotlight on the big black bro

tapping the wheel; the engine hisses

and quakes like a brass gong ensemble

past wooden barns, sheared sheep,

solar panels sparkling on highways,

across a river trilling like guitar strings;

early summer heat unwavering;

the New Hampshire landscape

scatters the sweet smell

of fallen trees;

Hemmed in by cars, as at a packed concert

or what the Asian recalls of a temple,

eyes prying into a stalled white stretch limo,

the driver puts on brakes, launches into a strange chant:

“My words’re a lot, so don’t speak;

if you don’t do nothing but honk horns and talk trash,

I’ll feed you a lolly just like a child;

never touch another mike;

I hear mothers screamin’

What is the meaning, when thugs cry?[30]

A lot more to say when I’m done with my rhyme;

So just sit on the back, and let them tires slide.”

The driver steers his makeshift stage

past a clutter of cars,

inside them hooded motorists

raise clenched fists.

They give way.

The Asian is in a world where words pick a fight,

rhythm coerces; for four hours,

after lunch and a bus change,

The interstate highway echoes

Gangster rap.

26. To the Women of Jerusalem

Mothers and sisters, why do your eyes burn

With tears? The mustard tree still draws sap,

Birds perched on its boughs heal with song;

The whistling wind invites meditation.

I was born a spring in the desert for shepherds and kings,

My water mirrors the blue sky during the day

And washes grime off travellers' feet,

My ripples reflect the moon in the thick night,

Redemption an open palm held out,

Hope a goblet in the other hand.

Dry your tears on palm fronds

Through eclipsed streets, mothers and sisters.

On the day your babies cannot lie still,

On the day their bleeding makes you plead

For Calvary to crumble and hide you

From the unquenchable fire into whose throat

Fall melodies, like dry twigs,

The same that desires my kindling flesh.

Mothers and sisters, why do your eyes burn

When the law forbids tears for blasphemers?

Let my cross rest under your plump sky,

My face take comfort in your whistling wind.

27. A Rebirth

A young man stole into the city

With a stooped Mary on a donkey and, across slush,

Huddled with friends from afar;

Cows fed on stored hay,

The path strewn with fresh prints

Of sandals on the run;

Shepherds tending flock

Fought back tears at the shattered peace

After a king's death.

In that nippy morning,

Dashing to the upper room

Past caked mud, crumbling leaves,

A throng speaking various tongues

Gathered in Jerusalem

And was thrown into confusion

As each was greeted in his language

In a spectacle of light

And felt warm in an instant.

A howling whirlwind[31]

Showered flames on the young man,

His crucified saviour’s mother and all faithful;

Millennial, ever praising

The fruit of the vine

And the arrival of spring,

It lit up mortar walls,

Circled the yard for a minute before

Igniting sorrel sunbursts,

Setting off supernovas in windowless voids,

Reaching out across time to warm a scribe's hands,

The quiet Spirit burned the page.

28. Cracking Mona Lisa

Your moss-and-ashen sky

Masks cobalt blue

As your faint eyelashes

Hide how you feel about

Burning rivulets in your landscape

And being trafficked to France.

Crouching on the belly of the earth,

You wantonly smile– or smirk,

Shawl uncovering a soft, pale shoulder

Buried under paint coats and varnish.

Vacant eyes crack, their lids shiver

At the crumbling poplar-backed sky,

Seductions by foreign emperors,

Abductions by women consumed with jealousy,

Or the peeling of artifice to reveal mystery

Vandalized by the onlooker's fancy.

29. Picasso at The Bull Run

Boldness etched in copper;

Superfluities chipped off;

A blood-red cape unfurled;

The artist's hand charging,

Full of blustering intent,

At a memory wearing away,

Wrangled out of oil and water,

Pressed on an ungrieving plate,

The bull glows in his sunny imagination.

No delight, only evisceration

Colour by colour; dissected in Guernica;

Limbs pared to arcs of motion on a block.

The eleventh print more spare than the first;

His mind's eye keener after the final thrust;

The beast reduced (at last) to fine art.

30. Last Newspaper Assignment

The voice on the phone was steady, calm

In his threat to sue me for publishing a secret.

Caught between appointments and deadlines,

My career was bereft of poetry.

It called to mind other gruff voices,

Not completely forgotten

Of telcos demanding flattery,

Software bigwigs editing my copy.

No subtlety, no reporting of truth,

Exiled to the desert by advertorial copy.

My heart bled for a higher calling

Than junkets and mammon can offer.

Resisting small tugs of the flesh

Strengthened my resolve to fly away.

31. Stinky Tofu[32]

I'll miss stinky tofu

Wafting around sundown

From iron-grilled windows on narrow lanes

Like friends made after hours of language exchange.

Its sour vinegar is like endless *ting xie*:[33]

Every morning in class,

A bloodletting to master Mandarin, friends of friends crowing,

"Are you from Hong Kong?"

Brine is flavored with chili and minced meat

Like plane tickets and freebies (even a water cooler once)

Offered to reporters as part of the job,

Like a colour photo next to my column.

Tofu is golden like sunlit clouds

Shrouding the Taipei basin in summer,

Freewheeling democracy,

Briefings I half understand, friends half translate.

Eating tofu makes strange music,

Like a slight drizzle and breeze

Or an emphatic pause after an IT executive

Tells me to read out my interview notes.

The sweet stench is gone like a daydream,

Yesterday's front-page byline beside Bill Gates' photo

Or a chat with a cabbie with betel-stained teeth:

"You look Japanese."

Stinky tofu, whoever is lucky to gobble you up

Cannot make me savour you less

As I recall your glories now as a nameless graduate student

In a Dettol-scented, Singapore library.

32. Dirges among Ruins (*City of God* Book II, Chapter 21)

A dead moon shone above the city of seven hills

As Vandals robbed it of gold and honour;

Lucretias raised eyes to heaven, with mouths half open

Stabbed themselves rather than submit to devils;

The homeless cursed martyrs' bones in tombs

As a ghostly September wind fanned fires

Across streets of blood, brambles and soot.

Chanting a psalm above the rubble,

Augustine glimpsed Christ's nail-punctured hand,

Not the vengeance of spurned idols,

Making a fold in the cloth of history;

The refugee's cry bounced off brick walls,

His glass stare glimpsed a new Jerusalem

Beyond the departed, ancient world.

Moans and screams at the market

Echoed the Tiber's tides

Lashing against departing boats,

Rivalling Augustine's baritone

Tolling from a cathedral pulpit

Among gutted columns and mortar,

Dried tears and broken bones.

The city once called “sink of iniquity”[34]

Emerged as a cemetery of wasted flower plots;

Ghosts of the slaughtered wandered like rats.

At a street corner, a gaunt flute player

Played music like a bruised bird,

Mourning a once luxuriant olive tree

Blackened and struck down like tinder.

Opportunists seduced with dulcet tones

The defeated who begged or stole bread.

Towers trembled from aftershocks

As empty altars reeled from tornados

In the second ring of the inferno.

Despoiled, the people could only hope for

A city without tears that is yet to come.

33. On Peace (Reading *City of God* Book 19)

When stars dance in their own orbits

Undisturbed by Leonid showers,

When body and soul ponder their image in health

And each makes a home with the other

Not when one commands the cosmos,

The tide to cease rushing to shore

Or a canker to heal when one feels a thrumming ooze,

Not as the devil passes his lie for the truth

Though he be an angel of light;

Not as one who, falling ill in body or soul, sobs

For what lies outside starry fields, beyond recovery.

Tears mark a trail toward peace

Like silver rain homeward seagulls glide through,

But not for ghosts who hide their gifts in shadows,

Whose thick skull sockets do not reflect

Love that sets stars spinning on their axes,

Makes the cut heal though deep,

Gilds in crystal summer daylight,

Trills like a perpetual, clear spring

As it trades jests at a floodlit banquet;

A white-capped peak above a dark grove;

An inn for pilgrims where ale flows free

And blankets are pressed warm for restless souls.

34. Restoring a Mural in Changi Prison[35]

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." Luke 23:34[36]

Under layers of paint,

Like tar pits of memory,

The wearied arms and legs

Of five half-naked POWs–

Crouching in outline–

They are the dead we mourn

Who are raising Christ,

Alive and golden on the cross

In the mid-afternoon sun

As if mercy sprouts a leaf

Breaking out of an ice floe,

As if hope could summon

Sculpted captives

From deep marble slumber,

Out of a plastered tomb wall

As a British bombardier

Fights smooth-tongued death,

Wartime nightmares

Of raising blistered hands,

Bony after three years of want,

Of making brush bristles from hair

And mixing paint with crushed chalk.

The prisoner mixes linseed oil

With salty sweat for body and gloss;

His figures' eyes closed to defeat,

Their spirit breaking at last the bonds of war.

35. After Ibrahim's Funeral

Before quivering images

And wailing voices

Of a Tamil talent TV show

His wife Isa lays out a banquet

And wipes her eyes dry

With henna-adorned, flaking hands

Chinese colleagues and his Muslim kin

Gather over chicken briyani and naan

In the living room of his Ghim Moh flat

Condolences and an envelope are passed

As relatives cluck stories about the man

Colleagues talk about the Little India Riot

Children shriek as they play Wii in a bedroom

Like a choir of cockatoos at dawn

While Ibrahim sleeps in the dark earth

Chinese colleagues and his Muslim kin

Pass stories, chicken briyani and naan

They come and go in his Ghim Moh flat

In that narrow living room

Cramped like a funeral parlour

Lamplight shines on sterling silver clinking

Against Ikea ornamented plates

We console each other with every mouthful

Reaffirm that the deceased was a good man

Chinese colleagues and his Muslim kin

Grieve over chicken briyani and naan

That he can no longer savour in his Ghim Moh flat

36. Final Surrender

We will chat again at table,

Me about verses and you our daughter over *kopi-o*.

Later I'll lay my brown head

On your pale stomach to the rhythm of Artie Shaw.

I'll forgive your indiscretion.

Forget occasions when I neglected you.

I yearn for a whiff of your jasmine.

Sing with me, only me, in paradise.

#DIRGES AMONG RUINS

A Poetry Blog by Christine Pereira

https://www.dirgesamongruins.net/blogs/christinepereira

1. #Haiyan[37] Posts

A blue and red Noah's ark

Anchored to a hill of wooden splinters

Its portholes dim, denizens drowned

By salt waters reclaiming what they'd lost.

Like a beached whale, it didn't belong

in a city between a gulf and the ocean

where industrial fumes stirred the perfect storm.

Noxious winds bawled and rumbled;

Thick cardboard and corrugated sheets

Bulldozed everything in their path.

A video game gone terribly wrong,

Atonal music clips downloaded,

Tweeted and shared on loop.

Clutching a pink toy car,

Abigail darts across a muddy footpath.

Strumming a guitar,

Chester squats on the pavement.

A blue and red flag peeks

Into a grilled window;

Abigail waits on news after the landfall.

But updates – like food aid – are late in coming;

Friends post another message for Chester,

Hope for a reply beside an emoticon.

Abigail’s sniffles are not heard in the wind;

No child’s laughter streams for relatives abroad

From binary codes in cyberspace.

Chester’s love song whimpers

In girlfriend Glenda's dream every night,

Amplified by shorn coconut trees left standing,

Heavy like salt in the black air.

2. Amazing Race in Little India

The charred engine parts were cleared;

citizen journalists' camera phones tucked away.

Race Course Road was just another street

On Google Maps until we clicked "News"

While waiting for a briyani order.

In opaque silence, avoiding probing eyes,

Mustafa salesmen obliged to Chinese Singaporeans

Filling almost vacant walkways guarded by cameras.

Rubber soles pattered in narrow passageways

Like an incantation appeasing ghosts

Or incense clearing the bad air.

As a posse of students appeased labourers

With offerings of *chendol potong* ice cream,

A cure for parched throats in the mid-day heat.

The students were there for an orientation,

Bonding in unfamiliar grounds denied

Fallen workers, the maimed already gone.

3. Tweets from Boston I

To a Maple Tree on Boylston St.

Your shade is lush and ample;

Blossom-laden branches

Quiver from the blast.

To Lu Lingzi

A too quick breakfast

Of bread and fruits at daybreak:

Wisp of heaven’s feast.

Chinese Driver of a hijacked SUV,

His left hand on a door,

Right hand on seatbelt buckle,

Escapes none too soon.

4. Tweets from Boston II

Summer on Boylston St.

Among maple leaves,

Crows raise chicks in grassy nests;

No pain in their cry.

Remembering Lu Lingzi

She celebrated

After the final exam.

Rightly so; she aced it.

Finish Line

Shouts and raucous cheers

Greet those crossing weeks later:

Each one a winner.

5. Stranded on the Roof in Cainta[37]

Ripples scratch the water’s leathery skin

And whistle as they display raw power

By knocking about my auntie's bungalow;

She hisses "Away!" to the typhoon on a yearly raid.

Auntie's face is flushed

Like ploughed earth.

She steels herself against the watery siege

By holding a red golf umbrella on the roof.

White cars, silver vans scatter

Like old toys discarded by a bratty child;

The waters claim them in exchange

For a water table smuggled by city dwellers.

On the iron roof Auntie lays out poker cards

And reshuffles them with one hand

While shielding a grandchild with an umbrella

From onrushing violence and thunderous din.

"This is no joke. *Grabe. Grabe*…"[38]

Her words circle like an incantation

And still marauding waters; a sun

She imagines above a rainbow.

6. Maranatha[39]

His eyes blink fast onstage

Like the image of a younger self

On a quivering black-and-white TV

After the island was expelled:

Pauses in the newsfeed: he sifts truths

Like a hard drive flashing a red light

As it slots signals into dormant circuits

As he wrings out a mantra from the stars

"Ma-ra-na-tha; ma-ra-na-tha."

He recalls our orphaning and wipes tears;

Calm under warm lights,

He draws out the ghosts of memory.

"Ma-ra-na-tha; ma-ra-na-tha."

He rests his sagging frame

Something, someone will come. Has come.

In his mind, he strolls in a domed garden;

Unbridled emotions run out to the sea.

7. Inmates

An inmate urinating at his jailer

At middle distance behind bars;

His wife's pupils dilated in fear

On a grey, scrubby Yemeni night;

Their baby clawing

the desert air in a cradle;

A soldier resigned to a duty

Not to leave Guantanamo;

Supercop using an assault rifle as pillow

As the inmate says his final prayers.

8. The Gardener's Tale[40]

We know all about you, nightmarish monster:

Your limp from a jump down the prison fence.

Your garden of rambutan and bitter gourd

Couldn’t hide you across the water.

We know all about you and your tough hide:

Your misreading of scriptures sowed black fear,

The bristly danger you pose is locked up

Under high security (as expected).

9. The Other War (An ex-Marine Looks at Photos)

Outside Fallujah I hear howling

Women cc-crying for their dead

Kk-killed by an order from the top

(girls in headscarves and boys

smile impishly at the camera)

A hulking sergeant shooting

Everywhere after shellfire and he

Running from phantoms in his head

(a boy in a brown-striped sweater

waves in front of a blue gate)

Hellish fire after the Humvee got hit

Waving away flies with a missing finger

Looking at the desert sky not at legs gone

(an Iraqi soldier in a blue beanie,

his hand on a US soldier’s shoulder)

Bloodied hands trembling

Cc-clawing on the dirt road,

Me whistling the Marine song

(three soldiers clown around

and moonwalk in a canvas tent)

Feeling like garbage with medals

I don’t want killing to control my life

and it happens all over again if I sleep

10. Independence Day in Hong Lim Park[41]

Two maids, one in white,

The other in black,

Arms stretch out like twigs

To catch tinsel-covered candy,

Like a bride’s bouquet, falling from a *piñata*:[42]

A snapshot of mute, ecstatic joy.

The only motion

Is in my mind as I compare

That photo on a news clipping

With a stream

Of familiar brown faces,

With mouths half-open;

Dancers glide onstage;

The rhythm of Tagalog

Rains down from the sky

Of unabashed freedom:

“Where to earn decent pay,

There I will stay.”

They are not acacias

Whose roots spread to overrun

And choke pavements.

What they long for

Is to wed with air,

To embrace the state of song.

11. Frozen Assets (a Sculpture Near Nicoll Highway)[43]

Ten thousand coins conjured up,

Poured unceremoniously at a roundabout,

Suspended in time, without a clink,

Like a cracked iron bell that once tolled,

Mourned for in a nearby church;

Rust creeps on the brazen display

Like robbers on the Yellow Emperor's hoard,

Moored on horseshoe clamps and clay.

The sculpture's alto ring when tapped

Is lost in the din of sputtering engines,

Commuters rushing for love of lucre,

Heartbeats racing beneath a highway's cave-in.[44]

A torrent of coins deposited in air

Crushes invisible life in the cityscape.

12. Return to the Island[45]

Before your imagination

Cures affliction, return

To that place of grief at noon

Where there is no time, and all is still:

The abandoned house is dwarfed by a leafy poplar;

The wind scratches your face and darts to the road;

The lighthouse woos a vacant sea;

The sun is veiled by the thin mist of your breath;

Children's shrieks are faint like crickets chirping,

Their dilated pupils frozen (or are you hallucinating),

And there are no words for any of you

In that garden where a brother slew his brother

Like the island that crushed your youth

Or the terminal with dreamy bags drenched by rain.

Take in all of that place as it crumbles,

Your body immersed in its caked, brown mud;

Feel your crooked scars and sunken cheeks

Or scowling indifference in a now strange land.

Yes, the terrain is blistering and strange

But the sulphur dust rubs off dead skin;

Your wailing is like an infant's born too soon.

13. War of the Worlds at Cochrane Lodge II

Arms akimbo, migrant workers in facemasks,

impervious to intimidation by the security guard

stake out a few square feet of parquet floor

for prayer mats with grey tape, one metre apart.

Their red-flame eyes try hard not to show

that they have been up all night crying,

on the edge above a yard of their dorm,

guessing who among them will the ambulance take next.

Glaring through a shield at an air-conditioned ward,

squinting through glasses, I scrutinize their symptoms.

Save for the colour, they have the same furrowed forehead

as locals when they are told they're positive.

Lungi, toothbrush, paste will be carted away

in boxes to Khoo Teck Puat where they're given soft pillows.

Their hearts are not of stone so they break down:

They've never had soft pillows in Cochrane Lodge II.

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[1]This translation is by Gerald G. Walsh, Demetrius B. Zema, Grace Monahan and Daniel J. Honan, edited by Vernon J. Bourke. (New York, New York: Doubledbay, 1958), 9: 46.

[2]The British poets Gurney, Rosenberg and Owen fought in World War I.

[3]Tomas Mateo Claudio died in Chateau Thierry, France, in the deadly Battle of Belleau Wood. It was in Belleau Wood that Allied and German soldiers sang "Silent Night" on Christmas Day before resuming fighting the following day.

[4]A town in Rizal province, the Philippines.

[5]Contract workers.

[6]The year of the Asian financial crisis caused by unreasonable speculation in currency and property trades.

[7]"How can this be?" in colloquial Hokkien.

[8]The Philippine province where ritual flagellation and crucifixion take place every Good Friday.

[9]The stories of the two terrorist brothers and two Aussie sisters were featured in the documentary "Zero Hour" on the Discovery Channel (2005).

[10]Connie Watson suffered burns and injuries, including damaged hearing, from the bomb explosion at the Sari Club in Bali in 2002. She completed her first full Ironman competition in 2007.

[11]Ninoy was the nickname of Benigno Aquino Sr., a political dissident who was exiled for a time in Boston during the Ferdinand Marcos regime. His widow, Corazon, overthrew Marcos in a People Power revolution.

[12]a helmet that ten Bornean datus or chieftains used to purchase the island of Panay in the central Philippines.

[13]Convicts are executed on Friday mornings at Changi prison. Doctors are on standby to harvest a few of their organs for transplant.

[14]Randy Scott was a broker who perished in the collapse of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001.

[15]From "Tradin War Stories" by Tupac Shakur.

[16]A town in Washington.

[17]The parents of an American IT executive who apparently committed suicide in Singapore claim that Huawei, a major Chinese ICT company, had tried to steal US technology from the executive's former company.

[18]The title is from the opening line of "Catering for the People" by Edwin

Thumboo. This poem is about the race riots in Singapore in 1964.

[19]The lines in italics open a typewritten statement by Lim Peng Koi, known as detective no. 131 during the Japanese occupation that is on display at the Singapore National Museum.

[20]A 1982 film shot on location on Fort Worden grounds.

[21]"Opium Hill" in Malay, the site of a bloody battle between a Malay regiment (codenamed "C") and the invading Japanese army.

[22]Edwin Thumboo's poem excerpt about Regiment C is displayed in front of a museum, Reflections at Bukit Chandu, at the battle site.

[23]St. Thomas More was Lord Chancellor of England during the reign of King Henry VIII. More was imprisoned in the Tower of London and then beheaded after refusing to recognise Henry VIII as the head of The Church of England. This poem is an imagined response to a letter from More's daughter, Margaret, to her sister, Alice. Margaret's letter features a dialogue about More's conscience.

[24]A profession of Christian faith that begins with "*Credo in unum Deum*" (Latin for "I believe in one God.").

[25]"Foreign Candy" in Spanish, Josephine Bracken's nickname. Bracken's husband, the Philippines' national hero and first novelist Jose Rizal, was imprisoned and later executed for treason for publishing two novels critical of Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines.

[26]Civil guard or the police.

[27]A Vietnamese cardinal who was imprisoned in his home country for several years in the late 1970s. He once preached spiritual reflections to the late Pope John Paul II that were published in the book Testimony of Hope.

[28]A Latin hymn to Mary whose title means "Mother of the Redeemer."

[29]Dale Chihuly, a glass sculptor.

[30]The last two verses are from "When Thugs Cry" by Tupac Shakur.

[31]The Holy Spirit that descended on Mary and the apostles after Jesus' ascension.

[32]Fermented tofu with a strong smell.

[33] Dictation drills in Mandarin.

[34]Sallust described ancient Rome thus even before its fall around 395CE.

[35]Overcoming initial reluctance because of wartime trauma, Stanley Warren returned to Singapore's Changi Prison thrice after World War II. He repainted his murals, rediscovered on the prison's old infirmary walls.

[36]This gospel verse is written on a Crucifixion mural by Warren.

[37]Typhoon Ketsana caused severe flooding in metropolitan Manila in September 2009.

[38]an expression that Filipinos sometimes use, meaning "Serious."

[39]An Aramaic expression meaning "Our Lord has come."

[40]Mas Selamat bin Kastari, Singapore's most-wanted fugitive, was recaptured by Malaysian police in Skudai in 2009.

[41]Hong Lim Park is a public park (also known as Speakers' Corner) in Singapore where resident Filipinos celebrated Philippine Independence Day in June 2011. An early version of this poem is included in UNDER THE STORM: An Anthology of Contemporary Philippine Poetry: http://evaluna08.wordpress.com/2011/07/28/updates-on-under-the-storm/ .

[42]A pot, filled with candies and coins, that is struck with sticks during fiestas in the Philippines and Latin America.

[43]A statue at the Singapore Management University; an early version of this poem was published in Illinois-based journal Jet Fuel Review: http://www.jetfuelreview.com/previous-issues/jet-fuel-review-fall-2011/poetry/eric-valles/ .

[44]An accident in the construction of nearby Nicoll Highway train station was caused

by the use of cheap, substandard construction materials and resulted in several deaths.

[45]Survivors of the 2011 massacre in Utoya, Norway, gathered with their families for a series of transpersonal therapy sessions on the island for over two years.

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