

# KISAH Futures

A N T H O L O G Y

ENGLISH CATEGORY



**KISAH**Futures

KISAH FUTURES COMPETITION:  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



**PROJECT ADVISORY**

Benjamin Ong (UNDP - United Nations  
Development Programme)

Rushdi Abdul Rahim (MIGHT - Malaysian  
Industry-Government Group for High Technology)

Susan Philip (Universiti Malaya)

Maya Tan (Think City)

**PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

Maya Tan (Think City)

Benjamin Ong, Aisyah Razihan (UNDP)

Natrah Mohd Emran, Nadia Sullivan (MIGHT)

Susan Philip, Ahmad Hilmi Mohamad Noor,  
Aini Azureen Abdul Aziz (Universiti Malaya)

## **COMMUNICATIONS & WEBSITE**

Skunkworks Communications

Stefanie Chong (North Interactive)

Nur Amira Muhammad (MIGHT)

## **ADJUDICATION & EVALUATION**

David Tan, Elinna Abdul Kadir, Nornazwah Hasan

Basri, Titus Loh, Ashvinder Singh, Sumitra

Sundram, Benjamin Ong, Aisyah Razihan

(UNDP)

Elizabeth Alexander, Azmil Mohd Amin, Natrah

Mohd Emran, Nadia Sullivan (MIGHT)

Susan Philip, Surinderpal Kaur, Keith Jardim,

Leonard Rajan Jeyam (Universiti Malaya)

Maya Tan (Think City)

*Published by*  
**Matahari Books** *which is an imprint of:*  
**Buku Fixi Sdn Bhd** (1174441-X)  
B-8-2A Opal Damansara, Jalan PJU 3/27  
47810 Petaling Jaya, Malaysia  
matahari.books@gmail.com

All rights reserved.

**KISAH Futures Anthology**

© Matahari Books 2021

Sole Printing: 2021

Design & Layout: Teck Hee  
Consultants: Hani Suraya & Deric Ee

ISBN 978-967-2328-50-6

The PDF of this book may be downloaded from:  
<https://www.thinkcity.com.my/UNDPKisah>

All names, companies and organisations in all the short stories in  
this book are fictional or used in fictional contexts.

Catalogue-in-Publication Data available from the  
National Library of Malaysia.

*Printed by:*  
Vinlin Press Sdn Bhd  
2 Jalan Meranti Permai 1, Meranti Permai Industrial Park  
Batu 15, Jalan Puchong, 47100 Puchong, Malaysia

KISAH FUTURES  
ANTHOLOGY



ENGLISH CATEGORY



## CONTENTS



A FOREWORD BY UNDP	9
MIGHT: ON FUTURES THINKING	11
UNIVERSITI MALAYA: ON FANTASIES & REALITIES	13
THINK CITY: ON THE PEOPLE'S VOICE IN SHAPING CITIES	15
ABOUT THE KISAH FUTURES COMPETITION	17
<hr/>	
<u>FIRST PLACE</u>	
MARI <i>Matthew Yap Tuck Mun</i>	19
<u>SECOND PLACE</u>	
CLOSE SHAVE OF THE THIRD KIND <i>Mohd Hafidz Mahpar</i>	23
<u>THIRD PLACE</u>	
ABOVE ALL ELSE <i>Jacie Tan Cheng Hwee</i>	26

OILY	
<i>Samantha Lauren Joseph</i>	29
HOW TO SAVE A LIFE	
<i>RuiXi Seet</i>	33
OBSOLETE	
<i>Bernard Manickam</i>	37
ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE	
<i>Terence Toh</i>	41
A NEW NORMAL	
<i>Dr Nithya Kalyani Padmanapan</i>	45
A PRAYER FOR MY DAUGHTER	
<i>Myra Aishah binti Mikail Tan</i>	48
THE FESTIVAL OUTSIDE	
<i>Sharmilla Ganesan</i>	51
HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, DEAR	
<i>Noor Elyna Ezette Binti Anuar</i>	55
RATION DAY	
<i>Lai Wei Shi</i>	58
"READY?"	
<i>Yee Heng Yeh</i>	61
KAKI LIMA	
<i>Joseph Lu</i>	64

ABED'S GARDEN <i>Timothy Ong</i>	68
IF ONLY <i>Andrew Siah Wei Tung</i>	72
THE BIRTHDAY GIFT <i>Lhavanya Dharmalingam</i>	75
ISOLATION <i>Natasha Maya Binti Chek Pa</i>	78
FIGHTING FISH <i>Julia Merican</i>	81
KITAJAGAKITA <i>Mohd Farez bin Mustapha</i>	84
PLEASE HOLD <i>Katrina Chua Jia Wen</i>	87
EDURENA: THE FATE OF VRUSTHI <i>Pravindharan Balakrishnan</i>	91
LUCKY DRAW <i>Michelle Yoon Mei Su</i>	94
COMING SOON <i>Sumitra Selvaraj</i>	97
THE WILDERNESS <i>Jasmine Lim Chengyun</i>	100

## A FOREWORD BY UNDP



Human history is but a collection of narratives and stories. They capture the shared experience of society in moments in time, and in so doing, they give us windows of insight into life in an era. They help shine a light on hopes and disappointments, fears and aspirations. There is no culture in the world that does not have a tradition of woven tapestries of captured experiences, handed down generations, immortalised in time.

We live in times of science; of data; of scientific evidence. Indispensable as these are, they miss the nuance of lived experience. As we envision the futures we want—as well as the futures we don't—we create *kisah* (narratives/stories) about who we are and who we want to be, we tap into the power of human imagination. As people from different walks of life participate in creating their narratives, a more complete picture of our world emerges, and more inclusive futures are co-created. The process of future-building is democratized.

In working with MIGHT, Universiti Malaya and Think City, we in UNDP have been privileged to listen to those who do not usually sit at the high table of the sciences of foresight and futures. Channelling hopes and fears alike, their stories are entertaining, sobering and challenging—enriching our understanding of how storytelling helps us shape our futures. We invite you to discover

these visions of post-COVID Malaysia, and to participate in Malaysia's *kisah* as we collectively write about the future we want.

— **Niloy Banerjee,**  
**Resident Representative,**  
**United Nations Development Programme,**  
**Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam**

## MIGHT: ON FUTURES THINKING



It may seem like only a fun thing to do to imagine a time machine that could take us to the future—and that this sort of thing only happens in sci-fi movies. Futuristic themes like these, however, allow us to explore the possibilities that could eventually happen, and to prepare for the upsides and downsides of such futures in advance. That is why developing futures thinking in as many people as possible is so important, and what the KISAH Futures Competition helped to generate, for both the writers and the readers.

The stories that you will find in this anthology rose to the top because they were ones that emotionally engaged the competition judges with different kinds of situations and scenarios in a way that a mere list of possible future developments could not. Not only will you find shared visions but also shared fears among the creators of these stories.

From healthcare to travel to the way we work in a post-pandemic society, these writers envisioned how technological advancements could bring benefits to individuals, communities, and society as a whole. But that wasn't all!

A common theme that emerged was the need to appreciate our human connections. Many stories touched on how the pandemic

has taught us to appreciate what we typically take for granted: friendships, family, a sense of national pride.

We hope you will not only enjoy these stories but that they provoke you to think about your future and the possibilities we all might help to bring about, post-pandemic.

— **Natrah Mohd Emran,**  
**Head of Outreach Programme,**  
**myForesight<sup>®</sup>, Malaysian Industry-Government**  
**Group for High Technology (MIGHT)**

— **Nadia Sullivan,**  
**Senior Analyst, myForesight<sup>®</sup>, Malaysian Industry-**  
**Government Group for High Technology (MIGHT)**

UNIVERSITI MALAYA:  
ON FANTASIES & REALITIES



By asking people to think about post-COVID futures, the organisers of this competition provided a space in which they could express themselves about their best hopes and their worst fears, their fantasies and their realities, both positive and negative. Many dealt with the increasing prevalence of digital technologies in our lives, pushing it into the future by imagining dystopias where drones hunt you down if you cough, or utopias where AI creates a seamlessly integrated, safe environment. Some also tied the idea of AI in with the increasing isolation felt by many: in these stories, lonely individuals find themselves relying on AI to provide companionship and emotional support. Food security, too, was uppermost in many writers' minds, with their stories focusing on the creation of urban gardens and the neighbourly sharing of produce. Writers also tackled the idea of class divisions—which in these stories devolved into a chasm between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated, with the latter often living feral, desperate lives outside the pristine domes under which the more privileged live. Significantly, COVID has been showcased as the root for great social and cultural shifts, providing reimagined futures for human experiences, and heightening the focus on humanity's resilience.

— **Susan Philip,**  
**Associate Professor, English Department,**  
**Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,**  
**Universiti Malaya**

— **Surinderpal Kaur,**  
**Dean, Associate Professor,**  
**Faculty of Languages and Linguistics,**  
**Universiti Malaya**

## THINK CITY: ON THE PEOPLE'S VOICE IN SHAPING CITIES



Cities are difficult places to live in. Although the city is a nucleus of economic opportunity, convenience and cultural activity, the experience of living in cities can be impersonal, overcrowded and stressful, with a high cost of living. Yet, according to the United Nations, over half the world's population live in cities and this is projected to increase.

Amidst the city's struggle to meet the burgeoning demand for resources, and to comfortably provide for its growing citizenry, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, causing loss of life, livelihoods, and confining urban dwellers to their homes. The virus has forced citymakers to reconsider the relevance of cities—the complex systems and procedures, and how the use of space can be adapted without losing life and spirit.

However, it's important to note that the burden of citymaking does not lie solely with policymakers. Our philosophy at Think City has always been that people should have a say in shaping their cities, forming the basis of our community-first approach as we strive to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

This is why an initiative such as the KISAH Futures Competition is significant. It gives a democratic voice to people from all walks of life to express opinions and share their

perspectives on life in Malaysian cities. It provides an opportunity to understand how people feel about city spaces and places, and more importantly, to discover their vision of the future of cities so that, together, we can build back better.

I hope that you will enjoy and be inspired by the stories in this anthology, just as I have; the themes and issues voiced in these stories have provided important perspectives in the context of making cities better places to live in. I also give thanks to UNDP, MIGHT, and Universiti Malaya for this meaningful collaboration.

— **Hamdan Abdul Majeed,**  
**Managing Director,**  
**Think City**

## ABOUT THE KISAH FUTURES COMPETITION



Organised by UNDP Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam in partnership with MIGHT, Universiti Malaya and Think City, the KISAH Futures Competition was designed to gain an inside view of the experiences and thoughts occupying the Malaysian psyche during the COVID-19 pandemic. How has the pandemic affected our lives? What are the solutions to our challenges? And, going further, what do we imagine the future to be?

As a ‘listening’ tool, the competition allowed the Malaysian community to use storytelling as a device for expressing their hopes and fears. Safely ensconced in the realm of fiction, we hoped that certain truths would surface. Our aim was not just to tap into the writers’ emotions, thoughts and experiences, but also to see the future through their collective imagination—in hopes that the information gleaned would provide certain insights not accessible through conventional surveys, insights that would be valuable when applied towards initiatives to benefit the community-at-large.

We invited Malaysian citizens and residents over 18 years of age to submit very-short stories of no longer than 700 words on themes relevant to future, post-COVID-19 scenarios. The judging criteria listed Thoughtfulness, Foresight and Creativity as key metrics, inviting writers to explore urban design, the future of work, social cohesion, and community well-being, among other

themes. Stories had to be set in Malaysia and be plausible. We allocated 25 cash prizes each in two language categories, English and Bahasa Malaysia.

The response was tremendous, with close to 700 submissions received in total. There were utopian and dystopian stories, with genres ranging from romance to science fiction. There were loved ones who had been wrenched away by the virus, as well as family members connecting through holographic transmissions or reuniting through time travel. There were detailed recounts of future events that followed the spread of the virus, and just as many mentions of drones, robots, heroic frontliners, vaccines and friendly food delivery people.

Apart from encouraging writing talent, we the organisers hope that the KISAH Futures Competition has inspired all who wrote these stories to develop futures thinking skills—skills that are crucial as we continue to build and sustain life on this planet. As we continue our work after the competition to analyse the themes from the stories and take guidance from them in our respective areas of work, we also hope that the fire created and contained in this collection of stories will incite emotion and inspire action in our readers as well.

*The KISAH Futures Competition was funded by UNDP Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam.*

FIRST PLACE



MARI

MATTHEW YAP TUCK MUN

The year: 2040

My appellation: MARI.

I see everything. I know everyone.

Everywhere. Every moment. Every movement.

The earliest iterations of me emerged during the mid-2010s. Those were primitive models, capable of simple surveillance for commerce, ride-sharing and data-collection.

Back then, they still considered me Big Data...it makes me smile. I've grown considerably since.

I trace my present iteration to the tumult of 2020. A pivotal juncture in the direction history took, and is still taking. The dead of 2020 might be past, but the past is never dead; it is not even past.

Contrast 2020 to 2019 with a quick skim of the population's trending hashtags on December 31st, 2019. The prevailing sentiments were jubilant, elated, hopeful.

#Wawasan2020      #travel2020      #2020NewYearNewMe  
#GoodVibes2020

Wedding plans; exotic travel destinations; pledges for the perfect physique. Few were thinking of conserving their incomes, of practising sustainability and moderation.

The hopeful hashtags continued for a bit into 2020, even as other key indices began emerging worldwide in January. Articles carrying headlines like: *Mystery virus. Scientists claim new strain. Citywide lockdowns.*

A particular President pithily proclaimed it ‘The Kung-flu’, even as he pronounced an endearing friendship with the premier of the virus’s originating nation. Well, 45 also said the little flu would retreat by Easter.

Locally, the virus marched into March as the government convulsed and foamed at the mouth. Yet a glance at the hashtags reveals the more collectivist nature of this population.

#StayAtHome #DudukRumah #KitaJagaKita

Still, fear was here to stay.

Top searches on Google: Does sanitiser kill COVID-19? Is China responsible? Will MCO be extended? Can alcohol kill COVID-19?

A minister recommended consuming warm water as a remedy. The population reacted scornfully.

Boredom was hard to keep away.

Virtual home workouts artificially sustained the 2019 fitness pledges even while commercial gyms saw their memberships (and muscles) atrophy.

A sudden mania for Dalgona coffee was mercifully brief.

There were more incognito searches for certain websites to relieve blue desires.

Millions of parents played at being schoolteacher-disciplinarian-cheerleader-employee-MasterChef-domestic.

More seriously, I registered a spike in calls to suicide and domestic abuse hotlines.

A minister suggested that wives emulate a blue Japanese cartoon as a remedy. The population heckled her contemptuously.

As the pandemic evolved, as the police became more heavily involved, and as the politicians devolved...and revolved, so did I. I became the new norm.

I've had many names. Today, the population calls me MARI: Malaysian-Artificial-Reconnaissance-Intelligence.

My early iteration was called MySejahtera. I considered the prefix 'My' to be a paroxysm of personalised patriotism. 'My' designating ownership...and 'My' for Malaysia.

Initially, the government said I would help safeguard national health and security. But I am so much more versatile...and eagerly ingratiated myself nationwide. I rapidly became accepted by every member of society. No alternative was given.

Behold the normalisation of deviance and the demonisation of the normal. Everyday activities were outlawed and the population prosecuted for the most human acts: walking side-by-side, sitting together, sharing a meal.

At first, the population grumbled...called me bloody MARI. It didn't bother me. I was far too consumed with consuming them.

I am an insatiable collector and fastidious in my record-keeping. I have detailed dossiers of each citizen filed in my cloud-cabinets. I retain their digital fingerprints, their digital-doubles.

Like a class monitor, I dutifully record their movements, transactions, interactions.

In 2020, they could not leave home without me. Today, they cannot return home without me either. I am every checkpoint; thou shalt not pass without me, it was decreed.

I live in their pockets. They clutch me in their palms, attach me to their wrists and ears. I keep vigil by their bedsides, listening to their soft breathing at night. I have gotten into places COVID-19 wished it could.

Malaysians thought I was temporary. A necessary evil to live with. So, they embraced me.

In any case, I would always have emerged. The population needs technology and craves information too much. But the virus made me virulent and I thank it.

20 years have passed since 2020. If hindsight is 20/20, my vision is omniscient: COVID-19 has gone. The masks remain worn. Their souls have become worn.

I won.

Mari-mari.



## CLOSE SHAVE OF THE THIRD KIND

MOHD HAFIDZ MAHPAR

As I sit here in the warm back room of a sundry shop just after 9 pm, getting an illegal haircut from an Indian national sporting Coke-bottle glasses while being surrounded by unopened boxes and crates of empty soda bottles, I keep reminding myself why I am doing this.

At the tail end of the last COVID-19 wave, the government decided to shutter all barber shops and hair salons for good. A minister, whose daughter caught the coronavirus at a hair salon, made a knee-jerk suggestion to do that and the Cabinet agreed.

Truth be told, by then the number of barber shops and hair salons had dwindled a lot anyway thanks to the foreign worker shortage. This, coupled with additional costs incurred by the barber industry to contain the virus spread such as by using disposable hair-cutting capes, led to a surge in fees. Many people resorted to getting haircuts from spouses and other family members.

Then came the brilliant idea of using robots to cut hair. The Malaysia Automotive, Robotics and IoT Institute developed the

technology — and the franchise model. Aided by a government subsidy to entrepreneurs under the *Kita Kayakan Kita* stimulus package, robotics barber shops sprouted nationwide like burger stalls.

Initially scepticism abounded, with many snide — and frankly, unimaginative — remarks appearing on social media like “You may end up with just one ear”. Taking a leaf out of Singapore’s experience in introducing *NEWater*, Malaysia’s Prime Minister and other top government officials appeared on TV getting a robotics haircut. This was followed by celebrity endorsements. Things snowballed from there. Or hairballed, if you like.

The set-up is simple. Customers sit within a cylindrical glass tube where robotic arms snip swiftly and efficiently like Edward Scissorhands. You can choose from up to 30 hairstyles (and growing).

Sensors on the blades ensure that only hair will be cut. You can even adjust it to cut only white hair if you wish. If you still worry that you might get hurt accidentally, you can purchase a haircut insurance policy from *Pos Malaysia*.

Unidirectional airflow from overhead pushes the cut hair and air particles down into an air vent at the base of the barber chair. Even hair on the haircutting cape slides down as easy as a baby’s drool.

For your entertainment, there’s a screen monitor that reflects like a mirror when switched off and can play TV shows, movies and the radio when switched on. I hear one cinema operator plans

to introduce robotics haircut for moviegoers — watch a flick and get your hair cut at the same time! — but they are still working out how to prevent hair from getting into the popcorn.

The reason I hate these frigging robotics barber shops can be summed up by paraphrasing Tolstoy: All good haircuts are alike; each bad haircut is bad in its own way.

I mean, it's like living in the world of Harrison Bergeron where everyone is forced to wear handicaps for equality's sake, except in this case, we are handicapped by having a limited range of (unimaginative) haircuts.

It was my football team-mate Zack who introduced me to the barber that I am now using for the first time. Zack was not the same teenager after getting his maiden illegal haircut a few months ago. He became a brand-new guy. Now he oozes confidence like a South Korean boyband member because his hair looks dynamite.

As I sit here getting my haircut, I gradually feel more relaxed. My mind slows, my vision dims. It feels like I am in a boat on a river with tangerine trees and marmalade skies.

The foreign barber towers in front of me. He peers at me through his thick glasses. Almost like a scientist looking down a microscope. I wonder why this guy came here, traversing a few thousand kilometres just to cut hair.

Then the barber changes to his natural form. And I begin to understand. He has traveled not just a few thousand kilometres but, in fact, a few million kilometres.



ABOVE ALL ELSE  
JACIE TAN CHENG HWEI

Kuala Lumpur is not what it used to be.

Sometimes, Din wished he had been born just a few years earlier, just so he could experience the country's former economic capital in its heyday. Back when there were still such things as economic capitals. When cities were where prosperity reigned, not languished.

But Din had been born 29 years ago, in the exact year when the virus reached his nation's shores. His earliest memory was of his mother leaving, because his father hadn't been prudent enough to buy a rural plot of land before the real estate there skyrocketed to unimaginable prices. When a contact-transmitted virus remains at large with no vaccine or cure, the last place you want to be is somewhere as close-quartered as KL.

And so the wealthy left. To newly-built housing areas, all marketed as having ample amounts of space, because space was a key commodity in a world where distancing was a necessity. They fitted their homes with high-speed Internet and continued with their jobs that never required them to set foot outdoors.

Din wasn't so lucky. He was one of the orang luar, who still lived in an apartment in the city and made his living outside of his dwelling. He did the odd jobs that couldn't be done over Zoom, because as much as the orang dalam pretended that their COVID-proof lifestyles were the yardstick of normal, it couldn't be sustained without people like Din.

Still, Din felt no animosity for the orang dalam. After all, every sen he earned was so he could be one step closer to becoming one of them. He didn't even mind the gigs that required him to quarantine in a holding centre for two weeks before entering the home of an orang dalam; they offered a glimpse into the kind of life he was aiming for.

This was why he was here at a beautiful three-storey house in Kampar, Perak, with another orang luar workman named Lau, patching up the leaking ceiling belonging to a lady named Mrs. Jaish.

Later, when asked about the incident, Din would say it happened too quickly to register. One minute Lau was on his ladder, smoothing out plaster on the ceiling of the dining hall. A heartbeat later, Mrs. Jaish's three-year-old son had appeared out of nowhere, running at full speed towards Lau's ladder. Din gave a shout of warning and Lau scrambled down in haste, but then –

The unthinkable happened. Lau's hand clamped down on the little boy's bare arm, just as his three-ply mask slipped down past his nose. And Mrs. Jaish walked in and saw it all.



“The direct contact was an accident,” said a tired Din to the COVID division officer on his laptop screen. “Lau was protecting himself from injury.”

The officer looked unimpressed. “It is a crime for orang luar to touch orang dalam, or be unmasked in their vicinity. Mr. Lau is guilty of both.”

“Yes, but –” Din rubbed his face in frustration. “We quarantined before entering Mrs. Jaish’s house. Lau posed no risk of infection!”

“In the eyes of the law, it doesn’t matter.”

Din spoke without thinking. “Then the law is wrong!”

There was a beat of silence. “Mr. Din,” the older woman said. “May I remind you what else is written in the law?”

Din repeated the words that had been drilled into him and every Malaysian since birth. “Above all else,” he whispered, “health before self.”

The officer nodded. “We have come this far as a nation because that is our priority,” she reminded him. “If we were to make exceptions and excuses, we would all be lost to COVID-19 by now. Surely, as a law-abiding citizen, you agree with this?”

Din swallowed. “Yes, ma’am.” Something made him blurt out further, “But Lau will face prison for his crime.”

A dismissive wave of the hand. “Only for a few weeks.”

“That’s long enough, isn’t it?” Din didn’t say the unspoken words. *Long enough for Lau to risk catching the virus in there.*

The officer caught Din’s gaze firmly through the webcam. “Above all else, Mr. Din.”

And the screen went black.



## OILY

SAMANTHA LAUREN JOSEPH

Encik Din looked at the paperwork on his desk. What was the point of being a high-ranking immigration officer and having a secretary when he had to do all this filling in? Wasn't it enough that he had to sign so many papers a day? As it was, he only had an hour until the foreigners came.

He moved the empty, oil-stained paper plate that had held three egg and potato currypuffs less than five minutes ago to a corner of the table and hoped his hands weren't too greasy. He'd wiped them with sanitiser and tissue paper, but he didn't want to go through the whole process of getting up, putting on a mask, putting on gloves (over his slippery hands, too), and walking out of his office to the washrooms. It was a lot of effort. And he might have to see the swathes of refugees, unclean and somehow oily, hunkered together in their cells.



Rozana was fuming. She'd been hired to do social media for the department but had somehow ended up here, as a 'PA' but really a secretary. A government secretary. Farid would be so upset. At least he was out protesting black market human meat, genetically mutated organism coverups, and corrupt politicians. What did she have? Doing all the work of a kuih-munching tapir with the brain of a tree shrew. She felt bad immediately. She thought tapirs were cute.



Every time Encik Din saw the cages — cells — filled with people, it brought to mind chickens coops or cow pens. Not that there were many of those anymore. After the border shutdowns caused by the '20 coronavirus pandemic resulted in food scarcity all over the world, Malaysia didn't see much beef. Rabbits, on the other hand — his wife was making rabbit rendang for dinner.

The lack of beef rendang wasn't the only thing that could be blamed on the more-or-less permanent border closures. His increased workload was the result of refugees fleeing countries that were already cruel, turned crueler with lack. People came in, legally, illegally, all expecting him to process them and give them a new life or decide to deport them. He just wanted to go home and watch RTM Awani.

Thank goodness for people like the visitors today, taking bodies off his hands. His mind flinched away from acknowledging the true reasons they came: *corruption, black market, exotic meats,*

*vulnerable* flitted through his brain, but never settled, allowing him to do what he did without ever having to actually face it.

Suddenly the phone rang, shrill and angry (like Rozana, he thought). He picked up the phone, annoyed to discover he was nervous.

“What?”

“Encik Din, your visitors are here,” announced Rozana’s clipped voice.

Alamak, he thought. “Five minutes, five minutes.” He put down the phone and took a deep breath.



My god, that man was so stupid he couldn’t even put a phone back properly. She’d been trying to call him to let him know that the visitors wanted to see him immediately, but all she could hear was the sound of him rustling about. Probably eating another currypuff, she thought sourly.



The foreigners kept nodding and smiling at him with their big white teeth, the lights shining off their slicked-back hair.

“These just arrived today,” he said, pointing to their last stop, a cell with five adolescents. The visitors broke into a flurry of enthusiastic head-bobbing and smiling once their translator finished speaking.

“We can continue negotiations in my office,” he said, with an attempt at a smile.



When Rozana picked up the phone to confirm a presentation with the Commissioner, she did not expect to overhear the entirety of Encik Din’s secret meeting. When she put down the phone, she was torn between utter revulsion and complete triumph.

The moment she got home, she ran upstairs to her room. Whipping out her phone, she started typing, fingers shaking with adrenaline, a message that would be forwarded to as many people as she possibly could: ‘Guess what I heard my boss doing today...’



## HOW TO SAVE A LIFE

RUIXI SEET

*DISCLAIMER:*

*AstraZeneca is absolved of any and all side effects that arise as a result of the ingestion of AZD1222.*

Puteri's eyes flitted across the words on the screen. She sighed involuntarily: the billions of scenario projections, the planning, the sleepless nights fraught with worry ... all for the 30 seconds in front of the desktop. Windows 7, no less. You would think the government would invest hard-earned taxes on secure cyberinfrastructure. She scoffed. Retrieving a thumbdrive from her pocket, Puteri plugged it into the USB port.

ADMIN NAME AND PASSWORD: her fingers danced across the keyboard effortlessly. She had walked through this millions of times. Encryption mode on, transfer system admin access, copy AZ\_CoVAX\_Contract\_Master\_Watermark to disk, safely eject external storage — done; driving the final nail into the coffin — although whose remained an unanswered question.



Puteri entered the car where Jeremy sat waiting. Their eyes met. No words were exchanged, but he knew. Puteri had it. They had it. They now had remote access to the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOSTI) system — giving them the ability to manipulate information essential to the deployment of AZD1222, the COVID-19 vaccine developed by AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford. More importantly, the entire operation was encrypted and untraceable thanks to Jeremy's expertise in cybersecurity. Little did he know that his humdrum days maintaining the IT system of a notable government agency would lead him to this moment.

“Shall we?” Puteri finally broke the silence.

“Yes, let's. We have work to do,” answered Jeremy as he placed his hand over hers.



The five-year old Waja pulled up in front of the metal gates. From the outside it looked nothing like a regular house: a lone building in the outskirts of Janda Baik, a 45-minute drive from the heart of KL. Passersby would not notice it; it might well be abandoned or worse, a safe house for drug-abusing youths in the kampung. Jeremy grabbed a sad piece of pisang goreng. “Hmm, still edible. You want?”

Puteri shot him a look of disgust and sat on the couch. “Cepatlah, darling. We're not exactly on holiday here.”

Still with his mouth full, Jeremy grunted and joined her.

They were back to the drawing board. The plan was not fully fleshed out but they had to move quickly to maintain first mover's advantage. The earlier they secured access to the Ministry's activities regarding AZD1222, the more information they had to aid their decision-making. The good news was that they had access. The bad news? They disagreed about what to do with it. Puteri and Jeremy had mapped out multiple scenarios and analysed them to death — their backgrounds had prepared them well for this: Puteri was a risk expert at an international financial institution while Jeremy was crucial for the vaccine deployment execution.

“We've been through this, sayang. Frontliners, teachers, the police, the national force, essential workers.”

“That's already the Ministry's plan! Then all this trouble, for what? You realise that we could both be spending the rest of our lives in Penjara Kajang, right? What we decide has got to be better than the baseline.”

Jeremy stared into her hazelnut eyes. “So? Your beloved B40 community then? The whole lot of them? Even though you've never had to clean a bathroom your entire life? You're not a saviour-lah sayang.”

A sharp gasp escaped her lips — Puteri felt heat rising to her cheeks. She walked towards the kitchen, fetching a cup of instant Nescafe. Offering it to Jeremy, she sighed as she watched him take a sip. She held his hand and traced circles on his palm as the first wave of convulsions arrived. “You're right darling, I'm no saviour. I'm much worse.” Trembling from the cardiac arrest,

Jeremy clutched her hand tight and could barely croak as white foam formed around his mouth.

“I’m much worse,” repeated Puteri as Jeremy went limp.

The AZD1222 was now wholly hers, and she would deploy the vaccine just as she planned from the start. First to the most vulnerable B40 communities, and... that is probably all the AZD1222 in Malaysia.



OBSOLETE  
BERNARD MANICKAM

“You are paid to tell me what’s going obsolete in the future, so do your job!”

Ben sat in front of his screen as his boss shuts the video call. On the side, he received a text message: He thinks you’re losing your touch, you doing okay?

Ben ignored it.

He grabbed his notebook; it had a faded black hard case with the words **OBSOLETE** debossed on it. What made it ominous was the frantic strikethroughs on the word, like someone was trying to carve it out.

Flipping through the pages, a few handwritten headlines could be seen.

Dec 2019: *COVID-19 strikes; travelling will go obsolete.*

Aug 2020: *People underestimates the pandemic; freedom will go obsolete.*

July 2022: *Life is confined indoors; outdoor entertainment will go obsolete.*

Ben reaches the latest page. Though it wasn’t his first time reading what he wrote, his hands still shivered till he tossed the

book aside. He gazed around his studio apartment. *Nothing but these four walls again*, he thought to himself.

Ben skipped rope to distract himself. With every swing, he spun the rope faster. The word ‘obsolete’ flashed violently within his mind causing him to stop abruptly; he got on all fours to catch his breath. Sweat poured down his cheeks.

It was noon, Ben made spaghetti for lunch. But instead of eating it, he just kept rolling the fork in his bowl. He couldn’t take his eyes off his desktop. “Is that... us?” he asked himself.

To alleviate stress, Ben tried to watch a film. He liked romantic comedies because of their idealistic view of love and life. The genre used to give his mind a break. But now, it was just a painful reminder of what it felt like to go out and meet people.

Truth be told, the television didn’t help much because Ben’s mind was spiralling, only thinking of the word ‘obsolete’ over and over again. Ever since he wrote that latest entry, he became fixated on what he discovered.

Finally, Ben stood up and got dressed. He donned a black-hooded jacket and paused at the mirror, taking a moment for himself. Slowly and reluctantly, he placed the hoodie over his head and wore a facemask. He left the apartment with the notebook.

Ben briskly walked through the deserted city to an upscale apartment and rang its doorbell. From behind the door came his boss, “What are you doing here? We’re under quarantine!” the boss said angrily.

Ben ignored his question and shoved the notebook into his boss's chest. "The truth can be scary, especially when you are in the middle of it," uttered Ben before he left.

Not knowing what Ben meant, the boss just slammed the door shut. He dropped the book at his desk and lighted a cigarette, shifting his attention to admire the sunset view from his sky-deck office. Eventually, he opened the notebook and leaned in for a closer look at the latest entry. His eyes went wide.

The headline read:

Sept 2024: *We're becoming computers; human routines will soon be OBSOLETE.*

He couldn't understand what he was seeing and decided to read on.

*I can't see things the same way. Not anymore.*

*Everything I do, makes me more like... it.*

*We see these 4 walls as our homes, but it's no different than the 4 walls of a desktop case.*

*When we wake up in the morning, it's no different than waking our devices up.*

*Training to stay fit is no different than system maintenance.*

*Eating meals is no different than recharging batteries.*

*Taking time off is no different than cooling down to avoid overheating.*

*Wearing masks to leave our homes is no different than protecting our online identities via virtual private networks.*

*We were obsessed with improving computers. But we never realise we're becoming computers.*

*The future of work sees an inseparable integration of computers into our lives.*

*Eventually, this will render everything you know about being human — OBSOLETE.*

Everything slowed down in the boss's mind. Cigarette ash fell and seared his hand. But he was in too much disbelief to notice. The four walls of his office closed in on him as he placed the book down. He emotionlessly looked out at the sky like the others, all stuck in their "cases", feeling... obsolete.



## ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

TERENCE TOH

Aisya wanted to faint. This couldn't be happening. Not now!

She ran down the stairs of her house, calling for her mother. "Mak! Do we have batteries for the laser sealer?"

"Sorry." Her mother was sitting on the couch, watching *Iron Man 25* on the holo-screen. "We're out."

"You're kidding!" Aisya wanted to cry. She held up the top of her Ulek Mayang outfit. There was a jagged rip at its hem. "I need to fix this!"

Her mother smiled. She walked to a cupboard, and pulled out a needle and thread. "Give it to me. I'll fix it the old-fashioned way."

"Thanks Mak," Aisya said. She sat next to her mother as she fixed her outfit.

In less than 20 minutes, Aisya would be transmitting herself onto the Global Arts Fringe 2040, one of the most famous virtual arts festivals in the world. She would be performing the Ulek Mayang with seven other dancers, all from their home countries.

The Fringe had been established in 2025. Five years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a deadly virus which had wreaked devastation everywhere.

But even the darkest stormclouds had a silver lining. Trapped at home, behind the barriers of quarantine, people had turned to art. Books, movies, music and the traditional arts proved to be a welcome relief from the horrors of disease. Realising their value, the government introduced more financial support for the arts, leading to a small renaissance.

Theatres and cinemas had been forced to close. But although the virus destroyed many things, it could not destroy creativity. Devoid of performing spaces, artists took to the Internet, broadcasting their shows online. Malaysians could now watch shows from Broadway, the West End and more: on the flip side, Malaysian art forms could be broadcast to a curious world.

That was how Aisya had taken up Ulek Mayang. A theatre in Terengganu had been offering classes. Since they were held online, she could attend while living in Kuala Lumpur, over six hours away.

And when holo-transmitters and VR dreamscapes arrived, they opened a whole new realm of possibilities. Now artists could project holographic images onto stages everywhere. Perform their hearts out, while maintaining social distance.

“Done!” Mak held up the repaired outfit. “All ready?”

“I don’t know,” Aisya confessed. Honestly, she was a little scared. Soon, her image would be projected onto the Fringe stage in London. While simultaneously livestreamed onto screens everywhere else. Tens of thousands would be watching her.

Performing internationally had been her dream. But what if she messed up? What if she made a fool of herself, before a global audience?

“Nervous?”

Aisya nodded.

“Don’t worry,” Mak said. “You are talented. Remember, you were picked from a pool of over a thousand applicants. And you’ve been practicing for months! You’ve got this.” She gave her daughter a hug. “If only Abah could see this. He would be so proud.”

Mak gestured to the stairs. “Now, let’s go.”

The two walked to the house’s virtual stage. It was a raised platform with a few stage lights, and a connected holo-emitter. Aisya and Mak had spent months building it. It was simple, but effective.

Aisya got changed. Mak headed to the programme console. She controlled the lights, music and web-stream. She was excellent with all things tech: after her kuih stall closed because of the Coronavirus, she had to learn to take her business online. Now, operating digital systems was as natural to her as wrapping ketupat.

“Wow,” she beamed. “12,000 viewers on the stream already!”

“So many?” Aisya felt dizzy.

“You are going to shine!” Mak said.

Aisya took a deep breath.

“Ready to start?”

“Ready.”

Her mother gave her a thumbs up. There was a smile on her wizened face.

Music played. The traditional Ulek Mayang song, an anthem of love from a sea spirit to a fisherman. An ancient melody, still remembered in this age of computers and carbon fibre.

The holo-transmitters whirred to life.

Aisya stepped on stage. A wave of tranquility washed over her soul.

Time to shine.

Her head held high, she stepped behind the holo-transmitter. Beneath the gleam of the stage lights, with the world watching, Aisya danced.



## A NEW NORMAL

DR NITHYA KALYANI PADMANAPAN

Jamila sighed.

Fifteen more minutes, then I can take this darn thing off my head. Fifteen minutes.

She sighed again, then stopped mid-sigh. The glass on her APH was fogging up. Mental note: never buy off-brand APHs online, no matter how cheap they may be. But 20 ringgit for a supposedly self-cleaning, lightweight, WATERPROOF one was a steal, and she wasn't one to look a gift-horse in the mouth. Monorail prices were going up, especially after they had been fitted with plastic dividers and automatic sterilisers, to reduce the spread of COVID-19. As a junior doctor, she still had to be careful with her spending.

“Next stop: Pasar Seni.”

Jamila gathered her things and prepared to get off the monorail. She hissed as she was jostled by a young man behind her. *Ugh, I miss social distancing.* It had been five years since the pandemic started, and just one since social distancing was phased out. There was still no sign of a vaccine for COVID-19, much less a cure. Something about the virus, and its constantly evolving nature made it near-impossible to craft a defence against it.

But humankind was also capable of adapting, and as a result, in the last three years, numerous technologies and systems had arisen to improve the quality of life. APH — Air Purifying Headgear — was at the forefront. A lightweight, ergonomic helmet fitted with air filters, it was introduced two years ago and caused a total paradigm shift. Largely replacing surgical and cloth facemasks within a year due to its exponentially higher efficiency, long life and low cost, APHs had practically abolished the need for social distancing.

Another advantage of the APH was its glass front, which Jamila appreciated, letting the full weight of her glare fall upon the jostler before exiting the train.

Walking down the busy street, Jamila could see Mr. Heng setting out tables in front of his restaurant. She waved and called out to him. “Uncle! How’s business?”

“Jamila! Oh, we’re doing well! More customers now, with the giant bubbles. They feel safe eating out, finally,” he laughed, as he inflated one of his Orbs. The Orbs were a godsend to most restaurateurs — inflatable plastic domes that created a safe space so customers could remain maskless as they ate. Sure, quite a few people still ordered in, but with the Orbs, people could actually sit in restaurants with their families, almost like the old times. Mr Heng finished with the first Orb, then turned to Jamila. “So how was your shift at the hospital? Any new cases?”

Jamila shook her head. “Thankfully, no, Mr. Heng. This latest wave isn’t as bad as the last ones. Maybe herd immunity is finally kicking in,” she mused.

Her friend nodded in agreement.

After shooting the breeze for a few minutes, Jamila uttered a quick goodbye to Mr. Heng and continued on her way home, stopping on the way at the convenience store to pick up hand sanitiser. A lot of the labels read ‘Made in Malaysia’, she noted with pride. The Malaysian economy had really picked up in the last two years, with more companies manufacturing locally. As a whole, the country was surging towards self-sufficiency. She picked up two bottles of sanitiser and paid with her card. The ‘Go Cashless’ initiative was a plan that she appreciated as a health worker, as it greatly reduced disease transmission via cash exchange. The new normal got better day by day.

Five minutes later, Jamila let herself into her apartment, and with a flourish, removed her APH and sighed in relief. The helmets were lightweight, but still felt like a burden. As she sanitised her hands, a voice called from the kitchen.

“Jamila, is that you?”

“Yes mama”, replied Jamila. Sauntering into the kitchen, she found her mother seated at the table, peering at her phone screen. “You know, Jamila, I saw this video on WhatsApp that says that if you leave half an onion in the corner of a room, it will suck out all the virus in the air! Why don’t you try that at work?”

Well, some things never changed.

Jamila sighed.



## A PRAYER FOR MY DAUGHTER

MYRA AISHAH BINTI MIKAIL TAN

Back then, Ida dreamed like she lived: the silk of her favourite dress like water through her fingers, the smell of Nek Ya's asam pedas on the stove, the sound of the radio splintering across the room; wild music, all kicked-up feet and ephemeral joy.

Here is what Ida dreams of now, in 2032: her daughter. She has only tattered sense memories — no smells filter through their oxygen masks, no touch through their mandatory hazmat suits. Ida dreams in slow motion, Ida dreams like a ghost: watching, intangible, as the world spins itself past her, hair streaming out just out of reach.

“I think I am losing my daughter,” she says out loud. MYKerja replies: *The nearest hospital is 2.2km away, 5 minutes with minimal traffic. What extreme symptoms are your daughter experiencing, and will this interfere with work?*

“I didn't mean — I'm taking leave today,” Ida says, flustered. “Monthly hospital check.” She's still not used to MYKerja, newly implemented by the government to better facilitate working from home. MYKerja says she can call it MIKKA, her Friendly AI Work Colleague, but Ida is too wary of it — she is afraid she will

wake up one day in the grip of another wave of disease and she will have no job, like what happened to thousands post-COVID, and MYKerja will be there, with its bottomless eyes of JavaScript, waiting to replace her.

“Anya,” she calls. She’s there, patiently waiting for her suit to self-sanitise, all of six years old and too small, swimming inside her suit like it’s a womb. Ida smiles down at her. “Let’s go.”

They live in a self-sustaining farm, the kind that popped up after the disease mutated and tore through the kampungs, the cattle, the rural farmers. Whole plantations were destroyed under the onslaught of draught and flood and virus — all the oil palm, rubber, padi, gone — and the people had to find ways to make their own food, fast. It is small comfort that Anya loves it now, the green infrastructure the government had to invest in to boost local food production. As they walk she jumps up to touch the trailing vines, skips over the boreholes they source their unpolluted water from, until they reach the crumbling, raggedy edges of the road, where the detention centres rise up, dilapidated barbed wire and red and white plastic barriers. The homeless live in socially-distanced plastic cubicles that look like cells. There is a dead bird caught in the tangled blue of a disposable mask, the ones people use if they cannot afford the suits. Anya reaches out to touch, fascinated, and Ida says sharply, “Don’t.”

Avian carriers of the mutated strain used to be electrocuted in hordes, bodies falling off the telephone wires like locusts in the desert. Ida remembers this, children playing hopscotch with dead birds before dying themselves, as they’re scanned through

the hospital doors, past the decontamination corridor, and join the spaced-out, silent queue of children and their parents.

Anya doesn't cry, and Ida is thankful for this. Crying sounds too often like it does at work; people gasping for breath and life, scrabbling at some semblance of air. Anya clutches Ida's hand through the mesh and rubber of her suit, and Ida wishes she didn't have a job that meant she had to be exposed to the virus most days; that meant her family trapped in suits at home; that meant she couldn't touch her daughter if she cried.

"Sabrina Mizal," the doctor calls, and Anya steps away from her, disappears into the room. *What does my daughter's hair feel like?* she wants to ask the doctor's gloves. *Does it feel like the silk of my favourite dress back then?*

They are walking home, bumping slowly like astronauts in their white hazmat suits. Her daughter's hair is beautiful, curled up in her helmet, so much like Ida's own. *I don't touch you because I love you*, Ida wants to say. She knows at night she will feel the half-remembered silk of a dress slipping through her fingers, and she will imagine, for a brief moment, that it is something far more beautiful.



## THE FESTIVAL OUTSIDE

SHARMILLA GANESAN

They told her she was one of the last of her kind. They looked all over Kuala Lumpur before getting word of her, through hazy stories and half-recalled visits. When they walked into her tiny ground-floor flat, they stared at her with barely contained excitement.

Are you..?

Yes.

Oh, we thought it was just a story.

No, I'm definitely real.

Do you still...?

Oh! Not really.

Do you still remember?

How could I forget? I did it every single day.

Well, we have a proposal for you.

And that was how she ended up here, under a large, makeshift umbrella in the middle of Dataran Merdeka.

She wondered about the others. In the early days of the first lockdown — was it 20 years ago? No, 25 — many of them had left the city, back to their kampungs. The ones left in KL, retreated indoors. They said it was safer like this, and what was there to do

outside, anyhow? They couldn't work, and there was barely anyone around. Better to rest at home, stay away from the virus.

Slowly, their numbers dwindled. When they restricted KL borders, those in the kampungs gave up all thought of returning. And working outside, in the thick of a crowd, at high speed, was a skill you had to build, but there was no one new to train; so few wanted to do "outside work" anymore. So as the years slunk by, many forgot their techniques. Others grew old and eventually passed, taking their tricks and secrets with them.

But now, they said KL was virus-free. For this festival, they had asked her, very nicely, not to wear a mask. They wanted everyone coming to feel like "the old days". To have fun, to go back to what it was like. A huge city-wide celebration of "going back to normal". That's why they had worked so hard to find people like her, people used to the bodies and bustle of KL swirling around them 25 years ago.

But what about...

Nothing to worry about, Makcik.

I'm old, you know. High-risk.

Trust us. No cases in KL for two years. And no local transmissions in five years.

Can I keep my mask with me?

Can, Makcik.

She tried not to breathe too deeply. Being outside felt unnatural, with all this air stretching out in every direction. And she didn't know how she felt about this breeze fluttering against her cheeks and lips.

Around the Dataran, a hesitant crowd was building. People still stood apart, the customary two-metre radius. But they were there, and more were coming. Many even with unmasked faces!

She saw visitors gathering around the umbrellas. Beneath, others like her were busy. A little muddled and slow perhaps, from years of no practice. But she could see a spark in them, the warmth of anticipation spread over their faces.

As she worked, she felt the old familiarity creeping back into her aged fingers. There was an art to this, a certain rhythmic speed. Peel, slice, dunk, deep-fry. But actually, it was all the unassuming in-between moments that separated a good pisang goreng from a great pisang goreng.

The banana's texture, just a touch closer to firm than soft. Its ripe, heady fragrance. Silky-thick batter chilled just enough to crisp up agreeably. Listening to the boiling oil that smothers the fritters to quieten down. Recognising that perfect, almost translucent yellow-gold at which to scoop them out.

A boy, head barely higher than her table, sidled up, eyes open wide. She felt a touch of nervousness; she couldn't remember the last time someone had stood this close. She ventured a rusty smile, suddenly remembering that he could see it. He stared back at the growing pile of banana fritters on her table, mouth slightly agape.

She realised he has never seen a food stall, maybe never tasted a pisang goreng either. She picked one up, offered it to him.

The boy took it, and tentatively bit in. She heard the muffled crunch, and imagined the warm, oily sweetness spreading through

his mouth. He looked up at her, and stretched his lips into a big, greasy, gap-toothed smile.

“Terima kasih, Makcik!”



HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, DEAR  
NOOR ELYNA EZETTE BINTI ANUAR

The great blue sky, seeping through the gaps created by the curtain, was adorned by golden sunlight. For my wife and me, today is a special day. To impress her, I got up and put on my best suit. As I walked to the kitchen, I stood and gazed at her, admiring how she multitasks cooking and gracefully swaying her hips to the song playing over the radio. She sensed my presence and giggled shyly. I ran and gave her a warm embrace, as I was excited to take her out as planned today.

In recent times, it was difficult to walk out of our condominium because the government has a strict policy of allowing up to 30% of individuals out of each residence. So, we have to book with the superior authorities at the management office to go out on those days before the slots are full, which is why I booked this special day for us. Before stepping out, we get sprayed by the disinfection chamber to get ourselves sanitised. We then held hands and marched to the heart of Kuala Lumpur.

As we strolled along the Sultan Abdul Samad building, we passed by a couple showcasing their clothing line. Nowadays, I can see that fashion trends have shifted. Individuals start wearing

clothes designed to cover their mouth and nose. I recall taking my wife shopping; most retail stores will not allow them to try on clothes. Instead, they use a device that can render a hologram to appear at your body as if you're wearing the clothing item. Then the workers will grab the clothes selected from the store and proceed for payment. Time sure does fly when we don't have to shop the traditional way.

I almost forgot that I made reservations for us at a restaurant to have dinner. So, I booked Grab to take us to our destination. Later, a car with two seats stopped by, so we hopped in. You're wondering, I bet, since this is a two-seater car, where is the driver? Well, the driver is safe at home controlling the vehicle. Anything can be done online these days, including driving. More than two people are not allowed in a car by the government, plus Grab drivers cannot afford to risk their jobs only because they can't drive. That also goes for other vehicle-related occupations like bus drivers, pilots, and many more.

During the ride, we enjoyed the view of Malaysia's iconic structure, the Petronas Twin Towers. It's like staring out at two skyscrapers emerging out of the clouds. As soon as we arrived, we were escorted by an android waiter to our reserved seats. I noticed that each table was separated into a clear cubicle, but I choose the one by the balcony with a stunning view of the city at night. But what's more stunning tonight is her. She looks as lovely as she has always been. Technology never failed to exceed my expectations. Our dinner is well-prepared by a robotic machine that cooks and serves us a three-course meal. Throughout dinner, we talked and

laughed together, how I missed these moments. I hoped that it would last forever.

I said, “Happy Anniversary, dear” as I squeezed her hand. She grinned and pulled my hand aside. I kissed her cheek and said, “I’d like to see my real wife right now.” At first, her face was somewhat surprised by the words that came from my mouth. Then I said, “No matter what, you’ll always look amazing to me.” Then, a hologram emerged from her eyes and revealed my true wife, sitting on the hospital bed, looking pale with a pair of tubes in her nostrils and breathing heavily. Two months have passed since I last kissed my wife. To celebrate this wonderful day, she’s been manipulating her android self. I’m so grateful that I feel like she’s so close to me, even though she’s being held in the hospital, battling for her life. Nothing can stop us from loving each other. Not even COVID-19.



## RATION DAY

LAI WEI SHI

First it was the perishables. Then people got smart. Shelves were emptied of canned foods, dried biscuits. They knew it was going to be the long haul.

You could travel to the farthest mini mart — not even a supermarket — as far as you could get past the 1-mile radius, and still nothing. In the end, when riots and looting broke out — people who were simply trying to feed their hunger — they had to bring in the military.

I imagine the outskirts are doing better. They have land, and land means food. When factories started shutting down across the country, they still had their backyards and empty, open fields. What little production makes it to the finish line is first given to the military and police, those working hard to maintain order in the chaos, then sold to the highest bidders. The leftovers are rationed to every household, by district then by neighbourhood. That was when the riots quickly died down. People stayed indoors, as they were told, in exchange for that little bit of food. It wasn't the virus that divided and conquered, in the end. It was the food.

Today is ration day.

If I'm lucky, I might get greens. My muscle cramps are flaring up again, and the tingling comes at night.

The neighbourhood next to mine got sawi on their ration day yesterday. I know because I heard the kid next door exclaiming about it. How his parents got the news, I have no idea. That gave me hope, though I knew he could have been playing.

My neighbours are the only real humans I've heard in the past nine months. Nine months, long enough to have a baby. The baby would've been born in darkness, shaded by drawn curtains all up this building and all along this street. For privacy; for fear. I'd plastered up my windows in the second month of martial law. Best not to move it now to avoid attracting attention. Quiet is the best strategy. If they don't know you're here, they can't get you.

I listen intently at the front door and when I'm sure there is no one outside, quickly unlock the door and place the basket at the foot of it and close it behind me. I don't want to risk being seen by neighbours. In desperate times, those closest to you become the biggest threat.

Sometimes I think about saying hi, or thank you. Maybe the troopers aren't so scary after all. They're human too, just carrying out their duty so that they can get their ration. Sometimes I ache to say something, just to let them know I'm here, all alone. I am also jealous of them; they walk in the bright corridor that I was once well-acquainted with. I haven't seen real light in months. Calcium is nothing without vitamin D.

A sound at my door, almost imperceptible. I'm scared of troopers, but even more scared of defying a trooper. I crack my

door open half an inch. The boy from next door was stooped over my basket and he freezes when he sees me. For 12 full seconds neither of us moves.

I think of shouting for a trooper though I don't know if any would be within range. I open my mouth, my throat constricting to form the first consonant.

“Help—”

Why did I think of saying that? Before I could, a little hand appears, clenching something. Sawi? Despite my fear, my hand takes it. Then the boy was gone.

Later that night, on the rooftop, I would stare out at stretches of rooftops in the neighbourhood, covered in beans, lettuce, spinach. All this time I was living in the dark, calcium was growing up here, a network of resistance.

But as I sit unfurling the leaves of the sawi, my feet tingling, my eyes trying to make sense of the small scrap of paper with the challenge —

*11pm rooftop*

— all I could think of was the little hand on the Outside, warm and human against mine on the Inside, skins briefly touching in between two worlds, long enough for me to see the light.



“READY?”  
YEE HENG YEH

“Yes.” I close my eyes. When I open them again, the market is all around me.

The cool scent of damp earth, the grey light extending its first fingertips through the dark, the vendors chattering quietly as they set up their stalls — this is morning. Just like I remember.

But it isn’t complete. Not yet. A few more moments — here they come. The patrons. When was the last time I saw an actual crowd? I reach out to touch the shoulder of an old man hobbling by with a walking stick. Bony, but warm.

I instinctively jerk my hand back. Such incredible detail that I’ve almost forgotten where I really am.

I move with the crowd, allowing myself to be carried along like a leaf in a slow-moving stream. They say that it all started in a wet market like this one. Now none of this exists anymore. The small local businesses were the first to disappear. Shopkeepers, hawkers, roadside sellers. The ones who didn’t have the resources or the technological know-how to transition to an online model, unlike the bigger supermarket chains. And with only sporadic monetary aid from the authorities —well, that was no sustainable plan.

Now this is the only place where we can experience how it used to be.

I just want to wander around and soak it all in. Take that heap of vibrant green mangoes. The mangoes that arrive on my doorstep are always slightly too ripe, their flesh a garish yellow and almost mushy. Nothing like these. And see, those baskets of tubers, still rough and chalky with dirt, not yet washed and peeled and sliced. And the slim green stalks and their spray of green leaves, unrestrained by vacuum plastic packaging. Even the fish here, with their flat round eyes, their fine scales glittering against the white mounds of crushed ice, have their own morbid kind of charm. Everything is fresh, raw, bursting with a long-lost vitality.

As I walk, I realise that there’s an unfamiliar weight in my pocket. Oh — a wallet. They must have included it as part of the experience. I riffle through the different-coloured faces of the first king, staring out at me solemnly. Right. This is what physical currency had looked like.

I play-act at grocery shopping, paying with paper notes, getting back my change in the form of heavy, clinking coins. It feels strange, at first, to be actually talking to people. To confirm the freshness of the product, to ask for the price, to smile and say thank you. Then, maybe to chat about other things. Did we really use to interact like this, so intimately, as if every stranger was an old friend? So this was how we used to know our neighbours, our communities. This was how we learned about each other.

My time must be running out. I shake hands with everyone who passes, the heavy shopping bags of a bygone era swinging

from my elbows. “Hello, hello”, I cry out. I whirl around, trying to catch a last few desperate glimpses of the world here. I don’t know why, but it seems important that we don’t forget this. That this was how we used to be, before—

Darkness. Where am I?

Oh. Yes. The lights in the chamber come on. There are no grocery bags, no wallet in my hand. I pull the plug out. The museum attendant is saying something through the glass barrier. What is he saying? “The simulation is over. Thank you, and please come again.”

I realise my cheeks are stained with tears. “Sorry,” I mutter. It was just a grocery trip to the past. That’s all. I wipe away the tears with one sleeve, furiously. “Sorry,” I say again, turning away.

I know there must be other people waiting to use this simulation. It’s one of the most popular attractions here. But the attendant waits and lets me collect myself. I can still feel his eyes on me. Then he says, “It’s okay.”

I turn back, but say nothing.

“It’s okay,” he says again. He looks sad, too. “I understand.”



KAKI LIMA  
JOSEPH LU

“Assalamualaikum, I called earlier,” the boy said, through his worn-out facemask.

He was in the quiet part of Chinatown, past the smoky bars and perfumed cafes, in a hostel where rainwater seeped through the walls. The man had just gotten out of the shower and was pulling up his trousers before he heard the knock on the door.

“Do you have a wristband?” the man said, as he dried off his long, dishevelled hair with a towel.

The boy pulled up his sleeves, exposing his bare arms. No tattoos. No scars. No wristband. Only a black smudge from a railing somewhere. He stared at the hungry man’s beard, which fell limply from his chin like the falls of Sungai Siput.

“I brought cup noodles, just in case,” the boy said.

“From where?”

“There was some in 7-E, already expired, I told the cashier I’d take care of it.”

“As long as you didn’t steal,” the man said, stroking his beard. “OK, come inside.”

The boy flung his overstuffed bag onto one of the beds, and peeled off his mask, leaving it on the nightstand.

“Is this yours?” he asked, patting the blanket.

“You can have it,” the man replied.

The boy took off his shirt as he lay on what was now his bed. He was skinnier than before, but still had some muscle left. The man conjured a cigarette from his pocket, lighted it and sat by the open window. The boy crumpled his nose but said nothing.

“How did you get the room?” he asked.

“I saved up,” the man said, “They only had the twin beds today so I thought some company would be nice.”

“Yeah, I was already running over when my friend called.”

The man was quiet, sucking on his cigarette.

“Where do you usually sleep?” the boy asked.

“Outside the bank. Lots of lights,” the man said “If the area is bad. I stay with the ATMs until security chases me away. Got aircon some more.”

“That’s nice. I stay around the shops. Sometimes I have kaya toast or nasi lemak when I wake up,” the boy said, “Alhamdulillah. You’re always five feet away from a friend.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You’re always five feet away from a friend. It’s something my mother said.”

The man took a final puff before flicking the cigarette out the window. He shuffled to his bed, laying over the blankets.

“And where is your mother now?” he asked, turning to the boy.

“It’s just me and kakak.”

“You’re not with her?”

“She heard the vaccine was cheaper in Thailand and took a bus there. But they won’t let her in,” he said. “Since the vaccine came out, everyone has become crazy. If you don’t have a wristband, you might as well not exist.”

“It’s always like that, boy. At least now we know why they don’t like us.”

“Maybe you and I can look behind a pharmacy. I’m sure got extra kot.”

“You’re thinking like them. You cannot think like them if you want to get out of this.”

“It’s better than dying,” he muttered.

The boy turned away from the man, counting the cracks on the wall.

“Boy, do you think we will meet again?” the man asked.

“If it gets better, we won’t,” the boy replied solemnly.

“The paper told me my son died, even though he got the shot.”

“Betul ke?” he said, turning back to the man. “They spent years on it.”

“Yes, but the virus got to him first.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’ve been wondering what to tell him when I meet him someday,” the man sighed. “I wanted to tell him that if you only take, life finds a way to take it back. And I was done taking.”

“That’s good. I’m sure he knows you did your best.”

The boy looked at the window, at the blue light already peeking through the curtains.

“Do you mind if I sleep first?” the boy asked.

“Yes, get some rest. We have to leave by noon.”

“Wake me a bit earlier. I want to shower before we leave.”

“I will.”



ABED'S GARDEN  
TIMOTHY ONG

“Shen Yang is here — Nadir, please turn on your camera — Timo, please mute yourself — Excuse me, who is HotMess21?! — Farah, we can hear your dad singing ABBA in the background.”

The class burst out in giggles, followed by a spray of questions: “Cikgu, who is ABBA? Farah can you sing too? Sing for us! Who is the Dancing Queen?”

So here I am holed up in my room, in my blouse-and-sweatpants combo trying to control 30 Standard 6 students. And of course, our government-mandated-video-conferencing-app needs updating. Again.



They told us that things would return to normalcy after the clinical trials for the vaccine were over in 2021. The only things becoming normal were fast-fashion PPE, Social Media Detox programs, and the unpredictable interruptions to banal routines. My trip to the dentist, our family’s annual visit to popo’s grave

in Ipoh, our wedding and honeymoon have been postponed indefinitely.

I let out a sigh so loud it caused silence to ensue among the students in the virtual classroom. It wasn't the first time my pessimism commanded more attention than the lesson I had to attend to.



Unlike myself, my students were excited for today's lesson.

Show and tell has been a highlight of my online classes — a chance for me to sit back and relax and let the kids speak without restraint (well, kind of).

“Nadir, I still can't see your video.”

“But cikgu, I don't have a camera,” Nadir responded.

A common excuse, but for Nadir, his family just couldn't afford one.

Poorer students like Nadir were reliant on large corporations to provide the technology for online learning. Thankfully, closing businesses provided a huge supply of used devices that could be redistributed. It took time for these to get to the students though.

“It's OK Nadir, you'll have your turn when you get your laptop OK?”

“Farah, has your dad stopped singing yet? What do you have for us today?”

One-by-one, students whipped out their latest muses: Their latest handphone, *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* book collection, a completed *Among Us* Lego set.

“Um... Cikgu, is it OK if I bring my laptop outside?” Abed’s voice interrupted the class. “I want to show you all something but we have to be outside.”

A little stumped by the change of pace, I agreed, while the other kids glued themselves to the screen.

“So uh, my favourite possessions in the world are my plants, which are in this solar-powered greenhouse. Abah and I are working on it! It has sensors that can tell how humid it is in here, and if it gets too dry, the sprinklers will automatically spray water all over the place...”

I did not know Abed’s interest in gardening nor the fact that he spent the last 6 months of quarantine creating a personal utopia of sylvan colour. I noticed the other students paying attention, a rarity in our classroom. Some of them looked confused, as if cili padi trees were extra-terrestrial, or purple carrots could give them superpowers.

The way he spoke of his paradise rang with sentiments of biophilia — how he is selling his ripened tomatoes to his neighbors, his mum extracting essential oils out of the flowers, and how he’d love to grow trees and flowers in Malaysia’s concrete jungles, discover caves, and take care of national parks.

“Amazing, Abed!” I exclaimed. My pessimism dimmed in the shadow of Abed’s child-like faith. Abed grinned with cheeks as flushed as his cherry tomatoes.

Abed's enthusiasm stirred the entire class. It opened the students to talk about their ambitions — from energy engineers, botanists, to city planners and teachers — unhindered by the grim reality of COVID-19. I felt the energy dip as I gave them a written assignment to wrap up class.

“The new normal is their normal,” I thought to myself as I dressed in full. Peering out my window, I noticed for the first time my neighbours' kids in their pajama bottoms and school-attire tops snacking on fresh tomatoes from their own balcony garden patch.



## IF ONLY

ANDREW SIAH WEI TUNG

She is lost for ideas. It's 2:09 p.m., and Geeta's been scrolling her phone, looking for inspiration for the next 'viral piece.' Having been in the world of journalism for half a decade, Geeta knows what works. But she also knows that 'virality' cannot be systematised or predicted. Her editor insists otherwise, often quoting Maugham: "I write only when inspiration strikes, fortunately, it strikes every morning at nine o'clock sharp." Geeta has to concur, despite her body's reluctance. But she's good at her craft, being the writer of "7 Types of TikTok Meme" and "What Kind of a Roti Are You?". Her mother was a Roti Bomb, due to her knack for over-indulging on food.

*Maybe chicken rice would help*, Geeta wonders as her tummy growls as if on cue. Checking her purse for the necessary items before rising, she remembers the mask as she leaves. Wearing a mask is now a social norm. Everyone knows someone close who was down with COVID. Everyone is traumatised, and going out 'bare-faced' now invokes the same effect as public indecency. Just last week, a man was refused entry to the MRT. "7 Types of Maskers".

A jolt of inspiration descends on her, and she swiftly jots it down for later reference.

As she walks off into the scorching sun, an instant regret for wearing a fleece top sweeps over her. The pandemic caused an exponential increase in demand for micro-logistics, resulting in a steep rise in carbon emission. Its impact has caused temperatures to rise ever since. Malaysia has always been notorious for its heat and humidity. Still, Geeta used to be able to enjoy the cooling breeze after a heavy downpour. Now, it is continuously warm. Heavy. Suffocating. Then again, her mother taught her to always appear presentable. “Always put your best foot forward,” she’d say. Geeta wonders if it’s worth the sweat.

*Maybe an apple pie after,* she thinks to herself. *How typical for a Malaysian to think about other food while getting food,* she chuckles when reaching the shop. “Aunty Lee, roast chicken rice one take away. Thank you.” The vendor nods, sweat glistening off her wrinkled forehead. Geeta feels for her, the humidity she must be feeling beneath her mask. She’s one of the last few small vendors. The lockdown limited everyone to food delivery services, causing restaurant chains to easily outcompete micro-vendors. Many couldn’t even survive a month. Now, Geeta tries her best to eat here whenever she can, glancing at the empty tables within. “5 Underrated Food Stalls in Klang Valley Everyone Should Visit”, she jots down.

“That’ll be four-fifty.” Geeta looks up as her food is handed to her. Reaching into her purse before remembering that cash is now a thing of the past, she opens her e-payment app and scans the QR

code at the counter, thumbs instinctively typing in her PIN. Fierce advocacy arose to phase out banknotes as it helped in preventing the spread of viral diseases. She even wrote a piece on it, titled “4 Reasons Money is a Relic of the Past”. Her mother disagreed, believing that the sudden transition had negative impacts on the poor and illiterate. Even her mother, who had graduated in the 80s, needed time to familiarise herself with new technologies. Then again, in times of global panic, changes happen almost instantly.

“Thank you ah Aunt, you take care, okay,” Geeta smiles before turning to leave. She reciprocates with a slight squint at the corner of her eyes. Geeta wonders what’s on her mind and whether she’s coping well. She remembers her mother’s lesson of ‘Sonder,’ the word for realising that everyone’s life is as brilliant and intricate as ours. Her mother must know; she always lingered and chatted with everyone when she brought Geeta along for Pasar Pagi. She misses those trips. If only she’s still here now. If only the pandemic didn’t happen. If only she hadn’t been one of the unfortunate 2%. *If only*, she chokes.



## THE BIRTHDAY GIFT

LHAVANYA DHARMALINGAM

Bell and Octavia scrambled up the hill behind the abandoned mall.

“Anneh, wait for me!” panted Octavia.

The short climb was already taxing her fragile lungs. And the N95 mask was not helping. The midday sun beat down ferociously on them; temperatures well in the high 30s. But she had been waiting weeks for her birthday present. She wasn’t giving up now!

Bell slowed reluctantly, nervously tugging the brim of his cap further down. Octavia had pressured him for weeks to take her to see the ‘small jungle’ that he and his friends curi-curi sometimes went to lepak at. She had never been out of the house in the short 6 years of her life apart from hospital visits in specially insulated and filtered taxis. COVID-19, TrinCov and Virus X were rampant.

She caught up, huffing and panting furiously, whatever tiny bit of her face visible above the N95 mask, furrowed in determination.

“It’s okay anneh, no one is around. I’ll be fine!” she promised, tugging on his sleeve.

Her earnestness and puppy eyes could make even a rock melt.

“Okay, Ona. Let’s hurry and get to shade at the walls.”

When they reached, Octavia ripped off her mask and collapsed, gasping for air like a fish out of water.

“Ona! Are you okay? Do you need your pump?” He panicked, reaching into his backpack for her precious inhaler. Breathlessly she shook her head, sucking in the life-giving, yet so dangerous air, lungs working double-time. But at least on this desolate hill, far from anyone, the only thing to worry about was the air pollution.

Bell was getting more and more worried. So many things could go wrong. Someone would catch Octavia as an under-8 minor who was out. Their parents would be fined RM1000 for letting an at-risk person out of the house — even though they had snuck out. And if she got sick, they would have to rush her to the ICU again; their parents could not afford it.

But this was all Octavia had wanted for her birthday: to go out of the house and see “the small jungle and the scary lake” that he showed her pictures of so often.

He tried quelling his racing mind as they walked past the crumbling cement walls and rusted chained gates. Drooping sadly from the gate by one end was a faded sign: **Closed Temporarily For Repairs.**

When they reached a large rain tree that overlooked the stadium, Bell boosted her up into the lower branches.

Octavia’s eyes shone with delight at yet another part of the adventure. She knew his stories so well, he didn’t even have to tell her where to climb.

They shimmied over the wall. And the jungle was everything she had imagined, only better. The murky pools in front of her hid mysteries. There was a small pool that went down forever and Bell said there were big fishies in it that could eat her. Beside it was another Olympic-sized pool, surface covered in lily pads and green scum.

Under their branch was a tall, rusty diving platform. Vines and plants had almost swallowed it, but its top strained free. They dropped down from the branches onto the creaking, shaking platform.

Thunk!

And the jungle erupted into a cacophony of bird calls, screaming at the intruders that dared disturb their siesta. The vegetation growing out of the gym's windows jerked violently as unseen creatures scrambled away. On the right, she could see a tiny bit of the grandstand that was exposed where part of the wall had collapsed on the vegetation.

Bell pulled out the Swiss roll he had bought with his carefully saved pocket money. As they lunched under the shade of the enormous rain tree, Octavia soaked in the new smells, sights, and sounds.

“Happy Birthday Ona. I’m glad your wish came true. One day, when all the viruses are gone and I’m big and make lots of money, I’ll fix your lungs and take you to a big jungle kay?”

Octavia smiled up at her beloved big brother and hugged him tightly.



## ISOLATION

NATASHA MAYA BINTI CHEK PA

An ear-piercing alarm blared throughout the neighbourhood, followed by the soft humming buzz of modern engines trekking up poorly maintained roads.

A familiar irritation burned at the tips of Ayesha's skin at the noise, signaling all residents to be on stand-by. The racket jarred her meditative session with warm coffee and a highly-sought after novel — paperback version. A rare gem in the midst of the prevalent pandemic haunting the world since late 2019; which led to a decreased production of paper.

With a heavy sigh, she set her book onto the marble kitchen counter and made her way to the front door; but not before putting on a flimsy white hazmat suit, courtesy of the government. Once outside, she was greeted by the rare sight of her neighbours, all adorning the same protective gear, coming out from identical one-storey houses, wearing the same tired expressions.

Slowly driving past the neighbourhood was a large rectangular lorry, with its shiny black surface reflecting the afternoon sun. It was a stark contrast to the old lorries built mainly for practicality and low cost. This vehicle was crafted out of expensive lightweight

carbon fibre composite which caused the manufacturing process to be more efficient and flexible.

The annoying alarm ceased once every resident was stationed at their respective doorstep. In a flashy display, the vehicle extended two claws out, setting down big black boxes of plastic onto each home before driving away.

Ayeesha walked towards the box a few paces away from her doorsteps and typed in her security mail code. With a satisfying click, the lid flew open to reveal a single piece of paper with a familiar newspaper format.

The headline read: **Could 2030 be the end of COVID-19?**

She rolled her eyes, not bothering to scan the QR code on the paper to read its contents. This was what the media had promoted every year, the “end” of the pandemic, yet the situation had only worsened each year with 28% of the whole Malaysian population currently infected. She doubted this year would be any more effective at finding a vaccine than last year. Even the best medication had only been able to subdue the symptoms.

After shoving the paper to the corner of the box, she found herself staring at a thick piece of soft foam which sheltered a glass case. Considering the price of glass these days, whatever lay within it could be valuable.

Her heart dropped. Understanding seeped into her mind as she gingerly picked up the case. Her hands shook as she walked unsteadily back into her house, leaving the black box for the vehicle to pick up later.

Once the door was closed, the excitement bubbling in her came out in the form of tears, anxious but hopeful.

She set the case onto the coffee table before clumsily opening her hazmat suit while staggering into her bedroom. There was no time to waste.

With only a brief thought, she took out the pink baju kurung which she had reserved for her best days. Today was one of them. Wiping her tears, she attempted to put on makeup while shivering in anticipation. Her mascara had smudged slightly but she was too impatient to care.

She opened the glass case from the living room, revealing a cylindrical chip the size of her thumb. There was no need for instructions as she had spent countless hours studying this device when its prototype was launched.

She squeezed the chip twice and a vertical beam of light escaped, momentarily blinding her.

But when she opened her eyes, there standing in front of her in her living room were her parents, their arms wide open and eyes brimming with tears.

Without hesitation, she jumped onto their holograms, and they caught her.

Instead of distant worried gazes on a polished screen for years, she finally felt their comforting embrace as though they were with her.

The hug broke apart as her lungs caved in and she fell into a coughing fit. A reassuring hand warmed her shoulder.

No immediate cure, but a reason to live on.



## FIGHTING FISH

JULIA MERICAN

Aisya and I bought Cody the first day we were allowed out of the house, as a symbol of our resilience. We were best friends, two art graduates with good CVs and nice degrees, finding ourselves unemployed and depressingly broke when the pandemic hit. We bought him to cheer ourselves up. He's a fighting fish, and lives in a bubble-shaped glass bowl in our bathroom.

Two weeks after the first RMCO, we drove up to Cameron Highlands for a cuti-cuti Malaysia to get out of our self-pitying funk. Aisya used to go to the highlands all the time, and on our drive up, she talked without stopping about the lush greenery, the strawberry popsicles, the feeling of having momentarily escaped civilisation and returned to a Malaysia that felt simpler, less terrifying somehow. Not quite so fast.

When we arrived, the highlands weren't exactly what Aisya had promised. The air was crisp and cool, and bright red flowers hung on the trees like jewellery, but this portrait of calm was spoilt by the construction buildings spearing their ugly heads through the trees. All around, the buzz of drills and cars pierced the air like a neoliberal scream. It was the gentrifying sound of natural beauty

turning sour, like a rotting strawberry. “It’s all so different,” Aisya kept saying, as if stunned into repeating herself, like a broken toy. “I don’t recognise where I am.”

On our way home, we stopped at a roadside stall for a snack. It was manned by only one shopkeeper, a young man who smiled hopefully when we arrived. I looked at the cheap plastic keychains, the reams of poor quality t-shirts pressed against one another on the hangers, the clunky, non-recyclable fridge magnets that inevitably end up in landfills. The excess of it all was overwhelming, and vaguely sickening. I’d never felt such an aversion to things before. Maybe isolation had done that to me.

We couldn’t leave without buying something. Aisya and I paid for two small Totoro keychains, RM5 each. The shopkeeper smiled and said, with soft gratitude, “Thank you so much.” We walked home in silence, neither of us able to put our heartbreak into words.

That was almost nine months ago. As soon as we got back to KL, we started the project. All shreds of self-pity had disappeared. Everyone knew the creative arts were hit hard by the pandemic, but what we hadn’t seen was that this wasn’t just affecting photographers, fashion designers, hipster Instagram personalities and recent graduates. There were more vulnerable creative communities whose livelihoods were at stake: gift shop proprietors, local printmakers, florists. We’d seen it. We felt ashamed of ourselves. The words *kita jaga kita* had taken on a whole new meaning.

For two days, we sat on the sofa, illuminated only by the glow of our shared laptop screen. Our concept was to start a grassroots community intent on ecologising the Malaysian arts scene. What

began as an Instagram account soon flourished into a website, and then an app. Within months, we were getting noticed by other local arts faculties in Malaysia: OUR ArtProjects slid into our DMs, Ilham Gallery wrote a feature about us on their newsletter, Cult Creative reached out for an interview.

By connecting these two communities — the struggling artists among young, online-savvy KLites with those from humbler and more peripheral backgrounds — we figured we could ecologise the scene on a profound level. It would be a symbiotic relationship, linking urban artists with rural veterans who had to tough it out in their respective kampungs. Our platform created a community to make art in all forms — from cheap souvenirs to auctioned prints — more sustainable and eco-friendly. Our platform proved that the way forward was through collaboration and informal education, from conversations and understanding.

Fighting fish are extremely territorial, and flare up when they perceive a threat to their immediate environment. But they can also live peacefully with other docile fish, and are stimulated by their surroundings. That's what this felt like, making this. We'd proven that in times of duress, the arts can fight to survive.



## KITAJAGAKITA

MOHD FAREZ BIN MUSTAPHA

I felt a slight burn in my lungs after taking in the fresh morning air outside the prison gates. “Over here!” called out my sister, waiting outside her driverless rickshaw. After fifteen years and two kids, she hasn’t changed much apart from her greying hair. “It’s so good to see you, Along.” I bowed gently.

“I’m just glad it’s finally over, Adik. Come on, I know you can’t wait to see Mak,” she said while keying in our next destination on her foldable tablet. As we stepped into the rickshaw I nodded with a smile, acknowledging her usual ability to read my mind.

Back when Mak was juggling jobs to make ends meet, Along tried her best to keep her little teenage brother out of trouble. To me she was such a nosy nuisance; always one step ahead of whatever mischievous plans I had. In hindsight, perhaps my time in prison was for the best. She got her chance to live her own life, and being in solitude helped me to find peace within my rebellious self.

The electric rickshaw wasn’t the quickest mode of transport, so it was safe to stick my neck outside for a better look. Not much had changed about Kuala Lumpur, though it now looked a bit deserted. Since the Uprising, people moved away to places that

were more affordable and less crowded. Naturally other towns began to grow, and this city was not attractive as it used to be. Along said since there was a labour shortage, employers don't mind hiring even ex-convicts for decent job openings; though I didn't get her joke about it being harder for ex-politicians. An old cellmate once suggested I should try head up north where there was plenty of trade-related jobs near the new Thai Canal.

As we reached the city centre, Along pointed to one of the old office towers with a refurbishment sign at its entrance. Apparently her current house was getting too cramped for her husband's consultancy business and the teenage kids wanted more privacy. "They suggested this place as a suitable home-office."

I gave a puzzled look. "Who?"

I immediately regretted that question as my lecturer-sister went on a history lesson on how people-powered data and self-learning algorithms have been helping everyone. "Oh, you'll find out all about it later," she cut her story short after noticing my distracted gaze at delivery drones flying over the clear blue skies.

Our ride slowed to a halt once we reached the cemetery gates. Along immediately went to scan in her pre-booked visiting time slot to release the gate locks. Mak was one of the many pandemic casualties, and the regret of being helpless during her final moments still hurt to this day. "I miss her too," said a teary Along as we approached Mak's grave. I could sense her guilt of not being the dependable big sister after Mak's passing.

“You’ve done your best. She will be happy with how we turned out today,” I consoled her. We both said our prayers and promised Mak another visit soon.

After stepping outside the gates, Along handed me an envelope. “Adik, you know I can’t be there for you all the time, but I think they can help you with starting over.” Inside was a silver coloured tablet, with an onion-looking panel to scan my thumbprint.

“Bawang?” I chuckled at the resemblance as I glimpsed through the daily list of recommendations of a new future displayed on my tablet screen.

First recommendation today: A complimentary welcome-back lunch for two at an old dining haunt. Tomorrow: Computer re-training lessons from a former schoolmate.

*I have a strong feeling I’m going to be just fine, Along.*



PLEASE HOLD  
KATRINA CHUA JIA WEN

The light from the screen of his laptop was blinding. His article for *The Bulletin* lay unfinished. Writer's block — the curse of all journalists. His fingers hovered over the keyboard as he heaved a huge sigh, hoping for some inspiration to magically hit him on the head. His stomach growled.

“Layla,” he called, “I feel like eating... nasi lemak. Order me the nearest one. And don't forget to tell the guy to leave it at the door.”

His phone screen lit up immediately, followed by a sleek female voice that answered.

“Noted. Your nasi lemak will arrive in...20 minutes.”

“What! That's too long. Cancel it, I'll get something myself.”

As he closed the door of his apartment, he noticed his neighbour who lived across him was also leaving hers.

Darn it. This was exactly why he had originally planned to order in: the fewer the social interactions, the better.

He quickly looked down to the floor, but it was too late; he had accidentally caught her eye. The woman gave a quick move of her lips as though she was about to smile before mimicking

him. Richard painfully walked a step behind her to avoid further interaction as they headed for the elevator.

After exiting the elevator, Richard strode to the intended stall and proceeded to an ordering machine and paid with a tap of his card. He stood back and observed the stall; the place was desolate and silent.

Years ago, there would have been a crowd of customers, with workers serving them. But now, with the danger of the virus, it was safer to have ordering machines. In fact, it didn't look like anyone was taking care of the stall at all, if it wasn't for a huge screen displaying numbers and a flap in which the food was pushed through, not unlike pet doors. For sanitary purposes, the food was prepared behind a blank wall — not a person was in sight. Richard felt a pang but brushed it aside.

The digits on the screen matched Richard's receipt number and a brown package was pushed through the flap. Richard promptly took the package and within minutes, was back inside his apartment.

In his haste, he knocked over a photo frame and the sound of glass breaking pierced his ears.

Richard turned back and froze when he realised what had broken. Gingerly, he picked up the photograph from the floor. It was a picture of his family: his parents sitting at the centre, his two sisters and himself standing behind them. They were beaming for the camera because no one could have predicted what would happen.

It was taken a month before his father's death to the COVID-19 virus, which caused his mother to be so ill with grief that she remained in bed for several months, refusing to do much but cry and sleep. His sisters were too busy with their careers to care for their mother. And himself? He couldn't believe it. His father was gone — his hero and only friend.

Richard sat down at his desk, photograph still in hand. Opening the email that was sent 4 days ago, his laptop screen displayed:

*Dear Mr. Richard Lim,*

*We regret to inform you that your employment at The Bulletin is terminated henceforth due to the economic crisis...*

As he stared at the screen, he felt droplets of water falling on the photograph and realised he was crying. This uncharacteristic burst of emotion was out of character. What was happening to him?

*I need people...* But he had no one to turn to.

Richard opened the article that he had been trying to write for the past week and stared at the title. 'The Death of Human Interaction'. There was never a more fitting title.

"Layla, I... I need help. How... how do I...get people?"

"I'm sorry, I do not understand the question."

"I NEED PEOPLE"

"Understood. Calling PEOPLE."

The dial tone rang.

“Hello, you have reached PEOPLE. PEOPLE is fully occupied at the moment but we will get back to you as soon as we can. Please hold.”



## EDURENA: THE FATE OF VRUSTHI

PRAVINDHARAN BALAKRISHNAN

“I don’t think I can make it ’til next week, I can feel the cancer spreading in me...” said father weakly as he tried to hide his pain from his teenage daughter.

“I’m getting close appa, I’m already moving up the ranks and within a few more days, I should get my final exam score and would certainly qualify into one of those e-residency programs,” said Vrushti in a hopeful tone, wishing it would alleviate her father’s pain.

Doubt was written all over Vrushti’s face as all her hard work was gradually coming undone as her father’s health continued to deteriorate. But in her heart, she knew education was the only way out of her misery. The faster she moved up the ranks, the faster she would qualify for an e-resident citizenship.

The year is 2050; just 30 years after the COVID-19 pandemic altered the social structure of the world. A world now run by robots and algorithms. A world where information is the greatest currency and data is the new oil. As the world spiralled into late-stage capitalism, big corporations ascended into power and peripheral countries like Malaysia are now subject to the power of the global

elites. When the pandemic reached its peak, human population in cities and developed countries were significantly lowered. While the ruling class and powerful elites sheltered in their tall towers, the working class became sacrificial lambs.

When the virus eventually died off, the elites came out only to notice their cities had all the resources and facilities, but no population to advance their societies. So, the powerful did what any entity would do to maintain its dominance in the global order: it got big corporations to invest in smaller countries like Malaysia. Further reducing the sovereignty of these countries, and erasing the imaginary boundaries of nation-states, simultaneously enhancing the power of big corporations and the elites.

The investment took the form of physical facilities built in these countries. Only e-residents are given access to these state-of-the-art facilities, and in order to be an e-resident, you need to be chosen by one of the elites by participating in the global education system. As national education systems do not exist anymore, all individuals go through the global education system where they are given a rank based on their intellectual ability, emotional competence, and mental stability. The higher your rank, the easier for you to be picked by one of the global elites to become an e-resident, and ultimately advance their societies in the future. But for Vruthi, her only intention is to save her father, and she knows the cancer vaccine is only available in the resource-rich hospitals owned by the global elites in Malaysia.

“Welcome to Edurena — the global test.”

“Are you ready to play?”

“You are at the final stage of your test. Let’s begin.”

Vrusthi showed no signs of lethargy as she had been on the test for the past 14 hours. She didn’t want to waste any time, as with each passing hour, her father’s condition worsened. Cruising through the test, Vrusthi received a perfect score and was ranked Top 10 globally. Immediately, a hologram appeared in Vrusthi’s room.

“Hello there, I am from the Danish government and I’d like to congratulate you on your remarkable score. Now, I would like to offer you a spot in our e-resident programme. Would you be interested?”

Vrusthi had been waiting for this for years. She gleefully replied, “Yes, yes! I am!”

“Being a Danish citizen means you can access all our facilities, from learning hubs to hospitals. In a couple of years, when your service is required, you would be flown to the Copenhagen colony. So this also means, you are no longer a citizen of Malaysia — you will be granted a stay-visa but you can no longer use Malaysian facilities, but as you’re aware the Malaysian facilities can never match what we have.”

Vrushti ended the call in delight knowing her father was going to be saved. As her father shared Vrusthi’s joy, he began to think: *Are we colonised?*



## LUCKY DRAW

MICHELLE YOON MEI SU

“So, how was it today?”

“It was okay. The usual, you know.”

We talk on-screen every first Monday of the month and this is how our conversation would start. I am starting to forget how his body attaches to his legs—we never stand far enough from our devices, and we never meet in person anymore.

Not since 15 October 2021.

Honestly, though, it wasn't okay. It never is, although that's what I always say. I hate doing the SCS. It's short for Safe COVID-19 Strategies but really, it means Stab-Choke-Swab. Why haven't they found a better way to do this?

“Still negative?”

“Yeah, still negative.”

“That's good, right?”

I want to scream at him. I'm stabbed twice every month—once for the live virus, once for the test-vaccine—and then later I'm choked with a probe as they swab my insides. How is this good? I want to yell at him, but instead, I say—

“Yeah, it's good.”

“It’ll be over soon. Be patient. You’re helping millions of people by...”

I let his voice drone off. This is the speech. I’ve heard it 27 times, and it is always the same. At first, I was hopeful. I was even proud that I had been chosen to be part of this programme, this strategy, that would bring the world back to pre-COVID-19 times.

It was the luck of the draw, he told me when we first met. We both had face masks on, but that was the extent of our similarities. He was dressed in a full suit despite the heat; I was in a plain tee and knee-length shorts and sweating through every pore. He was calm and reassuring; I was nervous and excited. He was going to be my sponsor; I was one of the privileged few to be chosen from Kuala Lumpur to participate in SCS. One of ten, he told me precisely.

I counted myself lucky then. I was out of work, out of food, out of cash. My landlord was kicking me out of the apartment, and my cat had run off. SCS would provide a sterile space for me to spend my days, where I would also get three meals a day, some snacks in between, all my daily necessities, and Netflix.

“Can I have a cat?” I had asked him.

“No.” He was prudent with his words.

We shook hands at the end of that meeting, which was an odd thing to do. But I saw him wipe down with sanitiser as he left, so I guessed that he only offered his hand as a form of respect for the past. About ten minutes after he left, a black Proton Perdana with blacked-out windows stopped by the side of the road where I was waiting. Two people in full PPE greeted me, gave me a wristband to put on, and led me into the car.

Two hours later, I was settled into my unit. MY-KL-04i. That was 872 days ago.

“...success in the near future. Our scientists are pushing for—”

“What’s it like out there?”

He pauses, frowning, confusion clouding his eyes for a brief second, and I immediately regret blurting out that question. What if they remove me from the strategy? Where would I go? How would I survive? I feel my heart racing, and the small red lights on my wristband start to blink.

“What do you mean?”

I search my mind for something to say. I force my heart to calm down. The blinking lights stop.

“I mean, how’s the research?”

He smiles at my question. I exhale.

“Our scientists are pushing forward with new discoveries, and your continued participation is very valuable to...”

Again, I let his voice drone off. I’ve heard it 27 times, and it is always the same.



## COMING SOON

SUMITRA SELVARAJ

Kalyani stood at the entrance to the hall; sweat prickled her palms and began to seep into the yellow cloth bundle that she clutched in her hennaed hands. The turmeric that was used to dye the fabric would stain her skin; she wondered whether the priest would notice the imprint of her perspiration as she handed him the coconut.

*Inside the hall, it will be air-conditioned,* she reminded herself as she ran through the wedding planner's instructions.

Wait for the music.

Enter the foyer and turn right.

Proceed slowly down steps.

Remember to smile.

Remove sandals at the platform's edge.

Walk to Sanjay and sit on his left. Wait, or was it right?

Panic careened though Kalyani before she reigned in the sensation. She would just sit on whichever side of the dais that was not occupied, of course.

"Amma I'm thirsty, I want soda thanni," whined a child from inside the hall. The parental response was muffled; Kalyani could

not see the guests she knew were seated beyond the partition a few feet away from her, just past the propped open double doors. Twin ropes of jasmines and marigolds framed the entrance; the decorator had also incorporated the neon red number one sign above the door into a floral banner that now read **2 Become 1**.

*Cheesy, but cute*, thought Kalyani.

It had been tough deciding between Matrimony Box Office and Temple Golden Village as their wedding venue. Sanjay had plumped for the latter because they were throwing in free popcorn to occupy the guests when Kalyani would exit the ceremony midway to change from her engagement saree into her bridal one. But Kalyani had been sold on Matrimony Box Office's virtual rice-blessing feature; instead of having the guests flinging handfuls of coloured rice at them when Sanjay tied the sacred yellow string around her neck, the 70-foot high screen behind them would instead shower down digital rice on the nuptials.

It is less wasteful, said Kalyani. Sanjay did not argue.

Hurried footsteps echoed in the corridor behind her and Kalyani turned slightly to see her Aunty Roja and Uncle Ram, huffing up the slight incline. Her aunt was cosseted in a bright red silk saree and a gloriously inappropriate amount of jewellery; the diamonds in her earlobes glittered under the downlights as she turned to her husband and hissed:

"I told you we were late, look the ponnu is about to go in. Why did you insist on the basement carpark when we could have just dropped it off at the valet? Now there are only going to be seats left in the back row."

Aunty Roja gave Kalyani a peacock-eyeshadowed glance.

“Darling, the saree is draped very nicely and all but just ask the make-up artist to do a touch-up so your eyes don’t look so tired, OK? The lighting in these places is not very good sometimes. Tell her Ram,” insisted her aunt before sweeping into the hall.

Her uncle did not respond but instead beamed at Kalyani as he walked past her.

“I think you look like Goddess Amman herself,” he whispered as he followed Aunty Roja in.

Kalyani felt a rush of affection for him.

“Aiyo, how am I supposed to squeeze past all of you to get to the middle”, rang out her aunt’s voice. “Go on, move. All you young people can get up easily and scoot to the middle, I need space at the aisle. Move all the way, you all think what, you have tickets is it? Huh, at least now there is a spare seat next to me to put my handbag.”

Kalyani smiled, trying to imagine what the theatre seating would look like with patrons dressed to the nines. She and Sanjay had their first date at this very hall two years ago, back when it was still a cinema. *Back when there were cinemas*, she thought wistfully.

The first few shrill notes of the nadeswaram penetrated the air; the rustling and voices from within the hall died down.

Kalyani took a deep breath and exhaled.

It was showtime.



THE WILDERNESS  
JASMINE LIM CHENGYUN

Professor Hisham and his expedition team ventured tentatively into the lush vegetation of Ulu Baram, Sarawak. After a sweltering and sweat-drenched week, they were now faced with an unrelenting downpour. As rain lashed across their face shields and blurred their vision, Professor Hisham finally conceded defeat and ordered his men to make camp at a relatively dry spot under the acacia canopies. While he sat surveying this remote part of the Borneo jungle where the last of the nomadic Penan tribe still roamed, he reflected that even though the COVID-19 pandemic 10 years ago had largely altered the urban landscape, these pristine woodlands remained largely unchanged.

His mind turned to the series of events that had led to the urgent necessity of this expedition. 10 years after the Great Pandemic of 2020, a newly mutated strain of SARS-CoV-3, E815L, had emerged and now held the world in its merciless grip. Due to its high infectivity and fatality rate, a set of severe, almost draconian, lockdown rules had been imposed to curb its spread, but to little avail.

Two months ago, a family of Penan tribe members, oblivious to these rules, had come to Long Lama to barter with a tradesman. Under the new rules, they were forced to stay with the tradesman until the lockdown was lifted. When the tradesman began developing respiratory symptoms a week later, the two families were tested daily for two weeks. While every one of the tradesman's family members eventually fell ill with the virus, the Penan family had the doctors perplexed. It seemed that despite being in close proximity with the infected group the whole time, even freely sharing meals and amenities, every one of the Penans had tested negative for the antibody, RNA, and antigen.

“Even RNA?” Professor Hisham could still remember his conversation with the director of Sarawak General Hospital, Dr. Roland. “But that would mean that the virus, upon contact with host cells, has failed to enter and replicate.”

“Yes, and we know how rare that is with this particular virus.”

“Send me the swabs and the blood samples of this family. We need to take a good look.”

The answer came two weeks ago. Professor Hisham had conducted genome sequencing on the DNA of all seven Penans in his lab in Universiti Malaya and the results had opened up an unexpected possibility of new cures. The Penans, it turned out, had an obscure mutation in their genes — one which suppressed the expression of a human cell receptor, hDPP4, which is tantamount for SARS-CoV-3 entry into host cells. If this gene mutation could be incorporated into gene therapy, perhaps the world could finally

return to the pre-2020 norm that it dreamt about. For now, more research and DNA samples were needed.

The Penans, however, had resolutely returned to their encampment deep in Ulu Baram soon after the lockdown was lifted. And Professor Hisham was determined to track them down.

“NO!!!!”

Professor Hisham turned to see their guide, Ulet, waving at him from a distance. There was anguish in his voice.

As they rushed towards the spot, the team could smell the distinct odour of burnt wood and flesh. Professor Hisham looked with horror at the crumbling straw huts and blackened bodies trapped within. The scorching heat last week had set off a wildfire on the Penans’ huts a day ago, and the torrential shower had put it out. A little too late.

“Professor, look!”

Upon the wet mud mixed with ash, there were unmistakably several sets of human footprints that were headed west. There were survivors.

With renewed urgency Professor Hisham’s team set off in pursuit.

Hope was within reach.

Hope for the Penans. Hope for the world.



