

SECTION I

Interview with Lim Jack Kin



Lim Jack Kin (b. 1996) is a Malaysian poet and arts writer. His work was previously featured in *Malaysian Millennial Voices* and *Strange Horizons*; his poem “Kuala Lumpur Urban Legends” was shortlisted for the 2022 Ignite Award. Jack also founded and led *The KIT.A! Podcast*, which features poetry, short fiction, and music from local and regional artists. He occasionally reviews arts and culture with Sharmilla Ganesan on BFM’s *Everyone’s a Critic* and tweets with reckless abandon at @JackKinLim. His poem ‘Year of the Rat’ won the first prize for the Malaysian Poetry Writing competition 2021.

MMOJ: Could you describe your journey in writing poems: When you started writing poetry? What keeps you writing poems? Do you have any vision of how you see yourself as a poet in a few years?

Jack: I've always enjoyed reading poetry, but the first time I was really awestruck, just completely floored by a poetic work came when I was about 20 or so, reading "Imagining Defeat", by the late David Berman, an indie rock musician who published only one poetry collection throughout his life.

I guess I keep writing because I haven't yet written a piece that affects me the way that "Imagining Defeat" or Berman's other work has! And in any case, ideas for poetry are hard to come by, so when I do get one I try to be grateful for it.

As for how I see my practice evolving, I have no idea and there's an element of excitement in that. Every time I write, my craft changes and I change along with it. Perhaps I'll write more often, perhaps less. As long as I continue to enjoy poetry in any form, as a reader or poet, I'll be happy.

MMOJ: What are your preoccupations in your poems?

Jack: I'm generally an anxious person, and much of my work deals with that. Whether it's the intensely personal anxiety that comes with love and personal relationships or my larger all-encompassing worries over where we're headed as a society, a lot of these thoughts are just constantly in my mental orbit, so occasionally I pick them out and distil them into a poem.

I'm also fascinated by people who act on that anxiety in strange ways, like the persona of Charles Bernstein's "Dear Mr. Fanelli," or the characters in Tim Robinson's incredible sketch comedy series *I Think You Should Leave*. There's something so relatable and magnetic about the kind of people who allow the intensity of their embarrassment or anger or loneliness to take them to awkward, surreal places, and that's a sense I try to capture in my poetry.

MMOJ: Who are your favourite poets and do they have any influence on your writing?

Jack: Apart from David Berman, my favourite poets include Kay Ryan, Norman Dubie, and Cathy Park Hong. I'd also be remiss not to mention some of my Malaysian peers, including Kwan-Ann Tan and Yee Heng Yeh, whose work I'm endlessly drawn to and entranced by. They all have a brilliant command of craft, a crispness of imagery, and a clarity of message in their work that I'm always trying to emulate.

I'm also very much influenced by art forms outside of poetry; rappers like Run the Jewels and Open Mike Eagle, or folk musicians like Iron & Wine have an intensely visual, evocative lyrical style that certainly leaves a mark on me. I'm a big fan of film and television as well; at the risk of sounding pretentious, I suppose it all contributes to the broad emotional milieu that informs my work.

MMOJ: Do you think about your position as a Malaysian poet writing in English?

Jack: Sometimes! Though I'm cautious of that phrasing, in all honesty; there's a lot of Malaysia that I'm simply not attuned to or capable of representing. My work is informed by a very specific middle-class Klang Valley-based experience, one that I'm aware is rather over-represented in Malaysian poetry. Within that, I'm happy to lend my own voice and ideas, and ultimately I'm feeling hopeful about the power of poetry as a vehicle for other Malaysians to share their own wildly different experiences.

MMOJ: Please choose one of your poems from either *Malaysian Millennial Voices* or *Year of the Rat and Other Poems* and share your experience in writing the poem.

Jack: "Year of the Rat" had its origins in all of the feelings I had about 2020, particularly the Sheraton move early that year and the potential proclamation of a state of emergency towards the year's end.

Seeing the violence of the state in using COVID-19 as an excuse to incarcerate undocumented migrants, crack down on protesters, and solidify the power of corporate interests was eye-opening. The structures of power and government were so clearly and unashamedly divorced from our interests and well-being. Voting didn't work, because the system we were voting over did not work. In my head, I think of 2020 as the year I became more of an anarchist and socialist, and I'm probably not alone.

I wanted to get all those feelings out onto paper, and "Year of the Rat" was what I ended up with. It's a poem about alienation, about a cold uncaring dystopia being imposed on us, about our lives being dependent on a class of decision-makers who can only be beheld from a distance, through a camera lens or a laptop screen, and the lack of choice we have about it all. The poem came to me rather quickly, and went through several very boring rounds of workshopping, feedback, and revising without much fanfare; like many poems, the context that inspired "Year of the Rat" is much more engaging than the actual process of its creation, I'm sorry to say.

I submitted it to *Almost Darurat*, a wonderful zine edited by Deborah Augustin and Samantha Cheh aimed at raising funds for mutual aid in Sabah. It wasn't picked up, but the thoughts and feelings never went away and despite the dated astrological reference, the poem still felt relevant in 2021

when I submitted it to the Malaysian Poetry Writing Competition. I had a lot of fondness for the piece; I'm just glad the judges did too!

Year of the Rat

Lim Jack Kin

A cell-phone camera on the overpass watched
the fleet of black cars devour the highway below.
Roads were closed today for the minister's entourage.
The city smiled, red cheeks bulging with police sirens.

That night, a shoebox sailed along a storm drain.
Inside it was a shopping receipt with "I'm sorry, I'm sorry,"
scrawled on the blank side, and something that mewled
while scratching at the cardboard.

By morning, it was hot again.
A grey committee gathered at the palace,
and a burst rat saw them walk inside
as it blistered in the parking lot.

Don't ask me what they talked about.
I've never been invited to these things.

(Source: Vethamani, M. E. ed. *Year of the Rat and Other Poems*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2022).