

## Interview with Fikri Ahmad



Fikri Ahmad (formerly published as Zulfikri Ahmad) took a big leap of faith in 2016 by pursuing postgraduate creative writing studies in University of Nottingham Malaysia after finishing his engineering degree in South Korea. During the 1-year programme, he developed both skills and love for poetry. He describes his poems as very Malaysian, nostalgic, and juicy.

**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?**

Fikri: I started late in writing poetry, 10 years after I first encountered the art at a small nook inside my school library. At 23 years old, I was planning on what should I do after engineering school and suddenly the thought of pursuing MA in Creative Writing came into my mind (you can tell how much I struggled in engineering school and being an engineer was quickly crossed out from the list). I did some research about the MA programme and it led me into writing my very first poems for the enrolment portfolio. I made it into the MA programme and after that, I've been writing poems whenever an inspiration appears in front of me. Hearing the readers' analysis of my poems never failed to excite me and it kept me writing more and more. I'm not quite sure what kind of poet I would become in the next couple of years but from what I can see, my craft always captured the stage of life I was at. So if I become a part-time florist in the next 5 years, maybe my poems will be about thorns and petals. Who knows?

**MMOJ: What are your preoccupations in your poems?**

Fikri: Childhood memories and personal upbringing are the subjects that I think about most of the time when writing poems. When I find it hard to sleep, these memories would either put me at ease or get me scribbling words until 7am.

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

Fikri: I have been reading poems (religiously) since I was 13, and my first love was Shirley Lim's *Monsoon History* - you can find the essence of *Monsoon History* in most of my crafts. These poems are usually written in the storytelling form, and you can easily find sarong, *belacan*, or paddy fields in the background.

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

Fikri: I find it embarrassing that writing poems in English comes more naturally to me compared to writing them in my mother tongue, and I'm finding ways to make my craft as multilingual as I am. I have a special poem written for my mother and it's a shame she can't fully understand what I wrote for her. But in the end, what lies beyond the words matters the most and I'm happy that by writing in English, these poems can reach more souls in this world.

**MMOJ: Please choose one of your poems from *Malaysian Millennial Voices* and share your experience in writing the poem.**

Fikri: *The Land of Unknown Grandfathers* gives you perspective on what a Millennial feels about their ancestors and the suffocating Asian culture of worshipping someone who is related to them but too distant to even know their name (by distant, I mean, in-a-different-world-kind-of-distant). I wrote this after observing a group of people around my age visiting the cemetery during Hari Raya, and I could definitely feel what they felt, deep in my bones.

# The Land of Unknown Grandfathers

*Fikri Ahmad*

It is Raya morning  
and we are heading to

the graveyard to re-mourn  
the death of our unknown

grandfathers. Better go  
early before it's too

hot — the shades are scarce in  
the land of forgotten

corpses. The sun will burn  
any bare scalp. We hop

around in the graveyard,  
trying our best not to

step on the unmarked tombs.  
We don't want to offend

any ghost. Poor remains.  
The poor tombs, we scratch and

slap our legs while reading  
few annual verses.

(Source: Vethamani, M.E. ed. *Malaysian Millennial Voices*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2021.)