

EDITORIAL

Welcome to the June 2023 Issue #6 of *Men Matters Online Journal*. This marks three years of our journal publication and we are happy to see the continued growth of the journal both in terms of readership and contributors. We have twenty-five contributors for this issue, which features writers from Malaysia, India, USA, UK, Australia and Mauritius. We are happy to have several returning contributors too.

We hope the cover image piqued your interest. Since AI has taken the world by storm, most of it around the emergence of ChatGPT, we thought we will make it a resource to design the cover for an issue with the theme of “Men and Machinery”. The cover image was generated by WOMBO Dream, a free AI art generator. After some trial and error, we decided on using the title of Urna Bose's poem – “My Bicycle is a Time Machine” – as a prompt. We tried out multiple art styles and settled on the image that offered an interesting interpretation of the evocative poem title and a striking visual. All our previous covers were drawn from free photos from the Internet while one was given to us from one of the contributors for that issue. No cover designer's job was risk as we never had one.

This Issue opens with drama scripts. These are all recently staged plays in Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown, Malaysia. The director of a series of monologues titled *His Story*, Fa Abdul, introduces the three monologues that are featured in this Issue. After each script, the writers, Zee, Karam Tabba, and Lawrence Chin, answer three questions about the whole process of scriptwriting and having their monologues staged in Kuala Lumpur Performing Actors' Studio (KLPAC). In Yee Heng Yeh's “163288”, two friends find themselves in a bind and need to resort to supernatural assistance to resolve their plight. Yee gives a fresh take on an old and well-known superstitious practice. It has humour and macabre in a scary setting.

We have a big poetry section with a total of thirteen poets. The section opens with Allen Massey's poems of domestic life. Alshaad Kara's poems both celebrate and interrogate gay life, employing an interesting choice of classical references and contemporary concerns:

*All the kingdom has united for the sake of true love.
Staples of love have been ignited by Emperor Hadius.*

*Khnumhotep and Niankkum are the essence of love.
("Battles of the Centenarian Walls")*

Meanwhile, Bartek Boryczka creates a meditative mood in his poems:

*I've learned
life just
is and is and is . . .
("lusty infatuated love's intoxicated imagining")*

Poems by Brandon K. Liew, Ismim Putera and Jude Aquilina poems address the theme of Men and Machinery. Brandon K. Liew's "ars facsimile" explores the printing of the word and how it is made real by the persona. Ismim Putera's explores his ingenious "Kissometer" and in "Battery-operated: 5 haikus" he looks afresh at the almost mundane objects in a home. Jude Aquilina's four poems envision a world where man's initiatives with science have severe consequences on mankind. His poems evoke science fiction scenarios, some quite frightening:

*Hopes of trapezing stars,
of decanting the milky way
and manning new planets
flew high back then.*

*Yet, now,
all that grows above
is a litter of satellites
and a gaping hole*

in man's sunshield.
(“Moon Landing”)

Lawrence Pettener’s three poems vary in tone and thematic concern. They move from humour on cats (and dear T.S. Eliot) to horrific violence and to a rejoinder to Dylan Thomas' "Do not go gentle into that good night". Leon Wing’s four-part poem, “Age” considers the fragility of aging and the persona asks:

Feet, fingers, toes – do they totter?
Do they lose their digits, go splat?

Longbir Terang’s two poems, “Blood on the Face” and “Crumbled” give voice to the oppressed tribesman from his Indian state. His is the poet’s voice crying for justice:

unsympathetic charges of
atrocities-
pulled, beaten, walloped
in their own soils-
the homeland where they belong.
(“Blood on the Face”)

Niccolo Bechtler’s three poems are slightly more experimental than the other poems in this Issue. This is most evident in “*Your grandfather, as a child*”. Part 2 of the poem appears as a found poem that disaggregates and rearranges the lines from Part 1.

Sanket Mhatre paints variously dark themes in his three poems, covering the tsunami, a dystopian landscape and love in the digital age but with some hope:

Between you and me
lies this programmed distance
And words are spaceships trying

to diminish the space within

(“Code”)

We have six poems from Sudeep Sen’s latest collection “Red” written during his recent stint in South Africa. His poems extend and build upon his last book, *Anthropocene*. Here we have Sen’s elegantly crafted poems, as seen in the lines below:

Like wind-driven flotsam, haiku cover our oceans.

We’ve sailed the seas from land-locked terrains —

from geographies of imagination, we created waves,

sailing routes guided by the prevailing trade winds.

(“Flotsam Haiku”)

Urna Bose’s four poems explore the theme of machinery by detailing how men and women navigate its presence in their lives. Her poems are critical and meditative:

[...] In India, a cow must be

owned as must be a woman.

Your masculinity purchased by another man — my father,

for the dowry of a Mercedes-Benz,

Of course, a boy must have his toy, you grin,

spouting the virtues of hollow feminism.

(“My Bicycle is a Time Machine”)

The final poet, William Waters presents a tender, yet raw relationship between two men in “Walking Home”. The persona’s lover is dying of cancer and he wonders:

and just

a little while ago

the beat

of his skin and sweat

burnt the back

of your legs

with a promise

of forever

Some of the thirteen poets in this issue take on the theme of men and machinery, while others explore various man-related themes on a wide landscape. We hope some of these poems will resonate with you, the reader.

The four short stories in this issue deal in various ways with men and the machines that either liberate them or kill them. In John Mauk's "Her Only Monster", two men find freedom in jumping down an aeroplane and waiting for the parachute to open and bloom behind them, landing them to safety. But one of them unfortunately dies when his parachute doesn't open. The other, Laurel, is a survivor, and like all survivors, have to endure both the trauma in the wake of the accident, and the guilt of surviving it. The story maps the downward spill from the freedom of the sky to the gravity of the ground. And on the ground there is grief, with the loss, and unhappiness in a world where he used to be one of the best bartenders. But now it is summer, with a renovated club offering tutti fruit-laced drinks at the Happy Hour for a young and penniless crowd. It is summer, but it might as well be the winter of discontent.

No hearts, but holes seemed to have yawned inside the chests of the characters in Paul GnanaSelvam's "Manducate". Set in Kuala Lumpur in the middle of the MCO that locked up people in their condominium units during the COVID-19 pandemic, our main character Kumar lost his partner, Cassey, and his job. He turns to opioids, shabu and sex with strangers. The meth crystals in the bowl and the transparent tube he uses to ingest them are the industrial products that seem to soothe him. It is a nether world of nightmares, where a character flits in and out of walls, and sex partners are killed and cooked in broad daylight. It's an updating of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "Autumn of the Patriarch," where a bloated dictator is killed and the people feast on him. But this time, what we have is a lonely man on

the verge of everything—walking to the wide-open window of his condo unit, then returning to the depths of the darkness in his room.

Reuben Dass’s “The Daughter of Jaffna” dives deeper into the heart of darkness: the Freedom Riots in Colombo, where Sparrows dart in and out of the besieged city, shooting people or blowing themselves up to carve a free state “where discrimination and abuse against the Tamils won’t exist anymore.” The motorcycle is the machine that ferries the young Usha, a female who is 21 years old, into the central station. She sits on its back and views the countryside of Sri Lanka unrolling before her like a panopticon. It is a beautiful morning, with people going about their ordinary tasks. But she is on her way to the central station, to blow it up. It’s a world of guns and bullets wound around the waist like shark’s teeth. It’s a grim world of knives hidden inside shirts and trousers, of “words of liberation” spread through bandit radios hidden in jungles and newspapers that must have been printed on the run. Around the necks of the Freedom Sparrows hang cyanide capsules, which they must pop into their mouths once the enemy has caught them. And the AK-47 gripping their hands, ready to shoot the enemy between the eyes, or on the heart.

Martin Perlman’s “The Tree Cutter” works like a dance with words and gestures. Our main character runs the Davis Tree Service that one day is tasked to cut down the sick tree in the yard of Mrs. Kaufman. Both are in their late 40s. He is divorced and she is unhappy with the doubtful comforts of her suburban life: “a shiny new Cadillac,” a big house with a green garden. And a dying tree, that stands for the detritus of her life. It’s the lift of the post-war baby boomers in America, when young people flocked to college only to get married early, when houses were built in the frontiers beyond the city. The hum of the tree-cutter, its efficient blade, breaks the contented silence of the suburbs. In the end, Mrs. Kaufman makes some lemonade for our main character and his two assistants while all around them rose “the smell of fresh sawdust and the lingering hint of aromatic sap.” Could endings also be beginnings for the two unhappy characters of this story?

The machines and industrial products that populate these four stories either liberate them or sink them into levels of despair and decay. These are nuggets of wisdom we can

ponder on, as we hurtle into the world of Artificial Intelligence and ChatGPT—and its assortment of dreams and discontents.

This issue also features one creative nonfiction text and one essay. Reema Rajbanshi’s “The Courtyard or A Man Named Victorious” is a sprawling personal essay that revolves around the 2012 death of the author’s cousin in Assam, a state in north-eastern India. Rajbanshi travels from the United States to India, reconnecting with her cultural heritage as she reflects on her cousin’s tragic fate.

“The Deep Reprogramming of Men: Modern Society as a *Forster’s Machine*”, on the other hand, is more abstract and polemical. Inspired by E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” American author Zephyr Dorsey argues that men need to reclaim their agency from The Machine – which is not machinery or technology per se, but “the accumulation of all our social, economic, and political rules and activities”.

The final section of this Issue is a book review by Yee Heng Yeh on Malaysian author Shivani Sivagurunathan’s latest book *What Has Happened to Harry Pillai?*. As with her earlier prose publications, Sivagurunathan returns to her fictional setting of Coal Island in the two novellas published in this volume.

The next issue, Issue #7 of *MMOJ*, has no specific theme and contributors are welcome to submit on any of the issues that are of interest to *MMOJ*. Further details on the Call for Submissions will be uploaded in our website in July 2023.

Thank you to all the contributors to Issue #6 of *MMOJ*. We hope to see you again in the future issues. Our appreciation to Augustine Chay, the journal Copy Editor, for his assistance in putting together this issue and for the sneak previews which appear on our Facebook page. We also express our gratitude to journal Web Editor, Kayven Chew Kian Tatt, for his technical support for this issue and for the maintenance of the journal website.

We look ahead to the next *MMOJ* issue in December 2023! Do continue reading our journal and we invite you to send in your submissions.

Happy reading!

Malachi Edwin Vethamani & Danton Remoto