



THE OGHAM STONE 2023

This edition of *The Ogham Stone* showcases the work
of alumni, current students, and staff of the
University of Limerick.

We have picked a theme for this issue: METAMORPHOSIS.

We are living in ever-changing times, and so we decided to
bring together pieces which encapsulate the various meanings
of the word; pieces which say something about the world
and our navigation through it. Metamorphosis might mean
change for the better, or perhaps change for the worse. To
some, metamorphosis could be a bizarre twist of fate, or an
affirmation of identity. We have carefully selected poetry, short
stories, flash fiction, and creative non-fiction that engages
with this theme in different ways.

We hope you enjoy the 2023 edition of
The Ogham Stone.

VAGABOND

TIMOTHY NAKAYAMA

I have stopped writing about death for a while now.

Yet people still die.

As will I. Eventually.

When we pass on, the world does not stop spinning. People move on. Not everything gets resolved. Life is a lot of loose ends.

These dark thoughts play out in my mind as I do my best to lie still. The hospital's new MRI scanner makes so little noise that I soon find myself drifting off to sleep.

They say that your whole life flashes before your eyes when you are about to die.

They were telling the truth.

Twenty-five years old

'I know this isn't anyone's dream job, James. But stick with us and you could have your own column one day.'

The gentleman patting my back as he uttered those words was Raj Balasingam, Chief Editor of the *Malaysian Citizen*.

'Well, I'll leave you to it, James.' With that, he walked away, off to torment some other poor sap.

I spaced out the five photos on my desk. I studied each of their faces.

Could I really write about death when I had seen so little of life?

‘You the new obits guy?’

I looked up into the face of a handsome young man. Standing beside him was another young man – with the exact same face.

‘Hi,’ the young man said, ‘I’m Faiz.’

‘I’m Zul,’ said the other young man.

‘Uh, hi. I’m James.’

Faiz picked up the batch of business cards next to my keyboard.

‘You’re James Hamamoto,’ he said, reading the name aloud.

‘Uh, yes.

‘We’re identical twins,’ said the one called Zul.

‘Never would have guessed if you hadn’t mentioned it.’

The twins looked at each other and chuckled.

‘We have a smart one here!’ said Zul.

Faiz flashed me a winning smile. ‘Wanna join us and the rest of the motley crew for lunch later?’

‘Sure.’

Faiz leaned in closer. ‘Word is you actually *wanted* to be in obits. We’re all kinda surprised. Last guy didn’t last two months.’

‘Well,’ I began, ‘I’m thinking that attempting to find the life in death might make me a better writer.’

Not exactly untrue. But there was a deeper, darker reason for it, something that I had never told anyone.

Eight years old

‘Come on!’ Ben called out as he ran ahead.

I am a city boy. My parents and I lived in a terrace house by Tanjung Aru beach, a seven-minute drive from the city center.

My cousin Ben, on the other hand, was the great country mouse. Ben and his family lived in Tuaran, a sleepy town out in the countryside.

It was the school holidays and my parents had dropped me off at Ben's for a whole week. We climbed wooden fences and mango trees, waded across knee-high mud in the paddy fields directly behind Ben's house, and flew homemade kites when the sky was clear and the wind agreeable.

On that afternoon, we were heading off to a nearby stream, fishing rods in hand. My aunt was expecting catfish for dinner.

Ben had raced ahead while I was still struggling to get past some overhanging branches.

Then, I saw it.

A dead rat, floating above the water, trapped in an eddy near the steep bank.

I do not know why it drew my attention for so long, but it did.

Although my parents had taught me about death and what happened when we die, the dead rat was a glimpse of what death was like in the wild, in nature, outside of sterile hospitals and urban cemeteries.

A small part of the eight-year-old me understood why I stood there, riveted by the sight of the rat's body spinning slowly within the tight confines of the eddy while the rest of the river continued flowing downstream.

Five minutes old

I remember nothing about my grand entrance into this world. Who does, really?

But on those rainy nights when we ate roasted chestnuts together on the beach, my mother and father would regale me

with the tale of how I had shrugged off Death's embrace five minutes after being born.

'You were a premature baby,' said Mom. 'When you came out, your lungs weren't working properly.'

Dad would nod. 'The nurses had to hook you up to a ventilator. It was the most painful five minutes of our lives.'

Mom would then smile. 'But then the doctor gave us the thumbs up. You were our miracle.'

'In a match against Death, you won, son,' Dad would say quietly, looking out into the distant darkness.

I would then snuggle between Mom and Dad, letting the warmth and heat of their bodies ward off the chill I felt whenever I looked out across that inky blackness.

Thirty years old

The words were there, on the screen.

National Laureate Othman Awang's stories are more than vignettes of everyday modern Malaysian life – they are reflections of humanity that transcend the conventional media-saturated milieu, ones that bring us closer to understanding who we are as a nation, and where we are headed. His stories and his deftly painted heroes and villains will continue living on in our collective cultural consciousness. His light may have left us, but his vision has lit the way for an entire generation of Malaysian artists and writers.

It was serviceable, but I had doubts on whether I was a skilled enough writer to do justice to Othman's many achievements.

As I made my way out of the office for my coffee break, I could not help but think back to some of the sage advice Othman had passed down to me over the years.

‘We’re the writers of our own lives, James. It’s you sitting alone at your keyboard. You get to decide how best to continue. The keys are at *your* fingertips.’

If Othman were still around, I would have told him that my life at that moment was a continuous case of writer’s block – I had no idea where the story should head next. The protagonist kept running away from his dreams because he was afraid of failing.

Maybe I just needed that one glorious moment of inspiration, that one spark that would set my imagination and words ablaze.

‘James. Americano. Wei Ling. Four cappuccinos.’

In that one fleeting second, our eyes met. I knew then that *that* was my one moment, courtesy of some great karmic force beyond my understanding. The universe appeared to have collapsed upon itself because the only thing I could see was her, the only thing I could hear was the delirious cadence of my beating heart.

The conflagration that lit up my entire being like wildfire only burned brighter as I realized she was walking in the same direction.

I quickened my pace to catch up with her. To hell with the social contract and my inclinations to avoid awkward situations; this was where James Hamamoto’s story picked up again!

I finally caught up with her. Such were the confines of my immediate universe that I failed to see the car careening toward me, taking the sharp corner at a ferocious speed.

There was a hand on my wrist, pulling me backward and saving me from being yet another statistic in pedestrian fatalities.

The hand was hers.

‘Oh, crap,’ I said when I saw that her cappuccinos had tumbled down onto the road, leaving growing pools of brown on the sunbaked asphalt. ‘I’m so sorry.’

She smiled, a fountain of calm despite the moment of chaos that had just transpired.

‘That’s okay. It’s only coffee.’

‘Thank you, for pulling me back.’

‘That driver was crazy, huh!’

‘Let me buy you coffee,’ I said. ‘Four cappuccinos. And anything else you want. It’s the very least I could do in return for saving my life.’

That was my moment.

Thirty-four years old

Wei Ling looked at me expectantly as I walked down the stairs.

‘She’s asleep,’ I said.

‘Finally! Let’s eat!’

We ate straight out of the take-away containers. With a two-year-old daughter to take care of, who had time for plates and washing up?

We filled each other in on how our day had been as we wolfed down room-temperature noodles and dumplings.

Minutes later, the house phone rang.

It was either Mom or Dad, or Wei Ling’s parents; only they had the number to our house phone. I glanced at my watch – five to ten. It was late. I wondered what could be so important that it could not wait until tomorrow.

I made my way to the living room and picked up the phone.

‘Hello. Who –’

‘Son.’

Something was dreadfully wrong. It was my mother, but I could tell by the tone of her voice and her ragged breathing that something was horribly wrong.

‘Mom. What’s wrong?’

‘I-it’s your father. He’s...’

I heard the words before they came to her lips.

Every child dreads the coming of that day. We hope and we pray that that day will never come, knowing full-well that we are wishing for the impossible, wishing against the inevitable.

I crumpled into a heap on the floor. My mouth opened and a great silent scream erupted from deep within, threatening to engulf my very being in an immense wave of pitch-black grief.

The conversations we would never have. The blossoming of our daughter into a young woman he would never witness.

Every child wants to make their parents proud. I had done nothing in the past that was worthy of pride, and now I had to continue living knowing that I would never have the chance to make my father proud.

Fingers slithered across my ravaged heart. They held it gently within their grasp – and then they squeezed. Their grip was icy cold.

Thirty-six years old

‘Three days have passed since the Kamunting riot. As of this morning, the identities of forty-two of the forty-seven people who were killed in the bloody riot last Friday have been confirmed. All parties have agreed to shut down their respective election machinery with immediate effect as they wait for the Election Commission to –’

Someone switched off the television in disgust.

I brushed away my tears and turned my attention back to my desktop.

The email had been sent hours ago, but I was still staring at the words on the screen.

Having dedicated fifteen years of their lives to the Malaysian Citizen, Zulkarnain and Faizal Sulaiman’s stories

have always captured the bits of people we so often fail to see if we do not look closely enough: their humanity. The twin brothers' love for people went beyond color and creed. Their sense of humor and zest for love for life was infectious. They were the stars of their own show, playing characters that were larger than life. They leave this world the same way they came into it: with arms hugging protectively around each other and a silent promise that they would never let go.

By the time I realised that Raj was standing beside me, there were wet tracks on my face again.

'James,' said Raj softly. 'Thank you. You did them justice.'

I brought my hands to my face. 'It could have been me.'

Raj's only reply was the gentle, comforting hand on my shoulder.

The present, Seventy-four years old

'There's one here, here, and another one all the way over here.'

Dr. Steve Morales points to the various spots on the 3D-holographic MRI image of my brain. He turns toward me.

'Look, James...'

'I know, Steve. I know.'

'Are you serious about going off the treatments?'

'Steve, in the last ten years, I've been in and out of here more times than I've been to the golf course.'

'James, you still have plenty of years ahead of you.'

I start putting my shoes on. 'Steve, you and I, we've lived a good life. What good is a few more years when we've reached the twilight of our lives?'

'You have grandchildren, James.'

I stand up slowly. 'They don't need me. They have their parents. For that, I am grateful. It means I can let go and move on.'

Steve finally realises that he cannot sway me.

'You're not going to write another book?' he asks.

'Probably not.'

His face finally breaks into a smile. 'I still remember reading your first book, *By the Sea*. It seems like a lifetime ago.' He pauses. 'When did you write it again?'

'When I was forty, so, more than thirty years ago,' I reply, walking toward the door. I stop and turn back. 'I just want to go home now, Steve.'

He nods.

Seventy-four years old, by the sea

I look out and see only the inky darkness of the night. The warm seawater reaches my knees; the cool, breezy night air caresses my face.

Having grown up with the sand of this beach underneath my feet, it seems only proper that I live out the last years of my life here. The years I have spent in Kuala Lumpur and abroad are part of my story, but I intend for the ending of that story to come full circle.

I hear little Annabelle's laughter ringing out across the air. I turn around and look back toward the shore. I can make out the outlines of my wife and that of Annabelle, our granddaughter.

Annabelle will turn three in April. Wei Ling, the love of my life, understands, and more importantly, accepts my decision. We are unbowed and unbroken.

I turn and look out once more, out over the silver surface. This time, I almost see her.

A woman, with pale luminescent skin and an unearthly grace, shrouded in the canvas of the night and wings of the finest black.

I know her - I have walked alongside her all my life.

She was there when I nearly fell into the stream after creeping down that steep bank to pull the dead rat out of the eddy.

She was there when a car nearly ploughed through me right after I learned the name of the woman whom I was to marry.

She was there when I nearly succumbed to a heart attack after learning of my father's passing.

She was there when Raj approved my day off and sent Zul and Faiz to cover the Kamunting election trail in my place.

I am sure she was there the day a premature baby boy fought for his life after showing up in his parents' story just minutes before.

I know her.

I also know that my fingertips are poised just above my keyboard, waiting.

One ending sees me walking toward her. To save myself from pain and indignity. To take her hand. To go out with the tide.

Another sees me walking back toward the shore. To hold on as long as I can. To kiss my wife. To see Annabelle celebrate her third birthday.

I draw in a deep breath.

My fingers come crashing down.

I make my choice.

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