

SHORT STORIES 2023

Jasmine H. Low

Works produced from the Words on Fire: Finding the Flow Writing Class March-May
2023 (www.sharonbakar.com)



Aunt Jenny's Room

BY JASMINE H. LOW

*Exercise - Writing from a Safe Space | Words on Fire Finding the Flow Writing Class
March-May 2023 (www.sharonbakar.com)*

*Photo credit: leszekglasner via CanvaPro/Getty Images, Billion Images & Aleksandr
Petrunovsky via CanvaPro*

I curl into a knitted ball of thread, safe from even the most curious of cats who may pry. I'm under the bed and no one can see me unless they're an ant or a nosy puppy. This is the safest place in the house. I know, because I used to hide here, away from an enraged mother who was seeing my face full of promise, only to be let down by my reading of Beano Comics and TV binges. Aunty Jenny would stand by the doorway to her room, protecting me with her shadow, telling mum that I was indeed reading a geography book about Argentina's pampas and there was no harm in reading some comics in-between.

"Aiya, sis, it's good spoken-language English practice anyway," she'd argue. "Make sure she's in bed by 10 the latest! It's an early morning tomorrow, Ah Chee,". Mum would shake her head and walk away with a feather duster in hand. She wasn't dusting.



Aunt Jenny would close the door and we'd both giggle and snigger before continuing an episode with Bruce Willis in Moonlighting or Tee Vee Tiga's latest advertisement. Whatever it was, Aunty Jenny's room was my safe haven and from that 19 inch colour television, we both escaped to Hollywood holding fairy floss in one hand and a large American milkshake in the other. Some nights, we'd visit Hong Kong and spar with Michelle Yeoh and Jacky Chan with a mouth full of fish balls. The police stories by Hong Kong script writers seemed so real, it was surely a mimicry of life. I couldn't wait to visit Hong Kong to find a bad boy boyfriend! Other nights, we'd be Bollywood queens, disappearing into the night in song, dance and a dosai. But the southern Indian Tamil flicks were most heart wrenching in between punches and dance and a muruku crunch. Oh, oh, here comes mad mama again! Curling into a ball as I type, I curl into a ball and disappear into my reveries.





Tsunami Dream State

BY JASMINE H. LOW

*Exercise - Writing from Dreams | Words on Fire Finding the Flow Writing Class
March-May 2023 (www.sharonbakar.com)*

Photo credit: Spondylolithesis via CanvaPro/Getty Images Signature

I'm holding my breath and feel the pressure on my lungs from being under the weight of the entire water mass.

It's not a pool. I'm trying to make out if it is. There are no walls, there is no bottom even though I'm clearly somewhere near the bottom.



The ocean looks like evergreen jade, the same kind of richness that mum wears on her left wrist, I hear waves crashing against a 20-footer boat, that is what I hear and like a pendulum, it becomes a constant, I'm rocked to sleep like a baby in a sarong on a hot sweaty humid day.

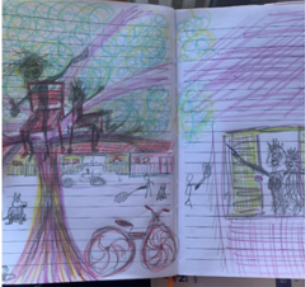
Schools of Asian anchovies, some slightly slimmer and some stouter than the Mediterranean ones, swim past so closely to my skin, I can see bubbles on the pores of dermis, this beautiful machine God has created to keep water out and water in.



Our makeup is just like planet Earth after all, and Carl Sagan's little blue dot despite where you are in the Universe, is blue because of Earth's makeup.

I take one deep breath and I can hear people chattering, drinking and eating, glassware a-clinking.

I'm awake now, I rise from the hotel bed and appear all made up and ready to go join the rest of the family at Timmi's wedding party.



A Rambutan Tree House

BY JASMINE H. LOW

Exercise - Writing from Drawings / Places in the Heart | Words on Fire Finding the Flow Writing Class March-May 2023 (www.sharonbakar.com)
Photo credit: Jasmine H. Low

There are some places that remain at a small corner in your heart for all of your life. It's that place you'd retreat to for some respite. My treehouse was a handmade space in front of our terraced house. My childhood dreams and aspirations were born out of the tree. I would hug it sometimes, feel the bark of the tree rough against my skin, touch and caress the nooks and corners while tracing my fingers to the ant trail. They were hikers on a mission, these ants, and I'd imagine conversations they'd have with one another.

"Hey bro, take a left far North as you reach the edge.

Trust me, it'll lead you to the next trail,"

"Sure or not, bro? Last time I followed your advice, I landed on that dog's furry back!"

The branches of the trees carried my weight, they laid my foundation. Two red plastic-wired chairs, my playground, wedged securely into the sterile rambutan tree in the middle of a housing estate in suburban Kuala Lumpur.

Little doggie stares at us up above the tree, wondering when we'll come down and play with it. Last time it willed so hard, a bunch of ants fell on its back and found their way from fur to skin, biting hard on his back until he'd yelp "woooooof! Wooooooof woooooooof!".

Spotty was desperately wagging his tail and despite having only three legs, it was a solid good strong wag. Three because one time, he was following the teenage spotty girl on a jog around the neighbourhood, and he dashed in front of a steel grille as he suddenly felt courageous. Spotty thought the car was aiming directly at the girl, so he veered in front of it as if to protect her, the spotty girl and bang, his left paw went a-dangling, while I held the bleeding saviour dog in my hands. An uncultured pet I brought home from school, not a four-legged fit to have tea with the Queen, this dog's values were more intact than my neighbour!

How did I not guess that I'd be asked to take it to the pound? How would anyone have known that years later, it would be that very same animal who would save me from near death.



Sales Executive Weds Teacher

BY JASMINE H. LOW

*Exercise - Writing from a Family Photo | Words on Fire Finding the Flow Writing
Class March-May 2023 (www.sharonbakar.com)*

Photo credit: Jasmine H. Low

I'm thinking about an opinion piece by Zadie Smith about her Smith Family's Christmas scenes and found this image in my archives, "Sales executive weds teacher". This was how they advertised marriages in 1969 in Penang, one of two highly successful Straits Settlements in British Malaya which lasted up until 1946.

The dapper ICI sales executive from Kajang bravely placed an oyster pearl and diamond ring on mum, one which likely took three months of his wages at that British firm. Across the Pacific, Nixon has just been sworn in as America's 37th President and within a month, Yasser Arafat would take his place as leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Soon after this ring exchange, I would have been conceived and six months in, Apollo 11 would have landed the first humans on the Moon and the first Boeing 747 flown, meanwhile in Amsterdam, fluttering around that same year's timeline, John Lennon and Yoko Ono are featured on the cover of magazines while calling for peace lying in bed in pyjamas. That famous Bed-in peace pose invited the world's press into their hotel room every day between 9am and 9pm.

Come with me back to Penang, and I'm seated across from the sales executive, now a retired 82-year-old, still dapper, extremely spritely and he's spruiking to me his next business venture. A machine that would reverberate under the soles of your feet such that you'd feel youthful and pain-free. His teacher bride, now 78, sits beside me and sighs. There he goes again. Ring finger blank, a little on the side of an early on-set case of dementia, she had forgotten where she had kept her ring for safe-keeping.

"Let's go for ice-kacang, she'd say,"

"I'm so hungry.."

"You're always hungry"

"Ya, I haven't had breakfast, no lunch, no dinner,"



Like her mother and her siblings, their diet has always been rather rich. They're all from Penang, the state with the most famous foods in Malaysia. Grandma I remember, had to undergo kidney dialysis and eventually succumbed to chronic kidney disease. Mum and I, her carer now, both do daily back-paddles from this same non communicable disease. But it's so hard. "You will survive," quips dad, foot resting on an electrical pulse machine, quoting Hippocrates, "Tell your mother to teach her mouth restraint and let food be her medicine!". Who do you think will have the last word in? The salesman or the teacher?

My Other Half

BY JASMINE H. LOW

*Exercise - Random word writing, 10 words in 10 minutes from
www.randomwordgenerator.com: Stumble, Thank, Labour, Rugby, Transmission,
Cancel, Pledge, Item, Banquet, X-ray | Words on Fire Finding the Flow Writing Class
March-May 2023 (www.sharonbakar.com)*

“Stumble, come here you one-legged beast!”

“Stop calling me a beast, that’s not very nice you know. My teacher told me that I should not allow anyone to call me names!”

“Oh, c’mon, you know that you’re a beast! Have you forgotten how you got that stump of a prized leg?”

“No thanks to you!”

“Haha! Blame me as much as you like but we all know the truth,”

“Yes, and the truth hurts, we know that for sure”

“Your labour of love, turned you into an animal. A monster with one limb, an invalid, what else can I name-call you until the truth is set free?!”

“You really have no heart”

“Of all things, you had to choose rugby as your sport of choice at university! What a blooming idiot! Didn’t you know that contact sport has an extremely high incidence of injury? And of all days, you chose one of the most important days to foil up! Bloody fool!”

“Well, I tried transmitting messages to you to ask for your opinion, but I suppose that transmission got lost in the airwaves. You know I always ask for your opinion, but you weren’t there that month,”

“Oh, c’mon, you know that’s a lie, you just cancelled me out of your life the minute you started university. You thought you were grown up and ready to take on the world, didn’t you? Blooming idiot!”

“Hey brudder, you know that’s not true. You’re always my go-to, and I will always ask for your opinion, almost as if I pledge my allegiance to the school of hard knocks with my beloved bruh as principal, you know that,”

“Ya, but you didn’t have to choose that day for me to come rescue you?! So selfish! Always about you, you and you! That’s what our mother used to say. It’ll always be about you, from the day you were born, mother already reminded me, you’re No. 1 because you’re special,”

“Oh c’mon, I knew from the moment Shelley and I were an item, you would have found a way to foil my life.

“No, I wouldn’t do that to you!”

“How about that first banquet we hosted for the family? Remember that evening downtown in that Chinese restaurant? I booked out three tables for our family, ordered the best and your favourite dishes but you had to foil it. I knew then, it’ll really all be about you!”

“No, that’s not true. You look at me with X-ray eyes, as if you knew what goes on in my brain. You take advantage of the fact that I’m a highly functioning person with non-visible disabilities, and yet you tell me I’m the cause of your personal problems. How could I predict that rugby would cause a loss of limb?”

“No, of course you wouldn’t know that, but you did. You chose that game to gain attention, you wanted us to cheer you on!”



Love, All

BY JASMINE H. LOW

*Exercise - Writing Prompt from Sharon Bakar's goodie bag = a tennis ball!
Words on Fire Finding the Flow Writing Class March-May 2023
(www.sharonbakar.com). Photo credit: Billion Photos via CanvaPro.*

A perfect day for a game, but today, she thought she'd had enough of tennis. It was her grandfather Lawrence's insistence that she be a tennis star, following the footsteps of her mother Martina. It was a tall order, but ten years in a British private school up on Penang Hill primed her to undertake any challenge. Any except this.

Her dream was to graduate from high school and join Mohammad in Paris. They had secretly gotten engaged while in high school up on the hill, at a bungalow next door. Set just like a scene from Tan Twan Eng's *Garden of Evening Mists* on that one misty afternoon, their schoolmate Florence, daughter of a priest pretended she was all there and solemnised their engagement.

Tennis was the last thing on her mind, and Mohammad was her only prize. They had it all mapped out and had planned to get married and make it official two years after finishing high school.

Little did she know, her grandfather had already made plans as well. By the weekend, at the end of the final term, he would have her sent to Europe where she'd be taken in by one of the world's most renowned tennis coaches. It didn't take a lot of persuasion for the coach to accept. After all, her mother was Martina and her grandfather was Lawrence.

All of her life, her identity sat at a precipice while she contemplated the fulfilment of her marriage desires. There was nobody else in the world who knew her like Mohammad.

At each bounce off the practice wall, the tennis ball would reverberate louder and louder in her head and she wept. She knew she'd be facing off family versus independence. She kept on going, hitting harder and harder, crying louder now so that you could hear her. Everyone else around the court kept quiet, eyes welling, for they knew her dreams were only but a dream. Little did she know Mohammad was actually her step-brother.



Cancelled minstrels

BY JASMINE H. LOW

*Exercise - Writing Prompt from Sharon Bakar's Pinterest Images!
Words on Fire Finding the Flow Writing Class March-May 2023
(www.sharonbakar.com). Photo credit: mrdoggs via CanvaPro.*

The box measured one foot square squarely on my lap. I remember the feeling of excitement mixed with fear of the unknown and a taste for adventure. The box was black and white striped as if it were a minstrel show. My peachy fingers touch the sides of the box and I gently lift the lid in anticipation, half expecting to see a limited-edition make-up kit by Sephora except it's not.

I hold the box tight while my eyes adjust to what's inside. Emblazoned on the top right of what looked like an old-fashioned mini television were three faded letters in gold; B. B. C. I trace my finger along the raised B. B. C. letters and then press play. An edition of the BBC's immensely popular Black and White Minstrel Show starts playing. In brilliant song and dance, a group of white Caucasian men sing and dance with their faces painted black with a clown-like large white mouth and eyes. I focused on their moving mouths and peering eyes and recall the research paper I read about the heydays when this show was so popular, over 18 million viewers would tune into the BBC. As faux pas as it was, the shows went on pre-Malayan independence through until the late 1960s with many refusing to see it an issue of concern. Get on with it, they'd protest in type-written letters!

As a woman of Asian heritage, being called out yellow quite often when I was honestly peach was tiring. I'd hear of Hollywood directors casting Caucasian actors to play Asians in classic films, without thinking about the repercussions of racial stereotyping being a yellow-face smack! Yellow peril was a hashtag even before hashtags existed!

So it was quite a surprise to find the BBC player intact and so well preserved, just like the memories of those men in black! I meant those men painted as black! I wonder how many more secret boxes of cancelled culture lay lying one foot square on another's lap.



House Music

BY JASMINE H. LOW

*Exercise - Writing Prompt from The Search
Sharon Bakar's Words on Fire Finding the Flow Writing Class March-May 2023
(www.sharonbakar.com). Photo credit: Ryotaro Tsukata via CanvaPro/Pexels.*

I'm stuck in between floors and am inside of a lift, one with mirrors where you can see many versions of yourself. I keep on pressing on the button but the lift doesn't budge.

Standing on the right side, panicking and wondering which button to press, I hit the alarm button and suddenly the door opens up to level 4.

I step out into a large wide open and empty space, you can make out what it once was, perhaps a stock broking firm or an advertising agency, there are odd pieces of office furniture still lying around, a poster of a staff Zumba session stuck on a pillar, pristine white A4 paper strewn on the floor beside a solo Xerox machine, fluorescent lights amidst neon lights as if the interior designer went to town with a light display. The high glass windows reveal a concrete jungle we're trapped within, a horizon of buildings on buildings, glass on glass.

I have hope.

I keep looking as far as my eye can take me.

I bounce from the glass panel to the building next door, only to find myself back in front of the lift at level 5 now.

This time, I hear a faint thud, boom, boom and as if it were a speakeasy bar on the other side of the lift, I put my ears on the cold steel doors of the lift and listened.

Sounds like my favourite house music thud-a-thumping away. I'm now 30-something, my skin taut, my skirt short and the sound of music reveals a younger me back in a PR agency.

I press on the button to go up, the door opens almost instinctively and I step into the arms of the DJ.

MY BLACK HAIR (I REMEMBER)

Jasmine H. Low

*Exercise - Writing from I Remember
Sharon Bakar's Words on Fire Finding the Flow Writing Class March-May 2023
(www.sharonbakar.com). Photo credit: Melpomenem CanvaPro.*

I remember how thick you were

I remember how strong each strand feels

I remember Samson's hair and Delilah's quest

I remember when my hair was short and I was weak

I remember when my hair grew long and I grew strong

I remember walking into that room amongst beautiful women

I remember holding my head high and letting my hair down

I remember dancing and throwing my long hair like those Mat rockers in music videos

I remember sweating profusely and feeling hair on my face

I remember hair on my face and yours

I remember tears welling then trickling down your face

I remember tears welling then trickling down my face

I remember when change was around the morning sun corner

I remember when you were gone and I swept up last season's hairfall

I remember how tired I felt that day I fought off hairy monsters

I remember when I braved myself to shave my head in the bathtub

I remember when my hair was gone but I grew strong

I remember heckles at the petrol station

I remember how they tried to pull me down

I remember how the wind catches my hair when it was once long

I remember hair grows

MY BLACK HAIR (LOST THINGS)

By Jasmine H. Low

So dark, so long, so exotic
were was is west
A woman's worth is
As thin as her locks
While grey is a commodity
No one cherishes,
Gold, red, black with curls or pearls beaded
Along make perfect display
Of how well you have kept or been kept
But listen hear ye girls and boys
Of 50 years more,
Unkempt and unkept as you are,
Get lost if your hair looks moist oily
or glistening less gold,
Hue less black,
Shave it off I urge you
So no ageist can come a-calling
You names other than your own.

*Exercise - Writing Prompt - Lost Things
Sharon Bakar's Words on Fire Finding the Flow Writing
Class March-May 2023
(www.sharonbakar.com). Photo credit: byandone
CanvaPro.*

www.jasminelow.com

Townhall day

by Jasmine H. Low

*Exercise - Writing from a Whole Bunch of Random Elements
Sharon Bakar's Words on Fire Finding the Flow Writing Class March-May 2023
(www.sharonbakar.com). Photo credit: prettyboy80 CanvaPro/GettyImages.*

That steamy prawn mee was rancid, pink and steamy hot but smelt like it was cooked in the most rushed of manner, by a silly chef who couldn't be bothered because he was too worried about the scaly fishes he wanted to add to the recipe and in his mind, saying "it's my time" while stirring in the thick broth prawn heads and fish scales amongst beef bones thinking even that professional cake personality Marleene would approve!

What a bloody long sentence, he thought, wiping sweat off his forehead with his forehead. His mother would disapprove. Sweaty and all that.

Go wash your hands, son! Who would ever want to eat at your restaurant if your food is infused with your bodily fluids? Eeeeeek! Sweaty boy!

It's too salty, uncle, the little eight-year-old whispered. It's too salty. He spat it all out on the floor under the table. There was spittoon under the table. I always wondered about that bowl with stickers around the walls of the coffee shop, "No spitting". Ah! Alas! That's what it's for!



A British gentleman who sat across from the boy sneezed into a white handkerchief, wipes his bloodied nose then swiftly hides the hanky in his left vest pocket. His gaze turns towards the chef, standing above the little boy, and gestures for him to come over.

The chef walks over to the gentleman who was reeking of alcohol. Had he been drinking all morning? But it's only 1pm in the afternoon. He really smelt of rigour, pain and destitute. But it was just a whiff. He could be wrong.

Marleene, the British gentleman's wife, was due to show up at the coffee shop for afternoon tea. She was to host a reading event with the town Mayor's wife, Nadia. The two women shared a passion for the creative arts, baking fruit cakes and words. And Thomas Steele. Although both were unaware of that one passion.

The chef, still in a silly love stupor, hovers above the stinking gentleman and like a drone in first-person view (FPV) mode, spots a faint lipstick stain at the back of his neck just hidden under his collar and shrugs to himself.

Meanwhile, back in the kitchen, that pot of boiling broth he was stirring since morning provided enough steam to pop even the tiniest pimple, symbolic of what was about to take place.

Jasmine H. Low is a writer, producer & podcast host of 'Listen by Heart Podcast', inspired by her mother Shirl. The project sets out to archive voices and stories from women of Southeast Asian heritage, and also advocates peace for the South China Sea region.

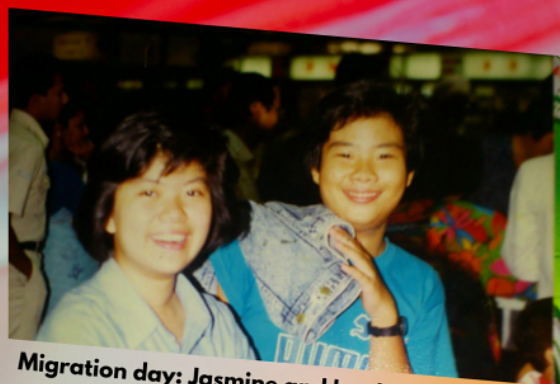
She was runner-up at the Motion Picture Association APAC Script-to-Screen Pitch Competition (Malaysia) for 'Kurang Manis', a documentary about lifestyle diseases like diabetes and is now also a podcast.

For a decade, Jasmine hosted 100+ music and spoken word events in Kuala Lumpur. She co-created FEYST Indie Youth Fest, that sent 65 national representatives across eSports, music and arts festivals worldwide and in 2009, she received a VIMA Hall of Fame Award for her contribution to the independent music scene.

She co-hosted and co-organised Wayang Kata spoken word events with Jerome Kugan in collaboration with the British Council, was a moderator at Georgetown Literary Festival 2011, 2012, 2013 & 2015 and created the Penang In-between Arts Festival 2011-13.

Sydney-based and Penang-born, Jasmine juggles her creative escapades while running a creative media & technology agency.

Find out what she's up to now:
www.jasminelow.com/now



Migration day: Jasmine and her brother Chris at KL International Airport in 1987.