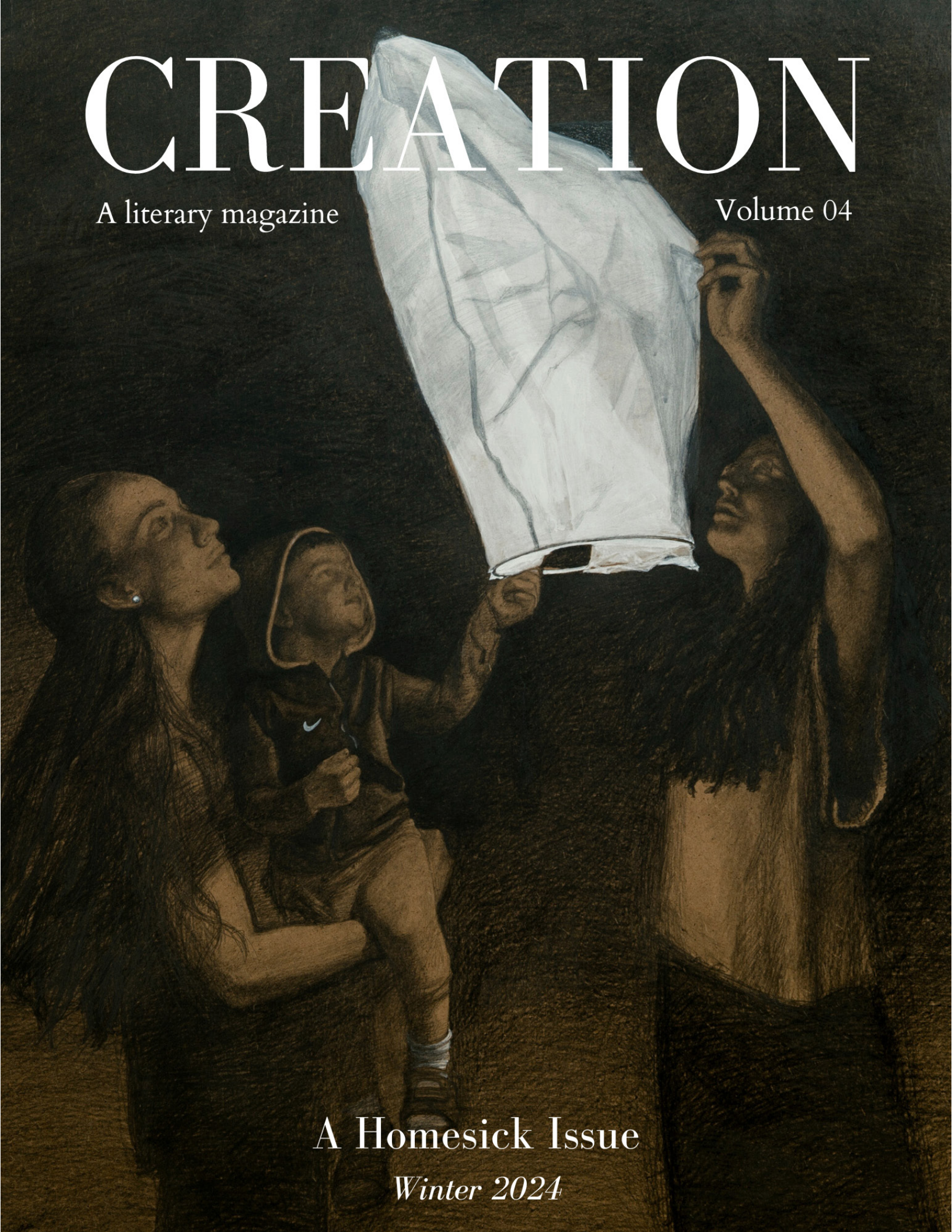
CREATION

A literary magazine

Volume 04



A Homesick Issue

Winter 2024

A Homesick Issue.

Glenn Dungan, J. Lynn Lyons, Kristin Helms, Alex Heoft, Kelly Piner, Raisatul Zannat, Janet McMillan Rives, Jessica Clem, Donna Langevin, Yukti Narang, Sherry Cummins, Linea Jantz, Connemara Wadsworth, Holly Ratcliff, Michelle Disler, Linda Lamenza, Sana Mufti, Carl “Papa” Palmer, Amanda Nicklaus, Christine Marie, David Milley, Julian Matthews, Lisa Trefsger, Dawn Sperber, Julie London, Sonja Rue , Daniel Moore, Victoria Sorochuk, Agne Silkinaite, Milena Maksimovic.

Creation Magazine

Winter 2024

No. 18

By Julian Matthews

Once, a friend sprung a revelation on me over lunch.

"Yes! I've been to that house! My father used to bring me there every Christmas as a child. Your mother made the best chocolate cakes!"

The "house" she was referring to was the family home I lived in from ages zero to twelve. On every festive occasion, my parents hosted streams of visitors. The coincidence of meeting someone who had been there almost two decades later was a surprise, but not extraordinary. In the 1960s and 1970s, I believe, we were more congenial and interconnected, not bound by status nor divided by religious and racial conventions. The neighbours were friendlier – and our homes were open to anyone.

Today, dropping the casual "Where are you from?" in conversation almost seems like an affront. What was a perfectly reasonable question to ask a stranger – to connect dots, to establish each other's early histories, to find commonality in places we lived, schools and colleges we may have attended, places we both knew and were familiar with as children, is seen as being too nosy – even threatening.

At No. 18, Freeman Road, there was no such pretense. The irony of the name is not lost on me now. Freeman Road was apparently named after David Freeman, part of a renowned legal firm, Freeman and Madge, in the early 1900s. It was later renamed Jalan U Thant after the Burmese diplomat who was the first United Nations secretary-general from Asia. The road was situated in a suburb just outside Kuala Lumpur city, that was known as Embassy Row because of the number of diplomatic missions concentrated there. Our house, No. 18, was just opposite the Indonesian Embassy at the time. The house was a bungalow, in the familiar colonial-style post-WWII architecture of the 1950s that dotted most towns in Malaya and was often occupied by senior government officers.

The house had an expansive garden, in the front and the back: a perfect children's playground for us kids with trees to climb and build swings and treehouses on. We would spend hours in the sun, playing rounders, hockey, football, or badminton, until we were called in, all sweaty and soiled, to have dinner, or if it rained, whichever came first

The roof was reddish-brown, with eaves where our paper planes or shuttle-cocks got stuck, occasionally, and we had to nudge them off with long, makeshift poles strung together with several of mother's dismantled broom and mop sticks and raffia string – much to her annoyance.

The rooms had high ceilings, with slats for ventilation, tiled floors, and much space for entertaining guests. It had wooden banisters on the staircase to slide from; oblong windows with wavy grills to stare out off on mournful, rainy days; an annexe with a garage to play hide-and-seek in; and an L-shaped store-room under the staircase to take refuge from an angry sibling or parent, after some transgression. The house was more functional than palatial – with a gaggle of cousins staying over during the long, year-end holiday breaks.

No 18 only had two storeys but it was filled with ours.

Like the story of the moist chocolate cake that my friend remembered.

My mother was a great cook and avid baker, but I am biased, of course. On the run-up to Christmas, Easter, or Deepavali, her kitchen was inundated with the smells of baking powder, flour, caster sugar, eggs, butter, chocolate, almonds, cashew nuts, raisins, and vanilla essence. We children, six of her own, and the cousins were roped in to help with the prep. As the youngest, my job was to cut out "tracing" paper, line, and butter the pans, or sometimes, shape he cookie dough with steel molds. I would also be assigned the very important role of warning the adults when the timer for the oven went off, or something was burning – which was rare, if at all. There was not just chocolate cake but also fruitcake, sugee cake, butter cake, and marble cake – each from proven, long-held, well-guarded secret recipes that only a certain auntie shared. My favourites were the cookies: chocolate chip, cornflake, shortbread, rock buns, almond melts, and of course, the ever-present pineapple

tarts – onto which, I was allowed to put tiny crosses.

My mother also made traditional local sweets: circular, stringy murukku and flower-shaped, crunchy achi murukku dipped in a wok of boiling oil, diamond- or conch-shaped sugary cookies, which I called chippies, Kesari that sweet semolina orange-coloured fudge, and explosive ghee balls that crumbled in my tiny, clumsy hands, if I wasn't careful and didn't pop them into my mouth quick enough.

But the cookies and cakes were only the half of it. If you were a visitor at our house, you would not leave without being stuffed, from various dishes lovingly prepared by mum – a mouth-watering vindaloo, say, or steaming mutton dalcha, a spicy hot chicken curry or idiyappam (string hoppers) drenched in fish sothi. And if the food, cake, and cookies arrayed did not satisfy you, then surely the copious amount of alcohol available, whiskeys and brandies and beer – lots of beer – plied by my father, for only the adults, of course, and maybe a rascally teenager or two, would be your ticket to heaven.

In my mind's eye, I see No. 18 again, exactly as it was, like those 3-D virtual house tours with Morgan Freeman, no less, narrating.

Here then is the living room– where all the merriment and intoxication and story-telling and laughter took place.

Here is the dining room, with the wooden round table and the lazy susan in the middle spinning in slow-motion with all the delectable food displayed in mother's precious Pyrex ware, steam rising from the hot dishes, and a riot of colours of cakes and cookies.

Here is the large front yard where we played catching and other games, stumbled and fell and cried and got up and ran again, chased fireflies and lit sparklers and fireworks at night; or lay under the stars with binoculars to make out constellations, or spot the odd plane or two, or if we were lucky, passing UFOs.

Here is the bicycle lane around the house where we raced on Raleigh choppers to and fro and back again and challenged each other to cycle the full length without hands on the handlebars just like circus clowns.

Here is the frangipani tree that bled milky latex, from which my sister fell once and broke her arm. Here is the rambutan tree and mango tree, which bore fruit every season without fail but had Kerengga, big red ants that gave nasty bites. Here is the huge red saga seed tree, where birds lingered and squirrels scampered on, its branches stretching high up past our bedroom windows casting fearsome shadows on our walls in the moonlight. Here are the banana trees at the back that terrified us because of the Pontianak movies we watched on TV.

Here is the black and white TV where we watched those Pontianak movies. Where we gathered as a family to watch the Brady Bunch or Little House on the Prairie or The Waltons – and would imitate John Boy and his siblings saying, "Goodnight Grandpa!" – and to each other in that Southern accent. Or we would sing that Doris Day Show song, Que Sera Sera, or the Happy Days tune together, or whistle and act out the catchy themes of Mission Impossible or Hawaii Five-0.

Here is the brown and beige Philips valve radio with the large dials and white ivory keys which we would tune in every Sunday after mass to hear Patrick Teoh and his "Kee Huat's Fantastic Facts and Fancies show", with his signature sign-off "Blue skies and everything nice."

And here is the L-shaped storeroom I hid in when I wanted to get away from it all.

It was my hideaway to dive into a Beano or Dandy comic book, or curl up with a Famous Five, Secret Seven or Hardy Boys' book, and in the poor lighting, under the cover of semi-darkness, be lost in another world.

For some days and nights at No. 18. there were times the inebriation was in excess.

There were the beatings; the fights and the bullying. There were the tears and the screaming. The breakdown. Again, then again, and yet again. So, the walls of the house that harboured all the joys and wonders of growing up also bore the guilt and shame of a dysfunctional family – the kind that Tolstoy speaks of when he says, "Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Now orphaned by the passing of our parents, we have moved onto shores of estrangement as waves of childhood memories recede into the distance.

Yet, each of us, I am sure, holds on to No. 18 in some way in our hearts: what it was, what it meant to

us, what was gained, and perhaps, what was lost.

No. 18 as it stood no longer exists. It has been flattened. The house, the cycling path, the gardens, every tree, all gone.

From Google, it appears to have been re-built into another set of overpriced condominiums touted as an “exclusive oasis of tranquillity” with “beautifully crafted garden architecture” —whatever that means.

So, the memories I and others – siblings, relatives, friends, and visitors – hold of it are all that’s left.

It is a place, like many places now forgotten in time, that may never have any historical or archaeological value. For some of us, it was home — all the food-making, camaraderie, and laughter – and yes, even the hurting and tears – will always occupy a special place in our hearts.

Place *Oil on Panel 48x36”*

“This painting is about wanting to belong somewhere. I prefer working at night; there are fewer distractions and interruptions, but it can also be isolating. You can be homesick without really going anywhere.”

by Daniel Moore