

Prose Poetry by Mani Rao

Mani Rao (b. India 1965, r. Hong Kong 1993-) is a poet, and the author of *Echolocation*, *Salt*, *The Last Beach*, *Living Shadows*, *Catapult Season* and *Wingspan*. "Cuntree" is around her own experience of immigration to Hong Kong in 1993. "Writing to Stop" is about where she is. Her texture's density comes from how she locates herself, it is a play -- of sound, voice, and perspective. And some of her play in public spaces like cafe windows and toilets can be seen on <http://www.manirao.net>.

Writing to Stop

Writers, fireflies, mistake white paper for light.

The only writing really necessary is one's Last Will and Testament, and even that implies a lack of trust.

If we don't stop writing love poems, how can we be loved?

So the cured writer threw all her writing into the compost – the vegetables that grew turned eaters into writers.

Does the tree take you to the sentence, or the sentence to the tree?

Writers once communed to work, to take their position as gatekeepers. Now fallen asleep at the post, what's there to guard, the raided vault free of conscience, and the community's irrupted impotence pleads not guilty.

Mishearing the question – are writers profits? – was a part of the symptom, as writer after writer explained they were in no position to play lens. Severed, they had fallen into the pit of relativity and dedicated their lives to comparing this truth with that.

Now closed in by mirrors on all sides, there is expandable space for more writers to play the mumbling peripatetic undead, propped by a dicta-phone or notepad-pen. Whatever they ear, it's not each other.

Water, flat and earless. Fins sliced before sharks tossed back into the sea.

Boiler mouth, blockaded ear valve. Mouths ladle air. Soup thinner and thinner, audience.

A matter of time before ears fall off. Meanwhile holes can be corked and lobes can be hooks.

Primitive telephones were nimble and balanced, sprinting back and forth between mouth and ear. When the handset's dumb-bell shape came about – *seesaw* – it was a warning, an aid to exercise both organs in equal measure. Ironically, today's bug-sized phones clog ears, while really being powerful microphones.

It does seem as though mouth ogre can only ever be temporarily appeased by fame's offerings, or writers who enjoy notoriety would not continue to confess. It's a getting rid of, a clean habit.

According to one why, there was a pile of limestone rubble in Giza after the pyramid was done. Instead of carting it all away, they put it together in the shape of The Great Sphinx, and gave her the job of guarding the necropolis.

Our body of writing guards our tombs and loves to strangle victims – *sphingo*, in Greek – someone please chop her nose.

Sound continues to rise in the shape of a funnel we are digging our way out of, with.

When we have recycled the page and written on the other side of it, we wash off the ink, pulp it and make more. Consumed, our body's a matchstick in language forest fire, patches of ink fertilize the soil, new trees, more logging, more martyrs. The congenital disease, and the curse.

How can this curse be lifted?

Cure, as opposed to temporary relief from pain.

Inside the relativity pit, there are those so struck, they hold language by its wings and look at it, a child's sharp delight dismembering a butterfly. Language replies, the dice is thrown, the stakes increase, both sides keep losing limbs in the fray, and the impasse is utterlessness.

Arriving here comes with a wild hope, spaceshuttles on standby, tentative about a schedule for a new watery planet. Nothing happens, language is language and gives away no clues.

When the detective heard that artists were interrupted yogis, she went to *Patanjali*. She learned, that together with the opening of certain *chakra* one also gained the ability to comprehend any language of any realm, whether animal, human or spirit. Crucially, this new skill lay safest in the hands of a yogi beyond the desire to intervene. Imagine the disastrous consequences of trying to act upon overheard casual banter between idle crows, malicious dogs. This corroborated my own childhood un bafflement with conversations between animals and humans in the Jataka tales.

Writers need help to levitate, they seem to suffocate when they don't write, language is the air they breathe, the atmosphere they live in, and atmosphere stays bound, to the earth.

Atmosphere also holds moisture which acts like glue. In Egyptian mythology, Atum of Heliopolis creates a son, Shu the God of Air, and a daughter, Tefnut the Goddess of Moisture. In turn, Shu and Tefnut together (pro)create the earth and sky. If language is Shu, then Tefnut must be silence.

Silent, Charlie Chaplin and Mr.Bean become universal instead of themselves.

One, more sound. Collective flogging of sound. With everyone a mouth, speaking exercises anonymity. The cultivation of monofloral bees an impossibility as even the flowers cross-breed and defy isolation in greenhouses. Auroma no longer recognizably distinctive. Faults of the signature too inconsistent to be admissible. Chanting.

Two, more silence.

When the temperature drops suddenly, trees panic; so that they may not be stuck in the frost with their leaves out they go into hyperactivity and in a matter of hours they withdraw all the ink from their leaves, leaving behind a yellow and red dry blaze. Writer, if you want to keep that one greedy hand in the jar; godspeed pulling out in time for a sudden winter.

Notes: Study how bee populations die.

ADVERTISEMENT: All is forgiven - come back home!

Return to tyranosaurus hetero-sapien a-lie-nation? I'd rather hang on to a stump and float out to sea. You won't understand. (= I can't explain.)

You remind me of Trishanku.^{iv} Neither here nor there.

Trishanku was a king of the Solar dynasty, ruler of the kingdom of Ayodhya. He wanted to go to heaven while still in his mortal body. The gods would not let him in. He took his plea to arrogant, easily-flattered Sage Vishwamitra, who said 'yes'. Vishwamitra cloned the Sapta Rishi Mandala (Ursa Major) in the Southern Sky, cloned heaven, and began to clone Indra (the god). That's when Gods & Co. intervened, and after a meeting and a negotiation, everyone agreed to compromise. Trishanku's new, custom-made heaven could stay, but without new gods, and Trishanku would have to remain upside down, looking away from the heaven he had wanted to inhabit. This is a story in the Ramayana, the Indian epic about boundaries.

Heyhowzlife after the handover? Heydidyoutry to vacate when S.A.R.S came out of the barracks?^v

Look who's yellow!

I spy! I spy!

It's a Bird - It's a Rat -

Flea, Flu, Fly!

Message Received – *If you like paper money, you must be dead.*

Reply: Money? What Money?

One day a architect got a lot of people together in a place too small for them and yelled – “sit !” That's how Hong Kong's design came about. Nobody objected. After the buildings went up, one woman who worked for a proper-tease company raised her hand and asked where she was expected to spit, when every place was taken. That was when they invented plumbing. You could tell it was an afterthought.

Money Cat, Greedy Cat.^{vi} The left arm is broken, slung and ringing Gimme Gimme Gimme. The whiskers are too stiff, and the buttocks too large to move.

When I resigned from a job I'd done for years, my colleagues got a teacup designed with a poem from one of my books. In Univers font, 20 point size, along the curve of the teacup, looking like a slogan. It was a one-word poem: Hopemoreness. There was a typo. The teacup became a Hong Kong souvenir: Hopemoreless. A nudge for all the times I was called *Mulley/Malley* instead of *Mani /Money/Munny*, and I knee-jerked: *M-A-N-I = Mother Apple Nothing India.*

A Writers Festival.

Panel: Powers of Observation.

A, E and I discuss the writer as observer. Chaired by O.

A talked about the many varieties of wattles he spotted when he moved to Tasmania and began to obsess about planting native plants in his garden. Surprising how things show up when you look for them.

Audience member complained there was very little opportunity to observe anything in Melbourne, what with the monotony of clean space and concrete flyovers. But in Istanbul, in Mumbai, so much to see!^{viiiviii}

I responded, don't remember seeing anything in Mumbai, but last week, wonder-struck by the varying sizes and types of muffins in the Melbourne cafes.

General laughter.

Doctor cross-cultural Love.

Look at all those sad Asian family girls and those bad Asian Wanchai girls dangling on the arms of the dilapidated mid-life alcoholic white men.

Your: heart-failure. Their: love and laughter.

But some of these couples can't even converse.

Speechless, even sweeter, the body language! If all the Asian women are coupling with all the Western men, then, all the Western women and Asian men are on their way to extinction.

That's absurd. You push things too far.

I ?

Don't want to eat snake-soup.

Be longing!

Grow new tongue, exercise new voice muscles.

Language as route.

English knows me best.

Oh that! Common wealth. The English Patient.

Your roots?

My wings.

Globalisation.

When India 'opened up' in the early 90s, many Indian professionals, on the phone and in meetings with multi-nationals, found out they were as good as anyone else, smelt air, packed portfolio and bought air-ticket. You went to the Middle-East if you were a mercenary, everywhere else if you were internationally-minded. Chose Hong Kong / Singapore/ Bangkok / Kuala Lumpur over New York or London because cheaper flights, lower risks. Besides, S.E.Asia might shape up to be the stop-over, the first leg of the Marco Polo to London and New York.

Has there been any discourse about this particular wave?

No. Everyone's looking East-West. Tell me more about China's adoration of Taiwanese pop music, Taiwan's fancy for Korean toys, Hong Kong's idle craze for Korean soap operas, too much lime in Singapore's cocktail, Japan getting into Indian fabrics.

Localisation.

After the Article 23 march,^{ixx} my black T-shirt met an articulate cabbie in the rear-view mirror.

He said: So, you are one of us.

CHAO S is also a building near the Sheung Wan market. The missing apostrophe fell to indifference in the Chao family.

ⁱ 1947 Indian independence and partition of the country with the formation of Pakistan and Bangladesh and violent regrouping of populations into separate regions based on religion. 1998 Chinese attacked in Indonesia and forced to flee the country.

ⁱⁱ 4th century BC. A legend about the conversation between Alexander and the Indian King Porus (Puru).

ⁱⁱⁱ Tsim Sha Tsui is an area in Hong Kong. The English rendition of a Chinese name is not a good indication of how to pronounce it.

^{iv} A story / legend from the Ramayana

^v SARS epidemic 2002 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) was believed to have originated in China and reinforced Hong Kong people's mistrust of China. Barracks is a reference to People's Liberation Army posted in Hong Kong, but confined to the barracks so as not to intimidate Hong Kong people. Yellow reference to Chinese skin colour. Flu refers to Bird Flu. Paper money is burned as an offering to ancestors, symbolising fortune in the after-life. SARS was found to spread through the poor plumbing infrastructure of Hong Kong multi-storeyed buildings.

^{vi} A Hong Kong icon, used by merchants supposed to be good luck in business. A white paper mache cat, with one arm raised.

^{vii} The Age Melbourne Writers' Festival. Excerpts from a panel discussion, called Powers of Observation, chaired by Peter Goldsworthy. The co-panelist mentioned is John Armstrong who talked about wattles in Tasmania. I was the panelist who brought up the case of muffins.

^{viii} Wanchai is a nightlife-district in Hong Kong, and one of the centers of the city's commercial sex industry.

^{ix} Article 23 amendment

^x A building in Sheung Wan with a broken signage. Chinese names written phonetically in English are a common source of humour for English-speaking immigrants.