

Every April, Singapore poets gather on facebook to bash out 30 poems in response to 30 daily challenges for Singapore Poetry Writing Month (SingPoWriMo). This year's edition, the seventh in the series, saw historical prompts, home-based-learning prompts, junk mail prompts, censorship prompts, and even cursed prompts — and over and above the already excruciating prompts, the poets inflicted new constraints on themselves, writing poll poems and twine poems and poems of every shape and form.

But away from the unbridled enthusiasm of the SingPoWriMo poetic orgy, I've often heard it said by various editors or anthologists that they hate receiving SingPoWriMo poems as submissions. Not that the poems are bad in and of themselves, but they all reek of a certain samey sameyness, usually due to an over-invasive prompt rubbing itself all over the poem like an enthusiastic puppy. The only thing worse than receiving a batch of SingPoWriMo poems, I've been told, is receiving a batch of manuscripts written entirely during a SingPoWriMo, and sent in virtually unedited, hashtags and all.

~~(Most) people shouldn't be producing publication-ready poems in a matter of minutes. A 30-day-30-poem challenge is a fit place for first drafts, or as Koh Jee Leong once told me, to give your poetic muscles a solid workout. Training as opposed to competition (or performance, if you dislike comparing poetry to blood sport.) When you consider its exacting time and content constraints, SingPoWriMo is a terrible place to create work that exists outside of the specific frame of the month-long challenge. Why would you work with artificial lines like "Beside **the killer** Babujan Zoo" — what makes a hundred poems about that special?~~

~~This is why I've floated the balloon several times of a SingPoEditMo — a time after SingPoWriMo for people to sit down, take out the nonsense they churned out just before the clock struck whenever, throw half of it away, and conduct major surgery on the other half — removing the overbearing influence of the prompt, or keeping the idea but rewriting the whole thing, or chopping off some number of lines or words, or changing "a" to "the"...~~

~~But while there's plenty of material available on the internet on how to write a poem — there isn't much that explains how to get from a rough first draft to a polished piece. So the team at *poetry.sg* asked twenty-something Singaporean writers (who are mostly not twenty-something) to edit a poem they'd previously published, and to document their process.~~

*(Ed – Not everyone reading this wants to be a poet, and is interested in the craft of things. Also, this article just revisits several things that you've said in other interviews about SingPoWriMo. This is an exercise in **Ip** by the seaside. Also, this is not SingPoWriMo.com. Rewrite.)*

~~At an earlier part of my poetic career I was knee deep (and upside down) in the editorial process when a friend I'd asked to look at the manuscript told me to give it a rest. At some point, they said, I needed to let it go to print, and become a thing. Because I could revise it hypothetically forever and continually find something to improve on each day, but until it went to print, and became a thing... at this point they said something that I forgot. It didn't matter? It wouldn't be able to gain from engaging in a conversation with the wider public? I would not be able to move on to the next thing? I can't actually remember what they said. I suspect that the "I" in this anecdote was not actually me, and was instead the emerging poets in the first manuscript bootcamp for poetry that I was a fly on the wall for, and the "friend" in question was Cyril Wong. But I could be making all of this up.~~

~~That thing of which I am unclear by the person of whom I am uncertain stuck with me, long after the event of which I am unsure. *Why does something have to go to print in order to become a thing?* That's certainly an interesting question to explore, but not the one I want to deal with today. *Why can something no longer continue becoming a thing after it has gone to print?* Yes, that's the one. I probably imagined it into being, as a strawman to initiate a project against, or a scarecrow for me to shit on. Yet there's a history of poets reaching back to meddle with their own work. Tse Hao Guang provided me a reference from Marianne Moore's *New Collected Poems* edited by Heather Cass White, which explains how Moore extensively revised her pre-1940 poems, and tried to influence their reprints in order to shape the public perception of her work. Reality is illusion.~~

~~But I do believe there's still a certain amount of preciousness about the word in print — some originalist, essentialist idea of an ur-text that is sacreligious to amend or append. Ah, I remember now — I think someone scolded me about adding extra material to the second edition of the *Unfree Verse* anthology, about how I shouldn't be “changing the book between editions”, and forcing readers to buy a second copy to get the extra material (but no one forced them!). Or maybe it was when someone scolded me about “upsizing” *sonnets from the singlish*, and changing the order of the original poems in the process, and likened me to one of those textbook authors who added one chapter and swapped the chapter numbers so they could extort another \$80 per head from a new cohort of university students (it was 50% new content! I wrote a second new book and stapled it to the first one — 2 for the price of 1!!!) Actually, my bad memory could be making all of these anecdotes up, and this is neither here nor there.~~

~~Regardless, this project pokes a finger in the eye of that potentially strawman-shaped idea. So here are twenty poems that were once published in the form of print, and have gone on to evolve, take on new life, and adopt new form. Some aren't half the poem they used to be — some are. Some changed but a single word. I make no assertion that these poems are better poems than their previous incarnations. I only claim that they are changed, and if anything, that is the point of this exercise — to show that poetry is constantly changing, constantly evolving, and in its making and remaking, capable of finding new energy. Whether in the eye of the beholder or restored to the hand of the smith to be reformed, poetry transforms, and retains in its inherent mutability the potential to transform the things around it.~~

*(Ed – Hello, can you source everything properly or not? Half of this piece is just you pretending to remember things. And that last paragraph was laying it on way too thick. It reads like – a heavy fall of rain, **Joshua**. Can you try and move this away from your personal poetic practice, and draw some link to why this is on poetry.sg?)*

Poetry.sg has gone through many changes since it dropped, bawling and bloody, onto the face of the internet in 2015. We have added new waves of writers, including multiple pre-independence writers whose work is hard to find outside of libraries. We have continued to record new videos for the site and its Youtube channel of writers reading their work, including proxy readings for deceased writers. We also included our first wave of Malay-language poets from 2017 under the hand of Annaliza Bakri, and have recently begun work on Sinophone poets with the help of Zhou Decheng and Tan Chee Lay. We have yet to find suitable language editors to bring Tamil-language poetry and poetry in other languages to the site, and we can only afford to fund a certain number of new developments at a time, but please contact us if you are willing and able and we will make the budget work. And most recently, we have turned over an all new team of editors, with heavy representation from NIE educators.

One feature that has been on the to-do-list for *poetry.sg* almost since its inception has been, well, features. Various generations of editors have debated at length whether *poetry.sg* should be an archive / database akin to the Yellow Pages, or something closer to a periodical, with regular feature articles and interviews to attract and engage new readers. These are of course not mutually exclusive – we recognize that *poetry.sg* was always intended to fulfil the functions of an archive, all the way from its fetal pre-conception as the Singapore Poetry Archive (SPARK) under Jen Crawford’s team from NTU. But every now and then, with no commitment to a regular schedule, we may push out a batch of feature articles to activate the site, and if nothing else, to demonstrate that plenty of the poets on *poetry.sg* are alive and still writing(!)

Hence, this is our first feature – a project engaging with the idea of editing poems. Few will disagree that poetry can be improved by editing. But it’s rare to be able to share a “track changes” view of the editorial process, to observe different versions of the same text side by side and see how it developed – and going even further, to read comments from the poets explaining their own edits, whether as in-line annotations or exegeses after the fact. We believe that this review function will cater not only to writers as part of their journey through craft, but also frequent or infrequent readers of poetry – we hope that knowing how the sausage is made will not turn you off from taking the next bite, but instead offer a deeper appreciation of the mouth-feel of each poetic morsel.

So a couple of months ago, an invitation to edit a previously published piece and to write an explanation how and why was sent out to twenty-ish poets featured in *poetry.sg*. A mind-boggling variety of responses came back, which we have divided into three batches for your moderated consumption. Leading off the first batch, Eddie Tay compares not only two versions of the same poem, but also another poem from the same collection with the earlier poem for effect. Felix Cheong shares the transpositions and modulations required when writing in a different key – a musical one. Heng Siok Tian stretches her architectural creativity while conducting renovations within the tight confines of the sonnet form, with its multiple load-bearing walls. Koh Jee Leong boasts the highest exegesis-to-edit ratio by a significant lead (you’ll have to read the piece). Playing no favorites, Loh Guan Liang bifurcates and re-cinematographs the titular poem from his debut collection, “Transparent Strangers”. Pooja Nansi also went back to remember and then dismember a poem from her first collection (which will pass the age of consent this September!) And Toh Hsien Min’s “Recomposing ‘Decomposing’” is the most composed of them all, tracking with handwritten annotations the poet’s rigorous process – a rare treat for the seven other sonnetophiles of Singapore 🍷.

We fiddled around with any number of punny titles (Not The Last Word? Edits Inc.? Revisionaries? I Eat My Own Words?) before Hao Guang proposed “Track Changes”, which the team thought accurately captured the detail of the ubiquitous MS Word reviewing pane (and associated homonym), with its versions and markup and commentary. To point to a loose end, the missing function is the comments thread – all these edits are just a single person’s opinion, and the entirely compromised person who wrote the original poem, at that. We welcome you to interject your thoughts, opinions, or even recommended edits of your own into the comments thread (or at least a comments thread, as *poetry.sg* doesn’t have one...), as a poem can be more than a statement, albeit a revised one – it can be a conversation.