

# “As women have assessed, some things work better dressed”

The fourth part of a Southeast Asia Globe series that shines a light on the region's finest poetry

NATHAN THOMPSON

JANUARY 22, 2014



## The fourth part of a *Southeast Asia Globe* series that shines a light on the region's finest poetry

Compiled by **Nathan Thompson** Illustration by **Mike Stone**

This month the spotlight falls on the work of two young poets from Singapore. Both poems cleverly represent the intricacies of relationships through the use of the mundane themes of food and home.

Joshua Ip's "First Date at Jumbo Seafood" sets the tone with the humorously hyperbolic "Jumbo Seafood"; the words conjure up images of Homer Simpson at an all-you-can-eat shrimp buffet – certainly a "compromising venue" for a first date.

During the date, the man demonstrates his masculinity through his ability to "crack crustaceans, muscle open mussels", while the woman "opts for a course of more restraint". The gent remains unsure about the answer to his "proposition", but the reader knows that his efforts will be in vain. The final couplet delivers a witty aphorism and pun as the woman selects fried fish in soy, concluding "some things work better dressed".

Perhaps the pair at Jumbo Seafood eventually fell in love. We can imagine them as the couple in Jerrold Yam's "Blueprint"; moving in to a new apartment together and beginning the task of rebalancing their public and private spheres in order to adjust to the new arrangement. The poem uses a synesthetic effect to explore the couple's social and temporal situation; grandma's sleep becomes the television's chatter and community gossip becomes the apartment's windows. The layers of social space fall away as the couple begins by arranging curtains and bedspreads and finally make love. The theme of being held and protected rises to the surface; the couple have a safe space in their new apartment, friends and families seem to be part of the physical space, and the final image of cupping hands suggests the birth of children.



\*\*\*

### “Blueprint”

by **Jerrold Yam**

The best part of getting an apartment  
is not to live in it, as newlyweds know,  
but persuading curtains  
to complement bedspreads, then  
entering that strategic harmony,  
aria of migratory birds,  
windows patiently eyeing  
how long it will last. Grandma  
would sleep away television chatter  
in the afternoon, a breeze  
parting curtains to invite sunlight  
on her skin, her body  
another surface to conquer, another  
shelf of want. Cupping  
her hands in mine the way  
a nest hoards its tenants, I can be  
so deliberate as to fill  
spaces she has emptied with herself.

\*\*\*

### “First Date at Jumbo Seafood”

by **Joshua Ip**

a compromising venue, he surmised,  
offering her a wholly shellfish menu,  
the none-too-subtle proposition – here,  
i will peel prawns for you, open oysters,  
crack crustaceans, muscle open mussels  
to tease out sea-sweet, freshly shell-shucked flesh.  
for after all, men take the softest  
pleasures in the taking off.  
she noted, though, his intent to unclothe  
and opted for a course of more restraint,  
requiring less hands-on, practical:  
soft-shelled crab, cereal-crustad butter prawns,  
fish, skin-on, fried gingerly in soy.  
as women have assessed,  
some things work better dressed

**Keep reading:**

[“My country and my people, I never understood”](#) – The first part of a Southeast Asia Globe series that shines a light on the region's finest poetry

[“There is a country and there is no rule”](#) – The second part of a Southeast Asia Globe series on the region's finest poetry

[“Night falls onto a sinful whispering realm”](#) – The third part of a Southeast Asia Globe series on the region's finest poetry

