Rosa redux

WOMEN FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA



edited by
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INTRODUCTION: RECIPES FOR BEING HUMAN vii
Katrina Stuart Santiago

DESPITE ALL ITS HORRORS 01
Maesy Ang

THE WOMAN FROM HÀ TĨNH 06
Linh Le

READING ROSA 11
Manin Ath

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE FULL OF LOVERS 14
Andrea Panaligan

ROSA, BOPHANA, THEARY 20
Phina So

CRIME & CONVICTION IN AN ISLAND-NATION 25
Nabilah Said

THE INTERNAL LIBRARY 30
Amitha Amranand

DEAR MUM, 37
Ma Hnin

THERE IS TIME TO LISTEN TO THE BIRDS SING 43
Sharmilla Ganesan

STILL HERE 48
Marj Ostani

RECIPES FOR BEING HUMAN

A hardbound book of Rosa Luxemburg's letters once landed on my lap as a gift, with a dedication that hoped, in so many words, for a love as revolutionary as that which Rosa and Leo Jogiches had. It was an aspiration that was one-sided for sure, even as it was earnest.

I am one to think myself disconnected from the work of Rosa — the years are too profoundly long, our lives so different. Besides there are more than enough women here, in my context, to provide me enough impetus for hope, enough anger for struggle.

That relationship would end swiftly, painfully — none of it about a revolution of any kind, as it was simply personal.

Rosa would, I know now, understand.

1

The core question on my mind in the unfolding of this project was about the personal. I have always thought of reading as an invitation to inhabit a space, one that demands the use of all our faculties, as it does our time and energy. It is a personal exercise, one that is an introduction to the text, yes, but also to the person who exists in its interstices.

But Rosa felt inaccessible. A monolith of a woman who spoke of theory and practice, of workers' rights and changing the world, beyond any way I could imagine, or make real to me, in the present. Yet as I read through her more famous letters — the ones about her political work which she wrote about with her lovers and comrades — I could sense traces of her person beyond the big words and angry proclamations.

There seemed to be a playfulness as she shifted from the political to the personal — the questions about why there were no letters in response, or why letters were taking long to arrive; the declarations of love and tenderness, the insistence on being treated with a modicum of the same.

Yes, there was the revolution. But there was also, if self-consciously, just the person.

2

I found more of this side of Rosa in letters published elsewhere, distinct from the more famous volumes of her letters that speak of the

political. That these would be letters she wrote in prison was no surprise. Incarcerated, what surfaced was a different set of emotions, which is to say a different Rosa. There were anger and frustration, yes, but in this set of letters there was also quiet introspection and tender observation. That this would reveal itself while she is in entrapment is telling — certainly, anger can be fuel for survival, but so can calm and composure. Serenity is what is in these letters, even as these speak of revolution and change, politics and movement. It is Rosa revealing the value of reconsidering the language, tone, and tenor of the revolution as written, through the experiences and emotions of a woman.

It is Rosa reminding us that there can be other ways.

3

Entrapment was the thread I wanted to pull at through this anthology. I knew that by inviting these women from across Southeast Asia, that this would be an opportunity to tell stories of the present, given our varied oppressions, our different notions of freedom. The invitations were simply based on women whose cultural labor I knew were heavily impeded and affected by shifts in their political contexts; women who work within communities, or who try to build them; women who wage their own battles, maybe more quietly, differently, than Rosa. I sought those stories.

To say that we got more than that is an understatement. In this gathering of women's writing from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, The Philippines, and Vietnam are multiple threads woven into Rosa's prison letters. The present becoming a reversed palimpsest for a far distant past, that which makes visible Rosa, her revolution, and her womanhood.

4

Some started with distance — being introduced to Rosa for the first time, such as with Phina and Manin (Phnom Penh). Yet both shift towards a realization of the ties that bind, if not through similar experience, then through the lives of more familiar women. Maternal histories are also strong in this anthology, specifically in the essays of Ma Hnin (Burma) and Linh (Ho Chi Minh), who tell the stories of their mothers, ones that surfaced in their reading of Rosa, and which reveal narratives of revolutions, disappearance, motherhood — and two daughters living their lives differently but also in parallel to their mothers.

Introspection and self-criticism are in the essays of Sharmillah (Kuala Lumpur), Amitha (Bangkok), and Maesy (Jakarta) — a sensing of their own practices and its limits, but also and uniquely its privilege and possibility: what else can be done, how else the present can be lived. What Marj (Manila) proposes is to navigate gently, wait patiently, as she does in acts of care

and writing, both of which she extricates from entrapment, almost in defiance.

The contemporary forms of political violence, the ones that silence in ways rarely talked about, that fuels rage kept bubbling beneath the surface, are in the essays of Andrea (Manila) and Nabilah (Singapore), speaking as both do of how nation's oppressions seep into one's creative life, one's person.

5

The women in this anthology are part of a Southeast Asian orbit that I have been lucky enough to be part of in the past decade. Some of the women here I nurture years of friendship with; others I've met more recently, across various projects, our connections premised on solidarity. I sought these women's writings for this collection because I felt that each one would engage uniquely, specifically, with Rosa. I sought these stories in hopes that this collection might introduce more readers to contemporary female voices from Southeast Asia, my exposure to which has been critical for my own practice as a writer, as it imbues my sensing of the world with a grounding in the fact of difference, and how these need not be points of departure, as these can allow for intellectual and creative collaborations and confluence that are new.

That these are such personal narratives is exactly the point. Contemporary acts of resistance need not be limited to dogma; neither do these need to

fit into the box labelled as Marxist, or leftist, or activist. This has always been what my friendships across the SEA remind me: that while we might speak of similar experiences, it is the dissimilar ones that become most instructive for self-reflexivity. Something that cannot but seep into one's creative practices and political engagements.

6

In a letter to her friend Tilde dated 28 December 1916, Rosa wrote: "Oh, I don't know how to write recipes for being human, I only know how one is."

I wonder often about humanity. This seems necessary at a time like the present, where violence and oppression, inequality and injustice, have taken over our nations, as these have over our collective experiencing of the world. And this is what I hope this modest anthology reminds us: where we continue to create and critique, we build connections and compassions for the things that matter. And we find our squads, no matter how small, regardless of distance. If we're lucky, it will be a group of women who teach us about being human.

DESPITE ALL ITS HORRORS

I was reading Rosa Luxemburg's letters one morning in my small bookshop in Jakarta, a few hours before it's time to roll up our doors. Here was where I first encountered Rosa back in 2019 — her ideas on social democracy, introduced in Bahasa Indonesia for the first time by an Indonesian male scholar. I remembered displaying the book with its magenta and fuchsia cover on our shelves, beside an anthropologist's account of life in Jakarta's slums and a critique of racialised beauty standards in Indonesia, wondering what Rosa's own voice might have sounded like.

I know now: it sounded like a slap across a century. Sounds of the market that my bookshop calls home leaked in — the hiss of corn fritters frying at the Makassar food stall next door, 90s soft rock from the record shop behind us, the impatient honks from the parking lot. Rosa's reprimand cut through the noise: *You have again totally succumbed to the environment in which you move... Despite all its horrors the world is still beautiful, and if there are no weaklings or cowards it will be more beautiful still.*

From the Wronke prison in 1917, where she was held during the First World War, she chastised her friend Mathilde Wurm for despairing over the state of the German Social Democratic Party, to which they both belonged. Like Mathilde, I

MAESY ANG

too have been guilty of despair. How could I not, when in the world we live, genocides have been livestreamed for years, and each time I turn on my phone I see citizens detained across different countries for exercising the same freedom to dissent that Rosa defended with her life?

Lately I've been wondering whether keeping a small bookshop and press still matters in a collapsing world. We've done what we can in small acts of solidarity: hosting reading circles on the memoirs of women political prisoners from Indonesia's anti-communist purge; placing books on anarchism prominently on display after police confiscated books bearing the word "anarchy" as supposed evidence of criminal intent; starting a zine library to make space for voices that emerge outside the publishing hierarchies — including our own. I wonder whether these are simply ways to feel less powerless or if they can still bend the world, even slightly, towards change. And if not, whether they are still worthwhile.

Rosa's reply was clear. How dare you surrender, there is no excuse for hopelessness when so much is at stake.

As I read more of her letters from prison, I understood that Rosa's wrath towards Mathilde did not come from ease, but from discipline. Hope, for Rosa, was not instinctive; it was something practiced against all odds. She spent her days in solitary confinement, writing to friends she could not see, yet she continued to send encouragement

— to a dying comrade, to a friend whose husband had been imprisoned, to those faltering under the weight of war. Her letters are filled not with manifestos, but with small joys: the half hour each evening spent watering the pansies and forget-me-nots she had planted herself; the comfort of hearing a child singing somewhere beyond the prison walls; the natural science books that helped her identify the marsh bird she once saw years ago in a botanical garden—an antbird, she noted with delight. Rosa refused to let confinement dull her curiosity or capacity to notice. She understood that beauty and struggle were not opposites but companions, that to see the world clearly was, itself, an act of resistance.

Rosa is not the only textual godmother to remind me of this. Mia Bustam, an Indonesian painter imprisoned without trial for thirteen years after the 1965 anti-communist purges, wrote in her memoir that beauty is essential to survival, as vital as sustenance. Like Rosa, she planted flowers in captivity: sunflowers that grew so tall the guards cut them down, fearing secret meetings beneath the stems. She would then lead the planting and care of an entire garden in Kamp Plantungan, working alongside other prisoners to nurture roses, begonias, and the common green grass. She found joy in tending these plants, yet never romanticized her labor. In her own words, she was fully aware that prisoners were treated as milch cows, their work imposed and extracted.

I may never know whether keeping a small bookshop and being a publisher can bend the world towards change. It might be naïve to believe it could; to say it doesn't matter would be surrender — and Rosa has already shaken me out of that. The truth is, the bookshop keeps me. It asks me to stay present: to be deliberate in the titles we choose to feature, to listen when readers talk about the books that moved them, to work with writers we publish so that their words could offer hope. The community we're connected to keeps me as much as the books themselves.

That is the inheritance I have received, whether or not I am worthy of it. Not the heroism of Rosa's intellect or Mia's endurance, but the quiet insistence that life — political, artistic, communal — must be tended even when it seems to wilt. Their gardens remind me that tending, however small, is a form of survival. Keeping this space alive, making room for curiosity and care, is my own kind of resistance.

By the time I roll up the doors, the market is fully awake. The record shop shifts into a sparkly 80s city pop tune, the earthy aroma of kapurung wafts from the Makassar stall, and the sound of visitors chatting rises above the hum of traffic outside. My partner arrives with yellow daisies from the flower stall downstairs, our Saturday ritual. I place them in an old whiskey bottle by the window, above the shelves for books in translation. There are boxes of new arrivals to unpack, a meeting with a writer later in the day,

and the rhythm of readers coming and going. In the evening, we'll eat dinner with the bookshop team after closing, sharing stories and laughter as we discuss our next event. Somewhere in between, strangers will become a familiar face over shared love for a book.

In these small, ordinary moments, I try to see the world as Rosa did: despite all its horrors, it can still be beautiful.

THE WOMAN FROM HÀ TĨNH

My mother was born in 1954 in a small town in Hà Tĩnh Province in central Vietnam, just a few kilometres from the East Sea (known on maps as the South China Sea). As the eldest daughter in a working-class family, from a young age, my mother was expected to help her parents with household chores and eventually babysit her six younger siblings. Back then, before the Second Indochinese War, family sizes in Vietnam were big. Having more than three children was the norm because an abundance of offspring was, and probably still is today, a sign of prosperity. Above that, however, it was a strategic decision: the more children you had, the more help the family would have, and if you lost any child to hunger, disease, or war, the family still had someone to continue the lineage.

Growing up, my most exciting hours of the day were when my mother and I lay next to each other on our bamboo-framed bed. Back in the early 2000s, as coloured illustration books had yet to hit the Vietnamese countryside, my bedtime stories came straight from my mother's memory. She was, and still is, a great storyteller. I remember during those years, I clung to her stories as a source of magical nourishment that would briefly snatch me away from reality. She kept telling me the same thing over and over, of course, at

my fervent request, and I would close my eyelids when she finished, satiated.

My mother would tell me how, as a child, she scored the highest mark for a poem she wrote in her literature class. As the eldest sister, she had to take care of the house while her parents tended the fields. She said that, even as a child, she could feel her hips were slightly slanted as she had to carry a baby all the time. Each time she told this story, she would often say, her tone tinged with deep regret, that had there not been any war, had her family not been so poor, and had she not been the eldest sister, she would have pursued her studies further. In another world, perhaps, my mother would have been a poet, a writer, or a literature teacher. She would often recite passages from *The Tale of Kiều*, an epic poem written by Nguyễn Du that is hailed as a classic in Vietnam. She did so in a singing voice thick with a Hà Tĩnh accent. The accent is so distinct that it betrayed her teeth-gritting effort to blend in during our years living in Ho Chi Minh City. Nonetheless, it was that very accent that made the poem even more lyrical. After all, Nguyễn Du was also from Hà Tĩnh. Each night, she would sing me an arc from the poem, for it had more than 3,000 lines. Despite her interrupted, modest education, during my childhood she was the most brilliant adult that I knew. She would stop occasionally to explain what the word meant, and the ancient anecdote that it references. She spoke at length about how Nguyễn Du, being confined by the limits of words,

still managed to tell thousands of years' worth of history and human life amidst adversity.

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On a recent trip back home, I stumbled upon photographs of her in her late 30s, before my parents lost it all. They were married just before my father was enlisted and went to the South to fight for the Communist army. After the war ended on 30 April 1975, my father, having lost all his paperwork that certified his revolutionary contribution, went back to Hà Tĩnh, and a few years later, he and my mother moved to Gia Lai, a province in the Central Highlands. Their move was a response to the New Economic Zone Programme, a government scheme from 1975 to 1980 calling for people in the North to migrate to the Central Highlands and the South. My father had a successful rock-mining business, while my mother took classes and became a nurse. It was a job that she was so proud of, because, for once, she was no longer a farmer, no longer the girl from Hà Tĩnh with patchy education. When my father's business went under, just a few years after they had me — for which they were "disciplined" for violating the country's two-child policy — we all moved back to Hà Tĩnh. My mother had to cut up all her áo dài — the Vietnamese traditional tunic — and dresses to make shirts and pants that would be more appropriate in the countryside and for her work in the field.

With the prospect of no more hard labour shattered, and subsequently with my father's illness that tormented him every day for the rest of his final two years in Hà Tĩnh, my mother grew old all of a sudden. White hair started appearing, her eyes were clouded by tears, her face was marked by wrinkles from sleepless nights thinking of different ways to make ends meet. Her temper got worse in those years; she would yell at me for any little mistakes; she also started beating me. One time, as I sat in a corner crying, she too collapsed and wailed helplessly. And at nightfall, it was the bedtime stories that sent me to sleep, and her, too. Four years after the day we moved back to Hà Tĩnh, I moved to Saigon with my older siblings. My mother and I would write to each other every week. While every week I told her about my new, exciting life in the city, she told me about her routine week and occasionally, with a sprinkle of gossip from the village.

Unlike Rosa Luxemburg, my mother was neither a revolutionary figure nor a feminist icon. Just like many women in this country, she served as the "strong support" for the men to accomplish big things. Reading Luxemburg's letters, so intimate and raw with emotions, I cannot help but think about my mother. They both are capable of cruel words when facing great disappointment: "You and your kind belong altogether to a different zoological species than I, and never was your morose, peevish, cowardly and half-hearted kind more alien, more hateful, to me than it is now." But, they are also vulnerable and sentimental

when they are in confinement: "Only in the depth of the night, through the gentle breath of the summer air, were spun those mysterious relations between people who never knew or saw each other."

But, unlike Rosa Luxemburg, whose fame and influence through her scholarship and politics encourage a deeper dive into her personal life, my mother is just an ordinary old lady living in Hà Tĩnh, whose letters I no longer keep or remember.

READING ROSA

This is the first time I am hearing about Rosa Luxemburg, and learning about who she was, I started to realize how special this is. To have the opportunity to read some of the most personal letters of an incredible woman, a fighter for justice, is definitely an honor, as it is a privilege. I am also amazed by how these letters, written more than a hundred years ago, somehow feel like it is part of its destiny, its meaning, that it be read by me — an opportunity I wouldn't have imagined in my lifetime.

To me, Rosa's name alone is very beautiful, but it is her whole political life that is inspiring and deeply admirable. To read her personal letters sent from prison, is to feel what she was like as a woman. Her letters paint images of her emotions and feelings. She was behind prison bars, but her mind was flying free. There is poetry in her letters, as these are subtle and detailed, sometimes dreamy, a portrayal of her emotions that seem endless.

I couldn't believe I was reading letters that were written over a century ago. I am reminded that literacy is timeless, human experiences are as fresh as the new works we encounter, pain and joy included.

Rosa's letters to Karl's wife reveal a compassionate and highly empathetic woman. Her vocabulary, her choice of words, were very sensitive and sensible, even as these were also emotional. I read these letters and felt these words deeply. The best writers have the ability to portray the form and shape of emotions so vividly that the reader feels a part of it. Reading Rosa, I didn't feel that it is from a time long ago, a distant land. Instead, these very much felt like letters from yesterday that I picked up from the post office.

It allowed me to imagine how lonely it must have been for Rosa to be so smart, assertive, and righteous. What it must have been like to be a fighter soul, a rebel for freedom, at a time and place where women were voiceless and invisible. She was ahead of her time, which makes me think about the path that has been paved by the previous generations of women who came before me. Reading this, I am reminded of how the fight was started long ago, and that every liberty, freedom, and the rights that women like me and my generation have now, are not automatically-given. It is the fruits of the labor and bravery, the selfless acts of the women who came before us.

Despite some progress made in society in terms of women's rights and gender equality, many issues and oppression against women and underprivileged groups continue to persist to this present time. And that is something I think about: for women of my generation, we need to carry on the work to fight for equality and social justice.

This work is not yet done.

In fact, the world has not moved that much. I see in Rosa's situation from her time, similarities with this present in my own country.

Those who dare to have different ideas, or who dare criticize the state, or stand up, speak up against injustice and corruption are actually putting themselves at great risk. There are many political and environmental activists, as well as unionists, who are being arrested and detained in prison. It happened a hundred years ago, and it still happens now. The system, across generations and geography, still seeks to oppress and silence dissenting voices.

And yet, we continue. Because we are reminded by Rosa that we can, as she did, write so beautifully, even from the darkest of places.

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE FULL OF LOVERS

I was 17 when I learned to wear my pessimism like a badge. Rodrigo Duterte had been president of the Philippines for a year, and rape jokes and the war on drugs increasingly became news cycle mainstays.

That being Filipino meant being perpetually exhausted was not a recent development. Duterte was not the country's first, or even most popular, political strongman. I was angry all the time because things remained hopelessly unchanged, and I didn't know how else to express that I cared. I had grown up believing fathers who explained away their violence like this; "Tatay Digong" was in power precisely because of it.

Anger informed my belief system for years, like I was wearing blood-tinted glasses. I fought with childhood friends who defended Duterte's militarized solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic. I blocked family members who said on Facebook that they were voting for Ferdinand Marcos Jr., son of dictator Marcos Sr., in the 2022 presidential elections.

I learned about feminism like I learned about anything else as a young girl in a conservative country: through the internet. This meant my classroom was always up in flames. Almost

everything I learned, I would come to unlearn in the next few years: the eagle-eyed hunger in which we policed each other's thoughts and behaviors, our stubborn inability to grasp two truths at once. It was feminism by way of an absolutely good identity, rather than a collective struggle that's more concerned about what you do and less about who you are.

My anger, then, was good for nothing aside from brief moments of moral ascendancy. I was angry because I believed I knew better and everyone else didn't. When I was supposed to be standing shoulder to shoulder with others, I was making enemies instead. It was only when I stepped away from algorithmic echo chambers and comment sections that I grounded my activism in something more solid.

In a letter from prison dated June 1917, Polish-German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg wrote in thoughtful detail about little lives she'd glimpsed during otherwise unmoving nights. There were soft quacks of ducks, or a mother cooing a crying infant back to sleep. They were not exactly reminders of the world outside but of life's beauty in general. She said, "The air in my evil-smelling cell seemed suddenly to exhale the fragrance of falling dark-red roses... This is how one can everywhere find a little happiness in the streets and how one is always reminded that life is beautiful and rich."

Rosa, of course, was also angry. She is most known as a staunch critic of reformist Eduard Bernstein, who argued that capitalism was far from collapse and the working class must forego revolution and work towards reform instead. Rosa contended that reforms were simply means to an end; revolution remained the primary goal. Failing to recognize this meant bowing to the false permanence of capitalism.

This isn't to say there is a dissonance between the venomous public Rosa and the vulnerable private Rosa, who studied plants and cared for hurt animals while in prison. But there is a difference between anger for anger's sake — the kind that fuels hopelessness and indifference, which I made my guiding principle when I was younger — and the anger that is ultimately drawn from the same well as love and empathy for others. Rosa was angry precisely because she loved not just those around her, but all living things. "In nature," she wrote in a letter from May 1917, "at every turn I see so much cruelty that I suffer greatly."

I think of growing up in a country regarded as patient zero of the global disinformation crisis, and all the liars and thieves easily rising to power. I think of how angry this has made us. But dig deeper and you see that this anger is ultimately fueled by care and love for nation. We're angry because we don't want our communities to be misinformed, deceived, and taken advantage of.

Anger can drive us to action because it is explosive, a boiling point, but love is what sustains the action. It's what helps us recognize that we have more in common with each other, that we share in the same struggle, than our political loyalties would like us to believe.

Love, also, is what keeps us hoping in spite it all. It's how we reject the alienation and defeatism that capitalism feeds off. In speaking with community organizers or even simply confiding in my peers, I find that I get my hope partly from some grand purpose, sure, but mostly from the minutiae of everyday life, from seeing my loved ones, my community, and wanting so badly for things to be better for them. I'm made courageous by fellow Filipinos in the streets, in the grassroots, both in the present and in decades past, who never saw building a better nation for all as a futile task.

In another correspondence, Rosa assured a close friend that they need not be concerned for her while she remained locked up. "I absolutely do not despair. Dearest, when the situation looks most desperate, history itself always provides the best counsel," she wrote. "The human will must be stimulated to the utmost, and it is our task to struggle consciously with all our might."

The truth is that we feel hopeless, but the truth is we are not alone. The truth is we can and will continue to rely on the people around us. And the truth is we have done this many times throughout our history. Rosa's letters were addressed to

friends, but also perhaps the future: people have always been fighting. And Rosa's love and hope are so potent that they withstand centuries and are able to travel to the other side of the world.

I remember, during the dull hours of a college internship, my colleagues and I got to talking about recent student-led protests against mass arrests during the COVID-19 lockdown. One of them said — a la Eduard Bernstein, now that I think about it — that he doesn't believe in protests or getting organized, because it was too idealistic. What a strange thing to see as a flaw; I would hope the people fighting for brighter futures would remain steadfast in their idealism. Our ability to imagine a better world and recognize the progress we've made throughout history is what gives us hope. And hope is the very thing that pushes us forward. Or at least gets us out of bed.

After all, isn't that precisely what drew me to feminism in the first place: that it was idealistic? That, even in Duterteland, or when history repeated itself with the Marcoses, there remained a hope that all this could be different? It granted me not even permission, but the very ability to imagine our nation as fairer and more truthful.

"Freedom," Rosa famously said, "is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently." So in a world that thrives on our exhaustion, I will be optimistic. Where it expects resignation, I will be imaginative. Of course I'm still angry, especially at the ringleaders and

beneficiaries of the daily injustices to which we are subjected. But never at the ordinary Filipino, regardless of their political loyalties, who has to make do with whatever the elite will let us have. In them I will always see myself, and to them I will always be fiercely loving.

ROSA, BOPHANA, THEARY

I have to admit that this is the first time I have heard of Rosa Luxemburg and had the chance to read a little about her and her letters from prison between 1916 and 1917. Cambodia does not have creative writing education, and critical writing is not encouraged. Reading critical literature is not a norm. Though I consider myself an avid reader and recently committed to reading more Asian books, I must say that I am still behind my fellow writers in the region, especially when it comes to critical literature from the West. Thus, chances to read something like this are rare, and I feel privileged for the opportunity. As a woman and a writer, reading letters written by such a strong and intelligent woman, I wish that we all could write like her — and that we should always write, and write what we can.

My impression of Rosa gravitates towards her unwavering sense of values, which she carried with her even in prison. Reading her letters, studying her words, and hearing her questions to her friends reveal such strong love alongside critical thought and fierce, straightforward critique. Her affection for her friends is so strong that she demands they write back and tell her how they are doing. I also love how she describes the nature around her and creates a sense of nostalgia for those who will receive her letters.

But then I gravitate towards something else. Rosa's struggle, her dream for a just world — these remain sadly relevant today. How strange for a Cambodian writer in her 40s to be reading the letters of a woman from Poland written 150 years ago, and published after her passing, and find these to be both educational and captivating.

After Rosa's letters, I could not help but think of two Khmer women. The first woman is Huot Bophana, a young Cambodian woman imprisoned and executed by the Khmer Rouge for writing love letters, a story that became a symbol of courage and love. With the goal of introducing prisoners' lives and Bophana's courageous life, the director of the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum requested me to write about her life in creative fiction, which I accepted with pride.

Through the novel, many young people decided to visit the infamous S21 Prison, a former high school turned torture center by the Khmer Rouge in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to learn more about her or to pay their respects. In general, younger Cambodians do not wish to visit such a traumatic place, but the book pushed them to learn more about this Cambodian woman who dared call for her freedom to be with her lover.

The similarity between Rosa and Bophana is in their writing of letters. Bophana defied the deadly laws of the killing machine, and despite knowing that the Khmer Rouge would execute anyone

who knew how to hold a pen, Bophana secretly wrote love letters, through a trusted source, to her husband, Deth — a Khmer Rouge comrade who could not love her openly. Although Bophana wrote her letters before she was arrested and imprisoned, her life under the Khmer Rouge, like that of millions of Cambodians, was *already a life in a prison without walls*.

A major difference between the two women's letters though, is that in Rosa's letters, I feel she was hopeful that a good day would come. In one letter, Rosa wrote, "Despite all its horror the world is beautiful, and if there were no weaklings and cowards it would be more beautiful still. But come: you get a kiss after all, for you are still an honest soul. Happy New Year!"

She also wrote, "History itself always provides the best counsel." Her last paragraph in *The Springs of History* resonates deeply with me — it gives me hope.

In Bophana's letters, by contrast, readers can feel her hopelessness growing stronger with each word she wrote.

Another sister which Rosa's letters remind me of is Seng Theary, a fierce fighter for justice and democracy. After being repeatedly harassed by unknown men, Theary conducted several protests and called for justice. In 2022, she was sentenced to six years in prison for conspiracy to commit treason and incitement to create gross chaos

affecting public security. Many human rights defenders believed the cases to be politically motivated. Theary went on hunger strike four times already during her imprisonment. Author of *A Daughter of the Killing Fields*, she has been active in human rights, transitional justice and civic engagement. Such a kind and generous woman, I feel guilty each day for not be able to support her during her prison term.

Rosa's desire to read more books while in captivity reminds me of a recent incident when I learned that some of my books were read and appreciated by a number of female activists who had been arrested and imprisoned. One of the women came to visit me and shared her ordeal and the stories she witnessed inside the cell. She told me how she found my books. At that time, many young female activists were still being held in captivity. I sent a few more books, hoping that the stories could comfort and entertain these sisters while I could do little else to help them.

Taking the matter further, I asked one of the women whether she and others wrote letters during their prison terms. Her answer was yes — of course they wrote. They recorded the inspirations they received from reading books, especially from the courageous and rebellious life of Bophana. However, the activist told me that she could not take those writings out of prison when her term ended due to fear of being used as another excuse to extend her unjust imprisonment.

While writing this, I keep thinking about these similarities: women, prisons, courage, activism, and determination — among Rosa, Huot Bophana, Seng Theary and many other young female activists divided by generation and history and geography. Together, they embody a sense of feminist continuity within me. When writing and reading are possible, these women demonstrate their resistance through words.

Prison, women, letters — expressions through time, from Europe to Cambodia — where pain and struggle never leave us. These connections bind us through history and make it possible for our feminist sisters to remind us that we are one: reading and thinking and hoping, in admiration and amazement. Women's struggle — everywhere! I return to Rosa's words: "History will do its work; see that you, too, do your work." I am grateful to receive such a hopeful sentiment from reading these powerful letters, the defiant letters of Bophana, and the writings and readings of these female activists. And I realize that perhaps reading and writing this personal reflection about these women's lives *is* part of my work — what I am meant to do with these other women's stories.

Like Rosa wrote: "Make your mind easy. Everything will turn out all right."

CRIME & CONVICTION IN AN ISLAND-NATION

I'm thinking about what it looks like to wear my heart on my skin.

You see, for the longest time I held everything close. As a child growing up in the 1990s, my world opened up the moment I knew how to use my family computer. It made a racket powering up, and then a louder racket as it connected to the dial-up internet, but I kept my activities to myself. Everything was clandestine — from the mundane searches executed on Ask Jeeves, the precursor to Google search, to my clumsy Internet Relay Chats with school boys around Singapore. My education on how the world worked, the jokes that found broad popularity, what sexual proclivities I found repulsive or otherwise, was shaped in the quiet and the dark.

My family called me "Miss I-Don't-Know". It was my boilerplate response to any question, and not because I didn't know the answers. My true reply would have been meandering and hard to articulate. I was all colour and nuance and no firm opinions. I was the child who'd pick up leaves and make up songs about going to the provision shop, that 11-year-old who scribbled in the margins and wrote compositions about sharing a semi-detached house with my six best friends. I would proudly sing songs of patriotism every time

Singapore's National Day rolled around, my arms around my classmates.

I had no political awareness, and even less political courage.

30 years later, I will see a picture of three minority women from Singapore walking out of court, each resplendent and powerful in their Palestinian keffiyeh. They are being investigated for allegedly leading a pro-Palestinian march towards the Istana, the residence of the President of Singapore. Scrutinising the photo, I sense in their faces a lack of fear. What is it like to be so sure of your convictions, that you would be prepared to go to jail for it?

What is it like to be ready to die for your beliefs?

I read Rosa Luxemburg's letters to her friend Sophie, and wonder about her elaborate musings on foliage green and verdant, and her treatises on birds. She writes of songs and great works of literature; I think about her strident convictions amidst a gentle nature. The wide expanse of the mind — its ideas, its capacity to hold nuance, the depth of feeling it can nurture — stands in such contrast to the confines of a prison cell.

In Singapore, most people are scared to be definitive. It is closely tied to our relationship to democracy — we've mostly given up our political agency to the ruling party. In return we get relative peace, economic growth, and regular

handouts. The nation momentarily shakes off its slumber once elections come around, when we dare to shout our grievances out loud in political rallies, but stay meek at the ballot box. In a country marked by pragmatism, change comes at a glacial pace.

We're a nation of neutrals, playing both sides like a perpetual middleman. We dress in Uniqlo and casuals issued by the Army. We're law abiding, and don't want to draw attention to ourselves. When I wear clashing prints or an outfit that's too loud, I wonder whose tastes I might offend. Would they call me "obiang" or "obit" — garish, offbeat, too much? There is a median in this country for almost everything, and to deviate isn't the standard.

Hello polis?

I'm remembering the days before cable television, when an entire generation grew up on Crime Watch, watching police officers talk about real-life cases, followed by a cheesy re-enactment. It was anodyne and seemingly harmless, but it solidified who we thought of as being right, and who was wrong. When kids misbehave, we say "police will catch you". In a country where caning is still a form of corporal punishment, discipline was the consequence of deviation, and fear of it became deterrence.

I am an artist, and words are my only medium, but even then I hide behind them for safety.

Trees were hope. Did I know then that they were already setting the olive trees in Gaza on fire? That they would burn every living thing? The truth is, I did not have the capacity to imagine.

I did not name the place. I did not name the people.

I did not name the square. I did not name the violence.

I smoothed over everything I did not know.

Excerpt, *Conjuring A Square* (2025)
by Nabilah Said

Without specificity, my words are toothless. They absolve me. I long to express my conviction without fear of reprisal, of being reported, of being denied a grant, a job, a project. Have I sanded down my moral backbone, thinking my poetry insulates me from being called out? I try to amplify the social media posts, donate where I can, but still something separates me from the ones who lay it all on the line.

What price my silence? As an adult, I'm no longer Miss I-Don't-Know. I have a point of view, yes, but I don't know if I have much courage. The truth is, I have tried. I have revealed my cards before, only to realise much too late that I was never part of the game. These days, I am often tired.

I have also become superstitious and a little spiritual, looking for signs around me. I've made

up a rule that whenever I spot a yellow bird, it is a sign of good luck. I try to stay present so I can catch that flutter of yellow in the trees. Some days, that's enough hope to hold onto. Other times, I wonder if there is a policeman in my head with a gun to my throat. It is my own personal violence, my body eating itself from the inside. Sometimes it masquerades as burnout. My mind gets mushy from overthinking.

Today my heart has been reskinned. It has been wounded, pierced by emotion. It has felt the heat of injustice, of being asked to speak but not listened to. It has seen the sneer of cynicism, dallied with power, and ached for others with no name. It is no longer heart-shaped but some other thing. I've let it bleed out.

Singapore's former, and only female President writes Facebook posts condemning the violence in Gaza but she no longer holds office so her moral conviction is received like a preserved sour plum — beloved, acrid, and at most, tolerated. I think about the power of her words. She gets thousands of "likes", but there is not much she can do to shift sentiments. I wonder if she misses being in the corridors of power, her words having purchase.

I am no longer a child. Anger exists, but it burns silently, as dark embers.

THE INTERNAL LIBRARY

I am writing this surrounded by my own books. At my fingertips is a gateway to much more information than I will ever need in my lifetime. I am free, in my own home. I can, with a few clicks, purchase a digital copy of a book. I can put on my shoes, leave my place at will, take a bus, a train, or a walk to one of the bookstores or libraries in Bangkok and purchase or borrow a book. I can contact people near and far, my messages to them and theirs to me not screened by any officials or authorities. I am free.

Since I've been assigned the Rosa Redux project, my mind keeps returning to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and that suffocating feeling I had reading it in high school that the handmaids, living in the totalitarian society, were forbidden to read and write. To be with one's own thoughts without any outlet. To be without other people's words and thoughts to echo, reflect, or wrestle against one's own. To be without the comfort of stories. It is to be stripped not only of power. It is to be stripped of an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual refuge. It is to be made homeless within one's own self.

My mind has also kept returning to Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail and how I felt reading it for the first time. I was in awe of the

knowledge he seemed to have at his fingertips — the sentences he seemed to know by heart from great thinkers and philosophers. He was in jail, without paper or pen of his own, without access to a library, let alone the Internet like today, and with limited and controlled contact with the outside world. Somehow, he was able to write as if he was sitting in a library.

It's always fascinating to see what a person reaches for within their vault of memories when they're living in one state of imprisonment or one form of exile or another. Whose thoughts and words do they keep within them to turn to for refuge?

Pondering the state of his own imprisonment as a sufferer of locked-in syndrome, Jean-Dominique Bauby recounts in his memoir, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, how his friend Jean-Paul K, after being taken hostage by the Hezbollah, spent years repeatedly reciting the wines of the Bordeaux Classification of 1855 to keep his sanity. In a foreword to Pablo Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, novelist and poet Stephen Dobyns relates a story told to him by a friend who was present at a Neruda's reading in Venezuela in the 1960s that was attended by over 600 people. When a request for one of his early poems came, Neruda apologized for not having a copy of the poem with him. But he didn't need to reach into any part of his memory to satisfy the request. According to Dobyns's friend, more than half the audience stood up and recited the poem to its author.

Reading Rosa's letters led me to revisit these stories. It led me to learn about her herbarium, a hobby she began as a child and continued in prison when permitted, which led me to learn of other great thinkers' herbariums, including that of the famous recluse and poet Emily Dickinson. All these stories, along with Rosa's letters, provoke the same question in me: how can we build a library within ourselves?

In the Internet age, we seem to have outsourced the act of remembering and memorizing to our phones and other digital devices. We feel less need to commit things to memory ourselves. Look at the alarming speed at which so many of us embrace AI. Some of us don't seem to even think twice before outsourcing our own thinking, creative process, and expression to this new technology. Some even rely on it for a simulation of intimate human connection.

When we so easily give up our freedom to think and create for ourselves, what will this eventually mean for our inner lives? How can we resist this slide into technological dependence, into this dehumanization of the intellectual and creative endeavor, into, essentially, soullessness?

The Covid pandemic gave me a firsthand lesson in the fragility of human civilization. It taught me that we can never take our fundamental freedoms for granted. Not even if we have the fortune of living in a democratic society. Today, we are witnessing daily how freedom can be

suddenly taken away from people living in liberal democracies, sometimes by their own governments. But sometimes, they are hounded into silence and ostracized by their employers, colleagues, classmates, neighbours, or a faceless Internet mob for their opinions and speeches.

If your freedom was suddenly taken away, what would you have left inside yourself? Could you remain rooted in yourself? Is there an internal library where you can take refuge?

In Rosa's letters, I found a person with a rich internal library. This was not a person whose life was fixated only on politics. She had deep bonds with her friends. She had boundless curiosity for living things, poems committed to memory, a poetic sensibility, and observant eyes and ears. Reading her letters, I sensed a profound hunger and love for life.

From her letters, I learned what it means to construct an internal library. To construct an internal library means to form, cultivate, and sustain friendships, to observe and study the world around you, to develop a relationship with the natural world, to read, to memorize poems or lines of words that strike you in the heart, to learn to communicate with others through words, to write, to write to those you love. These are skills. More importantly, these are human skills. We should learn, wrestle with, and hone these skills ourselves, alongside other human beings. They cannot, should never, be outsourced to a machine.

A few months ago, I returned once again to Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair.* This time, I was struck by something in Dobyn's foreword that I had forgotten: Neruda's open letter in a newspaper in response to the negative reviews of his first collection of poetry. He wrote, "I undertook the greatest departure from myself: creation, wanting to illuminate words."

I was excited by the notion of the act of creating, of writing, as a departure from the self, but I also struggled to understand what he meant. Don't writers and artists turn inward to create? I didn't expect to find understanding through Rosa's letters, but they ended up illuminating this notion of departure for me. What I love most about her letters are the observations of her environment and her multifaceted curiosity. Even when her sight was blocked by her cell, she listened and collected the voices and sounds around her to nourish and soothe herself.

Perhaps this is how writers like MLK, Neruda, and Rosa came to write not only to and about others, but also to write and fight *for* others. Departure from self.

Indeed, writers and artists turn inward to create. But first they must turn outward so they can meaningfully turn inward. There can be no internal library if a writer locks herself within herself. There can only be a meager internal library if a writer confines her mind to only one intellectual realm. She must depart from herself

and travel into the minds and souls of others to understand them. She must stand at a distance from herself to understand herself. She must commit to departing and roaming free.

I say "commit" because freedom is a responsibility and a commitment that I am often too afraid to take up and confront. Already content with the internal library I've created thus far, I sometimes lock myself in it. If I depart from myself to roam free, more often than not, I roam freely into new territories that look and feel safe. I sometimes mistake our convenient access to information and the comfort of global connection for freedom. They provide many benefits and offer certain kinds of freedom. If I'm not careful, however, they do bind me tighter to my internal refuge and remove me further from the physical world.

Deep down, I know that departing from oneself and roaming free takes more than reading books about unfamiliar topics and talking to new people with interesting thoughts. It's not all beauty, poetry, the friendly side of nature, and palatable flaws of other human beings.

To roam free as a writer also means to cultivate the courage in yourself to step into territories that appear hostile to values you hold sacred. To depart from yourself as a writer means to try and take your ego and belief system out of conversations with people who belong in these hostile territories.

Building an internal library, I realize, is more than just stocking it with memories of loved ones, fragments of beauty, and edifying facts and ideas. It's more than just creating a refuge in preparation for dark times. It's about equipping it, equipping oneself, with the skills to venture into terrifying spaces, confront ugly thoughts and ideas, and discuss and argue with the people who hold them. Since civilization is always vulnerable to collapse, a writer's internal library must contain skills for maintaining civility in battlegrounds of ideas.

Too often, I lack the courage to do this. My internal library is still lacking in these skills. But I must force myself to commit to building them. I see no other choice.

DEAR MUM,

We live in a world where hope and uncertainty often walk hand in hand. Yet, in the middle of it all, there is something that endures — love.

A love for myself, a love for you, and now, a love for the child growing inside me. It is this love that anchors me when everything else feels fragile and shifting.

I was never someone who planned far ahead. When people used to ask me, "Where do you see yourself in five or ten years?" I always avoided the question. Maybe it was fear — fear of disappointment if things didn't go as I hope, fear of losing the freedom to follow life as it unfolds. I preferred to live in the present, to move where life led me, without clinging too tightly to the idea of what should be.

But something inside me is changing now. As I prepare to bring new life into this world, I find myself thinking about the future in a way I never have before — not just my own, but my child's, and somehow, yours, too.

I wonder: when you were carrying me, did you think about your own future? Did you have plans or dreams, or were you, like me, simply moving through each day with hope and uncertainty

as your companions? Did you talk to me, as I sometimes whisper to my child now — quiet promises, small jokes, and plans for the day.

I'm writing this from Chiang Mai — a place that has gently become one of my homes, even as a part of my heart still belongs to Melbourne. Since I became pregnant, people have asked me again and again, "Where will you give birth? Are you going back to Australia?" But I've decided to stay here. My partner won't be able to come to Australia, and what I want most is for our baby to be born into a world where both her parents are present. It's not about having the best hospital or the most advanced healthcare system. It's about something far more essential — love, connection, and togetherness.

Home, I've realised, isn't always a place. Sometimes it's a person, a shared heartbeat, a feeling of safety in someone's eyes.

Lately, I've been thinking of you more than ever. You weren't in your hometown when you carried me either, and you weren't surrounded by family. What or who decided where you would give birth? Did you have help? Were you lonely? Were you afraid?

I was born just two days before the 8888 Uprising — a time when Burma was alive with both hope and fear, when people filled the streets to demand freedom. I've read the history, but I can only imagine what it must have been like to give

birth amidst such chaos. How did you reach the hospital? How did you bring me into a world that was trembling with both revolution and despair? I know Dad wasn't with you when I was born. What was that like for you, Mum — to be alone at such a moment? Did you have a plan, or were you, too, simply holding on to love and courage in the middle of uncertainty?

When I lived through the 2021 coup in Yangon, I saw firsthand the madness, fear, and violence that engulfed our streets. I remember how each day felt like a question without an answer. But then, I wasn't carrying a child inside me. I can't imagine the strength it must have taken for you to endure that kind of world while nurturing new life. You've never spoken about it, not really. Maybe I was too afraid to ask before, or maybe you chose silence because words could never contain what you lived through. But now, as I carry my own child, I feel I am beginning to understand your silence.

Maybe it wasn't silence at all — maybe it was your way of protecting me from the heaviness of history, from the pain of what you endured. Or maybe it was simply the language of survival — the unspoken strength passed down from mother to daughter.

You were the wife of a revolutionary — a freedom fighter. That title sounds so grand, but I know the reality must have been heavy, full of sacrifice. I know one of those sacrifices was me — leaving me with Grandmother while you stood beside

Dad and his cause. I used to think of that as a story of distance, but now I see it differently. Maybe that, too, was an act of love — trusting that Grandmother would care for me so you could fight for a future you wanted me to grow up in.

Still, I wonder: what other dreams did you have to let go of, Mum? And Beside becoming the supportive wife of an armed group fighter like the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF). What parts of yourself did you have to set aside for the sake of a larger fight?

"In 1988 upraising, thousands of female students abandoned their university degrees to lead protests, many eventually fleeing to the jungle to join armed groups like the (ABSDF). In 2021 Spring revolution, Gen Z women similarly walked away from medical, engineering, and arts degrees to join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), choosing a "gap year" that has now lasted nearly five years. Women have repeatedly set aside their individual identities — their "personal flights" — to fuel the collective struggle for freedom."

Now, I find myself walking my own version of that path. I wear many hats — activist, cultural organizer, curator, producer, and executive director of A New Burma, an organization that tries, in its own way, to empower our people through art, creative resistance, and advocacy.
And soon, I will wear another hat — mother.

There are moments when I worry that I am not ready, that I won't know how to balance all these roles — how to nurture both a child and a cause. But then I think of you. You didn't have the privileges I do. You didn't have safety, resources, or stability. Yet, somehow, you made space for both love and purpose. You showed me that motherhood doesn't mean giving up who you are — it means expanding your capacity to love and to endure.

My Australian passport gives me a kind of privilege — a small but real power that allows me to help our people from a distance. It's something I never take lightly. I try to use it with intention, with responsibility. Sometimes it feels like standing in two worlds at once — one that offers me comfort and safety, and another that pulls me back with pain and longing.

But even across these worlds, I feel your presence. It's in the way I move, the way I speak, the way I love. It's in the rhythm of my heartbeat and the shape of my hands. It's in the courage I didn't know I had until now.

Maybe this is what motherhood really is — carrying not only a child, but also the stories, the memories, the hopes, and the unfinished dreams of those who came before us. Maybe this is what connects us across time and distance: the quiet strength of women who love fiercely even when the world around them is uncertain.

Thank you, Mum — for your resilience, your sacrifices, your love that asked for nothing in return. Thank you for showing me what it means to be strong, not through words, but through the life you lived.

As I prepare to bring my child into this world, I hope to honor you — to pass forward the courage and tenderness you planted in me. I hope my daughter will one day feel the same invisible thread tying her to the women who came before her — a thread woven from love, endurance, and hope.

And maybe one day, she too will write to me — asking the same questions, wondering about her own future, and realizing, as I do now, that love is the only answer that truly matters.

With all my love, always,
Your Tha Mi Gyi

THERE IS TIME TO LISTEN TO THE BIRDS SING

A few years ago, I made a remark about a local human rights activist that I have since come to regret and even feel ashamed of.

I was well aware of how committed she was to her cause, and how much she put her own well-being on the line for her work. But I also followed her on Instagram, where she typically posted about her love for fashion and make-up, along with beautiful, meticulously posed, often sexy photos of herself. She also posted frankly and openly about her emotional highs and lows, not just in relation to work but her personal relationships, too.

My remark? I said privately to a colleague that I found it difficult to take this activist seriously when she chose to portray herself in this way. That she seemed shallow and frivolous.

I thought about this remark often while reading the letters Rosa Luxemburg wrote to friends during her imprisonment in Wronke and Breslau in Poland, between 1916 and 1917. And I thought about how much we've been trained collectively to associate certain qualities with "seriousness" and "commitment" especially when it comes to advocacy and social justice.

We think of hardness. Solemnity. Ideological rigour. The ability to put political necessity over personal feeling. It means staying focused on what "matters" — the cause, strategy, impact — and not getting distracted by things that are soft, aesthetic, beautiful or emotional.

And it's no coincidence that most women who want to be taken seriously, often work hard to delineate these qualities to only specific parts of their lives, and specifically not in their work.

In my own career, while on assignments as a journalist, I used to worry about wearing colours that were too bright, or patterns that were too splashy, lest I come across as giddy. As a radio presenter discussing current affairs and politics, I was ever-wary about laughing too much on air and getting accused of "giggling"; or being so affected by certain issues that the listener could tell I was tearing up. Being an arts critic, I've often tempered my emotional responses to works I review, worried that I'd be accused of losing my objective eye.

To put it plainly, we're taught early that these qualities are too "feminine." We learn to associate them with weakness, self-indulgence, or frivolity — especially when expressed by women. The same tenderness or love of beauty that might be admired in art is treated as a liability in activism or intellectual life.

Seriousness, in other words, has long been gendered masculine.

And then there's Rosa Luxemburg.

One of the most formidable Marxist theorists of her generation, imprisoned for her opposition to the First World War, a woman who held her own in brutal ideological debates with Lenin, and who would be killed for her politics in 1919.

And what does she write about from prison? Birds. The quality of a child's laughter echoing from the street outside her cell. Flowers. Cloud formations. Opera arias. Her anguish at seeing a beetle, still alive, being eaten by ants. The precise differences between the songs of the various birds she observes.

And yet, these are not all she writes about. Her letters are also full of her polemical take on socialism, her staunch opposition to war, and her absolute commitment to her cause. But strikingly, she refuses to separate these two seemingly opposite aspects of her life. In fact, she views them as necessarily intertwined.

In her letter to Matilde Wurm in December 1916, she says: "See to it that you remain a *Mensch*... To be *a Mensch* means gladly to throw one's whole life, when need be, onto the 'great scale of destiny.' And it means, as well, to find pleasure in each clear day and each beautiful cloud."

And in a letter dated January 1917 to Luise Kautsky, she writes: "...And besides, everything is still left that otherwise gave me joy: music and painting and cloud and botanical excursions in springtime and good books and Mimi and you and many other things besides — in short, I am immensely rich and intend to remain so until the end."

Luxemburg's letters were also deeply, unabashedly emotional. In that same missive to Wurm, she displays unvarnished anger and disgust towards a group of men with whom she disagrees ideologically: "...never was your morose, peevish, cowardly and half-hearted kind more alien, more hateful, to me than it is now... I warn you that as soon as I will be free to taste fresh air again I will chase and hunt your company of frogs with trumpets, with cracking whips and blood hounds..."

Then there's one of her most famous letters, written to Sophie Liebkenecht in December 1917. Here she writes with aching distress about seeing a military wagon being pulled by a team of water buffaloes , and the savage treatment inflicted on the animals by a soldier.

It's clear that her sensorial, emotional engagement with the world was as much a part of her revolution. If the personal is political, then so is the soft, the aesthetic, the beautiful, or the emotional. Throwing your life onto the scale of destiny and noticing beautiful clouds are both

shown as equally human, of being the kind of person capable of fighting for liberation.

These are not a contradiction of her politics, but its deepest expression. She refused to divide herself into compartments — the thinker, the revolutionary, the feeler, the lover of birds.

After all, how can one commit themselves so firmly to society and change, if they did not first see some beauty in it to hold on to? How does one stare at some of the world's deepest injustices and not respond emotionally? And how does one fight for freedom if one does not embrace wholeness?

I realise now that my dismissal of the activist was rooted in my own discomfort and resentment of having to perform this "right" kind of seriousness. When we demand this false hardness from those in social justice movements — especially women — we don't just risk excluding people. We risk losing the very qualities that make sustained struggle possible: joy, wonder, empathy, tenderness, the capacity to be moved.

Luxemburg understood this instinctively. That her attention to beauty, her love for nature, her deep feelings, and her focus on life's smallest details — that all these constitute radical acts of care. That even amidst a revolution, there is time to listen to the birds sing.

for Rosa, who refused despair, and taught us to love the world anyway

Dear Rosa,

You once wrote that one must "find pleasure in each clear day and each beautiful cloud," and that to be a *mensch*, to be fully human, is to keep one's heart clear and serene, despite everything. I've been trying.

Recently someone asked me, "Let's list all our near-death experiences," like it was a game. I jumped up in my seat. "Finally," I thought, "my Olympic sport."

I don't wear it like a badge of honour, but I've had my fair share. A shining report card in that department, if you will. So without missing a beat, I rattled off some of my best hits, almost comically, as if near-misses with death were just punchlines I deliver on an average Tuesday.

And I'm not going to bore you with my stories of assault and violence, of all the cruelty that women continuously face. The same ones you knew in your time, Rosa, they still persist now.

It's a sad, exhausting inheritance. You, more than anyone, would understand that. The thing is, that moment of listing the brushes, the closeness

to endings, it comes back in the random and mundane. This time, while I was standing in line at the pharmacy, waiting for medications. Of course it did.

I scanned the room. People around me were doing the same thing. Quietly tending to their own invisible needs. There was a strange kind of recognition in it all. I've been thinking a lot about these lately: collapse, care, and the labour of surviving. The management of illnesses, the labour and pain, how caregiving has taken on a fuller role in my life. Not just receiving it, but offering it, too.

In the same breath, I've been joking a lot about going to medical school. With all the time I've spent in hospitals over the years, I might already qualify for clinical hours as a resident.

I rarely speak of this because medical jargon doesn't fit right in my mouth. As a writer, it often feels like science and language operate on different frequencies. Even now, with all my supposed fluency, there are diagnoses I still don't understand. Words that never quite translate. However, what I do know is this.

At sixteen, I was diagnosed with my first mental health disorder, the beginning of the circus. Between then and 19 were bed years, the soft rot of depression. At 23, I lived inside the prison of an abusive relationship. Love came laced with fear and fists. I learned then that leaving was a form of staying alive.

Twenty-four was a year of tests, scans, and needles — a body under surveillance for chronic illnesses I still can't bring myself to name. They all sound too final, too clinical, and naming them doesn't change the story anyway.

Hospitals are strange limbos: a blur of fluorescent lights, waiting rooms and white coats, medication swaps and follow-ups, a discreet race against my own unravelling. A place where time stalls until you're deemed better.

By 27, I burned out completely and got severely sick. Then ADHD arrived, fashionably late, naturally, now that it's having its cultural moment. My brain obviously didn't want to miss out on the trend.

My doctors told me to start taking my recovery seriously, as if I hadn't been auditioning for it my whole life. It felt, honestly, like this has been a decade-long process of recovery. And somehow, through it all, I managed quite well. I lived richly, brilliantly, and abundantly.

I'm 29 now. Two years into what feels like a new chapter. Some days, I feel like a person. Capable, functional, bright again. Then there are days when I feel like a task list with a pulse.

There's also caregiving now. Not just for me — for others. For my parents. For my father, specifically. I moved back home to rest and ended up becoming the one who holds things together. It's humorous, in that twisted way life tends to be.

To have spent a decade learning how to care for my body, only to be handed another's body to tend to. It's one of life's cruel ironies. One of the hardest things I've done. I think of you in this, Rosa, the ways you wrote and turned confinement into clarity.

Caregiving can be its own kind of imprisonment, a soft cell made of love and duty. I do it willingly, but that doesn't mean it's easy.

Because then there's the larger machinery of the medical industrial complex. Being both patient and caregiver has forced me to see how broken it all is. How little dignity there is in being sick.

If you are poor, you end up in public hospitals that move at the pace of decay. If you go private, you're handed a spreadsheet of numbers that determine whether you live. Everything comes back to money. Survival as a transaction.

How do we not have affordable healthcare? How are hospitals not properly funded? Every conversation circles back to the same question: how much is a life worth, and who gets to decide? I have never been more aware of how cruel this system is. It cages people in exhaustion, paperwork, and waiting lists, while pretending to be about care.

This machinery, though polished and polite at surface, feels structured and designed. Each signature becomes a confession that you can't afford to get better. There's no morality in the system, only maintenance.

You once wrote that "out of the moral filth through which we are wading, this huge madhouse in which we live, may all of a sudden become something stupendously great and heroic; must inevitably transform." I'm holding onto these lines.

It makes me sick to see how we've built a world where compassion is rationed. How greed is rewarded and empathy taxed. I often think of how tired everyone is. How the people we ask for help are also just surviving.

Yet still, even with all the horrors of broken systems and politics, I keep finding small acts of goodness: a neighbour who shares a meal, a friend who checks in, a colleague who offers a ride. These are the gestures that keep me from giving up.

I'm learning to hold my ground. To meet the world with composure, grace, and tenderness. I remind myself: don't let the rot make you hard. Don't let the exhaustion hollow you out.

If I am to remain hopeful, then I must still believe that care can be restored. That everyone deserves dignity. Proper care. Where human beings are seen in their fullness rather than a statistic or a case number.

So I'll keep holding on. To all acts of joy, to the people who remind me that care still exists. All those whose hands keep others alive. I honour them. And perhaps, in some way, we all are nurses and doctors too. Each trying to save one another through our small, ordinary mercies.

No one's coming to save us, Rosa. But the ones already beside us — our friends, families, communities — might be the answer. Might be enough. If we keep choosing to care, to look after one another, that's how we stay alive. That's how we set each other free.

Funnily enough, the same one who challenged me to list my near-death experiences asked me one night, "If you could live the most perfect version of your life, are you living it now?'

I closed my eyes. I thought about my body. About hospital hallways. And said: "I've lived a full life. I've had big, tiny, ridiculous dreams that came true. I've had wonderful people. But goddamn, I do wish no one was sick."

I know I won't be doomed forever but this is my life now. A lifelong work. With a bit of a stutter and trailing off thoughts I continued: "I wonder what it would be like to not know this life..."

I imagine another version of this world many times. One where I don't keep a binder of prescriptions. Where my phone doesn't have a section for doctors' numbers. Where I don't carry the intimate knowledge of medical bureaucracy. One where I'm not always calculating how much energy I have left before another test, another flare-up, another emergency.

Thankfully, I am, by most metrics, "high-functioning." Which is its own quiet heartbreak.

I've been asking myself more and more lately: What does care actually mean? What does it cost?

What does it return? To whom do we give our time and resources to?

The answers keep evolving. I'm so afraid of endings that I don't know how to close this neatly and that's the truth of it. Life doesn't tie up cleanly, it just keeps unfolding.

Still here, somehow. Still keeping score in the Olympics of staying alive.

You're not alone in the waiting room.

With tenderness,
Marj

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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MA HNIN is a Burmese–Australian human rights activist and the founder and director of A New Burma, an organisation committed to empowering Myanmar's marginalised and exiled communities through creative resistance, advocacy, and public engagement. Working at the intersection of art, activism, and exile, she leads initiatives that elevate the lived experiences and political struggles of Myanmar's people. Emerging from Myanmar's global diaspora of artists, activists, and cultural workers, A New Burma curates collaborative exhibitions that travel internationally, creating platforms for art-based resistance, women- and youth-led storytelling, and evidence-based regional advocacy, amplifying the voices of those challenging military oppression and advancing movements for justice, memory, and democratic futures. Ma Hnin's dedication to this work was recognised with her inclusion in the 2022 Victorian Honour Roll of Women as a Change Agent.

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ROSA REDUX is imagined as a recurring volume that gathers together women writers, artists, and cultural workers to engage with the life and works of Rosa Luxemburg, on the one hand as a way to reconsider her icon, and on the other as an entry point for discussing contemporary struggles of women.

This first volume gathers women from Southeast Asia, speaking across the contexts of Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, The Philippines, and Vietnam.

Rosa Redux
Women from Southeast Asia
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"Oh, I don't know how to write recipes for being human, I only know how one is."

Rosa Luxemburg,
writing to her friend Tilde,
28 Dec 1916

essays by
Maesy Ang
Linh Le
Manin Ath
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