YZ Chin, *Though I Get Home*. New York: Feminist Press, 2018. 216pp. ISBN: 9781936932160.

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YZ Chin's debut collection, *Though I Get Home*, comprises fourteen intertwined stories that delve into life in Malaysia, blending the personal and the political, and raising difficult and often provocative questions about self-identity and the identity of Malaysia as a nation. At the collection's shifting centre is the story of Isabella Sin, who is detained without trial in Malaysia's notorious detention facility for allegedly writing controversial poetry. Chin's collection weaves together personal and national history, exploring issues such as social justice and political freedom in a racially fraught society.

A Malaysian currently living in the US, Chin draws inspiration for her collection from the social and political landscape of her home country. The book makes a significant contribution to contemporary Asian American literature, and is the winner of the inaugural Louise Meriwether First Book Prize founded by the Feminist Press and *TAYO Literary Magazine* to support the work of women writers of colour. There is much to admire in this collection which offers an intimate look into Malaysian culture and politics. Most of the stories are set in Malaysia and address our immediate times, referencing events that took place in the Malaysian political scene in the years leading up to the book's publication, including the outcome of the 2013 Malaysian general election, the Bersih rallies, and the sodomy conviction of former deputy prime minister and current opposition party leader, Anwar Ibrahim, in 2015.

The strength of the collection lies in Chin's daring choice of subject matter and her nuanced treatment of such difficult themes as state- and self-imposed censorship. In "Though She Gets Home", Isabella Sin moves from the small town of Taiping to the larger city of Kuala Lumpur, where she participates in her first political protest, and is arrested after being wrongfully identified as the author of seditious and "[i]nflammatory" poems (47). Five stories, interspersed throughout the collection, trace her brutal experiences in detention, from her arrest to her eventual release. The attempt to silence her awakens in her a fresh passion to write, and finds her embracing a new identity as a "poet and revolutionary" (214): "My name is Isabella Sin [….] I thought I was a writer, then I thought I wasn't, but now I know I am" (58).

Through careful development of her characters, Chin captures the dense and complex layers that make up their inner lives. The collection shines the brightest in its depiction of those characters who live in a liminal state, as they navigate the uncertainties of home and belonging. "A Malaysian Man in Mayor Bloomberg's Silicon Alley" narrates the experiences of the main character, Howie Ho, who travels home from America to vote in the general elections and reconnect with his Malaysian roots. He is forced to confront not only the tacit challenges to his identity in the form of unwitting remarks made by his family – "Stay so long overseas become ang moh adi lah!" (131) – but also the acute realisation that he is nothing without his "borrowed" American identity (160). The latter is palpably brought to his attention when his marriage proposal to a young Malaysian woman is rejected by her parents because of his decision to settle down and start a family in Malaysia instead of choosing to return to America to do so.

Throughout the collection, Chin explores the fraught and unstable notion of home. Several stories are set in Taiping, "that confused place with the infrastructure of a small town and the population size of a city," where Chin herself was born and raised, and examines the characters' evolving familial and romantic relationships amidst its changing landscape (79). These stories explore how the concept of home is rooted in creating the conditions that enable meaningful relationships. "A Bet is Placed" is a light-hearted story of a man who wins a bet on the monsoon rains and looks forward to spending his winnings on a meal with his granddaughter at KFC when she comes to visit him. In "Taiping", a retired assistant branch manager in his golden years struggles to come to terms with his wife's passing, his strained relationship with his daughter, and his own existential crisis amidst the lush tropical forests at the foot of Maxwell Hill, or Bukit Larut. "When Starbucks Came" is a story about a young woman who reevaluates her unfulfilling sexual relationship in the wake of the opening of the first Starbucks in Taiping that has the town abuzz with excitement and possibility.

The ability of individual agency to master or navigate their fate and the mechanisms of control around them is played out in intense and often profoundly life-changing ways: a divine ruler's concubine becomes a protégé to an Olympian sharpshooter ("The Olympian"); a Scottish doctor serving in a local leprosarium in 1936 makes a surprising scientific discovery ("Just How the Fire Will Burn"); a first-generation immigrant to Malaya lays a claim on this newly-adopted land when he stages a traditional Chinese funeral for a colonial officer's daughter who is missing and presumed dead ("The Butler Opens the Door"). These stories seem to be questioning: Can individuals effect meaningful change in their social, political, and private spheres of influence? Can individual action and volition bring about impactful changes to the forces that surround and oppress them? The characters find themselves often locked in a dynamic where societal expectations threaten to determine or undermine individual actions and decisions. In "Bright and Clear", a young woman is forced to defend her sexual

identity against the heteronormative expectations of family and society. “Duty” is a heart-rending story of one man’s struggle with the devastating effects of his religious principles on those nearest and dearest to him. In these stories, Chin probes the uncertainties of human existence and delves into the recesses of human emotions to seek answers to questions about who we are – how we define ourselves and how others define us.

While some stories fit in more seamlessly with the central narrative than others, the concern they all share is the need for self-discovery. The collection as a whole looks inward to reflect on who we are as individuals and as a nation: “We either think we are the best country in the world or the worst country in the world” (120). Training her lenses on a staggeringly brutal, politically fraught Malaysian society, Chin’s stories often uncover the darker side of Malaysian life and politics, but also shine a light on the hope that prevails in the face of challenging circumstances.