Cynthia Miller, *Honorifics*. Rugby: Nine Arches Press, 2021. 81 pp. ISBN: 978-1-913437-15-2.

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Shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, Cynthia Miller's *Honorifics* follows a similar trajectory to other UK-based diasporic Chinese-Malaysian poets like Nina Mingya Powles and Lisa Kiew, who document their lives across a multitude of vistas, languages, and past historical and re-imagined migratory experiences. Formally daring, Miller's collection paints a series of homilies to family members and her own cultural heritage via her intricate crossings from Sarawak, to Minnesota, to the UK, allowing her to showcase her various innovative styles and registers in the process.

Early references to Miller's Malaysian heritage can be found in the collection's opening poem "Sayang / Sayang", where the word's various meanings are listed in a dictionary format and used to frame 'love' in the domestic realm, accompanied by the 'regret' of wasting food. Besides the occasional play on Malay or Hakka Chinese terms, Miller frequently uses lists and other fragmented styles, which occasionally play out across the white space of the page and evoke a continual slippage and rediscovery of past memory. One poem, "Malaysiana", recalls those halcyon days of childhood by forming a praise poem out of these fragments of memory, recreating a nostalgic sense of community upon "Streets where you recognise everyone / and call out to each other". This tactic becomes more overt in "30 things Sarawakians know", where the list poem format yokes together a series of seemingly random vignettes on "The difficulty of returning" or "Migratory patterns of children", but which eventually converge together into a narrative whole.

In this opening section, tangential relations to Malaysia are made but subsequently problematized through Miller's recollection, though these are lovingly rendered through vivid imagery that helps offset the distance that most diasporic writers inevitably recreate in narrating their experiences and relationships with the long-departed mother country. For example, in the five-part poem sequence "Portmeirion", her irretrievable family past is rendered through yet more fractured memories that, like her mother's wedding china, threaten to smash apart. These ruminations on time as a disrupter for meaningful relations are pushed further in the prose poem "Proxima b", where the physics of space-time become another focal point, with her lovelorn persona lamenting that "Home

/ here / there / you / me / past / future / present / now is a series of dislocations, and dislocations are never temporary. I fall out of love with now."

In one of Miller's most experimental poems, "Homecoming", alternative trajectories of migration and their ensuing experiences are plotted out via three separated vertical stanza columns, with each beginning with a variation of the line "In this version, you [never] leave Malaysia". In this configuration, these separate stanzas collide when read alongside each other. At the same time, they are interrupted simultaneously at key points by two single-line directives, "And if you had known differently?" and "If having considered all the options, you decide on this one, know that:" which appear to invite the reader to choose a new pathway in a form of interactive writing, before converging together with the ending line: "Homecoming is the last, hardest thing you'll ask yourself to do".

Miller's stylistic innovation can also be found in "Glitch honorifics", which appears as a two-page visual flow chart partially resembling a matrilineal family tree, with additional paratextual content appearing in separate boxes dotted around the page to add an extra level of narration to the main lineage tracing "Cho Cho 祖祖 (great-grandmother)" to Miller herself as "Wa我 (me)". Yet, despite her futile attempts to trace a direct lineage across four generations of women, the persona can only admit that they all co-exist in her imagination "at the same glitch point" where "Coming back to Malaysia feels like stepping into another self that exists in parallel."

To complement these formal experimental poems, Miller includes more conventional poems on themes related to her immediate family. In "To become a dragon, first wear its skin", her mother's bridal dress and seductive power is asserted via her ability to "swallow any man whole" but later, "finding the cheongsam at the back of the wardrobe, / pressed and forgotten", Miller concedes that she must, like her mother, now "imagine memory as a whetstone". Aside from poems about diaspora and memory, there are a few covid-era love poems that evince strong emotive control between the lines, such as in "Eurydice video calls her lover in lockdown" where, fearful of a new reality where "Everyone here / is on a long distance call, speaking to someone / already slipping out of memory", the persona looks in vain for "certainty / or to finally set down this longing."

Yet Miller's most imaginative writing occurs in the middle section entitled "Bloom" where, through her jellyfish persona, she embodies a more complex subaltern identity, allowing her to juxtapose her more intimate poems with extended metaphors on the political, environmental, and social changes currently affecting Britain and the world. Emerging in the opening sequence as an invasive species that is "startlingly large and daring", the lines shift from taunting their addressee ("Calling me unearthly shows how small your world is") to playful yet evocative ecological critiques of jellyfish evolving from "plastic carrier bags, punctuated balloons", to more overt references to immigration policy and its legacies. This latter issue especially unravels in "[spineless menace]"

with the persona mimicking government discourse whereby "Only the best and brightest jellyfish are allowed in our waters", and "NO RECOURSE TO PUBLIC FUNDS will be stamped in squid ink on every tentacle".

The UK's "hostile environment policy" shows up again in "The Home Office", voiced by a political persona "Who loves the smell of closed borders in the morning" (echoing that famous line from *Apocalypse Now*), yet who nevertheless fails to see the irony in the phrase "Leave to Remain". Ending with a quote from the then Home Secretary Theresa May that "nobody necessarily stays anywhere forever", Miller switches to a more sympathetic persona in the subsequent poem "Leave". In a nod to Warsan Shire's acclaimed poem "Home", she narrates that "Home is a weapon that you lift / to your shoulder", but later comes to see that, actually, "Home is the wrongness of a muzzle / at the door, the heart's dark chamber".

Despite these negative portrayals of the UK, in contrast to the idyllic Sarawak of her childhood, Miller's poems strike a generally upbeat tone on the issue of travel and the freedom it enables, with later poems continuing the metaphorical transformations introduced by the jellyfish persona. In "Abridged dictionary for water babies", the author's biracial make-up is alluded to by the mythological selkie persona who utters the line "I am forever half-one thing, half something else", while in "How to perfect a flip turn", the moment before the swimmer touches the end of the pool is described thus: "It is never / wanting for anything except the easy slip / of your body in its spandex skin. / You kick off wherever your feet land". Taken together, these poems use a combination of water imagery to signal the fluidity of the self and the effortless movement from one location to another. Ultimately, such positivity on the part of Miller comes down to her ability to playfully traverse these multiple landscapes in her imagination and to reconcile them with the multiple personae she relies on. One particularly memorable example can be found in the final poem, "Voicemails from my mother", where the polyphonous narration Miller uses at the beginning of the collection comes full circle as her mother's voice echoes her own: "All I need I can carry in my hands. / I like me best when I chose to leave".