

Negaraku

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I'm on opening duty. Under a flickering fluorescent bar, I try to unlock the door. The padlock clangs and echoes down the empty hall as I fail to find the receptacle with my key. Inside, my hand has to grope the wall looking for the switch, my fingers running over the bumps of paint, squashed mosquitoes left to rot from yesteryear, possibly poisonous mold.

The light seems to heighten my sense of smell. As my bandmates flick the latches open on their cases, what greets my nose is a concoction of copper and zinc, dried saliva on brass, evaporated saliva in instrument cases.

Oh, and a load of valve oil.

The sun has yet to peek over the horizon and while it's still somewhere over there, burning some other country up, it's relatively cool here. A solid 25°C. The felt temperature is about 30°C, but over the course of the next hour or so it will feel about 35°C as I sweat and insulate heat underneath my white long-sleeved shirt and pants, new black leather shoes, and a navy blazer made out of cheap cotton. Since fingerprints will bring about punishment, I also have to wear white cotton gloves. All of that is garnished by a tie, on the centre of which is my school's badge: a roaring tiger surrounded by ribbons with a motivational Latin quote. Over the years, the thread has frayed, and so it looks like the tiger has no stripes, or is all stripes.

Studio A, a storage area for brass instruments, is actually just spare space underneath a staircase. Here sleep the brass instruments in their Yamaha cases: tubas, trombones, trumpets, French horns, and so on and so forth. I play the euphonium, a three-valved instrument similar to a baritone. In our marching band, it bridges the rounded bouncing notes of tubas to the forceful braying of trombones. The name comes from Greek to mean "sweet-voiced," though if you only have one or two in your marching band, such as ours, it won't be loud enough to seduce any ear.

I play the euphonium for about five years in middle school and every day I wonder why.

It is 7:25. Boys and girls at a ratio of roughly 95:5 (girls are only accepted for the high-school curricula, though by this time they are, for all intents and purposes, women) converge on the school field. An elevated view would show a thousand odd students filing in from various parts of the campus to form a square bracket. The base of the bracket faces an elevated stage, on which there is a podium, and a few of the best-looking chairs one can find in this public school, for big shot teachers such as the principal, the morning session coordinator, the chief disciplinarian, and other people I would rather not face in the long school year ahead. On the right hand side of the stage are three flag poles: one for Malaysia, one for the state in which we live, one for our school.

Every morning starts with a school assembly, but Monday is the day we go all out. Thirty-minute guest speeches, moral lessons of the week, applause for sporting achievements, poetry readings, everything is game.

It is the first day of school and in a time before permanent and instantaneous Internet connections, when summer holidays sucked your friends away into the aether, teenagers



Pierre-Jean de Béranger (Music) / Saiful Bahri (Lyrics)

"Negaraku"

Adopted as Malaysian National Anthem in 1957

are reuniting by waving, by hollering, by reigniting games put on hold from the year before. In a quiet, small, Malaysian city, there are no new kids to be curious about or former students to remember. In classes, students arrange themselves in rows of two, with enough spaces in between them for roaming student prefects who try to bring order and quiet. Teachers arrive from their air-conditioned quarters, taking their seats next to the stage.

Instead of trading jokes with friends whom I haven't seen in months, I am way at the back in the middle of the field. Woodwinders and percussionists arrive from a different part of campus and we set up in three parentheses of increasing length, our conductor like the bottom period of a wi-fi bar.

Our job is to play two songs: the national anthem, "Negaraku," and the school anthem. We are the only ones who do not have to sing, providing the melody to everyone in attendance while broken male voices chime in with the vastly outnumbered female ones, as we all watch the three flags climb the poles.

I am in the last year of middle school. I was not born here, nor have I been in the Malaysian schooling system all my life, but I know I have been attending these assemblies for seven years and performing for two of those. At an average of 37 assemblies a school year, not including the times I spent learning the lyrics or any other special occasion which warrants the anthem such as Sports Days or Teachers' Days, I have sung the national anthem at least 185 times and played the euphonium part 74 times.

In a time before cheap, portable music players, when one could not simply play the latest pop jam on a smartphone, there was no music in the classroom. To hear any music at all on school premises, one needed to sing or attempt beatboxing. You could tap and slam your hands on the tables for percussive rhythms. If you weren't afraid of theft, you could bring a guitar and play it at recess. To remember these times is to realise that, for a lot of students, growing up in a place of relative socioeconomic poverty, arriving at school via school buses before the sun was up, the national anthem our band played was the *first* piece of music that one heard every single week.

As far as national anthems go, "Negaraku" is not particularly special. No national anthem is. Regardless of the age or geography of a country, national anthems contain the same gene of rote pomp, bravado, and machismo. Most are composed with yesteryear's folk instruments in mind. There is, to my knowledge, no national anthem designed for synths and guitars, even though current definitions of folk instruments would have to include them. Post-classical instruments do not inspire praise for a country, ground it in a triumphant historical narrative, or evoke the sanctity of religious institutions (as most states are, to differing extents). As it stands, if a new flag were erected on Mars, future founders would still fall back on the trumpet and flute to accompany the ceremony. Ideally, lost perhaps amidst the Colin Kaepernick v. Donald Trump debate, one should not have to stand for the national anthem; instead, the national anthem should make you *want* to stand, to fight, to sacrifice yourself for the nation's purposes.

It's easy to do this with lyrics. In a mere two stanzas, "Negaraku" has school students singing about spilling blood in the country, advancing the country, asking favours from God to protect the citizens and king. As for the arrangement: a melody carried by either high register brass instruments or strings; marching bass drums of varying notes generating the thunderous beatdown that the nation is going to dish out its enemies; snares militaristic in their rolls; and flutes, clarinets, and oboes providing the graceful

flourishes, the pirouettes, the curlicues of decorum and finesse that all countries must have.

Which leaves us with the low register brass. Your tubas, sousaphones, trombones, and the euphonium of yours truly. In marching contexts, these instruments could be as menacing as the All Blacks lineup doing the haka. Not for nothing are these instruments called the bass of the orchestra, able to alter the heartbeat of a given listener. In John Williams' "Imperial March" and Wagner's "Ride Of The Valkyries," the trombones and the euphoniums are the ones making people back off, release cold sweat, and tremble in their boots.

Yet, while it's possible to create good music without bass, a bass playing on its own is like a goldfish in a bowl. There's only so many places you can go. In practice runs in our small bass cohort, we sounded like a line of men with beer bellies of varying sizes taking random turns belching. Plus, on most Monday assemblies we only had the personnel for a tuba, a trombone, and a euphonium. We didn't even own a sousaphone.

The boys at the end of the lines turn back at us as they chatter. A couple of them jeer. Everybody's favourite method of making fun of the band is to mime playing a clarinet and make melodic farting noises. It makes no sense and doesn't apply to me because I don't play the clarinet nor the trumpet, but I'd still rather they cut it out. I spot a couple of my friends, ambling slowly to our class' row. They've got two hands in their pockets, one-strapping their bags, yapping on about personal video game achievements. Chilling, one might call it. One of them has the audacity to pinch their collar and fan his neck while sweat tickles my unreachable lower back.

A euphonium weighs about four kilograms and I am holding it against the left side of my body with my left arm. As per marching band protocol, my right fist is by my right pocket. Working on its own, my left bicep is host to a mellow fire which will only be put out when the conductor raises his wand and I'm allowed to rotate the euphonium, bring the mouthpiece to my lips, and ease the weight with my right hand.

The master of ceremonies clears his throat. He's some fifteen-year-old student prefect that the school is grooming to be Head Boy one day. Assalamualaikum and greetings to the most respected principal, the most respected vice principal, the most—and I clock out.

While the MC continues to rattle of his respects, stumbling over the words he's written on a folded up piece of paper, an insect with flying capabilities takes interest in one of my nostrils. I'm not allowed to move my limbs so my only line of defense is to exhale forcefully. It leaves my line of sight and I feel something land on the back of my neck. Instinctively, I swat at it, breaking stillness.

Someone with a higher ranking than I do barks, "Joel, you owe me twenty."

That's twenty push ups for a fly that might come back around. In my head, I curse and plead for it to go bother the conductor instead.

Years later, my friends ask me why I was in the band. Since I am their friend, I can assume they think I'm cool, regardless of whether we are to others are not. Given this assumption, we can also surmise that this question is loaded with a sizzling insult, a quizzical judgment of my "uncool" teenagehood.

Fill in the blank: school band members are _____.

Readers from a western cultural hemisphere (especially the States) might complete the above with "nerdy," "geeky," or "awkward," but they might also suggest "cool," "fun," or "the life of the party." A football half-time marching band show or a drumline faceoff doesn't bring down the adrenalin of what preceded it. No, it maintains or elevates it. At the college level, band membership numbers in the hundreds and their viewership on any given night is not double, nor triple, but exponential. The extra-curricular activity has even been made the subject of a Hollywood film (see *Drumline*, dir. Charles Stone III).

Being in a Malaysian school band does not carry the same prestige.

At the start of middle school, my friends or people I wanted to be friends with were in the band. Then, as now, I considered myself musical and wanted to make music that did not come from a recorder. I had played the angklung, a percussive instrument made from bamboo, in elementary school and enjoyed the feeling that arises when multiple people play music at the same time, my notes blending with others, organised noise.

As can happen over the course of school, friends in the band became mere schoolmates and schoolmates outside the band became brothers. The sun grew stronger every passing day, punishing us as we learned marching steps and routines. Drum majors put more and more faith in shouting as a disciplinary method. The supervising teacher slapped a trumpeter silly for daring to question him. Every minute at practice was not spent enjoying video games at home, or with non-band friends such as girls from other schools. My grades dropped, my skin grew tanned, my popularity stagnated.

In versions of "Negaraku" that you can find on YouTube, the bass continues where the melody drops off. The bass either echoes or alternates the scale of the melody. The result is a neat push-and-pull, the bass filling in the brief but silent moments in between verses.

Our school band, technically less adept, relied on a simpler arrangement. The euphonium's motion was oblique to the trumpets. That is to say that, while we both started on the melodic note of the verse, the euphonium toiled away on the bass clef, blowing minims and semibreves. The trumpets went off to do their thing on the treble clef, voicing the syllables of the verse. Light as they are, they were the ones lifting the voices of an entire school.

Consider too, the shape of the euphonium. The one I held was not of a marching band build. When played, the bell faced upwards. As a highly directional instrument, whatever sound I produced went in the direction that the bell faced. In orchestra settings where we sat down, one could angle the bell to face the audience. While standing up, short of actually bending over and killing the lower back, my part of the national anthem went straight up into the uncovered sky, scattering into a million waves. The only living things that could hear me were the birds.

I am fifteen-going-on-sixteen. I'm shorter than everyone I want to be taller than. I can't do a lap without spitting out a piece of my lung. I'm nervous about things such as the girl who hasn't texted back, about a year of not understanding Chemistry, about some teacher noticing that I'm not wearing a name tag. People in class are talking about pre-college and matriculation and med school.

I don't know it but ahead of me is a life of emigration. This is not where, as the anthem goes, my blood will spill. At the end of the year I will leave and never have to sing, play, or hear the national anthem ever again. I will adopt another, one with more verses and metaphors, and with God as an optional pronoun. This anthem will just be one sandwiched between many others. I will travel places and be visited in others. I will go to university and later find a job that doesn't bother me. I will forget the Malay language bit by bit and learn another bit by bit.

I will lose weight, gain height, and fix my hunch. I will learn the guitar and impress one or two girls with my mediocre songwriting and fingerpicking. I will see many shows, drown in guitar, drum machines, synths, trumpets, and violins. I will live in Canada for five years where people stand for their national anthem before sporting events. They will do this even if they're in bars. I will awkwardly stand with them, being neither Canadian nor a fan of hockey. I will think of "Negaraku" every time I do this.

I will, however, never play the euphonium ever again.

But now, I am fifteen and it is the first day of school and it's too early to be awake or make band noises. The MC has given us the signal and our conductor raises his wand. The tip of it goes hazy in the heat that will come for our throats every single Monday.

Rolling snares start us off from the back and then the trumpets come in with their opening salvo, like the lifting of the curtains. In the song "Negaraku" you will hear a French melody called "La Rosalie."

I press a valve or two down, press my lips tight against each other, and bring the mouthpiece close. By the third note, I realise on the first day of school in my last year here that over the past few months of holidays, neglecting to practice, I have forgotten the notes.