

# SAMPAN

The LASALLE Anthology of Creative Writing



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# FOREWORD

Reading SAMPAN has been simply a joy. What a delight to lose myself in this wonderfully rich and satisfying anthology of work. Congratulations to all who are included here. Writing is hard work and so much of that work is in the attention to detail, the endless editing that is necessary to create something that both writer and reader will feel is rewarding. The work presented here has been honed and polished with care and attention.

In this collection of work every shade of lived experience is attended to. The Flash Fiction includes striking evocations of different kinds of lives. In Vanessa Chng Pei Shan's *A Wasteland Maybe*, we learn of the 'tundra town and its blazing winters'. In Mandakini Arora's parallel stories *Close Quarters* and *Malaise* she portrays sympathetically both the stifling and constrained life of a maid for whom work in Singapore represents an escape route but also the tricky balance in that relationship as seen from her employers' more comfortable and entitled perspective.

The poetry gathered here displays and reflects the interesting and varied approaches taken in reading and studying the form. Francis Lau lovingly and compassionately evokes different kinds of intimacy. Gabriel Oh Teck Bian and Ian Goh's use of shape and form is particularly arresting in their poems, 'Fireflies at Aiya Falls' and 'Blockheads'. Contrasts fill Bryce W Merkl Sasaki's description of bustling

commerce in which he concludes by wistfully reimagining the possibility of the urgent marketplace as a garden. A sense of an enduring landscape and the strength of the elements are powerfully present in the poems of Jinendra Jain, 'Tithonus' and Phong Huynh, 'Saigon Monsoon'.

Amongst the rich variety of the longer prose pieces everything is covered, from Amy Chia's revelatory excursions into real estate, *An Inch of Gold* which concludes, 'My casa my rules. And each inch of that freedom is worth a foot of gold' to Mohamed Shaker's moving story of young men together, the camaraderie, the masculinity and the exclusion, *Arm's Length*. Love and trust are at the heart of Vicky Chong's story, *Shared Space*, qualities that also infuse the closing lines of Daniel Seifert's story, *Condor*, centred on the silver mines of Bolivia. Tradition comes up against the wish for change and independence in Jurveen Kaur's *Let Her Go* and differently, and poignantly, in Alastair Wee's *Five Seasons*. Relationships at large, within contemporary office culture, are wittily portrayed in Tan Ai Qi's *Office People*, 'You have to find your joy in soul-sucking places like this'. Meanwhile, in two evocative pieces, Peter Morgan expertly captures the flavour of a specific time and place in Beijing and in Singapore.

The work brought together in SAMPAN shows a great breadth of form in both poetry and in prose. This is matched by a similar breadth of subject matter: capitalism, loneliness, consumerism, family, gender, societal shifts, sexuality and

mystery. Here, we find vivid and imaginative shifts of mood from one piece to the next and careful attention to detail, so that the reader's senses are alert to the sounds, smells and temperature of both Singapore and many other parts of the world. One moment we are on the High Speed Rail with Gabriel Oh, *The Space Between Here and There*, next we find ourselves with Corporal Dave Teo Ming on the third floor of Cineleisure shopping mall, in Joseph Tan Soon Teck's *A Map of the Territory*, or, perhaps, as evoked in Aswani Aswath's *Cradle Fall*, back in 'my first home. A cocoon of amniotic fluid'.

It has been my pleasure and privilege to watch this MA at LASALLE grow, develop and blossom under the excellent guidance firstly of Dr Darryl Whetter and now Dr Rosslyn Prosser. The quality of the writing in this journal bears witness to the hard work of all at LASALLE in creating a unique Masters Programme. Here in SAMPAN is work of depth and sensitivity, of precision and power: writing which is measured and thoughtful and writing which is a riot of colour and sound. Lucky readers!

**Maura Dooley, FRSL**

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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to SAMPAN 2, the annual anthology of the LASALLE Masters in Creative Writing student and alumni works. This year the anthology has been produced, edited and designed by a dedicated team of students and alumni. A dynamic knowledge and capacity exchange between past and current students provided a unique opportunity for alumni to be involved in the anthology and for students to extend their connections in the writing community. It's been heart-warming to witness the gentle and considered approach the editors have taken, and the care for design and process by other members of the team. The range of work in this anthology presents views of culture, the social and the historical of not just Singapore but further to other spaces. We read about how space might be considered through the genres of poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. These spaces are in the institutions of work, family, gender and sexuality, and other relationships. The works present a view of place and space and the pleasures and pains of living on an island that has a complex history and relationship to the world through shipping, commerce, exchange and encounter. What great stories can be told and are told here. Embedding thinking and writing in the place we are in through fiction, in the poetic, and in creative non-fiction adds to the world's knowledge.

The Singaporean project of land reclamation and building anew has produced a space that is filled with erasure. This may be the condition that allows stories to emerge as carriers of memory making, in the process producing a memorialization that is not just nostalgic but powerful. In the ways that a historical photograph might tell a history of the kampong or the destruction of a forest, the works presented here speak to the places that are left for the stories to arrive at, that allow for new ways of seeing the personal and the political. We all live in spaces, both internal and external, and the work presented here in SAMPAN 2 provides another navigational tool for understanding the many worlds we inhabit.

**Dr Rosslyn Prosser**

**Programme Leader**

**Masters in Creative Writing**

**LASALLE College of the Arts**

**University of the Arts Singapore**

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## GABRIEL OH

Gabriel Oh is pursuing his MA in Creative Writing at LASALLE College of the Arts. He loves getting lost in fantasy and science fiction, and dabbling in experiments that combine words, visuals, and technology. His works have been read at the Singapore Writers Festival and NTU English Graduate Research Symposium, and he maintains a collection of snapshots at [glimpsesnaps.blogspot.com](http://glimpsesnaps.blogspot.com).



glowing,  
glowing,  
glowing,  
stars  
neon  
among  
drift

world where, I, lost  
alien into their shrouded fleeting floating  
alone. Waters eddy beneath my feet greeting, embracing an  
aside laughter and hugs drifting into darkness, displaced,  
I fail to understand. Far from home, a foreign third wheel  
out my host family who gush too fast in Japanese  
roaring water crashes down from above, floods  
In the sweat and darkness of summer,

## Fireflies at Aiya Falls

dazzling dreams and blinding ambitions.  
a city's  
than  
beautiful  
more  
far  
far  
brighter,  
shining,



## The space between Here and There

*'Pintu akan de tutup. Sila awasi jarak anda.'*

Gerald looked up from his phone as the train doors hissed closed. On the platform, a young Malay man with a weathered toolbag groaned as he stumbled to a stop before the closed doors. The train began to move, its engines whirring to a muted drone. The man's resigned face melted away into the blur of commuters on the platform.

*'Stesen berikutnya, Ayer Hitam,'* came the announcement from the speakers, friendly yet unsympathetic. 'Next station, Ayer Hitam.'

Many commuters had gotten off at the Kuala Lumpur and Melaka stations, leaving the train cabin with more empty seats than passengers. More will board at Johor Bahru. From his flat in Ipoh, it usually took Gerald around an hour and a half to reach Punggol station. He'd usually be scrolling through TikTok, but something about that odd job worker they had left behind fizzled all interest.

The High-Speed Rail cruised through the Malaysian countryside. Under the sleepy blue light of dawn, palm tree plantations and barren farmland passed by in a blur, interspersed with murky, sprawling mountainscapes that disappeared before Gerald could take them in. Occasionally, the lights of a giant billboard advertising beauty cream or a

home furniture sale broke the darkness, temporarily blinding him. A jingle looped again from the screens overhead, accompanied by the beaming profile of a Malaysian celebrity promoting luxury villas—who she was, Gerald didn't know. The television in their living room, though rarely watched anymore, had always been tuned to Singapore channels.

*'HSR Malaysia-Singapura mengucapkan selamat datang—'*

The sharp cry of an infant broke through the cabin, coerced by the bouncing arms of a young Chinese woman nearby as she cooed softly into her clothed bundle. Gerald looked away as she draped a blanket over her baby.

Gerald glanced over to the commuters seated across from him. Some were completely out of it, their mouths wide open as their heads left greasy trails on the windowpane behind them. One had a print newspaper wide open before him. The thin papers threatened to break from his wiry fingers and splatter onto the floor with each sway of the train. It was *The Straits Times*, the Singapore one. The man was brave to read it so openly here. No one had confronted him about it yet. Below a frontpage spread of spectators in red and white staring gape-mouthed into the sky, the headlines read: 'POSHs to be opened for balloting in Pahang and Penang next month'.

The government had bought land at Banda Uda Utama to build more Public Offshore Satellite Housing flats two

months ago. Gerald wondered how many POSH flats were across Malaysia. His family had moved into their POSH flat almost eight years ago, when he was just starting Primary Four. It was the fifth POSH flat built in Ipoh following the completion of the High Speed Rail. When his old home had been due to be demolished for land repurposing, the option of living across the Causeway was presented to them.

Cheaper prices, cheaper commodities, cheaper food — and you'll still be Singaporeans, had been the offer. Gerald's parents had agreed without hesitation.

Malaysia had been a place for weekend shopping trips and school holiday getaways. The streets and malls that his family had frequented in Johor Bahru hadn't left much of an impression on Gerald, but that hadn't been a problem. It wasn't his home, after all, just another holiday destination with cheaper prices, cheaper commodities, cheaper food. He was livid when his parents broke the news to him about their relocation, but being the child he was, he had no say. Everything will be the same, they told him. You'll study in Singapore; we'll work in Singapore. Just that during night and over the weekends, we'll be on vacation across the causeway.

'*Ayer Hitam,*' announced the train as it slowed down into the station. A small jerk, and commuters' heads bobbed in unison. '*Sila awasi langkah anda.*' The doors hissed open.

The heat followed commuters in as they boarded, jostling with the air-conditioning in a losing battle. The sound of splashing water drew Gerald's gaze outside. Under the platform's glaring lights, water flowed from a giant earthen pot into sculpted outstretched palms. '*Ayer Hitam, Pottery Town — From the earth we receive our living*' read the nearby bronze plaque. One of many places he'd pass by countless times but had never set foot on. On a wall just behind the fountain, the words '*SG dogs go home!*' was spray-painted in black. That hadn't been there last week. A commuter stumbled as she tripped over the gap between the coarse granite platform and the grey vinyl flooring of the train. She cursed as her phone clattered across the carriage.

The doors closed, the train started again. '*Stesen Berikutnya, Johor Bahru.*'

Gerald wondered about the journeys this train had taken from one end to the other. Every day, over months, over years. Had it ever gotten tired? Had it ever wanted to stop?

'*Tali pinggang kulit?*' prodded a raspy voice. A variety of items wrapped in thin crinkly plastic were thrust out to him, reflecting the harsh white light of the cabin. An Indian pedlar had stopped before him, his wiry grey hair and beard blotting out the light from the ceiling. Gerald caught a whiff of a sour stench from the man's muddied clothes before his musty breath. '*Fidget spinner, Jam Tangan Rolex?*'

Gerald gave the man a thin smile and shook his head.

'Polo Lauren shirt, laser pen?' the man continued, each item appearing from the large blue IKEA bag slung over his shoulders.

'Sorry, *tak ada ringgit*,' Gerald finally muttered.

'No problem,' the man countered. 'Dollar *boleh*.'

Their exchange was thankfully cut short by a pair of Rapid Rail officers coming through from the neighbouring cabin. Someone must have complained about the man.

'Dollar, *ringgit*, Singapore, Malaysia, same-same!' The man hollered as he struggled against the officers. Commuters gasped at the altercation, finally looking up from their phones. 'No difference!'

The officers finally cuffed the pedlar before leading him further down the train.

'*Anda akan tiba di, Johor Bahru*,' announced the intercom, as if nothing had happened. '*Dan stesen terakhir Malaysia. Penumpang tanpa kad EZ-Go dinasihatkan untuk turun. Sila pastikan tiada barangan yang tertinggal. Kami mengucapkan terima kasih dan semoga berjumpa lagi.*' Then in English, 'We are approaching Johor Bahru. This is the last station for Malaysia. Passengers without an EZ-Go token are advised to disembark. Kindly ensure that none of your belongings are left onboard. Thank you for riding with HSR Malaysia-Singapore, and we hope to see you again.'

A shuffling among commuters gathering their belongings to disembark. The cabin dimmed as the train entered the cavernous platform, the lattice of grey panels and beams above blotting out the sky. A few snorted awake as they woke from their sleep, bloodshot eyes wildly scanning their surroundings as though taking in a foreign land. A rustle of papers as the Singaporean newspaper was folded up and stuffed into a tote bag.

The train doors opened, and another exchange of commuters commenced. Gerald shifted in his seat as those beside him got up and left. Their still-warm seats were quickly taken up again by still-warm bodies. The man beside him sat spread-legged, loud techno booming from his headphones as he thumbed his Twitter feed. Gerald felt his space encroached upon with each unsubtle boom of the bass.

The doors had yet to close. The air-conditioning worked twice as hard against the heady fumes of car exhaust and the humid morning. Through the gaps in the platform's shelter, Gerald caught glimpses of multi-coloured trails snaking to and from the nearby checkpoint, the multi-toned drone of horns a frustrated symphony. The jingling of keys and thudding of boots accompanied them as a uniformed train operator shuffled along the platform. Gerald heard the slamming of a door from the front of the train.

A chime. A different one from that he heard earlier in the journey. ‘Doors closing.’ The intercom beeped as the doors hissed closed. The train left the gloomy expanse of the platform and broke through into the open again. It neared the trail of cars as the tracks aligned with the causeway. Soon, they took off from land, soaring along the causeway over choppy dark blue waters.

‘Next station, Woodlands Interchange. Passengers travelling on the North-South line, the East-West Line, the North-East Line...’

Gerald craned his neck to look out of the window, ignoring the annoyed glance of the headphone wearer. The sun was breaking over the horizon, painting the deep sky with hues of pink and orange. The canvas of sky and water was bordered by dark shadows of far-off buildings on two shores, floating boats on the strait, its subjects. A streak of white on the waves as a speed boat raced across the waters, bounding, weaving between invisible defined borders, unfettered by fixed tracks or roads. It swerved, spewing sprays of water as if taunting any coast guard patrol nearby. Gerald imagined whooping into the salty sea breeze, at home in this space between here and there, limited only by how far the waters went.

The scenery transitioned again into gloomy grey metal as the train rolled into Woodlands Terminal. Beside him, Kit Chan’s song serenaded through the headphones. Its owner clicked his

tongue as an unskippable ad for hand sanitiser flashed on his screen – National Day Promotion, Buy 3 for \$20!

The EZ-Go token in Gerald’s pocket vibrated as the train passed under the automated immigration gantry overhead. He pulled at the straps of the duffle bag at his feet, feeling the weight of his boots, army fatigues and five days’ worth of necessities inside. Like the others around him, he knew where he had to be. And just like them, he wished he was somewhere else.

## PETER MORGAN

Peter Morgan's poetry has appeared in the *Southeast Asian Review of English*, and his short story in *Best Asian Short Stories 2022*. His photography has been published in *Queen's Quarterly*, an Argentinean math textbook and a German surfing magazine. Peter completed his MA in Creative Writing at LASALLE College of the Arts in 2019.



## A Season in Singapore

Vanesa shuttered her newspaper's modest Seah Street office. Her beloved son was off with his friends, and she had no need to be back at their Ann Siang Street apartment for a few hours. She looked forward to her last-Friday-of-the-month ritual. She set off to meet Gyanendu, her drinking companion.

How the world's circumstances shaped people and how they in turn reacted and explained their behaviours to themselves and others intrigued Vanesa. This served her well as a journalist. A Russian-Ukrainian journalist based in Singapore working as the sole Asia correspondent for a precarious small-time Moscow newspaper.

When she spoke, she instinctively modulated her voice so that her most penetrating interview question had a beguiling, poetic ring. She earned a Masters in International Relations with a speciality in European history, and enjoyed discovering indie music wherever her travels took her. Drinking was a stereotype of her Russian heritage. She was a tall, strong-featured woman who looked like expensive vodka.

And now she couldn't return to her father's Russia *or* her mother's Ukraine. Fate. You can't go back.

She was here, now. The latest in a series of extraordinary and seemingly tangential experiences.

\*

The first of these happened long ago on that warm German summer evening. On the most fleeting of hunches and just out of j-school, Vanesa had gone for a stroll nearby to her apartment when the murders took place. In 1992, four Iranian-Kurdish opposition leaders were killed at West Berlin's Mykonos restaurant. Not all was as it seemed and it took some doing to unravel the geopolitical undercurrents. The Iranians denied involvement. But their Berlin Embassy, a subsequent trial revealed, was headquarters for an intelligence operation targeting the exiles. Vanesa's hastily written but first-hand coverage dramatically boosted her early career.

Being close at hand to misfortune was her fate, it seemed. On September 11, staying across the river in Brooklyn, being in Cairo during the Arab Spring (while most had written off the period of protests and aborted liberalisation as a failure, she felt the jury was still out as the reverberations were still ongoing, however faint), the Russian annexation of Crimea with that photographer... her reporting a diary of the last thirty years of geopolitical events.

\*

As she navigated along the five-foot ways, she imagined the area bustling with rubber traders. It was still early, and the day's heat was subsiding, so she took a detour along the lower end of Orchard Road near Dhoby Ghaut. Until the

1900s, the *dhobis* carrying overflowing baskets of laundry would tread down the steps (ghats) and use the stream water for washing.

She walked past MacDonald House. An older seven-story red brick building amidst more recent glass-fronted malls and towers. On 10 March 1965, the building was attacked by Indonesian saboteurs during the *Konfrontasi* period between Indonesia and Malaysia. Two powerful bombs exploded, killing three people.

Places in a city, Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk said, can serve as an index of emotions. Her mind ricocheted back to the chaos and noise and dust and shattered lives of the Berlin bombing. She believed she was capable of switching off the impact of these complex torments and the damaged innocents. Now and again, she glimpsed the greater forces at work and how one might, almost, stroll blissfully past such now-plain sites. Almost.

She continued her journey along the five-foot ways to Little India, bought some cans of Kingfisher beer—a concession to Gyanendu—from a corner store, and found a concrete bench off one of the main roads. Gyanendu arrived, cheerful as ever. Sitting in public for a casual drink was unconventional behaviour, but amidst the hair salons, vegetable stands and stalls selling garlands of marigolds in Little India, not so much so as to attract unwanted attention.

‘This,’ Vanessa said as she glanced about at the street life, ‘this is freedom.’ They toasted each other’s health with the tall red aluminium cans.

Dusk’s gentle wind, laden with incense from the nearby temple, came with the equatorial evening. The frenzy of day-time capitalism receded, just slightly, to a more indulgent night.

Gyanendu came to Singapore from Mumbai through hard work and a lucky break. The multi-national corporation had secured Gyanendu an Employment Pass and he’d made himself useful to the point of indispensability. The only woman he’d ever slept with, his wife, with whom he had borne one child at KK, had returned to the familiarity and chaos of family and India. If Vanesa was expensive vodka, Gyanendu was stout — a strong beer that was cheaper and not easily affected by the heat.

He talked of his crazy schemes. One time it was Canada, and he was planning to learn French. Another time he was waiting for the Australia office to call. He had a side-line trading fountain pens. His ideas came as regularly as their meetings, and Vanesa accepted them, uncharacteristically, unquestioningly.

‘Anytime I get a bonus, I give myself a present,’ he said. ‘The rest goes home.’ The latest model iPhone cost one of his first month’s salary. Most recently, he’d acquired from a

colleague what everyone thought was a joke; a seemingly unrepairable Alfa Romeo. When he wasn't at his office, he would be in an industrial garage in Toa Payoh tinkering with the old car.

A healthy distraction if one were contemplating an encounter with the void, Vanesa thought.

Their platonic friendship made things easier. Vanesa liked Gyanendu, although she was never quite sure if he felt more for her. She was grateful he had a properness about him that meant, even with a drink in hand, he wouldn't broach probity.

\*

Before it had closed due to COVID, there was a rooftop 'summer cinema' on Ann Siang Road, behind the fabled bustle of Maxwell Food Court and across from the esoteric Buddha Tooth Relic Temple complex. Ann Siang Road was closed off on weekend evenings, and a street party took over. The hipsters shoulder to shoulder at the zinc bars, calamari and sushi shared between them. Vanesa enjoyed the street noise.

The flat roof of her third-story apartment building was across the street and just high enough for her to see the cinema screen. The trouble was that they were too far away for some scenes. Gyanendu suggested she buy a pair of binoculars. Thus equipped, she and her son watched the films in comfort, sharing the binoculars for points that weren't obvious. They'd go up on the roof almost every Saturday night. One night,

it was a film about Jesus Christ. In a scene in which Christ staggered away from the camera with a cross on his back, she couldn't make out what was going on even with the binoculars pressed to her eyes. She walked towards the image. Her son rushed to grab her at the very edge of the roof.

'Jesus, Mom,' her son said.

\*

Vanesa arrived in Singapore a few years before the (current) Russian war with Ukraine. At the outbreak of the war, she'd quickly adapted her life story to emphasise her family's overlapping history with Russia and Ukraine, despite having come from St Petersburg. Everyone from her country understood politics as they did the blood in their veins. Here, she often adjusts to the apolitical citizenry, or at least to their more restrained ways. But she needn't have worried – after some initial antagonism, the collective pragmatic Singapore soul soon realised there was more to be gained by staying friends with both sides.

'Not my *pasar*,' Gyanendu said. 'There are worse places to be stranded than paradise.'

She knew at least a brief history: fishing villages, then supplemented with tin mining; a freeport under Raffles prospering as sail gave way to steam; then rubber, and now finance. And some light manufacturing, oil refineries, and transshipping. A careful study of what made other economies



tic—property, stability and, for the time being, English, as well as an authoritarian hand... presto. The bright lights.

So it was with her understanding of Singapore that she set about to report on local events that had significance beyond the sea borders that would interest her readers.

‘They say Singapore is Asia for Beginners,’ Gyanendu said.

They drank in the night atmosphere in Little India and casually sipped their second Kingfisher.

‘Maybe if you live in the expat’s ‘Bermuda Triangle’, as my son calls it,’ Vanesa said. ‘Home, school and shopping mall.’

A man in bright orange clothes and his wife in sequined sari made their way past on the road to the nearby temple.

‘It sure doesn’t feel like it’s for beginners to me,’ she said.

\*

During COVID, Vanesa’s early nightlife experiences had faded with the prohibition of drinking past ten-thirty and the curtailment of live music. But now life was returning. And she remained determined to keep looking under the glossy surfaces of the glittering state. One of her encounters was with a musician who played in the symphony. They had been living across the street from each other for a long time. It took a while for their occasional neighbourly wave to develop into a closer friendship. It was curious how these brief encounters made her feel more connected.

Other encounters were with foreign workers — labourers. Most spoke of having paid a fee to come to Singapore, and the situation was much different and harder than the agents had told them, but they still felt better off. Many had had COVID, and they missed their families, and more than a few workers hadn’t been able to cope, but overall, they were satisfied. This contradiction concerned Vanesa. She couldn’t relax unless she had a coherent worldview.

She summarised all this for Gyanendu during one of their evenings.

“‘Violence as liberation”, Fanon wrote of Algeria,’ Gyanendu said.

‘We haven’t got there,’ Vanesa said.

‘Maybe they’ve found a way to step around it?’ said Gyanendu.

The heat was bytimes too much, but then the blast of an air conditioner after a hot walk was superb. That notion, how perspective was relative, intrigued her. To the Pakistani, now a permanent resident, Singapore was an oasis of stability. To a mainland Chinese who became a citizen, the country offered meritocracy for their kids’ schooling.

‘Singapore can be a charm, a promise of a future ever just ahead,’ she said.

A gaunt, shirtless man pushed past with a shopping cart of cardboard boxes.

Gyanendu knew she was distracted.

‘How is the book?’ Gyanendu said. Months had passed since she’d mentioned she was working on her third non-fiction work.

She deftly searched her phone.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘This is the blurb the publisher wants to use.’

‘Of course, the book raises questions, not only about policy and its rights and wrongs but about news and photography and how events are reported. Vanesa has taken care to be as even-handed as possible — she shows victims and heroes — but her story is mainly one of a hopeless clash of cultures.’

‘Do you have a lover?’ Gyanendu said. ‘It helps.’ He took a swig of his beer. ‘Or maybe two?’ His smile made her feel a kind of warmth.

She thought about how to answer. The time she got into the black car? Or another time, she’d slapped the man as he came on to her aggressively at the hotel bar. Or when... her mind went on. Since then, it had been journalism, her kid, the outdoor cinema and chats with Gyanendu.

‘Too much work,’ she said.

‘Give it one more try,’ Gyanendu said. ‘Having a lover takes off the edge.’

The next time they met she described to Gyanendu the

photography exhibit she’d seen. She’d even written a short piece based on an interview with the French photographer who’d taken pictures of the 1970s Bugis Street trans community.

‘They liked having me photograph them and would strike natural poses. The street seemed to belong to them,’ the photographer had told her. ‘It had to be shut down,’ he said matter-of-factly.

‘That might be so,’ Gyanendu said.

The next time they met, she handed Gyanendu a scrap of paper.

‘With apologies to T. S.,’ she said.

As she rose and fell

She passed the stages of her age and youth

Entering the whirlpool.

‘You mustn’t take it all so seriously,’ Gyanendu said. ‘It will drive you crazy.’

\*

‘The purpose of these fantasies is to create a distorted sense of togetherness, of being besieged by an external, hostile world.’ She slurred out the message on her keyboard before slumping asleep, un-showered. In the morning, she was surprised to see the words. A not infrequent blackout. ‘Write drunk, edit sober.’ Wasn’t that what Hemingway said?

She drank the bracing coffee. She needed to get a grip. The time zones meant she had just a few hours before the

deadline for the piece on post-COVID Singapore. What had Gyanendu said? As he got older, he more and more wanted happy endings.

‘Everything we undertake is satori; it flows from an ephemeral and intangible inspiration; satori. These moments are coming back. I’m recovering — we’re recovering — the vividness, the colour of the place. COVID is receding. The streets are filled again. People are celebrating at restaurants.’

Not Pulitzer material but edible copy.

‘I’m losing faith and I’m scared I’ll pass these feelings to my little son,’ she said the next time she met up with Gyanendu.

‘Each act, small as it may be, such as reading to your boy, writing your stories that help others understand, or singing along to an indie band’s song, keeps the devils at bay. In time perhaps we will come to find that it is so. Hopefulness is hard-earned *and* can be lonely.’

She punched him affectionately on the shoulder. ‘Gyanendu the Sage!’

The Kingfishers clinked; the weighty mood lifted.

‘So how?’ said Vanesa.

Vernacular Singlish had helpful phrases that cut to the point.

Four weeks later, he waited at their usual bench. As Vanesa approached with the Kingfishers, she paused.

Something was up. He was never there before her.

Gyanendu gazed at the canyons of buildings and the glistening night lights. The immediate shophouses bustled with local trade — gold dealers, shoe shops and barbers. But it was the tall bank buildings amidst the dark night sky that carried the twenty-four-hour hum of money circulating.

Later he’d said this was perhaps the last time he would see such a sight. This beautiful and even peaceful place. It had served him well. He just wanted to remember the experience.

‘It’s always like that,’ she’d said. ‘It’s the best ones who leave.’ After drinking, she went with him to help put his cases in his old Alfa Romeo. Some crazy notion about going overland back to India.

While they were loading the car she thought about all the talks they’d had. About wars, about his crazy schemes and unexpected perspectives, about cinema, about her son and about Singapore.

After Gyanendu left, she realized there were only her experiences and connections.

Her drinking subsided — no more blackouts, however poetic.

Another index of the city. Some weekend afternoons she now strolled along the East Coast. The Singapore Strait and the distant South China Sea lazily lapping on to the beach. There would be a volleyball game and maids taking

day-off photos of each other, muscular protein-shaken men running, midriff-bare women at an outdoor yoga class, older folks moving in synchrony to a tai chi class... and on certain especially humid days, a mist would envelop the shore. Beautiful, like the ineffable, like a dream, fleeting. Like a kind of love.

## Graphite

Beijing summer nights: dusty, sodium-vapour lit, noisy, under construction, and beautiful. Packed with migrants, families, battered apartments, party members, expats and intrigues. Bedard, a rugged old China hand, had cheerfully asked me along this Friday night—down some Sanlitun *hutongs* and through a courtyard—to the Capital Bar & Great Leap Distillery.

Graph, whom I only knew fleetingly, was nicknamed after his father, a nuclear physicist. He was sipping his Tsingtao when Bedard and I arrived. Bedard treated Graph as an old friend. After our beers were served, I asked Graph what he did. Security for the High Commission, he said. Aiding ill-prepared travellers needing emergency medical care, calming newly arrived staff who had been pulled over by the Public Security Bureau, visiting jailed expat countrymen caught up in drugs and awaiting trial. That sort of thing. Friendly chatter.

‘Your man when you get into trouble,’ Bedard said. He raised his glass.

Officially, Graph said, he was both sympathetic to them all and respectful of local laws and processes. He emphasised the *and*. After a decade and a half, though, he knew now most were complicit, at least, in their fates. When people are

far from home, they feel freer to put themselves in morally ambiguous situations. Almost always, they'd get off without real punishment, occasionally due to my efforts, he'd said.

Another round of beers served by a Tsingtao girl, one of the waitresses in shiny sky-blue dresses employed by the brewery rather than the bar.

Bedard often had this friendly grin. Endearing. He tapped Graph's phone, holster-like on his belt. 'They are listening to us.'

'Even though the Chinese can track me,' Graph said, 'I've got to keep this with me. So, when Bedard gets in trouble, he can call me, and I can rush over and reassure the PSB he didn't mean it.' He angled his head jocularly at Bedard, who smiled at the teasing. The High Commission staff had been briefed and briefed; in an accident, call the emergency number and Graph, or one of his team, would arrive shortly. Day or night. New Year's Eve. Hot summer nights. Whenever.

The bar was brick walls and wooden flooring; busy, cheerful, old-time rock and roll, out-of-season LED Christmas lights, and decent fish and chips. Tables and bar stools. The Capital Bar & Great Leap Distillery was a classic of its type. We sat at a table away from the bright lights. Later, I wondered if that was intentional.

I prided myself on being culturally *au fait*, but tonight, the expat bar was relief. The warm summer evening had an

easy, endless feel; business men and corporate women swilled around. Many seemed to be friends or at least acquaintances of Bedard or Graph.

Bedard was asking Graph what was new. Security detail on a tour with the Prime Minister when he visits next month. Including some forsaken city in the middle of nowhere to see our nuclear technology, Graph said. I thought of the anonymous Chinese towns with their endless rows and rows of similar apartment blocks.

Rumours swirled of China having sold our technology to Iran, or North Korea. What did Graph think? Not likely, he'd said.

The Tsingtao girl, April, kept the beers topped up. She was friendly and flitted in and out, joining some of the banter. More stories from Bedard and Graph. Dubious Voice of America technicians shifting between Xinjiang and Kazakhstan. Russians eyeing trade across the Pamir Mountains. I wasn't trying hard to keep track, but maybe four or five pints? Eleven or twelve o'clock at night?

Graph, Bedard and I left at the same time. Bedard to drive me to my apartment, and then to his sleeping wife. Graph got in his Jeep too. I just made out the diplomatic plates. Drinking and driving weren't really an issue in Beijing. There were a few red lines, even fewer for diplomats; drink driving wasn't even one of those lines.

It was hard to be sure in the darkened parking lot, but I thought I saw Graph almost immediately pull off to the side—to have a smoke? Bedard navigated confidently over the curb and onto the street. Had I also seen April emerge from a side door? Bedard seemed indifferent when I asked.

A night of wild stories and probably even wilder truths. I was trying to remember the details, taking mental notes. But the evening was now a pleasant blur.

\*

April shook Graph. His phone was vibrating in its holster. She could tell his head hurt, and he didn't want to move quickly. Bright lights flashed. The vibrating phone didn't stop. Slow unending waves of nausea. He was bent over on the pavement. It was less painful when the lights were blocked by the policeman. April helped Graph stand. He was rousing from the abrupt crash and feeling a mix of guilt and panic.

He breathed so as to calm himself.

April was handling the situation, Graph noted. The uniformed man—what was he doing? Asking her questions? Graph assessed the policeman for a moment. Non-threatening. Still... damn. Damn, he chastised himself, as lucidity returned. His Jeep straddled some bits of concrete. At least he hadn't driven into the ditch. He'd been saved by the construction rubble on the side of the road. The endless construction. Four am? There was little traffic. The odd beaten

listless taxi. The neon blue police roof lights meant anyone curious would stay away. The patrol car license was regular, not military police. Why was his phone still ringing?

'Graph here.'

It was the night clerk, a trusted local hire. There had been an incident. Diplomatic ID found in a wallet, no name, no details. The earnest voice apologised for waking Graph at four am. No, no one from the High Commission had called in on the emergency number, just the PSB. A bit odd, thought Graph. The night clerk told Graph the location. Graph stalled a bit by asking the clerk to repeat the street name, even though he'd got it the first time. And then, thanking the clerk, said he'd take care of it by himself. No need to send anyone else.

Graph put the phone away and surveyed the scene again. His training was taking over.

April was dressed in jeans and t-shirt. She and the uniformed policeman were talking in Mandarin. They were speaking too quickly for Graph to understand. He'd never heard her talk so formally; she'd always had a simple rural vocabulary.

He'd been with April before tonight. Her cousin's apartment way up in the sky of a half-completed condominium complex. A few pieces of furniture, a bed, a kettle, A view of the lights of the dark city of fourteen million. A shared beer. Then she'd ask him to drop her at some other

place, and he would go home to get some sleep. Alone in the apartment his estranged wife had abandoned him too.

A policewoman he hadn't noticed was on a phone. Speaking with a superior, probably. Being *laowai* meant a competent response from the police. A police division for managing incidents involving foreigners, for example. People who hadn't been in China underestimated this. The whole place could feel like an unfinished construction site: physically, economically... morally. Like where Graph was now, beside a half-completed broken road. But when the Chinese wanted to be adept... The policewoman walked over and made a gesture of offering Graph the phone. The supervisor introduced himself. Foreign Affairs Division. Polished professional English. Was he alright? Did he need a tow truck sending? Did he want Foreign Affairs to come to the scene?

Graph was making more sense of the situation. He, and Foreign Affairs, for different reasons, didn't need this to be a big deal. The local police, perhaps under direction from Foreign Affairs, wanted to take April in. But they'd leave him be. He wasn't sure of her status, especially if he wasn't around. He glanced at her, asking with his warm eyes. Proper permits, family members who knew people, not to worry, etcetera. She said this in better English than he remembered her speaking, too. 'I'll be alright,' she said.

In the sodium and flashing lights, her sharp features—

he knew she was older than she looked, but—what was the feeling? Possessiveness? She touched his arm.

\*

Eleven am Saturday morning: Graph had until Monday to sort out the details. He'd had a coffee in the apartment and gone for a walk to clear his head. He stopped in at the neighbourhood Starbucks. Inexplicably, the café playlist was on Canadian folk singer Gordon Lightfoot's song 'Second Cup of Coffee'. By the time he left he had most of his story straight. It would be awkward to explain how his wallet had got dropped when he'd got out for a piss driving home earlier, how in rushing back to the scene at four am, he'd swerved to avoid the police car at the last minute and ended up scrapping the Jeep's undercarriage. But it was plausible enough. Everyone at work would tease him about drinking too much, getting out to piss, losing his wallet, and later having some responsible citizen see his diplomatic ID and call the PSB. And then crashing his government vehicle rushing to his own incident.

The Chinese didn't log things as zealously as others would, or if they did, it would be put in a folder on a shelf and forgotten.

\*

Over the next few Fridays, Bedard would again cheerfully ask me along—down the now familiar hutongs through the courtyard—to the Capital Bar & Great Leap

Distillery. Graph would also be there, nursing his Tsingtao at one of the long high wooden tables. Bedard still treated Graph with *bonhomme*, but Graph was now more subdued. The Tsingtao girls were there, but April was nowhere. What worried Graph was how much he'd told April.

We were two- or three-pints in. There was a lull in the rock and roll, and the bar room commotion and the chatter took a moment to rise. Bedard went for a piss and to flit around kibitzing with colleagues, real and potential. Graph and I were momentarily alone. I felt naïve beside the man and his formidable adventures. Graph asked me if I remembered what we'd talked about that first night. It seemed an odd question. Bar stories, I said.

But specifically?

Mutual acquaintances, countrymen, drugs, joking about getting Bedard out of trouble. The beer talking.

Anything else?

The Russian military, April's hometown, the nuclear program... just stories.

The driven guitar music resumed. Bedard returned with new friends to introduce. Graph stared off absent-mindedly at a distant shiny blue dress. The commotion began, the white noise and summer chatter spinning up again.

## ASWANI ASWATH

Aswani Aswath is a bilingual writer and teaching artist who primarily writes plays. She is interested in socially-engaged works that shed light on issues faced by marginalised communities. Her non-fiction essay was last published in AWARE's *What We Inherit* anthology, with a Tamil-translated version appearing in *The Serangoon Times*.





## Cradle Fall

The 1am night is trying to seduce me again. Her cool, steady breath lingers on my neck as if beckoning me to stay longer. But her attempts are shattered by the dinging lift door of my HDB flat.

‘Going up,’ an automated voice cracks through the speaker and the lift accedes obligingly. I turn to stare at my weary thirty-two-year-old face in the mirrored panels. The tan-coloured concealer has dried up, accentuating my dark eyebags. Work starts in five hours and I am still not yet in bed. But dinner with Bumble Guy was a treat. I rarely had satisfying second dates like this where a burly man in a beach shirt quietly held my hand as I prattled away about my mid-life crisis.

The lift door opens and I step out. A hue of warm lights seep through the tinted glass windows of my apartment. Shit. Someone’s awake. I try to quietly unlock the floral-designed iron gate while my mind races for an excuse. Had dinner with colleagues and felt obligated to stay out? But tomorrow’s a workday, so that won’t make sense. Was out catching a play? My key is now jammed into the brass keyhole so I turn it counterclockwise, which releases a loud *click*. Shit. I forcibly pull the darn key out, shaking the entire wooden door.

‘You trying to break the door is it?’ My pot-bellied father is in front of the plasma TV, his beady eyes glued to a Tamil drama about bickering sisters-in-law living under the same roof.

My mother emerges from her bedroom, her neon green batik dress flowing past her knees. She must have heard my duel with the door. It’s bad enough that one sixty-something-year-old parent is awake, but both? This is what adult nightmares are made of.

‘Why so late?’ She pushes her red plastic glasses over her nose bridge. ‘And you never reply to my WhatsApp.’

‘Didn’t see it,’ I lie. An “R u ok???” text glared from my vibrating phone while Bumble Guy drew closer to me, a whiff of vanilla and patchouli permeating the air.

‘Why’s everyone awake? Don’t you have work tomorrow?’ I ask them both.

‘Waiting for her lah,’ my father grunts at my mother, his moustache twitching.

‘I’m not a kid.’

‘Of course she’s still a child.’ He is still not directing his answers to me.

Sighing, I rush into my bedroom and lock the door. I zip down my mesh jacket, revealing a burgundy spaghetti top, one of the many “skin-showing” clothes my parents would never approve of. The garments live in secret spots in my room, proof of the dual identities I shuttle between. Dainty convent girl at

home, wild woman in the streets who isn't afraid of showing a little cleavage. I have perfectly sculpted these Dharinis, knowing when to tone one down and when to dial the other up – my survival mechanism to cope with divergent worlds. 'Still a child,' I mutter, stuffing the top into a travel suitcase behind my bed, also known as my makeshift laundry basket storing Dharini 2.0 gear. Women my age bear children, for crying out loud. What does my father expect me to do? Rush home to serve him rice and lentil curry for dinner? My parents never berate my brother like this. Before he got married, he came and went as and when he liked. McDonalds at 3am? There, there, you must be *so* hungry. Random trip to Japan with friends on a Tuesday? Remember to get green tea bags. And the reasoning always boils down to the existence of a womb in me, and my family's reputation stamped onto it.

But I am staying ahead of the reputation game. I scroll through my email to see if any new notifications from my property agent, Genesis Chow, have trickled in. I know – Genesis? 'Genesis as in I'm the beginning chapter to your new life,' the slender young man clad in a preppy striped suit beamed when I first shook hands with him at a pop-up fair a few months ago. 'Independence is like having a coat hanger. Your life is like a piece of clothing. It needs its own place and structure, not be folded or stacked. Why can't you get your own coat hanger?'

I squint at him, trying to process this logic. Genesis continues to flash a winning smile.

'Of course! Makes *so* much sense!' I nod, not wanting to disappoint him. Honestly, it doesn't take much to convince me.

Genesis has sent some listings from ResidentialFlight.com. The first few pages are lined with four-room flats at a staggering \$4000 per month that would wipe out most of my savings. And then I see it: a fully-furnished 120-square feet apartment close to Marsiling MRT at \$850 (negotiable) per month. The walls are painted in sad cream tones, but they look clean. Decent. The long barred windows face an unexciting row of flats. I imagine life in this room saturated in varying degrees of boredom, loneliness and mild claustrophobia... but minus the prying eyes of helicopter parents and double identities. I could finally just be one person. One Dharini.

\*

'Wei?' a man speaks from the other line.

'Hi, good morning,' I try a polite, polished tone.

'Wei? Harlow?'

I drop the grammar to appeal to his communication style. 'Saw your listing on Residential Flight.'

'Orh. Yah?'

'Can see your flat?'

The homeowner, Mr Sim, wants me to text him my details. Gender, rate, race. The last criteria unsettles me. I've read enough horror stories of rental racism that range from local Chinese landlords declining Indians on the pretext of "heavy cooking" to preferences for Western expats who would presumably have "high spending power." But I decide to give Mr Sim the benefit of the doubt and yield to his specific requests.

A few seconds pass and my phone vibrates. I hold my breath. Don't worry. Not everyone wants to be a stereotype. The words "Sorry, no Indian" appear on the screen.

My hands are shaking. Did I not leave this racist nonsense at college seventeen years ago? I want to screenshot the discriminating words and shame the man. I want the anti-racism influencer-advocates to hound the fella on social media, find his LinkedIn account and demand his manager fire this loser who does not deserve to exist in a multi-racial, globalised world. Surely, this is the righteous way to use cancel culture.

I type a begrudging "Thanks for your time" and wonder where unhappy, unmarried minority Singaporeans belong.

\*

'Let me see!' my mother looks up from her phone as I am about to scurry out.

Today I am dressed in Dharini 1.0 clothing, a knitted

midi dress with capped sleeves, so there's less to worry about.

'Your chest looks so big. Are you wearing a spongy bra?'

'No! My chest is like this.'

'Who're you meeting?'

'A friend.'

'Boy?'

'Girl.' It's always a girl. 'Genevieve.'

'Sounds new. What does she do?'

'University lecturer. Married with kids.' Dharini 1.0 has perfect friends.

\*

'You should've called me,' Genesis says as he walks me through an airy kitchen. He is taking me on a house tour around a two-room condominium apartment in Punggol. '\$850 per month? Unbelievable.'

'It's not my fault he was a racist bigot.'

'I'm sorry that happened. That's why. Go through me first.'

'What happened to independence being like a coat hanger?'

'I said get a coat hanger. I didn't say get it on your own.' He gestures at the surroundings. 'See, can you find this without me?'

Furnished with sleek black cabinets and a glossy maple countertop, the kitchen is a whole Scandinavian vibe.

‘Too much black. No good,’ my mother clicks her tongue in disapproval. I try to push her voice out of my head.

‘There’s several amenities,’ Genesis continues. ‘Just a five-minute walk to the train station and shopping mall. Look at that view!’

We both peer out the window. True to its name, The Ivory is a scenic spread of creamy-white flats. Smack in the middle is an inviting pool with complimentary sounds of shrieking children.

‘Twenty-sixth floor. I’m not used to this height.’ I’ve lived on the third floor all my life.

Genesis leads me to the bedroom, his socks padding the laminate flooring. Another industrial aesthetic awaits, this time a brick wall panel, low warm lights and a queen-sized bed in grey sheets. I entertain the idea of inviting Bumble Guy over after a night of drinks. No more curfews so I generously let him graze his stubble-peppered face across my cheek. I laugh freely, no longer having to periodically glance at the phone for a frantic mother’s slew of texts.

‘How much again?’

‘\$1.1K if you can find one more housemate.’

I purse my lips. As a copywriter, surviving on \$3K plus each month is rough. There’s electricity bills and groceries to account for on top of my regular expenses. But what if I don’t like my housemate? What if the housemate piles up the sink

with dishes for days or gives me the silent treatment when we bicker over said dishes? Is this what it all boils down to? My freedom versus unwashed dishes?

‘I’ll consider.’

‘It’s out of your budget, but don’t expect anything lower lah. It’s Singapore.’

\*

A house lizard chirps as I try opening the front door, still mulling over the apartment. The key lodges itself into the keyhole again and I pull it aggressively, rattling the faulty door. Thankfully, it is a Saturday afternoon and my father should be out with old school friends while my mother should be in the kitchen. Women of her generation, working or not, are expected to voluntarily relegate themselves to domestic spheres. Even a visit to a relative’s does not stop her from heading straight for the kitchen as if reporting for duty. The thing is, I don’t know who’s taking attendance.

So on this mundane afternoon one would *expect* said mother to be stirring a pot by the stove. Instead, she is rummaging through my dresser, her nimble hands skittling across jewellery containers.

‘What are you doing?’ I yell.

‘Oh!’ She turns to face me, her curly puff of hair swinging. ‘You know those uh – hoop earrings? I-I want to borrow them.’

I stare at her. How long has she been in here? What has she seen? My eyes dart to the back of my bed. I feel eleven all over again when my mother fished out my Pikachu hardcover diary from the depths of my secret hiding spot – the base of the cupboard – a spot I was so proud of creating. She had read the entire diary, then screamed at me for the horny fan-fiction with boyband crushes and made me swear never to write about my life again.

‘Let me look for it and pass it to you,’ I gently nudge her out.

‘You can search now!’

‘I’m not free.’

‘Is it because you’re busy hiding this?’ She whips my lacy white bra from under the bedcovers and dangles it in my face. ‘What did I say about the spongy kind?’

‘Are you snooping around?’ I snatch it from her, face flushing. ‘This is *my* room!’

Her mouth twists into a frown – a look I have seen. I know what she’s about to say and pray the words will not slip from her quivering lips.

‘But Dharini... I’m your *mother*.’

Like specks of dust, the words drift into the room, coalescing into an uncomfortable silence. How long are my elderly parents going to resort to this guilt trip? I’m your mother therefore I have a right to know where you’re going,

who you’re talking to, what you’re wearing, when you’ve eaten, who you’re kissing, how you’re ovulating and breathing and defecating. I’m your mother therefore. What exactly would be the most socially acceptable way to respond to that without sounding like an ungrateful prick? Yes, you’re my mother but... *so what?*

She locks her brown eyes on mine, a seething glare. My gaze defensively steers away and lands on the travel suitcase, which has been oddly unzipped. The whirring of the ceiling fan lingers, and my parched throat welcomes the light breeze.

‘I... I need my space,’ Dharini 2.0 blurts.

‘Space?’ She asks as if she has never heard of this word.

‘Yes. If not, I’d have to move out.’

‘To where? Who’ll you stay with?’

‘By myself. I’ll rent a flat. I’ve... been looking.’

Her jaw drops. ‘Don’t be stupid! You only move out when you get married.’

‘No, many do this now. I’ve a full-time job. I can support myself.’

‘Rubbish! What will people say?!’

‘Who?’ I know who she is referring to – a group of relatives gathered outside our faulty door, wagging their fingers and tongues in my mother’s imaginary purgatory.

‘I’ll tell your father.’

‘Please do. I’ve no idea how to break the news.’

Later that night, my disgruntled father delivers a forty-five minute lecture on the perils of living alone as a defenceless, unmarried woman, a speech so impassioned one would accidentally mistake him for speaking from experience. 'All you young people think you know everything. An unmarried girl must live with her parents.' His breath reeks of alcohol.

'It's not like I'm disowning you. I'll call you both every night. You can visit. Sometimes.'

'I said, NO!'

Like a good wife, my mother sits beside him in the living room, not interjecting. Her gaze occasionally shifts to the show running on the television screen as she tips her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. Why does the drama on screen interest her more than her daughter's feelings? I must be a bad child. After all, children are not allowed to hate their parents. Mothers in particular endure the onerous task of childbirth, an endeavour I don't know if I'll ever have the strength to execute someday.

As my father's voice recedes into the background, I wonder about my first home. A cocoon of amniotic fluid, home would have been a delicate molecular exchange between my mother and I, held by the tendril of an umbilical cord. The pulsating blood flow would have lulled me into a perpetual state of sleep, peace never a quest but a norm. With each

passing week, my organs would take form until my fully-developed lungs would finally send signals to my mother's brain. Her cervix effaces while my head, far too heavy for her, slides down into her pelvis. She might have been scrubbing the stove after a Wednesday morning's worth of cooking when her waterbag threatens to rupture. Caught off guard, she contracts her pelvic muscle, hoping the pain would cease. But I no longer fit inside of her, so I kick and bawl. I must go, mother. Let me out. And when she finally relents, the waterbag bursts, dousing us both in waves of relief.

## FRANCIS LAU

Francis Lau is a published poet and filmmaker whose work explores the themes of memory, displacement and redemption. His films have participated in international festivals and won awards. As an educator, he teaches screenwriting, and creative / critical thinking skills. He is currently a postgraduate student at LASALLE College of the Arts.



## Lessons

The kettle boils, I recall a time  
when I barely reached the stove,  
but you held my hand and we struck  
a match. Stand on your toes, you said.  
I giggled and shook my head.  
You gave a hug and lifted me up.  
Had anyone entered the kitchen that day,  
she would have thought a mother  
was playing with her child.

I wait for the kettle to sit  
before straining the leaves. When tea  
is finally ready, you raise the cup to blow  
on rising steam. The rim touches  
your lips, your hand trembles  
and your fingers lose their grip.  
A child would have flinched  
you manage to still the cup,  
as if to say, 'no pain, no pain!'

Two months ago, it was like this —  
a knife plunged between  
your thumb and fore finger

while you were slicing persimmons.  
Soft flesh parted, you gazed at me  
and whispered, 'no pain, no pain!'  
Two more inches, the doctor said,  
and it would have severed  
a major gateway to your heart.

As you lean on your walking stick,  
you wipe away tea on your skin  
and push back the chair to stand up.  
You stretch your arm to return  
an heirloom, a used cup.  
I do what a child does  
when presented with a gift:

I hold on to my mother's hand.



## Urban Romance

— after Wong Kar Wai's "2046"

The first time you touched me

I almost missed my step.

You grabbed my waist

and slid into my arms

a box of stockings — so long

they swallowed me whole

like a pair of snakes.

That evening, you stole

into my room and opened

me up, as if I were your gift.

Afterwards you paid me ten shillings,

each time, as a testament.

In my body, love was more than

a feeling. It had a price.

In all of this, money was never

my point. Your scent had purpled

around my breasts,

seeped into my heart,

no matter how hard I scrubbed,

the marks would not come off.

I tried showing them to you

but you started to come

less and less to my room,

reminding me

our bodies were vessels for hire.

If being a passenger in your car

has its imperative, could I

choose for one last time

to remain silent,

be held captive,

while the driver marks time

and I close my eyes,

rest my face next to yours

till the first signs

of the dawning of light?

# JOCELYN LOW

Jocelyn has lived in so many worlds from all the stories she has read that she hopes that her stories also allow others to escape from this world, even if it's for a little while.



## Unburiable Bodies

Exactly how I ended up in that bedroom with the two guys is a bit hazy now, but what stayed in my memory were their bodies, ten years after the event, like the afterimage of an uncomfortably close camera flash. Vastly different physiques, yet devastatingly similar in how the two sinewy bodies somehow made my own more supple. Clyde, tall with a lazy fringe and Zhenning - the one whose approval you sought - shorter with a swimmer's build and you, false bravado at twenty, insecure about your nudity. Zhenning did not know how you burned for him, or he might not have shared you with Clyde, the owner of the house, whose bed the three of you were lying on. The oldest in the room being twenty-four, no one wanted to admit to not having a fucking clue what to do in a threesome. Let's take a shower together, someone proposed. Not you. You were too busy wondering if your breasts looked flat when you lay down. Like the troopers that you were, all three trotted to the open shower area. Clyde Doved you, you sprayed him down. Zhenning trickled water over your buttocks, you leaned on Clyde for support. They wiped you dry up and down. 'I like her body. Very nice to *bao bao*,' Clyde pronounced.

To stoop so low as to consort with such doubly illiterate ilk, bad in English, bad in Chinese, neither here nor there, like the half-formed woman that you still were at twenty.

Your sense of self caught in a liminal space, not a virgin, not a whore. Ten years of convent school could not curb your over-simmering sexuality. You wanted Zhenning, but to get to him you had to play his game. If not a twosome, a threesome would still be winsome. What price prick? Just notch it up to experience. In the not-so-dainty 1990s, no one cared about 99 red love balloons anymore.

Full-on lust made up for the lack of love. But, not so fast. Someone suggested saving a memory of this grand occasion, when Madam had a Sir on each side. We declared loudly in our birthday suits: Let's capture this moment forever! Not BFFs, but MMFs. To seal the unconsummated lust and pure trust, we each took home a polaroid of the three poses: FMM, MFM, MMF. You took the last because Zhenning was the M next to your F. If you looked at the photograph at an angle and with an eye closed, you could almost believe it was just the two of you.

And now one of the other two polaroids has surfaced. On a friend's friend's friend's social feed. Your MMF was still snug at the bottom of your linen drawer. MF-er. Why now, when you have just hit your big Three Oh, and your fiancé has proposed? The old you, amorphous, is now incongruent with the shape you have come to define for yourself. In this new life that you have built brick by brick, there is only space for one scripted you.

## Only Friends

I first saw them having lunch together in the staff canteen.

James had his head bent solicitously towards his female companion. She said something. He threw his head back to laugh in abandon. I loved that laugh, but I thought only *I* got the full version? His hair haloed in the sunlight coming through the glass panes of the small staff canteen on the third floor of the hotel. I thought of the strands of his dark brown hair I had found on my bed after he had left on Sunday morning.

I was with some visiting colleagues from our partner hotel in America. As the Human Resource Manager, I was roped into the entourage with the top brass, as our American partners wanted to remodel theirs after ours, and apparently our hotel had come up tops in staff well-being. Well, if they knew how much personal attention their HR Manager was paying to the needs of the Front Office Manager, James...

So what was he doing with another woman? I could only see the side view of the woman, so for all I knew, she could be just a co-worker. Flames licked at my insides. I couldn't stop thinking of the way he had laughed. I knew he got along well with his colleagues. But was this *more*? James and I did not move in the same social circles. We did not keep it a secret that he drove with me to and from work, but everyone thought we were just carpool colleagues.

Only friends. After all, I was approaching fifty, and James was only thirty-three.

James texted me in the late afternoon that he would not be needing a ride home that evening. He did that occasionally when he was meeting his friends after work, or when he was caught up in meetings, but most of the time, he preferred to go straight home to his family for dinner. He had lamented a couple of times that his salary did not allow him to eat out too often. Usually, I did not wonder what he did in his free time, but now that I knew about this new woman he seemed to be so chummy with, my senses were on edge and my possessiveness was working, painfully, on overtime. I could tell from his body language that he had enjoyed her company greatly. I had looked through the new staff profiles and matched his lunch companion's face to an intern in the Front Office. A sweet, eager face with medium-length hair looked back at me, with clear, untroubled eyes. So, this was the intruder. Mandy Ng. Aged twenty-five. Theoretically, James did not belong to me. Our arrangement was only temporary, offering each other a certain level of physical and emotional comfort. However, one was never rational when it came to affairs of the heart. Did I just say "of the heart"? Oops. I meant a win-win arrangement for both parties. I was just not ready to give up having him as my toy boy.

\*

James and I worked in an organisation with over five hundred staff and, as was the case with the hotel industry, a high percentage of the staff were female.

I hated them all.

Don't get me wrong. I was not a walking example of a bitter, unmarried, old maid. I, Katherine Ann Tan, led a rich and successful life. As the HR Manager, I did have a certain power over the careers of quite a number of staff here. James was one of three Front Office Managers, and even then, he was still on probation. I might have played a part in his promotion in the first place. I owned a cosy little terraced house in the East, and my BMW got me around. I might not be married, but neither was I shackled to a pot-bellied husband or enslaved by any offspring. Having an uncomplicated, no-strings-attached relationship with a young man like James was icing on top of the proverbial cake for me, despite the age gap. Or was it because of the age gap? Didn't they say fifty was the new thirty?

But still, I hated the other female staff. Each year, they got just that little bit more attractive. I was not that well turned-out or poised at their age! It took me years to learn how to use make-up to enhance my plain face, and aesthetics and strict dieting to add shape to my substantial charms. And now, these young women entered the workforce with a full arsenal of brains and beauty (and boobs too), and I hated

them for the threat they posed. Mandy Ng was just the latest sweet young thing; was my James going to be seduced by this cheap bauble?

James with his boyish looks had made me grow unduly fond of him. James made himself available to me when I needed a dinner companion or a movie date. Most of the time, though, we had just been, to put it indelicately, fuck buddies. However, lately I was beginning to find that I also enjoyed doing normal things together, not just when we were in bed. I was shrewd enough to know that James would never consider me as a romantic partner. Perhaps that was due to the way we had started our arrangement. Work-related phone calls, then meals then one drunk night. In the past eight months, "love" or "relationship" was never mentioned. I knew this was a transient... transaction at best, but I was not ready to lose him to any of these insipid young things. I was therefore always on the lookout for any sign that James seemed a little too keen in the way he talked about any new female colleague, especially if she was unattached and attractive. Would that be you, Mandy Ng?

\*

My car drew up to the kerb in front of James' parents' house.

'Good morning, Kate!' James said.

'Hi, James!' I signalled to join the traffic.

'So how was your dinner last night?' I broke the silence.

‘Oh, er... I didn’t have dinner out. I had to stay behind to induct some of our new staff. I Grabbed home after that.’

*You sure you weren’t with Mandy?* I gripped the steering wheel a little tighter in the hopes of keeping my tone light.

‘I thought induction was under HR. Why were you involved?’

‘Oh, Lim talked about it at lunch that day. He thought it might be a good idea to have a separate session for Front Office staff only. That made sense to me, so I stayed behind to help.’

Sure. Help yourself to the new help.

‘Ah, I see. Yes, it’s a great idea! Maybe other departments can take the lead from Front Office. Want me to bring this up at Exco?’ Didn’t hurt to remind him who can help him up that corporate ladder.

‘Oh...’ I could tell James was pleased. ‘But it wasn’t my idea, I just went along with it...’

‘Ai ya, it’s okay. You and Lim are both Front Office Managers and you are helping to execute it, aren’t you?’

‘In that case... thanks!’

We continued the ride in companionable silence. Just when I was thinking of other ways to strengthen my hold on him...

‘Oh, by the way, so sorry. I can’t come over this Saturday. There is another training session for all the new staff that

Lim has asked me to be around for.’

Was that a slight guilty tremor in his voice? Chancing a look at him on the pretext of checking my blind spot, I saw the blush on his face. What now? I was on full alert again.

\*

It was Saturday. I did not usually have to report to the hotel for work, but I decided to drop by. I told myself I had to finalise a report for the Board but in fact, I could have tasked my PA to do that. I had been struggling within myself since he cancelled our usual Saturday tryst; I refused to admit even to myself that I could be jealous of the likes of Mandy Ng. Too proud to ask him point blank, I was also unwilling to be the first to suggest we took our relationship further.

I decided that I would go to the HR training room to check on the session. As HR Manager, I could say I was there to offer support. I could see for myself his interaction with Mandy, to see if I should be worried why he was sacrificing our Saturday together.

Arriving at the training room, I realised that it was empty. Did James lie to me? Or...? I made my way to the Front Office Reception. Carol was on duty.

‘Hi, Carol. I thought there was training going on for your department? Where’s it being held?’

‘Oh, hi, Ms Tan. Er... James came earlier. He took the key to the training suite so I guess it must be there.’ Carol

turned with a smile to the Japanese hotel guest who had just arrived behind me.

‘Okay, thanks!’ I could barely get the words out.

The nerve! I walked towards the lift to get up to the suite that the hotel had set aside for staff training. *Could he be there alone with Mandy? The liar, the cheat, the cheapskate! Why was the lift taking so long? What did she have? Just youth and a pretty face. Men!*

I tried the door. It was unlocked. *In too much of a hurry, James?*

‘Take off your underwear, James!’ Was that Lim’s voice? What was going on?

I marched quickly into the room.

‘No wa-’ James broke off in shock. He was standing by the bed in his briefs.

‘Kate!’

‘Ms Tan!’ Lim was sitting on the edge of the bed with his phone aiming at James.

\*

Lim left the room looking as sheepish as I had ever seen him, bowing repeatedly and apologetically. James hurriedly put on a tee shirt and a pair of shorts.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Kate.’

I waited impatiently for him to continue.

‘It was just for fun. My ex-rugby friends and I dared

one another to pose topless for our Instagram and before you know it, I had five thousand views. I told Lim about it, and he convinced me to get an OnlyFans account. He promised to take artistic photos only.’

‘But why, James? Do you need money that badly?’

He hesitated. I could see he felt self-conscious. Something made me soften, just a bit.

‘I... I feel inferior to you, Kate. I am...’ he stammered uncharacteristically ‘...not earning as much as you and I am lower in rank. I just wanted to have more money.’

‘James... I’m so sorry you felt that way. I wished you had come to me if you needed money.’

‘But... that’s just it! I don’t want to rely on you. Much as I like being driven by you, I want to be able to pick you up in my own car. I also want to buy you nice things.’

‘Nice things? I have many nice things already...’ I didn’t know where he was going with this. Could it be...?

‘My mother brought me up to be old-fashioned. I know it’s not cool in this woke age, but as a man, I want to be able to take care of you. I want to date you properly and well, that means earning more than now. If that means showing a little skin...’

‘Oh, James!’ I could finally let myself pull him to me in a tight embrace. ‘You’ve made me so happy. I don’t care about the money, but strangely, I also don’t care about you striking sexy poses for your “fans”... Just not full monty okay!’

## JOSEPH TAN

Joseph Tan is a screenwriter who had a mid-life crisis, but did not have enough in his bank account for a flashy sports car. He had, however, just about enough to sign up for the MA in Creative Writing program at LASALLE College of the Arts. He might have been better off seeing a therapist.





## A Map of the Territory

### I

The map is not the territory.

To be useful, a map has to be accurate. But the most accurate map becomes the territory itself – and is therefore useless.

We must remember this:

The map is not the territory.

### II

Let's play Two Truths and a Lie.

On 2 September 2007, National Serviceman Corporal Dave Teo Ming went AWOL. He smuggled an assault rifle and eight rounds of live ammunition out of a military camp. 20 hours later, he was found on the third floor of Orchard Cineleisure shopping mall, and arrested. The rifle, disassembled into smaller parts, was in a bag; he had the eight bullets and a knife on him.

It was only when Corporal Teo's photo was splashed all over the papers later that I realised we had been in Orchard Cineleisure at the same time. We shared the same lift. I was heading up to meet my girlfriend at the cinema on the fifth floor, where we were going to watch *The Bourne Ultimatum*. No, we were going to watch *Rush Hour 3*. No, we were going

to watch *The Nanny Diaries*. He entered on the first floor, and got out on the third. He and I both carried black backpacks. He and I both looked everywhere else except at each other. He and I both wished the other had taken the escalator instead.

I wonder if there was anything that could have changed how things for Corporal Teo that day. I wonder if there was something that I should have done that would have changed anything about my life, not just on that day, but on any other day. Especially when it came to her.

### III

What is the goddamn point of photo-realistic art?

We've all seen those viral videos on Instagram or TikTok. Using a reference photo, or drawing from memory, an artist reproduces an image down to the smallest, finest detail. Look, here's a portrait of Johnny Depp so life-like you can smell the wine-breath on him. And there's Winona Ryder, with that look she always has when she's being photographed, like she's just caught the photographer ripping off a wet fart.

If I want real life, I'll look out the bloody window.

The map is not the territory.

The map cannot be the territory.

### IV

At some point, a friend pulled me aside, and quietly suggested it was time I deleted her photos.

He's concerned. He cares. He's a good friend.

But the only thing I can draw are stick figures, and even then, only just. And more of her is fading from my memory everyday.

But I can write.

So I nodded at my friend, and mentally composed the opening line to this story.

## V

Let's play Two Lies and a Truth.

On 2 September 2007, National Serviceman Corporal Dave Teo Ming went AWOL. He smuggled an assault rifle and eight rounds of live ammunition out of a military camp. 20 hours later, he was found on the third floor of Orchard Cineleisure shopping mall, and arrested. The rifle, disassembled into smaller parts, was in a bag; he had the eight bullets and a knife on him.

After he slipped away from his army camp, Corporal Dave Teo Ming went to Geylang. We realised this only later, of course, when his photo was splashed all over TV, but my girlfriend and I had bumped into him as we walked to our favourite Teochew porridge stall for supper. No, it was a dim sum restaurant. No, it was a nasi lemak place. His black bag almost slammed into me. We barely avoided contact. He glared at me. I said sorry. He spat on the ground, and walked away.

That night, I stayed over at my girlfriend's place; Corporal Dave Teo Ming slept in a dingy hotel room with a Thai prostitute. That night, I rested my head against my girlfriend and listened to her beating heart; Corporal Teo set his on pillows which hid his rifle from view. That night, I whispered a wish into the quiet of the room, heard only by my girlfriend's sleeping form; that night, Corporal Teo dreamed of a date with destiny.

## VI

I've started doing this thing in my writing.

I reuse the same two names for my male and female protagonists. In one story, he is a teacher and she, an architect. In the next, he is in a band, and she does the bookkeeping for a small business. In another story, he works in IT, and she is a beekeeper.

But their names are the same. Always the same. Constant and unchanging.

Another friend who had read these stories raised an eyebrow when he saw the recurring names and said:

Who hurt you, bro?

I just said, I'm crap at coming up with names. I'm too lazy to think up new ones every time I write a story. Plus, it's kinda cool, no? Like a multiverse thing – different circumstances, different relationship dynamics, but the

central couple is always the same, constant and unchanging.

It is true: I am crap at coming up with names. I am lazy. And it is kinda cool.

Many things can be true at the same time.

My friend laughed and said, bruh, if someone did hurt you, let me know. I'll help you take revenge.

When I heard that, I thought about Corporal Dave Teo Ming.

## VII

Let's play A Lie and a Truth.

On 2 September 2007, National Serviceman Corporal Dave Teo Ming went AWOL. He smuggled an assault rifle and eight rounds of live ammunition out of a military camp. 20 hours later, he was found on the third floor of Orchard Cineleisure shopping mall, and arrested. The rifle, disassembled into smaller parts, was in a bag; he had the eight bullets and a knife on him.

Corporal Teo had broken up with Crystal Liew, his girlfriend, six months before. He allegedly made death threats towards her and her family afterwards. She had to be put under police protection while the manhunt was on-going.

I was in Orchard Cineleisure when he was arrested. I was seated at Subway. No, I was at Burger King. No, I was at KFC.

I was waiting for my girlfriend. She had called, and said there was something she had to tell me. Something best said in person. She sounded a little sad.

I was waiting for her to come and tell me this thing when I heard the stomp of footsteps. A small army of blue-uniformed police officers ran into the mall, and bounded up the escalators for the third floor. Eventually the footsteps receded. I had no idea what was going on, so I went back to waiting.

I have never, ever, actually seen Corporal Dave Teo Ming in the flesh.

## VIII

In some ways, I'm still waiting.

Maybe we all are.

In a yet to be written story, the male protagonist who shares the same name as all the male protagonists in my other stories will continue to wait for the female protagonist who shares the same name as all the female protagonists in my other stories.

Always waiting. Constant and unchanging.

## IX

I've never been to Milan. Or Tokyo. Or Buenos Aires.

But I know, by looking at a map, that Italy is shaped like a boot, that Japan is an island, and that Argentina shares a border with Chile. The previously unknown and unknowable

are a little less unknown and unknowable because someone transposed them onto paper. But that curved line representing a mountain range isn't gravel under my feet. The sand of a printed shoreline will not run through my fingers. And the woman in my stories is not the same woman whose beating heart I once listened to.

Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

Once something – a character, a plot, an idea – is on the page, it becomes both unreal and hyper-real. Something more, and something less.

Even someone like Corporal Dave Teo Ming.

Especially someone like Corporal Dave Teo Ming.

Many things can be true at the same time.

## X

I have told the truth. I have told lies. Sometimes in the same sentence.

There is a girlfriend.

There were many girlfriends.

There is no girlfriend.

And there never was.

Everything is up for grabs; nothing is sacred. Except this:

The map must not be the territory.

In the Orchard Cineleisure of my imagination, Corporal Dave Teo Ming is about to be arrested with an assault rifle,

eight rounds of live ammunition and a knife in his possession.

In a Subway or Burger King or KFC, someone like me, but not quite me, is still waiting.

Will always be waiting. Constant and unchanging.

## DANIEL SEIFERT

Daniel's stories have been published in *Discovery Channel Magazine* and the upcoming *Missed Connections* anthology, and longlisted in *The Letter Review*. He is an MA in Creative Writing student at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore.



## Condor

Sunrise paints the mountain gold. The houses stir under its shadow, as mothers and wives cook breakfast for husbands and sons.

Luis can't remember when he last saw a sunrise. Each time he emerges to the surface of the mountain mine, the sky overhead is painfully bright. White clouds tumble like dollops of cotton. He's one of the many who work the early shift, five am to noon.

Luis washes his hands with water from a grimy 7-Up bottle. He's not been a miner for long, yet already his fingers look gnarled, old. He sits to eat lunch on a rusty stool near the mine entrance, looks into the paper bag. *Salteñas* again. He keeps telling his mother. She just cuffs him on the head and says, 'You want something different? Cook it yourself, Gordito.' Little fatty. A family joke because he's rail-thin, with elbows like chicken bones. He's made the mistake of telling his crew about his nickname; now everyone at work calls him Gordito and rubs his belly — for luck, they say. Secretly he likes it, and God knows you need luck when you work in the airless guts of the mountain.

Luis spits out the mash of coca leaves lodged in his cheek, breaks apart the pastry. The chicken has congealed into the egg and potato. Habit makes him look up and

squint, to see if he can spot — ah. Far above, an Andean condor coasts the thin air with lazy wings. *Vultur gryphus*.

Before the mine's silica dust crippled his lungs, his father would teach him the names of species, and give him a sour candy for every bird Luis could spot and name. *Vultur gryphus*, papa had said. 'See how it just glides on the thermals? Effortless. We probably look like ants to him. Or little moles,' he mused. 'Underground mole people.' Then he would croon a little song, 'Oh for some wings, oh for the wind in my hair, oh for a job that gives me air...' Only when Luis became a miner too did Luis realise how papa cloaked fear and fatigue with songs and crooked smiles.

Luis closes one eye and points at the bird with a straight finger, perhaps to name it, perhaps to shoot it down in his mind.

In a week he'll be seventeen. In a year he will be blind.

Though he's worked in the mountain's veins for months, Luis has yet to see the glint of silver. He waits patiently while older men set dynamite charges. After the crump of an explosion, it takes many minutes for the dust to clear. Then he wades in with another boy to haul the rubble into carts. Only once this is done can the older men attack the chalky walls with picks. This far down the heat is intense, and after four or five hours the sweat mixes with the dust into a thin paste on his skin.

At the start of each shift, Luis gives El Tio his daily gift. He used to roll his eyes when papa told him about Tio, but not any more. When he started the job, a few men told Luis, *Your dad stopped saying hi to Tio every day, I'm not saying that's why he fucked his lungs, God rest him, but...* Then they would suck their teeth and lean in: *Up there we worship God, sure. But below we worship the devil, okay Gordito?*

Now Luis makes sure to start every day with something for Tio, the lord of the underground who safeguards miners. Luis squats in the culvert, the smoothest patch of land in the shaft. The statue of the demon grins at his riches: cigarettes, bags of coca leaves, candy bars. Luis unscrews a small bottle of *puro* and daubs Tio's smiling mouth with it. In the still air the pure alcohol makes Luis's eyes water.

Further down, he hears the deep-throated cough of a detonation. He heads towards it.

Tourists come by often, from all over the world. By now he's heard Jorge the tour guide yammer away enough to know the story. *Welcome to Bolivia friends, welcome to what was once the world's richest silver mine, when Potosi was the most populous place on earth, bigger than London, richer than Paris, bla bla bla.* Luis can always tell when a tour group has snaked past. They leave a smell that's clean, alluring. Intoxicating.

Luis has the confidence of youth. He has a plan. He will learn English. He will become a tour guide and flirt with

blonde tourists from Norway and California. He'll get fat tips after each tour and whisper his phone number to them; these *gringas* love local men. He'll be smart, save money. When he has enough, he'll get a tattoo. A condor silhouette whose wingtips brush his shoulders, its beak nudging the back of his ear. And one day he will see a beach — not just any beach but Miami beach, and drink five-dollar tequilas until the sun rises.

He studies hard. Closes his eyes sometimes at the cinema, watching Marvel movies with his eyes screwed shut to follow the dialogue, murmuring 'I - am - Iron Man' until his friends smack his head and say *callate* man, I'm trying to watch the movie.

He's saving up for a third-hand phone, one that doesn't have a tired battery and a screen cracked to hell, so he can download an app that pings him English lessons every day. He listens to American rock. There's a band called Rage Against the Machine. He likes the growling panther-like guitars, the fury in the voice of the Latino frontman. Though the lyrics are spit out too fast, the English words a fiery blur, Luis mouths along in his bed, his bangs tickling his eyelashes as he sings 'Fuck you! Fuck you!' But quietly, so mama doesn't hear.

In the pauses between songs, he realises the toll of daily dynamite blasts has planted a ringing in his ears.

Luis makes the mistake of telling mama that for him, working in the mine is temporary. He doesn't want an

underground life, doesn't want to taint his body with silica and end his years in a miner's care-home, wheezing and grinning. He wants to see the world. Mama is rolling the dough for tomorrow's *salteñas*, and the back of her neck tightens. She swivels. Dough hangs from the rolling pin as she brandishes it.

'Both your grandfathers were miners. Your father, God rest him, was a miner. My papa's uncle was a miner.'

'I thought Uncle Andres was a dancer?' Luis says.

'He was a dancer for a year and then he got two girls pregnant. Two! He had to scuttle off in the night and work in some god-forsaken factory in Peru that caught fire. Would that have happened if he was a miner from the start, do you think, if he thought with his head and not his, his — anyway you should sleep, you need your rest.' She cuffs him on the head.

He works up the courage to ask Jorge. Though the guide wears a permanent scowl when not shepherding herds of tourists, Jorge can be kind. If you catch him between bouts of *puro*.

'An assistant?' Jorge closes one nostril with a dusty forefinger and blows something thick onto the ground. 'I don't know, Gordito.'

'I'll do it for free,' says Luis. 'For a month. Head up the rear so stragglers don't get lost down there. Answer their questions. If I do good, you pay me.'

'Your English is for shit.'

'Fuck you,' he says fluently, and rattles off some of the patter he's heard as groups trundle past. 'Hey man where from? Yeah Chermany cold huh, Bayern Munich man — fantastic strong team.'

Jorge purses his lips thoughtfully and clears the other nostril.

He joins the tours shyly at first, his English withering under the bright foreign smiles. Even so, a few people slip him tips now and then. Month by month he grows more confident. At the end of each tour the visitors emerge from underground, knuckling their backs to crack sore muscles.

It's time to let them play with dynamite. For a few extra dollars Jorge gives them a few grams, tucked into plastic bottles with a metre-long fuse. Luis lights the fuse as they hold the bottle. They toss the dynamite nervously to one another — 'Snap a photo, quick' — before Luis takes it. He'll trot away and drop the bottle in an empty plot of sand. After a few seconds it bursts and sends a mushroom of dust into the air. It makes Luis happy to see how happy this makes them, like little children. He feels old and wise.

The Mexican tour groups love ghost stories. So in the dark pressing heat of the shafts, he tells them a few, whispering for effect. Most are stories papa told Luis when he was a boy, about dead miners who still clock in, grinning cheerfully with



crushed skulls, mangled arms dragging shovels behind them, jaws melting from mercury run-off. The groups chuckle. They think he's exaggerating.

Tourists ask him to pose next to Tio. He smiles and tilts a bottle of *puro* to the devil's mouth. One of the tourists is a doctor in Oaxaca who looks at the bottle and whistles. 'Ninety-four percent pure? It's practically ethanol. You guys actually drink this? It'll rot the eyes right out of your head.' He gives Luis his smartphone. Luis takes a photo of the doctor pretending to glug *puro*, his eyes crossed.

The doctor calls over his wife and whispers, but Luis hears. 'Give the kid a few notes. I don't know how these guys live past forty. God knows what their lungs are like.'

The wife nods. 'You know what the guide said they call this place? The Mountain That Eats Men.'

Every few days, Luis takes the bills from a coffee can in a drawer and counts them, again and again. After ten months of work, he has saved up nearly two hundred dollars. He imagines buying the plane ticket, imagines taking flight, gliding away on a condor's lazy wings, away from the mountain that eats men.

The mountain shimmers like a hot plate. The bangs on Luis's forehead are claggy with sweat. A rowdy group of Australians are the last tour of the day. They bought a bottle of *puro*, barely diluted with water, and have been daring each

other to take nips throughout the tour. Two of them are now bent with arms around each other, throwing up into the dust.

'I try to warn you, man,' Luis says. He gives them each a few coca leaves and mimes chewing. 'This is good for nowsy — nowseah?' He pats his stomach.

Jorge is lighting the fuse held by the smallest tourist, whose eyes are blank and drunk. He looks down at the hissing fuse like it's a present and goes into a little routine. Pretends to drink it. Rocks it like a baby. Dangles it between his legs.

Luis smiles at one of the coca-chewing Australians. 'Your friend is Mister Bean, yeah?'

The man cackles. 'Too right.'

Now Jorge tries to take the dynamite bottle from the short man, who tucks it into his body and pushes past. He cradles it like a rugby ball, pretends to pass it right, left. His friends laugh a little.

'Jezza, that's enough mate,' they say. 'Hand it back now.'

It doesn't seem like enough time has passed for the fuse to be a thumb's length from the top of the bottle. Remembering it later, Luis feels like he's watching the scene from above, a condor with clear icy eyes. Jorge is fighting the short Australian for the bottle. There's a quiet thunk as the laughing man head-butts Jorge, who snaps his face back and holds his nose.

Luis moves quickly, threads through the men like he's dribbling a football with his friends down the street. He snatches the bottle. Momentum keeps him running for two steps, three. He arcs his arm back, ready to throw. There is a flash.

\*

He wakes early, well before the sun heats the grey mountain. He likes the feeling of the world asleep around him. In the kitchen Luis grips a spoon with his left hand, spoons potato and raisins and chicken into the cold dough. His right hand, and his sight, are gone. The doctors tried but they couldn't save his eyes.

He raged and spat at them, for all the good it did, but with time the hate leaked out of him. Mama helped. She held Luis to her and whispered, 'You're still here, you're still here.' Then she said, 'You're out of the dark of the mine, boy. Don't let the dark fester in here,' and cuffed him on the head.

With practised fingers, he pinches the pastry shut and makes sure they're spaced out neatly on the tray, so they brown evenly. He slides it into the warm oven and hops onto the counter. Drumming his heels against the cabinet, he listens to the mountain wind sigh.

When the timer rings, he feels his way to the oven gloves and takes out the *salteñas*. He will pack them gently into a Mickey Mouse Tupperware. Mama will take his elbow and walk him down the street to his usual corner. His friends

will greet him on their way to work and buy a pastry or three. Some still rub his belly. They call him Gordito the Lucky. Insane that he's still alive. Tio took pity on him. Others glue their eyes to his stump when they meet him, he can hear it in their voices.

He's getting better at identifying birds by sound. Wings crackling, they ripple out from house eaves and settle on street lights. Sometimes when they sing, he sings back their names. *Passer domesticus*. *Tyto alba*. *Calocitta formosa*. But no condors. He'll never see one again, and they glide too high to hear their call.

Maybe Lena will come by. The sister of a neighbour. He saw her once, before, and has a vague memory of a button nose and mischievous eyes. Her laugh is excellent. It's a strange thing: without sight his confidence has risen. His world has shrunk, his goals simplified. Maybe he can make Lena laugh today and give her a *salteña* on the house tomorrow. And from there, who knows.

The mountain will watch all this, unmoving as Luis squats on his street corner, season after season. Years will glide by as shocks of silver weave through his hair. His lungs will stay strong, his back straight, his face upturned to the sun.

But all that is in the future. For now Luis is content to drum his heels, feel the warmth radiating from the oven, and hear the wind sneak its way past the mountain.

# VANESSA CHNG

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## A Wasteland Maybe

The Grandfather had been out drinking later than usual. That was all the old people ever did here. Can't get out, they shrugged. The world didn't bother trying to get in either. So the old ones buried themselves in one of the four bars that existed in their tundrapolis and its blazing winters; a watering hole where you had to be at least fifty to enter. The Grandfather, himself, sixty-five. Along the bar counter, a slew of salt-and-pepper heads slurring about the aches in their bones and the kids—their kids' kids—in town killing themselves. A high school reunion of lives decades-old, lived out, reconverging in this space with groggy lights and heaters turned up so high you could sweat from talking too much. Now, the barmaid's face. Once the beauty queen of a frosty town, *Population: 5,000*. Epicanthic folds that had seen better days. Sprouting cat whiskers for eyebrows. White at the roots, black at the tips. Why'd you stop coming every night? She was always asking things. My grandson will die on a Tuesday this year. That's what the town's soothsayer told him. But he didn't let the doom talk escape his lips. On Tuesdays, while the other boys hunted seals with their fathers or shot themselves in the head, the Grandfather was sober at home with his grandson to—

—read. Except the boy only ever thumbed through stories about American teenagers who lived in cities and played in rock bands and told their best friends they were in love with them at burger joints and moved away for college.

By midnight, the Grandfather was out of the bar. Outside, someone said, Another one, and the Grandfather turned to look. A boy on the ice with his brains blown out. The dead boy—his boy's boy—had a beige parka on. Trousers that clung to his sticks for limbs. Pockets of air in those pant legs that his boy-flesh would never fill out. Next to what remained of his grandson's head—a juvenile creature stood, hugging a shotgun, cheeks red and alive, booted feet pointed at the world beyond the ice. At first, this one seemed to be trembling. But really, the kid was just staring into the break of Tuesday.

# SARA PATRICIA KELLY

Sara Patricia Kelly is a creative storyteller, nonfiction writer, and poet. Based in Singapore, she authors [flossiebossy.com](http://flossiebossy.com) – a ‘sticky poppy poetry’ site for kids, and has been published in *AWA Magazine*, *Punt Volat*, and the 2023 anthology *Incredible Women on How to Embrace Equity*. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts.



## Names Are Important

*You will independently provide a wide range of advanced administrative support to the Head of Business Development. Responsibilities will be diverse and include calendaring, event planning, information management, and special projects. Travel may be required.*

As I made my way to the interview, I found myself locked in an internal debate. One voice insisted, ‘You are overqualified for this position; with fifteen years of executive experience, you can do better.’ Another countered, ‘No, the job is too good for you. You can’t handle detailed-oriented work anymore.’ A third echoed, ‘Get your shit together and try to behave like a competent human being.’

Bleue Partners, an American hedge fund, had a fancy-schmancy office in Raffles Place. A brooding receptionist escorted me to a room adorned with pearl-grey carpet, maple wood furniture, and floor-to-ceiling windows offering breathtaking views of Marina Bay. I was left to wait for Human Resources. An hour later, just as the voices shouting, ‘You’ll never fit in here’ were about to push me to leave, a woman with gelled blonde hair strode in.

Baring fleshy, raw-sausage lips, she uttered— ‘*Talalala Kelly?*’—completely mispronouncing my name. Nobody in Singapore (or back home) can pronounce my name. I’m a

fifth-generation Australian, but my dad is convinced we’re Irish. Before I could correct her, she continued, ‘I oversee the HR and administrative functions for our businesses across Asia Pacific. You’ll address me as Mrs Baronova. I’ve noted that you are a Singapore permanent resident with no Master’s degree, but you’ve worked at some of our competitors. This is a full-time position with an immediate start date.’

For the next twenty minutes, she interrogated me about expenses and booking travel, emphasising the need for “proactivity”, and then abruptly ended the interview without allowing for any questions. Surprised to receive a lucrative offer later that day, I flapped my arms, wiggled my hips, and squealed ‘yes’ in reply. COVID had reduced me to an overemotional mess after thousands of job applications over the past two years. My confidence and bank balance were at an all-time low, and even eavesdropping on my husband’s conference calls had become tedious. I needed this job. I needed something to do. And I needed something on my CV before I became completely unemployable. I could handle one grim-faced HR lady.

\*

Kala sat filing her nails at the receptionist’s desk when I arrived for my first day of work. She smelled sweetly of coconut, and her round hazel-toned pudding face would have been pretty had she bothered to smile. Thrusting a

laptop into my arms, she led me to a single desk away from the rest of the office.

‘Why don’t I sit with everyone else?’ I asked, trying to suppress any hint of a whine.

‘You’re Andrew’s EA. You sit near him, lah,’ she rolled her eyes.

That’s when I noticed the private office, camouflaged by frosted glass, behind me. I thought I detected a shadowy form inside. If my new boss were in there, surely, he’d come out and greet me? I decided to wait, pretending to do work by casually checking out my new colleagues on LinkedIn (naturally, everyone had an Ivy League MBA, except for Kala).

When I sensed the silhouette shifting behind me, I debated emailing Andrew. But then, Mrs. Baranova’s words from the interview echoed in my mind— ‘We need someone proactive’. Ah yes, this was a test of my proactivity! Andrew was waiting for me to make the first move. Determined to prove myself, I straightened my shirt collar and boldly marched into his office.

‘Good morning, Andrew?’ I mentally punched myself. Phrasing everything like a question is an uncouth Australian habit I couldn’t kick despite many years in Singapore.

Andrew was a picture of sophistication in a navy Burberry knit vest over a baby blue shirt and thick-rimmed blue spectacles. ‘Barging into a private office is bad manners.

I’ll call you when I need you,’ he uttered in a clipped American accent.

I mentally punched myself again. Why didn’t I knock? The pandemic must have robbed me of any social skills. I turned to leave.

‘Wait. Take those with you.’ He pointed to four blue mugs on the edge of the desk.

\*

Minutes later, Andrew sent me an email requesting I return to his office.

‘Sorry if I was curt,’ he began. ‘I value proactivity. You should have noticed the cups and done the necessary.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And names. I’m a stickler for names. My name is Andrew Seaton, not sir. If I’m asking institutional investors to pledge millions into our funds, they’ve got to trust me. They’ve got to trust my EA. You won’t inspire trust if you don’t use names.’ Scratching his nose, he continued. ‘My surname is Scottish. Seaton means *by the sea*. That’s why I own two yachts, a Squadron 50 and an SL78 by Sanlorenzo, both docking at Sentosa. Names are important.’

I wanted to knock him down by replying, *How often do you take a shit on your yachts, or should I know by your name?*. I kept nodding instead.

‘*Taloolia*,’ he roared, butchering my own name in the process. ‘I’m under tremendous pressure. I need a capable right hand to keep things in check.’

He spent the next twenty minutes explaining my role. Main duties were diary management, scheduling meetings, coordinating roadshows, planning events, and communicating with prospective investors. I was worried about that last one – wasn’t there an analyst managing that? I needed time to get used to working again; if I’d lost the common sense to knock on my boss’s door, I certainly wasn’t ready to liaise with important people in any professional capacity.

Andrew continued in a passionate soliloquy, ‘My methods are my religion. Have faith. Don’t ask questions. I only use email. Never WhatsApp me. Never phone me. If I want to speak to you, I’ll initiate the call. Check with me or the other assistants before ordering any catering for meetings. I’m on keto and cannot afford a sudden drop in my blood sugar levels. I drink black coffee without sugar and can’t stand the filtered muck in the pantry. Fetch me a takeaway coffee from Providore café at three-thirty each day. Serve my coffee in a blue cup.’

I wanted to clarify whether the cup *must* be blue, but he firmly said no questions. Well, all senior execs have their quirks. Accepting that Andrew was a bit standoffish was far better than the alternative. Earlier in my career, I’d supported

a lovely but way too cosy sixty-something-year-old who had trouble bending over. He had liked working with his shoes off, so I had been obliged to help put on his socks at the end of each day. I’d take being the “cup lady” over dealing with crusty yellow toenails any time.

\*

At 11 a.m. I was asked to join an admin meeting in the boardroom. I sat next to Eunice, another assistant with luscious black hair.

‘Hello, uh, uh...’ she fumbled with my name. ‘We have these meetings every week to discuss critical administrative matters.’

Kala and Mrs Baronova sat opposite us.

We spent some time discussing executive schedules before the conversation turned to snacks. Mrs Baronova wanted new ideas for the office pantry, which was currently stocked with Cadbury chocolates, packets of cream crackers, Oreo biscuits, and various soft drinks.

‘We are financial services, not manufacturing. We need a more cultured offering for staff, especially the managing directors and above.’

Kala answered, ‘I place the order every month and never get complaints.’

‘The execs don’t have time to complain.’



‘They’re hardly in the office. Eunice, me, and the IT guy are the only ones who eat the snacks.’

Mrs Baronova’s nostrils flared. ‘I’m in the office, and I don’t want anything around that will derail the raw food diet I’ve started. Look into replacing the chocolate with nuts, dried fruit, and those date balls I’ve seen at Grain Traders.’

‘But chocolate is the only thing that makes this place...’

Eunice interrupted, ‘Date balls taste like chocolate and are great for losing weight. They contain sorbitol which increases bowel movements.’

The attempted diplomacy backfired because, while Kala warmed up to the idea of date balls, Mrs Baronova had become turned off. The women eventually compromised on fresh fruit and chocolate-coated protein bars.

As the meeting drew to a close, Mrs Baronova remarked, ‘We haven’t heard a peep from the new girl.’

I was afraid she thought I’d done no work, so I murmured, ‘I cleared four dirty cups from Andrew’s office.’

‘Disgusting. Are the cleaners slacking?’

‘The cleaners only wash dishes left in the sink,’ Eunice said. ‘We’re all adults. It’s not unreasonable to expect everyone to clean up after themselves.’

Mrs Baronova’s meaty lips curled. ‘So, our most senior EA expects the company leadership to carve out time for cleaning. Just as well you’re not running the HR function.

*Talalala,* she spat all over my name. ‘Continue monitoring Andrew’s office for cups.’

Sheepishly, I added, ‘While we’re on the topic, Andrew mentioned something about drinking from a *blue cup*. Does that sound right? Does it have to be blue?’

Eunice’s mouth twitched. Breathing heavily toward the ceiling, Kala spewed a weird mouth fart that sent both assistants into a cackling fit.

‘Enough!’ Mrs Baronova snorted and swiftly departed.

Kala snatched my arm, ‘If I was Andrew’s EA, I’d never let him touch a dirty cup. He’s a managing director, not a dish pig! Good luck with the afternoon coffee dash...’

*What was up her bum?* I wondered.

Escorting me back to my desk, Eunice soon explained, ‘Kala’s moody because she applied to be Andrew’s EA. She’s a fantastic receptionist but lacks the experience to provide dedicated executive support. She’ll get over it.’

‘Will she? I want to do well here. It’s a lot easier if everyone gets along.’

‘We do. We aren’t a typical investment firm. We have a real family-like culture.’

‘Hopefully nothing like my dysfunctional family...’

‘Everyone is super nice, including the CEO. Including Kala.’

‘Including Mrs Baronova?’

‘Relax, please. She is HR. She must be strict. Although,’ Eunice suppressed a giggle. ‘She’s also fixated on the colour blue. Don’t look so terrified! Andrew and Mrs Baronova joined Bleue Partners around the same time, and both are vying for a promotion to senior managing director.’

I said sarcastically, ‘I see, the blue cup fetish totally makes sense now.’

‘Relax. You’ve done this gig before. You’re used to dealing with inflated egos and bizarre whims.’

Reaching the desk, I saw a large box of Janice Wong chocolates waiting for me.

Eunice smiled. ‘Offer one to Kala if you want to get in her good books. We are all so glad to have you onboard. You’re going to love working here.’

I wanted to collapse into her arms and confess my insecurities. A small part of me also wanted to slap her for the presumptuous tone and for holding the senior position I used to have. But, as I’ve always done, I concealed my emotions and joked, ‘Mental note: start wearing blue to the office and bribe Kala with chocolate.’

\*

As I geared up for the afternoon coffee, my gut churned with nervousness. Nothing felt more ridiculous than being a middle-aged woman whose biggest fear was fetching a simple cup of coffee. What could go wrong?

I plotted the timing meticulously – not too early to avoid the dreaded queue monster, yet not too late to prevent the coffee from turning cold. I arrived back at three-twenty-five, triumphant with a piping hot Americano in hand. Success was almost within my grasp until I swung open the pantry cupboards to an awful surprise; the fleet of empty blue cups I’d clocked earlier had vanished, leaving me faced with a sea of red cups.

‘Not a fan of red, *Terullah?*’ Kala called from the doorway, provocatively posed with a hand on her hip.

‘Just call me T!’ I screeched, triggered by the worst-ever pronunciation of my name. ‘And I’m never giving you chocolate again!’ Pushing past her generous form, I paced the office like a queen in heat, spotting Mrs Baronova at the back of the room, sipping from a blue cup.

‘What are you doing?’ Eunice called from her desk by the window. Following my gaze, she sprung into action, strutting over to the HR woman’s desk. She seized the cup from her grip and delivered it to me like a coffee angel. I had to exercise all of my willpower not to melt into a puddle of grateful tears.

Clutching the cup with shaky hands, I raced to the pantry. I was alive again after two pyjama-clad COVID years stuck on the couch. I felt invincible. With my heart pounding wildly, I hurriedly rinsed the cup and transferred the precious

coffee. Bursting into Andrew's office, I proudly slammed the beverage onto his desk. A mischievous twist of fate sent the aromatic liquid dancing around the rim, soaring into the air like a caffeine rocket, and landing splat all over Andrew in his pristine Burberry vest.

Before he could say anything, I declared, 'My name is pronounced *Talulla*. It's Irish and means princess. In other words, I'm not a glorified coffee fetcher. Names are important!'

## TAN AI QI

**Tan Ai Qi** is an MA in Creative Writing student at LASALLE College of the Arts. She loves to bring characters to life on the page and hopes that more people enjoy reading and writing like she does.



## Office People

Josh came into the office late today without his perfectly styled hair and Starbucks. I guess he is human after all. Chloe has been sneaking glances from her cubicle, doing the whole 'I'm not looking at you just something in your general vicinity' shebang. That shiny new university degree definitely did not include lessons on stealth. The whole dance routine with those neck muscles makes her look distinctly chicken-like. I add on clucking noises in my head and almost grin. You have to find your joy in soul-sucking places like this. Selling insurance to poor misguided souls was definitely not my childhood dream, but this dollar store Cinderella is addicted to donuts and has too many damn bills.

Beth's stayed pretty silent. Colour me impressed. Maybe she's finally birthed some manners along with baby number three. Her mouse hand hasn't moved in the fifteen minutes she's been staring at the monitor. She's doing the lip biting thing again, chewing on her bottom lip like an old piece of gum. I wonder how long she can resist the urge to say something, picturing those facial muscles getting a workout under that layer of cement she calls foundation. Maybe she'll spontaneously combust. That'll break the monotony.

Two spreadsheets and a pathetic number of sales later, I finally break free from my cream-coloured enclosure and head

to the feeding trough, or what the others call the break room. My old school canteen looks like a restaurant compared to this pit. I plop myself down onto the flimsy plastic chair, ready to shovel in mouthfuls of rice and trans-fat. My lukewarm Styrofoam box of fried rice from the coffee shop downstairs squeaks as I push the tab open. Ah, the wonderful aroma of guilt and increased risk of heart disease. Beth and Josh are already seated. She's got her usual assortment of leaves and mulch and he's holding a half-eaten tuna sandwich. At least she's too distracted today to comment on my choice of nourishment. I tuck into my rice and egg salad, sensing impending drama.

Beth chews her shrubbery whilst the room slowly fills. Just as she's shooting glances at my rice and my flabby body, Chloe appears like a poltergeist. We sales folk always sit together. Just old school habits rearing its separatist head, when the bell rings we'll all go back to class. Chloe's got a lot more bleached hair and much less tact than Beth. If I didn't know any better, I'd think she's in the wrong department, but then again, they did hire me.

'Josh, today never gel your hair ah?' Ah, Chloe, ever the perceptive and sensitive one. Beth is mid-chew, and her face gets steadily redder as she struggles to swallow. Chloe has threatened her stranglehold on the gold medal in the gossip olympics. I go over the Heimlich manoeuvre in my head

whilst the greasy rice glides down my throat with ease. A swig of kombucha finally clears her pharynx. I eye the three of them whilst sweeping morsels of rice around with my spoon.

'I think I like my natural hair more. She used to say I look better with gel. Since we're not together already, I'm trying something new.' Josh takes another bite of his sandwich, a dribble of mayonnaise falling onto his tie. For a moment I feel sorry for the poor man and his terrible condiment choices, before remembering that he got a huge raise last month because the company was 'rewarding employees with the best performance.' The work put into acting like I care about Beth's shoe obsession or Chloe's revolving door of love interests ought to qualify as an Oscar-winning performance. Damn those management schmucks.

Chloe perks up, cockroach feelers in the air. Josh's subtle hint at relationship trouble has given her the energy that her bowl of spinach and grass clippings seemed to have failed to provide. After four glasses of red wine at last month's company dinner, she'd let her romantic interest in Josh slip. I've kept it a secret. I'd like to think that it's because I'm trustworthy, but I just thought I might be able to blackmail her someday. The woman's like a chicken nugget, tasty looking but full of fillers and processed crap. Josh doesn't need a bite of that.

'Oh, I heard you guys broke up. Her loss la. This hair suits you.' My Spidey senses detect a slight falsetto in McNugget's

voice. She's either training to be an opera singer or the little minx is flirting by brandishing the sympathy card. My non-existent money's on the latter.

'I don't know la.' Josh has finished his sandwich. The poor guy has no idea his vague reply could be the catalyst to an avalanche of questions. He licks traces of mayonnaise off his lips while Chloe gives him a putrid, doe-eyed look. He crinkles up the empty paper wrapper into a tight ball, his knuckles white. I can feel the two vultures circling, claws ready to sink into their prey. He's too consumed in his thoughts to notice imminent danger, flicking the paper ball back and forth absentmindedly. I have neither the stomach for carrion nor the desire to watch these two scavengers demolish their fodder.

Josh and I used to be cubicle neighbours, and I looked forward to our lunchtime conversations. There was spirited debate over pertinent issues, like which of our esteemed colleagues would be the first to turn in a zombie apocalypse. Then he got a promotion and a new relationship, and these two airheads sashayed in. Now I can't even eat lunch without losing brain cells and my will to live. We crash landed as two humans on a strange planet, and he was the only one I counted on to understand amidst a sea of Martians. Now the Martians have kidnapped and brainwashed him and I've realised that they're not the aliens, I am. And I'm the only one left.

'Josh, last month's sales report, did you manage to finalise the numbers?' I had broken a cardinal rule - no work talk at the lunch table. Swallowing the last bites of my contentious lunch, the silent protests of both women hang in the air like dirty laundry. Josh launches into an arid spiel whilst I nod at appropriate intervals. Chloe gives me her signature semi-eyeroll behind Josh's back, while Beth sips on her kombucha, brow furrowed. I made a choice, live with it. Feigning interest can be a tough job, but I built a whole career on it. I can outlast lunch.

After lunch, I pry myself away from the motley crew and head back to my cubicle. I watch Josh out of the corner of my eye as he slumps away, shoulders hunched, still holding on to that paper ball. You can tell how defeated a man is by how he treats inanimate objects. That ball has been crushed as many times as my dreams of being able to afford a house in Bukit Timah.

At 5pm, I turn off my computer. I suppress the urge to sprint towards the lift, trying to disguise the bounciness I feel and hoping my body doesn't betray me. Two glorious days of not being in this place can make a girl giddy. Mrs What's-Her-Name will have to wait for the next working day to bitch about her hospital bill, this girl's got a date with a bottle of red wine, a medley of carbohydrates and possibly congestive heart failure. I hurry to the lift, waving to faces I don't have to see for two full days.

I was thanking the lift gods for the lift's emptiness and timely arrival when Chloe barrels towards me, sticking a pink-heeled foot in the gap between the closing doors. I curse inwardly, recanting my prayers whilst smiling at Chloe, pretending I hadn't seen her dashing to the lift in those gaudy heels. Dang that worthless "Door close" button. Her face is slightly flushed from her surprising feat of athleticism and possible heel injury. A thousand bucks a month for yoga sessions at that fancy women-only gym and she's still out of breath. I contemplate taking a taxi home just to avoid her, but the trip back could buy me two stuffed crust pizzas.

'You think Josh is dating again?' How tactful. She thinks she stands a chance. Her stripper height heels clack against the pavement with an annoying staccato beat as we walk towards the MRT. I pray that one of those heels gets stuck in the drain grate.

'Maybe.' I've mastered the art of ambiguity.

She continues her analysis of Josh's relationship while I mull over my dinner options, careful to provide intermittent nods and shrugs. At the train station she waves a perfectly manicured hand at me and struts away towards the other platform. I resist the urge to shove her onto the tracks.

I wake up the next day at two in the afternoon, half naked on the living room floor, cradling a baguette. Ed Sheeran is crooning from the speakers. My T-shirt is stained with

something dark and red. Blood? I pinch the edge of the stained fabric, lifting it up to my nose. Distinctly fruity. My wandering eyes spot the wine bottle seated precariously on the edge of the coffee table. It's half empty. Stain accounted for, I turn my attention towards the crusty artisanal loaf I've been caressing like a lover. The logo on its paper wrapping reveals its origin - I frequent the bakery more often than I should. Getting up off the floor, I survey the room. Apart from the wine bottle and remnants of food, everything seems to be in place. I reach over and turn off the music. The sudden silence feels unusually oppressive, the single wine glass screaming to be clinked.

As I clear away the evidence of my gluttony, snippets of last night come back to me in pieces. The croissants were superb, the cheap supermarket wine passable. Four glasses in and I'm slow dancing to "Thinking Out Loud", waltzing with my tall, starchy French lover. I've always been a lightweight, except when it comes to the bathroom scale. Living alone has its perks.

My phone chimes just as I'm sweeping away the last few crumbs. The dastardly beeping leads me to the couch. Reaching between the cushions I locate the glowing device, along with pieces of lint and errant coins. Josh's name flashes on the screen. Three messages. Why is he contacting me on a weekend?

'Thanks for the talk. I didn't expect it,' followed by

'Sorry, I didn't mean it like that,' and then 'Are you ok?' I pause my haphazard cleaning attempt abruptly, my heart doing the rumba. Murky memories of a phone conversation last night surfaces like the oil in my mala hotpot. A soup that's decidedly too spicy and peppered with more *feelings* than Sichuan peppercorn. I sit bolt upright on the sofa, my heart now transitioning to an uncomfortable tango.

'Ignore anything I said last night. I had too much wine.' My stubby fingers punch the glass screen, autocorrect working overtime to decipher my frenzied taps. Sent. Of all the people on my admittedly minuscule contact list, why did I have to call Josh?

Three hours and hundreds of checks later to make sure I've not turned silent mode on again, a reply comes in.

'It's ok, I understand.'

I mull over this as I stress eat a family size packet of Doritos for dinner. He doesn't sound too concerned. I'm always overthinking these things. I lick orange cheese powder off my fingers and turn on the tv. Zombies and mangled body parts take my mind off the texts and the self-imposed guilt that comes with eating processed foods.

On Monday, I drag myself unwillingly into the office, leaving my soul still tucked underneath my duvet. Always clocking in at eight am sharp, I'm never the first one in. I'm not giving my boss the satisfaction of a single unpaid minute

of work. I make a beeline for my cubicle, avoiding eye contact with my fellow corporate slaves. The squeaky swivel chair betrays my presence, and my weight. I brace myself for the usual onslaught of meaningless good mornings, but none are uttered. I glance around, strangely uncomfortable, the silence punctuated by clacking keyboards and shuffling papers. Beth's in her cubicle opposite me, her eyes fixed on the monitor. Chloe's next to her, uncharacteristically silent. As I'm setting down my vending machine coffee, my hand scrapes against the edge of a small box tucked away beside my pen cup.

Chocolates. I'd recognise that box anywhere. Godiva's dark chocolate truffles, like the almost empty box I always have hidden in my bottom drawer away from freeloaders. A yellow sticky note sticks out against the muted colours of the box. Skinny, sloping letters in blue ballpoint.

'Thanks. If you change your mind.'

## PHONG HUYNH

Phong Huynh graduated with an MA in Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts, and his stories have been published in *Best Asian Short Stories 2020* and *Beyond Words*. His writings explore the tensions of love in the LGBTQ+ community in Singapore, the unspoken eccentricities of Asian families, and the search for self-identity in modern life.





## Chasing Light in Finnish Silence

The air was cold, fresh, and crisp, like two dewy leaves getting crushed together. The vast expanse towards the horizon was lined with silhouettes of pine trees. ‘Shall we take a short break here?’ I suggested to Jarmo, my Finnish hiking guide.

Jarmo shrugged. ‘Sure. We are at a good pace anyway.’ I sensed he was slightly judging my fitness level.

We stopped at a clearing in the woods where two trails intersected. Putting down my backpack, I filled my lungs beneath the puffy down jacket, and let out a big breath. The warm vapour formed a faint cloud against the night sky. The autumn sky of Saariselkä was moonless, brilliantly lined with a carpet of stars seemingly sprinkled casually across above us, like flour spilling off onto a velvet black carpet. The fragrance of dry wood and dead leaves permeated the air, filling up my nostrils with a unique kind of olfactory clarity. Unlike my hikes in the tropical forests, there was hardly a sound around us. Not an insect. It was as if all the animals had gone to sleep or were quietly hiding, watching and gauging our movements on the trail with bated breath.

For the first time in many months since I left my hectic job and went on a sabbatical, I felt light. I had been running away from the 4am teleconferences with US corporate drones,

arguing with my ex-es about weekend plans, and ironically, the harrowing thoughts of death and decay. Singapore and its soul-crushing weight was somewhat a black dot on the map in my mind hardly visible now. Here for the first time, I finally felt a sense of change.

I was running towards something. I was chasing the auroras. I was chasing the light.

Jarmo and I reached our camp site, a little wooden hut by an oval-shaped lake at the end of the trail. I found Jarmo on Airbnb Trips a week before to guide me through this hike in the Urho Kekkonen National Park. Born and raised Finnish, Jarmo was in his mid-forties, tall, blond with sharp jaw lines and deep blue eyes. Despite his lumberjack build, there was a sensual grace and zen in the way he went around chopping up wood for our campfire. Each stroke of the axe formed a pleasant hypnotic rhythm like the sound of a sleepy metronome.

‘Here?’ I pointed to a flat clearing on the ground. ‘Can I build the fire?’

‘You sure?’ Jarmo raised his eyebrows, eyes widened.

‘Yea. I watched a YouTube video yesterday evening. I wanna try.’ I said.

‘Go for it, man.’

I carefully stacked the logs on top of one another in alternate directions until a box-like structure took shape. In

the absence of fire starters, dry dead leaves would do the trick. I grabbed a bunch and lit them up in the hole in the middle. To my satisfaction, the fire grew and engulfed the log pile in just a couple of minutes. I lit up a cigarette, took a puff and offered one to Jarmo.

‘Not too shabby for a tropical island boy, eh?’ I said.

‘Yea, not bad at all.’ The thin shadow of the cigarette smoke against the fire veiled Jarmo’s face like a handsome angel.

‘Do you know what we Finnish call the northern lights?’ Jarmo asked.

‘I am not sure. It must be something long and hard to remember like all the other Finnish words?’ I quipped.

‘Revontulet.’

‘Wow. It sounds beautiful. What does it mean?’ I asked Jarmo while flipping the logs, dodging the glowing specks of ember floating up like fireflies.

‘It means “fox fires.”’ Jarmo said.

‘Wait, you mean the Finnish believed foxes could breathe fire? Or were they burning foxes?’ I was genuinely confused.

‘Hahaha. Not in that way. In the old days, the Finnish believed that these magical veils of light were created by foxes running over the tundra. As their tails brushed against the ice, sparks of light emitted to the sky, making the auroras.’

Jarmo went on to tell me many more tales he heard from his grandfather who had heard them from his grandfather about the old Finnish days, the time before Finland was even a country. There were tales of the Vikings, tales of witchcraft and paganism, tales of struggles with Russia and Sweden. I was totally enthralled by Jarmo’s stories and accidentally let a speck of ember land on my right hand.

‘Ouch!’ I jerked back in reflex.

‘Careful there.’

Jarmo and I sat in silence for a good thirty minutes before two hikers passed by our camp.

‘Hey!’ I greeted them. They nodded, let on a slight smile, averted their eyes and quickly got on.

‘That’s cold, isn’t it?’ I asked Jarmo.

‘They are just being Finnish. In Finland, speech is silver but silence is golden. We are just not a very talkative people. We don’t get to know each other by talking about the weather. We are comfortable with silence. If two Finns in the middle of lunch find nothing significant to talk about, they are perfectly fine with eating silence for five, ten minutes or even longer.’ Jarmo explained.

‘Got it. I will shut up now.’

Jarmo burst into a ripple of hearty laughter at my remark, breaking the quiet of the woods like a sledgehammer shattering a mirror. I recalled how back home in Singapore,

quietude was somewhat rare, especially on annoying cab rides when the taxi uncle doesn't stop yapping about how the government had forsaken the low-SES population.

'Look! The light!' I exclaimed. Finally, the moment I awaited arrived. A faint veil of green hung across the sky and reflected on the lake. It swirled slightly as if it was a little shy in its glorious dance in the night. I had seen the auroras many times in videos and pictures but this moment was incomparable. It felt as if for a brief while, magic were real and I was the privileged witness to its secret existence. All of a sudden, my journey from the tropical island of Singapore to the furthest point north in my life in Saariselkä felt right. It was no longer an escapade but a quest for clarity, now a little bit clearer under the magical light of the revontulet.

Jarmo and I sat side by side by the fire, mesmerised without a word as the revontulet serenaded across the sky.

It was the perfect silence.

## Saigon Monsoon

It rained.

Saigon monsoon crept up on the boy,  
ten year-old, bed-wetting, bolster-hugging.  
The downpour, a formless boogeyman whose footsteps  
got louder  
banging down the door in a jump scare.  
The boy cowered in a fortress of blankets and towers.  
The sound of thunder,  
courier of doom,  
curse words between his parents,  
chairs breaking like bones crumbling  
under the weight of unspoken secrets  
slamming of doors  
vibrating the little toy figurines  
like make-believe aftershocks  
china smashing onto the floors like shrapnel  
from grenades of absent parents, adultery,  
verbal butchery  
painting the rain crimson.

Saigon monsoon drenched the boy  
it nursed him with Ma's warmth  
he sat behind her on the moped

hiding beneath her poncho  
strained his eyes reading comics,  
shielded from the ceaseless  
beating  
of raindrops  
heavier than the dead husband sorrow  
in Ma's ribcage.  
Would there be a rainbow after the monsoon?  
Or would it just be black mud and sewage water  
packed with litter, pig innards, fish scales, eggshells,  
and plastic bags  
from the wet market down the road  
A treacherous urban bog forever trapping us

Saigon monsoon rushed on  
in the formless ghosts of  
air evaporating from the hot tar as rain hit the roads  
It is time to clear the flood water from our childhood home.

## MANDAKINI ARORA

Mandakini Arora co-chairs the Writers' Group of the American Women's Association, Singapore, and reviews books for their bimonthly magazine. She shares book news on Instagram as [travelling\\_bookmark](#). She has a PhD in History from Duke University and is doing an MA in Creative Writing at LASALLE College of the Arts.



## Close Quarters

I'm craving a cigarette, my room is so hot, bedsheets sad and sodden with sweat. I miss the days of sleeping with Mina, when she was a baby, in her aircon room. I used to get two or three hours of sleep between her bottle feeds. Should I open the door of my windowless room? Turn on the pedestal fan in the back area to help the fan above my bed—a small wall unit because there's not enough space on the ceiling? But if I open my door, Simba might come in and jump onto my bed. What's the use of double-fan-breeze if there's a big hairy dog in my bed? Sometimes I sleep easily even when it's hot. But tonight, after Rekha's phone call, I'm restless. I need a cigarette. But last week Madam caught me. In the afternoon, when I thought she was out, I was smoking in my bathroom. I rest in the afternoon unless Madam comes home and needs help carrying shopping bags up from the parking lot. Or if she wants me to pack a sandwich for Mina before she picks her up from school. Sir has no fixed office hours. He can come home at any time and ask for nimbu pani or tea. I'm not complaining. At least he behaves properly. Not like Malti's Sir who touches her in the wrong places when her Madam is not home. My Madam and Sir are good people. They both smoke but I never take their cigarettes. Madam shouted when she caught me smoking. 'Do what you want

with your friends on Sunday,' she said. 'Not in this house.' Even for that I'm lucky. Some of my friends get only one day off a month. I get every Sunday and I don't have to work when I come home at night. Only feed Simba and walk him. Pack Mina's school bag and sometimes iron clothes for Monday morning. And wash the dishes and clean the kitchen after dinner. I cook on Sunday morning before going out. Paratha and two sabzis. I'm lucky to be in Singapore. Many of my friends in India dream of getting a job here. I earn enough to pay for my two daughters to go to college. They won't become maids like me. But today my younger daughter Rekha called and said Seema has a boyfriend and is missing classes and might fail her final year of college. Thank God I am allowed to use my phone at night. But Seema isn't answering my calls. 'I'll speak to Papa,' I told Rekha. 'No, Mummy! Please don't!' Rekha said. 'If Papa hears the word 'boyfriend,' he'll really beat Seema when he's drunk.' I push open my door and turn on the fan outside. Simba doesn't move. I'm lucky that Madam doesn't go through my things like some employers do. Without turning on the light, I feel under the T-shirts in my cupboard for my cigarettes and light one.

## Malaise

Laxmi cringed, turning her face away as Amit nuzzled her neck.

A young girl burst into their bedroom. 'Look, Mummy, I made this for you.' She held out a tambourine assembled from two paper plates glued together, decorated with glitter.

A harried-looking woman holding a dishcloth ran in after her, followed by a large dog. 'Don't disturb Mummy and Daddy!' She tried to shepherd the girl and the dog out.

'Let Mina be!' Laxmi snapped at her. 'Don't you have ironing to do, Shanta?'

Shanta left the room wordlessly.

'I've started finding her really irritating,' Laxmi said. 'Since I caught her smoking last week.'

Amit sighed. 'How does it matter? We can't know what she does in private anyway.'

'She's been acting sulky and I hate when she pulls a long face. It drags everyone down.'

'As long as she's doing her work.'

'I guess. I just hope she isn't bringing men into the house,' Laxmi said. 'But I don't like it when she sulks.'

'Who's bringing men, Mummy? Who?' Mina cried.

'No one *beta*. We're talking about one of my friends.'

'Who was smoking?' Mina asked.

'This little one's a sponge. Careful what you say around her.' Amit pulled Mina onto the bed where she settled between them. 'Here, Simba,' he called. The dog jumped up and spread at their feet.

'Dinner out?' Amit asked. 'The new Italian place next door is decent, I hear.'

'Tonight's not good.' Laxmi frowned. 'I have an early morning wake-up tomorrow to decorate cookies for Mina's class party. And Shanta already cooked mutton curry for dinner.'

'It'll keep. What do you think, Mina? Dinner out?'

'Pizza!' Mina shouted.

'You'll get pizza at Singapura Nonna,' Amit said, wrapping a lock of Laxmi's hair around his fingers. 'Come on, let's get ready.' He squeezed Laxmi's shoulder.

Mina ran out of the room, Simba behind her. 'Shanta Aunty, Shanta Aunty,' she called. 'I'll change my dress. We're going out.' Squeals of delight mixed with Simba's excited barks came from Mina's room. And Shanta's voice. 'Take me also for dinner, *beta*. You can't leave Aunty all alone.'

'You won't be alone. Simba will stay with you,' Mina said.

'Uff, I hate it when Shanta acts like *she's* Mina's mother.' Laxmi had not moved from the bed. 'She should know her place as a maid.'

'Aren't you going to change?' Amit asked as he took off his button-down shirt, pretend-sniffed his armpits, and pulled on a T-shirt.

'It really does drag everyone down, when she pulls a long face,' Laxmi repeated.

'Get ready,' Amit said. 'You said you didn't want to stay out late.'

'I said I didn't want to go out at all. I have a full day tomorrow, starting early.'

'Oh, someone's got to work so hard. Decorating cookies!' He laughed. 'Come, let's go.'

Laxmi smoothed her dishevelled hair into a ponytail, clipped on earrings, and applied lipstick. 'I'm ready.'

'Uff, I hate when *you* pull a long face.' Amit grinned. 'It drags everyone down.'

## VICKY CHONG

Vicky Chong is the author of *Racket and Other Stories*. Her short story 'The Uber Driver' won third prize in the 2018 Nick Joaquin Literary Awards Asia-Pacific. Other short stories are found in the anthologies *The Best Asian Short Stories 2021 & The Best Asian Short Stories 2022*, *Letter to my Son* and *A View of Stars*.



## Shared Space

The door to the studio was ajar, casting a shaft of light onto the dull concrete floor of the dim corridor. Sara lightened her footsteps as she stepped out of the lift. There was silence in the industrial building, which usually buzzed with noisy activities, even on weekends. The building housed printing companies, light manufacturers and storage facilities. Perhaps the long Chinese New Year break had turned the building into a ghost town, perfect for an artist like Han to work in. As Sara walked through the uneasy quiet, she thought about the affection she felt for him. Although he'd been successful, the last few COVID years had been hard on him. Her heart ached thinking of him staying up all night, working on a commission instead of one of his beloved abstracts. Han hadn't been home since yesterday.

Han was a well-known painter, sought after for his landscape and abstract art. Many of his pieces graced the walls of suites in six-star hotels like MBS and St Regis. Those periods of hotel booms were good times for him. An artist's income had always been uncertain, but since COVID, his income had dwindled. Commissioned works had all but disappeared. This industrial building was not the most ideal place for an artist's studio, but Han was adamant about purchasing this space. The rental at his previous studio in

Chinatown had crept up exorbitantly. He would rather pay a lower monthly mortgage for a freehold space in Bukit Batok than cough out the killer rent just to be in town. Han was right, of course. He always was, for he was much older, and thus wiser, than her.

This space was brighter, with tall ceilings painted white to match the white concrete walls and floors. It was also larger than his previous studio, with enough space to hold an exhibition, although who on earth would come to an industrial estate in Bukit Batok for an art exhibition? But she knew better than to voice this out. With good soundproofing, one could never tell the neighbouring unit housed a printing company with noisy machines that would have previously driven Han crazy. What's more, the value of this unit had appreciated 50% since their purchase two years ago, if one could believe the numerous flyers that were thrust into the post box, urging owners to sell. Yes, Sara owned half the space, since she was the one who had obtained an employee-discounted mortgage rate from the bank at which she worked. She liked how they shared ownership of this space, although she would much prefer they shared something else, something she could have a say in. A dog, or a condo. Here in the studio, there was nothing to signify her share. *This is good enough for a first step*, she consoled herself every month when the bank statement arrived, her salary halved to service her 20% share of the mortgage.



A white sateen curtain, rarely drawn, partitioned Han's workspace from the main room, where many of his art pieces were displayed in diagonal rows on the artificial white walls. More canvasses were stacked in the far corner, awaiting their turns for an opportunity in the limelight.

He had told her he had a project to complete, one which would bring him a five-figure sum and he would work all night. He was not expecting Sara this afternoon and would probably be annoyed at her for coming. She hadn't texted but she was hoping he would appreciate her bringing him lunch since most food outlets were closed for the Chinese New Year.

Han's shadow was moving about behind the curtain. Feeling like an intruder, Sara crept to the corner and peered in. Han was hunched over a side table, mixing oils on his palette. She loved watching him work. He was so focused on whatever he was painting, often trapped in a flow for hours as if he were in a meditative trance. Yet, there was a certain grace in his movement, almost like a dancer waltzing around his canvas and palette. She was drawn to him the moment she first spotted him two years ago, a lonely figure painting the scenery at Sungei Buloh. He had been so absorbed he hadn't noticed her standing behind him until almost an hour later when her phone suddenly rang, startling both of them. She was apologetic. He was annoyed until he turned and saw her. Then he smiled, and they introduced themselves. She

googled. He was on Wiki, single and not gay. She went to Sungei Buloh every Sunday until he finished the painting eight weeks later, to be presented to the Irish Ambassador on St Patrick's Day. The eight quiet hours spent on eight Sundays sealed their relationship. She hadn't believed in love at first sight. Perhaps it wasn't his appearance but his scent that had attracted her, for that was all she remembered about their first meeting. The volatile mixture of the oil paints and mineral spirit, mixed with his sweaty pheromone on a warm, humid day, made a perfect aphrodisiac for women. He laughed when she told him that later but he hadn't looked surprised, as if he was already aware of that.

Despite his fame, her parents and friends were against the relationship. That was understandable. They had never heard of him. But then, neither had she. When she told her mother he was an artist, her mother exclaimed excitedly, 'From MediaCorp? Channel 5 or Channel 8?' She told her friends she was dating a painter. After some disparaging remarks about Sara dating beneath herself, they asked her for discounted quotations to paint their BTO flats. They were more aghast that he was twice her age. She was in love and she didn't care.

Han straightened and stood back. He was a head taller than Sara. Grey hair knotted in a bun at his crown, and grey sideburns ran down and around his jawline, concealing deep laughing grooves around his mouth. *A kissable mouth that*

*tickled as it moved down her body.* Sara was about to call out to Han but stopped. Her eyes followed his paintbrush to the strokes he was making on the canvas, small swirls of brown. She squinted. Nipples. On a pair of voluptuous breasts of a woman's half-painted torso. As he added more touches of oil paint, the nipples puckered before her eyes as if they had just been suckled by a lover. Han stepped back again to inspect his work. Sara followed his gaze. He was midway through painting a life-size nude of a woman lying on a settee. The head had been pencilled in, the face still blank. Sara could just make out the faint lines of arms crossed on her forehead. Below, the torso was almost done. The slim neck. Pink breasts hung like melons, tipped with the brown nipples he had just suckled. Sara hastily shook her head to erase the last thought. What's the word she wanted? *Puckered.* She frowned. *Painted!* What was the matter with her? A wave of jealousy washed over Sara as her hands pressed on her own chest, flat like an airport runway, which was the common Chinese description for a flat chest. Her hands then traversed to the six-pack abs she had worked so hard for, as her gaze went to the soft, rounded tummy on the canvas, ending at the dark pubic triangle between the still unpainted thighs.

Han disliked doing portraits and had rejected many well-paid portrait commissions. He had even refused Sara when she had requested that he paint her. His reason? He

could never do her youthful exuberance any justice on his canvas. She didn't believe his reason but didn't pursue it. So who was the woman in the portrait?

'Darling, could we please take a break? I'm exhausted. We've been doing this all night.' A voice responded as if to answer Sara.

Han chuckled even though Sara found nothing funny in the statement. 'But it was you who had insisted you wanted this done last night after dinner.'

*After dinner? They had dinner together?* Sara's legs weakened and she slumped to a squat. Han had said he was working.

'Honestly, I didn't know it would take quite this long.' She gave a loud yawn and Sara could imagine her stretching her arms over her head, her back arched with her melon breasts thrust up.

Han put down the paintbrush. 'All right, we'll take a break for now.' He lifted his arms and stretched as if mimicking the mysterious woman behind the canvas.

From under the canvas, a pair of bare feet, nails painted blood red, tip-toed towards Han.

Sara covered her face and unconsciously groaned. The tingat she had been carrying dropped to the ground with a clang.

'Sara, what are you doing here?'

A pair of hands gripped her shoulders firmly and pulled her to standing.

She lowered her hands and pointed to the tingat on the ground. 'Lunch.'

'Silly girl, you should have told me you were coming. Come, meet my client, Datin Lena Lim.'

Datin Lena Lim stepped forward. She had long curly hair, a face that was too tight from Botox, and thick lashes announcing loudly that they were false. Sara guessed that she was around Han's age. She was now dressed in a white, full-length silk robe.

'Datin, meet my partner, Sara.'

Sara turned to Han with a surprised smile. *Partner?*

The Datin narrowed her eyes. 'Partner?'

'Yes. Sara is half-owner of this space.'

*Half owner of this space? What about our relationship!*

'Are you all right, Sara? You look pale.' Han put one arm around her, and she circled her arm around his waist.

Sara stretched out her free hand and took the Datin's limp hand, shaking it unnecessarily hard. 'Thanks for the business.' She said in what she hoped was a most professional voice. She added: 'It's hot in here. Why isn't the air conditioning switched on?'

And then she smelled Han's familiar scent, the scent she loved, for which the Datin being a woman, must also be

aware of in the warm humidity of the afternoon.

'How do you like the painting?' the Datin asked Sara. 'It's a present for my husband. Do you think the Datok will be happy with it?'

*Would the Datok be happy with another man seeing his wife naked?* Sara hadn't realised she uttered the question aloud.

The Datin laughed. 'You know, I've not considered that. But this is purely professional, like a doctor seeing a naked patient, right?' Datin directed the question at Han.

Sara forced a laugh. She could be mature about this, too. 'Of course.'

'Considering Han and I go a long way back, he's charging me ex...xor...bitantly for this. Aren't you, Darling?' Her red, fat lips pouted as she stretched the *xor*. *Does Han find those lips kissable?*

'A long way back?' Sara whispered. She imagined Han and the Datin as a young and reckless couple. She had read that's how the boomers behaved when they were in their youth. Reckless.

'Yes. We were in Milan together. I was studying jewellery design and he, art.' The Datin flung her hair to one side, her eyes never leaving Han's. 'Do you still have those portraits you did of me? Han was into charcoal nudes then. And he was good at them. Why on earth would you change to landscapes and abstracts, Darling?'

'Yes, *Darling*, whatever happened to those?' Sara asked, her tone dull.

Han took Sara's hand, picked up the tingat on the ground and directed them to the table, which served as a reception counter/desk. 'Let's eat. I'm starving.' He opened the top tier and the aroma from the fried prawn rolls wafted out with the steam. 'Let's see what good stuff you brought me. Come, Lena, join us.'

But Lena had disappeared behind the canvas, leaving a stony silence as heavy as an elephant between Sara and Han.

'You should have called me before turning up like this,' hissed Han, without looking at Sara.

'I didn't know you had company.'

'Lena is a client.' He was about to pick up the prawn roll with his fingers when Sara stopped him and passed him a pair of disposable chopsticks.

'Were you ever a couple?'

'Look, Sara...'

When Sara thought back much later to how they were whispering, she would laugh at the comical scene. Like a pair of fugitives plotting a getaway. But at that moment, she was very close to tears.

The sound of approaching stilettos clicking on the floor halted their conversation. The Datin appeared, fully dressed now in an iconic DVF Julian Wrap dress, the Midnight

Kiss Multi design sprouted lipstick prints in different hues floating on a black background. \$736.00 SGD. She recalled the price she recently saw online. The melon breasts created a deep cleavage in the V-shaped neckline.

'My driver is downstairs. We'll arrange for another seating, won't we, *Darling*?'

'Come, I'll walk you down.' Without a backward glance, Han and the Datin walked out of the studio. Sara heard the lift doors open, and then silence. She searched for the remote and turned on the air conditioner. Finally, a comforting hum started. She covered the tingat and walked over to the canvas.

Up close, she could see the pencil details for Lena's face, her eyes closed. The wave of hair on the arm of the couch. Her gaze went to the nipples. Was Lena cold? Was that why the air conditioning was turned off? Was that why her nipples were erect?

Han found her still standing in front of the canvas twenty minutes later. He stood beside her without a word.

'That was a long goodbye,' said Sara, still staring at the canvas.

'Her driver was late.'

'Has her body changed after all these years?'

'Look, Sara...'

'Did she have a breast job too? I mean, her face was obviously botoxed, the eyes, the lips.'

'Are you jealous?'

She rolled her eyes.

'She's history.'

'Does she know that, *Darling?*'

'She's married.'

'Doesn't make any difference to some people.'

'She's a paying client. You know I need this job.'

'Is she giving you this job out of sympathy? Did you beg her for it?'

He let out a long, held breath. 'No. I. DID. NOT. Ask. Her. For. The. Job.' He paused, searching for patience. 'She called me out of the blue from KL. Wanted a gift for their twentieth anniversary.'

'You didn't answer the Datin's question. Do you still have those charcoal nude portraits?' She stared into his eyes, willing him to give her the answer she wanted.

He held her gaze and did not disappoint her, but his pause was a second too long. 'No, I threw them out long ago.'

She smiled and went into his arms. His familiar scent, a comfort before, now oozed with guilt and deceit. Her eyes strayed to the stacks of canvases in the corner. She'd start her search from there.

## JURVEEN KAUR RANDHAWA

Jurveen is an educator who enjoys nurturing her students' love for writing. Currently pursuing her MA in Creative Writing at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore, she is drawn into the world of fiction and the similarities it has to reality. Her poem, 'One Too Many,' appeared in *The Ekphrastic Review*. Find snippets of her works at [jwritespace](#) on Instagram.



## Let Her Go

I was on my way to meet my daughter's boyfriend. He wasn't my choice.

I asked her what he did for a living. She mentioned something about working for Puma as a Data Analyst. I looked sideways and rolled my eyes. It sounded like one of those fancy names a company gave their employees. He could simply be keeping track of the number of shoes Puma sold.

Before you label me a judgmental old hag, a single mother suffocating in solitude with no other motive but to prod at her daughter's happiness, listen to my story. For now, we will begin with the conclusion that a mother's instinct is a creation of God. When something is amiss, warning signs are sent to the brain. These signs grow into loud protests that trigger shock waves to the heart. The pounding intensifies, indicating an ominous calamity. My gut knows best when it comes to matters concerning my daughter. No one can deny the power of my instinct.

Tara and I were on time. Something told me that he would be late.

We waited for him at Providore, a café in the heart of Orchard Road.

The waiters scurried around like ants as they balanced trays filled with cups of coffee. Tara peered over the table to

see if he had reached.

'Is he always this tardy?'

She heaved a sigh of resignation but said nothing. He could have always been Mr Punctual, but it did not matter as today he was late. I slouched back into my seat, getting comfortable as she pressed her fingers into her handphone. She craned her neck once more. Mr Boyfriend was late. I pressed my lips together to contain my laughter. Ten minutes passed. My daughter sat up straight and adjusted her thick black wavy hair. She twirled her locks, pulled it to one side of her face and smiled. I watched him from a distance.

'Hello Aunty, this is for you.'

His hands cradled bouquets of lilies. The smell shot up my nostrils and temporarily fogged my brain. I took a moment to catch my breath before responding.

'Hello Sameer. Tara has told me a lot about you.'

There was a moment of hesitation in his eyes. He stretched his hands out to shake mine but decided against it when Tara widened her eyes, signalling him to lean in for a hug instead. I would have preferred a handshake to get a firm grip on him.

'This is for you, Aunty,' he handed me a bouquet.

'How could I not get one for you?' he said to Tara. She gave him a quick peck on his dimple as he settled in his seat.

My eyes darted back to my daughter who was grinning

like a puppy. She inched her body next to his taut biceps that were bulging through the sleeves. In a jeans and navy-blue t-shirt, he looked young, fresh out of university. I wondered if he had enough savings to marry my daughter. Apart from looks, what else could he provide?

'It must not be easy finding a parking lot in this area. Orchard Road is always so crowded.'

'Yes Aunty, that's why I took the train. It's much more convenient.'

'You don't drive?'

'I do have a license, but cars are so expensive these days. I Grab when I need.'

Tara's lip twitched. She moistened her lower lip with the tip of her tongue and leaned forward to take a sip of the coffee.

He added, 'We will share and buy a car in the future. She works very hard too. Just like you. She always tells me how you spend hours perfecting cakes and pastries.'

We continued with small talk. I shared with him how baking started as a hobby and eventually turned into a small business that paid enough to run a household.

'Tara is as independent as you. She does so many things on her own,' he continued.

'That is right, she doesn't need a man.'

He furrowed his eyebrows while trying hard to maintain a straight face. Tara seemed ready to launch at me.

Instead, she whispered something into his ear that sent him springing out of his chair towards the Saturday-special cakes displayed at the counter.

Tara looked at me with the same contorted expression her father had just before he abandoned us. If I could live my life all over again, I wouldn't have put my faith in the hands of a matchmaker.

'You should consider his profile. A Singaporean man. An accountant who earns well. Your parents are so delighted about this proposal, and I am sure your in-laws will take good care of you, just like a princess. Who knows, they might let you keep your nursing job,' Aunty Seema, the famous matchmaker in Selangor, said. Everyone believed her because of the way she would drag her words, 'Belieeeeeeeve me.'

I came to Singapore with the dream of living a good life. Instead, on my first day, I was brought to the metal racks with pots and pans dangling overhead. Heaps of soiled laundry were tossed at me for hand washing. Randeep did not utter a word. He was a puppet with an invisible string around his neck, scuttling wherever his mother dragged him. Eventually, she pulled him away from me.

Tara and I continued to sit in silence until Sameer appeared with two cakes.

'Aunty, try this. It's the best seller!'

I took a bite to see if it was just as good as mine.

He continued talking while eating.

‘So, when exactly do you see yourself settling down?’

I asked.

‘In another three to four years’ time, when I am 34 or 35. Everything in Singapore is expensive,’ he added.

‘Tara said that you both are planning to settle down in a year’s time.’

At this point, she slid the plate of cake nearer to me. The more I looked at it, the more it looked like a disgrace. Couldn’t he have chosen a better cake?

‘If you guys love each other so much, then why wait?’

Sameer’s eyes bulged like a pomfret’s. Poor guy. He must be counting the hours required to sell Puma shoes to save for the wedding.

‘I think Tara and I need to discuss this,’ he said.

There was half a slice of cake left on the plate when the waiter appeared.

‘Do you want me to clear the plates?’

‘Yes, please get us the bill,’ Tara said.

A glimmer of hope flashed in Sameer’s eyes.

The waiter appeared with the bill. Sameer took out his wallet in a reflex action.

‘This is on me. It was nice meeting you today, Aunty,’ he said.

I glanced at his wallet. A black one, slightly ripped at the edges.

Sameer handed us the bouquets as we stood up to make our way out. Tara quickened her pace as if the door was going to shut on her. Oblivious to her surroundings, she did not notice a petite waitress gripping a tray of coffee cups that were wobbling precariously.

‘Tara, be careful!’ Sameer said.

She was too quick to turn and collided with the waitress. The bouquet of flowers fell from her hands and the cups shattered onto the ground. People stared at the commotion as they took a bite of their Eggs Benedict. Some exchanged looks of sympathy as the lilac petals turned into a shade of brown.

‘Oh, I am so sorry,’ the waitress said as she cleaned up the mess.

‘Are you okay? Did the coffee spill on you?’ Sameer asked Tara.

‘I heard you calling my name, and I turned around.’

‘That’s why you can’t keep running to him whenever he calls your name,’ I said.

Sameer held her hand, and the two made their way out of the café. I pressed my foot on Sameer’s fifty-dollar bouquet and walked out. As soon as they were out of my sight, I gave Sneha, my best friend, a call.



'Hi Harleeeeeeeen! I was waiting for your call. How did it go?'

'He still needs to work many years to save up for the wedding. He doesn't even have a car. I don't want her to struggle in her life like me, Sneha. She could have just said yes to Haresh, the guy I chose for her. By now she would have been living the Singapore dream; a landed property with a car and two big golden retrievers, but she said no. It was such a good proposal, but she changed her mind at the last minute.'

'Okay forget about Haresh and his golden retrievers. Let's talk about Sameer. Is he handsome?'

'Sneha, he is just an ordinary guy. There is nothing exciting to tell you. And the flowers he bought, they were so pale like those you see in those funeral scenes on TV. The best part is, Tara accidentally dropped the flowers.'

'Oh my God, what an unlucky guy. There he was trying to impress her.'

'What if she insists on marrying him?'

'Then she can decide if she wants to choose this guy over her mother. I don't want her to marry an ordinary guy and struggle to make ends meet every day, especially when she has choices!'

'You are right. Look at all the ladies in our group with husbands who are earning just enough to run the family. Every day is a struggle.' Sneha said.

'I will do all it takes to protect her.'

'The is one way out. You can call Joti. Remember her daughter was in love with a guy of her own choice? Joti didn't approve of it and went to see a priest. Guess what, her daughter eventually listened to her. No one knows how she did it. I think Joti might be able to help you.'

'I don't really believe in all this. Tara is my daughter after all, and she doesn't listen. Nothing I say ever changes her mind and nowadays she only listens to him. But like what you said, no harm trying. Acha Sneha, I am going to bake Tara a cake before she comes back. Let me sweeten her mood before I convince her to leave her yummy chocolate boy.'

'You are too funny. Okay anything just WhatsApp me.'

I reached home and threw myself into flour and eggs.

Sneha was my first friend in Singapore. She used to frequent the Gurudwara like me. We spoke in the Langar Hall and realised how similar we were as we bonded over piping hot tea and crispy samosas. Both of us were married to Singaporean men who had left us.

I took out a bowl and whisked together butter and sugar till it turned white and fluffy. I cracked some eggs, added the flour and stirred it for exactly five minutes. When it looked ready, I poured in the orange zest to give it that burst of flavour Tara liked.

The air whiffed of our memories together when she was a child. She used to run towards me with her hands wide open, ready to envelop me whenever I baked her favourite Orange Bundt cake. I would hold her little hands and tell her Ma will bake anything you like to eat.

Once the batter was mixed to perfection, I poured it onto the tray and let it sit while I cleared the kitchen.

Tara came home much earlier than I expected. She stepped through the door without saying a word. Then she made her way to the room as if I did not exist. I entered her room with a slice of cake and noticed the picture of us hanging on the wall. She was lying in bed, hair tousled, eyes misty. I sat beside her and patted her head. She moved my hand and sat up.

‘It is obvious that you do not like him just because he doesn’t have a high-paying job. But I really love him, and you need to give me some space and let me make my own choices.’

Did he cast a spell on her or what? I composed myself before responding.

‘I told you from the start. Marry a man I choose. You are my daughter. I know what is best for you.’

She got up and slammed the table. The plate flew off and the cake smeared on the walls. Tiny bits of orange skin scattered on the floor. I clenched my jaw.

‘If you are living in Singapore, you need a comfortable

life so that you don’t suffer and fight with your husband when you don’t have enough money to raise a child! You don’t understand now, but one day you will. And if you marry him, you will slog for years. Your child will suffer with you. You can have it a lot easier if you listen to me and let me find your husband for you.’

‘You are not deciding who I get married to. Just because you are a single mother doesn’t mean you can say whatever you want and get away with it!’

‘If you really think that this guy can keep you happy then go ahead. You are on your own. Don’t turn back and look for me.’

I exhaled and wiped my eyes.

Am I that cold? I know of some parents who are worse than me. They would threaten to kill themselves. I often wonder what drives them to take such drastic action. Now I understand what it feels to be pushed to the edge. She remained in her room that night. There was occasional whimpering followed by the sound of rubber wheels rolling against the floor.

Through the window, I peered at the HDB blocks, visible with the streetlights. The one opposite mine was slated to be demolished as it had passed its ripe old age. The pristine white paint had chipped off and the walls had grown moldy. The cracks and leaks were far too damaging. It was best to let it go.

I woke up the next morning and felt the stillness in the house. Her cupboards were emptied. The room was bare. There was not a single piece of clothing left. Everything was cleared except the photograph hanging on the wall. It was taken on her graduation. She was glowing in the gown with the mortarboard that I had wanted her to don from the day she was born. I checked my phone. No messages. I leafed through her childhood photographs and started putting them up one by one in the room.

A month passed. I changed her bedsheet with the new silk ones I had bought for her on her birthday. They felt velvety soft, just like her dewy skin. The only thing I could hold on to were her pictures on Instagram. There she was, smiling with Sameer and her newfound family. She was seated beside his mother, whose arms were around my daughter. Sameer was on the other side, together with his sister.

It's been two years now. Not a text from her. There is a saying that hope is a double-edged sword, the longer you hold onto it, the more it hurts. I looked at the hundred sent-messages. None responded to. I hugged my phone to my chest. This was the closest I could get to holding my daughter.

The image of Randeep and *his* mother appear before me again. She says I can go back to Malaysia. I promise to make tastier meals for her to boast to her friends. I promise to nod my head to everything she says. I promise to be a good

housewife. I promise to give birth to a son.

For all that life throws me into, this is the price I have to pay for wanting the best for Tara.

I shut my eyes and feel the hot, acrid tears.

Maybe I should text her one more time.

*You are such an ungrateful daugh...*

I delete it.

*Will you ever forgive me?*

I hold onto my phone and wait for a reply.

She responds.

How could I ever let her go?

# JOY ANG

Joy is working on her Masters' dissertation with the goal of completing it by the end of the year.



## Tanjong Rhu

The taxi stopped just before the entrance to the condominium.

‘Are you sure this is the place, Grandpa?’ my granddaughter turned anxiously in her seat towards me.

‘I think so,’ I paused and peered rheumily out the dirty taxi window.

‘Are you sure you don’t want me to enter the condominium, Sir?’ the taxi driver said, looking through his rear-view mirror.

‘No need,’ I looked at the meter which showed fifteen dollars. I withdrew my wallet from my trouser pocket and extracted two ten-dollar notes. ‘Keep the change.’

My granddaughter pulled the handle to open the door, stepped out and leaned in to help me. I pushed myself along the seat and slowly emerged. The walking stick wobbled as I steadied myself on it. It had been a long time. Nothing in the area looked familiar. I didn’t remember the tall condominiums that loomed around us.

The air’s salty tang triggered in my mind’s eye a stretch of sandy beach leading down to the water’s edge; a slim young girl dressed in a flowery *samfoo* squatting near the water, washing soiled clothes, wringing them out to dry and placing them back into the basket beside her.

I’d seen her before at the wet market situated at the junction of Tanjong Rhu Road. This major road ran along the periphery of the beach on which a group of attap huts had been built higgledy-piggledy beside the sea. At the market, I’d admired how she was able to interact differently with the various vendors: flirting with the male stallholders but showing respect and politeness towards the female ones. What really caught my attention, however, was her disguised lack of respect for the *Kempeitai* who often trawled through the market. Although she superficially bowed her head and lowered her eyes when they approached, her shoulders never shifted from their upright position, and she’d quickly raise her head once they walked past her. She noticed me staring at her through the hordes of people around us. She stared back, unblinking. Most women averted their eyes when I looked at them, even at a distance.

I was on friendly terms with the *Kempeitai* as I was fluent in Japanese and frequently offered officers the freshest catch that came in daily from the fishing boats. Being a broker of fish as well as other materials required by the ruling Japanese, I was respected by all at the market. Those who dared cross me in our business transactions, soon found themselves without any income, or without their limbs.

Even though I was married and had three daughters, my wife was cold. This was unsurprising given our marriage

of convenience. I'd been part of her family after I had to work for her father to repay the huge debt my father owed. Her father must have liked me as I was treated like the son he didn't have. Gradually I took over his business and ensured its continuity. His daughter was gifted to me as a means to gain respectability as well as to fulfil my conjugal rights. Once they were done, my wife never shared our marriage bed again.

I therefore thought little of having a series of flings with women who willingly threw themselves at me. After all, a man had his needs, and my wife hadn't birthed any sons to continue my legacy. She tolerated my philandering as long as I generously provided for our daughters and her.

My wife and the countless women however, did not have such a hold on me as this plain-looking neophyte who was barely out of her teens. I was intrigued by her quiet defiance towards the *Kempeitai*, and the way she'd stare back at me, across the market, unashamed, unflinching. It was only on my third visit to the beach when I decided to walk nearer the waters' edge.

'Hello.'

She pretended not to hear me.

'Here, let me help you,' I rolled up the sleeves of my shirt and squatted down. I started rinsing a submerged shirt when her hand pulled the garment away from me.

'Please!' she re-rinsed the shirt I'd been laundering, wrung it dry and placed it in her basket.

'Ah! You do have a voice. What's your name? I'm Fu Hong,' I offered cheerfully.

'Weixin.' A barely audible response.

Her mother operated a boarding house just up the road. It was her daily routine to bring dirty clothes down here to launder. I distinctly remember her regularly turning her head to stare at me with her large, long-lashed eyes whenever I appeared on the beach. As I continued to visit, Weixin grew more comfortable. Her monosyllabic responses soon morphed into longer speeches.

One day, after the other girls had gone and no one else was around, she stood up from the shore, ran towards me and threw herself into my arms. Her face lit up as she raised and offered her untouched lips to me. I bent my head and tasted them.

'Why are you often looking at me when I'm at the market?'

'You're very beautiful.'

'Don't lie! I know I'm not pretty. Only strong and hard-working. So don't lie, please.' Her eyes were only downcast whenever we were close together and talked.

Our regular trysts took place at a rocky area further up the beach I knew would be isolated and hidden from the main road. This was where we often made love: her naked body

tucked snugly between two taller rocks, legs barely spread wide to receive me, and her gasps coming fast and quick. Our lovemaking was the only time her eyes bore unwaveringly into mine, searing deep into my soul.

A month later down by these rocks at the beach, she broke the news: she was pregnant. I was elated as I hugged her fiercely. I felt in my bones that the child growing within her was a boy. I dreaded, however, what would come next.

'You'll meet my mother to talk about marriage arrangements, won't you?' her eyes shone with anticipation, 'I'm so excited. Imagine being your wife!' She'd hidden her face in my chest as she spoke. I gently pried her away but still enveloped her in my arms.

'You do know I'm married with three daughters,' I began slowly, 'however, I can put you and your mother up in one of the lovely bungalows along Tanjong Rhu Road. Which one should we buy? How about the one that's painted a lovely light blue with an open balcony running at the top of the house? I hear the owner's in financial trouble. Your mother can still have boarders, and charge more as she'll be offering much better accommodation.'

She pushed hard against me and left my arms. Her face hardened as she glared bitterly at me. Her lips thinned. 'So' her breath came out in bursts, 'I'm stupid to think you loved me. I was simply your newest plaything. The pocket watch

you gave me wasn't a reflection of your love. It was merely payment for being your virgin whore!'

'Weixin, that's not true. I do have feelings for you. The pocket watch was given with all my heart. But surely you can see I cannot marry you as I'm already married. What I'm certain is through our lovemaking, I'll have the son my wife was never able to give me.' Weixin's face never changed from showing disgust and disapproval, as I cajoled and pleaded. She didn't once flinch as I moved closer to her. Her cold eyes bore into mine. After a tense moment, she turned on her heel and walked briskly up the slope towards home.

'You don't know what you're giving up!' I shouted after her, 'I can make sure you and your mother never have to work again. Your lives will be very comfortable under my care! Weixin!'

That was the last time I saw her at the beach.

\*

Over the years, I used my far-reaching contacts to keep track of what happened to Weixin and my son. She married an itinerant preacher who found work in a small East Malaysian church. Eventually both Weixin and her preacher husband moved to Kuala Lumpur where they stayed with his elder brother and sister-in-law. Weixin had two sons - one mine, the other, his. Her husband was imprisoned by the *Kempeitai* for plotting against them, then released

when the Japanese surrendered. But he later died in prison where he was held again for having Communist ties. Her brother-in-law became a drunk, since he never recovered from the injuries he'd sustained at work.

Both Weixin and her sister-in-law set up a market stall selling cooked food to make ends meet. I made sure - when ingredients and opportunities were scarce - they were able to earn a decent living by providing cooked food for a popular restaurant I owned.

Weixin however, never knew all the serendipitous opportunities she encountered for her business had been orchestrated by me. I kept tabs on how my son was faring and made sure he was well provided for. When I learnt he had a place at the University of Singapore, I arranged for him to receive a scholarship for the duration of his studies. He's now a successful director at a multinational company based here in Singapore. He lives in a good class bungalow in Bukit Timah together with his lovely wife who's given him three children - two boys and a girl. Weixin often visits him and his family from Kuala Lumpur, where she lives with her other son and his family.

Once when I was returning to my office in Shenton Way, I came face-to-face with my son. He stared momentarily at me and moved on. My heart ached at him not recognising me, and my not being able to call out to him.

Now as I stared at the towering condominium apartments that blocked access down to the beach and the sea, I wondered whether Weixin ever thought about me and the love we shared.

Only once did she seek me out. My stern facade almost cracked as she stood quietly in front of me. I yearned to move forward and wrap her in my arms. Her dry leathery skin had aged her considerably, and she'd grown thin and wan. There was little resemblance to the youthful girl I'd known all those years ago.

She'd come for money so her brother-in-law could receive costly medical treatment for his chronic pain. My throat tightened as I witnessed her awkwardness and discomfort standing on the carpeted floor of my office. Not once did she take a seat even though I offered repeatedly. The quiet air-conditioning hummed in the background as she withdrew a box I'd recognised from her handbag and placed it on my desk.

Weixin's face had glowed with eagerness the day she'd held the gift box in her hands.

'What is it?'

'Why don't you open and see?'

She undid the ribbon bow and opened the cover. Her delightful gasp as she looked at the shiny pocket watch nestled within brought a smile to my face.



'Oh, it's beautiful. You know I don't know how to read it. This watch is wasted on me!'

'I'll teach you, Weixin.'

'Please give me what you think your watch is worth. I wouldn't do this if I didn't really need the money. You'll never see me again after this,' she said. Her eyes never once left the carpeted floor.

'You can keep the watch, Weixin. I'll give you the money. Just tell me how much you need. And if you need more, you're always welcome to come back and ask.'

She shook her lowered head; her voice grew firm. 'No. Take the watch and give me what you think it's worth.'

I sighed, dialled the intercom and spoke to my secretary. 'Linda, go downstairs to the ATM and withdraw ten thousand dollars for me.'

The minutes ticked by. My growing yearning to go towards Weixin and hold her in my arms was excruciating. When I thought I couldn't stand the strain, the door opened, and Linda walked in. She placed the envelope with the money on my desk. I pushed it towards Weixin.

She took the envelope and tucked it into her handbag, muttering a soft 'thank you'. Then for the second time, she turned on her heel and walked out on me. I never saw her again.

\*

'Grandpa!' My granddaughter had walked further from the spot where the taxi had dropped us off. 'There's a little pathway between these two different condos. I think it'll take us down to the seafront. Do you think you're able to walk it?'

I shuffled slowly towards her and saw a narrow passageway where the smooth, cemented floor held little impediment to my shaky footsteps. My granddaughter stepped onto the passageway and stretched out her hand to help me down the short gap. We walked for what - to me - seemed like an eternity. The passageway was level at first. It then sloped downwards at a gentle angle. After that, the passageway gradually sloped upwards and widened to an opening where a cool breeze hit our faces as we stepped out.

We reached the sandy ground fronting the seashore. I looked to my left and in the distance, I saw a clump of crumbling rocks. These resembled the ones where Weixin had conceived our son. I blinked and the rocks disappeared. To my right, the beach stretched, unfettered by trees. As the sunlight shimmered against the glassy sand, I saw spectres of Weixin and the other girls doing the laundry by the water. The group of attap huts and the market at the junction of Tanjong Rhu Road had long disappeared. What now covered the ground, just above the seashore, were tall conifers, benches, and barbecue pits. I stared at my surroundings. The memories were still so fresh. Today would be the last time when I'd

smell the salt in the air, feel the cool breeze on my face, hear the echoes of Weixin's voice, and once again imagine her lithe body against mine as we hugged and cuddled.

I've often wondered in my long and chequered life, the hold Weixin had on me. Perhaps I was lucky enough to meet, what others only wish for, the once-in-a-lifetime love.

## JINENDRA JAIN

Jinendra Jain is an emerging writer and a seasoned banker. His fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in *Meniscus*, *Rattle*, *TEXT*, *The Best Asian Poetry 2021-22*, *Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English 2021*, *The Punch Magazine*, and *The Best Asian Short Stories 2022*. He is working on his first book, a personal memoir-cum-spiritual-travelogue set against the stunning backdrop of the Mustang Trail Race in Nepal.





*Masai Mara* by Jinendra Jain (1 August 2018)

## Tithonus

The ancient acacia,  
alone and incongruous,  
wearing wisps of cloud  
strung on a thinning canopy  
of hollowed wheezing thorns  
guarding feathery leaves,  
weary of wildebeest and lion  
that walked a dim trail  
across an endless plain  
—stoops in supplication—  
to lie down  
on the soft savanna  
at the break of Dawn

# BRYCE W. MERKL SASAKI

Bryce W. Merkl Sasaki is a writer, editor, and wizard-errant [citation needed] currently living in Battambang, Cambodia. When he's not wandering through Southeast Asia, he writes travel poetry or works on his science fiction novel, *Lucky Prime V*. He can usually be found snuggling with the nearest cat.



## A Pulau Pasar, in Passing

Welcome to the pulau pasar, that lush  
labyrinth, free-flowing garden city  
without beginning or end, connecting  
travellers, tourists, and (lately) tycoons  
from every point of the compass rose.  
Relish its multi-layered, sultry perfume  
of durian, cash, and kopi grounds  
at the intersection of long bean and lemongrass,  
pumpkin and pineapple, cargo and currency,  
among the little red dots of lychee and  
jackfruits trafficked to tempt the best of us—  
green, ripe, fragrant, soft-peaked, perfect.  
Get lost amidst the brinjal and galangal,  
the pomegranates from Galilee, the tea leaves  
from Lumbini, the cashews from Chennai,  
the sweet dates from Palestine and Madinah.  
Sniff at the crosswinds of cardamom, clove,  
and chicken rice; paprika, pepper, pandan leaf,  
saffron, sesame, and basil of every dialect.  
Wind through the supply-chain wonders of  
Korean oysters, Canadian clams, Hokkaido scallops;  
if it swims (or swam once), it's hawked here  
and wrapped in yesterday's Straits Times—

along with the mince, chops, shanks, ribs, and rumps,  
of any animal you'd care to consume  
(the king of beasts excluded, of course),  
next to a crowded rack of foreign chicken  
necks, hanged systemically as an example  
to their peers on the concrete jungle floor.  
Between the neglected melting ice and  
the frequent rinsing of blood and  
offal off of the butcher's bench,  
the floor of this pasar is never dry.  
Of course, every wet market hosts  
its stench, aromas, and perfumes,  
its delights, delicacies, and deficiencies,  
so as you wander, remember  
a pasar is not just a place, but a  
verb: to market, to exchange,  
to encounter, to connect.

## MOHAMED SHAKER

Mohamed Shaker is a Singaporean writer based in Singapore. He holds an MA in Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts. Currently an educator, his writing explores how Singapore and Singaporeans continue to live with and in their past in the present.



## Arm's Length

We don't stand an arm's length apart. We stand less than that. When the command from the trainee on the second floor pierces the blue, not-yet-sunrise sky, we slam our feet in unison and our right arms shoot up from our sides straight out, shoulder-height. Our fists search for the back of the squad mate in front of us and settle briefly into his spinal crease before we back up to just out of reach. Our feet shuffle like mice squeaking as we settle into formation. Unprompted, our arms descend in a smooth wave from front to back.

Water parade at Home Team Academy is like this every day, twice a day. Bodies fill the open gap between the two wings of the coy. When the Coy Commander is sighted approaching for this twice daily ritual, he is a speck of dust dropping onto the cool pond of our coy, his presence announced in whispers like ripples that flow from the boys nearest to the entrance of the coy to those of us at the far-right edge who cannot see him in our periphery nor hear his footsteps as they break the silence of the early morning or late night. Then, a series of commands: bottles up. Caps off. Drink up. Some yelling, some getting yelled at. Some drills. *Keluar baris*. The water swells and we rise back to our bunks or off to morning PT. Together.

\*

Men gossip like they say women do. NSF's gossip like little girls. Whispers travel on breezes. This is HTA, not BMTC; Choa Chu Kang, not Tekong. The voices speak in Malay as often or even more than in English. Such and such squad got in trouble for being late. Some trainee got caught with a phone charger. Someone else got scolded for altering his pants too tight to properly perform drills, which we were explicitly told not to do.

There's more: *did you hear?*

Did I hear what? I don't usually hear things. They're not always told to me, or maybe I don't angle my ear out the door enough when we're polishing our boots in the evenings, crowded around the doorway, bent over our shoes, shining black circles into them until the murky grime clears and we see our own faces, warped by the convex shape of the toecap.

*About that one guy, the one he always hang out with his FI one. Some fit squad. Like short, fit.*

I think I know who and I think I know what, but I didn't think they would know. I thought only I could pick up on things like that. I thought only I could tell. What about him I ask.

*Apparently, his squad not happy with him.*

Then? We were also not happy with some of our squad mates. One of them threw his dorm key to me but overshot in his carelessness, and it flew down to the first floor and almost into the drain, and we nearly got into serious trouble.

*Apparently, he tell on them to their FI. They really close one, you know.*

What do you mean?

*Like really close. After lights out, he sneak out of the bunk and go meet the FI.*

For what?

*You don't 'for what,' lah, what else could it be? At night? After lights-out?*

Where, sia?

*In the gym!*

Okay. It's a bit weird, maybe, I say without believing, but who cares?

*His squad lah. He tell on them about something.*

What?

*How should I know? Anyway, they take his spray bottle and...*

And what?

*They peed in it!*

Nonsense.

*No, really, they peed in it! They say he so annoying one, always tell on them to the FI. Always go play together at night. So they took it and peed in it! Then he sprayed all his clothes and ironed them. And he sprayed himself, too! They were laughing like crazy, eh. Wab, fucking funny, lah. He go and spray himself with his own pee.*

\*

Months later, basic training is over. Those of us selected to go on to the Ground Response Force remain in HTA for another three months. This time, we aren't watched as closely. We do water parade quickly under loose supervision. We are waved through during bag checks. We are allowed to bring packaged food. When we have no activities in the afternoon, we spend the hottest part of the day with the front door of the bunk closed and locked, all the fans on, sleeping under the blankets that we used to never touch out of fear of constant bunk inspections.

On book-in nights when there is no dinner, we eat together, more than half the squad crammed into a single bunk. We use the hot water from the water cooler to make Maggi. I forgot to bring a spoon one week and took one of the blue-handled ones from the mess and hid it inside my raincoat to bring back to the bunk. Later, we would learn how to balance an iron upside down between two chairs and turn it on, place a heat-safe bowl on top, and gently boil water to cook the Maggi properly instead. Some of us bring chips, cookies, bread. One guy brings *murukku*, and we all cheer because none of us thought to bring it. We crush the small packets and sprinkle them generously on our noodles and soup. We lick the seasoning off our fingers. We take to calling this our weekly *murukku* party.



We squeeze to fit, some of us sitting on the beds and the rest filling up the floor. The fans whir loudly overhead, set to the highest setting, but we still sweat from the profuse body heat stuffed into a room not meant for all of us. We always feel on the brink of suffocation, but when we laugh, we break through the stale air and create our own raucous wind, which ricochets off the walls and dissipates the stuffiness. The guy next to me introduces me to new, spicier, dry Maggi noodles, and they're so good I take to bringing them every week instead of the soup version.

I always sit furthest away from the door. The room is so cramped that out of necessity, I sit behind someone else, just out of the circle. Maybe I do this on purpose. I talk to whoever is closest and spend most of my time eating. I enjoy the laughter. I love the wind. But I sit apart. I look into the group, and I feel the distance grow, and the mass of men slide away from me, and I am suddenly far away, in space and time, back a few months ago, in the dark of my old bunk, with my old squad, conspiratorially talking after lights-out as we sometimes did. Everyone's faces are covered by the dark, but I can make out who's talking by their voice. Who has a girlfriend? Who's ever had a girlfriend? I tell a lie that is almost true, so I rationalise that it is: there was a girl I liked. It's true. We went to a dance together. Also true. We stopped talking after that. True again. So maybe it's all true.

The details are, at least. Maybe it's only a lie by omission. Maybe it's only a lie because of what I don't tell about myself, about how I really feel about women.

An offhand comment from someone else comes out of the dark. I don't remember if this was said that night, or if it was said on another night, or if it wasn't said at night at all, but rather in the clear light of day when we could all see who asked the question. I don't remember who asked it, only it being asked. What would we do, this headless, formless voice asks, if one of us was gay? Nobody answers at first. Then, my buddy, the boy who sleeps across from me, the one whom I am supposed to check on and him on me during the course of the day, says, in an offhand way, his voice sounding as though it is stifling something (a whimper? A sneer? A giggle?), 'We'd kick him out.' No one objects. No one says anything. I feel myself sliding out of that room, the world around shooting away, and I am back at the *murukku* party, sitting with my noodles, just outside the circle.

\*

As we approach the end of our life in camp, bunk and uniform inspections are so rare that we hardly use the iron. Between *murukku* party on book-in night and uniform inspection on book-out day, I never touch it, though it's used a few times to boil water for noodles. On book-out day, I notice my pants are wrinkled and flip the switch that the

iron is plugged into. I don't realise it's still set to the highest temperature so that it might muster enough power to turn water from a liquid to a gas for our own satisfaction. My uniform pants fall apart in front of me. A hole burns right through one of the legs. The wrinkled fabric adheres to the iron's scorching metal surface. I quickly spray it with water and scrub the melted navy-blue material, controlling my urge to hiss in pain when my fingers graze the still-hot iron. I have an extra pair. I don't tell anyone what has happened. I nearly burn my fingers scrubbing away the singed fabric. I reset the temperature to the lowest and quickly pull out an extra pair from my closet. No one has to know.

## AMY CHIA

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**She is working on a collection of travel flash fiction.**



## An Inch of Land, A Foot of Gold

「当万葩竞秀时，培植妙卉，寸土尺金，  
顾令此无足重轻之小草，蔓延庭阶，  
大是恨事。」

杨懋建《帝城花样·纫萝传》

*“When ten thousand varieties of flowers are competing,  
when cultivating new blooms, every inch of soil is a foot of gold,  
to have this insignificant weed spreading in the courtyard,  
is a hateful thing.”*

*Yang Mao Jian, Legend of Ren Xiang in the Imperial City*

### Singapore 2012

I was called crazy twice over my public flat in the established school estate of Bishan, near the middle of Singapore. The first time, when I pushed forward with the purchase five years ago, my former mother-in-law shrieked, ‘You *siao, ab!*’ Half a million Singapore dollars was a “Sky Price” for public housing, more so for resale units. She complained my then husband and I could have gone for a condominium near her Bukit Batok flat. She lamented the lost opportunity to pad up her son’s social standing.

Her only son had no savings, no job, and none of the banks wanted the risk of putting his name on a private property lease. He had no other option apart from the

highly subsidised Housing Development Board (HDB) flats built by the government. I had shelled out from my hard-earned savings for the down payment, fees, renovations, furniture, and wedding rings. I serviced the lion’s share of the monthly mortgage. I called the shots on every inch of the 1,700 square feet duplex penthouse maisonette, down to brusquely kicking her son out at the start of the three-year separation. Cheaters have no say.

The very minute my lawyer updated that the decree absolute for my divorce had been granted by the court, I listed the flat. My real estate agent friend called me crazy when I set the sale price of the flat at one million. No flat sold for seven figures. On the first day of the open house, a middle-aged uncle from China popped by in flip flops and a full haversack. He offered \$980,000. My agent was happy to be on the Straits Times front page for the record-breaking transaction.

Over the next three months, I would hand over the keys to the matrimonial property that had trapped me for five years, dump my majority share of the sale profit on a free-hold condominium along the sought-after stretch of Meyer Road by the east coast, and leave for what turned out to be a six-year overseas posting across Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong.

## Hong Kong, 2017

Hong Kong's skyline of bright skyscrapers looks perfect in postcards. Zoomed in, she is used and worn out like a pair of my grandmother's socks. Too many residential flats and offices cohabit in each block of precious land, growing like undernourished bean sprouts fighting for sunlight. Narrow flyovers cross neighbourhoods like roller coaster tracks that were built as afterthoughts. Some parts run so close to buildings that if a car crashes past the barricade, it will simply fly into a living room. The main island is packed like sardines. People shove each other for space to breathe the funky stench from rubbish-choked gutters. This city suffocates me.

A grey pigeon paces along my windowsill. Its black beady eyes darting around, checking for dangers such as my alarm clock, which has just gone off with frenzied dings. Startled, the bird flaps its wings and takes flight. Full-length back walls of buildings are painted with streaks and blobs of bird poo dribbling down mazes of pipes to the alleys below. No one cares what goes on at the back of postcards.

Not quite awake at midday on Saturday, I absentmindedly look out of the window into my neighbour's empty bedroom a few metres away in the adjacent apartment block. The savoury smell of oyster sauce from her kitchen wafts into my room. She must be making lunch. We share the same air on the sixteenth floor of our condominiums at Tin Hau on the

main island of Hong Kong, where I rent a lavish one bedder four times the size of a parking lot – three lots more than the average allocation per capita.

The unit has enough space for a kitchen in a closet, complete with a two-in-one washer and dryer tucked under the countertop. Cooking, dishwashing, and laundry are within arm's reach. I make jokes about the efficacious commode that reminds me of the prefabricated bathroom pods found in Japan. With a single tile for my feet, I only need to turn my body clockwise in forty-five-degree angles to use the shower, sink and toilet. The economic use of space saves enough room for me to get off both sides of the bed. Hong Kong is the only country I know where people customise the size of mattresses to open the door to their bedrooms – if there is a door, or a room.

The apartment is surrounded by convenience stores, bakeries, cafes, fast food joints and restaurants. I never need to turn on the portable induction stove. I have given in to the abundant choice of food and grew from a loose medium to a tight-fitting large in a year. It does not help that Cantonese or Yue Cuisine tastes deceptively light, and that I prefer to stay home. I need to wash up, get some lunch, do something to beat the growing inertia of life. Maybe buy myself that pair of gold earrings I have been eyeing for a month from one of the many jewellery shops lining the nearby shopping belt of Causeway Bay.

Unhappy with Beijing, pro-democracy activists are camping out on the tram tracks passing through the usually bustling Causeway Bay. More than a year later in 2019, refuelled by the government's proposed extradition bill, these protests grew bigger, more frequent, and turned into city-wide violence. For now, this stretch of Hennessy Road is cordoned off by the police to protect the protesters from traffic. Businesses are suffering from having fewer (Chinese) tourists, I can get a pretty discount.

It is mid-afternoon and well over lunch hour by the time I am done pottering around all five hundred square feet of the apartment. If I rock up and order a proper meal, I will surely be judged by vocal and grouchy waiters. They will let me know they are unhappy with my just-before-they-break business, by slamming whatever I order on the table while expecting tips on top of the ten per cent service charge. There is a constant plume of surliness, or rather, a lack of cheeriness from the locals. These are people who speak before they act and act before they think. Perhaps it is the congestion and price of living that has bred this unique brand of gusto keeping Hong Kong buzzing day and night, bedazzling the world for the last two centuries. I decide to skip lunch and have afternoon tea instead.

All dressed up in sweats, I weave through bamboo stilts and scaffoldings that cover the world-facing side of buildings

under repair, to a hole-in-the-wall tea house two blocks from the protest site. The city has seen better days, like the tea house which has undoubtedly spared no expense on its renovations – fifty years ago. Much of its old-world charm remains intact with an ornate wooden signboard, green ceramic floor tiles, and faded red booths. An elderly waiter is shouting orders to the kitchen not far from him. I am in time to grab a couple of piping hot egg tarts before they sell out for the day. But almost every stool that can be cramped inside is already taken up. I do not want to wedge past sweaty backs to a butt-sized spot, moving one arm locked in an angle like a Barbie doll to eat, while rubbing shoulders with some dude.

That is how I ended up hurrying back home, cradling a bag of custardy egg tarts, protecting my golden nuggets of happiness from pedestrian rage. My sixteenth-floor pigeonhole may be small and without a view, but it is worth the fortune I pay in monthly rent. I have this space to myself, a personal hideout far away from home, high up from the crowd. I close the door to this city's nervous pace and sullen mood, and binge watch Korean dramas on weekends.

### **Singapore, 2023**

I never got around to buying that pair of gold earrings in Hong Kong before returning to Singapore in 2018. The move was a timely coincidence. I watched Hong Kong burn

as the police turned brutal against protestors on the news. Just when I was wondering if, and how months of this escalating violence and injustice will end, COVID-19 properly whacked the world to its knees at the start of 2020. I was glad to be home after a long Tour de China and be around to look after the needs of my elderly parents while the pandemic raged.

Hanging on to the apartment I bought before leaving for Shanghai was another stroke of luck. While I was away from 2012 to 2018, the property prices in Singapore were rising so rapidly that five more real estate pricing cooling measures were put forward by the government, doubling on the existing five rounds since 2009. Despite the curbs, nouveau riche en bloc sellers and wealthy foreign investors continued to jack prices up.

With a sweet hike on the value of my freehold asset, I was tempted to be mortgage free and live like a hobo. I could always go back to my parents' house. According to my father, a Chinese woman who does not have a husband, regardless of age, technically still belongs to her paternal family. In fact, it is common for grown adults to live with their folks in Singapore, married or not. No one will give a hoot if I mooch under my parents' roof forever. Dad sends subliminal messages at each opportunity. Like the time they refreshed their house, 'Renovated YOUR room.' When I quit my corporate job, 'Mortgage no good.'

Two hundred years ago during the Qing Dynasty, Chinese writer Yang Mao Jian originated a famous Han idiom 「寸土尺金」, which means that an inch of land is worth a foot of gold. In condensed cities like Hong Kong and Singapore today, competition to own limited real estate in the centre of action, in prime neighbourhoods, to upgrade to more prestigious addresses or from leasehold to freehold, has driven the property prices of land to an unreasonable pitch with no ceiling in sight. Developers driven by profit buy up bigger apartments and tear them down to build more even-smaller units, at multiples of what the original apartments cost.

The Pinnacle@Duxton is a fifty-storey residential project housing over 1,800 families in seven towers next to the central business district. The 156-metre beehive hangs on the original site where two ten-storey blocks, amongst the oldest HDB flats built, once stood. The development is an attempt at the concept of place-making within a high-rise, high-density settlement. Its vertical urban design had been well publicised as a symbol for a new generation of public housing in Singapore. Though rooms have been generally sized down over time throughout the country, common areas in recent designs have become more creative. While ground floor decks in traditional estates grant walking access and serve community needs such as weddings, the Pinnacle has retail shops. Collective spaces were moved to higher floors

and roofs, offering both function and astonishing views. Prices have multiplied since its launch in 2009. A five-room 1,141 square foot resale unit sold for \$1,400,000 in March, making it the most expensive flat per square feet in Singapore yet. While a bigger property further to the west, north and east may cost less than half, it still takes the average Singaporean a twenty-five-year loan to pay it off.

Ironically, the buyer who wants affordable properties starts rooting for the price to inflate once he becomes an owner. I am the same. When I babysit my nephews and watch them play in the condo pool, I worry if they can afford a roof over their heads when they grow up while admiring my upmarket estate, gleeful that the new train station will send prices soaring again. I am the hypocritical aunt who gave up her childhood dream in art to earn more money, who threw in her whole life savings twice, who slogged as a mortgage slave in foreign lands for six hardcore years, to line a cushier retirement nest.

More than safeguarding my future, I am already used to having my personal hideout where I close the door to a city's nervous pace and binge watch Korean dramas on weekends. While others struggle for space and privacy during the pandemic circuit breaker curbs and work-from-home arrangements, I have all one thousand square feet of my own top floor two-bedroom home. Floor-to-ceiling

windows in every room and a balcony flushed along half the apartment give me an unblocked panoramic vista all the way to Mount Lalang in Malaysia. Cottony clouds, a crisp morning breeze, the pitter patter of raindrops greet me when I wake. My piece of sky turns into paintings in every imaginable hue of ruby and amber at sunset. I decorate my home in any style I fancy, leave dirty dishes in the basin, fill up shelves with books in no order, and swagger about in nothing but baggy underpants. My casa, my rules. And each inch of that freedom is worth a foot of gold.

## ALASTAIR WEE

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## Sandstone's Children

It was a hot, radio-crackle morning. Through the night, a long wind had risen, pestering against the octagonal hull of the ancient structure. Vaporous notes blew over its stripped shingles, its bare rafters and rust-holes, where earlier storms had chewed their way in, and in the hour before dawn, a cross-breeze had brewed in the spokes of its halls, converging in fury at its nexus. As the wind threw itself around the large central chamber, another sound began in its confines; first small like a grumble, then a growling, acrid plea, and then the full-throated keening of metal on stone as the entire structure lurched from within, the old cast-iron ribbing groaning as one. For a time, its halls were endless with pitch, the building battered outside and in, and for a time it seemed that the solid foundations, never intended for such strain, would finally yield. But the sands of its grave were piled high on its face, obliging it all to hold as it always, ever had, and so the structure grated and shook but did not give, and with enough time the wind freed itself again, easing back through the gaps into the early morning blue. Now the air inside was thick and still, like a rigid tarp over the brown stone floor. It muffled the tinny sounds of a handheld radio that lay on its face, where nearby, out of the wreck of a fallen clock tower, an old woman was emerging from a flap of fabric.

Sandstone's eyes were grey and bright. Her thin black hair bushed around her forehead where it escaped her ponytail, and a pink feathered shawl draped low across her shoulders and back. Her arms were wrapped in skin-tight sleeves, and a frayed belt cinched the dress of faded colours that flowed down from collarbone to slipper. A crop of wrinkles filled her neck as she turned, surveying the mess the storm had left her. Her gaze ran over the fresh film of sand that now covered everything, pausing on the chunks of metal that had not been there the previous day. From inside her door she pulled out a tall broom.

The chamber now was warm and still. Pockets of light filtered in a slow haze. Only the sound of sweeping cut the quiet, and the burr of the radio that grew louder as she came around. Sandstone stopped, digging her broom into the floor, and slowly bent to pick the device up.

She turned it over in her hands. The voice on the radio was moderate and male, speaking at a brisk pace in a language she did not know. Usually, when the weather was clear, the radio would merely hum with static, its signal lost and weak, and only when the storm gates were open and the air howled through would the voice come in as well. She'd heard it in snatches last night, before the wind drowned out everything. But this morning the voice continued to speak, unerringly audible, if yet incomprehensible. Sandstone clipped it to her

belt, listening as she did a circle round her house, clearing away a neat radius of sand. As she began to sweep it all together, a single phrase caught her attention.

Lau Par Sat, the radio said.

It was the only phrase she recognized in the chatter, the ancient name for her home. Lau Par Sat meant Old Market, and once, more than seven hundred years ago, it had been just that, its corridors vibrant and living. She remembered the colours, the smells, the scene. It was a different existence back then, blending among the crowds that came for lunch, unseen and untroubled amidst the noises and tangs of patrons who queued and talked and ate and left. She would help shoo birds from food and flies from drinks, pick up lost wallets and slip them in pockets, scrub the floors and clear used trays when people had left them behind. Few had spared more than a glance in her direction, so busy were they with their distractions - first broad sheets of paper, then small palm devices, then seemingly nothing as everyone started to talk into the air - all these things had changed as the years passed. What had never changed were the hawkers, and every day, up till the end, she would stand by them as they prepared their stations in the dark of morning, picking pieces of protein and vegetable from cookers and woks, smuggling in dashes of sauces and spice. The hawkers knew her by her presence, and despite that their eyes were old and worn would turn

their heads as she went by, and for those who prayed to her to listen, she would answer - whispering in their ears the secrets of broth, skill, and fire.

But those times were past, the people long gone. Today, most of the building's roof was stoved in, weighed down heavily by sand and age, and over the centuries even the earth had moved, sinking some corridors and lifting others. One of the market's eight hallways now lurched at an angle, ending aimlessly as it pointed up to the sky.

The sky. Through this opening she could see the gleam of its blue-glass panes, the lines of latticework stretching high and away into the oblong dome that surrounded the Old Market; a bell jar around her forgotten place. At its apex shone the lamp of the sun, fixed in place by four large, strong girders. A row of storm gates lined halfway up, ringing the sky like a collar, and above and around in five-pane intervals hydration grates were affixed, each protruding and porous like the root of a lotus. It had been this way for a long time; so long that it was hard to remember what it had all been before, but she supposed that in practice it was very much the same. It still rained, every other day. The wind still blew. And while it no longer moved from its bracket, the sun would still brighten the mornings and dim the evenings, and at night, a laser matrix would sprinkle stars in the sky.

Sandstone frowned, the broom coming to rest in her hands. The radio was still going, loud and deliberate, which meant the storm gates were open, even as the air was inert. This had never happened before. This was now different. And the words: Lau Par Sat. They were talking about this place. They were talking about her home. Perhaps, she thought, they were even talking about her.

She pulled the pink shawl tight around her neck, feeling its knotting smooth against her skin. The shawl had been a gift. A history major, the young man had explained with an awkward bow as he proffered it to her, standing out in the heat of the sands on the street marked Raffles Quay. A faint shimmer played around his jaw as he spoke. My thesis is in pre-Crash civilization, and I got us all visitation permits. Us - my friends from university, he said, waving at the loose group of people huddled a few steps away. They all seemed about the same age.

I've heard so many things about the Old Market, the man continued, and I had to come see it for myself. To do my research first-hand.

Here he paused, and his friends whispered fiercely, egging him on.

But, uh, he said, I also wanted to meet you, and I was hoping you could help me. To understand, he said, and gave a shy smile.

His friends were nudging each other restlessly, shooting smirks of anticipation. They were being crass, she decided, but she sensed the sincerity in the man's words, the genuine nature of his desire. She tugged at the hem of the presented gift. The shawl was softly textured, its colour a pleasing pink. And the man himself looked rangy and strong.

It's actual wool, he ventured. Very expensive to synthesise, nowadays.

Come, she croaked, and his friends slapped him on his back, shoving him forward. She took him by the arm and led him onwards, feeling his shiver as they passed from the light and descended down the maw of the sunken structure, stepping over the skeletal ruins of broken metal and stone. As their eyes adjusted, she felt him gawk up at the high ceilings, and heard his gasp as he beheld the flanged arches that held up the roof, twisting and curling down into green iron pillars that lined their path on either side. Incredible, he exhaled, as they came upon the long rows of brick-and-mortar that marked what had once been the market's stalls, and so fervently in awe was he by the backlit sight of the fallen clock tower, that for a second he looked confused when she stopped and motioned him towards a flat piece of rubble. His energy grew nervous again, so she calmed him with a bony, knowing hand.

This is how we understand each other, she said, and his eyes met hers.

When they were finished, her mind still swimming, the young man rose and looked around the chamber, as if seeing it anew. He sprung to his feet, naked, and pointed excitedly at the foundation stones, exclaiming that now he could see, now he could see the hawkers back in their heyday, drumming knives and ladles as they chopped up chickens and doled out nasi padang. There must have been hundreds of people here, he said, spinning around in the dusty space. And the bustle - how busy it must have been! His arms were stretched, his bearing rapturous, as if to encompass the Old Market and all its history. I see it now, he cried. People would come here for cheap eats. For the variety, the inexpensiveness! They would come for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, or they would come at any time at all, to gather and sit and talk over coffee. Over their coffee - over kopi! Lim kopi, he shouted, his arms thrust into the air. His voice rang ecstatic across the hollow chamber, the words small but triumphant.

For her part, as she caught her breath, she was suddenly, vastly aware of other things, the rolling blur of fresh knowledge beginning to separate in her mind. Lying back, she glimpsed the sky through ragged holes - a cathedral of blue, the bright glass rearing - it seemed so perfectly clear, yet still so opaque. A fuzzy curiosity came over her. She looked at the man who'd come from outside.

Tell me more about your world beyond my sky, she said, catching his arm as he finished whirling. She pulled him back down beside her, and used the shawl to cushion their backs. Now that the knowledge had settled, she knew that the faint light that came upon his jaw when he spoke was a translation mesh, converting his speech into Dialect so she could understand him. When she spoke, she noticed the same shimmer around his ears.

He told her that outside of the dome - outside Hermetics such as hers - there were people, and people still lived. Society's still out there, but it's all a bit different now, he said with an eager smile, though he seemed hard-pressed to really explain how. We're still people, he shrugged, and we do the usual things. We eat, we sleep. We learn. We're still the same, he said, rubbing her shoulders. She regarded the shallow dimple on his left cheek.

But what's beyond my sky, she asked, draping his arm around her and pointing up at the sun. What's just behind there?

Oh, he said, and thought for a while, his toe deftly tracing her leg. These decks are *offices*, he said eventually. The word came new and slow. Little boxed-up spaces, slightly smaller than... a market stall, he said, gesturing towards the broken curbs of one. And inside is where people... *work*.

She felt the alienness in the translation of that last word, the mesh struggling to convey what precisely he meant. It

was as if the concept was so foreign, so bizarre, that *work* was the closest the mesh could do, and so she asked if what he meant by *work* was what the hawkers in the Old Market had been doing when they cooked chicken rice and prata and sold it to people. He shrugged, and said that in these times *work* meant something different than what it once did, something else entirely. Now *work* was a vivid pleasure, he said, and he supposed the hawkers could have theoretically been enjoying what they did as they prepared their stalls and made their food. But then he shook his head, and said it was hard to imagine someone taking joy in that, in spending time creating food for others. Now we eat cricket, he grinned, and cricket's the best. It comes in from the wall chutes, and you can have as much as you want.

This she mulled as he continued to babble about the arrangement of tables in the Old Market - how efficient it had to have been! - and also what it must've been like to drink from a straw. Pressed into his arms and chest, a cold wave rolled over her, and in a single beam of sunlight she suddenly felt shrivelled and rough, like a flesh-covered prune; even as he stroked her hair and thanked her profusely for what she'd given him, and said that despite her age she still looked royal, like weathered sandstone. But with her newfound sense of knowing, the gulf in understanding between them now seemed to echo, large and wanting like the chamber before

them; so she dismissed him with a quiet push, signalling him to return the way they had come. As he began to gather his things, she said again, more firmly, *go*, and as he turned he froze, finally seeing her as she was: an old spirit amongst the broken rubble. His look of protest melted, and he abandoned his clothes, slinking down the hallway and up the steps, back into the light and the waiting roars and hoots of his companions above.

She cut his trousers down the side to replace her door hangings, and used his shirt to wrap her pillow. This was many years ago now, and her hangings had changed a few times since. But the shawl she still wore, taking care to beat the sand out after every storm. And the name she kept - Sandstone. She'd had many before, but this one felt right and good.

Now she started to sweep again, the radio loud, and the storm gates warily silent. It was as if the big storm last night had exhausted them, or that someone had forgotten to close them after all their wind had been expended. Her circles grew as the voice rambled, spiralling larger and larger around her clock tower, and when she reached the edge of the chamber she glanced down each hallway, checking for debris. As she did so, she saw a golden silhouette far down one, moving and pacing on the sands above.

There was a visitor on Robinson Street.

## Fifth Season

In autumn on the West Coast the leaves turn deep orange and red, just like in the movies, and someone has swept rings around their trees. Along unmarked ways, the grass of the campus Arboretum is long and crisp and paper-brown, rubbing together with a light dust film. Here, a single jacket is enough to feel warm out the door, enough for the wind to whisk cool around my bike, twirling leaves in eddies. The earth is dry and loose and has a pleasant smell. The branches rustle with spreading colour. Everything feels light and beautiful, like a golden skin around me, as I cycle the quiet mile to school.

There is an eternal feeling in the air. How lucky it is to have the seasons - I think as I pedal - how rare indeed. In Singapore the year is muggy from start till end, the heat and humidity soaking deep into shirts and schedules. As a foreign student in America, my days feel insular, divorced from the regular hurry, and a school year here is an uncommon gift, a special oasis in time. Here the sky is wide and peerless, the houses low and the country vast, and the faces I meet are new and rested, eager to learn and very clever. In this way they are infectious, and so I find myself rested and eager too, banking onto the main approach, a sprawling boulevard lined with palms. The chain whirs out beneath me, and up ahead, the red-roofed blocks of campus rise like dunes.

But with this contentment comes a chaser of doubt, because I am here as part of a trade. A Singapore government scholarship means both a world-class education and the waiting promise of future employment. In my case this will be in engineering, so I choose and attend my classes duly: linear algebra, electromagnetics, signal processing. The professor who teaches statistical learning asks us to buy his authored textbook, where I read that many of the field's fundamental techniques were pioneered by him. A Nobel laureate in physics teaches a highly-subscribed class, and after promising an A on the first lesson, gets on his soapbox about his fringe views on climate science, resulting in heated exchanges with the other students. I join a choir and we hold our first concert a few weeks later; a humbling experience in the school's Memorial Church, its rich stained glass bright and bold. Standing in the chancel, looking over the pews at the Roman arches, the vaulted ceilings, the dark wood inlays and polished mosaics, I can't help but feel a sense of displacement. Nothing is truly novel here - a Singaporean studying in America - nothing too dramatic, or strange. Yet long after the last notes of Mozart's *Missa Brevis* in Bb, my thoughts continue to linger; of opportunity, and the heavy tag it carries.

Surely, I think - I shouldn't be here.

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Then it is winter, and the way to school grows wet and bare. In November Trump is elected and my choirmaster cries, and the mood on campus drops with the temperature. I switch over to taking the bus. When the first quarter ends, the locals fly back for Christmas, but my flatmate is Singaporean as well, a coincidence of the housing ballot, and we connect with the other Singaporeans in our year. Soon we reach critical mass. On New Year's, my flatmate and I arrange a cook-out and prepare the food we know from home - chicken rice and kuluyuk - but also lemon drizzle tart and Ceasar salad, strip steak and salmon wellington. We are in America, after all. As the night goes on I invent a new cocktail - pipagao and whiskey mixer - and nestle deep in the sofa after having a few, lording it over the other drinks, claiming the herbal syrup takes off the edge and improves the flavour. Amidst the good-natured laughter and teasing calls, we find ourselves fast friends.

Before long I rely wholly on them. The nearest supermarket is a Trader Joe's, a fifteen-minute walk from my apartment, but it doesn't stock Chinese condiments and I never learnt to drive, so my friends take me to an Asian grocer the next town over. Another weekend we head up to Seattle, ten of us in two cars. As the shrubbery races along the Californian highway, grass-bleached hillocks push out across the plains, breaking into pale distant lands and far blue sierras. Comfy

and snug behind the glass, I can only think of dark mountain trails. We pass through Oregon and it gets even colder. Our Airbnb is shaped like a castle, on the edge of a pine forest sheeted in snow, enough for footprints and one lean snowman, which we decorate with sticks and an old borrowed beanie. Come midnight we play the piano and sing songs from home, with no neighbours close enough to hear, and when we grow tired we lie on the carpet and talk each other to sleep.

The friends, the warmth, the familiar cant - they help me stave off crawling unreason, and I imagine it all somehow staying this way.

Winter term is busy and subdued. For class I learn circuits and program robots, and rig spinning flywheels to shoot balls through hoops. When we gather again it is CNY. Someone's parents send over bakkwa in small, clear packets, and we toast each other our small, clear victories.

\*

Spring arrives, bolstered by the cannon of bells ringing from tops of the red-domed towers. In one strong week the campus comes into leaf. The student café below the quantum physics classroom serves good Thai food, so during lunchtime I pack a box of basil stir-fry and cycle back out to the Arboretum. Few of the plants here flower, but it is the trees that call me to their sides: the lofty old ones, those indifferent to the man that sits beneath. Cedars with hairy

hands grasping down; sequoias and sycamores plummeting up. Their leaves carve a lattice in the light. I prop up my food with a laid-out textbook.

It's easy to put your back to a tree, the grass so freshly strewn. But as I finish my food, a wind comes unbidden upon the branches; a scurrying feeling that fills the air, like all the squirrels of the land coming out to steal, and I feel again that homeward pang.

For now the year is halfway done, and a low melancholy finds its way in. With a sentiment now common to the Singaporeans, we sit together in pairs, in groups, at each other's apartments, talking heart-to-heart deep into the night, about girlfriends and boyfriends, marriage, BTO, and most of all the spectre of work that hangs before us. Already I've started getting emails asking whether I've maintained my GPA, asking if I'll have any problems graduating, asking when I can start at the office - a grim reminder of the current fantasy. This was known from the start, keenly so, but in springtime it feels all too real, with career fairs gutting the hallways and recruiters handing out smiling brochures. I snatch a few free T-shirts out of spite. A single-credit class I share with my friends is called *Designing the Professional*, in which the teacher asks us to imagine where and what we could be in five years' time. All of us write down Singapore, working in the civil service or adjacent. Imagine something crazier, she urges,

beaming with forgiveness. What would you do if you had no limits? When she goes to another table we trade looks and shrug. Overseas government bonds are six years long.

'Have you ever thought of breaking your bond,' more than one person asks.

'No,' ever the reply. 'No money.' With that hint of pique, and all of our entitlement on full display. As if we weren't getting exactly what we paid for.

Singapore's got its fingers in us, I remark to my flatmate over pasta dinner. It's our privilege, he replies, with his usual kindness. Remember Singapore Day in San Fran? They flew us sambal stingray, hokkien mee, rojak, all the way from home. I know, I know, I reply quickly; and there was also Hossan Leong, The Sam Willows, and Teo Chee Hean. And it's a good deal - a wonderful, great deal. One we could never afford on our own.

So why the regret, he asks, spooning out the bolognese.

I have no answer. It's trade-for-trade, remarkably so, and yet I can't stand the bargain. In a fit of misgivings, I start cycling past frat houses and undergrad dorms in the evenings, watching the throng of people, the parties and barbecues, and learn to recognize the smell of weed. The denial of my own responsibilities seems to recur. Partying is one part of college life I'm missing, one that I don't actually miss, but still I find myself nursing the itch. Instead I go back to the Singaporeans



and we play beer pong. It's fun with the alcohol and the big red cups. Still we are a tempered bunch. No one gets blackout drunk, no one falls out a window.

There's something about the lack of dreams that binds us, the Singaporeans studying overseas. Something that shelters us in, by way of future and fate. It's not that I didn't try to make other friends, I reason, sleepless, late at night; but their hopes and dreams always seemed too big, so I never could get off the ground with them.

\*

In the end comes summer. A nova of roses planted in the shape of the school logo shimmers in the main quadrangle, the campus baking with unreasoning heat. I front-loaded my credits, so I only have three classes left, and now they whip collectively by, leaving me directionless with energy. My flatmate reminds me to reply to those persistent work emails. You always want to start work with a good impression, he says. I do so as cheerily and politely as I can. It's now the last two months to return.

We take a trip down to the Grand Canyon. Standing at the lip, in the deadening of wind, I watch fliers drift on invisible currents. Somehow I feel like I'm out there too, making a long, hard turn in space. On the road back, at an IHOP diner, my friends debate which American chain makes the best pancakes, so someone can bring the franchise

back to Singapore. We chatter and chat and finally agree. The restlessness doesn't burn away.

Back on campus, the Arboretum is full of hanging bristles that stick to the sides of my shoes. It's now the last month to return.

In the week of graduation, the greens are stacked with lines of chairs. Every blade of grass quivers as we sit and listen to stirring speeches from guests and valedictorians, from those who have limitless possibility, who will no doubt go on to do something else, be someone else. From our vantage below the podium, their faces are a shining blur.

We throw our caps, and they fall back down. As we exit, a small brown bob darts from the sky. Nobody else notices, so I reach to catch it, but it unfurls into a sparrow and flies away.

For the last time in our flat, everyone remarks how nicely our graduation photos turned out. Lit against the buff manila columns, I don't mention how the gown looks foreign on me, as if superimposed onto my body in stripes of cardinal red, along with an obligatory smile. I want to paint it out, paint it deeper, paint it all away. Paint myself back to autumn; to orange, red, and gold.

There's one final mixer for the graduating students. They've built a diorama of the Golden Gate bridge out of painted wood and plastic, and mounted it in the centre of the hall for students to take farewell pictures with. Next week we

are due to fly, so I have too much to drink, and don't quite believe it afterwards when my friends say I went wild - so my flatmate takes out his phone and shows me.

\*

I still have that photo. It's just me, in a black suit and bow tie, swinging out like King Kong from the rope-bars of the Golden Gate. It's not flattering, my face hot and scrunched, but in a slightly crazed way I look happy, as in whole. Even after all this time, there's a special place in memory for my year in the States, enough for me to close my eyes and cycle back there. To hear my friends calling from the sofa, cooking and singing, and to watch the world out the glass, with an old gratitude that I didn't feel back then. Back when I didn't know how.

But now I do. I know it now. And so I stay for a while, under the trees, in this fifth season.

## BRANDON TOH

**Brandon is a professional writer, Chinese-English translator,  
and English tutor.**



## **Pockets of Aloneness**

### **Searching for Solitude in the Psychogeography of a Singaporean Boy**

From my bedroom window, I can see a slice of the well-trodden footpath that wraps around the HDB estate. It guides the way for bicycles, PMDs, sandals, dress shoes, sneakers, and heels. Handfuls of somebodies hurry by every minute. Sometimes I glimpse faces I think I recognise. In the morning, they leave these apartment blocks and head to work or to school. In the evening, they come home. It always feels like there are too many people whizzing by for either side of the path to hold.

On this people-dense island, we afford space for ourselves to stretch by stacking people on people, families atop families. Even so, it is hard to find space to call one's own. Not even my room is wholly my own. My brother is barely home, my piles of clothes have encroached on his bed, and my books have overflowed into the nooks of his wardrobe, yet the room is still both his and mine. I've grown used to the compromise. Places that can seclude me, in a country hungry for progress and efficiency, are momentary.

#### **Stairwell**

That dim stairwell behind the canteen of my primary school, for instance. It had about thirty steps and led straight

up to an unused corner of the multi-purpose hall. Its sides were pure wall. Hiding in that stairwell as a child, I'd imagine myself trapped within a wisp of smoke. I still find it cosy to be hemmed in like that. During recess, in that half hour before noon, I'd sit on a step near the bottom, bathed in a slab of light from the sun shining in at a slant. Sometimes, I'd be reading. Charles Dickens, Enid Blyton, the occasional Hardy Boys. Mostly, I stared out the entrance of the stairwell, past the chain-link fence dividing school from world. Mynahs and sparrows were camouflaged in the branches of skinny trees, hidden by the shimmer of leaf-filtered sunlight. Birds chirped more back then. The bird calls were clearer than the children chattering and cutlery clanging in the canteen. Past the fence, beyond the divide, though, the world was quiet.

I wondered why it was so deserted out there when the light seethed the strongest and felt most like life.

#### **Basketball Court**

Unlike the wistful bluster of twilight or the callous optimism of sunrise, it's harder to purposefully hold dear that half-of-an-hour before noon. That half-of-an-hour, one out of the forty-eight we get every day. That half-of-an-hour, when the sun rises towards its apex. In my late adolescence, I picked up basketball. Come that half-of-an-hour, I'd go out to play. The sticky tropical heat was not yet able to exhaust the font of teenage vigour.

The open-air court was mere seconds away from my home. Its floor paint was cracked, breaking the top of the key and a part of the three-point line. Its hoops could never preserve pristine nets for long. I frequently played alone then, being the rare sort that found the sun's scorch intoxicating. It is a time of day when play is an assertion of freedom. Responsibilities at that age tend to be light and thus easy to abandon. The metallic twang of a dribbled ball, the quick flex and release of muscles with each attempt to shoot, and the sweat covering my slightly tanned skin put me in a giddy trance. Often, I'd play for hours, shedding time off as a pink poui sheds its petals. As dusk neared, more people would gather, many also wanting nothing to do and space to simply be. We would play for hours, at times sitting around the perimeter or the poles holding the hoops. There we stayed until the floodlights were turned off, and it became too dark to see each other's faces. Wasting day after day, week after week: this too is an assertion of freedom.

I thought of the basketball court as an eternal refuge, even as my acquaintances and I grew into our burdens, and new groups of youngsters took our place. It accepted those who needed its consolation. Year by year, many would play on the court for the last time without knowing it. Many would also stumble upon it, nestled in the middle of an HDB estate, and they would make it their regular spot.

Yet, it was an unexpectedly fragile refuge. During the quiet tumult of the COVID pandemic, the government removed the hoops. People stopped congregating without the facade of a reason to do so. For two years, basketball courts were simply rectangular voids.

I'd feel exposed standing in that small expanse of air. In this concrete jungle, there seem to be tall buildings in view no matter where I turn. True solitude is impossible when we are never more than a stone's throw from the reach of another person. When found, often by happenstance, those pockets of aloneness prove themselves fleeting.

### **Park Lane**

Once, a group of friends decided to meet at "Park Lane" around midnight, for supper and a session in an internet cafe. As a borderline shut-in, I had not traversed the Singaporean terrain enough to align the cluster of rooms in my head with their bearing in the physical world. I wasn't aware of the invisible borders separating Jurong East from Clementi, Orchard from its suburbs, Pasir Ris from Tampines. I had not yet grasped how exactly to navigate from one locale to another without having already committed a path, however meandering, to memory. That was something I learned much later. My ignorance meant not knowing "Park Lane" referred to Park Lane Mall. It would be a sensible colloquial shorthand save for the existence of

a thin bend of road that, too, is Park Lane. It sits next to a wetlands park confined by an industrial area to the north of Singapore, closer to Malaysia than its namesake mall.

I typed “Park Lane” into Grab, which was still just a taxi app then. It hadn’t developed the habit of trying to read my mind and dictate where I should have wanted to go. The taxi driver made no comments, and let me alight at the sole bus stop near the road. A few minutes later, the last bus came and went. It carried no passengers, only an encased brightness.

I sat on the bus stop bench, and could hear myself breathing. There was no other person around, but the street lamps lit the way just the same. My phone battery was dwindling. I was in no hurry to leave. Entranced by the depth of the silence and the dark of the night sky, I felt I could sit through the night until the first bus.

Before that could happen, though, a car drove over, and stopped in front of me. My friend sped over, having received the text I sent before I surrendered myself, and stole me away from the moment. He told me that the place, far-flung and bare of tall apartments, was sometimes used for illegal street races. It seemed, even when I found myself absolutely alone, I still wasn’t far from the ghost of a crowd’s furore. I could almost imagine it. Space-starved adrenaline chasers, under the porous cover of night, driving in blistering circles to break the monotonous rhythm of life here.

That happened in my early twenties when I was a volitional insomniac. I’d borrow sobriety from my future self for a few hours of wakefulness. A few days of stupor to see a night to its perfunctory end. Those nights, I mostly wandered aimlessly with friends as we let conversations I’d long forgotten unspool. I’ve never pulled an all-nighter for good reason.

### Temple

My father spent countless all-nighters playing mahjong in a haze of cigarette smoke of his own making. If bad habits could be inherited, I suppose I got it from him. His regular spot is a small Chinese temple in the neighbourhood. I never liked that place. There were always crass middle-aged men talking with their grating, gravelly voices. They would, between tile discards and liberal swearing, work up bountiful balls of spit and launch them into the patch of grass next to the mahjong table. Eventually, a sign that said “No gambling allowed on sacred grounds” was put up, but all it did was push those men to play with a defiant edge as they placed their feet on the chairs and brick-tiled floor in obstinate comfort.

Occasionally, I’d accompany my father, and the temple’s steward would limp over, greeting us with a light wave and a smile that showed the gaps between his yellowed teeth. He was a diabetic amputee who seemed to wear the same dirty singlet every day. When no mahjong game was ongoing, he’d have a

mutt for company. It used to be a stray, but made the temple grounds home after the steward tossed it some burnt meat.

During the mahjong sessions, I'd find a place to wait. I'd sit inside a room housing altars of Taoist and Buddhist gods. This room, dimly lit, housed King Yama, the ruler of Hell. His altar was flanked by effigies of Heibai Wuchang, Chinese deities who escort the spirits of the dead. They, too, are spirits. One has a ghastly snarl. The other, a long, drooping slug of a crimson tongue. To scare off evil spirits, so I was told. Or the merely curious, I thought.

I knew I wasn't yet due for Hell. The noise of mahjong tiles being shuffled kept me tethered to reality, like the patter of rain and the soft white noise from an old television at once. I'd hear it, that irregular flurry, that night song.

Until the sky turned a static blue.

Then, I'd prepare for the day before the day was ready.

The tinge of spurious solitude waned like the translucent moon, and I'd go back to being a pair of feet hurrying along the concrete footpath on a blue Singapore morning, moving slightly out of time.

## IAN GOH

Ian Goh writes about video games, pop culture, and other wabi-sabi stuff. His work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Star\*Line*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, and elsewhere. He attained his MA in Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts. He currently works as a scriptwriter at Ubisoft Singapore.



## Blockheads

my sister carved a hobbit hole  
from the mountain side: fine-  
aged barrels for dirt walls,  
golden-amber ridges carved  
into a once-rocky ascent, and  
a free spirit and her fox friend  
left howling in one corner  
despite a lifetime of magic  
berries and ritual melancholia

the youngest raised an altar  
from dark oak and stripped  
spruce, golden lanterns strung  
from wood beams and beaten  
birch, an entire chamber  
dedicated to her cobblestone  
collection and another to her  
dog, Freya, the goddess of  
love, longing, and listful bliss

another slayed a creeper and  
adorned its frown on ashen  
double-doors, her borders  
marked by tiki-torches and  
smirking jack o' lamps, and  
trapdoors sprung with TNT  
and lava pools for the would-  
be thief who'd dare snatch her  
ten diamond-encrusted hearts

the eldest built a five-room flat  
from dredged sand and dragon  
bone: a space to scale and  
barely fitting a queen's bed,  
two side-chests, maybe a  
Siamese or three, and a single  
occupant weary of waiting till  
thirty-five to fly away and  
hoard a treasure of her own

# Gotta Catch 'Em All

## Encounters in the Wild

Amidst tall herds on trains and carriages, *they* hide, crouching in wait for the hapless Trainer, lured in by loose Maxi Dresses or purple-blue Pinafores. Equipping items like Silky Hair and No Make-up might boost encounters in the wild, but Loose Clothing will repel such creatures due to a Trainer's bolder personality and increased chance of a confrontation.

Other signs of creatures nearby: unwanted pats on the head, ponytails munched upon, ear plugs replaced by tongues, or sudden pressure applied to the pelvis. Also watch out for shoes poked between your feet or bra straps found sliced by a pair of boxcutters.

More 'Legendary' creatures might try and snap photographs from beneath sewer grates, don wigs and follow you into the Lady's, or feign deaf or blindness before lunging for your chest with their crooked claws.

If you feel a sudden sensation of wetness, flee the area via Escape Rope immediately. It is most likely *not* a natural leak from a breached wellhead.

their brother hid in a mountain gorge, a swampland of tricky witches and flawed thinking: 'ere the sun rises over Shinto rooftops and burnt hinoki bridges, as he tended proud and wistful rice fields, the odd wolf panting for a bone, and a vista bled in pixelated glory

Ma and Pa spawned in with unmarked errors, her head spinning with WSAD nausea and his saying, 'So stupid this game...' before exiting the world they had both wedded to seed, block by painstaking block, over the years chipping away at a quintet of obsidian blockheads



## **Gotta Catch 'Em All**

When engaging in a battle, a coloured ring will manifest on a creature's face, which reveals its difficulty of capture:

### GREEN:

Easy. Simply shout, 'Don't mess with me or you'll cough your testicles out your mouth.' to send it fleeing.

### ORANGE:

Medium. Use Anti-groping Stamps or high-performance Pepper Spray to boost your Accuracy to Stun.

### RED:

Extreme. Hold your Backpack firmly in both hands before flinging it into its face.

After the creature is pinned to the ground, do alert nearby Trainers to aid you. Ignore common protests like, 'I bump into her only what!' or 'Taking selfie only lah!'

If successful, you may deposit your cretin at the nearest Police Centre, to be secured in a tiny metal box. Watch out, though — there's still a chance they might break free, leap off the platform, and flee down the tracks!

## **Hidden Machines**

Prolonged incarceration and public canings have produced mixed results, with bad behaviour often relapsing upon release.

Perhaps if their mothers had hugged them a little more or they were forced to flee from their homes at the tender age of ten, these creatures could have found their true cause.

Trainers should consider a creature's Special Abilities, Hidden Potential, and Move-sets. With great skill, courage, and patience, we can teach these monsters to behave at their very best!

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## ABOUT THE COVER

### **Singapore Sunset**

By Sara Patricia Kelly

The cover draws inspiration from familiar spaces, inviting readers to consider the essence of design in the age of artificial intelligence. Artistic works (including book covers) can now be generated at the click of a button. The scene, a sampan at sunset, was created from found objects photographed with an ordinary camera: noodles, paper, a kopi cup, and a child's painting. Through minimal digital manipulation, a longing for yesteryear is evoked. The sampan's journey is a metaphor for the endless exploration of creative spaces amidst the relentless waves of technological progress.



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