SAMPAN

The LASALLE Anthology of Creative Writing

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SAMPAN

The LASALLE Anthology of Creative Writing

LASALLE COLLEGE OF THE ARTS School of Creative Industries | UAS University of the Arts Singapore

FOREWORD

Home

The first thing you think of when you say 'home' is probably that point on the earth's surface where you return to rest, to be at peace and secure. It's where you hang your hat, as the song says. I contend that today the writers of musicals and popular songs, like old-time poets and balladeers, provide a common lexicon for our emotional world.

Thus when John Denver sings 'Take me home, country roads, to the place I belong', we know that home is the beloved, familiar place of ease. My home is in Block 44 in Pek Kio in Singapore. Here is the apartment where I have gathered memories and physical possessions around myself, as an oyster builds its shell. I have invested time and thought to shape it so that it expresses who I am.

Singaporeans can resonate with Dick Lee's lyrics, 'This is home, truly, where I know I must be [...] where I won't be alone.' This National day song conflates 'home' with 'homeland', and I am one of the people who feel they are the same. My forebears came to Singapore seven and five generations ago, on the maternal and paternal sides respectively. They settled here, raised families and contributed to the growth of the country.

My family memories are entwined with the development of the city and the nation; my personal concept

of Singapore is the historical district along the banks of the Singapore River. I was born in Scotland but grew up here. I came of age in the year Singapore became a nation. My growing-up years were full of questions: what does it mean to be a Singaporean? What is Singaporean identity? I have continued to write about this ever since.

But people leave their homes, that one single place on earth, and become uprooted and dispossessed. Humans have always been on the move, like the Hakkas in South China, migrants from the north whose name means 'guest people'.

People may carry their homes inside them. In the musical Chess, the defector Anatoly sings an anthem of love for his homeland: 'I cross over borders but I'm still there now. How can I leave her? Where would I start? My land's only borders lie around my heart.' In the Middle East, it is 75 years since Palestinian fugitives left their homes in Israel to flee into Jordan. Today their grand-children grow up and vow never to forget the expulsion, the Nakba. In the bitter hopelessness of the refugee camps, or in suburbs of Sydney or Chicago, they remember the olive-trees and wells of the farms they left behind.

Migrants bring their memories and customs to the new country and recreate enclaves called Little India or Chinatown, till the third or fourth generations venture out to assimilate. Or the move takes just one generation, one lifetime. An old scholar recalls that in his youth in Malaya

of the 1930s, his parents taught him China was his home, to which he must eventually return. Through several decades he tried to make this happen, but when he did return to China he found the country so changed that he could not stay. So he settled with his wife in Australia, saying to her, 'You are my home', as in Billy Joel's song: 'Wherever we're together, that's my home.'

My son said to me that at the age of forty-five he had spent fifteen years in Malaysia, fifteen in Britain and fifteen in Australia. Now he has his family in Sydney, a well-renovated house and a community of friends, but he has no sense of 'homeland'. His children, educated in local schools, can sing with Peter Allen, 'I still call Australia home.'

In Singapore, so many of the people I meet every day have come from somewhere else, and this is particularly true of the writers in this collection. Each has their own unique story of home, whether here or far away, about belonging or not belonging, or of learning to belong.

When someone tells you of their home, they are telling you about themselves. Let's give ear to their stories, to their songs of the heart.

Stella Kon is a writer whose works include the monodrama *Emily of Emerald Hill*, four novels and five musicals. For fourteen years she was Chairperson of Musical Theatre Ltd, an arts charity devoted to creating original Singapore musicals.

INTRODUCTION

"Death is a happy return, like coming home."
—*The White Lotus*, Series 3,
Episode 6, *Denials*

On a recent return flight to Singapore from Australia, while watching the television series *The White Lotus*, I'm struck by the interweaving and convergence of ideas about 'east' and 'west'. Is there accuracy in the depictions of Thai culture and customs? There are certainly numerous representations and stereotypes that reinforce and reinstate attitudes and beliefs about both east and west.

As Programme Leader for the Master's in Creative Writing, I have made numerous observations and been part of many discussions and debates about writing and the meanings produced in the Southeast Asian region. These include the perceived dominance of Western literature and writing; the desire for a local and regional voice; the perceived power of external and dominant voices; and the recognition and confirmation that students in the region seek as writers.

In my first years in Singapore, I learnt about the concept of double confirm. This concept is evident in the works in this collection. For many students, writing is a process of confirming and reconfirming that their ideas are worthy, that the local is important, and that their stories are globally relevant. How can we commune with others if we don't share

our ideas through writing, personal histories, memories and meanings of home?

Welcome to SAMPAN 4, the annual student and alumni anthology of the Master's in Creative Writing Programme at LASALLE College of the Arts. SAMPAN 4 coincides with the establishment of the University of the Arts, Singapore, through the involvement of the first cohort of Master's students to graduate from this fledgling university.

Students and alumni worked with extra dedication on this issue. I'm always impressed by the many volunteer hours spent on the production of the anthology, from issue concept, submission of works, editing, and design, to final publication. For some students, working on the anthology while completing their 20,000-word thesis, the pressures were great.

Congratulations to the team who brought SAMPAN 4 to fruition. This issue focuses on the idea of home as a response to this year's celebrations in Singapore, marking 60 years of independence. The writing in SAMPAN 4 reflects on the idea of place as home and asks questions. Whose home is it? What is home? As we see in the works here, home is never a simple idea but found in the ordinary, the unusual, and the extraordinary. The question of *Where are you from?*, a question that resonates with citizens and non-citizens alike, is answered through descriptions of objects and encounters that represent lived experiences and memories of home.

Through documenting the contents of refrigerators, the work of Malaysian photography artist Roslisham Ismail (Ise) and others worldwide, has produced images that provide a banal and mundane representation of the everyday lives of many. What's inside Singapore's fridges may show us the extraordinary diversity of a small country. In fridges we might find the cuisines of the four government-recognised cultural groups, the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others. Lydia Shah's poem *Your Canned Cuttlefish* clearly shows how, in the opening of and looking into the fridge, the question: '*Do you have anything for me there?*' arises. This work opens up possibilities for thinking about the fridge as a space shaped by codes. How does one read a Coke bottle, for instance? It helps to read the images of fridges alongside Craig Santos Perez's prose poem *Spam's carbon footprint*, to understand the networks of global and local implications of multi-national trade and influences on cultures. Like global literatures, objects and encounters tell stories. In this issue of SAMPAN, the works focus on the mundane, the ordinary and the everyday as a way to tell larger stories of the personal, the cultural and the historical. The question *Do you have anything for me there?* becomes more than a simple question about the contents of a fridge. It is a clever coding of the desire for more; the yearning is a double confirm for the status of the creative subject in Singapore.

Seeking or describing concepts of home shapes the writing in many ways. Asked to imagine home through prose

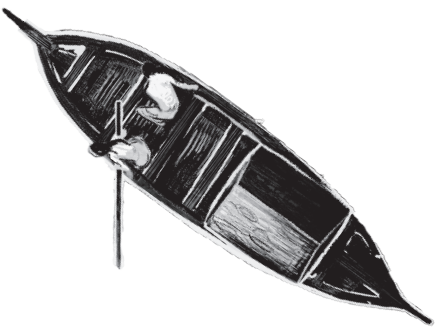
and poetry, the contributions allow insight into not just the ubiquitous fridge and its necessity but the idea of a fridge in Singapore is of special interest in the humidity and heat that provide the backdrop to thinking and writing about the meaning of home. Objects found in the home shape memories and stories, where home is found in a face – the face of a parent, or as a place one needs to leave and return to.

The works here don't address the idea of home directly, but come at the idea in circuitous ways that allow the reader to understand that home is never the same for everyone, and that it is not always safe, nor benign. Home embodies the poetics of survival, and of finding ways to walk between homes that are found in countries or even bodies.

And finally, Malay greetings such as Selamat Pulang, Chinese traditions of rolling pineapples, and the Indian festive decorating of doorways welcome you, for Others you too are welcome and may all find a home in the words of the writers.

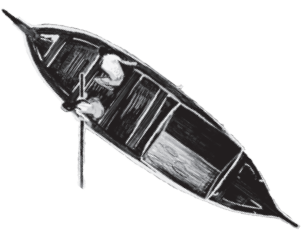
Dr Rosslyn Prosser
Programme Leader, Masters Creative Writing,
LASALLE College of the Arts,
University of the Arts Singapore

CONTENTS



ABERGALE SHEPHERDSON

Abergale Shepherdson is a writer of short stories, poetry, and creative non-fiction. Her works explore the feminine, identity, and human rights. In her spare time, she writes book reviews for *GrimDark Magazine*, where she indulges in upcoming horror and weird fiction. Abergale is a recent graduate of the MA Creative Writing Programme at LASALLE College of the Arts.



because i am not white

today, a grab driver asked me where i was visiting from.
before i answer, he guesses 'indonesia'
before i answer, he says 'philippines'
before i answer, he insists i am from thailand.

i tell him—no uncle, i am *eurasian*,
—he squints at me through his rear-view mirror
and i can almost see a lightbulb flicker as he says
'oh, you peranakan!'

because i am not white,

people read my name and expect a towering caucasian
but all they get is a brown smurf.
i note their disapproving eyebrows as
they eye my lack of height and abundant skin colour.

because i am not white,

my heritage is a heated debate—
my ancestors arrived by ship two hundred years ago,
how can i explain that i am ashamed of my own bloodline,
that colonisers skulk through my veins?
because i am not white,

i am not a poster child, but my grandfather can tell you
how the hokkiens used to call us
tsap tsing kia—
—child of a thousand fathers, born of a thousand surnames;
illegitimate child.
doesn't that make ang moh sound
like a compliment again?

but because i am not white,

there are some perks that i enjoy
i have mastered the art of ordering nasi padang
without paying a premium.
i have become an expert in blending in—
thais speak to me in thai,
filipinos speak to me in tagalog,
indonesians speak to me in bahasa

i am a foreigner in my own home,
and at home with being a foreigner

because i am not white.

Homing Device

I stare at the application form on the holo that I just spent an hour filling in. Requesting extra overtime hours … How did I get here? The room is packed with people who belong to one of two groups: those who are trying to get away from home, and those who need more money to get a new one. I sigh and tap *SUBMIT*. The document folds in on itself and hurtles off into the system. I'd heard stories from co-workers about people getting sent to rehab for working too much, but I'm sure the ministry planted those. I guess if you can't keep applicants away, frighten them till they stop trying. Still, the room is crowded with workers wearing hopeful eyes. I slink over to the waiting area in the next room, where the sliding doors hiss open, welcoming me into the abyss.

Ever since *PulseSG™* was enforced on the working population, forums like ByteSkye were never in short supply of tips for getting additional overtime hours. No one knows how many applications come in daily, but they keep the administrative staff at the ministry busy – I'd waited three months just to get an appointment here. I wonder if even ministry staff have geo trackers in their Pulses too. And if they do, how do they ever finish their paperwork? Employees

aren't allowed anywhere near their workplaces after working hours or over weekends: Pulses give warning zaps for first-time offenders, and prolonged ones for repeats. Getting a second job is out of the question, and prices for just about everything have skyrocketed. A dozen eggs are close to ten dollars – the black market for live chickens on Reddit is thriving. Only people like me see the device for what it truly is: a collective punishment.

I wonder what Mum would say if she saw me—her only son—renting a three-room HDB flat with a crazy couple in Yishun because he can't afford a flat of his own. The couple's eccentricities were tolerable at first, but a month in, they turned on me. Reports filed for the most minor infractions. They accused me of exceeding my warm shower quota, of farming my relaxation score, logging my wellness activities a few minutes off-sync. I filed multiple police reports, but the only advice the officers gave me was to move out – with what money? Flats for singles were going for upwards of $1 million per unit. I think the couple must have found out about my reports because their behaviour got worse.

Yesterday was my last straw. I came home to find the passcode changed. I scanned my wrist on the lock two, three times, but the door stayed shut. Music pounded against the

windows. They ignored my knocking. The time on my Pulse had already started. I had twenty seconds before the electric shocks – a nifty government implementation to ensure that working citizens comply with the curfew. I must have passed out because when I came to, I was on my bedroom floor. All I need is three more months of overtime work, and I'll have enough to rent a unit of my own. No more crazy Yishun people.

I settle into one of the pods, which curves like a cocoon, engineered to discourage talking. To my left, an eleven-inch entertainment screen lets me choose from a podcast, the ministry's radio channel or a meditative playlist. I scroll and pick one that promises a calming effect. Chimes play from the fabric of the pod. I shut my eyes and try to let the gentle notes soothe me.

***

Lao Pa Sat's high, domed ceiling, large chiming clock, and deep green pillars never fail to make me feel minuscule. I weave through the shirts and pantsuits, compelled to buy my food and find a seat before the crowd surges. Steam billows on my face and arms as I pass a hawker tossing fried rice in a giant wok. Turning the corner, I find myself at a table, a plate of Hokkien Mee waiting. My favourite. I want to

savour the slick, savoury broth and noodles but I can't help but feel uneasy. I know it's about to happen. Shouts burst from the table behind me. Plates and cutlery clatter to the floor, sending hot soup into the air. I turn around just in time to see the man helping himself onto a table – my operations director. I can't hear what he's saying, but his mouth is wide open, his right arm jabbing the air. Someone taps his shin, a girl in a nice blouse – someone from the marketing team. She hands him a piece of cloth, which he unfolds and reveals. In bold, red lettering, the banner reads '4-day workweek 4 everyone'. More people start leaving their tables to join him, and the crowd closes in on my table. Fists pumping. Banner unfolding. I try to reach for the girl from marketing, to warn her, but she's moving too much. The heat from the bodies chokes me as my head pounds from assessing how much damage control I'll have to do for the next two weeks.

I'm whipped to the protests on the street. People everywhere I turn, just like on the news. Uprisings in major cities all over Asia—Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Seoul, Tokyo—only now on our tiny streets. Men and women linked by the arms, demanding their right to a four-day workweek. Their faces sear themselves onto the backs of my eyelids, and their voices echo in my head. Then, I'm in front of the television

at my mother's house while she cooks us dinner. The news is on, playing a montage of the – angry employees dragging their bosses out of their bungalows. Bus drivers setting fire to their vehicles. Citizens looting NTUCs. The whole country at a standstill.

In the next image, the Minister for Manpower is standing at a podium, broadcasting live to the nation: 'All SMCs and MNCs operating in the country must make immediate preparations for a consecutive four-day workweek. The ministry will issue standard operating hours to all companies. Employees caught within a one-kilometre radius of their workplaces after working hours will be subject to a fine. Repeat offenders will be liable to a fine, a term of imprisonment, or both. Lastly, the Ministry of Manpower is pleased to announce its latest partnership with the Singapore Health Promotion Board to launch *PulseSG™* – a wearable that all working citizens must be fitted with on their left wrist. The device will help track cortisol levels, facilitate nationwide wellbeing and eventually, work-life balance.'

***

When I wake, my forehead is damp, and a glowing amber heart pulses impatiently on my wrist. My heart rate monitor is firing off. The meditative chimes in my pod have

been replaced with a lady's voice. 'Number 1009. Please report to counter three. Number 1009, please report to counter three.' The announcement repeats. In an instant, I'm out of my pod, dashing through another pair of hissing doors into the interview room. The fluorescent lighting stings my eyes, and it takes a moment to orient myself. The room is empty, save for the ministry staff sitting at their counter booths. I head for the one with a blinking number three. A thin piece of glass separates me from the counter staff, who has her hair sleeked back nicely into a bun and her nails neatly manicured. Her uniform is a government standard issue; hideously cream coloured, embedded with a biometric tag on the collar. Working at the administration department must pay well. She looks up at me as if she's just read my thoughts. Her name tag says Sue.

'Number 1009?'

I nod.

She swipes through my application, sighing. I guess the ministry doesn't pay well, then.

'It says here that it's your third time requesting extra overtime hours?' Sue looks up from my form. I straighten my collar and nod. Her eyes scan through my document some more, and a thin layer of sweat begins to form under my pits

when I see her eyebrows furrow.

'Your reason for application is that you're saving up for marriage?' Sue looks up from my form. I can't read her expression. Curiosity or doubt? I give her my most genuine smile.

'Yes, next year, if possible,' I say with a practised voice.

Sue sighs hard this time. She click-clacks on her keyboard, and there's a whooosh from her computer. There's no turning back now. 'Thank you for your application. Please have a seat. A representative will be with you shortly.'

That's new. I smile despite my agonising anxiety and sweaty pits. Before I can utter a thank you, Sue flicks a switch and blacks out her glass. Her entire counter is thrown into darkness, leaving me with my lacklustre reflection.

***

I'm back in my pod, scrolling on ByteSkye. A few recent posts ping through – success stories from workers who got advice from the forum. I manage a smile. Maybe things will work out after all.

The overhead speaker crackles on, and my number is called to counter 10. This is it. I stand up and make my way over to the counter at the end with a back door leading out. Sue is waiting for me next to someone who looks like

her manager. He's wearing a crisp, dark grey suit—non-government issued—and a pair of round metal-framed glasses. As I get closer, I notice he's not wearing a name tag.

'Number 1009? Please come with me,' he gestures towards the door that glides open.

I'm surprised to see that it's not a room but a corridor. A long one. And dark. The cream walls are illuminated only by wall lamps every twenty metres. Mr. Manager stops in the middle of the corridor and gestures towards a metal door engraved with the letters 'ARC', which I assume stands for Approval Room. I feel confident about my chances. He taps his wrist on the small holo-panel, and the door slides open, revealing a brightly lit interior similar to the interview room. I squint and see that the room is barely furnished. Apart from the clock on the wall, only a single mahogany table and two leather armchairs wait in the centre of the room. Efficient.

'Please, have a seat,' Mr. Manager walks briskly to the armchair on the far side of the room. I take the one opposite him and prepare to be bombarded with questions about my life.

'I'm sure you know why you're here,' he starts. I straighten my back.

'Yes, I've applied for additional overtime hours. Sir.'

He purses his lips and leans back, appraising me. The clock's second hand ticks mockingly. I can hear my heartbeat.

'I see. And you're saving up to get married, was it?' He cocks an eyebrow at me. I can't read his expression. I nod and mumble a yes. He seems pleased and smiles. His smile grows wider and wider until his mouth lets out a barking laugh. My wrist starts glowing amber, my heart rate is quickening even though I'm sitting down. Bad news – my wellness score's already way below acceptable standards.

'What's … so funny, sir?' I try to laugh, but it comes out shaky and nervous.

Mr. Manager sits up suddenly, hands clasped. He looks directly into my eyes.

'Which one of the little forums did you get that from?' He asks.

My heart drops to my stomach. How did he know? My browser history? But I had my VPN on the entire time. Maybe it was—

'You're not the first one to pull this trick,' he smirks. 'We've had a surge in applications over the past few days, and almost fifty per cent of them claimed that they are saving up for marriage.'

Words swell in my throat. The forums aren't as

underground as I thought they were. I wrack my brain for a lie, but I can't think of anything. I just look down at my hands, at my untrimmed nails, not meeting his eyes.

'The ministry has launched a formal crackdown on forums claiming to have a fast solution for acing the overtime application. We've been contacting people close to these applications, and … your housemates had some very interesting things to say about you. I hope you understand that we can't have a repeat of the Fifth July riots. The country will never recover from that.'

'So, what happens now?' I hate that I can barely hear my voice.

I look up to see him peering down his nose at me. From a drawer on his side of the table, he produces a sheet of paper and slides it over to me. The front page has the letters 'ARC' printed on it, in the same font as the one on the door. I flip the document open, and as I read the first line on the page, my mouth runs dry.

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

Agency for Reconditioning (ARC)

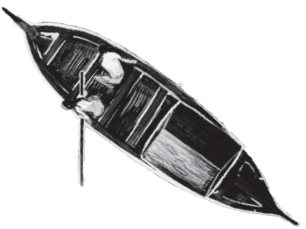
I, _____ agree to undergo 200 days of reconditioning for the betterment of society and my contribution to the nation. I agree that this reconditioning program should be kept strictly confidential and that I will be exempted from work duties until the end of the program. I understand that I will not be permitted to apply for Extra Overtime Hours for the next 2 years. Finally, I agree to community service duties at the Ministry of Manpower, where I will be paid a minimum stipend for my contributions.

This agreement shall be governed by and construed under the laws of the Ministry of Manpower, Singapore.

Please sign on the dotted line.

STACY BUEVICH KAY

Stanislava "Stacy" Buevich is a British writer and award-winning filmmaker whose work explores speculative fiction, magical realism, and young adult horror. She published three novels, including *Clearlake*, *Maya Fairy*, and *The Soultrapper*. Her films have screened internationally. She currently lives and writes in Singapore.



The First Question

I slide into the passenger seat of my taxi. A Chinese brand I still haven't learned the name of. Probably never will. Cars aren't really my thing. The seats are black, covered in doily-like cloths. A litter of Labubu toys sits proudly on the dashboard – pink, yellow, green, blue, purple. It's a huge collection. My gaze, however, shifts to the rearview mirror, bracing to meet the driver's eyes. It always does.

Sometimes (nowadays more often than not) the drivers barely pay me any attention. Thank God. I'm rarely in the mood for chit-chat. I like quiet cabbies. Can we still call them that? Cabbies? Uber drivers, Grab drivers. Whatever you call them, I like them quiet. But now, the dark brown circles of his eyes fix on me. Curious. He's young, skinny, olive-skinned. If I had to guess, I'd say Malay. He wears a yellow T-shirt, three sizes too large, and jeans (which I will never understand in Singapore's heat). I quickly turn my gaze away – a last-ditch attempt to deter him from asking me questions. Particularly, the question. That one question that always comes first. The one I hate so bloody much. The one that causes me more aggro than it should. I close my eyes, feigning exhaustion. Just leave me be. Please.

He doesn't.

'Where you from?' I hear, and my heart sinks.

I press my lips together, forcing a smile. I always smile at the drivers. As much as I abhor small talk, I never refuse their attempts at conversation. It doesn't seem polite.

'Um …' I begin, stretching the consonant to its limits, as if meditating. Though really, I'm just buying time. What am I going to say this time? I have a few options.

I could utter the name of the country where I was born, where I lived for a large chunk of my childhood. Russia. I can't stand that answer. It brings on a physical, visceral discomfort I can't fully comprehend or explain. A kind of sinking that opens at my navel and spreads to my bones. An itch that burns, but I can't reach it. It wasn't always like this. Some time long ago (or maybe not that long at all), I was fine with that answer. Even if I hadn't visited the country in donkey's years, it seemed like the correct response. I'd calmly say I was from Moscow and answer a few questions about Red Square, War and Peace, Tchaikovsky. Or maybe bears, vodka, and eternal winter. Depends on the company.

It's not the same now. Now, there is only one name that always comes up: Putin. That name sends shockwaves of nausea and anger through my veins. It's gotten so bad, I want

to vomit every time I walk past a poutine stall at a market. And potatoes never did anything wrong.

The absolute worst is when the cabbies (et al.) congratulate me on him. Here in Singapore, it happens more often than I can possibly bear. They nod with approval in that little mirror and say something utterly infuriating like: 'He's a very powerful man. A real strong leader.' That's when I turn red all over and start shaking from the inside, like an electric kettle just about to boil. One day, I might actually explode. Spontaneous human combustion is real, okay! This is also the point where my politeness vanishes. 'He's a dictator, a murderer, and a thief,' I would say through clenched teeth. Their eyes always widen. They stare at me, dumbfounded, when really they should be looking at the road. And then I get even more nervous and anxious and … No. I can't risk that. Even thinking about it gets me riled up.

'The UK,' I could say. In my heart of hearts, that's my truth. The UK is home. The UK is safety. It's where I lived my whole adult life (until I moved to Singapore two years ago, that is). It's where I met my husband (also a misplaced Russian) and had my daughter (a true Brit). It's a fuzzy, warm place like a stuffed toy (even though it's pretty damn cold most of the year). It's the truth. It's what my passport says.

My only passport, since in a fit of rage and shame at the war in Ukraine, I gave up the Russian one. Yes, I could say I'm from London. The only problem? I wasn't born there. I didn't grow up there. I don't have the accent, and that might tip them off that it's a lie. A lie that isn't really a lie. But also … it is. In a way … in a way … in a way … because technically … technically. There are so many bloody technicalities.

For a moment, I consider throwing the car door open and catapulting myself out of this vehicle. If Tom Cruise can do it, so can I.

Should I say 'the US?' At one point, it was true. A chunk of my childhood belongs to New York. Oh, how I love the Big Apple. And California, where I lived between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. Though I can't say that I loved it that much – the spray-on fake tans, the fake smiles. I'm an East Coast kind of gal. Still, I can't deny that I'm alive because of California. That's where my wonderful doctor Mark and my nurse Patty (the kindest person I've ever known) guided me through what no teenager should ever go through – chemotherapy. It was home, back then. I stood up like all the other American children and recited the Pledge of Allegiance with my hand to my heart. They welcomed me. They took me in as one of their own, and there was never a question – I was

American. I sounded American. And though that changed, I can still slip into the accent when needed. Which is a definite advantage.

Trouble is – it's just not true anymore. I'm not American. Not in the slightest. And Putin is terrible, but Trump is only marginally better, and I can't … I can't get into that again with the damn taxi driver.

Would it fly if I said Switzerland? My parents are technically Swiss. At least that's what their passports say. Well, my mum is. My dad was. A proud Swiss too, now resting in the most beautiful spot – a quiet cemetery on a hill, overlooking the blue waters of Lake Neuchâtel. It's wonderful, really. Except I doubt he gets to enjoy the view. But who knows … maybe.

Switzerland is home (in a way), too. It's where my dad will stay for the rest of time. Where memories of him hug me in the cool lakeside breeze and gentle rays of sun. Where the house he left me stands tall and beautiful, waiting for me. And when my hair is white and my bones are brittle, I will live there, breathing in the purest air imaginable, and hug trees for energy like my grandmother used to. Switzerland is peace.

But if I'm worried about my English accent (or lack thereof), what if the cabbie asks me something in French?

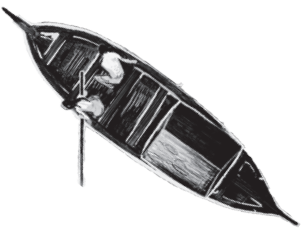
Or, God forbid, German? My French is just north of dire. My German? Non-existent. Imagine the humiliation. And while this particular driver likely knows neither French nor subtle accent distinctions, I can't take those risks. People are rarely what they seem. They always have a way of surprising you.

'Ma'am?' the driver asks, craning his neck to get a proper look at me in the mirror. To him, I'm just a white lady – an ang moh. I can be from anywhere in the world that's not here. I close my eyes. Just for a moment. And inhale the lingering scent of stale peach air freshener.

'It's a complicated question,' I finally respond.

SARAH TAN-LIM

Sarah Tan-Lim is inspired by water bodies and one particular period in Australia she wishes she could freeze in time. Her work has appeared in *SingPoWriMo 2017*, *ASINGBOL*: *An Archaeology of the Singaporean Poetic Form*, A*NIMA METHODI: The Poetics of Mirroring*, and *Atelier of Healing: Poetry About Trauma and Recovery*, amongst others.



home for my fig

you begin like a bruise, an open fig
i am sinking into siestas,
you have arrived
i say you begin like a bruise
the way you flower as you grow
the way figs look when pared down,
the way my face crumpled
into cherry as you struggled
to
stay

you begin like a bruise, and you heal
the way bruises do
swollen then flowering into purple green
you nest
in my belly yellow a warming sun
first light lengthening
on our walls

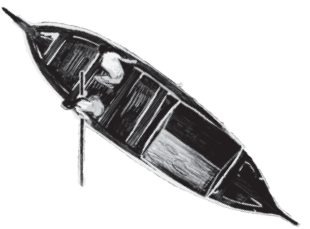
you begin like a wound,
healing upon itself,
the way stitches dissolve,
the way bone
fuses over time,
you
fusing to me

under the terracotta leaves,
        you're not just a fig,
you are honeysuckle fire-red berries pulpy

remember: you begin like a bruise,
        but you flower like an open fig
                ruby-red amber glittering
nestle in me like a welcome bruise, my fire-red fig

LYDIA SHAH

Lydia Shah is a television director, writer & producer with a penchant for documentaries. She is passionate about telling Asian-centric stories, drawing on her travel and life experiences to bring creative fiction and non-fiction works to a broader audience. She published her first visual novel, *Licence to Care*, in 2022.



Breezehome

Dan's hands clutched at the pineapple-shaped plush toy; its stitched smile, frozen. Our friend Kwok wanted us to bring a real pineapple, but my husband baulked at the idea of Chinese superstitions. The word for pineapple in Hokkien is "ong lai", which sounds like "good fortune comes". Kwok, in good conscience, couldn't allow us to miss the chance to bring ourselves good fortune, so he found a workaround and bought us a fruity stuffed toy instead. Dan accepted the plushie as a reasonable compromise and agreed to perform the house-welcoming tradition that Kwok and thousands of Chinese Singaporeans practised.

I fumbled at the loop of clattering keys, twisting amongst each other and yanked out the lone silver piece of metal that mattered the most: the front door key. With a twist, the snap of the locking mechanism announced a welcome to our home. The white and grey emptiness of the flat greeted us. Chalky particles floated in the vacuum, dangling over the haphazard ridges of dried cement. Aluminium window frames composed an undesirable view of vacant apartments just twenty meters in front of us. The muddy infant landscape nestled between the two buildings promised us that one day,

we would have a green view.

Our excitement was tempered by the echoes of Kwok's insistence that we must perform the pineapple-rolling ceremony before entering the home. Our toes pressed against the edge of the doorway as Dan launched the fake fruit into the empty home. It flew two meters into the house before landing face down, disappointingly. It failed to have the barrelling momentum of a real pineapple. Dan rushed in to roll the toy with his palms, yelling out a comical cry as Mr. Pineapple was guided to roll across the cement. As the toy finally reached the other side of the apartment, I hit the red button on my iPhone to stop recording the ritual. 'I'll send this to the Trolls,' I said, referring to our group of university friends who were expecting us to send them proof of our home ownership.

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Dan and I called it Breezehome, named after the first house a player gets to buy in the game, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Aptly, the home was breezy, despite being sandwiched between another block and the multi-storey car park. The concrete buildings sheltered our third-floor unit from the unforgiving Singapore sun. I didn't get to vet this unit before buying it, unlike my mother, who could do that with almost

every other house we ever lived in. Despite being located next to the central rubbish chute, I was fortunate that Breezehome wasn't a terrible unit. When you're a broke, young couple, you take whatever HDB offers.

Dan stood quietly, studying the space pensively. He tapped the hollow walls, mind considering the infinite possibilities. 'This is my most expensive purchase,' he said, 'Quarter of a million dollars.' He was finally a homeowner, an adult. Sheltered by his parents for all thirty-seven years of his life, he was unaware of the burden of maintaining his CPF account so that the house would always be paid on time. He never experienced the struggle of pooling together everyone's measly salaries to cover the monthly rent to a shady landlord. I, on the other hand, had a very different relationship to home ownership.

Walking into the flat for the first time was like Groundhog Day. This was the tenth house I had moved into in my thirty-three years of living. The lead-up to every house move is stressful; it's an overwhelming process of navigating red tape and bureaucracy. However, every time I walked into a new home for the first time, I would be humbled by the emptiness, the vacant echoes, and the promise of renewal. I never tire of that wonder. However, I admit that this was the

first time I ever rolled a pineapple (even a fake one). If my family had done it in the first house, maybe we never had to move nine times.

Every house was different. It's like a new sexual partner. They're houses, just the same, but built differently—some, like this one, are a clean slate: virginal, ready to be shaped into whatever you want. And some carry the burdens of traumas past, hiding secrets that the walls never reveal. The last house that I lived in with my mother and siblings certainly had its fair share of emotional baggage.

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I wasn't there when my mother first saw our ninth house, back in 2016. She had enough of our tiny flat in the seedy estate of Marsiling Lane and wanted us to move into a larger home, a cleaner neighbourhood— something suitable for a family of four adults. I would argue that we weren't financially ready for another house move, but Mama wasn't consultative when it came to making big family decisions. She was a client who was impossible to please. The average Singaporean resale homebuyer typically does three to four home viewings before succumbing to lethargy and buying whatever their real estate agent presents them. My mother, however, had the tenacity to view houses almost every day for

months. She'd view up to twenty houses, always finding an ick. She performed her dowager tour of every home, maintaining a contrived politeness yet silently judging every paint job, every inconvenient layout, and every traffic noise that wafted its way into the apartments. She concluded every house tour with, 'Nothing else, ah?' She drove our poor agent up the wall. His name was Gordon, but behind his back we called him Gondoliza – a play on the Malay word "gondol" meaning bald, though I think we meant to call him a "goondu", which means idiot.

Gondoliza was an idiot. He'd show my mother houses that never met her exact brief. He'd bring us to units along the corridor, or houses that had a picturesque view of the ugly neighbours' homes. I did feel bad for Gondoliza. Although he was an idiot, he was an adorable fool. He felt very sorry for a single divorcee with three children, and wanted to help our struggling family get out of poverty. However, he didn't know how to meet my mother's neurotic standards. Eventually, she got tired of the flats he was shortlisting, and she went on a solo journey to find her dream flat. She found herself in a Sembawang estate called Blue Riverview. The name grossly exaggerates the scenic quality of the area. The only things blue about it were the sapphire windows imposed on all of the

units. The river view should have been called "longkang view" because the river was a brown and muddy canal. However, when she first entered that fifth-floor unit, she was taken in by the breeze. Wispy leaves of a Casuarina tree danced across the living room window – a reminder of the foliage we grew up with when we lived in Brunei. The layout of the home was experimental; it defied the cookie-cutter layout found in most HDB homes, opting to curve out towards the so-called river. Two of the three bedrooms overlooked the park connector lined with Whistling Pines. Despite being a corridor unit, my mother seemed to have forgiven its indiscretions. She made up her mind.

She told Gondoliza that she had found a flat on her own and brought him there to finalise an offer. Gondoliza's ego was damaged, disappointed that he wasn't the one who discovered the flat. That disappointment turned into reluctance as he began to suspect that the homeowners were untrustworthy. This was something that my mother chose to ignore. On his first visit, the Malay homeowner was lounging in the corridor, sucking deeply on a Marlboro Red. I wouldn't usually classify that as a red flag, but it left our agent with a very bad taste in his mouth (probably as bad as the taste of cigarettes). Gondoliza noticed traces of red paint dotting the

door's hinges and peephole, most of which were seemingly hidden by a coat of fresh grey paint. The owner rushed our agent through the unit, breath weighed by the heavy stench of cigarettes – he seemed impatient to sell the home. All signs made Gondoliza suspicious that the owner was trying to evade debtors. My mother dismissed our agent's insecurities, attributing it to the fact that he was a "goondu". He bit his tongue and reluctantly agreed to help her with the paperwork. However, we soon learnt that Gondoliza wasn't an idiot.

A week before our appointment with HDB, my mother received an ominous call. She was lounging lackadaisically on her tilam on the floor. Her phone pressed against her ear as she muttered the intermittent 'Ah… ahh', the same disparaging ahs used to belittle me. When she finally got a sentence in, she said, 'You can burn my house down if you want, but you still won't get your money.' Ten minutes later, she told me that she had just been warned about moving ahead with the purchase. Some thugs got her number. They knew our appointment date and time, and threatened to burn our house down and beat us up at HDB Hub in Toa Payoh. However, like Gondoliza, these gangsters did not know how incredibly obstinate my mother was. No amount of violence or terrorism would stop her from getting the home she wanted. She made

her decision. Meteors could strike the whole of Sembawang, but she would never cave. The thugs never came, and the sale went through.

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The day my family moved into Blue Riverview was eventful. My brother made no effort to pack our things, which frustrated my sister and me, who often carried the emotional burden of the family. My brother marched into the empty house, planted himself in the middle of the dining room, and pouted angrily while staring into the abyss. He refused to move his body as we tried to negotiate space to plant our boxes. My two cats, Ben and Sam—overwhelmed by yet another house move—hid in the kitchen cabinets and cosied up with each other, although they were mortal enemies. When all our boxes and furniture were finally moved in, I took my brother to a nearby coffee shop to discuss his discontent. He was reluctant to say anything to me, so I decided to find the words for him: He was frustrated. He wasn't consulted on the decision to buy the home or even move. When Mama made up her mind, the rest of us had to get on board her bullet train, whether we liked it or not, just like the divorce. I admitted that I didn't get much of a say either, even though my CPF was used to buy the house. She had to tap into my pool of

savings because this flat in Blue Riverview had cost us more than we could afford. Eventually, he softened, confessing that he felt neglected in the decision to move, but agreed to return home and help with the unpacking. His feelings were valid. Despite his rotten behaviour, I told him that I still loved him.

***

After we moved in, neighbours had warned us of the home's past, pointing to the faded scribbles of the unit number on the walls of the lift landing. Again, my mother was not phased. She never seemed to mind the odd, mysterious figure lurking outside. We were even receiving letters from an inmate who was writing love letters to the previous owner. We had no qualms about reading and marvelling over those letters, knowing full well that it was illegal. The only things Mama complained about were the kitchen's size and the curved shape of the home. It ate at my self-diagnosed OCD that the corners weren't at a perfect ninety degrees, making it difficult to position furniture neatly. Despite the flaws, we were just relieved to have moved into Blue Riverview. No more shady landlords trying to extort us for money. No one was threatening to raise our rents by a hundred per cent. No longer did we have to live in the slums of Marsiling, where drug addicts would brazenly smoke marijuana at the void

deck across from the police station. My mother no longer had to sleep on the floor, and we didn't need to fight over one tiny bathroom. This ninth house, the one along Sembawang River, would be our final family home. But it wasn't my last.

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Four years later, a month after Dan and I exchanged our vows, we were standing in our own home. I pulled out two bottles of Hawkers' Dream Ale; a craft beer brewed by That Singapore Beer Project. Dan was commissioned by the brewer Casey to design the bottle's label. He drew a portly hawker juggling various Singaporean foods with eight arms stretched out like the Hindu goddess Durga. I managed to acquire two bottles in the morning before our appointment to collect our keys from HDB. Even though Dan was reluctant to perform "ong lai", he was a sucker for personalised ceremonies to mark significant milestones. 'I thought it would be nice if our first drink in this house were your beer,' I suggested as I broke his stupor. We stood by the kitchen window – it was hardly a window. It was more like a gaping hole in the wall. We looked out at the uninspiring view of a dusty, half-finished multi-storey car park. The citrusy ale dribbled down my chin, onto the exposed parapet. Using my thumb to wipe away the spill, I said, 'This is the first mark we will make in our home.'

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After ten house moves, your sense of self and identity diminishes. That was how my brother felt on the ninth move. Your attachment to places, spaces, and communities gets disrupted every two or three years. We lived in this constant state of anxiety, always insecure about whether we could sink our roots into the soil. Would my father bankrupt us again and force us out of a stable home? Would my mother wander to a new estate and buy an unaffordable house on impulse? I no longer needed to ask myself those questions. Standing in Breezehome, I was washed with gratitude that my housing insecurities could finally be put to rest. As Dan and I clinked the necks of our beer bottles, I declared, 'I'm never moving again. This is it.'

Your Canned Cuttlefish

The pop of metal
peels from the can,
mistaken by our cat
as dinner's call.
Putrid stench wafted
from the tin cradling
disembodied squid
swimming in
fermented sea slime.

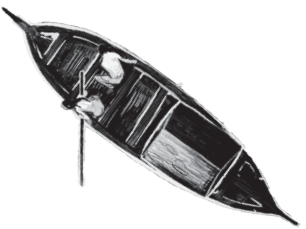
I pinch my nose
while you grin
over one indulgence
your offspring
deigned to invite
onto their tongues.
Your thick fingers
dip into the can,
of floating orange rubber,
picking at pieces,
pinching the
perfect slice.
Your victim,
hovering,

over your gaping mouth;
dribbling
sludge down your chin.
Slippery skin
sliding from your fingers
into your gullet,
before your lips seal,
jaws gnashing, pursing
a crooked smile.

Your burly frame eclipses
the fridge glow.
You linger over
a second piece.
Between the gaps
the light seeps.
Our young eyes study
the icy shelves
standing bare. We wonder:
Do you have anything for me there?

ALASTAIR WEE

Alastair Wee is a Singaporean writer of poetry and speculative fiction. His work has been published in *The Sengkang Sci-Fi Quarterly*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Quarterly Literature Review Singapore*. Check him out at alastairwee.com.



Sandstone's Children #3

They travelled.

Far beneath the ground or far above it; far from their Hermetics, from their old, rightful spaces, far away from who they had been and farther still from home, the three displaced Caretakers carved deeper into the city. The backways they travelled were narrow and gloss-lit, sloping, branching, turning sharply without warning, plotting a dense limbo between the shapes of large buildings, or what counted for them, Sandstone thought. Sometimes there were snatches of people muttering or children laughing or heavy machinery, far and muffled, or maybe just on the other side of the wall. It was all too featureless to tell. Most of the time, though, it was quiet, and they were alone.

OL skipped forward with her usual dalmatian-like energy, revelling at each oddity as they went by. 'Amazing lah!' she exclaimed as they scaled a helix of stairs, wrapped around the hull of a bulbous dome-like shape. 'Walao eh!' she exclaimed, as they crossed a bridge, and saw in the chasm below the contours of many others, jutting at all angles. 'See what they do in all this time.'

In contrast, Hiram lapsed into stern vigilance, never

speaking more than necessary. Ever since they'd left the Old Market, he'd deferred to Sandstone, his shoulders unburdened with the lead; but more and more she caught him brooding, his face inscrutable as time crept on. None of this was natural to any of them, she knew, but least of all for him, a guardian of the wilds, so she put her hand gently on his shoulder.

Days slid into weeks. They ate lightly, OL pulling out packet drinks and chewing gum and boxes of snacks from her handbag, and when they slept, it was in a tent she provisioned, a thick mass of fabric that unfolded in a snap. Larger inside than out, it was spacious and fluffy, with clean beds and air-conditioning. 'No need be uncomfortable,' she said brightly, trotting in her loungewear. She dived face-first onto a thick four-poster, her sighs immediately drawing out into snores. Sandstone pulled out a futon and lay her head. She watched Hiram settle cross-legged on a rug, the shadows around him deepening as he closed his eyes, the relief of some memory visiting quietly, as the three of them drifted, shapelessly, into sleep.

***

One day, they came upon a blank door in a wall at the end of their passage.

'Perhaps this will lead us where we need to be,' said

Sandstone, and touched it. The door hummed and slid away, a wave of air washing over them as they stepped across the threshold into a cool white room.

The room was fifteen paces in size. It was bare except in the middle, where on a single stout plinth stood an upright, red-handled lever.

A man looked up from his stool in the corner. For a moment, his eyebrows met, then he got up and dusted off, shaking each of their hands with cheer. He had dark brown hair and eyes that smiled as he did. From a trolley-cart, he took a pot off its warmer and poured each of them a steaming mug of coffee.

Sandstone took a deep sip. The coffee was grey and tasted unfamiliar, but it was strong.

The man gestured at the lever. 'Greetings, friends. How many are you on now?'

Sandstone glanced at her companions, then back at him.

'What do you mean please,' she said.

'How many levers?' he asked, as if it were a question.

'I'm afraid I don't know what you mean,' said Sandstone. 'We're not from here. Rather, we're new here. In a manner of speaking.'

The man looked bemused, but caught OL nodding her head vigorously.

'Not from here,' he repeated. He looked behind him. 'Never seen one of these before? Never pulled a lever?'

'No. Should we have?' Sandstone asked.

The man examined Sandstone's old dress, Hiram's tan shirt and pockets. OL strutted and preened, snappy in black and white.

'Wow. I wouldn't have thought …' said the man.

He trailed off, then returned to attention. 'No worries. It's actually very easy,' he said, patting the plinth affectionately. 'Just pull this lever.'

'Pull this lever?'

'Yes.'

'And then?'

'Then make your way to the next.'

'The next?'

'Your next lever. Somewhere out there,' he said, waving beyond the walls of the room. 'Wherever that may be.'

'Why?'

The man smiled. 'Why not?'

A pause.

'You'll have to give us more than that,' said Hiram. His

mug was returned to the trolley-cart.

'We new here,' said OL sweetly. She inspected the lever, her fingers wandering over its dull metal stem. 'Lever siah,' she said admiringly, looking at the handle. There was something transfixing about the red patina. Sandstone followed her gaze, too.

'Oh,' said the man, scratching his head. 'Well, I'm no expert, but I'll do my best to explain.'

He began: 'The levers are everything here. They're the key to this city. It's how we keep things running around here. Every lever needs to be pulled, ever so often. And there are a lot of them, so it's all planned out for us. We've got a specific lever to pull – one assigned at all times, always. And that's what we do.'

'Do?' asked Sandstone.

'Pull our levers.'

'Or?'

'Or?' the man repeated.

'Or what?'

The man hesitated. 'Or something Bad will happen.'

'What would that be?'

'Something Bad,' he said. 'Just, Bad. But you shouldn't worry about that. Everyone pulls their levers here. It's a small

chore. A civic duty. And not so tough to do, really. There are no hard deadlines.'

'Does anything happen when you pull them?' asked Hiram.

'Yes.'

'What?'

'Nothing. As in, nothing Bad.'

'But does anything happen, actually? Anything noticeable? That you can see or hear?'

The man shrugged.

'So if nothing happens when you pull them,' said Sandstone, 'how will you know what the levers actually do? How will you know how they stop the Bad thing from happening?'

He shrugged again. 'We pull our levers here. We wouldn't do otherwise. And nothing Bad happens. It's not like we want to find out.'

'That's not sensible,' said Hiram. 'You pull levers and nothing bad happens – which doesn't mean that nothing bad happens because you pull the levers. Would you believe that the act of waking up each morning causes the sun to rise?'

'Not in such simple terms,' the man replied without missing a beat, 'but the city's a far more complicated thing. It

was built long ago, in a time of nothing. By those with great foresight, who saw what we could be, what we could become – if only we could live together in harmony. If only we knew how! And so the first lever was made out of nothing but wood and stone.'

He looked at them proudly. 'Since then, the city has grown. I was born here. It's my home. And I'm on seventy-two levers. But I'm hoping to step it up. Reach my hundred in the next few years.'

Then the man's face clouded, and he spoke grimly. 'Sometimes you see it on the bulletins. A city that didn't pull its levers. They say at first nothing happens, at least not to the individual eye. And at first, no one thinks they're responsible, or that missing one lever or two is going to change anything. But after a while, they recognise it. It's the feeling in your home, in the streets. In the air. It's in the faces of people you knew and loved. Something Bad gone Wrong. Soon, no one can ignore it, and it spreads – and by then it's too late. Too much to catch up on, too much to fix. Things slow down, stop working. And nobody pulls their levers anymore. We don't want that here.'

The man's breath was hard.

A silence in the room.

'I don't like this,' said Hiram to Sandstone. He turned on the man. 'You shouldn't be pulling these levers.'

The man stood his ground. 'They're not just levers. They're your assigned levers. Just do the work, won't you? Everyone helps each other; like me now, to give you some coffee and chat before we all go our separate ways. That's all – there's barely any pressure! Just promise to pull your levers. The rest of your time, you can do as you please.'

'And what is it that you do?' asked Sandstone.

'Some poetry, myself,' the man said, brightening, and he pulled out a notebook from an inside pocket. He flipped backwards a few pages and recited:

When my days are discovered, for naught and for all.
When my body at last is drawn down to dust.
O wise ones, where lies, the bed of our labours?
I see now with yellowed eyes – a bough of this city.

'Of course it's derivative,' he said, scanning the page ruefully, 'but what isn't these days? It doesn't matter. The point is in the doing.' He gestured again. 'Just like you and your levers.'

Hiram turned away, his tall frame darkening. He

looked upset.

The man waved his hand. 'Give it a go! It's your first time.'

'What if you pull it two times?' asked OL playfully, her fingers coming to rest on the handle.

The man's expression went bleak, and OL jumped as he moved abruptly. 'Why would you even suggest that?' There was a shiver in his throat. Then his eyes found the red handle, the panic in them lingering for a heartbeat, before he exhaled, and a calm swept through him.

'Now normally you would insert your card,' he carried on quickly, rubbing a thin slot in the surface of the plinth, 'but not if it's your first time. On the first time, you just pull.'

He was smiling again. 'This is exciting, now – I've never seen adults on their first lever. We do it with our families, at an age so young most people don't even remember. My mother let me pull when I was eleven,' he said fondly. 'It was high above the city, with windows on all sides, overlooking an expanse of the softest colours. Pink and blue, I think, or some combination of them. I remember the fondness of it all. The sense of everything I needed there before me, moving swiftly below. Quite a formative memory,' he said, blinking suddenly at the thought.

Sandstone reached out and placed her hand on the lever. It was cool to the touch.

OL giggled excitedly. Hiram watched from a corner.

She pulled the handle. It went down smoothly. The man looked at her expectantly.

If there was something she was supposed to feel, Sandstone felt nothing.

With a click, a card popped up in the slot that the man had indicated. It was white and plastic-looking.

'There you go. That's yours now,' the man said, holding it up. A brief prism of light played across his face. Sandstone saw that it had all their names, embossed in thin metal.

Hiram (Caretaker)/**OL** (Caretaker)/**Sandstone** (Caretaker).
Next Lever: Downdeep Gardens, Central Island Pond

She pocketed it.

'Now you know where to go. I'm going to my next,' said the man, folding up his stool and stowing it into his knapsack. He put on a jungle hat, strapped on a pair of detachable sleeves, and pulled out a tube of sunblock.

'You could go now too,' he said, smearing his face, 'but I suggest you stay a while. Meet more people. Give them some

coffee! Pass it forward. Just a little bit of your time to spare, something good to do. That's what the work is, isn't it?'

'Work,' murmured Sandstone. A memory stirred. She'd remembered reading Voltaire from a book someone left on a seat back at the Old Market. Dedication to plain gardening was what preserved the hero Candide from worry; the book had concluded – not heroic gestures, not thoughts of right or wrong, good or evil. And hadn't she been a Caretaker herself, lingering in Lao Pa Sat for almost a millennia after the Crash? She'd felt it so strongly; it had been her duty. Would she begrudge them what they felt was theirs?

The man tapped his own card on a spot on the wall, which slid open, revealing a bright bar of sunlight – then in a flash, the man was gone and the wall was whole again, leaving the three of them blinking slowly.

Hiram strode over to the lever.

His shadow, all the while restrained behind him, now curled forwards and wrapped around it like a shroud. It filled grooves and seams, dim and malignant, flowing down into the gap between stem and base. The air went cold, and Sandstone's hair fluttered. She remembered her Hermetic, and the visions he brought. His eyes, normally a solid black, were lightless pools.

And Hiram was silent for the longest time.

Then a shudder ran through him, and he withdrew, his shadow shrinking back to normal around him.

'Millions,' he coughed, one hand finding the wall. 'The city is threaded with them.'

'What did you see?' Sandstone asked.

'Connections. Like a web. I followed, but the path grew tangled. Then it led beyond my sight.'

Sandstone and OL looked at each other.

'Sounds like fun then,' OL said cheerfully, playing with her hair. 'We should go explore our next lever!'

'Or, we could do what the man said,' said Sandstone, watching Hiram. 'Wait for the next person. Give them coffee.'

Hiram grunted. He sat, slumped.

So they waited by the lever. OL got to business, decorating the room with cushions and beanbags and a bed from her tent, and loaded the trolley-cart with colourful assortments of snacks. Sandstone turned the card over in her fingers, feeling its curved corners, reading their printed names again. When she put the card down, she found herself looking over at the lever, its red handle, and the feeling of pulling it crept back into her hands. Blinking, she turned away.

Hiram nursed his shadow.

Finally, a woman entered the room, her frizzy hair slick with rain. Sandstone poured her a coffee, and she sipped it as she caught her breath, nodding as she looked around the room.

'Great what you've done here,' she remarked appreciatively, and OL blushed.

With her free hand, she slotted in her card and pulled the lever in one quick, downward motion. A new card emerged, but the woman was already plumping up a beanbag.

'Go ahead,' she said. 'I'll take over. Needa rest anyhow.'

'Why did you pull this lever?' asked Sandstone, as she tapped her card to the wall for them to leave.

The woman already had her knees up comfortably and was pulling out a long stick. Some sort of wind instrument, Sandstone thought; then the woman took a long puff and let free a pearly cloud of smoke. She looked up and winked.

'Aye, a questioner. So few of you, nowadays. Lemme tell ya. Levers, not questions, keep this city running, doesn't it?'

Sandstone's Children #1 was published in SAMPAN Issue II.

Sandstone's Children #2 was published in SAMPAN Issue III.

Returning Home

After some measure
of yesterday's success
you return, and there's that door again.

You remember well
how it closed—no, how
you closed it all behind you

how ungrateful, they cried

when you would not fit
the steel-shouldered mould
they cast you in,

how disloyal, they lamented

though you could not fulfil—

till in breaking
you were born, leaving
the first great sadness
    of your life
to the shape of its pieces.

And turned to something new.

Time had passed.

Not new, but different.
Not *different*—no, not for
its own sake, but yours.
Now in your heart you recognise this;

now you knew vast altitudes

of who you were, and where
you were going,
the import of your travels.

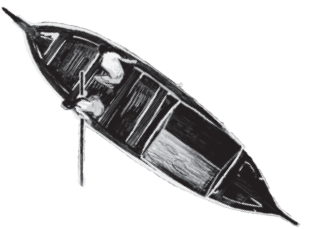
Yet that door looks ahead
its fragile eyes, the worn grain
carving an old guilt in you.

Perhaps there was no change within
as you turn the key
    to admit
only at last, you had

forgiven yourself, and all
you were returning home to.

PRACHI AGARWAL

Prachi completed MACW in 2019 from LASALLE College of the Arts (Goldsmiths, University of London). Her short story *Mountains of Fear; Valleys of Hope* won the first prize at the Nick Joaquin Literary awards 2019, 'Lahore to Amritsar' was published as a web special on *TBASS Best Asian Short Stories 2020* and *In the Shadows* was published in the anthology *Best Asian Short Stories 2022*. She is from Mumbai and has lived in Singapore since 2011.



Beyond the Vermillion

'Welcome *kanna*. Enter with your right foot.' Savitha smiles, flashing her brilliant white teeth. She welcomes her son Parshuram's new bride, Aarthi, into their three-storied shop-house in Taya Lane, off Race Course Road.

The young, twenty-year-old bride is bent under the weight of the gold loaded on her. Three thick necklaces of varying lengths cover her from her collar bone down to her navel, half a dozen shiny yellow bangles jingle on her wrists, her earrings brush her shoulders and stretch up to reach the top of her ears, and a broad *nethichutti* covers the parting of her hair. Aarthi keeps her gaze low as she feels the fresh line of red vermillion powder in the parting in her hair pulsating, making her heart dance excitedly in tandem with it, and her cheeks burn. Her new husband put the red vermillion in her hair earlier in the day, marking her as his wife. After more than two days of sitting through endless prayers and ceremonies, Aarthi has finally entered her new home for the first time. The moment she has been waiting passionately for, when she would be alone with her husband, also for the first time, will be soon. Aarthi takes a few quick steps in excitement, before

she remembers her mother's repeated instructions to be demure at her in-laws' house and slows down. Next to her—a step behind in this entry ritual—is her twenty-seven-year-old, Singaporean-Indian husband, Parshuram. Parshu, as he is usually called, is heir to Uphaar, an island-wide chain of South Indian fast-food restaurants.

***

The newlywed couple is led through the living room brimming with relatives, into a high-ceilinged enclosure where life–size idols of the bow and arrow holding Rama, Sita, Laxmana and Hanuman line one wall. The priest, who has been tirelessly reciting mantras for the last two days, continues his monotonous singsong monologue. He stops at regular intervals to tell the groom to offer a flower or pour water out of a spoon into a silver plate. The bride is given just one instruction at the start of the ceremony—to keep touching her husband's elbow as he performs the rituals. By the grace of their recent wedding, she is now a partner in everything he does. Each time Aarthi touches Parshu's elbow, she feels a current run through her. She wonders if his heart skips a beat at her touch, too. But Parshu has shown no reaction.

Aarthi stretches her back to ease the discomfort her *Kanjivaram* saree and embroidered silk blouse cause her. The

last few days have been uncomfortable— wearing clothes she is not used to, sitting cross-legged on the floor and being told to join her hands, hold coconuts or offer flowers, fruits or sweets or water to the fire or idols. None of what she has been doing makes any sense, but she complies sincerely; these ceremonies will result in the most important relationship of her life. She had seen these rituals up close when her older brothers got married. But she hadn't given it much thought then, let alone think about the boredom and fatigue of the bride. Youngest of three and as the only daughter of the most successful real estate magnate of Chennai, Aarthi dreamt of a romantic husband who would dote on her like her own family.

She shuffles to release the stiffness in her back, uncomfortable in her heavy sari and jewellery. Parshu leans forward to offer yet another flower dipped in vermillion to the Gods. Aarthi sneaks a glance at him. The dark chocolate complexion of his bare torso shines from the oil bath he had in the morning. His bicep flexes as he holds the flower in his outstretched hand for a minute till the priest instructs him to offer it to the holy fire. Aarthi feels grateful, as they run the final lap of their four-day-long Iyengar wedding. Life with the handsome stranger will start with the intimate night, only a short while from now. She bends her head lower to hide her

cheeks, which she is sure have turned crimson.

They first saw each other during a Skype call, accompanied by their respective families. She is with hers in Chennai and he with his in Singapore, in this very house. Other things—caste, family status, photographs and star positions—had been successfully matched before their new age, technology-enabled, matrimonial meeting. Parshu had smiled hesitantly under his bushy moustache and asked her a couple of formal questions. Under her mother Meenakshi's strict watch, she had replied as coyly as she could.

In the three months since then, Aarthi's world metamorphosed from college, movies and friends to shopping for sarees, jewellery, beauty treatments and of course! the last-minute cooking tips. Her grooming for the transition from being a denim-clad, university student, to a cultured, saree-clad Brahmin daughter-in-law had begun. Aarthi welcomed the change, enduring the struggles it brought, with her eyes set on the destination of the journey—the beginning of her first and last lifelong romance. She giggled with married friends about the intimacy that marriage would bring and scoured the Internet so her husband wouldn't be disappointed at having married a novice like her.

But Parshu had barely called her during those months.

Aarti had complained to her mother. 'He was shocked when I called him to make sure his wedding outfit was beige! *I* told him my dress was going to be red, *he* didn't even ask. I asked about our honeymoon—'

'A well-brought-up Brahmin boy will not run around the girl as soon as they are engaged,' Meenakshi put her hand on her only daughter's head, 'And I know you *anpe*. My princess will have him around her pinky, like she has us all.'

***

Of course, she would make him run around her. After all, she had mastered the cooking her mother had taught her, learnt more from Instagram reels and watched enough rated movies in three months to make sure she would thrill him in the bedroom. But right now, this never-ending *pooja* at his house is testing Aarthi's patience. Maybe she should pretend to be sick to speed up the rituals. Just then, the priest announces that the groom and bride are successfully married. They seek blessings from the elders to begin their married life together. She follows him around the large living room where he is diligently performing the *Satsang Namaskar,* lying completely prostrate with his head facing the ground, in front of the elders—parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts. Aarthi's eyes stray to Parshu's bare upper body as he stretches

to perform another *Namaskar*, and a shiver of excitement runs through her body. She struggles to suppress a brash smile as she counts down minutes till she would be in her new bedroom, on her marital bed with her handsome husband.

Finally, after days of sitting around like a decorated cow, Aarthi now waits for her husband on the flower-decorated bed. This is the moment she has been waiting for since she read her first Mills & Boon novel. Parshu's room has been renovated to suit his young bride. Aarthi looks around, trying to guess the new pieces of furniture. The handcrafted teak dressing table, a four-poster that is now covered from top to bottom with flowers and a line of wardrobes near the bathroom to accommodate her ample trousseau—all look new. The room has recently been painted; she can faintly smell the fresh paint. But the smart TV on the wall opposite the bed seems like it has been there for a while. She spots stray drops of the light blue paint on the top edge of the screen. Aarthi plays with her glass bangles as she sits with her hennaed feet on the bed, the pleats of her red and gold saree fanned out around her. Parshu enters the room just as she leans over to pick up the bottle of water kept at her bedside.

He shuts the door behind. Aarthi's heart races like it

does when she is on a roller coaster and her cabin is at the top of the track, about to plunge down.

'I'll go first to change,' Parshu says.

Aarthi spills the water on herself in surprise. In all her daydreams about this night, her husband had not said anything so trite.

Parshu opens a cupboard and pulls out a pair of striped blue pyjamas. She shuffles noisily in her uncomfortable and now damp clothes.

'You also change,' he says over the restless tinkling of her anklets and bangles. He goes into the bathroom and shuts the door.

Aarthi gets up to find her clothes. Her mother-in-law would have unpacked the dozen suitcases her parents had sent to her in-laws' house before the wedding. She tries the cupboard next to the one Parshu had opened. Over a dozen bright, silk sarees hang on the top shelf, and another couple of dozen are kept folded in the middle rack. In one of the bottom drawers, she finds a pile of petticoats for her sarees and a smaller pile of nightdresses. She sifts through the stack to find the pink, two-piece nightie she had bought from Pondy Bazaar in Chennai. She holds up the knee-length singlet and

a modest button-down gown uncertainly. Should she wear the singlet that she had planned on their honeymoon? Or with the covered gown over it? She has dressed too conservatively for the last few days; now it's time for the bold look; she pushes the gown back into the drawer. She chooses a naughty, red lacey set of lingerie, and the thought of Parshu seeing her in it makes her smile.

Aarthi changes out of the wedding finery with one eye on the bathroom door. It is taking so long to take off her elaborate bridal jewellery and the pins that hold her saree that she is certain Parshu will finish before her and walk in on her. That would not be so bad, she thinks with a grin. He could give her a hand in taking things off. But she slips on her seductive lingerie and her singlet over them, folds her thick *Kanjeevaram* saree, before Parshu emerges from the bathroom.

'Where to keep this?' She points at the mound of jewellery she has piled on the dressing table.

'You give that to my *Amma*.' He looks at the jewellery and the folded sari.

Aarthi nods but doesn't move. He can't expect her to go to her mother-in-law wearing her sexy singlet. Has he even

noticed what she is wearing?

'Give in the morning better.' He smiles sheepishly.

She returns to her spot on the bed, sulking at the loss of a romantic opportunity of aided undressing, but playing with the red and white flowers, woven into her waist-long braid, in excitement of what would happen next.

Parshu takes excruciatingly long as he puts his phone to charge on the study table at the far end of the room, combs through his thick, black hair, which is still wet from the shower and rubs on coconut oil. He finally sits on the other side of the bed and smiles at her. Aarthi's heart races as she notices for the first time how the end of his moustache turns down when he raises the corner of his lips to smile.

'Aircon temperature is ok?' He picks up the remote from his bedside table.

She nods again, and the goosebumps return, this time all over her hands and back. His voice is soft, like silk.

'*Light ae anachutama?*' *Can I turn off the lights?*

This time, Aarthi wants to disagree; she cannot sleep in pitch dark. In none of her imaginary wedding nights had her husband asked such banal questions. She nods her head out of duty to agree, and he turns off the faint light on the headboard. He barely even noticed her skin-baring negligee,

and now the room is too dark to see anything. So much for modern Singapore.

Aarthi feels for the pillow in the dark with her hands. She pulls the thick duvet cover over herself as she slides lower so her head rests on the pillow. After a few still minutes, there is a rustling beside her, and a hand removes the duvet from her. A firm mouth covers her soft lips, and she struggles to catch her breath. His moustache tickles her nose, but she tries to slide her hands into his hair and respond to the kiss. Her first kiss. But as abruptly as they descend on her, his now-moist lips move downwards to her neck and then lower. After some more fumbling in the dark, she feels him tugging to pull her nightdress down. A couple of noisy breaths later, he seems to realise the folly of trying to pull a dress down and clumsily raises the thin fabric above her waist and shuffles her legs apart. In another minute or two of heavy breathing, the pushing gets frantic. She feels a sharp pain as Parshu breathes heavily and thrusts into her. And then, before she could comprehend what hit her, he sighs and slumps on her. A minute later, he rolls off her and the bed.

The bathroom light interrupts the darkness of the room, and then Aarthi is left alone again, in the dim light escaping from the edges of the closed bathroom door. Tears

slide down her temples and disappear into her hair. Every minute that she endured the torturous wedding to reach this special night was a waste. She fumes as she remembers the scrubs and sandalwood pastes that had been plastered on her in the month leading up to the wedding. Her husband did not even see her! In less than ten minutes, he has shattered every fantasy she had about their first time together.

'Ummm, you can go and wash up I am done.'

Aarthi turns in shock at the softness in the voice. Was this the same man from a few minutes before? How could someone with a voice that gentle leave her feeling so violated? *Did he really treat our first time together like it was another ritual that needed to be done?*

'You're ok?' he asks when she comes back from the bathroom.

What do you think? She wants to snap as she slips under the duvet again.

She tries the switches by her bedside till she finds the nightlight. There is a sigh of protest from the silhouette beside her. She ignores his wordless objection and picks up her phone – it is time to groom her groom. The light of the screen adds to the dull yellow in the room. Aarthi changes the country in her Netflix app to Singapore. She selects the

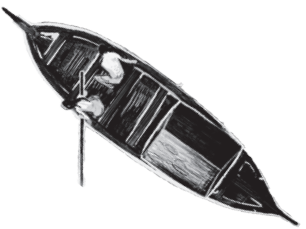
Movies option from the drop-down menu, clicks into the search tab and types:

Kama Sutra

The poster of the movie fills her phone's screen, and Aarthi smiles when she sees that the movie is streaming in Singapore too. Her husband would enjoy watching their first film together tomorrow night.

BRYCE W. MERKL SASAKI

Bryce W. Merkl Sasaki is a writer, editor, and wizard-errant currently residing in northern California after eight years of living and wandering through Southeast Asia. He's currently working on a poetry collection and a science fiction novel with his cat, Mao Mao, serving as editorial assistant



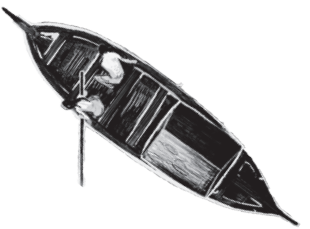
But when

When are you going to unpack
that six-and-a-half-foot stack of
boxes you left behind in America—
you know, the ones in the garage?
When are you going to hang up your
late brother's old Tiger of Sweden suits,
the ones I saved for your return
to the office? When are you going to
unroll your winter coats, or unbox
those leather-bound photo albums?
When are you going to take back
your spider plants I've been watering?
We already planted your pink lemonade
blueberry bush out back; it's thriving,
you'd better come home to taste how
sweet the berries are, a little bitter too.
When are you going to dust off
the hand-painted Japanese plates,
the ones Grandma gave you? I think
some of them might have broken
from years of shifting in sojourn.
When are you going to finally
take out the family Waterford crystal
I've always wanted you to display

in the china hutch of your dining room
where you'll host us for Thanksgiving?
When are you going to settle down and
or more pressing: When will there be six-
to-seven new cousins to play with
barefoot and giggling in the fresh-
mown grass of the big backyard
wrapped in the white-picket fence
of the five-bedroom house next door,
the one with red-trimmed dormers?
When are you going to come back and
unwrap the Ninja blender, the toaster
oven missing a knob (or two), the antique
dining room table that's dried and cracked
beneath six Sacramento summer suns?
Maybe in that last box, hidden there
at the bottom, you'll find the shadow of
another person who packed this all up
when he left us behind in America,
uncertain of his homecoming or what home
coming means any more. Don't worry,
just unwrap him carefully, blow off the dust—
I'm sure he's just the same, unaltered
from years of shifting in sojourn.

T. L. NGUYỄN

T. L. Nguyễn is an aspiring writer, graduating with an MA in Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts. Most of the time, she writes to see inwards. But occasionally, she also writes to sow connections with another soul.



Sundays

When I open my eyes, the wall clock already has its short hand pointing at ten. No rush to get up since it's a Sunday. On Sundays, I am free, free from work, from family, from all entanglements of modern society.

On Sundays, my husband leaves the house early to pick up his daughter and spends the day at his parents'. On Sundays, even our noisy cat would leave me alone. My husband always makes sure that the cat is fed and her tray is cleared before leaving.

Sundays always bring me mixed emotions. If I have an adequate dose of social interaction on weekdays, I will enjoy Sunday by rolling in bed and doing nothing in particular. But if I don't have any reason to go out and exhaust my energy all week, Sunday magnifies my loneliness. I have no authentic way to describe my Sundays, but to borrow the words Murakami's Toru used to describe his Sundays, waiting for Naoko's reply: 'quiet, peaceful, and lonely'.

On Sundays, I don't wind my spring.

Still, I need to rise at some point. This Sunday isn't one of my usual Sundays.

I reach for the phone and send Stephen a text: 'See you

at the café.' Then I spend another hour in bed, thinking of what to have for lunch. How grim it is that such a first-world problem sometimes can weigh our spirit to the bottom of the sea.

We would have Japanese, and Stephen would order tofu salad again, if his schedule wasn't too booked up to have lunch with me. That guy must have tried tofu salad at every Japanese restaurant he's been to. For a non-vegan, heavy-eater, his obsession with tofu is rather fascinating.

***

Eating alone has become less dreadful over the years. Yet, sometimes I'm still unable to conjure enough confidence to walk into a restaurant and occupy a table for myself. In situations like these, a café seems more suitable for dining alone and pretending to savour one's solitude.

'May I have your name or initials, please?' the barista asks.

'L. Just L,' I say.

Later, I receive my cup of latte with a neat handwritten line that reads 'Great day, Elle!' and a smiley face scribbled on it.

Perhaps because of my poor diction, non-Vietnamese always get my name wrong. I don't mind. There's no special

endearment tied to my name, nor does it carry any hidden wishes from my parents. For more than a decade overseas, I've settled with "Lynn", or "Ling", or whatever my name sounds like to the person I'm conversing with.

I didn't think I would need an English name. Vietnamese is challenging for the tongue. But my toneless one-syllable name should be simple enough for anyone to pronounce. Or so I thought.

I never thought I would leave Hà Nội either. Yet, here I am, trying to take root in this foreign soil. While my Vietnamese friends have scattered everywhere like dandelion seeds, Stephen is the last of them who has stayed.

***

Stephen has changed significantly from the last time we met. He is much slimmer now and less of a guy who doesn't care about how he looks. Instead of his usual T-shirt, he's wearing a gingham shirt this time. Stephen's most recent blind date in Hà Nội must be the catalyst for all these changes.

'Just back from Hà Nội?' I ask in Vietnamese, too eager to wait for him to take a seat first.

'How do you know?'

'It's still cold there, isn't it? You need moisturiser,' I point to my lips, implying his chapped lips.

'I must look terrible.'

'Not at all, you're glowing,' I grin. 'Things are going well with that girl you met lately?'

'Exceptionally well,' Stephen grins even broader. 'We're getting married next month. I'm trying to lose some weight to fit in the tuxedo.'

'What? So fast? How long has it been again?'

'Less than a year. But you know what they say, it doesn't take long when you meet the right one.'

'Right time, right place, right person, huh?' I force a smile, trying to recover from the shock. I'm sincerely happy for him. Right time, yes. Right person, maybe. But not very much in the right place if I have a say in this. 'Any chance you could sponsor a Dependent's Pass for her to come here?'

'She doesn't like it here. Also, being a doctor, it's troublesome for her to relocate. Meanwhile, I got a few interviews lined up in Hà Nội already.'

If only I weren't so self-centred, I could stay happy for Stephen, and we could continue talking about his wide-open future. But I can't contain this desolation that is screaming in my mind. 'Everyone has moved on, except me. I'm stuck here.'

'What are you talking about? You got what we were all chasing after – a golden ticket to stay.'

Before meeting his future wife, Stephen was applying for Permanent Residency (PR). For a Vietnamese who isn't married to a Singapore citizen, getting PR is almost impossible nowadays. But it got me excited knowing that at least one of my friends was planning to stay for the long haul. 'What's the point of staying when you have no one left?' I mull it over.

'You got your husband.'

'Right! Me expecting him to learn Vietnamese is already overwhelming enough for him, let alone replacing all my friends.'

'This doesn't mean the end of our friendship, right? We can still hang out when you visit home.'

'Of course, it'll be just like the good old days,' I lie.

I know all too well by now that the good old days will never return. When people relocate, their lives refocus. Their priorities change, and their social circles refresh. Gradually but certainly, I will be out of their lives. Sure, we will meet again. And for a fleeting moment over some coffee table, we may fill each other with an illusion of reconnection. We may still call each other good friends. But when they hit rock bottom, I won't be there to share the pain. And vice versa.

This meetup marks the beginning of the end. It's the

first time Stephen's needed to rush out on me. He has a bunch of other people to bid farewell to before his flight tomorrow. Unlike me. Touch wood, if I got divorced today, I could just pack up and leave on the same day. No one left in Singapore would need a farewell from me. Foolishly, I thought, after marrying a local guy, I could finally be able to call this place home. But Stephen's departure once again stirs up the bitterness I first tasted when Rachel left.

***

The image of a youthful Rachel never fades in my memory, even though motherhood has transformed her in many ways. The Rachel I met during a Vietnamese students' gathering back in polytechnic was a social butterfly: pretty, witty, and exceptionally confident. Rach attracted almost every guy, which intimidated almost every girl. But it wasn't hard to see through her imperfection. Rach herself was a mess, yet she never shied away from who she was. That courage to put her rawness on display, in my opinion, was exactly what made Rachel attractive. She contrasted me in every possible aspect. So naturally, we had not been friends.

Until Rachel happened to text me on that devastating afternoon when my first love had just ended. I held on to her like a lifeline. We went out for dinner so I could talk trash

about my ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend. As mental health gained more awareness, many understood better the requirements of a great confidant – two listening ears with less than a mouth. But back then, Rach gave me the exact opposite, and that didn't bother me. What mattered the most was that I didn't have to be alone. Someone was there for me. Physically present.

By the time I got over my heartbreak, the bond with Rach had become liberating. For the first time since I moved overseas, I stopped questioning about belonging. We didn't find home, but we'd found each other. What made Rach a homeless soul like me? I never truly knew. Maybe it was a few things we had in common: growing up in a dysfunctional family, being outlanders in this country. Or maybe it was the way Rach used to live her life, bound to no solidified goal. Whatever it was, her companionship locked away all my regrets and self-doubts so that I could enjoy a taste of freedom.

Friday nights spent with Rach were always the highlight of my youth. We were both at our first job. Broke-ass. But invaluable memories of mine were usually crafted this way. We made it a tradition to meet after work, grab a drink from a convenience store, climb up on one side of the Read Bridge, and watch the vibrant nightlife playing out like

a music video. People passing by. Water flowing under. A giant slingshot shooting for the stars. On some high-spirited nights, we even stood up, danced around and sang along to the surrounding music as if nobody was looking. Obviously, people were looking. But I wasn't my usual timid self, because Rach's confidence was spilling all over me.

When Rach left, the delusion of belonging was quickly shaken off my being. Once again, I was made aware that I was a foreigner, and I wasn't home. Rach didn't belong here. I didn't belong here. To foreigners like us, staying or leaving wasn't entirely up to our desire. Among the 1.7 million foreigners who lived in Singapore, only thirty thousand PR applications got approved each year. We all did the math. In most cases, this country had swallowed up our entire youth and spat out no leftover bones. After Rach, many more of my people had left, empty-handed, to find their future somewhere else.

***

I, on the contrary, never intended to, but always had a reason to stay. When I finished my diploma, there was a bond obligation to be served. When I lost my first job, there was a bachelor's degree to be completed. And when I lost my community, well, there was T – a local guy who couldn't leave his country – my husband.

At the Marina Barrage, lying barefoot on the grass, listening to colourful kites fluttering above our heads, I whispered to T that he was my anchor. And it remained true in many ways. I cherished the statement in every possible way, except for the geographical restriction of it. Every time we quarrelled, the temptation knocked violently on my impulse to flee the country. Every time we fought, I pulled out my desperate bargaining card: 'I stay here because of you, in return for what? A dead-end career and many Sundays being by myself. Why can't you just give in to me over this little thing?'

But T didn't fold his cards. 'I'm sorry that we have to stay because I need to be here for my daughter,' he said. 'But if staying here is such a sacrifice for you, I'll never be able to match you, no matter how many little things I would give in to you.'

Every so often, when I reflected on the bigger picture, I found it ironic, almost like a distorted joke, the way my marriage mirrored my relationship with my mother. The way I lost my temper, the way I made demands, the way I argued, it was very much my mother's way. Luckily, T wasn't me. Guilt-tripping didn't work on him. He was opinionated enough that he refused to join the cycle. He refused to let what I called

sacrifices suffocate him into submission.

Eventually, I came to the realisation myself that T could have easily won the argument if he had set out to compare sacrifices. While I battled through one day of the week, he was in a silent battle every night, not being able to tuck his daughter into bed. The least I could do was to quit dumping my misery on my husband.

***

At this point, the only person I had regular meetups with, who seemed willing to listen to my problems, was my insurance guy. Though he preferred being called a financial advisor, I couldn't bring myself to indulge him. We rarely talked about finance.

When I opened up about how dejected I felt, wondering if I could ever feel at home, he circled back to my husband. How frustrating! Was it so hopeless that an emotional state of mine could only be found in the hands of somebody else?

'You see, my wife used to carry the same feelings because of her estranged relationship with her family,' he explained. 'So when I proposed to her, I promised that she would be a part of my family. And that support has brought her to a much better place now, I'd like to believe.'

'That's nice.' Nice for his wife. Pretty much useless in my case, since I wasn't welcomed by my in-laws, even before

they knew of my existence.

I once harboured a similar expectation that a caring in-law family would give me what my parents failed to provide. Nobody got to choose the family they were born into, but one could choose their in-laws, right? I used to see it as my second chance to be part of a functional family, where parents could show their kids what love looked like, siblings could be each other's best friends, and everyone would see me for who I was, not a resemblance of the person they resented. Half consciously, I allowed this expectation to form a pattern in my dating history. Every boy I dated was extremely close to their family, a doting brother to their little brother or sister, a proud son who spoke of his parents with glowing admiration.

Little did I consider that such a family had their own standards to uphold, and I was never their chosen daughter-in-law. When they looked at me, they saw a family behind that was a little too complicated for their precious son. It was funny. Because the only trouble they knew about was that my parents got divorced.

They knew little to nothing about my father, who didn't finish secondary school, used to be an alcoholic, a gambling addict, and had been in jail for an assault on my mother's co-worker.

They knew a little more about my mother, who was a

chief accountant of a foreign company, spoke a bit of English and Japanese, and had some commendable traits which were necessary to be a single mom. Nobody knew about her insecurities, her possessiveness, her manipulation. Nobody but me.

If they stopped at "her parents are divorced" and concluded that my family was too complicated, I suppose they were right.

***

Then T came along. It was tough for me to justify how I should feel, whether it was a consolation that his parental disapproval this time had nothing to do with my family. This time, it was his ex-wife who stood in my way.

'My parents have to maintain a good relationship with my ex so they can continue seeing their grandkid,' T gingerly explained why his parents didn't want to acknowledge me. 'They don't want to do anything that seems like a betrayal to her.'

Alright, so this whole delicate situation might not be about me or my family at all. Even then, it stung just the same. So long to the acceptance I'd been craving for.

If there was anyone who sought acceptance harder than me, it was my mother. Despite how much she adored T – she even called him the son she never had – my mother was against

my marriage because, in her words, "it is socially unacceptable to marry someone without his parents' blessings."

We had a big fight over it, until I realised my mother's reaction wasn't solely about social acceptance. It was about the wounded pride of a mother who did her very best to raise a good daughter who yet wasn't good enough to marry into another family. Though I'd stopped being upset with my mother, this comprehension didn't make it any easier to call home and face her questions about when I would be meeting my in-laws. As a result, I drifted even further from my family and was nowhere close to T's family.

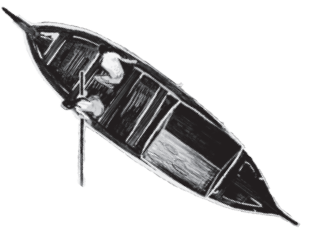
***

For now, my single purpose on this Sunday is to rush back and serve our cat dinner in time. "Our cat" used to belong to T and his ex, a brown tabby with a bobtail named Miu Miu. The first time we met, Miu Miu was already an adult cat, as round as a chunky sausage, surely not the cutest cat I'd ever seen. But before I knew it, she found an expressway into my heart with her melodic rumbling purrs.

Although it wasn't my choice to adopt her, she is my responsibility now. And Miu Miu, without any doubt, will purr with the loudest contentment to welcome me home on a Sunday night.

IAN GOH HSIEN JUN

Ian writes about games, pop culture, and wabi-sabi stuff. His work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Star*Line*, *t*'s, and elsewhere. He attained his MA in Creative Writing from Goldsmiths University of London (LASALLE College of the Arts). He's currently doing his best Jack Sparrow impersonation as a Scriptwriter at Ubisoft.



Safe Distancing

To curb the population growth, prevent babies
(and uni grads) from being born, the gahmen
has outlawed all physical contact, punishable
by a stump-duty (you choose which hand)
and exile to sixty-four isles along the Straits.

When I meet my friends, we wiggle our fingers
at least one meter apart. At the food-court, I take
my pack of ji fan without grazing the aunty's
wrinkles. Ma veered in for a hug on Tuesday—
I was forced to take evasive manoeuvres in case
we kena spotted through the shades of our flat.

At the theatre, I sneak a feel of my lover's finger
across dark velvet seats. At the back of the bus,
I pretend the road is uneven so we bump shoulders.
For extra spicy days, we share chopsticks for mala
hotpots, kisses along the rim of teh peng gah-dai,
reach simultaneously for lift buttons and twenty floors
of finger-on-finger action. On Sunday, I engineered
a bicycle collision along East Coast Park, hoping to
briefly fly into your arms. The bruises were worth it.

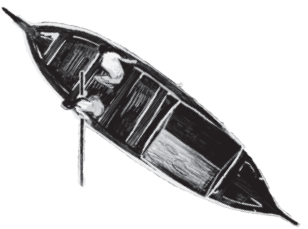
Late at night, your breathing wafts across our bolster
as a makeshift prostitute. I have to say: I'm satisfied,
for now, sipping the same air you've swallowed.

Xenogastronomy

We found a home where the native diet
comprised starched pearls and sweet tea.
Devotees downed three cups per meal
and six per supper, drooled over caramel
bolted in drums, hidden in bomb shelters.
Artisans perfected percentages of milk
and syrup, prized concoctions savoured
on very special occasions. People queued
for miles, infinite choices of black or white,
bak chor mee or diarrhoea-infused foam.
During the Great Shortage, nations fought
over pearls of tapioca; neighbour turned
on neighbour for that tingle on the tongue.
Having once bled for boba, people learned
the taste of blood, like sweet explosions
in the mouth.

NADIA ISKANDAR

Nadia Iskandar is a speculative fiction writer and storyteller whose work explores bureaucracy, death, memory, and the uncanny. Blending emotional depth with modern mythology, she crafts narratives spanning novels and games. Her characters navigate liminal worlds shaped by history, technology, and the lingering ghosts of home.



Homecoming

The hum of the hospital machines is soft and steady, a lullaby that placates no one.

You're not sure if you're sleeping. Perhaps you're trying to. Someone holds onto your wrinkled hands, but your foggy vision makes it impossible to identify the figure by your bedside. Whoever it is, they're stroking your palm with a gentle shush. Rhythmic. It reminds you of the gentle ministrations of parents, a sensation that once was familiar to you so many decades ago.

You close your eyes.

When you open them, you're standing in front of a familiar house.

You feel a pinch as you shuffle your feet. You're wearing the first pair of loafers you've ever owned, purchased after taking your first desk job. Fake leather. Thin soles. Your mother had disapproved of the purchase, saying that they made you look dirty and poor, subpar for the architecture firm that had graciously taken you in. That stale burble of shame rises in your throat even now. But the pads of your feet heat up, the sun-baked tiles warming you in welcome, and shame quickly replaces itself with nostalgia.

The late afternoon light spills down the sidewalk. Flaking yellow paint feebly embraces the house's exterior. The low rumble of traffic hums beyond the neighbourhood, kept away by gates that housed your childhood. Fifty years ago, its noise beckoned danger. Your mother told stories of wicked strangers snatching children off of suburban roads, of inattentive drivers running over children too short to be seen through the windscreen. They were the same cautionary tales you told your children when you eventually had your own.

A barren mango tree sags by the fence, its roots cracking the tiles like buried toes breaking through warm sand. Curtains peeking through grilled windows stir like breath. Somewhere beyond its veil should be your parents' room. You can still remember the console where a boxy television hunkered down, its drone accompanied by the constant, permeating smell of menthol from your mother's balm and your father's cigarettes. You hesitate, but your body moves without permission. You raise your fist and knock three times.

It opens. And there your mother stands.

Her youth snatches your breath. She looks maybe thirty-five. Slim. Barefoot. Her hair is ensnared in a weak claw clip. She's wearing that hibiscus-print house dress, the one you always thought looked like a caricature of real flowers

– its neon colours too garish, petals too flouncy and curled. The mental image you have of your mother is not the one you see before you. Unpained. Sprightly. Not battle-ridden by rounds of chemotherapy, slouched by age and absence. It's odd to be reckoned with this version of her now, when you are wasting away in a hospital bed just as she had been.

Your mother's brow is slightly furrowed, curious but guarded. Her elbow rests on a rusty doorjamb.

'Yes?' She asks.

You say the first thing that comes to mind. 'Sorry. I was passing by. This house used to be mine.'

She tilts her head. 'Used to?'

You nod. 'A long time ago. I grew up here.'

A pause. She narrows her eyes in an attempt at recognition. Still, she opens the door wider, just a little.

'Would you like to come in?'

Your real mother would never let a stranger into the home this easily. Not even your neighbourhood friends, with their gap-toothed smiles and thirsty pleas, were permitted entrance. Her acquiescence hints at the illusion of this place. One made of memory; sinuous, boundless and amorphous, and its rules bend as such.

You hesitate, but say, 'Yes.'

Inside, it smells exactly as you remember: old floor polish, floral detergent, a faint trace of whatever your mother had cooked up for lunch. Today, the scent of herbal chicken broth lingers. You can't pin the aroma on one single dish, but its scent recalls disjointed snapshots of your family: your father's silent consternation at the head of the table; a wrist slap from your mother when you attempt to ladle a second helping; your little brother, who receives another bowl without fuss despite this.

The dusty ceiling fan wobbles slightly, still making that rhythmic whir-whir-whir, dramatically protesting its overuse. The large floor tiles here are smooth under your feet – cool, even in this heat. They were once large enough for you to curl into, all your limbs keeping within the grout like a neatly colored drawing. You would place your ear against the faux marble and listen for the hush of your blood rushing through you.

Your mother watches you as you step in.

'Are you alright? You look a bit pale.'

You nod, curling your bitten nails into your palm.

She gestures to the coffee table in the living room. 'Sit. I just made tea.'

You sit in the chair you'd wrest from your little brother,

a seat by the window where the light drips down the backrest like honey. Adjacent to it is a long, patterned sofa, still wrapped in fraying yellowed plastic. You used to hate having to sit on it. With the simpering heat, the skin of your thighs would weld itself onto the covered cushions.

She brings over a cup. It's that chipped ceramic mug she only reserved for guests. The small crack never depreciated its value, only added charm to the intricately painted whorls. A sign that your mother owned something lavish, and was not so precious about it to keep the cup unused. That she allowed luxury to run rampant in the house, instead of being locked behind fortifying glass. Sometimes, you would slip it out of the cupboard, wrapping your little fingers around the smooth glaze and taking an empty sip, imagining what it would be like to be a stranger in your own home. To sit opposite your mother on the sofa and see just another woman, and not your mother.

You curl your hands around it. It doesn't fit like it used to.

You clear your throat. 'This is a beautiful home.'

She laughs, and it's startling to hear your mother laugh like that. Light. Unburdened. Yet another thing only reserved for strangers. You've always wondered how she managed to

uphold such an amicable front, knowing how it melts off the moment they leave.

'It's old,' she replies. 'But it's ours.'

You sip the tea. It's the same chrysanthemum from packets she used to hoard in a yellow tin. Sweetened just a little too much. From this angle, you have a view of the kitchen, just past the arched doorway behind the living room. It's exactly the same, fading blue backwash and all. Even the leaky faucet drips in its quintessential lazy rhythm. A plastic bag of chicken thighs thaws on the spotty countertop. Tonight's dinner.

'How old are you?' She asks.

You catch a reflection of yourself on the glass of the coffee table. You're still wearing your old glasses, the ones with the tortoiseshell frames. Your hair falls right above your shoulders, humbly displaying the elegant, looping embroidery stitched onto the collar of your blouse. It used to be your mother's, loaned to you for work.

Slowly, you answer. 'Twenty-three.'

She hums. 'That's a good age to be.'

The house demands your attention, every nook begging to be inspected by eyes hungry for recognition, superimposing your memory onto this museum. Is that wooden rooster still

over the mantle? What about the stubborn smudge on the fridge? The crack in the wall? The stain? You want to ask her where her daughter is. You want to say, *I was born in this house. I played pretend here. I cried into the pillow in that room every night until I learned how to leave*. But you don't.

'Would you like to see the rest of the house?' She asks instead. 'I'm just tidying up.'

You nod, too eager. You follow her past the table, down the hallway, and everything snaps into place like muscle memory, even the ghosts of corners you thought were lost to time. There's the tear-off calendar hanging by the far wall, frozen in the middle of July when the novelty of it must've worn off. The shadow of your old height chart is scrawled below it, erased but not gone. The space beside it, still unmarred, would be where your little brother starts the same graph.

His, though, would never be erased.

Then, you stop. In the room at the end of the hallway, the door is half-open. And you see her.

You.

Kneeling on the floor, a plastic cooking set sprawled across the tiles. You hum to yourself, turning a yellow teacup over in your small hands, bearing the same chip on its rim

as your mother's prized ceramic cup, gnawed into the plastic by incessant teeth. You remember this game. You remember pretending to serve your dolls invisible tea. You remember the peeling sticker on the blue cookie plate, the crooked plastic spoon, the matted teddy bear that was your favourite customer. You remember your mother's warnings that if you broke one of your toys, she would never buy you a new one.

Your breath catches.

'Is that—?' you begin.

Your mother's gaze skips over the room.

'That's my daughter,' she says simply. 'She's always playing by herself.'

She doesn't seem surprised that the child hasn't noticed you. You don't know what to anticipate if she does. Would she stare with confusion? With recognition? Would she look at the older version of herself and be awed, or disappointed? Did you want to know? Maybe she can't look up. Maybe she's frozen in a looping sequence, turning that plastic teacup around and around, unknowing yet of how this house would make her feel. Maybe this is grace.

'She's very quiet,' you say.

You thought you used to make more noise than a little harmless hum, barely heard over the whir of a standing fan.

If your mother came close to your room while she mopped the floors, she would yell at you to be quiet, kicking away the plastic silverware in a furious sweep.

'My daughter doesn't like to cause trouble. Not like other kids. But she has a temper when she wants to.'

You nod, slowly. You look at your mother, and you want to tell her: *She grows up. She becomes a teacher. She moves far away. She marries a man. Then she lives alone. She stops calling you for a while. She stops coming home.*

Instead, you ask, 'Do you love her?'

Your mother's face hardens, only for a moment. 'What mother doesn't love her child?'

'Does she know that?'

She scoffs. 'Children always do.'

You glance back at your younger self. Serene. Oblivious. You wonder when you grew out of the fortifying bubble of your room and became aware of other noises in the house. A part of you wants to kneel beside her. To say, *You'll survive this. You'll leave. You'll learn to play again. Eventually.*

But you don't go in. You just watch.

Later, you're back in the kitchen. Your mother cuts fruit. Pink water apples with sour plum salt. She serves it on a plate with the red flowers that used to fade with every wash.

'Eat,' she says. 'You look tired.'

You take a bite. It's crunchy. Sweet in a way that only nostalgia can taste.

'You remind me of someone,' she says suddenly.

You look up. 'Oh?'

'My sister-in-law,' her face sours, wrinkling in disgust. 'She and I never got along. But you have her nose. That entire family has the same nose. And your eyes … They look the same when you smile.'

You don't smile.

'We had a really big fight, once,' she says, flippant. 'Something about raising children. My husband didn't take my side. He never does. Worthless. So, I left home for a few days until he came to find me. But not because he wanted me, but because he needed me. He can't take care of himself, let alone children.'

You know this story. Every time you hear it, your mother's bitterness never wanes.

'Later on, when she got pregnant, she sent me an angry message,' she continues. 'That she didn't want to be a mother like me.'

You look down at your tea. The amber surface trembles.

'What does she know about being a mother, anyway?

What do any of us know? I thought rules meant love. That fear meant respect. That survival was enough. You'll understand when you have children of your own.'

You do have children of your own. You love them. They love you, and not in that baseless, inward way you loved your mother, an affection borne out of necessity and proximity and desperation, the way a man adrift would cling to floating driftwood. But a love that was incessant, vocalised. A love that kept the house warm, that kept the hatchlings returning long after they'd left the nest.

You look up. 'And now?'

She shrugs. 'Now? I think my children needed more than survival.'

The silence wraps around you like gauze. You can't tell whether it suffocates or heals. The house breathes. It's too little, too late. All you've known is how to survive. It's the only thing your mother taught you, beaten into your bones through cutting words and a bamboo cane. And survive you did, though you barely lived.

You stand.

'I should go.'

She nods. 'The front gate's tricky sometimes. You have to lift before you slide.'

You make your way out, but you pause in the doorway.

On the wall beside it hangs a photograph, sun-faded at the edges, but still clear: your mother and father on their wedding day. She's in ivory, beaming, her eyes squinting in laughter. He stands beside her, a rare smile lifting his face, hand over hers like it meant something. The frame is the same one it's always been. Unevenly gilded, a little crooked, not classy by any means – the true prize was the picture stored within its bones, after all. You stare at it longer than you mean to. They look so happy. So sure.

You've never seen your parents look at each other like that. The only dregs of affection you can conjure in memory was the quick kiss your mother would press into the corner of your father's mouth before he left for work. And then those dwindled too, until eventually they stopped altogether. Your dinner tables were silent, if not for your mother's snips. Your house was vacuous, if not for your parents' screaming in the middle of the night, when they thought the children were asleep.

You wonder, not for the first time, if this picturesque moment was ever real, or just a trick of the camera. If the absence of love you were raised in was always there, even as the shutter clicked.

You look back at your mother. An indignation fills you, hot and breathless like squalid summer sun. For the way you grew up, after knowing how easy maternal love was for your own children. For the person you could have been, and the person you have become.

'She forgave you, you know. Your daughter.' Your voice trembles in an effort to keep your resentment unheard. 'Later. After you'd get sick. You would laugh together again.'

Your mother says nothing, her expression carved of stone. But her bottom lip quivers, just a little bit. It disappears under the shadow of her hair.

You take a breath. 'She still loved you.'

Finally, her voice, quiet, 'I know.'

You turn the handle of the door, its rusty weight slotting perfectly in your palm. Your hand was moulded from this jamb, after all.

'Meilin.'

You stop.

How long has it been since you've heard your name spoken from your mother's lips? How long since even the quietest snap brought immediate dread? How long since that dread turned to comfort? Despite everything, you turn.

Her expression is unreadable.

'I knew it was you the moment you knocked,' she says. 'I just didn't know if you were ready yet.'

You stare at her. 'I don't know why I'm here, but I guess a part of me had to see it,' you whisper. 'I had to see you. I had to see … her. The girl I used to be. The house.'

'You came home,' she says gently.

'I don't know if this is real.'

'Does it matter?'

You shake your head. 'No. I guess not.'

She steps forward and wraps her arms around you. Her touch is warm, solid. You inhale, and for a moment, the scent of menthol and clean cotton and a thousand home-cooked meals fill your lungs, grounding you. You can't remember the last time she'd embrace you like this, not even as a child. You shake in her hold. In her arms, you're always shaking.

'Did you go somewhere, too?' You ask softly. 'When it was your time?'

'Of course.' She caresses the top of your head, a rough hand moulding against your cheek. 'My girl. I went to see you, too.'

You shudder out a breath. And perhaps that is what daughters are to mothers. What mothers are to daughters. In perpetual orbit with each other. Sometimes close enough

to touch, sometimes so distant the space aches. But always circling, always tethered by some invisible gravity: of memory, of blood, of something older than both.

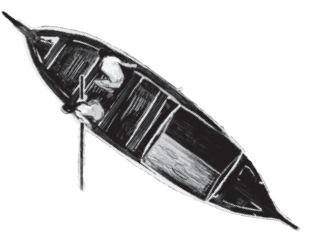
'Come home again,' she says, 'if you need to.'

You nod.

And just like that, you're gone.

ADI JAMALUDIN

Adi is an educator who loves iced milo and ondeh-ondeh. He writes, produces and directs scripts that are performed in theatre for young audiences (TYA). Find him online @adijamaludin!



Things on The Floor

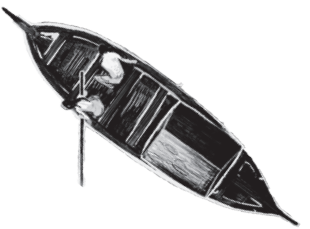
Shards of a funfair-won vase,
scattered
crushed
Khong Guan dry biscuits,
plastic ruler
snapped clean into two,
a million shrapnels from
hand-me-down
brown glass plates and cups,
saliva
mixed with blood and
snot and
tears,
bent
rusty fan blades
with wet red lining,

hard buckle off a faux leather belt of a man,

molars with
moist
dangling
roots.
torn pages
off a dictionary defining
home and house.

GABRIEL OH

Gabriel Oh is a graduate of the LASALLE College of the Arts, MA Creative Writing Programme. His interest lies in genre-spanning experiments that combine words, visuals and technology. He maintains a collection of snapshots at glimpsesnsnaps.blogspot.com.



Decluttering

The house was almost empty now. With a month to go before Justin's flight to Australia, only his bedroom cupboard was left. Brewing himself some coffee, he stood by the window overlooking the quadrangle below. A group of boys were taking turns to kick a ball at a "No soccer" sign under the glaring morning sun. How many years had it been since he was one of them? He was six then, forty now. He had grown up in this house, played around the neighbourhood below, attended primary and secondary school nearby. Now all his friends had been replaced by young families with their branded strollers and miniature dogs, while condominiums stood where his schools used to be.

The coffee had already gone cold. Justin sloshed the remainder down the kitchen sink and headed to his bedroom. He was dreading going through his cupboard – admittedly, he was somewhat of a hoarder. He had learnt a mantra while doomscrolling through social media, though – keep that which sparks joy, discard that which doesn't. Perhaps he'd use it to clear his belongings.

The cupboard doors creaked open, a familiar sound since the hinges started rusting a decade into use. No amount of Singer oil or WD-40 had worked, so the cupboard was

left with its nagging sound. He took in the shelves stretching from the ceiling to the floor. Keep that which sparks joy, discard that which doesn't, he reminded himself.

He took out trading cards from Saturday morning cartoons, self-help books with spotted pages he had never finished, dried-out acrylic paint from when he tried picking up the hobby, résumé drafts and portfolios from his job-hunting days, rolls of posters from when he still thought race cars were cool. These would be discarded.

The box showed itself as Justin took out yellowing issues of Newsweek. It had always been there. Justin strained to drag it from the back of the shelf where his father wouldn't find it. Not that he would have wanted to look through Justin's cupboard. The box gave a dull thud as he placed it on the floor. Black and dotted with a plague of yellowish-white mould, the cardboard box was as long as his forearm and reached up to the middle of his shins. His father had mentioned in passing that it kept baby clothing given by his aunt for his one-month anniversary. He couldn't verify that since he didn't remember his aunt. After his mother died, no one ever came to visit.

A stale sour odour hit his nose as he pried the lid off. Justin wasn't sure if it came from the mould or the objects inside. The mynah's talon caught his eye first. He picked it up,

studying the gnarled off-white toes that curled into darkened claws. He ran a claw along his finger, indenting a faint line of red.

He had found the talon by the car park when he was six. The claw was furled in, as if hanging on to something that wasn't there, even after life had long left it. Justin tried to imagine the mynah in its final moments. What had it thought and felt as it crossed to the other side? Justin couldn't fathom what it'd be like to die. He brought the talon home, thinking to show it to his father if he got back from work. Justin hadn't seen him return or head out the next morning as usual, and the talon was forgotten.

Ever since his mother had died, Justin's father had mostly left him alone and focused on his job, almost as if he'd rather not look at him. He had overheard his father on the phone saying that it was his fault his mother died. Justin knew not to ask him why. The only interaction they'd have most of the time was the monthly pocket money that his father would give him, along with two dehumidifier tubs for Justin's cupboards. During the times he was at home, Justin's father would be vigorously scrubbing at specks of black mould around the house – the toilet ceiling, a cupboard door, a shoe less worn. It must have been his father's hobby.

Justin found a rat two weeks later. Its faint chittering drew him away from a game of catching into the ixora bushes by a linkhouse. The rat was lying on a patch of blood-soaked earth, glistening viscera splayed out from its round stomach. Its mouth was agape as it heaved breath after breath. The rat's beady eye had narrowed to a slit, the sunlight glinting over its cloudy black surface. Justin saw his reflection in it. The rat was looking at him. The rat saw him. At that moment, the rat was with him, and he with the rat. Picking up a nearby rock, Justin brought it down on the rat's head.

There it was, at the corner of the box. The yellowed rat tooth's ridged surface glinted under the room's light, no bigger than a five-cent coin. It had broken off from the rat after Justin was done. Justin placed it with the talon on the box's cover.

Justin's stomach rumbled. He realised he hadn't eaten anything since starting on his cupboard. Outside, the sky was already an orangey pink. He got up, wondering if he should close the box before leaving, but left it open since it seemed pointless to keep its lid on now. The shadows were drawing longer throughout the neighbourhood when Justin stepped out. He passed by office workers who were trudging home with packets of food in hand. A cockatoo flew by overhead, its

shrieks piercing the evening. There weren't such birds around when Justin was young, but now they were everywhere, banshees gleefully accusing, reminding, with their grating song.

A shout nearby caught Justin's attention. An area near the playground had been cordoned off with red and white tape. Construction workers were in there, their actions covered by the ixora bushes circling the grass patch, their intent hidden behind a language he could not understand.

There was no one at the grass patch when Justin returned. The workers must have called it a day. Beyond the tape and ixora bushes, Justin noticed a large patch of uneven earth with clusters of fresh grass, almost as if someone had dug and patched up the ground in haste. Justin couldn't recall what had been there until he saw a massive oblong mound of earth by the corner, spindly roots sticking out from it like stubborn strands of frizzy hair. The workers must have cut down a tree and left its roots behind. A neighbouring tree reached up to six storeys. Had the tree here been just as tall? In the decades Justin lived here, he had never noticed the trees. He was leaving when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Justin squinted into the shadows, wondering if the darkness was playing tricks on his eyes. He did not hear

anything, but he thought he saw the mound of dirt and roots move.

A month after the rat, Justin found a pigeon huddling beside a riser pipe during an afternoon downpour. Dull feathers surrounded its thin frame, ruffled and unkempt as if slick with oil. A wing was splayed out to the side at an awkward angle. The bird barely tilted its head as Justin squatted next to it and scrunched his nose at the sour stench of the droppings it was standing on. The beady eye staring back at Justin calmly registered the rock he held in his hand.

The splintered wing bone was moved to the box's cover. Justin dug through the remainder of the box's contents, rattling its sides. A sickle-shaped claw from the barebones kitten mewing by the letterboxes. A knobby tail bone from the dog that had a wooden stake in its neck. A rib bone as thin as a curved toothpick from the squirrel with cuts all over its body gushing blood onto the barbecue pit. A charcoal-black beak from the sparrow whose bloodied body had been plucked clean of feathers. Justin had buried the carcasses in the densest grass patches around the housing estate, making sure to flatten the soil to the way they were before. Each time, he took a part of the animal and added it to the box. He kept the box in his cupboard, together with his textbooks and

stationery.

Posters against animal abuse began appearing around the neighbourhood. Other children began talking about the blood stains and dead animals they had found when playing around the void decks. He could only nod and say he had seen them too.

The grass patch was still cordoned off the next morning. The mound of dirt and roots was also still there. In the daylight, the reddish-brown mound glistened from the early morning rain, drenched but kept together by its roots. Justin ducked under the tape, nearing the mound. It reached up to just beyond his knees. Justin stooped down, frowning as he studied the mound. He wondered if his eyes were playing tricks on him, but he could make out on its grainy, muddy surface a semblance of cheeks, protrusions that looked like a blunt chin and a sharp nose… The clump shuddered, flicking off droplets of rain onto Justin. Wide slits parted on the mound's surface, and two black eyes as wide as discs stared at him.

Justin returned home from playing in the void deck one day to find his father in his room, the black box opened in his trembling hands. The spectacled, grey-haired man's eyes flicked over to Justin for the first time in years, but Justin didn't see

himself in them. He was dragged into the room where a wide hand met his cheek. His father roared that he couldn't believe his mother had died for a psychopath. The box was tossed onto the floor, and the bedroom door was slammed shut. He heard the front gate being chained. For two weeks, Justin's cries that he hadn't done it, that the animals were already dying, went unheard. Then one day, Justin found the front gate unchained. He heard the news later from a neighbour that the actual culprit had been caught. Injured animals stopped appearing around the neighbourhood. Justin's box was relegated to the back of his cupboard. His father never spoke a word to him since then, up until he checked himself into a nursing home decades later.

The mound was still by the grass patch two days later, even after Justin called the town council. He went back to make sure that he wasn't going crazy. Sure enough, the same black emotionless eyes greeted him. Justin had freaked out when the mound awoke, but calmed down when he saw it wasn't doing anything besides staring back at him. The dry spell these past two days had dried up the mound's surface to the consistency of cracked earth, the fissures widening and narrowing as if it were breathing. Frail red and green ixora seedlings poked out from the top of the mound. Who had

stuck them there, Justin did not know. He tried talking to the mound, but didn't get a response. Throwing a pebble at it only got an agitated puff of air that rustled its twigs and broke off clumps of earth, scaring off nearby pigeons into chittering flight. Justin crept closer to the mound. Even though there were no discernible irises, Justin could feel those eyes following him. He was now close enough to see the trail of black ants circling the mound's surface, the caterpillar helping itself to the seedlings' leaves, the splatter of bird droppings on the mound's top. Justin squatted in front of the mound. The furrow that looked to be its mouth was furling and undulating, almost as if it had something to say but didn't, or couldn't. Justin peered into the mound's eyes. The two discs, like yawning black holes, had nothing to give him.

There wasn't anything that Justin wanted to dispose of from the box's contents. He placed everything back into the box, closed it and returned it to the shelf. He took out instead the two dehumidifier tubs beside, unreplaced since his father neglected him, their translucent white bodies heavy with moisture absorbed and retained through the years. Justin wanted to chuck them into the discard pile, but he had another idea.

He was back at the grass patch again, a week since

he was last here. The mound was still there, its gruff face as unreadable as before. The saplings on its top had grown taller, the reddish leaves now mostly green. Justin trudged through the uneven ground, the water in the dehumidifier tubs he held sloshing around as if raring to spill out. When he got to the mound, he tore off the seals from the tubs and poured their water over it, making sure to go over its stony top and plants. A soft, shrill sound, like a kettle boiling, began to fill the air. Justin didn't know what he was hearing until he realised that the sound was coming from the mound's mouth, which had contorted into a dark gaping hole. Startled, Justin stumbled back and fell to the ground. The mound shook violently, writhing in what looked like pain. The stony features of its face were melting away into mud, sealing away its obsidian eyes, blotting out any semblance it had to humanity. The saplings on its top shrivelled and darkened, withered leaves snapping from dried branches. The muffled shrieking escalated until it became imperceptible. Justin felt waves of anguish, anger, and shame wash over him and dissipate into the air, as the mound of earth and roots returned to being just that.

The last time Justin saw his father was when the nursing home called, saying he had suffered a stroke. When he neared his father's bed, he was met with a bald, shrivelled, brain-dead

vegetable, a prisoner strapped to a beeping heart rate monitor and saline drip. Consulting the doctor, he agreed to pull the plug. The old man's heavy-lidded eyes flitted open moments later, drifting over to the newcomer at his bedside, clouded over with cataracts and unrecognition. He met his gaze, not knowing if he saw him. A sunken, toothless mouth opened and closed wordlessly, almost as if saying something, almost as if gasping for air. Seconds later, Justin's father passed.

Justin did not hold a funeral since he didn't know any of his father's acquaintances or relatives to contact. He opted to have his father buried because it was cheaper. A month later, Justin left his job, sold the house and booked a one-way ticket to Australia. Now, with a day left to his departure, his belongings had been shipped to his new home across the ocean. All that was left was the black box. He took it again from the shelf, opened it, and beheld all the memories inside. From his pocket, he took out a pair of dentures and placed them inside. Among the bones, they looked like they belonged. He closed the box and took it down to an incense burner by the void deck. The box thudded as it hit the bottom of the burner. Justin lit a piece of paper, threw it into the burner, and watched the fire grow. As the vermillion sparks crackled into the night sky, he smiled.

[HOME]

Welcome to the home complex of the Multi-Dimensional Exploration System, or Mul-DES for short. This ground-breaking system, developed by Denper Corp., allows users to travel to parallel worlds. Since the discovery of the multi-verse by Makcerdeltan scientists two centuries ago, over twenty quadrillion users have made warp-jumps to an uncountable number of dimensions. This home complex houses amenities catering to your every need between warp-jumps – sleeping quarters, showers, pantries, entertainment systems, lounge areas and exercise equipment. You may even chance upon fellow warp-jumpers between trips. On behalf of everyone at Denper Corp., we thank you for using Mul-DES, and hope you make countless wonderful memories beyond your dimension.

IMPORTANT NOTICE: The multi-verse is a vast, unpredictable place through which you must chart your own path. The dimensions you warp-jump to and the choices you make will determine the course of your journey. While Denper Corp. strives to provide a safe experience through regularly updated multi-verse databases, the corporation will not be held responsible for any injuries or deaths resulting from warp-jumps.

When you are ready for a warp-jump, please select:
For Dimension 34829e, go to ***[11]***
For Dimension 00001e, go to ***[14]***
For Dimension 58475c, go to ***[6]***

[1]

The grass along the path gives way to barren soil as a tall wire fence and apartment blocks beyond come into view. You hear footsteps just as a gaunt female jogger in exercise gear sees you and skids to a stop.

'Oh, another one. Welcome to Utopia!' she says in a lilting voice. Unsure of how to react, you freeze. She rolls her eyes. 'Always a bumbling bunch. Come, let me show you around.' She grabs your hand and leads you to the housing estate. Despite her stature, her grip is strong.

'This is where everyone in this dimension lives,' the woman says, gesturing around. 'All of us are warp-jumpers like you.'

Dirt roads line the estate. The blocks are a monotone grey, cold and uninviting under the harsh sunlight. You pass couples gathering rocks from the barren ground, children playing in the dirt, seniors lying on the bare pavement. Were these all warp-jumpers? How long have they been living here? The estate resembles an internment camp, making you wonder why anyone would want to live here.

You ask the woman this, and she laughs, a little too hard. 'Oh, everyone says that when they first arrive. It's that view-window, really. Take it off and see the world for yourself. Breathe in the air – it's crisp and fresh!'

If you take your view-window off, go to ***[13]***
If you keep your view-window on, go to ***[7]***

[2]

The guard frowns as he reads his tablet.

'I'm sorry,' he says, looking back at you. 'You are unqualified to be in this dimension. Please try again later.'

Before you can say anything, he taps his tablet, and the shutters come down on your view-window.

Your suit's emergency warp-jump activates, forcing you ***[HOME]***.

[3]

You continue through the deserted village, noticing the absence of wildlife. You turn back, but the child has disappeared. A maroon trail, however, snakes out from a neighbouring hut – fresh blood accompanied by a set of footprints. Inexplicable dread washes over you. Following the trail, you find an adult villager tying someone to a tall pole. A bloodied warp-jump helmet rolls away from them, and you realise it's a warp-jumper that's been bludgeoned to death.

You activate your suit's emergency warp-jump and hurriedly return ***[HOME].***

[4]

'Everything looks good. Welcome to the Dimensional Emporium,' says the guard. He taps his tablet, and the door pops open like a steaming oven. It closes back after, sealing you in.

The emporium is filled with orange warehouse racks stretching as far and tall as you can see. Lining the metal shelves are spheres of different sizes, their glow illuminating the emporium.

'Welcome, welcome,' echoes a thin nasally voice. A man no taller than your shoulders approaches, dressed in a white tuxedo and straw hat. 'I'm Mr Denper, Head of Denper Corp. I hope you've been enjoying the Mul-DES we developed, and trust it's been everything you've expected and more.' He flashes you a toothy smile. 'As the name of this place suggests, we sell every dimension imaginable here. Each of these spheres is a dimension, compressed into a storable and portable form. Jumpers who find one they like can buy them here. We can't possibly have our users warp-jumping into something we can't sell to them, can we? Follow me.'

He leads you through the racks, making so many turns that you lose track of the entrance. Occasionally, he stops by a sphere, admiring it with an 'Ooh' like a child with his new toy. Just when you think he has forgotten about you, he stops before a wide desk covered in folders and papers.

'Pardon the mess,' Mr Denper says as he sends a flurry

of papers to the floor. He pulls out a platter of neatly laid spheres from behind the table.

'Now, here's what I'd like to discuss,' Mr Denper says, leaning on the table. 'Your dimension's been on our radar for a while now. Nuclear fallout, desolate wasteland, underground bunkers – sure, we've similar dimensions, but yours is the only one where Mul-DES has been introduced.' He twirls two spheres from the platter in his hand. 'We've wanted to see if, when presented with alternatives, humans would choose to leave.' The spheres slip out of his hand, falling to the floor with dull, muted thuds like dense metal balls. 'The results were interesting. Within the first century, three-quarters of your population permanently relocated elsewhere, while a quarter spent their days warp-jumping.' The spheres have rolled away into the shadows of nearby racks. Mr Denper makes no effort to retrieve them, however. 'It's been a long time since then, and now you are the sole being in your dimension.'

'Don't be so surprised. When was the last time you saw another person around? Anyway, I'd like to propose a trade. 'Mr Denper picks up another dimension. 'Your dimension,' he gestures around him, 'for any one here.'

Mr Denper makes his way back to you from behind the table. 'When was the last time you spent even a bit of time at home? Your jump-logs show that you've been successively warp-jumping from one dimension to the next. Why not pick a suitable dimension to call home? I'm sure there's one you'll

like. Your dimension has so much potential as a dimensional experience, you know? An undermagma civilisation, or maybe a world where everything's inside-out. You can even pay it a visit once we're ready.'

Mr Denper holds out your dimension towards you. You cannot imagine your whole existence – underground bunkers, lab-grown fauna and animals, a toxic red sky – fitting into such short, grubby fingers. 'So, what say you?' he asks, one eyebrow raised.

If you give up your dimension, go to ***[9]***
If you keep your dimension, go to ***[15]***

[5]

Following your suit's directions, you emerge into a small clearing. The sun's rays cast the cluster of mud huts before you in a violet hue. You trudge through the village, looking for someone to befriend. There are no signs of life around, save for the smoke snaking from the chimneys of the huts. You consider leaving when a small figure emerges from a hut. It's a child, although their violet skin, almond white eyes, and two-pronged nose make it certain that they're far from human. Seeing you, the child tilts its head in curiosity. You wave, holding out your hands to show you mean no harm. The child smiles, then beckons you to follow as it scurries back into its hut. As you approach, a savoury smell enters your suit's ventilation systems, but it's too dark inside to see what's inside. Perhaps a meal is being prepared.

To enter the hut, go to ***[8]***
To continue exploring the village, go to ***[3]***

[6]

The shutters retract from your suit's view-window, and a vibrant light blue sky greets you, its rays golden white. Back home, the sky is red – or so you've been taught. You've never left the Underground, even when transferring from your bunker to the Mul-DES complex. You've been told that it's suicide to do so.

Waist-high shrubs, winding creepers and metre-tall trees are planted neatly everywhere, a polished concrete path cutting through them. Searching your suit's database, you learn that this is a nature reserve – a term also used in your dimension, but by its inhabitants three millennia ago. Shrieking winged creatures taking off from the branches above startle you. Your suit tells you that they are cockatoos. When their jarring screams fade into the distance, a shrill chirping from a multitude of small insects called crickets fills the air.

Your suit floods you with information about your surroundings – this dimension seems well-documented. Standing around digesting everything will take forever, and you'll quickly grow bored. You can download the information pack and have a good read back in the Mul-DES complex, or learn everything as it comes to you down the path.

To take the path, go to ***[10]***
To head back, return ***[HOME]***

[7]

'What a pity,' the lady says, sauntering off as though she's forgotten about you. She has a drunk swagger.

As you continue through the housing estate, your unease rises. Everyone you pass is smiling, but their eyes are vacant, staring off into the distance. A truck rolls in, and the residents perk up at this and shuffle over.

A warning has been flashing on your view-window. 'ALERT: Toxic levels of hallucinogens in the air,' it reads. Before you can comprehend what that means, you hear growling and grunting. The residents are tearing into food packets like ravaging hyenas, flinging rice, meat and vegetables as they jostle for what they can grab. You see the female jogger push a girl to the ground, tugging at her hair with a snarl.

You couldn't activate your suit's emergency warp-jump sooner to head ***[HOME].***

[8]

You enter the hut. The first thing you notice is the skulls strung along the walls – some big, some small, all noticeably human. Something heavy strikes your head, and even with your suit's cushioning systems, you tumble to the ground. Your vision spins as you struggle to get up. From the shadows emerges the child, clutching the flayed robes of its parent, who is wielding a thick club. The adult snarls, revealing the needle-like teeth in its wide mouth. You scramble to access your suit's exit warp-jump option, but the villager is landing blow after concussive blow on you. The last thing you see through your suit's broken view-window is the club swinging down towards you.

End.

[9]

Six months have passed since you accepted Mr Denper's offer. Under the shade of a banana tree, you stretch out in your beach chair, enjoying a book as waves caress the nearby shore. Your life before seems as real as the story you're reading.

Denper Corp. has just announced a new slew of dimensions. Perhaps, when you're done reading, you'll pay them a visit.

End.

[10]

You emerge into a vast field and the path branches into two before a pristine metal signpost. Your suit translates the signs – the 'City' is to the left and 'Residences' are to the right.

To go to the city, go to ***[12]***
To go to the residences, go to ***[1]***

[11]

The protective shutter retracts from your suit's view-window when the warp-jump completes. A dense forest canopied by trees stretching into the sky surrounds you. Bronze beetle-like creatures scuttle away from the shrill chitter of an unseen creature ringing through the forest. Long-necked primates huddle in the trees. You are stunned – back home, plants grow in hydroponic labs while animals exist in archive logs. Your suit's database tells you there is a village ahead, but there are no details about the locals here. You can learn more about this dimension from them, but you're not sure if they are friendly.

To head to the village, go to ***[5]***
To head back, return ***[HOME]***

[12]

The grass along the path gives way to barren clumpy soil as grey and silver skyscrapers come into view. People in businesswear stream the streets, walking to and from the buildings, but only the clopping of court shoes and heels echoes through the skyscrapers' atriums. Walking down the street, you notice that no one is paying any attention to you or others. Everyone is wearing blank looks, their motions robotic. Amidst the rhythmic footsteps, you hear shuffling. A man staggers towards you, dragging one limp leg behind him. His face is peeling off, revealing complex machinery beneath.

Jolts of electricity flow through your suit, dropping you to the ground. Your view-window flickers erratically, disrupting your vision. Several orbs emerge from the shadows – surveillance drones armed with lethal and non-lethal weaponry. Some circle the malfunctioning android, securing it with energy cuffs. The glowing red scope of the drone that tased you studies you as it nears. You try to back away, but you can't feel your limbs. The drone whirs and delivers yet another shock. As your consciousness fades, you feel the drone dragging you off to an unknown destination.

End.

[13]

You ignore the suit's warnings and take off your helmet. The sun's golden rays warm your face – something you've never felt before.

'How is it?' the woman asks. Her voice rings in your ears, unmuffled by the suit's audio receptors.

The suit must have been lying to you, because you're not in a dreary neighbourhood. The blocks are adorned with splashes of colour, complementing the lush fruit-bearing shrubs and trees planted throughout the estate. You inhale the sweet air and can't help but laugh in delight.

'Amazing, isn't it? This isn't called Utopia for nothing,' the lady beams. Her skeletal frame and pasty skin have been replaced with a flawless face and radiant, flowing hair. 'How about it, will you stay?'

You readily agree, registering at the town centre for a resident chip head implant.

Years pass in a flash. Each day consists of chats with neighbours and lazing around. There's no need for work or money as housing is free and food is delivered daily by a truck. You had taken off your suit some time ago, and now you're not sure where it's gone. You hit it off with the female jogger and soon marry her with plans to adopt.

Life couldn't get any better.

End.

[14]

Your view-window opens, and you're floating among speckles of white stars glinting in endless space. You spot a small asteroid nearby and glide towards it with your suit's propulsion system.

A building stretches across half of the asteroid like a down-turned mouth. 'Mr Denper's Dimensional Emporium' announces its big neon sign. Its façade is featureless save for a single door, which you approach. A stocky guard stands by it, decked in a Denper Corp suit.

'Good morning,' says the guard, waving his tablet at you. 'Your Identification Profile, please.'

You call up your Profile and send it to the guard via your suit's Link Transfer system.

If you have not visited two other dimensions, go to ***[2]***
If you have visited two other dimensions, go to ***[4]***

[15]

'Suit yourself,' Mr Denper says as he puts your dimension away. 'Now that it's clear that you have no intention of buying or selling, you should be on your way.'

He picks up a tablet from the table and taps it. Your suit's emergency warp-jump activates, returning you to your dimension.

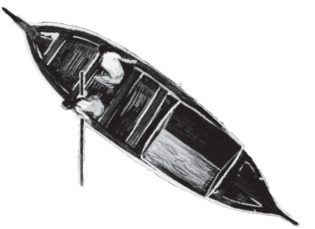
You stumble into the Mul-DES home complex. As Mul-DES powers down, the only sound you hear is your haggard breathing. For the first time in a while, you take in the silence, realising how alone you are. There are no cannibals or drugged internees, no emotionless robots or star-speckled darkness.

You wonder if you've made the right choice, but perhaps, just like Mr Denper had said, there's so much potential waiting to be explored right at home.

End.

AKANKSHA RAJA

Akanksha Raja is a writer and editor from Singapore.

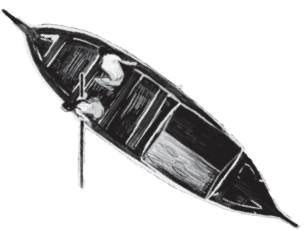


Sealegs

Home is a land
that tells me to go
back home, where I
want to go when I am
home. A dry room
out of which I carve
myself.
My voice fell asleep
at home a long time ago
and I speak in a borrowed tongue.
Syllables cleaved from my name.
My self run aground
watching the tides turn over
toes deep in the sand of other lands.

MEHR IMAAN

Mehr Imaan is a writer from Sri Lanka. She believes that magic lies hidden amidst the chaos of life. She swims in the ocean of fiction while occasionally diving into the lakes of creative non-fiction. Her writing explores emotions using nature and poetics as tools. She likes to think of herself as a modern nomadic bard. She loves dogs, mythology and completely irrelevant facts.



Nesting Time

It's not a dream.

The deep, dusty wooden floors are now aged and glossed—secret spots with loose planks to hide memories under. Tall people should steer clear of the staircase railings as climbing too close will cause heads to be hit. Still, silence moves, thieving squirrels and gossiping birds make their rounds; skittle scattle. The air tastes of Shan's biriyani masala mix, gently laced with threads of frankincense that lay over me. Light chooses her favourite spots, and filters in from the garden to very specific parts of the house, leaving the rest in the dusk. Between her rays I lay curled, like a shaded fern, at the railing's edge. Perfectly inconveniently positioned at the bottom of the staircase. My family thoughtlessly steers clear of me as well. Allowing my rest, allowing me to be alone. I am an alien creature that was accepted in this house. Able to be. Still judged, but not poked and prodded to be different. I have a refuge.

For hours, I would lie asleep while life carried on around me. My mother must have thought, "What is that child doing now?" My father probably didn't. Regardless, they let me be. I felt a swishing of my mum's dupatta every

time she left the TV room for the kitchen, stepping over me. Heard the crumbs fall as my dad secretly ate another packet of Maliban chocolate biscuits, and then slowly hopped after Sebastian, may he rest in peace, trying to recover his stolen sock before it was buried in the garden. The cool and tender sniffs of Zazu, may she rest in peace, as she checked on me before also napping a few feet away from my exhalations, in a more convenient, sunny spot. Her nose directed towards mine.

In these moments, my mind is held and pulled to a new place. I am allowed to fold in on myself to find my home. The physical world bubbles away, while I swim in the oceans of my dreams. Consistently, and forever running through the thoughts of my brain. Running and erasing breaths, catching memories, creating new ones. Meeting friends, recreating adventures. Through it all, I am home. Fallen trees, now with me again, wrapping me with their twiggy embrace, lotus leaves flopping over my head, and their leafy counterparts singing whispers in my ear. It sometimes feels so good there that it becomes impossible to leave. But sometimes the yellow bird with the toothpick beak sings its happy song, and all I can do is cry. When my mind turns on me, I can still be safe here. In the depths of my broken breath, when my lungs

are pierced with the flukes of a thousand anchors, pulling me down to drown. I can close my eyes and go home. Sanctuary is snuggling in the cushions of my cerebrum. I can smile there while tears sear my face. I can breathe there without feeling my chest can cave in. I can just be. Forgetting about the needles stabbing my heart into a jammy pulp. I can spread the jam on toast and devour it with a hot cup of tea. Free and untethered.

Red, Gold, and Green.

The fog of music clouds the night. The exhalation of all the people at the party, coupled with the smoke, makes it hard to breathe. Speech isn't a skill of mine yet. I am trapped at the table surrounded by family friends who don't see me. "Children are meant to be seen, not heard." I wasn't seen or heard. The music is hitting my chest. It doesn't stop. The lights are narrow strips of leather whipping me wildly. My hands are squeezing my arms tight, my eyes searching for refuge. Left, right, and again. Scanning layer by layer. Nothing. Till I look down. Just past my obnoxious tulle dress is a quiet darkness. I slide off the chair and crawl under the table. The fallen glitter sticks to my brown skin, hiding within my crinkly knees, mirroring flakes of light into my new space.

I found the centre.

The tablecloth protected me from the brutal tribal celebration: an unrelated uncle's birthday. Finally, some calm. I laid flat on the shiny, false wooden floor and looked up. The speckles of red, gold, and green party confetti and glitter covered me, reflecting a version of the light outside. It wasn't so harsh, no strict lines or neon colours were telling me off. It had softened, blended. The light was a water flurry. In this new space, where the noises beyond the tablecloth weren't given access, the voice of Boy George and his Culture Club stepped right in. Reminding me that life would be easy if the colours were like my dreams. In that moment, it was just us, and it didn't feel real. I didn't feel alone. The Karma Chameleon never left me. Instead, together, we come and go.

Wake up.

Wet tiles, deep sapphire skies, and a cool, misty rain enveloped me. A few minutes to midnight. The air quenched my body from the heat. I was quiet. The first came out in the distance. It was premature. But soon they all followed. First in the middle, then to the left, then to the right, and then they were everywhere. The sound was muffled, almost muted. I could listen to the music in my mind and watch the

magic. No smoke to tear my eyes, no people running about with so much energy. Just the calm. The soft. The art. It was my bubble of silence stopping the explosions of anticipation. I got to daze out at the neon-coloured chocolate sprinkles that were tossed like a salad into the sky. This was the first time I enjoyed the fireworks. It was a new year. And a Tekken rematch was waiting.

when the jam tree fell

warm earth swirled a
sopping
cascading
lair
guarded by worms
and broken
roots:

my first
pottery studio,

mumma's
newest headache,

thathi's subliminal
loss,

Appa
didn't notice.

the bas aiya's
came to carve

out the
corpse
to free
our garden from
this ephemeral excitement
to flatten
my cinnamon flavoured
chai—
—tya

don't leave

hands scrunch
fingers stretch
my veins reach to
rescue her
keep the
art
alive
I tried
to preserve—
—to bake

mumma's oven
ruined,
thathi made a call.

grass bars
rolled over her
I was back in solitary
and

Appa

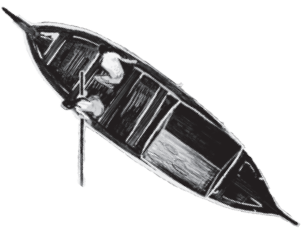
didn't

notice.

Thathi: father
Appa: Older sister
Bas: construction worker
Aiya: Big brother
Chaitya: a shrine, sanctuary, temple

FRANCIS LAU

Francis is a published writer and award-winning filmmaker whose works have been showcased globally. With over two decades of experience, he leads creative teams, teaches accredited film modules, and champions storytelling across cultures. As both artist and educator, he fosters innovation and nurtures the next generation of storytellers.



Unmarked grave

You hid in the fields
lest they pulled your skull
bleached and chiselled
like a conch in the sand.
Wielding their rifles,
they tried to hunt you down—
a nest of scorpions lifting their tails.
They shoved their muzzles
into father's mouth, and hauled
mother away into the woods.
When the boy between her legs
blasted open a door,
a scorpion blasted inside of me.
Father used to draw circles
to crush their sting.
But this time, death decided
to draw one for him.
I pray someday you would
pierce the scorpion's nest,
and come out holding
a long godhead.

Soon you were gone,
your outstretched arms
believing you were a sparrow,
while I sat here with no name.
Day and night, my skin stretched
over a membrane of broken bones.
Writers, diplomats and scholars
anyone who spoke French
or wore glasses, I pushed
them all into the ground.
I pushed the sick and the defenceless.
I pushed my neighbour's children.
Once I saw my teacher drag her
clitoris across the plains
and I thought of mother
and what they'd done to her.

Arise, sons and daughters of Angkor!
They may kill you but not your spirit.
Arise, grandchildren of Angkor!
Beware of what you endure.
You're teaching others how to treat you.

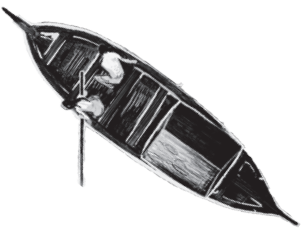
So I took up the cudgels,
and rallied those in the trenches.
Justice was my only set of tools.
អាចុយម៉ែរាយ (You motherfucker)!
Fuck you for resetting us to Year Zero.
Fuck you for making us an experiment.
I cleaved open one of the scorpions.
Out of its dorsal spat a huge lodestone—
still born, deformed, black like a bomb.
I stomped on it, and it blew up in my face.

Nobody told me demagogues
kill in the name of ideology.
Nobody told me history is a circle.
Nobody told me, because nobody was left.
Years later, I still hear the moans,
the stifled groans.
The sound of gold being snatched from teeth.
The beaten hearts, the strangled tongues,
the screams of mothers and children
at the crack of dawn.
Each time, when the monsoon whips

things up from the ground,
I'd expose myself,
hoping you might see.
I lie somewhere in the middle
of a lake, now covered in
marshes and weeds.
That skeletal frame,
its jagged arms and twisted legs
mark a senseless carnage.
Its caustic bark grated
like the skin of a snake
when they clamped their muzzles
between my teeth.
Against my tongue,
flesh and metal melted into one
till I could no longer
speak your name.
If tears ever flowed from
the Mekong, mine would have filled
every river in Phnom Penh.

VICKY CHONG

Vicky Chong is the author of *Racket and Other Stories* (Penguin Random House). She was a prize-winner in the 2018 Nick Joaquin Literary Awards Asia-Pacific. Her stories are found in *Best New Singaporean Short Stories Vol 6*; *The Best Asian Short Stories 2021, 2022, 2023*; *Letter to my Son*; and *A View of Stars*.



Glamour Girls

The soft hum of the air-conditioning penetrated her consciousness. Meredith rubbed the goosebumps on her bare arms, and suddenly awoke from the chill. A white sculpture of Jesus on the cross stared down at her. Dark-stained wooden panels on the arched ceiling contrasted with the whitewashed walls on both sides of the hall, intermittently flanked by glass doors leading to a courtyard on the left and a garden on the right. For a moment, she forgot where she was. Meredith's gaze shifted to the coffin in front of the rows of pews. Her heart became heavy with grief and something else. She looked at the phone she was clasping. A brief respite to escape the afternoon heat had turned into a forty-five-minute nap. She was exhausted.

'Well, I have been at the wake for four days,' she thought. The cavernous hall was empty. Such a waste of energy to keep the air-conditioning turned on. She stretched her arms overhead and silently thanked yoga for keeping her 73-year-old body lean and lithe. Still, her joints creaked and back ached. She limped to the coffin, feet numb, and glanced through the glass window. Despite the natural makeup, the body did not resemble Geraldine. Meredith could not

pinpoint exactly the difference between a sleeping Geraldine and a dead Geraldine. There was a waxy sheen on her skin that made her look unnatural. Even the wax figure of Princess Diana had looked more alive. Geraldine would be furious at the embalmer who had styled her freshly dyed auburn hair, cut just two weeks ago. Her cheeks were a tad too rosy, lips just a tinge of pink and not the bright red she preferred. The Swarovski crystal ear studs were expensive to be burnt but cheaper than her favourite diamond earrings.

Thank goodness they had the good sense to do their wills, LPAs, AMDs, and ACPs when they turned 65, so Meredith knew exactly what to do. They, the Glamour Girls – Meredith, Geraldine, and Wendy, friends since secondary school. What did they have in common that had kept their friendship alive all these years? Geraldine, an ASEAN scholar from Ipoh, boarded at the school and, after university, never returned to her kampong. Wendy, the only child of a seamstress whose father had died in a traffic accident when she was twelve, was studious and introverted. And sporty Meredith, the sixth and youngest daughter, whose parents welcomed her two friends whenever they visited after school.

All now alone – Wendy, a recent widow, with two successful children in distant New York and LA. Geraldine's

short-lived marriage to a wealthy, albeit philandering, American expat had produced no children (but a huge alimony), until recently, when she purchased Lula, the poodle-mix, who must be whining in Wendy's flat at the moment.

'I can't take Lula. My three cats at home will tear her to pieces,' Meredith had told Wendy when they first discovered Geraldine's death.

'But I can't stand that dog,' Wendy protested. 'He drools and yaps nonstop.'

'It's a she. Anyway, would you rather she be ravaged by three cats?'

'I don't care. Did Gerry mention anything about who is going to be his guardian in her will to us?' They were the executrix, but that was before Lula came along, so there had been no mention of guardianship.

'*Her* guardian!' Meredith corrected again.

'Why in the world would she have gotten a dog at this late stage of our lives? What was she thinking?' Wendy had wailed, more from the responsibility of taking over the dog than the demise of her friend.

'You know why. She wanted a companion who would give her unconditional love,' Meredith said, remembering how she had tried unsuccessfully to dissuade Geraldine from

buying the dog.

'Not that Geraldine had time to arrange for a new home for Lula, with her sudden death,' Meredith muttered.

Poor Geraldine, who didn't wake up from her sleep, her death undiscovered for an entire day. The three friends had once argued about the pros and cons of wishing each other a daily *Good Morning* in the group chat just to check on each other. Geraldine had insisted that this might lead to unnecessary worry, should one of them fail to reply. In the end, Wendy the worrier, insisted on going to the condo when Geraldine didn't reply by midday and made the gruesome discovery.

A sudden thought hit Wendy. 'Just so you are clear, Meredith, I'm not taking over your cats when you die. You need to look for an alternative home for them before you go.'

'We should update our wills. But don't you worry, my three cats will be willed to the cat community, and most of my inheritance.'

'Are you mad? What about your nieces and nephews, and grandnieces and grandnephews? Don't they get anything, seeing that you were the doting aunt to them when they were kids? I can never understand single women,' Wendy sighed.

'If they had wanted anything from me, they should

have kept in touch more.'

Now, as she looked at Geraldine lying in the casket, Meredith thought about her family. Her once-a-year Chinese New Year family. Her heart shrank a little. Yes, she understood they were all too busy with careers and young families to remember their independent and fit Aunt Merry. But at least she was sure her family would come to her wake, unlike Geraldine's. Where was Geraldine's family? Meredith had placed an obituary in *The Straits Times* and the *New Straits Times* in Malaysia. The visitors to the wake during the last three nights had mostly been Geraldine's colleagues and friends. Surely someone from Ipoh would have seen the obituary?

Meredith opened the glass door and stepped out of the chapel. A blast of warm humidity swaddled her. Beside the chapel, a large tent had been set up over the courtyard with wooden tables covered in white plastic cloths and white plastic chairs. Overhead, wall fans whirled ferociously, fighting a losing battle against the heat.

Wendy was seated at one of the tables, chatting with a man. Meredith walked over to join them. She looked at the man curiously.

'Merry, meet Mr Koh. He is a brother working for the

church,' said Wendy.

Mr Koh was around their age or even older, with his mop of white hair and age spots on his wrinkled face. He and Wendy looked like twins, sitting together with the same silvery hairstyle. Meredith hated to sound like an ageist, but she couldn't help but blurt out, 'Wow, must be a good retirement job.'

Mr Koh laughed. 'I have been serving here for over three decades, and I hope to continue until I die.'

'Good for you.' Wendy and Meredith both uttered together, although each sounded different in their meaning.

'And how long have you known Sister Geraldine?' he asked.

'All our lives,' said Meredith.

'Since school,' said Wendy.

Mr Koh shook his head. 'I heard she died of a brain aneurysm. You must be devastated by her sudden demise.'

Wendy nodded. 'Yes, we are.'

Meredith shook her head. 'At our age, we can go anytime. Nothing to be sad about. Do you remember, Wendy, we said a good age to die was 75? So Geraldine left a little prematurely. Just like her to always be the first.' She turned to Mr Koh. 'She was a scholar and always came first in class.'

'It's not like we plan our deaths to the exact time. We can't choose our birth or our death,' Wendy said, her tone impatient.

'Still, I hope to go when I turn 75. Don't want to be suffering from sarcopenia and dementia and whatnots,' said Meredith firmly.

Meredith felt a kick on her leg but ignored Wendy. She turned to Mr Koh and found him smiling sheepishly at their exchange.

'Regardless of when we die, we will all eventually return to our eternal home with God. You will be comforted to know Sister Geraldine is now safe.' He bowed his head dramatically.

Wendy was giving Meredith a death stare. Meredith hastily swallowed the retort at the tip of her tongue. The two ladies nodded silently.

Taking that as his cue to continue, Mr Koh said, 'You know, Sister Geraldine is a very lucky woman.'

'How so?' Smiling in uncertain agreement, Wendy asked.

'Her casket is in the cool chamber of the chapel. We usually only allow wakes outdoors, never inside the chapel,' Mr Koh smiled proudly as if Geraldine were royalty.

Meredith found this baffling. 'I'm curious,' said Meredith, sweeping away Wendy's warning pinch on her thigh. 'Why exactly is our Sister Geraldine luckier than the other brothers and sisters? Shouldn't all be treated equally?'

Mr Koh's deeply lined brown face turned a slight tinge of pink. The ringing of his phone made all three jump.

'Sorry, do excuse me.' He mumbled and scurried off.

'Saved by the phone,' Wendy laughed.

'Ouch! Your pinch is going to leave me a bruise,' said Meredith, rubbing her thigh as she glared at Wendy.

Wendy and Meredith were taken by surprise when Geraldine told them that she was a born-again Christian. She was the last person they expected to accept Christ.

'I never had a church wedding, although my Bali wedding was nice.' Geraldine had told them while preparing their ACPs. 'Let me hold my wake in one. I like the romantic notion of hymns being sung while I rest in my coffin. Not those noisy wayang Taoist funerals for me. Both of you can say the eulogies, read my favourite poem.'

'Do you have a favourite poem? You don't read poetry,' Meredith had said.

'But you're not even baptised and don't attend church. How are we going to arrange this Christian funeral when

none of us is Christian?' Wendy asked.

'Don't worry. I've done my research. All these churches want is money. At the most, I'll show my face in church once in a while and get to know people. I'll even buy a niche in the church so they can't reject me.'

'I think it's easier to book a hotel function room. You're making things difficult for us,' Meredith grumbled. 'Why do you even want a niche? Who's going to visit your niche?'

'Hey, this is my last wish. Can't you respect that? I'd do anything for you. Tell me yours.' Geraldine had looked at them eagerly, exactly the way she did when they were sixteen and describing the kind of wedding they would like, wide-eyed, grinning with enthusiasm.

'I'd like a simple Buddhist wake. No incense. Some chanting by monks. Cremation and ashes to be scattered at sea,' Wendy said. 'No niche. My kids won't bother to visit me.'

'That's environmental pollution. How is it we never knew you were Buddhist?' Meredith asked.

'I'm *trying* to be one. Meditation is so hard,' Wendy said.

Geraldine rolled her eyes. 'Oh, hush, Meredith, and let's respect her wish. Now tell us yours.'

'No wake. Just donate my body to the university

hospital as a cadaver for the medical students so they have one less homeless body to import from India.' There was a silence before Meredith continued. 'Oh please, both of you close your mouths before a fly gets in.'

Geraldine immediately nodded. 'As you wish.'

'Would the hospital accept any dead body?' Wendy asked.

Meredith felt her voice rising in annoyance. 'Do you expect them to set an age limit? No dead body above fifty? As long as they get a healthy dead body, they should be grateful!'

Geraldine was lucky to get her last wish to hold her wake in a chapel, dressed in a white lacy gown (to match her white casket) and hymns sung every evening until her funeral the following day. Would Meredith be as lucky for somebody to arrange her last wish?

She instinctively took Wendy's hand. 'Wendy, can you make sure I leave before you? I don't want anybody handling my affairs other than you. Not siblings, nor my nieces, nor nephews. At least you have children you are close to. They will take care of everything if I were to die before you. You're the closest person to me. I trust you.'

Wendy's eyes moistened, and tears rolled down. 'I don't want to be left alone with both of you gone. What would I

do? We've always done things together. The Glamour Girls. I thought we had plans to move into the retirement home in JB and live like the Golden Girls? Our final home before we die. Now I'm faced with the prospect of being confined forever to my three-room Bukit Merah HDB with no friends.' She pulled a tissue from the box on the table and blew her nose. 'And you know what's worse?'

Meredith shook her head, face wet with tears and perspiration.

'We won't even be together after we die. Geraldine is in her forever home with her Lord Jesus, and I'd be reincarnated, and you … ' She swallowed a lump and whispered, 'Where will you go when you die?'

Where would Meredith go when she dies? Who cares? Not her. She was not afraid of death, but did fear loneliness, old age and sickness. She'd seen too many decrepit old people, in and out of hospitals, becoming shadows of themselves, while people talked dismissively over and around them.

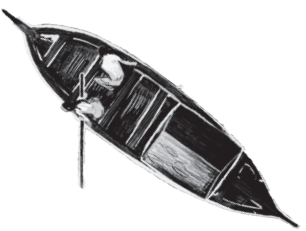
She grabbed Wendy by the shoulders. 'Wendy, you're right. We had plans to move in together. Why haven't we done it? We could put our HDBs up for rent and use the income to pay for our retirement home in JB. It's better to live together and not die alone, with no one knowing.'

Wendy nodded, her hands clasping Meredith's. 'As soon as we settle Geraldine's affairs, we'll move in together. I'll get Lula adopted, and you settle your cats. Instead of animals, we will have a garden plot to grow plants and vegetables. We won't be the Glamour Girls without Geraldine, but we'll be two Golden Girls.'

Meredith looked at her old friend and laughed, her heart lighter, a burden she didn't know she was carrying lifted.

CHARVI RAMMOHAN

Charvi Rammohan is an aspiring film-maker and screen writer who is currently pursuing her masters at the Lasalle College of the Arts. She grew up in the United Arab Emirates, in an Indian family that hails from Kerala. She holds a bachelor degree in Visual Communication and received an HNC certification in Film-making. She wishes to make movies in her native tongue Malayalam, that tell stories that touch on topics and certain dynamics that exist within people or society that go unexplored. In her free time, she enjoys cooking and eating the food she has cooked.



Hello

The Husband fixed the cuffs of his sleeves. The Wife made sure that the box of Indian sweets was intact. She fixed his collar. He smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. He moved his hand down to touch a small red bruise on her neck: a mark left by him earlier when he had helped tie the lace of her saree's blouse. She tried to cover it with the pallu of her saree. She found a certain pleasure and pride in the mark. She gently moved the husband's hand away with a seductive smile and rang the bell.

They were visiting the Aroras' home at Serene Heights, a luxury gated community hidden away in the suburbs, not too far from a natural reserve. The sustainable living space was conceptualised and materialised by the rich and environmentally conscious. They had taken the place up for a month. There were no aunties, the equivalent of CCTVs, clocking in every time the Husband or Wife left and came back to their apartment.

The door opened. The Aroras stood, their hands folded in a humble namaste. Mrs. Arora received the box of sweets from the Wife with the customary 'Oh, you shouldn't have.' The couple entered, stunned by the extensive interior work.

A semi-nude bronze statue of a dancer welcomed them in her stationary, coy pose. The Husband stopped to admire its finesse. The proportions made it seem like a real woman dipped in bronze paint. The Husband walked further in, noticing an old rifle hung high up on the wall.

'Belonged to my father. Hunting enthusiast. Like my grandad and my great-grandfather.' Mr. Arora beamed with pride as he revealed the gun's lineage.

'I see … A family heirloom …'

Mr. Arora nodded, still gleaming with honour.

'So, do you hunt, Mr Arora?'

'No, it's not for me. But I do hunt in a way. You see that horn on the wall? I bought it from an art dealer in Kenya. It belonged to a white rhinoceros. Quite the beauty, isn't it?'

The Wife walked cautiously, worried she might knock a priceless vase or one of the many granite statues. Most were the sensual Apsaras or the celestial Indian dancers, known for their beauty and grace. They weren't among the clouds and the stars, but aptly placed in a penthouse closest to the sky.

The space was lit with golden lights and candles, giving just the right amount of brightness to illuminate the paintings and the sculptures of the house.

'You'd almost think it is an original Klimt,' said the Wife.

'That's because it is … ' The tone in Mrs. Arora's voice was hard to miss. 'It was up for auction in London. I took the next flight and returned with this winner.'

The Wife tried to behave as if it hadn't been the first time she had casually come across the original work of an artist. She had briefly studied Klimt during her undergraduate days in the UK. She had witnessed many 'originals' in the museums and art galleries, but this felt different. She could almost smell the artist's essence. She took a whiff of what felt like a strangely gratifying smell. Mrs. Arora gave an understanding smile rather than that of a snobbish art connoisseur. The Wife was shown towards a lift within the house, where the men waited.

The lift was big enough to hold just four people. Mr. Arora pressed a button on the floor below. The door of the lift opened to a passageway with black walls, dimly lit by tiny spotlights fixed above the monochromatic photos of the busts of Greek Gods and Goddesses on the wall. The Wife and the Husband looked at each other as they followed their hosts. Their fear vanished as a spectacular room welcomed them. A classy lair: tall bookshelves, a bar with designer barstools, and a comfortable leather couch awaited them. The party settled down on the couch, and entrees were served by two servants in black suits.

The Wife wanted to gorge on the little chutney sandwiches, the chicken strips marinated in tandoori spices and the large cheese platter. The servants brought plates of cocktail samosas, cottage cheese stuffed mushrooms and more. 'Please, help yourselves. Don't be shy.'

As soon as Mrs. Arora's words fell on the Wife's ears, she wasted no time taking some from each dish, careful not to drop the fine porcelain plate in her eagerness to devour the first bite.

The Husband chuckled as he watched his Wife close her eyes, inhaling deeply as she took every bite. The food was accompanied by drinks served by Mr. Arora. He served the Husband and himself a glass of apple brandy made by a friend at his own distillery in Serbia. The Husband smelled the high potency of the homemade spirit.

The Wife and Mrs. Arora were served a bottle of white wine from Georgia, formerly a part of the Soviet Union. Mr. Arora held up his glass, and the party clinked their glasses to his, making sure they made eye contact.

***

After an hour of drinking, Mr. Arora was well on to his third drink. The Husband held on to his second. He enjoyed drinking. Over the years, he had taught himself to drink

slower at social events. His senses remained heightened, and there wasn't a moment of vulnerability.

An evening like this would have never been possible in the community that they lived in earlier. The aunty-squad there knew who came in when, how and with whom. And if they didn't know who the 'whom' was, then you could count on them to ensure that the entire building knew.

'Come on, Akash, Drink up!' Mr. Arora's voice snapped the Husband out of his thoughts. He chugged it and gave Mr. Arora a big smile. Mr. Arora poured the Husband and himself another drink. He took a sip and broke into laughter.

'It's funny hearing me call my own name out loud.'

He acknowledged what Mr. Arora said with a smile. It was true, though. They had the same names, and so did their wives. They were both 'Akash', married to 'Jia' and in their mid-thirties. The Husband was mostly the silent listener, something he despised doing when he was off work, after listening to people all day as a psychologist.

The only person he cared to listen to was his Wife.

'You've never thought about having kids?' Mrs. Arora's question was direct, yet there was no judgment in it.

'I don't think we're quite ready for it. We want to take our time.'

'I fell pregnant in the second month of our marriage.' Mrs. Arora moved closer to the Wife to whisper. 'My Mister here, claimed to have mastered the pull-out technique, and I believed.'

Mrs. Arora burst out into a high-pitched laugh that caught the Wife off guard. Mr. Arora, deep in conversation with the Husband, rolled his eyes, annoyed by the interruption.

'What was I saying? Yes. Kashyap gave me exactly nine days to turn all his unaccounted money white. It was terrible. But you see, I have a way with this. It's a God-given skill. Do you know where most of the funds to build that housing community went? An offshore account in Seychelles that belongs to his mistress. He had the audacity to talk to me about integrity when I asked him to give me more than just nine days. Let me show you a picture.'

'A nine-day deadline does not seem so bad when it comes with a BMW, does it?'

Mrs. Arora's question seemed like a rhetorical one. The Wife maintained her silence while trying to look impressed. She did not care much for cars and the usual riches. She was in love with free will. If she could live on a mountain along with her Husband and build a community that hadn't been tainted by the pseudo-virtuous ideologies of society, she

would. That Fabergé egg on a stand in a glass box sure looked nice to her, though, with the intricate work of gold, encrusted with precious stones.

***

Every story the drunk Mr Arora shared was about his accounting firm, built from scratch and tending to the filthy-rich and problematic politicians, businessmen and celebrities.

The conversation with Mr. Arora seemed like the Fabergé eggs. Rich and seemingly intricate on the outside, but lacking anything of value on the inside. For a second, he questioned his decision not to get drunk and slightly vulnerable. It would have made his conversation with the pompous host bearable.

'You're a pretty little thing, aren't you? So is your Husband. He's got that aura around him. The kind that pulls you towards him …'

Mrs. Arora stared at the Wife for a moment, placing her hand on the Wife's hand. Mrs. Arora was on her sixth glass of wine. She watched her husband, who was engrossed in conversation with the Husband. She moved towards the Wife and held onto her by the shoulder. She was about to place a kiss on the Wife's cheek, but the Wife stopped her. She held the drunk Mrs. Arora firmly; it appeared as though

she had stopped her from slipping off the chair and falling. The sound of the screeching barstool alerted the men.

The Wife held Mrs. Arora as they walked to the couch. She was drunk, yet not completely out of her senses. Mrs. Arora held the Wife by her bare waist. The Wife did not try to shake the hand off. Reaching the couch, the Wife carefully removed Mrs. Arora's hands and made her sit next to Mr. Arora, much to her disappointment.

'You're a therapist, Akash?' Mr. Arora's question was sudden, and he did not seem too concerned about Mrs. Arora.

'I bet you make more than I do.'

'I wish, Mr. Arora.'

Money was, after all, what determined the quality of the life they could lead. It was a simple and undisturbed life that they wanted but it still came with a cost.

'Would you be open to offering your services to my Missus?'

'Excuse me?'

The Husband seemed confused as Mr. Arora laughed.

'I am just joking!'

The Husband failed to find the humour in it, and by the way Mrs. Arora looked at her husband, it was evident that she did too.

'I do hold couple therapy sessions … if that – '

'What even is the point of couples therapy when marriage is just a sham?' Mrs. Arora cut the Husband off. Mr. Arora poured himself another drink.

'Humans are just not designed for it. Look at us, for example. When was the last time we had sex?' Mrs. Arora's question got Mr. Arora thinking. The couple remained silent.

The question was followed by a deeper analysis of marriage and about the ageing sex lives of long-term married couples. Mrs. Arora went on about her own ideas, how open marriages could be the new age solution. Mr. Arora agreed to all that his wife said and sometimes even bothered to echo her thoughts with an 'Exactly.'

'What do you think, Akash?' Mrs. Arora ended her speech.

The Husband took a minute to process the question.

'I really need to use the loo.'

The Wife walked towards the washroom next to the bar. The Husband followed his Wife. Once inside, The Husband locked the door.

'I think this is it.'

'Are you sure? They are a little tipsy … ' The Husband's doubt was evident in his scrunched eyebrows.

'I am sure. How often has my intuition gotten us into trouble?'

'But I still think we should wait and have a couple more meetings perhaps?'

'Listen. This is it. Trust me.'

In his experience, she was right about things, and with a smile, he agreed.

***

The couple joined their hosts. There wasn't a perfect moment to start, so the Husband initiated the conversation.

'We hear you, and we find your thoughts quite intriguing. In fact, Jia and I have thought about the same.'

Mr Arora and Mrs Arora listened to the Husband.

'I think everything happens for a reason. Us moving into this nice community, bumping into a couple just like us, with names just as ours and now views that are exactly the same as ours.'

Mrs. Arora waited patiently, wondering where the conversation was going.

'Jia and I have been trying to meet people who share our views. We were sceptical, but having heard your take on this subject, I think we are on the same page. Our thoughts and feelings are in alignment, and it's not every day that we

meet such like-minded people.

'What we are trying to say is that …' began the wife, placing her hand on the husband's knee, 'as souls who are stuck in the monotonous nature of what we call a marriage, we need to perhaps form a bond.'

'Exactly! One where we explore a healthy relationship with our spouses. I mean you with mine, and mine with yours? If you look at it one way, we would still be with a 'Jia'. He smiled like he had just delivered the winning argument.

Mr. Arora stared, agape at the husband with his gaping mouth, trying to process every word. 'So, is that a yes, Mr. Arora?' the Husband asked, holding his glass up.

***

The Husband and the Wife stood outside. The door slammed in their faces. 'I told you they weren't ready.'

The Wife looked at the Husband, observing the changing floors above the lift.

'They seemed so sure and … Mrs. Arora seemed –'

'What?'

'Nothing. I got it all wrong. I am sorry. It's moving time again.'

'We are good. Thanks to Mr. Arora, who was quite trusting this evening, I might know where a few hidden

accounts of some naughty rich fucks are.'

'What a waste of a good-looking man. I was really looking forward to trying out something with Mr. Arora.'

The lift arrived, and the couple entered to find a man and woman who looked around the same age as the couple. The Wife pressed the button for the 25th floor.

Two floors had gone by when the Wife broke into a conversation.

'Hi, do you live here? I am sorry, we just moved in so –'

'Ah, yes, I am Lara and this –'

'Wait. Your name is Lara too?' The Wife laughed.

Lara laughed at the oddity of it before she moved on to introducing her partner, named 'James'.

' – Ok, now you're just playing with us. My name is James!'

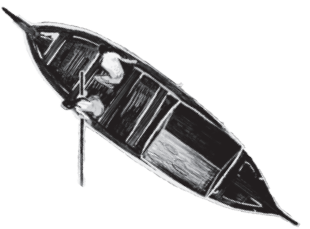
Lara and James were stunned.

'We'd love to have you over – James here is an amazing cook.'

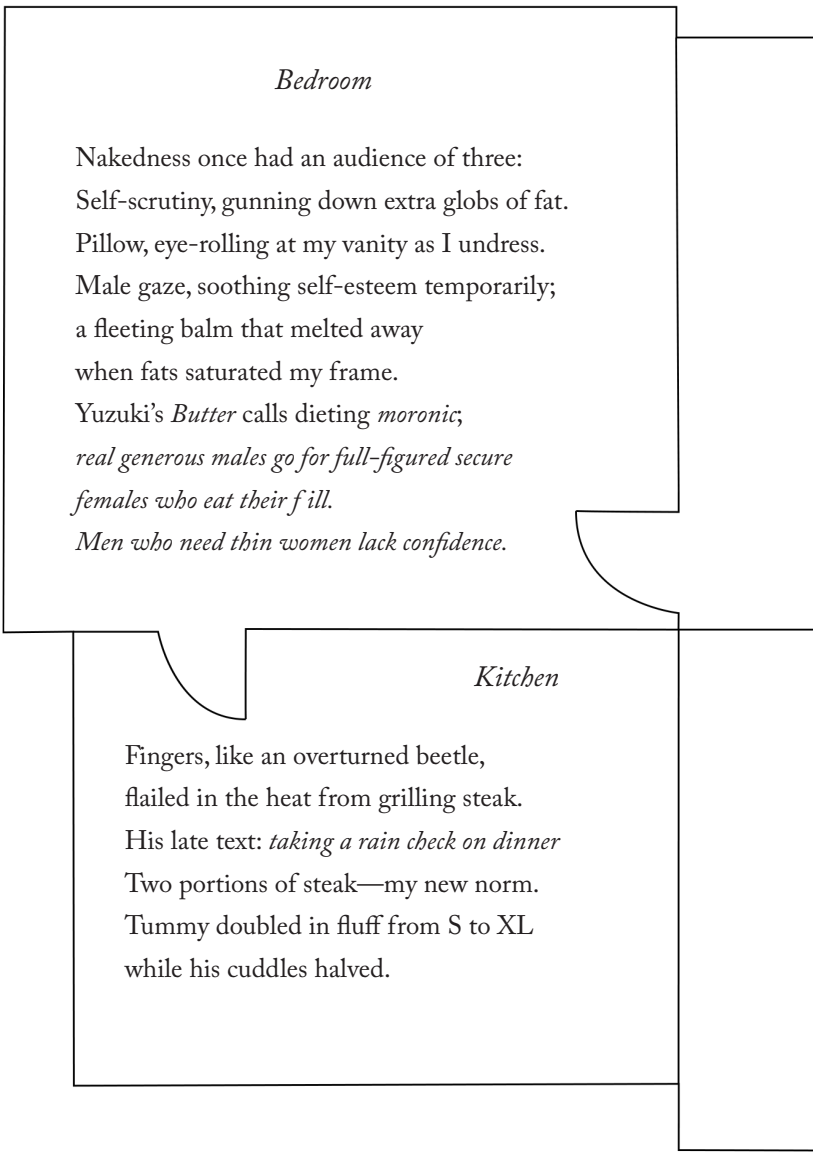
The Husband and the Wife smiled at each other knowingly.

FLORENCE LOH

Florence adores novels by Japanese authors, who inspire her to write. Bliss to her is a snaking queue of Japanese novels fighting to be read. She hopes to learn the Japanese language to take this inspiration and pleasure to a whole new level by reading them in their original texts.



A Blueprint



Bedroom

Nakedness once had an audience of three:
Self-scrutiny, gunning down extra globs of fat.
Pillow, eye-rolling at my vanity as I undress.
Male gaze, soothing self-esteem temporarily;
a fleeting balm that melted away
when fats saturated my frame.
Yuzuki's *Butter* calls dieting *moronic*;
real generous males go for full-figured secure
females who eat their f ill.
Men who need thin women lack confidence.

Kitchen

Fingers, like an overturned beetle,
flailed in the heat from grilling steak.
His late text: *taking a rain check on dinner*
Two portions of steak—my new norm.
Tummy doubled in fluff from S to XL
while his cuddles halved.

Living Room

Torn page from a letter pad with his last scribbles:
Women cannot let appearances go;
never be a consumable who's lost her worth.
From audience of three to Pillow only,
nudity ventures from bedroom to living room,
reaching for the telephone.
French buffet dinner for one? Reservation made.
Flaunting my gourmet cushions with pride,
a new chapter takes flight.

Bath

Jiggly tyres still stare back
as I coax pus from a pimple
to dive for the mirror.
Repulsed then by rubber,
my eyes preferred the unruly
bloody pubic bush
to love handles.

WC

He's gone.
Eyes no longer
rain tears
as toilet bowl
sings with glee
yellow rain
go away…

a definition by Negation

Her eyes are almond-shaped,
nose sharp as diamond's edge.
Fashioned like her father
who's left us forever.
No wedding bells sublime
only his last words chimed:
'Freedom in life's my creed,
a kid's out of my league!'

Her Grandma hugs her tight,
she squirms in pure delight.
Forced smile on Grandma's face,
her joys will soon erase;
gone on Grandpa's return.
Without a glance, he spurns:
'Unwed daughter with child,
be banished and exiled!'

A guarded look turns to a scowl
creases forming between his brows.
Darts of contempt shoot from his eyes
my Childcare Leave he just denied.

Disdain shamelessly undisguised,
the Boss makes a show to despise:
'Single mothers are all trouble,
hired only to be fired!'
Is this the oasis for my thirst?
Where my hungry soul is fed kindness?

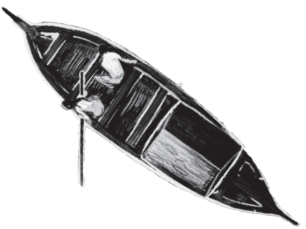
Despite his fatherly sympathy,
the Priest bows, deep in apology:
'We acknowledge your life choices made,
but teach abstinence before marriage.
Who knows if you might lead some astray …'
In just a heartbeat, I walked away.

no ring donning my finger
no father for my daughter
lost my parenting partner
Who won't find us a bother?

I chose to give life, there's no regrets.
What's done is done, I cannot turn back.
We dare not covet your acceptance;
is it too much just to spare judgment?

JOCELYN LOW

Jocelyn Low also writes under the names Jocelyn Chen and Joy Chen. Her short stories appear at anaksastra.com, and her flash fiction is featured in *Missed Connections: Microfiction from Asia*. Her love of reading runs so deep she dreams in text; she's equally drawn to writing for its power to inhabit different lives across different worlds.



The Principal

A 39-year-old principal from a prestigious Singapore junior college was among 44 men charged with soliciting minors. He had paid $500 to have sex with an underage girl at a local hotel. He pleaded guilty to the charges. The married father of a young son was part of a larger case that also involved other prominent figures from government and private sector organisations.

* * *

Wai Meng flicked the ash from his first cigarette into the standard-issue ashtray provided by Value Hotel, the budget accommodation tucked along the bustling Balestier Road. Wai Meng and the girl he addressed were in Room 202. They sat on opposite sides of the Queen-sized bed. A TV mounted on the wall in front of the bed showed a rerun of a local Chinese drama. Wai Meng told her he needed a smoke first.

'It's not easy. Surrounded by young, nubile flesh all day. Can see, cannot touch. You know what I mean? I'm talking about the girls, of course, though some of the guys are pretty buff for their age. I'm not that way inclined though haha!' Wai Meng looked at the TV screen instead of the girl. He knew that she would want to have the money upfront and the

transaction over as quickly as possible.

'Can you believe this is my first time paying for sex?' Wai Meng said. He was talking too much, but who cared? He was the one with the purchasing power here, and power was what he had over her. For the next two hours, she belonged to him.

'Almost forty and I just found out about girls like you. Ironical. All those scholarships, climbing the ranks… and now I finally get the real perks, eh? Top secret access to top call girls, hahaha.' Wai Meng sneaked a look at the girl. Would she be offended? He blew the cigarette smoke out of the corner of his mouth, making sure to direct it away from her face. The girl's face remained impassive. Dull thumping sounds from next door underscored the awkward silence as the smoke drifted towards the ceiling.

'Er, you understand "ironically?" Did you go to school? I'm sure you did, right? In Singapore, everyone needs the compulsory ten years of education.'

'Yeah, up to Sec 4. But before the exam, I dropped out. I know what is irony,' said the girl. Her pretty eyes flashed. Wai Meng felt suddenly foolish, his nervous laughter dying in his throat.

'Oh, I see. Sorry,' said Wai Meng. His face grew hot.

'I have a wife, and a son. My wife conducts Sunday school classes at our church. I'm not your typical customer.' The words tumbled out faster than he intended. The room suddenly felt too small, thick with the smell of his own nervousness and the girl's perfume.

'All my clients are normal people,' she said.

Wai Meng's face turned redder.

'Hey, are you sure you're above eighteen? You don't look it.' Wai Meng attempted to take control of the conversation again.

'Don't worry. You saw my IC.'

'Oh yeah, "Jessica," right?' Beneath her thick make-up and tight dress, she could have been in secondary school, not the twenty-year-old her identity card claimed.

Jessica nodded. She fiddled with the strap of the Chanel handbag on her lap. Wai Meng had bought enough expensive handbags for his wife. Jessica's was the real deal. He briefly wondered how Jessica could afford the Chanel.

'I'd like to pass you the five hundred dollars now, but you have to promise to do something for me first.'

She looked up. Beneath her eagerness for the money, Wai Meng sensed her apprehension.

'Mr Tang says this one is normal, no special request.'

'I know. I just need you to change into this, nothing kinky, okay? And clean off your make-up?' The Isetan paper bag crinkled as Wai Meng extracted the white school blouse and pale blue pinafore. He held them for a moment before passing them across to her.

Something flickered across her face—a question, perhaps—but mutely, she went to the small bathroom. She closed the door.

Wai Meng lit up a second cigarette. Smoking was one thing he was not allowed to do, neither at home nor at work. Compared to what he was doing here with Jessica, though, his wife catching him smoking would be the least of his worries.

Wai Meng looked around at the sparse furnishings. Forty dollars for two hours. Wai Meng was terrified of running into colleagues or church friends at those well-known hotel chains. Value Hotel was better. No one in his work or social circles would ever come to this budget hotel at Balestier.

Wai Meng looked at his reflection in the mirror along one wall of the room. His rimless spectacles framed his clean-shaven square face. Behind him, the closed bathroom door seemed to loom larger than it should.

The minutes stretched. Jessica was still in the bathroom. Wai Meng removed his spectacles. He took out a handkerchief

from his pocket and began to polish the lenses. Without his glasses, he managed to look both helpless and petulant. The bathroom door opened with a soft click. Wai Meng saw a blurred pale blue, but even so, his heartbeat quickened. He put on his glasses, and yes, now he could clearly see the schoolgirl standing in front of him.

She was even more beautiful without the makeup. The freckles on her high cheekbones contrasted nicely with her lipstick-stained mouth. Wai Meng smiled. He would be tender with her.

'Ah ... Jessica. Thank you. Do you have something to tie up your hair with?' Jessica rummaged in her handbag for a rubber band. She tied her hair in a loose ponytail.

'Can you tie it higher?'

There was a tightness in his chest. Wai Meng wondered if his voice sounded as strange to Jessica as it did to him.

When she raised her arms to tie a higher ponytail, her skirt rode up. Wai Meng glimpsed her pale upper thighs and looked away.

'Can you give me the money first? I need to pay Mr Tang his commission.'

Wai Meng gave her five one-hundred-dollar notes. He adjusted his crotch.

Jessica put the money in her Prada wallet. She lay down on the bed.

'Do you want me to take out my clothes?' she said.

'No!' Wai Meng said.

Jessica looked surprised at his tone.

'No,' Wai Meng said again, softer this time. He needed the school uniform.

He lay down carefully next to the young girl.

The only sounds came from the low volume of the TV. Wai Meng turned

towards Jessica and half rolled over her. She made a soft grunt at his weight. He reached for her mouth.

'Sorry, no kissing,' said Jessica, moving her head to the side. Some strands of her hair came loose from the ponytail and fanned out along her fair neck. Wai Meng felt a rush of blood to his groin.

He reached under her pinafore and pulled her underwear down. Jessica lifted her hips slightly for him to remove her underwear. Wai Meng pulled down his zipper and yanked out his engorged member.

'Can you touch me there?' he said.

Jessica reached down and used her hand on his erection. She made a few deft movements with her soft hands.

'Wait, wait,' said Wai Meng. 'Slow … down.'

'Need a rubber,' said Jessica, her up and down movements considerably slower. 'You know the rules.'

'Yes,' said Wai Meng. His eyes remained closed. It had been a long time since he had felt another person's touch, almost three years.

'Do you want to put on the condom now?' Jessica said.

'Yes.'

Jessica stretched out her other hand. She reached into her handbag and took out a small foil packet. She handed it to Wai Meng. He used his teeth to make a small tear. He removed the condom and tried to roll it on. He had to lift his body slightly away from Jessica's to complete the task.

'Okay?' Wai Meng said.

Jessica nodded.

He slipped into her. The tightness. He closed his eyes again. An image of his wife flashed in front of his eyes. *Not now!* He quickly reached back into his visual memory. A Japanese schoolgirl appeared on his mental screen. He huffed and puffed.

'Ah … ah …' *Oh no!*

***

Was that five hundred dollars well spent? Wai Meng

lay on the bed staring at the shadows cast into the room from the streetlights. He stretched to retrieve a cigarette from the bedside table, but changed his mind. His eyes fell on the used condom slung over the rim of the wastepaper basket. The condom mocked him. He had anticipated this fantasy for so long, going over countless variations in his head. None of them concluded in this fashion.

Jessica walked out of the bathroom wearing her own dress. 'Don't worry, it happens to a lot of my clients,' she said as she passed the school uniform back to Wai Meng. The glow of streetlamps now illuminated the room through the curtains. And the soft lighting made Wai Meng's body appear thin and awkward. His zipper remained undone.

'What are you waiting for? Haven't I paid you already?' Wai Meng said, casting aside the outfit into a crumpled heap. Jessica picked up her handbag and left the room in silence.

Wai Meng lay there, inert. He searched his body for any hint of gratification, but found none. The sheets were cold and unwelcoming to his skin. Wai Meng sat up, feeling the sudden urge to call his wife, to hear her voice, to pretend he was somewhere else. But he couldn't bear the thought of lying to her while in this bed. He gathered the crumpled uniform, making sure to smooth out the creases before folding it into

the Isetan paper bag. He checked his watch, calculated the time to get home, what excuse to give. The mechanics of concealment fell into place – as just another administrative error that would go undetected.

A/Z

By the time Z saw A—a chance meeting—long after they were no longer each other's destination, A had done things to herself in the eight months they had stopped talking. Her long, black hair that Z had always loved had been shorn close to her skull, dyed blonde. She had resorted to coloured contact lenses, discarding her dark-framed glasses that accentuated her almond-shaped eyes in a way that used to send flutters to his heart when she threw a glance his way. Now she looked at him indifferently through cool green eyes. Her once crooked teeth were also encased in metal, glinting in the light from the bright 7-Eleven logo. Z took all this in at a glance, but he did not know that the biggest acts of violence to her body were the cuts on her upper arms and inner thighs, neat, parallel strokes as though A was hastening the process of Z bleeding out of her life. The number of cuts proved this a futile enterprise. Exit wounds.

'How are you?' Z asked.

The more he wanted to both hug her tightly and trample on her to oblivion, the more he kept his voice at a normal, disinterested tone.

'Good,' said A.

What was one more lie in a relationship that had gradually consisted of more and more half-truths and compromises? Eventually, neither could tell what was real and what was not, which version of truth depended on what angle that age-old argument—all their arguments were age-old after nine years together—held.

Now they met in the most ubiquitous of places in Singapore, a 24-hour convenience store; there were so many unspeakable, unspoken words that A imagined floating above their heads. One wrong move and the words would come crashing down. She imagined both of their heads being chopped off by the wedge of a guillotine formed from these words. That might be a relief from this constant pain, pain that had been sharpened razor thin.

They nodded. Z turned left, and A turned right, leaving 7-Eleven.

Z once wrote in his journal: Was destruction necessary for love? Z and A had to destroy their own selves, sense of who they were, before they could let each other in. Their love was not an easy birth, and now the pain of its death was almost reviving the two dead people. They destroyed themselves to come together, but now that there was no 'they', there was also no Z, and no A.

Perhaps on the road to their destruction, there could have been traffic signs to help. "Stop" signs to say pause here: this is beautiful, and you may not visit this place again. Or "Bump Ahead" signs, like when the colleague got too close to Z.

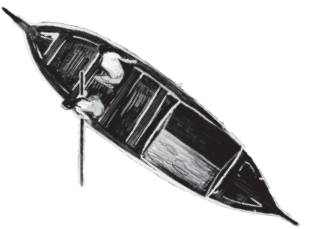
***

Maybe in the next life, A thought, *we would meet again in the eternal sunshine, and instead of growing to love each other, which we found to have destroyed us more completely than any hatred, we could grow wings. We would be modern-day Icaruses, not so greedy as to fly too near to the life-giving sun, but to stay low, keep below the radar of our burning love, and just be happy we could skim the surface of the seas of bliss, dipping our wings in every now and then, but not allowing ourselves to get so fucking crazy happy in love that we got too high; wrapped up with each other, aiming for perfection, we allowed the sun to melt our wax. That was when we crashed.*

Where does love go when it is gone?

NEHA NARANG

Neha Narang enjoys writing about the everyday experiences that remind her of home. Her work reflects on what it is to be a misfit in varied cultural and demographic contexts.



Hiraeth

Is it the house?
Arms that cradle?
Eyes that beam?
Hands that feed?

mouldy walls
broken floor
leaky faucets
discoloured ceiling

indifferent faces
unmet needs
emotional ruptures
unfulfilled dreams
walls close in
arms stifle lungs of air
eyes pierce every move
hands leave their imprints

Some only know
what home is not.

Vahana

They've seen the horrors of humanity,
shed tears seeking solace.
Shut themselves tight,
hoping darkness quells the grotesque sights.

They've heard the screams of inadequacy,
seethed at the jarring judgments.
Two of them no match for one,
thank heavens light travels faster than sound.

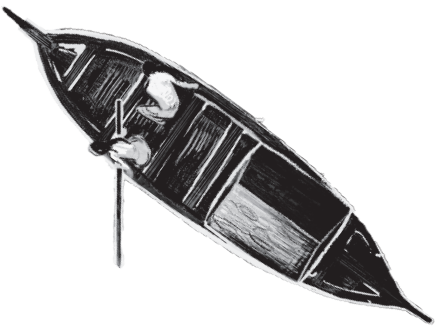
It smelt the stale dreams abound,
flowers turned to mulch all around.
Filtering the putrid before soaking it in,
nudging me to try it all, *yet again*.

It tasted the sweet before salt,
even if salt was where I was born.
If only this preference holds,
as it unfurls upon bitter words

It housed the intricacies of being human,
making space for stings and tingles,
the icy cold, the feisty brittle,
reeling at touch beyond palatable.

My eyes *see what they still can*
My ears *hear only what they want*
My nose *breathes it all in*
My tongue *is learning to hold still*
My skin *withstands the many autumn chills*

I live here; my body is my home.
The only one that carries me through it all.



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ABOUT THE COVER

Sampan's Wake
By Dan Wong

What hides beneath the visible? What is displaced yet remains? Like the roots of a tree, unseen yet indispensable to life. This illustration is inspired by the anthology's theme 'Home'. In its myriad forms, 'Home' can be the memories that rise above the surface.

Or the wounds that lie covertly beneath the waves. Or perhaps, they are the reflections dancing in the water's wake.

Dan Wong is a commercial illustrator living, working and plying his trade in sunny Singapore. He loves to draw.

Dan is the founder of the artist collective and illustration house A Good Citizen, also known as 好公民.

"Home is not where you are born;
home is where your attempts to escape cease"
—Naguib Mahfouz

Home
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