

SAMPAN

The LASALLE Anthology of Creative Writing




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Industries

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SAMPAN

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FOREWORD

Borders and Boundaries: Within, Between, Across, and Beyond

Dear writers and readers,

Borders and boundaries – what an intriguing theme for this year’s edition of SAMPAN, and what a rich tapestry of writings we find in this anthology!

Indeed, the theme resonates with “sampan” as a name for the anthology and speaks to our place in this part of the world, now commonly known as “Southeast Asia”, with the “Malay world” or “Nusantara” – “the islands in-between” – as our immediate neighbourhood. Hence the fecundity of the image and metaphor of the sampan, moving freely within, between, across, and beyond islands in the region.

Yet is there something about living in Singapore, a modern island-city-country-nation, that pulls us into insularity and away from a profound sense of the “in-between”? Recalling John Donne’s poem “No Man is an Island”, could we say that perhaps no island is an island? An island can never exist and thrive on its own. In our case, we are not in the first place “a piece of the continent” but a piece of an archipelago at the heart of a millennia-old maritime world, connecting us to many continents.

The idea of borders emerged at a very late stage of

human evolution. It is most clearly manifested in the making of nation-states, where sovereignty needs to be defended, and territorial borders need to be protected. Put simply, this contrasts clearly with the borderlessness of the pre-modern world, including Southeast Asia where peoples and civilisations interacted for the longest time before the creation of colonial territories and then independent nation-states.

Borders divide and separate; borders need to be secured and policed once territorial lines are imagined and drawn on maps, and demarcated on land, and in the sea and the sky. In an age of polarization, ideological borders are built and hardened along the lines of nationality, race, class, and gender, sometimes leading to violence.

The idea of boundaries, however, connotes fluidity and porousness – with in-between or liminal spaces that allow for negotiation and contestation, holding the tension between polarities rather than hardening into fixed binaries.

This is amply reflected in remarkable ways in the varied writings in this anthology. Taken together, these writings offer complex and nuanced portrayals of human beings located in specific places and times and having to confront perennial existential polarities, for example: self and other, us and them, human and animal, love and desire, dream and reality, force and consent, cowardice and courage, the corporeal and the spiritual, attachment and detachment, and truth and untruth.

Borders open and close depending on the designs of those in power. The spaces between shifting boundaries,

however, always imply and enable the active making of choices from moment to moment, keeping within, remaining in-between, crossing, or going beyond boundaries.

The creative writing that we have before us in this anthology demonstrates the creativity of human beings in making sense of universal human dilemmas and making choices that have consequences that they must be responsible for.

Here, we witness literary creativity in the service of human creativity – and we readers are thankful to the writers for conveying this to us in ways that are at once thought provoking and pleasurable.

With gratitude and appreciation,

Professor Kwok Kian Woon
Vice-Chancellor
University of the Arts Singapore

INTRODUCTION

And We Have Countries ...

And we have countries without borders, like our idea
of the unknown, narrow and wide - countries whose maps
narrow to a gray tunnel as we walk in them and cry out
in their labyrinths: 'And still we love you.'

—Mahmoud Darwish

In Singapore, the date of 1 September 2024 is significant. On this date, the rules around ownership of cats and dogs in Housing Development Board (HDB) flats changed, to allow up to two cats, and in private dwellings three cats. Before this date cats were not allowed in HDB flats and the 'community cat' was found lounging about or looking comfortable and quite at home, and mostly cats were taken care of by residents. Cardboard shelters and beds were provided and in shopping malls, cat cafes flourished and provided an opportunity for petting and spending time with a cat. The nation of Singapore turned 59 this year and the acceptance of cats as pets in the home marks a new border that has been broken, and, through government edict.

The writing in this anthology demonstrates an understanding of the ways that writing can undo borders and boundaries. Like a cat, the works creep up on you and surprise with their confidence.

Welcome to SAMPAN 3, the anthology of writing from LASALLE's Masters in Creative Writing programme, this year edited, produced and designed by a dedicated and committed group of alumni. As we moved to becoming a University of the Arts, the alumni have stepped into the gap produced by the later entry of new students into the programme and available to work on this edition. Future students will return to working on SAMPAN alongside alumni in the future.

You may wonder why I opened by writing about cats. A number of works here feature cats. Cats as a domestic and wild force are used to articulate the boundaries and borders that exist between humans and animals, human and human, humans and place, humans and religion, and other constructed boundaries. Boundaries exist in workplaces and other sites of living, such as the domestic sphere, or between ourselves and others. All of the works here, that seek to unsettle, comment, and document boundaries and borders through poetry, scripts, short stories and creative non-fiction, present views of Singapore and occasionally beyond, that provide glimpses into lives that understand the impact and imposition of border-lines that keep us apart, whether imposed by others or self-imposed, by species differences or by governments and nations. Borders that are imposed by regimes through force can produce new borders, often in a

disruptive way, and in the process unsettle lives and whole generations.

Cats know their own boundaries; indeed, they understand innately, and can be seen encroaching and testing out spaces as a way of moving into and slowly making themselves known. While cats are now authorized to live amongst us and are given recognition for their status, this is a signal of the at times, taken for granted place of this domesticated and feral creature. What cats can teach, as borders and boundaries become tighter and more restrictive, is the possibility of sneaking across fences, of making others love us, of enticing and encouraging to provide food and shelter. Of course, it is well documented that cats also suffer abuse at the hands of those who do not love them. We can learn from a cat's longevity and observational skills. They always seem to know what to do and where to go. Cat stories may seem of little interest and yet, the cat as metaphor is an appropriate one for thinking about border and boundaries.

Dr Rosslyn Prosser

**Programme Leader, Masters of Arts in Creative Writing
LASALLE College of the Arts**

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VICKY CHONG

Vicky Chong is the author of *Racket and Other Stories* (Penguin). 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*.



Beyond Borders

They had met for the first time two weeks ago. She messaged him on the dating app as soon as his photo popped up. A side profile. His nose had a sharp bridge, which she liked in a man. A dimple. Chiseled chin. Slight smile. Short-cropped hair, as if he were in the army. She knew he was good-looking, even without looking at his full face. But what made him attractive wasn't his looks, but that he was cuddling a brown tabby cat. A man who likes cats must surely have a kind heart. Two years older than her, he was the best match so far. He had replied instantly and suggested champagne high tea at a cafe in a hotel along Orchard Road. 'I bought a Fave voucher, one for one,' he added in the text as if reading her mind about the exorbitance of the first meeting.

He was better looking in person, even minus the cat. They met at the Somerset MRT Station. Tall and lean, she came up to his shoulders on her flat canvas shoes. He had bought her a small bouquet, probably from the vending machine around the corner. Her heart warmed to him.

Like typical Singaporeans, as soon as they sat down, they talked about work. She told him she was a project planner at a statutory board and had just finished serving her six-year bond, but would remain with the company because she enjoyed her work.

‘Smart girl,’ he remarked.

He was in IT at a finance company. ‘Columbia College on my father’s scholarship. No bond.’ His dimples appeared as grooves when he grinned.

A young waiter poured champagne into their flutes and they raised their glasses simultaneously.

‘Here’s to a new relationship,’ he said.

‘New relationship,’ she echoed, visualising themselves toasting the guests at their wedding.

She rested her chin on her knuckles as she listened to him. Affluent family. One older brother and an older sister, all educated overseas.

‘My sister stayed on in the UK after graduation and married a British man. They have two cute little girls.’

He popped a mini cream puff into his mouth. ‘Ooh, Mao San Wang filling.’

She took the smoked salmon toast instead. ‘I prefer savouries before sweets.’

When she finished chewing, she said, ‘I have a married older sister too.’ She swiped on her phone. ‘This is my nephew. He’s four. Handsome?’

He nodded, indulgently.

‘If we weren’t on this date, what would you be doing now?’ she asked.

‘Gaming,’ he replied.

‘All weekend?’

He smiled. ‘Do I hear disapproval?’

She shrugged.

‘What do you do on weekends?’ An obligatory question from him.

She sat up straight, all ready to list her schedule. ‘I freelance as a yoga teacher at a studio in Chinatown. I usually stay back to attend classes after teaching. Then I might go to the gym, rock climb, calisthenics.’

He whistled. ‘I feel shagged just hearing that. You are one fit lady.’

‘On Sundays too. Most nights after work, I’ll be at the studio teaching too.’ She gulped down her champagne and signalled for more. ‘Do you read?’

‘Do you mean books?’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Yes, books.’

‘The last fiction book I read was my English Literature book in Sec Four.’

‘To Kill a Mockingbird?’

‘You did the same book?’

She nodded. ‘What about non-fiction?’

‘Self-help books are a waste of time.’

She paused and wondered how to respond to that. ‘Looks like we don’t have very much in common,’ she sighed.

He shrugged. ‘I don’t mind. Opposites attract. I’m

enjoying myself so far.'

She looked down at the truffle pâté on her plate, the tinge of truffle aroma escaping her as she pondered her next question. Would it be too soon to ask? Should she keep it for the next date, if there was one?

'Spit it out, whatever is on your mind.'

She looked up, her eyes wide. 'How...?'

'You've been staring at that pastry for far too long.' He popped the pate into his mouth. 'What is it? You want to know about my past relationships?'

'I was going to ask about the cat in your photo, actually, but since you brought it up...okay, tell me about your past relationships.'

He laughed a deep-throated belly laugh that was so contagious she laughed too, even though she hadn't found anything funny about it.

'Tammy was my ex's cat. My ex adopted her at six weeks from a litter of four. Jenny never had time for her as she was flying with SQ. I don't know why she even adopted Tammy.'

'Your ex?'

He nodded. 'We broke up six months ago. I miss Tammy.'

'More than Jenny?'

He squinted as he considered the question, then

laughed. 'Yes.'

'How long were you together?'

'Let's see. Tammy should be two now, so a year and a half.'

'With the ex or with the cat?'

He laughed again. 'You're funny! I like you.'

She thought he was doing it on purpose, misreading her question. She kept her face serious.

'Jenny and I were together since JC.'

Her mouth made an O. 'Twelve years!' She gulped down her champagne and signalled for a refill. 'Why did you break up?'

He shrugged again. 'Enough about me. What about you?'

'I've not been in any relationship.'

'Seriously?' He, too, emptied his flute. 'How come?'

'Just never met the right one.' She watched as the bubbly golden liquid was being poured. 'I want to get married. Time is running out.'

'Hmmm...'

'What does that mean?'

He nodded. 'Isn't that the reason we're on this app?'

'Do you want to get married too?'

'If I meet the right one.'

'How many have you met?'

‘I’m currently seeing three other women.’

She swallowed her gasp. ‘I’m the fourth.’

He grinned. ‘You should meet more men, too. Save time.’

He’s a player. She should strike him off and move on to the next on the list.

‘Hey, what are you doing next weekend? Want to go to JB for a staycation?’ He had a cheeky grin on.

Her eyes lit up despite herself.

So here they are, beyond the border on their second date, having just checked into this fancy hotel in Johor Bahru. They had agreed to split all the bills. He had drawn up an itinerary for the two-day-one-night escapade. Makan, shopping, massages, haircuts.

The hotel room was huge, with a minibar, a sofa, and a coffee table in front of floor-to-ceiling glass panels. Two twin beds, each with a plush duvet tucked neatly, were pushed side by side to form a king-sized double bed. In the bathroom, there was a jacuzzi bathtub and a rain shower.

She heard a whistle behind her.

He whispered next to her ear, his breath warming her neck. ‘Fancy, huh? Can’t wait to use that jacuzzi later.’ His cologne sent shivers down her spine.

Their reflection in the mirror above the vanity sinks

seemed that of a couple in love, except they were not. They were strangers, meeting for the second time. Could they be a couple?

He knew his way around JB as well as she did. They argued about where the best massage spa was and booked an appointment for the next day. There were Singaporeans everywhere in the mall, and she wondered if they would meet anyone they knew. Dinner was at a Japanese omakase restaurant, at a fraction of what they would pay in Singapore, so they ordered sake to pair with their dinner. After dinner, they listened to the live band singing 80s pop at the hotel bar and ordered complimentary margaritas. By the time they made it back to the hotel room, she was feeling woozy, giggly, and outrageously flirty.

As soon as the door closed, he pulled her into his arms, his palms cupped her face and he kissed her, his tongue snaking into her mouth, tasting and chewing on her lips. Taken by surprise at the intensity of his kiss, she wondered at which point she should put a stop. She must set her boundaries before things escalated.

He pulled her scrunchie off, and her hair tumbled to her waist. Her hands were on his back and they both fell onto the bed. His mouth traced a path from her lips to her neck and sucked. He'll leave a mark.

'Do you want me to stop?' He panted, his tongue

licking her shoulder, the strap pushed aside.

She should say yes. They barely knew each other.

Suddenly, she could hear the voice of Mrs Chua, her English teacher at the convent school she attended. 'Men want to play with naughty girls, but they want to marry good girls. You have to set your boundaries before marriage.' Mrs Chua always had a particular way of emphasising before.

As if he could read her mind, he stopped. 'I'm going to take a shower.'

She watched him disappear into the bathroom and slide the door shut.

Why had he stopped? She was so sure he found her attractive. She lifted her arms to smell her armpits. Sweaty but didn't stink. In the bathroom, the water was running. He was filling the Jacuzzi. He would be there for ages. How was she going to spend the time waiting for her turn in the bathroom? The lights outside the window beckoned.

The bathroom door slid open, and she swirled around from the window. He was dressed in a white bathrobe.

'The bath is ready. Would you like to join me?' He stretched out his hand.

The bath water was warm, and he was hot. And hard.

She moaned. 'I've never been in a Jacuzzi before.'

'I'll go slow. I know you're a virgin.' His hands were everywhere on her slippery skin.

She froze. 'Virgin? What makes you think that?'

His hands stopped moving. 'Aren't you? You said you've never been in a relationship before.'

She turned to face him. 'I've never been in a relationship, but that doesn't mean I've not been with a man before.'

'Who did you sleep with?' His frown deepened.

'Just someone,' she mumbled. Then a little louder, 'What's this inquisition? What are we doing now? Are we in a relationship?'

They stared at each other, their breathing fast and heavy. Later, when she recalled the scene, she found it almost funny. Their laboured breathing could have been because of the sexual tension, instead of anger and frustration. She couldn't help herself, but Mrs Chua's words echoed in her mind again.

She slipped her arms under the water to his waist and hugged him. 'Do you think I'm a naughty girl?'

His body softened, but one part remained hard as his arms enclosed her body. 'I guess I'm just surprised. You don't seem like that kind of girl.'

She forced herself to appear not to be reacting. 'What kind of girl?' she asked, as casually as she could. 'A girl who sleeps around?'

He shifted uncomfortably. 'You look so innocent.' He stroked her hair as she rested her head on his shoulder. 'I don't

want to hurt you, that's all.'

She moved away and sat next to him, their bodies not touching. The bubbles gargled noisily, tickling her backside, and she sighed at the loss of what could have been a beautiful experience—making love in a hot tub.

'The world is so unfair. I never thought you'd be so sexist. Why can a man enjoy sex but not a woman?' She straightened, facing him. 'My English teacher warned us to set boundaries, to never let any men cross them, because men only want to marry good girls. Am I a naughty girl for enjoying sex? You enjoy sex. Are you a bad man?'

'Men are different...' He looked away, avoiding her eyes.

'How so? Have you slept with the other girls you're seeing now?'

'Not all.'

'How many?'

'Two.'

'Do you consider yourself to be in a relationship with the girls you're sleeping with?'

He got up without answering and stepped out of the tub, went into the shower cubicle, and started showering. A few minutes later, he stepped out, put on the robe, and went into the bedroom.

He was in bed, under the duvet, and still wearing the

robe when she emerged from the bathroom an hour later, her hair washed and dried after enjoying the hot tub. No point wasting the Jacuzzi, she had thought, but she had also wanted time alone for him to consider what she had said.

‘Hey, are you mad?’ she asked, even though he had no reason to be.

He sighed. ‘This is not turning out as I had expected.’

She laughed. He chuckled.

‘You’re disappointed I’m not a virgin, like the other two, aren’t you? What is it about deflowering virgins that men like so much? Deflowering a virgin—this is like a line from the historical romance books I read as a teenager.’ She slid under the duvet on her bed and turned her back to him. ‘You know, I’m disappointed about tonight, too. But I’m more disappointed with you.’

‘Disappointed with me?’ He sounded incredulous.

‘Double standards.’

He sighed. ‘I’m disappointed with myself too, actually.’

She turned to face him. ‘How so?’

‘Your English teacher was right about setting boundaries. My mother wanted me to set boundaries, too. Don’t sleep around, respect the girls. All girls are good girls until they meet bad men, so don’t be a bad man, she constantly drilled into me.’

‘Who listens to their mother, or teacher, for that

matter?’ she replied, understandingly.

‘I tried to. Don’t roll your eyes. I really did. But in the US, college students sleep around. Girls were throwing themselves at me. I would be considered weird, or perhaps gay if I didn’t accept their offers. I just didn’t think girls in Singapore would be that easy too.’

‘Why do I feel offended by the last sentence?’

‘I’m sorry. I just thought we’re more conservative here.’

‘It’s just that I like you. All I want is to be intimate with you,’ she whispered.

He moved closer, his lips inches from hers. ‘Can I kiss you? Shall we continue where we left off?’

‘I don’t mind...to heck with Mrs Theresa Chua and her boundaries.’ She grabbed his head and pressed her lips to his, but he recoiled and pushed her away.

‘Wait...wait, what did you just say?’

‘I said I want this.’ She flung herself to his side of the bed and sat on him.

‘No, no. Who did you just mention?’ He shifted so quickly away from her that he fell off the bed.

She stared down from the bed at him lying on the carpet, confused. ‘Who did I mention? Mrs Chua? My teacher?’

‘Your teacher was Mrs Theresa Chua? From St Francis Convent?’

She nodded. 'Do you know her?'

'Oh my god. Damn, damn, damn. She's my mother.'

There was a deathly silence in the room.

Silver

This text message in my neighbourhood group chat was a change from the usual laments about parking woes and wrongly delivered parcels. Instead, it was a photo of a cat chilling on a garden wall ledge with the caption *Whose cat is this in my garden?*

I thought the cat was beautiful, and it must have escaped from a neighbour. There are no stray cats in my estate.

Two weeks later, another neighbour posted another photo of the same cat. This time, I commented that she's too beautiful not to have an owner, even though I rarely comment on the group chat. Many of the members I do not know, despite living in the estate for over two decades.

The neighbour living opposite my house, Doreen, walks her Chihuahua nightly and knows all the cats and dogs in the estate. She told me she had been feeding the silver cat and it responded to her *meow*. The next time 'Meow' came for dinner, Doreen shouted from across the street, 'Come see the cat!' Although 'Meow' appeared friendly, twirling between our legs, her sharp claws quickly swatted away any of our attempts to pat her, allowing only a gentle stroke on her head after sniffing our hands.

'Meow' was pregnant, her nipples swollen. That might explain why she was guarded. While she had the liberty of

rubbing against our calves, this gesture was not mutually consensual. There was a boundary she did not allow us to cross. Doreen was attached to 'Meow' and would have adopted her if not for Eiji, her Chihuahua, who was smaller than the cat.

While I had dogs in my youth, the anguish of seeing them pass away one after another was hard to endure, and I had told myself I'd never get another pet. On my travels overseas, I had cuddled cats and kittens and heard them purr. Sometimes, while watching television, I imagined having a lap cat like a friend in Perth did, keeping me company during my empty nester years but quickly dismissed the notion because it would be impossible to keep a cat indoors in my semi-detached home, with my open doors and windows. The six-foot wall surrounding my garden, good for keeping dogs in, would be useless for a cat that climbs and jumps. I had found poop in my back garden (no thanks, 'Meow'!) and squirrels exploring my sitting room.

There is no way of keeping animals in or out of my house.

Doreen texted me about five weeks after 'Meow' first appeared. 'Meow' had not come for dinner. Doreen suspected she might have given birth in another neighbour's house and wondered if I would accompany her to enquire. Despite most people having lived in the estate since it was built twenty-four years ago, the six-foot concrete walls surrounding each

house had kept most neighbours cordial but not close.

We found 'Meow' nursing four kittens under a red palm in the neighbour's house. Doreen requested I house 'Meow' and her kittens temporarily. I agreed with some reluctance, and we moved the kittens into a carton and lured 'Meow' into it. An hour later, 'Meow', holding one kitten in her jaw at a time, moved all four kittens back to the neighbour's garden. My first thought was, '*Wow! She can count!*' as I saw her return for another, then another until the carton was empty.

Feeling helpless, I telephoned the SPCA for help but they declined to come and advised us to leave the cats alone. I protested, to no avail. The July squall was raging and the red palm provided no shelter to the feline family.

Two days later, 'Meow' moved her kittens to the garden at another house, giving Doreen a fright when she couldn't find them. She was having too many visits from unwelcome visitors.

Doreen then set up Eiji's old cage. We locked 'Meow' and her kittens in the cage in my backyard while I frantically appealed to my friends and social media cat groups for help. Many wanted to foster the cats. I couldn't wait for the cats to go. Yet, Doreen was adamant we couldn't let just any strangers adopt them.

With the helpful advice from many friends, I unwittingly became a cat fosterer. My husband came back

from an overseas trip to find five cats in our backyard, which he accepted in his good-natured way. A friend found a trusted fosterer, but Doreen begged me to keep the kittens until their eyes opened. The kittens had blue eyes and Doreen again begged for another two weeks just to see them play. She spent hours in my backyard watching them, supplying post-natal kibbles, and boiling nutritional white fish for mama cat, which I had renamed Silver.

‘Don’t get too attached to Silver,’ my son warned, and I assured him I wouldn’t, because I had better things to do than to be bothered by a pet. Yet, I found myself in the backyard every hour, checking on her and the kittens. I knew it would be easy to get attached to the little ones. They were cute with their wide-eyed stares and mischievous antics. I refrained from picking them up as much as possible. Less contact meant less emotional involvement. Doreen and I bonded as we shared updates and videos on the kittens’ developments. We were two new parents, in awe with their new babies’ ‘firsts’ – the first time they ate solid food, the first time they climbed the cage, the curious ways they explored every nook and cranny.

I was surprised when Doreen readily agreed when I told her I found homes for the kittens. Two friends agreed to adopt the kittens in pairs.

‘What about Silver?’ I asked. ‘Shall I look for a home for her too?’

Doreen wanted her to remain in the community. 'I'll continue to feed her. She'll be our community cat.'

I had read about TNR - Trap, Neuter, and Release for community cats - and agreed. A friend who is a community cat feeder also told me finding a home for Silver, a domestic short-haired tabby, would be a challenge.

'But she's so beautiful, people would want her.' I had argued.

She replied, 'You're attached to her already.'

Silver's four kittens were adopted at six weeks' old, after they were weaned. The SPCA vet sterilised Silver for free. She was also vaccinated, dewormed, and de-ticked.

When Silver returned from the vet after her operation, Doreen housed her in the cage in her garage, just so Silver would be in unfamiliar territory and not look for her kittens. I could see Silver's cage in Doreen's garage from my bedroom balcony. In the quiet of the night, I called out softly, *Silver, Silver*. When I heard her soft reply, *meow, meow*, my heart leaped with joy. Did Silver miss me, too?

Silver escaped from the cage two days later during feeding, disposed of the neck brace she had been wearing, and hid under a car, refusing to come out despite us tempting her with treats.

I gave up after an hour-long struggle. 'There's your community cat,' I told Doreen and went home.

Another hour later, I heard meowing at my front door. Silver came home.

She never left.

Silver is on my lap as I write this, eleven months after I first saw her photo.

Many adjustments were made to accommodate a pet in the house.

In the early days, I often sat outside with her, just so she wouldn't feel lonely. The first time Silver climbed onto my lap and purred, I froze. I could feel her nails piercing through my clothes and onto my skin as she clung to me to avoid slipping off. Cats, unlike dogs, do not crave affection, especially stray ones. They are often guarded and would not come to you unless it is mealtime. So those precious minutes when our bodies touched were magical. I felt the vibration of her purr, yet our bodies were not relaxed. That was probably the first time Silver sat on a human's lap, and I wondered what spurred her to do that. Had she wanted comfort? Or did she crave sensual affection?

After that, Silver would often climb onto my lap, or if I was lying on the sofa on my chest. The effect of having a cat sleep on your chest is indescribably pleasurable. Scientists have found this is because of the release of the happy hormone, dopamine.

Being a cat owner didn't sink in at first and I never

referred to Silver as my cat; in my mind, she remained a community cat, and I, instead of Doreen, had become her feeder. She was there meowing for breakfast when I opened the back door every morning, there when I peeked at her every hour during the day if I was home, and there on her scratch box grooming herself when I wished her goodnight when I closed the back door before I slept. If she was out, she was never far and would return soon enough.

One evening, I noticed a gash across her cheek. The gash became infected, and I noticed a smell on her. Cats, unlike dogs, do not smell, so I knew this was serious. The vet gave her an antibiotic jab and instructed me to clean the wound and apply an ointment. For the first time, I had to hold her down forcefully to clean her wound. I was terrified. The memory of being bitten and scratched from the time she was in the hospital was still fresh. While she struggled, she allowed me to tend to her wound, meowing pitifully. It suddenly dawned on me then: Silver had become my responsibility. *She is my cat.*

When Ngee Ann Polytechnic organised a *My Cat and I* workshop, I promptly signed up and introduced myself as a new cat owner to the other fourteen participants. I was surprised to see experienced cat owners attending the workshop, and shocked to learn about brushing my cat's teeth. Brushing teeth would surely overstep any cat's boundary. The

participants unanimously agreed that we would not want to risk being bitten or scratched just to keep our cat's dental hygiene. They helpfully shared other methods to maintain the cat's dental health, which the instructor, a vet, unfortunately, disagreed with. Poor dental health would shorten a cat's lifespan.

When I complained to Doreen, whom I blamed for putting me in this predicament, she told me she had just spent a few thousand dollars on Eiji to extract eight decaying teeth. She now diligently brushed his remaining teeth every night. I immediately went online to order a cat's toothbrush and toothpaste.

I don't know who is more stressed about tooth brushing, Silver or me? She runs as soon as she spots the toothbrush in my hand, hiding under the couch or table where I cannot reach her. Brushing her teeth is a two-man effort, one to catch her and the other to supply the tool, much like a surgeon in surgery. I have become an expert at catching her by the scruff like how the vet did it.

Once, when Silver lost her appetite, I spent close to \$500 for blood tests alone. Owning a pet in Singapore is expensive because vet fees are exorbitant. I balked at friends who spent thousands to buy their pet dogs, what with grooming and medical fees. This is one reason cats are abandoned: the owners cannot afford vet fees when it's

time for vaccination and sterilisation or when the cat is ill or pregnant, as in Silver's case.

Thankfully, the vet gave Silver a clean bill of health except for dehydration and to return for further scans if she refused food again.

I decided that a consultation with an animal communicator (AC) was cheaper than a vet. The AC communicated telepathically with Silver. She claimed Silver was being fed elsewhere and for me to not worry. I was sceptical after hearing that. (I've since discovered that Silver, like most cats, is a fussy eater and would rather go hungry than eat something she doesn't like.) The AC also said Silver was happy living with me, as she had the freedom to roam. She warned me she would not be able to help if Silver got lost since Silver was an outdoor cat, as her view from Silver's perspective was limited without helpful landmarks to pinpoint her whereabouts.

My initial apprehension about Silver running away and getting lost is always at the back of my mind, even though she rarely wanders out, except for toilet breaks in my neighbours' garden. She naps in the house most times, in the many carton boxes placed around the house, or, on the sofa, under the sofa, behind the television, on my husband's calligraphy table, and on my bed if I allow it. I check on her every hour. If I don't see her in the usual places, I'll go outside and call her name,

and soon enough, I'll hear her bell as she runs toward me. We now lock her in at night.

I have declined social gatherings and stopped my yoga studio membership to be home with her more. My husband had gone on three overseas trips without me. A good day starts with Silver finishing her breakfast without fussing and ends with me brushing her teeth without drama. I fear I am turning into an eccentric catwoman.

Silver reclines by my side as I read on the sofa on rainy days, her paws curling in the air. She climbs on my desk as I write, tapping illegibly on my keyboard. She loafs on my mat when I do yoga, oblivious to being a hindrance. At night, she begs outside my bedroom to be let in. More often than not, she ignores me whenever I call her name, but will sometimes reward me with a few slow blinks, a cat's way of showing affection.

I often marvel at how Silver came into my life. I tell people she adopted me instead of the other way around. Were we connected in our past lives? Is the law of attraction at work here and my subconscious wish for a cat somehow manifested into reality?

Beside the television on the console is a cake box with a transparent window on the cover—a *room box* I made in 2019 after learning the craft at a workshop. I had wallpapered its insides with pages from an IKEA brochure depicting a cosy

sitting room with a rattan lamp hanging above a couch. A laminated photo of me suspended in a yoga hammock swings freely in the centre. In one corner, there is a mini porcelain vase with dried flowers. Loafing on the carpet looking up at the mini me hanging over it, is a mini porcelain silver cat.

GABRIEL OH

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



shy mimosa and feathery lalang
once thrived,

Along the void

deck, a man steals
a photo of a hornbill. I cannot see
where it is, until I see

fleeting black

disappearing

into a concrete jungle.

I had a dream.

I'm leaving home for the bus stop. I pass children shrieking for their parents in childcare. I pass a resigned vigil at a funeral. The bus arrives, its engine roaring, hot diesel-tainted air stirring up the leaves and litter on the ground. The talk is in fifty minutes, and I'm going to be on time. The bus ambles along, swaying against the bumpy road. The neighbourhood outside streams by in a blur, a murky blend of images and logic fighting to remain. Sweat is accumulating on my brow. I fan myself under the air-conditioning. The sky outside is grey. A veil of humidity blankets everything.

I'm in our hall of tatami mats, the musty grassy scent filling my nostrils. Beyond the open paper doors, golden morning light streams in from the garden into the shadows, spotlights on drifting specks of dust. My skin is sticky with sweat. Summer's humidity is already here at spring's near end. The straw sinks under my socked feet as I rush through it. I am heading for my room to retrieve what I had left behind. My grandparents are by the door, my parents by the car. I had told them I won't be long. The car is already loaded with our belongings.

I'm in my hostel room, my belongings scattered around in messy piles of what to keep and what to pack into my already-full luggages. It's the last day of my study abroad and I

hadn't slept through the night. Through the frosted windows, glints of light are brightening the navy sky. My bus to Kansai airport is leaving in two hours. How can five months' worth of memories fit into such finite spaces? There is so much I want to keep.

The bus stops across the MRT station and I get off with other commuters. The humidity hits me as I step out of the air-conditioning, breaking me away from the temporary bliss of cooled air. In front, a middle-aged lady is rushing towards the pedestrian crossing with her trolley; the green man is blinking. The pedestrian light turns red as I reach it, stopping me in my tracks. The lady makes it across and disappears into the station. I look at my watch. I still have time.

The bus terminal's clock tower shows that it's eight in the morning – I am in time for the school orientation. The sky is a cloudy grey, the air rising wisps from my breath. The bus terminal is largely deserted and I'm the only person in the queue. Snow continues to fall, weightless inconsequential specks of white that melt away as they touch the ground. I glance at the sign above me, and do a double take. The name of my host university is there, but the kanji for the campus doesn't look right. I bring up the directions on my phone and see that I am in the wrong queue. I leave, grateful that the bus has not arrived. Ending up in the wrong part of a city I had just arrived in yesterday would be unimaginable.

Gentle morning sunlight envelops me, illuminating the leaves around in a blinding green glow. After yesterday's seasonal shower, the spring sky has cleared for a rare warmer day. Swallows dart around above, chirping noisily. The shears feel light in my hand as I snip at the branches of an azalea, trimming away stray twists and turns, growths competing with the main trunk, dead branches. I turn the pot around, looking at it from different angles like how my grandfather taught me to. Satisfied, I return the plant to its rack. Sweat is already forming on my brow, and I wipe it away with the sleeve of my yukata. The garden of bonsai basks in the light before me, taking in the sun's goodness, growing strong and healthy. Just two more pots before I head off to scrub the onsen showers. A light voice drifts from the house. It's my grandmother, calling me in for some warabimochi. I leave my tools behind and grinning, head back into the shade. The baths can wait. I still have time.

The MRT train arrives and I step again into cool air. Rows of empty green seats stretch along its length, but I'm feeling too hot so I stand below the air-conditioning. As the train rumbles along the tracks, I trawl through a decommissioned email inbox for directions to the talk venue. I find the email, but its pictures will not load. I read the directions, hoping to make sense of them, but they are meaningless, pointing to landmarks I cannot see. The train

reaches my stop, the announcement system mechanically beeping through the carriage. Absent are the new jingles akin to those of trains in Japan. Instead, the sounds from an era before ring in their place.

The tune comes on as I am waiting on the empty platform. *Yuuyake Koyake* – The Sunset Glow. I think at first that a train is approaching but the music continues, its slow tones echoing through the quiet town just across the tracks. I know the tune, a daily beckoning for children to head home. *We see the sun setting with its beautiful glow and hear the bell of the temple in the mountain ringing. Let's hold hands and go home together. Let's go home with the crows returning to their nests.* As suddenly as it came, the tune ends and the emergency broadcast system dies down with a whirr. I am surrounded again by silence. The vermilion glow of the sun hits a nearby window, blinding me. Lost in the countryside, a three-hour train ride away from my hostel in a neighbouring prefecture, I am going home alone.

I hope that I am not lost. The venue for the talk is only six minutes away from the station, and I've been there before. As I descend an overhead bridge, the sunlight catches the bougainvillea along its lengths, glowing golden as it did on the tatami mats in my grandparents' home. I stop, awestruck by the semblance, remembering the hall. I start; if I don't hurry, I'll run out of time. The heat is starting to overwhelm

me again.

Steam swirls around me in unfurling wisps, dissipating into the tree-covered mountains afar. My skin is red from being in the onsen, but as I sit on its stony ledge under the veranda, I feel my mind clear and my blood coursing through me. The waters are warm around my feet and the trickling of water echoes around me. My grandparents aren't getting younger so there's still much to do around the baths and gardens, but it's a slow day and I'm the only one here at the onsen – a perfect opportunity to have a soak after scrubbing the showers and hanging out the towels to dry. A benefit of living in a family-run onsen. If life can continue like this, there isn't anything more I'd ask of it.

I arrive at the auditorium with minutes to spare, drenched from the unforgiving heat. I find a seat behind the sizeable crowd. The screen in front shows a university building bordered by blooming sakura trees and a curtain of drifting pink petals. I try to imagine being there but I can't. Has the picture been tinted too pink? No—all I can do is recall touching the tender flowers up on the tall stone walls of Osaka Castle. The talk begins with a professor introducing the university. He talks about opportunities and possibilities, fulfilling the dreams of those who enter.

A dream. A wandering of the mind. Something that happened but didn't.

It fades away, clear as it is in the moment it is seen. The comforting mustiness of the tatami. The tinniness of the evening song blaring through the town. The stickiness of my skin under the morning sun. The smooth stone brick walls of a foreign university. Yet when I reach out to grasp them, they peter away like the wispy mists of a hot spring, undulating, degrading, fading away as if they had never truly existed.

After the talk, I head to the National Library for a writing workshop. Out in the atrium, in spite of the humidity, a fair is happening. *Plan today!* encourage the bold blue words from each booth. One is promoting planned parenthood while another, palliative care. Both looking to the future—one to life, another to death.

My hostel is a bus ride away, but I decide to walk back from school. As I trudge down the slope, fenced in by roadworks and an evening vista of houses stretching downwards, I wonder how anything around me makes sense, how everything around me can still be so *normal*. The flashes of colour as the bomb detonated; lives vaporised in intense heat and light; the city glowing bright with flames; bodies tattered and blinded by countless glass shards; living corpses of burnt and melted flesh leaping into dark waters for relief only to drown; the dirty rain that showered slow painful deaths after. These are still imprinted on my mind. In the dark classroom where an anime about wartime Hiroshima

was being shown, I relive a semblance of history and see little difference between life and death, reality and fiction.

The workshop explores Creative Non-Fiction. Snippets of the past—records, anecdotes, photographs—are points of surety for historical writing. The gaps in between can be filled in to reach the emotional truth of the narrative. I turn back to the dream I had feverishly jotted down before the workshop lest I forget it. A narrative, raw and unadulterated. Can everything that has never happened be considered a falsity? Can everything set in stone be considered reality?

Trimming wayward, meandering growths; intertwining wire and branches to firm slopes and angles; carving and prying layers to weather deadwood and bare branches into a living story. Two truths, one lie. All truths, all lies.

I head for the corridor across the hall, racing through curtains of dust and light. I don't have much time. As the corridor turns a corner, a large boulder reaching up to my chest nestles on a bed of pebbles, its coarse grey surface riddled with streaks of moss. I near the relic. A wide wheel of deep emerald levitates above it, glinting as it spins noiselessly like a grindstone. Our family heirloom, a generational secret. Not even regulars to our onsen know about the emerald wheel. No one knows why the ring moves only in the presence of family, but its revolutions warm our hot springs and nurture our bonsai. There's nothing like it where we're moving to,

I'm sure. There will never be anywhere like home. Then, as inexplicably as it rotates, the emerald wheel slows to a halt.

The pedestrian light stays red as the evening winter breeze blows through the wide intersection. I pull my felt coat tighter around me. It's only five, but the brightest lights are from the MacDonald's across the road. So much for staying on campus until I finish my schoolwork. Roadworks have been going on along this road sloping up to my host university, even before I had arrived months earlier. In the dark, I don't see the orange barricades or the wire fences. All I see are flickering red and yellow lights, like countless stars in the night sky.

The triad hotel buildings of Marina Bay Sands tower before me once I find my way to the study abroad fair from the National Library. The convention centre is near enough that I can make out the details through each hotel window. In one, luggages have been arranged against the wall; in another, crème white duvets pile high against the glass, their folds darkened by the afternoon sun. I feel my own insignificance against such sprawling open structures, yet see that they too are made of the insignificance of several lives. Perhaps, there is value in life's experiences, whether in the flesh or in the mind.

I continue round the corner past the relic, the lacquered floor thumping against my feet. To my right, paper windows

overlook the garden I've tended to for years. I stop to take in the sight. The bonsai glow green under the sun as they do any other spring morning. From the shadows, they're too dazzling. Several pots levitate above their racks, revolving as if on turntables. The emerald wheel had resumed turning after I left. I remember tending to the plants yesterday, watering them, trimming their errant branches, enjoying the wide blue sky above, not wanting to believe that that morning would be my last. I had no other worry in life, just the plants and the hot springs. I had been content to spend the rest of my life that way. But now, I don't know what I have left.

Laughter comes from the kitchen where other hostel residents are preparing their dinner. I'm working on my assignments in the dining room when an irony smell makes me scrunch my nose. Yuu is pan-frying fish again. Even in this temporary abode of a hostel, the everyday seems to go on forever. I had been homesick my first few months here, but the hostel is home now. I dread the inevitable end of the semester when I must leave – not just this place, but this point in life.

The study abroad fair fills a ballroom with booths and queues of students and parents. I walk among the crowd, looking for the universities I've marked out in my notebook. Around me, agents and fair-goers converse in a hushed jumble of voices. Recommended programmes, available scholarships,

steps to apply. I find the booths I'm looking for, but no one's there. Perhaps, the agents have already left. I am too late.

My elder sister is heaving a basket of bamboo to the bonsai garden, her yukata matted with sweat and dirt. *Please, let me stay*, I plead through a window as she nears. *I am sorry*, she replies, *but that is not possible. Your father came here knowing it would be for the time being. Now that the time is up, you must leave*. I cry. *But I've been here all my life. I've tended to this garden every day. It is mine as much as yours*. She looks at me with sorry eyes, then beckons to her younger sister who is trudging up the path behind her. They continue past me towards the garden.

Darkness veils my room, but I need not see where I'm going. I pull out my dressing table's drawer and from its gaping emptiness pick up a brazen coin-shaped charm I had gotten as a child. I can't remember who gave it to me, but I know I can't leave it behind. As I run my finger over its engravings, I freeze. My hand looks different. I look up at the dark mirror, and do not recognise myself.

I flee my room for the onsen but stop as I near some visitors. I am no longer who I am; they won't recognise me. I am unwelcomed here. I can no longer come back. I rush past the baths, hoping no one finds me and throws me out. Collapsing in an unoccupied room, I cry in the darkness—this is my life now, but it's all a lie.

I am in bed again, drifting off to sleep. I hope to return to that same dream, but it does not come.

SEAN TOBIN

Sean is a theatre maker and teacher from West Australia, who has been teaching and making theatre in Singapore since 1993. Sean writes, directs and performs, and is also known for his leadership in the arts, having led M1 Singapore Fringe Festival (2015-2020) and SOTA's Theatre Faculty (2009-2019).



An excerpt from:
Get Used To Death : The Lost Book of Enoch

Enoch - A passionate and troubled young man, most likely in his 30's. He is torn between living life fully and living it with apology.

David - A healthy looking middle aged bachelor who never 'settled down'. He is warm and inviting but has a subtle protective veneer of denial about him. David puts all his significance into his religion and ministry work.

Act One SCENE 6 : Conversion
Projection #8

And I proceeded to where things
were chaotic.

And I saw there something horrible:
I saw neither a heaven above nor a
firmly founded earth, but a place
chaotic and horrible.

1 Enoch 7:9

Enoch switches his attention to David dancing with his eyes closed. He circles around him, watching with admiration. For a short while he attempts to dance in a similar spirit or fashion. He gets closer and closer to him and touches his body. David freezes, eyes closed.

DAVID

Welcome.

ENOCH

I like your dancing.

DAVID

Thank you.

David removes Enoch's hand from his body.

ENOCH

Sorry.

DAVID

It's okay.

He opens his eyes and looks at Enoch.

DAVID

Your eyes.

They hold a stare. They remain still. After a while David nods as if to communicate he has seen or known something.

He looks away.

ENOCH

What is it?

Silence

What is it?

Silence

DAVID

I saw deep inside you.

ENOCH

Hmmm, *(Cheeky and suggestive)* deep inside me.

DAVID

(Serious) Yes.

ENOCH

I feel something different with you.

DAVID

It's God's light.

ENOCH

I know you.

DAVID

It's Him, not me.

ENOCH

I don't know you.

DAVID

I've met many people like you here before.

ENOCH

Oh.

DAVID

Same emptiness. Same sadness.

ENOCH

Is that all you see?

Silence

This feels familiar

Silence

We have met before, haven't we?

Silence.

Why are you here?

DAVID

Why are you here?

ENOCH

I want to be swept away. Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go?

A sudden sound of ocean waves merges into more dance music building in the background.

Skeleton appears, dragging the dummy of Enoch's dead body slowly across the stage, upstage. It is not visible to David or Enoch. Enoch pulls away from David and continues to dance again. He waits to see if David will also dance. He doesn't. Enoch closes his eyes and continues dancing.

ENOCH

Dance like nobody's watching,
right?

He dances and tries to 'let himself go'. David walks behind him and stops him, grabbing his shoulders.

ENOCH

(Gasps) I like that.

Enoch pants. Music continues building in the background, muffled.

DAVID

There's always somebody watching.

ENOCH

Will you watch me?

DAVID

God.

ENOCH

You're God?

DAVID

God is always watching.

ENOCH

Doesn't feel right talking about
God here.

DAVID

God is everywhere.

ENOCK

Everywhere but here.

DAVID

God is here.

Enoch kneels and closes his eyes. David joins Enoch on the floor, still behind him but no longer holding onto him. A vocal effect is added to his voice, to create more authority and mystery.

DAVID

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity. Men abandoned natural relations and were inflamed with lust for one another.

ENOCK

Are you trying to turn me on by quoting scripture?

David moves away, to distance himself. Enoch stands and approaches David to hold him. Still with voice effect, he looks into his eyes.

DAVID

Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

ENOCK

What shameful act would you like to do? And what's my penalty?

They remain in embrace, staring at each other, faces intensely close, for a while.

Skeleton reaches the other side of the stage, with dummy and exits.

There is no longer a voice effect for David.

DAVID

I'm not gay.

ENOCH

The dog at reception said
otherwise.

David snarls into Enoch's face like a dog and finally lets out a loud bark.

Enoch is a little shaken but still holds his gaze with David. Dog enters on another part of the stage and begins to howl into the night, the way a dog or wolf might howl at the moon. David releases Enoch and looks up above him, also howling. Enoch joins him and Dog in a collective howl, like a pack of dogs. The howling slowly diminishes. Dog remains on the fringes watching them quietly, with whining and whimpering.

DAVID

I'm not gay.

ENOCH

I don't need you to be.

DAVID

You are more than your sexuality.

ENOCH

You are more than your religion.

Enoch kisses David. David pulls away.

ENOCH

I'm not here for love. Just this one kiss. I've never done this before.

DAVID

I'm here for love.

ENOCH

You're not gay but you're here for love?

DAVID

I'm a man of God.

ENOCH

(Less convincing) I'm a man of God.

David hugs Enoch, then holds him firmly, at a slight distance, looking deeply into his eyes again.

DAVID

I'm here to bring God's love.

ENOCH

Are you here to save me? To change me? (Beat) Help me!

DAVID

Only God can do that.

ENOCH

God has had 365 years to change me.

DAVID

You're still young. It takes time.

ENOCH

I was born old. Fuck time. I'm done with time.

David is still staring into Enoch's eyes.

What else do you see?

DAVID

I see you want love.

ENOCH

You don't say, Yahweh!

David chokes Enoch, then releases.

DAVID

You need love.

David chokes Enoch, then releases.

ENOCH

No shit, Shadrack.

DAVID

But you are afraid.

David chokes Enoch, then releases.

ENOCH

No kidding, Christ on the cross.
Kiss me... just once.

DAVID

Fear and love can't live together.

David chokes Enoch until he seems to have lost consciousness. He then snaps Enoch's neck. As David holds Enoch's dead body in a way that might remind us of Michaelangelo's "Pieta" sculpture, four excessively gay Worship Dancers pass briefly across the stage, in a highly theatrical but deeply sincere worship dance, incorporating tambourines, ribbons and flags.

IAN GOH

Ian writes about games, pop culture, and wabi-sabi stuff. His work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Star*Line*, *Asimov'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.



Attempts to Assassinate Thought

All trapped dreams must die.

— James Branch Cabell

In the memory labs of Io, a dreamweaver asks
how I'd like to kill the thought of an ex-lover.
Would I keep the gin on his breath, piss stains
on his pants, frayed roots and split veins, his
fist-shaped craters on my skin? Would I miss
the worn kisses on wrung necks, house keys
jammed into the dresser over lunch-dates with
just friends lah, poor Mochi whisked to the vet
the day he saw us furred on the couch too snug,
his version of five-year plans always smeared
with *forgive mes* and *please one more chances?*
Will his eyes be my keepsake: twin orbs seared
into mine the night he asked, *We met before?*
along our hallway at Sheares, *Why your hair*
cut so short, shoulders and midriff too lemak
for suppers with boy friends, and why not I just
Come in lah, his breath musked with spearmint
and open-and-shut replies? Or should I smother
the thought of the thought of the thought, a want
for his wanting; to not know I would never know
the answer is no.

The Second Rape

You tell me to lie down, this time with a 'please',
your sweat still clung to the mattress where others
have been forced on before. *Did he use his authority?*

you ask, as a life-sized anime doll—wide eyes
and lips parted in an 'o'—is lowered onto its equal.
Like this? you press, plastic arms pinned above

my head and inflated thighs caged across my pelvis.
Or like this? lights flashing across the Black Box
on the second floor of the station. *What's my type?*

Was I 'pure' when 'it' happened? your helpers
push, hard-boards in hand, swallowed in a semi-
circle of blue-black vests and uniformed nods.

You have the same receding hairline and chicken-
wire for specs, a bastard's face blurred between
the sterile squeaks, till I find my breaths become

my own: Why? Why had this happened? You push
for a shrug, as though in hushed re-enactment.
We have to ask, you say, your quasi-concern like

quashed blows to a body already found wanting
to fling itself off, and his, and his, and hiss back,
Why ask now?

JOCELYN LOW

Jocelyn dreams in text.



Pattern Recognition

On the fifth floor of a small government flat in Toa Payoh, Alan stared at himself in the mirror. *Who are you?* Alan could not remember when he started feeling each night stretching longer than the last. Going from one room to another of the four floors of Value Hotel doing minor repairs, he was constantly exposed to other humans. He thought being a maintenance guy at this place and working the night shift would minimise human contact, but he had not reckoned on the entangled, sometimes soiled bedsheets, the barely flushed toilets, the almost palpable lingering belches and farts; all these smells of others in the small rooms overwhelmed him with disgust. He could learn to unsee, but he could not unsmell.

Alan plunged his face into the basin and splashed hard with water before patting his face dry, careful around the angry acne clustered around his mouth. He looked into his wardrobe. *How do I feel today? Let's see...* He wanted to shock all he met that day with the most outrageous t-shirt.

Ready to leave the flat, Alan caught sight of himself in the hallway mirror. The spikes on his bleached blonde hair seemed defeated by the humidity. *Need to try that new Gatsby wax.* He did a swift upsweep through his hair for a more dishevelled look.

Stacks of his widowed father's *Lianhe Zaobao* and his younger sister's lifestyle magazines cluttered the foyer. Alan flipped through one of these magazines, looking at the photographs of celebrities all made-up and pretty, posing in their best pouts. *Disgusting*. Alan wondered why his sister would spend her pocket money on such trash instead of buying more assessment books for her A levels. She could also start reading about being anti-establishment instead of filling her head with such cotton wool. Alan stomped about in his seasoned black Doc Martens to make them fit more comfortably. They were a little tight around the toecaps. As an employee of Value Hotel, Alan had to wear the standard grey and blue uniform for work. Only to and from work could he wear his favourite ripped black jeans and Napalm Death band t-shirt. With depictions of agonised faces, distorted limbs and gory death scenes, this t-shirt would often make strangers avert their eyes, or turn to stare disapprovingly at him. Who cares? He just liked it for making him feel bigger than his wiry frame.

He swaggered towards the shopping mall near the bus interchange. He liked to think his all-black get-up appeared menacing to the middle-class snobs. Any opportunity he had, he wanted to show he was different from them, the powers that be. Like his manager, Hock, with his braggy ways. Alan grew hot at what Hock said to him just yesterday:

‘With only a diploma, you can forget about ever becoming a manager like me. You better get used to your DIY home dyes! Blonde some more, hahaha! Poly grad is poly grad!’

Alan pretended to rearrange his tools in the toolbox. Anything to stop his fist from reaching out to knock the fake Prada glasses off Hock’s face. That day would come, somehow. He’d show Hock and the likes of him! In the bus now on the way to work, Alan glared at the other passengers. *One day, I will do something so shocking that you will no longer think of me as just Alan, that maintenance guy. You wait. When the time is ripe! Just because I don’t have a degree, I can never be promoted? How many years have I worked here? A degree is just a piece of paper!*

Nearing his stop, Alan pressed the bell and stood up to get to the exit of the bus. The bus swayed and someone elbowed him in his ribs. *What the...!* Alan turned and looked into a pair of thick glasses.

‘Sorry, uncle,’ said the teenager, red in the face.

‘What uncle? I am not that old!’ Alan saw that the teenager was wearing an all-white uniform. He looked at the boy’s school badge to make sure.

‘Studying in the top boys’ school in Singapore and yet no manners ah? Any man also you call as uncle? Do I look like an uncle to you? Maybe only ten years older than you.

See what I wearing?’ Alan puffed out his chest.

‘Sorry, unc—Sir!’ said the teenager.

‘That’s better!’ said Alan.

Alan clattered down from the bus when it stopped. He made sure he got down ahead of the teenager. *Better that I show my claws now. Students from that school all end up as ministers. I’m sure he’ll make my life difficult in future. Haha, feels good to hear him calling me Sir now!*

Alan walked along the dusty uneven pavement that led to the back-alley staff entrance. He hurried to meet the seven p.m. reporting time. Alan stepped on the cigarette butts and crushed beer cans littering the alley. He made sure to avoid the still smouldering ashes from the burnt incense papers left on the ground near an offering of oranges. He did not want to risk offending any hungry ghosts. Approaching Value Hotel, he heard the raised voice of a man.

‘Fifty dollars not enough ah? Who you think you are? My last one cost forty leh! Can come Singapore very lucky already, don’t act virgin. I’m sure in *Zhong Guo* you get paid less!’

Right next to the staff entrance, a burly man shouted at a young Chinese lady. The dim orange light from the entryway shone on his bald patch. He had a thick gold chain round his neck, and some Chinese characters inked on his muscular forearms. A packet of Dunhill cigarettes peeked out

of the pocket at the front of his white short-sleeved shirt. Long, black pants completed his outfit. He did not look like the usual hotel clientele. The lady stood rooted to the spot. Despite her frail frame being almost in shadow, Alan caught a glimpse of her pale skin and almond-shaped eyes. Her simple shift dress reached her knees.

‘Stupid woman, think Singapore men easy to cheat? Count yourself lucky I talk to you. I trying give you money you don’t want? I can give you a good time, more shiok than other men! You think you so greedy any Singapore man will want you? Or you think you can trap us with sex, get pregnant, marry then get PR here? *Ptui!* You wait long long! Go back to *Zhong Guo* lah you!’

Alan looked around. The alley was deserted except for the three of them. Local tabloid newspapers were filled with insinuations by Singaporeans of the ways life had changed for the worse after the influx of foreigners. Higher property or rental prices, stiffer job competition, foreigners not integrating well socially to name a few. The young lady did not look like a local at all. Her skin was too fair and her mannerisms too cowed. She remained mute. Her continued silence seemed to prove the old man right. Any local Singaporean woman would have yelled back, or at the very least, glared at him defiantly. Here she looked down, avoiding any eye contact.

Alan knew he could just walk away, but still, he lingered.

His palms became clammy. He clenched and unclenched his fists. *I'll tell him off! Don't embarrass us Singaporeans! Or, or, I'll comfort her!* Alan tried to catch the young lady's eye, to assure her not all Singaporeans were like the old man. He did not particularly like foreigners himself. Even Yuan Yuan, his colleague at Value Hotel; well, he behaved civilly towards her, but he would never trust her. He had heard far too many stories of foreigners stealing jobs and marrying Singaporean men solely for their money, making him naturally wary of them. Alan thinks Singapore should belong to those born here only. However, the old man's words were unwarranted. How could the old man assume that any Chinese woman walking along the alley must be a sex worker? That was too much. Alan looked in the direction of the young lady again, only to be confronted by the cold eyes of the older man staring intently back at him, with an obvious glint of mockery.

'Eh, you! Young punk with that monkey hairstyle. You think you *ang moh* ah? What you staring at? Not happy, is it? Want to act hero, is it?'

Alan froze. He could almost hear Hock in the old man's tone. How Alan hated all these older men who always talked down to him, jeering at and belittling him. Alan clenched his fists. *Just give him a punch and run away! So what if he is bigger! What the hell! All these men who always talk down to me!* Alan prepared for action.

‘Stare what stare! Is she your girlfriend? Singapore girl not good enough for you? Can’t get local so want try *Zhong Guo* is it? You think they simple, easy to cheat love from?’

Alan could only glare. *Do it! Shut his mouth once and for all.* The next moment, though, to his mortification, Alan felt quick tears gathering behind his eyes. He was more shocked than anything else at his body’s betrayal. His shoulders drooped, his adrenaline rush dissipated. As in other previous times, he lost his courage to fight back. Just like that.

The older man laughed as he strutted away, clicking a lighter to the cigarette in his mouth. He left behind him the acrid smell of smoke.

Alan slunk away, deflated. He had to report for work anyway. His heavy boots now seemed too big for his feet; his Napalm Death t-shirt hung dejectedly on his body.

Alan heard hesitant footsteps coming towards him.

‘Thank you.’

Alan turned.

‘My name Mei. Thank you. Just now.’

Alan walked back towards her. She moved slightly into the light. Up close, she appeared even more lovely. Her beautiful eyes were accentuated by a sharp nose and shapely lips.

‘Oh, I didn’t do anything.’

‘Is okay. I know. I work that restaurant. I waitress. Not

sell body. I pass here only. That man...Thank you...thank you. And...I like your hair. Your shirt also. Is it because Hungry Ghosts' Festival you wear?'

The blood rose to Alan's face. *I am really not the hero she seems to think I am.*

'Can I buy you drink? Say thank you?'

About to answer, Alan caught sight of his and the young woman's reflection in the glass door of the entryway. Due to the trick of the light, their two bodies seemed to be standing closer than their actual distance. Her straight long hair contrasted with his spikes.

'Er, it's really okay. No need. I didn't do anything at all. Sorry, I need to go.'

Damn.

Seeing the flash of confusion on her face, Alan grew annoyed.

'Er, sorry. I am Singaporean. You are from China. We are not the same. You understand?'

What if someone sees me talking to her? They will think I am trying to chat her up!

'You, I, Chinese. Same! I speak little English. Little bit. I understand you. Ni hui jiang hua yu ma¹?' The young woman gave a tentative smile.

'No, I speak English, you speak Mandarin. We are

1 Do you know how to speak Mandarin?

different.'

'Okay. Not same. But make friend?'

'No! I already said no! I know you are not for sale. I know you are not a sex worker. But it doesn't mean we can get to know each other okay? You are from *Zhong Guo*!'

Alan hurried away into the staff entrance. He did not look back.

* * *

Reaching into the locker for his nondescript uniform, Alan thought of the encounter with the old man. He clenched his fists. *Okay, next time. You just wait. Next time I will surely punch you! This is too near my work place; I don't want to get into trouble. But let me catch you somewhere else, I will sure knock that jeer off your face! My tears were only for the pitiful state that humanity is in. Nothing else!* He stooped to unlace his Doc Martens and stepped out of them, reducing his height considerably. He took off his Napalm Death t-shirt and started buttoning up his work shirt. *And you, I know you are pretty, but please don't try to make friends with me.* Alan wriggled out of his ripped black jeans. *Zhong Guo is Zhong Guo; Singapore is Singapore. Citizenship is important. No way can I be seen with you. Cannot! No way will I associate with you. Wait till you have a red Singapore passport!* He pulled on his baggy work pants and slipped into his black Crocs. He clipped on his nametag. Alan looked into the small mirror

at the side of his locker. He combed flat his bleached blonde spikes and rearranged his facial expression. *I am Alan Tan. I am different from all of you, but I will pretend to fit in.* Finally satisfied at his bland countenance, Alan mentally prepared himself for the night ahead.

Alan walked away from his locker and came face to face with Yuan Yuan, his colleague. Alan squeezed out a weak smile for Yuan Yuan.

Split Lives

if I asked,
would you allow a sliver,
the teeniest tiniest slit—
as clean and sharp
as this permanent pain—
for me to squeeze through,

and on the other side
I could stay swallowed
by time
daysandweeksandmonthsandyears would pass,
or even
an
eternity

before I come through the tear
to find all that is here now—
the malleable memories
the numbing anguish
(including you)—
all gone,
the ashes
of youmeus
the only reminder.

I'd have a new narrative,
rearranging
the whowhatwherewhenwhyhow.

I'd grow wings
and
fly

SARA PATRICIA KELLY

Sara is a children's poet. Born in Australia, she studied in Singapore and now lives in Thailand with her family. In her free time, she enjoys making up new words, exploring the fragrant herbs at her local wet market, and cooking French toast for her children.

Sara authored 4 a.m. *Raspberry Party: Childhood Poems* and *What Are Bubbles?* She holds an MA in Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore.



Queen Cat

I am the Queen of Bedroom Land,
licking my paw with grace.
From chair to bed and fluffy rug,
ruling this cosy space.

Me-ow! A small intruder comes
a-charging with a wail
through sheets, crushing cream pillow hills.
How dare it yank my tail!

I am the Queen of Cupboards now,
my whiskers curl just so.
Perched on high, a wooden throne,
to look at all below.

MANDAKINI ARORA

Mandakini Arora is an Indian-Singaporean writer and historian with a PhD in History from Duke University and an MA in Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts. Co-chair of the American Women's Association Singapore writers' group, she reviews books for the AWA magazine, and on Instagram @travelling_bookmark.



The Border of a Dream

An eleven-year-old girl delights at the sight of *ood bilav* diving for coins that visitors to Lahore Zoo fling into the water. The smooth-coated otters are a novelty, unknown in the girl's native desert town of Khanewal. This day of firsts will forever be scored in her memory—first time in a big city, first visit to a zoo and first sight of otters.

Lahore is everything the girl has imagined. City of palaces, tombs and gardens. Mosques, temples, gurdwaras, churches. City of her dreams. Before visiting, she had set her sights on the shimmering Punjab metropolis—from the moment she first saw the nineteen-year-old daughter of her father's friend in Khanewal, unimaginably fashionable with black, glossy hair twisted into a stylish updo, long fingernails painted scarlet, wearing a salwar kameez of the finest silk.

'She's home for the holidays', someone said to the girl's parents. 'Studying English Literature at Kinnaird College in Lahore. Not in a hurry to get married. She wants to study more.'

A frisson of anticipation ran through the girl. Overhearing, she resolved to study in Lahore when she grew up.

Her excitement on her first visit is almost uncontainable, the sights overwhelming—most of all the otters, strange

creatures that swim like fat, sleek fish but look like misshapen, lolloping cats on land.

A year later, the girl's world is upended and Lahore lost to her forever. In August 1947, an improbable severance creates two independent nations out of British India. With the stroke of a colonial pen, Lahore and Khanewal are included in Muslim-majority Pakistan. Muslims pour out of Hindu-majority India to Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India. The girl and her family, Hindu, have crossed over early that summer. Her father has bought a holiday home on the "right" side of the border, in the hills of Punjab's Simla district, which becomes part of India. They are separated from their house and all their possessions, from their *watan*, as the border hardens and their homeland burns. The girl overhears adults talk in lowered voices of cross-border trains arriving at their destinations filled with mutilated corpses, young women protectively killed by their parents, others snatched from the edges of *kafilas*, the large columns of humans struggling across the border on foot.

She and her family are lucky, the girl is repeatedly told. She buries old dreams and learns to dream anew in a new hometown in newly minted India.

Sixty years after the Partition, now a widow in her seventies, a mother living in Delhi, the girl visits another

metropolis for the first time. Amritsar in a truncated Indian Punjab. From Amritsar she travels to the Attari-Wagah border, 30-odd kilometres away, to watch the Beating Retreat Ceremony. She has heard of the performance that tourists flock to watch.

Nearing the border, a border which demarcates a country from itself, her eye falls on a signpost: 'Lahore 23 km'.

An old dream stirs.

She joins crowds of ebullient spectators watching as soldiers from the two hostile countries kick up their feet almost to their foreheads and march to mock-confront each other at heavy iron gates, opened for the duration. When the ritualised, dramatic posturing is done, the Pakistan and India flags are lowered and the gates closed.

My mother is distracted—sad and quiet.

'Twenty-three kilometres. So close,' she says. 'That's where I first saw *ood bilav*, when I was eleven.'

JOY SHINCHI

Joy is a recent graduate of the MA in Creative Writing programme. The learning she gleaned from her studies has certainly sharpened her writing skills in various genres, and to think more critically about her creative work.



The Model

The lissom female lifted her leg across the top tube of the stationary bicycle to position herself onto the seat. As she shifted her weight to comfortably settle herself, the stand gently wobbled, but the bicycle remained stable.

‘Lovely,’ the photographer crooned as flashbulbs went off in succession. “Great. Lean forward...flirt with my camera.’

The model leaned. As she batted her lashes, her peripheral vision caught a flash. She turned her head for a fuller view, but all she saw were the warehouse’s bare walls, the many assistants running dizzily to fulfil all the assignments needed during a photo shoot. She tilted her head up but only the bare ceiling met her gaze.

‘Aurora! Can you focus?’

‘Sorry. I thought I saw lightning but I must have been mistaken. We’re indoors, right? There can’t be lightning!’

‘It’s only these colossal flash bulbs going off!’

The session continued without any more interruptions.

Aurora furrowed her brow as she packed her things. All during the shoot, she had a vague sense she was being watched, but by whom? The photography sessions had taken place in a contained warehouse surrounded by hundreds of people. She had been flanked by physical sets showcasing

different scenes required for each photo-shoot. All this happened within a cavernous confined warehouse topped by a solid roof and surrounding walls. So how could there be any external stimuli? The tight building did not even allow natural light to filter in.

She was now in her dressing room: another enclosed space. This was not a movie but reality. She was imagining things. The shoot must have tired her out.

As she left the warehouse, Aurora lifted her face to the sun, feeling its warmth shrouding her skin like a comforting cocoon. A gentle breeze blew. She closed her eyes and sucked in large breaths of refreshing air. She wrinkled her nose. The air held a smidgen of pungency like the breath of someone suffering from gingivitis. She took another deep breath. The smell had dissipated. Were her senses playing tricks on her?

She waited at the bus shelter and checked her phone's transport app. The bus would arrive in ten minutes.

Aurora, the wind whispered gently. Her eyes flicked up. She cocked her head and held her breath. Nothing stirred. Only silence. The bus shelter was in a remote part of town. She blew her breath out.

Aurora! This time there was no mistaking the voice. She swung her head round.

'Show yourself,' she shouted and immediately felt silly. There was no one.

The brightness dimmed sharply as passing clouds hid the sun. The earlier pungent smell returned, stronger than before. Aurora looked up, catching sight of a pair of black pupils staring down at her. Her eyes widened. Her jaw dropped. She stretched her mouth to scream but nothing emerged...

The reader slammed the cover of the photobook shut. He could not believe the model's eyes had connected directly with his.

A Bidayuh Travels the World

[Adapted from an original documentary script]

The ship's horn blew long and low. And then the steamship gently lumbered from the dock. James' spirits slumped like the horn's bassy moan. He watched as the ship steamed away from the dock and Kuching's familiar landscape and buildings diminished as they moved further into the open ocean. His mind returned to that fateful day...

"What do you think, James?" R. C. Perry asked.

James stared wide-eyed at his headmaster, too stunned to respond.

As he and his siblings trekked the dusty 13-mile road home to Quop from Kuching, his dizzying thoughts spun like the game of *gasing*¹ the children played at the village. His younger siblings chattered loudly amongst themselves, oblivious to the raging turmoil roiling within their elder brother.

How do I feel about following Mr Perry and his family back to England? From what they've shared with me, the country offers abundant opportunities for me to become better educated. This could help in securing well-paying work, and be helpful to my siblings. I'm so excited, yet, fearful. I've never travelled beyond

1 Malay term referring both to spinning top and the game of top spinning

Kuching.

What would it be like to sail on a large steamship? From photos I've seen, the ocean can be turbulent! When I accompanied Mr. Perry in the car, I'm already nauseous and this was on land.

Oh dear. Would it really be worthwhile giving up my life here in Sarawak? I don't know. Should I stay? Should I go?

Papa, Mama, I wish you were alive to guide me on what to do. I'm so lost.

The usual din of ten siblings eating and talking during their meals at the dining table assailed James' ears. The young ones were not only busy eating but also sharing about their day at school albeit with raised voices. James chewed his food silently. When the chatter around the dining table dropped, he raised his voice.

"Mr Perry called me into his office earlier today."

Edwin stopped munching and stared at his older brother. "You got into trouble, right? That's why you had to see the headmaster!"

James turned sternly towards Edwin. "I'm not like you! Heard you didn't do your homework again!" The younger boy looked down at his plate sheepishly.

James' eldest sister Alice furrowed her brows. "Mr Perry's retiring, isn't he? Why did he want to see you?"

"He offered me the chance to go to England together with him and his family."

Teddy, the second-eldest, stopped eating and asked, "What was your answer?"

"I told him I'll think about it," James pressed his lips together, "it's a major decision."

Edith, one of the younger Skadiang siblings, wailed loudly. "Don't go, *Kor-kor!* I'll miss you!"

Katharine, the third oldest sibling, asked, "what did you decide?"

"Since the meeting, I've been thinking about nothing else. I'm really in two minds," James hesitated, "I think it'll be good for me to go. Yet..."

Edwin frowned. "Why?"

"Well, Mr Perry did share a lot about how England has many fine colleges and universities. So, I do hope to further my studies. With better qualifications, I would be able to get a well-paying job. Then I can send money home!"

"That's good," Teddy nodded appreciatively. "But?"

Edith and her younger sisters chorused, "We don't want you to go...we don't want you to go..."

"Hush!" Alice's voice quavered as she silenced the young ones. "It'll be hard..." she paused, "but necessary."

After the dishes had been cleared and the young ones chased off to bed, James stood on the veranda of their home and looked at the mountains surrounding village Quop. He closed his eyes and inhaled the rain-tinged air as dark clouds

gathered, signalling an impending storm. The leaves fluttered in the strong winds. He would miss this tropical heat and humidity that he had grown up in.

The spray from the ocean waves jolted James back to the present. His stomach lurched as the large vessel rose and fell. He clung to the railing, and tried his best to quell his spinning vision as he slowly inched his way towards the cabin he would be sharing with the Perry boys.

James opened his eyes expecting the ceiling to swirl around. He was surprised when the overhead light stayed still. He swung his legs from the bunk and keenly heard his stomach growl. He hurriedly washed and shaved. Together with the Perry boys, he made his way to the dining room. While waiting for Mr and Mrs Perry, James' mouth watered as his nose smelt the variety of food aromas as waiters brought heaping plates to the dining tables.

"James!" He turned to see Mr and Mrs Perry making their way to where he was seated with their sons. "I see you've found your sea legs at last!"

"Yes," James grinned. "It's good to be able to eat and drink comfortably. This ship's journey has now become more pleasant."

Over the next few weeks, James, together with the Perry children, walked the decks, climbed up and down stairs, clung onto the railings, sat on the deck chairs dotted round the ship, and felt their hair blow wildly into their faces as they gazed at the never-ending ocean.

“Dad! We see land!” The Perry children shouted excitedly to their parents. James – leaning on the ship’s railings – spotted tall, hazy shapes in the distance. These expanded into distinct buildings as the ship reached the docks. He saw people scurrying along, pushing heavy handcarts, riding bicycles, loading cargo onto lorries. A cacophony of sound assailed his ears: voices, car engines, bicycle bells, thuds and thumps as heavy cargo landed onto the beds of stationery trucks.

As the vessel gently maneuvered alongside the docks, the ship’s sailors – men with thick sinewy arms – heaved heavy ropes and threw them to the longshoremen, who grabbed and secured them to the moorings.

The Perrys and James disembarked to be swallowed by the massive crowds. They valiantly tried to stay together and resisted being separated, but fought a losing battle. When James eventually reached the car, he found all their luggage had been stowed securely onto the roof of the car.

“What do you think of England, Jimmy?” the Perry boys, using his nickname, asked eagerly. “Don’t you think it’s

much nicer than Sarawak?”

“Well...it’s different,” James looked eagerly around him as the car moved cautiously down the road. He stared gobsmacked at dormer windows topping towering buildings, ugly-grinning gargoyles looking like they would fly off into the sky with piercing shrieks, and tightly packed buildings crowding both sides of the road. The sound of car horns honking and the smell of petrol overwhelmed his senses.

Over the next few weeks, James settled into the routine of having hard-boiled eggs, baked beans and toast with the Perrys, writing to colleges and universities, helping Mrs Perry with household chores as well as her extensive stamp collection. He drafted letters on her behalf offering to exchange stamps with other avid stamp collectors.

The weeks morphed into months. James’ heart sank deeper daily as the pile of college and university rejection letters grew. The bright future he had envisaged back in Sarawak diminished with each rejection. He wondered what would become of him.

Would he have to return to Sarawak? Where would he get the money to buy the ship’s ticket? He couldn’t keep relying on the Perrys’ generosity. How could he tell Mr Perry the truth? He kept the growing disappointment to himself.

One evening, Mr Perry looked up from the newspaper

he was reading and asked, "James, have you heard back from the colleges and universities you wrote to?"

James wavered before softly answering. "Yes." He hesitated as Perry laid his papers down. "All my applications were rejected. The colleges had written to say my qualifications were not suitable."

"Oh!" Perry paused, "I'm so sorry to hear that." He paused again. The silence stretched and James' anxiety grew, dreading what would come next. But Mr Perry continued thoughtfully. "Tomorrow we should visit my friend who operates a printing press. He's been looking for an apprentice. That could provide you with a useful skill!"

Mr Perry and James set off the next morning to meet Arthur, who was happy to accept James as an apprentice. James was taken under the wing of Arthur's senior foreman Harold, and started learning the intricacies of typesetting: loading the bales of papers onto the rollers of the printing machines, locking the typeset blocks into their respective frames, and varying the speeds of the press. Initially, James worked with an assistant, but within a couple of weeks, he grew confident and was working on typesetting and printing of the different documents by himself.

Six years passed. His work as a printer enabled him to save and send money home. Letters from home updated

him on happenings with the Skadiang family: how Katharine had married a wealthy Chinese man named E.V. Lim and moved to Swatow, China; and how Edwin – who had not been particularly studious – was now working on a ship. The letters also emphasised how they missed hearing James play the banjo as the family lustily sang their favourite songs.

James' letters to his siblings often began with "Dear all at home. There's so much to write about that I hardly know where to begin..." and contained pleasant anecdotes such as his continued banjo playing where he entertained the Perry children with cheerful songs of the day like "Roll out the barrel". In church, his clear baritone could often be heard rising melodiously over the voices of the congregation. This resulted in many members turning their heads to seek out the owner of the distinct singing voice and smiling as their eyes connected with his.

After work one day, James returned to find a letter covered with Chinese stamps sitting on his writing table. He eagerly tore open the envelope and read "Dear James, I hope this letter finds you well. E.V. and I have been in Kulangsu, Amoy, China for some years now. His business is doing very well and expanding. As a result, he needs additional help. I'm writing to ask if you would join us..."

James re-read the letter with growing excitement and elation: he would be with his family again in China, a

country he had read about and now a chance to stay. At the same time, his heart dipped. He would be leaving all he had grown to love – the Perrys with their kindness and warmth, his work mates at the printing press, and members of the church. He had grown accustomed to English customs like starting the day with bacon, eggs, sausages, and making milky tea beginning with milk followed by hot water poured over the tea leaves. He sighed. He alternated between re-reading his sister's letter and staring at the ceiling. After what felt like a long time, James went in search of the Perrys. Another adventure awaited him.

The day of James' departure to China dawned bright and sunny. He whistled as he packed the hand luggage he would carry on board. He looked round the empty bedroom, and a twinge of regret fluttered within him, but only for a while. His time in England had been a very pleasant experience but it was ending.

"We'll miss you tremendously Jimmy," Mr Perry was solemn as he spoke. "But family's needs come first. At least this beautiful wooden stationery box gifted to you from our church will be a tangible reminder of your time with us."

"Thank you so much for your kindness all through the years. I'll never forget what you've done for me." James hugged the Perry boys, clasped Mr Perry's hands tightly, and

bowed to Mrs Perry.

“Please cable to let us know you’ve arrived safely.”

James nodded, his eyes red with unshed tears as he pulled on his new coat and entered the waiting taxi.

Two months later, James stood on the deck as the ship slowly maneuvered its way to the docks of Kulangsu, Amoy, China. As he descended the gangway, he searched the massive sea of people crowding the platform. This crowd was even denser than what he had encountered in England. He was a little disconcerted as he scanned many Asian – and not European – faces, and realised he had grown accustomed to seeing pale faces topped with light-coloured hair. He finally spotted his sister Katharine and her husband E.V. Lim and waved excitedly to them. He kissed his sister on both her cheeks and warmly shook his brother-in-law’s hands when he reached them.

“James! It’s so good to see you after such a long time.”

“Welcome to Kulangsu,” Lim returned James’ warm handshake, “I hope the sea journey wasn’t too rough.”

James shook his head. “My sea legs are still with me. Goodness! There are just so many people here.”

“This is China, one of the world’s most populous countries. You’ll eventually get used to it. Come. Your luggage has already been stowed in the car.” Lim steered him

towards a large black sedan parked nearby, and gestured for James to get in the front seat. He and Katharine then settled themselves in the back. As the car crawled its way out of the port, James looked through the closed window at the heaps of bodies pressed dangerously close to the car's sides. He was terrified that at any moment, a few of these bodies might just be sucked by the car's undertow and disappear from his sight. He shuddered at the thought of the car rising then falling as the wheels crushed the bones of these fallen bodies. Thankfully the driver skilfully maneuvered the car out of the port without incident. The sea of people thinned considerably and the car picked up speed.

Although the faces that had assailed James were unfamiliar, the architecture of this city – in contrast – were similar to those he had just left in England. He turned questioningly to Lim.

“Kulangsu is known as an international settlement. An area welcoming to many foreigners,” his brother-in-law responded.

Katharine spoke up. “You’d have noticed people in Kulangsu are not only Chinese, but Europeans and Westerners like the Italians, British and Americans.”

Lim continued. “This international settlement has certainly benefited my business as it has opened doors for me to export tea, spices, and silk to Europe and England. You

coming here and joining me will certainly be of great help.”

The next few weeks saw James accompanying Lim on his visits to various European businesses, working with the foremen at Lim’s warehouse and observing cargo at Kulangsu port being loaded onto ships bound for Europe.

On Sundays, James accompanied his sister and brother-in-law to church where he met the Chiu siblings. As he interacted with them each Sunday, James felt drawn to their petite sister called Po-poë.

What he did not foresee at this point, was Po-poë eventually becoming his wife, bearing him eight children, and returning to settle with him and their children in Teluk Intan, West Malaysia.

[Incomplete]

PETER MORGAN

Peter Morgan is a photographer, writer, educator and IT professional. His poetry has appeared in the *Southeast Asian Review of English* and a short story in *Best Asian Short Stories 2022*. His photography has been published in *Queen's Quarterly*, an Argentinean math textbook and a German surfing magazine. Peter completed his Goldsmiths/LaSalle College of the Arts MA in 2019.



The Secret Classrooms

Setting: Cornwall, Britain, Fall 1951

EXT. WINDING COUNTRY ROAD, MORNING

Quiet road, pastoral landscape, without cars.

SUPER: 1951, CORNWALL, POST-WWII
BRITAIN.

FRED THOMSON, early twenties, fit, British, dressed in military greens, rides a Royal Enfield Bullet motorbike. Sun shines as morning fog lifts. He races along a country road, cheerfully weaving across the centerline.

DAME LIZBETH HART (V.O.): The Russians called us a spy school, but... the best way to learn Russian is a rigorous study of grammar, to understand the country, what people read and how they dance. If my students fall in love with Russia, so be it. We've defeated the Nazis, and we'll defeat communism.

EXT. COUNTRY MANSION REPURPOSED AS SCHOOL, MIDDAY

Expansive gravel approach road. A desk is set outside on flagstone forecourt. DAME, middle-aged, professorial, with gravitas, in civilian dress, stands to the side. Two uniformed OFFICERS #1 and #2 (young, male, clean cut) sit at the desk and register servicemen.

Fred arrives, disembarks, and stands in front of the desk, at attention.

DAME appraises Fred. Fred is distracted by DAME.

Fred salutes the officers imperfectly.

FRED
Thomson, sir.

Officers salute indifferently while shuffling through paperwork.

OFFICER

First assignment after basic training? Motorbike in the shed on the left, dorm 7C, main hall on the right. Quickly.

Fred stiffens and turns to his bike. Officers prepare for the next arriving enlisted man.

Fred takes the saddlebags off the Enfield and prepares to push the bike to the shed.

DAME

How well can you ride... Thomson?

FRED

Well, enough, ma'am. Shall I take you for a spin?

Officer #1 stands, strides forward and faces Fred in a threatening manner.

DAME

It's alright, officer.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. LANGUAGE CLASSROOM, SPRING, AFTERNOON

Cold, drafty classroom, expanse of windows on one side overlooking estate grounds.

SUPER: 6 MONTHS LATER

STUDENTS, all male, early 20s, varying dimensions, heartily sing last stanzas of the Soviet National Anthem. TEACHER dismisses class.

Students chat in Russian with varying degrees of competence, but all with enthusiasm, as they gather their belongings.

ROBERTSON, fellow student, speaks with Fred in English.

ROBERTSON
The Pub tonight, unless you've found a local girl?

FRED
Wouldn't miss our last night. You'll be married before me, Robertson.

ROBERTSON
We'll soon be scattered. Know your posting? SigNet, for me.

FRED
Unassigned, as of yet.

FADE TO BLACK:

EXT./INT. PUB WINDOWS, NIGHT

Darkened village street. Light spills from 16th century-era pub. Bundled in a fur coat against the late night cold, Dame walks briskly but then slows and peers in a window.

Students, including Fred and Robertson, and local women dance. The group forms a circle around Fred as he does a particularly skilful solo dance. Dame nods to herself and carries on. Fred and the group sing boisterously in Russian.

INT. DRAFTY CORRIDOR, OFFICE, DOOR SIGN SAYS 'COMMANDER', DAY

Fred, in uniform, walking down drafty corridor, stops at the door, knocks and enters.

High bookshelves, busy desk. View of grounds from windows. Dame is seated, flanked by OFFICERS #1 and #2. Fred salutes rigidly, eyes straight ahead.

DAME

Hopefully, you can redeem yourself, given our first meeting. I have a mission for you. A version of your grande tour. A chance to see Belle Europe. We need someone to fetch a young woman from Moscow, and who better than a man taking time off after a postgraduate degree, wanting to see the world. She'll be invaluable to us. Your C.O. will provide the details.

FRED

Yes, ma'am. One question, ma'am, if I may?

DAME

Yes.

FRED

(Smiles)

Why me?

DAME

I thought that myself.

FRED

My Russian?

DAME

Not entirely.

FRED

My motorcycling?

DAME

You see, Thomson, we need someone who can speak Russian, ride a motorbike and dance. The woman is a passionate dancer.

FRED

Yes, ma'am.

Fred leaves.

Dame turns to one of the officers.

DAME

Now all we need is for Fred to
fall in love.

If Fred only knew it's her
Nazi father we are after, and
what he knows of the Soviet
military. He's told us he
won't come unless he knows his
daughter is safe.

OFFICER

And despite his resourcefulness,
our courier, HALDIN, won't be
able to get Anastasia beyond
Finland.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. RURAL AREA, ROUGH BARN, MORNING

SUPER: 1930, NORTHERN GERMANY

Dim light, strewn straw bales for makeshift
bed. SONIA MÜLLER, late 20s, Russian Jew,
is having a difficult labour. A MIDWIFE is
helping. Senior German officer GERHARD MÜLLER,
early 30s, uniformed, commanding bearing,
paces anxiously.

GERHARD

(Uncharacteristically,
deferentially, to Midwife)

How long?

After some struggle, ANASTASIA is born.
Midwife swaddles the baby in cloth and hands
the baby to father. Gerhard looks adoringly
and longingly at his child and then hands
the baby to the mother.

FATHER (CONT'D)

(to Sonia)

I'm already overdue. Make for
the border as soon as you can.
A daughters of Russian Jew,

no matter how pretty isn't
welcome anymore.
 (he caresses her)
I don't want Anastasia growing
up here. I'll protect you as
best I can.

SONIA

Do your duty. I know you mean
the best for us. Come as soon
as you can.

Gerhard, grudgingly, leaves. Sonia embraces
baby.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. UNHEATED DANCE STUDIO, 1951, MOSCOW

Tarnished floor-to-ceiling mirrors line one
wall. Anastasia leads a ballet class in a
sparse dance studio. Anastasia in a sweater
to stay warm. The class ends.

SUPER: 1951, MOSCOW

ANASTASIA

Enough for today, everyone.
 (Quietly, in exasperation)
The war is over, and every
day, for three years, still no
heat.
 (Slight smile, louder
 voice)
Until tomorrow!

FADE TO BLACK:

EXT. MOSCOW BOULEVARD

Two-story buildings, street sellers,
bicycles, cars. Fred (obviously well-
traveled) leans against his motorbike,
looking down the street. He revels in the
atmosphere. Finnish courier HALDIN, shifty,
late middle-aged, business dress, some
distance away, nods discreetly.

Anastasia exits a building and walks
briskly.

Fred and Haldin observe Moscow MILITSIYA #1 and #2 stopping Anastasia. She shows her papers. Undeterred by the routine police check, she hurries on.

FADE TO BLACK:

EXT. CAFÉ PATIO

Charming, well-visited café. Haldin and Fred sit at table with vase of red carnations. Dance-able music plays in the background.

SUPER: MOSCOW INVADED FINLAND IN NOVEMBER 1939. THE FINNISH-SOVIET WINTER WAR LASTED UNTIL MARCH 1940, WHEN FINLAND AGREED TO A PEACE TREATY. THE SMALL NORDIC COUNTRY LOST TERRITORY BUT MAINTAINED ITS INDEPENDENCE.

Haldin, alert, sees Anastasia passing. He stands and walks to intercept her. They are familiar but formal with each other.

ANASTASIA

Herr Haldin.

HALDIN

Coffee? Perhaps there is some progress in arranging to meet your father. I have an escort for you.

He nods at Fred. Anastasia regards the Englishman aloofly.

Anastasia joins Fred and Haldin. Coffee is served.

HALDIN (CONT'D)

Well, I'll let you two talk.

(Facing Anastasia,

upbeat, in hushed voice)

You will see your father again soon, I am sure.

(Turning to both, in regular tone)

If there is any difficulty, you
must come and see me at my
hotel in Helsinki.

He hands each a hotel card with the name,
HOITO, visible.

ANASTASIA
(to Haldin's back,
imperceptibly to Fred)
I don't trust any of them.

Fred, naively and enthusiastically, talks to
beautiful Anastasia. She answers coolly, at
first.

Background song changes. Fred, recognizing
the music, stands and does a short, smart
dance.

Anastasia leans forward and nods, impressed.

ANASTASIA (CONT'D)
You dance?

FADE TO BLACK:

EXT: RURAL ROAD, LATE AFTERNOON

SUPER: NEAR THE USSR/FINLAND BORDER

Countryside and distant forested hills. Fred
holds his bike up, on the gravel shoulder of
a narrow, roughly paved road, offering the
motorcycle to Anastasia.

ANASTASIA
Me?

FRED
You can do it!

Anastasia nervously mounts the bike and
slowly sets off before cautiously but
competently turning back. She dismounts and
feigns a curtsy.

FRED (CONT'D)
Just like dancing!

Both remount the bike and ride across the countryside toward the hills. Rain threatens.

FADE TO BLACK:

EXT./INT. ABANDONED BARN, DUSK

They stop on the roadside near an abandoned barn. Fred offers his leather jacket. Anastasia accepts as she looks skyward, enjoying the rainfall. They rush into the barn.

Fred returns to the bike, bringing the leather saddlebags into the dusty barn. Anastasia studies a small, worn photo she has kept with her. Fred moves closer to see the image.

FRED
(Withdraws, startled)
He's in uniform?

ANASTASIA
(Abruptly)
He is my father.
(And then more
compellingly)
I don't know what he is to you
and your government, but he's
my father.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. ABANDONED BARN, LATE EVENING, SOUND OF RAIN

The barn is almost empty but for a few rusty tools and some straw fashioned into two mats. Fred and Anastasia lie each on their own mat, clothed but as if for sleep. They talk amiably. Rain patters on farm tools.

A gap in the roof directly over Anastasia drips. Anastasia, hesitating, looks to

either side. She rolls closer to Fred. After a time in the dark, they kiss tentatively and then passionately.

FADE TO BLACK:

EXT. ROAD, REMOTE RUSSIA/FINLAND BORDER
CROSSING.

On the bike, Anastasia, holding tightly to Fred, approaches border. They slow.

SOVIET BORDER GUARDS #1 and #2 block their way.

GUARD #1
Papers!

Fred and Anastasia dismount. They produce their papers from the saddlebag. The soldier moves into a small, rough tin building. Fred and Anastasia exchange nervous looks.

Guard #1 returns.

GUARD #1
(facing Thomson)
Your exit papers are in order.
Proceed.

Guard #1 hands Fred his stamped papers.

Guard #2 appears.

GUARD #2
(facing Anastasia)
Your papers are not in order.
You will be returned directly
to Moscow.

Guard #2 hands Anastasia her papers.

GUARD #2 (CONT'D)
There is a train in two hours.
You will be escorted back.

Anastasia is bewildered. Guard #2 approaches her. Fred steps nervously but determinedly between Guard #2 and Anastasia. A scuffle

ensues. Fred has the upper hand until Guard #1 draws a pistol.

GUARD #1 (CONT'D)
It is finished. Go. Now.

Anastasia reaches out and touches Fred's arm.

ANASTASIA
The Hoito.

Guard #1 forcefully removes Anastasia.

Fred looks confused, but then shows signs of recognition. Fred hesitates.

GUARD #1
If you don't leave, you will
be violating Soviet law. You
will be arrested.

Fred mounts and rides slowly across the border.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT./EXT. HOITO HOTEL, MORNING

Functional two-story hotel on Helsinki side street. Fred exits the hotel and looks hopefully, forlornly, up and down the Helsinki Street.

EXT. HOITO HOTEL, MORNING (SECOND DAY)

Fred exits the hotel and looks hopefully up and down the street.

INT. HELSINKI, HOITO HOTEL ROOM (THIRD DAY)

Fred lies on one of the two single beds; he fitfully reads a Russian grammar book. His saddlebags are on the worn dresser.

A knock at the door. Haldin stands at the entrance. Anastasia, smiling, enters the room.

HALDIN
(to Anastasia)
I'll just have a word with
Fred, if I may?
(beckoning him to the
hall).

HALDIN (CONT'D)
(angrily, in whispers, to
Fred)
I've had to call in all kinds
of favours. It would have been
better if you'd brought her
here properly the first time.

Whatever you do, you must not
let on. Dame Lisbeth has sent
a message. There has been
trouble. Herr Müller may not
be in England on schedule.

There are new restrictions;
emigration will stop soon, and
the borders will close. Return
to England with Anastasia first
thing tomorrow. She can wait
for him there. And don't fuck
it up. Again.

Haldin leaves. Fred waits in the hallway
momentarily, collecting his thoughts. Fred
enters and embraces Anastasia.

ANASTASIA
What did he say about my
father?

FRED
He is waiting for you.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. HOITO HOTEL ROOM, MORNING

Sunlight fills the room. Fred and Anastasia
are sharing one of the single beds.

FRED
I'll go get us some fresh
bread.

Fred dresses quickly. Anastasia sees him to the door, embraces him and then locks the door.

INT. HEKSINKI HOITO HOTEL CORRIDOR

Fred carries a loaf of rye bread and some flowers. He taps on the door, and it swings open, unlocked. On the unmade bed is a note.

*Dearest Fred, we are two islands,
two countries. I will find my father.
And then, perhaps... Love, Anastasia*

Fred searches the room. The saddlebags are gone. He rushes out of the room, down the stairs and onto the street. Air is cold.

EXT. HELSINKI STREET

In the distance, Anastasia rides off, at speed, on his motorbike.

Coda: Research Notes

My father attended the Joint Services School for Linguists (JSSL) as his compulsory national service. He was discharged after serving in the Signals Intelligence Branch, never having left Britain. He had a lifelong interest in Russia.

Cambridge professor (later Dame) Elizabeth Hill founded JSSL in 1951. JSSL trained 5000 British national servicemen, including a number who subsequently obtained prominent positions in Britain.

Elliott, Geoffrey. *Secret Classrooms: An Untold Story of the Cold War*. Faber and Faber, 2011.

At the end of World War II, senior Nazis went into hiding, some with the aid of the Vatican. When the perceived threat of communism developed, the Nazis were seen as a means to learn about the Soviet military and were highly sought after by Western intelligence. The mechanism for getting them out of Europe and to South America became known as 'The Ratline'.

Sands, Philippe. *East West Street: On the Origins of 'Genocide' and 'Crimes against Humanity'*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2016.

'Intrigue: The Ratline, Episode 1 - Secrets in the Castle'. BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p061h2b5>.

Fred Thomson, a British citizen; Russian Jews such as Anastasia and her mother; and Haldin would all have had varying travel restrictions placed on them within the Soviet Union and were often subject to surveillance.

Moscow invaded Finland in November 1939. The Finnish-Soviet Winter War ended in March 1940—when Finland agreed to a peace treaty. The country lost territory but kept its independence. Finland played a pivotal and ambiguous role between Russia and the West. In 1952, Finland hosted the Winter Olympics.

Haldin, Kim. "Summit Host Helsinki Has Played a 'Peaceful Note for the World'." <https://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2018/07/11/summit-host-helsinki>.

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*, *ANIMA METHODI: The Poetics of Mirroring*, and *Atelier of Healing: Poetry About Trauma and Recovery*, amongst others. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts.



tell me again

what longing looks like
biting our tongues
watching goldfish swish
around the water

tell me again why
there are daffodils on the doorstep
was it when we cracked
our foreheads together?

tell me again why
this want aches aches aches
did it start?
as in did you know? did you feel it?

tell me again it will
come home sticky handprints
on mirrors an overly ripe tomato
bursting between little fingers
hair pulled into a spray of fountain
as in like a whale as in like a blowhole

tell me again you'll harvest
my hands
unstitch welts cascading
down
our breastbones

so tell me again
the green grass here is green
we have years ahead of us
tell me again
we'll begin again

JOSEPH TAN

Joseph Tan is an established screenwriter and director who has contributed to critically acclaimed and award-winning television series of the last fifteen years. He also enjoys writing short stories, one of which—*Effigies*—placed second at the Golden Point Award 2023.



(5 x 5)

Days after my mother died, I bought some land through the Internet. A small square of dirt in the middle of nowhere, somewhere in America. I will never remember the name of the town that it's in. I will set neither eyes nor foot on it. But it is there, and it is mine.

Welcome to Bumcrack, Missouri. The town is dying. Some bright spark came up with the idea to divide up the land up north into five-foot-by-five-foot parcels and sell them online. For just two hundred dollars, you can own a piece of Tusslehart, Iowa. The money would go into a revitalisation fund. Save the lovely community of Dickgulch, Kentucky by buying a piece of it.

When I got my novelty certificate of ownership in the mail, I showed it to my brother Colin. See? I own land. He blinked, and reminded me Ma had left us the flat. Since he and his fiancé Audrey had already bought their own place, he was going to sell his share of the flat to me at cost. What's a crummy piece of land in a country that is not mine, and will never be mine, compared to my own HDB flat? I reminded him that in Singapore, we don't own our flats, we just lease them for ninety-nine years. We own no part of the land our apartment blocks sit on. Mom's cremated remains are now housed in a niche, twenty-two by twenty-four centimetres. I

waved the certificate at my brother. A five-by-five square of land is more than Mom will ever get.

Right now, Callas the housecat, who lives with kindly Mrs. Munroe on Bushell Lane in Boogerbristle, West Virginia, leaves home for the last time. She is tired, sick, old. The vets had made a mistake and thought she was five when in fact, she was twelve. Callas—known as Tabby then, after the colour of her fur—had meowed, but of course, no one understood her. So she went home with lovely Mrs. Munroe, who renamed her after opera singer Maria Callas, and she would curl up in sweet Mrs. Munroe's lap on lazy afternoons while arias played on the record player. But now Callas is about to die—she can feel it, her kidneys are failing—and she wants to spare gentle Mrs. Monroe the pain of finding her lifeless body. Better that saintly Mrs. Munroe not know Callas died, like how her son Danny had died, stuck by an improvised explosive device while serving in Baghdad, or like how daughter Suzie had fatally overdosed on sleeping pills at twenty. Better that selfless Mrs. Monroe hold out hope that she will return one day, Callas thought, as she sniffs Plot A37, the designation marked on my certificate of ownership, and nibbles on a blade of grass. She thinks she hears the notes of an orchestra, the warble of a female soprano's voice. She walks in circles inside my five-by-five square of dirt, before curling up so she can close her eyes one last time, fall asleep

one last time. But the music gets louder, and maybe, there is time enough for one more aria, one more belly-rub. Callas gets up to go home, but A37 opens beneath her, swallows her up. Callas cries but there is no one to hear her, no give in the earth claiming her. This five-by-five square is her grave and final resting place. It is more than my mother ever got.

I stuck the certificate into a drawer, and locked it. I would not set eyes on the certificate again for a very long time. But it is there. And it is mine.

Weeks after Yvonne broke up with me, I developed insomnia. It persists, even today. It isn't constant; most nights, I'm dead to the world a minute or two after my head hits the pillow. But every so often, I'd toss and turn for hours.

It starts with the itching. A prickle on a toe, or the forearm. I pick at it, but soon there is another one on a different part of my body, a cascade failure of continuous scratching. They are never true itches, more like approximations, imposters—ghosts of itches past, present and yet to come, haunting my skin, just like how the ghosts of Yvonne's footsteps, voice, scent, haunt me still, in the flat my late mother left me.

I've started mapping my body. A life, told in itches. I've mentally broken my body into five-centimetre-by-five-centimetre squares. Every time an itch starts in one of these

squares, I connect it to a memory. This is where a pimple burst on my left cheek and left a small scar that matched a similar scar on Yvonne's right cheek. This is the spot on my side that she liked to poke for shits and giggles as we cuddled. This is where my left eyebrow was singed, the first time I made us dinner.

Right now, a red pick-up truck is parked across A37 and its adjoining plots. Frank and Diane, both seventeen, are in the cab of the truck, taking turns to be on top as they kiss on the lips, on the neck, tips of tongues tracing curves of earlobes, perimeters of areolae. The truck's undercarriage drips black engine oil onto A37. Diane's feet are pressed against the half-open window on the passenger-side; her toes wiggle when a breeze tickles past. They are supposed to be watching a movie at the town's only cinema, but they had turned left just before Bushell Lane and come up here instead. Frank fumbles at the zip of his jeans, and Diane thinks, oh my god, this is it, it's finally happening, but she just moans encouragingly the way actresses like Zendaya do in the movies. Nine months later, she will give birth to a baby boy, five days after Frank leaves to find work in the big city, because the automobile plant that used to sustain their town had shut down. The first year, he will make the two-hour drive every Friday night to spend the weekend with her and John-boy, and plan their wedding at the smaller banquet hall of the Veteran's Memorial Lodge,

before driving back on Sunday night. The weekend will become shorter and shorter—he'd roll in Saturday morning, then Saturday afternoon, then Saturday evening, and he'd roll out Sunday evening, then afternoon, then morning. He will miss weekends. John-boy will take his first steps without Frank around. Baby's first words will be "Dada", but with a question mark. Diane will lose her deposit on the smaller banquet hall of the Memorial Lodge. She will date, but not remarry. By the time Diane is twenty-three, she no longer loses any sleep over Frank; working two-and-a-half jobs to make ends meet, she is dead to the world a minute or two after her head hits the pillow. But every so often, she will lie awake into the deep hours, picking at an itch here, there and everywhere, remembering his taste on her lips, and tips of tongues tracing curves of earlobes, perimeters of areolae.

These days, I just get up when the itching starts, and work until it's time to begin the day.

A couple of months after I quit my job, I started playing Dungeons and Dragons. A one-hundred-dollar monthly subscription paid to a gaming hall in a half-dead shopping centre, even as my savings dwindled from sustained unemployment.

In Dungeons and Dragons, combat plays out on a grid-map made up of one-by-one-inch squares, with

every inch representing five-feet of the battlefield. My first campaign, I was Janarraah, a half-elf bard who secretly wanted to be a rogue skulking in the shadows, because skulking is way cooler than whatever it is a bard does. Janarraah ended the campaign fending off monsters in a furious last stand so that survivors of a dying world could escape into a new one through an unstable, collapsing portal. Fighting nearly to the death, Janarraah held the enemy at bay and jumped through the portal as it closed, then was never seen or heard from again. That one-inch-by-one-inch map-square that was actually five-foot-by-five-foot did not end up having to serve as the altar for his heroic sacrifice.

The next campaign, I played Tellus, an ancient mechanical being adopted by a band of nomadic druids who taught him their culture and magic. Tellus' crowning achievement was killing a boss character by transforming into a fly, entering the villain's skull through his ear, before shape-shifting back to his usual form and size, causing the Big Bad's head to explode from within, just like that scene in David Cronenberg's *Scanners*. The five-by-five-foot square that was actually a one-inch-by-one-inch part of a map-grid had become the enemy's burial ground.

Right now, in Skidmark, Florida, forty-two-year-old Lorraine sits with fourteen-year-old stepdaughter Allison on a big picnic blanket spread over plots A37 and A38. This

is Lorraine's third life, not counting the one she escaped in New York. In 2001, she was still known as Carol. Twenty-six. Unhappy college dropout stuck in an emotionally-draining on-off relationship with a married man eighteen years her senior. Facing a lifetime of ninety-minute commutes from her family home in Staten Island to a dead-end job as a file clerk in an office in the Twin Towers. On September 11, she was horrendously late after sleeping through her alarm. She heard about the planes crashing into the towers—perhaps even heard the second plane crashing into the towers—as she pulled into the car park of the Staten Island ferry terminal. She stayed in her car to finish listening to the news report. When she got out, she threw her keys and ID down a drain. She took the ferry into Manhattan for the last time, holed up in a fleabag motel, then hopped a Greyhound bus to the other side of the country. She chopped off her waist-long hair. Carol was dead, claimed by 9/11; long live Katherine who worked in a dive bar in Laguna, California. Long live Riki, who taught pre-school in St. Paul, Minnesota. Long live Lorraine, who met Allison's father and loves them both enough to come to Crunkskunk, Kansas, to meet the extended family. Every life she had lived had been a chance to start fresh, become a new person—except, she never did. The jobs she took, the men she loved, always got less exciting, not more. She kept hoping the next life was the one she was meant to have, the one that

would make her happy. Today is the last time she will see Allison, the last time they will sit in the sun together. She has already bought the train ticket that will take her out of Scuttlebutt, Indiana and into a new life. She will get on the train and not look back.

In the next campaign, I will play a farmer with no name. He will not go on adventures. He will stand to the side, and watch other rogues and bards and druids walk by on their way to liberate a treasure from a dungeon, to slay a dragon, to rescue the kingdom. He will wonder how different his life would be if only he had picked up a sword instead of a hoe. He will think often about leaving his small five-by-five-foot allotment of land that is also a one-by-one-inch square on a paper map. Or it is a one-by-one-inch paper square that is also a five-by-five-foot allotment of land? It doesn't matter; he just knows he will never leave. Because it is there. And it is his.

Decades from now, construction will begin on a government-funded billion-dollar tech park in Fartsville, Nevada. The town will revive, its economy will boom. Land is needed for the thirty-storey headquarters of a major tech company. Digging through the records, the developers will learn that the land up north was divided into five-by-five-foot squares, and sold to randos around the world for two-

hundred-dollars each. They will generously offer to buy my land for ten times what I paid.

I will decline to sell.

The developers will offer me twenty times more, adjusted for inflation. It is a very good deal, but I will say no. They offer even more money. An insane, ludicrous sum. Still no. Why, they beg. Why? Why won't you sell? We cannot start building otherwise. And I will say: because it is there, and because it is mine.

Right now, a seed is growing in plot A37. It had dropped from an apple eaten by fourteen-year-old Allison, on the last picnic she'd ever have with the stepmother she adored. The seed absorbs nutrients that used to be Callas the cat, who lived with wonderful Mrs. Monroe on Bushell Lane, off Main Street. Choked by the oil that had dripped into the ground from Frank's pick-up truck, the seedling tries to push through the ground, to air, to sunlight, to life. Several hours from now, at 3:26a.m. that night, it will emerge from the ground into a perfect evening. A full moon hangs high up in the sky. The stars shine down. A breeze brushes across the open plain. Then the wind picks up, the seedling snaps, and that is that.

Eventually, the architects will find a solution around my stubbornness. They will have to build around A37, that five-by-five-foot square of dirt and weeds in the middle of a

gleaming steel-and-glass skyscraper, the tallest in Assclench, Oklahoma. Because it is mine. Because it is there. And because it is more than my mother ever got.

Right now, in Crackerbum, Tennessee, someone is writing a story.

The story will have five sections. Each section, five paragraphs. The writer would love to make it so that each paragraph has five sentences. But that would be too cute. And too hard to do.

The story will be published in an anthology. The writer—and all the other writers in said collection—will be proud and happy.

Right now, I sit in my study. It used to be my mother's bedroom. This was where I found her body, after she had died peacefully in her sleep. Where I went to sulk, after an argument with Yvonne. Where I did my work, back when I still had a job. Sunlight is falling through the window onto my face. Someone in the next block plays music at a fuck-you volume, but it's a song I like, so it's okay. I am happy for a moment. That is enough.

The anthology will not sell out. It will go out of print. The book and the story will be forgotten. But for the writer who is right now thinking of writing that story, that is okay. Because for a moment, it exists. It is there. And it is his.

THE HIT

SCENE.

(The living room of a Housing Development Board (HDB) flat. Windows along the back of the stage look out onto a backdrop of other flats. Afternoon sun floods in; as the play progresses, the light will change to mark the passage of the day. The noise of a typical HDB estate—children playing, gossiping neighbours, and passing traffic—filters up into the flat.

The decor is typical Singaporean HDB, punctuated with colourful prints of Western art—including one of Picasso's Guernica. Toys—a dollhouse populated by Barbie dolls, action figures wielding guns and swords, and a stuffed Paddington Bear—litter the room. On a wall hangs a blown-up photo of a smiling woman in her 30s and a 10-year-old child—obviously mother and daughter.

There are odd, surreal touches around the house: framed black-and-white photos of knives. A Punch and Judy puppet theatre stands in place of a television, with both puppets slumped lifeless over the edge. Signifiers of violence and masculinity out in plain sight—including a great big honking sniper rifle set up at the window, pointing out to the street; a daisy has been stuck onto the scope. Also not hiding are BLACK and WHITE.

WHITE is in his late-twenties. Calm, carries a wisdom beyond his years. He is reading a book. BLACK is in his late-forties. Scowls like a child playing at being grown-up. He frequently peers down the rifle and fiddles with the dials,

constantly adjusting the rifle.
Black and White are Asian and
speak with American accents unless
otherwise stated. They are dressed
in their respective colours.)

WHITE

Quit your fussing.

BLACK

It's nearly time.

WHITE

"Nearly time" is not actually time.

BLACK

Just wanna make sure we're ready when she
arrives.

WHITE

We've been guaranteed our target will show
up at the designated time, wearing a red
hat. Pretty fucking hard to miss someone
wearing a red hat. Not when we're us.

(White mimics the firing of finger
guns; off-stage, an accompanying
sound effect like that of six-
shooters in an old Western,
followed by the refrain from the
children's song Pop Goes the
Weasel! Black doesn't seem to have
noticed the sound effects or the
music, but White hums along to the
song.)

BLACK

Why are you suddenly humming "Pop Goes the
Weasel"?

(A pause, as Black looks at White.
White shrugs. Note: it is ambiguous
as to whether White suspects he is
fictional.)

WHITE

Song must've just... popped into my head.
Geddit?

(Black rolls his eyes and turns
back to the rifle.)

BLACK

Still. We can't be too careful. Not after
the La Paz job.

WHITE

What La Paz job?

BLACK

The La Paz job. In June.

WHITE

I wasn't in La Paz in June.

BLACK

Yes you were.

WHITE

I was in Marseilles, knee-deep in... well,
you don't wanna know what I was knee-deep
in. But I for sure wasn't knee-deep in
Bolivia.

BLACK

We were holed up in that cheap motel room,
eating McDonalds and watching old cowboy
movies, waiting for that dumb shit in the
blue shoes.

WHITE

Nah. Wasn't me.

BLACK

Yes. It. Was. You got the shifts from that
leftover milkshake and I had to sit in our
one-room shanty swallowing way too many
whiffs of your farts for you to tell me
otherwise—

WHITE

It was Gray.

BLACK

Fuck you it was Gray.

WHITE

If it wasn't Gray, then it was someone else. There's always a pair of assholes watching bad cowboy movies, eating shit food in some motel in La Paz, in Paris, in Bruges. But this wasn't me, because I'm so wanted by the authorities in Bolivia that not even the ghosts of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid—god rest their souls — can drag me back there.

(Throughout, White does not take his eyes off his book.)

BLACK

It was Gray?

WHITE

Or it could have been me. Who knows.

BLACK

Motherfucker—

(Black stalks, ready to fight, towards an unfazed White.)

WHITE

Sit down.

BLACK

Not till I kick the shit out of you—

WHITE

You gotta make sure we don't miss the little miss with the red hat, bud. This ain't about us. It ain't even about Ms. Red Hat.

BLACK

Fuck does that mean?

WHITE

Think about it. It's curtains for Ms. Red Hat in a bit, so who gives a shit about her? And we, we pack up and vamoose once we've pulled the trigger. No, this story's about somebody and something else. It's about someone who loves Ms Red Hat dealing with the grief. Or someone trying to work out who ordered the hit. You and I, we're just facilitators. Catalysts to this little tragedy or comedy or whatever genre is in vogue now—

(The doorbell rings. Black and White freeze and tense up. The doorbell rings again. Black, drawing his gun, walks over to the front door near stage left and peers through the peephole.)

BLACK

(whispering)
Deliveryman.

(White heads off stage right, exiting through a door he leaves ajar. We hear a gun being cocked, and then some desperate whispering in a woman's voice and the sobbing of a child. But we cannot make out what is said because Pop Goes the Weasel! plays again.)

(While this is happening, Black sees the book White was reading. He picks it up. He is puzzled as he looks through the book over, inadvertently showing the pages to the audience—they are all blank.)

(Black hears White returning, and sets the book back down. White closes the door behind him, ending the song and any other off-stage sounds. White absent-mindedly hums the song.)

BLACK

You're humming that song again.

(Flustered, White clears his throat, ignoring Black's observation.)

WHITE

They say they aren't expecting any deliveries.

(Black turns to the door, and they both wait, quietly. Black peers through the peephole again. He cautiously opens the door, gun at the ready. He steps out—and returns with a small, sealed box.)

BLACK

What do you think's in it?

WHITE

A map of the world's nuclear arsenals. Fuck would I know?

(Black sets the box down on the table. Black and White look at it. In unison, they bend down and put their ears near the box. Silence. White picks up the box and shakes it, to Black's horror.)

BLACK

What the fuck? There could be a bomb inside! You could have blown us sky high!

WHITE

And yet, we're still here. Ergo, there is no bomb.

BLACK

You can "er, go fuck yourself".

WHITE

(points to rifle)

We can't die. Not until we fire that thing over there.

BLACK

What?

WHITE

I mean, we have a job to do, and nothing's getting in the way of that. And there weren't no ticking from the box. So whatever it is, it's not a bomb.

BLACK

Not all bombs tick.

WHITE

The ones we encounter do. They tick until they get defused with one second left on the clock. They are defused by cutting the red wire. Unless it's the black wire. Or the yellow wire. Sometimes it's even the green.

BLACK

Like that time in Kiev five years ago.

WHITE

We weren't in Kiev five years ago. We were in Mombasa.

BLACK

Bullshit. It was Kiev. We were stuck in a village out in the boondocks that had this rinky-dink burger joint where the owner yelled "rock and roll babee" every time we walked in, and we sat there every day for a week, eating those greasy-ass burgers and watching re-runs of *Law and Order* on their shitty-ass TV until one day, the man with the yellow belt walked in right as the show went "dun dun" and—

WHITE

It was Mombasa.

BLACK

Fuck you—

WHITE

It was Kiev, it was Toronto, it's Singapore. Different cities, different countries—but the same food, the same TV shows. Always two people. Different. But the same.

BLACK

(unsure)

This isn't how this is supposed to go. Normally, I'd start to believe you, and then you pull the rug out from under my feet. Like Bugs with Elmer. Or the Road Runner and—

WHITE

Who's the package addressed to? Who's it from?

(Black checks the packaging on the box.)

BLACK

What the hell? It's—it's for us. Our names are on it. And it's from... Brown.

WHITE

I don't know a Brown. Do you?

BLACK

I could.

WHITE

But do you?

(The light has receded into a dusky hue that is otherworldly. The ambience of the HDB estate has dropped out, plunging the flat into an sinister silence adorned only by Black and White's breathing. They look at the package on the box again.)

BLACK

We should open the box. We should see what's inside.

WHITE

No.

BLACK

It's addressed to us.

WHITE

No.

(White pushes and pulls Black with him towards the rifle.)

BLACK

It could be mission-critical.

WHITE

It could be a vibrating dildo for all I care. The only thing that's mission-critical is us firing this 308 Sniper Special when the little miss with the red hat shows up.

(Black wiggles out of White's grasp and marches back.)

BLACK

I want to know what's in this damned box and I want to know who sent it to us—

(Black picks up the box, but White is chasing him down.)

WHITE

Fuck's sake, I said leave it alone—

(Black moves to open the box but White knocks it out of his hands. It lands near the front of the stage. Black and White scramble after it. White is first, but Black swings a knife at White. A knock-down, drag-out fight takes them through the entire stage. Things go flying. Picasso's *Guernica* supervises the chaos. The box, and Black's knife, change hands several times throughout.)

BLACK

Fuck is wrong with you?

WHITE

Fuck is wrong with you?

(More fighting.)

BLACK

Someone we don't know sends us a package at a place no one is supposed to know we're at -of course I want to know more!

WHITE

(accent starting to slip)

Know more for what? Woman in red hat shows up, we shoot. Simple!

(Still more fighting.)

BLACK

Maybe it's intel. Maybe Brown is trying to tell us something important. I think maybe-

WHITE

(lapsing into Singlish)

You think, I thought, who confirm? I don't care who send what, or who knows who or where we are. They say my job is to shoot the *char bor* in the red hat, then that's what *lim peh* is going to do! Confirm, chop, guarantee!

(The fight ends. The box lies between them. Black stares at White.)

BLACK

Why are you talking like that? Like a Singaporean.

WHITE

No I wasn't.

BLACK

You were.

WHITE

It's all the local TV we've been watching since we got here.

BLACK

It's always American shows on TV no matter where we are. And there ain't no TVs here.

(White looks around the TV-less stage. Black gestures to the box.)

BLACK

We have to open the box. Why don't you want to open the box?

(A pause. As White speaks, he moves to center-stage where a spotlight falls on him, while the rest plunges into darkness.)

WHITE

People think the universe is governed by the principles of order and chaos. But the true guiding principle of our lives is predictability. You wake up, you eat, you shit, you go to work, you grab a beer with friends, you go home and pet your dog and then you sleep so you can wake up to do it all over again. Rinse and repeat. Even the unpredictable, the cannot-be-predicted, is based on the predictable. You wake up, you hop into a cab to go to work, then wham! A bus sideswipes you or a lump of frozen shit from the International Space Station survives re-entry and comes at you at such speed it drills a hole through your head. It's unexpected precisely because it's an aberration against the predictability of your day. Even the aftermath is predictable—the next-of-kin beat their chests and gnash their teeth as they come to terms; the person responsible suffers consequences. Everything has a place, everyone plays a role. Butch and Sundance; Bugs and Elmer; you and me. There are two, always two. La Paz, Marseille, Singapore. Different cities, but always America. The same food, the same

TV shows. Same same, but different. You and I and the man in the blue shoes and the woman in the red hat. Killer and killed. We play our roles, we do our jobs. And our job today is to put a bullet in the head of the little miss with the red hat so that the story-whatever it is-can unfold. It's the only thing I've ever known, it's the only way I will ever know. I am the role I have chosen to play. Been chosen to play. I am nothing more, and nothing less.

(White's speech ends. The stage is restored to its otherworldly, dusk lighting. Black sees the book that White was reading earlier.)

BLACK

Your book. I flipped through the book earlier. All its pages were blank.

WHITE

No it's not. See?

(To prove his point, White picks up the book and flips through it, turning it to show us that indeed there are words on the pages.)

BLACK

They were blank when I looked earlier.

WHITE

Well, they ain't blank now. Pages of text. *The Hit*, by Joseph Tan.

BLACK

"Tan" means brown, no?

(Black looks at the box, still lying between them.)

BLACK

"Even the unpredictable is based on the predictable." Ain't that what you said?

(Black looks at White, who just looks back at him, and finally sighs - his go-ahead. Black picks up the box, rips it open. He pulls out what seems to be a piece of wood shaped like a small baseball bat. Black looks it over, then laughs.)

BLACK

Fuck me. It is a dildo.

(White comes over, and takes the bat from Black.)

WHITE

No, it's not.

(White crosses over to the Punch and Judy theatre. He puts the bat into the Punch puppet's hand. Lights go up; Punch and Judy come to life and act out their designated roles. *Pop Goes the Weasel!* plays. Together, with blank expressions, they silently watch Punch pummel Judy to death with the bat.)

(There is the sound of a gust of wind from outside the apartment. And then a red hat, borne upon a breeze, flies past the window, where the sniper rifle is positioned, unfired. Black and White do not notice, and continue to watch the Punch and Judy show. Both hum along to *Pop Goes the Weasel!*)

CURTAINS.

AZHARI JASMAN

Azhari is a skibidi amidst everybody a somebody as anybody
a busybody. Writes he for no_one while everyone a someone
as anyone when busyone. Really really a nobody (who
finished his MA in Creative Writing at LASALLE in
2024, but that's another story's story).



regardless of

alamak!

screams a
Chinese uncle
at the park

abang!

as his pet
barks and
wiggles free

sowie!

to lick clean

my ankle
i whisper

*masha-
Allah!*

while an

angel above
supposedly
scribes another
black mark upon
my soul's

scroll, i
squat down to
pet the cute

oi!

puppy

to allay

haram!

his fear for
disharmony, i
tell my slanted

truth
in thick
accented
Singlish
i lie

kamusta-po!

so-kay so-kay
me Pinoy
not
Malay

Too Close For Comfort

No, don't...

the skibidi cook shakes his head
so up instead woke the imam,
muttering to me: no, not *haram*.

Chicken and egg.

The rabbi, in
awe, headbutts his Talmud
and up instead woke the priest,
muttering to me: confess a sin, please.

Chicken; egg.

The stand-up
comic brands me a joke
so up instead woke the poet,
muttering to me miscarried words:

Chicken (with) egg!

The scruffy
divorced dad asks: you hungry still?
But up instead woke my child,
muttering to me to not let both,

to not let both—*No, don't...*

{Chicken (&) Egg (Problem)}

let both, dad.

Please, no.

No, don't

let them

touch!

NADIA AYESHA

A graduate of the MA Creative Writing programme, Nadia Ayesha was one of four students who started the SAMPAN anthology in 2022. She is the author of a young adult novel, *Showers of Luck*. Currently based in the UK, she is working on publishing a contemporary adult novel.



Coconut Tree Tales

Allow me to let you in on the secret to the best beef rendang: kerisik, toasted coconut. Kerisik is used for its fragrance and creamy flavour. Dishes which have kerisik added to them last longer. Mama taught me to use freshly grated coconut and carefully toast it over low heat until it reaches the ideal golden-brown shade. The toasted coconut must be pounded to release natural oil. The final product is a beautiful, shiny brown paste.

Mama and I usually cooked beef rendang together. She tasked me to pound ginger, garlic and onion, and taught me how to bruise the bottom part of lemongrass by lightly crushing it with a pestle. Dressed in her faded baju kurung, she chopped and coated beef with spices. While I watched her, I licked my lips, and imagined savouring the rendang with its thick texture almost like soft butter. The mixture of spices blended in harmoniously, giving it a touch of heat that comes through when eaten.

Today I was cooking it on my own because Mama was having a migraine. I sautéed lemongrass in a pot. As I inhaled its fragrant smell, I added in the ginger, garlic and onion mixture. I continued sautéing until the mixture turned almost translucent. Then I added galangal and finally, shallots. When that was done, it was time to cut the beef into

small cubes. Mama said cooking small cubes meant perfect tenderness for each chunk of beef. As I chopped up the beef, my mind wandered to last week's 'coconut tree tales'. I came up with the name 'coconut tree tales' because my neighbours and I enjoyed sharing stories about the latest happenings in our lives or trading gossip under the coconut tree. We traded food too. Some chicken curry and bread for sweet and sour fish and rice or pisang goreng for ang ku kueh. I found that where there is food, friendship will grow.

'Coconut tree tales' could be renamed to 'Mrs. Chen's tales'. Mrs. Chen was the chief source of gossip in our kampong and more often than not, she dominated the session. Last week, she shared that the satay seller's daughter was pregnant out of wedlock. She told us how she and Mr Chen were helping themselves to an assortment of grilled satay when they heard the satay seller sharing the story with a long-time customer. Mrs. Chen was a great story-teller; she wielded the tools at her disposal to pique the interest of her audience. As she told the story, it was as if I was there, dipping the satay into the communal pot of peanut gravy, metres away from buses belching out thick exhaust fumes.

When I was done cutting the beef, I coated each piece of beef evenly with a delicious dance of spices: pounded chilies, fennel seeds, coriander and cumin powder. I sautéed the beef until excess water from the beef was released. Then I

added in the other ingredients, including the kerisik, into the pot. After I brought it to a boil, I lowered the heat. It took around two hours to reduce the rendang sauce until the gravy thickened. Patience was required, which I lacked.

I looked out the window and saw Salmah standing under the coconut tree, waiting for me and our neighbours to appear. Lucky, single Salmah. She was my age but had somehow escaped the confines of marriage and motherhood. As soon as this thought came to my mind, I bit my tongue and silently chided myself. I knew that Allah had blessed me with my husband and children. But there were times when I thought I had married too young. I had barely turned eighteen the day I married Adam, my tall, quiet and handsome neighbour, in the blue-domed mosque nearby. Ten months later, we had Ilker and barely a year and a half later, Sofia. I love Adam so much but Ilker and Sofia are my whole life. Ilker is my sweet boy who loves reading and sitting under the shade of a rain tree. Sofia, my loud and proud girl with the mischievous twinkle in her eye, always has a joke or song to regale us with.

‘Smells good, Aliah,’ Mama murmured from her chair.

‘Are you feeling better, Mama?’ I asked.

‘Yes, I think so. I can stir the rendang,’ Mama said as she got up from her chair.

I looked up from the pot, feeling a surge of gratitude.

I thanked her and escaped out of our house. I spotted Mrs. Chen in the centre of the group of women, gesticulating animatedly with her plump hands. The other neighbours were gathered around her. Mrs. Chen was sharing what came to be known as her 'lok lok love story'. I hurried over, eager to listen. As I joined the group, my friend, Shi Min, grinned at me and gave me a quick hug.

'I was picking cooked octopus, cuttlefish, chicken wings, pork belly and pig's ears too, my favourite. Suddenly, I heard a lady nearby, sobbing. I turned around and saw another woman patting her on the back...' Mrs Chen said.

All of us leaned in just then. Mrs. Chen had succeeded in casting a spell of intrigue.

'What happened?' Salmah asked, her marble-like eyes wide with curiosity.

Mrs. Chen smiled and paused, which I recognised as a skilful manoeuvre to keep us in suspense. 'Well...'

'Tell us,' Cik Aminah said, drawing out her vowels in her signature drawl.

'Yes, tell us!' Shi Min exclaimed.

'Okay, okay...well, this woman was crying because her only daughter, whom she'd raised as a Catholic, wants to marry a Muslim boy!'

'Oh dear,' I said. As a Muslim, I felt warm discomfort burn its way through my cheeks in a strange snake-like way.

I gulped down some saliva and bit my tongue hard to make sure I didn't say anything I would later regret.

Mrs. Chen puffed out her cheeks as air blew out of her mouth. 'Can you imagine? I'd never allow my daughters to do that!'

I could see the Malay listeners were getting irritated. Salma's eyes narrowed as she stared at a spot beyond Mrs. Chen's head.

'What's wrong with Islam, Mrs. Chen?' Cik Halima asked, smoothing out her baju kurung.

'Nothing, nothing, of course,' came Mrs. Chen's swift reply. 'But they are Catholic. A marriage won't work out between her daughter and the Muslim boy.'

'Maybe it will,' Salmah said, clasping her hands together. She let out a dreamy sigh.

'InshaAllah,' Cik Aminah replied. 'It is good if her daughter becomes Muslim.'

Mrs. Chen opened her mouth to reply but closed it just as quickly. She looked like she was grimacing in an effort not to say anything potentially offensive. 'A forbidden love story!' she said, wiggling her eyebrows as she relished in the gossip.

Everyone nodded in agreement, except me. I was imagining the sumptuous deep-fried taste of the lok lok I could not eat as a Muslim.

I plucked the last ripe chilli padi from the plant and put it in my basket. As I stood up, I saw Salmah running towards me, a blazing look of focus on her face. I had never seen her run before. Once, she joked that her heavy body was not made to move fast.

‘Aliah, Aliah!’ she called out, almost tripping on the hem of her baju kurung.

‘Oh, don’t run, Sal!’ I shouted back.

Salmah reached me and wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand.

‘D-did you hear about the riots?’ she asked, wringing her hands.

‘Riots? What riots?’

‘Papa just came back from the Padang. Today was Mawlid...’ her voice trailed off.

‘Yes, I know. There was a riot?’ I bit my lower lip and looked into Salmah’s familiar eyes that always let me know how she was feeling. At that moment, she was blinking rapidly. Finally, she nodded.

‘Papa said he saw a bottle appear in the air and land on the head of an old lady in the parade.’ Salmah’s eyes welled up with tears. I put my hand on her shoulder and patted her back as I felt her pain.

‘Come, come inside,’ I said.. ‘Have some water.’

Salmah shook her head and took a deep breath.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Adam's lanky figure striding towards us. He never came home this early from work. I realised that the situation must be grave.

'I-I better go home,' Salmah said in between sobs. 'Sorry I couldn't finish telling you e-everything.'

'It's okay.' I pulled Salmah in for a hug. 'Everything will be okay, InshaAllah.'

Salmah sniffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

I watched as she and Adam walked past each other without saying hello, both seemingly lost in thought. Usually they would have exchanged greetings but today – today was different.

When Adam arrived, he took my hand and gently guided me up the steps of our attap house into the safe cocoon of our living room. I exhaled and closed my eyes. In our living room, the first sight that greeted me was of my parents in front of the television. Behind the closed door to their room, I hoped that Ilker and Sofia were doing their homework. I wanted to check on them but decided to stay and listen to what Adam had to say first.

'Papa, Mama, Aliah,' Adam began, his voice dropping down to a whisper. 'I have bad news.'

Papa immediately switched off the television, seeing the worry written on Adam's face. I sat next to Mama on the

sofa as she glanced from me to Adam, looking for an answer as to what was happening.

Adam sat down next to Papa, and his voice dropped to a whisper.

‘There was a riot at the Mawlid procession. Chinese and Malays fighting with one another. People are dead.’ Adam ran his fingers through his hair.

Mama gasped. ‘How many people?’ she asked in Malay.

‘We don’t know yet. The riot will spread. More people will die.’

My right hand, cold and clammy, found its way to Mama’s. We sat on the couch, silent with fear and uncertainty of what was to come.

I looked over at Papa and was surprised by the anger that clouded his features.

‘Stupid,’ Papa spat out. ‘So stupid.’

‘W – what is stupid, yang?’ Mama asked, as I felt her hand tremble in mine. I grasped her hand more tightly to steady it and to calm the panic that was rising in me.

‘Whoever started the riot,’ Papa said. ‘Haven’t Singaporeans learnt anything from the Maria Hertogh riots? That Malay group distributed leaflets stoking anti-Chinese sentiment. Adam and I didn’t tell you.’

Mama looked upset as she bit her right fingernails. ‘Are you saying we Malays are at fault?’

Papa wore a pained expression on his face, as he shook his head and looked down and away from Mama's gaze. As the son of a Chinese mother and a Malay father, he had spent his whole life struggling to fit in with either group, only to find that neither group accepted him completely.

'I don't think Papa meant it that way,' I said, patting Mama's hand in a way that I hoped would comfort her. But Mama did not look my way. Her eyes were still focused on Papa.

'Let's all try to stay calm,' Adam, ever the voice of reason, reminded us. 'There will be a broadcast tonight – I think the prime minister is going to announce a curfew. The most important thing right now is to ensure the safety of our family.'

Mama nodded in agreement while Papa looked solemn, leaning his forehead against his hand.

Many questions were swirling around in my mind. A curfew? That meant staying home. Would Ilker and Sofia go to school? What about Adam's job? What about my 'coconut tree tales' friends? I could not imagine not seeing them every day. Our kampong was predominantly Malay but there were a few Chinese families. I worried about my Chinese neighbours like Mrs Chen and Shi Min.

I felt Mama patting my hand, her touch breaking into my thoughts.

For the rest of the evening, we sat in silence until it was time to pray.

* * *

It had been two weeks since the first riot was reported. Since 21 July, the curfew was lifted and imposed again on two occasions after racial clashes reoccurred. I felt let down each time as if a fist had clawed its way into my heart and grabbed it. But this time the situation felt a bit better. The prime minister informed us it was safe to go out and reminded all Singaporeans to act civilly towards other races. Ilker and Sofia were back in school and Adam was at work. Mama and I cooked together that morning - a huge pot of warm mee goreng with chicken, enough to share with our neighbours.

I wondered if everyone would show up under the coconut tree that afternoon. I was standing there alone, clutching the bowl of mee goreng I was carrying to my stomach. I waited, feeling my heart sink. I waited for what felt like half an hour but not one of my neighbours showed up. I turned around and started to walk off. Just then, I heard a cheerful 'hello' float towards me. I recognised that voice instantly.

'Mrs. Chen!'

'Hello Aliah! Wah, your mee goreng smells good!' Mrs. Chen said, putting an arm around me.

I smiled. 'We are okay, right?'

‘Of course,’ Mrs. Chen boomed as her face brightened in front of mine.. ‘What goes on out there in this crazy world has nothing to do with us.’

I exhaled in relief. ‘Alhamdulillah for you, Mrs. Chen,’ I said.

I saw Salmah running towards us. But this time, with joy. I opened my arms wide and Salmah ran into them. We embraced tightly. Though only three of us had shown up today, I hoped that the group would come back together with time.

‘We’re back together again,’ Mrs Chen said. ‘We are coconut tree tales!’

I looked up slightly, feeling grateful as Salmah looped her through mine. Mrs Chen winked at me and within the next few seconds, she started spinning her next tale.

BRYCE W. MERKL SASAKI

Bryce W. Merkl Sasaki is a writer, editor, and wizard-errant [citation needed] currently living in California after an eight-year pilgrimage in Southeast Asia. When he's not writing travel poetry or working on his science fiction novel, *Lucky Prime V*, he can usually be found snuggling with the nearest cat.



through the grass

we look past each other
on this side of the border, across the river:
sawasdee-kah and mingalabar
well-being and auspiciousness,
neighbour, brother,
I've got some fresh
bamboo shoots, weed, koh,
want any?
some of the best grass
this side of the
Moei— Thaunggin;
Don't worry,
sister, neighbour
since the Myanmar tenant , our Thai landlady
doesn't care and doesn't know and
or doesn't know or doesn't care
to cover the rent of my existence
really (shrug, smile) as long as my Canuck girlfriend pays
everyone is happy, she won't call the police
so take the shoots, it's okay, since there's no money in the matter
cook a spicy curry, the kind from across the river, that is,
use the lemongrass too, even though it grows on both banks
yes, chai, kah, same, same, but different,
don't worry, k- oh, the crinkly-eyed auntie
ah, the other neighbour tends her own weeds, she
doesn't know and doesn't care and
or doesn't care or doesn't know
of my existence really (smile, shrug);
on this side of the river, across the border,
we look past each other
through the grass

ALASTAIR WEE

Alastair Wee lives in Singapore and writes speculative fiction. He holds an MA in Creative Writing from LASALLE College of the Arts, and his work can be found at alastairwee.com.



Sandstone's Children #2

He was waiting for her out on the hot sand surface—a tall man with a long, dark shadow. Dust and grit dragged in the bone-still air as Sandstone climbed the collapsed steps of the Old Market, skirting the broken struts of rebar that littered her abode. With one hand, she steadied herself, her fingers finding the cracks in the raw concrete; with the other, she folded her shawl around her head, forming a loose mask around her mouth. Her dry skin pressed tenderly against the hot, pink wool.

As she climbed, her unease grew.

The air today was stagnant, forebodingly so. The radio at her belt whined softly. This morning it had uttered a name, one she hadn't thought of in a long time—Lau Par Sat, the ancient name of her home—and now a man was waiting, his pose expectant, his features blinded in the sun. Light warmed her back as she exited the ruins. The storm gates gaped down like dead mouths, fifty storeys high. Always, when they were open like this, they howled with wind; a reminder of what had brought on the Crash. Yet now they were silent and empty, no breath of air passing their lips.

The signs were enough to give her pause. But this man was waiting.

She stopped an arm's length from him, regarding him

slowly. In another time, he might have been a middle-aged businessman or an office worker pausing while out on his lunch break, tilting his face to the warm, pleasant day. His hair was black and neatly cropped. His skin was a light shade of brown. His shirt was loose and casual. She had never seen him before.

She waited. He bowed.

“Caretaker,” he said. His voice was deep and trailing, the echo of a lost canyon. To her surprise, she saw his lips move—he spoke Dialect without a translation mesh. The sound was crude and natural, with none of the clean undertones. It was unexpectedly comforting.

She nodded. The man placed a hand on his chest. His dark eyes met hers. “Hiram. From the Catchments. That’s where I was Caretaker.”

She had never heard of the place.

“A small way from here. Much wetter, not much cooler. Some plants,” he said, looking at their barren surroundings. He scratched his beard. “More plants. Or there used to be. I do not know what it is like there now.”

Then Hiram said, “In any case, we need to leave. They are shutting off this sector.”

His words were gentle, their meaning swift. Sandstone looked at him sharply. He dipped his head again, apologetically. “I thought you might not know. But it’s true. They came and

told me.”

“Shutting off... this sector?” Sandstone’s voice was thin and cracked.

“Yes. This place,” said Hiram, gesturing up at the tall vault of her blue-glass sky, each pane winking in the artificial sun of its apex. “And others like it. They are cutting life-support to all Hermetics. Water, light, air. All of it will go. Soon—now. It has already started.”

“But why?”

Hiram shrugged. “They would not say. Only that I had to go, or be shut down too, so I left immediately. Better this way, for each to hear from one of our own. You are not the first,” he said, his eyes searching past hers. “I did not come alone. Come out, then.”

Sandstone turned. Sitting under a low outcrop, legs crossed in the shade, was a young woman in her twenties, a small portable fan held up to her bangs.

“Hot leh,” she huffed. “Freaking shag.”

With a graceful two-step, the woman rose—and suddenly, she was beside them, twirling the stem of a small umbrella between slim, pale fingers. It flapped open with a *whoosh*, sheltering her and only her.

“Coming or not? Faster leh. Cannot tahan liao,” she said, tapping a black, manicured nail. A thick layer of makeup coated every inch of her porcelain cheek. She wore a black-

and-white pantsuit and a wide-brimmed hat. Her heels were six-inch and black. Her umbrella was fluffy and white. In fact, everything about her was either white or black, save for the scarlet red lanyard that swayed around her neck.

She could have passed as an office worker too, Sandstone thought.

“This is OL,” Hiram said. “I fetched her first.”

“Should fetch me last,” OL said delicately. She blinked away a tiny bead of sweat. “Need air-con. Or some shade,” she said. She looked longingly back at her perch, then down at Hiram’s feet. “Some of yours, boy. So poor thing, we ah, no one want us liao. Maybe can stay... together.”

She seemed to be admiring his shadow. Hiram ignored her.

“We must leave, Caretaker. Already there are signs.”

The radio. Sandstone turned the volume up and held it to her ear. The voice from afar came over, speaking its unknown language at a rapid-fire pace.

She looked to Hiram, who shook his head, but OL leaned in intently. With both hands, she gripped the handle of her umbrella, extending and thrusting it like a spear into the sand. It expanded into a parasol—and now OL was bouncing on a chair beneath its canopy, seated inexplicably at a lone cubicle-desk. Another flourish produced a pair of sunglasses. Her hair, previously down to her shoulders, was

done up in a tight bun.

She pulled open a drawer and scrolled the file divider, tabs ticking against her nail. Then she plucked out a single piece of card paper. It was officially creased. OL cleared her throat and pronounced each syllable with an officiant's drawl.

"Ex-e-cu-tive Policy Order β -68-16E. All Hermetics, the last of the wild areas, are to be shuttered, their land returned. Utilities to be cut. Inhabitants evacuated. The old sites have served their purpose. We need to make room for *new* things." Her eyes flicked up. "I paraphrase, lah. But look like they don't want us anymore."

Hiram growled, a rumbling sound. "This is why we need to leave, Caretaker."

"Then who will receive the visitors?" Even to her own ears, Sandstone's voice sounded weak.

"You got visitor? Lucky lah," said OL, squatting lazily. She fished out a lipstick case and flipped out a mirror, smoothing a rough patch with her nail. "I only got one this century. And she never take care of herself. They forget liao, how to pay tribute! Had to make do. Still fun, though."

The case snapped shut, and she flashed an eyebrow at Hiram. "Now, if she look a bit more like you..."

Hiram's gaze was stone. "There will be no more visitors. For any of us."

"But why?" Sandstone repeated. "And what will become

of my home? Lau Par Sat?”

OL sighed and dug out another sheaf of papers.

“Justification: end of 999-year lease, all land is state land, flawed rights of perpetuity, blah blah blah. Future plans... ah here got say. *Reclamation*,” she uttered, angling her sunglasses. Her forehead creased into a frown. “For the... *future of work*. Mai siao,” she said, exasperated, “every time work keep changing. What this poor Office Lady to do?”

“We are no longer needed,” Hiram said firmly. “Nor are the homes we care over.”

“But why?” asked Sandstone for the third time. “They have always needed us.”

“Have they?” he asked, and Sandstone thought back to her visitors.

The record-keepers were most frequent. She worked with them, told them the facts, the physical details, as much as she remembered of the time before the Crash. The thrill-seekers avoided her, skulking about her home without her noticing, or so they believed. She only intervened when they began to scavenge. And the officials—the white-wearers—were the most brusque, taking her pulse, scanning her forehead, accounting for her as if she were a scattered rock. Checking to see if she was still alive. Or, at least, still present.

Only that one curious university student had asked to understand.

Understand. It was what they needed, she knew, even if they did not. They needed to understand.

She shook her head. "They have always needed us. How else will they learn what was? How else will they remember their mistakes?"

A hot silence. OL dusted her clothes with a distracted hum. Hiram's eyes were thin in the sun, regarding Sandstone solemnly.

Then he raised his arms.

His shadow spilled from his feet, sinking into the ground around them, spreading through the sand like an ink stain. The temperature cooled abruptly as it fled across the Hermetic, racing over the sunken top of the Old Market, climbing the walls of the dome. Everything was turning dark—colder and darker than night.

OL spun and clapped, laughing like a child.

Sandstone looked up, a hand over her eyes as Hiram's shadow enveloped the sun. Now the light above was pale and dim, casting a luminous sheen on the sands below. The sight was foreign, eerie, almost alien, yet...

With a gasp, she remembered. A cry escaped her lips.

The moon. For the first time in seven centuries, she saw the moon again.

Then a twitching, in the darkness. A medley of softness erupted from the sand, curling and twisting as new life

quickened, shooting up, up into young stems and buds and fronds and vines that clambered and rose—and then larger plants emerged, the trunks of trees lumbering up from heaving gaps in the earth, stretching high to grasp the moonlight, their branches booming out into wide leafy canopies.

Wetness lapped at her toes. She stood before a shimmering lake, surrounded by the shadows of a long-lost forest.

“This was my lot,” Hiram said. His eyes were a gleam, as fatal as quarries. “My charge. Before the glass and steel. There was mangrove. River. Forest. Sea. A million forms of life. I was charged to keep it.”

He waved a hand. With a loud snapping, the trees splintered and died, replaced by orderly palms that rose erect behind him, a long line of guardians in the night. The lake burped and retreated in on itself, shaping itself into a small fountain. Ferns became shrubs. Vines became grass.

“When humans came, I knew there would be trade-offs. To accommodate the new, the old must stand back. Bend. Break, even. It is in all nature, the way of all life. But just how far they would take us... I knew not.”

The floor beneath Sandstone’s feet was neat and paved. A dark shape sped past her, then a bus, and then more. There were giant shadows now, showing the lines and corners of buildings. And there were small ones, too, hurrying to and

fro. Something like a hymn arose. The babble of people, the long-forgotten snatches of worry and joy. A song to her ears.

Memories surrounded her. Sandstone's breath caught in her chest. Robinson Street—the broken street they stood on—was whole again.

“They bargained with themselves,” Hiram said. “Convinced each other that I was expendable. Reducible. Replaceable, with these altars, this fever-dream of progress, these manicured sticks. Hah! I tried to warn them. I helped them recover what they had lost. But it was too late. And then the Crash.”

Around them, palms were withering, buildings crumbling. The fountain sputtered; the moon went out. The wind, which had grown, now became an endless thing, pulling the shawl from Sandstone's mouth. The pavement fractured; the people disappeared. Ground and grass swarmed into choppy mud, surrounding her, tugging at her feet, threatening to consume her.

Beside her, OL was giggling, riding her upside-down parasol like a raft.

Still Sandstone struggled, holding her ground. “All the more they need us.”

Hiram scoffed. “They forget everything, these people. They destroy the things that would help them remember.”

“We are still here. We have adapted. We must do so

again.”

“Must we?”

Sandstone straightened her back and looked at Hiram. Her gaze was a rock in the storm.

“Your *charge*, Caretaker. What is, if not this?”

A quiet froze the air. The sound of wind faded.

The darkness lifted. Trees and roads escaped into shadows, and shadows slipped down the dome walls, as the past and its visions pooled back around Hiram. The sand shifted to grey, then yellow. The cool of night gave way to a wave of dry heat. Brightness overtook the Old Market once more.

Hiram lowered his arms. He was looking away.

Sandstone blinked. OL sniffed and held up her umbrella again.

“What is, indeed,” Hiram said, his voice distant. “I have asked this, too. It changes little, Caretaker. They have closed us all down. We must go. You must come, too.”

“Sandstone.”

“Sandstone.” Hiram smiled. His eyes found hers again.

“A good name. Who gave it to you?”

She did not reply.

“Where?” she asked instead, and Hiram gestured behind him, towards one of the glass panels at ground level, just as blue and featureless as any of the others.

She nodded, then turned. OL fidgeted, her umbrella spinning, but Hiram shot her a stern look.

For the last time in history, Sandstone strode through the halls of the Old Market. She walked its broken corridors, touched its twisted pillars, placed one foot after another upon its crumbling foundations. Her central chamber basked with light, and she retraced the way she walked each morning, running her hands upon each rock, each piece of rubble. A hundred paces brought her in a circle, the circle she had swept that morning, around the fallen clock tower that had been her home for hundreds of years. It had birthed her, fed her, contained her, and everything she owned, everything she was—so here she stopped, a slowness opening beneath her feet, tight and inevitable. The stones in her hands were low and familiar.

There was something here. Something only she could see. A boundary she had never questioned, never thought to cross. The knowledge—no, the knowing—that something had moved, deep in the veins of the outside world. That something had come loose, or undone, or overdue... and now that something was driving her away.

Would she preserve it?

Her door hung open a few steps away. A wind fingered the flaps, calling her home, waving her goodbye.

She was no anachronism. She had been made this way,

for this time. For this. They needed her. They had to need her. If they took this place... she was all that was left. She was all that survived. She was all that would remember.

It was clear. She had to remain.

And so, she must leave.

Her trusty broom lay against a rock. She left it there. Easiest to believe it might someday be needed again.

Hiram and OL shared a glance as she climbed back out of the ruins. Sandstone avoided their eyes, tightening her shawl.

“Come, then,” she said, and the three Caretakers walked towards the edge of the dome, leaving the Old Market behind. As they reached the walls of the Hermetic, the panel irised open to let them through.

Then it closed, like they never had been.

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FRANCIS LAU

Francis is a published poet, filmmaker and educator based in Singapore. His award-winning films set out to explore notions of loss and identity and have travelled to festivals in Italy, Romania, India, Hong Kong and Japan. His poetry appears in ASEANO, an anthology by ASEAN writers.



Dalliance

When we sat down in the evening
to coffee at the table, each in turn
noticed the steam had turned,
from sitting unnaturally still
to becoming insignificant detail.
Yet no one mentioned it,
neither looking up,
nor into each other's eyes,
for fear of drinking in the thirst
that held us fastened to our seats.
The waiting became a time
to hear our thoughts.
A fire rising from the tip
of a smokestack reminded you
of cigarettes, at the back of your car.
A fitting end to a sudden
rush of blood, you said,
and the heat of commingling.
I closed my mouth, but could still taste
the ashes, for all I saw in the distance
was a beacon beating itself
against the reef. Or was someone
with a headlamp straining
in dark enisling winds,
violating the skin of a moving trout?
How you must have savoured
that twisted flame—*not this, not that*
while I clutched my breath
and held on to my coffee
to catch my fall through the night.

Landscape

doors closing
at every stop
break
the spell
of you ()
on the phone
standing
sitting
it makes no difference
considering how it
rumbles
day and night
up the slopes
down
the tracks
and into tunnels
until light strikes
upon a pregnant woman
made to hang
on
for
dear life
or glints off metal
that rises and
falls
in an old man's hand
so delicate you feel his arm
is all of a sudden
weightless
while the rest
of his shadow
swings its lure
at every step calculated
to sweep him
off
his feet.

ANISHA RALHAN

Anisha Ralhan is an independent copywriter and founder of the Content Writing Agency: Catchphrase. Her work has appeared in the *Best Asian Short Stories*, *Growing up Indian: What we Inherit*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Missed Connections: an anthology of flash fiction* and more. She calls herself a cat whisperer but Mowgli and Pikachu, her two cats, disagree.



A Tale of Two Crazy Cat Ladies

“It’s 12.30. What does she want from you now?” my husband mumbles after I hang up the call.

Her number is saved in my phone as *TB Cat Aunty*. TB as in ‘Tiong Bahru’. The Singaporean neighbourhood we moved into a year ago.

“She fell on the road. She can’t seem to get up,” I say, wiggling out of my jammies, withholding the worry from my voice.

The distance between our condo and the alley, on which the eighty-five-year-old claims to have fallen, is less than three hundred meters. Yet, my husband doesn’t offer to come along. I’m not surprised. Seven years of marriage has conditioned me to keep my expectations low.

Out in the humid alley, I spot a human puddle. She’s still as a pebble. Only her eyes move, scanning for any potential injuries on her knees. She looks helpless but not inadequate, weary but not weak, just like I’ve always known her to be.

Her sheepish apology for calling me so late in the night indicates this is not the first time she’s needed help to get up after a fall. Then, as if reading my furrowed brows, she confirms it.

On the count of three, the recently arrived building

watchman and I help her back up on her feet. She holds on to my arm, hesitantly, while stabilizing herself. I offer her my palm. She grasps it quickly.

We walk until we find a patient cabbie who will drop her to her flat, which isn't far.

To a bystander, I may seem like her granddaughter from a stepdaughter (She's Chinese. I'm Indian). Or perhaps, one of those countless advertisements, rolled out by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, propagating racial harmony in Singapore.

What I've come to understand is that our relationship exists beyond the outskirts of language. Beyond the obligatory highways of blood ties, beyond the reluctant bridges built between work colleagues and beyond the roundabouts of romantic love. We are friends who look out for each other, give without being asked, tolerate each other's quirks with a smile or a sigh, depending on the day of the week.

Of course, it wasn't always this way.

I discovered TB Cat Auntie, who goes by the name of Auntie Bella, accidentally on my usual walks around the neighbourhood, in a small back alley lined with old shophouses—the ones that come with dangerously steep staircases, peeling walls, and are often advertised to unsuspecting expats as 'heritage properties.'

I had just opened a can of chicken with bonito flakes

for the noisy golden tabby cat in front of me, whom I had met a few days ago, when I heard a woman screaming from the sidewalk.

“Aiyo, girl! What do you think you’re doing? Are you blind?” She was pointing to a poster on the alley wall. It said, *Do Not Feed the Cats*, followed by eight threatening exclamation points.

I told her I thought the cat was stray and hungry.

She promptly corrected me. “He belongs to me. Along with the other eight. I am their mother.”

I glanced at the two cats nestled in a cardboard box under a plastic chair on which rested labelled feeding bowls. A ticked tabby sashayed towards us, eager to get to the source of the commotion.

As a cat fanatic, I was overcome by a desperate urge to convey my intentions. I told her I used to feed stray cats in the parking lot of my previous condo, that six years ago, I had adopted a British Shorthair from a Chinese family in Singapore. Thinking, I am different from dozens of opportunistic neighbours who visit the alley only to exploit cats for ten more likes on Instagram.

My explanation had the opposite effect on her.

“Please! You people get pets and discard them like used clothes when it’s time to leave.”

A third of the cats in her custody, as I found out later,

had belonged to expats who no longer live in Singapore. To her, I was just another selfish expat, responsible for the exploding population of stray cats.

A self-respecting person in my place might have been wildly offended by the words of a seemingly senile woman and resolved to never see her again. Not me. I was determined to prove her wrong, as if only her validation would deem me a true animal lover. Which is funny, considering I had practically turned my childhood house in Delhi into Hotel California for the wild, where the parrots, and the pigeons, and the bunnies and the mongrels could come but never leave. Unlike the other eighteen-year-olds, my biggest offence in college was to offer asylum to a wild goose, who had ventured into our hostel on a cold rainy night. After multiple food thefts from the campus canteen, the building manager wanted it buried in the backyard.

So, day after day, I showed up with clean card boxes and newspapers for her nine cats to rest on; yellow pills on days Tekka, the ginger tabby, wouldn't hold food in his belly; dental treats every fortnight, to ensure they never developed plaque or bad breath. I would hold Ah Bi (the most notorious of the clowder) firmly, while Auntie Bella clipped his nails and bring Cage, the chubby, handicapped striped tabby, out of his metallic cage to socialize with his friends because Auntie was advised by doctors not to lift anything heavy. Earning

Aunty Bella's trust seemed more rewarding than winning new projects.

During my visits, Aunty never failed to regale me with stories both heart-breaking and inspiring. One time, she hid a hundred cats in her privately bought shophouse when the grassroot leaders came to confiscate the domestic cats residing in the nearby government-subsidized housing flats. Back then and even up until recently, Singapore government had the arbitrary no-pets-in-HDB rule.

In the 1960s, Aunty Bella decided to invest in stocks for the first time. When the broker quizzed her about her investment goal, she told him she wants just enough to get twenty cats of Tiong Bahru neutered. This was shortly after the government, in an unpopular effort to control Singapore's growing stray cats, had passed a policy to put down stray cats. The decision to get the cats neutered herself, a one-year-long project costing thousands of dollars, was a result of the bargain she made with the local law-enforcing authorities, proclaiming her as a local hero and a crazy cat lady (depending on whom you ask). In her words, it was the best financial decision she could have made.

I'm yet to meet a person, let alone in their elderly years, more devoted to a cause than Aunty Bella is. Since her twenties, she has consistently dedicated at least four hours of her day taking care of the abandoned cats in the alley just

behind Kim Tian Road. Seeing her affection for the felines, in the early 2000s, the owner of a nearby Thai restaurant offered her the backyard of the estate, which opens to the alley, making it easier for her to stock food supplies, sandboxes and cages. Latter only for the disabled ones. She claims the secret to her relatively healthy life is the love that she receives from her fur babies. A compensation for the love she never got from her biological mother or her adoptive mother. Carrying her childhood trauma well into adulthood, she never met a man fit enough to marry or start a family with. Spinsterhood, she says, came naturally to her.

Up until I was twenty-five, I too envisioned myself growing old with a jolly clowder of ten cats. Lonely but never alone, blabbering stories to whoever is willing to listen. Until, that is, I met a boy, who swept me off my feet with thoughtful gifts (a miniature Beetle, after I wrote an award-winning ad for the car's relaunch in the Indian market) and gestures (a six-hour red-eye flight just to hold my hand, while I was getting an endoscopic tube shoved down my throat). S, my husband, has many remarkable qualities, but unquestioning kindness towards strangers isn't one of them.

Aunty Bella, on the other hand, goes out of her way to make me, a friendly stranger, feel welcome in a country that is frighteningly cold towards brown people; 'job-stealers,' as we are called. Through lessons in Hokkien, so I'm not short-

changed by local handymen; via immunity-boosting recipes when she sees me sneeze, and sometimes through salacious gossip featuring neighbours and their frustrated helpers.

While my initial reasons for seeking her company may have stemmed from a child-like need to get the ultimate cat lover's stamp of approval, my visits to her these days feel like a self-care ritual. Listening to the unwinding tales from her youth induces a meditative calm. I better be listening carefully because she will pause every now and then to quiz me. When I walk with her to 7-Eleven for her daily newspaper, I learn how to slow down literally and metaphorically, observing high curbs or cracks in the pavement, every little obstacle that could cause her to trip and fall. With her, I'm fully present in the moment, doom-scrolling be damned!

Recently, she gifted me a limited-edition gold-plated coin issued by the national bank to commemorate the 100th birth anniversary of Singapore's former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. When I asked why she bought me a present for no reason, she flashed me a toothless grin and rambled off a phrase in Mandarin. Its loose translation being: 'You give me one foot of respect and I will return it to you ten times.'

As Indians, we are taught, unanimously across institutions, to respect the elders around us. Never mind, if they have been abusive to our parents, have extorted acts of service through emotional blackmail, or have been awful

humans in general. We are told to respect elders on the premise that they exist, not because they inspire, as if age entitles them greatness and time absolves them of their worse traits.

All these years, even in two Asian cultures that revere the elderly, I never understood why I couldn't get close to my paternal grandma. Now, I do. The more family, neighbours and teachers in Delhi expected me to "respect" grandma, the more I found reasons not to.

Neither age, nor blood group nor marriage, nor birth certificates have any bearing on the friendship I share with Aunty Bella. Perhaps, some people become our friends because they remind us of who we were, and some remind us of who we can be years down the line. Weary but not weak.



SAMPAN ISSUE III TEAM

Dr Rosslyn Prosser - Programme Leader,

MA Creative Writing, Editor

Ian Goh - Project Coordinator, Editor, Proofreader

Sara Patricia Kelly - Designer, Social Media Manager

Shreyaa Kanneboina - Editor, Proofreader

Sarah Tan-Lim - Editor, Proofreader

Peter Morgan - Editor, Proofreader

Hanis Husin - Editor, Typesetter

Brandon Toh - Editor

Francis Lau - Editor

Gabriel Oh - Editor

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