

Meanwhile

What the sea deposited it will deposit
again: arms, conquerors, thirsty
faiths, through the languid rearing
of the tides. Defunct crops
will be a fad before long. Taboos
will come and go, whether bare
breasts or fish-eating or incest.
Genocides of every kind, like those
with unattached earlobes. Then a Ten-Second
War, a Long Century, a Pax Somewherea.

Meanwhile unanswered
messages on the phone; the shredding
of top-secret files; the squirting of chilli sauce
on fries; sex with the wrong stranger;
greengrocer's apostrophes on signs;
a complaint to the bus company; a new
Second Minister for Trade and Industry; an ant
dies in a park connector; the neighbour's dog
has lung cancer; in a café, tai-tais parade
their shellshocked husbands.

Meanwhile the almost-epiphany
while waiting for the auntie to pour curry
on rice; a vision of Timothy, whom
you never spoke to in Scouts; the suppressed

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half-smile at nothing at all; the post-mortem
of a failed joke; the sudden weariness
that upstages an evening; the sigh
after a bowl of soup; the sensation
of freefall just before sleep.

Meanwhile, my pen.

The Forgotten

I invented the telephone

and I, the spaces between the teeth of combs.

I defeated Napoleon

I once licked his bathroom slippers.

I led our country to independence

I thought the carpeting in the hall exquisite.

I shot JFK

I cull the crows over Orchard Road.

I wrote a collection of experimental poetry

'Free Sex call me', I once wrote, but it was erased soon after.

I first made chilli crab and sold it from a pushcart

I sometimes eat peanut butter from a jar.

I designed St Paul's Cathedral

and I, the local temple.

I had sex with the President

I died a virgin.

I did something stupid

yes, actually, so did I.

Applying for an Invasion

found in a filing cabinet, in a rotted file, next to a dead lizard

Dear Sir,

We appreciate your attempt to further hybridise our already sufficiently hybridised culture [...]

far more effective recording

technology than in past millennia, and a greater appetite for [...]

news, we regret to inform [...]

expected atrocities will be more widely

documented than in past similar exercises [...]

your news media [...]

disinformation campaigns [...]

racialist feeling. (Annex A [...]

Given the above circumstances

[...]

the chance of your culture [...]

assimilated [...]

no great disparity between the state of your civilisation

In a hundred years we will compare new migrants to our country [...]

nostalgia.[...]

remnant

minority of your race would legitimise another invasion of our country.

Yours sincerely, [...]

Sang Nila Reclaims the Throne

*'...when eyes were still embers waiting for a
crownless Prince of Palembang.'*

At 4.45 on a Saturday, all TV channels and radio stations announced his resumption of the throne.

As the news filtered down, the queues at the 4D shops grew longer, though no one was sure what numbers to buy.

The President, Prime Minister and members of the Cabinet were found in their homes with arrows in their backs, except for the Minister of Culture, a secret double agent.

Bands of revenants secured power stations, army bases, telecom buildings, and other such installations.

At 6, he emerged from a *keramat* in Telok Blangah, surrounded by devotees. However, they were shocked to discover he was a Buddhist.

There was a run for Singapore history titles at bookstores. But most of them only had a single unilluminating paragraph.

He enquired about the state of his kingdom and successors. No one seemed to know anything, and so the presence of the Royal Historian was demanded. Someone found the number for the National Heritage Board.

He desired to ascend the Forbidden Hill to visit his palace, or what was left of it. There were no horses, so they had to call for taxis.

‘Does anybody know of a good goldsmith, with crown-making experience?’ he asked.

Neighbouring countries denounced the change of regime, ‘Sang Nila’s mythical claims notwithstanding’. In Malaysia, those who spread rumours of a returning shah were detained.

The opposition parties did not make any press statements.

In the taxi he named several devotees as members of his ruling council. A committee was formed to examine his claims to Malacca, Bintan, Palembang and other parts of Sumatra. War with Majapahit was declared. He tried to pay for the taxi in old Chinese coins, each worth tens of thousands.

Congregations poured into temples, mosques and churches, though few knew what to pray for.

Government, as ever, went on, despite the absence of politicians. Some senior civil servants remarked that government had never been smoother.

At 8, he appeared on national television, vowing to keep Singapore a haven for traders, to personally lead an expedition against the pirates and to sustain the alliance with the Mongol Emperor. The Chinese ambassador declined to comment, citing portions of international law that were later found entirely spurious.

I watched him speak at the coffeeshop under my block, where a crowd had gathered. There were mutterings about a new public holiday. Most of the uncles and old men concluded that everything would be the same, king or no king.

He clarified that it was indeed a lion, experts be damned.

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At 10, we lined the streets around Dhoby Ghaut, waiting for him to descend, our king. We had no idea what flags to wave, what banners to brandish, what to shout, and in what language. We settled on 'Singapura'.

Ghazal of the Vanquished

after Edwin Thumboo's 'Temasek'

Where there are now ruins there was once the city.

My children tell me not to mourn the city.

The scrolls crumble in the forgetful sun.

We are exiles in a friendless city.

The graves of my fathers were spat on and smashed.

Did anybody make a map of the city?

After the siege, my kinsmen were burnt alive.

Some ask, 'Why do you grieve for a worthless city?'

My hand trembles, I can no longer hold tool nor spear.

I don't believe I ever climbed the walls of the city.

I did not stay to battle; hardly anyone did.

Why then, do we still dream of the city?

Our only solace is time's oblivion.

I do not know who founded the city.

It will rise again, mutters the prince's lackeys.

Perhaps tears will shake the seed of the city.

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I will head out into the jungle.

Please, Poet, write about the city.

Coffeeshop

a mostly true Singaporean fable

‘Why do people worship money?’ he’d always wondered,
then his cousins sold the kopitiam and asked for his blessing
afterwards. ‘Eight million dollars!’ they shouted over the phone,
an old Nokia jammed between jugular and clavicle.

‘Tai gong’s soul worth so much ah?’ he shouted back,
fury and sarcasm mixed, tilting the long-spouted pot.
Coffee, oily, steaming, flooded the counter, overran,
soaked old dust he’d meant to clean for years.

Not a blubber, so customers that day did not detect
a salty note in their coffee (just the same buttery depth)
but when he told his wife, she wept, and still does
every other week. ‘Four generations,’ she keeps mumbling.

A sleepless month, so a good thing he brewed coffee
for a living, a zombie on robusta fumes.
On the last day, his regulars, hoarse with sadness, proclaimed,
‘it’s not an ending, Tang, it’s a new beginning!’

That night, Money, a gout-ridden demon, laughed.
His minions (Yuan, Riyal, Dollar, Dirham) would ever harass
the unconverted and destroy their dwelling places.
Brother will be set against brother; women will weep.

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Tang, foolhardy, reopens fifty metres away,
and every day he sees the old place, now a beach club.

All he needs to protect his patrimony
is Money, just more Money.

a visit to choa chu kang columbarium, 12 jan 2014

columbarium,
marble dovecotes lined:
i press my ear against
yours, thinking i hear
a forlorn flapping.

hemmed in in life
walled in in death
you were resettled
thrice, a national
average, perhaps.

traditions adapt:
false flowers, not fresh
clean the niche with wet wipes
on the tiny row of space
people place dollhouse food.

offerings have logic:
must open up packet
of 5-star duck rice
otherwise like that
ah tai how to eat?

not enough numbers:
the niche number only

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three digits, how to buy?

can what, this is row d

d is number four.

to pray is to channel

my desires towards

some supplicating will

i don't want to do that

so let's just talk, ah tai.

don't worry, ah tai

the living too are all

in cells: housing blocks,

cubicles, excel sheets,

dating apps and forms.

i run my hand over

your life carved out

in gold characters:

dialect, maiden name,

some hometown in fujian.

these things i remember:

you, on a chair, dazed

me greeting you good night

every night till you died

then saffron and smoke.

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hey, ah tai, it's been

half an hour: have you

had your fill of joss?

hope the rice was nice.

we'll be back next year.

The Prophet

*'the stranger whose face is leprous under the road lamp
and his face clogged with new earth'*

Among these bartered rocks have I sought in vain
for a scrying stone and having found none,
have made do with a styrofoam cup
half-filled with muddy water.

The air is filled with spectral
intelligences, the cries of sea gypsies,
the discombobulated dead, starving schoolchildren
robbed of their Pocky, the whines of a cur.

They refused to sell me noodles, claiming
the coinage unsatisfactory. Is commerce
dead? No cheap lager either. These pebbles
best find a better seller.

Put your ears to gravel and catch the whiff
of old urine. The government could cure death
tomorrow but refuses. Murmurs of insurrection
stalk the land, all due to shoddy paperwork.

Too many stairs to climb, and damn
the incontinent crone who makes my bed!
The bench suffices, though on Thursdays

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I don't sleep under trees. The wind brings omens.

From his zinc kennel, the god
interrogated me. He was also a dog. I restrained
the claw of my hand from flinging him
into the ditch. Instead, I drank his tea.

Desperate auguries in the river: the water
catenates rotting leaves, plastic bags, takeaway
boxes. I say to the fishermen: Beware –
only stares and kicks to the shin. 'No honour,' I cried.