The year 2015 will be a significant year in the annals of Singapore history. Together with the commemoration of the 50th year of our independence comes news of the passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

Some may perceive history to be fact and literature to be fiction, but the story of a country and its people can also be found in its literary chronicles. Our national narrative is one that interweaves suspense, romance, fantasy and satire, and these too are reflected in the contemporary works featured in Fiction Singapore 2015. As our country grows, we too must find a stronger, more mature voice in our reading and writing of contemporary local works. Written in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, these stories reveal the blending of light and darkness that gives character to the colourful texture of our nation’s canvas.

Though men may go the way of all flesh, literature and words live on and give significance to our transience. We hope that Fiction Singapore 2015 will introduce you to writers who speak as individuals, as members of social and cultural communities, and as citizens of a nation.

DR DENNIS YEO
Contributing Editor
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University
The National Arts Council (NAC) is a Singapore government agency which nurtures the arts and makes it an integral part of the lives of the people in Singapore. It supports the practice and appreciation of the arts in Singapore and facilitates the internationalisation of Singapore artists and their works through various initiatives, programmes and events.

NAC’s funding supports the creation of literary content, research, capability and talent development, organisational development, publishing and translation, production and market development, and the presentation and promotion of the literary arts.

International publishers and literary agents can tap on grants and other assistance to bring original Singaporean literary works to the world.

An important event on the literary arts calendar is the Singapore Writers Festival which has multilingual programming, with a strong emphasis on Singapore’s four official languages - English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

For more information on NAC’s grant schemes and initiatives, please visit the Council’s website at: www.nac.gov.sg or email: nac_literary_arts@nac.gov.sg
TEN THINGS MY FATHER NEVER TAUGHT ME AND OTHER STORIES

LANGUAGE: English  FORMAT: Paperback  NO. OF PAGES: 192

A woman learns of a friend’s illness and wonders if she ever truly knew him. A boy who sees ghosts heeds the advice of a fortune-teller, with surprising results. A woman learns of a friend’s illness and wonders if she ever truly knew him. Nobody hears them but me.

Do you think you’re ready, Raj? Are you ready to go out to work? Will you come back on time? Will you upset your employers again this time?

I see William, another inmate — wait, the word is “resident”; they say we must say “resident”. We are residents, not prisoners. When we are well enough, they want us to leave, get jobs, and find a place to stay where we will take our medication on our own. All alone.

I observe William, an old Chinese gentleman who has grown too old, limping in slow motion while leaning on his walking stick. He will never leave this place. He will die here, alone in his room. A nurse will gently close his rubbery eyes and cover his body with a piece of cloth.

But William is not dead yet. He is walking, or struggling to walk, down the hallway, towards me. “Hello, Raj,” he says in that eighty-something-year-old voice, full of gravel and heaviness. He is friendly. The other residents are not so friendly. The others are lost in themselves, turning in circles inside themselves, not sure which way is out; not sure where the sound is coming from when someone talks to them, telling them to sit down and keep perfectly still.

Hello, Mr William, I reply, still standing and leaning against the window. I turn my face back out to refocus on the rain that meets the ground outside, making sounds no one else can hear.

Are you ready, Raj? Are you ready to go out and work? Are you ready to clean tables, Raj, Raj...

“Raj! I’m talking to you!” It’s Tiffany Chia, the friendly social worker who is always leading residents from one end of the home to the other to attend workshops. I like carpentry classes the best, but I injured my index finger while sawing a piece of wood and my finger swelled to the size of my thumb; Tiffany told me I could no longer continue. Tiffany likes to smile a lot and shows plenty of teeth. Now she is smiling but she is also impatient because I ignored her. I need to pay closer attention.

“Sorry, Ms Tiffany, I didn’t hear you,” I reply. “Really sorry, Ms Tiffany.”

“It’s okay, Raj,” she says, her tone softening. She is carrying a file in one hand and a plastic bag in another. “Today is your big day, right, Raj? Today you get to go out to work again. Are you ready, Raj? Are you ready?”

And I follow her down the corridor. I wonder where William has gone. He must have wandered into the canteen, where he will be fed coffee and biscuits. At least they feed us regularly here. Once I leave, I have to find my own things to eat. I will need to earn money to buy food. But leaving is good for me. I must be independent. I am forty years old. Not a kid. I need to look after myself. My medication is working, everyone says so. I will no longer lose my temper and hit people for no reason.

They found me on a public bench one night, lying there half-naked with just my shorts on. I had no idea how I got there. I still don’t. They told me my mother died in her sleep and I slipped out on my own to sleep outside that same night. Did my mother actually die? I never saw my mother again after they found me shivering on the bench. They separated us, taking her body away and putting me here in Pelangi Home. I never even attended her funeral.

Or did it? Didn’t I see them carry her into a van? Why can’t I remember? Wasn’t there a building with an escalator tilting up to the sky… Had it been a dream? Didn’t the escalator take me to a cold, cold room where my mother was kept inside an open coffin, waiting to be rolled away? Wasn’t there a church ceremony? My mother and I are Hindu, not Christian. So why was there a priest in a white robe muttering prayers I didn’t recognise —

Maybe the medication is blowing out my memory. But medication is good. Everyone says so. Medicines keep me quiet. And perfectly still.
Deepika Shetty brings her varied life experiences into her writing. She spent six years in television as a producer and anchor of a weekly segment on books for Channel NewsAsia’s breakfast show, “Prime Time Morning”. She then became Arts Correspondent for The Straits Times for seven years. During that time, she developed and shaped its coverage of the visual arts, museum shows, and even Bollywood. Deepika had also previously worked for The Times of India and India Today. On the literary front, she has moderated at several key literary festivals in Australia as well as Ubud, Galle and Singapore. Launched in 2013, her popular Facebook page, Sadee Saree, has galvanised a new generation’s interest in the saree, which also forms the subject of her next book.

**The Red Helmet**

The Red Helmet, Deepika’s debut novel, has taken her 23 years to write. A social media phenomenon, it was initially marketed only on online platforms. Since its launch at the 2014 Singapore Writers Festival, the novel has sold over 4,000 copies globally and a second edition will be published soon.

The novel talks about growing up at a certain time in an uncertain India. It speaks of loss, love and the journeys they compel us to make. Set in the 1980s and early 1990s, this coming-of-age novel is inventive and irreverent. In her witty and honest narrative, Deepika weaves a story about a young Indian woman’s struggle with her family, her fight to balance the love of her life and her desire to make it in the professional world. It tells of how children and teenagers cope and overcome painful experiences and adversity, and learn never to be defeated.

**Extract from The Red Helmet**

Sleep beats me. There are fits and starts, a nod here and there. Nothing like the deep sleep from which you wake totally refreshed. I can’t get Ambala out of my head. There is a date playing in my head. The day it happened. Our school holidays were ending. We had spent another winter at Nani’s home in Chandigarh and Pa had arrived to take us back to school. He had nearly missed the bus from Rajpuri, where he was posted and there have been many times I have wished he had. Because this is a day I cannot forget.

October 31, 1984

There are things I remember about this day. Ready on the race track for the 200-metre dash at the inter-school sports meet at Doon School. Then the announcement: “Our Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is dead. The sports meet is cancelled. We will now observe a minute’s silence.”

News travelled slowly in those days. We did not know it was an assassination by her Sikh bodyguards. Living in a boarding school, it would be weeks before we knew about Sikh homes in Dehra Dun being attacked by mobs. They showed up at ours, but left it alone because by then my father had been posted to Amritsar and our tenants were Hindus.

In late-November, on our monthly day out, I saw the devastation.

Gaylord, our favourite bakery, a charred mess, only pillars left at the chemist shop, also owned by a Sikh. Further down, Paltan Bazaar and Rajpur Road, shops, hotels, restaurants, anything owned by Sikhs that could be burnt had been incinerated. Pa was in Amritsar and knew more about what was happening. When he came to visit us, we went to see our home. That is when the neighbours spoke of lists, of mobs taking over the streets, knowing exactly which address they could joyously destroy.

The death toll in Delhi was a few thousand. The reports were so horrific that the day I read this in an international news magazine, I had to gasp for breath and stop reading for a while:

“Fires of vengeance were burning everywhere. Said a civil servant: ‘The backlash is terrible. It reminds me of the days of partition.’ Hundreds of frightened Sikhs took refuge in the Delhi railway terminal, unable to take trains home and afraid even to leave the building. By week’s end the nationwide death toll had passed 1,000.”

It didn’t end in November or even December of that year, you know. Nor was it contained in Delhi. Spending our holidays in Amritsar, my sister and I learnt all about curfews and shoot-at-sight orders.

But we hadn’t encountered fear. Not yet.

Nani howled when news trickled in of a family she knew. All six members left to die in a burning house. She spoke of how it felt like partition and 1947 all over again. “There was blood everywhere,” she cried. She cried easily and we failed to pay enough attention to her tears or the pain she bore in her heart. I didn’t know what she meant till we encountered a mob. We were on the bus from her home in Chandigarh going to Dehra Dun. It happened between Yamuna Nagar and Saharanpur. Pa should not have been on this bus and I have often wondered how differently my life would have played out had my stars been, if not perfectly, at least a little, better aligned. He was dozing when the mob came to our bus, baying for blood. Only Sikh blood would do.

Our bus had five Sikh families aboard. The men stepped out, like proud sardars hoping that when they were done with them, this would end. Pa whispered in our ears to quickly take our kadas off. Mine came off quickly, but my sister struggled. I held her tight telling her not to look the way they had taken Pa.

Terrible things were about to happen.

You just know these things. There was no sound from the men as the swords sliced through their bodies and the dance of death commenced.

There is something about blood. It is a little like money. You get some, you want more.
SINGULAR ACTS OF ENDEARMENT


After twenty years abroad, Jasmine Lee-Heschel, a Jewish-Chinese, has returned to Singapore to read literature at college. Her grandfather, Ah Gong, has cancer and is given a year to live. A caretaker at a plant nursery, he is bent on building a garden for their HDB flat. To appease him, Jasmine is tasked to take Ah Gong to what small enclaves of nature still exist on the island. In the process, she meets a boy and encounters the dead Nina who saw an angel. In the anticipation of death, she finds that "nothing makes sense.

Completed as a project under the NAC Gardens by the Bay Residency, the book contains information on indigenous botany.

An Intimation

There is nothing to be abridged about death. Death becomes less of an abstraction when you decide to end a life — yours or another’s. Neither of these lines seems proper in this circumstance. The first sentence could also be how heavily it rained this morning, and how chronology is illusion. Or how the frangipani flowers had fallen to cover the road.

There weren’t even clouds to warn us. Some pedestrians and I were at the junction, and we were caught completely unawares. The same way the body can get. That cancer is something you can be witness to, but never truly understand. “It comes in waves,” Ah Gong said, between sobs. “Very bad, very bad.” That’s all he can muster sometimes, a bit too much to bear. Ma says we’ll never understand how painful the body can get. That cancer is something you can be witness to, but never truly understand.

I’m reading The Stone Diaries. It’s by Carol Shields, its title embossed in shiny red because it’s the fifteenth anniversary edition. Ma passed it to me after reading the first few chapters. It was shipped from Amazon, Dad’s Valentine’s gift to Ma. He thought Ma would like it, the story being set in Bloomington, Indiana. The protagonist of the novel is Daisy Goodwill Flett. She seems lost and in search of a larger purpose to her life. There’s a picture of her parents, Cuyler and Mercy, in the book. Her mother died during childbirth. She looks dumpy, with broad shoulders and a big waist. But her father is clean-cut and handsome. He lets his right arm fall to his side, as if too nervous to even place it behind his back or in his pocket. He looks like a quiet neurotic.

“Daisy is the unknowing pilgrim,” Jeremiah said. “She’s an ordinary person trapped in the everyday mundane. She’s being co-opted to attend to questions she’d probably avoid asking.” Jeremiah is right. Daisy is like so many of Shields’ characters. It is only ‘life’ fully capitalised — the various situations and scenarios it places in front of all of us — that calls her characters to action. Her characters are inevitably forced to deal with the world that way. To deal with their lot in life. From there, they find their footing and begin to engage with the world. Otherwise, they might be happier simply being adrift, with little to say or add to anything.
Justin Ker's stories are like forgotten keys and misplaced umbrellas — seemingly simple objects of affection, yet full narratives within only a few pages. Each evanescent story inhabits the fleeting, unrepeatable place between the falling droplets on our island of Singapore. These are words that leave both a smile on one's face and a lump in one's throat.

In this moving, inspired collection, Justin Ker doesn't just show us the space between the raingrops, he shows us the space between everything: every person, every thought, every moment. This is flash fiction at its best. — Robert Swartwood, USA Today bestselling author of Marathon Man and winner of the 2013 Pearl Buck Award.

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REVIEW / AWARDS

“The space between the raingrops, the stories — Justin Ker’s stories are like forgotten keys and misplaced umbrellas — seemingly simple snippets of indispensable reality that have the power to turn things on their head. These are words that leave both a smile on one’s face and a lump in one’s throat.” — Krishna Udayasankar, author of Objects of Affection and The Ayavarta Chronicles.

The light wooden shelves were filled with glass and ceramic perfume bottles, each with a square white card in front, diffusing its individual scent into the air of the shop. No, he thought to himself, he wasn’t exactly looking for her. He was looking (synesthetically) for her scent — and all that it triggered — which was different from her woman-shaped body of carbon and water. He picked up one of the white cards and inhaled. Then again, maybe he was just lying to himself, to make the act of cheating less morally onerous.

He found that, more than a faded childhood photograph, or the half-remembered chorus of a song he had heard at the Nirvana concert of his youth, smells trip-wired memories more strongly than any of the other senses.

The array of scents and bottles in that small perfumery from the South of France. She nodded and led him to a corner shelf, where she pointed out five different silver aluminium perfume bottles next to each other. Do you know which one you want? she asked.

He thought about her question. One was going to be his wife. The other, possibly his mistress. He shook his head. He said, I only know the scent by its smell.

The shop assistant took the square white card in front of the first bottle between her thumb and forefinger. She smelt it before giving it to him.

No, not this one, he said, holding the card in front of his face. She had worn it on each of the two times she had gone out with him for coffee, when his fiancé was away. The first time, the scent had overcome him (and his defences), and he ached to revisit it. The second time, she had worn it again, but less strongly. While driving her home, he asked her what she was wearing. Regret, she said. Then she smiled, and told him the name of the perfumery. Her regret was in buying too small a bottle during her trip to the South of France. He deduced that her bottle was almost empty.

Looking at the five silver bottles, he had wrongly assumed that the perfumery made only one scent. He put the first card back and took the second card, but was stopped by the shop assistant.

She handed him a small, hexagonal glass jar of coffee beans, which fit into the palm of his hand. You have to sniff this first, to forget the first one, she said.

He was doubtful, but inhaled the cloud of caffefinated amnesia anyway, and was surprised when the smell of coffee completely erased all traces of the first scent. He thought the coffee beans in one hand, he smelled the second card. This one smelt of lemon and frangipani, but it wasn’t her. He went down the line, inhaling the coffee beans after each perfume, alternating remembrance, with deliberate, obliterating amnesia.
The beefy man closed the back door of the ornamental fish shop and leaned against it. The one watching the pet fish swimming in their tanks turned and closed the sliding front door. The cheeky one grabbed Big Mole from behind, pinning her arms and squeezing her throat. She screamed her loudest; the back door burst inward, followed by Sachee and three of his backdoor rats. The thatched leaves in the roof trembled with the impact, and the beefy man stumbled forward under the assault. Sachee smashed his pipe into the cheeky one’s face, and the man immediately let Big Mole go. The third man reopened the sliding front door to escape, but was shoved back into the shop by another group of backdoor rats who’d been waiting outside; they came in and closed the sliding door behind them. It was all over in seconds. Big Mole readjusted her bra strap, and rubbed her aching arms and throat, not really hurt but just shaken up. Her attacker lay on the floor of the shop, shivering and bleeding from his forehead, nose and mouth. He tried to talk, but no words would come out, only a gurgling sound; his jaw was clearly broken.

The beefy man was lying on his side, unmoving. No blood was visible on his body, but the backdoor rats had rained down blows upon him with their pipes, bashing his bones and internal organs. His fishy eyes stared wide with raw horror and he breathed heavily.

The one who had tried to escape trembled like a leaf in the wind. He collapsed to his knees when Sachee dragged him in front of Big Mole so she could decide what to do with him. She was not frightened; she was furious about what could have happened to her had Sachee and the backdoor rats not been there, about how many girls this trio may have raped and sold into slavery. She bent down and yelled in the face of the trembling leaf: “You trying to fuck me here or what!”

The leaf shook his head from side to side. “No, not me, not my fault!” “You better be straight with me,” she growled. “Tell me the truth. What do you want from me?” She wanted him to confess openly, not just for her sake but for everybody in the shop, for she knew that the truth was crucial for survival at the knife’s edge of life.
The Adopted: Stories from Angkor presents a labyrinth of stories shaped by different themes, inspired by different provocations, and told in different styles.

To begin our journey, Yong Shu Hoong transports the reader to Angkor Wat, where a fleeting encounter between two strangers sparks off diverging storylines that oscillate between Cambodia and Singapore. His tales segue into Heng Siok Tian’s sequence of stories that questions the perceived boundaries of historical facts, subjective perceptions, subconscious imagination and dreams. As we travel, Phan Ming Yen’s noir fiction with its brand of slow-burning domestic horror reels the reader in to a different turn. Lastly, Yeow Kai Chai entices the reader to walk on the wild side — along with tourists, macaques and other enigmatic beings — in exploring psychological insights and the rituals of human behaviour.

One ancient land. Four writers. Guilt, ruin, loss, fear of change, and forgiveness.

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“Maximum Headroom”  
by Yong Shu Hoong

Darkness and the scent of fresh sweat, their sweat, enveloped him as he closed his eyes. He soon found himself all alone within an ocean of blackness… before a dim glow appeared in the distance, piercing the bleak horizon. By this time, he realised that his body had acquired a weird buoyancy, which he used to his advantage by floating himself closer to the light. Then the light was all around, and he could see he was among the familiar ruins of Angkor Wat. He was running. In fact, he was trailing Gwen closely as she sprinted along a passageway. This was Angkor Wat, as he had remembered. He didn’t expect the place to have undergone much change, despite the passage of 10 years since he was last there. In a way, it was as though he was back to being five years old again, on a particular day in his childhood that for some reason he could always retrieve from the clutter of his recess of memories. Back on a day not unlike any other day when he would be despatched by his orphanage to sell soft toys to visitors at Angkor Wat, except that it was the day he met a sad-looking woman who stood out from all the other tourists frantically snapping their cameras.

For some reason, he could still remember the woman’s facial features. And as Gwen turned back to steal a glance at him, pausing by a depilated column inside the temple complex, he could see her face morphing into the face of that female tourist. The column had a pear-shaped crevice, and Khiev immediately recalled that it was the same column which he had seen the woman whispering her secret woes to, on that particular day many years ago. It was the same column he had approached, after the departure of the woman, to stick his tiny fist into the hole, wondering what she had deposited there. But there was nothing — no money which he had hoped for — only dirt that she had used to seal the hole. All of a sudden, it dawned on Khiev that that was also the day when the voices in his head first appeared.

EXTRACT FROM THE ADOPTED: STORIES FROM ANGKOR

“Do not tempt…” the woman said as she gazed at him. Within seconds, her face had transformed back to Gwen’s. As she walked off, picking up speed in her gait, he followed suit, stalking her into the labyrinth of columns, wall murals and passageways, only to emerge a moment later into a clearing where trails of smoke spiralled from a bunch of joss sticks stuck onto a grey stone tablet on the ground. “The spirits,” Gwen muttered beside the stone tablet, before she morphed once again into the woman tourist, who then turned to reach out a hand to lightly graze the lighted tips of the joss sticks.

The smoke seemed to be conjuring up outlines of two small faces, but before he could make out the half-formed faces, the woman had turned back to confront him. The shape-shifting smoke dissipated, and she was Gwen once again. “Don’t ever tempt the spirits,” she purred, a warning that came across both ominous and sensual. Suddenly the ground started to rumble, and columns were swaying and toppling. He had a brief moment to wonder about how rubble, the way broken bits and fragments were arranged, could possibly contain secret meanings yet to be deciphered. But all too soon, he was free-falling as support under his feet gave way to emptiness. And the voices. The twin voices started again in his head.
Three retired soldiers resolve to fight to the death to rescue an aged battle ship. Sunken and in disuse, the ship is loaded with the heavy baggage of history. From the ocean rises countless questions and pauses. Why are these soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-history. From the ocean rises countless questions and pauses. Why are these soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-time companion? Is it because of loyalty or a desire to revive past glory and memories of their hometown?

The novel juxtaposes time and space taking us through history from Shanghai in the 1940s to Taiwan in the 1990s, from tearful departures by soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-history. From the ocean rises countless questions and pauses. Why are these soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-history. From the ocean rises countless questions and pauses. Why are these soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-time companion? Is it because of loyalty or a desire to revive past glory and memories of their hometown?

The novel juxtaposes time and space taking us through history from Shanghai in the 1940s to Taiwan in the 1990s, from tearful departures by the Huang Po River to the fiery waves by the shore of Yehliu, unfolding the love-hate relationships between the people of the two shores.

Three old men and one old warship, Who once fought together in an era of absurdity and chaos, Are now brought together by chance; As time goes by.

Is it fate, irreversible destiny, Or the law of inheritance. Stranding, that heralds another new journey.

Leap Month of August, 1995

Deep in the night of October 5th, 1995, City of Keelung, Taiwan.

Like foam soaked in sea water, half floating and half submerged, the whole island of Taiwan was overwhelmed by rainstorms in a night of torrential rain.

The leap month of August delayed the footsteps of fleeing summer. Even the slight heat in the day was quenched by this sudden rain, signalling the coming of autumn and winter that would freeze the island in a hurry.

The squall ran wild and raged along coastal Yehliu in Keelung with huge waves surging fiercely. Even the ‘Head of the Queen’, a scenic spot, was severely smashed, leaving her facial expression laden with sadness.

At one corner of the bulwark around the resort was seated an old man, alone and skinny, who, if one did not observe carefully, would have been mistaken as a part of the damaged rock.

Without any rain gear, he was dressed simply in a flimsy white shirt and dark grey pants. He wore only one slipper. Perhaps the other had been lost on his way here or had been swept away by the turbulent sea while he was sitting here.

Rain kept pouring down like the long hairs of brushes, while waves surged rhythmically echoing its continuous undulation. Despite trying to stay rigid, the man could not help tilting a little as if he was about to fall into the sea, like the slipper that hung on the big toe of his left foot.

Staring blankly into the sea, the old man wore no expression on his bony and wrinkled face. He compressed his dry lips. The sweeping rains were unable to wash away the isolation and loneliness from the corners of his mouth. Whether it was because of the reflection of the waves or his wandering thoughts, only his eyes flashed with his changing emotions. Even his thick eyebrows could not carry the weight of the raindrops falling on his face. The old man remained indifferent. It was not important to tell whether they were raindrops or teardrops.

In such a moment, it could have been mistakenly assumed that the man was committing suicide in such bad weather; but his eyes were lit with such ferocity, it seemed more like he was taking vengeance on the sea and defying the darkness around him.

EXTRACT FROM RESCUE LST 222

Translations rights and publishing rights available for sale worldwide, except Singapore and China.

BI MO graduated from the National Guoguang School (now known as National Taiwan College of Performing Arts) and has a Bachelor’s degree in Chinese Language and Literature from Beijing Normal University. She has lived in Singapore for seventeen years, writing screenplays and TV scripts, publishing novels, compiling Chinese Language teaching materials and teaching languages. Currently, she is a member of the Tropical Literature and Arts Club, the World Chinese Micro Fiction Association, and the Society of Literature Writing. She published an abridged version of If There’s Love in 2002, and a collection of short stories A Pair of Dancing Shoes, and a novel Rescue LST 222 in 2014.


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Three retired soldiers resolve to fight to the death to rescue an aged battle ship. Sunken and in disuse, the ship is loaded with the heavy baggage of history. From the ocean rises countless questions and pauses. Why are these soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-history. From the ocean rises countless questions and pauses. Why are these soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-history. From the ocean rises countless questions and pauses. Why are these soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-history. From the ocean rises countless questions and pauses. Why are these soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-history. From the ocean rises countless questions and pauses. Why are these soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-history. From the ocean rises countless questions and pauses. Why are these soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-history. From the ocean rises countless questions and pauses. Why are these soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-history. From the ocean rises countless questions and pauses. Why are these soldiers ready to go against the Navy and battle the elements for this long-history.
三个老人和一艘老军舰，
曾共同走过荒漠，惊险的年代。
如今，时过境迁，物换星移，
竟又再度重逢；
是宿命，是天命难违，
抑或是世代交替的规律，
揭开，另一个旅程的影子。

一九五五年十月五日深夜，台湾省
基隆市。

这天是个鬼哭神嚎的风雨夜，整个
台湾岛笼罩在暴风魔影里，就像浸
在海水中的泡影，半浮半沉。

因为八月，限定了夏天脚步的
离去，白天还残存有一丝暖意，却
叫这场命里注定，趁着夜色的秋
冬，刺痛侵湿了急迫的寒冻。

基隆至台北的沿海一带，更是狂风怒
卷，洪涛巨浪；就连风景区的“女
王头”也是坑坑洼洼，皱皱重重地
憋着一张脸。

在那个时候，这种天气，出在这个
里，很容易被误会是要来寻仇；可
那双是狠狠的眼睛又像是来寻仇，对
象是大海以及连绵大海的黑暗。

他叫江凯，曾有人叫他“上海小歪
（小 HEAP）”、“涉车专家”、“台
湾黑毛”、“外资人”、“老羊
头”。最近的新称呼是“台独分
子”、“钉子戶”。

串串相间的符号，注释了他一生的
际遇；或说，他一生的际遇，成了
这些符号的注解。
MICRO-FICTION BY LIN GAO

In this collection, Lin Gao expresses his unwavering passion and concern for Man, while exploring the aesthetic traits of micro-fiction. His concern for life and living in these stories creates endless artistic space and will enlighten the reader. There are four volumes in all. The first volume comprises unpublished new stories while the other three consist of pieces selected from previously published volumes.

EXTRACT FROM MICRO-FICTION BY LIN GAO

Translated by Enoch Ng

Drawing Mum

The fifth contestant went onstage, stood in place, bowed, smiled lightly, and opened her mouth. Her movements relaxed. She was an adorable little girl, not much older than ten.

Qiu Hong's eyes followed the girl, like the lens of a video camera, as if she wanted to record everything. She was very happy that her Dad had brought her to the community centre to watch the Children's Story-telling Contest.

Gu Kaizhi was playing happily with a group of friends. Suddenly, he heard someone shout, “Mummy!” Looking up, he saw a lady walking towards them, smiling. A child rushed over and the woman gathered him in her arms, kissing him all over. Gu Kaizhi was a little taken aback. “Where's my mum?” he thought.

Qiu Hong was already in Primary One, her Dad still often carried her to the community centre. Her father said that it did not look like his mother. The little boy set it to again, drawing day and night until his father finally said, “It looks like her. You've seen Mum!”

Father said, “Qiu Hong, let's go home.”

“Is the contest over?” asked Qiu Hong, tear-eyed.

He did not answer. He was afraid the stories that followed would be similar to the one about Gu Kaizhi drawing his mom. Sadly, he gathered Qiu Hong up in his arms and walked away. Even though Qiu Hong was already in Primary One, her Dad still often carried her in his arms. At that moment, he wrapped his arms tightly around her, wishing he could give her something.

“Dad, who is Gu Kaizhi?” Qiu Hong asked on the way home.

Her father wanted to tell her he was an artist, but hesitated, then said, “Daddy doesn't know. Maybe there was no such person.”

“Can I learn to draw?”

“Yes, when you're older.”

When they reached home, he put the little girl to bed. Feeling uneasy and nervous, his thoughts and emotions were like a roller-coaster. All these years, he had loved his daughter deeply, but he still could not make up for the maternal love she had lost. Sometimes, in the midst of enjoying dinner with her Dad, Qiu Hong would suddenly ask, “Did Mummy like this dish?” When she saw mothers hugging their kids on the street, she would turn to her Dad and say, “It's so good to have a mother!” At such times, her father felt as if his heart was being dug out and emptied, but he had nothing that could make his daughter happy. All he felt was loneliness, bitterness, and helplessness.

Late that night, the father went to check on the little girl. He found the light still on in his daughter's room. She was slumped over on her desk, asleep. She held a pencil in her hand, and there were several pieces of paper with pictures of a woman on them scattered over the desk. The father stared, dazed. He sat down, deep in thought. Then tears ran down his face. He went to the storeroom, took out his wife's picture, and placed it at the head of the little girl's bed. He carried her to the bed. Tomorrow, she will be able to see her mother, he thought.
林高微型小说

把妈妈画出来

第五个参赛者上台，站好，行礼，微笑一笑，然后开口，举止从容不迫，好可爱的一个女孩儿，不过10岁吧。

秋红的眼睛像录像机的镜头，紧跟着女儿，一举一动都如照相机进去。爸爸带着女儿到民众联络所来看看儿童讲故事比赛，她好高兴。

顾欣之和一群小朋友正在玩着。忽然听到谁喊一声“妈妈”，抬头一看，一个妈妈哭着哭走过来。孩子奔过去，妈妈抱住孩子，这边亲情，那边亲情。顾欣之看得呆住了。
他想：“我的妈妈呢？”

秋红听得好入神，眼睛红红的。爸爸有些不放心，带她来，是要她快乐，结果反倒使她伤心。

顾欣之和爸爸知道再也不能忍儿子……顾欣之天天吵着爸爸，要爸爸告诉她妈妈的模样，爸爸怎么办呢？他打了好几个比方，把妈妈的样子说清楚了。顾欣之就画呀画，他日也画夜也画……

爸爸把注意力都移到秋红的表情上，他看到女儿眼里漓出泪水。他后悔带她来。台上的故事还要听下去。

妈妈的画像好了，顾欣之拿给爸爸看，爸爸说不像不像。顾欣之又画呀画，他日也画夜也画……爸爸说：“像了像了，孩子，你看到妈妈了。爸爸说：“秋红，我们回去吧。”

“比赛完了吗？”秋红说着泪水问爸爸。

爸爸没有回答。他怕有类似顾欣之离妈妈的故事在后面，抱起她，郁郁地走。秋红读小学一年级，爸爸还常抱她。此时此刻，他把她抱得更紧，想给她点什么。

顾欣之是谁？爸爸。”半路上，秋红问。

爸爸想告诉她，顾欣之是个画家，可心里顾虑点儿什么，便说：“爸爸不知道，没有这个人吧。”

我可以学画画吗？”

“嗯，等你长大了，爸爸一定给你学画画。”

回去后，爸爸安排女儿上床睡觉，自己却坐不安，思绪起伏。几年来，他爱女儿，无微不至的爱，还是弥补不了失去的妈妈的爱。父女俩高兴兴奋着吃晚饭的时候，秋红忽然问“妈妈喜欢吃这菜吗？”
I wanted to seize the opportunity to return to the station of my life when everyone was still around. I wanted to love my parents well, while they were still alive. With no regard for how difficult it was to walk on the floor of the station lobby, I ran with all my might. Following the directions of the signs in the station, I wove through the crowd, walked around in circles, and finally found the ticket office. There were no holes on the glass window, so I was not sure if the person on the other side could hear me speak. I did not bother and shouted through the glass at the old woman sitting in the heated room, ‘Single one-way ticket to Xian Zhai train station.’

I waited in anticipation to get on the train. I sat by the window. I waited anxiously for the masked man to appear again, for him to turn back the time to when I was just fifteen, to the time and space when my little brother and parents existed. This was the first time I yearned for my brother’s presence. Even though he was a little brat who was just two years younger than me, he was still my brother.

I waited for the train to start chugging away but I discovered that the trains of the future were very quiet and did not cause any pollution. The windows would even dim automatically in the bright sunlight. This upset me as I was afraid that I would miss the masked man if he came.

Time passed, and because there were no reflective rays, there was no negative energy, and no wormhole. Time was just a track that carried every life form hurtling forward in one direction. I could not return to the past.

I had missed the station called “Home”. I had missed it forever. I yearned to go home with all my heart, to apologize to my mother, but it was futile. I could no longer see my mother, to crawl into her arms and whine. I did not know that my parting words to this woman who gave me life would be “I hate you”. Life was too short to love sufficiently, and I had chosen to hate.

As I got lost in my thoughts, I broke down completely.

I wanted to seize the opportunity to return to the station of my life when everyone was still around. I wanted to love my parents well, while they were still alive. With no regard for how difficult it was to walk on the floor of the station lobby, I ran with all my might. Following the directions of the signs in the station, I wove through the crowd, walked around in circles, and finally found the ticket office. There were no holes on the glass window, so I was not sure if the person on the other side could hear me speak. I did not bother and shouted through the glass at the old woman sitting in the heated room, ‘Single one-way ticket to Xian Zhai train station.’

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我要趁大家还在的时候，赶快回到我生命的候车站去。我要趁爸妈还在的时候，好好地爱爱他们。

顾不了，候车厅的地板再多不易行走，我都使劲地往前跑，跟随候车厅里的指示牌，在繁杂的人群里绕呀绕了好几圈，辛苦了大半天才找到售票处。到了那里，发现玻璃上没有孔子，不知对方可会听到我说的话，管不了这么多了。我对着玻璃向坐在暖气房里的老太太说：“宪宅火车站，单向、单人票一张。”

我引颈期盼着，终于可以上车，重新坐在靠窗的车厢位子上。此刻我无比期待那个蒙面男子的再次出现，再把时间扭曲一次，从未来回到现在，回到十五岁的我，回到我十五岁时，父母，还有弟弟存在的空间里。

可过了许久，那道反光始终都没有出现。没有那道反光，没有那些负能量，没有那个虫洞，时间就只是时间，就是一段承载着万物生命、单一方向，往前走的铁轨。我回不到过去了。

那个称为“家”的候车站，错过了，就永远错过了。

无论此刻我有多渴望回家，都再也不能跟妈妈道歉了，不能再看妈妈一眼了，不能再钻进妈妈怀里撒娇了。想不到我对这个赋予我生命的女人的最后一句话竟然是：“我恨你！”

人生，爱都来不及，我却以恨相待。

想着想着，我彻底崩溃了。

回不去的候车站
HASSAN HASAA˝REE ALI

HASSAN HASAA˝REE ALI won the third prize in the 2007 Golden Point Award in the Malay Short Story category with his short story Amnesia. In 2011, he won the first prize with a piece entitled Homeostasis. He was also first for Sayembara Nokhta Puth with his science-fiction short story Souvenir Dari Angkasa Lepas. In June 2012, Hassan attended the Iowa Summer Writing Festival in the US.

He also graduated from the National Arts Council Mentor Access Project. Selamat Malam Caesar (Goodnight Caesar) is his first short story collection. He is currently working on his second anthology tentatively entitled Kesian Sampiring (Side Effects).

Hassan is a full-time nurse working in a local hospital.

EXTRACT FROM GOODNIGHT CAESAR

Translated by Alfiian Sa’at

The Laureate’s Dream

Singapore 2155 AD

“Sir...”

A plump man in an expensive suit was facing them. The hair on his head was combed to taper towards the front. The words MINISTER OF CULTURE AND HERITAGE was inscribed on a metal plate on the table and on a name tag on the right of his suit.

The minister greeted his visitor with a wide smile. He spoke in English.

“Ah there he is, award-winning author and Nobel Laureate. Please take a seat.”

“I’m honoured to be invited here, sir.”

The minister took his time before speaking again. “You must be asking yourself why I have asked you here, why I have sort of kidnapped you from your era. I would like you to be an advisor on a new initiative that the ministry is coming up with.”

“What initiative, sir?”

The minister switched on a hologram and accessed a data file. The Laureate felt aghast as he read the words, “Initiative to bring back the use of the Malay language” on a glass screen in the minister’s office.

“So I thought that the best thing to do was to bring together the best of our literary minds to advise us on the launch of such an initiative. That is why I asked Dhul to bring you here.” The minister studied the Laureate’s face. “We are in dire need, sir, and your insight is greatly appreciated. Our language is at the brink of extinction. If we don’t save it, who else will? I will have my staff print you a copy of the report.”

The Laureate sat on a row of chairs in the lobby of the building browsing a file that had been specially printed out for him. Dzulkifli appeared after having changed into a new suit and bow-tie. While passing through a corridor, some music caught the Laureate’s attention. He followed the direction of the music and came to a window. There was a podium floating in the middle of a street. It was surrounded by tourists with cameras taking pictures of a few robots dancing the ronggeng, a traditional Malay dance.

“Robots?” Dzulkifli replied. “We’ve no more teachers and even the community has lost interest. So we just upload a programme into robots to perform for the sake of tourists.”

Dzulkifli brought his visitor to the edge of the city where some old buildings stood. Traces of Malay architecture could still be seen on the shapes of the dilapidated buildings despite their peeling paintwork and disorganised structures.

“This is the heritage village,” said Dzulkifli.

“Why is it in such a mess?”

“The money that is channelled each year isn’t enough to maintain this place. They’d rather channel the funds to symbols of progress.”

“But isn’t a people’s culture the symbol of its progress?” asked the Laureate.

Dzulkifli could only shrug in resignation. They stepped into a room that had been prepared for him. It had a bed with a hard mattress, a typewriter and reading materials.

The Laureate’s thoughts were like a kite floating in the night breeze. A full moon illuminated the heritage village, casting shadows onto the street and onto memories of a history that had long vanished.

Dzulkifli’s appearance at the door snapped the thread of his thoughts. “I think you’re very shocked at the situation?”

The Laureate shook his head and answered with a smile. “It was the same situation in my time. The signboards were starting to disappear. If we needed assistance, we’re only asked to press the numbers one and two on the telephone. There were no instructions to press the numbers three and four for other languages. The initiative that your minister seeks is a difficult task. Just look at all that...”

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Goodnight Caesar

Language Malay Format Paperback No. of Pages 102 Publication Year 2013 ISBN 978-981-07-6012-0 Form Short Stories

After reading Julius Caesar, Hassan was inspired to adapt Shakespeare’s play of corruption and betrayal to modern Singapore. Selamat Malam Caesar (Good Night Caesar), the author’s first anthology of short stories, features narratives from a variety of genres ranging from science-fiction to mystery. The award-winning Homeostasis is a tale of humanity’s quest for immortality and the consequences we face if we ever obtain it. Hassan is a full-time nurse working in a local hospital.

Goodnight Caesar

The Laureate’s Dream

Singapore 2155 AD

“Sir...”

A plump man in an expensive suit was facing them. The hair on his head was combed to taper towards the front. The words MINISTER OF CULTURE AND HERITAGE was inscribed on a metal plate on the table and on a name tag on the right of his suit.

The minister greeted his visitor with a wide smile. He spoke in English.

“Ah there he is, award-winning author and Nobel Laureate. Please take a seat.”

“I’m honour...
Mimpinya Seorang Sasterawan

Singapura 2155 AD

“Tuan…”

Lelaki berbadan gempal memakai sut mahal berpaling menghadap mereka berdua. Rambut pada kepala kelihatan menipis pada bahagian depan. Plat pada meja bertulis MENTERI KEBUDAYAAN DAN WARISAN MELAYU juga pada tag nama pada bahagian kanan sut.

Si menteri menyambut tetamunya dengan senyuman lebar.

“Ah there he is, award winning author and nobel laureate. Please take a seat.”

“Saya amat berbesar hati dijemput ke sini tuan.”

Si menteri mengambil masa untuk berkata lagi.

“You will be asking yourself why did I ask you here. Why I sort of kidnapped you from your era. I’d like you to be an advisor on a new initiative that the ministry is coming up with.”


“Robot?”


“Kita perlukan keindahan yang kekal, bukan sahaja yang baru…”

Dzulkifli berkata lagi. “Rehat lah tuan, esok kita akan pulang ke bangunan kementerian untuk mesyuarat.”

SELAMAT MALAM CAESAR

Dzulkifli membawa tetamu ke pinggir kota di daerah bangunan-bangunan lama, seni bina Melayu kelihatan pada bentuk bangunan yang usang dan cat yang terkrop dan struktur yang tidak terurus.

“Ini adalah kawasan kampung warisan,” kata Dzulkifli.

“Kenapa tidak terurus?”

“Wang yang disalurkan setiap tahun tidak cukup untuk membiayai tempat ini. Mereka lebih menyenalurkan wang kepada lambang yang membawa kemajuan.”

“Bukankah budaya sebuah masyarakat lambang kemajuan,” kata si Sasterawan.

Dzulkifli hanya mampu mengangkat bahu sebagai tanda tidak berupaya. Mereka melangkah masuk ke dalam bangunan, katil dengan tilam keras, mesin taip dan bahan bacaan untuk beliau.

“Kemunculan Dzulkifli di pintu kamar memutuskan tali fikiran beliau. “Saya rasa tuan amat terkejut dengan keadaan kami?”

Si Sasterawan menggeleng kepala dan membalas dengan senyuman. “Ya merupakan keadaan yang sama, pada zaman saya. Sudah mula hilang papan tanda dan jika ingin mendapat pertolongan hanya diberi arahan untuk tekan butang nomor satu atau tekan butang nomor dua. Hilang sudah arahan untuk tekan butang nomor tiga dan nomor empat.”

“Ini adalah inisiatif yang diminta menteri adalah satu tugas yang sukak, engkau lihat sahaja kehilangan yang ada di sekeliling.”


“Kita perlukan keindahan yang kekal, bukan sahaja yang baru…”

Dzulkifli berkata lagi. “Rehatlah tuan, esok kita akan pulang ke bangunan kementerian untuk mesyuarat.”
While delving into the mystical world of Malay chivalry in the legendary Malay annals locked in the heart of the British Museum, a teacher stumbles upon information that could lead to the Malays dominance of Seking, a satellite city of the Lion City. The discovery opens up a Pandora's box of questions that could complicate international relations between the British, the government of the Lion City, and the Malays. Trapped in a dilemma of divulging this potent information, he finds himself posing a security threat to the preservation of Malay history. There were numerous historical books that were kept in the University of London. I was fortunate because an old manuscript from the British Library had been loaned to the university for three months for the purpose of exhibition and research. I overrode with my present discovery. I rushed to the office of Prof Sultz and knocked on his door. "I should ask Prof for help." My heart guided me.

I went out of the antiquity museum. It was a place where they kept ancient works from the various Malay states in the Malay Archipelago. The British had contributed immensely to the preservation of Malay history. There were numerous historical books that were kept in the University of London. I was fortunate because an old manuscript from the British Library had been loaned to the university for three months for the purpose of exhibition and research. I overrode with my present discovery. I rushed to the office of Prof Sultz and knocked on his door. "I should ask Prof for help." My heart guided me.

I immediately entered his office. "Sit down." Prof Sultz greeted me.

He was truly an expert anthropologist in the study of ancient Malays. He also had the gentle disposition of a Malay person. Perhaps it was due to his deep research into the Malay people. However, in terms of his physique, his sturdy and towering frame, as well as his thick moustache and piercing eyes, he projected the arrogance of English imperialism. I jumped straight to the point. "Prof, I've found something interesting. I'm sure you know that the offshore islands surrounding the Lion City belong to Singapore, right?" Prof nodded.

"According to the 1819 agreement between Raffles and the Temenggong, Pulau Seking belongs to the Malayan Peninsula, which is Malaysia. It was loaned to Temasek for a period of only 250 years." I was getting excited.

"How is that possible? Pulau Seking does not fall within Malaysian territory. It's located near the Lion City." Prof Sultz attempted to defend the Lion City's territorial rights.

"That's true, Prof. But the Lion City was also under Malay sovereignty until the Separation. So it's not surprising that Pulau Seking is still considered Malaysian territory." I tried to defend my theory. Prof became quiet.

"Do you know what the implications will be if this were true?" Prof stared at me gravely.

I nodded. We headed briskly for the museum of antiquity that was located at the University College to seek confirmation. On the way there, I was smiling. The image of the manuscript of Hikayat Abdullah in its glass exhibit flashed in my mind. We arrived at the Ethnography Collections section. After obtaining authorisation, we entered the room which housed the manuscript.

"Prof, you should read this paragraph. I pointed out a paragraph in the manuscript. The Arabic letters that marked the page were so fine and almost faded because the manuscript was so ancient. However, my careful study of javi writing and the Arabic language had contributed to my ability in deciphering the contents of the manuscript with accuracy.

"Prof, look at the part of this sentence on the 12th line of this paragraph. The letter 'ta' should be in front of the letters 'ha-waw-nun' meaning 'hun'. So if you combine them, it means 'tahun'—250 years." I explained.

"But the phrase 'hun' means money value in as a thousand dollars, which means 250 thousand dollars." Prof was becoming more puzzled. He also explained that thus far there were a few copies of the original manuscript of Hikayat Abdullah kept in the Library of Congress in America and all of them recorded the phrase 'hun' only, which was accepted by the academic world, especially among anthropologists, as referring to a unit of currency.

"This copy also happens to be the original one that was loaned by the Library of Congress to the British Library for a period of three years. It was produced by Abdullah in the year 1843 and sent to the United States by Alfred North at the request of the head of the American Expedition who was in Singapore in 1842, Charles Wilkes. In the year 1865,
This means that this manuscript copy has not been altered or adapted by any party." I completed Prof's train of thought.

"But the Library of Congress has in its possession three copies that were published on different dates. Other than the original, there was a copy made by a Bugis scribe under the direction of Alfred North in 1888. The other one was published by Shellabear in 1915. These re-copied manuscripts contain a few adjustments according to their dates." Prof was silent and pondered for a moment.

The Hikayat Abdullah was his area of expertise, along with the Sejarah Melayu and a few other manuscripts.

"Yes, that's true. I once thought that the recension made by Shellabear of the Hikayat Abdullah was less accurate if compared to the original. For example on page four, he had dropped the word 'Keling'— or 'Indian'— in the sentence 'And then study languages and learn numbers ...' whereas the original sentence should read 'And then study the Indian language and learn numbers ...'. Furthermore, this manuscript was copied by a non-Malay Orientalist." Prof was becoming more animated as he expounded on his theory.

"But Prof, if I'm not wrong, I do recall some reference materials produced in the catalogue of the Library of Congress stating that the second manuscript of the Hikayat Abdullah had been copied by someone who was Bugis — Idris Bin Hussein. I was trying to play the Devil's advocate.

"Right! But he was closely supervised by Alfred North and that manuscript was prepared in only five months." Prof explained. "This means that the second manuscript was also under orientalist influence," Prof concluded.

"If this is so, I'm certain that the blank space in front of the syllable 'hun' is the syllable 'ta'. Perhaps this original manuscript holds the most accurate meaning compared to the other two in the Library of Congress. Maybe this is the most authentic manuscript. Let's ask for permission to study it without this glass obstruction. I'm sure we'll be able to see the text more clearly," I suggested.

"I don't know. It's not easy to make such a request especially for such an invaluable document as this. Prof Sulz was focused on the word that I had pointed out to him. His forehead furrowed.

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"Yes, that's true. I once thought that the recension made by Shellabear of the Hikayat Abdullah was less accurate if compared to the original. For example on page four, he had dropped the word 'Keling'— or 'Indian'— in the sentence 'And then study languages and learn numbers ...' whereas the original sentence should read 'And then study the Indian language and learn numbers ...'. Furthermore, this manuscript was copied by a non-Malay Orientalist." Prof was becoming more animated as he expounded on his theory.

"But Prof, if I'm not wrong, I do recall some reference materials produced in the catalogue of the Library of Congress stating that the second manuscript of the Hikayat Abdullah had been copied by someone who was Bugis — Idris Bin Hussein. I was trying to play the Devil's advocate.

"Right! But he was closely supervised by Alfred North and that manuscript was prepared in only five months." Prof explained. "This means that the second manuscript was also under orientalist influence," Prof concluded.

"If this is so, I'm certain that the blank space in front of the syllable 'hun' is the syllable 'ta'. Perhaps this original manuscript holds the most accurate meaning compared to the other two in the Library of Congress. Maybe this is the most authentic manuscript. Let's ask for permission to study it without this glass obstruction. I'm sure we'll be able to see the text more clearly," I suggested.

"I don't know. It's not easy to make such a request especially for such an invaluable document as this. Prof Sulz was focused on the word that I had pointed out to him. His forehead furrowed.

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SHANAVAS

SHANAVAS studied Chemistry in Jamal Mohammad College, Trichy and was awarded a post-graduate degree in Politics and General Administration by Madurai Kamaras University Madurai. Kalai Ilakkiya Perumaran marked his entry into the literary world. He is a voracious reader who is fond of poems, and loves to write essays and short stories. He was also involved in acting while serving in the civil service. His famous essays, like Thurai Meenum Vanmurai Kalacharamum and Sathu Kosam Sathu Telore, have been compiled and published. He also contributes regularly to Singapore’s popular newspaper, Tamil Murasa. His masterpiece, Ayal Rasi, a collection of lucid and vivid essays, was selected at Best Foreign Culture Book for the year 2012 by Mr S Ramakrishnan, a legend in modern Tamil literature. His short story Anumananam, from his short story anthology Moontravathu Kai, was adapted into a drama for Singapore television. Shanavas currently runs a hotel in Singapore.

MOONTRAVATHU KAI

LANGUAGE Tamil FORMAT Paperback NO. OF PAGES 102 PUBLICATION YEAR 2013 ISBN 978-81-928443-1-2 FORM Short Stories

Moontravathu Kai brings together twelve stories that draw upon the author’s experience of living in Singapore. The stories depict the different aspects of life faced by people in Singapore and highlight the varied relationships among families. Does the younger generation understand senior citizens, or do they stereotype the elderly population? Do past memories match up to present scenarios? Can we liken a stranger entering a teenager’s life, this collection makes whimsical observations about Singapore’s diverse social culture and celebrations.

EXTRACT FROM MOONTRAVATHU KAI

Translated by Palaniappan Arumugum

Witness

“Good morning.”

“Vanakkam.”

“Terima Kasih.”

“Xie Xie.”

“Thanks. How are you?”

Often before I could even respond to this daily torrent of greetings which came my way, the person offering the morning salutation would be gone, tossing coins on the table as they whisked away. I have been blessed to receive such greetings every morning since I started selling newspapers ten years ago. I would arrive at the break of dawn before the disturbed moon leaves its place in the sky. One can see people appear from nowhere and head towards the bus-stop. By the time the stack of newspapers is prepared for distribution to the different blocks of flats, the delivery boy would have made his presence felt at the strike of six o’clock. As soon as the papers for sale find their respective places on my table, a squirrel would make his routine trip from the nearby coconut tree, roll on the ground and make a return trip to his humble abode on the tree. Although the reason for his daily trips is a mystery to me, I imagine that the sight of the stacked papers gives him a surge of energy to scurry down and roll on the ground. It usually takes more time to stack the Saturday edition and amazingly, he sizes up the situation, waits for an opportune time to roll on the ground before scurrying off to the coconut tree. This squirrel aside, I am also familiar with most of the residents in this area as well. The Bangladeshi cleaner who wakes close on my heels would say, “As Salaam Alakum.” He persistently greets me this way without realising that I am a Christian. What does it matter anyway? I can always find out from Ahamed Bhaiya what the appropriate response is and return a “Wa Alaikum Salaam”.

Bhaiya’s knack for neatness in his work is utterly amazing. He takes great pains in putting each of his belongings back in its right place. I have never seen his shoes, clothing or belongings placed haphazardly. His shoes and broom always find a place under a bush behind the coconut tree before he goes for his coffee. With a renewed burst of energy from the caffeine when he returns, he sweeps the floor gracefully without getting in the way of the people walking by.

Let me tell you about Ahamad Bhaiya. I sell newspapers at the foot of the block where he resides. He helps at a food stall. In those days, it was not uncommon to witness squabbles erupting at the tables. When this happened, Bhaiya would be the one settling the disputes. He is glad that those days are bygone days as everything now is contracted and orderly. His wife works at a cardboard factory. She had previously worked at a spare parts company until her eyesight dimmed and her hands lost their ability to grip firmly. Sadly, her condition was not detected, even with microscanning and she had to eventually leave her job and work in the cardboard factory. The couple has two daughters. One of their daughters, Mariam, married a non-Indian Tamilian.

Mariam would come to Ahamad’s house with her children during the festive seasons of Deepavali and Hari Raya. Ahamad Bhaiya would remain scarce on these special days. He would only present himself to offer a tray of festive goodies made especially by his wife. On such rest days, he would emerge to show his presence but quickly disappear into the background to continue his chores.

Another person is Joseph, a retired pilot, who resides in a maisonette, a double-storey flat located in a semi-circular block. His daughter is an ex-flight stewardess who presently works as an owner of a travel agency. Joseph’s wife Mariam is fondly called Aunty Mariam by the children in the neighbourhood. For that matter, when Joseph collects the newspapers from me, even he would ask whether Aunt Mariam had already taken the papers earlier.
The other person who attends to his daily chores only after collecting his newspapers from me is Sundaram. He is very fluent in the Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese dialects. His daughter resides in Perth, Western Australia. As it takes only four hours to fly over from Perth, she visits her father at least once a month on a Sunday without fail.

The reason for giving such elaborate detail about these people is because I painstakingly bundle up the newspapers of their choice and they faithfully collect them from me before I will call it a day.

Every day, I become an important witness to different people in the early hours of their day but I do not know how to describe the day I witnessed the death of an old Chinese lady. It was a Sunday. I was there as always. In fact, I had been there for a long time looking at three lovely butterflies flying around haphazardly in a circle. The place where I sell my newspapers is at the junction of an unreasonably narrow road. If a lorry attempts to drive down that road, it has to reverse a long distance before it can make a decent move forward.
NOORJEHAN SULAIMAN

NOORJEHAN SULAIMAN’s journey as a Tamil writer started in 1966 when her first article was broadcasted on radio. Since then, she has been writing short stories, novels, poems and contributing her works on other Tamil literary platforms. Veril Nirkum Vizhuthugal, a collection of Islamic short stories, was her first book. Subsequently, she published a novel, Pozhutha Pularuma, a poetry collection, Uyir Nilavu, and most recently, a short story collection, Thaival Machine, with the support of the National Arts Council. Vergal, a novel based on an Indian Muslim’s life, has won the third prize in a worldwide Islamic Tamil novel writing competition and was shortlisted for the 2014 Singapore Literature Prize.

VERGAL


Set in Singapore, Vergal depicts the lives of three generations of Tamil Muslims who emigrated to Singapore due to a cholera outbreak in India. The novel begins with the childless Resavappa, the elder brother of Abu Bakar, arranging for the move to Singapore to escape the deadly disease. Settling down in the Tanjong Pagar area, the family tries to integrate into life on the island nation, while maintaining their ties with their family in India. The plot intertwines with historical events as it unfolds. Through the simple conversations between the characters, the realism of the Indian villages, and the subtle humour throughout the novel, various aspects of life such as family ties, death, greed, and separation are explored.

EXTRACT FROM VERGAL

Translated by Palaniappan Arumugum

The slumber that embraced him like a doting mother whenever he lied on his bed refused to turn up now. Though he lied with his eyes closed, the prints left behind by the events of his past life could not be buried and dotted his heart like an indelible pattern.

How momentous this house is! Ahmad was born in this very house. He was the second son born to Abu Bakar and Fatimah. It was in this house that the naming ceremony was performed forty days after Ahmad’s birth. The entire village was invited to the feast. The guests who came had a hearty meal and showered their blessings on the child. The whole family was immersed in joy.

The day after the celebrations, a contagious disease known as cholera spread through the neighbouring villages. This turned the whole village topsy-turvy. Fear gripped every part of the village and every sight and sound vibrated with the cry of death. Innumerable people were dying every day.

Medical facilities were absent in those days. Social development was lacking and superstitious beliefs were rampant among the villagers. When a major disease struck, people would run to the town. To treat other ailments like headaches and fever, a home remedy was always used. At this point of time when this contagious killer disease was jolting the whole village, Ahmad’s paternal uncle came running agitatedly in search of his brother, Abu Bakar.

“Hey, Abu Bakar! Do you know that two people died this morning because the cholera has spread to the neighbouring street? Two other children are fighting for their lives and are on the brink of death. What assurance is there that it will not spread to our street tomorrow? Hey, Abu Bakar! God has bestowed us with two children who are like golden statues. Like an uncultivable land, my life has become a wretched one. If you, with the help of Allah, desire to raise these two healthy children who have come to coo and play in this childless family, I beseech you, my loving and darling brother, run away to Singapore with your wife and children! It seems like the cholera which has hit the neighbouring street will come to our street in a blink of an eye” he said anxiously.

“Anney (elder brother)!
How can we go and leave all of you behind? Who do we know in that country? We will go only if you come with us as well. Otherwise... I don’t want to go, Anney. Do not send us away alone,” cried Abu Bakar.

After the birth of Abu Bakar, his father and mother had passed on one after another because of this very same disease — cholera. As such, Resavappa, who was ten years older than Abu Bakar, was the one who nurtured him with tender loving care. After the demise of Abu Bakar’s parents, it was a middle-aged woman who fetched water to their household that was the one who raised him.

There were two servants, a washerwoman and an accounts clerk, working in the household. With the assurance that these four people would look after Abu Bakar, Resavappa was able to immerse himself confidently in his farming. Resavappa stood before his brother with great determination. He had nurtured his brother’s family with love and affection and if they were to live well, he had to somehow, under such trying circumstances, send his brother’s family off, together with the other people who were going to Singapore.

With such an inseparable bond existing between the elder and younger brother, would Abu Bakar actually desert the extended family? Even then, the persistent Resavappa acted swiftly. He obtained the consent to send his younger brother, and soon received all the tickets and came running to inform his brother of his plans.

Abu Bakar was in deep sorrow as he leaned on the pillar with Ahmad on his lap. As soon as Resavappa arrived, he hurriedly bundled the things, clothes and food stuff into two gunny sacks. He handed the train
tickets to his brother and told him that he would accompany them until Nagapattinam.

He had made arrangements for them to travel from Nagapattinam to Singapore by ship. He had also made arrangements for the ship tickets with a friend. All arrangements had been made briskly. He advised his brother to be ready to leave by train at eleven o’clock the next morning. Ladies were gathered in the house to cook the meals throughout the night. As the ladies hurriedly involved themselves in the preparation of the food, Resavappa lied close to his younger brother, giving him advice as he stroked his younger brother’s hair with great affection.

As Abu Bakar held his elder brother’s hands and with tears welling in his eyes, he said, “Elder brother, I do not know how I am going to survive in Singapore. Is this night going to be the last night for us?” Abu Bakar could not talk any further. As Resavappa gestured for silence with his fingers, Abu Bakar gave his elder brother a hug. “Abu Bakar, do not cry. Be brave. If Allah’s grace is with us, we will meet again. Otherwise, mmm, it will be a path led by the Almighty! We were born on this earth… we will live until God settles our life account. He will take care of the rest. You are a child I raised. I have confidence. Definitely next year… bless my heart! Year after year, come with your family during the rainy season to the Kuttralam waterfall,” spoke Resavappa positively.

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LATHA

LATHA is the author of two collections of poetry in Tamil: Theevelli (Firepace) (2003), and Paampuk Kaattil Oru Thaazhai (A Screwpin in Snakeforest) (2004). Her 2001 short story collection Nan Kolai Seiyum Penkkal (The Women I Murder) won the Singapore Literature Prize in 2008. Her poems and short stories have been published in several anthologies including Words, Home and Nation, a multilingual anthology published by The Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore (1995), Rhythms: A Singaporean Millennial Anthology of Poetry, published by the National Arts Council (2000), Fifty on So and Tumask, published by the National Arts Council (2008), and various Tamil literary journals in India, Sri Lanka and France. Her works have been translated into English, French and German. Latha is currently the Sunday editor of Tamil Murasu, Singapore’s Tamil daily newspaper.

THE GODDESS IN THE LIVING ROOM

LANGUAGE English (Translated from Tamil) FORMAT Paperback


FORM Short Stories TRANSLATORS Palaniappan Anumugum, Sulosana Karthigasu, Kavitha Kumbarjaneyaram, Yamuna Murthi Raju, Ravi Shanker and Kokilavani Silverath

Tamil women in Singapore are given a powerful voice in this collection of stories. Translated from Tamil to English, the book begins with the story of Alyssa, who is left with her grandparents on Pulau Ubin as a child and her stories. Translated from Tamil to English, the book begins with the story of Karthigasu, Kavitha Karumbayeeram, Yamuna Murthi Raju, Ravi Shanker and Kokilavani Silverath.

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EXTRACT FROM THE GODDESS IN THE LIVING ROOM

Alyssa

The sand below was now clearly visible. Peering deeply into the still waters, Alyssa took stock of the different shells, pebbles and black stones of varying sizes peeping out of the weeds, foliage and algae covering them.

Her grandfather sat beside her, legs drawn up at the knees, motionless. As still as the waters in the lake. His left arm was propped on his knee and the fishing rod in his hand was equally motionless, but his right hand, holding a cigarette, was moving rhythmically, from his lips back to the right knee, as he took regular puffs from the cigarette.

Occasionally, the fishing line in the water drifted, ever so slightly. But the worm, dangling from the hook at the end of the line, remained immobile.

Alyssa looked at her grandfather’s reflection in the pond. She preferred this to looking at him directly. She seemed to take pleasure in gazing at the motionless worm and then suddenly swinging her gaze to her grandfather’s silhouette reflected on the water’s surface.

Her grandfather coughed suddenly, breaking the water’s stillness, sending small bubbles scattering in ever-increasing symmetric circles.

He let the fishing line droop deeper into the water and in one graceful motion yanked it out quickly, turned and thrust the fishing rod towards Alyssa. A big fish dangled at the end, thrashing desperately, as it struggled to free itself from the hook.

“Your grandmother will love this.”

Alyssa looked up, directly into his face. She observed his widened eyes, alert, focused. She noticed the ease with which he caught the struggling fish, how he deftly dislodged it from the hook and then tossed it into the pail sitting beside him.

Instinctively, Alyssa knew that she would have to handle the next catch. Her grandfather did not believe in giving explicit instructions. His philosophy was “You observe and follow”. She had learnt this in the one month she had been staying with him.

He now passed the fishing rod to Alyssa. She grasped the nylon line, pulled it taut and fixed the hook, a bit clumsily. The slight cut on her hand, sustained when she had tugged forcefully on the line, did not bother her. Opening the lid of the small jar beside her grandmother, she fished out a worm, hooked it on the line and passed the rod to him.

With one sweep of his hand, he threw the line, snagging a large crayfish within minutes. Reeling the line in, he handed it to Alyssa to remove the prized catch. She did not disappoint him.

By the time they packed up, the November skies were darkening.

Grandfather’s fishing trips at lakes or by the coast would always end before night fell, as there were no streetlights in Pulau Ubin. He fished at night only when he went deep-sea fishing.

Her grandfather picked up the pail (now overflowing with the day’s catch), the water bottles and fishing rod, and loaded them into his pick-up van. Swiftly gathering up the remaining plastic bags, Alyssa followed closely, trying to match her small steps to his big strides.

The streets would be pitch-dark by now. They would have to travel by the light thrown from the headlamps of her grandfather’s battered pick-up. Legally deemed as not road-worthy in Singapore, it had been consigned to the scrapyard. Grandfather had bought it and given it a new lease on life — Pulau Ubin had no such legal requirements.

Her grandfather had the engine running even before Alyssa could shut the door. By the time they reached home, a mere twenty minutes away, TV transmissions for the day had begun. There was no television in their house — Grandfather was dead set against it — yet they could distinctly hear their neighbour’s TV.

The houses here were large and well spaced out, unlike on the mainland. But not everyone on the island had electricity, let alone a TV set; the government’s electricity programme had not reached Ubin as yet. Some of the islanders, however, had installed their own electricity generators, especially since the television programmes had been launched.
YOU JIN

YOU JIN is a prolific writer of travelogues, essays, opinion pieces, short stories and novels and has published close to 160 literary works. She won the National Book Development Council of Singapore Book Award in 1982 and 1991 and was the inaugural recipient of both the Singapore Chinese Literary Award in 1991 and the Montblanc-NUS Centre for the Arts Literary Award in 1996. She was honoured in China with the establishment of the You Jin Research Centre in Qinghong University in 2000. You Jin has been a schoolteacher for nearly 30 years and received Singapore’s Cultural Medallion in 2009. Her essay A Fish in Water was included in Lee Kuan Yew’s 2012 book, My Lifelong Challenge: Singapore’s Bilingual Journey. In the same year, her writing was translated into English for the first time when her 2004 collection of short stories was published as Teaching Cats to Jump Hoops.

IN TIME, OUT OF PLACE


To read this book is to vicariously travel the journeys and tangibly experience the encounters with the author, such as her travels in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, when the region was undergoing dramatic change. Adept at capturing whimsical incidents and weaving them into narratives both compelling and amusing, You Jin brings to her travel writing the same wit and storytelling ability evident in her fiction. Nearly every continent is represented in this volume, beautifully captured with her trademark spirited humour, bringing to life the vastness of the globe we inhabit, as well as more intimate encounters with the people she meets along the way.

Czech Music, a Silent Composition

A Czech Encounter — Like Old Friends

At exactly five in the evening, just as we had planned, the doorbell rang.

Outside the door was a Czech man wearing grey trousers and a T-shirt with the words “The Great Wall of China”, making his sturdy physique all the more remarkable. His eyes were crystal clear and bright as he reached out to shake my hand, his grip firm.

In a very clearly enunciated Beijing dialect, he introduced himself: “I am Ruzicka, Tang Yun Ling’s husband. I’m happy to meet you.” He paused, then said, “Yun Ling is waiting for you downstairs.”

I looked down and saw a small red car with a Chinese woman standing beside it. At that moment, she turned her round face upward, her delicately curved eyes blending perfectly with her smiling expression. The mild warmth of the spring sunlight sat luxuriously on her face, making her features bright and adding depth and brilliance to her smile.

Yun Ling. I knew a lot about her, but this was the first time I had seen “Ms Tang, the teacher” in person.

My husband Risheng and I sat in the back seat of the car whilst Yun Ling drove, speeding us along to her residence in the suburbs.

Outside the car window, the setting sun bravely burned itself out, lighting the sky with fiery colours and turning the Vitava River into a dazzling strip flowing through the centre of the city. Buildings of many different styles towered along both banks of the river — Roman, Gothic, Baroque, Renaissance — each with its extraordinary workmanship and unique charm, revealing the soul of the people with a silent vitality. Everywhere we looked, there were countless ancient structures, their spires stretching gracefully toward the brilliant sky.

So here we were, in Prague. The capital of the Czech Republic had been untouched by the blazing flames of battle during the Second World War, so most of the buildings in the city retained their original styles. At first glance, one feels its subtle grace; a second look reveals its layers of dignity.

Sitting in the front seat, Ruzicka faced the window and pointed out the sights, a fitting sense of pride in his tone, enumerating the historical value of each location. “Oh, that building took a very long time to build, going through several different eras and designed by different architects. So the evidence of both the Roman and Gothic styles it bears is quite singular.”

It was as if we had entered an architecture museum. Risheng and I clicked our tongues in admiration.

The car raced along for another half-hour, and we saw fewer people and cars as we travelled. When we finally stopped and parked the car, we were surrounded only by tall buildings.

“Here we are.” Yun Ling turned off the engine and bustled out of the car. Pointing to a building dozens of storeys high, she said, “My apartment. We’re on the sixth floor.” Curious, I asked, “Do you rent, or did you buy it?”

“When the flat was first planned, we paid half of the money to the government, then when it was completed and we moved in, we continued to pay the other half in monthly installments. When it is paid off, we will be the owners, but we still cannot buy or sell freely. We can only leave it to our children when we die.” Yun Ling offered this general explanation in a regretful tone as we walked. “In Prague, housing is a big issue. My youngest daughter has been married for six years and has two children, but she still cannot manage to buy an apartment. Recently, she was finally allotted a flat, but the location was not ideal.”