

# GriffithReview49

## New Asia Now | volume 2 |

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**GriffithReview49**

**New Asia Now:  
volume 2**

Co-edited by Julianne Schultz and Jane Camens

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Image courtesy of QAGOMA ahead of the 8th Asia Pacific  
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<b>Editor</b>	Julianne Schultz AM FAHA
<b>Co-Editor</b>	Jane Camens
<b>Associate Publisher</b>	Susan Hornbeck
<b>Fiction Editor</b>	Sally Breen
<b>Poetry Editor</b>	Martin Alexander
<b>Editorial Manager</b>	John Tague
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<b>Business Administration</b>	Jane Hunterland
<b>Publication &amp; Cover Design</b>	WH Chong, Text Publishing
<b>Text Publishing</b>	Michael Heyward, Kirsty Wilson, Shalini Kunahlan
<b>Editorial interns</b>	Maria Gunn, Richard Newman, Jia Xin Loh
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GRIFFITH REVIEW  
South Bank Campus, Griffith University  
PO Box 3370, South Brisbane QLD 4101 Australia  
Ph +617 3735 3071 Fax +617 3735 3272  
[griffithreview@griffith.edu.au](mailto:griffithreview@griffith.edu.au) [griffithreview.com](http://griffithreview.com)

TEXT PUBLISHING  
Swann House, 22 William St, Melbourne VIC 3000 Australia  
Ph +613 8610 4500 Fax +613 9629 8621  
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## ESSAY

# What happened to 'old Asia'?

Oh yeah, I killed it

Kirril Shields

ON THE MONGOLIAN steppe roams a dog with the unfortunate name of 'Rabies'. Some years ago, while I was working as a journalist in Mongolia's capital city, Ulaanbaatar, Rabies decided to adopt me. Then a scrawny little puppy, she followed me back to my apartment and climbed the five storeys to the front door. Eventually I had to leave the country and she now lives with Mongolian herders, but for two years Rabies called my apartment home. It seems somewhat ridiculous to suggest this animal capable of making such a conscious decision, but among the many remarkable stories to come out of Mongolia, one is of Ulaanbaatar's street dogs.

Rabies has two brown dots above her eyes. These are a trait of the traditional Mongolian dog, a breed a vet would call a Tibetan–Mongolian mastiff that is more commonly referred to as the 'four-eyed dog'. You find these dots on many dogs around the world, however their origin is the Mongolian grasslands as these animals are shepherds, trained specifically to ward off wolves and bears. The two brown spots make it appear as if the dog has its eyes open even as it sleeps. Wolves and bears have to be wary of encroaching on the grazing sheep as these dogs, when awake, are viciously loyal.

So Rabies is one-part Mongolian shepherding dog, but her origins are also German, and there is a noticeable streak of Alsatian in her. The other half of her lineage is made up of German-bred Alsatians taken by the Russian army as they defeated Nazi forces during the Second World War. Ironically, these German dogs, initially trained to patrol Nazi concentration camps, were re-trained by the Russians to guard German prisoners of war. A great swathe of German prisoners were forced to build or repair sections of the

trans-Mongolian railway, and Alsatians accompanied this corpus of slave labour. When the Russians decided their German workforce had served its purpose they executed them en masse, and that's who lie, quite well preserved, just under the sands of the Gobi. Today, if you go searching, you can find human remains and tattered uniforms preserved just beneath the surface of the Gobi Desert – the mass grave of tens of thousands of former German *Wermacht* and SS.

For whatever reason, the Russians did not shoot the dogs; instead, they transported them to Ulaanbaatar, and when the Soviet soldiers returned to their homes in places such as Moscow or Ekaterinburg, the dogs were left to wander the Mongolian streets. Given her lineage, it is little wonder Rabies would always impress me with her street acumen and determination.

The story of the street dogs is just one exotic and curious anecdote among the many to be found in Mongolia: there are people smugglers, former high-ranking Nazis, reindeer herders, dancing bear trainers, dinosaur discoveries and Soviet war monuments – this list of the potential for opportunity and experiences goes on. Little did I realise that when Rabies came looking for a home, her story would lead me to a sandy grave of mummified skin and bleached human bones. When I moved to Mongolia, however, this was the very thing I had hoped for – a taste of the unusual and the exotic.

Many other people who travel to Mongolia seek a country that has largely retained its exoticism...this is 'old Asia'. Still offering glimpses of a nomadic existence, with stories of adventure akin to something from *Indiana Jones*, Mongolia is the chance to revisit a past in the present. The country provides a slither of insight into a world unsullied by capitalism that contains, among other things, an abundance of shamans and unrenovated houses with original Soviet architecture. The place remains 'exotic' in every Western sense of the word; there is still just enough Mongolian heritage to attract a growing tourist industry.

As a child, I was privileged to visit a number of other Asian nations, and even back then it was the unusual or the exotic that made my pulse quicken. The snake charmers who once resided outside of Singapore's Tiger Balm Gardens, for example, or the chance to buy an ornamented human skull on a Hong Kong street (not surprisingly, Australian Customs confiscated this). Now a grown man, the more I fly to Asia the more I question where this



exoticism – the indigenous cultural authenticity – has gone. Is there anything left to discover in Asian nations, or has old Asia been trampled by new Asia? And what exactly is this 'New Asia' anyway?

DUE TO RABIES' decision to live in my apartment, she was spayed, immunised, taught to walk on a leash and had to eat from a bowl. She even learnt to shake her paw. I Anglicised her, both to her benefit and to her detriment. Now she'll never catch some horrid canine disease, nor have to fend for herself on the streets. However, there are downsides to her Westernisation. She can't have puppies, and she is no longer free to move about the world as she once did. I gave Rabies her health, and she provided me with a glimpse of the exoticism I sought as a tourist...and I'm still telling stories about her.

This symbiosis, I think, is representative of New Asia, and here I hope you don't take offence at 'Asia' being drawn as a single entity, which it's not. What I mean to suggest is that there are advantages and disadvantages to this redrawing or rediscovering of Asia, this remoulding of what might be considered archetypal, stereotypical or even romanticised versions of those Asian countries that many tourists seek. New Asia is a cross-cultural pollination. For me, as an Anglo male, what I miss when I travel to places such as Hong Kong are the extremities.

One of the advantages of New Asia is that I now find Asia at my own front door. As a child, I had to fly with my family to distant countries to experience Asian tastes and faces, whereas now a bicycle ride allows me the same kind of interaction. In this New Asia I am tourist and native alike. New Asia is me and my peers and colleagues, both Anglo and Asian, experiencing a slightly watered-down version of the Asia I seek as a tourist, but this new version feels a more natural and fruitful cultural exchange.

Currently I live in the Australian city of Brisbane, a sprawl of suburbs on the eastern coast of the continent, about one thousand kilometres north of Sydney. In my day-to-day commuting about the city I encounter a great many people who are Asian, and for some years I've noticed a growing influx of Asian residents in Brisbane; there are even one or two suburbs now, such as Sunnybank and Darra, which are largely populated by people of Asian origin. Whether these populations are Australian and of Asian background, or Asian and just passing through the city, Brisbane is beginning to resemble a New Asian city.

Interestingly, this is a conscious town planning and governmental decision, for the city aims to be ‘Asianesque’ in character. What this actually means to those bureaucrats attempting to define the term ‘Asian’ would be interesting to find out, but the city is in the midst of developing high-rise apartments to replicate Asian living conditions. With this building spree comes Asian grocers and restaurants. Then there are the bubble-tea vendors, exhibits such as the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at Brisbane’s Gallery of Modern Art, and the annual Asia Pacific Film Festival and Asia Pacific Screen Awards. It seems as if Brisbane is slowly developing into the Asian city that the council and government are hoping it becomes.

THIS ‘ASIANISATION’ IS by no means a bad thing, for any change to the city’s dominant Anglo hegemony means the region develops intellectually and culturally. I find that I’m no longer looking at Asia from afar, but feel I’m becoming Asian (or Asianised) myself. I take for granted Chinese or Thai ingredients on supermarket shelves; I think nothing of buying sushi for lunch; my tastebuds hunger for Korean meals; and I walk among the Asian-influenced art exhibits and no longer regard the content unusual. The Anglo population around me transforms accordingly due to this migratory osmosis, and talk of manga, Korean pop, Japanese architecture and wagyu beef has become the norm among the non-Asian population.

There are a plethora of advantages when living in this New Asia but, just like the friendship formed between Rabies and myself, there are also disadvantages. Not to Brisbane or Australia, I don’t believe, but to Asia itself. First, while there may be better opportunities to study in places like Brisbane, and better living conditions may exist (this list of upsides goes on), Australia and its dominant social and cultural discourse taint Asian culture.

Around the time Rabies came to call my apartment home, an influx of small rodent-like dogs began appearing in the handbags of Mongolian people. This Hollywood trend meant that the traditional ‘four-eyed dog’ was no longer given cultural status and many of these animals were either released onto the streets to fend for themselves, or were socially relegated of secondary importance where once they were venerated. Here, Western trends – the small handbag pooch in this particular case – affected one aspect of Mongolian culture within a relatively short time frame.

This cultural assimilation, some would suggest, is the natural offspring of globalisation and is amply discussed under academic banners such as 'modernisation and Asia' or 'Westernisation and Asia'. But there's a second downside I wish to highlight, of which discussion is not so abundant even though it directly relates to ideas of Westernisation and cultural homogeneity. It relates to the question of why this New Asia is losing its distinctiveness, those unique cultural ingredients that tourists like me seek when they travel to Asia. Again, this is partially derived from Anglo-American cultural influence, yet, ironically, this is also due to the yearning of tourists such as myself. The more we seek 'the exotic', the more we destroy it.

I was lucky enough to live for a month with the Tsaatan, a community of people who herd reindeer up on the Russian–Mongolian border. It's a bloody long horseback ride to find these nomads, but when you eventually come across their camps you sleep in a yurt and drink salted reindeer milk, and, if you so choose, you can hunt for a bear. I was initially amazed at this Tsaatan lifestyle, thrilled that people are still living by age-old tradition, and in many aspects of day-to-day life the Tsaatan exist as they had for hundreds of years, possibly thousands. And yet, I later discovered that much of what I experienced was for my own benefit. The illusion of the exotic was dashed one afternoon when a group of Tsaatan and myself settled in to watch the Australian television show *Home and Away* via a huge satellite dish. Then there was the proliferation of Mars Bars, vodka drinking (introduced by Stalin during World War II to raise war revenue), modern hunting weapons, sleeping bags and an open admission by the younger Tsaatan population that the tourist season provided enough money to live comfortably in the city in the 'off season'.

What I had wanted to experience in that far-flung region of Mongolia was, to a degree, a figment of my own romantic notions of nomadic life. Due to that, the business-savvy Tsaatan heightened their cultural performance; I was watching a breathing museum and, as with all museums, this exhibit was curated. I came to the realisation that the Asian exotic, as far as I knew of it as a white Western male, or had read of it, or experienced it as a child, no longer existed. In fact, the exotic was mere artifice – viewing an Australian sitcom in a yurt (while enjoying American chocolate and Italian coffee) made it evident that the globalised world reduces everything to status quo, even for those who are most removed from mainstream influences such as the Tsaatan.

In Europe, this form of curated cultural expression, similar to that which I experienced while staying with the reindeer herders, became apparent after the formation of the European Union. Enclaves of people from traditionally conservative provinces in Europe, such as Bavaria, were so scared of losing their ethnic and cultural uniqueness that their cultural activities became over-the-top, hyperbolised...too many lederhosen and much too much schnapps.

Our determination as affluent Westerners to find the last remnant of the 'unique' or the authentic is, therefore (though not wholly), responsible for killing off the old Asia. Given the current Western fascination with countries such as Kazakhstan, it will be interesting to see how long these regions remain alluring to the modern middle-class adventurer. What Westerners like myself feel when we go in search of exoticism is now mostly disappointment, and this all our own doing. On a recent trip to Thailand, my partner and I came across a community of the Karen people, those Burmese refugees whose females wrap the golden rings around their necks. We paid our entrance fee to their settlement, wandered up and down an established tourist alley, bought a couple of scarves that the women had woven and, when satisfied that we'd experienced something from *National Geographic*, we drove away in our rented car. We both reflected on this experience with an odd mixture of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. We thought that we had witnessed something unique, but conversely, there was a sense of exploitation on both sides.

Similarly, in Beijing some years back, I was impressed with the city's *hutongs* – those ancient districts with narrow streets and alleys. Nowadays there are still some intact, although in Beijing many have been demolished. Of those that remain, the majority are tourist destinations. Walking from ceramic shop to antique shop to Starbucks is not really the experience I was expecting and again I was disappointed, for while these districts are a glimpse of old Asia they felt more like an exhibit in a museum.

I'm being somewhat farfetched in suggesting that there's nothing in Asia worth seeing if the 'exotic' is hard to locate, for even a wander through Tokyo's Shibuya ward, or through the restored Dutch architecture in Jakarta's Kota district, inspires the imagination. These places are not so unknown, and much of what you find even in the little off-streets will be familiar, but stimulating culturally and aesthetically nonetheless.

Brisbane, by contrast, as an ever-evolving city, is doing the opposite – purposefully shaping itself into a city that Asians may wish it to be. The city is appealing to an Asian market, hoping to lure in students and business opportunities from all over the Asiatic world. In doing so, Brisbane is building to the requirements of a New Asia and offering much to show that the city is as exciting as a trip to, let's say, the southern islands of Japan. From what I've experienced of it, New Asia promises the familiar but never to the point that it feels completely known. A nice balance, no better exemplified than a recent drive to the Brisbane suburb of Darra. Here, the Vietnamese community have lived for some generations. Similar to Cabramatta in Sydney, if you desire a taste of New Asia then wander through these suburbs. There are fish markets, Asian fruit, hanging ducks, odd meat cuts and exciting smells that float from the various cafés and eateries, and these are located beside a Woolworths and a bakery selling lamingtons and meat pies.

I felt at home in Darra, but also at a distance. A nice distance, an exotic distance. New Asia, I'd argue, is that ability to feel at home in a place that is not quite home. It means that racial and cultural differences are gradually dissipating and, in their place, understanding arises. We force difference on people when we go traipsing through countries as tourists. We pay people to be different from us, and when it feels a little too common, we feel ripped off. Well, Brisbane and its role in forging or partaking in New Asia is showing me that this rebranding of the exotic is not about distance, but about cultural exchanges on footpaths and in parks, in local cafés and at down-the-road food outlets, in nearby clothing shops and in regional musical performances, in...

Now, did I ever tell you about the singing eunuch in Shanghai who attempted to woo me with a rendition of 'You Are My Sunshine'?

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Kirril Shields was the English-language editor of Mongolia's *UB Post* (2007–09), and has written for many other publications, much in the field of architecture and design. He teaches literature and communication at the University of Queensland and the University of Southern Queensland.

FICTION

# OF DURIANS AND VIPERS

DAMYANTI BISWAS

BLACK AND YELLOW pit vipers lazed in durian trees, sleepy and fat under the Penang sun. Visitors to Mr Henderson's plantation in Balik Pulau did not notice them at first, busy defending the split-open durians from the flies swarming their tables. Mr Henderson watched the tourists as they jabbered like magpies. Their eyes shone in lust for the creamy insides of the fruit, snakes the last things on their greedy little minds.

Into the open cartons under their tables they tossed the hollowed-out, spiky durian corpses and the plastic glasses from which they had just downed nutmeg juice. Over the years, Mr Henderson's nose had so grown used to the cloying durian and the spice of nutmeg that he didn't notice when they mingled with the plantation smell of damp, rain and joss sticks. But today the air seemed drugged by the smells rising from the courtyard. Mr Henderson took in a deep breath and decided to rest his legs. The chair on the balcony creaked under his weight, and he stretched his long legs far out across the wooden balustrade.

Inside, the old pendulum clock struck eleven. Its gong rang through the corridors of the wood-and-brick Kampong house, rose up against the shaded eaves, shivered against the doors of the rooms upstairs, then fell down towards the open kitchen. It mingled with the smoke that rose from large covered pots heating over a wood fire and came back to haunt Mr Henderson again. He hated that clock, a wedding gift from his father-in-law. But his wife liked it and he'd let it stay.

His head drooped in the wake of the ringing and the sunlight melted into an orange haze behind his shut eyelids. No matter that he'd now lived longer in Penang than in Ottawa – the daily tropical sun still felt like a personal blessing. He soaked it up and felt sleep crawl up over him. He needed to lie down, get an hour or so of uninterrupted shut-eye. But he wouldn't give in to it, not just yet.

'You'll fall sick like this, you know,' Dr Chong had warned him when he'd gone to collect the results of the last scan. 'Let the others take care of her once in a while. Your body needs its rest.'

That was last week. He had thought about it – Lord knows he'd pictured taking a night off. He would let his body sink into the mattress in the guest room, forget about his bedroom with its tubes, oxygen mask and cylinders, the bird-like body of his wife caught between them as she lay on their four-poster marital bed.

The bed looked stark minus its pale blue curtains. His wife had bought the fabric on an eventful trip visiting his folks in Canada and wanted the curtains back, but Dr Chong would have none of it. 'At this stage, all we can give her is palliative care. Infections will only make matters worse, trust me,' he said.

Every once in a while, like now, Mr Henderson would close his eyes and make believe that his wife did not lie in that bed. She walked about instead, saw to the filling of the water troughs, made sure that stakes stood in place to support the branches bent with the weight of durian, supervised the serving of tea to the workers, asked the maids to wring the laundry dry before hanging it out on the lines. Or perhaps she paced the wooden floors in her printed cloth slippers, flitting from room to room, re-lighting the joss-sticks that burned in a steady funnel of smoke in honour of Chor Soo Kong, so the snakes would stay content and not strike the householders.

Not that the yellow-and-black temple vipers had enough venom to kill. He'd done his research before he decided to settle down on a plantation thick with them. Through the years of their marriage, his wife had tried to keep the snakes out of places where they might alarm him. She had put nets on the windows, got all the nooks and crannies of the house swept out each day without fail. Getting rid of



the snakes would bring bad luck and a deluge of pests, so she'd tried to make a home where her husband and the snakes could co-exist. During the last year though, she had begun to slip up. She fell asleep at odd hours, didn't remember to chase the maid about the sweeping, forgot to call Connie.

CONNIE, THEIR DAUGHTER had taken on more and more to stop the place falling apart. She spent all her weekends at home. Even now, as he opened his eyes to a series of sudden half-shrieks, she stood down below, smiling, reassuring the tourists. She informed the group of soft-spoken but greedy-eyed Thais, and the Singaporeans stiff with their money, that the vipers didn't care to come down from the trees. She had grown up on the plantation, she declared, pointing to her own muscled Chinese-Canadian sun-browned arms. Look how hale *she* was.

The middle-aged men in the group smirked and nodded at the sixteen-year-old. Connie had inherited her mother's doll-like beauty and the height and vigour of her father. He would have to tell her to play it down. A few months ago, her mother would have told her. He waved to Connie when she looked up, and she waved back. The tourists stepped back from her. There, that had done it, for now. If he didn't need their money for his wife's treatment, Mr Henderson wouldn't have suffered the tourists on his plantation, not for an instant.

The foodie gang stood about waiting in what shade they could find – they must have read the glowing reports of this year's durian crop. The babies wailed in the heat while their mothers tried to shush them. The older women ogled the spread of *lipan* and *kulit hijau* durians at the table and glared their impatience at folks already gorging on the creamy flesh. He'd never figured out its appeal. Jackfruit had better flavour and smelled so much better.

He laid his head back. If he could put a price on a day like this, how much would it cost him? He longed to buy a single day, lay it out, pat its soft underbelly under his fingers, do nothing more than idle about, take a walk or two, and never, never see a doctor or injection or bedpan. How many days like that had he let slip, days of hugging his wife when she least expected it or driving Connie and the dogs to

the beach for a day under the sun? He had let such days fall through his fingers and disappear, not giving them the weight of memories so they could stand, each separate from the other. Instead, they had ended up in the same, sandy twilight.

‘Your wife is asking for you.’

The night nurse stepped out into the sun of the balcony, her hair glinting red. Last night that hair had felt rough between his fingers. The first time he had betrayed his marriage in two decades, he had to do it with this woman, whose henna-dyed hair made him cringe.

THE DAY HE had touched his wife for the first time, her hair shone like spun silk. He’d reached out to caress a lock, making her shiver against the wall of the abandoned temple where they’d met. She, a Chinese plantation owner’s daughter, had let a man touch her before marriage, a white man at that – had risked life and limb, all for him. It felt like some other man had lived that life. He had only ever received a summons like this one, today. His wife’s hair these days felt like autumn grass, mowed by a boy in a rush.

He could hear her from the corridor. She had reduced his name to a one-word prayer; she said *Rick*, then paused, then *Rick* and *Rick* and *Rick*, till he stood by her side. Richard, he wanted to tell her, *Ree... chard*, say it like you used to say it in those days when I met you at that temple, when no one knew about us. Not even us.

He followed the nurse’s tight-skirted butt into the bedroom. He hadn’t seen her in daylight before. He wanted to send the woman off on an errand, any excuse not to see her dark, pockmarked face with its why-won’t-she-die-and-be-done-with-it-already smile. He couldn’t think of a job though, and the elderly Chinese nurse who worked the day shift hadn’t shown up yet. Strange, because that one came on time, and had dirty looks to spare for her Indian colleague.

‘Where you go, Rick?’

This, between gulps from the oxygen mask, a sentence so slurred he wouldn’t have got it had he not known exactly what his wife wanted to say. He held his breath and stood still whenever she talked, because she got upset if he didn’t obey her straightaway and her breath grew

laboured. The last time he'd rushed her to the hospital, unconscious and un-breathing, she suffered brain damage. The stutter came with her when she returned.

'Another trip like this one,' Dr Chong had tried to look him straight in the eye, 'we cannot bring her back *one*.'

Mr Henderson didn't want to think of Dr Chong and his look, but faced with his wife's hollowed-out cheek and sunken eyes, he thought of the cancer in her blood, emptying her inside out, like a gleeful tourist working on a durian.

'I was here all the time.'

Mr Henderson walked over and, moving his wife's scarf aside, blew air on her bare head, feeling the curves and dents of her scalp under his fingers. She liked this, begged him to keep going, for hours. Once he stopped, she forgot he'd done it and accused him of neglect. That's how they found out, because of her forgetting. At first they thought it was Alzheimer's. But that was only at first.

'The brain not getting enough blood *lah*,' Dr Chong had explained to Mr Henderson, 'she lucky to be fit as she is till now. Surprising. Soon, she'll forget what she had for lunch. Sure will happen soon, cannot help *one*.'

Good thing, in a way. Maybe his wife had heard the nurse gasp in the anteroom last night and the sound he'd made towards the end, the sob-groan that escaped him no matter how hard he'd clamped down his teeth. But if his wife had heard, she'd forgotten about it. The nurse stood folding a few sheets beside the cupboard, all her hair and pins and clothes in place now.

'Want to...sit up.'

His wife raised her arm, wrinkled like a dried tree branch, covered with roundish dark patches. Her palm felt like worn, distressed leather. He raised her up while the nurse fluffed the pillows. A thousand, a hundred thousand times a day she wanted to sit up, move, lie down, turn to one side, then the other.

'There's fluid in her lungs, so she cannot rest, but draining it will pain more.' Dr Chong had taken Mr Henderson aside a few weeks ago at the hospital. 'You want to admit her?'

Later, his wife had shaken her head. 'No need. Waste money for what?'

To make it easier, he wanted to tell her. For you and for us. How long do you think I can keep this up? That's when he'd asked Dr Chong for nurses. His wife had pursed up her lips and closed her eyes the minute she saw the tall night nurse whose white uniform did nothing to hide her curves. After that, his wife had asked to be shifted and moved more often. She would groan loud enough to bring the kitchen maids upstairs if the Indian nurse tried to touch her, so he had to be around.

He set up a single bed beside the four-poster, so he could lie down between the times his wife needed him. Instead of her, he could have been the one on the four-poster, lungs bursting with fluid, while she employed a stud of a male nurse to take care of him.

His wife had made the plantation business thrive, not him. She had had new varietals planted, bought more land. He saw to the accounts, applied for loans and arranged for the plantation to feature on local durian tours. But to this day, he didn't organise the selling, the harvesting or the loading of trucks. He left the splitting open of durians, one of the simpler plantation tasks, to those who knew better. Everyone in the house knew better, even Connie, whose laughter he could hear rising in the late morning air. He'd better have that chat with her before she got herself into trouble.

'It hurts.'

His wife whimpered, like she did every day about this time. The nurse connected a pack and a tube to the cannula on his wife's arm. As the clear liquid dripped through the tube, his wife's eyes closed and he removed the oxygen mask. She could breathe without it most of the time, but it calmed her, so Dr Chong said she could wear one while awake. She would sleep through the rest of the day, her chin digging into her collarbone. He or the day nurse would shake her awake for the little chicken porridge or vegetable soup that passed her lips for lunch or dinner.

She woke up, again on cue, past midnight, when the night nurse had fallen asleep in the anteroom and he on his bed. She cried

*Rickrickrick* and when he reached her, she said she had to go. Some days he woke the nurse and then his wife would say she was fine, no need. At other times he fetched the bedpan and positioned her on it. Once she'd finished, he wiped clean her bony little butt and flushed what little she deposited in the bedpan. The night nurse never insisted on cleaning up.

AFTER WAITING ANOTHER half hour on her chair this morning, eyes closed, the night nurse asked permission to leave. The day nurse still hadn't shown up, which meant he couldn't relax on the balcony with his usual lunch of a sandwich and cold beer. He let the nurse leave and walked out to the balcony. He watched as Connie continued to serve durians to busloads of tourists thronging the large plantation gates.

He wanted to set a nest of vipers on them, the lazy, vacationing devils, with nothing better to do than chase after durians on a weekday morning. No consideration for a girl's lunch hour. He waved at her again from the balcony and she smiled at him. What would he do once the summer vacations wound up and she headed back to Georgetown? He would deal with it best he could, no point worrying about it. His wife had served durians to tourists all her life and look where that got her. Connie would find a man in the city, far away from durians, plantations, vipers.

Dazzled by the sun, his eyes couldn't make out his wife for a second when he stepped back into the bedroom. Then her body swam into focus, pale head lolling on the white pillows. Drool trailed her lips. He wiped it up and stood watching her, leaning on the bedpost near her head. He felt his eyelids close, but he couldn't afford to nod off. What if she woke up and needed the oxygen mask or some water? She might call him, grow hoarse and angry, push at the tubes, try and reach for the bedside table to overturn a glass to wake him up. Unable to reach the table, she might stretch up for the oxygen mask hanging over her head. What if she didn't make it? He would wake up to see her face sagging on her breast, not breathing.

He walked back to his bed, switched on the lamp and grabbed the newspaper. Having scanned the headlines, he furled open the paper and

stopped cold, because across his feet now hidden from view, he felt an unhurried slithering. He wanted to jump up, but controlled himself. Years of living around snakes had taught him that sudden movements around these reptiles didn't end well. He waited for it to cross over to the floor, but the dry, sinewy, lightly-ribbed pressure didn't stop. His stomach clenched. He tried to guess the size and species he had to deal with. A cobra perhaps, but not the way it kept crawling across his feet, metre after metre, with no end, fat and heavy. A python?

He folded his newspaper slow and easy, inched it up so he could see his feet, then wished he hadn't.

The floor had turned into a roiling pattern of black and yellow. Vipers big and small crawled towards the bed where his wife lay, covering everything in their path in a rustling carpet of muscles and scales. He squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them, not a whisper, no pointed head, no chequered pattern, just the shiny wooden floor.

So simple. Just one of them in bed with her. A random flick of her scrawny hand, a flailing of the tubes, and it would strike. Dr Chong would say, 'She didn't have a chance you know, already so weak. Did you see it? I used to tell her be careful. But this bugger reduced her suffering *lah*. What to do? Sometimes is better this way.'

Outside, the clamour of the tourists had died down, along with the light from the windows. The maids had forgotten his lunch. The one who used to remind them lay in bed before him, breathing deep, her pigeon chest rising and falling under the fumes of sedation.

He stood up, rumpling his hand on his balding head. His stomach growled its protest. Casting one last glance at the bed, he ambled downstairs to fix himself a sandwich. Behind him in the semi-dark, a black and yellow speckled band rose up on the tube that fed her oxygen mask. Mrs Henderson stayed asleep.

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Damyanti Biswas is an experienced freelance writer for non-fiction magazines. An Indian who currently calls Singapore home, she tinkers around with people, culture and countries in her stories, trying to figure out what makes them tick. She has published a bunch of short stories in the US, UK, Singapore, India and Malaysia, and is busy tinkering with the people in her first novel.

## ESSAY

# Uniquely unique, with reason

Inside the minds of China's future elites

Merriden Varrall

WITH CHINA'S RISE, understanding what the country's political elite thinks is no longer a matter that concerns just China or China scholars. Chinese students at the China Foreign Affairs University form a key talent pool for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Their attitudes, ideas and convictions will likely have an impact on the behaviour of Chinese foreign affairs diplomats. Teaching at CFAU from 2009–10, I gained insights into how students at the university are taught, not only through the subjects they study but also through the way their everyday lives are organised, to identify as 'citizens of the Chinese nation', to quote one of the students.

The students I came into contact with shared a strong conviction that Chinese culture is 'uniquely unique', that being Chinese is immutable and that this 'Chineseness' fundamentally underpins China's international behaviour.

I noted three particularly powerful themes central to their notions of how Chinese identity shaped China's role in the world. First, my students believed without question that China would resume its role as the great country it had been before its natural path was disrupted by the Opium Wars and a 'century of humiliation' starting in 1840. The second deeply held belief was that Chinese people and the Chinese nation-state are part of the same family, rather than existing in opposition, as my students understood was the case in the West. They felt that the relationship between the people and the Chinese state shaped China's views of non-interference and broader ideals of social harmony in the international arena. The third theme was obligation



and moral responsibility: who was obliged to whom and under what circumstances. This was based on an understanding that social relations in China are not linear as in the West, but built on concentric circles. Together, these themes suggested a narrative around how China should fulfil its role as a responsible stakeholder on the world stage.

Unlike most major Chinese universities, the CFAU is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), not the Ministry of Education. Until a few decades ago, only students from CFAU could become foreign diplomats. During my first semester I taught a class on culture and context in foreign policy and, in the second semester, a class on assistance and development. My classes were based on student presentations of reading material, followed by guided discussion. I taught six classes of twenty to thirty third- and fourth-year students across three majors: international law, international economics and trade, diplomacy, and one special class of external students who had obtained a degree elsewhere.

I met Buddy (his name, like the names of all the students I mention, is a pseudonym reflecting his self-selected English name) when he was a junior student. Buddy had come to Beijing from his hometown in south-east China to study diplomacy, as he wanted a career in the Chinese foreign service. He seemed just the right type of young man likely to be among the few graduates selected for the ministry. He was focused, diligent, hardworking and had firm career goals. He pursued every opportunity to extend himself in fields related to working with foreigners or learning about foreign relations, both for his own satisfaction as much as for his résumé.

Buddy was committed to Chinese tradition, particularly Confucianism. He was very clear that in his view Confucianism underpinned contemporary Chinese life as well as China's behaviour in the international sphere. Buddy was also a big fan of Chinese traditional medicine, particularly acupuncture. He dreamt of one day travelling the world with his mother, an acupuncturist, to treat great sports stars whose ailments might be anything from a sprained ankle to cancer. He was the lead guitarist and singer in a rock band, which had done well in several big competitions, and he enjoyed listening to live bands with his friends and girlfriend. He was also a keen basketball player. He was in essence a good example of the modern young Chinese man.

Some of my other students told me that, like Buddy, they had ‘a burning goal’ to join the foreign ministry when they applied for university. However, Buddy worked harder, both in class and in extracurricular activities. He was regularly involved in meeting and hosting visiting foreign dignitaries, including African diplomats and American university professors. In his final (fourth) year at university, Buddy sat the extremely competitive public service entrance exam. He was not offered a position in the ministry. He did get a job, though, in an affiliated organisation dedicated to people-to-people diplomacy. After several weeks of compulsory military training, Buddy began work arranging and hosting forums and visits by foreign dignitaries.

OTHER STUDENTS WERE not so fortunate. Buddy’s classmate Blue, a bright pupil at the top of the class with a reputation for earnestness, diligence and a conservative stance, did not pass the public service examination despite two attempts. Blue was always quietly confident in his own abilities and that his views were ultimately correct. Blue firmly believed that Chinese foreign policy, like the rest of contemporary Chinese culture, was built on Confucianism, although a version of Confucianism that had ‘adjusted to fit the modern era’. He, like most of his classmates, presumed he would be a natural candidate for the MFA. However, it seemed that Blue’s academic abilities and conservative beliefs were not considered appropriate for the diplomatic corps. Blue went on to take a job helping Chinese students with their applications for overseas universities.

I also taught several students like Cello, a young woman in the international economics major, who said from the outset that she had no desire to work for the government. She wanted to travel the world and write newspaper columns and magazine articles. Cello was a hard-working, analytical, curious student, who stood out from her peers for her unconventional and sometimes controversial comments in class, such as her criticism of the Chinese government’s role in censoring the media. She asked me questions in breaks and after class, saying she felt she could get into trouble if she asked in front of her classmates. She often asked for advice on what to read on topics such as political philosophy. She felt that she couldn’t ask for that information from her classmates or other teachers.

Cello considered herself as ‘rather unsatisfied’ with university life at the CFAU, saying it was ‘so small and so political’, the atmosphere ‘not very open’ and somewhat ‘pure and conservative and not very tolerant’. A number of students like Cello said they wished life at CFAU was ‘more lively, like at Peking University, where students participated in all kinds of different activities’. It was Cello who pointed out what I was starting to observe myself, that students at CFAU were expected to be citizens of the nation first, above all else.

Like Cello, Primo was intelligent, insightful and analytical, and had no desire to work for government. From a small village in Heilongjiang province, next to the river that delineates the border between China and Russia, Primo was enrolled in the international law major. When he first came into the classroom at the start of the semester, he reacted with considerable shock at how I had moved the chairs and desks from their usual straight rows into a circle. He asked, hesitantly, whether we were going to do this every week and seemed disappointed when I said yes. He cheered up later, however, saying he was happy as long as they would not have to ‘recite socialist theory’, or indeed ‘recite anything at all’. Primo had originally chosen ‘Stanley’ as his English name, but subsequently decided it was too old fashioned and changed it to something ‘more simple and modern’.

At the same time as wanting to project himself as modern, Primo, like almost all my students, was certain that Chinese culture was too ancient and too deeply ingrained for any Chinese person to ever become fully Westernised. Primo also felt that ‘Western-style democracy’ would not be suitable for China in the current period, or for a long time to come, and that a model of ‘Confucian government by gentlemen’ would be more appropriate.

There were other students whose primary concerns were simply about graduating and getting a good, comfortable job so they could get married, have a child (or two) and live in financial security and comfort. This sometimes translated to wanting a job in government, but based on lifelong job security rather than a ‘burning goal’ to pursue a career in the ministry.

Ricky, for example, a Beijing local in the international economics major, said he had ‘few dreams’ apart from wanting to ‘live a happy life’ and had no particular career ambitions. Ricky was not unlike a significant number

of my students who had enrolled in CFAU for reasons other than a desire to forge a career in the MFA. These students' views provided a foil to ambitious enthusiasts like Blue and Buddy, as well as to the views of the more cynical, like Cello and Primo.

SCHOOLS SOCIALISE STUDENTS – they are institutions well known for creating appropriate citizens. The CFAU taught not only the academic curriculum, but also organisational and life skills considered a requirement for students to be professional and competitive in the job market. In Chinese universities, however, students are selected on the basis of their already demonstrated ability to abide by social rules – otherwise they would not have been able to pass the series of stressful examinations that allow them to enrol. CFAU students are further immersed in appropriate behaviour and attitude for Chinese foreign affairs. The university does this not only through explicit training, but also in the way it structures students' use of time and space.

As a result of the 'patriotic education campaign' unremittingly promoted after the Tiananmen incident in 1989, my students were learning the appropriate ways of understanding narratives of time and Chinese history, suitable constructions of self and other, and the correct relationships between individuals and power. Frank Pieke writes in *The Good Communist* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) how cadre training at Party schools in China takes place in an 'anti-structural' environment, separated from normal life, to facilitate forgetting about 'their position, rank and normal obligations and privileges of family and work'. In a similar way, living and studying at CFAU produced citizens who see it as *for their own good* to align themselves politically, morally and socially with the Chinese national identity and who, therefore, do so *by their own will*. In my students' 'realm of the undisputed', placing primary loyalty with the Chinese nation-state was considered in their own best interests, so they did it without further thought.

My students understood that all states act on the basis of their own individual and immutable cultural characteristics. They believed in the unquestionable truth that China had been one of the world's greatest nations until Western powers subjugated it. And they were in no doubt that China's

tradition as a peace-loving country would continue to provide the model for its behaviour in the future. They felt that because China had suffered at the hands of the West in the past, it would never interfere in the sovereignty of other countries now or in the future. They understood China's commitment to principles of territorial integrity and national sovereignty as deriving from past experiences. It was *indisputable*, in their view, that China should, and would, resume its former, rightful position on the world stage.

The idea that in the past China had never acted in anything but a peaceful way on the world stage arose often in essays and class discussions. For example, in her mid-semester essay, Melanie wrote:

Historically, China has always had a focus on peace. In the prosperous Western Han dynasty, they followed pro-peace policies. During the Tang period, Princess Wencheng, not the army, was sent to Tibet. In the Ming dynasty empire, Zheng He's fleets made seven ocean voyages, not bringing aggression but the gift of great power and dignity. The only exception to this peacefulness was the ruling Mongolian Yuan regime. The bloody killing and conquering shocked Europe, but history has proven that such a regime in China is bound to be short-lived – the Mongolian regime only survived for ninety-seven years before it was overthrown.

Like Melanie, many students used the story of fifteenth-century sailor Zheng He to illustrate how the Chinese people are, and have always been, harmonious and peace-loving and have never instigated conflict. Most students understood that Zheng He only ever used his maritime power for diplomacy and trade, and never for invading territory. As another student explained:

As the most powerful country in the world at that time, China did not bring cannons or colonisation, but friendliness to Africa. Accordingly, they did not bring back gold or slaves but giraffe as a symbol of auspice. It is just the same today whenever there is a problem.

By drawing on the few historical stories available to them when discussing issues of international relations, students reinforced their own and their peers' existing convictions that Chinese culture had always been and would therefore always be peace-loving.

The trope of China's glorious past was fundamental to students' predictions of how it would behave in the international system in the future. Overall, the expectation was that China would resume its former position in the global order and 'go back to where every country respects us'. As Charity explained:

Because China has always pursued an independent foreign policy of peace, China hopes that we can have a long-term peaceful co-existence with other countries. And we want to get a peaceful and stable international environment. Our country's implementation of this policy is solemn, sincere and will not change in the long term, because it conforms to Chinese people's fundamental beliefs. Peace-loving Chinese people abhor aggression very much and will never impose such suffering on others.

The students I taught were adamant that while China certainly wanted greater respect in international relations, China 'did not want to become number one', and in no way posed any sort of threat to the international system. Traditional Chinese culture explained how any Chinese shows of strength were no more than demonstrations of renewed dignity. When one student posed the hypothetical question of whether the recent increase in military expenditure may have been motivated by a desire for China to be a strong military power with genuine deterrent capabilities, her classmates at once argued that the issue at stake was actually one of 'dignity and face saving'. Following the same line of argument, Charity wrote an essay about the US–India military exercise conducted just after the sixtieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China in October 2009. The anniversary celebrations were an impressive demonstration of China's wealth and power, and brought many Chinese people to tears of emotion. More than a hundred thousand people participated in the country's largest ever military parade.

Shortly afterwards, when India and the US began joint military exercises in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Charity argued that the purpose of this exercise was ‘very clear’, and ‘just a demonstration, a demonstration against China!’ However, Charity felt that this response was ‘really not necessary’ as:

China’s parade is just the Chinese government wanting to show their country as wealthy and strong to their people. China wants to tell their people that our country is better now, we are not that sick man of Asia anymore. China has made great progress, social progress, Chinese people can live a good life. We do not need to constantly fear others’ aggression, the days of the Nanjing Massacre will never return again!

China has absolutely no intention of demonstrating our power to the world, and we never want to become the world’s hegemon. The Chinese people came from a war, we have had so many terrible and horrible experiences during that war. So China will not bring ourselves into a war again, or put Chinese people into such difficult circumstances. China will not be aggressive or impose this kind of pain on other people around the world, because the Chinese people love peace and the Chinese government’s foreign policy of peace will never change!

Charity’s remarks demonstrate the extent to which students believe that traditional Chinese characteristics of peacefulness and harmony would continue to underpin its behaviour in the international system in the future.

As cultural characteristics were considered immutable, foreigners – whose nations had once carved up strategic Chinese ports to divide China among themselves *guafen* (like a melon) for their own gain – were viewed as greedy and aggressive as far as international relations were concerned. Therefore, Western powers could not help but continue to protect their own power by encircling and diminishing China – in whatever way possible. My students believed that Western powers, particularly the US, would continue to exhibit suspicion of China and counter its rise, regardless of what China said or did to contradict this fear. And, just as China’s



inherent love of harmony and peace underpinned its behaviour and would continue to do so, so Japan would continue to be untrustworthy in the future. Students believed that the past behaviour of certain Western powers meant that China had to be constantly on its guard against future threats to its sovereignty.

In this worldview, any external criticisms of China could be interpreted simply as a continuation of inevitable Western bullying and humiliation.

MY STUDENTS UNDERSTOOD the state-society relationship in China as akin to *guojia* (country-family), in which faults were accepted and excused because that is what love of family means. They felt that the state was not an object external to themselves, but was rather like a father, sometimes strict, but always acting in the people's best interests. Indeed, they told me that government officials are sometimes described as *fumuguan*, which loosely translates to parent-official.

As in a family, if the strict father makes a mistake or misjudgement, this is seen as based on the best intentions and not to be discussed or examined in any public arena. Students took any external criticism of China very personally, explaining their often emotional response in terms of being 'offended', or of experiencing hurt feelings. In one class, I allocated a chapter of Lin Yutang's *My Country and My People*, written in 1935, for students to read. In the chapter, Lin strongly criticises the extension of what he calls 'the family mind' to the state. To see if my students would react any differently depending on whether they thought criticism was coming from 'inside' or 'outside', I gave the reading without revealing the author's identity. Students' responses clearly indicated how defensive they were towards outside criticism. They told me that 'we were so angry when we read it', but that 'we changed our feeling when we realised it was written by a Chinese'. As one student, Dart, explained:

Quite a few of us felt offended because we thought it was written by a foreigner who didn't know anything about China, and seemed only to see shortcomings. Now we know that it was written by Lin Yutang. If we knew it was a Chinese person, we would have had

more of an attitude of self-checking, but not when we thought it was external criticism. Outsiders criticising us makes us feel defensive.

When I asked why exactly the same comments would cause anger if written by an outsider, the students explained that it was because China was like a family, in which it is all right to criticise your own parents or siblings, but you would always feel protective and defensive if someone else made the same point. Sandy, a diplomacy major, wrote:

Chinese people tend to label everything into different groups, including themselves. The criteria for classification may vary from one to another, however all will end up with two groups, *zijiren* (ourselves), and *wairen* (outsiders). For those in the category of *wairen*, he can enjoy the utmost courtesy from the Chinese counterpart, yet he will always be carefully guarded against at the same time. Chinese people will only entrust *zijiren* with the deepest secrets.

At CFAU, the nation-state was held up as the ultimate social organisation, a conflation and extension of the concept of family. The *guojia* (nation-state) therefore warranted an extension of the primary obligations traditionally owed to family. Likewise, anything outside of the *guojia* unit did not warrant any automatic sense of obligation.

Social relations in China have undergone profound disjunctures over the past sixty years. However, the concept of the family as the central social unit and resource is still important. What has changed is the extent to which the nation-state is conceptualised as a natural extension of the family unit. For my students, being a 'good Chinese' meant extending one's natural loyalty to family to one's loyalty to China. As Fei Xiaotong noted in 1947 in *From the Soil, the Foundations of Chinese Society*, 'the path (of obligation) runs from the self to the family, from the family to the state'.

Those external to these in-groups are *waiguoren*. Students tended to see other countries, particularly developed nations, as part of a greater 'non-Chinese world' in which all particularity was subsumed within the catch-all term *waiguo* (abroad). When considered at all, other countries were

conceived of as peripheral entities, relevant only in terms of how they may or may not relate with China. Students felt strongly that China was doing its best to be a responsible global actor – for example, in its development co-operation – but that ‘responsibility’ meant different behaviours than expected in the West. They viewed Western criticism of China as not fulfilling its obligations as frustrating and unfair, but almost unsurprising given that, as they saw it, the West would always continue to try and keep China from regaining its historic place in the world system.

IN EXAMINING HOW and why CFAU students adhered so strongly to a national logic to understand the world, it is important to consider individual agency. How can we know whether my students genuinely held these views or whether they simply expressed them because they thought they were expected to do so? For the most part, my students closely aligned themselves with official, state-sanctioned narratives. It is possible they were simply lying to me as the outsider, a foreign teacher, and on occasion to their own classmates. But a critical element of my students’ training as diplomats at CFAU was the internalisation of the belief that their own best interests were aligned with promoting the best interests of the Chinese state.

When the state is understood not as a power to be resisted, but *as society* (following Frank Pieke), as it was among my students, strong incentives exist to consent to and operate within power rather than struggle against it. Students believed that success could not come from resistance or struggle against the system. Connection and participation provided the most benefits. For students, doing and saying what was expected of them was at the foundation of their identity. In their social imaginary, not conforming would not yield positive results. Because benefits derived from maintaining social order, students consented to consent. For my students, genuinely believing was both a personal and professional imperative. They had strong incentives to conform to official versions of truth and, as a result of the conflation of their interests with the state’s, were willing participants in the production of their own conformity.

What students told me in class, and in front of their classmates, was not simply a matter of professing whatever opinions they thought would gain respect or good grades. I believe my students adopted an approach of

‘self-directed self-control’ as the most effective means for achieving success and happiness. Students chose to align themselves with the prevailing discourses of the state *for their own good*.

The students in my study represent an extreme case of conformity with official narratives of the nation. This does not imply that other young Chinese people would necessarily display the same profile. However, given that my students were in training managed by the MFA to become official representatives of the Chinese state, the way they saw the international system has implications for any perspective that China’s rise will inevitably lead to a clash with existing powers.

Commentators like John Mearsheimer argue that, based on the unchangeable exigencies of the international system, China simply cannot rise peacefully. Mearsheimer and other structural realists, whose views form the intellectual core of many nation-states’ foreign policy approach, assert that as China becomes more powerful, the country will inevitably want to dominate the world system. In 2010 he wrote: ‘You can rest assured that as the country gets more and more powerful, and its military more formidable in twenty or thirty years...you don’t think they won’t push when they’ve got muscle?’

In fact, my students’ understanding of China’s role in the world was very different to how mainstream Western discussions presume China’s rise will impact the current global order. The three themes I’ve illustrated underpin a clear view among future Chinese elites of what the world looks like and what China’s role in it should be.

These students believed that China would inevitably recover its ‘rightful position’ as a dignified actor in the world system. They felt that China had no interest in challenging existing powers in order to become sole superpower, or even sharing global leadership in a ‘G2’ with the US. China had no interest at all, in their view, in accumulating relative power gains at the cost of other international actors. They felt that the world was evolving towards a multi-polar system in which China would represent the voices of other developing states as the largest, and only, developing country at the table. Students felt that China would be, and was already being, a responsible player in this system.

As China would become more economically influential, my students believed the country would use this strength for the good of the world,

particularly by representing and providing a voice for other developing nations in international forums. The students' optimism about China's resumption of its former status in a multipolar and peaceful world co-existed simultaneously with the strongly held sense that Western powers would inevitably harass and bully China and try to contain its growth.

It is my view that in order to understand how China fits into the world, we need to move away from the usual dichotomous question of whether China's rise will constitute a material threat or opportunity for the international system. As others before me have recommended, we need to ask who China is and how it socialises itself into a particular view of itself and the world. China's national identity needs to be foregrounded for a deeper understanding of its foreign policy motivations and behaviours.

Insights into the worldviews of future Chinese elites enable reassessment of currently influential understandings of China's motives as 'a rising power'. To respond constructively to the changing international situation, we need to be aware of the values underpinning China's decisions and behaviour.

Nicholas Wong

## Vacuum

In 2013, there were 319,325 migrant workers in Hong Kong.  
About half were Indonesian and nearly all were women.  
Recruitment and placement agencies, in Indonesia and Hong Kong  
respectively, are routinely involved in the trafficking of migrant  
workers and their exploitation in conditions of forced labor.  
- *Exploited for Profit, Failed by Governments* (Executive Summary),  
Amnesty International, 2013

The moon blue, shy  
at first to know you now croons  
for your childhood  
spoon. Its edge and back  
once sliced, mashed a world  
into bites and paste fitful  
for your mouth that,  
over the years, has learned  
about survival,  
though later you know  
habits form territories, though  
questions, not meanings,  
remain. You, no  
longer amused by the spoon's  
plastic handle of faded  
giraffes, choose to sweat  
in Hong Kong streets, eat  
take-outs with chopsticks  
that do not split  
like win-win situations.

~

It takes a romantic to say  
extroverts need a large world  
to perch on love. You have  
a new self, new feet, with which  
    you run to look  
for the cause – why  
a clock is losing  
its hand to get to time  
as time crushes  
continuity. Your old  
home's ribs shaped  
in that hour of leaving  
like an hourglass.  
You watched its waist,  
where skin flakes fell.  
It was a sign of slowed  
pain. You have  
a new Ma'am, who visits  
the salon, returns every  
Saturday with the same soufflé  
hair-do that holds  
the sweet shape of her youth  
that has already leaped.  
    You want to adjust  
time, but it adjusted  
others around you: a limp,  
an unhearing, here  
and there, enormous  
    maternal skins wounding  
into a maze. Because everybody  
surrenders in the same way, you left  
your arms at the entrance.

~

A cobra imitates a collar  
and says constraint is fine  
so long as it is gentle.  
An octave of pleading  
makes begging  
musical. How hard

does forgiveness scratch? What if  
 returning home means blanks  
 to fill? Would you foil?  
 Humpback whales are mammal  
 jukeboxes, each song  
 twenty minutes long. How short  
 are your regrets that you keep  
 in a jar with the herbs?  
 Mermaid are scaled and wet  
 with brine in the West, they sauté  
 tales. But you cook fish,  
 married the common type. Which  
 of your lungs bursts  
 when you surface  
 from the deep to feed  
 others' sons, with fins that grow  
 fingers calloused and lost?

~

[mid-notes]

53 out of 54 interviewees were not properly informed about the recruitment fees they would have to pay

60 per cent believed a mop got into the habit of drying

41 out of 79 wondered why homes insisted on windows

34 out of 62 did not trust windows or temples gilded in gold

The same 34 had to wash clothes, clean the living quarters or take care of the children of the staff and/or the owner of the recruitment agency

57 out of 57 responded to the phenomenon that tires of school buses moaned like babies mistakenly fed with rice

35 out of 81 discovered there was language in SETTINGS, there was language in

27 per cent discussed whether it was possible to say different things in the



same voice, same breath

26 out of 29 tended not to think it was odd for Hong Kongers to say  
'Have you eaten yet' instead of 'Hi'

11 out of 40 were getting more pocket-conscious

79 per cent thought 'She only likes Caucasians' implied either a problem  
or symptom

4 out of 37 wished they would wake up as a four-year-old and crying in  
the morning was acceptable

6 out of 51 studied science before arrival and knew the tighter a hen's  
vagina, the smaller the eggs she laid

~

The placenta, for example, understands  
parodies. A lump of tissues launching  
the script of much loneliness.  
If the night is blood, the day wakes.  
I wake to a language delayed, a slaughter  
of nouns to select colours. The true story  
is that flags are an assertion of the blowing  
winds, as if to mean each rising was enclaved  
by practice and reflection. My medical  
record is clean, no allergy, been bitten  
by dentures of dogs, your country's teeth. What else  
can I declare to your loudness of fortunes?

~

What else can I crush besides garlic, histories  
and hormones? My ovaries not more occult  
and my eggs not any mosaic than hers. *Look,*  
*these cams are watching if your hands open things*  
*they should not*, she said, not knowing he, the one  
who picked me, had already filmed me. He saw

my fingers between my legs, a brown visual motif. Unearthed. Some sockets and I have two legs. When they choked the vacuum cleaner's tube into my mouth, I was just a make-happy machine. I made them a happier machine.

~

Since I lied, they took out the truth detector all the time. *Wash grandma before chemo. Don't frown, I have seen you. Buy your own bowl. Table is for us, you eat by the stove. No Jesus behind this door, I have seen you. Don't leave the tap running. Don't run. I keep your passport. No Skyping your sisters at night. No night is purely your night. Don't switch your tone, don't switch on the Wi-Fi yourself, I have seen you. Don't act like a man with your boots on Sundays, I have seen you. Don't kiss your friends. They are friends. We are family. There are things lips should not do.*

~

A tub told by a bath that feeling is not in its design has its desire of holding to hold. The fabric of *selendang* clads you in with an anthem, loose, rhythmic, about home. I consume gaps into resistance. I, yes, daughter of textures, thin as ventilation. I am restricted to lists strictly odd, yet manicure helps. The edge of nails smoothed and round like the norm. I paint them red in splotched August, your month of Hungry Ghost. Why should I be scared if I dust, curse to your altar each day but survive?

~

I have flip-flops, clogged pores in your homework. Match my image with A MAID, my madeness makes your home work. Your kids call me *eight woman*. You say if I *enough* ginger I can talk

back. Grandma steals chips, murmurs, mostly, *fry squid*  
if I *report string*. If I triple my strength,  
I dare they *have teeth*. Ten years ago, I left  
home to *do the world*. I see *road carefully*,  
face *green green*, *walk walk stand stand*, each day is gone.  
I have *seeds* that grow into debts which are sewn  
into a fence. Behind it, I thin to contradict rust.

---

Nicholas Wong is the author of *Crevasse* (Kaya Press, 2015) and an assistant poetry editor for *Drunken Boat*. He holds an MFA from City University of Hong Kong.

# THE DOGS ARE BARKING, BUT THE CARAVAN MOVES ON

DEA ANUGRAH

THE LAST TIME I visited Pat was this past September. His house was the colour of the shell of a salted duck egg, and in the yard, rosebushes had just been planted – four small thickets alongside the path. It was impossible to cram the yard with more things and, had Pat's fence been higher, any living creature thrown in there would surely strangle itself in two days tops.

I pressed the bell once, firmly. A faint '*Assalamualaikum*' echoed from inside. There was movement behind the beige-coloured curtains draping a window – Pat always took a peek at his visitors. He would pretend not to be home if a salesman offering pots or vacuum cleaners was standing on his doorstep. If it were a member of the neighbourhood committee or the local mosque, a distant relative, a distant neighbour, an officer from the census bureau, a preacher, an orphanage admin, or anyone else for that matter, he would also pretend not to be in the house. In short, Pat avoided human beings.

Four years ago, our desk editor told me that the art expert Pat Wicaksana was the man to talk to regarding the mysterious disappearance of the original *Sabung Ayam* painting from the Affandi Museum.

I have understood the beige curtains and the person who hid behind them since my very first visit. On that occasion, I pressed the

bell over and over again. At first I was calm, but the longer I waited and the more sweat and hair gel ran down my face, the more violent I became towards the bell. After a while, the 'Assalamualaikum' that resounded became much like the long, hopeless bellow of a machine that could no longer retain its dignity.

I refused to leave because I did not want my editor to lecture me about the importance of endurance, so I decided to wait under the guava tree across the street. I squatted and read my own article in an issue that I happened to have with me.

Roughly twenty minutes later, a man wearing a sleeveless shirt approached me. His age must have been twice my own. His hair was thin and his head resembled a kiwi fruit.

'Patrick Wicaksana. And you are?'

The interview was brief. Pat had long known that the painting was a fake. But nobody had agreed with him because the imitation was that good. He gave a list of reasons that I could not fully comprehend due to my own lack of knowledge in the field. I simply recorded and took notes.

I RESPECTED THAT man the moment I heard him speak. His statements were clear, rhythmic and delivered with a calmness that soothed me. But it wasn't the interviews that started our friendship. It was the stories.

'Do you know that poet, K?' he asked after I switched off the recorder.

I told him I had heard the name in several conversations, though I could not recall when those conversations took place or what they were about. 'Are his poems any good?' I asked. I have never been able to distinguish a good poem from a bad one.

Alif Sudarso, a co-worker and hopeless romantic who deserves to be laughed at by the ghosts occupying every banyan tree in town, fooled me once. One day, as a sort of test, he showed me some love poems that he claimed were written by a renowned poet named Paul Éluard. Alif spoke vaguely about the poems and what they meant, but his point was clear: to say the poems were bad would be like admitting

that my artistic sensibility was close to non-existent. I might as well forget a career in journalism and become a plumber like my late father.

I fell right into Alif's trap. With the determination of a real man, I slammed my palm on the table, clicked my tongue, and said, 'These poems are amazing, man. Paul Éluard! E-lu-ard! He's French, right?'

Alif Sudarso produced a pack of Camels from his flannel pocket, took out two cigarettes, placed one between my trembling lips, lit it, placed the other one between his own lips and lit it as well. He collected the pieces of paper from me, re-read the poems, blew out smoke four times, and said, 'I think I got them all mixed up, man. These poems are the ones I wrote last night. I'm flattered, but I don't deserve your praise. I appreciate your sincerity, though. Thank you, thank you.'

Until this very second, I am still terribly saddened and embarrassed by that experience. It makes me want to cry at times. It's like having your lips stung by a wasp and everyone around you is trying to help, while also trying not to laugh because the newly formed shape of your mouth reminds them of a vagina.

'Never mind. We're not going to talk about K's poems,' Pat said. He then began to talk about the habits of the poet K, the Mooi Indie painter M, the overacting actor H, and other artists whose names I had never heard of. Even if Pat didn't share so many funny stories, I would've liked him. He made me want to keep listening.

I became a frequent visitor. If the choice were ours, of course we would share only stories that made us laugh. But stories have a mind of their own. They like to make abrupt turns and surprise the storyteller. There were times when I returned home with a sense of discomfort heavy on my shoulders, as if my mother had died that day, and feeling almost nauseous, as though I'd cooked and eaten a disgusting omelette.

Once, Pat showed me a portrait of a woman who looked like she was in her thirties. He said it was his ex-wife. I wondered what to say; it would have been offensive to ask where she was, especially if she had already died. On the other hand, if I had asked when it was that she passed away, and it turned out she was as healthy as a fifteen-month-old kitten, purring cooly to her new husband, the conversation would not end nicely. Pat cleared his throat as if he could read my mind. 'Her

name is Sekar,' he said. 'She's six years younger than me. No, she hasn't passed away. And yes, she's purring and pregnant, happy as a twenty-month-old cat. I hope that one day, her husband sprains his penis and she'll be forced to do it with a soy sauce bottle.'

Patrick looked at my face for a moment and grimaced. 'There's nothing worse than a story addict,' he mumbled.

FOURTEEN YEARS EARLIER, Pat had realised that being an art critic wasn't the best way to survive. Work was hard to come by and even when he got lucky, he didn't get paid well. That is why he got in touch with his late father's cousin, a contractor who supplied medical equipment. Pat learned the old man's business and then earned the money he wanted. He was quite happy with the change, especially since it made Sekar – not unhappy to begin with – more positive and vibrant. But it's impossible to avoid a bad storm forever. Competition, arguments, fights, Patrick Wicaksana's sentence to thirteen years in prison for the premeditated murder of a doctor.

The newspapers said that the punishment was not harsh enough for someone who murdered a doctor (though too severe if the victim had been a trishaw driver). As always, there was something not written in the papers: the doctor (Dr Badar) had a side job also as a medical equipment contractor, was a certified gun owner, had a bad temper and was prone to snap when his wishes were not fulfilled.

One night, the two of them met to resolve all the problems that had only gotten worse since the public hospitals in the region depended on Patrick and his partners for medical equipment. The negotiation did not go according to plan. The doctor hit Pat in the forehead with the grip of his gun, and four seconds later heard a loud ripping noise. His forehead was suddenly drenched in sweat. The doctor looked down and saw parts of his innards scattered on the pavement. 'Before he fell,' said Pat (he then licked his lips), 'at least Mr Doctor got to learn two things: one can hide a knife in one's jacket and a gun doesn't make a man invincible.'

Pat was released on parole after seven years in prison. During that time his love for Sekar had multiplied. Not once, not even at the lowest point, did Sekar show signs of leaving. Patrick repeatedly told

his fellow inmates, with immense gratitude, that Sekar should be a saint, that he would be a husband who wouldn't kill a mosquito if killing it would hurt Sekar.

About a year after his release, Patrick Wicaksana called his wife 'the biggest whore in history' and believed that every doctor under the sun deserved to have their guts torn to pieces.

Sekar, terrified over the affair she had with a doctor (not Dr Badar, who appeared in this story only to die) for three years, left the same day Patrick found out about it. Two weeks later Pat received the divorce papers. He used them to wipe his ass, which he then put into a new envelope and delivered to the doctor's office.

'So you met her for the last time in court?' I asked without taking my eyes off of Sekar's portrait.

'It was the last time I called her the biggest and worst slut in the history of *homo sapiens*. In court, she was represented by a lawyer whose face looked like porpoise's.'

'Did you ever ask her, well, you know, why, or since when? My father did it, too.'

'You mean Sekar's reasons for messing around? No. And no need to mention what happened between your parents. My heart aches every time I realise that this kind of thing didn't only happen to me. I want to believe that humans still have something valuable to cherish.'

'There is. Cat shit.'

'Come on, man. You're too gloomy for a guy your age. Jerking-off leads to depression. You've done it too many times.'

I HAVEN'T DONE that most enjoyable thing in two weeks. And the cause of that, I suppose, is some form of depression. I now smoke four packs a day and occasionally take a hit or two, but I still haven't been able to shake off this sense of helplessness. It's like I'm stuck in a foetal position at the bottom of a dry and closed well. I have experienced it in a dream. No matter how many times I lift my head to look around, there is nothing but darkness, dampness and despair.

On Wednesday morning two weeks ago, Patrick Wicaksana died. Heart failure. Alone. People – I assume it was Sekar, her husband and



their two daughters – came to the funeral. Sekar did not cry when the coffin was lowered into the ground; she remained silent as if drowning in a sea of memories, just like everyone else present.

I stood beside our desk editor (who had transferred to another desk) and did not say a word other than standard small talk throughout the ride to and from the funeral.

That night, I talked to Jay Catsby – the cat that liked to visit my room – until we both fell asleep. I told him everything I knew about the poet K and the artists, about the asshole Alif Sudarso, about my mother, about Sekar, about the sentence ‘Among the many ways a person can die, the worst is to continue living’ that was engraved on Pat’s tombstone at his request.

The next day I overslept and stepped on cat shit when I got out of bed. Without even the slightest hint of indignation, I opened the door and kicked Jay right in the stomach.

*Translated by Dwiputri Pertiwi. The title is a translation of an Indonesian proverb ‘anjing menggonggong, kafilah berlalu’, meaning ‘whatever people say, life goes on’.*

Dea Anugrah is a poet and short story writer based in Jakarta, Indonesia. His work has appeared in *Koran Tempo*, *Media Indonesia*, *Suara Merdeka*, *Bali Post*, and other publications. His book of poetry, *Misa Arwah & puisi-puisi lainnya* (Indie Book Corner) was published in February.

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Dwiputri Pertiwi is an essayist and poet currently based in Jakarta, Indonesia. In 2014, she self-published her first poetry collection entitled *Hiatus*. Her writings have also been published by the *Whiteboard Journal* and the *Murmur*.

# THE NEW WOMAN IN THE OLD FLAT

SHANDANA MINHAS

THE PARSIS OWNED a lot of Karachi at Partition. They still owned a little of it.

‘You can’t have the wrong scavenger picking at your bones, Aneel *bhai*,’ Ms Zoreen told the estate agent. The white flesh of her bare arms wobbled as she giggled and raised one hand to scratch her frizzy grey hair. The *pallu* of her sari slipped from one shoulder to reveal a dimpled stomach.

She was a big commission. *Vultures would fight over you, Madam*, he wanted to tell her. He didn’t. An avian virus had decimated the vulture population that tended Karachi’s Towers of Silence. Ms Zorreen would fly in every two years to supervise the search for new tenants for the flats she owned, and his office would burn. The contemporary high-rises were contractor-built, contractor-owned and contractor-marketed. NO BROKERS, the advertisements warned. Estate agents could find no foothold in their marble glaze.

Ms Zoreen still did it the old way. He was lucky.

Birdsong from a banyan spiked the air as Ms Zoreen picked at a leisurely tea arrayed on a round cane table. They were sitting on the patio of a ground floor apartment in Clifton owned by a friend of hers. The only thing that had changed over the years was the boundary wall at the foot of the garden. It had started white and low, with fuchsia bougainvillea laying a friendly arm across it. It now loomed high enough to prevent the hordes riding on the tops of buses from glimpsing in, and anti-climbers had replaced the flowers. Aneel and

Ms Zoreen could no longer see the people making their way to and from work, but they could hear them. A conductor and a passenger were having a conversation about the fare. It touched briefly on inflation, then escalated to mothers and sisters.

‘Tea?’ Ms Zoreen offered loudly.

He accepted a cup of tea and refused a slice of homemade apple pie. It was fresh and flaky. He was afraid he would drop crumbs, soil the file resting on his knees. He flinched when Ms Zoreen leaned across the table to reach for it. At their first meeting, two decades ago, they had sat side by side.

The file was thinner, thinner even than it had been on her last trip. People wanted luxury, now. They wanted granite floors and elevators and new fixtures. *But why should I care how high the ceiling is? And what am I supposed to do with an original mosaic, eat off it? Tell the old lady to die so someone can build something better already,* he didn’t tell her one potential had said. His own apartment would fit into the master bedroom of either of the apartments she owned. And he didn’t own it.

‘Only three, Aneel bhai?’

‘The market is down.’

‘Nonsense. New money. No taste. You shouldn’t lie to me Aneel bhai. I’m too old to believe anything.’

‘You will never be old, Madam.’

‘Flatterer!’

But the white flesh jiggled its approval.

‘Which one do you like?’

‘They are all corporate, as usual, Madam. So no tension about rent.’

‘That’s not what I asked you, Aneel bhai.’

‘The one at the bottom. I have only met the wife. She loved the place. She praised the light. She said they just don’t make them like this anymore. She reminded me of you, a little.’

‘Why? Too old and too fat to climb the stairs? How will she reach our little corner of heaven?’

Heavenly Apartments. That was the name of the ground-plus-two construction. Once quarters for the commissioned officers of the

empire, now prime real estate between a shopping mall and a consulate. The buildings around it looked down on the scarred roof.

‘You are still fitter than me, Madam. She is youngish. Thirties. They have one little girl. The wife is a painter.’

‘Painter or artist?’

‘She paints pictures. Did I use the wrong word? See Madam, every time I meet you I learn something.’

‘When can I meet them?’

‘She said anytime that is convenient for you.’

‘Consideration is a good sign. Nobody has any manners anymore. Lets do it tomorrow. I want to meet this woman you say reminds you of me. You know I don’t rent to anyone I don’t like.’

He did.

‘It’s not just space you know. They have to fit each other. Like seashells, you know?’

He didn’t.

He also didn’t tell her the woman, Dilnaz, was Parsi. The Parsis didn’t like those who married outside the community. Nobody did.

‘THEY’LL FIT. THEY’LL get along,’ he told his wife that night. ‘Like calls to like.’ He waited for her to ask him what he meant but she didn’t. He realised she hadn’t asked him about his day the whole week.

Perhaps she was upset because he didn’t ask about hers.

‘What did you do today?’

‘What do you think I did?’ Her arms traced the tiny space around them and then came together. A sharp clap.

‘This will be a big commission, if they close the deal. One more, and we can put a down payment on a bigger place.’ She didn’t say anything to that either.

BUT ONLY THE husband came to the meeting. His wife had an exhibition coming up, he told Ms Zoreen, and he had insisted she prioritise her work. The old lady was charmed. The man was engaging and solicitous. He talked to her about the weather in Calgary, where she now lived, and his nostalgia for the streets of his childhood, close

to where she had once lived. Everybody in Karachi had lived close to each other, once, before slums pushed them apart. Those above a certain age could still call roads by their Empire names. Elphinstone. Napier. The owner and the potential tenant recognised each other in their knowledge of St. Andrews Church as a navigational beacon and not a tourist curiosity. They had both gone to Gandhi Gardens when it was Gandhi Gardens and not the Karachi Zoo.

‘Every time I come home,’ she told Aneel later, ‘I cry to see how much has changed. With people like this sticking around, maybe one day it will change for the better.’

Aneel was happy she was happy. He was happy with his commission.

THEN THE WOMAN, Dilnaz, came alone to the apartment for the handover of the keys. Aneel said, to make conversation, that he hoped the man of the house wouldn’t be too busy to take over the supervision of the movers.

‘Didn’t he say we are separating and the place is only for me?’

He had not. In Aneel’s head, the lease broke.

She offered him sweet tea from the flask she had brought, pouring it into a Styrofoam cup and seating him on a box she assured him would not break.

‘He’ll still pay for it, of course. If you’re afraid the lady will cancel the lease, I’d be happy to talk to her about concerns she might have about my occupancy,’ she said. ‘She’s hasn’t left already, has she?’ One of the labourers carrying furniture up the stairs asked where the bathroom was and she pointed him to the one in the master bedroom.

‘But Madam, you make such a beautiful couple!’

To discuss business with one so confused about etiquette would be crude. And they did. The little girl she had brought when she came for the first viewing had been testimony to that. Like her mother, she was well formed and compact, with long, straight hair and an easy smile. Her father was tall and well dressed, with symmetrical features. He had a firm handshake and made eye contact. The enquiries Aneel had made revealed he was well thought of by his peers and underlings.

The ladies in the office, in particular, had never had a bad word to say about him. Oh.

Had he married her for her money? Parsis always had money. That's how they could afford to leave for the West.

On his way out, he thought of her alone under the high ceilings once the labourers were gone and the light retreated. A life in boxes she thought wouldn't break. He went to the car he had borrowed from his boss for the appointment, while his motorbike was in the shop. He saw the flowers he had bought for his wife, a peace offering, on the front seat. He stepped up the stairs on tiptoe, left them at the doorstep to the newly taken flat, rang the bell and bolted.

The new world could be cruel to the old. It was the kind thing to do. His wife would understand.

He decided not to tell her.

EVERY CHAAND RAAT, before the three-day Eid holiday, the agents competed among themselves, hoping to poach. A text message to everyone on the client list was mandatory. Those with flash cash sent cards via courier. The biggest commissions merited a cake. Imtiaz had ten stacked on his desk and was yelling at the office boy to deliver them faster as Aneel agonised over the composition of his own SMS greeting. He thought about sending it to his wife for her input. She had a master's degree in English literature from Karachi University. He could text her and joke that it was time to put it to use. He had encouraged her to, often. She could teach, or tutor at home. She had been offended. Had he married her to live off her?

He deleted his request. She might take it as a reminder of a happier time, before him. Increasingly, she seemed to regret accepting his proposal. She wished he were younger, she had told him the night before, then maybe he wouldn't tire so easily. She wished he wouldn't work so hard, she had added. She wished he worked harder, she had meant.

'Still struggling with spelling?' Imtiaz was at his shoulder.

'No.' He slipped his phone into his pocket.

'Sorry. I wasn't peeking. Here,' Imtiaz slid a cake on to the desk, 'my compliments to Mrs Aneel.'

To leave it on the desk would be to give offence. He couldn't afford the luxury. On the way home he balanced the cake on the handlebars of his motorcycle. He thought about giving it to one of the street children, but it seemed a waste. They were feral. Their aggression didn't deserve to be rewarded. The traffic congestion as people flooding the shops and the streets for bangles, finery, henna, shoes, flirting, spending, made him irritable. When a roadblock thrown up to stop men joyriding towards the sea and the luxury enclaves around it forced him into a detour, he considered gunning his engine and driving into the policeman. He took a minute by the side of the road to compose himself. It was a blessed time. He was a blessed man. He had a home, a wife, a job and transport of his own. He wasn't dependent on the kindness of strangers. He realised he was close to Heavenly Apartments.

Anel had meant to ask the *chowkidar* to deliver the cake to Mrs Dilnaz but the man's reluctance made him take it up himself. He hoped she wasn't having problems with the neighbours. It could happen, with women alone. People pointed fingers, tried to take advantage.

'Nothing of the sort,' she told him once he was settled with sweet tea on the dining table. 'He's just angry because he wasn't doing his job right and I reported him and the building association head told him off.'

He wanted to tell her to be careful. Those men recently come down from the mountains still housed women in the caves of their minds. But it wasn't his place. Children squealed in the corridor outside. 'Somebody must have gotten a lot of Eidhi. And your little girl must be looking beautiful in her new clothes.'

'I don't know.' She peered intently at her fingernails, started rooting under their tips. He could see they were clean. 'The court has decided she will live with her father.'

He realised then that she hadn't converted. The cake lay on the table between them. She had opened the box and brought a knife and plates and napkins. May Allah Bless You On This Auspicious Occasion, it said.

On the way out he stopped to talk to the *chowkidar* again. He thought he would let the watchman know, subtly, that the woman

was under his protection too. But the man was brusque about power failures and noncommittal about whether the water was piped or still bought in tankers, and after he started making fun of the aged motorcycle, Aneel left without bringing it up.

FORTY DAYS LATER, the eve of the second Eid brought the annual staff barbecue. The agents gathered on the old man's rooftop, around plastic chairs and tables, hands washed in the open sink at the corner, waiting to be served by the specialists he had hired for the night. Bakra Eid was the busiest time of the year for butchers and journeyman cooks. Everybody complimented the old man for his foresight in hiring them months before. He was in his seventies and threatening to retire. Foresight was habit for him. They had only to look at his journey from a small village in the interior to this palace at the edge of the suburbs of the city.

It was a ground-plus-three construction on the fringe of the most exclusive residential area in Karachi. The land had been the most expensive, and he had compensated for the size of the plot by greasing a few palms and building upwards in contravention of zoning laws. Everybody did it, in the fringes. They could look down at the blood and guts strewn along the bustling lane outside. Or across into the fronts of the shuttered shops in the commercial area. Or behind them into the securely guarded thickets of the rich, who had started outsourcing their slaughter to keep their roads clean. The old man had spent his life saving to build it, and the barbecue was the time every year he felt expansive enough to tell his employees they had what it took to do the same. They speculated about what it had been worth once and what it was worth now. At the head of the table, the old man crossed his hands across his paunch and closed his eyes.

From the wives' table across the roof, one of the women called to her husband to check if their host was all right.

'I'm fine,' he said without opening his eyes. 'I'm just preparing for my speech.'

They had all been expecting it. But his choice of successor was a shock. Aneel, loyal Aneel, was still silent when he kicked his bike off its



stand half an hour later, still feeling like he had been drenched in cold water and stood in front of an air conditioner. He had become invisible to the others, as well. They were clustered around Imtiaz, standing by his second-hand Suzuki Alto parked right in front of the gate, as if he was now the boss of that gate too.

Even the women had made their knot close to him.

Aneel tried to attract his wife's attention. But she was in the thick of it, throwing back her head to laugh at something one of the other women said, her crimson lips catching the flare of the halogen lamp and absorbing it. She wouldn't see him. She couldn't see him, alone down the road.

'No hard feelings, Aneel bhai.'

*He even moves like a snake*, as he realised Imtiaz was standing by him.

'Of course not. Congratulations.'

'I just want you to know that you are my senior and I respect you very much and I hope I can learn from you.'

'Of course. Of course. No problem.'

He waved to her, half-heartedly, maybe the latent schoolteacher in her would catch a raised arm. Her eyes slid across, ignored it.

'*Bhabi!* Mrs Aneel!' Her head turned at the sound of Imtiaz's voice, and she scuttled obediently to them.

DILNAZ CALLED HIM the day they went back to work. Someone had broken the windshield of her car when it was parked in the compound and taken all her T-shirts from the laundry bag in the front seat. They had left her *shalwar kameez*. She was convinced it was the chowkidar. The compound was closed to outsiders and guarded by him. She had complained to the building association. They said she had no proof but she knew it was him. Could Aneel bhai put her in touch with the landlady, or speak to her on her behalf instead? She owned two of the flats in the building. Maybe her word would carry more weight.

She hated to ask, but he was a decent man. Decent people had to stand up for one another, didn't they? Or all would be lost.

He listened, let her run till she was tired. That was when calm came and he waited till she found it. She was glad to hear he would

drop by in the evening to discuss it in person. He was sliding his chair back to go get some water when Imtiaz dropped a packet on his desk.

‘I don’t want to interfere and I hope you won’t be offended, but I think this might help you.’

HE READ IT in the shade of the building at lunchtime, munching on a bun kabab from the cart vendor under the overhang where somebody looking out from the office on the mezzanine floor would not be able to see him. *The Duties Of A Muslim Wife*, it was titled.

There were guidelines for men, on what their wives owed them. And for women, on what they owed their men. Devotion. Pleasure. Loyalty. Obedience. Obedience was key. The world was changing, the writer said, it was a time of flux. Women were the homemakers and the home breakers. It was they who gave birth to warriors. They who raised them. They who had a duty to love them.

HE CLIMBED THE steps to the flat with heavy feet. What would he say to her? They spoke a different language. He took the pamphlet from under his arm, slid it under the door and pelted down the stairs.

On his way out of Heavenly Apartments, he stopped to wish the chowkidar *Eid Mubarak*. They embraced. One cheek, two, three, and parted friends.

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Shandana Minhas’s first novel, *Tunnel Vision* (Roli Books, 2008), was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 2008. Her second book, *Survival Tips for Lunatics* (Hachette), was published in October 2014 and won the KLF French Embassy Fiction Prize. Her fiction has appeared in the *Indian Quarterly* and been adapted for stage and screen. She lives in Karachi.

## ESSAY

# Connected and disconnected

It's a Vietnamese thing

Sheila Ngoc Pham

WHEN GARETH EVANS visited Saigon on his way to London in 1968, it wasn't exactly a common travel route, given Vietnam was in the midst of a raging civil war. The country had only just shaken off the yoke of French colonial rule and was being plunged back into conflict, and once again foreign intervention was leading to unanticipated consequences.

Now chancellor of the Australian National University, Evans shared an anecdote from that visit at the opening of a conference called Connected and Disconnected in Vietnam, held in December 2014:

Out of some crazy spirit of adventure, I found myself in Saigon at the height of the Vietnam War. There was no tourist infrastructure whatever, even for a down-market backpacker. I hitched a ride into the city and finally found a cheap hotel, where it became immediately clear from the condition of my room that it had recently had a lot of short-time occupants with not much cleaning in between. As I was wondering what I had got myself into, I heard a commotion on the landing outside. Opening the door I confronted the dreadful sight of a drunken GI beating a young Vietnamese woman with a broom as she fled screaming downstairs. The whole sickening cameo – the squalor of the place combined with the brutality of the conduct – seemed to me to summarise in an instant, in a way that I'd never fully grasped in my previous years

of university campus demonstrating, everything that was wrong about that war: not least the inability of the West to comprehend that it was much more about a struggle for human dignity than anything to do with ideology or great power *realpolitik*. It made me deeply reluctant to accept that any great power had the right to lord it over anyone else, outside the framework of a UN rule-based international order. In this way, my initial contact with Vietnam and its people was one of a handful of moments that profoundly shaped the outlook I brought to my later roles both in government and with global NGOs.

Evans' trip was a transformative moment on a path that eventually included being Australia's foreign minister for both the Hawke and Keating governments (1988–96). What might have otherwise been a metaphorically distant country became embedded in his consciousness, a demonstration of how a crazy spark of curiosity can lead one on a long, meandering journey.

During his tenure in Cabinet, Evans took an active interest in Vietnam, more than he would have if not for such a formative experience there in his youth – a cultural exchange of sorts. It was partly this early interest that enabled him to take a long view of the country while witnessing its remarkable changes.

Gareth Evans' personal story formed part of the twentieth Vietnam Update, the world's longest-running conference series on Vietnam. When he launched the first Vietnam Update in 1990, he had spoken as the foreign minister for the Hawke government. This occurred only a handful of years after the enactment of the communist government's *Doi Moi* policy in 1986, the reform that aimed to 'renovate' the Vietnamese economy. Almost a quarter century later, Evans situated the conference squarely in the present after daring to mention the war at the start. In fact, over the coming days the war would be somewhat glossed over, but that was fair given the number of other topics that hadn't received enough oxygen.

Thousands of academic conferences occur every year, many of them obscure and mostly uninteresting to everyone but the communities of scholars dedicated to the research area in question. The online meeting of minds hasn't

completely replicated the alchemy of face-to-face meetings. Conversations spark new ideas and directions for inquiry and such conferences contribute to understanding the world as defined in human terms. Each person holds a few pieces of the puzzle, and meeting others may provide an opportunity to click the pieces into place. Scientific and technological advances can perhaps be made by people working on their own, building on the work of others without communicating directly; but social progress is inherently about direct communication and collaboration. And if academia is not striving towards social progress in some broad sense, what is the point of the endeavour?

The theme for the latest Vietnam Update – ‘Connected and Disconnected’ – was interpreted in a multitude of ways. The conference attracted people from across Australia, as well as from Copenhagen, Denmark and Syracuse, New York. The gathering was open to a wide audience, including the general public, and attendance was free. Alongside academics were tour operators, high-school teachers and bureaucrats from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Many of the presentations were anthropological in nature, with detailed accounts of fieldwork in, for instance, remote leper colonies, hill tribes and an island in the contentious South China Sea. Others shone a sociological spotlight on overlooked aspects of Vietnamese society, like Linh Khanh Nguyen from Syracuse University, who spoke about the migration of Vietnamese women through marriage, creating connections that are rural to rural, internal to international. Though, as she explained, these kinds of linkages are also disconnections, dividing people and places in the very process of appearing to join them. And then there was an impressive and self-possessed young researcher named Giang Nguyen-Thu, undertaking a PhD at the University of Queensland on an Australia Award scholarship. Her presentation focused on a part of her doctoral thesis that analyses Vietnam’s transition to a neoliberal society as reflected in a television talk show, *Nguoi Duong Thoi* (*Contemporaries*). This popular program featured one-on-one interviews with celebrities and business people, alongside other high achievers – the self-empowerment discourse seemingly incongruent with the values of a classic socialist society.

The overall scope of the presentations suggested that we have arrived at a pivotal moment in Vietnamese history, with both obstacles to development

as well as social shifts becoming more apparent. But, as Linh Khanh Nguyen pointed out, the conference had dealt largely with fringe groups rather than the majority. So what is going on with the Vietnamese populous? It was a question partly answered by Vietnam historian David Marr, who said, ‘it had been like pulling teeth to get Vietnamese scholars in the room...and now there was a Vietnamese majority here.’ It was an upbeat note on which to end.

After several decades of active multilateral engagement, there are now more Vietnamese researchers asking critical questions and able to access their country in a way that foreigners never will – though that’s both an advantage and a disadvantage.

THE CONFERENCE WAS the first time I could recall being with so many young Vietnamese nationals. Although we were all close in age, it was as though we had grown up in parallel universes. Few Vietnamese–Australians were in attendance; aside from me, there was also ANU academic Kim Huynh. Years before I had corresponded with him after reading one of his articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, so he immediately felt like an old friend. There was, however, one other person there who had an even better claim on the hyphenation than either of us, a Vietnamese–Australian in a more literal sense because she is half Vietnamese and half Anglo-Australian. Kathryn Dinh was there because she had recently embarked on a PhD in public health relating to Vietnam. I couldn’t help but feel there was something almost poetic about the way we were both peering into a country we’re outsiders of, because we have such a strong connection to it.

I’ve long felt jealous of migrant children forced to spend summers back in the old country; I mostly spent holidays impatiently waiting to go back to school due to the boredom of being at home while my parents worked with little respite. My most formative years passed in complete disconnection to our homeland. When I finally visited Vietnam for the first time it was on the eve of my thirtieth birthday, just older than my parents were when they left. If their trajectory in Australia is anything to go by, even if I spent the next thirty years in Vietnam, understanding it will always remain just out of my grasp.

Somehow, I’ve grown comfortable with living in a state of disconnection as a member of a minority in Australia. However, since visiting Vietnam I

understand that I'm part of the ethnic majority, the *kinh*, in the Vietnamese context (notwithstanding what constitutes an ethnic group). But it's not quite as simple as that, either. Even though I'm ethnically of the *kinh* majority, I'm a *Viet kieu* – one of the diaspora of three million Vietnamese, and a minority in another real sense.

Outsiders often think ethnic communities are tight knit, but in truth it seems few of my generation are deeply interested in interrogating our complex identity issues, not in the public sphere anyway. If anything, we seem to be a fairly disconnected generation, struggling to have a meaningful relationship with the Vietnam of today. Part of this is perhaps due to the generational divide in the Vietnamese community, which feels more insurmountable than ever. Even now, *Viet kieu*, who are perceived as being sympathetic to the current leadership of postwar Vietnam, risk attack from the fiercely anti-communist stalwarts in diaspora Vietnamese communities.

Over the past few years I've increasingly focused on Vietnam in my work. And the deeper I immerse myself in my research, the more fascinating I find the country is in its own right, with its rich history and diverse ethnic make-up; a post-colonial, post-conflict, post-socialist society in transition. It's a shame that I can't easily talk to my parents about what I'm learning.

KATHRYN DINH'S FATHER left Vietnam on a Colombo Plan scholarship to study at the University of Adelaide in 1960, before the war had even begun. Over the past few years I've also encountered others from my parents' generation who came to Australia the same way, migrating earlier than the majority. The cluster of those who were educated in Australia, and able to speak academic-level English, has become a source of fascination because it's a pathway that is little remarked upon in the general story of how the Vietnamese arrived in Australia.

From the launch of the Colombo Plan in 1951 right through to 1975, scores of students from Vietnam came to study in Australia as part of the education-focused aid of the plan. The flow of students ended only when the communists took control – although it should be noted that Vietnam was not a significant recipient country because most of the aid was directed towards Australia's nearest neighbours. In any case, the Colombo Plan continued in

different forms. In 2014, the Australian federal government launched the New Colombo Plan with the tagline ‘Connect to Australia’s future – study in the region’, and this ‘rite of passage’ is described in the following terms on the website of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade:

The New Colombo Plan is intended to be transformational, deepening Australia’s relationships in the region, both at the individual level and through expanding university, business and other stakeholder links. It will encourage a two-way flow of students with the region, complementing the thousands of students from the region coming to Australia to study each year. Over time, the Australian government wants to see study in the Indo-Pacific region become a rite of passage for Australian undergraduate students, and as an endeavour that is highly valued across the Australian community.

In a paper for the Alfred Deakin Research Institute, ‘The Colombo Plan and “soft” regionalism in the Asia-Pacific: Australian and New Zealand cultural diplomacy in the 1950s and 1960s’, David Lowe details the way the Colombo Plan was part of Australia’s Cold War activities. This included anti-communist intelligence activities in Thailand and Vietnam, but there were unintended outcomes as well. In relation to the training of scholars and its effect on Australia, Lowe writes, ‘Lyndon Megarrity has suggested that when policy towards Colombo Plan students and private international students began to merge in the second half of the 1960s, this hastened the rapid dismantling of Australia’s White Australia policy.’ The stage was set for the resettlement of thousands of Vietnamese refugees from the late 1970s, which instigated significant policy reform and changed the face of Australia.

A FEW DAYS after the conference in Canberra, I received an email from Linh Khanh Nguyen, who had sat next to me at the conference dinner at Lemon Grass Thai restaurant in Civic. I enjoyed her sardonic sense of humour, so we arranged to meet for ‘real’ Asian food on her last night in Sydney, before she returned to the US.



We connected easily, speaking in English, relating to each other as contemporaries with more common ground than was otherwise apparent. She affirmed this in our conversation at some point, saying, ‘You understand what I mean, it’s a Vietnamese thing.’ But there was the fact that she’d been living in the US for most of the past decade, so her identity was also fluid. We didn’t talk about the war, of course, though I referred to it at least once in the evening.

In the twenty-first century there are more people than ever straddling the different worlds of Asia, no longer rooted to one particular place. This includes those who leave their homeland to undertake study, and also people like me, the children of émigrés. My parents fled their homeland and spent years talking about counter-revolution, eventually giving up that dream on the warm, embracing shores of Australia.

And although the counter-revolution may never occur, change is still happening, certainly at the level of researcher to researcher. As a Viet kieu, I would like to contribute by conducting research that I’m in a unique position to do: examining more closely how international researchers work in Vietnam, and how they build relationships with their Vietnamese counterparts. In answering these questions I’ll seek those who hold some of the other pieces so that, together, we can connect different parts of the puzzle.

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Sheila Ngoc Pham is a writer, producer, communications professional and public health specialist. She has produced programs for the ABC and her writing has appeared in a wide range of anthologies, websites and publications. She also writes for performance and was a storyteller in Performance 4a’s *Stories Then and Now*.

# Racial amnesia

The danger of falling into a post-racial slumber

Candice Chung

IN RETROSPECT, IT was inevitable. But I know now there couldn't have been a better place to have a racial epiphany than the buffet table. Apart from the fact that it was my parents' favourite dining genre, it was also – let's face it – the closest simulacrum of cultural diplomacy. There's something oddly utopian about seeing piles of salt-and-pepper squid sitting inexplicably alongside shrunkened frittatas and 'French' country stews. Under the heat lamps of the bain-maries all nations are equal.

It was the early '90s, and our first school holidays in Australia. To celebrate, Mum and Dad had surprised us with a week-long trip to Brisbane with a dozen or so Chinese strangers who shared their passion for languorous naps and competitively priced coach tours.

My sister and I were the only kids in the group. By nightfall, we were thoroughly sick of each other. The twelve-year-old me knew it was time to find a new ally – someone else who was alone and alert to the threat of in-bus karaoke. My ally was a woman in her early thirties. She was holidaying from Hong Kong and spoke to me in English-spliced Cantonese. 'You have an excellent accent,' she said. (It was mildly American at the time.) She declared it 'authentic' because it was the kind you heard on all the popular TV shows. This made me beam with pride. That she was smart and worldly made it all the more surprising when, one morning, a heated argument broke out between her and the hotel staff. At the breakfast buffet, a waiter had abruptly ushered her back to 'our area'. Our tour group, apparently, was to eat from the Asian section. Continental breakfast,

which our competitively priced package didn't cover, was strictly out of bounds. It didn't matter that my friend was headed for the bathroom and not the home-brand toast – all the waiter saw was a Chinese woman trying to get away with what wasn't hers. In a split second, he'd turned the room into a Venn diagram of white faces and petty thieves.

'WE ARE ALL savages inside. We all want to be the chosen, the beloved, the esteemed.' Though the opening line of one of Cheryl Strayed's best-loved 'Dear Sugar' advice columns deals with the origin of insatiable jealousy, her words nonetheless speak to our most private agony. And it boils down to this: it hurts to feel invisible, to have our complexities trampled upon, to suspect someone else's needs are being tended to while we wait with growing frustration for our turn to come along.

To fight the fate of invisibility, we become experts at cutting and re-cutting the highlight reel of our social selves. We remind each other we are aspiring food photographers/occasional (half) marathon runners/reality TV hate-watchers/ long-black-with-a-dash-of-cold-milk-drinkers. But in a crush of 7.2 billion bodies, how many glossy life trailers can we realistically expect to see?

Instead, we take to scanning a sea of faces like an endless Rorschach test. Our first impressions, in a sense, are also by-products of our innermost prejudice and fears.

In his widely shared *New York Magazine* essay 'Paper Tigers', Korean-American writer Wesley Yang describes an unsettling disconnect between his appearance and personal identity. Thanks to a lifelong wariness of Asian stereotypes, Yang has come to feel alienated from his own face. 'Sometimes I'll glimpse my reflection in a window and feel astonished by what I see,' he writes. 'What I feel in these moments is its strangeness to me. It's my face. I can't disclaim it. But what does it have to do with me?'

The internal world of Yang, like that of many immigrants, is more a product of the culture he grew up in than his 'racial roots'. Yet his Asian features – the visible legacy he inherited – nonetheless continue to define him to strangers on the street. Here is what the acclaimed writer suspects his face signifies to others: 'An invisible person, barely distinguishable from a mass of

faces that resemble it. A conspicuous person standing apart from the crowd and yet devoid of any individuality... Not just [part of a] people “who are good at maths” and play the violin, but a mass of stifled, repressed, abused, conformist quasi-robots who simply do not matter, socially or culturally.’

AND YET, DESPITE sharing some of Yang’s anxieties, sometimes I forget I am Asian. Working in a predominately white newsroom I’d go for days, even weeks at a time without giving a thought to the colour of my skin – until someone reminds me casually, offhandedly. These sporadic reminders often catch me by surprise. Like the time I overheard a workmate’s complaint about her Chinese nanny’s ‘distressing’ accent, or when, more than once, I’ve had to break the news to fellow colleagues – sometimes mid-conversation – that I wasn’t the executive assistant, the *other* Asian employee with short hair in the office. To quote American screenwriter Justin Simien’s satirical book *Dear White People* (Atria, 2014): ‘Since falling out of vogue, blatant lynch-mob style expressions of racism have slowly morphed into more subversive forms.’ These days, it’s not so much the occasional mad, racist rants on public transport that trouble us. For the vast majority of non-white Australians, it’s what lurks beneath the polite bubble wrap of subtle, everyday microaggressions that causes more disquiet. Coined by psychiatrist Chester M Pierce in 1970, the term ‘microaggression’ refers to any ‘brief and commonplace verbal, behavioural or environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour’. Think of it as the reverse *Eat Pray Love* (Penguin, 2006), if you will. Only instead of a white, middle-class woman’s journey to lose herself through the delicious culture shock of exotic climbs, imagine a trio of Italian, Indian and Indonesian immigrants arriving in an Anglo-Saxon country, constantly being bombarded by subtle messages that they are different, never allowed to forget their outsider status. What makes microaggressions tricky to deal with is that the comments are often made by well-meaning folks who have no idea they are causing offence. For many Asian–Australians, these subtle reminders can range from the gently stereotypical assumption that you can magically split the group dinner bill, an unabated interest in ‘where you are actually from’ or the suspicion that you are, and always will be, a rival in the property and selective school markets.

The bottom line, says Simien, is that this can cause a sense of paranoia for members of marginalised groups who ‘suspect oppression but feel guilty bringing it up and worry about being falsely accused of using the “race card”’. Or worse, simply being told to lighten up.

HERE’S SOMETHING I can’t help but wonder: if our racial identity is defined not only by who we are, but also who we’re not, then surely all migrant Australians must carry with us a human-sized dent of ‘whiteness’ in our shadow selves?

That was the kind of question I would’ve liked to ask my *Smash Hits* pen-pal Rebecca, back in Year 9. Instead, under the pen name ‘Antonia’, I was too busy mentally cataloguing what being a non-minority kid feels like. For example, Rebecca told me:

Friday: ‘I’m having the greatest time ever. My folks are down in Melbourne and I’m here all on my own. This is the life. Me and David, a Beam bottle, a Cougar bottle, each other, the stereo blasting (Nirvana + Alanis Morissette) and the place all to ourselves (and the dog). We are just making homemade pumpkin soup for tea...’

School: ‘I couldn’t give a flying fuck what my parents want me to do. At one stage when my dad was cracking a major fuss, I nearly took off with the circus. Ultimately I want to be a teacher but it’s a total utter fantasy land dream.’

While her letters were tiny glimpses of a life that felt as far-fetched as it did fictional, it wasn’t until years later that I understood being ‘white’ has less to do with the way you look, or what you do and eat, but the unqualified comfort you feel in your own skin. It’s the sum of suburban domesticity, the heady smell of vinegar and hot crinkle-cut chips, the Kelly Slater and Dieter Brummer posters on your bedroom walls – the lake of collective memories that brims over every time a stranger catches sight of your face.

Interestingly, it seems like that sense of radical comfort can be nourished. At a Sundance Festival panel this year, Indian–American actress and

showrunner Mindy Kaling said: 'I have a personality defect where I refuse to see myself as an underdog. It has gotten me into a lot of trouble but is also the reason for my success. I am often reminded of it when people ask me why I'm confident. Why wouldn't I be? It's because my parents raised me with the entitlement of a tall, blonde, white man.'

My parents never brought me up this way. But I'd already had a taste of what that feels like in my childhood in Hong Kong: when everyone at school, on the street, on TV and on the radio looked and sounded – reassuringly – like me.

THE DEBATE ON whether or not we have arrived at a post-racial world always reminds me of US comedian Hannibal Buress's 'discount apple juice' joke. Buress, an apple juice lover, recalls the day he spotted a great deal at the supermarket. Excited by the dollar-a-litre juice sale, he grabbed eight bottles with his girlfriend – before noticing an old man shaking his head at them at the checkout: 'I'm like, "What's wrong, old man? You mad cause we got all this apple juice?... 'Cause hell yeah I'm hoarding this juice, taking advantage of this before the store realises what a horrible mistake they've made."' It wasn't until later that he realised he'd completely misread the situation. The old man wasn't shaking his head because of the apple juice. He was shaking his head because Buress was black and his girlfriend was white: 'But I was so caught up in the euphoria of having all that apple juice that for a minute I lived in a world where racism didn't exist.'

Indeed, when we look at our own multicultural society, it's tempting to assume – as Buress did – that we are long past the point of old-fashioned racial bigotry. After all, how can we *possibly* be intolerant if there are more ethnic faces than ever in Australian schools, workplaces and on TV? How could we *not* be bathing in the bain-maries of goodwill when so many of us can judge the authenticity of a good pad thai, *bahn mi* or *bibimbap*? How can we not be champions of diversity if our cities are home to so many interracial couples and their supernaturally beautiful kids?

Well, it's because the numbers tell a completely different story.

In 2010, an Australian National University study found that in order to get the same number of job interviews as a white Australian for an entry

level role, someone with a Chinese last name will have to apply for 68 per cent more jobs. The figure is 64 per cent for applicants with Middle Eastern-sounding names and 35 per cent for Aboriginal counterparts.

Then there is the latest *Mapping Social Cohesion* survey by the Scanlon Foundation, which found 19 per cent of Australians were discriminated against because of their skin colour, ethnic origin or religious beliefs – the highest ever since 2007. Meanwhile, a 2014 Deakin University study revealed four out of five high school students born in non-English speaking countries experience racist taunts at least once a month.

Without question, these are sobering statistics. But to borrow from US Secretary of Defense (and conservative mascot) Donald Rumsfeld, it is the ‘unknown unknowns’ that should spark alarm. In other words, try as we may to measure overt discrimination, it’s impossible to count the number of opportunities you weren’t given if you had no idea they existed in the first place.

In the same way that glass ceilings exist for women, experts argue that when it comes to ethnic Australians being locked out of leadership positions – and, by extension, mainstream culture at large – there is a worrying level of ‘unconscious bias’ at play.

‘Western culture has long entertained the trope of the invisible, inoffensive and submissive Asian,’ said Race Discrimination Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane in a 2014 speech. The same destructive stereotype, presumably, that explains why, despite the fact that Asian–Australians represent 11 per cent of the population, only 1.9 per cent of executive managers and 4.2 per cent of directors have an Asian background. It’s tempting to fancy ourselves colourblind just because we happen to live in a multicultural society. But wouldn’t it be a shame to fall into a post-racial slumber when the trappings of true diversity are practically within our reach?

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Candice Chung is the editor of Fairfax’s feminist website *Daily Life*. Her work has appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Age*, *Sunday Life*, *Cleo* and *Yen* magazine. She is also a restaurant reviewer for *SMH Spectrum* and a contributor to the *Good Food Guide*. In 2015, she was a Walkley Awards judge for the freelance writing category.

# INTO THE AIR, INTO THE SKY, INTO THE CLOUDS

DANUSHKA SILVA

OUR VAN FLOATED on the river of mid-morning Kandy traffic. As though we had dropped anchor, we drifted forward sometimes, or a little to the left or right. Around us, the polished chrome sedans and rusted buses were smothered in smog that resembled the mist that sometimes cloaked a river in the morning or after sunset.

On the side of the road, sweat had already stained the armpits of men in business shirts. Women in saris walked with their long plaited hair swinging like pendulums. Children in blue shorts and white, freshly ironed shirts screeched like cymbal-banging monkeys, oblivious to the heat, dust and smog. The stray dogs knew better though. They shuffled out of the sun and into the shade, congregating in lazy packs.

In the front of the van sat the driver and the guide we had hired to take us to the river. In the back sat my family. The air conditioning kept us cool like the underground crypt of some European church. The tinted windows dulled the vibrancy of the world beyond. Directly beside me was my sister – white iPod earphones in her ears, Ray-Bans over her eyes. Her hair, usually straightened in the morning, was frizzy and unkempt in the humidity. In front of her sat my mother, her breathing slow and rhythmic. Her skin was oily from the sunscreen she'd applied before we departed. Beside her was my father. He sat with both feet flat on the floor. His hands were



palm down on his thighs. Around his neck hung his camera. On his black T-shirt was the white silhouette of an elephant and in the bottom corner, written in white, were the words 'Sri Lanka'. His head was turned toward the window.

It was my father's voice, in Sinhalese, that broke our sepulchral silence.

'And this also has been one of the dark places of the Earth.'

He spoke without the expectation of a reply. He addressed no one in particular. My sister continued to listen to her music and my mother's breathing remained as rhythmic as a river lapping its bank.

'Of course I mean years ago, before you were born, when I must have been around your age, younger even. When I first made my trip to this river.'

He didn't look back but I felt he was addressing me. It had been my father's idea to travel to the river. Indeed, it had been his idea to visit Sri Lanka again, as a family, after so many years. My sister and I had protested: we were too old for family trips – my sister twenty-one and me almost eighteen – and we had too much to leave behind in Australia, even for a couple of weeks. My father listened then simply asked us again to please accompany him to Sri Lanka.

There had been a time when he pretended not to understand us if we addressed him in English. He'd put on a bemused air, shrug his shoulders and reply in Sinhalese that he couldn't speak English. But he'd given that up a long time ago and when he asked us the second time to come with him to Sri Lanka, though he had asked in Sinhalese, at the end of the request he'd asked in English, 'please?'

'Of course, all of this was different back then,' he waved towards the buildings and construction sites on both sides of the road. 'Thirty years ago I never could have predicted any of this. How could I? I knew at the time if I ever returned it wouldn't be in the same way. Hindsight's a funny thing.'

His voice was deeper than usual. He spoke as though he didn't care if no one heard him.

I didn't realise at the time that he was about to begin a story that I'd heard a truncated version of countless times. Whenever I went

near the water my father would mention how his friend Ravi had drowned in water ‘just like this’. Ravi, my father would say, was the best swimmer he knew, the best friend he’d ever had. He’d tell me to be careful: if Ravi could drown, then anyone could drown.

I had always assumed he made up that story to frighten me. He’d change the story to fit the scenario: if we were at the ocean, Ravi had been dragged down by a rip-tide; if we were at a river, Ravi had been caught in some rocks. My father had never told me the details, so I assumed that it wasn’t true.

Perhaps the only reason he wanted to travel to the river where his friend had drowned was so he could tell the full story. But I think it had something to do with being back in Sri Lanka. My father was different in Sri Lanka. I sensed that he could be himself there. I would see him sitting on my grandfather’s chair for hours – his legs spread over the arm rests, his sarong tied up around his bare stomach. I remember the last time we visited he found my grandfather’s bike and with my cousin’s help he got it working. He would go for long rides around town and come back with bags of fresh fruit and delight at how juicy they were – always adamant that we’d never find fruit so good back in Australia.

But I think my presence had a lot to do with why he told the story again now. The story was directed at me.

‘WE STARTED EARLY that morning,’ he began. ‘Me, Samir and Ravi met one another at the bus depot where we ordinarily took the local bus to school. In Sri Lanka everything begins early. The sun hadn’t risen but we had to shout over the honking of three-wheelers and the exhausts of car engines as we watched our school bus depart.

‘The regional bus was bigger but it was rapidly filling up, not only with passengers but boxes and packages. The storage area at the bottom was full, so two bare-footed boys stood on the roof yelling instructions at people to pass their packages up. They must have been our age,’ he said. Then he added, without turning around, ‘About your age now.’

I pretended not to be paying attention and he went on.

‘When we boarded, the bus driver greeted us with a yawn that smelled of cigarettes and chewing gum. He rubbed his bloodshot eyes with the back of his hand then gave us a once over: taking in our white school-shirts and navy blue pants with perfect creases ironed in by our mothers. We waited, certain that he’d figure out we were wagging school and kick us off the bus. But he simply waved us on, scratched his balls then stretched his legs out over the steering wheel and on to the dashboard. We slipped past him, mischievous smiles on our faces, proud of our deception.’

I caught a glimpse of my father’s reflection in the window. He had a smile I’d never seen before: the mischievous smile of his youth, perhaps.

I recalled the last time I took a bus with my father in Sri Lanka. I remembered paying the conductor – a boy only a few years older than me – and waiting for my change. He had organised all the notes in the webbing of his fingers – his hands were his cash register. I stood toward the back, gripping the railings. More and more people got on and the bus darted violently through the traffic. The fumes from downtown Colombo oozed in through the open windows along with the dense, humid heat. My back was wet with sweat. Every time the bus hurtled toward the stop, breaking through from the far right lane to the left, I could feel my stomach turn. We got off two stops earlier than we were meant to and I rushed for the closest gutter. When I had finished, my father handed me a bottle of soft drink he had bought from a street vendor.

I tuned in to my father’s story again. ‘At each stop more and more people squeezed on. You’d move your hand to grab a rail and accidentally touch someone’s moist back. That old bus vomited fumes. Its rusted gears made a grinding noise each time the driver changed up or down. But we’d grown up with those buses. We didn’t know any different. We stared out the windows as the city disappeared and the buzz of three-wheelers was replaced by the bellow of oxen dragging carts full of barebacked farmers, smoking cigarettes, staring intently at us inside the bus.

‘We’d been travelling for an hour-and-a-half when Ravi said we

were at our stop. We pushed past people who gave us dirty looks, as if they knew we had no real business getting off there.

‘After the bus had driven off and the smoke from the exhaust had cleared, we were left in the blinding sunlight. It was like opening your eyes for the first time; no, like opening all your senses. I remember the smell of paddy fields, of manure, of rice, of vegetation and of mountains – green-blue silhouettes on the horizon. The squawking of a distant bird was the only sound to break the silence. A cool, soft breeze blew through our damp hair, entered our nostrils and permeated our lungs – purging the reek of the rusty bus and the city.

‘There were no construction sites back then, only a few clay huts among the paddy fields where generations of farming families lived – grandparents to grandchildren who would sit together eating and talking. Men with bare, black chests, sarongs hitched up above their knees. Women with long, oily hair curled into buns, blouses stained orange from dhal curry, fingers mashing down handfuls of rice, feeding plump children sitting near naked on tiny stools.

‘And no one saw the beauty of it all,’ my father said, louder now. ‘The simplicity. Those people then shared a kinship with their neighbours and the land – with their rice crops and oxen, with their chickens, with the sky and trees and their country. All of it, everything, unified.’

HOW MY FATHER romanticised his past! He spoke with such ferocity – barely pausing between sentences – but he was talking about families he didn’t know and memories he couldn’t have shared. He had grown up in the city. His father was a police officer. But he spoke with authority, and no one interrupted him with the facts.

‘Across the road was a bakery where three men sat outside drinking tea. They all wore sarongs hitched up above their knees. One was shirtless while the others wore grubby singlets. We could feel their eyes on us as we walked by, staring at the ground.

“No school today boys?”

‘We felt ourselves imposters in their morning ritual of sitting with a cup of tea and watching the bus go past. I wondered how often they saw anyone get off.

“Not today,” Ravi lied.

‘The one without the shirt ejected a wad of spit onto the clay beside him. He chewed his betel like a cow chews its cud. He slurped back some red drool, wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand and pulled his pouch of betel leaves closer toward him.

“Where is it that you’re off to then?” he asked.

‘Ravi pointed vaguely toward the mountains, saying we were going to the river. The man grunted then spat another red glob.

“You boys from the city?”

‘We nodded.

“City boys,” his friend said. “You city boys should be in school.”

“You even know how to get to the river?” the shirtless man asked.

‘Ravi nodded. “There’s a road, a few hundred metres that way before a path.”

‘The shirtless man shook his head. “No, no. The best way is through the paddy fields. Go straight through until you reach a well, then turn left into the bush; that’s the way you want to go.”

‘We hurriedly thanked him and walked away.

“You city boys be careful,” a voice called from behind us.’

OUR VAN WAS off the highway now and had turned into a smaller road ridden with potholes. The vehicle sank into potholes and with great effort rose back out, the engine screaming and the tyres searching for a solid footing.

On my right were paddy fields that belonged to the nearby houses. Most of them were outgrown and abandoned. From somewhere a buffalo produced a great lamenting bellow. My father looked toward the direction of the sound. I stared at the back of his head: at the grey hairs that he had stopped colouring and at his neck, the skin folded and loose, a few shades darker than my own.

‘I remember how these paddy fields used to smell,’ he said.

‘They smelled of moisture. Everything did. We three were soaked with sweat from walking and the wind that blew from the mountains made us shiver. I remember almost photographically all that went on

that day. I remember Samir asked Ravi about the last time he had been to the river, but Ravi was cryptic in his answer.

‘Ravi’s father was from this area. He had lived in one of those paddy field huts before he joined the police force and moved into the city. He’d retired and Ravi and the rest of his family lived on his pension. There was only Ravi and his mother and father left – before his middle brother, Gayan, came back from the war. Ravi was the youngest. His sister was already married with children and his eldest brother was in the army too. Gayan had been discharged after losing his left arm. Rumour had it that he’d lost a few fingers operating some faulty equipment. The wound became infected and the doctors were forced to amputate his arm from the elbow down. But I never knew for certain. No one talked to me about it. My parents took food for Ravi’s family and sweets for Gayan but they never discussed what happened.

‘I never talked to Ravi about it either, even though he was my closest friend. I never thought to talk to him. Ravi was mature for his age. He joked around with us, but sometimes he could be very serious. When he got like that we all just left him alone.’

It was strange to hear him describe Ravi in that way. If I were to describe my father, it wouldn’t be too different: quiet, serious, brooding. He rarely showed emotion – neither anger nor affection. When we argued, he’d stand without responding. If I wanted something he’d simply say no, as though he didn’t need to give a reason. His lack of engagement always antagonised me and he’d win the argument by staying detached.

One time, though, he did react. I wanted to skip Sinhalese school one Saturday morning. He refused to let me. We argued, and for once he lost his cool. He slapped me across the face. I was fifteen at the time, far too old to be slapped. I can’t remember what I said to him. I know I told him I hated him; I probably said much worse.

The next morning at breakfast – after I’d spent all evening and night in my room refusing to talk to anyone – he acted as though nothing had happened. He never apologised. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him apologise to me for anything.

I'd hear stories or read things about father-and-son relationships and wonder about my own. I knew he loved me, yet I'd always felt I didn't know him. I figured it would change when I was older. When I was a man – when I had my own family and my own kids – then we'd be closer. So it was strange to hear him be so candid as we travelled towards the river.

'Ravi didn't say too much about the last time he'd come to the river. What he did say was that the river was beautiful: it was fast flowing on one side, while on the other there were calmer rivulets. He said the foliage on the bank was almost impenetrable in some places, and he told us there were waterfalls with deep, dark pools into which you could leap if you wanted to.

'I've always wondered if he came with the intention of diving where he did. His dive I've rehashed in my head countless times. The horror of standing above the brown pool, waiting for his head to resurface.'

The driver parked the van in the shade. We'd reached as far as we could go by car and the rest of the journey was a short walk away. We walked in single file, I behind my father, watching the back of his head. We could hear the river. I pictured its little nooks and rivulets that formed waterfalls under which you could rest your back and feel the water, like firm fingertips, massage your spine. Somewhere downstream elephants bathed in it and somewhere upstream women washed their clothes, washed themselves and washed their children in it.

When I saw a clearing I knew we had reached our destination. A gust of wind blew through the leaves and the rustling branches above momentarily drowned out the sound of the rushing water. My father took a deep breath.

'I've always been fascinated by rivers,' he said. 'By their power, by the way they can cut through the Earth and carve it up over centuries and millennia. The tiniest and seemingly most insignificant trickle has such an immense, invisible power. And I've always imagined the stories a river could tell. Imagine all the creatures that would have relied on the river for survival and all the lives that the river must've taken away. Ravi wouldn't have been the first or the last. He'd just be another story as far as the river was concerned.

‘I remember looking down at the spot where Ravi would soon jump. The river was magnificent then. It was just like Ravi had described. I can see it perfectly: our brown, wet chests with new hairs stuck flat, stretch marks on our shoulders from growing up too fast. We were only boys. We stood on the edge of a waterfall and looked down at our reflection in the pool below.

“What do you think?” Ravi asked. He was standing a little further toward the edge than Samir or I. Perhaps half a metre away, certainly within arm’s reach.

‘We remained staring at the pool. But we looked beyond our reflection on the surface of the water. We looked into the river and we saw something, or at least I’ve always believed we did. It sounds ridiculous, but I’ve always thought that what we saw, what I saw, was the heart of that river.

‘Ravi broke eye contact with the river and took a few steps backwards – and they were very cautious steps. His knees were bent, his arms were spread and the palms of his hands leant on the surface of the river as though for support. With every step forward his feet searched among the rocks and pebbles for a solid footing. He was looking for something, and after a few steps he plunged his arms down and pulled out a large stone. It was polished smooth like a giant oval egg. He carried it against his chest, like a baby, and brought it back, a few centimetres closer to the edge of the waterfall than where he had been standing before.

‘He looked down over the edge. Then, he took a step back, braced himself, and with a twist of his hips hurled the stone high into the air over the edge. The three of us watched it initially float against the blue sky before it dropped; we heard the splash before we could look down and see where the river swallowed it.

‘The ripples floated toward the edge of the pool and eventually disappeared. No one spoke. We didn’t look at one another. We didn’t ask Ravi why he had thrown the rock in.

“What do you think?” he asked again.

‘I can’t remember what we said. We probably told him not to be stupid: that it was too far to jump, too risky, too dangerous. Samir and



I weren't great swimmers; Ravi was the best out of the three of us, and if anything happened to him we weren't in any position to help. I'm sure we told him that. And anyway, he wasn't really asking us.

'Everyone, after the fact, said that we were just naive and stupid – kids looking for an adventure. Ravi jumped because he was trying to impress us, they all said. But it wasn't true. Ravi wasn't half as naive as everyone thought, and he certainly didn't need to impress us. I don't know what made him jump, but for a long time I blamed the river. I saw something down in that river and I know Ravi looked down and saw something too. Or maybe he saw what I saw and reacted differently. I saw life and death down there in the river. That is to say, for a moment I swear I saw a tiny glimpse of what the river had seen; I heard the stories the river had heard. I'm not ashamed to say I blinked. But Ravi didn't. I saw him being hypnotised by the river. There was something in his eyes as he stared into that incomprehensible heart.

'I wanted Ravi to jump. I can admit it now, to all of you. I'm not proud of it but it's true. I'm not going to blame anything or anyone else – not my youth, not the way I looked up to Ravi, not even the river that in some small, though not insignificant way, conquered and corrupted all three of us. But I did want him to jump, and though I told him not to, and though I warned him against what could happen, I wanted to see him try. Maybe Ravi saw that in my eyes as we told him not to do it. I can analyse these things for the rest of my life, I suppose. Either way, Samir and I stepped back as Ravi took maybe three or four steps and then leapt over the edge and into the air, into the sky.

'We heard the splash. Samir held onto my shoulder as we watched and we listened and we waited. We saw the white, frothing water at the mouth of the waterfall churning. The ripples spread over the surface and the perfect reflection of the sky reassembled itself on the dark, beautiful water in the pool. We listened to the river and to the millions of sounds all perfectly arranged, all details perfectly masked, so that all we could hear was the one sound of rushing water, the sound of life-giving, life-taking rushing water.

'I can't remember who spoke first after that. But we waited for a long time.'

My father took a deep breath, as though having resurfaced for air. He sat looking into the distance, into the green valley where the river disappeared.

I followed his gaze toward the horizon and the spindly tops of palm trees and the dense olive green of jackfruit trees. I imagined my father standing above the pool, and I imagined myself with him, standing with Samir and Ravi. I wondered if I'd have had the courage to jump as Ravi did. And, I wondered, if I had somehow resurfaced, would I break the skin of the water as the same boy who jumped in.

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Danushka Silva was born in Sri Lanka but has spent most of the twenty-five years of his life in the suburbs of Melbourne. He graduated with a masters in creative writing, publishing and editing, from the University of Melbourne and currently works in publishing.

## ESSAY

# Islam, capitalism and literature

The novel as a tool of fundamentalism

Okky Madasari

NEARLY SEVENTEEN YEARS after the fall of Suharto's totalitarian New Order regime, Indonesia is a different nation and many changes have taken place inside South-East Asia's biggest economy, not least those within its literary world.

Indonesia is now a vibrant democracy – the president, governors, mayors and regents have been directly elected by the people since 2004. At the national level, Indonesia has regular direct elections every five years to elect a president and legislators, while at the regional level, successive elections of governors, mayors and regents take place in thirty-four provinces and more than five hundred cities and regencies across the archipelago.

Since the fall of Suharto, Jakarta has delegated significant power to its surrounding provinces, cities and regencies, while the country's press freedom is among the highest in the region. Everybody is now free to express themselves – to be creative, write and publish – and the state has little power to ban or even censor literary works.

In this climate of freedom, citizens are able to express their opinions about existing conditions and criticise the government without fear. While a number of books are still banned by the Attorney-General's office, no one has been detained for writing books or articles in the media. The law guarantees a constitutional right and legal protection for mass media and published material, such as newspapers, magazines and books, without government interference or censorship.

Literary works banned during the New Order era, such as those written by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, can now be found easily in book stores. Writers jailed under Suharto's regime can now publish their work and are free to speak at events across the country.

New publishers have mushroomed in this open environment; in 2014, there were 1,126 officially registered publishers across the Indonesian archipelago. (The number could have been twice that if unregistered publishers were included.) During the thirty-two years of the New Order, when the draconian regime monitored every publisher and every book published, only six hundred and fifty publishers existed. Companies regarded as dangerous by the state were quickly closed down.

This new publishing freedom has been supported by technological advancements in printing, such as print-on-demand, which enable the production of more books and encourage more writers to aim for publication. In 2014, around eighteen-thousand book titles were published, a jump from around only eight-thousand titles in 1996.

In the post-New Order era, Indonesia has seen a number of literary works produced that are considered phenomenal not only in term of their sales, but also their influence. I divide these into three main categories: Islamic novels, motivational novels and romance.

Many Islamic novels are labelled as such by their publishers, often on the cover. Motivational novels are called 'novels for the soul' or 'spirit-developing novels', and romance novels – mostly for teenagers and urbanites – are labelled 'metropop' or 'chick lit', and seem out of touch with reality and the problems faced by society.

These three categories of modern Indonesian literature dominate our bookstores; they occupy the front shelves, next to books on Islamic teachings. One such successful novel will inspire dozens of duplicates written on the same topic using the same formula – as long as they sell.

While formerly the nation's standard of a bestselling novel meant reaching sales of ten to twenty thousand copies nationwide, these new novel categories can sell hundreds of thousands, or even millions of copies. To use a Foucauldian phrase, they become the dominant discourse for Indonesian people.

The question is why, after the fall of a totalitarian regime and when the country has such a degree of freedom, are the majority of Indonesia's writers indifferent to, and even ignorant about, social conditions? They surrender to stories that detach themselves from reality and fall into the realm of soap opera and Islamic moral guidance. Critical thought and questioning social conditions are essential for a developing country like Indonesia to improve its standards of living. The novel in Indonesia might be seen not only as entertainment but also – deliberately or not – as a tool for pushing certain agendas.

Literature portrays a snapshot of life or a mirror of what happens, has happened or might happen. It represents conditions of a society in a certain period of time. So, it's a no-brainer that literary works cannot be entirely separated from social reality; they are born from and are shaped by it. However, they also help *form* social reality. Social changes influence literature and, in turn, these works can influence social change.

Within the context of Indonesian literature, there is a marked difference between literary works created under colonial rule – books published by Balai Pustaka (a publishing company established by the Dutch Colonial government in 1920) and Angkatan Pujanga Baru ('New Poet Generation', which emerged in the 1930s and lasted to 1945), for example – and revolutionary works under Angkatan 45 ('Generation 45', which arose out of Indonesia's struggle for independence from just before 1945 into the 1950s). These works are also very different from literature produced by writers affiliated with Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat ('Lekra, People's Cultural Institution', a body established by the Indonesian Communist Party) or literary works that appeared under the New Order regime and current post-New Order era. Each of the nation's historical eras has produced literature with distinct characteristics.

NOVELS PUBLISHED BY Balai Pustaka were mostly about the impacts of tradition and local ethnic values, especially the traditions and culture of the Minang, the biggest ethnic group in West Sumatra. Some questioned certain values and practises within the community at the time, such as forced marriage and feudalism. The stories are sentimental and usually end tragically, with characters ultimately surrendering to tradition. The noticeable works

during this period include *Azab dan Sengsara* ('Punishment and Misery', 1920) by Merari Siregar, *Siti Nurbaya* (1922) by Marah Rusli and Abdul Muis' *Salah Asuhan* ('Wrongly Educated', 1928).

The subsequent generation of writers – New Writer Generation or New Poet Generation – broke this ethnicity boundary. Their literature is optimistic and full of hope, unlinked to local values. Their novels – especially those by Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, the pioneer and biggest writer of the generation – highlight young people's enthusiasm to embrace the new world, full of hope and belief in universal values rather than tradition and ethnicity. The poet Amir Hamzah started the country's modern poetry tradition, using a simple style and diction – his *Nyanyi Sunyi* ('Silently Sing', 1937), for example, is forever breaking free from traditional Malay-style poems.

The next era, known as Generation 45 (1945), described the world as a place for struggle. According to the literature of this time, life is a fight from beginning to end. Poetry dominated the period, with Chairil Anwar, Indonesia's most celebrated poet, leading the way. He and fellow poets believed they were part of a global community, and claimed not only their identity as Indonesians but also their right as heirs to the world's body of knowledge and literature. In their manifesto, *Surat Kepercayaan Gelanggang* ('Gelanggang's Letter of Confidence', 1950), they made their claim as the voice of universal humanism.

It was in this period that the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) established Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (known as 'Lekra'), the Institute for the People's Culture. It harshly criticised universal humanism and the spirit of Generation 45. Lekra, which carried the tag 'Literature for the People', considered universal humanism the extension of colonial power and capitalism. The most famous of its authors was Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Supporters of universal humanism became a target of bullying and even violence, and Lekra's writers became dominant in the second half of the 1950s and the early 1960s.

As a form of resistance in 1963, a group of writers produced a cultural manifesto embracing universal humanism, condemning Lekra's tactics and rejecting the use of political power over literature. Just a couple of years later, the scene changed dramatically.

Following the bloody anti-communist purge of 1965 and 1966, all writers affiliated with Lekra were jailed without legal trials. The subsequent New Order regime became more and more repressive. First, the iron-fisted government banned all books related to the PKI and Lekra. Second, it took measures to ensure all books published would not put its supporters in danger. During that period, there was no freedom of expression. Censorship of the media and books was common and considered normal, as people were made to believe that the PKI was still waiting to take over Indonesia – and they would do it through books.

The thirty-two years of New Order government were Indonesia's literary dark age. Writers in this period generally played it safe; however, several did try to write about what was happening. Ahmad Tohari, for instance, tried to highlight the fate of PKI-labelled victims in his novels, although these underwent heavy censorship. The famous poet and dramatist Wahyu Sulaiman Rendra saw his performances cancelled or banned by the authorities.

Economic crisis, followed by massive demonstrations across the country in May 1998, brought down Suharto and his New Order regime. A new era in almost all aspects of life began in Indonesia. Freedom and democracy were nurtured across the country, and everybody was able to say whatever they wanted. But...

SEVERAL YEARS AFTER the fall of the New Order, Indonesia remained euphoric. Such euphoria was felt within the literary world. In 1998, Ayu Utami published her novel *Saman*, which led the way in breaking the taboo of how Indonesian women expressed themselves, especially their sexuality. *Saman's* phenomenal success was followed by other bold women writers such as Djenar Maesa Ayu, whose short stories have been described as 'brave' and 'provocative', and Dewi ('Dee') Lestari's 2001 breakthrough novel *Supernova*, which mixed straight and gay love stories with science and spirituality. They briefly dominated the discourse within the country's literary world.

But these too have been swept out by that new wave of Islamic, motivational and romantic literature with phenomenal sales and influence. Among these bestselling novels are two exemplars of the now dominant genres in

Indonesia: *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* ('Love Verses', 2004) by Habiburahman El Shirazy, and *Laskar Pelangi* ('Rainbow Troops', 2005) by Andrea Hirata. Both have been adapted for movies and attracted audiences in the millions across the country. The first, a romance, is masked by a conservative interpretation of Islamic teachings. It proposes that a Muslim man – however poor he is – can have more than one wife while still enjoying the wealth of his first wife. The second, a motivational novel, is a dream-come-true tale about a boy living on one of Indonesia's small islands, who went on to study in Europe and have a successful life ever after. Dozens of titles using the same recipe have crowded the bookstores and occupied conversations among many Indonesians. They represent the current dreams of Indonesian people, and allow them to buy their dreams cheap.

With 90 per cent of its 250 million population declared Muslim, Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim majority country. When *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* gained huge success in sales, the publishing companies knew what type of books to sell. At this point, a rare phenomena occurred: the marriage between capitalism and religion, in this case Islam.

The success of *Laskar Pelangi* was also harnessed by publishers. They realised that, as with soap operas, people are entertained by novels that reflect their dreams, and many Indonesians dream of winning a scholarship to study overseas. The Islamic novel *Negeri Lima Menara* ('Land of Five Towers') blends this dream of studying and working overseas with an Islamic theme.

These novels show perfect union between conservative Islam, young intellectuals who have studied or want to study overseas, and capitalism. The result is the death of serious and critical literature, and the enabling of conservative Islamic teachings to penetrate wider and wider audiences.

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Okky Madasari is an Indonesian novelist. Three of her four novels have been translated into English: *The Years of The Voiceless* ('Entrok'), *The Outcast* ('Maryam') and *Bound* ('Pasung Jiwa'). Her other novel, 86, is now in the process of translation. She received her master's degree in sociology from the University of Indonesia. She is also the co-founder and program director of ASEAN Literary Festival.



## FICTION

# TINDERBOX

ALICE BISHOP

BACK WHEN THEY'VE not yet met, Ameer wears a pressed shirt in his profile picture, Ada a cellophane stare. Then it's winter, June, and a soft-screen glow lights up her face like his, silvery crescent moons cupping both pairs of eyes. Marjan the lion, lapis lazuli, fire-and-forgets. Ada's smudged laptop glass shows new search histories, not her usual Facebook feed, framed by too-bright ads for geometric wedding rings and *maquiladora*-made clothes and shoes. Her Tinder top, crab-coloured, lies scrunched on the redwood floor. Filling moments, Ada scrolls, comparing other people's pictures to her own – marked by three emoji suns (☀️☀️☀️), a bunched smile, along with other musts: 'twenty-six years old, mostly happy, five-foot ten'.

They speak, online, about Kandahar and Flowerdale, about Preston – how you can get good, cheap coffee in all three. عاچ ښځه, Ameer types that first night, attaching a photo of the warm drink, beside a bowl of defrosted pomegranate jewels – red juice bleeding over hills of no-name ice cream: vanilla bean. *The pomegranates of Kandahar*, Ameer writes, *they grow like money does here – on trees*. Ada continues learning what she can on stalling wireless, tabs open to ten: the open plains of Bamyan, his country's glaciated north, along with sleeping butterfly mines – laid to wait by roadsides. *All the cars back home*, Ameer adds much later, when they are comfortable on the phone, *were Toyotas when I left. Every one*.

Ameer Sahar: 'thirty-one, sometimes lawyer, five-foot seven', is working in translation – Pashto, Dari, Arabic – sometimes for VicRoads, in Sunshine, but mostly on Christmas Island. They take his phone from him up there, his shoelaces too. When Ada asks him what it's like working in the camps Ameer asks her if she has a driver's

licence, and if, when he comes down, they can go to her hometown – *to see the houses with the brick fences you can step over, the koalas in the trees*. There are no trees there, anymore, Ada writes, and koalas are rare. Are there really bears in Kandahar? Ada asks, her keyboard sticky from honey, from on-sale brie. *Lots of them*, Ameer says, his buried voice crackling, later, through the island's chalky line, *in the Pamir hills*.

ADA'S OWN TOYOTA, rusting, starts to frost over most mornings: the last owner's bumper stickers (for RRR, for Bright ☀) peeling from mid-morning mist, from sun. She unpacks her only surviving teenage jumper – pink galahs and sulphur crests knitted in. Taking a photo in the Colgate-flecked bathroom mirror, her caption for Ameer reading: *Cockatoos like these ate our decking when I was small*. Walking to the milk bar, later – for a Caramello Koala, for canned cola – Ada feels Flowerdale gravel beneath her jelly sandals, not the Coburg pavement it actually is. The power poles are the trees around her family home, still standing – uncharred and tall.

Afghanistan's about the size of Texas, Ada reads, in between Googling 'Ameer Sahar' again and again. She finds hundreds of people with the same name, along with a short essay written in Pashto that Google can't quite translate. The title is clear, 'Same Boat, Now'. When Ada asks Ameer about his flight here, he only mentions the warmer weather on Christmas Island – comparing it to the VicRoads office, Sunshine, the place not nearly as sunny as he'd first thought it would be. *In other news*, he says in a short voicemail left on her phone, *it's our fasting month. Just ten more sleeps 'til morning coffees, 'til cigarettes*. Ada, sitting against her back wire door, thinks of Ameer's fingers – short, rough, nicotine-stained – threaded through her own.

THE FLOWERDALE RIDGE once bloomed with Victorian wildflowers: wax-lip orchids, early Nancy's, native heath. But Ada only remembers the leaning gums, smelling of home, and September-blooming wattle: silver, yellow, grey. She tells Ameer about the cockatoo with the cable-tie anklet – the escaped one she always saw on the deck when she was small. Perhaps, she thinks, it was some eccentric

type's long-lost balcony bird. *Maybe it was that one that screeched*, Ada almost writes, *when I looked up to the sulphur-streaked flock, fleeing smoke*. But as usual she just deletes the details – her keyboard's Cmd + Z short-cut worn.

*Four bedrooms, mountain-ash floors, silver-flecked doors* Ada is Skyping Ameer, video-off, when he eventually asks about her family home – his island wireless stalling and Coburg cats yawping over the bin-night scraps on her street outside. My first one? she asks, remembering a leaning hen house, along with the smell of toast in carpeted, photo-lined halls. *Yes, your first place*, Ameer answers, mentioning his own dad, then the ice-cream he bought him and his brothers back from the Afghan highlands – *made from snow*, he says, *it had a taste all of its own*. Are your brothers here? Ada types, before wondering if she should have. 'Ameer is typing' shows up, then vanishes. Then Ada goes to the fridge for coconut water – carton printed with ersatz-blue ocean, with cartoon-like leaning palms, bending to some unseen island wind.

Before letting Ameer pinpoint where in Victoria Flowerdale was, or perhaps of what it became, Ada begins speaking of snow – of a planned trip to Hotham, maybe Thredbo. Was it ever cold in the Kandahar plains? Ada writes, before looking it up on Wikipedia, at the average mean temperature of 18.6 degrees Celsius. Kandahar winter begins in December, she reads, and sees most of its precipitation as rain. *Flowerdale*, Ameer almost repeats, *sounds very nice*. But then, Ada says – remembering neighbours' cars like dried-out, blackened beetles – *Christmas Island, associations aside, that place sounds nice, too*.

*Two thousand nine hundred and sixty one* Ameer spells out, word-by-word – his font changing to Palatino, to ten-point instead of twelve. Those thousands of people, Ada reads, eat Weet-Bix and angel-hair pasta with sauce most days – tinned peaches on Saturdays, too. *Occasionally though*, Ameer adds, *one will eat carefully crushed Coke-bottle glass*. When Ada asks if he finds it hard, seeing people confined up there, Ameer mentions that it's just six weeks on, then six weeks off, for him: *You can't think of it another way*.

In her rented yard, the backs of her bare thighs covered in milk-crate print, Ada closes her laptop around ten – mid-morning sun

catching clumps of unwashed mascara, the toast crumbs of pilling knits. The overgrown garden bed of dried-up artichoke hearts, of zucchinis, gone to seed, makes her think of the roundworms lacing Christmas Island soil – of reading that nothing there grows. *There are no fresh vegetables here*, Ameer confirms on Monday, his voice again sounding smaller on the phone. And Ada wonders if Ameer83@gmail's knees would fit into the backs of her own.

PAKISTANI DETAINEES, WANTING-EYED, drink Noon Chai – a pink-milk, pistachio tea – if they have a big anniversary or if there is a newborn in camp. The babies, Ameer says, are very quiet up there – very well behaved. *My boss company is good in that way, he says, they give the mothers clean blankets, nappies, formula even – if the women are too stressed to feed.* Do you drink Noon Chai at lunchtime? Ada asks, not knowing, for a moment, what else to say. *What are your favourite foods?* Ameer answers, *Are you vegetarian or paleo like a lot of the Australians up here?* He talks about the Seaview chippy – where he goes with co-workers on Friday nights for a feed. Ada sees men and women in their business-blue Serco shirts, ordering with small voices, with eyes on an oily, linoleum floor.

It's long before they meet. July turns to August. Ameer's told not to document the names of his 'clients', only their numbers: 673/RYP/039, maybe 160/AEB/086. Then, *Placement's over soon* – Ameer types, on Facebook messenger – his profile shirt crumpled at the sleeves. Ada looks at the curve of his cheek, the dimple in his chin: the new photograph taken against bare white walls. Ameer says he can't wait to try Coburg coffee, his own toast. *I hope you have a cat to keep you warm*, Ameer writes, and *I'm still looking forward much to seeing the bush.*

'لېلى': the Pashto word for blue. Ada practices writing it on yellowing newspapers, old receipts and flattened Kelloggs' boxes – taken from the neighbour's paper recycle overflow – always spilling into her own. She tries to say it out loud, in preparation for the day she meets Ameer in person – appearing through arrival doors. They'll drink Styrofoam coffees, maybe eat an \$8 airport-lounge caramel slice before she drops him home – the freeway out to Sunshine, perhaps

sunny this one time. *Can we take the Toyota to Flowerdale, tomorrow?* he'll say, reaching out to touch her corduroy thigh. Perhaps then he'll mention the ferns with yellow, powdery flowers, the kind he's seen on Christmas Island tea towels, on the TV. *Maybe*, Ada imagines she'll say, leaning into his scratchy chin – his kiss tasting of airline aftershave and peaches, tinned.

But still waiting, Ada drives out to Flowerdale, to her parents' caravan home. She watches the local library's cooking shows on the donated iPad – her mother noting how to cook the smaller rainbow trout, how to cut carrots into the tiniest match-thin sticks – for when she has a kitchen to call her own again. They both fill themselves with pastry knots, recently bought, from the rebuilt Flowerdale Bakery – each parcel filled with cauliflower and cheese. *Do you ever feel like you're just floating?* Ada asks – her mother's lap full of just-begun knitting and her irises, bright blue, flecked gold. *Yes*, she replies. *I do*. And in the quiet that follows, flakes of pastry fall about them like ash.

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Alice Bishop is from Christmas Hills, Australia. Her writing has appeared in *Australian Book Review*, *Overland*, *Southerly*, *The Suburban Review* and *Seizure*, among others. Her first manuscript of short fiction, *A Constant Hum*, received commendation in the 2015 Premier's Literary Awards.

# Bastard child

Illegitimate beginnings and renewed hope

Elaine Laforteza

‘MY MUM IS pretty devastated about it, you know,’ my friend says. ‘She completely trusted this man and then he goes and cheats on her.’ Her hands ball into fists and the strain in her neck reaches her eyes.

‘You know, if your mum needs to talk to someone, my mum can talk to her,’ I say. ‘She went through something similar and she might be able to help.’

My friend looks at me as if I’ve just offered her a slice of sunshine. ‘That would be fantastic. You know, my mum had such a hard time with my dad, and then she marries that lying cheating bastard...’ Her voice trails off and she looks at me askance. She goes on. ‘But, I don’t know if your mum can really relate. Isn’t it common for men to cheat on their wives where you’re from? Aren’t mistresses common there?’

*Where you’re from.* I’d often heard those words concluded with a question mark by strangers and colleagues. *Where are you from?* Replying that I am from Australia is never enough to quell curiosity. Only when I respond that I’m ‘from the Philippines’ do people stop questioning. In fact, I could say I am ‘from China’ or ‘from Japan’, and they would believe this more readily than ‘from Australia’.

The idea of me coming from *elsewhere* is narrated through the chromatic surface of my skin and the presumptions of those who think that Australia is simply a white space. There are many who implicitly believe in the ubiquitous whiteness of Australia. And those who think to question me about my origins are as common as the mosquitoes that suck on my flesh. So this phrase is common enough, but I never expected to hear it from a friend, especially in the way she was saying it.

Even if cheating, lying bastards are supposedly common *where I'm from*, the pain of being betrayed aches in the same ways. The heart still beats, breaks and shudders wherever you're from and however 'common' misfortune is. Besides, my friend didn't have the whole truth. Yes, my mum was cheated on, but *she* had also been 'the other woman'. Her heart had lived through the two sides of the story, with me as its epilogue.

I knew about my father early on. It's one of my earliest memories, seared into my mind because of the worry sutured into my mum's eyebrows when she told me. This worry snaked into her voice as she revealed that she wasn't married to my father. He was married to someone else. She asked me if this was okay. I wasn't in a position to offer absolution, but I felt her anxiousness drip from her like sweat. I remember reassuring her that it was okay. I explained to her that, for me, her relationship was just like the soap operas my *yayas* (nannies) watched during their *merienda* (snack break). In my five-year-old brain, soap operas were a flurry of shoulder-pads, glamorous permed hair and lingering looks passed from one character to the next. Melodrama and overacting were fairy dust to me.

I saw the worry lift from my mum's face. I felt proud at easing her conscience, but I started to obsess over my papa's intermittent visits. Before he arrived, the mood in our house would swirl with anticipation. My mum dressed in her best clothes, as if she were going for a job interview. She would set her hair in big curlers and apply flawless makeup. She would take time off work and wait for him, with an inane smile plastered across her face.

I was made to dress up as well. My mum and my *yayas* would transform me from a grubby kid to a facsimile princess in an ironed floral gown, ribbons in my hair and my cheeks pinched to make me look as doll-like as possible. It wasn't me. I always felt like a fraud when seeing him. He saw only sanitised versions of me and my mum, never who we were in tired everyday moments. He experienced the gloss, not the substance. At least, that's how I felt. I was my illegitimate self whenever my papa was around.

My father wore particular scents when he was visiting us – soaps, shampoo, conditioner and aftershave. Looking back, my mum suspects he probably had the same scents in his wife's home, and with his other mistresses. He was smart. He would have made sure that he smelt the same wherever he

was to avoid questions about where he had been. He called my mum 'darling', in his strong accent that made the word sound like 'dul-ling'. But mum guesses that the endearment was not so personal. Perhaps he called each one of his women the same name to make sure he didn't blurt out the wrong one.

But he was at my baptism. My mum often tells me this, as if to overcompensate for his absence at other important moments of my life. His signature also inked my birth certificate and claimed me as his blood. There were two pages to this certificate, and on the second page the word *illegitimate* was scrawled in black ink.

UNLAWFUL, ILLEGAL, ILLICIT, dishonest, prohibited, criminal, banned, proscribed: these are the words that Microsoft Word Thesaurus deems synonyms of *illegitimate*. They are such ugly words that don't readily describe how I feel. But they are not a complete mismatch. I can feel the rawness of these synonyms in the way my family remark on my 'goodness', as if they expected something different. I feel the criminality of being a bastard child when I see my mum refuse to take communion during church mass because she imagines God's wrath for her actions. Instead of accepting communion, her eyes fixate on the ground, as if searching for Him in the floor's grooves and creases.

*Illegitimate*. The word haunted me. I was my parents' illegitimate child. We were our own illegitimate family that my papa visited in secret moments. He loved us in snatches that couldn't be measured in the 'real time' he spent with his 'real' family, his legitimate one. In this family, he had another daughter. She was supposedly like me in personality and appearance, but I had never met her.

On my sixth birthday, my papa was due to make an appearance at the bakery where I was having a birthday treat. When he arrived, he wasn't alone. A tall, beautiful woman was hanging on his arm. Her blush was overly pink and her laugh garish... She seemed happy but there was a glint in her eyes that made me draw back from her. My papa didn't hug me that day. Even when he gave me my present, he handed it over while trying to keep as much physical distance from me as possible. As my confusion grew, the woman's laugh got even louder. It sliced through my ears as I opened my present –



a charm bracelet with pieces of golden fruit hanging from it. I held out my wrist for my papa so he could clasp the bracelet on, but he waved me off as he said goodbye. I've never worn that bracelet.

Spurned by my papa's deceit and his new girlfriend, my mum's vulnerable heart fell for another man; a man who could give her security and, most importantly, a way to leave her life behind. We both felt like we had become even more illegitimate than ever before: the cheater was being cheated on.

So, my mother married her new man and we migrated to the USA: the land of opportunity and fresh dreams. But this land was not the blank slate my mum and stepfather craved, so they applied to migrate to Australia. This was a place I'd heard nothing about until my mum showed me touristy pictures of a shiny continent full of furry koalas and elegant looking kangaroos. I imagined I would have a koala as a pet and a kangaroo as my best friend. I began to count down the days until we could move to this magical place.

I was sorely disappointed. Disembarking at Sydney International Airport, my mum, my stepfather and I took a taxi towards our new home. The white sails of the Opera House did nothing for me. Where were the large stretches of red land I had seen in happy snaps of Australia? Why were there no kangaroos or koalas bounding over to me and wanting to be my friend? This was just like any other city. But it was a city that didn't have my papa in it. I was seeing Sydney through the lens of a disappointed child who had left her papa behind.

But my mum made sure that I didn't leave everything in the past. She encouraged me to write letters to my papa. I filled these letters with updates about my new life and the home I was beginning to love: the glorious purple of the jacaranda trees, the surprising cries of the kookaburras, the funny lilting accents of the locals and the crunchiness of hot chips. Being raised on a diet of rice, rice and more rice, hot chips were an exotic culinary treat.

I also wrote to him of the way people asked me, 'Can you speak English?' in a loud, slow voice. I thought these people were all touched in the head and wondered why they spoke so hesitantly. I wrote to him of being the only brown child in my primary school. I was an anomaly in the world of the Northern Beaches: a brown child with an American accent who brought in lunches of rice or peanut butter and jelly (not jam) sandwiches. My fellow

classmates were impressed that I had just arrived from California and they dismissed my past in the Philippines. I emphasised my 'Americanness' to stand out while trying to fit in. I also wrote to my papa about the television advertisements that were blasting on every commercial channel. The advertisement began with a picture of a barren Australian continent that was rapidly being taken over by angry red dots. This red rash spread, chickenpox-like, over the pristine space. As the invasion of red dots stained the country, a booming voice said: 'your land could be next.' This was the time of the Native Title Act. Supposedly the 'abo-ree-gi-nees' were taking over people's backyards. I was aghast. I had just moved here and now we were being taken over? I felt the forceful push of assimilation that demanded that everyone saw Indigenous people as the shadow-beasts that threatened Anglo supremacy. While I wasn't an Anglo-Australian myself, I was co-opted into this message and made to feel as if *my* home were being attacked. I soon learnt that others saw me, too, as an interloper who had trespassed on their land.

OFTEN, MY GRADE five class would play Pictionary – one student drew a picture on the blackboard and the rest of the class had to guess what the picture was. During one particular game, nobody could guess the right answer. One of my classmates had drawn an army tank with guns pointed towards stick figures. We called out 'war' and 'army', but none of those answers were correct. After collectively agreeing that we had given up, my classmate revealed that he had drawn a picture of Australians killing 'all Asians'. He spat out the word 'Asians' like a bullet aimed straight between my eyes. I was stunned. The class was stunned. My teacher was stunned. We had all been hit.

So, I wrote to my papa about loving my new home but also about suffering from the pain of being different. I never mentioned the pain of missing him. I never mentioned my sadness about failing to receive a reply from him, even though I always ended the letters pleading with him to write back.

Eventually, my letters grew perfunctory. They were like reports about the minutiae of my life: my favourite colour, the names of my best friends, my favourite food, and so on. My letters spoke of how we were rapidly becoming strangers.

Twelve years went by without any correspondence from him. I filled his silence with dying hope until, one day, my mobile phone rang and I saw an unfamiliar number on the screen. The voice that answered had a strong Filipino accent that didn't match what he said: 'Hello Elaine, this is your dad.' My stepdad had a British accent and this 'dad' on the other end of the line sounded nothing like him. I didn't catch on until we hung up, and I cried like never before. The person I called 'my papa' called himself 'my dad'. The way that we referred to his role in my life didn't even hold the same title. The phone call confirmed everything I already knew. My dad and I were strangers to one another.

But, I still sent letters in a futile attempt to pretend we had a connection. I thought this bond had become a reality when I found a letter from him in my mailbox. I carried the letter carefully into my home as if it were a fragile package. I showed it to my mum and we opened it slowly, teasing the lip of the envelope away from its glue. I lifted out the contents reverently and pieces of scissored photographs drifted onto the floor. I picked them up and saw my mum's face diced into shards. Inside was a terse letter specifying that my papa would no longer accept letters from me.

Accompanying this letter was a signed 'contract' specifying that my papa agreed letters from me were no longer welcome. His signature was evidence of his rejection. My mum was furious. She knew that this was the work of his mistress, the same woman whose shrill laugh and sneaky eyes I could still recall. She was now my papa's wife, married to him soon after his first wife breathed her last breath. As my mum cried for me, my heart turned stone cold. I looked at the letter written by the jealous mistress and laughed at its typos, grammatical errors and awkward formatting. But my mum could hear through my forced laughter and into my sadness. She assured me that his signature had been forged, but in my heart I didn't believe her.

So I turned away from thinking about my father. I stopped admitting that I loved him. I focused instead on trying to forge a new link. I always knew I had an older sister, the legitimate child born into the legitimate family, and from my mum I knew her name, though not how it was spelled. I searched for her on the internet, trying different variations of the name. I wanted to see a picture of her, print it out and sketch it onto my heart.

I started my search for her in my early twenties and, as I approached my thirtieth birthday, I found her.

I found her Facebook profile page. We look alike: the same round face, the wide smile, the almond eyes. She is the image of the future me. I saved the web address for her page and visited it frequently. This miniscule peek into her life was tantamount to the greatest gift I could have received.

I also discovered I have another sister. She is the daughter of the woman who sent the shredded photos of my mother's face. Her name is similar to mine and she is only a few years younger. I treasured the knowledge of my two sisters and pray that I meet them one day.

MY DESIRE TO meet my sisters was heightened on the eve of my wedding. My fiancé and I had been together for twelve years and getting married felt like something we had done five years prior. He knew the sorrow I felt at not having anyone from my father's side of the family at our wedding. I didn't know if my father's family even knew about me, or whether my papa was aware that I was getting married. I didn't write to tell him as I was done with putting my heart on the line.

A month later, my mum and I chatted about whether it would have been a good idea to inform my papa about my wedding. My aunt was visiting from the Philippines and she asked me how I felt about him. Flippantly, I replied: 'I have no idea. I don't know anything about him. For all I know he might be dead.' My aunt and mum exchanged glances. I told them I sometimes searched for my two sisters online and that I used to search for news about my papa in the same way. My aunt urged me to do that now and pulled out her iPad for me to check. I typed my father's name into Google, not expecting to see anything new. But there it was: a tweet from someone sending their condolences to my papa's family. He had died a few days before my wedding.

My whole family already knew about his death but had kept it secret from me to make way for the happiness of my wedding. I stared at the tweet on the bright screen in disbelief. My aunt and mum didn't say a word.

This silence continued up to Christmas. I was angry at the way I found out and I hated how my papa continued to dominate the sadness in my life, even when he was no longer alive to reject me. But it was Christmas and we

dressed up our regrets in tinsel, glittering Christmas baubles and paper crowns from popped Christmas crackers. It was a delicious Christmas. We spent it with my husband's family eating fresh prawns, salmon smoked over wood chips and steamed Christmas pudding with sherry-soaked sultanas peeking enticingly from thickly cut slices. After eating more than my fill, I was dozily using my mum's iPad to check on my older sister's Facebook page. There was nothing I hadn't seen before, so I checked my email. In my inbox was an unfamiliar email address. I clicked on the message and realised that this message was not meant for me, but was addressed to my mother. Even though I knew I shouldn't read on, I greedily scoured over the email. It was an email from my eldest sister.

She wrote about wanting to form a relationship with me. She asked my mum if it was appropriate to contact me directly. She said she had asked our father if she could 'make things right' with me and our brother.

Brother? I speedily hit 'reply' and began agonising over my wording. I asked my husband to read it over, then clicked 'send' just as the iPad shut down. Its waning light winked at me maliciously: the battery had run out. I scurried over to a charger, but as I'd pored over the worthiness of each word, it wasn't long until I again wrote out exactly what I wanted to say to my sister. I breathed out a sigh I didn't know I was holding as I sent the email.

A reply came a few hours later. I read her email hungrily, devouring her words and relishing them. She writes about our brother. He is five years older than me and is the son of one of my father's former mistresses. I cringe as I read this and think how tiring it must have been to maintain multiple lives and multiple families. She tells me about our younger sister, whose mother married our father before he died. Her email was the reply I had always yearned for from my papa. My sister had known about me and searched for me as well. She accepted me as her sister and wanted to know more about me – not pretend I didn't exist.

Since then, we have exchanged many emails and Facebook messages. With each one, we discover how uncannily alike we are. Our outlooks on life and the ways in which we express ourselves are similar. We even chance upon the same things and ideas at the same time. Even though we weren't raised together and there is an age gap between us, the blood we share courses

through our veins and forms a bond we had always searched for. I am also in contact with my brother. My younger sister is still a mystery. I don't think she wants to know me.

I have yet to meet my older sister and brother face to face. It has been one year since our online reunion and we're both waiting to open a new chapter in our lives. We all reside in different continents, but we try to close this gap through frequent contact.

Through forging a connection with my siblings, my bastard self doesn't feel quite as 'unlawful, illegal, illicit, dishonest, prohibited, criminal, banned and proscribed' as it once did. I may still be the bastard child of my mum and papa, but I am also the child of renewed beginnings and hope.

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Elaine Laforteza is a cultural studies lecturer at Macquarie City Campus and communications tutor at the University of Technology, Sydney. She writes for *The Philippine Community Herald*. Her book, *The Somatechnics of Whiteness and Race*, was published in May 2015 by Ashgate.

## MEMOIR

# Abi nako

Or so I thought

Jhoanna Lynn B Cruz

THE PHRASE *ABI NAKO* has fascinated me since moving to Davao where I've had to make sense of the world in Cebuano (or Binisaya), the city's lingua franca. In Filipino, it translates into *akala ko*: equivalent to the English expression 'or so I thought'. It suggests that one's expectations have been thwarted by reality. The Binisaya dictionary tells us that *abi* means 'to misconstrue, misread', while *nako* means 'mine'. In this language, my misconceptions are not only my own, I must also own them. Thus, I am not just misreading it; it is my own misreading.

It is a thin distinction between the Filipino and Cebuano, but one that must be made nonetheless. As American anthropologist-linguist Edward Sapir hypothesised, one's first language determines one's interpretation of the world. My misunderstanding of the world is not accidental. But *nako* also means 'me', so I must consider, in the spirit of Descartes, whether I *am* my false expectations.

When I moved to Davao in April 2007, I had my own expectations of what it would be like. I had heard it fondly called 'the Promised Land'. So I imagined that this move was going to bring me all that has been promised me and has been denied me by being born and raised in Manila, and later living in Baguio City. Whatever it was that I thought I deserved, I was going to have it in my new life.

I was starting over at thirty-six, leaving behind all that I thought I had failed to do, getting a new chance to get it right. I took my two children with me on the journey: Veda Sachi, then six years old, and Raz Hiraya, three. All I wanted to keep with me in the new life fit in one wooden crate the size

of my grandfather's six-seater narra dining table: some much-loved clothes, books on writing, my journals, photo albums, paintings and travel souvenirs. When I saw the packed crate, I couldn't believe it. Here was all that I had in a two cubic-metre space. Sea freighting cost only 8,500 pesos (about \$240). I had sold or given away everything else. But it was a necessary sacrifice at the altar of my new life.

I also decided to drop my old nickname, Joy, and embrace my given name, Jhoanna. On the one hand, I simply wanted to end the confusion that my nickname caused when I began to publish my writing as Jhoanna Lynn Cruz. Especially in the light of an undergraduate thesis that had been written about my fiction, which was (erroneously) entitled 'Disruptions: The Lesbian Narrative Space in the Short Stories of Joy Cruz'. On the other, I also thought dropping the nickname meant I was getting rid of who I used to be. The better to start over. *Abi nako*.

It was not the first time I had felt how significant one's name is. 'What is your name and why?' I sometimes ask my new students. They think I'm joking and they're often confused about how to answer. I explain that our name has an incantatory quality: it is how we know ourselves (being the first word we recognise) and how others know us – our identity and our identification, but it can also embody who we aspire to be. In this sense, I actually like Joy better than Jhoanna.

In 1996, when I first (brazenly) decided I wanted to be a writer, I went to Hong Kong on my first trip abroad. It was for an academic conference in which I was to deliver a paper for the first time. The only thing I remember now from the keynote lecture was the bit about the Chinese word 'Kwang Ming', which the speaker translated into 'joy' but also meant 'one who brings light'. That, I thought, was who I want to be. More than a source of joy or delight, I was now tasked to bring light as a writer. Promethean in aspiration. Maybe even Messianic. *Abi nako*.

I ventured out to get a marble chop made of my Chinese name, together with a pot of red ink. I was sure as a Filipino I had Chinese blood flowing in my veins, somehow. I planned to use it to sign copies of my future first book, which I finally published fourteen years later. By then the red ink had dried out and hardened. Of course.



My dream of having a book published came true in Davao with my first book, *Women Loving: Stories and a Play* (Anvil Publishing, 2010). Before moving to Davao I had been afraid to present the manuscript to a publisher. I had written it under a fellowship from De La Salle University, which gave their press right of first refusal. But the press went belly up at some point. I couldn't get around to finding another publisher. And then I had decided to get married and have children. These were stories of women loving women. I couldn't find it in my heart to come out anymore. I didn't think it was fair to my husband, which was ridiculous because he knew of my lesbian past; nor to my children, who would have to explain that yes, this writer is their mother. But I couldn't write inside that marriage. I was dried out, mute. During that barren period, I wrote one essay on coming to motherhood, in which I blame my struggles with my new role as a mother for my inability to write. I ended it with a lament:

On the night of the phantom Leonid shower, I made my wishes... I wished to have my courage back, without the guilt, the shame, the terror of failing and, most of all, to write again.

*Abi nako.* I realise now that it wasn't my daughter who stopped me writing. It was my own misunderstanding of my marriage. Writing was too dangerous. It would shed light on the dark corners of our happy home. I thought my writing would destroy my family. So I sacrificed it. Sacrifice, from the Latin, to offer something to a deity (Hymenaeus, in this case), in homage or propitiation. And later, to suffer something to be lost. I suffered it for six years. And then one day I woke up and decided I was done. I gave up my marriage and other people's demands. Here now was a sacrifice in the true sense of *sacra*, sacred rites. It freed me to write again.

When my book finally came out, it wasn't the end of the world, as my internalised homophobia had it pegged. And yet it wasn't what I had expected either. *Women Loving* is the first single-author anthology of lesbian-themed stories in the Philippines. It should have blasted me to literary stardom! *Abi nako.* But it seemed the community was more interested in gossip about my budding relationship with a famous writer, whom they

thought was the reason I had left my husband and for whom I'd moved to Davao City. *Chismis* – our Filipino word for gossip. I should have published my journals instead.

Despite myself, I knew I didn't move to Davao for love. I wasn't that stupid anymore. I knew it wasn't such a great idea; I had made that mistake before. This time I was moving for me. It was a complete leap of faith. I didn't have a job or family or love waiting for me. I just wanted a fresh start. And the village I moved into seemed perfect: Wellspring, it is called. It was the source of bounty, of hope, of life. I imagined it had incantatory power. *Abi nako*.

And besides, we weren't really 'together,' this writer R and I. By the time I moved, we had been dating for a year, but because of his image as a *soltero*, he refused to define our relationship, or to commit. I must admit I was more eager than he to take our relationship further. But I was also still seeing other people in Baguio. Why not? Then again, maybe I also moved to Davao to get closer to him. Maybe I thought that would prod our 'thing' forward. And forward it did go. But not in the direction I had expected.

THE DAY WE arrived in Davao, R came to meet us – me, my two children and my angel of a nanny, Nanette – at the airport with a hired jeepney. He sat my son beside him and along the way pointed out places of interest. 'This is the Diversion Road,' he said. 'It's a longer route, but it's faster. It wasn't built yet when I moved here ten years ago.' He had found us a house, right beside his, which I thought was a good sign. At least we were going to live next to each other. That was commitment of a kind. When we entered the empty house, I was pleased to discover that he had bought us one mattress and one electric fan, anticipating our immediate needs. And he even said I didn't have to pay for them. What's more, he had made a welcome poster for us, his own drawing of a nipa hut, with cut-outs of our names. I was certain he must love me to have gone to all that effort. He just didn't want to admit it.

In the days that followed, he devoted himself to helping us get settled. He asked his laundrywoman to accompany me to the wet market; he brought us to the mall and the supermarket; he came with me when I bought appliances and furniture. He sat with my children to watch television and even read to them at bedtime. And we had sex at his place. A lot. On every surface not

littered with the books he voraciously collected but never read. It seemed to me we were a couple. Yay.

But in the University of the Philippines Mindanao, where we both taught, he made sure everyone knew what we really were. When we all needed to get a new ID card printed because we had a new chancellor, he placed my name under his 'In Case of Emergency' contact. And then below my name, he indicated in parentheses 'neighbour'.

I didn't know at that time that those were the good times.

After two years of dancing around the issue, he finally said 'I love you'. I felt triumphant. I had been telling him I loved him after we had sex (Every. Fucking. Time) because I did love him. But I must admit I was hoping he would at some point submit under post-coital duress, which he eventually did. I realise now I had made him my project. I wanted to be the woman who 'achieved' this elusive and accomplished bachelor-poet, who was notorious for 'not doing relationships' and on whom I'd had a schoolgirl crush. I didn't care that he was twenty years older, or that he called me a fat and whiny spoiled brat. I harboured the illusion that if R loved me, I must be somebody – some woman. *Abi nako*.

It should have gotten better, what with the love now official. But instead it felt like I had released the Kraken. R started acting territorial towards me, asking all the time where I went, what I was doing, who I was with. He threw a fit every time he saw me looking at my phone and texting, demanding to know who it was. Once, when I dropped by his house before work, he remarked that my skirt was too sheer, saying, '*Wala ka bang kamison?*' He demanded I wear a chemise under the dress, or change my outfit. But I hadn't worn a *kamison* since I was twelve. When we were climbing stairs or escalators, he would tell me to close my legs tightly so that other men wouldn't be able to peep at my crotch, because 'that's what men do'.

Every time I 'disobeyed' him, he would break up with me. Then he wooed me back after three days. I had my very own Stanley Kowalski, though he was careful never to physically strike me. In the course of our six-year on-again, off-again relationship, he broke up with me at least thirty-six times. But he insists it was because I refused to change.

I did try to change for him. The first two years. I wanted him to love me. Once, another male poet, who knew early on about our 'thing', challenged

me, '*Paligayahin mo siya* – make him happy'. I should have been offended by it, but at that time I thought it was quite the privilege.

What made him happy was when I obeyed him dutifully. I was his project too. He wanted to fix me, calling himself at the beginning my 'bogey-man *hic et nunc*'. I did try to, in his own words, 'shape up'. An old friend visited me in 2008 and she was incredulous: 'I don't even recognise you anymore, Joy Cruz.'

Jhoanna,' I corrected her. 'I don't use Joy anymore.'

Once, at the university, I was walking on the covered path and someone called out, 'Joy, Joy!' I didn't even look, but it was indeed me he was calling to. At that time I thought it had really worked. I was a new woman. This was my new life. *Abi nako*.

I KEPT FAILING. Something in my spirit resisted. How could I obliterate who I was, after all? And why was I never good enough for him? I admit my occasional faithlessness and deceitfulness, which he found out about because he read my journal. Particularly hurtful was when I had to leave suddenly for Manila for my brother's wake and I didn't think to hide the journal. He said he just knew I had left it out for him to read, that it was my 'cry for help'. I altogether did not deserve R. But all my friends (especially my mother) said he did not deserve me.

In fairness to R, he did try to make it work; he even went to counseling with me twice. Then he made the grandest gesture of his life: he bought the house he had been living in for the past ten years and put it in my name. 'Think of it as a proposal,' he added. It was the closest we came to getting married. And then he broke up with me every week thereafter.

He soon took back the gift, probably thinking I didn't deserve it. Three months after we signed the deed of sale together, he spent (another) 60,000 pesos (about \$1,700) on lawyer's fees to transfer it to his niece.

I didn't think we would get back together again after that grand gesture of lack of faith. But maybe I wanted to stand by the choice I had made. On bad days I really thought I did move to Davao for love. I didn't want to have another failed home for my kids; it filled me with guilt. Yet I also knew that a house in ruins is not where I want to raise my children.

So, in December 2010, before Christmas (as usual), when he broke up with me again because he was once again suspecting that I was having an affair, I told him that this was going to be the last time. He insisted on telling the kids about it on Christmas Eve, despite my pleas. My daughter, aged ten, said, 'Nanay, if you get back with Tito R again I will never believe anything you say.'

This gave me strength to stay away. Even my daughter knew there was something terribly wrong with the relationship. What was I teaching her about being a woman? Then R declared he didn't want to have anything to do with me because I'm a whore and a 'lying, deceitful piece of shit'. This was how he always viewed me. But I refused to believe him anymore. I was finished with his version of me. For about two years.

Then in a moment of madness and desperation, I succumbed once again to his pleas. He promised he had changed. He said: 'It is time to give the children a stable family home.' The trump card.

We made a big public show of our getting back together. We announced it on Facebook. To this day, it is the photo that has collected the most 'likes' on my account. But I also received many personal messages from concerned friends asking, 'What are you doing?'

It was great, that reunion in May 2012. We revelled in our renewed vows, both thinking that the time we had spent apart had taught us what we needed in order to be able to love each other. Then after three weeks he broke up with me again. Because of Facebook. He didn't like a status I had posted: 'At the University Freshman Convocation. It was my first time to sit on stage at the atrium as the University Council representative to the Executive Committee. Interesting view! But I made sure I wore pants so as not to give everyone else an undesirable view! Hahaha.'

It was enough to trigger him. Our argument dovetailed into all the old issues and before I knew it, he proclaimed, 'You haven't changed! I break up with you!'

'Are you sure? It has only been three weeks since we got back together.'

'We will tell the kids tomorrow,' then he walked away in a huff.

'This is the last time you are walking out of my house,' I shouted after him.

After three days, he was asking for me back.

But this time, this time I was through with him.

In Cebuano, '*abi*' means to misread. But they also have a word, '*abi-abi*,' which means to welcome someone. Despite my doomed literary romance, all was in fact well in the life I had chosen in Davao. My book of stories and a poetry chapbook were published, I won my long-awaited Palanca literary award for an essay, I received tenure at the state university, became head of the Davao Writers Guild then regional co-ordinator for the National Committee on Literary Arts. I was cast in an independent film where I got my two minutes of fame on the big screen, and I even did a local television commercial for instant noodles. In 2014, I bought my own house. But best of all, I have found what I thought I lost. Davao was large enough to welcome me and my wishes home. And it taught me that I was truly something. Some woman.

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Jhoanna Lynn B Cruz's first book, *Women Loving: Stories and a Play* (Anvil Publishing, 2010), is the first single-author anthology of lesbian-themed writing in the Philippines. Her writing has won the Philippines' prestigious Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature. She is currently associate professor at the University of the Philippines Mindanao in Davao City.

## MEMOIR

# Where are all the nice Asian girls?

Living the lie

Michele Lee

STUART PICKS ME up from the train station. Because we are in the country, everything is close by so it will take five minutes to get to the library and then after the talk it'll take another five minutes to go out to his property. Because it is the country, he's hospitable and has offered that I can stay the night rather than make the trip back into Melbourne after the talk. His wife, Ruth, will cook us dinner. We talk a little bit about his family. His children are half-African, as it turns out, because Ruth is Ghanaian. Because I'm Asian but I grew up in Australia, I feel an instant connection to anyone when I learn that they're less white than I initially thought. I actually then think that they're better people, which probably means that I experienced enough racism and intolerance growing up. The pert helpdesk lady at work who, on what I imagine are those days when she glares into the mirror and agrees today will be her spunky day, often wears red suits with a slightly dated cut and length. She mentioned in the kitchen the other day that her husband is Singaporean. I instantly liked her more, which was still not very much.

In late 2013 I had my first book published, *Banana Girl* (Transit Lounge). It's a memoir. Because I studied creative writing and learnt the term 'creative non-fiction', I tried to pitch it to every independent small publisher as such but a standard 'memoir' is what it's become.

And because of all of this, that I studied and began writing a book about my life, that my life is in some ways about growing up Asian in Australia and as such one piece of the publicity ran with a headline about me having written

a book about growing up Asian in Australia, and because Stuart from the Broadford public library had googled me when searching for unconventional authors for his monthly author talks at the library – yes, because all of this I am now a few minutes away from giving my first talk about my book. The library's neither historical nor is it quaint. I don't know what I was expecting. Something vanilla and antique, me spicy and contemporary. It's a modern building but slightly dated, like the lady at work's red suits. I wonder if she's from the country. No one I know in Melbourne is from Melbourne. Everyone is from somewhere else, except for the black people. And I don't mean Ruth.

ONCE I TRIED to write a play about Asian people and Aboriginal Australians. It felt 'urgent' – another term I'd learnt, not to label art but to justify it. Urgent. I'd read something about Australian race relations in the twentieth century, in the process of researching another play, and some line I'd read about Aboriginal people had stuck in my head. I, as an Asian, was part of a history of marginalisation just as Aboriginal people had been, bloodily so. Here was an overlap that I'd overlooked growing up. There weren't many Aboriginal people around me as a kid or a teenager, well, not many that visibly identified as such. There were the Ingram sisters: lithe brown girls who were good at sports and always wore sporty windcheaters and sneakers, some athletic brand like New Balance. Their hair was curly and long, they had freckled cheeks and button noses. And there was Aaron, who wore baggy jeans, fashion sneakers like Nikes and swaggered like he was the original gangster. I guess he was more original than anyone else at Calwell High School. He was naughty and not just in a school detention way: he was getting into trouble with the police. So, sports and crime – maybe my little slice of Aboriginal Australia was adequately clichéd.

It was hard getting the play supported. I was even working with a theatre company. They'd commissioned me.

I sat across from an Aboriginal arts producer. We were meeting so he could suss me and my play out. He told me that it wasn't only white people who appropriated Aboriginal culture for their own purposes. I was joining a queue of well-meaning non-Aboriginal people who wanted to have a say about black people. I declined to mention the shared marginalisation.



Anyway, I couldn't remember the exact sentence that had sparked my interest and I'm so bad at paraphrasing. And at telling funny stories. I tend to ramble. My book does too.

The play got to a mighty first draft, had one reading and then it sort of died. The arts producer moved to another organisation, in a completely different role with no producing responsibilities. There were official cultural protocols to follow if a project, like my play, had federal money behind it. I was waiting for the theatre company to initiate the protocols with someone else. They were waiting for permission to initiate. I don't know if it was about blackfella time, but the time never came and so the play died by default.

SO I WROTE a book about my life. A rambling book. I tried to pitch it as creative fiction. I tried to pitch it as postmodern. Possibly post-race. So many new words to use. We live in complicated times. My book was to reflect this, and be oh so much more than a plucky migrant story. I had other labels to demonstrate. 'Woman', 'Generation Y', 'Artist', 'Hipster', 'Melbournian' – I am all these things and so the book would be rich with my richness.

And because I said it was these things, others who read it would also say it was these things.

By mid-2014 or so I stopped googling reviews for my book (there weren't that many – the publicity blitz lasted only as long as the publicist's fee did and my book was released pre-Christmas and, I surmise, got lost in the lead-up to the holidays). There was an arts reviewer from Canberra, my home town – go girl! – who said my book was rambling. She seemed very frustrated by my book. A reader on Google Reviews called Helen had been so incensed as to post a short review. She'd heard me on the radio during the publicity blitz. She said I'd sounded like an interesting person so she'd bought the book. She hated it. It was shallow and self-obsessed. The interviews were a lie. Where was the stuff about growing up Asian? The family stories? The irreconcilable cultural dislocation that ultimately is reconcilable because Australia is so multicultural? All she got was an emerging playwright running around inner city Melbourne with an asymmetric haircut, name-dropping bars and cafés and having casual sex in some poorly articulated sex-positive version of Gen Y feminism. Blah.

At least Helen didn't critique the rambling non-structure structure.

Mark's dad read the book. I have no idea why. The context to my being surprised that Russell read my book is because he'd gone icy on me after I broke up with Mark. But Mark, my dear friend and my favourite ex, featured heavily in the book and I assume Mark had told Russell as such. Everyone's such a narcissist, perhaps. They want to see themselves reflected, even if it's by proxy via a son.

'I wasn't supposed to tell you,' Mark said as he told me what he wasn't supposed to be telling me, 'but he picked it up at an airport and he hated it. He hated all the sex.'

The publisher had emailed me the day he'd secured the distribution deal with Watermark, which is one of the airport book distributors. It was a good thing to be in the airports. I understood the fortune of this. People wait in airports to go sit on a plane. Perfect time to buy a book. Not much choice. Buy the one with a nice cover. Not that I buy books at airports. I buy my books at garage sales or Readings or eBay. I disdain airport book stores. So commercial. I'm so obnoxious, even at thirty-four, unless I'm being ironic about it, like watching Katy Perry film clips.

Incidentally, the video clip for her single 'Dark Horse' feat. Juicy J was the most watched YouTube video clip in 2014.

I don't know how my book has sold in the airports.

My book is a lie.

In the library, there are two copies of my book, which Stuart has bought in expectation that after tonight's talk people will want to read my book.

No one has yet read my book. I did a local Broadford radio interview with Stuart the other week to promote the talk but no one has then gone and borrowed my book from the library. Stuart has only just scanned the book himself, at home, in between watching TV.

Stuart says not to worry about the empty chairs. He has a bunch of regulars who come every month and they'll be here soon. I put my bags down, I have a drink of water and then, because I just had a drink of water, I have to use the toilet. When I come back the seats are filling up. The mean age in the room is about seventy. The mean ethnicity is various shades of speckled white. Ruth isn't going to come tonight; she's busy at the house.

MY ASIAN ACTOR friend, Arnold, might be auditioning for a TV show by Tony Ayres. Tony Ayres made *The Home Song Stories* (2007), an autobiographical film about his mother – a perpetual and tragic ingenue, plucked from a bar in Hong Kong to suburban life in Australia. Joan Chen played his mother, quite beautifully. Tony Ayres is making Benjamin Law's memoir *The Family Law* (Black Inc., 2010) into a TV show. I haven't read his memoir but I know it's funny; I've read his articles and essays in the many newspapers, websites and magazines he writes for. It'll be the first Asian–Australian TV drama. It'll be history making. Meanwhile, over in America, comedian Margaret Cho had America's first Asian–American show about twenty years ago and it was heralded as landmark then. One day, while Katy Perry-ing my way through YouTube, I took a break and I watched an episode of Margaret Cho's *All-American Girl* in which Quentin Tarantino was guest starring.

*All-American Girl* was so awful. Especially because I wanted it to be so good.

Was it awful because it was in sitcom format? And all '90s sitcoms are numbingly sedate? And Margaret Cho, a mouthy comedian, was on a cheesy sitcom set, quipping sanitised PG one-liners to the tune of a laugh track while Asian–American actors who were clearly culturally white were playing Margaret's Korean parents? Quentin Tarantino seemed gimmicky. He was painfully portraying one of her boyfriends. He was no Joan Chen.

Eddie Huang wrote a memoir called *Fresh Off the Boat* (Spiegel & Grau, 2013). He's Taiwanese–American. I probably first heard about Eddie Huang when watching his cooking show on Vice's YouTube channel. I generally follow any stories of successful creative Asian people in Western countries. I like the dual hot feeling of extreme envy and extreme pride in learning of the talents and successes of fellow Asians. The sitcom version of his memoir comes out this year, in 2015, and will be the first Asian–American TV show since *All-American Girl*. Eddie Huang penned a long essay for *The New Yorker* about the complicated process of watching your book turn into a network TV show. A Persian–American writer at the helm, a white audience in mind, the chance for the entertainment system to spit out something progressive but still marketable, nothing alienating, so something fundamentally conservative.

Something commercial. Comforting. Constrained. Eddie's book would be one ingredient in the show, to what degree was up for debate. By the end of his essay he recognises the historical nature of having his book made into a show.

Benjamin Law is making history in Australia.

Extreme envy. Extreme pride.

Recently someone mistook me for Benjamin Law's sister. Not because all Asians look alike. Ha ha, cue the laugh track. But because her name is Michelle *Law*. She's a writer too, and a second-generation Asian–Australian woman who grew up in the '80s and '90s. I'm Michele *Lee*. Writer, Asian–Australian, child of the '80s and '90s. Needless to say that, despite these similarities, I'm not his sister. I have met Benjamin Law a couple of times and we share a common literary genealogy having been printed in similar publications. Well, one publication that I was printed in once or twice over ten years ago. A youth magazine when I was still writing short stories. Now Benjamin Law has a public profile, like Margaret Cho does and Eddie Huang does.

I write plays that never get put on. Needless to say, no one has asked to adapt my book into another format.

Which is fine. It's totally fine. I'm an artist. My book will retain its unique soul. I won't sell out to the TV genre. I won't be moulded into a nice Asian girl for the sake of a mainstream white audience (like, say, Helen from Google Reviews) who only want palatable and predictable stories that reinforce their notions of Asian identity: migrant children struggling to fit in but essentially fitting in; loyal daughters who work hard and study hard and dutifully become model mouthpieces for their communities. I won't pornographify and simplify my 'community' into digestible half-hours of TV narrative so white people feel sympathy and white people learn about Asians and white people feel good about themselves.

Unless Tony Ayres asks me to.

MY ASIAN ACTOR friend Arnold had a crisis of integrity recently. He volunteered to perform in a community Chinese show as part of a pre-harvest festival in country NSW. Given Arnold is a professionally trained actor and would be performing in the community Chinese show as part of the festival,

a local (white) director asked Arnold to offer his time as ‘General Massacre Member’ in the annual historical re-enactment of a Chinese massacre from the 1800s. I didn’t know that Chinese people had been massacred there. And every year, it seemed, the massacre was re-staged as a solemn reminder of past racial tension. Arnold is passionately proud about being Chinese and promoting Chinese stories, so he initially accepted the invitation to be a General Massacre Member. There were going to be horses involved and all the Massacre Members were going to be rounded up – I mean, ‘rescued’ – by a white man because, it seemed, that was what had happened in the 1800s. Before the rescue happened, a few Chinese people had been scalped. This was to be included in the re-enactment.

Arnold felt very uncomfortable the more he learnt about this story. He was to have no lines, possibly be scalped, and then be saved by a white man on a horse.

I should add that Arnold’s involvement in this occurred within an intense period of about forty-eight hours before the festival opened. So Arnold said yes, then he said no. A local Chinese lady who knew the local director was pressuring Arnold to stick to his word, and there was some other layer of local politics at the council level. Arnold was actually tormented because he’s a bit old-fashioned in some ways, and when he gives his word he finds it excruciating to go back on it. He called his dad, who told him to oblige and be massacred. He called an Asian–Australian academic. An Asian–Australian paralympian. Each person he called was progressively more famous and accomplished than the one before but the response was the same: toe the line. They were all from an older generation.

With his wife’s support, Arnold eventually extricated himself from playing General Massacre Member. That was, for him, the only way to hold onto his integrity. As it turned out the horse was not performing that day either, and though the massacre re-enactment went ahead, the horse, I believe, carried off the white saviour before he could rescue the scalped Chinese. Arnold was given the chance to make a speech, in which he asserted pride in his Asian–Australian identity and in telling stories rather than having stories told about him. His wife, who is white, was sitting in the audience and she said it was a beautiful speech. I imagine that Arnold would have been close to hot tears. He’s that sort of guy.

I DON'T KNOW much about the country so when I say 'country' town I'm highly aware that this can be a sort of meaningless term, the way that me using the word 'white' can be – do I mean someone with a Latvian Jewish grandmother, someone who has a Norwegian surname, someone with First Fleet blood, or all three? I grew up in Canberra and, unlike Melbourne, everyone in Canberra seemed to be from Canberra. I didn't have friends who were from the country. And even now as an adult, I don't really know where the country begins and ends. I don't know which towns are provincial and cute, which towns are sort of backwards and racist. I have a vague idea about the country areas where city people have moved to for tree changes, and these are the places I am less afraid of. Growing up I had bad feelings about all of Queensland and all of Tasmania. I'm not exaggerating. I don't know where this came from because I didn't really watch the news or read newspapers, and there were Hmong people living in those states so it wasn't as though I thought there were only white people there. When I was about eighteen, with my first boyfriend, I went up to the Sunshine Coast where his mother lived. I was nervous because, like I said, I thought the whole state was racist. I can't remember if anything racist or bad happened, besides drinking XXXX Gold and getting head lice from his nephew.

I don't know much about the country town of Broadford. I had visited in 2012 for a friend's wedding – a colleague from work. Her parents had relocated from NSW and bought a property in Broadford, which is where my friend's wedding was held. A hundred or so city people had travelled out and we sat around, picnicking under the warm sun on a private property. After the wedding was done, I was in a car and back in Melbourne within an hour and a half.

Stuart and Ruth have lived in Broadford for many years now. They moved out when he was still teaching in Melbourne. The commute wasn't actually that far, which means that Broadford isn't deep country. Stuart speaks fondly of Broadford. He had told me that there weren't many Asian people living there. There are refugee women and unfortunately they wouldn't be coming tonight.

There are probably about fifteen people in the room in the Broadford library. The advertised time for my talk was 7 pm and there are a few posters

around with my pleasant little face smiling on them. I present in a way where one would assume pleasant things about me. My haircut has now become symmetrical, I don't have scary facial piercings or facial tattoos.

Stuart has decided that he'll run a Q&A-style talk, which will eventually open up to questions from the audience. He suggests that we talk a little about my 'relationships' (sex) but that it won't be the main focus.

Stuart introduces me using the biography I've provided. He tells them I am Hmong, that I am a playwright, that this is my first book. The being Hmong thing is usually a time-killer because generally no one knows who the Hmong are and it takes time to explain. Talking about being Hmong takes up most of the talk, actually. I tell the story about my mother nearly drowning as she crossed the Mekong from Laos to Thailand by cover of night with my older brother, who was about three or four, and my older sister in her belly. It's a pretty gripping story and a very dramatic precursor to me being born in the safety of a hospital in Canberra. This story isn't in my book though. I just use it as a go-to story when confronted with people who want an interesting migrant story; it is top-shelf migrant porn. I read out an extract and, though I'd earmarked a few sections, I abide by the golden rule of knowing your audience and this audience is hooked on my Hmong-ness. The extract is about the first time I was in Laos and visiting a village where my mum's half-brother lives. I was a fish out of water. It's a hit, people in the audience are hmm-ing and chuckling. Someone asks me if I feel like I'm two people, one Australian and one Asian. Another man, with a walking stick, pipes up and assures me and any doubter in the room that I'm 100 per cent Aussie. I try to make a point that identity is nuanced and layered, that I have gained privilege in some respects through my education, my income, my position as an artist, but eyes glaze over and someone asks me if I'm ashamed to be Asian.

Stuart addresses one question to me about the sex in my book. I think he frames it as me going on a lot of dates. It's true, I dated. A lot.

The session runs its full hour. Because it's the country, we stick around and have Arnott's biscuits and tea afterwards. The local doctor arrives, to show support I think. He's Chinese, and he came to Broadford many years ago as a recent medical graduate and never left. He's laid his roots here, as many hundreds of Chinese people did in Australian country towns, and married a

local white woman. They're both very well dressed. He's got a strong Australian accent. One woman has a Thai daughter-in-law, another has an Afghan son-in-law. So it's not a completely white-bread town and I don't feel the way I did when I was eighteen and about to go up to Queensland. I don't think everyone is racist. But I do think I somewhat exploited my mum's story of survival for gaining intimacy and favour with this group. I don't know if that is an Asian thing but it's certainly something I've always done when in a social panic. Don't tell me anything personal – when I'm nervous I'll talk about your secrets, embellished and analysed, to strangers just for something interesting to say.

My book is a lie.

Stuart told me that one of the ladies, whose name I can't remember now, borrowed my book the next day. She returned it shortly after and remarked that it was so disappointing because I had seemed like such a nice girl.

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Michele Lee is a playwright and author. She is currently working on a digital theatre piece, *The Naked Self*, with Arts House, and her play *Rice* with The Street Theatre and Playwriting Australia. Her audio theatre work *Talon Salon* premiered in the Next Wave Festival 2012.



Stephanie Chan

## Back Again

Chain-smoking *karang guni* guy  
pushes his bike on the leftmost side,  
along the double yellow lines  
as taxis slither past.

I admit I missed your diesel smell,  
waking up to hear the *mee pok* auntie yell  
as rush hour traffic on your highways swell  
to the rhythms of reversing rubbish trucks.

Above me, the rain trees roll their eyes,  
they know I can't help but romanticise  
everything I see and feel and hear:  
it was only yesterday that I returned to you.

I'll admit I enjoyed that stranglehold  
you held me in outside the Changi  
airport cold, how your sticky arms  
never seem to let go:  
it is as if you've always known  
how I really only want to cuddle.

I want to lie in bed and breathe you in,  
hope you won't mind my faded tan  
from all those months I spent snowed in,  
all those months spent trying to blend in  
you know I was only compensating,  
living all those miles away.

But will you take me back  
for what I've become,  
the taste of English  
strangers still on my tongue,  
the smell of American Spirit  
tobacco still clinging to my clothes?  
I want to lie naked in your peripheral  
vision, the one marked STATE LAND,

exposed to all the ants and pigeons  
and policemen who will quickly  
pull me away while you sit and watch,  
grumbling, *Why do you have to be so weird?*  
*I told you this would happen.*

And I'll say,  
*It's a performance art-slash-direct-action-kind-of-thing.*  
*I saw it in Berlin.*

But today I want to climb all your acacia trees,  
take grassroots polls from your citizen monkeys  
about the recent traffic jams on the BKE  
and how it affects their work-life balance.

And the monkeys will pat my head and laugh at me,  
they know this is all just temporary,  
that I'm still high on this humidity  
and your fermented shrimp-paste perfume.

They know that in a week or so,  
your stranglehold will start  
to dig in deeper around my throat,  
and you tell me I've changed,  
that my accent's got strange  
and I will remember why I left.  
But for now,  
when your East Coast coconut palm  
does that thing with its fingers  
on the back of the setting sun,  
my wires get crossed,  
all memory gets lost,  
all I can do is watch  
as their shapes entwine  
and pull me all the way back in.

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Stephanie Chan is from Singapore and has lived in rural Ohio and London. She has won national poetry slams in Singapore (2010) and the UK (2012), and has represented these countries in regional and international poetry slams around the world. Her writing has been published in the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Body Boundaries: The EtiquetteSG Anthology* and the anthology *SingPoWriMo 2014*.

FICTION

# THOSE YOU CANNOT SEE

LAVANYA SHANBHOGUE

ON A RAINLESS monsoon Sunday, she walks to the electric train station closest to her house. She turns back twice to look at no one in particular. Sunday is a good day; the railway police are an uninterested lot, sitting around on their motorbikes, drinking cardamom tea, talking about this and that, and when it rains they move under a blue tarpaulin sheet.

Around her neck she wears a black amulet that her mother has lent her and around her wrists she wears a blue and white bracelet of beads that look like little white eyes. She wears rings on all fingers of her left hand, yellow sapphires and amethyst, jade, moonstone and a large lapis lazuli ring for her thumb. Her right hand is bare except for a little black dot that her mother has drawn on her palm.

She takes long strides and makes her way to the entrance of the station located on a street about ten feet wide that's two-way, magnanimous for a thoroughfare. Traffic is everything – vehicular, bovine, people, poultry, street dogs, about a dozen of them in varying states of famish. She walks past the animals towards the station's entrance, ignoring adolescent boys playing street cricket, wooden planks as bats and dry bamboo sticks as wickets. She watches a woman drive by, steering carefully to avoid the dogs and the clucking hens. She watches as the front left wheel of the car gets wedged in soft mud, almost hitting an old woman sitting on the threshold of her mud house

oiling her knees, her long thin hair draped around her shoulders. The old woman mutters little phrases in Hindi.

*Women who drive. Women who masturbate. House-husbands. Disgusting.*

She walks past the mud house, past a little shop that sells loose liquorice candies from large glass bottles, past a flower seller seated with a basket of jasmine and chrysanthemums on what was once the pavement. She walks into the railway station. She turns back one more time but nobody is there. She goes unnoticed, as she knew she would. She is a tall person with an ordinary, unremarkable face, the kind of face that disappears into crowds, never to stand out, just about fitting in but if you look more closely, not fitting in at all. The nose is too large, the head too small and her complexion was described as 'wheatish' in the matrimonial advertisement her parents placed for her in the papers.

Today her breasts feel heavy and she's feeling a certain something in her belly, a little rumble, like she wants to keep burping.

She walks to the railway platform and all the way to the far end, the place where the train's engine will halt. She has chosen the Harbour Line because there won't be many people. The platform is vacant, almost bare except for a family of four seated on the rusty iron bench. An old man in khakhi sweeps the ground while chewing betel leaf and she watches the red juice stain his teeth. His lips and the sight of the liquid touching his dark bushy moustache makes her nauseous, more nauseous than she was this morning.

She looks at her watch, a possession she is sentimental about – an old HMT with a stainless-steel body that needs winding. She then looks at the display board that flashes the arrival and departure of trains. She'll be run over on time.

JUST THE OTHER day they were all looking for two but find only one and she tells them, *keep looking, keep looking*, because it's very important to her that they find the second one but those who are looking regard her with something that resembles sympathy and say, 'No, we're sorry. There's only one.'

'Are you sure?' he asks

'Yes, there's only hers,' they say.

‘What do we do now?’ she asks, her voice low, her eyes moist, her cheek sunken and her face ashen.

‘You come back in the evening and we’ll take care of it.’

They both know that they won’t come back that evening; maybe the next evening but not the same evening. It’s too much for one day.

They walk out of the white building and into the waiting car. The driver knows that he has to take them home. She sits by the window and he sits beside her; he’s checking his phone. She looks outside and watches Bombay go by. Street hawkers are selling peanuts in paper cones while dirty little children throng traffic signals, knocking on car windows peddling many things – the day’s newspaper, colouring books printed on cheap paper, jasmine buds strung together, a string of green chillies and a single lemon to ward away the evil eye. They have to make a sale when the light is red.

The boy outside her window is small and his eyes dart to the light. Still red. His knocks on her window become more frantic, more powerful as his little fists thump the glass. He speaks with his eyes.

*Please buy this. I need food.*

She purchases a string of green chillies strung together with a whole lemon. He stops whatever it is that he is doing on his phone and looks at her.

‘It is the evil eye,’ she says ‘It has to be. We can’t see them.’

He says nothing. The light turns green.

THEY LIVE IN a simple Bombay apartment on the twentieth floor of a high-rise. The flat has two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen. The floors were white but she had them changed to a bamboo-coloured tile that resembles wood. You can do that these days, use one thing to look like something else, polished porcelain to look like marble, cheap quartz to look like granite, a coat of golden paint on wrought iron to look like brass. She is like that. She looks whole although she’s unfinished.

When they enter their flat he sits down on the sofa and she walks to the kitchen to make chai.

Later that evening they say their goodnights, he with a raised hand and she with a nod. She goes to her room and he goes to his. He

wears a white muslin vest over white cotton pyjamas and she wears a long black nightdress.

She mourns in black. He mourns in white.

TODAY, BEFORE SHE left to go to the station, she went to her balcony. It is a sad, beautiful view. From her balcony she can see both Bombays, the little shanties covered in grime and dust, tucked away beneath layers of blue tarpaulin. When it rains, the water ricochets off the blue sheets and black water flows into sewers. In the *other* Bombay that stands by the shanties, ambitious buildings with glass facades sparkle as they stretch to the skies.

On the left she sees a dense growth of shrubs and a clump of trees in the distance. She knows that the Tower of Silence stands a few metres behind the coppice of vine creepers and palm trees. It is a bleak stone tower within the Doongerwadi jungle, where the Zoroastrians leave their dead behind for birds of prey, especially vultures, to feed on. She wonders what it might feel like to be eaten alive by vultures. She closes her eyes and imagines sharp, pointed beaks pecking at her arm, her thigh, her belly, tearing, nipping flesh away from her bones, the sharp pinch, the pain, drops of blood, scarlet trickling down her calves to match the nail paint of her toes. She wonders what it might feel like to jump off, to fly, to float in the air, to hit the concrete, smashing her head, blood everywhere, brains spilling out. Will the pain merge with death? Will she feel anything at all? What if she were to pop some pills? How will that be? She thinks of a number. Seventeen. In her mind she sees herself cradling little white pills in the palm of her hand, swallowing them, three by three, and then five by five until her bodily functions shut down, one by one, like inviting the darkness by turning off the lights, one by one, each night at bedtime.

She thinks of Anarkali, the slave girl, the dancing girl who was buried alive between stone walls for being in love with the crown prince Salim. She thinks of how it might be to stand still between cold stone, walled up, as a tomb is raised around you shutting out the light and air while you breathe slowly, then gasp and pant and beg for air as your lungs twitch and convulse until you are over.

She turns to the right and sees the steel and wrought-iron electric train rattling across the tracks that run past her apartment. She walks back to the living room and towards a wooden shelf on the wall. On it stands the Lionel Mogul, a miniature battery-powered electric train that her father bought for her on one of his business trips to the US, before he left her mother.

THE FIRST TIME it happened she was eight years younger. They had been married for two years. She was with her client, a handsome woman of fifty-three. She remembers the day clearly because she remembers exactly what she was wearing, a white blouse over a short navy blue skirt, pointed pencil heels and a string of small pearls around her neck.

The client turned to her and said, 'Look, I don't want it easy and clean for him. For me, easy and clean. Got it?'

'I'll try,' she said with a smile.

She knew that it wasn't going to be easy or clean for either of them but she didn't say a thing.

The client turns to her again and says, 'I want his blood. Got it?'

And that's when it happened, when the woman said blood. She excused herself and told her client that she had to go to the bathroom, for just a minute please, but the older woman was very reluctant.

'What if they come, the men, when you're gone?'

'I won't be long. I promise.'

She couldn't keep that promise. It took twenty-nine minutes and her client found her on the bathroom floor, her hair dishevelled, mascara goo around her eyes and blood trickling down her thighs.

Even then they looked for two and found only one.

LATER THAT NIGHT he watched the sports channel for a while; the women's archery team was celebrating something. He changed the channel and began to watch some American sitcom. When the picture quality dilly-dallied between grainy and grainier he walked to the TV and thumped it on the top with a fist. The news channel came on and there was a story about a state-run orphanage who solicited

clients for their female inmates. Images of little girl children, their faces pixelated, wearing tight sequinned bodices over glitzy skirts filled up the screen and the word SHAME appeared again and again. She felt sick. He switched off the TV.

She told him. He took her in his arms and they sobbed together.

THE FOURTH TIME it happened, her mother came to visit.

‘It’s the evil eye,’ her mother told her. ‘Young lawyer doing well, house in a high-rise, a good husband, a car, a driver...yet an incomplete family. The evil eye. Somebody’s eye.’

When her mother spoke she became afraid. She remembers being afraid as a child.

*Put your toys away else the toothless witch will come.*

*Tie your hair otherwise everything will go black.*

*Don’t whistle. You’re calling out to the spirits of the night.*

*Put the train set away. All that noise and the dead might rise.*

‘You can’t be sure who they are but they are there,’ her mother said.

She said nothing. What can you say about those you cannot see?

FOR SEVEN MONTHS her mother stayed with them. Every evening she was greeted with a fistful of rock salt that was rotated in the air, around her face, almost like her mother was drawing an invisible circle. On other days it was the burning of red chillies on the stove. The brighter the flame the more potent was the evil eye.

He didn’t mind, at first, when little things appeared in the closet, on the shelves and on the centre table, things like a picture of a blue eye looking outward, a six sided mirror hung on the front door, pyramids in different colours, crystal, rock salt, candles...but when she brought a leather amulet for him to wear and suggested that they go to a god-man who had helped a sixty-nine-year-old woman conceive, he told her that she was going too far.

‘You’ve never liked my mother,’ she told him.

‘That’s not true,’ he told her but she wouldn’t listen.

‘You can’t see them but they can see you,’ she told him.



*Please.* He told her a few things about how she's changed, how it's not about the babies anymore or how badly they both want them, about how she regards everybody with suspicion, about how everything has become about being protected from those she cannot see. She cried. He reasoned. She sobbed. He left the room exasperated. She wept.

Her mother watched them from behind a half-closed kitchen door. She watched them go to different rooms, sleep in different beds.

*The evil eye is causing them to fight.*

THOSE SHE CANNOT see. They haunt her. She thinks of them as hooded creatures in black, following her around, waiting for her to falter, waiting to strike. The pictures that she has made at art class in school comes to her mind, the black giraffes and the grey peacocks, people with no faces and animals with two legs.

She thinks of the people she runs into every day, ticking off names from an invented list. An old school friend who's in serious debt, a colleague who lost the last two cases, maybe the overweight neighbour with two children, maybe the man next door who failed his law exam twice, maybe her sister-in-law who stays at home taking care of her ageing parents...

Those she cannot see are ones who have been stealing heartbeats, she decides.

TODAY, THIS SUNDAY, he comes to her. She is sitting down on her bed surrounded by her crystals, her pyramids, her beads and her mirrors.

'How're you feeling?' he asks

He's seated on a chair beside her. He's leaning in towards her.

'Um... Hmm,' she says.

'We have to take care of it. It's not healthy.'

'I will,' she says

TWO TRAINS HAVE gone by on the opposite platform. To get there she has to cross an over-bridge. The train she is waiting for has

not come yet. She looks at the display board and sees the word 'delayed' appear in Marathi first, then Hindi. She becomes aware that somebody is watching her. The platform has more people now. She turns back to look at the family of four. She regards them with some curiosity. Two little children wearing clothes that are too big for them are huddled close to their parents. The father is talking to the man in khaki with a broom. The mother meets her eye and smiles at her. She smiles back, a twist to her lips, but there's no warmth in her eyes.

'It's late,' says the mother taking a step towards her.

'Um... Hmm, yes,' she says

She frowns as she watches the children, who begin to chase each other around the bench. The father, from where he is sitting, speaks to no one in particular

'It should come now. I called the helpline.'

'Um... Hmm,' she says while contemplating how she might do what she has come to do in front of these people who are talking to her like she's somebody with a schedule to get to some real place.

'Don't worry,' the father tells her, 'you won't be too late. A few minutes here and there...'

'OOOyyyee!' the mother suddenly calls out to her children. 'Don't go down to the tracks! It's not a joke!'

'These boys,' says the mother turning to her, 'playing like that. But don't look so worried. You'll still make it.'

They're kind, affable people who mean well but what she needs is some solace and a train that arrives on time.

They are too close to her, too concerned and will not let her finish her business.

'I am going to take a taxi,' she says and with a quick raise of her hand, she waves goodbye and leaves.

'WHERE DID YOU go today? Before we went to the hospital?'

For a long moment she can't breathe. She closes her eyes and thinks about what she was about to do. She thinks of the lady reprimanding her children, telling them that going to the tracks was not a joke.

'Where's my mother?' she asks.

‘I told her that I wanted to be with you for a while.’

She’s silent. He speaks again.

‘Where did you go today?’

She looks at him, his stubble, the shadows beneath his eyes and something like sadness written all over his face.

‘I went to see the trains,’ she says touching the Lionel Mogul that she’s brought with her to her bed.

He smiles, sits down beside her and touches her hair with a light hand.

‘Did it calm you? Watching them go by?’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘I will go back tomorrow.’

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Lavanya Shanbhogue-Arvind is an Indian fiction writer and social worker from Mumbai. Her story, ‘The Crystal Snuff Box and the Pappadum,’ won the Commonwealth Short Story Special Prize (2011) for the Commonwealth theme, ‘Women as Agents of Change’. She holds a MFA (fiction) degree from the City University of Hong Kong. Her debut novel, set in India under British colonial rule, will be published by Roli Books later this year.

## MEMOIR

# Hero

Loved wife, mother, mother-in-law, grandmother

Lian Low

‘WASN’T AH MA your hero? Didn’t you write about that somewhere?’ Robert asks, eyes locked ahead onto the black country highway. His tone is tender and intimate, a change from his usually distant pitch. I’m not sure how to answer my uncle’s question. Piano and strings music gently gauzes the gulf in our disquiet as we speed onwards.

Robert is a music schoolteacher. He has a grand collection of classical music and an encyclopaedic knowledge of it, with a fondness for Mozart’s piano sonatas since he plays expertly himself. As a child, I thought Robert and I had a special bond because we’re both born in the Chinese animal zodiac year of the snake, albeit twenty-four years apart. However, now at thirty-three, I’ve come to accept that we’re both secretive, a characteristic that’s seen as a negative trait in our zodiac sign. So while I’ve known my uncle all my life, I only see the side of him that he chooses to show me – stoic, like listening to the background music playing in hotel lobbies and elevators. I don’t want to hurt Robert’s feelings, nor do I want to lie, so I make a ‘hmmm...’ sighing sound in response to his question, as if in deep thought about my grandmother. I look outside and feel leaden, like I’m being pulled into the night sky’s infinity. I hope for the fairy-like star twinkles to buoy me to a safe shore, even if it’s filled with the ghostly silhouettes of trees that chase us along the Western highway to Ballarat Hospital to see my dying grandmother.

MY GRANDMOTHER, LEE Soon Moy nee Lee Soon Nyeong, was born in 1922 – the second oldest in Lee Bah Chee’s family of seven sons and three daughters. She went to school until she was nine and had a grade-three standard of reading and writing English. The eldest daughter in a large

family, she had to help her mother; hence, her schooling stopped. When one of her younger sisters was a baby, she was given away to relatives who did not have children. Another sister passed away young from a heart attack, leaving behind three sons and a husband. In 1943, my grandmother married my grandfather, Low Thuan Boo, her first cousin, their wedding held quietly during the Japanese occupation of Malaya in World War II.

Soon Moy's parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary was documented in 1961 by Malaysia's national English language paper, the *Strait Times*, in an article titled 'Their golden anniversary'.

Wearing Chinese traditional wedding costumes, Mr Lee Bah Chee, 69, helping his wife to cut a five-tiered cake to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary in Kuala Lumpur.

Mr and Mrs Lee were married on Oct 21, 1911 at Malacca and have seven sons and two daughters and eighteen grandchildren. More than five hundred guests attended the anniversary dinner given by the couple's children and sons-in-law.

The black-and-white photo accompanying the short article shows my great-grandmother smiling, her mouth slightly askew as she shares a knife with her stern looking and unsmiling husband while they attempt to cut the base of the ginormous wedding cake. At her parents' golden anniversary, Soon Moy would have been thirty-nine and her oldest child, my father Kim Seng, seventeen.

For the first nine years of my life in 1980s Kuala Lumpur, my grandmother dictated my world. I adored her more than I feared her threats of using the *rotan* to cane for any disobedience. She was my Ah Ma, and I was her first grandchild, born the year her husband, my grandfather, died. Sometimes it felt like we were conspirators, Soon Moy dismissing my father's house rules and confiding in me. Soon Moy taught me card games like set of fives and solitaire. She let me roam the kitchen when she was cooking, fan the fires of her charcoal burners and roll pastries for pineapple jam tarts. I thought my grandmother fearless. Once, I walked out to see her cleaver in hand, ready for the kill. The knife came down so cleanly there was hardly a squawk. She popped the whole

chicken, sans head, into her giant pot on top of the charcoal burner, where it would boil until the feathers could be easily plucked. When I was sick, Soon Moy let me sleep on her bed and she'd put a cold cologne compress on my head. She sewed her own loose cotton tops on our foot-pedal Singer sewing machine for home wear. For formal occasions, like visiting relatives during Chinese New Year, she would dress in stylish Nyonya fashion – a sarong and kebaya, her long hair in a neat *sanggul*. Relatives we would only see at Chinese New Year would rock up just for my grandmother's Peranakan banquet, replete with soups, pickles, stews and desserts that any restaurant would envy.

As matriarch, Soon Moy was the spiritual force behind our household. The foldaway altar would pop-up under my grandfather's photo in the main hallway during Chinese New Year and the anniversary of his death, the two major rites that we observed privately as a family. I would help to set up the altar with all the ceremonial fineries, and to dismantle it once the prayer period was over. My grandfather's favourite dishes were served together with fruits that symbolised luck and fortune. Additionally, she had pedestrian rites like her weekly smoking ritual. I often woke to Soon Moy waving a clay incense burner in my room. She would do this just after her morning shower, so her face would be powdered white with *bedak sejuk*. She looked like a witch, long hair out loose to her waist and wafting smoke.

When I turned nine, Soon Moy left for Australia to live with Robert. The week before she left I had a horrible sore throat, so she let me sleep in her bed, a cold cologne compress on my head. I was miserable knowing that she was leaving and not returning, but she assured me that she'd visit often from Australia. I was comforted with the knowledge that my family would join her in Australia in a few years time. Australia in my imagination was compiled from random sources: my uncle Robert and two aunts, who lived in Melbourne; postcards, keychains and toys that informed me the native wildlife of Australia was mostly koalas, penguins and kangaroos; the Australian science television show *Beyond 2000* with Amanda Keller (who I had a crush on), which Malaysian TV broadcast uncensored; and Robert's 'adopted' white Australian brother, Scott, who he met at church and whose Strine sounded very authentic, with all his 'G'days' and 'mates'. As a teenager, Robert had converted to Catholicism and became very devout. Scott wasn't

really orphaned; however, he was part of a church program that facilitated role-modelling and caretaking, which my uncle participated in.

After migrating to Melbourne, from 1986 to about 1990, Soon Moy would visit and stay with us in her old room. On one of her visits, Soon Moy caught me by surprise with a question. I'd started reading the comics and arts section of the newspaper, when she sprung an ambush: 'Don't you think I cook better food than *your Mummy*?' I was still pre-teen, but '*your Mummy*' was like a hot iron prod. The question confused me. My grandmother was testing my conspiratorial allegiance to her. Later that day I asked Soon Moy, 'Why don't you love Mummy?' I'm not sure why I asked; in my pre-adolescent logic, all families cared for and loved each other. As simple as that, how could it be anymore complicated? My grandmother reacted like I'd taken that same hot prod and used it to slap her face. In anger, although not raising her voice, she replied, 'You don't care if I die.' Then she left.

AS A DUTIFUL son, Robert took Soon Moy everywhere with him. We would receive photos in the mail of their holiday travels and it seemed like she went all over the world with him – the United States, Europe, Asia. When Robert moved to Singapore for a few years for a teaching post, she moved as well and stayed with him.

In early-2000, my father's younger sister, Auntie Junie, moved with her husband Jonathan to their Clunes property in country Victoria after Jonathan – a chain smoker – took sick with emphysema. They hoped the good country air and quieter lifestyle would aid his frail health. Jonathan was entirely dependent on Junie, needing her to wheel him around and monitor his oxygen levels. Junie cared for him willingly, despite her own health issues. Her back was bent like the curve of a question mark from scoliosis, but she had no social compunction. She reared native birds – cockatiels, rosellas, sulphur-crested cockatoos – in her backyard and kept some as pets in her house. She was the only Peranakan in this rural town and she was determined to die in Clunes. She'd already organised three spots in the Clunes cemetery – one for Jonathan, one for Soon Moy and one for her.

Jonathan died on the Western Highway during the long drive back to Clunes after a Christmas dinner at Robert's house in Nunawading. On

the day of the funeral, I told Junie that I would stay overnight to keep her company because she hadn't eaten properly the past few days. Her church friends had gathered round her in this tight-knit community and kept her company as much as she wanted it. When the pallbearers bore the coffin away, my aunty shrieked with grief like a cockatoo's scream, her mourning haunting the church walls.

Around mid-2000, Robert and Junie decided it was time for Soon Moy to move to Clunes, to live with Junie. They said that the country air would be good for her and she would have her own space out the back in a granny flat. In her first year in Clunes, my grandmother seemed content as she was in the main house with my aunty. When the granny flat was built at the back of Junie's property, we'd alternate Chinese New Year and Christmas celebrations between Soon Moy's granny flat and Robert's apartment. To get to Clunes, I'd make the long trip from Melbourne to Ballarat via V/Line and my aunt would drive the half-hour to pick me up, as I didn't have a car. I would try to keep my grandmother company, but it was hard striking up a conversation with her. She would be up for a while, with the television switched on, and then she would retire to her bedroom for a snooze. Conversation revolved mainly around food. Whenever I visited, I'd cook a meal – usually laksa on her little kitchen stove. The only way to have a relationship with my grandmother was to be with her, but as I didn't have a car my visits weren't frequent.

SOON MOY TURNED a grand eighty-eight in May 2010. In Chinese fortune telling, eight is considered a very lucky number because its Mandarin pronunciation sounds similar to the word that means wealth. By extension, eighty-eight indicates double fortune.

A few weeks before her birthday celebrations at a Ballarat Chinese restaurant, Soon Moy had a painful fall. Junie had to travel somewhere for a few days and so placed my grandmother in an aged-care facility. At her birthday, when we toasted Soon Moy, I looked on worriedly at the black-brown bruise prominent on her cheek. When she fell, she'd hit her cheek on a sideboard. It was difficult – impossible, even – for her to have any independence since her children had always taken care of her. Despite all the good country air,



she spent most of her time indoors with the television blaring listlessly in the background.

When Soon Moy had her first heart attack, Junie was with her, and the ambulance arrived to take her to Ballarat hospital. My family and I visited not long after, and she was sitting up after just finishing a meal. She even asked me to accompany her to the toilet. So when Robert rang to tell me that Soon Moy was dying and asked if I wanted to go with him to Ballarat Hospital, I was caught by surprise. I knew Soon Moy was old, but she had been talking normally just the week before. I understood that her body couldn't cope any longer, that the second assault was too much to bear. But Soon Moy was *always* around. My Ah Ma was always there for me. On the first day of kindergarten, she accompanied me and my brother on the bus. When the teacher closed the door to class, I sobbed inconsolably, crouching by the door while Ah Ma sat patiently on a stool outside. She was there waiting for me when the class ended.

WHEN ROBERT AND I arrive at Ballarat Hospital, Junie greets us in the room where my grandmother lies unconscious. The rest of the family are on stand-by in Melbourne and Glen Waverley. Even though I know Soon Moy is dying, I hold onto some hope that she'll wake up. There are tubes stuck in her nose and she looks tiny. Her eyes are clamped shut, wet around the edges, like she's shutting out the pain. 'They're giving her morphine,' Junie explains. We don't talk much. Robert decides to stay overnight on the camp bed beside Soon Moy. Junie drives me the half-hour back to Clunes.

The next day, Junie and I leave early for the hospital, the smell of bird feed in my breakfast of white bread, jam and instant Nescafe. Before we leave, Junie says goodbye to each of her birds, calling them by name. She also checks to see that there is enough water and food for them, as she expects to be gone all day.

At the hospital we meet Robert, who hasn't had a good night's sleep. He greets us solemnly and is distracted, frequently checking on his mother. Hoping for some sign of consciousness. Soon Moy is still breathing but it is heavy, laboured – no change from the night before. My aunt leaves for the kitchen cafeteria. It is around a quarter past eight.

‘Raina is dancing at 8.30 this morning at Fed Square, and she’ll be on *Sunrise*,’ I say to my uncle as conversation filler; also I’m curious about how Raina, my girlfriend, is coping with dancing in the freezing June morning. There is a little TV set above my grandmother’s bed and, coincidentally, it’s tuned into *Sunrise*. At 8.30 am, the journalist presents Raina and her Mohiniyattam dance troupe, and I gesture excitedly to my uncle. We then realise Soon Moy isn’t breathing. I remain at the edge of the bed as Robert rushes to Soon Moy’s side and holds her. Two tears roll down one side of Soon Moy’s cheek. My dead grandmother is crying.

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Lian Low is a writer, editor and spoken-word artist. Lian is currently editor-at-large with Asian-Australian arts and culture magazine *Peril*. Publication credits include *When Our Children Come Out: How to Support Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Young People* (Finch Publishing, 2005), *Growing Up Asian in Australia* (Black Inc., 2008), *ArtsHub Australia*, *ArtsHub UK*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Chart Collective* and various queer street magazines. She was commissioned to collaborate on the text in the *Do you speak Chinese?* section of the Dance Massive program, held at the Malthouse Theatre in March 2015.

FICTION

# THE GHOST IN THE GARDEN

TED MAHSUN

FOR GENERATIONS, THE Ghost languished in the garden of my *nenek*'s house. If you've ever been to Sungai Rokam, you might have seen it. It's the white wooden house, just a short distance up the road from the school.

The Ghost had been there since long before I was born. People came and went, but it remained, the one constant occupant. As I stand here in that very same garden, looking at the rusting, rotten carcass of the Ghost, I am taken back to an earlier time – to when I was just a young boy, barely in my twelfth year. I remember the smell of beef *rendang* in the air, and each and every one of my cousins was gathered in the living room of our *nenek*'s house. It was something that happened annually back then, the whole family gathering together for at least a week for the Raya celebrations. Things have changed. We're all grown up now, and we interact through the occasional comment on each other's Facebook statuses, but not much more.

So we, the little children, gathered round our beloved ageing uncle on that one Hari Raya years and years ago. We called him Cik Dada. Cik Dada looked old even back then. He had long, wavy, grey hair, tied back in a small ponytail. Around his mouth and on his chin grew the same wavy, grey hair, but this at least he kept neat and short, probably at the insistence of his four wives. The most prominent feature of his face was a huge, bulbous nose – a result, I suspect, of our family's north Indian ancestry, and something I felt fortunate not

to have inherited. He was wearing one of his favourite white pagoda T-shirts and a sarong, his typical attire when resting at home.

We sat around Cik Dada in a circle on the carpet, asking him to tell us about that ‘thing’ outside. With a stinky pipe stuffed with cheap tobacco in his hand, he leaned back dramatically, making the old wooden chair he was sitting on creak and groan under his weight. He puffed out several wisps of smoke from his lips and placed his foul pipe aside. Then he began his act.

‘What’s that?’ he asked, feigning deafness. He cupped his hand on his ear for extra effect. ‘You want Cik Dada to tell you about what?’

‘Tell us, Cik Dada, tell us about that,’ we said, and collectively pointed outside towards the Ghost in the garden.

‘What is it? What are you children pointing at?’ Cik Dada said. He placed his hand as if to shade his eyes and squinted to look, but in the opposite direction from where we were pointing.

We screamed with laughter, enjoying the act of japery from this seemingly daft old man. ‘No, not there, Cik Dada...there,’ we said in between bouts of laughter.

But eventually Cik Dada would look in the right direction, and on his face would appear a sly, crafty smile. A smile that told you he had a secret, a secret he was wondering whether or not to reveal to us young ‘uns.

‘Oh, so you want to know about the...Ghost?’ he asked, barely above a whisper.

We gasped at the mention of ‘Ghost’ as if it was something truly frightening.

‘A ghost? Is it dangerous?’ one of us asked.

‘Well, it depends,’ Cik Dada said. ‘When you’ve been naughty, it would know. And when a naughty child gets too near to the Ghost...’

We leaned forward, waiting for the reveal.

‘It will snatch you and eat you, bones and all!’ Cik Dada said with his arms raised, hands in a clawing motion. His eyes bulged and his bulbous nose trembled.

We screamed in fright, but Cik Dada would just laugh his jolly, hearty laugh.

Aunt Mimi appeared in the living room, clutching her hips and looking particularly irate. She had been sleeping in the bedroom at the back of the house, nursing a migraine. Nenek's house had thin, wooden walls and sound easily carried through the rooms, even all the way to the back.

'Dada, stop scaring the children,' Aunt Mimi said after she was sure she had sufficiently gained the attention of the room. 'All this screaming is making my migraine worse.' After Aunt Mimi was satisfied with the reception of her message, she marched back to her bedroom.

'My apologies, dear sister,' Cik Dada said, even though Aunt Mimi had left. He turned back to us, and continued his story. 'There, outside in your grandmother's garden, covered in overgrown weeds, is a Rolls Royce Phantom Two. That is why we call it the "Ghost".'

'Four-point-three-litre, thirty-horsepower, six-cylinder engine with Stromberg downdraft carburettor. Can go from zero to one-hundred kilometres an hour in twelve-and-a-half seconds. And I used to like the colour before it faded away into its present grey.'

'Cik Dada, you're pulling our leg again,' I said. 'That's not a Rolls Royce Phantom and you're just quoting *Indiana Jones*.' I took pride in being a movie buff. Still do. Cik Dada called me an insufferable know-it-all.

'It isn't?' Cik Dada said, absentmindedly scratching his ear and frowning. 'Are you sure?' And then Cik Dada broke out into another hearty laugh.

'You're much too clever, and you watch much too many movies,' Cik Dada said. 'But you're right. It's actually a 1962 series IIIA Sunbeam Rapier convertible, but I call it the Ghost anyway.'

'Why is it abandoned though?' one of my cousins asked. 'Seems like a shame to just leave it there rotting away.'

Cik Dada nodded sagely. 'Sometimes these things happen and who's to say why such things happen in the way they happened?' He took a puff from his pipe and looked wistfully out the window towards the Ghost.

'But whose was it? Who bought it? Did you get to drive it, Cik Dada?' another cousin asked.

‘Oh yes, I did get to drive it, of course. But that was many, many years ago.’

‘Where did you drive it, Cik Dada? Where did you go? And with who?’

‘Oh, we drove the Ghost to many places! We went to Coronation Park, we went to Kuala Kangsar for laksa by the river; some weekends we drove to Taiping to picnic in the lake gardens. The sun would be shining and the breeze would kiss our faces as we ate *mee goreng* and *nasi lemak* and fresh, crunchy *karipap*. Your mothers were much younger than they are now, and with the Ghost’s top down they would stand on the back seat and make faces at the drivers of the cars behind us. Good thing they were cute little girls, so the other drivers didn’t mind as much. It was a simpler time back then. But can you imagine? Your mothers would pull a face like this...’ Cik Dada stuck his tongue out and pulled his eyelids up so his eyeballs bulged out like ping pong balls.

We burst into uproarious laughter once again, prompting Aunt Mimi to come screaming at all of us – Cik Dada included – to stop it. Her migraine was getting worse and worse by the minute because of our racket, and if we wouldn’t stop, she’d take out the *rotan* and beat us all sore. So Cik Dada ended his story there and told us to go outside and play instead.

MY STORY OF the Ghost would have stopped there if not for the fact that, years later, the topic of the Ghost came up in conversation with my mother. By then I was a stupidly confident young adult who thought he knew everything there was to know about the world, and during one of my college breaks I made the rare decision to come home and visit her. Even though Mak was disappointed I didn’t come home as often as she wanted me to, somehow the conversation veered towards the topic of the Ghost. I asked her how the car came to be in the possession of our family.

Until then I had always assumed it was Cik Dada who owned the car, since the many stories I had heard about the Ghost were usually about him driving it to some exciting locale and generally having a whole lot of fun. But of course, like many of Cik Dada’s whims of

fancy, his story of the Ghost was baked together with generous doses of half-truths and white lies, and whatever he blabbered forth was meant to be taken with equally generous doses of salt.

‘I was a little girl back then,’ Mak said, ‘and Aunt Mimi happened to be friends with an Englishwoman. Aunt Mimi was a teacher at the Methodist Girls School back then, and that’s how she met this *minah salleh*. There were still a lot of *mat salleh* and *minah salleh* working in the country in the ’60s, and Aunt Mimi became very good friends with this particular lady who we came to know as Mrs Benson.

‘Aunt Mimi didn’t call her that of course. She was much too close to her to be formal. I don’t remember what it was she called Mrs Benson. It’s been so long.’

I kept silent so my mother could continue her story.

‘I think it was in ’65, or was it ’66? Sometime in the mid-’60s,’ Mak said. ‘Mrs Benson had to return to England, and as a parting gift she gave your Aunt Mimi her car, which she couldn’t take back with her. It wasn’t practical to ship it back to England from Malaya, you see.’

‘What? She gave Aunt Mimi the car? For free?’

‘Like I told you, they were really good friends. They kept in touch with each other right up until Mrs Benson passed away several years ago.’

‘How did Aunt Mimi know she died?’

‘Mrs Benson’s son eventually wrote to Aunt Mimi after he had found their letters of correspondence while cleaning her house. He read the letters and realised they had been very good friends, and felt obliged to write Aunt Mimi and tell her that his mother had passed away.’

Mak stopped her story here; it’s funny how death inspires silence in conversations. But I wasn’t about to let her quit just yet.

‘Aunt Mimi must’ve been really exhilarated to get that car. After all, it is a convertible and sort of like a sports car even. And from what Cik Dada told us in his stories, everyone must have had a lot of fun, going for joyrides, picnics at the Taiping Lake Gardens, that sort of thing.’

My mother nodded and smiled, and her eyes had a faraway look.

‘Yes, those were fun times. I used to sit in the back and make faces at the other drivers, even the people on bicycles. There were a lot more people using bicycles to get around back then.’

‘I bet Aunt Mimi must have been really proud to have driven that car to school,’ I said.

‘Oh no,’ Mak said. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because Aunt Mimi didn’t know how to drive at the time.’

‘Oh. So she let Cik Dada drive it in the meantime then?’

Mak didn’t answer and because she looked tired from the conversation, I left it at that.

In those days I had seen Aunt Mimi less and less, and her visits to Sungai Rokam became rarer and rarer still. I didn’t know it at the time, but her marriage was on the rocks and she hadn’t dared to tell anybody about it. She couldn’t leave her home in Johor Bahru because her husband had refused to allow her the freedom of being in public unaccompanied.

ONE DAY, FEELING bored during a college break and not wanting to go home and visit my mother, I decided to make a trip to visit Aunt Mimi in Johor Bahru. She was delighted to see me. I was probably the first nephew to have visited her house since she had moved several years before. Her husband wasn’t at home; he was almost always not at home and often travelled to Australia on what he claimed were business trips, leaving Aunt Mimi at home all by herself. Aunt Mimi didn’t have any children, so she lived alone.

Aunt Mimi’s hair was stringy and thin but she tried to make it look presentable. It didn’t really work. She wasn’t as old as Cik Dada, but she was close enough. And whereas Cik Dada was fit and strong for his age, Aunt Mimi was frail and hard of hearing. She had the same large bulbous nose that I’m fortunate not to have inherited.

Having always been curious about the Ghost, and armed with the new information that I had received from my mother, I found the confidence to ask Aunt Mimi about it.



Aunt Mimi scratched her nose absentmindedly and her eyes glazed over, her mind recalling a distant past. She remained silent for several moments and eventually I leaned over and touched her shoulder.

‘Aunt Mimi?’ I asked. ‘Are you all right?’

Aunt Mimi did not stir and kept looking at something beyond my sight. ‘I loved that car,’ she said, eventually. ‘It actually had a name, did you know that?’

‘Apart from ‘Ghost’, you mean?’

She sneered. ‘That’s a stupid name Dada came up with, and only because he wished the car was a Rolls Royce instead of a ‘silly’ Sunbeam. That’s typical of your useless, layabout uncle. Always wishing for something he doesn’t have, and never being grateful for what he already has. Never being able to see what’s in front of him and appreciating it for what it is.’

‘What was the name of the car, Aunt Mimi?’

‘The car? Oh, oh yes. Margaret had called it “Lilly”.’

‘Lilly?’ I said, frowning. ‘That’s a strange name to give a car.’

‘Well, I assure you it wasn’t so strange back then, but I wouldn’t expect you youngsters to appreciate or understand it. And how much stranger is it than ‘Ghost’, hmm?’

‘Sorry, Aunt Mimi. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.’

Aunt Mimi slowly turned her head and looked at me. She smiled.

‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘Nothing to be sorry about.’

‘Did you ever get to drive the Gho— I mean, Lilly?’ I asked.

‘No, I never did get a chance. By the time I got my driving licence, Cik Dada had driven it with such reckless abandon that it was in a state of serious disrepair. The engine probably needed an overhaul, and goodness knows how long the car went without servicing.’

‘Cik Dada didn’t even bother sending it in for servicing?’

‘You have to remember, our’s was a poor family back then.’

‘So in the end, the car was just left to rot in Nenek’s garden?’

‘I didn’t have the money to repair it. And Cik Dada, well, he didn’t assume any responsibility for the car. Telling him off would have been out of the question. He is my big brother after all.’

‘The car must have been a beauty to look at in those days,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ Aunt Mimi said. ‘It was.’

Now, decades later, my aunt and uncle are long gone and their stories with them. It’s funny how a rotting, rusty old car can evoke so many memories, and how it shaped the people who had come in contact with it throughout the years.

I am sun-baked standing in the garden on this smouldering afternoon, but that doesn’t stop my eyes from getting a bit damp as the man from the scrap metal yard arrives with a snarling monster of a lorry. With mechanical efficiency, the man hauls the car up to the flatbed. When he is done, he looks at me and says, ‘My friend will come tomorrow to demolish the house.’ I nod and thank him for his service.

The man climbs back into his lorry and drives up the road, past the school and to the junction at the end that leads to Jalan Gopeng. I can’t pull myself away from the rusting remains of the Ghost – or Lilly – being slowly driven away. Finally she disappears, taking with her the memories of times long past.

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Ted Mahsun writes technical manuals for a software company by day and writes fiction by night. His book reviews have been published in the *Star*, Malaysia’s daily newspaper, and his fiction has been included in several anthologies published by Malaysian publisher Fixi. He lives in Kuala Lumpur with his wife and daughters, and occasionally blogs at [tedmahsun.com](http://tedmahsun.com).