



“ Refreshingly honest and daring.” —Lily Rose R. Tope



HEAVEN

HAS EYES

STORIES

PHILIP HOLDEN



“By turns thoughtful, satirical, even dreamlike, these stories delve in and out of memory and alternative histories, capturing misconnections between characters that even include modern Singapore’s founding father.”

—Cyril Wong, award-winning author of *Ten Things My Father Never Taught Me*

“Quiet yet disquieting, these stories shimmer with the unsettling currents that stir beneath the placid surface of Singaporean life, here and elsewhere. Philip Holden’s prose, meditative and thoughtful, has a sharp bite to it.”

—Jeremy Tiang, author of *It Never Rains on National Day*, shortlisted for the 2016 Singapore Literature Prize

“This collection of stories is refreshingly honest and daring in its treatment of Singapore’s history and quotidian life. The stories disturb; they are painfully truthful. This kind of storytelling is what is missing in Singaporean literature.”

—Lily Rose R. Tope, Professor of English, University of the Philippines

“Stories as complex, narrators as multi-lingual, and stylistics as code-switching as the island nation of Singapore from where they come, Philip Holden’s stunning three-decades-long-in-gestation collection is a wholly local-global achievement. His extraordinary multi-layered, poly-vocal, transnational fictions are absolutely worth the wait.”

—Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Commonwealth Poetry Prize and American Book Awards winner, and author of *Among the White Moon Faces*

“*Heaven Has Eyes* unfurls a range of complex, uneasy and often difficult-to-define emotions and sensibilities, as well as thoughtfully sculptured scenarios both artfully simple and poetically nuanced. Philip Holden tackles the amnesiac confusion that comes with urban development and rapid change, the sacrifices made for material progress, the liminal suffering of bureaucracy’s insistence on its own schedule, and the anxiety of an increasingly borderless world. These effortlessly universal stories are told skilfully through self-reflexive, post-colonial lenses, stylishly and surgically executed by an insider-outsider storytelling sensibility.”

—Alvin Tan, founder and artistic director of The Necessary Stage

“The complexities of contemporary life in Singapore are revealed in subtle and nuanced ways in Philip Holden’s first collection of short stories. Ruminative at times but always insightful, a good read.”

—Suchen Christine Lim, author of *The River’s Song*

“Philip Holden’s short stories are delicate, deliberately understated and poignant—but sometimes also pointed, despite a subtle use of irony. The stories range from Singapore to England to western Canada, but the point-of-view is never that of a freewheeling, privileged and rootless cosmopolitanism, but one that offers personal and also political perspectives on the struggles to unroot and to root again the self. The painful details of the quotidian are part and parcel of such struggles. The legacy of colonialism and the Cold War also make its presence felt, as past and present are shown to be linked in a Singaporean society that people like to say is dehistoricised. A few stories enquire: what happens to political idealism? Connections and interconnections are palpable concerns in this at times disquieting short fiction.”

—C.J.W.-L. Wee, author of *Culture, Empire, and the Question of Being Modern* and Professor of English, Nanyang Technological University

“With a gimlet eye for detail and an instinctive feel for the complex cadences of life, Holden ushers his reader into worlds disconcertingly surreal yet also strangely intimate. His stories—whether set in Singapore, Canada, England or the spaces in between—speak of the (im)possibilities of communication, connection and arrival, hinting at emotional truths always glimmering in the near distance and just out of reach. These are stories which hold you in their thrall because they embody imaginative intelligence leavened with compassion—read them!”

—Angelia Poon, Head of English Language and Literature, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

“Subtle and profound, this book is a letter to an old lover, carrying in it the intimacy, honesty and tenderness that only those who have truly loved can give.”

—Tan Dan Feng, co-founder of The Select Centre and co-editor of *Singapore Shifting Boundaries*

HEAVEN HAS EYES

Stories

Philip Holden



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To all Singaporeans, citizens or otherwise

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Preface

THE STORY BEHIND this book begins in Changsha, Hunan Province, China, in September 1986. Sometime during that month, I arrived at Hunan Normal University with a freshly minted MA in English Literature to teach literary studies to graduate students older than I was, who had returned to the university after the nightmare of the Cultural Revolution. On the day I arrived, I was driven from the airport through the city, over the bridge across the Xiang River that I later learned many of the university's faculty had built with their own hands, up the hill, through the university gates, to the *Zhuanjia Lou*, the Foreign Expert's Building, at what was then the top of the campus, next to the water tower.

In the first few days before the semester started, I got to know others who lived in the building. Below me, on the second floor, was a large apartment inhabited by a Canadian couple, Edward and Margaret Berry. Edward was a professor from the University of Victoria, in Canada, an expert in Shakespeare but now close to retirement. An American

who had migrated northwards, he would often talk to me about Vancouver, and in particular the University of British Columbia, surely the most beautiful campus in the world, on a peninsula at the edge of a continent, covered in pines and jutting out into the Strait of Georgia.

On the third floor, there was a smaller apartment, inhabited by two undergraduate sisters from Singapore, who I knew as Zhang Hong Ying and Zhang Hong Nian, and whom everyone called, rather unimaginatively, the Singapore girls. Their father, Mr Zhang, taught at the Railway University across the river, and would visit them from time to time. They introduced him to me, and on weekends we talked over tea, about a city I had left, London, and about British Labour Party politics. As the weather grew colder we continued: we discussed decolonisation, democracy, political failures and hopes for the future. And our conversations condensed on another city, Singapore, the island from which he was exiled, and to which his daughters and then he himself would finally return at the end of his life. Slowly, from conversations with faculty and then from my own reading after I left Changsha, my companion's identity emerged. He was Eu Chooi Yip, Secretary of the Malayan Democratic Union and the Malayan Communist Party, someone who had taken a very different path in history from his fellow-student at Raffles College in the 1930s, Goh Keng Swee, or his journalist friend S. Rajaratnam.

I did not realise it at the time, but the topography of much of my life was mapped out through the conversations in that simple room in the *Zhuanjia Lou*, with its misaligned window screens that could never quite keep the bugs out, and its shower heater that gave you a salutary shock in the morning if the arc of falling water above your head completed a circuit. I sipped tea from Dongting Lake in a covered cup that I opened only after all the leaves had fallen from the surface of the water. I began my lifelong struggle with the Chinese language. And, at the same time, these conversations of three cities: London, the city I had left but would never return to as a Londoner, and the cities of my future, Vancouver and Singapore.

I arrived in Vancouver three years later, in September 1989, to study for my doctorate at that university among the trees on the promontory, up the hill. I came by train from Toronto, across the Canadian Shield, the Prairies, up through the Rockies and down along the Fraser Valley. I spent my first night in the Youth Hostel at Jericho. In the evening, free for the first time in days from my heavy suitcase, I walked out onto the jetty at sunset and looked in wonder at this golden, glowing city, cupped by mountains. The next morning, I took the trolleybus up the hill to UBC, into the mist and into a new life.

In August 1994, I flew into Singapore in a rainstorm. It was the National Day holiday: I hunkered down in the Novotel Orchid on Dunearn Road, now long vanished, took

a shuttle bus to Lucky Plaza for a meal. The next morning, I climbed up another hill, to the National Institute of Education, on the Bukit Timah Campus, to report for work. I had new clothes and shoes from Eatons in Vancouver, another now-demolished building. They chafed, and at the end of the day I hobbled back to my room to sleep. I had sent clothes to the hotel laundry, and belatedly realised that I had left my keys in a pocket. I called the reception, and a young member of the hotel staff came up to my room and proceeded to take off his clothes. I gently showed him out. A few days later I went to eat seafood at Punggol with a friend I had met in Vancouver. We ate prawns, in another long-vanished restaurant by the sea. They were juicy, and at some point the juices splattered over her hair. I found myself brushing them off, very gently, the tiny globes of light shattering and falling. Another story began.

This story should have an easy ending. It should be about arrival, about finding home. But stories are recalcitrant: they disappoint you, leading you to places of discomfort just when you think you have reached a conclusion. All but one of the stories in this collection are fictions in a very real sense. None of the characters, unless they are actual historical figures, have any intended resemblance to people who are part of my life in Singapore, although they at times pick up small details or phrases from my life. There is one exception, a single story that holds hands more closely than the others with truth, and because of the events in it I am

not quite sure what the future will bring. But, as the most famous Hunanese of all time once wrote, there is a law of contradiction in all things.

HERE

Aeroplane

JIN JIN, NOT *now*. *Later we can fold a paper plane. But now we've all got things to do. Gua ma is watching her movie on TV. I've got something I have to write. Do your Chinese homework. Look: you can sit here, at the table with me. Put a cushion on the chair, so you can reach. No pencil? Ask Yati: she's sure to have one.*

Outside, a light breeze before rain. When the music from the television fades away, sounds from beyond the house gather again. The wash of traffic on the recently widened road. Voices: raised, anxious, but too far away to understand. The sealing wax palm in the garden stirs. We wait for the patter of water on tiles, on the roof of the car. Or, soon enough, for the rattle of a bolt drawn back, and the creaking open of the gate. First Jin Jin's mother, my sister-in-law, and then other family members, settling like migratory birds at my mother-in-law's house in that golden hour before sunset, before dinner.

岳母，你在看什么电影？

She's watching *Air Hostess*, my mother-in-law tells me.

Look! Watch Ge Lan, see how she tilts her head when she smiles. See what she tells her mother, tells Ah Xiang, tells the boring boyfriend. She has thought about this career move deeply. She wants to take off, to fly into the blue sky. She does not want to be a canary in a cage, no matter how sweetly she can sing. And she can sing, very beautifully. Later, we will have the Calypso song. But now it is only the background music that swells. Miss Kang steps out, leading her new recruits proudly onto the apron. They wear high heels, pencil-slim skirts, and tiny blue-grey berets that nestle miraculously on their heads. Behind them are the waiting planes, white as birds flocking beneath the green of mountains.

I turn back to the table. Opposite me, Jin Jin hovers over her homework, head down, elbows sticking out, her exercise book ruffled by the fan. I look down at my own work. On my laptop are photographs and documents that I need to lay out one by one, into a story. A portrait of a young man with a trilby and a cheap suitcase, standing by a waiting plane. No mountains here, only a flat expanse of grass. Then PDFs of colonial office records, their folder covers turned a deep brown with age: even here, on the screen, you can almost smell them, musty, remembering how you were afraid they would fall to pieces in your hands under watchful cameras of the reading room. Newspaper columns with bold titles: ANOTHER YEAR FOR DETAINEES; FREEDOM AT LAST; THE BIG SPLIT; OPPOSITION LEADERS DETAINED; SUICIDE ATTEMPT IN

PRISON; EXILE OR DETENTION: PM'S OFFER; RELEASE TO GO ABROAD FOR STUDIES. Below the march of the headlines, the print diminishes quickly to the size of ants, trailing away into the darkness. Academic articles are much easier to read: bright, angular and solid, their references marshalled as neatly as the 空中小姐 on the tarmac.

It's also easy to watch the movie. Ge Lan is on her first flight. The propellers turn, slowly at first, and then fast enough to seem as if they are spinning backwards. The plane lumbers along, impossibly heavy, and then gathers speed for take-off. The music returns: the aeroplane seems to float in a blue sky empty of anything but clouds. In the cabin, the passengers behave much as expected. There is a terrified woman, who clutches Ge Lan's hand and will not let go, a lecherous middle-aged man, to be engaged in conversation and then avoided, a greedy passenger who wants two bowls of soup, and wants them now.

Uncle?

Jin Jin, one minute, I'm working.

Can I ask you a question?

Okay.

Your legs, why so hairy?

Because I come from a country very far North, very cold in winter. So I need to be warm.

Like a polar bear?

Yes, very like, very like. Now do your homework. Write

out those characters. If you don't practise over and over again, your writing, your 笔画, will be as bad as mine. Look, you've hardly started.

I turn back to the screen. This shouldn't be taking so long. Short entries, the dictionary's editor told me. We'll pay you per word, but only up to a certain limit. There's a knack to this, to these opposition leaders who are footnotes in history: a beginning, a middle and an end. But history takes you on detours. It keeps you waiting: it never arrives on time. Look at this photograph, and its description: "Riot at Nanyang University". Three earnest young students stand next to a banner, underneath a ceremonial gate. Where is the riot? How did the photograph, in the archive, come to be attached to the caption? What kind of a story is being told here? A story about the future, surely. Be quiet. Do your homework. Wait, work hard, and the future you want will be delivered to you. But what if you look up every now and then? The future has arrived, you notice, by express delivery. Each year there are bigger and bigger packages; they crowd around your desk. You do not open them; you return to your work. At some point, perhaps, you suspect that they are not quite what they seem: you open one, only to find there is nothing inside.

Mother-in-law turns, calls for Yati. An ad break. I turn to her.

葛蘭呢？空中小姐的生活过得怎么样？

It's not easy, she tells me, an air hostess's life. Did I see the

last few minutes? When Ge Lan promised that she'd come back for her mother's birthday? Not really her mother, of course. An actress whose name she can't remember. In this movie, Ge Lan plays the role of Lin Keping. Keping wants to come back to celebrate with her mother in Hong Kong, but the flight is cancelled. The mother waits by the window, with the rain pouring down outside, with her birthday cake untouched, she tells me. 被 *pang pui ki* 了. She's switched to Hokkien. My Mandarin flaps awkwardly, shuffles and sometimes takes flight. Hokkien's something else, a darkened landscape seen from above, with little islands of light: *mee sua, lay dio, pang sai, jiat png.*

岳母，*Pang pui ki* 用华文怎么讲？

Pang pui ki 就是放飞机。

Pang pui ki, then, is flying an aeroplane, to stand someone up. To say you'll do something, my mother-in-law elaborates, and then not do it. To say you'll meet someone, and not arrive. Quiet, now. The movie is starting again.

Uncle, my hand hurts.

Don't press so hard, Jin Jin.

But she's bored. She hops down from the chair, and comes over to my side of the table, under the flickering shadows of the fan.

Who's that?

Who?

The man in the photo on your computer.

What do you think?

I think he's going on a journey, a very long way.

How do you know that?

There's a plane behind. He's got a suitcase. It looks like it's empty. Maybe his mother gave him it. I don't think he has much money.

And his clothing?

He doesn't look...comfortable. Like he's wearing for the first time. And a long, long time ago. Like Gua Ma and Gua Kong's wedding photos.

Where is he going?

She shrugs her shoulders, holds up her hands.

Look again?

A hat and a coat. Somewhere far away, very cold. Polar bear land? Will he see the polar bears?

No, he won't see polar bears. A few ageing wolves, perhaps, across a table.

Can we make the paper plane now?

Ten more minutes.

Promise?

Don't worry. I won't 放飞机.

Eh?

Ten more minutes. You can watch the clock.

I assemble the pieces of the story. Quickly, now. This first flight, to that other island in the North, was a good one. Slow, of course, and uncomfortable. He was different from the others who went with him: he found it difficult to share their jokes, or their laughter, their ease with the English.

In the Northern Island, in that great grey city, in a season that for some unknown reason they called spring, he must have felt alone. But I can leave that out. At all those talks on Singapore's future, he was on the sidelines, waiting. This was his job for now: to listen, to express his opinions, but above all to wait, until history composed itself in his and his country's favour. But history has a way of not keeping appointments. There was a second flight, years later. No cameras this time; no photographs in the newspapers. A short transfer from prison, and then the journey. In the northern city, there were no service apartments in Westminster now, no chauffeurs, no ceremonies of welcome, only a fruit stall in Bayswater, the patter of rain. It was summer, and someone special to him had accompanied him. Yet he still found it difficult to recompose his life. He went for treatment. The psychiatrists were puzzled; after a while, they called on a young houseman from his part of the world, who listened and paraphrased. And so his words came back to him, like an echo from a well.

Music again, from the television. Ge Lan has discovered that the darkly handsome, brooding pilot, Lei Daying, so remote and authoritarian in the air, has a soft side. After the flight, he sidles up to her, and asks her what she is thinking about.

"A problem that isn't clear to me."

"What problem?"

"A person."

"What person?"

She hesitates, smiles and walks on, leaving him with a single word.

"You."

And then another break. My mother-in-law stirs, and looks impatiently up at the clock.

Jin Jin, it's time. We can fold the plane now. No, don't use your homework paper. Take another sheet. That one.

Like this?

Correct. Like that. Fold lengthwise. Make sure you get it right at the beginning. You can't afford to be like Ge Lan's friend in Gua Ma's movie: the one who was stuck doing ground service. 第一步我就失败了。 She said she failed at the first step. That's right: now press down with your nail, make the fold as clear as you can. Two triangles. Like this. Press hard. And then two more. Fold back; then on each side. Good? It doesn't look like a plane now? Like egg prata? Wait. Pull here. Do you see it now? Not like the planes in the photo or the movie. Thinner, sleeker. Like SAF fighters before National Day, the ones you hear first, and only then look up?

You want to try it now, in the alleyway? You don't want to watch the movie? Gua Ma says this is the best part. Singapore in 1959. The prison doors are open, but we do not see this. The plane passes over the Cathay Building and lands at Paya Lebar. Lin Keping and Lei Daying go sightseeing. There's Raffles on his statue, brooding over the Padang. The Sultan Mosque at Arab Street. And then Nanyang University, the central building just finished, the earth still raw and the gardens bare of trees. The

Aquarium by Fort Canning. And then, finally, the Esplanade. They look out onto the great harbour, full of the world's ships. This is a lost city that neither of us has ever known: only Gua Ma knows.

You really want to go? You don't want to wait for Ge Lan to sing Calypso? Let's go, then, before it's dark, before your mother comes. On the porch light. Wear your shoes. There's no wind now: I don't think the rain will come. Unlock the gate. Wait now, let's ask Gua Ma one more thing.

岳母，放飞机 用你们的福建话怎么讲？

Pang pui ki.

The sky is still light, as blank as the future. The lane is still empty.

Come, Jin Jin, let's fly the plane. Before dinner, before your mother comes. You're nodding. These moments are golden, aren't they, when someone doesn't arrive on time? They are places where stories can begin, where words can take flight.

Heaven Has Eyes

WHEN THE HEADLINES finally announced the election date, Zi Qiang felt little surprise. After all, the ground had been prepared for months. At Chinese New Year, citizens had been showered with what was described as a prosperity package; as always, small but significant sums were added to their state retirement and medical accounts. This time, in a further gesture, each of them had been given national shares, tiny virtual financial stakes in the country with an interest rate that, they were promised, would shadow GDP growth. A week later, the annual upward revision of public transport fares was postponed indefinitely. And on his housing estate, a long-delayed covered walkway to the Mass Rapid Transit station materialised almost overnight, gleaming in steel and glass.

He turned the page of his newspaper, weighing one corner down with his cup so that the wind from the fan wouldn't blow it away. Early morning in the coffee shop; the tables had just been wiped and if you looked at them from a low angle you could still see thin, persistent arcs



About the Author

PHILIP HOLDEN is a Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore. He is the author and editor of several books of literary criticism and history, focusing on auto/biography, and Singaporean and Southeast Asian literatures; these include the historical anthology *Writing Singapore*, co-edited with Angelia Poon and Shirley Geok-lin Lim. His short stories have been published in *Wasafiri*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Prism International*, *QLRS* and *Cha*. Holden has served as Vice President of the Singapore Heritage Society, and Deputy Director of the NUS University Scholars Programme.

“ These stories shimmer with the unsettling currents that stir beneath the placid surface of Singaporean life. ”

—Jeremy Tiang, author of *It Never Rains on National Day*

A teacher and his wife get caught up in the drama of election politics and a Channel 8 soap opera. An invalid house-sits for his sister and has to care for his nephew's pampered pet pig. A daughter travels overseas to convince her elderly father to move home with her.

An academic must navigate an opaque bureaucracy to renew his Re-Entry Permit. A young Lee Kuan Yew finds camaraderie with a future Canadian Prime Minister in England, and relentless tenacity from a British student in Canada desperate for an interview. *Heaven Has Eyes* dramatises these small moments of transcendence in everyday life, and more.

Philip Holden is a Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore, and the author of several books of literary criticism and history. *Heaven Has Eyes* is his first fiction collection.

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