

THE EPIGRAM BOOKS COLLECTION OF

BEST NEW  
SINGAPOREAN  
SHORT  
STORIES  
VOLUME ONE

Edited by Jason Erik Lundberg



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JASON ERIK LUNDBERG

SERIES EDITOR

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EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE



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# Introduction

Jason Erik Lundberg

SINCE THE MID-1990S, Singaporean literature has largely been dominated by two genres: poetry and stage plays. These two literary forms were so prevalent in 2003, the year that I visited Singapore for the first time, that a trip to independent store Select Books (then located at Tanglin Shopping Centre) became an eye-opening revelation about the local literary culture. Other than Catherine Lim's short stories and novels, not much else besides self-published titles with poor production values was frankly on offer in terms of local prose fiction. Coming from the USA, where poetry and plays have only a sliver of the prominence and readership of prose, I was pleasantly astounded to see these two forms supported by Singaporean readers. Novels and short stories by Singaporean authors had of course been written and published for decades before my arrival here, but at that point in time, were either out of print or existed in such small print runs as to be similarly unavailable.

However, in recent years, short fiction in particular has

begun experiencing a renaissance. Thanks to a plethora of anthologies and single-author collections from Singaporean publishers Ethos Books, Monsoon Books and Math Paper Press, the establishment of literary journal *Ceriph*, and the continuing presence of online journal *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, more Singaporean writers are expressing themselves through prose than ever before.

The interest in and pursuit of short prose writing has been additionally helped by the attention that has come with local authors making the longlist of the prestigious Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award: Wena Poon in 2008 (*Lions in Winter*) and 2010 (*The Proper Care of Foxes*), O Thiam Chin in 2010 (*Never Been Better*), Dave Chua in 2012 (*The Beating and Other Stories*), Felix Cheong in 2013 (*Vanishing Point*), and Alfian Sa'at in 2013 (*Malay Sketches*). For the prose enthusiast, it is a very exciting time.

In the past, reprint anthologies in Singapore have mainly been designed as a form of literary canonisation, such as *One: The Anthology* (2012) edited by Robert Yeo and *Telltale: 11 Stories* (2010) edited by Gwee Li Sui, just to give two recent examples. But to date, there has not yet been an attempt to curate the best **new** short fiction being produced by Singaporean writers, as a way to capture this representative moment in time of local literary culture. *The Epigram Books Collection of Best New Singaporean Short Stories*, designed as a biennial anthology series, of which this book is the first volume, is the answer to this lack.

Over a period of around five months, I read through hundreds of short stories in anthologies, collections, magazines and literary

journals, both in print and online, published between January 2011 and December 2012, by authors who were either Singaporean citizens or permanent residents. The wonderful National Library system was an incredibly beneficial resource in finding texts that I did not already have access to. In addition, I was allowed to pick from the top prize-winning stories of the 2011 Golden Point Award and Goh Sin Tub NUS Creative Writing Competition, and opened up nominations for consideration via a Submittable portal. At the end of this book, you'll find publication information for all of the stories chosen (which includes the venue in which each piece was originally published), as well as a list of more than seventy Honourable Mentions, in the hopes that you will seek out these texts for further reading.

The keen reader will notice that three of the stories included here were first published in the 2012 anthology *Fish Eats Lion*, which I also edited; lest your temper flare at thoughts of impartiality and unfair favouritism, please be assured that the final decision to include these pieces was left to publisher Edmund Wee. In addition, because of the restriction of the time period, there were some authors whom I would have love to have included, but simply couldn't because their most recent short fiction had seen print before 2011. Also, because of the mammoth task of searching out and whittling down the stories for curation here, I am sure that I inevitably missed some pieces that might have fit the criteria, as would be the case for any editor of a similar publication.

As to the chosen stories themselves, the authors are evenly split between men and women, and range from established

award-winners to emerging writers just starting their careers. I did not read the stories blind (i.e. I obviously knew who the authors were), but I put aside consideration of bodies of work and literary accomplishments and focused solely on the merits of each piece I came across. All of the stories I selected for this book had to fulfil the following criteria, regardless of genre or subject matter: exceptional writing, strong narrative voice, compelling plot, memorable characters, and the overall effect of moving me in some way as a reader.

• • •

When I was a teenager and living in North Carolina, one of my most anticipated books each year was *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, edited by Terri Windling and Ellen Datlow, and published by St. Martin's Press. At that time, I only had limited access to short fiction of the fantastic being published in the USA; my parents had gotten me subscriptions to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, but there was a wealth of short science fiction and fantasy being published in other venues, and I didn't quite know where to start in order to keep up with it all. However, the Windling/Datlow anthology series, each volume thick enough to kill a dozen spiders in one blow, was indispensable in keeping me current with the truly phenomenal written work being produced; and to my everlasting gratitude, it was consistently stocked by my local public library.

The series ran for twenty-one volumes, from 1987 to 2007 (with Kelly Link and Gavin Grant taking over Windling's role for the final four), and I quickly learned to trust the editors'

judgement, even if I did not always agree with some of their choices. Deciding on the "best" of anything is always an exercise in subjective opinion, and one could be driven crazy by questioning why one mediocre story was picked whilst an outstanding work was overlooked, but taken as an aggregate whole, my literary preferences very often lined up with theirs.

As I got older, my reading tastes branched out to encompass mainstream realism, mysteries, suspense novels, and even a bit of romance, but every year I came back to *YBF&H* to encounter the stories that I'd inevitably missed the first time round, to re-read pieces that had already touched me, and to discover new voices of whom I'd previously been unaware. When my writer friends started seeing regular publication, it was also a delight to turn to the Honourable Mentions in the back of the book to find out who'd made it; a highlight of my career was being included twice in this list.

When it came time to assemble the anthology in your hands, I kept *YBF&H* very much in the back of my mind in terms of organisation, standards of quality, and openness to lots of different kinds of writing. Although this book leans more heavily toward realism than the fantastic, it still owes a great debt to Datlow, Windling, Link and Grant, and I can only hope that it lives up to their example.

• • •

It may be an indication of the current cultural zeitgeist that the stories in this volume all deal with loss in one form or another, as though processing the rapid changes that

Singapore insists upon in order to stay globally competitive, and converting these impressions into deep meditations on life itself. Whether it is the loss of matrimonial intimacy in Dave Chua's "The Tiger of 142B", one's hearing in Vinita Ramani Mohan's "The Hearing Aid", youthful innocence in Alvin Pang's "The Illoi of Kantimeral", trust in parents in Yu-Mei Balasingamchow's "Lighthouse", memory and identity in Stephanie Ye's "Seascrapers", childish naïveté in Felix Cheong's "Because I Tell", a loving spouse in O Thiam Chin's "Sleeping", control over the natural world in Ng Yi-Sheng's "Agnes Joaquim, Bioterrorist", neighbourhoods in Karen Kwek's "The Dispossessed", moral assumptions in Jeremy Tiang's "Harmonious Residences", marital harmony in Amanda Lee Koe's "Randy's Rotisserie", familial accord in Koh Choon Hwee's "The Protocol Wars of Laundry and Coexistence", the entirety of humanity in Cyril Wong's "Zero Hour", filial respect in Verena Tay's "Walls", romanticism for dreams in Eleanor Neo's "Copies", social justice in Wei Fen Lee's "Welcome to the Pond", paternal authority in Ann Ang's "Scared For What", personal history and bodily appendages in Justin Ker's "Joo Chiat and Other Lost Things", precious family members in Phan Ming Yen's "Anniversary", or idealistic determination in Alfian Sa'at's "The Borrowed Boy".

Although, at the same time, that is not all these stories are about, by any means. Each examines various facets of the human condition and the truths that we tell ourselves in order to exist in the everyday. Some do this through domestic realism, and others through fantastical fabulation. The styles are as

varied as the authors, and no two stories are alike. I am proud to present you, the reader, with twenty separate and unique literary insights into the Singaporean psyche, which examine what it means to live in this particular part of the world in this particular time.



# The Tiger of 142B

Dave Chua

THEY FOUND THE mangled body in the evening when the sun painted the skies orange-red. It was an old Chinese man who lived in #17-803. When they printed his picture in the papers the next day, I tried to remember if I had ever seen him. Surely we would have bumped into each another on the elevator? Or I might have seen him hanging around at the void deck, sitting on the stone bench, pretending to play checkers while eyeing the schoolgirls who walked by?

But I could not remember him. He had worked as an accountant at a firm for sixty-one years and was reportedly “an upright, jovial man”. His family was in grief over his passing. The paper furnishings for his funeral spilled out onto the island of grass in front of the block.

His body had been found in the corridor, covered in blood and mangled, “as if clawed and partially eaten by an animal,” the newspaper said. Had anyone heard anything? Most folks were not in or had their televisions tuned too loud.

The police interviewed the neighbours and took down their statements. The tabloids were full of reports about the killing but had no real clues. The journalists circled the block like vultures in the next few weeks, hoping for a lead. His family padlocked their gates, refusing to answer the doorbell. I passed by the spot where his body was found briefly, but it had been wiped clean. There was not even a smear to indicate his passing or that he had died there.

• • •

“What do you think it was?” I asked her.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think it was random?”

“He was an accountant. Those don’t tend to have many enemies.”

“Maybe he added some figures wrongly.”

Her hand brushed my cheek. I loved how soft her fingers were. The radio was still on even though it was late at night, and it was bereft of the DJ’s drone and dedications.

“I should play the piano again,” she said, moving her fingers in the air.

“You should. It’s gathering dust. We don’t have that much space to spare for things that do nothing.”

“Like your VCR. Throw it out.”

“I will, I will. And all those tapes. Don’t even dare put them near the player. I’ll get the piano tuner,” I said, trying to sound useful.

“You know where to look?”

“Yellow Pages. The web. I can do that, you know.”

“Your mom called,” I said.

“What did she want?”

“Just to talk to you. She had that tone in her voice again when she talks to me. She always preferred your other boyfriends.”

“She always prefers someone else,” she said.

“She thinks I’m a bum.”

“Next time she asks, just tell her that you’re doing computers.”

“But I’m not.”

“Just tell her. She’ll stop. She thinks that people in computers make money. If you say finance, she’ll have a ton of questions to ask, and she’ll figure you out. You just have to dress better and not look like the assistant of a karung guni man.”

Chet Baker’s *My Funny Valentine* came on, a song that we both liked, and we went into silence and closed our eyes. I was not too sure how we had been together. I was let go from my job about two months back, and I had not been searching hard. I had been avoiding meeting up with friends and not going out. I ate out of cans to save money. Occasionally, I went to the shopping centres when the weather got too warm to soak in the air-conditioning or to the pool where I tried to find an empty lane, which was frequently impossible, but otherwise I stayed home.

• • •

Two weeks later, on the fourteenth floor, an old Indian lady on her way back from the market had seen a tiger about the size of a man striding in the corridor, as though it owned the place. She screamed and dropped her vegetables and started running

downstairs. She thought that she heard the tiger following her, and so she ran and ran, afraid that her heart would rip. When she reached the ground floor, she was still running. Then she called the police from a payphone.

The police arrived but found nothing. They escorted the woman to her house, and, after entering, she refused to come out again. She was burning incense and candles and screaming at the top of her voice about what she saw to anyone who would listen. On television, one could see her eyes darting around nervously.

The police had searched every floor and found no trace of the tiger. Not even a hair. There was no evidence except the ravings of a sixty-ish Indian woman.

She put out all sorts of wards, two huge locks, and statues of her Indian gods outside her flat. Some people said she had always been a little unhinged, and her children apologised for her rants, but she said that she knew what she saw.

The story refused to go away, and, though it elicited barely five lines in the main paper, it filled the tabloids. The people from the zoo were tired of answering questions from the press. There had not been a tiger escape, ever, and no tiger cub had been lost or unaccounted for.

“Come down here and count them!” the zoo spokesperson screamed to the journalists. He did say later in the article that there was an increase in the number of visitors.

• • •

When I told her about the news, she seemed bored. She had been having hard days at work and coming back late

every night. I massaged her feet clumsily, which made her smile. I told her about what the Indian lady saw.

“If it was a lion, we’d be honoured. They would have parades,” she said. “Proof that Sang Nila wasn’t deranged claiming he’d seen lions here in the 14th Century.”

“Who was that person I saw you with that day? Didn’t you see me?”

“He was an old friend.”

Her voice was careful. To know more would require navigating around the wall she had put up.

“Have you started playing? I wiped off the dust for you. Even got a piano tuner to come. He made me meet him at the void deck. He was afraid.”

“Did he rush through the work?”

“No. Once he was inside the house, he felt safe. He used one of those electronic things. Thought he was going to use a tuning fork.

“Well, I left him to it. I went to the bedroom. People don’t like being looked over the shoulder when they work, yah?”

“What did you do?”

“I tried to do some work, but it was sort of distracting. The sounds of him tuning the piano and clucking his tongue in disapproval. Like they were bad children. You feel a bit self-conscious about letting it fall into such a state.

“After a while, he knocked on the door. I must have dozed off.”

“So like you,” she said.

“Yeah. I went out. He had closed the cover of the piano and put our photographs and other things back, almost exactly as we had it.”

“They were not really in the same position. You didn’t notice? I did.”

“He played a tune. One of Chopin’s *Études*. He wasn’t bad. His hands still flowed over the keys even though his hands were old. He then asked if I wanted to test it, and I just pressed the C key. I can’t remember any of it.

“He asked if we had any tea, and I said yes. Then he stayed and chatted for about an hour. Think he was just killing time between appointments.”

“You had enough money to pay him?”

“Yeah, of course I did. So I made him some tea, and we talked. I didn’t want to talk about all the silly tiger stuff, so we discussed work.

“I asked him if ours was the worst piano he had to tune, and he said not by far. He said that he was at this mansion a few months ago, one of those colonial black-and-whites, which had a grand piano. It had obviously not been touched for a long time. The whole place was falling into pieces—paint peeling, cats running around chasing cockroaches.

“When he opened the piano, he found that it was infested with termites. Every time he played a key, dust fell out of the piano. He was afraid that, if he played anymore, the whole thing was going to fall apart.”

“He must have felt pain. To see something like that.”

“Yeah. So he waved goodbye and apologised to the maid. Told her that he couldn’t fix it. He never saw the owners of the house.

“There was another time he was tuning this stand-up piano, like ours. He played a few keys, and it was totally off and

muffled. He then opened the back and found that there was a plant growing inside. A vine was entangling the strings, choking them.”

“You’re joking. How could it get light and water?”

“Wow. Someone remembers her biology class. I don’t know. Maybe the sides weren’t built well? Light could seep in?”

“Hah. I don’t know. Doesn’t seem very likely,” she said.

“Anyway, he finished his story and got up. I paid him, and he left. I followed him downstairs. He was nervous. He clung to the sides of the corridor as we walked. I thought that, if a tiger did appear, he would just jump off.”

She smiled a small smile.

“Do you know why I got the piano?” She said. I knew that it was one of those questions she wanted to answer. The opening up of herself took ages, like parting rock.

“Tell me.”

“When I was six or seven, I listened to someone playing the *Moonlight Sonata* once, at a shopping centre. Everybody else was rushing around. Nobody heard her play but me.

“I told my mom I wanted to play like that, and then it was a project for her. Boom! The piano, the teacher, the lessons, the scoldings, the practice, the exams. Those things that stripped all the joy of the instrument from you. And you realised the path from A to B was a long, long road.”

“And did you ever play the *Moonlight*?”

“I stopped lessons at Grade Five, and, for a month, I just tried playing, but it was so filled with effort and pain that I couldn’t manage. I wanted to be like that piano player I saw—so

effortless, able to convey the melody without trying. As natural as breathing.”

“You can still do it.”

“No. Those days are over. I can even barely stand to hear myself play.”

“So there was no point tuning it?”

“No, there was. Maybe I’ll try playing something. You have to remind me.”

“I will.”

She folded herself into me and was quiet. I did not move, and we slept with the lights on.

• • •

Nobody reported anything alarming for a week. That was no surprise, considering the number of people hovering around the block. The police hunkered down, but even they could not lend any credibility to the story.

Ten days after the incident with the Indian lady, a mauled body was discovered on the stairwell between the sixth and seventh floor. The ambulances came, and one of the flat-owners on the seventh floor admitted hearing muffled screams in the night.

The next day, the corpse was identified as that of a known loan shark, a man in his mid-thirties named Ah Chan. He was said to be looking for debtors on the seventh floor. He had a parang in the small sports bag he carried, along with black markers. Word got around quickly.

Soon, the papers labelled the tiger as a folk hero, a divine protector placed at our block to defeat evil. The victim’s family

denied any wrongdoing. Some thought that it wasn’t there to kill us but to guard us, though I doubted the Indian woman would agree.

Protector or vermin, the voyeurs were back again, and so were the reporters. There were those waiting for the lottery numbers, but others really wanted more. The beast that haunted our flat became like a god. The stairwell where the body was discovered was covered with incense and flowers. Altars lined the corridors, saddled with shiny apples and mouldy oranges, lit by red lights in the balmy night. The smell from the incense floated up to our apartment, and made our kitchen smell like a temple.

One of the morning shows had a tiger expert who wore a khaki cap to talk about the animal and its behavioural patterns. He described different varieties of tigers. The host then asked him about the kind of tiger that could be roaming around killing loan sharks, and he paused for a while before saying it might be a Sumatran tiger “that had swum over”. He wanted to explain more, but they cut to a commercial. After the advertisements he was gone, whisked away.

• • •

“We should feed the tiger,” I told her.

“Put out the meat we can’t finish?”

“You’re eating less. When did you stop eating meat?”

“Recently. There’s this new guy at work, and he was telling us about the benefits of being vegetarian. He showed us some documentaries. You’ll give up meat too if you know how it’s prepared.”

"So we should throw out all the meat?"

"You can eat it if you want. I don't care."

"Maybe, maybe."

"What did you do today?" she asked.

"I looked through the papers and sent out some resumes," I lied. "I also found a CD of *Moonlight Sonata*. When I listened to it, I felt so stupid. I've probably heard it thousands of times."

"Yes, they love putting it in movies."

"It doesn't sound that hard to play," I said, trying to encourage her.

"Hah. Maybe when I have more time."

"Why not now?"

"I'm a bit tired. You don't want me to talk about work, do you?"

I shook my head.

She went to shower, and I looked at the ceiling and turned back to the television. I hated the way she smelled after work, an almost acrid odour, though I could never quite tell her

"Do you want me to play the CD?" I asked her when she emerged.

"Play what?"

"*Moonlight Sonata*."

"It's OK. I can remember it," she replied. "They said Beethoven composed it while playing for a blind girl at night. But sounds like bullshit, doesn't it?"

"Probably," I said.

I changed the subject. "So do people ask you about the tiger thing?"

"I had the cleaner lady tell me, and she gave me a charm.

It's in my wallet."

"Hah. Would that protect you?"

"I just think it's silly. It should just go away. When I was coming back, all these people were looking up. They're probably looking into our flat right now. Can you get new curtains and blinds?"

"Sure. Sure," I said.

"What would you do if the tiger came for you? If you were walking, and it was next to you?"

"I don't know. Maybe I would let it eat me."

"Like it would want you. With your lungs . . . give it cancer."

"It's a tiger. I don't think that they're choosy. You think that, when it catches a monkey in the woods, it lets it go? No, it eats. It's not like us."

"Maybe someone kept it for a while, and now it escaped. And it goes back every night."

"We're not next to a nature reserve or even a park. Unless it's hiding beneath the sand of the playground, but it would bake in the sun. There hasn't been a tiger seen in Singapore since what . . . the 1930s?"

"Why do you men think that there's a logical explanation? What if there isn't?"

"Maybe it's hiding in the bushes. Or climbed a tree."

"I'm sure that they checked everywhere," she said. I could hear the boredom in her voice.

"You trust them?"

She nodded. She closed her eyes and went to sleep.

• • •

There was no report for the next two weeks. One of the flats was broken into, and the police uncovered a group of illegal immigrants living there, Chinese workers who protested that they had not been paid and were thrown out by their errant employer. The police did not find any wildlife inside, but the tabloids hinted that they were responsible.

I spent more time walking, trying to stay out of the flat. When she was not there, the emptiness filled it. I had been listening to a lot of piano music, though I would turn it off before she returned.

I stepped up my hunt for work. I did not want her to think that I was not trying. When she came back, I told her about my day.

"I had a meeting today, with this client in town near Tras Street. But there was something not right about the woman."

"Why?"

"After a while, I realised that she had blue eyes. One of those blue contact lenses.

"I was too distracted. I couldn't concentrate on what she was asking. I just couldn't take her sincerely. Eyes window to the soul and all that.

"I couldn't take it. I wanted to tell her to take them off. And what a good impression that would make. She started asking if there was something wrong. And I said no. What else could I say?"

She listened in silence. I tried to justify myself, desperately.

"Then I was leaving, I passed by their main conference room. I could see a group of them in their business suits, the men in their ties, the women in their neat dresses. They had their hands

placed together in a pile. They then cheered for themselves. Like a sports team.

"Then one of them came out of the room, and I was almost ready to run off. He was older than the rest, in a long-sleeved shirt. I couldn't escape. He thanked me for coming and he shook my hand. This perfect handshake, with his long-sleeved right hand, with his cufflink which was like a counterweight, looking at me in the face while speaking with perfect sincerity to thank me for coming. I thought about how long he must have trained for that handshake, probably spending hours and weeks, shaking hands with his children or wife. Or maybe there's a handshake club like there are toastmasters, who practise until one day they know they got it. That perfect handshake."

She seemed bored with my words.

"He waved as I left, and I thought how he's found a fit. He's a peg who's found his hole."

"You didn't get the work then."

"No, I didn't."

"There's always something wrong, isn't there?"

"What do you mean?"

"You have to grow up. You can't be this way."

"It's her eyes. How can you work for someone who's lying to herself?"

"Look somewhere else. Behind her. At her chest like other guys do. Anywhere."

"I can't. Why don't you understand?"

She kept quiet and left the room.

• • •

We met our friends, the Lims, at a restaurant in town. As we passed the car park, we noticed their maid standing next to their car. When we were at the table, we saw them already seated, with their two-year-old in a high chair. She cooed at the baby, while I flipped through the menu and made small talk.

They were uncomfortable, but even the tiger was not something they wanted to talk about much. I could sense Simon's boredom. They talked about their children and how much diapers cost, and needing to get a car in Singapore because the buses shook so much they thought that "the baby's brains would turn to jelly".

It was hard for me to fill in the conversation, but I made small talk about soccer and music and bands. But, whenever the talk steered back to work and cars and property, I mostly clamped up again. I went for a smoke and hovered around the car park. Their maid was now conversing with other maids, speaking in Indonesian.

She was still able to keep pace, but I was falling behind. She paid for my share more often than not, and I tried to pay her back. But she always refused. I winded up stuffing it into her purse, never bothering to place it amongst the other bills she kept, but she never brought up how the money got there.

I went for a few more job interviews, and I tried harder. Once, I thought I had landed something, a marketing executive for a company that manufactured light stands, but they never called. I called them back to ask about the position, and a secretary, with the voice of a child, said they would let me know if I got it. But the call never came. I kept it all to myself, and she never

asked about how my job search was going. I wondered if she meant it as a kindness.

• • •

She was sitting up in bed, not lying down. She was coming back later. I did not even hear her enter the house.

"Maybe there's more than one. Maybe there's three or four. I mean then it makes sense."

"Why do you want to make sense of it? It just doesn't."

"It's a freaking Singaporean thing."

"It's probably a mad man who's going around dressed in a tiger skin. Wouldn't that make more sense?"

"Maybe. But so unromantic."

"Anyway, maybe a bunch of tigers. What do you call a group of them anyway?"

"Monkeys are bunches. How can tiger be a bunch?"

"I don't know."

"Why are we talking about this? We talk about nonsense all the time," she said.

"Do we? Is it that bad?"

"Why do you think it's here? Whatever is out there?"

"Who knows? Is it eating people?"

"Mangling . . . is it really protecting? Is it all a coincidence?"

"I don't know. Who knows?"

"Are people moving out yet?"

"No," I said. "Prices are too high now. Impossible to find a place."

"Even that Indian woman?"

"She stuck a whole bunch of crosses and sutras on her door.



And she goes downstairs with a pointed stick. I think she has a knife in her bag.”

“You should carry one too. In that big bag of yours. Could have a chopper.”

“There was a tiger shot underneath a billiard table at Raffles Hotel,” I said.

“You’re obsessed by it,” she replied.

“They used to be common, you know. Tigers were responsible for two hundred deaths in 1884.”

“Well it’s not 1884 now.”

She wanted to say something, and there was held silence before she spoke out.

“I have to work late the next few days. Something major is coming up soon. You may have to eat out yourself.”

“That’s all right.”

“Do you need money?”

“No,” I said. I felt insulted but kept it in.

“All right.”

She smiled, but I knew her well enough to see that it was something squeezed out of her, as though she had to think hard about it. I wanted to reach out to touch her, but I couldn’t. She went to the room and fell asleep.

• • •

There was a suicide at our block. It had been four weeks since the attack on the loan shark. The press no longer had time to send journalists down to scout the place but had offered a reward for any footage. So old folks and others set up camp

beneath, watching us, with video cameras borrowed from their children. We called the police to try to get them to stay away, but the area was public property.

When the woman jumped, there were photographs and videos of her as she clambered over the wall. Some of them claimed to have heard screaming, but the agitated voices of the mob drowned out whatever sound she might have been making. She jumped from the nineteenth floor, and some people claimed that she appeared to be running from something.

I watched the footage, and I could not tell. Her face was too much of a blur. A group of folk rushed upstairs to the floor where she jumped but found nothing except her worn shoes tossed to a side.

Then the journalists started wandering the halls again, knocking on doors. I refused to answer any questions and turned off the lights so that they would not think anyone was in. My neighbours were eager to give their views, and so the corridor became lit like a studio.

The woman who jumped lived alone and was retired. She had not kept in touch with her family for a while. The press eviscerated her children for being unfilial and for not taking care of her. The funeral was moved elsewhere as the family wanted to avoid the cameras and the reporters.

A private company wanted to install cameras everywhere, but the residents complained. We were sick of the scrutiny. I opened the windows and saw somebody trying to look in with binoculars. Undoubtedly, I have been marked as one of those who have been acting too mysteriously. The police had not

knocked down every door yet, but I was sure that they would be prepared to. They must have files on each of us. We were being examined in every way, and even a minor crime would be enough for them to come in and search our homes.

I emerged from my flat one day wearing a cap, and there was a brief flash from the flat opposite. Someone had taken a photograph of me. I saw a man in his late twenties in a chequered shirt wielding a camera with a lens the size of a tea-plate. Its eye stared at me accusingly. I ran to the staircase and hurried down. I ran so fast that the echoes of my footsteps sounded like I was trying to outrun myself.

• • •

They had been spraying the area around the flat more often. It seemed the pest-killers come here every two weeks and covered the ground in smoky white clouds.

They went to all the corridor and public spaces, in teams of two, and sprayed. Though they wore masks, I could see their nervous eyes. When they came to our door, they clouded the plants continuously.

“You killing the insects or the plant?” I said.

They just bowed their heads to acknowledge my question before moving on.

My neighbour scolded the sprayers. He said his child was having asthma from all the chemicals and fumes.

“Why are they spending so much money spraying? Why don’t they catch the tiger?” His fist thumped against the wall, which dropped flakes of paint as he spoke. I could see a large

beige dog with dusty patches standing next to him through the grilles of his gate. It smelled of soap, and I could hear it panting.

But the police did not acknowledge the tiger. No one wanted to come out and say that one existed. Who could blame them? There was no physical evidence.

I went back to the flat and fanned away the fumes. The leaky sound the sprayers made continued to fill the morning air. With their masks and hats, they resembled beings from another planet.

• • •

When I returned home, the heat was already seeping through me. I brushed past the tripods on which the digital cameras have been placed. Everything around the block was as it was before. The old folks were still playing checkers or practising tai chi, but the cameras filled the spaces in between. They had sprouted like bamboo. The children played in the garden, never in the corridors, and the neighbours had turned considerate. Nobody played his or her music loud. Nobody hung their clothes past their space. There were no vandals scrawling rude words in the lifts.

I hurriedly opened the door, fumbling with the keys, and slammed it shut. I tossed the tie on top of the piano. It had been another bad day of interviews. In my head, I wanted to shout at them with their own questions. I did not want to look desperate, but I had probably come across as such. On the table were her breakfast and a cold cup of half-drunk tea. She was here. I opened the refrigerator, and all I found was cabbages and fruit. I shoved some grapes into my mouth.

She did not come home one night. I called and called. I received

a text message from her that she was working late. I called her phone right after that, ready to plead, but there was no reply.

I was not sure if she was listening. I went out to the living room. There was darkness outside and I wondered if there had been a blackout or that I might be asleep.

I walked out to the corridor towards some flickering lights. I looked down upon the courtyard below where the vacant parking lot was. I did not know what time it was, but it was the deep part of the night. I did not see any lights on in the other flats. Only the street lamps and the corridor lights shone.

There was a light emanating from one of the cars below, and I saw the movement of the couple in the backseat, making love. I wondered about the way they touched, and I longed for hers.

I felt a presence and turned, and it was there. It was larger than a man, and its tail whipped casually around, sweeping the dusty corridor. The fur was messy, sprouting in all directions. It looked old; the eyes, like golden coins, appeared unable to focus. It watched me carefully as it approached. There was a thick, coiled smell around it—freshly cut grass and the sun.

I was stuck there, admiring its beauty. Its tongue curled out around the mouth, and the whiskers were as fine as guitar wire. Its eyes were intelligent and cunning. It knew that it had nothing to fear from me.

It approached, and part of me wanted to run away while the other part wanted to stay and watch, to find out why it was here.

It was only a foot away as it closed the space between us. I could hear everything around me. The slow hum of the car below. The hum of the aquariums. The hiss of the refrigerators.

Everything was magnified. I thought that it could have struck me down with a single stroke. I remembered what she said about fakirs in India offering themselves to tigers, believing that it was a great honour to be eaten by these splendid beasts.

I could see its body coiled, ready to strike and kill. I remained still. Maybe I should curl myself up into a ball and pretend to be dead. I looked into its eyes and saw how old it was. It was a mighty creature that demanded thick jungle and deep skies. It desired the chase and not to skulk around like a thief.

It stopped in front of me and stared. Its fat pink tongue flicked around its mouth, as if considering whether I was worth the trouble. I looked into its eyes and saw my past and myself and her. If I was consumed what would she do? Would I become an anecdote?

I sensed that it wanted me to walk with it. I followed him for a bit. We brushed past my neighbour's pots. The dog started barking. The smell of pesticide came up my nostrils. If I followed it more, I would venture into its magical world. The image of another universe came to me, one where everything here had become overgrown. Snakes hissed from the pots, threads of ants flowed from wall to wall; monkeys would clamber amongst the grilles.

I imagined the piano with the seed growing within our house. The seed would wind between the strings, the roots pressing against the wood, the leaves twisting out amongst the hammers. One day, it would break out from the piano, spreading around the ground, seeking sunlight. It would continue to grow, breaking out and spreading across the flat like a forest. Angry

with the life that wanted to deny it, the plant would grow and fill all the empty spaces, invading the surrounding flats, seeking other pianos as though they were lost relatives. It would turn the people out of their homes; they would run screaming onto the streets, clutching their photo albums and their certificates, as the vines and leaves took over. The tiger would be right at home, wandering amongst the now empty halls, listening to the abandoned radios and alarm clocks, pounding for their owners who no longer could silence them.

Toucans would clamber, searching for our pills and tablets, tearing apart old newspapers and stacks of *National Geographic* to make nests. Crocodiles would lay eggs and breed their young in abandoned aquariums. Serpents would dance in and out of our toilet pipes. The jungle would stride boldly on, invading and taking over all the adjoining blocks and eventually the estate.

The tiger seemed to sense my thinking and let out a growl that sounded like a low moan.

There was a time when I would tell her all this, but I could not now. She would dismiss it. Her absence was starting to make me feel how cavernous such a small space could be.

• • •

Then I stopped. I could no longer follow. It turned to give me a look, waiting for me to reconsider. The golden eyes were ancient and cold. It turned towards the staircase and, in a fluid motion, leapt away, leaving me to the dog's frenzied barking.

Eventually I moved and looked at where it had gone. It had fused into the shadows and disappeared.

The mob came about a minute after. I still held my silent phone.

"Did it come here?" the leader said. He held a long parang. He did not look like he knew how to use it. But, with the mob behind him, the tiger would have stood no chance.

"What come?" I said.

"The tiger," he replied. His teeth were brown and stained from cigarette smoking.

"No. You're crazy. What tiger?"

"Crazy? Seventh floor. They found bodies there. The family's Alsatian. Slaughtered. The daughter crying, can't stop."

I shook my head.

"Whatever did it didn't come here," I said.

"Why would it kill them? Maybe they wanted to harm it or capture it," one of the party said. It was a woman with shorter hair than me.

"You think the tiger is some hero? It just wants to kill," the leader shouted back.

The man looked exasperated. "Then join us. Help us hunt it down. The police don't believe us. Nobody else does."

"What can I do?" I said, trying to stall them further.

"Go grab a knife. Chopper, kitchen knife. Anything."

I went back into the flat and the kitchen. I stopped at the bedroom and noticed that she wasn't there.

I took a knife. It was a small one, hardly capable of slicing an apple. When I emerged from the flat, the man almost snorted.

"I don't think you could kill a rat with that but let's go."

I followed them as they methodically went up every floor. Everyone would be awake by now. I glanced at the others. They

carried knives, bricks, sticks, even a changkul. I wanted to ask the man, an Indian with red-veined eyes, wielding the changkul why he kept it. Where would he use it? But there was no space for conversation.

Their fear infected them, and they jumped at every shadow. A cockroach crept past, and three of them raced forward to stamp on it. Bits of the vermin stuck to their sandals. The contents of an altar had been kicked and crushed, the red electric bulb still flickering madly.

• • •

We found nothing, and, when the police came, some of them left to hide the weapons they had bought out. I went back to the flat and realised that I had forgotten to lock the gate. I called her name, but there was no sign of her. A great tiredness came over me, but I did not want to sleep.

I called her number, but she did not pick up. The humming in my brain grew louder.

I lifted the cover from the piano and played a key. It hummed. I pressed down on it harder. Then the keys around it. They formed a discordant combination, echoing in the ears and the empty room.

I continued to play the keys, trying to form a chord, a tune. I wished that I had asked her to teach me to play.

I wondered if the neighbours who heard it were cursing me, playing in the middle of the night. After the police left, they would come to my door, with their parangs and bricks and changkuls, ready to smash my bones and cut me into pieces. They would hack the piano into splinters, slicing the wires and keys.

My blood would spill onto the floor and the common corridor, my skin would be dried in the smashing light of the sun, and my bloodied body would be left at the void deck for all to see. I continued to press on the keys and looked to the door, waiting for it to open and the night to rush in.

## Contributors

**Ann Ang's** poetry, fiction and non-fiction have appeared in *Eclectica Magazine*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Poskod*, *Kartika Review*, *The Common* and elsewhere. Her first collection of short stories, titled *Bang My Car* (Math Paper Press, 2012), was launched at the 2012 Singapore Writers' Festival. An avid birdwatcher, she is an educator at the Academy of Singapore Teachers. "Scared For What" was originally published in *Bang My Car* (Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2012).

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**Felix Cheong** is the author of eight books, including four volumes of poetry; his latest is a collection of short stories titled *Vanishing Point*. His work has been widely anthologised and featured in a telemovie, *Love Story*, directed by Sun Koh. Conferred the Young Artist of the Year for Literature in 2000, Felix was named by *Reader's Digest* as the 29th Most Trusted Singaporean in 2010. He holds a master's degree in creative writing and is currently a lecturer in journalism at Murdoch University and University of Newcastle. "Because I Tell" was originally published in *A Monsoon Feast*, edited by Verena Tay (Singapore: Monsoon Books, 2012).

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**Koh Choon Hwee** is the former editor of *Kent Ridge Common*. Her writing has appeared in *QLRS*, *The Malaysian Insider* and *TODAY Online*, and she is currently studying history as a postgraduate in Beirut, Lebanon. “The Protocol Wars of Laundry and Coexistence” was the first prize winner in the 2011 Goh Sin Tub Creative Writing Competition, posted online by the Department of English Language & Literature, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, National University of Singapore: [http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/ell/docs/GST\\_1st.pdf](http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/ell/docs/GST_1st.pdf).

**Karen Kwek** read English Language and Literature at Oxford University and returned to Singapore to work in publishing after obtaining a Masters degree in Literature (Renaissance). She writes amid the intensity of life with a young family, that is to say the writing happens s-l-o-w-l-y, but she is ever thankful for this whole life. “The Dispossessed” was the first prize winner (English-language short story category) in the 2011 SPH-NAC Golden Point Award, posted online by the National Arts Council: <http://www.nac.gov.sg/docs/gpa2011-shortstory/1st--karen-kwek.pdf>; the story draws on some of her experiences of having grown up in old Upper Serangoon.

**Wei Fen Lee** is the co-editor of *Ceriph*, a literary print journal based in Singapore that promotes the work of emerging writers and artists. She is also a freelance writer and researcher of

South Asian diasporic literature in Southeast Asia. She recently co-edited *Coast* (2011), a mono-titular anthology of poetry and fiction by three generations of writers from Singapore, and her work has appeared in *QLRS*, *Nether Magazine*, and *Softblow*. “Welcome to the Pond” was originally published in *Fish Eats Lion*, edited by Jason Erik Lundberg (Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2012).

**Amanda Lee Koe** is the fiction editor of *Esquire (Singapore)*, the editor of creative non-fiction online magazine *POSKOD*, the communications director at studioKALEIDO, and the co-editor of literary journal *Ceriph*. With Ng Yi-Sheng, she spearheaded and co-edited *Eastern Heathens* (Ethos Books), an anthology subverting Asian folklore. Her short fiction has seen publication in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *COAST*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Ceriph*, *Microcosmos: Orbital Decay*, *Der Greif* (Germany) and *Thought Catalog* (USA). Amanda’s first collection, *Ministry of Moral Panic*, was published in 2013 by Epigram Books. “Randy’s Rotisserie” was originally published in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* vol. 11, no. 4 (2012).

**Jason Erik Lundberg** (editor) is the author of several books, most recently *Strange Mammals* (2013), *The Alchemy of Happiness* (2012) and *Red Dot Irreal* (2011), as well as the founding editor of *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction*, the editor of *Fish Eats Lion* (2012), and the co-editor of *A Field Guide to Surreal Botany* (2008) and *Scattered*,

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**Alvin Pang** is a poet, writer, editor, anthologist, and translator. Working primarily in English, his poetry has been translated into over fifteen languages, and he has appeared in major festivals and anthologies worldwide. His most recent books include *When the Barbarians Arrive* (2012), *Other Things and Other Poems* (2012) and *What Gives Us Our Names* (2011). "The Illoi of Kantimeral" was originally published as "Coast" in *Coast: A Mono-titular Anthology of Singapore Writing*, edited by Daren Shiau and Lee Wei Fen (Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2011).



**Phan Ming Yen** is the author of fiction collection *That Night By the Beach and Other Stories For a Film Score* (2012) and co-compiler of *Edwin Thumboo: Bibliography 1952 – 2008* (2009). A former journalist, magazine editor and arts manager, Phan is presently an Assistant Director (Academic) at the School of Technology for the Arts, Republic Polytechnic. “Anniversary” was originally published in *That Night By the Beach and Other Stories For a Film Score* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2012).

**Alfian Sa’at** is known for his provocative works and is often referred to as Singapore’s *enfant terrible*. A prolific playwright and poet in both English and Malay, he has won multiple awards for his writing. His most recent books include *Malay Sketches*, *Cooling-Off Day* and *The Invisible Manuscript*, all published in 2012. He is the Resident Playwright with professional theatre company W!LD RICE. “The Borrowed Boy” was originally published in *One: The Anthology*, edited by Robert Yeo (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2012).

**Verena Tay** (verenatay.com) is a writer, storyteller, theatre practitioner, and voice and speech teacher. *Spectre: Stories from Dark to Light* (2012) was her first short story collection. She has also published three collections of plays and edited two other short story anthologies: *Balik Kampung* and *A Monsoon Feast*. An honorary fellow at the University of Iowa’s 2007 International Writing Program, she is currently studying for an MFA in Creative Writing at the City University of Hong Kong. “Walls” was originally published in *Spectre* (Singapore: Math Paper

Press, 2012); the story is dedicated to Kamini Ramachandran (as well as to all oppressed and repressed souls who seek release) and was inspired by the folktale “Tell It to the Walls,” collected by A.K. Ramanujan in *Folktales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-two Languages* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991).

**Jeremy Tiang** won the Golden Point Award in 2009 for his short story “Trondheim”, and has been shortlisted for the Bridport and Iowa Review Prizes. His fiction has also appeared in *Esquire* (Singapore), *Litro*, *The Istanbul Review* and *QLRS*. In 2011, he represented Singapore at the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program. Jeremy’s plays have been performed in Singapore, Hong Kong, and London, and his adaptation of Hong Lou Meng’s *A Dream of Red Pavilions* will be staged off-Broadway in 2015. He has translated six books from Chinese, and was recently awarded a PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant. “Harmonious Residences” was originally published in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* vol. 10, no. 1 (2011).

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