

THE EPIGRAM BOOKS COLLECTION OF

**BEST NEW  
SINGAPOREAN  
SHORT  
STORIES  
VOLUME TWO**

EDITED BY JASON ERIK LUNDBERG



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JASON ERIK LUNDBERG  
SERIES EDITOR



EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE



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## Introduction

Jason Erik Lundberg

IN THE TWO years since the publication of Volume One of this anthology series, prose writing in Singapore has *exploded*. In deciding the contents for this new volume—of short stories written by Singaporean citizens or permanent residents, originally published between January 2013 and December 2014—I found myself reading easily double the number of pieces than for its predecessor (if not triple), travelling through unnumerable byways of story. It took a solid nine months to get through it all: single-author collections, themed and unthemed anthologies, magazines and literary journals both in print and online, prize-winners of competitions both local and international. While this made my job as anthologist and series editor much more difficult, it also enlivened my excitement at seeing the joyful bounty of short fiction that Singaporean writers were now giving themselves permission to create.

Out of all those hundreds of possible contributions, I winnowed the list down to just twenty-four (67% of these authored by women), an exceedingly tough task, as not

only had the quantity of published prose writing increased dramatically, so had the quality. There were decisions over which I agonised for weeks, and many more stories that I wish we could have included, but in the end, I'm satisfied with the curation of incredible writing which you now hold in your hands. I recommend that you seek out additional work by all of the contributors gathered here, as well as those listed in the more than eighty honourable mentions in the back of this book.

I must give thanks to the following publishers and publications for bringing to light the many, many works of short fiction that were considered for this anthology: Math Paper Press, Ethos Books, Akashic Books, The Literary Centre, The Substation, *Ceriph*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Mānoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing*, *Junoeseq*, *Asymptote*, *The Future Fire*, *Far Enough East*, *Meanjin*, *Clarkesworld Magazine*, *The Cadaverine*, Haranand Publications, Kind of a Hurricane Press, *The Conium Review*, *The Storygraph*, *Asiatic*, *Esquire (Singapore)*, *Apex Magazine*, *Lakeside Circus*, *Strange Horizons*, *New Asian Writing*, *The Bohemyth*, *Lakeview International Journal of Literature and Arts*, *Ambit* and *We Are Losing Inertia*. In addition, the competitions of the 2014 Commonwealth Short Story Prize (Asia Region), 2013 Golden Point Award (English Short Story), and University of East Anglia's creative writing programme.

• • •

Discussion of the best Singaporean short fiction of the previous two years must include Amanda Lee Koe's debut collection, *Ministry of Moral Panic*, published in 2013 by

Epigram Books, which won the 2014 Singapore Literature Prize for English Fiction. This is an astonishing accolade for a first-time author, and as of this writing, it has now led to the book going into its fourth printing, an unheard-of accomplishment for a local work of fiction, let alone a short story collection. The book was also longlisted for the 2014 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, counted among the Top 10 English Singapore Books from 1965-2014 by *The Business Times*, and chosen as "Book of the Year" four separate times on the *Singapore Poetry* website. We obviously think that you should read it, if you haven't already.

Amanda's story in this volume appeared after the publication of *Moral Panic*, but includes the same unique voice and searching off-kilter cultural scrutiny that has made her collection such a landmark irruption into the literary landscape.

• • •

Mention must be made of several stories that do *not* appear within these pages. On my initial shortlist were "The Forgetting Shop" by Justin Ker and "Cinema" by Cyril Wong, which were original to their 2014 collections published by Epigram Books, *The Space Between the Raindrops* and *Ten Things My Father Never Taught Me and Other Stories*, respectively. It was decided, after much internal discussion, that these two pieces would not be included, despite their obvious merit, lest we be accused of impropriety and favouritism. The same went for stories by Singaporean authors published in *LONTAR*, the biannual literary journal of Southeast Asian speculative fiction of which

I am the founding editor, also published by Epigram Books starting with issue #3. But I entreat you to find and read these pieces anyway, because they are amazing.

Assembling a “Best Of” anthology is in itself a subjective task for any editor; give twenty editors the same pool of stories, and they’ll curate twenty different books. However, this is complicated by my role as Fiction Editor at Epigram Books, where I may work on eight to ten titles in a given year, with single-author collections making up a not insignificant number of these. So, starting with the next volume of this series (scheduled for publication in 2017), we will have a rotating roster of guest editors. I will remain on as series editor, but each guest editor will be in charge of selecting the content themselves. It is with great honour that I announce Volume Three will be edited by celebrated poet and author Cyril Wong.

• • •

As before, all of the stories I selected for this volume 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. There is crime drama here, which ends in unexpected violence. There are everyday investigations of class, race, gender, sexuality, justice, power dynamics, displacement, regret. There is the employment of fantastical elements in the service of magical realism, fables, fairy tales, and unapologetic science fiction. One of these stories affected me so much that I burst into tears after first reading it, and knew unutterably that

such an intense emotional response warranted its inclusion (I’ll leave it to you to guess which one).

These pieces examine life in Singapore, beyond its borders to Toronto, California, Shanghai, Andhra Pradesh, Pyongchon and Paris, as well as to the distant past and the far future; travelling their narrative roads will change and enlighten you, as all good travel does.

Turn the page, and start your journey.

# A Day in the Death

Evan Adam Ang

LIM OH KEE kills himself in the early hours on the 12th day of December, 1921.

His last meal is rice and nothing. His last words are that by tomorrow (by today), he'd be gone. He dies by hanging. He can't afford to buy rope for an occasion like this—it's a scavenged piece of cord instead, that's wrapped around his neck when his son finds him, suspended from a door along the five foot way. He's blocking foot traffic, but it doesn't matter, because the route itself is barely used.

Whether he aimed to be considerate, even in death, or simply picked the nearest available option is unknown. His son (little, eleven years old, living with Lim's friend, Chuan) was not the first to discover him, only the first to recognise him. In the very short, very brief report on his death made by the coroner, it's noted that he has been out of work (like so many people have been out of work) for some time. It's noted that he's been ill (like so many people have been ill) for longer. He has—he had—nowhere to live; the door he hung from wasn't even his own.

He looked starved. He was starved.

Lim Oh Kee was not the first person around the area to die like this, and he won't be the last. Plenty of people have beaten him to the proverbial punch. The day before his death, another man hung himself. A week before that, a woman drowned herself in the river. A month before that, a woman sliced her own throat. Six months prior and there are more crimes, more murders, more dead. Some are caused by fights between gangs. Some are cheap, stupid deaths. Some are planned, deliberate, and carefully orchestrated.

No one of any importance cares, because no one of any importance knows he even existed.

• • •

This is Singapore, 1921.

It isn't a particularly nice place. Crime has gone up, but crime is always going up. It's bad, but it's not as bad as more important things like the prices of food going up. That's bad too, but not as bad as the prices of opium going up. That there—that's *really* bad.

Lots of people are generally miserable, and sometimes people aren't really sure if everything going to what seems a whole lot like hell is because more people are reporting things to the police and everything is getting recorded in greater detail, or if things are actually just worse in general. The truth is, things are worse in general.

Seventy-nine years from now, at the turn of the next century, the leaders of Singapore will honour the hardworking men

and women on whose aching backs their glorious nation-city-state was built. They were very good people, the leaders will say, who came from their hometowns in China chasing some kind of glorious dream; they were entrepreneurs who planted pineapple farms and were brilliant doctors and were willing to sacrifice everything they had (next to nothing) for all the opportunities that Singapore afforded them (still next to nothing). Museums will showcase their lives and the hardships they faced, children will be told to go ask their grandparents about them, and their lives will form an integral part of the Singapore Story™.

Unfortunately for them, this is not seventy-nine years later. This is not even forty years later, or thirty.

This is now, where even *opium*, desirable as it is, is starting to be a hard sell at sixty out of the eighty cents that the average coolie earns each day.

This is a story of why people die.

• • •

Lim Oh Kee does not qualify for the Contingency Relief Fund, the Destitute Seamen's Relief Fund, the Indian Coolies Fund, the Tamil Immigration Fund, the Widows and Orphans' Pension Fund or any protection ordinances. This isn't actually a serious problem for him, because even if he did, he wouldn't have applied for them anyway.

Hard to do something like that, when he doesn't even know that they exist.

He does know about the societies, though, and the Huay

Kuan clan association that provides help to people in need. He's heard of a free hospital for people like him but he doesn't trust hospitals and he doesn't think they'll help. *Sure, a lot of Chinese people go to hospital, he tells his friend who's come over with his son, but they're a different type of Chinese people.*

Chuan, sitting next to him, listens, nods, agrees, and then asks him: *What about the free one?*

*It's still a hospital, Lim Oh Kee replies. And I'm not Cantonese, he says, because this explains everything.*

It doesn't, actually—not everything, but there's enough in there that his friend (whose wife passed away in a hospital a month back, who didn't understand why, only that she did, who says he wasn't angry with her and who genuinely never understood why she tried to kill herself) nods, and says that he understands too. They're Hokkien, not Cantonese. This matters. He gets it.

Besides, people die in hospitals. That's not so good. Lots of people die outside of hospitals too, but that's natural. That's different. If they were going to die or if they wanted to die or if they had nothing left but to die, then the death houses on Sago Street would have been happy to welcome them, for the price of what they had left. But hospitals are different. Since they were introduced to Singapore by Europeans, they will always be different. The only thing that matters is how, and why, and whether people can afford to be different.

Right now, not many can.

Lim Oh Kee shakes his head at that, says he heard of a family that ran a store selling paper goods to people who wanted to

pay their respects where two uncles and a son died in short succession. It bankrupted them, to pay their respects to the various deceased properly. *This, he says, is a bad time to die if you're rich. It'll cost you. But if you're poor, and you couldn't afford anything to begin with, you lose nothing. It's a better time to die if you're poor.*

Chuan says, *It's always a bad time to die.*

Lim Oh Kee isn't so sure about that, but he pats his son on the head and gives him a brief hug before he goes.

He's hungry.

He's not quite starving, but he will be soon.

• • •

The thing about Singapore in 1921 is this. If you're the average person (Chinese, male, somewhere in your twenties if you're going by what the mode is and older—but not too much older if you're going by the median), then you're probably working an average job that pays you barely enough to get by.

This is not actually a bad life, or a bad salary.

You could live on it, probably. You could maybe raise a family on it; a small family with not too many children. But here's the thing: the way prices have been looking, the way the cost of *everything*—from rental and lodging to coffee to night soil—has increased, you won't be doing much more than living on your salary. There's no saving, there's no sending home, there's no maybe doing something else in the future.

You have to work because you came here to work, like every single other person like you did. You probably can't read, but

that's fine, you can find someone to read things out loud for you (for money). You sometimes dream about wanting to go back to where you grew up, but if you don't have the money then you can't, and if you did have the money why would you ever want to? If you have the money (you don't), this place is quite nice.

If you were an average person and had the money, you wouldn't worry so much about your life. You'd be able to pay for the opium that you need but can't afford. You'd spend it on something that would make a real difference or that you really want—maybe a generator, because you have the money. Maybe an expensive raincoat, just so you don't get wet outdoors. Maybe chicken, for once. You haven't eaten chicken in months.

But you don't have the money. What you are is—you're a coolie, you're some sort of physical labourer. You wake up at five sharp every morning and are out of the door by a quarter to six. Your life is drudgery, mostly, there's very little thinking involved. You get by, because you've always got by. You don't like to think about what would happen if you lost your job or if you fell ill or if you couldn't work, because every single other person you see on a regular basis is a hell of a lot like you are, and all they want is the work you're doing and all they need is half a chance to take it. If something like that happens, you think, maybe you'll kill yourself.

Find some rope, loop it around your neck, tie the other end to a doorframe and drop yourself right down. Suspension hanging, as opposed to the long drop method practiced in the prisons. It's easier to do, and there's less chance of a head

flying off because the drop was too long. Either way, though, you'd still be dead at the end of it, a nice miserable corpse for someone else to find.

But the thing is, despite all this, you're still thankful for what you have.

You should be; you're one of the lucky ones.

You still have a door.

• • •

Lim Oh Kee's son doesn't want to leave.

It's not as if there's much of a choice, though. His son can't stay with him not because he doesn't want his son to stay, or because he thinks his son is worse off around him, or anything like that. His son can't stay because there's nowhere for his son to stay.

It's a simple enough problem, and easily patched over. Their savings have run out, and even rental in a room with five (or six, or seven) other men is too much, for someone like him and a child who can't earn money yet. Maybe if he had another year, if his son was twelve instead of eleven, someone would hire him.

There isn't another year.

He pats the boy on his head. This is simple; it's a matter of priorities. Lim Oh Kee doesn't expect his son to understand, but that doesn't matter; right now what matters is keeping his son alive and as well as is possible for him. Paying rental means money that he can't afford to spend, and what's the point of having a place to stay when you don't even have food to eat?

Even that is limited right now because he can't work. And assuming he could, who would hire him? There are younger and stronger men with no jobs and no sons.

Sure, there are the triads and the gangs and the societies, but if he's too sick then he's not much use to them either. In any case, he can't even claim to be able to read or write. His main asset used to be his strength. Right now, he doesn't have that.

So he ruffles his son's hair and sends him off with his friend Chuan and tells him to come by every evening to see him. His son promises he'll do that; Chuan promises to send the boy over and to come over himself if he can. For a while, Lim Oh Kee gropes for something to say to his son. There isn't much that comes to mind. He's already told the boy not to be a bother.

*Drink milk, he says finally. It'll keep you healthy.*

Chuan says, when he comes by a few days later: *Come live with me, it's better than out here. Your son already does. You're not working anyway, don't you want to be closer to him?*

Lim Oh Kee looks at the money he has left. There's not much.

*I can't pay for anything, he says.*

*You pay for opium, Chuan replies.*

*Opium's different.*

There's a pause, and Chuan sighs.

Opium's different.

• • •

Of course life isn't like that for everyone.

This is the early 1920s. What an exciting time it is! Newspapers, previously the domain of the Western colonial,

are starting to be written and set up by Asians. *The Fookien Times* in the Philippines, and *The Malaya Tribune* in Singapore. For Asiatics by Asiatics is what it stands for, and all across the region there's never been anything like this before, this is novel, this is new, this is brilliant.

Somewhere in there is a story, starring Dr Lim Boon Keng, struggling to set up a paper that caters to English-speaking Asians. Somewhere in there, he faces challenges and difficulties of all sorts, but with the support of the Chinese community behind him, he successfully challenges the way newspapers cater only to Europeans with his new publication. This fledgling start-up, the Europeans who believed in it and worked for it, the negotiations they had to perform and the audience they had to please, all of that makes a good tale.

Somewhere in there is a narrative about the colonised man who struggles with his ethnic identity and his place in a society that calls him second class and will never see him rise above it due to his birth, and which expects him to fit himself comfortably into the social order. Future writers will touch on the strange dichotomy that exists between creating a sense of belonging and forging a national identity where none existed before; they will cover the slow realisation about the inherent injustices that lie at the core of colonial society.

This is all very important to the future. When countries are created based on the legislation and nationalistic arguments that the colonial powers have inadvertently introduced to the region, narratives have to be made, stories have to be told of the past, linking the people and places and joys and sorrows

to the present. Everything that happened built up to this. The nationalists were *our* nationalists, the coolies were *our* coolies, their stories are *our* stories.

It's all very dramatic. But that's good, people like drama, especially when it's drama about themselves and it makes them out to be the heroes, or the sons and daughters of heroes, which definitely sounds better than the children of people who never really thought about the future because just getting past the day was good enough for them.

Of course, the important thing to keep in mind is that while all of this is unquestionably important, whether or not the people from that era were aware at all that they were labouring away in someone else's story is another matter altogether.

See, the thing about caring is that it doesn't always go the whole way. Coolies, that's one thing. The coolies, the people who came, who worked, who suffered so that future generations could survive, those hardy belaboured men. They're easy to care for.

A coolie?

That's another thing entirely.

• • •

Lim Oh Kee is not a rich man, but he's doing well enough. He's a normal man in many respects—no wife, but a child he feels responsible for and takes care of as best as he can. He doesn't earn much, but there's enough for him, his life, his child, his child's life, and his opium habit.

It's not a bad habit, he thinks.

Before he came to Singapore, he never smoked opium. It's not as if he hadn't heard about it, of course he had; it was a big issue that big important people talked about using big important words. A big distant issue, not one that ever really affected him. Not until he came to Singapore and finished working every day only when he was tired to the bone.

The first time he tries smoking opium, he's not very impressed. It's a bad drug, he's heard a lot about how it ruins lives and ruined a country (or helped it along its way to ruin, but that isn't much better). And yet, all he feels is...mellow. Good. Comfortable. All right.

*That's it?* he asks, leaning over and looking at his friend. *That's all?*

*That's all,* his friend says. *It's good.*

He can't disagree with that. Opium isn't a scary drug; it's soothing. It doesn't make him want for things, or put himself in danger, or have visions and bad dreams; it doesn't scare him or lure him into believing he's fine when he isn't; it just calms him, that's all. And the next day when he wakes up for work, he doesn't hurt as much; it's not like that one time he got drunk and couldn't walk straight the following morning. All he feels is okay.

And "okay" is better than "normal".

It isn't even that expensive, really. Just a few cents here and there, he still has enough of his daily pay left over to buy food and supplies and save a bit of money. And what else is there for him to do? He has to work hard, for the sake of his son. He never touches alcohol these days. Hasn't even thought about it,

for a long while. Opium, though, opium is all right.

He works better on opium, rather than worse. He doesn't feel sad, doesn't feel tired, doesn't hate his life, he's okay. He can wake up in the morning and go to work, he can come back and smoke opium and tell himself that he can get up the following morning. He can smoke opium and go to work and come back and smoke opium and he's okay. He can love his son, and opium, he can live like this—

And he's okay.

Only the few cents of opium isn't working any more, and he needs money, but it's no problem. It's no problem at all. He can afford this. It isn't that much of an increase, not yet. It will be, in another two months, another three months, but not yet, and when it increases then it's not going to be that much of an increase compared to what he would be paying by then. It's not much.

He's just a normal man, anyway, no wife, one child, enough money, some savings and maybe he has to dip into them now and then but it's fine if he has opium, *everything's fine*—

Everything's fine, he says, when his son asks him how things are. *Don't worry.*

*We're okay.*

• • •

The thing about the past is this: no one is really special, unless someone else makes them out to be.

At the very start of 1921, a man dramatically murders another man over a pot of curry. The case is notable for the amount

of detail and investigation that went into it, all of which was recorded into the coroner's report on the man's death. It's very exciting, and it has all the elements of a good tragedy. People coming to Singapore to work, the struggles they face in their lives, the hopes and dreams they had, and all of that shattered by a senseless, reckless act of violence.

The thing is, that's it.

Looking over the reports and cross-referencing them to several other sources reveals a few things. The first is that there isn't really any mention of it in papers anywhere. It's very exciting, but no one at the time really wants to read about it, or wants to read about it enough that anyone else would want to write about it.

No one is even sure how old the victim is, or how his name should be written down. No one is entirely sure about whether the murderer was drunk at the time or whether he wasn't and whether or not it mattered. Time passes, and all that remains is the crime and the records.

It's a good crime, as crimes go. Saucy, dramatic, tragic, exciting, but there really isn't much more of it that has been recorded since then. If Gopal (or Gopaloo or Gobaloo or Gobalu) is special in any way to anyone alive now, it's because he died in a pretty spectacular way over a pretty stupid thing. No one can reasonably claim to know for sure what he dreamt of, or what he wanted to be, or what he hoped for, or what he loved, or if he ever loved, at all.

Unless, of course, someone starts to lie.

• • •

Lim Oh Kee comes to Singapore in the early 1900s with nothing but a small package and the clothes on his back. In the package is everything he owns, and once he steps ashore he finds friends and contacts and societies that will help him find a job and find a home. The process isn't easy, but he works hard, he makes friends, he survives. Some years past, and he finds love, he has a wife, he has a son. He's happy.

Lim Oh Kee comes to Singapore in the late 1900s with some money and a letter in his pocket that he can't read. He knows what it says, though; it's an introduction of who he is and what he's there for. He's supposed to pass it to a person his family knows, and they'll help him find a job and find a home. After a long while, where he's young and foolish and does stupid things and makes up for them and more, he finds love, he has a wife, he has a son. He's happy.

Lim Oh Kee is born in Singapore in the mid-1880s into a moderately well-off family. His parents are merchants. They have him as their son, and they're happy. He knows the basics of reading and writing. When he's young, one of his uncles dies, then his father dies, then his cousin dies. The family is bankrupted by the expense, and his mother takes him and leaves. He struggles to support her, then when she dies, he struggles to support himself. Eventually, he forgets everything he learned, remembering the past in only vague terms. Eventually, he finds a new home, a new life, a new job. He even has a wife and a son of his own. He's happy.

Lim Oh Kee is—

Dead, and it's sometime in December in 1921.

That's about all anyone can be sure of.

It doesn't matter how his story starts, but this is how it ends.

• • •

The thing is, Lim Oh Kee isn't special.

He could have any one of a dozen different origin stories, each of them dramatic in their own way. It's hard to say which would work better for the sake of narrative.

Maybe he's the Struggling Independent Coolie That Dreamed of a Better Life, or the Bearer of His Family's Dreams That Dies Alone, or even the Tragic Once-Rich Son That On His Deathbed Thinks About Everything He Could Have Been. The last one is definitely the most dramatic, the second the most bittersweet, and the first the most tragic.

Either way, none of that is ever recorded down.

The only facts about Lim Oh Kee's life that are known for sure are that he was forty-five years old when he died, had a son, was starving, and hung himself by tying a cord around his neck and then tying that to the door of a house on the five foot way where he slept. He was sick when he died, and starving. He had a friend called Guan Chuan who offered to let him stay with him, but refused because he was too ashamed—or so his son says. He worked as a coolie, when he was still healthy. He had a wife, but she died some years before he did.

We don't even know if he was ever happy at any time ever. I just made that bit up.

I like to think he might have been, once. It makes for a better story, for him to have been happy once and then to lose it all. If

his whole life had been miserable, that'd just have been a pain to read through. A societal tragedy, not a personal one.

But everything that was made up (right down to the opium addiction), well. It's not real, but here's the thing: it could have been. For some people, it was. Maybe not the part where they were married, or had a son, but maybe the part where they had a friend whose help they turned down. Or maybe not that part, but the part where they faced the choice between food and shelter. Or even the part where they had to plan out how to die, and genuinely thought that it was the right choice.

Lim Oh Kee isn't special as himself. As someone who symbolises destitution and poverty, though, he does a decent job, but lots of other people and lots of other stories would do good jobs at that, too. His story doesn't even have to be set in 1921. Lim Oh Kee could be thirty, in America, in 2012; he could be twenty, in Singapore, in 1980; he could be fifty, in London, in 1840.

But as himself? He's a man whose last words to his son were: *Tomorrow you will find me gone.*

So here's the real story of 12 December 1921:

The weather is (more likely than not) rainy. It's the monsoon season, after all, so people who sleep out on the streets are miserable. Early in the morning, people are struggling with questions of identity and nation, furiously writing down their thoughts. In some places, they're waking up before 6am to head out to today's work, which is exactly like yesterday's work, which is exactly like the day before yesterday's work. A man starts on his real breakfast, which is not the same as his morning tea or his tiffin lunch.

As the day rolls on into afternoon, newspapers are sold for five cents and ten cents to a small group of readers who are automatically set apart from the vast majority of people for the sheer fact that they're buying newspapers. A woman heads to the market to buy food for her family, and then instructs her Cookie on what to prepare and how exactly to do it. As the day rolls on into evening, another man tries opium for the first time, and feels good. A movie theatre puts on the latest show, preceded by a few minutes of newsreels. Hawkers pack up their stalls and head home, if they have homes, and to their families, if they have families.

And Lim Oh Kee looks at the cord in his hands, ties it to a doorframe, and decides to kill himself.

## The Cat That Disappeared

○ Thiam Chin

THE WALK TO the woman's flat was a pleasant one, the weather cool with a skin-calming breeze. We had arranged to meet at one in the afternoon, and I was early. So I headed to the park, which was near the block of flats where the woman stayed. Sunlight reflected off the windscreens of parked cars in sharp, pulsating glints. A mother pushing a stroller turned to look at me, smiling hesitantly. A stilling quiet settled over everything.

A short path led to the playground, devoid of children except for a few schoolkids in uniform huddled together beside the swing set. A young girl in the group kept bursting into laughter, boisterous and attention-drawing. From where I sat on the bench, I couldn't see what they were doing. One of the boys uttered something, perhaps an instruction or a command, and another boy took a small object out of his bag. I turned my face away, ignoring them. The mother with the stroller had settled on a bench opposite mine, and was taking a milk bottle out of a large carrier bag hanging from the stroller.

A peal of laughter rang like a gunshot from the group of

children. Someone shouted, "Let's go," and everyone ran, leaving behind a dark mound on the sand. Curious, I walked over and saw a small dead pigeon, chest slit open, and wings burned to a crisp. The smell of burning suspended in the air around the body. I closed my eyes, backed up and hurried out of the park. As I was leaving, I saw the mother give me a severe, disgusted stare.

• • •

Nobody answered my knocks on the door. I tried the door handle and found it unlocked, and went in. Immediately something brushed against my leg, and I jumped. A tabby. It looked up at me for a moment, then moved away.

"Hello, I'm here," I whispered. No reply. The living room was steeped in silence. I stood and waited, unsure what to do next.

The room, though spacious, was cluttered from floor to ceiling with all kinds of things—newspapers, magazines, electrical appliances, cardboard boxes, old clothes. Yet, even in the mess, there was a certain kind of order in place, a haphazard arrangement of sorts. A tiny walkway cut across the stacked heaps, leading into the kitchen and other rooms. A feathery skin of white dust lay over the surfaces.

Slowly, as if drawn to the stranger in their midst, the cats began to make their appearances, popping up from different corners of the living room. Some walked up to me while others kept their distance, throwing wary, suspicious glances.

Somewhere in the house, a phone rang. It rang for the longest time before cutting off abruptly. A brown-coated Singapore

leaped onto a pile of yellowing newspapers in pursuit of a cockroach that was crawling up the wall. More cats turned up, each bearing a distinct, regal poise.

Apart from the meowing, there were no other sounds in the flat. I thought I might have got the date wrong and quickly checked the calendar on my phone. No, it was today. Maybe the woman had forgotten. Since I had the whole afternoon free, I didn't make any move to leave. Maybe I would wait until the woman came back. The cats could keep me company in the meantime.

From a hidden part of the flat, a voice called out, "Give me a minute, please wait." I turned to where the voice had come from, peeking through the narrow gap between the piles of flattened cardboard and thick bundles of clothes. Against the dim background of the kitchen, I could make out the shape of the woman's pudgy body. When she entered the living room, I saw that she was middle-aged, her grey hair tied up in a bun. She scanned me with a deliberate intensity, as if I were a salesperson who had stepped into her flat without permission.

"So, you are Lee Ching?" she said. "You called me about your cat?" Her expression remained unreadable. "Where is your cat? Did you bring it with you?"

She pointed to a wooden stool beside me and motioned for me to sit. She grabbed the stool near her and sat in front of me.

"It's not my cat. It's my father's. I'm only taking care of her till I find a suitable place for her. And no, I didn't bring her today." The woman reached down and picked up a Burmese cat, bringing it close to her face.

"Your father's? Then why are you giving her away?"

"I can't take care of her any more," I said, not elaborating. She stared at me, and I looked down at the dirty floor. We waited out the silence. A crash sounded from one of the rooms, and the woman tilted her head backwards, but she didn't get up to investigate the cause of the crash.

"The cats are always bumping into things and breaking them," she said. "You can spend the whole day cleaning up after them. There is no end to it, I tell you."

"How many cats do you have?" I asked.

"I don't know. I lost count. Maybe twenty, thirty. Hard to keep track when they are all over the place."

The cats, perhaps sensing that we were talking about them, began to saunter off, heading for their usual hideouts. I counted those in front of us. Thirteen. No wonder the whole flat reeked violently of cat piss. Tiny clusters of cat hair clung to the black T-shirt and slacks that the woman was wearing. When she let the Burmese cat down, I noticed the dark patches under her armpits and caught a strong whiff of her unwashed body. It was the sour-vinegarish smell of dirty mattresses and week-old clothes, which caused me to pause and hold my breath. Something about the familiar smell brought up a sudden surge of panic and fear.

"It must be a tough job taking care of so many cats. For me, one cat is already quite a handful. I don't know how you can manage. You must love cats a lot."

"You don't have to love something to take care of it," she said. "I took in my first cat only because she was limping,

and there was no one to help her. I don't want her to die, like something unwanted."

"But why so many of them?"

"I don't know. One day there was only one, and the next day, another would appear, out of nowhere. They kept turning up at my doorstep."

"I'm only taking care of the cat because my father has passed away. He died three months ago."

"Sorry to hear that."

"It's okay. It doesn't matter."

• • •

My father died alone in the flat where he had lived for sixteen years, after he and my mother had divorced. He was dead for five days before I found him. My mother was the one who had told me to visit. Even before I stepped into his one-room flat, the smell was enough to alert me that something was terribly wrong. He was on the bed, in his usual white singlet and pyjama bottoms, his eyes half-closed as if on the verge of waking. His ears and lips had been chewed off.

The mackerel tabby, hiding under the bed, came up to me. She meowed softly and began to circle my legs, touching me with her upturned tail. Around her mouth were dried specks of blood. Every stroke of her furry tail sent shots of electricity up my spine, but still I couldn't find the strength to move away.

"Pa," I said, my voice disembodied, as if someone else in the room were uttering the word. "Pa, it's me, Lee Ching."

The air barely stirred, and the stench was overwhelming,

like a physical force pressing in on me from all sides. A viscous moat of blood and bodily fluids had formed a dark outline around his stiff, shrunken body, with a battalion of houseflies attacking different parts of it. A few of them had landed on my father's mouth, and the effect was one of agitated movement, as if his mouth were trembling. His hands hovered slightly above the soiled bedsheet, in a half-grip.

I can't remember much of what happened that day, but at some point, I found myself on my knees, still in the same spot. The sunlight coming in from the window had weakened significantly, the room growing darker. In the dying light, the skin on my father's body seemed to glow. The mackerel tabby had climbed onto the bed, and was licking, or chewing, my father's face, and purring contentedly.

Any moment now, I thought, he was going to wake up. Any moment.

• • •

The woman could have asked me follow-up questions to find out more about my father's death, but she didn't. She let it pass without another word of commiseration or consolation, and I was thankful for that. Often I had to brace myself for these questions—from the police, relatives, friends and colleagues. Their curiosity, puzzlement and exaggerated looks of concern caused me to simmer inwardly with rage, and I learnt to mask my disgust with silence and inertia.

"Now that you have seen my cats," she said, "and how they live, in my cramped little flat, maybe you have your doubts.

Well, I can't promise you that your cat will live a pampered life, but at least she will be fed and taken care of. And she will have plenty of good company here. So really, it's up to you, your decision."

The woman tried to read my face and even gave me a faint smile. I wanted, there and then, to tell her everything about my father's cat: that she was the last thing to have seen my father alive, that she had stayed by him after he had died from a heart attack, that she had got so hungry she had eaten his face. But, of course, it would be inappropriate, even absurd, to do that. The woman wouldn't be able to understand what I'd be saying. So I just gave her a consenting nod.

"Yes, this is the right place for my cat."

• • •

After my father's death, I took the mackerel tabby home and took care of her. My mother didn't say a word about the cat. I fed her three times a day and watched her eat, chewing the food with uncomplicated pleasure. Over time, she grew bigger and fatter. I fed her snacks in between meals; I even gave her part of my dinner. I couldn't find the appetite to eat and skipped my meals frequently. The cat's insatiable appetite both repelled and fascinated me, and I couldn't help but feed her more and more.

"The cat is getting too fat for her own good," my mother said, pushing the animal away with her feet. She meowed once at my mother and walked up to me. I reached out to touch her ears and stroke her fur, which had become softer and shinier, no doubt from the good food I was feeding her.

"Get rid of her," my mother said.

I picked up the cat and left the living room where we had been watching TV. The cat resisted my rough handling, trying to escape from my grip, but I held tightly to her wriggling body, digging my fingers into her skin. She hissed at me, baring her fangs, trying to bite me. I hissed back at her, and when she sank her teeth into my left hand, I threw her to the floor. With nimble, dexterous grace, she landed on all fours, and ran into the kitchen.

• • •

The woman got up from the stool and headed for the kitchen, indicating for me to follow her. In single file, we walked between the towers of trash into the dim and humid kitchen. A few pots were boiling on the stove, and the smell of urine was even stronger here. The woman began to stir the contents of the pots with a wooden ladle.

"I feed them cooked meat twice a week, instead of dried cat food from bags. Just leftover fish parts and pigs' insides that I get from the wet market," she said. "My special treat for them."

She turned off the stove, picked up one of the pots and carried it to a large metal serving tray on the floor. A few cats that had been lying on the dining table and shelves of the cabinets roused themselves and began to come forward. The woman poured the contents onto the tray and spread them out evenly. Then she went and got the other pots, pouring everything out. A cloud of steam rose and very slowly disappeared. More cats crept into the kitchen, and suddenly it was as if the entire

kitchen floor were made of different shades of fur.

“Wait a while for the food to cool,” the woman said, directing her words at the cats nearest to the tray, which were sniffing at the food, waiting for her next instruction. There was no jolting or climbing all over one another; the cats crouched in an orderly fashion, dignified.

The woman came to stand beside me, then uttered, “Go.” The cats dug into the food, those at the back attempting to squeeze through the wall of bodies to get to it. I drew in a long breath, as my chest constricted in a spasm of mixed emotions.

“What a sight, right? To see them eat like that, with such pleasure,” the woman said, not taking her eyes off the cats.

“Yes.”

Both of us stood there, in the sea of cats, watching them eat, snapping the fish bones and chewing on the pig innards, all hunger and appetite. We didn’t move until the food on the tray was all gone, every surface licked clean. When the woman turned to me, she had a look of surprise on her face, and it was then that I realised I had been crying throughout the feeding.

• • •

My father had suffered from schizophrenia all his life, and his condition took a turn for the worse after he and my mother were divorced, and he moved to his own place. He would stay in his flat for weeks in a row, afraid to venture out because he was scared that his neighbours would break in and rob him of all his money. Later, he claimed he was being stalked by an

elderly woman who followed him everywhere he went. That was why he got himself the cat, a stray he picked up in the neighbourhood, because the elderly woman was apparently afraid of cats and wouldn’t come near him if the cat was with him. He took the cat everywhere he went, talking to her as if she were the dearest thing to him, a daughter perhaps, someone he couldn’t let out of his sight.

A crazy, fucked-up father. That was my lot in life, a fact that I couldn’t shake off. Relatives often commented that I looked a lot like my father—the sharp nose, high forehead, jutting-out ears—and I never knew what to make of it. Did his madness lie in me, a dormant gene waiting to be triggered? Was his fate an ominous harbinger of what lay ahead for me? A future not waiting to be born from the unknown or to be constructed by my choices and actions, but one already determined, set in course, DNA-ed in my blood.

I sought out stories, whatever I could get my hands on, on how people with schizophrenia lived, the meaningful lives they could lead. I took my father to the doctor, monitored his medication, went with him for meals and long walks. I forced long conversations on him, encouraging him to “talk it out”. I fed him bitter Chinese medicine, made him endure long acupuncture sessions, even hired a therapist. No amount of scolding, pleading, pacifying or soothing could unmake him.

Sometimes, I let my mind wander to the other stories: a man who cut up his wife and ate her because a voice from heaven commanded him to; a young girl who slashed her arms and chest with a penknife to release the snakes hidden inside her

body; a mother who suffocated her two young sons with a pillow out of a fear for their future.

And when my father died the way he did, I was shocked, naturally, but also relieved, knowing that the worst that could happen to him had happened, and that there was nothing more to fear.

• • •

I went back to my father's flat several times after his death, before my mother sold it off. The mattress that my father had died on had been taken away, leaving only the metal bed frame. All traces of the blood had been wiped clean, and it took some deliberation on my part to detect the faint death-stench in the air.

On each visit, I'd walk around the flat with a black trash bag, and throw my father's belongings into it. Sometimes, if my mood remained stable and placid, I could fill five to six trash bags, mostly things he had picked up and hoarded from his walks around the rubbish dumps in the neighbourhood. When I had cleared out most of the garbage, the whole flat looked like a hollowed-out beast, stark and powerless, and my voice echoed as if I were in a cave hidden from civilisation.

When I grew tired, I'd lie on the floor in the middle of the skeletal bed frame. Rust flaked off the metal like dry fish scales. I'd look up at the ceiling, trying to imagine what my father had seen when he was clutching his hand to his chest, in the last moments of his life. I'd hold my hand to my chest and force myself to re-enact this last scene, to experience his death as my own.

• • •

My mother came into my room, saw what I was doing and screamed. She ran to me, pushed the cat away and put her hands on my bleeding wrist.

"Why are you doing this?" she yelled in my face.

I had only wanted to know what it was like to bleed just a little, and to let the cat lick my wound, to salve the pain.

• • •

Once, I found my father lying in bed, deep in his own world, his mouth moving wordlessly. He hadn't heard me enter the flat, and when I touched his arm he gave me a strange, alarmed look. His eyes were unfocussed, lost and dreamy. I waited for him to come round. He smiled when he finally recognised me.

Taking my hands, he led me to a corner of the flat where he had placed the water bowl and a few sheets of old newspapers that functioned as a litter area for the cat. Opening a tin box, he drew out a few biscuits and crumbled them into the empty bowl. The cat appeared from out of thin air and approached us. She lifted her nose and sniffed the air. My father bent down to pat her, an undiluted expression of happiness on his face. Had I ever seen him like this before? If so, I couldn't remember.

Looking at them, it occurred to me how natural their relationship seemed: simple, uncomplicated and instinctive, each reciprocating the other's affections so openly. With the cat, my father could afford to be unguarded and vulnerable, to enjoy a brief moment of reprieve from the endless battles he had to fight with himself. The cat was the only one he could

depend on, when everything and everyone had turned against him, even me, his own child, who was always on the verge of giving him up.

I turned my eyes away, bitterness eating away at my pathetic little heart.

• • •

I only vaguely knew what had transpired between my parents before they decided to separate—my father’s unspoken need for greater isolation, and his gradual distancing from us; and my mother’s pressing desire to get on with her life, one of her own making. I was the only constant that overlapped their parallel existences, and in the space between their lives I had to find my own bearing, to salvage whatever I could to carry on, to live my own life. Though my father never mentioned my mother after their divorce, my mother, on the other hand, often shared random shreds of their past to me, forgotten incidents from my childhood.

“You shouldn’t judge your father as he is now,” my mother said, levelling her gaze at me, over a plate of steamed pomfret, during dinner.

“No, I don’t.”

“He really is a kind man, even if you can’t see it. He has many good qualities.”

“I know, I know.”

“He liked to buy you things all the time when you were a kid, toys and sweets and whatnots, and god knows we were barely surviving back then with his meagre income.”

For over a decade, my father had worked as a caretaker in an animal shelter, taking care of the abandoned animals, feeding and cleaning them, dressing their self-inflicted wounds. He smelled like the sad-fated animals he took care of. Whenever I encountered the smell of damp animal fur, it would trigger sharp, fractured memories of my father.

“Did he tell you that there was one time we took you to the zoo, and you cried like no one’s business when you saw the tigers in the cage?” my mother said.

“No, he didn’t. Did I?”

“Yes, you did, you cried your eyes out. Your father had to carry you away quickly, because you were scaring the other children. You refused to come down from his arms the whole day, because you were afraid the tigers would attack you and eat you up. Your poor father had to hold you throughout the whole zoo.”

Somehow, I found it hard to reconcile the image of my younger self with the person I had become, as if somewhere in my personal history, some parts of me had vanished without a trace, slipped into the gaps. I had awoken years later, and I was a different person, the past a phantom disappearing into the air. Nor could I picture clearly my father in the light of what my mother had told me, as if the person she was describing were someone entirely made-up, a fictional character in a story.

“I must have been such a pain back then, with all the crying.”

“Yes, such a nuisance. If it wasn’t for your father, I’m pretty sure I’d have killed you when you were a kid.”

“You should have,” I said, smiling weakly.

“Nonsense. Anyway, what I’m saying is that you should treat your father better, even though he and I are no longer together, which is a completely different story. You are his child. When’s the last time you visited him?”

“Last Thursday. I have been very busy lately.”

“Go visit him soon.”

“I will.”

• • •

It was past two in the afternoon when I left the woman’s flat. I agreed to bring my father’s cat to her the next day. With no plan in mind, I walked to the park again. Nobody was at the playground at this time of the day; the mother with the stroller was gone. Moving through the hot, stuffy afternoon air was like breaking through the suffocating folds of an electric blanket.

Without realising it, I had walked to the spot where I had last seen the dead pigeon. It was no longer there. I looked around, wondering if someone might have moved it. But I found nothing.

Just as I was about to give up, I saw, out of the corner of my eye, a mackerel tabby, staring at me from a short distance away with a knowing, complicit look. In its mouth was the dead pigeon. Before I could do anything, it disappeared into the bushes.

## **Patterns of a Murmuration, In Billions of Data Points**

JY Yang

OUR MOTHER IS dead, murdered, blood seared and flesh rendered, her blackened bones lying in a yellow bag on a steel mortuary table somewhere we don’t know. The Right will not tell. After the flames and radiation had freed the sports stadium from their embrace, the Right were the first on the disaster scene, and it was their ambulances that took the remains away to some Central hospital that the Left has no access to.

“We will release the bodies of the victims when investigations are complete,” said the Right’s ombudsman to the Health Sciences Authority, to the families of the victims.

But we will not bury our mother. We have no interest in putting her bones in soft ground, no desire for memorials and platitudes, no feelings attached to the organic detritus of her terminated existence.

An awning collapse, the resultant stampede and a fuel explosion taking the lives of two hundred seventy-two supporters of the Left: Headlines announced the death of

*The Epigram Books Collection of Best New Singaporean Short Stories: Volume Two* gathers twenty-four of the finest stories from Singaporean writers published in 2013 and 2014, selected from hundreds published in journals, magazines, anthologies and single-author collections. These pieces examine life in Singapore, beyond its borders to Toronto, California, Shanghai, Andhra Pradesh, Pyongchon and Paris, as well as to the distant past and the far future. Accompanying the stories are the editor's introduction and an extensive list of honourable mentions for further reading.

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