

THE EPIGRAM BOOKS COLLECTION OF

**BEST NEW
SINGAPOREAN
SHORT
STORIES
VOLUME THREE**

EDITED BY

CYRIL WONG

SERIES EDITOR: JASON ERIK LUNDBERG

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PREFACE

CYRIL WONG

POPULAR DICTATES OF what constitutes good readable fiction usually include having a surprising beginning, a suspenseful middle, an ending with a revelation or a dramatic twist, and being peopled by memorable protagonists and intriguing minor characters. Depending on whom you ask concerning the readership for fiction, regardless of whether the writing is considered good or bad, one could argue that the rising or declining popularity of fiction is a result of the continued acceptance of the importance of such dictates.

In Singapore particularly, as fiction increasingly takes over from where poetry has left off in terms of capturing the attention of both literary creators and consumers, it is not unfair to assume that most fiction-lovers here prefer to judge a story based on more commonplace structural principles. But one could also make a case for a smaller-trend-within-a-larger-trend of readers and writers who are increasingly looking for something more in fictional prose. Especially with regard to short stories, where there might appear to be more of an inclination to experiment with form and

structure, conventional dictates can be persuaded to take a back seat, providing more space and freedom to that urgent tendency to speculate, evoke or draw psychological portraits that mess around with readerly expectations.

For certain, as a writer, critic, and now guest editor for this series of biennial anthologies, I'm personally more drawn to, or sustainably engaged by, originality at the level of form, rather than by conventional standards of what makes "a good story". There is very little about human characters with their plights and concerns that surprise me anymore, at least not in fiction; in terms of standard plots, nothing for me is ever truly suspenseful or unforeseen for very long.

This is not to say that I'm no longer touched by convincing characterisations of protagonists who might or might not have discovered something significant about their circumstances or about themselves. I'm just more moved and impressed if such characterisations are conveyed through scenarios that are bewilderingly surreal or fable-esque, expressed through language that is resolutely and paradoxically mysterious yet revelatory. Singaporean fiction has a long way to go before it might even dare to break down its own boundaries and extend itself into other oppressively static categories of "essay", "word-art", "poem", etc. But I do think that our fiction is slowly getting there.

For this particular anthology that you now hold in your hands, I have mostly chosen pieces that tell "a good story" in more expected ways, especially since this is still the predominant reason that readers here still read fiction. Death and the supernatural—pet themes that have gripped our fiction since the

late eighties—came up a lot during my final selection; perhaps I was being nostalgic, but I could argue that a solid Singaporean story sometimes doesn't feel right if a dead body doesn't make an appearance. I have also hopefully succeeded in picking stories that are inclined towards a greater sense of stylistic and thematic experimentation. Several of these stories are particularly short, and I picked them because they came close to being atmospheric prose-poems, even as they also contained embedded but evocative storylines.

The notion of "Singaporean" in the anthology has also been expanded to include authors whose works here first appeared in Singapore-based publications or who have been published by Singaporean publishers; I discovered their writings amidst the growing cornucopia and diversity of Singapore's cosmopolitan publishing scene. In my mind, "Singapore" or "Singaporean" in relation to creative writing in this country is less of a form of official categorisation than it is an opportunity or a platform for imaginative reinvention as regards political, sociocultural and temporal specificities (at least, I like to think so anyway).

INTRODUCTION

JASON ERIK LUNDBERG

WELCOME TO THE third instalment in our *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* anthology series! Each volume from now on will be helmed by a guest editor curating the content, and I am elated that Cyril Wong has taken the reins in this case. I have long admired Cyril as a poet and fiction writer, and am very happy to note that his prodigious talent extends to anthologist as well. His criteria are very clearly laid out in his preface, and it has been fascinating working with him on the selection, especially since this is not necessarily the book I myself would have constructed. Cyril's particular vision has resulted in a collection of stories with an interesting (and at times uneasy) thematic unity. It feels all of a piece, this book, and I cannot thank Cyril enough for taking on the task of putting it together.

Out of all the hundreds of stories published by Singaporean writers in 2015 and 2016, we winnowed the list down to just twenty-six (62% of these authored by women). The total undertaking took 18 months: the first six months were devoted to reading and evaluating, and the last 12 months were spent working together

to curate the finalised list. Both Cyril and I recommend seeking out additional work by all of the contributors gathered here, as well as those listed in the forty honourable mentions in the back of this book.

...

The last two years marked a dramatic turn in Epigram Books' general fiction line. *It Never Rains on National Day* by Jeremy Tiang and *The Widower* by Mohamed Latiff Mohamed (trans. Alfian Sa'at) were both shortlisted for the 2016 Singapore Literature Prize in the English Fiction category, which was won by our graphic novel, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* by Sonny Liew. *Big Mole* by Ming Cher (sequel to his seminal novel *Spider Boys*) was a finalist for the 2016 Singapore Book Awards for Best Fiction Title and Best Book Cover Design.

And most importantly, we established the annual Epigram Books Fiction Prize to promote contemporary creative writing and reward excellence in Singaporean literature: the 2015 winner was *Now That It's Over* by O Thiam Chin, with a shortlist comprising *Sugarbread* by Balli Kaur Jaswal, *Death of a Perm Sec* by Wong Souk Yee, and *Let's Give It Up for Gimme Lao!* by Sebastian Sim. The 2016 winner was *The Gatekeeper* by Nuraliah Norasid, with a shortlist comprising *Fox Fire Girl* by O Thiam Chin, *Surrogate Protocol* by Tham Cheng-E, and *State of Emergency* by Jeremy Tiang.

In addition, at the end of 2016 Epigram Books established a London office, in order to bring Singaporean fiction directly to the United Kingdom. 2017 saw the UK releases of *Inheritance* by Balli Kaur Jaswal and *Kappa Quartet* by Daryl Qilin Yam in May,

Now That It's Over by O Thiam Chin and *The Last Lesson of Mrs de Souza* by Cyril Wong in July, *Sugarbread* by Balli Kaur Jaswal and *The Gatekeeper* by Noraliah Norasid in September, and *State of Emergency* by Jeremy Tiang and *Let's Give It Up for Gimme Lao!* by Sebastian Sim in November.

...

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: Ethos Books, Epigram Books, Fixi Novo, Landmark Books, Marshall Cavendish, Math Paper Press, *adda*, *Berfrois*, *Blunderbuss Magazine*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Drunken Boat*, *Esquire (Singapore)*, *Female Magazine*, *Happy Tropics*, *Junoeseq Literary Journal*, *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Reader's Digest*, *The Stockholm Review of Literature*, *Swag Lit* and *We Are a Website*.

The pieces herein examine urban dissatisfaction, major life changes (committing a crime, escaping an untenable situation, encountering the supernatural), and the tragedy of miscommunication. This particular group of stories ordered in this particular way have created a book unlike any other that you will read this year. The only thing that remains for you is to find a comfortable chair, shut out the external world, and turn the page.

THESE FOOLISH THINGS

YEO WEI WEI

WAITING FOR DANNY to come home, Yuan sits and stares at the polka-dotted plate. She's set it at the centre of the table. Her movements are deft, silky. She's been at this for a week now, going through boxes labelled with her name in the closet, drawing out a different item for display each day.

A loose sheet of newspaper flutters and flaps against the table leg. Sliding glass panels lead out to the balcony and a draught is whistling through the slit between the rightmost panel and the frame. Some things haven't changed. How she used to chide him whenever he neglected to push that panel flush. The slightest opening allows the wind to intrude and re-arrange moveable things as it sees fit.

The art deco clock on the walnut side cabinet, bought during their honeymoon, shouldn't be out here. Its displacement from her bedside table was one of the first things she noticed after her return a week ago. Out with the old, in with the new. She'll deal with the clock later, she needs a breather now, moving that plate took a lot out of her.

She glides through the small opening to the balcony. Twenty storeys below the Kallang River shimmers.

This was an industrial district half a century ago. Nothing remains of the old sawmills and charcoal factories, no hauntings, she'd know if there were any. In the '90s, developers muscled in on the land, building sleek high-rise condominiums like this one. She remembers signing the Option to Purchase, collecting the keys. Months spent on renovations, the makeover for their dream home. By the time of her trip to Phuket they'd lived here for five years and she wanted a change. She longed to be free from the confines of that old life, from this box in the air. She started to travel on her own, weekends, then four-day trips; Phuket was supposed to have been a week.

She gazes at the jagged outline of skyscrapers in the distance, institutions and structures of concrete and glass, built to outlast the people who work in them. Perhaps this apartment will be here forever, perpetual like the commercial heart of the city.

She can't be standing out here in the light, but it should be all right at this time since it's dusk. A renegade sheet of newspaper streaks past her, slapping into the balustrade as its luck runs out. Her journey back has been nothing short of fortuitous.

From the corner of her eye she spies something flapping on the old laundry rack. The yellow umbrella is open, left out here to dry. Nudged this way and that by gusts of blustery wind, it looks undecided whether to stay or go.

The front door opens. She recognises Danny's footsteps and she floats herself over to the dining table to check on the plate, even though she knows that nothing could have changed its position. Not yet.

"You forgot the doors," Yuan says. Danny and the woman called Fern can't hear her, of course.

Particulars are pressing in on her like a succession of movie close-ups. The brightness in his eyes, the curve of his lips, his arm around Fern's waist like a ring. The band of gold on his ring finger. Their wedding bands, hers and Danny's, were platinum.

He is whispering something to Fern, making her giggle. Her hair skims her waist and as she turns to go into one of the rooms, it swings out like a net. Yuan has seen strands of long black hair scattered around the apartment.

She looks at Danny. He's seen the plate. She watches to see how it's going to be dismissed and shelved away. Every day for the past week he's been clearing the table, stuffing her belongings back into the closet.

He rushes past her to get to the dining table, grabbing the crumpled sheet of newspaper around the table leg, using it to wrap the plate. This he then brings to the recycling bin in the corner and carefully stows inside.

Yuan flits to the kitchen. Unwashed breakfast things sit in the sink: two mugs with the stains of this morning's coffee, plates pimply with crumbs. She can ignore them, like the frilly underwear on the laundry rack, but they are real, more real than she is, and they are part of Danny's life now whether she likes it or not.

She looks at the umbrella on the balcony. How the wind taunts the poor thing. She feels tired looking at it. This could go on for a long time. Sometimes it's necessary to be firm, to take a stand.

She's going to unwrap the polka-dotted plate and put it back on the table, back in the centre. She's not being foolish or petulant. No, this is what she came back to do.

...

Phuket, 26 December 2004. The wave was grey. Minutes before it crashed onto land, small animals could be seen dashing away from the seaside towards higher ground. The sea surged across the beach towards the town. It rampaged across tall buildings, swallowing up deck chairs, cars, lorries, motorcycles, strollers, roadside stalls and people still in bed after Christmas Day's revelry.

Yuan was one of those asleep. She had gone to Phuket to be on her own, to figure out what she wanted. She wasn't clear yet what it was but she felt sure it would entail more time apart. Yet when the tsunami struck, it was Danny's face that came to her as she flailed, arms thrashing against the sea's fists; it was Danny's name she called as her lungs were clogged with scummy water.

When she came to she was on the beach. She could see the moon, distant, luminous. Her hands reached for her hair. A tangled sandy nest but it was still attached to her head. She looked at her arms, her legs, and cautiously she touched her face, her breasts, her belly. There were no cuts, not even a scratch, nothing to suggest that she'd gone through the most terrifying ordeal of her life.

She looked around her, moving very slowly, hopeful but also fearful of what she might see. A piece of corrugated iron lay across her. It must have come off a roof. Maybe the rest of the house was lying around somewhere on this beach. When a shadow moved out of the darkness towards her, she called out to it, thinking it was someone crawling on all fours. But soon she saw that it was a dog.

The first thing she noticed was its tail, curled and raised high like a comma, not wagging. It must have seen her, its eyes glowed as it bounded towards her. She scrambled to her feet. She shouldn't run, she should stay calm. She had been bitten by a street dog

when she was little, it was around the same size as this one, but she was a grown-up now. She hunched her shoulders and kept her gaze averted, she was trying to let it know she wasn't a threat. But she could hear it coming closer, and she knew it was heading straight for her, so she looked and she saw its fleshy tongue and the whites of its teeth closing the distance between them.

She sank her hands into the sand. But no matter how hard she clawed at the sand, her hands couldn't pick anything up, they didn't even leave an imprint. As soon her fists touched the ground, they faded as if they were mist. She reeled backwards and just then the dog went straight through her. It had caught the scent of something underneath or behind the corrugated iron sheet, she didn't look to see what it clamped between its jaws, she was too busy staring down at her intact chest.

She spent the coming months getting to know her new shade-body, carrying out small experiments to see what she could and couldn't do. It didn't take her long to decide that she would test the limits. Wasn't her continued post-death existence proof that nothing, no matter how unthinkable, was impossible? So she challenged the first manifest boundary, wiping her palms over the sand, poking her fingers into it, not allowing herself to give up. One day she pressed her palms into the sand, turned them over, and saw grains stuck on them.

She learnt that the sun was her enemy. She spent daylight hours inside a rolled up beach umbrella, slipping out at night to wander through desolate streets. When she was tired she lay on the beach and gazed at the moon or its reflection on the sea. How it comforted her to know that the same moon was in the sky above their home, that he could be looking at it too.

As months went by, tourists returned. The resort that put the beach umbrellas out re-opened. One day at noon, the hour when the rays of the sun are most deadly to her shade-skin, one of the boys working for the resort was trying to open her beach umbrella. She'd tampered with the mechanism so that it jammed. He had to fetch another one. After he left, Yuan peered out of the folds, excited by what her ears had picked up. There was a couple bickering and their accent was unmistakably Singaporean.

This was it, this was her ticket home.

The woman was under the shield of a yellow umbrella. To Yuan's delight and relief, she set this down next to Yuan's beach umbrella. In the time she took to squeeze a dollop of sunblock on to her hands and apply it to her face and arms, Yuan crossed over to the yellow umbrella and spread herself on the canopy, like a layer of oil in a wok.

Once she was safe inside the air-conditioned space of their room, Yuan checked the address in their passports. She could hardly believe it, these people lived a stone's throw from her place. The umbrella had much less space than what she was used to with the beach umbrella, but she didn't mind. She contorted her body around the stretchers and tucked her head into her stomach, pushing her nose into her belly button. She did breathing exercises to prepare for the considerable stretch of time ahead when she would have to stay in this position. How her heart was ablaze! She smacked her lips, savouring the salt of the Andaman Sea for the last time.

...

Yuan could see a pair of eyes squinting at her. Their owner tightened the grip of her shaking hands around the closed umbrella.

"Ai, sejuk!" the young woman said, dropping the umbrella.

She shuffled backwards in a kneeling position until she was at a safe distance.

Yuan wasn't sure what one should say under such circumstances so she coughed.

Most people would have heard nothing but the young woman whose grandmother was a bomoh back in Java heard Yuan's cough. She moved a little closer to the umbrella, chanting in fervent hushed tones a prayer she'd learnt from her grandmother. Her hands trembled but she extended them and grabbed the handle, using so much force her knuckles turned white.

Again she felt it, a chill that ran down her spine, making her hair stand on end.

She had to do something to send this hantu away, she couldn't let it stay here. Peeping into the umbrella, she saw a dark cloud-like thing, shivering, smudgy.

That's why the CD player switched on in the middle of the night! And the rice-cooker also, suddenly turned off before the rice was cooked. Ma'am scolded her but it wasn't Assia's fault. Assia mustn't make Ma'am and Sir angry, it was the hantu, not her, but how could she tell them, they wouldn't believe her. She needed this job, she needed the money for her daughter, her grandmother.

She grabbed it by the ferrule and opened the rubbish chute. Bad smells wafted out. She should get rid of it and chucking it down the chute was one of the easiest ways, but why now, she was finding she didn't have the heart to do it. Ghosts were very poor thing, this hantu must have come back for something or someone. She kept the umbrella inside the cupboard beside the chute and every day she said the prayer for it to find peace.

Yuan spent days wondering if she should ask Assia for help.

Maybe she could tell Assia her address. If Assia could hear her cough, she should be able to hear Yuan's voice. She never expected to meet someone like Assia, nor did she think that Assia's prayers would work.

Assia's Ma'am had a friend, a pretty lady with long fine hair, who came for dinner. She asked if she could borrow an umbrella for her walk home as it was raining heavily. Yuan found herself woken up as the cupboard door clattered open and Assia started on her chanting.

"Sorry ah, Ma'am," Assia murmured, handing over the yellow umbrella with an anxious smile. Ma'am's friend didn't hear her because the rain outside was making such a din.

"Bye," Fern said, opening the umbrella.

"Bye," Yuan said wearily, but no one heard her.

...

Her eyes blinked in disbelief. Could this be...?

The wind whistled loudly through a gap in the sliding panels. Yuan felt the coolness of the night air as she went out to the balcony. The rain had stopped and the river surface was smooth. The city's bright lights shuddered into a blur through her tears.

"Danny," she said, remembering. There was so much she needed to say to him. The words she'd been carrying around inside her all these years bloomed. Their fragrance was her favourite scent, sweet gardenia.

In their bedroom the bed was in its old place. There he was, her Danny sitting up in bed. But what was the woman called Fern doing in here?

"Are you feeling better? Want something to eat?" Fern asked, leaning over, planting a kiss on Danny's forehead.

Yuan looked on, not understanding.

"Why didn't you call me? I could have come to fetch you."

"It's okay, baby."

"You don't like long hair," Yuan said weakly.

"Did you get wet?"

"Julie lent me her umbrella."

She had seen and heard enough. Yuan hid inside the umbrella, limp and wet on the floor. She had never felt so alone.

...

She's put the plate back on the table. It's a gesture she will keep on repeating until he acknowledges her presence.

She tumbles out of the umbrella and joins Danny at the dining table where he is staring open-mouthed at the plate. He's also noticed that the clock has disappeared from the side cabinet. A suspicion that has been nagging at him drains the colour from his cheeks.

Six years—it has been six years since Yuan died.

She kept a small tin box of dried sage leaves in her study. He's not been inside this room since she died. Prising the lid open, he puts two leaves on his palm.

He strikes a match, the spark catches. She goes up to him and blows it out. He strikes another one, she thwarts him again.

"It smells stale in here," she says. "You should air the room." There's dust on the shelves, dust on her books. Both of them notice this.

The floor around his feet is littered with the spent bodies of used matches. He lights the last match.

"Yuan," he whispers. She pauses, lips pursed. He guides the flame to lick the leaves. One of the leaves is burning faster than the other and brittle flakes of ash crumble and fall.

She chases the ashes, blowing at them from below to make them flutter and fly. He watches as if in a trance, dazed to see this happening in an airless room.

Her body was never found, so there was no one in her casket, only her favourite dress and shoes and trinkets, the foolish things that give shape to a life. Leaden things left behind. Her books and papers in here, the plate outside.

“Yuan, my love.”

As if in answer, the remaining smouldering sage leaf flies into his face. Instead of a cindery smoky aroma, he catches a whiff of gardenia, her old scent. The perfume surrounds him, and he turns this way and that, his arms flung wide, his fingers searching.

Three times he tries to wrap his arms around her, three times they cross in vain. She is a current in the sea, she is a breeze. He tries again, opening his arms wide, trying to wrap them around her, or where he thinks she might be. There is nothing to hold and he stumbles, crashing into a bookcase.

Her eyes are wet like his.

From the floor the ashes of the sage leaves whirl and rise. They float out of the study and he scrambles onto his feet in pursuit. The glass panels slide open, letting in a bracing wind. The sparse cloud of leaf ash swims through the air until it reaches the yellow umbrella. Danny rushes out to the balcony and the hovering particles start to break away and scatter like rain.

From the river rise the hearty cheers of men on dragon boats. Are they rowing towards the light, Yuan wonders, letting go, listening to the oars cut into water, stab after stab after stab.

THE THING

YEOH JO-ANN

WHEN HE ARRIVES at their house and finds that she is not home, the father does not worry. He makes himself a cup of oolong tea, turns on the television and watches the seven o'clock news: floods kill thousands in Bangladesh, another crime ring is exposed in Malaysia, tainted tofu makes its rounds in China and the library board bans three children's books in Singapore.

The front door opens and someone enters.

The father lowers the volume. Dear, is that you?

No, it's me.

The son. He comes into the living room, picks up the remote control and changes the channel. The news gives way to a talent show hosted by two Chinese girls with American accents.

The father walks into the kitchen. The lights are off and there is nothing on the stove. This is odd— he knows the mother begins making dinner at about five-thirty every evening and she always tells him early if she isn't cooking, so that they can make plans to eat out.

There is no one in their bedroom nor in the bathroom, though for a moment he thinks that maybe he will find her dead in the

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VOLUME THREE** gathers the finest Singaporean
stories published in 2015 and 2016, selected by
guest editor Cyril Wong from hundreds published
in journals, magazines, anthologies and single-
author collections. Accompanying the stories
are the editor's preface and an extensive list of
honourable mentions for further reading.

EVA ALDEA • JOELYN ALEXANDRA
JENNIFER ANNE CHAMPION • ANDREW CHEAH
CLARA CHOW • NOELLE Q. DE JESUS
MELISSA DE SILVA • SC GORDON • JON GRESHAM
PHILIP HOLDEN • AMANDA LEE KOE • SU LEONG
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