

THE EPIGRAM BOOKS COLLECTION OF

**BEST NEW  
SINGAPOREAN  
SHORT  
STORIES  
VOLUME FOUR**

EDITED BY

**POOJA NANSI**

SERIES EDITOR: JASON ERIK LUNDBERG

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## PREFACE

POOJA NANSI

**THE STORIES COLLECTED** here are a result of my wanting to read all the short Singaporean fiction out there that I could, in the process of editing a selection. I'll readily admit that I was partial to names I was unfamiliar with. This largely stemmed from the fact that, despite being so deeply involved in the literary scene in Singapore, I was aware that there were so many people currently writing whom we do not hear from. I was especially curious about the one-off stories that appeared in issues of online journals, stories that upon reading were crying out for a wider readership.

In my editing process, I also thought a lot about the title of this selection. *Best New Singaporean Short Stories*. The idea of "best" in any form of curatorial process is undoubtedly arbitrary and subjective. I only wanted to include the widest variety of interesting, insightful and inquisitive stories from the most diverse group of writers I could gather in one book. You'll find in this selection very established names like Cyril Wong, Ng Yi-Sheng and Balli Kaur Jaswal, as well as writers who have published full collections and novels such as Jennani Durai, Rachel Heng and

Victor Fernando R. Ocampo; you will come across names you may not have run into before, and I am elated to have you encounter them here. I've also included a story that's never been published before, which I discovered in my work teaching creative writing at NTU, because it is my strong belief that publication is not the only mark of a worthy story.

What I deeply know to be true, and hope to convey with my editing of this collection, is that our stories are everywhere we look and all of our stories matter. They are as varied and as manifold as we are. The pieces here are by student writers, full-time writers, hobbyists—some of the writers are based in Singapore, some are away from the city, and others call this city home, however momentarily. But all these stories speak to the very human truths of loss and desire in one way or another.

I'm so very excited to present this collection to you, the reader, because I believe these stories sit side by side like Inez Tan's characters "creating visions of a more equal city together". I hope you enjoy the transformative experience of reading them as much as I did. Tuck in.

## INTRODUCTION

JASON ERIK LUNDBERG

**WELCOME TO THE** fourth instalment in our *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* anthology series! Our previous volume established the practice of inviting a guest editor to curate the contents and shape each book, and Cyril Wong did an outstanding job gathering a collection of stories that felt both unified and haunted. In this new volume, Pooja Nansi—poet, performer and organiser—has taken the reins to produce a sleeker anthology than in years past, and with a clean curatorial angle. I cannot thank her enough for putting together such a unique selection, while also simultaneously spearheading the 2019 Singapore Writers Festival; her passion and vision have been invaluable, and working with her has been a delight.

Out of all the hundreds of stories published by Singaporean writers in 2017 and 2018, we narrowed the list down to just sixteen (63% of these authored by women); in contrast, we published twenty-six stories in *Volume Three*, twenty-four in *Volume Two*, and twenty in *Volume One*. As a result, *Volume Four* has a particular focus, one that rewards careful reading and attention. In addition,

we have made the decision to forgo an Honourable Mentions list this time, in order to concentrate more fully on the contents at hand. Both Pooja and I recommend seeking out additional work by all of the contributors gathered here.

...

The last two years have continued the trend of excellence in Epigram Books' fiction line. The English Fiction category of the 2018 Singapore Literature Prize was completely dominated by our titles (and if I can be permitted a small brag: I edited four out of the five finalists): *Sugarbread* by Balli Kaur Jaswal, *Regrettable Things That Happened Yesterday* by Jennani Durai, *State of Emergency* by Jeremy Tiang, *The Gatekeeper* by Nuraliah Norasid, and *Death of a Perm Sec* by Wong Souk Yee; *State of Emergency* took home the top prize. (In addition, former Epigram Books editor Melissa de Silva won the prize in the English Creative Non-Fiction category, for her mixed memoir '*Others' Is Not a Race*, published by Math Paper Press.)

The Singapore Book Awards, organised annually by the Singapore Book Publishers Association to recognise the best in book publishing, have also been a source of fruitful recognition for Epigram Books fiction. In 2017, *Now That It's Over* by O Thiam Chin won for Fiction (with a shortlist that included *Sugarbread* and *Let's Give It Up for Gimme Lao!* by Sebastian Sim), and *Inheritance* by Balli Kaur Jaswal and *Kappa Quartet* by Daryl Qilin Yam were finalists for Best Book Cover Design. In 2018, *The Gatekeeper* won both for Fiction (with a shortlist that included *State of Emergency* and *Lieutenant Kurosawa's Errand Boy* by Warran Kalasegaran) and for Best Book Cover Design (with a shortlist that included *Gull Between Heaven and Earth* by Boey Kim Cheng and *Once We*

*Were There* by Bernice Chauly). *Once We Were There* also won the inaugural Penang Monthly Book Prize, awarded at the 2017 George Town Literary Festival.

The annual Epigram Books Fiction Prize has remained a force for promoting contemporary creative writing and rewarding excellence in Singaporean literature: the 2017 winner was *The Riot Act* by Sebastian Sim, with a shortlist comprising *9th of August* by Andre Yeo, *Sofia and the Utopia Machine* by Judith Huang, and *Nimita's Place* by Akshita Nanda. The 2018 winner was *Impractical Uses of Cake* by Yeoh Jo-Ann, with a shortlist comprising *The Movie That No One Saw* by May Seah, *Beng Beng Revolution* by Lu Huiyi, and *The Lights That Find Us* by Anittha Thanabalan. The prize was reorganised thereafter in terms of schedule and scope (opening up to all of ASEAN), which meant skipping a year; the next winner will be announced in January 2020.

In March 2019, Huggs-Epigram Coffee Bookshop was opened on the ground floor of the Urban Redevelopment Authority Centre at Maxwell Road, specialising exclusively in books by Singaporean writers and published by Singaporean publishers. The 400-plus titles in stock are shelved face-out in the floor-to-ceiling eleven-metre-long bookshelf, showcasing colourful evidence of the vibrant health of Singaporean literature, with fiction titles occupying a full one-third of the space.

And finally, our London imprint continued to bring the finest in Singaporean and Southeast Asian literature to the UK and beyond. 2018 saw the UK releases of *The Widower* by Mohamed Latiff Mohamed and *The Tower* by Isa Kamari in January, *Once We Were There* in March, *Fox Fire Girl* by O Thiam Chin in May,

*Lieutenant Kurosawa's Errand Boy* in July, *A Certain Exposure* by Jolene Tan in September, and *Altered Straits* by Kevin Martens Wong in November. And for 2019, we released *Confrontation* by Mohamed Latiff Mohamed in January, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* by Sonny Liew and *Nimita's Place* by Akshita Nanda in March, *Love, Lies and Indomee* by Nuril Basri and *The Minorities* by Suffian Hakim in May, *Regrettable Things That Happened Yesterday* in July, and *The Last Immigrant* by Lau Siew Mei and *This Could Be Home* by Pico Iyer in September.

...

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, Marshall Cavendish, Math Paper Press, *The Adroit Journal*, *Asia Literary Review*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Sunday Express* (UK), *Pembroke Magazine* (UNC–Pembroke) and *We Are a Website*.

The pieces herein examine anxieties about technology and “progress”, the so-called permanence of societal institutions, challenges relating to friendship and loyalty, and the dissatisfaction that comes from unreasonable expectations (of self and others). A wholly unique reading experience awaits you, whether you partake in a comfortable chair at home, or among the throngs of humanity on public transport. It doesn't matter where or how you do so, only that you do so. So what are you waiting for?

## LIMASSOL, CYPRUS

BALLI KAUR JASWAL

**SHE HAD GIVEN** up hope of hearing from him but here was his name in her inbox, three weeks after their date. “Hello” said the subject line. “He-llooo,” she sang to the screen, as her excitement built. When she clicked, her heart sank.

“I am in Limassol, Cyprus and my bag containing my passport and wallet has been stolen. I need your assistance. Please let me know if you can help.”

It was an internet scam.

She knew about these viruses: a stranger breaking into people's accounts and taking advantage of their concerned friends.

Maybe she should write back: “Hi there. It appears that you've been hacked, or else you've landed in some dire circumstances indeed.” Was that gloating, though? She didn't want to seem pleased at his misfortune, be it hacking or robbery.

She opened another window and typed “Limassol, Cyprus” in a search engine. Images of tree-lined beaches formed a row at the top of the screen. She pictured him wearing sandals, his cheeks reddened by the sun. It was possible.

In one of their online chats on the dating website, he'd mentioned wanting to spend his retirement travelling. "Me too," she had written, and then deleted it because it wasn't true. He continued to fill the chat window with questions: "So what do you like to do in your free time? Hobbies? Projects? Passions?"

But what if the robbery had happened? She saw a tall glass on a café table. He leaned forwards to take a sip, blissfully unaware of the movements of the men behind him. They approached and one tried selling him some tourist souvenirs. "Sir, you'll like this one. I'll give you my best price." While he was busy batting away the vendor, the other one plucked his bag from the chair and dashed off. The vendor bolted in the other direction. She clicked through the images of pristine beaches and pictured those crooks escaping, toppling furniture and leaping over fences.

During their date, he had asked about hobbies again. "What do you do in your free time?" The truth was, she didn't know where her free time went. The internet was magical like that—you clicked on a salacious headline or two. Embedded in those articles were links to other stories, background information, similar incidents, so why not read those too?

Then there was the eternal roll through her Facebook page, that bottomless feed of pictures, articles and videos. A few hours passed easily before having to decide what to cook for lunch and more time melted away in the search for recipes, placing eBay bids for a second-hand air fryer. By the time she went to bed, there were dozens of tabs open, the promise of more entertainment tomorrow.

"I read a lot," she'd finally replied on the date, forgetting that he had been an English teacher.

The ensuing discussion about books had been fairly one-

sided. Throughout the evening, she noticed the shine in his eyes dimming and the conversation whittling to a polite silence. She vowed afterwards to become more engaged with the world, at least read global headlines, but the next day a machete-wielding madman was at large after attacking shoppers in a car park up the road, and in keeping abreast of hourly updates, her goal was quickly forgotten.

She opened a leftover tab from yesterday: a ninety-minute documentary about an investigation into a boy's disappearance in America. The video was buffering when a pop-up ad appeared: "Cheap flights to Limassol!"

She wouldn't normally click on an ad, but she wouldn't normally look up Limassol, Cyprus either. Several flights from Heathrow daily, and not as far away as she thought. But it was silly. Where would she stay? What would she do there? She knew nothing about Cyprus.

The documentary began. "Two years ago, a young couple woke up to find their son missing and no traces of forced entry. Imagine seeing your child's empty bed in the morning..." the narrator said grimly. She shook her head, tears already blurring her vision, when a flashing banner ad scrolled across the screen.

"Limassol half-price hotel deals! Book your getaway now!"

She squinted at the picture. Could the ocean really be that blue? She clicked. The resort's package included airport transfers, a buffet breakfast and spa vouchers for early bookings. She found herself navigating hotel review websites and making a mental shortlist of places.

Lunch brought her back to reality. "It was ridiculous," she thought as she washed lettuce leaves over the sink. Travelling solo

wasn't safe for women in places like that. If he might have been robbed, imagine what could happen to her?

She shuddered at the thought, bringing her plate to her desk, and continued the documentary.

"You don't expect something like this to happen in your own home," the child's father was saying. A wobbly home video showed the boy playing in his backyard. She realised she'd already seen most of this footage on a television series about unsolved crimes, but she continued watching. The day stretched before her, safe and uncomplicated. Only a few times, her gaze wandered to a picture she had left open: a woman at the ocean's edge, her arms outstretched to the world as if to say, "Here I am."

## THE TUNNEL

PATRICK SAGARAM

**THE YEAR BEFORE** we turned thirteen, Kevin and I wanted to be Crockett and Tubbs. We imagined cruising through the dark Miami night, streetlights sliding off the hood and hubcaps of our Daytona as "In the Air Tonight" menaced in the background. Wednesday nights we'd watch *Miami Vice* on Channel 5 and the next day, we'd be hunting criminals around our neighbourhood. Unlike other kids, we were latchkeys with no interest in dribbling a ball or flying a kite. So we stuck together, busting drug dealers on foot or tracking shady cartels on our bikes, speeding like demons on running tracks that roped our estate.

Kevin lived a few blocks away and attended a different school. That didn't stop us from meeting almost every afternoon. Before all this crime-fighting business, he'd take me to the open patch of land opposite our flats, both of us squinting, our hands cupped and ready to trap grasshoppers as blades of lalang scratched our thighs. When rain puddled the grass, Kevin would point out clusters of frog eggs to me. Days later, we would return with jam jars to see if tadpoles had squeezed their way out into the world.

Crockett and Tubbs changed everything. We dug the clothes, the cars and all things slick. On afternoons when the sun hung like a coin of flame in the sky, Kevin would meet me at the canal and we'd run sting operations under the footbridge, sprinting up and down its sloping walls, bullets of sweat sliding down our backs.

All this was good fun until Aunty Verghese, my neighbour living two doors down, spotted us and told my mother. My parents had warned me never to go there ever since a brother and sister drowned some years ago. I can still picture my mother in her housedress, screaming at me in front of people passing by and pulling me home by the ear. Later that evening when my father got home from work and got the news, he unbuckled his belt and lashed me behind the knees.

He worked long hours at the shipyard and was always tired and moody. My mother had her hands full at home. She was either pulling clothes out of the machine, labouring over the stove or keeping an eye on me, making sure I wasn't spending all my time daydreaming or sitting in front of the TV.

Our family rarely went out during the week, but on Sundays we'd attend morning Mass without fail. Afterwards we'd have breakfast at the coffee shop opposite the church, my father rushing through his meal and tapping his fingers on the table while my mother and I hurriedly mopped curry off our plates with prata.

For Kevin, it was just him and his mum. I knew better than to ask because everyone in our neighbourhood knew his father was out of the picture. Whenever I was over at his place, I never heard them really speak. If they did, it would be a one-way thing where she'd say something and he'd answer in a snort.

You should have seen her in those days: always in this pair of

ridiculous shorts, hitched up high enough you could see the curve of her ass. Always wore this one tank top, her nipples poking out of the cotton. She walked around with a lit cigarette between her fingers or dangling from her lips, smoke curling up her face. I could tell Kevin was embarrassed to be around her. And could you blame him?

Worse still: every now and then there'd be some man his mother brought home from the bar and they'd lock themselves in the bedroom. "Wrestling," he'd tell me with a wink. "They're wrestling." It took a while before I understood what he meant. He lost count of the times he caught his mother's flings sneaking out and fading down the corridor. Sometimes he'd see their faces and other times he didn't.

I was over at his place all the time. There'd be piles of clothing left on the furniture, a flowery ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts that sat on top of the TV. Decorative plants took up space in the living room. A crazy mess but homely, at least.

My parents didn't mind us hanging out. In fact, my father snapped a photo of us on our bikes, arms around each other. If they were uncomfortable about our friendship, they never mentioned anything. But my mum had a way of asking about his mum.

"How's Aunty Doris?" she said, letting lentils simmer in a pan.

"Like that," I said.

"See anything?"

"No, why?"

"It's nothing. Place still cluttered?"

"More potted plants. Cactus, this time."

My mum clanged a lid over the pan, mumbling something about Chinese people loving to hoard things at home. "Don't know how they live like that," she said in Tamil.

In my home, things had to be in their place. What I couldn't stand was the major cleaning on Saturday mornings when my father ran the vacuum cleaner and sucked everything out including sounds from the TV. He would make me drag a pail around the flat and wipe down all the doors and windows. Once, I rushed my chores as I was eager to get back to *Man from Atlantis*, just as he decided to spot check by running his fingers over the door frame. Because of my sloppiness he kept the TV unplugged for a week.

Kevin never lifted a finger around his house. He was a third of a metre taller than me and talked like a know-it-all, though he never went into detail about his father or the men who snuck in and out of his home. Still, you could always tell when one of them was getting serious with his mum because he'd ask me over to show off an action figure or a LEGO set. One time he unboxed a radio control replica of the Daytona. Like the real one, it was black with pop-up headlights. We took it to the void deck where I stood watching him make loops around a wall scrawled with graffiti of a cock and balls. "Just like Crockett's," Kevin said, thumbing the controls. He never let me touch it, though.

...

Kevin found the videos in a shoebox one afternoon when he was wandering around by himself. I was in my room racing through my homework when he rang. "You'll never guess what I found," he said. "Come over now."

All the girls in the film looked like nothing I'd seen before. Tons of freestyle hair permed and teased to perfection, eyes staring into our own through thick lashes and creamy breasts with veins

contouring the skin like lines on a map. The men in their mullets and striated muscles looked like characters in the comics I was reading. When I saw what they did to those girls in strange positions, I felt something inside of me implode.

But Kevin was ahead, fast-forwarding the VCR to the good bits. "That's almost the size of a fifty-cent coin," he said, pointing to a blonde with pink areolas before palming the screen in a grabbing motion.

"Hey," Kevin said, turning to me. "Look at those nehnehs!"

I could only nod because I couldn't find any words to express what I was seeing. Kevin rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"Damn suaku lah you," he said.

After a while he got up and disappeared into the toilet for a long time before I heard a flush of water. He stepped out, wiped his hands on my T-shirt.

"Where did you find the tapes?" I asked, eyes on the TV.

"At the tunnel," Kevin said.

"The tunnel?"

"Yup," he said. "It's close by. Near the market."

"Really?"

"You don't believe ah? I'd take you there if you weren't such a pussy."

I told him I wasn't a coward.

He grinned, raised his voice and said, "Yes you are."

Around this time he started to curse, picked up from what he had heard from the older boys playing football below our block or from one of his mother's boyfriends. Kevin started swearing in front of his mum to provoke her. When it appeared she couldn't care less, it made him so angry he turned on me, daring me to try it on my parents.

I'd rather die.

The one time I said "shit" after spilling Milo on my sleeves, my father walked up behind me, tapped me on the shoulder and timed his slap across the side of my face as I spun around. "Next time," he said in Tamil, waving a finger, "I'll cut your tongue out." In atonement, I had to kneel in front of the family altar and recite a decade of the rosary. Between Hail Marys, the fantasy of trading places with Kevin crossed my mind. No one turning off the TV, sending me to bed early or yelling at me to take my feet off the sofa. I could do whatever I wanted and I didn't see anything wrong with that.

...

"Oi," Kevin said. "Do you have money left?"

We were at the hawker centre, sipping Coca-Cola, taking a break from cycling, both of us sitting under a hard whipping fan, sticky with dust from the pavements and grease from the stalls.

"No," I said.

He clucked his tongue. "I want to get some gum," he said. "Stick the tattoo on my arm."

"Go back and take," I said.

"Nah, waste time only," he said. "I've got an idea."

The plan was simple. Cycle to the provision shop, the one with the sleepy old lady sitting upfront fanning herself. It was by the corner of the market near the fruit and vegetable sellers where there weren't many people around in the afternoon. She put everything out in front. Sweets, crackers and jam biscuits. One of us had to get off the bike and distract her by asking for the price of the plastic ball hanging overhead in its netting. The other

would ride past and scoot off with the loot. But who was going to do what?

I had my doubts.

"If we get caught, she'll call the police."

"You stupid or what?" Kevin said. "They'll just tell your parents."

I was wondering which was worse.

"Easy for you to say," I told him. "You have no clue what my father will do to me."

"Don't be a pussy."

"I'm not."

"Prove it," he said, balling his hand into a fist, calling lom-cham-pass. "Loser gets on the bike."

I lost.

I watched as he cycled up and idled around the shop for a while. He got off and started talking to the lady, pointing to the ball. Then he glanced at me, our eyes locking.

I began to pedal.

Later, as I waited for him, it felt as if my heart would burst out of my chest.

"Did you get it?" he asked, cycling towards me.

Opening my hand, I showed him the packets of gum. On the wrapper, one had a cartoon of an Aztec impaling a cactus with a spear. I passed everything to him and watched as he unwrapped a stick, popped it in his mouth and started chewing.

"Here," he said. "Take one."

I dropped to my knee, shook my head. I felt like throwing up.

"Hey," he said, landing a whack on the back of my head. "Relax lah. Come, let's go."

"Where?" I asked looking up.

"Just follow me."

He took me to the tunnel where he'd found those videotapes. It was about a klick from the market near the point blocks. We accessed it from a tributary drain and splashed about ankle deep in syrupy brown water for some time before coming to an open area shielded by overgrown vegetation. There was an old mattress and a guitar with two strings. T-shirts hung from a pole jammed between cracks in the walls. Water jetted from a hole in the wall, overflowing into a dirty pail.

"Eww, disgusting," Kevin said.

"What?" I said.

"Condoms," he said, stepping sideways.

"Condoms?" I said.

Kevin laughed, signalling he knew something I didn't.

...

From chasing make-believe criminals, we became criminally advanced. Afternoons we spent at the stationary store gliding past the aisles and stuffing our pockets with flag erasers, mechanical pencils and Matchbox cars. Once I stole torch lights just because I could. When someone looked my way, I'd put on my earnest face pretending to look for something I needed for school. Kevin was always cool, lifting things right under everyone's noses. Sometimes on his way out he would stop and make small talk with the uncle sitting at the cashier while I waited outside, trying not to shit my pants.

My parents never suspected a thing.

Did I feel bad? Sure I did. But it wasn't guilt on Sunday morning during Mass. More like a hollowness in my gut when I watched

Crockett and Tubbs infiltrate a violent gang or foil some shady arms deal. Deep down, I knew no one stays smooth forever.

One day at the 7-Eleven, we got careless. I'd just stepped outside, my schoolbag stuffed with packets of Cheezles and Twisties. But the store lady stopped Kevin. Through the glass door, I saw him comply, his hand reaching for his bag. Next thing I knew, he took a swing at her. She hit the floor, face flat on the white tiles. Kevin stepped over her, pushed open the door and ran past me.

He headed for the tunnel. I followed.

...

Kevin knew something wasn't right but I saw the triangular piece of glass protruding from his shoe, as both of us crouched in the tributary drain. It was stuck between his toes, the blood forming tiny archipelagos against his white shoes. He didn't make a sound but I could tell he was in pain from his face.

"I can't move my foot," Kevin said. "It's gone all the way in."

"How deep?" I said.

"I don't know."

"Take off your shoe, let me see."

"I can't lah. It's stuck in between, stupid."

"Keep your voice down," I said, realising things had just taken a turn for the worse. "They must have called the police by now."

"They'll never find us here," he said. As he ran a finger over the wound, his jaw muscles tightened, the chords on his neck pulled tight.

"Why did you have to hit her?"

He kept quiet. His voice shaking, he said, "You'll have to pull it out."

"Maybe I should get help," I said.

"And leave me here all by myself?" he said, grabbing my hand, the bones in our fingers touching. "No way."

"C'mon, Kev."

"Do it," he said, stretching out his leg over my lap, determined.

"Okay, okay."

I pinched the piece of glass between my thumb and forefinger, holding down on his ankle with my other hand. He bit down on his lip; eyes clamped shut, borders of perspiration lining his forehead. I puffed my cheeks and pulled with one quick movement. It was so fast, he reacted with surprise until the blood started and the pain hit.

I shoved my palm on his mouth, muffling screams into whimpers. Then he stopped, exhausted. I removed his shoe.

"It's a deep cut," I said. "Put your finger on it. Stop the bleeding."

He made a slow wheezing noise as he took off his sock, all covered in blood.

After a while, I suggested we leave.

"Not yet," he said, sniffing back tears. "Let's wait a little longer. I need to rest."

"It's getting late," I said. "You know my mum, right."

"Just tell her the truth."

"What?"

"About my little accident."

"Oh."

"You know," he sighed, shaking his head and shrugging on his schoolbag. "Sometimes you're such a blur block."

He limped towards the open area.

Years later and I still can't think of a reason why I never ran

a common sense check at that moment. Why I went along with him, foolishly.

We heard the sounds when we approached our spot. A long drawn-out sigh, like a cry in reverse. It was my first time seeing men kiss. They were on the mattress, a mangle of mostly bare bodies. I remember looking at their faces, their expressions of agony. It didn't occur to me that the experience could be painful. A metre away water trickled into the pail. One of them ran his hand down the other's belly unbuttoning his jeans and pulling the zipper all the way down before letting the cloth flap open, hanging out like wings.

It wasn't long before one of them caught sight of us. Our eyes locked and he pulled away. But when they saw us they relaxed. One of them pinched the other's buttocks and got up. He was skinny with hair collected in a ponytail. He didn't bother covering up. Kevin held on to my shoulder, hobbling on one foot.

"What are you staring at?" he said.

"We weren't staring," Kevin said. "We didn't see anything."

"You heard that, Zuk?" he said, approaching us. "He says he didn't see anything."

"Liar," Zuk said, stretching out on the mattress, yawning. He lay there supporting his head with his arm, watching us.

"He's hurt," I said pointing to Kevin's foot.

"Poor thing," he said, making a cooing sound. Turning to his friend, he asked, "Maybe I take a look, eh?"

Zuk nodded assent, started whistling.

Kevin began crying softly.

I took off running.

I was already down the tunnel nearing the tributary drain, my

clothes and shoes soaked and stinking from slipping twice. By the time I crawled out, the sky had purpled down and mynahs squawked on trees in protest. I vomited on the pavement, threads of saliva hanging from my mouth. Along the running track nearby, people passing by threw glances at me.

Back home, my mother's voice cut across the living room. "Where were you?" she shrieked as I tracked grime all over the floor, stammering something about getting into a fight. Good thing my father was working the night shift because there was no telling what he would have done. I went into the bathroom, took off all my clothes, turned on the shower and ran it blazing hot, but still couldn't keep from shivering.

After that day, I kept my distance from Kevin. When I got home from school, I'd be in my room finishing homework or studying. I killed free time reading, having stopped watching TV altogether. I was afraid to leave the house. When my mother asked me to run errands at the market, I'd find some excuse not to go or make it a fast trip. Every time a shop owner paused too long when returning change, my stomach churned.

...

Months passed. One Sunday before Mass, I decided to come clean to the priest. I told my parents I needed the washroom but I ducked into the confessional box. Inside, I crossed myself and folded my hands together, saying, "Bless me, Father."

It was all I could manage. I waited for the truth to come out of me, but it wouldn't.

"You seem to be having trouble," said the priest, his voice on the other end so deep and scratchy.

"Yes, Father."

"Have you given this a lot of thought?"

I told him I had.

From the wicker mesh, I could hear his breath coming out in wisps, his patience wearing thin. Leaning closer, I whispered, "I deserted a friend."

He remained silent for a moment and then said, "Did you make good with him?"

"No."

"Then I pray you have the courage to do so."

The priest gave me my penance. As I pressed my palm against the door of the confessional box, he said, "What's life without friendship?"

It's not that I didn't try. Except that I couldn't track him down. It was as if he had completely vanished.

...

"Did I tell you?" said my mum, standing by the kitchen sink scooping onion skins into the bin. "I saw Kevin the other day."

Sitting at the dining table, I paused and looked up from my equations. Realising who she was talking about, I said, "Really? How is he?"

"He seems okay. He asked about you."

"What did you say?"

"Told him to come over, pay us a visit."

"What?" I said, terrified of the thought of seeing him in my home.

"He was in a rush," my mum went on, bent close, knife in hand as she trimmed the strips of fat from a slab of mutton. "Lives with his grandmother now, you know. Comes to see his mum

Her message was brief. She thanked us for our hospitality, and was sorry her people could not stay longer. She praised the beauty of our land and our traditions, citing a story found in several of our holy books. Once, two strangers arrived at the gates of a city. They were taken in by an alderman, who offered them protection from an unruly mob, and would have sacrificed even his children for their sake. His actions were wise, for those travellers were angels, and his people were thereby blessed.

“The name of that city was Sodom,” she said. “But we are no angels, or else not anymore. We are the fallen. We cannot demand such a privilege. It is our lot to be outcasts.”

She stepped down into the crowd, her form dissolving into the mist of foreign shapes that filled the room. As one, they bowed their heads, united in mourning and in anticipation, for their transport had come.

The haze descended again that night. We heaved a sigh of relief as it took its passengers.

It has not lifted since.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**SHREYA ACHARYA** is a recent graduate from Nanyang Technological University, where she read English Literature. She crafted her first poem when she was four, and has been in love with writing ever since; her ideal day sees her inhaling fiction in worn-out pyjamas. Her writing has appeared in *Asian Geographic*, as well as *International Powerlifting Federation (IPF) Magazine*, where she has combined her love for the sport and the written word. Pasir Ris Street 51 is Shreya’s favourite place in the world, and she thinks it should attain landmark status. “Wings for Marie” is original to this volume.

**NIDHI ARORA** is a business consultant by training and writer by passion. Her work has been published in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Litro*, *Thrice Fiction*, *Open Road Review*, *Out of Print* and other international online and print publications. Born and raised in India, and having spent over a decade in Singapore, she now lives in London with her family. “Love in Singapore” was originally published in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* vol. 16, no. 3 (Jul 2017), <http://www.qlrs.com/story.asp?id=1359>.

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PATRICK SAGARAM • RACHEL HENG • SHREYA ACHARYA  
VICTOR FERNANDO R. OCAMPO • ZHU YUAN LAURA**

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