

THE EPIGRAM BOOKS COLLECTION OF

**BEST NEW  
SINGAPOREAN  
SHORT  
STORIES  
VOLUME FIVE**

EDITED BY

**BALLI KAUR JASWAL**

SERIES EDITOR: JASON ERIK LUNDBERG

**“If you’ve never read Singaporean literature, this would be a good place to start. If *Crazy Rich Asians* was the last thing you read by a local author, even better. The authors’ names might fly under the radar, but their voices are all too familiar—they’re the voices of our neighbours, our colleagues and our loved ones. And occasionally, they sound a lot like our own.”**

*–Wonderwall.sg*

**“Showcases the best in contemporary Singaporean writing now, with a diverse multitude of local voices that tackle their subjects with tooth and claw, flair and finesse.”**

*–Singapore Unbound*

# BEST NEW SINGAPOREAN SHORT STORIES VOLUME FIVE

**EDITED BY BALLI KAUR JASWAL**  
SERIES EDITOR: JASON ERIK LUNDBERG

Copyright © 2021 by Epigram Books  
All works copyright © 2021 by their respective authors

Published in Singapore by Epigram Books  
www.epigram.sg

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publisher.

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Jaswal, Balli Kaur, 1983–, guest editor.  
Lundberg, Jason Erik, 1975–, series editor.  
Title: The Epigram books collection of best new Singaporean short stories. Volume five / edited by Balli Kaur Jaswal ; series editor: Jason Erik Lundberg.  
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2021.  
Identifier(s): ISBN 978-981-4901-14-7 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-981-4901-15-4 (ebook)  
Subject(s): LCSH: Short stories, Singaporean (English)  
Classification: DDC S823—dc23

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First edition, October 2021.

# CONTENTS

<b>PREFACE</b> BALLI KAUR JASWAL 1	<b>WHO'S YOUR DADDY? / SIAPA BAPAK KAU?</b> SUFFIAN HAKIM 127
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> JASON ERIK LUNDBERG 5	<b>A MINOR KALAHARI</b> DIANA RAHIM 131
<b>HARIHARA</b> CYRIL WONG 11	<b>XINGZHOU</b> NG YI-SHENG 143
<b>FISH</b> ASHISH XIANGYI KUMAR 25	<b>SACRED SCALP</b> ANITTHA THANABALAN 163
<b>THE PRAYER MAT</b> WISHA JAMAL 43	<b>BUDDHA WAS AN ARIES</b> ADELINE CHIA 169
<b>THE VISIT</b> JON GRESHAM 51	<b>A TRIP TO THE BEACH</b> BARRIE SHERWOOD 189
<b>FLING</b> JAYASHREE PANICKER 69	<b>THE KAPRE</b> PATRICIA KARUNUNGAN 205
<b>TO ASHES</b> WAYNE RÉE 85	<b>THE BEST OF TIMES</b> SAMANTHA TOH 227
<b>THE PANASONIC</b> PRASANTHI RAM 95	<b>THE UNSULLIED TONGUE OF SAINT ANTHONY</b> ARIN ALCYIA FONG 245
<b>THE PRISONER</b> YU-MEI BALASINGAMCHOW 101	<b>CONTRIBUTORS</b> 267

## PREFACE

BALLI KAUR JASWAL

**YEARS AGO**, I signed up for a fiction writing workshop with an author who was a master of the short story form. I had dutifully read his latest book and I was prepared to learn the secrets of narrative. Fiction mystified me. I knew how to appreciate a good story, but what did it take to write one? For our inaugural class, the author held one-on-one meetings so he could get to know each of his students. When it was my turn to walk into his office, he was looking out the window, preoccupied with the view of a possum gasping its final breaths on the thick branch of an oak tree. We talked briefly, but our attention kept wandering back to the possum. At the end of the session, he noticed my open notebook and said, “You can close that now. You’ve done your day’s work.” I stared at the blank page; I hadn’t written in it. I hadn’t done a thing except watch an old possum die in a tree.

I find myself thinking about this idea of “doing a day’s work” when I write. I can’t measure what a “day’s work” is, exactly, but I recognise the threshold when I approach it. Sometimes it’s a page of a scene, sometimes it’s a few meaningful lines of dialogue.

Sometimes it's looking out of a window and paying witness to a moment so closely that the rest of the world falls away, and you are on a trajectory you could just as easily have missed.

What are short stories supposed to do? How do they work exactly? It's a small miracle that any story is told, and yet storytelling is innate to human beings. Cavemen created narratives through pictures to warn each other of impending danger. For centuries, folk songs and morality tales guided the norms of human society. In modern life, we continue to tell stories when facts and numbers fall short of conveying the dizzying depths and infuriating paradoxes of human experience. As I read and selected the pieces for this volume of *Best New Singaporean Short Stories*, I was drawn to the power of those electric moments that pass from writer to reader. Give it a technical narrative term like voice or climax, or credit some divine, crackling alchemy if you like—the point is that each work in this anthology shows a fundamental understanding about writing: *a story is a promise*.

As I write this in August 2021, the world is reeling and only slowly recovering from a pandemic. Add that to the list of twenty-first century woes—climate change, overpopulation, unending wars—and there are many reasons to wonder if survival is in the cards for humanity. Existence feels fragile, if not futile, and one need only look at the number of lives lost and the daily news headlines to admit that we're all in a rocking boat.

If that sounds too fatalistic, let me offer the following short stories as an antidote of sorts. Are they hopeful? Some, perhaps, but I certainly wouldn't use that term to describe all of them. These stories take on some big and bold themes that will feel familiar to any discerning reader: tensions between parents and

their children, the ripple effects of authoritarianism, our longing to understand our traditions and heritage, casual and not-so-casual racism. The authors invite us to pay close attention.

To read fiction is to suspend your notions of what should be, and simply reside in these narratives as they are. These stories carry the weight of our turbulent times without offering easy answers or indictments; instead they say: remember we are all trying to survive.

## INTRODUCTION

JASON ERIK LUNDBERG

**WELCOME TO THE** fifth instalment in our *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* anthology series. Once again, we have a rotating guest editor curating the contents and shape of this new book: internationally acclaimed novelist Balli Kaur Jaswal. She has risen beautifully to the task of finding many stories by lesser-known writers, as well as some familiar faces, and doing so in the midst of a global pandemic. Her laser focus and her generous spirit have resulted in a compelling assemblage of fiction that will both delight and unnerve you.

Out of all the hundreds of stories published by Singaporean writers in 2019 and 2020, we narrowed the list down to just seventeen (59% of these authored by women). Both Balli 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 finalists for the expanded English

Fiction category of the 2020 Singapore Literature Prize were a more diverse grouping this time (after being totally dominated by our titles in 2018): *Lion City* by Ng Yi-Sheng and *Nimita's Place* by Akshita Nanda (both edited by me), alongside *Bury What We Cannot Take* by Kirstin Chen, *How We Disappeared* by Lee Jing-Jing, *Delayed Rays of a Star* by Amanda Lee Koe and *Modern Myths* by Clara Chow (all of whom have been published by Epigram Books in some form or fashion, either in book form, or as contributors to previous volumes of this very series or issues of *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction*). To our amazement and gratification, the prize was split between two books, *Lion City* and *Nimita's Place*! Many congratulations again to Yi-Sheng and Akshita.

The Singapore Book Awards, organised annually by the Singapore Book Publishers Association to recognise the best in book publishing, have also once again been a source of fruitful recognition for Epigram Books fiction. In 2019, *Lion City* by Ng Yi-Sheng won for Best Literary Work (with a shortlist that included *The Riot Act* by Sebastian Sim and *Nimita's Place*). In 2020, *The Angel Tiger* by Barrie Sherwood won for Best Book Cover Design, and *Impractical Uses of Cake* by Yeoh Jo-Ann was a finalist for Best Literary Work and Best Book Cover Design.

The annual Epigram Books Fiction Prize has remained a force for promoting contemporary creative writing and rewarding excellence in regional literature; originally restricted to Singaporean citizens, permanent residents and Singapore-born writers, the EBFPP opened in 2020 to all of Southeast Asia for novels written in or translated into the English language. We also shifted our award ceremony and production schedule so that now

the winner is announced in January, and it and the other finalists are published later the same year. The 2020 winner was *How the Man in Green Saved Pahang*, and *Possibly the World* by Joshua Kam, with a shortlist comprising *The Java Enigma* by Erni Salleh, *A Good True Thai* by Sunisa Manning (already in its second printing) and *The Fisherman King* by Kathrina Mohd Daud. 2021 saw two co-winners, *And the Award Goes to Sally Bong!* by Sebastian Sim and *The Formidable Miss Cassidy* by Meihan Boey, with a shortlist comprising *Kopi, Puffs & Dreams* by Pallavi Gopinath Aney, *The Punkhawala and the Prostitute* by Wesley Leon Aroozoo, *Blue Sky Mansion* by HY Yeang and *Lovelier, Lonelier* by Daryl Qilin Yam.

The Covid-19 pandemic put a big hurt on Huggs-Epigram Coffee Bookshop—the only bookstore in Singapore specialising exclusively in books by Singaporean writers and released by Singaporean publishers—as it did to so many retail outlets nationwide, with the result that the location on Maxwell Road had to shutter its business at the beginning of August 2021. It was terribly disappointing for all of us. But thankfully, by the middle of that same month, The Lo & Behold Group kindly offered their Looksee Looksee space on Beach Road for us to host a pop-up store until January 2022; it was a wonderfully generous move that has enabled us to continue selling books out of a brick-and-mortar shop space. Epigram Bookshop also saw an uptick in online sales when people could not leave their houses to buy books, which levelled back off again after the vaccines became widely adopted.

On a personal note, three of my own works of fiction were released by Epigram Books in 2019 and 2020—all edited by my former colleague, Eldes Tran—and I am very proud to see them out in the world: *Diary of One Who Disappeared* (a novella supported by



a Creation Grant from the National Arts Council), *Most Excellent and Lamentable* (a “best of” short story collection), and *A Fickle and Restless Weapon* (my first novel, started fifteen years earlier).

Our London imprint released ten titles into the UK market in 2020: *If It Were Up to Mrs Dada* by Carissa Foo and *Impractical Uses of Cake* by Yeoh Jo-Ann in April, *Marriage and Mutton Curry* by M. Shanmughalingam in May, *Annabelle Thong* by Imran Hashim and *This is Where I Won't Be Alone* by Inez Tan in June, *It Never Rains on National Day* by Jeremy Tiang in July, *Best Singaporean Short Stories 1* edited by yours truly (drawing in part from the four previous volumes of this series) and *Timothy and the Phubbers* by Ken Kwek in August, *Diary of One Who Disappeared* by your humble introducer in September, and *The Angel Tiger* by Barrie Sherwood in October. Very sadly, in January 2021, the decision was made to close down the London imprint so as to focus more on our production in Singapore; thirty-three releases over four years was a remarkable run for a publisher largely unknown in the UK, and we are taking the lessons learned during that time to move forward.

...

It is extraordinary to me that this series has now progressed to five volumes. I first pitched the idea of *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* shortly after I was hired by Edmund Wee in September 2012, with the hope that these biennial volumes would find an audience. And not only have they done so in spades (with the first three books now sold out), but they have become the standard bearer for high-quality short fiction in Singapore. Various volumes have been adopted as university set texts, and

examined in peer-reviewed academic articles.

And so I want to give sincere thanks to anyone who has picked up an instalment of this anthology series (including this one!); you have helped us establish it is an important facet of Singaporean literature, and encouraged us to continue with subsequent volumes in the future.

So, what comes next should be familiar by now. Find a comfortable seat with good lighting, perhaps your preferred beverage at your elbow, take a deep breath, open your mind and turn the page.

## HARIHARA

CYRIL WONG

**BURNT-UMBER NUGGETS OF** her toes, browning terrazzo, ochre edges of table legs—these did and did not belong to her, all at the same time. They were merging, becoming one and the same, continuous surface.

This had happened once before.

The longer Sumitra stayed with this steady blurring of divisions, the more reality opened itself up like a slow-motion sequence of matryoshka doll dreams; dreams nesting inside each other; each dream flowering to reveal that other dream within; until the overall blurring was an undeniable singularity, a tremendous truth.

Sumitra was not going crazy.

Maybe it was because she was grieving, but she was also calm and sober; she had not imbibed a drop of alcohol for many years, due to liver issues. She still behaved like a normal person (as normal as one could be in such moments), as visitors drifted into the flat to see Vinita laid out in her coffin in the middle of the living room floor in their cramped flat.

Not *their* any more: it was really just Sumitra's flat now.

So, yes, grieving was probably a major part of the cause. Sumitra would be left alone in this flat in Singapore with its ceiling fans that squealed on warmer nights, its ageing furniture both of them had kept promising to replace, the bed they had shared that Vinita, aged seventy-two, declined to get up from one morning, her heart stopped. (To go in your sleep, wasn't that everyone's preferred mode of departure?)

Flowers scattered over Vinita's body glared with a garish beauty. Embalmers had done a wonderful job with her make-up; Vinita looked ten years younger. Her reddened lips glistened, hovering on the brink of a smile. Because she had died while asleep, there was no need to glue the eyes shut. Sumitra wondered if the embalmers had glued them anyway, as a precaution. She didn't dare press a finger against Vinita's lids to check if they could still open.

More visitors hunkered down to hug Sumitra, who had been sitting next to her wife on the floor for hours. Each also knelt politely beside her to observe Vinita for a few moments; in passing, unspoken communion.

Some standing around whispered that Sumitra had never stopped crying. But Sumitra knew not all the tears were for Vinita. She would not be able to prove it, but Sumitra was crying for other reasons as well. A huge part of her wanted everyone in the room to know exactly *why* she was crying. Yet what she experienced was not describable, which was the problem. The paradox.

Was it, ultimately, a problem, though?

Sumitra was feeling happiness, such happiness she wished all the mourners might discover. For to know such happiness would be to know death did not have to be a misery; that death did not need to be, well, *death*.

Death was not the end. She was crying because it was not the end. How to illustrate this openly here without anyone misunderstanding?

How to prove what death really *was*?

...

Sumi-tra and Vini-ta, the "rhyming lesbians" (Vinita's bad joke from their first few dates).

So long ago, Sumitra had been the stereotypically "butch" one, while Vinita was regarded as more "femme". Age rapidly erased that dichotomy. Plump, affectionate "aunties" who happened to sleep together—that was how Sumitra had once confessed to seeing themselves.

Sumitra closed her eyes now, and in the darkness of her mind, she saw a helicoid spark growing into a freewheeling tarantula of light that was maybe the self in renewed formation, or whatever the self might look like without the body; whatever the soul might actually *be*. And the light it was made from was the same light in everything else; in every body; even inside every object.

Somebody was touching her arm. Sumitra opened her eyes abruptly. She recognised the person kneeling before her as a colleague from work from long before she had retired. Wen Jie (or some other Chinese name) was smiling, embarrassed; eyes wide with an almost strained and artificial sense of sympathy. "So sorry for your loss," he was trying to say. Had he been one of those people who gossiped about Vinita and her at work? Was he no longer homophobic? Was he now repentant, even a little guilty? Or had he always been an ally, a potential friend? It no longer mattered.

How to tell him, anyway, that she wasn't simply sad, at least not in the way that everyone here believed? That she was even fine with Vinita's passing? That her tears and her silence were not just signifiers of sadness, but of something more encompassing?

How could she prove this without sounding like a crazy woman in grief? How could she show everyone kneeling or standing around, sucking up all the oxygen in her flat, that she was actually happy too?

Ecstatic, even. Even as sadness was still a jagged part of the ineffable equation.

After Wen Jie embraced her awkwardly and stood up to move away, Sumitra reached out for Vinita's body in the coffin; not because she wanted to feel connected one last time with her partner of thirty years, but because she wanted to adjust a wrinkle in the white sari she had chosen for Vinita's "send-off".

Upon this intimacy, Sumitra felt a sharpened oneness with the corpse beyond the physical; starting from a tingling sensation to a spatial expansion and overwhelming connectedness that brought even more tears to her eyes.

Those watching her reach inside the coffin were moved to fresh tears themselves. This is real love, a few must have thought.

Sumitra was not thinking about love; at least not romantic love, even as such love was surely a part of it. Time was still, and when time stood still, reality was no longer divisible between one body and the next; between this and that, then and now, now—and what was to come.

The coffin was Sumitra. Vinita was Sumitra. Those flowers scattered in a pleasing pattern over Vinita's body were Sumitra. A fly having perched on a sunny petal and about to float off was

Sumitra. The people standing around, looming too close behind her at times, some wringing their hands uneasily at the sight of Sumitra's sudden gesture, were also her.

A desperate part of Sumitra wanted to announce loudly what she was experiencing. But how to prove that it was not a mere dimension of grief, even of impending insanity? Sumitra *was* past seventy, after all; mental impairment was always a possibility.

*I am not crazy*, Sumitra insisted to herself, amidst an unspeakable sense of expansiveness. *I am just* here.

...

After the cremation, after the last of the occasional visitors (mostly relatives of either Vinita or Sumitra) worried that Sumitra would not be able to tolerate being alone post-tragedy, after packing most of Vinita's things in boxes and donating them to the Salvation Army...

Sumitra is sitting naked in the centre of the living room, where Vinita's coffin had been placed not very long ago. Sumitra has not gone crazy (this time, nobody is around for her to feel the need to prove this). It is a warm afternoon, after all. All wrinkly skin and unwieldy breasts, the cool floor sharing its coolness with her through her spreading buttocks, Sumitra sits, eyes half-closed, the fan humming indifferently overhead.

After everything that has happened, being naked somehow makes sense. It feels far more real, more honest. The ease with which skin may merge with warmth and air...

She is not meditating. Or maybe she is, but, really, she is recollecting what happened on the day of the wake. She is realising what had led to that experience of expansiveness beside the coffin.

A week before Vinita's passing, they had made a trip to Karnataka for the first time. India was not one of their favourite tourist destinations (too hectic and crowded, they always thought; they were nearly geriatrics, after all), but this year they decided to go.

They stumbled upon Harihareshwara Temple in Harihar. The temple was constructed in a staggered, squarish mantapa (meaning "hall", according to their youthful and energetic male guide) style, its outer walls receding one behind the other in a series of projections and recesses. There was also a parapet on which carved pillars supported corniced ends of the roof. The ceiling inside was adorned by lotuses and supported by fuller, rounded pillars.

Inside the temple's sanctum, they encountered a looming, vibrantly dark-faced and silver-gilded statue of the deity Harihara, a fusion of the gods Vishnu and Shiva.

According to Hindu mythology, a demon successfully appeased the god Brahma, through penance and gained power, such that it would be impossible for either Hari (Vishnu) or Hara (Shiva) to destroy him. Drunk on his power, the demon became a vindictive and regular tormentor of gods and humans alike.

In order to overcome him, Vishnu and Shiva fused (perhaps homoerotically) to form Harihara. As one, they descended to earth and vanquished the demon.

Sumitra remembers Vinita staring up at the statue. Her hair was particularly curly and livelier in South India, due to the different humidity (Sumitra's own hair remained stubbornly flatter, thinner, greyer), hiding much of the awe (Sumitra assumed it was awe) on her face.

Sumitra remembers Vinita reaching out for her hand, as if unconsciously. They held hands with nobody watching them; in front of Harihara, a unity denoting (some say) different aspects of a supreme truth. For the first time, Sumitra felt a tingling sensation passing through her body (or, she liked to think, through *both* their bodies).

Maybe the tingling was love, or it started out as love, but it soon became altogether more (at the wake, not so long later, grief would be the catalyst leading to Sumitra's transcendence). The statue of Harihara did not change its expression, but Sumitra could almost feel its acknowledgement, an emanation of approval.

...

By the time Vinita and Sumitra first fell in love, decades ago, before their time in India, they had already left their disapproving parents' homes, their families' religious and conservative small-mindedness; homosexual runaways with similar sadnesses and unresolved burdens, working and meeting at the same travel agency after graduating from university.

Followed by casual flirtations in the office; surviving the gossip swirling around their deepening intimacy; daily dinner dates and sexual relations over the weekends; promises to find a home together; then waking up together, at last, in the same bed every morning as partners.

A romance that thrived against predictable odds.

The collateral splendour of that predictability.

Standing before Harihara in India, Vinita turned towards Sumitra, hair shifting to reveal her face, a settling of emotion in the eyes, the gravity of a widening smile.

Vinita and Sumitra. A rhyming love. Two elderly women clutching each other.

Older, wiser, more knowing. Knowledge spreading through them both to include a benediction—but from what? God? Brahma? Parinirvana?

What proof did Sumitra have that *both* had experienced the same thing?

Neither had ever been religious.

(No, not religious: *spiritual*.)

So why now?

“Baby, do you feel that?” Who spoke? Was it Vinita? Or had Sumitra asked the question, one hand grabbing tighter the other’s hand?

The other woman nodded.

Love was a gateway. Being with Vinita. Being with each other. And standing before Harihara.

A blessing and a miracle. Vinita felt it; Sumitra is certain. From tingling to that merging—the *marrying*, the loss of differentiation...

The very thing that happened during the wake in the midst of grief.

(A consciousness of every *separate* thing, but also *everything*...)

Sumitra fully closes her eyes in her living room now, and she knows what happened during the wake is not a fluke. She is here and not here again. She is everywhere: the persistent fan, the floor pressing into her bottom like a mother’s palm, the mynah fluttering and falling now outside the kitchen window—

Vinita’s face appears in her mind. The urge to weep creeps up on Sumitra, but she does not push it away. Instead, the urge passes, and in her mind, Vinita (a younger Vinita, for some reason; darker hair, a steadier voice; beautiful, girlish Vinita; eternally girlish, at whatever age) is speaking: “You don’t have to do this, you know...

Baby, I love you, you know I love you... We’ll never miss each other. We are each other. Old bitches and Siamese twins, dead or alive...baby, baby...”

Sumitra, speaking without speaking, in response: “I’m not sad. But I want to go; I just want to find a way to go...”

“Do what you feel is right.”

...

Sumitra is no longer naked. She is wearing a casual silk dress that Vinita bought for her birthday some years ago; fading blue with white prints of falling leaves. “The sexy, recently widowed, single-again retiree.” How Vinita would have described her. It is a different morning.

A moth has landed on the living room wall. Vinita would have swiped it away with a broom or a rolled-up newspaper.

Sumitra does not chase it away.

From inside the coffin, that day of the wake, if Vinita had opened her eyes, miraculously, she would have seen that moth if it had landed on that exact same spot on the wall.

Past and present are leaning into each other’s arms.

Some say that the spirit stays inside the body for many days after death. Hindus cremate quickly in order to free the spirit. So maybe Vinita’s spirit is here now, with Sumitra. Sumitra thinks: *Not with, but in*.

Maybe that is why Sumitra feels no loneliness, despite missing her late wife (her smells, her hairs in the sink, her clothes in the cupboard) every other moment of the day.

There is no contradiction. Sumitra is even smiling as she does her chores today: wiping emptier shelves, mopping the floor,

dropping laundry into the washing machine and barely filling it. She considers doing laundry once every two weeks from then on, to save water, since now she only has her own clothes to wash.

When an elderly, willowy pair of male Jehovah's Witnesses knock on her front door to evangelise about the "end times" and "how to prepare for God's judgement", she refrains from raising her voice at them like she used to, when Vinita was still alive. Instead, she laughs in their faces, and laughs so hard, her laughter unsettles the two Chinese gentlemen, and they leave hastily to harass neighbours a few doors down along the same HDB corridor.

Sumitra thinks Vinita would have remarked, upon seeing these men: "They look so repressed, so dried up—and so *gay!*"

...

It has been a year since the wake. Since Vinita's passing.

Sumitra is in Karnataka again. It will be her last time.

She is at the entrance of Harihareshwara.

Thinner, slower (not a result of weariness but a deeper, psychological gravity), and—Vinita would say—more stunningly handsome than ever, especially with that recently cropped hair, prominent grey strands clustering to compose a silvery flame along her fringe.

It has taken a year to get here because Sumitra has spent months packing and selling or giving personal items away. Sumitra's flat now stands empty, except for its furniture.

Sumitra even "forgot" to lock the front door behind her before heading to the airport. She has come to India on a one-way ticket with a small satchel instead of a suitcase. She does not intend to return.

"Hurry, Hari-hara, come to me," she kept muttering on the plane, as if intoning a mantra; deliberately messing up the lyrics, yet keeping to the rhythm of a melody from that chorus of a half-remembered Paula Abdul love song; out loud so fellow passengers in Business Class suspected she might be senile.

And now she is here, stepping into the cool shadows inside the temple, then ambling quietly and reverently to the inner sanctum. This time, she will prove, once and for all, at least to herself, that a joyful interconnectedness with everything is real, is undeniable, is permanent; that she can let go of loneliness, of any attachment to the physical; that she can step outside of time without returning.

That Vinita and Sumitra can be together forever.

A rotund, potbellied priest is conducting prayers for a pair of western tourists, so she stands and gazes upon Harihara from a respectful distance behind them.

That dark, unseeing or all-seeing face of Harihara, gazing back down at her.

There are more garlands around the statue's neck than the last time she was here with Vinita.

(Oh, Vinita. *Baby...*)

She half-closes her eyes. Her hands wrestle each other. She bows, slightly. She is ready.

She surprises herself by suddenly walking away, eyes still not fully open, as if she were in a trance.

And walks to a corner of the temple. Gently, she plonks down her satchel and lowers herself to the floor, remaining still in view of Harihara.

Tall, magnificent Harihara.

The priest keeps chanting, waving a tray of offerings at the

deity; the tourists behind him, hands now clasped in prayer.

Sumitra shuts her eyes completely. Without opening them, she knows Vinita has sat down beside her.

*Baby, what if robbers unlock our front door and set fire to the flat?*

Sumitra smiles.

That soft tingling. That feeling of expansiveness that is not unlike falling but, more accurately, is akin to a dispersion of concentration in all directions.

A concentration no less intense.

Also, an intellectual dissolution:

*What flat? What robbers?*

*What, love? What, baby?*

*This body... This self...*

*Who is Vinita, who is Sumitra?*

*What rhyme? What time?*

Nobody pays attention to the elderly woman sitting, or meditating, on the floor, her body stiffening, then softening, almost imperceptibly.

A merging with humidity and air, with floor, with incense, with that priest's soft chanting, that lullaby of a temple bell—

When one has loved as Sumitra has loved.

Sumitra and Vinita. Collateral splendour.

What is love without duality and the ending of that duality?

Sitting here would be the final proof of that ending.

Yet, this is not the end. And time has not been unkind.

*What time?*

*Hurry, Harihara, come to me.*

*Rush, rush...*

Behind the eyes, not a tarantula, but an unfurling web of light.

Endlessly unfurling.

One of the tourists turns around, a blonde male in his early thirties. He sees Sumitra, while the chanting still carries on. He cannot understand what he is glimpsing: multicoloured hues swirling in a glow of white fog around Sumitra—vanishing when he strains to observe the phenomenon more carefully.

Perhaps it is jet lag; he closes his eyes and opens them again and the colour-fog, well, disappears. He turns back to the priest, who is entering a closing mantra now and lowering his tray of offerings.

*Baby, do you feel...*

*Baby...*



## FISH

ASHISH XIANGYI KUMAR

**I DREAM OFTEN**, these days, and primarily of fish. A quiet night, the sea still and unremarkable above, but underneath thousands of bodies welling up, who knows how many really, so thick and fast the sea turns silver, almost the colour of a bullet. Thousands of creatures, perhaps even millions. All so taut with movement that even though there is no light when they turn, the curves of their bodies glimmer.

A co-worker told me that you dream about what you are thinking of before you fall asleep, but in truth I have no cause to dream of fish. Are there this many fish left in our waters? In all the oceans, even? I keep reading that fish are disappearing from the world, so I doubt it.

...

This is something that flashes through my mind when my son Aaron asks me, over dinner, if animals feel pain.

"That's a funny question," Faye says. "Why do you ask?"

Aaron pokes at his food and shrugs. "I'm just asking. It's kind

of a natural question to ask, isn't it?"

"You're not turning vegetarian, are you?" Faye says, and laughs.

But Aaron's question has got me thinking. "It's a difficult question," I say.

Faye reaches out and touches the back of my forearm, lightly. "Honey," she says. I put my hand on top of hers. "I mean, how do we know if any other person feels pain? You can't actually feel what any other person feels."

I watch Aaron as he uses his fork to push rice onto his spoon. "P-zombies," he says.

"What?" I say.

"You've gotten him started," Faye says.

"A philosophical zombie. We were discussing it in class today. It's physically identical to a human, acts exactly like one, but doesn't actually have consciousness. It does not experience anything, it's like a machine."

"What's that meant to show?" Faye asks.

"What I think," Aaron says, "is that it doesn't matter. Because it doesn't matter if I don't know if you really have conscious experience. It's good enough that you act like you have it. Since you can't tell anyway, why wonder about consciousness? I mean, p-zombies are a silly idea."

There is something thrilling about the way Aaron turns contemptuous. "Have you caught a fish on a line before?" I ask. "Uncle Michael used to do it. Those things really struggled. They really looked like they felt it."

"Maybe," Aaron says. The way he says it makes me think I've made some kind of mistake, that he regards this as a wrong turn in the conversation.

Later that evening, I idle through some websites discussing animal cognition. It turns out to be a very complicated topic. This is when Faye opens the door of the study and says, "You've got to be careful."

"I know," I say. "I'm careful."

...

Faye and I met in California, at a funeral. One of the grad students in my corridor died in a car accident and the family invited his friends to the funeral. I hadn't properly known the guy—we went rock-climbing several weekends and that was about it—but I thought it improper not to go. At the funeral, the brother asked if anyone had anything to share ("In celebration of Clarence's life," he said), and Faye had gone up. I remember being surprised that there was another Singaporean there, and then surprised by how funny she was (she made Tim's mother laugh, once or twice). When Faye cried a little towards the end of her speech, I felt a terrible need to go up and comfort her.

After the funeral, I drove a bunch of us back, including Faye. I offered her the front seat, which seemed like a wild and reckless thing to do. We started seeing each other a month after that. She was taking a course in art history and since the classes were on Thursdays, which I had cleared, I sat in on them occasionally. We didn't hold hands, then we did. She learnt to grab my hair in class, quite forcefully sometimes, and tousele it.

Occasionally Faye sat in on Philo 132 too, as part of what I understood to be an unspoken quid pro quo, but she seemed bemused by it. I worried if she thought it was all silly.

"It's not silly," she said. "Shit. Do you think I think you are silly?"

the meat back into the spoon, making me laugh louder than I had in months. I leaned over and kissed her, despite the soup trail on her chin.

“In front of Nana?” she said, almost incredulous, but reaching again for the warmth of us, for the lips still learning to speak.

“Bos teng yo sa korsang,” I said, the only words I knew in my broken grandmother tongue. Sometimes we speak in other tongues not to be understood, but with the hope that those we care about the most don’t ask to translate.

Naomi raised her spoonful of un-masticated tongue, offered it to me.

Nana always told me to chew thoroughly, then swallow. So I did. I still do.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**YU-MEI BALASINGAMCHOW** is the co-author of *Singapore: A Biography* (with Mark Ravinder Frost, 2009) and co-editor of the literary anthology *In Transit: An Anthology from Singapore on Airports and Air Travel* (with Zhang Ruihe, 2016). Yu-Mei’s work has been published in Singapore, the UK, the US and Canada. She is originally from Singapore and now lives in Boston. She has a MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University and is working on a novel and a short story collection. “The Prisoner” was originally published in *Mississippi Review* 47:1/2 (Summer 2019), 63–78; it also won the Mississippi Review Fiction Prize in 2019 and received a Pushcart Prize Special Mention in 2020.

**ADELINE CHIA** is an independent arts writer and editor based in Singapore. She conceptualised and edited a series of chapbooks called *Discipline the City* (2017), themed around the cultural and social aspects of discipline, published by The Substation. Besides being involved in independent publishing, she contributes regularly to *ArtReview Asia*, where she is also the reviews editor, and *ArtReview*. “Buddha was an Aries” won an honourable mention in the 2019 Golden Point Awards for Best Short Story (English Category), organised by Arts House Limited.

**ARIN ALYCIA FONG** holds a MA in Creative Writing from Nanyang Technological University. Her work has appeared in *QLRS*, *In This Desert*, *There Were Seeds*, *this is how you walk on the moon* and elsewhere. She is the co-editor of *To Gather Your Leaving: Asian Diaspora Poetry from America, Australia, UK and Europe* (with Boey Kim Cheng & Justin Chia, 2019). “The Unsullied Tongue of Saint Anthony” was originally published in *Southeast Asian Review of English* 57:1 (July 2020), 218–231, <https://sare.um.edu.my/index.php/SARE/article/view/25312/11982>.

**JON GRESHAM** is the author of short story collection *We Rose Up Slowly* (2015) and co-editor of *In This Desert, There Were Seeds* (with Elizabeth Tan, 2019). He helps run the Asia Creative Writing Programme, a collaboration between the National Arts Council and Nanyang Technological University, and is a co-founder of Sing Lit Station. “The Visit” was originally published in *Transnational Literature* 12:1 (Nov 2020), <https://www.transnationallitsubmissions.org/index.php/trace/article/view/131/21>; it was also shortlisted for the 2020 Short Fiction/Essex University Prize.

**SUFFIAN HAKIM** is a Singaporean author and screenwriter of Javanese descent. He has been hailed by *The Straits Times* as “undoubtedly one of the most whimsical, creative and unpretentious young voices in Singapore literature”. His creations carry the mark of his kaleidoscopic imagination and distinct worldview, and they can be seen in television shows such as *Random Island* and *Amaranthine*, as well as in his books. *The Keepers of Stories* is Suffian’s third novel, longlisted for the 2020 Epigram Books Fiction Prize, after the national bestseller *Harris bin Potter and the Stoned Philosopher* (2015, 2019) and the critically acclaimed *The Minorities* (2017, 2018). “Who’s Your Daddy? / Siapa

Bapak Kau?” was originally published in *Esquire Singapore* (Apr 2019).

**WISHA JAMAL** is an aspiring author from Pakistan, currently studying Global Affairs and Arts & Humanities at Yale–NUS College. These days she spends her free time working on a collection of short stories centred around the lived experiences of South Asian women. She is especially interested in themes of diaspora, queerness, family, death and the things that are left unsaid. Aside from writing, she is obsessed with her cat and everything horror. “The Prayer Mat” was originally published in *Mahogany Journal, Issue 1: The +65 South Asian* (Jun 2020), 38–43.

**PATRICIA KARUNUNGAN** graduated with a MA from Nanyang Technological University, where she specialised in contemporary Southeast Asian fiction. Her essays, poems and short stories have appeared in *poetry.sg*, *SG Poems 2017–2018*, *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction*, and *Get Lucky: An Anthology of Philippine and Singapore Writings*, among others. She also co-edited *this is how you walk on the moon: an anthology of anti-realist fiction* (with Samuel Caleb Wee & Wong Wen Pu, 2016). In 2017, she was awarded the Koh Tai Ann Gold Medal. “The Kapre” was originally published in *Singapore Unbound* (Dec 2020), <https://singaporeunbound.org/blog/2020/12/22/the-kapre>.

**BALLI KAUR JASWAL** (guest editor) is the recipient of the 2014 Sydney Morning Herald Best Young Australian Novelist Award for *Inheritance*, which inspired a film adaptation directed by K. Rajagopal, called *Lizard on the Wall*. Her second novel, *Sugarbread*, was shortlisted for the 2015 Epigram Books Fiction Prize and the 2018 Singapore Literature Prize, while her third book, *Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows*, was a Reese Witherspoon Book Club pick in 2018. Born in Singapore and raised in

Japan, Russia and the Philippines, she studied creative writing in the United States, and has received writing fellowships from the University of East Anglia and Nanyang Technological University. Her most recent novel, *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters*, was released in 2019.

**ASHISH XIANGYI KUMAR** was born in Singapore to Chinese and Indian parents. He read law at Cambridge and currently works in Brunei as a diplomat for the Singaporean government. He won third prize at the 2018 Bridport Poetry Competition, and his poetry has been published in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *The Cordite Poetry Review* and *Oxford Poetry*. He has more hobbies than he has time for, but enjoys music, hiking and dinner with friends. “Fish” won first prize in the 2019 Golden Point Awards for Best Short Story (English Category), organised by Arts House Limited.

**JASON ERIK LUNDBERG** (series editor) is the fiction editor at Epigram Books. He was born in New York, grew up in North Carolina, and has lived in Singapore since 2007. He is the author and anthologist of over twenty-five books, including *A Fickle and Restless Weapon* (2020), *Most Excellent and Lamentable* (2019), *Diary of One Who Disappeared* (2019) and the *Bo Bo and Cha Cha* picture book series (2012–2015); he is also the founding editor of *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction* (2012–2018), editor of *Fish Eats Lion* (2012), and co-editor of *A Field Guide to Surreal Botany* (2008) and *Scattered, Covered, Smothered* (2004).

**NG YI-SHENG** is a poet, fictionist, playwright, journalist and activist, and the author and anthologist of ten books; this most notably includes *Lion City*, a short story collection published by Epigram Books in 2018, which won both the 2020 Singapore Literature Prize for Fiction and Best Literary Work at the 2019 Singapore Book Awards. He was also

awarded the Singapore Literature Prize for his debut poetry collection, *last boy* (2006). He recently completed his MA in creative writing at the University of East Anglia and is currently pursuing his PhD at Nanyang Technological University. “Xingzhou” was originally published in *Clarkesworld Magazine* 154 (Jul 2019), [http://clarkesworldmagazine.com/yi-sheng\\_07\\_19/](http://clarkesworldmagazine.com/yi-sheng_07_19/).

**JAYASHREE PANICKER** holds a MA in Creative Writing from Lasalle College of the Arts. Her writing has appeared in *QLRS* and *Mahogany Journal*. “Fling” was originally published in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* 19:1 (Jan 2020), <http://www.qlrs.com/story.asp?id=1541>.

**PRASANTHI RAM** recently completed her PhD in creative writing at Nanyang Technological University. Her short stories have been published in places such as *The Tiger Moth Review* and *The Willowherb Review*. While working on her debut collection of short stories, she also contributes to *Singapore Unbound* as a regular reviewer and essay reader. Most recently, she co-founded and has served as fiction editor of *Mahogany Journal* (est. 2020), an online literary journal dedicated to South Asian anglophone writers born or based in Singapore. “The Panasonic” was originally published in *Food Republic: A Singapore Literary Banquet*, ed. Ann Ang, Daryl Lim Wei Jie & Tse Hao Guang (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2020), 134–137.

**WAYNE RÉE** author of *Tales From a Tiny Room* (2014), as well as the co-creator (with Benjamin Chee) of the prose / comics mash-ups *Mr Memphis* (2017) and the forthcoming *Work-Life Balance* (2022). He helped create Singapore’s very first tattoo magazine *FlashINK*, and his fiction has been published both regionally and internationally, most notably in *Infinite*

*Worlds* and *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction*. He's also the co-creator of the narrative podcast *Ghost Maps*, and co-writer of the pilot for Audible's *Virtual Insanity*. You can find him online at waynereewrites.com. "To Ashes" was originally published in *Infinite Worlds Magazine* 3 (Mar 2020), 18–23; it is a direct sequel to his previous work, "Satay".

**DIANA RAHIM** is currently a community worker who thinks and dreams of autonomy and decentralised futures. Her written and artistic works revolve around the themes of feminism, religion, class and the politics of public space. Her recent photographic project, *Interventions* (2020), was exhibited at the National Gallery Singapore. She is also the editor of *Beyond the Hijab* (est. 2013), an online platform for Muslim women in Singapore to discuss their experiences and opinions. "A Minor Kalahari" was originally published in *In This Desert, There Were Seeds*, ed. Elizabeth Tan & Jon Gresham (Singapore: Ethos Books / Witchcliffe: Margaret River Press, 2019), 209–219.

**BARRIE SHERWOOD** is the author of short story collection *The Angel Tiger* (2019) as well as two novels—*The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa* (2000) and *Speed of Lightness* (2021; originally published as *Escape from Amsterdam* in 2007). He is also an assistant professor in the School of Humanities at Nanyang Technological University. "A Trip to the Beach" was originally published in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* 18:2 (Apr 2019), <http://www.qlrs.com/story.asp?id=1482>; it was also collected in *The Angel Tiger* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2019; London: Epigram Books UK, 2020).

**ANITTHA THANABALAN** is the author of *The Lights That Find Us*, a finalist for the 2018 Epigram Books Fiction Prize. Efforts to keep herself

and Dino (her poodle) alive include freelance writing and tutoring English literature. She has devoted an extraordinary amount of time to rapping Twista's "Overnight Celebrity" without turning blue in the face, but has failed consistently. Anittha is currently working on her second novel. "Sacred Scalp" was originally published in *Mahogany Journal, Issue 1: The +65 South Asian* (June 2020), 24–28.

**SAMANTHA TOH** has had her fiction, poetry, translations and criticism published in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *QLRS*, *Spittoon Literary Magazine* and various Math Paper Press and Epigram Books anthologies. The recipient of a Stanford University Alumni Arts Grant, Sam writes and makes art in Singapore and Tokyo. Her work can be found at samanthatoh.com. "The Best of Times" won third prize in the 2019 Golden Point Awards for Best Short Story (English Category), organised by Arts House Limited.

**CYRIL WONG** is the two-time Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of eighteen books of verse and prose, including most recently the poetry collection *Infinity Diary* (Seagull Books, 2020) and the novel *This Side of Heaven* (Epigram Books, 2020). He is also a past recipient of the National Arts Council's Young Artist Award for Literature (2005). "Harihara" was originally published in *In This Desert, There Were Seeds*, ed. Elizabeth Tan & Jon Gresham (Singapore: Ethos Books / Witchcliffe: Margaret River Press, 2019), 17–28.

“Showcases the best in contemporary Singaporean writing now, with a diverse multitude of local voices that tackle their subjects with tooth and claw, flair and finesse.”

*SINGAPORE UNBOUND*

**THE EPIGRAM BOOKS COLLECTION OF  
BEST NEW SINGAPOREAN SHORT STORIES:  
VOLUME FIVE** gathers the finest Singaporean stories published in 2019 and 2020, selected by guest editor Balli Kaur Jaswal from hundreds published in journals, magazines, anthologies and single-author collections.

**YU-MEI BALASINGAMCHOW • ADELINE CHIA  
ARIN ALYCIA FONG • JON GRESHAM • SUFFIAN HAKIM  
WISHA JAMAL • PATRICIA KARUNUNGAN  
ASHISH XIANGYI KUMAR • NG YI-SHENG  
JAYASHREE PANICKER • PRASANTHI RAM  
WAYNE RÉE • DIANA RAHIM • BARRIE SHERWOOD  
ANITTHA THANABALAN • SAMANTHA TOH • CYRIL WONG**

FICTION

