

THE EPIGRAM BOOKS COLLECTION OF

**BEST NEW
SINGAPOREAN
SHORT
STORIES
VOLUME SIX**

EDITED BY

GWEE LI SUI

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.”

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–Singapore Unbound

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STORIES**
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First edition, October 2023.

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EPIGRAM

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PREFACE

GWEE LI SUI

I COULD BE discovering new places or, if I were to stay home, I could be reading a book. I could also be reading a book if I were out discovering places and finding a spot perfect for a spell of solitude. Instead, I am bent double over my laptop in a corner of a humdrum kopitiam, a stone's throw away from where I have been carving out my hermithood. So an introduction begins.

I'm writing this on the 15th of February, the day after Valentine's Day—also the day Imperial Japan began its reign of terror in Singapore eighty-one years ago. Symbolism fails. I have just emailed my selection of short stories to Epigram Books's point man for fiction, Jason Erik Lundberg, thus winding up a year-long reading plan that took me through over two hundred fifty Singaporean stories. If there were more of such pieces published in the stipulated years of 2021 and 2022, I offer my apologies in heartfelt embarrassment. But I profess that I have done my utmost to track down every qualifying story that might have been hiding in some physical nook or digital cranny.

In a few weeks' time, Jason will begin his interrogation of

my list. Now is that wonderfully liminal time when I can write without his mesmeric influence what I must say in service of the current volume. My mind is still swirling from the contours of all I have read. (I lie. It is still swirling from the Tsingtao Gold I rewarded myself with last night.) I am ready to put down as a matter of record my own thoughts on how environment influences what gets written.

Mull over these words with pious care, because I shall attempt a brief but as-yet unsought inquiry into what this endeavour has been ultimately about. This anthology, like the series's other volumes, collects stories that have emerged of the kind that keep emerging, keep getting collected, the collecting never enough to be done with. After all, the limits of selection aside, there are always more new stories.

Best New Singaporean Short Stories is now in its sixth volume and, if the hunger for short stories continues, it shall continue as well. But as you savour my verdict on the "best new", what is newer may already undermine me. "New" here, to be sure, does not mean original—and this detail need not disappoint. Seeking original inclusions is risky anyway, since all readers start somewhere. A story feels original to us only because it is the first of a kind we encounter. When we discover something earlier and alike later, our idea of originality changes.

Newness goes in a different direction, looking forward where originality turns its head. Stories that are original *and* new—as well as, in terms of execution, best—occupy that sweetest of creative spots. But newness, unlike originality and merit, highlights an aspect that underlies all stories, in that all stories are new or were new once. Stories, as I have said, emerge, and they have been

emerging long before there were even books!

I cannot imagine any publisher (this one included) being happy to admit that stories were told, sung, performed, painted or carved into stone, all before the advent of print. Publishers typically want us to believe that print—or words, for that matter—is the reservoir out of which all modern narratives reaching into movies and TV shows come. The notion confers on the industry an eminence in the universe of things when stories have an ancient, even prehistoric, origin. Now, if stories had existed before words, did they exist before humankind?

This seems a better question, although it arrives with an impasse. Stories, in always involving humans or at least some anthropomorphism, are definitely tied to us. They are part of how we experience the world as an unveiling—and are, in this sense, world-like. But does this mean that stories are bigger than us as, say, breath is bigger than our lungs? I do *not* know if breath is bigger than lungs. I do know that air becomes breath when it is breathed. Stories are stories when they are told.

So what makes us make stories? What compels our minds to want such non-physical time processes, to find them enjoyable in order to keep wanting them? Whether we answer with God or evolution, the finding is the same. Stories hold a physiological purpose aligned with our neural impulses to create experiences that feel metaphysical. These experiences may last a long time or they may recede right after we gain them. Their persistence seems not to be a requirement.

We may say then that stories function like exercise machines for our inner restlessness, our unactivated life. But function and outcome are crucially distinct stages. I do not, for a minute, think

that I am eventually any different—smarter or more aware to have read more or better stories, or less nimble or moral should I read carelessly, less or not at all. Yet something *is* jogged. While I read, I feel my time well spent.

In fact, I feel that some stories, though horridly wanting, are still fecund enough for my mind to extract enjoyment. Others show ornateness and intricacy through which their “story” nonetheless emerges thin. This oddity manifests a point we must remember, that words and construction are *not* the story. Relatedly, we cannot be satisfied with a popular contemporary call to read and write what tells us our truths. Stories that do so may move, but the power of testimony detracts from what stories uniquely bring.

Stories do their “thing” when they are set free to surprise, baffle, nauseate, stretch us. The best truths they tell are those we did not or could not grasp until we fully exit them. We thus cannot snuggle up to comforting, predictable stories only and imagine that we understand stories! Stories are these effective means precisely to lose our centres without destroying ourselves. We exhaust their worlds by drawing availing experiences deep in, grinding these until they disappear.

Whether or not we are changed as a result, we cannot know. Some stories, like food, do have that effect. Neither can I know whether reading the “best” stories will do you any measurable good. But this anthology does make this assumption and, with it, three more. First, it follows an established biennial frame for capturing the right amount of excellence. Second, picks by a single guest editor—in this case, me—guarantee some eccentric quality you the reader can enjoy. Third, each new volume is, as such, meaningfully distinct.

I have gone a long way here to say something and nothing. I have also, if you have not yet noticed, reserved my cabalistic thoughts for those who bother to read ceremonial introductions. The fact that you are still persisting certainly qualifies you to be a member of a global coven of dangerous readers. Readers who read anything are dangerous; I know so. But now I must mask my words again and write a ceremonial conclusion for eyes that prefer to skim.

This latest volume in the *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* series offers arguably more humour and supernatural mystery than its predecessors. I have also selected a few quasi-biographical stories and, if you find them inside, it means that Jason has bowed to my howling about how I cannot tell if they are *not* fictional. In addition, in an age when we need to try harder to reach across demographics, I have kept an eye on striking a balance with stories by writers from a wide range of age groups.

Jason’s role as series editor honestly extends beyond his standard duties I have referred to. A truth I need to mention now: he had, in fact, approached me for years to work on a future volume, and I could not accept the invitation until such a time that our stars aligned. Finally, let me thank Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, Vicky Chong and Dave Chua, who snatched on the whereabouts of some rather good stories.

INTRODUCTION

JASON ERIK LUNDBERG

WELCOME TO THE sixth instalment in our *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* anthology series! This time, we welcome Gwee Li Sui as our rotating guest editor curating the contents and shape of this new volume, joining Cyril Wong, Pooja Nansi and Balli Kaur Jaswal from our previous volumes. He has risen wonderfully to the task of finding many stories by lesser-known writers, as well as those from some familiar names, and doing so in the midst of the continuing global pandemic. This has resulted in a compelling assemblage of fiction that will both delight and challenge you.

Out of all the hundreds of stories published by Singaporean writers in 2021 and 2022, we narrowed the list down to nineteen (68% of these authored by women). Both Gwee and I recommend seeking out additional work by all of the contributors gathered here, as well as the stories included in the Honourable Mentions at the end of this book.

I have to 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, Hermit

Press, Kitaab, LASALLE College of the Arts, Marshall-Cavendish International, Math Paper Press, Monsoon Books, Penguin Random House Southeast Asia, *The Adroit Journal*, *Anak Sastra*, *The Colored Lens*, *Fragmented Voices*, *Granta*, *Guesthouse*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Litbreak Magazine*, *Litro*, *Mississippi Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *The Selkie*, *Shenandoah*, *Sine Theta Magazine*, *Soft Punk*, *Southeast Asian Review of English*, *The Southern Review*, *Strange Horizons*, *Sundog Lit*, *WordCityLit*, *Wyldblood Press* and *X-R-A-Y Lit Mag*. In addition, thanks go to Arts House Limited for organising the biennial Golden Point Awards, and sharing the winning pieces for consideration.

The last two years have continued the trend of excellence in Epigram Books' fiction line, while the Covid-19 pandemic made it a challenge for us to even stay in business. The finalists for the English Fiction category of the 2022 Singapore Literature Prize were varied across genre, style and type: *This Side of Heaven* by Cyril Wong (edited by me), alongside *Shantih Shantih Shantih* by Daryl Qilin Yam (also edited by me, but on a freelance basis), *Not Great, But At Least Something* by Clara Chow and *She Never Looks Quite Back* by Mallika Naguran (both collections containing stories reprinted in this volume), and *Snow at 5pm* by Jee Leong Koh (who is a good friend to Epigram Books and me personally, and has done an amazing job spreading awareness of Singaporean literature in the US). The top prize went to *Snow at 5pm*, breaking Epigram Books's winning streak in the SLP fiction category since 2014; we'd won the previous four consecutive prizes (with two co-winners in 2020), and I edited all but one of those five books. It was bound to happen at some point, and is actually a

good indication of the current health of the local literary ecosystem. In addition, *Shantih Shantih Shantih* won the SLP Readers' Favourite, determined by public vote, among all the books nominated across categories in the English language. Many congratulations again to Jee Leong and Daryl.

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 validation for Epigram Books fiction. In 2021, the audio adaption of *Impractical Uses of Cake* by Yeoh Jo-Ann won for Best Audiobook and *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye (5th Anniversary Edition)* by Sonny Liew won an Honorary Mention for Best Book Cover Design; *This Side of Heaven* by Cyril Wong also was a finalist for Best Literary Work. 2022 was an even better year, with *The Formidable Miss Cassidy* by Meihan Boey winning Best Literary Work, and *The Punkhawala and the Prostitute* by Wesley Leon Aroozoo winning 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. The 2022 winner was *The Accidental Malay* by Karina Robles Bahrin (already in its fifth printing as of this writing), with a shortlist comprising *We Do Not Make Love Here* by Nisha Mehraj, *Every School a Good School* by Ng Ziqin and *Lost Treasure of the Lanfang Republic* by Tan Lip Hong. The 2023 winner was *The Campbell Gardens Ladies' Swimming Class* by Vrushali Junnarkar, with a shortlist comprised of *The Enigmatic Madam Ingram* by Meihan Boey (sequel to *The Formidable*

Miss Cassidy), *The Disappearance of Patrick Zhou* by Ally Chua and *Gus: The Life and Opinions of the Last Raffles' Banded Langur* by Jon Gresham. At the EBFP award ceremony in February 2023, it was announced that the prize would be suspended for one year, so that Edmund Wee (Epigram Books publisher and current president of the Singapore Book Publishers Association) could organise the first Singapore Children's Book Festival, tentatively set for June 2024.

The Storytel Epigram Horror Prize was established in 2022 as an annual short story prize initiated to put the spotlight on horror fiction in Singaporean literature. The judging panel consisted of Gwee Li Sui, Annaliza Bakri and myself, and the top three prizes went to "Breakwater" by Kelly Leow, "Hantu Hijau" by Dave Chua and "Under the Banana Tree" by Dew M. Chaiyanara. These three stories and the eight remaining finalists were published in *Fright 1: Winners of the 2022 Storytel Epigram Horror Prize*, which was launched at the awards ceremony in November, and then afterward they were released in audio streaming format by Storytel AB. Unfortunately, Storytel withdrew their financial support for the prize in early 2023, so as of this writing, both the prize and anthology series are on indefinite hiatus.

In overseas recognition news, *The Accidental Malay* by Karina Robles Bahrin was acquired by Picador Books for republication in the UK, and Pushkin Press in London has acquired *The Formidable Miss Cassidy* by Meihan Boey. In addition, *Lovelier, Lonelier* by Daryl Qilin Yam was longlisted for the 2023 Dublin Literary Award, which takes its nominations from libraries all over the world.

On a personal note, my anthology, *Fish Eats Lion Redux*, was released towards the end of 2022. It is a sequel of sorts to *Fish Eats Lion*, which was published ten years earlier (to the month) and

was a game-changing landmark publication for speculative fiction in Singapore. This new book is the culmination of a conversation between good friends, and a promise I made to myself after releasing the final issue of *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction* in 2018. We launched *Redux* in two parts—first at the 2022 Singapore Writers Festival, then at Kinokuniya's main store on Orchard Road—attracting packed crowds and long book-signing queues. The anthology showcases the vitality of non-realist writing in Singapore by some very imaginative writers, earning its four-star review in *The Straits Times*; it is something I'm incredibly proud of. I'm also gratified that Dr Gwee chose two pieces from *Redux* to appear in the book in your hands.

I am thankful beyond words that the *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* series has now made its way to six volumes. Bless you for picking this book out of the multitudes you could possibly read, whether bought in a bookshop or borrowed from a library; that simple act celebrates Singaporean short fiction, which is well worth celebrating. There were times when it was unclear whether this series would continue, but readers like you have made it clear time and again that there is a hunger for great local short stories.

So it's time to slake that hunger. Clear your surroundings of all clutter, pour yourself a favourite beverage, turn your lights to the preferred luminosity and settle into a comfortable seat. Oh look, here comes the first course, right on time, steaming underneath its tableware cloche. You find yourself involuntarily salivating in anticipation. Turn the page, and dig in.

THE LAST DIVER ON EARTH

SOFIA MARIAH MA

WHEN THEY FINALLY found Ibu, she was laid out on the beach.

Draped in a shroud of slimy, rusted kelp, she looked like a giant glutinous rice dessert encased in steamed bamboo leaves. It wasn't unusual that she was naked. Here, we dived naked. Off the coast of the Lesser Sunda Islands. Between the seas of Banda and Flores. But seeing her like this, I remembered Ibu's promise.

She had told me she wanted to be the last freediver on Earth.

She had once tried to forbid me from going into the water—the water we both love. But who ever really listens to their own mother?

With our lives so intertwined with the sea, Ibu and I had always lived with death as our fickle, wearisome neighbour. In the good years, death kept to himself. When things were bad, we would see him wandering the coast and picking at debris, at bodies, as in the aftermath of a tsunami.

Sometimes we would see him watching eagerly as sharks prowled the shallow, inshore waters for easy pickings—well, not too easy, as we Bajau learn to swim before we walk or talk, but easier than, say, venturing into the dark, frigid depths without

coming across a meal for weeks. Still, I never expected I would come across my own mother's body on land rather than in the sea.

A small crowd had gathered around Ibu by the time I arrived.

No one spoke. No one so much as breathed, as if out of respect for the woman they recognised as their dukun—their medicine woman, who had taught them to harvest remedies from the waters around them. Need a quick pain reliever? Agitate an ointment from the venom of chestnut-coloured cone snails. Want to disinfect a wound? Cultivate a salve from the vase-shaped glass sponges.

Her marine knowledge unparalleled, Ibu had seemed chosen by the sea. Its crystalline blue waters formed her skin. Its rippled, foamy white waves like mottled sapphires took the place of her clothes, which kept her warm on stormy days when the water temperatures would drop, drop, drop.

"Rumi."

I knew it was Professor Arisa even before she called for me, her stiff, gnarled fingers gripping my shoulder and pinching me right to the bone. Few were convinced that lanky, wiry Arisa, who suffered from severe arthritis, was in her seventies.

She often enlisted Ibu's help along with her sensitive hands and inflamed joints to carry out her research in the twilight zone of the mesophotic reef. This was where sunlight reached its end and the abyss began; where, if life could resist death's gravity in the deep, it would move to thrive in brighter, warmer waters. As it was already too expensive to use offshore deep vessels and submersibles to locate and collect samples of new marine species, Arisa was relieved to have found a natural deep diver in Ibu to aid her in her discoveries, particularly in places that were too erratic, too intricate for any machinery. Nonetheless, as we dived,

scrubbing the bleached reefs, or surveying the continental shelf, Arisa always came with us. She, in full diving gear—wet suit, rebreather, computer; Ibu and I, armed with only our spears and the intergenerational map of the sea imprinted into our minds, our muscle memory.

Once, Arisa had told us that scientists like her had ascertained how our enlarged spleens and specialised eye systems are what enabled us to dive without masks or without the need to breathe for long periods of time.

But to us, it was our poverty that had created these material effects.

In fact, if it weren't for Arisa, Ibu wouldn't have been able to raise or educate me, and this made Ibu feel indebted to her. She didn't even mind that, once a year, when she was invited to the mainland, to Nusa Baru City on Kalimantan, she was made to act like a sea lion exhibit in an aquarium, while Arisa presented papers and published books on the new marine plant and animal species she'd identified after the Second Deluge at the end of the twenty-second century. Ibu said that Arisa rarely mentioned the ones we could no longer find. But I suppose with Ibu gone now, this debt fell to me.

"Rumi, get a hold of yourself."

I couldn't.

"Marli's gone."

I didn't stop crying and beating my chest until the sight and smell of Ibu's sickly white, bulbous body, reeking with a sour, putrefying odour, hit me. Yet it was also in that moment that I saw the strange-looking weed—no, seaweed—trapped in her wrinkled, bloated fingers.

At first glance, it appeared typical of green algae. Velvety to the touch, its flat, delicate fronds opened to a fan the size of my palm. Even the mossy-green, thread-like tendrils that barely clung on to the seaweed's frayed edges, as if it had been torn from its source in a hurry, looked normal to me. But the second my eyes saw the inner midrib structure of the seaweed, I knew it was something I had never seen.

Seemingly more akin to a common vascular plant than a seaweed, its crimson "veins" stood out against its olive-green fronds. They were aligned in such a fine, tightly packed mesh that it reminded me of the netting used by the village fishermen. Waking up at dawn, they would cast their nets to trap shrimp or anchovies before the village farmers could start switching on their drones or gathering their seaweed. As Ibu was neither fisherwoman nor farmer, she had no business being so close to the coast or holding on to some seaweed.

Wait—is that why Ibu was taken? She knew our myths, our stories.

Our seas belonged to the Queen of the South Seas, to Nyai Lara, the Protector, the Avenger. Ibu would have castigated me, slapped me, if I dared to wear or carry anything green—even a shade of it—without preparing a tribute for the Queen. And there was nothing, *nothing* that Ibu could have given, naked and alone, when she'd chosen to return to land with this *weed*. So why had she?

Why had she risked inviting Her wrath, Her jealousy? I didn't understand it. I couldn't.

Later, when the village cremated Ibu—coming together to build a bamboo pyre for her then set her on fire—I went through the motions as if hypnotised. Like an infected snail with a parasitic worm in my head, I shook hands with every villager

who approached me and offered me their condolences and memories of Ibu helping them in some way or another. Through their words and gestures, I already knew they wanted me to replace Ibu—to be what Ibu had been for them.

From my mother, I had learnt how to swim with the currents and dive so far from the village, and to such great depths, that even Arisa was tempted to recruit me. With Ibu, I had stayed in a stilt house so close to the sea that I too could warn the villagers about its caprices. Its warming surges. Its chilling swells. Its acidifying fluidities.

I too could tell them: "Harvest your sea lettuce today. Get your drones to take them out of the water. Come moonlight, you can put them back into the absurd squares of ocean you think you can control or own. And don't forget your tributes to Nyai Lara. Yes, yes, flowers will do. Put them out to float in baskets weaved out of bamboo leaves. What? You've forgotten how to? Come here, I'll show you how."

Before she died, Ibu had asked me to follow Arisa back to the mainland. There, I could find a job, a life, and never return. When I objected, she laughed. Her tanned, wizened features were strikingly delicate when she smiled. And when she replied, her thin, dark hair and small, hazel eyes had bristled, just like mine. "Live, Rumi."

Watching the flames engulf Ibu's body, spreading over the strips of palm leaves and vines used to bind her, I told myself that the villagers could have their memory of Ibu as the woman carved by the sea. I would remember Ibu as the woman who had carved *me*.

•••

Deeper into the night, when Arisa arrived to take me back to her stilt hut by the beach, the last of the smouldering embers that used to be Ibu finally died. Opening my mouth to speak, I couldn't help that my tone was accusatory. I was angry. "You did this," I said, looking out to the dark waters lapping around the village and seeing little. "It was you."

"You don't know what you're saying, Rumi."

I knew exactly what I was saying.

"It was you who pushed Ibu to dive farther...deeper..."

"It was not just for me. It's for science, for everyone," answered Arisa, sounding like one of those ubiquitous holographic advertisements I saw floating along the MagRail tracks in Nusa Baru City. Each and every one of them advocated the green-powered dreams of carbon-free, autonomous transportation and production made into reality by developments in solar and biochemical energy sources.

All for a better world. A better humanity.

Following Ibu on one of her trips to visit Arisa, I should have been impressed. I should have been amazed by the city's naturally bioluminescent walls, paths and trees at night, allowing its inhabitants to work and play while being swathed in subdued tones of blue, green and white.

But everything—*everything*—that Nusa Baru City was built on was owed to the sea.

In school, I had learnt that this very trick of light was derived from single-celled dinoflagellates or plankton, which bloomed on coastal waves and glowed luminous blue right after sunset. Yet, at the same time, I also remembered Ibu telling me how these same

surrealistic organisms signalled an omen—a warning from the sea. "Rumi, sometimes too much life is too much. Avoid eating any fish in the area. Throw back the crabs and mussels taken from this sea, because tomorrow, a red tide will come."

For most depressed towns and displaced villages such as ours, red tides had become the norm. They brought unnaturally warm currents with too many nutrients and too many parasites spreading disease among the plankton and all that relied on it, including humans.

Like Rotterdam, Jakarta too had attempted to hold back the sea, with its own version of the Maeslant Barrier. After it failed, drains and canals were designed and built to turn the area into a "city of sponge." It wanted to naturally redistribute floodwater and rainwater away from its low-lying roads and housing areas to its man-made parks and rooftop gardens as Shanghai had done. Mangroves were replanted. Wetlands were reformed along the tragic coastline of abandoned highways and buildings, looking more and more like a last-ditch attempt to cleanse the city of the failed, embittered concrete nightmares, and returning them to Nyai Lara, the Queen of the South Seas.

But Nyai Lara had predicaments of her own too.

Extensive swathes of ocean had been left deoxygenated and dead. Massive volumes of trash and plastic had been regurgitated onto her shores. Still, by 2210, Nusa Baru City on the Kalimantan mainland was marketing itself as the *real* "city of the future"—a revolutionary capital that would contribute neither carbon nor plastic to the environment.

However, diving with Ibu and still finding dead zones and currents of plastic wherever we went in the ever-warming sea, I

knew Nusa Baru City would be no different. I knew the Bajau would remain just as isolated as we had been when the red tides first came, and little help arrived.

When Arisa finally spoke again, she looked distracted. She was sitting on a chair surrounded by stacks of paper filled with numbers and scribbles all around her cluttered hut. Numerous cups of *sopi*, or palm liquor, were poured from bamboo bottles and drained. Her *ikat* skirt, spun out of silky golden and red strands, was softly shimmering like tessellated gossamer under the full moon.

And for once, Arisa was looking at her computer screens, which were showing changes in sea conditions and seeing nothing at all. Combing her hands through her hair shining hoary white like optic fibres, she said, "You know, Marli understood that everything we ever did was for the future."

"But she was *my mother*," I shot back from the entrance of her hut, as if it meant something. "And she gave up her life for something you believed in. No, Arisa, you *will* help me."

"What do you mean?"

"You *will* help me find out what happened to Ibu."

"But you already know what happened to her, child."

"I mean, *where*." Arisa stared at me. "You saw it," I said, my tone accusing her again. "She must have found... a new species of seaweed, out there, in the mid-light. And I need to know why it was so important to her—I need to know *where*."

"Why?"

Why? "You said it, didn't you? It's for the future, for science."
For me!

"Rumi—"

"Besides," I said, cutting her off, "I know that you know exactly where she'd been."

Swiftly, Arisa's black eyes regained their sharp aspect. They were cold and calculated. Resolute. Good; I was unaccustomed to the emotional and empathetic side of Arisa.

Ten years earlier, she had come to our village and recruited Ibu with wads of cash, as if the Bajau had only dealt with barter. We were harnessing solar energy for our phones and tablets long before the Indonesian government offered us more stable livelihoods based on drone-enabled fishing and seaweed farming. For taking away our dying art of bare-handed pearl diving and fishing, it seemed that we were meant to thank them.

But perhaps what neither Arisa nor the government truly understood about us was why we persisted in keeping our traditions of freediving and living free on the sea. As for us, we couldn't understand why both the government and Arisa spent so much time and so many resources to look for some rare, still-unknown species of marine life that could help decarbonise the atmosphere or oxygenate the seas, when what needed to be done to save the world should have been done long ago. Not now. Not here. Not in a hurry.

Staring at me, Arisa said, "Hold on. How could you know that I know something like that?"

"You must have found something—you were so late to Ibu's funeral." Arisa sucked in her breath, and I continued: "And you must have been curious about the seaweed, and about why and how Ibu died."

Arisa sighed. "Oh, I don't know if the word for it is *curious*,

child. But, yes, I might have detected Marli's wrist tracker using the equipment on my boat this morning."

"So, you *did* find something."

"Look, I don't know if it's *something*," Arisa answered, sweeping an arm around her hut, pointing to everything. "And I don't know if it's something worth pursuing."

"Don't say that," I whispered, as Arisa fell silent. "Ibu didn't die over *nothing*."

Arisa nodded. "But Rumi, if we are to do this, we must do this *my* way, with *my* equipment."

"Why?"

"Listen, wherever Marli found herself, it must've been dangerous. And if it was so for Marli, it will be doubly so for you. You can't deny this."

I didn't.

Arisa explained that Ibu had been investigating an area of continental shelf that hadn't yet been explored. We didn't think to. Just east of the village, it was precariously close to an active volcanic island, Batutara, which had been spewing ash and triggering earthquakes for years. Its state was so volatile, it sometimes created dead zones in the surrounding sea. Glutted with toxic algae and marred by lava flows, carbon dioxide and sulphurous fumes were dissolved directly into the mid-light waters of these dead zones. There was no other reason except for Arisa's research that Ibu would venture there.

"All the more reason we shouldn't head there," Arisa said, vacillating now, loudly but half-heartedly. I watched her drink copious amounts of *sopi*. The deep, feathered creases in her face were flushing red with warmth, illuminated by the yellow bio-

luminescent lamp in her hut. I could smell the cloying sweetness on her breath competing with the saltiness of the breeze around us. But I wasn't sure if I felt closer to Arisa than I ordinarily did. Hadn't she betrayed Ibu—and for what? Ambition? "You're still a child—even if you're Marli's child."

"I'm not a child any more, Arisa. I'm nearly sixteen."

"Not nearly sixteen at all, Rumi. Not even close."

At dawn's arrival, Arisa and I were equally determined to set off for Batutara.

As she started up the engine of her boat, fiddling with the latest maritime and scientific paraphernalia, I sat on its solar roof and watched the dark sky lightening to dusty blue from the stern. For a few minutes, all I did was watch the crepuscular rays of the rising sun scattering against the low-lying clouds, painting them in streaks of rosy pink. I took in the crisp, briny morning air and relished the sea winds brushing against my darkened, sun-parched skin.

When we were far enough away, I turned to look back at the village.

Square-hewn seaweed farms by the hundreds demarcated its shoreline. Each square was occupied by a tube-shaped, solar-powered drone scooping up the ropes of seaweed for harvesting and laying them down in the water again, only after trimming them perfectly. The village farmers still had to remove invasive sea grasses or sea urchins by hand to protect their aquatic crop, so a few of them were already up and about as we headed east out to open sea.

As the seaweed farms shrank in the distance, the village's free-

floating fish farms came into view at the horizon. Looking at them from above, they appeared as grey geodesic domes. To ensure that the free-range fish being reared inside these massive, seemingly self-sufficient farms were safe to eat, numerous divers checked on them daily. Marine drones supported their work, helping to gather and collect the fish, and alerted the farmers to any openings made by sharks or thieves. But anything else that required a subtle touch still had to be done by a professional diver, which is what Ibu and I could have become but didn't.

Once we travelled past the fish farms, we hardly met any other boats or man-made structures. Only once were we interrupted by a pod of dolphins, breaching in the frothy playground of the boat's wake, and playing catch with a piece of kelp in their snouts. Their tittering attracted Arisa's attention. She came to the stern and took videos of them. "They're a good sign, aren't they?" she shouted up at me, but I waved her off.

It is not she who will be risking her life looking for some mystical seaweed.

Before I was prepared for it, we soon arrived on the jade green shores of Batutara. On seeing the volcano up close, coughing plumes of ash and smoke into the dark, grainy clouds above, fear crept up in me. Worse, the more time I spent on the boat with Arisa—who was refreshing my memory of how to use a mask, a pair of fins, a rebreather and even the white wetsuit she had prepared for me—the more scared I felt. It started innocently enough, as mild tremors in my fingers and toes, but grew to a spine-rattling chill that felt as though it extended right down to my groin.

"Are you listening to me, child?"

I wasn't. I was more aware of my heartbeat pounding in my temples and my throat tightening in dread than anything else.

"I need to tell you something before you go into the water." I didn't respond. I was busy trying my hardest to conceal my fear, and failing. "Marli never wished this life for you."

"I know."

"Yes, so... Couldn't you say that you chose this life for yourself, Rumi?" Arisa's face was so close to mine, I could see the flakes of dry skin around the edges of her mouth and along the line of her silvery white hair. I didn't want to trust anything more that she said, but on this wide expanse of ocean, above the place where Ibu was possibly last alive, she was my only friend. "You must know that, even though your mother was the more experienced freediver, you are better. She always said that you were faster and smarter, and could hold your breath for longer. I don't know why Marli wanted to stop you from becoming a freediver, but you are her natural successor. Her future."

Although it didn't sound like Ibu at all, I wanted to believe Arisa. I wanted to feel that, as I finally stepped into the ocean and submerged, it would be an adventure—not an obligation to either Arisa or Ibu, or a mere reckless endeavour. At the very least, the ocean's warm, wet embrace felt familiar. The cavernous silence in my ears soothed me, while I became more composed and accustomed to its enveloping pressure around my head, my chest. Stretching to my full length, I used my arms and legs to start my descent.

Drop.

Kick.

Glide.

Stroke.

Four steps were all Ibu had needed to teach me about freediving. Forget about breathing or being human. And as I descended the depths of the ocean, aided by but not reliant on Arisa's rebreather, I etched those four steps into the recesses of my mind.

The first thing I noticed about the waters surrounding Batutara was what looked almost like mist. I wasn't sure if it was from the gases released by some undersea magma flow or from the coral spawn of the nearby reef. But while I saw countless species of fish, crustaceans and algae, there was nothing like what Ibu had found. I swam purposefully but patiently along the rocky and uneven shelf of sea, until inspiration struck me.

What if the seaweed Ibu found contained both green and red algae characteristics? Couldn't it be a new species? What if it can control whether it photosynthesises in sunlight or the blue light penetrating deeper into the sea?

In an instant, I looked for a drop in the ocean—a crack, a fissure—where sunlight could penetrate, but only teasingly. Gradually, I did manage to notice a glimmer in the corner of my eye through Arisa's mask and headed straight for it. It felt like a sign from Ibu. A clue. When I discovered that it was a just a small, transparent section of plastic, my hopes deflated.

In its former life, it could have been important—a protective cover for food or medicine—but down here, it was fodder. Fodder for whales and bottom feeders. Fodder for bacteria...and *algae*.

Following the trail of plastic, I went farther along the shelf to the edge of the coral reef, and came across an underwater channel teeming with plastic. The sheer amount of plastic in between these layers of dark, maroon-hued rock caused it to glisten like

a river of aquamarines when sunlight bounced off it. I imagined that a kind of deep undertow current had formed to compensate for the waves approaching Batutara's shoreline, which then drew in all this plastic and trash, and even marine life, straight down into this stream.

It looked as though, over time, a strange kind of sea habitat had developed and thrived inside it. But as the opening of the channel was so constricted and shallow, I knew I would have to leave behind all of Arisa's diving equipment just to explore it.

I scanned the jugged rocks for more signs that Ibu could have been here, but didn't need to search far—Ibu's solar-powered wrist tracker was sitting just on top of it. I picked it up, and it died, with its final flash in muted white and blue telling me that it had, at least, communicated with Arisa's boat. This, I supposed, marked my point of no return.

I bit hard onto the mouthpiece of the rebreather. With every inhalation filling my lungs, I relived every dive Ibu had ever taken me on all through the sixteen years of my life. Once I was ready, I abandoned everything that Arisa had given me to drop down to the bottom of the underwater channel. At this depth of about seventy meters, it almost felt like I was flying—like I was gliding weightless into the heart of the ice-cold sea. It made me forget that my chest was collapsing, and every inch of my body was being pummelled by pressure, which caused me to drop, drop, drop into the belly of the reef.

I didn't fight it.

I felt it flow over me, gently pushing me to walk along the sea floor strewn with plastic, as I continued to look for the next clue that Ibu had seen.

CONTRIBUTORS

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