

**“These heartfelt stories are keenly drawn with
an unpretentious, empathetic eye.”**

—Cyril Wong, award-winning author of *This Side of Heaven*

Eternal Summer of My Homeland

Agnes Chew



“Richly atmospheric, *Eternal Summer of My Homeland* hums with buried grief and secret wonder. Moment by moment, Chew deftly interweaves these keenly observed portraits of Singapore with the luminous interiors of her characters’ hearts. This is a collection to savour.”

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“These heartfelt stories bear the familiar tropes of our island city life—our ubiquitous airport, the unspoken impact of urban development, class difference, corporate pragmatism, foreign labour, climate change—and are keenly drawn with an unpretentious, empathetic eye.”

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THIS SIDE OF HEAVEN

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Cover design by Annisa Lintang Suminar

Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
www.epigram.sg

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These pieces were originally published (in either slightly or significantly different form) in the following venues:

- “When What Is Linear Meanders” as “Abnormality” in *Bosphorus Review of Books*, July 2021
“All We Are at the End Is Ash” as “What We Are” in *Ricepaper Magazine*, 5 April 2021
“For One Minute on Stage” as “Braces” in *Litbreak Magazine*, 8 August 2022
“Home” in *Wildness* no. 30, August 2022
“Diary of an Employee” in *époque press é-zine* no. 12, November 2022
“Did You Know” as “Letter to My Unborn Child” in *Necessary Fiction*, 15 February 2023
“Don’t Be Foolish” in *QLRS* vol. 20 no. 3, July 2021

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data

Name: Chew, Agnes, 1989–
Title: Eternal summer of my homeland / Agnes Chew.
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2023.
Identifier(s): ISBN 978-981-51-0504-9 (paperback)
ISBN 978-981-51-0505-6 (ebook)
Subjects: 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 author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First edition, May 2023.

Eternal Summer of My Homeland

Agnes Chew

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EPIGRAM



*for my family,
in Singapore and in Germany*

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GARDEN CITY

HUI SHAN WAS about to put down the sage-green phone when the distant sigh of her father's voice resounded in her ear.

"Pa?" she said. "Are you okay? I've been calling you all afternoon."

He grunted, his tone barren of affection.

She wondered where he could have gone. As far as Hui Shan was aware, her retired father had no friends. Her mother used to be his sole companion, but since her passing four months ago, he had become even more reticent. Questions began sprouting up in her head, but she willed herself to suppress them. "Dinner together this Sunday? We can go to that restaurant you like, the one with the roast duck."

Another grunt. Another one-word reply.

"We'll pick you up at 5.30pm?"

She was granted a final grunt, then a click. Each felt like a splinter puncturing her skin. At least it was affirmative, she told herself.

Hui Shan returned the receiver to its cradle. At once, the

baby began to bawl. She hastened to the cot and put her son to her swollen breast, wincing as he began to suckle. But no milk flowed. He let out a wail. She felt her cheeks turning the same shade of crimson as his. She tried to recall the tips the nurse at the hospital had given her, but her mind was a thicket of tangential thoughts.

Only when she noticed fat droplets falling onto her son's ample cheeks did Hui Shan realise she was crying. She watched as her tears merged with his before trickling down the folds of his barely discernible neck. Her mother would have known what to do. If her mother were here, the baby would be soothed. Herbal soup would be simmering on the stove. The apartment would be free of soiled diapers, puddles of vomit, clumps of frizzy, unwashed hair. No plants would be wilting in their terracotta pots.

The doorbell rang. Hui Shan looked down at her red-faced son, at the front of her floral top flaring out to expose her bare chest. The doorbell continued to ring. She grabbed a stained brown towel and threw it over herself, baby and all. Someone was now rapping at the door with blatant impatience. The moment Hui Shan pulled it open, the surprise on the delivery man's face reminded her what a sight she must have looked. With her free hand, she wiped the snot from her face before signing the delivery receipt. It was a package for Kenneth.

Hui Shan tossed her husband's parcel on the coffee table. Months ago, she would have been mortified to be caught in such a situation. Now, she lacked the energy for

mortification. Pain shot through her body. Her baby needed his mother. She longed for her own mother. With the baby still howling in her arms, Hui Shan collapsed on the couch and stared into the abyss of her son's dark, open mouth.

Hui Shan's father made his way up to the eleventh storey, entered the flat and locked both the gate and door. After tugging at the door handle to make sure the lock was secure, he was about to sit in his old rattan chair when the phone rang. It was Hui Shan, reporting that they were on their way to his place. Confusion creased the skin between his eyebrows. As if she could see his expression, she reminded him about the dinner that he had forgotten. Drained from the exertion of the day, he sank into his chair and considered cancelling on her.

But as he opened his mouth, he felt his late wife's gaze from the photograph on the shelf. It had been taken during Hui Shan's wedding three years ago. In it, his wife's eyes were bright, smiling, urging him to go. The eyes of the woman to whom he had pledged his devotion. Despite his reluctance, he submitted to her wishes—as he had faithfully done for the past fifty-three years, since the day she moved into the attap house next to his, sharing first the same lane, school and playmates, and then, eventually, their lives.

Fifty-three years, he thought to himself as he put down the phone. Where had she gone, and could he follow?



“I wonder if Pa’s okay,” Hui Shan said.

“What do you mean?” Kenneth asked as he steered out of the car park, his eyes fixed on the road.

“He lost weight,” she said, pinching the bridge of her nose. “And he didn’t eat much again today, did he? Even though we ordered his favourite roast duck.” She had had to leave the table for the most part of the meal, for the baby wouldn’t stop crying and refused to be pacified. Hui Shan glanced at Kenneth, who had yet to reply. The car entered the main road, then slowed down before an amber light. The tail lights of the car in front of them cast a red glow over the lines on his forehead.

“He’s probably still getting over your mum’s passing,” Kenneth said when the car came to a stop. “Give him some time.”

Hui Shan dug her nails into the undersides of her thighs. Indignation filled her eyes. She tilted her chin upwards to prevent it from streaming down her cheeks. For a while, they remained silent as the car accelerated and entered the highway. In the rear seat, the baby gurgled, now demanding nothing of her.

“It’s tough for me, too,” she murmured at last.

Kenneth placed a hand over her lap. “I know,” he said. “I know.”



The next morning, Hui Shan’s father was back on the open patch of land. Tirelessly, he worked for fifty, maybe sixty, minutes. His greyish-white singlet, streaked with soil, clung to his ribs. Pausing for a moment, he pulled off his top, wrung out the sweat and began to survey the verdure.

A smile crept onto his face as his eyes fell on the lush, sprawling vegetation. His pandan, lemongrass, chilli padi, Thai basil and curry leaf plants—their leaves were so green, so glorious. His wife would be so pleased, if only she were here. With calloused fingers, he caressed the splendid blue petal of a butterfly pea flower. “Piao liang,” he murmured to himself. *Beautiful.*

He bent to pluck stray weeds as he went. Soon, he reached the grove of fruit saplings. He beamed as he envisioned the plump papayas, guavas and bananas that would hang from their branches one day. Whistling to himself, he continued to work in the dappled light—pruning, watering, planting. So absorbed was he in his tasks that the hours of the afternoon slipped by without him realising it.

As the weeks passed, Hui Shan realised that there was a limit to how often she could bear to dial her father’s number knowing there would be no answer. The frequency of her calls and visits gradually decreased. At times, Hui Shan wondered if her father noticed. But she would remind herself that he also never showed any appreciation of her efforts to carve out time for him as she simultaneously tried to keep a

baby alive and a household running, among a million other things. She had never shared a close relationship with her father, but it was only now, in the aftermath of her mother's passing, that Hui Shan realised how her mother had been the essential rope that had bound them all together. With her mother gone, she felt herself becoming swiftly unmoored.

Day after day, Hui Shan's father found himself returning to the open patch of land. Yet before his wife passed, he had been content simply to be a spectator as she assembled two neat rows of terracotta pots by their doorstep. In them she would plant seeds that germinated and bore herbs and vegetables under her tender touch. Being the extroverted one between them, his wife would often offer the fruits of her labour to neighbours, relatives and friends. After her funeral, with the plants no longer blossoming, the people had gradually stopped coming by.

Back when he was working as a security guard at a nearby condominium, he would sometimes return home after his shifts to see a sparkle in his wife's eyes. Then, even before stepping into the flat, he would know what was on the dining table: tantalising dishes made with her freshly picked harvest. Sambal kang kong. Stir-fried ladies' fingers spiced with chilli padi. Rice scented with pandan leaves. Butterfly pea flower tea, which his wife liked to serve with lemon wedges; a mere squeeze of citrus was capable of conjuring swirls of violet in the pale blue tea—a chemical reaction that

marvelled him only because of the way it marvelled her.

His wife had been a sensible, loyal woman who had a knack for stretching dollars out of cents. In all their years together, she had never asked for more than what was needed, never once disparaged him or complained about the little he brought home. Even when he lost his job three years ago, a year short of his planned retirement, there had been no trace of resentment in her face when he relayed the news to her. Instead, she told him to embrace the expanse of time it granted them.

It was then when they began going on long walks in Clementi Forest. They usually set off early, after having their morning kopi and butter crackers, before the heat of the day became too much to bear. Their three-room flat was about ten minutes away from the main road. From there, it took them another twenty minutes before they reached the fringe of the forest. Surrounded by foliage that grew denser, richer, wilder the further they walked, they found the clamour of the city falling away. What remained was the bright song of birds and cicadas, the soft whisper of rustling leaves, the steady rhythm of their footsteps. Arm in arm, they would walk alongside the trees. Often, they would venture where there were no marked paths, where there was no other human being in sight. Sometimes they would talk, reminiscing about their childhoods in the kampung. Other times, they remained quiet, lost in their own thoughts. Each time, he would have the fleeting feeling that they had found an Eden, one that belonged only to them both.

Although their forest walks were nothing illicit, they mentioned it to no one, not even their daughter. When Hui Shan called, his wife would say they had been out in the neighbourhood. He had never asked her why she kept the details vague. Now he wondered if it had anything to do with the words she had uttered one showery morning. The details of that day remained vivid in his mind. The sky had been sown with clouds when they awoke, but still they decided to go on their walk. After reaching the heart of the forest, a light rain began to fall around them. Under the shoulder of a large tembusu tree, they stood huddled together, feeling the gentle spray on their faces, inhaling the smell of rain on bark. He closed his eyes while his wife kept hers open. “How nice it’d be if we had a garden of our own,” she murmured to herself, a longing she didn’t realise he had heard.

In the middle of the nursery, Hui Shan stood in a daze. She had just got off the phone with Kenneth, who insisted he had to go on an urgent business trip for three whole weeks. A desperate longing for her mother rose within her. Hui Shan had never imagined that her mother would leave her so early. Her mother had only been sixty-one when she passed. Had her mother lived three more months, she would have been able to carry her grandson. She would have become a grandmother, and seen her only child become a mother. Eleven months had elapsed since. Still, Hui Shan couldn’t

come to terms with her mother’s life having been snatched so cruelly away from her.

Hui Shan clutched the side of the cot, her knuckles turning white against the grain of the wood. She watched as her son shrieked—his lungs expanding with air, with life that her mother no longer had. Her son was turning seven months old in three days, days that her mother no longer had. Hui Shan’s head throbbed. She tried to feed him, checked his diaper, felt his forehead for a fever. She rocked him in her arms, popped a pacifier in his mouth, sang him lullabies, making up the words as she went along. But nothing worked. The pacifier, smothered with spit, lay abandoned at her feet. She had no idea what it was the child wanted. She no longer had the strength to be the sole interpreter of his distress.

“Shut up,” Hui Shan said, taking herself by surprise.

For a moment, her son stopped screaming. His large, round eyes stared at her in bewilderment. Teardrops perched on his lashes. Drool trickled down his chin. She lacked the energy to wipe it away. He blinked, then resumed the training of his vocal cords. She gritted her teeth. The screeching continued.

“I said, shut up!” she yelled at the child.

Hui Shan left the room, slamming the door behind her.

Despair welled up in her eyes. She crouched down by the kitchen cabinet, tore open a box of chocolates and began jamming pralines into her mouth, one for each regret. She wished she were still working a corporate job. She wished

she still possessed her willowy figure. She wished she hadn't agreed to care for the baby on her own. She wished Kenneth would help out more with the interminable cycle of thankless chores. She wished her father wouldn't be so aloof. She wished her mother were still here. She wished she were a child again. She almost wished she hadn't been fertile.

Hui Shan's fingers reached out for yet another praline, only to realise that she had emptied the box. A muffled sob escaped from her lips. Unsteadily, she got to her feet.

As though she had suddenly regained her sense of hearing, the cries of her child again reached her ears. Hui Shan rushed into the nursery, pulled the whimpering child to her chest and whispered, over and over, "Sorry, baby, Mummy's so sorry."

Hui Shan's father found it hard to believe that nearly a year had passed since the accident that had stolen his wife from him. He still remembered the day with piercing clarity. His wife had gone to the wet market early that morning, wanting to buy fresh ingredients to cook Hui Shan's favourite dishes. She said their daughter had sounded down when they spoke over the phone, and she wanted to bring some food over to their daughter's place to cheer her up. After finishing her rounds at the market, his wife was waiting to cross the main road ten minutes away from their flat when a lorry crashed first into the railings lining the pavement, then into her.

He didn't know how he had made it through that initial

period following his wife's passing. Incapacitated by grief, he had lain in bed, unable to sleep or eat. Remorse coursed through his veins. If only he had accompanied her that morning, he might have been able to push her out of harm's way. If only she hadn't spoken to their daughter the day before, she might not have decided to go to the market. If only, if only, if only. The possibilities of what could have been paralysed him.

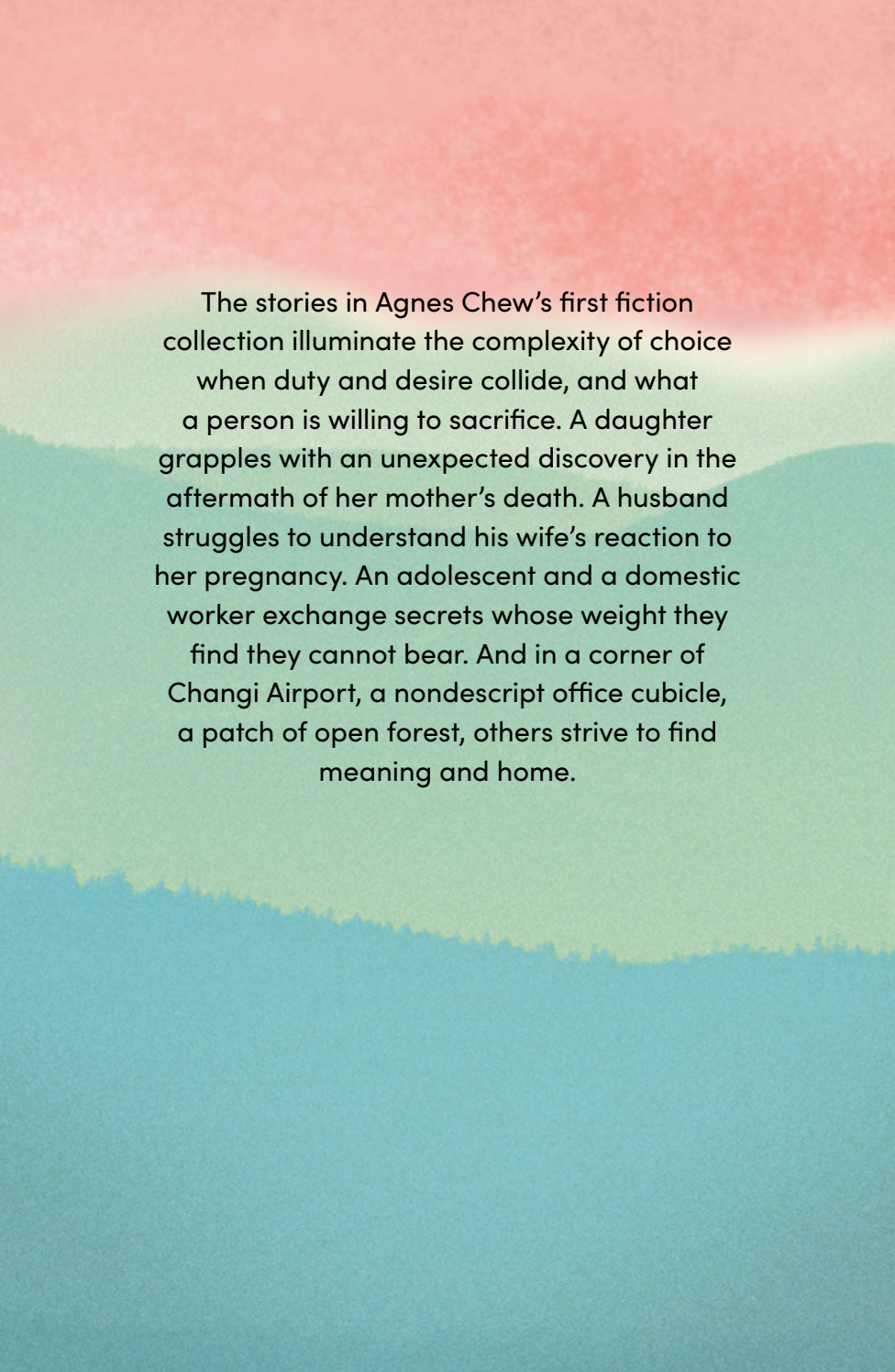
He barely registered Hui Shan's visits, ignored her pleas for him to get out of bed. He couldn't bear to look her in the eye. Their daughter, who had her mother's eyes. Their daughter, for whom her mother had lost her life. Only occasionally, when he had no choice but to respond to his body's needs, would he climb out of bed. He would then collapse into his rattan chair, the matching one next to his, forlorn. He would stare at the Styrofoam boxes of food Hui Shan had brought him, thinking about the dishes his wife had planned to cook on the day of her untimely departure, dishes he could never taste again. With a palm on her chair, he, riddled with bitterness, would weep and weep.

He might still have carried on that way, had it not been for his wife, who entered his dreams one evening. When he roused, it was early morning. Outside, the sky was beginning to fill with light. For the first time in weeks, he took a shower and changed into a fresh set of clothes. He sat next to his wife's rattan chair and dipped butter crackers into hot coffee, feeling the thin biscuit soften and nearly disintegrate before placing it in his mouth. By the time he

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Agnes Chew is the author of *The Desire for Elsewhere* (2016). Her work has appeared in *Necessary Fiction*, *Litbreak Magazine* and *NonBinary Review*, among others, and her story, “Oceans Away from My Homeland”, was shortlisted for the 2023 Commonwealth Short Story Prize. She holds a Master’s degree in international development from the London School of Economics; her prize-winning dissertation, which examines inequality and societal well-being in Singapore, was featured in *Singapore Policy Journal*. Born and raised in Singapore, she is currently based in Germany.





The stories in Agnes Chew's first fiction collection illuminate the complexity of choice when duty and desire collide, and what a person is willing to sacrifice. A daughter grapples with an unexpected discovery in the aftermath of her mother's death. A husband struggles to understand his wife's reaction to her pregnancy. An adolescent and a domestic worker exchange secrets whose weight they find they cannot bear. And in a corner of Changi Airport, a nondescript office cubicle, a patch of open forest, others strive to find meaning and home.