

FRIGHT



WINNERS OF THE
2022 STORYTEL EPIGRAM HORROR PRIZE

FRIGHT



EDITED BY GWEE LI SUI, ANNALIZA BAKRI AND JASON ERIK LUNDBERG

FRIGHT

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EPIGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

Gwee Li Sui
Annaliza Bakri
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GHOST STORIES and tales of terror have a long verbal and written tradition in Singapore. Horror is also one of the most popular genres for today's readers; the longest-running, continuous Singaporean book series (regardless of genre) is Russell Lee's *True Singapore Ghost Stories*, which released its twenty-sixth volume in 2020 and shows no signs of stopping. This is the case even though horror as a literary genre is often thought of as the black sheep of "respectable" literature, sneered at by those with elitist tendencies.

Spine-chilling stories are also extremely popular for listeners; the audiobook distributor Storytel AB, our prize sponsor, has claimed horror as one of the most streamed genres they offer on their service. And audio storytelling hearkens back to that feeling of sitting around a campfire, the flickering firelight on everyone's faces and total darkness beyond, while being scared witless by nothing more than words and verbal performance.

So we present you with *Fright*, a new annual anthology series of terrifying local fiction by Singaporean citizens and permanent residents. This debut volume showcases the winners and finalists of the 2022 Storytel Epigram Horror Prize, and celebrates all subsets of the horror genre, told with a Singaporean twist.

For our inaugural prize, we received sixty-eight entries over the three-month reading period, split exactly fifty-fifty between men and women, with ages ranging from 20–64. The 2022 SEHP carried a monetary award of S\$3,000 for the top winning entry, S\$2,000 for second prize, S\$1,000 for third prize, and S\$500 consolation prizes for the remaining eight finalists. In addition to all eleven chosen entries published in the book in your hands, they have also been adapted for audiobook streaming production by Storytel. (Visit www.epigram.sg/sehp for more information.)



Congratulations to the top three prize winners: “Breakwater” by Kelly Leow, “Hantu Hijau” by Dave Chua and “Under the Banana Tree” by Dew M. Chaiyanara. The judging was a fascinating and lengthy discussion on the merits of the eleven finalists. And even when the three of us had differing opinions on our top choices, we were able to narrow these down to stories we all agreed were winners; and of these, we were all unanimous in which constituted first, second and third prize. All the finalists displayed a great understanding of what makes a compelling scary story, but these three were highly original, deeply unnerving and exceptional in their subject matter.



THE GENERAL'S WIFE

Meihan Boey

“YOU WILL BE the General’s wife.”

My mother looked at me, for the first time, with a certain softness in her eyes. She was a tall, forbidding, extremely beautiful woman, in her powerful middle age, mistress of a vast household. The only canker in her soul, for all these years, was me—the fourth daughter.

Four is an unlucky number. It signifies death. My mother had six surviving children, and I was the last. After two sons, her womb’s energies began to cool, and she produced daughter

after daughter, to her great disgust. I am the fourth and last daughter, receptacle of her wrathful irritation at fate. To make matters worse, I was ugly, with crooked shoulders and a pockmarked face. She despaired of ever being rid of me.

Then word went round that the General needed a wife.

I knew nothing of the man simply called the General. But I knew about his home. The General's home was on an island, all by itself. It was built on the edge of a cliff that dropped steeply into the sea; behind it was all jungle, no villages, no neighbours. The General had bought it from a British man, a land surveyor who had since left Singapore, but that was all anybody knew of it.

To me, that house was the stuff of dreams. From the edge of Johnston's Pier, which I passed by often while attending to chores, the General's house on the island was just visible, a pale spot against the deep green of the jungle and the grey of the granite cliffs. The island was tiny, and to me it looked a splendid abode, silent and still, and far away from fearsome mothers, rude siblings, heavy-handed senior maids and screaming smelly infants not my own.

The General's housekeeper, Li-Soh, paid a fisherman to row her to the mainland every week, so she could buy supplies from the wet market. We knew of her, but nobody I knew had ever met the General in person. It was believed he must be a strange creature; that he must hide sinister secrets, living there alone in the white man's house. He was probably old and ugly; perhaps mad.

But it did not matter. I was to marry him, so the matchmaker said—he had chosen me, sight unseen.

"Why?" I ventured to ask.

The frost came back into my mother's eyes. "It doesn't matter," she said sharply. "The matchmaker did well by you—recommended you, despite everything—and you have a husband at last. That is all you need to know. Now pack up your things. You shall go to your husband in two days."



Ordinarily, a Chinese wedding occurs over two or three days, sometimes more. Gifts are exchanged, the bride is dressed in red and veiled, the groom must play games with her sisters, and carry his new wife off on his back, under a red umbrella. None of this was done for me. I was given my bridal gifts—clean sheets, a spittoon, a comb, soap and face powder—and told to carry them to my husband myself.

I begged to bring one of the maids my mother called "the little fools" with me—the household's scrub maids, many of them slow of learning, who earned their keep with menial tasks. My mother preferred them, because they did not spy or gossip. I was good friends with many of them. They were the only ones who never shouted at me or beat me.

"Let me have any one you do not like," I begged my mother. "The slowest one will do."

So she let me bring Siu Sek, the one she disliked most,

because she considered Siu Sek too pretty. Siu Sek's blank, doll-like face and gaping rosy mouth showed she did not understand her instructions, but I was so grateful to have her that I wept on her shoulder.

Shortly after, we packed our things, and were sent away by the back door. Nobody saw us off.

DAY 1

On a grey and drizzly morning, we were taken by rickshaw to the jetty, and a sampan ferried us and our things to the island.

An old man was waiting for us there; he loaded our things into a rusty old rickshaw, and we sat on top of them, then were dragged along the only road on the island, winding up the steep hill to the house. It was—oh! so steep, and sometimes Siu Sek and I had to hold on to each other to stop from falling out, but the old man didn't seem to feel the weight or the hill at all, and by and by we reached our new home.

To my eyes, this close, it was a strange and lovely home. It reminded me of the schools and churches in the centre of town—white walls, black timber-framed windows and steeply pitched roofs with clay tiles. The path led into a large open courtyard with brick paving.

The house was built on two levels, and the jungle closed in around it from all sides except where it faced the sea, the edge of its veranda dropping down into a high cliff. When we first saw it from the sampan, on the sea journey across, the house

gave the weird impression that it was about to leap.

Li-Soh was waiting to meet us. I was familiar with her from seeing her in the marketplace. She was a very thin, bony, grey woman with a sharp face and an unpleasant mouth. Still, she was not unkind. She nodded to me and addressed me as Mistress, which I found very strange.

Then she looked at Siu Sek and said, "Oh, there are two of you."

I explained that Siu Sek was there as my maid, and that she was slow but hardworking and gentle.

Li-Soh seemed to have no reaction to this. I could see she was observing my crooked shoulders, but whether with pity or revulsion I could not tell.

"We have very few servants here," she said eventually. "I am the housekeeper. Abang, who pulled your rickshaw, comes once a week from the next island, to help me with the heavy work, and I do the cooking and general housekeeping myself. The Master is seldom home."

Not knowing what else to say, I murmured, "I see."

There was a silence, then Li-Soh, realising I had nothing intelligent to add, crisply instructed, "Follow me—I will show you to your room."

To see inside this house was a culmination of my secret day-dreams. It did not disappoint. Clean, bright and sparsely furnished, it had many little rooms and a dark hallway with a carpet. Unused rattan furniture, kept scrupulously clean, lined that hallway.

We passed into the main room, and this one was beautiful. There was a fireplace built on one end, which was a strange thing to have in the tropics; a sliding door and many windows opened out to the veranda, through which breeze and sunlight streamed in. More rattan chairs were gathered about the fireplace, as if waiting for a merry party to sit down and start passing drinks around.

And it was oh, so quiet! So wonderfully cool, calm and quiet!

I heard Siu Sek gasp over my shoulder. She had been trained, over many years, not to exclaim when something startled or delighted her, so instead she would pinch herself sharply to keep from making noise. She pinched herself now, and I said, "It's okay, Siu Sek. Here, you may speak." But she didn't understand me; she continued to pinch her own plump arm, though there was a broad grin on her face as she looked out at the view of brilliant blue sky and sea.

Li-Soh gave us a moment to admire the view—perhaps she was proud of it, as many housekeepers are of their masters' homes—then ushered us up the stairs.

Another dim hallway lined with low doors, one of which turned out to be my room. It was neat, clean, and well-appointed, with a much larger bed than I'd ever slept in, and a window that framed another beautiful view.

"Thank you," I said earnestly to Li-Soh, who nodded impassively. Then I noticed it was a single bed.

"Um," I said hesitantly, "does the General... sleep elsewhere?"

"He has another room, to which he will summon you if you want you," said Li-Soh. "You will not see him yet. He is away on business and will return next week. He wanted you to be well-settled once he is back. We will sign the final papers then."

Sign the final papers seemed to me a cold way to express a marriage, but I kept quiet.

It was hard to sleep that first night. The sound of the sea was loud outside my window, and the room, despite its loveliness, was still strange to me.

DAY 2

In the morning, I woke before dawn, as did Siu Sek—it was difficult to be rid of the habits of a lifetime, although I was now supposedly mistress of the house and could sleep as long as I wished. When I awoke, Siu Sek was already in my chamber, putting out my clothes and sweeping up the room; she then stood still and waited for instructions, uncertain of what to do next.

I decided we might as well go down; I got dressed, then took Siu Sek's hand, pretending to lead her, but I just wanted her near me. We ventured out, and were relieved to see a light in the main room.

Li-Soh was there already, setting out breakfast. It was a more sumptuous breakfast than I'd ever seen—rice porridge, pickled vegetables, fried fish, salted and preserved eggs. She

nodded at us as we entered, unsurprised. “You are a little early, but breakfast is ready. Come, Mistress, sek fun,” she said formally—*please eat*.

I was nervous. Although I was the daughter of a grand house, I had never before eaten at the family dinner table. I was used to sitting with the lesser daughters-in-law and the little children at a low table out in the backyard; we had spent most of our time feeding and minding the babies, and stealing a bite here and there for ourselves. I had never before sat by myself at a table spread out especially for me. My hands trembled when I took up the bowl, and I apologised profusely when I accidentally dropped a piece of pickled cabbage from my chopsticks, as if I was not the matriarch of the house who had every right to expect to be cleaned up after. The food was delicious, but it was hard for me to enjoy it.

After breakfast, I cleared my own plates because I was used to it; I carried them into the kitchen myself, trailing after Siu Sek.

Li-Soh was not pleased to see me. “Mistress, this is not your place,” she said sharply. “I will train your maid. Do not fear that I will beat her or scold her. There is no work here that needs to be rushed, and she has plenty of time to learn.”

“Oh, it is not that—I fully trust you, Li-Soh,” I said hastily. “It’s just...I do not know what to do. I have always minded the children at home, and fed the chickens, and did the cooking and washing and...”

I subsided, realising abruptly that these were not suitable admissions for a new mistress of a grand house to make. But Li-Soh was as impassive as always.

“Go and take a walk,” she suggested. “Bring a basket, gather some fruit or flowers. Come back before it gets hot. You do not want to darken your skin.”

I was glad for the suggestion, and felt better once I was outside. The jungle grew thick and lush around the house, and the gentle rush of the sea was comforting. We lived almost on the edge of the cliff, but a flight of stairs had been cut into the granite rock face, which led down to the sea and a personal jetty, where there were two sampans gently bobbing on the waves. The tranquillity made my heart ache with gladness.

I decided to forage and make myself a little useful. Although I was not familiar with every plant or animal in the jungle, I recognised the more obvious things that were good to eat—wild bananas and papayas, edible fungi. There were a number of large grey monkeys racing about the branches overhead, and I knew that if I watched and followed them, I would probably find more fruit trees.

By and by, following the monkeys, I came to the banks of a babbling spring, with cold, clear water tumbling over smooth grey rocks. A few banana trees grew here, their fruit still a sour green. Under one of the trees, I saw an elderly lady, grey-haired and bent, with a large basket of banana leaves roped to her back. She looked up when I approached, her mouth red

with betel-nut juice; she carried a well-maintained parang to cut leaves with.

I spoke in standard Malay to her: “Makcik, do you live here?”

She replied, also in Malay, though it sounded a little different to my city-dweller’s ears; more sing-songy and lilting. “We live on the other island. Nobody lives here but the General and Li-Soh. I come here to harvest fruit and leaves, because Li-Soh knows me of old. Who are you?”

I found myself reluctant to tell her that I was the General’s wife. Why, I could not say; perhaps I just wanted a friendly conversation, and I knew the old lady would not stop to chat if she knew I was supposedly the mistress of the house (and, by default, the island, whose banana leaves she was harvesting). I replied, “My name is Siu Sek. I am a maid, from the mainland. I have come to help the General’s new wife.”

The makcik looked surprised, then laughed. “New wife! He is marrying again, is he?”

Again? “Has he been married before?”

“Oh, yes, but it was long ago. When I was as young as you. She died.”

“He must have been very sad.”

The makcik shrugged, and spat a gob of red betel juice on the ground. “Tell your new mistress to be good and obedient, and nothing bad will happen to her,” she advised.

Before I could question her any further, she waved her

parang at my basket. “Are you looking for mushrooms? Li-Soh likes mushrooms, I know. I found some just now. Come with me.”

Her name was Cik Mun. She was at least seventy years old, and had many children and grandchildren, most of whom had left their village and gone to the mainland to work for foreign people, a decision which Cik Mun dismissed with a scornful wave of her hand.

“The sea gives us everything we need,” she said, while poking at the ground with her parang to reveal hidden treasures—dusky black or creamy yellow mushrooms. “I just welcomed my seventh grandchild, but she is ill. My daughter has just come home from the mainland with the babe, to see if our pawang can help. I knew it would come to this, you know. All this running around after foreigners, wanting a big house, wanting fancy clothes. Honour the sea and praise God, and you will want for nothing.”

She showed me as well where to find the fruit trees before the monkeys stripped them—papayas, mangos, bananas, durians. She showed me where kangkong grew, profusely, on the banks of the little stream just before it wound its way to the sea. She showed me where cockles could be found, where wild chickens and ducks roosted, and how to scoop little fish from various rock pools, good for frying with garlic and chilli.

“Get one of these,” she told me, waving her parang, before she took me back to the path that led home (how strange to think

of that wonderful house as “home”). “They are very useful.”

“I don’t know where to get one.”

“I will bring you one from our village,” she said. “You can pay me with rice dumplings.”

Cik Mun did not say goodbye. She merely turned off away from the path, and vanished into the jungle.

DAY 3

“What food would you like to eat next week?” Li Soh asked me, on the third day. “I will go to the market.”

“Oh, let me go to the mainland and help you shop,” I said enthusiastically. “The vendors know me at the market. I get good deals.”

Li-Soh frigidly shook her head. “The mistress does not do the grocery shopping. Stay here. I will bring your maid, if you give her a list of things you want.”

“But I—”

“It is unseemly. Stay home. We will bring you all you need.”

I agreed, with much reluctance.

I thought I would be lonely when they were gone. To my surprise, however, I felt somehow free—lighter, happier, as if unburdened by a great load I hadn’t even known I was carrying. I suddenly felt sad that I would soon have a husband to obey and cater to. How wonderful it would be, I thought wistfully, if this house was only mine—if every day was as free and light and easy as this, in peaceful solitude!

I moved from room to room, and marvelled at how easy it was to walk with confidence when I knew there was no one to see me. Nobody called to me, no disapproving eyes glared at me, no mewling child demanded my attention, no spiteful older sister would bear down upon me with the hard side of her slipper. The house seemed to welcome my curious exploration into its nooks and crannies, every corner flooded with sunlight as the day wore on.

I decided, on a whim, to open every door, explore every cupboard, hunt for keys to every lock. After all, was I not mistress of the house? Did I not have every right?

I started in the kitchen, of course. Although Li-Soh had gone to get more groceries, it seemed to me that the larder was quite full. Apart from staples like rice and salt, there were multiple jars of various pickled and salted vegetables, meats, eggs, herbs; dried mushrooms and fish, shelled peanuts already roasted in sugar, even biscuits well-sealed in glass jars, presumably meant as gifts, for they were carefully wrapped in red paper decorated with the double-happiness wedding symbol. The colour was a bit faded, as if they had been made a while ago.

There was candy too; I found sugared hawthorn wafers, my favourite sweet, wrapped in pink paper. Li-Soh must have also had a weakness for them. Feeling curiously elated, I unwrapped two packets, and began to eat them as I continued wandering the house.

I found I was becoming cheerful. I decided I might as well dust and sweep, while I was exploring. The exercise, and the act of doing some good in the house, was making me feel better. Under dusty sheets, I uncovered some good, solid rosewood furniture, heavy tables of cool gleaming marble, beautiful embroidered screens and lovely mirrors with frames of inlaid mother-of-pearl. So beautiful! Perhaps they had been my predecessor's, and the General had covered them up, heartbroken, after her death. I gazed into the mirrors, into my own plain, pockmarked face, and wondered if she had been beautiful.

I opened up room after room, cupboard after cupboard, making a number of curious discoveries. There was a lacquered box, carefully hidden, which I thought might hold jewellery; instead, inside was a carefully-preserved collection of feathers, from ordinary black and brown to vibrant yellow, red, blue. There were glass bottles that might have held perfume, except their contents did not smell at all pleasant. I found some men's clothes and shoes in an old wardrobe, which looked very much neglected—perhaps the General no longer wore these.

Then, abruptly, I came across a door that would not open.

It was a curious colour, something between yellow and green; it appeared green where the shadows fell upon it, but a muddy yellow in the light. It looked like it had been painted over many times, and rust spots clung to the hinges. It was also a different size from the other doors in the house; lower down, and narrower. It was very securely locked; even in touching

the door handle, I could feel the weight of the bolt behind it.

At first, I thought perhaps it was Li-Soh's room, and she had locked it before leaving. But no—her room was just off the kitchen; I had seen it, a neat and spartan little closet, with a bed and wardrobe and red spittoon. This room was in a rather dark corner; it looked like it should lead into nothing larger nor more important than a storeroom. So why was it locked?

I worked at the door handle a little. I rattled and shook it; I tried every key. It would not open. Finally I sighed and said, "I suppose you must be broken."

Then I heard, from behind the door, a horrible, rattling moan.

I leapt back, my heart in my throat. The sound did not come again, so I took one step closer...and another...

My blood turned to ice as I suddenly remembered the General's first wife...

"Siu Sek! Are you there?"

I had never been so glad to hear another human voice, calling to me from the front garden. I ran out, almost wild in my terror, and babbled utter nonsense at Cik Mun, who stood agog at the gate.

"Door...locked...voice...trapped..."

Cik Mun had brought me the parang she had promised. Giving my arm a sound pinch, she said sharply, "Pull yourself together. Is your mistress not home?"

It took me a while to remember that to Cik Mun, I was Siu

Sek, the maid. "No," I said, "she wanted to go to the mainland, and Li-Soh went with her."

"And you are alone, and went poking and prying, I suppose! You maids are all alike."

"But I heard—"

"Take this," she said, putting the parang in my hand. "You probably heard some poor animal, trapped in the storeroom and dying. Let us go look, and put it out of its misery, before you make yourself ill with silly imaginings."

I am nothing if not obedient; indeed, the relief of having someone tell me what to do was so great I began to silently cry. Cik Mun did not appear to notice, or if she did, she took it in her stride. "Show me," she commanded crisply, so I tremulously led her into the house.

She followed me to the yellow door, then stared at it, puzzled. "That is so small," she said, "it looks like a cupboard. You are sure you heard something inside?"

I nodded. Cik Mun rattled the door handle; she struck the door with her knuckles, then with the handle of her parang. Nothing happened. She tried inserting the blade of the parang in the crack in-between the door and the wall, but it would not go through. She poked and prodded, and was turning to me with an exasperated expression when we both heard it.

A long, low moan, rattling and rasping, behind the door.

Cik Mun jumped back. She let go of the parang, which remained jammed in the gap.

Then, very slowly, *the parang began to move.*

First, it just jerked, as if trying to work itself free. Then it began to slide, slowly, down the gap...slowly, slowly, making a harsh dry rasping sound as it scraped against the old wood.

And finally, it dropped to the ground with a rattle.

I wanted to scream, but my voice had vanished into the pit of my stomach. Cik Mun, however, was made of sterner stuff. She seized her parang from the ground, then shouted, "Oi! Whatever you are, this is not the place for you!"

The door went blank and silent.

"What are you? Why are you disturbing this poor servant-girl?"

Silence.

"I have to get out," I cried. "I cannot stay here. I must go." I turned and ran, blindly, out of the hallway, out of the house, out of the front garden, and into the jungle, where I collapsed in a state of absolute terror by the roots of a great banyan tree.

When Cik Mun found me, carrying her parang and looking grim, I cried out to her, "Take me with you. I cannot sleep here."

"Nonsense—where can I bring you? This is your home. Look, there is Li-Soh."

And indeed it was Li-Soh, coming up the path, her baskets full of good things. Behind her trailed Siu Sek, puffing with the weight of another big basket. Li-Soh paused at the strange sight of me blubbering under the banyan tree, Cik Mun brandishing her parang. "What is this?" she demanded.

Cik Mun said, without preamble, “Kak Li, your house is unclean. Tomorrow I will send our pawang to you.”

“Rubbish,” she snapped. “What foolishness have you been filling the girl’s head with?”

“The room,” I babbled. “The yellow door. The room.”

Li-Soh looked coldly at me. “Do you mean the prayer room?”

I only repeated, “The yellow door.” Siu Sek, distressed, had come to me now, and was making small comforting sounds, indicating I should stand up because my outfit was getting muddy.

I barely registered Li-Soh and Cik Mun talking together; hardly felt it as Siu Sek, with her strong arms, lifted me and half-dragged me back to the house. I could hardly resist her, though I dreaded re-crossing that threshold; when we reached the yellow door, I turned and buried my face in Siu Sek’s shoulder, not wanting to look at it.

I heard the chink of keys, the sound of a bolt being drawn and the squeak of hinges.

I peered over Siu Sek’s shoulder. The yellow door was open. Beyond was a small, dark room—not really a room, just a recess, in which sat an altar, heavily laden with offerings of fruit and joss sticks. On a tablet was a woman’s name in gold foil, and a small, oval, black-and-white photograph of a solemn young woman, whose presumably red-tinted lips looked like black bruises in the monochrome image.

More to the point—under the altar lay a large black cat.

“I lock Orgu in when I am not around, because he damages the furniture,” said Li-Soh frigidly. “He used to belong to the old mistress, so out of respect to her, we keep him. But he is not a friendly beast, and I am careful to keep him caged, which is why you have not seen him.” She moved her gaze to Cik Mun. “So unless your pawang wants to adopt a cat, I think you had best leave him alone.”

Cik Mun, however, was staring at the cat, whose large yellow eyes and bristling fur were certainly not inviting a friendly caress. I knew what she was thinking. Even if the cat could have made those noises—even if the cat could rattle the door handle—how could a cat slide a parang blade by its tip?

Finally, however, she shook her head. “It is not my house,” she said, “and it is none of my business. But Kak Li, if you need help, you know how to find me.”

She did not wait for Li-Soh to make a scornful response; in her usual abrupt manner, she simply turned on her heel and left, sweeping past me without a word.

“I am sorry,” I whispered to Li-Soh.

“What for? You are the mistress of the house. You have every right to open any door.” Li-Soh, as she spoke, was letting the cat out, and shooing it into the kitchen with an ungentle kick. “I only ask, in future, if you want to unlock a door, ask me for the key. Do not distress yourself with foolish imaginings, and rouse the whole neighbourhood. Cik Mun will have a

whole circus in here with rattlings and chantings and all sorts of unnecessary hue and cry.”

That night, I was grateful for the parang Cik Mun had brought me, which I now placed beneath my pillow, wrapped in cloth. It was not very large compared to Cik Mun’s—she did not expect me to chop through underbrush like she did, so it was clearly meant for harvesting fruit and chasing off monkeys. What I intended to use the parang for—what I thought I would be defending myself against—I did not stop to question.

DAY 4

I returned to the prayer room the next morning. I lit a joss stick at the altar, and offered it to my predecessor, whose name I read aloud from the tablet: Ching Li. I gazed hard at her face, so solemn; her eyes were small black dots, smeared with time and joss smoke.

“Sister Ching Li, I will share this house with you,” I said solemnly. “I will do nothing to disrespect you. I promise.”

There was no reply. But I felt better somehow.

I went for a walk again, hoping to meet Cik Mun to thank her for her help, and bring her some home-made red bean rice dumplings as payment for the parang.

I was enjoying the peaceful walk, when I heard the frightened cry of some poor mynah bird. I was very much startled when a large black cat dropped from an overhead branch, almost directly upon my feet: Orgu, and he had the struggling bird in

its jaws. I stared at him—where had he come from? Why had Li-Soh not locked him in, as she claimed to always do?

He looked up at me with his baleful yellow eyes. Then, as the bird’s panicked struggling stilled, he dropped the poor dead creature at my feet.

I stared at him. I began to speak. Then I saw it.

Following in Orgu’s wake was a shadow. It appeared to be attached to the cat’s shadow, but it was far larger, stretching out across the ground as if the beast was ten feet high. Its shape was not that of a cat; it was not shaped like anything at all. It moved, it flowed, it slid about like it was made of oil.

Then it grew small—smaller, smaller. It began to pool underneath Orgu, and around my feet.

There was a curious noise—a crunch, a crumble, a crackle—and I suddenly realised that the dead bird was no longer there.

“Ching Li?” I whispered.

The cat yawned, turned and walked away.



Night fell.

When I thought it was safe, I quietly made my way to the prayer room. In one hand, I gripped the parang; in the other, a candle. I dared not use a brighter light than this.

I now knew where Li-Soh kept the keys. I unlocked the prayer room door, and pushed it open.

Orgu slipped through my ankles, silent and imposing. The

altar flickered with the faint light of slowly-dying joss sticks, gleaming against the gold-foil lettering of Ching Li's name. I lit a fresh joss stick and offered it to her.

"What are you?" I asked tremulously, but the altar remained impassive and still.

I heard Orgu meow, softly.

I carefully picked my way down the hallway, watching his wavering tail. He led me to the front door, but something made me pause; I stood within its threshold, within the shadows of the house, and let Orgu leap gracefully out the open window.

I peeped out through the curtains, and I saw Li-Soh and Cik Mun in the front garden, conversing in low tones.

"How long will you continue this, Kak Li?" Cik Mun was asking severely. "This poor girl you got from the mainland! Very pretty, but she can hardly understand what all this means. You should not take advantage of her."

"I don't know what you mean," said Li-Soh coldly.

"We both know the General is never coming back. What purpose does this marriage serve? I am sure he is dead. He has been gone for too long."

My head began to pound. Li-Soh remained silent.

Cik Mun shook her head. "Loyalty is all very well, Li-Soh, but who do you think you are? You were only ever his housekeeper. This—all this—gila, you understand?"

Orgu's shadowy form stepped in-between them, and Li-Soh jumped back as if he were a cockroach, although the cat

entirely ignored her. Cik Mun, for her part, simply stared at the beast.

"What is it?" she asked, quite suddenly. "What have you done?"

"You did not come here at this late hour for chit-chat," said Li-Soh sharply. "Did you bring what I asked? I have the medicine for your granddaughter."

Each of the women gave the other a small wrapped paper bundle. I recognised the paper packet Li-Soh handed over, marked with the name of a famous Chinatown medical hall. I did not know what it was Cik Mun paid Li-Soh with, and she did not open the bundle enough for me to see.

"The pawang followed your instructions exactly," said Cik Mun reluctantly. "I do not know why you need a binding charm; the girl is pretty enough, if it is the General you are thinking of. You do not mean harm to her, do you?" asked Cik Mun, as Li-Soh frowned, confused—as well she might, for I was no beauty, and she could not know that Cik Mun had taken pretty, slow-witted Siu Sek, the real Siu Sek, as the General's bride. "This is only for the General's return—if he returns—yes?"

"Is it done well? There will be no mistakes?"

"I told our pawang exactly what she looked like, and I took a strand of hair from her sleeve."

"Then that is all. Go. It will be too dark for the sampan, if you tarry."

Li-Soh stood, sere and severe as a stone statue, as Cik Mun made her way down the path.

DAY 5

I could not find the charm, though I searched every room, on the pretence of putting flowers up in all the empty vases.

Orgu the cat now seemed used to us. He followed me around for a little while, then transferred his attentions to Siu Sek. This was disruptive to her work, so, following Li-Soh's usual habit, we locked him in the prayer room with food and water, planning to let him out later in the day.

I don't know what I did all day—the hours passed in a kind of blur. Every so often I went to the prayer room, pretending to bring Orgu water or scraps; Li-Soh watched me keenly each time I opened the yellow door, and eventually I had to stop.

Sister Ching Li, don't hurt me. The house is yours if you want it back. But where can I go?

By night-time, I had hardly eaten, fearing Li-Soh might have put something in my food; I was not hungry at all, for I was too frightened. I lay awake in the darkness, clutching my parang to my chest. I was abnormally alert that night, so much so that when the yellow door quietly creaked open, I heard it. Gripping my parang, I rose and left my room.

The house was still, silent, full of shadows. Such a beautiful house—no wonder Ching Li still wanted it! And if the General were truly dead? What would happen to this beautiful

house? Li-Soh could not stay, if the General were dead. Is that why she wanted to bring him a new “wife”? Someone like me, unquestioning, easily cowed; someone she could bully and keep isolated, someone with no one else to turn to.

But Ching Li...

I caught my breath. Someone was in the front garden again. Orgu's extra shadow passed over the window shutters, flowing like black milk.

In the cold moonlight, Li-Soh squatted over a coal brazier, holding the little packet Cik Mun had given her in both hands. Over it, she muttered something unintelligible. At her feet was the lacquered box I had seen before, the one full of feathers.

Orgu glided his way silently to her, and sat before the brazier as if waiting.

Li-Soh glared at him. “Do you like your new ‘wife’?” she demanded. “Well, that's a pity. The Mistress needs a new maiden, so this one is for her, not for you.” Orgu made a sound like a snarl. His shadow leapt in the light of the brazier.

I was trying to comprehend this, when Li-Soh opened up her hands, and quietly let the little paper packet fall into the fire.

The air seemed to grow heavier around us. Orgu hissed at Li-Soh, hackles raised. Li-Soh, ignoring the cat, then placed carefully into the fire a bright yellow feather.

“Mistress, sek fun.” *Time to eat.*

Abruptly, I heard Siu Sek scream. Such a bloodcurdling scream!

All else forgotten, I ran—ran through the house to Siu Sek's room, and threw open the door. Siu Sek was nowhere to be seen, but there was a small black-and-yellow bird in the room, an oriole, flapping and panicking, slamming its head into the walls and windows. I threw open the window to let it out, and shouted, "Siu Sek, Siu Sek, where are you?"

I ran out into the hall again, and slammed directly into Li-Soh coming back in. "Li-Soh, help me! I cannot find Siu Sek—I heard her scream—something is..."

I stopped. Li-Soh's face was deadly pale. "No," she said. "No, something is wrong. This is not the right..."

Orgu came padding into the room. In his jaws was, once again, a frantic bird. It looked very much like the oriole I had just let out of the room.

The prayer room door creaked open.

We both turned and stared at it. "No," cried Li-Soh. "Mistress, I am so sorry. I sent you the wrong maid. I don't know how it happened—I gave clear instructions. Mistress, please..."

There was a mad flapping of wings as the black-and-yellow oriole, released by Orgu, went hurtling out the window and off into the night.

A great shadow began pooling around us. I jumped out of the way, frantic, and clambered onto a nearby tabletop. Li-Soh, in a panic, tried to reach for me. I grasped her by the hands, and tried to tug, but it was like moving someone stuck in concrete.

Li-Soh was sobbing now, crying out incoherently. The shadow was growing around her feet. "Mistress, please, forgive me," she cried. "I intended a worthy sacrifice for you—a daughter from a good family! Her soul would have kept you fed for a long time..."

The shadows—oh, the shadows! They were like black butter now, sliding up her legs, slithering up her waist.

"Have I not served you well?" she cried in terror. "I will give you this one, just as I promised—I will give her to you! I only need a little more time..."

I stared at Li-Soh's wide eyes—at her hands, scrabbling at me. Her feet, stuck in the shadows as if in tar, did not move. But the dark spirit could not swallow her any further. She was too big.

I realised, abruptly, that I was still gripping the parang. I reached out to Li-Soh as if to help her, and as she lunged for me, I swung the blade wildly, blindly. It caught only three hairs from the top of her head, but it was enough.

"No, stop!" she cried, as she saw me scramble off the tabletop and run out of the house and towards the brazier, still smoking, in the front garden. "You don't know what you are doing! You are not the true mistress of this house! Stop!"

I reached the garden. I seized a feather from the lacquered box, twisted it together with Li-Soh's hair, and flung it into the brazier.

"Sister Ching Li," I cried, "sek fun!"

There was a high-pitched scream, a curious wet snapping noise...then the frantic flapping of a large bird. A great black koel, screaming *ooo! ooo!*, wildly slamming against walls, trying to find its way out...

Through the window, I saw Orgu leap into the air and catch it in his jaws.

I shut my eyes tight. I heard the crunch, crumble, crackle.

Then, abruptly, there was silence.

DAY 6

The beautiful house glowed with tranquillity in the morning light. A few pieces of furniture had been knocked over the night before, which I set to rights.

I went to the prayer room and offered up a joss stick to Ching Li. "Please watch over Siu Sek," I whispered. "I will take care of the house for you, Sister."

Orgu meowed, and I absently stroked him.

Then I had breakfast, and carefully wrote a letter, thinking hard about how to phrase it right. My sisters—and their maids—had to be jealous enough to visit, but not all together. One or two, until I had the trick of it. After all, Ching Li was my responsibility now.

When I heard a knock at the door, I knew it would be Cik Mun. She looked at me, startled, when it was not Li-Soh who answered.

"Siu Sek?" she said, surprised.

I shook my head. "I am the General's wife. And this is my house now."

ABOUT THE FINALISTS

DAVE CHUA is the author of *The Beating and Other Stories* (2011), which was shortlisted for the 2012 Singapore Literature Prize for Fiction. His first novel, *Gone Case* (1996), received a Singapore Literature Prize Commendation and was adapted into a two-volume graphic novel by artist Koh Hong Teng. He has also written three graphic novels: *The Girl Under the Bed* (2013, with Xiao Yan), *We'll Eat When We're Done* (2018, with Max Loh) and *Blade of the Chrysalis* (2018, with Koh Hong Teng). "Hantu Hijau" won second prize in the 2022 SEHP.

DEW M. CHAIYANARA is a trilingual poet and playwright from Thailand, who has lived in Singapore since 1994. She is a Drama graduate of LASALLE College of the Arts and is actively part of the arts scene as a theatre director, playwright and performer. Her dark comedies include *Fat, Taxi!, Goodnight, Junkfood, The Reunion, Subculture: Punks vs Peranakans*, and *Subculture II: The Art of Exploitation*. Her play *RACE* was selected during Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay's 2021 Open Call, and staged as part of Kalaa Utsavam: Indian Festival of Arts. Dew has been awarded a Certificate of Excellence in Story Writing from the International School of Brunei, and a Merit Award in Scriptwriting from the Singapore Broadcasting Authority. "Under the Banana Tree" won third prize in the 2022 SEHP.

JANE HUANG has always been fascinated with horror and the macabre, in particular the psychological aspects of what scares us and why. She also enjoys exploring and questioning social structures and hierarchies through fantasy and supernatural worlds. When she is not writing, she enjoys going on nature walks and playing board games with her husband and two wonderful children. She also owns too many fish tanks. Jane currently works as a freelance bilingual editor and copywriter.

KELLY LEOW is a senior communications manager at AWARE, Singapore's leading gender-equality organisation. She co-wrote and co-produced the limited-series podcast *Saga* (2020–2021), Singapore's first narrative long-form podcast, which won a Silver prize at the inaugural Anthem Awards, the social impact arm of the Webby Awards. She graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2012 and worked for five years as deputy editor at *MovieMaker Magazine*, an internationally distributed quarterly about independent filmmaking. She has also freelanced as an editor for the Singapore International Film Festival and co-programmed Objectifs's Women in Film and Photography showcase. She volunteers with transgender organisation The T Project in her spare time. "Breakwater" won first prize in the 2022 SEHP.

KIMBERLY LIUM is a BA Hons (Film) graduate from LASALLE College of the Arts, majoring in screenwriting and cinematography. When she's not writing for the screen, Lium continues to hone her craft within the literary community. In 2017 she won the Merit prize in the #IfILiveInDarkness Short Story Writing Competition, and in 2020 she wrote for the *Sit With Me* column at the Singapore Writers Festival. She is also the author of "Longkang at the End of the World", a speculative short story published in *Fish Eats Lion Redux* (2022).

MEIHAN BOEY is the author of horror-romance-comedy *The Formidable Miss Cassidy* (co-winner of the 2021 Epigram Books Fiction Prize) and science fiction novella *The Messiah Virus* (2019). She is vice-president of the Association of Comic Artists (Singapore), involved in projects like *Supacross* and *The Once and Marvellous DKD*. Her short stories have appeared in various anthologies, as well as role-playing game material for local projects. She spent eight years as a bookseller in the comics & genre fiction section, and is a dedicated fan of anime, video games and comic books. She is still trying to go Super Saiyan.

O THIAM CHIN is the author of four novels and six collections of short fiction. His debut novel, *Now That It's Over* (2016), won the inaugural Epigram Books Fiction Prize and the 2017 Singapore Book Award for Best Fiction Title. His work has appeared in *Granta*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Mānoa*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *QLRS*, *World Literature Today* and elsewhere.

QUEK SHIN YI is currently working as an allied health professional in the public healthcare sector. She garnered third prize both in 2007 and 2013 for the English fiction category of the Golden Point Award. Her works have been published in literary journals and anthologies such as *QLRS*, *Ceriph*, *Coast* and *Drunken Boat*. Shin Yi is a graduate of the National Arts Council's Mentor Access Project, and is grateful to her mentor Dave Chua for his guidance. Aside from writing, Shin Yi enjoys reading, hiking and birdwatching.

TAN LIXIN is the author of three poetry collections, including *Before We Are Ghosts* (2015) and *I Arrive as a Bloody Morning* (forthcoming). Her work has appeared at *Willows Wept Review*, *Trampoline*, *Train River*, *Eunoia Review* and elsewhere, and featured at various events including The Show Goes On...line by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. She is also deeply interested in true crime, the unexplained and all things macabre.

TEO KAI XIANG is a storyteller, researcher and journalist focusing on digital rights, tech policy and interactive media. He recently completed his Master's degree in Sociology at the University of Cambridge as a Chevening and Cambridge Trust Scholar. Prior to this, he was Communications Officer of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, and studied political science at Leiden University and creative writing at Singapore Polytechnic. He started *Singapore Internet Watch* and also produces the *Singapore Samizdat* newsletter, which covers Singaporean media and politics. In his spare time, he makes games and interactive media that revolve around contestation and change; his game, *Choose Your Own Singapore*, was showcased at the 2021 Singapore Heritage Festival.

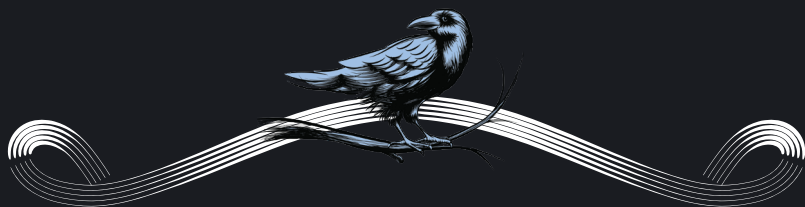
WEN-YI LEE is a Clarion West graduate and Octavia E. Butler memorial scholar who likes writing about girls with bite, feral nature and ghosts. Among other venues, her fiction has appeared in *Uncanny Magazine*, *Strange Horizons* and anthologies including *Fish Eats Lion Redux* (2022), while her non-fiction has appeared on Tor.com. She also runs Southeast Asian youth zine *Amber: The Teenage Chapbook*. She can be found on Twitter at @wenyilee_ and otherwise at wenyileewrites.com.

ABOUT THE JUDGES

DR GWEE LI SUI is a poet, graphic artist and literary critic, and has written and lectured on a range of subjects. He has published seven volumes of verse to date, most recently *This Floating World* in 2021. He wrote Singapore's first English-language graphic novel *Myth of the Stone* in 1993, re-released in 2013.

ANNALIZA BAKRI is a writer, translator and researcher. Her work has been published at *Prairie Schooner*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Transnational Literature*, *s/pores*, *Budi Kritik*, *Asymptote* and *Centre for Stories*. In 2017, she edited and translated the poetry anthology *Sikit-Sikit Lama-lama Jadi Bukit*, featuring places in Singapore and surrounding islands.

JASON ERIK LUNDBERG is Epigram Books's fiction editor, and the author and anthologist of over twenty-five books, including *A Fickle and Restless Weapon*, *Fish Eats Lion Redux*, *Most Excellent and Lamentable*, *Diary of One Who Disappeared*, the *Bo Bo and Cha Cha* picture book series, and the biennial *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* anthology series.



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