

SHELLY BRYANT

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LAUNCH PAD

# LAUNCH PAD

STORIES

SHELLY  
BRYANT



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FOR MY FRIENDS

WHO HAVE TAUGHT ME THAT THERE ARE NO  
SUCH THINGS AS STRANGERS AND MONSTERS

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# INTRODUCTION



In this gem of a short story collection, Shelly Bryant explores the trajectory of Singapore as a launch pad—a bridge between worlds, a crossroads—taking the reader on a journey of discovery from the earliest days of Singapura to the far future. It is a journey into our past, present and future, one that seems at once astonishing and yet totally real, totally plausible.

These stories are an almost magical alchemy of Shelly's worlds: the translator, the science fiction poet, the 25-year Singapore resident, the postcolonial thinker. Her poetic sensibility deftly homes in on the very essence of her characters, while her translator's ear gives us the pitch-perfect cadences of our own Singlish, in all its variations. The science fiction futures she describes,

# LAUNCH PAD



easily understandable by non-sci-fi geeks (I speak from experience), are so tangible that it almost makes you wonder if there isn't really, somewhere in Singapore, a SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) Centre. It's details like this that bring these stories to life, and make them real.

That alone would make them worth reading, but *Launch Pad* is much, much more than a collection of Singaporean stories. Two compelling threads run through these tales: one, the voicing of the silent "Other", whether that other is a minority, a woman, a robot or an alien. What does, what would, the Other think if they had a voice? The second thread is our common humanity, and our common emotions: love, connection, morality, language, whether we're from this age or another, this planet or another, whether human, alien or artificial. In the end, she shows us that we're not so different. And simply in getting us to think about these things, our worlds expand.

For me, there's a personal reason why *Launch Pad* is such a joy. For a native Singaporean of the generation raised on British literature—raised as always thinking of ourselves as the Other—reading something so very Singaporean remains a thrill. Shelly nails Singapore, in the cadence of the language, in the familiar landmarks, in the issues that are central to who we are. And with each story, she leaves us thinking—the greatest gift of all.

**Tina Kanagaratnam**

Co-founder, Literary Shanghai

[A hologram appears onstage. A blue shimmer passes over its flesh as it smiles, then starts speaking in IHNese.]

Welcome to the Midway Space Station History Museum! My name is Tarmonak, and this is the room where I was born. I was not the first child raised in this facility, but I am the first of my kind not only to be born here, but anywhere. I am half-Earthling, half-Kepleran; my mother a biped, my father triped. You can see in my form the result of the blending of these two species, and you can decide for yourself whether it is a pleasant shape. Perhaps you will even meet some of my younger siblings in the flesh as you tour the facilities. Many have chosen to remain behind here at Midway, making it their permanent home, but I have chosen

to follow in my parents' footsteps, working for ever-greater intergalactic diplomacy. I am currently serving as Midway's ambassador to XGF4873M, where the latest contact has been made with intelligent life.

But here, it is not the future that interests us so much as the past. The rooms you are entering now tell the story of Earth's integration into the Interstellar HoloNetwork nearly 300 years ago. This room tells the story of my mother's home planet from her perspective. It is adapted from a written record she sent with the cryos to this space station. It is the only first-hand contact I ever had with my mother.

To modern eyes, my mother's record appears extremely parochial—not only focused almost exclusively on her own planet's history, but on the history of the Earth-bound nation from which she came, which was one of the smallest on the planet. Much has changed for Earthlings since that time, allowing us to feel how narrow the confines of her view were. Even so, when compared to her contemporaries, my mother was an open-minded, pioneering spirit, and certainly ahead of her time.

What follows is extracted from the record she left for me, her telling of one side of my heritage. She writes:

*Fifty years. Not a short time to human eyes, yet if a person dies at fifty, we say she or he has died young. Similarly, at its fiftieth birthday, a nation is still young. Very young. Its future is still being determined, and its past still being defined.*

*In 2015, as Singapore turned fifty, one aspect of its identity, both past and future, was tied up in a particular*

*role. An English-speaking nation with a Chinese majority, it often functioned as a launch pad for foreigners who either used it to educate their children in English in the safe confines of a traditional Chinese culture so that they could be sent on to Western universities, or—for those moving the other direction—to set up business in Asia, usually with an eye towards China.*

*The role of launch pad was nothing new to Singapore, even if it was only with some reluctance that the role was played. Its location had always made it a strategic site on the shipping lanes, a feature particularly maximised in its colonial days. That period in Singapore's history cemented its fate as a melting pot for cultures and languages, making it a celebrated bridge between worlds for several generations. When independence was thrust upon the island-state in 1965, the consistent direction in the early government's policy decisions for the first several decades served to stamp out the flourishing of linguistic and cultural variety, creating a watered down mixture of limited language skills and narrow cultural bounds that was branded a more unified and cohesive "Singaporean identity".*

*Even so, its reputation as a crossroads continued to draw people from around the world to live, learn, trade and toil in Singapore—even if they only stayed long enough to launch new lives and careers on other shores. On the micro level, there was some grumbling among Singapore's citizens. On the macro level, the influx of "foreign talents"—and their capital—was celebrated by those in power, and policy continued to embrace the role of launch pad, creating favourable conditions for foreigners to choose Singapore as a temporary abode at least.*

*By the early 2030s, the situation in Asia had changed dramatically. China and India were no longer developing nations, but fully developed superpowers. These changes forced Singapore to adapt; not just keeping up, but thriving in this new environment where Asia set the pace for global development and the global economy, and was likewise the centre of development for all sorts of high-tech fields. By 2040, Singapore was among the world's leaders in robotics and artificial intelligence technology. This expertise, coupled with its reputation for cultural and linguistic diversity, added further appeal for foreigners who already saw Singapore as an advantageous tax home. Once again, the population grew, culturally and linguistically diverse.*

*As space on the island became further limited, Singapore turned its eyes to the stars. Aerospace exploration took centre stage in Asia's continued push for superiority in every arena, and Singapore grew into one of the key centres for research and development in the field. Using its colonial history and reputation as a multicultural, multilingual, multiracial nation to its best advantage, Singapore sought to convince the world that it was uniquely suited to play a leading role in space exploration and colonisation. It would be sensitive to the dangers attached to the colonising process, given its own colonial history, and it would be more experienced in dealing with the Other, were Others to be found out there.*

*For once, Singapore's small size worked to its benefit. No other nation saw Singapore as a threat to its own agenda or superiority. As a result, many larger and more powerful nations were willing to relocate their research centres to Singapore in order to work with other competing nations.*

*Singapore provided the perfect neutral ground for large-scale international cooperation.*

*In 2065, the SETI Centre moved its headquarters from the USA to Singapore, on the occasion of the nation's one-hundredth birthday. The communication centres there connected research facilities all over the globe, as well as probes, satellites and space stations that had left the planet for good, searching for extra-terrestrial intelligent life. Platforms in the South Indian Ocean, some housing research facilities that were larger than the entire island-nation itself, fell under Singapore's jurisdiction, as did several space stations and, eventually, an R&D and Communications Centre on the Moon. At last Singapore had more land, even if it was located farther away from its administrative centre than anyone had before imagined possible.*

*As a proud Singaporean, I signed on as a volunteer when we first came into contact with life "out there", lending my own linguistic skills to the work. When I left for the TransNeptune Region, I never imagined how profoundly I would be changed by the experience. I see now how naïve that was. We had found something so far beyond anything we had ever known before. How could I help but be changed?*

Those were some of the words my mother left for me—the words by which I know her, and know my Earthling heritage. In the memoriavision exhibits contained in this room, you will see my mother's Earth recreated. If it seems unnecessarily focused on one small part of her home planet, it is because this is how we all see our worlds—at least until someone opens our eyes to wider truths. The

other rooms in the Earth portion of the museum will give you a fuller picture of the planet's history. But here, in this room, I invite you to see Earth as I first experienced it—through my mother's telling of it.

Enjoy your visit!

## THE HANDLING



A sweaty strand of hair fell over her eyes as her body quaked. She gasped, trying to breathe normally. She ground her fists into her eyes, but she could not stop the tears.

How could this have happened to her? She was the concubine of Iskandar Shah, the Parameswara—maybe not the favourite concubine, but still part of the royal household. To be reduced to this—

Her mind reeled as the scene that had just occurred washed over her again. They had dragged her into the square at the centre of the fortress, leering men surrounding her on every side. She knew what they were going to do. They were going to strip her and display her naked body in front of everyone. She had seen it done

before, and she knew she could not respond with the proud exhibitionist pose the harlot had struck when the same punishment had last been meted out. While she admired that woman's boldness, she couldn't replicate it—she was no harlot, and she wouldn't endure having strange men's eyes on her.

But neither did she want to cave in and weep, vainly attempting to cover herself. Things never turned out well for girls who reacted that way to their punishment.

So that left her with only one choice. As soon as the man guarding her loosened the rope around her wrists, she ran. It didn't keep her from being stripped—there were too many hands for that—but it did preserve the last drop of self-respect still left to her.

She ran. The hands grabbed at her, pulling off her sarong, the lone covering she had been allowed as she had been marched out. They continued to grab at her flesh when no clothes were left, but she kept running. She made it out of the fortress, escaping those greedy, ugly hands.

She ran as fast as she could, into the jungle. Without thinking, she ran straight to the spot where she and her brothers and sisters had always loved to play when they were small. It wouldn't offer her safety for long—the mob would find its victim eventually, as it always did—but it was a familiar place, and this was where her legs had carried her, as though she were fated to die in the place that brought her back to childhood innocence.

She sobbed as she lay on the jungle floor, naked. Why had they done this to her? She had done nothing wrong.

Never had any man but her husband seen her body, much less touched it. Not until today, when her husband had ordered she be thrown to that pack of wolves with their filthy hands.

She heard people moving through the jungle, heading towards her from the direction of the fortress. They were coming to finish the job, to complete her humiliation.

She looked about desperately for a place to hide. Even though she knew it wasn't enough, she scrambled as silently as possible towards a fallen log.

“Adik.” It was her mother's voice. Her mother would take care of her!

“Ibu,” she whispered.

“She's there!” she heard her mother say to someone. Then to her, “Adik, I'm here. I'm coming.” The older woman stepped around a banyan tree, a bundle of clothes in her hands.

Her mother rushed to her and embraced her. After she was covered, her mother turned and called to the people who had been with her. Two of her brothers stepped around the tree, following their mother's path. They walked to her. “Come,” the eldest said, and reached over to help her up.

□ □

She lay on her mat in the women's room—her room during the years she'd spent in this house. She had not been here since she had been sent to Parameswara's home four years earlier, but it still felt the same. She could almost believe she had only dreamt that she had been a part of the royal harem.

Almost. Her father and brothers were talking in the outer room, reminding her that she really had suffered that humiliating treatment earlier in the day. She numbed her mind and lay mutely on her mat, listening to the voices as if in a dream.

“Bapa, she says she did not do anything wrong. That there was no other man.”

“I know.”

“Why would she say that?”

“Because it’s true.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Did you not hear what the Parameswara said in his edict? He said she had an affair with a Majapahit merchant. Where would she have met a Majapahit merchant while she was living in the Parameswara’s harem, under such close watch all day and all night?”

“Yes, that’s true,” her brother said reluctantly. “But why did he do it then? Why disgrace her, and even bring shame on himself?”

“It was not punishment for her. It was meant for me. I have had dealings with the Majapahit people, and he fears I am disloyal—that it is I who have adulterated myself. That is a bigger threat to him than the disloyalty of any common concubine in his house. Let there be no mistake about that.”

“What should we do, Bapa?”

“Do?”

“Yes, of course. He disgraced our family!”

“He did. And he is the Parameswara, so we do nothing. For now.”

□ □

She lay on her mat for many more days. She did not wish to be seen, and no one asked for her. Her mother and her sisters cared for her, but no one spoke much. What was there to say, anyway?

On the fifth afternoon she was home, she heard her father speaking to a stranger. As they exchanged pleasantries, she began to realise that the man was from Majapahit.

“Are you sure?” the man asked her father.

“I am sure. You get word to Wikramawardhana for me. If he attacks Singapura, I will support him.”

It was weeks later that the Parameswara’s man came to their home and called for her father. She still had not left the women’s room, though she did occasionally rise from her mat and walk about within its confines.

When her father returned from the meeting with the Parameswara, her brother asked what had happened. She froze as she listened for a hint of her fate in the conversation between the two men.

“You know, son. There was an attack from Majapahit. They sent ships, but there’s nothing to worry about. The fortress is strong. No foreign troops will bring it down.”

“Why did the Parameswara want to see you?”

“To find out if I was involved, if I had plotted with Majapahit.”

“And did you?”

“Of course not!”

There was a moment of silence, then her father said,

“You may not believe me, but the Parameswara does. He even signalled his trust in me by giving me a new post. I am in charge of the royal store houses, from today onward.”

“That is very good news.”

“Yes, it really is.”

□ □

The next time she heard the Parameswara’s man at her father’s home, he said, “Sang Rajuna Tapa, the Parameswara needs you to open the store houses. There is a shortage of grain.”

Her father took a long time to answer. When he did, he said, “I’m afraid the shortage of grain extends to the royal stores. We have no more left. We cannot help the people.”

“Then they will starve.”

“They will.”

“What will we do?”

“We? We will starve with them.”

□ □

The following weeks were terrible times. She heard constant reports as they were brought to her father, tales of people dying of starvation. She, though, had a regular supply of food, brought by her mother and sisters, and it soothed her wounded heart after the humiliation she had endured. Her tummy swelled as she lay quietly on the mat, getting up several times a day to walk and build her strength. Her mother said time would heal her sorrow.

It would not heal the people’s hunger. They grew weaker each day. Eventually, they opened the gates of

the fortress so they could send out a party to seek help from Ayuthaya to the north, hoping the conflicts between the two kingdoms were far enough in the past that a neighbourly offer of help would come.

But when the gates opened, Majapahit was waiting. The whole army burst into the fortress, massacring the half-starved people.

When it was finished, blood had turned the streets into a series of ghastly red canals. Only Sang Rajuna Tapa’s family was left alive. Not one person in his household had come to harm.

□ □

As she lay on her mat, she heard men approaching the house, calling her father’s name.

“Wikramawardhana,” her father greeted the Majapahit king, his tone full of respect.

“You have done well, Sang Rajuna Tapa. And we have spared your family. You may continue to live here on Pulau Ujong in peace, as my loyal subjects.”

“Thank you. Are we the only survivors from Singapura?”

“No. Parameswara and some of his household fled.”

“Fled?”

“Yes. They left the island. My scouts say they headed north.”

“What will they do?”

“They will resurface somewhere eventually, as has always happened in such times. It was when Chola attacked Sri Vijaya that Singapura was born, you know.

Now, who can say what the offspring of this event will be?”

There was a very long pause. Then her father said, “You know what happened to my daughter?”

“Yes. I am sorry for your loss. Would you like for my soldiers to try to recover her body from the jungle for a proper burial? It has been months, but perhaps...”

“There will be no need.”

“I understand.”

“No, my lord, I don’t think you do.” Then her father called her, “Adik, come out here.”

Slowly, she rose from her mat. Keeping one hand on her back, she walked into the main room, eyes lowered and head bowed.

“She’s alive!” Wikramawardhana said.

“Yes, she is,” her father said.

“And...whose child is it?”

“Parameswara’s, my lord,” she answered for herself. “There was never anyone else. It could not belong to any other man.”

“Let us not say that,” Wikramawardhana replied harshly. “It is not prudent. Let us make him the son of a man of Majapahit. You will marry her to one of my subjects immediately.”

She looked at her father, wondering what he and fate had in store for her now. He returned her gaze, then looked back at Wikramawardhana. “Yes, that is seemly,” he said, then took her by the arm and handed her over to their new king.

## TAN SWEE NEE, BARBER



It was too dark to see the waves that washed beneath them as they sat waiting on the jetty, but the sound of the incoming tide was like the voice of a fifth companion to their party. Three of the four men huddled close together on the raised boards, sheltering from the coolness of the night breeze coming from the sea. The fourth, a white man, leaned against the wooden handrail, smoking, the light at the end of his cigarette a tiny beacon for the boat they had expected an hour earlier.

“Still no sign of it,” the white man said, turning his back to the rail and positioning his backside more comfortably against the planks.

“They’ll be here,” Azhar said.

“They better, mate, or this’ll be the last time I spend

a night out here in the middle of the jungle waiting for a shipment from you.”

“It’s not actually the middle of the jungle,” Aaran said. “The jungle extends several miles inland from here.”

“Don’t get smart with me,” the white man said. “You know what I mean. If he doesn’t show soon, you can forget about doing business with me and my lot again...”

“They’ll be here.”

The fourth man, Ah Yeo, spoke over Azhar’s repeated assurance, “Ah Sir, you know this jetty is very famous, right? It’s where Tan Swee Nee first arrived in Singapore. Brought his little boat here from Malaysia, but originally he came from Fuzhou.”

“Who’s Tan Swee Nee?” Aaran asked. “A pirate?”

“A barber,” Ah Yeo said.

“How does a barber get to be famous?” asked the white man at the rail, flicking his cigarette butt into the sea.

“Not from cutting hair,” Ah Yeo said. “From cutting throats. So yah, a bit like a pirate, in a way. He came here a long time ago, back when you Brits still ran everything.”

“I’m not a Brit. I’m Australian born and bred, thank you very much.”

“Aiyah, Brit, Aussie...same to me. Ang moh. When you ang moh still ran things. Tan Swee Nee came to Singapore back then, a hundred plus years ago. He came here, and life was really not easy. He wanted to bring his wife and kid over from Fuzhou, but could not afford. Finally, he went to the Henghwa clan and made some connections there. They were the ones who brought his wife and kid over. A girl, about ten years old.”

□ □

So Tan Swee Nee, he had to work very, very hard, *Ah Yeo said*. Every day he was at Ching Jia Li there, working in a small lane near where the other members of his clan also worked. They helped his wife find work in a factory near Boat Quay. Their daughter sat every day by Tan Swee Nee’s chair, watching him cut hair and shave beards. She was very clever. Every time new people came to cut hair, she heard them talking different languages, so she tried to learn. Before long, she could not only speak Mandarin and her Henghwa dialect, but also Malay, Cantonese, Bengali, Hokkien, English, Teochew, Javanese, Hainanese, Portuguese, and even a bit of Tamil and Hindi. Back then, everyone could speak many languages. No choice. Got people coming from all over, sure must learn many languages once they come to Singapore. So this girl, she was very clever. She listened, then she learned. Like that, she helped Tan Swee Nee run his business, collecting money and getting new customers. All the customers, they liked Tan Swee Nee’s daughter because she was so clever. She was also very pretty, so the men liked her a lot.

Then one day, one ang moh man came for a haircut and shave. As soon as he saw Tan Swee Nee’s daughter, he liked her very much. Actually, he said he loved her. This fellow was very rich, owned lots of warehouses at Boat Quay, and lots of factories and shophouses, including the factory where Tan Swee Nee’s wife worked. He also had a few other kinds of businesses in Chinatown—pawn shops, gambling houses, opium dens, brothels, everything. So, he

saw Tan Swee Nee's daughter and thought she would be good for his Chinatown business, since she was so clever with languages and also beautiful. Maybe he wanted to keep her for a little private business too, you know. So he told Tan Swee Nee he wanted the girl to work for him, but Tan Swee Nee didn't want. He knew what happened to girls in those kinds of places, even good girls, and he didn't want his daughter to end up like that. So he told the ang moh man, "No way. My girl work here is better."

That ang moh man wasn't used to having people say no, especially not Chinese people, and sure not one who cut hair down at Ching Jia Li. So, he made life really hard on Tan Swee Nee's wife, making her work long, long hours in his factory. But it didn't work, even though Tan Swee Nee and his wife felt very pressurised. They said, "Work like coolies also never mind, we're tough people. Sure can manage."

So one day, the ang moh man finally got his guys to go bully Tan Swee Nee's wife when she was walking home from work—it was late at night, since the ang moh man made her work OT every day. She kena raped, and kena cut, but she didn't want her husband to see her like that. She tried to get help on her own first, so her husband didn't have to see. But no one wanted to help women like that, not back then, and no one wanted to cross the ang moh towkay either. So, in the end, Tan Swee Nee's wife died on the streets that night, looking for someone to help, and too ashamed to go home.

Next day, the ang moh man told Tan Swee Nee's girl, "You come with me, or your daddy's next." So she never

tell her father, just went like that. She worked in that ang moh fellow's opium den, and later in his brothel. Everyone knew about it, but Tan Swee Nee, he couldn't do anything to stop it. His business went downhill, because he was so sad about his wife and daughter. When he could barely make ends meet already, Puan Kasih took pity on him and so she went and helped him.

Puan Kasih owned a shophouse at Ching Jia Li. Before, Tan Swee Nee always set up his barber chair outside her door. Now, she told him he could move inside, use her second storey to run his business. That way, he wouldn't have to see that ang moh man every time he came into Ching Jia Li with all his guys, showing off and talking big.

So Tan Swee Nee, he moved upstairs to Puan Kasih's shop. She kept selling her kueh-kueh, and sometimes she sent people up to Tan Swee Nee for a haircut. But for Tan Swee Nee, mostly he just sat thinking about his wife and little girl, getting sadder and angrier all the time.

One day, Puan Kasih sent this Indian guy up to get his hair cut. She followed the Indian fellow up, grumbling all the while. She told Tan Swee Nee, "This fellow ah. He cheated me. He's just off the boat, and says he can't pay for the kueh-kueh he ate. But my shop girl saw him take out a fat purse at another shop up the alley just a few minutes earlier. You charge him more for his haircut, then can pay me later for the kueh-kueh he stole, can?"

She said all this in Malay, since the Indian guy just arrived and couldn't understand.

So Tan Swee Nee, he nodded to Puan Kasih and says, "Boleh." Then he said to the Indian guy, in broken

English, “You want haircut?”

“Yes, and shave,” the Indian guy said. “A nice, close shave.”

Tan Swee Nee started to shave the guy. His razor was long and sharp, and very shiny. He liked the way it felt when it scraped the Indian man’s skin. But he was not careful enough, and his blade nicked the guy. So that fellow, he scolded Tan Swee Nee. “You stupid Chinaman! What you wanna do, kill me?”

And right then, Tan Swee Nee snapped. He thought, *Yah, that’s exactly what I wanna do.* So he put more pressure on the blade, and blood started spurting from the Indian guy’s throat. It was a good cut, right there where you bleed really fast, so fast you can’t scream. Like that, the Indian guy died really fast, and Tan Swee Nee, he was left with blood all over his hands, and a big mess in his room.

Just then, Puan Kasih came up the stairs. Tan Swee Nee, he was really scared. He’d sure kena kicked out of the house now, and get locked up and eventually hanged for murder.

Puan Kasih looked at his hands, then at the dead Indian. Her eyes got big and round, and she opened her mouth wide. She said, “Did you get his purse?”

Tan Swee Nee was a bit confused, so he never answer. Puan Kasih walked over, dug through the Indian man’s clothes and found his purse. It really was a fat purse.

“If you don’t want to get caught, we better come up with a plan,” she said to Tan Swee Nee.

“What to do with the body?”

Puan Kasih thought for a while, then said, “Cut it

up into small pieces, like that.” She showed him the size she wanted, about the size of the end of her little finger. “Then I’ll take care of it.”

Tan Swee Nee nodded, then said, “What if someone comes to look for him?”

“Won’t. He’s new here. No one knows him. Oh, and—when you finish cutting him up, don’t forget to mop up the blood.”

Tan Swee Nee spent the whole night doing what Puan Kasih said. Then, when she came upstairs early in the morning, before any other shop was open, the two of them carried the little pieces of the Indian man down to her kueh-kueh shop.

That day, Tan Swee Nee slept all day, not dreaming at all. Puan Kasih, she made lots of money on her new special dish, mutton curry puffs. Everyone said they were the best curry puffs ever, the meat very fresh.

After that, Puan Kasih had fresh mutton curry puffs once a week. She and Tan Swee Nee both started to get rich. No one noticed the missing Indian sailors—they were all far from home, no family here anyway.

Later, they started plucking Chinese sailors from the crowd too. The Chinese sailors usually had even more money on them, gold sewn into the hems of their clothes. Puan Kasih added chicken curry puffs to her menu. Later, Malay and Indonesian sailors started to disappear too. Sardine curry puffs appeared on Puan Kasih’s shelves. Once in a long while, she advertised potato curry puffs, but the frequency of ang moh sailors disappearing could not keep pace with the other races.

After a while, Tan Swee Nee told Puan Kasih, “You remember the ang moh man who killed my wife and stole my daughter? Let’s get him in here. You’ll have lots of ingredients for potato curry puffs from that fat ang moh.”

“Tak boleh,” she said. “People will notice if he goes missing. Anyway, so long ago. You should forget your wife and move on. My husband also died long ago, you know. Look how well I’m doing without him. If he’s around now, you think we two could have such a happy partnership like we do now?”

But Tan Swee Nee, he was a bit blur about that hint from Puan Kasih, because he was obsessed with the thought of taking revenge on that ang moh man. He watched out his window every day, and he always saw the ang moh man strutting here and there along Ching Jia Li, bullying everyone he saw. Tan Swee Nee thought, *I have to get him.*

Finally one day, he came up with a plan. He can do this without Puan Kasih’s help. He wrote on a big board in red letters, hoping to attract the ang moh man’s attention with the English name he’d chosen for himself—because the ang moh, they never really bothered to learn other languages like the people in Ching Jia Li did. Ang moh never had to learn local things if they didn’t want to. So anyway, he wrote: *Sweeney’s Barber Shop*, with an arrow pointing upstairs.

One day when he was watching, he saw the ang moh fellow coming, and he noticed that the man’s hair and beard look a bit long, so he ran down and hung the sign outside, arrow pointing up his stairs. Then he went

upstairs and wait, wait, wait...

Before long, the fat ang moh man came up. He sat in the chair. Tan Swee Nee, he tied the towel around the ang moh man’s neck, lathered up his face, and said, “Close shave today, Ah Sir?”

“Yes, yes,” the ang moh man said.

“Good. I’ll give you a shave to die for,” Tan Swee Nee said. Then he pulled out his shiny razor and slashed the throat, just like that. He went crazy, slashing and chopping and cutting—until that ang moh was nothing but a bunch of tiny pieces of meat scattered on the floor and splattered on the walls.

Tan Swee Nee sat on the floor, never calling Puan Kasih, and not cleaning up the mess. By lunchtime, the smell of blood was very strong, but he couldn’t be bothered. The ang moh man who killed his wife and stole his girl was gone, and Tan Swee Nee—he was not really happy or anything like that. Just tired.

After a while, the blood started to drip through the floorboards into the shop downstairs. It dripped right onto the head of the police constable, a big Sikh man. The Sikh police took his curry puff and went up to see what’s going on. He saw Tan Swee Nee, sitting there in all the blood and with pieces of meat all over the room. The constable arrested him and took him to jail.

At first, everyone felt sorry for Puan Kasih. Just when her business was going so well, all these years after her husband died, she suddenly got this kind of problem. So unfair. But eventually, everyone said her curry puffs weren’t as good as before. No flavour. They thought

# PEREGRINE



she must be shaken after having that murderer upstairs, so now she lost her touch. After a while, they forgot all about her, till one day, her kueh-kueh shop closed and she disappeared. After that, life at Ching Jia Li just went on as usual.



“That’s disgusting,” Azhar said.

The white man standing at the handrail laughed. “It’s funny,” he said, “but it’s not very original.”

“Yeah,” Aaran said. “You got that from the ‘curry murders’ that happened seven or eight years ago—when that woman killed her husband at that church.” Before Ah Yeo could open his mouth to object, Aaran winked, shaking his head slightly. Ah Yeo smiled, understanding passing between them.

The Australian laughed again, his tone filled more with contempt than merriment.

In the distance, a light flashed, moving up and down with the tide. The sound of an outboard motor reached their ears at precisely the same moment they noticed the lights.

“See,” Azhar said, “I told you they’d be here.”

It was easy to imagine that the *Peregrine* was aimlessly adrift, just the way Hamasaki would have liked it. This was always his favourite part of any run, when they were weeks away from land in every direction, as far south in the Indian Ocean as they could go without sighting Antarctica. The rest of the crew usually started to get restless at this point in a run, but none of them ever let Hamasaki know it. The boys all wanted to be included on the next run, and complaining about being sick of the sight of endless waters didn’t earn a guy another invitation to join Hamasaki’s crew.

But today, the solitude one usually found this far south had been disrupted. The equipment he’d volunteered to carry on his runs was picking up some strange readings.

He wasn't ready to let anyone know yet, not until he was sure what it was.

Anyway, he knew what the men said about the equipment. Not a single one of them bought the rationale he'd repeated so many times—that it was his civic duty to carry it, being captain of one of the few vessels that regularly plied these waters. Even his first mate, Azrul, was sceptical, though he never mentioned it. Hamasaki figured Azrul believed what he had heard the other crew members whisper, “You ever hear of a captain of a merchant ship that had any motivations that weren't completely mercenary?”

Hamasaki shrugged and refocused his attention on the readings. These definitely weren't pings—another reason not to alert Azrul yet. He didn't want to get his first mate's hopes up, thinking they'd stumbled across a part of that missing plane. These readings weren't consistent with the sort of pings Azrul was hoping for, but that might not stop the first mate from jumping to that conclusion all the same. Finding a piece of MH370 would send him home a hero.

These sounds weren't pings. It wasn't the elusive black box. It wasn't whale song either. In fact, if Hamasaki was reading this correctly, these sounds weren't coming from underwater at all. Whatever was out there, it was *above* the surface, in the air somewhere.

But that couldn't be right. Not this far from land. Any aircraft would have to be carried here on a ship equipped with a launch pad or runway. They were too far from land for any aircraft to make it this far alone, and his radar was not detecting any ships that size.

“What are you?” he said aloud, thumping the coordinates of their present location where it was marked on his charts.

He pulled the headphones on again and listened. It was unmistakable. The equipment was picking up a stream of sound that kept an irregular rhythm. It had been tailing them for hours. But when Hamasaki had gone on deck for a look, he saw nothing.

Gradually, the sound began to take a more regular shape. That wasn't just a random series of tweets and blips. It was a tune.

Suddenly, it struck Hamasaki that the tune was familiar. Azrul whistled it all the time when he was distracted.

“Azrul!” Hamasaki shouted, bursting from his cabin. The men he passed in the narrow corridor shuffled out of the way as he stormed towards the deck.

“Azrul!” he shouted again as the blast of cold wind hit his cheeks. It was freezing, but it was sunny.

“Yes, captain,” the first mate called.

“Why are the instruments picking up your song?”

“My what?”

“Your song. The one you're always whistling.”

“Wasn't me, sir. I was busy yelling at the new Indonesian fellow you picked up in Melbourne. I wasn't whistling anything.”

“Anybody else whistling it?”

Azrul shrugged. “Rasa Sayang? Sure, could be anyone. Everybody knows it.”

The whistling came to them again, the tune of “Rasa Sayang”.

“Where’s that coming from?” Hamasaki asked.

Azrul shrugged. He looked around, then shrugged again.

Hamasaki looked up. “It sounds like it’s coming from up there.”

“Can’t be,” Azrul said. “No way any bird could fly this far away from land.”

Hamasaki held out a hand, indicating Azrul’s binoculars. The first mate handed them over.

Hamasaki focused in the direction the whistling was coming from. After a moment’s search, he saw something white fluttering in the distance. He looked more carefully, watching the movement. “There you are,” he whispered.

“What is it?” Azrul asked.

Hamasaki passed him the binoculars. “Tell me what you think first.”

After several minutes, Azrul said, “It looks like a bird.”

“It does.”

“But it can’t be. We’re too far from land.”

“I know. Let me have another look.”

Azrul handed him the field glasses. Hamasaki watched the slow, steady flapping of the wings. “It looks like a bird,” he said.

“Yah,” Azrul agreed. “Sir, do you think it might be something mechanical? A probe or something?”

“A probe? Probing for what? There’s nothing to probe out here.”

“A drone I mean? Maybe some military equipment.”

“Okay, I know what you mean, but still...for what? There’s nothing out here to observe or spy on.”

“Maybe it went rogue—got away from its developers. Maybe it’s lost.”

Hamasaki lowered the binoculars and looked at Azrul. “You’re joking, right?”

“Er. Not really.”

“But you know it sounds crazy?”

“Crazier than a single bird out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Singing ‘Rasa Sayang’...” Hamasaki couldn’t help but smile. Azrul grinned too, then started laughing. “That’s crazy either way.”

Hamasaki laughed too, long, loud and hard. When they fell silent, they again heard the thing tweeting “Rasa Sayang”. Hamasaki wiped his eyes and lifted the binoculars again. The chorus seemed to be repeating on an endless loop, steady as the flapping of the creature’s wings. It was mesmerising.

“What do you think it is, sir?”

Hamasaki took a deep breath, keeping the lenses focused on the thing overhead. “I really don’t know,” he said at last. “But it looks like a bird.”

Through the binoculars, he watched the obscure white object flittering along in their wake, almost as if it were intentionally following the *Peregrine’s* route. Before his mind could quite grasp what he was seeing, a cloud floated across his field of vision, hiding the thing from view. Lowering the binoculars, Hamasaki stood beside Azrul, both of them silent as they waited for the wind to blow the cloud away. From the middle of the fluffy mass, strains of “Rasa Sayang” came to them. Before

long, Hamasaki was whistling along, keeping time with the unknown creature's song. Azrul looked at him, shrugged, then turned back to look towards the horizon. As he waited for the cloud cover to pass, the first mate started whistling in counterpoint, while the low rumble of the engines and endless miles of rolling waves formed a pleasing bass line beneath the melody carried by the captain and the unknown object flying in their wake.

## 三人行, OR THREE TRAVELLERS

—

October 2016, a true story

There was no more joking when we got back into the car this time, not even about the sign we had seen a half-hour before we reached this town, the one reading “青海外星人遗址”, with “Alien Relic Site, 30km” written below. Even that had lost its humour after the third rejection from as many hotels.

“I think we should go to the next town,” I said.

“Yeah,” Leng agreed reluctantly. “So sian. I was ready for a shower and a good night's sleep.”

“And an early start tomorrow to see the aliens,” Joyce said from the back seat. We didn't laugh.

“Obviously a hoax,” I said, sighing. “Aliens clearly aren't welcome here.”

That at least elicited a weak smile from the other two.

“Who knew they wouldn’t take foreigners? We haven’t had any trouble in any of the other towns.”

“Maybe Qinghai is different from Gansu.”

“We could ask that one guy to take us to the police post.”

“Hm. I don’t know...” I said.

“Yeah,” Leng agreed. “He seemed a little shady.”

“I still think we push on.”

“Well, whatever you say. You’re the one driving,” Leng said, resigned.

“But we should get you some tea first,” Joyce said. “And a hot meal.”

“Yeah. Let’s go to that fake KFC,” Leng agreed.

We drove on the long stretch of road beside the canal, now much less interested in the flashing neon on the other bank. The countless hotels were useless to us, now that we knew how unwelcome we were. All the appeal they had earlier held for us, after so many hours of driving from the edge of the Gobi Desert and across the first steppes of the Tibetan Plateau, had vanished as one hotel after another refused to house us. It might have looked like Las Vegas from a distance, but we were clearly not going to be big winners in this city.

After a meal of local fast food fried chicken and a hot cup of tea, our spirits were lifted a little. We took turns going to the washroom, the cleanest facilities we’d seen since checking out from our hotel in Dunhuang eighteen hours earlier.

“All set now,” Joyce said, returning. “Did you get directions?”

“Yep. Let’s go.”

We got back into the car and followed the directions we’d been given. Reaching the gantry beneath a sign reading “G6 Xining”, we found all the tollgates blocked and a long queue of lorries waiting.

“Aiyoh,” I groaned, thinking it was time to turn around and backtrack, to hit the expressway where we had left it. But that was at least an hour away.

Someone knocked on my window, a man in uniform. I lowered the glass.

“Where are you going?” he asked in thickly accented Mandarin. He peered in at the other two women in the car.

“Xining,” I said, kicking myself after hearing how obvious my own Singaporean accent sounded in the un-aspirated *Xi* in the name.

“You don’t have to wait. Go on.”

With that, he walked to one of the gates and removed the barrier.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Guess it’s just lorries that have to wait?” said Joyce.

“Yeah.”

I inched forward. Leng was removing my wallet from my bag, preparing to pay the toll. The officer waved us through, not stopping us for the toll fee.

Without stopping to ask why, I sped onto the empty highway. The open road felt good, and we moved along at a quick pace.

The first sign we saw said “Xiarihazhen, 143km”.

“Alamak,” I said.

“Another hour and a half,” Leng said, dejected.

“Not necessarily,” I replied, pushing the needle on the speedometer just past 150kph. “The road’s empty. I think we can get it down to an hour.”

“Yeah, not another car in sight,” Leng said.

“A little scary,” Joyce said.

“It’s just late,” I replied, worrying only about the road, and trying to ignore the nagging doubt about how welcoming the next town would be towards foreigners. It was much smaller, not even showing up on any of my maps.

An hour later, just as the clock hit midnight, we reached the exit. “Finally!” I said, veering towards the right.

“We made good time,” Leng said.

“Yeah.”

Joyce leaned on the back of my seat. “We haven’t seen a car in ages,” she said.

I slowed down as we followed the curve of the exit ramp, then suddenly slammed on the brakes.

“Aiyoh,” I muttered.

A roadblock stood in front of us, a high mound of sand with a single concrete block in front of it, flanked by two warning fences with orange and white stripes reflecting the light of my headlamps back at me.

In red spray paint, I saw the two characters for Xining, with an arrow pointing left below them. To our left, hints of a narrow dirt road could be seen just on the other side of a shallow ditch.

“I wonder if it’s like that spot we hit a few days ago, after Jiayuguan. Remember how we had to follow that dirt path around the construction?” I said.

“Yeah,” Leng said, “but that was daytime.”

“And there were plenty of other cars,” Joyce added.

“Shall we see how it looks?” I asked.

“How? It’s so dark!”

I reversed and pulled to the right, then yanked the steering wheel to the left as we inched forward. In the headlights’ glare, we could see tyre tracks crossing the ditch and connecting to the path.

The air in the car thickened. Without speaking, we could each feel the others’ reluctance.

“Well, let’s check it out.”

I pulled forward slowly. The path on the other side forked. I opted for the right side, following the direction we had been travelling on the highway.

After less than a minute, the road stopped at a sharp drop-off. There was just space for a sharp left turn, leading us under the highway, where a new path seemed to join this one. I followed it, only to find that the right-hand option led to the same sharp drop we had just left, while the left seemed to go back the way we had come in.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

“Go left,” Joyce said.

“But that’s where we came from.”

“Boh pian,” Leng said. “Look at that drop. And you can’t reverse.”

Sighing, I turned left. We ended up at a spot with the same little ditch, and a signboard reading “Siting, 75km” pointing the way to the exit in one direction and “Delingha, 143km” in the other.

“Another half-hour to Siting,” I said.

“Where’s Siting?”

“No idea. None of this is on any of my maps.”

“So how?”

“Let’s go back over there one more time,” I said. “We must have missed something. The sign says Xining is that way.”

I turned left, this time moving more slowly along the path, hoping to spot something missed before.

Just before we reached the drop-off, I saw it. A path veering to the right. I turned as much as the narrow path allowed. What we saw in the headlights’ glow was intimidating. Another ditch, this one much deeper than the first we had crossed.

“Not sure this little car will make that,” I said. “I wish we were in a four-wheel-drive vehicle.”

“Or at least in daylight,” Leng said.

“True.”

“I don’t know...” Joyce said.

“I think we turn back,” said Leng.

“Shall we try the Siting exit?” I asked, not wanting to return to Delingha.

“Up to you. You tired?”

“Not too tired to give it a try.”

“Okay, then.”

As we crossed under the highway again, Joyce and Leng said, “Sure you don’t want to go back to Delingha?”

“I don’t ever want to go back there.”

“We could see the aliens tomorrow morning...”

“We will. All we have to do is look in the mirror.” I could hear the tinge of irritation creeping into my voice. I had

gotten to the point that such reminders of my alienness in China came up less frequently. Years of working there had taught me how to mask it, despite the obvious physical markers. But out in such rugged parts of the country, things were sometimes different. And anyway, there was little we could do to mask our passports, which we had to show at every hotel.

Leng heard my irritation too. “Okay,” she said softly.

So we followed the Siting exit. It led us onto a large, brightly lit entrance ramp, aglow with promise.

And then we promptly ran into another roadblock, this one on the highway.

Leng drew in a sharp breath, then said, “What is that?” She was clearly struggling to control her anxiety too.

“Never mind, I’ll turn back,” I said.

We turned back, again seeing signs for Siting. “Oh, we must have missed a turn,” I said following the sign.

After a long ramp, we were faced with the same roadblock we had first encountered. About fifteen minutes had passed by this time.

“I feel like I’m in the *Twilight Zone*,” Leng said.

“Well, I don’t feel so bad about missing the alien relics, then,” I said.

We all laughed, sitting for a moment in the unmoving vehicle.

“We could sit here until morning, then head along that dirt path to Xining,” I said uncertainly.

“Yeah...” The agreement seemed equally doubtful.

“Honestly, I think that’s the idea I like least.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Same.”

“Okay, then,” I said, “let’s head back to Delingha.”

“You sure?” Leng asked, knowing turning back was never my style.

“I think so.”

So, I put the car in reverse, turned left, crossed the ditch, and went through the whole routine again. I drove slowly, not wanting to miss any signs. We followed the Delingha exit carefully. And within a few moments, we ended up at the same roadblock, which was now beginning to feel like an old familiar friend.

“Seriously lah! *Twilight Zone!*” Leng said.

We could not help ourselves. We had to take half a minute to laugh at the crazy situation.

“Shall I try the right turn on the dirt path?” I asked.

“It doesn’t look very promising,” Joyce said.

“Or safe,” added Leng.

“But maybe it’s the road out of the *Twilight Zone,*” I said.

“Up to you.”

And so we tried. The car groaned as we crossed the larger ditch, but proved rugged enough. We could not see much around us, only a view of what was lit in the narrow space before my headlamps. I imagined large expanses of green fields around us, like we had seen earlier in the day, while driving for hours across the vast grasslands on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. The thought of what surprises all that space might hold was much less romantic now.

The car crept forward. I hunched over the steering wheel, on high alert. There was another large dip in the

path, then a sharp left turn. The path after the turn was refreshingly straight, but very long. I felt a hint of discouragement creeping over me.

“If you keep going, there’s nowhere to turn back,” Leng said.

She was right. The road was slightly elevated, with what appeared to be steep drop-offs on either side. It was a uniform sight for as far as my high beams reached.

“What does that sign say?”

We all leaned down for a clearer look at the large red signboard just above us. It had a long stretch of white characters against a red background—the kind of sign I generally ignored when making my way around Shanghai. I was less inclined to ignore it in this instance.

It took a second for the words to sink in.

“Aiyoh!” I said, and started reversing.

“What?” Joyce asked. “I can’t see from here.”

“It’s an ethnic minority region. It says not to enter without proper permissions. I think it’s a pretty sensitive situation. My friends from Xinjiang and Guangxi have told some very unpleasant stories.”

“Not safe for aliens like you?” Joyce asked.

“It’s you two who are in more danger here. There’s often lots of animosity towards Han people in these areas. I’d be right at home, being just another alien, but you two...”

“We’re as alien as you, according to the hotels in Delingha,” Leng said.

“Yeah, but you have to show your passport to prove it. My alien status is written all over my skin.”

“Let’s go back,” Leng said.

“I’m trying. It’s not going to be easy to turn around here,” I said.

I had just enough space behind me to reverse and head back along the path we had come in on. When we reached the roadblock this time, it felt almost like a homecoming.

“So we stay here until it gets light?”

“Hey, I know,” I said. “We don’t have to get onto the highway going the other direction. We can go back on this side, just the way we came in.”

“A bit dangerous leh, driving against traffic.”

“But that’s just it. There *is* no other traffic. The only cars we saw all night were on the other side. They must have come from Siting.”

“True,” Leng said. “We could try it.”

I was already reversing and heading back up the exit ramp.

“Be careful,” Joyce said from behind. I could tell she was nervous, but I felt this was our only real option.

As we got onto the highway, driving on the wrong side of the road, I realised how nervous I was too. My neck and back felt tight as I hunched over the wheel. I kept to the shoulder, hardly daring to venture into a proper lane, despite my earlier bravado.

“Hey, what’s that?” I asked Leng, pointing out her side of the windscreen.

“Where?” She leaned forward, peering into the darkness.

“Is it a gap in the divider?” I slowed down, trying to aim the lights at what I thought I had seen.

“Yes! It must be for emergencies. Remember we saw some places like that this morning?”

I pulled across the highway and slowly made my way through the gap. It seemed to be an access road for work vehicles.

We all breathed a sigh of relief as I pulled onto the correct side of the highway. I leaned back in my seat for the first time since we had entered the highway a few kilometres back.

“You feel better, right?” Joyce said.

“Yeah,” I readily admitted.

“Me too,” Leng said. “Even though we are in such a ghost town like this, it feels safer somehow.”

“I know. I mean, we haven’t seen another car on that side of the road all night, but…”

Before I could finish my thought, we saw headlights ahead of us, moving closer. They were on the opposite side of the highway, moving fast.

“I’m glad we found that turn-off,” Leng said quietly.

“Me too.”

More lights appeared. As we drew near, we noticed it was a convoy of at least eight lorries.

“Where did they come from?” I asked. “There wasn’t another exit or entrance for the whole 143-kilometre stretch.”

“Aliens,” Joyce said.

We all laughed, just a little too loudly.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Shelly Bryant divides her time between Shanghai and Singapore, working as a poet, writer and translator. She is the author of seven volumes of poetry, a pair of travel guides for the cities of Suzhou and Shanghai, and a book on classical Chinese gardens. Shelly's poetry has appeared in journals, magazines and websites around the world, as well as in several art exhibitions. Her translation of Sheng Keyi's *Northern Girls* was longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2012. *Launch Pad* is her first fiction collection.





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—TINA KANAGARATNAM, from the introduction



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