

"Dazzlingly original,
wickedly inventive."

—Amanda Lee Koe

LION CITY

STORIES

NG
YI-SHENG

Winner of the Singapore Literature Prize

“Beyond succinct speculative re-imaginings and cultural subversions, these stories cut to the quick of fragile relationships and the tired assumptions about what we tell ourselves regarding our hyper-modern paradise.”

—CYRIL WONG, Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of *Ten Things My Father Never Told Me and Other Stories*

“Dazzlingly original, wickedly inventive.”

—AMANDA LEE KOE, multi-award-winning author of *Ministry of Moral Panic*

“Ng Yi-Sheng’s surreal and intoxicating imagination is on full display in *Lion City*, taking readers on a breathtaking tour of secret places above, below, and beyond the Singapore of his dreams. At times lyrical and quiet, majestic and oracular, but always powerful, these stories brim with nuanced observations of people in a crisis of identity, at a crossroads culturally and geographically, seeking definition in the comfort of the past and the promise of the future. This mesmerising collection is the opening salvo of a startling and important voice in contemporary Singaporean fiction.”

—DEAN FRANCIS ALFAR, Palanca Grand Prize-winning author of *Salamanca* and *A Field Guide to the Roads of Manila*

“Combining the dark fairytale visions of Neil Gaiman and Intan Paramaditha with the deadpan wit of Etgar Keret, *Lion City* is a wildly imaginative collection of stories centred around the past, present and future trajectories of Singaporean consciousness. Ng Yi-Sheng is a natural storyteller full of insight and humour.”

—SHARLENE TEO, author of *Ponti*

“*Lion City*’s short sharp shocks of short stories surprise and delight in equal measure; always conceptually arresting and beautifully executed. Wonderful.”

—LAVIE TIDHAR, World Fantasy Award-winning author of *Osama* and *A Man Lies Dreaming*

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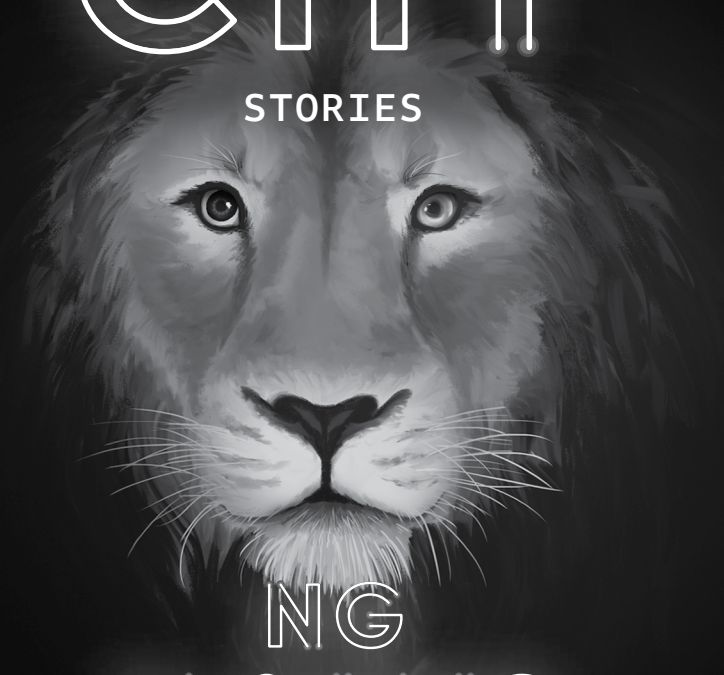
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LION CITY

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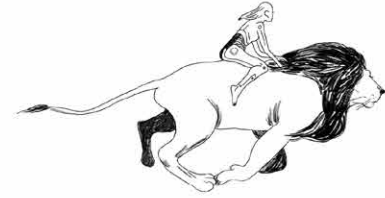


NG
YI-SHENG



EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE · LONDON

*To my father, Ng Hark Seng,
who blessed me with a love for
reading and a passion for all
things weird and wonderful*



Lion City

On our third date, we went to the Zoo. “I’ll show you where we make the animals,” she purred, still tipsy from the Carlsberg. It was 3am, but she was the hottest thing I’d ever laid my eyes or hands on, so I said sure, why the hell not, let’s go.

We zipped down Mandai Road on her chilli-red Yamaha motorbike, me behind her, gripping her waist, past walls and walls of choke-thick jungle: a mess of flame-of-the-forest and jelutong. I hadn’t been to see the animals since primary school, so I’d forgotten about this bit of Singapore: a piece of wild left over from before the skyscrapers and bonsai gardens swallowed everything up.

We got to the alphabetised parking lot; slipped past the entryway, where all the tourist info desks and the orangutan-themed café lay dark and silent. Then we came to an iron door painted with zebra stripes. She waved her card at an RFID scanner and pulled me in.

“This is where the magic happens,” she whispered, sticking a tongue in my ear. And no joke, when I’m in her presence I think with my lower half every second on the clock, but the sight before me goggled my eyes so hard, sex was the last thing on my brain.

We were in a warehouse, filled top to bottom with shelves of animals. Tigers and tapirs and tamarins, cheek by jowl, squatting still next to each other like so many library books. Life-size beasts—and no toyshop reproductions, either: in the dark I could hear them breathing at me, yipping, whooping even, their jetty black eyes winking in the light of my Samsung screen.

She laughed at my slack-jawed stupor. “This never gets old,” she said, and ducked into the shadows, leaving me alone with the thousand-odd animals. Seconds later, she popped up again with a flashlight in her left hand and a something in her right.

“Look,” she said. Flanked by pillars of possums and penguins, the something wasn’t impressive: just a pawful of wire mesh, cable spaghetti and the like, silicon garbage, the city’s detritus. But then she tickled it under its chin—yes, it had a chin—and it stretched its arms and eyes and yawned and nestled again, buzzing against her breasts, kittenish, puppylike.

“Lion cub.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been working on it these past three months. New design for infant lion. Release date’s confirmed: edition of six, just in time for Chinese New Year.”

She popped open her purse and pulled out these tiny fuzzy pyjama onesies, clenched the flashlight in her teeth, and forced

that wriggling little baby robo-cub in. And what do you know, with the bot in those clothes, it really looked like a genuine little Simba, whiskers and all.

“Skin,” she told me proudly. “Zoo’s finest achievement. Pulls the wool over their eyes. We could make a toaster look like a tarantula.”

“No shit.”

But her attention had drifted. “Here, hold this,” she said, and thrust the mewling cub into my hands. I fumbled and it bit me, but I stopped my curse halfway when I saw she was removing her shoes and her T-shirt, her jeans and her socks and her bra.

She clambered onto her workbench, her graceful arm clearing a space for us amidst the wires and screws, the flamingo feathers and fox fur.

“Come on up,” she grinned. “Let’s make some animals of our own.”



I’d met her the way everyone meets these days: online. She’d liked my profile, she said. It was no fun going out with a bad boy: her hobby was preying on decent, hardworking office types who actually took a bit of work to corrupt.

Other things she liked included punk rock bands, graffiti art, the spiciest varieties of Indian food, the most slapstick of Hong Kong kung fu comedies. Anything that was loud and joyous and verging on the borders of good taste.

“I didn’t have much of a childhood,” she explained. I’d just bought her very expensive tickets to see one of those cruel-

ty-free circuses at the Indoor Stadium, full of New Age clowns and acrobats instead of bears on unicycles. Now we were in Clarke Quay, amidst the art deco shophouses and colossal glass mushroom canopies, watching the intoxicated expats, watching the neon fountains, watching life itself. My clothes were sticky and my feet hurt, but I couldn't complain. I rather liked watching her like things.

And of course, there was the sex. It was crazy, savage stuff, the kind they're scared to mention in textbooks. Mondays at the photocopying machine, colleagues would stare at the network of lovebites on my throat, shocked, envious, unable to fathom that this colourless admin nobody might be the object of someone else's desire.

Usually we did it at the Zoo. After that first time, she'd decided her workbench was too stiff, too cluttered, and I wasn't wild about the dozens of mechanical eyes hovering over us anyway. Lucky for us, there were plenty of other love nests hidden away on the map. The baboon enclosure, the pony stables, the manatee tank.

After she came, which she did with flattering regularity, we'd share a cigarette. She'd extract a pack of Dunhill Reds from her purse and pass it between us, the sweat cooling on our bodies, stars above us peeking out between the trees and the necks of the spindly giraffes as they charged their battery packs.

She'd get all solemn sometimes. "I thought I was through with guilt," she'd say. "But yesterday, I was doing the elephant show and I saw this six-year-old Scandinavian kid. And he looked into my eyes, and I thought, he knows. He knows. He knows I know he knows."

We paused for a bit, listening to the lap of the reservoir water. Then I asked her if it'd always been this way.

"My god, yes. I mean, we're Singapore. We're a fully urban microstate in Southeast Asia. How else do you think we built the world's number-one zoo back in 1973?"

"Of course it was harder then," and here she blew a few smoke rings, "when folks were farmers and hunters and fishermen. They'd actually grown up around animals, some of them. And we had old tech. They must have smelled the trick a mile away."

"Why'd they keep their mouths shut?"

"Money, lover boy. Not bribery, mind you: they just knew we'd lose our pants if anyone squealed. And back then, everyone actually loved this country. We were all so hungry to succeed. So hungry that we were willing to tear everything down, all the villages and black-and-white colonial bungalows, and stack up these towers of glass and steel in their place."

There was a sound of crickets. Digital, maybe.

"But I'm not being nostalgic. This is nature. Renewal, like a snake shedding its skin. God, when was the last time I saw an actual snake?"

"What if the other zoos found out?"

"Are you kidding? Everyone's doing it. Basel, San Diego, Tokyo. Did you know, the giant panda's been extinct for a hundred years?"

Her fingers took aim and flicked the cigarette stub right into the designated trash bin.

"Gimme another," she nuzzled into my neck, and to my delight I found I was ready to go again.



It could've gone on forever like that, if it wasn't for that Valentine's Day stunt I pulled. I'd been shit-scared of her tiring of me, yawning during the same-old same-old fucking, gearing up mentally for another conquest.

So I decided to surprise her at work. Begged my boss for leave on the 14th, and spent it in the Zoo myself, wandering all over, a corny bouquet of a dozen red roses stuffed into my laptop bag.

I took my time with it. Stopped to sightsee. I saw the giant tortoise. I saw the polar bear. I saw the hippo and the gavia and the peacock and the dingo. Even hung out by the lion's den and checked out the listless, roaring felines—not that lifelike, I thought. I'd seen better.

But I didn't see her.

Texted her. No reply. Texted her again. Phone call, email, WhatsApp, Facebook, Line.

She's in a meeting, I told myself. She's asleep. She's gone on an overseas trip to repopulate the Okavango Delta with robocats, and never told me. I spent the hours dredging up every excuse my sorry brain could conjure, just to still the sour pool of vomit in my belly that'd hurl itself upwards if I even dared to consider the possibility that she didn't want me.

Around six o'clock closing time, she still hadn't replied, and suddenly a wave of acid reached the roof of my mouth, so I ducked behind some bushes and sprayed the heliconias with my overpriced lunch of yong tau foo. Getting up off my hands and knees, I saw a door. A familiar zebra-striped door. I jiggled

at the knob. The scanner gave a low-pitched whine but the whole thing came open with a click, so I stepped in.

It was her workshop, all right: those endless shelves of critters, kingfishers and Komodo dragons and kangaroos, all stacked up in the darkness. And there in the centre of it all was a blue acetylene glow of a blowtorch, illuminating a woman.

It was her. But she looked different. The skin on her face and arms looked torn, as if by animal claws. And she was carefully welding the fingers of her right hand back onto her knuckles.

Maybe I let out a little cry, enough to startle her. She whipped her head around, showing the mess of circuitry in her cheeks, the fibreglass surface of her skull. Her eyes, the left one lidless, glowed iron-red in the flame. A low wail came from her throat, sub-sonic, making the very bones in my body tremble.

I think I shat myself. I can't be sure, because I was racing my way out of there, through the puddle of my vomit and the stinking mud of the flower beds, up and over and through the closing gates of the park, plunging into the nearest taxi, throwing my wallet at the driver to hightail us out of that place, before I could even begin to consciously process what I'd seen.

Hours later, while I was scrubbing myself raw in the shower at my parents' flat, my phone buzzed.

She'd sent me a text message. "Tks 4 the flowers," it read, followed by the emoji of a rose.



She turned up at the office a week later. It was ten in the morning, but I excused myself from the accounts committee and told everyone I needed just five seconds alone with her in the pantry.

It was odd, seeing her, scary and gorgeous as ever, on my home territory, against the dull sink and the corporate coffee mugs. I took a moment to brew us some Nescafé.

“You weren’t supposed to see me like that,” she said.

“No shit.”

“I mean it, though. I’m one of the Zoo’s newest designs. Government secret. Very hush-hush.”

It turned out she was a third-generation replicant: part of a master plan to build a cheap, highly-skilled labour force that’d integrate seamlessly into the populace. A unit of productivity and consumption, but minus the mess of childbirth and immigration and voting rights. Basically, she was an economist’s fantasy come true.

“You’re very alive for a robot.”

“Asshole. But yeah, I overcompensate. And it gets lonely in the warehouse.”

She stared at her hands, then raised the mug to her lips. I did the same. Finally, she spoke.

“Is that it for us then?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Sorry I asked. Have a nice life.”

“No. I mean...”

I checked the windows. Fuck, I couldn’t believe I was doing this. But it was either this or lose her, wasn’t it? I shook my shoulders loose, reached into my chest, and gave a firm tug.

For the first time in years, maybe decades, my skin came off. I padded out on my four paws, huge and nervous and naked in my fur, tail waving back and forth. She seemed kind of confused, so I lay down next to her, placed my head in her lap and told her she could stroke my mane if she liked, I wouldn’t bite.

“When the cities grew, us animals didn’t just disappear,” I explained. “We adapted. We’ve been living alongside men for centuries, tilling their fields, fortifying their fortresses, fighting their wars. And above all, surviving.”

“We don’t change back a lot. Too risky. Some of us even forget how—it’s a tragedy, but at least we’re around to mourn. And we’re there in any city, no matter how cold or plastic. If you only know where to look.”

Something like hours passed before she said anything. Maybe she was stuck in one of those programming feedback loops. I wouldn’t know.

But eventually, she sat upright and grinned. “Lion cub,” she said to me, tenderly, touching the fuzz on the tips of my ears. Then she threaded her fingers into her hair, undid some hidden catch and peeled off the rubbery coat that enveloped her. All shining metal, she stepped over my squashed up clothing and gave my muzzle a kiss.

We unlocked the door. We stepped through, passing the cubicles full of my screaming colleagues, down the lift corridor, past the security guards and out the lobby, into the streets.

“Ready, lover boy?” she said, and swung a silver leg over my back. I gave a rumbling roar in assent.

“Perfect. Let’s ride.”



Fishing Village

They say the city never sleeps. Not true. Once a year, on the hottest day of the calendar, when the air shimmers off the mirrored skyscrapers like pale flames; when reservoirs sizzle and air-conditioners spontaneously combust; when grass cutters flood their protective masks with the salt of their foreheads and bankers pull at their fetid ties and stinky pantyhose; then even the best of us can do nothing else but set down our heads and snore.

All over the island: cashiers at conveyor belts, surgeons in their ORs and sisters in their cloisters; gamblers at their baccarat tables, firefighters on their poles, CEOs in their boardrooms mid-PowerPoint; even the discipline mistresses in detention rooms and the sergeant-majors in parade squares; even the maids hanging out laundry on bamboo poles and pilots cruising at thirty-six thousand feet. Even they stretch their faces, put up one arm then the other, fold it into a

makeshift pillow and curl up in place. Even they know that enough is enough is enough.

And while they whistle in dreamland, the bob-bob-bob of the tides somehow jerks, the shoreline sinks, and the seas around the island drain to reveal fresh sand, new shells, bleached corals. Like a boudoir curtain drawn sideways, the waters expose new nakednesses: a world of ancient horseshoe crabs and turtles scuttling amidst ugly derricks and trawler nets.

And there, in their huts of shipwreck jetsam, are the duyungs.

They are the first people. The original fisher folk. They who lived in the littorals of the island, bathing in quicksand, sleeping in sun-baked pools of starfish, the tide their blanket.

They who were dark and sleek and healthy, fed on a fat-rich diet of slippery bright souls. They who swam with the squid and fucked with the dolphins. They who wrote nothing, built nothing, claimed nothing, knew nothing save for themselves, till the brown man, yellow man, white man came.

If the historian should wake now in the nest of her office, lined with stacks of books and microfilms, she might recount the little we know of their tribe. How a rajah from the line of Iskandar Dzulkarnain once plumbed the depths to discover their sovereign kingdom. How he wed their princess, who bore him three noble sons. How each one of these sons grew to be a prince. How the youngest named the city he founded after a lion.

She knows nothing more. How could she, when she naps, peaceful as a skeleton in a morgue?

Besides, they have aged since the time of legends. See how dull the scales are at the edge of their lips, how ragged the fins that adorn the fringe of their toes and whirlpool eyes and navels. How grey the hairs of their nostrils, which flare in amazement at the sunlight, mistrusting it as an allotrope of water.

But with a blink, blink, they recall their duty. Clambering into their sampans, they gather their tools and wait.

Then the wind rushes in, and like long balloons their boats are aloft, hopping across the air, into the city, coasting through the mighty towers and steelworks, mere metres above the ground. They chuckle as their barks narrowly miss collision with construction cranes, concrete malls, playground equipment, abstract statuary, scalps of citizens still snoozing below. They clench their knuckles as the wind blows them higher, higher, flipping them wavelike, stringless kites. The sun bakes their skins and they laugh, the quiet, gurgling laughs of those whose years outnumber any heap of salt-grains.

And they bask in the open air for a moment, gazing with wistful bliss at the land below them, all spiked and grey. But the sun is high and can go no higher. They must set to work. Before the hour is out, the harvest must be complete.

So they throw out their nets, and what nets they are, knotted from the finest of silks, sheerer than any a worm or spider might purge from her belly. And they cast out their hooks, and what hooks, smaller and sharper than the spark in the eyes of a cornered cat.

And these traps fall. They fall into the laps of those of us sleeping below, at our desks and our workstations. They fall

into our mouths. But we do not wake. We do not catch hold of these hooks and ride them, heavenwards, to say hello. We only toss our heads, smiling undisturbed, as magic covers us.

But something is caught. Their nets become heavy, their fishing lines taut. And we frown a little as they reel in their bounty from above, as if, in our unconscious slumberland, something has been irrevocably lost.

The boats of the duyungs drift back downwards. The waves blanket them as they pass.

The sky cools a tick, and as if on command, the city wakes. We gaze downwards at our hands, guilty that we have allowed ourselves this lapse of judgement. We reproach ourselves, privately promise it will never happen again, that it was not in character; that no one noticed anyway, therefore it never happened at all. We shall forget it ourselves by the evening.

And if the eyes of a few of us are a little emptier, our smiles more false, our chests more hollow, what of it? Nothing has truly changed. And look: our work is not even halfway done.

Below, they laugh at us, rustling the depths. They count and celebrate their spoils. But we shall pay them no heed. Whatever has happened, we are convinced we are none the poorer.

We can afford to be magnanimous, anyhow. We are wealthy sons and daughters of industry.

If something was taken, we are sure it will not be missed.



Hub

Boss. Boss.

Yah?

We checked out your competitor.

Good, good.

They have no name.

Yah.

Funny, right? So big, but don't have name.

Hullo, friend. I am Chua Soon Teck. I am Founder and CEO of Golden Wonderland Integrated Resort, rated number one shopping complex in Southeast Asia. Five years old, I already sell fish in wet market; twelve years old, I open drinks stall in pasar malam. Hawker centre, mama shop, hypermart, boutique mall: All I also do. I pow kar leow, understand? I long time in this business already. So I know this kind of pattern. No name is also a name. No branding is also a kind of branding.

OK Boss. I call them No Name then?

Can also. What I want to know is, how can we tekan them? How can we steal their market share? What do they have that we don't have?

Everything, boss.

Hah?

They have everything. We checked. White rice, brown rice, red rice, purple rice, they all have. Cinnamon, lemongrass, nutmeg, sumac, asafoetida. Strawberry, durian, cupuacu, jabuticaba, physalis. Tomato, bok choy, broccolini, samphire, manioc, coca leaf, cannabis sativa. Snickers, M&Ms, White Rabbit, haw flakes, murukku, Mysore pak, pemmican, balut, escamoles, Sriracha popcorn. Buffalo burger, crocodile steak, wagyu panda meat. You want, they have, Boss.

How can?

I don't know how can.

Like this then cham. Goods and sundries, how?

They also got. Paperclips, coat hangers, shampoo, copper wire, dental floss, cupcake holders, surge protectors, oyster forks, cocktail umbrellas, hollow point bullets, sledgehammers, skipping ropes, satellite dishes, diapers, T-shirts, swimming goggles, friendship bracelets, kasut manek, three-piece tuxedos, Anarkali suits, invisibility cloaks, waffle irons, microwave ovens, aluminium foil, enriched uranium, jelly moulds, telegraph poles, X-ray machines, AM radios, gramophones, motorcycles, ocean liners, lifeboats, lifesavers, Nazi memorabilia, relics of the Christian martyrs, moon rocks, Buddha heads, amphorae, ushabti, Mayan codices, Dead Sea Scrolls, cave paintings, dinosaur fossils, pencil sharpeners, de-

fibrillators, paper plates, cow manure, unclaimed ashes from the crematorium at Choa Chu Kang. They got everything lah, boss.

Never mind, never mind. This kind of specialty business very tok kong, but we also can undercut. Next question. Who goes there?

Everyone, boss.

Hah?

Everyone. Young, middle-aged, old. White-collar, blue-collar, no-collar. Locals, PRs, foreign workers, expatriates, tourists. Male, female, both, neither. Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian, Other. Army boys, factory girls, civil servants, bankers, nurses, gangsters, pregnant mothers, novice monks, police, tai-tais, Mediacorp celebrities, homeless ah peks, airline stewardesses, hajjis, hajjahs, multi-level marketing salesmen, gamblers, gangsters, retirees. Chinese Communist Party officials, Indian IT engineers, Filipino call centre operators, Korean cosplayers, Swiss bankers, Italian supermodels, Egyptian tour guides, Maasai warriors, Argentinean gauchos, Samoan wrestlers, scuba diving instructors from Pago Pago.

Like that then how?

I don't know how, Boss.

You don't know, then I tell you. Like that then we die liao lor! Fifty years! Fifty years I have built my company up from nothing, and for what?

Boss? Boss? Where are you going?

I am going to No Name!

Don't cause trouble leh.

Trouble? What trouble? You tell my secretary we all can

go home, close shop! Tell her to draft letter, send to all the shareholders tomorrow. Say we have to cut our losses. Golden Wonderland IR is finished. We cannot compete.



Boss?

Mm.

You're back.

Mm.

Your secretary draft letter already. Wait for your OK, then can send.

Mm.

Boss, I never see you like this before.

Thirsty lah. You want whisky?

You go No Name already?

Of course I go.

And then?

I went shopping. I bought a soft drink that tastes of watermelon and chicken curry. I bought a TV that plays only black-and-white Hokkien shows from the 1960s. I bought the crown jewels of Wu Zetian for my wife and a pair of Cleopatra's panties for my mistress. I bought a baby Triceratops for my son and the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge for my daughter. For my father I bought an oil painting of the Eight Immortals signed by Leonardo da Vinci. For my mother I bought a photograph of the boy she loved when she was a little girl, before the war.

Wah. Very nice.

I also saw many people I knew. I saw the Queen of England having kopi with the Sultan of Brunei. I saw my last-time neighbour laughing with Kim Jong-un and Oprah Winfrey and I saw my last-time girlfriend holding hands with the Dalai Lama. I saw Elvis Presley smoking with Francis Seow. I saw Joan of Arc sharing coupons with S Rajaratnam. I saw Adolf Hitler and Lin Dai and Othman Wok and Jesus Christ. I saw my grandson, who is not yet born. I saw my twin sister, who would have been here if not for the accident. And I saw the owner.

Owner? No Name got owner meh?

Yah. I got lost in the aisles. I walked around in circles in the section that sold only chandeliers and dragonfly wings. And then she saw me. She helped me with my purchases. She gave me a storewide discount. She ordered me a glass of seven thousand-year-old Persian wine. And she told me her business structure.

Wah! Can copy or not?

Cannot.

Why not? Copyright ah?

She says there is a point in the universe, in all possible universes, where everything meets, like the centre of a wheel. All times, all places, got connection there. All products, all customers will naturally flow here. She very lucky. She found just the right location.

Then how like that?

How? How, your head lah. You tell Gina, can delete the letter. Tomorrow we open as normal. We will be OK. The customers will still be there.

How you know?

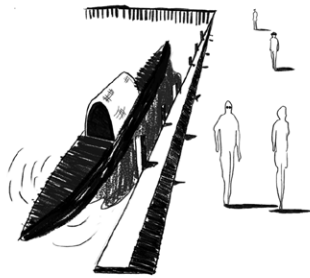
No Name owner tell me one.

And you believe?

Yah. She a bit ko lian dai, actually. Very old, very lonely. No one takes care of her. You know what she say?

What?

Yah, everyone comes. But this one is a crossroads, not a centre. It is a nowhere place. Everyone comes. But eventually, everyone goes away.



Harbour

I.

It's Sunday night, June 20, 1937. The pilot can't sleep. She swelters in the tropical heat, choked by the veil of mosquito netting that cocoons her four-poster bed. Her coverlet itches, her pillowcase is soaked with sweat, and the humidity is wreaking havoc on her sinuses. And then there's the dread: God help her, it's growing in her heart, and its needs must be quenched.

In a fit of lucidity, she tries to calm herself. There is no reason to worry, she thinks. The day's journey from Bangkok was a mere thousand miles: a virtual heartbeat in her aviation career. Her Lockheed Model 10E Electra now sleeps soundly in a hangar at the Kallang Aerodrome, a jewel of a terminus without equal in the Far East. Meanwhile, the American Consul-General and his wife have been perfect hosts, ensuring

that she's as clean and well-fed as she would be, were she back at her grandmother's house in Kansas.

Yet her skull is flooded with mucus, and next door, her navigator snores like a buzz saw. "Fuck it," she says aloud to the darkness. She's had enough. She hauls herself out of bed, pulls on her checkered shirt and gabardine trousers, and slips out of the mansion into the gas-lit road.

She walks for half a mile, then hails herself a rickshaw, bargaining herself a deal based on the fact that her wallet's still full of American dollars. A brisk ride later, she's at the junction of Malay Street and Kandahar: the legendary pleasure district she's heard whispers of amongst the oil-slicked mechanics of Calcutta and Rangoon; a pavement praised in drunken song amongst colonial officers in London pubs.

Strolling along, she melts easily into the crowd of tattooed sailors and gamblers, secret society members and opium addicts. No one questions her presence; with her cropped hair and small breasts, she passes easily for a man.

All eyes are on the women, anyhow. They come in all colours: Mongoloid, Caucasoid, Austronesian. Lashes mascaraed, lips daubed with carmine, faces powdered with rice dust, they sit and stand in the glow of red lanterns above their bordellos. Some laugh as they court their clients, playing mahjong or chap ji kee. Some strum on the pipa, chanting mournfully in Cantonese. And others stand sullenly, directing their eyes only at the spaces between the men. They find no joy in this business, and will not pretend.

And amongst them, there's her. A tiny creature on the pavement, sitting cross-legged, dressed in a kimono, valiantly

exorcising the heat with a silk fan printed with peonies. On closer examination, she's no longer young: her once delicate features are ravaged by age. Yet her spine is erect and her gaze is unflinching.

Eventually, their eyes meet. They size each other up: a barely perceptible nod, a brief discussion of prices, and the transaction is sealed. Claspng her hand, she guides the pilot through a beaded curtain. The rabble of the street barely notice as they disappear.

II.

The karayuki-san's name is Yoriko. She has lived in the city for thirty years now, and she has bedded countless men, of all colours and creeds, of all nations and professions and ages. This, however, will be her first woman. She does not relish the experience. She smears medicated oil on her hands and sets to work.

Her client, who wishes to be addressed as Millie, lies naked and facedown on her mattress. By the light of the kerosene lamp, she kneads the knots out of her back, smoothing the muscles with her practised fingers, just as she would for any stevedore or rubber-tapper who came to her door.

"I'm travelling around the world," Millie says, quite suddenly. Her voice is American, light and young. "Where are you from? Maybe I'll be in your neck of the woods."

Yoriko thinks of her village on the island of Amakusa, named for its sweet grass. A place of famine, where little girls

grew up knowing they might be sold at the first bad harvest. A land where folks were so poor, they never tasted fish, even though they lived next door to the boundless sea.

Try as she might, she finds she can barely remember the faces of her parents, her playmates, her infant siblings. Only the smell of an empty pigsty, a cowshed without a cow, the jetty and the beach where she stood in file to be taken away.

"I'm from Japan," she says.

"Shame. I'm not headed that way. But I am crossing the Pacific to Honolulu. You know Honolulu? Lotsa Japs there."

An awkward silence.

"You must miss home, huh?"

"No."

"Come on, hon. You can tell me."

"No. Once we leave, we do not return. Better not to be a burden. Better not to think of home."

She does not speak of the money she has sent home through the decades to ease her family's hunger and debts, nor the letters of thanks she has received, describing the auspicious weddings of her sisters, the graduation ceremonies of her brothers. These thoughts fill her with pride, but it would be too, too crude to speak of money. Even in front of an American. Even in front of another woman.

A question occurs to Yoriko. She dismisses it as impolite, yet there is something about this woman that has loosened her tongue.

"Why?"

"Sorry?"

"Why are you going around the world?"



About the Author

Ng Yi-Sheng is a poet, fictionist, playwright, journalist and activist. He was awarded the Singapore Literature Prize for his debut poetry collection, *last boy* (2006). His other publications include a spiritual sequel to that work, called *A Book of Hims* (2017); a compilation of his best spoken-word pieces, *Loud Poems for a Very Obliging Audience* (2016); the bestselling non-fiction book, *SQ21: Singapore Queers in the 21st Century* (2006); and a novelisation of the Singapore gangster movie, *Eating Air* (2008). He also co-edited *GASPP: A Gay Anthology of Singapore Poetry and Prose* (2010) and *Eastern Heathens: An Anthology of Subverted Asian Folklore* (2013). He recently completed his MA in creative writing at the University of East Anglia and is currently pursuing his PhD at Nanyang Technological University. *Lion City* is his first fiction collection.



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