

“Amanda Lee Koe is mesmerising.
One of the finest writers in her generation.”

—Daren Shiau, author of *Heartland*



STORIES

AMANDA LEE KOE

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—Daren Shiau, author of *Heartland*



AMANDA LEE KOE



EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

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Published in Singapore by Epigram Books

www.epigrambooks.sg

Edited by Jason Erik Lundberg

Cover design and layout by Lydia Wong

These pieces were originally published (in slightly different form)
in the following places:

“Flamingo Valley”, *Bellevue Literary Review*, Fall 2013

“Pawp”, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, Vol. 12, No. 3, July 2013

“The King of Caldecott Hill”, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, Vol.
12, No. 4, October 2013

“Love Is No Big Truth”, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, March 2013

“Laundromat”, *From the Belly of the Cat*, Math Paper Press, October 2013

“Siren”, *Eastern Heathens*, Ethos Books, March 2013

Published with the support of



National Library Board, Singapore

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Lee Koe, Amanda, 1987-

Ministry of moral panic : stories / Amanda Lee Koe. – Singapore :

Epigram Books, 2013.

p. cm

ISBN: 978-981-07-5732-8 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-981-07-5733-5 (ebook)

I. Title.

PR9570.S53

S823 -- dc23 OCN855509308

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entirely coincidental.

With thanks to Amelia Ng, Wei Fen Lee, Wei-Ling Woo and Winnie Wu
—ALK

First Edition: October 2013

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Bud,
left standing*

Was it Laurie Anderson who said that VR would never look real until they learned how to put some dirt in it? Singapore's airport, the Changi Airtropolis, seemed to possess no more resolution than some early VPL world. There was no dirt whatsoever; no muss, no furred fractal edge to things. Outside, the organic, florid as ever in the tropics, had been gardened into brilliant green, and all-too-perfect examples of itself. Only the clouds were feathered with chaos—weird columnar structures towering above the Strait of China.

The cab driver warned me about littering. He asked where I was from.

He asked if it was clean there. "Singapore very clean city." One of those annoying Japanese-style mechanical bells cut in as he exceeded the speed limit, just to remind us both that he was doing it. There seemed to be golf courses on either side of the freeway . . .

"You come for golf?"

"No."

"Business?"

"Pleasure."

He sucked his teeth. He had his doubts about that one.

— William Gibson, "Disneyland with the Death Penalty",
Wired, 1993

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Flamingo Valley

LING KO MUI, the hot fuss of Flamingo Valley, the old Malay man says. Oh ho, you still gots it, don't you, baby.

All the old Chinese men and women turn up their yellow wrinkled faces like sea turtles, and Deddy Haikel gives a flourish that looks like *shazam*. Ling Ko Mui creaks her gaze tentatively toward him.

Yes, you! Deddy Haikel says, I'm talking to you, girl, but her clouded eyes have swivelled back to the television set, where some Mandarin travel show is playing.

Didn't you ask me to take you for a ride on my motorbike?

Didn't you come see me play the National Theatre?

Didn't your Chinese boyfriend beat me up on Bencoolen Street?

It's *Deddy Haikel!*

He picks up his guitar, which is never ever too far away, and begins strumming the first few chords of 'Barbara Shimmies on Bugis Street'. His voice isn't like it was any more, not since the throat operation, but it reaches into Ling Ko Mui and she looks up at him, her squinting eyes almost meeting his.

The woman is *nyanyuk*, one of the old Chinese men croaks to Deddy Haikel, twirling a finger beside his temple. Doesn't remember anything. Can't even recognise her daughter.

Deddy Haikel lets the riff sag, props a leg on a chair and

says, Hey, this whole ward is the *nyanyuk* ward, isn't it? Don't think you're so smart. You're soft in the head too. He turns back to Ling Ko Mui, but she has averted her eyes, in exactly the same manner as when she was eighteen and he asked her for a dance.

There are things that cut through swathes of memory, there are things you take with you that are non-essential, that drag you down, but you can't offload them because there is only one way to throw them overboard and that is for you to walk the plank.

• • •

He'd finished his set in the small pub, covers of the Rolling Stones and the Beatles, played on a guitar he'd saved up a year and a half to purchase, delivering newspapers on weekends. He'd skipped school to see Cliff Richards & the Shadows at Happy World in 1961 and could there be anything better?

He'd come off the small raised platform and was making his way to the bar. The pub, popular with British servicemen, was a short distance away from the barracks. In the mass of khaki uniforms, there was a young Chinese girl in a full white skirt, prim on a bar stool. He wondered if she was here with someone—it was rare to see girls out alone in the evenings, much less in bars. When he reached the bar she turned.

You're very good, she said.

Thank you. Do you come here often?

My father owns the pub. We live upstairs.

It must get noisy.

It does, but I love music. The only thing I don't understand

is why it's always only the Eurasians and you Malays. We don't ever have Chinese musicians coming in to play.

He laughed. You Chinese are too busy trying to be businessmen. Making real money.

That's sad.

Nah, it's how the world works—it's how your father can give me five dollars for playing tonight's set.

Listen, I'm starving—will you take me to eat? I saw that you ride a motorbike. I've never been on one.

Sure. What would you like to eat?

Surprise me. As long as we get there on your motorbike.

• • •

They sat across a rickety aluminium table at a kedai makan, platters of nasi kandar and sup kambing between them. Ling Ko Mui picked up a fork and spoon. Deddy Haikel considered the cutlery briefly, then reached in with his right hand as he normally would.

Is there a technique?

To?

To eating with your hands?

He showed her how to gather the rice into a loose ball, packing it more tightly as he went along. She imitated him with her own hands.

Only with your right hand.

Why?

Well . . . the left is unclean.

I could wash it.

No, not like that. The right hand is for eating, and the left hand—the left hand is for cleaning your bottom.

Ah, I see.

Do you like the rice?

It's delicious. But why is Malay chilli sweet?

It helps the musicians write better love songs.

• • •

Every Friday evening, he would play the 8–9pm set at the pub owned by Ling Ko Mui's father, and when her father was busy at the counter, they would sneak out for supper on his motorbike—Malay food one week, Chinese food the next. Her father was cordial enough to Deddy Haikel the musician, but Deddy Haikel the suitor would have been tossed out the back door like the bean sprout ends and chicken bones left over from dinner. Over teh halia or hot Horlicks after supper, they would talk about music. She told him he ought to get a backing band, that he ought to write his own songs, that she could help with the lyrics.

Once, he came to the pub an hour earlier. Her parents were at the temple of the Goddess of Mercy, her younger siblings playing catch on the street. They ran upstairs, light-footed, and she drew the curtains together before unearthing her father's record player from under a Chinese silk doily. They crouched close together as he watched her delicate fingers put on an imported Petula Clark record, tuning the volume down. When 'Ya Ya Twist' started playing, Deddy Haikel got to his feet and put out his hand. Ling Ko Mui hesitated, then took it; they

danced in the gathering twilight, ceiling fan whirring slowly above them.

She started singing softly with the music as he held her close, and then closer. He loved the sweet, nasal quality to her voice and he closed his eyes, letting his thoughts race through—perhaps she could be a backing vocalist in his band? Would they have a Malay wedding, or a Chinese one? Could he give up the Qur'an for her? Would she give her own parents up for him, the way he was prepared to give his up for her? He wanted to say something, but the record was ending, running empty under the needle. Ling Ko Mui pulled away from him gently, kneeling by the floor to flip the vinyl.

• • •

There was a Chinese girl I was gila in love with, Deddy Haikel says to the young nurse, as she listens to his heartbeat, assessing the damage of this second heart attack. I would have done anything to get into her pants, and it wasn't even about that.

There was a Chinese boy who felt the same way about her. I didn't know about him, but he knew about me. I was walking down Bencoolen Street one day when someone tapped my shoulder. When I turned around, he punched me right in the face. He'd sent his men to do the legwork: they knew I played Friday sets at her father's pub and that I had supper with her after. That she would put her arms on either side of my waist as she rode pillion on my motorbike.

He smelled of treated cuttlefish and shrivelled red dates; told me he was the son of a dried sundries merchant and that

they were made of money. He could give Ling Ko Mui the life a girl like her deserved. I went at him, but he had these lackeys with bad teeth and white singlets under unbuttoned shirts. They broke a rib of mine.

When I lay in hospital I thought about it like a carnival act. I'd reach into my throat, all the way in, and unearth this rib between my thumb and forefinger. I'd transfigure it into a bone-china rose and press it into her soft palm. She'd understand, she'd wrap her fingers around it and tell me that her heart had fallen on my side of the fence.

You're nothing, the merchant's son had said into my ear as his men held me back. You're just a loafer, sitting in the shade of a palm tree, playing your stupid songs to ten people in a pub. If I see you hanging around her again, you'll find the head of a pig on the front door of your father's house. My men are everywhere: if you speak with her, you'll find a parang in each of your kidneys the next morning—don't think I'm not up to this. He stamped my guitar to bits and spat into my face. Besides, you'll be doing yourself a favour, really—did you ever think for just one second that she would really go with a Malay boy?

That was when I knew I had to make it.

My guitar was my life. I stole money from a Chinese medicine hall and bought a new one, practised day in and day out. I stopped looking at girls. I stopped looking into the mirror. I grew calluses atop my calluses on my fingers. I made love to my guitar.

It took years, and I'm not going to pretend like it was easy, but I did it. I became famous. We had the adoration of schoolgirls

and young women: Malay, Chinese and Indian. I never stopped looking for her face in the crowd, or imagining it, but deep down I knew he was right—she would never have been mine.

• • •

A constable was flagging Deddy Haikel's motorcycle down. Deddy Haikel's hair hung to his shoulders, blasé to the deterrent posters plastered all about town: *Males with Long Hair Will Be Attended To Last*. He wore motorcycle boots, a shirt with the top three buttons undone, and drainpipe jeans. These jeans were the sort that the police couldn't pass a Coke glass bottle through—the test that determined if your pants were too tight. If the Coke bottle couldn't come through your pant leg, you would have to remove your pants.

Deddy Haikel knew all the lyrics to the White Album, and John Lennon was his favourite Beatle because he'd heard through the grapevine—fancy Liverpool and Singapore neighbouring cities, not colonial affiliates—that when John Lennon met Yoko Ono, they went back to his place and made love all night. When John's wife, Cynthia, who had been out of town, walked through the door the next morning to see Yoko wrapped in her towel, all John said to Cynthia was—*Oh, hello*.

That is how a rock star should be, Deddy Haikel thought, as he lit a cig, as he picked chords on his guitar, as he thumbed the calluses on his fingers, as he rode a Malay girl, as the police were unable to pass the Coke bottle through his pant leg—*Oh, hello*.

Pants off, the Chinese constable told Deddy Haikel in Malay. Deddy Haikel shrugged his shoulders, grinned at the fellow. He

wriggled out of them, with some effort because they were *that* tight. He hoped they wouldn't discard his jeans, that secretly back at HQ they would squeeze their fat Chinese calves into them, checking themselves out in the mirror, wishing they too could adopt these vistas of fashion, music, rebellion. Sighing as they holstered their batons, as they downed the dregs of their sock-kopi so as not to doze off on duty.

Deddy Haikel thought—a glowing, swollen thought that felt like the beginnings of a hard-on—as he passed his jeans amicably to the constable: in exactly twenty-four hours, I'll be on a stage. Paid to make girls scream. Don't you know who I am? Tomorrow I play the National Theatre. A sold-out show.

• • •

3,420 seats in the amphitheatre. 3,420 seats filled, and they all know the lyrics to every song, this makes him want to cry.

The back of the guitar against his pelvis, every twang amplified.

Malay girls, Chinese girls, Indian girls—all ages, and the same with men, but it is the girls he sees and the girls he hears, and they are screaming his name.

Mid-set someone throws a bullet-bra bustier onto the stage. As he leaves the microphone and bends to pick it up, he's thinking, John, hey John, I get it.

Deddy Haikel forgets to breathe because the song is his breath. He is thirsting and he is drinking in every yearning face in the crowd. He is not looking to a faraway point in the distance like his manager told him to, he is revelling in the

specificity of each face, and he can see in their faces that they all want to touch him.

Twelve songs but it feels like it's just the first one even at the last. They think so too, they have banded together to demand *Encore, encore.*

Barbara shimmies down Bugis Street

And every sailor's head turns.

Feathers and a dress of midnight blue

Barbara's got an axe to burn.

He bows, his bandmates bow, they scream; he bows, his bandmates bow, they scream. The adrenaline crescendos, the area before his eyes explodes into tiny bright stars.

Peace.

• • •

They were walking to the carpark behind the National Theatre, equipment in tow, when a Rolls Royce pulled up in front of them. The backseat window rolled down.

Deddy Haikel, you did it.

Ling Ko Mui was smiling, shining. Long, finger-waved curls had replaced the schoolgirl bob, and her face was lightly made up. Only five years and now she was a woman.

This is my husband, Leong Heng.

It was the son of the dried goods merchant. In the backseat of the Rolls Royce, he looked perfectly civil. He smiled at Deddy Haikel, holding his hand up as a perfunctory greeting.

When I saw you on the poster I squealed, “I know him, he used to play at my father’s pub!” I made Leong Heng get tickets right away. We had a marvellous time—it was a great performance.

Thank you.

It’s a pity you stopped coming around to the pub though. I wanted to call you up at home but my father wouldn’t give me your number. I’d thought maybe you lost interest in music.

No, that would never happen.

Well, then I guess our pub got too small for you.

It wasn’t that either.

What was it, then?

My dear, you’re not being very polite are you, Leong Heng interrupted, leaning over to put a hand on his wife’s knee.

Look at me going on about the past. I don’t mean to, Deddy Haikel. Congratulations again.

Thank you.

We should go, Leong Heng said. My heartiest congratulations to you.

He signalled to the driver, and the window began rolling up.

Goodbye, Ling Ko Mui said.

Goodbye, Deddy Haikel said, but the Rolls Royce had already pulled away.

• • •

The day they began tearing the National Theatre down in 1984—with its sharp rhombused frontal design, its amphitheatre, its crescent-shaped fountain—Deddy Haikel had his first heart attack.

Too much mutton, his first wife said. Too much cendol, his second wife chimed in. Too much kueh, his third wife added. This was his problem with having three wives. The rotational sex was good, but the three wives got along so well that they frequently rallied against him.

Sometimes he wondered how they could be so chummy—did he not inspire the surly beast of jealousy in his women? He tried to grunt and moan louder in his orgasms, so the other two wives who weren’t on the master bedroom bed that night would hear. He hoped it kept them up at night, that they would try to outdo each other.

But they never did. They continued combing each other’s hair, purchasing colourful faux silks when there was an offer at the market on each other’s behalf, taking turns to bake sugce cookies for the brood, like sisters.

• • •

Wife Number One is signing in at the counter at Flamingo Valley for her visitor’s pass. She’s the fat one, the one who waddles when she walks, her ass expansive. She kisses his hands and they speak in Malay.

How are you, the doctor says you can come home soon? Still two more weeks?

Sayang, I’m still recovering from the bypass, look at me. He clutches his heart and pulls a face. Wife Number One frowns amusedly.

Five hundred dollars every week even after subsidy, you know. Isn’t that what I have seven children and three wives for?

He says this cheekily, with a roguish grin.

Wife Number One looks at him, exasperated, but it is a loving exasperation.

We need to save up for our retirement—you don't want to be a burden to the kids, do you?

Yeah okay, okay. It's not like I'm having a holiday here, you know. They poke all these needles into me three times a day, and the food is awful. I miss Khairah's beef rendang.

We'll get her to cook that on the day you return. I'll get the beef from the market.

Doctor says no more coconut milk and less red meat! Clogs up the heart.

How then?

Skim milk. Fish.

Poor Deddy. All your favourite things gone out the window.

She's near enough; he reaches out and squeezes her bottom gently. She pushes his hand in surprised outrage, turning to see if anyone's seen the act, but laughs.

Deddy, Deddy. She strokes his arm.

• • •

Deddy Haikel sits by Ling Ko Mui's bed. His is a shared ward of six but hers is a single.

Ling Ko Mui, do you believe in magic?

Ling Ko Mui looks at Deddy Haikel, shakes her head no.

How about fate, then?

She nods, very slowly. It's been awhile since questions such as these were asked of her, for a long time it'd been: How are

you feeling today, Have you taken your medicine yet, Is it time to change those diapers?

She wants to speak, but language has been beyond her for so long. She shapes the words with her lips. *Whhh*. Nothing comes out.

Deddy Haikel is looking at her closely.

Fate is when you come from a different place from someone, but you keep seeing that person. Is that talking it down?

He scratches his head.

You know the way in your Chinese folktales, where the mortal spends a minute in Heaven and returns to Earth to find that thirty years have passed?

Ling Ko Mui is gesticulating, verging on speech.

A woman enters the ward, with her an unwilling child pulling on his own hands. Who's there? she demands.

Who're you? Deddy Haikel returns. The woman is affronted. This is my mother, the woman says, placing a hand on the side of Ling Ko Mui's bed.

Excuse me, Deddy Haikel says as he stands up, smoothing his johnnie shirt down and extending a hand, I'm an old friend of your mother's.

Really, the woman says skeptically. She doesn't take his hand. Ma, she says to Ling Ko Mui, who shows no interest in her nor the child. Call Ah Ma, the woman says to the child. Ah Ma, the child parrots. A nurse comes along, and the woman makes small talk with her, but as with long-stay nursing home talk, the talk is rarely substantive, prognoses seem at best a plateau, the only direction of progress often a slow careen towards certain death.

The nurse leaves and the woman eyes Deddy Haikel with suspicion again.

I used to perform in your grandfather's pub, he says.

The woman softens, looks at him now. My mother used to love talking about that place, she says, A pity I never got to see it for myself—demolished before I was born. She pauses. I'm sorry about earlier, she says. It's just—all the old people on this floor seem to have lost their marbles.

Don't worry about it. Deddy Haikel waves her apology away. I'm a short stay. Recovering from a heart bypass. Still got my marbles, for now at least.

She smiles at him.

Where's your father? Deddy Haikel asks, suddenly.

He passed away from a stroke several years ago, the woman says.

I'm sorry to hear that.

It's just so difficult having to deal with this again, the woman says, shutting her eyes briefly. I'm glad he's not here to see this, though—if you knew them, you must have known how much he doted on her.

Deddy Haikel strains to smile. The woman smiles back.

What did you play back then?

It was the 60s, sayang. Everyone played rock 'n' roll. A touch of Pop Yé-yé.

• • •

It smarts when he thinks about it later that night, the life Ling Ko Mui shared with the son of the dried goods merchant.

Five decades, half a century. He tosses in bed, dreams of an eighteen-year-old girl in a white skirt, eating nasi kandar with both hands.

Deddy Haikel sneaks into Ling Ko Mui's single ward before dawn. When she opens her eyes about an hour later, there he sits. It startles her, but she's always had a strong heart.

Ling Ko Mui, remember when I brought you to eat goreng pisang? You loved it. Remember when I took you to eat nasi kandar? You asked me why Malay chilli was sweet.

She's shrinking away from him in a sleepy stupor, but already there's the taste of deep-fried bananas, kampung chicken and yellow rice in her mouth.

Do you remember, when you brought me to eat dough fritters and soybean milk, and I was like, Why the hell would you guys dip the fritters into the soybean milk, wouldn't it lose its crisp? You laughed at that. Remember? Or when I told you I'd have to pray ten times a day because you were taking me to eat food that wasn't halal? How when I tried to kiss you later, you said "But I'm not halal", and then you closed your eyes and leaned in anyway?

Ling Ko Mui looks at Deddy Haikel's hand. She opens her mouth. The words don't come out, but she's nodding, this time with confidence. She's smiling. She reaches out for his hand. Before he gives it to her, he draws the peach curtains apart, throws the windows open. He sits by her bed, gives her his hand. He doesn't ask more, doesn't nudge her to speak, doesn't venture to ascertain what it is she remembers. They remain like this till the sun comes up. He has an eye on the clock. He removes his hand from hers at 7.15am, before the breakfast

trolley comes around to the single wards.

As he moves away to the door, he hears a rustle of bedclothes. He turns, and she is reaching out for him, the way a child might.

He walks over to her bed, kisses a prominent vein on the left side of her forehead. His faulty heart thuds from acting on impulse. He leaves briskly, just missing the breakfast trolley on its rounds as it turns the corner on the other end of the corridor.

• • •

She begins responding to her name, but only if the doctors and nurses say it in full with an exclamation—*Ling Ko Mui!*—not if they call her Mrs Tan, or Madam Ling, or Auntie, Asian assumptions of preferred deference.

She's stopped needing her bedpan. They bring her for physiotherapy sessions now. Atrophy is easy, effortless; but when you have something to live for—even if you're not sure what it is—the body fights back.

They call her daughter, informing her of these improvements. Ling Ko Mui's daughter arrives to witness the changes for herself, but is still ignored by her mother, who simply stares straight ahead in her daughter's presence. She returns home and thinks: what a waste of time. She isn't sure if there's a difference between a bedridden dementia patient and a more active dementia patient.

Ling Ko Mui still can't speak, but her mouth contorts itself around language as she remembers it. They see the marked change in her; the younger nurses aren't so hardened as to let

this pass. They try to encourage her.

They ask her: What do you remember?

Ling Ko Mui remembers five stars and a moon.

But the five stars are a building's pointed façade, and the moon is crescent, with jets of water shooting out of it. She draws this for the nurses, who are puzzled.

She's walking towards it, it's a futuristic brick-and-brown building and as she passes the threshold the crescent moon-like fountain dies down. She files past the box office, enters a sprawling hall of 3,420 seats, takes her place. She looks up to the cantilevered roof. When she looks back down all the seats are filled, Deddy Haikel and his band are on stage, and the music is inside her.

Deddy Haikel, she writes on the piece of paper shakily, Deddy Haikel.

It is lunchtime, and the nurses wheel her to him. She sits with him in the halal section of the cafeteria. She looks up into his face, she touches his cheek from time to time, his forehead, as if anointing him.

He smiles, first with his lips pressed together, then breaking out into a crinkle-eyed grin. He picks up his guitar, propping it on his knee.

And she begins singing with him, in perfect time, the lyrics word for word.

*Barbara shimmies down Bugis Street
And every sailor's head turns.
Feathers and a dress of midnight blue
Barbara's got an axe to burn.*

• • •

The nurses show Deddy Haikel the paper where Ling Ko Mui has sketched the diamonds and the crescent. They want to know if he knows what it is. They have romanticised it as some cosmic hieroglyph.

It's the National Theatre, Deddy Haikel says decidedly.

What's that?

Deddy Haikel shakes his head.

Another dead national monument. Do you know they had a-dollar-a-song campaign for it on the radio? You called in and paid a dollar and the DJ dedicated a song to you, and that dollar went to the building fund.

That sounds fun, one of the nurses says.

Fun? It was pride. We were a new nation. Everyone buys their firstborn the best clothes. Rich businessmen made phone calls arranging for direct contributions, trishaw riders called in to the radio with their day's savings earned through backbreaking work, and went hungry after. These days, they do whatever they want. It's still your money they're using, except they don't remind you of the fact any more, and you don't get a tune out of it. They don't want it to get personal.

What happened to it?

Twenty-three years was what it was worth, demolished to make way for part of the Central Expressway underground tunnel.

The tunnel? I thought this was what happened with the National Library on Stamford Road.

Well, it would seem then that we're always one tunnel short, wouldn't you say?

• • •

Ling Ko Mui's talking, peeing and shitting of her own conscious accord, asking the nurses and doctors plucky little questions. Her sudden recovery is a miracle, that much is agreed upon. The doctors shake their head at the mysteries of neurobiology.

She and Deddy Haikel sit in the herb garden in the sunshine.

So girl, let me ask you something: what's going to happen to you when I'm gone?

I'll tell my parents I want to be with you. They can't stop me.

He starts in his seat. He wants to say, *Baby, look at me. Look at you*, but he can't bring himself to do it. He's waited half a lifetime for this.

And, and if they do?

Then we elope.

What about my bandmates?

They'll come with us. I'll be your agent.

She has an impish look in her eyes.

There's something I've been meaning to ask you. What about Leong Heng?

Who?

The son of the dried goods merchant.

What are you talking about?

Sorry, I—nothing.

Who's that?

It's nothing, I just—there are so many people out there who could provide better for you. I don't have much to offer you.

Look into my eyes, Deddy Haikel: you have nothing to worry about.

Deddy Haikel will leave in four days. Every night he dreams of the eighteen-year-old girl, and every morning he wakes to be with her. They have their meals together, they talk about music, he plays songs for her. She talks about her parents, she talks about being with him. She doesn't question why they're surrounded by the elderly and infirm, the doctors and nurses in uniform, nor where they are.

At night Deddy Haikel thinks to himself, he's setting things up for heartbreak, but what else can he do? He never thought this would happen to him at seventy. He pictures his girl segueing back into silence and incontinence upon his departure. He's done this to her, it is done.

Tomorrow he will tell her.

• • •

She won't have anything to do with it. Her puzzlement is giving over to angry tears.

Ling Ko Mui, listen to me. Look at my face—I'm an old man. We've already lived our entire lives out.

She's jammed her knobbly hands over her ears, she's sobbing inconsolably like a young girl.

I can't be with you now. I have children, wives; a family.

She turns to him hotly, tears and loathing in her eyes, hands still over her ears, says in a low tone: *I'll never let another Malay*

boy break my heart.

Ling Ko Mui, you don't understand.

He tries to come over to her, places his hands on her upturned elbows, says, I could come visit you, but she shrugs him off.

Get out, she hisses, rocking back and forth on the nursing home bed, *get out*.

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At Flamingo Valley, Ling Ko Mui's daughter is speaking to the doctor, distraught. She doesn't understand why her mother has recovered her faculties but not her memory of her family. She'd tried explaining to her mother—for the umpteenth time—who she was, but all Ling Ko Mui muttered was some gibberish, over and over. *De-de-hi-ke, de-de-hi-ke*.

The nurses know who Ling Ko Mui is asking for, but they also know he checked out this morning, and what would be the point of attempting to explain to the daughter?

In a flat in Tampines, Deddy Haikel is home. Khairah's cooked beef rendang, Azzizah's made lontong, Fathiah, who can't cook, has prepared sirap bandung in a jug. Skim milk in all three cases, they hasten to impress upon him. The children gripe that it doesn't taste the same, not as lemak, but they're happy to have their old man back.

Deddy Haikel's heart murmurs, skips beats. He picks up his guitar absently, strums and sings. He imagines reaching into his chest cavity, disentangling heartstrings, affixing them

on his guitar, like pro tennis racquets strung with Taranaki cow guts. What would that sound like? He tugs at a chord. He's thinking of writing lyrics and melodies again. Songs for an eighteen-year-old girl.



Meet an over-the-hill Pop Yé-yé singer with a faulty heart, two conservative middle-aged women holding hands in the Galápagos, and the proprietor of a Laundromat with a penchant for Cantonese songs of heartbreak. Rehash national icons: the truth about racial riot fodder-girl Maria Hertogh living out her days as a chambermaid in Lake Tahoe, a mirage of the Merlion as a ladyboy working Orchard Towers, and a high-stakes fantasy starring the still-suave lead of the 1990s TV hit serial *The Unbeatables*.

Heartfelt and sexy, the stories of Amanda Lee Koe encompass a skewed world fraught with prestige anxiety, moral relativism, sexual frankness, and the improbable necessity of human connection. Told in strikingly original prose, these are fictions that plough, relentlessly, the possibilities of understanding Singapore and her denizens discursively, off-centre. *Ministry of Moral Panic* is an extraordinary debut collection and the introduction of a revelatory new voice.



Amanda Lee Koe is a 2013 honorary fellow at the Iowa International Writing Program. She is the fiction editor of *Esquire (Singapore)*, editor of creative non-fiction magazine POSKOD.SG, communications director at studioKALEIDO, and co-editor of the literary journal *Ceriph*. She co-edited *Eastern Heathens*, an anthology subverting Asian folklore. Her short fiction has been published in Singapore, Hong Kong, Germany and the United States.

ISBN-13: 978-981-07-5732-8



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