

NOW

WINNER



EPIGRAM  
BOOKS  
FICTION  
PRIZE  
2015

THAT

IT'S

a novel

OVER

O THIAM CHIN

**ALSO FROM THE EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE**

FINALISTS

*Let's Give It Up for Gimme Lao!* by Sebastian Sim

*Death of a Perm Sec* by Wong Souk Yee

*Sugarbread* by Balli Kaur Jaswal

LOGLISTED

*Annabelle Thong* by Imran Hashim

*Kappa Quartet* by Daryl Qilin Yam

*Altered Straits* by Kevin Wong

**NOW  
THAT  
IT'S  
OVER**

a novel

**O THIAM CHIN**



EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

*For my parents*

Copyright © 2016 by O Thiam Chin  
Cover Design by Yong Wen Yeu  
Cover Photograph by Eng Chun Pang

All rights reserved  
Published in Singapore by Epigram Books  
[www.epigrambooks.sg](http://www.epigrambooks.sg)

---

**NATIONAL LIBRARY BOARD, SINGAPORE CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA**

**NAME:** O Thiam Chin.

**TITLE:** Now that it's over : a novel / O Thiam Chin.

**DESCRIPTION:** Singapore : Epigram Books, 2016.

**IDENTIFIER:** OCN 946800817

**ISBN:** 978-981-4757-28-7 (paperback)

**ISBN:** 978-981-4757-29-4 (ebook)

**SUBJECTS:** LCSH: Indian Ocean Tsunami, 2004—Fiction. Tsunamis—Thailand—Phuket (Province)—Fiction. Disaster victims—Fiction.

**CLASSIFICATION:** DDC S823—dc23

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

---

**FIRST EDITION:** June 2016

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

“All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.”

—TONI MORRISON

“The heart is but the beach beside the sea that is the world.”

—CHINESE PROVERB

# PART ONE

# 1

AI LING

*The body lies on the quiet beach, its long hair wild and brittle, streaking across the face and back. It has floated for a day on the waves, before finally being deposited on this stretch of fine, pristine sand, the shoreline of a tiny island that lies nine kilometres southwest of the coastal town of Phuket, Thailand, one of over four hundred such islands sprinkled all over the Andaman Sea. Until the body arrived, the only presence on the island has been a family of crabs that found refuge there—digging holes in the sand, multiplying in great numbers—as well as the occasional seagull that would pause and rest on its way to or from Phuket.*

*In its wake, the body—a woman in her mid-thirties—has brought along a school of dead fish, mostly red snappers and garoupas that the fishermen in the vicinity hunt for their livelihood; the decomposing piscine bodies litter the beach, their silvery corpses sparkling under the sun, already starting to reek.*

*A seagull flies down and lands on the lower branch of a coconut tree. It eyes the sea with a weary, suspicious stare, and then scrutinises the woman's body, as if waiting for her to stir. But she remains motionless.*



It had been Ai Ling's idea to go to Phuket for a vacation.

"It would be a nice change to our usual year-end holidays," she told her husband Wei Xiang over breakfast. "The price of air tickets

is cheap, thanks to the promotions going on for the December holidays. It'd be easy to get tickets to Phuket."

"It's already November, isn't it too late to plan? What about work?" said Wei Xiang, looking up from the newspaper. "And you were in Thailand just last month."

"I'll get someone to cover for me," she said.

For the past four years, Ai Ling had worked as a preschool teacher in a childcare centre, taking care of children aged one to five. It was the longest job she'd had after graduating from the National University of Singapore with a Social Sciences degree. The job market was in a bad shape the year she graduated, and for years all she could find were temporary contract jobs that only lasted from two to six months. Fortuitously, she was able to find something more permanent, as a secretary at a mid-sized air-con repair company—a job recommended to her by Cody, a close friend from university—which she held onto for a year before quitting out of boredom. She hated the idea of taking calls, making coffee and scheduling her boss's calendar as a long-term career, even though the pay was decent enough and her boss treated her well. When she told Wei Xiang she wanted to quit, he tried to reason with her: the job was stable, regular hours, no overtime, good salary. But with her mind made up, there was nothing he could say to change it. The teaching job at the childcare centre came along just a few months later, reinforcing the belief that she had made the right decision.

Once Wei Xiang agreed to the Phuket trip, Ai Ling went about checking the prices of tickets online and borrowing Lonely Planet guidebooks from the public library. Cody had visited Phuket two years before with his boyfriend Chee Seng, and over coffee one afternoon, Ai Ling asked him to join them on the trip.

"It would be fun, just like old times. God, how long has it been since we last travelled together? Since our university days?"

"Yes, years ago," Cody said. "To Bangkok, for our secret getaway, where I broke your heart, and then you married Wei Xiang after. Do you still remember that trip?"

"Asshole, still dare to say. Lied to me and dragged me into the mud with my little crush."

"You were too blind to see it, so obvious to everyone else. I made it very clear to you, but you didn't pick up the hints."

"How could I know? It's not as if you had a sign over your head screaming 'gay'," Ai Ling said, mock-punching Cody in the arm. "So how, you want to join us?"

"I don't know. Does Wei Xiang mind if we tag along?"

"He's perfectly fine with you guys, you know that. He won't mind at all."

"Let me ask Chee Seng then, see whether he's interested. He hates when I make any decision without asking him first."

A few days later, Cody called and told Ai Ling to go ahead and book the tickets for him and Chee Seng. His voice over the phone was upbeat but somewhat restrained, as if he were carefully mulling over his words. When she asked if anything was wrong, he said, "There's a lot of shit going on in our lives right now. So I think we really need a break to get away, you know? To sort things out."

When Ai Ling pressed for more details, Cody became cautious and vague in his replies. She gave up trying after a while and put the whole matter aside; she'd take it up later when the time was right.

Fortunately, there were still available seats on flights to Phuket during the Christmas period, after she checked with several budget airlines. It would be a good idea to spend the holidays away from Singapore, she convinced herself, to leave behind their busy lives,

even for a short while. Good to take things easy, and maybe then she could drum up the courage to break the news to Wei Xiang. She did not think she could keep it from him any longer.

So Ai Ling bought the tickets. They would fly to Phuket via a nine o'clock flight on the morning of Christmas Day and come back four days later.

## 2

### CODY

Your eyes snap open as the television suddenly flares to life. First there are only faint voices, a static buzz of broken, disconnected vowels. Then images appear on the screen, wavy and distorted. Disoriented by the intrusion of light in the dark hotel room, your thoughts scatter in every direction. You peer at the television screen from your position on the floor: the patches of darkness floating on the fuzzy sea of white have slowly assembled themselves into vague shapes and forms. You stare at this ghost of a ghost until your eyes hurt.

The images resolve into a hazy shot of a middle-aged Caucasian man in a tailored suit, sitting behind a desk. The man is nodding his head, his mouth moving, the sound of his words breaking up in stuttering bits. The image jumps and scrolls upwards. You can't make sense of it. In the corner of the screen, a video is playing within a rectilinear frame: shaky images captured with a mobile phone of the waves sweeping in to shore, toppling huts, smashing into trees and buildings, swallowing everything in sight. The image shifts, now showing the wall of water approaching, with people in the foreground, unaware: food hawkers milling around, a bunch of skinny children drawing in the dirt with their sticks. The video is cut off mid-scene, and the man behind the desk appears again. You pick up the remote control next to you on the floor and switch

the television off. The hotel room returns back to tight silence, broken only by the rasp of your breaths.

How long have you been lying here?

As long as you keep breathing, time is immaterial. There is nothing else to consider; every memory or thought is held at bay. The only thing you can feel is a debilitating heaviness, seeping into every part of you—it is a deeply familiar sensation, from a time long ago. A distant memory surfaces: the death of someone—but whom? Your mind is blank.

The curtains are drawn and the lights remain off even with the return of the hotel's power. All you want to do is to sleep, to slip away and become nothing; there, nothing can touch you. Outside the hotel room, in the flooded streets, the world has turned to water; the infinite sea that thrums with life has taken everything away. You've been spared, while Chee Seng—

You blink rapidly. The curtains lighten—weak morning light seeping through the worn, dirty fabric—and then darken again. You feel no thirst or hunger—only the tightening knots of guilt and numbness in your stomach. You turn on your side, pull your knees to your chest. Maybe if you can stay like this, you'll disappear, slipping into something similar to death, a realm of non-existence. But only if you keep very, very still.

A knock on the door, followed by a pause, and then another few quick raps. Vague shadows in the narrow gap between the bottom edge of the door and the floor. A voice deep and urgent—someone calling out—the words indistinct. Another two knocks. The shadows hesitate, then move away, footsteps fading down the corridor.

You stay very still, close your eyes and wait to fall into the deep well of your dark, swirling thoughts.

### 3

CHEE SENG

A sharp smell assaults my senses as I stir awake. The hard, wood-planked bed beneath me creaks as I try to move; every stiff muscle in my body shrieks with pain. A frayed stale-smelling blanket is draped over me, looking as though sewn together with different rags. The air in the room is warm, almost suffocating. I manage to lean up onto one elbow; I appear to be in the living area of a small, sparsely furnished hut. Slender beams of sunlight stream through the only window in the room, illuminating the dust motes that dance languidly in the stuffy air.

Directly opposite the bed, a dented soot-stained pot is boiling on a stove, with soft plumes of steam rising from its jumping lid. A sharp hunger comes alive inside me, though my body is too weak to move. No one seems to be around; everything is still. Outside, a songbird is trilling. I open my mouth but no sound comes out; my tongue is thick and my throat feels scraped raw.

I turn my head and see a ceramic bowl holding some kind of dark liquid, on a wooden stool beside the bed. I inch towards it. I try lifting my hands, but they are so sapped of strength that they barely move. I lean over the edge of the bowl and sip—and almost immediately my gag reflex kicks in, and I vomit up the little that was left in my stomach, leaving behind a rancid aftertaste. I spit onto the floor, strings of yellowish saliva sticking to my chin. I

start to cough, which causes me to double up in a knife-sharp convulsion of pain. Once it subsides, I lean back and sink deeper into the folds of the rag blanket, and close my eyes, exhausted.

I hear something, the scuffle of someone stepping into the room, and crack my eyelids open to see a figure in silhouette. It approaches the bed and presses a hand to my forehead. Then the hand moves to the back of my head, raising it up. My lips meet the rim of the ceramic bowl. The bitterness of the brew once again causes me to gag, but before I can retch, the foul fluid is poured down my throat, forcing me to swallow it all. Then my head is laid back down, and I fall instantly into a sleep as deep as death.



Dipping in and out of wakefulness, I lose track of the reality around me; the only thing that makes any sense is the recent memory that keeps looping through my mind.

I was lying on the beach after a long tussle with the sea. I could feel the gritty texture of wet sand on my face; my lips were crusted with salt, and a residual metallic taste lingered in my mouth. My stomach churned, and I began to tremble violently, as though I were still trapped in the sea's undercurrents, being whipped and tossed about, drowning. I forced myself to calm down, then opened my eyes again and surveyed the beach. The harsh sunlight had bleached everything of colour. I had no clue where I was; the long expanse of beach seemed to stretch without end in both directions. Apart from the rhythmic sound of the lapping waves, it was utterly silent.

With great effort, I flipped onto my back. The sky was smothered with billows of heavy rain clouds. I could have lain there forever were it not for the sharp little flints of raindrops now hitting my face. I jerked backward on the sand, away from the

breaking waves, suddenly overcome by the primal fear that the water would take me again. I had to leave the beach immediately; despite the pain, I struggled to my feet.

Past the beach was a thick grove of palm and coconut trees, a forest that led to a hilly, craggy ridge via a narrow dirt path. A world of shadows beckoned from within. I took a step, and then another, and stumbled my way into the dark forest.

## 4

WEI XIANG

The man hears a deep rumbling coming from the distance, a collision of noises that grows into a forlorn, bewildering cry. And he understands what it is, after a while: the crashing of waves.

The sea is coming for him.

The man is standing in a hotel room, looking out of the glass-paned door to the balcony. A woman lies on the bed, deep in slumber. Her pearlescent naked body shines against the white bedsheet; her fingers twitch, the wedding ring catching the pale light from the window, flashing once, twice. The man bends down to the bed, hesitating over whether to wake the woman. He breathes in the warm, musky smell emanating from her body.

The sound of waves grows louder, more insistent. He turns back to the window, to the world outside the room. The sky is grey, made impenetrable by a thick bank of ashy clouds. He opens the balcony door and steps outside. The sight below him is unlike anything he has ever seen before: a tempestuous sea stretching to the horizon. He shivers uncontrollably.

A hand touches his shoulder and shakes the man out of the spell. The woman. The man stares at her, unable to comprehend her immediate presence. The woman turns her gaze to the roiling water, her expression slipping swiftly into disbelief. And for a long time they stand there, side-by-side, mute and unmoving.

The woman lowers her head into her palms, her body heaving as if in deep agony; the man puts a hand on her back, and strokes gently. He can feel the trembles rippling through her, unstoppable, as if the sea itself were churning inside her—urgent, fervent, alive.

Her body, the sea.

The man hears another sound, a cry. He looks out, straining to catch its source, his eyes scanning the surface of the water, and sees it: a small boy enfolded in the waves. The woman looks at the man with stricken eyes, willing him to act. But the man does not move. She takes a step backward, away from his touch, then leaps over the railing of the balcony before the man can even react, and is swallowed whole by the sea below.

In the long moments that follow, the man can only register the silence in his head—a dark, hollow pit that takes in all and gives nothing. The water around him continues to swell. Just as he is convinced that he has lost the woman to the sea, she suddenly breaks the surface of the choppy water, holding the unconscious boy in an arm-lock, their entangled bodies bobbing, appearing and disappearing with every wave. But then, just as abruptly as they first appeared, they are gone again: the waves have pulled backward, as if the sea has sucked in a deep breath, and dragged them both away.

The man lets out an anguished cry. The world he knows is finally gone, and there is nothing he can do to stop it.

∞

Upon waking, Wei Xiang realises Ai Ling's side of the bed is empty. He sits upright and rubs the sides of his throbbing head. Remnants of the dream are still playing in his mind, some parts so clear that when he closes his eyes he can see them again: Ai Ling and the boy in the waves, disappearing under the water, drawn

away from him. He is seized by a sharp moment of panic; he breathes deeply and shakes his head, forcing the strange dream to break its hold on him.

Wei Xiang turns to the digital alarm clock on the bedside table: 8.37am. Ai Ling's pillow is slightly indented; he reaches over to smoothen it out. He throws off the blanket, gets out of bed, and shuffles into the toilet. The area around the washbasin is wet, and Ai Ling's toothbrush lies beside the tap; he replaces it in the glass container that they are using to hold their toothbrushes. The room smells of minty toothpaste and lavender-scented talcum powder. Wei Xiang stares in the mirror at the sagging eye bags and days-old stubble of his reflection; his eyes are lustreless, and his skin pale and sallow, the texture of bread dough. How did he get so old, so quickly? Only thirty-eight, yet he feels at least ten to fifteen years older, already a middle-aged man. He sighs, then turns on the tap and splashes his face with cold water, rubbing the skin roughly. He grabs a face towel from the rack and realises Ai Ling has used it that morning. He breathes in her familiar smell, then dries his face.

After stepping out of the toilet, he wonders where Ai Ling could have gone so early. She has always been a morning person, waking at least an hour before him, even on weekends. Sometimes, while half-asleep in bed, Wei Xiang could hear her moving through the flat, doing laundry or getting ready for a five-kilometre run around the neighbourhood park. Maybe she has gone out for a run; her Adidas shoes and running attire are no longer in her luggage. Whenever they travel, she always tries to explore the new surroundings when the day is still young with a short run. "Come on! The air is good!" she would say, trying to drag Wei Xiang out of the hotel bed, but over the many years, he has probably only joined Ai Ling a couple of times.

Wei Xiang checks the time again. Perhaps he should wait for her to come back so that they can have breakfast together at the hotel café. He remembers the porter telling them, when they checked in yesterday, that the continental buffet breakfast was available until ten o'clock. He changes out of his sleeping attire—singlet and boxer shorts—into a white T-shirt and Bermudas, then lies back on the bed. He stares up at the ceiling and recalls their lovemaking the night before: his mouth on Ai Ling's engorged nipples, the fleshy swells of her breasts, her stifled groans as he moved within her. His skin tingles from the remembered pleasure, and an erection stirs in his shorts. He reaches in and gives his cock a few tugs, then stops himself. This can wait; it is still early.

Even with the windows closed and curtains drawn, Wei Xiang can still hear the sounds of the town coming through, soft and muffled. He thinks of the places they will go to later; Ai Ling has already planned a long day packed with activities and sightseeing. They only managed to check out Phuket's shopping district yesterday after arriving from the airport, with a trip to its wet market and bazaar, and ended their day with dinner at a beachfront restaurant showcasing a panoramic view of the sea. Wei Xiang reaches for the printout of the itinerary on the bedside table; under one column, Ai Ling has listed some restaurants and cafés, and directions to get to them. She has also printed out a map of Phuket Island and marked down these eateries, highlighting each with a different colour for different days. So typical of Ai Ling, to plan everything down to the smallest detail.

The night before, after dinner, they took a walk along the beach, and stopped at a clearing of rocks on the shore. He noticed the worried look on her face, but when he tried to cajole her into telling him what she was thinking, she became taciturn, even evasive. Her moods can sometimes turn dark, as he has learnt over

seven years of marriage, and leave her distant and distracted for days on end, even weeks. Each time she slips into this state, she pushes away from him, retreating into a secret place inside her to which he does not have access; it always pains him to think that his wife does not trust him enough to share whatever is going on in her life. He does not want his marriage to slip into that of his parents', one that was virulent, destructive.

Even when he was just a young boy, Wei Xiang could clearly sense his parents' profound unhappiness, flinching at the hurtful words they constantly hurled at each other. His parents' lives had drifted apart, taking separate paths, until they were practically strangers living under the same roof. For a long time, Wei Xiang could not understand the causes behind his parents' frequent fights, and where all of it would eventually lead. All he can remember is the fear that ate away at him, that the world was no longer stable and at any time would collapse. He carried this fear as a warning to himself, an old wound which he kept scratching.

Wei Xiang took it upon himself to do whatever he could to keep his family together. Without any prompting, he cleaned his room, put away his shoes neatly in the cupboard, washed his eating utensils, did his homework, folded his clothes, showered and ate and slept at the same time every day, and nailed down his daily routine into exactness and precision. He listened to his parents, obeyed their instructions, came home on time, did not ask to watch television, kept to the rules (and made some of his own), helped out his mother with the housework and went out on errands to buy newspapers or cigarettes for his father or a bottle of soy sauce for his mother. He passed his tests and examinations with flying colours, and received praise from all his teachers for his results in the year-end assessments. He performed as the lead in the school play in Primary Six, which his parents attended together; they even

clapped for him. He kept everything in check and in order, and firmly believed that if he did everything perfectly, down to the tee, nothing would ever go wrong, not in his life or in his parents'.

And yet, the fights persisted, worsening in severity and frequency; Wei Xiang would hold himself responsible, believing that his actions, or inactions, were to blame, that he had not done the right thing at the right time—an unseen and unknown catalyst that had sparked off yet another chain of regrettable events. And he would redouble his efforts, adhering even more staunchly to his quest for perfection; he would not give in to negative thoughts, thoughts he would never share with his parents in any case. His faith in his own actions always depended on this belief, and he never swayed from it, even in adulthood.

Later, of course, he came to know the reason for the collapse of his parents' marriage, a reason that caught him completely by surprise: the death of a brother he never knew. One night when he was in his early twenties, his father told him everything in a state of drunkenness: when Wei Xiang was seven, and still an only child, his mother went away for two months to stay at her sister's to recuperate from a miscarriage. Alternating periods of sadness and neediness and silence ensued after his mother came back home, strange baffling episodes in which she would pull Wei Xiang into a hug as easily as she would push him aside or ask him to stay in his room and do as he was told. This had also been the beginning of the long stretches of fights that took place between his parents, their angry voices penetrating the walls of his room.

Wei Xiang was stunned by the news, and by the fact that he had been kept in the dark for such a long time, and at the same time he was intrigued by this secret part of their family history. He wondered how his parents had worked in tandem, through the long years, to keep any hint of the death from him. He felt

betrayed by the secrecy that had led to nothing but pain for all of them.

Yet, even the birth of Wei Xiang's younger brother, two years after the death of the unknown brother, did little to obviate what was ultimately the end of the marriage. His parents had hoped that the new son would take on whatever the dead son could not, but this was an unfair expectation, a false hope. The shadow of death loomed over the family, even if Wei Xiang and his younger brother were never consciously aware of it.

"But still, we tried, we really did," his father slurred as he peered into Wei Xiang's face, seeking some sort of penance, perhaps even forgiveness. Wei Xiang turned away, not knowing what to say.

In the end, Wei Xiang's mother was the one who decided on the divorce, which was finalised when Wei Xiang was seventeen, in his first year in junior college. His parents sat him and his younger brother down to break the news to them, and he asked all the questions that could be asked about the causes and outcomes, but his parents provided only what he needed to know, and nothing more. Wei Xiang was furious at this obfuscation, but was even angrier with himself for not being able to forestall the divorce, for his faltering faith in his own beliefs and actions.

After signing the papers, his mother migrated to Hong Kong, where one of her sisters was living, and within two years she was romantically involved with a man who owned a chain of watch shops. Always the dutiful son, Wei Xiang kept in contact with his mother, and took two trips every year that his mother paid for, visits in which Wei Xiang took pains to be as obliging and accommodating as he could, to present his best self to his mother. But when she invited him to attend her wedding, a simple church affair followed by a reception, Wei Xiang politely declined, citing his year-end examinations.

After a brief period of uncertainty and adjustment, Wei Xiang and his brother continued on with their lives in Singapore. Wei Xiang fought hard to get back the life he had before, to achieve the sense of balance and control that had been hugely unsettled by his parents' break-up, and to this end he devoted himself, sticking to his routine and habits with a doggedness that left little to chance.

His father, on the other hand, became a pale shade of the man he was before the divorce, cautious in his ways, defensive and prone to anxiety attacks. So different from the man that Wei Xiang grew up with: wiry, greasy-haired, bent over the nightly Chinese newspaper, his plastic-framed thick-lens spectacles perched on the bridge of his nose; dozing on the sofa after a meal, snoring like a drill; leaving for work, his shoulder blades sharp and visible under his short-sleeved shirt. His father had worked as a clerk in a heavy machinery firm that loaned out tractors, digging rigs and lifting cranes on long-term lease to construction and building companies, until he was retrenched when the company had to downsize. He never found a permanent job after that, making do with odd jobs here and there to support the family. Apart from his drinking—he now limits himself to two bottles of Tiger Beer daily—Wei Xiang's father has little comfort or enjoyment in life, defeated, buckled by the forces of life.

These impressions of his own father have affected his thoughts on becoming one himself. He told Ai Ling more than once of his decision to delay their parenthood after they were married, and he knew Ai Ling silently took heed of it, though he could see it hurt her and conflicted with her growing desire to be a mother. He has softened his stance in the last two years, after seeing how affected Ai Ling was when one of the kids from the childcare centre went missing; it was clear how much she denied herself the pain of this loss, the disappearance of a boy she had grown very fond of.

Wrapped in the silence of the hotel room, Wei Xiang feels something constrict in his chest, an imperceptible ache that spreads across his body. He turns to face Ai Ling's side of the bed again and runs his hand over the pillow. He plucks a strand of her hair and tosses it aside, then notes that half an hour has passed while he was daydreaming. What is taking her so long? A random image from the dream comes to him then—the sorrowful expression on Ai Ling's face, her eyes drilling into him, before she plunged into the water after the boy, and disappeared.

Wei Xiang leaps up from the bed, suddenly uneasy. A wave of fear and nausea passes through him. Muted sunlight filters through the curtains. He opens the glass-paned door, steps out onto the balcony, and finally sees the new world outside the hotel room.

# 5

CHEE SENG

When I open my eyes, the world around me is shadows, and it takes a long time before they start to rearrange themselves into shapes and dimensions, shades and colours. The sounds, and then the smells, begin to make themselves known, little by little, as my mind struggles to make sense of these new, strange sensations. Slight movements out of the corner of my eye: a figure bent over a soot-blackened stove, swathed in layers of rags, stirring a pot, somewhat familiar. Steam rising up from the pot shrouds the face.

I shove away the dusty blanket, and pain shoots through my arms. I attempt to push my body upright and fail; I fall back on the bed, drained. The figure at the stove does not turn around or show any sign of noticing me; it keeps stirring the pot. The smell of garlic and eucalyptus hangs in the air, prickling my senses. My stomach rumbles with hunger, and then I remember the ceramic bowl, the bitter concoction.

Nearby are a small wooden table and two benches; on the table is a bundle of tiny yellow flowers with red berries—herbs?—and a water jug. At the ankle-high threshold of the doorway, two brownish-grey hens are clucking and pecking, sneaking glances into the hut. Morning light reaches in to expose the grainy texture of the cement floor. Near the far wall, three wooden chests are stacked on top of one another according to size. The dark figure

trudges towards a latticed larder, and from one of the compartments takes out a glass jar. Removing its cover, it sprinkles the contents into the pot with two light shakes and continues to stir it with the ladle. Then turning around, it finally acknowledges my presence with a steady gaze.

I have a hard time deciphering the face looking at me. With a scarf covering the hair and deeply creased lines around the eyes and lips, the face looks ancient, otherworldly, like a stone carving that has weathered seasons of rain and sun. The eyes, however, set deep within the folds of wrinkled skin, beam with a sagacious, ageless intensity, the eyes of a cat in the dark. As the figure steps towards me, I notice that one of the eyes is actually a glass eye, slightly larger, unmoving in the socket; the other is assessing me closely.

It is an old woman.

Putting the ladle down on the wooden table, she pours some water into a cup and brings it to me. I drink it very slowly, but want more. The old woman brings the jug over and fills the cup again. I drain it. After I finish, she points to the boiling pot on the stove. She places the jug on a stool beside the bed, then goes over and ladles the contents of the pot into an earthenware bowl, the steam rising visibly. It is a thick broth, almost gruel-like, rich with herbal spiciness; I scald the tip of my tongue in my haste, and it leaves an acrid aftertaste in my mouth and a sizzle on my chapped lips. Holding the bowl, the old woman encourages me to eat more. It takes a long time to finish it all; by the time I'm forcing the last granular dregs into my mouth, the soup has turned cold. I lie back down; a warm, effervescent sensation infuses my insides, spreading out to the rest of my body. Once again, I feel drowsy, the irresistible pull of sleep dragging me under. The soft, nearly incorporeal touches of the old woman as she arranges the

blanket around me and smoothens out my hair come to me as if from a distant place.

The next time I wake, the old woman is nowhere in sight. How long have I slept? A few hours, a day? There is no clock to tell the time. How long since I was carried off by the waves? I try to recall something else—anything—but my memories are all fuzzy and loose, untethered to any semblance of reality. I slowly sit up on the bed, some of my strength returned, and listen to the surroundings. Apart from the clucking of the chickens outside, there is hardly any other sound. At the foot of the bed are my shirt and jeans, dried out and stiff like pieces of a discarded husk. The old woman has dressed me in layers of dun-coloured robes, held together with frog buttons. Though it is warm, I can't bring myself to shed the layers.

The cement floor is cool to the touch. I try to stand and the blood rushes from my head; I waver unsteadily, my knees almost buckling, as though the earth is shaking under my feet. Once the moment has passed, I hobble towards the doorway in small, tottering steps. The soles of my feet are raw and tender. Narrowing my eyes against the light, I look out, resting my shoulder against the wooden doorframe.

Outside the hut is a small, compact courtyard, bordered on one side with ramshackle wire cages with missing or unhinged doors, and on another side by a tidy garden plot, its perimeter marked out with trails of stones and pebbles, and a brick well in one corner. Budding knots of yellow flowers bloom in the garden, along with hanging fruits of berries, green limes and chillies. The raked soil looks freshly turned over; a brood of chickens prances and pecks on the ground beside it, seemingly aware of the boundary of the garden, taking care not to step into it. A stone-cobbled path, perhaps smoothed by years of footsteps, leads out

of the courtyard and into a thick grove of trees about fifteen metres away. Beyond that, the hills rise and dip in smooth undulations, stretching to the distant coast.

The old woman is sweeping the fallen leaves with a short rattan broom into the thick undergrowth of shrubs bordering the compound of the hut, stopping from time to time to pluck weeds from the ground. Despite her apparent advanced age, her strength is evident in the manner in which she is able to easily yank out the weeds, the roots still clutching clumps of damp soil. Across the sloping hills, the sun is descending, drenching the sky in yellow, purple and orange. The old woman continues to work, undisturbed, oblivious to my presence. I sit near the threshold in the shade of the hanging eave of the hut—standing has become unbearable—and watch her move across the courtyard, finishing her sweeping, then tending to the garden and herding the chickens back into the cages. She surveys the whole courtyard and walks to the brick well; she removes the wooden cover, picks up a small bucket attached with a rope to the side of the well, and throws it in. A hollow sound echoes from the mouth of the well, a watery slap. With a few tugs, the bucket reappears, water overflowing the brim. She splashes the dry, hard ground of the courtyard with the water, then repeats the motion. The water spreads across the cracked surface in dark, rapidly moving tentacles, until the whole ground glistens like a shining coat of oil. From somewhere deep in the forest, a melancholic howl pierces the air.

The old woman unties the rope from its metal handle, hefts the bucket of water and walks towards the hut, nodding at me as she crosses the threshold; her shrunken, furrowed feet are caked with grains of wet soil. I follow her inside.

She empties the water into two large earthenware jars and a cooking pot on the stove. With a quick strike of a matchstick, she

lights a handful of dried chaff and shoves it into the hole of the stove, provoking the flames with a straw fan. Flickering orange embers glow from within. She starts to cook, taking out rice, eggs, cloves of garlic and stalks of leafy vegetables from the larder, and seasons the food with sauces taken from bottles coated with a sticky layer of grease. The smell of cooking conjures up fragmented memories of my childhood, of time spent in the kitchen watching my mother prepare dinners, a miasma of smells that lingered in the air long after the meals were done and the dishes put away.

The old woman performs the task briskly, knowing exactly when to add a pinch of salt or a dash of sauce, and how long to keep the lid on the pot to allow the soup to simmer. She does not ask for my help, though she throws pithy glances at me every so often. Sitting at the wooden table, I rest my cheek on my arm and drift in and out of sleep.

My dream is a broken reel of images and sounds: random faces, the terrible sound of waves crashing in my ears, a deluge of noises that shatter the silence. Amongst the images, I catch a glimpse of Cody's face, staring into mine, expressionless, vanishing and then appearing again. His mouth moves, but nothing comes forth. I reach for him, but he is pulling away, receding farther and farther. I start to shout—in the dream?—and suddenly feel a firm pressure on my shoulder, shaking me, and I leap back into wakefulness with a gasp. The old woman is standing over me, watching me intently. She gives me a cup of water, puts her hand on my forehead, and motions to me to lie down on the bed. I fumble my way to the bed and collapse into it. Though I'm bone tired, I try to keep myself awake this time, afraid to slip back into my dream.

When the food is cooked, she heaps the rice and stir-fried vegetables onto a metal plate and brings it to me. Though I'm hungry, I can barely eat more than a mouthful of rice. She serves

up a bowl of egg soup and nudges me to drink. I take a few sips and push the bowl away, suppressing the urge to throw up. I lie back on the bed and stare at the ceiling. The old woman returns to the wooden dining table and eats quietly; other than the chirping of crickets out in the gathering dusk and the nervous clicking of darting geckos, the hut is silent.

The old woman has still not spoken a single word to me, yet I do not find it in any way strange. It has briefly crossed my mind that perhaps she is mute, or if not, that she has chosen not to speak for reasons of her own. Perhaps since she lives alone—I have not seen any other person in the hut or its surroundings—she does not need to speak at all, and maybe has already given up the ability. I myself am still too fatigued to speak, and even if I could, what could I say? Even the simple act of opening my mouth and forming words with my tongue seems like an impossible feat, one that requires a reserve of strength that I do not have.

After our meal, the old woman puts aside the leftovers in the larder, and washes the plates and bowls. When she is done, she dunks a rag in a small pail of water, then takes out a glass bottle filled with a dark liquid from a wooden chest beside the wall. She places a small stool before me and rests my feet on it. She starts to clean the dirt from the cuts and wounds on my soles and calves, causing me to grit my teeth against the pain. After pouring a small amount of the dark liquid onto another rag, she dabs gently. Some of the injuries are inflamed, while others are starting to ooze yellow pus. I bite my lip and taste blood. The pain tips over into numbness. For some of the larger wounds, the old woman applies a salve—from another jar—with her fingers. By the time she is done with my legs, and then my arms, chest and back, I have been reduced to a mass of worn, frayed nerves, beyond exhaustion, and I pass out.

Waking up later—is it the same night?—I immediately sense the absence of the old woman from the room. In the near darkness, I listen for any sounds of movement amidst the nocturnal noises of the night. A flute-shaped kerosene lamp is placed on the wooden table, emitting soft, feeble aureoles of light that throw the shadows of the objects in the room onto the walls in sharp relief. The wooden door of the hut is partially open, letting in the cool night air. I stumble to the entrance, using the lamp to guide me.

Outside, I can barely make out anything in the darkness, which has sealed the surroundings in a thick, impenetrable cloak. The sky is a lighter shade of purple-blue, and the scattering of stars seems to pulse with an irregular rhythm, like weak heartbeats. A wedge of light emerges from a gap in the tiny shed beside the hut. In daylight, the shed looked nondescript and run down, constructed out of uneven planks of wood and a corrugated-zinc roof; but now in the dark, it seems ominous, foreboding.

I hobble towards the shed, careful not to trip over any unseen objects or make a sound. The door is unlocked. I pull it open, adjusting my vision to the wan light provided by the lamp on the floor. The old woman is squatting just inside, her silhouette shaky on the wall of the shed, her body bent over something. I sidle up to her, and peep over her hunched shoulders.

Lying on the ground before us is a young boy, unmoving, his body enshrouded in a coarse blanket, revealing only his bloated face. And cutting across his closed left eye: a deep, red scar.

PHOTO BY: ALLAN SIEM



ABOUT THE  
**AUTHOR**

O Thiam Chin is the winner of the inaugural Epigram Books Fiction Prize, the richest literary award in Singapore, with a cash prize of S\$20,000 and a publishing contract with Epigram Books. He is also the author of five collections of short fiction: *Free-Falling Man* (2006), *Never Been Better* (2009), *Under The Sun* (2010), *The Rest Of Your Life and Everything That Comes With It* (2011) and *Love, Or Something Like Love* (2013, shortlisted for the 2014 Singapore Literature Prize for English Fiction).

His short stories have appeared in *Mānoa*, *World Literature Today*, *The International Literary Quarterly*, *Asia Literary Review*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Kyoto Journal*, *The Jakarta Post*, *The New Straits Times*, *Asiatic* and *Esquire (Singapore)*. His short fiction was also selected for the first two volumes of *The Epigram Books Collection of Best New Singaporean Short Stories* anthology series.

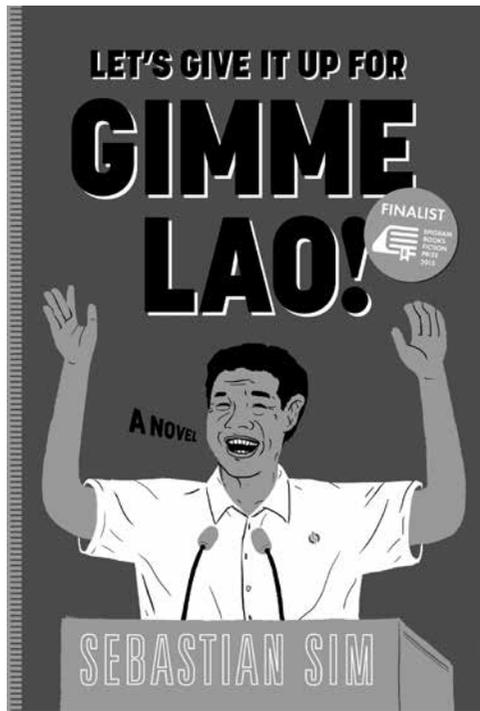
O was an honorary fellow of the Iowa International Writing Program in 2010, a recipient of the NAC Young Artist Award in 2012, and has been thrice longlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. He has appeared frequently at writers festivals in Australia, Indonesia and Singapore.



The Epigram Books Fiction Prize promotes contemporary creative writing and rewards excellence in Singaporean literature. The richest literary prize in Singapore is awarded to the Singaporean, permanent resident or Singapore-born author for the best manuscript of a full-length, original and unpublished novel written in the English language.

The closing date for submission to this year's prize is 1 September 2016. The winner will be announced in December and have his or her novel published by Epigram Books.

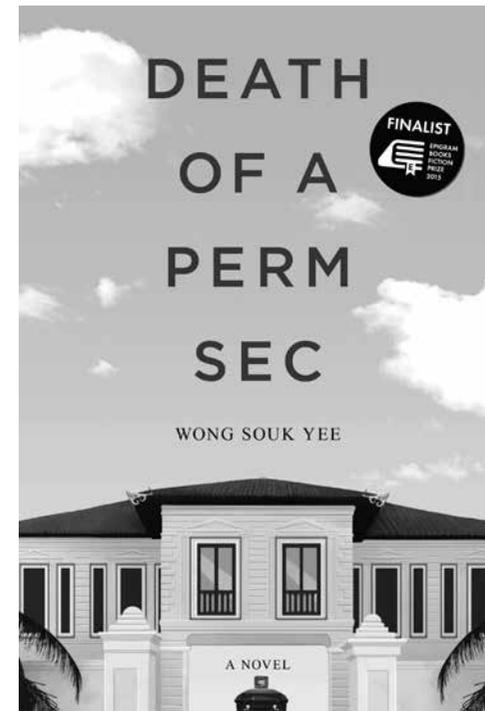
For more information, please visit [EBFP.EPIGRAMBOOKS.SG](http://EBFP.EPIGRAMBOOKS.SG)



**LET'S GIVE IT UP FOR GIMME LAO BY SEBASTIAN SIM**

Born on the night of Singapore's independence, Gimme Lao is cheated of the honour of becoming the nation's firstborn by a vindictive nurse. This was the first of three things he would never know about himself. The second was the circumstances surrounding his parents' marriage and the third was the profound, but often unintentional, impact he had on other people's lives.

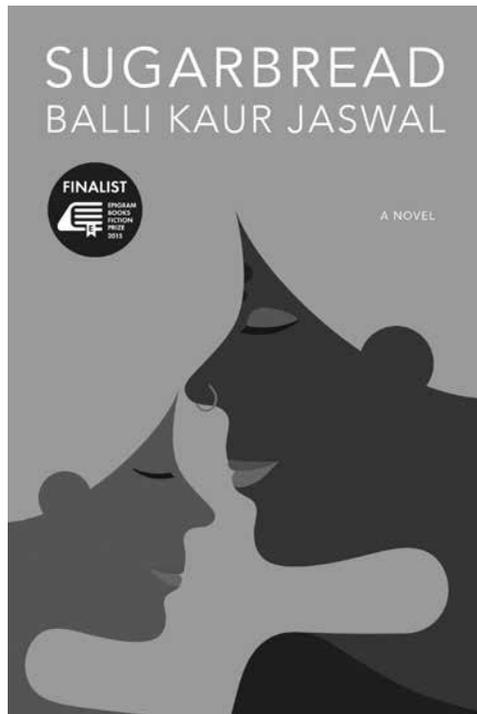
FORMAT: Paperback, 288 pages, 152x225mm  
ISBN: 978-981-4757-32-4  
PRICE: SGD \$24.90  
AVAILABLE ONLINE AT: [www.epigrambooks.sg](http://www.epigrambooks.sg)



**DEATH OF A PERM SEC BY WONG SOUK YEE**

In 1980s Singapore, a top civil servant is found dead. It appears to be suicide, by a cocktail of morphine, alcohol and Valium. But upon investigation by a CID inspector, who might not be what he seems, the family discovers there may be far more sinister circumstances behind his death, reaching the uppermost echelons of government. *Death of a Perm Sec* exposes the dark heart of power politics, from the country's tumultuous post-independence days to the socio-political landscape of the 1980s.

FORMAT: Paperback, 284 pages, 152x225mm  
ISBN: 978-981-4757-34-8  
PRICE: SGD \$24.90  
AVAILABLE ONLINE AT: [www.epigrambooks.sg](http://www.epigrambooks.sg)



***SUGARBREAD* BY BALLI KAUR JASWAL**

Pin must not become like her mother, but nobody will tell her why. She seeks clues in Ma's cooking when she's not fighting other battles—being a bursary girl at an elite school and facing racial taunts from the bus uncle. Then her meddlesome grandmother moves in, installing a portrait of a watchful Sikh guru and a new set of house rules. Old secrets begin to surface but can Pin handle learning the truth?

FORMAT: Paperback, 276 pages, 152x225mm  
ISBN: 978-981-4757-30-0  
PRICE: SGD \$24.90  
AVAILABLE ONLINE AT: [www.epigrambooks.sg](http://www.epigrambooks.sg)

---

WINNER OF THE 2015

---

# EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE

**“A heart-stopping elegy to the unrelenting tragedy of time, the trauma of impermanence, set against the backdrop of a tsunami that devastated Thailand’s coastlines. Thiam Chin’s characters are tested for their resilience and courage as relationships and self-deceptions are unforgettably wrung to the breaking point.”**

—Cyril Wong, author of *Ten Things My Father Never Taught Me*

**“A sensuous, heartbreaking and devastatingly true account of the everyday disasters of our lives: the tiny tragedies and betrayals that shape and destroy us. I advise getting a warm drink and a hug after reading this book. You’ll need it.”**

—Ng Yi-Sheng, author of *last boy*

**“*Now That It’s Over* is an intense read: a bold, insightful examination of the secret traumas that lie beneath the surface of everyday life, which grow until they break forth with devastating consequences. O Thiam Chin is a writer at the height of his powers.”**

—Stephanie Ye, author of *The Billion Shop* and criticism editor of *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*

**“A complex jigsaw of interlocking voices. As the disaster of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami strikes Phuket, O Thiam Chin’s debut novel leads us on a journey into the hidden conflicts in two parallel relationships, and back to Singaporean childhoods marked by violence, loss and love.”**

—Philip Holden, Professor of English,  
National University of Singapore

ISBN-13: 978-981-4757-28-7



9 789814 757287

[www.epigrambooks.sg](http://www.epigrambooks.sg)