

STORIES

The
Space
Between
the
Raindrops

JUSTIN KER

“In this moving, inspired collection, Justin Ker doesn’t just show us the space between the raindrops, he shows us the space between everything: every person, every thought, every moment. This is flash fiction at its best.”

—Robert Swartwood, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Man of Wax* and editor of *Hint Fiction: An Anthology of Stories in 25 Words or Fewer*

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“The stories in Justin Ker’s *The Space Between the Raindrops* deftly capture and unravel both the off-kilter and the meditative. His stories are revelatory, intriguing and delightfully absurd. I thoroughly enjoyed this book.”

—Kristine Ong Muslim, author of *We Bury the Landscape* and *Grim Series*

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JUSTIN KER



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For my parents

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THE BED THIEF

ONE

Every day for the past year, he has been breaking into her flat after she leaves for work. He steals nothing, except for a few hours of rest on her unmade bed. Then he carefully reconstructs the tousled mess of bedsheets after he leaves, so that no trace of him is left.

He picks the lock and it takes less than thirty seconds to enter the flat. Barefoot, across the cold tiled floor, he heads for her bedroom. He has never walked into her kitchen, never used her toilet. Once, however, he did stop at her bookshelf (in the living room) to see what she was reading. He agreed with her choice of literature. Vonnegut, Rushdie, and a book of Persian poems by Iqbal. Exactly what he would pick up at the National Library at Bras Basah Road. But there was also a number of management and business books on the shelf, which made him frown. Even the perfect woman has her flaws.

There is a grey wardrobe in the corner, and a dressing table next to it. The table is crowded with a small city skyline of perfumes and moisturizer bottles. A teddy bear has appeared there recently.

He stands at the edge of the bed, and memorises the diagonal slash of a blanket thrown hurriedly aside (woke up late again), the topographic lines of the bedsheets, delineating

each cotton peak, valley and plateau. Then he deduces where her body must have lain the night before, and he lies down on the bed gingerly. His body takes up the space her body had taken during the night.

His head lies on the single pillow where her head lay, his body in the imperceptible shallow caused by the depression of her body. A small amount of heat from her body lay dormant in the layers of insulation, the blanket, the duvet, the bedspread. He is not after this warmth, which is merely physics, nor the imprint of her dreams or thoughts, which is merely metaphysics. He had been waiting for a bus and she had walked past him. Then he followed her home.

He has suffered from an intractable insomnia for years, even before coming to Singapore. That is why he chose to work nights. But even during the day, he cannot crossover to the blackness of sleep. Her bed is the only bed in this country where he can fall asleep.

The human being is the only animal that requires rotating the axis of the body from vertical to horizontal to sleep. Horses, elephants sleep standing; dogs and cats lower their bodies to the ground. He thinks of nothing as sleep claims him, once again.

TWO

The first time she watched the surveillance video, of a man entering her bedroom, she wanted to call the police. But then as the black and white video continued, the man took nothing, stole nothing, and merely slept in her bed.

This strange ritual went on for several days, then weeks.

She would watch the real-time video on her computer at the office in the mornings, if she had no meetings, streamed live from the camera hidden in the eye of the teddy bear on her dresser. A neighbour had told her she saw a man hovering outside her flat once, and she went to get the teddy bear from Sim Lim Square.

She was so far from home. The bed she grew up in, in a small apartment on the desolate, eastern coast of Taiwan, was still there. She went back to visit her parents once a year, over Chinese New Year. Her father was a fisherman, and if she thought about it, she had grown up, gone to school, and ended up at this banking job in Singapore, because of the thousands of blank-eyed, gape-mouthed mackerel her father had caught in his nets.

During the typhoon season, all the small fishing boats in the harbour would roll in the harbour, toys boats in a squall. At night the wind howled over the cliffs, and the rain fell so fast it was invisible. Looking out the window, she saw lightning illuminate the entire town for milliseconds, the curve of the harbour and its breakwater, like an embracing arm, the squat three-storey houses arranged in haphazard lines. Bicycles fallen over, their wheels turning in the wind.

She thought of all the beds that she had slept in. First, with her sister, then alone when she turned seven. In the bed of the boy who lived down the street, whose father sold his own special brew of motor oil to all the fishermen (his muscled body bore the sweet machine smell of this special grease). One or two frat boys in America, who made her swear off white men forever. The bed was used for sleep, sex and, in the case of

this strange interloper of her bed, rest.

She had this intrinsic loneliness, perhaps a result of growing up in a desolate landscape. It was a different, deeper type of loneliness (there are three) that did not need to be cured, nor could it be. But it allowed her to see the same loneliness in others who were similarly affected, like this visitor. There is, if you will forgive the paradox, a camaraderie amongst the creatures who are alone. She thought that it was fitting, that two lonely people would share the same physical space on the same bed: he during the day, and she at night.

THREE

One morning when he breaks into her flat again, he is shocked to see that the bed has been made. The bedspread is tightly tucked under the mattress, as if closing off the bed to him forever.

Did she somehow discover his presence? Is she trying to communicate with him that their unspoken and presumed contract is annulled? He looks around. No policemen spring out of the wardrobe.

He takes one step back, unsure of what to do next. He leaves the flat quietly.

That night at work, his friend pats him on the back: Hey, have you eaten? But he is exhausted. He hasn't slept at all. All around Jurong Shipyard, the basal hum of crane motors is interspersed by regular clinking and tinkling, the sound of metal against metal. Men greet each other in Bengali, Tamil and Keralese. The dry dock is dotted with little yellow hard hats, welding the sides of ships while perched on scaffolding,

carrying metal pipes into boiler rooms. A Chinese foreman below a crane is shouting into his walkie-talkie, don't try to Ali-Baba me! You better hurry up stop Ali-Baba-ing, or I'll send all you Ali-Babas home!

He turns a knob and the oxyacetylene flame roars to life, drowning out the surrounding noise. But he is lost in his thoughts, and spends a little too long staring at the flame. He closes his eyes, and there is an amorphous red shape, just like when one stares at the sun for too long. He used to do that when playing cricket, staring into the afternoon sky, looking for the arcing travel of the little red ball, while his retinas were being burned by the sun. Those were the good days, before the private school closed down, and all the teachers had to look for new jobs. Almost overnight, he went from teaching English in Kerala to repairing ships in Singapore. His thoughts suddenly lost all their metaphors and life became a lot more concrete.

The following morning, he goes to her flat again. The bed is made. Untouched since the day before.

When she returns from Hong Kong a week later, she goes straight to the office from Changi Airport. She works another ten hours before she leans back in her chair and closes her eyes. Just before she leaves the office, she decides to check the video from the surveillance bear, which she had not seen for a week.

Despite the grainy black and white video, she can make out the surprise on his face on the first day he encounters the made bed. She made the bed since she would be away in Hong Kong for work. On the second day, he has the look of a man with a plan.

She moves closer to the computer screen to see what he's

actually doing. He goes to the bed, and removes the bedsheet, blanket, and all the coverings. He folds them neatly and places them on the dresser. The surveillance bear watches as the man pries the mattress from the wooden frame, lifts it up, and carries the mattress out of the edges of the picture.

She leans back in her chair, and thinks about where she can go to buy a mattress now, at 11pm. Maybe that Mustafa Shopping Centre place. She knows that she will not see him in the surveillance video, in the subsequent days. She knows that she will not see him again. She turns off the computer screen, and wishes him all the best. She takes the lift down from her office in Raffles Place, and gets into a taxi. Can you go to Little India? she asks. The driver nods silently. But then she changes her mind, and decides to just go home.

At that exact moment, a ship is on the Indian Ocean, midway between Singapore and Kerala. Below deck, in a cramped bunk, reeking of a special brew of Taiwanese motor oil, lies a man fast asleep on a stolen mattress. His body is perfectly supported by the ten thousand springs underneath him, each absorbing the undulating rhythm of the waves as the ship crashes through them. The rhythm forms the structure of a song that is transmitted into his body.

Tonight, as the moon reaches the middle of its arc over the Indian Ocean, a bed-less woman is lying on the floor of her flat, and a man is in the middle of the sea, lying on a mattress bearing the imprint of a missing woman. They are both incomplete creatures, both fast asleep, and each thinking of the other.

SPEED DATING

ONE

He has twenty minutes to get through three women, six minutes and forty seconds each to find his perfect match. He has a little clipboard to take notes, and simply not enough time.

The first woman introduces herself, and makes a joke about how she stole her last boyfriend's shirt after they broke up. Well not really, she says, he left it at my place and I just didn't give it back. She glances at the shirt that he is wearing. Don't worry, she smiles, I just wanted a souvenir. He asks her if she still has the shirt. She is unsure of what to say next and just keeps quiet.

He records her name and a comment: He took her heart and so she stole his shirt. She has attempted to replace the vacuum in her chest with a memory—of how his body once filled the shirt's empty space.

The second woman reviews books for a local newspaper. She reads almost three hundred books a year and is a specialist in South American literature. But, she says conspiratorially, what I like most are the trashy romance novels, anything that has a cover with the picture of a woman lying in a man's muscled arms. Those never disappoint. She asks him what is his favourite book, and when he says that he doesn't have time to read much, she looks a little disappointed.

He writes a question next to her name: I know it is in the nature of men to disappoint, but what is to say your fiction won't let you down either?

The last woman is a schoolteacher, and has just exited a long-term relationship. Like so many others, she turned twenty five and despite the comfort and dependency of inertia, could not imagine living the rest of her life with him. She makes a note about how so many of her other friends are on this speed-dating circuit as well; unfortunately, she says in jest, it is all because of men. And then she adds—yet here I am, the scientist moth to your destroying flame.

In the blank space under her name, he draws not a moth but a butterfly with blackened singed wings.

TWO

At the cafe, she is given a clipboard and instructions to spend only seven minutes talking to each man. Someone will ring a bell at the end of each period. Before she starts she has to tell herself, smile, be friendly, be open, not all Singaporean men are that horrible. Those are all in Vietnam right now buying brides.

They sit across from each other in two overstuffed sofas, the upholstery thick with the smell of coffee. Before either of them says anything, she sees that he has already started to undress her with his eyes. She does not fear him or her own nudity, so she undresses him as well. A crowd has gathered in the background, and the organiser from the Social Development Unit is looking at her watch. But if you could visualise the superimposed mental space of the scene,

you would see the two strangers sitting opposite each other, the man and the woman completely naked of clothing. And then you will note her slight disappointment, not at her own nudity, but at his transparency.

The next one is a civil servant, but don't prejudice me, he says, I really don't fit the stereotype. All right, she says, tell me about the last book you read. He nods, and regurgitates a short paragraph that he memorised before coming, but it is too obvious, even to him. She does not have to say anything, because the only sound between them is the sound of him realising that the stereotype, like the cast of all archetypes—is immutable and inescapable.

Two minutes into the last man, she realises that he is not really here to meet new people, but to have someone to listen to him. His wife divorced him because he named their newborn daughter Alice. At first, she was pleased with that name, because Lewis Carroll was her favourite author. But one day in a fit of epiphany, she realised why he had chosen that name: it was an anagram of his first girlfriend's name—Celia. She confronted him about it, and since he could not lie to her (though he wanted to), he admitted that there was something fundamentally wrong with the marriage. He was still looking for Celia. His wife kept the baby and renamed her something else. That child will be one of the few who will grow up with two names, one of which is secret. What is your name, he asks. Lecia, she replies. Immediately, she thinks that she should have lied and told him something else.

At the end of all the meetings, she has to give the names of the men that she would like to see again to the organiser.

But her piece of paper is blank. She decided that it would be blank before she had met any of the men, and only came to the speed-dating event to experience that addictive feeling of almost meeting. It is like jaywalking across a busy road, the cars passing so close you can almost feel their speed. She is still waiting for her chance meetings, and the accidental intersections—the lack of deliberate thought behind them is self-validating. So she hands in the blank slip of paper as her answer, because she is still waiting for her accidents, because she does not want to ever admit defeat.

FALLING PAPER

ISLA NEGRA, CHILE

Pablo Neruda looks up from the blank piece of paper in front of him and leans back into his rattan chair. From his second floor balcony, he stares out at the measureless black sea and taps his favourite green pen against the edge of the chair. His mind wanders to his last posting in Paris as a diplomat, where there was never blackness such as this. A black that was amorphous—like the masses of slaves who carved Machu Picchu and its one hundred giant stone steps from the jungle. Suddenly, Neruda realises that he has been tapping his pen in time to the periodic wash of the waves. There is only the title of the poem on the piece of paper. It reads: *Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche* (Tonight I can write the saddest lines). He forms the first line in his head and brings the tip of the pen to the paper, but then stops himself. He sighs softly and keeps the green tip of the pen in mid-air. Then he gets up and puts the stack of papers on the floor, with the pen on top of them as a weight. The kerosene lamp above his head dims as the wind sweeps into Isla Negra from the sea. He hears the bells and the moan of wood from the fishing boats in the harbour. His wife is calling him. He gets up and enters the bedroom. Perhaps it is the wind, but the pen rolls off, and the topmost piece of paper containing the unfinished (or unstarted) poem is lifted up into the air,

and carried out to sea. It is lifted past the cliff edge, and carried high into the black canvas sky. Neruda will begin “Tonight I can write the saddest lines” on a new piece of paper, and it will lead to winning him both the Nobel Prize, and the occasion to read the poem in front of seventy thousand people at the National soccer stadium in Santiago. His lines will reverberate around that concrete amphitheatre, though few will grasp its meaning. But returning to that first piece of paper with the unwritten poem, there will be a single moment in mid-flight, as it arcs up into the night sky above that black expanse of the sea, when the piece of paper has an infinite number of possible destinations.

CORNELL UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK

Outside their laboratory, it is mid-autumn and the trees shed their leaves as a wind enters them, carrying away the colour of the trees from the landscape as well. There is a transient rain of leaves before the wind dies down. Each leaf that falls follows its own unique spiral path towards the ground, which no other leaf in the world shares (this is the same with raindrops). If one could trace out each single descent, the landscape would be filled with grey, spiralled lines. This scene is transmitted through the three large windows along the wall of the laboratory, but it is not noticed by the two physics graduate students inside. One of them is standing on a short ladder beside four glass walls (arranged to form a square), preparing to drop a piece of paper from the open top. The other is bent over a video camera on a tripod, attempting to focus it on the path of the falling piece of paper. They have computers with MatLab humming

in the background, other pieces of paper lying on lab benches, vandalised with the Universal gravitational constant, Bernoulli equations, and other mathematical apocrypha. From watching a stack of playing cards fall off his desk in 1853, the Scottish physicist Maxwell had wondered why flat things like leaves and paper never fell straight down. Two hundred and fifty years later in Cornell, New York, two graduate students are still trying to catch the chaotic fall of paper. From their work here, the students will discover the invisible arrows along the edge of a falling object that guide its descent, but they will not be able to make the trajectory of the fall any more predictable.

MUTANNABI STREET, BAGHDAD

He lies on the ground staring at the blue afternoon sky, unable to move or hear anything. Approximately one million pieces of paper are in mid-air, shimmering with light as they fall back to earth, as if dropped from an invisible airplane. The man feels like he is in a dream, but it is perhaps more accurate to describe the scene as one where reality (as we perceive it) has been torn asunder, to reveal the underlying surreality that exists beneath everything. Here, it is a million pages of text falling slowly back to earth. Such a tear in the fabric of space-time occurs very rarely, and it is unclear why they are allowed to happen. The man lying on the ground is a writer whom the suicide bomber has never heard of. In fact, the suicide bomber has never read a book in his life, and there was only a black hole in his brain as he drove his explosive-laden truck into the crowded Sunday book market on Mutannabi Street, near the old Jewish quarter in Baghdad.

The bomb detonated in the heart of twenty thousand second-hand books, instantly unbinding and mixing up a million pages of text in the air. Diagrams from Russian car repair manuals floated next to the labyrinthine pages of Jorge Luis Borges. Some pages were torn by the explosion in such a way that individual alphabets (English, Arabic, Cyrillic) descended next to each other, and were mixed into a fleeting, temporary language.

At the very moment when the curved edge of the explosive fireball touched him, the man had just started to read an Arabic translation of Pablo Neruda's "Tonight I can write the saddest lines". He had gotten as far as the first line (which is the same as the title) when he was lifted three storeys into the air and thrown down onto the dirt ground. That is to say, the last thing that entered the rapidly dying neurons in his brain was the line (read from right to left): *وَبِذِكِّكَ يَا عَرَبِيَّ طَهْرًا مُلِيًّا لِيَا طَوْطُؤُلَا*. The man was nearly sixty, and had been a writer all his life. He had published his first book of Arabic verse, just as the last King of Iraq was being led out of his palace to be shot, and thereafter, he published political tracts under pseudonyms attacking the subsequent dictators.

Throughout his life, the man always came back to the narrow, book-strewn Mutannabi Street and its secret alleyways. The intellectuals, the poets, the writers, they all came here. They browsed the books arranged in rows on the dirty street itself, sat in the decrepit cafes smoking smuggled tobacco and spoke in hushed voices, as the clink of metal spoons against their shallow tea glasses mixed with the stifled roar of the hidden printing press in the back-room. The secret police came here

often to arrest dissidents, after finding that they were not at home. But despite the rhetoric of rebellion and the copious plans to betray the state that were birthed here at Mutannabi Street, history will demonstrate that no writer (in Iraq or anywhere else) has ever executed a successful political uprising. The man himself had been in trouble with the state before, an order that had come down from above—his conscience had prevented him from writing a paean about the latest dictator in the newspaper. For his troubles, the secret police broke down the door to his house on two occasions, the first time to arrest his Arabic typewriter, and two weeks later, to arrest the man himself.

The suicide bombing on Mutannabi Street may be construed as a symbolic attack on thought (a symbolic assault is the only way to attack thought). It is a line of thought that began in Spanish, in a poet's mind on a balcony during a night in Isla Negra, Chile, and which branched to England, the United States, France and Vietnam, with their respective translations. One of these lines then extended from Paris to Beirut, where an old Francophone book-seller with a pirated French copy began translating Neruda into Arabic. It was this translation that the man had picked up and opened, an almost random choice amongst the rows and rows of books on the street. If he had walked further down the literary canon, picked up an Arabic version of Joyce, he might still be alive. But the man does not regret as he continues to bleed to death. His eyes are open at the fluttering, shimmering pages wafting in the air—the shredded, destroyed pages of our immutable thought.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Justin Ker is a medical doctor at the National Neuroscience Institute, Singapore. He has a special interest in the injured brain and its damaged memories. His story “Joo Chiat and Other Lost Things” won second prize in the 2011 Golden Point Awards for fiction, and was anthologized in *The Epigram Books Collection of Best New Singaporean Short Stories* in 2013. He received the National Arts Council’s Emerging Artists Grant in 2005. *The Space Between the Raindrops* is his first book.

"This is flash fiction at its best."

—Robert Swartwood, editor of *Hint Fiction*

Contemplative and filled with possibility, each evanescent story in this collection inhabits the fleeting, unrepeatable place between the falling droplets on our island of rain. A bed thief breaks into a HDB flat every day, only to steal a few hours' rest. Two national servicemen debate the finer points of Singlish phonetics. Singapore is interviewed as a psychiatric patient on National Day. A man enters a scent shop to recall the memory of a lost love. *The Space Between the Raindrops* is a remarkable collection of short stories told by a startling new voice.



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