

FINALIST FOR THE 2017 EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE

JUDITH HUANG

a novel

*Sofia
and the
Utopia
Machine*

Sofia
and the
Utopia
Machine

JUDITH HUANG

ALSO FROM THE EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE

WINNER

The Riot Act by Sebastian Sim

FINALISTS

9th of August by Andre Yeo
Nimita's Place by Akshita Nanda

2016

The Gatekeeper by Nuraliah Norasid (Winner)
State of Emergency by Jeremy Tiang
Fox Fire Girl by O Thiam Chin
Surrogate Protocol by Tham Cheng-E
Lieutenant Kurosawa's Errand Boy by Warran Kalasegaran
The Last Immigrant by Lau Siew Mei
Lion Boy and Drummer Girl by Pauline Loh

2015

Now That It's Over by O Thiam Chin (Winner)
Sugarbread by Balli Kaur Jaswal
Let's Give It Up for Gimme Lao! by Sebastian Sim
Death of a Perm Sec by Wong Souk Yee
Annabelle Thong by Imran Hashim
Kappa Quartet by Daryl Qilin Yam
Altered Straits by Kevin Martens Wong

a novel

Sofia
and the
Utopia
Machine

E

EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE · LONDON

Copyright © 2018 by Judith Huang

Author photo by Viva Photography. Used with permission.

All rights reserved
Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
www.epigrambooks.sg

National Library Board, Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name: Huang, Judith 1986-
Title: Sofia and the utopia machine / Judith Huang.
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, [2018]
Identifier: OCN 1031833091
ISBN 978-981-47-8580-8 (paperback)
ISBN 978-981-47-8581-5 (ebook)
Subject(s): LCSH: Singaporean fiction (English).
Science fiction, Singaporean (English).
Suspense 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 2018
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For my parents, who were always there for me;
and for Xuwen, who always believed
in this book even when I didn't*

there is no eden, there is no jerusalem
this is wasteland, this is utopia
this is monte carlo, this is your and my casino
this is my inferno, this is your paradise

Yeng Pway Ngon, "On the Operating Table"
translated from the Chinese by
Alvin Pang & Goh Beng Choo

Part

1

CHINESE NEW YEAR

“Sofia, you are so tall now! Stand up, stand up and let me see,” Auntie Rosie said. Auntie Rosie was Clara’s older sister, but she was so matronly and there was so much of a generation gap between them that Clara somehow appended “Auntie” to Rosie’s name when she thought about her. Auntie Rosie was a very persistent woman. There was no turning down her invitations, and experience had proved that the consequences of not going to her gatherings were far more severe than bearing with her company for a few hours.

“Wah, they grow up so fast, ah!”—she addressed Clara now—children under the age of 16, like Sofia, were usually props in such conversations, to be marvelled at and ranked against each other rather than talked to. “Such a pity your Peter couldn’t see her grow up! She looks so much like him!” Auntie Rosie was all smiles and sympathy, as though Peter had died instead of merely being gone. “She so tall already, nothing like my Pei Pei, short short one, and so lazy some more, always dunno what to do... Dunno how they can even be cousins!”

“We must really find you a new husband, huh?” interjected another clucking relative.

“Yar lor yar lor, while you are still young! Nah!” Rosie took an ang pow out of her purse and pushed it into Clara’s palm. Clara took it uncertainly. Without warning, the woman had

taken hold of her elbow, steering her towards the snack table. “Come, come—must eat. You are all skin and bones already! We need to fatten you up! Work too hard, lah, you!”

The thing about Rosie, Clara reflected, was that she really wasn’t being unkind. Clara only found her rude because of her own years of tertiary education abroad, which made the local attitude of all-pervasive intrusiveness seem so grating. She couldn’t just tell them to mind their own business, or be affronted by what they said.

Everyone’s affair was everyone else’s in this country. If you saw schoolchildren making out in their school uniforms, as an upstanding citizen, you took holos of them and sent them in to the media outlets. If you were single, everyone from your distant relatives to your boss to your cleaning lady crowdsourced your love life. They were, in fact, being polite and caring.

“Too old already lah!” She smiled ruefully at the repeated offers to help her “find husband” before edging towards the pyramids of mandarin oranges in a bid to stuff her mouth so full she would have a valid reason not to talk.

Auntie Rosie’s netbox was blaring some inane sitcom. Loops of holographic cartoon rats—the zodiac animal of the year—pranced around the living room, holding mandarin oranges in their paws, while people poured Coke into glasses and crunched on peanuts out of shiny Thumb-brand plastic packets. Red and gold decorations in the shape of ingots and coins festooned the living room, indicating Auntie Rosie’s wishes that she would strike it rich in the new year. Clara wondered at herself and her relatives. The same blasé middle-class rituals continued in the living rooms of every Midlevel flat. Worrying about their

brand name schools with this or that special proto-genetic enhancement programme (PGE), where the best dim sum and spa package deal was, or the damned new ultramegalex, which, as far as Clara was concerned, looked exactly like the last one, full of the same chain stores.

Didn’t they have better things to talk about, to think about? But she was being unfair. She had been stung by the petty humiliation of the ang pow. It reminded her that, as far as everyone here was concerned, she was single. What her sister had meant as a sisterly kindness had put her firmly in her place.

She knew she cut a strange figure at any family gathering—37, with a teenage daughter, working at a job so secretive she couldn’t make small talk about it, and most of all, the inexplicable missing husband. She felt the whispers behind her back, the ones full of malice and worse, the ones full of pity.

“PhD, you know, from Harvard and MIT or Mitch-chee-gan or somewhere, and she had a child so young... I know, right? Dunno, dunno, rumour only. Sometimes I worry about that girl, I wonder what it must be like, living with no father. Clara ah, she not young already...but like that, very hard to find husband leh...”

Clara simply gritted her teeth. Sometimes, during these events, she would go to the bathroom and just lock herself in there for a few minutes to catch her breath. Then she would straighten up, clean up her face, reapply her lipstick and stride out, the confident but weird auntie once more.

But not this time. Because this time, when she walked out of the bathroom, she found Auntie Rosie talking to Sofia, and something in her just snapped. It was a line that had been crossed.

*

“So, no ang pow from your father again this year ah, Sophie? You didn’t get a message or anything? These men are so weird sometimes. Scholar, and was such a good boy some more... But grow up already become like that.” Rosie gave Sofia a wide, dangerous smile.

“Hiyah, you know that kind... He was from the Voids mah. Some more, I heard he is Catholic, his church like cult like that. As they say, leopard cannot change its spots,” said another relative wisely.

Sofia had gone beetroot red. “I don’t know where he is,” she said, truthfully. “Maybe he couldn’t send message from there.”

Rosie’s eyebrows shot up. “So you mean he hasn’t talked to you since...how old?”

Sofia was trapped. “Eight,” she mumbled. Now everyone was listening. She tried to inch away towards the drinks, but to no avail.

“Well, you know, you can tell your Mama that if she really need help, my good friend Ah Kiao works in SDN... Your mother very proud one, better you ask her than I ask her...”

“Damn right!” said Clara, her temper shot through the roof. “You leave my daughter alone, okay? Bitch!” Before she knew what she was doing, Clara had sworn at Auntie Rosie at the top of her voice. Auntie Rosie looked like she had been slapped. The dumpy little woman stood there, stunned.

Then she rubbed her face and said, “Huh—you...you... You go America, think you big shot or what! I older than you okay! Really boh dua boh sui!”

Sofia was still confused about what was going on. She was in the middle of pouring herself some Coke.

“Sofia, let’s go!” said Clara through gritted teeth. When Sofia didn’t move, Clara knocked the glass out of her hand, smashing it to smithereens. She hadn’t meant to—Sofia had flinched. The shards clattered on the tiles. Now they really had the whole flat’s attention. After a long minute of stunned silence, Auntie Rosie burst into tears.

“That cup was Mama’s one! How dare you break! You don’t care about me never mind, you don’t care about your own mother? You are really heartless, you know... You think got so many degree, very great is it?! I know you look down on me! You think I dunno what you do in that lab-bor-ratory—you think I dunno! I tell you, you will pay! You will pay! You leave now, you don’t come back! You never, never come back!”

Amongst the gasps and titters, Clara grabbed an angry Sofia by the wrist, tucked her purse under her arm and made for the door. Soon they were zooming on an escapod towards the MRT station, scaling down two hundred floors in a blink.

*

Sofia grew more and more annoyed as Clara dragged her along, shoving her way through the sea of people, all frantically making for the door of the train to get to or away from their reunions. Why had she made a scene like that? Why had she embarrassed her in front of all their relatives? Why had she made this irredeemable break from the rest of their family? And underneath it all was the larger, more pertinent resentment, of course: that Sofia considered it Clara’s fault

that her father had left. It was her choice, wasn't it? Who else's could it be? Hadn't she driven her father away, and wasn't that why she had to face the indignity of the interrogations about his absence?

Elbows jostled, mandarin oranges held tightly by the fists as body squashed against body, occasionally squeezed when the train made a sharp turn. Sofia felt her underarms puddle with sweat. The crush of bodies, a mixture of hair products, juice from the oranges and sour sweat made the ride unpleasant. By the time they got home, Sofia was livid. The moment they had an inch more breathing space, she shook her hand out of Clara's vice-like grip and ran to her room.

"LEAVE ME ALONE!"

"SOFIA!"

Sofia slumped onto her bed, which produced a long, metallic screech. She knew her mother was in a bad mood too, but she didn't really give a damn.

"SOPHIE!"

She grabbed a pillow and covered her head with it. She hated this time of year.

"SOFIA!"

Everything told her she should love this time of the year, but she hated it. She hated it with a passion. Everyone else was so happy—their lunch boxes stuffed with Chinese New Year goodies, their wallets full of brand-new vintage-style banknotes issued especially for ang pows, and the megacineplexes blasting the obnoxiously cheery music to ring in the new year. But not for her. And not for her mother. Somehow all this made their lives seem sad and lonely, even though everything was fine.

As far as Sofia could remember, her mother had always disliked going to family gatherings. Some, such as the Chinese New Year's Eve gathering at Auntie Rosie's, were just not optional. But even then, her mother avoided all the other aunts, uncles and cousins Sofia didn't really know.

Sofia felt envious of her classmates, who would talk about sleepovers or shopping trips they had had with their cousins. Some travelled with their extended families, piling all together into the high-speed rail north to exotic beaches in Thailand. Her wealthier classmates even did moon trips with their cousins during the longer June and December school holidays.

Sofia, on the other hand, barely knew any of her cousins or extended family. She and her mother might as well have lived on a different planet, a planet of just two people, who didn't even like each other that much. It was somehow her mother's fault, she thought. She was the antisocial one. And now she had embarrassed her in front of the entire clan. They were surely going to gossip about them even more now. Sofia flicked through her holos on her netbox, the device hovering at about eye level around her. Another boisterous Chinese New Year jingle blasted through the speakers.

"Gong xi, gong xi, gong xi ni!"

Sofia batted the floating netbox onto her bed violently. The device, programmed to detect extreme frustration, packed itself into a small, hard case and scuttled out of reach. And then she slammed the door of her room, even though she knew her mother would be there in two seconds to swing it open, but it was more for punctuation than an effective parent repellent. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the coming tirade.

But then it didn't come. Five minutes, ten, twenty... Then she heard something far worse coming from the other side of the door—the muffled but unmistakable sound of her mother sobbing. Softly, she crept to the door and opened it a few centimetres. Her mother was on the sofa, her body shaking. The sounds she was making didn't sound human. They sounded like the moans of a wounded animal, like nothing Sofia had ever heard before.

Sofia was scared, but she steeled herself and opened the door wider. Very quietly, she inched her way towards the shaking creature. When she got to her knees, it suddenly engulfed her with its hands, and buried her in a mixture of heat and tears. Then she started to cry as well, without understanding why.

As her mother held her in her arms, Sofia felt a growing resentment. She didn't understand any of this. She didn't understand why her mother was crying, and why she was crying herself. Weren't adults supposed to deal with this kind of thing? Why was her mother inflicting this on her? Why the sudden display of emotion? She felt indignant. She didn't want to see her mother like this.

“Please, Ma, please... Stop crying.”

Clara bit her lip and pulled away from her. Sofia felt her shudder a little.

“You're right. I need to get to the office.”

It's a public holiday, Sofia said to herself, but bit the thought back because frankly, she was glad to see her mother go. She wanted the flat to herself for a bit.

As the latch of the gate clicked, Sofia picked her way to her little bathroom. She pushed aside the grey accordion door.

Her face was sticky, and the tears had left little trails of salt, which made her feel disgusting.

After she had washed her face, she looked at herself in the mirror.

Her eyes were puffy, her nose red. She was going to be 15 soon, and she still didn't like the way she looked. Her eyes had potential, she decided; they were a lovely almond shape and very lively, although obscured somewhat by her glasses, which were round with silver frames. But her ears were a bit crooked. And her mouth was too wide. She had absolutely no idea what to do about her hair, which stuck out at weird angles and looked greasy no matter how much she washed it. But worst of all, she had another giant pimple right in the middle of her left cheek. She grimaced, and started picking at it irrationally, even while she overcame the last of her sniffles.

She felt very hot and sticky, despite the cool water she splashed on her face. She considered getting onto her holosheets on her netbox, but then thought better of it. She felt very, very tired. The best thing to do would be to go to bed early, she decided.

Wriggling rapidly out of the uncomfortable red Chinese New Year dress Clara had forced her to wear, she changed into a ratty primary school PE T-shirt and a pair of cooling FBT shorts. The shirt was getting tight around her chest. She fidgeted a bit, then flopped herself onto her bed.

Sofia wished she could remember her father better. What she could remember seemed so fleeting, barely clinging to the edges of her consciousness, and the vague blur of memories seemed more insubstantial the more she tried to dwell on any one specifically. It terrified her that she might lose all

memories of her father. Even his face was a bright blur in her mind, and she simply couldn't bring up any memory of him and her mother really interacting. She couldn't ask her mother. There was a huge taboo around the topic in their house. All her mother would say about him was that he left when she was eight, although for what reason, and where he was now, was a complete mystery.

The clearest memory that she could recall of him was a happy one. She was young, barely as tall as her father's knee, clinging to his hand as they walked the boardwalks in the Canopies. Not the residential areas, of course, which were far too exclusive for mere Midlevel civil servants to afford to visit—just the lower Canopies where the boardwalks and restaurants were.

It was the weekend, and her parents had taken her to a restaurant lunch up here as a treat. Was it somebody's birthday? Sofia couldn't be sure, but there was an air of festivity to the memory that seemed to suggest that they had been celebrating. Perhaps her father or mother had just been promoted at work. Whatever it was, the little family was happy—it was perhaps the only memory Sofia had of her mother smiling and completely relaxed, her arms hooked with her father's while she clung on to his other hand with little stubby fingers.

The city sprawled out beneath them like a map, glinting in the sun as the windowpanes of the Midlevel flats caught the light, rising hundreds of storeys into the air. They were like facets of a jewel, each block rising up gracefully like the spines on so many fern leaves spreading down to the canals, over the shadowy, watery Voids.

But it wasn't the magnificent city that had caught little Sofia's eye, it was something her father pointed out to her—an island, in the distance, lying out beyond the water, on the horizon, like a lazy cat. "Pulau Ubin, Sofia," said her father's voice, a gentle baritone at her ear, as he lifted her up in his arms and pointed towards it.

The bright white beach lay like a ribbon around the island, glaring back at them under the blue-grey sky. It was a beautiful thing, and Sofia could smell the salt spray in her nostrils, the scent of something wild and free beyond the reach of the city.

She could feel the strong arms of her father lifting her by the armpits, could feel the swing of freedom in the way her legs lifted off the ground, dangling uselessly from her waist. She felt so small and so safe, despite how high up they were.

In that instant, the island seemed like a fantastical place, a place where mysterious and magical things could happen, a place unlike the humdrum everyday of Midlevel life. And then her father began to hum a tune to her, a happy tune he had taught her, and she sang along.

The clouds kissed their feet as they walked along the corridors of the Canopies, and she was so high up and so close that her cheek was brushing his cheek. And that was how Sofia remembered her father, wistful and safe and strong, pointing out the little dark green stain against the horizon.

CHAPTER 2

THE CHAIR

Julian felt powerful when he sat in the Chair. He wasn't supposed to, of course. It was his father's chair, and though Julian was confident of his father's approval in general, he wasn't confident that he would be too pleased if he knew that his son occasionally sat in the Chair on the sly.

The Chair was designed to make you feel powerful—a gorgeous bubble, a dome, a tour de force of precision engineering hovering twenty thousand feet above sea level, with a floor all of glass except for the sleek, white ergonomic seat itself. You could see everything from up here.

There was a slight drifting movement, but it was barely perceptible. The Chair's bubbled dome was a protrusion of part of the hovering platform in the Canopies immediately on top of the Istana. Sitting in it was the closest thing to being a Renaissance angel, perched on a cloud.

Beneath him, the earth stretched out lazily like the vast back of a whale. According to Marlowe, Faust's first wish upon making his infamous bargain was to take flight around the world in order to check the accuracy of the maps those intrepid 18th-century explorers were making.

Now, Julian reflected, anyone with the money could do the same in a day trip. And he, of course, didn't have to make a trip at all. Sitting in the Chair meant he was at high enough an altitude for a god's eye view, yet low enough that the clouds

didn't get in the way. And at sunset you got these gorgeous flaming panoramas, where the sun spread a rainbow of colours along the horizon and the city's lights glowed like stars.

Beneath him, tiny lights, like blood cells carrying oxygen to different parts of the body, streamed through the roads, canals and skyways like blood vessels. It was late afternoon, and the traffic was just approaching the mad rush of peak hour again. But up here, it was extraordinarily, luxuriously quiet. Julian liked to pipe in some music—Bach, usually, or sometimes Handel. But today he chose Wagner, just because he was in that sort of mood.

He flicked a switch, and the info streams came on—tracking the minuscule dots of moving ships, MRT trains, even individual escapods and citizens, if you cared to zoom in on them. Traffic reports, weather forecasts and key financial indicators streamed in a moving matrix on his right. He swiped the display to the thoughtcloud stream. Gossip about local celebrities, the best sales for Chinese New Year clothing, and worries about the water supply today—so the terrorism rumours had been seeded successfully.

The aggregators flashed. Discontent—a little bar on the left—was low; the weather was fine and no one had forgotten their umbrellas for the light shower predicted for the late evening. There was a flame war going on about property prices again, and some possible seeds of unrest among the server farmers, but nothing that tripartite negotiations wouldn't sort out. Another cat holo had gone viral—but the MDA bots had scanned it and it was nothing to worry about.

Bored with the privileged info streams from the Chair, he turned to his private holo streams from his netbox. Several

notices for a primary school reunion—Julian showed these slightly more interest, flicking through some old holos his friends had created.

The truth was, after the initial surge of power from secretly being in the Chair, the usual Chair display was really quite dull. People can be so extraordinarily dull, he thought. Vast streams and torrents of uncensored information from the best academic libraries and universities lay ripe for mining in the netbox rivers, but hardly anyone accessed them, instead limiting themselves to petty social interactions.

What he needed, he thought, was a real girlfriend. And not one of those giggly, frivolous things he saw at society parties. Not that he hadn't had his share of flirtations, of course. Any society girl with half a brain knew he was just about the biggest catch in their circle. And he knew he could dress, act and look the part. He always had the latest gizmos and gadgets that were all the rage at the time. And when he was not in his status-telegraphing pure white school uniform, he wore the coolest, most exclusive labels. He holidayed in the most exclusive destinations and had the sophisticated taste that only money could buy—ski trips in the Swiss Alps, where the pristine snow glinted off the tops of blinding white mountains against a blue sky; rich hot cocoa from the most refined of Mexican cocoa beans; delicate bubbles of caviar that burst against your palate. He made sure he was spotted often at the most exclusive country club, where he had swimming and tennis lessons, and had VIP passes to invitation-only rooms in nightclubs and bars, so he was never short of female company, if he so desired.

He'd had one serious girlfriend—whom he had picked up at a Cambridge May Ball and jetted into Paris that same night,

an evening spent hovering over the Eiffel Tower—but she had thought better of dating someone with such a high profile and moved with her family to the Maldives or somewhere like that after their break-up.

Frankly, he was bored. Bored stiff by the same damned company, the simpering smiles, the eager handshakes of the fathers eager to display their daughters. It was never that hard to get a girl, if you were as loaded and privileged as he was. But it was also horrifying how little he felt afterwards. It was all so sordid, beneath all that refinement.

The pretty society girls, their eyebrows plucked and their fingernails manicured, their hair disgustingly stiff from coiffing, just tired him out these days. Even the older ones, the ones with degrees from Bei Da or Swiss finishing schools or French Sorbonnes, were still dull as dishwater after a while. It was like they all expected him to take on the sole responsibility of carrying the conversation. Or maybe, he thought, they were just scared—that they hadn't lived up to the perception of his extensive experience. That if they said something wrong, he would have them banished or their tongues cut out, or something.

Julian felt lonely.

That was when it came to him—that old story of the Caliph of Baghdad who disguised himself for one night every year and roamed the marketplace with his vizier, incognito. Well, he had no vizier. But he did have a couple of good magic carpets... He would take the jet—no, that would still give him away. He would slum it and scour the Midlevels for some sweet, unspoiled secondary school girl. It would be fun. Maybe he would even fall in love. That, at least, would be a little bit

different. After all, sometimes Julian wondered what life, “real life”, in the Midlevels was like. He always had the impression that being in the Canopies all the time divorced him from the “real” Singapore, which disturbed him somewhat, since he cared a lot about his country. Maybe he would learn something from this. He warmed to the idea.

He jumped out of the Chair and walked down the gangway back down to the Istana, a new spring in his step.

CHAPTER 3

ISAAC

In Sofia’s bedroom, the holo display projected by her netbox glowed, promising some entertaining distraction. The light formed the shape of a sparrow before presenting her with an array of icons. She reached out to see what was new on her friends feed. Some of the girls from her class were online, their avatars sparkling with gossip. But she was in no mood for that.

Then she noticed something new, a little prism in blue, glowing in her peripheral vision, and she reached for it.

“Do you open the door?” Words formed at her eye level, swirling and eddying in the darkness. She was about to swipe them away, thinking they were some kind of pop-ad promotion, when she saw the little prism shining, leaping into her hand. It was quite beautiful.

A thrill ran down her spine. It materialised in her hand the moment she touched it, the holograph rendered solid. Perhaps it was just a very cunning pop-ad. Or maybe it was just spam. But something told her it was something more—it was a gift.

“Hi! What’s your name?” came a voice from out of the prism.

“Sofia,” she said. “How did you get my contact?”

“Through your holosheets. They’re pretty cool. I saw them on Natasha’s feed.”

Sofia was very proud of her holos. Natasha was one of the most popular girls in her class, and while they weren’t really

friends, they were at least listed as friends online. This cheered her up considerably.

“What’s your name?”

“Call me Isaac.”

A boy! Sofia’s heart skipped a beat. Boys were strange and unfathomable creatures to her, as she had gone to a girls’ school ever since primary school. Some of her classmates knew several from their co-ed primary schools, and undoubtedly that was how Natasha knew this guy, and Sofia had been hoping to meet a boy herself. “What school do you go to?”

“RI,” he said. Raffles Institution. That sounded pretty good. Sofia accepted the chat.

When she did, she found herself in a perfectly-rendered study—an old-fashioned one, with shelves lined with books.

“Hello—I’m here. Where are you?”

Isaac materialised. He looked about 17. He was handsome, with prominent cheekbones and a fashionable haircut. Of course, avatars could look like anything you pleased, but most teenaged boys had, perhaps unsurprisingly, pretty awful taste. Isaac didn’t have neon green hair or wear a baggy shirt. He looked smart.

“Hi,” she said.

“Um, hi.”

The avatar Sofia had chosen for herself had purple-streaked hair and dark, big purple eyes, and, of course, she had done away with her glasses. She thought her avatar looked pretty cool, though she had probably overdone the androwear. Sofia felt a bit self-conscious showing that much midriff, even if it was computer-generated, but she also felt him eyeing her appreciatively.

Sofia was terribly drawn to the books. She reached out to finger one of them. They actually felt solid, which surprised her. This guy must be loaded.

“Are these real?” she asked in surprise.

“Yup, they are. I collect them. Antiquarian. This is my study.”

“How do they stay up on the shelf?”

“It’s the latest technology. Holomatter 4.0. I can show you more if you want,” said Isaac. He rummaged in the shelf and chose a few of his favourite books. This was already going better than he had hoped.

“Why were you looking at my holosheets?” asked Sofia.

“Well, to be honest, I was just bored...and Natasha used to be my primary school classmate. So.”

“Yeah, Natasha is cool,” said Sofia, her heart sinking a little. Maybe this boy just had a crush on Natasha and had contacted Sofia to suss out whether she was single. Natasha got any guy she wanted, sometimes more than one guy. It just wasn’t fair.

The boy hesitated, unsure how to approach his question. “I like building cities too,” he said. “Did you have to do that Worldbuilder thing in Social Studies class too? They made everyone at RI do it.”

“Yeah, we did.” Sofia remembered it clearly. They had been in the dark classroom, which was blackened like an observatory. It was like being alone in the universe, with only made-up worlds eddying around you. That was how she had got into world building herself, which had surprised her as she usually found schoolwork boring.

They had created imaginary cities filled with wondrous technology, impossibly high skyscrapers and hanging gardens

that rivalled the legendary cities of myth and folklore in their splendour. When she had got back from that class, she had applied it to her own holos and created elaborate worlds of her own that she then spent way too much time tending to.

“So,” said Sofia shyly, “what’s with the prism?”

“Oh, that?” Isaac laughed in a self-consciously off-hand manner. “It’s just a symbol. A gift.”

“Yeah, but why a prism? Why not a sphere, or a cube or a cone?”

“Well, you know Isaac Newton, right?”

“Yup. Were you named after him?”

“Isaac is just a name I use online,” he said. “But yes, I use it because of Isaac Newton.”

“Well, my name really is Sofia,” said Sofia, a little reproachfully. What was the deal with this guy, and who was he really? Nobody was anonymous these days. She suddenly felt a little scared and considered ending the chat right there. But curiosity got the better of her. “So what about Isaac Newton?”

“Well, he was the one who discovered how to split light. Here, let me show you.” He reached for the prism, and Sofia handed it to him. He picked it up and held it to the light. Like everything else in the room, it was exquisitely made.

“It’s real, right?”

“Yeah, of course it’s real. It won’t work if it’s just a holo,” he said. “Here—” he pressed a button on a device he held in his hand, and a beam of light shot out from it. “Look at this—”

He held the prism up in the path of the beam of light. He tilted it this way and that. Suddenly, he hit the correct angle and a lovely rainbow streamed over Sofia’s forehead—a dash

of red through indigo. Sofia’s heart leapt. She had heard of the experiment before, but had never seen it performed. She had never seen a real glass prism split light into a rainbow before, and holos were just not the same. Julian gave his hand a little flourish, like a magician.

“There—the prism experiment, splitting a beam of light into a spectrum,” he said. “It’s illustrative of the principle of our society, too. It’s quite amazing, really.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Sofia. “I thought it was just a science experiment.”

“Well, all branches of knowledge are related,” said Isaac wisely. “At least, that’s what I think. Truth and beauty in one discipline can be applied to another. There is no shortage of metaphors drawn from science in all the classics of statecraft.”

“Statecraft?” Sofia’s eyes gleamed. “Do they teach you that at RI? All we have is stupid Social Studies, which is like, everything rolled into one. My teacher was just complaining about it—last year it absorbed Literature and History too, both of which used to be my favourites.”

“Oh no, not at all,” said Isaac. “They only teach crap at my school. Everything I know,” he added impressively, “I learned from books.”

“I wish I had so many books,” said Sofia wistfully, fingering the spines of the pile on the table.

“Well, you know, you are welcome to borrow them any time, especially if you become part of the club.”

“The club?”

“Yes, the Prism Club. Anyone who’s anyone is in it, you know,” said Isaac, a proud grin on his face.

“How do you get in?”

“Well, that’s the tricky part. You have to be tapped. But I guess I could see what I could do...”

“You mean you’re a member? They let teenagers in?”

“Well...” Isaac hedged. “They don’t really. It’s an elite club for top leaders. But I know a lot about it because of my...connections.”

Sofia’s heart was racing. A whole library of books—and an intellectual circle to debate them with, and a cute guy to boot? And one who seemed to have a lot of insider knowledge...

“That would be amazing! You have no idea. My mum is always going on about how I don’t take my studies seriously, but she doesn’t buy books. All she does is work.” Sofia stopped herself, remembering she shouldn’t talk too much about her family. “But wait, you still haven’t explained to me what the metaphor is,” she added.

“Well, you know how Singapore is split into the Canopies, the Midlevels and the Voids?”

“Yeah... But the Voids aren’t really part of Singapore, are they?”

“Well, that’s what everybody says, but I mean, they still contribute to the GDP, so...”

“How do they contribute to the GDP?” This flew in the face of everything Sofia had been taught in school, and therefore, excited her greatly.

“You can’t possibly be that naïve!” said Isaac with mock-exasperation. “Don’t you know about the black market? The server farms?”

Sofia shook her head. She had never been very interested in the Voids. To her they were just a putrid, sordid part of the landscape that she never set her foot in, so she didn’t see why

she would ever bother with them.

“Well, okay, you know that about a quarter of Singapore’s GDP comes from nano-conductor server farms, yes? And another quarter from pharmaceuticals?”

Sofia nodded. This stuff had been drilled into her during Social Studies. She could recite the exact percentages by heart.

“Well, where do you think the farms and the pharmas are located? In the Midlevels?”

He had a point. No one ever did any manufacturing in the Midlevels. All the offices she knew of that were connected by the MRT were for financial or consulting or law or accountancy firms. Oh, and research communities, of course, like hers.

“So there are actually people working in the factories in the Voids?” This had simply never occurred to her before.

“You do know that like forty per cent of the population lives in the Voids, right? It’s not just factories, but also services. There are all manner of services in the Voids,” said Isaac, his voice dripping with innuendo. “The black market, for instance—anything you like—smuggling, piracy, custom modification—you name it, they’ve got it. But anyway, about the Prism...”

All this fairly boggled Sofia’s mind but she tried not to show it. She wanted to come across as sophisticated, as knowledgeable as Isaac was.

“So what’s the metaphor of the Prism?”

“The philosophy of the Prism Club is that, in order for there to be beauty and harmony, you must split the beam of light into its constituent colours. That’s how you get a rainbow of diversity, the colours each separated from each other.”

“That’s pretty,” said Sofia. “But what does that have to do with the manufacturing and the services and all the black market and stuff?”

“Well, let’s just say that the black market is the ultraviolet part of the spectrum,” he said with a laugh. “It’s part of the beam but we can’t see it—not with our eyes, at least. But anyway, it just means that it is the role of governance to ensure that the levels remain distinct and each contributes in its own way. And we believe that further stratification is the key to our competitiveness.”

“Do you think about this sort of thing a lot?”

“All the time,” said Isaac eagerly. “I care a lot about this place. I guess it’s something I was brought up with. I can only imagine what a great place this will be by the time we grow up...”

Sofia smiled, fingering the prism. “So can I keep it?”

“Of course!” said Isaac with a smile. “It was a gift. I’d meant for you to keep it, even if you hadn’t accepted my invitation. Perhaps you will hear more about it soon.” He gave her another wink, then set the prism into her palms firmly.

“Listen, I think I should go. My mum’s finished making dinner, and I’ve already pissed her off once today.”

“Yeah, no problem! I’ll be around.”

Sofia smiled again and flicked off her netbox. Flopping back on her bed, she examined the prism closely, stroking it, holding it up to the light. But the light from her nightlight wasn’t a concentrated beam, like what had emanated from Isaac’s lamp, so it didn’t turn into a rainbow. She kept looking at it on the shelf, thinking of Isaac. She couldn’t wait to talk to him again.

THE FIRST LETTER

How can Singapore remain competitive in the 22nd century?

The sentence blinked at Julian in the air. He sighed, swiped it away, started to type, then deleted the whole thing and tried to start again.

How can Singapore remain competitive in the 22nd century?

The words flickered around his head like a shoal of fish. He did actually like thinking about these things, only he hated the format his Social Studies teachers always insisted on: introduction, three main arguments, snappy section headings, conclusion that was exactly the same as introduction. It bored him to death. Typing and deleting, typing and deleting, he ended up with nothing in his file. He thought of Sofia and what he wanted to tell her. What he felt she was trying to achieve in her holosheets.

It had, of course, been a bit of a standard ruse. Julian knew that the way to a girl’s heart was always to praise her holos. But, to his surprise, he found himself to be quite sincere. Unlike the vast majority of holos made by teenage girls, hers were not simply iterations of their creators in various outfits and scenes from holo series and films they had seen. There was something entirely marvellous, entirely self-contained about Sofia’s worlds.

There were the unicyclists, the mass form of transport in one of her cities. These tiny, unflappable men and women were

obsessed with the minutiae of fashion and would flit from one style to the next at a moment's notice, wearing strange mechanical contraptions that flapped this way and that. They operated their unicycles using complex mechanisms with multiple pieces of string. It was really quite witty.

There was the fantastic architecture, a fusion of organic and mechanical forms, with an astonishing level of detail: façades of detailed splendour; bungalows of glass and steel, and black and white wood; temples and cathedrals plucked from around the world, transformed beautifully and clustered together.

And, above all, the elegant genius of her urban planning: wide, genteel promenades; public telescopes; sprawling libraries; and row upon row of the loveliest blooming trees, shedding their leaves and magically fruiting all in symphony. And through it all, the marvellous river, the jewel of the crown, snaking across the city like an old god, roiling and bubbling like a living thing. It changed colours with the multiple sources of light deep within it, fluorescent algae or creatures lighting up the water. It was the Singapore River he knew and loved, yet splendidly transformed.

Julian marvelled at the mind that could have produced this rich tapestry. He shrank his avatar down in miniature to discover the hidden corners and secret alleyways, and the shops selling marvels and the peaceful courtyards where one could rest one's soul. The more he wandered Sofia's worlds, the more he felt himself in touch with something wonderful, something ineffable. It was a special place, a city of marvels, and he wanted to really get to know its owner with a fervour that surprised him.

He knew there was something faintly unorthodox about the whole thing—they had done simulations in school and they

were all not even remotely like this one—but he felt it a terrible waste that the vision would not be realised, somehow. This was why he had picked her as his target when he had decided to get to know a Midlevel girl incognito. Without realising it, thinking about Sofia had led him to type a letter to her.

To: Sofia
From: isaac iskandar
Subject: *How can Singapore remain competitive in the 22nd century?*

Dear Sofia,

Ever since I saw your holosheets and met you, however briefly, I have been doing a lot of deep thinking. Something about you just brings that out in me.

Why are we filled with longing for the things we cannot have? Why is it that beyond the vision of every statesman and philosopher is that shimmering something, blinking in the corner of his eye?

There is something that haunts our dreams. There is something that drives us, that racks our sleep with discontent. We long for the high, the beyond, the sublime.

It is a lover, it is a homeland, a childhood, a future. Wherever we locate this thing, in thing or person or land or time, it is beyond our reach—eternally unattainable, an insistent, unending longing.

In this place the moon shines brighter, the laughter is more innocent, the caresses are softer, the knowledge deeper. It resonates with something within us. It fits the shape of the missing puzzle-piece. It is obsession and pain and desire. It is a self-lacerating wound, a maw, aching to be filled.

You glimpse it in the mundane and in the sublime. It stares at you from pop-ads—the sheet washed whiter than before, the woman more beautiful than anything on earth. It stares at you from the height of art, its beauty distorted, its bleeding hands held out to you from behind the glass pane.

Everywhere you turn you see it, and everywhere you turn you miss it. Everywhere there is beauty you clutch at it, only to see it fall like sand through your fingers.

It is un-graspable, unknowable, unknown. It is an old flame, an old song, an old country rising like a spectre from the grave—it is utopia, it is Eden, it is heaven, it is paradise. It is a chimera, a protean thing, shifting and turning into something else the moment you clutch at it.

It is the tragedy of getting what you want—to have what you once wanted. For the lover, the land, the time, the place merely turns from sacred to profane dust the moment your hands touch it, and the fairy's gold

turns to yellow leaves.

It is the last thing on earth you glimpse before you die—the thing beyond things and the song beyond songs. It is gentle like the breeze and fierce like the storm, a whirlwind of the soul that lifts you clear up into the sky and into a strange land never born nor ever since seen.

It is news from a far country—the boat, returning empty, the ferryman, transfigured. It is the end of all tears, the end of all sorrow. It is the flame of leaves that, broken off by the bough, turns to glistening gold. It is the silver bowl, from which we scoop our desire, from which we drink. It is the real deal, the golden ticket, the kingdom of heaven, the pearl of any price, the beloved, the garden of eternal spring.

And it is within our minds, within our hearts, eternally generating. I have heard it called something by those in the know—they call it the Utopia Machine. The question that burns in my heart is this: do you know it too?

*Yours,
Isaac*

He read it over and over again, and finally, taking a deep breath, sent it on its way.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judith Huang is a three-time winner of the UK Poetry Society's Foyle Young Poet of the Year award, and her writing has been published in journals including *Prairie Schooner*, *Asia Literary Review*, *QLRS*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Loreli*, *Ceriph*, *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction*, *Spittoon*, *Stylus*, *Clockwise Cat*, *Asymptote* and the *Harvard Advocate*, as well as in anthologies such as *In Transit*, *Journeys*, *Singpowrimo 2014* and *Body Boundaries*. She holds an AB from Harvard University, where she belongs to the Signet Society of Arts and Letters. *Sofia and the Utopia Machine* is her first novel, and you can find her online at judithhuang.com.



The annual 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.

For more information, please visit **EBFP.EPIGRAMBOOKS.SG**

“A bold and fantastical work that posits a new cosmology within which a science-fictional vision of Singapore is rendered in dystopian terms. It’s a work that would sit perfectly on any Young Adult speculative fiction shelf, with its fast-paced and childlike sense of adventure.”
—Cyril Wong, author of *The Last Lesson of Mrs de Souza*

Sofia’s father has been missing for seven years, and her controlling mother doesn’t understand her. She attends a good school and lives in a nice Midlevel flat, but she’s always felt like something was missing. When she unlocks the gateway to a whole new utopia, the truth comes crashing down around her—about her stratified society, her scientist parents, and her own existence.

YOUNG ADULT

ISBN-13: 978-981-47-8580-8



9 789814 785808

www.epigrambooks.sg

