

"TRULY
MEMORABLE."
TASH AW

THE
ANGEL
TIGER

AND OTHER
STORIES

BARRIS
SHERWOOD



Praise for *The Angel Tiger and Other Stories*

“Beneath the placid surface of these stories lies all the pain and joy of human life as people struggle—sometimes quietly, sometimes less so—to make sense of their place in a changing, multicultural world. Barrie Sherwood has created some truly memorable characters who act as a reflecting pond to our own hopes and insecurities.” —Tash Aw, critically acclaimed author of *We, The Survivors*

“Droll, whimsical and tender, these stories feature individuals teetering delicately on the edge, waiting to fall into each other or into a startling revelation about themselves.” —Cyril Wong, award-winning author of *Ten Things My Father Never Taught Me*

“In Barrie Sherwood’s deft hands, the most banal aspects of daily life morph into the weird and wondrous—airports evolve into dystopian landscapes, dead city birds mutate into sacred offerings, high-end supermarkets transform into museums of treasure. Like all the best writers, Sherwood shows us the incontrovertible magic in the mundane. Tender, funny and laced with a dash of the absurd, these stylish stories will seduce, intrigue and, most of all, endure.” —Kirstin Chen, author of *Bury What We Cannot Take*

Praise for *Escape from Amsterdam*

“A wry, furious and occasionally heartbreaking look at the alienating effects of globalisation.” —*The Straits Times*

“A clever, fast-paced noir... Sherwood has a firm handle on red-light personalities, and his narrator dazzles as the self-aware antihero in this thriller for the Facebook generation.” —*Publishers Weekly* (New York)

“Dryly comic, utterly laconic... (an) engagingly literary coming-of-age novel.” —*Metro* (London)

“Sherwood convinces that this chase will entertain. His funky style and Aozora’s dissolute self-interest make an unusual pursuit: edgy, sexy and comic, with plenty of zip.” —*The Financial Times* (London)

“The novel is a symbiosis of culture yet the intrusions of mass-media don’t feel out of place or render the novel disjointed. If anything, it’s an achievement of Sherwood’s that he’s able to maintain a consistent narrative voice that’s cogent, engaging and wryly funny.” —*3AM* (Paris)

“A sobering confrontation of culture and a breakneck adventure-slash-satire about what the westernisation of modern Japan hath wrought.”

—*The National Post* (Toronto)

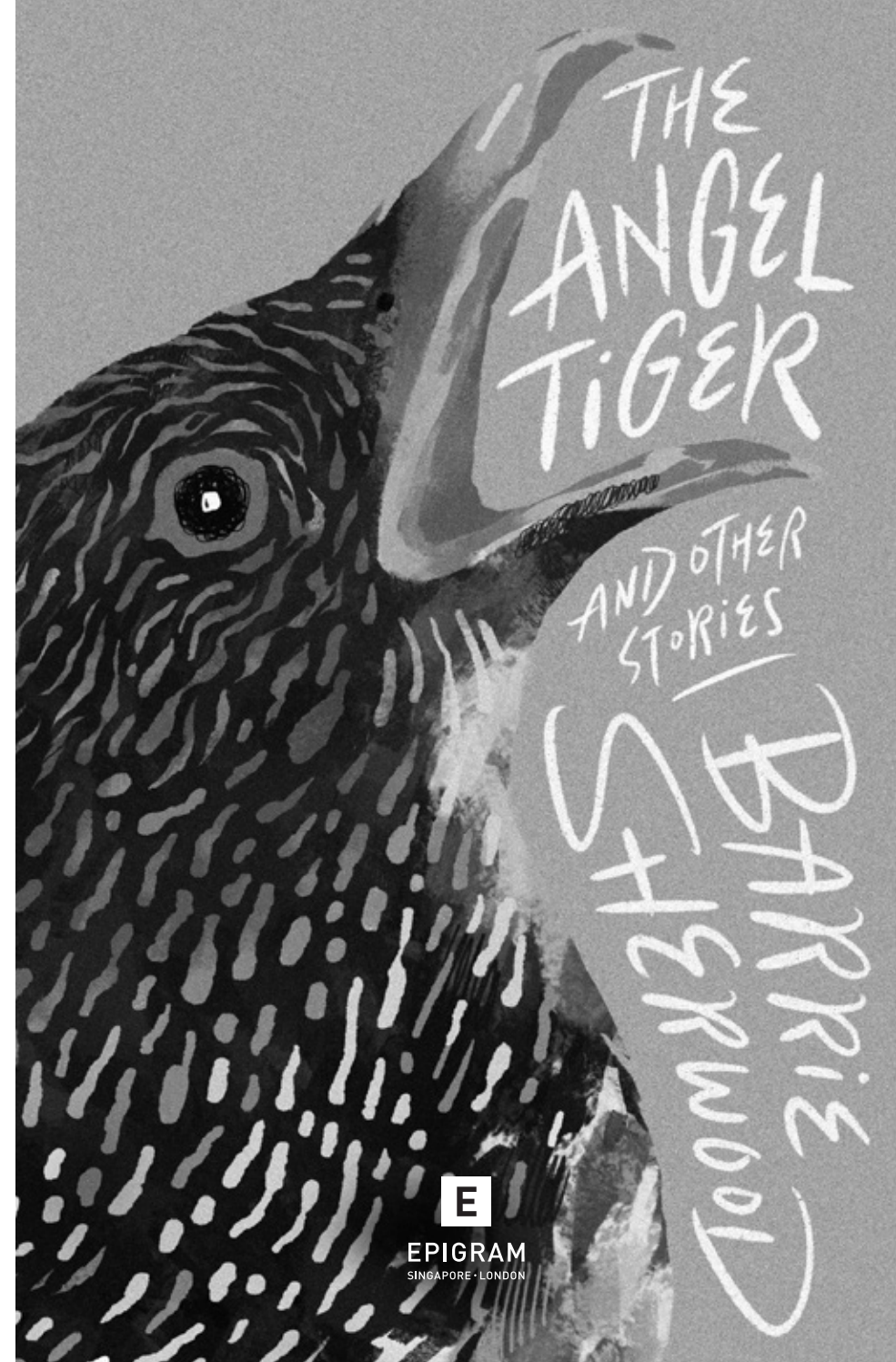
“...frenetic and surprisingly entertaining...” —*The Herald* (Glasgow)

Praise for *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa*

“Lady Kasa’s infatuation with a palace guard unfolds in a series of vividly imagined, obliquely sexual scenes and conversations. The poems she secretly writes to him suggest proto-haikus, stripped to the lucid expression of pure longing. Her journey toward consummation occurs amid growing courtly intrigue and, finally, treachery. Sherwood evokes this world with delicate attention to texture and nuance...” —*The Globe and Mail* (Toronto)

“*The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa*...pursues, to a certain extent, the same desires for splendour and charm that the original pillow book seeks, yet services a critique of false exoticism with interest and humour. This is a treasure of a very peculiar order.” —*The Montreal Review of Books*

“A delightful introduction to the attitudes and amusements of Japan’s ancient courtly society. History has rarely been easier to read.” —*The Canadian Book Review Annual*



To Patricia

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CROISSANT

ALL ELAINE HAD the night before was a Caesar salad and a glass of Chardonnay in the hotel bar. Now she'd been up since five, stuck with an incomprehensible and talkative taxi driver all the way to the airport. After passport control, she started down the concourse that stretched away in an endless curve. Boarding for her flight would commence in ninety minutes: time enough to find some breakfast. She was dying for something. There were fast-food places here but she couldn't bear the smell of donuts or dim sum this early. But a croissant? God, yes. She could hardly remember the last time she'd had one. Ages.

Beyond a row of duty-free stores, she left the tiled strait of the concourse for the Rio Coffee Company. She waited in the queue, inspecting the pastries in the cold cabinet, then asked for a croissant.

The girl behind the counter tilted her head. "A what?"

"A croissant."

"I'm sorry," the girl said, "I don't think we have that item. We've got chocolatey jaffles, five flavours of cream cheese bagels and two kinds of muffnuts."

Elaine stooped to confront the muffnuts behind the glass; they were, she was sure, made of Styrofoam drizzled with wax.

A moving walkway carried her towards the hazy blue reaches of the terminal, through shafts of sunlight that were purely aesthetic.

The next café she came to looked as if it were modelled on Anne Hathaway's cottage. A girl in a lace apron squinted when she heard what Elaine wanted. "I'm sorry, ma'am, what was it?"

"Quoi-saan. Croy-sant. Crescent roll?"

The girl cringed. "Maybe it's something that's been discontinued?"

Elaine checked her watch and turned to find her flight on one of the Departures screens. Under Status nothing had changed.

Green light flickered from beneath the walkway as if there were a discotheque on a lower floor. She still couldn't see the end of the terminal's curve, lined with potted palms beneath a cocoon of glass. At this angle, the walkway could go on turning for kilometres, the Muzak increasing and decreasing in volume as she went from one speaker to the next. The terminal emptied the further she went, the screens at the gates showing flights that weren't leaving until that evening. She passed more duty-free stores, smoking cubicles, water fountains, a glass display case full of seahorses, pangolins and an entire sun bear, and then, in the waiting area to one side of Gate A21, at least two dozen people in white robes, curled on the benches and stretched out on the floor, asleep.

She stared at them as she passed. They all had the same tags on their carry-on luggage, and a matching green sticker on their chests. Pilgrims. Their flight would leave in nine hours. Not one of them stirred. She wondered how long they must have been travelling to sleep so soundly. She both envied their ability to slumber on a hard floor, and disdained their proprietary colonising of the gate. And there was something annoying about their feet. All of them had taken off their sandals before lying down and it was as if their toes and pale soles were disconnected from the rest of their bodies, like clusters of fungi on a forest floor, crimped and wrinkled and lobed. She couldn't think of the last time her feet had been bare in a public place.

God, she thought, what a perfect business case. Customers but no tangible product. No quantifiable KPIs. Radical, intergenerational brand fidelity. In what, exactly, did she believe with that kind of devotion? Wherever would she herself go on a pilgrimage? The

fervency itself was embarrassing. Why would you reveal yourself in that way?

She spotted blue, white and red ahead, and two words coming into focus on a signboard: Boulangerie Paris. She actually sighed. There was a couple seated here, but no one queued up at the counter. A man in a black beret looked up from his phone when she told him she'd have a croissant.

"Oh, sorry," he said.

"Still in the oven?"

"We've only got what's on the menu," he said, pointing to the chalkboard.

"So why are they not on the menu?"

"It's a French thing, right? We don't do any regional variations."

Was she losing her mind? Were croissants just a dream she'd once had? "Sorry, but isn't it a reasonable assumption that a place called Boulangerie Paris would sell a goddamn croissant?"

At the edge of her vision, the couple stopped their conversation and looked at her.

The barista in the beret crossed his arms. "You know," he said, "we don't have to take any kind of abuse from customers."

"No," she replied, "but you might be expected to engage like an adult in a rational conversation. Is it not a reasonable assumption that I might find a French pastry here?"

"Ma'am, I gotta tell you"—he rubbed his chin—"I'm feeling a little threatened."

High above the walkway curved the honeycomb of steel and glass, the world beyond hazy and sunshot. Shadows of birds flickered across the floor. There was no one down this end. No airplanes at the gates, only the low Muzak and the silent palms that had never known wind or rain. She considered turning back to find her gate. A croissant wasn't that important. There'd be some reasonable facsimile of food available on the plane. But just when she was about to give up, her patience was vindicated by a hopeful sight: the Mercedes-Beanz café, all in brushed aluminium and black leather. There were no customers

here at all. A young man with a ginger goatee and those fluorescent green earring things that made enormous holes in his earlobes watched her approach. Elaine had little hope, but asked anyway.

The young man smiled. "No problem." With a flourish he turned to two baking sheets on which rows of raw white croissants were rising.

Elaine practically rushed the counter. "Oh god, yes. I thought they'd gone extinct."

"But we don't call them croissants," he said, his body rolling a little as he spoke, his hands moving about like a rapper's. "They're French Flaky Roll. Only another five minutes and they can go in the oven."

"Fine. I'll wait," she said.

"Any coffee for you?"

"I'd love one."

"Sure, I'll set you up. Can make you a bulletproof. Not on the menu."

"Just an Americano."

He snapped his fingers and pointed at her, grinning as if an Americano were a speciality for those in the know. He set about filling the basket from the coffee grinder.

"Tell me," Elaine said, standing at the counter, "why are they straight?"

"Say again?"

"The croissants. They're not actually crescents. They're straight."

"Oh that." He laughed. "It's the spreadability."

"Spreadability."

"Yeah." He fitted the basket into the big black and chrome machine, situated the cup underneath and pressed a button. "I think the move away from curved croissants was down to spreadability."

My god, she thought, one minute he's a barista, the next he's the CEO.

"The majority of customers find it easier to spread their preferred filling on a straighter shape with a single sweeping motion." His left hand became the croissant, his right hand the knife, as he demonstrated. "But with a curved croissant, people can take three swipes to achieve

perfect coverage. Just increases the potential for accidents involving sticky fingers and tables."

"You're serious."

"Oh, for sure. And making a sandwich, it's easier to cut when it's straight. When it's curved, the horns always break."

"The horns."

He spread his hands. "That's just what I call them. Anyhow, tastes the same, right?" He took the cup, topped it up with hot water and set it down before her on a saucer. "Et voilà."

"Thanks."

"And, you know, there's religious sensitivities and all."

"There are?"

"You know where they come from? I mean, these come from the central bakery on Industrial Avenue 5, but originally?"

"France?"

"That's where they were *perfected*," he said, index raised, "but they were originally from Austria. They were called kipferl."

"Are you a history major?"

"Am I boring you?"

She lifted the cup and took a scalding sip. "Go on. So they're from Austria."

"That is correct. The story is that, circa 1700, the Turks are at war with the Austrians, with all of Europe really, and one night the Turks launch a sneak attack on Vienna. Only people awake in the whole city are, guess who, the bakers."

"Of course. Making croissants."

"Well, no. Cos this is before croissants."

She closed her eyes and took another sip. Was she really having this conversation? Was a café worker really making her look like a dimwit? "I haven't had enough of this yet."

"Sure. How is it?"

"Hot."

"So anyway," he continued, "the bakers are the first to hear the Turks coming. They sound the alarm. Big battle. Full on mediaeval

craziness. Vienna's saved. When the fighting's over, the King of Austria gives the bakers special permission to make pastries in the shape of the crescent moon on the Turks' shields, so that everyone will remember how they saved the city. Kipferl. We're not supposed to talk about it, because we don't want to become a target. Any fundamentalists, you know, who may take exception. They could see it as derogatory. Thumbing your nose at them."

"You really think so?"

"I mean, they could *interpret*." He hooked his thumbs in the straps of his apron and leaned back on his heels.

"Your employers really think someone could take offence to a croissant?" Elaine said. "That's just demeaning."

"We don't want to be inconsiderate."

"No, but you don't want to be looking over your shoulder every time you eat a fucking pastry."

"Please, ma'am."

"What?"

"The f-bomb."

"Oh dear god," she muttered. "Well, what about hot cross buns? Do you not make those either?"

The man freed his thumbs and leaned across the counter as if to impart a secret. "*Not* Cross Buns. We make Not Cross Buns. You know, with a smiley face instead of a cross? No? Well it's there in the sales. People of all faiths buy more Not Cross than Hot Cross. Seriously, what do you want decorating your breakfast, a happy face or an instrument of torture?"

She lifted the coffee to her lips. Still too hot. She put it down and looked past him at the rising croissants.

"Quiet, isn't it?" he said. "Usually I'm not alone." He stood there doing what men always do with goatees. "The kid they found to work here, waste of space. Kind of makes it difficult at times." He looked at her intently. "It's just like, if I ever need to use the washroom...you know?"

Elaine couldn't believe it. First she was arguing with these people,

then getting dubious history lectures from them, now covering? "I take it..."

He gave her a pained grin.

She didn't reply. Only tossed her head to one side.

He clapped his hands. "You're sweet. So awesome." He came through the counter door and locked it behind him. "Just be gone a moment."

Elaine looked down the empty concourse. "Take your time."

He ambled off. Elaine leaned back against the counter. She looked over her shoulder at the...what even were they if they weren't curved? *Droissants*? How ridiculous. Symbols lurking everywhere. Worse, people who took them seriously. She sighed again—twice in the same morning!—and double-checked the concourse. Still empty. Not a soul in either direction.

"Ridiculous," she said, then put her bum against the counter's edge, palms flat, and pushed herself up until she was seated. She slipped off her black pumps, swivelled around and dropped to the other side.

Cold tile floor beneath her feet. She rinsed her hands at the sink, dried them with a paper towel and went to the baking sheet. She took the first croissant between thumbs and index fingers. It was soft to the touch and slightly tacky. Gently, she eased the two ends around. And went on to the next one. When was the last time she had baked anything? She went on to the third and fourth and fifth, enjoying herself. She was on the final row when she heard his voice.

"Um. *Excuse* me?" He was on the other side of the counter, their original positions reversed.

"I was just fixing them," she said, picking up one of the trays and tugging on the handle of the oven door.

He reached out. "Ah, ma'am, I think I'll take over from here."

"I'll just pop them in the oven for you."

"No, ma'am, that's not necessary."


Elaine slid the first sheet in.

"Ma'am, I can't sell those croissants now. Not once they've been tampered with."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barrie Sherwood is the author of two novels: *The Pillow Book of Lady Kasa* (2000) and *Escape from Amsterdam* (2007). He is an assistant professor in the School of Humanities at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. *The Angel Tiger and Other Stories* is his first short story collection.





“Tender, funny and laced with a dash of the absurd, these stylish stories will seduce, intrigue and most of all, endure.”

—Kirstin Chen, author of *Bury What We Cannot Take*

A couple’s cat leaves offerings of dead birds freighted with mysterious import. A foreign worker helps construct a concert hall that reawakens his musical longings. A young diver hunts venomous cone snails for a lovelorn researcher.

With disarming simplicity, Barrie Sherwood charts how the complex bonds between lovers are unravelled to the point of breaking, and the often strange and touching ways we define ourselves and our relationships in a fluctuating world.

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