

# THE WAITING ROOM



CHOO YI FENG

“Brimming with debris and surreal dreamers, *The Waiting Room* makes phantasms of its tenderly rendered lives. Choo Yi Feng tells of queer Singapores and their ecologies with cluttered shores, open wounds, temporary bodies, and a fateful voice. I’ll be watching what he comes out with next.”

—Wen-yi Lee, author of *The Dark We Know*

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Cover design and layout by Priscilla Wong

Published in Singapore by Epigram Books  
[www.epigram.sg](http://www.epigram.sg)

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The following stories originally appeared, in slightly different form, in the following places: “Spider Hunters”, *Foglighter Journal* vol. 7 no. 1, Apr 2022; “Sentosa Forever”, *Queer Southeast Asia* no. 3, Jun 2022; “The Museum of Mishandled Jetsam” as “Empire and Catastrophe”, *PR&TA no. 1: Migrations*, Nov 2021; “Parlour”, *Curios no. 6: Taste*, Jun 2020; “An Investor’s Guide to Abyssal Burial”, *Alluvium: The Journal of Literary Shanghai*, Apr 2021; “The Waiting Room” as “Wait Room”, *Alluvium: The Journal of Literary Shanghai*, Apr 2019; “We Don’t Sleep at Night”, *Here Was Once the Sea: An Anthology of Southeast Asian Ecowriting, Mānoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing* 35:2, Winter 2023; “Voice on the Line” as “Voices from the Line”, *Bayou Magazine* no. 78, Fall 2023

#### National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data

Name(s): Choo Yi Feng, 1997–  
Title: The waiting room / Choo Yi Feng.  
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2024.  
Identifier(s): ISBN 978-981-5105-70-4 (paperback) | ISBN 978-981-5105-71-1 (ebook)  
Subject(s): LCSH: Short stories, Singaporean.  
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, April 2024.


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CHOO YI FENG



EPIGRAM





To those of us for whom  
imagination is an act of survival

“What magical thing could you  
want so badly that they take you away from the  
known world for wanting it?”

–Carmen Maria Machado, “The Husband Stitch”

“I’d say that every book you read is  
a book about witchcraft, if you know how  
to read it.”

–Sabrina Scott, “The First Rule of Witch Club”



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# MULIAN'S LAMENT

The folktale «目连救母» (*Mulian jiumu, or Mulian Rescues His Mother*) finds its origins in the Ullambana Sutra. It tells the story of Mulian, a devout and pious Buddhist, who discovers that his recently-deceased mother has been reincarnated to the lowest circle of hell as a preta. Mulian approaches the Buddha to rescue his mother from her wretched state, and is told that he and all filial sons should provide offerings and dedicate merit to release all spirits from the hungry ghost realm. In doing so, his mother will be reincarnated into another life, and rescued from her suffering.

**T**he death of a loved one is a difficult ordeal. Grief and bereavement often whittle away at one's spirit. But the time for mourning was past—why did Mulian still feel the way he did? He awoke on the morning on the fiftieth day after his mother's passing to a heavy head, and passed through the back alleys of one narrow street to another with his shoulders rounded and tensed, as if bearing some unfathomable weight.

His evening meditation sessions, once a peaceful, pleasurable

treat, were now a vexing affair, disturbed by aches and pains in his joints. Worst of all, in the moments when he could breathe through the discomfort to find stillness, he felt an uneasy, prickling warmth that seemed to emanate from nowhere, and descend all around him. Once or twice, he thought he could hear someone crying out his name. He rubbed lavender and peppermint oil on his temples to ease his migraines and only occasionally resorted to medicine for his insomnia, but after a fortnight, Mulian finally gave up the losing battle.

The inner hall of the Nanyang Dongan monastery was worlds apart from the April heat that bore down on Lorong 162 just outside, the old street where the monastery was situated. The ceiling of the first storey had been built, with uncanny foresight, much higher than most temples in the area, inviting the circulation of air and allowing the smell of burning cedar to dissipate, rather than concentrate. Mulian knelt on one of the cushions arranged on the floor, facing the golden Buddha statue, and closed his eyes pensively.

“Mulian?”

“Abbess Yue,” he said, standing up to greet her. “Thank you for meeting me on such short notice.”

“No trouble, I was just making my usual rounds. A little bird told me that you’ve been suffering from troubling visions?” The abbess approached, clad in plain brown robes, her strides strangely noiseless for all the fabric that seemed to swing heavily from her diminutive frame.

“Yes, it’s my mother. Ever since she passed, I’ve had the feeling that her spirit has been reaching out to me. Though I’m not sure where exactly she is.”

“What is your mother’s name?”

“Liu Qingti.”

“Ah, yes. I do remember Qingti. Your father spoke of her, once or twice, when he was still alive,” said Yue after some

pause, a reticent smile appearing on her face.

“My meditations have been disturbed. I think she might be in trouble.”

“It is possible. Although your connection with her must be quite strong if she has been able to reach you multiple times in such a short span.”

Mulian felt his shoulders tensing up at this. “I wouldn’t say we were close, exactly.”

“Perhaps you might want to listen to what she has to say? Maybe there is something that she needs.”

Mulian thanked Abbess Yue and parted ways with her, even as he felt an uneasiness settling into his stomach. The afternoon air in the temple, just minutes ago gentle and playful, was now still and oppressive. The ghost of a migraine throbbed near the back of his skull, threatening to stir from its medicated stupor.



Mulian’s memory of his mother was a landscape shaped by distance, cold and unbreachable, from the time he was a boy. There were the beatings and scoldings that most parents partook in, the ritual of disciplining unruly children—only Qingti’s touch had not seemed to be as much for the sake of raising a child, but relieving her ire. Her corporeal punishment of choice was pinching, which she did with two powerful fingers, on his forearms, his ears, his neck, whenever he transgressed. The pain never lasted for long, even if it sometimes caused bruising. The physicality of her disciplining was not what troubled him; rather, it was the way that she handled his younger self—the way she screwed up her face, like she’d been tasked to dispose of a rat found in the rubbish.

The responsibility of his proper moral instruction whenever

he went wrong fell upon Mulian's father instead. Qingti played her part just by existing, and even then barely so—without her husband's patience, there was little doubt that she would've packed her bags and fled her old life. She was frequently snide and snappy about her husband's devotion to his faith, even as she continued to benefit from his unfaltering forgiveness and compassion, a trait taught to him by the sangha.

As a teenager, Mulian picked up his mother tongue of distance with frightening proficiency, treating Qingti as a non-event, and it was only then that Qingti seemingly realised, all of a sudden, that the child she'd birthed, like any other child, had taken after his progenitor. Thus, mother and son passed their days, perpetually in one another's orbit, but having less and less to say to each other over the years, strangers living under the same roof. When Mulian graduated from university, he dived right into his sparkling new career as a secondary school teacher, busying himself by organising activities at the Buddhist society after hours, and spending less and less time at home. He built of his new life an elaborate, shining palace, whose breathtaking dimensions and intricate details would forever be closed off to the one who birthed him. It was a life whose very foundations had, in fact, been cast in the contrasting relief of the imprint she'd left upon his childhood. Mulian wanted to embody everything that his mother was not.

Whether or not she deserved this treatment was not a judgement that he registered; Mulian just could not bring himself to ever consider that this was somebody he wanted in his life. It was a mercy to her, he was sure, just as much as it was to him. And as the years passed, she never said or did anything to suggest otherwise. At least, this was how he arranged the facts of his life, now that hers was all over—this was the story that Mulian told himself, of the person who was his mother.



The teahouse was relatively quiet during a storm at eleven in the evening. The single bamboo steamer of bao that Mulian had ordered earlier sat before him, emitting a slow trail of heat that dissipated sadly into the space of the second storey.

The empty chair across from him was occupied, finally, by Vinnie, who descended in a cloud of heavy perfume.

“Hello, love.”

“You're late.”

“I am.”

Mulian narrowed his eyes at Vinnie, a grin creeping its way onto his face in spite of himself.

“Don't be so uptight about it,” she deflected. “Aren't you Buddhists all about compassion and forgiveness?”

“Fine,” he said, shaking his head in mock-reproach. “Eat, then.” He pushed the steamer of xiaolong bao over to her.

“You first,” she said, nudging it back, before gesturing to the waiter to place her usual order.

“Client held you back?” asked Mulian.

“They often do,” sighed Vinnie. “But it was all right. He wants to meet again next week.”

“Business is good, then.”

“Passable. So, you wanted to talk about your family?”

Mulian caught Vinnie up on the events of the last few weeks. The waiter arrived, bearing plates of chee cheong fun, egg tarts, har gao and chicken feet. Mulian, still suffering from a headache and not feeling particularly hungry, took nibbles here and there, while Vinnie inhaled everything else with surprising rapidity for her small size. Soon, all that was left on the table were two cups of black tea that had been steeping since the two friends had started on their first mouthfuls of food.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Big thanks first of all to my editor, Jason Erik Lundberg, for his guidance and patience during the editing of this book. I would also like to thank my designer, Priscilla Wong, for a beautiful book cover that gave colour and form to my fictional imaginings. Thanks also to Epigram Books for picking up my manuscript in the first place, and giving me my debut publishing project.

Many thanks to my family and friends for their unconditional companionship and support in everything I have pursued, for giving me the space that I have needed to be my chaotic, unhinged self.

I would like to thank the members of my previous writing group for their dedicated, compassionate feedback and insightful discussions about many of the short stories that appear in this collection, as well as Sing Lit Station for hosting us. With special thanks to Claire, Melody, Christine, Ally, Lisabelle, Jen Yee, Josephine, Lixian and Stacy.

I would also like to thank the editors and publishing teams of *Curios*, *Alluvium: The Journal of Literary Shanghai*, *PR&TA*, *Foglifter*, *Queer Southeast Asia*, *Anathema*, *Bayou Magazine* and *Here Was Once the Sea* for giving several of the stories in

this collection their very first home, and for being some of the first to believe in my fiction.

Most of the short stories in this collection were written during my time as an undergraduate at the National University of Singapore. As such, I owe a debt of gratitude to the professors and lecturers I have had the good fortune to meet, and whose thoughtful guidance challenged me to think (and feel) more deeply about things I once took for granted. Special thanks to Céline, Yanbing and Danwei.

I would also like to thank the 2018/19 batch of tWord, my creative writing interest group at Tembusu College, who were with me when I first started this journey of cultivating a deeper relationship with fiction. Special thanks to Hannah and Lune, my disaster gays, with whom I've shared one brain cell and many moments of joy.

In the words of José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*: “Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.” I would like to thank everyone who was part of the 2019/20 batch of tFreedom, with whom this horizon of queerness, in all of its vivid warmth, was made possible.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Choo Yi Feng** (he/him) is an intertidal explorer, environmental activist, ecologist and fiction writer. His writing has been published in *Foglifter Journal*, *Queer Southeast Asia*, *PR&TA*, *Alluvium: The Journal of Literary Shanghai*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Mānoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing*, and *Curios*, the annual student journal of Tembusu College at the National University of Singapore. His story “Spider Hunters” was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. *The Waiting Room* is his debut collection of short fiction.

**A man seeks resolution when the spirit of his abusive mother calls from the grave.  
A sex worker finds temporary salvation with a returning Australian tourist professing his love.  
The afterlife plays host to a vast museum dedicated to jetsam from the living world.  
In this debut fiction collection, these imagined worlds are set variously in plural Singapores, Southeast Asia and beyond, and illuminate the urgent need to connect even after death.**

FICTION

ISBN 978-981-51-0570-4



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