



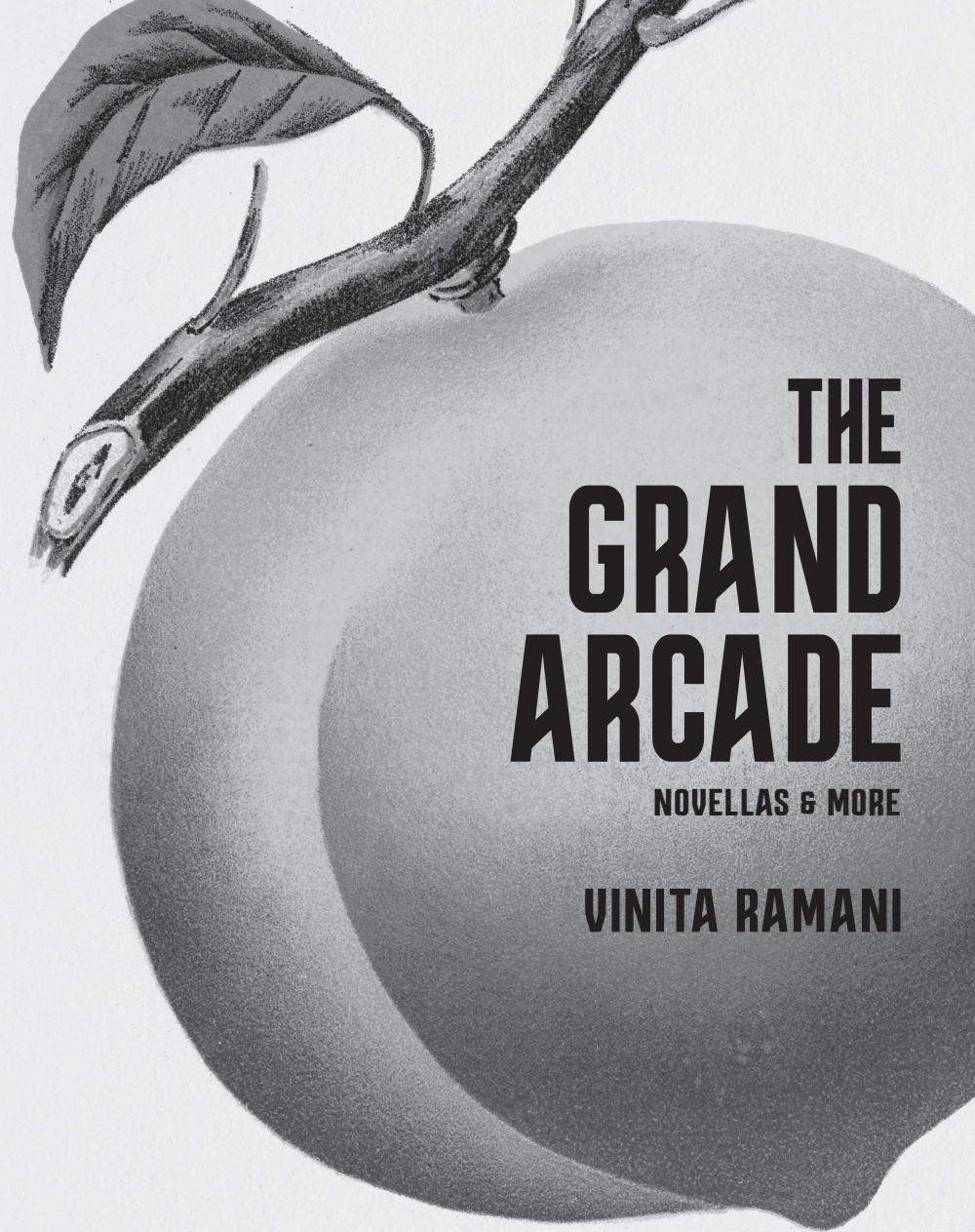
**THE
GRAND
ARCADE**

VINITA RAMANI

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ARCADE**

“Provocative, urgently lyrical, vividly lucid and absolutely unforgettable, Vinita Ramani’s debut collection transports us into subversive, sensual, previously unremarked spaces, both external and internal, with thrilling lapidary fierceness and an incisive intelligence that connects the Indian vedas with case briefings, and the longings of a Cambodian refugee with rapturous female desire. Every human tastes different, she writes, and she might well be describing her own method of illuminating the architecture and anxieties of Singapore while delving into the delirious and exquisite depths of being a woman so startlingly that normative narrative is forever disrupted. Ramani’s prose blazes with a dazzling, erotic frankness and pulsating, cosmopolitan intelligence, making *The Grand Arcade* a triumph of the embodied imagination.”

–Dr Ravi Shankar, multi-award-winning
author of *Correctional*



THE GRAND ARCADE

NOVELLAS & MORE

VINITA RAMANI

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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.

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EPIGRAM

For Sabana



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“Whom the gods would destroy,
they first make mad.”

–William Anderson Scott

“How could one reconcile this timeless
bliss of seeing as one ought to see with the temporal
duties of doing what one ought to do and feeling
as one ought to feel?”

–Aldous Huxley

THE GRAND ARCADE

1

Raffles Place at Lunch Hour

MARCUS LIM, A partner at one of the largest law firms in the country, stood next to one of the bins at the main plaza of Raffles Place, taking in the din of the lunch hour in Singapore's Central Business District. He was flicking ash off his cigarette when he spotted the man with the supermarket trolley, a scavenger covered in liver spots. The man waited for the chain-smoking corporate workers standing in an open circle to finish the cigarettes, their black shoes tapping. iPhones in their pockets sent little tremors through the creases of their trousers; their BlackBerry devices agitatedly blinked, like the red lights of a plane cruising at thirty thousand feet. They snuffed out the cigarettes, washing the nicotine down with Coke Zero or kopi-o, and dispersed like startled shoals of fish—a swift, frenzied flight in all directions.

Marcus watched as the old man pushed his trolley and made a beeline for the cylindrical steel rubbish bin where a group of men had been smoking; the scavenger picked up the butts, shook off residual ash, wiped them carefully on his dirty shirt and pocketed them. Marcus finished his own cigarette and wondered if he should offer a new one to the man, but changed his mind and walked towards The Arcade.

Tay Sui Lan Agency was located on the ground floor of the building, and a queue had formed at its entrance, along the corridor next to the escalators. It was a tight spot by modern mall standards. The men (and odd woman or two) were impatient for their lottery tickets; the gamble for a million dollars wore away at their nerves.

The Arcade was also where you came to change money. Indian money-changers, like moustachioed temple guardians, sat at its entrance while not working. They were used to their routine, used to punching figures in calculators and fanning out currency, counting once, twice, thrice, then stacking, clipping and printing receipts. They were practiced at converting vast amounts of money, stacks of foreign currencies that seemed like play money until it was handed to the customer in the stronger Singapore dollar. When they weren't manning their little, fluorescent-lit box kingdoms, they roamed the narrow corridors of the building's first storey, past the small tea outlets, clothing boutiques and stationery shops, pausing to catch up with each other, letting the stressed human traffic move around them, slowing the relentless pace by merely standing still.

But being stressed was all part of the larger ecosystem of life at Raffles Place. If you didn't feel stressed or weren't busy, you wouldn't need the smoke or the drink after work at Boat Quay, the bangers and mash at Penny Black. And if you didn't need

any of that, then there was no reason to be here. Anxiety got the job done. The bored kids in uniforms ambled through the plaza of Raffles Place with tin cans, trying to persuade the bankers, stockbrokers, lawyers and secretaries to give ten, twenty, fifty cents, a dollar maybe, to a worthy charity. Again, the waiting, debating, conversing and gossiping masses dispersed.

Marcus bought a chicken curry puff and after he texted his driver, to come pick him up to head to the Subordinate Courts, he spotted the news. A man had been murdered at The Arcade earlier that morning. A courier for money-changers in the neighbouring Indonesian island of Batam had been stabbed to death behind the fire exit doors leading to the cargo lift on the ground floor. Marcus marvelled at the fact that it had happened so close to where they all congregated, worked and had drinks. It gave him pause for thought. He wondered how long it had taken for the body to be found.

He had a soft spot for The Arcade. Its western façade was currently covered in blue tarpaulin. It was being hacked away, and its innards were showing. But it had had many incarnations, like so much of Singapore. It started as a rubber share brokers' den with Dutch gables, then in 1909, the Alkaff family turned it into an architectural wonder and renamed it The Alkaff Arcade. They had owned it from the start and envisioned how splendid a thing it would be, the first of its kind on Collyer Quay. Painted pale green and yellow, with dark Moorish domes, elegant Islamic arches and Victorian-era tiles, it stood right by the sea. There you could sit in posh tearooms and watch the heaving, sweating, bare-bodied men at the godowns, or the junkboats plying the waterways. It was just four storeys, but already taller than anything around it. Singapore was still a budding port city that existed closer to the ground, crowded and hot, the air heady with opium smoke.

Life teemed in alleyways where jabbering mouths showed teeth stained with betel nut juice the colour of dried blood.

And just four years after Marcus Lim was born, The Alkaff Arcade, which he still remembered his parents taking him to, was torn down. It had never been well maintained; it had become a fire hazard, and its owners sold it more than a decade earlier because it hadn't made them the sort of profits they'd hoped for. It was then rebuilt in the 1980s, into the multipurpose shopping arcade and business spot he had known from the day he began practising as a litigation lawyer in Raffles Place, where hunters, gatherers, gamblers and scavengers moved in grids past its entrance. It was no longer splendourous, but it was always bustling. Which was why Marcus couldn't have expected it to become a place of death.

His phone went off: the driver was here.

There was a lot going on at the Subordinate Courts when he arrived and walked through its security gates. The usual daily chattering along its octagonal corridors filtered in and passed like a wave. *Commissioning fee too expensive...don't pay because it's unreasonable behaviour...someone died and no one bothered to get the charge sheet.*

There was an Indian man with a mullet, wearing a heavy-metal tee-shirt and sitting beside his wife, both of them staring vacantly at passers-by outside Court 14 on the third storey and listening to their Sikh lawyer. *The Judge said he'll go to prison for a year for the drug offence.* His voice fading, replaced by the quiet exchange in Malay outside the Drug Court, where an older couple waited nervously while their daughter stretched the skin on her face tight with her palms and idly swung her legs. Policemen, in navy blue with batons strapped to their buckles and belts, briskly rushed in and out of courtrooms with charge sheets.

Marcus's team had just come out of a hearing that had gone well. It was in these brief moments that he felt respite—not a moment, really, merely the walk from the courtroom down to the waiting car, or briskly walking past each courtroom—and he liked picking up the ambient noise, the snatches of frustration, excitement and confusion in people's voices as they debated ongoing cases. Some part of him especially liked the anxious, suffering faces, the nervous energy of people grappling with the law. He liked the Subordinate Courts and was at his happiest in one of its courtrooms, neck-deep in trial. The Supreme Court, with its cold, marble interiors and carpeted courtrooms, felt like a bank—soulless and dull.

He had his Blackberry in his right hand, a kopi-gao in his left (the new pupil had already learned the routine well), and the e-mails were flowing in, as usual. As he scrolled down through the fifty-odd messages, he spotted a couple from his former colleagues at the Attorney-General's Chambers, about several murder cases.

Years ago, when he had started out as a justices' law clerk for the legal service, he'd looked at the roster of cases at the Supreme Court for the day and stepped into a particular courtroom because the name on the noticeboard seemed foreign, maybe Nigerian. He had entered about five minutes before sentence was pronounced. It was, quite clearly, a capital case involving drug couriers. The man was physically fit, seemed healthy. But his face was something else altogether; contorted into a mess of fear and sick apprehension, it was an expression Marcus had only ever seen in the face of a boy at a playground, about to be violently beaten by bullies.

Even from the far end of the public gallery, Marcus could see that the man was whimpering, crying really. The sentence pronounced, the man's body fell, fell like a drape falls; fell the

way a pigeon shot by a gun falls: one moment in flight, the next with wings limp and tumbling like a heavy omen from the sky. He had no knees. He had no legs to carry him back to his cell and to his inevitable, certain death. The guards had had to haul him up by his armpits and drag him out of the courtroom.

It wasn't the last time Marcus saw that. He'd prosecuted drug traffickers, often young, stupid boys under twenty-five who had the misfortune of being sent off on life-threatening errands for kingpins elsewhere in the world. "Guilty of drug trafficking under the Misuse of Drugs Act, which is a crime punishable by death by hanging." He remembered the statement well, had got used to hearing it often. They were words that, at the time, made him reconsider his profession as a prosecutor.

That was even before the anti-death penalty furore had started—rudimentary advocacy campaigns in a country where advocacy was just not a part of everyday life. For Marcus though, it was a practical consideration. It seemed like his skills could be put to much better use as a lucrative commercial lawyer, and so he'd done precisely that.

But walking down the steps of the Subordinate Courts, he wondered what it would be like to be involved in a Supreme Court death penalty case once again. He didn't do murders though. He left that to the rest; whoever that might be, if they were smart, they would rely on the new reforms to the Penal Code to argue that a defendant should not get the death penalty because in some cases, a murder was in fact a lesser crime like culpable homicide.

But drug mules, that was different. The mood in the country had changed, and it would be exciting to do it. It would garner international attention. A case would come along eventually, one that would be compelling enough for all the reporters. It would have to be something with a hint of public interest (and

something more far-reaching than migrant workers and labour issues). There was always that element. It was always some poor young guy, a pawn in a larger, complex operation who did not deserve to be hanged. But until that case came along, Marcus wasn't prepared to get involved in death penalty cases. Nobody cared about murderers' rights. Not really.

2 Gurjit

The thing about Singapore, and strangely the reason I am wired to it, is because everything reminds me of sardines in a tin. And I don't mean the overcrowding. Everyone goes on about the overcrowding. That's not it. It's time. I like how they compress all that time—past, present and future—tidily into a durable little space. Like one of those Russian matryoshka dolls crammed in seven hundred thirty-four square kilometres, but occasionally you've got to take one of your antique nineteenth-century pieces and smash it or give it away, because you need to make room for a Made in China doll that's no longer wearing that cute peasant dress (yesterday's peasants are today's nouveau riche).

The thing that makes me laugh, though, is this whole deal with what they call ang mohs here. I grew up with teachers and professors who used to tell me that we British Asians were doing far better in schools than the white kids. We just got pushed hard. Had one professor, used to egg us on. We didn't have all this "them and us" crap. But out here, it looks like the pre-independence British civil servants have turned into hyperactive British investment bankers, drinking themselves silly at that posh place, the Oyster Bar next to Marina Boulevard. It doesn't matter if some of them are from the East

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I OWE A debt of gratitude to my editor Jason Erik Lundberg, for taking a leap of faith and being visionary when he decided to pull together these disparate works into one hotchpotch collection. Thanks are also due to Edmund Wee, publisher and founder of Epigram Books, for believing that the voice of an itinerant immigrant-turned-Singaporean was worth being heard. I'm grateful to designer Priscilla Wong for executing cover art that so simply and boldly conveys so much of the spirit of this collection.

The stories in this book sit somewhere between autofiction and flights of fictional narratives that began as a seed of truth. So much writing begins this way, borne out of pain, disbelief and wonder. I could not have lived or seen some of these stories without Mahdev and Sahana. They appear and disappear in some of these stories, partly as themselves, then as composite characters who took on a life of their own, on the page.

“The Life of a Cuntly Woman” could not exist without

the many women with whom I conspired, conversed and cried, as we tried to make sense of our gendered bodies, the cultures we were born into and the relationships that we found ourselves in, which seemed, at times, to dictate who we must be, unto death. I can't name those women because our stories interspersed, creating a *mélange* that was at turns ethnographic and imagined. While I've been inspired by the likes of Annie Ernaux, Catherine Millet and Hélène Cixous, so much of this story was about writing openly, boldly and starkly about gender, desire and death from the vantage point of Asian women. I hope I've managed to do so in a way that speaks to my readers.

I remain eternally grateful to the many, many members of the Khmer Krom community, both in Cambodia and in California, who patiently and willingly handed their stories over to me, believing that I would hold them with care and share them with the respect they so very much deserve. While "Same Same But Different, or the Fate of the Khmer Krom" is a work of fiction, so much of what underpins it is entirely gleaned from the collective memories of a community that suffered persecution and genocide during the Khmer Rouge era. That trauma will never go away, but it can be shared in stories that move and breathe, allowing the trauma to lessen over time.

And finally, I thank you, the reader, for coming here and inhabiting these pages and for being with this author, for this moment in time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Vinita Ramani works at Mandai Wildlife Group, where she writes scripts and helps create programmes and presentations on wildlife, human-animal interactions and the biodiversity extinction crisis. She has held roles as a contributing editor at *RICE Media* and as a data journalist and editor at *Kontinentalist*, where she covered a broad array of topics including politics, race, identity and biodiversity conservation in Asia. Her film and music criticism has appeared in *BigO* (Singapore), *Criticine* (Philippines), *Kino!* (Slovenia), *Exclaim!* (Canada) and *Raj Palta* (Canada); her writing has also been published in *Portside Review*, *Kyoto Journal*, *POSKOD*, *Esquire* (Singapore), *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, *The Straits Times* and *The Margins*, among many other publications. She was a founding editor of the National Museum of Singapore's *Cinematheque Quarterly*, as well as a recipient of an Arts Creation Fund grant from the National Arts Council. Her graphic memoir, *Bearing Witness* (with Griselda Gabriele), was released in 2022 by Difference Engine. Vinita was born in India, then at an early age relocated to Bahrain, the UK and Hong Kong, before migrating to Singapore, where she currently lives with her family.

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Vinta Ramani’s debut fiction collection is a kaleidoscopic jolt to the senses. A foreign talent barricades himself in his rented condo as he gradually loses his grip on reality. A wife explores a series of affairs in order to exert control over her sexual autonomy. A retiree descends into silence when he refuses to wear a hearing aid. An artist takes a road trip to unearth why the mores of her community have led to her sexually stunted adulthood. These stories unearth the truths often hidden by polite society.



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