

THE “His stories are excellent.”
—Edwin Thumboo

WAYANG AT

EIGHT *Stories
& Essays*

MILESTONE

GREGORY

NALPON

Edited by Angus Whitehead



ADVANCE PRAISE FOR THE WAYANG AT EIGHT MILESTONE

“I am glad that Gregory Nalpon’s work at last has a chance of being recognised. His stories are excellent.”

—**Edwin Thumboo**, award-winning Singaporean poet and academic

“Gregory Nalpon wrote from the margins about a Singapore in the throes of great change, and I am convinced that he is our first true proponent of magical realism.”

—**Robert Yeo**, author of *The Adventures of Holden Heng*

“Gregory Nalpon’s stories and evocative commentaries might seem nostalgic for a pre-development Singapore, but make no mistake—there is little sentimentality here, as marginalised characters get fleshed out with brutality, as well as compassion. His poetic, fable-esque narratives possess a sense of magic that is almost spiritual, full of moral lessons about the abjection of human desires, death, and a knowing presence at the heart of the natural world.”

—**Cyril Wong**, author of *Unmarked Treasure*
and *The Last Lesson of Mrs de Souza*

“Gregory Nalpon’s stories are perfectly poised between gritty realism and mythic wonder. He observes and embraces the rich local diversity of Singapore with the eye of an enchanted poet and the heart of an honest friend. He fathoms the human soul through, and beyond, cultural identity. Editor Angus Whitehead’s love for Nalpon glows in this informative and accessible edition, which will be a treasure for Singaporeans, and a gratifying find for the rest of us who are eager for great reads from around the globe, or take interest in the development of post-colonial writing. Nalpon deserves to claim a place among the most unique and significant voices of the formative and vibrant 1970s.”

—**Tristanne Connolly**, Associate Professor of English,
St. Jerome’s University

“Enigmatic and evocative, Gregory Nalpon’s stories unsettle the reader, sometimes with unexpected tenderness, other times with startling violence. They usher us into a Singaporean world smudged and erased from public memory but throbbingly alive in a fictive universe uniquely shaped by Nalpon’s creative imagination and his spare but suggestively symbolic style. For this wonderful experience we have to thank Angus Whitehead, who with dedicated, perceptive, and historically sensitive scholarship, excavated these stories and brought them into the light of day.”

—**Dr Angelia Poon**, Associate Professor,
National Institute of Education, Singapore

“Angus Whitehead’s timely recovery of Gregory Nalpon’s hitherto largely unknown but fascinatingly unique voice makes not only for gratifying reading but also helpfully challenges and enlarges our notions of post-colonial Singapore and its literature.”

—**Mohammad A. Quayum**, Professor of Language and Literature,
International Islamic University, Kuala Lumpur

“The modernity of Singapore tends to be regarded as functional and technocratic, pragmatically future-directed. The stories of Gregory Nalpon, light, deft and deceptively understated, restore an alternative past to the city, drawing on its richly diverse collective memory, its multiple cultural identities, and the shaping omnipresence of its coastal terrain. Editor Angus Whitehead has uncovered a distinctive and enchanting new post-colonial voice, wry, lyrical and humane, whose evocation of the local and particular is deserving of a wide international audience.”

—**Stephen Clark**, Professor of Literature, University of Tokyo

“Gregory Nalpon’s short stories and essays bring to life vibrant, colourful and rich depictions of everyday cosmopolitanism of old Singapore. Vivid descriptions of fishermen working on islands southwest of Singapore complement stories in a diverse range of settings from a kampung in Bedok to a bee hoon factory in Upper Thomson, a one bedroom flat in Bukit Ho Swee, and a wayang by a graveyard. This collection is an absolute treasure; it provides an important literary archive of Singapore’s forgotten history and should be made essential reading in the Singapore literature classroom.”

—**Dr Suzanne Choo**, author of *Mining for Meaning and Reading the World, the Globe, and the Cosmos*

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FOR MONA

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PREFACE

IT GIVES US great pleasure to see—finally!—a collection of our father’s short stories and other writings published in Singapore. Papa always protested that his pieces were “not good enough for anyone to read” and that “more corrections needed to be made”. We beg to differ, as we did then, almost forty years ago: a collection of Gregory Stanislaus Nalpon’s stories of *his* Singapore is long overdue.

For over three decades, manuscripts of Papa’s stories in his unique hand have lain undisturbed in a red suitcase in Singapore, others carefully kept in Papworth Everard, in Cambridgeshire, England. It has been a joy for us to rediscover and transcribe them in places Papa would have loved: on beaches, in pubs and quiet rooms in France and England.

We very much hope you enjoy—as we have—encountering these miniatures, Gregory Nalpon’s attempts to capture a slightly earlier, but now very much lost, Singapore.

Jacinta & Zero Nalpon
May 2013

INTRODUCTION

DURING MY FIRST YEAR working in Singapore (2008) I faced a long journey home: an hour or more on a nondescript MRT train from Boon Lay back east to Bedok. One book I recall whiling away those journeys with was a tatty Heinemann Asia copy of *Singapore Short Stories* picked up at an NIE book sale. Wedged between largely silent fellow travellers, I first encountered Stella Kon's knowing "The Martyrdom of Helena Rodriguez", three sardonic-ambivalent strokes of Arthur Yap's genius, and Catherine Lim's tell-tale proto/faux-Singlish "The Taximan's Story" (perhaps even more pertinent thirty years on). But the story that intrigued me most was Gregory Nalpon's local-quotidian fairy tale (or national allegory?) "The Rose and the Silver Key".

I was eager to read more. At the end of the book I found a brief biographical notice: "The late Gregory Nalpon [...] has numerous other stories which await collection and publication."¹ So there were more stories? Where were they now? And who exactly was the "late Gregory Nalpon"?

Upon its original publication in 1978, Malcolm M. Mercer, in his review of *Singapore Short Stories*, declared that, “[p]oignancy is [...] reflected in ‘The Rose and the Silver Key’ by Gregory Nalpon [...] to my mind one of the most stimulating of all the [twelve] authors in this collection”.² During the early-mid 1990s, *Singapore Short Stories* was one of the first local texts to be studied for O-Level Literature in English examinations in Singapore. Thus, hundreds of young Singaporeans, now in their mid-thirties, must have read, written about, or even seen performed, “The Rose and the Silver Key”,³ yet almost two decades on, no one I spoke to seemed to have heard of Gregory Nalpon. While I did discover Nalpon’s lighter, nostalgic “A Girl as Sweet as Alice” (reprinted here in its original form as “The Courtship of Donatello Varga”) in another short story anthology, I eventually abandoned hope of locating the unpublished stories.

However, one afternoon in September 2011, while absent-mindedly searching online, I came across a third Nalpon story, the John Steinbeck-influenced, ingeniously local-satiric “A Man without Song”, published in *The Straits Times* in 1975. The same site revealed details of Nalpon’s careers as court advocate for the Singapore Manual and Mercantile Workers Union, and as a radio and newspaper journalist. While a writer since his schooldays at Saint Joseph’s Institution, it seems that Nalpon, a perfectionist never completely satisfied with his own work, must have only seriously considered publishing his stories around 1975, three years before his untimely death at just 40 years old.

Gregory Nalpon’s funeral notice in *The Straits Times* helped

me to locate and contact his son, Zero Nalpon. Mr Nalpon, now an eminent lawyer in Singapore, kindly put me in touch with his elder sister Jacinta, a nurse working in the UK. As luck would have it, Ms Nalpon was about to travel to Singapore, and yes, she and her brother would be happy to talk about their father. Meeting at Mr Nalpon’s distinctively furnished shophouse office on Kampung Bahru Road near Outram Park, I also first read the peculiarly wonderful “The Knocking on the Door” and “A Soul For Anna Lim”, two of the three stories Nalpon published in *Her World* (1975-6) as well as three published articles, and, fascinatingly, a 1969 birthday present for his close friend, and renowned sports coach, Patrick Zehnder—typewritten passages from Nalpon’s favourite authors, John Steinbeck and the Mexican novelist José Rubén Romero. In the weeks that followed, Jacinta, on her return to the UK, sent me, along with fascinating anecdotes about her father, three of his unpublished stories: “The Mango Tree”, “An Eye for an Eye” and “Mei-Lin”. These stories were as good as, if not better than, the published ones.

The following spring when visiting Singapore, Jacinta happily surprised me again by reading aloud, in the rain on Bras Basah Road, the short but evocative and angry “The Old Woman of Bukit Ho Swee”. So there were indeed numerous Nalpon stories awaiting collection. Why had they not been collected and published before? During his lifetime, Nalpon appears to have been reluctant to publish many of his stories, and a subsequent attempt to publish the short stories in the 1990s was abandoned. Thus sole, fragile original manuscript copies of Nalpon’s stories, radio plays and other

pieces had remained precariously concealed in boxes in Papworth Everard in Cambridgeshire (Jacinta's home) and Singapore. This volume thus finally recovers, collects and preserves for future readers a representative selection of Gregory Nalpon's writing.

For those who encountered him either in life or through his writings, Nalpon must have seemed both unique and eccentric. Few local writers in Singapore in the 1970s can have resembled the tattooed, completely toothless,⁴ scooter-riding ex-trade unionist and peripatetic DJ, journalist and dogged habitué of the Singaporean 'ulu'.⁵ Nalpon, with his eclectic taste for nature, life on the street as well as high culture, resembled his beloved Ernest Hemingway, or literary heroes such as Steinbeck's Doc in *Cannery Row*, Dumas' Cyrano, Romero's Pito. Indeed Nalpon's stories seem to have grown out of a peculiarly Singaporean life. Even a story as seemingly slight as "The Appointment", a Christmas ghost story in a local women's magazine, apparently emerged out of "The breeze and I are whispering goodbye to dreams we used to share"—lyrics to a record regularly played at the Nalpon home in Jalan Soo Bee: Caterina Valente's "The Breeze and I", in Al Stillman's adaptation of Ernesto Lecuona's *Andalusian Suite*, music beloved of the couple in the story.⁶ Quietly unconventional, a nomad on a tiny island, socially engaged and concerned—Nalpon's consistent willingness to help, notably in his legal representation of the poor and disenfranchised, seems to continue into many of his stories.⁷

Patrick Zehnder remembers Nalpon's penchant for the kinds of coffee shops and bars we encounter in "A Soul for Anna Lim", "A Girl as Sweet as Alice", "Mei-Lin", and of course "The Rose and the

Silver Key". In such crowded, socially-local environments, Nalpon, never without a book, would read and write down ideas for stories, plays and essays on the backs of cigarette packets or anything he could lay his hands on.⁸ One wonders: was "The Rose and the Silver Key" first conceived in such an environment?

Nalpon was something of a natural storyteller. Collectively the stories comprise a valuable picture of an urban and rural Singapore, of pig breeders, interminable bus rides and only occasional saloon cars, gangsters, sarabat stalls, samshu shops (how many Singaporeans today know what a samshu shop is?), bar girls, wayang, attap huts, seaside coffee shops on stilts, fortune tellers, freshwater wells, hunters, rubber trees and bee hoon factories. In short, a Singapore that was, as Nalpon was all too aware, fast disappearing.

Such a fondness for his pre-developed Singapore, an organically local-multicultural milieu barely imaginable today, was surely coloured by his upbringing (a mother, two sisters and a Chinese step-brother) and continued life at the Nalpon family house at Jalan Soo Bee (the mixture of Malay and Chinese here seems prescient) near the sea at Changi. At the same time, these stories, often conspicuously short, with a slight hint of melodrama, gesture to publication in popular local magazines such as *Her World*. Nalpon was writing for needed money in a young, small country. Conversely, "Mei-Lin" appears to draw on Nalpon's journalistic career and his travels during the late 1950s / early 1960s through Siam, Borneo and Malaya.

In the background of many of these stories, notably "A Man Without Song" and "The Old Woman of Bukit Ho Swee", a

careful reader can detect the dreaded *kempetai* headquarters of the Japanese occupation, participants in and witnesses of the Malayan ‘emergency’, the Maria Hertogh, Hock Lee bus and 1964 and 1969 race riots, the withdrawal of the British, the controversial Bukit Ho Swee fire. Yet it seems significant that Gregory Nalpon, dying in 1978, did not live to witness Lee Kuan Yew’s introduction of the national ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign. Nalpon’s refreshingly unique cross-cultural lens in his stories suggests an alternative kind of nation-building, described by Shirley Lim as a “provisional, unsettled, improvising identity-formation”⁹, celebrating the national via democratised, undemonstrative local and mutual appreciations of otherness. Like Lloyd Fernando and Goh Poh Seng, albeit in a wholly different way, Nalpon “contribut[es] to a counter-tradition, resisting the sometimes unsubtle official encouragement of literature that supports and celebrates nation-building projects”.¹⁰ Few other Singaporean writers of the 1970s so successfully and consistently represented a local ethno-religious culture neighbouring but not his or her own, while continually, ambiguously crossing cultures.

Nalpon, a descendant of French-speaking South Indian Catholics, was occasionally mistaken as Eurasian. He playfully deploys a similar cultural ambiguity in his stories’ representations of characters like Fatimah, Alice, Greenwater Boy, and Masood and his family. In his representations of the black dog spirit penned by nails up a mango tree that supports Awang, Minah and Ruqayya’s house in “The Mango Tree”, the apparently insane Ruqayya’s erotic affection for the tree, Fatimah’s apparel, and even the description of the rose in “The Rose and the Silver Key”, we encounter a rich

fusion of Malay, Indian, Chinese, Western and other cultures through Nalpon’s unique, eclectically-fed imagination. The bright beauty of the world of these stories is often suddenly shot through with death, and disturbing human and/or supernatural violence, for which the haunting voice of one of Nalpon’s favourite singers, Yma Sumac, would make an ideal soundtrack. Significantly, much of the action in his stories occurs in lamp-lit night. Might then we call, for instance, “The Mango Tree”, “An Eye for an Eye”, “A Soul for Anna Lim” or even “A Knocking at the Door” examples of an early post-colonial Singapore gothic?

In these stories, the magical/miraculous seem very much a reality. One thinks in this context of Nalpon’s daughter, Jacinta, named after a Portuguese ‘saint’, one of three children who encountered and communed with the Virgin Mary at Fatima in the final years of the first world war.

Nalpon, eccentric, freethinking rather than subversive, ahead of his time in his local cosmopolitanism, a media-hungry citizen of the world who never physically travelled farther than Siam and Malaya (as was), seems a local idiosyncrasy: an Indian Singaporean writer seemingly largely unfettered by the standpoints of nation and culture. Yet such imaginative and socially conscious writing in the increasingly authoritarian Singapore of the 1970s was not without personal cost. For Nalpon’s sister Bridget, “in his writings, Gregory represented the unheard voice of the Singapore people and their culture. I think he was misunderstood, ignored and often lonely.”¹¹ Too little known during his lifetime and neglected after his death, for me Gregory Nalpon seems one of Singapore’s most exciting

and genuinely inventive early writers. It is hoped that through this collection, Nalpon's accessible, memorable and gratifyingly ambiguous stories should finally obtain the readership they deserve.

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My thanks to Patrick Zehnder; Bridget Egbuna; the staff at Epigram Books, especially editor Jason Erik Lundberg and publisher Edmund Wee for their enthusiastic support of this project. I would also like to thank Aliah Ali, Jagit Kaur Major Singh and Chong Yin Fong at Singapore Press Holdings; Connie Chng and Hua Hong Koon at Pearson Longman, Angelia Poon and Farah Roslan at NIE, and most especially to Mona, Jacinta and Zero Nalpon. Jacinta tirelessly transcribed the majority of these texts from fragile manuscript pages to Word documents that then formed the basis of this edition of Nalpon's writings.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Nithiya, Samantha, Nurul, Nicholyn, Edward, Zhi Wen, Hannah, Debbie, Annie, Ernest, Chin Yee, Matthew, Fabian, Perdana and Su Peng, my fifteen Year 2 BA Literature students taking the "Singapore and the Region in Literature Course" at the National Institute of Education, NTU, Singapore, January 2013 semester. Their positive responses to and perceptive readings of Nalpon's texts further enhanced my enthusiasm for this project.

Finally I am grateful to Jinat for her patience and support as I obsessively immersed myself in the life and work of this 'unknown' but increasingly fascinating Singaporean writer.

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In editing this collection of Gregory Nalpon's stories and other

writings, I have relied upon either previously published material or transcriptions of increasingly fragile manuscript material currently in the UK and sent to me as digital files by Jacinta Nalpon. Jacinta has also kindly checked my edited manuscript against the original manuscripts. A wealth of manuscript material has yet to be transcribed and it is hoped that further volumes of Gregory Nalpon's writings will be published in the future.

We did our best to ascertain where material had been previously published, and gratefully acknowledge that source for permission to reproduce here. However, we were unsuccessful in the cases of "The Hunter Lays Down his Spear" and "Lion City Filled with Panthers". All other material as far as we know is published for the first time here. However, we would be very grateful if omissions could be communicated to us at whitehead65_99@yahoo.co.uk.

Angus Whitehead

August 2013

¹ *Singapore Short Stories*, 121.

² Malcolm M. Mercer, review of Robert Yeo, ed., *Singapore Short Stories Volumes I & II*, *Singapore Book World*, Volume 9 (Singapore: National Book Development Council of Singapore, 1978), 56.

³ See “S’pore Short Stories a sell-out”, *Straits Times*, 15 June 1991.

⁴ As Robert Yeo recalled (conversation with editor, November 2011).

⁵ Nalpon’s tattoos included the words ‘Love’ and ‘Mona’, his wife’s name, inscribed on his knuckles (Jacinta Nalpon, conversation with editor, October 2011). He also had a small pet monkey he named Gaugin (Bridget Egbuna, email, 4 November 2012).

⁶ Nalpon adored music, books, films and all things South American.

⁷ Nalpon’s younger sister recalls in the bad floods of 1954 the 16-year-old Gregory Nalpon helping the small Chinese farmers save their pigs from drowning (Bridget Egbuna, email, 4 November 2012).

⁸ Goh Poh Seng, the author of arguably the first Singapore novel also “eavesdropped shamelessly” at sarabat stalls, coffee shops and what Koh Tai Ann describes as “seedy bard in less salubrious districts” (xiv). See Koh Tai Ann, “Goh Poh Seng, *If We Dream Too Long: An Appreciation*”, Goh Poh Seng, *If We Dream Too Long* (Singapore: NTU Press, 2010), xix, n. 21.

⁹ Shirley Lim, ‘Introduction: 1965-1990’, in Angelia Poon, Philip Holden and Shirley Lim, eds., *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 177.

¹⁰ Lim, 179.

¹¹ Bridget Egbuna, email, 4 November 2012.

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MEI-LIN

I HAD ALREADY BEEN ten days on the island when I met Mei-Lin. It was a small island of coconut trees and milk-white sand and, at night, a moon wide as my outstretched arms escaping from the sea.

I rented a hut there—five dollars a month. Cheap because it stood alone past the kramat° in the haunted end of the island. Nobody ever went there after seven at night. But I couldn't afford anything more than five dollars per month and I wasn't afraid except one time late at night when the earth trembled with the footsteps of some gigantic, ghostly being and the air was torn by the screaming of frightened birds. Anyway, I don't suppose I could live as cheaply anywhere else. Five dollars a month for rent, enough fish in the sea, and beer on tick° from the Chinese store. I also dived for corals° in the reef. By the time I'm talking about, I had collected a treasure of coral worth at least one hundred dollars.

And in the evenings I'd sit in the little, railed veranda of my house in the sea, listening to one of the fishermen pluck chords on his guitar and waiting for visitors from Singapore. Ah Leong, the storekeeper, had a darling bottle of old whiskey stashed away and I

needed to sell my corals to buy it, the only thing in his shop that I couldn't take on credit.

I was happy on the island. The fisherfolk were friendly, the men sun-browned and strong, the women charming. We got on very well together. I managed to borrow their boats anytime I wanted and got myself invited to their homes for makan whenever my diet of fried fish grew monotonous. They lived in huts, just like mine, standing on stilts in the water. The stilts, slim and crooked, don't seem strong enough to bear the weight of the huts but the islanders say that the stilts grow stronger all the time.

At low tide, the waves seldom if ever touch the stilts, but at the high tide, the water rises to just below the floorplanks of the huts. Crowds of shellfish and crab that inhabit the barnacle-encrusted stilts crawl higher as the water rises and the sea looks green and sweet through cracks in the floorplanks.

I remember that it was evening, gold and pink and purple, when Mei-Lin came to the island. I was sitting with Ah Leong in his shop drinking beer and insulting him good-naturedly about his twelve children when we heard a heavy boat crunch into the beach and a small scream that changed to laughter. Ah Leong rushed to his wide window and looked out, and turning to me, he revealed all his gold teeth. "Visitors," he said happily. I was glad too because I could sell my beautiful branches of coral for Ah Leong's bottle of mountain dew°.

I didn't get up to look because within a few minutes of arrival, all feet gravitated naturally towards Ah Leong's store. And sure enough, I heard approaching voices as Ah Leong chattered excitedly

and rubbed his palms in anticipation.

The visitors wiped the sand off their feet before entering the store. There were three men and two women. I recognised one of the men, a large fellow with a beer-distended belly who treated everyone the way he treated his favourite drink, with savour and open friendship. don't think anyone hated him. The world found him fascinating, especially women. He was sub-editor in a local newspaper and I knew him slightly. He led his party in, sweating freely under a load of filming equipment.

"Hey, bring out the beer!" he shouted happily. "I've got a thirst, real bad!" Then noticing me, he bellowed with joy and made as if to hug me. That was his way with everybody.

"Hello, Carl," I said. I gave him my warmest smile. This was a good catch. I could unload all my corals onto this man for double the usual. I made a great show of shouting to Ah Leong to hurry up with the beer, and Ah Leong, to whom I spent my earnings, reacted magnificently. Carl introduced me to his friends. There was Edward and John and John's girlfriend, Sally. And there was Mei-Lin.

They had come to the island to make a film for TV, Carl told me. Between great gulps of beer he confided that Edward and John and Sally were old friends of his and that they knew quite a bit about filming. Mei-Lin was someone he had met the night before at a party. She was a fascinating creature to whom he had been attracted immediately.

He had flirted lightly with her, and after a couple of gallons of beer, he invited her to join his filming expedition. "She's a queer one, that girl," Carl said. "She reacted with a what-kind-of-woman-

do-you-take-me-for look, turned on her heel and left me. Ha! You know where she was this morning? The first one on the pier where my boat was moored!”

I took a swallow of beer and looked across the store to where Edward, John, Sally and Mei-Lin were seated. Mei-Lin sat closest to the window; a wash of sunset touched her hair, trimmed short and styled to flow around her neck, ending in two points on either side of her chin. I liked her hair. Her eyes were large; I liked them too. Her lips were soft, her throat made my teeth itch, and her cheekbones were high and strong. She wore a sleeveless blouse, her body young and firm. Very nice. She wore white shorts; her legs under the table were long and smooth and creamy, so good in fact that I wished I was a cat with short, soft fur so that I could purr around those legs. I liked all of this woman. She caught my eyes on her and smiled.

It was a mischievous, nicely naughty smile, a downright wicked thing to do to a lonely bachelor like me who consoled myself with dreams of one day meeting a woman with this kind of shape and this kind of smile. I took another swallow of beer so as not to betray the convulsive movement of my Adam's apple.

I turned to Carl. “How're you fixed up for the night?” I asked.

“Oh, any place we can hire for a couple of days,” he said. And I felt a tingling at my fingertips that meant more money.

“I live alone on the other side of the island,” I said. “Come, be my guests.” Carl shouted out the good news to the others who, in turn, said that they were grateful for my offer of hospitality, but couldn't possibly accept it without paying me at least a little for

the inconvenience they'd be causing me. I protested to the contrary of course, and finally agreed to accept eighty dollars per day from them, food thrown in for free.

It was between the time of nightfall and the rising of the moon when, after a last round of beer, I walked them across the island to my hut. I cuddled Ah Leong's precious bottle of whiskey to my heart. My shrewd storekeeper friend, realising that I was in for a lot of money, had pressed the bottle on me. I will not attempt to justify my method of making money. Not now or ever. I live by my wits. And anyway, I could have struck them for more money if I hadn't been dazzled by Mei-Lin.

I made small talk with Carl as I concentrated my attention on Mei-Lin walking lithely in front of me. We passed the huts of the fisherfolk. They sat on their doorsteps and murmured greetings as we walked by. We entered the shadow of the tall coconut trees and skirted the graveyard and the kramat to my part of the island. Mei-Lin was walking beside me by then, and I acted as if I wasn't interested in her at all.

We reached my hut. It looked as cosy as closed sparrow wings in the dim light, standing alone in the open, with white-lipped waves of incoming tide swirling round its stakes.

“My house,” I said, throwing out my arms.

“How lovely,” Mei-Lin murmured. “Do you live here all alone?”

“Most times, except when I have company. What do you think of it, Carl?”

“Magnificent, my boy. Absolutely magnificent!”

I led them into the hut. There's a narrow room partitioned from

a wider room in my hut, and a curtain of fishing net studded with starfish separating the tiny veranda from the main room. All this, of course, supported by stakes embedded in the sea. I lit a kerosene pressure lamp, tidied the place up a bit and allotted the large room to Mei-Lin and Sally, and the small room to the others. I would sleep in the little shack outside the house, which I called my kitchen.

They were a merry group of people, my guests. They went swimming as the moon rose from the sea, suddenly. And I busied myself about the kitchen. Mei-Lin was the only one who wasn't swimming; she stood by the shore watching the others. Apparently, she hadn't brought a swimming costume with her, which, as Carl said, was silly of her, but he intended on seeing her wet anyway. Then I heard a shriek, as Carl, huge and bloated as a decadent Roman emperor, rushed out of the sea and swept Mei-Lin into the water with him. Although Mei-Lin kept screaming for a while longer, I saw that she was really enjoying herself. They laughed and romped and shouted in the water, and after a time Carl and Mei-Lin, by reason of tide or current or because they wished it, were some distance away from the others, talking quietly.

I finished cooking dinner and called, "Come and get it!" and they ran out of the sea shouting and laughing. Carl led them rushing to the hut to dry and change. Mei-Lin brought up the rear. And whilst running, she suddenly changed direction, came to the shed, her clothes wet and clinging to her body, put her arms around me, kissed me with all the warmth of her young body, and then ran to the hut. I stood there, cursing with astonishment, feeling the taste of her sweet sea-wet lips on mine.

We had dinner in the main room of the hut. Mei-Lin looked at me deliberately all the while, smiling provocatively. Carl teased her but she had her eyes on me. John, Edward and Sally carried on a conversation, consisting in the main of how nice the island was and of the scenes they were going to shoot the next day. I began a series of ghost stories^o after that, which made even Carl laugh nervously but had no effect on Mei-Lin whatsoever. She kept on looking at me naughtily.

Later, when it was time to go to bed, I arranged their bedding for them, wished them goodnight and retired to my little shack. I breathed a sigh of relief and anticipation. My darling bottle of whiskey! Now was the time for it. It wasn't meant to be shared. I drew the cork, savoured its bouquet, and took a nip. Glorious!

A sea breeze fanned me gently and was content. I thought of Mei-Lin when I had drunk down to the shoulder of the bottle. Supposing I fell in love with her? Impossible thought! I wasn't the type to fall in love!

But late that night, three quarters of the way down the bottle, I heard a song. A high sweet voice singing sadly. I walked into the moon-wet night and saw her leaning against a coconut tree on the beach. Without a word she came to me and caressed me and kissed me with her soft, clinging lips, and I fell in love.

She left without explanation or farewell early the next morning in a fisherman's boat. We didn't know she was leaving until she left. I consoled myself by spending all the money Carl had paid me in Ah Leong's shop. Ah Leong was rich and happy. I was drunk every day.

I took a trip back to Singapore a week later. I went to the first

bar in town to see what I could do about my thirst. I picked up an old newspaper and, rifling through the pages, I saw a photograph of Mei-Lin. She wasn't alone in the photo. There was a man with her. He wore a suit and she a bridal gown. Both of them were smiling.

I looked at the date on the paper. It was the same as the day she had left the island.

Her trip to me then was nothing more than a last fling at life. I was sure that my Mei-Lin would have a happy life. I'm not so sure whether her husband would share in her happiness—but that's life, isn't it?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregory Nalpon was born in 1938 in Singapore. After attending St Joseph's Institution, he energetically embarked on a variety of peripatetic careers: disc jockey, journalist, trade unionist and 'gentleman of leisure'. These assorted vocations took him from Singapore to Sarawak, Northern Malaysia, Thailand and Australia. During the 1960s and 1970s, Nalpon composed numerous stories, essays, plays and novels. His short story, "The Rose and the Silver Key" was studied by thousands of Singaporean secondary school students. With Nalpon's sudden death in 1978 at the age of 40, the majority of his writings remained unpublished for over thirty years.

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Angus Whitehead is an Assistant Professor at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has published a number of papers, reviews and interviews related to literature in Singapore, and is currently editing a collection of short fiction by acclaimed poet Arthur Yap. A William Blake specialist, he is co-editor of a collection of essays, *Re-envisioning Blake* (2012). Currently based in the west of Singapore, Angus remains committed to recovering and exploring other roads less travelled in Singaporean literary history.



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This long overdue collection gathers together sixteen of Gregory Nalpon's short stories, eleven of his essays, and a selection of his sketches of life in coffee shops, hawker stalls and samshu shops. Through his writing, Nalpon poignantly records a lost, rich world: the colourful, exciting and sometimes perilous Singapore of half a century ago.

With this collection, a vital Singaporean voice is finally recovered. Nalpon's inspired blend of close observation, legend, local superstition and peculiarly eclectic reading results in some of the most imaginative and exciting writing produced in Singapore during the 1960s and 1970s, including authentic descriptions of indigenous culture and working-class men and women rarely found in Singaporean writing of the period.

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