

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

PLAYS

*Bisik: Antologi Drama [Melayu Singapura
[Whisper: Anthology of Malay Singaporean Drama] (2003)*

*Collected Plays One: The Optic Trilogy, Fugitives,
Homesick, sex.violence.blood.gore (2010)*

*Collected Plays Two:
The Asian Boys Trilogy – Dreamplay/ Landmarks/ Happy Endings
(2010)*

Cooling-Off Day (2012)

POETRY

One Fierce Hour (1998)

A History of Amnesia (2001)

The Invisible Manuscript (2012)

PROSE

Malay Sketches (2012)



CORRIDOR

12 SHORT STORIES BY **ALFIAN SA'AT**

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I just kept silent and smiled at him. It was a smile to show him how tired I was, how late it was, a well-worn smile excavated from a time when I was still young. He reached out his hand and took away the pillow. My hand rested on his chest as if to both push him away and support him as he leaned forward, first into my neck, as I rolled on my back, then my ears, my hair, his lips grazing over all the places his tears couldn't reach. When we finally kissed, he could only reach the corner of my lips because half my face was buried in his pillow. When we made love he mentioned my name several times, as if it was the only name he knew. "Oh," he called, "Oh Simon, please! Please!"

That night, and I promised myself that night only, I decided to let him have the pillow. But I didn't say anything. I just held his head on my lap between my hands trying to remember a song whose tune was at the tip of my tongue but whose words I couldn't recall. After he fell asleep and started snoring I changed my mind and pulled the pillow away from under his head. I started thinking of all the friends I had lost, and the boys whose favours I had tried so hard to win back in secondary school, mentioning their full names one by one. And then for those whose names I had forgotten I mentioned what I most recalled about them. The one with the flapping shirt. The one with the dark nipples. The one with the flying shoelaces. I even tried to remember silly things like how my mother looked like when I was four years old. I cradled the pillow tightly and pressed my nose into it. I had a feeling that if I were to come up for air my face would crack into hundreds of wrinkles.

CORRIDOR

When the body of the murdered man was found in the corridor we were having our holiday in Jakarta. Our next door neighbours weren't in as well and nobody knew where they had gone. But we told the newspaper man not to send our newspapers for seven days. This was different from the last time when we could tell our old neighbours, Mr and Mrs DeSouza, back in Tampines to take the newspapers for us, read even if they want to, just return to us once we got back home. And even if they were to give the newspapers back with, "sorry we had to cut out this coupon, the sale ended yesterday", or if one of their children scribbled someone's face with a blue beard and spectacles, we would close an eye. And also please help water the plants, except the children's cactus, because they will rot with too much.

Thank you, and yes, we will have a good trip.

The body was found by one of the women along our corridor, this woman who goes to work in the morning earlier than everyone else. She always keeps her windows closed and once in a while she would bring a man back to her house. But we don't care what they do. Anyway she was always well dressed, she knew how to wear shoulder pads and stockings and sometimes when I am in the living room I see her passing

in front of our house. This is when I tell my grandchildren to hurry up, put on their shoes quickly – why so dirty, just second day of school, come, don't forget to kiss your grandmother's hand here, study hard. I think of that woman sometimes and how she must have walked back to her house, fumbling with the keys. Calling the police. Asking why she has to call the police. Asking why they needed her address.

Asking why they needed her name.

I think if I think hard enough, I can remember her name, because one day one of her men was shouting for her as she raced down the corridor, trying to hide her face. Like she was crying. He called her something like Lydia or Linda, "Lydia come back I'm sorry." If my memory serves me right I think it was Lydia.

* * *

In Jakarta I stayed in the hotel most of the time. They would come back from the open-air markets with food; it was always food, chicken wings in oily plastic bags, fishballs on sticks, sitting on the edge of the bed, watching TV and eating. Sometimes I'm not sure what to say because I don't eat a lot, so I will tell them, this afternoon I watch this show already. Then they will tell me this is a hotel so they get cable, so the shows repeat themselves, as if I didn't know. I sometimes want to tell them I know, it's just that I want to tell you that I watched it, I'm not complaining, in fact I want to tell you that it was funny, it made me laugh all alone in the hotel room with the curtains drawn. Which in itself is a funny thing.

Then I will ask my grandchildren what they did and they will show me the shells they collected at the beach, common ones, some cracked, but they will ask me to keep them. When I ask them what they want to do with the shells, they will say

that they will wash them. Wash them, and then lay them in the sun to dry. What else, I will ask, and it will be my son-in-law who will say, oh, they're so young, don't ask them questions like that, what are they supposed to answer. I sometimes feel like saying it's as if we don't have a beach where we come from but usually I kept quiet. Whatever it is when he scolds his children they will run to me, and I will say let's get some ice cream, go look for my purse, even though I knew where I had put it.

I caught my son-in-law one day telling my daughter, your mother has a sharp tongue, and my daughter, so eager to come to my rescue, said it's because she has a sharp mind. I wish she hadn't told her husband that. I wish she had just kept quiet, because the best old people to live with are the dull ones. The ones who don't use the telephone and who go to sleep early each night.

* * *

"*Mak*, we spent a lot on this holiday. Try to be happy."

"Who said I'm not happy?"

"You just stay in the hotel room the whole day."

"I'm an old woman."

"Why don't you follow us for some shopping? Things here are quite cheap. We saw some crystal bowls yesterday."

"There's nothing that I want."

"*Mak*, we wanted to have this holiday because we wanted to get away for a while. I don't know lah *Mak*. At home, you're not happy, bring you here, you're still not happy. Tonight dinner... come with us, *Mak*."

"Who said I wasn't happy at home? You all go to work whole day never see me in the house."

“We’re so scared leaving you alone at home, *Mak*. With that kind of neighbour.”

“They never do anything.”

“*Mak* follow us to dinner.”

“I don’t like to eat at restaurant.”

“*Mak*...”

“Okay. Just for tonight.”

* * *

The body was found at about 5.30 a.m., and by the time the police came there was something of a crowd around it. I’m not sure if Lydia was one of the people, but I can imagine there was the Indian man and his wife. The Indian man is a marathon runner, and if you pass by his house you can see through the window all these cups and trophies and medals in the living room. I once saw him in the newspapers and I asked my daughter, “isn’t this our neighbour?”, and at first she said no, but later she said, “oh, I didn’t know he could run.” She said no wonder she saw him jogging all the time, but she thought he was just some army kind of person. I wanted to tell her it’s because you never pass by his house. Our house is the second one from the staircase, and you have to walk deeper into the corridor to pass by the Indian man’s house. But I know my daughter will tell me, we only need to walk to the staircase to get to where we want, walking the other way is no business of ours.

His wife also looks like a runner, skinny, all elbows and knees, but you can imagine her on the track. She shaves her legs and I can understand because she wears shorts all the time, even when she goes to the shops. She also wears an anklet, and I don’t think she works; most of the time she stays in the

house. But she does look like a new wife, like they’ve just been married, and the type who will still walk around the house with a house decoration book, testing out new recipes, still trying to arrange the wedding photos in the best sequence for guests to look at. At the most they have been married for one year, which is how long we have been staying in our new house.

So I see the Indian man and his wife looking at the body, and the questions the wife will ask her man, in his arms, are, “Who would do this to him. Why do this to him. What were we doing when this happened. Were we both sleeping. Was one of us asleep and one of us awake. Why are the houses here empty. Didn’t they hear anything. Why didn’t we hear anything.”

But the only question she will actually ask her husband, as the body is sheeted and taken away is, “Who’s this man?”

* * *

Jakarta is a big city, the traffic is bad, people are just honking everywhere, dashing across roads. The hotel I stayed at sent us newspapers every morning which I tried to read, but I realised that the Malay and Indonesian languages have some words in common and many words not in common, so I gave up after a while and watched TV. It was strange to see the programmes we got at home which were usually snowy suddenly look so clear. At home we could get some Indonesian channels, but they always looked like there was a swarm of ants on the inside of the screen, crawling all over but not disturbing the studio host, the newscaster with the big earrings, or the soap opera star with the giant hair bun.

Sometimes I try looking back and I wonder what I was doing when the man got murdered in our common corridor. Maybe at that time I was opening the mini-bar and wondering

if it was all right to throw out the beer cans; I didn't want to sleep in a room that had alcohol in it. Or when I was trying to figure out how to open and close the vertical blinds. Or when I wondered where my daughter had packed my bra and panties, in which bag and which compartment. Or maybe it was in that exact moment when I thought about home, that I wanted to be back, at Changi Airport, the white tiles, the cleaners, most of them at my age, how I might have ended up like them. Then the drive back on the expressway, my son-in-law speeding, maybe we could wind down the windows, the children opening their mouths to the wind, tasting air, feeling the roofs of their mouths turning dry. That man might have been killed at the exact moment when I was sitting in that hotel room with the silly piped music I didn't know how to turn off, feeling homesick. Which also means to say that the man could have been killed any time at all.

* * *

It is also not a surprise to me that our neighbours weren't in. I'm sure that there was a meaning to it, the two families who hate each other not being in when something evil happens in front of their houses. The hating started one day when my grandchildren decided to play with the water pipes. They had just come back from school and were waiting for me to open the door when the younger one decided to twist the tap that fed water into our neighbour's house. I can imagine our neighbours turning on their taps and then calling up the Town Council, and then people all coming down only to find out that someone had been playing with the pipes outside.

My grandchildren happened to do this quite a number of times after that, and one day I met my neighbour, the wife, at our corridor twisting the tap back.

"Someone's been playing with our water."

"Yes, there are naughty kids around here."

"This isn't the first time it's happened."

"There are naughty kids. Sometimes they pee on the stairs."

"It's such a shock to turn on the tap and then find there's no water."

"Children can be naughty," I told her. "Oh, my mother used to keep these flowers when we had a garden."

"Yes, it's very hard to grow."

"Most people will just grow the usual kinds, but I suppose if you have the patience, you can grow anything."

"There's nothing much to do at home anyway."

"I think in this whole corridor these are the nicest flowers."

"You think so?"

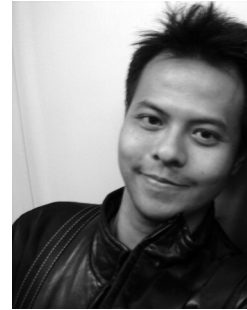
"You don't find flowers like these around anymore."

* * *

It was classified as a murder, which is obvious, because how many people would kill themselves in front of a stranger's house with seven stab wounds? It was something about bad debts and trying to run away and the killer being still at large. The man was in his late 30s, and for the next few days I tried to look for his obituary in the papers but I couldn't find it. Which could mean either that he had very few relatives, or that they were embarrassed or scared for their own lives. The man didn't live in our block. He had a lot of bad debts and he was in his late 30s; every single paper I bought since we came back said the same thing. If I was not in a hotel room I would have been in the crowd. If there was a police line we would be standing behind it, the brave ones in front, the cowards behind, the

p.136	sotong [<i>b.m.</i>]	Squid
p.138	Lontong [<i>b.m.</i>]	Sliced rice roll served with a coconut-based vegetable stew.
p.138	Mee Rebus [<i>b.m.</i>]	An egg noodle dish with sweet gravy sauce.
p.138	adik [<i>b.m.</i>]	Younger sibling
p.140	VCR	Video cassette recorder, a now-outdated gadget that uses removable cassettes to record and play back television programmes.
p.140	Kadi [<i>b.m.</i>]	An official appointed to solemnise Muslim marriages
p.141	Sah [<i>b.m.</i>]	Valid or in order
p.145	kaya	A jam made from coconuts and eggs.
p.146	sayang [<i>b.m.</i>]	Love, used as a term of endearment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alfan Sa'at is a Resident Playwright with W!LD RICE. His published works include three collections of poetry, *One Fierce Hour*, *A History of Amnesia* and *The Invisible Manuscript*, a collection of short stories, *Corridor*, a collection of flash fiction, *Malay Sketches*, two collections of plays as well as the published play *Cooling-Off Day*.

Alfan has been nominated eight times for Best Script at the Life! Theatre Awards, eventually winning in 2005 for 'Landmarks', in 2010 for 'Nadirah', and in 2013 for 'Kakak Kau Punya Laki' ('Your Sister's Husband'). In 2011, Alfan was awarded the Boh-Cameronian Award in Malaysia for Best Book and Lyrics for the musical 'The Secret Life of Nora'. In 2013, he won the Boh-Cameronian Award for Best Original Script for the play 'Parah'.

In 2001, Alfan won the Golden Point Award for Poetry as well as the National Arts Council Young Artist Award for Literature. He has also been nominated for the KiriYama Asia-Pacific Book Prize and the Singapore Literature Prize for *A History of Amnesia*. His short fiction collection *Malay Sketches* was longlisted for the Frank O'Connor Prize in 2013. His plays and short stories have been translated into German, Swedish, Danish and Japanese and have been read and performed in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Brisbane, Melbourne, London, Zürich, Hamburg, Munich, Berlin, Copenhagen and Stockholm.