

HERE AND BEYOND:

12 *Stories*

edited by Cyril Wong



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Introduction

Cyril Wong

Short narratives and tales have existed for centuries in prose, poetry and drama. Examples throughout history include *Arabian Nights* during the Islamic Golden Age of the 8th century, Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameròn* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* in the 14th century, sub-plots in novels and plays, narrative poems, as well as pieces of journalism. British author William Boyd has suggested that the booming middle class literacy of the 19th century in the West ensured the sustained popularity of magazines and periodicals invented to service a new reading public; writers suddenly found that they had a new literary form to play with and reach out to a steadily growing audience.¹ Even today, readership for short fiction has never gone away, despite the vicissitudes of the publishing industry and the introduction of new media and technologies. We all love a good anecdote or story, particularly when it is well-told and does not go

¹ Boyd, William. "A Short History of the Short Story". U.K.: *Prospect Magazine* (10 Jul. 2006). 1 Jul. 2013 <<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/william-boyd-short-history-of-the-short-story>>

on for too long. Of course, the range of stories, both told through text and even graphic form (think comics and short graphic novels, as just a couple of examples), is astonishing these days; and the spectrum is still expanding due to the flexibility of the short narrative format, the imaginations of new and innovative writers, and the further development of technologies in transmitting these stories.

The Singaporean writers selected here are no different in taking advantage of the short fiction form to tell a good story and to tell it in original ways. Singaporean writers have long been concerned with issues of national identity, social changes, ethnic differences and a perpetual negotiation between the local and the global. As Singapore is a small and relatively young country, the goals of its citizens have long been shaped by geographical, economic and political factors. A modern Singaporean's life is marked by frequent travel — even if just across the causeway into Malaysia — and by studies and work-trips abroad, sometimes even by permanent migrations. We are never still; we are always busy working while dreaming of elsewhere. The Singaporean imagination is accustomed to negotiating between the historical past and the modern day present; to not just dreaming beyond the local, but also beyond the borders of realism or practical demands.

The stories chosen here explore what it means for Singaporeans to be “at home” while being pulled constantly between different realities. The sense of the local can sometimes fade into an empty signifier, or become a site for self-defeatist conflicts and desires; however, it can also serve as a source of positive renewal for one's sense

of identity. These short fictional works chart the emotional ups and downs of protagonists who strive to find meaning against the backdrop of intersections between the local and the global, between the past and an ever-changing, urbanised present, between reality and fantasy, between the present and the hereafter, extending beyond into the afterlife and the realm of the supernatural. Rediscovering the self and the value of relationships form the focus of these tales, which range from the realistic to the darkly surreal, with the occasional epiphany about one's mortality and the meaning of existence within the bustling city.

We start off the anthology with “The Tiger” by S. Rajaratnam, the late co-founder of the People's Action Party and a long-serving Minister and member of the Cabinet from the fifties to the eighties, a man less known for his storytelling skills and more for his contributions to the country's political landscape. Rajaratnam's stories frequently draw upon a pre-urban world in conjuring up striking distinctions between the politics of human behaviour and the world of nature beyond their purview. “The Tiger” is, at first sight, about the menacing presence of a tiger in a village; this story is counterpoised with the story of Fatima's pregnancy. Fatima's fear of the tiger turns to sympathy and compassion for the animal. The contrast between the ineffable serenity of the natural world and the self-absorbed agitation of human society becomes the backdrop for a subtler and more poignant parallel between the two mothers, Fatima and the tiger. Pathos is rendered not just for the death of a tiger protecting her cubs, but for the potential loss of a deeper and less tangible connection between people and the rich landscape they occupy.

Yeo Wei Wei's "Here Comes the Sun" casts a different light on the relationship between people and the natural world as wrought through the perspective of its psychologically troubled protagonist, Mdm Goh Lai Peng. Here we see an abandoned rubber plantation which becomes a surreal backdrop to Mdm Goh's relationship with a speaking mynah. The voices of people in the story are severed from their identities and recede into the background, while insects, animals and the natural world take on a more overwhelming dimension for a woman entering the twilight of her life. The unpleasant, present-day reality of the home she has been forced to live in gradually fades and the "real world" of the singing mynah and emotions of her happier past form the reality that Mdm Goh eventually escapes into. The increasingly colourful evocation of the natural world blurs the line between sanity and madness, opening up a timeless space in which freedom is possible away from the imprisoning anxieties that have arisen from tensions between past and present.

"The Shoes of My Sensei", an early story by the late Goh Sin Tub, offers a more straightforward and political portrayal of the tension that arises between past and present realities. The lines that divide one's Self from the Other are redrawn with political and personal ramifications as a result of unexpected social change. Goh's short narrative reflects on the more universal bond of friendship between student and teacher, as well as the private sacrifices enacted in courageously preserving that bond, regardless of what others might think or what consequences might result.

Friendship also forms the poignant focus in the following story, "My Cousin Tim", by Simon Tay. In

this longer tale, set against the backdrop of a funeral, a protagonist recounts his days growing up with his cousin Tim. Despite not having undergone a Western education, Ek Teng has a smoother path in his studies and career, while the risk-taking Tim drops out of school. In comparing the lives of these two boys, the narrative exposes the close associations between educational levels, wealth and class divisions. Notions of "success" and "failure" are problematised to show that there is no easy link to be made between educational levels, exposure to a foreign culture, and the constituents of a meaningful life. The pressure to travel, self-induced or socially conditioned, and negotiations between the local and the global fade to the periphery, with more universal notions of kindness and friendship becoming the central focus of the story.

Stephanie Ye, a relatively new writer, delves lyrically and thoughtfully into the tension between the local and the global with her story, "City in C Minor". The protagonist, Emma, has a keen interest in classical music, symbolic of the global culture she hopes to participate in; however, her father struggles financially to support her passion. A travelling cellist whom she idolises in the story is shown to develop generalisations about the different cities he has passed through, suggestive of a growing and detrimental sense of detachment that has resulted from staying too long away from home. When Emma fulfils her dream to move abroad for her studies, an ambivalence sets in and a disconnect opens up between past desires and present realities. Distance from her home country grants the protagonist a new perspective that she might not have gained if she had not left in the first place. Old views are

dismantled and new opinions forged. She attains a new sense of self-awareness and maturity regarding her place in the wider world.

Cultural differences and the problems of having to explain these differences form the focus of Alfian Sa'at's "Visitors". Like Emma in "City in C Minor", the protagonist of "Visitors" has left Singapore to be educated in New York. The two earlier stories focused on the perceived advantages of studying abroad; in this case, the challenges of living abroad become more specific as Hidayah grouses about the difficulty of explaining her ethnicity to others. She is also apprehensive about a visit from her parents, who epitomise the very cultural context that she has been trying with difficulty to explain. But it is by meeting her parents, at last, that Hidayah is able to gain a newfound confidence in her own identity. She comes into her own after having grappled with notions of home and selfhood in a foreign land.

Whether one is studying or working abroad, cultural differences may intersect with divisions in class and economic status, resulting in problems of inequality and insurmountable anxieties from surviving in a foreign country. Such problems are highlighted in Suchen Christine Lim's "Gloria". In the story, a Filipino domestic worker is overwhelmed by the disparity between the luxurious materialism of Singapore and the poverty of life in her homeland, and the class barriers between her Singaporean employer and herself. Eventually she makes a mistake that threatens her livelihood and her freedom. At first, one could interpret the story as presenting a sympathetic picture of

its tragic protagonist while being critical of Singaporeans who take their comfortable lives for granted. But the narrative later shifts by humanising Gloria's employer and leaving readers ambivalent about Gloria's emotional state of mind. Everyone in the story is inevitably culpable for failing, ultimately, to move beyond cultural stereotypes and differences in status. The absence of productive communication and the failure of an empathetic connection between Gloria and her employers suggest that meaningful relationships become tragically impossible across barriers of class and nationality.

From a pessimistic portrayal of what it means to exist meaningfully in a new country, we encounter in Wena Poon's "The Shooting Ranch" two groups of relatives from Singapore who have adapted to a foreign country with dramatically different results. The Chinese narrator and her mixed-race daughter, two cosmopolitan urbanites presently based in New York, travel to meet their less polished Singaporean relatives; the latter reside on a farm with an attached shooting ranch in Nevada. Over time, the narrator and her daughter progress to sympathising strongly with their female relatives upon learning about their psychological and physical abuse at the hands of the sole male character. The narrator's compunction at not being able to help is soon overtaken by helplessness and resignation. Readers are left wondering after the families part ways about whether they have affected each other in any long-lasting or positive way. Differences between them seem to remain entrenched by the end of the narrative, albeit tinged with a lingering sense of regret. The story

highlights contrasting sides of what can happen to people trying to make a home within a foreign land so far away from their country of origin.

In comparison to the earlier two stories, O Thiam Chin's "Grasshoppers" strikes a more optimistic tone. The story is a return to the past which unearths more than just happy memories; it also brings back life-affirming lessons and revelations that remain profoundly relevant in the present-day. The narrator remembers being raised single-handedly by his mother, a *popiah* seller, and having learnt a life lesson about moving forward in the face of adversity through the grasshoppers he played with. Like the characters in "The Tiger" and "Here Comes the Sun", the characters in "Grasshoppers" relate closely to creatures of nature. Like the narrator, Uncle Ben, another character in the story, finds a similar connection to the crickets that he keeps. Growing up and surviving in rapidly developing Singapore, these characters from a lower income sector of society discover joy and value in the little things in life, as well as in the relationships they forge with one another. Much like in "My Cousin Tim", such relationships bring about lifelong meaning and satisfaction in the midst of the demands of life.

In contrast, we encounter relationships that are far from rewarding or life-affirming in Claire Tham's "The Judge". In this story, the central protagonist is a judge with an estranged relationship with his son, a fact that manifests during a family meal when the latter brings up a case in which the judge has to decide whether to mete out the death penalty or not. The judge tries to distance

himself from the people he tries in court, assuaging his own conscience with appeals to legislative logic. When his son questions him on the matter of capital punishment and after the judge learns that the mother of an alleged drug smuggler whom he has the power to put to death may be trailing him, the protagonist has no choice but to confront his repressed sense of guilt.

Guilt also informs Philip Jeyaretnam's "Campfire". In "Campfire", the narrator reluctantly confides in his campmates during National Service about his girlfriend, her positive impact on his life, and about her sudden passing. Not unlike the judge in the previous story, the narrator here is wound up and in constant self-denial about his emotions. But a positive difference is evinced here: it was through love that the narrator gained self-confidence. However, the narrative ends abruptly after a note about mortality. The narrator tacitly acknowledges that he is still mourning the loss of his past love. The sputtering campfire at the centre of the story becomes a moving symbol of the capriciousness of time and memory, as well as the unpredictability of life.

Death takes on new meaning in Felix Cheong's "True Singapore Ghost Story". In this story, the narrator is a businessman who begins to "die" from the moment global markets crash. He fades to insignificance upon retrenchment, transforming into a wraith. Just like in earlier stories which point to the detriment of using economic success as the central barometer for a meaningful life, Cheong's narrative centres on an individual whose life becomes nothing beyond the materialistic and hedonistic lifestyle that he craves. The story even stretches beyond the parameters of

realism into the haunted sphere of the supernatural. The title of the story is an ironic nod to the popularity of ghost stories which many Singaporeans have grown up listening to or reading, stories that often take place within an urban setting. Cheong's narrative may be read as a parable about a man becoming both a literal and figurative ghost of his former self. Whether one is dwelling in the living present or beyond the finite time of our existence, the story suggests that hell is in the mind, and a happy existence, here or in the hereafter, is dependent on our priorities and on whether we concern ourselves with more worthwhile matters like love and compassion.

As the title of this anthology suggests, the twelve stories gathered here portray negotiations between the "here and beyond" within the context of an ever-changing society with constantly shifting and conflicting demands. Individuals tackle and sometimes resolve the tensions between Self and Other, past and present, nature and society, life and death, and even between truth and fantasy, in the hope of entering happier modes of existence. The dilemmas that torment and challenge these individuals also go on to shape and direct them. Along with explanatory notes and a study guide at the end of this book, this anthology is presented here with the hope that it showcases an informative and enriching selection of Singaporean writing that will speak to a broader and newer range of readers today.

The Tiger

S. Rajaratnam

Fatima felt the cool yellow waters of the river — a sheet of burnished gold in the dying sunglow — flow sluggishly around her. She clung to the bank and moved further along until she stood waist-deep in a shallower part of the river. The wet sarong° clung to her plump, brown figure and accentuated the full breasts and womb of a pregnant woman. The round, high-cheekboned face, so typical of the Malays, had been drained of its dark sensuality, and instead an ethereal melancholy in the black oblique eyes gave her the expression of one brooding over some pulsating vision within herself.

With a quick toss of her head she unloosed her black, glossy hair, and let the wind whisper gently through it. From where she stood she could neither hear nor see the village obscured by the creepers and trees at the bend of the river. In front of her stretched an unbroken expanse ofalang° grass, tall trees, and a bewildering luxuriance of foliage. The languid stillness of the evening was

Here Comes the Sun^o

Yeo Wei Wei

Mientras un pájaro detiene el silencio
[as one bird halts the silence]

— Jorge Luis Borges¹

The mynah hopped onto the bridge. Mdm Goh Lai Peng took in the blue twinkling lights that lined the sides, the curves of the structure, the dark water underneath, the opposite bank shrouded in mist. After years of waiting, the time had finally arrived — she could see it now, the last path she would tread in this life. She threw a glance at her legs. The mynah flew up to the railing where it perched. “Here comes the sun, doo doo doo doo,” it sang, “here comes the sun, I say, it’s alright.”

¹ Coleman, A. (ed.), Kessler, S. (trans.). (2000) *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Poems*. United States of America: Penguin

Two weeks ago, the mynah flew into the room Mdm Goh shared with two other women. It was a hot August day and an acrid smell of ashes wafted in the air as if a giant smokeless fire was lit somewhere. At midday, the sky was an expanse of greyish white light strangling a sheath of pale blue. Clouds were suspended here and there in a few barely visible puffs.

It did not surprise Mdm Goh to see the mynah. On the plot of land next to the home there used to be an abandoned plantation of rubber trees. A month ago, all the trees were chopped down and their logged remains stacked everywhere on the cleared land. There was talk that a new extension was going to be built for the home. There were names that had been on the waiting list for as long as three years.

Before the mynah, other birds, insects and small animals visited the room. Butterflies, moths, dragonflies — they flitted in and out, resting on the bright pink curtains, or on the rim of the enamel washbasin with its gaily painted flowers. A squirrel scampered in once, and although it was never sighted again, Mdm Goh was certain it came back. Wafer biscuits, haw flakes,^o sunflower seeds — she had strewn these on the windowsill as she wheeled herself around the room. After she woke up from her naps and inspected the sill, everything would be gone, not a seed left.

“Have you eaten, Mdm Goh?”

“Wah, you finished everything. Go-o-o-d girl. Still hungry? Want some more?”

The porridge did not taste of anything, but perhaps the mynah would not mind. Some animals are not choosy. Her dog QQ would never touch leftovers, even when he was just a mongrel puppy rescued from a drain near the market and brought back to Mdm Goh’s flat. As a 10-year-old senior, he wore a patient and expectant expression on his face as he waited for Mdm Goh to finish her dinner. The moment she put her chopsticks down, got up from the table and walked to the kitchen, he would trot after her, his eyes shining, mouth open and tongue hanging out.

QQ, are you hungry? *Lai*,^o Mama give you dinner.

It was in the middle of the night when QQ suddenly barked. Was someone at the door? Mdm Goh was making her way in the dark to the living room when she stepped on something, lost her balance, slipped on to the cold hard floor and broke her hip. When she opened her eyes, QQ’s furry face brushed against hers, and the dog licked her face, her hands, her feet. The whining and then the frenzied barking of the dog over several hours prompted the neighbours to call the police who had to break the lock on the door to get in.

Good boy, QQ. Good boy.

The mynah was the only creature that drew attention to its repeat visits. Mdm Goh recognised it partly because of a song it sang. An English song with English words. She recognised some words, “here,” “sun,” “long.”

On the mynah’s second visit, it was just after lunchtime and the other two women were in the room. The woman on the bed on Mdm Goh’s right was sitting up and staring into space. The woman on the bed on Mdm Goh’s left was lying on her side, facing the wall. The night before, she had kept them all awake with her incessant coughing. She was quiet that afternoon but when the helper came to clear the trays, her food was untouched.

The mynah flew out of the window when it heard the helper’s footsteps. Before that, it was standing on the bedside table, right next to the tray of food, and it threw its head back and squawked loudly. Mdm Goh looked at it sternly and wagged her index finger at it. The bird cocked its head to one side. There were some bits of fish in Mdm Goh’s porridge. She scooped them out and gave them to the bird.

Animals know when they are welcome — that was why they came to Mdm Goh’s room. Mdm Goh could read the faces of animals better than the faces of people. Cats with their haughty or sluggish too-much-sun expressions, dogs with their ears perked up and their tails relaxed and wagging, and even hamsters, with their silent sign language of twitching noses.

After they moved to a fifth-storey HDB° flat, Mdm Goh’s mother reared chickens in one of the bathrooms and let Mdm Goh keep two white rabbits in a hutch in the living room. After school, Mdm Goh would let all the animals out into the corridor for their daily exercise. She kept a close eye over all of them, using two baskets as barricades to keep the creatures away from the stairwell.

When they left the village, they had to leave the dogs and cats behind. This Mdm Goh found out only after the day of the move. Looking out of the windows of the flat, wandering from room to room, peering down at the grounds of the estate with intense concentration, she waited to catch the very first glimpse of their dogs galloping home. She could picture their excited faces, a scuffle of wagging tails, prancing paws, lolling tongues and bright happy eyes. She could already hear their deafening high-pitched barks — happy, happy dogs! Happy to be home! Didn’t everyone say that dogs had powerful noses and could always find their way home by following the scent of their owners?

On the first day the mynah came, Mdm Goh was alone in the room. She heard a sound and saw that there was a mynah on the floor, waiting. She had always felt that there was something cartoonish about these birds. Unlike the sunbird with its fierce beating wings as it studiously reaped its harvest, or the merbok with its polka-dotted

neck and shy pretty face, or the black-naped oriole, gallant and confident with its sharp yellow plumage.

She was wrong about the mynah not being a picky eater. It rejected the mushy rice grains from Mdm Goh's porridge, unlike the furtive squirrel that cleaned the floor of anything edible left on it. Mdm Goh never saw the squirrel after their first chance encounter but the mynah was a different story. It seemed to crave Mdm Goh's attention while it ate.

It would not touch the food she put on the floor until Mdm Goh signalled that she had finished her meal by putting down her spoon noisily and wiping her mouth. As she ate, she allowed bits of food to drop from her fingers, and she did this in an absent-minded manner even though she knew that nothing escaped the bird's watchful gaze. If it was fish she would crumble it just in case there were bones.

"G-o-o-d girl, Mdm Goh. Your appetite nowadays very good ah?"

"Want some more?"

When she was eight, Mdm Goh and a few of her classmates found a dead sparrow somewhere in the field next to their school. They gathered all the flowers they could find — bougainvillea flowers, frangipani flowers, pong pong tree flowers — and they put the dead bird

inside a plastic bag. Someone said they should not put the bird in the bag; the soul of the bird would be trapped and it would not be able to reincarnate. One of the girls made a paper boat, tearing a sheet of paper from her jotter book, and two of the braver ones gingerly tipped the dead bird from the bag into the boat.

They dug a hole in the bamboo grove beside the tuckshop° and they placed the paper boat with the bird inside. They covered the hole with earth, stones and smooth grey pebbles from the grove, and they arranged the flowers they had collected on the small mound. They stood with bowed heads in a silent semi-circle around the fresh grave, their hands and fingernails streaked with brown soil. Some of the girls wiped their hands on their pinafores. Later that day, their mothers would ask them, how did the uniform get so dirty, but they were sworn to secrecy and nobody said a word about the sparrow's funeral. Mdm Goh could not stop wondering about the sparrow's soul, when would it abandon the limp and lifeless body soon to be devoured by worms and bugs, when would it find a new home.

When the mynah showed up in the room on the fourth day, the fifth day and the sixth, each time standing for a good while on the floor by Mdm Goh's bed, it occurred to Mdm Goh that the bird might know her from its previous life or from her life before the home. If it was

not on the floor, standing quite still, the mynah liked to perch on the windowsill. Sometimes it stood on one leg, looking out of the window at the deforested land.

August was the lunar seventh month of hungry ghosts.° One Saturday morning, ashes of burnt offerings flew in with the wind like the shed skin of crows. On weekends, the smell of fire and haze lingered in the air. A mynah was a very different thing from a moth, and Mdm Goh had never heard of spirits coming back in the form of mynahs, only moths. There was something curious in the way the bird seemed to have attached itself to her. When she spoke to it, it cocked its head to one side and looked at her as if it understood her every word. On the mornings when the others were sent to the physiotherapist and she was alone with the bird, she hummed Teresa Teng° songs.

QQ, is it you? Come here, boy, come to Mama. Good boy. *Guai.*°

The mynah sang the English song on its third visit. On that day, Mdm Goh had saved it a large piece of beancurd and some minced pork. After it had pecked away at all the food, it squawked and flapped its wings as if to do a little dance and then it flew up to the windowsill and started to sing.

“Little darlin’, it’s been a long cold lonely winter,” it trilled, “little darlin’, it feels like years since it’s been here.”

Certain foods brought out the songster in it, Mdm Goh soon deduced. It loved fruit — papaya, red apples cut into cubes, watermelon. Once, Mdm Goh offered it a green grape but it spat it out. The others in the room got used to seeing the bird and if they were awake, they sometimes clapped along as the mynah sang. A helper came in once to see what all the commotion was about and the mynah quickly hid under Mdm Goh’s bed. The pink curtains fluttered in the breeze, letting in rays of afternoon sun into the room.

Can you sing something else? How about Teresa Teng songs? *Yue liang dai biao wo de xin? Tian mi mi? Xiao cheng gu shi?*°

They were songs Mdm Goh used to listen to in the kitchen as she prepared dumplings for her stall at Ellenborough Market.° QQ lay on the floor, and sometimes Mdm Goh turned to him and sang a line or two as if to serenade him. Sometimes, she squatted by his side, held his paws in her floury hands, and sang, swaying her head from side to side whilst QQ thumped his tail excitedly.

Mdm Goh discovered that she could sell more dumplings if she played Teresa Teng on the little stereo at her stall. Several years had passed since the singer’s sudden death, but people still remembered her — her honeydew voice, heart-shaped face, wide cherry eyes, the

saccharine love songs that everyone grew up listening to over the radio in the seventies and eighties.

Watching her customers eat, Mdm Goh could see the sweet notes from Teresa Teng's songs emerging like invisible scudding clouds over their heads, and she smiled to think of the same notes soundlessly popping in their mouths as the peanut or sesame paste inside her dumplings erupted from the soft chewy dough, mingling with the sweetness of the rock sugar syrup, the fragrance of pandan leaves.

The last time Mdm Goh made dumplings, she made them for QQ. She dribbled water slowly into a hole in a mound of flour and mixed the water with the flour thoroughly, kneading the mixture with the seasoned movements of her bare hands into a smooth white ball of dough. She rolled the dough and then she halved it, quartered it, and rolled these smaller balls into long narrow sticks. From each soft white stick, she tore off a small piece about the size of her thumb and rolled it into a ball, flattening it with a rolling pin into a circle. In the centre of each circle she placed a dollop of peanut paste, QQ's favourite, and sprinkled the ten Panadol tablets she had ground into a fine white powder. She gathered the sides of each circle, joining them so that the parcel was sealed and she rolled it between her palms until it became a perfect little sphere.

She told the social worker that she would like to make some dumplings before the staff from the home came for her and the SPCA^o came for the dog. The social worker prepared all the ingredients for her, laying them out on the kitchen table so that Mdm Goh could easily reach everything even as she sat in her wheelchair. She was her usual calm, quiet self; there was no sign, no hint, of what was to happen, nothing to suggest she had planned anything untoward. She had asked to take a final meal in the flat where she had lived all these years and the social worker thought it was a harmless request, why not, it might even help the old lady move on to the next chapter of her life.

By the time Mdm Goh was pushed out of the flat in her wheelchair and loaded into the mini van, someone had already come and taken the body of the dead dog away. The social worker tried to speak to her but Mdm Goh looked steadily away from her, fixing her dry eyes on a distant object far away. Her lips were a thin line, dry and cracked, and her tongue slid over them from time to time, expecting to taste blood. Her hands did not stop shaking even when she reached the home. One of the helpers gave her an orange and she clutched it, brushing her fingers over the dimpled spherical surface of the fruit, a lump in her throat.

"This is your home now, auntie. Over here is your bed."

On its final visit, the mynah flew into the room at four o'clock in the morning with something that made a tinkling sound in its beak. It swooped over Mdm Goh's head and dropped a silver tag gently on to the pillow. Mdm Goh recognised it at once and looked around for the mynah but it had flown out of the room. She could hear it singing.

"Here comes the sun, doo doo doo doo – here comes the sun, and I say – it's alright," sang the mynah.

"Little darlin', the smiles returnin' to the faces. Little darlin', it seems like years since it's been here."

The door was not locked. She wheeled herself out into the corridor and saw that the mynah was flying towards the lift lobby. She trundled after it, QQ's tag giving off a dull metallic shine in her lap under the fluorescent tube lighting of the corridor. The bird was not singing but she could make out the dark cool shape of its flapping wings as it made its way ahead of her.

When the lift doors opened, the mynah hopped inside and Mdm Goh followed it, panting and gasping for air. On the ground floor, the bird flew out and she followed it, steeling herself, peering at the shadowy shapes of the half-waking world. The mynah alternated between hopping and flying, but Mdm Goh wheeled on and on, sensing and not sensing the grooves of the thin tyres, the coarse grains of grit and sand they rubbed into her palms.

She pushed her forehead down against the air, forcing her way through column after column of heat and dust, her eyes taking in the ground as her chair sped over it.

As the wheelchair entered the former rubber plantation, the ghosts of old chopped trees made a rustling sound. Absent leaves shivered and the earth sighed mournfully. Blue fairy lights came on and off, the only hint of life in the void. They were cerulean flickers in the inky pool of night from afar, but as Mdm Goh drew closer, she saw that they could be joined like the dots on a child's activity worksheet to form the outlines of a bridge.

She squinted, trying to see where the mynah had gone. When she located it, it was levitating like a magician's handkerchief between the arches of the bridge. Acknowledging Mdm Goh's presence, it began to descend, singing the English song as if it were a trumpeter, not faltering or missing a note even as it landed clumsily on one leg. Finished with the song, the mynah stood and looked at Mdm Goh with its bright unblinking eyes. The silence fell like a drape on to Mdm Goh, covering her head, shoulders, her feet.

Gingerly, Mdm Goh placed her grimy and sweaty palms on the armrests. Just before she swung her feet on to the ground and hoisted herself up from the wheelchair, she heard a familiar barking in the distance on the other side of the bridge. Without further thought or care, she

swallowed the fear that was beating its wings violently in her heart and pushed herself off the chair, causing the dog tag lying in her lap to slide down her nightdress onto the ground where it would lie undiscovered, a buried relic under the cement of the ground floor of the home's new wing for months and years to come.

The Shoes of My Sensei

Goh Sin Tub

I was glad to hear from my Japanese teacher but his letter also worried me. It was 1945, the British had just returned to Singapore, Sensei° and the other Japanese had been interned as POWs,° and young Singaporeans (including teenagers like me) were anxious, confused, feeling our way about under colonial rule — phasing from one subjugation to another.

I was surprised that Sensei had not yet been repatriated to Japan, but happy to learn that he was well treated, as he was classified as civilian, not armed forces, or possible war crime suspect. My worry was for myself: I had received a letter from the enemy openly posted to me! Although the enemy was detained, still, the letter could have attracted the attention of our new rulers — in particular some clandestine police department responsible for keeping dossiers on subject people in their colony? I could be marked down, barred from education and jobs... Surely they were now watching me — to see how I would

Biodata

The Writers

Felix Cheong is the author of eight books, including four volumes of poetry. His latest is a collection of short stories, *Vanishing Point*, which was longlisted for the prestigious Frank O'Connor Award. His next book, a collection of satirical tales titled *Singapore Siu Dai*, is due out in early 2014. Felix has been invited to writers' festivals all over the world, including Edinburgh, Austin, Sydney, Christchurch, Chengdu and Ubud. Conferred the Young Artist of the Year for Literature in 2000, he was named by *Readers Digest* as the 29th Most Trusted Singaporean in 2010. He holds a master's degree in creative writing and is currently an adjunct lecturer with Murdoch University, University of Newcastle, Temasek Polytechnic and LASALLE College of the Arts.

Goh Sin Tub was a well-known pioneer of Singaporean literature. He was a prolific writer of numerous titles, including bestsellers like *The Nan-Mei-Su Girls of Emerald Hill* (1989), *The Ghost Lover of Emerald Hill* (1998) and *Ghosts of Singapore* (1998). He also wrote a collection of short stories in Malay. He died in 2004.

Philip Jeyaretnam is a Cambridge-educated lawyer and writer. His first book, *First Loves*, was on The Sunday Times Bestseller List for 18 months; subsequent bestsellers include *Raffles Place Ragtime*, *Abraham's Promise* and *Tigers in Paradise*, the last of which comprises a collection of his earlier works, along with two essays on Singaporean literature in English. In his capacity as a lawyer, he was

a Visiting Fulbright Fellow at Harvard Law School and received the Airey Neave Award for constitutional law writing and writing on the rule of law. He was President of the Law Society from 2004-2007 and is Managing Partner at law firm Rodyk & Davidson.

Suchen Christine Lim's publications include 5 novels: *The River's Song* (2013); *Fistful of Colours*, awarded the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992; *A Bit of Earth*, shortlisted for the Singapore Literature Prize (2004); *Ricebowl*, and *Gift from The Gods*. Other works include a co-authored play, *The Amah: A Portrait in Black and White*, awarded the Short Play Merit Prize (1989); *Stories of the Overseas Chinese*, a non-fiction book (2005); a collection of short stories, *The Lies That Build A Marriage*, shortlisted for the Singapore Literature Prize, and several children's books written for schools. In 1997, she was awarded a Fulbright fellowship at the International Writers' Programme, University of Iowa, USA. She was the first Singapore writer-in-residence at the Arvon Foundation's Moniak Mhor Writers' Centre, Scotland, and was awarded the SEA Write Award in 2012. She has given readings in Malaysia, the Philippines, USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand.

O Thiam Chin's short stories have appeared in several literary anthologies, including *ONE — The Anthology: Short Stories from Singapore's Best Authors*; *A Rainbow Feast: New Asian Short Stories and Malaysian Tales: Retold & Remixed*; as well as in journals and websites, such as *World Literature Today*, *The International Literary Quarterly*, *Asia Literary Review*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Kyoto Journal*, *The Jakarta Post*, *The New Straits Times*, *Asiatic*, and *Esquire*. Twice longlisted for the Frank O'Connor Short Story Award, in 2010 and 2012, he is the author of *Free-Falling Man* (2006), *Never*

Been Better (2009), *Under The Sun* (2010), *The Rest Of Your Life And Everything That Comes With It* (2011), and *Love, or Something Like Love* (2013). He was an honorary fellow of the Iowa International Writing Program in 2010, and a recipient of the Young Artist Award in 2012.

S. Rajaratnam was a former journalist, co-founder of the People's Action Party (PAP), the first Minister for Foreign Affairs after Singapore gained independence in 1965, Member of Parliament for Kampong Glam constituency and the former Minister for Labour and Culture. He was the Second Deputy Prime Minister in 1980 till he stepped down in 1985 and became a Senior Minister. He was one of the pioneer leaders who helped to shape the social and political development of Singapore. He wrote short stories in London in the 1940s, and these were published in various collections. Upon his return from London, Rajaratnam stopped writing fiction and took to journalism. Moving into political commentary and satire, he also wrote a number of politically-charged radio scripts, which were broadcast on Radio Malaya in 1957. He died in 2006.

Wena Poon is the author of six books of literary fiction. Winner of the UK's Willesden Herald Prize for best short fiction, she has been nominated for France's Prix *Hemingway*, Ireland's Frank O'Connor Award, the Singapore Literature Prize and the UK's Bridport Prize for Poetry. Her stories have been professionally produced on the London stage, serialised on BBC Radio 4, and extensively anthologised and translated into French, Italian and Chinese. She graduated *magna cum laude* in English Literature from Harvard and holds a law degree from Harvard Law School. She is a corporate finance lawyer in the United States.

Alfian Sa'at is the Resident Playwright of WILD RICE. His plays have been translated into German and Swedish, and they have been read and performed in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, London, Berlin, Stockholm and Zurich. He has been nominated for the Life! Theatre Awards for Best Original Script six times, and has received the award twice. Alfian was the winner of the Singapore Press Holdings-National Arts Council (SPH-NAC) Golden Point Award for Poetry and the Singapore Young Artist Award for Literature in 2001. His other publications include the poetry collections *One Fierce Hour* and *A History of Amnesia*, as well as the short story collection *Corridor*.

Simon Tay is a Singaporean law professor and former nominated member of Parliament. He is the author of 5 (1985), *Stand Alone* (1991), *City of Small Blessings* (2009, recipient of the 2010 Singapore Literature Prize), *Alien Asian: A Singaporean in America* (1997) and *Asia Alone: The Dangerous Post-Crisis Divide From America* (2010).

Claire Tham began her writing career at the early age of 17. She has gone on to pick up several accolades, including two Commendation Awards from National Book Development Council of Singapore (NBDCS) and another two Golden Point Awards from the SPH-NAC Short Story Writing Competitions. A CHIJ and Hwa Chong Junior College alumna, Tham graduated with a degree in law from Oxford University. One of her short stories, "Lee" (from *Fascist Rock: Stories of Rebellion*), was adapted for television on MediaCorp's *Alter Asians*. Away from writing, Tham is currently a partner at a law firm in Singapore.

Acknowledgements

Stephanie Ye is the author of *The Billion Shop* (2012) and the editor of *From the Belly of the Cat* (2013), both published by Math Paper Press. Her work has appeared in journals in Singapore and abroad, including *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Esquire* (Singapore), *Southeast Asian Review of English* and *Mascara Literary Review* (Australia), as well as in several anthologies. She is pursuing a Master's in Creative Writing (Prose) at the University of East Anglia and is an honorary fellow in writing of the University of Iowa via the International Writing Program (2012). She is a recovering journalist.

Yeo Wei Wei completed her PhD in English at University of Cambridge in 2000. Her short stories have been published in journals and anthologies. She works at the National Art Gallery, Singapore, as Deputy Director of Publications, Editorial and Resource Centre.

The Editor

Cyril Wong completed his doctoral degree in English Literature at the National University of Singapore in 2012. He is the Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of twelve poetry collections, a volume of stories, one novel, and editor of an anthology of Singaporean poetry and prose. He serves as co-editor for the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* and was the founding editor of the poetry webjournal, *SOFTBLOW*. His poems and essays have been published in journals and anthologies in Singapore and abroad.

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