



the orchid folios

*"fertile and
kaleidoscopic"*
—amanda lee koe

mok zining

“A fertile and kaleidoscopic meditation on hegemonic mythmaking.”

— **Amanda Lee Koe**

Author of *Delayed Rays of a Star*

“Mok Zining’s breathtaking, debut collection *The Orchid Folios* almost defies description. It is a collage of disparate information; a book of lyric poems; a gathering of official documents and letters, interspersed with monologues of nameless women and florists; an informative guide to the history of orchids in Singapore, and includes a list of orchids ‘named after foreign dignitaries’. *The Orchid Folios* is dazzling, precise, sharp, playful, poignant, and engaging. Most importantly, it is a signal event marking the presence of a brilliant young writer who addresses global culture and the upside-down world we live in.”

— **John Yau**

2018 recipient of the Jackson Poetry Prize

“An evocative book of intersections and entanglements about Singapore history and culture, done in charming and skeptical poems. Mok Zining’s *The Orchid Folios* centres on multiple, oblique stories about the national flower, colonial politics, policy and meanings. The work is serial, documentary and notational. The drama of orchids, their beauty, hybridity, and uses in cosmetics all together create allusive allegories, mingling cosmopolitanisms with backstories.”

— **Rachel Blau DuPlessis**

Author of *Drafts*

“The orchid here is no mere motif. In its tropic desire and ambition, it achieves such compelling agency. This lyric authority is self-aware, a florid assemblage of texts that decentre, yet return to an appreciable heart. This heart is where Mok Zining’s collection is at, something alluring yet elusive, palpable yet only proffered in wisps, in whispers. What is being named, and what metaphors take root, take flight? In how cultivated its constituents remain, this very chic collection swells into a resplendent flourish. What a beautiful, entrancing strangeness!”

—**Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé**

Winner of the Singapore Literature Prize 2016 (Poetry)

“With a voice both cutting and considered in its articulation, Mok intertwines technical floristry with lyric sentiment, then wields it to pry at questions of language, society and the body. Mapping personal disparagements and devastations onto a painstakingly researched, multitextual geography, she reveals a Singapore narrative as engineered as a commercial orchid. Like the origin of the *Vanda* Miss Joaquim, *The Orchid Folios* wrestles with uneasy histories, only to pivot into unexpected beauty.”

—**Marylyn Tan**

Winner of the Singapore Literature Prize 2020 (Poetry)

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I was about to leave. Then I tripped, knocked over the books I'd stacked to make a stand for my phalaenopsis. The pot shattered. The roots were bare, coiled tightly around bark. *It's overdue for repotting.* I was surprised I felt nothing else. It's an old orchid—one I gave Mum almost a decade ago, before the store opened. My oldest orchid. It flowers, still.

One of the books on that stack—a dictionary—had fallen open. On the recto page was a morning glory, its indigo now sepia. On the verso page, a brown stain. I bent to pick up the dictionary, sent a flurry of flowers and leaves flitting to the floor.

Mum used to bring me to the neighbourhood park. The swings at the playground made small, silver squeaks. On the way home we would study the ground for blooms to press between pages. We had a vast collection, which I had forgotten for years, until now, when I find myself sitting on cold tile, sobbing amidst the foliage of a past life.

When I got up to repot my orchid, the sky was indigo. I unclipped the stakes holding up the stem. I dug into the roots. Mum taught me everything I know about orchids.

Inside, everything—the orchid, my hands, the freckled leaves of old books laid bare—was steeped in blue. I surfaced for breath, opening the door to warm air. Cars drove in low hums.

noun 1

“Orchid” grew out of the Greek “orchis”, for tubers of orchids resemble testicles.

Orchis, hybrid son of a nymph and a satyr, raped a priestess at a festival held for Dionysus. The fates sent wild beasts to tear his body apart.

Orchis’s father mourned and prayed the gods would make his body whole again. Instead, they took the deconstructed material of his body and rearranged it into a plant, flowering, still.

noun 2a

Greek symbolism is not always good for business. But the story can be tweaked. Learn to identify the beginning that best serves you. Prune it where it doesn't.

Begin, for example, with Henry Ridley and our national flower for a local flair and a tint of colonial nostalgia.

1893, five years into his job as the Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens (SBG), Henry discovered a new orchid hybrid. He quickly took a cutting, had it sketched, preserved, and presented *Vanda* Miss Joaquim in *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, the respected horticultural periodical in London.



*First cuttings of the Vanda Miss Joaquim recorded by the Singapore
Botanic Gardens, 1893.*

The label, written in Ridley's hand, reads:

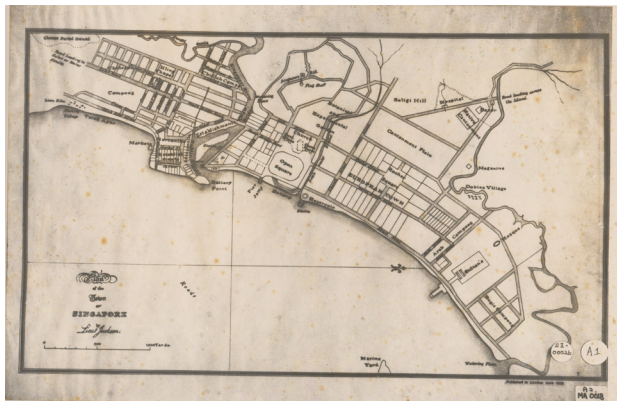
Vanda x Agnes Joaquim

V. teres x V. hookeriana

Hybrid 93

Exemplary Arrangement B: “Raffles Town Plan”

In the following 1822 arrangement, Raffles put forth his vision of town development in Singapore. To keep the town orderly, Raffles segregated the land, giving the Europeans, Chinese, Bugis, Arabs, Indians and Malays their own space.



Exemplary Arrangement B: Background & Discussion Questions

Just ten days after arriving in Singapore, Raffles set sail for Penang, leaving William Farquhar, his appointed Resident and Commandant, a list of instructions on how to allocate the land around the River. On the north bank, he placed the government buildings and the European town; on the south bank—nine feet lower than the north—he crowded the non-European populations. *floods @ high tide*

When Raffles returned to Singapore in 1822 for his first long-term stay, he was furious to find that Farquhar had neglected his vision. Raffles immediately set up a town planning committee, and tasked Lieutenant Philip Jackson with drawing up his plan. “The first and most important point to be attended to,” he advised, “is the removal of the native population and buildings from the space on the north bank of the river between the Tumongong’s and the sea, to the opposite of the river, and a date should be fixed at which the present buildings, if not removed by the present occupants, will be pulled down by the Government.” *because it made no sense. See trimmed affixes 1/2 discarded roots.*

Identify the social theories that formed the basis of Raffles’s arrangement. Discuss why the Raffles Town Plan is remembered as one that “emphasised communal harmony and ease of trade for the growing town”.

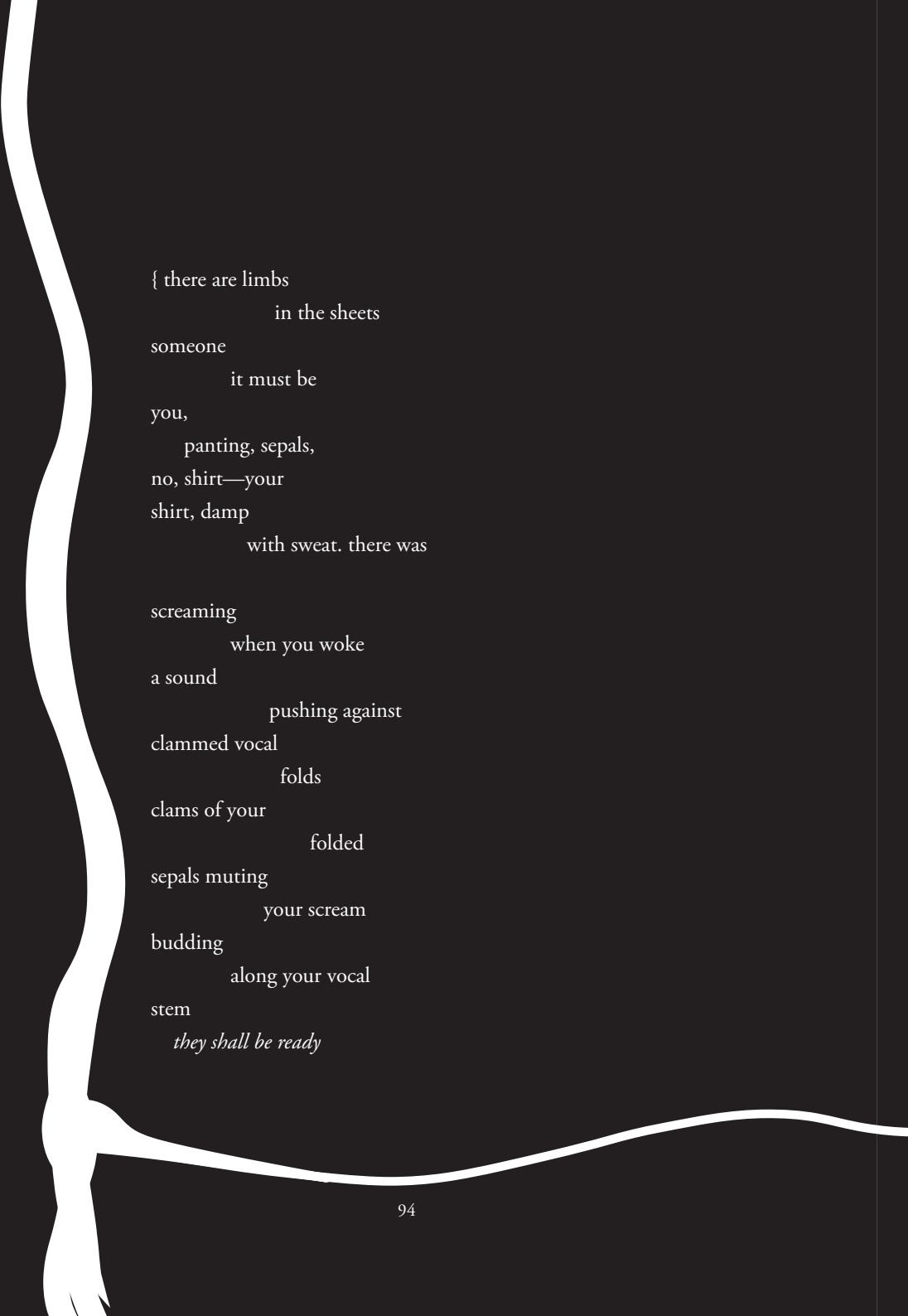
[5 marks]

Bestselling Bouquets: Bird Orchid Fragrance



The *Chiloglottis trapeziformis*, more commonly known as the broad-lip bird orchid, is well-known for its ability to turn harsh conditions into sexual advantage. Upon flowering in the spring, it converts UVB light, the wavelength that causes sunburns, into chemicals that mimic the pheromones of female wasps. Thinking that it has found a mate, the male wasp probes his genitals at the orchid's lip, and in the process, unknowingly collects pollinia with its body. Meanwhile, the other bird orchids continue tanning in the sun, confident that the same wasp, frustrated by its mate's passivity, will attempt copulation with another bloom.

Daring, seductive, sophisticated, the Bird Orchid Fragrance is not for the faint-hearted. Bottled in a delicate, hand-blown glass, our signature scent is an intoxicating blend of wood-smoke and mischief that promises to transform you into a seductive sorceress.



{ there are limbs
 in the sheets
someone
 it must be
you,
 panting, sepals,
no, shirt—your
shirt, damp
 with sweat. there was

screaming
 when you woke
a sound
 pushing against
clammed vocal
 folds
clams of your
 folded
sepals muting
 your scream
budding
 along your vocal
stem
 they shall be ready

*for cuttings in the next
few days.*

around you rows
of doppelgangers

penned
in their pots,

perfectly voiceless,
perfectly faceless.

now a face
closes in,

in its gaze
your buds

swell,
bloating

ballooning
as sugar, water course

from leaf
to stem

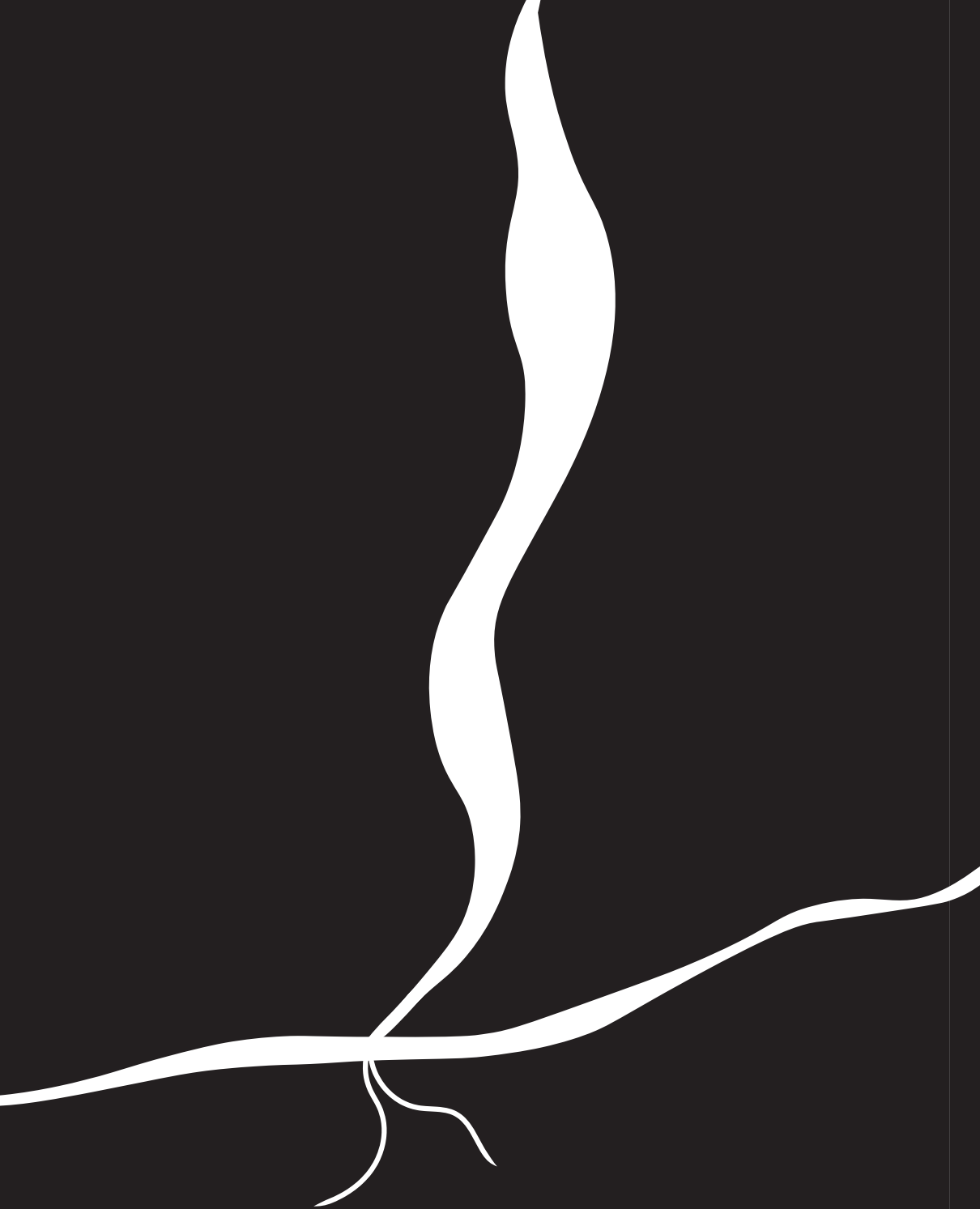
to root
to pulse

through your veins,
beating, beating

against the clams
of your sepals—

in your dream

you were an orchid



{ a scream
and this
time the waking
comes wrapped
in sheets
sepaled
about me,
back damp

sweat. i must
have
been running, there
are petals
in my head
sugar
pulsing at
lips
aching
for sepals
to unfold. inside,
a voice says *cuttings*
in the next
few days—
the same
dream, same orchid

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