

The Inlet  
© Claire Tham, 2013

ISBN 978-981-07-7384-7

Published under the imprint Ethos Books by  
Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd  
28 Sin Ming Lane  
#06-131 Midview City  
Singapore 573972  
[www.ethosbooks.com.sg](http://www.ethosbooks.com.sg)  
[www.facebook.com/ethosbooks](http://www.facebook.com/ethosbooks)

With the support of



The publisher reserves all rights to this title.  
Cover design by Merlin Sudianto  
Design and layout by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd  
Printed by C.O.S. Printers Pte Ltd, Singapore

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any  
resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely  
coincidental.

**National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**  
Tham, Claire, 1967-

The inlet / Claire Tham. – Singapore : Ethos Books, [2013]  
pages cm  
ISBN : 978-981-07-7384-7 (paperback)

1. Singapore – Fiction. I. Title.

PR9570.S53  
S823 -- dc23

OCN855728235

# *The Inlet*

**CLAIRE THAM**



## *Ling*

*Two years ago*

Old Mr He weeps silently, tears limping down the deep furrows that line his cheeks. Stepping into his tiny sitting room, Ling peers at the birdcage that he holds out to her and sees immediately that Little Red, the pet parrot Mr He bought in the market at the height of summer, is dead. He lies stiffly on his side and there is something about the way his spindly legs stick out that is both absurd and strangely affecting.

It's the coal brazier, of course; Ling has told Mr He not to use the brazier in the courtyard to warm Little Red because the fumes can overwhelm him but Mr He is stubborn as only the old can be. His legs were broken twice by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution and now he hobbles around, swaying dreadfully, on a stick that always threatens to give way beneath his diminutive frame but never quite does. His son, who works in some American bank based in Beijing, makes lightning trips back home to plead with his father to move in with him but Mr He will not hear of it. These visits invariably end with a shouting match that echoes along the corridors of the apartment building where the occupants are all tenants on short-term leases like Mr He and Ling.

Ling ran into the son once in the stairwell some weeks ago; he was a tall man in a well-cut suit – Italian, Ling surmised – and his face was contorted with anger after his argument with his

father. Galloping down the stairs two at a time, he looked right through Ling. She was wearing her white laboratory coat that day, having dashed back during lunch to retrieve a file that she'd forgotten; perhaps that accounted for the younger Mr He not seeing her. He looked like the kind of man who looked through people in lab coats.

"I'll get you another parrot from the market," Ling says.

"They only sell parrots in the summer."

There seems to be no answer to this. It's late autumn now; the air has the anticipatory chill of winter. Ling wonders, briefly, what it would be like to be old Mr He, pottering about his minuscule flat and lavishing attention on his pet parrot rather than the grandchildren he seldom sees. Old age is a foreign kingdom; your only real passport to it is to become old yourself. She gives Little Red a last valedictory look; she's already late for work.

In the way of these things, the bus is also late that morning and when it arrives it's packed. The crowd at the bus-stop surges forward. Ling may be slender, but her elbows are sharp, and she's one of the first to scramble on just before it lumbers off. Through the back window, she catches a glimpse of the fuming commuters who haven't managed to board shouting at the departing bus. She feels no compunction for them. She's at the very bottom of the anthill that is China, jockeying for space with all the other ants; compunction is a luxury she treats herself to sparingly.

Swaying from the strap that she clutches at on the jerking, lurching bus, she feels her handphone vibrate in her pocket and her heart sinks. It's Jiang; she knows it must be him. He'd called her several times yesterday and once this morning; he's nothing if not persistent. When she saw him off at the railway station two days ago, he'd pressed her for an answer again, and again she had fended him off. She needed time to think about it, she said,

and Jiang's nostrils flared as they always do when he's thwarted. He stood with one foot on the lower step of the train carriage, while someone behind Ling shouted at Jiang to get a move on, he didn't have all day. Instead, Jiang pulled Ling close, and she felt the familiar warmth of his cheek and traced with her eye the familiar whorl of his hair just below his ears. In his arms, she felt stiff and unyielding, awkward, as though she'd been cast against her will in a mediocre melodrama, and she disentangled herself as soon as she could.

They had met at college, in a small middling town that nevertheless seemed laughably vast to Ling in those first few months away from her village (pop. 1000). In the rural school that she had attended and excelled in, there had been few competitors for her position as principal's pet and star pupil. In college – even in the middling, functional college that she settled for because the fees were covered by a scholarship and it was not too far from home – she found herself just one among many similarly ambitious students from rural backgrounds. For the first time in her life, the airy confidence that had buoyed her all the way here suffered a bruising deflation; in this low, rocky mood, Jiang's steady, unexcitable personality had seemed to her exactly what she wanted. Graduation brought about their first real separation – Jiang was only able to find a position in a research laboratory in a southern province, a day's journey away by train – and separation wrought a change in perspective.

Jiang wants to get married. Well, of *course* he does; to him, it's the inevitable culmination of their three-year courtship, all those long hours of kissing and petting and sexual frustration, thanks to the paper-thin walls of their hostel, relieved only by the occasional furtive, unsatisfactory coupling in hourly-rated hotels where they signed in as Mr and Mrs Li and where the calling cards of social escorts littered the hallways.

Unwisely, she'd invited him to the village to meet her family over the New Year; all of them, including her grandmother, had shared a meal around the dining table in the front room which also doubled as a storage area for lumber and where the coal brazier smoked terribly, as it always did. She remembers Jiang looking round that front room with a carefully neutral expression that didn't fool her. She's always known, of course, that her village is poor and that her parents are peasants but this was only brought home unpleasantly to her when she saw that information working its way through Jiang's mind (trust a scientist to calibrate social distinctions in a way no-one else can). The quick, complicit glance which he flashed her promised, *I will take you away from all this*. (Jiang's village is larger and more prosperous than hers; his parents own a three-storey house which they have just finished building and they drive a sedan car. Her family has lived in the same lean-to for generations; her father borrows the neighbour's twenty-year-old pickup truck if he needs to sell his produce in town.)

She was conscious of the first stirrings of resentment; she didn't need condescension, she wanted to tell Jiang, she didn't need rescuing. Across the table, her father, who's always delighted to have visitors, urged Jiang to *eat up, eat up*, all the while giving his daughter broad, knowing looks that made Ling long to jump from the table and flee. Unwittingly, she had created expectations in Jiang and her family and now she has to deal with the consequences.

Ling is not sure what she wants, but it's become increasingly clear to her, during her year in the laboratory after graduation, that it's not marriage. *I love you*, Jiang says; he says it often and easily, too easily, it seems to her. Love ought to be hard-won, hard fought; it's a word that ought to be banned and used only *in extremis*. There's also something about the way he says it that

makes her think that he's experimenting with the word, trying to get its measure, its heft, as though it's a pair of stilts which he's not sure can bear his weight. When she closes her eyes and tries to think of Jiang, he's worryingly elusive, like one of those crime scene chalk outlines she sees on TV dramas, waiting to be filled in.

There's a screech of brakes. With the rest of the bus passengers, Ling is flung forward, landing on a stout woman smelling strongly of onions. The bus has collided with a minivan. Both drivers hurtle out of their vehicles to confront each other in the middle of the intersection; around them, traffic snarls into perfect urban gridlock. A policeman from the other end of the street, blowing furiously on a whistle, hurries towards the source of the mayhem. The bus passengers swarm out.

No other bus will be along for some time. If she walks really fast, Ling estimates she can reach the laboratory in fifteen minutes. She starts walking, almost scurrying, then stops short. Above her, a sign says, *Pet Shop*; she must have passed it every day on the bus to work without ever noticing it. She glances at her watch, but the pull of serendipity is too strong. She plunges into its unpromising interior.

Minutes later, she emerges with a birdcage containing a parrot that, apart from its colour, is the image of Little Red. She can't bear to think what the head of her laboratory will say when she finally arrives at work jauntily swinging Little Blue, so she doesn't. Released from the confines of the pet shop, Little Blue eyes the city streets beadily and squawks something unintelligible. Little Blue, the pet shop owner assured Ling, made the journey all the way from Africa, mentioning a country that Ling has never heard of.

Around her, people push past Ling and Little Blue impatiently, but she barely notices them. Her handphoned's

ringing again. She takes a deep breath; if she's to do this, she has to do it fast, or she'll lose her courage. She presses the phone to her ear.

\* \* \*

“Going out tonight?” Mr He calls through the open doorway of his apartment. Mr He almost never closes his door. Few of the tenants do; the apartments are so tiny that an open door is the only way to create an illusion of more space.

“Taking a walk,” Ling says truthfully. She peeks in at Little Blue, who is strutting around his cage. He seems like a parrot with a great deal more personality than Little Red, who tended to be rather passive.

“I'm calling her Ling.”

“What? Oh. No. It's a he. His name is Little Blue.”

“Ling,” Mr He says firmly. When Ling had shown him Little Blue, his eyes had gone big and round like a child's and he'd taken the cage reverently from Ling with trembling hands.

“Ling then,” Ling says and escapes from Mr He and her namesake before Mr He can overwhelm her again with his courtly gratitude. Little Blue is the only highlight of her day. As expected, the head of the laboratory was apoplectic when she finally showed up for work with a parrot – a *blue* parrot, he said scathingly, as though any other colour would somehow have made it better – and Ling endured a dressing down that would have left her feeling much worse if her mind was not preoccupied with her conversation with Jiang.

He heard her out in an ominous silence over the static and the roar of the traffic. She can't recall now exactly what

she said – something about their being too young, about her not being ready for marriage, something anodyne – but it didn't really matter because all her excuses seemed to be swallowed up in the heavy, glutinous silence at the other end of the line. “Jiang?” she said. “Are you still there?”

*You whore.*

And he rang off.

The thought of staying in her apartment that night makes her feel queasy, trapped; she needs to walk the city streets, walk those words out of her head. It's not the words that bother her so much as the fact that Jiang – steady, unexcitable Jiang – had said them. She understood, in that moment, that he said them not because he was really in love with her but because his ego had been bruised. *That* had been the unforgiveable slight. In a year or two he'll thank her, she knows, for breaking it off, but the thought is of little consolation to her at this moment.

The skin on her fingers itches, thanks to the heavy plastic gloves she dons all day in the laboratory, measuring, weighing, calibrating. All day, she wears the gloves and her white unisex lab coat, her hair trussed up in a net, her eyes shielded by wraparound goggles. In this attire, gender distinctions are blurred; all the workers look like giant white goggle-eyed silkworms.

Absently, Ling scratches the skin on her fingers. She has to remind herself to stop doing it before the skin breaks and bleeds; it will be ironic if she has to give up the job that she trained for because of an allergic reaction to gloves. She knows how lucky she is to be working in this laboratory in this city in the northeast of the country; many students in her course applied for it and she still wonders what the head of the laboratory saw in her. A nice pair of legs, some of the other students muttered

sourly but she doubts this, as the head has never treated her with anything other than the hectoring contempt he reserves for all his minions. Yes, she's lucky, but only after a fashion; it's become increasingly clear to her that without a master's, or a PhD, she will never rise very far up the laboratory's totem pole, but a master's, let alone a PhD, requires money, connections and time, none of which she has, and she is young and impatient and the work is dreary, far drearier than she had anticipated when she whooped with delight on receiving the letter of appointment from the laboratory.

Still.

She's made it out of the countryside, at any rate, and to the city. She hangs on to this thought, as though it's an article of faith; she needs *something* to hold on to, now more than ever, now that Jiang is in the past. She's left the village behind; apart from Chinese New Year, she will never go back. She'll never live through another winter in the countryside, where water freezes almost in mid-air and her toes are in perpetual danger of frostbite, no matter how many socks she wears. (Her sensitivity to cold is a running joke in her family and her mother is always brewing her vile concoctions to thicken her "thin" blood). In the city, she cannot see the stars – the night sky is a polluted neon glow – but she is earning more money than her father ever will from the land, she has her own warm tiny rented room, she comes and goes as she pleases.

Still.

Before coming to this city, she had little idea what to expect. A naïve hope, perhaps, that the city would fall open at her feet like a jewel box and all its treasures come tumbling out, except that it remains stubbornly, impenetrably closed to her. The long hours at the lab give her little opportunity to socialise; Mr He is the closest she has to a friend.

Her anonymity in the city is both liberating and demoralising. At night, after work, she's fallen into the habit of wandering the city, window-shopping, people-watching, taking in the street life as though it's her own personal diorama. The city is not one of the great metropolises, not yet anyway; it's a brash upstart, tearing down and rebuilding everything in sight in a frenzy, the air itself electric with elusive promise, the way New York must have been at the turn of the twentieth century, a city pulsing its way towards would-be greatness. In the city, Ling catches shadowy glimpses, hints, of a way of life that borders for her on fantasy, so far removed from the world she inhabits. Around the city's main ring road is a cluster of five star hotels. At night, a steady stream of luxury cars disgorge men in tailored suits and women in various states of shiny dress and undress. She watches the women, especially, the way they emerge from their vehicles one stiletto heel at a time, gingerly testing the ground before floating off in a cloud of silk or jacquard and perfume so strong she can smell it even at the distance she stands from them. She watches them and thinks, *That could be me.*

That sense of infinite possibility in the city buoys and frustrates her. She moves, it seems, like a ghost through the throngs on the streets, waiting to be noticed, waiting for that moment to arrive, that one transforming moment that will make sense of her life so far and tell her what it is she's meant to do.

Tonight, she walks in her usual reverie along the city's main shopping street, which spools all the way down to the river. The cardigan she threw on before leaving her building is no protection against the night's chill; without her quite realising it, winter's right on the doorstep. She crosses her arms tightly across her chest. Only two nights ago, she'd passed this very stretch with Jiang, his jacket slung over both their shoulders, their arms

around each other's waists, neither with any idea of the rupture to come; she shivers, though not entirely from the cold.

“Want some company?”

She gives him a swift onceover. Thirties, jeans, cheap black leather jacket smelling of hotpot and liquor, longish hair tickling the edge of his collar, bloodshot eyes.

“No thanks.”

Before she knows what's happening, he reaches out and tips her chin upwards.

“I know how to give you a good time. I know you'd like that.”

She swings her handbag in his face and breaks into a run, threading through the crowd with that eye for an opening that had always served her well when she played basketball in high school. The man doesn't have a chance.

It's not the first time she's been accosted on the streets. There's a matter-of-factness to human relations in the city that's both scandalising and oddly bracing. At the laboratory, her colleagues discuss their significant others with the dispassion of a bookkeeper totting up profits and losses for the quarter; any mention of love is greeted with eye-rolling. Prostitution is officially illegal but everyone, especially the police, knows where to get a woman. On the streets, men catcall Ling and the drunks shout out invitations to her from doorways. Ling has never been accustomed to thinking of herself as pretty, or even passably good-looking; in the village, her height – she is taller than most of the village boys – and her wide, full mouth are considered rather gauche, attracting much clucking from the older women. In the city, though, she looks exotic, even vaguely foreign. For the first time in her life, it's brought home to her that men – some men, at any rate – consider her attractive.

The man disgusts her, but the proprietary touch of his finger on her chin stays with her. In a frozen lake, her mother's fond of saying, one crack is all it takes. Ling feels a long shudder go through her. She thinks back to that spring night, months ago, when she and Jiang made hurried perfunctory silent love on her hard narrow bed while all round them the sounds of her fellow ants going through their nightly routine – the sounds of hotplates sizzling, heaters whirring, a small dog yapping, a couple quarrelling – reverberated through the walls. Afterwards, she and Jiang lay like a pair of effigies on her bed until his light, even breathing told her that he was asleep. Awake, she lay staring into the darkness; involuntarily, almost curiously, she raised a hand to her cheek, as if to convince herself she was still there. She felt curiously insubstantial, light as ether, completely alone, even with Jiang next to her. Two days ago, when he wanted to go back to her apartment, she said no.

Some nights later, on her peregrination through the city, she finds herself outside the Golden Palace Hotel, watching a cavalcade of luxury cars parade past the entrance. She's about to turn and leave when a man who has just handed over his black coupe to a parking valet catches her eye and, after the briefest hesitation, comes up to her. He invites her for a drink at the hotel bar.

She says, “I'm not dressed for it.” She's in her usual after-work attire of jeans and cheap worn black leather jacket.

He laughs and tells her she looks fine. She looks at him consideringly. She guesses that he's in his forties, which seems ancient to her, but he's tall and trim for his age and everything about him speaks of an ease with money and himself which Hotpot Man so conspicuously lacked. There's nothing waiting for her except her tiny rented room, Mr He and Little Blue. She thinks of water surging against the ice, testing for fissures,

trickling and seeping through relentlessly until it becomes a torrent and the ice breaking away and sinking into the sea. Jiang's voice is in her ear: *You whore*. The anger that has eluded her for days now has her in its grip. She says yes.

She's right; she's not dressed for the bar, where the women in stiletto heels that she's been observing for months are draped like fox furs around their men. Perched on her stool at the bar, sipping a chemical-blue cocktail, she listens with half an ear to Q complain about the stress of running an internet start-up company, while watching the women and thinking, *So that's how it's done*. She will learn, she resolves; she's always been a fast learner.

Q asks her if she wants to dance; there's a nightclub next door, its loud, insistent beat clearly audible through the thin walls of the bar. She tosses off her drink – her second? her third? no matter – and shrugs. Why not? She cannot remember the last time she's gone to a club. Her colleagues prefer karaoke bars and Jiang cannot dance if his life depends on it. The nightclub's packed; in the crush of bodies, she's thrust against Q. Up close, she's able to observe the fine greying hair at his temples, smell the slightly old-fashioned, agreeable aftershave that he wears. His mouth on hers comes as a surprise, before she finds herself kissing him back with a passion that has nothing to do with him and everything to do with her strange, unsettled state of mind.

She cannot remember exactly how she arrives at the point when she wakes and finds herself, undressed, in a bed in a hotel room far more opulent than anything she has ever stayed in before. She turns her head to glance at the bedside clock: six a.m. Next to her, Q is snoring beneath the bed sheets. She has a dim recollection of them staggering across the hotel room, shedding clothing along the way like moulting birds and collapsing on the bed. She remembers pushing Q onto his back and straddling

him; she remembers crying out, her hair partly caught in her mouth. She tries to remember why it seemed like a good idea at the time: wanton, heedless sex, sex-as-oblivion, sex as she'd never had it before.

Q wakes as she's pulling on her jeans. He sits up, rubbing one hand over his face.

"That was fantastic," he says in his slow, sleep-curdled voice. "You were great."

At six in the morning, naked, his body shows the soft sag of age around the waist. Black pouches rim his eyes. Reaching over for his trousers, he tugs out his wallet and extracts a wad of cash.

"How much do I owe you – never mind, take this."

Ling looks at his extended hand with incredulity. "I don't want your money."

He's equally incredulous. "Why the hell not?"

She turns her back on him and walks towards the door. Behind her, she hears him saying, "What the – ? You don't walk out on me –" Hopping out of bed, the bed sheet clutched to his waist, he pursues her into the corridor, shouting, "I'm not good enough for you?"

He hurls the notes at her back and slams the door shut.

Ling leans her forehead against the corridor wall, laughing; *come on*, she tells the censorious little voice in her head, *you have to admit it's funny in a way*. A middle-aged chambermaid trundles a cleaning cart past her, giving Ling a suspicious look. Ling sobers up; for one thing, a blossoming hangover means that laughing causes tsunami waves of pain in her head. The chambermaid, her view blocked by mops, has not seen the banknotes strewn on the floor. Ling contemplates them and thinks, *why not?* Someone else will just come along and scoop them up, whooping at his



luck. The thought comes with a tinge of contempt for herself, for Q. She closes her eyes, takes a breath. Pockets the notes.

\* \* \*

The fissure in the ice is still there and widening by the day. She has the sense of something waiting to happen, though she has no idea what it may be. The trees along the city avenues are almost bare now, their naked branches raised in supplication to the sky. Before going out in the evenings, she shrugs on the fur-lined aviator jacket which she bought with Q's money. She knows, without being told, that she looks striking in it. Partly out of curiosity, rather than anything else, she makes her way to the Golden Palace Hotel over the course of the next few days, but she never sees Q again.

On nights when she works late, she eats dinner at a hole-in-the-wall dumpling shop where the other diners are people like her: harried, overworked, eating alone with heads down. There's little talking; there's no incentive to linger in that dimly-lit, stuffy place. A month after her encounter with Q, Ling is eating at her usual spot when she becomes aware that a woman at the next table is staring fixedly at her. Ling glances up. Her first impression is of an extraordinary theatrical ensemble. The woman, whom Ling guesses to be in her fifties, wears huge dark glasses, even in the twilight gloom of the noodle shop, and a white tubular knee-length winter coat of the texture and consistency of rubber, which gives her something of the aspect of a Michelin man. Her short cropped hair is streaked pink at the crown. She thrusts a broad, determined chin at Ling. The other diners are staring at the woman, some covertly, some openly but she seems impervious; Ling has to admire her for that, if nothing else.

The woman leans across. "I'd like you to come work for me." Her Mandarin is guttural; her accent is definitely not local.

Ling stares at her.

Ms Fung says, with that unflappability which Ling will come to know well, "I'm serious."

Either the woman is crazy, or she is, as she says, serious. A month ago, Ling would simply have stood and moved to another table, but now there's something in her that's alert, like a tuning fork, to the unbounded possibilities around her.

She says, playing along, "And what would I have to do?"

"Serve drinks, carry on conversations with lonely men, sing the occasional song."

"I can't sing," Ling lies, though she does in fact have a clear, pitch-perfect singing voice.

"Of course you can," the woman says, imperturbably.

"This is a –"

"Lounge. In Singapore."

Ling says, stupidly, "Singapore?" She's never been out of China. She's been to Beijing and Macau once and Shanghai twice. It's as though the woman has offered to fly her to the moon.

"I'd pay you. Much more than what you're earning now, that's for sure. What do you do?"

"I'm a laboratory assistant."

"You have a look...you're wasted in a lab."

"It's a good career."

"But it's not enough for you."

"And how do you know that?"

"I know girls like you."

“Oh yes?”

“You want more.”

“I’m not a stereotype.”

Ms Fung looks at her for a moment. “I never said you were.”

Ling has to laugh; there’s an absurdity to the situation that tickles her. Mentally, she’s composing a witty little anecdote to relay to Jiang when she remembers, with a jolt, that he’s not hers to amuse any longer.

“How do I know you’re not a human trafficker?”

“Do you think I’m one?”

Ling looks at Ms Fung, her broad, sturdy frame. There’s something about Ms Fung’s directness that appeals to her. “No.”

“Well, then.”

“But I’ve never been out of China. I don’t know anything about Singapore.”

“It’s hot and everyone speaks English. Do you speak English?”

“Yes.” She does, in fact, speak and read English, much better than even the laboratory head; languages have always come easily to her.

Ms Fung reaches out one firm, stubby-fingered hand and circles Ling’s wrist with her thumb and finger, as though she’s taking possession of some rare, precious bird that might take flight.

“Then you’ll do fine.”

## *Cheung Fai*

The early morning sky was overcast. Clumps of furry, shirred clouds, resembling nothing so much as fields of dead grey mice, hung low over the horizon. Grey mouse day. Ordinarily, Assistant Superintendent Wong Cheung Fai liked grey mouse days, with the sun veiled and the air cool against the skin. But not today.

He’d broken into a run as he crossed the lawn towards the swimming pool and now he skidded to a halt by a deckchair and gazed down at the body of the young woman floating face-down in the pool. She was naked, probably East Asian from her skin tone, her long black hair fanning out in a peacock’s train across her upper back. Shapely, too: he observed, with not entirely professional detachment, the slim torso, the long, toned legs. Upright, she must have cut a willowy figure of about five feet ten or more. So different from the short, wiry compactness of his wife and yet, there was something oddly familiar about the girl’s body that he was unable to place immediately. Curling over her left shoulder was a small, iridescent dragonfly tattoo. She bobbed, gently, just below the water surface; she might have been sleeping.

A slight breeze stirred the surface of the pool and the girl’s hair rippled. For a moment, it seemed as though she would lift her head and rise up out of the water, and Cheung Fai heard a

## *About the Author*

At the age of seventeen, Tham won two second prizes in the 1984 National Short Story Writing Competition for “Homecoming” and “Fascist Rock.” Her debut collection, *Fascist Rock: Stories of Rebellion* (1990), secured the National Book Development Council of Singapore Commendation Award (Fiction) in 1992. *Saving the Rainforest and Other Stories* (1993) won a Highly Commended Award (Fiction) from NBDCS in 1995. She has also collected two Golden Point Awards, in 1999 and 2001, for her stories, *The Gunpowder Trail* and *Driving Sideways*. “Lee” (from *Fascist Rock*), was adapted for television on MediaCorp’s *Alter Asians*, while the title story from Tham’s third collection, *The Gunpowder Trail and Other Stories* (2003) has been adapted for the stage. Tham read Law at Oxford. She is currently a partner at a law firm in Singapore.