

These Foolish Things & Other Stories
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ISBN: 978-981-09-5060-6

Published under the imprint Ethos Books
by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
28 Sin Ming Lane #06-131
Singapore 573972
www.ethosbooks.com.sg
www.facebook.com/ethosbooks

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Cover design by The Press Room
Layout by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
Printed by Ho Printing Singapore Pte Ltd

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National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Yeo, Wei-Wei, author.

Description: These foolish things & other stories / Yeo Wei Wei. | Singapore: Ethos Books, [2015] | pages cm

Identifiers: OCN922305537 | ISBN 978-981-09-5060-6 (paperback)

Subject(s): Hope -- Fiction. | Desire -- Fiction. | Regret -- Fiction.

Classification: LC Classification PR9570.S53 | DDC S823--dc23

THESE FOOLISH THINGS & OTHER STORIES

YEOWEIWEI



in memory of my grandmother Teo Siew Heng

(1927 - 2015)

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THESE FOOLISH THINGS

Waiting for her husband to come home from work, Yuan sets the polka-dotted plate at the centre of the teak dining table. Signs of the handiwork of the afternoon's sudden downpour are visible everywhere in the apartment. Loose sheets of the *Financial Times* have been scattered by the wind, intruding through the floor-to-ceiling glass doors. Yuan watches as a yellow umbrella, left open to dry, is nudged this way and that by the blustery wind, looking as if it were unsure to stay or to go.

There is a puddle of rainwater in the dining room, on the side that opens out onto the terrace, exposed today and other days before it to wind and rain. Gusts of air dart across the water, scattering the light. A rain-soaked satin bra and panties with ivory lace trimmings, draped on a rack out on the terrace, return Yuan's stare with undampened forthrightness.

At the other end of the apartment another set of glass doors, also left open, leads to the balcony. A sheet of newspaper streaks through this gateway to the open, slapping straight into the balustrade. Only the wind regains its freedom, fleeing gaily back to nature.

How many times has she had to remind Danny to make sure the windows and doors are closed before going out! In

the kitchen unwashed breakfast things sit in the sink: two mugs with the dried stains of this morning's coffee, plates with toast crumbs. She shrugs. Some things will never change.

Twenty storeys below the apartment lies Kallang River, dwarfed in age only by the skies. On and on it goes, drowsy and carefree, sidling up to the city. It glitters under the bright afternoon sun, dismissing the ghosts of sawmills, the jumbled baleful faces of earlier settlements.

In the '50s the area was populated by timber factories and charcoal merchants. The businesses were uprooted and relocated in the '70s during a river cleaning campaign: huts and sawmills were demolished, sampans beached and carted away. Real estate developers muscled in on the land, building high-rise condominiums like this one.

Out with the old, in with the new, Yuan murmurs as she takes in the view of the city from the balcony. But some things are perpetual. She stares at the jagged line-up of skyscrapers, battlements of steel and glass, institutions and structures that outlast the people in them.

It was their ritual, Danny's and hers, to watch the National Day fireworks display from their balcony. Soaring into the dark, hissing and crackling, the fireworks bloom like chrysanthemums of light. Their rays cascade down to earth, falling on the face of the river before they dissolve and nothing remains except for wisps of smoke and the acrid smell of sulphur.

She crosses over to the dining room. The clock on the walnut side cabinet, bought in the third year of their marriage, shows the time soundlessly. It has been moved from their bedroom and it surprises her still, to see it in its new setting.

The newspaper sheets flutter and flap. An angry, impotent sound, lashing out at the air as if they are upset by its indifference. Or is it she who has become indifferent to air? Inconsequential air. Gazing at the terrace, she looks at the lingerie, resisting the urge to unpeg them and toss them, piece by piece, to the wind.

Hours later, the front door opens and Danny walks in, followed by a woman with waist-long hair. Her neck and cheeks are pink.

"You forgot to close the doors."

Danny darts around, gathering the dispersed newspapers. Yuan waits. He does not see the polka-dotted plate.

"You forgot to close the doors," she repeats.

The woman has reappeared with a mop and a pail.

With unflickering eyes, Yuan watches as her husband says something that makes the woman giggle. She looks on long enough to take in the sparkle in his eyes, his arm encircling the woman's waist. Out on the balcony, Yuan presses her face into the skirt of the expansive night sky.

The moon is luminous and distant.

Amid the sound of voices and more giggling, she hears the mop handle crashing to the floor, a door opening, a thud, the sound the bedroom door makes as a foot nudges it to close.

What Yuan wants more than anything else is for everything to cease. She cannot bear the thought of going on like this. This hateful shadowy non-life. She longs for a proper ending with nothing else afterwards. How many times has she tried to hold her breath to block the passage of air into her nostrils? Weren't her lungs clogged in Phuket? Why won't death fully erase her? This afterlife, becoming this in-between something or other that people cannot see or feel or know, when did she sign up for this?

"Danny," she whispers to the inky night sky, tipping her head back, seeing the letters of his name float from her mouth. The word blooms and wilts.

Funny how her actually being dead confronts her with feelings and meanings that she took as 'dead' whilst she was alive.

"Danny, come back. I have something to say to you."

Funny that she should be uttering now the very words she used before leaving for Phuket, the last time they spoke.

“Come back, I have something to say to you,” she had said.

“So say it.”

“You’ve known about this trip for some time. I’ll go and do my thing, and I’ll return, as I always do.”

“Why?”

What his question meant, neither of them could say. In the solitary months afterwards she floundered in her memory of this scene like a drowning person grappling for dry land.

“Will you listen if I try to...” Try to give us a second chance. The unspoken words had been used before. Tired words conscious of their futility, taunting her to use them again, to give *them* a second chance.

“Don’t insult me, Yuan,” he said.

“I don’t understand why you are making such a fuss this time,” she said, changing tack.

The jubilant cheers of dragon boaters on the river drifted up to the apartment. An image of the bronzed, unbridled torsos of young men, damp with the splash of water from oars and perspiration, flitted across her mind.

“I just want... happiness... for both of us,” she said.

She stopped when she saw the look on his face.

He could allow her to go where each moment led her, to let her will have its way; he could bear all that. But to see her pretty eyes plead on his and her behalf for something they mutually knew to be as impermanent as sparks of light on water – this was asking too much.

§

Phuket. 26 December 2004. The wave was grey. Minutes before it crashed onto land, small animals could be seen dashing away from the seaside towards higher ground. The sea surged across the beach towards the town, carrying deck chairs, tables,

roadside stalls, everything that could not escape or did not run away fast enough. It rampaged across buildings that were five storeys high, swallowing up cars, lorries, vans, motorcycles, bicycles, tires, tables, chairs, strollers, beds and people, still in bed after Christmas Day’s revelry. Those who were awake saw the murky churning waters, a flood of scum and refuse coming at them. The ones who were swept along howled and screamed until no sound was emitted by mouths and lung tissue clogged by grey scummy water. Those who managed to wrap their limbs around the trunks of telephone posts and coconut trees clung on like iron filings riveted on magnets.

Yuan was one of the thousands holidaying in beach resorts along the Indian Ocean when the tsunami struck that morning. The man asleep beside her – Oliver, her lover, divorcee, father of two children. Since the morning of their drowning she has not seen him.

The smell of his skin alone used to make her wet with desire, a clean bergamot fragrance that called out to her from the first moment she succumbed to his kisses. His face with the angles she loved to trace with her finger as he slept, his soft mouth slightly open.

They had checked in under the names of Mr and Mrs Moon. The beautiful bones of Mr Moon’s face shattered by the ugly fists of the sea. His flesh nibbled by fish and plankton in a watery grave thousands of kilometres away from home.

Leaving the sun umbrella before it was rolled up at night by the boy from the beach club, Yuan sat and watched the waves charge towards land, puffing and raging until they collided into the placid sand and fizzled into foam. She rubbed her soles against the rough grainy sand. It never ceased to amaze her, how her scraping left no trace.

After the rescue workers left Phuket, the only signs of life came from the sputtering of motorcycles, the hum of cicadas and the cawing and cackling of crows. There she was for many

months, listening to these sounds, a marooned shade-body.

One day at midday (and as she was to find out, the time when the sun is at its deadliest), a jazz singer's velvety voice made her forget herself and she slid out of the beach umbrella.

*Gardenia perfume lingering on a pillow
wild strawberries only seven francs a kilo
and still my heart has wings
these foolish things remind me of you...*

Yuan leapt back into the folds of the umbrella, cradling and licking her singed skin. Post-death she might be susceptible still to a love song's enchantment, yet her body had gained different reasons to quake and quiver.

Lorries carrying construction workers and cement mixers trundled up and down the streets. Lights came back on inside shuttered shops and restaurants. Tourists were starting to trickle back into town. At first they were mainly Caucasians, backpackers, sprightly retirees from Germany.

With her new experience of dying and ghosting, she could finally write a bestseller. For the longest time her publisher had been cajoling her to write ghost stories. But he may not appreciate an overseas call from her at this point in time. The distance between Singapore and Phuket vanished through a phone call – if only she could travel via telephonic electric currents!

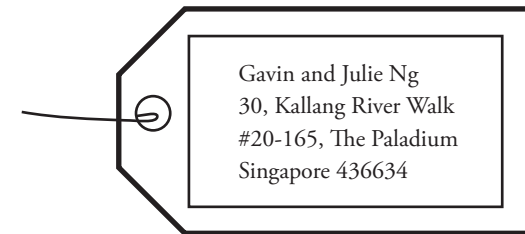
She spent hours trying out different modes of transport. On any day she could be rolling down roads inside an empty beer can until it came to rest by the kerb or was obstructed by piled up rubbish. Or she could be blowing and punching the insides of a plastic bag to make it flutter towards the shade of banana trees, peering through the plastic to steer clear of motorcycles and street dogs.

On the day that was the start of her passage home, she was asleep inside the beach umbrella when she heard a man exclaim,

“Aiyah! Don't waste money on this lah!” Her ears pricked up. When the umbrella was opened, she peered down, spread as thin as a layer of oil in a wok. The beach boy was setting out two deck beds, unfolding striped towels for a couple who stood in the sun, tapping away at their mobile phones.

“How long do we have to be out here?” the woman said, smoothing large dollops of sunblock on her face and arms. When she was done, she quickly picked up her yellow umbrella.

Back in their villa, when Yuan saw the couple's luggage tags, she danced and whooped with joy like a streamer buoyed by a sudden breeze:



As the couple busied themselves with last minute packing, Yuan slipped back inside Julie Ng's yellow umbrella. It had a much smaller circumference than the one at the beach club, but the fabric was also thinner and more stretchable. She contorted her body around the stretchers, bending her arms and legs at awkward angles, tucking her head into her stomach, pressing her nose into her belly button.

Every inch of her body was in pain. But how her heart was ablaze! She smacked her lips, grinning, savouring the salt of the Andaman Sea for the last time.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family for their love and for being a compelling reason to not write or edit on Sundays. To the friends who have made my journey as a writer less solitary in one way or another, I can only say thank you, two words that don't quite do the job of expressing my sense of blessing that we met: Mewsy Adkus, Chelsea Baranski, John Batten, Kelley Cheng, Heman Chong, Chong Lii, Maryelle Demongeot, Fong Hoe Fang, John Koh, Lee Yuen Shih, Bevin Ng, Tania Roy, Liz Simpson, James Teo, Joce Teo, Yvonne Tham, Michelle Turkie, Ellen West, Yeo Li Li. I am also grateful to my friends at Squaw Valley Community of Writers and Faber Academy; I have learnt so much from all of you.

Two of the stories were originally published in very different form in the following: *QLRS*: 'The Beholder'; *Silverfish New Writing* 7: 'Beer in Fukuoka'.

Five of the stories were originally published in slightly different form in the following: Ethos chapbook: *These Foolish Things*; *QLRS*, *Union: 15 Years of Drunken Boat*, *50 Years of Writing from Singapore*: 'Branch'; *Passages, Here and Beyond*, *QLRS*: 'Here Comes The Sun'; *Twenty-Two New Asian Short Stories*: 'The National Bird of Singapore'; *Stationary*: 'Innocence'.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Yeo Wei Wei is a Singaporean writer and translator. *These Foolish Things & Other Stories* is her debut collection of short stories. She is currently working on a novel.

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