

“Felix Cheong has a powerful narrative idea: to look on the world we know from the station of an exit door. Each eventual non-closure is certain and deafening — but how do stories sound at the point just before words fall over the edge? These are unnerving, wonderfully nasty tales.”

– Dr Gwee Li Sui, Literary critic, poet, and graphic artist

“Cheong's stories are steeped in a kind of mysterious melancholy and Cheong brings them to life with his page-turning prose. As a fascinated reader, I found myself asking, where will Mr. Cheong go next? And usually, I felt myself riveted by the twists and turns that followed. These are stories that will not only keep you reading, they may keep you awake and wondering.”

– Dr David Fedo, Author of *Carrots and Other Poems*

““Ways of loss”, a phrase from one of his stories, could be an alternative title to this riveting collection. Felix Cheong's characters, or parts of their bodies or spirits, as they are usually self-conflicted, vanish. The alert, nuanced prose style precariously balances the suspension between appearance and reality. The reader cannot help but read on.”

– Dr Robert Yeo, Poet, playwright, novelist and S.E.A. Write Award winner, 2012

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FELIX CHEONG

# VANISHING POINT

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**By the same author**

**Poetry**

*Temptation and Other Poems* (1998)

*I Watch the Stars Go Out* (1999)

*Broken by the Rain* (2003)

*Sudden in Youth: New and Selected Poems* (2009)

**Young adult fiction**

*The Call from Crying House* (2006)

*The Woman in the Last Carriage* (2007)

**Non-fiction**

*Different* (2005)

For Georgette

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The Little Drummer Boy: *The Straits Times*

The 10<sup>th</sup> Floor: *Coast*

Because I Tell: *A Monsoon Feast*

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## Foreword

Felix Cheong occupies a rare and rarified space among Singapore writers.

He is one of the few authors who convincingly straddles the third-wave of Singapore literature (comprising writers such as Simon Tay, Claire Tham, Heng Siok Tian and Boey Kim Cheng), and its diverse fourth-generation (including the infamous ‘Class of 1995’ of Alvin Pang, Toh Hsien Min, Yong Shu Hoong, Yeow Kai Chai, Paul Tan and Gwee Li Sui).

Yet, he is also one of the community’s most progressive writers. In his early work, Felix mastered an unmistakable lyric voice, high on tenderness and semantic gymnastics. As soon as he became defined by that form, he abandoned it and immersed himself in milieus that enabled him to take on the haunting personas of strippers, prostitutes and killers.

And so he goes, constantly pushing himself to the vanishing point, before reinventing himself again.

In over a decade, Felix, a former Vice-President of the NUS Literary Society, has evolved from a lyric poet (*Temptation and Other Poems*), to a Beat Culture versemaker (*I Watch the Stars Go Out*), to an editor of erotic fiction, to a novelist and finally to giving up poetry altogether.

I was present at Felix’s book launch of *Sudden in Youth: New and Selected Poems* where he declared that he was no longer

writing in verse thereafter. This would have been a tragic revelation if not for the fact that every ending for Felix has been a transformational beginning.

*Vanishing Point* is a case in point. The collection portrays a magically realistic universe reminiscent of Murakami, of people who mysteriously disappear, who harbour untold secrets, are behavioural addicts and who are haunted by psycho-physiological demons such as phantom limbs.

Logic is also often turned on its head, in a manner which is as surprising as it is comforting in its inevitable truth.

In *Because I Tell*, a young man learns from his mother the reason drains in Geylang smell rotten like old eggs from their old fridge: “It is because Geylang hides many people’s dirty secrets. Many people go to Geylang to do things they cannot do in the day. That is why it smells bad”.

And as with people in hiding, it is the absences and emptiness in *Vanishing Point* which define the collection: the tension perpetually existing between the desire for nullity and the inexorable persistence of being. From *The Little Drummer Boy*: “You would not think a person would disappear so easily, in this small country where no patch was left unturned, no nook left untouched”.

In portraying this small country, where the hinterland is often imagined rather than real, Felix expands our focal point, extending our vision into endless possibilities. In the eponymous line in *True Singapore Ghost Story*, the protagonist Wong responds to profound adversity by merely nodding and “staring at the vanishing point far into a diminishing horizon”.

There is a song by latter-day post-punk band New Order - itself a rebirth of the seminal Joy Division after its lead singer

Ian Curtis hung himself - which best characterises Felix's journey as a writer leading up into this pivotal work: about going and grinding against the grain, about giving up and gaining new lives. Not unsurprisingly, the track, from the album *Technique*, is also titled *Vanishing Point*. An excerpt:

My life ain't no holiday  
I've been through the point of no return  
I've seen what a man can do  
I've seen all the hate of a woman too  
  
Feel your heartbeat lose the rhythm  
He can't touch the world we live in  
Life is short but love is strong  
There lies a hope that I have found

Being a man of many journeys, not less the defining walk between two generations of authors, people always want to know where Felix has just come from, and where he is going to next.

Where he is now, however, is very clear: he is on the verge of disappearing deep into our consciousness again, and these pages are his wormholes.

*Daren Shiau*

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Daren Shiau is the author of four books, including *Heartland* (1999) which won the 1998 Singapore Literature Prize Commendation Award. In 2002, he received the National Arts Council's Young Artist of the Year Award for Literature.

As we approach the vanishing point, the body increasingly becomes a matter of the head...The human body is taken up into the heady eye of mind.

– Robert Romanyshyn, 'The Window and the Camera'

## In The Dark

Pek's wife's hair began appearing in the house exactly a week after she had disappeared and a few days before the strange knocks on his door. At first, there were just a few strands, with uneven flecks of cloudy-white, straight and as long as his hand. He thought they were blown in from the outside, since the December sea breeze had been particularly wayward the past week, howling well into the night.

Soon after, more strands began showing up; lazy and almost incidental on the marble-white floor, despite his efforts at keeping his four-room HDB flat spick and span. Now that he was retired, relieved of the need to leave the house, Pek would spend the whole day cleaning it.

In the morning, he would dust the furniture, sweep and mop the floor, making sure no grotto hid cunningly between tiles and no insect lived greedily in cupboards and cracks in the walls. By mid-day, after a quick lunch of bread and hot barley, he would give the kitchen and bathroom wall tiles an once-over with Clorox and scrub the toilet bowl till it gleamed like an ivory-white trophy. By evening, after another meal of

bread and hot barley, he would bleach bed sheets and towels, starch and iron his pale-white cotton shirts, singlet and briefs. Before going to bed, Pek would give his house a final inspection, checking for dust with a white glove worn on his right hand. It was exhausting work and although he was already in his mid-sixties and his eyesight was not so good anymore, Pek still had considerable nervous energy about him which radiated through furtive eyes and a sensitive nose flaring at anything that had not been edified by a cleaning agent.

Needless to say, Pek never cooked at home, not even fried himself an egg, steamed a bun or microwaved a hotdog. The smell, grime and grease would have sullied the postcard godliness. Everything in the house had to be snow-white, from appliances to drapery, from pots to utensils. He would not have it any other way. Whatever he could not find in white, he would paint, lacquer and varnish white. Or he would cover the exposed surfaces with white cloth as though the owner had long taken off for a holiday.

As with everything else in his life, there was reason in his method. For one, having everything in white spared him the hassle of colour-matching the décor. For Pek was born with a rare condition in which only a single optic nerve channelled the outside world to his brain. This meant he could not distinguish between colours and could perceive, at most, variations in brightness. Red was as green as blue and they all made absolutely no sense to him. In effect, the viewfinder of his eyes tidied up reality into permanent waves of white, akin to watching life through a white-on-white television screen. It was sharp and crystal-clear; he could notice details at one glance which no one could have spotted nor understood.

Pek had thus never known the frivolity of rainbows or roses, the transience of fireworks or sunsets. Too much fuss for no returns, he reckoned. Given his condition, he could not drive, paint or design a birthday card. All his clothes, socks and shoes were in shades of white: off-white, egg-white or porcelain-white. He spared himself the illusion of choice and settled for efficiency instead. It did not matter to him that he was not like normal people, for whatever he did not have or could not do, he would not have missed anyway. He saw his condition simply as simplification, the same way scientists like Einstein sought to reduce natural phenomena into one brilliant, immutable equation. To live was to discover this equation, complete with the full force of logic, unquestionable and fully realised. Everything else, like the split-hair difference between sky-blue and baby-blue, between pink and fuchsia, was chaos and clutter, dust and disturbance.

Which was why Pek's job in the army fit him like a glove. There were rules no one could browbeat into submission or bend backwards for. There was protocol to follow, forms to inform and conform, a tick for a 'yes' and a cross for a 'no'. There were checklists, lists of checks and balances, the balance of order and an order as certain as sunrise.

But not everyone knew how things ought to be slotted and allocated. Which was where Pek came in, given his gift for *reductio ad essential*, in reclassifying and filing documents. He had joined the army as a junior clerk and risen, the way driftwood rose naturally with the tide, to senior clerk grade one by the time he retired. Scanning memos, letters and any document that found its way to his in-tray, Pek would spend hours at his desk – coffee-stain-free, pencils sharpened and arranged by



length – deciding how best to re-classify them. He had a knack of cutting big words, jargon and obfuscation down to size. His equipment: five stamps variously labelled, ‘Top Secret’, ‘Secret’, ‘Confidential’, ‘Restricted’ and ‘Unclassified’. And he applied these tools of his trade without fear or favour, stamping his decision over the original on every single page.

A letter marked ‘Confidential’ by CO Lim about a camp-wide exercise to condemn old cupboards? Definitely an ‘Unclassified’, and Pek duly stamped it so. A memo marked ‘Top Secret’ by Chief Cook Tan about reducing the men’s rations by one dish? Without a doubt, a ‘Restricted’, and he duly dispatched it as such.

“Pek, what will I do without you?” Chief Clerk Aziz had asked rhetorically when Pek’s promotion to corporal was made official in the camp’s Routine Order.

Aziz had long run out of cabinet filing space for ‘Top Secret’ and ‘Secret’ documents, so fond of hush-hush classifications were officers at the camp. Even their leave applications were marked ‘Secret’ as though enemies of the state cared whether they had gone on a diving trip to Tioman or a shopping spree in Bangkok. Filling out a requisition form for a new set of cabinets, however, was out of the question. It meant paperwork, for which Aziz had no inclination, and questions from his superiors, for which he had no patience.

Pek was thus a godsend. He might be finicky about wiping all the desks in the office for an hour before getting down to work. He might empty the wastepaper baskets every two hours. But once he got down to work, Pek would clear his in-tray by the end of the day, however thin or thick the stack, without complaint or slacking and always promptly at six. It was so precise you could adjust your watch by his routine.

Misclassification was never an issue, since no one would relook documents after they had been filed. To Aziz, Pek’s work was all about the equitable distribution of space. And since ‘Restricted’ and ‘Unclassified’ documents would be shredded after a year, he could now make room for more documents without having to tediously type a three-page requisition for new cabinets. It was like an en bloc sale, albeit on a smaller scale, bringing down the old in order to make way for the new.

“You know what you are, Pek? You are like a reverse Ikea manual!” Aziz told him one morning, genuinely pleased his subordinate had just unceremoniously consigned a stack of ‘Top Secret’ files relating to the National Day Parade five years ago, to ‘Unclassified’. “You can unpack and dismantle things till the parts are flat-packed again!”

Pek did not understand what Aziz meant. Why would anyone want to dismantle furniture after they had been assembled? Wasn’t the furniture more efficient in an assembled rather than dismantled form? He nodded uncomprehendingly and returned his attention to the letter in his hands.

Efficiency: that was what Pek loved to think about during his lunch hour. He would submit Work Improvement suggestions, two a day, regular as clockwork. On sheer numbers alone, he had won the camp’s award for most contributions outright six years in a row until CO Lim barred him from taking part. Pek would then channel his suggestions directly to his office.

The idea of making things efficient excited Pek, especially the challenge of streamlining processes into a viable procedure. For example, he once put forth the idea that the army’s Physical Employment Status or PES, the standard by which servicemen were classified according to their physical fitness, be reduced to just two categories. Or to be exact, one question.

“Classification of servicemen should be based on patriotism rather than fitness,” Pek had written in his Work Improvement form, neatly-typed in Courier New, twelve-point font, double-spacing. “If you are a PES A but a coward, you will run away in times of war. If you are a PES E but patriotic, you will stand up to the enemy’s bullets. No amount of training can teach you patriotism and why you must die for your country. You either have it or you do not. It is a non-negotiable item. So, I suggest the five PES categories be reduced to two. This is how it works. All servicemen, upon enlistment, will be solemnly asked this question: are you prepared to die for your country? If they answer ‘yes’, they are fit to serve. If they answer ‘no’, they are exempted from national service and will be stripped of their citizenship with immediate effect, since the country has no need for such people.”

Pek heard, by way of Aziz by way of CO Lim, that his proposal was actually tabled as a White Paper by the Perm Sec<sup>o</sup> and presented to the Cabinet, although he was not credited for it. The patriotism angle had apparently moved a few ministers to tears. But the proposal never saw the light of day and nothing more came of it. Still, it was reassuring for Pek to know some of the higher-ups did appreciate his ideas about order and simplification.

You could thus appreciate Pek’s annoyance when stray hair began inviting themselves into his house, though his windows were always closed, his door double-locked and their gaps hermetically sealed with carefully-folded rags. Despite his arsenal of cleaning tools and agents, he found hair in the dirt-trap in the bathroom, beside the stove, on the sofa, under the bed. He was even alarmed to find a small hairball in the fridge. This would not do, this would not do.

He picked up the strands, held them up against the light. His annoyance turned to puzzlement when it dawned on him that they belonged to Sum, who had disappeared exactly a week ago. Unmistakably so. A man would recognise his wife’s hair after being married to her for twenty years.

Was Sum back? Now that he was retired, he was rarely out of the house and would surely have heard if she had come home. Did she sneak in when he was asleep? He was a light sleeper and would have heard the key turning and the door yawning open.

No matter how he turned it over in his mind, he could not fathom it. Where would a woman in her mid-fifties have disappeared to? More importantly, why, especially since she had practically no money of her own? Sum was made redundant from her job as a cashier more than twenty years ago. As far as Pek could remember, whatever savings she had had long gone into buying whitening creams which he had insisted she needed.

Sum was a dark Peranakan Chinese, with an even tan and a flattish face framing a pair of dark eyes. At a distance, she could easily be mistaken for an Indian. To Pek, his wife was literally an absence of light, a black hole into which her features - even at times, her personality – disappeared. Sometimes, he would pass her in the dining hall without sensing her presence. She was there but only just so, the same way you would only notice a wall if you happened to walk into it.

That was, in fact, Pek’s first impression of Sum when they had gone out on a blind date. It was arranged by their respective mothers, concerned that their children might be assimilated into another statistic about the alarming numbers of singles in the country. No doubt, a statistic the Prime Minister would wring his hands over and again during his next National Day Rally speech.

Sum was thirty-five at that time and had not found a job after her retrenchment, her prospects – in career and matrimony – dimmed somewhat by a mousey manner and hesitant speech. She did not seem to have an opinion about anything – not as far as Pek could tell – and if she did, she certainly found a good corner in her mind to hide it.

At forty-two, Pek had already reached a plateau in his career. He could aspire to the Chief Clerk position but Aziz, younger than him by nine years, still had years to go before his retirement. Pek's salary was comfortable, notching up the scale with every passing year; he had a flat to call his own and he had household chores to look forward to after office hours. He had never dated nor seen the need to get married. One more person in the house would surely double the mess. Pek would have it known and he lost no words in telling Sum so, that he only went out with her – and eventually married her – to please his mother. There was no wedding dinner; it would have been messy and pointless. A simple solemnisation at the Registry of Marriage, attended by his parents and hers, was enough to set the record straight.

Married life, to Pek, made no dent or headway. He kept to himself most of the time, talking to Sum as a necessity rather than choice. They slept in separate rooms, ate out separately – he forbade her to cook - and rarely went out together. He still left for work promptly at eight, five days a week, returning home at seven sharp. Nothing seemed to have changed, except now, he had an extra pair of hands to clean the house when he was at work. What an efficient idea marriage was.

And contrary to his initial belief, Sum did not double the mess. Instinctively, she took to his instructions as though she, too, saw the world furiously in shades of white.

But one thing Pek could not accept was how dark Sum's skin was. If she could be as white as she was diligent, that would be perfect. This thought occurred to Pek one evening when he almost ran into her while hurrying to the storeroom.

“Can you make a sound when you see me coming?” he said, annoyed. “Research shows a lot of accidents happen at home.”

“But I am here,” Sum said, almost in a whisper. “Can't you see me?”

“You are too dark to be seen,” he said. He decided if he could not see her, given his condition, she just had to make herself more visible to him. She had to be reclassified, given the right stamp so that she could be filed away in the right place. An elegant solution to a simple problem.

“I have heard about a cream which a lot of Asian women use to whiten their skin. I want you to buy a tub and try it,” he told her. And he promptly disappeared to the storeroom to continue mopping the floor.

Over the next few months, to his delight, he observed how Sum's skin began lightening. From a burnt-out charcoal, it took on hues of pasty pallour, as though a painter had dipped her body, somewhat clumsily, in a pool of white paint. Whatever else could be said about this cream, it certainly worked.

Emerging from his bedroom one muggy evening, Pek finally noticed her, on her hands and knees, scrubbing the floor. “You are almost white. I can see you now,” he said in a tone close to complimentary. His wife nodded, acknowledging this almost-compliment. “It looks good,” he continued. “Now do something about your hair. It is neither black nor white. Dye it white.”

“But I like my hair,” Sum said, her voice squeaky and quiet. Pek could not see into her eyes – they were too dark - to make out whether she was defiant or deficient. He decided it was both.

“Can’t you see it does not match?” Pek said, a little taken aback that she might, in fact, be talking back at him. “You, of all people, should know about my condition. White has to go with white. I cannot see clearly otherwise. So, if your skin is white, so must your hair. Look around you. In this house, everything is white on white. It is for a reason.”

“But I like my hair. I like it the way it is,” Sum said again, still keeping her voice on an even keel.

“Dye it white, or I may have to do it for you,” Pek said, his voice firm and final, and returned to his bedroom to clean the cupboard. To prolong the conversation was fruitless. It would go round and round, harvesting nothing but more words. Words, like colours, tended to cloud the truth, muck it up in thick, unwieldy layers. This was why in the army, orders were orders. No ifs or buts. A left turn was a left turn. Not a maybe, not a right. And whatever that was not right had to be put right.

The next day, the day Sum disappeared, as Pek remembered it, he had left for the supermarket, punctually at eight.

“Remember to dye your hair white,” he said.

She had smiled, wanly surfacing her dimples, and said, “I will dye. I will dye it so white you will see it everywhere.”

And that was the last he saw of her. When he came home promptly at nine, she was nowhere to be seen or heard.

Fingering and sniffing the strands again, Pek thought about what she had said. It had puzzled him like a riddle almost solved at the tip of his tongue. Was this her way of taking revenge on him, doubling the mess in the house? All he asked of her was

to dye her hair white. Which part did he not explain clearly and which part did she not understand?

His thoughts were interrupted once again by the strange knocks on his door which had taken on greater urgency. This was strange; he had never had visitors before.

“Mr Pek? We are here about your wife. We found her body...” a disembodied voice said when he unlatched and unlocked the door, taking care to check the rags under the door for hair. Who was talking to him? The sun was rising, straight and unforgiving in his eyes, the wind rattling his body in its tattered singlet and soiled shorts. In one gnarled hand, he held a scrubbing brush and in the other, a bottle of Clorox.

Since he saw no one at the door, Pek decided it must be the wind carrying a conversation over from somewhere else. Or maybe a neighbourhood child playing a prank on him. He closed the door quickly, spraying the Clorox into the sun, before the wind could bring in a swirl of dust, and set about putting his house in order again. There was a lot of hair to be cleared before he was done cleaning the house today, tomorrow and many days after.

## About The Author



Felix Cheong is the author of seven books, including four collections of poetry, two young adult novels and a non-fiction anthology of interviews. He has also edited a volume of essays and written two plays, one of which was commissioned for the Singapore Arts Festival in 2004.

Felix has been invited to read at writers' festivals all over the world, including Edinburgh, Austin, Sydney and Christchurch. His poems are widely anthologised and have been featured on TV, read on radio and staged. In 2000, he received the National Arts Council's Young Artist of the Year for Literature Award and in 2010, he was named by Readers' Digest as the 29<sup>th</sup> Most Trusted Singaporean.

Felix completed his Master of Philosophy in Creative Writing at the University of Queensland in 2002. He is currently an adjunct lecturer with Murdoch University, University of Newcastle and University of Western Australia.