

When The Bough Breaks

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September Season 2001, in response to September 11 2001.

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Tammy L Wong

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*For Summie, as you journey towards adulthood.
And for that anonymous girl who falls asleep each night,
dreaming of flight.*



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Foreword

Within the covers of this deceptively slim volume are two entire worlds, the worlds of two extraordinary women, leading lives fifty years apart. They are wives, daughters and mothers fully engaged in life and their community — they are gems in the crown of Singapore's proud history and wonderful examples of the concept of 'local hero'. But neither Tammy Wong nor her much admired Elizabeth Choy are 'heroines' from fiction; indeed both refuse to fit the classic mould: they are at once idiosyncratic and original whilst determinedly normal. Much has been written about the dilemma women face when forced to choose between marriage and a career, but Tammy and Elizabeth seem to suggest that both are part of a woman's vision and can be embraced naturally and with equal appetite, and that strident feminism is much ado about nothing.

Tammy Wong is best known through her dance company, her performances and teaching; she is one of the first Singaporean dancers to train extensively abroad and bring her skills home to benefit others. Elizabeth Choy is best known through her extraordinary strength and courage under Japanese torture during the occupation of Singapore. Though this book centres round the actual meeting and friendship of these two women, and is also the story of their lives and times, I value it most as a

record of courage in adversity and grace under extreme pressure. If ever two seemingly unlikely women were to be soul mates, it is Tammy and Elizabeth: revealing that friendship can be found in opposites and across generations. In life I suspect both women maintained secret centres, but in this book, they open their hearts and share all. Much has been already written about Elizabeth, so this is primarily the story of Tammy, but her personal discovery of Elizabeth — and Elizabeth's response — is the unique feature of this gentle work.

Tammy Wong's deliciously fresh writing style echoes her choreographic values: exactness, simplicity, grace and depth of heart. She is innovative also as a writer, playing with tense to make her events more immediate; and structuring in tantalising ways that gives glimpses of larger worlds. Sketching outlines, rather than colouring all her canvas, she has choreographed her writing with characteristic elegance and rigour.

As a theatre director and arts educator, I am always interested in the personal, the similarities as well as the differences, and I seek determination and aspirations. Tammy deals with these aspects, but like Elizabeth finds herself in frank pragmatic facts rather than recording anything of ego and self-promotion; and though difficulties are evident, these determined women never lose touch with their humanity, their compassion, interest in others, and appetite for life. There is something special in their quiet, passive resistance to all that would diminish their character.

Elizabeth had much more to do than dwell on the suffering in one part of her large life; similarly Tammy never once mentions the pain and suffering her body must have endured to reach dancing heights. Faith is a recurring theme: for Tammy, her belief in art — in her case dance — and for Elizabeth, her belief in a God of compassion and forgiveness. In the original nursery rhyme, when the bough breaks the loss is devastating;

but Tammy does not dwell upon the loss surrounding her at September eleven, nor Elizabeth at her World War II losses; instead she focuses upon survival, courage, resilience and human traits worth celebrating.

After reading of these women — and glimpsing their remarkable mothers — I'm reminded of the words of another great lady, Mary Gilmour, an Australian pioneer from the generation of Elizabeth's mother. Her words exemplify the same female fortitude:

Never admit the pain, bury it deep,

Only the weak complain, complaint is cheap...

Aubrey Mellor OAM

Senior Fellow, LASALLE College of the Arts

Aubrey Mellor holds an Australian Medal for services to the performing arts and has been working across Asia for forty years. An award-winning director, he has been Artistic Director of four significant theatre companies; and trained generations of actors, writers and designers — including several academy award winners. After being Dean of Performing Arts at LASALLE for four years, he is now a Senior Fellow.

Prelude

Tammy

I am often asked by strangers where I come from. During the early years spent at school in America, I would say, *Oh, Singapore*. Later especially when living in New York, I realized that it was just less of a hassle to say, I come from Los Angeles instead.

The *Oh Singapore* reply would invariably lead to explaining why English is my first language, and why I speak it without an exotic foreign accent. It would also mean lightly correcting my American stranger-friend, on the geographical location of Singapore.

No, Singapore is not a province in China. No, I have never been to China. No, even my grandmother does not speak Chinese nor does she wear traditional Chinese dress. Yes, that's right, we were once a colony. Yes, the country suffered immeasurably during the Second World War.

Born to a baby-boomer mother at the height of the People Action Party's 'Two Is Enough' policy, and growing up in Singapore in the 1980s, the drama of the Japanese Occupation for some reason permeated my subconsciousness. It seemed as if the older generation like my grandmother, her peers, and the Ministry of Education, were anxious that we who benefited from independence, self-rule, economic and political stability, never ever forget, how far as a nation we had come, and how hard life

had been, merely a few decades ago.

And so in some way, the stories of heroism, of self-sacrifice and unshakeable values, became woven into my growing up years. I remember Elizabeth Choy, our female war heroine, celebrated and revered, and I remember Lim Bo Seng, his valor and full commitment to the cause of justice.

Oh, Singapore. This child of yours also remembers Sang Nila Utama, Sir Stamford Raffles and the East India Company from history lessons with Mrs. Solomon at the convent school in Katong.

But it has always been the timeless story of Elizabeth Choy, her dignity and grace that captivated me.



I grew up in my grandmother (Popo)'s house. The house was always busy with nine teenagers living and growing up together. My cousins, brother and I played hard and fought as loudly. Sometimes my grandmother disciplined us — *belachan*^o on the lips for lying, the cane for everything else. Many times she left us alone to resolve our squabbles. I think the absence of an authoritative male figure and the omnipresence of my grandmother in these growing up years, made the Elizabeth Choy story even more appealing to me. My grandmother clad in her *sarong kebaya*^o with her unmatched culinary expertise was my hero. Occasionally, I think I confused the Elizabeth Choy story with Popo's life. Both to me were women of towering strength and ageless beauty. Popo I knew from family gossip then, had survived a very difficult marriage, crushed girlish dreams, and was capable of a love that was at once encompassing as it was divisive. Elizabeth Choy had endured the worst forms of cruelty and torture during the Japanese Occupation, and yet as I

had learnt in history, had not yielded under extreme strain, nor compromised herself, or others.

In 1996, heavily pregnant and miserable, I read Zhou Mei's book, *Elizabeth Choy — More than A War Heroine*. I think the story of Elizabeth Choy comforted me as hers was an illustration of female strength and power in the most tragic of times.

It would be a story I would return to years later, when in the aftermath of September 11 2001, I found myself for the first time in my life, with shattered dancing dreams, and an overwhelming sadness that made living each day almost unbearable. I went searching for her because I believed that if I encountered someone who had truly suffered so much more, perhaps I would then have some understanding, a map of sorts that would give me the resolve to move forward and to live, really live, again.

Elizabeth

The postman comes late in the morning. The hum of his motorbike interrupts my reading. Yati, my maid, stops her chores and walks outside to retrieve the mail. She hands me a stash of envelopes. There are the usual bills to be paid and a thin white envelope is addressed to me. The writing is light, lilting almost. There is a sense of impatience in the way my name has been printed. Within the envelope, I find a letter, explaining who she is. She would like to meet me. She would like to speak with me. She tells me she is an artist, a dancer. Her writing is polite but purposeful. She reminds me of another.

She says that her name is Tammy Wong. I read the letter again. She has included two numbers where she can be contacted. I ask Yati to bring the phone to me.

I sit down on my favorite chair. I look at the many photographs of my family, my loved ones, framed around the piano. I am an old woman now. I am no longer as busy or as active as I used to be. There is time in my afternoons for a *tête-à-tête* with a dancer, I think. So I read the numbers out loud as my fingers dial 9-7-4-5-4-3-9-3.

Her voice is unexpectedly young and hurried.

Hello Tammy? I say. I am Elizabeth Choy. You sent me a letter...

Tammy

In the early evening hours of September 11 2001, I am home fixing dinner when my daughter Summer, cries for me to come into the den. Her voice is alarming — *Mommy! Daddy wants you to look at this now! Come quickly! Mommy!*

Dishcloth in hand, I rush down a short corridor and poke my head into the first room. My husband is silent and still. My daughter is looking at me anxiously, unsure of what to say or do. On the TV screen, I see a plane plunge itself into one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in downtown New York City. There is hysteria in the newscaster's voice. There is a burst of flames and clouds of smoke. When the camera zooms in for a closer shot, there are people in business attire jumping out of the building.

It takes me a moment to find my breath and then I realize that what we are looking at is not some badly scripted Hollywood thriller, but is in fact, a real life event occurring in real time.

I am horrified. I am stunned. The nursery rhyme I used to sing to soothe an infant Summer to sleep, for some reason plays like a tedious record in my head.

Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetop,

When the wind blows, the cradle will rock,

*When the bough breaks,
When the bough breaks...
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall,
And down will come baby, cradle and all...*

I want to cry, scream, shout. New York for a young dancer was a temporary home, a place to make dancing dreams happen. New York for a young choreographer embodied similar promises. Watching the towers crumbling was to me, akin to watching all that I believed and trusted in, collapse before my very eyes.... The bough is breaking!

The world as I understood it, seems to come to an abrupt end for me that day. A deafening sound of silence rises within me. The silence burrows and burrows, at times undulating like a tide, at times whirling like a tornado, uprooting.

When at last I am able to look away and find my voice, I call my dancer EC, and tell her to turn on the TV. EC is out in town. She goes and stands by the large screen hanging above the Suntec City Mall, and watches the horror replay over and over again.

In September 2001, EC, Yong, Grace and I form the tammy l wong dance company, a non-profit modern dance company from Singapore that had just made our New York debut to much support, at the New York International Fringe Festival. Each day that we were in New York City, I would say to the dancers — walk towards the Twin Towers and you would be walking towards the theater. Walk away from the Twin Towers, and you would be walking back towards our hotel.

In September 2001, I am thirty-one years old and my dance career in Singapore is thriving. My dance company that started only three years ago on a shoestring budget and a prayer is now an audible voice in the local arts scene. In a short span of three years, we have represented Singapore at art festivals in Australia,

New Zealand, Korea, and the United States. We are actively engaged in arts education programs with schools, and have a busy season performing and touring. I find myself often used as the “face” of dance in Singapore, and along with my dancers, enjoy a substantial presence in local media.

In September 2001, my daughter turns five years old.

By September 2001, I have received the Montblanc Peak Magazine Businesswoman of the Year Award, become the first Singaporean dancer to be invited to the International Choreographers’ Residency Program at the American Dance Festival, and be selected by the National Arts Council for a danceWEB scholarship at Impulstse Dans Festival in Vienna, Austria. With an international touring grant, I then presented my work in New York City with my fledging dance company. Three days prior to September 11 2001, I returned from New York City, and was in the midst of preparing for the company’s highly anticipated September Season.

In the afterglow of our New York tour, I also made a mental note to now schedule an annual performance in the city, and seek out the appropriate platforms for this to be done. It was my hope that by performing before a more sophisticated, mature dance community, my company would be given the best environment for growth.

In September 2001, my daughter turned five years old. And the conflict that began from the moment of her conception — motherhood versus dance/dance versus motherhood never felt more acute.

The planes crashing into the World Trade Center, the war that resulted, a dramatic change in travel security, a spiraling economic situation that saw a dramatic cut in funding for the arts... all threw me off balance for a long time.

Watching the buildings fall, watching the world hate each other again and again, I stopped believing that art or my dance had any worth. Life is too short, too fleeting. Why was I *in pursuit of*, when here at home, was a very young child *in need of*? For what purpose? Whatever for?

I was devastated by the calamity of September 11. My dancing dreams in the light of such significant, global, life-altering events seemed so petty. I had worked so hard in the last few years to establish myself as a valid voice for dance, but now I no longer saw any point in this pursuit. Did it really matter? Who really cared about dance when there were immediate, pressing demands of a war, lost lives, a battered city, and closer to home, motherhood and marriage?

In September 2001, I finally made the decision to walk away from dance. I was going to give up my dance company. I was going to give back arts funding, give back arts housing. Never again, I told myself firmly. In this city, with what time I have, I shall instead remain anonymous as an artist. I shall walk away from Tammy L Wong. Henceforth, I will simply exist as Mrs. Jonathan Chan.

This decision was made with determined ease. And then in October of the same year, the National Arts Council gave me the Young Artist Award for my dance work and initiatives. I looked at the award — a shiny, heavy trophy. It felt like a punctuation mark in my career, an affirmation of my choice. This was in a sense the highest honor a young artist could ever hope to receive in her country. What more was there to strive towards, from this place?

But the sadness that began as a force of silence on that fateful September day, dug deeper and deeper within me. I found myself unable to cope and function as Mrs. Jonathan Chan. I was sad

because my adopted city for art was harmed. I was sad because I could not fathom that man was capable of so much hate. I was sad because I no longer had any dance hopes or dreams to lift and spur me. I was sad for all the lives lost on that terrible day, and for the lives that would be lost in the senseless war that unfolded. There were days I would wake up and feel I had no anchor within me, and no wish to live on. Time stretched on and on. I felt like I was sleepwalking through the days, the weeks. I questioned repeatedly, the sense in bringing up a child in this sort of world.

Towards the end of 2001, basic daily tasks of waking, eating, washing began to feel dangerously arduous. My husband suggested medical assistance, a therapist, and appropriate medication. But I was reluctant and obstinate. In the end, I decided instead to look for Singapore's beloved war heroine, Elizabeth Choy. All I wanted to know, was how a woman who had seen the beast in Man, found the courage to live on, and to live so fully.

Julie a dear friend and colleague of my mother-in-law's, got wind of my search. It turned out that she knew Mrs. Choy from St. Andrew's Church. It was Julie who told me that she was still alive. And it was Julie who then got her address for me.

So sometime at the start of 2002, in the midst of winding up my company and choreographing for the Singapore Dance Theater, I sat down and wrote a letter.

I had no expectations or hope. I was lost and I was curious. I mailed the letter and forgot all about it. But a few days after I sent the letter, I received a phone call.

Her voice was clear, but it was the voice of a woman much older and wiser than me.

“Hello Tammy? This is Elizabeth Choy... I got your letter...”

About Elizabeth Choy

Elizabeth Choy nee Elizabeth Yong Su-Moi (b. 29 November 1910, Kudat, Sabah – 14 September 2006, Singapore) is Singapore's beloved war heroine. Unjustly imprisoned and tortured for 193 days during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, Elizabeth spent her life engaged in teaching, good works and service to her community and nation. She was the first Principle of the Singapore School for the Blind, an active member of the Singapore Volunteers Corps, and the only female member of the Legislative Council in 1951. She represented Singapore at the 1953 Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, taught at the Church of England Zenana Mission School (currently, St. Margaret's school) and St Andrew's Schools. For her outstanding contributions, Elizabeth received the Order of the British Empire, the Order of the Star of Sarawak, The Girls' Guide Bronze Cross and the Pingkat Bakti Setia Award (Singapore). In 1997, the Singapore History Museum presented *Elizabeth Choy: A Woman Ahead of Her Time*, a special exhibition of her life, in her honor.

About the Author

Singapore-born Tammy L Wong is an award-winning dance artist whose works have been presented at festivals in Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Korea and the United States. The recipient of the 2001 Montblanc Businesswoman of the Year Award, the 2002 National Arts Council Young Artist Award (Dance) and the 2003 Chancellor's Fellowship (University of California, Irvine), Tammy has also received choreographic commissions from Blurred Borders International Dance Festival, The Esplanade Theatres on the Bay and the Singapore Dance Theatre. From October 2006 to May 2010, Tammy was appointed Head, and subsequently, Artistic Director of Dance at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. In 2010, she stepped away from dancing to write. Her first book *'A' is for Achar, 'L' is for Love*, was published in September 2011.



July 2004, Elizabeth with Tammy.
Photo credit: Summer Chan