

“It is rare to get such a range of experience in a single collection of poems. There are four sections: each looks a different way into different experiences with a different rhythm, style and degree of distance from the subject; like different neighbourhoods of the same city. Throughout, there is a real sense of a single life, highly varied and intensively lived, perceived and recorded. It does this without fear. Grace’s name in Mandarin is translated as "demure cloud" but the collection starts with a thunderstorm of emotions and perceptions, frantic, raucous and sometimes comic. As you move through the book, you will encounter social poems, family poems, travel poems, coming home poems, music poems, poetry poems and childbirth poems but the ones that cut the deepest into the reader's consciousness are poems of love and desire. They are open and direct and you cannot avoid their unaffected power.”

- Timothy O' Grady, author of *Motherland* and *I Could Read The Sky*

“Sensitive and evocative, Grace Chia’s poetry is more than equal to her wry and poignant observations of love and life. A worthy, long-awaited follow-up to her first volume, *womango*.”

- Felix Cheong, NAC Young Artist of the Year (Literature) 2000

“These poems pull electricity up from the magmatic earth and down from an ether crawling with myth and dream. They’re abundantly playful, riding hard on accelerated blood and jumpy nerves through broad, wild soundscapes. The passions written here are intimate but never closed. The poet brings the reader into a close and lively experience of the body and its layered realms as she roves from igloos to volcanoes to the rivers and quays of home. Home may never be quite familiar to this curious, unsettling gaze, but its pleasures, like many others, are richly rendered here.”

- Jen Crawford, author of *Bad Appendix* and *Napoleon Swings*

# Cordelia

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# Cordelia

*Grace Chia*

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*for Iva & Konstantin*

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## PREFACE

### The Cordelia Complex of Grace Chia

*Gwee Li Sui*

One simply does not come to the poetry of Grace Chia expecting gentleness or moderation. This lover of life thrives on turbulence, the kind that lets her tear towards the heroic with enormous awkward force. She may ultimately fall short of transcending the damned lot of her sexual and cultural identities, but it is quite enough for her to make futility know vengeful mischief. Chia has bite precisely because she dares to trope in ways a more cautious poet would have steered clear of. She mixes provocation with frivolity, breaks down cultural strata, layers excess with excess, and celebrates form and sound with rare compelling simplicity. Her voice seems to blurt, in bursts of energy that rattle the irons of language, willing poetry into a language of struggle.

All these still inadequately describe what Chia has managed to achieve with her long-awaited second collection of verse here. *Cordelia* reveals not merely a part-transformed environment with a music that firmly wants to move away from the usual ramble and wit of much Singaporean verse. This book also does something more; it offers a previously missing inner blueprint, one that has the potential of shedding light on the curious

furniture of Chia's poetic space. Indeed, we do well to see her exciting new resource less as a history of feeling or thought than as a collection of private manoeuvres, the cinders left behind by a trekker of life with all its promises, sharp turns, dead ends, anticlimaxes, and absurdities. Of course, we should have known better: no poetic sweetness could have been possible without the hard lessons of scars, these conduits of art. Chia shares her haunting moments with eerie accomplished calmness, and she makes every line in them sing. In a real way, we are only now starting to understand this poet.

Chia's development is especially significant in view of how, back in 1998 when her first volume *Womango* appeared, she was herself an agent of a different upheaval. Restless young Singaporean poets then – she, I, and others – were calling for change to our country's poetic vision via the instruments of our own verses. Each of us carried the art form in a distinct direction and sought to redefine for ourselves the private and public responsibilities of the literary figure. Chia was unique among us not just because she was conveniently the only woman; more importantly, she celebrated the female experience in an exuberantly immodest way that set her apart from older female poets such as Lee Tzu Pheng and Leong Liew Geok. As irony would have it, younger female poets after her, such as Teng Qian Xi and Grace Chua, took this freedom to its logical next step and spoke from an enforced position of equality and autonomous strength, eclipsing the ideological sexualised voice.

This leaves Chia today with a fateful loneliness, being an older and yet still unresolved presence. On the one hand, post-feminism has made it too easy for readers to misunderstand her radical sensualism and even be

embarrassed by her girlish frenzy and flamboyance. On the other hand, only Chia seems able to reaffirm for a new generation of sexual subjects the woman's daily private struggle with ghostly patriarchs, taboo desires and excesses, and her own changing body. The English writer Dorothy L. Sayers once warned against belittling the frivolous, noting how poetic language "is a web of light, the whole of which is spread through time and space, and quivers at every touch".<sup>1</sup> The connections Chia is making between her own lived and poetic past and present open up meaning in both directions and demonstrate the old paradox that the child is indeed mother of the woman.

Accordingly, I see the anchoring idea of this collection to be something amounting perhaps self-consciously to a Cordelia complex. There are several ways to manage a long-drawn struggle: Chia chooses to invert what she cannot discard into what she claims to be keeping by sheer resolve and reformulate the inability to move on as itself a healthy, if not ethical, position. We must nonetheless also find her implicitly acknowledging that the strategy bears a Shakespearean will to the tragic, underlying which is much doubt that good can come out of a poor bargain. The poet denies nothing of the agony, the work, and this consequence even as she insists on the virtue in holding to the attachments that hurt her. So the whimsical pop-cultural girl – who else could have seen in the Goyaesque *El Coloso* the Incredible Hulk or in a lover's presence kryptonite?

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1. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement and Other Posthumous Essays on Literature, Religion, and Language* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 272.

– survives. The futile postmodern games of subverting patriarchal language, dismembering and inverting the romance of London in "Don Lon" and punching the electronic Wonderland of "@lice", are still played.

Chia shows these aspects as, in fact, her responsible acts of wiring up to a culture and a time in order to clarify her own freedom. Being one of two kinds of poet, the type who waits for insights rather than one who writes into them, she sweeps for material through her experiences before and during her "silent" years and displays her vigilance in four distinct sections. The first section looks at the romantic waywardness of her past, the moments drunk on the indulgences of youth, the memories that have unknowingly shaped a beginning. The second turns to her encounters as a faceless outsider in the great harsh cities of the world, and those naturally include Singapore. The third deals more directly with the question of existence as framed by a daily dying through desire, the stigmata of memory, and the fight for sanity. The last section sketches the trials arising from her markers of identity, from cultural myths and beliefs to family, maternity, and her poetic calling.

As a reader, I am profoundly surprised by Chia once more, fourteen years on, and find myself drawn to her will to artistic self-reinvention. As a fellow slow writer, I can discern all the layers of time in each of her poems, the roominess they create making a fair number of emotional entry points possible. As a gendered being, I stand with her single great provocation: whether, in all the claims to value a creature independent of its trap, one is prepared

to know its pure being. As a Singaporean, I recognise her efforts to resolve guilt in responsibility and, in this sense, see her Cordelia complex as a general curse for those who cannot relinquish relationships. As a fellow traveller on the passage of life, I remain glad to have grown up with Chia, we two tributaries of a still poorly charted cultural phenomenon. In a real way, even I am only now starting to understand this poet.

.....

*I remember the things I want  
and forget the rest*

Gwee Li Sui is a literary critic, a poet, and a graphic artist. He wrote Singapore's first comic-book novel, *Myth of the Stone*, in 1993 and published a volume of humorous verse, *Who Wants to Buy a Book of Poems?*, in 1998. A familiar name in Singapore's literary scene, he has written essays on a range of cultural subjects as well as edited *Sharing Borders: Studies in Contemporary Singaporean-Malaysian Literature II* (2009), *Telltale: Eleven Stories* (2010), and *Man/Born/Free: Writings on the Human Spirit from Singapore* (2011).



## A Woman's POV

I forgot to screw on my head  
when I woke up this morning  
and it tumbled onto the floor,  
cracked like a glass globe;  
pieces of cities and earth  
broken up by failing memory -  
they snuck inside the mildewed carpet,  
becoming a mosaic swallowed up  
by the stains of muck you left  
behind in a hurry last night  
when I couldn't stop nodding  
meekly like a bobblehead.

I forgot to sharpen my tongue  
when I went out to face the world;  
words blunt, each phrasal thought  
shaved into meaningless chippings  
as trashy as the lips I paint,  
my wit a smeared carbon copy of ideas  
someone else had uttered before me;  
so I pretend to be clever,  
gloss over details, effuse sparkly jibes  
about what coulda, woulda, shoulda,  
wear a fake smile, put on a sheen of cool  
then paint scarlet letters on  
the chipped ends of my filthy hands.

## White Flag

You are a handful  
of gerberas  
rounded up against your will;

a brady bunch strangulated by  
a vapid lavender bow as  
civil as the greetings that tagged along.

You are a conscripted army  
of scarlet blood  
bath, a burst of tangerine dawn,  
giggly blonde cherubs  
prancing in a playground of  
baby's breath.

In my greased palm  
I clutch this ransom  
the way a terrorist would,  
smug at winning the first round  
of an elliptical war, a combat  
ping-ponging without pause.

It's not game over, yet,  
this temporary truce -  
in my court, I behold  
the seductive stems of your tribute maidens  
in their seedy vase, wondering  
what conspiracies they are brewing  
to ensnare the likes of me.

Appeased for now, if only to reload,  
a scene frozen in mid-air, a lull  
waiting for a postwar level two, when

the weapons become sharper,  
the fight sequences quicker,  
the body count pile up -

I've got my claws out,  
darling,  
are you ready to spar again?

*the spit of strangers*

## Paradox of Desire

This whole place smells of you;  
You leave a trail of your scent  
in the traces of every wall, table, chair,  
even when you haven't been there.

I hear you in every footstep  
along the corridor, thinking it must be you  
coming to knock on my door  
but you never do.

In every back turned to me  
walking past, beside or far away,  
I see you being elusive  
leaving me footprints; I kid myself,  
knowing it's someone else.

Then when you stride towards me  
and I'm walking into your path,  
our eyes, magnetised,  
lock for a moment -

I fall apart -  
I gasp, choke,  
words stuck inside my throat;  
I tremble before you,  
and I wish you were gone.

## Valentine Voodoo

I wring the blood-soaked rug of my brain,  
measure the remains into cups,  
each diluted by tears sweating  
out of squeezed lids, limes  
leaking one secret at a time,  
muted, muffled,  
with no one to tell.

It's all about you.  
It's all about how you stir  
my imagination, spice up the brew with  
twigs plucked from the leaves of books,  
eyes gouged from cold-hearted reptiles,  
the skin of moles gone underground  
sneaking around the nights of burrows,  
hiding the bones of your marrow.

This is my doll.  
My limbs, my head,  
my neck swivels backwards  
so I can see you better.  
Bend me, pin me,  
crack my back,  
sever me socket to socket -

Let me haunt you, voodoo,  
swimming in the pool  
of you, going under,  
wave after wave,  
surrendering to the pull  
of the trawl you cast over me;  
a spell to spell my doom.

## Temptations

The Zen of my cerebrum  
is quiescent, a vacuum growing within  
the pews of my twisted thoughts.

I am perched on a mountain top  
self-flagellating solitary blues,  
musing on esoteric theorems of godliness,  
praying for rapture, hopelessly.

This vast tide of desire  
is awash with relics of the past,  
beached with ocean trawls of promise,  
memories shipwrecked;

buoyant in brittle glass,  
this is my message in a bottle,  
arid and anchored,  
signed with love, helplessly.

## About the Author



Grace Chia is the author of *womango*, a poetry collection published in 1998, and two non-fiction books. Her poetry and short stories have been widely anthologised in Singapore, the US, Australia, Germany, France, and Serbia, including in *Singapore Literature in English*:

*An Anthology, Mining for Meaning, Merlion: An Anthology of Poems, SilverKris, Fish Eats Lion, Di-Verse-City (US), HOW2 (US), Stylus Poetry Journal (Australia), die horen (Germany), La Traductière (France) and Knjževne Novine (Serbia)*. Her works have been translated into French, German and Serbian.

Grace was invited to read at the Singapore Writers' Festival in 2011, Austin International Poetry Festival in the US and Queensland Poetry Festival in Brisbane, Australia, in 2002, and National Young Writers' Festival in Newcastle, Australia in 2003, as well as UC Berkeley, UC Santa Barbara and UC Santa Clara, Royal College of Art and Guildhall School of Music & Drama in the UK.

A recipient of many awards from the Singapore International Foundation and National Arts Council (NAC), she was the NAC-NTU National Writer-in-Residence for 2011-2012.

"Partners" was first published in *Di-Verse-City* based in Austin, USA, in 2002.

Tom Waits' song "Singapore" was released in *Rain Dogs* in 1985 (Island Records).

"Musing on the Merlion Myth" was first published in *The Straits Times, Life!* in 2000. It is also being used in a permanent exhibit on the theme of the Singapore River for the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore. It was subsequently republished in poetry anthology *Reflecting On The Merlion: An Anthology of Poems* edited by Edwin Thumboo & Yeow Kai Chai (National Arts Council of Singapore) in 2009.

"Deliverance" was first published in *Today's Parents* in 2010.

"Djinn" was first published in *La Traductière* in Paris in 2012.