



this is how you walk on the moon

Patricia Karunungan · Samuel Caleb Wee · Wong Wen Pu

this is how you walk on the moon: an anthology of anti-realist fiction

© Ethos Books, 2016

Copyrights to individual stories featured in this book are reserved by their respective authors.

ISBN 978-981-11-0985-0

Published under the imprint Ethos Books

by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd

#06-131 Midview City

28 Sin Ming Lane

Singapore 573972

www.ethosbooks.com.sg

www.facebook.com/ethosbooks

Supported by



NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL
SINGAPORE

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

The song “Getaran Jiwa” has been reproduced with permission:

“Getaran Jiwa”

Composer: P. Ramlie

Lyricist: S. Sudarmaji

OP: EMI Music Publishing Malaysia Sdn Bhd

SP: EMI Music Publishing Group Singapore Pte. Ltd.

The publisher reserves all rights to this title.

Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Official printing partner for SWF 2016 titles: Ho Printing Singapore Pte Ltd

Cover photography and design by Sean Cham (www.seancham.com)

Layout and design by Word Image Pte Ltd

Typefaces: Helvetica Neue, Avenir Next LT Pro, Adobe Garamond Pro

Material: 80gsm Prima Book Cream

NATIONAL LIBRARY BOARD, SINGAPORE CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Name(s): Wong, Wen Pu, editor | Wee, Samuel Caleb, editor | Karunungan, Patricia, editor.

Title: This is how you walk on the moon : an anthology of anti-realist fiction.

Other title(s): Anthology of anti-realist fiction

Description: Singapore : Ethos Books, [2016]

Identifier(s): OCN 960501610 | ISBN 978-981-11-0985-0 (paperback)

Subject(s): LCSH: Short stories, Singaporean (English) | Experimental fiction, English.

Classification: DDC S823--dc23



this is how you walk on the moon

Patricia Karunungan · Samuel Caleb Wee · Wong Wen Pu

Contents

Foreword	6
-----------------	---

section one

Spaceship	13
Audrey Tan	
Adam Contemplates Life	19
Russ Hoe	
The Ostrich of Kampong Glam	27
Kane Wheatley-Holder	
Weapons of Mass Destruction	39
S. Mickey Lin	
The Telescope Man	47
Meiko Ko	
面子	55
Charlotte Hand	
Fink's Bar	71
Larry Lefkowitz	
Gollum's Demon	79
James Tam	
Because we must begin somewhere	93
Francis Paolo Quina	
The End	99
Kieran Dhaliwal	

section two

An Experiment in Moderation, or The Girl Who Ate The Photocopier	113
Li-Min Lim	
This Storm Is You	125
Dylan Randall Wong En Lai	

A Brief History in the Life of Christopher McClunky Charles Wong	135
Dogs Leanne Dunic	147
A Day at Terminal Aleph Ng Yi-Sheng	149
the mammon woman Irving Paul Pereira	165
The Goldies O Thiam Chin	179
The Anti-Art Puzzle Box Starring Diogenes of Sinope Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé	197
Notes on the Writing of Fantasy – A Story EJ Betita Villena	209
don't die before i do Ong Sher Li	223

section three

Private People in Public Spaces Sihan Tan	241
Earthrise Li Huijia	263
Nesting in the Crevice of a Human Ribcage Teo Yi Han	269
multiply, God, their choirs Sharmini Aphrodite	283
The sheets we drape over the things we don't say Arin Alycia Fong	301
About the Contributors	312
About the Cover Designer	317
About Ethos Books	319

Foreword

Why anti-realism? And why experimental fiction?

These questions are hard for us to answer as editors. The temptation for us is to draw from academia and offer you several multisyllabic words, such as:

“discursive epistemic violences”

“transmodern ontic localities”

“COUNTER-ANTI-COLONIALITY”

“phallogocentrism”

These descriptions wouldn’t be inaccurate, but they would obscure the plain fact that has driven us all through this project—quite simply, these are the stories we like.

* * *

Writing of the modernists, Jeanette Winterson describes the First World War as having “devastated consciousness—the inside of people’s heads, as well as their world order. Linear narrative no longer makes sense—and so poets, and poet-novelists, can no longer write in that way.”

Roughly a century on, *post*-postmodernism, it is not war but peace that has mutated the inside of our heads. Technology has minted cynicism and belief onto the same coin—in the span of seconds, we can scroll from videos of cats to dying Syrian refugees on our social media newsfeeds. Baudrillard's rhizomic simulacra has become so pervasive as to be unremarkable.

In the course of reading *this is how you walk on the moon*, you might experience this same sense of whiplash and dislocation. In marking this anthology a book of *anti*-realist fiction, we've tried to make a conscious choice to avoid prescription, preferring instead to set the parameters of the playbox. To mark something as *anti*, after all, is to demand direction instead of position, a straying away from the centre; to experiment with standards and form, to call into question the criteria of fiction.

The selection we've made in the anthology, hopefully, reflects the capaciousness of that choice. These fictions are diverse, and at times contradictory in worldview and in style. They run the gamut from sentimental to nihilistic, posthuman to lyrical. They are ironic, sincere, impenetrable, straight-faced; plain-spoken, earthbound, self-reflexive, space-strewn.

They circle the horizon of the margins. They rim our minds is what we're saying.

* * *

What these stories share, despite all their differences, is a common agreement that fiction is not merely a transcript of this world, but also an alternate dimension in which we might castigate, rebuke, reshape, or even redeem the bizarre facts of human phenomena.

In “Spaceship”, a beguiling intruder disrupts the comfortable reality a security guard inhabits in his guardhouse. “Adam Contemplates Life” juxtaposes the sacrosanct language of creation myths with the knowing cheekiness of a twenty-first century narrator. “面子” incarnates the pressures of race and womanhood into a terrifying apparition, while “An Experiment in Moderation, or The Girl Who Ate the Photocopier” renovates the Victorian convention of nested narratives to slyly question genre expectations. “A Day in Terminal Aleph” makes a compelling argument for Singapore-as-postmodern-city by exposing the religious fault-lines of our society as the rhizomic borders of a decentred surface, while stories like “The Goldies” and “Private People in Public Spaces” revive the age-old marriage of satire and pastiche by bending technical inventiveness towards social commentary.

“Weapons of Mass Destruction” we just chose for the blow job.

* * *

The range of narrative styles in this anthology has necessitated a certain categorisation. We offer you three sections here. Consume them according to your mood, or the chemicals in your system at the time of reading—we particularly recommend dihydrogen monoxide.

Rather than explain how we differentiated these stories, here are three images for you to interpret at your own leisure (or risk):

Section One is foreplay.

Section Two is a gimp suit.

Section Three is a post-coital cuddle.

* * *

Throughout this foreword, we have borrowed several hallmark ideas from postmodernism, but you might have noticed that we avoided using the word. While postmodernism is commonly associated with a nihilistic take on the universe, our anthology closes on a hopeful note and offers the tender view that one can marry anti-realism with real human pathos. These stories might eschew empirical linearity, but they still tell emotional truths, shining a light through real facets of human feeling in these disjointed worlds.

This anthology is named after an Arthur Russell song that has lingered with us and become our own. *this is how you walk on the moon* classifies our book as a type of guide, but also signposts an engagement with the improbable. Who is to say, though, that not everyone can walk on the moon? And who is to say that the moon we see in the night sky is what “moon” means to everybody else?

The moon itself is a potent symbol, both for reflection as well as for defiance. Hopefully, just as the physical moon reflects light from the sun, so will our metaphoric moon transform the intellectual and stylistic currencies of our time into beacons in the dark—moonbeams by which you might read the world around you.

They may only be brief looks into existences other than our own, but each of these stories possesses the capability to haunt us. Long after the last page has been turned, we hope that what remains with you is the singular, evocative power of fiction. The worlds aren't real, but the characters are.

section one

Spaceship

Audrey Tan

NIGHTLY, he would sit at his post under the moon's watchful eye, wondering about space. While he never had the audacity to contemplate the space between his feet on the ground and the yellow beam suspended in the sky, he often thought:

Was it possible to transcend the space between the square window of his guardhouse and the rolled-up tinted glass of guests' cars? He often toyed with the idea of trespassing the space between his firmly raised palm and the guests' politely waving hands when their cars took a breather at his post before turning left to dock at the open-air car park.

During the first quarter of the night, he tried to snatch the spaces between the feet of passing joggers and his own, dangling from the high stool. Always, these spaces grew too long to tame. He, however, enjoyed feeling their speed without hurry—which was why he never chose to work the morning shift. His post overlooked a field across the road and he watched it like a silent film every night.

A year ago, a troop of workers had come to claim the field to spawn a hotel. With tractors and cranes, they annihilated the

congregation of knee-high grass which came to exalt the moon every night. He used to fantasise about trampling on the half-dug soil and raw cement, meshing them into a useless slab of mush, so that the workers would return the field to the moon. But he flung those heroic plans out of the square window when he heard the soft, warning purr of the cement mixer deep in the night.

Before this, a young couple would visit the field at least three times a week. He could only see their backs and shadows patterning the concrete then slipping through the grass. The girl would pedal spiritedly on a red bicycle and leave it flat and unchained by the roadside when she reached the field. He could somehow relate to the bicycle's wheels. They were always upturned facing the sky, spinning then gradually coming to a halt after they had come to terms with their abandonment. The boy would drive a small white car. It was most likely his father's.

From where he was, he could see the gap between their lips as the pair talked, and wondered how many assortments of words could cause the girl to laugh in the same manner each time, as the boy would pull her under his armpit while they trudged into the heart of the field.

They were always far off, but the slits in the grass had divulged scenes of the duo's lovemaking. Occasionally, he would see the boy's head emerging from the grass, then back down and up again. Or he would catch a bare leg or shoulder rising, their skins paler under the stern glare of the moonlight.

The couple had stopped coming to the field a few months after some men in ties cut a red ribbon across its mouth, officially and auspiciously marking it as a site for construction.

Perhaps the couple had migrated to a new nest.

Some nights, when his colleague Rohan had gone home and he was left alone, he thought hard about these spaces, wishing he could quantify and stuff them in labelled jars at home.

Him and the country club's guests: "Space that separates touch."

Him and passing joggers: "Space that is distance."

The half-built hotel on the field: "Space that replaces space."

The young couple: "Space that closes in."

* * *

It was the first time he was at his post before the sun had yet to retire for the day. He had to cover the last quarter of the earlier shift as Rohan's son was flying back from Australia that evening, returning with not just a university degree, but a wife and kid in tow.

Lately, he had grown to notice a particular female guest. There was nothing spectacular about her from afar and the nights dimmed her features, but he could make out her boy-cut hairdo and pastel skirts that reached the middle of her calves, glowing softly under the orange street lamp in front of the building.

He had never seen her entering or leaving the country club—she would only pop out to walk her companions to their cars or to hail a cab for them before re-entering the building. She had no more than three guests each time, and, like her, they looked important without dressing formally. They all wore lime green lanyards that looked like chains of glowworms round their necks. She would only stay for one night, probably leaving the

next morning at a time past his shift. He would see her a few months later in the same routine.

With her being the exception, the member demographic of the country club was rather predictable. Caucasian men were the most common, rotund and slightly grey with the complete family package: a long-haired Chinese wife at their sides with a sleeping toddler draped across her shoulder. At the beep of their remote control car locks, their older child would take the cue to wriggle free from the maid's grip, sprinting across the car park while rolling an oval float, the smell of chlorine spreading over the asphalt.

Although her activities at the country club seemed unorthodox, it was not the reason why she became a subject of interest. The first time he saw her, he found himself transfixed by the way she walked. It was something between a waltz and a sprightly amble. When she passed his post, he became convicted that music should be composed for her kind of movement and not the other way round.

Today, however, she was alone. And it was still bright.

He watched her emerge from the building and make a beeline for the guardhouse. As she approached, he straightened his back and pressed his palm across his torso, smoothening out his uniform.

"Good evening." She smiled, and he felt all the air within him congeal in the centre of his chest.

"Hi, Ma'am." He stood up, trying to maintain eye contact for a moment, but his gaze fled to the walkie-talkie he was fiddling with, then up to meet hers again.

She was still smiling as she drew out her hand and extended it through the window. Up close, he made her out to be in her mid-forties, recognising the soft pad of grey creases beneath her eyes that he, too, saw in the mirror daily. She made no effort to conceal this, but he noticed a faded plum lip colour that was perhaps applied much earlier in the day.

"I'm in 607," she introduced herself. He wasn't sure if it was an invitation or mere information.

"I stay here whenever I have meetings or when I need to observe and write," she mumbled to her bag as she dug a hand in, producing a glossy white card with the word "Member" emblazoned across it in cursive script. He wanted to tell her that she didn't have to prove anything to him.

"May I help you?" he asked Member 607, and was secretly impressed the words found their way to his brain. She had released her hand from their brief handshake, and now her palms were clutching the bottom of the windowsill. She peered in.

"I'm a professor," she said, offering more information.

She continued to talk, and he caught words like: *thesis class-differentials occupation recreation ethnography*. He could identify them as semi-big words, and they sounded so elegant striding out from her mouth that he wanted to ask for an encore.

"May I come in?" the professor interrupted herself. He knew it wasn't really a question when she stuck a foot in through the sliding door that was ajar.

"Actually, Ma'am..." He eyed the camera surveying from the ceiling, but she had already put her other foot in. As she entered, her gaze frisked across the switchboard, to the computer, to the

multiple screens reflecting camera footages of different parts of the grounds.

“Coffee,” she inhaled then pulled her breath into a grin, nodding towards the stale brown liquid in the styrofoam cup on the desk. He realised he could not feel any space between her and himself as she spoke.

“From Street 52—the best.” His lips shyly turned upwards, a weak match to her countenance.

“You want to sit?” he rolled the high stool towards her but she waved it away and began to talk.

Work environment observation, discuss over coffee, next Tuesday. He managed to fish out key phrases while the remainder of her speech was left to drown in a well of desire pooling inside him.

“Okay.” He wasn’t sure what he agreed to, but two syllables were all he could string together when all the spaces around him started receding.

When she was halfway through the door, the professor turned back to the guardhouse, gesturing to the multi-coloured buttons and tiny red lights on the switchboard, gleaming extra brightly for being recognised.

“This reminds me of a spaceship,” she said.

He wanted to tell her how right she was. But as he watched her vanishing into the building, all the spaces around him reincarnated, joining to form the farthest space which he could never measure—like forever can never outlive eternity—which is the space between the squeak of his high stool, and the clicking of her black heels across the marble floor.

Looking for strategies to cope with existing under an omniscient narrator? Keen to optimise your interactions with ancient deities? Perhaps you're a star in a corner of the Milky Way with a penchant for human-gazing, or even a young girl confronting the disturbingly solid spectre of her ethnic identity...

this is how you walk on the moon is a practical field guide to the vagaries of our contemporary universe; a handbook for navigating the sublime, the subjective, and the inexplicable. Collected in this anthology are 25 previously unpublished short stories from award-winners and newcomers alike—fictions that declare the infinite permutations of reality, while exploring the rarity of human connection across all possible worlds. Come leap off the edge of all known existence with us, and let editors Patricia Karunungan, Samuel Caleb Wee, and Wong Wen Pu ease your landing into this bouquet of prose.