

Re(Fractals) : a collection of gay short stories

Kent, Reginald James

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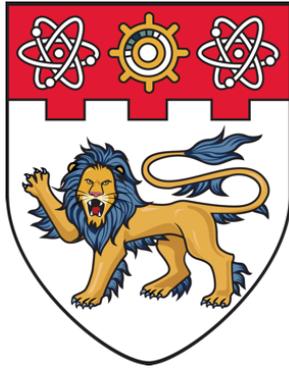
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**NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
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SINGAPORE

**Re(Fractals): A Collection of
Gay Short Stories**

**Reginald James Kent
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
2021**

Re(Fractals): A Collection of Gay Short Stories

Reginald James Kent

School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang
Technological University in partial
fulfilment of the requirement for the
degree of Master of Arts

2021

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SUMMARY

Re(Fractals) is a collection of gay short stories accompanied by an exegesis detailing the theoretical texts and media that have informed the collection. These eight stories dramatize, render, and contextualize the lives of gay men in Singapore. These stories document their experiences, explore their trauma, and celebrate their triumphs. They were written to illuminate the fact that the gay experience is not monolithic but exists in a myriad. The queering of the short story was important to me in this process, and this can be seen in the unconventional approaches that the narratives adopt. There is the incorporation of lists, the use of excessive dialogue, and the breakdowns of time as well as setting, among others. Drawing from my forebears, other gay fiction writers such as Christopher Isherwood, Ocean Vuong, and Bryan Washington, queerness is not only present itself in plot and characterization, but also in form and narration. These stories also examine the intersectionality present in the gay experience arising from factors such as upbringing, nationality, and economic class. Institutions and societal conventions form the backbone of most of the collection's conflict. Characters in *Re(Fractals)* strive against the forces that hinder their realization of authentic gay lives. Through subtle but meaningful epiphanies achieved in the narratives, they come closer to understanding what the gay experience means and how it manifests for them. These stories were written by a gay man for his community. They open conversations on our existence and hopefully provide healing and solace, even amid trauma.

Bubbles

Cutting through Pagoda Street, I'm buffeted by white tourists. Some stop to gawk at chachkies imported en-masse from China. Serving staff hand out flyers, beckoning them to patronize their overpriced restaurants. Most locals are heading to their usual dinner haunts, little eateries tucked into the smaller streets. I turn left onto New Bridge Road. The shophouse I'm looking for has been completely gutted and retrofitted. I push the heavy bulwarks open. The attendant asks me to fill in a membership form as he checks my identity card. For me, it's twelve dollars a year. The man with the straggly mustache hands me a set of keys and two sets of face towels. In the small gym a silver daddy is doing deadlifts in a jockstrap, his sneakers on. Behind him are rows of red lockers; I look for the one that my key will open. I start stripping. The men around me stare; mirrors everywhere. Eyes follow me to an open courtyard behind the lockers; it's like a Roman bath. But I don't head to the open showers first, I head to the toilet stalls, in one I get some reprieve from the eyes. I douche with a hose and bidet. After I'm clear, I saunter into the shower. I'm lucky on my first night—a smooth twink one rail away eyes me up. I turn my back to him using my hands to cup my ass cheeks. He might be a few years older than me. He's as defined as I am with no softness in his abs. After we're dried off, he leads me up a flight of stairs that are next to the lockers.

I'm here every weekend, in this maze filled with cubicles. The darkness helps with the anonymity of it all. My favorite spot, the one I always return to, is an intersection of three dim bulbs. No uncles catch me off guard here. They brush me as I cruise to blasting remixes of Sia, Madonna, and Rihanna. Some have the gall to grab me by the wrist after I reject them. I tell them to fuck off. In the real world, they may be big shots whose cocks I have to suck,

but in here they are desperate men, hungry for boys. The management of Bubbles knows this, it's why they let men under twenty-five come in for free on Fridays and the weekend.

A dud of a night. I'm about to head down to the steam room but before I make it back to the staircase, I'm turned by the shoulder. The gall. A lithe silhouette plants his lips on mine. Soft lips, soft hands, and young skin. I run my hands down him; not as built as I am but toned. As he cups my ass and balls under my towel, I bring a hand to his face; he has thick spectacles on. He pulls me, hand on my excitement, into a cubicle and locks the door. He turns up the dimmer. For a moment he looks confused. He begins to grin. By the time he begins laughing, I lose all my confidence.

"Ashley? Is that you!" The boy says, "you know I always had a feeling." He embraces me like an old friend. The gall. It's fair to say that my face isn't the only place blood is draining from. "Well isn't this fun," he says.

I met him in a freshman class, *Myths and the Narrative*. Professor Cheong loves him, praising his deep engagement with the material. He references Vladimir Propp, saying that all myths can be broken into constituent elements. I think of this in relation to the essay I'm planning to write. The flood of his biblical namesake also appears in the Babylonian origin tale I'm looking at, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. As interesting as it all sounds, he goes on too long, likes the sound of his own voice too much.

In the cubicle, Noah climbs onto the foam mattress wrapped in faux leather that sits above a platform. On his elbows and knees, he looks at my reflection in a wall-length mirror in front of him. He grins again, arches his back, and lifts his ass up spreading his cheeks. "You ready handsome?" he says. I inch backward, the door rattles. Noah turns around. His upper lip curls.

“I’m sorry, is this weird for you Ashley? I get it! It’s weird seeing a classmate here, but it’s not really, it’s a small country.”

“You know my name?”

“We’re in the same intake so why wouldn’t I?”

He pats the spot next to him. “Come on,” he says, “I don’t bite. Well, unless you’re into that.” He inches closer, slipping his right hand between my thigh and crotch. He nuzzles the nape of my neck. I get excited again. “Well, I’m glad the feeling is mutual,” he says. He pushes me down and straddles me, barely giving me breathing room between kisses. He trails them from my neck to my pecs, then sucks on one like a baby. I moan as he switches over to the other side. The residual sensation of his wet tongue keeps the abandoned nipple rock hard. I think of him with his back arched.

“Wait,” I say, “You’ve got the wrong idea,”

“Wrut?”

“I don’t top. I’m a bottom too.”

He shrugs. “Well, plenty of solutions to that.” He flips around and wraps his lips around my excitement. I cry out louder than I want to. Using his toes and thighs, he lifts his erection, piling it into my open mouth.

Professor Cheong wraps up her lecture on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; Narcissus became a flower after falling in love with his reflection. The ancient Greeks placed them around tombs, but this isn’t the case for us Chinese. My Ah Ma buys them before Lunar New Year. The flower of vanity symbolizes rebirth; they grow as spring arrives. I bring this up in class, that myths are changeable. Professor Cheong is impressed. Noah rushes after me as I head toward the canteen.

“Ashley! Wait up.”

“Yes?”

“Lunch? I wanted to talk about last Friday.”

“We don’t have to.”

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

At this point, I want to get out of sight from my other classmates. So, we queue up for Pasta Express. There is no red or white sauce left, the aunty asks us if we’re okay with Aglio Olio. Noah says we’ll have two and pays. The gall. Of course, he’s a rich kid: only rich kids feel it’s reasonable to pay for oil and noodles. He’s opted for spaghetti; I hate twirling it on my fork.

“So that was fun, I was wondering if-”

“Look, I mean I did enjoy myself Noah, but we wouldn’t work out.”

“Youch. No Ashley, not my thing.”

“I’m not your thing?”

“Don’t take it personally, I’m not a boyfriend kind of guy.”

Good. He’s too flamboyant for me: the way he dresses in Harajuku pastels, the way his voice goes up two octaves when he’s excited, he even twirls his pasta with a limp wrist. “I don’t want to force anything,” he says, “but I was wondering if you’d like to go to Bubbles with me on the regular.”

“But we’re not compatible in that department either.”

“Ashley, two bottoms can have plenty of fun!”

“Not so loud.”

“It’s peak hour, no one can hear us. Look, you want dick, I want dick, but it’s nice having a fallback if we don’t find anyone else we like, no?”

I only get a sense of myself when I gaze into a mirror like Narcissus. My mother, my two brothers and I live in a flat with two bedrooms, we don't talk; everyone is too tired. I do not get an allowance from my mother. I filed a special request to be able to work jobs on campus, a privilege usually denied to freshmen before their first set of grades come out. She tells me how proud she is that I got into university. She doesn't talk about the whole gay thing. The only thing my younger brothers ask me about is gym techniques. Albert and Aloysius go on about the girls they are dating; it forms their entire universe. I'm glad my mother can sleep easy at night knowing the two of them will be able to give her grandchildren.

After my *Survey of Literature* tutorial, Noah runs up to me across the quad. He's booked a Grab to Chinatown. Lorries and trucks full of industrial materials pass us on the PIE: concrete prefabs, steel beams, and suspended plexiglass. Noah smiles, admiring the canopy of raintrees lining the road. The way his upper lip curls, when he is in deep thought, is feline.

"Noah, you believe in anything?" I say.

"Oh, plenty! But I suppose you mean a religion. No, I don't. What about you?"

"I did. I was raised Catholic. I still pray to someone I call Mother, but she's not Mary anymore."

"That's cool. Me, well I guess we return to the void after all this."

The Grab drops us off. I'm about to walk into Bubbles but Noah grabs me by the arm.

"It's so early. Aren't you hungry?"

"I don't eat dinner."

"Ugh, you're one of those boys. What was it? Intermittent fasting? Eat with me; I'm buying. How does frog leg porridge sound?"

We sit at a coffee shop on tall stackable plastic stools in front of a foldable table. The frog aunty, in knock-off Crocs, waddles up to Noah to take his order. They talk in Teochew.

“Wah! Boy! This one who? Boyfriend is it?”

“No lah aunty, a friend from school.”

“He going with you next door is it? Aiyah! Going university also, handsome boy, try try lah!”

“Aiyah aunty, he’s very handsome, but me, what kind of mother will want?”

“Don’t say like that hor, if you like girls I already set you up with my daughter. I get your usual.”

Soon two large claypots arrive at the table with a ladle, two sets of bowls, chopsticks, and Chinese soup spoons. The porridge bubbles and steam wafts up condensing on Noah’s glasses. The other claypot is full of white frog legs dyed brown by soy sauce.

“You’re very good with people,” I say, “especially aunties.”

“Oh, you understood! She’s a sweetie, the best frog leg porridge in Chinatown. There are better in Katong but don’t tell her I said that. Jiak Jiak.”

He ladles the porridge into my bowl, then tops it up with a helping of legs. I never got why this was a thing; it tastes like chicken and chicken’s cheaper.

A good diet incorporating a lot of fiber helps me to get ready, but no amount is full proof. Douching should be every bottom’s responsibility. While the occasional accident may still happen, it’s good to minimize the risk of that. I hate a top who doesn’t understand why he needs to wait for me.

I find a salaryman in his thirties, who I can tell spends time on the bench press. After we’re done, he talks to me about insurance schemes to avoid, gives me a kiss, unlatches the bolt, and says he hopes we run into each other again. In the blasting air conditioning, I imagine little changes I’d make to Bubbles if I ran the place. I’d put throw rugs in the cubicles, but that’s another thing the attendants would have to clean up. I’ve seen some

questionable residue. Bigger towels to cover us then, but no, we're supposed to be showing off as much skin as we can here. And no, turning down the air conditioning is a terrible idea; it would result in too many sweaty bodies.

Someone pushes the door open, I start, it's just Noah. He's not bothered wrapping his towel around his waist and has it slung over his shoulder.

"You done? Want to head off?"

"How did you know I was in here?"

"Saw you going in after I was done with my first. Just got done with my second."

"It's not a competition."

"I'm hungry, we can still get supper unless you're still *hungry*?"

I consider staying longer but that bowl of frog porridge has reminded me how good eating at night feels. Bodies are weird, maybe God wanted me to be a top; I am more well-endowed than the insurance agent, more gifted than Noah in that sense too. But he has other assets, more pronounced if he bends down to soap his calves. As we shower, an uncle comes up to him, asking if he's just arrived. Noah's too polite, gives him the whole story.

Noah brings me to a rooftop bar, leaving a credit card for the tab. This is starting to get uncomfortable. "You're too nice to the uncles," I say, sipping my daiquiri. "You don't have to be so...Forthcoming."

"There's enough meanness in the world, no reason not to be civil."

Of course, he can say that; he has the luxury of letting them walk all over him. Out here, he can still go to rooftop bars, paying for ridiculously priced cocktails on a whim. Men in shirts and ties chat up women who are wearing dresses that could pay for my weeks' worth of meals. All this "industrial" furniture is a joke; people who come here know nothing of being stripped down. Poverty to them is aesthetic.

I look up to the cloudless night sky. There's only one thing glowing in it; there's too much light pollution from the city for there to be any stars.

"You know, Noah," I say, "way back when, people thought that the moon did more than affect the tide. They thought it had the power to change people's moods."

"Your point being?"

"Lunacy is the word, Noah. Those men *can* change your mood. You'd be crazy to let them."

"Ashley, I'd rather be warm, instead of only being capable of reflecting the light around me."

He wants to save them. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, there too is a story of a flood that destroys the world, but the Sumerian Noah is named Utnapishtim. The difference lies in the myth's outcome. For Noah, there is a covenant with God: a promise that world-destroying floods will never return. For Utnapishtim, it's being granted immortality by his pantheon. Changing one constituent element changes the story. I wonder what element I am and what Noah is. Are we the men surviving the flood? A pair of animals? Or the wicked men not on the ark?

It's always a tossup, us sleeping together. I've come to enjoy the frog porridge, the suppers, and the intimacy we share. During our last class with Professor Cheong, Noah unzips his backpack sitting between us, revealing a big black double-ended dildo. He asks if we can head into a cubicle together from the get-go. A covenant is broken.

Silicone never replaces a real dick, but it's not as weird of an experience as I imagine. Noah slips one end into him, then begins fingering me. When I'm ready, he slips the other end in. He places the soles of his feet onto my chest and grabs my wrists. Bending his knees, he begins pulling us closer, getting the toy deeper into each of us. After several pushes and

pulls, I end up coming hands-free. Seeing this in the mirror, he grins. I pull my end of the dildo out of me and wrap my lips around his excitement. I start rapidly thrusting the toy into him. He finishes in my mouth. I'm sure the uncles hear him. We stay in that cubicle; it's nice, he's the closest thing I'll have to a throw rug; we fall asleep in each other's arms. I know it's a mistake when we wake; I've crossed the Rubicon.

When we shower, the same pervert uncle who can't take no for an answer starts staring at Noah. I know that look—it's entitlement. He has the gall to grab Noah's ass. I lose it. I punch him square in the face. He falls on the wet floor, nose bleeding. Everyone on the veranda is staring at me, stark naked. It's not long before straggly Mustache arrives on the scene.

We're still wet when we're outside. Noah is storming off. I rush after him. "Noah. Please stop."

"No!" he screams; I'm sure frog aunty can hear him. "I've never felt embarrassed in that place. I can't ever go back; do you know what you've taken from me?"

"He touched you without consent."

"It's a bathhouse! We touch each other; what's wrong with you? Why do you hate them so much?"

"You're worth more than that, you're worth respect!"

"I did the same thing to you the first time we met. Why don't I have a bloody nose, Ashely?"

I don't have an answer for him. He sighs.

"You can't go on with these double standards. You're not better than them."

And he's right. As much as I can pull people in, I am also the lunatic pushing them away. I watch him hail a cab, disappearing into the night.

The management ban the pervert. Noah and I are welcomed back. I am sure Noah has received the same call, but he hasn't responded to my texts. I look at myself in mirrors but only see him. I replay all the reflections I saw of us in the cubicles. I've become as childish as my brothers; I've made him, if not my universe, some sort of a moon.

My mother, on one of her odd Fridays off, asks why I'm not going out. She works so hard to put food on the table. Noah would never understand—he feeds strangers on a whim. He couldn't understand how love grows in small spaces. We don't skip meals because it's trendy, but out of necessity. There was a time where we didn't have to live like this. I can't see that life reflected in me anymore.

A week before the new term begins, Noah answers my texts, telling me to meet him for porridge. Frog Aunty does not look at me. Noah doles out my portion but holds off on the legs.

“So, what is it, Ashley?” he begins. “I'm trying to figure it out. You like me? You just don't like people who don't meet your standards touching me?”

I stare into my bowl, filled with porridge as white as a full moon. “I know that you don't want to date, but something's changed.”

He sighs, ladling the frog in. I'm not crazy. He must feel conflicted too.

“I like you,” he says. “But I'm not going monogamous.”

“I don't expect you to,” I say. “I just want to be with you. See whoever you want. Hell, I'll meet other tops with you. They can take turns with us. I just don't want to do this alone anymore.”

His upper lip curls. I'm pulled into his orbit: into lunacy.

No Room for the Dead

Victor doesn't need to read the death certificate. He dons his personal protective equipment and respirator, taking in a deep breath through the filters.

It is stage four ovarian cancer that has spread in spite of the chemotherapy.

Ze Chian had discussed his mother's final arrangements with her long before; it gave Victor hope at the beginning of their relations; perhaps Ze Chian could understand his work.

"You know my mother doesn't care about what happens to her body after she dies." Ze Chian stirs syrup into his cold brew, sounding muffled in the clamor of the hospital's Starbucks. "But my grandfather is adamant about having a wake."

It isn't against the rules but Victor hadn't heard of anyone in the industry preparing someone they knew. It must happen; there aren't many mortuaries in Singapore, not many embalmers. You keep a distance from the people you prepare, for good reason. Victor's own mother had died before he finished his A-Levels. He sighed. Ze Chian knows what his job entails.

"I won't even consider it if you're not into it," Victor said.

Ze Chian taps his temples. "She's fading, but she'll always be in here. This is for the rest of the family. You don't have to worry; I'm not looking into the casket."

Pictures of Victor's own mother from the early nineties, still wearing an outdated big bouffant, like Dolly Parton. "It cost me a lot of money to look this cheap," the country star professed. This summed up what he did. Why does it cost so much to take a last look at a body? He'd hear his father, funeral director, trying to calm down a customer. They'd ask, "What do you even do to my mother? Why do I have to pay to see her?" It is often worth paying to take a last look. Bodies—freshly passed—are not pretty sights. The nonsense on *CSI* skewed what most thought of death. The dead on television were Adonises and

Aphrodites. *CSI* never featured the old man sapped by lung cancer, the child decimated by leukemia, or the coma patient covered in bedsores.

Victor prepares himself. Ng Bee Leng is put on the highest allowed dose of morphine, there is nothing to do but wait. He'd try to imagine she was someone else's mother. Victor's father doesn't think this particular undertaking is a good idea, but he understands what love makes you do. He would have done anything for his late wife. She is the only reason he and Victor are still talking. After his O-levels, Victor heard his mother shouting through the thin apartment walls, "You're what? Ashamed? If they have a problem, they aren't your friends. He is your son; I will not live like this." Victor wished it was his father who passed instead of her. She defied her generation, she defied convention, expanded her definition of love for him: she opened her eyes then opened her mouth.

Ng Bee Leng is transported from the morgue. Victor is relieved the discoloration is limited—she is just paler than usual. Bodies can decay to shades of black and orange. He wipes her down, averting her gaze, as with many of his charges, her eyes are open. These are eyes he knows.

"So, what makes you think you're good enough for my Ze Chian?" she had said, glaring at him the first time he was invited over. She was pointing with a pair of white chopsticks, still tinged with the sticky sweet ruby molasses covering the roast pork dinner. Ze Chian was about to protest, but Victor knew his answer.

"Aunty, your son makes me the happiest I've ever been. I don't know if I'm good, but I want to do whatever I can to make him happy."

Whatever makes Ze Chian happy, Victor thought—reaching for his first tool on his stainless-steel dissection trolley—is whatever makes you happy, Aunty. He loads the curved needle with a sturdy thread of nylon. He focuses on the procedure.

1. Part her lips (which you find unfortunately curled).
2. Place a mouth former under them. Find that it makes her sullen face too ape-like.
Remove the mouth former and cut it down with a pair of scissors. Adjust till she stops looking like an orangutan.
3. Pierce her cold bottom gums through the back of her teeth with the needle, looping through the base of her chin.
4. Turn back around, pull the needle up through the same hole, coming out through the front of her teeth. Pull her jaw into place.
5. Thread the needle through her left nostril, then septum, then down the right nostril back into her gums. Pull her jaw shut and tie the thread tight.
6. Superglue her lips.

Victor trims the eye caps. Like the mouth former, they are films of silicone perforated with spikes. After cutting them to the right size, he slips them under her lids to hold them in place: modern coins for the ferryman. Ze Chian has her eyes, especially when he's sleeping, his long eyelashes swoop upward, forming a pincer with his downward tilting brows. There is never enough time with him. Embalmers don't have days off; when you get the call, you get the call. Ze Chian gives up on making bookings for date nights. He stops promising his friends that his boyfriend will join them; he makes it clear that he will go out with, or without him.

They rent a little studio in Chinatown but even while they share the same space, weeks pass where they barely see each other. Victor comes home, opens the fridge, and finds a simple dinner, a homemade chicken wrap, or wonton noodles from the hawker center. He unpacks it

and still smells formaldehyde. On the dining table, Ze Chian's laptop is still aglow. Email correspondences between him and his suppliers chronicle new spice routes from Java to Europe. Victor, having showered at the mortuary, just strips when he gets into the bedroom, finding his partner curled up on his side of the mattress. He becomes his big spoon, half-afraid the scent of chemicals will wake Ze Chian. Some days he just thinks of quitting, but this is all he knows: Victor only sees how things die.

7. Dilute the embalming solution.
8. Confirm that you only need about 8 liters, this corpse is a small lady.
9. Locate your partner's mother's carotid artery and jugular vein, below her collarbone.
10. Slice both open; no blood will gush out.
11. Pump the artery with embalming solution, massage her body as you do so, watch her blood flow out her vein, and down the drain.

Ze Chian moved out of the studio six months ago. He tells Victor that with his mother being so sick, it's best that he returns to the family home. Maybe it'd be best if they take a break. Victor doesn't protest.

"You know that's the problem with you," Ze Chian says. "There was only one thing you fought for—that embalming diploma. Everything else you just said yes. I need you in the business. Yes. Come to the mortuary now. Yes. Can you make it tonight? Yes. But it doesn't work when you have to take that yes back. You can't keep saying yes, even for me. Because I end up waiting for someone who never comes for me."

Victor considered a life of celibacy after his mother died; he wondered if he would ever be loved again. All he has of her that isn't preserved in him, is his father's embalming of her, her visage that he sees in the back of his irises. No one has enough time to say goodbye,

that's why families bring fading wedding portraits to place at the head of caskets: It's a hope in the double negative, that fading will cancel out fading. The marvels of modern technology and the macabre are indistinguishable. What took the ancient Egyptians months, he does in hours. There is a price to pay. Mummification preserves bodies in the dryness, but his handiwork comes apart quickly, that's why the bodies are cremated. Partially why anyway, in this tiny city-state, with land at a premium, there is no room for the dead.

There are no canopic jars to hold Ng Bee Leng's internal organs for the afterlife. No pyramid to direct her soul to Anubis, who weighs it on a scale against a feather. But perhaps Victor is standing in for Amut, the half-crocodile, half-lion waiting to devour a heart too heavy. He retrieves his trocar, readying the oversized syringe to stab her.

12. Puncture her abdominal cavity. Turn on the suction to aspirate, removing any gas or liquid arising from the process of decomposition—along with any feces left in the body. Let this glide down the drain with her blood.
13. Turn off the suction. Using the same trocar, inject embalming solution into her abdominal cavity.
14. Plug the hole with a trocar button. Prevent any seepage of the solution by packing leaking orifices with gauze.
15. Wash and dry her.
16. Apply heavy moisturizer to her face.

Victor's mother didn't want a wake. Was it a slap to his father's face? Victor thought it was a small mercy. How could his father give her to anyone else? How could his father oversee the embalming of her body? She made her wishes clear: direct cremation, no-frills. She was rolled into the incinerator in a plywood coffin; though his father had wanted to put her in the

most expensive casket he owned. Victor had read that in the UK, there was a crematorium that used the burning of bodies to heat up a swimming pool in winter. His mother would have loved that. He remembers the trips they took to the community swimming complex, how she taught him to float on his back, how he felt weightless.

Ng Bee Leng's corpse weighs on him; she never thought he was good enough for her son. She was right, three missed birthdays and two no shows during Chinese New Year don't leave the best impression. Neither does the embalming. "At least you got a steady income I guess," she told him, one of the times he could make it for dinner.

17. Take mortician's wax, using it to smooth out any abscesses in the face.

18. Match your pigments with her pale porcelain skin. With an airbrush, spray over regions where discoloration is intense.

19. Apply make-up on her cold closed eyes.

20. Set with powder.

21. Using a brush, paint a neutral pink onto her lips.

22. Review your handiwork. Remind yourself that every corpse you touch does not look like the person they love, only like a bad photograph of them, overexposed in the light.

Two weeks after the funeral, Victor meets Ze Chian for boba at Chinatown Point. His boyfriend slurps the milky tea through a straw wide enough to carry the black tapioca pearls. Victor read in a *Straits Times* article that the black balls were carcinogenic, but who is he to talk, he works with formaldehyde for a living. He never drinks the stuff; the straw reminds him of his trocar. As they walk toward Hong Lim Park, Ze Chian asks, "Does it go away?"

"What?"

"The house being quiet. The silence."

Victor thinks of crates as large as coffins carrying spices from Southeast Asia to Europe. He thinks of his father, a shell of a man, wrapped around his mother. He imagines his trocar filled with the black chewy balls, suspended in diluted formaldehyde.

“No, it doesn’t” he replies, “You just go on living.”

The Kindness of Strangers

The sun is wringing me out as I climb the hill of Second Avenue, dragging two blue Samsonite cases with me, the only things I have ever stolen. I didn't call Diane. In hindsight, it would have been the more polite thing to do, perhaps the more logical thing to do.

She lives in a green mansion, not emerald opulent like in the *Wizard of Oz* but rather moldy, somewhere in between stray lichen and dragon's beard moss. To get in, I must pass through a large gate made of oak, held together by steel rivets. I ring the doorbell and the gate's security console lights up; its camera eye angles up toward me.

"Si Damien?" a familiar voice crackles through the intercom.

"Murni? Is Ma'am Diane in?"

"Ma'am is at club eating lunch, she never say you coming."

"I didn't know I was coming, sorry."

The gate swings open and an Indonesian woman now into early middle age descends the pyramidal stairs. She eyes my suitcases, asking "Are these for ma'am?" I shake my head and shrug. She trots back up and gets two other maids to come down, new girls I have never seen before, then leads me into the kitchen cum dining area. Artisan pans hang like a chandelier above a huge central island. I eye a pot pie in the oven. Diane has a pie on standby policy. She finds it strange when nobody pops over.

"If you want," Murni says, "you can eat in twenty minutes,"

"It's fine, thanks, I'm not hungry."

I sit down on a bar stool by the island. Diane was the most immaculate mother. My parents always thought she dressed too young, but I think she was just that punk kid who never grew out of it. She'd wear gold ankhs to our Methodist high school over distressed halter tops. Unlike her kitchen, she was never traditionally opulent, never fully made for the world she inhabited.

As dusk settles, pouring in through the bay windows, I hear her high heels clacking up the steps leading up from the garage. I turn around. She's subdued but not unfamiliar: black jeans, and a black Cure tour t-shirt. As soon as she sees me, she drops her Channel clutch by the doorway and runs. She hugs me tightly. She hasn't seen me since I graduated from high school. The coolness of the Tuscan marble creeps up through my feet as I feel her warmth.

Diane didn't need to put me in Rohan's room, but I suppose she and Murni made it up out of habit. Diane liked me, so I was on the approved sleepover list. This time, though, they don't pull out Rohan's sofa bed for me, but lay a set of nightwear on his King-sized mattress. The truth is, after a certain point, I never slept on that sofa bed. I linger on his floor to ceiling bookshelves housing a plethora of miniature models and military histories. It's just as it was before he left for the University of Saint Andrews, though he moved his desk next to it. On the desk's surface was a half-finished model plane covered with a thin layer of dust.

I open his side drawer filled with practice papers. They are still there, old copies of *International Baccalaureate* questions marked up by his tutors. They were mostly perfect; math was the only thing he sucked at. Adding things up and balancing equations was never his strong suit. He'll probably find a job in an overfunded think tank after he graduates. I rifle through them, and sure enough, beneath the pile, is the wine opener, a bottle of Shiraz, and two mugs.

"You're going to get caught one day," I warned him.

He chortled. "Mom orders this stuff in boxes."

He only ever drank by himself or with me, one bottle when he was alone, two when we were together.

“You got to stay in control,” he explained. “Any more than this, and I don’t like the person I am anymore.”

I wish I had the right thing to say to him, but what teenager has the vocabulary? I’d tell him that there wasn’t a part of him that wasn’t good. At the time it was just easier to nod. We sat on the balcony that overlooked the entrance stairs, garage, and courtyard. It was monsoon season and the red bricks by the ledge were a shade darker than the ones we sat on. He liked that he couldn’t stain them, that any spills would evaporate. Flashes of lightning danced across the night sky followed by loud booms. We were both under a throw rug. “Do you want to hear about missiles?” he asked.

“Do I have a choice, soldier boy?”

“This one you’ll like. Okay, it’s not actually about missiles. Do you know the first thing the Russians sent up to space?”

“A dog?”

“No, you’re thinking Laika, that was later. First, Sergei Korolev figured if he couldn’t send a warhead up, he could send a simple satellite.”

“The potato thing.”

“Sputnik, the first radio broadcasting from space. Beeping on two frequencies. It makes you think, even if we can’t see the stars, if you listen hard enough, you can hear them.”

“Is it still up there?”

“Nah, it burnt up re-entering orbit a long time ago.”

Yes, you could only hear those far away beeps, until you couldn’t. I close the exam drawer and look up at the shelf to find his favorite model, a B-29 bomber.

I slip on the pajamas left on his bed and slip under his comforter. In another wine and balcony memory, he tells me that more bombs were dropped on Vietnam than in the entirety

of World War Two. Bombs he tells me, are divided into two major categories: explosive and incendiary.

“You’d start with the explosives, they would rip open the roofs, then the second wave of bombers would sweep in with the incendiaries and ignite everything. In Japan, since everything was made of wood, they just went straight to the incendiaries. A firestorm sustains its own vortex of destruction, powerful enough to pull people back into the burning masses they are escaping.”

“I wonder if any of those B-29 crews ever just reported jammed bomb doors and turned home.”

These sheets still smell of Softlan fabric softener, intensely floral as only chemicals can be. I clutch them close. My bomb doors will not open. I’ve already unleashed a firestorm on my family, I cannot afford to unleash another here. Rohan isn’t here anymore. There are days I miss falling asleep while holding him. Old habits die hard. When I wake up, to make it look convincing, I move to mess up the sofa bed and remember that Murni didn’t set it up last night.

Diane never woke up before twelve, she had some sort of insomnia. I didn’t know if it was natural or from the diet pills she took that were chock full of caffeine. Rohan and I never had to worry about her barging into his room in the morning. I slink down the grand staircase leading to the foyer, then slide open a set of oak doors. Diane is in Lululemon yoga gear. With a bowl and dainty spoon in hand, she overlooks a Spanish-ish fountain. She spoons granola and yogurt into her mouth. She stares at me under the portico, then she gets it, she says, “Oh, yes, since Rohan left, I started sleeping earlier. Sit Damien, don’t be a stranger.”

I butter toast, though Diane offers me anything I want. Bordering fifty-five, she still holds herself as she must have at Studio M in the eighties. Her spoon goes agogo as she lists

what she has in her fridge: smoked salmon, prosciutto, cheddar laced with Cambodian pepper, or if I were so inclined, she could always ask Murni to whip up those Belgian waffles I used to love. It's still the same cornucopia, though the parties she used to host for Rohan are long past. I stick with the toast. After my last bite, she drops the bomb, "I'm happy to see you Damien, but why are you here? And does Mummy know?"

Diane also pulls you in like a vortex, she makes you feel like she would do anything for you. Maybe that's what I remember, why I came here. I don't think Rohan ever saw her as anything more than an annoyance. The other kids flocked to him for the immaculately packed bento lunches that Diane would pop over with for recess. She handed them out from the boot of her Mercedes sedan. She wanted him to be loved. I'm not sure why she said she loved me, for as far as I knew I was of no use to him.

My first love wasn't a boy being groomed like a debutant by his mother; it was drama. I auditioned for every play and musical. Academically, I threw myself into my humanities, for I saw no humanity in the vultures that swarmed Rohan as they clutched their Pradas and stampeded in their Balenciagas. I always told him he should have joined me on the stage. He played the hetero as well as Marlon Brando. He was loved, and I suppose on some weird level, he must have loved me. I wanted to keep him safe. Any suspicions of us were shrouded behind the veil of our respective capabilities. I was the smart boy who sometimes sang. He was the belle of the ball who played rugby. Rohan never spoke of his interest in military history to anyone but me. In some sense, you can only be incendiary with someone you hold close. If there was any service, I could offer Diane, it was to be real with her son and not with her.

Diane nods as I tell her how I came to leave home. She said she knew, that she had always known, and Rohan probably did too. She makes me a Horlicks, extra malty just like when I

was a kid, but I leave it sitting on her patio table, coagulating. I recount how I betrayed the friends she had made in high school.

“I came out to them after convocation. Dad said he never wanted to see me again. Mom told me to go get HIV and die. She asked if I, at the very least, did the fucking. Please, she said, tell me that my son doesn’t take it up the ass.”

She grips my hand hard, “Enough. Your parents are imagining the world you’re going to face. This is the fear talking, they will come around. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“Would you have said that to Rohan if it was him?”

“Of course, I would have told him that I loved him no matter what.”

I don’t understand how her acceptance hurts as much as their rejection.

I didn’t go to prom, I only wanted to go with Rohan. It wasn’t against the rules per say. I understand now, that for people like me, omission is as close as we get to permission. But Rohan wasn’t ready, and in all honesty, neither was I. So, we agreed to give it a skip and hang out after the final rugby game of the year. I was scrolling through Instagram that night, seeing my former cast mates in gowns with little corsages on their wrists. After a night of dancing, they’d all wilt. Then I saw him, with one of the vultures: a girl named Hui Er who played for the school’s touch team. Stanley and Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I confronted Rohan after the game. He was sitting on white bleachers scuffed with streaks of mud. There were two empty bottles of wine next to his open duffle bag.

“I’m not like you, Dame!” he screamed, throwing the half-drunk bottle in his hand toward me. I dodged it, and the green glass didn’t shatter on the grass, but the Shiraz emptied out of it onto the pitch.

“Then what are you, soldier boy? Your parties? Your rugby? Or just whoever they want you to be?”

The floodlights pierced us on the school field, his teammates long packed up. He descended and moved to cradle my face. “We’re supposed to grow out of this.”

I inched away. “And grow apart?”

“No, no we don’t have to, we just have to grow up. Isn’t that fine?”

I knew that it wasn’t going to blow over. That I was so close to being pulled into a firestorm. That the kindling was always there in the kinship. Always one air raid away. I did move towards him. I hid his small muddy frame, pulling him close to my chest, and told him, “I love you, but this doesn’t make sense.” I suppose looking back on it now, it wasn’t meant to.

The water that trickles down the Gaudi-esque fountain in the patio reminds me of that night. Rohan always smelt like chlorine after practice, it was vile.

“You’re of course welcome to stay,” Diane offers. “For as long as you need, until things at home blow over.”

“Thank you, they won’t, but I won’t stay long, I just need another night. I had a rental lined up, but it fell through, I found a backup, but I can’t move in just yet.”

“You knew this was going to happen?”

“I hoped it wouldn’t but wanted to be ready.”

Diane sighs with a mixture of awe and I sense, disgust. “You were ready to leave? Are you even going to give your mother a shot? Does your father even know you’re doing this?”

“Some words, you can’t take back.”

Behind the unfinished model on Rohan’s desk is a toolbox. There were nights where he followed a manual. He’d break off parts from plastic frames with a combination of pliers and

X-Acto knives. Using a thin strip of sandpaper, he'd smooth out the residual plastic that remained from the cuts. His eyes fluttered between all the laid-out parts and the instructions.

In the light of the desk lamp, I open his toolbox. I grab a small rag in it and wet it with a bottle that Murni left me on the bedside table. Even with the dust wiped away, I can't identify the plane. The manual says it is a Messerschmitt Bf 109. A neat plane but one, according to Rohan, that was always outclassed by the British Spitfire. The latter was more responsive and capable of tighter turns in a dogfight. This German model has its cockpit and chassis assembled but lacks its tail and wings.

I lay out the remaining pieces and consult the instructions. After each joining, I file it down, trying to make the superglued seams seem less apparent. I must take twice as long as Rohan would have, but I finish it before daybreak. I won't have time to paint it, but it doesn't matter. The airbrush primers are still salvageable, but the small pots of acrylic have long since turned solid. So, I leave it on the table and decide to catch some sleep after all. Maybe he'll find it here one day, and figure that all he left hanging was the paintjob.

Murni calls me a cab. Diane waits with me on the pyramid staircase, she grabs my hand and squeezes it tight.

"You know I love you, right?"

"I know, the feeling's mutual."

The sun above us makes the lichen mansion glow like the Emerald City, she squeezes my hand tighter. "You'll come to visit again? Maybe when Rohan is back from Scotland?"

"Of course."

"Or you could stay," she pleads. "Just stay."

As much as I want to, I can't. As much as she glows, I can't. I tell her, "I can't go back to depending on the kindness of strangers."

Slow Violence

In between the drills, we'd stare into the water of our little enclave. In the middle of the night, the surface of Seletar Reservoir shimmered, reflecting the floodlights. We floated on M3Gs: amphibious vehicles that unfolded to form rafts. There were four of us to an M3G, four rigs per platoon, and two platoons per company.

Eric didn't belong to any of the rigs. He did not belong to the anchorage team either. Lieutenant Saw Say Sern was the one who had announced our roles to us after our Bridging Engineer Conversion Course. He decided if we would drive the bus-sized monsters, crew them to transform them into rafts, or work landside.

We weren't surprised by Eric's appointment. He always had his nose in a book. He'd keep them in a Ziploc bag along with wet wipes. We would ask him what they were about, and he would answer like he had a spot waiting for him in university, which of course he did. He always answered us like we would understand him but most times we didn't. He didn't talk to keep awake like we did between drills. He'd finish his task, wipe his hands and squint in the dim light of the training shed, plowing through pages.

Sir Saw made him his runner, some of us thought it was a cushy job. *The asshole can enjoy aircon just because he can speak like the gweilos*, some of us said. Some of us defended him. *Have you seen the comms pack? Looks like it's from World War Two. Where got easy to carry that everywhere dumbass?*

Some days Eric would help us clean the rigs, pumping hydraulic ports full of red sticky lubricating fluid which we called strawberry jam. Some days he would join anchorage for endurance training, using piling hammers to drive metal stakes as tall as some of us into the ground. Some nights he stayed up with Sir Saw, helping him fill up spreadsheets or mark-up maps in the office. We knew Sir Saw and Eric had a history, they had gone to the same Junior College. They managed to hide it for a while but in camp, there's nothing to talk about except

each other. Eric said we gossiped more than girls. *Eh you know Eric before this Sir?* we asked. He had arrived back at the parade square after the weekly cohesion run. *Yeah, he was my junior. Both of us were on student council,* Sir Saw said. *Serious? You close?* we asked. *Yeah, close enough, we went on school trips together, he helped me with my GP essays a lot. He's a lot smarter than I am,* Sir Saw said. *Yah, damn smart, too smart for this,* we said. Sir Saw's eyes lingered on Eric who had arrived before him. *Yeah, too good for this,* he said.

When we were processed into Seletar, our new captain ordered us to fall in at the company line and asked us to drop. We held push-up position on the hot concrete as he 'welcomed' us to the 35th Singapore Combat Engineers. The sergeants and officers loomed over us at the edge of the square. *I want to know your names,* Captain Joel boomed. *What's yours?* With every name, Sir Saw would bark *down!* We knew the names were irrelevant. After sixty push-ups, he commanded us to rise and stand at attention: *Sedia!* And then at ease: *Senang Diri!* The sound of our boots reverberated as we parted our legs. We had our eyes on the captain, but Eric's were on Lieutenant Saw Say Sern.

Eric was confusing. Even some of the regular officers, the sign-ons, the ones with the degrees, didn't get his books after he summarized them. He could lift more than some of us and run faster than others. Captain Joel asked him why he didn't go to Command School. Eric shrugged; *I just wanted more time to read.* That wasn't the only weird thing.

Well, you can't blame a guy for looking a certain way, but it made some of us uncomfortable, especially when we were in short shorts for physical training. Eric had smooth shapely legs and a bubble butt, the kind that would make you think of Kim Kardashian. From the hips down, he looked like some of the calendar girls the more beng among us would put up in our lockers.

Most of us wouldn't fixate too much on his looks, we were afraid of what it might mean. So, we tried to see him as a kid brother. The wrong choice maybe, he had all the answers.

When we talked to him about our girlfriends, he always knew why they were angry and knew what we should say to make it better. He'd tell us if they were being bitches or if we were being dicks. Some of us didn't deserve them, and some deserved better. We asked if that's what was in those books. He gave us the same answer regardless of what we were doing: eating bland steamed chicken in the cookhouse, catching a breath in between interval training, or pumping jam into the hydraulics. *Don't be silly little boys.*

Sir Saw was always tougher on Eric, even Captain Joel said so, *You're going to run your runner ragged*, he joked. Eric always got the *sai kang* jobs: staying back to scrub clay off the stakes before returning them to the storeroom, dismantling the water stations after PT, or logging in maintenance data. First to arrive, last to leave with Sir Saw. To his credit, Sir Saw would never make Eric do anything that he wouldn't do. Sir Saw could laugh with us, crack jokes, but never with Eric. At first, we thought it was because, like us, he didn't fully understand him. We realized, though, he might have understood him before any of us. He knew what it might have meant to be laughing with him.

We never said shit after we figured it out. If he had been a dick, maybe we would have brought it up. The guy was gay. But not a gay we'd imagine, with a limp-wrist and talking the way *ah-kuas* talk. No, he said things like *silly little boys* but that was about it. Maybe it was the way he said it like he was all *atas*. The way he made the words longer, how he dragged them out. There aren't supposed to be any gays in the combat units. The system was supposed to screen them out. We all were summoned to Depot Road when we were civilians.

Somewhere along the line in manpower base, a medical officer asked us to pull down our pants and cough. To check for hernias or something. Afterward, he'd ask us to pull them up and then he'd sit us down. *Do you have anything you wish to declare?* he'd ask. Maybe you were schizophrenic, depressed, suicidal—or maybe there was a reason you couldn't stay in an all-male bunk? The medical officer would record that into the system. When it was lumped up

with all that, who would declare it? So, there Eric was, a queer in a bunk of straights. Business as usual for us if we didn't think of it. He pulled his weight, that's all that mattered. He was good at his job, and he always helped us with ours.

We often wondered how they figured out where to send us after BMT. What made us particularly qualified to become bridging engineers. The easiest answer was, they didn't give it any thought. It was on us to think on. Did we have it worse than the riflemen or the tankies? Who was to say, it depended on the stories being told.

Some of us had fathers who had been trained by the Israelis. The foreigners spat in their mouths. They made them run until they had to puke in their helmets, then they commanded them to drink from them. We asked our fathers about boys like Eric. One of them said his bunkmates would collect their shit in a bucket, and then toss it over into the shower stall that the fairy was in. Yeah sure, some of us had the odd slur, but flinging shit was unthinkable.

We were supposed to have each other's backs. During operations, we weren't supposed to sleep, but often, we were able to take small naps in shifts. Eric, without a crew, was alone. Maybe we should have been more attentive. His scary-ass fever happened after our second ATEC, an evaluation the higher-ups conducted to test us with after a year in Seletar.

Hours before daybreak, we assembled in the converted hangar that housed our rigs with our field packs ready for inspection. The moonlight pierced a riddle of unaddressed bullet holes in the rooftop. They were made by zero fighters during the Japanese invasion of Malaya. Like in Pearl Harbor, the Japanese had hoped to get the planes while they were still grounded. This base once housed the RAF. These converted hangars would be retired after our batch returned to civilian life. New ones were being built. We loaded up our Rigs while the officers and runners took a briefing from Captain Joel. Then Sir Saw gave us a pep talk, *Okay guys simple,*

we just tahan, follow the plan and before you know it, we're back in three days. Drivers, be aware of what's going on in the convoy, crews I better not hear of any lost equipment, and you all just take care of each other, okay? Force prep at 0400, so make sure your packs aren't missing any shit, convoy departs at 0430.

The convoy: three Landrovers, two five-tonners, and eight rigs long departed. A good part of our journey started off on the CTE; the expressway was all but empty in the wee hours. All these forested training sites were still so close to the neighborhoods we lived in. We broke off from paved roads and soon enough, we entered an undisclosed location in Mandai. It had rained the day before. The roads became muddier and more unstable. This was when we pitied our drivers the most, the dirt paths were barely wide enough for the rigs. Sometime before daybreak, rig five almost got bogged down in a sinkhole, its driver had to speed up at just the right moment to miss it. He was literally a few centimeters short of grazing rig four. We weren't supposed to, but some of us did roll the windows down, and a cool humid air carried the smell of mangroves and fermenting undergrowth.

We reached our first deployment site. We were ordered to dig shell scrapes, body-sized holes a meter-and-a-half deep, with a divot slightly deeper below our feet that we could use to slot our field packs in. They would provide cover from shrapnel, apparently. It was Eric's job to dig his and Sir Saw's because officers had to sit in on briefings. Eric drove his changkol into the earth but dug too close; the wall between both shell scrapes collapsed. We thought Eric was going to get an earful, but when Sir Saw returned, he said, *Doesn't matter, no one checks up on us during this phase of deployment.* Eric snaked a landline into the shell scrape. Officer and runner lay prone in their two-man cover. Throughout the night Eric would relay orders from HQ. Enemy at nine, twelve, or three. *Fire, fire, fire* we would shout, SAR-21s pointed in the right direction. We screamed into the night, by the end of it our voices were hoarse.

They trained us to go without sleep for days. It was part of the job, we needed endurance to be ferrymen for Leopard tanks and 5-tonners. It was torture for us because we knew we would never see war in Singapore. That was something from the history books. All of this was pointless. Dawn colored the jungle orange, and we began to fill our shell scrapes up with clay. We weren't supposed to throw trash in them, but most of us didn't want to carry that shit with us. Even Eric was too tired to go on about how bad for the environment it was, or whatever. *Just make sure the officers don't see anything, cover it up fast.*

We moved out to the next site. The anchorage 5-tonner set out earlier so they could meet up with Boat Company to get the banks ready for rafting operations. Come breakfast, we had arrived at our Wet Gap, the body of water we were supposed to deploy in. Wet gap. That never got old. This reservoir was far more expansive than the one we trained in. To our sleep-deprived eyes, it could have been Jurassic Park. The edges were covered in mangroves. Spiky roots jutted out from muddy banks to take in the air. In the emerald water, we'd spot catfishes and river otters. Some of us found it beautiful that this was nestled in our city, some of us would have never seen this if not for National Service. The wonder was lost as soon as the sun crept up. Our metal rigs painted black made us feel like we were working on frying pans. Two years earlier, an NSF had drowned during ATEC, so we now had to wear thick orange life jackets over our fatigues. We were drenched without ever having to touch water.

We drove the rigs into the reservoir, as they entered the massive front plates extended and broke the water. The tops unfolded like a butterfly awaiting take-off. We swapped from the engine to the jet propulsion system, and the sergeants took their positions at the crane consoles above the M3G cockpits. The two coxswains would position ramps stored in the vehicles' center, lifted by the crane, connecting them to hydraulic pistons on the side. While this all happened, anchorage was split into two groups, one for the home bank and one for the far bank, both ferried by Boat Company.

We had to set up the anchorage sites and rafts in twenty minutes. We all hated the stopwatches. When the ramps were in place, we would scissor them with another rig. They were lowered into place by the rig sergeants manning the cranes and locked by the coxswains. Two rigs made up a raft. Then the ferrying would begin. The rafts would dock, the vehicles would drive on them and we'd push off.

Eric mostly stayed on the home bank with Sir Saw on the second day. He was responsible for relaying the tally of vehicles transported. The signal on his comms pack was so shitty that he had to make several trips from the home bank to HQ. Protocol dictated that he carried this load with him wherever he went. We found it cruel that Sir Saw made him relay every bit of information as it came in. He didn't want to mess up our, or was it his, evaluation. It was his last exercise. Eric must have made more than fifty trips from the home bank to HQ that day. He shielded himself from the sun with a black clipboard he had brought outfield. Occasionally when our rafts docked and there was a lull from the next vehicle arriving, he'd pop on and sneak us sour gummies he had stashed away in his Landrover before deployment. There was something wholesome about him. We ate them quickly because if we left them, the candy would melt in our fatigues.

We worked through the night, and after the last vehicle had gone across the wet gap, we loaded up, returned the rigs to land mode, and drove on. We saw Eric rest his head on Sir Saw's shoulder in the Landrover. It was a thirty-minute drive, finally, a straight road, the end of all this was in sight.

The last evaluation was forming a bridge spanning a narrower wet gap. Eight rigs assembled again and scissored into position. We cheered as the last Leopard tank crossed it. ATEC was over. We would drive up to the armor camp at Sungei Gedong, rest, and be back at Seletar by nightfall. We reached out to Sir Saw for high fives. He waited on the far bank with

us. *Congrats Sir, this is your last thing before you pass out hor?* we said. Sir Saw's smile almost covered up his eyebags. *Sorry losers, but you guys find me on the outside, okay?* he said. We knew the truth, we wouldn't. It never happened. When you were out, you were out. Sure, we'd have the once-a-year reunion, and of course, the reservist cycles. But that was it. He'd clear all his leave, and the last time we'd see him was when he traded in his 11-B and collected his pink IC. We didn't want to see him anyway. We wanted him to enjoy his freedom.

We were doing final inspection and dreading the maintenance we would need to do after the exercise. We'd need cartons of tubes of strawberry jam to push out all the reservoir's gunk. Before that though, we'd be able to take a shower and get some sleep. We looked around for Eric, but he wasn't with us when the last tank passed over our bridge. Sir Saw had sent him back to HQ. We figured he wasn't rushing back because we were nearly done, but an hour after the last tank, we started getting worried. *Eh Sir,* we said, *you don't think he fell into the water, right?* We chortled. *Fall in also got life jacket one.* But Sir Saw wasn't laughing. *I'm going to look for him. You all listen to Platoon Sergeant Desmond, we're almost wrapped up here anyway.*

It was another hour before he returned. He had Eric's comms pack on him. We asked him where Eric was. Sir Saw, for the first time in the exercise, seemed lost. *He's on his way to Nee Soon Camp in an ambulance,* Sir Saw said. We didn't understand. *What? Why? When?!* we asked. *I found him passed out on the path toward the command tent, heatstroke.* Sir Saw had accomplished his mission, a smooth uninterrupted ferrying operation, the higher-ups would be pleased with his contribution, but this was a bad mark on the record. It was unclear if his blank look was from his fatigue, his fear of being reprimanded for pushing a man to collapse, or because he was, to our minds, the closest to Eric. Breaking all decorum with his head in his hands, he stomped his right foot and screamed, *Fuck! fuck! fuck! fuck!*

We found Eric in bunk, dressed down to admin attire. He looked cleaned up and there was a plaster on his right hand. We surrounded his bed and he shrieked when he opened his eyes. We laughed. *Aiyah! Chow keng so close to the end for what?* we said. We smacked the back of his head. *Can be less stupid or not? Eric, you okay or not?* Eric sat up and smiled. *Yeah! All good, they just put me in the high-pressure shower with ice packs, then put me on a drip. My temperature's stable now.* Eric, Sir Saw said, *please never do that again.* And Eric's smile disappeared. *Yes Sir,* he said, *sorry Sir.*

We didn't get the sleep we were hoping for, as the night drew on Eric began to sweat and soak his sheets. His fever returned. We ran to Sir Saw's bunk to wake him up. We watched him shake Eric awake with the same look he had when he was repeating *fuck*. We got out a thermometer. 39.6°C. Sir Saw sent one of us down to the company office to get the sergeant on duty to call another ambulance. Eric shook his head. *Just need water and paracetamol Sir,* he said. We told Sir Saw, *instructions are to monitor and send him to the medical center in camp tomorrow.* Eric was delirious. So, Sir Saw lifted him up bridal style. *You guys get some sleep,* he said, *I have a spare bed in my bunk, I'll keep an eye on him.*

Captain Joel gave our platoon a night out the night before Sir Saw was set to collect his IC. He was clearing his last bit of leave, so he wasn't with us in camp. Eric had become more reserved. A runner without an officer. He still did the same things, but he wasn't there anymore. He stopped calling us silly little boys. One of us caught him sneaking texts when he should have been asleep. It was Sir Saw's name on his screen. That night out, we thought we'd get Sir Saw a cake. So, we approached Eric while he was reading in bed. *What flavor does he like?* Eric laughed for the first time in a long time. *You've spent a year with him, and you don't know he hates sweets? Get him a bucket of KFC.* You two, we said, *you're close huh?* Eric sighed. *Share a past, and you become close enough.* The kid brother who gave us gummies left when Sir Saw

did. But maybe some of his intuition finally rubbed off on us. Some of us felt that Sir Saw didn't deserve him and that he deserved better.

Babi Pongteh

The boxes wobble and their contents clang as Ze Chian curses under his breath. It doesn't help that Kepayang, an old shophouse painted with garish pastels and gold, sits on an incline. He rings the doorbell with his elbow and hears loud thumps reverberating from the restored staircase. Boon Tat greets him at the door in an apron and an oversized batik shirt. "Ah Boy! Why you take so long to visit ah?" He reaches out to hug him but realizes he can't. He turns and leaves Ze Chian to find a place for his haul.

The night before, Ze Chian had laid out the cluster of cooking implements: mooncake moulds, mortars and pestles and woks of descending diameters; there were so many, they had to be stacked like Jenga.

Then the text popped up, *Sorry Didi! Still with Qiao En, too much to catch up with, you can manage alone, right?*

Fuck Beatrice. Ze Chian perches the boxes on a table and Boon Tat invites him to sit. The chef instructs his waiter to get two glasses of *bandung*. The interior of the shophouse is thoroughly modern, save the beams and the wooden ceiling that support the second floor. Kepayang is as white and chic as any Michelin star restaurant. No more than ten tables are served at any one time. An unviable business model, but Boon Tat comes from old money. A server, with a crew cut serves them two pink milky concoctions. Ze Chian turns to Boon Tat. "I swear this one looks younger than the last one you *chee ko pek!*"

"Say louder lah!" Boon Tat flashes Ze Chian the middle finger. "So he can hear you. So uncultured! He's very good hor, worked at the Raffles before, got ambition, I respect." He leans in. "Not a crime to hire some eye candy also, right?"

"Dirty old man!"

Boon Tat gasps theatrically. "Unfilial ungrateful boy! You don't forget who gave you that same job when you were looking for pocket money ah!"

The two laugh and catch up, though it has only been a month since they last met at the funeral. Ze Chian offers his mother's hoard to his old boss. Boon Tat beckons the same boy from the Raffles to bring the boxes to him, peers into them, then tells him to bring it all to the kitchen.

"They don't make them this solid anymore. Thank you, Ah Boy. You sure you don't want to take any for yourself?"

Ze Chian shakes his head. "No lah, you use them, give them a good home. A thank you for helping me cater at the wake. Anyway, when was the last time I made *rempah*?"

"Eh, of course, don't mention it. That's the problem with you incorrigible youths. No time for anything, eating that trash like macnoner and playing video games instead of taking the time to make a good *rempah*."

When he was a child, Ze Chian's mother would come back from her day at the firm and ask him to wait as she made her *rempah* from scratch, pounding shallots, lemongrass, ginger, galangal, garlic, candlenut and chillies with a mortar and pestle. This thick paste was the backbone of Peranakan cuisine. His stomach would gurgle as she macerated the ingredients. She would fry and toss the paste with chunks of meat while the rice was steaming. As the dish sizzled in the wok, the air would be suffused with another time. As he ate, his mother would take a shower, and only eat after he and his sister started washing the dishes. He thought, watching her cook, that she would live forever. The women in Ze Chian's family always died before the men. It was as if tradition had decided it was going to spit in the eye of science. Ze Chian thought it was because they never stopped working.

"Before you head off," Boon Tat says, "I have something for you in the kitchen."

Tucked in the industrial freezer is a Tupperware. It contains chunks of meat suspended in a black block. The chef fishes it out and hands it to Ze Chian. "Your mother's *Babi Pongteh*. I think it's her last batch. Did you find any in her freezer?"

“No. How old is this?”

“About three months, so definitely not as good as when it’s fresh but still edible. She traded it for some of my *ayam buah keluak*. Honestly, I forgot about it. You take it, more special if you have it.”

Ze Chian returns to his mother’s old home. Beatrice is in her pyjamas eating a peanut butter sandwich. “How’d it go?”

“Like you care.”

“Don’t be a prick. What’s in the bag?”

“Don’t blow off your commitments then. Boon Tat gave me this.”

The almost obsidian block thuds as it hits the dining table. Beatrice rises from her sprawling position on the couch and picks it up. Her long nails, painted with glossy red polish, dig into the tight lid. She gives it a sniff, closes it, and then puts it back down. “Babi pongteh. Did he make it?”

“No, Ma made it.”

“Thought so, looks and smells like hers. You let her cook when she should have been resting?”

“You think I had a say in what she did? She probably did it when I was at work.”

Beatrice ignores the explanation. “Let’s eat it tonight, I’ll start the rice.”

“No.”

“What’s your deal? You want to keep it in the freezer as a memento? It’s food.”

“I’ll eat it by myself.”

Beatrice lets out a snort. “Boon Tat gave it to *us* to eat.”

“He gave it to *me* to eat. Go order your Foodpanda. This is mine.” Ze Chian grabs it and moves towards the freezer. “Don’t you dare touch it.”

“Of course, everything of hers is always yours.”

“For good reason.”

“Oh, and what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you come back when it suits you,” he says. “You treat this family like a business venture.”

Beatrice sighs and places her hands on her hips, covering her pyjamas with breadcrumbs and peanut butter. How did she, this slob, make anything of herself in America? How was she his mother’s daughter? It must be easy being successful when someone gives you a leg up. She didn’t return a cent of his mother’s loan. An entitled brat in besmeared Care Bear sleepwear.

“Didi, come on, we agreed on this, there’s no point keeping the house, and it’s a good market.”

“That’s not what I meant. Fuck the house. Where were you when she was dying? Living it up in L.A.”

“I told you, I was waiting for my green card. You really think I didn’t want to come? Look I’m sorry, I’m here now.”

“Are you? You’re in your pyjamas and clearly hungover. When did I become the older brother?”

“Oh my god, Ze Chian, I’m allowed to have a life outside of this house. You need to figure that out for yourself. Life is not Ma.”

What right does she have to his mother’s last offering? The freezer begins to beep incessantly, a reminder that it’s been left wide open. He places the block in, closes the door and retreats to his old room.

Ze Chian regrets taking down his curtains early. The light from the streetlamps pours in through his windows. He shifts in bed, half-dreaming and half-remembering his mother. She's in the kitchen on a Sunday morning and the house is overtaken by an incredible aroma of cloves and cinnamon. She had started the ritual after Dad had left them. It was her reclamation for the years she had to cook fish and chips or pork chops. *Chao ang mor*, she'd call him after the divorce; he refused to touch anything that was too heavily spiced. His father only comes to him in dreams. Ze Chian turns over and sniffs the air. But this smell, no this is real—cloves and cinnamon wafting into his bedroom. That bitch!

Beatrice is standing in front of the microwave, illuminated by its yellow fluorescent light. She has a bowl of rice with a spoon in it. Ze Chian grabs it from her.

“What the fuck!” she screams.

He opens the microwave and retrieves the Tupperware. When he reaches the hallway leading to the bedrooms, he hears her. “You're deranged! You know that, Didi!?” After he puts his prize on his desk, he locks his door. He pours the steaming contents of the Tupperware into his bowl. His mouth is soon coated with a lingering layer of spices, carried by the pork fat that has melted into the stew. The pork is so tender it disintegrates into the rice. When he's done, he stares into the bowl. He feels his mother's death as dark as dried cloves wash over him, spreading from his mouth to the rest of his body. He begins to cry, that's all she will be now—a dream.

When Ze Chian does dream of his father, they are in Amsterdam. He is always a little boy holding a hand in a black leather glove, they walk by the canals. He asks his father what the beams on top of the canal houses are called. “*Verhuishaak*, moving hooks,” his father replies in his thick accent. He asks what they are for, and then he's picked up by the wrist and swung forward, his father shouting, “to lift up little boys like you!”

After his father left them, Ze Chian read books about the Dutch. He discovered that they liked pancakes, speculated on tulips, and were merchants. It'd take up to two years for a letter to return home from a Dutch East India Company colony, so their sovereigns gave them free rein.

It was the company who had “discovered” the Maluku islands in Indonesia—the only place where cloves grew in the world. To create artificial scarcity and spike demand, the fine men from the Netherlands burnt most of the spice groves in Maluku to the ground. They bathed the islands in blood, brutally quashing all resistance. The British who took over weren't much better. They uprooted the trees that remained and scattered them across their colonies for their subjects to tend to. Spice was a whole lot of trial and error, with a lot more error than trial.

“Not the same yet,” Boon Tat judges, taking the teaspoon from his mouth, “Not the right mix.”

It's Ze Chian's fourth attempt. He spends his nights borrowing Kepayang's kitchen after the dinner service. The pork trotters simmer in the black reduction comprising garlic, fermented soybeans, soy sauce, shallots and spices. Boon Tat jokes, “If I tell the team it's babi pongteh for family meal again, I think they're going to kill me. You take this batch home tonight.”

Ze Chian takes his own teaspoon, slurps, then slumps on a stool. His old boss sighs. “Look. Your mother took years to come up with it, cannot expect to figure out so fast one. Why don't you just give this a break, spend more time with your sister instead of this *lao gay*.”

“You still think I should patch up with her?”

Boon Tat sets a timer and lowers the heat on the stove. He pulls out another stool. “You’re lucky to still have family, you can call me old school, but at the end of the day she’s still your sister. Why don’t you give her a chance?”

“She keeps asking me how I could have let Ma do this, let her do that. Why I let the doctors treat her that way. Bitch, where the hell was she?”

“You cannot think liddat one. Your *Jie* had to live her life, you know the most, your mother also not the easiest to be around hor. So, she went away, didn’t you want too as well?”

“She took everything. Ma had to live so frugally after she asked for those loans. All for a new life in America. Ma was stuck because of her.”

“Your mother, or you Ah Boy?”

Making babi pongteh isn’t like making rempah. There is no piping hot oil and vigorous frying. It is a slow process—the stew sits on the stove for hours on a low heat; simmering as the pork turns the broth gelatinous and that fat takes on the flavor of spices. It’s a dish reliant on sacrificed time. When the Dutch sailors went on a voyage for spices, was it wise for them to think of home? Was it wise to think of the wives and children they left behind—the infants who would not know them when they returned? Was that taste, that morsel, that little bit of flavor, worth it? Were dried flowers on faraway islands worth the pustulating pools of blood?

He would not let Beatrice’s decision to leave for America be the nail in his mother’s coffin. He would not betray her as his sister and father did. He stayed so his mother wouldn’t have to think of dying alone.

Driving home from Kepayang, Ze Chian counts the streetlamps. Lights are just another preservation, a mourning from the day past, a clinging on as it dies. Maybe Boon Tat was right. He did want to leave this country—this sleepy port town, now an illuminated

metropolis. It all caught up with his mother in the end. The women in Ze Chian's family always died before the men. He didn't work hard enough to keep her from dying.

Beatrice hands the property agent the keys. The agent smiles and departs. She sits on the floor, cross-legged in front of the kitchen portico. Ze Chian joins her. "Look, Ma would have wanted us to get along. I know I've been a little shit. Sorry."

"You know I loved her right?"

"You don't leave the people you love."

"You do when you know you don't work out."

"After you left, she'd have the blankest look when she cooked. She was always somewhere else."

"I'm sorry you took care of her alone. But you of all people should know you can't live for other people."

"What's that supposed to mean."

"I mean, you and your boyfriend...never mind. Look, nobody's perfect."

"I'm not asking for perfect, I'm asking for decent."

"My point exactly. Before you could walk, she used to beat me. It got worse after Dad left. I did everything right for her. Best grades, no boyfriends, all the filial piety nonsense. Yeah, I was angry. Even after you came out, she still loved you the way she loved you. It was fucked up to feel jealous, I know. But your Ma and my Ma are not the same person."

Ze Chian doesn't feel inclined to believe her. His mother was strict, but he had never seen a rattan cane in his life. He had vague memories of her reprimanding Beatrice over grades, but wasn't that every Asian parent? It's not like he didn't experience it too. And what did Beatrice want from Ma after he came out? Did she want her to disown him? It was

Beatrice's words against the void left by his mother. For now, this revelation would just have to sit. He gets up and moves toward the kitchen. "Let's eat."

Ze Chian starts setting the table and reheats his last batch in the only pot left in the house, clay, cracked, and charred. Beatrice starts the rice in the Zojirushi cooker that she'll pack back home. They take out disposable bowls and cutlery.

"I've been trying to make Ma's," he tells her. "It never turns out right. I can't figure out the spices."

She ladles some Babi Pongteh on her rice and chews. "I honestly think this is better, more authentic."

"What do you mean?"

"You prefer Ma's? Babi pongteh isn't supposed to be black but dark brown. You're supposed to just use dark soy sauce. Ma's is so black and salty because she added Marmite."

"No! That's disgusting."

"I thought so, but I guess you didn't. You were never objective about what Ma made. She made us wait so long for dinner that anything tasted good."

Object-Oriented Ontology

I'm standing at your kitchen counter holding a packet of red Twizzlers and considering if I should forget them on purpose. I hate the taste of licorice, and this junk doesn't even purport to be licorice. I've already packed the Ziploc bag with granola and M&Ms, something that you euphemistically call trail mix. They're just like the Fruit Loops you start your day with. I wonder how you continue to look as lean as a greyhound. When you're thirty, that's when it's going to go downhill for your metabolism, when I can have my just desserts. I'll force us to eat kale salad for dinner every night and spoon chia seeds into your oatmeal. Yes, not cereal, oatmeal. But you're driving, and I have no license, so what can I say, you have the right to your garbage. This country of yours is vast; I've never needed a car. You ask me where the cooler is, and I remind you that *this is your house*, and then apologize because it's true; I rearrange things every time I come to visit you. You ask if I'm nervous. I ignore you and get the Yeti that I've relocated to the storeroom. Why you had put it in your wardrobe is beyond me. You tell me that we're going to get date shakes near the Morongo Casino. Getting a Hadley's banana date shake on the way to Glendale Arizona is a tradition. I decide that I can afford to "forget" the Twizzlers.

Pontiac Sunfire 2005, Cobalt Blue. You drive it up to the loading lot in front of your refurbished 1930s complex. We have ten minutes of grace; there isn't enough parking in Los Angeles. Your mother bought the Pontiac from a second-hand dealership before you moved out here for college. The city smells of piss, or maybe it's just your bit of Koreatown. There are so many dogs, and the internalized racism in me finds that ironic. I've heard from Americans that we Asians will eat anything.

We open the two doors of the Pontiac. You never have room in your trunk because you fill it with nonsense from art school. It's your last year and instead of putting your kinetic sculptures in the closet with the Yeti, you let them ride with you every day. On top of the pile

sits the one you call Oscar, a plywood tripod that you had covered with faux fur. I've seen you dance with him in your shows. After the last one, you explained object-oriented ontology to me. I still don't get it. All I know is Oscar and his compatriots are not saving you any fuel, but this is your car, which you drive through your country. We push down the front seats so we can load the Yeti and our haversacks in the back. You've had yours since high school—you got it from volleyball camp, a generic grey Nike. Mine's a Northface. Well not really, I bought it from a street vendor in Chatuchak. An imitation. You asked me where that was and when I told you Bangkok you giggled. You are a child. All our clothes are in mine and all the nonsense is in yours, well that's a lie, some of the nonsense is mine. Jars of kaya, instant A1 curry powder, and sachets of Kopi-O. I doubt your parents will even use any of it, but my mother insisted that I arrive with gifts from the motherland. I told her the furthest your family has ever gone is Germany, and only because your medic brother was stationed there. *Why would they feel the need to leave?* my mother says, *they just drive in their own country.* You don't have a passport. You didn't renew it after that trip to Schweinfurt.

Mojave is the current MacBook operating system; you tell me that's the desert we're driving through. We have the windows slightly lowered; I tell you that it's going to turn your Pontiac into a dust bowl. *Don't worry, Momma's house has a vacuum and a garage.* You called your apartment on Hobart a shoebox, but it's big by Singaporean standards. The notion of an actual garage sounds wasteful to me. I ask you what Arizona is like, you tell me it's urban sprawl, all the buildings are in the same shade of terracotta and you have to drive everywhere. It's just as hot as home but the air is dry, and when I shift in the Pontiac's seat, the speckled polyester shocks me. The desert is static. I ask if Death Valley is along the way, and you tell me the only national park we'll sort of pass is Joshua Tree. I ask if that's like the U2 album, and you call me an old man. You're the one who listens to Sondheim musicals. I've loaded *Sunday in the Park with George* on my phone and brought a portable Bluetooth

speaker, because your car's radio only takes cassettes. Mandy Patinkin sings about finishing the hat.

There is not a bit of sky back home as barren as yours. The desert is a mirage of convenience. It is barrenness infused with life. The roadkill is sign enough. We've passed two roadrunners and a jackrabbit. The creosote in the air makes me think of the monsoons back home. *Some of these bushes can be carbon-dated back 12000 years*, you tell me. I wonder if that's how they simulate the scent of torrents, they've accumulated millennium's worth of sparse raindrops. Your favorite smell in the world. It smells like childhood.

While you queue up for the date shakes, I'm downing sample cups of spiced nuts and assorted granola in the snack section of Hadley's. I try to be tactful, to only grab the offerings when the staff aren't looking. A middle-aged white woman stares at me, I question if she knows anything about her prosperity. Words like organic, single-source, and gluten-free are all over these stupid products. There is no possibility of popcorn containing gluten you idiots. Corn is definitionally gluten free. You ask me how the nuts are, and I tell you that you should know. You turn bright red and glare at me like that white woman. I enjoy embarrassing you in your polite society. *Drink your shake*, you tell me, and I do. I think of my best friend back home, Aliyah, and how she breaks fast during Ramadan with a Tupperware of dates. I asked her how she found the energy to go through her days and she told me, *Not all sustenance comes from food*. She's right, this isn't sustenance, it's basically blended ice cream. You drink this because it reminds you of your family vacations to California when you were being driven across the desert to get dessert. I tell you it is delicious.

Next to the gas station we're refueling at, there is a rotating sign, Jenny's Diner, a relic from a bygone era, gaudy and chromatic in the midday sun. Gladys in a black polo shirt escorts us to a booth clad in flaking faux leather, and asks if she can get us boys anything to start, coffee maybe? You get jittery with more than one cup, your hands shake, and you

already had one in the morning. *Just water would be great*, I tell her, though she's looking at you. They always look to you for the answers. I scan the menu, at its top: Jenny's pea soup, best pea soup west of Arizona. I wonder how much competition there is. The regular fare is there: pancakes, biscuits, bacon, sausages, and hash. Things that would keep in the middle of nowhere; hyper-processed. How do truckers live on this stuff? It makes sense that Jenny's is next to a gas station, this is food as fuel.

You ask me again after we hit the state border if I'm feeling nervous, and I know what you're really saying: *you feel nervous*. So, I tell you that there is nothing to be nervous about, *mothers are mothers and mothers love me*. This makes you smile. I ask if you think the shakes have lasted in the Yeti. You say they always do. The barrenness gives way to more red rock, and Saguaro. The treelike cacti branch out; taller than you. You tell me, *it is illegal to cut one down*. I wonder how many were felled as your ancestors moved westward. How many years of water is concentrated in a Saguaro? A thin layer of dust has covered your dashboard. The sky begins to look less endless flanked by the canyons we're driving through. *I think she'll like you*, you tell me.

We're standing outside a house that looks like every other house on the street. I think, were not so different after all, we both longed for something different and found it in each other. You turn the knob and pull the door handle. She hugs like you do.

Cuddles

Sven hands me a red plastic bag from the corner shop. In it are four cans of Anchor Beer and he is an hour late. How anyone is late in the world of Google Maps is beyond me, but people can still surprise you. He does apologize as I open the fridge, saying he keyed in the unit number as well and that messed up the directions. I tell him it's a chill night anyway; I was just sorry his pesto got cold. There is time to make the Anchor Beer cold Anchor Beer. It would be cool if Sven were a Viking. He'd burst into my life on a longboat, dropping his anchor. Too much? He's not a Viking, he's Eurasian. I tell him to stop flustering and give him a hug, patting him on the back. Too paternal? He is only a year younger than me. The fact is it's been a long time since I've attempted anything close to flirting.

"You know pesto is good cold too, right?" I say. "Isn't that how they serve it in delis?"

He shuffles and shrugs. "Happy to eat it any which way."

Sven takes a seat at the breakfast nook, a small circular table with two mismatched chairs which I bought from the Salvation Army. Ideally, I wouldn't be supporting the Christians but pillaging them. But I too am not in possession of a longboat. Is homosexuality my own brand of paganism? Semantics. Breakfast nook is also a mislabelling, I use it for every meal. I make us both gin and tonic, using lemon instead of lime, and we begin to eat our deli pasta.

Sven moves as I remembered; we were in a youth acting troupe together when we were teenagers. I must have had a thing for him, even then, though I wasn't sure if he swung my way. It'd be too awkward if he didn't, why ruin a so-so thing? There was something about his joints; how they'd buckle. He could have played one of the walkers from *War of the Worlds*, or maybe an ostrich. I told him as much once. He frowned. It was a compliment: birds like ostriches are better evolved for bipedal movement. "The human foot has far too

many bones,” I told him, “and our knees would be better bent backward. We were built for climbing trees, but our bodies haven’t forgotten that yet.” He kept to the other side of the studio for three weeks after that.

“There are two chairs in this apartment,” Sven says. “Two armchairs and two dining chairs.”

“It’s a one-bedroom, I can’t fit much more in here, can I?”

“I mean, did you live with someone before this?”

“I did, my partner was here. His name’s Elton.”

I point towards a print of him on the wall. He’s in a lilac sweater, posing on gleaming white bleachers. Next to him is his glazed obsidian phallic sculpture, not unlike a lingam, though the white boy does not know anything about South Asian religions. “We’re back to long-distance,” I tell Sven, “his Employment Pass fell through, and I still have a year of grad school.” Nothing new, this comes with the territory when you date an American who isn’t a banker in Singapore. Jobs for foreigners are few and far between in the arts.

“I didn’t know you had someone,” Sven says.

“Been a while, hasn’t it? I met him on my first exchange at UCLA. You went off to Cornell, didn’t you?”

“Right, I didn’t see you after you went into the army.”

“No one did, honey.”

When Sven’s done with the pasta and the gin and tonic, he has the courtesy to offer to do the dishes; the sink is right next to the armchairs, that’s how small this place is. I’m now sipping tequila mixed with apple juice.

“Feel free to mix up whatever you want. When did you get back?” I ask.

“December, I had wanted to stay and find a job, but well.”

“No one likes a foreigner contributing to their art scene unless they're Yayoi Kusama or something. Isn't it weirdly protectionist for such a liberal institution?”

“So is Yayoi Kusama. I heard she's pretty racist. Yeah, impossible there, difficult here. I've had to rethink what a practice means, maybe it only happens after hours here. I've applied to be a grant writer for the National Arts Council, we'll see how that goes.”

He sponges with circular motions, first with the scouring side then the soft blue polyurethane. I believe him when he says he would probably be able to work for the government. He is meticulous and repetitive, nothing like Elton, who leaves the dishes in the sink with a religious devotion to cultivating scum. I wonder how Sven would be in the bedroom, I could learn to appreciate meticulous and repetitive if he knew what he was doing. I imagine him in a bearskin loincloth, covered with blue warpaint. He was the one who wanted to meet up. So, did I invite him or is this his raid? He puts up the last dish on the rack, mixes a vodka tonic and sits on Elton's armchair.

“They gave me a case study and asked how I'd award funding.”

“How did you say you would then?”

“I said I'd follow the stipulated guidelines and precedents, it's the government.”

“Oh, Sven what would your cohort in art school say?”

“Cohort? I was alone there; I saw some familiar faces from class to class but there wasn't a cohort. Art history was kind of lonely.”

“Didn't find your own special someone there? I assume everyone is a sarong party boy in whiteland.”

He shakes his head; it looks like it could be popped off from his neck like a Ken-doll, though he has nothing of Ken's physique. He looks like a prepubescent Elton, albeit more Asian. A head taller than me, lanky and gangly, just the way I like them. Besides, no one wants a man with Ken's physique; have you seen his crotch? I am not inclined to stare at

Sven's, he dresses like he's Waldo from *Where's Waldo?* These are the same clothes he wore to troupe rehearsals.

"I went on a few dates there," he says, "it usually only works out if they've travelled out of the country I find. Otherwise, they have no point of reference."

"I disagree, Elton hadn't been anywhere but Mexico before he moved to Singapore. People choose foreignness or common humanity, their loss if they can't see beyond it."

As he downs his vodka tonic, his Adam's apple undulates. He gets up to grab one of his cans of cheap beer. "I did have friends with benefits like that, it was better than being alone."

"You didn't seem lonely when we were kids."

"Neither did you."

"A shame huh, you and I, closeted as kids, we could have not been lonely together."

"You were—are, cute. In another life maybe. But not a shame, you found your guy."

"The distance sucks. Seems like I'm perpetually oscillating between finding him and losing him."

Grindr is fun in America; fun is fun in America. Before I met Elton that summer, I had my share of hookups: in the backseat of a Latin boy's Corolla in Boyle Heights, some college kid studying Chemistry at UCLA, and a black boy who rolled me a thick joint. We talk about diversity here, but it doesn't exist on Grindr, unless you look, at the bare minimum, like Sven. Keep to your lane; no chubs, prefer similar builds, no Malays and Indians just preference. It's disgusting. The boy in Boyle Heights thought I sounded British, the Chemistry major and I fangirled over musicals after we were done, and the black boy read me Gwendolyn Brooks and said I had the thickest ass he ever had the privilege of pounding. They had no points of reference but their own and yet, I had more beauty there than in my

hometown. What did Sven have to complain about? He looks like a prepubescent Eurasian Elton. Sharp with sharp features. He'd be fine here.

"What was your worst story?" I ask.

"With hook-ups?" He stares at the picture of Elton, chugging more Anchor, to perhaps ground himself. When he's done, he tucks stray bits of his wavy hair behind his ears. "I rode the 7 train to Corona in Queens, does that mean anything to you?"

"Only been on the west coast, my man."

"It's like high crime, lower-income. I was going to meet a guy there, and he was alright, we smoked some weed to start off."

"As you do."

"Not really. I mean, I do it sometimes when I'm feeling anxious, but it goes bad sometimes. You get sleepy or you can't respond in real-time. But he offers and I take it."

"What did he look like?"

"Hairy white boy, a little older than us, said he was a production assistant. He makes me play this game, it's not Scrabble, but there are word tiles in a silicone banana."

"Bananagrams?"

"Is that a thing? It was my first time seeing it."

"I played it at a party before, it's whatever. So, you were making words?"

"I was, but then he kept passing me the joint, and I just got so out of it, and I told him that I was sorry, but I didn't want to play anymore. Everything was moving at a sloth's pace. He got angry and told me to get out. Honestly, I would have been happy to go home, but it was four in the morning. The trains had stopped running, and it was Queens. So, I asked him to let me stay, just till the trains ran again. We slept back-to-back. Or, well, laid there. I couldn't sleep, the idea of sharing this bed with a person who really didn't want me to be there, so odd right? But in the middle of the night, he changes his mind and asks if we can

give each other blowjobs. I don't want to, but I mean I'm so scared of being asked to leave again that I agree. After a while, he asks if he can put a condom on me and I'm like oh shit. Not because I can't get hard, but because I can, and he probably expects me to—you know. So, I do put it in, five minutes in he tells me he's not feeling it again. He tells me to get out and I'm freaking out, but then I figure he means from him. And we don't sleep. I catch the first train."

He blinks, then looks at me. Stares at me really. "Would you like to go to your bedroom?"

I lead him there and don't bother closing the door because we're the only ones here. I apologize for the sheets, he says he's unbothered, and we lie face to face. I move to kiss him, but he double-takes and shakes his head.

"You have a man."

"We're open, especially now." I do kiss him, and he doesn't push me off, as we make out and I trace the curves of his lean body, down his back, making a semi-circle around his waist to reach his fly button. Yes, all of this with one hand. The next thing to come off is my gym shorts which I pull to my ankles. God, it feels good, and we haven't even gotten to the best part, when skin meets skin. I pull down his Where's Waldo jeans, and I feel his bulge growing under, frankly, little boy underwear. It has dinosaurs on it. He moans. I must be doing something right. Elton constantly tells me I have the softest lips and hands. Soft lips and hands make for hard dicks, but before I can pull Sven's briefs off, he pushes me away.

"Stop. This isn't right."

But I can't stop, I won't stop. I need him, I've evolved past loneliness, I buckle under it, just like Sven's limbs. I've become unsuited to it. I know he is not staying, but I can have him, just for a bit. "It's all good, it's all good, I promise, we've talked about this." I lean in for another kiss, but he grabs me by the collar. "*We've* not talked about this!"

We breathe heavily, and his eyes are shining. Have I become Sven's new worst? He lets go of me and I sit at the edge of my bed muttering, "Shit, shit, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I've become a predator. "You should go, I've fucked up." He sits next to me at the edge.

"This *was* the plan." He sighs and looks up at the ceiling fan, closing his eyes, he lets the air current displace his wavy locks. Then he looks down at his knees letting them form a small curtain in front of his face. "But you're right, that wasn't cool. Call me old-fashioned, but I want to find my Elton." He uses one of his hands to tuck his hair behind his ears again, then places it atop mine. "I get it, you miss him. I've missed looking for him. I just want to be a good husband and Catholic boy. Does that make sense? It's not very progressive. Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about."

"Shirt off, lay with me. I don't need to leave, let's just cuddle."

Sven holds me, I am his little spoon, and this feels odd. This feels like, he doesn't want much from me, just a little to tide him over. A little closeness. He does not want to enter me, own me, or God forbid, play Bananagrams with me.

"Tell me about your worst," Sven says. He traces spirals from my neck to hand.

"It's not as fun as Bananagrams."

"Oh, come on, it's only fair, I told you mine."

Maybe it's that I haven't seen him since we were kids, maybe it's that he's been away while I've been here, maybe it's that I'm still awash with guilt.

"Sure. I went over to this guy's house in Sengkang, he poured me a mug of beer and led me to his bed. It tasted like beer, but saltier. Roofies. I woke up the next day naked next to him, got dressed, and went home. I couldn't remember anything. I can't remember anything, but I know it happened. I always thought forgetting was the worst thing. I was wrong. It's worse when you never had it."

Urchin

Pulau Ujung, off the coast of Malaysia, won't turn up on any map. Strangely, it translates to "island at the end," which the bulk of the Singaporean landmass was called in another time. I had driven up from Singapore to Kuantan in a friend's Ford Focus, I parked it next to a makeshift pier. The boatman, Abang Azri, waits for me as I pull up. He helps me to unload my supplies from the trunk.

"Kau datang sendiri kali ini?"

Yes, I had arrived alone. When *sen-diri* is broken up its second half means 'to stand.' Being alone is standing alone. I nod, telling him in Malay that my parents and their friends are too old now. The skinny man scratches the leathery skin on his face. He is older than my parents, yet still manages to take care of that desolate rock. Trying to understand that no one else was coming, his gaze retreats into his forming cataracts. He probably thinks it a shame, it is after all the last time they would have been able to see Ujung. The government is taking it back. Something about the private leases expiring. I don't think they even have plans for it. Perhaps Abang Azri expected more of us to return. A bigger party meant more ringgit in his pocket.

His vessel on the pier is long and narrow, it only sits one person at its widest point. A Yamaha engine is fastened on its squared-off stern. He has a bigger boat, a *bedar*, that he lives on. He would use it to ferry us when I visited as a child. But for now, the smaller *sampan* suffices. It was apt that the Malay word for paddle boat, was so close to the word for arrival, *sampai*. I only studied my mother tongue to meet the admission criteria for local universities. Mandarin was too difficult, so I took Malay. The word *sampan* was initially Chinese. Once a mode of leaving is incorporated into a language, the people who can speak it can fathom leaving. Some indigenous Malaysians became *Orang Laut*, or the people of the sea, living on sampans permanently. I wonder if, like me, they had confused the boats with

arrival. Abang Azri handles my provisions, mainly Styrofoam boxes, alternating between loading them on the bow and stern, counterbalancing this delicate scale.

“Kau boleh duduk.”

There is a divot for me in the center, I step in. The old man hands me a bucket. He remembers the last time I made this journey.

The boat buckles against the waves as the diesel engine roars and belches out rancid smoke. The water shifts from green to grey as we move into cloud cover. I end up using the bucket twice despite going on an empty stomach. Out of the corner of my eye, above the rim of it, I see islets, small foliage-covered formations without shores. When nausea abates and I manage to lift my head fully, I see them standing behind Abang Azri like scattered pawns on a chessboard.

Ujung was my family’s budget timeshare. Years ago, we’d take this journey on Abang Azri’s bedar with another family: my parents’ best friends, and their son Christopher. Our mothers joked that their periods were always in sync, so it was natural that their pregnancies would be too, only a month apart. Christopher would laugh at me as I hurled into the boatman’s bucket. He’d sit by me and take big bites out of his Ramly burger, a questionable “beef” patty covered with mayonnaise and Kraft cheese, and a fried omelet, sandwiched between two cheap buns. He always asked if I was going to eat mine, and I would glare at him between peering into the clear chunky pool. He’d take my burger wrapped in wax paper and rub my back gently. I always thought it was a fair trade.

Abang Azri releases his anchor about a hundred meters from Ujung’s shoreline. The bow of the boat won’t go any further, though we are a safe distance from the throngs of sea urchins clustered behind the vessel. I ask him about them as we balance my supplies on our heads and wade toward the shore.

“Terdapat banyak sekarang” he sighs, *“Jika air jadi panas, ada lebih landak laut.”*

How odd, a species affected positively by climate change. They propagated faster in rising sea temperatures. Destruction begets propagation. It takes two trips back and forth, to retrieve my Styrofoam boxes.

“*Mau beri ke rumah?*” he asks.

I shake my head and tell him I’ll be fine. Getting across the reef was the only thing I needed help with. He bids me farewell and says he’ll be back in two days, asking if I’m sure that I don’t want him to check on me. No cell phone signal, he reminds me. Got to give a man credit for casually slipping in the markups. I tell him there’s no need. He shrugs and wades back to his boat. My feet sink into the white sand and clumps of mud form between my toes. By the time I hear the roar of the diesel engine, I had moved all the boxes up to the shack on stilts. A rickety ladder leads up to a raised platform covered by a thatch roof. This was the same house I saw in my parents’ honeymoon album, the same house that lodged splinters into my feet when I was a boy, the same house I found myself wanting to see one last time.

The word for water in Malay is *air*. But it’s pronounced ‘eye-eh’. That confused me, but there was something magical about that, how something elemental could be transformed by words. I never really progressed beyond elementary Malay; it wasn’t something I was passionate about. There were already enough warping words in English to keep me occupied for a lifetime. I found it strange that we needed a mother tongue that we would never use to get into university. *Uni*, pronounced ‘ooo-nee’ is what the Japanese call sea urchins. Their flesh is a delicacy that commands a high price. When I was a boy in Ujung, I paddled out to the reef covered with the little balls of black spikes. They laid in clusters, anchored to the seabed. It would have been a stretch to imagine them edible, but the nature of things changes when you crack them open. Within their shells is something decadent, a sweet-salty sliver of bright orange that melts in your mouth.

The sun begins to set on Ujung but there isn't much to unpack. I set up a trash bag and spray myself to ward off mosquitoes. Before sundown, I forage for kindling. To the left of the stilted shack, I find a tarp covering firewood and a pair of gardening gloves. Maybe it was because I was a child then, but I recall the fires of the past to be bonfires.

The stakes were as tall as my father forming a tepee. My father's friend Brian cussed. The beer he had left by the shack the year before had expired. He asked me and Christopher to arrange them under the stakes, then he set it all blaze. At sunset, we heard whizzes, then pops. The exploded beer doused the embers, making them sizzle. I laughed with Christopher. His father, Brian, snuck us two fresh cans when my parents weren't looking. We grimaced after we discovered that beer wasn't sweet like soda.

As my current fire crackles, I decide to keep it going for as long as I can, possibly till Abang Azri returns. For luck, I toss in a can of Tiger.

The word for tiger in Malay is *harimau*. You can break this word up too, *hari* translates as day and *mau* is to desire. To drink a beer by a fire is to desire more time in the light. I want to see the past as clear as day. So, I drink and think of it.

Behind Ujung's shack lies a forest. You can hear wildfowl crowing in the mornings and on the nights we forgot to carry the garbage up the ladder, we'd hear the rustling of wild boars tearing through our trash bags. One morning, Brian found a snake near the shack. He ran towards his hoe, then, bearing down, he drove the blade into the base of the snake's skull. Christopher and I ran up to see the commotion. The thick spotted brown body writhed as blood gushed from the point of decapitation. I gasped in disgust and delight, but Christopher shouted at his father, "It's a python! It's not even poisonous. You should have left it alone!"

"Boy, it's a snake, what if it *was* poisonous? Be thankful."

Christopher stormed off into the forest. We had taken that path with our parents before. Without them, they preferred us to go together. I followed Christopher and he didn't

stop me. We bumbled through the undergrowth and the brambles. As the sun began streaming from above the canopy, piercing the orange barked pelawans, the palms, and strangling figs, we reached a clearing on the other side of the island—a labyrinth of rocky pools. Christopher dipped his feet into the water, and I joined him. Christopher always felt deeper than I, cared more than I. He spent the first part of his holidays after his O-levels apprenticing as a vet technician and said he would go to Australia to become fully certified. He stared into the pools, taking deep breaths.

“He doesn’t get it. That snake was alive, it wasn’t doing anything wrong, we’re the ones who keep bothering them.”

We came here every year after our folks secured the lease. They would unplug from city life and try to remember the days when they were young, just out of school. Back then, my father and Brian would pull stunts like strutting around with nothing but giant clam shells covering their genitals to freak out our mothers.

The pools our feet were in were filled with sea urchins too. Now, three Tigers in, I try to remember. Christopher and I were sixteen. I cannot recall exactly what I said to Christopher that day. The memories arrive like splinters. “He was trying to protect us, nothing wrong with that.”

I wake up to the light crackle of embers and a sea of red washing over my inner eyelids as the sun rises. There is sand in my mouth. To make myself feel better, I tell myself that I’m collecting history with it: skeletons of coral that have broken down over the millennia with the waves. I strip down and head to a plastic tub connected to PVC piping that draws water from a stream. Once, the bathing area was obfuscated by sheets of bent corrugated metal. I take care not to step on the remaining rusty edges. I’d always be antsy bathing next to Christopher, I’d never take off my underwear, no matter how sand-filled they were. I’d be

lying if I said I didn't sneak peeks at his crotch while he used a bucket to scoop water from the tub. He'd close his eyes and pour it over his head after soaping up. Wasn't that natural for boys our age?

"You know when you wear white underwear," he said, "I still see everything after you get wet."

I told him to shut up and used another bucket to fling water into his dirty mouth. Our parents would tell us to stop horsing around—there were times the stream stopped flowing and the tub didn't fill up.

How proud he would be of me now, standing here in the nude. I shaved before the trip, but I find myself rinsing my face over and over. A short beard, that collected sand too, has settled in overnight. I never packed a razor to Ujung. My father and I always looked like castaways when we returned home. The sun dries me off before a towel can, and I get dressed in my thin t-shirt and khaki Bermudas. I'm running out of time, having already wasted my first day here. When my father called me about Ujung, I was woefully short of leave. I could only take a Friday off to drive up, and a Monday to drive home. I retrieved a disposable bowl and spoon, a tetra pack of Dutch Lady, and a packet of cereal, the best I could do without my mother's creative island cooking methods.

I throw more fuel into the fire. By the pile of wood, I notice that Abang Azri has left me a parang. I slice through the brambles that cover the well-worn path, living in my Indiana Jones fantasy. I could afford to be more like Harrison. I shriek whenever a spider lands on me and I writhe when I notice leeches getting fat on the blood flowing to my ankles. Christopher always reminded me to let them feed, "It'd be far worse if you just pulled them off," he said. Why didn't I pack long pants? Another thing I had forgotten. It took me far longer than I remembered to reach those pools of memory.

I crouch down and see a small cluster of sea urchins. When I was with Christopher, I felt like I was walking on air and sinking into water. The pain I felt on that day with the snake I do remember. In my carelessness, I had swung my foot into an urchin and its fragile spikes lodged themselves into my skin. The pressure welled up, then came the spasms. Christopher carried me on his back to the shack and asked for the first-aid box and a pair of pliers from the toolbox. He carefully extracted each spine as I convulsed on a picnic table. My parents and his were more aghast than anything but in their shock they continued to let Christopher be the most experienced person in the campsite.

I dip my older feet into a pool and think Abang Azri might be right, the waters do feel warmer. Little black dots remain on my right foot where the barbs entered. It is not uncommon for some ink to remain, for an urchin to become a tattoo artist. Christopher doused my foot with hydrogen peroxide after removing the spikes. My parents started unpacking some bandages, but he told them that we needed to leave my foot uncovered. There could be fragments left in my body, that it would be able to push them out by itself.

Now, I make my way back from the foliage and assemble a Spam sandwich, then sit on that same picnic table. Having ended my walk down bramble-covered memory lane, I realize that this is the closest I will get to achieving time travel. As the sun sets for my last day here, I get up from the bench and lie on the table's surface. I turn my head to the right and still see the fire I've been steadily feeding aglow. I look up to the sky but see a young Christopher's face hovering above my own. He's taken my old position on the bench, saying, *"While you were resting, Dad and I brought the snake into the jungle."*

"Did you bury it?" I ask.

"Nah, that'd be a waste, something can come around and eat it up."

"You mean like a tiger?"

Christopher laughs. *“No tigers on this tiny island, man. Probably something smaller, maybe crabs, or of course flies can lay eggs in it and the maggots—”*

“Okay stop! I’ve had enough pain for one day, you don’t need to gross me out.”

“It’s the little things you know. Like those splinters.”

We both look up into an orange sky, but somewhere amid this reunion, I have placed stars in it, ones I only ever saw here. I don’t know where Christopher is now exactly. But I can still talk to him. I can still feel his smooth back on my torso as he carried me through the foliage. The light brush of the hairs on his knuckles through the pain, as he came close to pull the spikes out. I feel his breath on my cheek as he rests his chin on the table next to my head.

“Where did you end up?” I ask him.

“Like what did I do after this trip?”

“That trip,” I correct him.

“Right, I did what I said I would do, went to Melbourne, did pre-uni there, then became a vet. Worked there for a bit, fell in love with an Aussie, and married him.”

I struggle to see him with a scruffy-bearded white rancher. It looks perverse, this lecherous man with a baby-faced sixteen-year-old. Then it comes to me, no, he is probably like me now, with a slightly receding hairline, duller eyes, and more of a gut than when we both explored this island.

“Can I fix it Christopher?”

“Hmm?”

“That night, this night. After you came back. When we were on this table and everyone else was asleep. Can you—can you kiss me again?”

Christopher chortles. *“There’s nothing to fix! You don’t like me that way.”*

“Then why’d you stop spending time with me?”

The young boy shifts me so he can lie next to me. We lie until the sky actually turns dark and the stars are real and no longer superimposed. When they appear, he squeezes my hand and tells me, *“It just stung too much I suppose. But I was wrong, it wasn’t in your nature, it wasn’t you. I should have respected that and asked first.”*

“But what if you were right?”

Christopher rises and straddles me.

“Oh? But you pushed me away.”

“I think of you. I’m always thinking of you.”

Christopher shakes his head. *“You can’t call this thinking of me. Heck, it isn’t even remembering me.”*

. I had to come back here to remember the little dribs and drabs that remained. Sampan. Sampai. To boat or to arrive. How many things do we translate and reimagine? When does memory stop flowing like water but dissipate like air? Christopher leans down to kiss me and I pull him close. For a moment I feel him, as real as the pain of neurotoxins, I see him as clear as the dots on my right foot. Then the moment is over, and I’m looking up at the stars. Turning my head left, towards a dilapidated house that looks like it’ll fall apart in the next monsoon. Turning right, a fire reduced to embers, a sea of darkness beyond it, and the light of Abang Azri’s approaching boat.

EXEGESIS

(i) Introduction

(Re)Fractals is a collection of eight short stories that dramatizes, renders and contextualizes the lives of gay men in Singapore. It is a celebration of their experiences and an attempt to understand how the complex webs of power in Singapore encroach into their lives. Within *Re(Fractals)*, gay men confront the notion of queerness, of not belonging to wider heteronormative society and its traditional expectations. They attempt to internalize what this means for them. Through magnification and repetitious attempts and failures, they come closer to, if not fully achieving, “authentic” lives, or what the gay psychotherapist Walt Odets defines as lives “rooted in an internal center rather than in others’ norms and expectations” (Odets 50).

This path is unique to each queer individual. The title of the collection subverts the notion of replicability of experience, while acknowledging its role in the formation of queer identities. Fractals are mathematical objects wherein each subsection reflects the structure of the whole. Scaling the object reveals how it is constructed through smaller and smaller versions of itself. As such, every discernible magnification of a fractal points back to its infinite replicability without ever coming to completion. The fragment always represents the whole. This is analogous to the gay experience; one becomes queer when one accepts queerness and breaks away from heteronormative society. Through this, the individual becomes a shard of their wider society, individual and distinct, yet still functioning as if they are part of the same structure: abiding by the socio, economic and geopolitical norms of their culture. Because of this adherence to the superstructure, even in their difference from heteronormative society, they reproduce similar behavioral, analytical and aesthetic patterns. This collection concentrates on the moments when characters choose to become “fragments” and how that process both reflects and repeats.

Following the ethos that being LGBTQ+ does not make up the entirety of one's identity, the collection takes the moments where characters break their established patterns and allows that process to play out on the page. They are complete individuals, but the form of the short story allows one to zoom in on them, examining facets of what completes them in their striving towards authentic lives. In this process, wider heteronormative societal units such as families, state institutions and economic organizations push back against the protagonists, hindering the characters from achieving epiphanies. The push and pull towards and away from these moments of realization form the primary conflict of the collection. What this epiphanic "truth" is regarding queerness is a challenging subject of exploration, but through the work of queer theorists like Michel Foucault, Sara Ahmed, Jack Halberstram, and Judith Butler, this process was made more coherent in the creative conceptualization of the project. Indeed, *(Re)Fractals* was built upon many of their theoretical underpinnings. As such this exegesis will explore the ways that selected queer theories speak to the stories in the collection along with societal issues surrounding queerness that are apparent in Singapore.

In this exegesis, I start by exploring the societal zeitgeist in Singapore regarding queerness and homosexuality. Interviews and statements from public figures in government, regulatory policy and official reports from LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations are analyzed to provide a basis of understanding for the notions of power-knowledge by way of Michel Foucault. This will provide a frame of understanding sources of conflict in the collection, regarding what characters in *Re(Fractals)* must overcome.

Subsequently, using the defining aspects of Foucault's exploration of Jeremy Bentham's incarceration structure, the panopticon, the exegesis examines how institutional power shapes the queer experiences of the characters in this collection. This roadmap follows how the collection addresses oppressive structures in relation to power-knowledge. The

exegesis will then examine how the stories challenge said structures through the mobilization of “subjugated knowledges” inherent in queerness.

(ii) Laws that bind us

The primary philosophical pillar of this exegesis, the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s theory of panopticism, is both an inspiration and an interpretive structure for this collection. The characters in *Re(Fractals)* must contest with manifestations of power and its ability to coerce. Foucault writes:

power acts by laying down the rule: power’s hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks, and that is the rule. The pure form of power resides in the function of the legislator. (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 83)

The characters in *Re(Fractals)* are at times limited in their ability to articulate the effects of laws on their existences. This may not be confined to pure legislature but rather a “system of rules that a particular country or community recognizes as regulating the actions of its members” (“Law”). This exegesis thus aims to delve into how this superstructure at once encapsulates and supports the collection, expounding on the forces present in the real world in regulatory institutions such as government.

Singapore’s prime minister Lee Hsien Long, acknowledges that “We have LGBTQ people in Singapore. They live their lives, they are valued members of society... We welcome them, and we greatly appreciate their contributions. And there's no reason why, if you are a member of this community, you should not fit in Singapore" (Baharudin and Ong).

This however is antithetical to the fact that there is still a law criminalizing homosexual intercourse in penal code 377A:

377A. Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years. (Singapore, Singapore Attorney-General's Chambers, Legislation Division, Singapore Statutes Online)

Gay men in Singapore are tolerated but not accepted. Singapore's Attorney-General Lucien Wong assured the public in an interview that "the Government's position on Section 377A is that the police will not proactively enforce this provision, for instance, by conducting enforcement raids" (Wong). This promise of peace with wider heteronormative Singaporean society is tenuous; the fact remains, that with the law in Singapore's penal code, it can be invoked as the judicial system sees fit. This potential for state-sponsored discrimination casts a shadow of anxiety upon gay men in Singapore. Oogachaga, a non-profit organization supporting Singapore's LGBTQ+ community, found in its 2012 report on the Impact of Homophobia & Transphobia that "60.2% of respondents have had experiences with sexual orientation and/or gender identity-based abuse and discrimination" (2). If laws are recognized rules regulating societal norms, the fact that 377A remains in the penal code means it can be mobilized by heteronormative society to introduce discrimination for diverging from norms in gender and sexuality.

Prohibitive and prescriptive laws are ripe for analysis in the context of queer theory. In it, the attempt to "fit in" is a doomed endeavor. In her essay "Queer Feelings," Sara Ahmed posits that:

Assimilation involves a desire to approximate an ideal that one has already failed; an identification with one's designation as a failed subject. The choice of assimilation – queer skin, straight masks – is clearly about supporting the violence of heteronormative distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate lives. (Ahmed 427)

By identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community, gay men already acquiesce to an inability to assimilate or fit into wider society. Gay men and the LGBTQ+ community at large in this aspect, are in their own catch-22: the very definition of queer, “denoting or relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms” (“Queer”) works against the notion of legitimacy. Set against the standards of “compulsory heterosexuality – defined as the accumulative effect of the repetition of the narrative of heterosexuality as an ideal coupling” (Ahmed 423), queers will always fail, but this should not be a point of dismay. In his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam writes hopefully that:

failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods...it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. (Halberstam 3)

This speaks to the prime minister's statement, there should be no reason gay men should not “fit in”. It is positive to “fit in,” until it starts affecting one's sense of self-worth. *(Re)Fractals*, is as much of an exploration and a failure to discover what an authentic gay

man's life might look like in the context of Singapore as not just a physical place but an idea. Continents away, Walt Odets, writes:

America is not a coherent society or community, but an idea that leaves many Americans feeling like outsiders; and the communities in which young gay outsiders then seek belonging and insiderness— “the Castro,” “West Hollywood,” and “Chelsea”—are also just ideas. (Odets 255)

Re(Fractals) seeks to examine Singapore as a reality and idea. It attempts to discover how gay men fit into Singaporean society. The collection however is not a fantasy or a speculative utopia meant to provide an alternative to the real world; if it has any political underpinnings, it is simply a statement of existence and attempting. It does not posit that there is one way to live an authentic gay life but attempts to fully encapsulate the lives of gay men in Singapore. Odets states: “Authentic lives are significantly nonreactive: they are primarily rooted in an internal center rather than in others’ norms and expectations. Predominantly inauthentic lives are reactive and are decentered by external influences” (50). Queer theory can thus be used as a “method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems” (Halberstam 89). The stories in *Re(Fractals)* are the existing alternatives that I imagine.

(iii) The Panopticon

In his essay “Panopticism,” Michel Foucault refers to the physical structure of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, a tower that sits at the center of a series of prison cells.

All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor... By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 200).

Due to the nature of the structure, prisoners cannot observe the guards observing them. Thus, it is always safer to assume that they are being observed for bad behavior, which will be duly punished. In this, their minds become their own cells within cells. Foucault concludes: “the major effect of the Panopticon: (is) to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (*Discipline and Punish* 201). Foucault clarifies his notion of discourse in his *History of Sexuality Volume 1*: “power must be understood... as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate.” He is positing power as a sort of exchange or discourse. He does “not have in mind a general system of domination exerted by one group over another” (92). Yet the acknowledgment of structures like the Panopticon exemplifies that this discourse is not always equal. It can be warped by existing societal structures. “The Panopticon...has a role of amplification; although it arranges power... its aim is to strengthen the social forces...raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply” (*Discipline and Punish* 207-208). (*Re*)*Fractals* was crafted with Foucault’s model of discourse in mind. It sought to understand how discourse could be influenced by institutions of power. It is an attempt to understand the Panopticons that the collection’s gay characters live under and how said characters came to police themselves. Odets’s reactivity is apt and illuminating. Much of his work with mental health issues that American gay men struggle with is applicable in a

Singaporean context. He provides a differing definition of the gay man that speaks to the Panopticon:

There are two different perspectives on what makes a man “a homosexual.” ...the heterosexual perspective—is that homosexuals are “men who have sex with men.” The gay man’s perspective, briefly put, is that he is “attracted to other men.” ...the heterosexual identifies a single, objective behavior, the gay man an entire internal life of feeling. (Odets 19)

Within institutions of power, implicit compulsory heterosexuality remains, and it takes up more importance in the discourse. Singapore still regards the traditional family unit of a mother, father, and children as the bedrock of society. Institutional power endorses the coalescence of such a unit, namely, an opposite-sex couple with the presumed ability to procreate. This can be seen in the government’s approach to subsidized public housing. In 2021, Oogachaga, with another LGBTQ+ advocacy group, Pink Dot SG, submitted a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Joint Report to United Nations Human Rights Council on the state of human rights in Singapore. It found that:

LGBT+ Singaporeans who are single or in same-sex relationships are disadvantaged, especially if they only have the means to afford public housing, which is more affordable than private housing. Singles and non-heterosexual couples are currently only eligible to purchase public flats only upon reaching 35 years of age, and only as an individual under the Single Singapore Citizen Scheme or the Joint Singles Scheme, since same-sex marriages are not legal, nor are same-sex marriages from other jurisdictions recognized.

(10)

Gay men in this understanding are not envisioned as different but equal, but rather diminished, and inferior to heterosexuals. They are less deserving because they do not adhere to societal norms. To follow the housing example, gay men do not deserve the full support of schemes that facilitate basic needs such as shelter. Legislation actively dissuades same-sex relationships by rescinding the material support that is made available to their heterosexual counterparts. Through this, this behavior, what some states institutions refer to as “alternative lifestyles” is discouraged. We see this overtly in laws like 377A but also through more subtle means like through the limitation of access and representation in the media of “alternative lifestyles.”

Discrimination is not confined to the policies of the Housing Development Board that oversees subsidized public housing but also permeates state media regulations. Singapore’s Infocomm Media Development Authority’s classification guidelines stipulate that “Films that depict alternative sexualities, e.g. homosexuality, should be sensitive to community values. Films that centre on alternative sexualities may be classified at highest rating of R21” (4). This means such media would be restricted to those aged twenty-one and above. There again is a push towards assimilation, insisting on sensitivity to heteronormative values. Much like alcohol and other potentially harmful substances, representations of gay lifestyles must be restricted for the good of society. Oogachaga and Pink Dot SG’s UPR found that regarding television and radio:

Content Codes, under the heading “General Principles”, stipulate compliance with “prevailing laws of Singapore” and “not undermine national interest”, which effectively disqualifies positive depictions of LGBT+ persons and issues. It is notable that whilst discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, age, occupational status and disability

are prohibited in programme content, one's sexual orientation and gender identity are not included. (5)

Unless one is a fully cognizant adult, the notion is that individuals should not even be exposed to the moral degradation of alternative lifestyles. Those without agency, such as the children, must be protected. We see this as a genealogical truth in Foucault's *History of sexuality*:

Without even having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex, merely through the interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another: instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship. (17)

Homosexuality is not an "alternative lifestyle" that can be chosen but rather something implicit, something one is born into. Oogachaga, which provides counseling services for questioning LGBTQ+ individuals on the phone, has the following written in its Quick Reference Guide for Therapists Working with LGBTQ Clients:

a client...may also have internalized information which purports that being gay is a choice and that one's sexual orientation can be changed...At this stage, it is important to note that the American Psychological Association states that mental health professionals should avoid misrepresenting the efficacy of sexual orientation change efforts when providing assistance to people distressed about their own or others' sexual orientation. In the August 2009 report, it was stated that:

- There is insufficient evidence to indicate that sexual orientation is a choice and can be changed.
- Efforts to change sexual orientation are unlikely to be successful and they involve some risk of harm to the clients. (8)

If the notion of choice is erroneous, then it is even more insidious that media on the subject is regulated on restrictive principles. The fact that media that affirms or even acknowledges the existence of a gay “lifestyle” is not only restricted but actively suppressed has obvious negative consequences on the self-worth of gay men in Singapore. Ahmed illuminates how erasure and coercion can hinder healthy queer lives, “It is important to consider how compulsory heterosexuality...shapes what it is possible for bodies to do...Bodies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force (423).

In my short story, “The Kindness of Strangers”, the protagonist, Damien, decides to leave home and return to the house of a boy he had an intimate relationship with as a teenager. His then-lover, Rohan, is no longer there, but his mother Diane welcomes him. Through the story, this notion of the shaping of bodies and capabilities is dramatized. In a series of flashbacks, it is revealed that Rohan was incapable of being honest about his affection towards Damien; he believed that he was “supposed to grow out of this” (Kent 24). Damien is then revealed to have left his family home after coming out to his parents and being told by his mother “to go get HIV and die” (Kent 24). Damien is at once left with two voids of rejection in his temporary stay with Diane: a rejection from the past, and rejection in the present. He decides to keep his past relationship from Diane, feeling that he has “already unleashed a firestorm on (his) family, (and) cannot afford to unleash another here” (Kent 22). The tragedy is that Damien, in moving closer to his authentic truth, inadvertently estranges himself from the people he once clung to for support. In this rejection he realizes that he

cannot rely on their kindness, and this pushes him away from believing in emotional connection. He tells Diane, “I can’t go back to depending on the kindness of strangers” (Kent 26). Compulsory heteronormativity and its influence on both Rohan as well as Damien’s family effectively removes Damien’s pillars of emotional support. The reader might be tempted to cast the individuals rejecting him as villains, this arguably might be due to the bias of the traditional story form. Such a form presupposes that narrative conflict arises from characters and their motives. However, the employed epiphanic model opens other possibilities. Ahmed writes:

We need to ask: How does defining a queer ideal rely on the existence of others who fail the ideal? Who can and cannot embody the queer ideal? Such an ideal is not equally accessible to all, even all those who identify with the sign ‘queer’ or other ‘signs’ of non-normative sexuality. (Ahmed 427)

In other words, characters are as much defined by the society that made them as their motives. Identities are constructed and are in flux, in adherence to defining characteristics, which may involve a rejection of queerness. Some individuals hunker down and take a declarative stance. This can be empowering if coming from a place of authenticity and discovery but can be detrimental when it is applied to others prescriptively. One can gain a sense of solace coming to terms with one’s sexual identity, but one can also feel great sadness when that realization comes at the cost of acceptance or meaningful relationships. Damien is thus forced to inhabit a new world that is incompatible with the heteronormative. Ahmed continues:

Regulative norms function in a way as ‘repetitive strain injuries’ (RSIs). Through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being orientated in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted; they get twisted into shapes that enable some action only insofar as they restrict capacity for other kinds of action. (Ahmed 423)

Without exposure and affirmation there is paralysis. Damien’s story is hopeful in the sense that he can find reserves of strength to move forward despite uncertainty. However, it also reveals the very real fear that some gay men have, that they are doomed to misery. Diane explains that his parents are just “imagining the world (Damien is) going to face. This is the fear talking” (Kent 24). The bias of the Panoptic effect is inherent. Indeed, there are many discourses in Singapore that tell gay men that they are not ideal. Going back to the misconception of choice, it is preferable for an individual to “choose” heterosexuality. Walt Odets explains:

In the societal model, observed biological sex, gender self-identity, internal sensibility, and expressed sensibility must all be aligned. As children and young adults, we easily internalize this model, and any discontinuity between the four components becomes a painful internal struggle that is worsened by societal stigma and rejection. Although society has created the conflict by imposing a simplistic, inhuman model, it is left to LGBTQ people to deal with the problem: it is LGBTQ people who are left feeling deviant and “misaligned.” (Odets 57-58)

This feeling exists for characters in *(Re)Fractals* both in harrowing experiences and the quotidian. In another short story, “Slow Violence,” its protagonist, Eric is completely robbed of agency in both setting and narration. He must conduct his duties as a Platoon

Commander's runner in the course of his National Service. The short story is written in the first-person perspective, but through the communal pronoun "we." The whole platoon, as a collective slightly reminiscent of the chorus in a Greek tragedy, recounts Eric's story for him. There is a strangeness with the heterosexual entity taking on a homosexual's story but within the theory of Panopticism, this is the norm. Compulsory heterosexuality as an institution exerts its influence on queer narratives; Eric's masculine cohort focus on his otherness. Within the institution of a combat unit in national service, Eric's body and utterances are placed under scrutiny. The platoon reflects that:

Eric had smooth shapely legs and a bubble butt, the kind that would make you think of Kim Kardashian. From the hips down, he looked like some of the calendar girls the more beng among us would put up in our lockers...Most of us wouldn't fixate too much on his looks, we were afraid of what it might mean. (Kent 28)

According to Odets, Ahmed and Halberstam, the growing discomfort of the queer body within a heteronormative superstructure is slow and accumulative. Eric is confined within the institution of National Service: his body must remain in camp, and he must fulfill his duties toward the state. The military complex, with its established norms of promoting compulsory heterosexuality and masculine ideals wears Eric down. This is reflected physically whilst he is outfield, Eric's officer, Lieutenant Saw Say Sern, finds him "*passed out on the path toward the command tent (from) heatstroke*" (Kent 28). The story implies that Eric has homosexual relations with Say Sern, the platoon asks the officer, "*Eh you know Eric before this Sir?... You close?*" to which he replies, "*Yeah, close enough*" (Kent 28). Say Sern downplays his relations with Eric throughout the story, but he means a lot to Eric. After Say Sern is discharged from service, the platoon finds that "Eric had become more reserved...He still did the same things, but he wasn't there anymore" (Kent 35). When the platoon repeats

the question of closeness regarding Say Sern to Eric, he echoes his officer's distancing, "*Share a past, and you become close enough*" (Kent 36). Prolonged exposure to the malaise caused by an institution invested in compulsory heterosexuality thus negatively impacts the formation of healthy gay relationships as well as a healthy sense of self for Eric.

Oppressive institutions are not confined to the state or the military, but also find themselves in the quotidian, as in the family unit. Family members in the collection are for the most part pushed to the periphery but do affect the protagonists in non-affirming ways. In the short story "Bubbles," Ashley does not speak about his home life much, but when he does it is in relation to the disappointment he has caused his single mother. His statement that his potential love interest Noah "couldn't understand how love grows in small spaces" (Kent 10) refers to his family flat and his diminished emotional space. His uncertainty and self-loathing about being queer is made apparent by how he relates to others in the gay bathhouse of Bubbles he says: "Those men can change your mood. You'd be crazy to let them" (Kent 8). There is an implication that he fears associating with older gays, or perhaps becoming one of them eventually. Noah, who is more comfortable in his sexuality, confronts Ashley with the flaws in his perspective: "You can't go on with these double standards. You're not better than them" (Kent 9). In this way, he signals to Ashley that his current trajectory is a road to ruin. The disassociation by Ashley from his queerness and the dissonance caused can only be emotionally damaging.

Queer dissonances lie in perpetual feelings of a paradise loss, which ties back to Ahmed's view on heteronormative society. Heteronormative society reads sexual deviants as contorted, a phenomenon apparent. According to Odets, from the onset of childhood:

Heterosexual adolescents are supported in their hopeful anticipation of a paradise restored through current or future intimate relationships that gay adolescents are explicitly

forbidden. For gay adolescents, paradise was not only lost in infancy and childhood, it appears forever unattainable. With relatively few exceptions, we are taught that the futures of gay boys entail deprivation, abandonment, and loneliness. (Odets 129)

In “No Room for the Dead,” written in the more distant third-person compared to the first-person in “Bubbles” or even “Slow Violence,” the narrator reveals that the protagonist Victor “only sees how things die” (Kent 15). Through the process of embalming his boyfriend’s mother, he realizes how he fails in his relationship. Though never mentioned explicitly, there is an equal sense of loss by heterosexual characters in “Bubbles,” Ashley’s mother “doesn’t talk about the whole gay thing” (Kent 5). Panoptic forces in *Re(Fractals)* weigh on heteronormative characters, facilitating a failure to understand the gay identity as something liberating and authentic, but rather a loss or disability. They exude an implicit disappointment in protagonists “choosing” a gay lifestyle. Adherence to an “ideal” gender and sexual binary creates a cycle of loathing and othering. Ahmed in her reading on Judith Butler writes:

the heterosexual subject must ‘give up’ the potential of queer love, but this loss cannot be grieved... As such, homosexuality becomes an ‘ungrievable loss’, which returns to haunt the heterosexual subject through its melancholic identification with that which has been permanently cast out. For Butler, this ungrievable loss gets displaced: heterosexual culture, having given up its capacity to grieve its own lost queerness, cannot grieve the loss of queer lives; it cannot admit that queer lives are lives that could be lost. (Ahmed 430)

There are ideals enshrined in both state and societal institutions that thus push the blame onto gay men. Singaporean society asks them, in essence: “Why have you chosen to make things difficult for yourself after we have shown you how to fit in?” This is apparent in the Ministry of education’s approach to sexual education in its schools. Ogachaga and Pink Dot SG’s UPR finds that:

The current SE curriculum is inadequate in empowering young LGBT+ persons to make appropriate and healthy choices. It does not include LGBT+ issues from an evidence-based perspective, other than “what homosexuality is, the importance of respect and empathy, and the law concerning homosexual acts in Singapore.” One of its six guiding principles is to “encourag[e] heterosexual married couples to have healthy relationships with each other”, which is inapplicable and alienating for LGBT+ youth. (7)

If heterosexuality is enshrined as the only authentic self or ideal, and if binary thought in gender and sexuality is inculcated to be the only identity of ease, then indeed, queer loss does become ungrievable, for it is seen as self-inflicted, something that can be reversed or fixed.

Re(Fractals) was not written as an elegy, but an attempt. Its author holds the belief that there is merit to an unapologetically gay life. Even in struggle, there is always hope in moving towards authenticity, “rooted in an internal center rather than in others’ norms and expectations” (Odets 50). Even whilst living under Panopticons, gay men can break free from their cells and seek something outside the structures of oppression. This can only come with an understanding of the structures looming over said cells gay men find themselves trapped in. The next task then lies in moving towards understanding gay men as figures or actors inside said cells.

(iv) The Menagerie

Before striving toward emancipation, characters in *Re(Fractals)* must understand that in addition to living under structures of oppression, they are already categorized by them. There is an idea of a gay man that is foisted upon them by larger society as well as their own communities, and the internalization of this identity can be shackling. The attempt to understand is the first step towards authenticity. As such it is important to consider, as Foucault writes, the Panopticon as menagerie:

The Panopticon is a royal menagerie; the animal is replaced by man, individual distribution by specific grouping and the king by the machinery of a furtive power. With this exception, the Panopticon also does the work of a naturalist. It makes it possible to draw up differences... (*Discipline and Punish* 203)

The notion of a naturalist as “An expert in or student of natural history” (“Naturalist.”) highlights their role as arbiter. The naturalist seems to be able to define what is natural as opposed to manmade and, in some cases, abhorrent. The process that classifies gay men is historically apparent according to Foucault:

The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 43)

To return to Odets' distinction, there is a difference between the heteronormative and homosexual understanding of gay relations. Under the shadow of compulsory heterosexuality, gay men often take on the stereotypes ascribed to them. These stereotypes can cause trauma, in line with Ahmed's analogy of RSIs. Odets states: "Heterosexual society has a significant investment in keeping gay sex apparently promiscuous and emotionally empty" (Odets 30).

There is a danger in perpetuating self-fulfilling prophecies regarding gay men. If they are raised as Odets posits to expect "deprivation, abandonment, and loneliness" (Odets 129) chances are they will be unsurprised when those emotional landscapes come into being. If they subscribe to all the notions foisted upon them as a community, both internally and externally, an authentic self slips further away. Foucault writes on how they came to be labeled as deviant:

The implantation of perversions is an instrument-effect: it is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power to sex and pleasure branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct...scattered sexualities rigidified, became stuck to an age, a place, a type of practice. (*The History of Sexuality* 48)

Gay men are in constant danger of being stuck in their own stereotypes. A common question asked of gay couples in Singapore and elsewhere is some variation of "who is the man and who is the woman?" in the relationship. This predominately refers to questions of relational roles traditionally ascribed to genders and who is the penetrative or receptive partner during intercourse. Again, this harks back to compulsory heterosexuality where the gender binary of male and female is the supposed norm or point of comparison. As much as

heteronormative society might posit an idea or a template of a gay man based on its own matrix, the fact is that gay men do not exist, as straight individuals do not, in binaries. Roles in all spheres of relationships vary, and this is especially so in queer theory. *Re(Fractals)* in this vein questions how the short story can be mobilized to combat the enclosure of the menagerie.

In a zoo, animals are put on display for the amusement of visitors. They are made to be spectacles to be gawked at. Habitats are constructed to simulate where animals might exist in nature. The reversal of this enclosing of gay identities lies in the removal of the monolithic gay template from this manufactured habitat that is loomed over by the notion of compulsory heterosexuality. *Re(Fractals)* exists as a space written for gay men, taking characters out of the confines of their heteronormative and reductive simulations in their characterizations. In the collection, gay men are the majority, for the space is brought into being through writing for them. Here, they, in line with Jack Halberstam's theories, attempt authenticity and in many cases fail in that striving. While they still deal with the prejudices of heteronormative society, they do so in stories where they are protagonists. They do not have to exist as observable living curiosities in this reality but are given the space to explore what their authentic lives might look like.

In line with the repetitious nature of the fractal, *(Re)Fractals* repeats imagery across multiple short stories. The standing ethos, that characters do not have to adhere to prescribed stereotypes, is also extended to setting in the collection. This subverts the notion that an image can only represent one idea; certain elements manifest themselves differently in different stories. This is perhaps most apparent with the moon. Readers first experience the moon in "Bubbles" as a metaphor for illogical emotions. Ashley tells Noah: "Way back when, people thought that the moon did more than affect the tide. They thought it had the power to change people's moods" (Kent 8). In the story's wider examination of how myths,

shared and personal, change one's view of oneself, the moon becomes this otherworldly force that can exert emotional changes in the characters. It is a metaphor for how setting can warp the individual in question. Traditionally an image linked with the feminine, it now finds itself illuminating a setting of high homoeroticism. The collection though does not prevent the moon from representing other ideas. In "The Kindness of Strangers", there isn't a moon in the sense of the celestial body orbiting the earth, but there is another form of moon mentioned: a satellite. The motif that ends "Bubbles," "I'm pulled into his orbit: into lunacy" (Kent 11) is reimagined by Rohan in the form of "Sputnik, the first radio broadcasting from space...even if we can't see the stars, if you listen hard enough, you can hear them...it burnt up re-entering orbit a long time ago" (Kent 21). Here the moon isn't an all-powerful eternal celestial body, but a tiny man-made satellite shot into space. It lacks the former's resilience and no longer orbits the earth. This speaks to the fragility of the man-made, of romantic relationships made between men. In both these cases, the images are objects instead of effects. In "Slow Violence," which focuses more on the accumulation of incrementally damaging effects on the gay subject's psyche, the moon does not appear in fullness but rather in manifestation, "Hours before daybreak, (the platoon) assembled in the converted hangar...The moonlight pierced a riddle of unaddressed bullet holes in the rooftop" (Kent 30). Just as the gay subject, Eric, lacks the capability to address institutional discrimination directly, the narrative seems to be unable to address this recurred image directly. We do not see it in its entirety, but only in how it morphs the setting in question. Arguably, the repetition of imagery, like the moon, in a myriad of forms does not undercut their impact but rather magnifies it when spread out over several stories. Imagery, like the gay experience, is not confined to singular or monolith representations but can come to express a variety of meanings. There is no one "authentic" image but many as defined by their narratives.

To progress toward authentic lives, the characters in *Re(Fractals)* must understand the barriers to that goal. Butler's notion of gender performativity proves useful as a framework for understanding how character identities could be understood and expanded upon as a means of overcoming said barriers. She writes: "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which (constitute) its reality" (Butler 2548); she positions gender as not a static binary but something in constant flux. In the gender binary, Butler argues, "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (Butler 2549). This approach can, however, be turned against the binary, if gender is "a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (Butler 2552). In other words, for gay men, a methodology of authentic living can be focused on acts instead of ideals. Experimentation, recalibration, and subsequent repetition of acts can validate a gay man's authentic sense of self. An identity is created through performance, and performances can be varied. There is no one method of arriving at an authentic truth, nor defining the confines of an external one in one's performance of gender and sexuality. The truth simply exists and finds external manifestations. Butler's approach focusing on how internality manifests into externality is liberating, as the state of flux dissuades binary categorization and punishments for failing to fall within categories. An identity is a full being and not categorizable variables. She writes:

if the body is not a "being," but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and

compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its “interior” signification on its surface? (Butler 2551)

Characters in *(Re)Fractals* have a differing degree of assuredness in their internal truth and the subsequent manifestation of them in service to authentic lives. In “Bubbles,” the gulf between Ashley and Noah is wide. Ashley is on some level resentful of himself and the culture he finds himself in. He laments in relation to his straight brothers, “I’m glad my mother can sleep easy at night knowing the two of them will be able to give her grandchildren” (Kent 5). Noah on the other hand seems at ease with his sexual identity, conduct and way of carrying himself. He is the one who speaks too loudly but assures Ashley in the canteen that he shouldn’t care because “It’s peak hour, (and) no one can hear (them)” (Kent 4). Or rather they do not care enough to notice them and place the same emphasis and judgment upon their homosexuality. Noah is completely open about discussing his desires, “Look, you want dick, I want dick, but it’s nice having a fallback if we don’t find anyone else we like, no?” (Kent 4) In line with Butler, Noah’s outward expression of his internal truth, his performance of his gender and sexuality is done with more ease. However, Ashley in his narration judges him as “too flamboyant for me: the way he dresses in Harajuku pastels, the way his voice goes up two octaves when he’s excited, he even twirls his pasta with a limp wrist” (Kent 4). He links this ability to present as such with economic privilege. To Ashley there are different rules of conduct in relation to what kind of intersectionality you inhabit as a gay man. Yet these rules prevent him from understanding Noah’s comfort with his queerness. Ahmed writes:

To feel uncomfortable is precisely to be affected by that which persists in the shaping of bodies and lives. Discomfort is hence not about assimilation or resistance, but about

inhabiting norms differently...Queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us. (Ahmed 430)

There should be a comfort in failure. The characters in *(Re)Fractals* have failed, utterly, and in some cases miserably. For the most part, they are inherently aware of their deviations, even if they might not all be comfortable with them. Halberstam and Ahmed insist that it is not being fully realized that is important in queerness, but rather attempting queerness and finding worth in the failure to fit into heteronormative society. Halberstam writes:

Queerness offers the promise of failure as a way of life...but it is up to us whether we choose to make good on that promise in a way that makes a detour around the usual markers of accomplishment and satisfaction (186).

It is never wrong or unnatural to feel “uncomfortable about inhabiting the word ‘queer’, worrying that (you are) not queer enough, or have not been queer for long enough, or (are) just not the right kind of queer” (Ahmed 428). It is important to note that even as gay men are categorized, they have a choice; as Odets writes, “we can be ourselves, or we can be ourselves pretending to be something else” (Odets 74).

(v) The Laboratory

The notion of using queer theory as a means of exploration and an avenue of emancipation is an appealing prospect, but the fact remains, exploration is a matter of trial and error.

Exploration is a process of experimentation and becoming. In this sense, gay men do live in a

sort of laboratory. However, it is important to note that wider society and its institutions work in similar ways. In this Foucault illuminates another aspect of the Panopticon:

But the Panopticon was also a laboratory; it could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behavior, to train or correct individuals. To experiment with medicines and monitor their effects. To try out different punishments on prisoners, according to their crimes and character, and to seek the most effective ones. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 203)

Coming full circle, we return to the prime minister's statement of there being no reason why gay men should not fit in along with the punishments awaiting gay men in emotional, social, and economic spheres. The implication that there should be no reason why gay men in Singapore should not fit into wider society is erroneous. Gay men are trapped, fitting in would involve them contorting to compulsory heterosexuality, and in so doing, moving further away from their authentic selves to detrimental effects on their mental and emotional wellbeing. Oogachaga's Quick Reference Guide for Therapists Working with LGBTQ Clients has this to say on the subject:

Unfortunately, there are some healthcare and social service professionals who...still hold on to the belief that their patients are not well because of their sexual orientations or gender Identities...However, there are also LGBTQ clients who are actually struggling with mental health illnesses but do not seek appropriate treatment. They may hide their sexuality during treatment, resulting in the ineffectiveness of the medical attention. A possible reason for this could be because they do not wish to live with the double stigma of being gay and mentally unwell. (8)

Movement towards authenticity comes with the risk of exclusion and alienation. This is how the Panopticon as laboratory regulates discourse:

To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a law of prohibition. Its objective: that sex renounce itself. Its instrument: the threat of a punishment that is nothing other than the suppression of sex. Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed; do not appear if you do not want to disappear. Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification. (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 84)

To reverse nullification, gay men must come to understand what they have lost. Foucault's approach of archaeology or tracing genealogies is one method of coming to terms with society's Panopticons. Jack Halberstam evokes one of his methods:

Foucault exhorts his students to think about and turn to "subjugated knowledges," namely those forms of knowledge production that have been "buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations" (2003: 7) ... In some sense we have to untrain ourselves so that we can read the struggles and debates back into questions that seem settled and resolved. (Halberstam 11)

Just as Foucault attempts to chart the unfolding of our understanding of sexuality through genealogy, gay men too can explore the genealogies within themselves: their traumas and their triumphs. In the short story, "Urchin," an unnamed protagonist returns to a remote island off the coast of Malaysia where he spent some of his childhood. In the solitude, he visits places from his past, reaching literal and metaphorical "pools of memory" (Kent 62).

This allows him to relive the memories of his first love Christopher, to invoke his imagined presence onto the island he is alone on: “Christopher leans down to kiss me and I pull him close. For a moment I feel him, as real as the pain of neurotoxins, I see him as clear as the dots on my right foot. Then the moment is over, and I’m looking up at the stars” (Kent 65). The tense of the story fluctuates from past to present repeatedly and culminates with this reimagining. In this, the protagonist goes against conventional logic and methodologies. Imagination moves him closer towards healing and authenticity. Walt Odets gives us insight on how unconventionality could prove useful:

Sometimes we are simply attempting to learn to tolerate the emotional pain through repeated exposure to it. Sometimes we are hoping to have it come out differently, but without a change in how we resolve it. In either case, the exit trajectory is unmodified, and we have simply unproductively reenacted and relived pain that sits deeply in our emotional memories. (Odets 126)

Though gay men live under prohibitions and punishment in compulsory heterosexuality, their curse is also their salvation. Their queerness, when utilized, can provide them with methods of coping with the pain of minoritization. As the unnamed narrator of “Urchin” does, they can circumvent the prescriptive power of the Panopticon as laboratory, by invoking and testing their own hypothesis of subjugated knowledges and methods in laboratories of their own. Just as “There is not one but many silences” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 27), there is a spectrum of thought and possibility inherent in queerness and imagination. Through experimentation gay men can expand their understanding of their capabilities. Ahmed writes:

Sexual orientation involves bodies that leak into worlds; it involves a way of orientating the body towards and away from others, which affects how one can enter different kinds of social spaces... even if it does not lead bodies to the same places. To make a simple but important point: orientations affect what it is that bodies can do. (Ahmed 423)

(vi) Conclusion

It is fitting that this exegesis primarily delved into the theoretical underpinnings of the project. Theories exist in writing but need to be tested in the real world and in the gedankenexperiment of the fictional world too. In the crafting of *(Re)Fractals*, I had begun by thinking that it was my responsibility as a gay writer to contribute to my queer community by prescribing perfect solutions to the challenges we face. I sought to marry theory and the praxis of writing to help heal the wounds inflicted on my community. I had failed to realize that no one gay writer can fully encapsulate the myriad of queer experiences. I had to learn to reduce my scope but strive towards my goals of exemplifying hope amid traumas.

In many ways, *Re(Fractals)* has failed. It has failed to capture the wholeness of homosexual life in Singapore, to provide readers with a comprehensive manifesto to reach authenticity, and to come to a concrete understanding on what this Panopticon, Singapore, is to its gay community. However, as Jack Halberstram tells us, there is an art in and beauty to failure:

rather than searching for ways around...disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy. Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures. (Halberstram 187)

In this wisdom, I find solace in my failures in striving towards writing that dramatizes, renders and contextualizes the gay experience in Singapore. These varied attempts to write towards authenticity, a writing “rooted in an internal center” (Odets 50), is to be revealed in. For indeed, there is a beauty in all the multiplicities that gay men can strive towards.

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