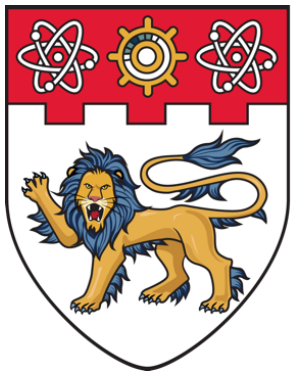

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

SINGAPORE

THE UNSULLIED TONGUE OF SAINT ANTHONY AND OTHER MIRACLES: A COLLECTION OF MAGICAL REALIST SHORT STORIES

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

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The Unsullied Tongue of Saint Anthony and Other Miracles: A Collection of Magical Realist Short Stories

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

2020

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SUMMARY

The Unsullied Tongue of Saint Anthony and Other Miracles is a collection of magical realist short stories—a liminal, speculative space where the Othered Eurasian body can exist and come alive. The collection is an exercise in creating a kind of magical realism tinged with Eurasian sensibility and the miracles that pervade and haunt the Eurasian-born-Catholic consciousness. In this story world, Eurasian characters grapple with various contemporary issues—the reclamation of Kristang as mother tongue; female sexuality and queerness; sexism in healthcare; taboos surrounding women's unruly bodies; religious suppression of women and sexual freedom; and the remnants of a violent colonial history largely forgotten by Singapore and many Eurasian communities. This collection of stories situates itself within a tradition of postcolonial magical realism and contemporary southeast Asian speculative fiction, expanding the subgenre to incorporate and suggest a Eurasian hybrid sensibility. The stories interrogate religious narratives through a fabulist lens, resisting homogeneity and reality as constructed by the state and Church, and teasing the magical from the real to reveal the thriving existence of alternative identities and ways of being. *The Unsullied Tongue of Saint Anthony and Other Miracles* is ultimately a celebration of the liminal, the tender, the surreal, the miraculous hidden in the shadows of the everyday.

LEFTOVERS

"The longer you keep the devil, the tastier it is," Odelia says as she beheads the duck for the feast. "Curry devil can freeze for three months. My wedding sugee, that one I froze for one year. My ex-husband and I saved it for our first anniversary. Bloody swine ate half of it. Don't marry a jockey okay? Don't look for trouble."

In the six hours since I met Odelia, she's schooled me on how to make a sugee cake more dense, how to make the rempah for curry devil, how to say "hunger" in Kristang, while we sweat through our aprons preparing a "Western" Christmas buffet for two hundred diners.

I silently chide my late Nana for sending another nenek in her place to do her nagging.

"So what's a young lady like you doing working on Christmas Eve?" she asks. "Not going for midnight Mass later?"

I shrug, remaining focused on oiling the skin of this duck breast.

"Very quiet, ah?" Odelia says, wielding the knife with her veiny hands, slicing a leg of ham into sheets that fold into each other like ribbons and melt on the tongue.

"Christmas is just hard," I say, turning away to check on the pork roasting in the oven.

"I've never met a Eurasian who didn't like Christmas," she says as she abandons the ham to help me lug the golden, crackling pork belly to the counter.

"I didn't say I didn't like it."

Ten-thirty. The servers bring back the trays of scraps and Odelia is about to dump them into the bin.

"Wait," I say, already regretting my haste. "I'd like to take them home."

Odelia starts laughing. Blood rushes to my face.

"Come on, they're from the serving trays," I mumble, sweeping the last shreds of ham, a slice of duck, and each crisp of pork fat into just one layer of my three-tier tingkat.

"I think you missed some crumbs," she says.

I snap the lid shut, a little too loud. She stops laughing.

“I’m sorry. This is silly. Let me take you out for a meal. Or even better, I can make you curry devil! With bacon bones, or even oxtail.”

I stack the round tin atop the two empty ones, trying to ignore why a woman who can afford bacon bones wants to go through all this trouble just to talk.

Odelia puts a tentative hand on my shoulder. “You remind me of my daughter when she was just starting out in the world. Quiet too, but so driven. Now she’s a big girl, a travel writer. Can’t even keep track of where she is. Sometimes I think she wants it that way. I’m sorry for all my yapping. I don’t know when to stop.”

Her hand is still on my shoulder and for the first time tonight, it’s trembling. I cup it between my palms, feeling her veins, just like Nana used to on lonely nights.

“You know, when my Nana was alive, she used to make curry devil on Christmas morning using leftover meats from the night before. Picnic ham, turkey, the chicken and sausages from her pie. That would be our Boxing Day lunch.”

“The longer you keep the devil, the tastier it is,” says Odelia, her eyes glistening.

“Maybe we can add these crumbs to your curry devil,” I say, grabbing my tingkat which slips from my grasp and clatters to the floor.

Odelia squats to retrieve it, heaving all three tiers onto the counter with a clang. Is the devil playing tricks on us?

She pries open the first container and it is packed with juicy sheets of ham. We unlock the other two tins and empty them out onto the table. An endless flow of meat—duck breast plump and luminous, succulent pork belly crackling on its own. For once, Odelia is silent. We look at each other and dare not ask how.

We are like children on Christmas morning. Crystal-eyed, gleaming with wonder. I pop a piece of pork belly in my mouth. The crunch is undeniable.

“Well Odelia, I guess we’ll be having curry devil for days.”

THE UNSULLIED TONGUE OF SAINT ANTHONY

I was alone at the food table, ladle in hand, fishing the tongue out of the broth. Its tip was slightly curled, peeking out from the muck of brains and innards swirling as I scooped the kambing tongue into my bowl. I could hear Nana's whispering in my ear, "They don't know what they're missing."

Nana used to ask for Bahrakath's kambing soup almost every day, because "God knows when I'm gonna die," she'd say. "I want to go while sucking on tulang!"

So I chewed on her behalf. She was busy lying in her casket in the living room, letting prayers and the croons of "Amazing Grace" wash over her like the evening tide.

The last of the mourners were ushered out by midnight. I sat by her casket, long after my parents went to bed. I couldn't decide which was brighter, her ruby rosary wound between her fingers or her Revlon rosewine lips.

Nana always told me to swallow the Eucharist upon receiving it. When she was a child, her aunt told her stories of a pubescent altar boy who once kept the communion wafer in his trouser pocket, perhaps to snack on later. Most Catholics believed it was for Satan worship because a good Catholic would always consume the Body of Christ immediately unless they planned to desecrate it in a sacrificial Satanist ritual.

So this altar boy forgot all about it until later, while serving Sunday evening Mass. During the consecration of the Eucharist, the parish priest raised the Host to Heaven and said, "Take it and eat it, this is My Body given up for you." The boy began salivating. His groin felt wet. He looked down to find a reddish patch on his white gown. He sprinted down the aisle, out of the parish hall to the back of the sacristy, garnering glares from the congregation and sniggers from the other altar boys. In the dim room furnished with chalices and other sacred objects, he took off

his gown. His trousers were stained a deep burgundy, as if a part of him was decomposing, yet moist like a fresh, gaping wound. His trembling fingers dipped into his pocket and gently pulled out—and Nana swears by this though no one has seen it—a wafer-thin sheet of coagulated flesh, spongy yet solid, umber like the earth, hardened like a large scab, glistening with what could only be tangy, fresh blood.

"Can you imagine," Nana said as she recounted the tale, "if he had held the host-turned-flesh in his palm, it would look like the stigmata of Jesus Christ!"

It was stories like these that kept Nana's fingers wound tight over her rosary. All I'm left with are her stories. All I can do is tell them.

*

Maundy Thursday last week, Nana was still alive.

"Emma, petto?" Nana croaked, de-crusting her nap from her eyes with her knuckles. I took the bottle of water from her bedside table and slipped the straw in her mouth. Her lips were still smudged with Revlon Super Lustrous crème in rosewine—she was hoping to charm Saint Peter into letting her through the gates of Heaven.

"Did you get the tongue?" she asked between bouts of hacking and wheezing.

"Of course. I called them just to make sure," I said. That wasn't exactly true. Naomi had called and bought the kambing soup herself. I had gone to her apartment on Adam Road to collect it from her. Admittedly, there was tongue involved there as well.

I popped the lid off the soup container. Propping it on Nana's bedside table, I dipped my spoon into the rich, earthy broth, swishing around amidst tripe and brain to find that tender piece of kambing tongue.

I slurped it up, grinding the mush between my teeth, especially the strangely gritty bits which were probably the taste buds.

"Don't forget that's for me, petto," said Nana, when I realised I had been chewing for a good two minutes. "You look like you're about to swallow anytime."

"This isn't the Body of Christ, Nana," I said.

"You're right," she laughed. "The Apostles didn't have *this* for their Last Supper."

I spat the premasticated tongue back into the spoon. It looked like a less appetizing version of a raw spiced meatball ready to be oven-baked and served with spaghetti. I wiped away a trail of saliva that escaped Nana's mouth before feeding her the kambing. I drowned it some more in the yellowish broth to help it go down easier. This is how I fed her in her final days, like a mother bird feeding her chicks. The only way her fragile stomach could take food.

You might cringe. But it's not unnatural. Premastication has been a thing amongst animals for centuries. Wolf pups nuzzle the snout of their mother, prompting her to regurgitate little portions of her hunt into their gaping mouths. Anthropoid great apes also followed this ritual of mouth-to-mouth feeding. Kiss-feeding, some call it.

"Go ahead, take the other tongue," Nana said after she had swallowed.

She watched me with a chuffed smile as I devoured the fatty tongue, sipped the gamey broth. "That's my petto," she said, her voice strained as she tried to suppress an oncoming cough. "Now, where was I?"

"I think that's enough storytelling for today, Nana," I said. "Just rest." She succumbed to the hacking, shaking her head in protest until her braids came loose. I realised then that she just wanted to talk.

I brought a bottle of water to her lips and she sipped fervently, holding the straw between her index and middle fingers, as if she were sucking on a cigarette. When her coughing had subsided, she shook her hair away from her face.

"Let me tell you a story about Sister Paola."

*

Friday was the day of incense. The workers in the convent were instructed to collect a censer from the vestibule, each one meant for a different wing of the compound. The pure white facade of the Sacred Heart Convent would be fleetingly engulfed by the thick smog of holy incense—a symbol of prayers rising towards Heaven.

These balmy afternoons were the best time of the week for Nana and her best friend Bella Hogan to sneak a puff. They slipped away from the cafeteria one by one—trying not to raise suspicion—leaving half-eaten congee in their plates for the flies (and other, hungrier girls). Hidden at the back of the chapel, which faced an alleyway separated by wire fencing, Nana struck the match and held it up to Bella as she sucked on her cigarette.

This was their weekly ritual ever since they befriended the neighbourhood newspaper boy who'd slip packets of Butterfly tobacco and rolling paper through the fence at precisely 12.15pm. When they were done, they buried the butts in the flowerbeds by the chapel. They were surprised the bougainvilleas never died.

"Why the chapel, Nana?" I asked. "Weren't the nuns' quarters nearby?"

"My pet, nobody looks for trouble in a holy place."

Nana's earliest memories were, according to her, in this order: her mother placing a rose at the feet of Mother Mary's statue at the grotto; the limpness of her mother's body, like a falling handkerchief, as her father attempted to shake her awake one morning; her father kissing her

forehead, departing his sister's house; her aunt teaching her Kristang so the Japanese soldiers wouldn't mistake them for the British; and, a few years after the war, her swollen eyes from crying the entire night after her aunt had left her at Sacred Heart Convent for orphaned girls. "Bos teng yo sa korsang," whispered her aunt into her ear before she left. But it didn't matter that her aunt, who had her five children to care for, had given her her heart. Love alone could not feed a family.

Nana had a habit of peeling the skin off her chapped lips.

"Stop that," said Bella. "You always do that when you're stressed. That's why your lips are always raw."

Nana stopped picking at her lips, placing her cigarette there instead.

Bella let her friend take a few drags before plucking the rollie out of her mouth, gently pressing her lips to hers, soothing them before returning the cigarette to its original place. Kiss-feeding?

"That's what I loved about her," Nana said. "Effortless, smooth like a movie star."

I tried to be cavalier next to my gently wheezing Nana talking about her teenage lover while sucking on tulang, incredulous at the realisation that if Nana had followed her heart—her korsang—I might not be here, telling her story.

That balmy afternoon, the girls hoped the incense and cigarette smoke would carry their prayers heavenward and make the Feast Day of St Anthony, patron saint of lost things, go away.

When I was a teenager, my mother would take me to church on the 13th of June to pray for my missing soul, that I might find a good marriage partner, as if the solution to waywardness was domestication. Part of me wanted her to meet Naomi, so she could see the fruits of her prayers.

Saint Anthony was an orator, gifted with words to spread the Gospel of the Lord. He died of edema in 1231, and when he was exhumed in 1263, they found that his entire body had decomposed except for his tongue, supposedly as wet and sensual as the days he spent captivating crowds with his sermons. Now his unsullied tongue, framed against his jaw bone, lies in the Basilica of Saint Anthony of Padua for all to venerate.

Nana and Bella sat amidst the bougainvillea bushes, wondering just what the nuns had meant when they said that this year at the Feast Day celebration they were about to be slain by the Holy Spirit.

"Do you think they're going to kill us?" teased Bella.

"You think this is funny? Bloody swine."

"Think about it. They're just going to pray over us. If we fall, we fall. It just means the Holy Spirit is working."

"And what if I don't want to fall? What if I don't want to be controlled?"

Bella took a long drag, exhaled. "Then we stay awake. Bos teng yo sa korsang."

"Ngka papiah korsang. Don't talk about love unless you mean it," Nana said, her aunt's words echoing in her mind.

"I do," said Bella. "You have my heart."

The discordant toll of the chapel bells sent the mynahs fluttering from the trees and the girls hurtling over the bougainvillea bushes. They dashed past the grotto, through the arched doorways, down the corridors, arriving at the assembly area where their classmates were lined up in twos, the last utterances of the Hail Mary drowned out by girlish chatter and the scuffling of shoes.

The two weren't usually this careless about punctuality. They would usually leave the chapel ten minutes before the bell, slip away to the bathroom to slather each other's backs and chests with talcum powder to hide the cigarette smell, and be back just in time for afternoon prayers.

By the time the two had joined the back of the line, the other girls were trudging back to their classes. When they tried to follow them, they felt a tugging from behind. Sister Paola, towering over them with an upturned nose, had her fingers hooked around the straps of their pinafores.

"Going somewhere?"

"Back to class, Sister Paola," said the girls in too-perfect unison.

The nun raised her thinly plucked brows, shaking her head with a snide smirk that seemed to stretch across her pale face.

"Why don't we take a trip to the chapel instead?"

Sister Paola Marino was born in a province somewhere in Northern Italy, the exact place escaped Nana.

"I'm dying already, you still want me to remember where she was born, ah?" she said, stifling a cough that she knew would escalate if she let it.

She joined the sisterhood when she was twenty-one. Bella had overheard whispers from the other nuns that she took up the veil to escape her military father and drunken mother. After only seven years of service, she was sent to Singapore by the Daughters of Saint Anthony of Padua, a missionary set up to provide shelter and education for vulnerable girls around the world.

It was only two years before Nana had arrived at the convent at age ten when Sister Paola had gotten off the SS Marina with a sharpened English vocabulary, and took up position as headmistress of Sacred Heart Convent.

To Nana, she was the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen, with plump lips, large, almond eyes and a jawline you could prick your finger on. "We called her the red devil," Nana said. "The rare times her veil was out of place from striding around the school in the heat, we could see loose strands of hair, fiery like chilli garam! That's the scariest thing. We learnt from young that pretty and pious women could do very ugly things."

"When we heard the pounding of pestle against mortar, we knew she was grinding ginger and chilli padi to rub onto someone's tongue. The shuffling of matches and the sound of splattering meant that she was boiling a pot of water and a saucepan of oil. Once I was peeing, and I heard her threatening a pair of girls who had come out of the same bathroom stall, 'Would you rather I scald you with water? Or let hot oil stick to your skin and sizzle your hairs to a crisp?' I lifted my legs and nearly fell into the toilet! Since then, Bella and I were always careful to use the bathroom at the home economics wing because no one used it since we started the rumour that Mother Mary once appeared in the bathroom mirror crying blood."

They had heard of her *punishments*, but no one ever saw them. "I have to admit," Nana said, "a part of me was interested to see who she really was. Out of control."

Sister Paola strode down the corridor of classrooms, a discreet palm on each of their backs, hurrying them along. She led them out into the gardens, past the eye of the Virgin Mary statue surrounded by a moat of lily pads. The chapel stood at the far end of the grotto, a pale yellow hut that looked more like a shack. Stepping through the creaky wooden doors, the headmistress's footsteps quickened, her block-heeled pumps clattering down the aisle. She halted them again by

their pinafore straps, pushing them to their knees before the statue of the crucified Christ nailed to the wall above the altar.

Sister Paola looked formidable in the light from the stained glass windows highlighting all the sharpest points of her face. “Can one of you tell me what’s happening in that window?” she said. The stained glass windows lining the walls of the chapel depicted dramatic moments of biblical history—Eve offering the forbidden fruit to Adam while the serpent watched; Noah, in his ark filled with animals, gazing up at the dove with an olive branch in its beak; Angel Gabriel appearing to Mary telling her that she would bear the Son of God; Christ in his final hours, nailed to the cross, eyes towards Heaven, presumably crying, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”

The window in question was the depiction of the twelve apostles huddled in a room, with droplets of fire suspended above their heads. The afternoon sun shone through the stained glass, amplifying the way the flames licked and kissed the scalps of the apostles.

“It’s the coming of the Holy Spirit,” Bella whispered. Nana managed to stifle a giggle at the thought of a Holy Immaculate Climax.

“Clever girl,” Sister Paola said, enunciating every syllable. “When Pentecost was fulfilled, the disciples were together. Suddenly, from the sky, came a howl, a blustery wind filling the entire house. Then there appeared to them tongues of fire, which parted and rested upon each of them. They were thus filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.”

Nana and Bella did not know then that Sister Paola had a background in theatre in Italy, that this monologue was a framing device, being used to truly build up to an Immaculate climax. With grace and incredible control, she crouched before Bella, like a ballerina performing a squat. “You like playing with fire, Ms Isabella Hogan?”

Later, Bella would tell Nana that she couldn't help but notice Sister's fiery baby hair peeking through the coif that framed her face, and that she had to fight the urge to tuck it back in.

"What about you, Zehnder?"

Nana thought that she would've felt the sting of hearing someone use her family name in such an accusatory tone, as if she had dishonoured it. But she had no family to dishonour. She had a rounded nose which other girls called penyet, fair Chinese skin with a Serani way of speaking English—cavalier, with a Malay-inflected vocabulary infused with a Portuguese languor inherited from generations ago, after Afonso de Albuquerque dropped anchor in the Straits of Malacca. Once, another nun sent her to detention for refusing to translate what she had muttered under her breath. "I told you so many times English is the only language we speak in this convent," said Sister Victoria Ranallo, a lanky woman who spat her words in quick, staccato beats. "I don't want to hear this crude, gragoh tongue of yours!"

"You see la, they had the cheek to learn our lingo and use it against us," Nana said to me as she rolled her eyes. I asked her why the nuns were so adamant about speaking English when it wasn't even their native language. "Aiya, they just wanted to control us. And it was easier to control us if we all spoke the same tongue." But Nana had no shame, because her name, just like her tongue, was hers and only hers.

Sister Paola moved closer to Nana. "I hear you like smoking cigarettes, Ms Zehnder?" As if she were following stage cues, she reached into her pocket to reveal the dirt-stained pack of tobacco. It was only much later that they found out they'd been snitched on by their classmate Catherine Oehlers, who had a prudish disgust for girl lovers while being irrevocably devoted to Sister Paola. "I think that swine might've been in love with me," said Nana, "either that or she loved carrying Sister Paola's dress while she squatted to piss."

“You know what I despise most?” Sister Paola said as she opened the packet, pinched the tobacco and rolled herself a smoke. “It’s the fact that you two had the cheek to come here on holy ground to *fondle* each other.” Nana and Bella kept their eyes on her as she puffed smoke rings over their heads. “What’s the matter?” said Sister Paola after taking a long drag. “Can’t you talk now that your tongues aren’t in each other’s mouths?”

Bella was silent, hot tears streaming down her cheeks. Nana felt her blood rise, itching to curl her fingers around Sister’s Paola neck so she might make her choke on her own blood. In her head, she yelled what her aunt used to yell whenever she came after her with a rattan cane—*cekik darah!*

“Bos sa linggu na bos sa mai sa bergonya,” Nana muttered under her breath, so instinctively, as if her tongue moved independently of the signals from her brain that told her to stay quiet.

Sister Paola dropped the cigarette and crushed it beneath her black leather sandals.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

Nana laughed. “Something about her mother’s you-know-what la. Anyways, you should have seen her face when I said that. It was the first time I had ever seen her frown lines, or the colour of her eyes, like the earth. They were reddened by the sunlight, shining through the droplets of fire painted into the windows.”

“Did you just curse me with your gragoh tongue, Zehnder?” asked Sister Paola.

When all Nana did was shrug, Sister Paola laughed, a jolted, empty sound that echoed throughout the chapel. “Do you know what happened to prophet Isaiah when he realised his lips were unclean in the presence of God?”

Nana knew her Old Testament, which was mostly what they taught in the convent. That God was most intolerant.

Sister Paola rolled another stick, struck another match, took long drags, her anger stewing. "So you like playing with fire, huh. Stick out your tongue."

Bella whipped her head towards Nana, who was busy performing the role of the fearless martyr, glaring at the headmistress in her flaming eyes. "Tongue out, Zehnder. Or your lover here gets burnt." She held out her cigarette just above Bella's trembling head, letting the ash flutter to rest on her hair.

Mute and unblinking, Bella watched as her best friend stuck out her tongue. Nana even took pains to stretch it, tilting her chin up, closing her eyes.

Sister Paola's voice reached the crescendo she'd been building towards. "A seraphim flew to Isaiah, holding an ember with tongs taken from the altar, and touched his lips…" As quick as striking a match, Sister Paola stubbed the cigarette out right in the centre of Nana's tongue. "*Now your wickedness is removed,* the seraphim said*, your sin purged.*"

*

Easter Sunday, Nana was too sick to get out of bed. I told her I'd bring back Aunty Judy Lazaroo's famous fruit cake for her.

At the annual Easter lunch at the Lazaroos (I always forget how we're related), I spent most of the afternoon avoiding conversation with aunties and uncles, stuffing my face with curry devil and sayur lemak, pretending to relish my godma Aunty May's parched, overly crumbly sugee cake while trying to resist the urge to call Naomi.

"I'm tired of this, Em," she had said the night before when she dropped me home on her Kawasaki. At the foot of my block, the night air was breezy but our hair was slick with sweat after removing our helmets. It was clear she had been waiting for one of these "talks", to coax a response out of me.

"What do you want me to do?" I said. "You know how my parents are. And the girls are starting to talk."

I remember when I was a convent girl myself, how we'd fool around in bathroom stalls or the chemistry lab, but the moment we saw a teacher couple, the cookie-cutter pair of the cropped-haired butch and dress-wearing lady, we made a considerable effort not to hide our disgust and conspiratorial whispering from them. We assumed that this fooling around was something to grow out of, or at least that was what we were told.

Now, Naomi and I were that cookie-cutter couple who never outgrew our desires; there was nothing childish about them. I've seen what those stares, those whispers look like on the faces of these wild but impressionable girls. But there were also the handful of students who smiled and waved at us when they saw us sharing a murtabak at Sri Sun Prata Paradise. Who gave us matching chocolate sets on Teachers' Day. A part of me didn't want to believe that teenage girls could be so accepting, so luminous. I knew too well that something, or someone, could stub out that fire, like a cigarette.

"You know the girls are fine. They like us. We're the role models we never had. Who gave you the idea that we're the problem? Carol?" said Naomi, impatient.

Principal Carol Tan seemed relatively progressive, a Catholic woman in her forties who looked thirty and could pull off a rounded, Winona Ryder bob. A hearty supporter of the arts who encouraged holistic learning rather than a solely grades-based education. How could I tell Naomi that it infuriated me when Mrs Tan sent girls to detention for having a buzz cut like mine? How could I tell her that when I once wore an AC/DC t-shirt on casual Friday, she pulled me aside to tell me she had received complaints from parents that I was promoting Satanism (she was under the impression that the iconic band acronym stood for After Christ/ Devil Came) and

told me to wear more “decent” things, more “feminine”. How could I tell her that Mrs Tan had made an offhand comment about how I best be careful about “latching” myself to Naomi. “What will the parents say?”

We weren’t kids anymore. We couldn’t be controlled. But was it ridiculous to think that with enough pressure from the world, she might decide that it was better to invest in a relationship that had a future. Like so many others had.

“You know Carol,” I said. “She’s a bit, intimidating.”

“I’m not asking us to come out to the school. I’m not even asking you to move in with me. I just want to know if you’re going to stick around.”

“I thought we were taking it slow.”

“I thought this was going somewhere.”

Wasn’t it clear that time I fed her fish soup when she had a fever, then kissed her between her legs? Or when I let her shave the sides of my head? Wasn’t it clear when I tugged her away from Aunty May and Uncle Roger the day before when they glared us down for holding hands at Pasir Ris Park while I was supposed to be at Good Friday service? Didn’t she know that I was trying to save her the anxieties of religious doctrine? Or perhaps she wasn’t afraid at all, and I was just saving myself?

I didn’t get to answer. All I heard was the hum of her bike fading away. How do you tell someone you love them when the words are as foreign as your mother tongue?

I was cutting a generous portion of the Lazaroo fruit cake to take home for Nana when Aunty May came up behind me. “Save some for the rest of us,” she teased. She had a smug look on her

face, the same as my mother's (her sister) when she knows something you don't, and will use it against you.

"So, my goddaughter, did you go for Mass this morning?"

"Of course. Went with mummy and daddy."

"And what was the homily about?"

"You don't believe me?" I said, staying the knife in my hand so I wouldn't ruin the cake. This only made Aunty May laugh, the kind that makes your heart drop.

"So defensive. I'm just asking my dear. Considering you were out gallivanting at the time of Good Friday service." Her eyes scanned me for a reaction as I continued cutting more fruit cake, scooping it into a container.

"So where's your boyfriend?" she asked, louder, making the people lining up for dessert turn their heads like meerkats. I could feel Uncle Roger's stares from somewhere in the house.

"You know I don't have one," I said.

"Then who were you holding hands with in the park?"

"Who I hold hands with is none of your concern."

"So you admit it!" Aunty May scoffed, her brows narrowing. "I told your mother to watch out for you. Thirty-two years old, still want to play these games. Come on, Emma. You're not a schoolgirl anymore. Your parents ought to send you back to that retreat."

I had a comeback, something dull and predictable, like "the only retreat I want is away from this family". But my throat felt constricted like a snake coiled around a rat. Before I could find my voice, I felt a cold, imperceptible gaze on the back of my neck. I turned around and there were my parents—my mother's tears, my father's glare.

Aunty May put a sympathetic hand on my mother's shoulder before taking away the rest of the fruit cake, proffering it around the room. As quickly as they had appeared, my parents strode out the door. My father leading my mother by the hand.

"No shame is it?" my father spat as soon as he slammed the door to the taxi. "Fooling around with a colleague. You think this is secondary school? That they just call your parents and send you for counselling when they find out? Don't be stupid, Emma. You could lose your job, or they won't give you promotions."

"Have I failed as a mother?" We entered the lift. "What did I do to deserve a daughter like this? What will people say? God didn't give you life so you can throw it away." We entered the flat, and I was storming off to my room, when my mother yelled, "I thought the Holy Spirit had cured you all those years ago. Seems like you need another purge!"

I slammed my door. As the silence reverberated in my ears, I chided myself for forgetting that fruit cake for Nana.

Pentecost, the day the tongues of fire descended upon the Apostles, was supposedly the moment the Church was founded. The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, enabling them to speak in different tongues. Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem gathered at the sound of this strange garble. They were confused because each one heard the apostles speaking in his own native language. And this is how the Good News would spread.

Some say this phenomenon is the reversal of Babel, the parable about how God had confused the tongues of men, distorting their common language and scattering them across the

earth to multiply, diversify. The Pentecostal fire didn't homogenise the tongues of men, it allowed people of different tongues to understand each other, without translation.

For the longest time, I always thought that this miraculous event was a celebration of difference. But the Church was not so tolerant. I learnt this when I realised I was different.

After my parents had gone to bed that Easter night, I crept into Nana's room. She was mumbling in her sleep. I was afraid to wake her; restlessness usually meant the Angel of Death was near. So I curled myself into a foetal position and lay in the tiny pocket between her feet and the end of her super single, my calves dangling off the edge.

My mother's voice felt deafening, like church bells in my head. *Purge*.

"Purge!" Nana woke with a start, sending my head crashing into the bed frame. "Oh, petto," she said, sitting up against the head board. "It's only you. What are you doing there?"

"Keeping the Angel of Death away," I said, holding my head still to keep from spinning.

Nana let out a laugh that was more a sigh. "Thank you, petto. Sorry to wake you like that. Even at eighty five. I still dream about that terrible place."

"Was it about Sister Paola burning your tongue?"

"Oh, that was nothing. Wait until I tell you about Saint Anthony's tongue."

It took ten girls to lug a ceramic Saint Anthony around the convent.

The procession began at the foyer, parading the statue of the Patron Saint of Lost Things on a wooden palanquin through the grotto, past the chapel, and all the way to the main hall, up the creaking wooden steps where he was stationed in the centre of a raised wooden stage. He was dressed in his teak-brown Franciscan cassock, one arm carrying the baby Jesus, and a serpent coiled around his other arm, its head limp and tongue hanging out like a kitschy cartoon. From

that height, he looked down upon the faces of the orphan girls, who would pray to him, asking for things long gone.

Nana and Bella sat on the floor, blending into the crowd. Bella's head hung low, not in prayer, but with guilt. She felt responsible for Nana's torment and had been mostly silent and docile since the incident. "I think she slowly realised that being together was not worth it if it meant getting hurt," Nana said, trying not to sound bitter.

But Nana was waiting for Sister Paola to speak. She knew she was planning something. She had heard the red devil making strange sounds in the middle of the night in the chapel (she still snuck out to smoke, a quiet act of indignation). She listened through the crack in the back door. The rolling of Rs. Hurried trills. As if they were a foreign language spoken with a forked tongue. Then cursing. Nana didn't understand Italian but she knew a cuss word when she heard it. This pattern of droning and swearing continued, and she recognised in it a distinct sound of quiet frustration unique to someone who always had to be in control.

Then, Nana remembered the tongues of fire.

"I thought, if Sister Paola could truly speak in tongues, wouldn't I hear it in Kristang? Or wouldn't it sound completely unhuman?" Nana realised that Sister Paola was rehearsing a miracle.

The choir was singing "Come All Ye Faithful" as the congregation lined up at the foot of the stage to receive the Holy Eucharist from Father Renold Peters, whom the nuns invited from Saint Joseph's Church. Nana watched as Father Renold raised the communion wafer to the sky, mumbling "Body of Christ" before placing the round, wheaty host onto the tongues of each girl and nun. Nana especially hated this brief moment of intimacy with a man of holy stature. "Feeding is sacred," she said. "We do it with those we love, whom we trust."

When it was her turn, Nana cupped her palms as if she were catching water and held it out to Father. The priest looked at her with stern eyes and eyebrows raised, the Eucharist poised in the air, out of reach. Then Nana begrudgingly opened her mouth and felt the parched wafer sticking to her tongue. In that brief moment, she looked up at the stage to see Sister Paola standing on a podium, looking down at her with a knowing smirk. Nana nearly choked, retracting her tongue without fully closing her mouth and walking briskly back to her seat at the back of the hall. When she sat down, she spat the communion wafer out into her palm. It was thin enough that it was already semi-masticated by her saliva. A renegade Eucharist on the floor would attract unwanted attention, she thought. So she slipped it into her pinafore pocket.

Sister Paola didn't move from the podium. She waited until Father Renold gave the final blessing, processed out of the hall and hurried back to his church before beginning to speak. Even on the raised platform, Saint Anthony was still a head taller than her. She began with gratuitous stories of the Saint, how he had converted the heretics of Rimini, astounding them by summoning schools of fish to the surface of the Marecchia River with his preaching. And the story of how during the building of Sacred Heart Convent, the workers had placed a statue of the saint at the construction site to ward off a serpent that was terrorising them. The next morning, the snake was found dead, coiled around his lifeless arms.

"Heretics and serpents!" boomed Sister Paola. A well-timed peak in a dramatic monologue. "They're all around us. Even among you girls." The students looked around at each other, mute.

"But sin is only mortal. On this holy Feast Day of Saint Anthony, with the power of his tongue and the tongues of fire, we are going to cleanse ourselves of our sins. Because only the

power of the Holy Spirit can purge the dirtiest, most abhorrent parts of ourselves. Only He knows what that is."

As Sister Paola spoke, Nana knew she was searching the crowd of pinafored, pig-tailed girls for her. But she would not find her in time. Nana had already snuck backstage. From between the curtains, she spotted Bella in the crowd looking confused and afraid. "Sorry," whispered Nana.

Sister Paola raised her arms to Heaven, began her performance, moving her lips at an abnormal speed, filling the hall with tutting, ticking, shushing, jabbering. The nuns raised their hands over the girls, offering their bodies as vessels for the Spirit.

The headmistress was so engrossed in her pageantry that she only realised Nana was on stage when she heard a rushing of consonants, an urgent rattling, like babel. Nana stood next to Saint Anthony, spitting syllables with percussive and languorous intonations. Just when she thought she couldn't go on any longer, when her mouth had run dry and her breath grew short, she felt a warm tingle in her legs. Her right hip felt wet. She dipped her hand into her pinafore pocket and felt something slimy and spongy. She trailed off, eyes widening as she felt every hair in her body rise. Without looking, she pulled out her hand and threw the mysterious clump to the ground where it landed at the feet of the blessed statue.

The oblong mound of flesh glistened with fresh, crimson blood. The length of it filled with raised, gritty bumps, like open pores, like taste buds. As it lay beneath the Franciscan Saint, the baby Jesus, and the dead serpent, it became clearer to Sister Paola, and the rest of the school, that Nana had manifested the most revered tongue of lost things.

We laid next to each other in the dark. She was stroking the shaven sides of my head. I breathed in the scent of her talcum-powdered nightgown.

"You want to know how I did it, don't you?" Nana finally said.

"Aren't miracles supposed to be unexplainable?" I said.

Nana laughed, "I'll tell you a little secret, petto. It may sound silly to you. But what was really coming out of my mouth were Kristang words. I mangled them, like how I grind the rempah to make babi assam. Made them sound gibberish when I said them over and over really fast."

"So does this mean you planned the bloody tongue too?"

Nana shrugged her shoulders. "It seems like I did, didn't I? I had a feeling something might happen if I didn't swallow the Eucharist, if I just kept it in my pocket long enough. I just didn't expect it to work out so well, so bloody." She chuckled again, reaching for her rosary on her bedside table and wound it around her fist. "Do me a favour okay, petto? When I go, don't let my wake be in a church parlour. They didn't get me then and they won't get me now."

I pushed myself up against the headboard, looking Nana in the eye, her face swathed in pale moonlight.

"What were you really saying, Nana? When you spoke in tongues?"

"The whole time I was looking at Bella. Hoping she'd understand. Beneath the babbling, I was really just repeating, Bos teng yo sa korsang." She sighed, sinking into the sheets. "I loved her, petto. Yo amor eli. But I guess it was not our time. Sister Paola didn't touch me again, but neither did Bella. She was afraid. Maybe we won't be so afraid in the next life."

I awoke in the morning next to Nana.

It was how I imagined she'd like to go. Quietly, without any tacky last words. I was naïve to think we had one more feeding session. How was I to tell her now that eighteen years ago, I too had to be "cleansed"? That my parents had sent me to a charismatic healing retreat, where for most of the weekend, someone prayed over me in tongues—whether it was divine or rehearsed, I would never know. That they attempted to purge my pubescent body of what they thought were demons creating lustful desires and abominable impulses. That they had me believe for years that I had no control over anything.

I didn't even get to tell her I loved her.

Then, I noticed her lips coated with a fresh sheen of Revlon rosewine, as if she knew she was ready for Saint Peter. As if to say she understood, that there was nothing left to say.

*

I never told anyone how I had been feeding Nana in her final days. There was something sacred about these mealtimes. Scientists and anthropologists believe that the kind of sexual or familial kiss we engage in today derives from this behaviour of socialisation, of tenderness, of passing nourishment from lip to lip.

I felt as if I had become an orator, a speaker of tongues. That I could give sustenance to another tongue. Nana's story will be the story of how we sustained ourselves, spoke ourselves into existence, how we made the unspeakable, the unintelligible, heard.

If Nana didn't have to be cremated, I knew her tongue would remain as wet as St Anthony's in the years to come.

On that last day of Nana's wake, in the early hours of the morning, I called Naomi, crying. She showed up at my door an hour later, helmet in arms. The muggy air stuck to her skin, the strands of baby hair flattened against her forehead the same way they did when she awakened in

the morning. She held up a plastic bag to me with that twitch of her upper lip which I translate into a smile. Of course she brought kambing soup.

We put the broth in bowls and sat by Nana's coffin as I tried to ignore the creaking of the master bedroom door, my parents' agitated whispers whittling down to sighs. They were bound to sit me down for a long talk after the funeral. Perhaps coax me into attending another "healing retreat". But sitting next to Naomi and Nana for the first time, steam rising from the thick, gamey broth, nothing else mattered.

"Why did you even dish out a bowl for yourself?" I asked. "You hate kambing."

"I don't know," she shrugged. "I guess I just wanted to make a good first impression." She glanced at Nana, her crimson-tinted lips seemed to conceal a smirk. Naomi tentatively slurped the broth. She didn't even have to chew to immediately spit the meat back into spoon, to make me laugh louder than I had in months. I leaned over and kissed her, despite the soup trail on her chin.

"In front of Nana?" she said, almost incredulous, but reaching again for the warmth of us, for the lips still learning to speak.

"Bos teng yo sa korsang," I said, the only words I knew in my broken grandmother tongue. Sometimes we speak in other tongues not to be understood, but with the hope that those we care about the most don't ask to translate.

Naomi took her spoon with the un-masticated tongue and offered it to me.

Nana always told me to chew thoroughly, then swallow. So I did. I still do.

AN ALABASTER JAR OF PERFUME

The trouble with Maggie's uterus was that it overflowed.

She looked at the screen, brows furrowed as Doctor Lim Wai Kit rummaged around in her vagina with an ultrasound probe wrapped in latex and coated insufficiently with cheap water-based lube. Doctor Lim sighed, frowned, muttered tentative "hmms", all of which, to the uninitiated, would be disconcerting. Maggie saw the blackened circles amidst the swathes of grey. Nothing she hadn't seen before. And yet, something was off.

After an intentional cough which Maggie had not read as warning, Doctor Lim pulled out the probe with swift precision and told her to change out of her plastic gown and meet him in his office. Seriously? The polyclinic recommended this guy? Maggie had been referred to many rough doctors before, but her body still never got used to the sting. She laid on the bed, legs tucked in to her stomach, as if by shrinking her body she might diminish her ability to feel.

Doctor Lim's office, Maggie noted, was devoid of any personality, except for a framed photograph on his desk where he stood holding hands with his wife, his stiff lips bent and hewn into a clown's grin. He laid the ultrasound scan before her, spewing medical jargon, prescribing hormonal medication, all the things she had heard before.

She recognised what was supposed to be a circular ovary now encumbered by a dark blob, an endometrial nodule probably. Another scan; oval shaped nodules, a tiny black hole too far to the right—her cervix displaced by the swelling of her womb. But her eyes were fixated on a minuscule anomaly, almost imperceptible, a shadow of a teardrop pearl too beautiful to cause so much agony to the body.

"What's this pearly thing here?" Maggie asked.

“Endometrial tissue,” said Doctor Lim, too quickly. “I said before, endometrial tissue has been displaced from your uterus. Instead of lining your uterine wall, it’s growing outside of it, on your Fallopian tubes, your ovaries, your bladder…”

“I know all this. I had all that removed in surgery two years ago. I was finally pain-free…”

“Yes, but you do know that endometrial tissue can grow back right? I suggest we start over. I’ll put you on painkillers. Some Danazol which will reduce the hormones your ovaries produce. If that doesn’t work maybe we’ll try an IUD.”

“You think I haven’t tried all this hormonal stuff before? That’s why I did surgery. Can you find out why this is happening again? Can you cut me open and see if there’s anything different this time? I swear the pain is different. It’s as if something is clawing its way out of me. It wants to come out.”

Doctor Lim’s fingers made satisfying clacking noises on his keyboard. Had she finally convinced him of her pain?

“Miss, Oyee-lers?”

“Oehlers. Like Oh-lers.”

“Right. Surgery is the last resort. We have to see if your body can respond to different treatments. Maybe this time it will be different. Trust me, these meds are completely safe. There are women with worse conditions than you who are taking these meds. All fine.”

“I want to remove my uterus,” said Maggie, sitting up straighter, looking Doctor Lim in the eye.

The doctor took his time to finish typing up his prescription of Danazol and a referral to a psychiatrist, finally setting his gold-rimmed spectacles on the table. “Look, Ms Oh-lers. You’re

only saying this because you're in pain. That's what the painkillers and the hormonal medication are for. You're in your childbearing years. You never know if you might conceive in the future."

"I'm quite sure that I won't have children of my own."

"Better safe than sorry. You're thirty-four. Still have some good years left in you."

"I can adopt, right?"

"You say that now. Women always want their own children. Their own flesh and blood. I'm sure your family wants that right? Being Eurasian? I mean, there are so little of you. Surely you'd want to continue your bloodline?"

Did she? Maggie thought. Was that really why her late grandmother used to line up all the female cousins at Christmas to measure the circumference of their hips? Why was it that her neighbour Madam Anwar wasn't asked if she wanted to "continue her bloodline"? Why was it that as soon as her newborn was taken away to be swaddled, a nurse so readily proffered a copper IUD to be inserted after she expelled the afterbirth?

Maggie stormed out of Doctor Lim's office. "This is the last time I'll ever step into this hospital," she said as she slammed the door, knowing full well that the next time her cramps became excruciating, she would be right back here, hopefully, though unlikely, with a better doctor.

It was only until three years ago that Maggie had acquired a vocabulary for her unruly body.

She had spent years sitting in polyclinics waiting for a GP to prescribe her painkillers, despite her pleading for an answer to the wringing in her uterus. When, finally, she saw a GP who thought it strange for pain to make a thirty-year-old woman develop a conch-like hunch, and referred Maggie to Doctor Janet Vas at her nearest public hospital.

Maggie remembered what her uterus looked like the day she had her first ultrasound, which for many women her age, would mean outlining the faint silhouette of a foetus on a dark screen. She had no idea what she was looking at, but she knew it was nowhere human.

Doctor Janet Vas showed her an illustrated diagram of what endometriosis did to her reproductive system. It looked as if the supposedly hardy exterior, the clear, once smooth, assuring outline of the uterus, was pockmarked with pomegranate seeds.

"There's no way to tell for sure without cutting you up, but your symptoms match many others who have this disorder."

Doctor Vas put her on hormonal drugs, to block the estrogen that surged through her veins and made a uterus swell and shed. There was less blood, less bloating. And there was more flesh. Her thighs grew thicker and her rear more melon-like.

"You're looking fecund today," her mother said to her once at dinner. Maggie pinched the skin on her widened hips, wondering how her mother had learnt that word and hoped that she never used it on other people.

She liked her new curves until she had to push her way through the peak-hour train crowd to escape a suited hirsute man whose eyes lingered on her for way too long. If that did not terrify her, the cystic acne did.

Angry, pus-filled bumps appeared on her cheeks and chin, puncturing her bronze complexion like strawberry seeds. She found herself the receiver of an unsolicited review of La Roche-Posay's acne care range from a well-meaning, but utterly tactless Watsons cashier.

"This is strange," said Doctor Vas when Maggie turned up at her office with her furiously inflamed skin. "The side effects usually disappear after three months. Some women even grow great boobs. Are you sure you're eating right? Curry Devil quite oily you know. "

Doctor Vas had immediately regretted her candour after Maggie had flung her bottle of Dienogest at the framed certificate on the wall. *Master of Science from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists* smashed to the floor, the pills pattering like raindrops on a tin roof. Maggie didn't know which infuriated her more, the assumption that all she ate was curry devil or the fact that her grandmother had passed without leaving anyone her recipe for it.

Finally, out of sheer serendipity, Maggie met Dr Sara Siddick. The doctor had taken a detour on her usual running route around Botanic Gardens and had found Maggie in her ranger uniform in the midst of inspecting a rotting branch of a tembusu tree. She was crumpled like an injured animal and slumped against the tembusu's hefty branch that dipped to the ground. "Don't worry, this is normal," Maggie cried while cracking a smile as the stranger sidestepped off the path and ran towards her. As the doctor stooped to the grass and offered her an unofficially prescribed painkiller from her shorts pocket, she said, "No dear, this is not normal."

Doctor Siddick sent her for an MRI a week later and found several cysts the size of grapes attached to her ovaries. Stage four endo, as the well-acquainted would call it.

"You might've already suspected this, but this is what endo really looks like on the inside." Doctor Siddick laid out some photographs from other laparoscopic surgeries on her desk. Maggie hugged her knees to her chest, staring at the images of cysts adjoined to ovaries, sinking into muscle, maybe an intestine. A bloated pink uterus streaked with crimson gelatin, the tears of the womb. Darkened nodules like arils and lesions the deep purple of decay. Finally, visual proof that explained the gnawing sensation in her lower back, the feeling that her uterus was suffocating, on the brink of collapse. She wasn't, as what some therapists had pencilled into their notebooks, "delusional".

Maggie felt the abundance of her womb, in all its destruction and power. She could feel the arils swelling, penetrating her uterus and piercing her tubes, ovaries, bladder. The seeds of her fecundity were alive and clawing to come out, just like that copper IUD many years ago when her cervix had slowly pushed it out. Her partner at the time thought he was being pricked by a needle and pulled out of her before she could whisper, “Blood.”

Maggie picked up the surgical photographs, thumbing the blackened arils like wiping away a smudge.

“Can you do this for me?”

Dr Siddick’s face was professionally neutral, but Maggie noticed an unusual understanding in her eyes.

“If we remove the endometrial tissue, there’s no guarantee it won’t grow back. We only do this after we’ve exhausted all possible treatments.”

Maggie slid the photographs across the desk, her fingernails turning white from pressing on the puffy pink flesh.

“Well, I’m exhausted. Shall we?”

“Damn swine,” muttered Maggie, tugging at the weeds that sprouted in the grass where the Virgin Mary stood, encased in a stone arch reminiscent of a cave.

Father Benedict Chia looked up from his Murakami novel and watched her from a wooden pew dotted with candle wax and shrivelled petals. “I know, those things are a pain.”

“That Dr Lim!” said Maggie, “What does that doctor know about pain? Let’s see him try to carry around decaying flesh that he doesn’t want.”

Father Ben tossed his book on the bench. “Who’s Dr Lim? Maggie, are you pregnant?”

Maggie surprised herself when laughter erupted from her belly. But her amusement was soon stifled by the twinge in her abdomen.

"Thank God no. The endo is back. Saw Dr Lim at the hospital this morning. He won't let me get rid of my uterus that is infested with things that aren't supposed to be there. All because I *might* want to be pregnant someday. It's always like that. Falling birth rates. Wait until my womb falls out. Then he'll know."

Father Ben sucked in his breath, choosing his words. "I'm sorry it came back. What happened to your usual doctor?"

"Dr Siddick? She closed her clinic. Didn't you hear about this twenty-one year-old with endo? Dr Siddick did a hysterectomy on her at the girl's request, instead of simply removing the scar tissue like she did for me. She just didn't want to hurt anymore. The kid's parents, Evangelical Christians, found out and kicked up a huge fuss. Threatened Dr Siddick with a lawsuit. Rallied their whole church to boycott and spread rumours about her over their WhatsApp chats. Made it seem like she was against life, as if she had forced the kid to abort a child or something. Mad."

"That is mad," sighed Father Ben, picking up his book again. Even from afar, Maggie could see his eyes glaze over the words, trying to understand this radical act of giving up what he saw was God's gift of procreation.

She stooped beneath Mother Mary, her palms open as if showing her the lone tangle of weed that she had missed. "This is my life now. You pluck one out, and they just keep growing."

Father Ben shut his book, watching Maggie dig her knees into the soil, on the verge of keeling over were she not so insistent on showing her strength. "Come sit with me."

Maggie tossed her tools in the grass and sat next to Father Ben. He smelled of incense and rosewood oil. "*Kafka on the Shore*, eh?"

Father Ben smiled. "My first Murakami book. You a fan?"

"Not really. His female characters feel a bit too empty for me. Like a vessel."

"But Mrs Saeki is so enigmatic. She's the source of mystery, no?"

"You know that Kafka sleeps with her, and she may well be his mother right?"

His cheeks turned pink as he ruffled the pages, as if that would change the course of events. "Thanks for ruining it for me."

She hunched over laughing, her eyes glistening with tears as the pain throbbed in her pelvis where her ovaries felt fit to burst.

It wasn't long ago, when the endo had been weeded out, that Maggie relished not having to craft apologetic messages to friends and family about missing birthday dinners, her niece's and nephew's baptisms, the countless weddings. She finally set up a Tinder account, no longer needing to worry about staining bed sheets, or rolling over mid-coitus unceremoniously clutching her crotch. Her longest relationship was eight months. It finally occurred to her that she could live.

She quit her job at the national park, growing tired of female colleagues whispering to each other in Mandarin about how "lazy" she was, how she made them look weak for citing her period as the cause of her medical emergencies.

It was a time when every other person on her Instagram was at a wedding, starting families. She decided that despite her distrust of monogamy and procreation, she could milk this culture of romantic grandeur through her own business of building centrepieces, arches of

peonies, five hundred-dollar bouquets for the age-old toss into the sea of eager skirts and corsages.

She first met the priest on the way home from such a wedding. On her walk home, past the gates of the church she hadn't stepped into since her Holy Confirmation, the street lights cast a fuzzy glare over a lone man in a snapback, sitting on a pew, wiping his eyes with his hands. She found it pitiful that even in the comfort of shadows and the presence of the stony Virgin Mother, he couldn't let his tears flow freely.

Her sneakers squelched in the fallen leaves wet with rot and the grass pricked her ankles as she wandered into the grotto. She retrieved a shrivelled rose from the ground and placed it at Mother Mary's feet.

"This place is a mess," said Maggie, taking a seat next to the man.

This made him laugh. "That's just another thing I have to fix."

"You work here?"

"I'm the new parish priest."

Maggie glanced at the man's tapered jeans, the tuft of hair that peeked through his cap. The man smiled and shook his head, "I know, I get that a lot. People don't take you seriously when you come out of the seminary at thirty-five."

"I know what that's like. People not taking you seriously," said Maggie, looking at the empty plot of grass around them. "I can grow things. If you let me, I can help you fix this mess."

She was immediately employed as the parish gardener when she identified a rotting branch in a mango tree that needed to be felled, lest it fall and shatter the Blessed Virgin Mother.

Her fingers imbued everything she touched with new life. Father Ben found her productive energy infectious. He was determined to move on from his mentors and

Monseigneurs, herd people back to a church that was safe and progressive. He spent many afternoons sitting at that once lonely pew, talking literature, philosophy, horticulture while Maggie mowed the lawn, planted tomatoes, sweet potato shoots and curry leaves. Maggie wondered if she was truly a friend or the perfect test subject for his unsubtle study on why people leave the church. “Don’t you feel like an outsider as a Eurasian lapsed-Catholic? What does your family say when you don’t attend Easter or Christmas Mass?”

“Do you feel like one day Eurasian culture will disappear as more of you leave the church? Will you not send your future daughter to Katong Convent?”

“Father,” she said to him, “if you don’t stop with all these stupid questions, *you* will be the reason why I’m leaving this church.”

In the grotto, she grew white and pink roses that bloomed all year round. Their intoxicating scent wafted through the parish halls like incense from a swaying censer, tingling the noses of the congregation. Maggie used these roses to make corsages for her clients’ bridesmaids. Strangely, she had received feedback from them that the smell stayed on the bridesmaids’ wrists for days, that all of them had gone home with someone by the end of the night. That they had a strange worry that the scent alone was potent enough to impregnate them.

Some parishioners armed with rosaries felt inclined to pluck the roses and leave them at the feet of Mother Mary. Some even claimed that their prayers were answered, but only after they had made this presumptuous offering. What was truly bewildering was how the roses flourished. With every bloom cut from its stem, two more sprang forth. The rumours spread like tongues of fire. Not everyone was convinced. Who was this woman tending to Our Lady’s grotto? How could one who did not attend Mass, who did not perform charitable deeds, who did not pray the rosary, who, as rumour has it, openly flirted with a priest and had frequent

intercourse with men (and women?), produce such abundance? It had to be witchcraft. Maybe she had sold her soul to Satan.

One of the non-believers, Mrs Seah, head of the Catechism ministry, approached Maggie one day while she was watering the rose bushes.

"You look familiar, girl. Aren't you that Caleb Oehlers's daughter?"

"Yes, I am," she said, without lifting her head. "How do you know my father?"

"Ah, you have his nose! I work with him at the Archdiocese. You don't go to his church?"

"I don't do church anymore. I'm just the gardener here."

"Hmm," said the woman, taking out her paper fan from her purse. "I must say, you've done an excellent job. No wonder Father Ben spends so much time here."

Maggie's hands stiffened. She knew how it looked. Nobody spent this much time with a priest unless it was spiritual. But she wanted a garden more than anything. A place that was uniquely shaped by her hands. Not the basil leaves and the potted monstera that struggled to find sunshine in her tiny common corridor. She wanted a lush space of ferns, to devour the fruits of her labour.

"It's scorching out here, isn't it?" said Mrs Seah, pointing to the growing moat Maggie had made around her beloved rose bush.

When the pain came back, so did the rumours.

Maggie was caught one day curled up on the pew in the grotto, folded over, her hands gripping her abdomen. Mrs Seah, who happened to totter by after attending confession, feasted

upon the spectacle. In the version she would tell people, Maggie's hands were wedged between her thighs with Father Ben's name escaping her lips.

No wonder she's unmarried. No wonder she can't have children. See la, give her body to all these men. Destroy the body God gave her. No wonder she's like this. No wonder she has nothing else to do but seduce Father Ben with her rose bush.

One night at dinner, Maggie's mother said, "I don't like what you're doing in that garden."

Her father, director of the Social and Family Life division at the Catholic Archdiocese, picked at his noodles, letting his wife do the labour of simultaneously disbelieving their child and protecting their family name.

"Don't worry, Mum," Maggie said. "I'm no Eve."

And Father Ben was no Adam. He wanted what he thought was a woman's sensitivity to counter the tiresome complacency and judgement from the older priests in the parish.

He confided in Maggie about his struggles to be taken seriously by older priests, his failed attempts to connect the church with the modern world. He once suggested to Monseigneur Charles, a greying man who punctuated his homilies with hacking coughs, that they address the news articles spreading worldwide about the Cardinal in Rome who had been accused of sexual misconduct. "To show our community that we don't condone this behaviour. That they are safe here."

Monseigneur Charles simply put a hand on his shoulder and mumbled something about not validating these claims. The age-old "innocent until proven guilty".

"We need more young people in the church," he said to Maggie, who was busy harvesting a sweet potato from the ground, one that had been multiplying ever since she had planted it with a tuber that had gone bad.

"If you want them to come back, make some real changes for once," she said.

"How am I supposed to do that when these dinosaurs are so set in their ways?"

"The problem with you, is that you care too much about what they think," said Maggie.

"What would you do?"

Maggie dug up the soil surrounding the tall purple shoots that were sprouting leaves, revealing a long, dusky-orange root in the earth.

"Did you read what I sent you on Mary Magdalene?"

"I browsed it, yeah."

"If you'd read it, you'd know."

Mary Magdalene; Jesus's right-hand woman. She was there when he hung from the cross, and the first to roll away the stone to his tomb, to find his robes limp on the ground.

On a rainy night while her friends were at a Bon Iver concert, Maggie was curled up in bed, pressing a hot water bottle to her pubic bone, cold sweat trickling down her jaw. She had not prayed to anyone since she discovered how her body could quiver when she touched the right places. But in a feverish state of desperation, she entered into Google: *patron saint of fallen women*. If she were to cry for divine intervention, she wanted it to come from a woman who was not as immaculate as the Virgin Mary.

The only time Maggie remembered hearing about Mary Magdalene was when she was fourteen and an old priest demanded from the pulpit that all Catholics boycott Dan Brown's *The*

Da Vinci Code, which had resurrected an old popular conspiracy theory that Mary Magdalene was Jesus's wife.

Downing a painkiller, Maggie fought through the fever chills. She found that in 591, Pope Gregory had interpreted Mary Magdalene to be the sinful woman who had thrown herself at Jesus's feet, who in another account had seven demons driven out of her. The pope called her a prostitute, even when there was no satisfactory documentation from the prophets that she was a sex worker, or that she genuinely and rightly enjoyed the pleasures her body afforded her.

Mary Magdalene wet Jesus's feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair. She kissed them, tipping an alabaster jar of perfume over Jesus's feet. "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace," he said. And for hundreds of years, this was how the world saw her. A lesson in salvation. A fallen woman known for the sins of her body, only reformed by faith and servitude to the Lord. Even after the Catholic Church quietly issued a statement in 1969 absolving Mary Magdalene of ever being a sex worker, the image of Christ's right-hand woman as eternally repentant for her sexualised body had already been hewn into popular culture and into the minds of believers around the world.

"I don't get it. What do you propose I do?" asked Father Ben.

Maggie twisted the base of the stem, breaking it off from the orange tuber. "Don't you see? People didn't take Mary Magdalene seriously. But she didn't care. People would say all they want about her. But she knew Jesus the most intimately. And I don't say that suggestively."

"So what, you want me to start preaching the Gospel of Mary Magdalene? Just add an unorthodox chapter to the Bible?"

"Calm down, Father Raptor. Now you're starting to sound like *them*," said Maggie. "You know, Orthodox Christians have long revered Mary Magdalene. They believe after Christ's

resurrection, she had gained an audience with Caesar, where she denounced Pontius Pilate's decision to crucify Jesus. When she talked of his resurrection, she picked up a hen's egg from the dinner table to show how he had emerged from the tomb, like a chick cracking through a shell. Born again. Caesar laughed and said that there was as much chance of a human returning to life as there was for the egg to turn red. And of course, the egg miraculously turned red in her hand."

Father Ben crossed his arms, watching Maggie remove the sweet potato leaves from its stem, reburying the purple shoot in the ground. "So what you're saying is, have more women in our ranks? Let them join the Vatican and spread the Gospel? Maggie, you know I'm all for progress. But I don't think the parish, yet alone the Archbishop or the Pope, is ready for that sort of thing."

"What I'm saying is, you don't need approval for progress. You just do what you have to do." Maggie dusted off the freshly harvested sweet potato in her rubber-gloved hands, planting it firmly in Father Ben's palm. "Some things don't require seeds to multiply."

When Maggie spent the evening of Holy Saturday hiding chocolate Cadbury eggs in the garden, she felt like her tubes were being rung like a rag. She flung the basket of eggs to the ground and lay on the grass, the straw-like weeds tickling her face and thighs as she hugged her knees to her chest.

"Need a hand?" said a voice from above. Maggie turned her head to the side, finding herself face-to-face with feet wrapped in brown leather sandals.

"Hide the rest of the eggs. But make it easy so the children can find them tomorrow. I'll just lay here for a while."

"Don't be crazy. Let me help you up," said Father Ben.

He slung Maggie's arm around his neck and hauled her up to her feet. As the both of them hobbled to a nearby bench, Father Ben noticed bodies watching from afar. A group of catechists craned their necks, peering through the slats of the ferns that shaded the sweet potato shoots sprouting from the ground. The familiar Mrs Seah smiled as Father Ben caught her eye, shaking her head and herding her posse back into the church.

"Maggie, I wanted to talk to you."

"You sound like me when I'm about to dump someone," said Maggie, wincing as she inched herself into her seat.

"I was thinking, with the state of your health, maybe you should stop working here."

"Don't worry about it. I just need more painkillers. Find a doctor who will make this all go away. I've dealt with this before. I'll do it again."

Father Ben pinched the space between his eyes, as if he were the one in pain. "I really think you should stop. You've done great work here, but maybe it's time."

"It's the rumours isn't it? They've always talked about us. Why are you so bothered by this? We're friends."

"It's different this time. I did what you said. I didn't wait for anyone's approval. At Mass last weekend, I preached about the redeeming qualities of Mary Magdalene. How she was misunderstood for her time. That this Easter, we should see her in a new light, not as a sinful woman, but a leader, a role model. After my Homily, Monsignor Charles stood at the pulpit and made an offhand comment, 'Seems like Father Ben is spending a lot of time smelling the roses in the grotto.' The congregation laughed. I just…I can't do anything right. You shouldn't have put these ideas in my head. I can't make any change when people see me as this…fallen man."

"How dare you."

"I'm sorry, Mag. Maybe it's best that you focus on yourself. Get better."

Maggie felt it again. The wringing of her uterus. The twinging in her ovaries. A peristaltic pushing that seemed to run from her back, routing around her hips, and hurtling down to her cervix. In a surge of fury, she stood up, barged over to the plot of soil and dug up all the sweet potatoes. She lifted her oversized plaid shirt, exposing her bloated belly, and gathered the tubers into the folds of the fabric.

"The only one who needs to be better is you," she said, without turning to face the priest who was pacing up and down before the Virgin Mary.

Maggie brisk-walked out of the grotto, waiting until she had turned the corner, out the back gate, before crumpling to the ground, the sweet potatoes rolling back and forth like she had on so many sleepless nights.

Maggie woke up alone in the dark. The air smelt like ethanol. She heard the shuffling of a woman with a fall-risk tag on her wrist inching her way back to her bed from the bathroom. A nurse ran into the room and scolded the lady for getting out of bed on her own and laid her back down.

"Hey," Maggie called. "What happened?"

"Happy Easter, Ms Oehlers. You're in Mount Alvernia Hospital. You collapsed outside the Church of the Blessed Mother. Your blood pressure is fine and everything looks good. But we're going to keep you here under observation for the night, given your medical history."

"So my body just gave up? Just couldn't take the pain?" said Maggie too quietly while the nurse hurried away, caught up with stopping the fall-risk lady from going back to the bathroom alone.

Father Ben must have called an ambulance. Did he tell them to bring her here? Where were her sweet potatoes? She felt that familiar tugging in her abdomen but strangely no pain. How drugged up was she?

There it was again. Not the tugging. That peristaltic movement, this time in her cervix. Something was being pushed out of her. Maggie rolled herself out of bed. The gravitational pull from standing up helped. She was wet.

Dragging herself into the single bathroom that all six women in her ward had to share, she locked the door, dropped her pants and sat on the toilet for a long while, staring at her white cotton underwear turned pink between her thighs. In the centre of the slim fabric lay a crimson teardrop clot. Shedding clots was normal when the body tried so hard to stop the bleeding in the uterus. But Maggie knew this was no blood clot.

This was just like her first period. The wonder. The fresh stains. The feeling of power, as if she had turned water into wine. Only this time, there was no twinging, only release.

She held the teardrop in her twitching fingers. She soon realised that it couldn't be squished. It was slippery, but solid. She held it up to the dim fluorescent light above her, marvelling at how it glistened, how she could see the kernel of a seed encased in a gelatinous red. The nectar of an aril. A tear from a pomegranate.

Maggie wept as she enclosed the aril in her palm, held it to her chest, unfurling her fist again to see if it was still there. And it was. Luminous, like a first-born. Here was proof that her pain was real, that it was alive.

She wrapped her aril in the cheap, two-ply toilet paper and stuffed more of it into her underwear for safety. She would drift back to bed, knowing this was not a dream. She would sleep with the paper-wrapped seed clutched in her hand under her pillow. She would awake the

next morning, and almost show it to the doctor who would tell her that she was fine and send her home with painkillers. She would go back to the grotto and harvest the last of the roses. Perhaps she would use the petals to make a jar of perfume, leave it on a wooden bench for Father Ben to find. Maybe he will sprinkle some on his feet.

Perhaps, she would go back to that grotto and plant the aril in the soil. Right next to the Virgin Mary. Maybe then the weeds in the grass would stop growing. Maybe then, it wouldn't matter if she had a womb.

PORCELAIN

Helena stands a bit too close to the bow, one hand gripping the railing and the other clutching the handle of her bike as the unruly Amsterdam wind spritzes her face with droplets of icy river water. She regrets never visiting Pulau Ubin or Batam when she had the chance, now they are likely on the brink of disappearing along with the rest of her home country. Under the cloudy seafoam sky, the 906 ferry carries her across the choppy waters of the IJ River to NDSM-werf, a former shipyard turned cultural playground for street art exhibitions, silent disco dance parties, and one of the largest flea markets in Europe.

The ferry docks and she's pedalling again. The IJ Hallen flea market is already thrumming with shoppers with powdered poffertjes in their hands browsing the five hundred stalls packed into an old warehouse and spilling out onto the sandy pavements outside. She strains to listen for the ringing that brought her here.

It had been three days of this rattling, and she was resigned to have it follow her forever. That perhaps all adults in the middle of their life experience some kind of awakening, a signal marking a half-way transit to an unknown destination.

The tinkling was particularly resounding this morning when she awakened. It was like she was made of porcelain and someone had been tapping her temple with a fingernail.

She couldn't articulate this feeling of being rattled, as if she was being called. Roused from an age-old stupor. Is this a symptom of menopause that no one talks about?

She grabbed a Q-tip and nearly burst an eardrum trying to expel the strange frequencies from her head. She lay on the floor and walked her legs up the wall, her taut arms trembling to balance her weight on her head, coaxing the energy back to her brain. This only threatened to deafen her and left her with a neck ache.

How could she explain the rush of understanding, the momentary stillness she experienced as she picked up a flyer that fluttered in the Amsterdam breeze and fell to her feet on the docks as she stepped off the ship that brought her here. Monthly IJ Hallen flea market,

Amsterdam-Noord, today, it said. As soon as it went away, the ringing and the disjuncture of the world came rushing back through her ears.

Now she is here, winding through the narrow lanes of vintage leather jackets, antique mahogany dressing tables, moroccan lamps (likely sourced from Spain), and antique jewellery and tableware (perhaps stolen). Her mind becoming quieter. It seems to be working. Maybe all it takes is to get out. To lose herself in the chaos. She finds herself terribly wrong when the world flat-lines, whittled down to a single octave. She turns around, the siren sounds, beckoning her to come close.

*

The bells are ringing and they are everywhere.

Glass cabinets, full of them. They are mute on their own, but Pieter Coen never thought how loud they would sound in his head now that the house is empty.

Pieter still doesn't understand his grandmother's obsession with them.

"A bell from every city," said his Oma when Pieter passed the cabin crew interviews for KLM Royal Dutch Airlines. "That's all I ask of you."

"Why a bell, Oma? There are so many other souvenirs."

"So that with every tinkle, it would sound like I was there."

After twenty years of flying, budget cuts set in. In an age where sea travel is hip and environmental tariffs make flying costly, inevitably, cabin attendants are let off. Even the ones who have been flying all their lives. Pieter finds himself chucking his steward uniform in a storage box, the same time he has to pick out a casket for his Oma.

At his grandmother's apartment, Pieter unlocks the gold-rimmed cabinets that have rusted at the edges. He surveys each porcelain bell, unable to touch them. One from Rome, the city now filled with sinkholes. Jakarta, now flooded beyond repair. Penang, its reclaimed land crumbling at the shorelines. When Oma was alive, she forbade anyone to even leave a fingerprint on the glass.

Too soon. This is the first time Pieter has visited since Oma left. He wouldn't have come if her last will and testament didn't request that he clear out all her possessions and sell the apartment.

Pieter drops the empty box filled with bubble wrap on the floor and closes the cabinet. Outside, the trees are flailing in the wind and he decides against cycling home, not tonight. He curls up with a duvet on the couch, the same one he used to sink into when he was a boy with a mug of steaming Ovomaltine.

Pieter jerks awake in the middle of the night, screaming for Oma. An unbearable ringing pounding in his ears. The room is dark and murky, which he realises is rain washing the window panes. He can't be sure, but the glass cabinet seems to chatter with the clamour of a thousand bells chiming out of time.

The hinges screech when he opens the glass door. He jams his palms against his ears, fighting the urge to reach for Oma's precious ornaments. But he knows it is time. The bells are calling. He grabs one, ready to toss it out the window, right into the Prinsengracht canal. It feels eerily light. No vibrational clattering in his palm. He turns it over and finds it hollow. No hammer. No tongue to rattle. Upside down, it is an empty vessel. An empty chalice.

He flips the others and, fuck, they're all empty. Yet, the chimes are incessant, like the altar bells he used to ring as a child during the *Gloria*, when his eyes would scan the congregation for Oma, mouthing the words, in time with him.

They're possessed, he thinks. He has no time to find one of Oma's rosaries. With bloodshot eyes, he shakes the bell out as if to rid it of this terrible curse. Another swoop of his arm. The bell slips from his grasp, sending little shards tinkling across the parquet floor.

*

Helena first heard the ringing when she disembarked the ship that brought her to Amsterdam. It was subtle, appearing in snatches, couched in other everyday sounds like the rustling of trees or

the bikes whizzing along the canals and drawbridges. At first she attributed the ringing to disorientation, a kind of alarm the body produces to click back into place.

It had been a trying thirty-three-night sail from Singapore to The Netherlands on the *Vasco da Gama*, a commercial cruiseliner with a name conveniently emptied of its violent colonial history. Nana would have risen from her grave to smack Helena on the head with her wooden spoon if she had known her chosen place of employment. It wasn't ideal. But her hometown was on the verge of sinking even if the government ensured them that it wasn't. She figured that working on a ship was the best form of insurance, so she wouldn't have to be there when the shorelines crumbled.

She witnessed monstrous storms all throughout the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, spending many nights cleaning broken glass, mopping up vomit from the decks, and breaking up fights between drunk white men. Helena was convinced that their port calls in Malaysia and India had severely offended the souls of Muslim, Hindu, Jain and Jewish natives who had been dismembered for refusing to convert to Christianity and thrown into the sea by da Gama's soldiers in the early sixteenth century.

As the *Vasco da Gama* docked in Kochi, while she was tasked with changing soiled linen slick with sex and Chanel eu de parfum, she looked out onto the balcony overlooking swathes of unending blue, remembering her late grandmother's story about the seven hundred pilgrims on the *Meri* in 1502. How the unending blue was once smeared with dark crimson. Muslim families were returning from Mecca, headed back to Calicut, not so far from where she was then, fluffing pillows, replacing shampoo bottles for guests who would have had no clue how red the umber land once was, how blood coagulated in the soil, birthing the palm trees that wavered and bowed to them as they arrived on the shore.

As a display of Portuguese power, da Gama had the *Meri* set ablaze, the pilgrims fed to the fire. For four days, men screamed and women raised their children in the air, begging for mercy, as da Gama himself, and her grandmother swore by this, watched from a distance through

a spy-hole in his vessel. Her maternal grandmother, a proud Eurasian historian descended from a long line of Topasses in Goa and Malacca, never let her forget how her ancestors had been born through this first of many acts of desecration.

"So our ancestors were the bad men that came to India? Then Malacca? Then Penang? I thought our ancestors were Dutch?" girl-Helena drilled her grandmother all those years ago.

"Our Burgher ancestors did not commit these heinous crimes. But it doesn't mean that the Dutch were all that peaceful when they stole Malacca from the Portuguese. If the Portuguese hadn't come to these shores, maybe the Dutch wouldn't have come."

"But if the Dutch didn't come here, then we wouldn't be here either, right Nana?"

Helena used to stare at herself in the mirror, trying to make a crease in her single eyelid because a Chinese girl at school had asked her why she looked *angmoh* but had *cheena* eyes.

"Perhaps not. Or maybe we would, in a vastly different form, not born from conquest and pillage."

"Does this mean that we are still guilty?" Helena pressed on, spiralling, "that we were born because others died?"

"No, petto. We should not have to bear this burden. What we need to do is bear witness."

Helena slipped away from the ship in the quiet of daybreak, a few hours before it would set sail for Mumbai. Wandering the Fort Kochi Beach, she dipped her toes in the cool sand. Despite coming from an island state, it had been years since she experienced the tentative *freedom* of being on the cusp, where the border of a country met a body of no fixed shape or form.

Strolling along the coastal walkway designed for sightseeing, Helena spotted a moss-eaten cannon, a lone gunnery once part of Portuguese-controlled Fort Emmanuel, poised eternally at the sea as if still guarding the town against Dutch vessels. A whole fortress reduced to a gun that was more art than weapon, slabs of concrete with a single bushel of green pushing through the cracks, as if to say, we are still here, there is still living to be done.

Her mind stretched like the coast to the Fortaleza de Malacca, how in 1641, the fortress built by the Portuguese, with towers named after saints, had failed the city in a five month-long siege. As Dutch fleets surrounded the muddy coastline, launching artillery, deploying spies, intercepting aid from Goa, thousands in the city had perished by the time the walls crumbled, became dust. Several thousand people, many of them must have been Mestiço—fisher-people, artisans, merchants, daughters, sons. If they had lived, would she have found her way into the world? Would the woman several generations before her mother have married, say, a Portuguese cartographer, rather than a Dutch naval officer?

Even at forty-nine, these questions come flooding back to her when she least expects it, in muted dreams, in which she is standing on deck of a Dutch vessel in the Straits of Malacca, clanging, pounding the ship's brass bell. And each time, no one hears her warning.

*

Pieter only stops when all the bells are shattered, like seashells. For a moment, the night is quiet. His pulse, the only sound in the room. He closes his eyes and as suddenly as it went away, the tinkling returns. He checks the windowpanes; the downpour hits the glass differently. A dull patter.

The noise is a trickle of rainwater. A gentle, but urgent tapping. He follows the sound like a siren song, up the stairs. He hesitates at the open archway of the attic. It's been years. His last memory, Oma and him ducking into a blanket fort, careful not to bump their heads against the roof. Oma reading to him by torchlight on a storm just like this. A regret—that the only time he came to visit as an adult was to bring a new bell (not as often as he would've liked).

The ringing calls him back. Up the final step, into the attic. Jesus Christ, he curses under his breath as he comes face to face with a Virgin Mary statue by the side of the archway, eyes listless, hands clasped in prayer, as if she was placed so strategically by the entrance to frighten away anything unholy. Oma must've been one of the handful of Catholic grandmothers, already

few in the predominantly Protestant city, whose devotion to Mother Mary was borderline treasonous, Pieter thinks, to the Crown.

It is colder up here. There's a whistling amidst the ringing. Did Oma learn to store wind too? Pieter inches down the narrow corridor, past boxes of DVDs, Tupperwares, oversized winter coats, a broken television, and god knows whatever the old woman couldn't let go of.

The window at the end of the room flashes with lightning. He counts six seconds until the thunder reaches his ears, but it isn't loud enough to shroud the urgent whispers, the chiming that he is sure, is calling him. He notices a large shard of glass has been knocked out of the window. By a tree? A hungry, determined bird? Stones hurled by drunken youth cruising along the canal?

Rain rushes through the jagged hole in the window. Tucked beneath the window, Pieter discovers an open rattan basket of trinkets. They look like the bells he has smashed downstairs. But they have no handles. The icy drops tinker, rattling against the porcelain. How can a wintry rainfall, the same kind that glazes his jacket as he bikes across the city, make such a racket?

There are a dozen of these, placed neatly facing down. Pieter places one in his palm, the cold pinching his skin. Porcelain. Chinese, Japanese? He isn't sure. It is painted an emerald green with a phoenix surrounded by peonies. Of course. The cups Oma used to drink chrysanthemum tea with. The ones she brought with her from Penang as a young bride, newly wed to a Dutch Lieutenant who had left her just before Pieter was born. Another regret—that he never took the chance to take her back to her childhood home.

The cups are neatly placed face down so they do not collect dust. All except for one, upright and concave, precariously brimming with icy water.

What are they doing here like this? Was she saving them for a special occasion? Did she place them near the window to see the phoenix dance in the sunlight? What could have whisked her away so quickly that she had forgotten to come back and allow herself the pleasure of drinking from good china one last time?

The tinkling is clear. He reaches for the freezing teacup, overflowing with rainwater. He holds it like Oma used to, both hands gripping to feel the skin burn. He lifts the cup to his lips. Sips. Do this in memory of me, he imagines Oma whispering.

It takes him a beat to realise the world is silent again.

*

Helena could not shake the alarms in her head since arriving in the famous city grown around a dam. It was a noise that was felt in her body, but also something that happened *to* her, as if she had been struck by a hammer and continued to reverberate.

The cruiseliner had just docked at the berth and it would be a few more days until they set course for the next port. She rented a bike, not to feel like she belonged in the city, but just so she could feel the wind sting her skin, to ring the bell on her bike so she would know where the sound came from.

She followed the bike path. Wherever it took her. Across the Mr J. J. van der Veldebrug bridge arching over the Oosterdok that seemed to part the river as Moses did the Red Sea. Towards the end of the bridge, at a certain angle, she didn't need to ring her bell to know where the noise was coming from. She first noticed a glass building shaped like a vessel, but past it, some distance away, she saw the faint outline of an old East Indiaman, a ship belonging to the Dutch East Indies company, like the one from her dreams.

She followed the bike path, curving past the glass museum, unimpressed by its similarity to the vessel perched atop Marina Bay Sands. She found herself at Het Scheepvaartmuseum, housing galleries of exhibits and memorabilia dedicated to the centuries of Dutch expansion. When she stepped outside onto the quay, the silhouette she spied from afar manifested in a kitschy, cartoonish vessel, like the pirate ships from storybooks she read as a child, the ones that pillaged and plundered, but were always defeated in the end.

Helena boarded the ship, the vibrations from the ringing becoming fainter, a low distant rumble. She thought of spirits like pontianaks back home, how they announced themselves through the wails of a baby—the softer the cry, the nearer she was.

The ship was a replica of the *Amsterdam*, the Dutch East Indiaman that sunk off the English South Coast. A replica that stood for many other vessels that had made about five thousand voyages to Asia, that had launched canons into fortresses, and transported spices, silk, porcelain, pilfered off the backs of the indigenous bodies that produced them.

Helena paced the decks, tracing the steps of sailors, missionaries, soldiers, merchants, mothers, fathers. On the lower deck, hammocks hung from the wooden ceiling. In one chamber, lamps suspended from a height seemed to flicker above a dinner table set with fake bread and jars of mead and wine. In the cargo hold, crates, barrels, and gunnysacks lined almost every corner of the room. In the middle of the space was an interactive pulley system where guests could tug on a rope to lift the hefty chests that would have contained silver and gold coins, so that everyone could feel the undeniable weight of wealth. Imperialism turned into spectacle. Helena could hear her grandmother grinding cinnamon in a mortar, saying, “I can’t believe you paid sixteen bloody euros for this pageantry.”

As she ducked out of the space, she noticed a large plaque plastered on one of the pillars greeting the guests at the entrance. A memoriam dedicated to the family names of those on board the *Amsterdam* when it sank into the muddy Bulverhythe beach.

Westerhout. She ran her fingers over the name engraved in stone, feeling a low hum beneath her nails. Her family name. One she hadn’t heard in a while. She was the last of her name in her home country, as far as she knew, refusing to fulfil her late parents’ wishes that she marry in the Church of the Good Shepherd, raise children in God’s likeness.

This Westerhout could have been a watchman, a shooter, a boatswain, perhaps a wide-eyed merchant tempted by the wealth of India, or a wife eager to reunite with her sergeant husband, whom she wouldn’t have expected to marry a dark-haired Javanese woman in Batavia.

Did this Westerhout go down with the ship, or did they escape to shore, return to Texel in North Holland and board another VOC vessel to the East?

In her name, she saw endless permutations of a life, and in it, herself, a speck in a continuum. What was she doing here, if not looking for life? For a sign that after all these years, she was indeed still here.

She emerged from the dim quarters to an overcast sky, the wind threatening to knock her overboard. Wandering to the front of the ship, up on the forecastle, Helena was struck by the singular object that pervaded her dreams. A brass bell carved with the ship's name and 1749, the year the vessel had embarked on its maiden voyage only to be embedded in sand. Had the skipper sounded the alarm when the rudder broke off, rendering it lost, directionless?

When she was a sixteen-year-old student with nothing to do and no one to be, she frequented the Long John's Silver at Tampines Mall. Not for its greasy seafood platter, but for a little tacky bell with a long rope attached to its tongue. A child would jump up and ring the bell, making a racket that was jarring, but born out of pure wonder at an object that could pause time. She wanted so badly to be that child who could rattle the banality of an ordered existence where nothing mattered except the ripple she had made.

Standing where the skipper must have just before chaos ensued, she thought about the years she spent willingly ignorant of history despite her grandmother's stories. The city she grew up in focused on order, harmony, to the point of hegemony. In school, she learnt Mandarin to fit in. On Racial Harmony Day, when she turned up in her grandmother's old stiff peak hat, a long skirt, and a double-layered vested top, her classmates laughed, called her the milkmaid from the condensed milk can. At her first job waitressing at Swensen's, when someone asked her if she was Peranakan, she nodded so she wouldn't have to explain her heritage. Even on the rare occasion she met a young Eurasian, radiant and relieved to find an elder to impart the cultural wisdom she so desperately craved, she would walk away pink-cheeked that she didn't know what Mulligatawny or Feng was and that she couldn't proffer the name of her parish church.

Helena reached for the handle of the tongue, clanging it against the brass. She stumbled backwards, covering her ears, almost convinced that she had gone deaf. Looking up across the deck, she noticed it had started to rain. All the visitors had already shuffled into the museum. No one was around to witness what she had done, to hear the racket she had made.

*

Pieter finds himself surrounded by a group of white-haired ladies ogling what he has laid out on the table. So exotic, goes one of them. Another one claims to have a tea set just like it that she procured from a trip to Beijing. For the experience, Pieter even has a flask of hot chrysanthemum tea which he pours into the porcelain cups for each potential customer. But each time someone takes a sip and makes an offer, there is a pounding in his head that makes him price the set too high, sending them trailing off to find another antiques stall.

It doesn't feel right selling off his Oma's porcelain. But it has been three weeks since he found it and the only thing he has given away, to the Church of Our Lady of course, is the Virgin Mother.

He doesn't know anything about porcelain. Can't even spin a story, like the origins of its manufacturing. Was it made in Japan but imported by Malaysia? Or did Oma buy it from a local artisan in Penang? What is the significance of phoenixes and peonies in Chinese culture?

Someone breaks his daydreaming. A tall woman in a down feather jacket zipped up to her neck. Her skin is the shade of a weak, milky latte. Her buzz cut brings out the hazel in her almond-shaped eyes. She doesn't look her age, except for the lines branching from her eyeliner drawn in a skilled flick at the sides of her lids. He wants to ask her where she is from but he doesn't want to be presumptuous. But there is something about her that he cannot place. He realises that it isn't her appearance at all, but how the frequencies in the air seem to align, like turning the dial on a transistor radio and finally arriving at the right station.

Pieter uncaps his flask and pours the tea into a cup, offers it to the woman. She seems perplexed, but cups it in her palm, thawing her fingers against the warm porcelain.

“Peranakan?” asks the woman.

“What?”

“The design. It’s very Straits Chinese. My grandmother was from Penang and she had a tea set just like this. Her mother and grandmother were artisans who made porcelain dinnerware just like this.”

“My Oma had a house in Penang! She must have got it from there. So this porcelain, it’s from China you think?”

“Not necessarily. The design and make of porcelain might’ve originated from China, but the Peranakans in Malaysia might have manufactured it and made the print. They’re the Straits Chinese who migrated to Malaya during the era of Admiral Zheng He’s expeditions.”

Pieter’s eyes are tinted with a glaze, the kind that forms when things click into place. “I think that’s what my Oma was.”

“You mean you don’t even know what your grandmother was?”

“I always thought she was just a Chinese woman who married a Dutch man, and that made her Dutch. She spoke the language and lived here since she was twenty. I never really questioned her origins. But now that I think about it, I don’t think she was just Dutch, or just Chinese. Sometimes I heard her use words from another language. Especially when she was in a bad mood.”

“Baba Malay,” the woman smiled, “my grandmother knew it too.”

Pieter locks eyes with the woman just long enough that he can see the colour of her pupils. Ochre, like sand dunes. In that moment, something like understanding washes over him.

There are no alarms. No suffocating tinkling. The noise of the world comes flooding back and he remembers what he is here for.

“Sorry, I didn’t get your name?”

“Helena Westerhout,” she says, bringing the lukewarm tea to her lips, taking a sip.

*

Another grandmother story. When the news reached the island that British colonial Singapore was under threat of Japanese invasion, families were dispersing to the other colonies. Friends of the Westerhouts, the Augustines and the Deskers, had secured a ship that would take them to Sri Lanka, maybe to a relative in Kochi. Mrs Westerhout, a telephone operator, wanted to stay on the island, still confident in British sovereignty. Mr Westerhout worked in the Crown treasury. He was not a loyal subject, but when he was instructed to burn all British currency so no enemy could pocket it should the time come, he believed in seeing things through. He didn't even pocket the money for himself.

On the morning of departure, the Westerhouts sent their friends off at the docks. Two days later, the ship bound for India had been torpedoed by Japanese submarines in the Indian Ocean. Nobody survived.

"Your stories are all about voyages, aren't they?" Pieter says, stretching his arm across Helena's bare shoulders as they lie in the weakening light of winter's evening.

"Wouldn't be here without them," she says, almost too quickly. She surprised herself when she held on her tongue the familiar flora of a Cantonese after-dinner tea which Helena and her parents had sometimes shared in silence, sitting at a round table too big for three people. She surprised herself when she said yes to this tall and strangely disarming Dutch man's invitation to more tea at his late grandmother's house by the canal. When she takes him tentatively by the hand, leading him up the narrow stairs.

"Why do you sound unhappy to be here?" Pieter draws her out from her head.

"I'm not unhappy to be here. I'm just not sure why I'm here," she says. Pieter sits up and leans back against the headboard, eager to listen, to witness.

"I don't really know what I did to deserve being here," Helena continues, keeping her naked body buried under the duvet. "All these journeys, all the lives lost and spared. And for what? To spend half a life forgetting and the other half just…adrift?" She glances out the window onto the canal, a boat drifting by.

“My grandmother always said our purpose in this life is to bear witness to the remnants of tragedy, to the injustice of history. But sometimes I feel like all I am is a ripple. A consequence of someone else plunging into the deep, of somebody else’s journey.”

Pieter reaches for the rattan basket by his bedside table; he cannot bear to leave the cups lest they start calling again. He takes his flask filled with fresh chrysanthemum and pours it into the two porcelain cups. It makes a splash on the bottom, a brief tinkle before it bubbles to the brim.

“You know, my Oma never liked to talk about where she came from. Maybe it’s because it pained her to talk about a home that was no longer hers,” he says, blowing on the tea. “But she did keep these. I think they were given to her by her mother, who got it from her mother. Her closest thing to home.” Pieter takes the porcelain cup, steam rising like a prayer, and places it in Helena’s coarse palms.

As the tea scalds her tongue, Helena suddenly recalls the dream from last night. Her grandmother stands at the wheel of a ship, pulling and spinning it, her hands gently guiding them through a raging storm, until the rudder snaps. Helena finds herself at the forecastle, her hands gripping the tongue of the bell. Her grandmother shouts to her through the howling winds and the rain drumming on the timber. “We’ll have to abandon ship! You know what to do.”

Helena cannot remember the rest of the dream but she doesn’t have to to know what serendipity looks like. Helena gazes at Pieter, the lines on his forehead, the grey tufts in his beard, defying the childlike earnestness that even he doesn’t know he has. “Who knows,” she says, “maybe your Oma’s family bought the porcelain from my grandmother’s family. Maybe all we’re meant to do is ride the waves as they come, trust the ripples in time.”

Pieter grazes his fingers over the slightly jagged rim of the cup, remembering the shards of the bells. “It’s yours,” he says. “All of them. You’re not born from pillage or conquest, Helena. You’re born from resilience. Like the phoenix. Like this porcelain. That’s enough.”

She decides then that she will never board another ship again, to never be an empty vessel. Tomorrow she will help Pieter clear out his attic. Patch up that broken window.

Helena sheds the duvet, takes both their cups and places them on the bedside table. Sitting on Pieter's lap, skins tingling against each other, the world whittled down to just their breaths, she holds his face in her hands, leaning in.

For now, she will fill her own cup.

WALKING ON WATER

There's a story about Saint Peter, patron saint of fishermen. The one we used to sing about in Catechism class. Peter, James, and John in the fishing boat, out on the deep, blue Sea of Galilee, not a fish in sight, until Jesus tells them to cast their nets again. They reel in a catch too heavy for them to carry.

Another story begins the same way. They're out at sea, their boat rocking against the waves. A figure walks towards them from a distance. They think they see a ghost. But it is Jesus calling out to them, "Do not be afraid. It is I!"

Peter calls back, "Lord, if it is you. Tell me to come to you." Jesus beckons him to come. Peter climbs out of the boat, setting his feet upon the raging sea. He takes a few steps towards Jesus, but, shaken by the howling wind, panics and begins to sink. "Lord, save me!" he cries. Jesus catches his hand and pulls him to his feet.

"You of little faith," he says, "why did you doubt?"

*

For a while, I keep wondering when this island will sink.

Whatever neighbours we have left are moving up to the higher floors, smashing in windows and climbing into abandoned units. Others have packed their canoes and set off for higher ground as the water seeps into the fourth-floor units of our block. I guess I'll never know if Bukit Timah Hill is high enough.

I no longer hear the faint crooning of the erhu and flutes coming from the top of the multi-storey car park. Old Madam Woo—who led the morning Tai Chi group at the basketball court before the flood—would never fail to lug her stereo to the roof of the car park. I always wondered; did she swim there? Or float upon the teh tarik-coloured water with her stereo cling-

wrapped and duct-taped to her torso? The music would echo throughout the estate. Hu xi. Inhale, exhale. Another day we are alive.

My mother is running out of beads on her rosary. Raj and Brian who live upstairs with their rescue dog tell me that the Lees went out to the docks to get supplies and never came back. The storms are getting worse, and the water, hungrier.

We stop rowing out to what we assume is Pasir Ris Park. Ever since the reclaimed lands started breaking away from the island, we can never tell where the horizon begins, and when it will shift. The only way to tell if the land is intact is by the flats reflected in the water. I imagine the broken ends of the island, like a rip in a map. The waves lapping at our jagged shorelines. The seabed filled with drilled-in tables of hawker centres and the dragon playgrounds of our childhoods, waiting to be turned into underwater theme parks by future dark tourism companies.

We no longer break into Giant Hypermarket or Courts to scavenge. Not since the Chands got caught in the whirlpool set off by the disintegration of Marine Parade. Only venture out at dawn, Mum warns, or when the sky is a paler grey. And only when the Fremantle boys dock at the new port with supplies. Besides, we've already swept the hypermarts clean of Dasani water, mixed nuts, and Spam.

That's the thing about living near the coast. You think you get used to the sea. You forget it's there. But when it submerges your void deck—the place of skate scootering, riding your first bike; of sharing first cigarettes and first kisses—and you no longer remember the feeling of knees scraping against gravel, of tiptoeing on playground sand, you start to recall the last time you went to the beach, when you were never afraid of water.

*

I know lots of stories of seafaring men. Noah, who survived the first purge, to whom God said, "Never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." Saint Francis Xavier, sent by the Portuguese crown to restore Christianity to the colonies. Afonso de Albuquerque, conquering Malacca for total trade monopoly, and inadvertently engendering the bloodlines of my kind.

My mother's story—our story—is a crossing. Not really by sea, but over the Causeway. Me in my booster seat, my mother cooing at me from the rearview mirror while shielding her eyes from the evening sun. She always talked about taking a road trip back to Padre Sa Chang. "Land of the priest" in Kristang. Mum calls it "Father's Land". Once I asked about my father and she never spoke about going back again. Not even before Malacca, and the other low-lying lands of the Malay Peninsula, began their descent into the deep.

When I asked her if she wanted to take a trip, to get out of this sinkhole before the region-wide evacuation began, she said, "I don't want to cross another sea again. If I can't save my home, I'll die with it," and continued rolling little balls of spiced minced beef and tucking them into buttery gold sweet potato dough. As if the only thing that mattered was that her prized pang susi would be served at Christmas dinner. As if Boat Quay, our oldest site of land reclamation, hadn't crumbled and floated away from the rest of the island. As if I hadn't spent four hours navigating the muddy waters of the catastrophe site with a camera crew, calling out to any living, moving person who would tell me what they had seen, what had just happened to our indestructible city.

I had returned home to find Mum stirring sugee batter, stabbing it almost, while staring at the wreckage on the local news.

"You're on TV," my mother cried, staring at the footage of me mouthing words into a microphone, wading around waist-deep amidst floating plastic bags and stranded cars.

“Who’s getting married?” I nodded at the pasty, beige batter thickening in the Cordeiro ceramic bowl. But with every stroke of her forty-year-old stirring cane, Mum just gazed from the TV to me, back and forth, wide-eyed, as if I were walking on water.

*

For a long time, I wonder how much longer we can live like this. How much longer I can paddle alone against the currents that pull me along newly formed streams, an amalgamation of the sea, longkangs, reservoirs, even mangrove swamps.

The shipment from Fremantle is late again. Every three weeks we meet at the new floating dock, where they’ll arrive with cartons of bottled water, matches, baked beans, canned tuna. On good months, we get Milo and cup noodles. Bad months, army rations. Whatever a small community initiative can put together.

Last month, I asked that Marbeck fella to sneak me something special—sugar, brandy, semolina. He raised his brows at this request.

“You from Penang?” he asked, scratching his beard. He exudes a vaguely familiar scent of cigarettes and whisky, old enough to be my dad.

“My mother’s from Malacca.”

“You a Marbeck, by any chance?”

“Cordeiro.”

“You know any other Marbecks stuck here?” It was then that I realised why he and the other fellas send aid here when no one else would. They’re looking for kith.

I shook my head, unraveled a cling-wrapped package and offered it to him—one of Mum’s bastardised pang susis, stuffed with corned beef and barely spiced with cinnamon and thyme to conceal our feeble attempts at keeping tradition alive. He gave it a whiff and bit into the

crumbly pastry. I scrunched up my face as he tried to swallow the overly salty excuse for a delicacy.

"How did you even make this?" he laughed.

"A portable wood fire oven we nicked from Courts. Mixed some flour we had from last year's raid with oil and yeast for the pastry."

"Your mother sounds… determined. I'd like to meet her one day," he said.

"I'd like that too," I replied. "But she's afraid of water."

*

There's a reason why my mother is afraid of water. It starts with a story about a fisherman who drowned at sea on Festa San Pedro. The Feast Day of Saint Peter, when Kristang people from around Malacca, Penang, Singapore, and even Perth, travelled back to Padre Sa Chang to revel in blessings and pageantry.

That year, like every other year, the fisherman hand-painted his sails, depicting the life of Saint Peter, the deep blue fabric tousling in the wind like waves in the Sea of Galilee. Father Fernando blessed his boat, docked along the coast with the others just as extravagantly decked with glitter banners, flowers and statues of the saint. As holy water glazed the wood of the boats, prayers were murmured for bigger catches, despite the mechanical cranes in the distance making land out of sand, extending the shores and pushing marine life further out into the Straits.

It had been harder to catch gragoh just by wading through the coast at low tide with a net. The fisherman, like many others, spent more hours out at sea, accosting Saint Peter for his lack of abundance. When he did catch enough of the tiny shrimp, he dried them, pounded them into paste for belacan, and tried to sell it, though hardly anyone in the settlement could afford it.

Despite the drought of marine life, the boats were the most beautiful that year; the prayers long and fervent.

It was in the early hours of the next morning, post-festivity, when the fisherman's wife realised there was an empty, sagging space in her bed. She wrapped her year-old baby in her batik sarong and went out to the beach. She nearly dropped her little girl as she noticed, through the misty dawn, a figure standing in the middle of the sea, as if the water had frozen over.

The figure began walking, gliding almost, across the horizon. For a moment, she was willing to believe that this was a dream, or a holy apparition.

Light streaked across the charcoal sky, like a rip in a map. And the thunder broke the stillness in the sea. Her little girl wailed into her chest. As if awakening from a dream, she realised that the man walking on water, her fisherman husband, was sinking.

She witnessed her lover spiralling, as if a hole had been made at the bottom of the seabed, the current dragging him down. She yearned to leap across the waves, to grip his hand and pull him to his feet, like Jesus would. She thought to pray to Saint Peter, but even she knew that he had his crises of faith.

This is a story just for me. I've only heard it once from my mother's lips. Only years later did I realise that it was my father who had briefly walked on water.

*

The other day, I awoke to Mum rolling little brown balls between her palms and tucking them into little clumps of crusty dough.

"Pang susi? Is it Christmas again?" I teased. Truth is, I had forgotten when our last real Christmas was. The fresh minced beef from Uncle Hua Kee's stall at the market had become sad

canned corned beef. Right then, close to five years since evacuation, my mother had resorted to stuffing her pang susi with canned tuna.

Thankfully, two weeks later, we saw canoes returning with sacks and barrels. The Fremantle shipment had arrived.

I told Mum we could finally make sugee cake, after what seemed like a lifetime of Christmases, birthdays, weddings and funerals that we had missed. All she needed to do was get in the boat with me.

"Do you really want to waste our supplies butchering your favourite pastry?" I said when she went quiet. She looked out the kitchen window, her rattan stirring cane propped against it to keep it shut after we wrecked its handle in the monsoon storm.

"Have a little faith, Mum." The words were clunky on my tongue, like learning a new language. Surprisingly, this made her smirk.

"You really are your father's daughter," she whispered.

We rowed past what used to be Pasir Ris Beach, where we would rent bright red canoes and paddle until our skins burned. Past our old rental flat in Chai Chee, the cluster of beige and peach blocks browned and weathered by the constant showers. From a distance, we could see what had become the southern edge of the island—a raised highway that was never completed, the end of the road marked by the last two street lamps, their heads peeking out from the water. Tethered to the lamps with lots of rope was the new port, a floating dock made of crates and fastened together with hundreds of plastic bottles.

We saw Marbeck and a few of his crew—like toy soldiers from where we were—on the makeshift dock, their small ship of goods anchored by their side. A few other canoes had already

dispersed after collecting their shares. Through the grey mist, everything seemed so still. For a moment, Marbeck looked like he was walking on water.

Then the skies grew even darker. The lightning seemed to rip the horizon in half. The thunder, monstrous, just like in the stories. I saw it in my mother's eyes; she's seen what this storm could do.

The waves sent the dock bucking like a frightened mare. The ropes that held the dock together quivered, blistered, then snapped. The impact uprooted the street lamps, propelling Marbeck, his entire crew and our life supplies into the deep.

The current dragged us closer to the wreck, but not close enough to wrest Marbeck from the water. We saw his head bobbing like a life buoy towards the crates, towards his ship. Then a wave rose above him, scooped him up, dragged him down.

Someone grabbed my shirt collar from the back. My mother had lost her oar. Our bodies slammed into the sides of the boat. I lifted my head to the skies and cursed Saint Peter for leaving us to die in a sea of floating crates and scattered plastic bottles.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I noticed a woman in a blue sarong leaping towards the wreckage. Had someone finally heard our prayer? Was it Mother Mary, Star of the Sea, who would run across the water, pull Marbeck to his feet, and save us from our impending doom? I almost didn't believe it when I realised, the woman swimming fiercely, riding the waves, was my mother.

*

For now, we believe that as long we keep stirring the sugee batter, the island will not sink.

It's a miracle that Pasir Ris hasn't broken away yet. It must've also been a miracle that Mum didn't drown when she dove into the raging sea. When I found her thirty minutes after the

storm subsided, she was clinging to a crate filled with Evian bottles, semolina, sugar, almonds, and a bubble-wrapped bottle of Martell Cognac.

That crate lies wet and splintered in the corner of our kitchen. Mum takes sips of brandy from a mug and recites the sugee recipe by heart, like a “Hail Mary”.

We mix our semolina with one cup of olive oil in place of the butter that had melted all over our fridge door the day the city lost power. We sit on the kitchen floor taking turns to stir the sugee for an hour with Mum’s trusty rattan cane. She asks if we should let it bloat overnight, as her mother did. She never consults me on anything sugee. So I know this must be her way of letting go.

With no eggs to hold the sugar together, we blend vinegar and baking soda and beat them in. Then we fold this into the sugee, together with some old flour, crushed almonds, and vanilla essence.

I take a swig of the Martell Cognac from the bottle. “Two tablespoons of brandy,” Mum says. “No more, no less.” I hold the spoon over the mixture and dribble the liquor into it. I fill the second spoonful, and the tremors begin.

The ceiling cracks and the floors begin to quiver. One side of our flat starts to sink. That’s when I know the pillars in our void deck are giving way, disintegrating with the rest of the island. We tilt over and slide across the floor. As I lay against the tiles, I see out our broken window, swirling pockets of ocean tunnelling to the bottom of the sea, like currents returning home. In the distance, buildings crumble like sandcastles doused in seawater. They seem further away. And I realise that this is how it feels to be slowly ripped from a map, to rupture.

Mum wraps the sugee bowl to her chest. There's a pool of brandy in the middle of the batter. The Cognac bottle is just shards of glass on the floor. Our bag of semolina has fallen over and scattered like sand.

"It's ruined," she says, her brows furrow and the skin around her eyes creases like contour lines on an atlas.

"Just keep stirring," I reply.

She softens her face, reaches for her rattan cane. I join her, cross-legged on the trembling parquet floor. The bowl between our shins. Our hands overlapped on the cane. The thick beige batter now teh tarik-coloured, like the longkang. As we stir the sugee, rowing in circles, it seems we've created a ritual, a covenant between ourselves that will ripple across the ages.

As the water spills into the house, pooling around my mother's batik sarong and the Cordeiro mixing bowl, I've never seen her look so eager to be home. For once, I believe that this feels right. That just maybe, we can walk ourselves off this island.

EXEGESIS: A Eurasian Magical Realism

Introduction

Eurasians occupy a uniquely liminal position in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Large enough, with a relatively strong cultural security to have persisted through the centuries, to be recognised as an ethnic modifier, but also far too few today in hyper-modern, globalised Singapore such that much of Eurasian culture has been misunderstood, forgotten or ignored due to the state's limited understanding of racial diversity.

"The idea of Eurasian identity seems to defy definition" (23) begins Antonio L. Rappa, fittingly vague in the early chapters of his book *Saudade: The Culture and Security of Eurasian Communities in Southeast Asia*. The elusive nature of Eurasianess possibly arises from a lack of knowledge about Eurasian culture, and a kind of racial ambiguity due to multiple mixings and strains of Eurasian ancestry, leaving many puzzled as to how to classify a person who does not fit neatly into the state's sanctioned CMIO racial categories—standing for Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others.

The term "Eurasian" comes from a "colonial administrative label" used by the British to identify their subjects (Rappa 21). The Portuguese who first arrived in Asia used the word "Mestiço" to refer to the offspring of Portuguese and Asian parents. Today, the term Eurasian is usually used to describe the communities born of unions between the Europeans and Asians during the British, Dutch, and Portuguese colonial eras, though there are some Eurasians who can trace their lineage to Danish, German, Spanish, and other European ethnicities. According to writer, educator, and researcher Kevin Martens Wong, the Portuguese Eurasian community is a small but "sizeable subset of the Eurasian community in Singapore, constituting perhaps one-third of the entire community" ("Kristang, lost language of the Eurasians"). Due to the scale of this

short-story thesis and my own limited experience as half-Portuguese Eurasian, the stories may focus on characters with tangible Portuguese Eurasian roots, though genealogy and intracultural diversity of the Eurasian community is not so much in the foreground as is the contemporary intersectional experiences of characters who share a collective, multi-origin Eurasian heritage.

Regardless of origin, many aspects of Eurasian culture revolve around food, vernacular, and religion. Eurasian food, just like in many cultures, is a more tangible aspect of Eurasian culture. The secret family recipes, the way the batter for a sugee cake is stirred for an hour with a rattan mixing cane, the different ways a curry devil is cooked, the rolling of dough and spiced beef into little balls of pang susi—these ritualistic acts that produce the food is embedded into Eurasian consciousness like a kind of spell. Food also becomes a site of hybridity. Tasting Eurasian food, one can discern influences from other cultural cuisines—oxtail buak keluak borrowed from Peranakans; Mulligatawny originating from South India; a vegetarian egg curry that my grandmother makes often, also borrowed from a South Indian version with eggplant and okra. This fusion of cuisines only point to the multiplicity of Eurasian culture, a reference to something that came before, as if to name or define "Eurasianess" is to always be in deference to something else.

Eurasian vernacular is derived from a similar multiplicity, from the mixing of languages. I grew up with my grandparents using snatches of non-English phrases in their everyday speech—*rayu* for naughty; *ja kabah* for when something has ended. I mistook them for Malay words, only recently learning that they are actually Kristang. My mother's arsenal of swear words also includes a Peranakan expression in Baba Malay—for example, by screaming *cekik darah*, she would be conveying her level of anger with the impulse to choke someone until they

"choke on blood". Like food, Eurasian vernacular is suffused with the influence of other mother tongues.

The most prominent mother tongue shared by Eurasians of Portuguese descent is Kristang, a creole that arose in the 16th century as a mix of Portuguese and Malay, and spoken by the descendants of the Portuguese settlers who intermarried the native inhabitants of Malacca (Wong). Author and educator Melissa De Silva writes in an article that "Eurasians of other threads of heritage may count many other languages—German, Khmer, Thai, French, for example—among their wealth of mother tongue inheritance" ("Reclaiming My Portuguese-Eurasian Mother Tongue, Kristang"). Questions of language and identity are inevitably contestable, but generally, Kristang is understood to be "claimed" by Eurasians of Portuguese descent as a "cultural artefact and important part of their tradition" (Wong). This is why Kristang features prominently in my short stories, mostly through the experiences of characters of Portuguese Eurasian descent, although I do not think that only Portuguese Eurasians may lay claim to Kristang as a mother tongue solely for their own safekeeping. Kodrah Kristang, a language revitalisation initiative helmed by Kevin Martens Wong, holds Kristang classes which draw many non-Portuguese Eurasians and individuals of other races, a possibility that many other Eurasians are finding resonance with the language beyond identity formation and economic utility.

Another aspect of Eurasian culture that has endured is the religiosity associated with it. When the Portuguese came to Malacca in 1511, so did Catholicism. Despite Vasco da Gama's cruel suppression of non-Christian spirituality and the violence inflicted upon indigenous populations in India,[1] Catholicism has been embraced by Eurasian communities and is arguably

[1] One of the most gruesome massacres of da Gama's voyages was the burning of the *Meri*, a Muslim pilgrimage ship returning to Calicut from Mecca. He first plundered the ship of all its wealth and set it on fire, leaving the flames blazing for four days until the approximately seven hundred pilgrims on board had perished (Ghazanfar 30).

why Eurasian culture has been able to sustain itself throughout the centuries. According to Rappa, Eurasians in Singapore are predominantly Catholic or Anglican, but because of the strong hold the Portuguese Catholics had on their colonies, it is "virtually impossible to ascertain whether religion or culture determines Eurasian community identity" ("Surviving the Politics of Late Modernity" 162).

Catholicism survived the Dutch invasions, despite the destruction of Catholic institutions and conversion to Protestant ones. From perusing Joan Marbeck's *Linggu Mai*, a collection of short English-Kristang verses, stories, and passages that display the vernacular of community Kristang-speakers in Malaysia, we can see how Kristang festivals are mainly Feast Days of saints and celebrations in accordance with Lent, Easter, and Christmas. In *The Eurasian Heritage Dictionary* edited by Valerie Scully and Catherine Zuzarte, there are English-Kristang translations of prayers, *rezu*, for the "Sign of the Cross", the "Our Father", the "I Believe" (33-35), all components of the Holy Mass, which indicates how at some point in time, it was possible that Mass was conducted in Kristang. Midnight Mass at Christmas had become, and still is for some families today, a Eurasian tradition, which would be followed by an open house supper running late into the night, with the usual fare of curry devil, sugee cake, shepherd's pie, feng,[2] and pang susi.

While Catholicism has been integral to the cultural security of the Eurasian community, it has also become a rather limiting aspect of the culture. Rappa talks about how after the eradication of cultural enclaves gave way to government housing, the dispersed Eurasian families either remained active participants in their previous Catholic parishes or "began religious and spiritual life anew in the HDB estates" ("Surviving the Politics of Late

[2] A curry dish with diced pork entrails served at Christmas.

Modernity"169). Religion might have been an important contributor to the survival of Eurasian communities, but it is also important to acknowledge other ways of life, other spaces carved within the community. Not all Eurasians are Christians, traditionally heterosexual, or part of the predominant Kristang-Catholic heritage. Even those who are born into Catholic families, with many being raised within single-sex Catholic educational institutions, may be alienated by the narrow, unmoving ways of the church. For years, priests and religious leaders who hold high positions in the Vatican have been accused of sexual abuse. A 2004 report commissioned by the Catholic Church said that "more than 4,000 US Roman Catholic priests had faced sexual abuse allegations in the last 50 years" ("Catholic Church child sexual abuse scandal"); the most recent, high-profile case being the conviction and subsequent acquittal of former Vatican treasurer Cardinal George Pell, to the disappointment of many, including the Premier of Victoria.[3]

These claims have called for a long overdue reevaluation of the toxic patriarchal order on which the Church is founded upon. Many have called for the inclusion of women in leadership positions, using the case of Mary Magdalene as one of the most loyal disciples of Jesus Christ.[4] Queerness, homosexuality in particular, is still largely unacceptable among devout Catholics. This intolerance is also ingrained into religious doctrine, as is inflected, for example, by the Archbishop of Singapore's statement in support of the state's retention of the contentious 377A constitution. Rev. William Goh wrote in his letter dated 18 September, 2018:

[3] The Premier of Victoria, Daniel Andrews, released a statement after Cardinal Pell was acquitted of his convictions of five counts of sexually assaulting two teenage choir boys in the 1990s, saying, "I make no comment about today's High Court decision. But I have a message for every single victim and survivor of child sex abuse: I see you. I hear you. I believe you" ("Statement from The Premier").

[4] The Gospel of Mary Magdalene, not officially recognised by the Catholic Church, has been sidelined for its message that Mary Magdalene might have understood Jesus better than all the other male Apostles. Michael Haag, author of *The Quest for Mary Magdalene*, argues that the Church has historically sidelined Mary Magdalene, framing her as a sex worker to "devalue" the empowerment she stood for as the alternative ideas surrounding the woman had been too destabilising to the Church's longstanding patriarchal order (Carr, "The Real Reason Why Mary Magdalene is a Such a Controversial Figure").

> "**Indeed, I would not object to a repeal of S377A if it were merely aimed at removing all potential criminal penalties against homosexuals. However, until and unless Parliament puts in place a formulation that more perfectly encapsulated the spirit of the law**, guaranteeing the protection of the rights of the majority who favour the traditional family, and that no further demands be made to legalise same-sex unions, adoption of babies by same sex couples, surrogacy, or to criminalise those who do not support the homosexual lifestyle, **I am of the view that S377A should not be repealed under the present circumstances.**"[5]
>
> (Goh, "Pastoral Letter on 377A to Catholics")

Rev. William Goh's letter insinuates a dangerous mentality that anyone who falls outside "the majority who favour the traditional family" should not have their rights to freedom protected. This harmful rhetoric can trickle into everyday life and the cultural politics of the Eurasian community. Given the Eurasian community's close association with Catholicism, and the traditional Eurasian sensibility being heavily tinged with religiosity, the inclusion and exclusion of Eurasian bodies based on whether one belongs to a parish or falls into heteronormative modes of being is incredibly reductive and restrictive. Narrowly-defined religious doctrine threatens the multiplicity and hybridity—the characteristics which in my opinion form the crux of Eurasianess—that make the dwindling culture so singular.

The name of the Portuguese settlement in Malacca, where many Portuguese-Eurasians still live, is called Padri Sa Chang—which in Kristang, an endangered creole spoken by few Eurasians today, translates to "Priest's Land" or "Father's Land". The word Kristang comes from

[5] Sentences in bold are as intended by the author.

the Portuguese word *cristão* which means Christian—*papiah kristang* translates to "Christian speech" (Martens Wong, "Kristang: a Shallow Sea"). Similarly in Macau, a former Portuguese settlement, an equivalent patua is called *papia Cristam di Macau*. Embedded in Kristang, through its root *cristão*, is the insinuation that to be Kristang, traditionally to mean a Portuguese-Eurasian originating from Malacca, is to be Christian, that the "father-land" which many Eurasians can trace ancestry to is still teeming with coloniality. These linguistic ties bring up interesting questions: How has the Catholicism that has remained so entrenched in Eurasian culture alienated others in the Eurasian community? How do these tensions manifest in contemporary Singapore, where many Eurasians do not carry Eurasian surnames or practice Catholicism?

With organised religion playing such a big role in Eurasian culture, the stories in this collection, *The Unsullied Tongue of Saint Anthony and Other Miracles*, interrogate how femininity, sexuality, tradition, and power have been governed by religious doctrine and how this religiosity has hindered not just the Eurasian community, but the agency of individuals. While being critical of organised religion, the stories are also imbued with the miraculous amidst the everyday, in the hopes of carving a space within the speculative fiction genre for another kind of magical realism that is suffused with Eurasian sensibility, playing with parables, treating the miraculous in religious doctrine not solely as proof of divine power and authority, but as texts that are equally ripe for contention, reinvention, for extracting the tender, wondrous moments of human connection. The miraculous, the fantastical, the uncanny, becomes a space in which those who do not belong find some semblance of recognition, an affirmation of their existence in a world that seems content to let difference be washed away by the tides of progress and power.

Speculative Fiction in Singapore and the Region

Speculative fiction and its subgenres mainly engage with non-realist modes of storytelling. Mareck Oziewicz summarises speculative fiction as an umbrella term that "houses all non-mimetic genres—genres that in one way or another depart from imitating consensus reality" (2). These genres do not just encompass fantasy, science fiction and horror, but also its derivatives—slipstream, fabulism, the uncanny, magical realism. But it is insufficient to simply dismiss a piece of literary work that does not adhere to realist modes of storytelling to speculative fiction. Christopher Patterson, who writes speculative fiction under the pen name Kawika Guillermo, argues that to "assign the label 'speculative' to a text thus recognises not merely its speculative elements, but how those elements refuse conventions that orientalise the 'alien' Other," (182). The speculative is political not just in the way it resists genre, but also in its potential "to describe "what happened" historically but "how it continues to happen," and how literary representations participate in continued reiterations of state and capitalist power" (Patterson 179). In a Singapore that prioritises order, wealth, homogeneity, that continues colonial legacies by retaining the reductive CMIO racial categories—with the 'O' literally standing for "Others"—and anti-queer legislation, it is no surprise that speculative fiction has been a ripe medium for imagining alternative ways of existing in the gaps of mainstream, capitalist, heteronormative society, for unearthing submerged histories and drawing attention to the absurdities and magic present in reality.

Speculative fiction in Singapore has tended to lean quite heavily on either fantasy or science fiction, but there are many hybrids. There is JY Yang's Tensorate series which has been labelled silkpunk fantasy by their publisher Tor and even *The Straits Times*. There is Kevin Martens Wong's *Altered Straits* which is a science-fiction novel predicated upon the myth of the

merlion, Victor Fernando R. Ocampo's *The Infinite Library and Other Stories*, which is a kind of science fiction that is suffused with Borgesian surrealism and a Filipino Catholic sensibility, Ng Yi-Sheng's *Lion City* that so defies categorisation, playing with tropes from science fiction, fabulism, folklore, and magic realism, that it crosses the threshold of categorisable into the unknown, elusive sub-genre, slipstream. Perhaps this is what speculative fiction entails, the inability to pin a sub-genre, or a piece of work, to a singular recognisable qualifier. This ambiguity and elusiveness is therefore a ripe medium to cultivate the kind of subversive magical realism that my collection of stories aims to achieve.

In 1925, Franz Roh theorised magical realism in art as a departure from Expressionism, which presented reality as a "fantastic dreamscape" [quoted in Reeds 177]. To him, magical realism was "a return to reality, but not simply going back to the realism which existed before Expressionism—a homecoming which carried with it the baggage from the trip through Expressionism's existential voyage, a mix of wild flights and anchored reality" (Reeds 178). As the term entered into the context of Latin American literature, and was subsequently in constant dispute with fantastical literature, Amaryll Chanady argued that part of magical realism's distinctiveness was in its perception of the narrator, the willing suspension of disbelief of both narrator and reader. She writes, "in contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader... The same phenomena that are portrayed as problematical by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in a matter-of-fact manner by the magical realist" [quoted in Reeds 189]. This difference in perception is also tied to cultural notions of what is accepted as reality, with magical realist narratives created in opposition to empirical reality as conceived by the West or the coloniser.

The Unsullied Tongue of Saint Anthony and Other Miracles might be distilled in a similar light, in that the magical realism reflected by the reality of these characters and narrators are always in opposition to the empirical centre. A magical realist reality might manifest along a spectrum of unnatural or supernatural occurrences—from the religiously miraculous, to the uncanny, to the grotesque.

The spectrum of magical realist themes are shaped by the speculative modes, literary inventiveness and contemporary engagements with feminism, colonialism, and religiosity of these two short story collections in particular—Intan Paramaditha's *Apple and Knife* and Ng Yi-Sheng's *Lion City*.

Indonesian writer Intan Paramaditha's *Apple and Knife*, translated from the Indonesian by Stephen J Epstein, is a collection of short stories that teeter between magical realism and the folkloric. These stories transplant the folk tale, the fable, into urban contemporary Indonesia, navigating the vagaries of taboos, violence, and injustices associated with disobedient women and unruly bodies. She creates a space for women who occupy liminal, marginal positions in society—the bleeding woman, the crone, the bomoh, the Pontianak, the office worker preyed upon by her male boss, the divorcée shunned by the other women in the family for having personal agency, the woman who deviates from cultural and religious ideals of womanhood. Her characters speak from power rather than from victimhood, tapping into a kind of feminine power or inner magic to resist the forces that try to suppress individual agency, to homogenise them. Paramaditha works within the folkloric tradition to show how women have and continue to be bound by the conventions of the real, the mimetic, as dictated by patriarchal structures; to use the same folk tales to tease the absurdity from the real is to reclaim power through magic.

"Blood", in particular, is one of these stories that reclaim power from the magic associated with menstruation, and through the marginalised, submerged figure of local mythology—the Pontianak. It challenges the taboos still surrounding menstruation in the 21st century by subverting this age-old folktale and superstition—never discard a sanitary napkin in the trash without rinsing it lest you find a Pontianak feasting on the blood left on it (24). The copywriter-narrator Mara grapples with cultural expectations to sell maxi pads through the idea that blood is dirty, smelly, shameful, punishable— as Paramaditha describes: "Revenant," a "[m]onster" (21). Throughout the story she also tries to reconcile her unruly bleeding body with the loss of her mother who died while giving birth to her stillborn sister, the parallels between mother and monster eventually converging, arriving at the conclusion that "I don't want to treat blood as the enemy" (30), that blood is power, life-giving, revenant. Blood is also the entity that acts on injustice through the surreal, the fantastic. When Mara sleeps with her first boyfriend, he rebukes her by saying, "This isn't your first time" (26). She exacts revenge when fooling around in his car, he "jerked away, his fingers coated in blood" (26), blood "oozing into a pool of crimson. Menstrual blood," (27), as if the expelled uterine lining has taken on a life of its own. Blood lives again when in the end, Mara quits her job and enters the office bathroom, chancing upon the bloody woman of folklore consuming menstrual blood, her appearance withered and pale, except for her lips which are "moist red, fresh. Beautiful" (31). She asks the woman why she likes blood so much and she replies, "Because it's life" (31). The transgression of the unwanted, monstrous female, into a space of capital and corporate decorum, and being truly seen by a fellow woman, is an act of resistance against power, class, sexism, and the wrongful shaming of women's bodies. In a similar way, my story "An Alabaster Jar of Perfume" highlights the taboos surrounding endometriosis and sexual agency, while also attributing power

to the biblical Mary Magdalene, a figure that has been sidelined and undermined through the church's narrative that branded her as a sex worker. The magic here—which manifests as the grotesque expulsion of a pomegranate seed from the womb; of the tabooed blood giving way to new life—grants power to the unruly female body, a magic that is fueled by the emergence of the submerged female, as well as various mythologies associating fecundity and sexuality with the pomegranate. Both mine and Paramaditha's stories can be framed as ways to understand the importance for "othered" bodies—the ugly, the bloody, the unruly—especially when they misbehave, to be a subject of literary fiction in the region. The fantastical transgressions further emphasise the need for alternative, submerged figures in literature and the real world to be understood, to coexist with multiple ways of being.

Ng Yi-Sheng's *Lion City* is possibly one of the more inventive and experimental works of contemporary fiction to come out from a single author. The short stories turn Singapore tourism clichés on their head, extracting the supernatural and ancient magic lurking in the corners of the urban city. In "A Day at Terminal Aleph", he writes of a magical terminal in Changi Airport, a transit point for all the world's gods and deities, a story that carves a space for multiple languages, customs, and ancient wisdoms to coexist with the contemporary, whether in harmony or in tension with each other. "No Man Is" is drawn from local myths of two sisters becoming Sisters' Islands and a turtle becoming Kusu Island. A boy transforms into an island, navigating the murky waters of colonial pillage when other islands try to conquer him and form a sketchy Archipelago. Ng's fiction creates a space for the forgotten, often suppressed identities in Singapore—the queer body whose sexual freedom is continually controlled by the state, the magical beings quelled by modern day science, the bodies and cultures stifled by European colonialism, and the ancient historical figures of the Malay Archipelago.

In the most formally stimulating story, “Garden”, Ng uses the science-fiction trope of time-travel to unearth submerged histories that have been forgotten by national history textbooks. The garden in question is a labyrinth, reminiscent of Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths”, a disobedient sibling of the manicured, prestigious Gardens by the Bay. The story challenges linearity, order, and the history taught and repeated by the state. Framed as a choose-your-own-adventure story, Dang Anom, a concubine, travels between non-linear fragments through a continuum of historical timelines, interacting, affecting, or dying at the hands of the historical figures she meets. In one fragment, Portuguese mestizo cartographer Manuel Godinho de Erédia is burning down a kampong in Malacca and shoots Dang Anom as she appears charging at him. In another, she meets Javanese royalty Pangeran Adipati Agung, father of Princess Radin Mas Ayu, stuck in a well and helps him find food. Even in 2019, Halimah Yacab makes an appearance in the Istana garden, hiding from the celebratory presidential reception, doing ordinary things like texting her friends, not enjoying being President. In line with Ng's praxis of using the speculative to subvert national narratives, my story "Porcelain" unearths violent colonial histories associated with Portuguese and Dutch conquest, tying these histories to the motif of bells—and with it its religious and nautical-colonial associations. The characters hear a haunting, persistent ringing that is only perceptible to them, the magical realism in this case taking the form of psychological horror and uncanniness.

The narrative also takes Dang Anom to fictional timelines, sci-fi storyworlds created by Singapore writers—Kevin Martens Wong’s *Altered Straits*; the world of the *Danger Dan* series created by Lesley-Anne and Monica Lim; Shelly Bryant’s *Launch Pad*; the grey goo apocalypse in Victor Fernando R Ocampo’s “Big Enough for the Entire Universe” from *The Infinite Library and Other Stories*. Ng’s sci-fi intertextuality tries to create a body of the speculative in literary

fiction, legitimising a space of play, invention, subversion, and historical inquiry that might otherwise be ignored or dismissed by mainstream genre fiction or conventional literary fiction.

One of the more significant intertextual time-travel moments is when Dang Anom meets Yva Yolan from Han May's *Star Sapphire*, paying tribute to Singapore's first science-fiction novel. Dang Anom's parting words to Yva Yolan are, "Our stories are already written […] But take every risk possible. There are more endings than we know of. It is possible, too, to live between the lines" (206). The reader is then instructed to go back to 1299, the first fragment the reader encounters, which is ironically, "The End" (172). The nonlinearity of the story creates a space where a character can thrive and die concurrently, where a victim of violence can rise up and live to fight again. These lines form the crux of what the speculative, what various forms of magical realism can do for marginal, submerged, forgotten figures, that in these sites of resistance, there is already immense power and radical hopefulness waiting to be unlocked.

Renewed Eurasian Writing

Melissa de Silva's collection of essays and stories *Others is Not a Race* is a direct challenge of the Eurasian made Other by state racial policies. The book draws from the oral history of the author's family and her own experiences of being an ethnic minority in a multiracial, multicultural Singapore that condenses its diverse make-up to four main racial groups, with Eurasians often being flattened into "Others" in this capacity. As with all stories about identity or community, one account of Eurasian family and culture cannot speak for all contemporary Eurasians living in Singapore today. The personal essays in the collection, that speak of Kristang as a forgotten mother tongue of Portuguese-Eurasians and sugee cake as the quintessential pride and product of Eurasian cuisine, though highly necessary in shedding light

on Eurasian culture when it has been relatively obscured in mainstream conversations on race, fail to tackle intersectional issues like class, sexuality, and religious suppression that is present in Eurasian communities.

However, what I would argue is the strongest piece in the collection is “Blind Date”, a speculative fiction short story where the last Eurasian man left in Singapore searches for fellow kith in a world where some species of flora and fauna have already gone extinct and appear only in educational simulations, the only remaining reminder of their existence. These simulations that play in the background as the protagonist goes on his walk is a haunting omen that encapsulates the anxiety over the erosion of Eurasian tradition and culture, a nostalgic grief of an older time that is already past.

This story arguably is the most politically-charged and demonstrative of how the Eurasian body has been Othered, and continues to be so. The insinuation is that the Eurasian body will continue to require explanation, this time, in a more absurd and eerie simulacrum. The speculative is what allows the queerness of otherness to come through, a resistance of the state’s compulsion to eradicate its diversity of species.

The complexity and dynamism of speculative fiction is what is needed to resist conventional modes of representing Eurasian identity, or rather, more hybrid, intersectional kinds of identities. To resist the reductive racial categories of the state, it seems fitting that literature about the liminal, hybridised “Other” should seek to deviate from formal conventions, from strict social realism that characterises novels like Rex Shelley’s *The Shrimp People*, considered seminal for portraying the quintessential Eurasian experience, as it was perceived in the 1950s, where the novel is set in. Shelley is most quoted for saying that he wrote *The Shrimp People* to set down a “social history” of the Eurasian community, that “this community is going to

disappear; it is too small to survive" (Klein 44). This anxiety towards disappearing also carries a sense that there is a sense of origin or cultural purity that is long past, which is in itself harmful to the survival of the culture. Here, I see immense potential for the speculative to open up new ways of imagining Eurasian existence, one that is not solely determined by race, tradition and convention, but flourishing and further diversifying through hybridity and ambiguity.

Kevin Martens Wong's mytho-dystopian science fiction novel *Altered Straits* is an example of a renewed way to write about Eurasianess without explicitly writing about Eurasian culture. He does this through the lens of queerness and an anxiety towards loss and erasure of personal agency, identity, a way of life, an anxiety that is both unique to Eurasian sensibility and relatable to the survival of other cultures in a destructive world.

In a 2047 dystopian Singapore, Lieutenant Titus Ang is sent on a military time-travelling mission to retrieve a merlion from Naufal's universe to stop the Concordance, a hive intelligence that threatens to destroy humanity by subsuming it into one homogenous entity. Time travel disrupts two things in the novel: the concept of a coherent corporeality and mind, and a sense of simultaneity across narrative timelines. The texts does not settle on a recognisable, or mimetically natural sense of time, and therefore, decenters the notion of a coherent, homogenous experience of reality. The instability of temporality, corporeality, and cognition correlates with the novel's central tensions between a homogeneity imposed by authorities—the state—and the endless pluralities of individual selfhood.

The speculative, the mythic, creates space for submerged, alternative histories to thrive. The text queers the national symbol of the merlion— they are hermaphroditic; they do not have homes ("We don't have families, so there's no need," says Bahana the merlion); they are suspended between the categories of natural and unnatural as they are "neither mammal nor fish

nor insect, and not really something in-between, either" (210). The fundamental make-up of this national icon in the real world—its hybridity, its liminality, its asexuality—contradicts one of Singapore's projected national ideals which is that of the heteronormative family unit that is integral to alleviating the nation's falling birth rates.

In the novel, the Singapuran army tethers soldiers to merlions to form a hive mind-like unit. Protagonist Naufal's tenuous telepathic connection with the merlion Bahana is an anomaly, and does not rely on language alone. The queer, non-mimetic unreadability of their minds is demonstrative of the resistance to authority and subordination. In the case of the novel, the readability and transparency of a mind enables that mind, and subsequently language and discourse, to be co-opted and controlled by authorities.

Though the novel relies heavily on science-fiction tropes, bordering on genre fiction, its queer speculative elements also resists conventions that "orientalise the 'alien' Other," (Patterson 182), in this case is less interested in overtly explaining the othering of Eurasian culture, but focuses on how the othering and suppressing of personal agency—of queerness, language, and cognition—describes the continual erosion of cultures and diversity, the perpetuating "reiterations of state and capitalist power" (Patterson 179).

A different kind of Eurasian writing that comes close to what my collection of stories aims to achieve, is, unexpectedly, Gregory Nalpon's magical realism which is suffused with cultural ambiguity, an understated anxiety that a way of life is on the cusp of disappearance. The late Gregory Nalpon, as Angus Whitehead describes, was sometimes mistaken for Eurasian—he is the descendent of "French-speaking South Indian Catholics" (xvi). And perhaps this seeming cultural ambiguity, the frequency of being mistaken for something else, something "other", is

often what it is like being Eurasian in Singapore—or any other kind of ethnic make-up that makes it difficult to place—to resist categorisation.

Nalpon's writing, strangely forgotten in the Singapore literary landscape until the posthumous publication of his collected short stories in 2013, represents an early gothic, postcolonial magical realism with settings comparable to the fictional villages and towns of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Eka Kurniawan's Halimunda in *Beauty Is a Wound*, all of which are places that have been irrevocably changed by colonialism but not yet touched by modernisation. In Nalpon's work, this setting is an old, pre-modernised Singapore, seemingly fictional only in its unrecognisability in the hyper-modernised city of today.

Whitehead argues that "few other Singaporean writers of the 1970s so successfully and consistently represented a local ethno-religious culture neighbouring but not his or her own, while continually, ambiguously crossing cultures" (xvi). This cultural ambiguity is present in stories like "Of Magical Things", "A Soul for Anna Lim", "The Rose and the Silver Key". "Of Magical Things" speaks of all manner of spirituality, without a commitment to a single belief, embodying a reality where indigenous wisdom and magic co-exist organically with the more monotheistic religions, where regardless of a person's spiritual alliance, there is a communal understanding that the everyday is suffused with the miraculous. In "A Soul for Anna Lim", Samuel Paul is a racially ambiguous drunk who patronises the local, now disappeared, samshu shop and despite his drunkenness, displays remarkable tenderness. Greenwater Boy is a mute kampong boy of unknown ethnic origin whose childlike eyes extract wonder from the ordinary. Hamid the stoic sarabat stall owner in "The Rose and the Silver Key" is a Pakistani man whose "lizard eyes" make him seem more than human, a kind of all-seeing observer, a ghost of a

tradesman rare today in a capitalist age of cafes in air-conditioned malls. Fatimah, a name of Arabic origin, but whose confidence in her sexuality challenges and prods the male gaze, as well as any assumption of her ethnicity and its associated cultural scripts. Nalpon's own cultural ambiguity, his inability to be neatly classified, comes through in his work, creating a storyworld where race and ethnicity, though secondary, organically come through in the cross-cultural, often whimsical, tender, magical interactions between characters. Magic becomes the source of tenderness, a space where human connection springs forth from an organically cross-cultural world.

"Of Magical Things" is more a flash fiction piece on the multiplicity of spiritual beliefs on the island, a multiplicity less celebrated and embraced today than it was in the 1960s and 1970s. The story opens "I cannot claim to know a person unless I know of his beliefs" (17), and the speaker makes it known that it is beliefs in the supernatural that are vital to the moulding of identity. The story celebrates not only the religions of "holy books", "mosques and churches and temples" (17), but the palmists, astrologers, fortune-tellers, snake-charmers, traditional healers, bomohs, magicians—spiritual practitioners who would likely be dismissed in today's age of modern science and capitalism. The story hearkens back to a lost time where magic was indeed reality. The wonder of the story is cut short by an anecdote about a girl who lost her mind when she was forced to marry someone her parents approved of, as opposed to the boy she loved. When she began "talking to people invisible to all eyes but hers" (18), her relatives beat the boy, presuming he had put a spell on her. The story ends with the haunting lines, "But Ruqaya never did return to normal. Her condition had nothing to do with magic, only love" (18). The supernatural here is a rejection of what is considered acceptable by an authority, like a fable warning against the destruction of multiplicity and personal agency.

"A Soul for Anna Lim" and "The Rose and the Silver Key", like much of Nalpon's other work, portray a nostalgic Singapore where samshu[6] shops, and sarabat [7]stalls were plentiful, and the sight of pigs being herded around kampongs was the norm. Reading it in a world where high-rise government housing has taken over the kampong, and pigs are now in agricultural farms and slaughterhouses, the dated settings take on a whimsical fabulism in these stories, the everyday setting fit for a fairy tale.

Anna Lim declares that she has lost her soul to the men who have paid to sleep with her, that "she could not accept the fact that she was alive" (26). She is visited by a mysterious monstrous presence in the night, and finds her ginger cat dismembered on the ground. A hungover Samuel Paul stumbles over from the samshu shop, brought over by the mute Greenwater Boy who finds customers for Anna Lim. She turns Samuel Paul away, convinced that she cannot continue doing sex work, for fear of the creature claiming her body like it did the cat's. As Greenwater Boy is offered wages to tug a stud pig to three sows in the neighbourhood, he finds "a pearl in a cage of white gold" (32) stuck to the pig's tusks and offers it to Anna Lim. To Anna, this is a miraculous sign that she has reclaimed her soul, that she can hold it in her palm; to Samuel Paul, who had retrieved the pearl from a locket he had stolen from his mother and stuck it to the boar's tusk, it is an act of tenderness that is elevated to the fantastic, the magical.

In "The Rose and the Silver Key", a rose mysteriously grows and takes root in a rubbish heap next to Hamid's sarabat stall outside the old Cathay theatre. A bargirl, Fatimah, tempts an unswayed Hamid with her silver key, rumoured to open the lock to her bedroom door for a fee.

[6] A distilled spirit made from fermented rice or coconut. By the 1980s, most samshu shops had disappeared (Whitehead 172).
[7] A strong, pulled black tea with milk and ginger.

The rose's magical properties first manifest when a ginger cat, run over by a speeding car, is tossed into the rubbish pile. And within minutes, Fatimah points in awe at the cat trotting back to the same spot on the road. Convinced of its magical properties, Fatimah begs for the rose in exchange for her silver key, to no avail. Late that night, Fatimah stumbles back to Hamid's stall bruised and beaten, it is not clear if she has been sexually assaulted but her kebaya is torn—by five men from the bar she works at. Hamid then cleans her wounds, smoothens her hair, covers the hole in the kebaya with a cloth, plucks the rose from the rubbish heap and places it in her hair. After sending Faitmah off in a taxi, he finds her silver key where she was sitting. As he buries the silver key in the rubbish heap, he notices "a new bud was opening into red petals. Soft as Fatimah's lips" (16).

Both stories possess similar fabulist elements—the ginger cat slaughtered in one and revived in another; both women are shamed and attacked for "misbehaving", acting out of line according to society's ideals of womanhood. Acts of violence are redeemed and remedied by tender, miraculous acts likened to magic, like drinking an ancient healing potion. These miraculous moments prioritise local, indigenous ways of viewing reality. In a world that suppresses alternative forms of existence, that inflicts violence upon the unruly female body, it is the willingness to suspend disbelief, to see the magical in the everyday, that allows tender acts of kindness to be elevated to the miraculous. This elevation, this surreal act of radical love, is what my own collection of short stories hopes to achieve, that tender miraculous moments of radical love be in themselves resistance to categorisation, to the reduction and destruction of the magical, the submerged reality.

Nalpon's social realism preserves a version of Singapore where magic is everyday, teeming with life, through which organic human connection and tenderness thrive. His stories

exist as resistance to current capitalist and racial hegemony, where such transcendence of ethnic boundaries, without erasing cultural histories and experiences, is rare due to the perpetuation of CMIO categories in administrative policies and everyday life. The aim of my collection of stories is not to elevate nor accentuate the Eurasian body as Other, but for Eurasian characters to navigate contemporary issues of sexuality, the unruly feminine body, and religious suppression, to move organically through a storyworld where the miraculous gives way to radical acts of love, independent of Catholicism, but occurring simply because the magical coexists with the real world.

The Miraculous, Uncanny Body as Site of Resistance

In Catholicism, the body, especially the body of Jesus Christ is a site of transformation, reverence, a site of divine power and healing. It is also a site of resistance to the laws of reality, a divine sign that challenges the persecutors and empowers the marginalised. There are many stories of bodies undergoing transformation as a sign of divine, uncanny power—when Saint Anthony's tongue remains unsullied after several hundred years; when a Mother Mary statue cries blood; when the tongues of fire transform the tongues of the Apostles who start speaking in languages foreign to them; and of course, when Jesus rises from the dead.

These stories, like folk tales, epics, legends, speak to a tradition of magic being the source of empowerment and resistance to injustice. The purpose of using these miracles in my collection of stories is not to assign power to a one true god, nor to privilege a Catholic institutional reality over others. The stories are shaped by these miracles, treating these biblical stories as texts, as sites of wonder, play, reinvention, and transformation that can be updated, interrogated, and thrown into conflict with the societal issues that have and continue to plague

the modern world—sexism, suppression of sexual freedom, religious tyranny, environmental degradation, and overall erasure of the uncategorisable, unhostable Other.

Nicholas Royle writes, "The uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality" (2). The uncanny forces us to reckon with the strange borders we put around ourselves and others. This liminality suffuses magical realism and the Eurasian condition; it disrupts the order of the world to reveal the Eurasian body as being between places, filling the gaps between categories, being seen by the novelty of having Europeans names but falling through the cracks of visibility when racial categories and lack of education homogenise a very complex and diverse ethnic community.

The elevation of the body as a site of resistance predicates itself upon the idea of the body as uncanny. Nicholas Royle describes various evocations of the uncanny. It is a sense of "homeliness uprooted", "curious coincidences" (1), when something that should have remained hidden has come to light (3), disturbing what is considered to be a natural order of what is inside and outside (2). Uncanniness, the idea of a body coming back from the dead, of a body expelling what should remain hidden, a body behaving in a way that is unhostable, unhomely to oneself, is central to *The Unsullied Tongue of Saint Anthony and Other Miracles* for it parallels the displacement and otherness that comes with the liminality of a Eurasian body. The concept speaks to a way that disjuncture, disorder, and disturbance is a necessary tool for the marginalised body to thrive and often, find tenderness, hope, and power.

The most demonstrative example of uncanniness enacted by the body in this collection is in the title story "The Unsullied Tongue of Saint Anthony", where the tongue is the central site of resistance. It appears in various permutations, a continuous transformation reminiscent of a miracle—a gritty, chewy kambing tongue in a traditional broth; the mother tongue as Kristang;

the tongues of fire that allow for the multiplicity of tongues to be celebrated and understood; the wet, sensuous tongue of Saint Anthony revered in a basilica in Padua, Italy; the violence enacted on the tongue, the suppression of language in the convent; the speaking of tongues as a pageantry displaying power; and the miracle of tongues, though involuntary and uncontrollable, as a reclamation of the tongue. The intergenerational inheritance of tongues is enacted by the narrator feeding her dying grandmother the kambing tongue, and in exchange, the grandmother imparts the story of how she reclaimed her tongue as a young girl, and how that cost her her relationship with a girl. Running parallel to the narrative of tongues and sexuality is the narrator's own struggles with her sexual freedom, her conservative Catholic parents' disapproval with her homosexuality. The religiously-inflected supernatural event of the immaculate tongue of Saint Anthony miraculously evoked by the grandmother as a young girl is not simply a reproduction of Catholic ontology or its associated oppressions, but a reclamation and reinvention of its ontology through a Kristang-Eurasian lens, a reality that opposes the racist, colonial-religious reality of the church while still remaining culturally tied to religion as practiced and perpetuated by Eurasian culture. This miraculous, supernatural event is a revival of hope, that a new generation of queer, marginal, suppressed tongues will thrive within a continuously Catholic community.

The Cultural Security of Eurasian Communities

The concept of saudade is a conflicting one with regards to its relevance to Eurasian sensibilities. Antonio L. Rappa describes saudade as "a lingering desire for something that has been lost and cannot be regained, a far and distant homeland that was never visited and never known", but he is aware that it is also "an ironic nostalgia for a past that no longer exists but could not be recognized during its existence" (213). The concept is fittingly untranslatable, with

no word in English to encapsulate its nuances and multiple meanings. According to Rappa, even the Malay word rindu— which refers to the longing or missing of somebody—only represents a fraction of what the term represents (213). Like the uncanny, like the liminal, saudade resists language and straightforward definition. To be Eurasian is to occupy these conflicting states, to be situated, perhaps even home, in Southeast Asia, and to have this sense of longing (conscious or not) to return to a home that was never accessed.

This strange longing can be described as uncanny too. Nicholas Royle writes that the uncanny may be intertwined with "extreme nostalgia or 'homesickness', in other words a compulsion to return to an inorganic state, a desire (perhaps unconscious) to die, a death drive" (2). This idea of the "death drive" is also present in the narrative of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, a desire to return to the father, the maker, a sacrifice for humankind. We also see this in ascension narratives, where the body of Jesus Christ, and subsequently, Mother Mary, is taken up, body and soul, to Heaven. The concept of Heaven is predicated on returning to the Father, or returning to an Edenic paradise. Whether consciously or not, through literature, media, or religion, there is a sense that the Eurasian body continues to be underway, in transit, under threat of erasure.

Saudade is a particularly tenuous concept as well; with the decline and demise of the colonial powers in Southeast Asia, the Eurasians were a liminal reminder of a "dead colonial past" (219). And since the demise of these empires did not guarantee a home for Eurasians in Europe, saudade then, according to Rappa, also encapsulates the tension between the Eurasian body signifying the colonial past and also "the fact that there is no other home for Eurasians than the ones they have made in Asia and the Pacific" (219). A tangible link to a colonial past is still Catholicism. The strong presence of Catholicism, which comes with a complicated history of colonial violence and a continued systematic suppression of sexual assault cases, becomes

deeply problematic when it has been ingrained in the consciousness of many Eurasian communities. Though the cultural security of Eurasian communities has relied heavily on the practice of Catholicism and its associated localised rituals and traditions, the community needs to allow for openness, play, inventiveness, and multiplicity, to release the idea that insularity will keep the culture alive, that there is another unnameable home to which to return to.

Conclusion

What ties the magic in my collection together, making it seemingly organic and untethered to a singular form—be it the uncanny or the miraculous or the supernatural—is what Amaryll Chanady describes as the "matter-of-fact" magical realist narrator, which allows both reader and protagonist to suspend disbelief and accept the magical event as a legitimate kind of reality that runs counter to an empirical reality. In my stories, the narrators and characters do not dismiss the haunting of uncanny bells but ride towards them in search of submerged histories ("Porcelain"); they see the expulsion of a pomegranate seed from the womb as the body's manifestation of liberation ("An Alabaster Jar of Perfume"); they treat the miraculous, parabolic multiplying of food as a way to celebrate cultural bonds of community, without overtly affirming religious affiliation ("Leftovers"); they attempt to salvage what is being lost to a sinking world, using religious parables, often told in matter-of-fact ways, to reify modes of resistance, defying a destructive reality ("Walking on Water"); and despite the workings of Catholic miracles, the characters also gain power in using those miracles to subvert the empirical centre of religious reality, to empower the submerged mother tongue and suppressed sexualities ("The Unsullied Tongue of Saint Anthony").

Like Paramaditha, Ng, and Nalpon, the magic in my stories, as Christopher Patterson puts it, refuses "conventions that orientalise the 'alien' Other". The stories decentre an empirical reality within the Eurasian community, providing a speculative-cultural lens to view contemporary issues of identity, femininity, sexuality, language, and submerged histories.

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