

Verena Tay, *Spectre: Stories from Dark to Light*. Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2012. 160 pp. ISBN 13: 978-981-07-3803-7.

Spectre is Verena Tay's debut collection of short stories. In the preface, she states categorically that she is "not a horror writer, aiming... to send chills down the reader's spine just for the sake of the thrill" (11-12). While she admits that "many of the stories are metaphorically and physically dark," she hopes that "they all contain elements of light, some more so than others" (12).

The collection begins with "Honey's Story," told in the voice of a dead woman whose body has been kept in a trunk at home. The woman came from the Enchanted Palace in Chiang Mai, Thailand; a lady of the night, she was hoping she would have a good life settling down with a seaman from Singapore but she did not. Why her husband killed her is not evident; perhaps the onset of darkness in the human soul is often inexplicable.

While "Honey's Story" has an urban setting, the next three stories, "The Land," "Broken" and "The gravedigger," draw upon the macabre in rural folklore. "The Land" consists of four episodes permeated by black magic revolving around unfortunate pregnancies and child ghosts. In the first episode in 1818, a pregnant woman is slit open by a *bomoh* (a Malay shaman or witch doctor) who wants her foetus for his rites. In 1898, a coolie tries to remove the vegetation from a piece of land to prepare it for redevelopment and dies after disturbing a pot containing the remains of a child. In 1948, a seamstress, having lost her ability to conceive after her days as "a comfort woman in a Japanese army camp" (37), longs for a child but when she does become pregnant by a spirit, it so terrifies her that she plunges her scissors into her belly, killing the baby and herself. In the final episode of "The Land" set in 2008, the shophouse the seamstress lived in has become a hotel haunted by a child ghost. The motif of female or child spirits taking revenge continues in "Broken," the third story in the collection; Lina, a girl from a humble background, dies while giving birth to a dead child fathered illegitimately by the young master of a plantation. The young master marries and his wife becomes pregnant. But Lina's spirit seduces the man and kills his wife and child. Charged with this double murder, the man becomes mad in jail. In "The Gravedigger," the last shaman story, a gravedigger digs for the fresh corpse of a virgin to extract her organs for sale to a *bomoh* but brings on his own demise. As a whole, these horrific stories do not seek to explain away the spirits using devices such as nightmares, psychotic imagination or coincidences. The spirits are potent and those who wrong them receive retribution, if not within a story, then across stories.

The fifth story, "The Fisherman's Wife," is set in a coastal village in Southern China, the ancestral land of many forefathers of present-day Singaporeans. A fisherman's wife badgers her husband to beg a magic fish in

the ocean to realise her dreams for riches. Her escalating greed terminates but in “opium-induced bliss” (81). As the centrepiece of the collection, this folktale with a moral serves as a transition, leaving Singapore with its plantation injustices and ghosts behind to herald in a modern era with different sorts of demons in the remaining four stories.

In “Walls,” Hui Luan, an obese grandmother, no longer feels at home in her five-room HDB (Housing and Development Board) flat, “a white-chrome-mirror-glass-steel palace” (86) presided over by her daughter-in-law. Hui Luan suffers a massive stroke and dies after wrecking the flat and becomes “light as a child” (103). Her final fate transcends cruelty, even if not always intentional, in a family. The other three stories are also variations on the dysfunctional family. In “Coast,” a daughter dates a gangster while her mother fades away after her father left the mother for a Shenzhen mistress giving him twin sons. The girl commits suicide after her boyfriend is attacked and dies. In “The Doll,” a father rapes his little daughter, dismembering her doll in the process; even as this happens, a mother missing her own little girl continues to put dolls together in a factory, hoping that they can bring some comfort to lonely little girls whose parents have to leave them for work. Juxtaposing the two vignettes – the little girl being violated by her father and the factory worker putting a paper heart into a doll – suggests that while life is cruel, that is probably not the intention of the creator of life. The collection ends with “Fast Food: 1979 Portrait of an Old Lady” in which an old woman tries her first hamburger to her distaste but still treasures the styrofoam container and the two packets of tomato sauce enough to take them home to her one-room flat.

The time span covered in the nine stories encapsulates somewhat the history of Singapore from a land settled in by seafaring folk through colonial times and the post-war years to modern Singapore in the global era with all the paraphernalia of white and steel in home décor and fast food in shopping centres. By telling these tales of gloom from bygone and modern times, Tay has revealed that no amount of external trappings can hide the dark side of human nature, which invades even the most ordinary HDB flat. Yet, the light promised in Tay’s preface still manages to glimmer, perhaps all the more precious in the enveloping darkness. Honey’s murderer husband tries to do his best for their son. Violators of maidens receive some due punishment and even a lonely old lady finds solace in the tomato sauce she manages to save from her unpleasant burger. Tay does not waste words in her storytelling, only saying enough for the reader to follow the drama. Observant and dramatic, these dark tales told in multiple voices contribute to the literary landscape of contemporary writing from Singapore and prompt the reader to anticipate with interest the first novel from a true daughter of Singapore.

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