

Jason Erik Lundberg, ed. *The Epigram Books Collection of Best New Singaporean Short Stories*. Vol. 2. Singapore: Epigram Books, 2015. 356 pp. ISBN 978-981-4615-92-1.

When I reviewed the first volume of Jason Lundberg's *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* I set out to be mercilessly discriminative, sifting out five particularly important stories from much that I intuitively felt was slightly wanting. My experience over the last year has suggested that unfortunately Singapore is still not quite ready for such head on criticism – a number of Singaporean writers and critics' skins based in and outside of the city-state remain too thin and unhappy with anything less than a supportive gush, perhaps understandable in a milieu artistically and critically in relative infancy. This time then I'll temper my constructive criticism; being slightly kinder, more general. In response to my review of volume 1 in this series, Jason Lundberg assured me that the quality in the second volume was higher. The quality is indeed higher, testimony also perhaps to Lundberg becoming an ever more discerning, consistently sensitive savourer of contemporary local short fiction. So the quality of the Singapore short story c. 2013 seems to be increasing along with quantity. In his introduction Lundberg tells us that he had to read double the number of stories read for the first volume. These Lundberg found in a bewildering range of places, such as small local presses, journals, zines and websites. Lundberg also gives an understandable nod to the contemporary local short story progress milestone in both quality, development and sheer numbers sold that was and is Amanda Lee Koe's collection, *Ministry of Moral Panic*. Lundberg also acknowledges that he has censored his story choices in the interests of impartiality (vis-à-vis his stakeholding in terms of editing short fiction collections and his publisher employer's stable) and what he calls avoiding impropriety. One wonders if this was needful in Singapore in 2015. Lundberg, clearly a man of feeling, agonised over the choices in this volume, and burst into tears reading one of the stories: can we guess which one?

I don't know if it's Lundberg's editorial propriety or the field of choice, but there's an apolitical vanilla sameness about too many of the chosen stories. Is this because even more than with volume 1, the stories come from the same small place, and if not perhaps the same gender, the same cultural group, social class? Or could it be down to reader reception concerns?: this physically large volume again with an HDB brochure resembling cover was promoted like few other local books have been with industrial piles of copies available even in the west of Singapore at outlets like JEM Kinokuniya, as if for a mass audience. So have these "finest" stories been picked for literary quality or with one eye on business, because they hopefully offer, in George Orwell's words, "the dope that a privileged minority demands" (27). We do encounter some voices,

representations by majority writers of those from the margins, the furiously masturbating kelong employee, Siva, for instance. But there seem fewer representations of migrant workers, Malay presence all but erased, aside from a salacious reference to the Malay ladyboys of Changi Village, again in a story from someone who doesn't live in Singapore anymore ("Reel" 289). It is almost as if Singapore is producing a socially engineered kind of navel-gazing, veal-flavoured fiction. This has little to do with Lundberg's choices but just how the Singapore story in general too often is. Granted there are repeated mediated gestures to social conscience even in this selfie city-state of anxiety. And having said all this, my favourite story, and perhaps the best story in the collection is not political at all, and very Chinese Singaporean, though it does engage with one sometimes marginalised group in Singapore: kampong-recalling elders, pioneers. Was this the story I wonder that brought tears to Lundberg's eyes?

Samantha Toh's "White Noise" is the first of several queer stories. Here articulations of desire and loss in a US setting grow sensitively, poignantly out of the story's somewhat cartoony, corny beginnings. It seems strangely disappointing that the young women on a nervously memorable first date drive so far only to arrive at a McDonalds. And the music played in the car seems less white noise than middle of the road. Ng Yi-Sheng's "The Crocodile Prince" is characteristically Wildean (or Furbankian?), mythologising even Jurong industrial estate to Tuas into interrogative fairy tale imaginings of an albino prince. Some of the writing recalls in fact the magical realism of Gregory Nalpon: "She saw the faces of the old bearded men that yawned in the bark of every tree trunk, and the faces of young maidens that laughed under the stones" (212). If in Cheryl Lee's "A Red Meteor in the Margins," lost lovers are momentarily, touchingly reunited by marginalia in an old book, the story also contains an appalling flashback to the young couple becoming sexually excited by their physical abuse of a cat, echoing the children who also treat a cat poorly in O Thiam Chin's story. Perhaps such a national pastime deserves enshrining in local literature. I was struck by Lee's curious use of the word "smoothing" (111).

Andrew Cheah's "Anaesthesia" revels in its colourful camp blandly name-dropping prose, mapping Singapore through Bloom-like peregrinations, style dancing over substance. However, its denouement is unsettling in an unfortunate way, coming a tad too much out of nowhere, rather like the ending of Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan's "Reel." The collection's opening story, Evan Adam Ang's "A Day in the Death" is in experimental form, at times more like an essay, just about comes off, shifting back and forth from general to particular bleak representations of a Chinese labourer and opium addict's suicide in Singapore in the 1920s. Significantly, perhaps, death seems continually present in this collection. Ang's premise is fascinating – I'd never thought of Singapore in the 1920s – this microhistorical reclamation of a labouring class, reclaiming their individual stories to bely homogenised general national narrative reminded me of Daryl Lim's

poetry: “The thing about the past is this: no one is really special, unless someone makes them out to be” (12). Ang also successfully, provocatively suggests the unsettling feeling that life for those in poverty in Singapore continues to be as bad as it was in 1921, hard economics persistently lying beneath everything. So was it the father’s parting from his son that made Lundberg cry? My only reservation concerning Ang’s story is the lack of ambiguity, with little left to our imaginations.

The title of O Thiam Chin’s, “The Cat that Disappeared” might (unfairly?) conjure up Yishun – but it’s not that kind of story. Albeit containing one of the only two times I intuitively winced reading the collection (“The room was steeped in silence,” along with “When she grows up she wants to be a dragon”), this is the best, most evocative story I’ve read by O. There is an early sense of an important story and a skilled story teller. I liked the deft gestures to madness, eugenics in this not so simple story about a dead father’s cat. I also liked the detailed use of names of Singaporean breeds of cat – something I had also never thought of before. I also liked the eerie quietly unhinged, whispering male narrator.

J.Y. Yang’s “Patterns of Murmuration, In Billions of Data Points” undoubtedly appeals to Lundberg’s fascination for of sf fantasy. This is a tour de force, experiment with a touch of *A Clockwork Orange* in its lexis and delivery, “A tan coat murkies the outline of a broad figure” (37). If its cartoony perhaps slightly overwritten hi-tech dystopian melodrama was a little too much for me, I could appreciate how the story originally gestured to individuals lost in the mass, meditations on the nature of history, clever wordplay even riffing off Hamlet. Another dystopian tale is Victor Fernando R. Ocampo’s ambitious long “I am d 1 in 10” which is certainly distinctive, much of it written in SMS format: “THEY R COMING 4 me, my Dev/Null executioners, I got no more tym left so u, dear reader, have 2 fill in the gaps in my story”(39). and seems to successfully nod to the world of social media operating in an ever more constricting and hierarchical climate of fear, while ironically bemoaning via machine the loss of material text, print culture. Slightly more delicately handled, Daryl Yam’s “A Dream in Pyongchon” distinguishes itself by its audacious, overwhelming but welcome use of footnotes – one seeming longer possibly than the entire story. The patterning and echoing of ideas and words in an Asian queer dream landscape (“tears,” “cold,” “Really?”) and the dialogue between “text” and footnote make “Dream” an exquisitely unique, probably groundbreaking experience in Singapore literature thus far.

Wong Shu Yun’s, well-written “A Short History of the Sun,” a refreshingly tight and crisp story, brings us back to a violent if more story-rich democratised Singapore past. Not for the first time Singapore itself seems characterised as drug-like, an addictive struggle apt to drive many crazy. The sun imagery as the father shifts from criminal to pastor via Chang is beautifully handled. Jeremy Tiang’s

“Toronto” makes for subtle storytelling: we learn so much about a Singaporean female – and Singapore – by her sudden entry into a freer, more liberal, protest-friendly urban milieu. Tania De Rozario’s “Certainty” is perhaps even more skilful – dealing with suicide, child murder while simultaneously grappling with local superstition, madness, “kaypoh”-ness, melding of the heartland seeming-mundane with the mythical, notably the tragic legend of Ang Mo Kio as well as charismatic church translations of the Book of Jeremiah and getting authentically to grips with the human heartland condition. I am haunted by the unmistakably malevolent looks both O and Rozario’s principal characters receive from everyday Singaporeans.

The first story fully catching my undivided attention and perhaps my favourite in the whole book is Yu-Mei Balasingamchow’s “Visiting.” It is a beautiful accessible story related in good old-fashioned story-telling fashion. Without sentimentality, the story evokes our sympathy for a middle-aged widow originally from the kampong whose life seems constrained by her oppressive socially engineered kiasu-kaypoh daughters. But things are changed by a succession of uninvited animal visitors. The unexpected but natural twist at the end really made me sit up and this is surely another candidate for Lundberg’s tears. It is perhaps a coincidence, but this story also marked for me the first appearance of convincing artfully used singlish in a story in this collection.

Amanda Lee Koe’s as arresting if more experimental “Why Do Chinese People Have Slanted Eyes” is perhaps the most wide-rangingly political, hard hitting story. It explores a detail, an instance of racial difference through vignettes from a succession of perspectives and places, including the consequences of botched third eye-lid surgery, to highlight and interrogate the enduring one-way traffic unfairness of West over East perspectives, voices and values:

When *Der Blaue Reiter* riff off of African objets d’art or Chinese paintings, we say how original; we consign them to the avant-garde. But when an Asian artist references Fauvism or uses a motif of Kadinsky’s, we say how derivative.
(121)

How does a human bi-product of the ice-age become twisted incessantly into Parisian chinoiserie cliché? The story also includes without introduction a legal document suing a teenage Miley Cyrus for making Chinese eyes at a photoshoot. This text chimes darkly with the initially patriotic later coolly drowning Chinese model’s experiences in Paris. But the nuance and ambiguity in the story recalls Jon Gresham’s “Other People’s Cats” – are we to unequivocally condemn the foolish teen Miley to the tune of millions? or is something else going on here? and how does this incident connect, resonate with past and present institutional use of Indian blackface by actors and businessmen in Singapore? Deconstructing

western academic dominance of art, the story ends pertinently with a curator's discussion of a Filipino art installation:

Look at this work. *Counter Acts*, by the Filipino artist Poklong Anading. It is a black-and-white light box showing a group of people holding up circular mirrors to cover their faces, which in turn reflect the bright sunlight in which they have been photographed. And I chose to open the exhibition with it.

Of course, because the subjects are holding up mirrors, neither viewer nor subject can see one another – in place of their faces are light flares. This thing about objectification: the artist restores autonomy. This thing about perspective: the artist reminds us that we can never look at anyone from the viewpoint at which they see us. This thing about clarity: the artist blinds us, and in so doing, he all but annihilates gaze. (122)

Among other things this wide-angle, cosmopolitan story distinct from the umpteenth engagement with majority Singapore interrogates narrow, suspiciously conservative arguments for a Singapore literature which must only perforce engage with itself and local everyday “folks”. How could or how can Singapore literature expect to thrive toiling in such strict mythical national bounds?

Does Gemma Pereira's story “Mama at Owen Road” give us a very welcome exploration of Eurasian culture in Singapore? The story also gives us one of the most evocative explorations of a shophouse interior since Arthur Yap's “Noon at Five O'Clock.” In addition, a female lens captures potentially lost details of a former time and space. Mama's pinches of chicken and children's flesh are eerily blurred. Here we encounter very good ever more lyrical writing, evoking that bittersweet feeling of sadness whenever one hears or reads about childhoods in Singapore. The story is enhanced by surreal anthropomorphic touches: “The attic watches proudly from above, admiring his intelligence” (130). “The Pope hears about her state of affairs and comes to see her at Owen Road” (131). And later, ever hot Ma seems to become her own house, or is she already a ghost-memory? By the end of Pereira's story one has a poignant intimation of the possibilities of what is lost and what can possibly remain of quickly ageing and changing Singapore, or even our own worlds.

Kirsten Chen's “Foreign and Domestic” is a very accomplished story that charts a teenage girl's relationship with her Filipina maid and which effectively crosses both class and race. Oh for more such stories. The paralleling of courtship patterns of privileged Chinese schoolgirls and their maids as desired objects despite the depressing wealth disparity was I thought wonderfully handled. No homogenising here – in Chen's story maids remain quite rightly an inaccessible even enviable mystery – no matter how they are treated in Singapore. I was pleasantly reminded of other maid stories, Amanda Lee Koe's “Two Way to do This” and Jon Gresham's “The Finger.” Chen conjures up the nosy auntie-like tightlippedness of Singapore: ““Those girls are up to no good,’ my mother would

say, frowning out the window” (153). The narrator also recalls her monetary snobbery and self-hatred as an ‘American’ Singaporean: like a Saudi Arabian with Yemeni roots, capitalising on the cultural clout but never actually going back. The story has pace, so much finely going on. Lucy’s letter years later from Cebu, referring to her daughter “She wants to take care of Michelle’s daughter like I took care of Michelle” (168), while gesturing to eternal unfairnesses and disparities might be yet another contender for Lundberg’s tears. It is sad that two of the few typos in this collection should appear in this sublime story. Jennani Durai’s “Tenali Raman Redux” is a neat, clever short story with a welcome Tamil setting. Jinny Koh’s “Off Duty” is also well-told with a poignant socially-conscious setting and ending, illuminatingly recalling for me Katherine Mansfield’s “Life of Ma Parker.”

Stephanie Ye’s “Meat Bone Tea” contains some nice writing, an original premise and the idea of intercutting geographical plates with more human encounters shows inventive potential. And yet again a telling Singaporean glare:

There is any number of superficial reasons why the mother could hate her on sight, and Julia does not begrudge her a single one. She is comforted by this revelation of a depth of feeling. (252)

Karen Kwek’s “The Moral Support of Presence”, full of first chop writing, explores a Chinese void deck funeral, the narrator (with an infected eye-brow piercing) having lost her once Buddhist, now evangelical, Christian Mother. Again, the democratised detail is fascinating. At times it is as if this collection opened out onto a certain dominant Singapore world, generational registers of Singapore English riffing tellingly off one another. Sharlene Teo’s “Coast” explores a dying middle-aged relationship with wit and irony. The ending defined by a consummate working of what’s not said.

Joshua Ip’s inventive and energetically written “The Man Who Turned into a Photocopier” makes poetry and classical myth out of the most mundane unlikely milieu, the Singapore office. It gestures originally to the possibilities of half-man half-machine, if not soft cuckold porn, riffing with a poet’s eye off the metaphorical possibilities of the dominance of photocopiers and pert female co-workers in office life. It immortalises Candy Crush Saga in Singapore lit, while asking the question, as males are we after all much more than slowly ageing photocopier models? The final story by veteran short story writer, Claire Tham, “The Judge” (currently studied as an O Level text) is one of the strongest stories, expertly tweaking the individual and national conscience on the issue of capital punishment via the perspective of a judge of a capital case: “Does it ever get easier?... Condemning a man to death?” (325). After all, the evidence is always *incontrovertible* isn’t it?

As usual, Lundeberg ends the collection with a list of (83!) “Honourable mentions” – stories that did not make the final cut. One wonders how different this collection might have been with the inclusion of say Jon Gresham’s “A Girl and a Guy in a Kijang in Kemang,” Lydia Kwa’s “Speaking in Tongues,” Amanda Lee Koe’s “Panda Cunt, Bear Gall” or Nurul H’s “Unravelling.” Nevertheless, this collection is a fascinating, engaging introduction to the Singapore story as it was in 2013-14. I very much look forward to volume 3 edited by Cyril Wong.

Lastly, tired old eyes like mine especially appreciate the larger format and print of these collections, but can anything be done about the quality of the paper? My copy has already BEGUN to “fox” like an old English book published in 1819.

Works Cited

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