

O Thiam Chin, *Love, Or Something like Love*. Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2013. 116 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-7671-8.

Seasoned authors will tell you that a short story is much more challenging to write compared to a novel. A narrative in condensed form, the short story requires not just an economy of words, but the meticulous distillation of a subject matter by paring it down to basics, thereby revealing something intimate and essential about it. A good short story can sometimes read like poetry, in which plot matters less than the exposition of an abstraction, be it a feeling, the dynamics of a relationship, or even a memory. Or, it can carry profound moral or religious undertones, thereby recalling the earliest forms of the genre – the fable and the parable – which tilts it towards the allegorical as its brevity becomes invested with layers of interpretive significance. And unlike a novel, whose length allows for narrative development that takes the reader through a roller-coaster of emotions, the short story can, and should, only leave a single impact; as such, it must exercise precision with each word and turn of phrase to ensure that the (alleged) desired one is achieved.

In this regard, Singaporean writer, O Thiam Chin's latest collection of short stories, *Love, Or Something like Love*, seems like a hit-and-miss effort. At their best, his stories, such as "The Cat that Disappeared" and "A Lost Boy," display an acute sensitivity towards narrative nuances that invite various reading positions while quietly discomfiting the reader. In the former tale, a woman attempts to give away her father's pet cat to a stranger after discovering him dead in his apartment and parts of his face eaten by the animal. Underlying this main narrative frame is another story, recounted through the woman's flashback, of a difficult relationship between herself and her schizophrenic father due largely to her shame of, and unspoken disdain towards, him. In the end, her motivation to relinquish the cat as the result of its action is possibly just a pretext to repress her terrible realisation that the animal figuratively mirrors her in terms of her filial failing: like it, she too has bitten the hand that fed her by gradually abandoning her father with the excuse of work, when on his part, he had only ever shown her singular devotion and battled his mental deficiency to secure a job so that he could provide for her. The latter story, also recounted *via* a framed narrative and flashback, focuses on a grandmother's fear of having infected her grandson with her immorality. In accidentally discovering his penchant for pornographic websites, her suspicion was raised in concomitance with the return of unwanted memories of her youth, and how her voracious sexual appetite had cost someone else her life. In oscillating between the woman's mounting concern over her grandchild and her memory of a tragic past, the narrative effectively juxtaposes the framing story against the framed one expressed through flashback. Although the story begins and ends with the

framing tale, it is undoubtedly the framed story that takes precedence, as evident in its longer sections. In this way, the narrative indirectly demonstrates the power of the past over the present that no amount of wilful forgetting or denial can undo.

The principle strength in the two stories discussed above obviously lies in O's sophisticated deployment of the literary motif. Indeed, comparing the motifs in both narratives reveal striking parallels, the primary of which is a transactional property that directly relates the motif to the protagonist/first person narrator in an intimate but damning way, thus necessitating its repudiation. While this is quite easily accomplished in "The Cat that Disappeared," since the motif is represented by a tangible object, the process is much more daunting in "A Lost Boy," where the motif is embodied by an immaterial but inheritable notion. As such, despite being in attendance throughout the narrative, its signifier (a bad gene, karma, the biblical notion of a parent's sin visiting upon his children?) is less easy to identify. Interestingly, the motif's transactional inclination in both tales also affords it a technical function as well, that is as the seguing device shifting the framing account to the framed. Clearly, O's use of the motif precisely complements the concise form of his chosen medium in its capacity as figurative shorthand to encourage various critical responses and interpretations.

Other commendable stories in the collection are "The Verdict" and "At the Suvarnabhumi Airport," both somewhat morality tales about sexual depravity and hypocrisy amongst middle-class men. Effective here is the author's steady building of events to simultaneously chart the (male) protagonist's moral decline and reinforce his corruption that by the end of the story, redemption is no longer possible. In this regard and specific to "The Verdict," O's utilisation of a confessional tone throughout the story is especially compelling as the first-person narrator's self-criticism is tellingly undermined by his claim of ignorance and gullibility, which together serve to only further betray his unreliability and accentuate his indictment.

Less effective in the collection, at least in my view, are stories that curiously also share a common theme. Evident in "Boys at Play," "Third Eye," "You are Always Here, All the Time" and "The Years," is the subject of loss – whether through death, paralysis, or a missed chance – and the desperate consequences it can thereafter engender. Somehow, when dealing with this issue, O's writing seems to display a tendency otherwise absent from, or tactfully restrained in, his stronger works, that is, to lace the narrative with emotionalism bordering on the banal. Interspersed between longing for the time "before" and wondering about life "after" in these stories are variously the protagonist's expressions of self-blame or self-pity, confusion and regret, all of which does little for the story except reduce it to melodrama. In a couple of stories, this is made worse by the protagonist's resolve at the end of the tale to

accept fate and learn contentment – a formula befitting the “Chicken Soup” series, but smacking of narrative bad faith in a work of art. With regards to “The Years,” which focuses on homosexuality, the possibility of reading loss as a blessing invariably imputes the story with a degree of (at best) insensitivity to, or (at worse) condemnation against, gay people. I believe neither is intended (judging from O’s other queer tale in the collection, “The Last Voyage”), but portraying gay men as promiscuous and predatory does not help to elevate their already unjustifiably besmirched image, and, with regards to the plot, directly renders hollow the protagonist’s lingering and unspoken grief over repressing his homosexuality, especially when in view of the fact that since his single gay fling almost three decades ago, his decision thereafter to renounce his desire and return to his newlywed wife have richly rewarded him with a faithful companion and dutiful children. In the end, not only does the narrative fail to draw the reader’s sympathy for a closeted homosexual’s plight (which seems non-existent), but has also, perhaps unwittingly, reinforced the purported rightness of the heterosexual imperative.

Perhaps to add a spice of difference to his volume, O includes two historical tales set against the backdrop of an ancient Chinese world. In “The Last Voyage,” O’s focus of homosexuality as a theme once again is more celebratory but only slightly better handled than “The Years.” Avoiding crass stereotypes (i.e. effeminate, passive, shy), O instead casts his two main gay characters as, respectively, a commander of the Yellow Emperor’s fleet and his trusted servant, whose bond of affection is equalled to their comradeship in battle. With such promising lead and premise, it is therefore unfortunate that the sum of the story amounts to no more than the commander’s confession of undying devotion to his lover that culminates at the end of the tale with his anticipation, as they near the end of his last mission, after which he retires, of spending his twilight years basking in the warmth of his beloved’s ardour. Admittedly, as a reflection of one man’s private thoughts, the tale can justifiably emphasise whatever (or whoever) it deems preoccupies him most profoundly; but homage can be easily overdone, turning praise into cloying pronouncements that reduce the speaker to a love-sick puppy. “The Voyage” comes dangerously close to this, concluding just in time to prevent the story from becoming a Petrarchan sonnet, although not soon enough to obstruct it from already getting there. Finally, the other historical tale stands out in the collection due to its unmistakable difference in tone and storytelling from all the rest. Told in a straightforward, unambiguous and no-nonsense manner, “Swordsmen” is a kung-fu flick rendered into words with a pace and the suspense to match. An entertaining tale of greed and betrayal filled with sword-fighting action, heightened passion and swift, gory deaths, it will certainly keep the reader at the edge of her seat from start to finish. One oversight in the story, however, is its reference to the metric system when measuring distance. For a tale about long-

ago China, this is evidently anachronistic to, and incompatible with, its setting and mood. Admittedly a minor misstep, it has the potential to momentarily ruin the reader's (like myself) pleasure derived from vicarious time-traveling and assumption of a different identity while being absorbed in the tale.

My criticism of these several stories in no way, however, suggests their lack of merit; as with any criticism, it is my subjective perspective as a reader and literary critic on what I think would improve the stories, and it is in this spirit that I offer my views. And despite my reservations with regards to some of the tales, I must confess that, overall, I did enjoy O's stories immensely. When in top form, they shine an indirect and terrible light on the problematic psyche of contemporary Singapore by revealing the incompatibility between, for example, a state-promoted ideology (such as the Confucian virtue of filial piety) and the lived reality faced by ordinary people (like belonging to a radically dysfunctional family, or having a parent who abuses you); or the past and future, which the self in the present, despite all her efforts, is unable to reconcile. And while consistency in quality seems to be O's Achilles heel, he is not entirely to blame since the short story is a difficult genre, and requires long years of discipline, practice and experimentations to master. But with this latest collection, his fifth publication, it is evident that O remains dedicated to his craft, which, already distinctive, can only get better with time and maturity. After all, and perhaps as an encouragement, one should remember that Alice Munro, who writes exclusively short stories, was 82 when she was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature – a definite indication that an unshakeable belief in, and a lifelong devotion to, one's art are never in vain.

Andrew Ng
Monash University Malaysia