

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

In the off-white, smooth-textured and aroma-scented malls of Singapore, the gloom of death seems to linger, haunting the city's cleanliness with the cold chill of an empty hospital. Verena Tay's *Spectre* revels in this chill, resurrecting horror myths and letting them loose in a city of health fanatics, giving voice to the lingering souls of wives betrayed by husbands, and of those forgotten in the masculine swirling tides driving the city.

Mostly known as a playwright, Verena Tay has recently stepped into the fraught field of short story writing, armed with an Honorary Fellowship from the University of Iowa and an MFA from the Creative Writing program at the City University of Hong Kong. With her finger on the pulse of Singapore's social scene, Tay is able to prod literary culture by recalling magical myths of the homeland and putting them into a contemporary context, re-signifying the myths from ethnic histories into repressed anxieties haunting Singapore's populous. Tay's technique is most effective when she focuses on the gore and horror caused by objects that transcend historical eras – the land, racial lineage – suggesting that the Singapore surveillance state, no matter how hardwired for optimisation, cannot contain the festering fear of isolation, disease, rejection and death.

Tay's most innovative contribution comes in her promising narrative form, as her stories lead from narrator to narrator in sometimes tenuous threads that become meaningful through their sudden juxtaposition. In "The Doll," a young girl's rape is juxtaposed with a young woman being laid off in a toy factory. "The Land" traces a bomoh's (Malay Shaman's) haunting presence from 1818 to 1898, 1948 and then 2008. This story structure that strikes from narrator to narrator in unexpected turns, across history and across nations, invests each story with the feeling of a rollercoaster ride rather than with a slow deepening into an abyss. Likewise, each story stops at a puzzling, hazy halt. The turns of story, once the reader begins to expect them, also leaves open the potential for main characters to get killed off well before the story's end, thus making every character as vulnerable to murder as the last.

Tay's transition from playwright to short story author brings pleasant innovations onto the genre, yet her blunt prose and exaggerated characters perhaps are best suited for the theatre. The collection's weaker stories continue to use ethnic myths and sudden changes in narration, but do so while also carrying forward simplistic characters that read more as old myths rather than as contemporary complex people. Her stories have a habit of turning female victims into bait for brutal murders and supernatural deaths, and most often this means simplifying oppressed historical figures into symbols of purity,

innocence and naivety, who then become defined completely by the violent acts done upon them. The first story, “Honey’s Story,” is a true crime tale about a Thai sex worker turned stay-at-home wife who is murdered and chopped up by her husband. Like most of the stories in the collection, it takes on the victim’s voice head-on, representing it as a victim and little more: “I stupid,” the voice screeches from beyond the grave, “think you my prince.... No, you hail me and me slave.... I cook you many food, serve you like king, must sleep with you every night, your belly rub, rub on me, and crush me until I give you a son” (15). After nine heavy pages of this victim’s voice, the shock begins to wear, and the gimmick of the Thai sex worker speaking after her brutal murder wears on the reader into a type of victim-fatigue. The woman’s voice, directed only at the husband, seems superficial, simplistic. She seems defined solely by her victimisation. She never stops to think of her mother, her father, her friends or her religious rituals. The voice seems to have been written from a playwright, as it awkwardly gives exposition while still exclaiming distress. “Oh, Lee,” she opines, “Why you chop me up like chicken? Everything bloody.... Toilet all blood. Now, you put me in trash bags, throw me like rubbish? Lee, why you do this?” (18). Similarly, Tay’s second story, “The Land,” takes on the voice of multiple oppressed women and seems to do no favours in their representation. It begins with the murder of a pregnant woman, Yati, who is defined by “her desire to help others,” that is, before she is mutilated and her child is sacrificed by a *bomoh*. Later, Tay introduces a woman over a hundred years later who lives nearby the same land where Yati was killed. She too only wishes she “could be pregnant and give birth to my own child” (36) but is unable to do so after “two years being raped daily as a comfort woman in a Japanese army camp” (37). This new character, pining for a child, is then attacked by the spirit of the *bomoh*, only to stab herself to death (aiming at her newly inseminated fetus) with a pair of scissors.

While the insertion of comfort women and chopped up Thai sex workers may seem laudable or provocative, the historical oppression that they signify seems to function merely as another anxiety for the reader to feel horrified by. Whereas horror films and stories often victimise the middle and upper class, thus revealing a society’s repressed hypocrisies, Tay’s stories seem to revel in the misery of the oppressed by oppressing them further with *magical* rape and violence. The stories seem to combine the market-driven exploitation of slum tourism with the market-driven exploitation of gore. Indeed, Tay seems unapologetic in this respect. Her preface admits that the market was a primary concern while she wrote these stories: “From the start, I did not intentionally set out to create a book of dark stories. Yet in writing these tales, I seemed to gravitate towards the spooky and the macabre, the bizarre and the fantastical, thereby increasing the potential of these tales to be sold under the supernatural and/or horror categories that do very well in the Singaporean context” (11).

If Tay's first two stories seem heavy-handed in placing victimised historical figures in horrifying situations to victimise them further, these stories happen to be only a warm-up for the dozens of historically oppressed female characters who are then attacked, gored, raped and made sex-slaves. Tay's stories then seem to be exposing (if not exploiting) the conservative anxieties of Singapore's obsession with healthy reproductive labour, and with holding children and family life sacrosanct. Tay prods this social anxiety through depicting overwhelmingly brutal violence upon fertile female bodies, while at the same time refusing to pause, reflect or analyse its own victims in a way that might reveal something perceptive or critical of the social sphere. Rather, these stories seem satisfied in wringing out the anxieties of state-nurtured health, marketing fear in a way that only produces more of it.

The collection's theme of resurrecting ethnic myths of the bomoh, the pontianak and the yamatoot also seems like an opportunity taken with mixed results. Tay places such myths in the contemporary period, yet the contemporary setting is barely visible, and is just that – a setting, while the stories and myths remain with little changes in their plot or their characterisations. In resurrecting these myths, Tay often reverts to horror cliches like the voice of ghosts coming through television channels and land-phones (*Poltergeist*, *The Ring*). But what about mobile phones? What about the internet, high speed rails, wonky Singapore architecture or anime? The one reference to digital media – a video game – fails its authenticity test as the child playing it obsesses over killing “monsters” to collect thousands of “points” (first-person shooters rarely stack achievement in collecting points).

The book's resurrection of popular regional myths then seems somewhat ahistorical, as it tends to smuggle along old assumptions of gender and sexuality, rather than seek to reflect upon them or shift them for a contemporary global political view. As in the world of these myths, all of Tay's female victims experience sexuality as an exterior threat: as a rape, as a means of obtaining a child, or as a way to satisfy their partner. While the setting of Tay's stories appears to be contemporary, the plots focusing on asexual women longing only for marriage, children, and a man's attention, remain unchanged.

Tay's focus on victimised women might be admirable, though her women struggle against a version of patriarchy as old as the myths that the stories seek to revive, with little attempts to understand masculine privilege in the context of global capitalism, the Singapore city-state, or neo-colonial cultures (“Walls,” about an obese woman raising her grandchild, being a grand exception). As a reader I end up having to ignore the book's murky politics and read the stories as pure entertainment, meant to make me gasp, wheeze, or even scream. As entertainment, they are delightful, no doubt. But if Tay's long journey through Iowa and the MFA program in Hong Kong were simply to write entertaining

(rather than provocative, perceptive) stories, then I am left hoping that her next fiction project pursues a greater ambition than to satiate the market.

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