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New material: a novella, and the
accompanying exegesis, How to log into
the book: cyborgs and fiction

Lucy Alexander
University of Wollongong

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New Material – A Novella

And the accompanying exegesis

How to Log Into the Book: Cyborgs and Fiction

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Master of Creative Arts (Research)

From

The University of Wollongong

By Lucy Alexander

BCA (Hons) University of Wollongong

Faculty of Creative Arts

2007

Certification

I, Lucy Jane Alexander declare that this novella and accompanying exegesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Creative Arts (Research) in the Department of Creative Writing, School of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Lucy Jane Alexander

August 2007

Creative Work – New Material

Abstract

The novella New Material explores the intersections between fictional space, cyber space and mythic space, through three characters' narratives: Jo, his cousin Mei and Lee Wei Hong. Set in Singapore in 2007, the novella is narrated by each of these characters, whose voices interrupt and layer one another's stories. Jo is a teen hacker and computer expert who lives fully immersed in a networked world. Mei has come from Australia to stay with Jo's family, fleeing her parents' divorce. She is an avid reader and uses fictional space as an escape route from her troubled family. Thirdly, the older Lee Wei Hong, an offset printer, whose narration takes the form of a statement to the police.

It is seeing himself as his online avatar through his cousin's eyes that Jo begins transformation and when Mei insists they need to experience a rainstorm Jo comes into contact with physical reality in a way he has been avoiding. Mei's journey through Singapore leads her to explore her roots and she and Jo come to know one another better through talking about their shared grandmother's spiritual heritage. However, Jo's double-dealing with gamers online leads him to be assaulted in a back alley. Strangely, the alley is full of paper. The night of the hungry ghosts sees Jo and Mei immersed in the novel they salvaged. The narrative entangles the two of them, as they become part of the story.

Lee Wei Hong's confession is the lead-up to his 'crime'. During the course of his day he reads and falls in love with a book, the physical book that he has been working on. When he discovers that his work will not be available to the public, but that the novel will only be available online he is moved to act. In a state of passion he takes the printed pages of the review copy his company has, and throws them off the tenth storey of the National Library. This is his criminal act.

These are the pages that Jo and Mei have found, read and also been inspired to act upon. Through his hacking Jo has unearthed a series of emails that read well as fiction. He and Mei decide to send them on to the author to influence his next book.

Exegesis – How to Log into the Book: Cyborgs and Fiction

Abstract

The exegesis situates the novella New Material in the surrounding landscape of literary fiction writing and theoretical posthumanism in two ways. First, it discusses the novel within the framework of two other novels, Peter Carey's My Life as a Fake and Jeanette Winterson's The PowerBook, both of which deal in very different ways with the cyborg within fiction, as both constructed character and constructed author. Secondly, the exegesis draws on the work of theorists and researchers Elizabeth Grosz' Space, Time, Perversion - the Politics of Bodies, Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", N Katherine Hayles' How We Became Post-Human: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics and Sherry Turkle's Life on Screen: Identity and the Age of the Internet. These four writers' works are used as metaphorical global positioning systems to discuss the novella New Material, and map the territories where its concerns overlap with those of the Carey and Winterson novels.

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But, especially to Winston, who's an amazing reader and honest friend. Thanks for all the time you gave to this. And also, young Toby who turned up in the middle of it all and changed everything. I love you both.

New Material

A Novella

To Mei Mei Chen and her father Dr. Eric Chen.

To Miles Cornel, Iris Peters and Lee Wei Hong.

And especially to Jo without whom, we would not have intersected.

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One

The Emails

To: [Email address removed for privacy]

Subject: 'New Material'

Attachment: 'Everything You Need.doc'

At 12.34pm [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

Dear Mr Stokes,

Please find attached all the material you will need for your next novel. It may seem a bit forward of us to send it to you zipped into an email like this. We feel sure it's the story you need. The one you have been searching for. A story only you will be able to do justice to. We have a part to play in it, too, but that will become clear as you read the material. We look forward to your new book. You won't believe how we read your first one. Or how it came into our hands. But read what we have attached to this email and you will start to understand. It won't matter too much once you see how this story has to fit together. We think it will capture you just as 'My Fierce Delay' captured us.

All I ask in return is that you dedicate the new work to my cousin.

Yours truly,

Jo.

Quarantine:

To: [Email address removed for privacy]

Subject: *Re: Immediate Connection*

At 11.21am on the 23.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

...What matters to me is this: that we should make a significant connection.

I don't want one of those chatty relationships that people have to make themselves feel certain of who they are – because I know who I am, and, it seems to me, you have a very clear idea of yourself (I imagine the way you read this, seriously, head bent low, hands flared out on the keyboard ready to reply). We may be able to share something extraordinary; the type of conversation I long for; with an equal, at last.

We will be connected, through satellites and cables and optical fibres, brain to brain, synapse to synapse: each of my thoughts will be yours, and each of yours will be mine.

What better way to love one another? (If it should come to this – ?) But, let me presume, in this strange universe where I can speak, at last, in my real voice.

I have thought about this, and what we are in need of is a set of rules, or we will almost certainly get out of hand. What I propose is a completely textual relationship. I am here, you are there, and we write. The idea, I suppose, sounds old-fashioned – it's more than that, it's ancient – and, you see, I am sure you do, how this will allow us to connect as humans, to make use of the technology at hand...

Two

How To Jack In

Jo:

On the 5.36pm MRT journey from Newton to Bishan on the north-south line, Thursday October twenty seventh and no one will meet my eye. I have been experimenting for the past few weeks. I recognise some of the same people each day. We sway to the same motions of the train, pressed together in the peak hour rush. Even though we can hear one another's breath, few of the others look up. These people are too busy with their phones, their games and headsets to notice me. Everyone is silent, each tuned into a world of their own. If you take out your ear-pods you can hear the voices of people talking on their hand phones; the ring-tones of various handsets, or – if you get close enough – the tiny sounds of headphones pressed into ears. If you want to really tune out the best ones to use are the canalphones – IEMs – they block out most of the environmental noise. They provide a seal for the ear. Mine were made to fit my ear canal so I can tune into my own choice of noise and watch the people in transit, while they don't mind my stare.

The neon light shows details in people's faces. It makes the plastic seats shine. In here, we are brighter than the outdoors, speeding into underground tunnels. I am not worried by the speed of the train or the tunnels any more, now I know how it works; the safety precautions that are in place. With everyone breathing, the swing of the train around the corners, the rise and fall of the phone conversations you can even get sleepy. Mesmerised. Have your thoughts pulled into directions you might not choose to go.

I like to stand by the door, politely moving aside. My game is to see how many people will touch me unintentionally. Afternoon is a good time for this game. The carriage is so full many people have to stand. I move aside to avoid contact with one person and get into another's way. My arm has to brush against a woman's back. A young man knocks me with the box he is carrying. Someone pushes past in a hurry to get to the door. I lose my balance and am forced to stumble into the uniformed body of the Japanese girl. She has headphones of her own plugged into her ears. She doesn't hear my apologies. Keeps nodding in time to music I can't hear.

As I watch my hand on the railing I also examine this girl's face. Her eyes, half closed, take me in, but don't focus. They have a dreamy look. I try to imagine what she might see as she looks into the spaces between us.

Everyone on the train, we are all in transit together. Though this seems obvious, it strikes me – none of us are going to the exact same place. We're all slightly put out to have to be here, to be in this compartment at all. Someone rustles their copy of the *New Paper*, as we all find our own way of pretending we're not here. I change my grip on the steel pole, and my fingers brush against the knotted hand of an old man, who looks up at me from his meditation through his magnified glasses. His huge eyes blink at me.

These are not simply scenes; I will remember all of these people, always. Until recently, going on the MRT was more than I could manage. Now, I have learnt to filter, one person at a time, one touch at a time. If you think about it in the right way, it all becomes a huge game. Everyone in the city is playing. And as you get used to it, it is no longer overwhelming: it is a challenge.

It isn't until Toa Payoh I notice him. The crowd has thinned a little. There is a point like this each trip. It seems there is more air in the carriage; more room around each of us. He is wearing a sleeveless t-shirt, allowing huge amounts of his white skin to show. At least, I think his skin is white, underneath.

I can see his back. His hair is thin and shaved so the tattoos on his scalp are clearly visible. They peer out at me, wide eyes looking back into my own. But what has captured me is the tattoo that drapes itself across his shoulder-blades and around the back of his neck. In vivid colour, looking almost as real as his body does, is the arm and hand of a woman. You can tell it belongs to a female by the shape, the curve of the shoulder it as it reaches across his back. The flesh of the arm is pinker than his, the hand is relaxed, the long fingers disappear under his shirt. The elbow wrinkles perfectly as it bends making a v in the flesh of the arm. There is a bracelet of bright beads twinkling on her arm. I am amazed by the way they convincingly morph: the illustration and the traveller. The straps of his backpack dangle into the aisle. But, he is not alone. He will never be alone, with the arm of that woman so lovingly holding on to him.

I realise I am staring at the man's shoulder. I am breathing in short breaths. I want to check my temperature, but that would mean leaning down to access the left pocket of my bag for the thermometer. Instead I check my pulse surreptitiously, my finger against my own wrist.

At Bishan the doors of the carriage open and hiss, and I step onto the platform a little too slowly for two men who tread on my heels. We are all drawn with the crowd of other passengers to the escalators. I take my place behind a woman wearing a silky headscarf that ripples in the air

conditioning. The exit to the outside world is all dulled with rain. Most people put up their umbrellas, others skirt the over-hang, past the newsagent, the McDonalds, the fruit shop and food stalls then cross the road with *The Straits Times* over their heads. I open my black umbrella, but after a few paces I have to stop to wipe the spray of water from my glasses with my sleeve. I hate not seeing in the rain. All the passengers behind me file past, making two neat rows either side, but no one touches me.

Do I want to be touched? If someone was there to ask me, yes, so what if I do? I want to have a connection to the world. You can have a connection through email, through online interaction, through internet and LAN gaming. But, when I am pushed, when I am taken up as part of the crowd (I keep my eyes unfocussed, I will not look around, I use the compass to keep to one direction) not just me but also my body is taking part in the game.

I keep my key to our flat on a chain around my neck. This way I can't forget it, and it's difficult to lose. Now I'm taller, the chain is not long enough and I have to bend to get the key to the door. Then I have to struggle to get the key back out of the lock. Every afternoon it gets stuck and I have to stand, bent at the hips, neck craned with the chain digging in at the back of my neck, to extract it. Amy laughs at me when she's still about, finishing the chores.

'You always get it stuck...' she says, winking at me and wiggling her finger, as I jiggle and pull and ease the key out of the lock. Sometimes, in the lift, I ask whichever God is listening, to let me in my door with no trouble.

This Thursday, out of the corner of my eye – the way you see things that move stealthily, trying not to be seen – I catch the edge of a dark shape. And as I turn to look the shape slides further out of view, until it becomes part of the shade under the armchair. Sometimes, when I see these things I am sure it is just the shadow of the rain. But, sometimes I think it's a ghost. This time I smile at it, thinking of the tattoo arm and the way it is missing its body, too. Amy tightens her mouth and continues the ironing. I close the door, hoping I haven't let in something unwanted. Something is waiting to happen, that's the feeling I have. Even though there is nothing more ordinary, I have the sense that everything is about to change. How do I know? I can't tell you . . .

I leave my shoes and jacket to dry out on the balcony, and go to my room. I sit down at the computer, wake up the screen with a touch and undo the collar of my shirt. I put my phone down next to my wallet so they are parallel to the keyboard. I tug on the key on its chain. It's a habit I have when I'm about to go into computer space. Like taking my shoes off to come into the flat. The computer unfolds itself from sleep and opens to my blog page, which I was working on before school.

On this site my thoughts are packed neatly into sequence. There are photos, banners that wave to my visitors. I'm never alone in here, in the stillness of the flat, with just the sound of Amy singing as

she does the ironing, or rain against the window. All I really need from any friend happens here, between me, the screen, the network and the other person. I have friends from here in this city. We live our lives moving between the dark grey buildings and the Breadfruit trees. This is the city where the rain falls heavy and thick. Each night the sun sets at exactly the same time.

There are others too, friends I've made from around the world by gaming. These people are mysterious to me but they show me so much. I learn about myself through them, through the games and through what they write to one another. They allow me to be more than I really am. In the games I can be extreme. I take huge leaps of faith, risks that terrify me in the real world. I do everything that in my room with the drooping curtains and the sound of Amy bringing in the washing, I am unable to do.

I log in and scan through the mail that arrived during the day. There is nothing that interesting. I am a little disappointed. But, most of what happens, takes place later in the evening.

I log in to my online discussion group. I know their identities, but they don't know mine, these boys from school, who pass me in the corridors and knock me over on the school's concrete paths. Here, they confess their anxieties. Younger boys, who jeer at my thick glasses and long eyelashes, repeat to me what their mother said about them. Here, they can't judge me by how short or strange I seem, only by my site, the way I run the discussion, the code I write, the way I make it and elegant and exact.

In the afternoons when there are thundery showers, the rain falling in long drops past our windows, there is time for us to gather in clear dry virtual places to chat. To exchange thoughts, to suddenly and safely reveal ourselves; to be touched, or to find love – even – between the dark columns of words and the flashing coloured promises of advertising banners. I watch this all from a distance, from the usual distance I am told I will always have. The computer is like the barrier, the invisible, impenetrable layer of air that hangs around me. Here, I am omniscient. I am like one of my grandmother's lesser Gods. I want to be a kind God, so I let them talk, I turn the discussion to topics of interest, of which I have an exhaustive list. The top five are: girls, football, gaming, movies and national service. National service hovers over all of us; unless football or gaming can get us out of it.

I get bored quite quickly; that first topic, doesn't really interest me. I code my way past the firewall and check in on what's been picked up by my invention, the little program I wrote that I call 'Quarantine'. Hackers would call it a trojan, because like the Trojan Horse it comes in like a gift message in a little flash animation. I think of it as jacking in, the cable in the back of the computer allowing access to see the world in another geometry. A list of emails is crouched in my files – for their senders they are lost in the intricacies of cyberspace, held-up, slowed while I have a look at them.

I find here, though these writers can't meet my eye, they manage to say those things that make eyes unnecessary. Other schoolboy's blogs make demands, as if their authors were peeling back their skins to prove their muscles, one at a time. But here, occasionally, in the text of lost letters that float into my net, I find what it is that other people say to one another behind all those closed doors. The stakes are higher than on the MRT. The game is to see what those travellers would be saying if they were writing to the ones they love. It is like mind reading. It is better than listening to the one-way whispered phone conversations you can hear if you are close enough. Here people don't hold themselves back. They think they know who will be reading. They write with the audience in mind.

Unencrypted emails are the easiest to catch. Ones from personal accounts that don't include the security that companies invest in. Stripped of formatting they come in naked. And though this game doesn't involve touching, there is so much more to see from a person who writes down a fragment of themselves, than from the way they present out in the world.

I began to read these when my parents allowed me the greater bandwidth, and I was fascinated by what I could find out there: people being genuine, showing all of themselves. Sometimes I imagine them with their brains pressed hard into the screen, synapses firing through the cables, the quartz, along the paths to satellites into databases, illustrating themselves more truthfully than I thought possible.

I blink into the screen that is several layers thick with documents, pages that scan lengthways. My findings. I imagine it is the man who swayed with me on the MRT that writes:

You will always find me here, wondering about the possibilities of your love. It's a little like freezing to death without you. They say you can't feel a thing, and dying is like drawing one long breath, not knowing it's your last.

And I think of that perfect pink arm across his back. Lovingly enfolding him. Never leaving him alone.

Three

This Particular Morning

Lee Wei Hong:

You see, to fully understand what I did – and believe me, I am more sure now than I was, even at the time, that it was the only possible thing for a man in my position to do – you need the whole story. What have I done, you ask, with my actions? What, but brought shame to my family and sadness to my friends? But I wonder if it's possible that I have hauled myself out of this sanitised landscape far enough to see through the city's camouflage of pollution to the clear air sweeping in from the Straits? Perhaps now I'm in custody I have a broader perspective. My offence comes to define me but, you see, that must have been what I wanted.

I have a feeling, even before I begin to tell you everything as you have asked, that we will disagree on what we mean when we say 'everything'. What I think is absolutely necessary to understanding, not simply what happened, but how it came to this – my own anger and determination, in fact the beauty of the act – is probably not the same as the law's. You expect a terse, brief statement and I want to make my confession – because, for the first time someone is listening to me.

That is what the whole incident is about, you see: the way a story is told and how it reaches its readers. The power of black words, ink pressed into the lovely medium of paper. A medium I have devoted my life to. And, it seems I have destroyed myself trying to protect. I would rather not exist myself than live in a world where the craft of words and ink and paper, with all its lovely properties, was redundant. You may not think you want to know everything I am about to reveal. Isn't that a charming contradiction? You don't know what you need to know; at least, not yet.

Starting with the morning of Thursday the seventh, I am to write it out exactly as I remember it. You want an explanation of precisely what led up to the crime. A *crime* you call it! It was an act of *liberation* in this city where that very word has a foreign tang to it ...A *crime*, up there on the roof of Singapore, listening to the morning breeze, the sirens below me, the flutter of paper in the embrace of the wind.

But this morning the air came streaming in through the tiny sliding window of my Department of Housing flat. It felt cool on my bare arms and face; it moved the sarong that serves as a curtain aside and fluttered the pages of the book on my table. Woken by the sound of air against paper, a hiss, it sounded like the breath of some living thing. Living alone – as I'm sure you know – I hate that

moment of waking. But on this day there was a sense of anticipation sitting in my throat. That storm hovered there over the islands, we all waited for it to break, but it held off. My alarm went off at 6am, I showered and dressed, put my keys and wallet in my pocket and went downstairs. Other than to go to the kopitiam to drink tay-cee and eat a kaya toast then catch the MRT to work, I had no plans.

At the print shop everything stood ready to start, just as I had left it the night before. The paper rolled and ready, the prepress done, the film negs a neat pile on my table. The disk they were made from sitting beside the computer. I had looked through them the previous afternoon and they were clean so we could begin printing when the workshop opened. That morning my job, my part in the process, would begin.

Now that I know it was to be the last morning I would walk out of my apartment, and greet my neighbour as she watered her potted chillies on the balcony, as we had done each weekday for the last nine years, there is a distance to it all. Routines have their magic and through them we make ourselves real. On that day, with everything before me, the very ordinariness of it was as bland as rice porridge. There was nothing remarkable in our greeting. And though it was the last morning I would walk to the hawker's centre along the concrete path shaded by banana palms – along the same route for nearly ten years, one that as I had walked it had become part of me, a way of defining myself each morning – I was oblivious to the finality of the occasion. Past the stairs with the chipped green handrail, the night rain caught in drops on the leaves growing by the path. All of it was ordinary, down to the men in earmuffs with t-shirts over their faces, tearing into the undergrowth with brush-cutters.

Outside the kopitiam my friends greet me. They gather for chess and squat smoking, arguing and gossiping together every weekday. Usually there's time to stop to talk with them. These are the men who know my routines and often I tell them about the stories in the books I lose myself in all night. They are the locals, the hawkers, the noodle vendor and the makers of ice ka chang, the owner of 'Golden Mile Special Yong Tau Foo', and 'Herbal Soup (healthy)'. As I pass they wave me down, greet me warmly with: 'Good morning!' 'How's the latest read?' and 'Is your book as good as a wife, my friend?' And I nod to let them know their joke's not taken the wrong way, and grunt to indicate I haven't had my tea, that there's no caffeine in my system, yet, and they fall back into their chess game, smoking and discussions. They assume they will talk with me later. They laugh at me; I am not one of their number. When I arrived on the estate they called me 'the book lover' or sometimes, 'professor' because, it is true, that I love books better than people. Printed pages hold more comfort for me than conversations, than the flesh the other men seem to crave.

On that morning, was there something more to the tang of the sugar in my tay-cee? Something more in the buzz and rumble of the traffic as it moved off from the lights? Something more in the

voices around me, the hawkers, the students, the Filipina maids gathering at the rival kopi stand? I can't be sure, can't tell you, and what difference would it make? When you ask me to recall that morning, to remember it so exactly – it was a morning where the atmospheric pressure was rising and the storm hovered there on the horizon, its clouds so many dark shadow puppets.

By Thursday the seventh of November I'd forgotten my previous life. A life from before coming to live on this humid island, where the mould that grows on the pages of my books resembles complex maps. I'd smothered memories of other places lived in and known with the smells that cling so strongly to the air here; potent aromas of pandang, frying roti and soapy water drying on tiled floors – the smell of two-stroke exhaust borne from the main road, following the trail of people through the dust and jack hammering of the construction site. I stopped – didn't I? – to savour this moment, before everything changed?

It was my habit to drink my tay-cee and eat the kaya toast seated at a blue table in the corner. No one likes it because it's right under the rattling fan. That fan dented at one time, has blades that have been bent back into shape, well enough too, but when it turns to the left, something in it jangles. There has been much discussion over what it is, and various customers have taken it down, shaken it, re-mounted it, set it going again, and it still gives off a metallic clatter. What is it that I like about sitting beneath this fan? Is it because one faulty thing has patience with another? And my reprehensible act and its outcomes are part of my own imperfection. This statement is my rattle, only now able to be heard in the midst of all the engines of this city.

That particular morning though, the food court was very busy and a young couple had taken my table. Choosing a table looking over the garden, I sat sipping the tea, turning the pages of *The Straits Times*. I shared this table with a man who smelt of ginger and bad teeth; he sighed and his sigh ruffled the newspapers, I felt it pass my face. He seemed unkempt, unloved, his buttons done skew-whiff. In a sudden panic to see if my own buttons were done up straight, I reached down and fumbled with the collar of my worker's shirt. Picking at my teeth with my thumbnail a new self-awareness crept up on me. As if I was able to watch myself from the perspective of the fan, or, more accurately, the storm hovering overhead. A perspective that showed life spreading out either side of me, with nothing out of place. The kalangoonie man, throwing papers for recycling into his truck, the young family leaving their flat; everything in sharp focus, everything hyper-real.

Often, I remember a smell better than the look of a thing and the smell of that man's decaying teeth stayed with me. Decay, carefully hidden and raked away here, happens everywhere and it happens quickly. I can summon that stench up now, part rancid body, part food. Wet, like the wind before the storm. You would think though, in my line of work, all I would care about are the precision

angles of pages, their cut, the depth, calibre and speed of the ink. However, there is more to it than even you can imagine, and sometimes I can almost sniff out a fault in the machine, the odour of ink too hot, the sharp smell of it as it cools too fast. In the mouth of the man opposite me, smelt of the change you've seen in me. From a law abiding and hardworking citizen – well almost – transformed into a wanton criminal. Instead of being passive – as I have all my life in one way or another – I have become active; I have *done* something.

There were spider lilies growing in the garden below my table. Their flowers are splayed out like tiny white rounds of paper cut to leave some of their edges trailing off, white against the dark leaves. I watched them for a while, thinking again of the imperfections we are all tied down with. Closing my eyes I tried to memorise these flowers, there was something about the way they looked unfinished, almost badly made. Something of them reminded me of myself – my own imperfections, the lopsided smile, the bent back that gives me such pain on these pre-monsoon mornings, the way I trail off into fiction, wanting to live in stories – as is possible for the short time I read them.

Deciding to leave that rancid smell hanging in the air around me, I walked down to Juron East to catch the MRT to work. I wanted to start on the manuscript that was sitting there, waiting for Cyril to fire the gas oven, chill the rollers and start the offset press.

As you know, it was a boutique run on a work of fiction. I imagined starting the spools running, keeping one eye on the console, the gauges and monitors of the offset machine. I had no thought that it was a day that would lead me here, to this grey room with the metal desk writing this all down for you. And I can't tell you if the sense of knowing myself more intimately within the proscriptions of the city, that was building up in my guts – as I sat there on the MRT, swaying and sweating with the crowd – wasn't simply connected to the new project at work?

Is that what you want to know? Was it a pre-meditated act in these days of terrorism? For me to simply tell you, you would have to understand all the complications and intricacies of the whole story. But now we are here, telling you everything shouldn't be so hard. Just as you asked; from my mother with the red-hot knife blade to the lost grandfather on the street, from the printing of that book, to the moment there was no choice. It *is* all relevant – though it will frustrate you – wading through the ramblings of a madman. But whether I'm mad or not is part of what you have to ascertain, too, isn't it? You can't expect me help you with that.

There was no plan. Not yet, anyway. There! It is written down. And now it's a fact. Just as after my breakfast of tay (there seemed no room in my guts for anything but the sense of expectation) all I was thinking of was the work ahead of me. I am trying to tell you – keeping resolutely to this claim, being as stubborn as an ox, you see – while holding the pole immediately in front of the carriage

door, I had no more idea than you did, living your life however you do, of what would become inevitable the following morning. Yes, ah, the morning of the eighth. I feel none of this guilt you try to press on to me. You will learn I am practised at letting that slide from me. Guilt is greasy, sticks to the skin like ink and in some people it blends in to the skin and stains their sense of themselves. But, as for me, I am waxy so it cannot take hold.

Four

On Arrival

Jo:

The afternoon we met was the second November. I felt she didn't like me.

She had curled her legs under her body on the far armchair and looked at me with widened eyes. I stopped in the doorway. She didn't move either. She reminded me of something cornered and even though she looked straight at me, I knew there was nowhere for her to hide in the open room. I took it all in, too, with the shiny tiles and lamps hanging from the ceiling. The rainy light showed up the smudges and hollows of her face. We both stared; there was silence.

With her there in the room, the flat's living area looks like a place I'd once been. A place from before where my memory starts. Our family photographs smiled out of their frames, none of them looked like us.

The chime of the lift breaks into the moment. I take one step into the flat.

There are five things I know about my cousin:

1. She comes from Sydney, Australia.
2. Her parents are getting a divorce.
3. She has long hair.
4. She was born in the year of the Monkey, the same year as me.
5. She is learning Mandarin while she's here in Singapore for the summer. I am to show

here where her school is.

'Hi,' I try cautiously. 'I'm Jo.' I remember to smile, even. It helps if you insert emotions into your face. Of course she would know who I am, but I want to seem as welcoming and gracious as my father; my father always wants me to follow his lead on these things. She doesn't seem too friendly.

'Yeah, I thought so.' Her voice has a musky edge to it. To me it seems almost red, there in the air, her greeting. Her mouth is closed. It seems she isn't going to say anything else.

'Well, yeah. Ah, you hungry?' My mother would have wanted me to ask this question. If Mei likes kopi we could go down and get some at the stall; but there is always juice in the fridge. How long has she been sitting there? She looks down at her hands and then up at me. I slide my key out of

the lock. I walk across the room. Smile. Put down my bag. ‘Or maybe you’d like some lemon barley water?’

‘Uh, yeah, OK.’ Again, that edge in her voice, as if she was much older than me, more sophisticated. Wiser. With all the knowledge that living in a place like Australia would allow. I’d have to travel the world to discover the things she knows. She uncurls herself, her hair swinging as she stands up.

In my hurry to be hospitable I spill the barley water that Amy bought at the market that morning, some on my t-shirt some on the counter. Mei only smiles, leaning on the wall. She would never spill anything. I adjust my glasses. Hand her the dripping glass. As she takes it, her hand shakes a little. Would jet lag cause that? Is she cold? Simply tired? Or could it be to do with landing in this country? Starting a new life – that will be temporary – with family who are really strangers? I want to be warmer to her, but the drink drips off my shirt onto the floor. It makes a small puddle. I stoop, instead of smiling, to wipe it up.

Mei:

I heard someone coming, and guessed it would be him. First, there was the clang of the lift then, his tinkering with the lock. I put the family photograph down gently – the one where my father and aunt stand up straight for the camera, her long thin arms protruding out of a white hand-made blouse, his eyes twinkling in the flash, his graduation cap slightly askew – and went and sat on the chair, as casually as possible, feeling a little bit like a member of an audience, waiting for the action to start. I pulled my knees up, so I could look at home – relaxed – when my cousin opened the door. You can’t have your legs like that on the plane, they make you sit properly, arms to your sides, seat belt fastened noting the nearest exit, which may, of course, be behind you.

He’s smaller than I expected, smiling so broadly at me it seemed almost forced; a smile you might use on a stranger, while you bought time to think of what to say. What did it mean that he was bowing towards the door? Turning his head towards me, as if he was surprised? I begin to worry that he didn’t remember I was arriving today; he isn’t sure who I am. Didn’t he know I’d be here when he got back? Surely my aunt and uncle must have talked to him about it? Even thinking that perhaps they hadn’t, makes my eyes water and my face go hard, as I fight with it not to crumple into tears.

I’ve been crying since Sydney, and really, I’ve had enough. My eyes sting, my face in the mirror was blotched and smeared. What upset me most was that I was not expecting to be upset; leaving my quarrelling parents, my boy-mad friends and my school hadn’t seemed like a bad idea: until I was

alone on the plane, reducing my situation into a couple of brief sentences for the enquiring woman next to me. She had nodded, as if all too familiar with such sad cases as mine, and as the plane took off and jerked my stomach up above my eyebrows, I had started to cry.

In the few hours since my uncle left me alone in the flat, I'd recovered and found a sort of calmness. Until Jo arrived it had been so quiet, the hiss of the city and the rain combined to make a sort of static that enclosed me, cut me off from everything I'd left behind, and also from the new experiences my parents had decided they wanted for me, here. In flat 17d, block 4a, Golden Palm Estate the gleaming tiles and polished wood, the porcelain figures in alcoves, the family portraits, seemed to insulate it from the outside world. Inside, past the security guard and the grille on the lift, it seemed more tranquil because just out of sight the lurid city with its neon and crowds, pulsed on.

In my father's city I am to learn my mother's language. They had decided on everything, before telling me. I am the one thing they are still negotiating, the one subject they can speak about. I had overheard some of the phone calls. I knew sketchy details of me going away when the court case was being heard. I knew my father was paying for the flights. I knew that had made my mother furious. But I hadn't thought Singapore. I hadn't thought that my Mum would come up with as much as Dad did for the flights and book me into a three-month language course. I hadn't thought of my uncle and aunt. And my cousin, who they all said, was 'strange'.

Perhaps they all *had* forgotten to tell Jo? He was still standing there, smiling, holding the key in the lock. My uncle had said he was the type of boy to forget things, wagging a finger in the air, that I '*shouldn't be surprised by him*', that he was used to being alone.

Jo ducks his head as he speaks to me. Lowering his eyes. Am I as terrifying as all that? I follow him into the kitchen. He pours us two glasses from a large jug with lemon rind floating in it, spilling a bit and fussing over it. The cloudy drink's sweet and cool; I hadn't known I was so thirsty, it slides down my throat, I feel that calm again and something tight in my chest gives way.

'What do you normally do now?' I ask him, trying to catch his eye, but he is holding his glasses on his nose and wiping at the floor where the spilt drink was.

'Oh, not much, really. I usually muck about with my computer a bit.' He tells me, seeming frank while distracted. When he looks up he seems to be examining the air around me. Not looking me in the eye.

'Do you use Myspace or facebook?'

'I have both.'

'Yeah? Me too.'

'Ah, want to look?'

‘Sure.’ He looks at me then, sideways, his eyes catching in the light that, to me seems subdued, as if it has come through several layers of water. I feel for a moment as if he knows so much more than I do, growing up here, with the huge city of Singapore at his doorstep, and that he sees right through me.

Jo:

The first thing Mei says is, ‘Wow!’ What does she mean when she says that? Is she just being polite? ‘Where did you get this stuff?’ I can’t help frowning at the question.

‘My parents bought it for me...’ I shrug, embarrassed by the way my gear takes up more of the room than I do. Amy hasn’t made my bed, so I go and sit on it, trying to tug the sheets into some kind of order.

‘No, I mean this.’ She’s pointing the mouse at the banner that heads my blog.

‘Oh that.’ I squint at it, as it slides across the screen like a caterpillar.

‘Mmmm.’ She’s scanning down the page.

‘Well, I wrote it.’

‘Nah, c’mon, you’ve copied it from somewhere.’

‘No, actually.’ She looks up from the screen eyebrows raised. Looks me full in the face, so I have to turn away.

‘You wrote it?’

‘Ah, yes. It’s not that hard...’

‘Impressive...’

‘You think?’ I am blinking and feeling slightly hot. I open the window, and try to breathe some cool air into the room.

‘Yes.’ She scrolls down, reading my latest entries. As I watch I start to feel uncomfortable. Cables tighten in my stomach, as I stand at the window looking away from her. Slowly sparks begin to flow up my spine making my face glow red, the blood lit from below. Under her scrutiny my page shrinks to the ravings of a pathetic and lonely outcast. A boy wrote that, not a man, a *teenager*. What I wrote there, those entries, weren’t – I see so clearly – what I wanted her to know about me.

‘Ah, do you have a blog?’ I want to distract her.

‘No, but I’d like to try, one day.’

‘It’s a good way to meet other teenagers, like at school.’ What am I saying? Meeting people in real life isn’t one of my strengths.

‘Yes?’ She is reading, not listening, and I feel my discomfort morphing into a new feeling. I try to stay calm and think what the feeling could be called. It has my lungs in its pincers; all I can see is the blur of my long, ill-made sentences flying, useless, across the screen. I realise it’s crucial to stop this introduction, to guard her from this virtual self. I understand that the feeling I am in the midst of could be called panic.

Until this moment I’d felt reasonably proud of my site; I’d carefully constructed it so that my faults were smoothed away. Painstakingly I’d sanded and polished the outlines, spent time on collecting the character features that I thought were necessary. Now, with my cousin’s pretty eyes over it, I see that the page that felt as if it was pumping up my ego is actually doing the opposite. I shrink into the phrases I’ve used. My opinions, the way I’ve expressed them, seem shameful and tired. I can’t think how to prove to her, now, that I’m so much more than this blog. That I am not as flat, I do not resemble in any meaningful way the description up there. I know I am more interesting, more complex, that I have secrets and hopes that change and crumble. That there is so much more to me than I am able or willing to show on the site. What I realise at the same moment, too, is that Quarantine, that small virus that picks up emails, that would only show part of the writers, too, wouldn’t it? The emails wouldn’t let me see the whole person, and I suddenly feel let down and disappointed, like I used to when I lost games.

‘I like it,’ she says, ‘you play a lot of war games? Oh, but you like poetry, me too, I like reading.’ She looks up at me then, breaking eye contact with the screen. Her voice is clearer now, as if it has been ironed.

I come away from the window, and begin to lean in towards her, to close off the page, to shut down the computer, anything to stop her reading – suddenly everything I ever wrote seems so unimportant. Reflected in her view, I can see myself trapped into a metallic persona, the kind of person I dislike for their lack of range, their small limited minds, the way they only look at the things immediately in front of them. The cables in my own mind begin to fray; I can feel the wires coming loose, the programs deleting themselves.

I want to suggest we look at something else; perhaps we should even go for a walk? But the words I want aren’t coming out, as they should. I only hear myself say a long ‘Ahhh!’

This is a pattern I know and recognise, time divides itself up, so I am leaning, the computer is whirring, and it is all happening in the flashes that seconds take to pass.

Mei:

I am interested in my cousin's page. It's a nice way to escape my own thoughts; have a good look at his. What I begin to think about, as I read, is that I could have done this from my computer in my bedroom in Sydney. I could easily have searched for and checked out my cousin's profile on the net. I could have been reading this blog from my own laptop on the balcony. Looking at him, though – yes, he probably had written the programming, – it wasn't going to give me much to be prepared for.

And I scroll down, through the older entries, I can hear what he's saying to me now, but I want to see what he says here online. I'm not really reading, just looking at the words, glancing at the pictures; even though I don't want to I am thinking about the flight, my mum in the airport, all sternness and worry. How her cheek was cool to kiss, and after the kiss, how my own mouth had tasted powdery, dry.

I see that Jo's into Warcraft, and MMORPGs, but here, he's been reading poetry, Plath and Yeats. Oh, maybe we will have something in common. I smile, and it feels stretched and taught and difficult.

Of course I'm not sure what to think of Jo. Usually I make my mind up instantly, when it comes to people. But, with Jo, it seems fair, I think to myself, to take some time given that he's meant to be *unusual* and I'll have to live with him for a while. I've met my aunt and uncle a few times before, when they travelled to Australia to promote their church, they always stayed with my father.

They never brought Jo with them, he was too busy with school and studies, and found travelling mysteriously *difficult*. He also seemed to get on well without them there, they told me. I had wanted to ask questions about the cousin I'd never met, but every time I brought it up, my questions were deflected with the most charming politeness, into questions about myself. Maybe I will like Jo, I think, sneaking a look at him standing near the window from the corner of my eye, he's nothing like his father – I always felt my uncle's too wide smile was hiding something. Jo seems to have nothing to hide. His blog's so extensive and honest, he must spend all his free time adding to it.

That's probably what Jo did all the time his parents were away. Tinkering online, befriending other teenagers, playing games, making up new programs. Easy to make it seem like study.

There's something about Jo, there, as the light catches his jawline, that's quite like my dad. He turns around, and the similarity is lost. They told me he was clever. They want him to do medicine, too. He's the same type of clever as Eric, that's all I remember my uncle Ng Teck telling me about Jo. And my father is clever, but it's the way he keeps his hands steady, his concentration focussed, he could do anything, not simply be a surgeon. Though, he does save the lives of children, ease suffering, take away the pain, it means that his mobile rings all the time. It means that my mother can't live with

him. It means that they must divorce, even though he says he still loves her, doesn't want to go; that I am too young to really understand, but one day I might. It means that I am here.

I think I'm not that type of clever. Dad's the kind of clever that takes feelings and squashes them into little boxes. I'm not sure if I'm clever at all. But, I do know that I can make sense of languages; I wonder if that's something Jo has too? Or are we too distantly related to have things like that in common.

'I like it,' I tell him looking up. But he seems upset, his face is distorted and he leans towards me, hand outstretched, reaching for the mouse. I swerve to get out of his way too quickly and the chair begins to tip. I can tell that there is something important happening, but I'm not sure what and Jo is making a strange sound like moaning. Is he crying? Is he angry? The chair and I tip at a dangerous angle towards the rug. What did I do? How have I managed to upset him this much? As a reflex I reach out and catch his shoulder, pulling myself, up against his weight.

A moment later the computer winks closed, the fans go silent. I look at Jo, my hand still on his shoulder. Outside, rain starts to fall in shards. His shirt is cool, but underneath his arm is warm. He feels like a cat, all warmth in the sinewed body, twitching with nerves, with impulses, with messages I can't pick up with my own blunt senses.

'Sorry,' I don't know what but I feel certain I've done something terribly wrong, gone beyond offending him. I lift my hand off his body. He's shaking, as though he's either sobbing, or laughing? He turns to me, I am half standing, in the middle of getting up from his chair.

'No, you're fine,' he tells me. 'I'm sorry.' He hauls in his breath.

'Oh, it's OK. Are you all right? Did I do something?'

'Ah, no. Not really.'

Jo:

I feel as if her hand is still on my shoulder, and it's a very strange sensation. The pressure of her hand as if it's still just there, on top of my shoulder and will stay there as if it's printed on, like the tattoo.

Five

Retrieving Emails

Quarantine:

At 1.54am on the 24.4.07 Email address removed for privacy wrote:

... What I really like is when someone is able to look you in the eye. It doesn't have to be meaningful, just a moment of – honesty. And now, I see that I've written that down and I've never looked you in the eye. I don't know how your face looks when you write...

At 2.26am on the 24.4.07 Email address removed for privacy wrote:

... There has never been a time in my life when I don't feel as if I am looking around the corner at the new thing ahead of me. Should this worry me? I don't know. How do I tell if I am unusual in the multitude when I am the only thing I have to compare myself to?

At 10.14am on the 25.4.07 Email address removed for privacy wrote:

... There were times when I really thought I would kill him. It's as if he just stole my life from under me. All the things you take for granted, like turning on the bedside lamp and being able to look at the familiar room you are living in. I don't know if I've really got it in me. I have a new life now; I try not to think about what he's done to me...

At 11.08am on the 25.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

... I used to read poetry. I would spend afternoons stretched out on the lawn reading Dickinson. I don't know how much of it I understood. At 16 I thought she saw clearly how cruel the world could be. Now, I am not so sure...

At 11.20am on the 26.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

I saved a collection of martini glasses. I sit them on the shelf and think of them as trophies from a previous life.

Six

Golden Fortune Fish Porridge

Mei:

I watch as the sky lightens and hovers over the city. I make out clouds; for a while there is one shaped like a rearing horse, dark against the sunrise. Its cumulous muscles stretch and distort. It rises and rises until its body is bent, its head is thrown back, one raised hoof takes on massive proportions. My horse becomes swollen beyond recognition.

There are birds calling now as the buildings are outlined as dark rectangles in the sky, and I know their call from summer days. They remind me of Sydney's jacaranda blossoms and fat rain dripping from the leaves of the Morton Bay Fig, the time of year when sunlight is hot and sharp when you step out the door first thing in the morning. It's the call of the rain bird, the brain-fever bird.

The birds start low, two notes repeated again and again, answering one another in the humid morning, gradually moving up the scale, until, when the sun has risen and the city hums awake, they are at a pitch. No longer just calling, but begging the rain to begin. I notice I am clenching the bars over the windows. I un-knot my fingers.

The start of my first day of my three months here in Singapore.

We all go down to have breakfast at the local Hawker's centre, which is a few minutes walk from the flat. My uncle is pleased at the idea of showing me the local market; he jingles his keys in the pocket of his trousers as we go down in the lift. His mouth is a broad smile, and he's combed his hair down so it sticks to his round head. My aunt frowns, her skin slowly folds into the expression. They look like caricatures of the aunt and uncle I remember from Sydney.

A woman and a small girl get in the lift at the eighth storey, and my uncle steers Jo out of their way. I watch Jo to see what he makes of it. I would have shrugged my father's hand off me with some annoyance, but Jo simply smiles at the woman, reading a text on his mobile phone.

The food stalls above the market are small with brightly lit signs. They all have pictures of what they serve above their openings, Roti Prata, Dosai, Ice Ke Chang, Kopi. My aunt and I sit on green stools and watch as my uncle and Jo order from a thin man in a striped blue shirt at 'Golden Fortune

Fish Porridge’. How can so much food come out of such a small kitchen? I have never seen familiar food made like this even though my mother used to make me fish porridge at home, when I was small.

The place is full, a sudden blossoming of people in the narrow aisles and under the neon and fan breeze of this Saturday morning. All around us people talk. Near us a man stretches his feet in his open-toed flip-flops. I close my eyes as words stream over me; I don’t know what people are saying but I can recognise Malay, Hokkien, Philippine, Mandarin, English, voices calm, others laughing, the squawk of a toddler. There is a scent in the air, something sweet like the condensed milk in the kopi, but also sharp, like sweat or fish.

My aunt closes her hand over my arm. Opening my eyes, I see that my skin looks so pale next to her long fingers with their painted nails and many rings.

‘We hardly ever come here.’ She whispers. ‘I think it’s probably safe, but you can never be sure.’ I watch her watch a Malay woman in an aqua tunic swipe three blue bowls and several orange chopsticks onto her trolley, and then rub the table with a cloth so that wet circles appear on the surface. My aunt lets my arm go to clutch at the bag she is holding on her lap.

A young man puts four fat glass mugs on the table. My aunt leans out of his way as if he might hurt her, her eyes are wide. He grins at me. I want to grin back, but I can’t find grin in my facial vocabulary right now. My uncle appears and gives him a five-dollar note, the man fumbles in the faux leather bag around his waist and drops a handful of coins on the table. My aunt, grimaces, her golden cross protrudes from the collar of her white blouse.

My uncle and Jo sit either side of me, we are all facing my aunt. Above us a fan works its air over the tables around us. Even though the centre is open to the air it’s still hot, like the heating’s on full. I can feel a trickle of sweat work its way down my back on the inside of my t-shirt.

‘Your tay’s not too sweet, is it?’ My uncle asks, his face all taken up with his smile.

‘No, it’s great.’ I grip the spoon as he is, using my thumb to hold it in place while I take a sip.

‘Excellent.’ He says this with the emphasis in the middle of the word, so for a moment I’m not at all sure what he’s said.

Our fish porridge arrives, in orange bowls with numbers on the sides. The man in his striped shirt selects the change for my uncle from his pocket. He has a moustache, which droops over both his lips. He balances yellow chopsticks on my bowl. In the rice porridge there are the blue fins of a fish, I stir them under the coriander.

Jo’s phone chirrup. His parents continue to eat. Jo looks at the screen but his face registers nothing. He eats too.

Seven

A Blind Man in the Traffic

Lee Wei Hong:

I caught the MRT at 7.18am to Ghim Moh district, where I work as the head printer at the Ang Seiw Press. It must be the past tense: worked. There is no doubt they have fired me, let me go, made me redundant, whatever they want to call it. The message just hasn't got to me in here. They would be shocked and appalled by what I've done and they would not want to be associated with the perpetrator of a crime. Though I don't think of it as a particularly heinous act – perhaps somewhere else it would mean a few hours of community service – here we are taking it very seriously. I must stress, no one at the workshop knew I'd taken the forklift. They would not have allowed it. Everything is done legally in that place; they do their work well. With this story I am trying to explain what came over me. I acted alone, the sole perpetrator of the crime; the lonesome figure – as I always have been – in the scenario that interests you so much.

From the Ghim Moh station it's a five-minute walk to the print shop, a low white building with its own gate, car park and security. A five-minute walk that runs along the edge of the shopfronts, past the reflexology massage, the closed restaurant, the cane furniture vendor, which are all unremarkable. Another route so familiar as to be hardly noticed. Stooped by my aching back I hurried because of the darkness of the clouds on the horizon edging their way in under my eyelids. Yes, rain was about to come.

It happened as I was in the middle of a thought about how I had dedicated my life to printing – because of writing: that it was literature, the memory of reading that had tied me as firmly to the craft as it's possible to be tied. Being a printer is what brought me here, to Singapore. If you become as absorbed in the mechanics of getting the letters onto paper, the process of ink and water, heating and cooling as I had, you find that you can rise to the top of your profession quite quickly. When the request came, to work the offset litho printer at Ang Seiw I took it with much enthusiasm. And here I have been, in the printing capital ever since.

Isn't it amazing what we do to escape? Reading, working hard, deciding to come to this island, as far away from London as I could, were all ways of escaping the very thing, which was waiting for me not far down the road. As I walked hunched and headlong down the street, blinkered by these

thoughts, my foot caught on his broom and I landed heavily on the gritty kerb at the bare feet of the old man.

He wasn't employed as a street-sweeper. I saw that straight away, he had no identification; he was just wearing a brown shirt and sarong, his hair was neatly brushed, his face and hands were clean. But, looking up and breathing hard from the impact of the fall with a bruise starting on my shoulder, I saw he was not seeing the scene as I did. He looked into the middle distance, not at me at all. He reached out a hand into that distance, as if there was a glint of something there that had caught his eye and pulling his broom over my body, he walked out onto the road, in among the morning traffic.

A taxi honked and swerved. A woman in a car hit the brakes, her tyres screeched on the bitumen. Some young men on a motorcycle swung over into another lane, dangerously close to a van. The air filled with the smell of burning rubber. I got to my feet and standing on the kerb, holding my throbbing spine in place with one hand I called out 'Where are you going?' over the whoosh and growl of the cars, but he didn't hear me. His arm still reached out in front of him, he stood for a while between the lanes of vehicles; more cars honked, trucks blasted him with their horns, air-breaks hissing as they swerved around him. But – at least it seemed to me – no one eased off their pace. It was almost as if the traffic sped up to pass him. A bus drove between us. I lost sight of him for a moment; and then, once it passed I saw him take another step forward, into the third lane of the busy road.

Other pedestrians had stopped to watch, but we stood on the side of the road, helpless in the wake of the traffic. There were so many trucks and buses that no one could see him until they were upon him, beeping furiously to no avail. On the other side of the road there is a concrete wall as the land slopes up steeply. I could see that he was headed to a hedge of thorny bougainvillea, hand outstretched towards the bevelled cement wall. If he made it through the traffic, he would be stranded there.

I wasn't thinking. Before realising it I was weaving my way between the lanes of traffic, one, then two and beside him. He didn't notice as I tugged at his arm. Some cars were slowing down, a bus pulled in at the kerb. He was muttering under his breath in Malay.

'Come, grandfather, you have to get off this road!' I tried to steer him around. But he held his broom and wouldn't move. He was like a corpse already frozen in rigor mortis, stiff and completely unyielding. He shuffled his worn old feet towards the fourth lane. The soles of his feet were brown and calloused against the smooth road's surface.

What else could I do? I hooked his outstretched arm over my shoulder and half-carried half-dragged him across the lanes of traffic and back up onto the footpath. At one point he let go of his

broom and it was smashed to pieces under a delivery van's wheels. The old man, who felt frail on my shoulder, sighed and mumbled unintelligibly into my ear. I felt my spine crack, one moment it was hot pain, the next, cold. I stood there breathing, waiting for someone else to take control of the situation, for someone to step up and take him from me, but no one did.

The assembled bus passengers had cheered as we reached the safety of the kerb. The schoolboys in their yellow shirts turned away now the fun was over. The bus-driver patted me on the back. Then, he quickly ushered the crowd back on board. I watched him settle himself in the driver's seat, let out the brakes and the orange vehicle hissed into motion, pulling into the traffic before I had time to untangle myself from the strange embrace of the old grandfather.

We stood there for a moment, still, among the noise and movement of the traffic and pedestrians, closer than I would choose to stand, with an old man whose hose eyes focussed on something further away than either of us could comprehend at that time, in that moment as we stood there.

That storm continued to loom over the city. People walked with umbrellas at the ready, their eyes cast down, avoiding my stare (as I tried to make out a friendly face that might offer advice or assistance) and the stare of the old man (which was like the opening of a dark tunnel).

I wanted to leave him. Wanted to get safely to work where I would have no responsibility for him – where I would only have to think of the private press of ink into paper; the intimate process of heating and cooling. But, since I had come this far, with the eyes of the world on me, it seemed that I had to do something more. I was trying to decide what – looking into his face with its wide nose and black eyes with their film of milk – when the young girl in her grey sweater with her hair whipped up in the wind of the moving traffic came and took his arm, smiled at me, and led him off into the crowd.

I hadn't expected thanks; didn't enjoy the attention of the busload of workers. But this quiet moment, the old man's retreat into the crowd that closed over him and the girl – I imagined was his granddaughter – took me by surprise. Picking up my bag and brushing myself off to avoid the confusion that pricked at my chest, I rolled my shoulder to see if it was still working and looked around to see who was watching. Two women at the small food court quickly turned away, and began to collect the dishes on the tables, to wipe them down with a sort of urgency.

Eight

Making Use of Periscopes

Mei:

It happens in what seems like slow motion; the books slide off the shelf and heap themselves onto the wood veneer desk. Some of them fall from there onto the tiles, pages opening out to show the words I traced with my fingers. To me, each book is like the opening to a story, and if I can find it, a *beautiful silence of the mind*. I read that somewhere, and that's how it feels. Even though I watch my books slide off the pedestal, I don't move to stop their fall – I'm not really surprised by the failure of the newly built shelving. The small crash it made didn't even make me flinch. It must be that I'm getting used to small crashes.

Each one of these books is from mum or dad. I've tucked cards and notes between their pages to remind me which book is a gift from which parent. Now, everything is scattered on the floor, the notes fallen out of their place on the tiles and it all seems unimportant. What type of parents are they anyway, who pack me off to another country to get me out of the firing line while they continue to fight their war? To leave me with heavy paper gifts to carry with me?

Right now, I can't remember why I've brought the books all this way; was I hoping to be left alone to read for a few months, while I studied at the private language college? Did I think that I would leave myself behind somewhere, in a new country, and start living life differently? Maybe I could become a character in a book, able to overcome my circumstances through knowledge of myself? Would I need these stories and poems to remind me, when I lost myself? My father's slim copy of *'Ariel,'* my mother's *'The Pillowbook of Sei Shonagon,'* my father's gift of *'Eucalyptus,'* my mother's *'Wild Swans'.*

Uncle Ng Teck had screwed the shelf into the wall himself, above the desk where I thought I could set up my laptop. He'd taken great care over the task, perhaps to make me feel welcomed? I'd held the support arms while he fitted the screws into place.

'There!' He said after he'd balanced the board on the two metallic braces and he stood back to admire his handy-work. I'd thought it looked a little unsteady, and wasn't sure it would hold up the small library I'd selected from my bookshelves at home. My uncle patted the construction – in exactly the way he patted Jo's head in the lift that time – and the shelf

shuddered slightly, as if to tell him that it wasn't up to the task he'd set it. But uncle Ng Teck was unconcerned as he packed up the borrowed cordless drill on the yellowing tiles, and smiled at me. The smile said 'No trouble, don't worry, you can stay as long as you like.' I tried to smile back, but it got stuck on its way to my mouth. A breeze lifted the lace curtains as I looked out the window – how do I stop myself from seeming so ungracious?

'This was once your grandmamma's room. You'll be able to make it into your own place, while you're here. Feel free to move the bed, if you want to.' He gestures and my eyes follow his hand 'Do you think you'd like it in that corner? Well, whatever you want to do. Posters are OK too, you know, Jo has football ones, but you probably have some of your own?'

'No, actually I don't.' I'm not planning to stay longer than the summer, or whatever it is here. I wonder what my father may have told my uncle that he hasn't told me. Perhaps that was his advantage, having me here under the wing of his family.

'Maybe we look for a few; brighten up this place for you. Change it from being an old woman's room.' Then he clicked the drill's black case closed, threaded his pointed fingers through the handle and stood up, suddenly awkward in the room now he had no job to do. Again I tried to smile at him, but it came out as a grimace and uncle Ng Teck sucked air through his teeth, which made a strangely loud sound. 'I'll leave you to redecorate. Call if there's anything you need help with.'

'OK, thanks.' My uncle took himself out of the room, stepping gently over my bags; one for clothes and the other full of books, my computer in its padded travel bag. I looked out the window again, through the bars.

Outside, in what Jo calls 'The Estate' there're several huge trees that spread out into circles when seen from this far above. A black and yellow bird swoops down into the leaves. The small bird makes me smile, the impudent yellow of its body. Such a miniature bird, happily living among the high-rise and manicured gardens, so far away from... what? The bird hasn't just come from Sydney, like me. Surely it doesn't miss the jungle where its ancestors must have flourished. I shake my head at myself and the assumption I had just made.

Out beyond the trees and the lower set of apartments, there's an oval that looks like it's made of velvety moss, then more flats, a construction site, with cranes dangling slabs of metal in mid-air. The city is visible, in the distance, its towers and pinnacles taking up the horizon. How does a bird find its way through all this? I can't imagine, but I'm glad it's there.

Some people walk along the path 17 stories below the window; I can't hear their voices. A car turns into the driveway from the road. Otherwise, everything is quiet.

Would my Grandmamma have stood and looked out the window like this? I feel sure she had, and through her eyes the scene warps and alters. She'd have known the names of the trees, that little bird, those buildings in the distance. To her, the place would be home, and the idea of all that space, the thousands of kilometres of sea to Australia would not have entered her mind – except, perhaps when she wondered about her son. It would be miles of sea stretching behind her, to China, to rice paddies and jutting hills. Where she had grown up there had been snow – my father had sometimes told me about the winters of his mother's memory. He told me stories about grandmamma's brothers and sisters shaking snow out of their hair; the darkness of those midwinter nights. He promised me that one day he would take me to visit his mother, and we dreamt of how he would show me his Singapore – his school, and the place where he first saw my mother (though, now, that out-door market is a bus interchange).

The air out the window is steaming with moisture – it's heavy and thick. Singapore must have been different then, when she arrived as a bride to an unknown new home. How incredible to come to a place where the sun sets at almost the exact same time each night. At least I have an idea of who my family is here, that they want to be kind to me. That they want me to feel at home here, in her old room, with the high bed and pink blanket, the towel folded neatly by the maid.

I pull myself away from the window, and get down to look on the floor for the screw from the shelf. The shelf had only been able to bear the weight of the books for the half an hour it took me to arrange my things in the room that's so empty and clean it's like a hotel room. So hard to believe anyone else ever lived in it, had their things arranged here, slept in that smooth bed.

The screw had sprung loose on the right support arm and it swung down, levering the books out of position. For a moment I'd felt sure that this was exactly how my life was going, that the flimsy support structures screwed straight into the brick or mortar of the wall were giving way for me, too, and I was about to thud down onto the wooden veneer of some ugly hulking desk of a court official or in a government department. How does anyone cope with being left so alone? There's the sting of tears in my eyes, again. I look under the bed, the tiles are smooth and reflective; there isn't any screw there.

'You all right?' It's Jo's voice through the door.

‘Yeah.’ I manage from a kneeling position at the bedside. The bed is so tall it makes me feel child-sized; like a good girl saying her prayers. If I was the type to pray I would say: please don’t let him come in and be sympathetic, because I might cry, and that would be embarrassing. Help me not to feel such a long way from everything I know. If my parents had given me a choice to come here, or even if they’d talked to me about it before making all the arrangements, it would be different. If there was some reason of my own to come here, even if just to visit, it would be easier. If I had wanted to come over here for the summer, to see the family, to meet my cousin, if there was some choice I could have made. But there wasn’t; my parents are sure I am too young to be consulted on these things. And it all feels futile: the shelf, the books, the city itself. What’s the point of even thinking about it? Why does anyone want to live here in these impersonal high-rise apartments, being blocked in by their neighbours, making segments of their lives?

‘Can I come in?’ Jo interrupts my thoughts. I get up slowly from my hands and knees and open the gloss-painted bedroom door with its faux antique handle. Jo is hunched in the hallway; he’s bigger here than I expected, maybe it’s because the hall is small, and crowded in with my aunt’s potted palms. Jo looks like he’s lost in a jungle of bowing leaves. His eyebrows are raised in an expression that mixes concern and interest. There are tears in my eyes, they’ve leaked out despite my promises to be brave and not show how small I feel in this monster of a city. Down the dim hall there is a gentle light thrown into the living room by the open windows. Jo’s face is part hidden in shadow. He doesn’t move, doesn’t say anything more to me; he just leans against the wall. I am so relieved about this I manage to smile.

With the door open a small puff of clean air blows from the fan in Jo’s room across my face. My eyes water more, but now I’m not crying: I have an unexpected sense that this is where I should be, here in the labyrinth of the estate, of the city, of the island as a whole, that there is something in this place, waiting to happen for me.

In Singapore, with this set of family I don’t know, with Jo particularly there’s a sense of – what? It’s like foreboding, but in a good way. I stand up and in the doorway and I see a version of myself I don’t know. She’s standing there in between the books scattered around her and the neat plain wall of the hallway. Behind her the window glows green in the lowering light. She’s barefoot, one hand holding the doorhandle, a silhouette. She is older, her eyes turned up. She knows things I do not. Is this what Jo sees when he sees me?

I see how inevitable it is that things will happen and extend themselves out of what happens right now in this hallway. I will have to grow and change, and as I do, everything else

will change. Even though it seems such an ordinary moment, my books piled on the floor, the apartment quiet and dim, everything is more solid, more real. The books are less like gateways to other universes; they are microscopes or telescopes or even periscopes, they'll allow me to see the world in another scale, through other lenses. Jo looks at me questioningly. I realise that here has been silence for a few minutes.

'Are you OK? What was that noise?'

'Yep, I'm fine, the shelf just fell down.' My voice is even calm.

'You want help?'

'Sure,' I step back to let Jo through the door. 'It's just the books that fell.'

'Oh, the books.' Jo's voice has an upset note in it, as if they were his books, the ones so neatly shelved in his room in alphabetical order, I'd noticed, by author.

'Yeah, I brought these ones with me.' I hadn't put them in any order, somehow I had felt that I should be fair to the gifts, one from mum, then one from dad. I kneel back down next to Jo on the tiles.

'You read a lot.' he looks at me as he's picking them up, handling them without looking, makes me think he knows them already, and I watch him carefully slipping the papers back between their covers and placing them against the wall. 'Before I got the shelves I stacked them this way.' He's seriously putting them in alphabetical order, by author, frowning slightly, and lining up their spines.

'Oh.' It's all I can say. I see a kindness in Jo that's not engineered. He smiles slightly at my copy of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, presses the dog-eared cover back into place with his thumb. I think that's one my dad gave me for my tenth birthday. It was late – my own father always forgets what the date it is.

'Grandmamma would like her room being used again.' He says from nowhere.

'She would?'

'Yes, for sure.'

Nine

Clippings

The Helpmann Review

Cordelia Furness

The copy I have of *My Fierce Delay* calls attention to itself; the paper is exceptional quality, the pages are delightful to turn, their rough edges rustle on your fingertips. And you find yourself turning the pages remarkably fast. But, if you want to read this novel you will have to go to the publisher – Hillkirk's – website and download it there. The pages will flip to the recorded sound of papers rustling. The experience will not be the same, but the book is worth reading. Marketed strongly for an unknown author, it is a story of the rite of passage youth takes to experience; detouring through the life of the author; the sought-after mother figure – delving into oedipal complexities, and yet redeeming the characters at the last moment. The author shows himself to have a real sense of timing; the conceptual nature of the basic premise – that the author is not dead, just elusive – is vivified in a discerning and intriguing way. The characters seem to live on after the novel's end; though some readers may find the highly open possibilities at the end a disappointment.

Library Guild Magazine

Robin Fletcher

A superb book, full of insights into the minor details that make up life, yet what it discusses is broad-reaching and relevant to today's climate of technological change. A young man is moved to master his own experience, through the network – compared not simply to his physical body but to the body of fiction. There are many turning points

in this work. The characters are empowered, the writing fine and inviting. The reader can get lost among the concepts at play here; two characters, one the ‘author’ the other the ‘reader’ are set into different roles when one pursues the other; the narrator is the reader, the author is, eventually, unreachable. An impressive debut novel for Stokes; we will surely see more of him.

Weekend Reviewer – In Brief

Yin-Lee Wen

Fiction commenting on the nature and scope of fiction has become a recent fad. The twist at the end is predictable – it was all a dream, a fiction, inside your head. In this novel *My Fierce Delay*, Ryan Stokes takes us along this same old road, so that just as we think we can feel sure of the destination, he surprises. With a new take on the possibilities the experience of a story holds for changing the reader, Stokes allows his characters to transform through the course of the novel and this saves them from the usual outcomes. Though he can’t quite explain how, the central character is moved by the crumpled manuscript he finds abandoned on the tube. As if the author always intended it to be so, he finds he must pursue her; not in an act of love for the author, but for her writing. In a post modern twist it’s the celebrity author whose disappearance has caused some sensation in the press. With an uncanny knack for researching and making technology work for him – can we believe he’s this savvy with computers? – our hero tries to unearth her after the police have closed the case. An evocative and satisfying read.

Catalogue

Rupert Fils

In an incident reminiscent of the loss of Hemingway’s unfinished manuscript on a Paris Metro, author Barbara Wainwright leaves hers on the London Tube. The manuscript is picked up by the bookish,

thoughtful and self-examining Rick who is lost in the tension he feels between the modern world's fast pace and the knowledge he has that slowing down would change his life. The text he finds plays catalyst for him find that time; it inspires him to quit his research job and put his skill into discovering the author, who has been missing for some time. Reality and imagination collide in a spectacular fashion; the question arises, did the author lose the manuscript on that train on purpose? Could it simply be a coincidence that Rick – the perfect reader – found it?

Ten

Hearing My Mother's Voice

Lee Wei Hong:

My feet pressed into the ground, as I started to slowly walk away. Could it have been that I felt heavier than a moment before? Up to the left my route takes a back street that's being upgraded where the path runs over a deep drain. To make it possible to navigate this route, the workers have placed a plywood bridge between the concrete sides of the small rivulet. This flimsy thing sags under all but the lightest body. I was afraid, for a moment that it would shatter with my body's new solidity. As if there was more weight to me, that sense of responsibility that had not been mine since I arrived here, settling down through my chest, pressing itself over my skin and forming cumbersome pockets of itself throughout me. But, I couldn't have explained to you that this was what I was feeling at the time. It's only now, in this quiet place that I see what happened. After the incident with the grandfather and the grind of my spine in the traffic, at the edge of my sensation was a feeling of heaviness that trembled as if it was about to fall out of me, like rain. My step shivered on the weak construction. The water underneath it was black and stagnant, the greasy film warping my blue shirt and puzzled glance into swirls of pink and green.

The rain came on like water coming to the boil. First there were specks, then it fell more rapidly, and finally it stopped being rain and became a confusion of water throbbing over the ground, throwing itself from the sky. Commuters took out their umbrellas and hid underneath them, but they couldn't contend with the volume of water. I sheltered in a stairwell with two women and we waited for it to pass, as it would. Others ran into shops, stood in the entrance to the food court. My mind was still full of traffic and the bleary eyes of the old Malay man, as I leant on the concrete wall taking the pressure from my back with my good shoulder firm against its weight.

Waiting for the rain to ease in the cramped doorway my mind rested on how it would feel to be that old man, his experience in among the traffic. What seemed certain is that he was not in what we call reality. He was somewhere in the past, deep below the surface of things. If his mind had taken him there so wholly, would it be possible for the traffic to harm

him? Perhaps I was the fool trying to save him? Maybe if the bus had run him down, there was a sense in which this was the right thing to happen. And, but for me, his smashed bones and brown shirt would, at this moment, be in the process of being washed away by the rain, into that murky drain. But, then there was the sense in which I was in a reality of my own. Was it such an advantage to be there, aware of the traffic and the danger that he was in? Could the way that I was experiencing the world change his? Would my absolute certainty that he would die under the wheels of the delivery van, mean that it would happen that way – just as it did with his broom?

Closing my eyes the scene replayed across my vision. His worn feet where the clean hot rubber had left dark marks on the road. His old flat gaze, like that of a sleepwalker; the stiffness of his body, rigid against me as we moved like a two-headed thing off the road. The shiny hair of his granddaughter, her brief smile. Who will care for me when I am old? I have left it too late to have a granddaughter to take my arm when I am seeing the scenes my mind plays out for me.

I began to see the morning stretching out to the days and months ahead. Each with the same pattern: the tea from the kopitiam stand in the morning; the fan above the table; the workshop with piles of printed pages blending into the rest of my life slowly curling at the edges and getting mouldy like aging paper does in the tropics. The blur of humid days, rain in the large puddle outside the door, pages and pages turning into the wind.

What cut through this, through the thunder and tangle of the rain was my mother's voice, as clear as any present thing. (The chat of some passing school girls, the cluck of their mobile phones, the shush of the bus stopping, the rhythm of the rain.) My own mother's voice, insistent, over all this sound. It was then that I knew it was no ordinary day and the weight, the responsibility that had lifted nine and a half years before – when I stepped off the plane and into this city – took its hold on me, gripping like some thriving growing thing. Digging through me to find a roothold, lifting my heart rate and shifting my breath.

This is a voice that hasn't had a place in my life for the whole time I've worked for Ang Seiw Press and lived here in Singapore. And even before that, it's hard to say. I looked up in alarm at the two women in the stairwell with me, to see whether they were speaking. It was impossible for either of them to have spoken with that voice with its hard flat vowels and fume of anger. Something, I knew, even then, had shifted; the lines I lived my life within had begun to change.

What I heard so clearly, on that dark stair – that led to darker flats – my long-estranged mother. It was as if she was speaking to me from just behind and if it were possible for me to look over my shoulder there she would be, her squat frame and furious scowl. My eyes dimmed, my arms and legs stiffened. I chafed my hands together to try to comfort myself, wondering what had rubbed off the mad old man onto me. Was it from him, or the storm, or the endless running of my life?

Needless to say, when I did look, rolling my eyes into the darker corners of the stair, she wasn't there.

Eleven

Dark With Water

Jo:

My parents have a meeting with the elders of the church, so they ask me to take Mei to Botanics. We catch the MRT and Mei uses my spare card. In fact, it'll be her card for the three months she's here.

When we get there she goes straight in and starts to walk up one of the brick paths ahead of me.

'Do you know where you are going?' I don't mean it to be, but my voice is shrill.

'No.' She answers, only half turning.

'Do you want to find a map?' I really do not like to be lost.

'C'mon, it's a botanic garden. What are you worried about?' She turns on me, her hair swings, then her bag swings around to her hip; she is terrifying.

I haven't told her that every excursion I make into the outside world I map out so I won't get lost. I carry an MRT guide, the bus map, a compass and thermometer everywhere I go. I reach for my water bottle, take a sip, offer her some, maybe this way I can buy time. She squints her eyes at me. I am afraid; the water trembles in the bottle. All around us people with strollers and wheel-chairs swerve to avoid colliding with us, we're like traffic islands for a minute. Then she says:

'OK, but can we just go up there and sit under that tree?'

'Yes.' It's still in sight of the gate, so I agree. Also, it's a Tembusu tree with a huge trunk, and leaning branches. *Fanreaea Fragrens*, I like them.

Mei sits on the grass. It's cooler here. The huge tree has greened the atmosphere under its canopy. She manoeuvres herself so she is half lying on her bag. Cicadas buzz like an electrical fault in the bushes by the path.

'What are ya doing?' I notice that way she has of talking to me in her own voice. It's not the polite polished English sounding voice she had for my parents, it's more natural, more Australian.

'I'm looking to see if there are any ants in the grass.'

‘Oh.’ She looks as if she’d like to laugh at me. There are no ants, so I sit myself next to her, not too close, and I lean on the tree.

‘Do your parents think something’s going to happen to me if I go out alone?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Why are you sent along with me then?’

‘Ah, I don’t know. Maybe to be polite, or so you don’t get lost?’

‘At home, most of the time, I go places by myself; not to say I don’t appreciate this.’

‘Yeah, but this is a big city....’

‘Hmmm.’ I don’t think she’s listening to me. She lies back and looks up into the tree. I watch her watching the leaves hang down, I watch her face, the way she’s not exactly smiling. I want to ask her what she’s thinking, or better, I want to see what she’s thinking without interrupting her to ask. I would like to dive into her brain and just know how her thoughts travel. To burrow down into her mind and watch the intricacies of neuron and synapse and calculate what it is that these sparks and thrummings mean. Then I could stay there and watch how the world looks from her point of view.

‘Jo,’ she says to me, turning, ‘Hey, what are you thinking about?’

‘Why, Ah?’ I am shy. I feel strange about how close we are. I think I can feel the way she’s breathing from the air on my cheek.

‘‘Cause you had a funny look on your face.’

‘I was just wondering if you’re hungry, la!’ I decide to take offence slightly.

‘After eating half a shark for breakfast?’ She is laughing. There is a rumble of thunder in the sky. I shudder, glance upwards.

‘Here’s that storm,’ she says, but she doesn’t move. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. I’m getting nervous. It will rain. We will get wet. We are under a tree.

‘I think maybe we should move. It’s going to rain.’

‘Oh, c’mon, where’s your sense of adventure?’

‘I’ve been wet before, it’s not an adventure, you know what the rain’s like here, at this time of year.’

‘No, what’s it like Jo?’

‘It’s really heavy, ah. You can get lost in it because it goes white. It’s like someone has put up a screen in front of you; like static on a TV. We should move, because this tree is really tall, it could get struck by lightning.’

‘But it says on the sign that there are lightning rods in the tree.’

‘Then they will get struck.’ I am getting nervous again.

‘Well, then it won’t hurt will it? The rods mean the lightning won’t hurt the tree and ...’

‘Yes, but it’s a risk.’ I stand up. I hold out my hand.

‘You don’t like risks, do you?’ Her mouth puckers at the corners. She looks pale here on the grass under the Tembusu Tree.

‘No,’ I tell her truthfully. I don’t like risks at all, and I am calculating the exact risk at this moment and it’s getting higher as the storm approaches, I can feel the rain coolness slithering through the gardens. I watch as the breeze ruffles the spider lilies and the simpoh trees through the lantana. The green air under the tree is pushed aside. On the lawn below us three banana palms bow down. ‘Mei, please, can we just stand under the shelter near the café?’ I don’t want to leave her and I don’t want to get wet. I keep holding my hand out, my arm is starting to hurt.

‘But, I won’t know what the rain is like unless I get wet.’ She is so stubborn. Just like my – no, our – grandmamma.

‘No, but I’ve told you. It’s really wetting. You’ll get cold... please, come...’ I want to grab her and drag her. A few drops are starting to fall on the grass. I look up at the path, which is suddenly quite empty.

‘Jo, let’s sit here and watch the storm.’

‘No, no, please, come with me.’ I am partly thinking about what my parents will think, when we get home soaked to the skin. I am weighing the risk of getting struck if I put up my umbrella. At the same time I am thinking about the afternoon a few years ago when I was lost on an oval in a storm.

How did I get lost on an oval? I can get lost anywhere, my thoughts take me over, as I try to work something out, find its conclusion. Then I forget that I am in the middle of a game of football and I don’t notice that the team have left the field to shelter from the rain in the stands. I have no idea which direction they went, or which way I am facing. That day the rain was so dense that I couldn’t see anything but white water around me. It was as if I was under a waterfall.

Right now, though, Mei has a wilful look on her face. She has stiffened her jaw, narrowed her eyes, pursed her lips. These are the signals I know, there is something to the clench of her face. In her face, now, I can see my grandmother. This expression means she will be staying; and I realise that I will have to stay, too. So I take out my umbrella, zip up my jacket and squat next to her.

The rain arrives. Thick, grey and soaking. But, through it I can still see the path with its border of ferns. Rivulets come down the tree trunk and drops fall heavily from the canopy onto my umbrella, which I offer to Mei who shakes her head vigorously. Her hair drips, her t-shirt goes dark with water. The cicadas have stopped, there is no sound but the rain and the coursing of water and the thunder, which gradually takes its disapproval away. After about 10 minutes my umbrella starts to leak water onto me. Even though I've tucked my whole body under it, I get wet, too. I watch to see how Mei is doing; she has her face up, her eyes closed, she leans on her elbows, like someone who is sunbaking, not getting drenched in a monsoon storm.

The storm is over when the rain starts to hit the ferns across the path in individual drops instead of a wash. After a while a nanny with two small children comes along the path. The kids hold their tiny child-sized umbrellas sideways and splash their feet in the puddles made in the crevasses between the bricks. Mei hugs her knees, and bends her body over the triangle they make. The girl pushing the stroller smiles at us. Her face seems to open, as if she understands Mei's need to get rained on.

'How was it?' I ask Mei.

'Oh, it was lovely. Such a lot of water.' She shakes her hair while I shake my umbrella. I stand up. My shoes are still dry, but my jacket is soaked from the shoulders to just below the chest. However, my cousin is a mess. Her hair is still dripping, even though she's wrung it out as if it was a cloth attached to her head.

'Ready to go now?' I ask, trying not to sound annoyed.

'Yeah, let's get a coffee.' I don't tell her that I don't drink coffee. There are so many things I'm not telling this girl; the person I want to tell everything to.

We arrive at the café just as other people think it's safe to leave the shelter. The trees drip on their umbrellas as they disperse. I steer Mei to a table and go to the counter to order.

'What happened to your girlfriend, buddy?' The woman behind the counter wants to chat. 'She fall in the lake or something?' And she chuckles with another woman who is frothing the milk. I stand there for a moment. I silently hope that one day I will learn how to joke along with people. I order us coffees, collect sugar, pay and go back to where Mei is sitting, staring at the palms that are growing at the edge of the gardens.

She smiles at me as I walk to her, balancing the cups. There is something about that smile. A warm smell to it, and I find I smile too, without planning it. She pours all the sugar

in the coffee and stirs it with the tiny white spoon I brought her. I see a minute tremor run through her.

‘Hey, you cold?’ I know she is, she must be.

‘No, it’s still hot here, for me.’ She looks up at me as she takes a sip. She holds her hands around the cup. It looks comfortable.

‘I don’t know.’ And I don’t. There are so many things I don’t know. Sometimes it seems to me that the world is conspiring to throw all the things I don’t understand at me. I go back to the counter for more sugar. The woman winks at me. I don’t know what this means, and I blink at her. My phone vibrates in my pocket. At least it didn’t get too wet.

We find a map and follow a crowd of tourists along the path to the lake, past the fountain to the ginger garden. Mei is shivering now, her t-shirt still is still wet and I don’t know what to do. Somehow taking her temperature seems inappropriate, so I don’t offer. But, when we get to the orchid house I have an idea, and I leave her looking at the display of *Dendrobium* hybrids and go to the visitor’s shop. There are paper and silk reproductions of orchids. In a glass case some orchid jewellery in silver and gold. I am almost distracted by these small lovely things, but I remember what I am looking for. On a display there are three t-shirts to choose from, I pick the green one, with the *Phalaenopsis Alba* and the man behind the counter smiles at me, as he swipes the credit card.

Mei hasn’t noticed I’m not with her. She’s absorbed in the flowers. She is taken by the *Phalaenopsis Violacae* with their purple centres and pearly petals. I watch her blinking at the flowers, but then she shivers a little. I tap her on the shoulder.

‘Here, I got you something.’ I hand the white bag over to her.

‘What?’ She’s surprised, even a little annoyed, I’m not sure. She looks in.

‘Jo, what’s this?’ We lean on the wall, out of the way of the stream of people. ‘Oh, it’s lovely. You want me to try it?’

‘Yeah, do that.’ I say.

Twelve

Error Port 115

Quarantine:

At 12.44pm on the 25.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

Until I was 22 and a stranger took me into his hotel bedroom. I was awkward, but he wasn't. What I think now, in hindsight, was that it was a little like a complicated dance, and he was leading me in. I didn't understand the steps or the rhythm but suddenly felt exotic and desirable.

At 1.10pm on the 25.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

Have you ever noticed how you can look back at a time in your life and wonder where you were? Why weren't you paying attention, what were you thinking? Moments, like little colour photographs, myself, the white walls of my office, the sanded green glass doors, outside rain and autumn leaves.

At 2.56pm on the 25.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

What I mean is that I can't believe myself, how quickly I felt I knew you. As if I had access to your mind and could read it, like a book. I always imagined reading minds to be a little like reading what's written on a word processor. Things can be deleted and changed. My sister can never decide at restaurants. She hesitates, decides that it's a choice between two things and then settles on a third. But here, it's like some steady continuous conversation...

At 5.00am on the 25.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

... The many times I wanted to send you a photograph, of stupid things, like: myself standing in the bathroom, toothbrush in hand when a thought I want to

tell you about occurs to me and I turn towards the computer. Or, the colour of the sky at sunset, while I was jogging. But this, this photograph, it outdoes everything I imagined for it. So personal and your own, and yet so surprising so creative. I am going to dream about your feet, because I will be able to see those toes in my mind's eye, or on it's retinal screen.

At 8.25am on the 25.4.07, Email address removed for privacy wrote:

There is that moment, you know the one, it's as if I've forgotten who I am and what I am doing. I stand there, at some console among the shelves and stare. I am so used to seeing pictures on my screen and putting them at a distance. Tsunamis come and break down the world's borders, and the images of suffering flood the screens. But, here, it's you, it's your hand, the fingers are so well formed, delicate but you can see they are strong.

Thirteen

Losing Jo

Mei:

On the steps, after registering for the class at the Kaun Yim Language School, I see Jo in the crowd. He waits until he's caught my eye, then he turns and heads away from Dhoby Ghaut MRT station towards the mall building beyond Waterloo Rd. My instinct is to follow him, so I do, weaving between the students, down the stairs. I know the plan was to walk down Bras Basah Road to the MRT Station, go back home – the home that is not my home, but Jo's family's apartment – and fill in those forms, begin on the pile of reading I've been allocated. Instead, though, I steady my bag on my sticky back and march after Jo across the busy forecourt, under the spreading trees and along the damp footpath. Where is he going? He stays just in view, sometimes lost among other students, pedestrians and commuters. The place seems to be teeming with people. How can so many of them fit on the island?

I have to wait to cross the road – yellow taxis slosh in the black puddles, bleating their horns – and as I stand there I remember the map of Singapore my father showed me: the small island in yellow, looking like something just broken off the larger brown cake of Malaysia, crumbling islands into the Singapore Straits. In my memory it seemed so small, such a tiny speck on the world, but my father's hands made maps of the places I would see as he spoke about them, and I knew he was more excited for me to go than I was. He'd told me about the clean streets with their tropical trees. The streets that seem impossibly long. He hadn't talked about the shopping malls, endless and glistening with marble and advertising. Or the gleam to everything, like lip-gloss. Satiny, wet, shiny,

On the other side of Middle Road I can no longer see Jo. He's disappeared among the shoals of people. I find myself stopping in the thick of their bustle; what am I doing here? Jo's gone, his figure in the crowd has been obliterated by that density of people, as they slide between and against one another. He's always so worried about being lost himself and for a moment I am confused, try to step forward and bump into the mass of bodies. Each of these people is on their individual errand, just the amount of them almost makes me want to scream. They smell of cumin and sandalwood with something like a mix of sesame oil and sweat.

The crowd is no longer a crowd to me, but a throng of complete people. Strangers. Each one of them among the many hundreds is on their way somewhere, with a particular place in mind, a person to meet, family waiting at home, a place to eat, a bowl to eat from. Every one of them has a reason to be here; except me. I am the stranger, what Jo calls the *ang mo*, the one who doesn't belong. And he's gone and left me here, among these people like so many distant aunties and cousins, crumbs from the same cake of family.

I press myself against a door to get out of the crowd, and it seems to me that I have never seen so many people in one place. A construction worker covered in dust shrugs past me through the doorway, in his smeared hand a silver phone with a clear blue screen. I watch for a while, fascinated by the way the people walk to and from one another: they never seem to have to stop, but politely turn aside just in time, avoiding a collision. It's like people as tides. People moving among each other with no problems, no upsets, but also, no friendliness. Everyone keeps their eyes down. Is it that I've never noticed this at home? There, the crowds allow for more space between the shoulders, there seems to be more air there, more room to breathe. A group of tall boys all dressed in the same green silk badjung sarongs pass me, one pinching another in the ribs, their long fingers seem to dance in the late afternoon light. A man with a swollen neck and a twist in his walk limps by, making no ripple in the crowd. They pass him, streaming past us both with their long hair, business shoes, t-shirt emblazoned by Von Dutch logo, head bowed into a headscarf.

Is this how we all fit on what the maps show as the tiny lion's head of the island? Pressed together so completely, there are questions over where one person begins and the other ends? I catch myself thinking of Jo and his blog, the way it links him into the whole of world of cyberspace, but also makes him individual, a separate, thinking being. And if each of these people could have a blog – maybe they do? – I would be able to read their thoughts, see their inner selves at work, understand better why I am standing here in the doorway, only able to look out at the movement, unable to move myself.

I look into the faces of the people closest to me, but they don't look back at me. To them I am another school-girl, I am seamlessly included in the scene. My parent's features, the straight hair, the skinny frame, all work as a disguise. They look up to see a local, but under that, below the orchid t-shirt and jeans, I know I am a foreigner, and I feel it now, among the people who made my father what he is. I feel the difference insist that it is there behind my eyes, under my tongue, in the trembling of my hands.

I decide I will walk to the end of the low colonnade, where ads for cigarettes and phone cards jostle against the news headlines for attention. I can't see Jo, and can't quite grip myself. I stop again and take a deep breath in front of a stall table covered in books under the awning in front of a sliding door. The spines show they are written in Mandarin and Malay, some of them in Thai. I try to make sense of the Mandarin, run my fingers over the words.

There is a family jostling and shouting beside me, I watch them argue as I run my fingers down the folded paper spines. I try to calm down, to stop picturing myself in the huge towering city, going black at the edges with night – with the familiar feel of the books. Then, he is there, by my elbow, smiling. His eyes are black, and he watches me. He has a long packet that smells of cinnamon and rust. There is a tang to it, the smell, that I see has been here all along. It makes me think of blood.

'Where did you go?'

'I had to get these.'

'What are they?'

'Incense,' he tells me. 'Are you going to buy one?' I still have my hand spread over the white spines of the books on display.

'Oh, no.' I'm surprised he's asked. 'My Mandarin's not good enough for reading this.'

'You want to go home?' It seems to me that he realises the heavy nature of that word. Home. The way it falls out last in the sentence, as if he was trying to minimise its impact by putting it last.

'To Sydney? No, not yet.' I am joking, trying to make light of it, let him know I am cool with it, not as helpless as I feel, standing here as people press past, going in and out of the sliding doors in puffs of air conditioned air.

'I meant ...' but he's embarrassed by my seemingly frank answer and doesn't finish, just turns and begins to walk back the way we came, to the MRT station.

Fourteen

My Fierce Delay

Book Reviews

Peter Ringwood

The novel *My Fierce Delay* opens by evoking the ennui of disenfranchised youth, somewhere between reckless student days and the responsibilities of adulthood. Set in London with the air of grimy technicolour achieved with a cheap video camera we know it is early in the 21st century. Enter Rick riding home late on the tube, unable to take his eyes from the tight type written pages of an abandoned manuscript he's found there. Affected to the point of tears, charged by the experience of reading, Rick, decides to take some time to follow up the coincidence.

Here, the mythic nature of story telling, the power of narrative, the tension that inhabits a fine story comes in to play. While Rick can be seen as a simple research student, he can also be read as a troubadour. He is struggling on the margins of society for the good of all. Rick's honesty is, at first, unquestionable and as his whim to find the author takes him over to France and a commune of spiritualists, he becomes able to define himself, less by social expectations – what his drink of choice is, or the things he owns– but more by the choices he makes. His transformation from student, disillusioned with the world, to an individual who is in charge of his own fate is very engrossing.

Throughout his search for the author he keeps coming back to the manuscript, which speaks to him of the possibilities of fiction; he changes his mind about the meaning of the manuscript several times, and as he does this, we come to see different sides to him, different possibilities for the plot. Fiction becomes a sort of 'meta-reality' that lays out the background, as Rick starts his detective work into the traces that the author – Barbara Wainwrite – has left behind her. A trail of bizarre characters and intimate secrets, which, in

the end, leave Rick wondering if the life of the author is fiction and perhaps, whether his own reality, or his sanity, is about to spring a leak.

A knack for finding the right question at the right time proves essential for Rick to keep up with the author's complicated affairs. But, it is exactly these talents that Rick sees as weighing him down, fastening him to the banal, the ordinary level of day-to-day life, the life he longs to escape. In Barbara's world, nothing makes sense; over on the other side of the page she lives out a kind of fiction that affects Rick's real world, a world which is populated with Barbara's children, her lovers, houses and pets. But just ahead of him – always checked out a day before he arrives – Barbara lives out the fiction in full surround sound, where Rick feels he can only hear the echoes. *'He looked back at the house where Annabelle had confided her mother's secrets. And from the driveway he thought he glimpsed something, was it just a reflection in the window? A tall woman with silver hair, slipped in behind the curtains. And it seemed to Rick that the wind seemed colder for that brief glimpse he had of her.'*

Another key moment on a fire-escape in Aberdeen - a city made of weighty grey granite, nothing could be more solid - Rick imagines a conversation with Barbara:

'I'm in awe of what you wrote,' Rick kept his eyes lowered. The cold voice replied, 'You think you are,' and then did she sigh, or was it the wind stripping a newspaper from the empty street? 'You are easily fooled.' 'No, no I'm not. That's just it.' He looked up, feeling his blood rise, and no, there was no-one there, but he kept saying what he needed to say, anyway, I'm not fooled. It isn't about fooling, it's as real as anything. What's real is the feelings. There is nothing unreal about them. And I'm the one feeling them, right? So, how can you tell me that I'm wrong?' The wind blew into his face...'

He confesses he doesn't want to give the manuscript back, and she confesses she is fleeing it. Rick is fictional, and his life may well end in becoming swallowed in unlikely fictional events.

The novel works to set the scene in scrupulous reality and then break it down into smaller details, which gradually become less and less ‘real’. You find yourself mesmerised by the writing, willing Rick to break out of the fictional confines set out for him. The end is surprising and daring. What is revealed has mythic proportions and implications far beyond the novel itself.

This is the first novel for Ryan Stokes, who proves to be a mystery himself. There is a photo of him on the dust jacket of the beautifully produced book – heavy paper, traditionally and expensively bound. A young face peers from lank grey locks, a face one could imagine belonging to the fictional Rick. If the story had not been so gripping and well balanced, I would be inclined to regard this as a type of hoax on the reading public. Fiction that inverts the very notion of fiction, and then sets it cleverly back into the world we know.

Fifteen

A Point of Understanding

Lee Wei Hong:

Perhaps one fact you'll be interested in is that I am a British citizen. Yes, my parents were both from Chinese heritage, but London is my place of birth. You see me melt into the stereotype on the train, at the food court or in the traffic, just like all the other Chinese here; and it's true, and yet it is not. Can't you hear it in my voice? Do not have the Singapore accent, ah. Am not one of you. Have different dreams.

Back to that morning, the actual, not the surreal, not my imaginings, if that's what this voice from the darkness was; the voice from the past. Just as I seemed to have no choice but to hear it, I also have to include it; it would not do justice to the story if it were left out. I am not the type of person who goes about hearing voices. What's important is that this was the only time. It is the only time. Having not thought about my mother, or my life before I came here for a long time it was astonishing to me. It is a life left far behind; it is a life I have been escaping for as long as I can remember.

As the rain abated I walked quickly from the stairwell, half thinking that some trick had been played on me. In some disbelief about hearing voices echo off the concrete walls. It took two minutes to cover the distance to the print shop.

Just outside the gate to the set of buildings, the old man who sells grilled chicken and rice cakes to the Malay workers was setting up his makeshift stall, which he can fold up in moments should authorities come by. It takes him about half an hour to set up, get the charcoal just the right temperature. Passing him I saw he was fanning his tiny barbeque made of a foil plate with the rim holding the smoking new fire. His wrists made small flicking movements, and the smoke moved across the path in grey blue wafts. Where does he go to shelter from the rain? The smell of his smoke and the small grunting noises he made set me at ease; this was ordinary, like the taste of tea and the smell of ink.

It was no longer early for me to be in at work after everything that happened on the way. Today we were printing the novel, on 120gsm paper and I wanted to be on the floor to oversee

that weight of paper going through the press, to bury myself into the job, to think about nothing else until it was done. Even if it meant staying on into the evening, something that has become a regular occurrence for me. I like to finish each job I do, well.

This job was a smallish run, a special edition. The paper had been flown in a few weeks before, and everyone in the workshop had stopped to look at it. None of us dared to handle it, so Tia – who had opened the box and called out in delight catching everyone's attention – carefully replaced the tissue that wrapped it and folded the cardboard down. She put the boxes on a shelf in the store, low down and occasionally one of us, after a break, when our hands were washed and our nails scrubbed as much as possible of the ink and dust, would fold back the coverings and look at the paper. It was like fabric, in it you could see the weave of the fibres, between them, perhaps, there was a promise. In the way they seemed to melt into one another, the filaments bonded tightly, running in the same direction, smooth and uniform and when you looked closely – we took turns to bend down and examine it, to breathe in the expensive scent of that paper – it wasn't the smoothness that was fascinating, it was that the smoothness was made from a kind of roughness that pressed together tightly enough, made it appear smooth.

Maybe it started, when I saw that paper and held my greasy hands away from its clean velvety texture. It reminded me of something, or made me think of the world elevated above us here in the printery. The air conditioned towers of glass so far away from the everyday smells of urine and fish, ink and the heat of the machines in the workshop.

I work with paper every day; but in that kind of work I have to think about its dimensions, its transparency, the level of gloss, how well it will soak up the ink. It had been a long time since I had something of such incredible beauty – but no, not even just that, of *worth* – fall into my world. That paper got me thinking, you see, about all these inequalities, about what I do, about where that fits into the world's vision of itself.

None of my colleagues were involved. I have to emphasise that. None of them knew, I didn't confide in them, didn't include them in my plan, though, at this point there *was no plan*. The only way they were part of anything was in how I avoided them. No one but myself is to blame. And even now, at this point in that morning I was perturbed, the core of my life here was under threat, but still, I had no idea what this job would lead me into doing the next morning.

I will insist, and go on insisting that this was a crime of passion, where the heart takes over from the head. I imagine your smirk, at the idea of me, with my balding head and face

almost obscured with the thick tinted glasses, with my ridiculous short legs and drooping spine, feeling passion. Calling it passion. But there is no other way of explaining it. Having no wife, I really haven't had any serious girlfriends or lovers, and have, as a result, no children, no grandchildren, no one. I am estranged from my family in the UK because of my mother. So, with no one close to me, my passions come out in other directions. They peer out of my work – which is why it is so good. They are located in books, sometimes in music, but mainly books. So, you will come to see that this was a crime of passion. The passion I have from inanimate things. For things that require as much of you as a wife would, or a granddaughter.

I got straight out on the floor and helped Cyril load the paper. We did it carefully, without needing to speak; we have come to a point of understanding; he knew what to do. He's a good man, and he'll be able to take over my post now, after what's happened to me. He's listened to all I've told him, and caught on to the many finer details of the process. I won't be back there, now. Ang Seiw won't want me. Even if you let me go, what I've done has disgraced me to my company. Worse perhaps than it is with my family, as you see. But, even if it's the only good thing to come out of this, Cyril can take over my role, train up a new assistant. If training anyone new is going to make sense to the company directors in the days of the technological revolution. The great corporate wheel takes another turn.

We decided to run the book through in its entirety, and we knew this would take some time, so we locked in the settings and settled down to watch how it would go. The paper was very porous and I was worried that the ink might take longer than usual to dry. So after loading the machine, we reset the temperature on the drying racks, so it could dry without smudging. All care was to be taken the word had come from the top, the offices in the city. You see, the job was a new departure for our workshop, and it had been mentioned that if it was to go well, that there may be more work like this for us to do. We knew we had earned the reputation after a few specialist brochures. It was exciting for everyone in the workshop.

I thought I saw Cyril's eyes shine at the thought of the rise in salary this would bring, at the thought of buying more pretty things for his daughters and wife. I wiped the sweat out of my eyes. Even though I've lived here for nearly ten years, I still sweat in the heat of the workshop. Wearing wristbands helps but they are soaked by the end of the day. The money didn't mean much to me, what I loved was the idea of printing more varied things, of testing my knowledge of this machine, of making it work to its absolute limits, of making things people might treasure. That one day in the future, when printers are a memory, when we have

died out as a breed, there will still be people who treasure our work, who will say, ‘Ah, yes, this was printed in Singapore, just after the turn of the century, see the workmanship here...’ and they will turn the heavy paper over in their hands with the kind of reverence I have for that first page off the press.

Tia arrived at 8.30am with the other women, and gathered around to see how the print came out on the paper. They had been eating the hawker’s wares and talking to him, I could smell the charcoal smoke in their hair.

While the ink dried into the paper I went to the washroom and used the big white bar of soap there that smells of glue, to clean my hands thoroughly. I dried them on the inside of my blue shirt, working down to the fingertips with the fabric. But still, see, the ink under my nails?

Sixteen

Anniversary of Grandmother's Death

Jo:

Mei and I stand outside the Gui Teck Lan temple on the stone path and look up at the slope of the jade roof, the pagoda and decorations. Beyond them is the grey rise of the HDB flats. I've turned my phone to silent so it won't interrupt this small ceremony. I find that I am not as interested in what Quarantine is picking up, anyway. Is it because Mei's with me that I feel at ease, as if this ritual is mine and mine alone? She is quiet now, though on the way here she was full of questions, and she lowers her eyes and stands back while I approach the altar, light the joss sticks and bow my head.

The anniversary of grandmother's death is a day I always remember. Even though dates and numbers are something I am good with, this one has a special strength for me.

Just before she died father had been fighting with Grandmamma. He had always wanted her to come to church, and she had always refused. She was not Christian, hadn't converted like my mother had; she worshipped different Gods. I was small and couldn't understand why these Gods could not live in the heaven above the believer's heads, and our God would hover over us. But my father was worried, and said that if she did not turn to God, there was no way she would find her way home. Their arguments were carried on in hoarse whispers; doors closed firmly in the corridor. My mother would put her arm over my shoulder, as I stood puzzling with my head on one side.

I didn't see it at the time, but that year she became weaker. She couldn't do the family chores – as she always had – couldn't care for us, couldn't make the steaming Lo Tong with Chicken curry or Mee Rebus – father's favourite dishes. Instead, father employed a maid, Amy. Instead of meeting me and walking home from school with me, grandmamma rested in her armchair.

That Sunday my father had insisted; if she thought of herself as part of the family, she would come with us, to attend our church in the city. I was young then, but I knew the significance of the day. My grandmother, carried to the car, her wheelchair placed in the back, the pink rug around her knees. She held my hand all the way there; held it as if my father was driving us all to our deaths. In the service she cried. I sat next to her and saw how tears caught in the wrinkles of her cheeks. While we sang praise and glory, she whispered to other Gods watching her. Her Gods that I imagined with black faces, green horns and huge white fangs. After the service we went to eat at a food hall. We offered

food to her but she wouldn't eat. She wouldn't talk to us, wouldn't meet our eyes. She sat, as if asleep in the wheelchair. There was silence – except for my father chewing and my mother's chopsticks – at our table.

When we finished with the fried pork and crab claws my father wheeled her and we followed him. When we reached our car he bent down and scooped grandmother up to put her in the back seat and her cool hand touched his. Too cool, I heard him say when he told his friends later. A shiver ran through him; Christ had taken her at her time of repentance.

But I knew there was no such repentance; no way she changed her mind. My father had it wrong. He'd seen only as much as he wanted to. We drove quietly to the hospital; the pork twisted in my stomach like eels. It was getting dark and I sat, clasped by my seat belt, afraid to touch the hands I'd held on the way out. Her hands that I would recognise from their pressure in the dark, all their tiny bones, waking me from nightmares; or their quickness, turning out the rice and grabbing at the rails of the staircase. I couldn't help looking over at her, silhouetted against the car's window, with her head nodded down and her shoulders slumped – when the street lights lit her up – she looked as she always did in the armchair during her afternoon nap.

I want to apologise to her now, here at the side of the temple, with the smoke of the joss sticks making my nose twitch. Now, without my father beside me, sighing at the idea she died just to annoy him. But I am tongue-tied, even though I am not using my tongue, and I find myself almost listening for that familiar whistling exhalation. Each year when the family comes here, my dad sighs as if the short journey hurts him. Or as if he knows how I saw through him that day.

How do I say sorry to her for what happened? Can I tell her now she's dead or anyone living how much I miss walking beside her, with her smell of tiger balm and dried persimmons?

I wonder if her Gods forgave her for going to the church with us? And wonder if she forgives my father?

Trying to reach out to her with my mind like a cell phone searching for a network, I listen for the slightest stir in the air. 'Grandmamma' using my mind to speak directly to her, 'I will remember you and remember your Gods – whoever they are – because you loved them.' The thought is like an SMS, sent out into the clouds of incense without knowing if it will reach its intended recipient. It's all I can think of to say, and somehow it feels right to be brief, to not ask too much of her; to not feel that need to explain. I know she understands all these other fears and doubts without me telling her about them.

Just as I am about to look up a tiny tremor runs through me, like an electrical surge; I see her teeth, all worn down – as if she'd just taken life and chewed it until there was nothing but small brown stumps left in her mouth. And then, I remember the day she pulled me close in the stairwell – so my

father wouldn't hear as he walked ahead with some shopping – and she whispered to me about how the gates of hell will open, once a year. How our resentful ancestors would come, in the shape of moths, or dogs, or even as rabbits or geese in the market stalls, and they would haunt us, to remind us of the family's wrong doings. Her skin, I recall now, was like the shell of a hundred year egg.

What seems unfair is that I knew her well, but never will. How do I explain to Mei what happened the day our grandmother died? Does she need to know? I step back and turn. Mei is watching the sparrows in the angana tree.

We have to remember grandmamma; it is family tradition, what she always wanted. As we walk to the door of the hall, I wonder what my father is doing now. I imagine him, as I always do when I think of him on conferences, standing in front of a blue curtain, the projection of a heart on the screen behind him, as he points with the laser pointer I gave him at Christmas. And my mother in the front row, in her yellow shirt, nodding at him. The heart on the screen will move to show it's alive.

I don't miss my parents, not right now – with Mei standing beside me looking around at the urns in their nooks along the walls the visit is complete– but I am sorry they decided they couldn't come.

The temperature always drops in this hall; I would like to check my thermometer but decide not to slow us down. There's something that makes me uncomfortable in this place. The white stone walls give off the chill with their row upon row of urns. Mei follows me closely as we walk further into the huge room. We turn right at row 578, and stop at urn 9223. Grandmamma is too high to touch, or even to make out the tiny portrait that's attached to the base of her urn. But there she is, and as I breathe it in there is a slight odour of stale air.

'Look.' I whisper to Mei. We stand there for a few minutes, the hall echoes with small sounds; scuff of shoes, murmuring voices. 'This is what she was like, Mei.' I say because I am thinking about it 'When I was very small and we went to the market together each morning. It was in a different spot to the one it is in now; it was more makeshift. My grandmother – our grandmamma – had many friends, and they would all meet at the market to chat; each one would come and greet her. They would take both her hands, like this, (so she would have to let go of me for a moment) and lean in close to hear what she had to say to them. I never heard what it was. I wondered about it and one day as a curious child, I asked her; what did she say to her old friend Ah-Ben. I remember the serious look as she bent in close and asked me: 'What do you want to know what I said to Ben?' (That's how she talked, but you always understood what she meant because she would look *through* you) 'What I said to him is for him, and what I say to you is for you.' And that was all. She had strong beliefs. She told me about the hungry ghosts, how they will haunt us, even though, or maybe because we are Christians. We would go to the stall and have mamak rojak for lunch; it always reminds me of her.'

‘Jo?’ Mei whispers.

‘Yes?’

‘What’s mamak rojak?’

‘What?’ I nearly shout, forgetting the rules of the place. ‘You don’t *know* – mamak rojak?
Indian rojak? Singapore salad?’

‘Nope.’ She says, smiling at me. ‘Sorry Gran, sorry Jo, I don’t know ...maybe Dad mentioned it.
But...’

‘Come!’ I have her by the hand, and we nearly run out of there. All this death has made me
hungry. ‘We will go to the vendor on Armenian St; we will sit under the arches of that old building
and eat the best mamak rojak I know.’

Seventeen

Reviewed

Elliot Lim

The striking thing about this novel by first-time author Stokes, is that no expense has been spared in its production. The review copy is lavish in the fine paper and wet dark words. However, the contents are even more unusual. The author has a unique persuasiveness about him – and as you read his meticulous prose the very unlikely plot is arresting in its charm and ambiguity.

The manuscript had been left, dog-eared and slightly crushed on the right-hand side of the luggage rack, and Rick felt his hand reach out for it, even as the train moved forward and all his sense of propriety and dignity screamed for him to stop. He knew then that it wasn't an abandoned newspaper, he recognised the lovingly thumbled flake of the paper, the clip, the margins, the header and page numbers. He knew at a glance that it was what he'd wanted to find, if anything, in grimy yellow neon that lit the speeding carriage of the underground.

And so begins Rick's journey through the ruinous past of the author who he attempts to locate, whose manuscript is incomplete and who comes to embody the illusive mother/mentor character that Rick longs for in his own life.

Rick imagined her standing at the top of the stairs, cigarette in one hand, her greying hair cut short, almost shorn off, wearing nothing on her feet. The fire escape became a momentary oasis in the wreckage of everything that he had found, an almost romantic setting where he might be able to finally understand the truth, to give and receive those few words that might set him at ease, might make sense of the whole journey. He longed to be comforted. But, the moon rose and rose over the dingy outlines of the hotel she once stayed in, and he saw, it was too late. There was nothing here to satisfy him.

There is something in the quality of Rick's longing that speaks to us all about something we've longed for, and maybe that we lost. Those chances for transforming our lives that passed by, even though we loved them and still don't understand why things happened the way they did.

The book is like one long and mournful epilogue to the possibilities that life offered and then retracted. Rick can't understand why everything he wants is so illusive. Maybe because of this, the reader is invited to draw a conclusion of their own.

Eighteen

Disclosures

Lee Wei Hong:

That first run came out clean and when it was complete I lifted the wedge of paper by the edges with my palms, out of the machine's metal slot. Cyril and I looked through the print. We were searching for errors, for problems with the conversions, for incompatibilities with the paper and the ink. There were none that we saw. I have to mention how unusual this is. Rarely does copy come out so cleanly. This paper was really beautiful, thick but also delicate, able to be plied through the machine and fall into the bundle on our table. We looked over it, held it up to the dusty light coming through the stained windows with their glossy blue paint. Tia had opened one window, and there was the slightest waft of cooler rain air coming in over the stacks of cardboard and papers waiting to be collected or to be stored in the warehouse.

In the workshop, with its shabby ceiling, under conditions I would have taken to the union if I was still in the UK, I occasionally lose my sense of the outside world. This is what I had wanted for this morning. To be absorbed entirely in the running of the machine, the quality of the printout, the way in which things come together, the ink, the paper, and the text. It's like magic for me each time, keeps alive my belief in the worth of the world and my place in it. When I'm there, taking part in the process I am like a part of the machine, part of the on-going process of the strings of words reaching out into the world to the people that read them – people who are somehow *meant* to receive them; and maybe sometimes, ones that are not.

But I was restless that morning; I walked through the workshop moving objects about, a tray of papers, a glue bottle. There was work waiting in my office, suppliers to talk to. But none of it seemed to matter. After hearing the voice in the stairwell, it still seemed to be echoing around me, through the rhythm of the machine, and it followed me through the dust of the floor, out to the warehouse.

For the rest of the day we watched the paper slide through the machine as if it was made to do so. It was flexible as well as thick. It went through smoothly, as if powered by some symbiosis. I couldn't believe the ease of it all; everything working so well, and though I'd been the one to put these things in place, I felt somehow redundant. Cyril took a short break and brought back noodles for me from the hawker's centre – I think he may have worried about me that day. There was something

about his concern that irritated me. I wanted to escape from it, because the implication was that I don't look after myself. That I am unable to care for myself, and that is why I have no family, my friends are the offset machine and the books I keep in my apartment. Perhaps he's right, there is a sense in which I look after my books, both those that get printed here (not to mention the brochures and booklets and colour plates we also do here) and those at home better than my friends. Books are what I treasure in my life more than any of the people who have passed through it.

As the morning turned into afternoon I tried to distract myself from my internalised thoughts by concentrating on the file of the paper through the machines, the growing stack of completed work, the black words pressed indelibly into the paper. Something of that weight I talked about earlier piled up with these pages. The feeling of heaviness didn't leave me; was it about a sense of responsibility; or those fibres of paper – with their beautiful solidity – piling up over me?

Of course I don't mean that literally, I was using a metaphor. These pages, you see, are like a history of my life: they have to be a biography. They speak about the solidity of words, of what has been written. Put down on the paper and made to stand alone. They will be read in the light of themselves. But, what you are interested in is my story. For the first time it is my individuality, a story of my own that comes under scrutiny. Not the way in which the words have appeared on the paper. I am not speaking through the offset machine. I am not filtered through the work of others. See, how this gives me freedom? Can you see how as the one serious student of my work you can take this heaviness, this burden from me? Once you have read it, it comes to live with you; the responsibility is not so much mine, as ours.

This heaviness I've talked about felt as if it inhabited me, like an illness. And I wanted to be able to set it in motion, to use myself as the fulcrum, the point at which the weight becomes a capacity to move, to lift and change things. Through concentration on my work I hoped to put the load that had landed on me that morning with the rain, to use. It was a sort of emotional heaviness, which stays in the body and slows it down. It slid up and down my back in a constant ache. I don't know if I can make you understand, you have your opinions about me quite fixed by now.

The echo of that terrible and familiar voice vibrated through the building as I climbed the stairs to my office, leaving Cyril on the floor to oversee things. It hummed through the walls, through the floor. The usually comforting sound of the machine as it turns through the motions of making words come out alive onto the pages, became intolerable. It seemed to me that the sound of the paper flying through the spools was mimicking the phrasing – the rise and fall – of her final words.

The door of my office remained closed all afternoon. I finished reading my copy of *The Straits Times*, and pushed it aside with some annoyance. I can read too much and I feel slightly sick at the

proliferation of information that crams the columns, that seems to grow out of the ink and crawl into the brain, burrow in there. That day it seemed to make nests, become comfortable and have children.

Though I complain about it, I am just as careless with the printed word as others are. It was a breeze from the small fan, blowing up the slightly damp air that lifted the pages and tipped the newspaper off the table so it fell on the concrete floor. I got up to check my computer and walked over it, leaving smudges of dusty shoe-prints on the back page. The paper has been printed, carefully laid out, thought through by someone, somewhere.

Yes, you want to go back to what I did. You want a rational explanation of my motivations, you want to hurry the story to the point where you get to understand me, to open me out like a fruit – say a mangosteen – and peer into the white flesh of my brain. The problem is I can't provide you with that account. The rationale goes back into my past into my childhood, into why I came to Singapore, into everything that's happened to me here since. You won't allow me to tell you about my mother, you will shake your head; this is an out of bounds area and yet you want to know what made me do this, so you can measure it up in little graphs and say that there's a 25% chance I am schizophrenic, a 75% chance that I am a lunatic.

You'll purse your lips, I know, but the thing that's starting to dawn on me is that it's not my story you want to hear; the interesting point for you is the part where you come in. You are just like some teenager looking through the school year-book for the photo of yourself, so you can be assured that you really are the cleverest, shiniest child in the room.

But you come in at the end of the story, this facility, the cell you've put me in, these written pages while you wait for the official line from the British Consul, they aren't part of the story, they aren't going to tell you anything. Everything about this place is depersonalised. You are sitting there in your own small office without a hair out of place, waiting for me to finish my confession. You could be anyone, but you see, for the first time in my life I am truly myself.

Nineteen

Are We Lost?

Mei:

This mall, just off Orchard Road, is filled with kids. They lean against the escalator rails, dangle their bags over the edge. Huge coloured posters for the movies on upstairs dominate the walls. The shops seem full of cute Korean things, blue bears to hold your mobile phone or DVDs and CDs cheaper than I've ever seen. I am distracted by the multitude of *things*. Jo ushers me into a huge silver lift and smiles to himself as he presses the button for the basement. Already he's somewhere else. I can see it in the way his eyes slide out of focus. He fiddles with the key to the flat around his neck. We get out of the lift, turn right and walk a short way to an open arcade. The lights are low, so that the screens of the consoles show up brightly, their landscapes and figures flashing and wavering, row upon row of them.

Jo opens a door to the side of the parlour and in the dimness I see a bulging American soldier smiling at me from the corner. It isn't until he quivers in the draught from the air conditioning I realise he's cardboard. I blink at the kids playing silently at the monitors; each screen has a green-grey background against the red-yellow of gunfire. They are all in the same world, they are all in the same position, hunched over the built-in desks, headphones over ears. I stand in the doorway, not quite sure where to go.

'Sit,' Jo says. And even though I know it's meant nicely, it comes out sounding like an order. It seems to be a Singapore thing, you are told in the briefest way what's expected of you, with no wastage of words. As if syllables are expensive or time is short.

Jo goes over and joins a small queue that's formed in a pool of light near a desk. There are two men behind it, serving the boys at the counter. I choose a chair and watch their conversation with Jo. They know Jo, greet him with high fives; I can't hear what they say. They look over at me, one of them winks, I feel the blush pull itself up my neck. I pretend to be interested in the black walls then swivel my chair and see that there are several more dark rooms full of computers, opening into one another. Not every seat is occupied, but there are many that are, and with a slight surprise I see every one of the gamers is a boy, some of them could even be young men.

Some of them look up at me, and seem to register that I'm not one of them, can they tell? Or is it that I'm a girl? Is it unusual for one to venture in here?

I'm a little bit relieved when Jo comes back. We sit side by side at two computers. He's paid for me to play: 'You'll understand Singapore youth,' he jokes at me. But I am not interested in my own screen, which is revolving through my choices – I am distracted by what he's doing.

How has he got a small window of code open while he's playing the game? He's typing commands, making the screen shift in and out of play. I've never seen this before – not that I've watched a lot of gaming. Jo's screen changes; the pictures on the monitor cycle through – like the choices on mine, but mid-game; on one screen the picture is grey, another is green and there are small figures. He types, leaning in, taking up the position of the other players. He is no longer the Jo I know, he is unfamiliar yet somehow *one of these boys*. His fringe falls across his forehead, and he blows it off with a puff of air from his lower lip. His wrist looks thin, and he moves the mouse so quickly, I see him as part of the machine. Here, he is unselfconscious, and I watch small wrinkles of a much older face line his forehead, lit up by the neon-like glow from the screen. His eyes are squinted from concentration, lips slightly pursed. His neck is curved and smooth and looks almost too narrow for supporting his head. His shoulders slump, he looks fragile, tiny, perched on the stool, playing the game.

There is a murmur among the players and then a shout from one. He has a small moustache and looks up for a moment, panicked. When he sees me looking at him, he doesn't smile, or shrug to show he knows it's all a game, he just leans back into his screen, serious. Others start to groan, smack their foreheads. It's as if someone has just animated the group, made them react, turned them from robotic players into humans again. They are playing like maniacs, keyboards and controllers click furiously, some one in another room starts to laugh.

I glance over at the guys behind the desk; I almost expected them to be looking over at Jo, to see how he's just changed the whole atmosphere in the place. But instead, they are both bent over the computer that's set up on the counter. One of them pushes his designer glasses back up the bridge of his nose. They are ignoring three or four kids waiting in line.

'Jo?' I tap his headphones.

'Hmmm...'

'What are you doing?'

'Ah, um.' Another shout and a collective sigh around the perimeter.

'Jo, is it OK if I go and look around the mall, and meet you back here?'

'You want to go?' He looks up at me, surprised, and again he's my cousin, my conspirator. 'I was planning on being here for about an hour, but if you want to go...' He looks as if he's about to log off.

‘No, no, you stay here, I’ll just have a walk, maybe get a coffee, look at the books.’

‘But you’ll get lost.’

‘No I won’t. I’ll be fine.’

‘Really?’ He seems unsure. Glances at his screen, which seems to be moving along without him.

‘Yes, really, I can find my way back here.’ I whisper.

‘The mall is confusing though.’ He reaches into his bag for something.

‘But I could ask my way back, if I really did lose you. You just stay here. I’ll come back.’

‘Here,’ Jo passes me a piece of paper. I unfold it, and see that it’s a printout of the floor-plan of this mall, all six levels. Marked in bold red is the entrance, the fire escapes, the lifts and some of the shops that he’s bought things at. There are lists in the margin, computer code, I don’t understand.

‘OK,’ I say, thinking that when they told me he was *different*, they really didn’t have it covered. I take the paper and fold it back along its creases. ‘Thanks. I’ll really be fine.’

‘Sure, try this tea-house with the grass jelly tea.’ He points at a small steaming cup symbol on one of the upper floors. ‘It’s really good.’

‘OK.’ I’m a little bewildered by his concern for me. My father’s like this, too. I can even hear his voice in my head: *Don’t get lost, don’t get cold, don’t eat that, and don’t, whatever you do, be late.* I sigh. Here’s Jo, acting like a miniature version of my father. I wonder if my father ever considered skipping his classes, going somewhere he shouldn’t, paying for things with someone else’s money? Maybe, I think, because he and Jo are alike in so many other ways.

‘I’ll meet you at the lift there, then.’ Again he points to the map. ‘Where we came down?’

‘Alright,’ I say, wanting to run, just like I do with my own father when he does this to me, the serious planning of each outing.

‘Have fun.’ Jo smiles his old smile. My dad never tells me to have fun. Somehow I’m relieved by the difference here. There’s a muffled shout as if the gamer’s voice had risen up out of the excitement of the game and had to be stopped from entering the real world. Someone nearer says ‘Yes!’ shaking two fists in the air and Jo looks back at his screen. ‘Ohh dear,’ he says.

As I make my way out of there, no one looks up from the screens, including the man who winked. The boys waiting in the line are young, and they crowd together, moving out of my way, even though there is enough space between them and the door for me to pass easily.

Out in the mall there is a crowd of girls looking at something on the floor. I wander over; what do the girls do while the boys are playing at being in military service already? I press into the crowd and peer at the white sheet on the floor, and arranged in order of their size are handbags; designer handbags, which are no doubt fakes, sold by a smiling African man. His teeth really seem to twinkle

in the light. The girls, some in uniforms, some in fashionable cork-heeled shoes, pick up the merchandise, look into the bags, check the clasps and zippers. None of them seem to notice me either, in my jeans and sandals. But the seller smiles at me, just the same, and I pick up an impractically small bag, thinking about my mother's interest in keeping up with fashion.

Money keeps changing hands and groups of girls break off from the crowd. I wonder where they go now. On the second level I find the tea-house Jo mentioned. I buy myself a grass jelly tea, large, and sit down at a small table with a white chair. It's the first time I've paid for something in days, Jo always has just the right change, or, needs to break a note here, or has to put it on credit, I should sort it out with his mother later, he tells me. But I know – he's also told me – that his mother doesn't know he has a copy of her card.

'Useful to have, ah,' He told me, as we turned away from the door of the language centre, 'in case of emergency.'

Nearby a group of girls swing their bags onto their shoulders, 'Enough gossip,' I hear them say. 'The movie's about to begin.' I take out the book I'm reading, and gently spread its pages open. I lose myself in it, just as Jo's gone and lost himself in the LAN gaming room, and these girls who've just brushed past me, into the darkened cinema. We are no longer here.

Twenty

Buried and Forgotten

Lee Wei Hong:

I've decided. The best way to describe myself to you is to say I am like a mimosa plant, that grows hardy and thorned on the vacant allotments or between concrete tiles. There is a variety of mimosa that is sensitive to touch, that folds itself away from the casual hand, from the geckos or rats that might try to eat it. I am like this plant. And very occasionally it holds out a pink flower for the sun to admire. Mimosa likes to grow in tropical Asia. In other climates, it wilts and dies.

If there were ever a reason to leave, I'd miss the rain and the hot stormy days, the light reflected in so many pearls of moisture on my neighbours. If I was a plant, I'd have fine comb-like leaves and grow out of sight, take up the space between the lush grasses, and there would be a magical quality about me. Touch me and I will turn away. It's always been like that with me.

When I heard my mother's voice that morning, it was a pivotal moment in the subsequent sequence of events. But, even more than that, the echo has – I think – distorted my life. My mother and I have not spoken since I arrived here – even before that, it's hard to recall how long it has been. She was, along with my elder brother, the most significant person I left behind. When I heard her voice on the morning of the seventh it was as if something opened me out. Instead of folding away, shying, turning my eyes away, closing off my ears, I was forced – I can't say how – to listen, to look, to see myself.

What you see here is a son emptied of his mother's traits. See how my nails are long? No, it is not from bad grooming. When they are long they are my nails, though the ink under them is dry and will never come out. But as they are these are my hands, this way they are individual, unique. If my nails are ever cut short, there, suddenly are her hands. Do you see? They do my work, they serve my food and with their flat-palmed hardness they beat me, smacking at any surface of my body. Even seeing those hands makes my breath echo in my chest.

See this lip? You have wondered at the scar that curls it up into an unfortunate sneer, even when I try to smile? This is what she did to me. She was the one who cut out a mole that was growing there with hot knives when I was six. My brother held me down; I was too young to throw him off. They

defaced me; took my smile away. It would never be possible for me to be the open-faced friend, the simple and happy child, the bridegroom or father. My face bled until my brother carrying several blood-soaked towels took me to the hospital in the early morning. The staff there stitched me up, with looks of concern.

Ah, but now you beckon me back to that particular day, that day that's led us all here. You are tired of me changing the subject? You are tired of my digressions? Realise, though, that they are part of the explanation you desire.

That afternoon I stared at the telephone in my office and thought of all the networks, the undersea cables and the satellites that would allow me to know if what she said to me in the stairwell was true. It is a very ordinary phone, yellowish with numbers on fat grey buttons. I thought about the order of the numbers one would have to press to make the phone ring in the small house where my brother and I grew up. Then, I imagined her shuffle to the phone. And it came back to me, the smell of rising damp and rot that came up from the cellar – the terrifying scent of that kind of darkness, of things, slowly, molecule by molecule, breaking down.

Swivelling the chair around I booted the computer, slid in the disk. At first my justification may have been to just check this manuscript that we were taking such care over, but soon I was drawn in, invited to another place, at once familiar and new. There was London, but a London I never knew. Transported from my own life, from the repeated phrase that haunted that day, into an alternate place, I read all afternoon.

To be honest, I was curious to see what the writing was like. To deserve to be printed on such rare paper, my curiosity as to what the author had to offer was piqued. Most novels are printed superficially, but here, we'd been instructed to spare no effort in the process of printing, and it seemed to me that this could mean one of two things. That the book was written by someone with more money than sense, and the printing and paper were an effort to dazzle the reader into not noticing the prose; or that it was an impressive work and the printing costs and paper were a celebration of the writer's talent. In this case, the manuscript was a new work of fiction, treated like a reprint of a much-loved classic. It seemed mysterious; something about what we were doing was not quite making sense.

When I was a boy I lined my side of the bedroom with books. They held a kind of reverence for me; my small self thought they were utterly magic. Stories appealed to me, but also books with pictures of animals. The line drawings were good, but a photograph was better, even in the faded blue green tones of rotogravure printing that dates those pictures so quickly. My side of the bedroom,

shared my whole boyhood with my brother, had stacks of books against the wall. We didn't have money for shelves, or for the books.

My books came from rubbish bins, from among piles of newspapers at the back of the chipper, from free days at the library. I spent afternoons walking up and down the street checking to see if anyone was tossing books. They were rough, those books, their covers often coming off, pages torn or missing, smears of grease or vegetable matter on them in various places. Eventually the neighbourhood got to know what I was searching for and they would leave their books on top of the bins. From here I collected some rare finds, Grimms fairy tales in German with colour plates, Keats' Collected poems, a few editions from a set of encyclopaedia about African animals, but also a lot of dross that for me had just as much value. The printed worlds, the photos of ships, the pictures of martyrs, the magazine illustrations of how a lady should dye her hair, I prized equally.

There is something of the vivid enjoyment of my new finds – when my hands were red with cold, the fibres of my coat frozen in the January air and my face ablaze with hot pleasure from the armful of books – that still visits me when I do my job well. My brother would sometimes come on my jaunts, but he collected toys, cars, trains, comics, and once, a book of stamps. But eventually he lost interest, and went with his friends to watch the girls from the other side of the park. Looking back, these books, even in their tattered state, showed me that there were other ways to live, there was an alternative to my life. Their pages revealed the mystery of how other people did live and I buried myself among their pages and forgot, for a while, about who I was and my place in the world.

The experience of reliving that magic there in my office under the neon lights with the rhythm of the paper going through the press in the background, starting to sound, again, like the old rightness of words going onto paper. Right there, virtually in my hands, even without the fine paper I've been telling you about, without the ink from my own printing press, was a story that spoke directly to me.

It's hard to explain to you why, after reading a certain book a man might suddenly find himself at the edge of one of those emotional precipices. How, occasionally in a life, events conspire like fiction to make change in everything. How a book might change the way a person views himself, his place in the society he lives in. It had been a strange day before I clicked into that book, but the moment when I began to read earns its place in my memory of moments – like finding a brand new edition of Gulliver's Travels under a pile of cabbage leaves; or realising that I could leave my mother's house and never come back. This book, as I read, was up there on the scale.

And it's not just me that has this reaction. Remember the expensive paper? Other people have been touched by this book, too, and have needed it to be made into the beautiful relic that it has become. They have put their weight behind it, important people who make decisions about publishing

manuscripts, who have reputations, things at stake. Who are now – no doubt – unhappy with their choice of printer.

Let me just go back for a moment to my mother, yes, it's important, it will let you see something that you would never otherwise understand. I told you, that morning as I sheltered from the rain under the building with the concrete walls, just beyond the road works, I heard her voice speak to me. What she said in that echo chamber of stairs was that she was dying.

As I began to read this book, I tucked that moment away in my mind. As I read her voice and all it meant to me faded. Since the moment that morning, I was trying to bury the voice, extinguish it with everything that was there at the printery at that time, at that moment. Until reading the opening where the young man Rick suddenly feels his life open up, I might have said to you that I'd had a delusion of hearing my mother's voice, or that I *thought* I'd heard my mother speaking, or even that it was some echo, something rational that would explain away the sudden weight in my step.

When we were boys, my mother would lock us in the cellar. Sometimes for whole days and nights together. Down there, in the darkness, with the smell of coal and wood rot and old stone, rats and the stench of the sewer, my brother and I would sit together and hold hands. In the winter it was bitter and we would arrange the blanket around us and try to keep from trembling and opening up tunnels for the icy air to get in. In summer it felt as though we would suffocate. She was strong; while we were young, if we resisted she would drag us out from under the bed by the hair, pick us up and hurl us down the wooden steps. If we went willingly, she would sometimes leave the light on. I could read on those occasions, huddled against my brother. And that's when I realised the magic of reading that has been so profound in my life. It's possible to read myself through any catastrophe. With words on paper in front of me I can escape grief and emptiness – the awfulness of night after night alone.

After hours and hours, so long it was hard to say how long it was, in the darkness, there was nothing quite like the crack of light appearing at the same moment as the door creaking – freedom. We would uncurl from our positions, like two thin cats and creep up to the light. Sometimes there would be food, sometimes just the relief and comfort of our own beds. I am reminded of that light, with its welcome release, the sense of the world opening up, of all the possibilities the world outside our cellar when I read a good book. It is exactly like being released from the dungeon of your own mind, into all the possibilities of another.

For some years I'd wondered if she was dead, but it was a thought I'd bury under all the good stories I ever knew. But it seemed impossible, that someone who played a huge role in my formation could ever die. Could someone who would swim up out of deep dreams to clout me with her fist, ever really be gone? When my brother was sixteen he was big enough (maybe it also took him that long to

realise that it wasn't normal to be locked away by your mother) to fight back. He got an iron bar that made up part of his scavenged bed and hit her over the head. She fell down, eyes rolling wildly. We ran, out of the house, out of our street, all the way to some park where we spent the night, eating leftovers out of the bin outside the fish and chipper.

But my brother made us go back. He always returned, and I went with him. That night we got back to the house to find her blood everywhere but she was gone.

Twenty One

Physical Assault

Mei:

Jo isn't at his terminal in the gaming centre when I go back there. I have a moment of panic. Faces swivel around to look at me, five blank backlit boy's faces, none of them Jo. Did I make a sound I didn't mean to? The cardboard American soldier grins. I glance along the row of computers, over to the desk. No sign of him. I step back, the door slides shut again.

Standing with my back against the wall just outside the door I try his mobile with the one his mother lent me. It takes me a while to navigate through the menu, but I find his number in there, and press the green button. Somewhere, his number rings to the recorded answer: 'Hi, Jo here, leave me a message.' And I am almost shocked to find there is nothing I want to say. I don't want to leave him a message; I want to know where he is, right now. All my breath goes out in one long sigh as I hang up. What will I do if he's left without me?

Closing my eyes, I try to recall the walk back to the Orchard MRT station. I find I do remember the way back to Orchard Rd, and then at Bishan, along the concrete walkways and past the hawker's centre to the flat. But I am unhappy about being left. I'm sure that Jo wouldn't go home without me. Would he? I remind myself to breathe and dial again; my fingers feel huge and sticky on the minute keypad, and I see them shake, as if they are someone else's fingers that I am observing with interest. I take out my notebook and dial the number he wrote in there for me, but it's the same: 'Hi, Jo here...' and I hang up. The recorded answer is out of date, useless, doesn't help me with where he's gone, or what to do without him.

I'd waited by the lift, sitting on the shiny floor for what seemed like hours, but was – when I looked at my watch – only fifteen minutes. I took a walk and found another lift at the other end of the complex, so I watched both of them from a vantage point in the middle, outside a photo store, where young girls in white sandshoes were flocking to buy sticker photos of themselves with their friends from vending machines. The occasional boyfriend went in – I suspected he was pulled, not simply guided by the blinking girl attached to him. In general, I'd noted, he'd be wearing a fresh white shirt and a look of horror masked by amusement.

I wondered if, when he arrived, I would have any luck trying to get Jo to go in there with me. But more time passed and Jo didn't turn up. What had started as a feeling of slight annoyance began

to gnaw at me. Nervous tension crept into my neck, and I began to picture what could have held Jo up for so long. I imagined the game swallowing him: he falls into a vortex, swirled around by a massive surge in electricity. No matter how clever he is, he'll never be able to get back to the real world. I also had a brief image of bandits holding up the centre, making the players lie on the floor. The gamers' virtual arms no longer of any use. Something about this struck me as ridiculous, just as I was thinking it; Singapore is one of the safest cities on the planet. These are my father's words reflected at me from that last lunch he stole between meetings. He was certain I would be safe here. And, even though being wary of my father's statements is a habit I've never been able to break, I found myself believing it as soon as I was in the city with Jo. Without Jo, there's nothing unsafe – just emptier.

I didn't want to read my book any more. It felt like I could miss Jo if I wasn't looking. And, anyway, I didn't want to rush and finish the book too greedily, then it would be over too soon. What could have happened to him? Is he lost without his copy of the map?

That's why I went back to the gaming centre, sure Jo would be there at his monitor, planning to pull off his headphones and ask him to check what the time was on his watch. Maybe that's why they all looked up at me – I'd walked in the door with an unladylike stomp in my step – I suppose my entrance may have been something unusual intersecting with the routine of their afternoon.

What do I do now, though? Standing here in the depths of this city, have I lost my sense of direction now Jo's not here? While I was reading in the café, I see that I thought of that in relation to where Jo was at the computer a few floors below. With Jo there I could forget about the route we took from the MRT station. With him there, I can forget about those doubts and concerns that hunt me when I'm alone. Could Jo have snuck off to buy something again? I touch the embossed flower on my t-shirt, thinking that the times he's done that he knew exactly where I was, and he'd calculated that I would stay there. Now, I'm less predictable, I had been feeling more sure of my surroundings, more at home in this city.

Someone leaves the centre and the door opens wide. While they're swinging their backpack onto their back, I peer through the door as it slides closed. Where Jo was sitting the computer screen is still lit, unlike the two monitors next to it, that are blank. Maybe he's just out the back. Maybe he had to go and take his temperature or find a drink.

Even though this seems plausible it feels wrong that Jo, who's been so constant and reliable would take off alone and leave me by myself in the mall, even though I am surrounded by so many other teens. I glance down at my watch. It's been 2 hours since I left him at the LAN centre. He's too careful of me, even though, at times it makes me feel that he thinks I'm an imbecile. Once he told me that Singapore was the last outpost of chivalry, as he'd ushered me onto the MRT.

What amazed me was the way he'd planned our excursions to the finest detail, so that instead of him ending up in Tampanese for a youth bible meeting, and me at the language collage, we'd been roaming the city, using his mother's credit card and my savings account for everything we wanted. I bought three books from the huge bright Borders Books that smelt of vanilla and coffee. Jo got an extra wireless system for his computer. We came out of Sim Lim Square, with one small yellow plastic bag. In that mall there were more computers and their accessories, ipods, memory sticks, Cds, external hard drives, games and software than I thought I'd ever seen in one place, under the bright glare of huge lights. The salesmen and women had it reflecting in their eyes; but Jo asked them so many questions they were soon helping him out. It was like he spoke the language, and for him doors opened, people started to smile and laugh. 'You know more about this than I do!' One of the men said in some incredulity to Jo, 'You can have this 10% off if you take it now.' Jo then looked at me sideways as if he'd like a hint on how to answer, but I was leafing through one of my books. I hadn't been able to get a discount at the bookstore because I'd read a book the staff had liked. This was another set of rules, and I couldn't help him out.

We'd made our way across town, our backpacks full of shopping, to Orchard Road and to this mall with all the teens crowded into it, to this gaming centre. Jo had told me excitedly that it was a great place and that I'd like it. It was strange, better than the Westfields at home, where kids like to go. You can get lost in those, and maybe it was me who was lost. Amy, the maid, was expecting us home in the evening. We would have to leave soon if we were going to be home in time to eat dinner with Jo's parents. I can't sit about here forever, being intimidated by the winking gamers.

I stand up to my full height and walk through the sliding door. Winking man is standing there, smiling broadly, as if he knew I'd been outside the door. His skin looks grey under the fluorescent blue of the lights, but still, he thinks he's handsome.

'You seen Jo?' I blurt even though I'm trying to be casual. I don't want to seem to be as worried as I am, but I fiddle with the phone, twist its lanyard around my fingers.

'Ah, yeah.' He frowns at Jo's monitor. 'He asked me for the key a while ago.'

'The key?' I'm imagining it's a computer term.

'Yes, to the toilet.' He tells me helpfully.

'Ah. I see. How long ago?'

'Not sure, ah.'

'And he hasn't been back?'

'No.' He's getting a little concerned now, too. 'I can't leave here, but if you want to see if you can find him go through here.' He slips in behind the cardboard man, who almost seems to be smiling

right at me and I follow, wondering where he's gone. Then I see there's a doorhandle in the wall just beside and winking man has unlocked a small door. I go through into a small metal staircase that leads down several flights. 'You can get back out through the alley.' He says to me. I take Jo's map out of my pocket. Yes, it's a fire escape and one floor down there are toilets. At the bottom of the stairs I can see a hall, where there's a rice-cooker and a few bowls on a small table. Next to these are two doors; one is marked with a small man logo, holding his knees together. The other is blank grey. I try that one first, because I don't really want to have to go into the toilet to find Jo.

It opens easily. Stepping through the door I find I am in an alley that runs along the back of the mall; it must be a service route. Skip bins are neatly arranged along the wall to my right. To my left there's a high barred window that must lead into the toilet. I wedge the door open with a piece of cardboard, noticing, briefly, that its part of another cardboard soldier. But then a small scuffling sound reaches me and I walk around the bins and down the alley before I think this may be a bad idea.

I stop. There is the sound of air being blown through vents, and, at the end of the alley traffic moves slowly along. Through a gap in the buildings I see a strange glass structure. Then, looking down I see a figure, slumped against the wall, surrounded by papers.

'Jo?' I say as I reach him. 'Jo?' I run forward, kneel in front of him and smack his face as they do to unconscious people in the movies I've seen. This sets a fresh stream of blood from his nose. His eye is swelling up, going blue. His lips are split and bleeding, and I reach down for one of the napkins he's surrounded by to mop up all the blood.

'No.' He says, catching my wrist with a surprisingly firm grip. 'It's a book.' I look down at the pile of papers, and see that it is. The letters stand out clear, even though the paper has been wet in the rain. I pick one up, it is covered in tiny waves, but the ink hasn't run or faded. It's page 132, the chapter is 'Inconsolable' and the first sentence reads – *'she took up one of the pages and read it out loud to him.'*

'Jo? What's happened? Who did this to you? Was it other gamers? Are you OK?'

'Yeah, sure.' And as if to prove it, he scoops his thermometer out of the side pocket of his bag, and sticks it in his ear. When it beeps he says: '37.5. Just fine.' And he takes a swig of water.

Twenty Two

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Quarantine:

At 9.25am on the 26.4.07 Email address removed for privacy wrote:

I recognise it. A piece of you, and you are dividing yourself up for me, because you can't when you write, you are too open and honest and truthful to compartmentalise yourself in that way. You are generous with yourself. But, here, one by one your physical attributes appear on my screen. One by one I will know you even more intimately and well.

At 11.33am on the 26.4.07 Email address removed for privacy wrote:

Everyone accuses me of becoming obsessed with unreality: with an unreal relationship. And I keep telling them that it is real. Just because it doesn't exist in the here and now doesn't mean it's diminished in any way. I also added that they should get used to this kind of thing, that this is the modern world, this is how things will be conducted more and more and they sound like a couple of dinosaurs from the dark ages with their comments.

At 12.02pm on the 26.4.07 Email address removed for privacy wrote:

Strangely, it feels even more real for me than those relationships that seem to satisfy most people. Something about the email takes us into another what I can only call – 'zone'. A philosophical frame of mind, or way of talking, where we have to digest, not only that we've never met, but that we have met in this new and intimate way. We don't have to be in the same country to appreciate the depth of how we are communicating, we don't need to live in the same house to see how well we understand one another. The distance between us allows us to be even more honest. Don't you think?

At 3.45pm on the 26.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

I am feeling disassociated with the people in my life. The only real conversations I seem to have are with you. Am I alone in feeling this way? Wafer comes to sit on my lap, as if he knows – in his own cat way – what I am feeling, as if he knows how it feels to only really know yourself through the lens of another person's writing to you.

At 5.59pm on the 26.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

I used to love detective stories. The way the villain, no matter how cunning they were, was always uncovered at the end. I was completely drawn in by the idea that things could be solved magnificently. I think that this is why I wanted to be a dentist. I also think that it is why I am so interested in our conversations. That these ideas we throw around could somehow be solved, resolved. But not by meeting. (Which is not to say that I don't wonder what that would be like, or how it would feel to touch you, smell your skin...) Because if we insisted that meeting together would cement this relationship what we have now, in this strange text-world of cyberspace, would be broken. You would hear me sing in the shower, I would tell you the thoughts that fly across my mind through the day, and you might begin to wonder what it was you wanted from me anyway. What was it you saw?

At 9.32pm on the 26.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

My mother lived with a man for many years after my father died. They would weave around one another in the house. One day I realised I hadn't heard them speak to one another in years. It was if they lived in the same house, but different worlds.

At 1.49pm on the 27.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

Yes, I understand, what you are saying is completely clear to me. I don't feel as if there is any distance between us, I feel as close to you, and understanding your life, as I ever have, with anyone. Ever.

At 5.15am on the 27.4.077 Email address removed for privacy wrote:

What I realised is the writing is something to do with it. When I am typing away here at my desk, the computer glow lighting up the darkening room, I feel as if I am at my most lucid. Details that show exactly what I mean spring easily to my fingertips. If you were to meet me for a drink, like a normal socialising couple would, I'm afraid you'd find me inarticulate and boring. I would keep saying 'Yes, yes,' as if it could ward off the sinking feeling you get when you realise you are boring someone half to death.

Twenty Three

The Ritual and The Storm

Jo:

I go out on to the balcony and awkwardly plant the four over-size incense sticks in a potted palm. Mei watches. Her face has made fine lines of concern in the dimming light. She leans against the doorframe. It feels to me there is a heavy atmosphere in the city tonight. My mother's *Paphiopedilum* orchids nod in the slight shift of the air. Maybe the tingle in my skin isn't just the bruises. Maybe it's caused by the way Mei watches. No one else has ever watched this small thing I do each year for Grandmamma. There is an excitement to it, like fear. But Mei just frowns at me.

'I don't understand Jo, aren't you Christian?'

'Well, I haven't decided.'

'But don't you have to 'forsake all others'?''

'No, Mei – that's the wedding vows.'

'Oh.' And I feel that 'Oh' as if it is in my own aching chest. Thumped up there like a pressure on my heart. Why did I have to say that? Couldn't I just have said 'Hmm,' and let it lie? Why is she so easy to talk to that I feel I can say anything? What is it about her that makes talking so possible? I list five things I could have said instead. They range from 'I think it's going to rain again.' to 'I am not about to forsake anyone.' (which I put at the top of the list.) It's never been like this before with me. Sure, writing, I can write to people. Sure chatting online. But talking, that is something people only do in books isn't it? I look up and see that she is still looking at the regular grey tiles on the floor. I touch my forehead with my fingertips. The bruise there makes me squint.

'Mei,' I say to distract us both, because I want to talk, to fill in this silence sitting between us. To tell her about what I'm doing. I want my words to reach out and touch her. 'You see, Grandmamma taught me to do this.' I say, looking down. It's easier if I don't meet her eyes. 'I remember, she was looking after me, I must have only been about 6 or 7 and we came out here on the balcony. It was at night and I was still a little bit afraid of the dark, so she held my hand. Her hands were always dry, you know?' I can tell Mei's interested, now, because her breathing is quiet. 'And we came out here and it was late and my parents must have been away...' I feel the story falter in my mind before it comes out; I push the panic down, and kneel on one leg to light the incense with my father's shiny

zippo lighter. ‘Well, she told me about the hungry ghosts, the night of the hungry ghosts. You know the story.’ I know she does. But when I look around she smiles and shakes her head.

‘No,’ she says, for her own reasons. I squint and try to calculate what they could be. Five reasons: she wants me to tell her the well-known story. Or, she wants to hear our Grandmamma’s version? Maybe she wants to hear me talk. Or perhaps she’s not sure I know the story as well as she does? Is it possible she doesn’t know the story? Her father is my Grandmamma’s first son, how could he not have been told the story? I touch my jaw, the sensitive red skin she recently helped me wash.

‘Well, it’s on the 7th month of the Chinese calendar. Which means it usually happens in September. It’s on the full moon, according to legend, that the ancestors come out of hell. And they’re really hungry. They’re also often angry, because we haven’t sent them money, haven’t taken care of their needs once they’re in hell. I can’t imagine it’s much fun down there, so they want all the help they can get. When they come out of the open gates they want to devour everything. But they can’t satisfy their appetites. They come after their relatives. I can remember the big yellow moon on the night I was telling you about. In my memory it takes up the whole sky and Grandmamma and I were tiny specks below it. Singapore seemed miniature to me and even though I could see the big flashing ads in the distance and the lights in all the buildings, still, it all felt small. And I had the sense that there were so many dead shadows creeping about under the trees, among the gardens and skirting the streetlights. There were more of them than us living beings. Somehow Grandma’s story shrunk the world.’ I have to stop to breathe. I don’t know, but that seems like the most words I’ve ever said together in a row.

‘Hmm... did grandmamma believe all this?’

‘Sure. She was priming me to do this. I think what she wanted was for me to look after her in the next realm, or whatever, just in the way that she looked after her husband. We sat out here and burnt the death money and incense.’

‘Did, I mean... do your parents know?’

‘No, I never told anyone.’ I look down at the smoking incense. There are a lot of things I don’t tell my parents.

‘Really?’ She takes a step out onto the balcony, leans with me on the railings. ‘But it’s November, Jo, you’re a bit late with the ritual.’

‘Yeah, I know.’ I take some of the death money out of the box I hide it in, ‘But I think my parents would notice if I came out here and burnt things on the Festival, so I leave it till later. I don’t think Grandma would mind.’

‘How do you know it will get to her?’ She asks as the first note curls and blackens and turns to ash in the air.

‘You Australians, you have no faith...’ She laughs then, like a trickle of water running over stone, as I light the next green note.

‘But I mean, how do you know it will get to her if you don’t believe?’

‘I believe it will get to her.’

‘But, you’re meant to be all Christian?’

‘What’s that mean?’

‘Well, it seems a little underhanded to go to church and worship one God and then come home and light incense to another.’

‘What other God? There’s lots of them.’

‘Oh. Is that what Grandma believed?’

‘Yeah.’

‘So, what’s it like – the festival?’

‘When you’re not a terrified 7 year old, you mean?’

‘Mmmm.’ She smiles.

‘You know, it’s all sort of touristy, really. The way I see it now, there’s lots of colour and life, people who wouldn’t usually, smile and talk. There’s opera down at the markets – to entertain the ghosts you see. But, Grandma’s version was much darker, more real, too, I think. She had the ghosts take on the bodies of dogs and moths; there was even the idea that they could – given the right circumstances and opportunities – take over human bodies. You could be inhabited by the angry spirit of your long dead aunt.’

‘Or grandmother?’

‘Well, yes.’ I pause, watch her face for a while. She’s frowning, concentrating, as if she’s trying to figure it all out. ‘One night, when I was a little bit older,’ I find myself telling her ‘We were walking home from the festival (my parents had let me go and see the fireworks down on the harbour with Grandmamma), and we came around a corner and saw a dog look up from one of the offerings – some boiled rice left out in a bowl, to feed the ancestors. It was a huge light coloured dog, a mastiff or something and it turned to look at us as it licked rice from its lips. There was no-one else about; we stopped in the middle of taking a step. The dog stared at us. I remember this feeling of my breath interrupting itself; I couldn’t breathe in a rhythm. Grandmamma tightened her grip on my hand. I knew she was afraid and that made me brave. You know, one of those strange things. I remember that

the dog stood there, looking too big on the paving. I knew I had to do something or it would certainly try to take our bodies.

‘I didn’t think, I just ran at it, slipping out of Grandma’s grip, wailing and yelling and throwing my arms about. The dog must have got a shock, because it galloped out of the way and behind a raised garden bed.’

‘Did you believe it, then, that it was a ghost?’

‘Yes. I think I was about 10. I really did. I knew it was real. It took me ages to go to sleep that night.’

‘But, now?’

‘Well, I found out later that the dog had got under a fence, that it belonged to people in a house nearby. It had been terrified of the fireworks. But Grandmother, she *knew* it was the spirit of her dead husband, our grandfather.’

‘Oh. Hmmm.’

‘So, now I don’t know, but I have to respect that Grandma would have wanted me to remember her, and also, somehow, that part of myself, the small boy believed it all. What I was then, you know?’

‘I don’t believe in God, but I believe in things – I mean, that there’s more to it.’

‘Yeah?’

‘But, we’ll never know, so it probably doesn’t matter.’ She smiles, again, out into the dark.

‘Well, that depends.’ I say lighting another death-money note.

‘On what?’ She cocks her head to look at me in the dark the storm on the horizon is gathering.

‘On when you die.’

The incense burns, and we lean on the rail and look out over the city. There’s a pile of clouds approaching, and a light rain begins falling. At first it smatters on the footpath below the balcony, then it thickens. Lightning smears through the clouds and it’s followed by thunder. It sounds like the growls of some huge dog that hovers over the city. To me, there is nothing quite like losing the view of the city to the rain. The way it will sometimes come on so heavy that all there is to see is the white moist shadow of its process of falling. The waterfall curtain of it, like a fountain in the city.

‘When I was young, I sometimes imagined myself the only person left in the world, the rest of them had been washed away. And my parents would come home from their work and smile what I suddenly saw as shadow smiles, the smiles of ghosts that had been taken by the weather, washed away from me by the water.’

‘Grandma’s ghosts really got your imagination didn’t they?’

‘Wouldn’t they have got yours?’

‘Yeah.’ We step back from the rain and into the balcony’s shelter. We close our eyes.

‘I like these storms,’ Mei says.

There are several layers of sound in the storm. Most constant is the hiss of the rain as it lands on everything around us, the balcony rail, against the glass and concrete of the building. It seems to almost rustle and drip as it lands into itself. Down below there’s that distinct sound as the water shushes on a passing truck’s tyres; and then, beyond that, the softer sounds of the rain on the gardens, on the grass of the ovals, even – could we really detect it? – into the estate’s swimming pool. Every so often, the thunder collapses into the city, and seems to avalanche itself all over the sky. Lightning whitens the light, so for seconds it looks like neon. Like strobe.

Then as the water gathers itself up you can hear it begin to move, down the gutters of the road, into the grilled drains where it patters like waterfalls, sprinkling itself into the dark underground, then along pipes, through drains and way off into the sea. We stand there and listen to the rain’s vocabulary pouring off the building’s facades, some of it smacking onto the cement, sounding like applause, like distant voices in rapid conversation, words indistinct. I open my eyes to the low sky, with its thick rain that threatens to swallow this building whole, close its grey teeth on the grey concrete.

‘One night – maybe I was 9 or so, ’ I tell her, now I’m talking I can’t seem to stop, ‘On my way home I noticed two silver moths in the lift. That wasn’t really unusual, the light there is always on, but that day was in the month of the hungry ghosts, so I leaned up and squashed them both with my fingers, I wiped the dust from their wings on my uniform.’ Mei takes a breath in and frowns at me – small creases on her forehead and around her eyes. ‘But, you see, I was convinced that they were Pretas, or ghosts that could enter my body and send me mad. I didn’t want to be mad. People thought I was pretty odd as a kid. That was enough. But I wasn’t actually all that certain that I believed in grandmother’s stories. And anyway, if you calculate the risk, it’s easier to kill moths than take the chance of them being ghosts, the hungry sort of ghosts. I’d get so worried about it in those days, when I was younger I’d put two fingers close into my neck to check how my heart was faring.’

‘And then I’d think too much about it; I mean what if killing the moths had only made matters worse? Perhaps you couldn’t kill things that are already dead, and they’d still be able to get you. That’s why people had decided to sing to them in the market square, to distract them from their mischief making. Or, burn money to send to hell for them, or, as they sometimes do in China, guide them out to sea with cradle-covered lanterns. I used to think that was a very good option. They could certainly hover over the water, holding their distended stomachs. I imagined them sipping on the salt water through their tiny throats.’

‘Jo, I think that’s the longest story I’ve ever heard you tell.’

‘Maybe it was.’ I say. My voice feels a little tired after all that talking. My lips are swollen so I sound strange to myself. It’s easier to type; but when you do that you can’t see the look on the faces of the people reading. I smile stiffly into the last of the storm that drips and tinkles of the aftermath, the gradual lift of the sky, and taste blood on my tongue.

Twenty Four

Suspension

Lee Wei Hong:

Could it have been that at the moment she died I heard her final breath creak half way across the earth? Find me under the storm in Ghim Moh district? Somehow, it didn't seem so implausible at the time. I focussed on my screen. I did not think about her, or let all the old hate come oozing up out of those nights in the cellar, of the scar on my lip, or the less visible ones on my body. This woman who birthed me and then tried to leave me behind; who, on a summer's evening incinerated all the books – the years of work that went into my collection. But more than that, she burnt the only way I had of resisting her, keeping her at bay. She burnt the only things I loved: my escape routes – what my life meant to me.

When I think of her, this picture comes to mind: she's wearing a green housecoat, eyes narrowed with a distinct look of hate. How I know it was hate I can't say; you come to see these things in the people you would rather love. I think now that she resented what she'd given life to – my brother, too – but especially me. I would bear the brunt of her anger against him; I was smaller, unable to defend myself. He would always return to her. One night I decided not to. When I try to understand her it seems clear that she longed for something more than she ever got her hands on. That she saw her sons as a burden, as a punishment, as a torture. If she is dying, if that voice does mean what it seemed to, it lent so much to the manuscript that was running through the spools downstairs.

It seemed so – appropriate – that I should pick up this book when I did. That a writer could speak so intimately, so directly to me about my own story. He drew lines between us, seemed to weave me into an account that allowed me to see myself from another angle. To see my life as a pilgrimage to this point, to see myself as an individual, with credibility, whose feelings were valid and meant everything.

The strange thing about this manuscript as I read it in the glow of the computer was that it seemed to be written for me. That's what I mean to say. It was written exactly and almost personally to my experience (even though the characters are wildly different, their experiences nothing like my own). It was the story as a whole, the way it was expressed. In all my years of reading I had never been so revealed by what I read. I had never come up against all the thoughts I've wanted to explore so carefully and thoughtfully portrayed. While I read, I'll admit to you, tears ran down from the

corners of my eyes into my ears. Suspended in that writing, I felt disbelief. This was the book I would have written if I could ever have written a book. This was a book that needed to be read by everyone.

Cyril knocked on the door about 7pm, he was about to leave for the day. I let him in, grudgingly leaving the story for a few moments. We have got into the habit, he will come – I should use the past tense: he *would* come – and give me a report of how things were running downstairs before he knocked off. He told me that the paper had continued to run through like a dream. As if – it seemed to me, halfway through reading the work – it had wanted to be printed on that paper. It was not going to let human or machine error get in the way of its birthing. But, to be honest, I wasn't fully listening to Cyril. The day had taken its toll on me. Even if you insist it was all in my mind – the residue of the old blind Malay in the traffic, or hearing my mother's call to me as she died. The echo of her voice all day in the workshop, as well as reading this story as it got born, the uncomfortable pattern of tracing through my own memories – it was still more than a common day's work. I longed for Cyril to leave so I could go on reading. I grunted – it's what I usually do; a grunt to mean 'I hear you, now go.' It's nicely ambivalent, approval or disapproval all in the one syllable – and he smiled.

I went downstairs and brewed myself a cup of tea. Everyone had left, and the sky through the windows was musky with stars. With the machines quiet, I could hear the evening traffic mounting up the main road. A motorcycle started somewhere nearby. Everything was completely ordinary. Everything, that is, except for me.

Back at the computer screen, I finished my reading. The clock said 9.45pm. I sat back in my chair. The darkness had crept up on me, and I realised the tea had gone cold, and I was incredibly hungry. As I readied myself to leave, I realised that the heaviness, the thing that felt like thickness in my blood, slowing me down, making me sweat, had always been there. It had taken the events of that day to let me feel it, to let me see that I was weighed down my whole life. What was that day through circumstances in which I had made no choice. It seemed I had been funnelled into the events of my own life, by others and by what they wanted and expected. By what they thought were my strengths and weaknesses. Automatically, I went through the motions of clearing my desk, (putting away the disks, the negatives in their envelope) and thought of the old man in the traffic, how, by wading out into the dangerous sea of fast-moving vehicles, I did something no-one would have expected. It was an action that was bigger and more courageous than even I gave myself credit for. In doing that, it seemed to me, I had broken some kind of spell. A spell of my own making, it seemed. And on reflection – as I came down the stairs – it was reading that had both put me into that magical place where nothing could really harm me, and now, had released me.

I crossed the floor of the print-room, ready to leave, when I saw, sitting neatly on the table, a cut edition of the manuscript. It was beautiful; the ink perfectly black, the paper pearly and just warm to the touch. The edges were clean, their thickness something like the pith of an orange. Tia had taken it to the bindery to experiment with the needles they would use on the paper, and it was loosely sewn together with the threads not tied or finished or glued in. How can I describe it? I was in love with this book. Trying to say more will debase it, make me seem less sane than I already do and this book and its effect less real. What I felt, standing there, stooped over this lovely thing, this artefact we had created, was that there was nothing I wouldn't do for it.

There was no one else in the building – it's not unusual for me to be the last to leave after reading, or fussing over proofs –but I looked about. I didn't want anyone to see me. I lifted the paper upright and tapped it on the table to even out the pages. Then, I slipped them into my bag. All of them were mine, at least until the morning – when I had intended to return them. And, after setting the alarm code, I went out the door.

When I left the workshop – at approximately 10pm – the rest of the printed pages had been cut and collated and left on pallets to be collected in the morning when they would be taken to the bindery. When I left work – pulling the roller door down behind me and setting off into the night, with its splashes of lights from the streetlamps out on the street I still didn't know what I would do the next day. As I have said, this was a crime of passion: it was not premeditated, I had no plan. I walked to the MRT station, my head full of the novel I had just read.

Twenty-Five

Rebooting

Jo:

Later that night when Mei's gone to sleep I lie on my bed to think. The storm is over, the ritual is done for another year. My body aches. I've taken ibuprofen, and the pain is starting to recede. When I brushed my teeth my lip bled everywhere. I had to wipe it up with toilet paper and rinse the sink. I don't want Amy to find the blood. I don't want her to know what happened and raise the alarm. Mei wanted me to go to the police, but what am I going to say? The police are no use to me. I am not entirely innocent myself. Best to just lie low and wait for the bruises to heal. If I tell my father I am sick he won't want to come near me, he's so afraid of viruses.

I try to work out what the strange feeling is that's hovering inside me. Is it that I'm not used to feeling that I'm the one who's been washed away? The one who's been turned into a ghost and can't find comfort. It's so hard to sleep when you're aching and throbbing. My tongue is tired, even through the painkillers.

Everything seems different, now. Is it Mei who's changed me, just by being here? Or could it have been those two in the alley, who used their fists? I was less afraid of them than I was of the moths in the lift, all that time ago. I touch my swollen cheek. My tongue keeps finding the places that are damaged on the inside of my mouth.

While it was happening, cornered there between the skips, I kept thinking that it would be all right, that I'd just be able to re-boot myself, iron out the corruptions in the code. I didn't even feel all that much, while they kicked me, maybe I was too surprised? Blood was coming from somewhere. They'd said that they would find me – track me down. And online, they never would have been able to. I'm too good at disguising myself there. But in the city, in the LAN centre, I hadn't thought of that. There was blood flooding my mouth, making me cough, they had their fists in my stomach, up into the gap between my ribs. One smacked me into the hard handle of the skip, my cheek caught there for a moment. The other kicked me hard in the testes and that's when pain over-rode any thoughts I was having.

I knew who they were as soon as they followed me downstairs. But, by then there was nothing I could do. I backed down the alley, hands up, as if they were holding guns out towards me. They didn't say anything to me, they just grinned crooked grins. The type of grins that looked as if they'd been hit themselves just where they were planning to hit me. They were both in dark clothes. Older than me, maybe, somewhere in their late twenties. There was nothing at all remarkable about them. Though, one had a tattoo of a bird or bat on his leg. They were wearing slippers. Flip-flops. What Mei calls 'thongs'. They kicked me into a narrow place between the skips, that's how I hit my forehead. But, once I was down in there they couldn't get a decent swing to hit and kick me as hard as they had before. I wouldn't even know them again; maybe because I was afraid I didn't notice things I normally would have.

I list five reasons to myself that they would want to hurt me:

1. Some people bet on the LAN games, and I always mess around with the code, so that could irritate them.
2. They could be gamers, who hate what I do. They found out about the hacking I've done, where I got the passwords for the games.
3. Maybe they just wanted to hurt someone?
4. They were bodies inhabited by my angry ancestors?
5. They know about the Quarantine virus eavesdropping on people's emails, all that stuff.

But, how would they know? And wouldn't they have wanted to stop me, not just hurt me? It would be so much easier to shoot me, then. Maybe they would have killed me if Mei hadn't turned up and just marched into the scene. Or had they left? Can't remember.

The strange thing was that the alley was half full of paper. As if it had snowed in huge flakes. I didn't stop to think about it. Not at the time. But the paper fluttered up and sort of muffled the scene. Looking up, I caught a glimpse of the National Library Building, all glass and balance through the city. A page caught on the back of my leg. A wad of paper tripped me. I fell on my wrist. Was it a mistake to get between the skips, turning to crawl. They had me cornered. Laughing, they kicked me and as they did pages flew up into the air.

They must have heard Mei coming. I didn't – I had noticed my mobile ringing and also that they hadn't robbed me. So, that wasn't what they wanted. They did just want to hurt me. They didn't say anything, though. So, if they were sent by someone to scare me, I still don't know who to be scared of.

I roll over and find that I can lie comfortably in one position on my side, where there are no bruises.

There were people who'd threatened online that they would cut off my hands, so I couldn't game any more. But, these two didn't seem to have the equipment. Maybe they'd only just got started. I think I might have passed out for a while as they were beating me. I remember Mei suddenly being there; kneeling down. There seemed to be dark patches all around me, bits missing from my vision. Or, I was seeing the void for the first time; the closed gates of hell? Mei shook me, her face a map of concern. I couldn't help finding it funny. How could this happen to us? Wasn't it that she was the new kid in town and I should be showing her how it's done, not the other way around? Isn't Singapore the safest city in the world? What would her father think of me, not taking care of his little girl?

My parents had cancelled coming home for dinner, their church meeting had run late. That was good, because I looked dreadful – big blue bruises all over my face, huge welts on my buttocks that I didn't tell Mei about. And Mei's white shirt was covered in blood.

But also, there was the paper. All that paper in the ally, somehow I'd seen that it was a novel. How I did that I don't know. Sometimes I just see the shape of the words before I've read them. It was a bit like that. I knew it was a story, and I was intrigued. Mei reached for one of the thick papers to wipe up my blood, but I couldn't let her. The words would be obliterated.

Five reasons to collect the papers in the ally: one, they would be gone by morning because someone would have put them in the bin, and I wanted to know what the story was about. Two, Mei likes novels, maybe she'll like this one. Three, there was no way we would have found the pages if I hadn't been beaten up, so it seemed right for us to take them home. Four, they were getting wet, and they were going to get more rain on them in the next storm. Five, I thought that even the paper that the story was written on was beautiful, I wanted to hug it to my chest. I wanted it.

Mei helped me sort them. We took one copy of each of the 375 pages. I piled them in order and then I was ready to move, the evening was coming in.

We made a strange couple limping out of the alley into the after work crowd.

Twenty-Six

Transfer of Files Complete

Quarantine:

At 12.39pm on the 27.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

... Don't write to me about sunlight. It doesn't happen here. And don't tell me anything else about your ex-husband. I am only jealous that he met you before I did. And don't complain about those kids stealing your library's books, because I am only jealous that they have seen you in the flesh....

At 12.45pm on the 28.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

... And I checked again, but there was nothing from you. Is there a bug in your system? (We had one here a while ago) Or did I write something that offended you or annoyed you? (Although I can't think what, I've got our correspondence all here...) Though maybe I did go on a little about my mother. But, please write and tell me you are OK. I have no other way of contacting you...

A 5.09pm on the 29.4.07 [Email address removed for privacy] wrote:

It is relatively easy for this kind of person get your user name and password, because your server has sent them in clear text format. We may have to consider encryption, though if they're reading this, then they'll know what I'm thinking of...

At 8.44pm on the 5.5.077 Email address removed for privacy wrote:

Miles, this has been like a dream for me. Strange that a stranger at the other end of the world shaped my days, and now I see how much a stranger you were. How much the weight of my existence was resting on your letters that arrived in my inbox. Perhaps this is the completion of your 'experiment' because it seems quite clear that it was your experiment all along and I was the victim of some kind of hoax...

Twenty-Seven

Logging Off

Jo:

It has been a week since I last logged on. The longest time I've been away from my blog, away from my computer since – I don't know when. My inbox is clogged with messages. My other life has been busy, but I can't be bothered. I don't care about them. I select them all hit delete. This is how I've changed.

Mei sits on my bed, she's reading. She reads with a frown. She holds one page out, supporting it gently from below with the palm of her hand. Finishing the page, she looks up at me, smiles. Then, she stands up on the bed and stretching hangs the page back in its place on the cable. There are ten cables arranged across the ceiling in my room. The pages we collected from the alley are hanging there to dry. The paper is amazing, hasn't torn or disintegrated. Instead, after the rain had wet it, the surface wrinkled into tiny exact waves. Somehow this adds to how we read it, with the words going in and out of focus. The pages of the staggering story are suspended above me, pegged to my old computer leads. Mei gets down the next page. She sits back down and starts to read.

I wonder if she's changed. And if so, how? It seems to me that she has. But maybe I have simply come to know her. It seems that something new about her is revealed to me each day. Is it the same for her? Does she know I am watching her smile as she reads?

I turn back to my computer; there is something I have to check.

In the secret storage space I made on this computer there are a collection of Quarantine files. When I collected them I was admiring the words of the budding relationship. Maybe I wished that someone would write like that to me. Now, I am about to delete them. I feel ready to farewell them. I don't need to spy into the loves of others, anymore. I don't need them to feel in touch with the world, or to feel that the world is touching me, even so distantly. I have the files selected; I am about to delete them when two things happen, at almost exactly the same time.

The first is that Mei, who must have been watching me, asks 'Jo what are you doing?' She uses a serious voice. What has the look on my face revealed? In the tiny pause following

her question – while I am trying to decide how to answer – I hear it quite distinctly, the sound of a key turning the lock on the front door. The click as the door opens. I shut the my screen in a panic; my fingers fumble with the keyboard. This is how I have not changed; this is how I am exactly the same as I always was.

I can hear it is my father: from the heavy breathing and the shuffle as he takes off his outdoor shoes. But, what is he doing here, at 11 o'clock in the morning? Shouldn't he be working? Shouldn't he be at some meeting? In my whole life he has never come home early. He has never been sick. He is always on time; he always sticks to his schedule. I like the way he is so predictable.

Mei and I sit still and listen; we are both frozen in the moment. In this moment before everything changed, I feel concerned that we are about to be caught doing something wrong. Maybe he will think it's wrong for Mei to be in my room? Or is it inappropriate for her to sit on my unmade bed? Maybe she should be wearing something more than the t-shirt and shorts? Or is it the pages of the banned book that are neatly arranged across my ceiling, like laundry?

Why hasn't he called my handphone? How did he know where to find us?

I have other fears below these surface ones. The five that spring to mind are:

1. Has my father been told I have not been going to bible studies or Mei to her language class?
2. Has my mother realised I have been using her credit card?
3. Has someone told him what the gamers know, or about what happened a week ago in the alley?
4. Does he know about my Quarantine virus?
5. Or, is it the book he's become worried about?

Mei looks at me from over the page she is holding. 'Your father?' she mouths at me. I nod. I can hear him turning on the taps in the kitchen. I close the computer. I stand up.

'I'll see what he's doing.' I know something must have happened, something out of the ordinary.

'No, Jo.' Mei grabs me by the shirt. But before I can move out of her grip, the doorhandle is turned and my father – with his black-rimmed glasses and sweat-stained business shirt – is standing in the doorway.

It must have looked odd to him, opening the door and finding the room full of fluttering pages with Mei and I standing among them as if we belonged in the fiction. Some of the cables were looped quite low in the small room; we were partly obscured by the black and

white words. He stood there without speaking. His shirt was white, his face somehow opened up by the unexpected scene.

‘Son?’ He asked, as if not sure he’d come to the right room to find me. As if there were other options for other doors with other sons behind them. Something, in a less stunned moment, I might have added to the list I have somewhere in my head of reasons I don’t think my father likes me.

What I had forgotten about was my injuries, the bruising on my cheek, the split in my lip, the bandage on my forehead. I had forgotten he hadn’t seen the swelling that was now going yellow, around my eye. I had forgotten these markers on my body that he would see. I had forgotten that he hadn’t seen me for the week since I got hurt. He looked at me steadily as if I was distracting him momentarily from something more important.

Perhaps I’d forgotten because Mei treated me as she always had. Or because the pain was getting less, so I wasn’t paying attention to it. Or maybe it was to do with the manuscript we had collected up in the alley, great armfuls of paper, counting the pages, laughing even. Or was it the excitement of sorting the pages into order and making a story from the debris? With me trying not to bleed onto the words, bending forward to read because my eyes were almost swollen-shut. Then, gently putting the paper into the plastic bags we scavenged. The way we smuggled it onto the MRT, using the bulky bags to hide my bleeding head.

Perhaps it was the story itself, the way it unfolded as the paper dried. We experimented using the family iron to flatten the paper down into its original shape, but it wrinkled back into tiny sine waves. We followed the story with our fingers, the words so beautiful we wanted to touch them. We sighed in the same places, passing the pages to each other in my room with the lamp trained on the writing.

My father stood on the threshold of my room, opening and shutting his mouth: his normal broad smile, gone. For the first time I can remember he seemed at a loss for words. In a situation he didn’t know how to handle.

Mei had let go of my shirt. We stood looking back at him. I was waiting for him to do or say something. I thought the silence was the pause before he became angry, or began to ask questions, because he was the intruder, the adult, bursting in on our quiet scene.

The silence, it seemed to me, lasted full minutes. The pages made tiny sounds brushing against one another above our heads. I knew Mei was holding her breath, waiting there, watching my father stumbling over the surreal moment. Finally, when he did speak it was to say:

‘I have news for Mei,’ he looked at us with concern. ‘I came home to tell her.’ The shake in his voice unnerved me, but broke the spell. At the time I didn’t question, why hadn’t he simply called home,? Why had he felt he needed to come home, to invade the sanctuary the flat became when only Mei and I were there?

‘Will we go into the sitting room?’ I suggested. Somehow there was a formality to the occasion, it needed us to be seated comfortably.

‘Yes, that would be best.’ He seemed almost relieved at my idea. I put the computer down and started to move.

Mei grabbed my shoulder. She lent on me heavily. This time I was aware of her weight in a whole new way, as if I had always known it.

‘What, what is it?’ she demanded, loudly. My father, who had half turned, looked back.

‘Come.’ he said, nodding at us. We came obediently, like two children: but, somehow not children at all. In the few seconds it took to walk down our hallway, it seemed to me we had become adults. The grown-up world beckoned us with its inexplicable subtleties. When I next looked at Mei, all the blood had drained from her face.

‘Is it my mother?’ she asked. Her voice was high pitched with panic, I could hear. It wasn’t her normal voice, or the one she’d used on the first afternoon we met.

‘No,’ my father said, indicating she should sit on the low chair.

‘Oh God, tell me,’ Mei said still standing, hands clasped. How did she know it was that bad? She must have seen my father’s visit as the anomaly it was. She couldn’t have known what was about to be said. I took her shoulders and sat her down in the chair. Her knees gave way as if the will to sit, to do anything had left her.

‘Your father,’ my father said ‘has been in a serious car crash. He is very badly injured. They say he may not make it. Let’s pray together.’

‘What?’ Mei almost shouted. ‘How did it happen? Where is he? Who are *they*? What should *I* do?’

I looked at my father. He looked at Mei, hopeless in front of her screwed up face and choking sobs. My hands were still resting on her shoulders. I left them there as she doubled over. My father bowed his head. Not from any respect for Mei, I thought, but because he had decided he would pray, with or without her. I watched his lips moving. I looked down at the back of Mei’s head. I felt the dryness creep into my throat like wires burning through their coating. Circuitry in meltdown, I crumpled to sit on the floor.

In the alley she had such a cool head. I remember now. The two thugs retreated as soon as she had come out the door, calling my name. What would have happened without her? I took my temperature. All was OK. I showed her where I kept the first aid kit.

But now, with my father at prayer and the only real sounds Mei's small sobs, I recognise that I have to be the one who stays calm. I think to myself how wonderful it would feel to save her from this grief that is bruising her with its tattooed feet. My mind files through the possibilities, opening windows like web pages where the cursor flashes in and out of focus.

Twenty-Eight

The Deep End

Lee Wei Hong:

Have you ever felt that lift in your world, as if your life could have turned into some kind of fiction? Here I am writing you this statement, which you will think is fiction; but it isn't until now that I can agree with you.

As I retraced the steps I have so carefully described on my way to work, I was still turning over the possibilities this book presented. It made me feel quite certain of two things: one was that it was my mother's voice I heard, not some invention, not something conjured – you must believe I wouldn't want to. And secondly, that my narrow life must change. Inside me, there was a sense, for the first time that I had a power in the world to act and that all I've done is to be the medium through which others speak – I mean as a printer. In my profession, I have been the voice of anyone who can afford to hire me, from the Singaporean government, to the publisher of this book. The difference is obvious; one is speaking out of me, through the machine, through the printed words, the other – well, the author – is speaking for me, is saying things I have thought, better than I could ever do.

I took myself to Clementi for Guan's roast duck. I felt a celebration was in order and that I needed something strengthening. When I had eaten the duck, the rice, the small green onion and drunk my chrysanthemum tea, I wiped the table down with a napkin and got the sewn pages out. I couldn't resist. I wanted to read the real thing, to touch those pages with the words on them. The paper still felt warm. I placed it on a bed several napkins thick and opened it.

Maybe I was hoping – to reveal everything – that someone would see me with this book. That people would be impressed with the company I was keeping. Somehow forgetting that no one else – apart from those of us involved in the process of making the book – would have read it yet.

A second reading in one day – you are appalled – I feel it. But, as I have tried to say – this was an affair of the heart. I can't put it more plainly. I have loved books before. *The Incredible Lightness of Being* when I read it as a young man changed the way I thought of the world. I carried *The Year of Living Dangerously* everywhere with me for months, dipping

into it and finding each passage pleasing, no matter where I entered the story. But, compared to the way this book spoke to me, these seemed like schoolboy crushes; nothing came of them, I was not changed. But, here, I felt real fascination. The book on the table (among the clutter from the kitchen and some awful Mandarin love songs coming through the tiny speakers in the corner) looked into my eyes and saw who I was.

It was after midnight when I finished. Guan and his wife were mopping the floor; their shop smelt of lemon cleaning agent. All the other customers had left. I felt myself creep out of the book and need time to adjust to the brightness of the eatery. I blinked at the scene I had so marvellously escaped.

‘Good book, ah?’ Guan asked smiling. It was so kind of them to let me read it all the way through without interrupting me to pay or leave.

‘Yes,’ it was all I could manage. I walked home sometime after midnight, picking up a copy of the *Evening Times* at the MRT station, as I always used to.

At the flat I unlocked the door and took off my shoes. Then I turned on the lamp and tossed the newspaper on the table. I boiled the kettle to make green tea, and while it boiled I opened the window wide to let some cool air in. I put the manuscript on the table, too. The title page beamed at me: *My Fierce Delay* – I felt that tingle of pleasure. How privileged I was to be involved in printing such a book – it would surely go on to change people’s lives, to be a best-seller. But, I saw at that moment, it was a small print run we were doing, a boutique affair. This couldn’t be the extent of it, surely? This must be a preview edition, to impress the reviewers?

I turned to the books section in the *Evening Times*. Holding the paper still on the table while the breeze came in the window and was sucked out again under the door, I saw a small filler article in the corner. ‘*Hillkirks Book to be Banned in Singapore.*’

(Police note: this was clipped onto this page of the statement)

A yet-to-be published book by author Ryan Stokes has come under scrutiny by the Ministry for Information and the Arts.

“The print run is small, we intend for the bulk of people to read the book online,” a Hillkirks spokesperson said today.

“We are concerned over some of the content of this book in terms of the political and religious issues it raises. We don’t think this novel is appropriate for Singapore.” A

spokeswoman said from the Ministry of Information and the Arts. Hillkirks were unavailable for comment. But how will the MIA stop people reading it online?

“We have appropriate measures in place,” the spokeswoman said.

The kettle was boiling, hissing steam. The breeze through the window picked up; I noticed these things but didn’t move. I was leaning, shoulders forward over the paper, the small article going in and out of focus. Surely I was reading it wrongly? It couldn’t have meant censored entirely? What content could they object to? The old hippies in France? Or the lesbian lovers? These things had not stood out as anything to be concerned with; they had not even made me think of the Ministry for Information and their regulations.

The kettle kept boiling, now whistling a high pitched and anxious sound. What had been a breeze, turned into an unseasonable wind – the day after the storm had passed had been still and calm from what I was aware of. But, now, as it gusted into the flat the moving air ruffled the pages of the manuscript sitting in the centre of the table. The kettle shrieked, hitting a note that seemed to vibrate the roots of my teeth. After turning the pages back and forth, the wind became rougher and twisted them with some force. I could only watch, as the beautiful paper with its flat black words was loosened from its bindings by the wind and taken up into the air of my flat, swirled there for a moment, then sucked out the window and under the door, into the night.

I couldn’t move. The kettle spluttered water onto the bench and blew a fuse, sending a shower of sparks into the air and shorting out the lamp. In the darkness the rest of the pages, liberated from the sewn book, flew up and touched my hands and cheeks (as a lover might) and were borne out the tiny window. I stood there, holding down the newspaper, sweat dripped off my nose onto the small article. Or was it tears? Once the kettle had died I heard my pulse against my eardrum running faster than I liked. The only other sounds were the swish of pages as they were carried past me, and the shrill of the wind against the building. My heart pushed against my ribcage as if it wanted to explode out of me and push my blood in some other direction.

Could the wind have wanted this story so much that it had taken the pages it was made from into the city, distributed them through the districts of Singapore? Was it the elements themselves that were just waiting for the opportunity to steal the story from me – to liberate it? Or could it have been, as it seemed to me at the moment it happened, that the book had

been able to take on life; that it flew like a bird, its pages so many birds, flocking out into the night.

I felt as though my body was so heavy, that I was made of gravity, that it had always been that way. I sat down on the chair very slowly and as my eyes got used to the dark, saw the last few pages caught against the edges of the window, with one left dancing in slow motion on the floor. That page, like me, seemed to have a special weight bearing down on it. The air swayed it – or did it sway itself? – there, across the tiles and back, rolling and hesitating, feeling its way towards the window.

Twenty-Nine

Prayers and Paper

Mei:

She had booked me a flight the next day. Would that be OK? My mother asked me if that's what I wanted. And even though I was already crying, there were new tears for this. What would it be like to be at home without my father? What would I feel when the plane landed and he wasn't there to greet me, and never would be again? Jo sat next to me without looking. His hair hung over his eyes.

After I hung up there was a long silence. The flat was quiet. Next door someone got into the shower. Clashed the dishes. There was a burst of radio music. Someone else's phone rang. Eventually, Jo looked up, brushed his hair aside and said: 'You asked me what I was doing, just before all this. I have something I want to show you. Something I have to tell you, before you go. Come and see.'

When uncle Ng Teck first unlocked the door I knew it was something to do with me. His routine had never varied all the time I'd been in the country. He never came home before dark. And here he was, looking shocked. Not because his son was bandaged, or I wasn't ready to leave for class. There was something else, I could feel it in the air. The way my uncle bowed his head in prayer told me he was trying to protect me from the awful news. Instead of answering all the questions that flashed into my mind, he hid among prayers. Can I blame him?

I cried. I had to, but I felt quite numb inside. Instead of thinking about my father, my mind seemed to focus very clearly on the book I had been reading. The book that we'd hung so carefully, from the ceiling in Jo's bedroom. Can I call it a book, when it was scattered like illegal litter all around the alley? It was a story, at least, and once we'd sorted out the pages, put them in order, it seemed to be a book. A book made up of papers that had been blown into the alley and escaped the street cleaners, the sweepers, even other scavenging kids. How strange, Jo and I, wading through the papers in the alley and stooping to find a copy of each page and fill up the plastic bag with paper that had been crimped by the morning rain. How strange, we had both forgotten in the excitement of the moment that Jo was quite badly beaten

up; that his head was bleeding into the cottonwool from his first aid kit, and a swelling was appearing under the bloody smear where his eye should have been.

How strange, my own father, a man who *saved* lives could just die. I cried out of confusion and shock, but inside part of me was calmly turning over the crumpled pages, drinking up the story, the same story that made Jo forget his bruises.

On the phone my mum's voice seemed an incredible distance away. I don't think it was the rustling and humming line. She *sounded* fifty thousand miles away, even though she was there, speaking in my ear.

He died in the hospital, shortly after getting there. Of his injuries, and loss of blood. All the questions I'd had were being answered, but I didn't want to hear any more. I wanted to put it on pause, to ignore it for a while. But, Mum explained to me the collision at the lights, the young man who ran the red, how my father's car spun into the fig tree, how it flipped, how it crumpled into him. The metal dug into his skin. (Did she say this or was this where my imagination took me?) The phone line crackled and hissed as if it didn't want me to know these details. Did mum say 'I don't know what I'll do now I don't have him to fight with...'? I can't be sure. The line kept stealing her words from me, echoing my own back at me, until I was dizzy with the sound of my voice and my mother seemed to be the echo. We could hear the ticks and thunderings of the seafloor – or was it the satellite freezing over, the adjustment of the stars? – just not one another. And it seemed to me that it had always been this way.

I followed Jo back down the hallway and into his room, which is just the way we left it when uncle Ng Teck interrupted us. This seemed wrong to me, it should all have changed, we should be different. Those pages should be back out on the street floating free where anyone could find them. And I look at the book hanging from the wires and Jo's face, which seems to have my father's embedded in it somehow, and fresh tears file up to my eyes. We sit down together on Jo's bed. He opens his computer, types in a few commands and a window opens.

'Before you came to stay I did a lot of this.' And he hands me the laptop. All I can see laid out in neat files are hundreds of emails. Each one is ordered by time and date, and there is a brief preview of the contents. The heading reads 'Quarantine'. A woman confesses her love for a man, the man responds, they start to tell each other intimate details. I can tell they are real, and in relation to them my own real made up of the pain and bewilderment, what I feel seems less real. I read greedily, wanting to devour their story whole. Something in the writing draws me in, invites me to listen. Is it the way they are telling one another stories to keep the meaninglessness at bay?

Jo is completely silent as I read and as I go further into their story I realise he's making a confession. This has been his secret for so long, this was his connection to the real. And I see how much he trusts me to show me this. And, how well he's distracted me. How does he stay so quiet? I can never sit so still without moving for so long.

'These would make a wonderful novel themselves,' I tell him, as I look up and realise it has got dark and the computer's glow is the only thing lighting us. Jo is flicking through the ten thousand dollar bills of death money, mesmerised.

'Yes, I was thinking something like that, too.' he says, smiling at the carpet.

We go out onto the balcony. My aunt and uncle will be home soon, so we are stealthy in the early darkness. We light some incense and Jo uses the shiny zippo lighter to burn the rest of the death money. My father never told me what he believed, we didn't talk about that kind of thing, but maybe Grandmamma had enough belief for them both. Maybe this is something I can do from so far away. Not as far away as he is now, of course. Perhaps this will help him, though there's a chance, it will help me more. It feels good to see the notes curl and burn, writhing in the heat they make. I feel it's only fair that the incense burn just so long, that its smoke will carry off into the air and maybe the scent of it will remind me somewhere some time in the future, of now.

Jo and I haven't got much time left. My plane is booked for the following morning. I will go home, and everything will be changed. I feel clumsy with sadness. I brush the orchid flowers with my fingers. It's as if I am making memories out of these few minutes. Singapore has stopped being foreign and started being the place where what has happened now, was always going to happen. I store and collect the scene, as I will store and collect the all scenes that preceded it.

'I didn't learn much Chinese.' I say to Jo. It comes from nowhere, until I said it I didn't know it was what I was about to say. I registered for the expensive three month course, and then went to about 2 classes.

'Maybe that's my fault.' He's concentrating on the death money and doesn't look up.

We are quiet then, in the way that Jo and I can be quiet without being uncomfortable. The death money curls and smokes into fine ash. I imagine my father in an urn, just like all the other urns on the shelves. Shelf after shelf of lives that were, where his lopsided smile and warm strong hands don't belong.

When the money is all burnt and the lights of the city don't flicker and die, the clouds still move across the horizon up and over the sky, when the evening sets in and I can hear

people in the flats around us talking and laughing to their distant music, I feel like doing something. The kind of something that won't be erased if I suddenly get eaten up by one of these machines we trust with our bodies, with our lives. I want to leave a mark on this city, on the lives of other people, on the world somehow, so they won't forget me.

'What can I do,' I ask Jo, 'to make people remember me?'

'I'll always remember you.' He says, and it's the way he looks up, with no guile in his face, I know he's sincere.

'No, I mean, well, like that novel, like the story that the guy wrote. The one we found. I want to do something like that.'

'I have an idea,' says Jo, and he smiles in that way that means his idea will be revealed in his own good time.

'What's your idea?' I am impatient. I want to know now. I don't want to wait for anything. I don't want Jo, of all people, to keep things from me.

'Well, those emails will make a great story, and I thought, we could send them on to the novelist.'

'But how can you do that?'

To explain Jo gets out his computer again and types an address into the bar. Up comes a site profiling the author, Ryan Stokes. There is a photo of a man with greying hair standing in the wind with his dark coat wrapped around him. I look at it closely, as if it could reveal the essence of the man, of why he wrote the novel. As if that could appear on the screen, some glow of inspiration around him, the aura of the writer, but no. There is nothing. He is an ordinary man, squinting into the camera, somehow looking self-conscious and as if he might be posing at the same time. The web page spruiks that *My Fierce Delay* is his first novel, explains how his publisher is moving with the times and is ahead in online books and audio books. It says the novel will be available online, as a talking book. But there is no mention of a second book. No indication that he is working on anything...

We smile into the screen together, the incense is pungent on our clothes.

'You see, what's most important to an author,' Jo says, 'is the inspiration. Anyone can do a bit of writing, but the real writers have really good ideas.'

'Like he did with *My Fierce Delay* ?'

'Yeah, exactly like that.'

'Hmm...' I say, wondering what Jo will say next.

'We could give Mr Stokes inspiration.'

‘You mean give him the emails, see what he makes of them?’

‘Yes. Don’t they remind you of bits of that book.’

‘What’s so sad is that its not even going to be a paper book. It’s all going to be online and in audio books, not the real thing that you can hold...’

‘They will print some expensive collectors edition, I’m sure.’

‘But that’s it!’ What we’d stumbled on wasn’t something that had overflowed from the skip. We had known it wasn’t rubbish. It was exactly this special edition that we had hanging above us on Jo’s old computer cables. ‘That’s what this is!’ I say pointing to the heavy pages pegged above us.

‘Yeah, I think that you are right.’

‘But,’ I feel all the excitement falling out of me, ‘does that mean that no-one will get to read it? There was more than one edition in that alley. It was all jumbled up. Has it all been thrown away?’

‘Well, not necessarily...’ Jo doesn’t sound all that sure. We sit there in silence for a while. Jo’s parents aren’t home, yet. They are rarely home. I think of how lonely Jo must be sometimes. And, in a way, how lonely I’ll be without him.

‘I think it’s a good idea, I mean sending the author the emails, but how exactly will we do it, Jo?’

‘We email him.’

‘With the whole lot of emails attached.’

‘Yeah, something like that.’

‘But how?’

‘I have his address.’

‘You do?’

‘Yes.’ Jo looks smug. The idea of acting as a muse for this author makes me feel flushed with excitement again. As if we could change the course of the written. As if the two of us could change the history of literature. And not be known to have done it. No one would know that Jo and I fed the author with this elixir of raw human emotions. I know I won’t be immortalised. But, somehow, this is much more appealing than some huge public act. I smile to myself, my eyes ache, my cheeks are tight.

‘How hard will it be?’ I ask Jo.

‘Not hard at all, it’s a matter of zipping up the files – maybe with a python script – and putting that into an email and sending it through to him.’

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‘But what about our part in the story, does he need to know where we fit in?’

‘Maybe, I’m not sure.’

Thirty

Falling Away

Lee Wei Hong:

Sitting there, in the flat with that smell of burnt fuse, as I breathed in, then out again I felt anger crawling up inside me. I hesitate to call it anger at first. It was unfamiliar. It itched inside my body, along my veins; it went down to my shaking up my painful spine into my hands, up still further making heaty-ness on my forehead. The chrysanthemum tea had not worked, the heat spread down my face and neck, down my spine. My thick woolly blood pushed its way outwards. I sat. The floor of the room swirled as if it too could be carried away on the wind.

In my life there has been very little anger. As I said, I am more likely to shy away; I am the type to go quietly down into the cellar, not willingly, but without fuss. That way I wouldn't be thrown down the splintery stairs into the brick-dust dark. I am more like a weed, though, than a rare and difficult plant. I take root, I have thorns and I am hard to get rid of. Give me sunlight and stormwater and I will thrive. But, come near me and I will close myself in. That way I don't have to ever be angry, or face the consequences of being touched or touching anyone. I don't have to let the heft of responsibility – to myself, to others, to the world – weigh me down. I had always thought that this was the best way for me. What if, like my brother, I became violent and damaged the people who showed a willingness to love me? What if, by opening out I just caused more harm?

But in my work, well that was different. Through printing, I act as a messenger, from author to a public of readers. I let the work come out into the open while I still lurk behind the walls of the workshop.

Until that night I felt I had been very reasonable about all of this. I had built my life so no one would come close. I travelled between work and home, I thought about inks and paper and edges and deadlines and when I wasn't concerned with them, I read. Looking into the flat you will see it littered with books. Shelves take up every wall. They insulate me; they take me from the world but they also bring the world to me. Until that night this was enough. This was who and what I was.

How can they do that to me? Make my job such a huge part of the process – to impress the reviewers – and then take it away? Make me redundant, take their money along with the written words and put them into a place that doesn't exist. A space that makes no sense – a virtual world – where people can't breathe in the wind; can't hold onto the words on the sweet paper. As I sat in the flat and the last page rustled out the window into the quieter air, I felt myself sliding into some change.

My heavy blood came roiling up to the surface of my skin and sweat slid down into the hollow of my back. I tasted the salt in it on my lips. Everything that I had ever thought of myself was falling away.

That's when the plan came to me. That's the moment it happened. Alone, in my flat, late in the night with no company, muffled from the world by the piles of books against the shelves that held more books. Those books seem to nod their approval, Hemingway, Atwood, Orwell, Winterson – *if you feel passionate, they seemed to say, then do it. What kind of story will it be if you sit here and do nothing? What kind of devotee at the altar of the book can you be?*

Under the shadow of the anger there was a regret; not of losing the book to the wind – it was only one copy – but of not doing more in my life; of not doing something of this magnitude earlier. What did I have to lose? My flat, my job, the books on the shelves – they are not the only copies. I smiled, to myself. I knew that it was not the smile of some evil genius smirking at my hulking creation as it twitched its yellow fingers. The feeling was similar to the one I'd experienced among the traffic that morning, that this was something unexpected. That I would take action, maybe this would prevent something. Maybe it would allow something to happen. At the thought of it, wiping the sweat out of my eyes my hands were unsteady.

There wasn't much time. Quickly, I rewired the fuse and the lamp flashed back on. In its light I rummaged through the drawer in the table and found the old safety goggles. These would be useful. I started to pack a small bag. The sarong from the window went in first and a small sharp paring knife out of the kitchen. Casting about for something small and heavy – dictionaries wouldn't do. A glass decanter? No, it would break too easily. I'd have to wait and see what came to hand.

The nightrider bus from Jurong East to Pandan Road in Ghim Moh district left at 3.45am. I chose a seat towards the back and felt my skin twitching slightly under the strain. Other night workers were returning from shifts. The bus looped past the city and out to the

airport. Stepping down with two other men, I pressed my hands into the pockets of my jacket. My nerves sang soprano. The bus hissed and drove off onto the empty road. Walking quickly stopped the twitching under my skin while crossing the square, past the dimly lit shoe shops. My body eased into the night; once the mad plan was in action, a variety of calmness entered me – as if I were just acting a role in a drama, which had been written and decided on a long time ago. Though still bent, my spine relaxed and the tension in it eased. The other men disappeared in around a corner. There was no one else about, the streetlights that spotted the road lit the way for nothing.

Turning the corner into the alley with the road works and the footbridge I realised, almost suddenly, where I was. My eyes flicked though the landmarks: the puddle the stairwell, the buildings dark, as if uninhabited. It was not until now that my mind caught up with my anger, that some part of me realised the full implications of the undertaking. Embarking on a self imposed mission that would be the end of everything I'd worked for. There were no ideas about success or failure; it seemed to be a matter of acting or not acting. If there was enough determination in me, it would happen. Not pausing for long in the narrow lane I began to half run towards to printery. To let myself consider the consequences would be to fail.

If it helps, think of me as a lover betrayed, as a man whose life had just been changed completely. It was emotion that fuelled me, even though the heat of the anger was subsiding, inside my shirt there was the residue of the clammy sweat and a shivering sense of anticipation.

The closest I can come to comparing that feeling to anything I've lived through is to say it was something like the moment I decided not to go back to that constricted house with its deep cellar, and my mother's unquenchable rage. My brother parted ways with me on a corner. He walked down past the cut-lunch houses with their neat white windows and I turned back to the lights of the youth refuge. I'd felt dizzy with my own bravado. There was something electric under my fingernails and in my groin.

When I arrived at the printery, all was quiet. Turning on some of the lights in the workshop I quickly disarmed the alarm. Having stayed on this late on a few occasions I calculated the security guards go to sleep in their office sometime around 2am. My suspicion was that they would be there, catching up on their rest so they can do their other jobs better during the day. Going down the ramp to the warehouse, flicking alive the neon all the way I found what was needed for the whole plan to work: that the boys had carelessly left the keys

in the bigger of the two Nissan forklifts. The fuel gauge was reading nearly full and when I kicked the tyres they seemed firm, probably they would hold up for what I had in mind. The machine was in good condition. But, my body ached; my spine was a thick cable of pain under my skin. My hair was stuck down with sweat, which also stung my eyes making it hard to focus. The engine of the forklift sparked to life easily as I turned the ignition and backed it tentatively out of its parking spot between the rows of cardboard.

My plan was simple from there. The Nissan easily loaded the two pallets of the unbound pages of *My Fierce Delay*. I took the route slowly back down the ramp to the loading dock, careful not to bump the edges of the pallets on the corners. Leaving the engine puttering away I found the main switch and the whole printery went dark. In that dense enclosed darkness I hesitated for a minute while thinking through what the code for the back roller door was, but was lucky with my first attempt: it was the same as the alarm code. It opened fast, and let off a huge clang as the handle hit the top of the doorframe. It seemed to me that it echoed wildly in among the silence of the rest of the building. I waited for security, thinking that it would surely have woken them. But out into the dark of the car park no lights came alive, there were no shouts to raise the alarm. They must have worked hard serving curry, pappadums and chai tea all day, because after holding my breath for a whole minute, nothing. The dark stayed dark.

Back in the driver's seat, goggles on and sarong over my face, I drove slowly through the potholes in the tarmac of the driveway. Turning the forklift left at the entrance – where the smell of burning charcoal lingered in the air, despite the breeze that was picking up leaves and twirling them under the streetlights I made my way slowly at first. Avoiding the alley I drove onto Vista Road, through Queenstown district and up into the backstreets of the City, past the hospital and Sim Lim square. There were a few bikes that went past, students or workers I supposed, but they just beeped and drove around me. The most frightening moment in the journey was when a semitrailer coming off the Central Expressway came up behind me. There are lights on the forklift but they are more like spotlights, one on the front, working as my headlight and one on the back, a small but bright tail-light. The truck driver hadn't seen them and honked at me as if I should make way for him. I was busy watching that the bumps and ripples in the road didn't dislodge the pallets. I hadn't tied them down, which was an oversight – I saw now – and they were rattling more than I liked. As the semi swerved around me, its axles creaking at the effort I crouched down into the seat well. The pages on the

pallets whirled in the air, but the weight of that paper must have been enough, and they stayed in their place.

I had left the loading dock door open and as I neared my destination I wondered if security would lose their jobs over what I'd done – though they will now I've mentioned what they do. What they would make of the scene I'd left behind?

As I drove into the city there were more vehicles. Taxis, trucks buses people walking on the footpaths, crossing the streets in groups. People leaving for work as the dawn began to shift into the sky, others just returning from their night time occupations. The engine complained, but I was too excited to ease off the accelerator. Sweat from my head had soaked the sarong. The goggles were fogging so I could only dimly make out the outlines of the road. How easy it would have been for my plan to be derailed at this point. How easily I would have failed!

I wasn't ever planning on getting away with what I was about to attempt. That wasn't the point, as you can tell by this long and detailed account. It was obvious from the start that I could not go back to my life as it had been. Maybe what I wanted was to end that life; to erase myself from memory – or, now I think of it, perhaps it was the opposite. I wanted to immortalise myself, through my actions, into the city's memory. I had time to think as I politely waited at the lights, staying as close in to the gutter as I could so as not to annoy the taxis and buses. Envisioning the newspaper headlines, maybe even my arrest, my struggling body between two strong security guards. I imagined reporters pressing their microphones on me. I imagined that my action – a kind of performance – would capture and incite the imagination of the people of the city. How wrong I was.

Among the markets near Bencoolen Street I became less conspicuous. Even though the Malay fruit sellers were using their sons to move the large baskets of pineapples and mangoes with no luxury like a forklift, I didn't look out of place. I pulled courteously to one side for a patrol car as it passed; they didn't stop me to ask questions even though my pallet of papers looked nothing like the durian, breadfruit and bitter melons in the baskets. In the bustle of the early morning – it must have been approaching 5am at this point, though I'm not sure – I was quiet and calm. My pain had subsided and though my mouth was full of the salt of my own sweat and my eyes squinted through the fug of my own heat I felt the cool determination under my skin. I had come this far into the action I'd envisaged for myself. I had all the printed copies of the manuscript under the bars of the little machine. I was satisfied, slowly making my way up Victoria Rd to the National Library.

Thirty-One

The Gift

Jo:

I have avoided the airport for a long time. Aeroplanes terrify me. In them everything changes. The air pressure changes; you aren't allowed to move about; you can't see how they are driven, you don't even know how fast you are hurtling through the air. Your heart rate fluctuates, your temperature changes. Compasses are useless in aeroplanes. And the big ones are so loud from the outside that they can damage your ears. In fact the pressure alterations in the cabin can damage your eardrums.

I am worried about Mei in an aeroplane.

But, Mei isn't worried about the plane ride. She's worrying about the fact that she hasn't been to the classes her father paid for. She's worrying that she's going to forget her passport. She's worrying that the piece she's written about us isn't good enough for Ryan Stokes. I think it's brilliant.

I knew she could write. When she showed me what she'd written that night I was amazed. She had written all night. My plan had worked, she hadn't cried at all. But maybe crying isn't all that bad. It's not something I can do. I don't remember ever having tears come out my eyes from sadness or emotions, it seems my eyes don't make extra tears.

Mei's making enough for the both of us, but she's not crying about her father's death. She's crying about going. We are nearly at the station when she realises her wallet is still at the flat.

'I'm tired and emotional.' She says, looking at me with her red eyes, her mouth all loose from the crying.

'Yeah, yeah, I know.' I say as I phone Amy to bring the wallet down in the lift. I notice I am distracted the way my father always is. Am I just like him?

We walk back through the construction site. There is cement in broken piles next to the path. Graffiti on the plywood barriers, in green and red it seems to say 'taste me'. It reminds me of something that was written in the emails.

We are running out of time. I try walking faster, pulling Mei's suitcase along, but Mei doesn't pick up her pace to match me. The thing about aeroplanes that I know for sure is that they are fussy about the passengers checking in on time.

'We might need to get a cab,' I tell Mei.

'Yeah,' she says, but I am not sure she heard me.

Mei:

Jo is all concerned. He makes me check all my things so many times before I leave that of course I forget my wallet. It begins to rain as we hurry back through the demolition site to collect it. Is it because I hardly slept that the world feels difficult to move through, or is it because my father is no longer in this world? Do all the orphans find life much harder because their fathers aren't there to breathe the air before they reach it, making it easier to move through? I am so slow, and I can see that Jo is worried I will miss my plane.

But why does he care? Doesn't he want me to stay? Won't he miss me? More tears fall and mix with the warm rain on my face so he doesn't know. I'll never be able to tell him that he also made me cry, when it seems there is so much to cry about.

We reach the stairwell and there is Amy with an umbrella and my wallet. She gives me another fond hug, and I feel her sympathy like a kind of weakening warmth that saps the life out of me. If she had been annoyed or rude I would have felt better. As it is she pulls me under the shelter of her umbrella and we watch as Jo hails a blue taxi, running out into the puddles and wetting his shoes.

The taxi driver tries to chat. Jo doesn't chat, unless it's online. He polishes his glasses, not making eye contact.

'I learn the English for three mons,' says the driver. I can see myself in the rear vision mirror; I look so small against the black upholstered seats. The driver swerves into the main road, 'you can't believe? No, my daughter she learn at the university, we pay wha, but I talk better in three mons than she does.'

'Really?' Even trying to be cordial is too hard. I am glad that he turns up the radio. The rain hushes down over us.

Jo:

I hate the airport, before we've even gone into it. The taxi drops us outside; I think he drove too fast. I didn't have time to make out all the signs. I check again, yes, the international airport.

In my backpack I have the first aid kit, the compass, the bottle of water, the umbrella and emergency MRT card; my wallet, the toothpicks, the back-up CD of my last will and testament. But I also have a surprise for Mei.

If there was someone to ask me what I was feeling right at this moment I would have told them that I was missing Mei already. Even though she's there, in her raincoat, looking at the printout of her ticket and glancing around at the signs that point to the different airlines and shops and toilets and cafes. Even though she's there, just in touching distance she's already gone. If part of her left when the news broke over her – her father's death, his body in the car wreck rushed through to the hospital – then the next part of her is leaving now. Not quite gone physically, but nearly. Just on the point of getting into one of those huge frightening machines. Perhaps they are not as dangerous as cars, or the MRT, but they feel worse.

Mei swivels on her heels and points to the check in counters where there are rows of people with luggage, all looking tired, haggard. They appear crumpled somehow, even though some of them are neatly ironed.

We walk together through the neon yellow light to the end of the queue and take our place. Though I am outwardly calm even the smell of the airport is making me nervous. It was over 13 years ago, but I still remember the scene very clearly. I was so small my mother was holding me in her arms, we checked in, my father led the way and we waited in the lounge for our plane. They pointed it out through the window. I was so frightened I held on to the chair legs and wouldn't be moved. I knew that death was imminent in one of those roaring machines. My parents couldn't loosen my grip; the airline hostess couldn't charm me on board, even though she said she was good with children. My parents missed their plane. We didn't have that holiday. I didn't sleep for two days. We went to see the psychiatrist.

We are half way through the queue when I know that I have to leave. Mei is already gone. I can't imagine hugging her goodbye. In a way it will be a relief when she goes. I won't feel responsible for her, I won't have to be acceptable all the time. But, I have to give her the gift.

Mei:

Jo is out of sorts, looking about at the other passengers. I know he will remember everything, but I don't know what to say. All the phrases from the books I've read seem inappropriate. Part of me just doesn't have the energy. I have to get home, that's all I can do at this point.

We must be about half way through the line on the way to the check-in desk, when Jo takes off his backpack, pulls out a red packet and says:

'I've got to go, sorry.' And he pushes the gift at me and without looking at me, leapfrogs over the rope barrier and disappears into the crowd. His small frame shaded by all the other larger bodies with their luggage. In a few seconds I can't see him any more.

I am left standing there, leaning slightly forward as if I was about to plant a kiss on his cheek, or at least exchange a few quiet words of goodbye. I am holding the heavy parcel in my right hand.

So I don't cry, I run my left thumbnail under the ledge of paper, the outer layer falls away and I see he has given me the manuscript we had collected.

Thirty-Two

The Wind and the World

Lee Wei Hong:

Let me tell you how I feel about the National Library building, just briefly. To me it seems like a monster that yearns to be good, and to be loved for that reason. With its glass towers and the unstable looking pod at its peak it is ambitious; to collate a world class collection of the literature of South East Asia, to hold it there, in its see-through abdomen. It aims to let us see the digestive process; Singapore will eat all the writing in Asia, digest it and shit it out, too. I have spent happy afternoons with a book from the Lee Hong Chian Reference Library watching the traffic of the city below me. The building makes the reader feel light-headed with their elevation over the rest of the city. The writer's works are kept in humidified cells and the reader, too, we are enshrined in glass and bathed in the light. The building itself, with all the air-conditioned goodwill in the world, is still a luxurious series of cells.

The viewing pod that makes up the top floor of the building is kept for special occasions, and only those with invitations are allowed to enter and peer over the city, past the Jurong district and over the Straits out onto islands in the distance. Some days it seems you can see as far as Malaysia. I have never been up there. Not important enough, la! But, the whole thing seems so presumptive, perched there in the centre of things, still mostly empty.

The 16 stories seemed to loom over me as I approached up Victoria Street. I saw that some of the lights were on, and to me the building seemed to be blinking as the sun threatened to rise, making smears of light in the sky. What is the use of this huge glossy space when nothing will be printed to store in it from this day forward? This was the anger I'd swallowed with that small filler article in the evening paper and breathed in with the story contained in that manuscript. It tasted of bile, bitter and thick. Something – you will like this – seemed to have loosened in my head; I rattled to the vibrations of the vehicle on the road, but what I felt like was that faulty fan at the food court. My metallic clatter, an entirely internal one, meant

that my thoughts were not coming out as a cool stream; didn't flow together, but came in puffs and bursts.

I angled the forklift up the deserted pedestrian ramp, past the garden – which I've always liked with its series of ferns. Taking the disabled access under the glass walkways I drove the forklift towards the main entrance. However, I did pause here for a moment. I know I've told you there is no feeling remorse in me for this *crime*, but I saw that this was the pivotal time. It was 5.46am. I could just make out by the clock in the atrium. The brick pathways, the squares under the building were all empty. Nothing but the wind humming through the support beams, hissing into the huge glass panes. Behind me on the road a little traffic passed. It was still not too late to turn back. I could wheel the forklift back to the warehouse; deliver the manuscript back to the exact spot it occupied on the print-room floor, park the forklift back in between the cardboard stacks. Maybe, no one would have noticed it was missing.

I had been working from bilious anger, from a sense that the book, at least this beautiful manuscript that I had made, must reach the people; that residents of Singapore, as much as anyone, should read this book. I was, to use the comparison again – because it's the best one I can think of – like a lover seized with the beauty of his beloved. I was unable to see one fault, at the point of infatuation where I wanted– no, *needed* – to share this love with the world.

Still, I backed the forklift away from the emergency panel and took a deep breath. I tightened the strap of the safety goggles, pulled the sarong closer over my head and tucked its folds in. There was a risk and it was still possible that this plan wouldn't work. But, I had come this far and had committed myself to my own angry plan. A plan I had to carry out. The perfectionist in me wanted it done as well as possible, I'll admit to that. So, checking that the forks were tilted at the highest angle they could go I pressed the accelerator. The machine revved noisily and ducking behind one of the safety bars – there to protect the driver from being crushed if he rolled the vehicle – I let the brake go. The machine lurched at full speed into the plate of emergency glass.

I chose the emergency glass because it is designed to fracture. It is made, like a windscreen, to crumble rather than shatter. My first run made an attractive dent in the glass that spread gradually out like a spider's web, but didn't come loose of the frame. In the collision I had hit my head against the bar. I knew there would be blood on the sarong, but now the action had me in its grip. I felt that I wasn't in control any longer; but also that all the decisions of my life had led here.

The pain in my head delivered me back to the nights I spent sobbing next to my brother in the cellar. The difference between a night with a book and a night in the blackness, in the void of my own fears and thoughts, was momentous. I remembered the injuries we would check for one another. Was it bleeding? How bad was it on the scale, when 10 meant near-death and 1 was unhurt? Even the worst bruises could be forgotten if you could read. And I knew that even if my mother had died I still had bruises that needed the balm of a good story. What I know is that there is no substitute for a book – the paper and ink variety. Even the ones on screen are entrances to the void. They aren't objects you can hold in your hands and love. They are impersonal, like an injury, even when it's on your own body.

In reverse the machine complained by wailing and shuddering. Smoke issued from the back vent. Ignoring it, I let out the brake again with the engine revving as hard as I could make it go with my foot pressed on the accelerator. This time the glass fell away like a heavy shower of rain and the machine with me still riding on it skidded over the raised frame, onto the polished floor of the reception area.

I reached up and touched the sarong, which was wet and warm under my fingers. But the pain had revived some of the anger from earlier. How can they ban this book – already here in Singapore? How can they use a printer here and at the same time make his job redundant? So much for more contracts, so much for the things Cyril was dreaming of buying his wife. So much for a lifetime's work learning the intricacies of printing; so much for libraries when the world has technology enough to make their existence redundant. I drove the machine with its load still somehow intact, up to the lift and pressed the button. The buzz in my eardrums was no longer just the vibrations from the machine, nor my own loose thoughts: the library's alarm was going off. I had forgotten about that. What happened next had to be quick.

The lift arrived, spacious and lit with yellow light. As they seem to be designed for cartloads of book, driving the forklift in was easy. Momentarily I worried about the weight, but the plan wouldn't work otherwise, so I slid the doors closed, pressed the button for the tenth storey. The lift did shudder, but the alarm was muffled in there, for a few seconds as I ascended, all was quiet and still. Through the glass windows I could see the traffic building up on Victoria Road below me. The polite bell chimed to let me know I had reached the chosen floor and the doors slid open.

The area between the lifts, with the tiled polished floor, was dim as I reversed the forklift out. There was no neon here, but out over Suntec City Mall and the wharf district

some faint light was beginning, making everything look slightly yellow. I sent the lift back down to the 5th floor. If anyone came looking for me at least that wouldn't serve as a clue. The alarm was not as loud here. The forklift almost seemed to drive itself. I knew there was no time for hesitating, no time to call a halt to what was happening. That's how I thought of it, as something that was happening, some outside force that was working on me. Could I have been so audacious to even contemplate that this was me, that this was what I was becoming? Not exactly a suicide bomber, but neither was I a performance artist. What I like the sound of now is *activist*. I was an activist, a protestor; I was now the kind of person who put belief over comfort; ideals over the ordinary way of living.

I revved the engine again; this time when I let off the brake I threw myself out of the way. Without my foot on the accelerator the impact was not as spectacular. A few cracks appeared, but they didn't move across the pane as the ones downstairs had. I took the tyre iron out from under the seat and, setting the break, I went and hit the glass as hard as I could, once, twice, then a third time. Again, it was safety glass, a removable panel I'd noticed when I'd first visited the library and wondered why, on the tenth storey there was an emergency exit out into the air. After a few sharp blows it shattered. I looked up and noticed the small hammer in its plastic shelf: Break in Case of Emergency written in three languages across the box that contained it. Who was to say this was not an emergency? I know that the rest of the city was sleeping, or waking up for dawn prayers, oblivious to the risk that they were about to be deprived of something. I laughed out loud at the difference between my idea of emergency and those of the rest of the population. I was about to give it back to all of them. I was going to let them see the real value of – not only the book – but of myself.

When the window fell away a gust of wind came into the atrium. It slid the glass on the floor, and lifted the edges of the pages that had come loose on their pallets. I took off the goggles and sarong wiping the blood away and looked down, onto the roads below, the traffic still glowing on the bluish tarmac looking like life-blood moving through a giant's veins. The scene was beautiful; the buildings silhouetted with occasional lights and out beyond them I could see the sky's yellow rim beyond the mauve mist hovering over the city. Below me, at the entrance there was movement. My head, that had been feeling hot with anger suddenly felt very cold. There you were with your little vans wearing your black uniforms, stalking through the gardens, swarming in the door. I knew I couldn't waste time with stopping to *feel* things, or to analyse these feelings. What I had to do must be done quickly.

I cut open the plastic binding that held the palettes with the knife, slicing through the cords that held the paper down. A few pages were immediately picked up by the wind and tossed playfully towards the escalators. I stepped in front of the machine and, taking as many pages as I could between my two hands I leaned out into the open air and let them go.

In the worst-case scenario I thought that the pages would blow back through the opening I'd made in the building. Or, fall down directly onto you police and your exciting little stakeout. (What was taking you so long?) Instead the wind collaborated with me. The creamy pages peeled away from one another, they waved like birds' wings in the dusky light and flew out into the sky. Another pile, another flock of wings. Again and again I turned to pick up the pages and toss them into the air. I was distributing the story I knew people needed; I was tossing the thing that would keep us sane out into the world, dripping blood onto that beautiful paper. How far would they get? How long could they hover there, like a trail in the air?

The sirens didn't interrupt me. Someone, one day, must look up.

I lifted another load of pages into the air. I wish I'd known some song, some poem, some anthem to recite to myself. Instead though, I thought of the stream of actions – reaching forward to take up an armful of paper, then turning, extending the arms and balancing carefully so as not to trip on the broken glass, with a sigh heaving another ream out into the space of the wind.

Exegesis

***How to Log Into the Book:
Cyborgs and Fiction***

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Introduction

‘ “The world needs Cartographers,” he said softly,
“because if they didn’t have Cartographers the fools wouldn’t
know where they were. . .”

Carey, “Do You Love Me?”, Collected Stories, 9

The intention of this exegesis is to draw parallels and examine the dualities that exist in the paradigms applied to fictional and cyber space¹. Employing a posthuman perspective, I will use the writings of four feminist theorists situated within the field of cyber theory – Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, N Katherine Hayles and Sherry Turkle. My objective is to use their thinking as a global positioning system to navigate the literary terrain between the fully imagined space of fiction and the crafted world of cyber space. Using the novels My Life as a Fake, by Peter Carey and The PowerBook, by Jeanette Winterson as examples of literature that explore the territory of the posthuman, I will position my own creative work (New Material) within this geography.

Posthumanism is a philosophic movement that incorporates advances in technoscience into the rhetoric of literary and theoretical philosophy. Its thinkers seek to equalise the status traditionally given to the human in exploring the territory of the non-human, the cyborg, cybernetic organisms and artificial life as well as the hybrid machine and animal; the equalisation is also extended to the environments, crafted or otherwise, that these creatures inhabit. In contrast to classical humanism, posthumanist thought embraces the darker side of human nature, with its imperfections and malfunctions. It proposes that technoscience – new media, computers and all the possibilities they contain – act, not only as a metaphor for human existence, but as reality of their own. In

¹ These two terms, though at times problematic, are used for the purposes of this exegesis to define firstly, fiction or literary space which has been imagined by an author and remains a fixed entity, and secondly technological or cyberspace which has multiple authors and can be altered and added to.

this, it values the non-physical as much as the physical, and thus the disembodied as much as the embodied.

In this introduction I will explain why posthumanist rhetoric is relevant to my own creative work. There are three interfacing planes of exploration: real life, as embedded in fiction, fiction itself and the world of cyber technology, all of which have wide ramifications in relation to posthumanist notions of embodiment, imagined space and the authorship of the text. I will then contextualise the theorists and their work, which I will use to metaphorically navigate the planes. The two novels that will be analysed at this point add detail and illustrate the map as it is created. Lastly, I will plot the exegesis as a whole.

The area of posthuman thinking is central to my creative work on three levels. Firstly, technoscience and new media allow for the networked world to exist; cyberspace can be seen as parallel to the physical spaces in which human lives are led. Of interest to me was the way in which characters could be altered and influenced by this non-physical world and how it would facilitate their relationships. The question I wanted to pose within my work was: what did embodiment and disembodiment mean in a fictional context? In New Material, the character of Jo, a young Singaporean technophile, lives almost entirely within a non-physical networked world. His character is defined by this virtual plane, his knowledge of cyber-technology and networked games. When his cousin, Mei, comes to stay with his family she drags him out of his virtual life and hacking pursuits into the Singaporean monsoon. Coming to terms with the physical world, one which he uses the medium of technology to read, Jo's double-dealing with gamers online leads him to be assaulted in a back alley. Here, the darker side of his life online is brought to the fore. His disembodiment online causes his physical body damage.

Secondly, the networked text is seen as a threat to traditional literature, the physical book. In New Material, the character Lee Wei Hong, a printer working with the non-virtual text, who reveres the book's physical identity – and the non-physical spaces it allows him to escape to – is moved by what he perceives as a possible threat to his life led through fiction, to take action. His narrative, as a confession to a 'crime', explores his entirely physical reaction to the non-physical. Through throwing a manuscript off the

National Library Building, he distributes the physical text – destroying it at the same time. What I wanted to emphasise was the importance of the non-physical imagined space of literature and how it was paramount to this character. Just as the non-physical networked world is key to Jo's charactersiation.

The third reason posthumanist thought is central to the narrative of New Material is that when fiction is viewed as a parallel non-physical world, in the same way posthumanist thought sees the virtual space of the internet, imagined and crafted space begin to merge. Two important questions through the novella New Material were: If cyberspace can act as a parallel life in some instances, if the networked world allows users a freedom to explore their true nature, can fiction act in the same way? And secondly, has fiction, until the networked world was invented, filled this role? Through reading a book and experiencing the imagined space it opens, are readers playing out – though with no influence on the outcomes – those same true natures? Mei is Jo's cousin, brought to Singapore to avoid her parents' divorce settlement. She can immerse herself and find comfort from her current life in fiction, she can also appreciate Jo's skills online, but more than the other two characters, she is grounded in what I have to call – though in a fictional context – reality.

The broadly posthumanist thinkers whose writings I make use of to contextualise New Material and explore the Carey and Winterson novels are Elizabeth Grosz' Space, Time, Perversion – The Politics of Bodies, Donna Haraway's seminal A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century, N Katherine Hayles' How We Became Posthuman, and Sherry Turkle's Life on Screen. Each of them brings a new element of posthuman and cyborg theory's rhetoric to the examination of the literature. These authors come to posthumanism from diverse areas, but collectively their thoughts map the parallels between the landscape of fiction and the world of technoscience. In this exegesis, their combined thinking acts as a global positioning system to navigate this region of nominally non-physical imagined space.

Elizabeth Grosz is the only Australian among the four writers, and in her work as a cultural theorist, feminist philosopher and academic has investigated Michel Foucault,

Gilles Deleuze, Judith Butler and Alphonso Lingis. In Space, Time, Perversion – The Politics of Bodies, she argues for a re-situation of the human body within the spectrum of feminist, literary and cultural thinking. Her concerns are not limited to embodiment, as she draws together analysis on living in the current climate of new media and technoscience, she acknowledges the disembodied and celebrates the power of the physical to act as an agent for change. As she writes in the introduction to Space, Time, Perversion – The Politics of Bodies on virtual writing ‘While presenting itself as a celebration of the body and its pleasures, this fascination bears witness to a profound, if unacknowledged and undiscussed, hatred and resentment of the body.’ But ‘...Such a conception never questioned the body’s status as an object (of reflection, intervention, training or remarking), never even considered the possibility that the body could be understood as subject, agent or activity.’ (1)

N Katherine Hayles’ work draws on literature and literary theory to make comparisons to science and scientific models. In How We Became Posthuman, she looks into the definition of ‘posthuman’ and explores its peripheries. She writes about the loss of embodiment – not just of humans but also of information, the emergence of the cyborg from a literary cultural point of view and drawing on the history of cybernetics and its voyage into the virtual, she works to contextualise artificial life into a more acceptable form and to show humans as complete cybernetic systems. As she outlines her thesis: ‘...the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born... In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.’ (3)

Donna Haraway – the mother of cyborg theory – comes from a zoological background, and wrote A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century as a feminist and scientist. In both areas this text sparked a great deal of controversial discussion. In Cyborg Manifesto she argues for the breakdown of the boundaries between human and animal as well as human and

machine. What is relevant here is the removal of limitations on where the body ends and technology begins. It has been argued that within this text the cyborg acts as a metaphor for the hybrid, for the formation of one thing from the merging of two others. In this exegesis the notion of cyborg – broadly defined as ‘creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted.’ (Haraway,1) is applied to a literary framework.

Sometimes called a ‘cyber shrink’ Sherry Turkle is a psychologist who has written extensively on the relationship people have with their computers, and what the computers facilitate. Using psychoanalytic techniques she explores the culture created by the way people interact with their machines. Her research references many ordinary computer users’ attempts to articulate exactly what their machines allow them to do. She makes the claim – based on the work of Jean Baudrillard – that the use of computers is a way of bringing the world into a postmodern understanding of itself. In her research she investigates the demarcations that are at the very edge of the experience humans are having through interaction with machines. Turkle writes extensively about gamers, the games they live through and intelligent robots. Her emphasis is on the societal impact these have on the way users choose to live their lives.

To situate the novella, New Material in the context of posthumanist theory, I undertake the examination of two novels that are key to this area of thought. Firstly, Peter Carey’s My Life As A Fake, in which a poet invented for the purposes of a hoax comes to life. This invention, the character Bob McCorkle, can be viewed as an icon of posthumanism. He arrives in the world fully formed; he enacts the darker side of human nature – killing his publisher, threatening his creator, kidnapping a baby; and he also writes sublime poetry. He is, and yet is not, human. He is a hybrid of non-physical imagination and fictional embodiment. Secondly, The PowerBook by Jeanette Winterson which is an exploration of the culture created by human relationships that are facilitated by technology. The novel acts as the networked, or virtual, text in which one lover – the constructed author – invents love stories for another, a constructed reader. To lure her reader in, the author’s stories become more and more true to life; the emotions closer to

the surface until at the end of the story the line between the planes of the physical and non-physical, the virtual, and the fictional, blur.

Chapter one of this exegesis sets out to travel through My Life As A Fake using the posthuman theorists as navigational devices. In this chapter, through contrasting the elements at work in Carey's novel I situate my own in the same context. Chapter two examines The PowerBook and applies the four theorists' work as maps for the landscape Winterson's novel delineates. Here, too, I use The PowerBook as a method of reflecting on New Material.

Chapter 1

Traversing Carey's Cartography

'A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.'

Haraway, A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century, 149

'... the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as its predicate; there is no time than that of enunciation, and every text is eternally written, *here and now*.' Barthes, The Death Of The Author, 145

The novel My Life As A Fake is based loosely around the events of the Ern Malley hoax². It uses the invented poet character – who becomes, in this fictional landscape, Bob McCorkle. It also uses McCorkle's creator, who becomes Carey's Christopher Chubb. Both are central characters in the narrative. Carey uses the shape of real events as a point of departure. From here, the fictional poet comes alive and his author – Chubb – loses his poetical gift, his child, his right to the poetry invented for his character, and perhaps, it is suggested, his sanity. Eventually, for the poetry's sake, he loses his own life. This story is embedded in another, the story of how the editor Sarah Wode-Douglas comes to Kuala Lumpur to happen upon Chubb and hear his strange tale. How she longs

² This was a poetic hoax perpetrated in 1943 by James McAuley and Harold Stewart (poets themselves) on the editor of the magazine 'Angry Penguins', Max Harris. They sent Harris the poems of Ern Malley, a fictional character of their own invention who was a bicycle mechanic and spontaneous modernist poet.

to publish the McCorkle poems, and her obsession with finding the truth of the McCorkle myth. At the end of the novel, it seems, there are in fact no absolutes.

Carey engages deeply with notions of how imagined space and unimagined space might intersect. In this novel, through the character of McCorkle, he explores – as Haraway has put it: ‘worlds ambiguously natural and crafted.’ (1) An extract from ‘The Darkening Ecliptic’³ can be read, in Carey’s novel, as speaking of McCorkle’s disenfranchisement as a Frankenstein monster made up of facts and fictions, who inhabits the narrative at once ‘natural’ and ‘crafted’:

Now I find that once more I have shrunk
To an interloper, robber of dead men’s dream,
I had read in books that art is not easy
But no-one warned that the mind repeats
In its ignorance the vision of others. I am still

The black swan of trespass on alien waters. (Carey, *My Life As A Fake*, 82)

The use of the poetry in this way places the text of Carey’s novel, though the characters are lightly disguised – Ern Malley becomes Bob McCorkle, Harold Stewart and James McAuley become one in Christopher Chubb – within the reach of the unimagined factual world.

The embodied McCorkle can be seen to have a similar nature to that of a cyborg – a creature that appears at the merging point between machine and human, robot and animal as well as artificial life. Haraway defines cyborgs in *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* as: ‘creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted.’ (1) What is of interest here is that McCorkle is embodied because of the poetry; his very nature is fictional. He is at once animal and fiction. He exists in a ‘crafted’ landscape – that of fiction. In the novel *My Life As A Fake* McCorkle is artificial life, life brought forth by the mechanism of fiction. Katherine N Hayles’ second definition of cybernetic is: ‘the replication or imitation of biological control

³ Here, Carey has used one of the actual poems that McAuley and Stewart sent Harris under the name of Ern Malley.

systems with the use of technology.’ (1) This definition can work well for the character of McCorkle if fiction is viewed as a kind of technology.

McCorkle is an agent that manipulates the very mechanism that created him; he is an actor in the universe of the novel, and in this sense can be seen as the archetypal posthuman. In enacting fiction on the fiction, McCorkle’s questionable origin and his questionable motives go to the very root of what interests and terrifies humans about such creatures. Like Frankenstein’s monster, the Terminator and many other posthumans in science fiction and cyberpunk writing, Carey uses McCorkle to draw on the fear that our creations can and will take control. That they will out-do humanity. As Kunzru writes in *Wired*: ‘These science fiction fevered dreams stem from our deepest concerns about science, technology, and society. With advances in medicine, robotics, and AI, they’re moving inexorably closer to reality. When technology works on the body, our horror always mingles with intense fascination.’ (Kunzru, ‘You Are A Cyborg’, 1)

McCorkle, like the monster in Frankenstein feels woefully unprepared for the world he now inhabits. As he laments: ‘I am a poet who does not know the name of things...’ (Carey, 154) And yet, his poetry and his story profoundly affect all the other characters in My Life As A Fake. Haraway goes on to note in A Cyborg Manifesto, that the longings the monster has are human, not cyborg, posthuman. It is as though McCorkle’s human desires – to name and to be named – are more powerful and perhaps more disturbing because they are desires we share. Because of McCorkle’s poetic gift – one that could be seen as a parallel in New Material, the character Jo’s gift for overwriting code – he has a form of control over what occurs in his ‘crafted’, fictional landscape.

The nature of the cyborg ‘a hybrid of machine and organism’ (Haraway, 149) is central to New Material in which the character, Jo, lives through computers and relies on his GPS system and thermometer to give him accurate readings of the outside world. His character is immersed in the world of cyberspace, a landscape of virtual games and networked texts. These are crafted landscapes where Jo is involved intimately with the machines that facilitate them and in this context he has some control. Like McCorkle’s inventor Christopher Chubb in My Life As A Fake, Jo is creative, an inventor – a hacker

in his language – and he is not fully in control of what he creates, nor of the ramifications of his creations. Jo's life is predominately lived in the world of cyberspace, which in his case acts on his mind in the same way that fiction does. He is able to immerse himself in a comparable way in the fictional novel 'My Fierce Delay'. When he becomes fully engaged with the fiction, Jo applies the same rules as used on the networked text to the fiction.

From existing in the 'crafted' landscape of the local area network (LAN) and massively multi-player online games (MMOGs) Jo, who we could see as a quintessential cyborg – relying as he does on his computer, his thermometer, his GPS, his hand-phone⁴ – is brought to the closest encounter he's yet had with real life (or RL) (Turtle, dust jacket). The setting in Singapore is significant in that Singapore is a city – perhaps more than others – which can be seen on a superficial level as a very 'crafted' landscape. The levels of crafting in Jo's environment make the moment when he crosses from virtual or cyber space into fiction – when he becomes obsessed by the novel My Fierce Delay, that he and Mei find scattered in the alley – unsurprising. Jo is able to cross that boundary easily. He is able to inhabit the fiction, just as he inhabits the other virtual environments and to some extent mythical spaces⁵, he defines himself by.

Jo's relationship with technology and cyberspace is transferred onto the novel within the novel My Fierce Delay. But Jo's idea of how fiction works is so embedded in his experience online he forgets that within fiction the reader doesn't try to influence the author. Online, emails, networked texts, in the alternate sphere of online and networked games require a level of interaction from the players. As Turtle's research has shown her: 'As players participate they become the authors, not only of the text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction.' (12) Within the parameters of the virtual world there is a type of equality applied to the paradigm set up between those at either end of the cable, sender and receiver. But, in fiction this demarcation is more traditionally defined: there is only author and reader, the two do not

⁴ As mobile phones are called in Singapore.

⁵ In relation to his family's differing religious beliefs.

reverse their roles.⁶ The only way the author is reachable by their public is, generally, through their publisher. Jo, as a hacker is used to bypassing these rules – that are even less rigid in his experience. ‘Hackers are...passionately involved in the mastery of the machine itself.’ (Turkle, 32). Because of Jo’s intense involvement with machines and the networks they create, he thinks of himself as equal to and able to influence the author of the fiction.

In A Cyborg Manifesto Donna Haraway theorises that: ‘Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden...’ (151) The conglomeration of fictionalised facts that make up the character of McCorkle in My Life As A Fake illustrate that he does not expect his creator’s help. McCorkle’s restoration comes from naming the garden, as the narrator Sarah Wode-Douglas discovers when she first sees McCorkle’s meticulous journals: ‘The pages held pressed flowers and leaves all of them densely annotated.’ (Carey, 212) With these objects, McCorkle’s extension into the fictional reality as a biological agent is given credibility. He is real because of what he has created, not only because of the poetry he allegedly wrote, but the relics of his life. Jo, in New Material can be seen to take this naming a step further, through his contacting the author of My Fierce Delay and influencing him to use the material that Jo wants to see written. ‘*Dear Mr Stokes, Please find attached all the material you will need for your next novel. It may seem a bit forward of us to send it to you in an email like this. We are sure it’s the story you need. The one you have been searching for. A story only you will be able to do justice to.*’ (1)

In New Material the character of Jo, like McCorkle, is forced into the physical world, in this case by the arrival of Mei. She requires him to disconnect from his server and interact with her. Her presence in his life changes the way he thinks about himself: ‘Reflected in her view, I can see myself trapped into a metallic persona, the kind of person I dislike for their lack of range, their small limited minds, the way they only look at the things immediately in front of them. The cables in my own mind begin to fray; I can feel the wires coming loose, the programs deleting themselves.’ (New Material, 20)

⁶ Reader response theory has more to say on this, but due to lack of space, I cannot divert the discussion in that direction.

The connection Jo makes with Mei causes him to become embodied in the ‘real’ un-networked world, to think of his body as a part of the living environment. There is also a collision at the moment Jo’s proficiency at the LAN games causes him to be assaulted. Jo is saved from severe bodily harm by Mei’s appearance. But when he comes to, he reassures her by quoting his temperature. Jo’s relationship, even with his own body, is filtered through the medium of technology.

Towards the end of the novel My Life As A Fake, Chubb has pursued McCorkle out into the Malaysian jungle and is named a *hautu*, a ghost, a succubus, a disembodied thing. This, his kidnapped daughter and the tribes-people believe completely. It seems that through their belief, Chubb and McCorkle’s roles are reversed. Chubb – the creator – finds himself made into the monster. His creation – if that’s what Bob McCorkle is – has overtaken him in being more believable. Haraway makes the point: ‘Monsters have always defined the limits of community...’ (A Cyborg Manifesto, 180) And here, Chubb finds that he cannot convince his adopted daughter of the verity of their relationship. The author is forced to give up his own reality – his authenticity – to his creation.

The relationship between the author, the text and the reader – and those who mid-wife the text (the publisher David Weiss, the editor Sarah Wode-Douglas) – are pivotal concerns of Peter Carey’s My Life As A Fake. The narration technique has characters speak for themselves and for others, creating a layering to the story, a pastiche of voices. Sarah Wode-Douglas remains in the outer frame of the narrative, which Christopher Chubb speaks through. Chubb then takes of the voice of the dead McCorkle. Wode-Douglas speaks for the poet John Slater, and re-tells the version of the narrative from the daughter, Tina’s perspective.

The narrator’s many voices could be seen to be mimicking an article or investigation, a written account of actual events. An overlay of voices that are similar to those found in the texts of cyberspace; the narrator/author becomes an unstable entity, an abstraction. In the fictional space of My Life As A Fake the abstract entity is not the author of the text, but the author within the text. In Bob McCorkle’s words: ‘Ask the bloody author, he cried. Ask the Author you fucking philistine.’ (Carey, 58). In his work, The Hacker’s Manifesto, McKenzie Wark notes: ‘Abstraction is always an abstraction of

nature, a process that creates nature's double, a second nature, a space of human existence in which collective life dwells among its own products and comes to take the environment it produces to be natural.' (016) When applied to Carey's novel, this abstraction can be identified as the key moment of McCorkle's appearance. It can also be read that the environment that comes to be 'natural' is the very fiction that characters such as McCorkle, or for example, the monster in Frankenstein, come alive and thrive in. If Haraway's 'crafted' space is extended to include fiction, the natural and unnatural can then become active within it.

The narrators in New Material each tell their stories from their own very defined subjectivities. Jo's view of the world is set against the understanding of the older Lee Wei Hong, whose reliance on the world of fiction is far greater. Mei, who is perhaps more grounded in the unimagined world of the narrative than the other two characters, mediates their points of view. Because the characters come to influence the author it is crucial that they speak with their own voices, separate from an omniscient narrator.

Hayles notes in How We Became Post-Human that 'The construction of narrator as manipulator of codes obviously has important implications for the construction of the reader. The reader is similarly constituted through a layered archaeology that moves from listener, to reader to decoder.' (46) The reader of My Life As A Fake is asked to decode the layers of voices, voices that are not simply that of the constructed author. In fact, in the fictional world, Carey stretches this understanding of reader and writer to make the narrator (Sarah Wode-Douglas) a 'reader' and her subjects 'writers' (John Slater, Christopher Chubb and Bob McCorkle). In this way, again, Carey inverts the expected constructs around authorial placement, enacting Barthes: 'The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into *before* and *after*.' (145) Which applies to the poems of Bob McCorkle – whose book of poetry is also called My Life As A Fake – but, Barthes continues: 'the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing...' (Ibid 145) which could be applied to Bob McCorkle himself through the pen of Christopher Chubb. As we have seen, McCorkle is in no way prepared for the world he finds himself in. And yet he

invents himself – through naming the world, as he tells Chubb: ‘ I sleep with the snakes and the spiders and often I have named them too. *Syzygium McCorklus*, he said...’ (Carey155) Through this he becomes the author of his separate existence.

In applying Hayles’ concept that ‘the construction of narrator as manipulator of codes obviously has important implications for the construction of the reader’ to my work, it seems apt that each character is at once a narrator and a reader. Jo, the hacker, whose experience is as a ‘manipulator of codes’ is in control of the technology, and writes viruses to trawl the networks for emails to amuse him, perhaps even educate him in ‘human’. In the posthuman context where it is possible to be at once sender and receiver, reader and writer can be seen as a metaphor for the construction of fiction. That the reader is not simply a passive entity but one who takes an active part in the construction of imagined space, as a hacker does in cyberspace.⁷ Lee Wei narrates another set of codes, ingrained in fiction: ‘Is your book as good as a wife, my friend?’ And I nod to let them know their joke’s not taken the wrong way...’ (11) He is a reader, who for the first time is asked to tell his story. Mei, acting as a foil for Jo, narrates her story as a foreigner in Singapore. The three characters take their roles as readers beyond Hayles’ description of the reader’s evolution from: ‘listener, to reader to decoder.’ (46) From passive readers they are inspired to take action because of the act of reading. Jo and Mei, to send the author the material for his next novel, Lee Wei to distribute My Fierce Delay to the people of Singapore in an unorthodox way.

Writing on re-conceptualising the body from a cyberfeminist position Grosz notes: ‘Only very recently has the body been understood as an impediment to our humanity...’ (2) Reading McCorkle as a sort of Frankenstein’s monster, his body here – constructed, as it is, from parts of others’ (‘Patched together from three different men. My Creature. Over six feet tall. Fantastic head, huge powerful nose and cheekbones, great forehead like a bust of Shakespeare. I had put him together...’ (Carey, 51)) – is an agent of fiction. Haraway calls such inventions hybrids, creatures ‘of social reality as well as a creature(s) of fiction.’ (149) Both Haraway and Groz suggest that the nature of

⁷ Though this is very central to reader response theory.

the hybrid creature is questionable. As Chubb relates in an incident to Sarah Wode-Douglas:

‘I finally understood, he said quietly. I had brought him forth.

Imagined him?

Brought him forth.

From where?

Choy! How do I know from where? From hell I suppose.’ (Carey, 98)

With this, Chubb brings into question his own reliability as narrator. Is the reader convinced that, within the fictional space, McCorkle is as real as Chubb? The arbitrator, the character used to judge this (and whose character works as the framing device of the complete story) Sarah Wode-Douglas, is unsure even at the narrative’s conclusion.

In the descriptors he applies to his characters Carey seems to give clues about the very nature of an author’s association with what they create. Chubb is often described as ‘papery’, which is suggestive of his own fictional nature, and perhaps of the nature of his story. What is explored through the relationship between McCorkle and Chubb is more than simply the struggle of the creation to act as its own entity. Or even the notion that the author has the ability to breathe life into the characters they create, perhaps more so than they realise – or even desire. Perhaps, most relevant to this reading of My Life As A Fake is the ability of the creation to impact destructively on the life of the creator. That Chubb’s death is a result of his attempt to reclaim the poetry he allegedly wrote for the character of McCorkle, would seem to support this interpretation.

In examining the novel *My Life As A Fake* in the context of posthuman theory McCorkle’s character can be read as a double agent of fiction. Drawing a parallel between fictional space and cyber space McCorkle can be interpreted as an archetypal posthuman character, one that works the mechanism of fiction to exceed his creator, perhaps also to destroy him. Through the examination of Carey’s text the intention was to draw parallels with the themes of *New Material*, to elucidate and explain the characters predominantly of Jo as the wielder of power because of his abilities in the networked world, but also of Mei and Lee Wei Hong. The four theorists, Grosz, Haraway, Hayles and Turkle were used almost as compass points to navigate between the two texts and aid

in highlighting where the concepts in *My Life As A Fake* overlapped or intersected with those in *New Material*.

Chapter 2

Winterson – Navigating the Networked Text

‘I am interested in the ways in which the author’s corporeality, an always sexually specific corporeality – not the author’s interiority, psyche, consciousness, concepts or ideas – intrudes into or is productive of the text. (Grosz, Space, Time Perversion, 21)

‘I know kinaesthetically as well as conceptually that the (cyber) text can be manipulated in ways that would be impossible if it existed as a material object rather than a visual display. As I work with the text-as-flickering-image, I instantiate within my body the habitual patterns of movement that make pattern and randomness more real, more relevant and more powerful than presence and absence.’ (Hayles, How We Became Posthuman, 26)

The PowerBook is one of the most widely reviewed literary novels that centres, not just on an email relationship, but on an exploration of the culture created by human relationships that are facilitated by technology. The novel centres on an email relationship that becomes, by degrees, more intimate through the author telling the reader multiple stories. Each story is a love story, with the only fixtures being the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ characters. Through the multi-layered stories and the various guises of the ‘I’ and ‘you’, the novel as networked text comes to question the embodiment, even the placement of the body – the physical author and the physical book – within context of cyberspace. With this novel Winterson’s goal seems to be to create a place for the text-based author within cyber space; a place for poetic explorations of the parallels between fictional space and cyberspace. In The PowerBook cyber and fictional space come to overlap. In this way Winterson is writing a posthuman novel; the disembodied author,

reader and text are a feature of the conceptual writings of the four theorists, Grosz, Haraway, Hayles and Turkle.

In The PowerBook, Winterson examines the effects of computer technology and the spaces it creates on the physical body. She also calls into question the placement and nature of the body when occupying this space. Embodiment is a chief concern of the cyber theorists. As Grosz writes, this questioning of the placement of the body also questions the ‘...positionality of the speaking/writing/reading subject, not only the position he or she occupies in textual production, but the way in which the authorial position is occupied.’ (22) The PowerBook makes strong links between the space created by fiction and that of the text as written in cyberspace. ‘This is where the story starts. Here, in these long lines of laptop DNA. Here we take your chromosomes, twenty-three pairs, and alter your height, eyes, teeth, sex. This is an invented world. You can be free just for one night.’ (4) Here, the character of the author seems to view the worlds of cyber writing and fiction writing as almost interchangeable.

As Haraway says: ‘the boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us. (153)’ And it is this boundary that Winterson seems to skirt through The PowerBook. In the chameleon changes of character and narrative – from a ‘flower fucking princess’ (Winterson, 25) to the death of Mallory on the slopes of Everest, (149) from Lancelot and Guinevere (67) to ongoing story of the redheaded lover. All of these narrative threads work to situate the comment of Kunzru’s: ‘When technology works on the body, our horror always mingles with intense fascination.’ (‘You are a Cyborg’, 1) The PowerBook seems to question this intense fascination; here the technology works on the body of the book, on fiction itself. Does this fascination still function within the networked text?

The effect of email communication as a textual relationship is also core to New Material. The characters, Iris and Miles, communicate in this medium and through the fragments of their conversations that are ‘overheard’ by Jo and Mei, (because of Jo’s Trojan virus) and the ramifications of the relationship as text in a networked world are explored. The characters of Iris and Miles are handicapped by their experiences in the unimagined world, so much so that they find it easier to enact their relationship in text, in

cyberspace – to fictionalise themselves, to an extent. Turkle observes that ‘Interactive and reactive, the computer offers an illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. One can be a loner, yet never alone.’ (30) As a result of this sense of illusion and invention, when Jo and Mei read Miles’ and Iris’ correspondence, they read it as fiction. This inspires the teenagers to communicate with Ryan Stokes, the author whose novel has excited them into action.

If Kunzru and Haraway would have it that the line between human and cyborg is not simply defined due to the immersion of the western world in technology, the use and reliance on machines, Winterson’s thesis would, perhaps, be that humans are also more than partly fiction. As Hayles observes: ‘In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation...’ (3) Winterson’s notion is that the written landscape is a type of simulation, created for her ‘reader’ (the client wishing to be ‘free for just one night’) and because it is written it will be lived – through the experience of reading.

Cyber technology allows Winterson to invert the relationship set up between reader and writer:

‘The story is reading you now, line by line.

Do you know what happens next?

Go on, open it...’ (84)

Who is created and who is creating thus come into question. What the network allows Winterson is a freedom to create and recreate her characters, the construction of her author, her relationship with the ‘you’ character, the reader and with the network itself. In The PowerBook, the concept of author as cyborg opens up a protean world of creation and recreation. As Turkle says ‘...life on screen is without origins and foundation. It is a place where signs taken for reality may substitute for the deal.’ (47) It is through the layering of the telling of the stories, providing substitute endings, changes in her narrator’s mood and style that Winterson hints that the real nature of her author is manifold.

Haraway’s statement in Cyborg Manifesto, that ‘Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs, etched surfaces of the late twentieth century.’ (176) seems

especially applicable to The PowerBook because of the constructed author's immersion in and intimacy with technology. The emphasis seems to be fall less on the content of the writing in The PowerBook – the overlapping stories could be seen to be etched over one another – and more on the method by which it was written. Through the constructed author's use of technology, she is able to reach an exact, specific reader, not a general readership. Through the technology this specific reader is able to answer the constructed author back:

'You said: 'Who are you?'

'Call me Ali.'

'Is that your real name?'

'Real enough.'

'Male or female?'

'Does it matter?'

'It's a co-ordinate.'

'This is a virtual world.' (Winterson, 26)

With this, Winterson sets up her general readership as voyeurs into the conversations of her protagonists. The technology by which they are overheard is not through the network, or because of its foibles, it is through fiction.

In the novella, New Material, the characters are each immersed in fictional space or cyberspace. What Turkle would call 'Real Life' is something each of them has a tenuous relationship with. What becomes real for each of the three main narrators (Jo, Mei and Lee Wei) is the connection they feel to the novel of Ryan Stokes. This novel acts as the nexus, the point at which they each connect, the intersection point of the real with the fictional, the unimagined with the crafted. It is in this crafted and networked world that they discover the inversion that Winterson alludes to in The PowerBook. They as the readers are no longer simply passive entities in the power structures imposed on the traditional interaction with text. They as readers are also cyborgs, and active. Perhaps Haraway's assertion: 'Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert. (152)' is also applicable to the new and immediate configuration the

networked world allows in the relations between the creator of text, the source of fictional space and the reader of this text.

Hayles points out that : ‘The very word *narrator* implies a voice speaking, and a speaking voice implies a sense of presence...as writing yields to flickering signifiers underwritten by binary digits, the narrator becomes not so much a scribe as a cyborg authorised to access the relevant codes.’ (43) The PowerBook is a text intimately aware of its textual nature and of the manipulation of this text in the networked world that is possible. ‘I can change the story. I am the story.’ (Winterson, 5) But also, at the end of the book the narrator points out: ‘You can change the story. You are the story.’ (243) The PowerBook is also conscious of the intrusion of the author’s physical presence into the text. When Winterson writes ‘But what if my body is the disguise? What if skin, bone, liver, veins are the things I use to hide myself? I have put them on and I can’t take them off. Does that trap or free me?’ (15) Without the body as a point of reference – she seems to ask – where does the self exist? And further to this, what is the disguise if not the body? Here, Winterson seems to have found the fracture between body and technology that Haraway refers to: ‘The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed.’ (152) Here, the PowerBook becomes a text that traces the contours of posthumanist thought.

In The PowerBook, Winterson makes use of an interior story, a love story – one especially tailored to her reader and an outer self-aware narrator who steps out of the story. As the narrative morphs and warps this narrator, or constructed author, acts to signal the shifts in the interior story. ‘Night. I logged on to the Net. There were no e-mails for me. You had run out on the story. Run out on me. Vanished.’ (63) The PowerBook draws on this tempestuous relationship to act as a metaphor for the difficulties the networked text faces in terms of the placement of the reader and the author. With section titles such as ‘Open Hard Drive’ and ‘View as Icon’ Winterson’s novel makes open reference to the inner working of the computer. Is it the computer the narrator-character loves, or the presence of the lover that it allows her access to? As Turkle comments: ‘Computers would not be the culturally powerful objects they are

turning out to be if people were not falling in love with their machines and the ideas that the machines carry.’ (49)

Winterson seems to ask her readers to be hyper-aware of the ramifications of text as changeable object: ‘This is a virtual world. This is a world inventing itself.’ Here, she seems to lament the loss of control the author of the networked text has over that text – and perhaps over the reader of that text, too. If imagined and unimagined space intersect within fictional hypertext, then that text can impact on both the author and their reader.

In a similar way, the use of the mythic space and the belief systems of Singapore act in New Material to create a parallel and further complicate the association between imagined and fictional space. Jo, having lived his whole life in Singapore has incorporated this mythic element into his existence and he is able to introduce this to Mei, whose life in Australia has left her unfamiliar with this element of her heritage and culture. It is through an exploration of this mythic space – specifically in terms of their shared grandmother and her beliefs – that they come to a point of insight and trust.

‘She had strong beliefs. She told me about the hungry ghosts, how they will haunt us, even though, or maybe because we are Christians. We would go to the stall and have mamak rojak for lunch; it always reminds me of her.’

‘Jo?’ Mei whispers.

‘Yes?’

‘What’s mamak rojak?’ (New Material, 65)

Here, the conversation comes back to food, to physical reality, and specifically to Singapore. Just as Miles and Iris couldn’t engage in a physical relationship and need to use cyberspace to understand one another, Mei and Jo make use of this set of belief systems to connect their worlds. Set in relation to the non-physical nature of cyberspace and the fictional worlds they formerly inhabited, the question I pose is: is this space of belief (though both Jo and Mei are questioning the prescribed boundaries of this space) imagined or unimagined space?

The third narrator, in New Material, Lee Wei Hong is a printer and sees himself as an intricate part, an actor in the formation of the reader/writer relationship – a relationship he sees as in decline due to the computer age, the networked world. As he

says about losing his position: ‘If training anyone new is going to make sense to the company directors in the days of the technological revolution.’ (60) Lee Wei is intensely involved in the process of bringing writing to the public – even if it is brochures and leaflets. The thought of his printing work on the novel My Fierce Delay not being accessible to the general public spurs him to act upon his feelings. Through this he is able to make the leap from passive reader to active agent in the story. When he reads:

‘A yet-to-be published book by author Ryan Stokes has come under scrutiny by the Ministry for Information and the Arts.

“The print run is small, we intend for the bulk of people to read the book online.” A Hillkirks spokesperson said today.

“We are concerned over some of the content of this book in terms of the political and religious issues it raises. We don’t think this novel is appropriate for Singapore.” A spokeswoman said from the Ministry of Information and the Arts. Hillkirks were unavailable for comment. But, how will the MIA stop people reading it online?

“We have appropriate measures in place.” The spokeswoman said. ’ (New Material 109/110)

Lee Wei is inspired to take action and protect himself from the two threats he perceives to his sense of himself. Firstly, his work as a printer will not be available to be read or appreciated by the general public. The book as physical object, an object that is central to his character, will never be a reality. Secondly, he sees that making the book available to read online forces him into redundancy. Lee Wei’s method of distributing the printed text, though unorthodox, does allow Mie and Jo the opportunity of reading it. The act of throwing the manuscript from the National Library of Singapore emphasises the importance of the role of those that work unseen between the reader and the writer – of traditional fiction.

While the networked world allows a sense of immediacy between the text, author and reader, characters such as Lee Wei (and Sarah Wode-Douglas, for example, from My Life As A Fake) begin to break down this perception, to question the authenticity of the intimacy it produces. Lee Wei’s narration, his statement, makes reference to the literary – the world of fiction in which – until the point where the narration begins, he has been

immersed. He is given the opportunity – perhaps for the first time – to express himself. Through the action of throwing his beloved manuscript from the skyscraper he makes the leap from reader and midwife of the novel, to a mutation of the author, creator of the text.

The PowerBook makes use of the template created by email exchange to universalise the reader/writer relationship. The emails themselves become less important than what they represent: a chance for reader and writer – the fictional and cyber – to cross over.

‘Night.

Screen. Tap tap tap. Tap tap. Tap.

The coded message that anyone can read.

I keep telling this story – different people, different places, different times – but always you, always me, always this story, because a story is a tightrope between two worlds.’ (Winterson 119)

The direct addressing of her reader re-creates the intimacy – that Lee Wei confesses he has lived on – between the creator of the text and the intended recipient. This sense of conspiracy is one that Winterson makes use of to create the tension in the contact between her (author) and the lover character (reader).

This sense of connection is magnified through the impression of the networked text as a place where the author is not the absolute and controlling force. The networked text (that The PowerBook self-consciously insists it is...) acts ‘to reposition the reader, from their placement as a passive entity to a space of an active ‘decoder’. (Hayles, 46) Grosz, too, touches on this point, in terms of the author: ‘I am interested in the ways in which the author’s corporality... intrudes into or is productive of the text.’ (21) The disembodied nature of cyberspace is compared to that of the body of the character and the author in the text of the novel.

The Text and the writer/reader are neither in a relation of exteriority nor interiority relative to each other. The Text is not inhabited by an authorial presence, in whatever form, nor is the author simply the subject who, independent of writing, exists outside of and autonomously from the text. The relations

between text and author/readers is more enfolded, more mutually implicated than either realism or expressivism can recognise. (Grosz, 21)

In this assertion Grosz underlines the difficulties that theory has in articulating what the formation of the correlation between the text, the author of that text and the reader of the text means. The PowerBook has difficulty with these concepts, too. Winterson's solution is to combine the exploration of complex communications in cyberspace and with re-writing legends (reclaiming mythic space). The PowerBook also uses poetic language and raw emotional writing, while inverting the established structures of reader and writer in the context of cyberspace and fictional space. Perhaps The PowerBook takes on too much to be really successful in fully articulating itself in this area.

This is one of the concerns I have for New Material: is it too driven by ideas to be good reading? To avoid this I have concentrated on setting (Singapore in monsoon, where the unpredictable weather comes to stand for unimagined/uncontrolled space.), character (the three narrators with their distinct points of view add and enrich one another's stories) and action (avoiding too much poetic writing in favour of getting events to happen; stopping the characters talking too much and making them assert themselves in their environment – whether within fiction, cyberspace or mythic space). I was motivated by The PowerBook to avoid the complications of imposing conceptual and academic theory too heavily on the narrative of New Material. However, as I hope to have shown, many of The PowerBook's central concerns are also concerns of my own work.

While title of The PowerBook seems to directly refer to the Apple Computer of the same name, there is also a sense that in the exploration of the structures governing reader and writer and the way they interact through textual production in a networked computer-aged world there is also an examination of the power that each of them is assigned. Winterson, as the author seems to suggest that the author no longer has the power to simply create. That the creation is specifically designed for the reader means that the power of the author is damaged. The reader is actively addressed – much of the novel is written in the second person – drawing constant attention to the power the reader wields over the author. 'You kiss me and the glass grows cloudy. I stop thinking. Meatspace still has some advantages for the carbon-based girl.' (174) While the influence of the author seems to wane next to the immediacy created by the

networked text, existing in cyberspace, the reader of The PowerBook is also aware that they are holding the actual physical book in their hands as they read.

In New Material, the fictional author does have sway over the cast of characters through his fictional work, My Fierce Delay. However, it is Jo, the hacker, the character who lives most fully in cyberspace who takes control of the conversation, and opens the dialogue between himself and the author. Is it that the one who understands and can control the technology can control the text, and textual production, even when that text is not networked? Jo's email to Ryan Stokes that opens the novel states: *'Please find attached all the material you will need for your next novel. It may seem a bit forward of us to send it to you in an email like this. We are sure it's the story you need. The one you have been searching for. A story only you will be able to do justice to. We have a part to play in it, too, but that will become clear as you read the material.'* (1) In this sense, it is Jo, with his knowledge of cyber space and mythic cultural space, who provides the meeting point between the fictional, the actual. He, as a character, also acts as a nexus for these parallel wolds.

As Winterson writes in The PowerBook:

'It used to be that the real and the invented were parallel lines that never met. Then we discovered that space is curved, and in curved space parallel lines always meet.

The mind is curved space. What we experience and what we invent running together track by track, then running into one...' (94)

With this Winterson legitimates her use of the parallel stories and the complexity of her narrator's voice. Speaking from a disembodied place her constructed author is nominally a posthuman character, a cyborg. Through the use of the lover's correspondence as a template for all reading and writing Winterson problematises the relationship and questions the validity of these set boundaries in the virtual world. The PowerBook can be read less as a novel, more as a manifesto that emphasises the power of fiction even within the virtual. Simulation is not simply a product of technology, Winterson argues, it is also a product of the written, textual world. This reading of The PowerBook aids the reading of New Material with many of the same concerns apparent in the two narratives. The use of email correspondence to universalise the relationship the reader has with the producer of the text; the physical and non-physical nature of the book; the networked text as problematic and changeable object. With the use of

the posthuman theorists as a tracking system, these common concerns can be brought into clearer focus in terms of the surrounding landscape of thought.

Conclusion

This exegesis, through a close reading of three fictional texts – Peter Carey’s My Life As A Fake, Jeanette Winterson’s The PowerBook, and my own novella New Material – drew strong parallels between fictional and cyber space, with the use of posthuman theorists writing in the field of cyber theory. The aim was to explore the territory these novels traversed and to situate New Material within this landscape, using posthuman theory as a navigational device, to make sense of the surroundings.

The novel, My Life As A Fake, revealed the possibility of a character acting as a technological organism in the context of fiction. It charted the relationship between the created and the creator, through the difficult terrain of the posthuman. Haraway’s thoughts on the intersection of technological with human were relevant here, when the character of McCorkle was regarded as a product of the technology of fiction. Notions of embodiment and the power of the body, the importance of naming and being named, the jurisdiction of the author as the creator, were all examined using the posthuman theorist writings as guides.

This reading of Carey’s text allowed parallels to be drawn with the themes explored in New Material. The character of Jo was most relevant because he relies on machines – where McCorkle relied on fiction – to function in the story. Jo is empowered because of his disembodiment, where McCorkle is empowered because of his embodiment. Jo’s creativity, his hacking pursuits empower him further, as he is able to manipulate the author, the source of the fiction that inspired him. But, because of the disembodied nature of his life, Jo is vulnerable to the physical: his cousin’s persuasive charms force him out of his networked world, into the landscape of Singapore, out into the physical world where his body is flesh and also into fiction. Here, Jo applies his template of the networked text to the fiction. Jo, like McCorkle, has a strong influence over the events of the narrative. McCorkle influences the narrative through his quest for knowledge; Jo influences it because of his integrations with the computer network – a form of knowledge he already has.

The four theorists, Grosz, Haraway, Hayles and Turkle were used as metaphoric compass points to navigate between the two texts and aid in highlighting where the concepts in My Life As A Fake interfaced with those in New Material. Grosz’ emphasis was on

embodiment and disembodiment in the posthuman context. Her argument revealed clearly McCorkle's identity as a posthuman character. Haraway's A Cyborg Manifesto aided in pinpointing the moment of traversal; McCorkle's embodiment as a hybrid, an agent of fiction; the disembodiment of Jo as cyborg, reliant on instruments rather than his senses to give information on the outside environment. Hayles' thinking from a posthuman perspective on the construction of the narrator helped draw the parallels in the two narratives where author and reader intersect. And Turkle's work strongly supported the reading of Jo's character as an empowered hacker.

The PowerBook acts as a fictional manifesto – one that explores the possibilities for the author of fiction in the virtual landscape. As a manifesto it argues that the author, as constructed entity, and their readers are more than just cyborgs, they are also made up of fiction. The use of a constructed author emphasises the disembodied nature of the author, through the many references to the networked world. Here, Winterson's author invents herself as a posthuman character, a cyborg. The lover's discourse embedded in among the many narratives – the emails and dialogues – comes to stand as a blue print for all reading and writing and to enact the relationship between readers and their writers.

New Material is concerned with many of the same notions that preoccupy The PowerBook. The use of email correspondence to explore and expand the relationship the reader has with the writer of fiction; the realms of embodied and disembodied; the networked text as problematic and changeable object. By using the posthuman theorists these parallels were able to be traced more clearly as contours of the two fictional works, and situate them in the immediate conceptual environment.

Turkle's work on the relationships that users are having with their computers opened a discussion of the computer as love-object, not just the connections it allows. Here, Grosz' thoughts on embodiment were particularly relevant, the placement of the physical body, the position the writing and reading entity occupies within the text. She argued for a reading which allowed the author to be enfolded, multiple. Haraway's cyborg myth illustrated that the author can be manifold and multiple, just as the cyborg is, and thus the text itself. Hayles, in her insistence that the demarcations between bodily existence and computer technology were problematised by the posthuman furthered Winterson's argument for a cybernetic author.

Concerns that are also central to the novella New Material are the text, which can be read as a physical object, but has a parallel doubleness contained in it: a non-physical world. Here, too, emails written as non-fiction are read by unintended readers as fiction, are. The character of Lee Wei Hong whose life is dedicated to the physical text is made to act because of his love of the disembodied world reading allows him to escape to. When they are read by Mei and Jo, the true emails, written by Miles and Iris, are read as fiction, not as the non-fiction documents they are.

If Carey's McCorkle can be read as an embodied agent of fiction, Winterson's constructed author is a disembodied agent of fiction. Both are valid posthuman characters. New Material is a novella that aims to chart, with fiction, the regions that exist between the technological constructions and their effects on the characters that make use of them. Parallels between the networked world and that of fiction help to examine these territories. Posthumanist thought provides a broader picture of the situation of New Material and its notions in the landscape of literature.

Through examining and interrogating the role of the posthuman characters that inhabit fictional, crafted or imagined spaces it is possible to come to a clearer understanding of the relationships that are facilitated by new media and technoscience. Not only the relationships that users are having with their machines and how this alters the text. Not only the networked narrative, what becomes of the reader and the author, and what the implications are for further work in this area, but also how the advances in our own technology will come to simulate us and what this means in terms of the intersecting planes of cyberspace, fictional spaces and the spaces that we call 'real'.

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