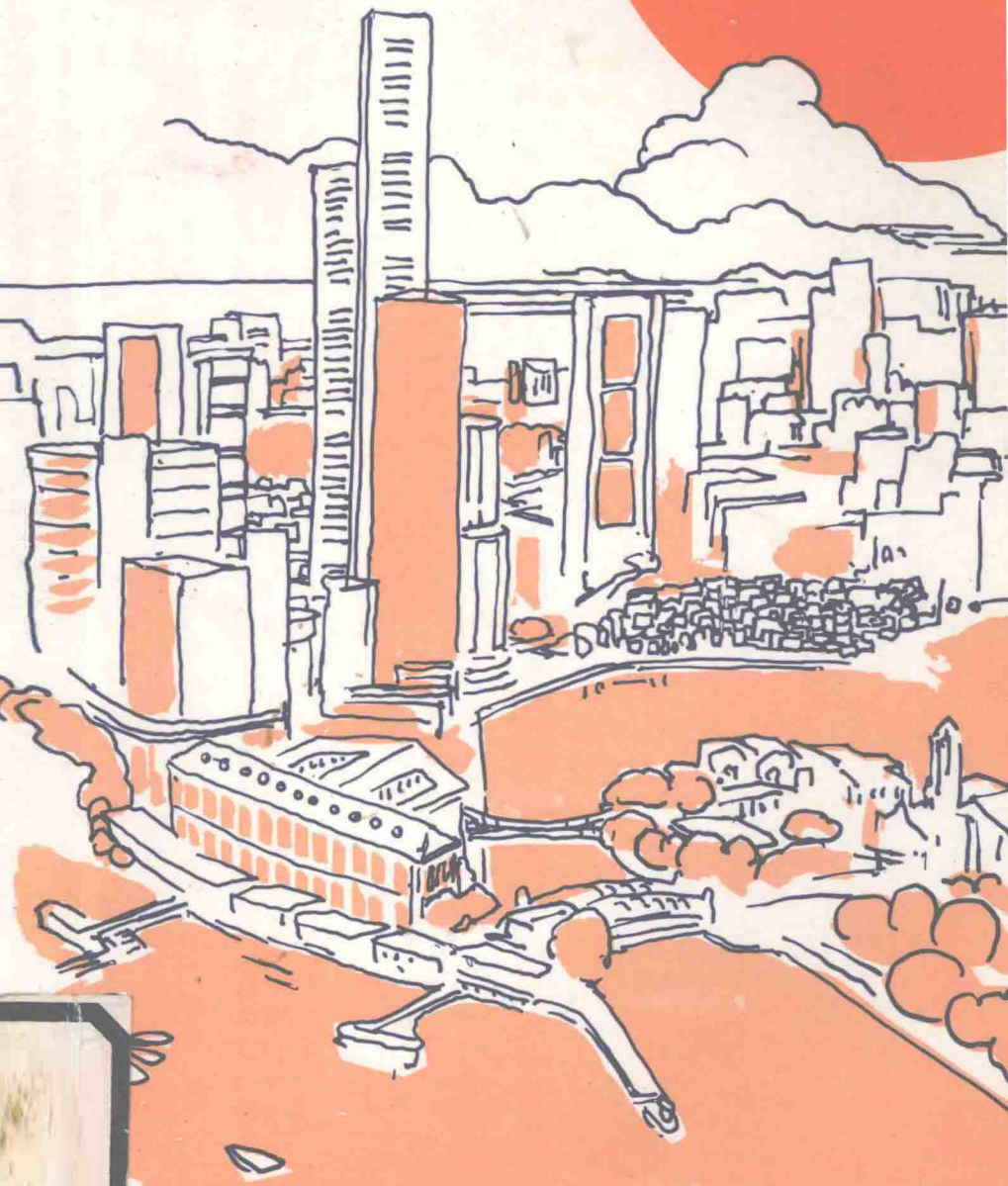


Singular Stories



Tales from Singapore, Volume One
Selected & with an Introduction by Robert Yeo

SINGULAR STORIES

Tales from Singapore
Volume One

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by Robert Yeo

Yang Publishers, Singapore
Three Continents Press, Washington, D.C.

Compilation and Introduction ©Robert Yeo 1993

Yang Publishers
44 Jalan Sembilang
Singapore 2057

ISBN 981-00-3939-5

Published in North America by:

Three Continents Press
1901 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
Suite 407
Washington, DC 20006 USA

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Singular stories : tales from Singapore / edited by Robert Yeo.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-89410-757-7 (v. 1) — ISBN 0-89410-758-5 (pbk. : v. 1)

1. Short stories, Singapore (English) 2. Singapore—Fiction.

I. Yeo, Robert.

PR9570.S52S55 1992

823'.010895957—dc20

92-34216

CIP

Distributed in Singapore by Lim Swee Heng Trading Co.
42 Jalan Rabu; Singapore 2057; Tel: 4529290

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Cover art by Max Winkler
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Printed in Singapore by Book Press Pte. Ltd.

Acknowledgements

The publishers would like to thank the editors of the journal *SINGA* for permission to reprint Kirpal Singh's "Monologue," Ho Poh Fun's "Rite of Passage," and Lim Thean Soo's "Sailboat."

The publishers would also like to thank Times Books International (Singapore) for permission to reprint Gopal Baratham's "Wedding Night," which was first published in the collection *Figments of Experience* (1981). Times Books also published Shirley Lim's *Another Country* (1982), where the story of the same title first appeared.

Ho Minfong's "Tanjong Rhu" and Ovidia Yu's "A Dream of China" both appear in *Prizewinning Asian Fiction*, edited by Leon Comber and published by Times Books International (1991). "Tanjong Rhu" has also been published in *Tanjong Rhu and Other Stories*, Federal Publications (Singapore), 1986. "A Dream of China" was first published in *Asiaweek* magazine, January 18, 1985.

"The Lady in Red" by Felix Chia was first published in his collection *The Lady in Red & Her Companions* by Heinemann in 1984. "Between the Lines" by Rebecca Chua was first published in her collection *The Newspaper Editor and Other Stories*, also by Heinemann, in 1981.

Woo Keng Thye's "Out of the Storm" first appeared in *A Question of Time*, published by Sam Boyd Enterprise in 1983.

A Note on the Selection

The stories here were written or published during the period 1980-1984. They are chosen from individual collections and magazines, and include two stories which have won first prize in the annual *Asiaweek* short story competition, namely "Tanjong Rhu" by Ho Minfong and "A Dream of China" by Ovidia Yu.

I am not able to obtain permission to use the story "The Landlord" by Wong Swee Hoon and very much regret its exclusion.

Robert Yeo

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Introduction¹

Robert Yeo

Catherine Lim declared, in a revealing 1983 interview, "But I'm definitely interested in people."

This remark could very likely be used as a credo for her writing and for much of short story writing in Singapore, to point to the fact that most Singaporean writers are realists, interested in people, interested in portraying people directly in actual, verifiable contexts.

This point is emphasized if comparison is made with the stories of Gabriel García Márquez. The magical realism of the stories in *Innocent Eréndira and Other Stories* cannot be successfully judged by the criteria applied to naturalistic fiction. Except for "Death Beyond Constant Love," whose reading yields a meaning in terms of plot, character, and suggestion in the setting of a poor third world country, the rest of the stories defy the attempt at realistic interpretation. Some of them are almost abstract prose poems, in which Márquez' major preoccupation appears to be the dream lives of his characters. They are caught in situations often nightmarish and their actions and speech are dream-like and repetitious. What action there is is cyclical and often subordinated to the recurrence of images and symbols the nature of which can be gathered by reference to the cryptic titles of the stories: "The Sea of Lost Time," "Eva is Inside the Cat," "Dialogue with the Mirror," and "Eyes of a Blue Dog."

¹This essay first appeared as "The Singapore Short Story," in *Tenggara* 26 (1990), 114-119. It has been slightly revised, and the bibliography added, for the purposes of this publication.

The result is a blend of form and content that is unique and reminds one of the films of another South American artist, the surrealist master Luis Bunuel. The experience of reading these stories is often one of confusion, if one searches for meaning that could be summed up logically. It seems best to surrender oneself to being in a state of unknowing, of responding to the linguistic word play and succession of images and symbols, and let the experience remain sensuous and indefinable.

Adherence to realism can be a trap leading to a piling of facts not integral to the story. Quite of a few of the stories of Singaporeans Lim Thean Soo, Woo Keng Thye, and Wong Swee Hoon drag under the weight of excessive documentation which, the writers feel, is necessary to establish the background.

The large majority of Singaporean stories conforms to traditional structure, with distinct beginnings, middles, and ends; this structure could also incorporate the surprise ending. For Lim, as he says in the Preface to his collection *Blues and Carnation* (1985), "my emphasis is always on the storyline." Earlier on, in the Preface to *The Parting Gift & Other Stories*, he writes: "The story's brevity dictates that it must absorb the readers' interest from the beginning to the end using well-known ploys such as the twist at the end, the onslaught of surprise after surprise, and the sort of dénouement that just stops short of a complete explanation."

This describes accurately most of the stories written by Singaporeans in the 1980s. Through the Prefaces to his books and through other essays, Lim has provided information about his practice; Catherine Lim, too, in interviews, has revealed her approach to the short story. But apart from them, other writers have not elaborated on their technique. Elsewhere, in an article "Catherine Lim and the Singapore Short Story" (1981), I have tried to show how well Lim understands and accepts the main features of the well-structured tale with its emphasis on story and suspense leading to foreseen or unforeseen ends. In addition, the point of view evident in her first book, significantly entitled *Little Ironies*, is sustained in later books; in fact, the ironic orientation she has given to the form is part of her distinct contribution to the short story. Irony is there from the beginning: notably in "The Teacher" from *Little Ironies* (1978), "Or Else, The Lightning God" from *Or Else, The Lightning God and Other Stories* (1980), "Lee Geok Chan" from *They Do Return* (1983), and

"The English Language Teacher's Secret" from *The Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream* (1987). The irony is also not absent in her later collection, *O Singapore! Stories in Celebration* (1989), but this book is otherwise a departure for Lim and will be discussed in more detail below.

Though she is technically skilled, Rebecca Chua has received little critical attention. Her book *The Newspaper Editor and Other Stories* (1981) contains stories about people in their twenties caught in personal stagnation with glimpses of better lives unrealised. Her stories often unfold in quick cuts reminiscent of the cinema and in this sense she is experimental, differing from the majority of Singaporean story-tellers. "Suicide" and "Vortices" are good examples of her technique, while "Between the Lines" demonstrates how cleverly though self-consciously this technique works.

Gopal Baratham is an ironist and his satire ranges from the tolerant to the biting. His "Wedding Night" reveals a cool style that exposes as coarse the open, unsophisticated Tamil attitude toward sexual and other misdemeanours. "Gretchen's Choice," from his second collection *People Make You Cry*, cuts away the cream of Western manners in which Gretchen is layered and uncovers a naïve girl unable to resist the shameful emotional blackmail of her traditional Tamil father.

Although the dominant mode of Singaporean writing is naturalistic, all the stories in Catherine Lim's recent collection *O Singapore! Stories in Celebration* are departures from this standard. In the context of her own writing, these stories move away significantly from the earlier works that mirror reality. Lim's writing had thus far progressed to encompass grittier subject matter, such as working-class themes (prostitution and vagrancy) and bold topics (transvestism in "Father and Son"), and to lengthen and flesh out the plots (particularly in *The Shadow of a Shadow of a Dream*) beyond the "single incident" concept. Nonetheless, these earlier stories remain naturalistic, portraying ordinary people who behave credibly and predictably in a known social context.

But in *O Singapore!*, while the social context is recognisable (Singapore in the 1980s), the ordinary people are seen to behave in extraordinary ways. Take, for example, "The Malady and the Cure": the "faceless" civil servant, after years of faithful adherence and indeed pandering to public campaigns which exhort him and other

Singaporeans not to spit, not to litter, etc., becomes a victim of a painful malady that makes it impossible for him to discharge his duties and obligations as a good government employee. His doctor diagnoses the problem as one caused by a too-strict observance of the injunctions of public campaigns and prescribes a cure that urges him not only to violate the injunctions but also to do other acts of discourtesy. It is soon discovered that other civil servants are similarly afflicted and a large-scale remedy must be devised: in neighbouring Johor (Malaysia), in cooperation with their state government, a special plot of land is put aside to allow the ailing Singaporean civil servants to perpetuate acts of extreme rudeness not allowed or publicly frowned upon at home.

Lim's deliberate deviation from naturalism assumes forms that recall the behaviour of characters in the plays of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson who fall under the influence of a "humour." Such persons display psychological traits of paranoid proportions and behave in ways which are exaggerated and extreme, designed to stretch and violate credibility. In addition to such characterization, one notices too that Lim is less interested in crafting a well-made short story with its familiar fine-tuned plot, in favour of the incredible and the unpredictable. The forms of her stories have changed too: "Kiasuism: A Socio-Historico-Cultural Perspective" is written like a pedantic academic paper; "In Search of (A Play)" is cast like a play; and "Write, Right, Rite: or 'How Catherine Lim Tries to Offer Only the Best on the Altar of Good Singapore Writing'" proceeds through a series of exchanges of letters between the Catherine Lim persona and various public institutions. Fantasy, not present in Lim's previous stories, becomes dominant in this collection; Koh Tai Ann is correct in describing the stories as "fantasies" in her review of *O Singapore!* (*The Straits Times*, 7 June 1989).

Style alters, from story to story, to cope with Lim's pursuit of the fantastic. "In Search of (A Play)" presents the Confucian sage speaking in a manner that parodies English translations of the *Analects* of Confucius ("Yes, the master he say virtuous woman always must prepare to copulate with man.").

In form and style, Catherine Lim's *O Singapore!* introduces the Singaporean short story in experimental flow. Rebecca Chua's cutting technique has been mentioned. Likewise, Kirpal Singh's "Little Sister Writes Home," in which an entire story is written in a register of

Singapore English (or "Singlish"), is reminiscent of Catherine Lim's earlier "The Taximan's Story"; Singh, as Lim before him, skilfully exploits the idiomatic richness of "Singlish," and one must hope for more experimentation in this direction in fiction. This has already been done with considerable success in stage plays, especially in S. Kon's astonishing monologue *Emily of Emerald Hill*. The popular and critical success of this play points to the possibilities of the repertoire of "Singlish" as a magical medium for speech and narrative. In the case of *Emily*, there is more speech than narration, and it is up to writers of fiction, whether in the short story or the novel, to show what can be done with narration. It is quite possible that one will write a novel that will match the Singapore English of *Emily*, and become for Singaporean fiction what *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is for American fiction.

"There are so many different kinds of short story that the genre as a whole seems constantly to resist universal definition . . ." writes Valerie Shaw in her Preface to *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (1983). Shaw takes as her scope the international short story and discusses modern masters who write in English such as Henry James, James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, and Elizabeth Bowen, as well as those who do not use English such as Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges. Stories written in English in Singapore obviously do not have the variety of form and theme found internationally; this point has already been made in my discussion of the short fiction of Márquez. There is no indication that any Singaporean writers have been influenced by or have benefitted from their reading of innovators like Kafka and Borges, assuming that they've read the stories of either of these writers.

Very little is known, in fact, about the reading habits of Singaporean writers of short fiction and the extent to which they are influenced by the genre as it has evolved and is now practised worldwide. Judging by the stories, it is safe to conclude that Singaporean writers prefer the relative safety of naturalism or realism and have learned to construct the short story in terms of a well-defined, single-moment plot, clear characterization, and a resolute or indeterminate end. There are few innovative tales featuring the surrealism of Kafka, the magical realism of Márquez, or the labyrinthine mazes of Borges; these writers have responded to the urgings of their personal visions of the worlds they inhabit and make, and in the

process have transformed the short story into almost unrecognisable moulds. (A notable Singaporean exception is Gregory Nalpon, who has regretfully left only a small body of mostly unpublished work.) Nevertheless, to judge by the sheer output, stamina, and quality of writers such as Catherine Lim, Lim Thean Soo, and Goh Sin Tub, the 1980s belong to the short story writers, just as the 1960s and 1970s belonged to the poets.² Philip Jeyaratnam's *First Loves* and Lim's *O Singapore!* not only made it to the Times Bookshops bestseller lists but stayed there for months, and Jeyaratnam's book topped the list. In doing so, their books earned for Singaporean fiction a mass readership and this is likely to secure for short fiction a ready audience, provided the authors can continue to deliver. Delivery, of course, depends also on how discriminating readers are: the bestselling success of the hastily assembled *True Singapore Ghost Stories* in 1989 points to the thirst of readers for supernatural sensationalism no matter how badly written. However, the success of two books as varied as *First Loves* (which consists of a series of linked stories and a section of three different stories) and *O Singapore!* (which consists of non-realistic deviations from narration) reveals a more selective readership appreciative of the diversity of good short fiction.

It is also significant that Singaporean writers have recently won top prizes in the annual *Asiaweek* short story competition, which invites writers from throughout Southeast and East Asia. Ho Minfong began when she won first prize in the 1982 competition with her entry "Tanjong Rhu"; Ovidia Yu continued, also winning first prize in the 1984 competition with "A Dream of China"; and in 1986 Nalla Tan took second prize with "What You Asked." This is indicative, surely, of merit beyond national recognition.

These achievements in Singaporean short fiction in the 1980s translate into Singaporean sales in excess of 10,000 copies (a large number for a country of only 2.7 million), and the gradual replacement of Western writers with local writers on the bookshelves and in the review columns. The Times Bookstores Bestseller list of 31 December 1989 presents four Singaporeans in the top six spots:

²The 1980s also saw the English-language theatre acquiring its national identity. Theatre is outside the scope of this essay but is necessarily part of the total picture.

3. *The Teenage Workbook* by Adrian Tan
4. *Miss Moorthy Investigates* by Ovidia Yu
5. *The Teenage Textbook* by Adrian Tan
6. *O Singapore!* by Catherine Lim

This points to a significant trend, which is the gradual but perceptible rise of mass Singaporean readership for home-grown authors. This trend is important not only sociologically but also artistically because, if the Singaporean writer is aware that he or she can appeal to a large number of local readers, then he or she may tend to write more for them. This is likely to have an artistic effect on what works are composed, and how they are composed.

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A Girl as Sweet as Alice

Gregory Nalpon

It must be remembered that Donatello Varga's father had once told him, "Listen you li'l rascal—choose the sweetest star in the sky and stand under it every night. Make a hollow with your palms and wait under the star and long for it and say good things to it. Ha! You know something? That sweet star is going to stay right where it is! Up there in the sky! But if you stand under it long enough, you will find in the cup of your palms a li'l pool of starlight. So boy, don't forget that!"

He stayed with his mother in Newton. They rented a room there. Donatello's father had died five years ago and Donatello was nineteen years of age.

He had two ambitions in life. One was to be admired by the whole world just as Fabian was. The other was to be a great trombonist like J. J. Johnson.

No one admired Donatello, except little boys to whom he would boast, so that listening, you would imagine that he was the most daring of men and the greatest lover since Casanova. Actually he had never fought anyone in his life and the presence of a pretty girl would reduce him to a state of speechless embarrassment.

Donatello was happy whenever a rich Chinese died. He'd play his father's trombone at the funeral for six dollars, followed by a scrumptious dinner and two large, cold bottles of beer. It was a good price for the wheezing bray his trombone would produce every time he tried to blow like J. J. Johnson.

Donatello appeared taller than he actually was on account of the wads of cardboard he stuffed into his shoes. He was quite pleasant to look at, if you could disregard his missing front teeth and

the thick grease in his hair, which melted as soon as he walked into the sun, oiling his forehead and ears. He talked as he imagined Fabian would talk and walked with an exaggerated swagger. He collected empty packets of an expensive brand of cigarettes and filled them up with cheap cigarettes, so that everyone could see a packet of high-class cigarettes in the pocket of his transparent terylene shirt and also a crisp one-dollar note which he never spent. He wore a gold-tinted bracelet with his name embossed on it: Donatello Fabian Varga. A photograph of Brigitte Bardot, in her most kittenish pose, peered out of the cellophane window of his wallet. He'd flash it carelessly in crowded places and smile, quietly acknowledging the admiration he thought he detected in everyone's eyes.

He combed his hair whenever he found a mirror. He'd raise an eyebrow and shape a leer with his lips, and gazing at his reflection would say to himself, "Huh! You handsome hunk of a man, you!" He practised kissing for ten minutes every morning, on his pillow, in readiness for the day when he would devastate lovely women with his kisses.

Donatello had three friends: Harun, the headman of a gang in the area whom he ran errands for; Albert, a final-year seminarian; and Dai Kee, the conductor of the Chinese funeral band. For some reason, nobody else, apart from his mother and small boys, tolerated Donatello Varga.

One day, as he was relating fabulous exploits which he had thought up the night before to a group of small boys, one of them said, "My brother told me you are a big bluff! He said you're a lousy, stupid bluffer!"

Donatello was deeply hurt. "Go and tell your brother," he said sternly to the small boy, "that I'll bash him up! Man, I'll beat his brains out! Tell all your brothers that!"

He delivered this challenge exactly as Fabian would have done it. Then he turned on his heels and slouched away, feeling sad that the small boys had lost faith in him and also feeling afraid that their elder brothers might accept his challenge to fight.

He had seventeen dollars in his pocket at the time. He was saving money for a lilac-coloured Dacron suit and a blood-red silk shirt. But having lost his admirers and facing the prospect of a number of severe beatings, Donatello discarded the idea of the lilac suit and the blood-red shirt. He felt like investing in a couple of