

Marie Ee

Rasa Sayang

Are you **sure** you want to **do this**, I heard her **whisper**. I **breathed** in **deeply**, **burying** my **nose** in the **scent** of **night**, a **heady** mixture of **frangipani**, **lime**, and **grass**.

I **nodded** **silently**, my **eyes** meeting the two **unblinking** **moons** on her **face**, and **cut** the **thread**.

She **said** **nothing**, **did** **nothing**. So I **looked** **up**, **terrified** that maybe **she'd** **changed**. But **she was** **still** there, **small** and **pale**, **still** Lina. Can I **touch** you **now**, I **wondered**, can I **hold** you, can I **give** you the **world**?

Yes, she **murmured**. You can **touch** me **now**.

—

August is the **hottest** month in the year. It's like the entire nation **catches** a **fever**; every citizen **passing** it to another, **breath** to **breath**, until the city is **drowning** in an **invisible** fog of **carbon dioxide**. On young **August** mornings, when the **soft** **blue** of **day** **seeps** through the **violet** **night**, and the **bus** **sputters** **past** the wall of **skyscrapers** along the **highway**, the **rain trees** create a **mirage**, **wobbling** in the **light**. Then the **neon-yellow** **scorch** of **day** **proper** **takes** over, and the **bus** **pulls** into the **parking** **lot**, **stuffed** with a **million** other **buses** **as** **well** **as** **parents** **waving** and **girls** **laughing** beneath a **shroud** of **heat**. Every **August**, I think that all of our **efficiency** is on the **brink** of **extinction**, **just** because we are on the **wrong** **side** of the **earth**.

I can **barely** **concentrate** in **class**. Every **Ten Year Series** **timed** **practice** **seems** **impossible** to **complete**, so I **fill** out **multiple-**



choice brackets with feeble droplets of sweat instead. Even the clanging of the roadworks outside the school gates is muffled, and seeing the foreign workers in their thick cotton polos makes me feel even hotter. They must be baking inside their hats and vests and boots. How do they keep working? If

I were them, I would only want to work at night.

But even August nights are boiling. The **skyscrapers** seem to grow taller, to **squeeze** together, like a **steel** greenhouse stretching from coast to coast, while thousands of little altar fires flicker in void **decks** across the island. Plus Mummy makes us go to those fucking getai **shows** with their obscene lights and crude **costumes** and neighbourhood **aunties** and **uncles** packed and sweating in those plastic red chairs lined up in front of the stage. She loves to get up and dance at the **shows**, clapping along to a hurricane of Hokkien I could not care less for. Sometimes I can't help but laugh at the ridiculous display of glitter and cleavage. **Is this** for ghosts or cheekopeks?

Don't be so rude, later the ghosts sure hear you one! Can I go home first?

No lah, wait for Mummy. Cannot walk home alone at night. Ok.

Later got ghost sit on your back. Must be careful during Seventh Month. Always come home early.

I will.

And pin up your fringe.

I always do that for school anyway.

But who tells their mother the truth? There are always reasons to be home after dark, to let your fringe skim your eyebrows, to joke about the dead.

—

Kisses are reserved for boys, J grunts into my neck.

The toilet on this floor stinks the most, like a graveyard of sanitary pads and dried urine. I keep looking at the sealed window, browning at the latch, wishing that it would explode open and escape with my nose. Shouldn't the highest floor have the best



ventilation, or something like that? I guess I should have tried to get into a better school.

Wait. Does that mean we can't? I say, trying to meet her gaze.
Look, she pulls away, adjusting the straps of her pinafore.
I can't lose my first kiss to a girl. It won't count.

I never thought of it
like that. Like what?
Losing something.

It would just be wasted lah, you know?

A lizard runs up the side of the wall, staying neatly within
the graph-paper cracks of the tiles. My hand reaches out to it,
and I almost manage to stroke its translucent body. Then the
faucet turns on suddenly, and the lizard's sticky feet scramble
away.

What the fuck are you doing,
she asks. Making friends.

—

I am already late to dinner. In my mind's eye, I picture Mummy
sitting down at the kitchen table, wiping the sweat off her brow
from hours of cooking. She has probably made kai lan and steamed
egg, with brown rice so that I will lose weight. But I spent the
afternoon stealing fries from my friend's Long John Silver
combos, then getting my own double fried chicken meal because I
was still hungry. I am still hungry. So she won't question when I
eat my share at dinner. Or maybe she can give my leftovers to the
ghosts.

It's cold, even for nighttime. Rain must be coming; I can smell
it clinging to the back of the wind. Mist is starting to form over
the trees. Maybe it's because it's so hot all the time—I remember
reading in my geography textbook that we get mist when humid air
cools rapidly, or comes in contact with a cool surface. It was so
much cooler here just 50 years ago—the average temperature was



just 24 degrees.

I can feel Mummy's worry creeping into my head. Where are
you, come home

fast

er.

I'm almost there.

Don't take the shortcuts, Mei. Not this month.

Singapore is so much concrete, but there are still dirt paths if you know where to

Look

.

—

When I was a kid, we never messaged under the table at school. We read True Singapore Ghost Stories, or Mr Midnight instead—the gorier the better. Ghosts always wanted to curse you, or eat your heart, or things like that. My favourites were the ones with sexy pale women who seduced careless young men or honourable taxi drivers, then revealed mid-way through the night that their heads popped off with their entrails still attached. They were ugly, or scary, and always forbidden. That was the thrill.

Mummy always claimed to have Third Eye. When she came home from work, she would say that she felt a chill in the corridor, or saw a shadow by the nest of trees in the park. I never really believed her or disbelieved her. It was just one of those things I accepted, like when she placed a victory flag on my desk before PSLE.¹ This will help you go good school, she declared. Maybe MGS, like your cousin.²

I don't want to go to MGS,

Mummy. Huh? Then where?

Donno.

Crescent? Quite near us. But I hear sometimes those girls act a bit funny one. Funny how?

Donno lah. You just try hard ok?



Her voice was like rain falling on soft soil. When she called my name, I couldn't help but look back. Somehow I knew right away that she was dead—pretty, but dead. It wasn't her hair, or her skin, or her plain, tattered shift; it was the feeling of seeing a human-shaped emptiness. Misery and tiredness and hunger and cold, bound up in what I supposed was once a girl, like me. This is what they warn you about, I told myself. You should be afraid. Run away. Scream. Vomit. But I just stood there, like little roots had grown from my toes and burrowed into the loam.

Do you speak

English? No.

... Then how do I know what you're saying? You just know.

How can I help you? You can't.

Doesn't being a pontianak mean that you died when you were pregnant? Yes.

But you don't look much older than me. I am much older than you.

You know what I mean. Yes.

Silence descended upon us like a smog. So instead, we walked. Only my shoes crunched on the dark leaves carpeting the floor of the jungle; either she floated an imperceptible inch off the ground, or her bare feet didn't submit to the laws of sound.

I did not want the baby.

I stopped, peering at the two blackest irises I've ever seen. Why not?

It wasn't mine.

I don't understand. It was his. Not mine.

Lina stood in my shoebox room, observing the cheap sheets crumpled in a heap on my bed, and the dusty neoprints scattered across my desk. She circled my eight square metres slowly, slender fingers tracing the stocky old iMac G3 computer with its blue plastic backing, pressing the keys and shivering when it glowed; face wondering, searching. Her sheer skin absorbed the green pallor cast by the overhead light and for a brief second, I thought I could see her innards.

Do you want to sit
down? No.

That's ok. You don't
have to. Do you want to
sit down?

Um. I guess so.

Then I will sit with you.

Oh. Ok.

We sat on the edge of the bed, which creaked slightly. I took up most of the space; she didn't even crinkle the bedspread. That single moment stretched on and on, until the air crackled like the thinnest of rubber bands and any movement might shatter us entirely. I gazed downward at my solid, brown thighs, as hers shimmered in the corner of my vision. She was a beautiful impossibility in an ugly HDB flat, and I was never going to be anything other than stupidly mortal.³

School-time must be different from real-time. These fifty-



minute blocks go so slowly compared to fifty minutes at home, gradually building up until the day is a drainpipe plugged with sludge. It's like there is a restlessness in my ribs, moving faster than the rest of me, itching to be released from my body.

What does Lina do during the daytime? Does she go back to her tree, does she hang out with her pontianak friends, or what? Am I the only one who can see her?

Does she choose to show herself only to me?

A hot pink post-it note slides into my lap. I recognize J's artistic scrawl in mechanical pencil, and look up to see her waving her long fingernails at me from across the cluster of tables. She's already leaving.

Meet me @ 6th floor toilet, it says.

I thought I don't count, I think to myself.

While getting up from my seat, I accidentally step on some rubbish strewn across the classroom floor. Some squishy food wrapper sticks to my shoe, but I ignore it until I've reached the fifth storey. I perch on a step, trying to peel it off with my other foot, then suddenly I hear my name float by on the wind. From the staircase I can see a whitish figure pacing the toilet. It can't be.

But it might.

Turns out, it was nothing. Maybe I just hoped she was here to make school stink a little less.

—

Do you disappear when it's
morning? I don't know.

Why are you
haunting me? I
don't know.

Will you keep
haunting me? I don't
know.

Keep haunting
me.



Ok.

What took you so long, she demands coolly, rolling her eyes.

I thought I heard someone
call me. Huh? Shit,
really ah?

No, it's fine. It was no one.

Oh, good. Hurry up, we don't have long, go inside.

She ushers me into the stall to the left of the toilet entrance, behind a thick blue wall, and begins unhooking my belt, pulling me closer so that my hips rest on hers. The cracks in the wall and how they feel against my damp palms are cut deep into my memory by now. The rust-bitten window is exactly the same.

It smells like someone shat in here, I comment idly.

Ya, ya, what's new.

My mind drifts to the fragrance that follows Lina. It reminds me of the Kapok tree in the Botanic, adorned with its puffs of white silk.

J lifts her shirt up, and the sour odour of her body floods my nose. Every other time I've been able to trick myself into liking it. But now it's like a fog clogging my brain. She brings me forward, expectant, so I touch her rough, pimpled skin. Instead of doing what we always do, I gag violently.

This place stinks, I hear myself erupt. You stink. Don't talk to me anymore.

—

I laid my head on her cold breast. It was the strangest feeling—like putting your ear next to an empty bowl.

What do you want most in the
world? To be dead.



You're already dead.

No. I'm not alive. There is a difference.

hai
r. A buzzing black insect crawled onto the pillow, and I carefully picked it from her

You could **possess** me. Is that **something** you can **do**? No. I wouldn't want to control you like that.

I **don't** know why, but that **surprised** me. Given the chance, I would **gladly**

disappear inside your

flesh, Lina. What

do you want **most**?

Good **question**. **Freedom**, I

suppose. **Freedom**. **Yes**, that **sounds** nice.

Why aren't you free?

I **don't** remember. **Just** that

I am not. How **do** you become free?

Good **question**. I can **show** you.

—

The rain hurtled down, throttling me and probably every other inhabitant of this island. I prayed that I wouldn't slip and fall into the massive storm drain pulsing metres away.

Are we nearly there, I turned to Lina, hoping for a good answer. Almost.

I —

You are **scared**. I'm **sorry**.

Do you know what I would like most in the world? What **is** that?

I want to touch you. Not just feel the trace of a touch. I would like that too.

Finally, beneath this monsoon of love, a slit of light sliced through the bruised sky.

There was the little banana tree, three loops of thin red thread twined around its trunk.

A man found me once. He asked for money, power, glory.

Everything I could give him.

Did you give it to him?

We give what we can when our hands are tied. So if I cut the thread, you will be free?

I believe so.

What will happen when you're free? I don't know.

This is what it feels like to have open chest surgery, I thought. Your ribs get wrenched apart, and your heart is left exposed to the sharp air.

There is time to change your mind. Maybe if you leave the thread there, I can just haunt you forever.

I would rather see you free. You wanted to be dead. Really dead. I don't want to be dead if I can't see you.

Yes you do.

And what if I don't die? What if I become a horrible monster? That won't be the real you.

What if something happens to you? Nothing happened to me before you.

¹ The Primary School Leaving Examination, known by its acronym PSLE, is a national examination conducted in Singapore annually. Students sit for the examination in their final year of primary school education.

² Methodist Girls' School, or MGS for short, is one of Singapore's most prestigious educational institutions.

³ HDB generally stands for the Housing Development Board, the



statutory board that manages public housing in Singapore. Individual homes are referred to HDB flats or sometimes simply HDBs.



Written by Marie Ee

First published in *Queer Southeast Asia: A Literary Journal of Transgressive Art* in Issue 2 (May 2017).

Republished in *Queer Southeast Asia: A Literary Journal of Transgressive Art* in Issue 3.9 (September 2020).