



## CHOO YI FENG

### Sentosa Forever

“You can’t leave. You don’t have anywhere to go.”

“Yes, I do. I’ll go to Sentosa.”

“You’ll die before you get there.”

“It would have been worth trying.”

“And even if you survived, for how long? How long would you stay away?”

“Forever.”

The duvet is soft. I am lying alone in his bed because it is the only place where my alien body feels like it has some shred of agency. His unit is on the 38<sup>th</sup> storey and there is arugula and sweet potato growing in the hydroponic vessels lining the walls, their leaf blades broad, fleshy and happy, fed by the persistent glow of red-purple light and vitamin-enriched water. There are vegetables growing in every home just like this. My eyes wander to the digital alarm clock sitting on the bedside table. I am waiting for the moment when the sky panels shift and signal the start of the lunar phase.

“This,” I whisper to myself, watching the subtle glimmers of synthetic indigo and teal ripple across the air. *This* was the Singapore that my mother told me about, the one she risked her life to get as far away from as possible before birthing me on a rock drifting in the middle of the ocean. On Sentosa. “Ocean,” she once said, “is pronounced oh-shen, not oh-sen. Because you can never escape the subtle froth and slosh of water that rounds out its bluest edges, not even in its name.”

I was six, lying on my stomach on the cold, hard floor, reading from a tattered children’s book. Ocean, the name of the element that surrounded and overwhelmed us, that drew a line from one point to another, and smudged it. My mother, her old rag wrapped in her hand, reaching out and wiping the mucous that was already flowing down my upper lip, even then. Then, she had not yet told me about Singapore—the city that conquers the ocean with its titanium-white storm-proof floodwalls, its buildings woven from steel, glass and trees, intertwining to form dense canopies that shield its citizens from acid rains and solar storms.



Then there was the Singapore told by black market merchants: always excited to show off their latest collection of pedigree seedlings and stolen plant grafts from there; said to be of the highest quality and often sold for the best prices. The Singapore of the waste people: learning how to recognise SembCorp shipments bearing discard, because those sometimes contained valuable nuggets of electronic waste and high-quality plastic, if one knew how to sift through hazards to recover them. Not everyone did, though, and not everyone who tried would survive.

And now the Singapore of a forest ranger corps lieutenant, the elite environmental squadron of the Ministry of Parks and Gardens that defends its boundaries: It is the view from the tiny sliver of window overlooking the damp and shaded streets hundreds of metres below. It is the green uniform with silver trim that he donned this morning before heading out to conduct raids on illegal foragers in the national forests. Singapore is the carbon-copy studio apartment that he qualifies for at the age of thirty-five, the bed on which he fucks me, the mug of clean water I am holding in my hand. A nervous tic causes my wrists and fingers to tremor, and for a moment I nearly drop the mug, until I steady myself again. My nose is wet, and I wipe the back of my hand against it to reveal a trickle of glittering, golden mucous.

The same shimmering discharge that betrayed me yesterday, when, already inside me, he reached toward my face with one outstretched finger and scooped it off my upper lip, with all the precision that my mother used to have, and none of the warmth. Then the realisation in his eyes, the anger and fury at my deception, that made the grip around my throat tighten and come ever closer to collapsing my windpipe. And then a split-second later, as I struggled pathetically against his mechanical grip, another realisation in the widening of his eyes, the way I could almost see his secondary programming kick in, the lessons taught in officer cadet school of how severely the biohazard level escalated should an Artefact die or become grievously injured. Only then did he let go, stumbling off the bed and staggering backward away from me, his erect penis still swinging between his legs like a phantom limb. And me, gasping for breath, the ghost of his fingers still pressed into my skin like modelling clay, the way the walls of my throat were plastered to each other like wet clothes in a rainstorm.

Why did I let it fall so far away? Why didn't I just shove a finger up my nose and wave it in front of his cold face when he first saw me on the coast of Christmas Island, a restless off-duty guardsman mired deep in the business of extending the sovereign reach of his corporate-paternalist-state into unfamiliar lands? This was the question that haunted me as we lay in each other's arms much later that night, when I'd coaxed him down from the fervent high that threatened to kill him, me and then some. Perhaps because I wanted to see the city lights for myself. Singapore was the creature that was woven from



imagination and memory, and somehow still superseded both. A place of mystery and brevity.

I knew who he was. I knew that he was conditioned to hate what I represented, that he dedicated the better part of his productive life murdering artefacts under the banner of law and order. But the way that the moonbeam glanced across his face that evening, illuminating the chiselled jaw and those black, soulless eyes, it filled me with an ethereal wonder. In a sense, I was the stereotypical artefact; the siren, the incubus, the plague-bearer, polluting the vestiges of advanced civilisation with my reckless discharge, my body like a bio-weapon. And yet he was the one who forced himself inside me, inside this miserable room that was his existence.

Half an hour after he gave me two white pills and swallowed three himself, I said: “The researchers of your country once published a paper stating that three to twenty-one percent of the average human genome today is black matter. That’s viral genetic components that infected our cells and then spliced and integrated themselves into human chromosomes hundreds of thousands of years ago, where they have remained ever since. A goodie bag passed from one generation to the next, infections accumulating like dregs snared in a drain cover. Mutating and mutating until all syntax breaks down and there is no logic, no code, just garbled nonsense, artefacts of a coevolutionary history.”

“That doesn’t make me like you,” he persisted. “You’re a sickness, an aberration. You’re not just damaged, you *are* damage,” he said, with full conviction behind his words, through a mouth that could have produced golden slime like mine given a few good days. But even if he did become an artefact, it would not have been the same. The sickness that he was pronouncing was my being born stateless on a rock, on Sentosa, and his being raised in utopia. A sickness of place and belonging.

“I am sick. But I’m not damaged. If anything, I’m hyper-functional. Both my human and viral components are replicating. Your viral components, on the other hand, have mutated into impotent rubbish, and that chance occurrence is what keeps you safe and healthy.”

I looked up into his eyes, wondering how the glamour of their steely self-assurance had collapsed so quickly into wallowing and self-pity. My head was groggy from the pills, the picture-perfect world outside the bedroom window blackened and drowned out so that it was just me, him, and the whispering leaves of his crop plants. I could almost hear the thoughts running through his head, reciting the verified statistics to himself: that only a fifth of normals that came into physical contact with an artefact were converted. I traced my finger slowly down his bare chiselled chest.

“I should have told you. I’m sorry.”



“I should kill you, properly. Cleanly. I should have fed you poison, not medicine.”

“What’s the difference,” I murmured. “Here we are. And you’re still alive, and we’ve already touched once,”

“So there’s no further risk to doing it again,” he finished, his warm breath pulled thin. And so we passed the rest of the night without killing each other, at least until morning came again; and I let him write himself on my aching body over and over in words that wouldn’t leave scars.

He’s standing in the doorway of the bathroom, towelling himself off after a hot shower. I linger by the window ledge, watching the brightly-lit monorail trams cut their way through the gloominess below, beacons of light on the way to nowhere and back. He pauses mid-wipe and takes a deep drag from a strange plastic tube. Fumes of pink smoke fill the room and I can smell oranges and mangoes.

“I haven’t been having any symptoms.”

“That’s lucky,” I reply without turning my head. The trams move like clockwork, starting and stopping at all the right spots. I’m watching an elaborate children’s playset come alive. A stray drop of mucous runs off the tip of my nose and falls out of the window. I wipe with the back of my hand again. I want to ask him what the plan is, knowing that he has none, and I have none.

“Tell me about Sentosa,” he suddenly says.

“What about?” I arrange the memories inside my head, turning away from the window at last. For all I know, this lieutenant could’ve spent his entire life fed and plumped up on the garden-variety horseshit that the demagogues here trot out about Sentosa being a failed political coup by radical subversives and Malaysian spies.

“How?”

“Hm?”

“How does it work. How do you get all that geo-mass to move like that?”

“The ocean currents. The magnetic rifts? I’m not an engineer, although we have quite a few incredibly talented ones.”

He shook his head in cold amusement. “All that technological potential squandered on this silly project. A waste and a pity.”



Perhaps the story that he had learned was a bit fuller, then. Maybe closer to the one that I learned as a kid in school. Sentosa, the island that valiantly uprooted itself and travelled the East Pacific doling out aid, in an epoch where the earth had turned inward on itself. When the floodwalls grew thicker and higher, Sentosa lost the need for boundaries altogether. A cute little parable, but really nothing more than that.

After a while, you learn that all truths are partial. What makes up my person? A classical scientist says it is the obedient tissue that jerks to the commands of my nerves. My mother said it is the cancerous polyps that bloom along the walls of my nasal cavity, producing the golden slime that pollutes and protects me. The world leaders say it is the viral particles that replicate themselves endlessly inside of my own fluids, the properties that legitimate their shoot-on-sight policies.

I feel the urge to object, to say “you know what’s *really* silly? Living your entire life in this melting dreamscape propped up by hundred-metre floodwalls, pretending that the world outside doesn’t matter,” but I don’t. I like his hierarchical beliefs about civilisation and advancement. They’re cute. Why else did I squabble with him about molecular biology? It explains a lot about him. It explains the aching sexiness of his upper back, the way those shoulders and legs fill out the frame of every door he walks through; it explains the uniform, the apartment, the way he is both drawn to and disgusted by body, by my filth.

“Do you know how I can leave?”

“There are ways. Pockets of shorelines where the sensors are outdated and don’t always work. But it’s a risk,” he says, with more than a little relish. *Serves your right for what you did to me, diseased scum.* “But are you sure you want to leave so soon? Don’t you want to go sightseeing? World-class city-state, you know.”

“I’ve seen plenty,” I assure him. “But maybe I’ll find some work for a while. Buy myself some nice things before I leave.”

The Singapore of a precarious wage worker, the blanks filled in this time by me and only me: 2am at the depot; the engine rumble of delivery trucks docking and departing is a sound that never leaves you. Dark blue uniforms made from some oddly comfortable cotton-linen hybrid and a cap that fits too tight but does well to protect me from the artificial, scheduled rainfalls in the early evenings. My warped reflection in the polished steel panes unrecognisable, my face concealed in a mask with a cute cat design purchased from the drugstore—it’s not uncommon for people here to wear face masks in public, and it hides the golden mucous. I keep my used tissues in my pockets and burn them to ash at the end of the day, in an old incineration bin meant for hell notes.



This place reminds me of the hatchery back on Sentosa, the underground space where we reared the animals we knew how to, and tried to keep alive those we could not name. Back then I worked with a girl, Neya, the kind of rare person who had a calling, who communicated with animals on another level entirely. Briefly, we flirted with the idea that her aptitude had a genetic basis too, even if she wasn't an artefact. But she was unbothered in the end.

"You are too constrained by molecules, Art." That was what my people called me—Art—short for artefact. Neya was a zoologist who practiced her science with a modicum of doubt.

"Don't let them decide who you are," she chided. "Molecules are just atoms that were entangled in a particular way by chance, over and over. You, you are free to entangle yourself with the world in any number of configurations, over and over." She was coaxing a three-week-old hawksbill turtle hatchling to take its medicine, knowing full well—better than anyone else—that it would probably die when it eventually got big enough that it had to be released back into the rust-brown sea.

A guy I met called Lu is sitting next to me, his eyes glued to a video playing from the flat device sitting in his lap. A few nights after I started working he brought me out to the places where the mainland Chinese cuisine was the cheapest and the spiciest, the places that opened till late in the night, with foldable tables and chairs out on the roadside. He can't speak much English, but we make do in the back of trucks, on the roads, in sullen corners of the park where even the perpetual streetlights don't shine; and fill in the gaps between sentences with our bodies, his skin slick against mine, our movements punctuated by my nervous tics and shivers.

"Do you think it's weird how in love this country is with plants?" I opined in my broken Chinese one night as we walked down a curving stone path somewhere west of the city centre. Neatly trimmed hedges lined the boulevards, vines intertwined with road signs and motion sensors. He shrugged, running his finger over the top of a shrub with fragile fuchsia petals like tear-sodden tissues. "This flower is found back in Yunnan too, you know. My countryman saw them in a park here and took some for cooking. He got shot in the arm by a forest ranger."

There was in his sober assessment of the moon-softened shrub a stillness, a knowing acceptance that his was a name that could be discarded and replaced at will, unlike the fleeting inflorescence that stood before us, willed into forever-ness with propaganda and techno-power. "Not weird," he said a while later. "Not weird at all."





Forever is a dangerous word. When I told Lu that I was leaving the country in two days he barely looked up from his phone, his mind lulled into a smooth bliss by the continuous stream of eloquent Beijing mandarin that rose from his video feed. I was tempted to add, “forever,” but then I wondered if I was just re-enacting the melodrama of my mother when she fled Singapore for Sentosa. Maybe he thought I was joking, because no foreigner in their right mind would leave so soon after risking everything to get here. Maybe he believed me, but had run out of nerve to say goodbye. We’d entangled and untangled ourselves, over and over, so many times over three weeks’ worth of wage work.

It is raining on the day that I decide to leave. Synthetic rain has a curious texture; it leaves your skin smooth with a glossy, filmy finish. I descend the ladders along the side of the storm drain, walking ever deeper and deeper along a labyrinth of aqueducts, the glomerular capillaries that re-route and expel the nephridial wastes of the city. In the half-light, a gathering of cockroaches, some big enough to straddle my palm, scatter from the vibrations produced by my footfalls. The sour, acrid stench of sewage guides me as it keeps up its relentless assault. I keep my mask on my face but it seeps into me anyway, invading the pores of my skin, the spaces between the hairs on my scalp, eating its way down the floor of my lungs, threatening to trigger my reflex to retch.

I place a tentative half-step into the torrent of urine mixed in faecal matter and am overwhelmed by a sensation beyond disgust. My leg trembles and the rest of my body follows on cue, succumbing to a wave of spasms. Years of learning to master my feral nervous circuits come apart in a matter of seconds as cold grime and fluids caress my shins. I close my eyes, willing myself back into my body. Nobody ever dies from swimming in sewage, least of all an artefact with hyperactive epithelial tissues shedding copious amounts of mucous.

I’m sunken in down to my waist when I realise it is not death that horrifies me in this lightless tunnel, but life, its *want*, the abhorrent excesses that arise out of a desperate need to sustain itself. A city, after all, is just a cesspit-in-waiting.

I think about the lieutenant, my viral genetic matter drifting in his veins, wrestled into submission by his hard-edged serum proteins. I think about how he wrestled me into his bed, the fingers in my mouth the same ones that clean the soot out of his rifle after a warm day, and wonder for the first time in a long while whether this is a filth I will be able to clean.

*I should kill you, properly. Cleanly.*

The way that he needed me clean, if not in sex than as a corpse.



I find the crack in the sewer wall that offers a detour around the chemical treatment facility and a direct path to the ocean. The one that's been there for decades, the same one my mother took to escape to Sentosa forever. I think about my body and hers, passing through canals in birth and re-birth, one tube for life and one for waste.

*You're not just damaged, you are damage*, he said, before doing it all again.

Forever is a dangerous word. The saltwater is cold in the spaces between my teeth.

My artefact body has no hope for original wholeness, twice expelled from a wonder-world of waste and futurity. So I paddle my foolish self back to home, nursing still an artefact dream.





## BIOGRAPHY

**Choo Yi Feng** (he/him) is a prose writer who thinks and dwells at the intersections of queerness and ecology. His short stories have been published in [PR&TA](#), [Alluvium](#), [Literary Shanghai](#), and *Curios*, the creative journal of Tembusu College. His aspirations are divided between becoming a fiction writer and a marine biologist.