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Compendium

Writing Lab 2025

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Compendium

Writing Lab 2025

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About Writing Lab 2025



How can writers draw from museums, collections, and archives to shape creative work?

Situated within NUS Museum and engaging with its art and archival collections, Writing Lab is a semester-long programme running from September to November 2025 that offers nine emerging writers a museum-based structure for cultivating multifaceted creative writing practices.

Over the course of the programme, participating writers encounter a range of visual and textual materials drawn from NUS Museum's holdings and exhibitions—including prep-room: *From Jurong Island to Selat Sembilan*, prep-room: *the hull and the rig*, *Radio Malaya: abridged conversations about art*, and the T.K. Sabapathy Archives.

Writing in response to these materials invites a different kind of attention—one shaped by frameworks of display and the echoes of multiple tellings. These museum-based encounters also serve as springboards for writing, reflection, and imagination, encouraging participants to approach archival and anecdotal materials as sites of lived entanglement where history unfolds through gestures, correspondences, and contradictions.

Through creative writing workshops led by playwright Jean Tay, artist-writer ila, and theatre practitioner Chong Gua Khee, participants are introduced to a range of critical and creative strategies for developing their practice. Over the course of the programme, they consider how personal experience, inherited memory, and broader narrative frameworks intersect, culminating in the development of an original piece of creative writing that engages with NUS Museum's artworks, artefacts, and archives.

About the Public Reading



Writing Lab 2025 cohort (from left to right): Marliini Heikkonen, Wee Yi Li Grace, Ho Yi Lin, Ahmad Syarif, Dia Hakim Khaeri, KQH Faith, and Tricia Sin, with Museum Research Fellow Mahima Hari (second from top right), with facilitators Eugene Koh (far left), Ila, and Samantha Yap (far right).

Writing Lab: Public Reading presents excerpts of new work from the cohort of Writing Lab 2025—Ahmad Syarif, Dia Hakim Khaeri, Ho Yi Lin, KQH Faith, Marliini Heikkonen, Tricia Sin, Wee Yi Li Grace, Wong Yang, and Zhixin Sheng—developed through sustained encounters with NUS Museum’s collections. Moving across poetry, prose, and playwriting, these writers approach writing as a practice of creative inquiry that extends the narrative worlds of the subjects and objects found within the Museum’s orbit.

Session 1: A Room of Relations

7pm to 7:45pm

Readings by:

Zhixin Sheng

Ho Yi Lin

KQH Faith

Session 2: Tides that Bind

8pm to 8:50pm

Readings by:

Marliini Heikkonen

Wee Yi Li Grace

Ahmad Syarif

Wong Yang

Session 3: Lives in Correspondence

9pm to 9:30pm

Readings by:

Dia Hakim Khaeri

Tricia Sin

Session 1

In dialogue with various artworks and archival materials featured in *Radio Malaya: abridged conversations about art*.

A Room of Relations

The writings of Zhixin Sheng, Ho Yi Lin, and KQH Faith respond to a chamber of *Radio Malaya: abridged conversations about art*, entering into close dialogue with archival photographs by Amanda Heng and Jimmy Ong, and artworks by Ho Soon Yeen, Lin Hsin Hsin, and Michael Lee. Their works probe and complicate the act of looking and making, attending to the presences of writer, artist, and viewer in the encounter with the visual work. In doing so, they lend voice to an expanded and relational field of artistic practice, one shaped through reciprocity, proximity and shared seeing.



Gallery view of *Radio Malaya: abridged conversations about art*, NUS Museum (2024).

Hide and Seek



Lin Hsin Hsin, *Posy* (1990). Oil on paper.



Lin Hsin Hsin, *Untitled* (1990). Pencil and watercolour on paper.

Hide and Seek is a suite of poems in response to Lin Hsin Hsin's work and her life — as an information technologist, poet, artist, and now cyber security specialist. I was drawn to Hsin Hsin's fascinating capacity for play and her world-building across genres, especially given the hostility towards art in the larger environment.

In responding to her work, I found myself also searching for a curiosity I once had but which now shadows itself — a form of curiosity that stays away from value judgement and the ordering principles of language. Through engaging with Hsin Hsin's practice, I'm trying to approach that curiosity that almost becomes a form of memory, and to summon back some of that earlier enchantment, and to build a corner for it.

<https://lham.com.sg/shop/artbooks.html>

magic has a life cycle of decay, losing its teeth over time
just like the antique charm of our first touch
to internet. So you relentlessly make magic
until magic becomes common sense—
until you don't think about magic
by living fully inside:
you put up a picture with depth, tucked at the
dead corner in a maze of webs, opens to the direction of yet another land:
through that one picture you travel, within seconds flash back and forth. You arrive at
the damp corner of your head, the memory palace where an image is always alive:
where you dip your toes gingerly, grip the rim of a trapezoid world,
wiggle first your head, then the whole body in: there lives
the night stories you wrote on a black screen,
when nobody's home in the quiet house:
you look at an image of a child standing beneath a massive
bookshelf, reaching for a precious almanac for the very first time.

Musical Chair, 1992, paper sculpture

A famous painter and musician one day couldn't tell hearing from looking. Her head was full of painting while composing music, thought about music while brushing over her canvas. She didn't compose music nor painted by the end of the day. She looked at the sun going down and started crying. Her tears dripped onto her music notes. Some spots turned inky. Deeply upset by the uneventful day, she torn both her canvas and music notes, and glued them together into a chair not for seating. She left the paper chair on her table and left her house. As the door closed, the chair started moving by itself, in both the way of the artist's hands and the rhythm of her music.

Posy, 1990, oil on paper

If only pixels can speak...

—Susan Hazan

If you want to see changes more than the essence of a material

If a material ends up looking like everything but itself

If the line between watercolor and oil becomes too thin

If pencil is simply a line that quivers

If a splash of ink doesn't want to be identified as Chinese

If pastel is closer to memory than what you currently see

If a brushstroke asks for another dimension

If you wonder how a color dies or lives

If you can deep dive into a paper skin

If the gap makes you question

If it allures you

If it exposes the edges to further tucks oneself in

If you don't repeat what you've said in pictures

If you see art historians as mouthpiece

untitled, 1990, oil on paper

When a painting speaks about your window
When it asks you to take enough steps back
When all the contours and shapes dissolve into colour dots
When a painting is small enough to fix the running through of life.
When your eyes could do just enough magic
When a river holds both the cage and the bed.
When you can forget all the laws and order in your mind
When cars on the railway are the same species as traffic lights.
When the rain drops of your windows freeze the shadows of your neighbours' light
When city lights gather like braille.
When the ships on the horizon blink like dime-stones.
When a long exposure drags a car into a light stripe
a milky way tumbles into a dark night—

Back to Nature, 1992, paper sculpture

The artist made a carnival of paper sculpture, with the shadow of a turtle in pencil and a platoon of purple dots. It feels as though you are looking from a plane window, with eyes as wide as sky, seeing giant mountains, sea monsters scattered like fragments of ancient porcelain. How strange it is to see things being big and small. Like seeing a face being young and old, time being far and close.

But there's no music in the carnival, or it tickles the key right beneath the ear.

Sometimes you just want to be reduced. A theatre set smaller than life. Familiar but perennial anonymous fellow. Like the hybrid creatures in a quiet masquerade. Feel free to change your masks and shadows. You look at those small forms more intently, eavesdrop their secrets. Asking for clues on the last time you've seen them. You vaguely recall that they all fell from the dreamscape of a big old painting.

Three-ply photographs, three-ply sanctity



Gallery view of *Radio Malaya: abridged conversations about art*, NUS Museum (2025).

Jimmy Ong, *Dragon Court* (c. 1987/1988) and *Pioneer Magazine* (c. 1981/1982). From the photographic collection of Jimmy Ong, donated to NUS Museum as "Shoebbox Collection".

Amanda Heng, documentation from *Let's Chat* (1996 - 2000). Photograph.

“that’s the sanctity of ritual – a ceaselessness in how...”
– Jessica gives me a chill pill, poem by Angie Sijun Lou

“her interview was apparently more coloured and eventful than it meant to me”
– interview between Shabbir Hussain Mustafa and Jimmy Ong, excerpt from
Recent Gifts: Works and Documents of Lim Mu Hue and Jimmy Ong

1. So when my poetics dusts a city

it means there is little light grafted on
this part of town, I cross-hatch these rooms into
courted reprieves, it means there are truths only I can
conceptualise. Tabled-longing on the old
street, *wet washing, a ginger cat guarding*
her litter, like a cat I sit and prowl, prowl and sit, eyes
on the craft, on my walls
peeling the arm of time into a dignified off-road
made-meaning by the body, this body mirroring only
a step-printed newness on *A150 FUJI ORIGINAL* a
euphemism for blurred angles and the living
as a subtext. All the art we make we forfeit into
the ones that precede. It means staticity abounding in named
spaces: *Dragon Court Studio, Bean Sprout Table*, names
I render, name it transmutes, name it our space. Marginalia awakened in the *Bed-room pictures*,
Apartment shows, these liminalities pushing
into the next, into the
next and birthing a new. Only so much I create I document,
my listless livings into
angled framing, the black-and-white rudimentaries of the ones I love
shoeboxed as grids for permanence. Sometimes I say I make
art without uttering the space it inhibits. Sometimes I know
what makes sanctuary a sanctuary without sounding the words out.
Sometimes I tell my friends: *I had a good day, I laughed till*
my belly hurts, when I actually mean there are ritualistic blessings
in what we do, when I mean *Let’s meet again, same place*.

So when my art dusts a city, same place,
I picture-frame the beings, the other shapes I lose through this
and savour.

“Instead, I spent a lot of time at Henri Chen’s studio talking or hanging out with my friends till late, coming home to work at two in the morning for an hour or so”

– interview between Shabbir Hussain Mustafa and Jimmy Ong, excerpt from *Recent Gifts: Works and Documents of Lim Mu Hue and Jimmy Ong*

“rethink how to be with others”

– “Let’s Chat: The Collaborative Work of Amanda Heng”, essay by Russell Storer

2. I’m preoccupied with the lived village

because our histories are calcified, meaning birds
on a landline know to return to displacement zero
knowing to water down the places I cannot again fathom.
I know I have left home. Twice now. Listen, double-valent are the images
that make these movements whole again, the living reincarnating geographies because
what is it that *Henri* used to say? *That one should cherish time with friends?*
This language outstripping into the other fugitive ones. Can I say: *Singapura, Singapore,*
Substation, Shopping malls, markets, other museums without metabolising
areas of creation? Is it now to map an otherly whole?
At the edge of great change only my body can tell:
Don’t bother the hands that salt the dishes, peel
away into timelessness. This table and that one and the one where we drank tea and the
words that silvered into the night, grace-circled because
the past suits you best. There are nights where I learn to remember,
there are nights I learn to forget. 3-ply newspaper drying beansprouts,
3-ply memory lurching back into a fold, I pry into
these metaphors until I sweat them through, and forth. Here,
I keep waking up as different beings, my
artistry sacrificial, my deity usurped,
and this summer eternal. We landline our nostalgia
as proof that we’re always looking up.

“Jimmy finds me a space to sit among the art books and jars of paint... We talk”

– interview between Shabbir Hussain Mustafa and Jimmy Ong, excerpt from
Recent Gifts: Works and Documents of Lim Mu Hue and Jimmy Ong

3. This space, my fleeting

Lately I have been taking on different
shapes, as photographs, as printed images, or as spoken
words from a righteous tongue, synapsed graphics
as the blur of faces I cannot furnish. I have been
existing solely through the grace of others
I contend, that before the shrine
and beyond, so many questions are about
making choices, the trajectory that spiral
forth, each begetting the next because
artistry ambushes you like this:
telemetric feeling, I create the imperceptible till I border
on sub-human, make it for me
will you, this almost-virtuality
streamlining my habitats. Neon realities,
neo-artistry, mythologise
my wording, this speech
halved,
we dress up as different selves, we host
parties, we talk about art, we make art,
and all that conglomerate, that
neoned-reality, that stop-motion picture in my mind.
And in the beginning it was glorious, walking up to
that shophouse, discounting how sun-stroked
we are, our craft
luminous, these paintbrushes gauging the same materiality:
object permanence, whatever name they give to the
visions that remain, this space, my fleeting,
eating into forever.

chronoesis



Ho Soon Yeen, *Monkey ♀ Thinker* (1992). Ink on paper.

KQH Faith



(Foreground) Michael Lee, *Sites of Manoeuvre* (2013).
Acrylic cut outs on lightboxes.

. (or point)

in the mirror
in those eyes
i look at i look at i

know you are neither i nor body
but body in addition
to i
the orb of experience
and thought

i look at i look at i
finding it strange to face
looking different from this
yet wanting another i another face
to look at

i to i
will tell you
what happened in between
child adolescent woman
for you to be those eyes
this portrait

i i

we both chose indefinable colours
to describe ourselves:
you are transparent,
and I, the light dancing over
pure water—sharp and soft—
surrounding dust and salt.

do you think of clearness
in terms of solid, liquid, or gas?

envision pure water
or its body in the earth
slowly freezing over
to reflect mountain, rock, and trees
at the periphery,
and you cratered in the sky.

or the way your stone skips,
how one ripple always encloses another.

do these definitions of clarity suffice?

because even glass has a tint,
so when two mirrors face each other,
eternity is dust
and verdigris.

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the light shot through the pane
and split into seven distinct hues
perhaps she was only imagining
the colours taking on warmth
from the amber source
but how startling
that band of pale green

her hands ran through hair
her eyes looked through the man—
a plane but also a prism
and at the edge of his being
he was a line of light

000000

brush dipping
to cradle a drop of ink

.
dripping hair
licks the dry paper
it does not shiver

be careful now not to
touch when still wet
let these tributaries of black
fan out freely
they know where to go
to outline the body

with loss of light
urging the unseen hand
noli me tangere
capture me faster
midnight is almost over
and the first hour is drawing near

Session 2

In dialogue with histories and artefacts on display in prep-room: *From Jurong Island to Selat Sembilan* and prep-room: *the hull and the rig*.



Gallery view of *From Jurong Island to Selat Sembilan*, NUS Museum (2025).

Tides that Bind

Marliini Heikkonen, Wee Yi Li Grace, Ahmad Syarif, and Wong Yang trace and retrace shifting bonds and allegiances to places and communities, extending from the anecdotal accounts of islander communities once residing on Singapore's offshore islands featured in prep-room: *From Jurong Island to Selat Sembilan* and a series of boat models from prep-room: *the hull and the rig*. Their writings move between interior and exterior landscapes, nesting between islander and island, mapping the fluid axes of belonging as they crest against tides of memory, migration, and loss.



Gallery view of *the hull and the rig*, NUS Museum (2024).

SWEET FISH



Gallery view of *From Jurong Island to Selat Sembilan*, NUS Museum (2025).

A sister writes to her late brother as she navigates the years' changing tides. A brother tries to write past death but has found himself untethered from time. Between them, the *pulau*s are shifting, the sun is nearing and neither knows how to come home. Still, they write as land grows stranger than life.

Selat Sembilan was a strait of nine islands south of Singapore's mainland. They housed families, festivals and communities. Now, they live in memory. In the post-independence 1960s and 70s, the islands were reclaimed and incorporated into the country's largest offshore industry.

Part elegy, part polemic, *SWEET FISH* asks what happens when the buried try to sing. A story that braids the love of two siblings, abridged into seven poems.

I said, say

Your shirt is sun-bleached. You've left
it on the clothesline. Won't you spare it

this suffering? In the wind, your arm billows
a greeting or a reaching for sea. How dare.

On those days, you make *mak* pray
against your restless body. Wry thing. You

flap flap flapping like fish fighting
air. There, a flag of love you

forget. Still, I let you wear in wait
of a raging rain to someday save us

the undoing of pegs and reanimate
your grave. Thunder will clap

you from life again. Won't you
say, you're being stupid?

Won't you scold me back?
I said, how dare *abang* go

on his own. I said, say
sorry. When I am alone

with laundry, won't
you hold

my hand?

Before this was before

Water hits rock and the oriole cries.
The shore is all dredge and slip beneath feet.
With nets of glory, this tropical sleet
comes home the men to blacken the skies.
Half bodies and open bellies nearby
of boats and limp sails, those arms of meek
that claw out of groves forgetting the creek.
So build them for morrow and all that might.
Rare egrets shadowed sleep by leaves of calm
and houses hold still in the dry of May.
Say hot air and sweat and the now's that be
chew betel make tea and heed the faint hum.
Hope runs to the sun and children they play
fore another frogmarch into the sea.

The sun falls everyday

The orange sea unzipping
to a vee of twinkling white.
Water arms wide open to
the lowering sun like a child
reaching out to mummy or
a people surrendering. Each
sparkle a dancing figurine
squeaking

take me! take me! take me

to their skyborne Maker—
all race the horizon to meet
Him—and ha! Before we speak,
the sea is emptied. Bedrock bare
to bear juvenile dreams. Now, only
the shadow of the used-to-be
hobble towards us in the dark.

So I will be folk or bedtime story

Air dies into water. The salty breeze sloshes into lungs. My legs are anchored by the pull of a no-end now. I wade my way to you but how the currents of sweet after and before stick to me still—I am stuck on the rack between metal and sill. Somewhere, there is the guttural groan of heavy machinery or a sun-blind animal—somewhere, I try to croak to you, *Please*. I pry open my mouth to cry—

The sky cracks into blue. The clouds are supple and fibrous cotton—it is a day for drying it seems. At daybreak, two herons tip-toe beneath the cool canopy of a being downrooting. It is calcifying. Listen: the morning whistle of a sewah mati anak, every rise in its scale a step to the ether for its son to wake up to. Watch: the phantom fish floundering in its jumps over faded waves. Nearby, there is the sizzle of wok and the thumping of stone against chili seeds. Oil spits at water. I remember unbagging beansprouts with you across floors—we plucked body from tail and smiled easily. Somewhere, my hands remember the shape of family.

I reach for you and the rain redoes your laundry. I call *adik* and the aged attap rustles—muffles your tomorrow. I will say: roll over to this warm side of the hill. Tomorrow, hear: I am here. In this still soil that neither tremors nor tastes the sky, lying behind lalang will be my overgrown feet pointing to sea and my teeth that will outlive the rest of me. In time, I will know what it means to be home—land stretching to other lands—to cup water like a saggy awning outside coffee shops. There is that buttery smell of a brewing life. Somewhere, there is the tune of a crackle-free radio. In time, I will recognise the bedrock underbelly as my own. Knees jutting out dry and lives lived on elbows—crevices shaped and reshaped by forces we know. That green blue that ends skies a charity to all our bones.

I am clothed in the enormity of this new olden me. Sea covering sand as day covers night—I will be let known such magnanimity. Between our sun and another's, faceless, I will face Light.

In time, when you next dive from the ledge into the yawning tide, know it will be my breath that catches you, that blankets us both in cold. So come now, find a sunny patch and sit by me. Bring your iced kopi and hum me that P. Ramlee. I'll be coughing up water till tomorrow.

May we meet on land

Half-lit ripples on a sun-stripped sea
 the cellulite of my mother's body—
 a softness that trembles beneath knowing
 winds—their touch—they say land is yours
 when you bury your firsts—all that's left of ours
 are pontooned boats on droughts ashore—
 all facing beyond—caskets unhomed—all bodies
 bowing their bows to sea. I'm poor at fishing

but abah once said *laut tu isteri yang berdua diri*¹ —bereave me
 of both. Flank them inland with mouths of border
 and industry. This burial—no ceremony—I stand and stand
 atop breakwater dry—watching your bodies get built over. The water

cries. The glimmer of a wave winks and at me, again, dies.

Elsewhere, a dark clearing of sand, awaits a sampan
 in my heart that points outland. It is moored and unfed but
 with all that's within its rot wood body it stares
 and stares along into sea.

¹ the sea's a wife with two selves

Behind, beyond, a little girl screams

Puzzle-piece kampong and all homes' esteem
 chucked into boxes, shelved, sent away.
 Exhibitions invoking history.
 From behind, beyond, a little girl screams
O Father! O Father! O Motherland!
 She hasn't tasted blood of rubber trees
 but knows her red is not hers, pries her teeth.
 Modern island girl, this country's first Man.
 We've left her on land while she gnaws her heart
 for some root or seed, some disembodied hand
 with knuckles like hers and faces of grands.
 No wood of the world that she was a part.
 Make her climb into skies to a sun that flays.
 This sound of scorching how our orphans pay.

To my children and the children that follow

To my children and the children that follow, know
we were okay. The winds of your day had reached us
long ago—we did not run—there was no flailing. No, the earth
was in our hands and we were in His. No, we walked
with our mother's tea sets and *bekal* and best *kain*
to the next home and home over. It will be over
again. In your now, somewhere, you'll find
the nibbled wood—no bone, just hull—the length
of a fourteen-year-old. You will dredge him from sands
wet with our land's memories. His body skinned
of sail and clothes. He won't shiver. He will
have no headstone. No cries. No signs
of our times together. But

in his belly will be an old echo, his hunger
home to the never dead. Still, in the breath of sunset
and chill of unknowns, set him abreast in the southern sea.
Still, watch as he soaks in the salt of friendship and sunken
cheer. Let him go. Let him—

In the crisp of midnight, he'll race the moon
with his unbalanced body on its side, planks
still splintered dragging that which comes by.

A Change of States



Gallery view of *the hull and the rig*, NUS Museum (2024).

A Change of States is a two-part short story set against the islands of Singapore as they undergo relocation and reclamation. Grounded in the disorienting histories of offshore land reclamation, these stories imagine the consequences of such seismic changes through feverish dreams, slippery time and warping space. Cresting upon these stories are the recurring boats, inspired by the prep-room display of *the hull and the rig*.

The Craft of Leaving opens on an island in the past, in the time just before it became taxonomised as an “offshore island,” back when it was enough to just be an island. Its inhabitants—human and non-human alike—confront the question of staying or leaving, a choice that they ultimately have little say in making.

Sandsong (Reprise) inhabits an island in the near future, when ‘Reclamation!’ is a new national anthem blaring from construction sites on Singapore’s ever-expanding peripheries. Amidst the drone of construction, age-old melodies stir in the barely-settled sand, there for those who care to listen. “Not all is lost,” they seem to sing.

i.

The Craft of Leaving

It was funny how we spent our whole lives rooted here, not knowing that we lived on the doorstep to another world. It had always been there, of course, as enduring as the sky above it. I just hadn't realised it was a portal, that passage through the blue was possible until you were hauled off into it. Since then, I've been grasping at it anew, pretending to be the balled fist of seed again, throbbing with the original desire to know everything.

I memorised the other world's flickering edges, its moon-rhythmed advances and retreats. Creatures shuttled between here and there, some many times a day, some just once a lifetime. It was a commute or pilgrimage, depending on who you asked. When they passed me along their way, I offered refuge in exchange for tales from the road. In the damp mat of feathers and slick glisten of scales, I collected testimonies of its surface, shallows and, rarest still, its depths.

The best interlocutors were the folk beings. They had sprung up so recently in our shared time that some of our kind still deny them, believing them to be nothing more than a passing blight. When it came to resting in my shadow, though they might like to believe otherwise, they were like any other creature—supple-bodied, tender-limbed and eager to offer their stories. Returning from the other world, they ritually unfurled themselves beneath me, waiting for the sun to lick them dry. I let their rest grow thick, narrow thoughts dilating until they bloomed, and then I listened in. Even in their dreams, the other world made them feel small and lonely. Perhaps this is why they had felled you and brought you along with them.

Now, when I finally realise that it is you who has returned to lie beneath me, all the way from the afterlife, it is in my nature to call out, even if you must not be able to reply. Even if I had been expecting you, I doubt I could've known you with any of my senses. Even my finest tips don't stir in realisation that you are close, didn't leap to receive your empty husk. This is to say that I could've only known you by heart, the persistently soft bulb. If you are almost beyond recognition, you must be beyond communication. Still, I try.

I pulse a faint signal, half expecting this dream to depart like vapour.

Took you long enough.

You laugh, and I am brought back to the first sound I knew as a seed, that rumble of happiness, the first movement in our dark bed of earth. I sense the soft steps of the folk being that brought you here retreating, eventually swallowed into the gullet of night. "How is the afterlife?" I probe.

Oh,

you would love it here.

I pause, first because I struggle to catch your new voice, and then to wonder if you are being serious. Your signals, if I can still call them that, drift imprecisely through the night, as if you are addressing the whole world of the living. As I strain to sieve them from the island's din, your form sharpens.

It's the opposite of everything we've known,

so abundant that it seems foolish.

You are lying where you once stood, your body shortened, both ends narrowing to a point. You've been burrowed open, but not by the mandibles of tiny home-seeking creatures. Yours is one perfect, hollow wound.

It's a world

drowning in what we horde inside,

what we've only known in drops and sips.

It's floating

on what we used to pull from the earth

and heft through ourselves, now given to me—

all for nothing!

Without meaning to, I recall that instant when the first cut passed into you and your last signal passed out of you. How dazzling your pain was, that the imprint of its flash burned even at night, bleaching the dark sky like a second sun.

And the wind!

It tears from above and below.

I don't part for it and let it through anymore.

I catch it, trap it in a new canopy, and it

carries me.

I sense that too, the new growth that sprouts from your husk, the singular oversized leaf. It could be that time passes differently between us now, but I am finding it difficult to keep up with you. It could be that I am still feeling your wound, feeling for your hurt, and, upon finding none there, discovering no relief in myself.

To be carried, to

go.

To be in more than one place.

Can you imagine it?

Because it is you who is asking for the impossible, I try to. Even if it goes against our nature, but maybe you have forgotten this. For our kind, the first and only travel happened before our beginning, when as sleeping seed we were carried by wind or channel or creature, to our first and final resting place. After that, the world was everything we made of staying. This was painfully true for us, who found ourselves too close for comfort upon awakening. In the blistering days when the earth croaked dry, we agreed, unspoken, to shrink together so that there was enough to go around. You used to urge, *take more, more, more*. Later, when the horned creatures made their hooved landing, they leered at us with gnashing teeth. We bittered our leaves with spite, how you used to taunt, *take that, that, that!* Finally, when the folk beings sized us up, and we realised there were ends more immediate than droughts or goats, how you pleaded, *take me, please, me*. The world was everything we made of our staying; it was our call to cultivate every promise the land held, even the surest promise of grief.

You know, there is a thing called speed.

*It is the measure of how good you are at leaving,
and it is of great importance to the folk beings.*

They line us up,

the others

like me,

and make a ritual of it.

I consider this turn of magic for a long while, how the folk beings have alchemised a creature of staying into an instrument of leaving. It preoccupies me, and I let it, knowing that at the end of this reckoning will be the first instance of my vigil that I allow myself to think of you as truly gone.

“And are you good at it, this speed?”

What do you think?

Seeing that we have shared everything since the beginning, it is hard to keep what you really mean from me. You are asking for forgiveness. Or in this case, where there is nothing to really forgive, absolution. Though it's no answer to your question, I finally let slip the terrible thing I've been fighting back. Its implications are as absurd as they are selfish, as if to say that you chose that death and this rebirth. Yet, my ends betray me as they waver sooner than I can seize restraint. “But weren't we good here?”

All I can ask is that you remember, that I am willing to absolve you of everything but this final obligation. To remember, from your other world overflowing with possibility, the lattice of our foliage where they touched, the bliss of sap, the gnarled knot of hard times, that we were once—

The best.

This leaving ritual, they call it a 'race', is happening soon.

Could you try to catch it?

This is impossible, we both know it. You'll be further than my ends can reach. I promise you I will try.

*I'll do better if you're watching.
Who could bear to leave you slowly?*

Laughter, mine first then yours, wells up like a sudden spring beneath us, gurgling and seemingly hand-placed by the divine. We bury its sound into the land, knowing that there is no forestalling the morning. By some grace, time has forgotten this clearing. When it remembers to fetch us, we'll return to pass through it differently. Inside me, time is an outward pulse emanating from the core, dilating in perfect rings that know no end. When I think of you, all I feel is the clean line of your new body, its driving point, parting one moment into the next: your time that is ever onwards. While the stars keep a lookout, while the fog lends us cover, while we still are, I hold onto a certain loveliness in our mismatched forms. I find it lovelier still, even in realising that I am the moment you are parting through.

When I rouse from the musk of the tropical reverie, recall the race, and lift my crown to the divide between our worlds, I face what I knew from the start. You, your new kin and the beings that command you lot have gone back into the indifferent blue. I cannot tell if you have just left, if you are deep into repetitions of the ritual, or if the prayer it invoked has been long answered; the ritual abandoned, and you have retired. Reaching towards where our worlds meet, my trunk bows. In time, even my crown caresses the sand.

Eventually, my end comes too. Unsurprisingly, the folk beings fell me. Since it is many rings later, it takes them more swings than it did with you. The whole time, it does not feel like dying. I am too excited, anticipating the digging out of myself, the gift of the big leaf, the delivery to the world's edge. *Speed, give it to me! I have somewhere to be*, I urge the nimble hands of the folk beings to undo me more, and they comply. The cutting goes on and does not stop until I am splinters and shards. Then, I am cast into flame, eaten by it, become it. Above me, the unmoving body of a little creature crackles and blackens. It once had scales, scales that glistened like dew, the fractures of me dimly recall.

I wish to consult my rings, but they are unspooling into coils of rising smoke. All of my time is incense now, offering up the sweet scent of memory to the island.

As night settles in, the last glowing ember clings stubbornly to my body, which is all of a speck. The ember struggles against itself, devouring its own foothold, insisting on staying. Soon, it swallows even its own shallow breath.

Fainter still, I wonder where I was headed before and why all the hurry.

Formless now, I rest in the bed of earth, waiting for a sound I cannot name.

ii.

Sandsong (Reprise)

Once the construction winds down for the day, the quiet rolls in from the coast like mist. This was good in the beginning. It meant that if you ever tried to reach out, I would hear it. But once I strained to hear you, everything else leapt for the open invitation too. Eventually, the nighttime stillness refused to merely throw other sounds in sharp relief. Pooling by my bed, it insisted on being heard for itself. It didn't use to keep me up till recently, this sound of sand.

Earlier today, I received a new shipment of dunes. Even with regular deliveries, I was still stunned by their shape, like sun-bleached roofs of giant thatched huts; surprised that rogue grains knew to tessellate into such pleasing geometries. What strange, beautiful cargo. It took an entourage of hard hats and high-visibility vests the entire day to escort them off the barge and show them to their new resting place. By dusk, a tiny plateau reclined into a ribbon of shallow sea. Watching its austere slopes smooth and settle, I listened for you. It looked like someplace you could dwell, soft and warm, the sand blushing terracotta against the dimming sun. Instead, I only make out the sigh of this stretching shoreline. Then, softer still, a faraway mangrove gasping at its overnight bareness and daylight robbery. At first, it had surprised me, the range of this new hearing. Once I grew attuned, these intercepting signals

cut in seamlessly, as if they all shared a name with you. Loss had a universal frequency, I discovered. Here, on land that raised the banner of “Reclamation!”, this was the one song banned from the airwaves, the only song.

Waiting for sleep to notice me, I face the silence in the dormitory, almost accentuated by the subpar ventilation. “There’s nothing there,” I am nearly tempted to dismiss. But that is also mainland parlance for these almost-there, born-yesterday islands. Only once the last trees are dropshipped over, like toppers on a cake, and bureaucrats double-check their spacing, will the days here start to count for something. Bristling at this thought, I bring myself to listen.

Nothingness pounds and churns around me. It is so concentrated on not materialising that it steepes into viscous coats, getting everywhere, catching on my lashes. It drones on, each inconsequential grain of it repeating, tessellating, going nowhere, until it remembers geometry, and it assumes form, grand forms, enough height for a cascade, enough mass to topple, then it falls away from itself, like a roof collapsing, and rises into sound. Akin to the rush of a waterfall, but it is dryness that is pouring. I am awash.

Surfacing on the other side, I am coughed up lying on a beach. No, rather, I am the beach lying on my side. The sand around me, composing me, is a rioting mob, and I know its throb as my own powdered, sea-pummelled bone. When my fingers twitch, it is the waves that curl, roiling with effortless muscle. Aware that I no longer have an outline I can feel, I try to locate my breath and find it belonging to the heave of the tide. In panic, I wash and froth. In helplessness, I am lapped at and spat out. The night sky is star-swollen, leaking light, and I grow moon-fattened beneath it. All of this nothing is pressed impossibly close and is incredibly loud. In equal measure, sound bleeds out of me, melting into the rest.

Coming to terms with my new disembodiment, I soon realise that a dispersed consciousness can’t bear complex thought. So, I settle for a simple one: *Holy shit, I must be dying*. Except that I always thought death was one final moment.

I, on the contrary, have been busy becoming nothing for a while. I should’ve kept count, I tried to, but I am now made of things that don’t care much for time. I inherit the bored indifference of the current, grain, salt, ether, heat. This brings me to another simple conclusion, the final circuit of reasoning I manage to close: that I must be something after all. Something new, composed of things that do not know of death, only a change of states. This is how I stay, for an imperceptible duration, not really living or dying. I might only call it a state of waiting.

What was I waiting for, all that while? Exiled from time and death, perhaps I wanted to believe in something outside of myself, something capable of escaping myself. By now, this useless consciousness, what diffused traces of it remain, does not constellate into any thought. So I phrase myself into the simplest, purest form: a wish.

When I am water, I imagine another parting through me, and from the gash, more of me pouring out to receive. When I am coast, I imagine another returning to me, not just because the moon seduces them, but by their own dogged volition, the clean devotion of an oar upon oar upon oar. When I am moonlight, I imagine another billowing to catch me, the generous give of a canopy, like falling into arms into bed. For it to come true, the wish needs a name to know itself by. I like the sound of “you”.

In time, other beings come along and take credit for this, claiming that they were the first hands to pull you from bark, dress you with cotton wings, rig you taut with ropes of braided plant hair. But I sowed that seed of invention in their minds, kneaded memory into their muscle. I let them strip the skin off my tree, spin me dizzy around a loom, sun-dry me into obedient flatness, all for you. I dreamed of you long before them, wished for the slice of your hull, the proud boast of your mast, the sweet cusp of your sail. Even if you are like sound—a thing made firstly for leaving.

Pinpricks of light start to stipple the whole world, like sun let through moth-nibbled cloth. They swell to bright columns. Then, the light bursts and floods, unmooring the world from its foundation, until only you are left cresting upon it. It finally dawns upon me that everything is mid-collapse when I find myself able to bear a thought again.

All the light reminds me of the first time we met in the waking world. The radiance of the pavement corner where I rounded into you. Every sunny day after will be measured against the bright and blue of this one. Your smile as you said, "What's kept you?" Back then, I had apologised for running late, but really, and I remember only in this moment, I had been excruciatingly early all along. I hope I am still early, that there are still corners to round, that there is another time.

When I wake up, back in a place where sound is opaque, back in a body with an outline and salt-crusts eyes, I arrive well-rested, as if returning from the longest night of my life. As with most dreams, I remember it only by its moment of departure, that brilliant flash as something is irretrievably lost, if not for the faint echo of a strange, wild song. Outside, yesterday's bed of sand has buckled into the surf, buttercream sheets tossed askew, as if slept in and savoured.

Judgement Day



Gallery view of *the hull and the rig*,
NUS Museum (2024).

SCENE 1: INTERVIEW ROOM 3, 0900 HRS

In the sterile interview room sits a metal table and two leather chairs. Laid on the table is a small digital recorder, a writing pad, and two cups of water.

SHAH is seated. The door opens, and ADAM enters with a file. He closes the door softly, crosses to the table, and sits opposite SHAH. He aligns the recorder at centre and checks the red light. ADAM opens his file.

ADAM

Interview Room Three, 0900 hours. Investigator Adam Teo is taking a statement from SHAH Munchah regarding the disappearance of three students during a kolek training session on Friday, the third of May.

Rights have been stated. Do you understand your rights and agree to speak?

SHAH

Speaking is a kind of tide. Yes.

ADAM

We will begin. For the record, on the morning of May 3rd, a class of three and you, their instructor, launched along the designated training lane near the southern sector. Conditions fair. No storm advisories were in effect. Visibility good. Routine traffic present in the strait. Two boats deployed. Is that true?

SHAH

Three in a hull to learn the chorus. One hull for me to tempo. Yes.

ADAM

Alright. What time did you launch?

SHAH

When the sun's coin was still wet.

ADAM

Poetry won't go in the log. Give me a number.

SHAH

Eight twenty.

ADAM

And what was the purpose of that day's session? A routine drill, or assessment?

SHAH

Neither. The sea sets the lesson. We show up and take it.

ADAM

Translate that.

SHAH

Into?

ADAM

Simple words.

SHAH

It depends, really.

ADAM

Insightful. Alright. How about, you walk me through what the four of you did from launch to ten-forty hours.

SHAH

We launched clean. Sailed for a bit. Nothing amiss until the water stopped answering.

ADAM sighs.

ADAM

Define "stopped answering."

SHAH

You see, when an oar is in, you'd expect the water to echo back right?

ADAM

Sure.

SHAH

But that morning, it only swallowed.

ADAM

Swallowed? Are you suggesting the sea took your students?

SHAH

The sea doesn't take. It keeps. There's a difference.

ADAM

Clarify the difference.

SHAH

Taking is theft. Keeping is custody.

Adam exhales. He looks down at the statements in his file.

ADAM

Prior to launching, were there any arguments onshore? Low morale, equipment changes, signs of stress?

SHAH

We ate together. We got ready together. There were the usual laughs and banter for sure. A little too much actually.

ADAM

Ah. Sounds like they were in good spirits.

SHAH

Yeah. I wasn't though. They were mocking an old habit.

ADAM

What old habit?

SHAH

I asked them to greet the water. They had ears that didn't want salt.

ADAM

Define greet.

SHAH

Hand to surface. Say the place by name. Ask to pass safely. Wait for the skin to answer back.

ADAM

Is that part of protocol?

SHAH

It is part of respect.

ADAM

Has it been part of the routine?

SHAH

Respect's from the heart. Routine's from the brain.

ADAM scratches his eye.

ADAM

Did they comply?

SHAH

They laughed. The water did not.

ADAM

Sure.

Adam flips to a new page, and did a brief skim over the statements.

Do you believe that there was foul play?

SHAH

Foul is a land word.

ADAM

Land word?

SHAH

A word for streets and courts. Not for water.

ADAM

Why can't there be foul play in water?

SHAH

Foul play comes from malice. The sea intends either good or correction.

ADAM

I'm not talking about the sea's actions. I'm talking about the boys.

SHAH

Oh. Then, no.

ADAM

You seem uncertain.

SHAH

I mean, foul play can be self-directed.

ADAM

I'm beginning to understand you less.

ADAM turns to a new page.

ADAM

At approximately ten forty hours, the instructor's GPS track shows a twelve degree deviation to starboard over a short distance. We have confirmed your boat did not capsize. We have also confirmed that no distress call was recorded. Do you dispute any of that.

SHAH

No.

ADAM

Describe the sequence that led to the deviation.

SHAH

The boat asked me to.

ADAM

The boat asked you to?

SHAH

Yes.

ADAM

Boats don't ask. Give me a cause, and then an action.

SHAH

Left was polished. Right had teeth. I turned for grip.

ADAM

Plain words, please.

SHAH

They were sliding leeward. I went twelve degree starboard to sit on the seam's edge to throw a line.

ADAM

Alright.

ADAM pens down on the margins of his paper.

ADAM

Why was no distress transmission made?

SHAH

My mouth had their names. My hands had the boat. When the rope returned empty there was no one left to call but the water.

ADAM sets his pen down, and snatches the recorder.

ADAM

For a battery check I will pause the device.

ADAM switches off the recorder. The red light dies.

SCENE 2: OFFICE PANTRY, 1125 HRS

ADAM sits alone at the table, eyes vacant, hands cupping a cup of coffee gone cold. Traces of the morning's interrogation are sprawled across the table; his laptop, papers and a digital recorder.

Behind him, ROHAN enters.

ROHAN
So, how was the session?

ADAM
My gosh, thank god you're here. Wait, why are you in the office?

ROHAN
Do you not want me here?

ADAM
I do.

ROHAN
So, how was the interrogation?

ADAM
Freaking useless, man. Sit down.

ROHAN pulls out the chair opposite ADAM and sits.

ROHAN
Oh c'mon, I'm sure you had worst sessions.

ADAM
I've handled capsizes, drownings, the usual sea mishaps. But this. Three students missing offshore, in calm water. It's a national crisis man!

ROHAN
Great. Then you're in position to be the hero, to be in the right side of history!

ADAM
I would, if the interviewee actually said something useful. Three of his kids are missing, and all your friend gave me was fluff.

ROHAN
Interviewee.

ADAM
Friend.

ROHAN
Interviewee.

ADAM
Friend.

ROHAN
Interviewee.

ADAM
Relax. There's no one around.

ROHAN attempts to digress.

ROHAN
How was it?

ADAM

Your friend answered in riddles throughout the entire interrogation — as you warned. He went on about how “the sea keeps, but never takes,” and how “return doesn’t walk through doors.” And when I asked for specifics, he handed me incense.

ROHAN

Huh, guess some things don’t change.

ROHAN takes a swig off ADAM’s coffee.

ADAM

Were you expecting him to?

ROHAN

I mean, he wasn’t always like this. Did he give any times tho?

ADAM

Times? A “ferry horn” and a “wet coin” for a sun if that helps. But he did give me eight twenty though. And at ten forty he says he drifted twelve degrees because the boat “asked” him to.

ROHAN

Hah. What about actions. Any lines thrown? Dive attempts?

ADAM

Uh, yes to everything and nothing at the same time. He says the rope came back wet and empty. You see the problem? Every sentence is smoke and I am somehow supposed to bottle it and understand it.

ROHAN

He lives in a grey area, not everything is black and white.

ADAM

Okay but three of his trainees disappeared on his watch.

I cannot submit a report that reads like a freaking sermon.

ROHAN

Then stop asking him to be a logbook. Ask him to be a shoreline.

ADAM

Wah you two really need to quit with the poetics man. What does that even mean.

ROHAN

You drew a straight line, but he lives in curves. So, meet him where his language is.

ADAM

Still as poetic, but whatever. Right now, boss needs a clean summary soon. The families and freaking media are coming in by evening.

ROHAN

What did you keep?

ADAM

The core points ah. Launch at eight twenty. Deviation at ten forty. Three trainees absent without capsiz. Recovery attempts negative - wait.

ADAM underlines a sentence on the printout and begins to write a note in the margin.

ROHAN

What did you just amend?

ADAM continues to write, neat and steady.

ADAM

Relax, not amend. Clarify. He said “the sea intends good or correction,” which is clearly metaphorical. I am noting that it was an act of God.

ROHAN

Which is still metaphorical.

ADAM

Is it? Whatever, the legal people would eat it up.

ROHAN

Read it.

ADAM

The interviewee clarified that it was an act of God.

ROHAN

He did not clarify that.

ADAM

I’m rewriting it anyway.

ROHAN

You can’t do that.

ADAM

No seat in the interview room, no opinion.

ROHAN

Geez, was just trying to help.

ADAM

Come on. You know I can’t put poetry in a report. It gets twisted. I’m protecting your friend okay.

ADAM flips the recorder toward ROHAN.

ROHAN

What am I looking at?

ADAM

Two-minute gap. 09:23 to 09:25. I paused during the inconsistency probe.

ROHAN

Wah. Got balls hor. How are you going to smoothen it though?

ADAM

I’ll just log it as battery failure.

ROHAN folds his arms, unconvinced.

ADAM

I’ll restate the questions in the transcript as if it was continuous. Trust me, it reads cleaner. Don’t worry about it.

ROHAN

Alright. You say one ah.

ADAM

Yeah.

Beat. ADAM closes his file. He takes a swig of coffee.

ADAM

You mentioned he wasn’t always like this, what was he like then?

ROHAN

Worldly guy for sure.

ADAM
In what ways?

ROHAN
Always working, never knew how to switch off. The textbook hustler. Career, success, all that. Fella drowned in it.

ADAM
Seems the same, no? His kolek career look solid. Pretty well-known instructor. Surely he had to slog through plenty to get here.

ROHAN
Nah. He started off doing environmental stuff; coastal systems, oceanography, all that water stuff - similar, yes, but he was really into it as an academic. Think field work, citations, proposals, that kind of thing.

ADAM
Damn.

ROHAN
He was obsessed. He'd disappear for hours at Changi Boardwalk -

ADAM
Disappear?!

ROHAN
Chill, not that kind. For hours he'd be knee-deep with a waterproof camera, collecting data and stuff. Pretty smart guy ah, knew every current around this island, and every stretch of shoreline from Pasir Ris to Tanjong Ghul.

ADAM
Siala, so you're saying he isn't a smart guy now?

ROHAN
Still is, just got his priorities straight.

ADAM
Priorities? Seems like he's got pretty great work-life balance already. Better than ours' for fuck's sake. Smart, fulfilled, able to take walks and soak his feet in the beach.

ROHAN
Right? Looked like the dream.

ADAM
Is the dream sia.

ROHAN
Yeah, but one afternoon he came back from a field trip all quiet — we were housemates then by the way. And within a week he had cleared his room. Tossed his like salinity meter, log sheets, sample jars, all that stuff. And ya la, eventually he told me he quit his job.

ADAM
Ah, the classic 180. Burn out, crash out, rebrand.

ROHAN
You could say that, I guess.

ADAM chuckles as he begins to tidy his desk.

ADAM
Alright before I too burn out and crash out, I'm going to head out for lunch.

ADAM drags his chair back and gets up.

You're still meeting SHAH yeah?

ROHAN

Yup.

ADAM

Alright. Just don't do eat too close to here. Everyone's around today, you know.

ROHAN

Yeah yeah. Catch you later.

ADAM grabs his coffee tumbler and heads for the door. ROHAN stays seated, watching the empty seat.

SCENE 3: KOPITIAM, 1230 HRS

SHAH sits in a kopitiam with two bowls of mee in front of him.

ROHAN arrives.

ROHAN

You always pick the same seat.

ROHAN drops his bag on the chair and sits.

SHAH

And you always say the same thing.

SHAH slides the second bowl toward him.

ROHAN

Thanks. So how are you man?

They said you left the station without a debrief.

SHAH

I was in the accident. I should be debriefing them.

They both took their first slurp of noodles.

ROHAN

What else did your colleague say.

ROHAN

You're too ambiguous. But I'm sure it's not the first time you heard it.

SHAH

Cmon, they asked for truth, not clarity.

ROHAN
You could've at least tried.
You know they're not exactly fluent in ocean talk.

SHAH
Well neither was I.

ROHAN
Learnt it the hard way huh?

SHAH chews, gestures with his chopsticks.

SHAH
Yeah. You know it.

ROHAN
Actually, I don't. Even after thirteen years.

SHAH
I know, I've never actually shared what happened.

ROHAN
Yeah, and I never bothered to ask.

SHAH
Pretty ironic for an investigator huh?

ROHAN
Work-life balance.

SHAH chuckles and goes for another mouthful of noodles.

ROHAN
Adam said you had that in your previous job.

SHAH
Eh siala you told him!

SHAH sets down his chopsticks with a soft clatter, mock-glaring across the table.

ROHAN
Relax. It was brief. Plus, I don't really know much about the whole saga in your previous job what.

SHAH
I think you'd have a better understanding now.

ROHAN
Now?

SHAH
Yeah, after this recent incident.

ROHAN wipes his mouth, sets his spoon down.

ROHAN
What? Did your colleagues disappeared?

SHAH
That would have been a dream.

ROHAN
Right?

SHAH
I'll tell Adam that.

ROHAN
Oh so you're open to another interview ah?

They both laughed.

SHAH

No la, but there are parallels for sure.

ROHAN

You keep hinting at it, but you never say it out loud.

SHAH pauses mid-bite. He half-smiles.

SHAH

Earlier that week I was offshore, doing some routine research work - you'd know. And yeah, it was the same stretch of water I'd been surveying for months. But that morning... the equipment had a life of its own ah.

ROHAN

Siala, compass can kena possessed.

SHAH

No, legit.

ROHAN

And that scared you away?

SHAH

No shit man. Every compass I had just spun like it lost north. And the GPS insisted we were circling the same patch of water over and over. Then the loggers, they started rewriting themselves. Timestamps were going backwards. I'd never seen anything like it. It was like the sea was scrubbing us out of its memory.

ROHAN

Could be magnetism, corrosion? Or like, interference, something technical maybe?

SHAH

Bro it has been a decade since. You think I wouldn't have considered?

ROHAN

Sorry.

SHAH

Yeah so this went on for a while. And by the third day, even the cameras refused to face the sea. Every time I set them up, they fogged over. Batteries were full and lenses were clean but still, they clouded.

ROHAN

Damn. Did no one bother to help?

SHAH

Haha, I was the problem ah.

ROHAN

As usual.

SHAH

The vibe then, I still can feel it. It was thick, full of tension - like between me and the old fishermen. They didn't like me from the start. City boy with government tags, poking at their coast. Understandable. So you would think that the least I could do was listen right?

ROHAN

And you didn't.

SHAH

I didn't lah.

ROHAN

My gosh.

SHAH

Cause they told me to do some spiritual thing, some offering — coconut, incense, pour kopi into the tide. They said the sea there had watchers.

ROHAN

Wasn't that when you had your whole existential thing too?

SHAH

Exactly. So I was pissed, man. I was tired, pissed, and on a deadline. And honestly, pragmatics, right? Chop-chop, get the readings, submit the report. No rituals, no bullshit.

ROHAN

So you just went ahead?

SHAH

Yeah. Straight into it.

ROHAN

Why'd you feel like you had to quit though? Just learn your lesson and move on ah. I mean, you're not the type to repeat a mistake.

SHAH

Because, the mistake was beyond work. It felt like a transgression. Some sort of blasphemy.

ROHAN

Blasphemy's a pretty big word you know.

SHAH

I know, but it was their life, their soul. I reduced it to counts and commodities. I used it as means to other things. And, then it hit me, I'd been doing the same thing to myself. There's this misplacement of, reverence.

ROHAN

Yeah, you did place a lot on your work.

SHAH

Right? And none to the heart at all.

ROHAN

Huh, guess seawater does reflect well.

SHAH

A little too well.

ROHAN

But hey, I assumed after all this time you've reconciled it all?

SHAH

Reconcile?

ROHAN

Yeah. Like. Body, spirit. Method, meaning. The worldly, the spiritual.

SHAH

Don't see a need to. I just gave one part a long rest.

ROHAN

Would you ever though?

SHAH

Reconcile? If it's mutually beneficial, sure.

ROHAN wipes his mouth, half-smiling.

SCENE 4: CONFERENCE ROOM, POLICE COAST GUARD HQ. EVENING.

A conference room inside Police Coast Guard HQ, refitted for the evening briefing. A long wooden table stretches across the front of the room, flanked by three chairs. COMMANDER LIM sits at the centre position, nameplate angled toward the press.

COMMANDER LIM

Good evening everyone. I am Commander Lim, Police Coast Guard. At about 8.20am on Friday, 3 May, the Police were alerted to an incident involving four trainees in a kolek training session near the southern training lane.

What follows is based on consultations with local coastal–ocean experts. Our working hypothesis is that Instructor Shah Munchah and his students encountered a narrow current feature that can appear even on calm days. Commonly called a current seam or surface slick, it is technically an internal-wave convergence zone, which is a place where water layers of different densities meet. At the surface, it may look smooth or slightly dark, but it creates subtle downwelling and shear that can unsettle light craft.

The area is also bordered by seawalls and busy traffic lanes, which can reflect a ship’s wake back into the training zone minutes after the vessel has passed. When such a returning pulse meets a convergence belt, the force can sharpen without forming whitecaps, producing a sudden shove that can unseat a small crew or push a light boat off its line.

To be clear, we have no evidence of foul play, and no storm activity occurred that morning. What we are seeing is a plausible interaction between local currents, internal waves, and reflected wake.

What are we doing now. From 2pm tomorrow, we will expand the search in a belt pattern rather than a straight grid. We will prioritise

foam lines, temperature steps, and seams where small fish churn without birds, which indicate potential convergence zones.

We are deploying side-scan sonar and temperature loggers to detect cold patches and subsurface structure, and reviewing traffic data to trace wake events and their reflections. We are also rechecking small-craft maintenance records for the training fleet.

We ask the public to avoid speculation. We will provide another update when search milestones are reached. Thank you.

COMMANDER LIM nods once and exits. The press murmur swells.

Reclamation and other poems



Gallery view of *From Jurong Island to Selat Sembilan*, NUS Museum (2025).

Wong Yang

Reclamation

"His hair, carefully combed through with gel, was slicked back into a neat, hard helmet, so smooth and perfect that one might think it brittle, prone to cracks."

- *The Great Reclamation* by Rachel Heng

Once, an islander lay here in his house on stilts.
The evening breeze whizzed through the cracks
in the floorboards, cradled his body, whispered

protection into his ear. On the day he was told to
leave, the crabs scuttled inland. They said it would be
like magic: foreshore and seabed levelled with

the earth, ground to stand on out of nothing and
nowhere. He would learn about this trick they call
reclamation: the process of claiming something back,

or of asserting a right. The guile lies in the muddy
misnomer, contorting language with a logic of boundless
gain. Standing on his veranda for the final time,

the islander watched the water lapping at the children's feet.
What a feat of engineering it must be, to strip the intertidal
imaginings and upturn the palm trees with unquestioned

roots. When, decades later, a road here collapses where
his house once stood, the islander reads about it in the news,
remembers the cracks in his floorboards, the once solid ground.

Departure is a kind of return

after an archival photo in prep-room: *From Jurong Island to Selat Sembilan*

Your mother shepherds the young ones aboard, coaxing curious steps towards care; father stands at the ready, shin-deep by the *sampan*. Away from the action, your gaze meets - or almost meets - mine. One leg raised, knees to the front, eyeline reaching for pelagic infinity. Like a little lighthouse at the water's edge.

The waves speak a spell-binding repetition: break, recede, and break again. Every push followed by a pull, every crash answered by a renewed tug at the heart. All those afternoons swimming at the beach, small bodies making shapes out of sea. Hunting for shellfish with the other children and catching worms in the sand, thinking yourselves explorers. How you followed your father out on the boat, how the wind and the waves guided him to depths bursting with fish. At low-tide, the water had hugged your waist when you were three, clasped your knees when you were six. Now it cups your ankles like a favourite pair of socks.

Never mind your family climbing into the boat. Never mind the rocky weight of leaving. Even in sepia, the sea pools itself into fresh tessellations, catches the light at new angles. A ripple you spark sends the questions in all directions, yearns towards me. What new routes will this *sampan* carve through the water? How many new roots can one sink in soil? The water sits where the water will - grey, brown or blue.

An Islands Nation

after it had cut through like a riptide
when putting the pieces back together

was just the way it goes
just the way the leaving bleeds into living

before you said *we couldn't bear to leave*
we kept thinking about the little island

when the names trickled off like a roll call
Seraya, Merlimau, Samulun

this land that measured your feet in
heartstrings, in the only way you knew how

in the way only *you* knew how
long after you were scattered across the pond

after you were made shoebox seedlings
and the high-rise hopes melded with

that pang of rupture, with still
no way to tell if this is head or tail

or if the river stops running when we are no longer
there, if the horizon that never wavered

always looked

this far away

Mangrove speaks back to me

i
want
to reach
for air again

add an *e* to *breath*
and it returns as a verb
add an *e* to us and it returns
unfettered as a silent reckoning
a pirate past with fresh conquests

if desire has a shape let it be like estuaries
bending, never breaking, insisting, but contained
let it be like my sinuous arms that bound me to the earth

i want to call the mud lobsters and sea slugs back to their
burrows and tide pools, absorb the erosion, the rot, the clearances
reach for air and and wear this meandering love that still has hearts to find

Session 3

In dialogue with narratives nestled in the T.K. Sabapathy Archives.

Lives in Correspondence

Drawing from the archives of art historian T.K. Sabapathy, Dia Hakim Khaeri and Tricia Sin unspool latent narrative threads within selected archival texts such as a privately circulated, unpublished poem by artist Patrick Ng Kah Onn, and a series of correspondences between Sabapathy and his mentor figure, Michael Sullivan, the first curator of the University Art Museum (now NUS Museum). Extending Sabapathy's own mode of writing-as-thinking, their works propose other practices of writing—forms that bear witness to the quiet motions of personal life as it bristles against the contingencies of parent states, figures, and the complexities of lineage, inheritance, and influence.



Gallery view of *Paper Trails: Navigating the T.K. Sabapathy Archives*, NUS Museum (2024).

NOWHERE, NO TIME, SOMEWHERE, SOME TIME, EVERY WHERE, EVERY TIME.

A vignette play about cross-border land travel between Singapore & Malaysia. This play takes place entirely in the present time.

Title and scene headers are lifted from a privately circulated and untitled poem by Patrick Ng.

Notes on punctuation: A lack of full stops at the end of sentences denote a quicker pace in conversations, or interruptions. Performers are free to interpret this how they wish.

Characters

- Wife (F, 40, Malaysian Chinese) & Chauffeur (F, 43, Malay)
- Niece (F, 23) & Aunt (F, 60), Malay
- Officer 1 (M, 28) & Officer 2 (M, 32), Singaporean Chinese
- Bus Driver (M, 36), Thai
- Lover 1 (F, 24) & Lover 2 (F, 24), French tourists

Dia Hakim Khaeri

SINGAPORE, 11.20 a.m., 15th September '57.

My cause lay in the will, that opens str
Upon an act for the most desperate.

That simple handle found, I entered in
The other room, where I had never been.

I found within it heavy-footed chairs,
A glass bell loaded with wax grapes and bars.

A polished table, holding down the look
Of bracket, mantelpiece, and marbled toir.

Much like the first, this room in which I went.

Only my being there is different.

NO WHERE, NO TIME, SOME WHERE, SOME TIME, EVERY WHERE, EVERY TIME.

Now it is fog. I walk

Contained within my coat;

No castle more cut off

By reason of its moat:

Only the sentry's cough,

The mercenaries' talk.

The street lamps, visible,

Drop no light on the ground,

But press beams painfully

In a yard of fog around.

I am condemned to be

An individual.

In the established border

There balances a mere

Pinpoint of consciousness.

I stay, or start from, here:

No fog makes more or less

The neighbouring disorder.

Particular, I must

Find out the limitation

Of mind and universe.

To pick thought and sensation

And turn to my own use.

Disordered hate or lust.

Patrick Ng Kah Onn, Excerpt from *Untitled poem* (undated).
From the archives of T.K. Sabapathy, donated to NUS Museum.

01. "...What final evidence
Lay in perceptions or in common sense?"

A condo in Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur, 5.59pm, 30th August.

Darkness. We only hear the sounds of a cupboard being opened, a loud zip being undone. Hangers falling, wheels of a luggage scraping against it.

When the lights come up, we see WIFE in a bit of a state in her own room – everything is on the floor, and luggage is overfilled with clothes. We watch her trying to decide which ones to bring with her, which ones to maybe discard.

A knock on the door. CHAFFEUR enters. She is holding an opaque envelope.

C: I have it

W: Perfect, just leave it on the dining table

C: Are you taking it with you?

W: Yes, but I need to double check them later

C: I'll leave it on your bed

W: No, I cannot concentrate here, I need to double check everything. Still have to pack

C: Yes but then

W: He's not coming home

C: We have to be

W: Cautious, I know but

C: Last time he

W: I know what he did

C: Just in

W: In case he comes back I'll call the police. If he tries anything you know what to do.

C: You're shaking

W: I'm not, I'm just

C: Don't be afraid

W: I'm not

C: There's security downstairs

W: I'll call the police if he

C: You sure you can want me to

W: Go and balik okay. You're done for the day. Don't need to pick up Kevin at KLCC. He called to say he's leaving with friends. Thank you.

CHAFFEUR exits. WIFE closes the door. She continues trying to pack.

Another furtive knock.

W: I said

C: What did you change your name to?

A beat.

W: If I told you there would be no point in changing it.

A beat. WIFE opens the door. CHAFFEUR is still holding the envelope.

C: I have a feeling

W: There is nothing

C: This will be you in a few days

W: Yes

C: You will be

W: Someone else entirely

C: Can you tell me the first one?

W: First what

C: Your new first name

W: I can't

C: I can try to use it. See what it sounds like. If it suits you

W: You can just call me Madam when you see me now. And next time. If I get to come back. I don't know if I will

C: I haven't called you that in three years

W: So you can start again now

C: First name. That's all.

CHAFFEUR hands the envelope back to WIFE. She takes a moment before she opens it, briefly skims over the papers, before quickly shoving it back into the envelope. She places the envelope furtively on her bed.

W: Sam

C: Sam...?

W: That's only part of it

C: Oh

W: That's all you get. If you're not happy then you call me Madam. Oh. How about you interview me?

C: Interview?

W: Thirty questions with me as Sam. You get to know me with this name. Just for this time.

C: Okay

A beat.

C: Hello, Sam

W: Hello

C: How are you, Sam?

W: You sure you want to ask me boring questions

C: Still question what

W: Well then I'm very very very very fine thank you! I will be travelling in a few days

C: I can see

W: I don't know what clothes to bring with me

C: I can see you have a *lot* of clothes

W: Yes, so many!

C: Is your favorite color white?

W: It might be. Purely on accident though. Such a boring color. But I like it the best

C: But it's a pure color.

W: Blank slate. You can mix it in with anything

C: Yes

W: A fresh start

A beat.

C: How do you feel about

W: Leaving KL?

C: Ye. I've not left KL in a few years. I'm... Bosan a bit, you know

W: Hm... "Kay-yell". "Koala Lumpo." I think sometimes
Maybe I want
But then I remember
I don't know what I want
A lot of the time

A beat.

W: You know what. You should go on a holiday. After I'm gone.

WIFE starts to sift through her clothes again.

C: Maybe in December.

W: Where would you go?

C: Thailand. Maybe Krabi. Somewhere with sun.

W: Malaysia doesn't give you enough of that isit?

C: Maybe I just don't get bored of it lah. The sun I mean.

W: You're not a very good interviewer.

C: How many questions do I have left?

W: I don't know. Maybe 27. 26 with that question.

C: Where are you staying when you go to Singapore?

W: I can't tell you.

C: I'm not following you.

W: You might if I do.

WIFE throws some clothes out of the suitcase. She compares the clothes to CHAFFEUR.

W: You can take some of these

C: They wouldn't fit me

W: Just try one on

C: I'm too big lah

W: Just try

C: I can't

W: I can't bring them all there

C: We can arrange for you

W: You don't need to, just take one

C: I really can't

W: Well then don't. Just go home then.

A beat.

C: Sam

WIFE doesn't respond immediately.

W: I'm not used to that yet.

C: How will you be travelling?

W: I've gotten a bus.

C: Oh.

W: If you leave you may as well take the scenic route.

C: It's quite tiring, the drive. My father used to do it with the whole family in the back seat. I hated all of them by the time we could get somewhere.

W: Well there's buses to go anywhere. Penang, Langkawi, Port Dickson. Just a matter of where and when.

C: Sometimes those drivers leave their passengers on the side of the road.

W: You trying to scare me?

C: I mean, what would you do if that happened?

W: Hitch hike. Call another bus. Go to the police.

C: I wish I could be as reactive as you.

W: Asalkan sampai.

As long as we get there

A beat. WIFE hasn't spoken Malay to CHAFFEUR in years.

C: Jadi kau puas?

So are you satisfied?

W: Ya. Aku... aku puas. Aku puas hati. Aku syukur. Kau orang yang tau tanggungjawab dia. Kau paham. Bagus. Bagus kau selamatkan aku. Bagus kau kat sini dengan aku.

Yes. I'm... I'm satisfied. I'm grateful. You're someone who knows their responsibilities. You understand. It's good. It's good that you saved me. It's good that you're here with me.

WIFE continues to pack. Lights fade.

02. "...I reached the end but pacing back and forth,
I could not see what reaching it was worth..."

SuperNice Express, Berth 12. Terminal Bersepadu Selatan, Kuala Lumpur, Midnight, 30th August.

AUNTY is sitting. She only has a backpack and is holding a folder with documents, with an air of care and caution. NIECE is standing. She has her luggage with her, and a paper bag with fast food leftovers in it.

N: Aunty

A: Hm?

N: Nak sikit?

Do you want some?

A: Apa benda tu

What is that

N: Marrybrown

A: Burger ke

A burger

N: Fries dari tadi

Fries from just now

A: Tak nak

No

N: Nak Teha bawakkan papa?

Do you want me to bring anything for you?

A: Tak payah

No

N: Luggage Teha boleh naik 35kg tau, masih ada space lagi

My luggage can fit up to 35kg, there's still space

A: Tak payah

No

N: Teha bawakkan beg Aunty tu la

Let me bring your bag home at least

A: Ada passport la dalam beg ni

My passport is in here

N: Barang berat bagi I bawakkan

I can bring the heavy things for you

A: Tak berat

It's not heavy

N: Dokumen dokumen semua tu

But all the documents

A: Aunty bawakkan

I'm still bringing it

N: Nanti kalau terhilang macam mana

But what if you lose it

A: Eh aku tua je, bukan nyanyuk

I'm old, not senile

N: Barang dalam bus tak boleh terbiar tau

You can't leave things behind in the bus

A: Aku simpan dalam bag aku tu

I'll keep it in my bag

N: Seram la I tengok Aunty naik bus sorang-sorang

I feel really freaked out seeing you go alone

A: Bukan aku nak, darurat

Not that I want to, it's an emergency

N: KLIA Express dekat je, ikot I la

KLIA Express is closeby, just come with me

A: Engkau tak biasa je

You're just not used to it

N: Apa yang tak biasa

What am I not used to?

A: Dah Aunty dah bayarkan

I paid for it already

N: Teha pon dah bayarkan

I paid for you too

A: Malam-malam traffic tak teruk

The traffic is smoother at night

N: Tapi highway malam malam gelap Aunty

But the highway is really dark at night Aunty

A: It will be fast game

N: Naik kapal terbang lagi cepat

Taking a plane is faster

A: Tak larat

I'm just not up for it

N: Dorang semua tengah tunggu Aunty

You know they're all waiting for you

A: Selagi Aunty belom sampai, badan tu tak dimandikan

As long as I'm not there, his dead body is not getting cleansed

An announcement for the bus rings out in the station. 30 minutes to reach the departure hall.

N: Janji sampai Singapore cepat, Aunty

But we'll get to Singapore quickly, Aunty

A: Dorang boleh tunggu Aunty sampai.

They can wait for me to get there

A beat. It's tense and heavy.

A: Kejap lagi aku berangkat

I'm leaving soon

N: *Aunty*

A: Nanti sampai Singapore aku message kau

When I get to Singapore I'll message you

N: Masih sempat if we go KLIA now

We can get there in time if we go to KLIA now

A: Engkau pergi je, aku tak larat

You go, I'm not up for it

N: Terbang tu 45 minit je

Flying only takes 45mins

A: MH370

N: Huh?

A: MH370. Kalau kau nak sangat terjadi macam dorang, kau naik je kapal terbang

If you want to end up like them, you take the plane

N: *Astaghfirullah*

A: Aku tak doa kau kena apa apa, tapi kau ingat je

I'm not praying anything bad happens to you, but you just remember that

N: Asal Aunty tak ikot Alang

Why didn't you just follow Alang (elder brother)?

A: Kau nak aku naik dengan si dua ekor kecik tu?

You want me to drive along with those two small children?

N: Sama kan kalau naik kereta

Is it not the same if you took the car?

A: Bising sangat lah dua budak tu

They're too noisy

N: Aunty banyak alasan je lah

You just make excuses

A beat.

N: Ikot I sudah Aunty

Just follow me

A: Aku taknak jadi beban

I don't want to be a burden for you

N: Habis? Kita terhegeh hegeh kat TBS ni tak beban ke?

Then? Us stalling at TBS is not a burden?

A: Melampau lah engkau

You're full of nonsense

AUNTY looks through the documents, like she's double checking them one last time.

N: Punca sakit dia

The cause of his sickness

A: Mm

N: Punca dia dari mana?

Where did it come from?

A: Wallahu a'lam

Only God knows

N: Takkan sakit tu datang macam gitu je

But it doesn't just come out of nowhere

A: Sakit dia tu mungkin orang lain tak boleh nampak

Maybe his sick is something no one could really see

N: Jadi apa?

So what?

A: ...Aunty pon tak tau

... I also don't know

N: Dia

He

A: Collapse

N: Masa BMT kan?

During BMT right?

A: Aah kat camp

Yes at camp

N: Keluarga Aunty ada ke history sakit jantung

Does your family have a history of heart problems

A: Tak

No

N: Diabetes?

A: Tak

No

N: Cholesterol?

A: Tak

No

N: Habis

Then what

A: Aunty sendiri pon tak paham

I myself don't understand

A beat.

A: Tak kira seram

Doesn't matter if its scary

N: Aunty

A: Tak kira seram, asalkan sampai jugak

As long as we get there

The bus arrives. The door doesn't open yet. They linger.

N: Teha pon kena berangkat

I also have to go soon

A: Pukul berapa terbang tu

What time are you flying?

N: Dua stengah

2.30

A: Kalau kau nak pergi, pergi

If you want to go, go

N: I tengok you pergi dulu baru I puas

I'll see you off first so my heart is at ease

A: Kalau terlambat macam mana

But what if you're late

N: Asalkan selamat

As long as I get there safe

A: Papa nanti aku telefon kau je

Anything I'll call you

N: Nanti kat R&R beli makan kalau ada

Get something to eat at the R&R if there's anything

The driver gets off the bus. The luggage compartment opens. People fill the bus with their things.

A: Nanti lepas mandi jenazah

After they bathe his body

N: Alang dah call Ustad Fadhli, dia akan settle semua

Alang has called Ustad Fadhli, he'll settle it all

A: Aunty nak beli

I want to buy

N: Kenapa?

What?

A: Rasa bunga apa cantik

Which do you think is nicer?

N: Aunty rasa dia akan pilih bunga apa

What do you think he likes

A: Dia tu anak lelaki

He's my son

N: Jadi

So

A: Mana ada dia pilihkan

Why would he choose one

N: Dia suka color apa?

What color does he like?

AUNTY deliberates on this.

A: Kuning

Yellow

N: Nanti Teha belikan bunga kekwa

I'll buy chrysanthemums

A: Ok

N: Ada papa lagi tak

Anything else

A: Tak ada

No

N: Sure?

A: Tak payah

No need

The bus is filling up. It almost feels like the passengers are expectantly looking at them to wrap up.

A: Aunty nak berangkat

I need to go now

N: Nanti sampai call Teha please

When you get there call me please

A: Ok

N: Mungkin Uncle Haizer jemput Aunty

Maybe Uncle Haizer will see you

A: Aku tak larat cakap dengan dia

I don't feel like speaking to him

N: He is trying

A: Dia boleh try untuk blah

He can try to fuck off

A beat.

A: Takot

Scared

N: Takot apa?

What are you scared of?

A: Takot pergi jenazah anak aku sendiri

I'm scared of going to my own child's funeral

N: Aunty

A: Kita dah lama tak duduk Singapore. Setakat passport je teringat asal kita. Aunty tak paham. Aunty takot. Aunty takot bila dah balik Malaysia, tak dapat ziarah kubur anak aku lagi. Pahamkan aku sikit lah Teha. Lain kali aku nak ziarah anak aku selapas ni Aunty terpaksa naik bus. Naik kapal terbang luar biasa sikit untuk Aunty. Badan manusia patut berada atas tanah kita sahaja.

We haven't lived in Singapore for a while. Only a passport reminds me where I'm from. I don't understand. I'm scared. I'm scared when I have to go home to Malaysia. I can't go to his grave to visit. Please understand. If I want to visit him, I have to take the bus. Taking the plane is unnatural to me. Human bodies should just stay on earth.

NIECE doesn't respond.

A: Teha... you mesti ingat

Teha, you have to remember

N: Ya, Aunty

A: Kalau you sedih, you bilang kita. Cakap dengan kita. Cakap dengan your family. Jangan tangguhkan sendiri je. Pendam dalam hati sendiri. Hati kita kecil, Teha. Rupanya sama genggamannya kita. Pendam lama lama kita tak reti angkat. Paham tak?

If you're sad, you tell us. Talk with us. Talk with your family. Don't hold it by yourself. Don't keep it inside. Our hearts are small. It's the size of our fists. If we keep it in too long, we can't carry it with us anymore. Do you understand?

AUNTY suddenly heaves into heavy, gasping sobs. NIECE hugs her.

03. "That simple handle found, I entered in
The other room, where I had never been,
...Only my being there is different."

**Woodlands Immigration Checkpoint, KTMB Shuttle Tebrau Station,
Singapore, 11.20am, 15th September.**

Before the lights come back up for this scene, we hear a phone ring. It keeps ringing and is deliberately ignored.

OFFICER 1 and OFFICER 2 are on duty. OFFICER 1 lets a traveller go after manually inspecting their luggage. They watch them leave.

O1: Why that one?

O2: Big luggage.

O1: Oh?

O2: Just need to make sure.

O1: A lot of the passengers from JB usually carry big luggage what.

O2: Ya lor. But boss now say if you see anyone with an abnormally large luggage they might be carrying illegal items la or what. Sometimes they never declare. Bringing in vape sometimes. All making my life fucking hard. Last time I got kena you know. Got this girl bring back alcohol but she never declare. Fought her way with Lim la. Under 1000ml she said. But 3 bottles, 500ml, you do the maths la. By right she just need to declare, pay tax. Simple.

O1: Aiyo.

O2: Ya lo. I get it la. She's not doing anything illegal, maybe she really didn't perasan or what. But must tegur la.

A beat. No travellers come their way – a lull in the air.

O1: Today slower than usual.

O2: Wednesday mah.

O1: If everyday like this kan shiok.

O2: Be careful what you wish for man.

O1: True what!

O2: I don't know which one is worse eh. Always working or not working at all.

O1: You can say. You don't have back pain like me.

OFFICER 2 thumbs a packet of cigarettes in his pocket.

O2: You want?

O1: What the hell!

O2: I cannot wait ah. You watch my back can?

O1: Sibe crazy la you. This is your own?

O2: I swiped it.

A beat – it doesn't register at first for OFFICER 1.

O2: Also never declare one.

O1: Wah, you really asking for it man.

O2: I'm damn broke la. Buy pack also must budget. Fucking frustrating. You want to come with me or not?

O1: Don't need la.

O2: Don't be so pussy la. Just a stick bro. And it's *free*.

O1: I want healthy lungs.

O2: Healthy your head! Motherfucker. The other time you missed the bus cause you thought got enough time to smoke.

O1: At least I actually bought the fucking pack.

O2: Whatever. Suit your very healthy self ok?

O1: You have five minutes.

O2: Whatsapp me if boss come down.

OFFICER 2 exits. OFFICER 1 is left alone. Nothing happens for a moment, before OFFICER 1 gets a call. He is absent minded and pays no mind. The call elapses. His phone buzzes again. He finally picks it up, before stomaching what's on the screen. He doesn't do anything for a moment, dazed.

OFFICER 2 returns. He is oblivious to OFFICER 1's change in state. OFFICER 1, from this point, should be extremely on edge, feeling like there's something watching him.

O2: See. Five minutes.

O1: What time are you getting off?

O2: I think like 4pm. You leh?

O1: I have till 6.

A beat.

O1: You want to OT with me?

OFFICER 2 genuinely considers this.

O2: Sorry man. Cannot ah. I meeting Sya later at Causeway Point. Could use the cash though.

O1: Oh. Ok. How is she?

O2: Same la. Fucking hates my guts.

O1: Not getting any better?

O2: No la! She's freaking crazy that girl.

A beat. He processes what he just said about her.

O2: Ya la. But like that lah. Trying to make this work with her. But I cannot fucking move to KL with her. We're not even married yet.

O1: So she was really serious about it?

O2: Yah. She's expanding her business la. But I don't know man.

A beat – but more that hopes someone will come to save OFFICER 2 from the embarrassment of his own situation.

O2: She wants us to relocate. Doesn't want to deal with the whole BTO situation in Singapore. Better we get married there, she said. We can actually own our house, she said. We can probably be happier there, she said. More opportunities there for us, she said. Everything *she* said la. Fuck.

A beat.

O2: My family from JB lah actually.

O1: I didn't know that.

O2: Yah. Technically Singaporean lah. My parents have a Singaporean passport. But they moved to JB when I was born. Got a house there. I was there till I was primary one. They go there quite often now - almost every weekend. More so when they got older lah. I think it's their retirement plan already. Got a similar pattern with a lot of seniors nowadays. They frustrated with the pace of life in Singapore but don't have money to go Australia or something. So they settle JB lah. But don't think that's really a huge issue for them. Malay speaking society la. Everything caters to them perfectly. Big house, slow life. (*A beat.*) She called me unambitious. I'm too fucking comfortable here. I dunno ah. But I just don't think I can go yet. I mean. KL is a fucking cop out.

O1: Yah.

O2: Like you turn around and confirm can find some Singaporeans at KLCC.

O1: Yah.

O2: She's crazy.

O1: Yah.

O2: Fucking crazy.

A beat. More waiting. No one comes to save either of them.

O1: But you think

O2: What?

O1: You think someday you will settle?

O2: For a woman?

O1: Maybe. Or even JB.

O2: Donno ah. I mean I got think about it la. Like the retirement plan and everything. Seems a bit convenient right? But you got ever think or not - Malaysians not pissed at us meh? Like confirm they a bit angry right? Cause we keep coming over there, and obviously we make shit more expensive for them. We raise the housing prices, gentrify the fuck out of some areas. Like what the hell. Last time when I was a kid I don't think it's possible that some stores or what have PayNow QR. I always feel a bit embarrassed using it leh. Like I remember when I was in secondary school and I worked for Muji, I didn't know that shops *in Singapore* can also accept other currencies. Imagine my shock ah when this tourist suddenly hand me Yen notes? I don't even know how to mentally calculate, if correct or not? Like I feel so fucking ashamed for some reason, showing the makcik at the food court at Larkin that the 16rm sup is like fucking 4 singapore dollars. I dunno man. Like I think we might be just as bad as people who like go to Bali or something then say wah everything is so cheap, better than the US, whatever. Maybe I'm masochistic or what but maybe it feels morally better to just suffer in Singapore than to act like that in fucking JB. Dunno ah. Feels like you lose street cred when you realise you actually wield power over someone else like that. You deprive someone of something just because your currency lets you get it. I dunno. Fair meh?

O2: No.

O1: No what?

O2: Not fair lah.

O1: Yah. Not fair.

OFFICER 1's phone rings. Both of them wait expectantly for it to be picked up. OFFICER 2 can't stand the noise and snatches it up.

O2: Hello? Hello?

There are voices, but OFFICER 2 can't make them out.

O2: Who the fuck is this?

The phone rings off.

O1: Scam call. That's why I didn't pick up.

O2: Then silent your phone la. Freaking noisy.

O1: Sorry.

OFFICER 2 hands back the phone to OFFICER 1.

O2: Sorry about OT bro.

O1: It's ok.

O2: I mean it ah. I rather do extra work than meet with her.

O1: Nevermind.

O2: Ok.

A traveller enters to pass through. They enact the necessary procedures.

O1: What time is the next train?

O2: Maybe in like half an hour.

O1: There might be more people.

O2: Ya lorh. Like that what. Always got people coming and going.

O1: Funny right.

O2: What funny?

O1: Like we are paid to be somewhere in the middle. Not coming or going. Just here.

O2: Like that lah.

O1: You don't want to choose either?

O2: Huh?

O1: Coming. Or going.

A beat.

O2: No ah. I think I'm happy where I am.

OFFICER 1's phone rings again. This time, he picks it up.

O1: Hello?

Lights fade.

04. "...In the established border
There balances a mere
Pinpoint of consciousness..."

A rest stop on the North-South Expressway.

A BUS DRIVER talks on the phone outside of an empty cross-causeway bus. He speaks in Thai, or with a Kelantanese dialect.

... I just told them. I'm not driving right now. I didn't see the car. I mean, I saw it, but I wasn't speeding or anything. What was my exact speed? 120 km/h. Normal expressway speed. It just... drove where it wasn't supposed to. I don't know. All I know is that it nearly crashed into us and I didn't register it until I heard someone scream. It came from behind me. The open road was all I saw and someone screamed. Then I saw it. Yeah... Proto Wira sedan. I don't think it matters though. It drove off. I can't... Ya. Okay. Maybe. Ya. I don't know. I'm not... I don't know. They're off the vehicle. Rest stop. Where? Nilai. Ya. No police. Don't need. The car is gone already. I cannot do anything. I think there were two people on the vehicle.

A beat.

... I cannot think lah. I didn't sleep. I didn't... It's not my fault. I took the bicycle from CCK. 5km. Cause no more buses or train. Woke up. Drove to Gali Batu. I clean the bus. Then I drive to Boon Lay. Wait for everyone. Got people late. Whatever. Always got some people late one. But my brain is empty. Like really got nothing inside. Drive to Tuas. People ask me what they should bring. *Passport*, I tell them. Like it's that fucking obvious right. *Passport sahaja*, and I have to use Malay, otherwise like they won't believe, there's been people like that before, and this Indian family just stare at me like I crazy. Mostly just the father. I heard them talk when I did headcount. One of those irritating families that can only speak posh English. Full sentences. Mummy, this bus is so blue. *Yes it is darling, it's so exciting. Daddy, why can't we take the plane? There's a first time for everything, darling. We're taking*

the scenic route instead. My head pain already. They make it worse. Fuck. So I keep telling them passport, and they don't understand until I actually take out my own damn passport and wave it in their face. And I see the mother's face sneer at me! Her nose go all the way up. You don't know how much it fucking takes not to fucking punch someone like that.

A beat.

... I'm sorry.

A beat.

... I'm just very tired.

A beat.

... I'm sorry.

He briefly looks around in case anyone heard the outburst.

... They're all still doing their stuff.

A beat.

... Buy food lah. Go toilet. Got food court. But they only take cash.

A beat.

... I dunno. Fifteen more minutes. I think they all know we're gonna delay it a bit.

A beat.

... The snake park? Ya. I remember.

A beat.

... Closed?

A beat.

... Ya. I remember.

A beat.

... Ya. I remember her. She came with her friend right? The one with...
Ya. They were from... Ya. I remember.

A beat.

... Tell her I said hi. Sorry about the... ya.

A beat.

... Why didn't she come back earlier?

A beat.

... You know I added her on Facebook right? We were friends on there for a while. The first thing I did after she left was message her. I ask her everyday how are you. What did you eat today. At first she reply also. But then slowly become more shorter and shorter. I ask the same questions. *How are you?* Ok. *What did you eat today?* Ok. *Are you travelling?* Ok. *When you coming back to Krabi?* Dunno. Then I realise I was the only one messaging her. Ever since she left. She didn't ask a single question about me. I post pictures of myself with snakes only then she reply something. *So scary!* Something like that. *AHHH!* Like that. Always the same thing. It started to piss me off after a bit, not gonna lie. It felt like the only thing she could see or ask me about was the fucking snakes.

A beat.

... I wish she said thank you or something. I thought we had a nice time while she was with us.

A beat.

... She didn't like you better.

A beat.

... Okay. Whatever. Tell her I said... Okay.

A beat.

... So why did she come back?

A beat.

... Honeymoon. Okay. So she... Okay. Sure.

A beat.

... Tell her I said hi.

A beat.

... Remember when we went to the beach. It was the last night of her trip. Her and her friend. She was surprised that we speak nearly the same language. But also not really the same. I felt like a child speaking to her, only speaking in a few sentences in her language here and there, fumbling with my English, but I was desperate. I remember I asked her *jom kita derak*, and I saw her face wrinkle at the last word. *Derak*, I said again, and I made that motion with my fingers. She finally understood, and she burst out laughing. I didn't know what was so funny about that. But we went. She got on my motorbike. You hung

back with her friend. I wanted...

A beat.

... I don't know. I wanted to tell her... I don't know. To what? To stay? To not go back? Knowing that would be her last and only time there with us? I was shooting in the dark there. I didn't know what to say. So I was quiet. And she was annoyed with me. On that walk. She kept looking at me like she was expecting me to say something. But I didn't. I didn't say anything. I was...

A beat.

... I wasn't scared. I just didn't know what to say.

A beat.

... But you know. Just tell her. Maybe she will. She remembered... you.

A beat.

... What the hell were you doing there anyway?

A beat.

... Oh. Right. Okay. Yeah. Sorry. Sorry. I'm tired.

A beat.

... I wish I could call the police. I'm tired.

A beat.

... We still need to get to KL. TBS. They paid for it.

A beat.

... How long more? I dunno. Maybe ten minutes. They're not here yet.

A beat.

... I think that family hates me. Not that it matters. Most of them do. I read the reviews sometimes. They don't mention you by name but they will always specify the date, the carrier, the journey. *Don't book this bus service – driver was bad. Book this trip if you want to lose faith in humanity. Just take the plane. Cheap rate not worth your time or sanity.* Shit like that makes you want to leave them by the roadside. If I could I would just go. If they really hated it so much they could just hitchhike by foot. I would just leave them there, with their bags and their things, and not have to repeat myself over and over again over the stupidest little things. *Bawak passport. Passport sahaja. Bawak bag semua. Semua! Must pass through inspection. Tak boleh drive luar Tuas. Must ikot route. Tunggu. Tunggu sekejap. Tunggu!*

Bring your passport. Just your passport. And all of your bags. All of it! You can't drive outside of Tuas. I have to follow the route. Wait Wait for a bit. Wait!

A beat.

... I'm just joking. When did you become so fucking boring.

A beat.

... Whatever.

A beat. Passengers start returning back to the bus.

... Ok. They slowly coming back. I have to go soon. Nak derak lah. Hahahaha.

A beat.

... Ya. Ya. I don't know. I want to. But...

A beat.

... I'm trying to save. You know that.

A beat.

... 1500 RM is still better than 400 baht a month at that stupid park. I can pay for a room. I can pay for my phone bills. I can pay for myself. You understand? It's not my fault you cannot fucking get over yourself.

A beat.

... Sorry.

A beat.

... I didn't mean that. But I will try. I will, OK? I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

A beat.

... Or I'll take another job that passes through. Then I can buy you lunch after.

A beat.

... I won't be tired.

A beat.

... I need to do a headcount soon.

A beat.

... Maybe by 9pm.

A beat.

... I might not work tomorrow. Maybe. I don't know.

A beat.

... You should try come to KL too. I'll take you around. You might like it.

A beat.

... Is she still there?

A beat.

... Can you... yeah. Yeah. I'm serious. Just do it. Okay.

A beat.

... Hi.

A beat.

... Is it really you?

A beat.

... Ya. It's me. The same.

A beat.

... I miss you.

A beat.

... Why did you go back?

The bus is full. Before he gets his answer, he has to hang up. He enacts the headcount. He closes the door, and starts driving again.

05. "... I end my circle where I had begun,
My circle's end is where I have begun.."

***Kereta Tanahapi Melayu Berhad, 6pm, 3rd October.
En route Kuala Lumpur Sentral Station.***

Lover 1 & Lover 2 are on the train. They sit on opposite sides. They speak in French.

Lover 1 has a bulky, retro video film camera with her. She points it at Lover 2.

2: Put that away.

1: I haven't started rolling it yet.

2: I look like shit.

1: Who cares? You're beautiful.

2: Like actual death. I need to wash my face.

1: I like the way you look.

2: Are you rolling it?

1: No, not yet

2: Don't

1: It's just for

2: Just don't shoot anything, not now

1: I'm just looking in the viewfinder. Relax.

LOVER 1 keeps looking at LOVER 2 through it.

2: Are we just gonna keep talking like this now?

1: Yeah, we are till we get there

2: You're so bloody pretentious

1: Just stay there

LOVER 2 begrudgingly stays in that position. LOVER 1 starts shooting.

2: I heard something

1: What

2: The camera made a sound

1: It's just going

2: But

1: Just talk to me like I'm not shooting anything

2: Is this for your documentary?

1: Are you kidding?

2: I'm serious

1: It's just for me. Just.. talk about our trip.

LOVER 2 deliberates.

2: Well okay. We were in Singapore for a few days. Went to JB. Took the train to Gemas. Waited 3 hours just for the next one because it doesn't connect all the way. Now we're going to KL.

1: How do you find the train ride?

2: Exhausting. I don't know why I let you do this to me

1: It's the spirit of adventure

2: It is the most tiring inter country trip I've ever made in my life

1: You said you wanted to try it

2: As a joke

1: Then let it be known on record that you still chose to do it with me anyway

2: You're so mean, stop the camera

1: It's just

2: Just stop the bloody thing

1: Fine.

LOVER I stops the camera.

1: It's a waste of film.

2: Should have thought about that before you started it

1: It's just for

2: Memories sake whatever whatever

1: Are you not enjoying yourself?

2: I am, I'm just

1: Tired?

2: What do you think?

A beat.

2: This is just very new to me

1: Oh I'm sure.

LOVER I puts the camera away.

2: I'm not used to the scenic route.

1: I got that the first time.

2: It's not that I don't want to be here.

1: Okay.

2: Okay what?

1: Okay, I understand.

2: You do?

1: Yeah. I think I do.

A beat.

2: I didn't mean

1: I know you didn't

2: It's just

1: Your first time, I know, I know.

A beat. The train announcement goes off to signal the next stop.

2: I'm not part of your documentary though, am I?

1: No. I would have made you sign off on it.

2: What is it about?

1: It's about... I dunno.

2: You don't know what your own documentary is about?

1: I got a bit side tracked

2: But you got money for it, didn't you

1: I did, haven't

2: Spent it?

1: Yes I'm not that fucking irresponsible

2: I didn't say you were

1: You were thinking it.

A beat.

1: I don't know if it should be a documentary, that's the thing.

2: Oh

1: Yeah. I might re-pitch the whole thing. Might be a pain in the ass but I dunno. It just doesn't feel like it should be a documentary anymore.

2: So what do you want it to be?

The train stops. People get off.

1: We're almost there.

2: What should we do?

1: Check-in first I guess.

2: I'll book the Grab to the hotel

1: Might be expensive at the station

2: I can cover that. I'm

1: Tired, I know.

2: I just really want to sleep for a bit.

1: Then we'll go out in the evening.

2: I'm enjoying myself, I really am.

The train arrives. They take their baggage and get off.

1: You know what I liked about this

2: What?

1: I liked how repetitive it is doing it

2: You

1: Get on get off get on get off. That's just how it is to do this whole thing. And in that series of repetitive actions, miraculously you get to where you need to be at the other end of it.

2: I never understand you artistic types

1: Let's just hail a cab.

2: We need to use the app

1: Let's just get it the old fashioned way

2: You sure?

1: Sure of what? Taking a cab?

2: Yeah.

1: Some things you just have to do it the old way, right?

2: I suppose so.

They wait.

1: I wanted to pitch a series of photographs instead. Something less filmic. I liked the idea of the event already happening. When it's on video, you get to see it re-enacted almost. In photographs you only see fragments of what had already happened, and it's almost unfaithful to the work. You get what I mean? Because once it's immortalised in that way, the only thing left people can do is speculate. They don't get to see the work being played out in front of them anymore. It already happened, and all they get is the remnants of what I wanted to say.

2: That sounds more complicated.

1: Maybe it should be. More complicated than it actually is. Less convenient.

2: Right.

A beat.

2: Am I in it?

1: What?

2: Those photographs. Would I be in it?

A careful, tentative beat.

1: No. You wouldn't be.

A cab arrives. They hail it down.

They get into it.

End of play.

The Archives: Road to Nowhere



Kendi (c. 13th Century, Cambodia). Ceramic.

Characters

- TRICIA
- YOUNG TRICIA
- SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES
- WRITER 1, also as SHAH
- WRITER 2, also as FAIRUZ

Tricia Sin

PROLOGUE

TRICIA is seated in the Resource Gallery. She is seated in one of 11 to 12 chairs, which are arranged in a circle. Audience members are free to sit in the chairs, or to gather anywhere around her. She greets them as they come in.

TRICIA: What I am about to share with you was written for NUS Museum's Writing Lab programme in 2025, in response to the T.K Sabapathy Archives and the museum's collections.

SCENE 1 begins when TRICIA throws a collection of notes, print-outs, and her notebook into the center of the circle.

SCENE 1

TRICIA: I want to say that everything has history. That seems self-evident, right? Time goes on, and everything it leaves behind is history. That's why the Resource Gallery exists; it is a collection of things left behind, like vases that no longer hold water, and textiles that don't drape on anyone's body.

TRICIA points at a small, brown kendi.

TRICIA: Take that kendi. We did a writing exercise in our second Writing Lab workshop. Our facilitator, ila asked us to write a quick piece speculating about its life. In five minutes, I wrote the following /--

TRICIA clears her throat loudly. At the same time, YOUNG TRICIA jumps out from behind the shelves to read TRICIA's sprint writing exercise.

YOUNG TRICIA (*in a child-like voice*): Back when she was a Kendi — back before she had been bought by a pasty, ghost-like man — she loved to store water! It was a feeling of being really full, which

she thought of whenever she was empty. Her body full of liquid was sometimes hot, sometimes cold. These were words used by the lady who owned her, who she missed very much. That woman had given her a use, a touch and a gender. Back before glass.

As YOUNG TRICIA exits, TRICIA clears her throat again.

TRICIA: So you see, even in fiction I couldn't help but think of its history. I had the whole (theoretical) world in front of me, and I still felt inclined to look back. Why not a speculative sci-fi future, where the kendi becomes part of the body of a make-shift laser gun?

TRICIA mimes shooting something with her fingers.

TRICIA: Or why not a dystopian parallel reality, where I throw the kendi at the head of a zombie after a virus breaks out on the NUS campus? Even magic realism could be fun, and I could... look at the life of an art handler who accidentally discovers the genie trapped in the vessel. All of these lovely fictional possibilities, that I thought of only much, much later.

TRICIA meanders towards the kendi. She presses a palm flat against the glass case that surrounds it.

TRICIA: But if I were to do it all again, I know that my first instinct would still have been to go to its history. How many of the peers in my workshop wrote otherwise? We were all prompted to — just look at these text labels! Full of details about British Scholars who arrived in Singapore, destined to change the course of Southeast Asian art history FOREVER/--

SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES yells as he runs in from the archives reading room. He is beating his chest like a gorilla. TRICIA stares at him.

Beat.

TRICIA: Wrong costume.

Beat.

SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES removes his tall coat. Underneath he is wearing a white formal shirt. He puts on glasses and a tie and appears much more docile.

He is REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES.

REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES: Better?

TRICIA: Better.

REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES smiles and waves like a princess. He walks around the circle of chairs. As he walks, the Royal March plays. After completing one circle around the chairs, he salutes TRICIA like a King's Guard before marching back to the archives reading room. TRICIA takes care to salute back.

TRICIA: Ahem. Where was I? Putting labels about old men aside, so much about this room pushes you right into the past. Like, look at that haunting glass case. I remember thinking this during the workshop that day. That the case is so... clear. It is so clear that every piece looks as if it is suspended in mid-air. It's almost like the kendi is *in medias res*. You know what I mean? Like someone looked at it in the middle of falling, like they trapped it in that square moment between its last action and its next. You look at this glass case and you cannot help but think/--

TRICIA directs this question to the kendi.

TRICIA: How on earth did you get stuck here?

TRICIA waits desperately for an answer. After hearing no response, she returns to her seat in the circle. She makes the audience wait for some time before addressing them again.

TRICIA: Earlier I told you that everything has history. Actually, that's more of a personal wish than fact. It's why I chose to study history, to be a history major. Deep inside, I wanted to believe that all histories could be recovered — whether it was through oral history interviews, or maritime archaeology, or through archives. All these people lost through the years, somehow or somehow I wanted to think that you could find them.

TRICIA straightens her back.

TRICIA: But the reality is that not everybody gets to be remembered as part of History. Not everybody has their story recorded in the archives. Or has their kendi bought by a colonial-era museum curator, so that others can reinterpret your story when it's SG60. Some people are just gaps in the narratives told by their own descendants.

TRICIA addresses the audience.

TRICIA: Let me ask all of you. How long do you think you, personally, are going to be remembered? Show of hands?

TRICIA waits for answers from audience members. After the first audience member answers, she asks if the others agree. Depending on the answers, TRICIA can remark that audience members think that they are either really important, or really unimportant.

TRICIA: Ok lah, so we all think we're going to be forgotten at some point right. History is just like that. At some point even History becomes history.

Agitated, TRICIA walks to the centre and stands in front of her notes.

TRICIA: That's the truth of why I really wanted to take part in the Writing Lab. I looked at all the people left behind: those whose histories had been left out of History, those whose lives that slipped away in the narratives we wrote. If I could not find a historical truth in the archives, then I wanted to try and find a fictional one.

TRICIA bends down to pick up her scattered notebooks and papers. YOUNG TRICIA walks over to help her.

TRICIA: This is the history of this work: it started as a tour, it was briefly a play, and now it is a lecture-performance on what it means to fictionalise history. I'll tell you the story of how I ended up here, and maybe you can help me figure out what to do next. Take your time and look around the Resource Gallery. I'll see you at *Radio Malaya*.

TRANSITION 1

Audience members are given some time to explore the Resource Gallery. After an appropriate break, they are to be ushered to Radio Malaya for SCENE 2. Optionally, student docents or ushers may be scattered around the Gallery to engage audience members in conversations about the exhibition/ object histories of specific pieces.

SCENE 2

TRICIA and REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES are sitting on a bench in Radio Malaya. As they swing their legs, TRICIA offers REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES a piece of chocolate Pocky. They continue until audience members are seated.

TRICA: I think I've been to *Radio Malaya* too many times.

TRICIA crushes the Pocky wrapper and tosses it.

TRICIA: Between tours for uni classes and a brief internship, I've walked through this exhibition at least 30 times. You pick up a few tricks over the years to make each return trip easier. I always tell people to turn tightly around the corner when they see Lim Mu Hue's woodblock prints. If you wander too far, you'll trigger an interactive artwork whose hum drowns out any conversation.

If the audience is too spread out, TRICIA can take this opportunity to get them to move closer.

TRICIA leans on the shoulder of REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES.

TRICIA: When it comes to *Radio Malaya*, the best tip I can give you is this: throw everything away at the door. Let every visit be a process of rediscovery. It is only through discarding these things (your memories, your art history knowledge) that you find new narratives that weren't there before.

Beat.

TRICIA: But I've always struggled with that. With throwing things away.

REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES exits scene. TRICIA moves off to stage left. They are replaced on the bench by WRITER 1, YOUNG TRICIA and WRITER 2.

TRICIA: Writing always begins with reading. I approached this piece by first reading the material in T.K. Sabapathy's archives.

YOUNG TRICIA lifts up several books. YOUNG TRICIA, WRITER 1 and WRITER 2 begin flipping through them. They begin a choreographed movement which imitates the physical process of research. As TRICIA lists artists or art movements, they produce photographs for the audience.

TRICIA: T.K. Sabapathy is an art historian and a pioneer in the study of Southeast Asian art. You may not know him but anyone with any interest in Singaporean art has felt his impact. For over half a century, Sabapathy worked tirelessly. His contributions to Singapore's art scholarship include the gargantuan task of identifying the "Nanyang" style of painting together with the late Redza Piyadasa.

YOUNG TRICIA, WRITER 1 and WRITER 2 point to Nanyang pieces in Radio Malaya.

TRICIA: Throughout his career, Sabapathy has remained dedicated to mentoring the next generation of art scholars. The existence of the archives are an extension of this. He donated his letters, original writings, and various recordings to NUS Museum for study. Materials in the archives were as diverse as Sabapathy was prolific. So before I could start writing a fictional piece, I had to answer simple questions about the archive: what did each piece say? Who were they speaking to? And what did they say about Sabapathy, their collector?

WRITER 1 drops their books and approaches TRICIA. WRITER 1 and WRITER 2 should deliver the lines as if coaxing.

WRITER 1: It has been 13 years since the National Museum Art Gallery was set up. Now that it is closed for renovation and is scheduled to be reopened in September next year, it is time to reflect on our accomplishments and our expectations of an institution such as the gallery. Art and the gallery are indivisible. The museum-cum-gallery is the temple of art, it constitutes the mystic body of Art. Art is born and buried in the gallery/--

TRICIA: From "The need for a real art gallery," written by Sabapathy for The Straits Times, published on 13th September 1989/--

WRITER 2 drops their books and approaches TRICIA.

WRITER 2: I have a request to make: will you give permission for your works to be photographed in slide-form for teaching purposes in the courses I offer in the School of Architecture, National University of Singapore? Once again, I have gained enormously in looking at and meditating over your paintings. I am of the opinion that you have disclosed and unveiled a joyful, gracious view of people, places and things/--

TRICIA: A letter to Georgette Chen, 30 October, 1985/--

YOUNG TRICIA drops their books.

YOUNG TRICIA: The first chapter in the story of art history in Singapore was effectively closed. Appeals to Sullivan in London for direction and advice drew a single, consistent response: graduate or any serious and further studies in art history were feasible only in institutions overseas. It was a response that haunts me until today. (So much so that when students approach me expressing interests in pursuing studies in art history, I unhesitatingly tell them to pack their bags and leave for institutions in Australia, Europe or the U.S.A. as facilities for such studies do not exist here).

TRICIA: Taken directly from *The Road to Nowhere*, an essay that maps T.K. Sabapathy's career against the path of art history in Singapore. Sabapathy wrote this in 2010, 48 years after he left Singapore to do his Masters in California.

TRICIA, YOUNG TRICIA, WRITER 1 and WRITER 2 stand in a row. REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES returns from off-stage to join them. The five actors begin a movement that ends in them sitting cross-legged on the floor. This movement should feel like a cascade.

TRICIA: I was confused and endeared by the person that I found in the archives. The hurt of Sabapathy's early setbacks seemed to settle in his psyche like arthritis in the bones. Here and again, they resurface in his personal writing: his forced departure from Singapore for graduate

studies in 1962, the closure of University of Singapore's art museum and faculty in 1970, and his displacement from Singapore until 1980. At the apex of his career, Sabapathy still sounds as uncertain as my friends have been in the months leading up to graduation.

Beat.

TRICIA: Yet his love for Art comes across as unwaveringly confident. Only one year into his role as a columnist, Sabapathy would write a scathing letter to fellow Straits Times reviewer Rachel Barnes regarding her review of an exhibition of Malay art and craft. His long critique of her review content and intention ended with two curt lines: "If you care to reply, directly to me, fine. Otherwise, happy writing."

The actors jump up one by one, beginning with REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES. This time, the actors should help each other up.

TRICIA: How do you distill a life so complex into a single narrative? There was the history of Sabapathy the person, the history of Sabapathy the writer, and the history of art history that was embedded into his story.

TRICIA, YOUNG TRICIA, WRITER 1 and WRITER 2 put on glasses similar to REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES. The characters, excluding TRICIA, walk around Radio Malaya. As they cross paths, they touch.

TRICIA: The answer is that you can't. Or that I couldn't. I tried to. The very first iteration of this piece was meant to be a site-specific play that doubled up as a tour.

At regular intervals characters should exit Radio Malaya.

TRICIA: Taking inspiration from the *Road to Nowhere*, this tour paired the development of NUS Museum with Sabapathy's personal

development. It had 8 scenes and began by unpacking Sabapathy's relationship with Michael Sullivan, who was both the first University Curator and Sabapathy's first professor in the history of art. Thereafter were scenes that included Ng Eng Teng's donation of his life's work to the museum and a conversation between Sabapathy and an aspiring student in the 2010s. It was ambitious, to say the least. Too much for a first time playwright with limited time.

By this point, all characters besides TRICIA have exited the stage.

TRICIA: This was the first hard lesson I learned about writing fiction based in history. It was advice that the playwright Jean Tay had given us in Workshop 2. I struggled to take that advice early on, and had to learn the hard way.

TRICIA removes her glasses.

TRICIA: You have to throw things away. A good piece must have good focus, and so you can't have everything. Just as a history paper would have a specified timeline, a fictional narrative must have defined characters and a plot that can only have so many dimensions. Regardless of how much you want it to, it will never have the same depth as real life.

Beat.

TRICIA: So this lovely person that I had come to know through the archives... I had to throw them away.

TRICIA throws away the glasses in her hands.

Blackout. End Scene.

TRANSITION SCENE 2

The audience is given some time to through Radio Malaya. They are then ushered to Ng Eng Teng's 1+1=1. YOUNG TRICIA, WRITER 1, WRITER 2 and REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES may serve as docents and answer questions about the gallery for interested guests.

SCENE 3

When the audience enters, TRICIA is sniffing in front of the glass case that faces Ng Eng Teng's The Last Masterpiece.

TRICIA: I forgot to tell you all that I've been a bit sick.

TRICIA sneezes. REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES runs in with a tissue box. He exits after handing it off to TRICIA.

TRICIA: Thank you.

After blowing her nose for some time, TRICIA runs out of tissues.

TRICIA: Oh... That will have to do for now. Where did we drop off?

Beat.

TRICIA: Oh, yes. Throwing things away. That's a lot easier said than done you know.

TRICIA dumps her used tissues in a nearby trash can.

TRICIA: I tried to be optimistic about it and think of it as what I preferred to save, I guess. Sort of like we're in a Russian Roulette kind of situation and I have to decide which history gets to live and which has to die.

YOUNG TRICIA, REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES, WRITER 1 and WRITER 2 march out holding hands. They are wearing identical targets and prison uniforms. A song and dance ensues in which TRICIA tries to shoot the targets with a finger gun. This should appear like a scene from a vaudeville. Eventually, all targets are shot apart from REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES. When REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES sees that he is the only one left standing, he gets on his knees to beg for mercy.

TRICIA: Out of the different Sabapathys I had come to know, one intrigued me the most. It was Sabapathy the mentee, whose relationship with Michael Sullivan was layered and complex.

TRICIA extends a hand to REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES. She helps him up before passing him a script.

TRICIA: Ahem. Read this with me. (To audience) I'm Sabapathy and he's Sullivan.

TRICIA AS SABAPATHY: Dear Professor Sullivan, I give Mrs Sullivan and you greetings. I hope you are both well. Do you recall the occasion of our last meeting? It was October 1965, in the Senior Common Room of SOAS. You invited me to meet with you, and we had a glass of sherry. So much has happened since then. I have been attached to the School of Architecture since 1982, where I teach classes in the survey of art. I have also been endeavouring to revive the art collection you initiated. You have been a source of unending inspiration to me, and have shaped my professional life in ways that may well surprise you. If such a visit is convenient for you, I will be in London from 7th to 13th September. I would love to meet you both.

REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES AS SULLIVAN: Dear Kanaga, we have just returned from a whirlwind-like world trip and I have an enormous amount to do. Khoan and I am delighted that you have achieved so much. This is just to say that we expect to be home on September 10 & 11, and would be happy to see you if you can come

up to 15 Oxford. Give us a ring when you get to London. Best regards from us both.

TRICIA: End scene.

TRICIA passes her script to REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES as he leaves the stage.

TRICIA: Sabapathy's relationship with Sullivan changed over time. What started as a professor-student relationship evolved over the years into a friendship. The dialogue we just read to you was adapted from letters between Sabapathy and Sullivan. They continued to write to each other for a number of years. But although these letters were positive and full of sentimentality, there were things that troubled me.

YOUNG TRICIA enters the stage. YOUNG TRICIA and TRICIA begin a choreographed movement that makes it appear as if they are mirror images.

TRICIA: How could Sabapathy feel so much affection for Sullivan? I did not understand it. When Sullivan told Sabapathy to leave Singapore for his graduate studies... when he told Sabapathy that there was no future in staying home, he hurt Sabapathy very very deeply. It is not clear that Sabapathy ever forgave him for this: in "Road to Nowhere" it is clear that Sabapathy felt neglected. Yet he never failed to speak to (or about) Sullivan with great reverence. The kind that is core to the structure of a mentor-mentee relationship.

TRICIA ends the mirrored movement by gripping YOUNG TRICIA's shoulders.

TRICIA: Do we always forgive the people we respect like that?

YOUNG TRICIA cups TRICIA's hands. Gradually, she slides them down so that they are holding hands.

TRICIA: To understand the nuance of this history, I felt as if I had to write about it.

SHAH and FAIRUZ enter. They are holding scripts.

TRICIA: So I created Fairuz and Shah, based on alternative ideas of what a mentor-mentee relationship might look like. Fairuz was an elusive mentor, who wasn't straightforward with their lessons. Meanwhile, Shah was a reclusive mentee, who seemed unwilling to learn from their "flighty" supervisor. With these characters, I tried my hand at writing a short play.

TRICIA sits off to the side with YOUNG TRICIA and REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES. As the following dialogue ensues, she watches her fellow audience members instead of SHAH and FAIRUZ.

YOUNG TRICIA: Roadtonowherescene | version | trialrun / - -

FAIRUZ: So when you come in, you have to go past the roundabout. The entrance is a bit hidden. *(pause)* It's your first time here right?

SHAN: Yes, I had my interview at a cafe. At the time Sam said there was no space to sit in the museum and if there was space to sit, then there was space for storage.

FAIRUZ: Still the same, sorry. Things are still a bit hectic. When did you move back ah? I hope you had some time to rest.

SHAN: I touched down two days ago.

FAIRUZ: Two days ago? Wah crazy... that's how I know you're young. Starting a new job in a new country 48 hours after getting off a plane is something you can only do when you're twenty-four. Haven't even unpack yet.

SHAN: I think returning home is easier than arriving in a new country--

FAIRUZ: Aiya — new time zone, new climate, new people. You know what I mean. Basically a new country.

SHAN: SHAN trips over a box.

FAIRUZ: Careful!

SHAN: I'm okay.

FAIRUZ: FAIRUZ helps SHAN up before rushing to check the contents of the box.

FAIRUZ: Okay, safe! Good thing you're both fine. Sorry ah, I should have warned you earlier to watch out for the mess. There's some things we're not done sorting out.

SHAN: It's okay, I should have paid more attention. That's what I'm here for, anyway. To help with the mess.

FAIRUZ: Yes, yes, yes, of course.

FAIRUZ: FAIRUZ gestures at a marble table. They take a seat together.

FAIRUZ: What did Doctor de Souza tell you about the job scope?

SHAN: Nothing much. Professor de Souza gave me a very brief overview. She said the museum was looking for more hands, that it's still young— it's just not really the best time to look for work back in the UK right now.

FAIRUZ: Understand, understand. Well, just to prepare you... It's only been a few years since the Museum was instituted, and things are still quite messy. There's a lot to do when you're playing catch-up on fifty years of neglect. Good thing you're here 'cause I don't have time to start from the basics. What did you do at the Tate?

SHAN: I don't... I don't think talking about the Tate would be helpful. I feel like so much has changed since I left. I don't know how things work anymore. Maybe you should give me a summary of how things work here.

FAIRUZ: New country, right? When you left for the UK, SAM and ACM were still young. Now hearsay the government is working on turning the old City Hall and Supreme Court buildings into a national gallery. Time waits for no one, especially in Singapore. *(pause)* You should go see them.

SHAN: The old City Hall and Supreme Court?

FAIRUZ: No lah, SAM and ACM. You haven't been since coming back right?

SHAN: Not yet.

FAIRUZ: Good. Then this will be your first task as a curator-in-training. To find and visit all of the museums in Singapore. Big and small. Then when you are done, can come back and tell us what you learned.

SHAN: SHAN looks visibly confused.

SHAN: Are you sure? You said that the museum is messy and that there's a lot to do. I'd much rather get right to work anyway. I can always visit other museums on the weekend.

FAIRUZ: How can you do work if you don't even know where you are?

Silence.

FAIRUZ: Trust me. Everything I do has a reason.

After a brief silence, TRICIA and REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES start clapping.

YOUNG TRICIA: So, what did you think? I mean, it's my first time writing a play so I get that it might be a bit shoddy/- -

REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES: It's not bad, its not bad.

Beat.

REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES: it's just... Don't take this the wrong way, but what exactly are you trying to say?

YOUNG TRICIA: Um. I was just trying to show a different kind of mentor-mentee relationship I guess and/- -

REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES: No I know but... what are you trying to say about the mentor-mentee relationship? Is it bad? Is it good? I feel like I don't know what it is that you think.

YOUNG TRICIA and REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES freeze..

TRICIA: That was the response to my first attempt at a play. Ouch. In getting caught up in the history of it all—the fascination of someone else's life, and the beauty of their loved experience—I had forgotten a key tenet of writing. That you need to know what you want to say.

TRICIA looks between YOUNG TRICIA and REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES.

TRICIA: Not only do you need to know what you want to say, but you have to take strong ownership of it. It was a strange realization, that to bring to light someone's lost narrative, you had to give your voice importance over theirs. That's what it means to write in response to history.

TRICIA stands in the foreground. Behind her, SHAH, FAIRUZ, YOUNG TRICIA and REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES remain frozen. From time to time, they shift all at once, as if like robots.

TRICIA: The idea is still terrifying. Wielding that authority, having that power... I still shudder at the thought of silencing people. Who knew trying to run away from the responsibility of historical writing would just lead me to another kind of the same thing?

TRICIA turns behind. She grabs YOUNG TRICIA's hand and pulls her out of her "frozen" state.

TRICIA: That's how I knew I couldn't continue with the play. Not until I confronted my fears. One way or another, this piece would progress. And I couldn't do it until I really thought about what was scaring me. See you at the space outside the Archives Reading Room.

TRANSITION SCENE 3

SHAH, FAIRUZ and REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES remain frozen while the audience explores $1+1=1$. After an appropriate amount of time, the audience is led to the space outside the Archives Reading Room.

SCENE 4

TRICIA: Look at us! We're right back where we started.

TRICIA laughs.

TRICIA: Let me go back to what I said.

YOUNG TRICIA: All these people lost through the years, somehow or somehow I wanted to think that you could find them.

TRICIA: At the start of this play, I said that if I couldn't write historical truths, then I would try to write fictional ones. I think I severely underestimated the burden of writing fictional ones. I'm not quite ready to take either step, whether it is to throw things away or to take ownership of what I'm saying. I feel like that's why Sabapathy's words kept appearing, in each and every iteration of this piece. No matter what I wrote, I always felt the need to defer to his words.

WRITER 1, WRITER 2 and REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES start reading SABAPATHY's monologues from previous versions of this work. After looking around at them, YOUNG TRICIA joins in with a selection from this play. TRICIA winces and cups her ears. She attempts to shout over them.

TRICIA: THAT'S WHY THIS TIME I WANTED TO USE MY OWN WORDS.

WRITER 1, WRITER 2, YOUNG TRICIA and REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES go quiet.

TRICIA: This time I wanted to use my own words alongside his. Step 3 on the road to writing fiction based on history: learning to trust yourself. Maybe this should have come first. I know it's no easy answer, because I still feel that insecurity. What gives me the authority to curate, what gives me the authority to choose and be heard?

TRICIA grabs onto WRITER 1, WRITER 2, YOUNG TRICIA and REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES and pushes them together. She prepares them for something.

TRICIA: But what if the risk is to lose everything? To lose to history Sabapathy the mentee, to lose the richness of his layered life, and to lose what he represents of the many people who walked through the doors of NUS Museum?

TRICIA initiates a trust fall. Hopefully, WRITER 1, WRITER 2, REFORMED SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES and YOUNG TRICIA catch her. TRICIA continues her dialogue in this position.

TRICIA: The right answer is to write with knowledge of my shortcomings. Not in spite or regardless of them. I know I struggle to throw things away, and I know I struggle with taking ownership of what I have to say. This time I'll trust myself to figure these things out. So that I can let my love of History carry me somewhere, and then let the urge to write carry me even further.

The others set TRICIA down.

TRICIA: This is the history of this work: it started as a tour, it was briefly a play, and now it is a lecture-performance on what it means to fictionalise history. I've told you how I got here; I'll see you the next time I decide on where to go next. Who knows, maybe next time I'll write a comedy.

TRICIA winks.

End scene.

Writers' Bios

Zhixin Sheng is a recent graduate of Yale-NUS College, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Arts and Humanities. Her practice encompasses photography, creative writing, particularly lyric essays and poetry, as well as installation. She is interested in the narrative possibilities between the intersection of text and image, and how literature, cinema, and installation converge to evoke affective and intersubjective experiences. An ongoing focus of her work is the representation of memory and its negotiation through perception and narrative form.

Ho Yi Lin is an undergraduate English Literature student at National University of Singapore. She dabbles in literary art forms of poetry and creative non-fiction, and her works have appeared in Same Faces Collective, Antler Velvet Magazine, and some others. You can contact her on Instagram at @leanzered.

KQH Faith is a third-year Literature student. She is an editor at Margins, the NUS student-run journal. Her work has been published by Paper Jam in a pamphlet featuring five of her poems and by AFTERIMAGE, which features three poems in the OFTHENOW Substack. She is interested in time, subjective documentation, and re-membering of the past.

Marliini Heikkonen is a Singaporean writer who grew up between Tampines and the Finnish countryside. She recently earned her Bachelor of Arts in History and Philosophy, where she studied across NUS, Princeton, and Oxford. First published as a teen in Foyles' Young Poets of the Year Anthology (2018), Marliini writes about the perennial intrigue that surrounds heritage, belonging and becoming—obsessions that drive both her academic and creative work. Presently, Marliini works in heritage conservation in Singapore. Read more of her work on her page at marliini.substack.com.

Wee Yi Li Grace is an aspiring short story writer. Having recently completed her Bachelor's degree in History, her soft spots for environmental and art histories continue to guide her writing. Her creative non-fiction has been awarded at the NUS Libraries Writers' Centre Literary Awards (2024). Presently, she is captivated by more-than-human representations of nature and magical realism—the stranger, the better.

Ahmad Syarif is a final-year Maritime Studies undergraduate at Nanyang Technological University with interests in ocean imaginaries and the ethnographies of coastal and island communities in maritime Southeast Asia. As an emerging writer, he aims to document and reimagine environmental ontologies and ecosemiotic practice; his collection of poems on affective ecologies received an Honourable Mention in the Golden Point Award, and he devoted his Oxford University Creative Writing Summer School portfolio to the displacement of the Orang Laut and Singapore's fading island and ocean memory.

Wong Yang is a journalist and writer. He is interested in how the personal and the political interface with land, ecology and memory, and the ways in which art can serve as a bulwark against forgetting. His poetry reviews have been published in Cha: An Asian Literary Journal and The Straits Times.

Dia Hakim Khaeri is an actor, playwright and dramaturg mostly within the realm of theatre. Their practice revolves around their current urgencies, and is rooted in Singapore.

Tricia Sin is a penultimate year History student at the National University of Singapore. She is a bit technologically challenged, which is why she only just learned how to use the monitor her sister left behind five years ago. On that note, she apologises for all unread messages. Since writing is a muscle, Tricia wants to try every medium at least once. This is her first time writing a play. Special thanks to her writing friends, who keep her buoyed.

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About NUS Museum

NUS Museum is a university museum that functions to advance critical inquiry, interdisciplinary learning, and experimental curatorial practice. Positioned within the National University of Singapore and focused on Southeast Asian and Asian visual cultures, the Museum serves as a platform for teaching, research, and dialogue across disciplines. Through collections-based inquiry, collaborative partnerships, and reflective exhibition-making, it fosters new ways of engaging histories, shaping knowledge, and contributing to regional museological discourse.



Museum