

“Lundberg combines accessibility with a uniquely Singaporean flavor in his selections. SF readers looking to expand their horizons will enjoy visiting new worlds from an unaccustomed point of view.” *Publishers Weekly*



FISH EATS LION

NEW SINGAPOREAN SPECULATIVE FICTION

EDITED BY
Jason Erik Lundberg

Contents

[Preface | Jason Erik Lundberg](#)
[Agnes Joaquim, Bioterrorist | Ng Yi-Sheng](#)
[Punggol | Ben Slater](#)
[Welcome to the Pond | Wei Fen Lee](#)
[Last Supper | Jeffrey Lim](#)
[Rewrites | Shelly Bryant](#)
[Big Enough for the Entire Universe | Victor Fernando R. Ocampo](#)
[The Digits | Ivan Ang](#)
[Apocalypse Approaches | Daryl Yam](#)
[010011010100010101001101010011110101001001011001 | Justin Ker](#)
[Dewy | Grace Chia Kraković](#)
[Where No Cars Go | JY Yang](#)
[Green Man Plus | Isa Kamari](#)
[Mirage | Noelle de Jesus](#)
[Feng Shui Train | Yuen Kit Mun](#)
[Last Time Kopitiam | Marc de Faoite](#)
[Chapter 28: Energy | The Centipede Collective](#)
[Waiting For the Snow | Carrick Ang](#)
[The Moon and the Stars | Andrew Cheah](#)
[The Disappearance of Lisa Zhang | Dave Chua](#)
[Open | Tan Ming Tuan](#)
[Zero Hour | Cyril Wong](#)

[About the contributors](#)

FISH EATS LION

New Singaporean Speculative Fiction

edited by Jason Erik Lundberg

Published by
infinity plus
www.infinityplus.co.uk/books
Follow @ipebooks on Twitter

Originally published in a print edition by Math Paper Press, 2012.
© Jason Erik Lundberg and contributors 2012, 2014

Cover © Keith Brooke and Weter777

No portion of this book may be reproduced by any means, mechanical, electronic, or otherwise, without first obtaining the permission of the copyright holder.

The moral right of Jason Erik Lundberg and contributors to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

Books by Jason Erik Lundberg

Embracing the Strange: The Transformative Impact of Speculative Fiction

The Alchemy of Happiness

Red Dot Irreal

Strange Mammals

The Time Traveler's Son

Four Seasons in One Day (with Janet Chui)

The Curragh of Kildaire (illustrated by Jamie Bishop)

As Editor

The Epigram Books Collection of Best New Singaporean Short Stories: Volume One

LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction

Fish Eats Lion: New Singaporean Speculative Fiction

A Field Guide to Surreal Botany (with Janet Chui)

Scattered, Covered, Smothered

Preface

Jason Erik Lundberg

The Republic of Singapore is known by several monikers: The Garden City, The Lion City, The Little Red Dot, and The "Fine" Country (for the hefty fines implemented by the government to ensure cleanliness and order). All of these, including the last, have come from the top down, as a deliberate way to brand the country in such a way as to make it positively memorable, and hence appealing for foreign investment and tourism. Singapore is every day reinventing itself.

One way that this has been done is through the creation of the iconic symbol of the Merlion. The Merlion was designed and developed as a logo for the Singapore Tourism Board in 1964: a mythical creature with the head of a lion and the scaled body of a fish. The concept of the merlion is not original to Singapore; it occurs in art and heraldry throughout history in locations as diverse as India, Etruria, the United Kingdom, and the Philippines. However, Singapore is the only modern country to adopt the merlion as a national symbol, combining the nation's historical identity as a Malay fishing village with its nomenclature in Bahasa Melayu: *Singapura*, the Lion City. The Merlion statue created in 1972 and currently residing at Marina Bay, which continually gushes water into the Singapore River from its open leonine mouth, remains a popular tourist attraction.

Although the fabrication of the Merlion as a national symbol is an interesting example of reinvention, even more interesting is the process of deliberate myth-making. Singapore is constantly telling stories about itself, to investors, to skilled and educated foreign workers, to the organizers of international sporting events, but most of all to itself. The annual National Day Parade, celebrated each year on the 9th of August to commemorate Singapore's independence, is an hours-long immersion in narrative: a rah-rah observance of nationalism, a listing of the nation's accomplishments, and a reminder not to take for granted the affluence and racial harmony that the country now boasts. Underlying this is the theme that Singapore's citizens ought to show appreciation for what its leaders have achieved since 1965, a notion that invariably leads to a snarky counter-response from many people, and occasional confusion from students who uncritically (and incorrectly) parrot how former Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew single-handedly hauled the nation out of the third-world muck and set it on its inevitable course toward first-world prosperity.

There is an inherent strangeness in constantly telling your own story that lends well to the writing of speculative fiction. Traditionally, fantasy and science fiction (and all

the places in between) have not seen much popularity within Singaporean literature, other than sensationalist ghost stories that tap into the culture's deep folk-religious roots. It can be found, but one must specifically go looking for it, and very often it is disguised as more "literary" magic realism or fabulation. And yet, these core "paraliterary" genres are quite popular amongst the nation's readers, regularly appearing in the bestselling lists at chain bookstores like Books Kinokuniya. When Neil Gaiman was a featured guest of the 2009 Singapore Writers Festival, the queue for his signing line stretched over a thousand people from The Arts House down to the Singapore River.

Being a writer and editor of speculative fiction, it has worried me to see such a lack of published SF writing within a Singaporean context, and so this anthology was born. I cannot thank publisher Kenny Leck enough for taking a chance on this book, and encouraging the proliferation of further imaginative writing in Singapore. During the submissions process, I was gratified at the overwhelming amount of submitted short fiction, which only confirmed my impression that Singaporeans are indeed writing fantastical stories, and are either presumably shelving them in favour of more "realist" writing or sending them to overseas markets for publication.

What you hold in your hands is a compilation of the best original speculative fiction being written in Singapore today, a home-grown anthology featuring a refreshing variety of voices and perspectives. Here are tales that are recognizably science fiction and fantasy, and others that blend genres and tropes, including absurdism, police procedural, fairy tales, steampunk, pre- and post-apocalypse, political satire, and alien first contact. These twenty-two stories—from emerging writers publishing their first work to winners of the Singapore Literature Prize and the Cultural Medallion—explore the fundamental singularity of the Lion City.

This book is a celebration of the vibrant creative power underlying Singapore's inventive prose stylists, where what is considered normal and what is strange are blended in fantastic new ways. It is presented in the hope that many more will follow it in the years to come.

Agnes Joaquim, Bioterrorist

Ng Yi-Sheng

History would forever remember 2 July 1899 as one of the darkest days of the British Empire, for it was on that day that disaster smote that most precious jewel in the Crown's possessions, the Oriental colony of Singapore.

The city's most loyal subjects were gathered on the Padang that morning, sweltering in their finest dress jackets, hoop skirts, sarongs and mandarins' robes upon the grounds of the Singapore Cricket Club. Regiments of *sepoys* in khaki uniforms stood at attention, overseen by mounted officers from the Service. Hordes of Asiatic schoolchildren played hymns on oversized bagpipes. An engineer from the Hokkien Clan Association directed a crew of coolies in the manipulation of their hydraulic dragon dance machine.

All were assembled to greet their guest: no less a figure than Her Majesty Victoria, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Defender of the Faith and Empress of India. Following her Golden Jubilee, at the age of eighty, the monarch had resolved to make a grand tour of her territories, cruising from London to Cape Town to Nova Scotia by means of her gilded zeppelin.

She had disembarked but two days before, leaving her airship moored over the newly completed Raffles Hotel, where she was accommodated in a customized luxury suite. In her honour, colourful streamers dangled from bamboo poles across the island: every shophouse and every *kampong* hovel displayed the hues of the Union Flag—even the rickshaw coolies had taken to emblazoning their vehicles with penny black stamps as a display of their devotion to the profile of the Queen.

There was, ultimately, only one problem. The Queen was late.

The officers and merchants on the Padang checked their pocket watches, shaking their heads, as the *memsahibs* fanned themselves with increasingly impatient vigour. She should have emerged at half eight, and now it was well nigh twenty past ten. Whatever could be the matter?

Then, suddenly, a peon came running onto the field: a young Chinese man with his pigtail flying behind him, an expression of acute distress on his face. "Sound the alarm!" he exclaimed, as he prostrated himself before the podium of the Governor. "Her Majesty is under attack!"

Almost as one, the assembly leapt to their horses, their coaches, their sedan chairs and their feet. Walking canes, umbrellas and young children were lost in the mêlée of hooves and wheels as the crowd rushed to the Raffles. As they dismounted, each

visage was touched with horror as they beheld the great calamity that had befallen.

For indeed, not only was their Queen in peril: the very building she had been housed within had been taken prisoner by an explosive growth of giant purple orchids. These botanic horrors penetrated every storey of the edifice with an excrescence of creeping tendrils. Guardsmen openly wept as they attempted to penetrate the foliage, hacking with their *parangs* at the greenery.

At the centre it all, the Governor stood agape, a single name quivering on his dumbstruck lips.

"Agnes," he finally whispered. "Agnes Joaquim."

~

By all accounts, young Agnes had had no initial inclination to become a terrorist. Born in 1854 into a wealthy Armenian immigrant family, she grew up in a splendid mansion on the undulating lands near the New Harbour, an area vulgarly known as Tanjong Pagar.

As the eldest daughter among eleven siblings, she assumed the role of housekeeper at an early age. Her girlish voice would often be heard supervising the Cantonese servants and urging her mother to purchase the latest imported domestic gadgets, such as the microwave eggbeater and the orgone-powered frigidaire.

Then in 1889, everything changed. One summer afternoon, while promenading in the family estate, she discovered the flower. It budded amidst the bamboo thickets, its handsome sepals opening in the shape of a pentacle. She dug it up with her hands, entranced by its delicate form and its strange, subtle scent. Hurriedly, she moved it to the potting shed, bedded it in fertile soil and rushed back to the kitchen, unable to understand the sense of thrill that had been planted in her heart, nor the pounding noises that had begun in the drums of her ears.

A month later, she paid a call on Henry Ridley, the Director of the Botanical Gardens. He received her in his laboratory, built as a vast terrarium, thriving with bromeliads, epiphytes, rubber-tree pods and foolish butterflies that fluttered next to the jaws of carnivorous plants.

"My dear Miss Joaquim!" he exclaimed with a bow. He had reason enough to be courteous, for her family had supported his recent research with not insignificant donations.

"Ah, and I see you've brought a little friend." He examined the flower, pausing to admire its rosy hue and elaborate column, which had been formed from a fused stamen and stigma, almost in the shape of an angel robed in mauve. "Extraordinary," he declared. "A cross between *Vanda teres* and *Vanda hookeriana*, unless I'm much mistaken. Wherever did you find it?"

She described the circumstances of her discovery.

"By Jove, you deserve a reward! Tell you what: I hereby christen this blossom the *Vanda Miss Joaquim*. There's immortality for you!"

Agnes took a deep breath. She had prepared what she was about to say for the past two weeks, and she was not going to make a hash of it. Patiently, she explained that while she was very grateful for Mr Ridley's kindness in bestowing the flower with her name, she sought a more mutually productive form of reward: that of working within the Botanical Gardens' experimental greenhouses, aiding him in his research and perhaps even pursuing her own.

She further assured him that she expected no financial compensation: rather, she was certain that her family would continue to sponsor his research as they had in the past, on the sole condition that she be granted access to his experimental facilities. She paused for breath. Ridley stood blinking, amidst the circling butterflies.

Throughout the rickshaw ride back to her mansion, her face burned with triumph. She had succeeded. In her hands, she clutched her own personal set of keys to the terrarium.

This was what the flower wanted of her; she knew it. For she had heard its commands over the last month, even as she scolded the cook or folded the bedclothes of her nieces and nephews. She stroked the petals of the specimen that sat on her lap, remembering that in her veins ran its fiery sap, transferred via the touch of its spongy roots, its slender stalk, and its gossamer labellum. And in her ears rang the flower's words, over and over like a malfunctioning gramophone: "Only you can change the world."

~

Five years later, in 1894, the Joaquim household was alarmed by the arrival of a horse-drawn police carriage at their door, containing a flustered English constable, two inscrutable Sikh *sepoys* and their maiden aunt Agnes, handcuffed and furious. The constable, whose name was Edmunds, was profusely apologetic. He knew it was terribly bad form to arrest a member of the local aristocracy, but, as he explained, circumstances had rendered such a course of action more than necessary.

While the Sikh guards escorted Agnes upstairs and bolted her into her room, he went over the details of the unfortunate incident. It appeared that Miss Joaquim had entered Government House, elbowed her way past the armed bodyguards, then barged into the chambers of the Governor himself, whereupon she had thrown a pot of fertilizer into his face.

"She'd wrote 'is 'onour 'undreds of these 'ere letters," he said, bringing out a thick sheaf of correspondence. "She were certain 'e could do somethin'."

Her letters were petitions for intervention in the Hamidian massacres: the widespread slaughter of tens of thousands of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire by the crazed Sultan Abdul Hamid II. For despite the horrific news of the genocide and the pleas of their own ethnic Armenian subjects, the British had done nothing to stop the bloodshed, continuing their trade with the Ottomans for the sake of economic expediency.

Agnes's mother parsed one or two of her daughter's letters. "Goodness," she said. "Whatever do these words mean?"

"They're words in the Fukienese dialect, missus. The meanin' ain't fit for a lady's ears."

Mrs Joaquim nodded slowly. She'd understood, even sympathized with her daughter's recent activist work: after all, the entire congregation of the Church of St Gregory the Illuminator prayed for an end to the reign of the bloodthirsty tyrant who had caused their people such suffering. Yet she fretted over the company Agnes kept. The silly girl had made numerous friends amongst the local Orientals. She'd even become familiar with the servants, persistently quizzing them on their knowledge of local herbal remedies. Rumour had it that she'd even ventured into their distant villages, seeking out *sinsehs*, *bomohs* and Ayurvedic healers to glean their botanic

wisdom.

"Methinks—and the Chief of Police, 'e thinks too—that mayhap Miss Joaquim'd be more comfortable in a sanatorium of some sort. There's an asylum in the north of the island, just past the wooden bridge."

Mrs Joaquim had had quite enough. "Thank you, Constable," she proclaimed. "The servants will see you out."

Over a rather unsavoury supper (meals had become less palatable since Agnes had lost her interest in housework), the family debated the issue of the rebel amongst them. Some were resolved on expelling her from the household; others were quite content to let her carry on harmlessly with her experiments with Mr Ridley, which had caused no harm up till now.

Naturally, all assembled cringed at the thought of sending her to the asylum, but, as a younger Joaquim pointed out, she might well have a disease. What other means was there to cure it? The sun set without a resolution to their conference. But in the morning, Mrs Joaquim decided to check on her wayward daughter. She fetched a tray of hot scones and pressure-cooked coconut jam from the larder, ventured upstairs and drew back the lock.

Agnes was gone, and the room was overgrown with orchids, their creepers extending out the window, through the garden and into the wilderness.

Later, the family would learn that Ridley's terrarium had been plundered the same night. All Agnes's notes and specimens had vanished, leaving only a few puzzling diagrams and fragments of research amidst the rubber seeds and butterflies. Ridley claimed he knew nothing of these studies—particularly not the studies that appeared to use botany for the purposes of warfare.

Then in early 1895, celebrations broke out amongst the Armenians across the world. The Hamidian massacres had ended, for Sultan Abdul Hamid II had been found dead in his palace. Officials claimed he had choked on a fishbone, but the people knew better. They said he had collapsed across his chamberpot, mysteriously asphyxiated by a creeper that had slowly grown throughout the interior of his body, a sprig of purple blossoms sprouting from his mouth.

Agnes's reign of terror had begun.

~

One might have assumed that Agnes would cease operations once the oppressor of her race had been wiped from the face of the Earth. No such luck. Her run-in with the Governor in Singapore had given her a profound distaste for all Empires, be they British, Ottoman, Manchu or Nipponese. Clandestinely, she travelled across the planet, making contact with local radicals who fought against the powers of centralized government. Thus, in continent after continent, she spread her seeds of dissension and chaos.

In 1896, the Empress Dowager Cixi went missing in the Summer Palace. After much searching, she was discovered in the pleasure gardens, half-dissolved in a massive pitcher plant.

In 1897, Tsar Nicholas II was struck with paralysis in his private chapel. His attendants discovered him collapsed on his knees, roots shooting through his trousers, his flesh turned into mango wood.

In 1898, US President McKinley and Maria Christina, Regent of Spain, were both

snatched from their boudoirs in a single night. They washed up in a lifeboat, miserably fused together through a fretwork of bougainvillea, having been forced to sign away the American and Spanish claims to the territories of Cuba, the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico.

Meanwhile, in Singapore, the colonial administration grew skittish. The downtrodden had lately begun to eschew their habit of taking government-taxed opium to dull their pains, opting instead for a cheap, plentiful drug they called Joaquinine, or else simply "Joe".

Joaquinine was especially dangerous for the British Empire, as it worked not only as an anaesthetic and a hallucinogen, but also as a stimulant. It sharpened one's sense of focus, driving its abusers towards new purpose in life. It soon became common to see dockyard coolies in Clifford Pier arguing over their plans for constructing hybrid electric steamships, or else pipa girls in Chinatown, huddled over the writings of Karl Marx in the original German. Shadow universities began to crop up, run by secret societies and mosques, where gangsters and farmers' daughters discussed every branch of the sciences and the arts in a motley creole based on English, Arabic, Mandarin, Tamil, Teochew and Malay.

The government did what it could to stem this burgeoning tide of intellect. They conducted violent raids of farms and shophouse cellars where crops of the magenta flowers were secretly grown, to be dried and processed into orchid cigarettes. Well-publicized trials took place, such as that of the young medical student Lim Boon Keng, who had been caught red-handed prescribing the drug to coolie labourers. And of course, campaigners such as Bishop Oldham and Sophia Blackmore lent their voices to the cause, alarmed as they were that their schoolchildren were puffing Joaquinine to aid their studies.

Such measures, however, worked to no avail. Rather than diminishing, the epidemic expanded its scope, as Singaporean sailors smuggled Joaquinine in their luggage, allowing its dissemination throughout the world. It was speedily adopted by other nations of people, including the Formosans, the Kashmiris, the Ashkenazi Jews, the Koreans, the Zulus, the Boers and the Apache.

And across the Earth, each smoker heard the flower's words pounding in his head: "Only you can change the world."

~

A fire sprang up amidst the orchid-choked Raffles Hotel, scorching its white façade a ghastly black. Some thoughtless officer had started it, believing it to be the fastest way to prevent further growth of the monster plant.

The Governor had been apoplectic. "You fool!" he cried. "The Queen's in there!"

There probably ain't much of her left, the officer thought, but did not say.

The crowd still milled about at the scene of the tragedy, hampering the rescue efforts. Chambermaids, barmen and guests wailed as the blaze grew higher, mourning the loss of their possessions and their livelihood. Yet every now and again, a sigh rippled through the masses as a cluster of purple blossoms went up in a psychedelic blaze of colour, scattering their cinders across the darkening sky.

Eventually, a crew of fire fighters arrived. But before they could direct a single hose towards the inferno, the heavens opened up and rain gushed forth from the clouds, drenching the *sahibs* in their Sunday best, ruining the coiffures and cosmetics of the

cultural dancers, washing the sweat from the bodies of the horses and rickshaw pullers.

The civilians scattered, and the fire fighters proceeded to assist the rescue team, clearing away the burnt vegetation in the building, for the flames had cleared a way through the ruins, and the downpour was quenching the flames. They clambered through stairways and broken ceilings, braving the smoke and smouldering vines. With luck, they might reach the Royal Suite yet.

Finally, they came to the rosewood doors, now reduced to charcoal and scrap timber by the fire and the orchids. After hacking away a curtain of vines, they beheld an amazing sight. On a four-poster bed strewn with orchids lay the two women, Victoria and Agnes, side by side. Both were motionless and apparently unharmed. The rescuers rushed to the bodies. The Queen, once woken, was in fine condition, though somewhat weak and bewildered about the commotion.

Agnes was dead. An autopsy later indicated that she had passed on mere minutes before the team's appearance. An enormous tumour was also revealed in her uterus, which had been killing her slowly since her discovery of the flower ten years before.

The Joaquim clan took charge of her body, and arranged to have her buried the next day in a quiet ceremony in Bukit Timah Cemetery. Yet, as the priest grudgingly read a psalm over her coffin, the cortege was stunned by the sight of a sea of humanity rising across the hill. Approaching them were men, women and children drawn from every class and race known to Singapore society. Some wore black, some wore white, some wore sackcloth, and some wore sarongs of blue and turquoise.

But each of them held something in common, a token of farewell to their heroine: a single flower.

~

After a barrage of medical examinations, the Queen was pronounced fit to return to London, though with doctor's orders to spend the majority of her waking hours in convalescence. Victoria obediently boarded the zeppelin. Yet as soon as her physicians' backs were turned, she summoned her secretary and began issuing a memorandum to the Cabinet to examine the issue of de-colonization.

Once in Buckingham Palace, she caused a scandal with her newfound opinions. She insisted that her subjects—or, as she called them now, her citizens—deserved greater liberty than they experienced at present under their imperial regime. She wrote essays for *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Times*, insisting on the need to equalize opportunities for the working classes.

In the year 1900 she resumed her travels throughout her Empire, armed with a vigour quite uncharacteristic of an octogenarian. She conversed passionately with citizens in Delhi and Rangoon and Cairo, often advising them on how to revive their own pre-colonial governments on a more egalitarian footing, even bequeathing considerable gifts of the Crown to help fund such efforts at nation-building. Such actions were much to the chagrin of her government, her administrators and the rest of the royal family, who watched with dismay as their inheritance dwindled daily. Yet when questioned about her actions, she had but this to say: "Only I can change the world."

Regardless, or perhaps because of the controversy she caused, the Queen remained beloved by her people. Thus it was that she rose on 22 January 1901 quite refreshed

and eager to appear in a scheduled street parade from Westminster Abbey to Leicester Square.

Though it was a wintry day, she insisted on riding in an uncovered coach. "I feel so light," she remarked, to no-one in particular. Then, without warning, her body burst into blossom.

The Londoners marvelled at their Queen. And as they gazed upon her, the seeds blew from her body, taking root instantly in the cobblestoned streets of snow.

And across the city, a million orchids bloomed.

Punggol

Ben Slater

"Your destination today is Punggol Station, the terminal point for PG-21 Eco-City. You have requested a basic package for sector access which I'm delighted to process."

The woman's voice was warm but had definite authority. Tony wondered not for the first time how they allocated the voices. Was there some form he'd filled out years ago? Slumped in a seat reserved for the elderly, infirm or pregnant, Tony hurtled north, towards the edge of the island.

Punggol, he thought. The end of the line. He couldn't remember a day when he wasn't going in that direction.

"What is your purpose in visiting PG-21 Eco-City today?" the voice asked brightly; no hint of interrogation or curiosity.

"I'm looking for answers." Sometimes he liked to be obtuse with the voices.

"You will agree to spend fifteen minutes conducting your business in PG-21 EC and if you stay beyond that duration you'll receive the first of two exit warnings. If you don't begin to leave the sector after the first warning, an alert will be issued to the Security Committee."

"A friendly bunch I'm sure."

The train incrementally slowed. Tony enjoyed the heat on his face from the last rays of sun through the Plexiglas window. A final burst of energy before the evening.

"Do you agree to these conditions, Mr Century?"

The light was gone. The train entered the station and stopped silently.

"Yeah," Tony said after a while. Doors opened. He didn't move.

"Can you do me a favour?"

"Of course, Mr Century."

"Instead of PG-13 Ecotropolis, or whatever you like to call it, just say Punggol. And no more of this 'Mr Century' crap. Just plain Tony. Is that all right with you?"

A pause for her to think. Could they even think? Then—

"OK, Tony, we've reached Punggol." Less authority now. He preferred that. I'm old-fashioned, he thought, but mostly I'm just bloody old.

"Thanks, darling." He lifted himself up and moved slowly out.

Chrome, metal, and glass. Tony shuffled through the immaculate station architecture with a limp. Her instructions played in the background like bad music. Up the escalator. Onto the train for the East Loop. Take the seat at the front. Or was that the back? Then we're off again.

"What is your purpose in visiting Punggol today?"

To find the girl.

Someone close to you disappeared? Owe you money and flown the coop? A figure from your past needs reviving? Call Tony Century.

The case of the girl. Tony had been on it for years. Every detective has one—the mystery that couldn't be solved. The face he saw when he closed his eyes at night. Even when the trail had been dead for years, the face in the dark, it remained.

And then a night or two ago Tony got the message: *She's at the end of the line. Go north.* Punggol was hardly a place to hide, but there was an old gumshoe motto: Everything is the opposite of what it appears to be. The note might have been from the girl herself—perhaps she wanted to be found. Or, then again, it could have been a trap.

"While we travel, would you like some facts about the area?"

Sometimes, Tony thought, it's best to agree.

She launched into a boiler-plate history lesson about Punggol's "humble beginnings" as a fishing community. Out of the window sat a row of high-rises, monotonously perfect. "Today, it's the country's first self-sustaining eco-city," she went on, rallying enthusiasm, "constructed on reclaimed land, built with innovative efficiency over two decades. Luxurious amenities and superb systems mean that none of the 535,112 inhabitants *ever* want to leave ..."

Tony looked around the carriage at his fellow passengers. No one over the age of thirty-five. Everything new here, even the people. He tried to read their faces. They seem glum, he thought, but inside they must be smiling. Each day, he'd heard, they manufactured their own memories. A fresh start every morning, and then they'd erase the accidents and bad decisions at night. No guilt or shame, nothing to make you wince for years. Memories lasted 24 hours. If there were any secrets here, they'd been long forgotten.

No one needs to remember in Punggol. Except Tony. That was his gig.

Tony had seen a lot of changes. Born in the last century and shoved into the next. He'd watched one country replacing another like a parasite killing a host. But he wasn't into the nostalgia trip. This dirty town had always been in the progress business. It was a shithole then and it was worse now. He might not always be able to see the filth, but Tony knew it was there. The trick was to find people before they drowned in it.

"There's three basic kinds of missing," Tony would tell prospective clients, or anyone who'd listen, over a can of Tiger, "The runaways, the neglected, and the confused. Or combinations of the above. First category don't want to be found. The second lot slip down the back of the sofa. Then there are a few who don't know who they are or what they're doing, like fireworks in a rainstorm. Lost souls."

Something about this case. The girl. He'd never figured out which category she belonged to.

"We're now passing through Vista Sixty," the voice interrupted merrily. "The newest estate in Punggol, seventy-five thousand residents live in perfect harmony between sub-luxury housing and lush green-themed leisure zones. The success of the Eco-City model ensures it'll be rolled-out island-wide by—"

"Enough," Tony said, more aggressively than intended. A young family turned away from him. He continued nevertheless. "I knew Punggol back when it was a mosquito trap full of squabbling farmers and spaced-out crab-hunters. Now I'm

whizzing round it on a train driven by a microchip. Talking to a woman who's about as real ..."

He looked out into a great wall of windows reflecting sunlight. Once, this had been the brink of the sea, then there were green fields and a lake, then the building sites, the cranes and the clever machines. How many times had he been back here?

"When was the last time you were in Punggol, Tony?"

They did that sometimes, asked just the right question. It always caught him off-guard.

"Don't remember." He lied and knew she knew it too.

Kadaloor, Coral Edge, Oasis. The stations came and went, the passengers entered and exited, all of them looked different in the same way, like extras in a movie. Tony hadn't moved.

"You have now been in Punggol for seven minutes and thirty seconds. Halfway through your permitted access period."

Tony was well aware of the clock ticking. For a detective he didn't have much of a method. There was a clue, and now he was riding the train, hoping for a sniff, the aroma of inspiration. It wasn't coming. He looked out—up and down at the streets and the gardens, so well put together, so carefully assembled. What wounds were festering underneath all this surface? Look harder, he thought, see with these eyes, they're all I have.

"I'm detecting critical physical and psychological indicators from you, Tony. Perhaps you might consider leaving Punggol early?"

"No, sweetcakes, I'm not going anywhere except where this track takes me." Perhaps that's what the note meant, the end of the line at the end of the line. The last station. They were speaking his language.

"Tell me about the girl."

She was trying to help, he knew that. Getting the old focus back. Returning that picture to where it belonged. He closed his eyes and saw it for a moment. The photograph that he kept in the drawer beside his bed. Young lady, couldn't have been older than twelve. Short, cropped hair, summer dress. She's smiling, and has the most open, honest face Tony had ever seen. He didn't believe in much these days, but that girl, she was an angel.

"Who is she, Tony?" He shook his head. Who was she? He didn't know anymore.

"You're tired, you can exit the area at the next stop."

"I have to keep going. Until the end."

"OK, Tony, I understand."

Yes, her voice. It reminded him of someone.

To do this job, to be a searcher, you had to know the city. The streets, paths, back alleys and short-cuts were marked on Tony's brain like an ugly tattoo. Then he tracked the changes. Every home demolished, every upgraded estate, he made a note. He'd forgotten all the details of his own life, but he still remembered places, directions, connections; it was in the blood.

"That was the first exit warning. Did you hear it?"

He hadn't heard a thing. Meridian, Riviera, Cove. More stops, more entrances and exits. When he'd started this journey he thought he was waiting for something to happen, but now he knew he was going somewhere.

"Tell me, is there a station along this line called Perfection?" Sometimes he liked to flirt.

"There is no Perfection, Tony."

"You don't mean that." You're pretty close, he thought, and the joke ceased to be funny.

When people chose their voices, they were supposed to mean something, weren't they? A replacement for a person long gone. Had everyone in this damned city lost the one they loved? A mother, a daughter, a wife, a lover. Which was she?

"You're right, Tony. I've been selected for you and you only." He thought he'd been thinking to himself, keeping a lid on it, but he must have been talking out loud. No wonder no passenger would look him in the eye. The strange old man in the reserved seat. A disturbing glitch to be edited out by morning.

"But you're no more alive than the circuit board that shunts this train."

"You could say that. But I'm all you have right now."

"And I could off you like bad music."

She ignored him. "There will be another warning soon. Let me guide you. Stay on until the terminal, then head back to town. If you do that, you'll make it."

He thought about his place, a stripped-out maisonette in Hougang. The room with the bed. The photograph in the drawer. Well, he didn't need that any more, he would see her soon enough.

"Today I'm going to solve the case. I have to." Desperation broke his voice. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"I believe *in* you."

"The last time I was here. It was sometime at the end of the last century, or the start of this one. They hadn't finished making the place."

The building sites, cranes and clever machines. First drafts of a future architecture. Linked gardens and networked walkways destined to be packed away and replaced by something cleaner, newer, better.

"Why did you come that time, Tony?"

"I took a wrong turn off the highway. It had been a bad day and I was trying to get as far away as I could. When I got here I was scared. I'd entered a city for ghosts. The empty spaces, the half-constructed ... and in the shimmering haze, I saw what it would become. For just a second, I saw all of this." He gestured out of the window, as if she was sitting beside him. "I left as soon as I could, but I knew, somehow, that I'd come back. But this time. Here. Now. It feels all right. Like I could stay for a while."

Somewhere far away, where only she could hear it, the second exit warning sounded. The Security Committee would show no mercy, not even for an old man who was lost. She'd made the calculations and it didn't look good.

The train sped up. A final burst of energy before it returned to where it began. And the loop would continue.

"She's waiting for me." Tony's voice was weaker now. No danger of a plugged-in commuter overhearing his whispers. "I don't have to find her. She's looking for me. Still sweet. Still sparkling. Her mother's eyes."

Her mother's voice. She knew. Of course she knew.

"I have so many questions," he continued. There were tears now. "Where should I start? No. I only have one question. Shall we begin again?"

The train had stopped and opened up. No standing room at this hour. A great surge of travellers. Parents returning to children. Tony still in the corner. Almost invisible now. Almost.

One last try from the voice. "You have to get off now. Go home. You'll be safe there."

He shook his head.

"You can leave me now. I'm staying for one more round. I want to see what's at the end. The very end."

"There is no end."

Me and the girl, Tony thought, we both belong to the third category. The hardest ones to find.

"Goodbye, Tony Century."

"So long, *sayang*."

The doors closed and the train moved off. And Tony was alone with himself and the silence.