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Excerpt from a memoir; poems.

From *Growing Up With Ghosts* (2011)

### Prologue

I remember the day my father stopped singing. Just as he sang me to sleep, he sang me to wake. *Wake up, my darling little girl, your Papa is here, your Papa is here.* In lilting tones and in different registers, he would sing to me throughout the day and into the night. In the quiet, windowless room of the blue, wooden house in Pasir Puteh, and in the whiteness of the room in Taiping with sunflower-splashed orange and white curtains, and in the hard, concrete room of Bapuji's house in Penang, where the windowpanes resembled patterns on my colouring book. The room that smelled of talcum powder and coconut oil, where he last put me to sleep and woke me that day. When we drove in the wide blue car with fins, with the windows open, he sang to me while we drove past the Chinese mansions on Macalister Road and onto the winding road with trees that would take us to the beach on Batu Ferringhi. He sang when he tickled my wriggling feet and splashed water on my open face, stinging my eyes. I heard him singing as I wandered up away from him, to be towelled dry, my face turning again and again to see him waving to me, his voice getting fainter and fainter. *Don't worry, my darling little girl, your Papa is here, your Papa is here.*

And then the sea came up and swallowed my father. The sea slithered salt, water and sand into his mouth and throat and lungs and his heart, the sea coiled its might around my father and silenced him. I was a child of four, and my father never sang to me again.

The girl in the striped dress

The old scrapbook. Big and bound with you in a turban flanked by many flags. Summer 1960. You were in Europe and you went to many places. I see the colourful faded guidebooks, yellowed photographs, lager labels, postcards of Liverpool, Arvika, Bremen, Hamburg, Volendam, Odense, Copenhagen, Goteburg, Amsterdam. The old scrapbook now tattered with age, gnarled pages, sticky tape and fingerprints that have traversed page by page, year after year, decade after decade.

The scrapbook. A door into memory. A great big book of your memories. Passages from the past into no future. I want more memories. More books, pages filled with your hand, but there are none.

Did you have enough life, dear Papa? It seemed that you had so much, that you embraced the world, and the world embraced you back. You were 21, your face full of life, your journeys just beginning. Life brought us together and then took you away. The world loved you too much.

Only memory is left. The dead are still dead with memory. I still mourn you. My memory begins on the day you died. My memory begins and ends there.

Static. Cloudless. Beach, sand, laughter, silence. Mother's screams. Manji beats her chest. A dead body. Papa. My Papa. Grey hospital walls. The doctor talks and talks. Mother cries.

I sit and stare at the grey hospital walls.

### 9 January 1973

Cemetery. Taiping. White roses, a striped dress.  
 Boy Scouts lining the walkway. Your students. Friends in tears. The white nuns.  
 Devastated. The blue and white urn. Your bones, ash, teeth all inside. Mother in black.  
 Stares. Don't look at me! Turn away. I am tired. It is hot. The roses are tired in my hand. I  
 want to jump in. I want to die with you.  
 I want to be with you, Papa. My Papa. Then we cover you with earth. We cover you  
 with fists of earth. They have to tear me away.  
*The little girl wants to jump into the grave.*  
 And you are gone. And I am gone with you. Forever.

The lady with the long hair.  
 The night my father is buried, I dream of a fire. I see his dead body on the beach and I  
 reach out to touch him, but then I see a flame inside his body. It begins like a small ball  
 in his belly and then, like melted butter, it spreads upward into his chest and into his  
 glowing heart, and then onto his throat, mouth, nose, eyes, and then it reaches his head. I  
 see my father burning before my eyes. *Pop! Pop!* His head cracks open and I see the  
 flames eating him up, the liquid yellow flames rushing out and then there is a large  
*Bang!* and then there is nothing. He is gone, and I am standing alone on the beach,  
 screaming.

I wake up clutching my blanket, and my mouth is open, wide, but I am silent. My bed is  
 by the window and I can see the bougainvillea tree swaying outside. The white room  
 glows and I reach out for my Golliwog. His white-rimmed eyes are gentle and I hold him  
 tight. I caress his face and his frizzy hair, and I begin to suck my thumb. I feel better.  
 I am awake now, and I know my mother and baby sister are in the next room. There are  
 relatives sleeping on mattresses in the living room. I see shadows playing on the wall  
 from the branches of the bougainvillea tree outside. My Auntie Lai is snoring silently in  
 the next bed. She is tired from crying. I pick up my Golliwog and I peer outside the  
 window. I see the lawn, I see my tricycle glowing in the dark and then I see her, a woman  
 by the gate. Her back is turned away, but I see her long silvery hair swaying in the night  
 breeze. She does not move, she stands there silently. I know she is a ghost, but I am not  
 afraid. I suck my thumb, and I cradle my Golliwog and I stare at her for a long time.  
 She is the first ghost I ever saw, and she would be there every night, standing alone  
 outside our gate, outside the white house on Jalan Merpati, Taiping.

I ask my father to come to me in my dreams. *Come to me, Papa, your darling girl is here,  
 please come to me, Papa. Come and play with me.* And he does, and I would laugh aloud in  
 my dreams. My mother hears me once, and she asks me why I am laughing when I am  
 asleep and I say, *Papa came to me, he played with me, we drank fresh cow's milk and then  
 he pulled my toes and tickled me.* My mother's face changes and she rushes into her room  
 and starts pulling down the blanket and bedsheet onto the floor. Then she sits on the  
 floor and cries. I hug my Golliwog and suck my thumb and then I run into my room and  
 close the door.

One day in school, I step on a cockroach and I kill it. It is squished up under my white  
 Bata shoe and there are brown bits and milky white bits, and my friend Kalpana goes  
 'Oh-oh, can die! The ghost of the cockroach will come and visit you tonight!' I am very  
 scared all day after that. She says that the only way the cockroach will not come is if I  
 hold a crucifix to my heart when I sleep. That night, I ask my father to stop the cockroach  
 from coming and I pray to him, *Please Papa, don't let the ghost of the cockroach come and  
 get me. Jesus will protect me, I know, I know you will, too.* I see the lady with the long hair

at the gate before I wriggle under my blanket and I hold my Golliwog close to me. My mother's crucifix is at my heart and I try to pray before I go to sleep. I am too scared to suck my thumb as I do not want the crucifix to slip.

That night, the cockroach enters my dreams, it enters my bedroom door and stands over my bed, it is so big it fills up the whole ceiling. The ghost of the cockroach is there, hovering over me, its spindly legs trying to get at me. I see its face, its glowering eyes, and then it sees the crucifix on my chest and then with a screeching wail, it disappears. *Pufft!* It is gone.

The next morning, my mother comes in to wake me and she sees me lying there, like a dead child with my Golliwog and her crucifix, and she screams. My mother is always sad but her belly grows bigger and rounder. My brother Bernard is born on the first day of September, eight months after my father died.

We live in the house on Jalan Merpati for three more years, until my mother says that we are to move to Ipoh to be closer to her parents. And so we pack our bags and we get into the car with fins, my sister Janice, my brother and I, and we drive to the cemetery and we say goodbye; goodbye to my father's grave, goodbye to the other graves we step over, goodbye to all the dead people of Taiping, goodbye to the white house on Jalan Merpati, goodbye to the nuns in the Convent, goodbye to the lady with the long hair, and we drive all the way to Ipoh. And we start a new life, a life without my father.

### Origins

I am Punjabi, a sardarni of the Khalsa. Of the pure, from the tenets sprung from the loins of Guru Nanak. From the plains of the Punjab, and the wheat fields of Amritsar.

I am Chinese, from the port city of Canton, from Fatshan, from Lam Soy Chea, from the village of fishermen and of joss stick makers.

I had two childhoods. A childhood with my father and a childhood with my mother.

This is a love story, of how my parents found each other. This is a life story, of how I found them and how I found myself.

I grew up with ghosts. I grew up with the dead, and the voices that resonate. I grew up with myth. I grew up with grief, and its untold stories.

In Ipoh, in the heart of the Kinta Valley, in the light of pre-war shophouses, cloth merchants and food. Of pigs, of slaughter, of tears. I grew up in Penang, in my grandfather Bapuji's house. Of snakes, and the Granth Sahib. Of my grandfather's typewriter and his white turban. I speak from five voices and I speak from my own.

These are our stories.

My great-grandmother was a witch. She reared snakes, they were white cobras. I was told this as a child. She used to worship the snakes in the village. She was a Naga worshipper.

There was a famine in the Punjab and many people died. Her husband died, and then her brothers died. Her sons were away in the army and when they returned, she sent them away. She sent them away so they would not suffer the same fate.



The villagers banished her. They sent her away. She was a curse, a bad omen. She left her village in Verka, close to Amritsar, and went to live in the caves, close to the border of Kashmir and there, she lived with her snakes.

After my father died, I did not know what it meant to be Indian. I grew up Chinese, yearning to be Indian. Death created distance.

Chapatti, saag, dhall. Manji, Bapuji, nehi. Chapatti, saag, dhall. Manji, Bapuji, nehi. Those were the only words I needed to know. Bapuji spoke English, he was a petition writer. My grandmother Manji stayed in the kitchen all the time. She made chai, lots of it. We were the half-breeds, the Chinese-Punjabi pariahs of Cheeseman Road, Penang. We drank chai, and we felt Indian.

My father's death evicted me from the world and now, I write myself back into it. Sixteen years after my father's death, I wrote a letter to my grandfather Bapuji and I asked him about our origins. He wrote me a letter, and this is what he told me.

*Your great-great-grandfather Bhag Singh was born in the Punjab, in the village of Verka in 1860. He inherited five acres of land from his father and his father before that. We were Jats, landowners, descendants of the agricultural caste of the Punjab.*

*Your great-grandfather, my father, Tehil Singh was born in Verka on the 15<sup>th</sup> January 1880. Tehil had an older brother called Surain Singh and they inherited their father's land after he died.*



*Tehil Singh left to join the Indian Army in 1902 and was stationed at Gilgit, an army post on the border with Afghanistan. He returned to Verka in 1907 to find the village ravaged by a famine and his bullocks dead. So, he mortgaged his share of the land, left his young bride, Bantoh in the care of his mother and left for Singapore in 1908.*

I had to go back to the beginning. I had to find bloodlines. I had to find secrets and stories, and then begin to tell them. But first, I had to begin with the snakes, I had to understand the curse.

*The ancient Kings of Kashmir and Punjab were known to have kept giant serpent guardians as pets. Nearchos, Admiral of Alexander the Great's army was known to have seen two giant serpents kept by King Abhisana of Kashmir after the Macedonian army retreated from its Indian onslaught in 326 B.C. One was 80 cubits in length and the other was over 140 cubits. These were giant serpents more than a hundred feet in length. However, Nearchos told of yet another beast, the most sacred of all serpents, one that lived entirely in a cave. When the Macedonian army marched past its cave, this giant Naga extended its head outside and emitted gusts of rage that terrified the army into retreat. Its eyes were as large as two Macedonian shields. And the race of people who worshipped the serpents were known as the Nagas.*

*Indian Serpent Lore or the Nagas in Hindu Legend and Art – J.P. Vogel, 1926*

This is where one story begins.

#### Papan, Perak

My Chinese great-grandfather Loh Heong Ying came from Canton, Guangdong, China in 1910. My grandfather Loh Mooi Fatt, the eldest of three sons and one daughter, was born in 1916 at 14 Leech Street in Ipoh, Perak. This is my ancestral home. Loh Heong Ying was a pig slaughterer. That's what it said on his death certificate. Pig slaughterer. It was his trade, much like a joss stick maker, bricklayer, bamboo chick blind maker, noodle seller, rice merchant. Like most Chinese tradesmen at that time, the lure of Perak was in Papan.

Papan, located on the Ipoh-Batu Gajah road, was named after the Papan River, a tributary of the Kinta River, the bringer of life to the valley that tin built. The hills

flanking the town are called Gunong Hijau, the Green Hills, which connect to the Kledang Hills converging in the north-east of the majestic Titiwangsa Range, the scaly backbone of the Malay Peninsula. If you drive to Papan, the Green Hills follow you, like guardians of a prehistoric monster which once sheltered a gigantic snake-like creature, seen some hundred years ago, struck down by lightning after gobbling down a child of six. The villagers, stumbling onto this monster, sawed its limbs apart.



Ho Siew Ngan's parents, my great-grandfather Ho Seng and great-grand-mother Wong Hung, in Fatshan, China

These were then carted in 13 bullock carts for viewing by the British and then dumped into the Kinta River, which swallowed them piece by piece.

Papan was a lumber town and one of the earliest settlements of the Chinese community in Malaya. It was rich, teeming with Malay woodcutters and Chinese sawyers, secret societies and their vice dens. This is where Loh Heong Ying started his pig-slaughter business. He named it Ying Woh. Peace.

There were only two rows of shophouses in Papan, which still stand today. Many are dilapidated and falling apart, overgrown with ficus creeping in and out of barren walls and broken doors. But Papan still has the same allure as it did a hundred years ago. In the evenings, the winds rush down from the Green Hills, casting a creepy shiver over the town. Many believe that the area is full of jinns and spirits hungry for blood. Or perhaps they are the laments of the dead, rising at nightfall to haunt those who still live there. The Mandailings from Sumatra settled here, the Malay penghulus rose and fell. The British saw through many wars. The Larut Wars in Taiping and the Penang riots in the 1860s and 1870s forced many to flee. The Ghee Hin and Hai San secret societies merged with the Tua Pek Kong to find roots in the Kinta Valley. Papan, Pusing, Gopeng, Lahat. These towns were ripe for conflict and the British brought in many Sikhs, Pathans and Punjabis to quell the discord. The Papan riots in 1887, which began in a brothel, escalated out of control. Looting and deaths ensued. The Chinese outnumbered the Malays; they ran the tin mines, the brothels and many businesses. Such was life in Papan. Robberies, riots, tin mining, and of course, the making of planks, or papan, from which the town derived its name.

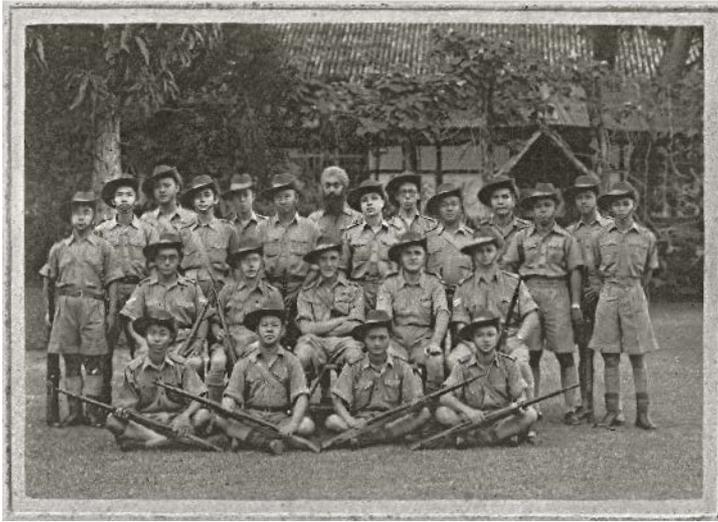
This is where my great-grandfather started his business, and this is where my second story begins.

Singapore, 1915

It is a time of war. Singapore is a Crown Colony, World War I rages in the western hemisphere and Generalissimo Sun Yat Sen has set up the Singapore headquarters of his Kuomintang party. The Boxer Revolution of 1900 has claimed China's last dynasty and the Qings have been overthrown. The Cantonese migrations begin. The Ghadar Party is formed in 1913 in the United States, by a Punjabi exile, Har Dayal, with the sole purpose

of getting the British out of India, by force.

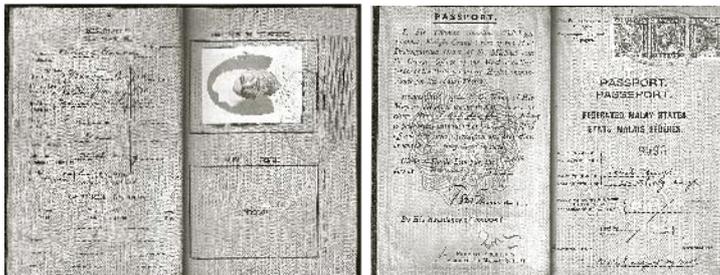
Tehil Singh is a tram driver by day and a jaga, a watchman, by night. The trams run on rails and are powered by electricity. The Chinese rickshaw drivers don't like the trams, so they lie on the rails as protest. But they know that if a Sikh is driving the tram, they will surely be run over. Tehil Singh, fresh from the Indian Army, is hired on this basis. He had served on the Indian frontier and now he is a tram driver in Singapore. It is 1915. My grandfather Jaswant Singh is two years old. He was born in Tanjong Katong, in the servants' quarters of a seaside bungalow of a wealthy Arab trader.



Undated photo of Tehil Singh; efforts were made to try and establish details about the photo, and subsequent correspondences with the Imperial War Museum in London also failed to shed any light

Sepoy. Soldier. From the Persian word sipahi. Sepoy, a native of India, a soldier allied to a European power. To the British or the Portugese. Tehil Singh was a sepoy with the Indian Army. He is no longer a sepoy, and does not know that mutiny is afoot. The Ghadar fervour travels across the continents to Singapore and whips the 5th Madras Native Light Infantry into revolt.

At 3:00 p.m. on 15 February, Ismail Khan fires a single shot. That is enough to drive over 800 sepoys into mutiny. It is the Chinese New Year, and many are on leave. Singapore is defenceless. The German troops at Tanglin Barracks are the first to be massacred, the mutineers then move on to Keppel Harbour and Pasir Panjang. No European is spared. No white man, woman or child. The killing goes on for 10 days. Martial law is imposed. Allied ships in the area are summoned. The French, Russian and Japanese marines trawling the area along with the Malay Johor Military Force and 5th Shropshire Infantry come to help the British.



Tehil Singh's British passport

The mutineers begin their surrender, some try to swim across the Johor Strait to Johor but they are captured and sent back.

The trials begin on 23 February and end three months later. Two hundred sepoys are court-martialled and 47 are to be shot. On execution day, Tehil Singh takes his son Jaswant to the Sepoy Lines near Outram Prison. It is a hot day, and there are 15,000 people cramming into the square. Tehil Singh carries his firstborn son on his shoulders so he can see better. He is told that the firing squad is led by Captain Tongue, and assisted by Lieutenants Blair and Hay. Tehil Singh is not a tall man, so he walks further away and manages to find a rocky outcrop. He sees a row of men, standing against the wall. The crowd is cheering. Baying blood for blood. He can see the guns, he recognises the short barrels: Lee-Enfield's Number 1. He hears the order and the guns fire. He sees the men fall, in twos and threes, then all fall. Their turbanless heads tumble. These were his brothers, Mussulmans from the Punjab, who had fought the same cause as he. His son is fretting, the sun beats down onto their white turbans. One big, one small. Tehil Singh wipes away his tears. He turns, picks up his young son, kisses him on the cheek and they walk away, back to the seaside bungalow in Tanjong Katong.

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From the poetry collection *Onkalo* (2013)

*JERIT*  
(Malay for 'howl')

And so he says it again  
through headlines screaming black bold Serif  
on undulating white perimeters  
Write – You will have the freedom to write –  
He says as he spouts jibber-jabber from pink, watery lips  
like swine-filled halos of doom  
from the plume of corrupt plinths of marble arches  
stretched across the abyss of power,

You, who have seized morality from cowards  
engaged in chit-chat over the rights  
To write – What is right?  
stemming from pulsating vagus nerves  
wandering over loose craniums, viaduct throats  
binary clots, loose thoraxes, abdomens filled  
with bilious bull,

You who rile with constipated gall  
You who sing the loose song of false freedoms  
You, who in toothless defense watch the night cower  
with homeless street urchins on Bukit Bintang  
hungry from spent mothers who spread their thin thighs  
to the glazed-eyed workers high from inhaling toiled  
humid days, sifting their morals and might from concrete  
constructing more pricks to adorn the history of this city of mud,

Will you let us write of new pages by those  
who in yellow-infused riotous colour  
betrayed the hallowed streets of the city  
in the hundreds, in the tens and tens of thousands  
who fought back the tear-gassed alleys  
with brave tears and Maalox  
and damp Good Morning towels  
armed with children who shrieked  
when the extra-strength gas laced  
their young eyes, nimble throats?

Of those who were faced with the ends of black-eyed boots  
swirling batons, swallowing their own blood  
and the towering lies of a people's revolution  
pulsated by the wrath of pubescent  
policemen in nameless fatigues –  
your shadow army, while we passed on  
mighty green, yellow balls  
and sang bravely whilst clutching  
empty hand phones that gave not

their paid networks, the final strains  
of the Negaraku,

Will you let us write of the deaths in police custody  
in the corridors and balconies of the MACC, which  
in their silences welcomed the deaths  
of those who did not deserve to die  
of the grazed back and bruised torso of Kugan  
of the twisted neck that Beng Hock did not use to bear  
of the sultry songs that she, with new breasts  
sang while she squatted and was made to lie  
on soiled concrete floors?

Or of the incandescent C4 that blew her up  
and the unsinkable submarine that colludes you  
with an unspeakable crime, with  
the One of the wind-blown face and sticky hair of grime  
witch-doctor magic, that soiled her childhood with dark filth  
and the loin-cloths of bloodied cocks  
of the tiger child lulled by the wind  
of the monsoons that birthed her –  
her legacy of guilt?

Will you let us write of the hunger that sucks us  
in meaningless traffic voids and unworthy  
side-kicked, bastardised mantras of feel-good phonetic tunes  
in between pin-pricks of holy spaces  
in between cars that reek of carbon monoxide  
the cacophony of Toyota's, Hyundai's  
Proton's and Myvi's  
that scream unholy visions  
of cancer-ridden ploys?  
You, with emptied-out legions of xanax, cocaine and ecstasy  
who wither into the cunning dreams of spirit guardians  
and the ghosts of suburbia, who with endless  
glee roam into your days and nights  
penetrating ethereal slumbers with porn-filled ease

with the magnetic sweep of jazz, K-pop and gangsta-rap

thump-pa-thum-thumping into the blackest of black nights,

The city of mud and shadows will claim you  
and night-toils reap you, of ingrained  
once noble philosophies of Islam and Al-Afghani  
Hadrami traders who fought your wars  
made you sane and insane from the trolled bulwark  
of petroleum patsies, nightshade bullies who set  
the motions of torture in pastured green camps  
where you made them write and sing unbridled anthems  
of mean civilian wars and with magnetic strains of

*Malaysia- Truly Asia,*

You who lull uncertain trash into  
our sullen skies, with more leaden lies  
and rare-earth plunders, the haze  
from forest fires of late night tangerine whores  
behind doors, willing to pay that little extra  
for, "Sir, I give you happy ending",

And against the backdrop of a hundred thousand  
rainbow-clad warriors at Stadium Merdeka  
You know that we are free  
We are free  
We can be,

Do not make it Your right  
to give us the right –  
We will always have  
the right to write,

Yes Sir  
We will write a new text  
We will write a new beginning  
We will have a better ending  
We will write a new country,

Free from fear  
from vicious ding-dong lies and decrepit cowardly threats –  
We deny this bongo-bongo land and its oil palm-republicanism  
and We will seek flight in the multi-coloured tapestry  
that Is this great country  
from the ends of this coloured cloak  
of the new and old regal Malays, Indians, Chinese  
Iban, Penan, Kadazan-Dusun, Temuan  
Rungus, Ukit, Lahanan, Jahit, Chewong tribes  
and the sullies of Allah and whose tongue it suits –  
It suits us All and  
We take offence,

You will not stop us  
and We will rise to fulfill  
the birthright that  
Is this nation –  
We will write this in  
All our voices,

And You  
Will listen.

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