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Siren

The Merlion (Malay: Singa-Laut) is a mythical creature with the head of a lion and the body of a fish, used as a mascot and national personification of Singapore. The fish body represents Singapore's origin as a fishing village when it was called Temasek, which means "sea town" in Javanese. The lion head represents Singapore's original name—Singapura—meaning "lion city" or "kota singa".

The symbol was designed in 1964 by Alec Fraser-Brunner, a member of the Souvenir Committee and curator of the Van Kleeef Aquarium, for the logo of the Singapore Tourism Board (STB). Although STB has since replaced the Merlion as its corporate logo in 1997, the board continues to regulate the use of the Merlion symbol.

With the exception of souvenirs conforming to specific guidelines, members of the public are not allowed to produce artefacts featuring the Merlion or anything that resembles it without seeking permission from the board. According to the STB Act, failure to comply with these regulations could result in a \$1,000 fine per artefact.

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He targets the tourists, sarong party boy. They want something local and exotic, all tourists do, and what could be more *experiential*, really, than a romp with him. Orchard Towers is where he plies his trade, vying for the indiscreet staring and propositioning with the Eastern European pretties in the leather minis and the docile Southeast Asians with their nasal sing-song voices. The finger-pointing and bad-mouthing fall in the wake of his path like so much confetti. He's learned to revel in it, gracious as a beauty queen.

Here we're brought up to call a spade a freak with such backhand ease. His name is Marl, and he sits at the back of class trying for the cool pallor of indifference, but his little-boy heart is breaking.

Your father is a lion! Your mother is a fish!, we used to chant riotously behind him, before him, beside him.

Already he'd looked so different, so alien-esque—his pale skin a sick shade of grey, always covered with a light film of sweat, large eyes, jagged milk teeth strangely juxtaposed with lips too full for a boy, lips he pulled at like a catapult when he was nervous—but we'd laid off him because he was quiet. We ribbed him discreetly amongst ourselves but we never laid a finger on him, until he blurted out once: My mother is a mermaid.

And then we were light-headed with relief because now he'd done it, given us a reason. Which self-respecting boy would say something like that? He deserved our ridicule, and we gave it to him in full force. We laughed boorishly. We drew pictures of him with breasts, seashells on the nipples. We drew pictures of his mother with breasts, seashells on her nipples. We drew pictures of what we imagined copulation between a boy and a mermaid would look like. We were graphic when it came to imagining where they would stick it in.

At some point, one of these drawings surfaced to a teacher. Marl wasn't the one who'd turned it in, we knew this, for between all boys—even the bullying and the bullied—there is a code of honour that is seldom transgressed.

We were called in for questioning; she gave each of us three light raps across the knuckles, with a wooden ruler. Marl's only making things up because he lost his mother, the teacher said, We should be ashamed of ourselves. None of us were; we were itching to get at him—someone had to take the discontent of our being ratted on, what more convenient a scapegoat than a victim?

The good intentions of the teacher were completely flushed away by the time we were done with his head and the toilet bowl. At the end of it, we called him a liar, an orphan.

To which he said, No, I have a father.

Of course we remembered—we'd seen his father once, waiting for him by the school gate. He looked like a rangy beast, with a head of coarse and curly long hair, and a face obscured by whiskers and stubble. Lionhead, said one of us in a hoarse whisper as we crept past the school gate, and it stuck.

*Your father is a lion! Your mother is a fish!
Lionhead fucked a fish, gave birth to a freak.*

My father is a sailor, Marl said, I live on a house made of sticks that floats on the sea. His hair was dripping toilet water. We laughed at his hollow boast.

*Liar liar pants on fire,
Suck on your pacifier.*

He snivelled wearily, drawing the back of a hand across his nose. We were quite prepared to let him off right then, until one of us thought to bring up a little rumour that'd circulated that very morning, right before the teacher had called us in—a boy in our class had been at the urinals at the same time as Marl, and came back reporting that what was between Marl's legs didn't seem to be what the rest of us boys had.

So what did it look like?

Different.

What did it look like!

I don't know.

Was it just tiny? Deformed?

I don't know!

The truth is, we were generally in silent agreement that our classmate was lying, given his unwillingness to substantiate, and our class's propensity to tease Marl. Except that when we relayed this episode, Marl's eyes flew open wildly, and he punched one of us. Never

before had he retaliated. Now we closed in on him uproariously, four boys packed into a toilet cubicle, three standing, one crouching.

Two of us pinned him down, leaving me to move in on Marl. Marl was kicking and screaming but we held fast. I took his bermudas off and we were laughing forcefully, pronouncedly, laughter as a swagger. Marl was sobbing, snot entering his mouth.

I hesitated, and the other two of us repeated in quick succession, like a cheer, like a warning: *Your father is a lion! Your mother is a fish!* I knew the code of honour, I knew they were leaving it to me to be pack leader, cavalier and cruel. I moved towards him again, with exaggerated motions.

Marl looked into my face, our eyes met, and I saw that there was terror in his. He closed his eyes and said through gritted teeth, *Please, no.*

I stopped and picked up his bermudas in a sudden awkward movement.

Let's see who can string this from the classroom fan, I boomed, and arranged my posture to suggest sprinting out of the toilet. If they bought it, we would run out in three, two, one.

They released Marl. We ran out; I held Marl's bermudas above my head like a flag, it became a race to reach the classroom first. When we reached the classroom, I volleyed the bermudas to them like a ball, and they received it like dogs, aiming it to land smack on the ceiling fan blade. They kept missing.

I went back to the toilet. Marl was still curled up in a corner of the cubicle, in his school shirt and underwear. I held out a hand to help him to his feet. He took it, and when I pulled him up, he dragged on the momentum and hemmed me into a hug. In his arms I could feel his gratitude, and his pale skin was soft. But everyone knows you can never embrace another boy, everyone knows what it means, and he was in his underwear for god sakes. I shouted, *Pansy, wuss, faggot!* Then I punched him for good measure and walked briskly out of the toilet.

Marl didn't come back to class.

In the middle of the week, Lionhead came to collect Marl's school bag, his wallet and his textbooks. At the end of the week, our form teacher canceled his name on the register whilst taking attendance.

We found new targets, but we went easier on them. We pegged his name as an insult—*Dude, you are as fucked up as Marl.* Primary school ended and we went on to secondary school, single sex and all boys as well, where bullying was no longer such a blood sport—we rarely went all out, as long as the freaks knew their place—and we began noticing girls. An overhead bridge away from us was an all girls high school, with neat white skirts to their knees.

Sometimes, though—through the years—I dreamt of him. Always in the white school shirt, the white underwear, sometimes in his arms. Always the flaming curiosity of what was in between his legs. Sometimes, reaching out to try to satiate that curiosity with my hands. That was always the point at which I woke; a safety valve as it were. I would

always wake before I touched, before I saw, in a furtive sweat. Then the shame of going to the toilet, feeling the viscous wet, washing and wringing my underwear.

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There was once a hirsute man who was a sailor for a British shipping company; when that dried up he got by as a fisherman. Anything so long as he could be near water. Do you believe in sirens? Not of the Greek mythology stock—the Southeast Asian variety featured ashen complexions set off by kelp-like hair, deadened eyes and garoupa-scaled tails.

Why the hirsute sailor and the ashen siren hooked up is completely up for speculation: if you'd been lost at sea for two days and two nights in a storm and a disembodied singing voice lures you into crashing your sampan—that is, your livelihood, onto craggy rocks—one would think you would be looking to wreak vengeance on the source of the voice, not fall into her arms—gnarly and cold—and copulate—for which she had to split her tail to welcome your appendage.

The capsized fisherman had stalked out of the water like a bull, emerging from his smashed ship like a singular seed from a pod. She lay askew on the shore, tail twitching slightly. Her eyes shone in the dark like a cat's. She issued her siren song, a reedy, strangled moan in varying pitches.

Sire me a son, she whispered in pidgin Malay, slowing down his fury. The waves crashed as the wind howled and he scarcely saw the movement of her lips, but the words were unmistakable, like a spell. As she said this, as he slowed, she parted her tail with her hands, as if slowly splitting an elongated husk to reveal virginal white flesh within. My world is your oyster, she sang softly, All it needs is one grain of sand.

His hands trembled as he lowered his drab olive fisherman pants, lay down on this cold dirty beach, and slid into her as the waves ebbed and flowed. She was cold and slippery to the touch; as he climaxed, he almost rode right off of her. He'd placed his face close to hers, and she smelled of seaspray in a more fundamental way than seaspray itself.

When he was done, as he was stumbling off the sand and dusting the sharp, gravelly bits from his knees, it occurred to him that her back might have hurt from the same. He wiped his palms against one another, cradled her into a sitting position—she was strangely pliant—and cleaned the bits of sand pressed into her pale back.

It was this gesture that saved his life. She'd already thought about breaking his neck between her tail muscles, leaving the body out to bake and decompose on the shore, the quotidian sharing of meat with others of her ilk alongside crabs and gulls, as they did with her.

She relinquished her grasp on the two ends of her tails, and they began to seal seamlessly beneath the ligaments and scales. Watching this retreat, he was seized by a fervid inspiration, and gently but firmly pried her tail ends back, as if parting the legs of a docile woman supine in the village fields.

She found herself allowing him this transgression. When he'd parted her far back enough and what he sought was back in view, he bent down and gave her head.

It was only then she writhed and thrashed; what went before had been for her but a grim inveiglement; this, this was something new and unexpected.

She tasted of oysters, raw but for a sprinkling of fine sea-salt.

They spent the night spooning in the recess of a huge, half-rotted log, softened by the moisture of the sea, ingrown with algae. When they came apart, her back was lukewarm, heated by his hirsute chest.

Before daylight broke, she showed him how to fashion a raft from halved banana tree trunks that they hacked at with jagged stones. To hold them together, she gave him her hair, black as squid ink and hardy as twine.

Together they pushed the raft out to sea. On the sand, she moved like a cripple, upper body weight supported by her tail and both hands. In water, she was indistinguishable from the easy grace of the waves. As they headed further out into the sea, he realised with each step that he could imagine a life with her. It wouldn't amount to much, and he might never see his family and friends again, but that didn't seem important. They could explore the reefs, lay thrown out on rocks like shipwrecks, spear fish for meals, couple on the sand. He'd dive for saltwater pearls for her. Braid them into her hair as she slept.

A hand on the raft, he turned back with the intent of asking her if he really had to leave. She spoke before he did.

Say nothing; you must go.

I will return to see you.

You will not—our island is on no map; found only through our song. I will never sing to you again. You must never return.

But—a son—you said you wanted a son.

This is what we say to every sailor, for that is our song. We are the black widows of the sea. We can never have child by a mortal. The womb does not fruit.

You have my heart. How will I live?

If you stay, I will break your neck between my tail tonight. If I don't, they will find you, and you will wish you were never born. The last sailor, they ate alive. I recall the jelly of his sclera.

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Hey stranger, the transsexual says.

He's beautiful, really, with his large eyes and full lips, features far sharper than all the girls in the room, very pale, and though I'm on my fifth shot and quite wasted, I'm not that adventurous. I have my eye on a Vietnamese plain-Jane in a silver dress in the corner, the one with large, soft-looking breasts spilling over just so.

I'm sorry I don't swing that way. I say it politely, with a tip of my shot glass.

It's Marl, remember? You used to stick your foot out to trip me, just like everyone else.

He flutters his false eyelashes, mimics: *Your father is a lion! Your mother is fish!*

My breath catches in my chest and a blind panic rises in my diaphragm. It makes me want to bolt, or to hit this beautiful being before my eyes. He is watching me, and smiling. It makes his mouth feminine, a mouth done up neatly in matte red lipstick.

I run a hand through my hair and try to still myself. Just a quick, awkward hello-goodbye and it'll be over.

God, Marl. What are you doing here?

Marl takes the question in his stride. His smile grows broader.

I could ask you the same.

It's been—how long?

Fourteen years. We were twelve, weren't we? He touches his left cheek subtly, and I remember punching him.

I'm sorry.

That's alright. Boys will be boys, won't they?

You transferred schools after that. I always felt guilty for that.

No honey, I stopped going to school after that.

I am silent. I down my shot and it tastes of culpability. The Vietnamese plain-Jane is headed in this direction; perhaps she's seen me staring at her chest. Marl sees her too, sees my contemplation, and closes in on me like a big cat, all lethal grace.

Don't you want to know, after all these years? I'll give you a good price.

What?

I sputter a little. He says it with such confidence, as if he's been privy to my dreams over the years, watching unseen from the wings. He is so close I can smell the sweet perfume from his broad but slender shoulders.

You owe it to me. It's been a slow week. Think of it as a favour you won't regret.

If you really need it, I could just give you the money, Marl.

He's splashed his margarita in my face, on my chest. The bartender has signalled for the bouncer to come over. I see the bouncer making a beeline for Marl, from behind him. I see Marl tense up. I see the other people in the pub turning our way, the expression on their faces alternating as they look from Marl to me—as they take in the details; the

transsexual in the tight dress, the man in the soaked shirt—derision for him, commiseration for me.

The bouncer is an elbow away, and the prurient pub crowd will have their collective gratification of seeing Marl led out by the arm in a moment. *Freak*, someone says, loudly enough to cut across the buzz of the room.

Just before the bouncer taps Marl on the shoulder, I pull him to me. His waist is at once taut and slender. The bouncer's raised hand falters.

Everything is okay here, I say.

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Every so often the hirsute sailor went out in his boat, circling the waters of the strait, but never again could he find that islet, through calm seas or stormy waters. He left his kampung to live on a kelong to feel closer to her. Sometimes it seemed clear he must never have met her; she was the ignus fatuus of a delirious sailor who had found land in a sea storm. Perhaps he'd made a hole in the sand to receive his desire. Perhaps he'd fashioned the raft on his own accord, held together by dark twine that resembled the hair of a siren, not vice versa.

Then the morning he awoke with her song in his head, months later. He fought wakefulness for as long as he could, afraid as he was that it would draw away her song. He was a refugee in anything that peddled her, clutching desperately at half-formed straws. But when he finally pulled himself of the bed—a thin mattress on the rough wooden flooring—the song was still pellucid. Then he knew it wasn't just a dream.

He got into his boat, and found himself on a prepense trajectory, quite out of his hands. A small strip of land, an island that was populated with a smattering of people—he'd been here before, the people were twenty years behind the urbanites of the hinterland, he'd felt far more comfortable here. As he got out of his boat, the song did not end. He moved as he saw fit, through dirt paths, undergrowth. At every turn he ached for her to come into view. He was beside himself with discomposure; his hands shaking, the sound of a snapping twig deafening. Half an hour later he was moving towards a small, decrepit beach to the north of the island. As he stepped onto the sand, the song stopped abruptly.

He scanned the small shore in a frenzy—she was not there. There were weeping figs near the sand, and as he approached them, he saw the bundle amongst the thick roots, composed of woven leaves and lined in a mulch of seaweed. The infant that slept within; the fruition that she'd said was impossible.

He began crying in anguish. What he wanted wasn't a child, but the siren. He would have been a loving father, if the mother of the child were in the equation. The child looked normal enough, but what would he do with this aberration of nature? He knew nothing of caring for a small living thing.

He wanted to leave the child there, on the remote shore, in the roots. He wanted to destroy the child with his bare hands—he'd spent only one night with the siren, and this child had spent nine months with her, inside her. The thought was more than he could bear.

Yet the closest he could ever get to her was this. He picked the bundle up, and the child did not stir.

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Marl's put on classical music; it was too quiet before, after I'd placed the \$500 on the bedside table. Tuning the hotel room hi-fi, passing Techno beats, Mandarin ballads, the Top 40, sentimental oldies, interspersed with static.

The string orchestra straining, now we're talking.

What he has between his legs, is a tail. At least four inches in length, silver grey, the finned tips of the tail with a touch of yellow.

And that was Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante, as performed by the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields.

We do nothing for a long while, just sit on the bed with his legs spread, my head between his knees like a midwife.

And next up, a soubrette from the opera Tartuffe, performed by the Bellevue Philharmonic for your pleasure.

It is moist yet scaly, soft yet sharp, depending on the angle. It is retractable, nothing but a cleft visible from the outside when he pulls it in. It reappears slowly, moistened and glistening. It wiggles urgently when I try to touch it, like a fish out of water. My hand jerks back too as a reflex, but his tail's spurt of movement, the attempt to escape my touch, has rippled thrill through my body.

I try again, more forcefully this time, and the tail doesn't shrink away. I stroke it, and Marl begins moaning, very softly. I wrap my palm around it and quicken the motions of my hand, and soon Marl is clenching the sheets.

After I've taken him from the back, Marl reclines onto the headboard, sighs. His tone has lost the octave of pleasure, it is an exhalation of the unhinging of certain weight carried over from an older place, as if this is vindication, in my face, which then again, of course it is.

Missa Papae Marcelli, a piece of compositional virtuosity from Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, this rendition under the baton of Riccardo Muti.

Marl smiles at me as if he's won, but the smile is gracious and kind. It's the smile of a winner, but it wraps around me like a coat of understanding, inclusive and indulgent. It's the kind of smile all men want to receive from all the females—mothers, wives, mistresses, sisters—in their lives, lines blurred, rolled up together.

He dozes lightly into the thick pillow, the shadow of the smile still on the fullness of his lower lip. His hair falls loosely over his shoulders and fans across the pillow. The duvet is thrown across his slim torso, leaving his crotch uncovered. The tail is no longer to be seen, and all that there is is the sweet little cleft.

It is the cleft that reassures me. Watching him sleep thus, it is easy enough to believe that I'd just made love to a woman, that my enjoyment was not untoward. I carry this thought into sleep.

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There was a storm and the kelong was rocking, the way a long carpet might when pulled from under a person. Yet the hirsute sailor and the beautiful boy of about sixteen were still out on the flimsy pier made of ferrules of cheap wood cobbled and bound together and stuck into the seabed.

If you were near enough, if the waves and thunder weren't crashing, you would hear the boy singing in a thin yet exquisite voice. You would see that the man had in his hands the ends of a large fishing net, and that fish were swimming into it blindly, as if drawn by invisible bait.

The hirsute sailor nodded at the boy and he stopped singing. He swung the net around and began hauling the catch out of the sea. They would keep enough for their meals and sell the rest to the fishmongers when they came later. The fishmongers always marvelled at the volume and scope of their catch. Tilapia, peacock bass, trevally, snapper and even daggertooth pike.

The hirsute sailor and the boy had a boat, but they rarely set foot on the main island, only once a month for dried groceries, and even then they often got the fishmongers to purchase their groceries for them in exchange for a catty of fish.

Life was simple. When they weren't fishing, they spent their time seated by the pier, darning their nets, looking out at the water. The boy had long, dark hair that hung to his waist, and ever since he stopped going to school, the hirsute sailor never made him shear it. Sometimes, he braided little trinkets into the boy's hair.

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I open my eyes and Marl is lying on his side, back in his sequined, low-cut dress, watching me. He lays a hand on my hip. He has drawn the curtains and it is dark but pregnant with impending dawn.

Marl says: Take me somewhere?

Following his directions, we reach a jetty. I've never been this far out, surely this must be the southernmost tip of the island. Marl takes two fifty-dollar bills from the ten I've given him, tucked into his purse. I wait for him in the car. The grey sheen of his skin is apparent by the coming daylight, losing the pale iridescence it maintained by night, subtly refracting artificial white light.

A man is waiting at the end of the jetty, silhouetted fuzzily against the sea at dawn, at his feet a small cooler. Marl opens it and peers in, then hands over the money. He comes back with the cooler in hand and says, One more place?

We end up outside a compound painted a sickly green. A sign reads: Brightcare Old Folks' Home for the Mentally Feeble. Marl unlatches the gate and lets us both in, the cooler in his other hand.

Nurses nod grimly at him, taking in the skintight dress, the high heels, the heavy make-up. An old man on a wheelchair hoots at him merrily, and Marl gives him a big wink. There is the smell of piss, and pine-flavoured floor cleaner.

Marl makes a left, and we enter a room of six elderly persons. One woman sits rigidly upright, drool slobbering down her chin, muttering, three other men are asleep, one snoring loudly. One man has playing cards laid out on his bed, which he appears to be arranging in a cryptic manner, cautious of my gaze as he flips open the cards. The last bed holds an old man who is tied down on both wrists. He is painfully thin.

Papa, I'm here, Marl says. I brought you your favourite.

He makes a lunge for Marl, but because both his wrists are bound, it is an awkward motion, and it is his bird-thin chest that bobs forward abruptly. He still has a shock of matted white hair, Lionhead.

Marl takes out black leather gloves from his handbag, and puts them on smoothly. For a moment I imagine him strangling this emaciated man in his bed. Then he slides back the lid of the cooler.

In it, oysters, at least two dozen. Marl picks out a shucking knife from his handbag, sits in a dark blue plastic chair, crosses his legs. He unhinges the valves of the oyster, twisting the knife around till it makes a little pop. It is an optimistic, celebratory sound, like corkage, the sound heralding the death of an oyster.

His father is salivating, like Pavlov's dogs. Also, he is having a hard-on; you can see it through the thin, pale green nursing home pants. Marl brings the first oyster towards his waiting, gaping mouth, and he laps at it. Marl cups his gloved hand under the shell so the old man won't cut his lower lip on the ridges.

It's the only thing he'll eat, Marl says softly, the softest he has spoken all this while, The only thing that makes him happy.

After awhile, the old man begins to croon. Absurd, happy sounds, a lack of self-consciousness most complete. The muttering and snoring fall into a strange soundscape, unified by his croons. The man in the bed next to him opens up the last card, the Jack of Spades, and declares emotionlessly, with certainty, *I've lost an ocean*.

As if that is his cue, Marl stands up in his three-inch heels and stacks up the empty oyster shells that are on the veneer bedside table. He fiddles around inside the cooler and takes out one last oyster. He dislodges it and extends the oyster before my face. I pause, then bend forward to eat out of his hand. As my teeth graze the shell lightly, I remember that it is a living, breathing organism on my tongue. The oyster tastes just like him, and I swallow.
