

YEOW Kai Chai
Prose and poetry

Excerpt from “Picnickers In New York, A Fugue For A Lost Cartographer”

for R.

O, how was America then, pre-discovery? Suffice to say there is no experience like being smack in the middle of this billowing concerto. It could turn out to be our tarnation or salvation, depending on the jury and their tote bags of mood swings. “You sound a little pitchy in the second verse.” But don’t you see, it’s all a harmless karaoke session, a symphony of wolves having a minxy reprieve of fun from a day’s hunting... A quizzical prairie dog would rear its head from its security blanket and nobody would lift a paw. For those commercial breaks, the globe twirls in total harmony and no one eats no one else: “In the months of spring, we will play like silly butterflies in the strawberry fields, but do keep out for muggers and axes with vendettas.”

Then pop goes the weasel. It takes merely one off key to change the dynamics of the whole corporation, to unravel the fabric of the nation with its own rotisserie of allotted roles: butler, maid, grande dame, parvenu and a masked serial killer on the loose. In comes summer, hot, flustered and shaggy, distracting everyone with its vaudeville of itches, leeches and hot flushes. Trotting behind it, a leash of no-names tiptoeing in from stage right in camouflaged leotards, trying their utmost not to rattle the snakes. Occasionally, a renegade will break the chain and deliver a vaunting jump, pirouetting across the white desert before an off-stage gunshot is heard... It’s the end of the illegal rope, this time. Other times, the clandestine serial has just begun, scattering into sweatshops, factories and restaurants in pursuit of the transcendental dog bone: The American Dream. In olive autumn, the yellow leaves are shed like mid-life crises, only to be recalled with incremental nostalgia in the manner of professorial chairs summing up the city in fine china and regal blue: In 1664, the British took over the Dutch colony and renamed it. Today, on Independence Day, faces and territories are being redrawn again like brand new curtains. Little Italy retreating for the voracious Chinatown where we are now: at a dingy corner restaurant, slurping on our Singapore Noodles found nowhere in our own parquet homeland. Then the immigration hounds descend one day and the Inquisition begins...

But stop this psychobabble and focus on filming a feel-good holiday movie at hand. These are the great baubles and colourful trinkets we have collected over the blessed holidays. And since we’re on it, remember to grab mementoes for your family and friends to make up for the guilt and years of absenteeism. And how about some fridge magnets, pins, fake Rolexes, South Park tees and towels? “Hey, he went to New York and all we’ve got are these quaint bric-a-brac?” “I want my money back.” We all have heard this before. You nod vigorously. It’s the Curse of the Déjà Vu, even if the forgetful among us haven’t really experienced it ourselves. And then bitter winter arrives and we find ourselves in a creepy, psychological drama with evil rabbits and terrorized peahens that shoot out of the left wing.

Who is this? What’s the prescription clerk with the one-eye patch doing here? Is this what you really think of us? A few minutes’ cruise away from an increasing din of misunderstanding, you stand in drapes of white on this spotless isle and a crown

perched on your head. Unmoved for over a hundred years – right hand raising a torch of hope and left clutching a tablet – looking at the city we are and have been, and what would become of us... Too many stories have gone up in smoke, and what's left?

An open cafe. Is it really all cream in this so-called latte? All these crimes and misdemeanours reduced to faint coffee stains on the wallpaper, fine, absent-minded scratches on the sofa courtesy of the lazy cat burglar, as the customers stream in and out with their specific, undying orders. The plot of the postcard meanwhile is retreating into another ordinary romcom and that's okay, if that's your career choice. Most folks revel in the daily soursop, without a bleep or false note, and they're perfectly happy. Why ratchet up the intensity and live dangerously? You might keel over after the canteen break. The orange lozenge in the sky slowly being swallowed by the Empire State Building where Harry met Sally. Then rain, unstoppable rain, and everything is clean and fresh like before, with a room full of discreet mistresses. So no thanks for the dirty laundry – office drudgery magicked into miracle dust. And still you, the scruffy bricklayer with the stench of gin tonic and that all-knowing, lopsided grin, are on my mind, 24/7, but toggled out in a different uniform every single night.

By the same token, love, do you have change, and how does one call home? Wherever you go the phantom towers stand where you once were. A pantaloone in black stalks the Haunted Inn of Memories, or maybe it's the golfer's own shadow that'd never leave till shoes are flipped and all cavities searched for combustibles? I don't know. Absence, they say, makes the heart grow fonder is a cliché basted in golden sunshine, a roll down the lawns of our civilisations with digitally enhanced clarity and perfectly timed sprinklers to keep the grass green and the gophers hopping. That's how the toilet paper unrolls over the years. Most times the picnickers have no idea how they have got here, which, if you recall, is a hidden grotto with its harem of microbes making do with what they don't have – the lack of clean, running water, electricity, the works. If you never had it, you'd never hunger for it. So enjoy the fondue while the sun lasts. From this angle, as lovers (give and take a couple of future alimonies) recline on this bristling field feeding each other strawberries, sandwiches and california maki while a horse-drawn carriage trots past, the viewfinder clears up for a sec. The click! of a lock, the strike of a triangle, a hole in one for total recall. The Egyptian Obelisk, unblocked by fussy trees and outlined by the afternoon sun's burnished glow, is true, faithful and zit-free. Ditch the jukebox. The Zoo's open. I'm missing you already.

August Moon*for M.*

As if nothing's unwound, the memory's a one-eyed trickster and all I remember is a vein slit, red flow, staining the white cotton sleeve; the fish head cast aside, eye popped. Her face amplified in fish lens, framed in a half-a-sec freeze. Before every thing is at risk. An accidental tourist chancing upon a perfect photo op, or a cliché set up for effect. "No matter if your heart is true." No sound even though the labia part, chopper dropped to the floor, an inch short of naked foot. Wash it, disinfected, then slip away, footprints invisible except to the forensic eye; or spill some ink for a feel-good lyric for national intimacy. Likewise, the voyeur stepping out of the mirror, looking back at the inverse: a blade chipped, whose flipper tongue parched, sea spreading under the soles; a primordial sea that links this pronoun to you inside me. Pretend I'm not here. Suckling the finger, the mouth draws a salty river; or in a different book, the suction siphons the pus from the bad cut, the way one would to keep mum. Every thing is reflection, associative and inescapable. Electrified with loss, a vertical breath flashes as long as the umbilical is plugged and we don't hug. The cursor is one of his names. Life is another. And in the half-lit, flooded kitchen, you flush the noise down the sink with clear tap water; then resume cleaving – chicken heart, wings, skinned breast, guts laid out on wooden block, words as cinema verite propped for hardcore romance. The rest to digest and pass out in the loo, away from the discrete stage. Two days' worth of clothes wrung, pegged on bamboo hung parallel as mnemonic on screen. Slack complaint, or wet nothing: Cut to his cheap tee-shirt's blue running, dripping onto tiles scrubbed clean of oil from last night's feast whipped up for ancestors without faces across the sea, inked on an idyllic isle exactly like this one. So no ghost or human, invoked or rinsed, would slip, blood-thirsty, soon surfeit on confession (innards, body parts and surrogate lexicon); before time and tide take over – moon, white from afar and round as forbidden metonymy, the light-stealer until the morning hunger prick.

Hunky Nuts Lupus

Could the Singaporean applicant not have protested
and thrust a poem of simple scenery instead?

Spot the ancient croc submerged in green,
bifocal periscope scanning for terrorist movement.

Lensed, the Japanese schoolgirl gasps,
an albino python wraparound for evidence.

In the beginning, Man created Heaven,
snow globes and letter openers for the tourist.

Our sky is devoid of emotional detritus.
On Ground Zero, visitors fluff for a jerk-off scene.

Here's a banana peel flung from the ring.
Whatta manna? You expect a durian anthem.

Kindly turn off your irresponsible mobile and
don't feed me despite my Golden Tamarin plea.

I am a meerkat standing erect on a tree stump.
A polite label explains who I am and who eats me.

The handsome Fuhrer raises his head high.
But all the African Nazi has as audience is me.

His body language – torso taut totem and paws
arched like potato chips – spells gladiatorial salutation.

Today the lexical march-past comprises comrades
armed with corporate brollies and patriotic digicams.

Did you miss me on August the 9th? Flash. Auto-
roaming peacock folds its tale and scuttles away.

This national lubrication is a zoological conceit.
Stop puffing and zoom in upon Bloomingdales.

A wolf howls a parliamentary monologue.
A bear, out of range, rubs against gentle rock.

Red and Blue

The accessory, zipped up,
awaits the blink-off.
Redacted, this could
just end up one jet-lagged lyre.
Keep soul, big stuff in the overhead
administration, says trolley dolly.
Here is what is: a suspicious package
with attendant implications.
It's none of my personal vertex,
but we're psyched for another
sexy spin, another hook
to hang civilisation on, like Equator.
Beyond allotted legroom,
degree of reclination and those
damp hot towels, we rise
and fall, aside from such plenitude,
terminal or tarnation.
Gazing out this sentimental window
into pitch dark, yanking soul
out of you . . . to winnow these aisles
or suffuse every spore . . .
that's what it should do, shouldn't it?
If he can't quite define it,
what hope the rest of us?
It isn't the blue dress,
which doesn't lie. It's in the bag.
It is. Don't get me wrong –
I like righteous peanuts and hot towels
that come all over my face,
the subject already taxiing
to a softly tick and what's that slipping
from its side? A whiff? It's time.
Hold that nip while the gentlest,
quietest one casually pulls a tiny red pin.

Couplets

here you are faceless bobs
like flotsam in the strait narrow

sea scented with iridescent oil
radiating in rainbow swirl

as fin glistens before tell-tale lollipops
are sucked into the cistern

they wave to no one in particular
as another burp pulls out for air

between horsburgh and mrs ramsay
lies the blue missionary yonder

so finally there they are
alone on this empty white spit

this sheen of bright light does blind
don't block bastard

his hair singed by the setting disc
as they reminisce it seems like

the male lead is characteristically terse
the other all hands gulping as

the ground's shifted already
the son is out of ampersands

change position even while
she unpicks the pretty doll and

where is the old non-sequitur
things have merged so well

it's impossible to tell is the sand
beneath transplanted from a rose

as he smiles and leers
into your huge eustatic eyes

boy are we good at reclamation
your lips seem to say

those eyes shielded no more
by thick lens and clear as mirage

then out of nowhere three lads
and one girl come trundling

wet and naked claymation
down the shore brown

transfixed the two of you eye
the stylus stuck in the groove

fat girl squeals as one boy shoots
a plastic stratagem at her

the beach ball bounces off
her lustrous black flies

flinging streaks of binary pulse
at her analogue assailant

the culprit's face perks up
a historical sparkle

one hasn't witnessed for light
years through fugged-up binos

liquid trickling down
the corrugated forehead

girl relishing undivided
audience dance up and down

a long evanescent shoreline
the tide creates her broad feet

racing sideways as an alibi would
leaving shallow imprints

as romance comes rushing in
so the male places a banal paw

over my shoulder
shudder out of focus

Obligato

Alerted to it, we tried our damndest not to notice it.

A damp spot on the ceiling, growing in your shorts... one day, the bag dries up. The morning after the bones were picked, a mosquito's obligato hovering far and near, then nearer and nearer, I could not, I could not swat away. Softly, absent-mindedly, fingering over a painful bunion. My dear absent father, years later, each new entry either revokes the previous sentence or dovetails into the provenance of silent tributaries. A chipped comma cuts into foot. The flush doesn't work. The drip. The drip. Unhooked, soon all become submerged as humid afternoons... where and what are you? A low-wattage whirring though the lights have been switched off permanently. The screen is black and non-referential. To this spot, all sentient creatures have come for supplication. Some cock an itchy ear. A few, no longer thirsty, will lie down for good. I understand and I wish to continue. Wade into this, dip your head and open your eyes

The Call of the Hungry

When there is no more land to walk, and all that's in front is a river that cuts this into half, you relieve yourself of all your clothes and waddle into icy waters – till you hit rock bottom.

Your teeth start chattering. They make strange rhythms, which must have drawn out the animals to get a closer look at the source of the unusual call, only to face a red spot bubbling to the surface before spreading across the white expanse even as we sleep.

It comes to be known as the Call of the Hungry.

In any case, either of us would have willingly sacrificed oneself for the other when the claws and fangs come out. (Today, the boy (or for that matter, the old man) still feels the sharp paper cuttings on his neck, brain and all over the back of his torso.)

Ever so often, one is distracted by clattering bones, driftwood, teeth and chipped fingernails that prop the stilts of your mind.

This morning, between the unswept corridor and the hung window, the animals, they hear the call again. Any time now...
