

Oceans Away from My Homeland

by Agnes Chew

(First published in *Granta* in May 2023)

1

My husband guides my finger over the curve of my breast. My heartbeat quickens. Then I feel what he's felt. Desire drains from my body. What was once familiar becomes foreign. I look down at my bare chest, unable to see the orb nestled in soft tissue that shifts beneath my fingertips.

2

In the days following the discovery of the orb, I cannot stop thinking of Marianne. She is a friend of a friend from back home, in Singapore. I don't know her well, but I know a story of hers. A year ago, Marianne found a lump in her right breast. She ignored it for months in the hope that it would go away. It didn't. By the time she got it checked, it had grown to a degree that necessitated the removal of her entire breast. Marianne was only thirty-one when she got diagnosed with breast cancer.

I am about to turn thirty-two. Where I now live in Germany, the earliest available appointment to see a gynaecologist is three months later, in January. I fear it is too late. I can't help thinking that if I were in Singapore, I would have been able to get an appointment within two weeks. I begin considering the pros and cons of flying home when my husband steps through the door to our apartment. I glance up from the wooden kitchen table at which I've been sitting all afternoon. As he shakes off his coat, he says he's called the gynaecology clinic and secured an appointment for me the following Monday at noon.

"They probably squeezed you in during their lunch break," he says.

"How did you do it?" I ask.

"I might have mentioned I'm a doctor and that the lump needs closer examination."

A sheepish grin spreads across his face. Despite the tautness in my chest, I find his smile is contagious.

3

A week passes. Seven nights of sleeplessness. Tonight is no different. In my left hand is my husband's hand. My husband, whose breathing deepens with each inhalation of air. Before my eyes I see the flickering of a thousand tiny lights, a thousand future possibilities. My mind drifts to Marianne.

What haunts me most about Marianne's story is the way her diagnosis hit pause on the unrolling reel of her life. At that time, Marianne had just quit her job at an investment bank, about to embark on a sabbatical to travel around the world. Her first stop was Beijing, from which she planned to take the Trans-Siberian Railway to Moscow. But on the day of her outbound flight from Singapore, she was rolled into an operating room. By the time she was supposed to have landed in Beijing, she had lost a breast. Instead of the promised views of beauty and tranquillity framed by a train window, what awaited her was hormone treatment and chemotherapy. By the midpoint in

her sabbatical, Marianne had lost the hair on her head, the bloom in her face and autonomy over her body and days.

But still she breathes. This is a fact we are meant to take comfort in.

Next to me, my husband lets out a snore. He lets go of my hand and turns to his side, away from me. I think about the novel I have spent the last four years writing, which will finally be released in eight months. I think about the changes Marianne has survived in eight months. I think about the bright lights that have been snuffed out, those that will be snuffed out.

I will not lie: it becomes increasingly difficult to breathe.

4

I have only been to the doctor once in the past three years I've been in Germany. My husband frowns upon this. What he does not know is that it is also my only visit in the past decade. It had taken place during my first summer here, when I was still taking intermediate German classes, and my husband had accompanied me then to the clinic.

Much as I wish to erase the entire memory from my mind, there are certain details that remain with me from that day. The way the patients had spilled out from the single waiting room, down the cobwebbed steps, out to the entrance of the faded, flesh-coloured building to form a human abscess of which I had become a part. That I had an appointment did not matter. There my husband and I stood in the heat for fifty-four minutes, staring at the cracks snaking across the length of the building, at the monstrous ants making their way across the tip of my dusty brown shoe.

The thudding of footsteps down the stairs announced the arrival of a nurse, who put an end to our wait. She frowned at her clipboard as she called out: "*Frau Yi—Yia—Ach, die Frau von Herrn Doktor Kupfer!*" Everyone turned to stare at me. In her inability to pronounce my Chinese name, my identity had been reduced to the wife of my doctor husband. I wanted to tell my husband that even the flaxen-haired children before me had been called by their own names when their turns came, but I bit my tongue and followed them up the cobwebbed steps.

For the next two hours we spent in the clinic—which suffered from an acute case of poor ventilation—the people around me talked about me, over me, across me. Perhaps my appearance gave them the impression that I could not speak their language. They say the Germans are practical. And I, a mere subject.

5

Despite my deep aversion to visits to the doctor, I begin a countdown to my appointment with the gynaecologist. Five days. Four. Three. Two. One.

It is Sunday night, shortly before midnight.

I lie in complete darkness and my right hand slips under my cotton pyjama top. My fingers travel along the flat terrain of my stomach, then reach the familiar rise of flesh. Like a pillow, the flesh yields under my finger pads. Before long, I feel that familiar pea-sized orb.

I ask my husband how I should describe the orb in German. I passed the advanced German proficiency test several months ago, but still I am unsure if it is enough to carry me through what is to come. I listen closely to the way the syllables leave his lips. Then I practise saying the words, as if reading from a script: I have a lump in my breast. *Ich habe einen Knoten in meiner Brust.*

I am repeating it a third time when my husband turns to me and takes my hands in his—his warm, mine cold. “*Alles wird gut*,” he says. All will be well. The same words with which I often reassure him.

“You don’t know that,” I say.

The night lamp comes on, bathing his thick brows and deep-set eyes in honeyed light. “Whatever happens, we’ll go through it together.”

He squeezes my hands and for a brief moment, I feel a cool trickle of uncertainty seep out of me. Still I know there are paths I must walk alone.

6

Monday morning. I am about to leave the apartment to catch the bus when a message from my mother pops up on my phone. It’s the same question she’s been asking all week. Is my husband accompanying me to the gynaecologist today? Again I reply in the negative. I’d told her yesterday that most of the doctors in his department are down with illness or away on holiday, that he won’t be able to get away from work. I pull back my shoulders as I open the door. But it is too late, my confidence wavers.

Forty minutes later, I step off the bus. With an hour to spare, I head towards the nearest bookshop. It is strange to consider how I used to always be late in Singapore, a habit I’ve gradually come to shrug off the longer I live in this land of punctuality. As I make my way to the English Fiction section, my phone lights up with a message from my husband, asking how I am feeling.

Ich habe Angst, I type back. In German, the word ‘angst’ refers not to the vague anxiety one feels about the state of the world but rather, fear. A literal translation: I have fear. I weigh them against the English equivalent of ‘I am scared’, and an undercurrent of comfort washes over me. Perhaps it is the subconscious knowledge that this fear onto which I am holding in this present moment could leave me in the next, would eventually pass me by. That it does not define me. That I am more than my fears, more than a pea-sized orb nestled in the left of my chest.

Ich schaffe das, I tell myself. I can do it.

There is no reply from my husband. He must be busy with his patients. I slip my phone into my bag and head towards the shelves of books. For the next thirty minutes, I flit in and out of luminous, imaginary worlds, and it almost distracts me from my impending ordeal.

7

At the entrance to the gynaecology clinic, I ring the bell.

Once, twice, multiple times. But each time I try to push the door open, it does not yield. Only after eight minutes, when someone leaves the clinic, am I able to enter. I notice the air-conditioning unit as I step inside, which briefly reminds me of its ubiquity in Singapore, though this one lies quiet now that summer is over. As I walk towards the reception desk, the door behind me clicks open. I glance behind. A red-faced woman whose stomach is swollen with life comes in. She is panting from the exertion of climbing one flight of stairs. I am likewise breathless, though for other reasons.

I practise enunciating the last name of the gynaecologist under my breath until it is my turn to speak to the bespectacled receptionist. She does not return my smile, but I tell myself not to take offence. I hand her my health insurance card, fill in a form, evade the question of when I had last been to a gynaecologist. She then directs me to the third waiting room at the end of the corridor.

I take a seat. Here, I am alone.

Inhale, exhale. I focus on the way my lungs inflate and deflate.

Last night I dreamt of my grandmother, whom I haven't seen in five years. It is only later, when the gynaecologist asks if there is a history of cancer in my family, that I recall my grandmother died from cancer, that I had not been around to hold her hands when she took her last breath. But for now this fact eludes me, and the details of my dream become hazier the more I try to recollect them. All I remember is the look of pure joy on my grandmother's face. The way the laugh lines that fanned out from her eyes nearly touched when she smiled. The way her affection flowed from her etched palms into the crevices between my fingers, my bones.

I wonder if this is a sign—a good sign.

Without realising it, I have folded my hands together in prayer the same way my grandmother had taught me to when I was a child, as I stood before the altar in her two-bedroom flat, barely tall enough to see the glowing tips of the joss sticks she had planted in the incense pot. I no longer remember the words of the sutra, but I remember how comforting it felt to be in her presence. By instinct, I bow my head and close my eyes.

Here I am, sitting in an empty waiting room oceans away from my homeland, from the safety of my girlhood. But perhaps I am, after all, not alone.

8

“Frau Vee?”

Wee, I correct under my breath. Unlike most of the women here, I have not taken my husband's surname after marriage.

I stand and walk towards the voice. It feels like a test and I will myself not to trip. One step at a time, I tell myself.

The gynaecologist is dressed entirely in white. She introduces herself but I daren't meet her gaze. I am told to close the door behind me, so I do. Then the questions begin. I want to express my preference to hold our conversation in English; it is at the tip of my tongue, but instead I swallow it.

And so we continue in German—my third language, one which I have only begun to acquire in my adulthood. Everything feels one level removed; one language further, less real. Perhaps that is why, when encouraged by the gynaecologist, I agree to do a routine Pap smear on the spot, in addition to the ultrasound that will follow. I do not believe myself, do not recognise myself. I answer her questions, follow her instructions. I remove my underwear, spread my legs on a tilted chair. Then I peel off my top, my bra, lie down with my arms over my head.

It is only when the coldness of the ultrasound gel stings my skin that I realise this is it: the purpose of my visit. I clasp my fingers together. If I shut my eyes tightly enough—could I pretend I didn't exist? But my eyes are wide open, staring at the screen. Dark, unknown waters emerge as the wand glides over my left breast. The images, swirled with white, appear murky, obscure. Then the wand stops. And I spot it at once: a black blob amid the foamy waves. The orb. My breath catches in my throat. The gynaecologist in white says nothing.

I wait, and the wand moves on.

9

I step out of the clinic into dappled light. A gust of wind rushes past, stripping a nearly bare tree branch of its yellowing leaves. Above me echo the yelps of migratory geese. I take a gulp of autumnal air, filling my lungs with the scent of decay. I reach for my phone and skim through the messages from my husband and my mother.

For now, no one else is privy to what the gynaecologist has said to me earlier in the consultation room. For now, no one else knows that there is not just one orb in my breast, but several of them. Bubbles of darkness lurking in the chalky waters of my breast tissue. The one that precipitated this visit to the clinic is the largest of them, measuring a centimetre and a half wide.

Soon my husband calls and I tell him the news. Then I send my mother a long message, telling her the same. When I read her reply, I begin to cry. It does not matter that I am a grown Asian woman, walking down a European street with tears streaming down my cheeks. I read my mother's message again, and again. She wishes she could have been here with me. I think back to eleven years ago, when she had to undergo surgery to remove a fibroid in her uterus. The same uterus in which she had carried me for the first nine months of my existence. Where had I been then? In London, on a student exchange programme. What had I wished for then? That the fibroid didn't exist, that I wouldn't have to return home prematurely.

The tears do not stop. It hurts to breathe.

10

I close the door to the bathroom. As I peel off my clothes, my fingers brush over gummy traces of ultrasound gel near the pit of my arm. In the mirror, I catch a grimace on my face.

You should be thankful, I urge myself. Thankful that the bubbles of darkness lurking within my chest have not been classified by the gynaecologist as sinister. Thankful that I now have another six months to live before the next check-up. Thankful for the steadfastness of my husband, my mother, my grandmother, in spite of my shortcomings.

But there is something I have not told them.

Within my womb lies another orb the size of a blueberry, whose life is at my mercy.