

He looked and looked. Panning left, zooming right, a shoulder-hung camera picked up and released. Perhaps it really wouldn't matter if he stepped leftwards, rightwards, upwards, or turned around by three quarters. All around him were the same neat rows of white structural columns, extending beyond and behind him like infinity mirrors. A cacophonous choir of cymbals banged ever more fiercely upon his ears as he staggered forwards. The February's sky scorching sun grinned to the pungent smoke languidly placating him, in an ironic game of torture. He could not get away from them, nor find his way out of the white maze, somehow. It would indeed be his plunge into a state of vertigo if not for the sudden swoosh through the fragrant air a purple-fringed flag, alive like a dragon awakened from its sleep, its scales black and white. He bowed slightly to the solemn folks nearby, and scurried off. The bus waited for no one, but more so because as much as he wanted to look through his camera, he decided that no creatures should follow him back today.

The Nikon's screen fogged to his heaving as he slumped down on one of the chair-cum-table sets, and snapped away his surroundings. Only a few stalls were open today. He could have made his way to 'Mr Prata', but his viewfinder perked up at the sight of a yellow lantern on its upper left corner. Situated just between the chair where he sat and extended through to the void deck behind the hawker centre compound's wall was a little stall. Behind its glass case were trays on display like treasure troves, filled to the brim with riches from large pork belly slabs and crisp golden banh mi loaves, to stacks of green rice sausage and grilled meat skewers. A couple was standing at the store front, waiting. Walking to the side on the void deck, he noticed how the stall's back door was flanked by steel shelves, packed with colourful sundries and groceries for sale impassively witnessing the solemn commotion.

'Hello, what do you want to buy?' Panning down from the garlic-shaped lantern, he noticed a slightly worn-out cash register and similarly worn-out lady, bringing out a rustic ceramic bowl and a flat-bottomed ladle of pho broth on a tray. Scaffolding her grin, she, like the grey

machine in front, tried to keep it together. The boy lowered his camera as he approached the metal countertop with a sheen of oil, grinning awkwardly in return, slightly hunching his back as he nodded. 'One *cà phê sữa*, please.'

'*Ô-kê*, \$4.50', the lady replied in Vietnamese, adjusting her *bà ba* blouse with an inaudible sigh, reaching for the condensed milk. The clanking of her teaspoon against the milk can syncopatedly accompanied the crashing cymbals nearby.

While she was pouring the filtered coffee, peeking through the viewfinder, the boy walked and zoomed in at the stall's back and front, capturing snippets here and there. There were a shelf row of Tide detergent packets atop another row of Cholimex chilli sauce bottles, garlands made of little conical hats adorning the stall's front,... the couple posing and giddily pouring the broth into the bed of pho noodles and miscellaneous ingredients in the bowl, and a pixelated stock photo pasted on the glass case of a doe-eyed woman wearing a tight fitting *áo dài*, presenting a tray of sandwiches and rolls.

'Eh, you forgot my elegant face,'

'Heh... *dạ*,' the boy faintly replied as he presented the notes to the lady, who was standing with one arm akimbo, letting out a hearty laugh.

'Do you want anything else? Can go to the back, I have the groceries imported from Vietnam,' the lady walked out of her stall and led him to the mamak shop behind.

'Thanks,' he replied, 'Uhm—you're not going back to Vietnam for Tet?' He decided to strike up the conversation. The bus hadn't come yet, probably.

'Last year... Tet there was definitely much longer. You don't either?'

'I have school tomorrow...'

An interlude of gongs and drum beats filled the silence.

'Man proposes, God disposes,' the lady turned and flicked her chin at the Taoist ceremony behind, shaking her head. 'To pass away so close to New Year... Anyway, how long have you been studying in Singapore?'

'This is my third year, I'm in JC now.'

'Oh, how?'

'Well... I applied for the government issued ASE—'

'Ah, I heard of it—that's smart.'

While he was sipping the cool drink, his eyes were directed towards a photograph pinned on the 'A' hygiene label. A classic family portrait, with the husband and wife on both sides of the son. They were all wearing magua, except for the woman donning her turban and *áo dài*.

'That's my son, when he was three,' the woman looked at the photo.

'He's in—'

'Primary. My husband mostly helps him with his studyin—Yea,' she chuckled, 'we mostly speak English and Chinese with him, but I did teach him Vietnamese, like phrases.' She smiled, fixing her hair.

'I see... So, you have been in Singapore for... eight years?'

'Hm,' the lady nodded knowingly, 'I wanted to escape from my parents!'

Both of them laughed. 'Well, you see I was from Tay Ninh. And, many left to survive in the city. So he and I, we got match-made.'

'Match-making... And you both decided to start this stall?'

'Well, I suggested it to him. I used to work alongside my mother in her bistro—that's where I learnt my craft... I think in Singapore's where I'll have the freedom to start my business.'

'I see, sorry I was checking my phone. But... your husband had a business before?'

'Not really. But he had satay making experience, quite skilled. When we opened this stall, he handled the grilled meat. He's very dependable—now he also knows how to bake bread.'

'Oh, I thought you were helping with his stall or something.'

'So, how's the coffee?' She tapped her fingers on the countertop, drumming on the same arpeggio. The percussive clangs quickened their beats.

'It tastes just right. Like Vietnam,' replies the boy, gulping his breath. 'Oh, have you ever considered making fusion food? You've been staying her for quite—'

'As in?'

'Like, you can make coffee based on the Singapore kopi variation system, the kopi O, Siew-Dai—you know right? Or like try putting satay and peanut sauce in banh mi, or—'

'You like that?'

'Well—wait. I don't know. Perhaps... I just like cultural things...'

'That sort of explains your camera. Hobby?'

'Sort of... but it's also for my future studies.'

'In what?'

'Architecture, I guess... essentially anything art-related, culture-related... I'm curious about their multifaceted nature, you know, and... I just want to experiment with them.'

'And your parents don't say anything?'

'No?'

'Oh,' she smirked, 'so you will—?'

'I like the works of Tiffany Chung, Danh Vo,... They have exhibited in Singapore for quite some time. I hope I can... you know, take inspiration from Vietnamese culture within the Singaporean context to... do something.'

'Certainly great that... you know of those artists. So you took up PR?'

'PR? No.'

'No? You sound like you love Singapore a lot. I thought you would take up NS and become a citizen.'

'Not yet. At least.'

'Why? It will definitely toughen you up, won't it?'

He squeezed the drinking straw, as his feet unconsciously moved backwards. As joss stick smoke fills the void deck, robe-clad men with giant crying masks convulse to the sharp clangs. The air lingered with a hazy boundary of truth and fiction.

'If you were me, would you do it?'

'Why not? What's there to lose when you will get the passport as well.'

'Shouldn't you have had it, since you're married to your husband?—why hasn't the bu—'

'No—'

'Well, I'm afraid they have been tightening security, in case of letting in any more of... social evils... see—'

'Social evils... If I can go to the USA I will have already gone—ah... that's why you're not taking PR right?'

'—see,' The boy charged forward, gesturing at the stall front, 'look at these: are there any stalls in Vietnam that hang such many conical hat garlands, or that pouring- your- own- pho- broth like some sort of ritual? Or—'

'Then leave! You don't like my stall? Just go. Throw the coffee away for me later, thanks.'

'It tasted tart anyway—where on earth is the bus!'

'You'd better be taught to be more grateful! You think you had it easy, is it?!'

'It's not difficult to marry Ah Tan!'

'That's not even his surname! Damn it, I should've just shut up all this time!'

'Me too! If this is Vietnam, I won't have to waste time talking!'

'But this is Singapore!'

'Then why are you a foreign bride?!'

'—God knows, for Heaven's sake! Then why would you be a scholar?'

'I regretted not buying coffee and left sooner! Good day!'

'Much better! That's the reality anyw—'

The cymbals and drum punctuated in unison. Then, silence befell, brief.

'You really think there'll be buses? Leading you somewhere?'

'What do you mean?'

The boy stopped short, and turned around. The lady gulped, frozen still, her widened eyes darted around.

'Well, see that Chinese man, over there...? I think I know why he died—'

'Tell me something else.'

'—someone real. Killed him.'

'How does this have anything to do with the bus?'

'That person... they created him—'

'Who? God?'

'—no ; they created him, just so they can kill him...'

'...So what you're saying is that—'

'We're in a contained universe, you know, like—a *tuồng*, an opera stage—'

'—we're not real?!'

'And it's... it's you twit who wrote me!' Hello, oh, I'm so sorry you got upset... It's [redacted] here. Lady, please calm—

'Who asked you to? Hah? So after all this time I've never made a damn decision on my own?!' No, no... your marriage, your business—they're all yo—well, at least they are based on real people—

'You just cosmically bar me from leaving like that? You really have to trap me, don't you? And with this woman!' I'm really sorry, I have no choice, you won't even talk in real—

'From where? Research papers? Why can't I be an actual Miss Hoa, or Miss Khanh in a nonfiction study? Am I—' I'm sorry, I'm trying my best... And you might appear worse elsewhere, you know... '—just a shell of those people? And is that funeral over there even real?' Well, you see—

'It seems like it...' Uhm...

'Seems like it your head! But this is fiction, that can't be!'

'Then go and try! Open the casket! Dismantle the joss sticks!'

'Nonsense! That's disrespectful!'

'Exactly!'

'So it's real enough? To us?' But we're all a little real, aren't we?

'And likewise all a little fictional, you mean?!' Well—

'Do you even know what you're doing? Have you ever been enough to hawker stalls and HDB flats? Have you even actually seen Tay Ninh? Did you even talk to those non-fiction people non-fictionally or not, before I was?' I'm afraid I didn't have any—

'Reality–fiction, Vietnam–Singapore,... Aren't we stuck in a limbo enough?' Calm down, you're being too dramatic— 'What do you mean by 'dramatic', you've never felt that way? What kind of person are you?'

'Yea right... who exactly are you, false god? Another Vietnamese?' ...Yes.

'Which school?' TRIJ. 'Well that explains...'

'Hm, another privileged student! Just like you!'

'I bet she has gotten her PR by now... Imagine having your cake and eating it too!' I'm sorry, I can't do anything about it— 'It's easy for you to say so, isn't it, with no strings attached?' Well—

'To think such complaints coming from the same mouth that wanted to discover "Vietnamese culture within the Singaporean context"—'

'Why would desiring to engage with a culture means I will 'convert' and become a "multicultural model patriot"? Am I wrong to be a sojourner who wants to study another country?'

'—And eating "fusion food"... Hah!'

'Still better than your "authentic" garlands and that image of buxom *ao dai* woman! This is exactly why Singaporeans find us nothing more than at best Mai Phuong Thao on Channel 8, and at worst KTV hostesses in Geylang. And you, are you sure your PR-ness is going to change any of that, [redacted]?' I'm... not sure.

'You can say all the big, right things, little boy, and still get wrong about me... Do you think you know more about building a life with your bare hands like me?' She patted her countertop. 'You'll never know what being part of a *hui* club is like just to save up enough money to create this stall. You'll never know how I need to set competitive prices for my sundries. You'll never know how every year I need to give my family back home gifts and take them to Singapore on vacation, just so they can help me buy and ship the goods over. But you'll never need to, anyway.' Sighing, she looked up and around her stall. 'I'll do anything and everything until the day this stall becomes brand new. I'll ensure that they'll come because they are captured by this pixelated image of the 'Vietnam girl', and they'll stay because they want to pour their authentic pho broth, and they'll come back because of the assorted mortadella authentically sourced from Hanoi.'

'I'm sorry if I've misunderstood you, and "authenticity" is indeed something that can never go wrong within Vietnamese restaurants in Singapore: any of them will definitely feel like Vietnam—with some more "hyper-authentically" Vietnam than others. But what is "Vietnam"?' said the boy tapping his knuckles upon the glass case. He looked at the pixelated photo. 'At the sake of simplifying her, she's French like this loaf, Chinese like that

roast pork, and Southeast Asian like these green rice sausages. She is hazily familiar enough as “Chinese” to Singaporeans, but also encapsulates the equivocal social category of “Other” and a hip, cosmopolitan “International”—because it needs to be “authentic”.

‘I just don’t understand you... If you want more than “authentic” Vietnamese food, why do you still seek it out?’

The boy pursed his lips, ‘I suppose... I miss wanting to see Hoi An lanterns twirling to Trinh’s ballads as the piping hot Hanoi pho is presented in front of me, but without all the traffic jams or the entrance exams...’ We all looked at the yellow lantern, and the garlands of conical hats, gently swaying. ‘But “authentic” isn’t “real”. And the ‘real’ Vietnam wouldn’t understand an “authentic” one like myself... I’m—yes?’

‘No, just go on...’ Yes, please...

‘Well, I’m not sure what my wide-eyed gaping-mouth Sec 3 self will say when he sees me? Will he be delighted? Puzzled?’ The boy leaned against the glass case, crossing his arms. ‘As time goes on, I’ve become more like Thanh, sinking into my own swirling thoughts. Not because I saw Tran Kim’s immolation at Thing Hoai pagoda, but because of my own fragmented space- time and connections to those I knew in Singapore and Vietnam, from being to and fro between both places... What’s the point of putting on the jockey cap when I’m still wondering if I really see myself being in Singapore? Should I just best be another “guest”, whose “authenticity” Singapore is helping me to preserve, before the stay is over?’ I rested my hand upon his shoulder, as I rested it upon mine. Don’t beat yourself up too much... It’s not a crime to feel attached after a while. ‘But nonetheless a guilt, gnawing, is still there, to be engulfed in the South China Sea.’

The lady brought a cup of water from behind the counter, 'Nè... might be cheesy to say this but, my son..., and myself, and [redacted] here at least will be engulfed with you. I think I understand how you feel.' She gently stroked the lantern's tassels. 'Working in Singapore doesn't mean I earn easy money, but I can't refuse my relatives' gifts and vacation requests... I need their help for the shop and—well, I'm not sure if my husband's extended family will fully accept him, but in case they don't, I need to make sure my relatives won't desert him... And my son, he'll learn English, Chinese, Vietnamese—I'll teach him them all! I really believe he can... [redacted], someday perhaps you'll also be there—but I'm sure you'll do it much better than me!' I nodded gently.

'Hey, [redacted]?' Yes? 'Why would you have to write us out, if this only brings us suffering?'

It was already afternoon. A breeze glided across the gold-rimmed hawker centre's tables, swirling through the void deck now emptying itself with the procession of the casket bearers.

I looked, and thought to myself: why would percussive music placate dead ears? And why would a cushioned coffin be necessary when you will be cremated anyway? We all write stories, don't we, about some 'self' or 'selves' through various others? I guess that's why we are absurdly ever so closer to the truth as we are fictional. Our lives and our deaths were real as they were imagined by us: sometimes it was the imagination that birthed reality... You see, like your photos in there—in a few years time, what reality of the past was left but sections cropped by your own eyes? Or for you, what reality of your presence was left after the Revitalising Working Group relocated you? And for myself... I was wondering what the reality of my post-PR future would be, when it was a hazy realm of a new/after-life: for those who entered it had chosen to quietly live their days? That was why I

would write, even if there were smears, crosses and tears in this manuscript, as they would be among us in Singapore. Because, well, I frankly just love us.

The fanfare of gongs and drums faded into the distance. Joss papers rustled in the void deck, as they were swept up by cool breeze as by the cleaners.

So, *cô Thom oi? Dương oi?* ‘Yes?’ How do you both want to end this story?

‘Me, and him, and you—we’ll die together.’

‘Hah? What in the world are you saying, auntie?!’

‘You calm down! See—Our “death” isn’t “the end”, but merely “the end of this story”.’

‘...So that’s mean—’

‘As soon as this ends, we might begin again as a new Vietnamese man, or woman, or boy or girl, in a new chapter in a Singapore story! We’ll be better, more rounder—’

‘—but no less complicated?’

‘Exactly, kiddo!’

‘Brilliant! But we need a ceremony—for our death also!’

‘Ok, but how?’

The boy suddenly sprang up, and rushed into the stall, taking out two loaves of *banh mi*.

'We're going to make them? Now?'

'Yes, and eat them also! We must end with some beginning, you know?'

The kitchen turned into a song, with miss Thom's sizzling grilled betel-wrapped leaves, Duong's rustling plastic gloves as he assembled the sandwiches, filling it with the assorted mortadella and pickled carrots, as well as the chop-chop of my slicing of the roast pork. In no time, we broke our bread in halves, with Duong giving miss Thom two, and munched our assemblage of crunch, juice, and freshness.

'Well, it's still not your fusion food though...'

'But at least it's made in Singapore.' And eaten at the void deck and the hawker centre.

'Yup! And I shall call this artwork "Singapore Pie"! Hah! *Ai lai kít Xinh-ga-po bai!*

'You both are crazy! And how is this supposed to be art?'

'That's conceptual art for you.'

'Conceptual art my ass!'

We all broke into laughter. The evening was near.

'[redacted]? Will you do the honour?' They nodded at me, smiling.

And so the story ended.

Now, I no longer have a say on my characters. Among the Vietnamese friends who have read my story, they told me that some months ago, they witnessed the lady at the airport, with her son. Perhaps she had decided to go back to Vietnam. But many who passed by Joo Chiat said that her business was better and she relocated to one of the shophouses there, as they had seen the same 'Huong Viet' stall—only now bigger and more well furnished. Meanwhile, my juniors, who were the boy's batchmates, told me that he decided to take up NS, as they hadn't caught sight of him on campus, and yet one of my seniors who was close to him argued that he decided to go to America...

For me, all I know was that some days later after the story ended, the air was filled with the syncopated beats of kompangs during the wedding procession, and loudspeakers playing 'Selamat Pengantin Baru' and other nuptial songs to the cheerful chats of the guests among each other and to the beaming bride and bridegroom, all splendid on their pelamin. The very void deck became alive once more.

[3512 words]