

“Cream of the Crop” was first published in Body 2 Body: A Malaysian Queer Anthology (Matahari Books, 2009), a collection of short stories that Pang Khee Teik co-edited with Jerome Kugan. It was recently republished in Ronggeng-Ronggeng: Malaysian Short Stories (Maya Press, 2020), which was edited by Malachi Edwin Vethamani.

In the story, Pang's autofictional first-person narrator provides intimate insights into a specific homosocial milieu. The story's title refers to Pang's positionality as a former Malaysian Chinese ASEAN scholar with mixed feelings about this time at an elite all-boys secondary school in Singapore (while living in an all-boys hostel wing with fellow scholars/schoolmates). The ASEAN scholarship was first introduced in 1969, offering ASEAN nationals the opportunity to study in Singapore at the pre-university level. Since then, the programme has been extended to include entry at Secondary One, Secondary Three, and university. While coed institutions are the norm at the Junior College and university levels, many of Singapore's top-ranking primary and secondary schools are single-sex institutions — a legacy that dates back to the colonial era.

Cream of the Crop

Pang Khee Teik

The gods of my former years are smiling in the garden of St Mary's Cathedral. I see them as I drive my Kancil through the gates. You can tell, even from far, that these guys are made of big dreams.

I have not seen them since high school and I didn't go on to a University like they did. Earlier this morning, I had to stand for a long time in front of the mirror and comb my hair with extra gel to compensate for my lack of a degree.

In the last year of my primary school, my father conspired with my teachers to get me the ASEAN scholarship. Before I knew what was what, the Ministry of Education of Singapore had whisked me into Raffles, their best school (or so they say). They kept telling us, “You are the cream of Malaysia's crop. Study hard. Get your education right, and your future will be bright.” Then they added, “Or we will have to send you back and your parents will have to pay up for everything you owed us.” We were just twelve.

In my first year, the tallest and biggest and most handsome boy in my batch made a hobby of pushing me about the hostel corridor. “Who asked you to tell Mrs Lee that I was hanging out at Far East Plaza?” I swear I didn’t. “You teacher’s pet, is it?” No, stop pushing me. “What are you crying for, you fucking sissy?”

And then there was my roommate. I always tell people he had a brain as big as the universe. But he didn’t find that very flattering. According to him, the universe is a self-collapsing space, which only seems to be expanding because our perception is limited by... Whatever. He is smarter than the universe. “Pang, please switch off the toilet light,” he said one night. Why can’t you do it, you are nearer the toilet. “Because the light is facing you.” What? “Don’t you know? If a person goes to sleep with the toilet light facing him, the fluorescent rays destroy his brain cells. I knew a family who left their toilet lights on and now they are all in Tanjung Rambutan.” Then he rolled over on his bed while I climbed out of mine and quickly turned off the light.

The funniest looking boy in my batch – he had more moles on his face than pimples on mine – was nice to me. He taught me how to masturbate. “There, you hold it like this, and then you just move your hand like that.” Wow, you are so big. “Ow ow, slower, don’t pull the skin down all the way!” Oh, erm, like that? “Yeah, yeah... better... Hey, Pang, don’t tell anyone about this, okay?” He became my best friend. But he changed his mind at the last minute and chose not to be my roommate the following year when we were allowed to change rooms. That was the first time I felt this hollowing sensation in my chest. It felt like the universe self-collapsing.

And then, in my third year, a new batch of scholars joined my batch. They had already finished Form Three in Malaysia. They were one year older, bigger and hardier than us; puberty at home makes all the difference. They marched into school and took up positions as prefects, chairmen and captains. I abandoned my mean old batch and took to scampering after these new gods.

They seem to enjoy my company. I once entered a room and found everyone there laughing at some guy. Desperate to prove I am the lesser loser, I piped in: Yeah, he doesn’t have a life. To which, one of them said, “Wait, wait, guys, listen to this.” And then he turned to me and said, “Pang, you have a life?” Everyone laughed. Well. It’s nice to make people laugh.

Peter was the one I got along with the best. He was as short as me but way smarter. He would strike you as nerdy, with his short, neatly parted hair, his copper-rimmed specs and his ironic smile, but because he was also sporty, he was a dashing nerd. Since Peter had the answers to everything, I turned to him for explanations about statistics, organic chemistry and *The Merchant of Venice*. When the other guys were not around and it was just him and me, Peter didn't even make jokes about me. We just talked. Sometimes in my room, sometimes in his room; sometimes in the hostel corridor, two short boys perched on the railing like Neverland orphans resting between flights.

After our Secondary Four finals, Peter wanted to buy a new pair of shoes. In the *New Paper*, Peter found an ad about a sports sale in Upper Thomson. He wasn't familiar with the area. I knew it was near the stupid reservoir where we had our stupid annual marathon.

We missed the stop and got lost. Upper Thomson was a maze of big suburban roads and trees and traffic lights. We were not in a hurry – the bus would loop back eventually, so we just sat back and talked. We had come to the end of our secondary years. There would be two years of junior college and then university – for which I would require some kind of scholarship or I would have to move back to Malaysia. For now, our goal was a pair of bargain shoes for Peter.

What do you want to do at Uni? I asked. "Political science," he said. Wow, you want to be a politician in Malaysia? "Please. You don't need to go to kindergarten to be a politician in Malaysia." Yeah, I suppose, haha. You think Singaporean politicians are better? "They have better kindergartens." I laughed again. Trying to sound more politically savvy, I asked, do you think things will be very different without Lee Kuan Yew now? They say it will be less draconian. Do you think so? "Who says that?" Um, they lah... "Don't be so naïve, Pang." I don't know lah, it's what they say. "Don't always listen to others. Nothing really changes around here. But Singapore compensates better than Malaysia for being draconian. That's why my brother is coming next year." He got the scholarship, too? "Of course. Our parents couldn't wait to get us out." Thank God for our parents, I said.

“We escaped, Pang. Think of the future possibilities. Just think of it.” Yeah, I said, thinking of the future as I pressed my left thigh into his right thigh while the trees blurred into slow motion by the windows and suddenly, I wished we could be lost forever on this bus. But we found the damn shop and Peter got his shoes and we headed back.

Peter’s brother, Larry, arrived at the same hostel next year, three years our junior. He was darker, less dashing and much more introverted than Peter. While I got along with the juniors – better than I got along with my batch – I left Larry pretty much to himself. It is Larry’s death for which we are all gathered here at St Mary’s today.

After parking my car under the trees, I walk to the group gathered in the church garden.

Hey, Marcus, what are you doing now? – Marcus used to be the most handsome guy in the batch, but he has gained some weight now; then, he was president of a few clubs and could get anyone to do anything for him. – You are a high security system consultant? Wow. Cool. Hey Wai Kiat. – Once in his room, Wai Kiat showed me the stretch marks on his butt. I didn’t show him anything back. After that, he told everyone he caught me checking out his butt. – A plastic surgeon in Singapore? Nice. Hey, where is Tim now? – At the drama competition in our final year, Tim’s play won the top prize while mine was placed fourth out of five. – Freelance art curator? Damn cool. You guys are all over the globe.

Peter, looking better than ever, but now shorter than me, strolls over and smiles his ironic smile. “Hey Pang, nice hair.”

Hey Peter, I hear you are a publisher in Shanghai now. I always thought you were going to be a politician. I saw that essay of yours in the papers. Brave stuff. Me? I... I am a photographer. For some magazines. Well, *Men’s Review*... yeah, I know, they used to be good.

Then he pats me on the back and says, “Hey, you know, we are always looking for photographs. How much do you charge?” Well, I am still quite cheap, just starting out lah. About four to eight hundred per assignment, depending on the jobs. “We are just looking for a picture of a handphone, you know, like this, like a hand just holding a handphone like that. Don’t you charge like the newspapers? What is it? Thirty ringgit per picture?” I’m not sure what to say anymore. Never argue with ironic people.

St Mary’s is an Anglican church at the edge of Merdeka Square. The last time the Queen of England came by, this was the church she visited. I wonder if she also checked in to see what we have done with the schools they left us. The buildings are still there, with their frangipanis, their bronze busts and their mottos in a dead language, but the best students have all made their escape, or are plotting it as we speak.

The priest in charge of the proceedings, a round middle-aged Chinese man in a shimmering purple robe, is now telling us we should all be like Larry – “How exemplary a Christian Larry was.”

This was news to me. Larry himself told me he was more inclined to Buddhism. Six months ago, we bumped into each other on the alumni mailing list. On the topic of architecture, I had declared that Singapore’s oversized Lego sets are inferior to Malaysia’s postmodern monoliths. Emails flooded in from outraged Singaporeans – Singaporeans are so easy to outrage. And soon, I found an email from Larry himself.

“Hey, remember me? I am Peter’s brother.”

Hey Larry, of course I remember you. Blah blah blah. Hey, what are you doing now?

“I am studying architecture at NUS. I should tell you the guys here are annoyed with your remarks. Anyway, I am going to Princeton later this year. Blah blah blah. What about you?”

Ivy League! That's brilliant. Me, I came back to KL, did a local diploma in graphic design. Now I am just a freelance photographer. Blah blah.

"Photographer. Wow, cool. Blah."

Three months later, Larry came back to KL and wanted to meet up. He was taking a short break before he left for the USA. We sat in Delifrance at Jaya Supermarket as he looked at my portfolio quietly. Some abandoned houses, some listless people. He liked them, I think.

After that, we went to the National Art Gallery. There, we saw a series of sculptures by someone named Kung Yu. There was the Petronas Twin Towers as a headless monster robot with grenade launchers for arms. The Sunway Pyramid as... well, the Sunway Pyramid is its own parody. I kept laughing aloud, while Larry nodded, pouted, snickered a little. He looked like his brother when he smirked.

Walking out of the gallery, he said, "I think I might change my mind." On what? "I wasn't sure about coming back after Princeton." Why? "Malaysia is white elephant country. Not my kind of animal." But it is so campy you gotta love it, I said. "I know. Yes. This exhibition... I like it. The art of loving and despairing for your country at the same time." There must be some way for you to work here. Out excess the excess. Build bridges! Big bridges are all the rage now. "Yes, weren't we going to build a bridge to Sumatra? To stop illegal immigrants, I think." I said, if we are so worried about them coming over, what we need is a bridge that leads back to itself. A bridge that keeps you in a state of constant suspension. Like coming home and running away all at once. Welcome to Malaysia! "Come home to run away," he added. Yes, I said, let's run away.

We went out another time to a music shop where he and someone from his batch named Jim introduced Radiohead, American Music Club and other strange sounds to me. They shared so much music together they almost spoke an alien language. I bought all his favourite CDs, hoping to decipher them. This was the point when I thought Larry would be someone cool to know. Then, I didn't hear from him again. Three months later Jim emailed me:

“Pang, what is wrong with me? First my girlfriend breaks up with me. Then my best friend dies. Larry passed away two days ago. He had a high fever one day, checked into the hospital the next day, and died the day after that. Fuck. How does one lose a girlfriend and a best friend within a month? What kind of a stupid shit is that?”

Larry was 21. He was the top architecture student at the National University of Singapore for two years. He got a scholarship to continue in Princeton. He didn't finish the third month. They cremated him there.

Now Larry is an urn. A gray marble urn sitting coolly on a wooden table in the middle of St Mary's church. That's what a good Christian looks like.

Larry's wasn't the only death this year. Sometime in January, I received news of Rajah's death. He died of meningitis in his final year in Medicine in some UK university. He was the one who made everyone laugh when he asked me if I had a life. Rajah was 23. I wonder if that was enough time for me to find the answer to his question.

I say to the group, I heard Rajah was engaged, wasn't he? Was it still that girl he dated from our batch, what's her name? June? “Pang, why are you so interested in knowing who he dated?” Wai Kiat asks. No lah, I'm just asking because I am concerned... “You wanted to date Rajah, did you?” The guys laugh. “Pang, nobody really wants to talk about this now, okay?”

I remain silent, and he says, “Still the same old Pang.”

Sorry, I say to no one in particular. Sorry for trying to be friendly and not knowing how. Sorry for always confusing friendship with all these other emotions. Sorry for these other emotions.

I raise my eyes, look hard at them again and turn to walk into the sanctuary.

I see Peter's mother in the front pew. Despite her red eyes, she has done her best to smile at everyone. Peter's father has a soft gentle face that seems designed to take blows. He too smiles at us. As Larry's father smiles at me, I realise how ridiculous I must look with all that gel in my hair.

After the rousing sermon, we board the bus that will take us to Nilai for the interment. Larry's father, hands holding the bus railings, smiles some more and says, "Thank you all for coming. I see that a lot of you are Larry's classmates. Thank you for making it all the way from Singapore. Thank you... My wife and I, and Peter, of course, yes, some of you are Peter's friends from school, too, we want to thank you... I know some of you are still asking how, what happened. They had done the post-mortem and all that but – but as you know, it was all so quick. We didn't even have the chance to... I mean, we always wanted the best for..." He stops himself. And smiles again. "They believe it is an infection of the heart. That's all we know. We should reach Nilai in about 45 minutes. Thank you all for coming."

In the bus, I sit with one of Larry's architecture course mates from NUS. I introduce myself. He says he is Larry's best friend. I say, I know someone else who also said he is Larry's best friend. "Well, we all want him as our best friend," he says.

And later... "Hey Pang, you are Pang the photographer?" Yeah. "Wow. Larry talked about you, man." Really? "Yeah, he said he doesn't know another ASEAN scholar who is doing something creative. All the scholars he knows are either studying to be a lawyer or a doctor or an engineer." Well, there's always one weird one in every batch. "Well, he thought he was the only weird one. He was so inspired when he met you." Well, I said. I wanted to add, look where that got him. But instead I asked, Did he have a girlfriend? "No, I don't think so. He never talked about any girl." He didn't? Is he interested in girls? "I... I think he is! I just never heard him talk about it." Oh, okay.

When we get out of the bus at Nilai, I notice that the sky has turned grey. The ceremony goes on slowly. I wonder what Larry would have made of the catacombs designed to house his remains, these rows and rows of indistinguishable, completely unostentatious square doors.

As distant thunder murmurs, the priest continues on his mission:

“God has a reason for all things. Good things will come out of this. (Ka-boom...) We must trust in God. He will turn our mourning into rejoicing. The Bible says, (Ker-ba-boom...) all who trust in God will rejoice. Perhaps, through Larry’s death, more will believe in God.”

And it pours. And the umbrellas come out and hair gets wet and papers (I don’t know from where they come) start flying about, like in a John Woo movie. They hurriedly put the urn into the square concrete hole. But they have to get each one of the family members to touch it as it goes in. They have the priest holding the urn, and then the mother, her tears in full force now, stretching out from the left, and the father, no longer smiling, stretching from the centre, and Peter, one hand balancing a large photograph of Larry against his chest, struggles upward this way from the right. And then the urn is in, and they shut the door, and the family falls back blinking in the rain. Then they stand in a line, silent as statues, as the rest of us walk pass, politely hiding a sense of hurry, and offer condolences.

I keep looking at Peter, holding his brother’s geeky face on his chest, both of them wearing the same bewildered look. It makes me want to rush forward and throw my arms around them, around both of them at once; I wanted to hug them with all my being and tell them, it’s alright, it’s alright now. But when it is my turn, I become nervous – as nervous as I was those many years ago on our way back from getting lost in Upper Thomson, sitting on the upper level of the double-decker bus, my heart thumping like a monster being shot over and over and over again. I had turned to Peter and said, hey Peter, would you be my roommate next year? And he said, “I don’t know. Let me think about it.” I said, sure, take your time. And he added, “I mean, I have no problem with my roommate now. If I move out, people might think I have fought with him or something. You know, people like to talk.” And I said, yeah, I understand. People do.

So, when I do put my arms around Peter that rainy day at the cemetery, and I feel his shoulders stiffen, I only manage a halfway hug. And suddenly, I feel that strange hollow sensation in my left chest again and I wish I could collapse into the darkness of the universe, into a black hole, into the catacomb, and never be released. No, Peter, I don’t understand. Weren’t we the same?

They gave us a few years to get it right, but we were too young, and then it is all over. The future possibilities you spoke about were never ours. They give you more scholarships, you go away and become cogs in their big wheels. That's what they want us to do, Peter, crush each other into the dust. Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter. Can't you see? All of us have died young.

We all rush to the bus drenched. People talk less on the journey back to the church. At first, I manage small talk with the juniors – wow, wasn't the rain sudden? – smiling the same smile as Larry's father. After a while, we fall silent. I just stare out the window watching the familiar blur, my shirt soaked, my hair flat, and the hair gel running over my face.