1991

Eyes of the dragon

Lolita Bannerji

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd

Part of the Poetry Commons

Recommended Citation

http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/158

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Eyes of the dragon
by
Lolita Bannerji

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
Major: Creative Writing

Approved:
Signature redacted for privacy

In Charge of Major Work
Signature redacted for privacy

For the Major/Department
Signature redacted for privacy

For the Graduate College

Members of the Committee:
Signature redacted for privacy

Signature redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1991

Copyright © Lolita Bannerji, 1991. All rights reserved.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. PICTURES OF CHILDHOOD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Origins Of A Graffiti Artist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water Dance</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Godfather</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revelation Of My Obsession</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerous Playmate</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's Indifference</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiation Into Sexuality</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destitute</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicious Empress Dowager</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling Devotion (To My Sister)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of Innocence</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Tyranny</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimidation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Monsoon Season</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. TRAVEL</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priorities</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Curse</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sly and The Prudent</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting Grandfather</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard to Please</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last Request</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travelers' Exchange</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overdose</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfying The Children</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Window Service</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge On A Prankster</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Monk In The Village of Darjeeling</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Riches to Rags</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>III. PICTURES OF SINGAPORE</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girl Watchers</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Despondent</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flood Impressions</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image Conscious</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture Breakaway</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bargaining</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Debate On Grooming</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Episode of Illogic</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care For The Dead</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyclical Pattern of Luck</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Downpour</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodwill Among Muslims</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertaining Spirits</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canine Dowager</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Day Celebration</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fragrant Season</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thimithi-Thaipusam Festivals</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water of Life</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PICTURES OF CHILDHOOD
The Origins Of A Graffiti Artist

As a baby, I treated the colorful patchwork blanket like a pet animal. Whenever I cried, mother placed me on it. Fifteen minutes later, she returned to watch me make gurgling noises at a brown pentagon design; make faces at the fruits, a maroon fish head.

She appears to like colors, father said, may become an artist when she grows up. A great artist, mother added, see her talk, whisper to the designs; I think we have a prodigy, a Picasso.

They bought crayons, color pencils, drawing pad for my fifth birthday, hoping to see a masterpiece. I covered the pad with strokes, crosses, circles, dots, finished the pad in two days, then continued my creations on the walls. Mother screamed, took the colors away.
Water Dance

I counted the seconds,
water rising in the plastic tub,
the drain rats jumping, poking their noses
through the mesh of the mousetraps,
squeezing their heads between interlocked
wires, bleeding above their ears.

Mother hit their noses with a stick,
looked at the awe on my face:
They nibbled our potatoes, apples,
urinated in our dishes, kitchen closets.
They have cute eyes, I said, see the toes
paddle, the mouths open and close.
Mum shook her head.
Their paddling became slower;
their fingers let go of the mesh,
and they sank down, down to the bottom.
Godfather

When I was four, I watched Mr. Tye walk in and out of father's clinic, a grave look on his narrow face. On one visit, he carried me in his bony arms to a sidewalk store selling sweets, stuffed my left pocket with dried olives, shifted my body as he bent to pick two packets of cuttlefish, preserved plums, then chuckled: Is that enough for today?

I did not understand, but nodded. He paid a man dressed in chocolate shorts. As we stepped out of the store, I pointed frantically to a kite. Next time, he answered; I asked if you had enough, you said yes. He never returned in the following months. I thought he was tired of buying sweets; then father mentioned a disease I couldn't pronounce, shook his head: Mr. Tye won't be coming anymore.
Revelation Of My Obsession

When I was eight, I loved
Red River Valley among others,
memorized the words fervently,
would have scored an automatic A
if such exams were given.

When I was twelve, I heard
my cousins sing them and wondered
why I was so infatuated,
not that I grew up to dislike them,
but how they echoed in my thoughts,
as though a hi-fi set were built
into my brain, playing itself when
I tried to concentrate on schoolwork.

I pondered over possible answers:
personality, inherent insanities,
hoping to arrive at a logical explanation,
a method to shut off the cerebral hi-fi.

One evening, father talked about Aryans,
that we Bengalis descended from
these sensitive, war-like individuals,
with a tendency to be passionate.
Those words struck my mind
like typewriter keys; the cerebral
hi-fi played Yankee Doodle.
I couldn't turn it off, but I knew why.
Dangerous Playmate

Dad was out for lunch,
Time for mischief.
He chased and I ran round
and round the mahogany bench.

Stop it, mum said, you'll knock into something.
He boasted his strength, wanted to carry me;
his body, thin and dehydrated,
ever knew a decent meal.
Mum said no carrying and went to the back room.

He lifted me, staggered and panted,
as he fought for balance, legs trembled,
slanted towards the glass case
filled with bottles of medicine.

I fell into the case, smashed the bottles,
and had a deep cut on one temple.
Blood dripped like a leaky faucet,
collected on my white polka-dot dress.

Father returned, asked in a loud voice,
who the hell did this?
In the emergency room,
I received stitches, sobbed convulsively.
Regrets couldn't heal the scar.
Father's Indifference

Mother held my hand
as we left the bakery shop
to cross the road.
An orange car passed by,
then a blue one and all was quiet.
Why are the streets empty, mummy?
Because it's Christmas Eve.

We entered our house, built on top
of father's clinic, still open
though the rows of shops were closed.
The Christmas program was on tv;
a lady described movie specials,
cartoons, songs, shops, food.
Pictures of Christmas trees
flashed across the screen.
Where is our tree? I asked.
Your father doesn't believe
in Christmas, mother answered,
as she put four teaspoons of Lipton
tea leaves into a pot.

From the balcony outside
the kitchen door, I stood
on tip toes to watch the colorful
lights, silver balls, stars,
sparkling on a neighbor's tree.
Every ten minutes or so,
a boy fidgeted with the ornaments
till his mother smacked his backside.
When my toes grew tired, almost numb,
I entered my own door.
On the way home from the bakery, I saw a classmate from kindergarten stand along the drain, undoing his pants: Mummy, look, I played swing with him. She told me not to yell or watch the boy. Why not? He's my friend, see those boils. She ordered me to look somewhere else. I asked why why why all the way home. Her only explanation was my tender age, that lumps would grow beneath my eyes.
Destitute

Seline stood outside the classroom everyday during recess time, drinking water from a flask, watched students in the canteen gorge on fried noodles, cakes, chocolates, smelt the aroma from the fish ball soup and felt her stomach growling. Her hands were cold, so she stuck them into her empty pockets. She wished someone would offer a bite, but she was petite, inconspicuous among the crowd, so she could only hope.
Vicious Empress Dowager

The class sat in groups of ten, whispered, glanced at the teacher busy at her table counting bills, arranging crayons, stacking readers, tight lips smeared with plum colored lipstick, mumbled as her fingers flipped through number cards.

She stood in her yellow cheongsam, streamlined at her waist, slit to six inches above her knee. Chalk in hand, she wrote numbers and symbols on the board: Repeat after me, she said; repeat after me, the class answered; she yelled, You don't need to say that. We looked at each other, puzzled.

One plus two is three; no one made a sound; she took a deep breath: Say one plus two is three. We whispered, unsure of the instruction, too afraid of her temper even to ask what to repeat. She flung the chalk, handed out reading books: Turn to page four and read silently for three minutes.

From the corner of my eye I glanced at a Chinese classmate. The Tamil girl with pony-tails shook her head, wiggled her shoulders. Our fifth day of school, we pointed at the English words, wondered what the group of letters meant, not daring to whisper, knowing that two eyeballs were scanning the room.
Sibling Devotion (To my sister)

Lina laid the toy furniture on a piece of hard cardboard, arranged the tv set, coffee table, to resemble our living room. I sat in bed, dim eyes, warm forehead, a thermometer in my mouth, waited for her story of two miniature dolls who ate and slept in the imaginary house.

I watched her delicate fingers acting as dolls, moving from one piece of furniture to the next. Balancing the cardboard on folded legs, she glanced to see the expression on my face while mum read the temperature, and I wondered when the dolls were added to our collection.
The monsoon drain along the field,
filled with tadpoles, little fishes, mosquitoes,
served as a convenient restroom for young boys
after a hard day of fishing.
The tricycle shop's second daughter sat
under the shade of a papaya to watch the boys
from seven to fifteen years, Chinese, Malay,
Tamil, Punjabi, Sikh, Singhalese, Eurasian,
stand in a row to fish, to piss, to tease her.

Come join us, his brother yelled,
the others laughed, to fish or to piss?
The Eurasian held up his glass jar:
You can have my black fish
if you pee for me; winked his brown eyes.

Oh come on, the Punjabi showed his bottle:
I'll give you my tadpole for a simple request.
Red in the face, thumb between her teeth,
she shook her head: I don't want a fish
or a tadpole, those smelly, stinking things.

She's so shy, the Malay sang, doesn't want to piss
or catch tadpoles, she's so...so...o...o... shy.
Leave her alone, her brother stepped forward:
If she cries, mum will think I bullied her;
I get the beatings; he wiped his forehead
on the sleeves of his Flying Wheel undershirt.

For the sake of your brother, we release you,
the Sikh declared, adjusted his turban, time for dinner.
The boys collected their jars and bottles,
smiling, whispering in each other's ear, glancing
at the petite figure sitting behind the trunk.
Academic Tyranny

A few of us stood outside
the ladies room to watch
fourth graders scrub the sinks,
then the tile floor, the walls.

Joo Lee was late for the flag
raising ceremony three times;
Li San failed to attend math remedial;
Devi couldn't donate to the building
fund because her dad was laid off;
Aminah didn't purchase crayons,
jig-saw puzzles, children's magazines
that were part of fund raising,
so her fingers were bitten by stain remover.

A teenage prefect yelled, arms akimbo:
Scrub harder, I don't care if your
hands bleed, no recess meal
until you rinse thoroughly.
I felt my knees trembling.
Intimidation

We watched silently from the back rows, heads bowed, as the math teacher swept his right hand across her face, hurled abuses like stupid, idiot and to hell with you.

Her hands, bony and tan, wiped the tears that flowed like channels of rain water. Tell your mother to buy you an exercise book, his eyeballs piercing like the point of a knife.

Our eyes were solemn; we swallowed hard, wanted to console her, to give her a tissue, but could not, dared not, knowing it was impossible to get up when the dictator was watching.
The Monsoon Season

Eating porridge, leftover
french beans, curry mutton,
rain drops beating like drums
on the zinc roof of a neighbor's
antique furniture warehouse.

When is father coming back?
The soft voice of my sister was
drowned by the rumbles of thunder.
I swallowed the porridge in gulps:
He is unconscious in the emergency
ward; mum had to sit up for two nights.
She put her spoon down:
What if the thunder spilt the roof?
That will never happen; mum wants
us to clean the toy cupboard.

The silver streaks flashed
above our windows, zig zag
bolts of light trying to break in,
electrocute the Aesop building blocks.
As I filled the red plastic tub
with warm water, listened to the flowing
movement in the water-pipe, I wondered
what to do if the chimney did fall in.
TRAVEL
Priorities

Grandmother walked into a Long Dyak House**, handed a basket of eggs, rice, french beans to a Dyak* woman saying: Peace be with you. A naked child went among the stilts under the wooden house, found a stick of sugar-cane and nibbled happily.

Grandma explained about hygiene, that microscopic worms caused dysentery, but the woman replied she had no time to think about health; that they needed her in the paddy field to reap the crop, thirty families lived there, food supplies were low. She thanked grandma for the foodstuff, took a sickle and headed for the field.

*(Dyak) natives of Sarawak, Borneo  
**(Long Dyak House) Village house of the Dyaks, built in a straight line
A Dyak woman sat on the mat, complaining that a bag of pepper beans was stolen from her room. The thief had smashed some on the ground, broken the branches and picked the unripened beans.

She called upon the antu* of the forest, the water, the air to hear her cries: If he was a man, let his wife be unfaithful; when he goes fishing, may a crocodile tear him apart so he dies of excruciating pain; may his children starve him during old age.

Saliva foamed, she became delirious: If the thief is female, may her husband ill-treat her; may she be barren; if she is pregnant, let her baby die during childbirth; may she lose her eyesight and have nobody to aid her when she is blind.

Men and women stood along the veranda, still and quiet, awe on their faces. The next morning, the bag of pepper appeared outside the door of her room.

*(antu) spirits
The Sly and The Prudent

The manang* sat on the swing outside the room, chanting spells for Loiyo's sister, in bed with a fever. The manang fainted for a while, one hand on his chest, then woke up with a piece of white rock crystal: This is the soul of your sister which should be healed to cure her.

That's not a soul, Loiyo claimed, you pretend it is so to get paid. The manang stamped his feet: I can catch anybody's soul, even yours. Do so, I want to see what it looks like. The manang danced, fainted, woke up with a piece of rock sugar in his palm: This is your soul, let me restore it so you will remain in good health.

Call that a soul, Loiyo laughed, you can have it as a gift from me. Loiyo's parents advised him to do what the manang desired, but the boy ran into the jungle, not to be found. Ten days later, he returned in good health. His parents asked how he lived without a soul. The manang claimed that a person has seven souls, so he had six to sustain him. Loiyo laughed.

*(manang) witch-doctor
Visiting Grandfather

Tombstone after tombstone, mass after mass of earth, we trudged, reached grandpa's grave, half a century old photo intact on his stone, characters in red ink carved vertically: Here lies Ho Kim Hong.
Mum wiped a tear: I'm back father, these are my daughters; the rim of her glasses collected the stream from her eyes, they attend a good school, one of the top nine, we live comfortably, I wish you could visit us.

You are talking to a spirit, sister intervened, her expression gloomy and intense.
Mum straightened her face: Take one minute of silence, show your respect. Solemnly, I gazed at the faded photo, the same one in our album, grandpa in a white working shirt, in his twenties, just married.

Let it be, I whispered to sis, let her talk. Not supposed to talk to a spirit, she was adamant. What are you two arguing about? Shut your eyes, you stand before your grandpa. There were photos of elderly men behind us, above us a woman with silver hair, samfoo blouse, the characters on her tombstone partly eroded. At sundown, our long shadows fell on the tombs.
Hard to Please

He looked at the coffee
the waitress laid before him:
In Sweden we call this dishwater!
Make your own coffee then,
said the Australian woman beside him.

He reached into his travel bag,
produced a small bottle of Nescafe
freeze dried instant coffee,
added two teaspoons into his cup,
nodded, as if acknowledging his audience,
then took a few sips, twisted his mouth,
unscrewed the cap, scooped another teaspoon,
mumbled in Swedish while he stirred.
We watched with amusement
as he drank, raised his brows exclaiming:
Ahh! This is what coffee should be.
Last Request

A Polaroid in her hand,
she looked out the window, red eyes,
inserted the photo into her crocodile
skin wallet and stood up saying:
Excuse me, I need to get out.

The door is already closed,
the air stewardess explained,
this flight is about to take off.
For two minutes, a last look at my child.
I am sorry, I can’t allow that.
If you see your child once every
six months, what would you do?
I understand how you feel
but it’s against regulations.

She staggered beside me:
I need to get in.
As I stood up, I banged my head
against the overhead cabin.
Sorry, she muttered in southern accent.
Rubbing the back of my head,
I glanced at her dim eyes:
It’s not your fault; they built it too low.
Travelers’ Exchange

I fell asleep on Greyhound, the Swede began. The Australian laughed: Where were you going? Texas, slept till customs officers woke me at the Mexican border, wiped his bifocals, must have slept for thirty-six hours. I was astonished: Didn’t you change buses, go to the bathroom, eat dinner? No, none of the above, I just slept.

The Australian took a diary out of her lizard skin handbag, wrote: What I saw at Yellowstone Park, tapped her pen on her almond brown hair. You must have seen an elk, the Swede started, a bison or a deer, his eyes clouded.

She wrote every animal he named, answered: Yes, yes, I think I saw that. What about birds? Winked his left eye: A pelican, a crane, a hawk, an owl. Yes yes thank you, such excellent memory, she remarked while he blushed. I controlled my laughter, pretended to cough.
Aggression

At the train station in Bangalore, boys climbed onto cargo carriages for free rides, crawled behind gunny sacks. Inspectors in crisp, khaki-colored uniforms yelled for them to get off or be hammered; thick, black moustaches moved up and down.

Mother held my hand as we stood in the crowd, packed like sheep in a pen. Women in saris had baskets of corn, millet, on their heads, the smell of olive oil from their hair. Men with live chickens in bamboo cages, nodded, knowing we were tourists in our jackets.

The green carriages came chugging. When the doors opened, legs fought legs, for seats, for a place to stand. Lustful elbows seized the chance to poke at breasts, brush against hips. The women grumbled, their bellies pinched; old men laughed inwardly in their eyes.

We wondered how to get on. Father said: Squeeze, don't be gentle or be left behind. I hopped onto the steps, wriggled between bodies, searched for vertical bars to hold, wary of pick-pockets nibbling wallets.
Overdose

Eating my chapatis with curry fish, mashing the white, soft meat, fifth uncle offered dahl, califlowers. I imitated my aunties: Bass bass, no more I'm full; covered my plate with two hands so he couldn't heap steaming, red-hot gravy on my rice.

Father sat at the head of the table, chewing his spinach, tore a portion of his chapati, folded bits of fish, his eyes on the plate, observed the Hindu custom of silence during meal times. Sixth uncle passed me fish, still warm in the aluminum dish: Don't be shy, when you eat with us, we feed you as much as you can take; it's a tradition in every household.

Bass bass, I looked at mom for help. Don't force her, otherwise she'll throw up. I nodded in agreement; my tongue burnt of paprika, nose was running, felt a tingling sensation in my ears. Poor thing, my aunties smiled at one another, the spices are too much for her; tell the cook to put in less tomorrow.
Satisfying The Children

At the night market, men in shirts and sarongs laid handloom blankets, cotton sweaters on mats, shouting:
Aunty, these are real Kashmir material, taken from the sheep in the Himalayas.
Uncle shook his head: Looks like polyester.

An old man displayed animals and reptiles.
Sister picked up a clay elephant, painted navy blue with red patterns of flowers on its body; the clay donkey had a garland dotted around its neck.

We pulled mother's arm, wanted her to buy the handicraft for our collection.
The white turban man said: Three rupees each.
Uncle bargained in Bengali: These items are worth less than two dollars, you can't fool me, been in Calcutta all my life.
He accepted three rupees for two animals, wrapped them for two beaming children.
Window Service

The train halted outside a Madras station canteen for the morning rest stop. The attendant blew his whistle, announced a twenty minute recess in Hindi. From our window, uncle ordered two cups of tea from a teenage boy, paid him one rupee forty pisae, while another boy mixed two tablespoons of milk, two cups of boiling water in a circular pot, dipped two Lipton tea bags and said: Three minutes wait.

We sipped our tea, thick, brown and steaming. Uncle proclaimed: The best tea one can get on a train, made before your eyes. When a bell rang, the teenager scurried from window to window to collect cups, heard the attendant's order to clear the tracks.
Revenge On A Prankster

In the garden of a temple,
a baby monkey sat on a branch
above me, hid its face behind
the mother monkey, to avoid the peanut
shells I threw; come play with me,
I whispered, beckoned it to climb down.

The baby began chattering to its mother:
Kee kee kee, pointed in my direction.
I ran out of shells, threw pebbles instead.
A few hit the mother's back.
She turned round while the baby clung
onto her shoulders, squeaking loudly.

She came down, walking on all fours,
her round eyes fierce and burning,
slapping her chest furiously,
growling, hissing, scratching
the dirt with her toe nails.

My knees felt like jello as I dashed
toward my relatives, screaming for help,
the monkey chasing, hissing behind.
I ran past the pond, the gazebo,
waving my hands; mum looked surprised:
What's happening? Why shout like a mad woman?

Uncle broke a dry branch, threatened
to thrash it and chased it up a tree.
I paused under a shade to catch my breath,
perspired, listened to mum's complaint,
the monkey squeaking overhead.
A Monk In The Village of Darjeeling

Under the rainforest tree,
a blind man sat with a tin can,
waited for pisae from wallets
and handbags to make a clanging sound.
At night, he slept in a dry canal, mouth opened,
teeth stained red with the juice of the ceray;
flies sucked the raw boils on his arms.

When canals flooded in the monsoon season,
he took shelter at the steps of Lord Krishna's
temple, legs with protruding knee caps folded,
as he chanted songs for his afternoon prayers.
Impressed by his devotion, the chief priest
said: It is a gift from God, to possess
such perseverance. If it is the will of God
that you came, so be it, sing with us.

The rain poured year after year;
then one February, they found his body cold.
A priest carved a statue from limestone,
the monk in meditation posture under a
rainforest tree, as a symbol of his faithfulness.
A scar on his forehead he hides
with a turban, coils of white cloth
on his head like a snake curled up.
He sits outside the gate of a terrace house
with a bent but usable metal bowl,
nods at the maid in a white sari
when she gives rice, pours the dahl gravy,
dips his fingers, tastes a morsel,
not caring about flies sharing on the side.

He is Anil K. Kumar, a textile merchant
in Bombay twenty years ago, lived in
a bungalow with European antiques, drapes,
half a dozen maids, contacts with state officials.
A fire turned saris, imported fabrics into ashes.
Unable to pay the mortgage
on his house, he lost it. Creditors auctioned
the crystal chandelier, the bronze Buddha,
and slashed his forehead in a fight.
He lost his mind and mumbles on the streets ever since.
PICTURES OF SINGAPORE
She called to anyone who would hear, curry puffs for forty cents, walked toward the construction workers drinking black coffee in a coffee shop.

A teenage Malay, a red band around his head, beckoned her: Here miss, what do you have? Give me two beef, three chicken, going to treat my friends. No pork please, handed her two dollars.

She put down her bamboo basket, placed the curry puffs in a plastic bag, poured chili sauce, managed terima-kasih, tuan* in broken Malay while they laughed: Come eat with us, you are so skinny. She shook her head, walked away, coins bulged out of her shorts pockets.

Don't be afraid miss, we won't eat you, we'll buy you some prawn balls. Want to go shopping, watch a movie, make love? Hey come back miss, don't get angry, you are not skinny, you are just nice, we like your food, but we like you more, this we say from the bottom of our hearts.

She ignored their whistles; they watched her transfer the weight of her bamboo basket from right to left elbow, lines of red bruises on her flaky skin.

* (terima-kasih, tuan) Malay for Thank you, sir
Despondent

My daughter-in-law has a sharp tongue, Mrs. Soo whispered to Fatimah Abdullah; old people don't need nutrition, can you believe she said that? Tell your son to reprimand, give her a few thrashings. My boy buys her expensive clothes, jewelry, takes orders from her.

At five a.m. on Monday morning, Fatimah heard a loud smash from her kitchen, as though ten flower pots fell off the balcony, tumbled thirteen stories onto hard cement. Two hours later, police and ambulance sirens echoed in the Kallang Bahru district; rescue workers lifted a mass of flesh from a pool of blood; stray dogs licked gratefully; Fatimah's lips turned pale.
Pride

Pa, must I give you an allowance?
Sunita browsed through her checkbook; 
most of my colleagues give at least 
three hundred to each parent.
Mr. Mitra looked up from his paper:
I don't need your money.
Mrs. Mitra sat on the sofa; 
her right arm reached her back with 
a long, slim bamboo back-scratcher:
We have our central provident funds, 
enough for food, clothing and expenses.

Sunita looked up from her flow-chart: 
Hayati hands her paycheck to her mum 
every month; her parents retired at sixty. 
Hayati gets lunch and transport allowances. 
Mr. Mitra lit a cigar: I have my savings, 
unlike some parents. What Hayati does has 
nothing to do with us, keep your pay, 
don't worry about me, spend it on yourself.
Mrs. Mitra tried to reach her left 
shoulder blade, squinting her eyes: 
Your father took care of retirement, 
we don't need your allowance.
Flood Impressions

The brown, murky water reached my knees; I lifted my uniform skirt, took slow steps, felt the tarred road underneath. Yellow, red, white vertical signs hung along pillars of shophouses partially hidden: “Lok’s Acupun,” “Mohamed’s Muslim Res. . . .” Paper boats sailed from the doorsteps; the mud that carried leaves, worms, tin cans splashed against the stairs.

Neighbors warned one another of water snakes, forbade children to engage in water fights. Adults moved chairs, mattresses, boxes, to the flats upstairs, yelling at kids to help. Buses, trucks, crawled along the junction; drivers with blank faces stared at traffic lights.

Water subsided gradually at sundown, left a layer of dirt on walls, gravel and trash inside houses, on the streets, choking the drains. Families poured boxes of detergent, scrubbed cement floors with steel brushes, swept the mud with jute brooms, then with aching backs stood under the altars to pray for the rain to stop.
Image Conscious

The owner of a district pawnshop, preferred to be called towkay*, flashed a gold tooth on his dentures, plated with twenty-four carat gold. He donated ten thousand dollars to a primary school building fund; your name will appear on the contributors board, the principal assured, so all will know towkay is generous.

One morning, in his chauffeur driven Mercedes, two police came up: Your son was arrested for importing imitations of gold wrist watches; come to the station for questioning; we hope towkay will cooperate. His son went to Changi Prison, the story made it to Shin Min Daily, Berita Harian, Tamil Murasu; towkay lost face in court, was a frequent topic for gossip; he was never seen in Katong district again.

*(towkay) Hokkien dialect for boss
Culture Breakaway

Dressed in an orange silk blouse, a leather executive case in hand, she was labeled the yuppy of Belle Vue, the young, educated, urbanized lady with Western taste.

She chose to be Elaine Nicole Tan, despite parents' protest to retain her Cantonese name; complaints turned to uproars when she announced her engagement to her French boss. Debauched blue eyes, wine connoisseur, loaded, played golf with diplomats, were her reasons for breaking tradition.

They wedded at St. Andrew's Cathedral, witnessed by friends from both sides. Her parents refused to come; his were sick and ailing. Hers placed an ad to disown her.
Bargaining

Can we have a cigar, Mrs. Wee? Hee hee.
The two workmen stepped
on each other's toes, a smoke
before we paint the iron gate.
They belong to my husband; he won't
be happy if I take without permission.
We promise to paint harder.
She paced the room: You are here
to work, not to smoke.

Don't get so technical, said the youth
with a Buddha on a neck chain;
the carton is full, if you take two, hee hee,
he won't know and we will keep quiet.
I have never tasted one before,
the teenager wiped his eyes, can't afford it.
Here, smoke your lungs out; she handed
the brown objects wrapped in cellophane.
Thank you aunty, heh heh heh,
flicking their lighters, you are so kind.
A Debate On Grooming

She is wearing that brown, four-piece skirt again, with her pink, cotton blouse. Ee Mei raised her fingers, Miss Tan owns four blouses and three skirts.

Why can't we have Miss Sallay for science? Munvinder Kaur sucked her ice ball: I like her salmon blouse, with pockets along the sleeves, the jungle green animal print skirt with front buttons. Secondary Two B is so lucky to get her, rose lips, so pleasing to look at.

Pat, from Two B, has a crush on glamorous Sallay, Su Ching chipped in, munching fried fish balls, dropping crumbs on her white blouse. Guess what, people? Siew Hoon stormed in, Miss Tan is getting married in two months' time.

Ee Mei slapped her forehead: Who wants a wife who wears her pink blouse three times a week? Let's face it, Monday, Tuesday, Friday of last week, I memorized her dressing. It's a short guy with thick glasses, Siew Hoon waved her plaits; he came yesterday after school, appeared to be a bookworm in gray shirt, green pants, must be some guy with no fashion sense.
At seven in the morning, housewives swamped Seng Lee Market with baskets in their arms. Mrs. Sim pointed to a hen in the cage: Kill it, I shall be back in half an hour. The chickens fluttered as Tony opened the door, grabbed the brown hen, slit its throat, dipped it in a basin of hot water as it screeched, plucked every feather and dug out the intestines.

The fruit seller came over: Tony, how's business, lah? Doing well, need a duck? Not today, lah. The egg seller saw Mrs. Sim weep as she walked. Her father hung himself after losing his entire savings at the turf club and mahjong. Her husband is worse, lah, spends three hundred a month on four-digit lottery, asked the temple medium for numbers to bet on, it's so stupid, lah.

Mrs. Sim returned with green onions, tofu in her bamboo basket: How much for the hen? Eight. It's a small hen, she argued, seven dollars. It weighs three kilos; that is big. She held it: The bones are heavy. Tony's ears felt warm: Do you have eight dollars? She looked into her purse: Only seven and a few coins. All right, this time you pay seven, only today. When she left, he turned to his friend: How do you sell a hen without bones? She doesn't make sense.
Care For The Dead

Joss-sticks, pink rice buns, oranges under trees along the sidewalks served as food for hungry spirits during the lunar seventh month. Buddhist women folded silver foils, gold foils, into miniature boats like ancient Chinese money, chanted prayers, burnt the pile to ashes on the green field outside apartment blocks, providing allowances for the deceased whose souls return to earth every year to fill their pockets, currency for food and drink in the other world, day by day livelihood.

In Buddhist Chinese homes, roast pig, steamed chicken, rice wine were laid on altars to appease the spirits who visited. Living beings waited patiently, muttered prayers, threw two pieces of wood for signs that the spirits had satisfied their hunger, so the living could fulfill their appetites.
Cyclical Pattern of Luck

The fortune-teller studied
the lines on her left palm.
The road sweeper in white shirt
and black pants sighed heavily:
Poor woman, some of us are born unlucky.

The fortune-teller stroked
his beard, instructed a green parakeet
to pick a card from his hand,
then looked up his manual:
Five years from now you will enjoy
a better life, luck is stronger,
your son will provide for you.

Watch your health this year, stay indoors
as much as possible to avoid misfortune,
especially the seventh month.
The people whispered: His prediction
is usually accurate, poor lady,
so many black marks on her arms.
The Downpour

On the metal steps of an atap house, Ahmad wound a string around his top, wiped his nose on the hem of his sarong. The strong breeze blew coconut leaves, grains of sand towards the door. It's going to rain soon, his mother called from the window, chewing tapioca cake; run to the shore, fetch your father.

From a distance, he saw several men mending the fishing nets: Pa pa, his call drowned by the rustles of palm trees, his bare feet burnt by hot sand. He arrived beside their boat: Heavy rain is coming pa, ibu* wants you home. Father wiped his forehead with a towel: So many holes, we need new nets.

Water droplets hit their heads, absorbed into the parched sand, so they folded the nets, pushed the boat into the tall grass. Ahmad placed a big coconut leaf on his head. Droplets turned to drizzles as they ran through overgrown vegetation, casuarina bushes. Mother collected clothes from the bamboo poles, waved at two figures in the distance.

*(ibu) Malay for mother
Goodwill Among Muslims

Muslim men in shirts and sarongs packed the streets of Joo Chiat Place, greeted one another after Friday’s prayer, chatted at roadside stalls. Indians and Malays in songkoks*, ate curry fish, coconut rice, spicy squids. Malay women dressed in colorful sarong kebaya, flattering at the waist, chrysanthemums in their hair, came with children.

Teenage Malays queued at “Singapura” theater, sporting spiky, punk hairdos. Long-haired youths in denim jackets, jeans, drank Coke in coffee shops, chatting with waitresses who served them lunch. Students in uniforms crammed the music store for tapes, posters of Indonesian stars, exchanged Rolling Stones, Teen Beat, traded pictures of American and British rock bands, oblivious of echoes from a nearby mosque.

*(songkoks) velvet headgear wore by Muslim men
Entertaining Spirits

In the lunar seventh month, tiny metal altars were laid along sidewalks ladened with cups of wine, rice buns, red candles, to feed spirits who were tired and hungry. Giant joss-sticks burnt for days; adults and children gathered to watch street opera, carried high bamboo stools from homes, clamoring for front rows, scattered peanut shells all over the tarred road.

Mothers with babies pointed to bright stage lights; actors in their beards, head dress, swung their spears, escorted ladies in sequined costumes to sing Teochew dialogues. Along the curbs, teenagers on bikes drank soda, soya bean, ate ice kachang*, raised their voices to compete with backstage orchestra. Old women placed bowls of rice, burnt paper money as offerings to spirits who came, held their joss-sticks to pray for prosperity.

(ice kachang) ground ice in a bowl, topped with rose syrup, fudge, condensed milk and bits of jello
Canine Dowager

When will you cut your fringe?
Her arms akimbo on her sarong skirt,
the mole on her chin moving:
My goodness! How can you see anything.
A decent lady should keep her hair trimmed.
Faridah stood up, eyes on her text.

What is the grassland of South-east
Europe called? Faridah stared at the page.
Next, hurry up! Judy Tang dropped
her pen when she stood, eyes on her notes.
Next person! Thirty-eight students
in blue and white uniforms stood
at their metal desks, looking at maps,
neighbor’s socks, canvas shoes, hair bands.

Steppe. Shame on you, can’t answer
a simple question. Sit down, all of you.
If you don’t cut your fringe in two days,
I shall slash it, you wretched, worthless girl.
Students in t-shirt, P.E. shorts walked along
the balcony, whispering: Vice-principal
growls like a tiger, bites like a bulldog.
National Day Celebration

Row upon row of stewardesses in kebaya scattered mauve orchids from their baskets. Chinese opera actors in white and pink faces, warriors' costumes, fought with swords. Eurasians in bright blue and red skirts danced to the Jinkli Nona, twirling their partners, blended with drum beats of the lion dances; the canvas dragon breathed fire, jerked from side to side, dangling its jaws.

Thirteen thousand in the field unfurled red and white umbrellas to form the flag, reciting the pledge with the masses. Australian veterans who built Lornie Road, British veterans decorated with medals, waved their miniature plastic flags. As the noise faded, the melody of Majulah Singapura* replaced the silence. The crowd stood with pride on their faces.

*(Majulah Singapura) National anthem of Singapore
The Fragrant Season

The noodle man in t-shirt and grey pants, squatted at a roadside fruit stall to eat durian*, wiping his mouth with the towel around his neck: One plate of fried noodles costs one forty, used to be one twenty. The price of kerosene is rising, but I can’t cook without it. The breeze ruffled his hair; he ate his fill, smoked his pipe outside Bedok Food Center.

Families dined at picnic benches, scooping seeds of yellow flesh, inhaling the sweet smell: A sixteen-year-old girl drank half a bottle of bleach when she failed her chemistry exam; the hospital had to wash her stomach; her parents were questioned by police, quoted in the papers, such a loss of face!

The seller smoked beside the oil-lamps; mothers in batik pyjamas brought their kids: What! Eight dollars per pound, this one is not matured yet. Don’t touch the spikes; you will eat your share, Kenny, if you behave.

*(durian) a green fruit with spiky shell containing seeds of yellow flesh
Thimithi-Thaipusam Festivals

The priests came out of the temple, reciting prayers, while Hindu men gathered with bare feet and shorts, waiting for the signal to run across a bed of red-hot coals, for purification. The crowd cheered during the ritual, foot soles that remained unscorched.

Semi-conscious devotees pierced skewers between their cheeks, through tongues, drove steel spikes through their bodies. Hindu women, elderly folks followed them from Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road to Thandaiyuthapani Temple in Tank Road, supporting steel kavadis* in the hot sun, painful to observers, painless to Hindus, an act of self-mortification, to purify the soul.

*(kavadis) steel spears, spikes, skewers decorated with peacock feathers, fastened onto the bodies of devotees
After the Japanese surrendered,
Chinese shipping companies in shophouses
brought their families from Fuzhou, Guangzhou,
Xiamen, for a new life along Singapore River.
Men in pig tails labored from morning
till dusk, unloading sacks of rice, flour, tea,
coffee beans from trading junks to bullock carts.
Gujaratis, Punjabis in turbans brought textiles,
spices from Bombay to sell along High Street.
The River saw warehouses dot the banks
of Boat Quay; porters in undershirts and shorts
lay under shade to smoke their pipes.

Immigrants who came with only the clothes
on their backs built banks, hotels, cinemas.
Multi-nationals came to Raffles Place;
shophouses were replaced by skyscrapers,
linked by Medeka Bridge, mass rapid transit.
The island grew from a fishing village
to the world's busiest container port.
Hail the sacred water, the lifeblood of our forefathers.