



STORIES

Foreword

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THE SEEDS OF this anthology were sown in 2010 when Australian writer Ken Spillman introduced Writing WA to colleagues at the National Book Development Council of Singapore. A relationship between our two organisations grew quickly and strongly around the emerging Asian Festival of Children's Content—an event that has since become the most significant annual festival of its kind in the region—and it was there that Writing WA's engagement with the literary community of Singapore began.

Our many years of supporting Western Australian children's content creators to participate in AFCC led Writing WA to initiate our first international publishing venture—*Near & Dear*; an anthology of stories for children from Singapore and Australia which we commissioned and published in 2014. *Near & Dear* then became the foundation resource of a two-year cultural exchange program between Singapore and Western Australia which saw several of the contributing authors working in schools to share their writing and cultures with young readers.

In This Desert, There Were Seeds is the latest outcome of our ongoing relationships with Singapore's writers and publishers. The result of a collaboration between Writing WA, Ethos Books (Singapore) and Margaret River Press

(Australia), it is a publication that was conceived over a lunch at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2017. The initial conversations that took place that day between Writing WA and the team at Ethos Books were fuelled by a shared enthusiasm to create a publication that would introduce readers to new and exciting literary voices emerging in both our countries. A few weeks later, back in Australia, Caroline Wood was equally receptive to the project and immediately committed Margaret River Press to partnering in its development and delivery.

So began a journey of nearly two years that has now arrived at the publication of this anthology.

The international co-publishing model that underpins *In This Desert, There Were Seeds* is one that Writing WA believes has great potential to evolve and be replicated by other publishers in Australia and elsewhere. We look forward to this anthology proving itself not only to be culturally significant but also commercially successful.

Writing WA is proud to have instigated this project and delighted to have been able to make a major financial investment in bringing it to fruition. We are grateful for Editors Elizabeth Tan and Jon Gresham, and indeed all involved in the delivery of this collection of stories that will bring our communities closer together. In supporting their publication, we hope we have sown seeds that will continue to grow and nurture similar publishing initiatives.

Introduction

Elizabeth Tan and Jon Gresham

IN DIANA RAHIM'S "A Minor Kalahari", a story which gifted us with this anthology's title, a watermelon spontaneously grows in an old man's yard. This grey, barren town is an unlikely place for a watermelon to thrive; but, as one character informs another, watermelons have flourished in deserts before. The appearance of the watermelon is less a beacon of hope to Mr Tan, and more a reminder that there is still living to be done.

In November 2018, writers based in Singapore and Western Australia were invited to submit short stories to an anthology addressing challenges, hopes and joy for the future. In Western Australia, Margaret River Press curated a selection of ten writers—a mixture of emerging and established voices in the literary community—who were prompted by the following questions: "What are our greatest fears? Isolation from this arid land mass or the irony of dense urban space? Do we sow for a common hope, or rake alone? Shall those who come after us inherit these geopolitical, social and economic anxieties?" In Singapore, Ethos Books sent out an open call for submissions to the anthology under the working title of "Our Imagined Futures". We received over ninety submissions engaging with the brief for the open call, which stated:

So what about tomorrow? What are our fears, and what do we think is changing us forever? We seem to be living in an era of widespread anxiety and despair with people becoming increasingly alienated and frustrated with political institutions, social and economic structures. Our sense of identity and community is changing, leading to a greater sense of mistrust, disillusionment, loneliness and isolation. Recent global reports on climate change have raised the prospect of the collapse of “civilisation” and the end of human life as we know it. In order to confront our prevailing fears and concerns, where will we find the courage to face our challenges, to see and do things differently, and build hope and joy for the future?

The divergent approaches of these two publishers and their intersecting questions about loneliness, fear, and legacy come to fruition in these final twenty stories. *In This Desert, There Were Seeds* aims to showcase evocative, fresh, quality fiction from Singapore and Western Australia that will help readers find and connect with new literary voices and stories beyond their own communities. The characters in this intimate collection find themselves stranded in deserts both literal and metaphorical, in which there is still, as always, living to be done.

Though the residents in David Whish-Wilson’s “Vigilance Security” all dwell within lonely boxes—their one-person apartments and a bank of surveillance screens—they rustle with their own private dramas, deserving of dignity. In Chen Cuifen’s “Reunion Dinner”, a daughter chooses to spend Lunar New Year with her sister in California instead of her mother in Singapore; although she is not homesick, she concedes, “I want there to be a place I go back to.” In

Aishah Alhadad's "Datuk's Home" and Heather Teo's "Gently Burns the Crescent Moon", the isolation of the protagonists heightens their sensitivity to the passing of time, as others conspire to uproot their "place [they] go back to", and as memories slip away. In these stories, home is a place of yearning, despite it being the location of a difficult lived experience.

Rashida Murphy, in "Death Lilies", aptly characterises her assortment of migrant characters as "outsiders trying to become insiders", though as it transpires, in this story and others in the anthology, "insiderness" is not permanent or guaranteed. The protagonists of Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes's "Maqdala 1868/London 2018" and Jay Anderson's "Flies" understand this too well: all it takes is a thoughtless remark, a sidelong look, to remind you that your belonging is tenuous, conditional on being agreeable and cooperative, honey rather than vinegar. Meanwhile, in Rajkumar Thiagaras's "The White Lotus: Sinking to the Bottom", the protagonist gazes at her reflection in the river Kaveri, an outsider realising she has no possibility of becoming an insider because she is trapped in a patriarchal society.

In this anthology's uncanny visions of the future, characters continue to grapple for peace and belonging in a hostile world. Arin Alycia Fong's "Walking on Water" provides a recipe for making sugree cake as a means of salvation as the seas rise. Marylyn Tan's "The Blue Leopard" critiques consumer culture and technology with a tale of alienation and urban frustration, in which sexual expression bursts out of community constraints to escape. There will be no escape in Leslie Thiele's "The Slaughterman", which beguiles the reader with a unique character study of a worker of tomorrow that morphs into a macabre, dystopian fiction.

This is, as well, an anthology about grief, in all its painful permutations. Despite the insistence of the ex-lovers in Jinny Koh's "Contentment" and Alicia Tuckerman's "Glass" that their histories—their oldest and finest selves—no longer matter, the present nonetheless nurses a long and wounded memory of the past. The narrator of Rachelle Rechichi's "Dark Mulberry" remains embedded in the present tense, a constant "now", illustrating how trauma capsizes time; meanwhile, for Chipso of Tinashe Jakwa's "Purple Flowers", guilt and regret render time as circular. The endless car ride to the airport in Laurie Steed's "Sometimes Close, Sometimes Distant" creaks with old hurts, as Jen and Sophie confront (and don't confront) their brittle friendship. Choo Ruizhi's titular "Aviatrix" and Sabrina Dudgeon-Swift's heartbroken Asha in "The Wave" both commune with bodies of water, who reassure them that resilience and persistence are their birthrights; that although time cannot promise to erase their trials all together, it promises to carry them forward. In Cyril Wong's "Harihara", the present embraces the past, and transcendence is achieved to the metamorphosing syllables of Paula Abdul's "Rush, Rush".

Many hands and minds have tended *In This Desert, There Were Seeds*, ensuring that no one has had to rake alone. We the editors would like to express our heartfelt thanks to Sharon Flindell of Writing WA for conceiving this project; to Caroline Wood, Camha Pham, and Jay Anderson from Margaret River Press for your wisdom and warm correspondence, for smoothing our paths, and for being a delight to work with; to Melanie Persson and others at the Centre For Stories for your insights and keen eyes; to Kum Suning from Ethos Books for your guidance and encouragement, and to Bettina Hu, Khalisah Wan and

Teo Xiao Ting for your meticulous work during the whole process; to Marie Toh for your exquisitely beautiful cover design. And lastly, thank you to the twenty contributing authors to this anthology for your bold imaginations, for your tenderness and humour, and for entrusting your stories to us.