Jon Gresham, *We Rose Up Slowly*. Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2015. 177 pp. ISBN 978-981-09-4564-0.

Jon Gresham seems, to me at least, one of the more straightforwardly approachable, affable, mature and socially engaged of contemporary Singapore writers. Of no tidy national identity, born in England, raised in Australia and now having lived over a decade in Singapore – Gresham provides us with a uniquely weathered and maturely distanced literary lens trained on Singapore, contrasting fertilely with much of the comparatively more instant writing generated here in the last few years. As Gresham himself suggests, his stories are as mongrel-mash-up as he is. His oddly arresting details and takes on the island-state captured in *We Rose Up Slowly* also suggest that the "other," pedestrian, migrant camera and pushchair wielding "comrade" Gresham has licked his fair share – if not quite all – of Singapore pavements. These very readable stories are sprinkled judiciously with names that might beguile us, have us occasionally Googling, while allowing us into small forgotten spaces, secret corners, the persistently resistant and unwashed residual folds in Singapore and the region's postcolonial skin.

While recently reading earlier reviews of *We Rose Up Slowly* I wondered if I were reading the same collection. The reviews on Goodreads reflect starkly how polarised people's reactions to Gresham's collection have been. I can appreciate *QLRS* reviewer Sam Ng's observation that Gresham's "tone… is difficult to grasp." I can also sympathise with the heavy critical usage of "surreal" (but shouldn't that be magical realism?) with reference to Gresham's stories. Strange? unsettling? incongruous? perhaps it's more accurate to describe them as just plain bloody weird – their flawed, mistaken narrators resembling a character out of Robert Browning. Both *QLRS* and *Cha* reviewers seem to have read Gresham's stories in the space of an afternoon. Such casual readings of Gresham's collection may have generated politically correct (in a Singaporean sense?) if also monochromatic readings of the stories. Shane, for instance, in "Idiot and Dog" is deemed merely a stereotypically ignorant postcolonial xenophobe Australian racist. My readings of *We Rose Up Slowly* makes me wonder if there is something more to characters like "simple" Shane than meets the hurried eye – why else would Gresham have drawn lower class, socially awkward Shane not unsympathetically, with depths unknown to himself. In fact weird, peculiar, sinning characters seem sympathetically drawn even those who collect severed cats' ears and have ignorantly blissful sex with their mothers. Like Steinbeck, Gresham isn't in a hurry to judge. An exception is the inadequate MINDEF lackey Henry Lim in "Walking Backwards Up Bukit Timah Hill" and even he seems redeemed as he becomes the beast he has previously confected and othered in the name of Total Defence. In "Idiot and

Dog" the well-heeled Singapore writer Benjamin Ng and his daughter exhibit their own forms of informed inhumanity arguably counterbalancing Shane's uninformed and momentary ugly idiocy. Gresham seems good at subtly teasing the postcolonial politically correct as not so monochrome simple so well here that I wish he'd been able to pick at the contrasts and tensions between major contending cultures closer to Singapore home, a la Emily Innes, rather than leaving his only major Malay character as a marooned heartlander initially kaypohing and masturbating in a borrowed condo apartment.

The QLRS reviewer also dismissed passages in "Rashid at the Sail" and "Walking Backwards Up Bukit Timah Hill" as too intellectual. I liked Gresham's authorial intrusions and cultural crossings. Maybe the reviewer was unaware of Arthur Yap's linguistic parodies of petty bureaucratic authoritarianism. Gresham can mimic cheekily too: "We live in a wonderful country and we are playing a vital role in preserving all we have and all that will be for our families, for our children" (41). "Be nice to maids, foreign workers, and uncles, just in case there is another bus riot" ("Walking Backwards" 52). The same reviewer, condemns Gresham's method of narration say in "Rashid at the Sail" as unsatisfactory intellectual postmodernism. It seems to me Gresham resembles as much Jane Austen's range of narrative techniques, and I find Gresham's language neither vague nor generalising. Indeed the stories repeatedly seem to gesture back in form and content to the earliest, local forms of storytelling. Perhaps after all it's not Gresham that's inappropriately intellectual but his reviewers deploying conned New Critical terms to ponderously crack Gresham's fine nuts. I think a more cautious, Monty Python acclimatised reader will pick up on the slightly un-Singaporean humour, the nuances, as well as the uncanny interconnecting echoes between the stories. Anyway, I doubt Gresham feels the need as writer to reveal any fundamental truths, or teach us how to live as good Singaporeans. A more weighty critical voice, Jee Leong Koh, who was dismissive of Arthur Yap's short stories, has nothing but praise for Gresham's collection. And not without reason. There's rich language, much stuff going on here: enough for a dissertation surely – in fact the more I read these stories the more I'm reminded of Nalpon, but perhaps even more of Amanda Lee Koe. As with these line-crossing local writers in all senses, in Gresham, something resonant is generated in the gentle vibrations between the very local mundane and the magical.

We Rose Up Slowly includes ten stories, six set in Singapore, two in Australia (albeit with SG looming on the horizon), one in Jakarta, and one in which the initial story location is unclear. Aside from "Rashid at the Sail," and the runaway impregnated and mistress-beloved maid Maria in "The Finger" there seems a privileged focus on the exogamous, fairly well-heeled ang moh and Chinese cultures. Gresham has his stories thoughtfully arranged, even interconnected by almost too subtle echoes. But whether the irregular, inconsistent story page

breaks indicated by an extra blank page for instance at page 15 are intentional or a design fault I'm not sure. But if so, perhaps even more overt relationships are being thereby suggested say between "The Finger" and "Death of a Clown?" "Idiot and Dog" and the final story "A Fleeting Tenderness at the End of the Night?" The last story title here seems characteristically Gresham-esque, suggesting eclectic fusings of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Jim Morrison. I also sensed song lyrics regularly woven into Gresham's storytelling. As in "Dog and Idiot," critics seem quick to pick up on the racism, or anti-immigrant feeling explored in "A Fleeting Tenderness," while glossing Gresham's critique of Singapore's long and proud history of sex trafficking.

The narrator of "We Rose Up Slowly" reminds me of Richard Jefferies' Victorian dystopian narration in the first section of *After London*. He is less than omniscient because convincingly stranded in an alternative moment – almost as if the whole story were a document from another reality. Gresham seems particularly good at conjuring up a wide range of distinctly different character narrators overtly first person or not, as well as convincing accompanying worlds. Perhaps the stories are brought together by their flawed, over-aware, consistently mistaken characters.

> The phenomenon began with birds flying higher and things falling slower. Now the phenomenon is everywhere and it has changed the way we touch each other. Once one evening, after you'd finished your ice cream, I came close to you and we took our clothes off. Socks floating around the room. ("We Rose Up Slowly" 3)

Gresham here evokes not least through the repeated incantations of "phenomenon," "birds flying higher and things falling slower," as well as liquorice ice cream and an unsettlingly gendered locket, a lyrically light universe. At times I thought this volume might better be titled if not "Blood and other bodily fluids," or "Things Singaporeans can still do without Maids' Help," then "guys and gals" – for the deceptively comical explorations of tragicomic sexual and not so sexual relations between genders, as well as same sex relationships, Gresham gives us. The narrator in "We Rose Up Slowly" recalls some playful oral jewellery play suddenly going sour:

> And you drew back… and the locket left my mouth. It felt like you'd taken a fish hook and snared a tonsil and the back of my throat. (6)

In the same story, as gravity lessens, rats are dropped from heights so that scientists can analyse tell-tale blood spatter – such a bizarre detail seems to conjure up simultaneously – very real local HDB suicides and unsettlingly ethically unaware technological university experiments: fusing insects with machines for surveillance purposes – "Nobody approves but the tests continue

because people want to find out more" ("We Rose Up Slowly" 7). "Kids go to school wearing backpacks loaded with bricks" ("We Rose Up Slowly" 8). The story isn't apocalyptic, more prophetic perhaps of climate change in ever hotter, rainier, overpopulated Singapore. I thought I saw in this quite contextless story a telling confusion or fusion of Australia and Singapore in the narrator's lexis: "Also, that day too, you were a right kookaburra" ("We Rose Up Slowly" 10). The image of a father chasing a chicken step by step up into the sky seems the stuff of indigenous myth, if not a Heaney poem. The stories themselves seem finely (not over-!) worked artefacts not least in their satisfyingly quirky-telling minutiae, such as clove cigarettes, Peach Temple smoothies and ornamental Sikh guardsmen at Bukit Brown.

"A Long Bicycle Ride into the Sea" is the first story I encountered of Gresham's half a decade ago, perhaps as a response to the prompt for the anthology *Coast*. The Eurasian (mistaken as Caucasian British in the Cha review) narrator is literally coasting. Gresham's photographer's eye (note the reference to the work of Diane Arbus in "Finger") seems to the fore in gently capturing the humanity of KTV girls in fraying outfits, ironing, preparing for work in opposite shophouses. There's something interesting about Gresham having his protagonist say of his "love" interest with a straight face, "I liked and lusted after her a lot" (61). Who does he take us for? The seedy pioneer lawyer boss appears in an intriguing, even sympathetic light haunting all night KTV lounges when we recall his beloved early drowned late wife, a prominent singer. And in Gresham's stories the most unnoticeable characters contain unfathomable mysteries: could an old uncle have a beautiful daughter and/or lover? I also found Gresham's oddball vocab (e.g. bonked, spiffy, floozie) satisfying after so many supposedly best Singaporean stories featuring such bland, un-unique lexis.

Many of Gresham's stories feature aspects some readers might be "somdel squeemish" of: plenty of goitres, farting, piss and vomit. Is Gresham a writer most at home amidst the excremental less sweet aspects of the Singaporean body – a local Smollett or Swift? Or is there something rather eighteenth century about the leaky Singaporean-global body politic? There are also a myriad of continuities, connections, repetitions across stories which I appreciated. It is almost as if the rat blood spatter in the first story had seeped quite a way through the subsequent pages of the collection beyond that on Henry's bestial face on Bukit Timah Hill in "Walking Backwards." I also sense echoes across stories: stray socks, Billie Holiday, earbuds pushed too far in. Also those song references that crop up frequently without fuss: "he thought about life and he thought about death" ("Walking Backwards" 47), "searching for a kiss" ("Walking Backwards" 50), "in between days" ("A Long Bicycle Ride" 59), "all things must pass" ("Rashid at the Sail" 29), the story title 'Death of a Clown' recalling the very British Kinks, "I will follow you anywhere" ("We Rose Up Slowly" 14). Gresham's unpoetic penchant for alliteration also

regularly enriches and enlivens his prose: "the bitches in the bathroom batter on the door" ("A Fleeting Tenderness" 172).

Towards the end of the volume we leave Singapore for Australia (refreshingly "the West," US and UK barely merit a mention other than in old memories, books, parties, songs). "Other People's Cat's" partially, surely significantly takes place in Dulcie Deamer Street: an Australia as most Singaporeans have yet to see it. As I suggested earlier, "Idiot and Dog" explores through an Australian/Chinese Singaporean confrontation the challenges of "just having to/Balance the intolerable in others/Against our own" as Seamus Heaney has it. Gresham presents us with "nice" Australians and Singapore Chinese caught in very human inhuman moments – while confronting us with the question, how should we respond to these moments in others and in ourselves?

Gresham masterfully blends geographies and past in his concluding story, "A Fleeting Tenderness at the End of the Night." With the backdrop of Zoukh nightclub, a sex-trafficked Chinese woman finds potential escape, advancement, solace in a toilet cubicle in the arms of an Indian female designer from Siglap in a spacegirl outfit. The girls aim to rendez-vous at the roti prata and teh halia shop on the very local corner of Kampong Bahru and Blair Roads. This detail of a specific enduring traditional democratised public space seems most telling, echoing the already developed hawker centre in "Rashid at the Sail." One might almost map Gresham's Singapore from the very local places he weaves into these stories: Duxton Hill Road, Everton Park, Books Actually, Bukit Timah, Bukit Brown, Toa Payoh playground. In "A Fleeting Tenderness" Gresham also privileges a sexual fluidity between these two marginalised women, reminiscent of the sexualities of Julia and her maid in "The Finger," the successful unproblematically bisexual personal trainer Azman in "Rashid at the Sail."

In "A Fleeting Tenderness" Gresham also weaves in historical detail – the notorious youtubed Chinese millionaire Lamborghini crash on Rochor Road in 2012 is pertinently translated to an intersection overlooked by the Police Cantonment Complex on New Bridge Road. The same is probably true of the drunken western expatriate falling to his death in "Rashid at the Sail." Gresham's light and breezy, almost farcical, way of ushering in the disturbing seems to make for effective mediated satire on many Singapore things, not least masculinity – the elite's unreflexive fetishising and cascading of "leadership," as well as the confection of a "garden city," plus national fertility anxieties. The sad work-chastened, domestic despot Henry Lim in "Walking Backwards" seems a grim walking "Singapore story" until he encounters something darker, arguably more genuinely of the island's "green spaces." Literature teachers might find fertile connections between this story and Amanda Lee Koe's "Every Park on this Island." Again, Gresham goes all eccentric in collapsing in a MINDEF employee's brain the last tiger shot in Singapore (wasn't that in 1930?) with the

Japanese invasion in 1942. Henry gains pleasure in creating MINDEF narratives of (fictional) reassurance – a sinister take on pedagogical and other pressures on Singapore writing to serve "national" needs.

Unequivocally effective humour is not always at a premium in Singapore literature even in its best writing. For me Gresham does yield some satisfyingly deadpan, telling lines:

> "Later, you said, "Of course it wasn't a dream. When you kissed me I smelt onions." ("We Rose" 5)
> "Your mother, that hideous, lovely lady with the bagpipe voice and aluminum alloy pelvis." ("We Rose" 11)
> "I imagined her at home in a decent HDB flat in Clementi, living an ordinary life with her evangelical Christian parents and her chubby, vision-impaired little brother." ("A Long Bicycle Ride" 61)

Gresham's slipping in of bizarre seemingly random phrases and details raises the writing above the Singapore popular-ordinary, and again perhaps gestures us back to something pre-Singaporean, the consummately told, intuitively apprehended tale. In discussing "Death of a clown" critics so far have exhibited little appreciation of Gresham's deft negotiation of different forms of storytelling. The emails in "Rashid" just like the concluding newspaper account in "Death of a Clown" are there for a reason – perhaps we as local readers, critics need to puzzle over such strategies a little more carefully. Such texts within texts surely open up further perspectives, dimensions and possibilities in respective stories. Might we even consider the unthinkable: an absentee entertainer father having perhaps one redeeming quality?

In this first collection, Gresham, conscious and cosmopolitan mongrel writer of the world, seems to have broken key ground and taken the Singapore short story into a newer, freer, adaptably post-national, and highly readable space.

Works Cited

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