To be awake

Mary Ellen Ballard

I wake each morning
into my death
I commend
my spirit
hold

that I might move
through
this world without
missing—

something in the trees
dogwood blossoms
cicada shells
like leaves will shelter
my knees
let me be lost
on my knees
reaching out
for the cool dark

of memory, I lay down
in the backyard
open mouthed
fireflies drip down
fog now
again wraps clarity

Flamingo Valley

Amanda Lee Koe

Presently

“Ling Ko Mui, the hot fuss of Flamingo Valley,” the old Malay man says. “Oh ho, you still gots it, don’t you baby.”

All the old Chinese men and women turn up their yellow wrinkled faces like sea turtles, and Deddy Haikel gestures at her with a flourish. Ling Ko Mui creaks her gaze tentatively toward him.

“Yes you!” Deddy Haikel says, “I’m talking to you, girl.” But her clouded eyes have swiveled back to the television set, where a Mandarin travel show is airing.

Didn’t you ask me to take you for a ride on my motorbike?
Didn’t you come see me play the National Theatre?
Didn’t your Chinese boyfriend beat me up on Bencoolen Street?

Deddy Haikel picks up his guitar, which is never ever too far away, and begins strumming the first few chords of Barbara Shimmies on Bugis Street. His voice isn’t like it was, not since the throat op, but it reaches into Ling Ko Mui and she looks up at him, her squinting eyes almost meeting his.

“The woman is nyanyuk,” one of the old Chinese men croaks to Deddy Haikel, twirling a finger beside his temple. “Doesn’t remember anything. Can’t even recognize her daughter.”

Deddy Haikel lets the riff sag, props a leg on a chair and says, “Hey this whole ward is the nyanyuk ward, isn’t it? Don’t think you’re so smart. You’re soft in the head too.” He turns back to Ling Ko Mui, but she has averted her eyes, in exactly the same manner as when she was eighteen and he asked her for a dance.

There are things that cut through swathes of memory, that are non-essential, that drag you down, but you can’t offload them because there is only one way to throw them overboard and that is for you to walk the plank.
He’d finished his set in the small pub—covers of the Beatles, played on a guitar he’d saved up a year and a half to purchase, delivering newspapers on weekends—and was making his way to the bar. The pub was popular with British servicemen, being only a short distance away from the barracks. In the mass of khaki uniforms, there was a young Chinese girl in a full white skirt, prim on a bar stool. When he reached the bar she turned. “You’re very good,” she said.

“Thank you. What’s a nice girl like you doing in a pub by yourself?"

“My father owns the pub. We live upstairs.”

“It must get noisy.”

“It does, but I love music. The only thing I don’t understand is why it’s always only the Eurasians and you Malays. We don’t ever have Chinese musicians coming in to play.”

He laughed. “You Chinese are too busy trying to be businessmen. Making real money. It’s how your father can give me $5 for playing tonight’s set.”

“Listen, I’m starving—will you take me to eat? I saw that you ride a motorbike; I’ve never been on one.”

“Sure. What would you like to eat?”

“Surprise me. As long as we get there on your motorbike.”

They sat across a rickety aluminum table at a kedai makan, platters of nasi kandar and sup kambing between them. Ling Ko Mui picked up a fork and spoon. Deddy Haikel considered the cutlery for a moment and then reached in with his hands as he normally would.

“Is there a technique?” she asked.

“Ts?”

“Ts eating with your hands?”

He showed her how to gather the rice into a loose ball, packing it more tightly as he went along. She joined him with her hands. “Only with your right hand,” he said. “The left is unclean.”

“I could wash it.”

“No, not like that. The right hand is for eating, and the left hand is for…” He looks down briefly.

“Ah, I see.”

After a pause, he asked, “Do you like the rice?”

“It’s delicious. But why is Malay chilli so sweet?”

“It helps the musicians write better love songs.”

Every Friday evening, he would play the 8-9 pm set at Ling Ko Mui’s father’s pub and when her father was busy at the counter, they would sneak out for supper on his motorbike—Malay food one week, Chinese food the next. Her father was cordial enough to Deddy Haikel the musician, but Deddy Haikel the suitor would have been tossed out the back door like the beansprout ends and chicken bones from dinner. Over teh balia or hot Horlicks after supper, they would talk about music; she told him he ought to get a backing band, that he ought to write his own songs, that she could help with the lyrics.

Once, he came to the pub an hour earlier. Her parents were at the temple of the Goddess of Mercy, her younger siblings playing catch on the street. They ran upstairs, light-footed, and she drew the curtains together before unearth ing her father’s record player from under a Chinese silk doily. They crouched close together as he watched her delicate fingers put on an imported Petula Clark record, tuning the volume down. When Ya Ya Twist started playing, Deddy Haikel got to his feet and stuck out his hand. Ling Ko Mui hesitated, then took it; they danced in the gathering twilight, ceiling fan whirling slowly above them. She started singing softly with the music as he held her close, and then closer. He loved the sweet, nasal quality to her voice and he closed his eyes, letting his thoughts race through—perhaps she could be a backing vocalist in his band? A Malay wedding, or a Chinese one? Could he give up the Qu’ran for her? Would his parents disown him? And hers? Would she give them up for him, the way he was prepared to give his up for her? He wanted to say something, but the record was ending, running empty under the needle. Ling Ko Mui pulled away from him gently, kneeling by the floor to flip the vinyl.
“There was a Chinese girl I was gila in love with,” Deddy Haikel says to the young nurse, as she listens to his heartbeat, assessing the damage of this second heart attack. “I would have done anything to get into her pants, but it wasn’t even about that.”

There was a Chinese boy who felt the same way about Ling Ko Mui. I didn’t know about him, but he knew about me. I was walking down Bencoolen Street one day when someone tapped my shoulder. When I turned around, he punched me full in my face. Said he’d sent his men to do the legwork: he knew I played Friday sets at her father’s pub and that we had supper together after. That she would put her arms on either side of my waist as she rode pillion on my motorbike.

He smelled of treated cuttlefish and shrimped red dates; he told me he was the son of a dried sundries merchant and that they were made of money. He could give Ling Ko Mui the life she deserved. I went at him, but he had these lackeys with bad teeth and white singlets under unbuttoned shirts. They broke a rib of mine.

When I lay in hospital I thought about it like a carnival act. I’d reach into my throat, all the way in, and unearth this rib between my thumb and forefinger. I’d transfigure it into a bone china rose and press it into her soft palm. She’d understand, she’d wrap her fingers around it and tell me that her heart had fallen on my side of the fence.

“You’re nothing. You’re just a Malay loafer, sitting in the shade of a palm tree, playing your stupid songs to ten people in a pub,” he’d said into my ear as his men held me back. “If I see you hanging around her again, you’ll find a parang in each of your kidneys the next morning.” Then he stamped my guitar in on itself and spat into my face.

That was when I knew I had to make it.

I stole money from a Chinese medicine shop and bought a new guitar, practiced day in day out. I stopped looking at girls, I stopped looking into the mirror. I grew calluses atop my calluses on my fingers.

It took years, and I’m not going to pretend like it was easy, but I did it. I became famous. We had the adoration of schoolgirls and young women—Malay, Chinese and Indian. But I never stopped looking for her face in the crowd, or imagining it.

1969

Deddy Haikel’s grown his hair out. A constable is flagging his motorcycle down. He’s wearing an open-collared shirt—top three buttons undone—motorcycle boots, and drain-pipe jeans tight against his skin, the kind you couldn’t pass a Coke glass bottle through. That’s what the police did to test if your pants were too tight: if the Coke glass couldn’t come through your pant leg, you had to remove your pants.

Deddy Haikel knows all the lyrics to the White Album, and John Lennon is his favourite Beatle because he heard through the grapevine—fancy Liverpool and Singapore as neighbouring cities, not colonial affiliates—that when John Lennon met Yoko Ono, they went back to his place and made love all night, and then John’s wife, Cynthia, who was out of town, walked through the door the next morning, Yoko standing in her towel, and John says—Oh, hello.

That is how a rockstar should be, Deddy Haikel thinks, as he lights a cig, as he picks chords on his guitar, as he thumbs the calluses on his fingers, as he rides a girl, as the police find that the Coke bottle cannot pass through his pant leg, and are shaking their heads. Oh, hello.

“Pants off,” the Chinese constable tells Deddy Haikel in Malay, and he shrugs his shoulders, grins at the fellow. He wriggles out of them, with some effort because they are that tight, and passes them to the constable. He hopes they don’t discard them, that secretly back at HQ they squeeze their fat Chinese calves into the jeans, checking themselves out in the mirror, wishing they too could adopt these vistas of fashion, music, rebellion. Sighing as they holster their batons, as they down the dregs of their sock-kopi so as not to doze off on duty.
Deddy Haikel thinks—a smirking, swollen thought that feels like the beginnings of a hard-on—Tomorrow, I'll be paid to make girls panic as I sing. Don't you know who I am? Tomorrow I play the National Theatre. A sold-out show.

An amphitheatre of 3,420 seats, of 3,420 people who know all the lyrics to every song. Malay girls, Chinese girls, Indian girls, and they are all screaming his name. Deddy Haikel forgets to breathe because the song is his breath. He is thirsting and he is drinking in every yearning face in the crowd. The back of the guitar against his pubic bone, every twang amplified and he's thinking, John, hey John, I get it. Oh, hello.

Barbara shimmies down Bugis Street
And every sailor's head turns.
Feathers and a dress of midnight blue
Barbara's got an axe to burn.

They were walking to the carpark behind the National Theatre, equipment in tow, when a Rolls-Royce pulled up in front of them. The backseat window rolled down.

"Deddy Haikel, you did it," she said. Ling Ko Mui was smiling, shining. The schoolgirl bob had been replaced by long, finger-waved curls, and her face was lightly made-up. Only five years and now she was a woman. "This is my husband, Leong Heng."

The son of the dried goods merchant looked perfectly civil in the backseat of the Rolls-Royce. He smiled at Deddy Haikel, holding his hand up as a perfunctory greeting.

"When I saw you on the poster I squealed, 'I know him! He used to play at my father's pub.' I made Leong Heng get tickets right away. We had a marvelous time—it was a great performance."

"Thank you."

"I wondered why you'd stopped coming around to the pub. I'd thought maybe you lost interest in music."

"No, that would never happen."
"Well, I guess our pub got too small for you."
"It wasn't that either…"
"Look at me going on about the past. I don't mean to. Congratulations again."

"We should go," Leong Heng interrupted. "My heartiest congratulations to you." He signaled to the driver, and the window began rolling up.

"Goodbye," Ling Ko Mui said.
"Goodbye," Deddy Haikel said, but the Rolls-Royce had already pulled away.

1984

The day they began tearing down the National Theatre—its sharp rhombused frontal design and the crescent-moon shaped fountain—Deddy Haikel had his first heart attack.

"Too much mutton," his first wife said. "Too much cendol," his second wife chimed in. "Too much sweet kueh," his third wife added. This was the problem with having three wives. Sure, the rotational sex was good, but the three wives got along so well that they frequently corralled against him.

Sometimes he wondered how they could be so chummy. Did he not inspire the surly beast of jealousy in his women? He tried to grunt and moan louder in his orgasms, so the other two wives who weren't on the master bedroom bed that night would hear. He hoped it kept them up at night, that they would try to outdo each other.

But it never worked. They continued combing each others’ hair, purchasing colourful faux silks when there was an offer at the market on each others’ behalf, taking turns to bake sugee cookies for the brood, like sisters.

Presently

Wife Number One is signing in at the counter at Flamingo Valley for her visitor’s pass. She’s the fat one, the one who waddles when
she walks, her ass humongous. She kisses his hands, the traditional exchange of greetings. They speak in Malay.

“How are you? The doctor says you can come home soon? Still two more weeks?”

“Sayang, I’m still recovering from the bypass, look at me.” He clutches his heart and pulls a face. Wife Number One frowns amusedly.

“It’s $2,000 every month even after subsidy, you know,” she says.

“Isn’t that what I have seven children and four wives for?” He says this cheekily, with a roguish grin.

Wife Number One looks at him, exasperated, but it is a loving exasperation. “We need to save up for our retirement, you don’t want to be a burden to the kids do you?”

“Yeah okay, okay, sayang. It’s not like I’m having a holiday here, you know. They poke all these needles into me three times a day, and the food is awful. I miss Khairah’s beef rendang.”

“We’ll get her to cook that on the day you return. I’ll get the beef from the market.”

“Doctor says no more coconut milk and less red meat! Clogs up the heart. Only skim milk and fish.”

“Poor Deddy. All your favourite things gone out the window.”

Deddy Haikel sits by Ling Ko Mui’s bed. His is a shared room of six but hers is a single. “Ling Ko Mui, do you believe in magic?”

Ling Ko Mui looks at Deddy Haikel, shakes her head no.

“How about fate, then?”

She nods, very slowly. It’s been awhile since questions such as these were asked of her; for a long time it’d been How are you feeling today, Have you taken your medicine yet, Is it time to change those diapers? She wants to speak, but language has been beyond her for so long. She shapes the words with her lips. Whhh… Nothing comes out.

Deddy Haikel is looking at her closely. “Fate is, when you come from a different place from someone, but you keep seeing the person.” He scratches his head. “You know the way in your Chinese folktales, where the mortal spends a minute in Heaven and returns to Earth to find that thirty years have passed?”

Ling Ko Mui is gesticulating, verging on speech.

A woman enters the ward, with her an unwilling child. “Ma.” She addresses Ling Ko Mui.

Ling Ko Mui looks on blankly.

“Call Ah Ma,” the woman instructs the child.

“Ah Ma,” the child mumbles, pulling on his own hands.

Deddy Haikel has reclined in the bedside chair, but the woman makes no attempt to engage with him anyway.

A nurse comes along, and the woman makes small talk with her, but as with long-stay nursing home talk, the talk is rarely substantive. Prognoses seem at best a plateau; the only direction of progress often a slow careen towards certain death.

The woman sits in a chair, fiddles with the touchscreen phone. The child is searching for something to do. He sits uneasily beside his mother. “Can I play games on your phone?”

“Later.”

“When?”

Ling Ko Mui shows no interest in the woman or the child. Even so, Deddy Haikel feels like an intruder. He moves slowly out of the chair, wanting to leave the ward, but finally it gets the better of him.

“Hello, Ma’am?”

The woman looks up, startled, a slightly cross expression on her face even before he’s said anything. “Yes?”

“I was a friend of your mother’s a long time ago.”

“Oh.”

“I was just wondering why your father didn’t come.”

“My father passed away several years ago. He had a stroke.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“How did you know my mother?”

“I used to perform in your grandfather’s pub.”
“Oh. I never got to see the place myself—demolished before I was born. What did you play?”

“It was the ’60s, sayang. Everyone played rock’n’roll. A touch of Pop Yé-yé.”

It smarts when he thinks about it later that night, the life Ling Ko Mui shared with the son of the dried goods merchant. Five decades, half a century. He tosses in bed, dreams of an eighteen-year-old girl in a white skirt, eating nasi kandar with both hands.

Deddy Haikel sneaks into Ling Ko Mui’s room before dawn. When she opens her eyes about an hour later, there he sits. It startles her, but she’s always had a strong heart.

“Ling Ko Mui, remember when I brought you to eat goreng pisang? You loved it. Remember when I took you to eat nasi kandar? You asked me why Malay chilli was sweet.”

She’s shirking away from him in a sleepy stupor, but already there’s the taste of deep-fried bananas, kampung chicken, and yellow rice in her mouth.

“Do you remember, when you brought me to eat dough fritters and soybean milk, and I was like, Why the hell would you guys dip the fritters into the soybean milk, wouldn’t it lose its crisp? You laughed at that. Remember? Or when I told you I’d have to pray ten times a day because you were taking me to eat food that wasn’t halal? How when I tried to kiss you later, you said ‘But I’m not halal’, and then you closed your eyes and leaned in anyway?”

Ling Ko Mui looks at Deddy Haikel’s hand. She opens her mouth. The words don’t come out, but she’s nodding. She’s smiling. She reaches out for his hand. Before he gives it to her, he draws the peach curtains apart, throws the windows open. He sits by her bed, gives her his hand. He doesn’t ask more; doesn’t nudge her to speak, doesn’t venture to ascertain what it is she remembers. They remain like this till the sun comes up. He has an eye on the clock. He dislodges his hand from hers at 7:15am, before the breakfast trolley comes around to the single rooms.

As he moves away to the door, he hears a rustle of bedclothes. He turns, and she is reaching out for him, the way a child might.

She begins responding to her name, but only if the doctors and nurses say it in full with an exclamation—Ling Ko Mui—not if they call her Mrs. Tan, or Madam Ling, or Auntie, the usual terms of deference.

She’s stopped needing her bedpan. They bring her for physiotherapy sessions now. Atrophy is easy, effortless; but when you have something to live for—even if you’re not sure what it is—the body fights back.

They call the daughter, informing her of these improvements. Ling Ko Mui’s daughter arrives to witness them for herself, but her mother simply stares straight ahead, unblinking, unaware. The daughter returns home and thinks: What a waste of time. She isn’t sure if there’s a difference between a bedridden dementia patient and a more active one.

Ling Ko Mui still can’t speak, but her mouth seems to contorts itself around bits of remembered language. The younger nurses aren’t so hardened as to let this pass. They encourage her. “What do you remember?” they ask.

Ling Ko Mui remembers five stars and a moon. But the five stars are a building’s pointed façade, and the moon is crescent, comprised of jets of water. She draws this for the nurses, who are puzzled.

She’s walking towards it, it a futuristic brick-and-brown building and as she passes the threshold the crescent moon-like fountain dies down. She files past the box office, enters a sprawling hall of 3,420 seats, takes her place. The route she makes towards her seat looks random, but is in fact specific. She looks up to the cantilevered roof, and then when she looks back down the seats are all filled, Deddy Haikel and his band are on stage, and the music is inside her.

It is lunchtime, and the nurses wheel her to him. She sits with him in the halal section of the cafeteria. She looks up into his face, she touches his cheek from time to time, his forehead, as if anointing him.

He smiles, first with his lips pressed together, then breaking out into a crinkle-eyed grin. He picks up his guitar, with him even in the cafeteria, and props it on his knee.

She begins singing with him, in perfect time, the lyrics word for word.

*Barbara shimmies down Bugis Street*  
*And every sailor's head turns.*  
*Feathers and a dress of midnight blue*  
*Barbara's got an axe to burn.*

The nurses show Deddy Haikel the paper where Ling Ko Mui has sketched the diamonds and the crescent. They have romanticized it as some cosmic hieroglyph.

“It’s the National Theatre,” Deddy Haikel says.

What’s that?

Deddy Haikel shakes his head. “Another dead national monument. Do you know they had a-dollar-a-song campaign for it on the radio? You called in and paid a dollar and the DJ dedicated a song to you, and that dollar went to the building fund.”

“That sounds fun,” one of the nurses says.

“Fun? It was pride. We were a new nation. Rich businessmen made phone calls arranging for direct contributions; trishaw riders called in to the radio with their day’s savings and went hungry after. These days, they do whatever they want. It’s still your money they’re using, except they don’t remind you of the fact anymore, and you don’t get a tune out of it.”

“What happened to it?”

“Twenty-three years was what it was worth. Then demolished to make way for part of the Central Expressway underground tunnel.”

“The tunnel? I thought this was what happened with the National Library on Stamford Road.”

“Well, it would seem then that we’re always one tunnel short, wouldn’t you say?”

Ling Ko Mui is talking, pissing and shitting of her own conscious accord, asking the nurses and doctors plucky little questions. The doctors shake their head at the mysteries of neurobiology.

She and Deddy Haikel sit in the herb garden in the sunshine.

“So girl, let me ask you something: what’s going to happen to you when I leave?”

“I’ll tell my parents I want to be with you. They can’t stop me.”

He starts in his seat. He wants to say, *Baby, look at me. Look at you*—but he can’t bring himself to do it. He’s waited half a lifetime for this. “And, and if they do?”

“Then we elope.”

He hesitates. “What about my bandmates?”

“They’ll come with us. I’ll be your agent.” She has an impish look in her eyes.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you. What about Leong Heng?”

“Who?”

“The son of the dried goods merchant.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Sorry, I—nothing.”

“Look into my eyes, Deddy Haikel: You have nothing to worry about.”

Deddy Haikel has only four days left in the nursing home. Every one of those nights he dreams of the eighteen-year-old girl, and every one of those mornings he wakes to be with her. They have their meals together, they talk about music, he plays songs
for her. She talks about the two of them, she talks about school, her parents, having to take care of her siblings. She doesn’t question why they’re surrounded by the elderly and infirm, the doctors and nurses in uniform, nor where they are.

At night Deddy Haikel thinks to himself, he’s setting things up for heartbreak, but what else can he do? He never thought this would happen to him at 70. He pictures his girl segueing back into silence and incontinence upon his departure. He’s done this to her, it is done.

Tomorrow he will tell her.

She won’t have anything to do with it. Her puzzlement is giving over to angry tears.

“Ling Ko Mui, listen to me. Look at my face—I’m an old man. We’ve already lived our entire lives out.”

She’s jammed her knobbly, wrinkled hands over her ears, she’s sobbing inconsolably like a young girl.

“I can’t be with you now. I have children, wives; a family.”

She turns to him hotly, tears and loathing in her eyes, hands still over her ears, hisses, “I’ll never let another Malay boy break my heart.”

“Ling Ko Mui, you don’t understand.” He tries to come over to her, places his hands on her upturned elbows, says, “I could come visit you…” but she shrugs him off.

“Get out,” she says in a low tone, rocking back and forth on the nursing home bed. “Get out.”

At Flamingo Valley, Ling Ko Mui’s daughter is speaking to the doctor, distraught. She doesn’t understand why her mother has recovered her faculties but not any memory of her family. She’d tried explaining to her mother—for the umpteenth time—who she was, but all Ling Ko Mui muttered was some gibberish, over and over. “De-de-hi-ke, de-de-hi-ke.”

The nurses know who Ling Ko Mui is asking for, but they also know he was discharged this morning, and what would be the point of attempting to explain to the daughter?

In a flat in Tampines, Deddy Haikel is home. Khairah’s cooked beef rendang, Azzizah’s made her sayur lontong, Fathiah, who can’t cook, has prepared sirap bandung in a jug. Skim milk in all three cases, they hasten to impress upon him. The children gripe that it doesn’t taste the same, not as lemak, but they’re happy to have their old man back.

Deddy Haikel’s heart murmurs, twinges, skips beats. He strums the weathered guitar, and the golden tones reverberate against his chest, soothing and stinging. He imagines reaching into his chest cavity, disentangling his heartstrings, affixing them onto his guitar. He tugs at a chord and it comes out ancient and resonant.