

# SARIMBOON

## ONE

unearthly  
    tendrils –  
eggshell  
    youth –  
the moon,  
the sea,  
and the stars  
on Sarimboon hill.

Begin with a photograph – start out black&white.

A man sits on a deckchair set on the sloping lawn of a large garden. Bushes and trees frame the garden's edge. On the grass, under the chair – a tin beer mug with a glass bottom. Above the trees, the sky.

Boy sits on his father's lap, mouth open somewhere between a smile and a yawn, looking into camera.

The deckchair balances precariously on its legs like a seesaw.

My father and I.

The picture was taken when I was four or five. The place is Sarimboon, somewhere on the north-west coast of Singapore.

The picture is coffee-stained and yellowing. There are dog-ears on all four comers, and it is mounted on a piece of chipboard that over the years has gotten mouldy, and has started rotting.

Should probably take better care of it. Should take it off its rotting frame and box it in glass. Seal it from the onslaught of time and atmospheres.

Maybe I should.

But you know I've always been the procrastinator of procrastinators.

My black&white photograph is my old friend, speaking to me from the edge of memories, which – like old photos – have gone off around the edges. I remember my shortpants days sometimes as black&white realities, sometimes as Polaroid ambiguities.

In the Sixties, my father took out a large mortgage and bought a house on a hill in Sarimboon.

You drive along Upper Chua Chu Kang Road past the village of Ama Keng and turn left and drive down the dirt road past the aromatic chicken farms, duck farms, pig farms and vegetable farms, and then turn off near the end of the road and come to our house on the hill.

It was our piece of the edge of the world.

A bungalow surrounded by acacia trees, with a long porch that faced the sea. The house sat midway down the hill. On top of the hill, the kebun's house where the chickens ran round all day.

The hill sloped down into some bushes at the bottom of the garden, and from the porch you could see the Straits of Johore, and further on behind that, a mass of land shaped like a turtle's back.

Looking outwards into sea at the age of five you could easily believe you were standing at the edge of the world.

Below the garden, there was a gate through the bushes, and small steps led down into a small, stony cove.

This is where I learned to swim. Holding my breath swimming under grown-up's legs. If you swam past the rocks on the left you came to the Yacht Club, and to the right was a long, rocky beach where during low tide we went looking for shellfish.

My father worked downtown. And he would come home in the evenings and stroll round our piece of the edge of the world, smoking a cigar, carrying a tin mug of beer.

At night, after the sun had sunk fireflies behind the back of the turtle, and the kerosene lamps were lit and the moths began their crazy dance and the generator would come on with low reptilian rumble – then, then my mother would sing to me in the bathtub.

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I had a big red cloth-bound Atlas of the world. From it, I learnt everything about everything.

I learned, from looking at the pictures that one day the Sun would swell up like a big red pufferfish and eat up all the planets around it, and then blow itself up.

And before everything, it all used to be nothing but gas. But when this cooled down they became planets. And we lived on one of these planets which used to be a swamp until the fishes learned how to breathe and climb trees.

Then there were dinosaurs and they walked around for millions of years and had brains the size of ping pong balls and one day they just disappeared.

Then everything froze up and was ice for a long time, and when the ice melted the monkeys came down from the trees and learned to walk and they became people.

One of these people was named Sang Nila Utama. Sang Nila travelled on a wooden sailing ship and one day he sailed to an island and saw lions walking on the beach, so he named the island Singapura – City of Lions – even though for many years there was only a fishing village and a place where the pirates hid, and no one else had seen any lions until the first zoo was built many years later.

Then an Englishman named Raffles rented the island from the Temenggong of Johore, and the island made such good

business they decided to keep it.

The English never took baths, killed tigers and elephants for fun, and liked to drink tea.

Then one day Japanese soldiers came down the Peninsula of Malaya. Pe-nin-su-la. They came down the Peninsula of Malaya and they were riding bicycles. The English, who were looking after the island, were pointing their guns the wrong way, so they surrendered.

The Japanese stayed and spent their time on the island cutting off the heads of babies with their long swords or pumping water into people until their stomachs burst.

From here onwards the story gets much too complicated for me to sort out, even now, at the age of twenty-three.

What really happened?

Who came first?

Or was it just more teevee?

Things become so improbable I shouldn't waste my time on details.

Dubious Authenticity.

All I can tell you is my parents got married in sixtytwo, and I was born in sixty-three – the year of the Rabbit, the year of the world-wide population boom.

Then, a few years later, my father bought a hill in Sarimboon.

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When the storms come calling on Sarimboon hill,  
You see them for miles from the porch of the house –  
Black gossamer curtains ringing the hills of Johore.

Stand on the porch, watch them coming,  
Run out back and fetch the clothes  
Before the rains come crashing in.

The storms uproot whole trees up the hill,  
Make hiding places for when the storm had gone.

Watch for the lightning, count the booms,  
And afterwards, the sea mirrorsmooth, mirrorsmooth,  
Except the ripple of sampans.

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Once upon a time, when I was a young kid of five, the world  
was really black&white.

And all because of teevee.

My parents fought off for as long as they could the  
temptation to let that contraption into the house.

But when it came, it came to stay.

Routine on the hill became like this:

After spending the day playing soldiers on the hill – me,  
Ali and Yusoff, the kebun's sons – we would pile into the study  
at five o'clock sharp, resting on our stomachs, and watch a  
procession of rabbits, dogs, cats, pigs, birds and coyotes get  
boulder-flattened, fall off cliffs, or blow each other up with  
sticks of ACME dynamite or the wrong ends of shotgun  
barrels.

In teevee, anything was possible.

On teevee, everyone looked the same.

People were just different shades of grey.

If the sky was grey on teevee, I knew it meant blue. When  
I drew a blue sky, my crayons made it grey. I fought with my  
best friend because he wanted me to colour my drawings.

But if I coloured them, they wouldn't look real any more.

Remembering Sarimboon, my memory has been coloured  
with almost twenty years of teevee.

So I like to imagine that on that hill for the first time I saw  
men walking on the moon, or girls tearing their hair out at  
a Beatles concert, or American soldiers throwing helicopters

off an aircraft carrier.

But the truth is, at five, I didn't give a damn. All I cared about was reaching the momentous age of six.

After which, everything would become possible.

## TWO

Our last night together, after dinner and bath, and then sitting on the mattress talking, and then you sleeping quietly, I felt both happy and sad.

The way you sometimes feel, you know, when you cannot put your finger on it – where the feeling comes from.

Sometimes I think it is like a wound finally opened to breathe, delirious as a fish out of water, the fresh air stinging to the bone.

I have this TDK C90 cassette tape on which I recorded some music from my father's collection of records. On one side is a performance by a gamelan troupe from Sebatu in Bali.

I remember many years ago when my parents took me to Bali. One night, under a web of stars, we entered one of the stone puri by the side of the road.

There were gay flags in the wind, and the stone gods were adorned with flowers, when the troupe, dressed in their smart uniforms, sat on mats laid out in the open terraced courtyard and began their performance under the frangipani trees.

These days since you've left, I have been playing this cassette on my worn-out machine, over and over again, just as I did, the night before you flew away. We had good food in our stomachs, hot bath on our skins, and wine on our brains, and I was giddy, giddy on life, even though I knew the next day you would pack your bags, I would escort you to the airport, and I would be in no mood to rejoice.

And you lay so quiet beside me I felt your breath. But could not sleep for the longest time, watching the shadows the street lamps threw, listening to the gamelan in my head.

The music began to grind its first unsteady steps, learning to walk, unsure of the beat of its heart.

Slowly, it found itself – began to rise.

Out of the ordinary, mundane life.

Out of the swamp of thoughts claustrophobic.

One step into prehistory – before thoughts crippled feelings.

For some reason, began to think of Sarimboon. The house on the hill where I lived as a boy.

Sarimboon has always been a part of my life I have never been able to explain to anyone, least of all – myself.

How to tell of thoughts that yet had no words to weigh them down? I remember nothing, and I remember every little detail. Five-year olds remember the damndest of things.

Sa-rim-boon – is strange enough put in the context of how I now live, to see that boy on the hill as someone else in another time and another place. Someone whom – if not for the strangest tricks of coincidence – I would not have known or be familiar – or friends with.

And how to explain that a feeling as insignificant as the passing of time in a person's life is of the utmost importance to that person?

Is it vanity that makes us put words on thoughts of no weight, that should be left to themselves, free as balloons?

Yet lying by your side before dawn, I could not think of anything but Sarimboon.

The memories flooding in, unstoppable.

The hypnotic flutes of the gamelan brought back dragonfly mornings in Sarimboon, before the mists had cleared off the Straits, and even the shadows of clouds, chasing each to each, up the hill.

The music of gongs and bells and tin beer mugs, and metal buoys clanging in the sea, and gates banging in the wind, and

the chug of sampans, and seesaw chains and ice-cream vans, and the wail of black&white Teochew operas on teevee with the stern generals with flags on their hacks.

I remember walks with my father in the garden.

We would walk down the stone steps to the rocky beach, on the way overturning stones looking for sea slugs or mussels.

And once something momentous had happened – sadness hung in the air like electricity, and I was five years-old and understood nothing.

Under the spread of the frangipanis the dancer began his slow haunting dance – eyes painted wide, feet moving to the bells and gongs, fingers jumping agitatedly, like writhing diviners, faster and faster, like moths, feverish on the light.

And I remember Chuang Tze, who could not tell if he was a man dreaming a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming a man.

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When night falls in Sarimboon, when the sun sinks behind the hump of the turtle, and the fireflies flit amongst the mangrove trees in Sarimboon River, and the insects begin their slow hypnotic gamelan till dawn – children will lie sleeping under the eyelids of whales.

Like burlesque Barong warriors, the cheechaks stalk their upside-down terrains in mock combat, bow-legged and comical, shooting the moths out of their mad orbits.

It was nights like these that I slept and dreamt my dreams of dinosaurs.

They were mute and dumb creatures.

In one recurring nightmare, walking alone down the Esplanade, under the wink of circling lights, all of a sudden, from one of the grey ships in the harbour – carrying Ali Baba sailors – would come the neck of a dinosaur from the boat zoo, craning towards the shore, heading straight for me, stretching till it reached my side and nuzzled my ear.



Sometimes dreamt of hidden fields under the sea, where the agitated fingers of anemone dance their erotic tango with the clownfish.

Dreamt of whales frolicking in secret oceans, light as balloons, and when they swam ashore to rest for a hundred years the grass took root and they became hills like the one in Sarimboon.

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Something in the music of the gamelan orchestras, and also, for example, the sitar of Ravi Shankar, makes me think of mornings.

Raga of dawn breaking and people waking with traces of their dreams still in their eyes and cups of coffee.

Raga of dew sleeping grass and water boiling on the stove.

Raga of family at the beginning of another day.

Mornings newborn, naive, hopeful.

Morning – that period of the day which holds hands with the last hours of yesterday's dreams – when you awake and have not yet found words with which to attack the day.

Considering the chronology of each day, mornings inhabit the grey period between our prehistory and history.

You could say Sarimboon inhabits the morning of my life.

Sometimes think that everything I've lived through, I first lived through those mornings in Sarimboon.

Sometimes believe that all my life up to now has been spent losing, finding, or looking for some trace of Sarimboon.

In the Sixties.

In the Sixties, our parents were giddy on independence and Merdeka.

The first song I was taught on Sarimboon hill was Majulah, Singapura.

The nation launched whole-heartedly into the experiment of independence.

Guided by our leaders, who shrank, added, subtracted, dissected, multiplied, and divided the essence of this enthusiasm into a point.

And this point was called the percentage growth of the nation.

And this percentage growth point was stuck on a chart, like a carrot on a stick, for all to see.

So we became a nation of chart-watchers.

And each year we watched the point on the chart go up and up and up.

So we imagined ourselves to be like the men climbing Everest.

Or a nation on the moon.

This was, of course, a time when it was proven conclusively, that it was possible for men to walk on the moon.

Growth was a heady drug, to which we became addicted.

We lost our fear of heights. You could say we lost our sense of the ground.

Gripped by a general amnesia, we forgot what all children know – what goes up, must come down.

My parents saw, and fell in love with that house on the hill by the sea in Sarimboon.

My father, a young G.P., took out a large mortgage to buy our piece of the edge of the world.

Like others of his generation who had studied abroad, he came back with his fresh shouts and outspoken ideals – they fought for what they believed in. Although he was the Chairman of the National Theatre Trust, he lived a double life – by day mixing with the rich and powerful, and the evenings coming back to Sarimboon and our kerosene lamps and generators and the sampans moving slowly up and down the Straits of Johore.

Paying the mortgage meant being flat broke. But he was happy. The future was bright.

In the evenings, we would walk down those stone steps to

the stony beach below, overturning the rocks that hid the shellfish and mudskippers going crazy.

Landing endless pufferfish onto the raft moored off the beach, the pufferfish swelling like stubborn red balloons, until we unhooked them and tossed them back to sea.

Sometimes.

Sometimes our little piece of the edge of the world would be intruded upon by the vulgar pleasantries of the rich and powerful, when my father invited them over to be entertained.

Then, the kerosene lamps in the garden would be lit, and the ice cubes and borrowed wine glasses brought out.

After I was made to do my goodnight rounds under the condescending smiles of the grown-ups, I would be brought to my room to be put to bed.

But then, I've always been the insomniac of insomniacs, even at the age of four.

Those nights I would hear the unnatural sounds of laughter drift up the hill under the glow of the fireflies burning bright, overwhelming even the hypnotic power of the insect gamelans – and I would lie awake.

The Sixties.

The Sixties came to an end. It was a honeymoon over and we all, all got on with the business of putting house in order. We were dead proud of the feat too, rolling that weighty point up the mountainous chart like an albatross hung round our necks. Not surprisingly, it broke not a few backs. For the greater good, the government acquired the whole piece of the island of Singapore to the west, for the purpose of turning it into an army manoeuvres zone.

Part of my parents' mortgage was compensated for, but they had overstretched themselves on loans. We went into our first period of debt.

Some years ago, that point on that chart of growth fell somewhat.

Some of us have chased that dot on the chart for so long, we

have come to believe that that dot on the chart stands for the country we believed in.

Anyway.

Anyway it's not easy to remember that countries have nothing to do with dots on charts, or governments, or even pieces of the edge of the world.

All countries start and end in the Sarimboons we carry in our heads.

### THREE

Woke up this morning the rainspeckled pane.

All night long the bastard winds howling outside, you know, reminding me of monsoons back home.

So sad to think of home, you know, miss everything and everybody real bad.

There I go again. Thinking of home. Now is now.

Here is South Lambeth Estate.

Where to begin?

Two nights ago, dreamt of Grandfather.

My father wrote: Yeh Yeh's gone to surgery to remove a cancerous growth. My father finds some comfort getting lost in the semantics, the technicalities – medical jargon – they act like a panacea. You see, my father cannot go back to see his old man.

It kills him, this grief about not being able to go back home to see his folks.

In my dream, Yeh Yeh was not as old as the last time I saw him, frail and the illness slowly eating him away.

More like how big and strong he used to be when I was a kid in Tanjong Pagar, and he used to bring me comics from Kuala Lumpur, around the time of Great Grandmother's funeral –

when I blocked up the sink playing with sand.

He was still strong but nevertheless white haired as I've always known him – in his big loose shirts, black pants and brown sandals on his feet, chain-smoking 555s. With that high forehead, fierce red-rimmed eyes and that proud mouth that made him look like one of those Red Indian chiefs you sometimes see on teevee.

And he was driving, barefoot of course, driving some car – a Datsun or whatever, I don't know – and I was sitting in the seat next to him, and together we drove through the Malaysian countryside, early morning rubber and oil-palm plantations with the mists on the hills.

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Before I left, I told this story to a girl I once fancied, in order to explain about my friends.

It is my theory about what happened to the dinosaurs.

The dinosaurs disappeared some years ago, and it is still considered a great mystery what became of them.

But I believe the dinosaurs they just got tired of being dinosaurs and decided to grow up.

Some started growing hair, so they needed to buy shaving cream and Gillette Gee-two blades. They began to wear neckties and carry briefcases and Pierre Cardin cigarette lighters, 'cause this was what was expected when you wanted to be a people.

Some dinosaurs refused to conform, to come back to ground. You called them drifters. They did not know where to go. Perhaps, they wanted to go ... everywhere.

Some drifted too far, falling off the edge of the world, and got lost.

Some sprouted wings instead, and learnt to fly. And that was the end of the story.

Actually, none have learned to fly, but they are still trying their damndest.

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When I was a kid living in Sarimboon, all I cared about was reaching the momentous age of six, after which – everything would be possible.

I bided my time, playing soldiers with my friends on the hill, waiting for my brother to be born.

One day, before I reached the age of six, my mother miscarried. I only knew that there was a big sadness in the air, my mother was ill, and my father came home early from work, smoking one of his cigars, and carrying that tin beer mug with the glass bottom. Together we walked down the garden with the sun setting on us, the house, and the hill.

My mother once told me she thought that was the day he wrote the poem for her, about the poet Tu Fu. Maybe, like to think so.

Probably understand just as little about the world as I did then. But it still amazes me, amazes me. Probably.

My mother got well again, and I finally reached six years old. A short while later, my brother was born.

The Sixties came to an end when the government took the land around Sarimboon, and the family moved to Tanjong Pagar, and I stopped my dinosaur dreams.

My father and I drifted apart, like the two people in my black&white photo.

Sitting on opposite ends of the seesaw deckchair.

I hardly think about Sarimboon anymore.

I just think about home, every now and then.

If Tu Fu was the poet of adversity, wars and suffering, then Li Po was the poet of partings, and drunken howling at the moon.

Maybe this song is only about that.

Li Po's moon, she understands ... she's seen more than one homesick poet in her life.

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I'll end with one more story.

A few years ago, when I was serving my National Service, they posted me back to the School of Combat Engineers as an instructor.

My sergeant, Bob "Dylan" Singh, was a seven-foot, two-hundred-kilo-beer-guzzling giant who once said to me: who cares if I'm fat, bald and ugly? As long as my wife makes love to me at night.

Bob and me, we used to bring our trainees to Sarimboon for field fortification training for a week at a time.

By now, the terrain was changed beyond recognition. The river had been dammed up to create a reservoir, the swamp had been filled. I was sure that our hill had long since been bulldozed away.

Each day the armoured tanks and three-tonners – they would roll by down the roads, stirring up the red dirt.

I told Bob I used to live in Sarimboon before the government took over, he grinned at me and would say, sure Boss, good story – tell me another one.

One day, after the field camp had been set up and the trainees were busy digging and there was nothing for us to do, Bob brought me to this spot by the sea where there was this slipway to catch crabs.

Standing on the slipway, I wondered if I was standing on the site of the old Yacht Club.

We started to climb the small knoll to the right. When we reached the top of the hill, we came upon it ...

It was a lost piece of the edge of the world.

I felt like a ghost, intruding on my own memories. The acacias were there, but the house was gone. The hill was

overgrown with lallang, and dug full of long trenches for FOFO - Fighting On Fortified Objective.

Everywhere the ground held used blanks, thunderflashes, and burnt-out smoke canisters.

We walked to the bottom of the hill.

There, partially hidden by weeds and bushes, were the stone steps, worn and broken, leading down into the old cove.

After that, each time we went training in Sarimboon, I would make regular pilgrimages up the hill.

In spite of everything, it still seemed to me the most peaceful place in the world.

The sampans plied their way up and down the Straits, oblivious to the passing of time.

Sometimes I would sleep on the hill.

One hot day, after lunch, I borrowed a stretcher from the medic, took it out onto the hill, took off my shirt and boots, and lay down to nap.

I was about to doze off when a soldier came crashing out of the bushes. Fully camouflaged in combat gear, wrestling with map and compass.

I got up, still stoned from the heat, and we nodded silent greetings. He came over.

“What you doing here? Trying to take cover?”

“Well, if got chance to keng then better keng, right?”

He kept quiet, looked around, taking in the scene.

“Right... Brother, you know where the fuck am I?” He giggled, “I’ve no fucking idea where I am, man. Cheebai kena sabo. Cheebai must have given me the wrong MGR ...” Map Grid Reference.

I shrugged. He looked around a bit longer. Then he plunged back into the bushes.

I went back to sleep – on Sarimboon.