

# FOREGOING/FORGETTING THE PAST THAT HAUNTS: A STUDY OF SELECTED PRIZEWINNING WORKS OF ASIAN IMMIGRANT WRITERS

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In a world where the Asian immigrant has become ubiquitous, it is not surprising to find a robust body of literature written by transplanted Asians in North America, as well as in other parts of the world. This literature is enriched by the fact that they grapple with such issues as hybridity, transnationalism and translationalism, the ideological and sociological constructions of identity, among others, not to mention the causes and consequences of cultural dislocations and displacements.

This paper aims to look at three prizewinning works of fiction written by just such Asian immigrants in North America within the past seven years: Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000); Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006); and Vincent Lam's *Bloodletting and Other Miraculous Cures* (2006).

In all three works, most especially in the first two, we find not only the clash of Asian and Western cultures, but also that of cultures and classes internal to the same countries. Since the writers belong to different generations of Asian immigrants, with Ondaatje being the oldest (64 years old) and Lam being the youngest (32 years old), each brings into his/her work a range of perspectives as well.

*Anil's Ghost* won for Michael Ondaatje the most prestigious annual literary award in Canada, the Scotiabank Giller Prize, for 2000. The novel also won a slew of other literary awards: Canada's Governor General's Award; the Prix Medicis; the Kiriyaama Pacific Rim Book Prize; and the 2001 Irish Times International Fiction Prize. Ondaatje, by this time, had already gained international recognition with his novel, *The English Patient* (1992), which made him a cowinner of the Man Booker Prize, as well as the Canada Australia

Prize and the Canadian Governor General's Award. His popularity was further boosted by the award-winning movie version of the novel directed by Anthony Minghella.

Ondaatje was born to Dutch parents in 1943 in what was then known as Ceylon, present-day Sri Lanka. His ancestry, upbringing, and life's journey as a whole best exemplifies the notion of a transnational identity. He was born to Dutch parents, but his ancestry includes English, Sinhalese, and Tamil. His paternal grandfather was a wealthy tea planter in Kegalle. He went to a reputable public school in London at age ten; at age 19, he immigrated to Canada where he eventually became a citizen, attended university, got married, and started a writing *career* (Cook 1).

As Victoria Cook states, "As a product of this somewhat 'colonial' background, Ondaatje's position enables him to explore, in depth, the conflicts and contradictions of the type of identity that incorporates a colonial past and a postcolonial present" (1).

In *Anil's Ghost*, we find people whose lives are rendered fragile and complicated because of the operations of histories, ethnic groups, porous borders, and political and ideological conflicts which result in wars fought between and among insurgents, counterinsurgents, the government and its military. The term "terrorist" ceases to become the monopoly of any one group.

At the heart of the novel is Anil Tissera, a young female forensic scientist. Like the author, Anil was likewise born in Sri Lanka, but she is educated in the West. Gone for 15 years, she finds herself back in her country on assignment from a human rights organization based in Geneva. She has been sent to investigate human rights violations, specifically murders and massacres, in Sri Lanka. The government allows this in a token show of goodwill to the international community, but Anil is skeptical from the very beginning as to just how much she will accomplish. She admits:

Forensic work during a political crisis was notorious, she knew, for its three-dimensional chess moves and backroom deals and muted statements for the 'good of the nation.' ... The grand logos on letterheads and European office doors meant nothing where there was crisis. If and when you were asked by a government to leave, you left. You took nothing with you (Ondaatje 18-19).

When she first arrives in the country, there is no feeling of coming home for Anil. She feels herself to be a stranger in her own land: “The island no longer held her by the past. ... Anil had read documents and news reports full of tragedy, and had now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a longdistance gaze” (11).

She is paired off with Sarath Diyasena, a local archaeologist, who likewise knows the futility of her venture, the investigation of “unknown extrajudicial executions mostly” (18). He knows the difficulty of working in a climate of fear. “Everyone’s scared, Anil. It’s a national disease” (53). Even sorrow has to be abated: “In a fearful nation, public sorrow was stamped down by the climate of uncertainty ... This was the scarring psychosis in the country. Death, loss, was ‘unfinished,’ so you could not walk through it” (56).

This notwithstanding, Anil and Sarath proceed with their work, and start to explore a specific archaeological site. They find four skeletons burned, buried in a sixth century burial ground for monks, a governmentprotected archaeological preserve, outside one of the Bandarawela caves; Anil is confident this will provide her with the evidence she needs because it is a site to which only the military has access. But Sarath finds the whole exercise futile. Anil pleads with him, to which he wryly replies: “You know, I’d believe your arguments more if you lived here... You can’t just slip in, make a discovery and leave” (44). Later, he tells her: “You should live here. Not be here just for another job.” Anil protests: “This isn’t ‘another job’! I decided to come back. I wanted to come back” (200).

Nonetheless, she feels hopeless: “And in any case, what if they did identify him, if they did discover the details of his murder, what then? He was a victim among thousands. What would this change?” (176)

Anil is constantly frustrated by Sarath, who seems to be more interested in pursuing his own archeological interests than conducting forensic investigation on the skeletons. As Sarath shows her ancient drawings painted or carved on rocks, and tries to explain to her the necessity of maintaining a balance between the past and the present,

Anil would not understand this old and accepted balance. Sarath knew that for her the journey was in getting to the truth. But what would the truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping

lake of petrol ... Sarath had seen truth broken into suitable pieces  
and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs.  
(156)

They focus on one of the skeletons, which they have named "Sailor." From this point on, Anil concentrates all of her time, energy, and passion on identifying Sailor, first as a human rights victim (and not one of the many centuriesold remains in the site), and as a specific person belonging to a family living in a village.

To Sarath, she argues, "There are so many bodies in the ground now, that's what you said... murdered, anonymous. I mean, people don't even know if they are two hundred years old or two weeks old, they've all been through fire. Some people let their ghosts die, some don't. Sarath, we can do something" (53).

Anil's obsession with discovering the identity of Sailor goes beyond her job of providing evidence of human rights violations. Gazing at the skeleton, she wonders: "Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest" (56).

As she lifts Sailor in her arms, she realizes that "she too would need to reach forward and lift Sailor into her arms, to remind herself he was like her. Not just evidence, but someone with charms and flaws, part of a family, a member of a village who in the sudden lightning of politics raised his hands at the last minute, so they were broken" (170).

Sailor is just one of many who have "disappeared" through the years of intermittent civil wars in the country. Such victims of senseless violence are the lost voices of the country. Anil feels she can at least begin to restore their voices, even as she knows her efforts will not be enough:

But in the midst of such events, she realized, there could never be any logic to the human violence without the distance of time. For now it would be reported, filed in Geneva, but no one could ever give meaning to it. She used to believe that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear. But she saw that those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection for the self. (56)

Her passion to discover the true identity of Sailor reveals her need to grapple with her own problems of selfidentity. In Sri Lanka, she does not seek out relatives—she knows of none. Memories of her own family are not happy either: “The family wars continued to reside in her, and hadn’t left her when she went abroad to study medicine” (137). Only one person is familiar to her, an old nursemaid, Lalitha, who she remembers to be “the only person who taught her real things as a child” (24). As a daughter, she remembers mostly being ignored while she was growing up. But fierce and spirited from the start, she decides to construct her own identity by changing her name: she buys the name of her brother, opting for a masculine name. She enters the field of medicine, a traditionally masculine turf. In Sri Lanka, she is looked at more as a foreigner than a native. She cannot speak the language fluently to begin with. She refuses to emotionally invest in a romantic relationship—she finally breaks up with her lover, a married man, by stabbing his hand to force her to let go of her. “Still, he had been like a wonderful house to her, full of unusual compartments, so many possibilities, sharply rousing” (265).

During their travels, Sarath takes her to a number of archaeological sites, including a forest monastery where an old, blind archaeologist, Palipana, lives with his niece. Sarath explains how this man had been at the peak of his career when he was accused of forging what he claimed to be ancient transcriptions. All this draws Anil to enter hitherto unknown chambers of a racial past, a past she had believed to be of no concern to her. In the forest monastery, “I will not want to leave this place, she thought, remembering, that Sarath had said the same thing to her” (97). She felt momentarily “Farther away were the wars of terror, the gunmen in love with the sound of their shells, where the main purpose of war had become war” (98).

The episodes on Palipana problematize the inevitable interweaving of history and politics. As Marlene Goldman states:

Attempts to link past to present seamlessly ... have become an important and dangerous tool of political legitimation. In Ondaatje’s novel the blending of fact and fiction in Palipana’s translations of the inscriptions, not to mention the blending of fact and fiction in the novel as a whole, highlights the predicament in Sri Lanka where “myth has become historical reality and history myth.” (Goldman 4; Bruce Kapferer qtd. in Goldman 4)

Whereas a violent, bloody history was in the making in the Sri Lanka of the 1980s and 1990s which Ondaatje alludes to in this novel, this was only part of a longer, larger history. On Palipana, we are told: “Most of his life he had found history in stones and carvings. In the last few years he had found the hidden histories, intentionally lost, that altered the perspective and knowledge of earlier times. It was how one hid or wrote the truth when it was necessary to lie” (105).

“Palipana could move within archaeological sites as if they were his own historical homes from past lives” (190-191).

Against all odds, they finally have evidence of Sailor’s identity. As Anil gives her report to the local authorities in Colombo:

Sarath in the back row, unseen by her, listened to her quiet explanations, her surefootedness, her absolute calm and refusal to be emotional or angry. It was a lawyer’s argument and, more important, a citizen’s evidence; she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, ‘I think you murdered hundreds of us.’ *Hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally *us*. (271-272)

To Anil’s surprise, Sarath stands up and publicly refutes her report, casting doubt on her findings. He challenges her by asking her to examine another cadaver (by this time, Anil did not know where Sailor had been brought to) and compare it to Sailor, suggesting that she would not be able to tell the difference between a 200year old skeleton and a 6year old one. Anil lashes out at him, “The skeleton I had was evidence of a certain kind of crime. This is what is important here. ‘One village can speak for many villages. *One victim can speak for many victims*.’ Remember? I thought you represented more than you do” (275).

Angry and confused by Sarath’s behaviour, Anil is close to giving up:

She knew she wouldn’t be staying here much longer, there was no wish in her to be here anymore. There was blood everywhere. A casual sense of massacre. She remembered what a woman at Nadesan Centre had said to her. ‘I got out of the Civil Rights Movement partly because I couldn’t remember which massacre took place when and where.’ (283)

As it turns out, Sarath publicly contradicted her because he was fearful of the dangerous risks Anil had put both of them in with her report. But he manages to secretly bring Sailor to Anil. In a note to her, he tells her to gather her evidence, complete her report, and leave the country. Sarath ultimately pays the price for this—he ends up being killed under mysterious circumstances by the military, his hands, like that of Sailor, also broken.

Given the madness of the civil wars, with everybody having blood on their hands and where murder, massacre, disappearances become common occurrences, Gamini, Sarath's brother who was a doctor, had earlier told Anil:

This was a civilized country. We had 'halls for the sick' four centuries before Christ. ... By the twelfth century, physicians were being dispensed all over the country to be responsible for farflung villages, even for ascetic monks who lived in caves. ... We were always good with illness and death. We could howl with the best. Now we carry the wounded with no anesthetic up the stairs because the elevators don't work. (191-192)

As she prepares to leave the country, Anil thinks of Sarath and Gamini:

If she were to step into another life now, back to the adopted country of her choice, how much would Gamini and the memory of Sarath be a part of her life? ... At one point that night, she remembered, they spoke of how much they loved their country. In spite of everything. No Westerner would understand the love they had for the place. 'But I could never leave here,' Gamini had whispered. (285)

It is the ghost of Sarath Diyasena as well as that of Sailor and the thousands of the unknown dead, the ghost of her country's past and present that Anil will always carry with her wherever she goes.

Kiran Desai's second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, won the Man Booker Prize in 2006, much to the ambivalent delight and surprise of fans of her mother, veteran writer Anita Desai who had, in the past, been shortlisted three times for the same award. It also won the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award.

Born in India in 1971, she lived there until age 14 when she went to England, where she spent a year before the family immigrated to the U.S. There she got most of her education, including creative writing courses where she began to write her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998). She later earned a master's degree from Columbia University. She had earlier been noticed and encouraged in her writing by family friend Salman Rushdie, who included her short story, "Strange Happenings in the Guava Orchard," in an anthology of 50 years of Indian writing.

Her maternal grandmother was a German woman who left India for good before World War II. Her grandfather was a refugee from Bangladesh. Her paternal grandparents came from Gujarat (one of the settings in the novel). As in the novel, too, her grandfather was educated in England and entered the British civil service in India ("Biography and Interview of Kiran Desai" n. pag).

In an interview, Desai insists: "The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance" ("British Council Interview" 2).

In this novel, Desai hoped to "capture what it means to be an immigrant" and to explore

what happens when a Western element is introduced into a country that is not of the West. ... What happens when you take people from a poor country and place them in a wealthy one. How does the imbalance between these two worlds change a person's thinking and feeling? How do these changes manifest themselves in a personal sphere, a political sphere, over time? ("British Council Interview" 2)

Though she has been a permanent resident in the U.S., Desai has not applied for citizenship. According to her,

I just don't have a simple flag over my identity. When I first came to this country I was trying to immigrate in a much more simple way—in an old-fashioned immigrant way. And then I found my own feeling about myself didn't fit into a purely American mold. I actually find I have a much stronger relationship with my being Indian than ever before. ("British Council Interview" 3)



She talks about colonization and immigration as parts of an inheritance of loss:

And yet we all know as immigrants we have lost a lot. You lose all the close family connections. You catch up once in a while, but their daily existence has lost you. It's a huge sacrifice. There's obviously a great richness to immigration as well. I don't think you can go back or want to undo that richness. I don't think you make your life simple once you've made it complicated. (Ahmad 3)

But in the novel, wealthy Indians in the past had also “immigrated” to the foothills of the Himalayas when the British left. It is the offspring of these formerly wealthy Indians who make up the Anglophile characters of the novel. Their privileged life of the past, their perceptions of themselves as a superior class, their British rituals and customs start to crumble in the outbreak of hostilities between and among different groups in the region.

Desai's belief in the “richness” that one gains with immigration notwithstanding, her novel portrays many levels of impoverishment that immigration, albeit of the illegal kind in the novel, a person can sink into. Even the concept of multiculturalism is problematized in a novel whose characters fall into gaps between the old colonial world and the postcolonial era where advocates of extremist causes avowing nationalist goals resort to devastating and destructive violence against their own people.

According to Desai, neither can economic globalization necessarily result in prosperity for Third World countries:

'Profit', Desai observes at one point, 'could only be harvested in the gap between nations, working one against the other.' ... This leaves most people in the postcolonial world with only the promise of a shabby modernity—modernity, as Desai puts it, 'in its meanest form, brandnew one day, in ruin the next.' (Mishra, 45)

Desai likewise casts a jaundiced eye on multiculturalism, pointing to racial riots not too long ago in immigrant communities in Scandinavian countries and in France, as well as to disturbingly rabid conservative reactions to the reform of immigration laws in the U.S. (“British Council Interview” 2).

The novel is set in the village of Kalimpong, on the Indian side of the Himalayas near Nepal. In Kalimpong is an orphaned teenage girl, Sai, who is

forced to leave her boarding school in Cho Oyu when her parents are killed in an accident in Moscow (her father had been one of the few Indians chosen to participate in the Russian space program). Sai is dumped in the decaying house of her grandfather, Judge Jemubhai Patel, an embittered, cantankerous old retired judge who had studied in England. An old cook is the lone servant who ministers to the judge and proceeds to take care of Sai. The novel moves back and forth from Kalimpong to New York City, where Biju, the cook's son, has been an illegal immigrant for the last four years.

Like Sai and her grandfather, the rest of the characters that flit in and out of the narrative are Indians who have immigrated to the TibetNepal region. They are, on the whole, Anglophiles who desperately try to maintain their "civilized" way of life—their Britishspawned rituals and preferences—in a region violently torn apart in the 1980s with political and military battles between and among the Indian government (during the time of Indira Gandhi), and various separatist groups made up of different ethnic strains—Nepalese, Bengalis, Assamese, Sikkimese, Sherpas, Lepchas, Chinese, and Gurkhas. The latter become the most visible in this political turmoil, as young, militant radicals mount an offensive against the Indian government in the villages, demanding their own political and geographical autonomy in a dream of "Gorkaland."

Sai is orphaned in many ways—she hardly knew her parents, she never knew her relatives on her father's side, she doesn't know her grandfather who resents the imposition of this unknown granddaughter on him. She has no sense of belonging, whether in a family or a community (she had spent most of her life in school in Cho Oyu), let alone in a country. She wonders: "What was a country but the idea of it? She thought of India as a concept, a hope, or a desire. How often could you attack it before it crumbled?" (Desai 236).

She sees little hope for Kalimpong, especially when the violence escalates and they are victimized by roving bands of brigands who rob them, first of the Judge's guns, then later of their food supplies. In the end, squatters start encroaching on the Judge's land, moving closer and closer to his doorstep. Sai early on believes: "She'd have to propel herself into the future by whatever means possible or she'd be trapped forever in a place whose time had already passed" (74).

But for the present, since she doesn't have the resources to leave, she finds some reason and meaning in her life when she falls in love with her math tutor, Gyan, a young Nepali student. But this romance is cut short when Gyan,

himself trying to find a home for himself, gets caught up in the revolutionary fervor of the young members of the Gurkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). He rejects Sai and her Anglophile friends, whom the young radicals have branded as among their enemies. But he is plagued by selfdoubts as to the nobility of his intentions, the genuineness of his belief in their movement: “But then, how could you have any selfrespect knowing that you didn’t believe in anything exactly? How did you embrace what was yours if you didn’t leave something for it? How did you create a life of meaning and pride?” (260)

In the violent riots that break out on July 27, 1986, the day the Gurkhas had planned to stage a ceremonial burning of the IndoNepal treaty, the world of the judge and the other Anglicized Indians continues to crumble: “This was how history moved, the slow build, the quick burn, and in an incoherence, the leaping both backward and forward, swallowing the young into old hate. The space between life and death, in the end, too small to measure” (276).

But as more and more squatters invade the property of the judge, Sai laments:

It was the impoverished who walked the line so thick it was questionable if it existed, an imaginary line between the insurgents and the law. ... They were the hungriest. ... There they were, the most commonplace of them, those quite mismatched with the largerthanlife questions, caught up in the mythic battles of past vs present, justice vs injustice, the most ordinary swept up in extraordinary hatred, because extraordinary hatred was, after all, a commonplace event. (282, 295)

Sai sadly looks at the young ragtag Gurkha army, the boys toting guns, riding stolen motorcycles, “taking their style from Rambo. ... They were living in the movies. By the time they were done, they would defeat their fictions and the new films would be based on them” (294-295).

When the judge had been in the civil service, the Indian ICS men/judges earned a lower pension than a white ICS man.

But profit could only be harvested in the gap between nations, working one against the other. They were damning the thirdworld to being thirdworld. ... The man with the white curly wig and a dark face covered in powder, bringing down his hammer, always against the native, in a world that was still colonial. (205)

Biju, the illegal immigrant in New York, remains impoverished as he takes on one low-paying job after another. Working as a kitchen helper, moving from one restaurant to another, he experiences the poverty, in body and in spirit, of the illegal immigrant, exploited by his Indian employers, ignoring and ignored by his fellow Indians who morph into confusing images as he encounters them in the restaurants. Constantly fearful of being caught and deported, “He tried to keep on the right side of power, tried to be loyal to so many things that he himself couldn’t tell which one of his selves was the authentic, if any” (148). He sees the Indian students trying to imitate their American friends, “one accent one side of the mouth, another the other side; muddling it up, wobbling them, downgrading sometimes all the way to Hindi. There was no purity of vision. And no pride. He had come home to no clarity of vision” (148).

Accosted by the strangeness, the meanness of his life in America, he doesn’t only start losing a sense of self, but a sense of country as well: “What was India to these people? How many lived in fake versions of their countries, in fake versions of other people’s countries? Did their lives feel as unreal to them as his own did to him?” (267)

He ends up working in the Gandhi Cafe, as he moves from his miserable basement quarters in Harlem into the kitchen, where he, together with the other kitchen help, illegals all, sleep on the rat-infested floors at night. The owner, HarishHarry, feels justified in paying them less than minimum wages, in exchange for free board and lodging. Even as he answers his father’s letters by saying he’s growing fatter and fatter, he is actually growing thinner and thinner. He is nowhere near his dream of even a modestly successful, decent life in America, or the cook’s dream of being brought out of servitude to America. Biju wonders about the sense of plodding on in New York: “And if he continued on here? What would happen? Would he, like HarishHarry, manufacture a fake version of himself and using what he had created as clues, understand himself backward?” (268)

Finally, when news of the violence and bloodshed in Kalimpong reach Biju, he decides to go home, worried about his father’s fate. In a long backward journey that takes him to Calcutta via at least half a dozen stops in European and Middle Eastern cities, he finds himself in the Calcutta airport, where he is swirled around “even more varieties of Indians ... back in the common soup after deliberate evolution into available niches abroad. ... Indians who lived abroad, Indians who traveled abroad, richest and poorest, the backandforth ones maintaining green cards” (296-297).

He chats with another newly arrived Indian and tries to affect nonchalance. He observes how “each time you come back you think something must have changed, but it’s always the same.” The other one answers, “That’s right. . . . You don’t like to say it, but you have to. Some countries don’t get ahead for a reason” (297).

Just the same, a wonderful sense of relief, even joy, envelops the constantly joyless Biju:

Sweet drabness of home—he felt everything shifting and clicking into place around him, felt himself slowly shrink back to size, the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner—that unbearable arrogance and shame of the immigrant. Nobody paid attention to him here, and if they said anything at all, their words were easy, unconcerned. He looked about and for the first time in God knows how long, his vision unblurred and he found that he could see clearly. (300)

But on his final journey back to Kalimpong, Biju finds himself a helpless Victim in his own country. He is robbed of his meager possessions, including the few dollars he had saved in America, with which he had hoped to buy a taxicab and start a business in Kalimpong. He is forced to hitch a ride with GNLf members who strip him down to his underpants. He snatches a woman’s floral printed housedress from a clothesline and walks to the judge’s house, so that when Sai sees him from a distance, she thinks it’s a woman approaching their house. The emasculation of Biju is rendered complete.

In the end, Sai contemplates everything that has happened to all of them, to herself especially, since she arrived in Kalimpong:

She thought of her father and the space program. She thought of all the *National Geographics* and books she had read. Of the judge’s journey, of the cook’s journey, of Biju’s. Of the globe twirling on its axis.

And she felt a glimmer of strength. Of resolve. She must leave.

Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it. (323)

Thirty two year old Vincent Lam belongs to the second generation Chinese immigrants in Canada. He was born in London, Ontario of parents

who had emigrated from Vietnam during the Vietnam War. He grew up in Ottawa, speaking Cantonese at home. He did his medical studies in Toronto, where he now lives and works as a physician in a large hospital. He also does international air evacuation work and occasionally acts as doctor in ships that take tourists on nature and science expeditions to the Arctic and Antarctic. He is also a concert pianist who teaches piano parttime and performs in concerts.

Interested in creative writing from the time he was 16 when he “read and reread Ernest Hemingway’s Nick Adams stories which he describes as perfect,” he later enrolled in writing classes in the University of Toronto and in the Humber School for Writers (“Biography and Interview of Vincent Lam”).

His first fulllength work, a collection of short stories, *Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures*, won the prestigious Scotiabank Giller Prize in 2006. His book has been warmly received as a highly competent piece of medical fiction and as a “tool for bioethics training” (Nixon and Baetz 1). It offers “fresh perspectives on medicine ... accessible enough to appeal to nonmedical audiences while still keeping seasoned health professionals engaged” (Tang 12).

Of the three books read for this paper, *Bloodletting* seems to be the least concerned with issues that confront Asian immigrants in a Western country. Is the reason perhaps that Lam, a secondgeneration ChineseVietnamese Canadian, feels that his cultural and ancestral past is too far away to implicate him and his life at the present time? Or is it perhaps because he has taken to heart what they taught him in writing school—that to write well, you must write of what you know best? And what he knows best is the privileged life of a young Canadian doctor just starting out on what he hopes will be a brilliant medical career?

The book loosely strings together twelve stories about the progress of four characters from the time they take admission exams for medical school until they become resident physicians in the emergency rooms of big hospitals. Three of the characters are children of Asian immigrants—Ming, Chen, and Sri. The fourth is a white Canadian, Fitzgerald. The stories focus on the daytoday problems as well as triumphs of these young medical practitioners—episodes that are all too familiar to viewers of such popular T.V. series as “Grey’s Anatomy,” “House,” and the daddy of them all, “E.R.” But Lam provides his readers with specific contexts as well, when he tells us stories set during the outbreak of the SARS epidemic which threatened to destroy the resolve of doctors and nurses and strained the resources of the Canadian health care system.

Only in a few stories does Lam tangentially allude to the specificities of his AsianCanadian characters. In “How to get into medical school, Part 1,” Ming is portrayed as one who is deeply aware of her responsibilities to her family—she strives to excel by totally concentrating on her studies, so much so that although she has a crush on Fitzgerald, she tells him from the very beginning that she can’t afford to have any romantic relationship as this may distract her from her goals. She also avoids being seen with Fitz, for fear that any of her countless Chinese relatives and friends may see them together. A nonChinese husband will certainly not be part of any future scenario for her. Predictably, in a later story, we find her married to Chen. But both of them are so busy with their work that they hardly have time to even see each other, especially when he is on night shift and she is on day shift.

Sri’s acute sensitivity, his desire to bring not only scientific objectivity, skill, and competence, but also human compassion to his medical practice, makes him different from the rest. In one story, “Wilson,” he seeks out a patient in his home when the latter fails to show up for followup consultations. The patient, claiming to have been poisoned, had been diagnosed as psychotic by his medical supervisor. It is also Sri who, when they dissect their first cadaver, insists on giving it a name, “Murphy,” in the story “Take all of Murphy,” whereas “Ming refused any name” (Lam 4). They discover a number of tattoos on the cadaver that lead them to speculate he must have been a pilot in the military. Sri insists that they not cut through, but instead cut around the tattoos, saying, “My mother, told me you shall respect a man’s symbols” (46). This is all nonsense for Ming, who always wants to do things literally by the book. When Ming misplaces half of the head of the cadaver, it is Sri who gets terribly upset and does not let the matter go until they have found it. He puts it back with the rest of the cadaver neatly, gently, saying, “He’s here for us,” meaning, they, in turn, should be there for him (n. pag).

There is only one story in the collection that deviates from this book of medical fiction. “Along Migration” is the story of Chen’s grandfather. This man had embarked on a long journey, from Guangdong where he was an orphan, to Vietnam and Hong Kong, and finally Brisbane, Australia, where Chen has now been assigned by the family to take care of him in his last days. Chen had grown up in Brisbane with his family.

This grandfather, whom they call Yeh Yeh, had been a legendary, notorious figure during his heyday—losing large sums of money as quickly as he

accumulated it, through gambling, drinking, and patronizing prostitutes. Many stories are told about him, and Chen goes through these conflicting stories, to sort out “what was true and what were the exaggerations of memory” (103). Even Yeh Yeh was known to give conflicting versions himself. “Rarely did a new version of a story require the old one to be untrue. Instead, it was as if the new telling washed the story in a different colour, filling in gaps and loose ends so as to invert my previous understanding of the plot” (103).

Yeh Yeh went through First Wife, Second Wife, Third Wife, and Fourth Wife in succession, as he journeyed from China to Australia. Although he eventually divorced one wife after the other, a cause of shame for them all, one of them continues to supply him now with Chinese herbal medicine painstakingly chosen and bought in Toronto and sent to Brisbane. Another continues to visit him in his retirement home in Brisbane.

Yeh Yeh tells Chen: “Toward the end of the Vietnam War, my aunts and uncles had been sent to different countries. The idea was that someone, somewhere would land on their feet” (115).

Chen is curious about his family, his Chinese ancestry, but when he asks Yeh Yeh who his parents were, the old man advises him not to pursue the past. “He said that I should remember always to move forward, to not allow the past to become hurtful. He advised me that this was sometimes a difficult thing to do” (117).

Chen is seen by the rest of his family, and by an old family friend, Dr. Wong, as “obedient and wellbehaved. A Chinese compliment” (114). But we do not see any emotional investment in Chen when it comes to his grandfather. He efficiently monitors the quality of the latter’s urine (i.e. how much blood there is in it) every day, because his big final duty would be to “forecast correctly” the condition of his grandfather so as to inform the rest of the family, spread out in different parts of the world, when to come to Brisbane—not too early as to find him recovering, not too late as to find him already dead.

Chen’s problem is that when Yeh Yeh’s condition gets worse, the old man refuses to be brought to the hospital. In the end, Chen prevails, and Yeh Yeh is confined. But Yeh Yeh orders Chen to stay in the house of Dr. Wong on the beach and enjoy himself, instead of mounting a death watch on him.



Michael Ondaatje, Kiran Desai, and Vincent Lam locate their stories in the context of the clash of Asian and Western cultures. Therein they contend with the causes and effects of cultural dislocations and displacements across not only external geographic borders, but also internal generational divides.

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