

A special collaboration:  
The Birthday Collective x Singapore Heritagefest

## Natural Heritage

*A mutually shaping dynamic*



  
Edited by  
The Birthday Collective



# THE BIRTHDAY COLLECTIVE

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The Birthday Collective aims to be a “Brain, Heart and Hand Trust” for Singapore as it deals with an increasingly unpredictable and complex external environment, and increasingly acute domestic constraints. Both the external and internal challenges pose risks but also opportunities, if we remain optimistic and creative in our approaches.

As a Trust, the collective focuses on the gifts it can offer to future generations. Unlike usual brain trusts, which tend to be mostly about talk, The Birthday Collective’s focus on the Heart and Hand emphasises that ideas are important but not enough; they need to be acted on to create a sense of national drive and belonging even as individual aspirations are nurtured and lived out.

# FOREWORD

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As the Singapore HeritageFest (SHF) approaches its 19th birthday this year, the festival has been mostly a digital affair, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, we are excited to bring back more physical programmes which ties in well with our festival themes of *nature* and *travel*, which are, without a doubt, best experienced in-person.

SHF 2022's celebration of Singapore's travel history and natural heritage is fitting as this year marks a number of national milestones: the 75th anniversary of Singapore Airlines, 50th anniversary of Sentosa Development Corporation, 50th birthday of the Merlion statue and 10th anniversary of Gardens by the Bay. As with previous editions, the 19th edition of the festival delves into the stories of everyday Singaporeans, and spotlights lesser-known aspects of heritage such as institutional history, social memories built up over the decades, and our intangible cultural heritage.

Through creative interpretations of our festival themes, many of which were conceptualised together with the community, we hope to bring heritage alive, allowing festival-goers – like you – to uncover our nation's history in refreshing ways. It is also my hope that our programmes can help to seed conversation starters to set people thinking about issues beyond Singapore's

history and heritage – on how looking back on our past, can inform how we can live better in the future.

**David Chew**

Festival Director

Singapore HeritageFest (SHF) 2022

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## **ALLAN LIM: FEEDING SINGAPORE BEYOND SG100 (BIRTHDAY BOOK 2016)**

We Singaporeans love our food.

When we eat together, we share our heritage, our values and our passion. However, while many of us are aware that as a small city-state, with no hinterland for agriculture, we have to import 95 per cent of our food, many have wrongly assumed that we will continue to enjoy a stable supply of food from global agricultural production centres.

Global warming, population and economic growth will affect the stability and levels of food supply. Many agricultural centres are already beginning to feel the pressure of producing enough food to meet the demands of their local markets. To prevent the decline or disruption of food supply to Singapore, we will have to develop a long-term sustainable plan to provide sustenance for our nation.

How do we do this?

Amongst the many ongoing efforts, three main approaches - diversifying our food sources, improving local farm productivity and stockpiling food – have so far been able to keep up with the demands of our population. However, in the coming years, we will have to think differently and innovate to ensure that we can weather future supply shocks.



## **Embracing High Tech Agriculture For Local Farming**

Our present strategies to increase food production locally rely on incremental productivity gains with the upgrading of machines and skills. Moving our farmers into highly productive techniques requires a step change.

Throughout our 50 years of nation-building, agriculture has been set aside in favour of urbanisation. While this was an understandable impetus then, our future leaders will have to recognise that agriculture, while it has lower direct economic value compared to manufacturing or finance, does have an important role in Singapore's future.

Advanced technologies in indoor/urban farming are improving yields of produce like fresh leafy vegetables exponentially. Many farm factories are sprouting up in advanced economies like the USA and Japan, yielding 10-15 times more than traditional farms in Singapore. The basis of such improvements lies in technology – the extension and intersection of infocomm, biotechnologies and processing engineering, in all of which Singapore is already proficient. We therefore have a natural base from which to get ahead in the adoption of such new technologies.

Modern high-tech plant factories do not require traditional agricultural land – most new high tech farms are built near, or even in, cities, to allow faster times to market and less spoilage of food during transfer and transport. Planners and developers should start to interweave high-tech plant factories into our future built environment as such urban transformation will provide more meaningful and rewarding jobs for Singaporeans and promote a self reliant community.

## **Foodtech Research**

Another important initiative is investment into advanced food sciences. The technologies currently being developed from advanced food science research, ranging from synthesising proteins to formulating liquid nutrition, are transforming the ways we manufacture and consume our daily requirements of nutrition.

Investments into advanced foodtech has seen some success in commercialisation in the USA, where a company, BeyondMeat, has successfully commercialised meat products that is made with plant proteins.

Research into cloning chicken breast or fish fillets has been successful; such technologies use natural resources very efficiently and could create high-grade, nutritious and tasty food. While they are still nascent, given the right resources and support, products made with such technologies, called “cultured meats”, will be stocking the shelves of supermarkets and featured in the menus of restaurants.

As a country that lacks natural resources for traditional farming, foodtech is a viable and attractive solution to boost Singapore’s internal food supply. Factories with clean rooms, operated by automated robots and manned by a skilled workforce, are not susceptible to climatic disruptions. Although the main inputs for such factories can still be vulnerable to climate effects, it is easier to stockpile them than fresh produce.

## **Building our Social Resilience**

We need to build our social resilience against disruption or shortage of food. While the chances of an apocalyptic food shortage are low, it is useful to start cultivating a sharing community that respects the process of growing our own produce and promotes the reduction of food waste.

For a start, we need to cultivate a sense of respect for the growing and production of food, educating our young on the process of growing. Giving them the experience of participating in various community farming programs is a good way of imparting such respect for food and food-growing in our society. For the wider community, public education on, and promotion of, food growing, with events to showcase the different aspects of agriculture, are important.

Singapore, as a society, has become more generous and caring. We can continue to build on this collective goodwill and encourage more public discussions on our food security so that we are motivated to come together and share our food should supply disruptions occur.

There is more than food at stake here. To solve the food security problem is to open our hearts and minds to understanding our vulnerability; to come together as one people to achieve the near impossible yet again. Compared to 50 years ago, perhaps it is now not so audacious to dream that we may indeed become self-sufficient in our food security in the foreseeable future.

**Allan Lim** is the founder of Alpha Biofuels, The Living! Project and Comcrop. He is an entrepreneur with passion for building innovative companies that create solutions for sustainable cities. He is a member of the Pro-Enterprise Panel at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and has also served as a member on the Committee to Strengthen National Service.

## **NAZRY BAHRAWI: A TRADITION OF ISLAND HOPPING (BIRTHDAY BOOK 2017)**

Islands beget utopia. This provocation is mooted in works of utopian literature like Thomas More's *'Utopia'* (1516) and Henry Neville's *'The Isle of Pines'* (1668). As inhabitants of an island-state, Singaporeans would do well not to forget nor forgo utopia. This stems from the view that speculating utopia stokes the imagination and slakes the thirst for human flourishing. In other words, it empowers. Also, utopia is ubiquitous. It is not a Western imposition, given that utopian literature can be found across civilisations even before More published his eponymous novel. Among these are Tao Yuanming's *'The Peach Blossom Spring'* (421 CE) and Al-Farabi's *'The Virtuous City'*, published in the 9th century. Simply put, it is an undeniable part of us.

But let us be honest here. Today, utopia has become a dirty word. When a suggestion, an idea or a person is described as 'utopian', this is often taken to mean unrealistic, unattainable or quixotic. Among the places that I have visited, I have heard variations of the term bandied about this way most starkly in Singapore.

It appears easy for many to dismiss utopian thinking as un-Singaporean. The scarcity of land and resources here has instilled in people the fear that there can be little room for mistakes. Many believe that there is no choice but to be cold and calculative pragmatists. It is certainly a crucial component of the political rhetoric fuelling Singapore's foreign and economic policies. Yet the island's histories suggest that this practice is, ironically, naive. Utopia is *uber-Singaporean*.

Lest we forget, the well-oiled bureaucracy that has come to define Singapore today has not always been her integral feature. It can even be said to be the product of the utopian imaginary coursing through the veins of her dwellers. Nowhere is this clearer than in Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's 2009 National Day Rally speech. Alluding to her efficiency, he described Singapore as a '*Garden of Eden*' state where "we are happy, where things are working".

In truth, Singapore was willed into being by the ideals, visions, and dreams of the multitudes who encountered it. The island's many monikers attest to this deep history of utopianism. Consider the origin of Singapura. According to the legend, the Srivijayan monarch Sang Nila Utama saw this island not just as a sanctuary from his sworn enemies of the Majapahit empire, but also as a new base from which he could rebuild his embattled kingdom that grew out of Sumatra. While out hunting here, the prince encountered a majestic lion, though no such a creature had probably lived here at the time. Sang Nila's vision might have been fed by his excitement over the island's prospects. Regardless, he christened this place *Singha Pura*, translated from Sanskrit to mean Lion City – a name gesturing to a sense of grandiosity and the dream of better things to come.

But if myth or literature is not your cup of tea, then we can turn to something factual: Singapore's days as a colony. Whether it was the 'benevolent' British or the less benign Japanese, Singapore had assumed a special role within their respective empires in land and in mind. Indeed, the World War II battle for Singapore between the two was as much a clash of the 'war-war'

type as it was of the 'jaw-jaw' kind, to reiterate one of Winston Churchill's most memorable aphorisms.

Confident that Singapore was an impenetrable fortress of the British Empire, then British Prime Minister Churchill paraded her as the 'Gibraltar of the East'. At the time, Gibraltar had played a crucial role as a stronghold of British sea power, entrenching their control over naval routes between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Like Gibraltar, Singapore was an island that is strategically located at the tip of a peninsula overlooking important sea routes. Seeing likeness between these island utopias, Churchill believed that Singapore, too, could help his forces hold sway over critical maritime passages.

Spectacularly, the Japanese proved Churchill wrong. Under the command of General Tomoyuki Yamashita, they overran Allied forces in Singapore in just over a week. Their corporeal victory was immediately sealed with a metaphorical stamp. Overnight, Singapore was renamed *Syonan-to*, or Light of the South. Rubbing salt into Churchill's wounds, the Japanese annexed this island to be the capital of their recently acquired southern territories that included parts of peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra.

But Singapore was not always the target of utopians. It was also an enabler of utopias elsewhere. We can turn to the Chinese revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen whose connection to this island-state was premised on the intertwining dream of two possibilities – China's potential to be a modern republic, and the promise that Singapore holds in making that dream a reality. These drove him to choose Singapore as the headquarters of

the *Tong Meng Hui* or Chinese Revolutionary Alliance for garnering financial support and spreading his ideals. As is well known, the plan for three revolutions in China were cracked here.

In a similar vein, Singapore was also once the epicentre for Muslim reformists wishing to disseminate their tracts to the rest of the Malay Archipelago. Between 1906 and 1908, it was home to the *al-Imam* journal, founded by Muslim intellectuals such as Syed Sheikh al-Hadi and Tahir Jalaluddin. The former was particularly taken by Singapore's economic and political progress under the British administration. He saw this as a marked improvement from the authoritarian rule of Malay sultans. Modelled after the *al-Manar* journal published in Egypt by the renowned Islamic modernist Rashid Rida, the Singapore journal advocated the practice of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), generally pitting what al-Hadi saw as the progressive *kaum muda* – reformists who believe in the compatibility between faith and modernity, against the conservative *kaum tua*, or the old guards who unquestioningly accept traditional Islamic teachings. Arguably, this tussle to define competing visions of the ideal Islam still transpires today.

These instances show that Singapore was not just built on the back of immigrants and island hoppers. It also grew out of a well-established tradition of island hoping. Singapore today could do better at continuing that utopian impulse.

Some might say that it is already happening. Over the past decade or so, signs suggest that her citizens are becoming less materialistic and more idealistic. The 5Cs no longer represent



cash, car, credit card, condominium and country club membership. The new 5Cs now denote a variety of non-tangible things like community, care, children, character, among others.

While this may be so, there are also indications that this newfangled utopianism of ours runs the risk of commodification. That we mark our success at 'doing culture' by profit-driven measures such as the amount of concert tickets sold, or the number of local literary books purchased, or the total attendees at the Singapore Writers Festival is cause for concern. This encourages industrialisation and mass consumption more than a meaningful engagement with ideas, ethics and aesthetics.

Changing tack would be no easy feat. It means culling some of our tried-and-tested pragmatist practices. We can, for instance, place emphasis on the value of abstract thinking, encourage the questioning of the status quo and learn to appreciate informed critiques as well as to dispense them. These are things we can garner from the humanities, which sadly remains an afterthought in our school system even as we dispense the clichés of a liberal arts education. For this island to beget utopia again, we need to become big dreamers, not big consumers.

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**Nazry Bahrawi** is a literary and cultural critic at the Singapore University of Technology and Design. His idea of a Singapore utopia necessitates a functioning Arts and Humanities Research Council, among other fanciful things.

## **KHAIRUL ANWAR: SILENT STREAMS – LEARNING TO JOURNEY WITHIN (BIRTHDAY BOOK 2017)**

Living in cities is a mixed blessing. On one hand, from Babylon to Beijing, cities are a font of opportunity, innovation and advancement. We know today that more than 80% of global GDP is generated by city dwellers, who comprise only about half the world's population. GDP is not a good measure of meaning, but at least economically, it does make it clear that cities (and in particular, our favourite sub-specie: high-speed, digitally-connected global cities) are where the action is at.

On the other hand, however, cities are incredibly noisy, busy, and full. Most of us tolerate this trade-off, but what if this daily sensory overload compromises our ability to be thoughtful, ethically-grounded members of society who can avoid knee-jerk responses to increasingly complex issues but instead, consider root causes, first principles and values?

### **Why Stillness of Heart is More Crucial than Ever**

If you've followed our recent national discourses even casually, it's hard to miss the rise of conversations that strike directly at questions of virtue and value, of "what is good" and "what is important". Whether it's re-directing the Cross Island Line to avoid tunnelling beneath the Central Catchment Area, improving educational support for children with disabilities, or redesigning the economy for a world where artificial intelligence will make many "good jobs" obsolete, we find ourselves at a place in Maslow's hierarchy where we can afford to debate trading off some economic gain to do the right thing. For many of us, this will

involve uncomfortably honest conversations within and between ourselves about what is good, what is important, and why.

Questions of virtue and value are the domain of the heart, requiring a healthy inner life, and sound awareness of its state and influences. To talk about this means wandering into the territory (and vocabulary) of faith traditions, which may be uncomfortable for some. Nonetheless, having witnessed in the last year how the fate of entire countries can be swayed by what Facebook algorithms deem we should (and should not) see, a conversation about the state and influences of our inner selves is one that we must learn to have.

Islamic and Christian contemplative spiritual traditions both uphold that the character of our inner life gives form to our outer life; in other words, a healthy society built upon many individual good choices is not attainable except through purifying the inner self. Their adherents went to great extents to realise this: for hundreds of years, monks from the Eastern Orthodox *hesychast* tradition withdrew to the wilderness of the deserts to achieve this stillness of the heart, while aspirants from some Islamic spiritual orders engaged in extended seclusion under the guidance of a teacher to elevate their consciousness to the constant awareness of God. The intent in all cases was to fiercely guard the mind from images and influences that would compromise the ability of the intellect to discern – right from wrong, important from trivial, reality from fantasy. That ability remains just as crucial today.

## **What Compromises the Stillness of Our Inner Selves**

If these monks from pre-modern societies were so concerned about unwelcome interference in their inner lives, then we should be doubly so today. We live in a multi-sensory wonderland, its noise amplified by the digital universe that we carry in our pockets.

We have learned to mitigate some of the more obvious intrusions. NEA has noise control ordinances and building setbacks that seek to preserve the peace for residents. URA guidelines govern the location and appearance of outdoor advertisements, taming visual chaos. MCI limits access to some websites with content deemed harmful to communal well-being, from adultery to ideological extremism. Where we can agree that something is harmful or a nuisance, we are able to take the necessary steps.

To stop at the obviously harmful, however, misses the more important conversation on the influences (or influencers?) that we let in willingly. Each day, Singaporeans spend over 2 hours on our social media feeds. Having no need to be cautious with seemingly morally-neutral content, we absorb these posts, images and videos with little restraint, after which they begin to influence our inner lives.

While most content is not malicious, we need only look at modern advertising to appreciate how sophisticated we have become at using innocuous content, particularly images, to shape human thought and decisions. Twitter can fan a revolution, Facebook triggers our shopping itch, and Instagram is just as likely to puff up a teenager's ego as it is to depress him.

That what we see influences us is not news; what is noteworthy is the volume and variety of casually-imbibed content and images that we are now exposed to. Once embedded in our memories, these images compromise more than just our data plans: we find it increasingly difficult to know ourselves and reality apart from the collection of images we have gathered.

### **The Call for Silent Streams**

In 2016, the Light Pollution Science & Technology Institute named Singapore the most light polluted country in the world. In our compact and well-lit city, the Milky Way and constellations, by which humans have navigated and been moved to poetry and painting for millennia, are now almost impossible to perceive at night.

My wish for Singapore this National Day is that our inner pathfinders don't go the way of our night sky. As we forge onwards and outwards with a smarter city and globalised Singapore companies, I hope we also learn to journey within ourselves, becoming more conscious of what we allow into this hallowed space. Many of our current challenges call for citizens who are self-aware, intellectually discerning, capable of wonder and curiosity, and of bringing to life truly original solutions. It starts with taming the noise, and bringing stillness and intentionality to our inner lives. After all, it is the silent stream that allows the jewels in its bed to shine through.

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**Khairul Anwar** *loves building and fixing things. He's currently exploring what next for urban Singapore, tying together his*

*interests in cities, systems, and user-centric design. He's always been curious about how we learn to manage our attention and emotional responses, and finds himself inadvertently involved in various mentoring and pastoral care initiatives – as a mentor, fundraiser, administrator, and app developer.*

## **LYNETTE OOI: LESSONS FROM MY MANGO TREE (BIRTHDAY BOOK 2017)**

A beautiful mango tree stands in my garden, nearly two stories tall, its lush foliage in full view from the street. It is probably a few decades old, and was there when my husband and I bought the house in 2013.

We watched in anticipation and delight as flowers began to bloom on the tree's branches, which eventually became heavy with swollen fruit. The flesh of the fruit was sweet yet tangy, firm yet succulent – truly some of the best mangoes I'd ever tasted.

One particular harvest in late 2016 overwhelmed us. We were plucking dozens of mangoes a week, and they were ripening at a steady pace. My toddler son was delighted with our steady supply of fruit, but we still had plenty left over, which we decided to use as gifts. Family and relatives received them first; next, we were slicing them up and bringing them to the office as pantry treats. One friend received a bagful as a birthday present – she spent a week in “mango heaven”.

Still, the tree kept on delivering, and we couldn't give the mangoes away quickly enough. I needed new ideas.

While harvesting one day, I looked out the gate at the neighbouring residences. I was struck, with some embarrassment, by how little I knew of my neighbours, after having lived in the house for a year. Partly, it was because few of them ever took the initiative to introduce themselves. However, what was stopping me from taking the first step?

The mango tree had given me a valuable opportunity to do so. One blazing afternoon, I put mangoes in bags and walked down the street with my daughter to hand them out. We started with our immediate neighbours. I had always assumed that the family to our right was unfriendly, as they kept to themselves and had a massive house surrounded by high walls. When I rang the bell, however, the lady of the house was delighted to see me. She said that she had been admiring my mango tree, and seemed so pleased with the few I gave her. It turned out that she was a lawyer like me, with four kids. I spent 10 minutes at her gate exchanging anecdotes from the legal industry and parenthood. The house to our left had an equally positive response: the elderly gentleman, who was tending his garden when we arrived, beamed warmly and exclaimed "These will make my wife very happy!"

However, the further I walked, the more lukewarm the responses became. The security guards at the condominium across the road accepted the mangoes, but seemed baffled by the gift. Another neighbour about 8 houses away expressed surprise when I told him my address, saying, "Wa, so far away!" I blushed when one couple seemed thoroughly perplexed by my offer and looked at me as if I was trying to poison them. I laughed it off, remembering a wise phrase I had heard before: "I'd rather be the weird over-friendly stranger than the cold acquaintance."

This is the year 2017, when it is far more acceptable to send a private message to a stranger through a handheld device, than to knock on the door a few steps from yours. The Singapore Kindness Movement (SKM) conducts an annual survey to track kindness and graciousness among residents. In the face-to-face



poll of over 3,000 Singapore residents conducted in 2017, one in 10 respondents did not interact with their neighbours at all. Hardly any engaged in displays of trust such as babysitting, borrowing or lending of household items, or safekeeping of house keys. Only 1% ever exchanged food or gifts with neighbours, and only 30% engaged in casual conversation with their neighbours more than once a week, a proportion significantly lower than the year before. Furthermore, of those surveyed, only 26% desired greater neighbourliness. More than half thought the current situation was “good enough”, while 15% preferred to maintain their privacy.

Yet, community bonding is essential to alleviating some of the most pressing problems our society faces today, such as income equality, political division, and racial and cultural fault lines. Recent political events, such as the “Brexit” referendum and the rejection of the political establishment by American voters in their 2016 general election, are a stark reminder of the importance of fostering a harmonious and inclusive society. To this end, the power of small gestures in our daily interactions should not be underestimated. In his keynote address at a 2015 conference in Washington DC, Singapore’s Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam attributed Singapore’s relative success in multiculturalism to one key ingredient: its neighbourhoods. He explained the importance of neighbourhood composition and design. However, he also emphasised: “It’s not just about the numbers... it’s about the everyday experiences. It’s walking the corridors and taking the same elevators as your neighbours every day; it’s the way the kids grow up together in the playgrounds and in the primary school nearby; it’s about the peers in the neighbourhood.

Neighbourhoods matter, the culture of neighbourhoods matter, but it doesn't come about by accident."

The information age and new technologies are often blamed for the demise of the "kampong spirit". However, rather than sounding the death knell for neighbourly ties, technology can be harnessed to facilitate and nurture them. SKM's survey found that 21% of respondents communicate with their neighbours via social media. Text messaging and instant messaging applications like WhatsApp make it easier for neighbours to keep in touch and share content remotely and on a regular basis. Residents can use mobile applications like Suburb and HoodChampions to trade items, share local information, form interest groups, organise friendly competitions, report on crime, or just converse with one another.

However, whatever the medium, every relationship requires someone taking the first step to reach out. What my mango tree taught me is that doing so is not only easy, but extremely rewarding.

My humble mangoes did not change the world, but they stirred a few hearts. Expatriate colleagues who were new to Singapore were thrilled to taste local, home-grown fruit. A few weeks later, my next-door lawyer neighbour returned the favour and gave me mangoes from her holiday in the Philippines, along with a heartfelt handwritten note. When I carried out waterproofing works on my roof, our left-side neighbour willingly shared in the cleaning of our border wall. I now feel more assured of an extra pair of eyes on my house while I'm on vacation, and my neighbours' understanding at the noise my family home

generates. Small steps, but they make my tiny corner of the world that little bit happier, stronger and safer.

What is the mango tree in your life? What do you have in abundance that might bear fruit for others? Last but not least: Are you willing to take the first step to share it with others?

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**Lynette Ooi** is a wife and mother of two, and a lawyer for Amazon. In her ten years of legal experience both here and abroad, she has focused on serving the technology and media industries. In her free time, she pursues many passions, including writing articles and volunteering in support of women leadership and medical humanitarian causes.

## **BENJAMIN MAK: GOING GREEN (BIRTHDAY BOOK 2018)**

What does going green mean to a society?

I pondered this question when I undertook part of my National Service with Combat Service Support (CSS) Command. As I was working in the Army, I focused on two specific issues:

- 1) How could going green enhance our security?
- 2) How might we work with different people to find green solutions to the challenges they face in their daily realities?

I started discussing both issues with a small team of like-minded superiors and peers. It soon became clear that going green could not be a road taken by a few people making plans on a whiteboard. Without a well-worn trail to follow, we needed the courage to forge a new path and encourage our friends to join us in sharing their knowledge and concerns. With the support of our superiors, we set out to organise the 2017 CSS Green Campaign.

In embarking on this campaign, we wanted to encourage all Army personnel to go green. Yet we also realised there was no single road to becoming more environmentally-friendly. Each CSS formation had different challenges and resources, and we wanted to ensure that all formations could produce green innovations that suited their needs.

To do this, we made a strong effort to engage enthusiastic full-time National Servicemen (NSFs) from every CSS formation to join our team. Working with a new generation of

environmentally-conscious youths, we were inspired by the wide range of innovations presented by our NSFs. For instance, the team from HQ Supply showcased their efforts to create recycling for old personal equipment, while Army Medical Services shared on WaterSense shower heads they had installed to conserve water.

As this was the first CSS Green Campaign, we had to think about how we could help our fellow soldiers to see how going green (and not just in the military-camouflage sense!) was relevant to the work of the Singapore Armed Forces. We thought a good way to do this was to show that going green could better secure our nation.

To see if this message was convincing, we sought the help of members of our research community in Singapore – Professor Asit Biswas and Dr Cecilia Tortajada (Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy); Associate Professor Kim Irvine (National Institute of Education); and Mr Toh Wee Khiang (then-Program Director, Energy Research Institute, Nanyang Technological University). We found that the message was not only persuasive, but also timely. Today, our world confronts a shortage of water, depletion of energy resources and the spectre of climate change. All of these can threaten our security, and this motivated our comrades to take up the cause of going green.

Beyond reaching out to the CSS community, we aimed to share our story with members across our Army and in the general public. We hoped that this would help others learn about our efforts and inspire them to go green too. In this endeavour, we received invaluable assistance from the teams at Army News and

MINDEF's PIONEER Magazine. Their efforts helped us to share our work across our Army and with our fellow Singaporeans.

Another way we tried to foster a strong environmental consciousness was by getting our people to discuss green topics they cared about in a concise and engaging format. We found the TED format a helpful starting point and organised a series of TEDx talks on environmental topics as part of our Green Project Showcase.

Our TEDx speakers – all NSFs – were excited about the chance to share long-held interests in green issues with us. This was seen in how the TEDx talks covered a gamut of green initiatives, from methods to recycle electronic waste to analysis of the psychology of going green.

In going about our humble efforts, we also began to see how our work fit into the context of broader green efforts in Singapore. We learnt how efforts to encourage food waste recycling fit within the nationwide campaign to reduce food waste, spearheaded by the National Environment Agency. Through presentations on installing water thimbles in our camps, we saw how our work complemented the campaign for water conservation by the Public Utilities Board.

Perhaps my experience reveals the importance of having courage and conviction to pursue what matters to us – together. In planning the CSS green campaign with fellow NSFs, we had no clearly paved road to follow. We carved out an approach based on what we knew, talked to people who widened our knowledge, and engaged as wide an audience as we could.

What started as the road of a few eventually coalesced into roads that we, collectively, could take together.

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**Benjamin** has helped to organise efforts to encourage personnel in the Singapore Army to adopt environmentally-friendly lifestyles. He was a member of the first Singapore team that won the World Schools Debating Championships in 2011. He is interested in how Singaporeans can better prepare for the roads we take in the future by better understanding our environment.

**DARREN HO: A SINGAPOREAN'S JOURNEY IN  
AGRICULTURE  
(BIRTHDAY BOOK 2018)**

Since I stumbled upon a rice farm in Cambodia ten years ago, my life took a completely new turn. Before, I was just like any other Singaporean male. I went to school, tried to get good grades, did sports, got enlisted, got a degree and joined the workforce. But something felt a bit off. I tried to find my footing. It was something I couldn't really describe in words but I could feel it quite powerfully inside and sometimes, you've got to just listen to that inner voice and follow your heart. So, I decided to explore our region – and after my first stop in Cambodia, everything had changed.

While doing my undergraduate degree, I took the chance to work in several farms in Australia, connect with farming groups across the world to understand each farmer's connection or disconnection with nature: how did their farming philosophies shape their daily decisions? In turn, how did those decisions shape the rest of the world's food consumption? The chain reaction I saw struck me hard. How one farmer decides to grow his crop, of course according to industry standards, could lead to the product going through several channels. For example, a typical wheat farmer would either send his grains to be processed for human food or animal feed depending on his quality of product, which was in turn an outcome of his methods.

All this was the just the beginning.



Agriculture is something subtle, yet powerful. The closest parallel I can think of for mother nature is your mother at home: We live in her environment and are fully aware of her importance, love and beauty, but we take these for granted. Every day, we are nourished; every day nature passes through and within our bodies, but we pay no real attention to it most of the time. Mindfulness is missing.

But on my journey to become a farmer, I started at the Cambodian rice farm. It had a very rural, traditional way of cultivating rice. Everything was done by hand: no machines or fancy equipment. Just good old-fashioned human effort and some rudimentary tools. I was there between the monsoon and harvest seasons, so the rice straws were starting to turn a shiny golden brown. The farmer's two kids just arrived home from the city, where they normally worked, to help prepare for harvest season (an example of Cambodia's rural-urban migratory workforce). I left just before they started to harvest and got a glimpse of how back-breaking and laborious the whole process was. All this, just to put a bowl of rice on our tables. I finally realised the true value of food, and the true meaning of nature. Working with nature, not against. Not for, but with.

This experience left a deep mark on me for two main reasons. First, it underscored the rural-urban divide. Urbanisation is inevitable. Cities are the future of the world, they say, and it is true. Humans, now more than ever, crave meaningful relationships, and cities are the perfect platform to seek them. But this process has completely forsaken the progress of small villages that are still reliant on labour.

Second, this was just one of the millions of Southeast Asian farming families, doing this day in day out. They are the most hardworking, simple and honest people I have ever met and I feel a sense of injustice to see them at the bottom of the economic value chain.

The next few years, in Australia, I had the opportunity to work in various types of farms. From dairy, to vegetables, to broad acre grains, to canola oil and even mushroom farming. In addition, I did the full range of farming duties, from starting up the farm from scratch, full operations, construction, sales and administration. Without even knowing why I did it, I accumulated invaluable experiences and nuggets of wisdom from all these farmers. Little did I know that working across so many disciplines and sectors gave me a different perspective and better understanding of the industry as a whole, which is very important as a farmer. Equipped with this knowledge, I came back to Singapore trying to set down my own farming roots.

My parents were skeptical at the start but they could see I was determined to make something out of this. I believed that it was possible too. It was quite hard to dissuade me. I hopped around quite a few farms before deciding to develop my role as the Head of Citizen Farm.

Singapore is an extremely urbanised environment. It has its charms and pleasures, like all major cities. But one very basic problem is our disconnect from nature and our food. Our culture has shifted to one where 'likes' on social media are more important than what we put in our bodies. We pay more attention to fashion sales than trying to understand and buying

good quality food. We study very deeply in our specialised fields but fail to connect the dots back to mother nature.

My push for urban farming is about more than just a passing fad. It is a road I want to take for the long term: to change the way we and other cities think about food, and through this improve the quality of urban life.

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**Darren** is the Head of Citizen Farm, Singapore's first and only closed-loop urban farm. After completing his studies in Economics and Natural Resource Management (BSc) at the University of Western Australia, Darren gained a wealth of industry exposure through work stints in a variety of farms around the world. Over a decade in agriculture, Darren has been featured in local and international news for his role in leading the sustainability and urban farming cause in Singapore. As part of the leadership team in Edible Garden City and a champion of the "Grow Local, Eat Local" movement, Darren is inspired to scale up urban farming in Singapore to share the benefits of agriculture with our community. It is his dream to see humanity live in perfect harmony with nature, empowered by technology.

## **LUCINDA LAW: GO WITHIN (BIRTHDAY BOOK 2018)**

Bundled up in layers of rainbow tie-dyed blankets on a hammock, sailing along the coast of the Abel Tasman National Park on a 38 foot-ketch with a group of new acquaintances who referred to themselves as "Peace Pirates", I finally conceded to the reality that I had no idea where my life was headed. And quite frankly, I felt rather serene about it. By then, I had been living on the sailboat for almost two months in mid-winter South Island, New Zealand, and had become acclimatised to the back-to-basic lifestyle with intimate connections to nature. Clearly, I was in a far better place from where I had been just two months ago, when a nine-year relationship ended, followed closely by the death of a cat companion of 19 years. When the opportunity of a sabbatical arose, I felt drawn to be immersed in nature, so I heeded the urgings of my instincts that went, "travel solo, go into nature, relax and just be".

That was it and so I did.

In hindsight, that sounded vague, but felt deeply true enough for me to follow that path. I was called to learn how to place my faith and trust in nature and to literally let nature take its course in creating a roadmap for my journey of healing, self-transformation and self-discovery. During my sabbatical, I have come to enjoy the solace and companionship I found in the magnificent mystery, beauty, wonder and divine creativity of nature, I also learned where to place my trust and faith so that I could do the most difficult part of getting out of my own way and surrendering the need to control uncertainty. In the times

that I do succeed, I felt grace and lifted. I felt lucky because the nature I encountered was kind, protective, nurturing, compassionate and even romantic towards me. I often found myself using the term romantic to describe nature because through the beauty of nature that I had seen, I felt love and loved. Plainly, this is how I was won over. Nature became my greatest holistic healer, inspiring teacher and guide to understand my inner self. I figured this was the most fascinating liberal arts education I would ever need in my entire lifetime and so I got really curious to research further into our relationships with nature.

Gradually, the map ahead began to form. I imagined new possibilities and designed a new life with the intention of living closer to nature – in coherence with nature and the wisdom it brings, whether within ourselves or with the world around us. I was especially fortified by Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh's mindfulness practice and meditations about our loving relationship towards nature to bring about changes in ourselves and our environment: *"You carry Mother Earth within you. She is not outside of you. Mother Earth is not just your environment. In that insight of inter-being, it is possible to have real communication with the Earth, which is the highest form of prayer. In that kind of relationship, you have enough love, strength and awakening in order to change your life."* In order to find enough love and strength to ignite my boldness in making choices towards my new journey, I had also needed to summon other qualities that resonated with me.

This I found in Clarissa Pinkola Estés' book, *"Women who run with the wolves"*, the first book I saw among the handful left

behind on the bookshelves when I returned to a dilapidated apartment in Singapore in 2015. I flipped to the inside front cover of the book and the first words and line boomed out at me, *"Within every woman there is a wild and natural creature, a powerful force, filled with good instincts, passionate creativity, and ageless knowing."* This gave me the pluck, gumption and courage to break free from the one-size-fits-all mentality approach to life and live a life that that would maximise my potential and well-being. Most importantly, while doing so, I also wanted to create opportunities for others to connect to nature, to themselves and their highest potential too.

A few months into rebuilding my life, I heard my instincts with another succinct instruction, "Start painting botanical watercolour again". This time, I protested because I have not painted since secondary school. I saw my fears but decide to try as I remembered how enjoyable it was. I first started painting when a book called "Magic and Medicine of Plants" arrived in the mail. Inspired by the botanical illustrations, I taught myself botanical watercolour painting using the old watercolour palette from my secondary school days. That practice had brought me so much creative joy and meditative peace that I continued to be a 'bedroom painter' for the next four years. Owing to this experience, I could easily empathise with those who share similar fears of picking up an art activity again after a long hiatus. But ultimately, the joy is worth it.

Reconnecting with this joy and peace again, I started painting in 2015 and set up "Within & Co" in 2016, a nature-led creative studio and consultancy that has since worked with over 45 collaborators with a diverse client list such as Diptyque, Faber-

Castell, Banyan Tree, Leica, Changi Airport Group, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and more. Our work constantly put us in close contact with nature, whether through our botanical-related art and design commissions or our nature-meets-arts educational programmes. During our workshops and immersive creative retreats, our guests learn a range of technical skills and holistic arts practices to help them to develop their creative confidence, rejuvenate and feel the therapeutic effects of nature.

In the road ahead, I am guided by how I can live my life closer to nature and how my work can help others to do the same. Being in harmony and synchronicity with nature helps us all to live more creative and fulfilled lives. In this way, there is also an assuring sense that you will always have a sanctuary within you. This belief grounds me as an artist and as an advocate for facilitating knowledge about creativity and nature. Being committed to spend the rest of my life depicting and talking about the beauty of nature and how to nurture a creative holistic life for others, truly makes me happy. The rest is up to nature.

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**Lucinda Law** is a botanical watercolour artist, teacher, writer and founding director of *Within*. Driven by her love to share the beauty of nature and for helping others to develop and nourish their creative confidence through nature-inspired arts practice, she started *Within*, a nature-led creative studio and consultancy in 2016. Since then, *Within* has worked on over 45 collaborations and commissioned projects. She also programmes and conducts botanical art workshops, courses and immersive creative retreats.

*She is the first Arts & Graphic Ambassador for Faber-Castell Singapore and the first Brand Ambassador for Diptyque Singapore.*



**BARBARA RYAN: POETRY, REST AND BIRDCALL  
(BIRTHDAY BOOK 2019)**

The Singaporean poet Arthur Yap was probably recalling the Malay name "*burung tukang*" when he described a local bird's call as 'tiny short *tuks*, each/ *lifting from the last*'. I use the English name "nightjar" (as Yap did too, to name his poem) because I enjoy the old-time use of the verb "jar" to mean "disturb". Yet I don't find that nightjars disturb the dark hours; to my ear, these birds enhance each night on which I am lucky enough to hear the cry that reaches my ear as a pleasant *klok*. A close cousin is a sound that you may have encountered in certain temples: the resonance, pause, resonance of a monk striking a not-too-big wooden *mokugyo*. This comparison came my way from a friend who listens out for nightjars as much as I do. Yap may have gotten there first, though, considering his interest in how *tuks* lift from each other. Think of the resolve, indeed, with which a monk, striking a *mokugyo*, lifts the striker to encourage reverberation.

So my topic is a bird's loud night cry? Yes. But where another poet, Ee Tiang Hong, heard '*insistence/ On being, I Something, somewhere*,' I relax into a sound that helps me forego sleep so that I can enjoy something different: calm rest. In this respect I differ from Yap, since he describes nightjars' sound as 'insistent call' that 'jab and jab'.

I need sleep; we all do. This need forms a perennial part of the human narrative, including in Singapore (whether or not we like to admit this limit on our forward motion). I notice, though, that lots of my fine students at the National University of Singapore send middle-of-the-night emails. It makes sense to prefer cool

hours for study, but student days end. Maybe, my students will work for employers like some in New York City – “the city that never sleeps” – who respect daytime naps by allotting costly office space to sleeping pods. Maybe not, though, since reports are emanating from Spain that the traditional afternoon *siesta* is giving way to other cultures’ time demands. Singapore faces time and sleep demands too: we have all seen people kipping on public transport. Since I prefer to sleep at home and can’t be sure that sleep will last though the night, the nightjars’ reminder is a firm ally for me to “be here now,” as the saying goes. Does this mean I agree with Yap and Ee that the call is insistent? No; I hear something gentler: a reminder to rest with a claim and happy heart in the night’s silence.

Sometimes, people look blank when I mention the nightjars’ call. Nightjars don’t find habitats in every part of Singapore; they like bushy shrubs and low greenery. But also, many people keep windows shut to sleep. Since I prefer unconditioned air at home, I heard nightjars as soon as I came to live at Kent Ridge. I didn’t understand that I was hearing a bird, though, until a neighbour one floor down grew so vexed that he marched to the lift in his pyjamas one night to suss out the racket. I learned from him that a bird was the source of the calls that I had credited to big-lunged frogs. Years later, I came across a memory by a Malaya policeman of wagers being laid on when the “maddening metronome” would end.<sup>1</sup> It’s unclear, from the way he relates the memory, who felt maddened: local gamblers, British officials or

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<sup>1</sup> Tock tock Birds – A spider in the Web of International Terrorism: Review by a Former Malaysian Policeman, “The Library, britishempire.co.uk, accessed May 21, 2019, <http://www.britishempire.co.uk/library/tocktockbirds.htm>

both. It's easy, though, to understand the tension that he remembers related to another British policeman's name for nightjars: the "tock tock bird."

A maddening metronome and time tick-tocking by through hours on watch recall jabs and insistence. Yet in a haiku, Leong Liew Geok hears the nightjars' call as music: a rippling 'pizzicato'. The place she described – Kent Ridge, again – was more jungly than you will find it now. Thus, if you infer from my writing a plea for unmanicured green space so that nightjars keep calling, you are right. If you infer, further, a wish for fewer lights and, so, fuller darkness that fosters deeper rest, you are right there too. Most central, though, I make a plea for a relaxing rest that you, too may relish when sleep is patchy.

A bit of learning that has served me well is finding out about *dorveille*, an old French word for a particular kind of sleeplessness: a pleasant, stress-free sort. A psychologist might connect this calm, happy state to the close tie between deep sleep and the pituitary gland's capacity to produce a relaxing hormone: prolactin. Ask an historian, though, and you are likely to hear about A. Roger Ekirch's discovery that before electric light altered life patterns, Europeans thought it normal to sleep for a few hours, wake for a soothing hour or so, then sleep again. Some used this time to write. It might be interesting to find out when Yap, Ee and Leong drafted the poems I've excerpted. It might be just as interesting to ask my students when they most happily draft their essays, lab reports and so on. Returning to Ekirch, though, he mentions in *At Days Close: night in Times Past* that some people used the relaxed state of *dorveille* to commit crimes: consider "nightpad," another antique word. A sense of

standing guard while others sleep could explain the negative reactions to nightjars' *tuk*, lift, *tock*. I've mentioned policemen, but Yapspoke of a 'soliloquy of ordered/ savagery' long before a local birder offered a phrase that I half-like but half-resist too: 'monotonous chonk'.<sup>2</sup> I think he's right about the whisper of an 'n': my sense of *klok* verges on *klonk*. Yet, I hear no monotony. Rather, my sense of nightjars' sound is like that of one last poet, Margaret McDaniels Leong. Writing for her children, she described nightjars' call as a lullaby.

When I enjoy burung taking's call, a psychologist might say, "Thank prolactin." Fair enough. Yet as I relax, I also thank primary-school memories of percussing soft wood blocks while my classmates rattled gourd maracas. The sound these blocks made – *klok*, pause, *klok* – frames the slow-beat delight that is, for me, a gift of *dorveille*. For some of us, this gift may be undiscovered or underway. For others thought, like me, the hope is that the nightjars' contribution to calm rest will be a growing part of the Singapore narrative for years to come.

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**Barbara Ryan** teaches in the National University of Singapore's University Scholars Programme. Despite the impression that her essay may create, she is no "birder". She just appreciates aural charm. Aural charmers who commented on drafts of the essay deserve her thanks: Miriam, Yu Jia, Imran and the Birthday Book 2019 team. Another gifted writer, Chun San, supplied

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<sup>2</sup> See KH, "Nightjars," Singapore Birds (blog), June 24 2012, <https://singaporebirds.blogspot.com/2012/06.nightjars.html>

*encouragement try a genre that is new for Barbara. One last writer, poet-memorialist Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, enriched Barbara's awareness of three poets named in her essay. With thanks for kind friendship, Barbara dedicates this essay to Shirley.*

## **CHEONG KOON HEAN: FROM GRID TO GREEN – THE PLANS THAT SHAPE OUR CITY STATE (BIRTHDAY BOOK 2019)**

I find maps and plans fascinating. Old plans capture intents of a time in history, revealing the ideals of the past to the present. New plans present aspirations and hopes for the future, to shape better ways of living.

In this bicentennial year, I would like to trace Singapore's dramatic transformation from a squalid trading port to a global city and endearing home through our urban plans, and postulate how our city state might further evolve.

### **Colony and Pre-Independence: Building a Trading Post**

Raffles' arrival in 1819 started Singapore's journey to becoming a British trading post and free port. The British gave us our first urban plan in 1822 when Lieutenant Philip Jackson drew up the Jackson Plan. It focused on the central area and featured a grid road layout and clear segregated areas for the ethnic communities. These became China Town, Little India and Kampong Glam – giving us the eclectic fabric of our cityscape. However, by the 1900s, the city grew severely overcrowded with many slums.

### **Post Independence: Developing a Global City and an Endearing Home**

Following self-rule in 1959, the newly elected government sought the United Nations' help to plan our fast-growing city state. Planning efforts in 1962, 1963 and 1971 resulted in the Concept Plan 1971, which proposed a 'Ring Concept' where

new high-density towns were to surround the central catchment area. Industry would be in Jurong with a new airport proposed at Changi. This plan was a discernible shift towards a more forward-looking, island-wide solution to address the housing and infrastructure challenges of a growing Singapore.

By 1989, most of the proposals in Concept Plan 1971 had been achieved. Concept Plan 1991 therefore charted the next lap of aspirations to become a 'Tropical City of Excellence'. More emphasis was placed on quality of life aspirations. Planners envisioned an island city that balanced work and play, culture and commerce; where nature, waterbodies and urban development were woven seamlessly together.

Alleviation of traffic congestion remained important. The Ring Concept soon evolved into a constellation of commercial centres in four regions (Woodlands, Tampines, Jurong East and Seletar) to bring jobs closer to homes and to ease city congestion.

The Concept Plan 2001 aimed to elevate Singapore further, to become a 'thriving world class city in the 21st century', with rich heritage, character, diversity and identity. With nationhood, building identity and social memories became important. The charm and endearing ambience of some familiar nodes, in terms of the scale and well-loved activities there – like Balestier, Holland Village, Joo Chiat, Serangoon Gardens and Jalan Kayu – would be safeguarded and enhanced. .

The MND Land Use Plan 2030 outlined strategies to provide a high quality living environment to sustain population growth.

New public housing areas at Punggol, Bidadari, Tampines North and the future Tengah Town, complemented by new residential areas at Bukit Turf Club, Kallang Riverside, Keppel and Bukit Brown would be built. To maintain Singapore as a garden city, about 900 ha of reservoirs and 100 km of waterways would be opened for recreational activities.

## **Exploring the Future**

These plans form much more than a mere list or chronology. Looking at Singapore today, it is remarkable that what was planned has been mostly realised. From the first grid layout to plans that map out a new nexus of growth, we have transformed our island into a green, global city in a garden.

Singapore's future success will similarly require forward-looking plans, daring enough to create an even better urban future. We need to anticipate and address looming trends, and ride on new opportunities that open us to exciting possibilities.

Singapore will continue to face land constraints, but in ways that are different from the past. With decades of urbanisation, we have become more dense. Our physical environment has to cater to an ageing population. Climate change will challenge us to mitigate sea level rise and extreme weather events. Digital and other technological revolutions will dramatically transform the way we live, work, move and play.

## **Creating More Space**

Overcoming land constraints requires us to creatively harness space where none exists. Building upwards, horizontally and



downwards – over our air and sea space as well as underground – will yield more space in bold, new ways.

We are already building higher where possible and appropriate. More mixed uses could be stacked vertically to save space and improve integration and convenience – for example, we could combine housing, leisure, lush roof gardens, offices, health and other uses.

We can create space horizontally through reclaiming sea space. Since this can only be done within our territorial boundaries, we could also explore spanning across large expanses of infrastructure such as highways and rail depots to create space.

Building more extensively downwards is another option. Underground space could accommodate research labs, storage, large water tanks and even infrastructure like power and water reclamation plants. Admittedly, these are expensive solutions and would require the right economic justifications.

## **Recycling Land**

As more developments use up land space, it is inevitable that future development would come from recycling what urban planners call brownfield sites. We will soon transit into a redevelopment mode where existing land and properties is 'recycled' for new use and new forms of developments. In fact, our leasehold land system is essential for us to achieve a virtual cycle of land recovery, continually rejuvenating our city and housing estates for future generations.

## **A More Sustainable Future**

Innovative, integrated solutions in energy, water, greenery and waste management will build us a more sustainable future. We should strive for a 'circular' approach to achieve multiple objectives. Re-use and recycling are hallmarks of a circular system. A good example is how we have closed the 'water loop'. Singapore is designed as a 'sponge' where almost every drop of rain is captured by a vast network of drains, or soaked up by parks, before being discharged into our reservoirs. Used water is also recycled using membrane technology.

Tightening the energy-waste-water nexus means we can use the heat from waste incineration to generate energy that powers water recycling. We should aim to be a zero waste nation through reducing and recycling waste. Smarter planning will encourage natural ventilation and reduce the use of air conditioning, thus saving energy. To reduce fossil fuel use, more renewable solar energy can be generated from floating solar panels on reservoirs and in the sea or even mounted on building facades. Public housing is a good starting point for us to invest our research and resources to help realise more sustainable outcomes.

## **Rethinking Mobility**

The future of mobility involves fewer cars and people getting around with different modes of transportation. With the doubling of the rail network by 2030, it would be more convenient to use the MRT. Instead of individuals owning cars, we will have 'mobility as a service', with shared cars and more 'on-call' cabs. Soon, we will be able to hop onto a driverless or autonomous bus or zip around on bicycles and Personal

Mobility Devices (PMDs) to the neighbourhood shops, via an extensive cycling network. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) could increasingly be used to transport goods, perhaps even people, in the future. Our city therefore needs to be designed to cater to 3D mobility, including safe pathways in the sky with landing points for UAVs.

### **Planning For An Ageing Society**

We need to meet our residents' needs as they age. This means more housing choices – such as three-generation homes for families who want to live together for mutual care and support, smaller homes for those who want independent living, and assisted living for those with health needs. Our environment should be barrier free with conveniently accessible facilities such as shops or senior activity centres. Designs should consciously promote interactions in the community, to reduce any sense of isolation and for healthy living. Pleasant community spaces, well-located community gardens, three-generation playgrounds and cross-programming of activities between young and old would encourage meaningful interaction.

### **Harnessing The Digital Age**

Digital technology will improve the way the city functions, and how people live. Data analytics and artificial intelligence will optimise and improve the performance, reliability and seamless delivery of public services. Digital connectivity can also better connect people and their interests, establishing virtual communities transcending physical limitations.

Now is the time to plan the digital infrastructure needed in the design of our city, so that we will be ready for the transformative changes.

### **Mapping Dreams: New Centres, New Growth**

Exciting times are ahead. URA's latest Master Plan 2019 has unveiled several extensive projects planned over the next two decades. To the west is the large western commercial district at Jurong East, complemented by the Jurong Innovation District, the new Tengah Forest town and the Tuas Mega Port. To the north, the Woodlands Regional Centre, the new Singapore Institute of Technology integrated with the Punggol Digital District will synergise into a North Coast Innovation Corridor. To the east, the relocation of Paya Lebar airbase will open up redevelopment opportunities. Changi Airport will expand significantly with the new Terminal 5. To the south, the vacated port land will provide exciting opportunities for new housing, commercial and leisure lifestyles.

These projects will carry Singapore into a new future, underpinned by a visionary master plan. We are a small country, but just as we did in our early years, we can continue to map big and bold dreams.

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**Dr Cheong Koon Hean** was the CEO of the Housing and Development Board, overseeing the development and management of some 1 million public housing flats in 26 towns/estates. She was also the CEO of the Urban Redevelopment

*Authority from 2004 to 2010, in charge of strategic land use planning, conservation of built heritage and the real estate market. She played a key role in the planning and development of major growth areas, such as Marina Bay as well as the Sino Singapore Tianjin Eco City. She is also the Chairman of the nominating committee of the Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize.*

## CHOO RUIZHI: EATING DOGS – A SINGAPORE STORY (BIRTHDAY BOOK 2019)

Yes, I ate that stupid dog. It was me. So what?

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*"One morning Colonel Farquhar went for a walk by the side of Rochore River taking his dog with him. The dog took to the water in the river when suddenly it was seized by a crocodile. A moment later Colonel Farquhar was told that his dog had been eaten by a crocodile, and he ordered the men who were there to put up a dam blocking the river. The crocodile was hemmed in by the obstruction and speared to death. It was fifteen feet long. This was the first time that people realized there were crocodiles in Singapore. Colonel Farquhar ordered the crocodile's carcass to be brought along, and he hung it on a fig tree by the side of the Beras Basah river."*

*Munshi Abdullah,  
translated by A.H. Hill, The Hikayat Abdullah<sup>3</sup>*

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Do you want to hear a story? Oh, don't worry, it's not history. It won't be authorised, edited, or published by approved angels in ivory towers. This is just a story sung by the half-light, a memory moulded from muddy, moon-dimmed shadows.

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<sup>3</sup> Munshi Abdullah, The Hikayat Abdullah, ed. and trans. A.H. Hill, in Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 28, no. 3 (June 1955): 149.

This is a story of the time I ate a dog.

All morning, that noisy cur had been ranging along the riverbank: squealing, gibbering, howling away. I'd been sunning myself, basking in the blunt glare of the late morning with several of my brothers, absently aware of that gormless creature. The dog was a sandy-furred mongrel, just like the other mutts brought here by the two-legs. By its insufferable yammering, I guessed it wasn't the brightest spark in its litter.

All morning, it had been playing near us, high-pitched yowls growing increasingly infuriating – but also closer and closer. My brethren, arrayed around me like monstrous scaled logs, weren't interested. Larger and older, they ignored such small prey, still sleeping off the fat, bristly warthog we'd taken two evenings ago.

But me? I was greedy, though I'd partaken of that hog-feast too. The *kancil* I'd ambushed in the blue hours of the early morning could only last me so long. My stomach rumbled, concurring with my slow-burning annoyance. Out of the corner of my armoured eye, I watched the dog sprint and whine in guileless delight, oblivious to the danger it was in.

I waited then: in that tranquil, crystal space before detonation, until it was too late for escape. You must understand: crocodiles are ambush predators. We pick our moments. The unending shrieks of that stupid dog deepened my desire to rip it apart. Further away, I could see the pale two-leg (male, from its scent) that was with the dog, so unlike the browner folk that lived here

in sight and scent... He was watching the canine distractedly, as it now splashed into the water.

Closer, closer, and then —

And then I am erupting out of the water: a thunderous terrible squall of flashing teeth and scale and scute and spray, my powerful tail launching my massive bulk out of the brackish water, straight at the imbecile mammal. My great jaws are already closing in, even as the surprised animal realises what has happened. Like a terrible clamp, I have closed over half its body, before it has even had time to react —

and then it was all over. I'd dragged it into the cloudy murk.

It squeaked, it struggled for a little bit. Even in my jaws, I could feel its little heart, palpitating in terror, sodden limbs thrashing in vain as I dragged it through the soft mud of the banks, deeper into the river's boiling, turbid gloom .

It stopped wriggling after I held it underwater a little longer, and crunched tits ribcage like a brittle shell. Then I swallowed the sodden thing: bones and fur and viscera. Crocodiles don't chew our food. I didn't give this meal much thought until later.

Hey, don't look at me like that. Do you know the personal relations of the fruits you eat? Would you even care? I barely remembered consuming that canine. Do you know how many things a crocodile eats? Fish birds crabs monkeys buffalo bats tapir mousedeer lobsters egrets tigers sandpipers warthogs turtles colugos rats otters pangolins... what's so special about



this dog, anyway, except that someone saw me eat it, except that someone wrote it down?

Caught me? *Speared me to death?* Don't be ridiculous. I moved too fast for them. The pasty two-leg who'd brought me that dog – Farquhar, you say? – his mind had been elsewhere. He'd had no idea how to react when his little pet became my breakfast. Do you think it's so easy to catch a crocodile? I heard him yelling in helpless rage; I smelled his confused fear even from the water. A commotion of men – but by then I was already swimming away, uninterested in more noise, eager to escape to quieter banks...

But of course, those men whose dog I'd eaten had to declare that they'd trapped me, netted me, and speared me with their strong, sharp, potent sticks. You see, it wasn't just their dog I'd drowned. It was, of course, their prestige and their manhood. And so how else could such a boy's story, a man's affair have ended, but in the normal, unimaginative ways: with lies, death, and the taming of the shrew – in this case, a crocodile? They didn't murder a crocodile – they told you a story about murdering a crocodile. And just like all stories, it was a neat one: with head, body, and tale. Stories, whether undiscovered or underway, are not supposed to wriggle away after they are concluded, slipping quietly back into the gloomy murk of the mangrove.

But crocodiles are, and they do.

Listen to your mother. Don't believe everything strange men say, even (or especially) learned famous ones, whose reputation precedes them on a gilt-edged cloud. What is history, but a

collection of stories, told and retold; sludge shaped and reshaped; added, subtracted, multiplied, and divided in the hands of every teller?

Whose tale will you trust, when there is only one teller? Which tail could you tell, when all crocodiles look the same?

The crucial thing about this island is that it isn't diamond-shaped, or dot-shaped. This island is story-shaped: moulded by the retold memories of its waters and its lands, smoothed like a polished pebble, shaped to suit its storytellers.

But there are other ways to tell a story: from the banks of vanished mangroves, or the cold eyes of this crocodile. This isn't history, permitted and protected. This is just a story sung by the half-light, a memory moulded from murky, moon-dimmed shadows.

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**Ruizhi** believes in magic. He believes there is still plenty of it waiting in the myriad corners of Singapore. As a researcher, tutor, and student of Singapore's pasts, he believes in the immense potential of stories and histories to entrap, but also empower. Presently, he runs @singapore\_stories, an Instagram project offering alternative insights into Singapore's pasts, presents and futures. He lives in a quiet HDB neighbourhood named after conquerors from a faraway land, under the shade of a Central American tree. His grandmothers like to tell him stories he can't find in textbooks.

**KOO HUI YING & NEO XIAOYUN: REFLECTIONS IN AND  
WITH NATURE  
(BIRTHDAY BOOK 2021)**

*"Where are we going next?"*

*"What will we see now?"*

When facilitating intertidal explorations as a wildlife/nature guide with *The Untamed Paths*, we emphasise experiential learning in unstructured environments. Much like the namesake of my company, we tread (gently) on untamed paths. Guides like myself deliver the full experience, passing on skills of spotting intertidal creatures, introducing their characteristics and ecosystems, and engaging guests – all while squinting in Singapore's less-than-clear waters for the faintest shape of something cool. This could be exhilarating, curiosity inducing and immersive; there are also, at times, long droughts in between sightings. The children start dragging their aquashoes across the seabed, and looking for little rocks to play with.

*"Can you find me an octopus?"*

*"Can we go someplace new?"*

*"Are we there yet?"*

For children more used to instantaneous digital gratification or the predictable sight of caged megafauna in Singapore's wildlife parks, the untamed paths offer something different. You never know when an octopus will show up, deciding to leave its rock

cavern home to swim out against the waves. You can never predict when a flat-bodied peacock sole fish would choose to make the smallest movement and give away its position on the seabed right in front of you. All you can do is to watch and wait and keep present in the moment, tuning your senses to nature's arrival.

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*"Are we almost there?"*

*"Is there air-con at the place we are going?"*

This question of 'are we there yet' is often asked in a Forest School Singapore session as there is never a fixed destination. From a coach's lens, the statement is rooted in curiosity, anxiety, and/or impatience, all which can look very similar from the outside. Usually, it's easier if we know where we are headed to and by when, especially when we live in a generation which expects quick answers and assumes the ability to control. The sense of time in nature is however different from our usual urban landscape, and this question is not just asked by children; in fact, sometimes by the adult as well.

*"I wasted all my energy and this is it?!"*

*"I'll never climb up here again. So tiring to come down..."*

*"It's harder to come down than to go up."*

*"If you need help, hold my stick!"*

*“Their ears are off...”*

The forest school concept offers a way of life and a space to be ourselves, follow our lines of inquiry and seek resources along the way.

In doing so, we allow for emotional self-regulation and deep reflection – for both the child and adult. Without direction from above, we learn how to work in groups, share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and make decisions – even in seemingly mundane moments.

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As we guide and coach, we both find ourselves caught in moments of surprise as we observe how kids behave, and how we respond in the moment. Here’s what we’ve learnt:

- When we make sense of our own discoveries, they are ours to own.
- When we are able to work on and through conflicts, we build a practice of resilience and learn to talk about it.
- When we allow appropriate risk-taking, this supports personal mastery and helps develop self-efficacy.

In the process of discovering all of the above, the question ‘are we there yet?’ doesn’t seem as significant. All moments are part and parcel of the experience to be managed. So we tell the kids, and equally ourselves: Where we are at is exactly where we should be at this point in our journey. What we will see next is

determined by our ability to pay attention and be attuned to the environment. There's still so much more to discover. If only we stay curious, stay present, and trust in the journey.

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With our guiding/coaching experiences as common ground, the two of us converge to reflect upon our experiences as a volunteer and an ex-staff of *Ground-Up Initiative (GUI)*. A non-profit organisation, GUI encourages connection with Nature, Self and Others, as a solution to heavy urbanisation. In its 13th year of existence, we have realised that different seasons bring about different needs. GUI needed to evolve our community engagement concept into a business with heart, in order to be financially self-sustaining on top of creating meaning and fun, while keeping our initial purpose.

Beginning with 100sqm of land in 2009 and slowly expanding over the years, GUI eventually grew to 26,000sqm of land in 2014, accompanied by a five-figure operational cost. This was a far cry from a time when we had almost zero expenses. We had to innovate and change. While there was no hierarchy in its beginning years, GUI is now made up of a core team of staff with various functions including finance, business development, marketing, estate management, and craft and farm operations.

Come by any Saturday and here's what you will see. Families picking leafy greens off the soil with bare hands, little boys and girls chasing after resident red roosters, nature-based health and wellness talks hosted at our HeartQuarters, aspiring bakers kneading butterfly pea flowers into bread and pizza dough, and

woodsmiths moulding toys and Christmas trees from discarded wood pellets. Countless initiatives over the years have helped people, especially the youth, who passed through GUI's doors cultivate a hands-on culture, social cohesion, grounded leadership, personal responsibility and teamwork. This has nurtured a community that cares about the wellbeing of humanity and the Earth. Challenges and trials have helped bind the community and kept us dynamic in developing our business plans towards a bolder ambition.

Or perhaps it's not a bolder ambition, but rather keeping us grounded to our *raison d'être*. GUI was founded to remake Singapore: it was established as a counter-proposal to the mainstream, to provide people with the environment to be creative and risk-taking, and to serve as a springboard to reshape the political, cultural and social norms of Singapore. Within this vision, contradictions and the external pressures of time and money from mainstream society and its norms are always going to be present. These tensions have been and should remain the impetus for GUI to explore why and how it does the things it does, to emerge with clarity on how we can activate possibilities and serve better.

Finally, where we go next is also determined by our ability to stomach failures and setbacks, not just successes. “要传承理念必须借由创业的契机和守业的坚持，‘初心’才得以延续” – an organisation has to bring together a fiercely enterprising spirit along with its initial reasons for establishment, for a truly sustainable legacy. GUI is a case study, and forever a work-in-progress.

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Are we there yet? No. The day we think we are there, we have stopped learning and growing. We only stop to breathe, take in the views, practise gratitude and self-compassion, and continue trying another day. As seasons pass, we continue to pave new paths, forge new norms and embrace new ways of measuring, being, and becoming.

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**Koo Hui Ying** is a coach with Forest School Singapore currently. Through her diploma in Tourism and Resort Management and a Bachelor of Arts (Communication), she had volunteered and worked at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), TOUCH Community Services as well as Wildlife Reserves Singapore (Jurong Bird Park).

Hui Ying's experiences have resulted in her love for people and being in the act of service – thus leading her to Ground-Up Initiative (GUI), a non-profit organisation set up to nurture creativity and risk-taking in future leaders for seven years. By connecting and involving people in nature through farming and woodworking activities, GUI aims to create a mindful connection for urban dwellers to explore and (re)connect through conscious living. With an experience of 11 years in hospitality, her goal in life is to die happy.

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**Neo Xiaoyun** is a policy officer concerned with advancing constructive international relations to secure Singapore's strategic aviation interests. When she is not firing email submissions, she's wielding her chungkol at Ground-Up Initiative (GUI), a non-profit community and organic farm. She also marries her love for education and the great outdoors as a facilitator of ecological learning journeys with *The Untamed Paths*.

Xiaoyun graduated magna cum laude from Yale-NUS College in 2019 with a major in Environmental Studies. She is also the author of the title essay in the anthology *Eating Chilli Crab in the Anthropocene: Environmental Perspectives on Life in Singapore*. In all that she does, Xiaoyun strives to be a part of purpose-driven businesses and groups that can make a lasting, positive impact on our environment and social fabric.

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