

Grace Chia

Roger

(for my cousin)

I

In this family of mandarins
Roger's anomaly was a blemish that
smudged the white crisp papyrus
scrolls of our ancestral lineage.

He disappeared from our annual festive meets;
A taboo hushed up, shooed away as bad luck.
His was a misfortune that befell only the *suey*.

Roger's name never came up once.
Eighteen years of existence erased without a trace.

II

At six, I – the consummate reader –
found a hushed clearing fringed by
overgrown bushes on a peripheral corner
of Grandpa's house.

I brought Barbie and books and Roger
obliged with a GI Joe while the imp in him made up stories:
science fiction, comedies, roaring epics.

His was an ambition as thirsty and unbounded as
his imagination.

III

Last day of primary school. Mr Tan sat us down.
I cocked my head up with a scrawny neck.
He looked at his report. Smiled at me, said

I was Number Two in the class.

Two years later, Roger had his name broadcasted to the assembly.
He'd topped his level and the entire school. Tried to keep up, I thought, but he beat me to it.

His was the final year of a now defunct primary school
before it made way for a retirement home.

IV

Roger followed me to secondary school.
He trumpeted tunefully to the band
while I marched weekends off to the student cadet corps, head
under beret and hairnet, perspiring in the noon heat;

lamenting how I had spent Friday nights polishing boots
to shine the nose of an inspecting senior. In my third year, my article fought its way to the
annual school book while

first-year Roger had his in there
winning a writing competition.

V

In junior college, I was off my head scrawling verses on foolscap
as the GP teacher droned on about the SAT and the Chinese teacher scolded everybody about
nothing. Smash Hits trivia topped
my must-know and I cried non-stop of failed crushes.

I discovered religion, prayed feverishly and trotted off to every
church invite, then lost it all again. Saved then damned, I oscillated
from heaven's favour like quicksand.

Only on the annual family meets do I bump into Roger, reed thin,
inching too tall for his size, doing well in school as usual.

VI

Roger's mom asked: is it true, polytechnic graduates could end up
in university? She wanted him to learn something 'useful'. I said, yes,

but why offer the family's best brain to a technical education?
Roger's braininess was a gift, an amalgamation of

many gifts others could only dream of. I hung up the phone.
Crept out for *nasi lemak* at the 24-hour restaurant where undergrads swarm past midnight
and forgot all about the call.

Roger went for his first choice and got in. He believed his brain
had space left for theory after the practical.

VII

We surrounded the bed the way the bushes had encircled our preadolescent hideout. Some
strangers came. Made a lot of noise.
Some mumbo jumbo about laying their hands on him.
By then, it was too late for paracetamol.

The ammonia of the ward reminded me of the hair perm solution
my Mommie always used. The leader of the cult placed his palm on
the bedridden boy. The strangers followed suit.

Roger's fever had boiled him into a coma. His religion forbade him
from taking medication. This will be his finest battle.

VIII

In theory, the faith of Roger's religion dictates a healing light would impart from the
community of the blessed converts towards
the weak and ailing. Roger would triumph, as he always did.
His mother had faith; and so did he.

The doctors said he would live. The fever had entered his head.
Roger's faith kept his body alive but killed his brain. This was
good news, the strangers said.

I remember my uncles and aunts turning their heads away. Ah Pa kept
a stiff upper lip while Mommie beat her chest and wept.

IX

Ten years now. I have not seen Roger since. This was paltry victory.
I wanted Roger to beat me hands down, knock me to the ground,
waving his GI Joe the way he used to. This is a fluke shot.
I wanted to arm wrestle him till he bawls.

Five hours away from the flight, I pulled out a paper coppered
with age. There was Roger; mischievous hair sticking out
spike-like. He had an elfin grin. His eyes sparkled.

I gave Roger's winning story to Mommie, saying, give this to him.
Though I doubt he can read what he once wrote.

X

Mommie tells me stories: Roger's doing really well.
He does handicraft, you know, to help bring income for the
special school. He's made new friends and settling in his new home.
But I don't think he recognizes me.

I don't think Roger will recognize me either. Or the old him in my memory. He's moved
forward but I've stayed back, staking claim over
the secret clearing at Grandpa's *kampong*.

Roger faces his present – amnesiac, brave. I remember the things
I want and forget the rest. I am a ghost. You win again, Roger.

Grace Chia has poetry and short stories published in *The Straits Times*, *SilverKris*, *Awareness*, *WOW*, *Di-Verse-City* (US) and the journals *Flying Inkpot* and *Stylus Poetry Journal* (Australia). She was a Guest Poet for the Austin International Poetry Festival and the Queensland Poetry Festival in 2002, and the National Young Writers Festival in Newcastle, NSW in 2003. As poet, she has collaborated on multimedia festivals in London for the Royal College of Art and the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. The runner-up of the National Poetry Slam in the 2003 Singapore Writers' Festival, Grace has received many awards from the Singapore International Foundation and the National Arts Council. She is the author of *womango* published in 1998.