

For Review Only



# CATHERINE LIM

## *The Howling Silence*

The living and the dead – there is something that binds them. For the living are endlessly fascinated by tales of the dead, whether they are about an old ancestor whose ghost reputedly haunts an old ancestral home about to be torn down; a child never allowed to be born, whose little frightened call “Mummy! Mummy!” fills his mother’s dreams at night; an airline pilot whose ghost is forever condemned to roam the earth with that of his mistress for an unspeakably cruel suicide pact that plunges a hundred others to their deaths.

In this collection of 14 short stories set in Singapore, Catherine Lim tells tales of the dead and their return, bringing readers on a journey of unease, excitement, trepidation and, above all, awe for the mystery that surrounds death.

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*The Howling Silence*

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*Tales of the  
dead and their  
return*



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*The Howling Silence*

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## *Great-grandfather with Teeth*

During a vacation from my studies in the United States in 1992, I decided to spend the night alone in the old, abandoned family house at Pek Joo Street, one in a row of dilapidated shophouses that must have been built before the turn of the century, soon to be torn down to make way for a gleaming shopping complex.

The reasons behind my decision were two: sentiment and bravado. The sentiment concerned my birth in one of the three bedrooms on the upper floor, which still contained the birth-bed, an old, carved, monstrous piece of furniture. The bravado concerned the alleged population of ghosts in the house, which I was determined to confront, alone and unaided, so that I could regale friends with vivid telling of the experience later. No. 37 was said to be the most haunted of the houses on Pek Joo Street; passers-by could feel the odour of its unsanctity.

“It’s definitely unclean,” they shuddered. Strange sounds, shadowy presences, fleeting movements – all had been heard or sighted in the derelict house of my birth.

The ghosts were those not only of forebears who had lived and died there, but also of maid servants sold into bondage to the family. The last ancestor to die was the first to be born there, my great-grandfather, Tan Siong Teck, who died at eighty,

just months before I was born, his first great-grandson. The only existing photograph of him, yellowed with age, shows a handsome, robust, well-built old man with a perfect set of teeth. In those days of stiff, formal poses for the camera, people never smiled. Great-grandfather did, for the pure pleasure, I was told, of showing off those marvellous octogenarian teeth.

“Tell me about *Chor Kong*,” I used to ask my mother when I was a little boy, impressed by the fact that he exited the world just as I entered it. But my mother would look displeased and turn away each time, as from a horrible secret not fit to be told. Great-grandfather became an absorbing mystery to me.

Two maidservants had died in the house, one of whom a nineteen-year-old called Ah Kum, had hanged herself from a ceiling beam one cold dawn before anybody was awake.

I relished the prospect when back in the States after my vacation, of tantalising my college mates, especially my roommate, Bryan Roberts, a dry, cynical Business Studies student, with a cool, detailed description of ‘My Adventures in the Haunted Ancestral Home’.

*“I spent a night with the spirits of my forebears, apologising sincerely, on behalf of the Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority, for the rude expulsion from their home, and promising to help them, in whatever way I could, in their resettlement in a new home. On behalf of the government, I offered at least a million dollars in compensation, burning ten stacks of ghost money until everything was properly reduced to ashes. It is said that some spirits do not even know that they are dead, and wander around in a confused state for years, on the face of the earth. I showed extra sympathy for these poor benighted souls which surely included that*

*of my great-grandfather, a fine-looking old man who must have done horrible things in life to make his descendants too fearful to even mention his name. As for the spirits of the suicides, they are supposed to be the most tormented of all. So I had to be extra gentle with that poor maidservant Ah Kum whose body, when it was detached from the hanging rope, was found to be with child. I was therefore dealing with two distressed spirits, not one; no pair of ghosts could be more tragic than those of mother and unborn child."*

I already saw Bryan Roberts' jaw dropping. He often spoke patronisingly about the bizarre customs of the East, in particular the obsession with the supernatural. I would rub that in, and watch his reaction with perverse delight.

My mother said, "Kwan, I wish you wouldn't." (She never called me by my Western name, Rudolph.) I had told her of my plan, and she had appeared upset by it. She went on to say severely, "Don't go disturbing them or making fun of them. They can be dangerous. What's the matter with you?" She never referred to ghosts by any other term than a safe pronoun. She also probably regretted my Western education which had given me a Western name she could not pronounce, a Western religion she could not understand and a Western levity she could not condone.

"Kwan, light these joss-sticks for *Chor Kong*," she said, placing them in my hand. She was clearly worried that my frivolity had displeased the ancestors who must be appeased quickly. But I could not make myself do it. That gesture of appeasement would have a hollow ring to it.

That night, alone in the family house on Pek Joo Street, I saw the ghost of an old man. Strangely, I was unafraid. Perhaps it was

my ability to stay detached from the culture of my childhood, to watch it coolly from the outside and not be intimidated by the exotic ghosts, ghouls and graveyard trysts that had so frightened me as a child. Indeed, I was elated at the thought of having a *real* supernatural experience, one actually independent of my imagination, that I could later narrate to my Western friends in every authenticity of detail.

I was lying on the bed of my birth when it happened. I heard small rustling sounds and instantly sat up to see an old man standing at the foot of my bed staring at me. He was thin and stooped, with wisps of white hair on his head. He was wearing a short-sleeved, white singlet and black cotton trousers. All these details registered clearly in the dim light of a street lamp coming through the wooden window slats. From the outside world too came the sound of cats snarling and of a garbage bin overturning, as if to confirm to me that what I was experiencing was not a dream but reality.

The ghost stared at me for a long time and I looked back, still unafraid. He moved slightly and opened his mouth, as if to tell me something. It was at this point that I saw, with a start, that he had no teeth. A toothless ghost. Even while gazing awe-struck at him, I was aware of the literal and metaphorical comicality of the situation. His gums were completely bare. It was almost as if, as a joke he had appeared with the precise purpose to disclose that special feature. Then he vanished.

The next morning I told my mother about the ghost. She became very agitated, shaking her head vigorously. She said, "I told you, but you wouldn't listen." What she meant was that I had, by my reckless deed, tampered with the past which now, like a disturbed pool, was stirring with dark, ugly secrets.

"Who was the old man?" I said.



“Your great-grandfather,” said my mother. Great-grandfather of the robust, well-built body and perfect teeth? Or did ghosts continue to suffer the ravages of time in the other world, becoming older, greyer, feebler?

“It was your *Chor Kong*,” my mother repeated, and was of course compelled to tell the horrible tale she had been holding back for so many years.

Great-grandfather Tan Siong Teck, up to the eightieth and last year of his life, had never even suffered a minor ailment like a cough or cold. His good health was legendary, which he would proudly proclaim every morning to the world through an hour’s exercise of *tai chi* in an open piece of ground at the back of the house. Neighbours stopped to watch admiringly. While other old men and women drooped, shuffled, limped, wheezed and used walking sticks, Great-grandfather strode briskly about, always wearing a short-sleeved white cotton singlet and black cotton trousers, the best exemplar of the much desired longevity and good health enshrined in every Chinese greeting.

But the greatest source of his pride and pleasure was his teeth: Great-grandfather never visited a dentist in all his life. He scorned to use anything but charcoal powder for cleaning that prized feature, carefully applying the stuff on every tooth and rubbing it vigorously with his forefinger. Then he rinsed his mouth several times with clear, clean fresh water from a large tin mug. He spat out the water, in dark streams, into a drain, watched by fascinated children. For their benefit, he clowning about, baring his charcoal-blackened teeth to frighten them and rinsing his mouth with loud, exaggerated sloshing sounds. The elaborate ritual of teeth-cleaning was always followed by the pulling out of a small mirror from a trouser pocket. Carefully examining his teeth, now white and sparkling in the mirror,

Great-grandfather would amuse the children further by inviting them to come up for a closer look. Once someone gave him a tube of Pepsodent toothpaste. Great-grandfather threw it away in disdain.

His pride and vanity about his teeth made him overly critical about other people's. He laughed unkindly at the brown, rotting stumps of Ah Chow, a neighbour who was a good fifteen years younger. He pointed with spiteful glee at the three remaining teeth wobbling precariously on the lower jaw of Ah Poon Soh who sold vegetables at the market. Ah Poon Soh could no longer eat the pork she loved, and watched with good-natured envy as Great-grandfather cockily cracked open boiled chestnuts and crab claws with his excellent teeth.

Great-grandfather welcomed the visits of the itinerant dentist who came to the neighbourhood once a month, because he loved to watch, with childish fascination, bad teeth being yanked out by the dentist's brutal-looking spanner-like instrument, and the bloodied hollows being plugged with large wads of cotton wool. The dentist carried with him on his rounds a small spittoon into which yanked teeth and the used wads, soaking with blood, could be thrown. Great-grandfather even made fun of his own family members, none of whom had teeth that could remotely match his.

"*Siow*," they complained privately to each other, meaning that he was crazy and not behaving with the decorum and dignity expected with old age.

Then something happened. When Great-grandfather turned seventy-nine, one of his three sons, Second Granduncle Oon Hock, aged fifty-one, died of a mysterious illness. Only the day before, he was enjoying his usual drink of Guinness Stout in the coffeeshop three doors away. The next day, he complained of

dizziness and asked his wife to rub Tiger Oil on his temples. She did so expertly and then went to get him a cup of hot Ovaltine. When she returned, he was slumped in his chair, dead.

Second Grand-aunt was inconsolable. After the funeral, when she had sufficiently calmed down, she made a sly remark to the effect that longevity for the old was fine, but should not be at the expense of the young. She had touched a raw nerve of the culture's abiding dilemma: what to do about old men and women who exceeded their appointment of long life, stealing years that should have been their children's. It was not in the natural order of things for parents to bury their children.

Second Grand-aunt, in her resentment, had planted the seeds of fear in that house on Pek Joo Street. It hung in the air, heavy, uneasy, palpable. It isolated Great-grandfather, already isolated by the eccentricities of his behaviour. But the old man, ever proud and stubborn, chose to ignore the snide remarks and continued his healthy regimen of daily morning exercise and meticulous teeth cleaning. He was looking forward to his eightieth birthday the following year and to the eating of longevity noodles at the celebration dinner which his children and grandchildren were obliged, by filial duty, to provide, and which was sure to confer at least another ten or fifteen years of good health.

Then another death in the family took place. This time it was a grandson, the youngest child of one of Great-grandfather's two daughters, First Aunt Kim Chee who lived at Downer Road, a few streets away. The boy, aged eleven, had fallen down while playing, slipped into a coma and died within a week. His frantic parents had consulted one temple medium after another for a cure, but in vain. First a son, now a grandson. The old man's longevity was proving to be a curse in the family;

it was dangerously extending itself by eating up the life-years of progeny. A relative went to consult a fortune teller who instantly identified the specific source of the continuing evil: Great-grandfather's teeth. They were abnormal teeth, too long, too strong, too powerful, indicating a monstrous appetite. They were the teeth of perverted parenthood that would devour its own flesh and blood. How many more offspring would have to be sacrificed? Great-grandfather's perfect teeth had suddenly become the focus of everyone's resentment and fear.

Since the gods sternly forbade any disrespect for the old, this resentment could only be expressed indirectly. The aggrieved victims, Second Grand-aunt and First Aunt Kim Chee, singly or together, made caustic remarks to neighbours who were certain to pass them on to the hateful old one.

Great-grandfather seethed with anger. He felt all the pain of the insult as well as all the confusion of an ambiguous gift from the gods: had the teeth of longevity turned into a weapon of destruction in his own family? Had the prized symbol of his good health become a toxic gift?

In his confused state, he became peevish and quarrelsome, isolating himself even more. As his birthday approached, he said loudly and testily, "No need for any celebration. Why bother at all?" It was of course unthinkable that the august eightieth birthday of an aged parent would go uncelebrated, that the longevity noodles would not be cooked and eaten by everybody.

At that time, my mother, who was married to one of Great-grandfather's grandsons (my father died when I was nine), was pregnant with me. A son, a grandson, a great-grandson: would the savage teeth chomp through three generations? My mother, a young bride at nineteen, was terrified. She avoided looking at Great-grandfather. Whenever she passed him, she looked down,

and raised her hands instinctively to cover her swelling belly, to protect the unborn great-grandson. She had begun her married life at 37, Pek Joo Street, a house with only three bedrooms and an endlessly proliferating family. At one stage, the family spilled over into the adjoining house at No. 38, which happened to be vacant, by simply breaking down a separating wall.

On the special day of Great-grandfather's eightieth birthday, at the precise hour when the food was all laid out on the table to be eaten, with a huge plate of celebratory noodles in the centre, Great-grandfather was nowhere to be seen. The children were sent to look for him. Someone had seen him, hours earlier, in the toolshed at the back, fiddling with tools and making strange noises. Nobody remembered seeing him doing his exercise in the morning or cleaning his teeth. Everybody became worried. What had happened to Great-grandfather?

Then somebody whispered, "Ssh, he's coming!" and the family quickly took their places at the long table, silent and anxious. They watched nervously as Great-grandfather came in, looking paler than usual, and took his place at the head of the table. Then he began to help himself to the longevity noodles.

It was at this point that the family realised something was wrong. They looked at him in horror, or rather, at his mouth, as it opened wide to eat the noodles. For there were no teeth. The gums were totally bare, and still bleeding from the despoliation, probably with a spanner from the toolshed. (A child later discovered all the teeth, a very large number, thrown into an old tin bucket in the shed, in a mess of blood, spittle and old rags.) Great-grandfather ate the noodles slowly, drawing in each long strand carefully, so as to maintain its length and wholeness, as tradition required. One by one, each long, wet, slippery noodle was sucked into the toothless mouth and swallowed, with great

slurping noises. Then when he had finished, Great-grandfather looked at the faces around the table, looked at each long and lingeringly. He said nothing but his eyes were bright with savage triumph: *Are you all satisfied now?*

He turned to my mother and looked hard at her, and again it was his eyes that did the talking: *Your unborn child is safe, Granddaughter-in-law. If anything happens, remember I'm not to blame. The young must not always blame the old. I've done my best.*

My mother said it was the most horrible moment in her life. Once again, she had instinctively placed both hands on her growing stomach to protect me from the malevolent stare.

Great-grandfather died soon after. It would appear that with his prized teeth gone, he had nothing more to live for. He lost interest in life, refused all food and medicine and went into rapid decline, dying only two months after his eightieth birthday. He was a shadow of his former self.

I went back to the house at No.37, Pek Joo Street. I wanted to see Great-grandfather's ghost again, this time to thank him. He had laid down his teeth for me. For this I would first beg forgiveness from the ghost and then thank him with the fullness of a humble, chastened heart. I waited all night and when dawn broke, the time for the spirits to return to their abodes, I knew Great-grandfather would never come again. He had left No.37, Pek Joo Street, forever.

Before I returned to the States, I paid a visit to the Shining Light Temple in which his ashes are kept. The Kong Seng Cemetery where he had been buried had been cleared for industrial development in 1984. Great-grandfather's grave, together with hundreds of others, had been duly exhumed, and the remains collected by one of my uncles for cremation and final resting in an urn in the Shining Light Temple.

Lighting two joss-sticks to stick in front of Great-grandfather's urn, I felt an urge to talk to him. I would have much preferred a ghost, palpable and real, in the urgency of its brief visiting time, to a cold, silent urn with its cold ashes. I stood awkwardly before the urn, one among hundreds in neat rows, and was not sure what to say, the great-grandson from a world separated from his by a howling, immeasurable gulf. But for one brief moment on a dark night in the old house at 37, Pek Joo Street, we had managed to reach across that gulf.

## *About the Author*

Catherine Lim is internationally recognised as one of the leading figures in the world of Asia fiction. The prolific writer and commentator has penned more than 20 books across various genres—short stories, novels, reflective prose, poems and satirical pieces. Many of her works are studied in local and foreign schools and universities, and have been published in various languages in several countries.

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