

Between
Water
and the
Night Sky

SIMONE LAZAROO



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**In memory of Judith,
and for anyone trying to bring light and
meaning to incomprehensible darkness.**

Simone Lazaroo was born in Singapore and migrated to Australia as a child. She wrote novels and short stories before completing her PhD in 2004 and teaching creative writing for several years at Murdoch University, where she is now an honorary research fellow. She mentors emerging writers and is in a Spanish-funded research group, writing about aspects of migrant experience, cosmopolitanism and cross-culturality.

Her five previous novels, and short stories, have been published in Australia, Spain, England, USA, Portugal and Cuba. Several of her novels have won or been shortlisted for Australian and international awards. Her novel *The Australian Fiancé* is optioned for film and she is currently writing two new works, one set in a coastal community in Western Australia and the other in Mediterranean Europe. She is a regular ocean swimmer, walker and unofficial rubbish collector at her local beach near Fremantle, Western Australia.

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*My mother told me photography means 'writing with light'.
That my father's lost ephemeris divided twilight precisely into
three phases. So I wonder, as the sun sets over the Indian
Ocean, when do the golden minutes pass into the blue?*

The Dark Room

NIGHT SHIFTING

MY mother's hand is still warm in mine. In the silence after she turns to face the darkness and exhales one last time, her eyes stay open but do not blink. I'm surprised by the low howl of some lost creature rising from me.

Past, present and future collapse. Tenses collide. She was my mother? She is my mother? She will always be my mother?

My only mother.

The nurse hurries in. She must've heard my cry. She checks for my mother's pulse, looks at the time. 4.05 a.m. Nothing but darkness outside.

'She's gone, love,' the nurse says apologetically, retreating to the doorway with her observation file. Keeping a respectful distance.

My mother's hand cools only slightly as the moments pass. I don't let go of it. Then I notice her chest rising and falling, almost imperceptibly.

'She's still ... breathing!' On the threshold of hope once more.

The nurse glances at her, steps forward to check my mother's pale wrist again, shakes her head sympathetically. 'It's not uncommon to imagine that. She's definitely gone. Sorry.' The nurse pats my shoulder, sidles through the door. Clears away a couple of empty bottles from last night's happy hour.

My mother's foundations were never strong, but she kept a roof over our heads for as long as she could. Now her place in time is collapsing, her life a house of unlucky cards; nothing beyond but darkness and a place we've never been together or seen. Now it seems only this cold fall will last forever. Shivering, I'm glad I changed her into her warm nightdress and socks before the ward lights were dimmed all those hours ago.

Her eyes gazing towards the dark sky look even larger than they were before, but what's almost unbearable is their expression of both resolve and fear, like that of some small nocturnal creature searching for scarce food in an immense night. Faith was always such a struggle for her: faith in any god, in other people, but most of all, in herself. She had her reasons for this, reasons that were too traumatic to reveal to anyone else. Except me, in her final years, when some memories weighed too heavily on her. Too much for an old woman to carry alone. I helped carry them, carry them still.

Outside, the sun dipped into the river and the crickets sang the night in. That was how my mother had begun telling me about her life. But near the end, sometimes blood came

from her mouth instead of words. The stains on her shawl and pillowslip, like the imprint of a rose pressed too hard.

How long had I been in that peculiar state of shock called grief? Hours? Days? Months? Ever since her diagnosis. As I'm wishing that I'd thought to take one last photo of her before she died, the night-shift nurse returns with another nurse and clears her throat.

'Do you have a funeral company in mind?'

'No.' Not ready. Never will be. I wanted my mother to live forever.

'We'll need to contact one soon. There's nowhere to ... keep her here. We'll phone one for you. Any preferences?'

'She wanted cremation.'

'Sure. An all-woman team? Eco-friendly?'

'She'd like both. But not the ones who wear the silly hats. She'd want it simple and inexpensive.'

'Sure. Why don't you go and have a cup of tea while we wash her?' the nurse suggests. It sounds almost like our past week's morning schedule here. But it's clear the bigger plan for my mother was wrong all along. The doctors told us her disease would progress quite slowly, over months, at least until the end, but it's gone too fast all the way. Death has not waited long enough.

I walk down the palliative ward corridor. In the rooms either side, those alive are still sleeping under white cotton blankets, cocooned against the worst. Outside the window of the visitors' room, the first birds are calling too early before

the first light; the first rain of autumn is falling too soon. The teabag makes the water from the urn smell like old vase water, the room looks desolate, despite so many flowers. All those bouquets given and abandoned by the loved ones of the dead.

The nurse calls me back. They've changed my mother into her thin white summer nightdress, laid her on her back with her arms by her sides and firmly rolled a white towel under her chin. Her nightdress's Bon Nuit label is just visible at her thin neck. Her expression and position are fixed, her skin paler. I cover her shoulders with the faded magenta silk shawl from Singapore's Little India all those decades ago when my father's love for her was strong; I take her hand. As if this will help me hold onto the life that's already left her.

The nurse pauses at the door again, offers me some transparent blue plastic bags labelled:

PATIENT'S NAME. PATIENT'S ADDRESS.

As if my mother still had another life and place to go besides death.

'Take whatever of hers you wish to keep. We'll ... manage the rest.'

The nurse leaves me to do the leaving by myself. Hospitals' hospitality only stretches so far; another hard lesson I've learned since she was first diagnosed. They always need more beds, especially on this ward.

Pack into my mother's small shabby Great Wall suitcase her velvet slippers, dressing-gown and messages from all

the people who loved her but couldn't make it across vast distances or misunderstandings to visit. Lift the silk shawl from her shoulders. Because she's worn it most winters since we migrated across the Indian Ocean to this cooler climate and the thought of it turning to ashes with her is unbearable. Because nothing can stop her body growing cold now. And because I still can't let go of her completely, though I've been rehearsing for years. Hold her hand and kiss her forehead beneath her wispy silver hair one last time, her belongings too light in my other hand.

It was like this on my first day of school: case in one hand, my other hand refusing to let hers go when the bell rang. Only a few months later, she tried to leave home, weeping, lugging a suitcase into the early morning. I'd run after her.

'Not far to go,' she said when I persuaded her to return home. Mother, how many times I tried to coax you back across the frightening distance of your sadness, back to your precarious home.

But not this time. I hope she saw more than darkness in her final moments. I wonder fleetingly if she would want a paper True Body from the funeral accessory makers in Singapore, to carry her from death to somewhere more eternal. But is there anything more eternal than death?

Now the pale sun rises between clouds dimmed by drizzle; the river carries the first glimmers of a new day towards the ocean. Infinity. I wish she could've seen that view as she waited to die.

Her nocturnal eyes, set on a future she will not live, remain open. Her cheek is cold when I kiss her one last time. The kitchen staff downstairs start clanging kettles and saucepans, making breakfast. The nurses are handing over. The night shift is ending. The day-shift nurse is at the door.

Time to leave my mother. To begin the longest shift. My feet step through the palliative ward doorways towards the hospital exit, marking the beginning of life without her. But the thresholds between my past, present and future seem to have vanished altogether. Only a glimpse of the Indian Ocean carrying the night over the horizon and beyond. Ocean without end. She was, she is, she will always be my mother. How far I would go to bring her back.