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THERE IS NO  
ESCAPING  
FROM OURSELVES  
THE HUMAN  
DILEMMA  
IS AS IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN  
AND WE SOLVE  
NOTHING  
FUNDAMENTAL  
BY CELEBRATING  
OURSELVES  
IN TECHNOLOGICAL  
GLORY.

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# Forgotten Memories: Stephanie Ye's Seascrapers

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## ABSTRACT

The paper aims to perform a close reading of Singaporean short story author Stephanie Ye. Using formalism as the core discipline, the researcher aims to develop and explain the concepts of time and memory presented by the author. In addition, a critique of the writing style and syntax in relation to the themes of the story will be tackled as well.

**Key Words:** Literature, Singaporean Literature, Asian Literature, Stephanie Ye

## PRESENTATION

Built on disjointed memories, Stephanie Ye's *Seascrapers* contains reflections on romance that has passed and how it can be rekindled albeit under painful circumstances.

Stephanie Ye is a Singaporean writer whose works have been featured in literary journals such as the *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Mascara Literary Review*, and *Sci-Fi Short Story Magazine*. Her first solo publication, *The Billion Shop* was released in 2012 and contained four connected short stories. She was also the editor of 2013 anthology of cat-themed short stories called *From the Belly of the Cat*. Having collected her Masters in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia last 2014, she is now an honorary fellow in writing at University of Iowa and is currently working as a journalist (<http://stephanieye.com/fact/>).

*Seascrapers* was inspired by the community outreach performed by writers who were participating in the 2011 Singapore Writer's Festival. Eight writers were invited to visit a hospice and an old-age home so that they may discover dormant stories within older citizens. Stephanie Ye talked with Madam Wong – a worker from the HCA Hospice and discussed her personal experiences regarding notions of love and relationships; this was then in turn utilized by Ye in her writing of the short story (<http://popspoken.com/the-arts/2011/10/5-rad-things-we-previewed-from-the-upcoming-singapore-writers-festival>). Exploring the possibility of rekindling a relationship that has run its course, *Seascrapers* tells the story of an unnamed newly-divorced couple and how certain conditions will force the two to re-evaluate where they stand. The story begins with a vivid look into the thoughts of the woman, who wonders at what her husband must be dreaming about as he sleeps, as she thinks of the possibility of another world being discovered within him – but she pauses and notes that being that he is cursed with a sickness that forces him to forget, what kind of world can he possibly create with his broken memories? Ye's use of time

qualifiers such as *Today*, *Yesterday*, *Two Months Ago* and others makes the viewer see, through a juxtaposition of conditions, how the man succumbs to his sickness and how the woman deals with these events. In the story, the man's current girlfriend approaches the woman to tell her that from forgetting the most mundane things he has reached the penultimate: he has forgotten about her – in turn she asks a favour from the woman, that if she would agree, she could be the one to take care of him. She notes growing instances wherein the man would ask for the woman, still thinking that they were together. The girlfriend states: "Can you imagine being in love with someone who doesn't remember you and never will?" The woman reluctantly agrees but wonders when he'll forget her too. The author manages to convey the busy nature of thoughts that both the women are having for the sentences and dialogue flowing into each other. The story loosely follows the style of *stream of consciousness*, told from the perspective of the woman – and appropriately so since her thoughts and the way they are presented heightens the emotions elicited from the reader. As the man and the woman reunite, the story now consistently shifts from present to past, from *Today* to *Yesterday*. The *Today* memories being recounted by the woman contain more sombre and solemn descriptions combined with existentialist reflections, like such:

What fools humans are, she thinks, to believe that myth of the immutable soul, when so much of one's sense of self is determined by one's corporeal circumstances: gender, skin colour, geographic location. Genetics, beauty. Wealth and health. The proportions of one's face, the sturdiness of one's limbs. When a fiery spirit can be extinguished by the breaking of the body; when identity can be destroyed with the mutation of a few cells in that grey hunk of flesh called the brain. (Ye)

The memories of *Yesterday* on the other hand, communicate a detailed description of the man's rituals and how he copes with the disease and his crippled memory. The man seems to be methodically planning for something and being his dutiful guardian; the woman quietly supports her while reminiscing on their past and how they are now. The stark difference in the overall tone of *Today* and *Yesterday* are skilfully emphasized by Ye, with *Yesterday* revolving more around the activities of the man and *Today* being focused on what the woman is thinking. This dichotomy can be seen here:

*Today*

He opens his eyes and looks up at her. His pupils constrict swiftly as he scrambles to sit up – or is it to back away? She hears herself say his name. He stops moving, but every muscle in his face, his arms, is tense. She says, You've been sick. You can't remember. Everything's all right. She realises she's babbling, so she tells herself to shut up. (Ye)

[...]

*Yesterday*

Some days were busy with errands: Groceries, taking him to the barber's, the doctor's. Or, if he felt up to it, they would go out on the town, to a museum or the park or to the shops, even to concerts a few times. She handled the schedules, and the bills. They sometimes did the same thing days in a row if she felt like it, since of course he never remembered what they had already done. These days were pleasant: she had forgotten how similar their aesthetic sensibilities were. (Ye)

The quiet and isolating tone assumed by *Today* can be justified by pointing a significant event that can be found not in one of the *Yesterday* testimonials but a memory classified under a different time qualifier. The author introduces this new qualifier as *47 Days Ago* and supplants an important event. Fond of planning, the man now informs the woman

how he would like to die – the woman responds sarcastically that it be a method wherein she wouldn't have to clean up. The man then introduces the best possible way he thinks he can escape the disease, drowning. Once again, being as supportive as she can be – the woman asks him when he would like to do it. He responds by telling her: "Let's go with the day I forget you." Fast forward to the last *Today*, and the man and the woman are heading to a beach where the man decides to end his life.

The concept of memories seem to be a prevailing concept in the story, a more direct understanding would be the woman reaching into her own in order to preserve his ex-husband's. However what is most interesting is how the author communicates this to the reader. Using differing time periods that contain different memories, the reader is made to jump back and forth and compare these different events and how they all complete each other. The story is consistently told from the perspective of the woman, although detached from her in a sense that she is not the one speaking in the story, the thoughts that are being expressed are hers. An interesting technique used by Stephanie Ye is not highlighting dialogues and writing the entire story as how one would converse or even think. As mentioned earlier, the style seems to be consistent with the *stream of consciousness* movement – this emphasizes the woman's thoughts even more and injects the reader more into the emotions being described by the character.

Throughout the story, the woman seems to be a more reserved and quiet person who prefers to reflect and evaluate than express her feelings. This is most evident in a conversation between her and the man as he suggests that ending his life might be better for the both of them – the woman responds coolly, her words and thoughts are calm and even sarcastic as she suggests ways for him to kill himself, as we see here:

It was on one of their stay-in days that he'd laid out his plan. He was in his mid-30s that day, sarcastic and a bit brutal. It's for your own good, he said. Do you still want to be taking care of me when I'm drooling on my pillow and pooping in my bed? By that point, I doubt I'll remember your name to thank you.

She answered coolly, trying to match his tone: And how do you propose to do it? Pills? Slitting your wrists? Hanging? Jumping from a window? Driving off a cliff? It would be great if it were a method where I didn't have to clean up afterwards. (Ye)

However as she spends more and more time pondering their past relationship and how their current one is shaping out to be, as the man begins to weaken and become more and more vulnerable, she starts to back away from his show of affection. Always careful to draw the line and justify to herself that she no longer loves him, this moment reflects another aspect in the woman's personality:

She wonders if he's going to start apologising again, but instead he says, Can I ask you a question.

When she doesn't say no, he continues, Is today the first day?

First day?

First day that I've... forgotten you.

She nods, suddenly afraid of where this is going. I see, he says. He purses his lips. Thank you. He adds, I'm sorry. She consciously holds her breathing steady as he slowly walks towards her. She supposes that if she were still in love with him, she would start crying when he draws her into his arms. Instead, she counts to ten, then asks him if he wants his coffee. (Ye)

By the end of the story, we see her become more vocal and resilient as she accepts the burden of having to witness a man she once loved give in to the disease that in some ironic twist of fate reconciled the estranged couple.

During the back and forth of the *Today* and *Yesterday* testimonials, the woman describes the man's personality as something that changes depending on his 'age' in that moment in time. For example, the man being "shy and earnest" would equal to him being in his 20s, while his 30s would reflect a more "sarcastic and a bit brutal" side. Being that he is stricken with progressive amnesia due to his brain cancer, the man's personality is bound to never be a constant –however, during the last moments of his life he shows the woman a more caring and considerate side.

I'm ready, he says softly. I'm going soon.

I'll go with you. I won't stop you, but I'll be with you. She feels a deep sense of calm settle in her bones. And I'll bring you back.

Thank you, he says. He smiles. She realises that this is the first time he has smiled at her today.

She rests her head on his chest. She can hear his heart, the thrumming of that robust, blithe muscle. It is the beating of a fantastic sea monster ascending from the depths, still innocent of the knowledge that it is the only one of its kind that survives. She thinks of their broken marriage vow, *till death do us part*, and how perversely they were ending up fulfilling it after all.

Is it all right if I kiss you now, he says. (Ye)

It is with the onset of the disease that the characters both experience metanoia, they both change in ways that they did not perhaps expect. The story in itself is not a story of finding love once again, since it is made clear by the woman that she does not love the man anymore – but this does not mean that she holds no fond feelings for him. As for the man, due to his sickness was brought back to the arms of the woman he believed was still his wife, and although the foundation of his return was a lie – his actions and words were enough to inform the reader that the woman holds a special space in his heart as well. Seascrapers in this sense is a study on love, on relationships, and on life. As this line suggests:

There are myriad kisses in a relationship: desperate ones as involuntary as breathing, stolen ones on crowded trains, ceremonial ones at the front door, routine ones as dispassionate as licking an envelope. It takes two to kiss, but does it take two to hold the memory?

The work mentions the title of the work seascrapers as the woman reminisces the night the man proposes to her. As the man recounts the story for the nth time, the woman listens and imagines.

It wasn't a nice beach – it was a city beach, smoky from the barbecue pits being manned by pot-bellied middle-aged men, as their wives sipped spiked lemonade and occasionally shouted at the children who wriggled underfoot, engaged in their own complex negotiations. As for the stars, those ancient fires were obscured by cloud cover and the reflection of the city lights. Only the sea looked anywhere near romantic, swollen at high tide, the waves rippling like the scales of an elusive creature. On the horizon was a string of lights, ships lining up to enter the port some ways down. Solid yet shimmering, they looked from this distance like a fantastic city of their own. He called them seascrapers as they sat on a blanket, their shoes slumped on the sand like toppled Easter Island statues. She sat behind him and rested her cheek on his back. The waters surged upwards, shuddering in their effort to obey the invisible moon; when he turned around and asked her to be his wife, what she felt most of all was a sense of inevitability. (Ye)

Coining the term from the colourful reflections on the water due to the city scape, the author uses the same setting to end the man's life. Much like their relationship which

flourished during the beginning and faded into indifference by the end, here the reader can see how much the characters have evolved throughout the story. They begin a journey together – seeing the seascrapers. They end their journey together – seeing the seascrapers but as changed people.

The structure of the short story also reflects its foundation. With memory as the base, the disjointed narratives that the author uses cleverly mirror the fragmented memories of the man. Although told from the perspective of the woman, the separate testimonials enable the reader to experience the heightening condition of the man as he progresses more and more to unfamiliarity. Another interesting choice made by the author was how the story approached time while at the same time catering to the differing emotions and points in the story. As was noted earlier, by using a dichotomy of perspectives by the author was able to successfully build upon a suspenseful and affecting story.

Stephanie Ye's *Seascrapers* tackles romance – which by today's standards is entirely passé. One might think – is there any other angle that can freshly discuss this daunting area? The story successfully answers this question. By working in reverse and instead utilizing the end of a relationship to begin a relationship, *Seascrapers* goes against the grain by providing grit yet activating human emotion through empathy, sympathy and reflection. Through clever storytelling and a creative use of time and memory, *Seascrapers* is able to make its readers swim in an ocean of lost and found memories.

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