

# Meeting with the Sea

**Melissa De Silva** mulls over what it is to be Eurasian in this evocative short story that takes her back to the Portuguese Settlement in Malacca.



**[Left]** On the shores of the Portuguese Settlement in Malacca, where many of the Portuguese-Eurasian residents used to be fishermen. Photo by Desmond Lui. Courtesy of Melissa De Silva. **[Above]** The writer at about five years of age. Courtesy of Melissa De Silva.

I am nine.

I am in Primary Three, in social studies class at the all-girls Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus. Not all of us are Catholic (we even have some Muslims in the enrolment) and unlike my mother's day when sweet Irish nuns taught classes, none of our teachers are nuns except one who makes me think of a bespectacled cockroach. That day, the social studies lesson promises pleasant disruption because we have to move out of the classroom to the air-conditioned video lab. We also get to choose our seats, and I choose to sit with my three friends (we're the only ones in class who study Malay as a second language): Faranaz Alam, Michelle Joseph and Geraldine Minjoot.

When the chatter and movement across the room finally settles, Ms Pat Lim, a short, chunky woman with a porky sort of face, casts her eye over us.

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"Those four Indian girls sitting together, split up!"

My three friends and I look at one another. Who was she talking to? Faranaz is of Pakistani descent; Geraldine is Eurasian, like me. Only Michelle is Indian.

"I said move!" she snaps.

She clearly means us. We are alarmed. Being nine, and cowed by the authority of a teacher, we break apart and manage to find random seats among the rest of the pupils. I'm not able to articulate the sense of unfairness I feel, like a hot, clenched fist. But during the rest of the lesson, and as I sit brooding on the public bus that afternoon, I can't shake my conviction – what she'd done was wrong. Why shouldn't we have been allowed to sit together? Never mind that she was ignorant only one of us was Indian. Every single one of the rest of our class was Chinese – all thirty of them – and they were sitting all together, weren't they?

I am twenty-five.

I am trying to communicate with the immigration official at the airport in Barcelona. He is speaking in Spanish, and I respond in my newly acquired broken Italian, refusing to lapse into English, because I'm ridiculously determined not

to stick out as even more of a tourist. He is stony-faced when he accepts my red Singaporean passport. Then he flips it open and his eyes glide over my surname. His expression lifts.

"De Silva," he enunciates perfectly. "You are Portuguese?"

"*Il mio nonno.*" My grandfather. Now, that's not exactly true. But I don't know how to say "great-grandfather" in Italian so I can't tell him it was my great-grandfather who was from Goa and he was only part Portuguese. But none of this seems to matter.

"*Muy bueno!*" He beams genuine welcome at me and I experience a strange warm feeling I've never felt at Changi Airport returning home.

I am thirty-five.

I am in a cab on the way to the Eurasian Association at Ceylon Road. The taxi driver eyes me openly in the rear view mirror.

"Miss, you are what *ah?*"

I've moved beyond my teenage belligerence, when I would either not acknowledge they were referring to my race or retort, "Human." I don't even roll my eyes anymore, even in my head. I think I've come a long way.

"Eurasian."

"What is *loo-rayshiu?*"

"People who are mixed. Europe people and Asia people mixed together."

"Aww... like Gurmit Singh issit?" he says, referring to the Singaporean comedian.

"Er... no. Uncle, Gurmit Singh is Chinese and Indian. His surname is 'Singh', so – never mind."

I've never understood why it seems so difficult to understand. No doubt we make up less than one percent of the population, but we've been part of this country since the colonial times, as long as some and longer than others.

We spend the rest of the journey in silence, zooming past skeletons of condos rising from stamp-sized plots of land, regurgitated tarmac and clay from road works and the boarded-up Red House Bakery on East Coast Road, its shophouse face shuttered and mute. This is Singapore. Where you'd be a fool to cling to any place held dear, where the treasures of space and memory being blasted into oblivion is the only certainty in the ferocious race for development. The red-brick National Library where my mother used to take me since I was two, demolished to make way for a yawning traffic tunnel. Block 28 Lorong 6 in the Toa Payoh neighbourhood, where I lived with

my grandparents till I was five, razed to the ground. Thank god the dragon playground in front of the building was spared, out of a government nod at "preservation" and "Singapore icons".

Some minutes later we approach the gates of our destination.

"Okay uncle, you can stop here please."

As the taxi rolls to a halt, the driver cranes his neck to look at the massive three-storey building in the middle of the leafy residential neighbourhood. "What is this place? Your house *ah?*"

"No, this is the Eurasian Association."

"*Har?*"

"For Eurasian people, mixed people, mix European and Asian."

Still not rolling my eyes.

"Oh, united nations *ah?*"

In December that year, I make a trip to Malacca in Malaysia. The Portuguese Settlement (formed in 1926 to help consolidate the Portuguese-Eurasian community) is a coastal hamlet of modest, mostly single-storey houses spanning three lanes on either side of the impressively named d'Albuquerque Road. As I walk along the main road, an old man with sun-creased skin turns his head as he cycles by. A wavy-tressed teenaged girl and two boys chatting

across a gate pause in their conversation, watching me silently as I pass. The stranger in the village. What's even weirder is I'm overcome with a feeling of kinship with these sun-browned, curly-haired people I've never seen before.

In the 1500s, when the Portuguese arrived at the palm and mangrove-fringed coastal town of Malacca, on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, their imperative was to gain control of the lucrative maritime trade passageway between Asia and Europe. As time went on, the union of the Portuguese with the local women resulted in the burnished-skinned children with Iberian features, and a culture that leaned heavily toward the religion, customs and language of the male colonisers. Five hundred years later, this tiny Catholic community, with a robust Latin tendency towards music, dance and enjoying the sweetness of life, still endures in the midst of the Muslim-majority country.

A month earlier in November, I was in Uncle Maurice Pereira's living room in the Portuguese Settlement. The rain was driving down against the slatted wooden shutters. His fisherman's hands, weather worn, were clasped on his lap. My father's cousin was bare-bodied, wearing only white loose cotton pyjama trousers, and



his still-muscular torso made him look like a jujitsu master. He regarded me with eyes of blue traced around dark lenses, the onset of cataracts.

My great-grandfather had been a fisherman in Malacca, the traditional livelihood of this community descended from the seafaring Portuguese. My father had told me how, when he was a boy, he would accompany his mother – who moved to Singapore with his father after World War II to seek a better life – to Malacca during the school holidays. There, he'd learned from his grandfather how to make two foods from the fishermen's catch: *chinchalok*, the relish of shrimp fermented in salt and brandy; and *belachan*, heavily salted, fermented shrimp paste, baked into hard cakes in the sun, excellent stir fried with vegetables and a generous handful of chilli.

As I explained how I'd like to document his work by going out fishing with him, to record it for future generations, his craggy white eyebrows rose.

"You want to write something? About me?"

That Saturday morning in December, it's just past 8.30 am when I set off with Uncle Maurice and his 18-year-old grandson, Jeremy, in his open boat named *Lucy*. His cropped-close white bristles are hidden under a black cap and he's wearing a white polo tee that says "Irish Harrier Pub" on the back.

The water glitters. My notebook and camera are waterproofed in plastic and ready to go. At my feet at the bottom of the boat is a one-day-use orange lifejacket, still in its clear wrap, and the fishing nets. The

planks we sit on are worn smooth, bleached by the sun. Even if I run my fingers along the edge of the boards, I don't feel any splinters.

Soon we are speeding through the waves and Maurice is pointing out spots on the shoreline where in the 1950s, they would push their boats through the mud of the mangroves at 5 am, carrying their water for the day in glass bottles ("Those days no one had a fridge").

We approach a boat with a flapping orange and yellow flag, carrying two Eurasian fishermen, a father and paunchy son, and a Malay boatman. A white buoy attached to a stick with a red flag bobbing nearby indicates where their net is.

"They are fishing for pomfret," says Maurice.

He asks them how it's going. There's no need to reply. As they draw up the net, it sparkles like fairy candyfloss, then we see they've only caught three tiny fish, each smaller than a child's palm. The son tosses a plastic bag caught in the net back into the sea.

Maurice's voice takes on a hard edge. "All the fish dying, all the construction, the reclamation."

We are soon scudding past a small island, called Pulau Jawa, just off Malacca's coast. "In the '60s, we would go camping there, to fish, eat sardines and gather seaweed to make jelly," Maurice tells me, his sea-otter face crinkled with glee.

Pulau Jawa was where the Portuguese naval general Afonso d'Albuquerque first dropped anchor on 1 July 1511, as he led a fleet of 18 ships, with 900 Portuguese men and 300 Goan-Indians, sailing in on his carrack, the *Flor de la Mar*.

## EURASIANS: MORE THAN JUST HALF-HALF

A Eurasian is someone who is of Asian and European lineage. Many people assume Eurasians are people with one Asian parent and one European or Caucasian parent. Children of such partnerships are certainly technically Eurasian, but a Eurasian isn't exclusively defined as a person with this combination of parentage. In the context of Singapore and Southeast Asia, Eurasians are long-established communities of people with mixed Asian and European ancestry and a history that dates back to the 16th century.

Many Eurasians in Singapore, as with the rest of Asia, are a product of European colonialism. The first European colonials in Asia were the Portuguese, who established themselves in Malacca, Macau, Goa and Timor in the 16th century. Other European colonisers followed, including the Dutch in Malacca, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, the Spanish in the Philippines, the French in Indochina, and the British in India, Burma, Malaya and Hong Kong.

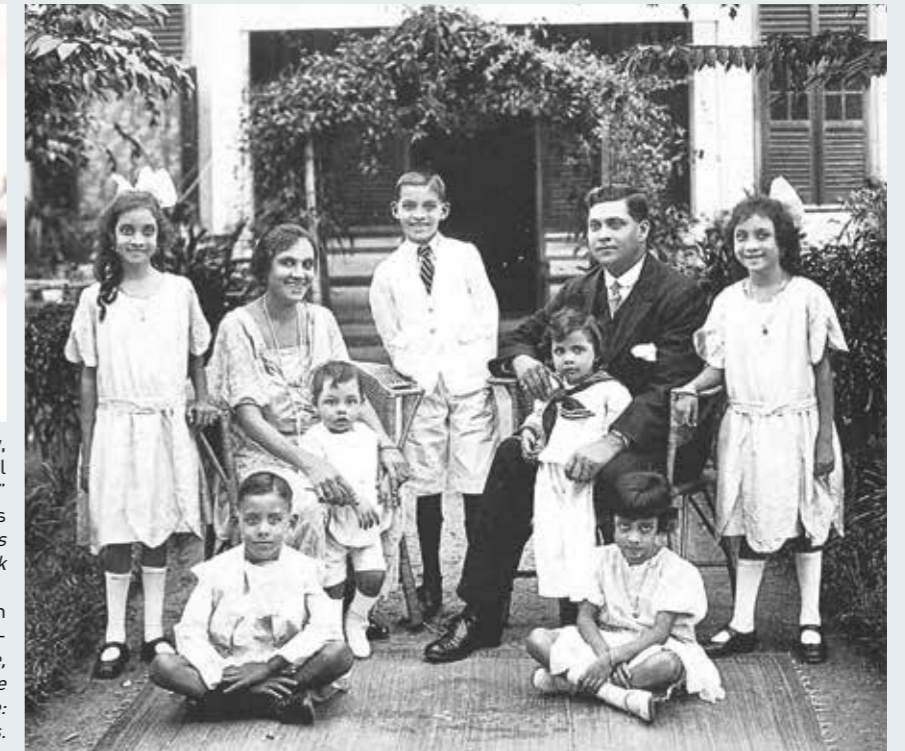
These colonies in turn attracted European traders seeking their fortunes. Unions – both illicit as well as legal – between European men and local Asian women eventually resulted. From these unions came Eurasian offspring such as the French Eurasians of Indochina, the Mestizos in the Philippines, the Indo in Indonesia, the Macanese in Macau, the Anglo-Indian and Anglo-Burmese Eurasians in the Indian subcontinent and Burma respectively, and in Sri Lanka, the Dutch Burgher people.

Similarly, many Eurasians in Singapore trace their mixed European and Asian ancestry from many generations past. Portuguese ancestry is a common thread among many Singaporean Eurasians because the Portuguese were the first European colonisers in Asia (having arrived in India in 1498, and then subsequently extending their dominion to Malacca in 1511). Due to the Dutch presence in Asia – who made their first Asian foray into the Maluku islands in Indonesia in 1605 – many Singaporean Eurasians also claim Dutch heritage. Other Eurasians in Singapore trace various European lineages, including German, French and British.

Over time, these diverse Eurasians came together to form their own distinctive community. Their common experience of having both European and Asian



(Above) Eurasian cuisine is a blend of Indian, Malay, Chinese and European culinary traditions. Devil curry – also spelt as "debal" which means "leftovers" in Kristang – is usually cooked for special occasions and best eaten with a side of crusty bread. All rights reserved, Gomes, M. (2001). *The Eurasian Cookbook* (p. 68). Singapore: Horizon Books.



(Right) William Jansen, a Eurasian, and his family in this photograph taken at the Kampong Java government quarters in 1923. All rights reserved, Blake, M. L., & Ebert-Oehlers, A. (Eds.). (1992). *Singapore Eurasians: Memories and Hopes* (p. 64). Singapore: Eurasian Association, Singapore, and Times Editions.

ancestry, their unique position of straddling two cultures while ostensibly belonging to neither, was an important factor in prompting them to band together as a cohesive group, one that was neither Asian nor European. In 1883, a group of like-minded Eurasians formed the Singapore Recreation Club exclusively for Eurasians. This was a reaction to the barring of Eurasians and Asians from the European-only Singapore Cricket Club that was formed in 1852.

Historically in Singapore, Eurasians married other Eurasians, contributing to the further mingling of European and Asian lines of heritage within the small, tight-knit community. The typical social circle of a Eurasian during the British colonial times and in the early years after Singapore's independence included other Eurasians. They were neighbours or family acquaintances; they attended the same church (St Joseph's Church on Victoria Street for many Eurasian Catholics) and went to the same Christian mission schools, especially those established by the La Salle Brothers and the Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus. Their active social life included tea dances and New Year's Eve balls, and games such as rugby, hockey and cricket.

The Eurasians were united by their common Christian faith, their fluency in English and their cultural habits, which included both Asian and European influences. Eurasian cuisine for instance draws inspiration from Indian, Malay, Chinese and

European culinary traditions and offers unique dishes such as devil curry – also spelt as "debal", meaning "leftovers" in Kristang, a creole language that is traced to the Eurasian community in Portuguese Malacca – beef vindaloo, oxtail stew, salt fish pickle and desserts like sugree cake and brueder cake.

Throughout Singapore's history, the number of Eurasians has remained low. In the 19th century, the Eurasian population never exceeded more than 2.5 percent of the population. In 1871 for instance, at 2.2 percent of the population, Eurasians numbered 2,164 people. In 1891, they numbered 3,589 people at 2 percent of the population. The Eurasian population shrank further between 1965 and 1980, when many of them emigrated to other Commonwealth countries such as Australia, the UK and Canada for various reasons. A *Straits Times* report from 22 February 2006 put the number of émigré Eurasians during this period at around 25,000. According to the 2010 census, Eurasians comprised just 0.4 percent of the population; only 15,581 people classified themselves as Eurasian in an island with over 5 million people.

Another factor which contributes to the obscurity of this ethnic group is that unlike the Indians, Malays and Chinese, who have their own category under Singapore's multicultural policy (known as CMIO, which stands for "Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others"), Eurasians are classified under the

category "Others". In past decades, this category used to refer predominantly to the Eurasians. In recent times, however, the "Others" category has expanded to include new citizens who do not fit into the categories of Indian, Malay or Chinese, such as Filipinos, Caucasians, Africans and Japanese.

Eurasians now find themselves in the same group as citizens who are not perceived as Singaporean from birth, a cause of much frustration and discontent as fellow Singaporeans question if they are indeed Singaporean. In addition, many Eurasians have married out of their race, resulting in a new generation of children who may or may not identify with the Eurasian heritage and culture. These factors in recent years have bred further complex issues of identity for the Eurasian community in Singapore, a people who have had a fractured cultural identity since their inception in colonial times.

## References

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Maurice Pereira (left) and his grandson Jeremy, in his fishing boat on the seas around the Portuguese Settlement in Malacca. Photo by Desmond Lui. Courtesy of Melissa De Silva.





Uncle Maurice points to undulations of pale grey mounds in the distance on the water. His forearms are compact and sleek with muscle, lined with protruding veins. "See what happened," his eyes rest on the coastline of developments, "to our sea".

Sand barges lie like alien spacecraft beside them and the air is filled with metallic hissing sounds. These piles of sand are the nascent artificial islands of Melaka Gateway, a project with ambitions to be the largest cluster of synthetic islands in Southeast Asia. The plan for the 246-hectare area is to hold entertainment resorts, theme parks and "man-made eco-islands".

"We fishermen don't cry *ah? Habis, habis lah,*" he says in Malay. When it's gone, it's gone.

As I look, I think of my great-grandfather, the fisherman, and imagine the times he'd shared with my own father, passing on traditions that had survived for over five centuries. And now, just three generations later, the thread of all this knowledge and richness would be snapped. My retired father had been trained as a mechanic. As for myself, former women's magazine journalist and urban princess, I'm hardly the material of a maritime professional.

A half hour later, we are having engine trouble. Maurice fiddles with the outboard motor but it doesn't revive. Smiley Jeremy, with blindingly white, straight teeth and an undercut with attitude, picks up the oar and rows. Without the low roar of the engine, the peace is velvet. The only sounds are the lapping of the sea against the boat and the swish of waves against the sun-bleached wood of the oar.

As we make our way slowly back to shore, Jeremy tells me he works for a local film production house called Marco Polo and has just completed a job working on a film set in Mongolia, filmed in a studio in Johor Bahru. His job was to look after the animals on the set. There were three pigs, two goats, a puppy and a lamb. When two of the pigs got into a scuffle, a piece of one pig's ear flew off. Jeremy saved it.

"It's brown now," he says, sounding like a proud father. "Soon I think it will be black."

"Does it smell?" I ask.

He nods, dazzling me with a smile. "Yes."

Finally, we make it to a ramshackle dock and Maurice trades boats with another fisherman. On the second leg of the trip, as we pass mangroves near Kampung Batang Pasir, the trees closer to the water's edge toppled like fallen soldiers, Maurice tells me the mangroves used to be alive with wild boars, monkeys and birds. This is



where the fishermen would catch *siput*, sea snails, then cook them with slices of unripe papaya, small prawns and *santan*, coconut milk.

Here, the ocean is a translucent mud tint, like watery tea stirred with milk, with a greenish-blue rim along the horizon. Flakes of sun dance on the water and I'm gripped by the urge to swim, to glide through the cool. I lean over the boat's edge and trail my fingers through the waves, letting the water release in a delicious crest.

"We're coming to the place for fishing," announces Maurice some time later, when the mangroves have become specks in the distance. I rummage in my bag and unwrap my camera from its plastic covering.

"Boy, where are the nets?" he asks Jeremy.

Jeremy stares at the floor of the boat as if encountering virgin terrain. He has the look of a boy who has misplaced the nets. There are the lifejacket, rope and a plastic container with money, sunglasses, a penknife and Maurice's mobile phone in it. They'd forgotten to load the nets when we swapped boats.

"If we go back one hour to get the net and come back, it will be too late for fishing already," Maurice explains.

My heart flops. There was only today. Tomorrow he'd be off to the hospital to have his cataracts removed, and he didn't know if or when he'd be fishing again.

I manage to nod. Maurice has been kind, hospitable and his company an absolute delight. I don't want him to feel badly.

"Never mind Uncle. It's okay. I got to see the sea. We can go back."

He cuts the engine. "No hurry. We drift for a while. We relax."

It was a clear distinction of values: manic urban efficiency versus sea village chill. I feel slightly chastened, not by him but by my own embryonic Latin spirit. "C'mon," it prods me. "Can't you even relax a little and enjoy being out at sea?"

I don't yet know what my Latin spirit looks like. I picture it maybe doing the flamenco, holding maracas, even though this is a culturally muddy, geographically inaccurate rendition. Is it a woman? Well, it looks olive-skinned, and seems to be wearing a red dress. But this just might be the subconscious influence of the Whatsapp emoticon of a woman in a red dress holding maracas I sometimes use.

Maurice points out a boat with a roof. He tells me how before, when they did night fishing, they would sleep in a boat like that. "No mosquitoes!" He slaps his knee as if in triumph. "If you get hungry, cook Maggie Mee, drink coffee. So nice!" His eyes shine. The man has a lifetime of happiness bottled inside him, I think, enough to last the rest of his time on earth.

As my mind flashes to my previous career of chronically overstressed cubicle rat and the illness that it finally produced, perhaps it's naive romanticising, but I feel a deep tug of yearning for this hard yet idyllic life, and an ache for everything that's passed and will be lost forever.

Later, as the boat chugs slowly back to shore, I think about how I'd travelled all the way here to document one of the last Portu-

guese-Eurasian fishermen in Malacca, and our traditional livelihood. It seems almost funny it didn't happen. Almost. Maurice stirs me from my reverie with a gesture. He jerks his chin toward Jeremy, sitting at the bow. The massive construction for a hotel by the settlement's jetty forms a backdrop for his grandson's figure.

Maurice's tone is a wash of sadness over weary anger. "Jeremy cannot be in this line already," he says, meaning fishing. "The sea is dead."

His last words are muffled as the dull drone of a generator fills the air.

The next morning, on Sunday, I walk to the settlement's Chapel of Our Lady of

the Immaculate Conception for Mass at 7.30 am. The place is not jam-packed like I expected but about 75 percent full. After I'm seated, I see the pew I've chosen has no kneeler. The polished ceramic tile floor looks practically spotless, far cleaner than the church floors in Singapore, where you can often spot stray hairs or dust bunnies. I decide to stay. Five minutes later though, the sun inching across the grid rectangle of window facing the pew is blinding.

I move to the adjacent pew. A dusky man with steel-rimmed spectacles is seated at the end, his head bent. I tap him on the shoulder and he makes way for me. Two minutes before the Mass starts, a short man with honeyed highlights smiles his way into our pew and takes a seat on my right. In Singapore, I can go weeks without seeing any other Eurasian except my own family. Here, I'm sandwiched between two Eurasian men, neither of whom are my relatives. This unprecedented scenario practically qualifies as being on a reality dating show.

During the Mass, the children are not heard, unlike the constant fidgeting, murmuring and some outright conversations between parents and their kids during services in Singapore. At one point, while we are standing, the boy of about six in the pew in front of me wiggles from his grandmother's grasp and scampers to sit and hug her from behind, burying his head in the small of her back. She takes his wrist and guides him gently to stand beside her. At no point during the Mass did I see anyone look at their mobile phones. This I like. This I like very much.

At intervals during the service, my eyes drift to the window. The early morning light bathes the brick wall beyond in a



(Top) Religious festivals are part of life in the predominantly Catholic Eurasian community of Malacca's Portuguese Settlement. Pictured here is the celebration of Festa San Pedro or Saint Peter's Festival. Saint Peter is the patron saint of fishermen. Some men of the community carry a statue of the saint to the shore to bless the fishing boats. Photo by Desmond Lui. Courtesy of Melissa De Silva.

(Above) The faithful gather for Mass at the Chapel of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in the Portuguese Settlement. Photo by Desmond Lui. Courtesy of Melissa De Silva.

gold glaze and casts the wrought iron lamp outside into silhouette. The lamp looks like those I've seen in photos of Lisbon's streets. I've always wanted to visit Portugal, to see the place of my ancient ancestors, but now, perhaps there's no need. I realise why I feel so strangely comfortable in Malacca. I've found a place I can claim as my own.

After Mass I take a two-minute walk down to the beach. The sun is watery on the blue and open boats with peeling paint bob against the charcoal rocks. In the distance is a *kelong* structure, picturesque, made of long sticks. Three mudskippers the length of my index finger hop among the ropes mooring the boats.

As I move closer to the jetty, the air is filled with the metallic whine of drills and the clang of machinery. Relentless construction, even on a Sunday. Instead of the unfettered expanse of ocean, now the view from the settlement is blighted by the concrete monstrosity of the upcoming hotel a few hundred metres away, grasping for the sky. In the sea beyond are islands of powdery grey sand. In an alternate universe, they could be beautiful, like the humpbacked mounds of Vietnam's Halong Bay, if you ignore the fact that these are the offshoots of reclamation.

I remember how it felt to be out in the boat yesterday, the lapping of the waves, the caress of the breeze, the sear of heat on skin. When I started out for Malacca just two days ago to document a vital piece of my heritage, I didn't imagine I'd be setting off on a journey to the place where I'd finally feel like I belong. Yet this place too, is having its identity eroded by the relentless claw of development. Is it selfish of me that my joy still outweighs my sadness? What I do know is that this is the only patch in the world where I don't have to explain who I am, or why. There is such relief at being able to walk among people like me, unexplained and understood. The feeling is euphoric.

*Tok, tok, tok.* The sound of hammering infuses the morning. The sun's soft light filters through the green netting shrouding the concrete structure, as the yellow hard hats scurry about their business. I turn my back to it all and start making my way down the beach, the noise of industry growing fainter with each step. ♦

"Meeting with the Sea" appears in Melissa De Silva's debut collection of short stories, *Others is not a Race*, to be published by Math Paper Press in 2017.