

Lesson 3:

“Elegy for a Silent Stalker”

Ow Yeong Wai Kit

After Kay Ryan; for Inuka the polar bear (1990-2018)

SINGAPORE’S LAST POLAR BEAR INUKA WAS PUT DOWN ON WEDNESDAY MORNING (APRIL 25) AFTER A HEALTH CHECK-UP SHOWED THAT THE 27-YEAR-OLD ANIMAL’S AILING HEALTH HAD NOT IMPROVED SIGNIFICANTLY... INUKA’S ENCLOSURE WILL BE REFURBISHED AND MIGHT BE TURNED INTO A SEA LION EXHIBIT.

— STRAITS TIMES, 25 APRIL 2018

Who wouldn’t be a polar bear in the tropics?

A solitary last emperor, an Arctic ambassador

paddling a marionette dance in his own lagoon,

never to be laid adrift on dwindling ice floes

or having to forage for food scraps ebbing soon. 5

His shaggy pelt, his algae-ridden fleece glows

amidst rations of apples and fish. He lumbers,

the scraggly hulk heaving to bear his own weight.

Resting his neck on his hairy paws, he slumbers

in an air-conditioned palace, his jowls sagging 10

on artificial permafrost. He knows the tundra

is an inconceivable dream. He has no need to hunt

for an ursine paramour. Trudging across icebergs

of indifference, he licks his fur. Silently, he stalks

nothing more than his own shadow. 15

“Koel Calls”

Ann Ang

Where do birds go when they die?
Do they rain down buildings in flights of echoes,
in ambulance sirens, or pass like trains?

Does a flower-pecker become a whistling-kettle?

Is this why you hear parroting in lifts,	5
grunt at the bark of an owl, or breath	
holding an evening full of windowed estates	
with house-swifts drawing down blinds	
behind wind chimes, stirred	
by crimson-eyed starlings	10
among berried palms?	

Tell me, have you ever seen a dead bird?	
Are they, like us, mindful when they die?	
Do they sing, as we grieve, incomprehensibly?	
Is flight to them like our faith in ourselves,	15
so mundane that we forget to read	
auguries in sparrowhawks, or wonder	
how a body may fall through the same height	
that lends us a view	
of stairwells, service balconies, water-tanks, hills?	20

Do they, unlike us,	
migrate without assuming differences,	
so that a koel calls before daybreak	
to question a sunrise elsewhere?	
Do we put a name to plumage and whistling-rite,	25
only to undress our ears and eyes?	
Do we live? Can they die?	