

P. Lim Pui Huen, *One-Legged Football and Other Stories*. Penang: Areca Books, 2020. 101pp. ISBN: 978-967-5719-41-7.

Reviewed by Carol Leon

Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

From the outset, it is apparent that *One-Legged Football and Other Stories* authored by Patricia Lim Pui Huen is a labour of love. The book honours the memory of her husband Dato' Dr. Lim Kee Jin, a man who dedicated his life to medicine and was an active member of JARO (Johor Area Rehabilitation Organisation) for many years, serving as its Chairman for forty-six of them. The proceeds of this book go towards the organisation. The eight short stories which constitute this book are preceded by a Foreword by the present Chairman of JARO, a Preface by the author, an Acknowledgements page, an Introduction by Professor Koh Tai Ann, and a section called "Explorations in Wood" which details Dr. Lim's love for sculpturing wood. I enjoyed reading all these different sections because they offer a nice preamble to the stories that follow, giving the reader insights into the inspiration behind these stories and the empathy both Dr. Lim and Pui Huen have for those who are often marginalised, even forgotten.

One-Legged Football and Other Stories contains tales of people with various physical challenges, depicting lives which, though full of problems and limitations, are not without dreams and desires. The first story in the collection, "One-legged Football", is a touching narrative of Dol who has to face the particular hardship of being handicapped and poor. The details of his life portray the vicious cycle of poverty and, indeed, opportunities are so limited for the talented footballer who can deftly manoeuvre a ball with one leg but has to beg for food and shelter. A chance encounter between Dol and Dr. Lim proves momentous for both men. It is fitting that "One-legged Football" is the first story in the collection as it introduces us to the personal story of the author, her husband, the reason they came to Johor and their involvement with JARO. I especially loved the depictions of a small town in the late 1950s: "Imagine a time when there was no traffic congestion on the Causeway and you could park wherever you wanted; that was when my husband and I came to live in Johor Bahru" (20). In detail she describes the government bungalow allocated to them and the sprawling garden surrounding their house, its old *tembusu* trees providing the wood for Dr. Lim's early forays into wood carving. This sense of an old world permeates most of the stories but as Professor Koh aptly puts it, the "finely observed local landscape" in these

stories “is fast retreating” (13) because of rapid urbanisation and economic development. This could also explain why the old-world settings and the genteel pace of life in these stories are very compelling, especially for those of us who once lived in similar small towns.

“The Wind in his Face” is dedicated to the memory of Zulkifli Abdullah, a paraplegic who had severe health issues. Abandoned at birth, Zul later came to work in JARO, and gradually became self-reliant. Sadly, he died of cancer in 1996. Pui Huen creates a moving narrative of how Zul rushes to the aid of a young Chinese man who is involved in a motorbike accident. They start talking, sharing their stories. Jimmy Ong, seeing that Zul moved around on a small wooden platform on wheels, decides to give his damaged bike to Zul. A little repair work on the bike and life changes for Zul who now can move around faster and further afield. His dream to be more mobile comes true: “Jimmy was right. There was nothing like a motorbike...the throbbing of the engine was to taste happiness. ...There was nothing like a motorbike for speed, for the sense of freedom, for the wind on your face” (45-46). The author seems intent on drawing together the lives of the able and that of the differently-abled in her stories. In the interface, feelings of kindness, acceptance, and joy are possible. This is also the case in “Her Beautiful Eyes”. The gardener Samy and his wife Kamala are aghast when their third daughter becomes blind. However, when the two older daughters leave home – one runs away, the other to get married – it is the blind and accomplished Jaya, once openly spurned by her father, who takes care of her aging parents: “We okay. Jaya looking after us” (35).

“Habibah’s Wedding” recounts the true story of a wedding the author attended on a day when the rain fell in torrents. The descriptions of the rain and of Bukit Chagar, once an old neighbourhood in the city, are vividly detailed. It is as if the author wanted to capture this moment in its entirety because she was deeply affected by the whole scene. Habibah, suffering from disability brought on by polio, and her blind husband, both middle-aged, had found each other and their joy outshone the damp weather. Everyone was “determined to enjoy themselves” (64) as they were celebrating the union of two individuals who defied the odds to find companionship and love, especially so late in life: “We have hopes and dreams whoever we are and whatever we are” (67).

The author adopts what I would call a quiet, uncluttered style of writing in this collection. It seems to coincide perfectly with the time and the places and the people she is writing about in these stories. She manages to convey her characters’ lives in a way which does not elicit pity or even sadness. Instead, we understand their hopes and dreams because they stem from the universal human need to have dignity and self-worth.

Areca Books has done a splendid job with *One-Legged Football and Other Stories*. This is a handsome book indeed. Each story in the volume is interspersed with a beautifully-photographed picture of Dr. Lim's wood sculpture which is accompanied by a small write-up about the sculpture. As I mentioned earlier, this book is a well-conceived venture, showcasing the different aspects of the man who inspired this collection and highlighting the noble aims of JARO to empower those who are differently-challenged. But more than that, as the author herself says in the Preface, "I try to show them as people who have the same desires and aspirations as ordinary people" (9). She has successfully done that with these stories.