

EMBODIED IN FICTION

By Akshita Nanda

I am primarily a writer and consumer of long-form text. When I think about the experience of fiction, I am fascinated by the way intangible ideas affect our physical bodies.

Writing or otherwise creating stories is a physical act. Words are scribbled, typed or spoken into air. Human muscle and nerves and sinew weave words into patterns called stories that can elicit laughter, tears and change the behaviour of both creator and recipient.

Stories originate from physical bodies and are received again in physical form; stored and interpreted in books or magazines or oral tradition or the patterns of neurotransmitters and nerve-ends firing in our brains.

Stories are embodied in and around us.

During my virtual residency in Norwich, I explored how we generate, transmit and participate in stories – embody them and consume them.

Attention spans are changing, as are the ways in which people encounter and experience stories.

For me, stories
began as people



Embodied in the
voices and persons
of those who told
me stories

I was born eleven years before cable television became commonplace in middle-income households. I first encountered stories in the human voice, as people read to me or told me bedtime tales. The memory of fables like that of the monkey and the crocodile come wrapped in the feel of blankets and the sensation of listening to the rumble of a voice while nestled in the crook of a grandparental arm.

For most of my life, stories came to me primarily through printed media. An archaeological examination of my bookshelves reveals decades of evolving tastes. A statistical examination of my bookshelves reveals a decade-long deceleration in the pace of acquisition. I still buy physical books but, for reasons of economy and convenience, do most of my reading on a screen.

How else are stories embodied today? A child today might be more familiar with the disembodied human voice coming from a screen. As a writer of fiction and a reading tutor, I do not think this is something to lament. It is something to be noted and considered when I create.

The medium of storytelling and the mode of transmission has changed thanks to technologically sped up communication. What has not changed is that we love stories.



We inhale
stories with our
first breath

And exhale stories
throughout our
lives



Whether short videos, bite-size blocks of text shared on social media or brick-thick printed novels, we hunger to be taken out of ourselves and to have our views on the world revolutionised – or, increasingly, affirmed.

We tell ourselves stories about who we are, individually, as a society, as a community, or as an oppositional entity.

Stories travel between people, between cultures and across seas. Stories travel and change the world.

Carried by winds
and preserved from
time on leaves



stories travel

Until very recently, stories tended to move with the speed of human mobility. Tales travelled through voice and print. People literally spread the word. Travellers took their myths, fabrics, behaviours and ingredients across land and sea, either deliberately or unconsciously influencing those they met.

About two hundred years ago, human engineering outstripped the speed of human conveyance. Stories began flashing through the sky and snaking through the sea. Radio, television and now transcontinental cable networks bring stories to us almost as quickly as the originator composes them.

It seems akin to the old bardic, nomadic traditions in which news-bearers and tale-tellers moved between homes and communities. They brought information about weather and war and matrimonial prospects. They exchanged gossip about everyday politicking and also about the deeds of the unseen supernatural beings that their community believed in.

The method of transmission may have changed but today, more than ever, storytellers embody the stories they tell.

I find problems with this, as readers conflate authors with their fiction. I also see opportunities to expand my storytelling technique through the use of contemporary media.

Stories are becoming shorter and more visual. Beyond the short story, novella and epic novel, we now have more recipients than ever for the WhatsApp forward, the Twitter thread and TikTok reel; the Facebook community and LinkedIn group

This affects how I tell stories.

Too much text? TLDR.

Only visuals? Inaccessible to many unless uploaded with alt text.

Fact or fiction? The boundaries increasingly overlap.

The way stories are told and presented online matters more than ever now.

Readers react differently to different presentations. I tried telling the same story two different ways, using free online software to generate fake social media posts and a fake chat.



Akshita Nanda  @naraitai · Jun 1



I've written two books but haven't read even one in two years
cry



 5

 20

 31



Nanobots4eva @badbot8765489 · Jun 1



Delete your account you suck

 2



 1





Akshita Nanda

Online



TODAY

I'm an author of two books but I haven't read even one in years 😞* cry*

11:43 AM ✓

You suck 11:56 AM

Message to Nanobots4eva can't be delivered

Message to Nanobots4eva can't be delivered

Message to Nanobots4eva can't be delivered



Type a message



Without me setting the context in words, the visuals immediately make it clear which was a public “conversation” and which a private one.

In the Twitter thread, the response to fake me’s statement appears to be that of a troll or bot. To me it exemplifies how online communication through social media has become disembodied. If we don’t see the person behind the post, we may find it harder to visualise them as human.

In the private chat, there is greater evidence that this is an exchange between two humans. Perhaps the response was warranted, context will be provided later.

Visuals are becoming more and more important to the way I formulate text in fiction. My previously published novels, *Nimita’s Place* and *Beauty Queens of Bishan*, were both written and published before the year 2020. I used emojis and hashtags when characters were communicating.

Since then, the ubiquity of reels, or autoplaying slideshows on social media, as well as minute-long videos, has made me rethink why I continue to choose to use text, and how the use of text could be enhanced in my writing.

There is no denying that attention spans have become shorter. Fake me has a few things in common with real me. Most of the fiction I read nowadays is online, or packaged as webtoons, a new comic format popularised by creators in Asia. Unlike traditional comic books or manga, drawn on paper or tablets and laptops with large screens, webtoons optimise pictorial storytelling for the shape of a mobile phone screen.

The predecessor of webtoons is the webnovel; a book doled out chapter by chapter at regular intervals to hungry subscribers. I subscribe to several. The ones I enjoy most are Japanese light novels, which are usually illustrated.

Static visuals have become my favourite new tool for writing fiction. Like many readers, my brain is fatigued by an onslaught of news, information and entertainment delivered in microseconds on multiple channels. Images and the framing of narratives in social media visuals heightens my sense of engagement with long-form text.

For my current works in progress, test readers have enjoyed seeing the text interspersed by cartoons and webtoons. It is also easy to generate animations and videos but then the reader is doubly bound to my sense of time and pacing.

Visual storytelling is an art form and the benchmark is very high for readers familiar with websites such as tapas.io or [webtoons.com](https://www.webtoons.com). I am currently experimenting with the online design platform Canva, which comes with free stock images and design tools, as well as templates for comic creation in the Microsoft Office suite of programmes.

As part of my residency in Norwich, I created a webtoon that summarises some of the themes in my works in progress. The fictional stories I am working on thanks to this residency follow the path of an idea as it jumps from creator to readers, is amplified by entertainment companies and then inspires other new creations. It is a story about the migration of a story and also the humans embodying it.

While working on these stories, I began a new daily habit of walking around the field behind my home.

To me, stories are physical acts. While in my home in Singapore, I was able to meet and converse with writers in Norwich, sharing ideas and generating laughter through an occasionally spotty Internet connection. Our conversations made me want to pace, to physically work through the ideas generated.

I have lived in my current home for more than a decade, but largely ignored the field behind it. I have circumnavigated the field often from the concrete footpath around its edges, but rarely dared to leave the footpath to trudge through muddy tussocks and uneven ground. One of the residency commissions was to envision a walk around Norwich. I could not explore Norwich in person but in the last half of 2022, I did step off the safe footpath and onto the grassy knolls of the field behind my home.

It felt very daring. I knew the field was home to at least eight snakes that had been evicted from our apartment complex after a rainy day. I could feel the mud squelching around my sneakers and soaking through the mesh tips. I was also easily fatigued and often gasped for breath, nine months after a Covid infection.

I began walking the field slowly in order to plot and rephrase my works of fiction. Mostly I pondered quietly. Sometimes I spoke aloud, halting my walk to catch my breath.

Over weeks of gentle walking and occasional stumbles, the field returned my breath and energy to me in the form of its own story.

There is a
field behind
my home



Depending
on who you
are, it is
a dog run





a cricket pitch

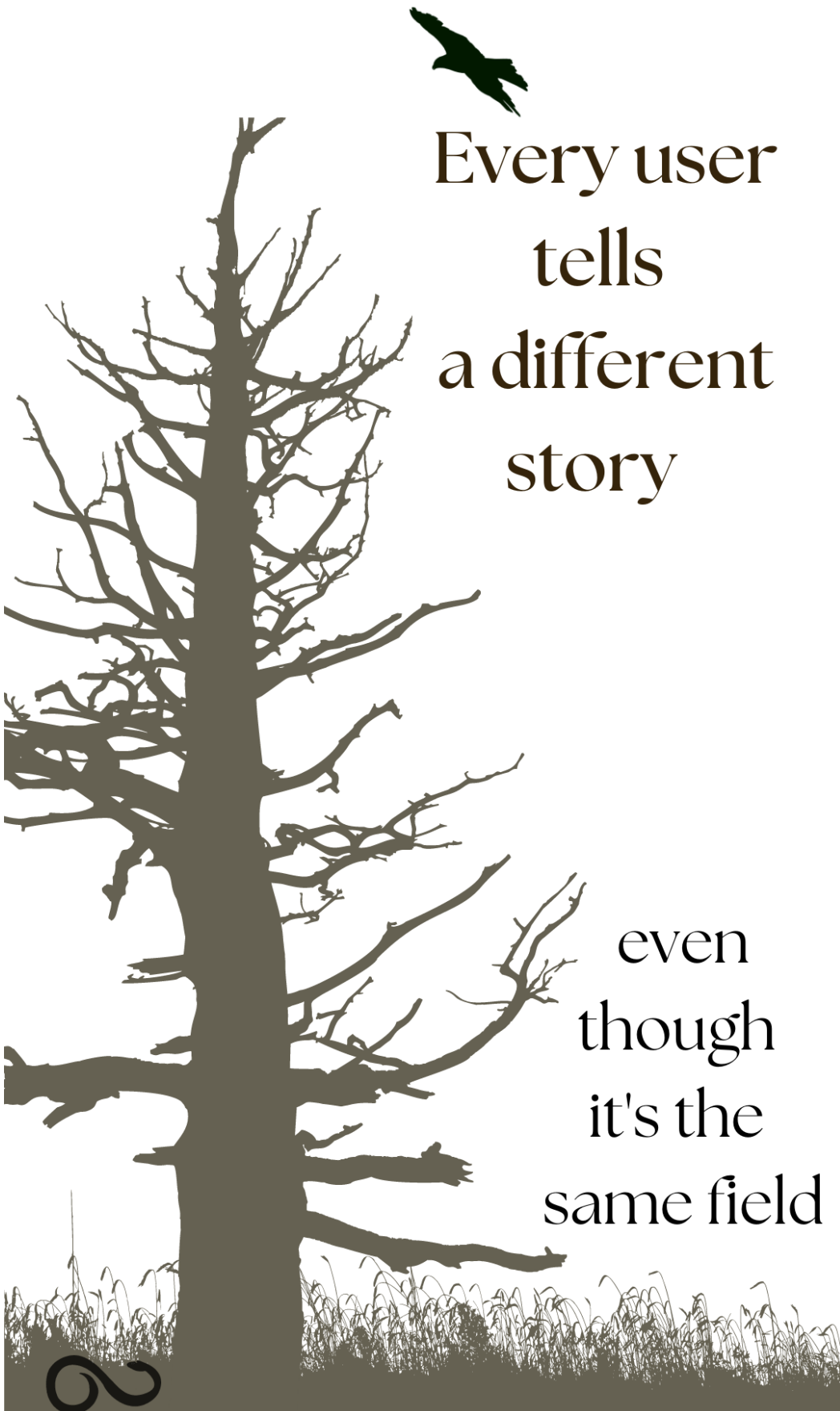


a place of
wonder



and danger





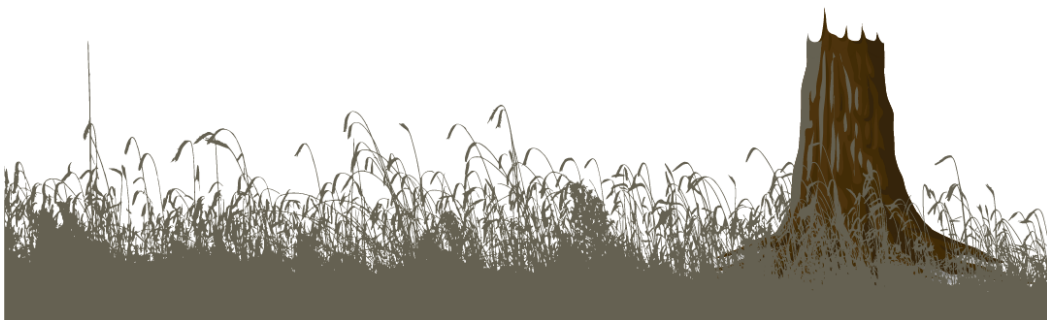
Every user
tells
a different
story

even
though
it's the
same field

2

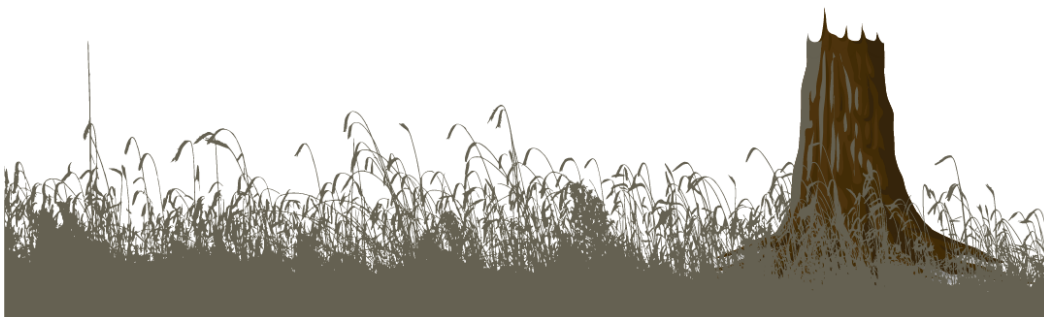
There are also stories
hidden in the field

told by ecology and
topography

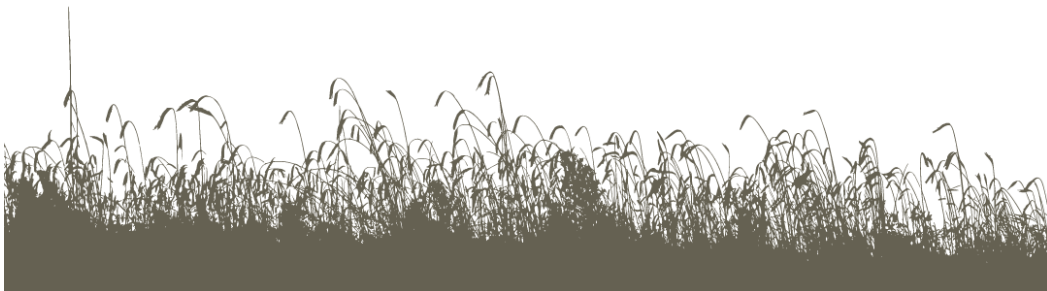


Decaying stumps of
healthy trees
cut in their prime

No one knows why
those trees had to go



Sometimes, while walking
I trip over columns
and mounds
of stone and concrete.
Relics of some unfinished
building.



The newest feature of
the field
arrived overnight



Rills and runs of red sand,
foreign to the native black
clay



This was imported by a
secret cartel of model
car racers for their
ideal race track

They come
out and play
on holidays

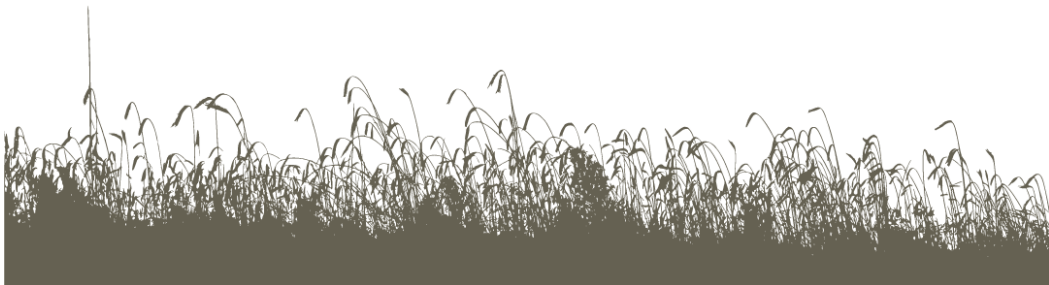


This field is an ongoing
patchwork of stories



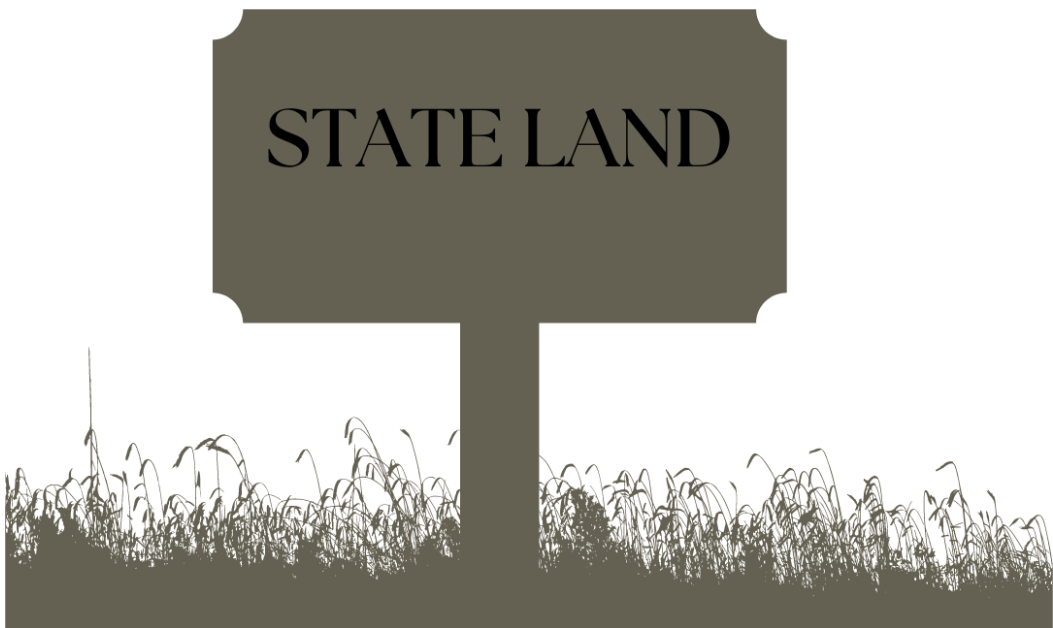
Ten years ago, my
neighbour planted
papaya trees in the field

But just as the first fruits
sprouted, her saplings were
uprooted



A sign sprouted in the field instead



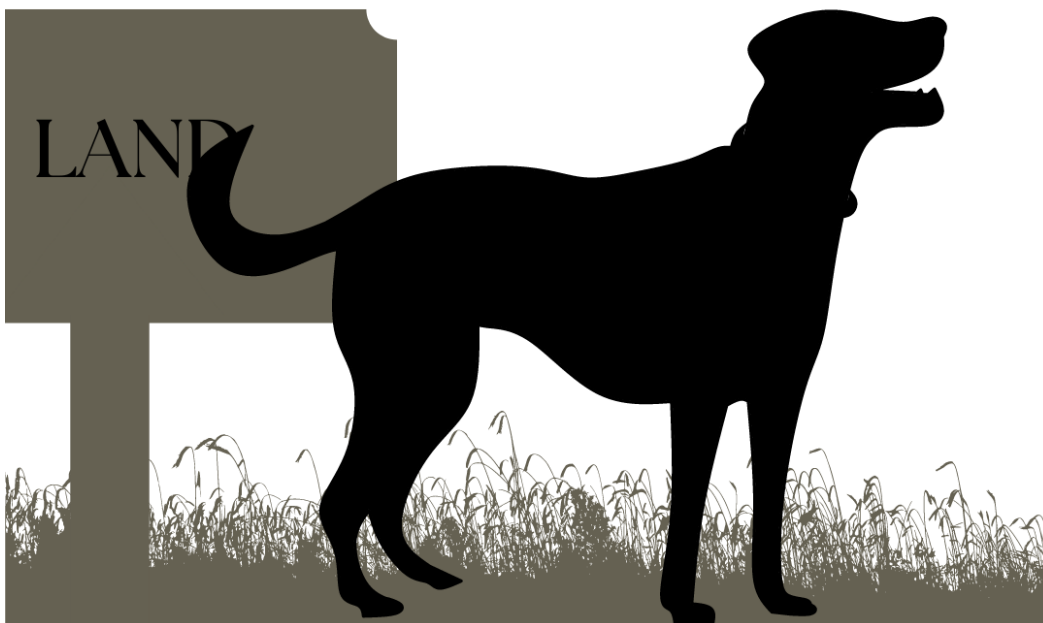


It was meant to
chasten

but the dogs couldn't
read it



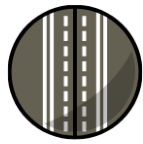
They wanted
their walkies as
usual



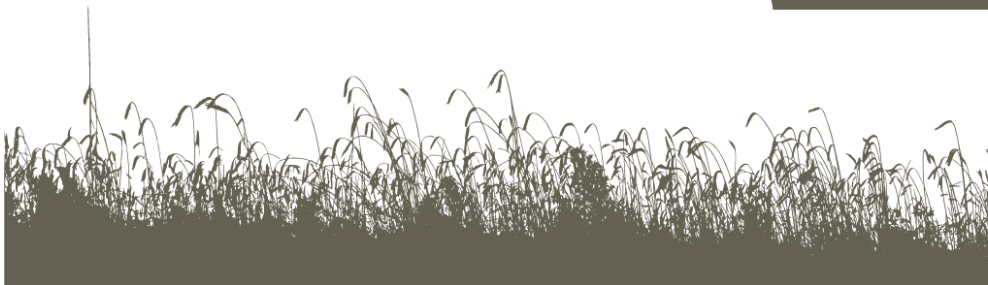
the children didn't care
either



The cricketers became bold too



STATE



It took months but
eventually, another
sign grew in the
same place





For a writer or storyteller, the beginning is the hardest part. Endings are easy, so easy in fact, that I write my beginnings after I have written the end.

“Once upon a time,” is how my English picturebooks begin.

The Hindi fables rumbled into my ear at bedtime start like this: “It used to be said...”

Japanese stories often begin with the words “A long, long time ago...”

Stories begin by displacing the recipient in time and space. The disconnect from the present and the everyday is necessary to enhance belief, even as it locates readers firmly in the fictional world.

Stories occupy an alternate reality. But the boundaries between virtual and real are always fluid.

The field behind my home is a real place. These are real events that I have expressed in visuals designed on Canva.

The field is also a tangible metaphor to me for fiction. As a writer, I remain hopeful that the world can be changed for the better through stories, just as the field that is state land became a public recreational space.

The people who enjoy the field would not meet or mingle under other circumstances. The cricketers are mainly migrant workers, who return to dormitories after their afternoon out.

The people walking their dogs in the field return to private bungalows. About 80 per cent of the Singaporean population lives in public housing, and until recently, only service dogs could be kept in such public housing.

The model car racers come from both public and private homes.

Some of the users skirt each other politely and try not to intrude on each other’s space.

Others call out to warn of a muddy patch, or to return a cricket ball.

As we share the field, physical and metaphorical, new stories arise.

The field remains
ours to define and
enjoy



We just need to
share it with each
other



And with the flock of
escaped chickens
that recently began
running riot at the
farther end



I wonder what will
happen next?



The escaped chickens are real. I do not know where they come from, in which bungalow they are reared and if it is for their eggs or for entertainment.

I do not know why the dogs do not chase the chickens around the field. I am just glad that these two species coexist happily.

I do not know how many chickens there are. I captured four on my cellphone last month and today I spotted a nest. I am aware that one should not count chickens before they are hatched.

You think this is a joke? Perhaps but it is also true. Please receive the story however you like.

This is a story embodied in the field behind my home, but it is also a story embodying the field we all share.

END

Visuals were generated using free software tools and royalty-free images from Canva.com; www.tweetgen.com and zeoob.com