



SINGAPORE
PIONEER
POETS

**THE
BEST
OF
EDWIN
THUMBOO**

Introduction by Lily Rose Tope

“Edwin Thumboo is an artist with a message. For him, the art of poetry lies in the poet’s technique. Each of his poems is a highly textured, grammatically intricate work of art with multiple layers of meaning and metaphor.”

Jonathan Webster, Professor and Head, Department of Chinese, Translation and Linguistics and Director, The Halliday Centre, City University of Hong Kong

“...the ever-renewing Edwin Thumboo, as critically important NOW to safeguarding the truth of his ‘post-colonial’ nation’s creativity against its on-going appropriation by the dominant global order as he was THEN, bearing Singapore through, in the words of Yeats, the pangs of her birth and the uncertainties of her setting forth.”

Thiru Kandiah, Adjunct Professor, Curtin University of Technology, Australia, and formerly Professor of English, University of Peradeniya

“He has almost single-handedly sought and achieved a necessary transformation of the individual into the collective while preserving the particular energy of his stereotypes. Thumboo successfully articulates the need for a continuity whose meaning must be found not only in the personal but the larger purpose of society.”

Ban Kah Choon and Lee Tzu Pheng, Singapore

“Thumboo writes as a committed Singaporean. He is a poet of skill and maturity whose imagination has clearly been fired by the growth and change that have transformed his homeland...”

Yasmine Gooneratne, Emeritus Professor, Department of English, Macquarie University, Australia

“Thumboo’s poems seem simple on the surface but are complex when one pays attention to the depths of the words. The words are a way of planting in the reader’s subconscious serious experiences and questions about what the people should be in the post-colonial, global and cyberspace world.”

Peter Nazareth, Professor of English and Advisor, International Writing Program, University of Iowa

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edwin Thumboo is Emeritus Professor and Professorial Fellow at the National University of Singapore, where he served as the first Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. He has received the National Book Development Council of Singapore Book Award for Poetry three times, the South East Asian Writers Award, Singapore's Cultural Medallion, the ASEAN Cultural and Communication Award in Literature, the Raja Rao Award and Singapore's Meritorious Service Medal. A Fellow of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 1977, he has given readings at various universities and international literary festivals and book fairs. He has been Fulbright-Hays Visiting Professor at Pennsylvania State University; Writer-in-Residence at the Institute of Culture and Communication, East-West Center Hawaii; Ida Beam Professor at the University of Iowa; Honorary Research Fellow at University College, University of London; Senior Fellow at the Department of English, Australian Defence Force Academy, University of New South Wales; George A. Miller Visiting Professor at the Center for Advanced Study, University of Illinois; Visiting Professor at the University of Innsbruck; Distinguished Visiting Professor at International Islamic University Malaysia and Visiting Professor at City University of Hong Kong.

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**THE
BEST
OF
EDWIN
THUMBOO**

OTHER BOOKS IN THE SERIES

The Best of Kirpal Singh

The Best of Robert Yeo

THE BEST OF EDWIN THUMBOO

Introduction by Lily Rose Tope



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In Memory of
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&

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& for

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ET

Introduction
by Lily Rose Tope

Edwin Thumboo's poetry spans more than fifty years, a lifetime for many individuals, older than his nation. It records and chronicles, celebrates, grieves over milestones and tragedies in the lives of the poet and Singapore, connects poet and country to global culture, and creates a cartography of a poet, citizen and man.

Much has been written and said about Edwin Thumboo and his poetry. Thumboo is perhaps the most discussed poet in Singapore and expectedly so, since he is one of those who broke ground for Singapore writing in English. As early as 1953 when he was still a student in secondary school, he had already chafed at the bond to the English canon and had begun to think of a Malayan perspective and a Malayan literature. In one of his earliest editorials in the journal *YOUTH*, he wrote, "Instead of being taught to see their people and their country in the right perspective, they are dished up with knowledge, which, while it is sound as far as academic requirements go, tends to restrict their outlook" (Thumboo, 3). For him, there is a concurrent necessity for a national literature. "YOUTH therefore appeals to you, young men and women of this country to HELP STIMULATE INTEREST IN THE CREATION OF A GENUINELY ORIGINAL MALAYAN LITERATURE. This is specially urgent in view of the efforts being made towards the creation of a MALAYAN NATION. Or, are we to be a nation without our own literature?" (Thumboo, 3–4).

His poetry is among the first, and the first usually sets the tone and tempo of literary production for his contemporaries and the next generation of writers. He privileged Malayan realities—"the modes of living of many races, their varied reactions to the impact of Western culture, and their living harmoniously together: these are no mean subjects for essays" (Thumboo, 3). Moreover, he has had an equally strong hand in the scholarship on Singaporean literature (especially in its initial stage), encouraging local and foreign scholars to spread the Singaporean word and cultural experience.

Indefatigable as a poet and as a scholar, Edwin Thumboo performs his advocacy for an Asian literature in English and a literature in Asian Englishes.

This collection is his oeuvre. It includes poems from his first to his last collection, selected by Edwin Thumboo to present the poet's own artistic landscape, different from those that other critics have drawn in the past. His poems tend to be read according to the historical sequence of his life and works. Often, only his public poetry represents him. In this collection, a new mapping has been done, erasing chronology and the boundaries between public and private. For instance, his most recent poems can be found in the same section as his earlier poems. This makes the poetic aggregate unaccountable to time or scholarly utility. The result is a renewed and vigorous omniscience for the poet who wills the new construction of vision. The new arrangement also creates a re-visioning of the poems, many of which are much anthologised and iconic, providing new contexts and a surprising freshness that invites various other readings.

The collection is divided into five parts: Roots; Feeling History; All in All; People, Moments, Places; Numinous & Making. These nodes, in a way, define the thematic logic of Thumboo's poetry: origin, nation, self, cultural geography and poetics. The poems in each node explore, interrogate, define, claim the poetic space, serving as a discursive representation of a poetic episteme. The nodes are poetic continents where the sites important to Thumboo's poetic journey are located and this is the contour that this introduction will follow.

Central to this discursive representation is origin. Origin is roots, beginnings. Beginnings look back to a migrant mixed heritage, a boyhood that witnessed the diasporic desires of ancestors, a *mélange* of uncles speaking different tongues, and one lived in a multicultural society. The poems here relive ancestral departures which

are fueled by need (“He too will follow the swallows South where / Indentured fathers-uncles-sons-nephews sweat” [“Arts House, Smith Street, Chinatown, Singapore”]) as well as immigrant arrivals fraught with pain. While opportunities abounded in the new land, one wakes up “In a land where man-in-nature is a different history / My neighbour is another language” (“Arts House, Smith Street, Chinatown, Singapore”). The diasporic spirit is generally survivalist and flexible, a spirit Singapore communities have imbibed. But there are those who never settled, who never left. The uncle who never knew, “never knew our age in full...could not hear migrant hearts change rivers.” “He was back in Swatow / ...Intoning Li Po, Tu Fu and reading Mao” (“Uncle Never Knew”). Migration often means economic opportunities but it is also burdened by psychic displacement which will take generations to heal.

But the growth of new roots is inevitable and the foundation of cultural beginnings can be found in spaces where there is mixture and the experiences become a commonality that binds. One such space is the school where students of various races “learnt quarrelled laughed” (“Victoria School, Jalan Besar”). The school is truly Singapore’s originary because the essence of being Singaporean is first taught here—that one lives with “Henry / Aziz Boey Soon Khiang Beng Keng Peter / Poh Guan Noordin Eric Heng Hoe Dhana / Teo Yong Chuan Seng” and that living with them is the foundation of national selfhood.

Beginnings are also personal. Boyhood memories of a father are depicted in “Father – IV” and “Father – V.” The youthful persona reminisces about times he spent with his father, apparently his first teacher. The morning walks were full of the wonders of nature, while the evenings prepared the son for the vicissitudes of history which will soon visit the family. That came in “Father – V” during which the son recognises his father’s sacrifice in times of adversity and the father becomes his silent hero.

Beginnings can also be spiritual. For many, spiritual beginnings are the alpha of their existence. For young people, spiritual flowering is born out of innocence and expectation, as seen in “Visitor from Galilee.” But for most, such flowering can be attained only after a fall from grace. The fall provokes an eschatology, questions on the ultimate reality. The eschatology seems to lead to a religious moment where humanity comes closest to God. Thumboo himself explains that it is crisis that provokes religion (Thumboo, interview, 2009). It is the struggle to be good, to do the right thing, to be a good Christian where faith begins. It is a difficult struggle for what is righteous is often painful. The struggle is also often tragic in the Greek sense because despite greatness, one cannot escape the consequences of moral disorder. Our humanity often fails us. This turns to grief and the need for forgiveness which ultimately completes the cycle of faith. The spiritual abyss that greets the sinner is deep and can only be “saved through Blood” (“Fall & Redemption”). When sin leads to the need for God, then sin can lead to redemption and a re-birth.

The vista of origin and roots in this first node is a panoramic view of life commencing and a testament of a man’s desire to be. Beginnings can be unitary as in a physical birth but it can also be repetitive and continuing as in a cultural or spiritual one. The second node contextualises the poetic journey by locating it in the historical. Thumboo is most known for his historical or public poems as attested to by three important collections namely, *Gods Can Die* (1977), *Ulysses by the Merlion* (1979), and *A Third Map* (1993) and for which he is regarded as the unofficial poet laureate of Singapore.

Thumboo’s unenviable position as witness to the first pangs of national anxiety to the wondrous economic miracle of Singapore has perhaps resulted in poems that are celebratory of Singapore’s achievements. One cannot mistake the national distress and fear in

the nation's founding, as seen in "August 9th." But this is a far cry from what Singapore is now. The process of building a nation must be remembered and this is usually recorded through monuments. Singapore was not founded on revolutionary struggle like some of its neighbours. Its sense of nation emerged from economic strength supported by an ethos that privileges intelligence and skill. Thus, Thumboo's chosen monuments such as the RELC, Victoria School and the National Library, among others, are intellectual in nature and are a declaration of Singapore's preference for knowledge as the instrument to national success. Victoria School honed the mind, RELC brought linguistic competencies and expertise to Singapore, the National Library served as the repository of intellectual weapons against vulnerability. These poetic monuments have often been misunderstood as acquiescence to state goals. Perhaps one must look at them in the context of the nation's past, a past marked by inchoate nationhood and unmeasured capabilities for survival. Monuments are acts of remembrance and Thumboo's poetic monuments are an act of memorialising a nation's ability to vanquish extreme uncertainty through national will. They are reminders, not only of achievements, but of struggle. Today's generation regards these edifices as a birthright and a privilege. To Thumboo's generation who knew how it was to be vulnerable, these monuments are a symbol of Singapore's stability which Singaporeans now enjoy and which is a triumphant outcome of the struggle.

The poem "The Way Ahead" illustrates nation building at its best. It explains the process of "framing" a city, the city here taken as a metaphor for nation and identity. A professor, a senior civil servant, a town planner and a man-in-the-street confer on "how to frame a city," to change it if need be, to make it "supple, rugged, yet acceptable." The innocuous "chat" though, is far from being a "tete-a-tete," for underpinning the gathering and the brainstorming is the invention of a city, the word "frame" implying boundaries or

containment of vision on the one hand, and gilding or emphasising a point of beauty on the other. Here, the writer seems to be "explaining society to itself" (Lim, 17). Thumboo performs the role of spokesperson for the State, not as a paid public relations man or ministerial official, but as a citizen convinced of the State's "framing" of nation. While the idea supporting the achievement of the state may cause derision, there is an element of sincerity in the poems of Thumboo. His gentle polemics reveal a citizen's appreciation of state efforts in improving the nation's quality of life.

Despite state achievements, Thumboo is not oblivious to the cost of national success. Several of his poems demonstrate the recursive concern of an individual chafing against State impositions and expectations. "The Sneeze, Hock Lam St, nr City Hall", for instance, satirises State regulations toward cleanliness. A food hawker blows his nose and wipes his hand on his apron, unwilling to "dirty the drains, clutter the spittoons," obeying the injunctions to "Keep Singapore clean— / Keep Singapore germ-free." The poem suggests a great divide between the discourse of the State and that of the community. The State discourse mandates cleanliness and sanitation to the level of law and elevates them to the level of national ideology. As far as the community is concerned, however, hygiene is purely personal and the social implications of the injunctions are somewhat lost on its members. At best, the laws are regarded as whims of the State. Thus, the hawker's action discloses the absence of the kind of civic-mindedness encouraged by the State. Obeying the law becomes a knee-jerk reaction, done more to stay out of trouble than for any social purpose. Hence, there has been a failure, not only of communication (as suggested by the elevated language used by the poet to describe the hawker's motions) but also of national purpose. In sincerely trying to uphold the law, the hawker commits a more serious violation. The hawker's ignorance of the hygienic assumptions of the cleanliness law

highlights the cultural disjuncture between State and the people. A slogan is memorised and obeyed but not necessarily understood or internalised, and the state injunction is just that—a slogan. Thus, the hawkers remain in ignorant bliss, symbolic in his unhygienic crimes against the State.

Probably the most important poetic contribution of Edwin Thumboo is in mythmaking and the anthem of the mythical poems is “Ulysses by the Merlion.” It is significant to say here that it is the most “imitated, celebrated, and most berated poem” of Thumboo (Patke, 183). It has caused quite a debate among Singaporean writers and yet as Patke describes it, “Each attempt by a younger poet to re-write Thumboo’s poem confirms its status as the patriarchal script that requires and invites incessant acts of provocation, less like drawing a pair of moustaches on the Mona Lisa than of children eager to step outside the parental shadow” (184). The poem’s gigantic figure will remain a reference in Singapore writing in English.

Thumboo could not have chosen a more unusual project than to bring together two great myths in a mythical time. Ulysses, the great traveler, puzzles at a “half-beast, half-fish” creature. Ulysses is a Western invention as well as an epic representation of keen intelligence, rationality, well-traveled sophistication and supreme loyalty. The Merlion represents the Other. This man-shaped creature is a symbol, uniting sea and technology with Singapore history, according to Thumboo (Singh, 82). The poem “confesses” (Kirpal Singh’s term) Singaporean history. Just as the countenance of the Merlion is marvelous, so are the people who invented it. They have come from the sea and out of the sea and built a strong economy (“towers topless as Ilium’s”). There is no pretension toward an illustrious past in the lines “They make, they serve / They buy, they sell.” Instead the poem acknowledges the acumen and hardiness of the early peoples to whom the present

nation owes its stability. Their cultural differences have not been a barrier to mutual mutation as they strive to coexist (“Explore the edges of harmony”) and find commonalities (“Search for a centre”). Though they have preserved some of their traditions, they are definitely “Full of what is now.” The Merlion is significant to Thumboo’s nationalistic expression because his valorisation of it gives legitimacy to its invention as a national symbol. While it lacks specific grounding in any ancient culture, the people’s awareness of its invention inspires a collective sentiment of active participation (instead of the usual tradition of imposition) in the creation of a national symbol. Thumboo admits that for his generation, the Merlion was strange and synthetic, for although they knew of lions and mermaids, that was the first time they had come together. For his children though, it is familiar because they have received it formed (Nazareth, 156). The bafflement has perhaps ceased for those who have possessed the myth.

While the historical makes the citizen, the personal makes the man. In the next node, we see the most intimate, poignant and yet often neglected poems of Thumboo, his private poems. In these poems, the poet is son, friend, husband. The autobiographical poems in this section bequeath a face and individuality to the poet, revealing a persona that one does not easily see even in personal encounters with him. It gives the hand that wields the pen flesh and blood, and gives the artist a humanity that connects him to the reader on a more visceral level. For instance, he becomes a son yearning for his father in “Father – I”. In contrast to the poems pertaining to his father cited earlier, “Father – I” speaks of a father long departed. The adult son is remembering him, is still in conversation with him. The filial ties are felt to be eternal and the persona, perhaps also a father himself, has not stopped being a son. The poet also mourns the loss of a good friend, a “brother,” in “The Return.” Thumboo writes a moving elegy for the departed friend, neutralising the grief through

memories of “sharing kopi halia / The occasional discontent, the open road, / Talk of politics, a ministering culture”—ordinary, mundane, passionate, humourous instances of pulsating life. And the ties that bound the friends become tighter with offspring that play together, “How Simon, Julian, Raymond seek to grow / As four Horsemen skirmish, ride their turn”, solidifying continuities that are threatened by death. But departures can come in other forms. Another good friend goes into exile in “After the Leaving...” and the burden of leaving, the splitting of self that is inevitable in exile, is subdued by remembrance. The poem’s details are a recounting of friendship, a strengthening of ties during adversity, made possible by specific and exclusive intimacies such as “your ukulele / Mastering the restless crabs / Sunset upon the brow of Panteh 2; / Our shared tobacco...” as well as shared longing for things such as “Heeren Street/Ancestral rooms, intricate histories” that had to be surrendered because of exile. The subject of the last two poems are real men, even famous men, and yet fame is superseded by the idea of special friendships born among like-minded individuals and connected souls. These friendships are personal monuments that can never be destroyed by death or exile.

Thumboo is most honest and human in the poems written for his wife, Chin. “Dawn” and “Evening” give us a glimpse of marital bliss and challenge. In “Dawn” the persona watches his sleeping lover, remembering the night, wondering, “Where are they, the two we knew / Walking into the evening / With hesitant, grievous desire?” If this poem is filled with tenderness, “Evening” is discordant with external and internal storms (“Outside our thunders quarrel”). There is no attempt to disguise the tension (“Jurassic clouds that war and break”) and so when the sky suddenly clears, it comes as a surprise. And it is the “other” that repairs the “broken rainbow” and causes the “metaphors and pauses” to “re-arrange.” She is the paradox in her strength to engage with the

persona, ignite war even, and in the next breath, induce peace. While the persona remains in the dungeons of his anger, (“I do not move, but move against / Grey dissolving skies, clean lightning”) she moves in with a rainbow and the sun. Clearly, she is the larger entity here, possessing an intelligence beyond the intellectual, with a knowledge of human nature that can only baffle the persona but consequently release him from his darkness. Most evocative of the Chin poems is “Chin’s Garden – I.” In the course of the poem, the persona enumerates the botanical presences and horticultural wonders of a garden, regaling the reader, not with herbal stillness, but with great vibrancy and activity within an otherwise quiet garden. The persona—onlooker, bystander, even intruder—realises that the garden is baring a character and a soul. The chronology of botanical details reflects the persona’s journey from the gate to the house, from the external to the intimate. It is also an exploration of Chin herself (Thumboo, interview, 2012). This is Chin’s chronology, a universe that obeys her patterns, obviously a passion that follows her personal logic. The garden inmates are Chin’s (“And they surely know my footfalls are not yours”), is Chin. He feels that she is adored and respected by the recipients of “an affinity, a care, a love, ampler than mine.” Chin never appears in the poem but her absence is an all-encompassing presence that unravels a woman full of love and nurturance. The three poems are ruminations of a husband on his wife as a quotidian as well as a transcendent element in his life. Their poignancy rests on the conflation of the familiar and the never-ending revelations of the wife’s uniqueness at the most intimate occurrences.

The next node takes us to the realm of the cultural founded on the physical and psychical geographies of the poet. The poems reflect the sense of place as the nexus of identity, but almost always too on the brink of erasure or transformation.

Physical landscapes are important to a community because

they provide foundations of comprehensibility and certainty. They are meant to be recognisable references of passage, stable founts of memories, preferably eternal and immutable. But in fast paced Singapore, landscapes are the first victims of progress, the pragmatics of nation building often overtaking sentiment and history. Thus as already mentioned earlier, there is a need for monuments as repositories of national experience. Psychic locations are however more difficult to monumentalise but the poems in this node attempt to do so, memorialising places, some of which have disappeared. "Mandai," "Island," "Today Once More," "Evening by Batok Town," and "Expressing Ubin" speak of places in transition, co-opted by the State to become "better" living spaces. Some, like Pulau Ubin, have so far escaped the transmogrifying claws of the machines, but the majority have succumbed to the forces of urbanisation. The poems are warriors of memory, preserving the past, chronicling the battles against transmutation, recording the pain and the nostalgia when things come to pass. Mandai is Thumboo's childhood space, a place of "Grandma's tales," of "Exploding rubber seeds; durian trees in flower." But it is now a city "redone rewritten reinforced," whose "Avenues were / Streets before, gleaming condos replaced / Ancestral homes, extended celebrations." As in the poems that will follow, the response to drastic change is a quiet resignation to "move, adjust," content in dual imaginings "between pages, between lines," an acceptance of liminality as a consequence of imposed inorganic spaces. In "Today Once More," Bedok reminds the persona of choices—to "stay and be damn'd. Or prosper in our fashion," ambivalent to yet understanding of the different destinations and destinies of each Singaporean generation. The same reinvention of landscape occurs in Batok town where there was a time "When little Guilin had no pools," and now there is only "high-rise and high-way." Folk heroes of the persona's boyhood—La Cha, Krishna, Arjuna—

are now challenged by a radar, an MRT station, four point blocks, JC and food centre. The persona looks back to "old geology" that is threatened by the "computer-mind" whose memory is shorter than the land's.

The loss however, is overturned by a new vision that promises great bounties. In a sense, those who stayed could not remain inured to that vision; eventually and inevitably, they must embrace it too. In "Island," the persona confronts the question regarding the cost of progress with the clarity and faith of a convert. In the poem, the loss of the idyllic life is compensated by the dynamism of a mechanised present. From scenes of a serene life in a seaside kampong, the poem shifts to images of the present—Aminah and Harun residing in flats and learning trade, "Men in overalls and helmets / Wield machines, consulting plans"—that represent the vitality of the nation. A welder's torch which creates "a rush of stars" and towering drillers which "look attractive" are objects of a strange beauty. The poem exhibits no regrets for the loss of the old world. Instead it celebrates the ascendancy of a new one where images of power, dynamo and diesel hum become unmistakably familiar in the landscape of the community as well as that of self.

The last node is the numinous and making. Numinous is a term that refers to something sacred or divine and making is the process of creation; together both terms imply the sanctity of the poetic process. In this section, the poetic persona of Thumboo comes to the fore to illustrate his poetics, a philosophy of poetry that can be formulated only by a poet of his experience. The poems here are a paean to poetic creativity, that elusive energy that is special, that must be guarded well, without which "Worlds and journeys stay unremarkable. / Stars burn and comets blaze without mythology" ("It Is Special"). The energy is fragile, "brittle," and yet capable of bringing one to great heights or "lift and spin a universe." It alludes to the gentle yet potent power of poetry to create insight

and experience. "It Is Special" recognises the complex process of creation, how artistry combines with intuition, how the everyday can be sublime. It enumerates the ingredients of the poetic brew—the thought, the emotion, the image, word and rhythm—and the poet is given the opportunity to use them to move and inspire. Most importantly, the process of creation can be claimed ("It is ours. Grasp it any way you wish.") There is no explanation why it comes, how it comes, "Only that it returns a sudden / Thought, a wink of light, a flash of knowing."

Poetry is a sensate process, closely involving minute reflections of sense impressions. "The taste of berries," "Small stars dissolved at the tip of my tongue," "the silent rise of your eyes" all lead to an instance of consummation, "That un-nameable doing grips," when a poetic moment is released. It is a fleeting second, when "To hold still, briefly / Is eternity. Mere thinking is Passover." Words are necessary to articulate such thoughts. In "Words for the Day," words take centre stage. Poetry uses words that brand the day, with colour but also with clarity ("Let there be no ambiguity. None."). Tone, mood, "Neat, clean / Metaphors of the day to lift my sentences" create an armour for the poet against world tragedies ("suicide bombs / 47 HINI") and tons of email that distract and detract. Words sustain the poet, they are his trusted tools ("Be fresh rather than habitual. Don't let me down, / I can't become upset. You are my only language.")

Poetry is to be shared and poetic energy is one of connectivity. The poetic moment is distinctness and cultural identity which no historical imposition or intrusion can dissipate. "Durban: Poetic Festival 2003" is interesting because it celebrates not the achievements of the canon but the claims of difference. The festival is set in Durban, a city where "crisp tribal theologies / At loggerhead," a city marked by "prospering wars, drought / Famine, crude corruption, young nostrils / Plagued by flies." Durban is certainly a strange

venue for the appreciation of the sensitive and the refined. It is a raw, guttural, even savage convention site for poets. But it is precisely this that the poem celebrates, belying poetry's alignment with only certain types of beauty. In Durban, civilities are unhinged, instead "Justice / Is maimed, at times cleverly imprisoned." This certainly calls for a different kind of poetic energy.

In Durban, poetry would be in the midst of iniquities, witness to the meeting of the colonised and the dispossessed. But it would also be a reclamation of lost languages and new Englishes and a reinscription of histories. It would be other meeting other, bringing about recognition of a similar past and recuperative endeavours. Thus, "we try / Steady uncoiling dialogue, partly Englishes." There is "re-marking every phoneme into ours / Commanding tongue, asserts history...mood and tense decolonise / Make new conjunctions...re-move their imperial themes... Ignore post-colonial patronage / In-judicious, hurtful judgements of the past." Indeed there is newfound camaraderie in "clearing / Throats for new vowels" so that "Words will never be the same again." And so, there is applause for "the laughter of his tribe, Cho Cho / Ke Ke murmuring walking through sunshine, shadow, / Sharing bone and marrow, while cleaving to our flanks." The poem resonates with words that are English and yet not, names that have dark skins. It is as if they now dominate the poetic world and poetry never sounded so good.

And finally, there is "A Poet Reading," a multilayered poem on poetic creation—from conception, release, crafting to articulation. The poem starts from the last—a lady poet reading (articulating) a poem to an audience. She is performing the terminal function, birthing a poem (perhaps not for the first time but each audience is different) "in a garden we laced with flowers / And songs..." Inadvertently, she becomes a poem too, a poem being read by the persona.

Her brow, lifted gently by rising lotuses,
 Receives the sky's deep reverence
 As her eyes watch seven golden koi
 Swim serenely into provinces of silence.

Then, on her left side, where the heart
 Resides, her hand lifts, reluctantly,
 As if compelled by lingering strands
 Of bitter, ancient winds, now sadly
 Come together, taking her
 In ways that only harsh things can.

"She is sunlight," a mother providing a natal moment, but also inspiring a thought that may lead to a new conception. She is life.

The second part suggests the tortuous path of crafting—of effort and failure, repeated attempts that must make the creative process move forward. The third part tackles the reading and readership of the poem, the mediated circumstances of its unknown audience. The last part is the performance of the poem, "once more. / Recalled, revised, recaptured for this gathering." And the reader joins the persona in meeting the poem, "As we listen to the one we come to find." All these are rendered through the metaphor of the poetic muse. While the poet reading may be a name "writ in water", she is also an essence that brings "metaphor, metonymy syllepsis, plus / Assorted relatives, to achieve a feverish / Making" and yet eludes perfection ("A cup always slips, shatters / Into lamentations at imagination's door") because "The perfect poem is future tense." She forges on against obstacles of verbs, "ancestral history," "great authority" only to soar "up the throat of language as she commands / Symbol, sound and image to open, and shut, doors." The poet, the poem, the insight and pleasures created become the logos of life and art, "our sole certainty" that binds man

and art into a faith that "Is transmuted into many distances" but "never leaves."

Poetry never ends and there is no ending to this collection. The collection is Thumboo's productive life, the nodes of his creativity and a guide to his poetic world. The collection takes us by the hand and shows us where the poet has travelled. At the end of the collection, we realise that the muse remains an enthralling presence. The poet is still travelling, the journey may never end.

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Renovation

I want to feel pure the wind
Glazed by dark narrating shadows
Among casuarinas tempered by sea-salt.

I want to see brown the hawk
Unrelenting beautiful death-dealing
Break open the unsuspecting sky.

I want to hear forked the tongue
From an uncoiling body tracking
Lusty crickets in the loam.

I want to touch blue the haze
Dimming Karimon, over-reach
Unknotted slopes to possible mysteries.

I want to taste sharp the petai
Straight from the curling pod
To hold the village in my mouth.

I want these five beginnings.

R O O T S

Temasek

Deprived of you, history and sense
Turn quicksilver. In my grieving side
Grammars of living break their tense,
Diminish tact, impatience, pride,

Other contraries of soft power
That override or humble fact, debate,
The sea's recession or the faded flower.
I wonder if, again, old fashioned Fate,

Jealously ruminates in secret, rides
Us creatures who celebrate or rue.
I am bare. Unknowing, the world derides
My acts, my silences...deprived of you.

Yesterday

Silence growing on a stem;
touch of rustic life:
a thin twig of smoke
following a dead creeper
among old branches
and both twisting
old thoughts to new ideas,
betrays a habitation.

Yet walk to the shadow
Of Mandai mountain
I will show you a
sleeping secret stream.

Bitter Ballad

Little boy smoking cigarette

come blow up your horn

little blue boy jabbering
old man's language.
He puffs lustily,
ignorant,
burning his body away.

Here is a picture you can paint:
little boy smoking
mixing images from gutter-clay.

Bits of anger, evil smelling curses,
the father clouts his head.

Old man cries over
fragment bowl:
His son can only have
the symptoms of a man.

Victoria School, Jalan Besar

NIL SINE LABORE.

We felt but did not grasp that truth,
Until the years, the changing age,
Confirmed severely: Nothing without
Labour; nothing is for free.

You grew us well, Mother of our youth,
Gave grace to toughness, tuned mind
And feeling. Our teachers scolded out
Of love. We loved them with that fervour
Only mischief has.

We learnt quarrelled laughed, little
Enemies great friends, in classroom lab
Assembly, below the arches of the Hall
Up the tower built by Amin, Maha, Bock
Hai and their scouting gang. We shared
Ourselves, and found ourselves: Henry
Aziz Boey Soon Khiang Beng Keng Peter
Poh Guan Noordin Eric Heng Hoe Dhana
Teo Yong Chuan Seng, among intricacies
Of calculus, adverbial phrase, *The Rover*.
There was the steadying of the eye
As a thought struck deep with beauty,
Or growing asymmetry, sudden revelation.
We did not feel the day go by.

Along the corridors fresh faces each year
 Labour, discover fellowship; yearn. They
 Too will know that here our better youth
 Was spent, that we were salted then. We

Do not return to you. We never really left.

Catering for the People

These are delinquent days.
 Brother kills brother in many islands,
 While some who lose that simple anger,
 Take to town and politic each other.
 That Christmas truce is cruel. How to die
 Thereafter, with peace in the heart,
 Hand-grenade in fist, goodwill in one hand?
 The bombs rip villages, expose the bowels
 Of a race, slice off the head and leave balls
 In brutal harmony. The simple folk too die.

It's dismal.

But we have to work at a destiny. We stumble,
 Now and then. Our nerves are sensitive.
 We strive to find our history, break racial
 Stubbornness, educate the mass and Educated—
 Evacuate the disagreeable. *Bring the hill to valley,*
Level the place and build, and generally cater
For the people... Set all neatly down into Economy.
 There is little choice—We must make a people.

We have a promising amalgam—
 Youth, anger, a kind of will, a style of politics,
 And bargain hard, sell common and unlikely things;
 Are kind or rude or merely reasonable. Some stay
 Awake to match the moon; eat bats, chateaubriand;
 Sing old songs that have the rhythm of the sun;

Beatleise the stage; turn traditional and keep our
Streets soft with the quiet of the night.

We are flexible, small, a boil
On the Melanesian face.
If it grin or growl, we move—
To corresponding place, keeping
Sensitive to trends, adapting,
To these delinquent days.

Wat Arun

I peel within
For heart, a stupa templed-grace,
Cleansed by the ash of Kings,
Grew a memory large,
Yielded the secret of its doing.

You my fathers made—
Left wheat and incense.
I, vestigial of that line,
Despite the buffeting of days,
Still quicken in your gaze.

Lord Buddha, shaman with the wheel
Was in the loaves of Christ.

Chao Phraya, broad belly of the day
Turned the corner—feet dipped—
Washed away pregnancies of hate.
Ears of mango, eyes of agate
Germinating in the sky-in-karma
With hands that calmed waters.

But this, this between time,
The pressure of your eyes,
I cannot hold,
Yet will never die,
Or gather crust.

Cremation

That they should burn you
 And I on another journey;
 That the heat of your dying
 Was not for me—
 Who knew you like a son—
 Is surely the cry of a crow
 Leaving me no superstition
 But a stare at your bones,
 Ash and shadowless.

No crying, for you taught
 Suffering without sorrow—
 Thanks to Brahma for little mercies,
 Faith in the earth you returned to.

Tears not to be shed were compelled:
 You were not dead, for an essence
 Noiseless you guide without pressure,
 A voice I still hear.

Yet gradually will slip
 Your inroads made in me:
 I'll laugh at your strength
 At the most in two years or three.

Shiva

I greet your temple door
 With pomegranate seeds:
 The mind too nimble, sore,
 Seeks the lotus in the reeds.

I came to see your priest,
 To lay the ghost in my eye;
 To watch your altar fire
 Burn a hole in the sky.

I saw a pattern there,
 A rhythm in the evening sun;
 Your dancing feet will tear
 The fibres of the drum.

Krishna

FOR RAJA RAO

Before he became a god
To tidy up the world, Krishna
Searched a thousand years,
Along the peaks, the lesser hills,
Each sudden plain, persistent star,
The columns of his thought,
Down deeply anxious limbs,
His great inclines of heart
To the rim of the world at sunset...
Searched among the maidens of the day,
The maidens of the night,
A face for Brindavan.

Under her consequential sun,
Computations of every rising moon,
That face grew, asserted
All his love, his dreams
Softly magical destinations.
She gazed upon him
With a look of morning lotus,
Till each stood within the other.
So the blue god, his votive flute
Multiplying his love, the gopis,
Sporting with them all,
He sported with but one.

Perched upon a chord of time,
His yearning flute unfolds
The lovely burden of her eyes
To feed his nimble fingers.
Within the radiance of each note
So bound to her answering look,
The world revives, quickens,
Renews itself, turns whole,
Adores their love unparalleled.
And so they sit, ever moving,
Ever still, in stone,
In ivory, in us.

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