

a  
bad  
girl's  
book  
of  
animals

A Bad Girl's Book of Animals  
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*Dear Mama*

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## Foreword

by Tse Hao Guang

IT IS 1969. A 25-year-old Wong May has just published her first book of poems with Harcourt, Brace & World, a major New York press. I still find it hard to fully appreciate the conventions her book defied just by existing. According to a bibliography of 'Asian American' poetry,<sup>1</sup> *A Bad Girl's Book of Animals* made Wong May one of only twenty or so people of Asian descent at that point to have had solo-authored books of poetry published in the US. This book, and Wong May's unusual literary career, emerged from her remarkable relationship with the English language, one which began in Singapore.

Wong May was born in Chongqing in 1944, moving to Singapore with her mother Wang Mei-Chuang in 1950. Growing up in a literary Chinese-speaking household and attending

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<sup>1</sup> Chang, Juliana. "Asian American Poetry: A Bibliography." *Quiet Fire: A Historical Anthology of Asian American Poetry 1892-1970*, edited by Juliana Cheng, New York, The Asian American Writers' Workshop, 1996, pp. 138-55.

Chinese-medium schools until Senior High, Wong May enrolled in preparatory courses at the University of Singapore designed to ease the Chinese-educated into the University's Anglophone paradigm. Providentially, my father-in-law was her classmate in these courses and recalls she was "very good at poetry already", his memory in tune with critic Angus Whitehead's observation of her "belated, but rapid mastery of English".<sup>2</sup> As a schoolgirl "with very little English", she had chanced upon T. S. Eliot's poem "Ash Wednesday", its Lady of silences leaving her "entranced".<sup>3</sup>

Wong May ended up majoring in English Literature, writing and publishing early poems which were considered significant enough to be mentioned by fledgling efforts to contrive a canon of 'Malayan' poetry. David Ormerod, a West Indian literary academic who had taught at the University of Malaya, said:

She seems to have discovered, quite unselfconsciously, a style of considerable power for which I can think of no precise

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<sup>2</sup> Whitehead, Angus. "Critical Introduction to Wong May." *poetry.sg*, 4 Nov 2015, [www.poetry.sg/wong-may-intro](http://www.poetry.sg/wong-may-intro).

<sup>3</sup> Wong May, "From an Interview with Wong May." *Picasso's Tears*, Portland, Octopus Books, 2014, pp. 289-301.

precedent or parallel, and which results in artifacts of great formal beauty.<sup>4</sup>

'Exophony' describes creative writing outside of one's mother tongue, and in this technical sense Wong May is an exophonic writer. But it feels more truthful to say that Wong May has at least two mother tongues: the Chinese of her birth, and the English of her rebirth. Wong May told me that British academic and Movement poet D. J. Enright, who taught her at the University, had clued her into the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. She applied, got accepted, left the country, and in the three years between her graduation from the University of Singapore in 1966 and the publication of *Animals*, her poetry had grown sly and pointed; inflected with but taking care not to be infected by the American idiom.

As George Starbuck, then-director of the Writers' Workshop said of *Animals*, slightly breathlessly and backhandedly:

One incidental amazement is that an Oriental, learning English under British tutelage, should not merely master the American language, but should play elaborate jokes on it which only a member

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<sup>4</sup> Ormerod, David. "Foreword." *A Private Landscape*, edited by David Ormerod, Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya Library, 1967, pp. 7-10.

of the family could get away with. In this respect, there is Vladimir Nabokov, and there is Wong May—I can think of no other foreigners who make *us* feel like beginners in our own language.<sup>5</sup>

The question of how language comes to belong to someone, especially one who makes art out of language, still haunts Wong May's poetry—"My poems ... are about wordlessness rather than words. I feel that we must recognize our ultimate wordlessness".<sup>6</sup> This question is mine too, is ours, and perhaps should haunt all of us.

\*

1969 is a tumultuous year for the US. Nixon is sworn in as President, the Stonewall riots break out, Apollo 11 lands on the moon, and, in service of the Vietnam War, the first draft lottery since World War II is held. It has only been a year since University of California Berkeley graduate students Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee named their student organisation the 'Asian American Political Alliance' in the wake of waves of civil

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<sup>5</sup> Starbuck, George. Jacket copy. *Reports*, by Wong May, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Wong May. Qtd in jacket copy. *A Bad Girl's Book of Animals*, by Wong May, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969.

rights and anti-war activism, marking the first public use of the term ‘Asian American’. On the other side of the world, the May 13 ethnic riots in Kuala Lumpur spill over within the month to Singapore, still barely half a decade into its independence from Malaysia.

Wong May is not and has never been Asian American. She used to be but is no longer Singaporean, having had to relinquish her passport after Singapore stopped allowing dual citizenship—“a severance which still pains me”.<sup>7</sup> She has described herself as “persistently stateless, between suitcases, as between continents, it permits me to say certain things”,<sup>8</sup> her exilic condition fundamentally shaping her poetry. Daryl Lim Wei Jie and I see in her exile her being cut off from every home she’s known, even the homes of “mother and mother tongue”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Toh, Wen Li. “Obscure Singapore-raised Poet Wong May, 78, Wins ‘Overdue’ Acclaim.” *The Straits Times*, 9 Apr 2022, [www.straitstimes.com/life/arts/obscure-singapore-raised-poet-wong-may-78-wins-overdue-acclaim](http://www.straitstimes.com/life/arts/obscure-singapore-raised-poet-wong-may-78-wins-overdue-acclaim).

<sup>8</sup> Chang, Jennifer. “Looking for Wong May.” *New England Review*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2020, [www.nereview.com/looking-for-wong-may](http://www.nereview.com/looking-for-wong-may).

<sup>9</sup> Lim Wei Jie, Daryl and Tse Hao Guang. “No Country but Our Century’: Wong May, Poet of Lostness.” *Poetry Northwest*, 14 Dec 2022, [www.poetrynw.org/wong-may-poet-of-lostness/](http://www.poetrynw.org/wong-may-poet-of-lostness/).

Her adoption of English, as Starbuck's "incidental amazement" suggests, made her poetry vulnerable to dismissal. An early review of *Animals* in *Poetry* magazine—written by Mona Van Duyn, who ended up becoming the US' first female poet laureate—turned Wong May's surprising use of language into a question of fluency:

Her poetry, a kind to which I am not attuned, causes me to ask questions which may be irrelevant. Undeniably, she avoids the trite and conventional in English verse. Is this because she is protected simply by unfamiliarity with it? Or does that matter?<sup>10</sup>

In Singapore, *Animals* was reviewed by Arthur Yap, who found Wong May "skilful", "surfacing from the depths of her wordlessness in similar, sharp and somewhat brittle strokes".<sup>11</sup> Edwin Thumboo, often described as Singapore's unofficial poet laureate, preferred the poems from her University of Singapore days, selecting them for his 1970 anthology *The Flowering Tree*, 1973's *Seven Poets*, and 1985's *The Poetry of Singapore*

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<sup>10</sup> Van Duyn, Mona. "Seven Women." *Poetry*, vol. 115, no. 6, Mar 1970, pp. 430-9, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=115&issue=6&page=60](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=115&issue=6&page=60).

<sup>11</sup> Yap, Arthur. Review of *A Bad Girl's Book of Animals*, by Wong May. *Prospect* vol. 1, no. 13, May 1970, p. 14.

(in which he also took a later poem referencing Singapore). Although he included three poems from *Animals* alongside her older ones in 1976's pungently-named *The Second Tongue*, he did so with reservations.

In his detailed introduction to *The Second Tongue*, Thumboo first said that *Animals* “reveals a personality distinctive in its combination of whimsicality, adulthood [ . . . ], innocence, charm and ironic sympathy”, but soon after criticised the poetry for being *overly-refined*:

A certain charm, an ability to express surprise, and a more open, less contrived power available in poems written before she left for the U.S.A. appear to have been refined out of her poetry. And they are an altogether regrettable loss.<sup>12</sup>

This story of two poets laureate (official or otherwise) not knowing what to do with Wong May, suggesting she is both unfamiliar and overfamiliar with English, feeds into a larger story of her not fully fitting into even her chosen language, or her two literary communities. Wong May would go on to publish two more books of poetry in the US—*Reports* in 1972 and *Superstitions* in 1978—but their critical reception

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<sup>12</sup> Thumboo, Edwin. “Introduction.” *The Second Tongue*, Singapore, Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1976, pp. vii-xxxviii.

remained mixed for many years.<sup>13</sup>

After *Superstitions*, Wong May stopped publishing for 36 years. She had earlier left the US in 1970, returning briefly to Singapore where she edited Arthur Yap and Robert Yeo's debut poetry collections for Federal Publications, subsequently moving to Berlin, then Grenoble. She eventually settled in Ireland, where she continues to reside today. She never stopped writing, though. This was the one thing she could not be exiled from—"I shall say, Poetry IS my Mother Tongue".<sup>14</sup>

\*

Fifty-four years separate the first and second editions of *A Bad Girl's Book of Animals*. In the intervening period, besides *The Second Tongue*, two poems from *Animals* appeared in 1996's *Quiet Fire: A Historical Anthology of Asian*

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<sup>13</sup> Valerie Barth reviewed *Superstitions* in *Commentary* vol. 4, no. 2, Jan 1980, rehashing Thumboo's complaints in an even more dismissive manner: "From lucidity to obscurity, from an emotional and imaginative sensibility to a clever but cold intellectualism, from an unsophisticated, if sometimes naive, simplicity to a too overt cosmopolitanism—this has been the development of Wong May's poetry." Various US publications would review her later books much more positively.

<sup>14</sup> Wong May, "From an Interview with Wong May." *Picasso's Tears*, Portland, Octopus Books, 2014, pp. 289-301.



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## On His 23rd Birthday

In his country they use water-  
hyacinths to feed pigs. Imagine  
the stuff pigs are made of!

He lies in bed thinking this  
is but a zone of his life—

As if life has zones!

The purple flood! That is, if  
Consciousness is  
in streams.

He gets up,  
eats a can of sardines  
& buries himself. He knows  
himself too well already,  
he hears his voice  
in another country,  
softly. Women  
would say: After  
all these years,  
You haven't changed  
a bit!

The telephone rings.

## History

The lie that snow was here yesterday  
up to my very door. The lie that  
though a brief thing it was,

It was. The lie then  
I've got a mother  
I've committed murder  
I've recovered  
I couldn't have wakened

to a finer world.  
I carry you with me now  
child and mother

(the weight of snow) sleep  
walking down the steps  
across the street

It is October 1967  
everywhere this sun and water  
we're going steadilier

steadilier immortal