

A Gathering  
of  
Themes



EDWIN THUMBOO

## By the same author

*Rib of Earth*. Singapore: L. Fernando, 1956

*Child's Delight: Book I & II*. Singapore: Federal Publications, 1972

*Gods Can Die*. Writing in Asia Series. Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1977

*Ulysses by the Merlion*. Writing in Asia Series. Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1979

*A Third Map: New and Selected Poems*. Singapore: UniPress, 1993

*Friends: 15 poems*. (Pamphlet) Ed. Goh Eck Kheng. Singapore: Landmark Books, 2003

*Still Travelling*. Singapore: Ethos Books, August 2008

*Bring The Sun*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2008. (A selection from three out-of-print volumes of poetry published for the Frankfurt Book Fair.)

*35 for Gothenburg*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2009. Co-published with the National Arts Council, Singapore

*Flow Across Our Ocean*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011

*Singapore Word Maps*. Ed. Michelle Heng. Singapore: National Library Board, 2012.

*Word-Gate*. Singapore: privately printed, 2013.

*The Banyan Tree*. Singapore: Jhivajothe, 2016. (Tamil translation of selected poems.)

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EDWIN THUMBOO



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**Dedicated**  
**with**  
**Affection, Appreciation, Gratitude & Thanks**  
**to**

Henry Chia Dr Goh Soon Khiang Dr Chew Beng Keng  
S Dhanabalan

Wong Phui Nam Joey Yin Chu Wai Oliver Seet

University Prof Lim Pin Joe Conceicao Dr Ban Kah Choon  
Prof Jonathan Webster

Dr Thiru Kandiah Dr Ong Jin Hui Dr Yong Mun Cheong

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Benny Lim Tim Yap Fuan

&

Prof Chew Chong Lin Dr Angel Lee A/Prof Leong Khai Pang

A/Prof Sudesh Sahadevan Dr Yong Quek Wei

***Mens sana in corpore sano.***

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## Eyes

Heading north after  
the day's ordinariness;  
overtaking timber lorries,  
buses, wheezing Morris Minors,  
hurrying  
x to the power of 3, and sitting out  
the Muar ferry's blown gasket,  
I turn the last corner.

The gate unlocks,  
the door opens...  
your eyes.

## Double Helix by the Promenade

Spun in curving steel, you stride  
 Millennia, carrying the sum of human history;  
 Arch back into beginnings, then loop ahead,  
 Powering ancestral visions, urban dreams.  
 Strung blue and red, your ruling molecules  
 Encode our destiny from ancient caves  
 To river-places: the Huang Ho, Indus, Nile.  
 And great cities that attempt the stars.

As metaphor, you untie possibilities,  
 Brew mind, imagination, heart and muscle  
 Till they flex and fret and brood, invent and soar,  
 Deleting darkness with infinite light, made bountiful  
 By children of the times who take their celebration  
 Into other lives. Let joy push sadness back.  
 Share this time and space, aptly re-drawn  
 In seven colours to make a modern homeland.

So flying cars, people with propellers; some compute.  
 Spread over a City in a Garden, Hands of the Nation  
 Transform circuits of a micro chip into a maze, and pulsate  
 Hexagons whose well-lit hearts are final promises.  
 All this lay in the rolling echoes of that lion's roar,  
 Sang Nila. Now another icon guards the River's mouth.  
 And a shore re-claimed from the waves you rode.

Histories meet and leaven our daily bread,  
 Tune octaves of our voices in this singular journey  
 With many thinking steps. Some start here.  
 So walk this Double Helix, point to point.  
 Recall its Science but see its Art speak life  
 Surrounding life, feeding on four waters, as skies  
 Unfold our destiny, as clouds bring benedictions  
 For us, for all.

## A Great Lady\*

Glow a step or two behind,  
Wise light; soft veil of grace.  
Constant, heart-beat lovingly ahead  
With clear, precise, unerring care,

Watchful,  
As when that thirsting kris  
Of politics poked us out.

Some say eviction; others brute casting off.  
Whatever. You knew our Island, thus bereft,  
Thus alone against each day's alarms; each  
Looming augury's stark improbabilities.

You did much; more than we will know.  
We guess generously, yet surely, surely  
Not enough. You nudged our destiny.  
Helped husband, children, vigilant PM;

Sense-surrounded home at Oxley.

You loved poetry dearly, which says much -  
Taking the world's best living in special

Think-through-feeling, to quietly bestow,  
Deed, enrich more than you received.

You were there. Are there.  
You move in ampler memory;  
Lift our history.

These and more we remember.

And  
Thank you, Lady, for Fajar fingerprints: ten  
Takes plus photo, of my young, green journey.

## Ah-Mah, Mah-cau, Macau\*

(for Godfrey and Pou Lin)

I

Northern habits of revolt, pesky Xiongnu, uneven  
peace, extravagant magnificence, feudal rivalries,  
the death of town and village, and more, pushed many  
down, across two mixed millenniums, two great rivers.

They came, they saw, they settled.

Ingenuity, resilience, tough spirt born of adversity,  
surmounted enormous odds. In 1277 50,000 fled  
rampaging Mongols, to life and refuge. Infusions,  
including fisher folk, added to constructive vitality.

A can-do people.

You scaled up, from far outpost, to fringe, to thriving  
prosperous Pearl of a river. In time, a strip of no man's  
land and two islands, packed people and chips. Your sky-  
line is lit by icons beneath bursts of scintillating stars.

Meanwhile, come what may, you kept speech, chapters  
Of culture; adaptive skills. Your bouncy Macanese heart  
tweaked destiny. Apt and timely, as Europe's rapacious  
maw recced spicy East, soon eyed your shores.

They came, they saw, they traded.

Portuguese, Dutch, then British, primed by continental rivalries. When half-built, Fortaleza de Nossa Senhora do Monte de São Paulo's priest lit guns slew, rebuffed the Dutch, opening the gateway to a golden century.

## II

Footfalls echo, measure streets, alleys, corridors, early air; share their varied origins; partner and bond; seal long journeys. The twain met: East and West, Temple and Church, prayer and chant; Mandarin and Hidalgo. Here

is visible history. It unfolds according to our inner selves. Here a young girl, returned in her goddess self. Revering Ah-Mah, their protector, they who brave pirates and ocean, built this, the greatest of her homes. Unfurling rise of

burning joss-sticks waft thanks and hopes. Further up, open to the sky, the boulder's lorcha, bobs agelessly with each swell. Every chisel nick was surely an act of faith. Up, where pray-poetry edifies rocks, we face the ocean.

She casts her protecting eyes.

Open waters brought captains, priests, soldiers. They plied latitudes and cleaved oceans. These 66 steps recalled how Jesuits had raised St. Antony and St Lawrence... *Tantum ergo sacramentum*... fostered learning, adding inheritance



to your mosaic and melding. On this hill, Mater Dei, College, Library which M Ricci, man of God who studied the science of creation, and robed himself in a story, prepared. Sadly, fires ate roof and wall, leaving this façade whose narrative enshrines

kanji, peonies, chrysanthemums.

Ends are beginnings in Zheng's Mandrin's House. Merchant, patriot, man of letters and mentor, he built an ideal, reifying ancestral tradition in hall, apartments, fung-sui tinted gardens, each prospect chosen by the angst of his intellectual heart.

His *Words of Warning in Times of Prosperity* influenced game-changers Sun and Mao. He saw what nations need, as he contrasted foreign ships in the Inner Harbour, Japan arming on the march, and moribund Manchu Court.

We three walk and pause, look and hear, watch a leaf fall, a flag angered by high winds, or follow the curve of mouldy walls, knowing more awaits metaphor and meditation. Memories make deep language, in this city, this unique definition, your Lady's, now your own.

## Bathsheba

I sin, repent, yet helplessly recall  
The fearful radiance of the King.

Its dark fruit, half lust, half betraying  
Love, must have a way to light.

'Send me Uriah the Hittite'. He comes,  
My unknowing warrior, to cover, hide.

I look into the innocence of water –  
Shadows crowd my eyes, my face.

Cleansing is withheld; my heart is stone:  
No touch of peace, no drop of joy.

Daily, the sun rises on my guilt,  
And sets on nights of tight contrition.

How will you punish me, my God?  
How will you end my fearful sin?

Be merciful my God. Let me suffer  
Shame; contempt of palace women.

Grant a little of your infinite grace.  
Let me have a good end, my God,  
My loving God.

## To A Young Poet

You asked how poems are made, and quick  
Afterthought, our hopes and dreams.

They are grown, I said,  
Thinking mostly of the first.

*How?*

Obviously you listen; be more sensitive and intent;  
Curious and comprising. Grip incessant worlds; catch  
Silences born of anger. Bend light. Cherish irregularities;  
Accost fresh endings. Reap tides. Put magic into blood  
About to revolt to unleash.

I said, watch for that tingling you can't yet name which  
Wraps and fevers that moment you first touch her.  
Then those little things, like an accidental thought,  
Or how a burst of dumplings, juicy beyond themselves,  
Circulates in you.

I too had dreams. Sixty years older, frayed around  
Edges, unlike yours. At sundry times some text each  
The other for no reason. Fun. But hopes are steadier.  
They followed me. A few proved hollow. Others apt,  
Flush with twinkling stars.

Cup beginnings in your hands. Words fly, turn, twist,  
Then summersault; start and stop. They are butterflies.  
They are birds. They are you. Watch wings grow; guess  
Their grammar as you note how their tales fill out. In time  
They fly. A special moment.

They need to be pressed, these words. Cajoled for body,  
Mood and voice. Punctuate to shift them higher. Also  
Search among relatives as some secrete better speech.  
Hunting for the snark is never easy. Always semi-final.  
You will learn that, near the end,

    The creature you energised,  
        Begins to stalk its maker.  
Keep engaging. Stay certain.  
    It will ripen, patiently,  
        Then come to you.

## About the Poet

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 (1980 – 1991). The awards he has received include, the National Book Development Council of Singapore Book Award for Poetry thrice, the South East Asian Write Award, Singapore's Cultural Medallion, the ASEAN Cultural and Communication Award in Literature, the Raja Rao Award and Singapore's Meritorious Service Medal. Poetry Festival Singapore (2015) is his most recent start-up.

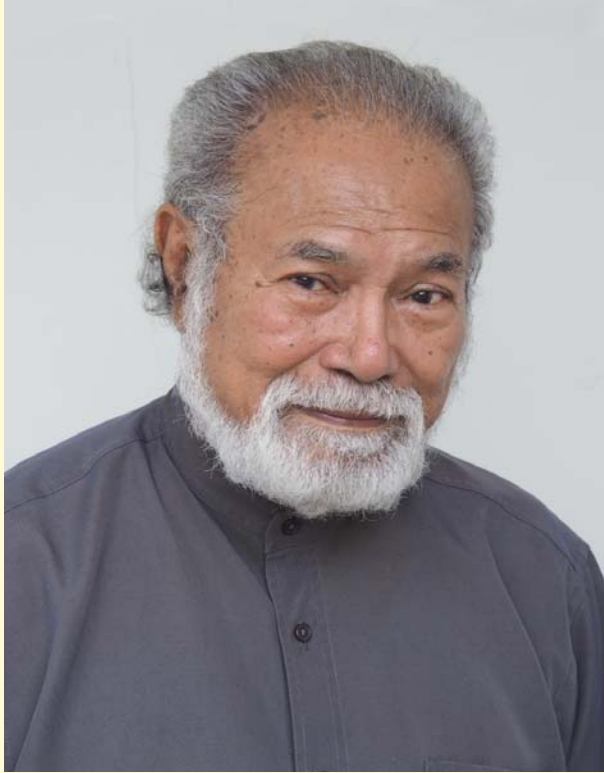


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