

# *Common Life*

*Drawings and Poems*



Ho Chee Lick  
Anne Lee Tzu Pheng

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Ho Chee Lick  
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*rooted in the commonplace  
an extraordinary grace*

remembering our friend

**ARTHUR YAP**

(1943–2006)

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# *From the Authors*

This is a book that we hope will, among other things, do at least two things for art and poetry. As collaborators in this work, our aspirations as artists are similar though we work in different media.

Firstly, our focus affirms that common human life brings us more directly into the character and soul of our nation. What is common bonds us as a people more closely, and makes the book's contents more universally accessible. Insofar as we believe in art that shares experiences that connect the most people, this collection draws its subjects from common places.

Secondly, and this the poems, especially, hope to establish more clearly: that poetry need not invest in the outlandish, the literary, and the scholarly to be able to transform the way its subject is seen. Empathy and insights being the nature and the distinction of poetry, its function is to illuminate its subject by rooting it in shared human experience and prompting thought and reflection. Similarly, for art, an open and receptive sensibility may find deeply moving subjects in the simple and the ordinary.

We wish very much to situate our work in this collection in the commonplace, where the human heart speaks most poignantly to us. In the same spirit, we pay tribute to a fellow artist/writer, our friend Arthur Yap, who also saw the transcending power of art, both through words and paint, as he used it to transform the mundane into the memorable.

## *Chee Lick, for himself in this collaboration*

There is a saying in Chinese, 衣食住行 (*yi shi zhu xing*), which refers to the everyday life of the common people: clothing, food, housing, transport. Since 2014, this four-in-one theme has been the main focus of my art.

With crayons and stained paper, I wander around neighbourhoods in Singapore, doing art—observing, perceiving, looking for that “something”; seeing it accidentally, hopefully; having strong, often unspeakable, feelings about it; drawing breathlessly ... What I look at, what I see, how I feel and what/how I draw, are part of my living, being, growing and learning.

There are unforgettable moments when a lovely stranger (a child, labourer or old man/woman ...) comes close to me, giving me a very warm smile, having a nice chat with me, offering me a bottle of water, even a packet of food ...

I am always excited about any viewer of my work seeing and feeling as they do individually, originally and creatively, totally independent of what is in my mind/heart.

Tzu Pheng and I interact and share with each other happily in this way. I have a lot to learn from her poetry.



## *Tzu Pheng, for herself in this collaboration*

Most things in the world around us have poems hidden in them waiting to be revealed, if we have the will to pay attention, and see them with the heart. Everyday life based on the basic material essentials—*yi shi zhu xing* (clothing, food, housing, transport)—may not seem like a very inspiring place for poets to visit; for the everyday may be too familiar to excite feeling or thought. However, working with an artist like Chee Lick, I had the advantage of an education in seeing; his feel for the ordinary, unremarkable scenes and objects around us selected the subjects for the poems. The challenge was then to know how to explore what is seen, using the linguistic stretch that words can command. This was my task in this collaborative effort.

The poetry of common life is what this collaboration draws on; the experience of this, I hope, dispels the notion that artists are only inspired by exalted, “important” subjects. For what is “inspiration” but that which provokes the artist’s, and the writer’s, sense that truth has a deeper vein that we have the tools to mine, and there is no rest for us till we set about doing so?

Chee Lick’s drawings, too, proffered in part a lesson I have found most useful for my own writing. The seemingly casual, swiftly executed strokes, the subjects chosen with a kind of confident abandon during his wanderings about the public housing estates—these spoke to me of balancing careful choice with spontaneity, a generous embracing of the sundry, the random, the taken-for-granted, so much a part of the life we see around us.

Even the deliberate staining of the paper on which Chee Lick does his drawings suggests to me that the artist's eye may not assume that it observes reality adequately, if at all. Each of us sees life "through a glass darkly", to borrow a biblical phrase. This aspect of the drawings presents to me a different challenge because of my own desired role for the poems, which is to penetrate reality with substantial clarity whilst creating openings for the reader's thought to go beyond what the poems give him immediately. I like poems to offer clear glimpses into that larger, more complex reality they often point to without trying to address it. I have applied my writer's eye to another kind of clarity behind the stained surfaces of the drawings; the stains were a gesture at truth and a nudge to go beyond surfaces to a deeper truth.

I am much indebted to Chee Lick for inviting me to look at our neighbourhoods with his artist's eye, and being given the opportunity to use his perspectives as seedbed for poems.



## Gallery

The space our home sits on is a gallery for paintings, movies, theatre, sports, bazaars, festivals, playgrounds of sorts, hardly deserving its common name *void deck*.

If you go down to the ground there are  
dramas, panoramas, packaged and ready for you.  
Look one way and you may see trees rocking  
birds asleep, or leaves in conversation;  
another may offer entertaining choice,  
mynah wars erupting in stereophonic noise;  
or the cool moves of wise cats marking territory  
with sneaking dignity. Further afield a football  
fight, the ball escaping to vanishing point  
in the night, its torturers trailing.  
You are seldom alone; actors and players walk out  
of the scenes towards you, the light smiles  
or frowns as the hours wear on, but at any time  
the gallery reminds you to come down to earth  
from that parcel of air in the sky.

Who knows, paying visits to this gallery  
with its living exhibits framed for you,  
no matter on which level you live,  
you may surprise yourself in discovering  
your artist's eye, and learn to see void decks  
with new insight, a world at your feet,  
never empty by day or night.





408 Woodlands St 41  
H 2017

# *Our Country*

You can tell by the flags we display  
the nature of our households:  
you can probably tell what we speak,  
what we wear and what we eat;  
if you look carefully, our GDP and GPI  
may be evident, and certainly you can see  
the demographics of our inhabitants.

Although we are different we breathe  
the same air; are born, live and die  
under the same sky. In earth's time  
and space our stories continue  
without and beyond us, although  
no one may see. But today  
we are here, and our flags fly free.

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