



I FOUND A BONE
AND OTHER POEMS



TEO KAH LENG

I FOUND A BONE
AND OTHER POEMS

TEO KAH LENG

CONTENTS

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION	6
TEO KAH LENG'S MALAYAN POETRY	11
by Eriko Ogihara-Schuck	
Endnotes	31
Bibliography	37
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	39
SECTION I <i>as brittle and as light as coral in the sea</i>	41
Arip	42
O For A Quiet Spot Somewhere	44
Symphony In A Pool	45
The Woodpecker	46
Singapore	47
The Leghorn Rooster	49
The Magic Robin	50
The Cicada	51
A Chinese Wayang	53
The Ronggeng	54
White Perahus	56
Beside The Chempaka Tree	57
To The Sakai	58
The Rhododendron	61
SECTION II <i>to face the rising tide</i>	63
Elizabeth Walk	64
The Old Boatman	66
Raja Chulan	68
The Bees	71
I Found A Bone	72
The Bell of Peking	75
The Flute In A Bamboo Grove	85
The End of A Kelong	86
SECTION III <i>is this the way of hope and faith?</i>	87
The Fighting Fish	88
The Turkey	90
O Little Tailor Bird	91
I Love To Hear The Bulbul Sing	92

The Lotus	93
I Met A Beggar Man	94
Change Alley	95
I Do Not Wish For Wealth Untold	100
What A Happy Breed Of Men	101
Intermezzo	103
Astrothoughts	104
West Of The Genting Pass	106
Kassim	107
A Prayer On Christmas Eve	111
SECTION IV <i>I heard a voice reply</i>	113
The Barau Barau	114
What Shall I Build For You?	115
My Coal-Black Hen	116
The Frangipani	117
Bunga Rampai	118
We'll Climb The Rainbow	120
On Elgin Bridge	121
The Atlas Moth	123
MY FATHER	124
<i>by Anne Teo</i>	
PROSE	
Flashes From The Past	132
Serangoon Long Ago	141
Serangoon Today	144
Farewell Speech	147
THE SONG OF THE BRAVE	150
<i>(Montfort School Anthem) by Teo Kah Leng</i>	
ABOUT THE EDITORS	151
ABOUT THE IMPRINT	152

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

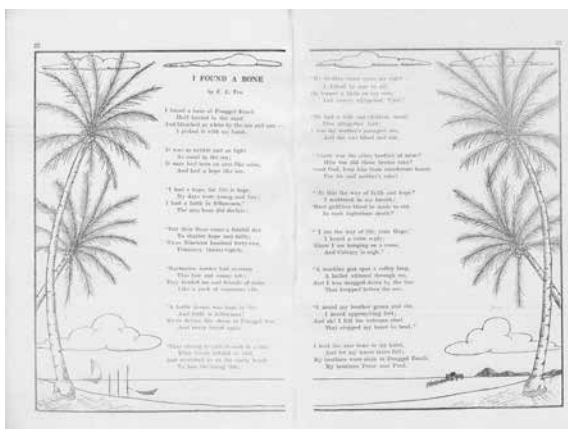
Eriko Ogihara-Schuck:

MY ENCOUNTER with the poetic works of Teo Kah Leng was the unexpected result of a two-year project on Francis P Ng's book-length poem, *E.M.S.R.* (1937). Narrating a pre-war train journey on the Federated Malay States Railways between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, this poem has so far been considered the first notable work of English poetry by a Singaporean author. Three years ago in the summer of 2013, in the course of my textual analysis of the poem, I serendipitously discovered that Ng was a pseudonym and the author's real name was Teo Poh Leng. But no further clues as to his whereabouts and his family members cropped up.

The turning point was when I sought help from *The Straits Times* and Akshita Nanda's article, "Do You Know Teo Poh Leng?", came out in *The Sunday Times* on February 22, 2015. The very day the article was published, Mr Samuel Chia promptly contacted Nanda, suggesting that the late Teo Kah Leng, a former teacher at Holy Innocents' English School, later renamed Montfort School, was perhaps Poh Leng's brother. Now in his sixties, and a former pupil at St Gabriel's School which was Holy Innocents' sister school, Mr Chia remembered encountering Kah Leng's poem, "I Found A Bone", in Holy Innocents' annual in the mid-1950s. Still too young to read the entire poem, he was first attracted to the bucolic pencil drawings of a peaceful landscape with coconut trees and the beach, and he asked his elder sister to recite the poem for him. But soon he was to discover that the story was anything other than peaceful. The poem was about the narrator's brothers, "Peter and Paul", who were senselessly executed in the Punggol Beach massacre in February, 1942.

This poem immediately struck him, never disappearing from his memory.

I knew from my previous archival research that Poh Leng's Christian name was Paul, and the Chinese names Poh Leng and Kah Leng indeed sounded like a pair of siblings' names. So I had an instinct that Samuel's guess was accurate. And when I read "I Found A Bone", my instinct was confirmed that "Paul" was indeed meant to be Poh Leng. In this poem, the bone that the narrator finds at Punggol Beach and guesses to be Paul's eventually obtains his own poetic voice, narrating in rhythms and rhymes the very last moment of his life from his point of view. And this poem even includes the date when he was taken away by the Japanese, thus shockingly serving as Poh Leng's death certificate, which I could not find anywhere.



*"I Found A Bone" published in The Holy Innocents' English School Annual in 1955.
Courtesy of Montfort Schools.*

When I finally met Ms Anne Teo, the daughter of Teo Kah Leng, I found out further that in addition to "I Found A Bone", her father had written many more poems. Anne showed me a worn-out manuscript titled "50 Poems by Teo Kah Leng". She said that he meant it to be a present for her. Some years after

failing to publish his poetry collection in the early 1960s, he compiled this manuscript so that his daughter would be able to read and keep it for herself. I also learned that many of his poems in this manuscript had previously been published in his school's annual as well as Malaya's post-war educational magazine, *Young Malaysians*.

When I read the poems, I was struck by the fact that the two brothers were writing so differently, even oppositely. Poh Leng's writing embraced the style of the Modernists', such as T S Eliot's; denouncing easy-to-follow poetry, Poh Leng pursued complexity and produced, using his own word, "hieroglyphics". As such, I ended up rereading *F.M.S.R.* numerous times, trying to decipher the meanings of its irregular rhythms and metres, symbols, and metaphors. But Kah Leng's poems turned out to be exactly the opposite of Poh Leng's: it was amazingly easy to follow, straightforward, and simple. And I ended up rereading his poems purely to enjoy their narratives and the beautiful rhymes and rhythms he used.

Kah Leng's writing style clearly reflects that he was a teacher-poet who saw a pedagogical value in reading and writing poetry. Like many other English teachers of the 1950s and '60s, he adored poetry as a means of teaching pupils basics about English skills, including pronunciation. He also believed that rhythms and rhymes are primary attractions to both his pupils and an adult audience, and hence poetry is also an effective way of transmitting important values in life.

Kah Leng's poems recreate the drama of the early scenes of pre-1965 Singapore, at the same time reflecting the values that have endured until the present. The poems have been forgotten, but had at one time caught the heart of his school's as well as Malaya's teachers and pupils. I am pleased that fifteen years after the author's death at age 92, Teo Kah Leng's poetry has been found again, and might now find a place in the hearts of readers today.

Kum Suning:

WHEN ANNE first presented us with her father's original collection of 50 penned works, we were struck by its particularity of subject, imagery, and rhyme. It was immediately clear that these were precious works from another time and place in our history. We allowed ourselves time—time to fully imbibe and assess Teo Kah Leng's voice through his work, and sought to find a thread that could string these poems together, to effectively present the voice and work of Teo Kah Leng as an intrinsic whole.

And it is a wondrous realisation, a beatific reminder—in this time and age—that words wield their unique power, retaining the heart of their maker, even when the maker is absent.

Teo Kah Leng was a man of faith, evidenced by the testimonies from his colleagues and friends, and much of his poetry references his beliefs. It was this outstanding trait that we adopted as an overarching motif, and expanding from it, *a pilgrim's journey*, that we hope the collection would reflect.

Here we emphasise that it is not our intention to frame the structure as specific only to particular faiths, thereby closing off other broader and more diverse associations. What the proposed structure hopes to reflect on, and refer to is that universal journey of life that one takes—regardless of one's belief in a god or not. The faithful call it a pilgrimage; others, perhaps as suggested—the journey of life.

In keeping to the fidelity of Teo's poetry, we drew lines from one of Teo's poems to serve as section markers. Apart from being a striking and evocative piece confronting the anguish of war, "I Found A Bone" became an apparent choice as it bore thematic similarities to the structure, and was in fact the poem that had first brought Teo's works to light.

Throughout the editing process, we were also intentional about keeping the original spellings that Teo had used to preserve the authenticity and flavour of that epoch. Teo's prose pieces, which provide further range and expression to his thoughts and person, are also included in this collection for the reader to gain a fuller appreciation of the poet.

Serendipitously, as this uncovering of brother-poets has been, both objects in the book titles of the brothers' two poetry collections refer to the same person. Be it happenstance or fate, we believe theirs and their family's journeys have come full circle—and we thank them for their enduring gift of poetry.

August 2016

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TEO KAH Leng (1909–2001) was born in Singapore to a Teochew family and was a former principal of the Primary Section of Montfort School (earlier named Holy Innocents' English School). His poems and proses were published especially during the 1950s and '60s up to his retirement. Twenty-six poems appeared in *Young Malaysians* and his school's annual.



Teo Kah Leng

O For A Quiet Spot Somewhere

We've lost the art of leisurely life
Which our father knew so well,
Say, half a hundred years ago,
As any old man can tell.

We're ever in a hurry and flurry,
We've hardly a moment to think;
And the constant bustle and hustle befuddle
And make a poor chap blink.

We boast of the car to whirl us along
To work or to keep a date;
And yet we are ever haunted by
The fear of being late.

We've scarcely time our food to savour,
Our drink we hastily drain;
Our fathers chewed and sipped with relish,
And suffered no gastric pain.

At mid-night, or at a later hour,
Into our bed we crawl;
But even before we've finished a dream
We hear the alarm's call.

O for a quite spot somewhere
Far from the maddening rush
Where there is time for everything
And listening to a thrush.

The Flute In A Bamboo Grove

I cannot sleep, I cannot sleep –

It is no use to try!

I cannot sleep because a flute

Is wailing somewhere nigh.

It is wailing outside in the grove

To the hushed and lonesome night,

Telling some touching tale of love

Or a mortal's painful plight.

What is it singing to the night

So very plaintively?

It aches my heart to hear its sweet

Yet mirthless melody.

Could it be singing about a lass

Keeping her tryst in vain,

Or a wife awaiting her warrior lord

Who in a war was slain?

Or sobbing out a broken troth

And a maiden in death's throes;

Or the wrongs of a heartless wretch called son

Who has brought his mother woes?

Perhaps it is echoing wistfully

The thoughts of an exile here

Dreaming of home in far Cathay

And spouse and children dear?

The flute is wailing in the grove

Of sighing bamboos tall,

Wailing as though its heart would break,

And I cannot sleep at all!

O Little Tailor Bird

O Little Tailor Bird

With a dainty russet head,
You seek the quiet hedge
And through its lanes you tread.

Though you can trill quite well
And tease me with a mew,
More often do I hear
A simple chirp from you.

But with what pains you make
Your nest with two leaves tough
Sewn firmly with a straw
And lined with lallang fluff.

Like you, O Tailor Bird,
I love a lonesome place
Where I may have a home
And pass unseen my days.

The Atlas Moth

From slumber deep she came into the world
And in the sun her beautiful wings unfurled;
And in a day her work is fully done,
Her life with all its joys completely run.
And now she hangs upon a plantain leaf,
Her patterns stark, a thing without grief,
Untroubled by regret or fear of shame,
Returning to oblivion whence she came.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

KUM SUNING is a literary editor at Ethos Books.

DR ERIKO OGIHARA-SCHUCK is a Lecturer in American Studies at TU Dortmund University, Germany. She is the co-editor of *Finding Francis: A Poetic Adventure* (Ethos Books, 2015) and the author of *Miyazaki's Animism Abroad: The Reception of Japanese Religious Themes by American and German Audiences* (McFarland, USA, 2014). Her current major research interest is cultural relations between Singapore and the United States from the nineteenth century to the present. Aside from being a Visiting Fellow at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, she is also a European Postdoc Fellow at the Eccles Centre for North American Studies at the British Library.

ABOUT ETHOS BOOKS

Giving voice to emerging and exciting writers from diverse backgrounds, we help foster an environment in which literature and the arts not only survive, but thrive.

That's why our authors and their ideas come first. By taking a collaborative approach to publishing, we bring each author's voice and vision to fruition.

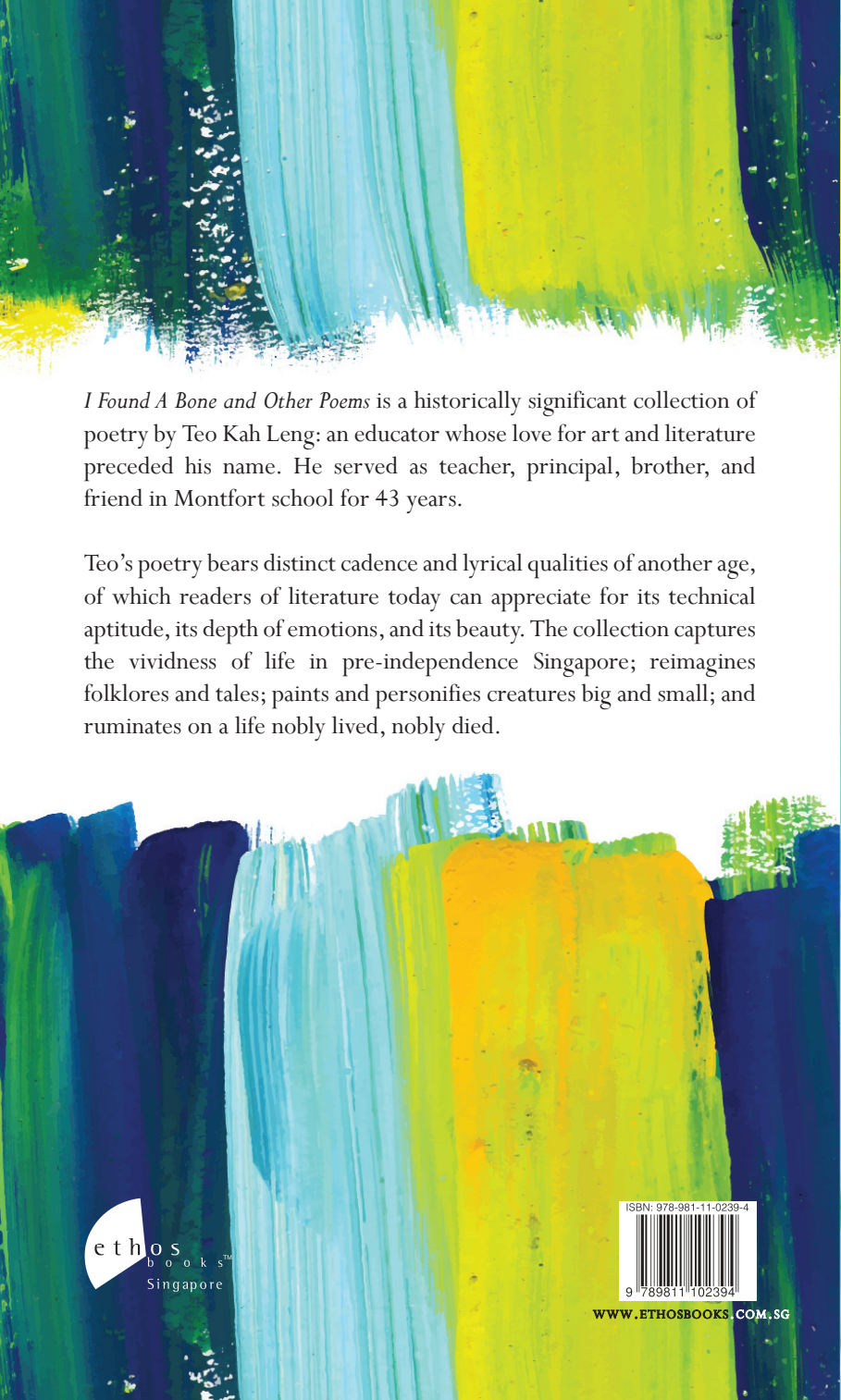
We are always open to new ideas: different ways of working and fresh ways of delivering the unparalleled satisfaction only a good book can bring.

Established in 1997, Ethos Books, an imprint of Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd, aims to create books that capture the spirit of a people and reflect the ethos of our changing times.

Visit us at www.ethosbooks.com.sg



Fresh. DIFFERENT. Enduring.



I Found A Bone and Other Poems is a historically significant collection of poetry by Teo Kah Leng: an educator whose love for art and literature preceded his name. He served as teacher, principal, brother, and friend in Montfort school for 43 years.

Teo's poetry bears distinct cadence and lyrical qualities of another age, of which readers of literature today can appreciate for its technical aptitude, its depth of emotions, and its beauty. The collection captures the vividness of life in pre-independence Singapore; reimagines folklores and tales; paints and personifies creatures big and small; and ruminates on a life nobly lived, nobly died.

