

dear reader,

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Welcome to a world that is now yours.

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Where *sayang*, *relationships*, *journeys*, or *home*, is
at once your experience as it is the poet's.

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Take off the book jacket; what do you see?
Draw it—design it—shape it. Pick up a
drawing or writing instrument, and create your
own cover. Lines spark code.

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lines spark code
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*lines
spark
code*

edited by
christine chia & aaron lee



Contents

Editors' Introduction	Christine Chia & Aaron Lee	6
• <i>sayang</i>		
The Great Escape	Alfian Sa'at	11
Man and Woman	Mayo Martin	13
Again Thinking	Chandran Nair	15
Hotel	Cyril Wong	16
explaining a thousand cranes	Joshua Ip	17
From Vincent	Tania De Rozario	18
This I Fear Most	Ng Yi-Sheng	19
Between Here and There	Pooja Nansi	20
the last leaf	Christine Chia	21
Days like a Prolonged Parachute After a Space Flight	Jason Wee	22
The Word	Felix Cheong	23
• <i>relationships</i>		
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Child	Grace Chia	27
in absentia: the power of the sun	Yeow Kai Chai	29
2 mothers in a hdb playground	Arthur Yap	32
Printing Money	Toh Hsien Min	34
A Letter to My Unborn Son	Aaron Lee	36
Between Forgetting and Clinging to	Yong Shu Hoong	37
Chopsticks	Cheryl Julia Wee	38
White Poems	Aaron Maniam	39
North Bridge Road	Theophilus Kwek	40
Ethiopian Famine Victims: Mother and Child	Lee Tzu Pheng	41
Vietnam	Goh Poh Seng	42
Power Lines	Marc Nair	44

• *journeys*

Alien Love Song	Jennifer Anne Champion	47
The River	Edwin Thumboo	49
Weekend of the Caves	Paul Tan	50
A Bridge of Birds	Teng Qian Xi	51
Koel calls	Ann Ang	52
Starry Starry Night	Desmond Kon	53
	Zhicheng-Mingdé	
La Mian in Melbourne	Boey Kim Cheng	54
Route	Jerrold Yam	56
Homecoming	Alvin Pang	57

• *home*

Equatorial	Leong Liew Geok	59
Raindancing	Gwee Li Sui	60
Cicada-flung Dawn	Ho Poh Fun	62
House of Cards	Loh Guan Liang	64
my city, my canvas	Heng Siok Tian	65
Delinquent Days	Eric Tinsay Valles	67
Crossing Over	Kirpal Singh	69
A Brief History of Toa Payoh	Koh Buck Song	71
Singapore Night Song	Simon Tay	73

Notes on the poems	75
About the poets	81
About the imprint	96

Editors' Introduction

"A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. The man who never reads lives only one." — George R.R. Martin

One day, robots will write poetry. But not just yet. If DNA is the code of life, poetry is the code of the human soul. Every feeling, no matter how ugly or arcane, can be found in poetry, and every feeling can be sparked by poetry. At the same time, poetry is more than merely a series of words put together to portray a person's thoughts and feelings. Rather it is that extraordinary combination of thought, creativity and expression that seeks out the human condition.

The 41 poems in this anthology were specially picked for your enjoyment and study, from among thousands of Singapore literary creations. Like stars dotting the night sky, these cultural artefacts are just waiting to be asked "What is your story?" Some of the poems are well-known, and when you meet them between these pages you will greet each other with a certain familiarity ("*I thought I'd see you here!*"). In fact, a number of them know one another, and if you listen carefully as you read, you will hear them conversing among themselves. The poems were selected for a certain literary quality, such that they speak for themselves; they have made their home in the wider world, and often even owe their lineage to literary creations outside of Singapore.

For example, if you read Loh Guan Liang's "House of Cards" first and then Philip Larkin's "Essential Beauty" (which inspired the former), assuming that you have never read either before, you will find that you respond differently after reading both. Both poems bear a different topography of ideas and experience, at once specific and universal, familiar and new. In poetry as in

life, every poem you *really* read, like every person you *really* love, changes you. That is how you live a thousand lives.

Some of the poems (e.g. Arthur Yap's "2 mothers in a hdb playground" and Lee Tzu Pheng's "Ethiopian Famine Victims: Mother and Child") in this book are already well-known, and have been anthologised before. Other poems may be less prominent because they are relatively new (e.g. Mayo Martin's "Man and Woman" and Ann Ang's "Koel calls") or the poet has not published prolifically (e.g. Aaron Maniam and Teng Qian Xi). Nonetheless, they all deserve to be read and pondered.

Due to constraints of space we could only feature some of the poets whom we think everyone should read, and each poet could only be represented in this book by one poem. Two poems in this book (Ng Yi-Sheng's "This I Fear Most" and Aaron Maniam's "White Poems") are being published for the very first time anywhere. Happily, this reflects the dynamism of the current literary landscape of Singapore, where it is no exaggeration to say that more than a thousand new poems bloom every year, especially in the "cruellest month" of April (hat-tip to T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"), because of Singpowrimo, a burgeoning Facebook community of more than 3,800 members who all pledge to write at least a poem a day in April.

When looking over the selection, we decided to tag each of the poems. All of them ended up with more than one tag, and we picked four tags to name the sections for this anthology. A word on tags and sections: a tag is only a suggestion, a nudge or a wink; each section is not a definition, not a wall, not a silo, not an executive order. To paraphrase Walt Whitman, a poem contains multitudes.

'Sayang' means love in Malay but it also means 'what a pity, what a waste, what a loss', and naturally, *sayang* starts off the collection. That said, readers are at liberty to engage the

sections in whichever order they prefer—although we suspect that many will read this section first.

Some of the poems under *relationships* could very well marry the poems in *sayang* but some cannot and because poems can get lonely too, the editors decided not to split them up.

Every poem in *journeys* invokes literal and/or metaphorical dislocation, befitting Singaporeans' travel lust and restlessness.

home follows *journeys* because “true voyage is return”, in a nod to the famous Ursula Le Guin quote from *The Dispossessed*, a book that is as relevant to our age of forced migrations as George Orwell's *1984*.

One day, people may not read poems. In an era of disruptive technologies, man may attain knowledge, even culture, by some other means. But not yet. With its gaze into the unimaginable futures that advance towards us apace, this anthology is titled *Lines Spark Code*—derived from the poem “Power Lines” by Marc Nair that is included in this book.

When you read these poems, we hope you will connect with them, and love them as much as we have. We hope that these poems will offer you the quiet so often lacking in the din of daily life, so that you can hear the music of another human soul speaking, one-on-one, to you. *Let these poems read you too.*

Christine Chia and Aaron Lee
Singapore
April 2017

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The Great Escape

Alfian Sa'at

We will wake at dawn. You will fumble
for the car keys under your pillow.

The engine quivering: another kind of dawn.
I wind down the windows and a breeze

steals in to unfasten our smiles.
Each traffic light stands ceremonial.

Each blush of green approves of us
stealing away like this, with suitcases,

and enough memories to stay awake in motels
while I watch you sleeping on your side

and vice-versa. The radio plays our songs.
We only know the words to the choruses

but that is enough for now. My elbow
leans out from the window-edge

and picks up fresh gossip from the wind.
A secret dialogue, punctuated with caresses.

In the rear-view mirror our eyes search each other.
Who will we blame on the day we awake

to discover we had left something behind?
Who will we blame for what sneaked in

the last leaf

Christine Chia

*“Over the years, she influenced my writing style.
Now I write in short sentences, in the active voice.”*

— Lee Kuan Yew’s eulogy for his wife

A ghazal

Is the last leaf falling? I ask myself.
There is no one left now, except myself.

It’s become my habit to keep living.
The effort’s absurd; I laugh at myself

walking, swimming, cycling in a triathlon for one.
Her race is done; I’ll finish mine myself.

Not many more miles to go now; press has
obituary ready. To read my self

in windy words my wife would pencil out
is a joke she would have enjoyed herself.

“How pompously they write, my dear Harry.
They need me to edit; or you yourself.”

First published in *Separation: a history* by Christine Chia
(Singapore: Ethos Books, 2014)

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relationships

2 mothers in a hdb playground

Arthur Yap

ah beng is so smart,
already he can watch tv & know the whole story.
your kim cheong is also quite smart,
what boy is he in the exam?
this playground is not too bad, but i'm always
so worried, car here, car there.

at exam time, it's worse.

because you know why?

kim cheong eats so little.

give him some complan. my ah beng was like that,
now he's different, if you give him anything
he's sure to finish it all up.

sure, sure, cheong's father buys him
vitamins but he keeps it inside his mouth
& later gives it to the cat.

i scold like mad but what for?

if i don't see it, how can i scold?

on saturday, tv showed a new type,
special for children, why don't you call
his father buy some? maybe they are better.

Ethiopian Famine Victims: Mother and Child

Lee Tzu Pheng

Her flesh and blood
are dying in her arms;
she does not reproach us,
she does not see us,
only the death she had
to give life to, the promised one.
The child has been made
to be claimed by this dry, unyielding land;
thus, as clay, it must return.
However lovingly she draws her shawl about him
shroud-like it remains, and she
the spectre that must attend his burial.

I have seen another Mother
holding her Son upon her lap
almost exactly like this—
inspirers of reverent adoration.

What are these pictures worth
if they do not impel
that desperate knocking
we must unlock our souls to?

Why is poetry shamed by its own words?

First published in *The Brink of An Amen* by Lee Tzu Pheng
(Singapore: Times Books International, 1991)

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A Bridge of Birds

Teng Qian Xi

Ice-pale spikes jut from canteen lights
at bird-toes ringed with dust.
All railings are the colour of rust.
The flag bleeds adolescent reds and whites
as a courtyard of tongues swallow *happiness*
on too many dim blue mornings. We scatter
when the sun rises. It does not matter;

this is nothing for the world or you to hear.
Listen to this: two lovers meet once a year
on a highway of wings stretching over the skies.
When we talk our words shatter into shrieks and shit
battering the air, unkempt and lit.

A bridge of birds is enough if nobody lies.

First published in *They hear salt crystallising* by Teng Qian Xi
(Singapore: Firstfruits, 2010)

Homecoming

Alvin Pang

On that day the tide will turn
and softly bring its crested head
to rest on the cheek of shore.

The jambu tree will shed
moist leaves, returning to earth
its debt of tears.

Every cloud will move
into its chosen place. Even the sun
will understand their boldness.

For so long I have listened to the call
of mountains in their loneliness,
the river's thirst to follow ocean.

I know the years trapped in you
like so many birds, their wings
the very flutter of your heart.

At that hour, I will uncage
your body's sadness with my own,
and make the sound locks make

springing open.

First published in *City of Rain* by Alvin Pang
(Singapore: Ethos Books, 2003)

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Equatorial

Leong Liew Geok

We were born into this:
Clogged pores, clammy limbs,
Sweat which itches and stains
Collars and armpits, souring nostrils.
Wrapped in blanket sheath,
Plants aren't pierced by ice
And trees don't save for spring;
A yellow sun burns harder,
Foliage throws a greener rash;
Fruit and flower clash for brightness
And rain's soap opera, the monsoon,
Drenches us into missing the sun.

Wet or dry, we use walkways, porches,
Umbrellas, trees whose shades—
Probed by tentacles of heat—
We swelter in. Let tourists bake
Themselves on sand. We love our
Air-conditioned places, at least
Till evening draws the sun-shy
And the breeze, if there,
Takes the humid out of circulation.
Through day, by night, the nature
In which termites breed unseen
And appetites cease only for death
Takes no rest: the equatorial floods
Profligate air, saturating.

First published in *Women Without Men* by Leong Liew Geok
(Singapore: Times Books International, 2000)

House of Cards

Loh Guan Liang

After Philip Larkin's "Essential Beauty"

People smile so much in advertisements these days,
especially those with little girls running away
from impossible lawns and immaculate fountains,
their arms open like gates. Dreamers slam
right into them, mistaking fences for home
or Eden moated by apartments and gyms.
Her parents and grandparents—it is easy to assume
familial relations here—stand further back,
well-represented in pairs like cards on the table.

Behind the airbrushed family, looming out of proportion,
a promise sits on furniture under wraps, appliances
unpaid in boxes. Train tracks and prestigious schools
filter into glowing clouds, a promising new day
played close to the chest beyond the sunset.
We watch the little girls run to a full house
that does not pay out, but one we cash in
all the same, because that is how we imagine
social mobility per square metre looks like.

First published in *Bitter Punch* by Loh Guan Liang
(Singapore: Ethos Books, 2016)