

Little Things: an anthology of poetry  
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# LITTLE THINGS

an anthology of poetry

Edited by  
Loh Chin Ee, Angelia Poon and Esther Vincent



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# INTRODUCTION

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LOH CHIN EE, ANGELIA POON AND ESTHER VINCENT

Many good anthologies of Singapore Literature exist. Our personal favourites include *No Other City*, edited by Alvin Pang and Aaron Lee, and *& Words*, edited by Edwin Thumboo. However, we realised as teachers and readers that it was difficult to find Singapore poetry that would appeal to younger adolescent readers. That, in a nutshell, was the challenge we set ourselves. In putting together this anthology, we wanted to move beyond the oft-dealt with topics of identity and nation-building to focus on the “little things” of everyday living. While issues of identity and nation-building have their place in Singapore poetry, we felt that it was important to make available poems that celebrate, reflect, and complicate life and living in Singapore and beyond. Through the juxtaposition of Singapore and selected international poems, we hope that readers can enhance their understanding and appreciation of both Singapore and the world around them.

In our search for poems from Singapore, we considered poems both published and unpublished,

and were especially keen to include poems by young Singaporeans. Beyond raiding the National Library for published works by poets both well-known and new, we looked for poems published in the *Quarterly Literary Review of Singapore*, an online literary journal that is a rich source of creative works. Some poems were also selected from issues of *Eye on the World*, an annual publication of the Creative Arts Programme, jointly organised by The Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore and The Gifted Education Branch, Ministry of Education, Singapore. We were fortunate to have the opportunity to work with Professor Shirley Geok-Lin Lim from the University of California, Santa Barbara, who was in Singapore as the Ngee Ann Kongsi Distinguished Visiting Professor at the National University of Singapore. She sent us a collection of poems (*Red Pulse*) her students wrote during her creative writing course, *Chap Books and Digital Poetry*. We found many gems in her collection, more than we could select for this anthology. Lastly, we issued an open call for poems through the National Arts Council and were delighted to receive an encouraging number of original poems from poets in Singapore and beyond.

This anthology would not have been possible without the encouragement and help of various people. Special thanks should go to Chan Wai Han and Fong Hoe Fang at Ethos for their enthusiasm and support. We salute them for their unstinting support of Singapore literature. To Gavin Goo, our talented

illustrator, thank you for the wonderful drawings that add a different dimension to our reading of the poems. To Adeleena Araib and Tay Khai Xin at Ethos, thank you for your work on the layout of the anthology. To Chew Yi Wei and Lim Wei Yi, thank you for helping with the preparation of the manuscript and proof-reading.

Finally, we would like to dedicate this anthology to our former and current students at the National Institute of Education (for Angelia and Chin Ee) and St. Hilda's Secondary School (for Esther) for making teaching a joyful challenge.

# LITTLE

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# THINGS

## Keeping Time

By Colin Tan

When will this class end?

I feel

minutes

until the hour

clicking

ticking by

like

the grasshopper in

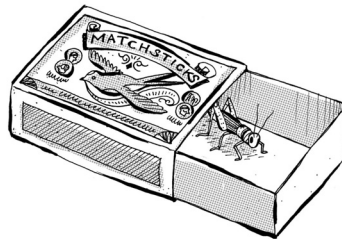
the matchbox

we caught yesterday

while

skipping through the field

after school



## I Can Read Now

By John Jenkins

*I am in the Bubs grade*

*Miss Math-yous has black hair*

*She has chalks and the blackboard*

*She does Singing and Spelling*

The first time ever this word lights up for me,  
S-U-N, I spell it out, *SUN* is running  
on three letter legs and jumps out from  
the board, we spell it out and it's my turn now,  
*SUN* I say, *Es-You-En*, is just the same  
as the sun in the sky that shines all day,  
she points to it outside, then points to three  
gold letters and a picture of the sun,  
and a sound is in my mind, it says *Sah-un*  
in my own voice, *Es-You-En*,  
three letters from The Alphabet,  
each letter in a row spells it out,  
and we all hear it back again, *SUN!*  
its picture smiles through gold chalk  
and I can read now, my first word is *SUN*  
and it's a new big *JUMP* for me  
I feel it shine, when *SUN* lights up!



## On Turning Ten

*By Billy Collins*

The whole idea of it makes me feel  
like I'm coming down with something,  
something worse than any stomach ache  
or the headaches I get from reading in bad light –  
a kind of measles of the spirit,  
a mumps of the psyche,  
a disfiguring chicken pox of the soul.

You tell me it is too early to be looking back,  
but that is because you have forgotten  
the perfect simplicity of being one  
and the beautiful complexity introduced by two.  
But I can lie on my bed and remember every digit.  
At four I was an Arabian wizard.  
I could make myself invisible  
by drinking a glass of milk a certain way.  
At seven I was a soldier, at nine a prince.

But now I am mostly at the window  
watching the late afternoon light.  
Back then it never fell so solemnly  
against the side of my tree house,  
and my bicycle never leaned against the garage  
as it does today,  
all the dark blue speed drained out of it.

This is the beginning of sadness, I say to myself,  
as I walk through the universe in my sneakers.  
It is time to say good-bye to my imaginary friends,  
time to turn the first big number.

It seems only yesterday I used to believe  
there was nothing under my skin but light.  
If you cut me I could shine.  
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,  
I skin my knees. I bleed.

## In Love, His Grammar Grew

By Stephen Dunn

In love, his grammar grew  
rich with intensifiers, and adverbs fell  
madly from the sky like pheasants  
for the peasantry, and he, as sated  
as they were, lolled under shade trees  
until roused by moonlight  
and the beautiful fraternal twins  
*and* and *but*. Oh that was when  
he knew he couldn't resist  
a conjunction of any kind.

One said *accumulate*, the other  
was a doubter who loved the wind  
and the mind that cleans up after it.

For love

he wanted to break all the rules,  
light a candle behind a sentence  
named Sheila, always running on  
and wishing to be stopped  
by the hard button of a period.  
Sometimes, in desperation, he'd look  
toward a mannequin or a window dresser  
with a penchant for parsing.

But mostly he wanted you, Sheila,  
and the adjectives that could precede  
and change you: *bluesy*, *fly-by-night*,  
*queen of all that is and might be*.

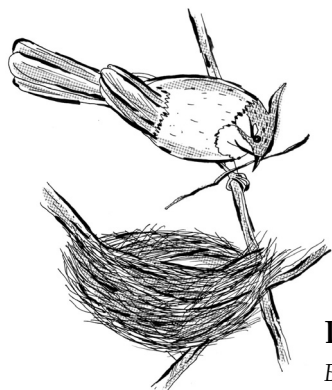
## chope

By Joshua Ip

seems half the work of weddings nowadays  
is all about the asking, bigger better  
bangs and bucks, and every suitor sets a  
higher bar for better men to raise:  
flash mobs and fireworks and fighter rides –  
the shock and aww is how a bride computes  
your manhood, though the snazziest of suits  
will sink without a rock of proper size.

is there an issue of sincerity  
if over coffee, talk turns by and by  
towards the prospect of a hdb?  
would it be disrespectful if I,  
while at a hawker stall, drop to a knee,  
and place a tissue packet on your thigh?





### Love nest

*By Jonathan Liautrakul*

Bulbuls built a nest.  
I looked in their twig-filled home:  
not a single egg.

### I dropped my phone

*By Ng Yin-Ling*

I dropped my phone  
into my soup.  
It plopped – I grasped air –  
too late,  
my phone was in my soup.

I fish  
the half damp carcass,  
shook, I blow  
two precarious  
fingers around its core.

Lift  
one sandy smear  
of egg yolk  
residue  
from its virgin swim.

My palm wipes its skin.  
Furious, I tap  
its unlit screen,  
pull my sleeve, polish the smear  
No, no, no, no –

I dropped my phone  
into my soup.  
It plopped – I grasped air –  
too late,  
my phone was in my soup.

# ON WORDS

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