Little Things: an anthology of poetry
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Contents

Introduction ...................................................... 12

1. Little Things .................................................. 17
   Little Things .................................................. 17
   (written on the Mid-Autumn Festival)
   By Geraldine Heng

   After The Lion Dance ........................................ 18
   By Chris Mooney-Singh

   Nailcutting ..................................................... 21
   (for Frank Lim Chwee Liew, 1922 to 2008)
   By Lim Min Min Dawn

   cutting grass ................................................... 22
   By Aaron Maniam

   The Habit of Leaves .......................................... 23
   By Yong Shu Hoong

   it rains today .................................................. 24
   By Arthur Yap

   Woods in Rain .................................................. 25
   By W. H. Auden

   Ode to a Raindrop ............................................ 26
   By William Wright Harris

   Trust. Weather forecast ................................. 27
   By Tan Wei Ting

   Fog ................................................................. 28
   By Carl Sandburg

   Ice Ball Man .................................................... 29
   By Margaret Leong

   Snack ............................................................. 30
   By Paul Tan

   There’s Always Things to Come Back to the Kitchen for ............................ 31
   By Alison Wong

   Morning relay .................................................. 32
   By Shuntaro Tanikawa
   (Translated by William I. Elliott and Kazuo Kawamura)

   hurtling .......................................................... 33
   (the ‘L’, chicago)
   By Stephanie Ye

   Cyclist ............................................................ 35
   By Lee Tzu Pheng

   Cat Apostrophe ............................................... 36
   (for Emi and Mewf)
   By Aaron Lee

   hover .............................................................. 37
   By Madeleine Lee

   Haikus In The Garden ........................................ 40
   By Janet Baird
## 2. Growing Up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only the moon</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>By Wong May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trouble with Snowmen</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>By Roger McGough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who are you, little i</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>By e.e. cummings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farrer Park</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>By Ann Peters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping Time</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>By Colin Tan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Can Read Now</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>By John Jenkins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Turning Ten</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>By Billy Collins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born Yesterday</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>(for Sally Amis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(for Sally Amis)</td>
<td></td>
<td>By Philip Larkin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>two balloons</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>By Madeleine Lee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Beginning of Speech</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>By Adonis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Translated by Khaled Mattawa)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the Dentist</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>By Ng Yi-Sheng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All In Good Time</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>By Felix Cheong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 3. People Around Us

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Current</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>By Dora Tan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys In Jungle Green</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>By Robert Yeo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinning Circles</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>By Prasatt s/o Arumugam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durian</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>By Gilbert Koh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>close all the windows</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>By Cyril Wong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>By Shirley Lim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Photos</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>By Wendy Gan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Papa’s Waltz</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>By Theodore Roethke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiation</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>By Alvin Pang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The End Of Every Field</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>By Teng Qian Xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits To Your Father</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>By Charmaine L. Carreon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-D</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>By Theophilus Kwek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching My Grandmother Eat Fish</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>By Joanne Leow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## 4. Going Places

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neighbours</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Alfi an Sa’at</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tropical Roots</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Margaret Leong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stamp Collecting</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Boey Kim Cheng</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescription</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Emma Kruse Va’ai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poem From A Tent</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Rapakoshi, Pakistan, 2006)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Heng Siok Tian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Game</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Leong Liew Geok</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Push To Get Your Instant Novel</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(or What Can Never Be)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Ivan Ang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chai</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Marc Daniel Nair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse Me, What Is Your Race?</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Esther Vincent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copernicus For A Singaporean</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Wena Poon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bed</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Muhammad Haji Salleh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everything changes but the sea</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Ruth Tang Yee Ning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 5. Love and Loss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letter From Home</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Grace Chua</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Autumn Mooncakes</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Eileen Chong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Velcro</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Stella Goh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Void Deck Romance</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Diana Johar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Light</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Charles Ghigna</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One note</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By J.D. Mitchell-Lumsden</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Love, His Grammar Grew</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Stephen Dunn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chope</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Joshua Ip</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene From A Marriage</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Richard James Allen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Margaret At Jogyakarta</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Goh Poh Seng</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fist</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Derek Walcott</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dead Crow</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By A. Samad Said</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Hello Green Leaf”</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Raymond G. Falgui</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Late Fragment ............................................ 122
By Raymond Carver

This Is Not A Love Poem .............................. 123
By Peter Huen Kam Fai

In-flight note ........................................... 124
By Judith Rodriguez

The Spider and the Ghost of the Fly .......... 125
By Vachel Lindsay

Missing Snapshot ................................. 126
By Boey Kim Cheng

focus your heart ..................................... 127
By Angeline Yap

old house at ang siang hill .................. 128
By Arthur Yap

Love nest .............................................. 130
By Jonathan Liautratuk

I dropped my phone .............................. 131
By Ng Yin-Ling

6. On Words

Lyric 17 .............................................. 135
By Jose Garcia Villa

If You Must Know .................................. 136
By Lee Tzu Pheng

Eating Poetry ........................................ 137
By Mark Strand

crvd grf ........................................... 138
By Grace Chua

when words are not enough
remember ........................................... 139
(for ivy)
By Chandran Nair

ting 聆 (listen) ...................................... 140
By Angeline Yap

Elementary Chinese .............................. 141
By Eileen Chong

Absentee words .................................... 142
By Tope Omoniyi

On Reading Your Poems ....................... 143
(for Mavis)
By Loh Guan Liang

Reading Wordsworth .............................. 144
By Eddie Tay

Casualties of the Efficient World ........... 145
(Singapore's bilingual policy and the
Speak Mandarin Campaign)
By Teng Qian Xi

Lit Boys .............................................. 146
(for Franklin and the Class of 2006)
By Ivan Ang

Copyright .......................................... 149

About the Editors ................................. 157
INTRODUCTION

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.
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.