

# NO OTHER CITY

THE ETHOS ANTHOLOGY OF URBAN POETRY

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I

"City of New,  
bring forth sentinels who sing praises  
for the demolition of what we  
were"



## KENOSIS

When I lose you  
for my fallen love,  
O City of  
Endless Energies,  
your eyes burn out  
along the streets

and there are cries  
between morning crows  
(as there sometimes are)  
but I have become  
your mimicry,  
a burnt moth's wing,

and in your lag  
I will walk amid  
my midnight voices  
and turn a single  
inner echo  
to deathlessness

for this is the truth  
that I hear, I hear,  
as long as my passages  
of beauty are framed  
above sharp edges  
without and within

and so, you City  
of my white bread,  
Demon for frail loves,



walk my broad roads  
of desiring  
but keep in mind

how we must trust  
each other after  
I have paid your bills  
and tapped your lines  
and know well now  
why you got lost,

why you mess me up,  
renounce your poor,  
dim your evenings  
with recklessness  
and scourge yourself with  
electricity

for this is the truth  
that you say, you say,  
as long as your passages  
of beauty are framed  
above sharp edges  
without and within.

## A PROPHECY DISCLAIMED

standing like sentinels of a dream  
the skyline's towering spires extend  
heavenward, where our aspirations  
flare with the blue and gold of morning  
we, the people, bear testament to  
a prophecy disclaimed: "there was a time  
when people said Singapore won't make it  
but we did" and we did indeed, doing  
feats of a lion in the body of a fish  
strength in credit cards, leather bags  
and steel buildings, cement statues;  
erecting glass monuments with glowing number glyphs  
reclaiming promises from the sea  
which brought us here when trees still ruled the land  
that now stand like dreamy sentinels  
of a lush and cooler time, before  
the fever came and set the island  
ablaze with sound and fury

## THE PLANNERS

They plan. They build. All spaces are gridded,  
filled with permutations of possibilities.  
The buildings are in alignment with the roads  
which meet at desired points  
linked by bridges all hang  
in the grace of mathematics.  
They build and will not stop.  
Even the sea draws back  
and the skies surrender.

They erase the flaws,  
the blemishes of the past, knock off  
useless blocks with dental dexterity.  
All gaps are plugged  
with gleaming gold.  
The country wears perfect rows  
of shining teeth.  
Anaesthesia, amnesia, hypnosis.  
They have the means.  
They have it all so it will not hurt,  
so history is new again.  
The piling will not stop.  
The drilling goes right through  
the fossils of last century.

But my heart would not bleed  
poetry. Not a single drop  
to stain the blueprint  
of our past's tomorrow.

## THE WAY AHEAD

We were to speak, to chat,  
 Involve our several minds on how  
 To frame a City.  
 We were asked, judiciously, to talk of beauty  
 In a town, how the town would change,  
 Turn supply, rugged, yet acceptable.

There were the four of us,  
 A Professor, much travelled and artistic,  
 A Senior Civil Servant who knew the way ahead,  
 The Town Planner and I; I?  
 The average man, the man-in-the-street,  
 Feeling nervous, struggling to free  
 Practicalities from dreams,  
 Leaving a small remainder hopefully sensible.

The Professor favoured China-town, not surprisingly.  
 His thinking was crowded, bred by city living.  
 The teeming interchange of word and gesture,  
 The odour of ordinary lives,  
 Intimacies overdone or underdone,  
 Privacy come to grief, private grief made public,  
 Were seen as energies of a proper order,  
 As breaking the loneliness of man.  
 It had the right perspective, he said,  
 In the middle of tourist China-town.  
 The flats were fine, but parcelled out too neatly.

The Town Planner took a different view.  
 Intricacies of change were based on principles;  
 A flat in the sun was to be had by everyone,  
 A spaciousness, part of the better deal,  
 Politics, economics, the re-deployment of custom,  
 Clan and tribe. Impulses of a national kind

Gave common rights. There has been talk of heritage.  
There should be change, a reaching for the sky,  
Brightening the City's eye, clearing the patches  
From the shoulders of her hills,  
For regiments of flats.

What could I say? Or think?

A city is the people's heart,  
Beautiful, ugly, depending on the way it beats.  
A City smiles the way its people smile.  
When you spit, that is the city too.  
A City is for people, for living.  
For walking between shadows of tall buildings  
That leave some room, for living,  
And though we rush to work, appointments,  
To many other ends, there must be time to pause,  
Loosen the grip of each working day,  
To make amends, to hear the inner self  
And keep our spirits solvent.  
A City should be the reception we give ourselves,  
What we prepare for our posterity.

The City is what we make it,  
You and I. We are the City.  
For better or for worse.

## THE CIVIL SERVANT

When surgery's a necessity, who hesitates?  
When it's an option, well,  
that takes some thinking, doesn't it?  
So it was with the river.  
We lived with it for years, you see,  
its notorious whiff of decay,  
the bankside scum and lighter congestion,  
the quaint unloading of the boats  
a nostalgic reminder of a way of trade  
backwatered by containers and computerization.  
When the PM said, "In ten years time  
let us have fishing in the Singapore River.  
It can be done," well — it had to be.  
But how? A labour of Hercules lay before us.  
A river is a system fed by many streams;  
clean the rivers meant clean most of the island.  
A major operation.  
When we began The Clean Rivers Campaign  
we felt as if the surgeon had cut open the belly  
to find the cancer spread through the body.  
It involved so many — from environment,  
health, sewage, drainage, housing,  
pollution control, primary production —  
you can imagine the problems of co-ordination.  
And the result?  
Farewell Bugis Street, goodbye Chinatown.

Relocate the bumboats to Pasir Panjang.  
Resettle hawkers, close down the pig farms,  
rehouse squatters far from their communities.  
These were the costs we couldn't count.  
Luckily, the river's a marvellous patient:  
stop the infection and it heals itself.  
"After the rains, fresh blood flows in old veins."  
Now the city's heart pours its cleaner, greener waters  
through a body working ever harder,  
transformed in the '90's into — well,  
a human, leisure-friendly river environment,  
yet incomplete.  
The river's renewal made the body whole  
but in the process we misplaced its soul.  
We can't devise an action plan for that,  
unfortunately.

## PHASES

Perhaps it is a phase  
I'm going through —  
this need to scrape out words  
trapped inside untidy nails,  
like scraping out accumulated oil-stains  
from sides of well-used oven.

This need  
to scrape words onto a sheet  
like the calm sea  
reclaimed for resettlement,  
so the mind  
dredged for techno-try.

The shoreline of simplicity  
is now a postcard of scenic imagination.

Words like simplicity  
have been wall-papered to decorate block offices,  
tiled in with floor mosaics,  
shuttled up and down on busy elevators,  
left homeless on high antennae.

Just the other day  
passing by dusty Shenton way,  
I saw  
Words unintentionally uncovered  
as workers dug  
for MRT tunnels.

These MRT tunnels:  
undoubtedly  
a phase to be going through.