

SG   
POEMS

2015-2016



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SG Poems 2015–2016

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# A REFLECTION ON HOME, NATIONHOOD AND IDENTITY

**THE** flurry of poetic activity during the past two years has coincided with two significant turning points in Singapore's history: the passing of the foundational era with the demise of the republic's founder, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, and the golden jubilee of independence. We mourn the end of an arduous transition from kampong to a city bracing to become a hub of hubs. We have paid tribute, even poetically, to Mr. Lee whose life has been so entwined with that of the island that it is difficult for some to imagine a future without his presence. At the same time, we celebrate racial harmony, a pillar of nationhood and identity from Singapore's nascent years. We also rejoice in the growth of industries, including inevitably the creative one, made possible in large part by the island's being a haven of harmony and order in the region.

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Any pivotal moment demands reflection and raising important questions. The sociologist Margaret S. Archer defines reflection as "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) context and vice versa" (2007). She adds that this activity becomes imperative in "the most developed parts of the world". After the close of the foundational era amid trickle-down affluence, what lies ahead for the little red dot? What resources can help reshape Singapore's multicultural population amid greater uncertainty in the world? Having leapt from Third World to First, Singapore is poised to reassess its memories and their impact on the present.

Perhaps no other art form expresses the concepts of home, nationhood and identity in a more heartfelt, immediate and diverse manner than poetry. Verses echo in the Singapore heartland as poetry remains many Singaporeans' preferred medium of literary expression. In it, much is said with little by a people preoccupied with studying, doing business or conducting daily affairs. Poetic reflection, in turn, enables us to understand and appreciate the passage of time beyond the recording of facts. This reflection enables us to internalize history, to give witness to experiences that go beyond our own and to empathize with others such as the pioneer generation or new citizens.

During the past two years, Singapore poetry has broadened its audience base and stylistic range. New groups such as the Select Centre, the Sing Lit Station and the National Poetry Festival (NPF) raise the profile of poetry while taking variants of this art form to the masses. All major bookstores compete to host almost weekly readings and panel discussions. Publishers unveil a poetry book in one of the four official languages every fortnight, even in unlikely literary places such as a *kopitiam*. A collection of experimental poetry, Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingde's *I Didn't Know Mani Was a Conceptualist*, finally emerged as a co-winner of this year's Singapore Literature Prize in poetry.

This anthology assembles a wide sample of notable Singapore poetry written in or translated into English, our common language, in 2015 and 2016. Several poets who published collections during that period or were featured in NPF 2015 were invited to contribute to this project. Several emerging voices who were declared winners or finalists in NPF's National Poetry Competition over the past two years were also included.

The poems assembled here fall into two loose themes, 'Home, Nationhood, Identity' and 'Reflections', which inspired the first two editions of the National Poetry Festival. Some poems are originally in English and others translated from Chinese, Malay and Tamil. The non-English poems in the first section are clustered according to their original language for easy referencing by students and readers. Within each language section, the poems are sequenced to initiate a dialogue based on common strands of themes or concerns.

### **On Chinese Poems in Translation**

"Without memory, there is no culture," Elie Wiesel once famously said. "[For] without memory, there would be no civilisation, no society, no future." Such an awareness of the hazards involved in the loss of personal and public memory would be well-appreciated by the Singaporean Chinese poets represented in this collection. Implicit throughout their poems are deep concerns about vanished histories, recollections and ways of life in the face of encroaching modernity. Navigating a restless, shifting terrain, the poets featured in this section lend expression to the grand sweep of larger historical forces, even as they chart the meanderings of the individual human spirit. Many of the poets here reveal a deep-set yearning for places, people, and narratives in Singapore, articulating a broad spectrum of perspectives in their distinctive forms, styles and patterns of imagery.

In their weaving together of disparate threads of memory, the subtle skill of these poets remains noticeable, even though these poems are offered in English

translation. Naturally, the act of translation is a difficult and demanding task. There are two main extremes when it comes to translation: one school privileges the literal meaning of words, demanding textual correctness at the expense of tone or rhyme; the other school believes that one can safely ignore the literal meaning of a poem when one has sufficiently imbibed enough of its spirit, such that a rough approximation of the original suffices. Reflecting sound judgment, the translators of the poems in this collection avoid both extremes. From these translations, even readers unfamiliar with Chinese can appreciate the poems' meaning while intuiting a basic sense of the form, rhythm and cadences of the original texts.

Nevertheless, there is always something inevitably lost in translation. Consider these lines from 'Chinatown' by Tan Chee Lay: "where there are bullocks/ there must be more than water" (必也牛乎/不仅水也 *bi ye niu hu/bu jin shui ye*). It is not merely the literal meaning but also a supple lightness in the rhythm of the lines that is communicated. Yet the symmetry and balance of the original two lines are untranslatable. The poem's density of cultural allusiveness may also be easily glossed over by the reader, who may be unaware that the Chinese name of Chinatown—*niu che shui* (bullock-cart-water)—has been cleverly alluded to. Yet the problem of language and communication is one that the poet himself is keenly aware of. The speaker in the same poem asks plaintively: "will there be a day/when only one language is used to order/Hainanese chicken rice Hokkien mee Cantonese yum cha Hakka yong tau foo Teochew porridge/even in Chinatown". In a country shaped irrevocably by the state's pro-Mandarin and anti-dialect policies, the whitewashing of linguistic differences has led to anxieties about the associated costs of cultural rootlessness.

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The novelist and translator Vikram Seth once commented that even in prose, the associations of words and images in one language do not slip readily into another—so what more in poetry, where the loss is greater, because each word or image carries a heavier charge of association but with reduced scope for choice and manoeuvre due to "the exigencies of form" (1992). The poems in this section are particularly resistant to simple translation, considering the richness of the vocabulary in offering shades of meaning, as well as the depth of cultural and historical allusion. Opening and closing the section, for instance, are poems that allude to figures in Chinese mythology: the mythical creator *Pan Gu* in Chua Chim Kang's 'Truth', as well as (in Tang Jui Piow's "Legends of Stone") the legendary ruler "Yu the Great", distinct from the long-suffering *senex* "Yu the Foolish". In future, NPF hopes to publish chapbooks featuring poems in each of the island's non-English mother tongues. In the meantime, for the reader unable to distinguish one Yu from another, the footnotes are invaluable.

The poems are grouped such that the reader can observe the interconnectedness between themes and motifs adopted, while not denying the uniqueness of each text's poetic voice. Common themes include nature, especially expressed in terms of mountains and rivers (reminiscent of Gary Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, in turn inspired by Han Shan's *Cold Mountain* poems): as in Lee Guan Poon's "Tale of Crossing", Chow Teck Seng's "Living – A Flower on a Mountain in a Postcard", and Liang Wern Fook's "Mountain Water Journey Song". Liang's poem, in particular, seems to combine Li Bai's flamboyant reflections about wine and poetry ("Should I say I'm drunk on sorrow, in a waking sleep?") with a Yeatsian yearning for idyllic nature ("Pan-flute raindrops piercing through the lyrics strong/ Until the leaves cease rustling softly, still dreaming all along"). Other poets prefer to feature either nature's constituent elements (Neo Choon Hong's "The Dialectics of Water and Fire"), in addition to natural phenomena like lightning, storms, and sunshine (Chow Teck Seng's "Lessons Every Day" and Chew Thean Phai's "Passing by a Cemetery in a Vehicle").

The pathos of nostalgia also features heavily in several of the poets' works. While Lin Rongchan's "Farewell at the Bus-stop" meditates on separation and the pain it triggers, Dan Ying's "Advertisement" dwells on the impossibility of holding on to the past. Such pathos rears its head again in Cheong Yun Yee's "Deconstructing Myself at Thirty" and Tew Yu Chan's "Who?", both of which consider the dissolution of memory, as well as Fei Xin's "Parting Snow", which contemplates how "all romance and beauty" is ultimately 'forgotten'. On a larger scale, Han Chuan's "For the Mistakes of History, An Elegy" reflects upon the rupturing of ancestral ties that has characterised the historico-geographical condition of the Singaporean Chinese (or more generally, the Chinese in Malaya). For the Chinese immigrants whose brief sojourn turned out to be a prolonged residency, nothing can truly bridge the gap between "this end/the garden of the next generation/[and] that end/the homeland".

Most remarkably, several of the poems also reveal an admirable self-reflexivity. Sterling examples of such meta-poetry include Xi Ni Er's "A Letter from a Distant Time" and Lim Hung Chang's "To Say This", which explores the complexities of articulation by employing complex grammatical constructions ("What must be said or told, to you/though, will be; despite/being difficult, and despite its difficulties"). It is, however, in Liang Wern Fook's "How to Read a Poem" that we especially encounter *logopoieia*, or what Ezra Pound would term "the dance of the intellect amongst words"—here words are engaged not just for literal meaning but for the nuances and associations that they evoke: "We forget so that we can remember/each time, we take flight anew/Each time we take flight, anew".

## On English Poems

In his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', T. S. Eliot writes:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. [...] what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted ...

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Although Eliot was writing about tradition and canon formation, his comments have some relevance to the act of anthologising. In recent years, there has been a flurry of poetry anthologies appearing on the Singapore literary scene. Some of these are structured around specific themes. Some—like what is fast becoming the annual SingPoWriMo anthology—serve a more documentary function, capturing a slice of literary history. Each anthology that appears is thus its own mini canon, reflecting a particular editorial agenda, but also capable of being read against the anthologies that have come before it and the anthologies that are yet to be.

Finding the poems for the English section was not the hard part. What proved tricky was trying to arrange them all in a sequence that flowed from start to finish, essentially allowing poems with common themes or images to play off each other, to modify (to borrow Eliot's phrasing) each other in the act of reading. What you will encounter is thus only one possible variation, which you might even disagree with.

One key consideration, however, was to sequence the poems without regard to whether they had been written by experienced poets or poets appearing in print for the first time. This was not some empty gesture of poetic democracy. Rather, it is a small attempt at returning attention to what should matter above all else: The poems. The text. The words.

## **On Malay Poems in Translation**

*Kita pencari erti*

*Lelah*

*Tapi mesti*

— Masuri SN

Poetry indeed can be a barometer of a literary landscape, of its spread of ideas, of the maturity of thought, the horizon of vision and hope, the corners of dark and gloomy emotions, of flowing words and imagination, the fountain of joy and wonder, the crevices of predicament and crisis, the depth of humanity and civility, or the clouds of knowing and ignorance.

Literature in general, and poetry in particular, emerged not out of personal verbose and imaginative articulations. Poetry is a product articulated by a social cultural being, with ideas, values and imagination shaping the poets and the environment, inasmuch as the poets are responding to them.

Poetry of insubstantiality, in its forms and contents, characterises an underdeveloped literary world. A poet divorced from the realities of his or her surrounding is prone to insubstantiality. Instead a poet driven and inspired by the complexes of the poetic and the prophetic will be one where the poetic leitmotif will become a mainstay in society, and a contribution to humanity.

The vista of modern Malay poetry in Singapore contains varieties of literary alignment and aspirations, some completing, while some other in competing postures as the literary site has always been a contested realm in terms of ethics, poetics and aesthetics. The collection of Malay poems in this anthology surely does not exhaust the range of Singapore Malay poetry, but the varieties of its literary strands tell something about the literary and poetic proclivities in the local Malay community.

Rafaat Hamzah stands out as the most vocal amongst the young poets, and his poems largely could only be appreciated fully if they are dramatized or performed. Invariably he is playful with words, harsh at times, but intimately provocative. The obsession of theory and theorizing becomes the subject of his cynical dismissal, with an affirmation in “Not My Theory.” The serious tone comes from Ciung Winara’s deep reflection in “Civilisational Plight in History,” where the human agency in history should not let us be dictated and defeated by history. To face reality is to witness history. It is imperative and fundamental for our wellbeing. Somehow the enigma of nostalgia and reminiscences of the past that were close to us linger. Faridah Taib’s the “Nostalgic Loss of KTM Tanjong Pagar Railway Station”

points to our attachment to familiar spaces that are increasingly disappearing from our sight and memories. But at a more personal level, remembrances of our loved ones is captured by Azizah Zakaria's "Escape", a poem that resurrects our own longing to be with those who have left us, a person or place where we could seek refuge in moments of despair and calamity. Reflection on life, with its limits and hope encapsulated in Annaliza Bakri's "Void" where the will to live would only bring forth hope, a counter against void and despair. Life can only have meaning if it is 'filled' and not "empty". The celebration of life and the need for its fullest appreciation are articulated in both Kamaria Buang's "Beneath This Sky" and Nordita Taib's "Motherhood". The spirit of exuberance, celebrating the life bestowed upon us, is an imperative appreciation. The land where we live is the very place where we should create meaning, and that is only possible if we first appreciate its many blessings.

This resonates in Azhar Ibrahim's "My Homeland in My Heart", which suggests that only through our dignified presence could we make and represent meanings. Without patriotic pride, the soul of commitment should be far deeper than the rhetoric of might. Finally, Imran Taib's "What More Shall I say" deeply penetrates the question and challenges where humanity is being pawned by those who disseminate and cultivate fear. Our nation and community should have no place for dehumanized sentiments. Indeed, a poetry of reflections should point us in that direction where our commitment, spirit and persistence should be our guide.

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### **On Tamil Poems in Translation**

The poets reflect the imagination of this community in Singapore. There are five poems from the Tamil writers, each one a different reflection on life.

The poem "Captive" talks of the inner voice lying captive within one's mind, not just of the Tamil but of anyone. In "Karung Guni", the poem is a reflection of nostalgia felt by many Singaporeans when everything old, from buildings to memories, is discarded amid the breathtaking pace of modernization. A striking line from "Dolls" is "Humans think they make dolls / In reality it's the dolls which make humans". This metaphor rings true for many things in life. "Foreign Flesh" depicts the dilemma of every new immigrant in any society. Here, a country which one has left becomes history and the new country, one's life. "Gaps" talks of the mollycoddled life in which one does not enjoy even the simple pleasure of raindrops falling on one's head.



The poetic Singapore conversation in this anthology has been made possible with the support of the National Arts Council. Poetry keeps alive memories of the simple pleasures of the heartland and opens up avenues for people of diverse tongues and cultures to share their dreams of the future on this island. It makes us imagine possibilities as we deliberate and come to terms with change.

**Eric Tinsay Valles, Ian Chung, Ow Yeong Wai Kit, Tan Chee Lay,  
Chow Teck Seng, Azhar Ibrahim, and K. Kanagalatha**

*September 2016*

# Chinatown

Tan Chee Lay 陈志锐 (Chen Zhirui)

Translated by Teng Qian Xi

where there are bullocks  
there must be more than water

once, bullock cart after bullock cart  
brought the fount of life  
even water  
has sunk its roots here

these roots are so deep  
that even tongues gleam  
the joss-sticks of the Hokkien people  
are spread along Cantonese-speaking Tofu Street  
at ease, they  
burn incense  
refill and relight oil lamps  
tell fortunes with moon blocks  
worship gods with a genius for language

we buy in Hokkien  
you sell in Teochew  
why not eat an appetising plate  
of classic Hainanese chicken rice

as we talk and talk  
houses grow old  
listen up  
the ears of dialects  
are ageing too

will there be a day  
when only one language is used to order  
Hainanese chicken rice Hokkien mee Cantonese yum cha Hakka yong tau foo  
Teochew porridge  
even in Chinatown

after some time  
even the most ungainly HDB flats  
have taken root here  
no longer the public's public housing  
they even charge for the scenery

in the end, will  
water  
carts  
bullocks  
still be a postscript to  
Chinatown?

Chinatown O Chinatown  
no matter how smart you are  
you cannot get the better of  
a half-cupful of the waters of history  
a cartful of the wages of an era

it's just that  
my old home was once there  
my insides are still there  
my colloquial dialect  
has been scoured into fluency there  
my childhood innocence is still  
unsuspectingly  
taking  
root  
over  
there

that place  
is still rooted  
deep in  
our hearts

# Burn

Agatha Tan

Burn

Certain mornings are like quiet resignation  
but with exaggerated, audible groaning –  
you think the Nephelae must receive many prayers at half past seven.

You would sacrifice a pig if it meant  
they would keep the sun out of your eyes for fifteen minutes  
while the flag rises into their territory.

Sometimes the days are like grey desks and chairs,  
and tiny shrugs you share with the girl next to you  
who has no idea what's happening in *Othello*, either.

Some things are like sparks  
flying off the construction site:  
only beautiful because you're far enough  
that they don't burn.

And maybe –  
maybe some things are brighter  
than you thought they would be.

Maybe some days,  
this is enough.

But other days you sit by the ocean  
and the hush of the waves fills you with static,  
with hues of green and blue and orange,  
where the sun hits the surface just right.

(Here, the waves roar in a way you could never capture.)

Other days you can remember a time you used to breathe  
the air of stale pages, new.  
Your world then was four storeys with rows of shelves, artificial winters.  
Your world now is four storeys inside a book bag,  
energy you temper with small movements of your leg.  
Artificial winters. Central heating, rows of seats.

(You have not traversed paper in a long time.)

You used to breathe words onto paper, and then  
onto blank word documents. You used to run  
alongside the clouds, sketch dreams aching with colour.  
You used to fill barely-there holes on your shelves  
with always-there pathways beyond half-hour chimes.

You used to set worlds on fire with single thoughts from long bus rides  
and on other days, you miss the awe  
of flames that danced at your touch.

On other days, you search the old playgrounds for that feeling  
until they are torn down.

# Motherhood

Nordita Taib

Translated from Malay by Azhar Ibrahim & Azizah Zakaria

You seem to understand  
the stem falling to the ground  
that inhibits comprehension  
is sure to be trimmed

beneath an old window  
you landed and perched  
weaving your nest  
away from man's wrath

a morning routine  
of dried twigs entwined  
a nest of love so refined  
living in comfort

determination and hard work  
warrant respect and awe  
creation without deliberation  
bestowed by the Creator  
inspiration and wisdom  
move the human mind to ponder

## Gaps

Sithuraj Ponraj

Make room, the rain is an old passer-by  
looking for space. Under slanted roofs  
black umbrella blown in the wind;  
clouds shake off dog-like wetness,  
causing office people to shriek politely.  
Usually a nuisance, the rain pushes  
a trolley full of old things, all grey and  
unwanted. We have filled our pavements  
with so much of ourselves.

The least we could do is make space.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Sketches in the book by Ho Chee Lick

"Commuting", Upper Cross Street, 2014

"Eating", Bukit Batok East Ave 4, 2014

"Living", Toh Yi Drive, 2013

"Truth" and "Waiting for the Bus" by Chua Chim Kang 蔡深江 (Cai Shenjiang)  
Original Chinese texts published in 《如果不能回头就忘记月光》 (If You Can't Turn Back, then Forget the Moonlight), Singapore: Hwa Chong Junior College, 1988. p.3-4 and p.11.

"Wading in the Wound" by Tan Chee Lay 陈志锐 (Chen Zhirui)  
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The source for the English translation of "Chinatown" by Tan Chee Lay 陈志锐 (Chen Zhirui):

Picturing Chinatown website (<http://picturingchinatown.com/>)

"Advertisement" by Dan Ying 淡莹  
Original Chinese text published in 《新加坡当代诗歌精选》 (An Anthology of Singapore Contemporary Poetry), Wong Meng Voon (ed.). Shenyang: Shenyang Press, 1998. p.56-57

"Parting Snow" by 李慧玲 Feixin 非心 (李慧玲)  
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"For the Mistakes of History, An Elegy" by Han Chuan 寒川  
Original Chinese text published in 《诗歌月刊》 (Poetry Monthly), Vol. 152, Singapore: July 2013. p.44

"How to Read a Poem" by Liang Wern Fook 梁文福 (Liang Wenfu)  
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“Mountain Water Journey Song” (lyrics) by Liang Wern Fook 梁文福 (Liang Wenfu)

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“To Say This” by Lin Gao 林高 (Lim Hung Chang)

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“Legends of Stone” by 陈维彪 (Chen Weibiao) Tang Jui Piow

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“A Letter from A Distant Time” by Xi Ni Er 希尼尔 (Chia Hwee Pheng)

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“Living—A flower on a Mountain in a Postcard” by Chow Teck Seng 周德成 (Zhou Decheng)

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Original Chinese text published in 《不为什么》 (Why Not), Vol.3, Singapore: Trendlit, January 2015. p.42.

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