



**U N F R E E  
V E R S E**

**SINGAPORE POETRY IN FORM**

EDITED BY  
**TSE HAO GUANG, JOSHUA IP AND THEOPHILUS KWEK**

UnFree Verse  
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# UNFREE VERSE

Singapore Poetry in Form  
1937-2015

Edited by  
Tse Hao Guang, Joshua Ip and Theophilus Kwek



*And among the tools for chopping, form.  
Precise instrument, stanzas  
slice to the bone, section harm  
from harm. As butchers, surgeons, dancers,  
the trade is blood, nerve, and craftiness.*

— Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “The Trade” (1985)

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## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

*UnFree Verse* was born out of a double lack. The first, a realisation that there are no Singapore anthologies organised by form. The second, that very few Singaporeans—even those who consider themselves well-read—know anything of their literary history. *UnFree Verse* is a book that deals with formal poetry as much as with its development over time, from Francis P. Ng's long poem *F. M. S. R.* (1937), to its contemporary resurgence with the rise of online platforms such as the Facebook-driven Singapore Poetry Writing Month. It is our hope that the book becomes evidence for a lithe and vital strand of local poetry in English. This poetry is neither merely imitative of 'Western' metrical verse nor expressed in free verse—arguably just as 'Western'—but embodies the tension between repeating and repudiating colonial histories. This is a tension that Singapore politics and culture at large has also had to grapple with.

First: a fundamental question. What is form? What is formal poetry? Our answer, hardly authoritative, but useful for our purposes, has been *poetry that has a recognisable and repeatable structure, or that varies such structures for effect*. Broadly speaking, two kinds of formal poetry exist: received and nonce forms. Received forms are those which possess a history of use and whose 'rules' have already been agreed upon, such as the tanka, the sestina, the ghazal. Nonce forms are those which possess the *potential* to become received, given time and usefulness. Under this definition, a whole range of poetic devices might be employed: rhyme scheme, regular metre, repeated syllables per line, concrete and shape poetry, the volta of the sonnet, anagrams, the liwuli's third questioning stanza, as well as formal parody or experiment.

And how about 'Singapore'? We believe that poetry by anyone who has a meaningful relationship with the island should be included, and we are pleased to showcase diasporic work, as well as so-called expatriate work by those who have made Singapore their home and their muse for a time. Starting November 2014, we read Singapore poetry wherever

it has appeared, from University of Malaya newspapers to anthologies to [the2ndrule.com](http://the2ndrule.com), extracting every formal poem, masterwork or doggerel alike. Sifting through this abundance has been a laborious but rewarding process, giving insight into old literary quarrels, unearthing long-buried gems, and throwing out unexpected names. At the same time, we initiated an open call for new and unpublished work. With an accountant's mentality, we started filling out spreadsheets. Over nearly two years, we have perused more than 300 books, every issue of 20 local periodicals, and assorted online journals, identifying over 2,000 formal poems.

The reason we are three comes from this sorting process—the odd number makes deadlock impossible. We have three criteria for selection. First, harmony between form and content, whether, say, this villanelle's subject matter fits its repetitive structure. Second, sound, especially in those poems that employ fixed metre and rhyme. Third, historical or cultural value. These rules, needless to say, are imbued with a great degree of subjectivity, especially because we are ourselves formalists, with our own biases and preferences. We would be the first to deny that the project represents any serious attempt at canon-making. On the contrary, we hope that *UnFree Verse* becomes canon-breaking, opening up possibilities for future generations of writers to consider the strategies and motifs of their predecessors, to avoid reinventing the wheel.

The next task, of course, is arrangement. For the most part, we realised that the best way to present the work had to be chronological, in line with our original aim of presenting one aspect of literary history. Poems in the first two sections of the book are arranged by year of composition, if known, then earliest year of publication (a full-length collection publication date supersedes a print anthology date, which supersedes a journal or periodical appearance), then by last name of poet, then by the order in which poems appear in the poet's work. This more-or-less mechanical approach has led to some felicitous resonances, the most striking being Edwin Thumboo's 'Friends' appearing next to Arthur Yap's 'some friends'. The long third section, roughly marking the

moment where more poetry and more formal poetry has been published, is instead divided up by form, the better to trace developments within different subsections. Within these categories, we have created a largely chronological progression, while also recognising that, especially in recent years, it is impossible to speak of any singular trajectory in Singapore poetics.

Section 1 begins with extracts from *F.M.S.R.*, possibly the first collection of poetry published by a local. We know that Alvin Pang has done some work on individual poems published before this in school journals, and hope that a second edition might incorporate his findings. Section 1 ends in 1969 with Paul Theroux's masterful 'Other Lovers Matter', published in *Focus*, the literary journal of the National University of Singapore. We chose to break at this time, instead of, say, 1965, recognising a certain transition in the material, from a heavily expatriate-involved body of work to a more locally-driven selection in Section 2 from 1970 onwards. Section 2 ends in 1994 with a poem by Toh Hsien Min, one of a few local poets with a consistent commitment to form. In deciding how the subsections of Section 3 should be arranged, we move away gradually from form driven by rhyme and metre, towards other characteristics such as repetition, syllable count, shape, alliteration, and so on. Notably, Alvin's terza rima 'Night Manoeuvres' was included in Nonce Rhyming Forms as that was the least ill-fitting section; other poems which imitate or parody those in the Western Canon ended up in this section too. The principle has been to section by looking at the evidence, not by political or historical development, nor by arbitrarily engineering literary history.

That is not to say that politics (or indeed, content) has no place in *UnFree Verse*. By virtue of the selection criteria, which privileges no theme or style, we have political poems of every stripe next to humorous poems next to lyrical meditations next to religious devotions next to avant-garde language poems. Sometimes, a poem might be several of these things at once. What has emerged as a successful poem in our eyes is one which understands the colonial histories of the English language in Singapore, and tries to do something new with that history. This might be new content, as in Malayan landscapes, situations, people, and

concerns. This might be new or rediscovered forms, such as the twin cinema, the liwuli, the empat perkataan, and Jennifer Anne Champion's singular venpa. The final poem of the book is Yeow Kai Chai's 'From A to Z, a Glamorous Zoetrope Names Parts of Singapore's Latest New Town via Gemstones, Female Singers and Outer Space Phenomena', which does exactly as described, bringing the local and the international into fresh relation.

We are indebted to Koh Tai Ann and her team, whose *Singapore Literature in English: an Annotated Bibliography* made it possible to read for the anthology systematically. It was at the National Library of Singapore and the NUS Central Library where we accessed rare books and periodicals, including the bulk of Singapore poetry in English, which is, for better or worse, out of print. Special thanks goes to Doreen Soh and Tim Yap of the NUS Central Library for their assistance with request items. To Alvin, one of the progenitors of the project, for his significant contributions in shaping its initial direction and soliciting contributors. To Angus Whitehead, for gracing us with an incisive preface. To Ethos Books, especially Ng Kah Gay, Rachel Tan and Maliah Zubir, for publishing our vision, and to the National Arts Council of Singapore, for funding it. Sarah and Schooling, always supportive of the literary arts, for their beautiful cover design and careful laying out of the text. To our hardworking interns Shawn Hoo and Ruby Thiagarajan, thank you for your heroic feats of data entry. Thanks is also due to various friends and family of those poets who have either passed or remain difficult to contact, for giving us leads, permissions, and well-wishes. Last, and certainly not least, we would like to acknowledge every poet within this book. You are, collectively, the reason *UnFree Verse* exists.

Tse Hao Guang, Joshua Ip, and Theophilus Kwek  
8 September, 2016

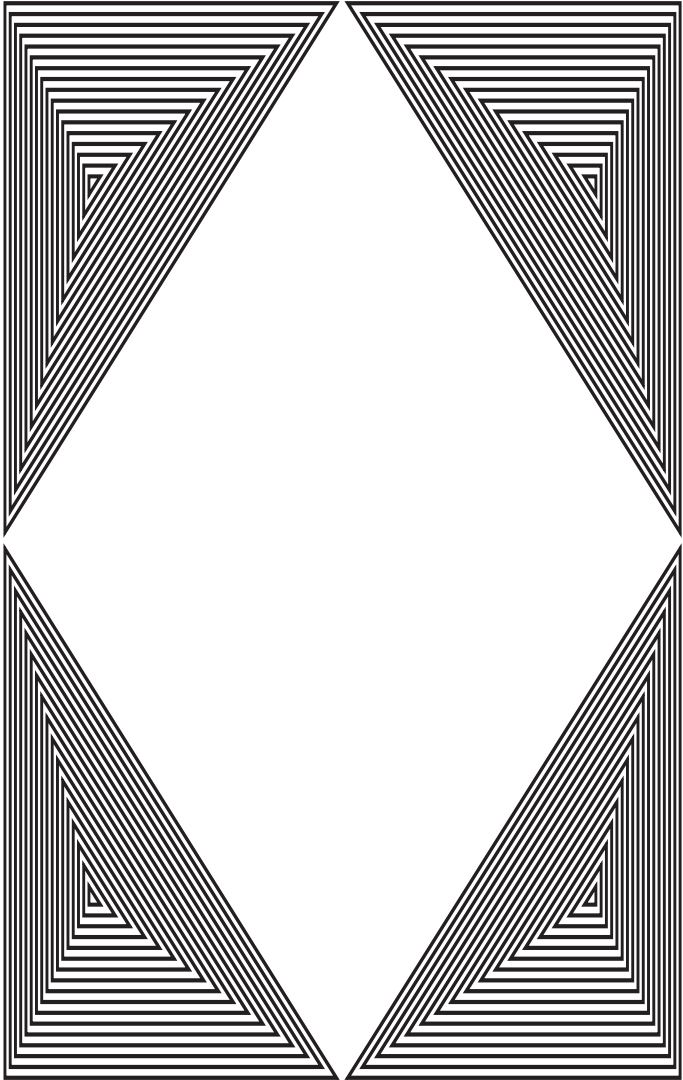


## A note on orthography and italicisation:

To reflect the diversity of influences that were expressed by the body of poets, the editorial team took care not to regularise the spelling and representation of words. More contemporary spellings such as “lalang” (Tham Zhen Teng) do not displace alternative versions such as “lallang” (Aaron Maniam). “Pedalling” (British spelling; refer to ‘Kashgar’ by Boey Kim Cheng) is spelt “pedaling” (American spelling; refer to ‘Mother in the suburbs’ by Shirley Geok-lin Lim) in another poem; however, differences in spelling do not occur within the same poem, which would be inconsistency.

To italicise or not to italicise? We have kept to the poet’s decision, which is one exercised for tonal effect. More often than not, we did not adopt the practice of italicising non-standard English, which would be deleterious to poems that draw on the colloquial tongues that nourish language use in Malaya and today’s Singapore.

SECTION I



1937-1969

O WHERE? (A SONG OF MALAYA)

George Puthuchery (1952-53)

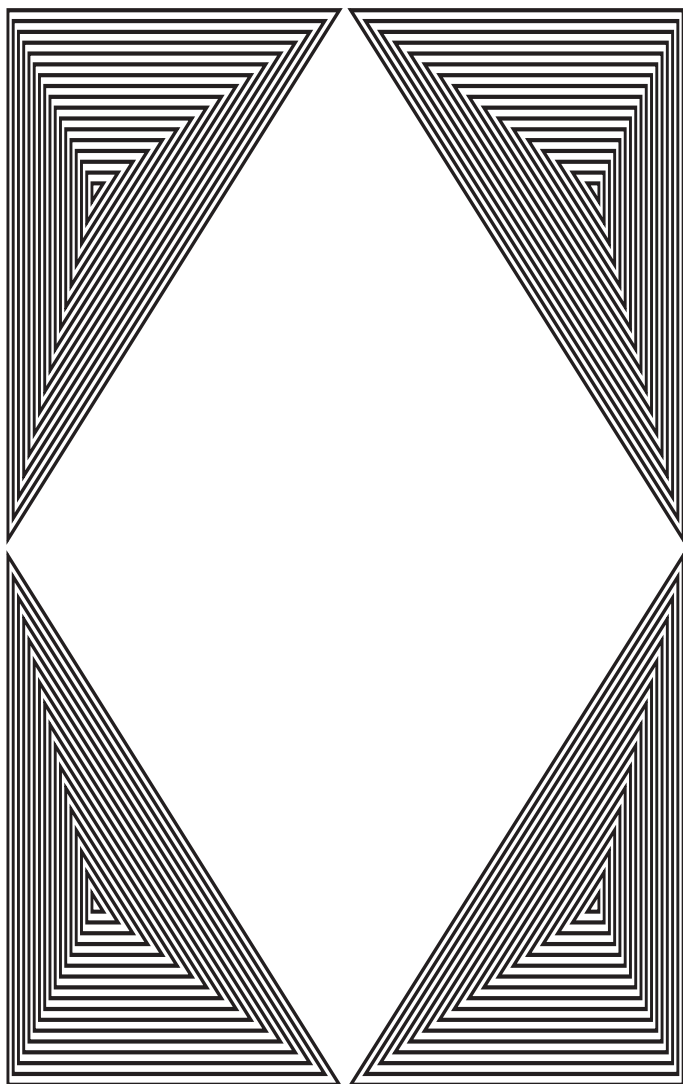
O where's my little orchid bed,  
The blossom I once loved?  
O where's my little attap shed  
And fields where I once roved?

O where those stately niyor palms  
That whispered to my soul  
And daily soothed me like the balms  
That crafty pawangs roll?

And where Pa' Long, that grand id man,  
Who told us tales of yore  
And sang in pantuns laws of man  
And gems from wisdom's store?

Oh! Gone are all, and none knows where  
O Mother dear, save thou,  
Thou unloved land, whose love all share  
—But oh! O where art thou?

SECTION 2



1970-1994

TEMASEK

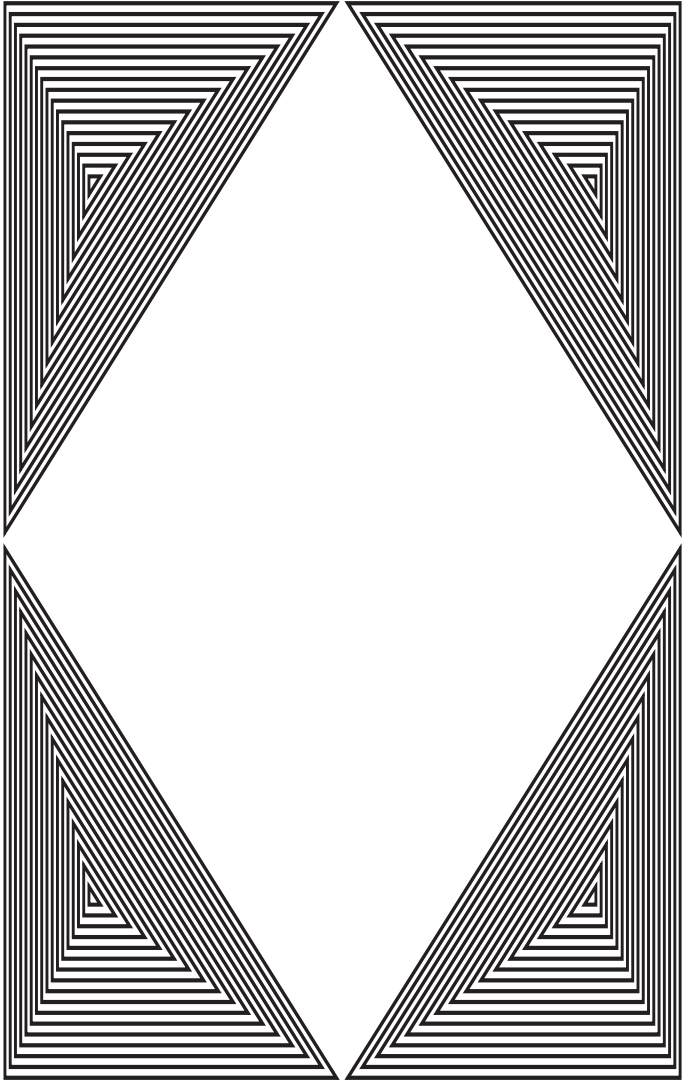
Edwin Thumboo (1993)

Deprived of you, history and sense  
Turn quicksilver. In my grieving side  
Grammars of living break their tense,  
Diminish tact, impatience, pride,

Other contraries of soft power  
That override or humble fact, debate,  
The sea's recession or the faded flower.  
I wonder if, again, old fashioned Fate,

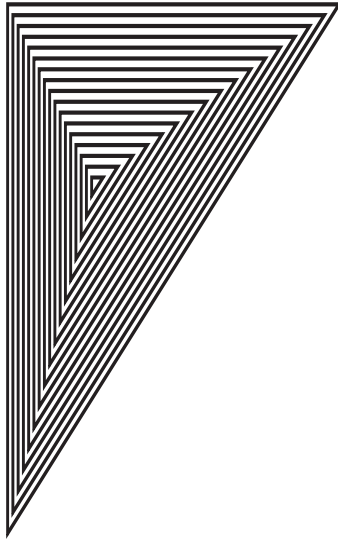
Jealousy ruminates in secret, rides  
Us creatures who celebrate or rue.  
I am bare. Unknowing, the world derides  
My acts, my silences... deprived of you.

SECTION 3



1998-2015

SECTION 3.1



SONNETS

## SWEAR-WORDS

Toh Hsien Min (2004)

Swear-words enhance capacity to cope  
with situations outside our control.

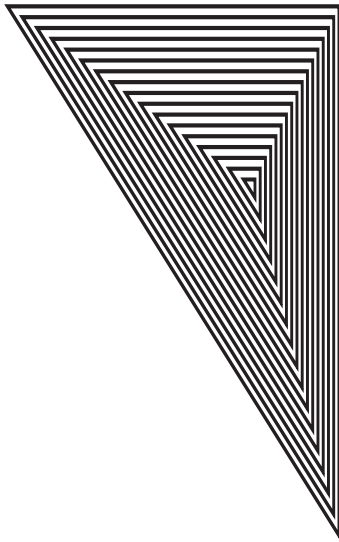
It's not so much that they deliver hope  
but that they open windows for the soul.

I'm not immune, although I try my best  
to keep my French words to myself; *alors*,  
my multi-tasks pile up, I get *très* stressed,  
profanities rack up a cricket score.

At such times, I remember what I once  
told you: the word for “snow” in Cantonese  
sounds much like *shit*, and when it craps down tonnes  
we say *lot shit* for “snowing”. So you'll know  
why Singapore has just begun to freeze.  
You left me, so it's snowing. Snow. Snow. Snow.



SECTION 3.2



NONCE RHYMING FORMS

PUBLIC READING  
Shirley Geok-lin Lim (2015)

The husband listens as she reads  
her poem for the twenty-third  
time, chest swelling as it had

all twenty-two times before,  
but less certain, more  
careful at its core

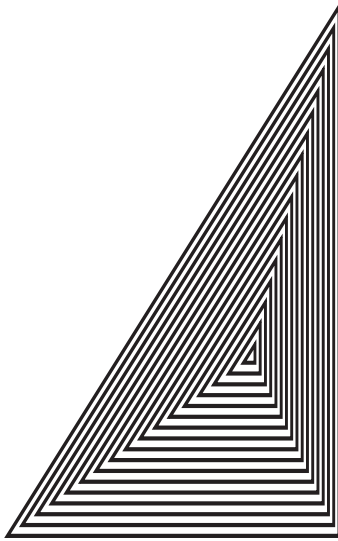
than her passion precisely  
noted, syntactically  
acute, the same as when she

said it first time at breakfast—  
thrilling, the first always—  
but it was not sex, it was

a poem, and he sits tucked in  
public on a metal folding  
chair as she reads the line:

sudden picture once un-cropped,  
now, pause, phrase, pause, drop  
a tone, tap fingers on thighs, stop.

SECTION 3.3



REPETITIVE FORMS

## HAIR APPARENT

Nabilah Said (2015)

Tough lah this line, life of always blow job,  
When person come in with broom hair, but ask for goddamn 'fro job.

Plastic head, ugly wig, practise until siao lor.  
\$800 one month only, but Ma say better than got no job.

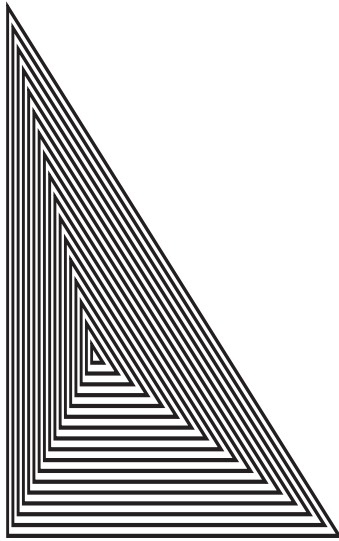
Work in bank? Can go and dye  
That one you know, not my kind—ang moh job.

Sweep hair sweep forever, wahlau eh that one you do lah.  
But carry heavy things leave to abang, for bro job.

Want me massage head? I can do 10 minute.  
Happy ending? Go and die, that one I call bloody low job.

High slope, undercut, Armani? As long as you happy lah  
Do until swee swee for you. Then I know. Is pro job.

SECTION 3.4



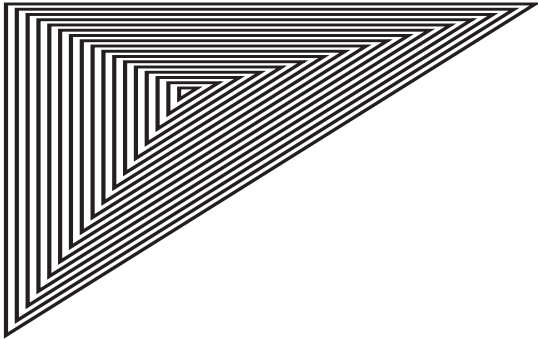
SYLLABIC FORMS

PANDAN VALLEY

Teh Su Ching (2014)

They've changed the word before "accident" on  
the signboard from "serious" to "fatal",  
which means at some point in the three  
days between Qing Ming and now—  
in the time it took me  
to bake a cake, hit  
the gym, lunch with  
the in-laws—  
someone  
died.  
Still no  
witnesses.  
The graphic shows  
a taxi crashing  
into a car. Zig-zag  
lines denote major impact.  
His last moments have come to this:  
stylised silhouettes. A cartoon. No  
portent of who lived and who struggled to.

SECTION 3.5



CONCRETE, PERFORMANCE AND  
EXPERIMENTAL FORMS

## ANIMAL ABECEDARIAN

Lo Kwa Mei-En (2015)

Zebra heart, cross it out, or let a boy make a bridle and a ride and a blur on white on blacklight. Oh the hot era, extinction in theory, X chromosome, X chromosome, sex pheromone, when some magic deletes all thought to death. Dog and door, we buffer. When I flew voluptuous fur to the after, he came back an anima in love, mule, frustrated to a genetic and cried It's the blueprint of why I want you that way, pulled back. I let a boy stripe me and bit the bit, so a ring hurried up, shining in the street like a factory of parts and holes. Real animals don't think twice I thought, and shotgunned the safari, jackalled up to a wild noise and not a loving voice. I sold for an IQ pointillist's first book in the market's muddy pen. I sold by the lick. Let the clarity roosters keep the smooth, the running, the placebo no beast could believe in. Let the kept cocks live to fuck and whim. No maker of mine will ever come near my phenome now, a farm lined with gold threat. Flea soul, mate survivor to survival or let go, peeled down to the whip. In love is a circus and a hoop to buck just around the bent in the boy, and my ghost lion racing the tranq, roaring in reverse, I mean, remorse, I mean, ticket to mastery, or I healed up nicely, didn't I? Love is a boy running out to repossess the feral who fled the house, is it? Filigree, fury, diamond thing fractaling, a narrative around a neck used to take me home to a you—vulture urges in the ugliest night used to home a you in on a me. Don't let a boy ride you to death and live, thoroughbred. Now I'm raw xenocracy at war in a yoke and the stable heaves up love is a panic boys don't ask to own to break. Dear hart. Not you. Not the proxy zoos bred me to bear to unflora at the dawn of an era. No. A boa.



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