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&Words: Poems Singapore and Beyond

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Contents

- Introduction 10
- Poems

Identity

1. Rumba – Richard Ong 28
2. But for the Impossible Dream – Rienzi Crusz 29
3. 我是 (i am) – Paul Tan Kim Liang 31
4. Three Faces of Night – Wang Gungwu 32
5. Well-spoken Cantonese – Louise Ho 34
6. The Tai-chi Man – Ong Teong Hean 35
7. The Wu Shu Kid – Chris Mooney Singh 36
8. Grandfather – Chandran Nair 37
9. Father – Theophilus Kwek 38
10. Placenames – Boey Kim Cheng 39
11. The Floral Apron – Marilyn Chin 40
12. worship – Theophilus Kwek 41
13. Kueh Belanda – Desmond Sim 42
14. A Grandchild's Monologue – Bryan Cheong 43
15. Leaving (in memoriam Grandmother) – Aaron Lee 44
16. Malacca Grandmother – Robert Yeo 45
17. Grandmother – Alamgir Hashmi 47
18. Good Ching Ming Day – Sng Boh Khim 49
19. Interview with a Beauty Queen – Eddie Tay 50
20. Dear Mona – Leong Liew Geok 51
21. Old Wives' Tales (My Country and My People) – Aaron Maniam 52
22. Noh Drama – Dudley P. de Souza 54
23. Conch Shell – Albert Wendt 55
24. Compulsory Class Visits – Roma Potiki 57
25. Uncle Never Knew – Edwin Thumboo 58
26. Patriotism – Ee Tiang Hong 60

Homeland

27. lion heart – Amanda Chong 62
28. The Mute Sea and my Heritage – Sunil Govinnage 64
29. Waiting for Independence – Daniel Massa 66
30. Song of the Workers – James Puthucheary 67
31. blood – Muhammad Haji Salleh 69
32. Cenotaph – Chandran Nair 70
33. May 1954 – Edwin Thumboo 71
34. 9th August 1965 – Robert Yeo 73
35. My city, my canvas – Heng Siok Tian 75
36. Concrete (Mudrooroo Narogin)– Colin Johnson 77
37. Summer in Perth – Sunil Govinnage 78
38. Never Forgotten – Eddie Tay 79
39. Corridor, Bukit Merah – Koh Buck Song 80
40. The Portrait of a Sentenced Library – Alfian Sa'at 81
41. Island – Edwin Thumboo 83
42. Ships at Singapore – Cecile Parrish 85
43. Land's End – Boey Kim Cheng 87
44. Tanah Merah – Oliver Seet 88
45. High Rise – Koh Buck Song 89
46. Solat (Place and Time) – Aaron Maniam 91
47. zairuddin – Damon Chua 92
48. discriminating evidence – Felix Cheong 93
49. Muslim Sim – Chris Mooney-Singh 94

Living

50. Origins – Vivek Narayanan 96
51. Doll – Joy Chee 97
52. Only the Moon – Wong May 98
53. A Tiny Idea – Aaron Lee 99
54. blue sky blue – Ho Poh Fun 100
55. black moth – Damon Chua 102
56. kirato's koi – Eddie Tay 103
57. The Kelongs – Magaret Leong 104

58. Of Pail and Spade – Colin Tan 105
59. Growing Old – Yong Shu Hoong 107
60. Meditations – Felix Cheong 108
61. Autobiography – Alfian Sa'at 109
62. Nightjar – Arthur Yap 111
63. Keeping Time – Colin Tan 112
64. curlers – Madeleine Lee 113
65. Child – Boey Kim Cheng 114
66. Dragon-fly – Wong May 115
67. Printing Money – Toh Hsien Min 116
68. Leaving – Lee Tzu Pheng 118
69. Fruits – Goh Poh Seng 120
70. The Feast – Chin Woon Ping 122
71. Psalm of Birds and Birthdays – Alvin Pang 124
72. Kendo – Wooi-chin J-son 125
73. Ne Zha – Ng Yi-Sheng 126
74. Hang Tuah – Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof 127
75. My Father Takes My Son For A Walk – Gilbert Koh 128
76. Fish – Cyril Wong 129
77. Prawn Fishermen – Margaret Leong 130
78. Low Tide, Johore – Cecile Parrish 131
79. Grazing – Eric Tinsay Valles 132
80. Morning Train – Alfian Sa'at 134
81. Parking Meter – Alamgir Hashmi 135
82. Other National Virtues – Gwee Li Sui 136
83. Cavenagh Bridge – Toh Hsien Min 137
84. Merlion Speaks – Daren Shiau 138
85. A Mythic Tail – Aaron Lee 139
86. Jurassic Gardens – Gwee Li Sui 141
87. National Grain – Yeow Kai Chai 142
88. Two Figures When One Is Sick – Simon Tay 144
89. Balinese Dance – Roger Jenkins 145
90. Dance – Fadzilah Amin 146
91. Wayang – Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof 147

92. Samoan Glass – Geoffrey Dutton 148
93. Daylight Photosynthesis – Charlotte Tan 149
94. River – Yong Shu Hoong 150
95. The River – Edwin Thumboo 151
96. Marina Barrage – Lee Tzu Pheng 152
97. Aliwal North – Chris Mann 154
98. Arming Rituals – Boey Kim Cheng 155
99. War Poet – Sidney Keyes 156
100. Yet Another Incident in July 1983 – Basil Fernando 157
101. Train of Thought – Stella Kon 160
102. Poem for Mr Barnard – Teng Qian Xi 161
103. The English Teacher – Lynette Lim 162
104. Love Is Not Enough – Leong Liew Geok 164
105. The New Academy – Geoffrey Lehmann 165
106. When The Barbarians Arrive – Alvin Pang 167
107. "Checking e-mail on a Christmas Eve" or "Crash!"
– Angeline Yap 169
108. Under the Covers – Yong Shu Hoong 170
109. Guilin: Sailing Down the Li River – Robert Yeo 171
110. Genuflections from Mysore – Dudley P. de Souza 172
111. Do not go gentle into that good night – Dylan Thomas 173
112. Sailing to Byzantium – W.B. Yeats 174

Words

113. Ode to Prose – Vivek Narayanan 178
114. What is Poetry – Angeline Yap 180
115. Words – Arthur Yap 181
116. English – Gemino H. Abad 182
117. On Writing A Poem – Ee Tiang Hong 184
118. Why I Sing – Cyril Wong 185
119. Ars Poetica – A Polemic – Nina Cassian 186
120. What is it to Write? – Felix Cheong 187
121. Lines – Shirley Lim 188
122. My Tree – Kirpal Singh 189

- 123. The Words – Lee Tzu Pheng 190
- 124. The Windhover – Gerard Manley Hopkins 191
- 125. Coda: Language – Nina Cassian 192

- **Singapore Poems in Translation**

- 126. Change – Zhou Can 194
- 127. The Wounded River – Wong Yoon Wah 196
- 128. Bird's Nest Ferns – Nan Zi 198
- 129. Lock – Dan Ying 199
- 130. Musings from the Bronze Statue of Mr. Tan Kah Kee
– Han Chuan 201
- 131. To the Bronze Statue of Raffles – Liang Yue 202
- 132. The Story of Chopsticks – Quek Yong Siu 204
- 133. The Degenerate South – Xi Ni Er 206
- 134. A Sad Sea – Henry Low Swee Kim 208
- 135. Crossing Paths – North, South, East, West – Chow Teck Seng 209
- 136. Devotion – Masuri S.N. 211
- 137. A story or history, perhaps? – A Ghani Hamid 212
- 138. Song of the City – Mohamed Latiff Mohamed 213
- 139. One Evening – Norulashikin Jamain 214
- 140. Lonely Souls – Rasiah Halil 216
- 141. Roots – Johar Buang 217
- 142. The Koran Chanter of Geylang Serai – Isa Kamari 218
- 143. The Children of Robinson Road – K.T.M. Iqbal 220
- 144. Valediction – Kadayannallur Jameela 221
- 145. Curfew – Elangovan 222
- 146. Karanguni – Kanagalatha 224
- 147. Urban Riches – Amiroudine 225

- **Four Short Forms:**

- **Couplet**

- 148. Thirst – Sa'adi 228
- 149. from The Character of the Happy Warrior
– William Wordsworth 228

- 150. Time – Leong Liew Geok 228
- 151. from Auguries of Innocence – William Blake 228
- 152. What is Life – Alvin Pang 228

- **Haiku**

- 153. Takahama Kyoshi 229
- 154. Nakamura Kusatao 229
- 155. Saito Sanki 229
- 156. Tomizawa Kakio 229
- 157. Kirpal Singh 229
- 158. Alvin Pang 230
- 159. Edwin Thumboo 230

- **Quatrain**

- 160. To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time – Robert Herrick 231
- 161. Celia – Alexander Pope 231
- 162. Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard – Thomas Gray 231
- 163. Poem – William Wordsworth 232
- 164. The Rime of the Ancient Mariner – Samuel Taylor Coleridge 232
- 165. A Bird Came Down the Walk – Emily Dickinson 232

- **Pantun**

- 166. Eight Pantuns translated by Rasiah Halil 233
- 167. A Precious Flower – A.W. Hamilton 235
– Katharine Sim 235
- 168. A Deceitful Tongue – A.W. Hamilton 236
- 169. A Weight of Kindness – A.W. Hamilton 236
- 170. Plea for Guidance – A.W. Hamilton 236

Index of Poets and their Poems 237

Index of First Lines and Titles 242

Index of First Lines and Titles (Four Short Forms) 252

Recommended Reading 254

Copyrights 257

Acknowledgements 264

我是 (i am)

Paul Tan Kim Liang

chinese too
skin as yellow as loess
shining like good gold
my eyes surely black
dark mirror black well
limitless unlike
my tun-tun-tu-tu¹ vocabulary
english speaking
cursing dreaming moaning in it
waist deep chest deep
in over my head
i eat these words
a whole thesaurus
stuck in my throat
stuck like sweet treacle
or glutinous rice, you say
why does the teacher strike
me with her wooden pipa
as i sing whitney houston for you?
my tongue feels kinda funny
i think i'll go eat worms
mr neither-here-nor-there
doing a slow limbo rock²
lower and lower
straddling two halves
there's a smell of joss
and the crowd is crunching ritz³
something's about to dislocate

1 Chinese proverb (吞吞吐吐) meaning having difficulty articulating a thought

2 popular song by Chubby Checker associated with a dance where participants have to take turns to cross beneath a long stick, bending backwards without touching the stick or the ground.

3 brand of popular American cookies.

Interview with a Beauty Queen

Eddie Tay

For beauty is a kamikaze act;
my great-grandmother used to sit pretty
and totter daintily on bound feet, yet
in the evenings, she pleaded in agony
as wrappings were removed. Such foolishness!
I know better. So long as I feel good
about myself, it's okay. It's pointless;
men are at fault when women pick their food.
That's their idea of beauty. Magazines
talk about it too – slitting breasts open
for silicone implants, and weight routines
just to stay trim and tight. That's how girls learn.

I think I have to go. Our time is up.
No pictures please, I'm not wearing make-up.

The Portrait of a Sentenced Library

Alfian Sa'at

So these bricks will be torn down
And books will still not have learnt
To spread their feathers and fly
Like pigeons from a shaken tree

So this balustrade will be dismantled
Perhaps reassembled somewhere else –
A conch paperweight by my head is a beach.
Each hour from a postcard Big Ben chimes.

This is the logic of nostalgia -
This is what I mean when I say
That my memory is selfish.
Who can guarantee that roaming

Through a tunnel I will find again
The Children's Section, where a boy walked
With 'the Little Prince' in his hands,
His smile the first line of a novel

Neither of us had read before?
One cymbal left in Chinatown.
Blueprints and forums and rhetoric ensure
That a firecracker makes no sound.

Dance

Fadzilah Amin (Malaysia)

We two are like partners in the ronggeng¹,
Approaching nearer, nearer and nearer;
But just when one would think we'd meet at last,
We turn away, reverse our steps, withdraw.

And like the ronggeng too, my life seems now,
With steps mechanical, repeated, meaningless;
Arms swinging back and forth, expressing nothing,
Feet pacing up and down the floor, going nowhere.

I am tired of going through these ronggeng motions,
Long to break this impasse of reserve;
If only at one point our hands could clasp,
What rich variety of movement and gesture could be ours.

1 A Malay dance accompanied by orchestra and a singer in which a couple move forwards and backwards

River

Yong Shu Hoong

Your veins still pulse with unstoppable delight
day in
night out
Your habit inconsolable even after a lobotomy
to glean aberration
from your surface light

Your temperament will not be reined into submission
You change your colour
one weather to the next

Weekend fishermen continue to extract hope
from your depleted bureau

But what the men in their lofty offices really want
is to comprehend your feng shui powers

They try

To grasp the content of your hidden cache
yet strange enough
are unable to distinguish
one colour from the next

Other National Virtues

Gwee Li Sui

I asked for teh tarek
Got half the glass in effervescence
Got food poisoning because
Half my mee's in its adolescence
Criticize, complain, condemn
With a hand over the abdomemn.

The players pant like pups
Think they are playing table tennis
The blundering referee
Is giving me tuberculosis
Criticize, complain, condemn
Throughout the National Stadiemn.

Sure, we may know we live
In a kind of modern paradise
But it's hell when we come to
Any bureaucratic exercise
Criticize, complain, condemn
All over on the referendemn.