

KEPULAUAN

Kepulauan: A Collection of Poems

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KEPULAUAN

A COLLECTION OF POEMS

Edited by
Zhang Jieqiang
Hidhir Razak
Marcus Tan Yi-hern



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FOREWORD

The title of this collection, *Kepulauan*, was inspired by an inside joke, a cheeky play on how Nanyang Technological University (NTU) is humorously and fondly known among its students as “Pulau NTU,” due to its being located so far south-west of Singapore it might as well be an island unto itself. Over the years, the University has built an impressive reputation for itself in the fields of engineering, science, business, and communications, but against the backdrop of its cutting-edge technological developments and groundbreaking scientific research, an effervescent community of prose writers, poets, and dramatists has sprouted up. Even though NTU still remains largely driven by its “technological” roots as an engineering university, it now boasts a thriving literary scene, one that is both vibrant and expanding, with the growth of its School of Humanities and Social Sciences (which celebrates its 10th Anniversary this year) as well as the flourishing of both its Minor in Creative Writing and Singapore Writing Residencies. We saw, in this anthology, a mere glimpse into the dynamic poetry NTU students have to offer, and we are excited to offer it here as a standing tribute to the University’s ever growing community of poets, many of whom are committed to exploring the possibilities of poetic expression and pushing the boundaries of verse.

The English poet John Donne writes,
No man is an island
Entire of itself
Every man is a piece of the continent
A part of the main.

While this sentiment would certainly ring true if we think of the writers belonging to the NTU community as a whole, *Kepulauan*—“archipelago” in Malay—also hopes to showcase how these individual poets are each an island in and of themselves. But just as “Pulau NTU” maintains strong links with the rest of Singaporean society, the poets in NTU are also inextricably connected to one another, whether through personal relationships or simply through our shared admiration of and love for poetry. Naming this collection *Kepulauan* is thus an attempt to capture this spirit of diversity coming together to form an archipelago of poetic expression. The majority of these poems are selected from the work of the undergraduate students in Dr Boey Kim Cheng’s *Creative Writing: Poetry* (2013) class, with the rest of the poems contributed by undergraduate students in Dr Jennifer Crawford’s *Advanced Creative Writing* (2013) class, as well as by other undergraduate and postgraduate students and a faculty member in the Division of English.

NTU is the first university in Singapore to offer a sustained Creative Writing programme with a comprehensive range of modules, a Minor in Creative Writing, and graduate programmes in Creative Writing. Such creative writing classes in the Division of English

have created conducive spaces and ample opportunities for students to explore the terrains of artistic creation. They equip its students with the tools to navigate and chart these landscapes, allowing them to expand their horizons within and across the various genres of poetry, fiction, non-fiction prose, playwriting, and screenwriting. In addition, the Division of English offers annual Writing Residences to a local writer and an international writer (Dr Boey is one such resident), who teach creative writing classes, give public readings, engage in discussions on their work, and are available for consultations with students. This anthology would not have been possible without all the mentorship generously offered by the writers-in-residence.

It is little wonder, then, that this creative environment has yielded its fruits beyond its boundaries. Only last year, two of the students who have benefitted from these creative writing classes have won Honourable Mentions in 2013's Golden Point Award for the English category of Short Story. One of them, Diana Rahim, has three of her poems in this collection. Eric Tinsay Valles, who is currently pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing in the Division of English and whose poems are also collected here, has been awarded second prize in the Goh Sin Tub Creative Writing Prize 2013—Poetry. Several other students have also had their work published in literary journals such as *Ceriph, Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, and *SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English*, among other journals

and anthologies. Also part of this creative environment is Epiphany, the University's English and Drama Society, which stages plays written, directed, and acted by students, publishes an eponymous literary magazine that showcases the best student works on campus, and hosts open mic sessions for students, faculty members as well as invited guests to share their work.

From the elegiac to the playful, from the personal to the political, from formalist work to postmodern improvisation, this collection is born out of writing workshops in which student poets have been encouraged to step outside their comfort zones to produce pieces that are as thematically and formally varied as possible. Many poems in this collection would have started out as free writing exercises or single-stanza expressions of ideas, then expanding and evolving through weeks of revision to its final, complete form under the mentorship of senior writers. In these writing workshops, student poets also share and discuss their work, providing invaluable feedback on each other's pieces as well as learning from each other new ways of reimagining their own poetry.

It is with this idea of individuality within community that we present *Kepulauan*, in which these poets offer not only their manifold observations about the world around them, but also pieces of themselves—*island voices coming together to form an archipelago they can call their own*. This archipelago of voices is one that is steadily growing and evolving—*new islands are always being discovered as new writers constantly join or emerge within the NTU community*. *Kepulauan* is not only a

collection of the fruits of this community's creative labour, but also a promise and a pledge to continue our literary explorations, a commitment to keep venturing into uncharted territory—a journey that we hope will never come to an end.

The Editors

Zhang Jieqiang

Hidhir Razak

Marcus Tan Yi-hern

Fist

i.

There must be a reason why the
heart is a fist wrapped in blood.
Why it is both tenderness
and violence. Life-giving
and brutal.

There must be a reason why
women beat their fists against their chests
in grief. Why we instinctively connect the two
as if our bodies were subconsciously
acting on primitive memory:

If I beat myself where it hurts the most,
will this feeling leave? Can we shake
the organ behind the bones enough to
break it?

ii.

On average, a heart pumps 1.3 gallons
of blood per minute. 48 million gallons
by the time we're 70. It doesn't have
the strength to pretend to be strong
or built from bone.

It revives and re-hurts with
mere precursors of memory—
a glimpse of a picture, a song sung

together in an empty room,
a lost bobby pin, a half-eaten
bagel, the same cold air touching
the same old skin.

But this is probably why
we raise arms against others,
push guns against their backs,
connect phalanges to cheekbones.
It is the first rule of vulnerability—
pretend to be otherwise. Pretend
that the blood coating your thin skin
is not your own bleeding.

iii.

Close a hand into a fist, feel the nails
dig into your palms. See this
unblemished reflection of your heart.
Was the body designed to warn us,
of how it was bound to batter
and pound us?

Closed, it will always be an image
of violence. An image of pain.
It took so much for us to open our palms,
and be gentle with ourselves when
hurt came. To lay our hands softly, with
our fingers flowering across our chest.
To weep without wanting to
kill what was beneath.

Onion Heart

There is a dusty basket in
a shady corner on my kitchen
counter where it is always dry
and cool and easily within reach
from the stove and sink.

In it are onions—small and round,
unwashed, unpeeled, unbled,
their thin rice-paper skin dirty,
their purple membranes running
deep between their layers of white,
acidic flesh, each layer
tightly wrapped around another
tightly-wrapped layer, like bandages
wound around wandering wounds,
purple petals with no room to bloom.

Some onions harden from
being kept too long.
Some wither and fester,
wasted, bitter.

Most of them end up peeled, washed, cleaned,
then sliced, chopped, minced—an onion can be
cut by all the different ways of cutting.
All the different layers can part
by all the different ways of parting.

But every once in a while, tiny, green
shoots would appear on one end of
an onion where, Ibu says, they must
have been touched by wet hands.
These her wrinkled hands
would take to plant in a pot.
These rare ones, in the carefully
portioned earth, under
the tropical sky, would
inevitably start to rot.

It saddens Ibu to see them die in the sun.
Not a single onion lived long this way, not one.
Where I am used to losing things to the light,
Ibu does not understand why some things love
the night.

In between knife and chopping board,
as an acidic elegy sprays into the air
at the parting of white and purple,
our hands find their rhythm and
our ears only hear:
Chop chop, chop chop,
Chop chop, chop chop.

Only our eyes sing in reply.

water is not your friend

my prime minister stands at
his podium
and looks me in the eye.
every year he repeats,
“this country belongs to no one.”
it used to be an assurance,
a confession,
that he remembers
his roots as an immigrant.
lately, it has begun to sound
more like a threat
that this land is
no longer my people’s.
i guess the hints have been all around;
this country has no more place
for me, child of the
people of the sea,
the water, the river,
the river where your
immigrant ancestors
spread out from,
like a cancer,
pushing my people inland,
away from their lifeblood.
this dirty longkang lifeblood of our nation
it tries so hard to recreate.
did you know
the river has been forced
into the shape of a carp, a
Chinese symbol of luck?

they believe us to be just like water:
formless, shapeless,
spineless.
and they think if you put water
in a carp
it becomes the carp
because Bruce Lee—
i mean, Lee Jun-Fan—
no, Lǐ Zhèn fān,
said so.
and look at the Merlion,
constantly trying
to purge the sea from itself,
the language it speaks
a jumbled gurgle,
like the Othered tongue we call
our national language.
and how the lion guards our shores,
our doors,
a cat constantly chasing its tail
a lion unable to eat its prey
at the risk of killing itself,
telling the fish to
keep swimming,
to hold it up,
and to always,
always,
stay out of sight,
where it belongs.