

© Leonard Ng, 2011

ISBN 978-981-08-9311-8

Published under the imprint Ethos Books by
Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
65 Ubi Crescent
#06-04 Hola Centre
Singapore 408559
www.ethosbooks.com.sg

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This book is published with support from:



Cover design by Merlin Sudianto
Produced by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd
Printed and bound in Singapore

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Ng, Leonard, 1979-

This mortal world : poems / by Leonard Ng. – Singapore : Ethos Books, c2011.

p. cm.

ISBN : 978-981-08-9311-8 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PR9570.S53
S821 -- dc22

OCN738384769



This Mortal World

Poems by Leonard Ng



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Foreword

By John Richardson

Leonard Ng's first collection is well named. There are poems here on many themes—nature, love, travel, the supernatural—but one theme stands out above all, and that is the mortal world. Perhaps it is not quite accurate to call this a theme. The poems do not reflect upon or philosophise about the world. Rather they observe it and recreate it in finely honed words. In doing so, they become, together, a celebration of the world of the title.

At the heart of Ng's work as a poet is observation—precise, disciplined watching. In one of the longer poems, "Fox", he describes his encounter with the animal of the title:

And so it was I who saw her, sitting beside you that day,
as she slipped across the road ahead of us:
a fine gangster's lady, in her crimson overcoat,
languid steps indifferent to our bus
as it rolled down towards her. She paused and turned to
watch us...

Ng captures the moment in the words of the poem, but before doing that he has captured it with his eyes. He has seen the colour of the vixen, her air of almost criminal swagger, her movement, her indifference and her controlled watching. Everything about her has been precisely noted and remembered.

That precise observation does not ignore the strangeness of the world. Indeed, at times it is the intensity of the perception which brings out the strangeness. The poem "My first hawk" recalls a strange meeting between the poet and a bird perched on a railing eight floors above a busy world. It is an almost surreal moment as man and bird stand together above the world and look down. Other poems even hint at a supernatural element in nature. "Moths at War Memorial after midnight" calls those insects "eerie angels" and "Galway" records a moment in which nature seems magically to have resisted technology. A camera fails to work during a moment of rare natural beauty, though later it is perfectly functional. Ng stops

short of ascribing the failure to unseen forces, but he allows the possibility:

just perhaps, that night
the camera had known things I hadn't.

It is a strange event, and one that makes the poet reflect on his own possible blindness. But notably, he still watches and remembers even when faced with that possibility.

The precision of observation which informs the collection is matched by a precision of language. Sometimes this appears in the choice of a single word. In "East Coast canal", there is the sentence: "Tiny and fugitive, they shiver upstream". The verb "shiver" captures exactly the way in which shoals of small fish move. A different kind of fish appears in "Saturday evening in March":

And a catfish rose too,
from the river bottom—skin patched and leprous,
unbeautiful, covered from tip to tail in mud—
but eyes still sharp, every curve and sweep
of that soiled body concealing a hidden power,
a wicked invisible strength.

A riverine Odysseus, returning to Ithaca.

The description is economical and precise, with each word signalling some fresh detail of the fish's appearance. Only in the final phrase does Ng move to a comparison, and then it's an apt one with Odysseus appropriately representing this battered, powerful creature. Elsewhere, in "Sunday morning", it is the fish that provides the comparison:

But the memory slides from me,
Slips clear of my clumsy grasp like an eel
Here the escaping eel nicely figures the swift disappearance of
slippery memory.

The collection includes many moods. There are poems of happiness, of loss, of regret and of plain puzzlement. But underlying everything is an implicit sense of wonder at the complexity, actuality and beauty of the world. One poem, “To the fallen”, takes a traditional title and topic, and turns it upside down. This is not a poem about the nation’s dead, but rather one about people who have fallen away. It ends with the imperative to “arise”, but before that, Ng has already commanded the fallen to “remember your birthright, the gift of your being.” This sense of the “gift of your being” is present more implicitly in a poem like “Drinking tea alone”, which ends with a simple listing of three sensory experiences: “the taste of tea, the sound of rain, the smell of fish frying.” Yet another poem, “After the rain” ends in this way:

Leaving only the rain, puddled on the grey paving
like ink on an inkstone.

Waiting for the soft, wondering feet
of drainborn kittens.

The kittens’ feet are notably not “wandering” but “wondering,” as if in acknowledgement of the feeling of wonder human beings sometimes experience after a storm. It is that feeling of wonder which holds the collection together and which makes it above all a celebration—a celebration of living in a mortal world.

This Mortal World



John Richardson is the Director of the University Scholars Programme at the National University of Singapore, and Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature. His research focuses on eighteenth-century British literature and the relationship of that to major currents in social and political history. He is currently working on issues of war and literature.



Koi

There they go, drifting idly by
in the mottled green light of their heaven:
these buddhas of water, knowing nothing but *now*,
in their last birth before the deep silence.

Bred for their beauty, bland unfinished faces
stay unlined by both sorrow and silent fish-laughter;
here in the blue-tiled bounds of their universe
only the placid prevail.
Streaming minds no longer remember
the cullings of childhood, the hungry mothers' mouths;
each life long since filtered through trials into patience,
they stay in midwater, in continuous meditation—
each mind with its world a confluence of rivers,

and when, each morning, manna breaks their sky
and faith, rewarded, rises to meet it,
they come, never questioning what lies beyond—
electric lamps, broad leaves, strange huge faces,
and other minds, caught still in the dusty webs of spiders.

My first hawk

stood watching from the corridor rail,
absorbed in meditation, looking out from his perch
over American silence.
His body the hooked curve of a brushstroke.
His eyes living amber, waiting only for time
to transmute them into shards of eternity.
The end of the summer, hot and dry and windless.
Nothing moving. Only a bus's dull grumble
harsh, far away, half hidden behind trees.
The hawk himself like tinder, parched on a woodpile,
in the dry dewless heat of morning.

Then I arrived, clumsy, busting through the swinging door
like an officer on a raid. Caught sight of him, staring
as if he had been some trespasser, a squatter, illegal,
a purveyor of poisons and contraband—
his head swung round to face me.
Incendiary yellow eyes and scimitar jaw
glared. For an instant neither of us moved. Of us two
I think I was the more surprised.
So there we stood. Just him and me.
Cowboys in a standoff, under the sun.

I was younger then, and foolish. I didn't realise
that this had been his land long before I arrived,
had been his country long before men gave it a name.
But somewhere deep the earth inside me knew.
My presence required permission. He gave it. Turned away.
Slowly I took a step forward. And then another.
Until, with him, I leaned over the railing.
Felt iron under my forearms. The same iron under his feet.
And there we stayed. Two of us, looking out over the drought-worn
landscape



Drinking tea alone during incessant rain

As rain lightens, tentative, I push my windows open:
raindrops stain the panes, but the room stays dry.
Boiling water, I make tea—the last of the leaves;
settling down, I read poems in the evening light.
Cooking smells drift over from a kitchen nearby;
a passing breeze carries a moment in the curtains.
Three things, I'm sure, will linger in my mind:
the taste of tea, the sound of rain, the smell of fish frying.

Visitation

Eleven a.m., Sunday. Silver light
shines through my window, illuminates the strings
of my guzheng. Metal's quiet sheen,
an unearthly radiance of bronze and green,
seems to hum electric through the air,
though nobody's there
to play. For a moment all balances brimful of music,
a bucketful of clear water unspilled.
Then the light passes like an onrushing cloud,
and the sky widens, the air shifts just a little,
and beyond my window a fluttering
of pigeons' wings.

