

## Bukit Panjang: Hill, Village, Town

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### I

Long Hill... way up, semi-north:  
Time-traveller; master of winds: you  
Culled our seasons years before we  
Glimpsed your contours. You

Rolled south to be the tip of Mother Asia,  
Picking up names like Bukit Batok. You  
Finally stopped for tectonic breath, at Mt  
Sopiah; your last spur is Fort Canning.

Still steady stately un-stressed, you  
Our vigilant secret dragon saw further  
Than Brit radars, tireless atop your peaks.  
They genuflected setting sun, rising moon,

Trying to spot Konfrontasi<sup>2</sup>: a word, a fear,  
A rant, an impunity that briefly sired a little  
Neighbourly bloodiness. Pray wars have  
Killed themselves, that skirmishes and riots

Miss our little red dot while we work to  
Push coasts against the tide, flats higher,  
Float IPOs, plant splendours-in-the-park,  
Though we are yet to parcel out the sky.

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<sup>1</sup> **Edwin Thumboo** is a Singaporean poet and academic who is regarded as one of the founders of literature in English in Malaysia and Singapore. He was appointed Professor of English at the National University of Singapore in January 1979, where he also served as Head of the Department of English Language and Literature (1977-1993) and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (1980-1991). Thumboo has won the National Book Development Council of Singapore Book Awards for Poetry three times: 1978, 1980 and 1994. He also received the inaugural SEA Write Award in 1979, the first Cultural Medallion for Literature in 1979 and the ASEAN Cultural and Communication Award (Literature) in 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Indonesia opposed the formation of Malaysia that brought together Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. Popularly known as Konfrontasi, it was not a full scale war. Indonesian armed forces posing as volunteers conducted raids, a notable one being the bombing on 10/3/1965 of MacDonald House in Orchard Rd in which two people were killed.

Granite, soil, sub-soil; beds of moss: you  
Flew our flag umpteen years; covenanted  
Ten faiths and more, aligned and bonded  
Immigrant syllables for our daily bread.

That we, too, did, as undergrads scouting  
Wild mid-50 ridges, skirting colonial camps,  
As butterflies rode winds, tilting to joust  
Fragrant moments as swifts snatched morsels.

When we got merdeka<sup>3</sup> and you, sub judice,  
We tickled your knuckles and your toes;  
Bit and dressed them; trimmed; dressaged;  
Progressed; installed occasional oddities.

Those were... the days... my friend  
Not the ones... with... deadly ends.

## II

If you seek how nations push and punish  
History, then know how one side's glory,  
Jacked high, is the other's killing field.  
1940: families, places, weather too, felt  
Threats of war, disturbing indicative ICs<sup>4</sup>  
For security; black-outs; makeshift air-raid  
Shelters; nifty camouflage; troops puffing  
Bag-pipes; aircraft strafing for the ARP<sup>5</sup>;  
Such fun for us kids, those games.

Papa in the MAS<sup>6</sup> had duties. I see  
Station-cum-policemen, neatly kept,

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<sup>3</sup> Bahasa for freedom; the main nationalist rallying cry in South East Asia.

<sup>4</sup> Identity Card as a precaution against infiltrators.

<sup>5</sup> Air Raid Precaution. A UK based organisation set up in 1924 and expanded just before WWII, leading to branches in the colonies. Its Wardens – mainly “voluntary” as in the MAS – ensured that black-outs were observed and sand, water tanks, pails, spades, hydrants and hoses were available to fight fires. As schools were spread throughout Singapore, teachers were a prime source of volunteers.

<sup>6</sup> Medical Auxiliary Service developed an extensive network in the period just before WWII to supplement the work of Hospitals, especially in patient care.

Dreaming on a knoll, now flattened,  
Concretised into Lot 1. It had chikus,  
Rose-apples, guavas, rambutans; ripe,  
Un-refrigerated; scrumptious, low;  
Eyed by merbaks; occasional pairs  
Of drongos, Golden Oriels; restless  
Dragon-flies. I plucked I ate I juiced  
My shirt. Leaf-washed sticky thumb  
And fingers, face beaming innocence.

Those too were the days my friend,  
I thought they would never, ever end.

Village, you buzzed half-corralled  
By make-shift barricades, barbed wire;  
Ciphers of wars echoing from far away.  
Yet deep night-thoughts rehearsed relatives'  
Uncertain lives on China's ravaged coast,  
Grown skeletally bitter under a Nippon sun.

### III

I watched you, our epicentre, from  
Mid-seventies Phoenix Heights. Newly  
Minted. Perhaps unconscious love saved  
Small clusters of rubber, durian, Mango,  
Tembusu, pulasan, mangosteen. Higher  
Up the slope were vigorous tickets whose  
Gloaming blew usual night safari sounds.  
Nostalgia is a habitation with many names.

Below, our BPG Chapel,<sup>7</sup> *Nearer my God  
To Thee*, where Dhana baptised me. Feed  
Us Your Daily Bread, O Lord. Forgive;  
Cleanse; fold us into everlasting love.  
*Your only Son, No sin to hide  
But You have sent Him from Your side  
To walk upon this guilty sod  
And to become the Lamb of God.*<sup>8</sup> Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Bukit Panjang Gospel Chapel where the poet was baptized by Mr S Dhanabalan on 22/3/1922.

Those PAP days were rapid fire; heaving.  
Planners with satellite towns itching  
In their brains, came super charged.

Across nearby postal tracks, a highway  
Dots unseen eyes to cut through granite.  
Steel jaws open Earth by chomping hard,  
Boneless, compacted beige Jurassic loam.  
Dishevelled, in the making, traffic-less,  
Ideal for walking friends discussing  
Whatever strikes a spark to turn and burn  
A thought, or prime life's little ironies.

Often, alone among deserted farms  
Nesting in hill and vale, mist and dew,  
I am back in Mandai, on bunds dividing  
Ponds. Pooish air. A loo in a shaded corner  
Where softest pops implode when fish rise  
For air. I watch widening ripples fade.  
I turn. Where the Hill should be stand  
Rows of papayas, over-ripe, unplucked.

Old ladies return to hungry dogs, harvest  
Memories, whatever hangs, then head to  
Market to sell to chat to meet old friends.  
*'Has Ah Noi given birth? How much did  
You get for those ducks? These spectacles?  
Too modern!'* enjoying a circuitry grown  
Over years, but now declining, as another  
Wooden shed is shredded in just hours.

Where is the cinema, large zinc box,  
Just off the road, by the railway tracks?  
At times when hero and heroine are  
Poised to clinch, whistle blasts warn  
The level-crossing, shake their moment.  
And kway teow, lush with cockles, lard,  
Bean sprouts, sweet sauce and chillies  
For that special taste, alive, alive O?

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<sup>8</sup> Lamb of God, a popular hymn.

These are the missing days my friend,  
They have rusted, met their end. Now

What's up? Getting townish, you? I should  
Say! Regular brick blocks carefully aligned.  
French tile roofs, sliding doors, tinted windows;  
Traffic lights overseeing Upper Bukit Timah,  
Choa Chu Kang and Woodlands. Double lines.  
Road widening. Paid parking. Dispensaries.  
Improvements? Perhaps. One thing's certain.  
You are getting plump with amenities.

#### 1V

Chipped, levelled, upgraded; possibly  
Burrowed by modest MinDef air-cond  
Tunnels shyly hidden, you protect

While I stride memories, circle your  
Amplitude. You are a special spine  
To many things; Little Guilin; hip condos....

But it's not military readiness, or the past,  
As when a tiger purred to church, or  
Chu rei to and Cross raised to bravery.

Time rolls and curves upon itself:  
Today is tomorrow is today. You  
Dream, draw and cast shadows,

Yours and ours. People come together,  
Simultaneous, complicated, overlapping,  
Merge life-styles. Make one out of many.

Like our multiplexes. Fusion, now in vogue,  
Is one of 144 buzz words. We change colour  
And rhythm; urbanise; always multiracial.

English bounces off the wall; Chinese via PRs;  
Tamil chanted between peeling temple bells.

Days start with Majula Singapura,<sup>9</sup> shared

By long cherished neighbours: Kum  
Kit-Fatmah, Cecil-Thana, James-Lee Fah,  
And others on this walk with you, sub-city.

I escaped your big brother 40 years ago.  
As you grew, so my irritation prospered,  
Loosed by curt efficiency, sharp politeness.

Now I feel a creeping love, abetted by age,  
Your sweet convenience, evergreen spirit,  
Like the school just down the road.

Above all, in the House of the Lord, where I  
Grew again, am fed on the Word for that  
Eternal Journey which makes this a fitter one.

Soon the MRT arrives, me still travelling...  
Long Hill... way up, semi-north, time-adventurer;  
Master of winds, culling our seasons, in all moods  
And weather, as we glimpse your changing contours.  
    You will be here, expanding, when we  
        Have gone.

June/July 2012  
Singapore

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<sup>9</sup> Singapore's national anthem which is in Malay.