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
Glimped 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\(^2\): 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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1 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.

2 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 merdeka³ 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 ICs⁴
For security; black-outs; makeshift air-raid
Shelters; nifty camouflage; troops puffing
Bag-pipes; aircraft strafing for the ARP⁵;
Such fun for us kids, those games.

Papa in the MAS⁶ had duties. I see
Station-cum-policemen, neatly kept,

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³ Bahasa for freedom; the main nationalist rallying cry in South East Asia.
⁴ Identity Card as a precaution against infiltrators.
⁵ 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.
⁶ 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,\(^7\) *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.\(^8\)* Amen.

\(^7\) 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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8 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.

IV

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 multiplexs. 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 pealing temple bells.
Days start with Majula Singapura,⁹ shared

By long cherished neighbours: Kum
Kit-Fatmah, Cecil-Than, 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.

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⁹ Singapore’s national anthem which is in Malay.