

Edwin Thumboo: Three Quarters of a Century

Ismail S. Talib¹
National University of Singapore

*Unlike gold earned by bringing firewood into a city,
And which depends on the chance of a sale,
His generosity is certain!*

from the *Pu[ana]n[u]*

I

No, this is not another Merlion poem
Nor is it a poem about an old man –
A little boy jabbering an old man's language.
No, it's not on eternal youth either:

The young are up in arms, not in each other's arms.
Nor – since the gifts of the Moon remain intact –
Do children stray near it:
They are told to shut up, or take a sweet.

It may be about life and death
But I don't know;
In the same way that I don't know Edwin Thumboo
(Even if I think I know him) –

For death, my brother, is not an everyday thing
And neither is life, even if we experience it everyday:
For what is life without poetry?
And what is death?

¹ Ismail Talib is an academic. He is also an occasional poet for much of his life. For the past twenty-five years or so, he has held the belief that poetry should be a momentary phenomenon – that it should be savoured for the moment, often by the poet himself, after which it should be thrown away and forgotten. This poem is a beneficiary of the sporadic exceptions he has made to this practice.

II

*We live; we die
But only when our hearts speak
Do we live momentarily*

Life is only meaningful
At the point of death.
Isn't the cry of the dying,
The lust for life?

But what is life, if it's
A calculus of work and tedium?
Do you call it life, if the heart doesn't speak
And if poetry remains unwritten?

Walking through the cold Pennsylvanian winter,
As you meditate poetically about your father,
Entombed in the great revolving stillness of the earth:
Conversations through the unbroken wind, brought back to life.

*We live; we die
But only when our hearts speak
Do we live momentarily*

III

Some say he's poet more than man.
Some say he's man more than poet,
Or a man with symptoms of poetry,
But this Merlionesque man-poet / poet-man (whichever way you want it)

Is greater than the sum of his myths, created or borrowed:
He sails through them
In an eternal quest
And never bothers about returning home.

*Yet to leave, surely,
Is to return;
But to return, also,
Is to go away*

Teacher, friend, brown man (like me)
 You're still travelling after three quarters of a century.
 In your voyages, you have brought new worlds to meet our own.
 You are older than Ulysses now –

Yet you have not reached your destination.
 But then it's the never-ending voyage that defines you
 – and your poems –
 Not living in a stilled place and calling it home.

IV

*As you move into
 Presences of the past
 Great things submerge;
 It's only the little things –
 In the best postmodern way –
 That remain dear to your heart*

You once reached an island with no name
 That Homer could not have recited about:
 An island vomited out of another country
 In a violently quiet, fatherless birth.

It emerged from those delinquent days,
 When brother killed brother (or wanted to),
 When balls were in brutal harmony
 (Or in gentle cacophony).

But the fate of your little island can never be
 A cause for having a face for minor friends,
 And another for the powers that be,
 Nor can it be a cause for saving or losing friends.

The island expands, invented, mortal,
 Hills are pushed into the sea;
 Yet the emergent self
 Sings songs of littleness.

*As you move into
Presences of the past
Great things submerge;
It's only the little things –
In the best postmodern way –
That remain dear to your heart*

V

No, yours is not an ordinary life
Nor is your poetic longevity, ordinary.
Sailor, hold your anchor (and your end)!
You know you've not reached your port, nor can you!

Bard, don't hold your tongue!
You know the end hasn't reached you, nor can it!
Nomad, distil your intellect, still,
Into the worded splendours of your heart.

Poetry is gentle lovemaking, without consent or carnal approval:
These are our emotional offspring, our gifts of power,
Our time-eluding bloodied gifts to the world –
Shakespeare's African lover eternalised in his sonnets.

Poetry does not have an end.
And as it always searches for other beginnings,
Its beginning is never
Final.

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