

Edwin Thumboo, *Still Travelling*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2008. 104 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-1000-9.

A few years ago I read one of Edwin Thumboo's poems through Peter Nazareth, who was writing a book on Thumboo. Nazareth asked me to comment on his then-in-progress work. When I read "Ulysses by the Merlion" I knew that I was reading a very fine poem. This poem stayed with me for days and became the genesis of my own poem, "Odysseys My Love," which was included in my most recent book, *In a Boston Night*. I became more familiar with Thumboo's work as I read (and reviewed) Nazareth's book, *Edwin Thumboo: Creating a Nation Through Poetry*. Thumboo, I came to learn, was something of a titan in his island state: civil servant, academic, critic, poet; and his poem, "Ulysses by the Merlion" a national showpiece, on display in Singapore near a national icon of his country.

A "Merlion" – a thing half mermaid, half lion – does not seem an unfitting symbol for a country which derives its name from a sacred and classical language of Hinduism, Sanskrit: Singapore means "place of lions." Thumboo is of Hindu ancestry on his paternal side – his father, a native of southern India, embraced Christianity like Thumboo himself – using Gandhi's thought that every Indian Moslem is someone of Hindu ancestry, which is equally applicable to people of Indian ancestry who are Christians. But what has religion and ancestry to do with poetry or art? Nothing and everything.

We cannot disassociate ourselves from the world around us as easily as we can the world within us: that world which stretches beyond our recent, if not immediate, histories. Perhaps, it is the pull of these two worlds which creates the tension that informs poetry. I opened *Still Travelling* thinking about this tension and how this pull informed the work of the great West Indian writer, Sam Selvon. Selvon, too, on his father's side was of southern Indian ancestry, and like his father who was Christian, Selvon, too, embraced Christianity – at least in his earlier years. Selvon's work, especially the novel closest to his heart, *An Island Is a World*, shows how much he realised that "immediate history" and immediate family cloud ancestry.

I expected to find some of this tension informing *Still Travelling*. What I found first was that Thumboo's publisher had used a quotation from my critique (published in *Confluence*) of Nazareth's book on Thumboo. The pleasure of this quickly gave way, combined with Thumboo's accomplishments, to the thought: how do you review this writer's work? The answer came in the form of a recollected paraphrase of D.H. Lawrence by Peter Nazareth: Never trust the teller, trust the tale. And Thumboo's book is a tale of sorts, a journey beginning

in the present and travelling back to his father's time and to an earlier Biblical time.

The book begins with some fine imagery and phrases: the first poem ending, "My neighbour is another language." The poetry positing: Those who have left to go south missing "morning's children's laughter"; and for the poet there are no "crocuses in spring; no spring; no plum blossoms/...only spider orchids for company." The writer sets the stage early in the first poem, with the line, "Moods re-arrange. Ink flows with a second spirit" so that the book is infused with a second coming – "second" and "spirit" touchstones for much of contemporary, proselytising Christianity. But this book, while dealing with Biblical subjects is not only about the poet's delving into Christianity.

The second poem, "Bamboos" begins with the beautiful images of bamboos, "Facing northern winds, they sing/ Like clustered lyrics in the sun..." This poem gives way to poems with titles like, "Memories – 1," "Memories – 2," and "Memories – 3" interlaced with, "Father – 4" and "Father – 5." The reader is left to wonder what happened to, or if there were, poems, "Father – 1," "Father 2," and "Father 3." These pieces read, as the titles suggest, like reminiscences: too wordy, too prosy, over punctuated and sentimental. Flip a few pages, however, and there is another deep thought intertwined in the lines, "Weeks and months are passing. I hear the abacus again./ It has many meanings. I hear my days being counted." This seems to explain the poems preceding and following it – the poems in most of the book, poems bearing the mark and the pressure of mortality, the realisation that death may be near, that there is much yet to be done, and the urgency to do these things – "Ink flows with a second spirit." There are times in literature when such urgency produces fine poetry, and times, as in this instance, when it produces writing that feels rushed, un-crafted, and of a raw texture.

But there are also places where poems sing as in "Quiet Call": "As the hills insist, / As the sunlight looms"; as in "Evening": "So the great and little chords shift;/ So the metaphors and pauses re-arrange./ So for a moment I am/ Released, my paradox"; as in "Memory": "For sunlight still submits to the glory of your hair." This phrase metamorphoses later in the collection in a fine poem, "With the Sixth":

I hear what is not heard: songs of your hair
Against the wind; then reluctant silence.

I see what is not seen: your fingers climbing
The nape of my neck; swans are in seasons.

I touch what is not touched: a world of origins
Unfolding continents; its lips warm our oceans.

I smell what is not smelt: nostrils flare, flame
Before the purest rose: it has no second name.

I taste what is not tasted....

It is ironic that this poem, with its clear echoes of Upanishadic poetry is, perhaps, the finest in the collection and sits in the heart of a few engaging poems on Biblical themes and well known figures: David here, lesser known as lecherous king seducing Bathsheba, whose husband, one of his soldiers, he has sent into battle. There is the moving, “Visitor from Galilee” and “O lente lente currite” and “Tuscan Sun Festival” in this cluster of poems. The appeal of poetry, as with most writing, being subjective, I could not help returning to “With the Sixth” and its Vedic penchant of using negatives to describe heightened experience and feeling. It reminded me of a conversation with Sam Selvon, late in his life, intimating that as he grew older he was more engaged with ancestry, that immediate ancestry and our recent histories act as smokescreen and often prevent us from seeing beyond our native West Indies and the contradictions of our lives: we rebel against the coloniser and take his language; we rebel against the coloniser and take his religion; we rebel against the vision of the coloniser and take his way of seeing.

Poetry makes readers stop and think and grow, as this collection forced me to; poetry makes the poet stop and think and grow, and no doubt it has done this to Thumboo – maybe, this is why he has named this book, *Still Travelling*. There are a number of engaging poems in this book and, at the same time, much material that was rushed and reads like prose, that needed editing and pruning. Perhaps, Thumboo’s ink might already have been flowing into a “second spirit”: a memoir.

Sasenarine Persaud, USA

Works Cited

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