

Alvin Pang and Tiziano Fratus, eds. *Double Skin: New Poetic Voices from Italy and Singapore*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2009. 220 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-2721-2.

This book teases the reader with the very idea of “double skin” – one side of the cover depicts a close-up of an alluring-looking woman; the other side, inverted, reveals an androgynous older figure in a judge’s robes from a further distance. And, inside, at first glance, *Double Skin: New Poetic Voices from Italy and Singapore* is a collection of poems and prose poems written in English, then Italian, by five young¹ writers, Ng Yi-Sheng, Alvin Pang, Quian Xi Teng, Hsien Min Toh and Cyril Wong. Yet, on the flip side, Italian poems preface English translations; here, the five poets, also youthful and well-published, are Andrea Bonnin, Valentina Diana, Tiziano Fratus, Eliana Debora Langui and Francesca Tini Brunozzi. Singaporean Alvin Pang, co-editor of *No Other City: The Ethos Anthology of Urban Poetry*, and author of a number of poems, including “Taste” and “So Many Ways Our Fathers Mark Us,” collaborates with Italian Tiziano Fratus, author of nine books of poetry, including *Flesh Gospel*, to unveil *Double Skin* for their audiences.

This concept of double skin, as represented by dual covers and multilanguage works, initially suggests the awkwardness of bringing together ideas and cultures. At the same time, this entity successfully binds together such works under common interests in poetry, the arts and political awareness. *Double Skin* particularly deserves accolades for its lyrical Italian stanzas and its rich glimpse into snippets of life, whether in Singapore or around the globe.

On the Italian side, writers (primarily from Turin)² concern themselves with commonplace tales of body politics, sex and marriage, but the poems transform such stories into majestic, insightful moments. The Italian writing is liting, but does not always translate as melodically into English: one poem by Andrea Bonnin opens, “*Quanta musica nella casa in Via Bava*,” which translates flatly into “There was always music on in the flat in Via Bava” (14, 15). Riveting accounts of love echo through a number of these Italian works – Bonnin also

¹ Critic David Fedo writes, “the oldest poet featured in this collection is 45 (an Italian); most are in their 30s, with one (a Singaporean) in his late 20s” (David Fedo, “Valpolicella with Chicken Rice: Italian-Singapore Poetry Anthology Criss-Crosses Globe and Inner Worlds.” 4 October 2009 (8. 4). 28 April 2010. <<http://www.qlrs.com/critique.asp?id=728>>.).

² See Fedo.

writes in another work, “*Il sole che cades su di te/ disegna foglie sul tuo bel vestito,/ amore mio.*”³

Amorous images aside, the Italian poems hinge on the idea of wearing a double skin, or a double consciousness. In “*Nella casa in Via Bava,*” the narrator laments the swings between solitude and busyness in *Via Bava*. The flat bursts with chilli peppers, last month’s papers, a crooked table drawer, and yet the poet croons,

*Ma c’era sempre più musica
e la solitudine mi poteva
anche abbracciare
ma mai e poi mai tormentare—*

there was more and more music on
It’s not so easy to live in a flat,
still it’s so easy to be left on one’s own. (16, 17)

The narrator also could be alluding, in this last line, to having been deserted, left behind by a lover or grown children, revealing yet another layer to this poem.

The reader must sift through the layers of this and other Italian poems; reading and rereading will reveal more folds of consciousness. Like Bonnin, Eliana Deborah Langui shares similar senses of loss and crowdedness in living spaces: “*Questi palazzini*” – “These apartment buildings” – are filled with “the fights of other couples,” a “terminally ill twenty-year-old,” and “Children/ Who listen petrified in bed” (95, 97).

The Italian writers’ tales of love and families can take place in any bedroom, any flat. In contrast, the English poems by Singaporean writers, even if they share tales of love and families, often offer pointed descriptions of settings: Tokyo, Shangri-La and even Pompeii.

For example, Qian Xi Teng, educated in three English-speaking countries, Australia, the United States and Singapore, writes,

Twenty-two years ago, my parents began to limp
across a road filled with shattered ideograms

reflecting the sky of the efficient English world.

Two days before I was born, dialect storytellers
spooled in Confucian values from the airwaves . . .

³ “The sun falling on you/ sketches leaves on your beautiful dress,/ my love” (Andrea Bonnin, “*Il Sole Che Cades Su Di Te,*” 26, 27).

... in white rooms children are born each day.
From plastic cribs red birth-cries bloom briefly

new named tongues pare the bilingual air. (52, 54)

Teng aptly titles this poem, “Casualties of the Efficient World: (Singapore’s bilingual policy and the Speak Mandarin Campaign).” This poem raises the question of what is sacrificed, what skin layers are sloughed off, as individuals traverse cultures, releasing one language to embrace another. Teng implies that language is not the only object one casts to the side as he or she traverses the “road.”

This poem echoes ideologies expressed by two speakers in Alfian Sa’at’s “The Merlion,” a poem about Singapore not included in *Double Skin*. In this poem, the speakers discuss their discomfort upon visiting the merlion, Singapore’s icon of racial harmony. One speaker says,

It's quite grotesque the way it is,
you know, limbless; can you
imagine it writhing in the water,
like some post-Chernobyl nightmare?
... why does it keep spewing that way?
I mean, you know, I mean....

Noting the first speaker’s awkward efforts to bleach hair and alter eye colour, the second speaker responds, “It spews continually if only to ruffle/ its own reflection in the water; such reminders/ will only scare a creature so eager to reinvent itself.”

Such poems contradict optimistic works by Singapore’s first generation of writers, including Edwin Thumboo, who, long before the emergence of *Double Skin*, likens the merlion and Singapore to one of the noteworthy marking points at which Odysseus pauses on his journey. Singapore, home of the merlion, holds powerful potential and fortune:

Peoples settled here,
Brought to this island
The bounty of these seas,
Built towers topless as Ilium’s

And the narrator adds,

Nothing, nothing in my days
Foreshadowed this
Half-beast, half-fish,
This powerful creature of land and sea.

Thumboo's descriptions command respect. And yet, Alfian Sa'at and Teng provide deeply sceptical reflections. They wonder what is lost – language – or created in this fusion – Chernobyl.

In a prose poem in *Double Skin*, Alvin Pang personifies “Race,” who struggles with the same issues as does one speaker in Alfian Sa'at's poem – “Race was naïve enough to think that dyeing her hair was enough to alter the pigment of her name, the nature of her shadow” (48).

However, not all of the writers in *Double Skin* express this unease. Many agilely wear their double skins as they traverse from one realm to another. And many of their images link and blend cultures. Hsien Min Toh writes about “Crossing the Mekong from Savannakhet/ To Mukdahan” (86). And Teng shares a “Pilgrimage” to the “grave of Sylvia Plath” in Yorkshire (68) as well as reflections on “The Evolution of Language” – “When I taught myself to speak in/ Knives, talk/ Became a court-martial...” (62).

As readers from Italy, Singapore or elsewhere navigate the folds of this work, exploring places such as Yorkshire or imagining bustling Italian balconies and apartments, they may still wonder, how do the relationships between these Italian and Singaporean poets go beyond a simple binding of cultures between a book spine? Critic David Fedo laments, “[I] would have appreciated an introductory essay by the editors, perhaps with an overview of what readers could expect, and what the poetry scene is currently like in both countries....” And I, envisioning the brick or concrete architectural intricacies of double skin (*doppia pelle*), wish to know why this book is titled *Double Skin*, in English, on both cover sides.

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