

Felix Cheong, *Sudden in Youth: New and Selected Poems*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2009. 94 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-3412-8.

At the beginning of *Sudden in Youth*, Singaporean poet Felix Cheong writes, “I have arranged the poems thematically, rather than chronologically as is the practice with such anthologies. It feels like curating a ten-year retrospective of my work” (9). Indeed, Cheong’s collection includes selections from *Temptation and Other Poems* (1998), *I Watch the Stars Go Out* (1999), and *Broken by the Rain* (2003). Amongst these older pieces, Cheong inserts new poems, making the anthology read less like an exhaustive collection and more like an inspired pairing of different pieces. These poems touch upon the themes of love and desire, the passage of time, suicide and loss, fatherhood, religion, and the act of writing. Cheong, who won the National Arts Council’s Young Artist of the Year for Literature Award in 2001, has crafted an anthology whose power lies in both the volume of different works collected as well as in the dynamic shifts that occur between earlier and later poems, inviting new readings of both.

Take, for example, the pairing of “Missing You” from *Temptation and Other Poems* with the poem “Tick-Tock.” In “Missing You,” Cheong writes, “I miss you/ in the privacy of pain” (30). In “Tick-Tock,” he writes, “There lived a couple/ who lived by a couple/ of clocks beside their bed” (31). These poems sit side by side, inviting a comparison of tone and content. While both poems discuss love and loss, the first is intensely personal, and it emphasises a singular notion of pain. In contrast, “Tick-Tock” begins like a children’s nursery rhyme and, like a nursery rhyme, has a sing-song rhythm to it. The word “couple” is playfully coupled, even as the poem is about an uncoupling.

Cheong’s religious poems are no different in their pairings of the playful with the deeply romantic and serious. “The Pope Turning Pop” is a wry commentary on the “MTV age” where images and words are cut and then pieced together “in the name of art” (79). Cheong asks the Pope, “would you have done the same,/ auditioned your parables/ under the harsh eye of the camera” (79). A few pages later, the poem “In Memoriam Pope John Paul II” pays tribute to the Pope:

you dreamed the blood ache
of a man who sings love
in roses and time
and sleeps true
on a bed of light. (81)

Only by reading the two poems together, we see the “light” of the Pope who “sings of love,” even as that song must compete in a fragmented, media-driven world.

Many of Cheong’s pairings reflect a difference in perspective that comes with time and experience. In a deliberate comparison, he includes the poem “Father and Son” from *I Watch the Stars Go Out* with his new poem “Father and Son II.” “Father and Son” considers fatherhood from an academic distance, wondering what kind of father James Dean would have been had he not died so young (62). “Father and Son II” also speaks of a generation gap, but the poem is written from a more personal perspective, one perhaps referencing Cheong’s own divorce in 2008 and the loss of his child in a custody battle. The father tells his son, “You are your own story now” (63). He continues, “How sand-like, your childhood/ when it slipped through my fingers” (63). “Father and Son II” is less speculative, more personal as the father acknowledges and mourns what is definitively lost.

Towards the end of his collection, Cheong focuses on the process of writing itself. His earlier poems emphasise dedication and drive as in “Cutting Edge” in which he urges writers to “Keep pushing the edge” (83). Yet, “In Praise of Sloth,” an older, and perhaps more understanding, Cheong writes,

For not writing is a virtue, let
sleeping words lie,
an implosion of sloth
before you find the gift. (86)

Whereas the younger Cheong writes about the passion and determination to write, the older and more seasoned poet acknowledges the difficulty of writing and perhaps alludes to the six years between the publication of his third poetry book, *Broken by the Rain*, and this book.

Sudden in Youth is a collection that demands engagement from the reader. To gain the most from this anthology, one must be attentive to when the poems were published and examine how they fit together. Reading this collection of poems, we see Cheong’s gift, both in his early pieces and his current ones, and in the ability to place them together in new and provocative juxtapositions.

**Nancy Srebro
Southern Methodist University, USA**