

**Edwin Thumboo, ed. & *Words: Poems Singapore and Beyond*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2010. 264 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-6321-0.**

There are several ways one can read Edwin Thumboo's poetry anthology: First, as a collection of Singaporean poetry in English; second, as poetry written in World Englishes, showing "how the shared experience of colonialism and recovery from it... generates common responses" (11) to it; third, as an outstanding collection, in English, of poetry from the richly diverse racial, linguistic and cultural traditions of Singapore and beyond. My approach to *Words: Poems Singapore and Beyond* is to simply enjoy it as an outstanding poetry collection and, as Professor Thumboo suggests, a resource for students of Singaporean poetry written in and translated into English.

*Words: Poems Singapore and Beyond* is one of the most enjoyable poetry anthologies I have read in some time. It reminds me, in its depth and range, of Scottish poet Kenneth White's massive *Open World: The Collected Poems, 1960-2000*, a book that I return to again and again to enjoy the poems and plumb their depth. Edwin Thumboo's anthology has the same depth and range. There is so much richness here that I carry the book with me when I ride the bus and subway or sit in my favourite coffee shop. As I sip my coffee, I read: "Across the shores, divided by a straits and separated by a/ generation gap,/ Lies the Magpie Bridge,/ A bridge linking historical Malay peninsula history and/ modern-day Singapore-Malaysia ties/ Who is the cowherd, who is the weaver girl?/ Where lies the Milky Way and whom is the Queen Mother of the West?" ("Crossing Paths – North, South, East, West" 209-10).<sup>1</sup> I am no longer sitting in my favourite Starbucks in Sapporo, Japan; I am standing on Magpie Bridge, crossing paths with so many people from so many places, doing one of my favourite things: listening to the sound of varied languages as they pour back and forth

Do I have any favourites in this collection? Yes; so many that the Table of Contents is strewn with tiny pencilled checkmarks identifying them. Here are but a few. Edwin Thumboo's powerful "May 1954" is a memorable one: "We do but merely ask/ No more, no less, this much: That you white man.../ See well enough, relinquish,/ Restore this place, this sun/ To us... and the waiting generations./ *Depart white man.*/ Your minions riot among/ Our young in Penang Road/ Their officers, un-Britannic,/ Full of service, look/ Angry and short of breath./ You whored on milk and honey/ Tried our spirit, spent our muscle,/ Extracted from our earth;/ Gave yourselves superior ways/ At our expense, in our midst,/ *Depart:*/ You knew when to come;/ Surely know when

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<sup>1</sup> This poem is by Chow Teck Seng, translated by Koh Chern Phing.

to go.../ Gently, with ceremony;/ We may still be friends,/ Even love you... from a distance” (71). The poem’s striking images capture my attention with this insistent message: Hey, white man, pay attention! It is 1954 and people have grown tired of colonialism’s power brokers and their minions. The poem’s visceral images command attention again today, as they did in May 1954 when five hundred Chinese Middle School students clashed with the police over the National Service Ordinance the British government attempted to enforce in Singapore. Angering Chinese Middle School students, who felt they were being compelled to defend the same British order that had discriminated against them and in which they saw no future, riots ensued. Soon the British government was gone and Singapore was a nation.

Another favourite is Theophilus Kwek’s “Worship.” Its last six lines are so surprising they are breathtaking: “her prayers were for neither her nor us,/ (and hence needed no god), but for her hands/ that kept us, her feet that carried us, her mouth/ that taught us, and her eyes that wept/ for us, gems glistening in the light/ of a different kind of worship” (41). Then there is Aaron Lee’s “A Tiny Idea” (99); Alfian Sa’at’s “The Portrait of a Sentenced Library” (81) (the title alone captured my attention); then Boey Kim Cheng’s “Child” (114); Gwee Li Sui’s “Jurassic Gardens” (141); Lynette Lim’s “The English Teacher” (162); Kirpal Singh’s “My Tree” (189); K.T.M. Iqbal’s “The Children of Robinson Road” (143) and Amiroudine’s “Urban Riches”: “The last village life/ is flying at half-mast/ In the name of progress/ villages are being clipped like nails” (225; translated by Azhagiya Pandiyan) – a stunning, memorable, visual image. All these and I haven’t even mentioned Kirpal Singh’s wonderful haiku: “In your loving arms/ my tired head/ – hours fly us by” (229). There is a novel in these ten simple words. Of the seven haiku in the book – four of them by Japanese haiku poets – Kirpal Singh’s is my hands down favourite because it is so tender, clean and clear.

For a European-American like myself, *Words* is an introduction to a part of the world most of us are unfamiliar with. For me personally, it is a reintroduction to studies that fascinated me fifty and more years ago. Selfishly, I hope the book achieves a wide readership in the Europe and the Americas; it certainly deserves it.

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