

Chandran Nair, *Reaching for Stones: Collected Poems (1963-2009)*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2010. 152 pp. ISBN 13: 978-981-08-6717-1.

Chandran Nair published two volumes of poetry in Singapore during the 1970s: *Once the Horsemen and Other Poems* (1972) and *After the Hard Hours, This Rain* (1975). The recently available *Reaching for Stones: Collected Poems (1963-2009)* allows us the opportunity to renew our acquaintance with those works and to read the small amount of writing he has done since then.

Chandran Nair was born in Kerala, South India, in 1945. His father, Gopala Pillai, migrated to Singapore in 1947 but it was five years before Chandran and his mother were able to join him there. The family settled in a S.I.T. flat in the Havelock Road area. In a brief essay in *Idea to Ideal: 12 Singapore Poets on the Writing of their Poems*, Chandran describes how: “From a very early age, the behavioural demands of an intellectual home, steeped in Hindu and Nair culture, had to be balanced against the very formative need to survive in an external environment that was rough and tough and very down-to-earth, working-class Chinese.” He learnt “some Hokkien, some English, to stand and fight and tide over the familiar racism of the time,” and went “from being a ‘mangali,’ and ‘oh kui,’ etc, to the acceptance implied in a nickname, ‘chow me kong’ (grasshopper)” (42).

Nair was educated at the Raffles Institution, where he had the special pleasure of being an assistant librarian and reading extensively in the Hullet Memorial Library’s eclectic collection of classical European and nineteenth century British literature. In Form Six (Pre-U), he began to make regular use of the nearby National Library, where he discovered the more modern writers: W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and e.e. cummings. Thanks to his father, himself the author of a number of short stories and novels in Malayalam, Chandran was also encouraged to read widely in Singapore poetry in English: Edwin Thumboo, Augustine Goh and Wang Gungwu, in particular.

He had begun publishing poetry while still at the Institution and continued to do so at the University of Singapore, where he further extended his reading of local and overseas poets, including Catallus and the Indonesian *poète maudit*, Chairil Anwar. Edwin Thumboo, who provides an informative and affectionate Introduction to *Reaching for Stones*, suggests:

Perhaps more than any other poet he had read into the growing body of Singapore-Malayan poetry at a crucial juncture of his development. He knew what could be done and set out doing for himself, perhaps more systematically than most others. (18)

After gaining a Masters degree in Science (Marine Biology) and a Diploma in Fisheries (with distinction), he took up employment in 1971, not in a scientific laboratory as might have been expected but as a Senior Administrative Officer for the British Council. He married Ivy Goh Pek Kien in 1973 and in that same year was recruited to manage the Eastern Universities Press, an offshoot of the British publisher Hodder and Stoughton. This was followed by a further five years with Times Publishing, also in Singapore.

Following the publication of two volumes of poetry in quick succession during the first half of the 1970s, Chandran became the founder President of the Society of Singapore Writers from 1975 to 1981. In 1981, however, he left Singapore to return to the Indian subcontinent with his own family, joining UNESCO in Karachi, Pakistan, as a Book Development Specialist; in 1985, they moved to Paris. The effect of the moves on his poetic output was considerable. Chandran himself admits in his prefatory remarks to *Reaching for Stones*: “Between 1975 and 2009, while the odd poem was written and some appeared in anthologies, after the move to Karachi, painting became the dominant mode... more poetry could have been expected” (11). The move to Paris curtailed his writing even further: “the need to learn French on the run and a culture that was radically not Anglo-Saxon in its basics and therefore a cultural environment from which one was excluded, mechanically reduced the impetus to create and both writing and painting faltered” (11).

Following his appearance at the Singapore Writers Festival in 2009, the Singapore National Arts Council decided to publish an anthology of his poetry. *Reaching for Stones* presents Chandran Nair’s collected works. It is divided into three parts. Part One, “Singapore 1963-72,” consists of 47 poems, and is based on *Once the Horsemen and Other Poems*. Two poems are added (“the argument of hours” and “philosophical argument”), and two are omitted (“hometown,” “at the country club”). One poem is moved into the overlapping Part Two (“if I am cynical blame the sun”). Part Two, “Singapore 1972-1981,” contains 35 poems, all of *After the Hard Hours, This Rain*, with the addition of three further poems (“voyage into the night,” “celine” and “paper cuts”). Part Three, “Karachi, Paris 1981-2009,” contains twenty-three previously uncollected poems, possibly ten written in Karachi, the rest in Paris.

The poems of Part One, from *Once the Horsemen and Other Poems*, were written between the ages of 16 and 25, and make up almost half of *Reaching for Stones*. They are the work of a young man beginning to make his way in the world and to learn his craft as a poet from his many teachers. The poems treat a wide variety of topics and take many different approaches, but most often these are poems of disillusionment and regret. This gloom is intensified by the setting of human emotions into a context of black barren landscapes, both urban and rural, something he may have learned from Chairil Anwar. As the poem “it is

not far away (chiangmai)” ironically notes, “this is no country for happy people” (79).

In some of the poems, a prematurely world weary “I” addresses an absent “you,” while attempting to resolve the dilemmas of human existence through some didactic insight. Other, more convincing, poems, offer strong depictions of individuals and scenes commonly drawn from Chandran’s own Indian culture, with less moralising. “ceremony,” for example, sympathetically and humorously describes the wedding of a friend, and gives vivid details of the couple, the “armpit smell of a chanting priest,” the noise of the temple, and the satisfaction of watching relatives – “see the groom prays/ this will end well/ he believes in god/ he obeys his parents” (30). “grandfather” presents a respectful portrait of a hardened, hardworking, non-religious farmer; it concludes, “like the padi stalk, once green, easily bent,/ he grew with age, aged to ripened toughness/ to resist anger, misfortunes of stricken years/ with dignity, unpersuaded” (34). “trees (for My Father)” uses the metaphor of “trees with leaves, branches in thin air/ roots in thin soil, growing tall,” but also decaying and breaking, to define a son’s growing separation from, and difficult but inescapable identification with, his father (83). (Chandran discusses the poem in some detail in “Trees (for my father)” [*Idea to Ideal* 36-43], noting that it was written as his father “lay seriously ill in hospital after a second heart attack.”) There are also deeply moving poems for an alienated, communal poet (“sincerity (for mohd.)”) and for a young woman named Laura (“for laura”).

Although the poems in “Singapore 1972-1981” derive from the time of his marriage, and the last poem, “paper cuts,” is for their firstborn daughter, Radha, the theme of love only slowly emerges. In the first third, it is still hypothetical: “at the old school” concludes “and idly he wonders how you will remember this/ some years, some dreams, a home, a wife from now” (100). The first manifestations of love are, in fact, violent; after a raging quarrel, the narrator concludes: “love/ exists/ inspite of/ torn flesh, flowering words” (“what it was all about” 106). In this second third, the rage and bitterness are reflected by separation and lingering hurts from old relationships. The decisive shift perhaps comes in “dry words,” which would appear to be an exploration of the poet’s uneasy position between two lands, India and Singapore, and two ethnic communities, Indian and Chinese. The poem opens with an announcement of a break “from the past,/ history etched in ancestral blood” and an affirmation of the writer’s vocation, “hands that have turned to writing/ and dashed across my throat dry words.” The second verse takes root in a different world, “another burning sun,” and an affirmation: “that I too have loved, given unstintingly/ and found the hurts deeper than fear/ of a loved one’s voice faltering,/ talking of some astrological doom/ lurking between lean years.” And the final verse quite simply states: “I have lived between these words/ found the days quietly slipping/ into softness and anger into calmness,/

because I love you, ivy” (121). The poems thereafter are gentle and generous, as indicated by their very titles: “after the hard hours this rain,” “find strength,” “two days’ absence,” “photographs” and “paper cuts.”

The poems in Part Three, “Karachi, Paris 1981-2009,” are the poems of maturity, and include some for his now grown up daughters – Radha, Meera and Chandrika – as well as one for his granddaughter, Menna. The first nine poems consistently relate two images: the “stones” of the desert and “she.” The relationship with the feminine is complex: beyond the rocky surface, she is the deepest, most hidden, part of the desert – “the desert undulates like mind/ love survives in stunted clumps/ longing turned to stone repeats/ *but she keeps flowers in her hills*” (“but she keeps flowers in her hills” 132). In the second half of Part Three, the feminine takes physical form in the persons of his wife, daughters and granddaughter. These are poems of middle age and self-acceptance – as he reflects, “midlife you begin to appreciate/ the necessity of surrender/ they will haunt you these dreams/ return in the sudden flash of longing/ the hand held, the lips, the eyes/ the waves on another shore limply dying/ on enduring sand” (“the limp mind closes” 138). They are also poems of great affection: “thirty years” concludes “she not only surrendered/ she also gave” (144); while another poem, “when words are not enough remember (for ivy),” simply ends: “when words are not enough/ remember love” (150). The poems for his daughters remember the girls’ childhood and welcome their husbands, accepting with pleasure: “today you achieve/ something rare, something refined/ a father’s true contentment” (“poem for a daughter (for radha)” 146).

In a fascinating essay, the Malaysian scholar Shanthini Pillai has linked the large scale migration of South Indian labour to the Malayan peninsula with the iconic figure of Nataraja, Shiva as the Cosmic Dancer. She describes the move “from one continent to another” as being: “in many ways a leap of fate, a movement that put into motion the cosmic re-creation of another identity, not divorced from the original land but re-created to a rhythm that is unique to the Indo-Malaysian experience” (36). Chandran Nair’s time in Singapore made him a poet but one who could simultaneously challenge and affirm his Indian origins. In the last long poem in *Reaching for Stones*, entitled “poem for a granddaughter (for menna),” although he fondly recognises his wife’s Chinese parents, fellow grandparents, he still addresses himself as “*appu*,” and his granddaughter as “*menna mohl*,/ the embodiment of my mother’s dreams:/ she who inherits the *tarawad*,” glossing these Malayalam terms as meaning, respectively, “grandfather,” “daughter,” and “the family estate of the matriarchal Nairs of Kerala” (149). Born in India, raised and married in Singapore, as well as being published there at two very different stages of his life, now living in distant Paris, the journey to the self and its complexities apparently complete, the dancer rests.

Harry Aveling
Monash University, Australia

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