

“An Island in Our Sea”: An Interview with Theophilus Kwek

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Theophilus Kwek, a Singaporean poet, has been writing for some years under the mentorship of Alvin Pang and Aaron Maniam. Eighteen years old, he is part of the Humanities Programme at Raffles Institution, where he is a Year 6 student. Theophilus has written for several school publications and has appeared in several journals and anthologies in and outside Singapore, including *Ceriph*, *Mascara*, and Daren Shiau and Lee Wei Fan's recent collection of local writing *Coast* (2011). He received a Commendation at the 2010 Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award. His first volume of poetry, *They Speak Only Our Mother Tongue*, was published in early 2011 and has excited some critical interest. Theophilus' collection is also on the list of books by local authors chosen by Asian Storytelling Network for its programme “I Like Local” under the National Arts Council “Arts Education Programme” scheme. This interview took place on 5 August 2012 at Raffles Institution, a fortnight after Theophilus had participated in a reading at the National Institute of Education together with fellow local poets Kylie Goh, Rosemarie Somiah and Joshua Tung.

In the interview Theophilus talks about his happy if taxing childhood, the influences of his parents and his Chinese Singaporean heritage, and how his runaway encounters with unfamiliar Singaporean spaces shaped his early writing. He goes on to discuss his often highly descriptive poems' resemblance to pictures rather than stories, and his scepticism regarding “inspiration.” In the final section of the interview, Theophilus reflects on being a mentee of two established Singaporean poets, and explores the role of autobiography, social critique and other themes in his early and more recent poetry.

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One of your favourite poets Philip Larkin recalls as a child not getting on with other children, and his disconnect with his parents, but you seem to have had an almost blissful childhood, school and family life. Your parents regularly played games with you in your three-storey terraced house in the east of Singapore; you appear to have had abundant toys and books; you attended Raffles. But was it really a happy childhood?

Yes, I think by all measurements it was a happy childhood. But what I especially remember, and liked about it, was the fact that we travelled often as a family. We even stayed for a year in the UK. During this time we made many trips to various places on the continent, to Hamburg and Leyden and Oslo. We stayed in Oslo for two months or so. This was for my Dad's work attachment there.

And how old were you at this time?

Around 7 or 8. It was on travels like these that I would go to the local library and pick up *The Chronicles of Narnia* or something. We also went to medieval castles. I think I mentioned *Ivanhoe* last time we met, so going to Warwick castle or Edinburgh castle and places like that made the things I read come alive. And so especially the travel I think was what defined my childhood. On the whole it was a happy time.

Where were you based in the UK?

Manchester.

But do you feel you spent your otherwise “Singaporean” childhood being “hot housed?” The ubiquitous intensive schooling, tutors, extra lessons, the emphasis upon tests and grades... to me it all sounds highly stressful, regulated, stifling for a child...

Stressful? Yes, I suppose so at certain points, but not stifling. I would always get to choose what I wanted to do, as long as it was in the general direction of adding some shape or form say to my violin playing or something like that. I remember once, while preparing for a particular piano exam (it was probably grade 7 or something). After a particularly stressful practice session I burst into tears and I asked my Mum, “why do I have to take the exam?,” you know, “why can't I just play the piano for fun?” And my Mum said “if you don't go for exams or competitions or things like that you won't know how good you are compared to others.” The usual things mums say when you ask about exams. So that episode was like a microcosm of the whole process. At many points I would question “why am I doing this?” Or “why do I have to go for this class, or this exam?,” “Why do I have to go to school?,” and the answer would always be, “you aren't learning things in isolation, you are learning with others, seeing

how good you are compared to others.” That was the pitch of the whole process.

I wondered if you'd noticed that your poems about your family seem to contain voluble females such as your Aunt and Grandmother contrasted with comparatively quiet or almost monosyllabic males.

I didn't notice that initially, but when I went back to the poems I started picking that up. It's definitely subconscious – I've no idea how it crept in. My Dad's pretty talkative and so is my Mum. It's a mysterious thing...

Have your parents been a big influence on you?

Yes. In fact my parents used to make this an almost bantering, competitive thing. They would talk about which parts of me came from which parts of them. My Mum would say, “his academic flair comes from me.” Then my Dad would say, “his writing, his photography comes from me.” To this my Mum would say “but his music comes from me.” Apart from this there was a conscious sort of imparting of their own likes and dislikes. My Mum always loved classical music and as a kid she always wished she had a chance to play an instrument, which is why she sent me for classes. On the other hand, my Dad loves calligraphy, photography, playing the guitar and climbing mountains. Those were the things he got me to do. So yes, I think my parents housed me into their interests. Character wise, I think I probably picked up some tenacity from my Mum and maybe the more philosophical side from my Dad. This is the way they are.

One of your poems, “Smile,” appears to explicitly talk about your parents. The speaker seems the typical Singaporean scrabbling about, rushing off to school, while his parents silently smile across the room at one another.

That actually happens every morning, in the rush for school. I think the closing lines of the poem are “In between/ tying two laces/ I realize they have not/ spoken the entire time.” That's what our life is like.

Were you an only child?

Yes I'm an only child.

In some poems you draw strongly and fondly on your Chinese Singaporean heritage – in a way that reminds me of Arthur Yap and poems like “old house at ang siang hill” – could you say something about your family history?

Both my parents are doctors and my paternal grandmother is a Chinese physician. At the same time all of them came from less well-to-do backgrounds, so there's that very strong streak of Self-driven-ness, working for yourself and achievement that runs through the family. Medicine has always been something that's been associated in the family with achievement. My Mum has four siblings and my Dad has three and they all ended up doing very diverse things. I'm not actually very close to my grandparents, perhaps as a result of language difference. I understand Hokkien but I can't speak it and my grandparents speak Hokkien, primarily. There's also the sense that some relatives have always been more withdrawn than others, which is part of every family's dynamics.

In one poem, “Grandmother Stories,” a grandmother recalls Singapore in the 1930s.

The poem is actually based on my maternal grandmother. She was born in Singapore but her parents were born in China, and she used to tell us about her childhood and the postwar years and things like that.

I remember you mentioning a period of slight alienation from your parents, in which you indulged in a kind of “running away.” You would travel to spots in Singapore unknown to you, chosen at random from a map. Poems such as “orchard, night,” “images, Clark Quay” and “MacPherson” I assume derive from this period?

Yes they do. It was less extreme than it sounds, but yes it was certainly a period of exploration, especially during the week of the Singapore Writer's fest, 2009. Because I was living in boarding at that time I was able to attend the sessions and then sort of sneak back at night. During the day I would go on long walks after school. Those poems do derive from those “rambles.”

And you deliberately chose unfamiliar locations?

The lucky thing was that at that time the first section of the Circle Line opened. So I went to station after station, MacPherson, Paya Lebar and so on, getting off and exploring the surrounding neighbourhoods. At other times I would take a bus and get off at a place I'd never seen before and walk to the next train station and come back.

I wonder if this “running away” could be read as you, recipient of a happy and relatively privileged Singaporean childhood, searching out less unequivocally safe and happy local spaces to create poetry out of?

Well, yes and no. I'll start with the "no": I didn't go to any of those places with the intent of making poetry out of them. The poetry really came as an afterthought to the walking, the things I saw when I was walking or even what I experienced on the train home, as in "Chinese Workers." But "yes" in the sense that I did try to intentionally seek out less well-to-do areas, for example, the older estates at Toa Payoh and MacPherson. In that sense they are the less unequivocally happy places that you're referring to. For me it wasn't so much of a "culture shock" thing as wanting to experience what other Singaporeans' lives were like outside my own Singaporean life.

In those poems I get a sense of you as "flaneur," pedestrian, "loiterer," watching the amours of maids and migrant workers on Orchard Road, the streetwalkers of Clark Quay, anxious maids stealing a moment at East Coast. Yet your speaker, while making friendly gestures to those on the local margins receives little response: the elderly, presumably Malay fisherman of "Foreign Workers" merely nods at your speaker's salaams, the Filipina maid in "Orchard, night" declines his offer of a seat. So in these poems we seem to encounter a Singaporean spectator watching but not really being part of or entering these Singaporean spaces.

I think this connects to the previous question. I was conscious when I was travelling that I had grown up in a completely different world from what I was seeing. But at the same time I wanted to connect with it because it was part of where I live. I didn't intentionally add those references. But in hindsight, yes, I do concede there was always this sense of noticing things, but not really approaching or engaging with what I saw. This is not to say that my walks were completely solitary. I would talk to people whom I met along the way, but somehow those conversations never really found their way into the poetry.

In "Foreign Workers on the Beach" the narrator does not seem to be on his own.

I was with my parents. That wasn't a "flaneur" poem (laughs).

In a poem like Larkin's "Reasons for Attendance" such spatial and ideological distance from everyone else (at a jazz concert) leads to irony, personal assertion, and ultimately a concluding summing up:

*Therefore I stay outside,
Believing this; and they maul to and fro,
Believing that; and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.*

I'm intrigued that in a poem like "Foreign Workers" you seem to avoid simultaneously the temptation to deploy any irony or assertion.

This is something that I've always been conscious about: just wanting to paint a picture with my poem rather than saying something about or imposing my story of what's going on upon the scene that I saw. It's one thing to observe a scene, and another thing to tell the story of what's happening in the scene. And I was very conscious that the story that I told would come from my perspective. And that would be not just disjoint but inappropriate in a sense of imposing myself on what (and who) I was seeing. So yes mine has always been a descriptive, observing kind of view.

And I think you do that particularly well. There are just moments when you describe Indonesian maids and their lives in both “Foreign Workers” and “Orchard, night” where I begin to feel a little uncomfortable at your tentative attempts to piece together their inner story and as it were speak for them. Do you like living in Singapore?

Yes, definitely. And I would definitely want to return to Singapore. My ambition was to join the Foreign Service. This might seem a bit counterintuitive to being in Singapore, but I always have this sense of Singapore as a gravitational centre whenever I travel. I can't write when I'm actually travelling, only after returning. I suppose I feel the need to coming back “here” to where “home” is or at least to somewhere where I can feel secure enough to write. It's the process of consolidation and re-routing that is as equally important as the travelling. So yes, definitely, if I study overseas I want to come back to Singapore. If I have kids I want them to grow up in Singapore.

No desire to emigrate to Perth?

I might always change my mind after studying overseas, but not at this point.

You've previously mentioned some of your early literary influences, Ivanhoe, Othello, Chronicles of Narnia, Tin Tin (the only comic you were permitted to read). Did you escape Enid Blyton?

No I didn't. *Tin Tin* wasn't the only comic I was allowed to read, but comics that contained ostensibly more violence were frowned upon. So I suppose in a sense I experienced early on some form of censorship. I did eventually get round to reading *Asterix* and *Marvel* comics. No, I didn't escape Enid Blyton, but I don't remember her books being a predominant influence. I just read them for fun.

When did you start writing?

I only started writing properly what could be identified as poetry at fifteen, the time I started going on long walks and “running away.” But the very first poems that I did write were during the time I was in England. These were mostly based on school assignments where they would get us to read limericks or haikus and ask us to write something from there. So I remember some childlike attempts but none that really constitute poetry.

Your recent poem “Valentine” – also grew out of a school exercise based on a poem by Carol Ann Duffy. Do you think school played a key role in nurturing your reading and writing poetry?

Reading and writing yes, but not poetry in particular. Probably because I went to a boy’s school in Singapore most of my literature lessons revolved around drama. In my four years from Sec 1 to 4 we did *The Merchant of Venice*, *King Lear*, *Oedipus*, *The Importance of being Earnest*, drama after drama. Poetry not so much, but that’s not to say that it was absent. I mostly picked up poetry on my own.

Many of your poems seem to contain a dramatic element, with their characters and interplay occurring in quotidian local settings, “Images: Clark Quay” springs to mind. So perhaps some of your poems could have been influenced by your encounters with Oscar Wilde?

(Laughs) I wish I could write like that.

Can you say something about how you write a poem? Do you have a schedule for writing, or do you, like Matthew Arnold’s “Scholar Gipsy,” wait “for the spark from heaven to fall.”

Well as I mentioned at the recent reading at NIE, I don’t really believe in waiting for inspiration, nor do I believe in “writer’s block.” You have something to say or you don’t. Saying it well comes from editing not from waiting. That’s always been the attitude that I’ve taken. For me, the best time for writing is early in the morning when there’s nothing on my mind except for what I want to say, or late at night when exhaustion has dimmed out everything else. But other than that all I need to write is a laptop, focus, coffee...

So you’ve never, like Wordsworth, had to run into a stranger’s house to write down lines in your head before they’re lost?

No I’ve never had that. Lines have occurred to me, I write them down in a notebook or on my phone. Usually I don’t end up using those particular lines. In the end, the “bolts” that I originally take to be “inspiration” actually don’t turn out to be as good as the lines that I finally come up with post editing and writing.

Larkin asserted that "writing poems should be a pleasure – so should reading them, by God." Do you feel pleased when you've written one?

Yes! Well there's always the feeling of exhilaration that comes both from first saying what you want to say, and, second, saying it in a satisfactory way. At the same time there are particular poems that I've never felt satisfied with. But because others have liked those poems I've had few qualms about putting them out into the world. But those are the poems I would never read at readings, even though they might find their way into publications. And there are also other poems that I'm very satisfied with and have never touched since I finished writing them.

You have recently been mentored by two well-known Singaporean poets, Alvin Pang and Aaron Maniam. What was that like?

It was intimidating to start with, because everyone has heard of Aaron and Mr Pang. When I first met them I felt hesitant to share with them anything I thought was not good enough. But they are very affable people and very approachable as well. Thus I soon realised that if I only showed them poems I already thought was very good, I wouldn't be able to receive much insight or advice on them. Slowly I began to show my mentors the poems I was less satisfied with. I was curious to see if they had any different takes on this scene that I was describing or the language I could use. Poems that have gone to them with many many many rough edges have, after discussion and review, become much more chiselled in my view. I still can't write like them. I wish I could. But they have definitely been a fantastic influence.

It's interesting that you say "chiselled." I think you talked before about how your mentors' comments on certain lines had often been: "irrelevant," "superfluous," "cut, cut," spurring you on to produce considerably more sparse, spare poetry.

They've been ruthless, but it's been great.

In this interview I've repeatedly alluded to one of your favourite writers, Philip Larkin. Who or what else do you like to read?

I used to tell people that I had a favourite author but I realised this started changing every three months or so on discovering something new. Some of my enduring favourites are Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie. My choices might seem counterintuitive because Márquez and Rushdie's style of writing in their novels is very effusive and it goes on and on and on; it's nothing

like the terse, clean cut kind of poetry that I write. But I admire these two novelists precisely because they can include such a wealth of detail in their writing without turning people off. I also admire how both these magical realist writers manage to infuse their fantasies, the “magical part” of it into the very real stories that they’re telling. In terms of poets besides Larkin, it’s a mix.

More about poems than poets?

More about poems than poets.

What about music? You play piano and violin, admire Stephane Grappelli. Larkin loved jazz. I think of a poet like Paul Muldoon, who in his poetry has drawn heavily upon his love of popular music from Blind Lemon Jefferson to Warren Zevon. More locally, Daren Shian shares his admiration of the Cocteau Twins in his novel Heartland. Is music important to you? Has it ever influenced or entered a poem?

No it’s never entered a poem and this is something I’ve noticed before. Actually my Dad picked up on it. I show my Dad the poems I’m more satisfied with and he’s noticed that none of them draw on my music background or musical education. In a sense it’s partly because music and poetry come from two, disjointed, periods of my life. Earlier, music was very important to me, particularly classical music. It remained important until about fifteen which was when I started writing. I wouldn’t say the latter replaced the former but they have just never coincided. But yes music definitely remains a great influence-slash-source of comfort.

So even if music never enters a poem you may have it on, playing in the background?

No. There has to be silence when I’m writing.

What about themes in your poetry?

Place is clearly a key theme in my earlier poems. But after Sec 4 I noticed place became less important, partly because by then I had less time to wander but also partly because I started to use other things as starting points in my poems, like myths, or other poems. My themes then appear to be mostly people, place, family in the earlier poems, and more recently legends, what we do, a variety of things... I haven’t yet been able to pick out a major trend.

So yet to be discovered then, multifarious?

But never nefarious.

What about feedback or responses on your poems from mentors, readers, those attending your readings?

I can't quite remember any particular pieces of comfort or condemnation. But it's always encouraging to get positive – or negative – feedback, because it shows that people do take the time to read what you write, sense where you're coming from and what you're trying to say and are willing to tell you whether you're saying it well. I think that's the basis of all feedback. It's been very helpful.

Is there one of your poems that you are particularly proud of?

No I don't think so. I always finish a poem with the hope that I will write a better one. So there hasn't been one that's yet been the “be all and end all” of what I've written.

There does seem at times a sense of social comment in poems like “Chinese workers on the evening train.” But didn't you say that the barely tolerant speaker in that poem derives from your own experience of noisy workers on the MRT?

I was intentionally trying to create an intolerant voice in the poem but that wasn't what I was feeling at that point. The experience came from a train ride that I took. The voice that I adopt in the poem actually comes from some of the grimaces I noticed around me on the faces of other Singaporeans when I was on the train with them. So in poems like that there is certainly a sense of social commentary. But I tend to think that those are a minority of my poems. I don't seek to make a conscious social point. I don't seek to provoke with my poems but rather to describe. I think that “Chinese Workers” has that element of social commentary precisely because it was a description of what the people around me were feeling at that time.

Some of your poems seem autobiographical but oblique – arguably to the point of obscurity – would you be able to share some of the backstory behind a poem such as “Arrival” or the last poem in the collection, Reunion,” interestingly framed as a father's diary entry?

“Arrival” is about my cousin, who's currently at Harvard, pursuing a PhD in Economics. He is the first male grandson in the family, a source of pride in any Chinese family, and especially so because he went to Berkley, picked up an econs degree and then went to Harvard. He's someone whom I really admire. He's ten years older than me, went to Raffles as well. His teachers were my teachers when I came to Raffles. So he is someone I admire a lot and whom I

grew up playing with. At the same time this difference of ten years does put a gap between us: when I was ten and was starting to explore novels that I liked he was in the army and soon enough he left to pursue his degree overseas. And so there's always been that distance that we have to catch up on whenever he comes to visit. "Arrival" is both about him physically coming home when we went to the airport to pick him up, here, but it also means "arrival" in the sense of someone whom I admire coming back and our being able to reconnect. I framed the poem against my relatives' reactions, what my grandmother says, for example. And once again it's the observer's standpoint that I take. So at a reunion at the airport like this, at the same time as I'm experiencing the joy of him coming back, I'm observing the reactions of the people around me.

I see. And isn't the context also that of an imminent wedding?

Yes. This was a few years ago when my cousin came back to get married.

I'm intrigued by how in such a poem as "Arrival" you, a young poet, draw cleverly upon a nostalgic infant lens, "the crib of not knowing," as you refer to it in another poem, "Worship."

I'm always actually quite worried about how as I get older the catalogue of memory that I seem to have picked up thus far will expand, and how what I'm doing now will find its way into my poems as memories. Well, we'll have to wait and see, I suppose...

With reference to the last poem, "Reunion," I can't actually remember how this poem came about. I think I was just imagining a bicycle because I've always wanted a bicycle and at about the time I wrote this poem I remember the rusty bicycle that we used to have was finally "decommissioned." That bicycle becomes part of the poem, but it was never actually my Dad's bicycle. It just became the starting point for me imagining a Dad like that.

I was interested to hear that a second collection of poems is imminent, not bad for a poet recently turned eighteen. Can you say something about this new volume? In fact it's not actually a second volume is it?

It's not. This second book is even thinner than the first, which had 44 poems if I'm not wrong. It will be more of a "chapbook" really. There are about 20 pieces in there, quite recent poems. I haven't seen how it looks. The manuscript has just been approved and accepted, and it should come out in 2013.

And, finally, what are your plans for the future?

Well, as Kierkegaard says, “life can only be understood backwards, it must be lived forwards!” The future, at this point, is really wide open: I’m two months away from finishing school and have no idea where college – and my A-Level results – will take me. Perhaps pinning my next step to my grades like this comes across as a rather Asian fixation, but that’s how it is, I think, for now. I’m planning to read History and Politics in the UK, as these subjects in particular have always been points of fascination. Still, I can’t say for sure how those plans will work out. Definitely, I’ll still be writing, regardless of whoever I become or what I eventually do. I think that, at least, is certain, and gives me some measure of comfort.