

Daren Shiau and Lee Wei Fen eds. *Coast: Fifty Three Works Titled Coast; A Mono-titular Anthology of Singapore Writing*. Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2011. 244 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-9938-7.

I recently encountered a November 1952 *Times* article which described Bedok, then on Singapore's south eastern coast, as "a kind of Singaporean Southend-on-Sea where Singaporeans eat fried shrimps instead of whelks and cockles."¹ Sixty years on, while Gwee Li Sui in his introduction to *Coast* observes that the fact that, "the title refers to a certain geographical area especially significant to islands... makes the endeavour suitably Singaporean" (6), this collection of fifty-odd local writings, all titled "Coast," only sporadically engages with the island's 193 km of coastline. This is understandable: today the average Singaporean or visitor is unlikely to encounter more than a fraction of the city-state's coast. If that coastline is, as Gwee describes it, "the urbanite's nightmare but the dreamer's kingdom" (7), some urbanites have guaranteed that that kingdom is small, debased. Even the seafront at Labrador Park increasingly resembles a promenade before Mordor. Indeed, in such a relentlessly bricked up space one can fail to recall that Singapore is an island approximately the size of the Isle of Wight. Melissa Lam sounds very much the landlocked metropolitan when she observes, "at times, the closest you can get to the sea/ is perching on the edge of an empty bathtub" (207). Such ironies either escape or are avoided by Gwee who makes a virtue of pragmatic necessity by privileging local writers' "inner sensitivity shaped by more or less random experiences" over "socio-historical environment" (3). At the same time Gwee celebrates many writers' attempts to transcend an impoverished environment characterised by "stigmatization and suffocation of creative work – outcomes maintained, if not created by cultural policies, academic complicity, and politicization of the private sphere" (4) through acts of "sheer will" (3).

While post-redevelopment Singaporeans are left with little coast, it endures as collective and personal memory in Edwin Thumboo's opening contribution, which simultaneously engages with Singapore's coastal past and the locations of Thumboo's childhood, including Bedok Road, Chek Jawa and "Mata Ikan" ("My coast was where the eagle swooped" [12]). Thumboo acts as our conduit to lost localities, while gently mocking "bite size" Singaporean now, a tsunami of amnesia: "Fast forward Hokusai: unlike you, we live tomorrows only" (13). Yet an earlier Thumboo seems also very much alive here, momentarily reviving older state narrative: "Pirate to buccanner, to imperialist, confiscated coasts, chained/ Them till Third-World daring freed, re-covered, re-

¹ "Duchess of Kent's Asian Tour: Value in Retrospect," *Times*, Friday, 21 November 1952: 8.

constructed” (13). One can’t help wondering if Singapore’s coasts ever felt more “confiscated” from its people than in the last 20-30 years? Thumboo seems to recognise this as he reflects on post “nation building” Singapore’s “tales of corruption, despair; successful mis-management” (13). Through psalm and gospel (and Arnold’s scholar-gypsy?) Thumboo advises, “Look for the core, the place of well-being, as you render unto/ Caesar” (13). Finally, Thumboo celebrates his recalled and recreated coasts as sources of renewal for all in the postmodern unreal city we find ourselves in, “My coasts, mine only, shared with you, for better not for worse” (13).

Boey Kim Cheng – one of Singapore’s finest poets – also frames coast in terms of memory: “the vanished coves and mangroves, measuring/ the geography of absence, erasing the cluttered skyline” (14). This self-exiled poet evocatively gestures to memory’s persistence despite totalitarian eradication:

Like rune stones, like beads of a rosary, you recite
the islands’ names, like shells you collect, conches
you hold to the present tense, to fetch the shapes
of vanished coasts, kampongs and palm-lined beaches
where morning and evening footsteps tell a different story
that the tides commit to their heart over and over. (15)

Boey simultaneously engages with actual – as well as connotations of – “coast”: “Coast to coast the top-forty hits chart/ the story of your life, one end to the other,/ the island traversed in an hours songs on the radio” (16).

The anthology continues with a fascinating, previously unpublished, if poorly edited, recollection of 1950s Connemara by the late Goh Poh Seng, “shouting Duino Elegies to the sea” and even earlier memories of Malaya’s Port Dickson: “That first sight of that incredible expanse of blue under a wide bright sky filled me with ecstasy... we abandoned ourselves to song whenever we crested the same rise and saw the sea” (37). The solitude of Connemara in the fifties is a universe away from twenty-first century Singapore and makes a striking contrast with much of what is to follow.²

Leonard Ng notes that as “spreading earth has driven back the water” (51) not only Singapore but its surrounding sea is changed too:

Where is the sea that lapped against the coast here,
when these verandas were built to catch the breezes
bringing the whispered hopes and dreams of sailors
in from the water? (50)

² Other coasts evoked and explored include Goa (Marc Daniel Nair); the edge of the Black Sea (Quek Shin Yi), Jeju (Catherine Rose Torres), and a myriad of coasts from Reunion to Marseilles in traveller Sarah Meisch’s heavily alliterative poem.

Ng laments the sterilising long term effects of coastal redevelopment: “Now newer generations/ wander unthinking” (50). Unlike younger Singaporeans, Ng’s speaker cannot accept the “different landscape/ where waves once rolled” (51).

Leong Liew Geok’s pithy mimicry of Singapore’s unequivocally summary dismissal of natural coastline in favour of concrete heart is particularly successful: “Such terra firma on which we squat,/ is better than neither here nor there... for land is land – not some halfway house:/ Muck intermingling with salt and sand” (54). Heng Siok Tian’s poem is also of interest, one of the few pieces to range beyond East Coast, to Labrador Park, and nearby “mega complexes/ with white winding stairways, architectural arches to blend with dancing waves” (55) at Vivocity and Harbourfront. Meditating on this coast throws up hard questions: as explorers discover “In corners” with hermit and other species of crab “continu[ing] to burrow inwards,” while “the coast further along gave way to mega complexes,” Heng asks “How will they shape the/ hermit in me?/ In a test-tube in a lab jar?” (55).

Stephanie Ye tells a revealing page-turner of a tale via a couple of thirty-something Chinese Singaporeans in a coastal town north of Portland. God is in the telling detail: memories of primary school discussions of “why the Japanese are so perverted (political correctness was something we would only be taught in secondary school)” (58), a friend’s death in “a freak accident” during national service, his funeral at the family home void deck, cardboard wedding cakes at the Mandarin Hotel, an American’s perception of faraway Singapore as “Very Sunny and Clean” (63). Ye’s story also begs the question of why a gay talented Singaporean would rather work at a bank in a “less ethnically diverse” US middle town than return to Singapore? Is it something to do with respective senses of history?, small town serenity?, or the fact that the sea “seems so much more energetic than... back in Singapore” (89)? Theophilus Kwek, a promising young poet, also explores Singapore from without, this time from the nearby island of Kusu, writing of “that vision of many towers; our altar against the northern sky/ perched soundless in the rain, where twenty-four is not enough” (116). Kylie Goh makes beautiful love out of Singapore’s forged coast: “on reclaimed land marked/ with bulldozer tracks, / you are the fishermen reeling in/ the sea and you are the crabs/ scuttling between the boulders” (234). Both poets are original, relevant and accessible, while memorably capturing the minute local particular.

Cyril Wong’s, “The sea is not without enemies./ A coastline as memory hacked into its pliant side./ Sandcastles are wishful thinking” (87) also makes for frankly satisfying poetry, rich in wordplay and suggestion. Wong reclaims, rehumanises the Singapore coastline, and makes for some of the most quotable lines in the anthology: “Rocks and shells bear news for no one in particular./

Pay attention anyway” (87). Carol Chan dedicates her accomplished, socially aware poem to Cyril Wong, suggesting perhaps the beginnings of a more credible literary tradition in Singapore.

Singaporeans are not poets.
Poets are among the mythical
creatures of this island, like the poor
or the homeless. (88)

Alvin Pang and Lee Wei Fen provide imaginative, if not wholly successful, imaginings of post-apocalypse Singapore. In a heady wave of post-modernity from downloadable porn to Dexter, Yeow Kai Chai namechecks Potong Beach and Bedok jetty but is more at home in the cyber realities of Pirate Bay as an antidote to Channel 5, asking “What is there to boast about our coast?” Rosemarie Somiah, in a fascinating poem makes a crafty connection between “foreign hands/ Redefining what we might/ Call our shores” and “the apathy of those that have too much/ and care so little” (101). It is refreshing to encounter a local poet with an effective facility for rhyme as Somiah cleverly channels coast through a Singapore sex worker.

Through a deceptively simple tale of a camping expedition to Changi Beach, Alfian Sa’at explores the submerged trauma of the expunging and scattering of the hundred kampong communities across Singapore following Independence. Farishas’s roots on undeveloped Pulau Ubin signify an enduring connection with the kampong, denied her Queenstown estate raised husband. While Farisha wryly observes, “The government took away our kampong... and they gave us camping!” (118), camping at Changi Beach initially provides an opportunity to recreate kampong life. But a Park Ranger’s demand to see camping permits reveals fellow Singaporeans, casualties of the island’s predatory capitalism reduced to living on the beach, “We have nowhere else to go. HDB took back our flats” (119). Farisha’s beach experience ends up recalling the days of the kampong all too vividly: “no reminiscence of the kampong is complete without the memory of eviction” (119).

Paul Tan’s “observant” Park jogger, “not putting his heart to the hurrying pace of this hurried island” (120) seems a sympathetic lens, approving a democratised seaside space including Filipino maids, newly arrived Indian families, and “fit young men speed[ing] by... tank-tops hugging their bodies with sweat” (120). This segment of coast is celebrated as a rare space for “undisguised glee, a brief reprieve” (121). Yet at one stage the jogger-narrator sounds suspiciously like Alfian’s Park Ranger.

Elsewhere there are blue tents, Malay voices,
laughing children playing badminton, the smell of
barbeque, a riff of a song hanging

in the air like the suspicious laundry line between
coconut trees. *How long have they been here?* (120)

Eric Khoo explores the important place of food at East Coast in Singaporeans' personal histories and then laments its essential flavour slowly slipping away, like the chilli stain on a table rag, the ember of a mosquito coil.

In Samantha Ong's short story, to "coast" describes her taxi driver protagonist's response to passengers donning earphones; blaming him for not avoiding traffic jams; demanding he stop in illegal places. In the context of Singapore's rhetoric of responsibility therefore, 'coast' carries subversive connotations. For Zhuang Yusa to "coast" includes "the rush of/ meth twisting through my own icy innards" (156), and a poem becomes "a gesture of/ communal sharing, like a gangbang –" (157). In Amanda Lee's story when an old man bequeaths ply-wood cabin by the sea, Singapore's undeveloped coast becomes a site for twenty-first century lesbian desire and loss; a hotcakes Happy Meal with accompanying toy a gesture of love. Sharanya Maniyannan engages with an extremity of Singapore – Pasir Ris – "the last station on the East-West line, a place you only really went to if you could catch a bus home from there. Or did not want to be found" (166). But for Maniyannan "Ris" suggests escape, a place to "watch the night descend," the few visitors "all return[ing] that surprise-secret smile, forced to admit their delight in... the shittiest little crap of a beach in South East Asia" (167). Jon Gresham's story culminates with its love-lorn protagonist cycling into the sea at East Coast. Desiree Lim sees East Coast as another kind of terminus: a site for death (suicide or drunken accident?) amidst coastal debris, Malays singing to guitars in the distance.

This rich, uneven collection must fill any enthusiast of local literature with optimism. Alongside established talents, here is generous confirmation of a multitude of fresh, promising local writers. Math Paper Press should be congratulated for another readable and stylishly produced book, as well as for fostering the work of these local writers. Singapore badly needs more of such genuinely creative outlets.

Angus Whitehead
NIE, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore