

Robert Yeo, *The Best of Robert Yeo*. Singapore: Epigram Books, 2012. 195 pp. ISBN 978-981-07-1840-4.

I first became aware of the work of Robert Yeo, one of Singapore's pre-eminent literary figures, through *The Singapore Trilogy*, three plays which traced the journeys of a group of young Singaporeans from their undergraduate years in London, through their personal and political journeys once they were back in Singapore. The first play in the trilogy, entitled *Are You There, Singapore?*, struck an idealistically hopeful note about Singapore's future, while the other two plays, *One Year Back Home* and *Changi*, were more mature pieces which took a more realistic, albeit cautiously optimistic, stance towards Singapore's development and its political future. It is the latter more mature tone that predominates in this current collection of poems, with an overlay of cynicism, as Yeo examines a variety of diverse subjects from relationships, to his country, to his travels in other places, to memories of friends, and so on.

This anthology, *The Best of Robert Yeo*, is the third in a series called "Singapore Pioneer Poets"; the first two volumes in the series focus on Edwin Thumboo and Kirpal Singh. The anthology gathers poems from Yeo's four collections of poetry, published between 1971 and 1999, as well as from other sources; it also includes arias and choruses from his libretto for the opera *Kannagi – the Ankle Bracelet*, written in 2009 and published here for the first time.

Several of the poems deal with what happens to people as they live their lives, seemingly with little control over or choice in what happens. In "Status," for example, he describes a life that "was all planned-/Not by Providence/but by his parents" (15); the young man in question adheres to his family's wishes, doing what seems correct and appropriate. Despite this, he finds that "still his material mirror/ Did not provide the right answer" (16) – so he continues doing the "right" things, joining the Rotary Club, starting a family, etc. Only once does he veer slightly from the course: "In his second year, he carried/ Seok Lin's bag to find/ Love somewhat heavy" (15). This line captures the incipient flame of rebellion, brought about by love, and then swiftly snuffed out when he realises that love comes with some rather heavy baggage. The poem speaks of lives lived in line with social and familial expectation; and in this case, it is a life lived unquestioningly, unreflectingly. In another poem, "Old Beginnings," he charts the course of a married couple who seem to have let events submerge them:

Overtaken, they became parents first before
They found leisure to be husband and wife.
It is doubtful if they were ever lovers. (110)

In “Garden City” – a phrase once used to position Singapore as clean, green and beautiful – he demands more than mere cleanliness from his home:

But a garden city? Well, I expect more
Than just a hygienic place, more than
Just the ordered tapestry of streets,
Tree-lined or linked by parks or squares.
But such imagination must extend
To pursuits where plays may be freely performed
Not banned by some policeman taught to think
That art must also have a criminal code. (83)

His cry for artistic freedom as well as order and hygiene might well spring from his own encounters with the licensing authorities and the difficulties he faced in trying to get his play *One Year Back Home* staged.

He also seems to be challenging the notion of beauty as sterile cleanliness. In “Singapore River,” he gives voice to the river as she laments the loss of what she once was, “the smelly whore –/ the way I like myself” (159). Those who want to clean her up tell her that “when my body’s cleansed/ my soul will be too” (159), but she is unsure if she will have any soul left. In the end the river becomes a haven not for painters “but for diners/ And those for whom beauty’s in light and noise” (162). There is a strong sense of loss here, the notion that the Singapore River’s beauty has been restored at a very heavy cost.

Yeo is a fiercely and determinedly Singaporean poet; as a writer, he has always dealt with Singaporean themes, characters, dialects. However, his vision of Singapore is never jingoistic; his vision of what makes Singapore unique, in both positive and troubling ways, comes through clearly in this anthology.

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