

Theophilus Kwek, *They Speak Only Our Mother Tongue*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011. 71 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-7535-0.

They Speak Only Our Mother Tongue is Theophilus Kwek's first collection of poems. Kwek, just 17 years old and a student at Raffles Institution, has already appeared in a number of publications including the Singapore quarterly *Ceriph* and the recent anthology *Coast*. Serving an informal apprenticeship under local poets Alvin Pang and Aaron Maniam, he is the recipient, amongst other honours, of a commendation prize for the 2010/11 Foyle Young Poet of the Year Competition. Interestingly, Pang in his Foreword to the collection warns us not to expect an angry young poet, but rather to celebrate the "heartfelt, yet deeply considered views of an informed young person on the cusp of a wider world" (7). Kwek's "poetic vision," as Pang rather preciously puts it, "has not yet learnt to feign" (7). By his own account, Kwek is "Still struggling to find his voice."¹ It will surely take a new poet, even in pragmatic, hurrying Singapore, a little time to achieve this. Nevertheless, no apologies need be made for Kwek publishing a poetry collection now. His best poems, well crafted, sustained, thought-provoking, already exhibit a gratifying maturity, complexity and wit. That Kwek should be writing memorable poetry of this quality at 17 is extraordinary.

Comprising of less than 60 pages (44 poems), *They Speak Only Our Mother Tongue* falls into three parts: "In Search of Roots," in which Kwek writes about family, past and present. "An Island in Our Sea" turns a lens on Singapore, Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans. The collection concludes with the self-reflective, then globetrotting "Our Silence into Syllables." In part 1 Kwek, at an age often impatiently dismissive of family and home, celebrates both. We encounter portraits of older relatives, foregrounding loquacious females over comparatively reticent males. "Visiting Aunty Feng Mei, 79" describes an ailing Aunt whose "troubled hair [becomes] dark with laughter" when family members visit, "a blessing and her farewell" (20): "talk to her and she becomes a river; flowing/ relentless from the depths of nineteen-thirty." "Grandmother Stories" engages with another familial conduit to a long lost Singapore: "we imagine, see/ the alley she was born in [...] the markets where she learnt to tell/ pomfret from garoupa." (21) It is refreshing to encounter a young Singaporean cherishing the quotidian particulars of his country's fragile past. Poems such as "Departures" (the short sharp title is typical) explore the impact of death and separation. In "Absence" Kwek addresses the missed with feeling, but avoids

¹ "Biography" from Ethos Books page. 29 July 2012.
http://www.ethosbooks.com.sg/store/mli_viewItem.asp?idProduct=266.

sentimentality: “gentle reminders of the space/ you leave behind are all there is, in grey/ and empty courtyards” (18). In several poems Kwek’s recreation of an infant’s eye view of home, “the crib of not knowing,” adroitly defamiliarises. “Father” and “The Flower” intimate that home itself can be sad. “4-D” tellingly describes an old man momentarily paying more attention to lottery numbers than his grandson, “four futures on his mind,” but whose, and to what end, remains uncertain. In “Seventh Month” with its “relatives, unseen for the rest of the year,” Kwek teases local-national conceptions of filial pieties as elders “talking at/ each other exile/ the younger generation reverently/ to the background, leaving/ them to study rolling TV headlines [...] Minister cautions against/ growing generation gap” (40).

Part 2 contains Kwek’s strongest poems. His repeated references to “corners” in Part 1 are echoed in an idiosyncratic choice of location for topographical poems focussing repeatedly on non-Singaporeans. *They Speak Only Our Mother Tongue’s* title derives from the concluding line of “Chinese Workers on a Train.” The poem captures a moment, ventriloquizing an accretion of present-day Singaporean attitudes to immigration, language, foreign workers, mainland Chinese and ultimately the Singaporean ethnic majority’s complicated relationship with its ethno-cultural roots. In describing a group of noisily sociable Chinese manual workers on a Singapore evening rush hour MRT as “an island in our sea” Kwek turns Singapore’s past popular nationalist rhetoric (“*Singapura o Singapura, sunny island set in the sea*”) outside in, foregrounding foreigners on Singapore soil. The seated Singaporean speaker-observer of the poem concludes “we cannot comprehend them/ they speak only our mother tongue” (28). Ironies abound here: while thrown together in a crowded MRT carriage, Chinese blue collar and Chinese Singaporean white collar seem divided not only by a supposed and imposed shared “mother tongue” (Mandarin), but also by something less definable than 60 odd years of divergent history. Kwek’s deployment of a persona signifying popular disquiet at Chinese workers’ physical and vocal presence, gently satirises “a generous but tired people,” tolerating those who get their hands dirty in the name of Singapore’s progress, “censor[ing] them with pretended sleep” (28).

A companion poem, “Foreign Workers on the Beach (*chinese new year morning*)” is framed by the haunting lines “nobody notices the old man/ fishing resolutely against the wind.” That the old man is presumably Malay enhances their resonance. On the beach “we” (again the speaker represents a group) “spot,” presumably by apparel, “waitresses/ and porters, cleaners and guards.” (29). The poem’s sense of a beach as a rare space of “reprieve” from the comprehensive rat race of contemporary Singapore, recalls Paul Tan’s “Coast.” As in Tan’s poem it is initially unclear whether everyone’s presence is sanctioned. A maid is described as having “stolen time/ from visiting the market.” Yet the prediction that, “perhaps there will be guests/ within the hour,

she will have to continue smiling/ from then till nightfall” (29) recalls Kathryn Stockett’s 2009 novel *The Help* and raises similar issues. While in “Celebration” Kwek evocatively conveys another dawn, this time from a high rise flat, heralding a Singaporean day (“defined with a certain violence”) bringing everyone quickly down to earth, “Home is” represents a double death of the kampong raised elderly consigned to government housing, “Home is the void/ deck where raindrops burn long/ moments into hours [...] home is/ waiting / to die” (46).

Gwee Li Sui bemoans local writers “depicting place with great socio-historical and emotional realism.”² Yet Kwek’s idiosyncratic choice of and cleverly pared engagement with less visible or overlooked spaces goes no small way in demonstrating that the local remains fresh and fruitful ground for a Singaporean poet. In such poems as “Queensway,” “Orchard, Night” and “Images; Clarke Quay” one senses Kwek as *flâneur*, walking and observing the streets (and corners) of Singapore by day and night, his privileged distance sanctioning ambivalence, irony and often nuanced social critique. In “Queensway” (the title alluding to one of Singapore’s oldest malls) a local shopper is caught between “the allure of fifteen-/ dollar jeans” and “sugared-peanut-hot-rice-dumplings.” A mounting suspicion that food was more fragrant in a childhood of “dirtier toilets and/ perhaps more familiar smiles” is avoided through more retail therapy miles from any country churchyard: “discounts/ rouse you to wakefulness, you slip/ back into the madding crowd and forget” (37). In “Orchard, Night” (place *and* time are tellingly signposted) the idea of non-Singaporeans as almost “an island” among Singaporeans is revisited. At one point the speaker observes a maid phoning home, boyfriend in tow. While Kwek’s tentative attempts to represent a maid’s interior life via fleeting observation and homogenising assumption may be slightly problematic, his adroit evocation of Singaporean anxieties regarding the regulation of maids’ bodies is sensitively handled. In “Images; Clarke Quay,” a series of fleeting impressions of the old quay turned expediently legislated tourist nexus recalls Blake’s “London,”

the child treading
bridges where once others bathed,
her champagne curls catching the sun
(perhaps the furtive eyes)

of the woman behind (33)

² Gwee Li Sui, ed., *Telltale: Eleven Stories*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2010. 6.

Moving outward from town to “heartland,” “Macpherson” describes older “almost tooth-/ yellow” HDB blocks, homes built for members of the hushed majority, as, “storeys/ with characters scribbled tiredly/ in each square.”³

In “Little India,” one of the last remaining ethnically and culturally distinctive spaces in the city-state, “smiles are not returned,” even “shophouses shrink from each other.” Nevertheless, Kwek’s spectator here elicits tenants’ stories:

the awkward Chinese couple wedged
in the quaint souvenir shop
between the pawn shop and the chilli-man will say
it took them longer to find this space
than they are allowed to keep it. (39)

In discovering and encountering “the five-sided square between Lembu Road and Desker,” the contested urban “third world space”⁴ of Bangla square with its “tick of carom boards,” Kwek goes beyond backyard cultural tourism to alert, uneasy observation and, arguably, his most authentic evocation of migrant experience. In “Old Coins at Pasar Street” Kwek’s context is the “thieves market” also in the precincts of Little India. Yet here the focus is distinctively Chinese: coins, “bear[ing] the names of gods/ [...] carved with sons of heaven” (38). Here Kwek discovers and relishes new possibilities in language:

Something about their etched backs
reminds me of countless surfaces:
counters spun upon, slid across;
pockets slipped into, stolen from;
drains disappeared in, washed
away from; fingers worn
weary by their passage; hearts
made light by their weight. (page 38)

The poem ends, “Once tokens of livelihoods/ they now inherit lives of their own.” In “Elegy to the Merlion” a national mascot undergoes similar time-bound transformations, from derivative tourist emblem to hastily mythologised national symbol to “another/ nameless uncle at the coffee-shop/ whom we’d really like to meet but just can’t find the time” (page 34). In “Housewife” (another poem set on the MRT) a tale of childlessness is poignantly positioned

³ In “Night Lights” similar structures resemble “a toilet” or a “cell,” inhabited by “neighbours worlds apart hiding.”

⁴ See Ho Kong Chong cited by Wong Shu Yan, “Not Such a Little India,” *Reclaim Land: The Fight for Land in Singapore*. 8 August 2012. <http://reclaimland.sg/rl/?p=30>.

between biblical text and Chinese tradition, gesturing to the apparent shortfall of either in the peculiar context of postmodern Singapore.

Part 3 if a slight disappointment considering what precedes it, contains two curious poems amidst slighter neighbours. In “The Picture” Kwek engages with the pressures of growing up in a simultaneously conservative and pragmatic city state. Despite “[f]or the moment, any chance of certainty/ [being] safely smothered,” a finger on a camera shutter is suggestive of carefree youth a hair trigger away from looming responsibility: “There is always/ less than enough time,/ too much to think about” (69).⁵ Poignantly the collection ends with a father’s diary entry bringing us back to an opening theme, our silence and withdrawal in the face of loss. Somehow this seems even more poignant in the context of “a half-an-hour island where/ life is of such proximity.” Kwek, unafraid of the obvious, or of engaging with his quotidian past and present, presents us with an authentic, unassuming local poetry refreshingly unreliant on weighty allusion. In a small country where anglophone poetry seems ever more side-lined, this promising, attentive, thoughtful and accessible young local poet deserves every encouragement.

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⁵ See also “To the Photographer in the Rain.”