

Pooja Nansi, *Love is an Empty Barstool*. Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2014. 46 pp. ISBN 9789810777166.

Obviously, there really are not enough published women poets in Singapore, certainly far from enough Indian, Malay or “other” island state poetesses. Teacher, musician and writer Pooja Nansi is perhaps one of Singapore’s most visible, colourful female poets, making waves with her performance poetry at Singapore Poetry Slam and other venues in the noughties, followed by her strong and exciting first collection *Stillette Scars* published in 2007. Sadly, that attractive volume, with its colourful angsty-Bollywoodesque cover, wonderful poems, and Stevie Smith cum Jean Cocteau illustrations, has been out of print and thus hard to source outside of academic libraries for years. The 64 page collection featured arresting, memorable poems engaging with past, memory and loss – as well as the seeming impossibility of a young Indian woman ever assimilating wholly into an increasingly hegemonic-monocultural Singapore (see for instance “listening to Mukesh”). *Stillette Scars*’ strong Indian-cosmopolitan flavour remains distinctive in Singapore literature almost a decade on. Nansi’s free/performance verse’s impassioned, often vulnerable, but also savvy, skilful and memorable engagements less with local places or totems, more with an “inner-mental exile in SG” state of mind struck a chord with more than a few Singapore units, ranging in race, culture, gender or persuasion. A poem like “anniversary,” for instance, resonant of grandparents dying or confused, parents greying, a not quite so younger generation travelling slowly but steadily ever more vulnerably up the line to oblivion surely satisfies (while going far beyond) even the most frigid local ministry lip service that poetry should have something to say about “the human condition.” In one of her travel poems Nansi rages at everyday, institutionalised racism in England, (One quick thing, White Boy,/wherever you came from,/didn’t they teach you to play fair?). Thus Nansi reminds us that mind forged manacles were never Singapore’s monopoly. Nansi’s play here on white boy and Asian woman communicating yet not communicating in English seems reminiscent of an earlier, equally peripatetic, equally not always at home female poet raised (but not born) in Singapore, Wong May. In another angry poem, “a rant,” Nansi again sets in so quotable words something of many of her local readers’ own condition, feelings, unhappinesses, speaking to and for them illuminatingly, comfortingly, memorably,

I want to hear a poem about Singapore.
About this multi-racial island
untouched by these lines of segregation
too faint to see.

In several poems in *Stillette Scars*, Nansi draws on her experiences as a Literature in English teacher, first with the “Gifted Ed” programme and then at a Junior College (her poem “teach less learn more” should be painted in letters of gold on the most visible walls at MOE and NIE).¹ In such poems Nansi asks hard questions that remain frustratingly, timelessly true despite (or because of?) a materially fast morphing Singapore:

If our elite are the cream of the crop,
why is it when I ask these *gifted* kids
For an opinion in class,
not *one hand* goes up?²

Another prevalent theme in *Stillette Heels* is the erotic, with Nansi teasing the edges of sex in the ever uneasy Singaporean public space. Considering the conservative milieu in which Nansi has flowered, this is done refreshingly, disarmingly well: from innuendo to vulnerable, featuring communicative thighs and lines like, “He loves my body like he is painting/the Sistine Chapel with his tongue.” (“affront”) and “What are the perks of caution and practicality/compared to the thrill of such altitudes?” Nansi’s consistently deft blurring of people and names results in delightful and satisfying slips past the censor.

About a year ago I saw Pooja Nansi read a commissioned poem, “A house made of words,” at a nocturnal outdoor event commemorating 10 years of Arts House (and its awkward rebranding as “Arts House Limited”). Nansi explored the Singapore Arts House building’s rich history, and earlier incarnations, refreshingly looking to too often expediently glossed David Marshall and “The old Malay words” rather than increasingly nationally prominent, abrasive associations of the building off Empress place.

This is the house in which Marshall wrote.
Merdeka he said *merdeka* over and over.
But they could not understand him.
The old Malay words, by then hungry
For a tongue to live on had starved into mist.

The unpublished poem ends poignantly, “if nobody/says a word long enough/

¹ Nansi and fellow teacher Erin Woodford’s recent guide to teaching poetry borne of such bitter-sweet experience, titled *Local Anaesthetic: A Painless Approach to Singaporean Poetry* (Ethos, 2014) is also to be recommended.

² See also “Marking Season” in “frustrated senryu.”

it disappears.” We can be grateful for local poets like Nansi for insistently unearthing and breathing life into more than a few of those words.

Seven years on, on the back cover of *Love is an Empty Barstool*, Nansi’s present darker, just as close and personal, even shorter volume, one encounters “operating instructions”:

The poems in this collection are best read with a glass of single malt but they work equally well in a quiet place at twilight. Test on a small area first – especially if you are in possession of a broken (or breaking) heart and see your bartender immediately if side effects persist.

Such prescriptively delivered intelligence seems to take us back to the scars of her first volume’s title and the small visible (complementing the invisible, but more painful) wounds on the body of the female speaker of several poems in *Love is an Empty Barstool*, whether deriving from razor nick or “chipped index fingernail.” The collection begins with a kind of mood-setting “Bar Room Haiku”:

Nights like this it feels
like I am a shot glass of
unrequited loves

with condensed connotations of need and desire, but whose? – wanting to be drunk like a shot. This second collection also engages with a world including love, travel, embarrassing-cult music and tv, booze, mc nuggets, loss. The volume’s title is taken from Pooja’s poem of the same name, the title of which derives from a line in Charles Bukowski’s masterpiece “definition,” which rather like Adrian Henri’s “Love is...” provides a list of characteristically disturbing definitions of love. Could Nansi have called her poem and volume “love is a crushed cat,” thereby perplexing the sensibilities of more than one fellow local poet? Perhaps, but her choice of that particular line from Bukowski goes some way to encapsulate Nansi’s life made into poetry themes of drinking, blues, sadness, melancholy explored and quite often transcended in these precious few poems. While in the first two lines of “Love is an Empty Barstool,” Nansi also paraphrases the final stanza of Bukowski’s poem, as if indicating a point of departure, a continuation, she produces a very different poem – a sad disturbing view of love nevertheless burning brighter, if less violently than Charles B’s. Nansi defines elusive, often agonising, unpindownable love through negatives, while retaining Bukowski’s sense of love mistook, but eluding any conclusive cheapening,

That stirring you felt
deep within

don't mistake it for love
 especially since
 we were both
 already naked.

Again like Wong May, Nansi, the “crazy curled girl child” seems to have acquired from modern American (as opposed to older English) poets, her masterful economy, crafty spacing and placing of lines. Refreshingly, Pooja’s is no latter-day run-of-the-mill don’t give up the day job gesture to “free verse.” If we didn’t know better the world portrayed might even be taking place in the land of the free the elder Lee so often gestured to. The collection’s epigraph: “No time to marry, no time to settle down;/I’m a good woman, and I ain’t done runnin’ around” derives from Nansi’s beloved Bessie Smith’s composition “Young Woman Blues,” a song described by Smith officianado John Capes as “a powerful and confident statement of independence.” It is perhaps not so uncanny that Smith recorded in the song in New York City in October 1926 when Smith was about 30, Nansi’s approximate age now.³ “This Poem wants to be a Blues Song” the first poem proper in *Love is an Empty Barstool* begins,

Some say the blues
 is a fat black woman

The lines might seem a reference back to Bessie Smith herself, Nansi characteristically, playfully blurring object and individual, though I am also reminded of Guyanese poet Grace Nicholls’ 1984 collection, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*. But Nansi turns things on their head:

I think the blues is that boy
 Who won’t leave your life
 or stay in it long enough
 for you to heal.

“The blues is all about longing cutting sharp into your bones,” Nansi observes. Riffing off of Wilson Pickett perhaps (or maybe again Adrian Henri?), the speaker croons a lament to a neglectful lover,

And sometime in the midnight hours
 when you don’t pick up your phone,
 I can feel the blues stirring, the blues is singing,
 don’t you know, don’t you know honey?

³ Smith had in fact married Jack Gee three years earlier.

In such lines, especially the last, one perhaps gets a taste of both Nansi performance poet and teacher. They also recall “serious” Irish poet Paul Muldoon’s recent playful attempts at rock lyrics, borne of Warren Zevon experience, *The Word on the Street*. Nansi certainly knows how to end poems in crafted, arresting, disturbing, wonderfully double-take inducing ways.

Sometimes the blues
can make the kisses of the wrong man
feel like a healing.

If Nansi looks to the US for much of her poetic and musical inspiration, at least the origin of at least one poetical wet dream is British. ‘If you’re reading this, Alan Davies’ offers a tongue in cheek love paean to the equally curly haired writer, actor and standup comedian. In an ingeniously inventive and quotable poem, Nansi winds up with the line “but the things I *really* want to say belong more to porn than poetry.” Hopefully after reading the knowing clever last line “kill me,” local readers will find themselves wanting to Google and YouTube Davies, rather than adding Nansi’s poem alongside Roger McGough’s ‘The Lesson’ to Stomp’s collection of poetry “unacceptable” in Singapore’s culturally beleaguered government schools, and perhaps beyond.

“I am beautiful,” with its title intriguingly subsumed into the poem’s body, and its Christopher Smart style repetition features a speaker with both vulnerabilities, and strengths on display:

I am beautiful because I am not capable of leaving anyone.
I am beautiful because I have become capable of letting people leave me.

I admire Nansi for the energy, vivacity and fun she brings to poetry, while almost simultaneously plumbing harrowing emotional depths. There’s also a sense of humour, and sense of past:

I am beautiful because I know songs from every decade since
the 1930s in two languages and I can almost always sing
along accurately.

The near-ending of “Dear Men I’ve never Met” is also striking:

What are the chances that as I load the groceries into my car,
those of you walking by might be looking at the nape of my
neck half covered with the defiant curls of my hair and think I
was someone who you could tame.
What are the chances you would make
that mistake?

though I feel less convinced with the poem's ultimate ending – has Alan Davies made another fantasy appearance? But Nansi also shows the breadth of her craft in a poem like “still in your pursuit” where the Singapore poet does something beautifully complicated with William Carlos Williams’ beautiful and very long poem “Asphodel that Greeny Flower.” As with Bukowski’s “Definition,” Williams’ vintage modern genius seems to serve both as a launching pad and enabling template for Pooja’s confessional poem, as she creatively works through enduring loss. For me at times it feels a bit like reading Blake’s later longer works as Nansi stages, engages with and struggles with past lost love. “Still in your pursuit” seems to echo and bleed into the concluding “I am beautiful,” as elsewhere, the poem is satisfyingly ambiguous in terms of its masculine addressee: boys to men, male imagined, no longer here? Though in some ways a dark, disillusioned book, Nansi’s second collection shares a profound and energetic sense of wonder within that disillusion.

So with poems consciously cohering around booze, bars, and young girls running around, beginning with blues as the wrong boy and ending with “that old man, /loss”, *Love is an Empty Barstool* is an enjoyable, accomplished collection of poems. And yet at 22 not so long poems, it left me very hungry for more from Pooja Nansi.

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