

George Szirtes, *Singapore Notebook & Blessed Isle*. The NTU Residencies Chapbooks. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2016. 98 pp. ISBN 978-981-09-6093-3.

George Szirtes (b. 1948) is a Budapest born, now Norfolk-based poet, translator and writer. In the autumn of 2014 Szirtes travelled to Singapore for a month-long Nanyang Technological University-National Arts Council fellowship as writer-in-residence. During his residence at NTU, Szirtes wrote a number of short poems as well as a “Notebook” of his impressions of Singapore. The notebook, together with a selection of poems, has now been published as part of a series of “chapbooks” penned by the first five writers-in-residence at NTU. In his notebook, Szirtes trains his seasoned, cosmopolitan, and well-travelled poet's lens on Singapore, a country he knew little of previously. The result is a brief but richly intriguing snapshot of Singapore from a sympathetic, very human writer with few expectations or preconceptions of the city-state.

Szirtes' first sustained encounter on arrival off the expressways cutting across the tiny island, is with the “sprawling, verdant campus” of NTU tucked away in the western, partially developed, end of the island. He reframes the green campus and its neighbouring military dominated jungle as Elizabethan travelogue: “Here be large kingfishers, hornbills, parakeets, mynahs, crows and snakes” (8). While Szirtes means to be kind, particularly to his generous hosts, he cannot help but note the instant Spartan nature of fast, aggressively spreading NTU, notably the thin transient material nature of its School of Humanities, its “fusion” (one of those monomaniacally and literally applied word in Singapore, along with “hub,” “leadership” and “service”) eateries such as “Fusion spoon.” In contrast, in describing an unenglish heavy downpour in November, well into Singapore's monsoon season, Szirtes invokes Philip Larkin's almost religious phrase “a furious devout drench” (9), and a sustained sense of wonder at Singapore's clouds and sky, recalling Paul Muldoon's fascination with rain watching in Singapore.

Szirtes' initial Notebook entries remind me of the gentle wit and urbanity as well as moving eye of contemporary and travel writer Michael Palin. But the style significantly changes as Szirtes finds his feet, getting more of a feel of the place through Singapore friend and fellow-poet Alvin Pang taking Szirtes to cultural spaces such as Blair Plain in Chinatown (which Szirtes compares to Shanghai). Already a poet's uneasy sense of the garden city is emerging as Szirtes, whisky infused cocktail in hand, looks down at night from one of the tallest buildings seeing the city centre far below “like burning shrapnel” (12). But the luxury and panoramic distance that frames such a vision also seems emblematic of Szirtes' inability to get up and personal with unelite and unarty multicultural Singapore. Try as he might, he locates no overt evidence of the sex workers he was told inhabited Little India or even Geylang. He never gets to the homes of 85% of the

population, the ubiquitous HDB “heartland” high rise estates. And yet Szirtes is not blind to the tensions and issues that are part and parcel of Singapore’s glittering miracle.

At first Szirtes’ view also seems proscribed by NTU-managed staff visits off the secluded campus. But even within NTU’s colonial compound-like confines he quickly perceives that “exams mean enormous pressure in Singapore” (15), as he rapidly becomes fond of both staff and students whom he reads to, teaches, observes, talks with. Szirtes also discovers that eating and poetry are prominent cultural preoccupations of the Singapore he encounters. Taking another journey into town with the Malay writer and teacher Annaliza Bakri, to see some dancing, Szirtes enjoys the more traditional than the modern “fusion” dances, initituled “Transporting Rituals.” He is impressed also by the young writers he encounters in Singapore – in the words of Pound “a darn clever bunch” – thin – “and more than clever, I think, going by the books. Clever, almost anxiously so, sometimes, but more. More what? We shall see” (33).

Like many British visitors of his generation, Szirtes wants to see Raffles Hotel which he finds “lovely and airy and somewhat Agatha Christie” with “Wildean sandwiches” (24). Yet Szirtes begins to sense that while Singapore “is simple in some ways” it is “very complicated in others” (24). Pang invites him to a truly significant event and milestone – the first ever poetry competition for Singapore’s many but often “invisible” and cheap migrant workers from Bangladesh. Szirtes gives an unsentimental but perceptive sketch of the workers’ lowly and marginalised position in Singapore – and globally. As he observes, at least this competition is a happier, affirming moment where poetry, singing and dancing privileges and liberates the workers. Szirtes has the perception as well as the candour to say that Singapore “is pure Thatcherism but working on a different population and cultural base” (27).

In fact, Szirtes is very sanguine about pure Thatcherite Singapore even while granting very real issues, such as censorship and institutionalised homophobia. Szirtes’ friends and minders feed him no mistruths but one feels that something has been left out of the scripted narrative:

The place is booming. The jungle is mostly gone as has some of the sea, which has been reclaimed for city use, but the buildings soar and sparkle and while there are obviously poorer places such as Little India and probably many others we have not seen, places where migrant workers share small rooms and tiny wages, the general air is of stable, civil, almost amiable prosperity. Who’d want to rock such a boat? The military is well equipped and on the alert. The ships keep docking. Money flies in through every orifice. (29)

But who does that money reach?

In meeting one of the young, thin and clever poets and movers and shakers on the literary scene, Tse Hao Guang, Szirtes notes that new local poets have a preoccupation with form – as a new revelation rather than old restriction. But one cannot help but wonder if Szirtes has some uneasy sense of elitism, policing going on even in the literary domain.

In an abandoned, still undeveloped part of the almost futuristic inner city Szirtes encounters old superstitions and fear of evil enduring – even amongst the young sophisticates. Invited to read at one of performer, teacher and poet Pooja Nansi's Speakeasy series of events, Szirtes ("probably best to hear me rather than read me") is retrospectively relieved he reads before livewire writer, performance poet, gay activist, Ng Yi-sheng:

He is gay and proud. His work is him, delivered at full rhetorical volume, his whole body pumping. Sometimes he runs on the spot. Sometimes he whispers, sometimes he bellows, sometimes he talks of his mother who is in the audience, checking with her it's okay to read something she might find shocking. He is verbally dexterous, rhymes, alliterates. He can do all that: he is a fully dramatized presence. He throws some water at the audience, he beats a plastic cup against his head, he takes off his shirt. I notice this more than I notice the poems but that's because I am older and less certain about who or what I am. (39)¹

At Marina Bay, shadowed by the new National icon cum casino of Marina Bay Sands, erected double quick by cheap migrant labour, Szirtes senses the relentless video game quality of the skyline, "an eternity of Christmases." Singapore as hubris (Szirtes' own buzz word for Singapore), the incarnation of wealth as dreamed of by the poor, Beckham and Hertfordshire Posh spice elevated to thrones, nemesis as yet hidden beyond the horizon. But as Szirtes observes, these comparisons are "wild shots in the dark" (44) not doing pragmatically enigmatic Singapura full justice. Singapore has darkly glittered in imagination and reality these 40 years, "teeter[ing] between celebration and hubris, between the trump card of capitalism and the burning of the gifts of the dead" since Edwin Thumboo invoked Marlowe's corpse-babe bewitched Faustus in "Ulysses by the Merlion": "towers topless as Ilium."

It is intriguing that there is little direct speech captured in the *Notebook* – when it does occur it is not quoted wisdom or aphorism from Singapore's overseas educated young homegrown poets or even NTU Humanities top brass, but a taxi driver, a former rugby international, "*No rugby now.... Football is a dead loss here. No crowds. We don't have cricket*" (55).

Szirtes takes in the nearby Jalan Bahar dragon kilns, notes the unhappy brides at the prescribed sights, the Botanic Gardens, Gardens by the Bay, gardens within

¹ See also "Solo for Slam" (88).

a concrete city. At East Coast beach, Szirtes reflects on the Japanese beach massacres of Chinese of seventy years before, and sees Singaporeans as almost Blakean: driving their ploughs pragmatically over the bones of their own dead.

Szirtes hears the Smurfs, singing "Mary's Boychild" in NTU's campus supermarket in mid-November, notices children, youths and adults overworking "as if everyone were in training for a big event due the next minute" (63). He wonders if overwork in Singapore might be a source of pleasure and/ or pride for a postcolonial colony lacking anything else and envisions the perfect Singaporean t-shirt boasting the slogan: "STRESSED AND PROUD." In fact, NTU students bear other messages across their chests: "PANIC AND FREAK OUT NOW"; "SHAKESPEARE HATES YOUR EMO POEMS." In this top-down, patriarchally orchestrated, society, however, the "young may be longing all the more to break out but they don't look to have broken much" (64).

For Szirtes Orchard Road is "Oxford Street as conveyor belt" (67); Singapore is read not through any local writer, but rather through Irishman Derek Mahon's poem "The Snow Party" and/or major work of Eliot, Yeats. Digging a little deeper, Szirtes infers "[u]nder the hubris, sadness. Under the sadness, anxiety. Within it all a kind of wryness..." (70). Yeats' rough beast has come and gone again and again, not least at East Coast. This is the age of the long-legged fly. Szirtes turning (Route) 66 at the end of November, imagines himself as a minor poet in late imperial Rome, noting an island state "in some ways, small enough to hold together as an idea but not as practice" (72).

Getting economically into town student-fashion, Szirtes encounters by bus the aptly named Pioneer (73), an MRT train station lesser known than the major interchange of Boon Lay, but handy for nabbing a prized seat. Szirtes notes the Englishness of so many names on the green West-East MRT line, not being surprised if he encounters a tube name like Mornington Crescent among them. Caldecott tellingly sets off memories of fifties and sixties English radio comedy.

I've left criminally little space to speak of Szirtes' haunting series of Singapore poems. "Sling" cleverly riffs off the word's polysemous possibilities via Raffles bar and the weather to a gnomic encapsulation of the island in eight short lines. "An Open Book" seems borne of the green campus and also Szirtes' sense of young Singapore as simultaneously complicated and simple. "The boys/ are at their desks. The girls darken and strut./ Now the books are open. Now they're shut" (87). "Dance" ("You don't want the dollar, you want papaya") must derive from the indigenous dances Szirtes witnessed. "Blessed Isle" is in fact the bleakest, and possibly the most striking poem, recalling friend Alvin Pang's recent short story of a future post-hubris devolved Singapore, or is it, more disturbingly, present Singapore?

It was happy and kind. It was the land
of amenable souls. It did things just right

and continued doing so. But late at night
energies took their fill. Each hand
an imagined axe. The sea was high
in the bay. The malls were running dry.
(“Blessed Isle” 94)

Szirtes as a poet of the breadth and cosmopolitan experience Singapore has yet to produce seems able to find fertile images for making sense of the simultaneously unprecedented and banal phenomenon that is Singapore. The hyper-developed island is like the flower dome at gardens by the Bay, a miracle of rare device – preserved but unsettlingly out of sync. As Szirtes leaves for Singapore’s looking glass neighbour, Malaysia, he dwells on the ambiguity of “pressure cooked” Singapore originating from and appreciated by those who in the past (O pioneers!) experienced a traumatic rawness, similar to that of Szirtes parents in forties and fifties Hungary. Literally, the last word of the book is “hope.” This is indeed a poet’s response to Singapore – a slim but valuable contribution to the island’s growing literature offering new insights, images and hard questions.

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