

A Poets Sense of the City

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1 If you cannot learn to love

(yes love) this city

you have no other.

Simon Tay, 'Singapore Night Song' (137).

2 Having lived in Australia for more than a year now, it is easier to view my own country through a telescope and learn to love what I used to loathe. It is easier to hold and weigh the ball of its contradictions in my palm and learn how each strand I unknot tells on myself, on my writing, to realise with a shudder that I am a moving microcosm of the city I was born in. Indeed, the more removed I am, the easier it is to be an apologist as it is to be a patriot.

3 Robert Drewe makes the claim that Australia is the most urbanised country in the world (7). Obviously, he has yet to walk the length and breadth of Singapore. To talk about Singapore is to talk about the city. As the joke goes, the capital of Singapore is Singapore, and there is no other city quite like Singapore.

4 It cheerfully admits to being an artificial creation, a test tube mixing West and East and bubbling with possibilities. It resents the reach and rinse of Western influences, yet it cannot afford to close itself from international trade and commerce. It is an Asian metropolis with a nouveau-riche arrogance about its place in the world, yet is a mere blip on the map. Call it what you will - a glass-dome city, a Disneyland postcard, an autocratic, authoritarian state with a muzzle and cane ready to keep its citizens in line the name-calling is probably valid, at some point, to some extent.

5 Yet Surprising Singapore, as the tourist brochures coin it, is a lot more elusive than the rumours. Everything about it - its size and vulnerability, the quirk of its history, the fabric of its immigrant cultures that sometimes threatens to fray along the fringes - demands its failure. But in just one full leap of a generation, Singapore has sprung the trap of Third World poverty, rising to become one of the richest nations in the world.

6 Something has to give, and it is in the Singaporean writer's sensibility that we read and understand the human cost.

7 Sometimes it is hard

to believe that creatures of flesh and bone

may tear up the roads like paper,

peeling the rind of earth

as carelessly as eating an orange.

Aaron Lee, 'Road-Works' (65).

8 Dennis Haskell rightly points out that it would be impossible to be a Romantic in Singapore (27). Not only impossible, but also false. For the reality is this: whatever nature there is, is there by design, not by default, nor by coincidence.

9 Nostalgia is cheap when land is scarce. The country has no hinterland to call its own, no natural resources to draw on but the will of its population of just over three million people. Because of the sheer limitation of size poet Edwin Thumboo once quipped that Singapore is physically an island 224 square miles - 226 square miles at low tide (159) the city has to keep changing, evolving, re-sculpting its coastlines, taking over the sky, laying mazes of walkways and tunnels beneath the ground. Flux becomes a necessity by virtue of circumstance, a virtue of necessity.

10 We are a country of dust

where nothing is saved

but face.

Felix Cheong, 'Work in Progress' (45).

11 The consequence is that Singapore is and will always be - a work in progress, constantly re-modelling its face, its face, its planners drafting and grafting the way a poet must rework his manuscript to the fullness of his gift. It is a post-modernist fable turning upon itself, over and over, deconstructing its own meaning, answering only to its own vision. The moment it has finished, arms outstretched and ill at ease, it is finished.

- 12 In his essay *Chaos in Poetry*, D.H. Lawrence avers that the task of poets is to
- 13 reveal the inward desire of mankind! The desire for chaos is the breath of their poetry. The fear of chaos is in their parade of forms and technique (92).
- 14 Stretch the analogy a little and the same holds true for Singapore. Examine its skyline on a clear blue day and you cannot help but marvel at how well this city-state parades its forms and technique. How well it conceals its fear of chaos beneath skyscraper chrome and glass. How, at its heart, it is still a frightened child of a city learning to cope with the means and meanings of change, pitched at once between promise and compromise, between a desire for chaos and the craftsmanship to contain it.
- 15 Perhaps this fluidity is a measure of redemption, like a writer with the wit and strength to scratch out the eyes of an unclear poem and begin on a clean sheet, all resources and lines shaped and sharpened by impatient fingers. Everything else about Singapore its politics, policies, polemics follows from this, originates from this fundamental insecurity.
- 16 When I love you
for my fallen love,
O City of
Endless Energies,
your eyes burn out
along the street.
Gwee Li Sui, 'Kenosis' (34).
- 17 Having grown up in the relative ease and affluence of Singapore after independence, all I know is the city. I am a child of my times, a child of the city, and its energy has now become my own. It is in my fingertips, in the grip of pen poised steady above paper. The restlessness owns me, steers eloquence towards a mouth, towards poetry.
- 18 I have even conditioned myself to write on the move in a crowded train or a bus letting the jolt and shuffle set a rhythm in my head. The whirl of a world as I stand on the still ledge of words, recording, rendering, remembering.
- 19 There is poetry in the silence of a man contemplating his feet on a train, unable - or unwilling - to connect with another through the corner of his eye. There is poetry in the knowing snatches of conversation eavesdropped. There is poetry in the smile of flowers as the boy opens his heart, for the first time, to his first love. For a moment, just a moment the lyrical in the transient.
- 20 The City is what we make it,
You and I. We are the City.
For better or for worse.
Edwin Thumboo, 'The Way Ahead' (39).
- 21 Excerpts of poems taken from *No Other City: The Ethos Anthology of Urban Poetry*.

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