Rosaly Puthucheary, Ed. *The Call to Poetry: Poems from Pre-Independence Singapore*. Gerakbudaya, 2021.174 pp. ISBN: *9789670311760*

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***T**he Call to Poetry: Poems from Pre-Independence Singapore*, edited by Rosaly Puthucheary, captures the emotional upheaval in the people of Malaya from 1900 to 1962, the years leading up to Singapore's separation from the Federation of Malaya. The anthology seeks to answer the call to poetry and to wrestle, in the words of D.J. Enright, a former professor of English literature at the University of Singapore, with a poet's "artistic destiny" (xv). Puthucheary's compilation of poetry weaves together the joys and sorrows encountered in a multiracial culture while drawing out the unspeakable pain of loss and longing in a nation.

Before each poem, Puthucheary provides a contextual introduction to the poet and poem(s) to indicate the possible inspirations and interpretations surrounding each work. She begins the anthology with poignant war poems written by George Joseph Puthucheary, such as "The Bellicose Mongolians" (1901), which combines ironic humor and the tragedy of war. George Puthucheary's poems revolve around the disillusionment about religion due to war crimes and the impact of injustice in a nation. In his visceral and intimate poem, "A Hero of Heartbreak Ridge," he paints a vivid picture of the overwhelming sense of betrayal young men experience, having been "tricked" into serving in the war.

The anthology also explores the struggles of the working class. Teo Poh Leng's "The Spider" describes the futility and hopelessness of work and war, after all, Teo experienced combat and was one of the 50,000 young Chinese men massacred during the Japanese Occupation. At times, Teo's language carries a suppressed sadness cloaked in philosophical considerations: "Gone like so many days undone,/ Lost in Eternity's upheaving" and "crave

and slave/beneath this Sisyphean penalty" (30); other times, in "The Song of the Night Express,"—written on a 9-hour long journey on the railway from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur—Teo contemplates a familiar and robust day-to-day scene, seen through the lives of Malayan jinrikisha-pullers: "the amorous/Whimsicality of the rich visitor" (17) and the "Drunkenness cacophonous sound" (21). However, despite his poetic virtuosity, some of Teo's rhymes come off as trite and simplistic: "The world is bad,/ The world is mad,/ The world is sad" (26).

The selection of poems from Wang Gungwu aims to humanize the Chinese people, often regarded as a different class of people by the British. "'Tis true the samsengs salt their dish/ And the opium-sleeper knows to kiss,"; these two lines from "The Pier" encapsulate Wang's empathetic portrayal of the outcasts in society then. His other poems, such as "Ahmad," "To Tigerland," and "Three Faces of the Night," explore the meaning of home and belonging. Wang illustrates the conflicting feeling as existing in "triple spheres:/ In laughter, in stillness, and tears" (98).

The tone and mood of the anthology lighten without undermining its essential consideration of nationhood. Hedwig Anuar's satirical poems such as "Rhyme in Time" and "Suez Canal Blues" poke fun at the idea of monarchy and colonialism. What is striking is Anuar's tactful use of rhymes to infantilize the topic with "…Chief Minister,/…plots sinister" and "talking himself out of Assembly,/ talking his way back to the old-apple-tree" (73) in "The Ballad of Davy Marshall." "Love Match" is, arguably, her best piece, depicting Singapore's pre-independence dilemma and political tension with the Federation. Portraying them as bickering and confused lovers, Anuar romanticizes Lee Kuan Yew's and Tunku Abdul Rahman's relationship to delineate the fraught history and abiding hope people in Malaya and Singapore shared about the merger. Ee Tiang Hong's heart-rending poems trace the unreciprocated love of and longing for Malaya. Leaving Malacca in the wake of the May 13

ethnic riots, his poems "I of the Three Monkeys" and "Dying" delineate the loss of hope: "Of my being a puppet./ Of a government/ Not of the people" (104).

Rosaly Puthucheary's commentary voice seems to fade towards the end of the anthology. Beginning with Lim Thean Soo's poems, she no longer presents a clear and extensive context to the poem but instead leaves Lim's poetry to the readers' interpretation. Lim's poem takes a philosophical approach to the mundane day-to-day. "The Towkay" deserves an honorable mention due to its lively description of a restaurant owner's unbecoming eating and governing habits. Malay poetic diction such as *Atap* and *Pawangs* creates the local and minute flavors of village life as the poem travels down memory lane to depict the simple pleasures of village life during the early days of Malaya.

Besides illustrating the Malayan landscape, the anthology also offers a glimpse from an outsider's point of view. Margaret Leong's poems characterize the foreigner's intimate fascination with Malayan culture. Originally from Missouri, USA, Leong married a Malayan Chinese and lived in Penang until retiring back in the States. In "Chinese Funeral," Leong's persona juxtaposes the mourners' sorrow and indifference toward the deceased and is bewildered by the transition. The theme of death and Malayan culture permeates the last few poems in the anthology. Delving into traditional Malay folklore and superstition, Wong Phui Nam's "My Pontianak Love" portrays the haunting romance between forbidden desires, death, and the pursuit of the unknown. On the one hand, Edwin Thumboo's ominous poem, "Peter Wee," explores the meaning of life and death to draw out the persona's conflict with Hinduism. On the other hand, Oliver Seet uses Hindu symbolism to celebrate the grand circle of life in "Vihara" and "Sleep Vishnu on Ananta." Similarly, T. Wignesan's "Who Dares to Take This Life From Me, Knows No Better" is a narrative poem that fuses Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures, using ancient folklore to convey the passage of time and memory.

Kassim Ahmad's "to the forgotten heroes of this land" sums up the anthology aptly by dwelling on the brotherhood that unites a nation. The persona hearkens to Malayan heroes like *Hang Jebat* and *Hang Tuah* to emphasize his longing for unity and freedom. Does the anthology answer its essential call to poetry and artistic vision? The array of poems renders the unspoken truths and complex experiences of pre-independence Singapore, a country known for its success and accomplishment, to present a breath of fresh air and a deeper discussion of the history of Singapore and Malaysia. Accompanied by Rosaly Puthucheary's historical and contextual commentary, the anthology is recommended teaching material for any post-colonial topic in poetry focused on nationhood and identity.