

WRITING OUT OF PLACE

Eddie Tay

Beast

Forged of the jungle, I have no language,
but there is a soft rain that wakes me,
healing the scars on my body;
wherever I roam, the ground is written
with rivulets, bringing relief
to thorns that clutch at a blackened sky.

Forged of the jungle, I have no language,
but boulders and branches prompt me
with their silences. The wind drums
a rhythm on my skin; wherever I roam
there are gasps of mud-flats at my feet,
and I murmur with the low rumblings of thunder.

Tall grass beating at my face, a vision
throbs behind my eyes. I quiver with lallang,
rear at full sprouts of flowers.
Forged of the jungle, there is a dull desire
emerging from disquietness of ancient trees.
I raise my raven head and roar.

This is the opening poem of a sequence in my collection titled *Remnants*, published by Ethos Books in 2001. The beast in question is the mythical creature (some say it's a lion) encountered by Sang Nila Utama, the legendary prince, when he first stepped onto our island.

The issue at stake in the poem is that of the struggle to speak. The poem marks the beginning of words in our history. At the same time, it marks the beginning of my words. Thus, when I write, I write under the influence of history – or rather, the lack of it. I am the beast lost in the labyrinth of history not quite my own.

After all, the history of Singapore is other people's history. Our country's colonial beginnings is part of the history of the British empire. Likewise, the resultant immigrant culture is composed not of one history but many – that of diasporic histories of China, India and Malayan cultures. Singapore's founding myth of the thirteenth century Malayan prince Sang Nila Utama encountering a beast or a lion when he first stepped onto the island is just that – a myth. Strictly speaking, we do not belong in history, and our history does not belong to us.

Since the beginning of our nation is based on myth rather than fact, how do we begin to know ourselves? What does it mean to be a Singaporean? By extension, what does it mean to be a Singaporean writer? Contemporary English writers have none of the problems encountered by their Singaporean counterparts. They are able to look back on the monumental history of English

literary tradition and define their writing in relation to it. They know their place in relation to the writers – be it Austen, Shakespeare, or Milton – that came before them. Singaporean writers, by contrast, have nothing of that sort of history to look back on. They write out of a cultural and historical vacuum.

Also, the fate of Singaporean writers is all the more threatened because they are marginalised by the pervasive ideology of economic pragmatism. As a colony, Singapore was nothing more than an economic invention of the British empire. When our then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew uttered the prophetic words “Singapore will survive” in 1965, he meant that Singapore will survive as an economic entity. Even till today, when we speak of national survival, we are primarily speaking of economic survival.

Writers or not, we cannot deny that we are first and foremost, economic creatures. After all, writers do not live on air – they have bills to pay, mortgages to worry about, and families to feed. Thus, unless one is financially well-off, writing is relegated to the status of a hobby, something that is carried out at leisure or in the wee hours of the night, after an honest day’s work has been done. Much like the Merlion, serious writing in Singapore is not taken seriously.

I have no choice but to be an idealistic pragmatist, forever negotiating the practical demands of living in Singapore with the demands of writing. This is the reality of writing in Singapore. I often imagine the late Gopal Baratham, who gave us the political satire *A Candle or the Sun*, sitting at his desk at night, working at his novels and short stories after a completing hard day’s work at the hospital, trying to balance his professional life with writing.

I am lucky in this respect because as a lecturer of English literature, my professional life is in line with my writing life. The issues and debates I discuss with my students in the day are of direct relevance to my writing at night. After spending nine hours of my day at work, I would try to squeeze in one or two uninterrupted hours of writing at home. The phenomenon of juggling teaching with the writing of literature is nothing new to the Singaporean writer. The three most prominent Singaporean poets, Edwin Thumboo, Lee Tzu Pheng and Arthur Yap, with the exception of the last who retired several years ago, are literature professors. Colin Cheong, author of award-winning novels like *Tangerine*, is a teacher.

Other than coping with the issue of finding time for one’s writing, there is the issue of finding publishers to consider. The number of publishing avenues in Singapore available to writers can be counted on one hand. This is understandable, given the target market in Singapore. The chief concern for the Singaporean writer would be - how can I seek literary representation overseas? Writers like Baratham, Catherine Lim and Hwee Hwee Tan have done well partly because they are represented by overseas publishers. Given this, unless we are willing to write for cultural and publishing centres like London, Paris and New York, what are the odds of a V. S. Naipaul or a Salman Rushdie emerging from among us?

Thus, when I write, I am conscious of the fact that I am writing out of place. I write with the consciousness that Singaporean literature exists, not because of, but in spite of Singapore. Part of the reason why the late Kuo Pao Kun is a celebrated playwright is that many of his plays are social and political satires. The cruel irony is that he is rightfully acknowledged as the pioneer of Singaporean theatre despite the fact that for fifteen years, his Singaporean citizenship was revoked. "Singapore you're not a culture you're poems on the MRT," writes Alfian Sa'at. His spiteful poem, "Singapore You Are Not My Country", is much celebrated partly because it articulates dissatisfaction with the way art is being appropriated by the official cultural machinery. His poetry accuses the nation.

Having said that, Singaporean writers are not alone in this predicament. We belong to a larger group of writers who are out of place in their own home countries. I have in mind Shirley Lim, a Malaysian poet and novelist who found a more congenial home in the United States. She calls herself a "voluntary exile".

Another poet I have in mind is Li-Young Lee, an Indonesian whose family fled to the United States after his father had spent a year as a political prisoner in President Sukarno's jails. Lee's poems explore cultural memory. "Memory revises me," he writes. The poem "Furious Versions" is intriguing because it exemplifies the condition of being out of place. In the poem, the son wakes up one morning as the father. Lee wakes up only to forget who he is, and he relives his father's memories of fleeing from Indonesia:

These days I waken in the used light
of someone's spent life, to discover
the birds have stripped my various names of meaning entire:
the sparrow by quarrel,
the dove by grievance.
I lie
dismantled. I feel
the hours. Do they veer
to dusk? Or dawn?
Will I rise and go
out into an American city?
Or walk down to the wilderness sea?
I might run with wife and children to the docks
to bribe an officer for our lives
and perilous passage.

Another poet I admire is Wong Phui Nam, whom I met at a poetry seminar a few years ago. Phui Nam is a Malaysian not quite at ease in his own country. In "Poem for a Birthday", the persona suffers from symptoms of cultural estrangement from the Malaysian landscape:

This then is a country where one cannot wish
to be. The spirit not given its features
festers in the flesh ...

It is from Phui Nam that I learned to be more inquisitive of the Chinese culture. There is a tinge of cultural guilt involved when I consider that as a Chinese, I know more about English and American literature than I do about the literature of the Chinese. I am comfortable with discussing the Victorian cultural values as exemplified in the works of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. However, I do not even know where to begin when it comes to Chinese literature.

I did the only thing I could – to misread. I began with misrepresentation. With what little Chinese I knew, I started reading the Tang poets in Chinese and rendered them into English, abiding by the spirit rather than the letter of their poetry. The section “Homage” in my collection is the culmination of my experimentation. I console myself with the knowledge that there is no such thing as a perfect translation. All translations misrepresent.

By paying tribute to the Tang poets, I am at least able to salvage the remnants of my cultural heritage. Strangely enough, poems such as the one below articulate some of my anxieties about my commitment to writing. The following is a poem by Li Bai about a meeting with Du Fu. Have I also translated some of my personal worries onto the poem?

A Meeting with Du Fu

Sudden upon the sinuous trail
up the mountain, where the wind
sweeps past dry throats of gorges,

I chance upon your hat
tossed among craggy slopes,
stones and dirt.

You are pacing, half-hidden,
among tall grass
that whips your shoulders.

Your clothes are tattered.
You were grateful to be away
from crowds in the city, you said.

Your eyes, sunken and sullen,
tell me you have not eaten
for days.

I see that your words
have denied you food,
and I am afraid.

After having seen *Remnants* into print, what's next? This is the question I have been asking myself for the past two years. Right now, as a Singaporean writer, I am painfully aware that my poems are written in English yet not English, Chinese yet not in Chinese, seeking to belong to Singapore yet not quite belonging. To me, a writer is not a writer unless he is sitting at his desk

working at his craft. Also, the fact that one has completed a book does not make the writing of a second book any easier. In fact, it makes it harder. I have to forget the first book in order to write the second. Every new poem and every new book must be written as if one is writing for the first time.

Many of my friends have asked me – will Singaporean literature stand on its own in the international scene? Would there be such a thing as The Great Singaporean Writer? Will there ever be a chance of a Singaporean novelist winning the Booker Prize? I do not know, even though the signs are encouraging. At the end of the day, writing is all about commitment despite the odds – that is all I know.

PERSONAL WRITE-UP

Eddie Tay was an NUS research scholar from 1999 to 2001. His research interests include the literary and cultural politics of Singapore. Currently, he is Head of English at the Singapore Institute of Commerce. He is also a lecturer for the University of London's BA English degree programme. His poetry collection, *Remnants*, was published by Ethos Books in 2001. He is currently working on his second manuscript.