Modern Singapore Poetry: an Introduction
by Grace Chia

Society in Context

To understand Singapore poetry in context, it is necessary to have an idea of Singaporean society. In 1965, Singapore became an independent nation state, divorced from British colonial powers and separated from the Malaysian Federation. It was a dot on the map. Its future seemed uncertain. The one thing it had on the plus side was a profitable seafaring port and a constant wave of migrants from the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. The indigenous Malays were a welcoming people. Arabs and people from the West flocked to the island to conduct business. There was a real buzz in Singapore commerce.

Fast forward to 2005. It is 40 years after. Singapore, an island with no natural resources, has reached a global status that defies conventional wisdom. Things work in Singapore. People are comfortable. There isn't a huge divide between the wealthy and poor. It is a microcosm of a developed country — ultramodern yet steeped in tradition. But the rules are strict. Is everyone content or is there a different story?

The key that saves Singapore from stasis is change. Because there is a sizable population that can afford to, or are resourceful enough to study or work abroad, the pool gets refilled by a wave of new migrants eager to farm the opportunities the gap leaves behind. And because the country doesn't bear a grudge against or reject the leavers, many eventually find their way back home. Others create new homes oversees, bridging dual cultures while taking the ambassadorial role and sharing what they remember best of Singapore. Longing creates nostalgia, extending the yellow brick road to wherever one is. You know you can always, and are welcomed to, go back home.

Singapore doesn't become the way it is without relentless hard work. The bedrock of our society is based on the virtue of excelling in commerce and meritocracy. But it is a virtue that too many Singaporeans take very seriously. That is fine for one who aspires to climb the social

rungs or draw bigger paycheques. But that is not the demographic most writers or poets aspire to. In Singapore, only a select few earn enough from book publishing to warrant a raised brow from the taxman. The rest of us just want our works read and heard.

The Problem with Language/s

Like any conformist society, creative writing in Singapore is a ghettoised activity perceived as either a luxury or waste of time. Why dedicate your best waking hours scribbling verses on a pad when you can be devising money-making schemes? Why spend days excruciating over a computer screen with a half-baked sentence when you can be sponging up film after film on cable TV?

The population of Singapore is circa four million people. The majority are ethnic Chinese. Legislation made English the first language of Singapore while the mother tongue, i.e., second language, is that language spoken dialectically at home — the language of our corresponding ancestors (i.e. Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakka, et al., for ethnic Chinese). That means many Singaporeans are effectively bi- or trilingual, but that doesn't translate to fluency of multi-languages.

Singaporeans are neither English nor Mandarin native speakers (or Malay, Hindi, Tamil native speakers for the non-Chinese minorities). Through the years, a pidgin English called 'Singlish' has become a street vernacular that has become a cultural and semantic signifier identifying the Singapore person but is kept at bay from media transmitters and educational institutions.

This poses a problem in the creation of Singapore literature, and for the creators themselves. Writers have to decide early on which language they are going to adopt for their works. But Singlish, like all vernaculars borne of the street, is branded with shame — good enough for the masses but a poor cousin of the Queen's English, the lingua franca we inherited.

So before the writer can pen a single word in paean to her emotions or reflections, she has to first decide on the language that best portrays her. The rest follows later: content, form, style.

The product of what a writer from Singapore produces is a pastiche of linguistic competency — writers switch modes from one language to another at home, in school, at work, in commerce, and especially, in crafting a literary piece.

Presenting the Poets

The majority of the poets in this selection are in their late twenties to thirties. Some write on the theme of leaving and returning. Others play the role of ethnographer, surveying their environs both familiar and foreign.

Wendy Gan, who has spent more than a decade away from Singapore working overseas, succinctly expresses the themes of leaving and returning ("Leaving") and of coping with the 'virtue' of excellence ("Drone"). In the poem "Map-readers", she writes of a common symptom afflicting young couples:

> We didn't marry till we had the flat
> Our postponed love sustained by hopes
> Of cherry wood doors and steel kitchen tops

Gan's writing is most powerful when she is economical with words, expressing forbearance that seems resigned to fate, but imbued with strength and poignancy that tells you to get-on-with-it. There is a cinematographic quality to her poetry, as if a short film is in progress.

Edlyn Ang's language is sometimes oblique, almost kooky. The poet-and-songwriter appears to enjoy playing with words like a trusting scientist mixing oddball elements together. She explains her method: "I'm very visual, and hypersensitive to colour, light and sound (I have perfect pitch). So I'm very much an instinctual artist." Her reading influences extend to Japanese anime and novels by writers such as Mishima Yukio, Kawabata Yasunari and Dazai Osamu, and folklores from the world over.

Bridget-Rose Lee, currently studying in Sydney, takes the role of ethnographer in the poem "This City Has No Bicycle Bells", depicting the almost warped everyday lives led by the typical Singaporean. The pressure of success is relayed here when she writes:

> Here everyone knows education is a thing of beauty but as a child who learned to pray, worship, economise, share, hope, expect and analyse, always a day before yesterday — what can I possibly say to an adult who cannot believe how few things I accomplished today…

Madeleine Lee, her career the embodiment of success, chooses instead a humbler literary alter ego. In "angkor", she is a traveller who muses that "the headless buddhas sit with equanimity, / bleeding saffron on blackened sandstone". In the poem "three images", she creates three imagist verses by taking a psychedelic trip down memory lane, waxing lyrically of nostalgia.

San Francisco-born Kristina Tom, now working in Singapore, is a dynamic mid-twenties female poet who pursues familiar themes of identity and home but does it with mature panache. She brings to the table a spray of the Bay Area literary legacy that is simply delicious to read. In "Parallax", she echoes the theme of leaving and returning when she writes: "I didn't think to walk back / until I'd flown miles away". But it is her snapshots of life's simplicities that are most striking:

> Waiting to heal, she picks at the scab
> knowing the scar will be beautiful.

Lastly, I have written "Roger", a poem of ten sections in tribute to my cousin of the same name. The history of what happened to him is laid out in the verses, so I am going to leave out explanatory notes. Similarly for those who ponder about leaving and returning home, whether home relates to country or family, there is much guilt involved — same goes for what happened to Roger.

For a society that has often been criticised for not being expressive or verbal enough, poetry is the medium of innovation for a handful of writers from a tiny island state to say what is really in our minds. Free speech is often taken for granted in other societies. In ours, it is precious, and the written page captures the battlefield of our thoughts.

Grace Chia has poetry and short stories published in *The Straits Times, SilverKris, Awareness, WOW, Di-Verse-City* (US) and the journals *Flying Inkpot* and *Stylus Poetry Journal* (Australia). She was a Guest Poet for the Austin International Poetry Festival and the Queensland Poetry Festival in 2002, and the National Young Writers Festival in Newcastle, NSW in 2003. As poet, she has collaborated on multimedia festivals in London for the Royal College of Art and the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. The runner-up of the National Poetry Slam in the 2003 Singapore Writers' Festival, Grace has received many awards from the Singapore International Foundation and the National Arts Council. She is the author of *womango* published in 1998.