

Evoking Our Shared Memories: Preserving our Heritage through Singaporean Poetry

Wet Markets Drying

(Upper Serangoon Road Market)

There were drains narrow and dramatic like arteries
Flowing vividly with blood of new slaughtered chickens
And the unruly clawing roots of vegetables carried
Soil with worms to remind us the source from where
The fruit was picked to fill our daily hungers.
Colours clashed unplanned – yellowing lumpy fat on
Dead white chicken skin, brinjals swollen shiny as
Water-plump amethysts, rubied chillies snuggled up
Close to emerald peppers propped up lazily against
A mound of pearl-and-paper-white garlic.

As we happily rubber flipped-flopped down the aisle
With dirty water flecks spotting out calves,
We threw ourselves into the all-absorbing,
Tenacious ritual of scrupulously haggling
For the last scrap of extra animal, vegetable
Or mineral per measly dollar – quite oblivious
To the rhythmic piling machines outside chewing up
The familiar, grubby world around our childhood
To spit up images big, tall, dry and shiny
Beyond the simplicity of our imaginations then.

Today we squeak down wide, pine-washed aisles
With spotless shoes dry as cling-wrapped chicken
Sure as prices fixed to discourage friendly banter.
And our children grow up certain that vegetables,
Despite biology classes, sprout from the supermarket shelves
Cleverly colour-coordinated by the same consumer experts
Market researching their cereals and sugar addictions.
How easy is it to throw the stuff away when we no longer
See it die to feed us or see the muddy effort it took
To raise leaves from a reluctant speck left in the ground.

This morning I am tired of plastic and chemical pine.
Turning my car around a too familiar street corner
I hear the bustle echoing – a little less raucous,
More subdued for its lack of unfashionable chaos.
But I have been away too long and fear soiling trousers
From the wet market floor – today, drier than memory.
Then, amidst the watered-down fecundity of farm smells,
I catch a whiff of chickens in cages, see loam drip off
Lettuce roots, hear a late hawker splash a floor clean ...
And feel my heart suddenly twist with the drying
of an old artery.

Desmond Sim

Void Deck

Where the neighbourhood wives,
After a morning at the wet market,
Sit facing the breeze
To trade snatches of gossip
About leery shopkeepers,
The local louts,
(Like the fella who's always drilling his walls –
Gives me migraine)
And that mad woman
Who throws things from her window.
With careful put-downs they
Fashion boasts, about stubborn sons,
Lazy daughters, who by some miracle or mistake
Always score well in class.
When words falter,
Gestures take over: pursed lips, rolling eyes,
Animated hands adorned by bangles of
Gold, jade, steel, string.

And children orbit around them
Laugh without diction –
Their games of tag a reassurance
That there has been no hothousing
Of who is unclean, unwashed,
Untouchable. When they break out
Into some kindergarten song,
One almost believes in a generation
Cleansed of skin-deep suspicions,
And free from the superstitions of the tongue –

And old folks sit like sages
To deploy chess pieces with ancient strategies.
In a corner, a caged bird bursts
With the song of its master's pride
And wrinkled women breathe, through
Tai-chi-tuned windpipes, the operatic melody of the air ...

All a wanton fantasy.

Eyes reveal a meeting-point
For loners and loiterers:
A sense of things reduced –
Conversations that trickle through
Brief noddings at lift landings,
Teenage rhetoric scrawled, in liquid paper,
On the stone-table chessboard,
(Where the kind used to sit)
The grandiose house-selling dreams of residents
Compacted in anonymous letterboxes;
As an afterthought, an old man pees

Under a public phone.

A place to be avoided, this,
How in its vastness it devours hours.
Little wonder then,
Why residents rush through void decks
Back to the cramped comforts of home
As if in fear of what such open space might do
To cosy minds.

Alfian Bin Sa'at

old house at ang siang hill

an unusual house this is
dreams are here before you sleep
tread softly
into the three-storeyed gloom
sit gently
in the straits-born furniture
imported from china
speak quietly
to the contemporary occupants

why are they not afraid of you
waiting for you to go
before they dislocate your intentions
so what if this is
your grandfather's house
his ghost doesn't live here anymore
your family past is
superannuated grime
which increases with time
otherwise nothing adds or subtracts
the brick and tiles
until re-development
which will greatly change
this house-that-was
dozens like it along the street
the next and the next as well

nothing much will be missed
eyes not tradition tell you this

Arthur Yap