Cha: An Asian Literary Journal

August 2009 Issue 8

Cha: An Asian Literary Journal

August 2009 Issue 8

Editors: Tammy Ho Lai-Ming, Jeff Zroback
Guest Editor: Royston Tester
Reviews Editor: Eddie Tay

茶 *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* (ISSN 1999-5032)
is the first Hong Kong-based English online literary publication
founded in November 2007. www.asiancha.com

CONTENTS

Some Other Life

The current issue of *Cha* features a review of Todd Swift's latest poetry collection, *Seaway: New and Selected Poetry*. One of the poems in the book, "Kanada Post", offers this meditation on the expatriate experience.

I remember some other life as if it's mine.
My country has become a stamp, weather,
And what my mother says, over the phone.

As all the editors of *Cha* currently find themselves living outside of their home countries, we thought it may be interesting if we each wrote our individual responses to Swift's lines. Below you will find these responses.

Jeff

I have been thinking about home a lot over the last few weeks. I guess you tend to do this when you are travelling, and the idea of home is necessarily fluid. Every few days you are faced with the prospect of finding a new place to lay your backpack (an undersized tent, an antiseptic hostel, the bed and breakfast with the dictatorial landlady), learning new streets, and locating a restaurant at 10 o'clock at night. And then after two weeks and a string of temporary domiciles, you return to your actual home—although if you are an expat, return to your place of residence is more like it. Even in your own house, you discover the idea of home is fluid.

Stepping off the train last week at St Pancras station, being enveloped by London's familiar unfamiliarity, I felt the ambiguity of home very strongly. I found a strange comfort in the scheduled tube station closures and obscene ticket prices, but I was still new enough to the city to be surprised by them. And I recalled similar experiences I had had while living elsewhere. Once while teaching in Korea, I had taken a ferry from Pusan to Fukoka in Japan for a brief trip. Despite having a perfectly fine time on my vacation, I was inexplicably relieved when I had set foot on the ferry back to the Hermit Kingdom; I almost enjoyed being rudely shoved by

middle-aged Korean women, was at ease among men draining soju bottles. Boisterous Korea seemed much more like home than ordered Japan. But of course it wasn't home; no one will ever confuse the Republic of Korea with Canada.

Perhaps it was because I was consumed by these thoughts that I was so taken by the quote by Swift, a fellow Canadian: "I remember some other life as if it's mine. / My country has become a stamp, weather, / And what my mother says, over the phone." I think that these lines offer some of the most concise and insightful I have read on the expat experience. Perhaps as a Canadian myself, his lines struck me particularly hard: there have been times that I too felt that the second largest country in the world had been reduced to a postage stamp, remembered Canada's climate only through discussions of unseasonal weather with my mother. But the power of Swift's words lies in their universality, as much as their Canadianness. I am sure they would resonate with expatriates from anywhere. They certainly did with my co-editor.

She seemed to experience the poem in a different way than I did. As someone who has been an expat for a number of years, I share the slight resignation in Swift's tone, a sense that this disconnection from his homeland has become a matter of fact, the normal order of things. But my co-editor, who has been living abroad for a much shorter time, appeared to feel his words more directly, more poignantly. Although in the form of a shipping invoice instead of a postage stamp, her city's post mark was very tangible; it decorated the box she received from home just last week.

Tammy

Last week, I received a parcel from my family in Hong Kong. It is the fourth they have sent me; and it is the biggest by far. The contents were nothing extravagant: some snacks, Chinese noodles, dresses, stockings, letters, pencils. Really, it was just an assortment of items my family could easily afford to lose in the post. But I would have been devastated if they had been lost. I was overjoyed for days after the box arrived. They have not forgotten me, I thought.

Although I have only been living in London for about a year, to my consternation I have started to slowly disremember life in Hong Kong. I am now used to the inconvenience of the public transport here, even expect it. I cannot recall exactly the taste of curry fish balls from street stalls. I wonder if my old bunk bed in my parents' home still smells the same: of mothballs, of ancient stuffed animals. Perhaps they have stored junk on it: broken electrical appliances, redundant pillows. Where did I hide my old notebooks?

This brings me back to Todd Swift's lines "My country has become a stamp, weather, / And what my mother says, over the phone." However, there were no actual stamps on the parcels and I do not talk to my mom over the phone (we use MSN messenger). But there is weather, drastically different from that of London. I love to hear news of Hong Kong's sticky summer. Has this all become "some other life", as Swift says in his poem?

Eddie

When I first arrived several years ago, I thought I would never get used to Hong Kong, with all those pushy elbows and shoulders in the MTR. And what kind of abbreviation is "MTR" anyway? I kept thinking that the "R" had been misplaced. In Singapore, the subway is called the MRT.

Yet my five-year-old son enjoys riding on minibuses (which are ubiquitous in Hong Kong) and the MTR. He doesn't talk about the MRT the way he used to, and he's picking up Cantonese. My daughter is coming into the world at the end of this month. She will, in all likelihood, spend her formative years in Hong Kong as well.

I am beginning to think that Singapore and Hong Kong are to me what Hong Kong and Singapore will be to my children. They might grow up thinking that the MRT in Singapore is the subway with its "R" misplaced.

Royston

What is a migrant qualified to say? It's an anxiety that besets many the creative person too, those who have up-anchored (up-ended?) and found another country…or a series of them. Where, in fact, is home—and does

it even matter? This summer in Beijing—a city I have come to adopt—midway through a short story, "Fatty Goes To China", I came to an abrupt and frustrating halt. Writer's block, homesickness, midlife crisis: these are not concepts I believe in. There is always something going on beneath the surface. You learn a wily stoicism.

I needed a pilgrimage. On a sultry July morning, I trekked across this city to the National Library of China where I found, miraculously, an English copy of Flannery O'Connor's *Mystery and Manners*. Here was a quirky, "grotesque" American author who never strayed far from her mother and the peacocks of her rural Georgia home. A writer's country, she said, is "the region that most immediately surrounds him…with its body of manners, that he knows well enough to employ."

How well do we know where we are? This, I think, is Todd Swift's question too. With terror that I might know nothing of Beijing, let alone China, I rather blindly drifted into the woodland behind the imposing library and came upon a lake and adjacent fishing pond. Several days later—"Fatty" sputtering still—I cashed in my hundred yuan library card and, with a Chinese friend and angler, returned to the tree-encircled watering hole. We sat there, like ducks, for hours in the torpid heat contemplating an unbobbing float, retrieving bare hook after bare hook—such a mysterious disappearing bait! Two elderly passersby—a husband and wife, serious fishermen both—had a go and fared no better.

After an entire afternoon (and between humorous exchanges with our new friends) Lei once again idly, resignedly, pulled in the line. This time to discover a tiny fish wriggling, but hooked in its belly rather than lip. Meandering past, no doubt. We looked at one another in astonishment: the behooked, Lei and I, those elderly passersby. Couldn't we even fish properly? How we laughed. For his part, our tiddler chuckled off the barb and swam away. Catch of the day, at the back of the National Library of China.

As Todd Swift puts it, us migrants, travellers, may have only stamps, weather and, if we're lucky, mother calls…as passports. We may have

Rilke in our ears, "this is the way we live, forever leaving". Yet somewhere between a fish hook in the gut and wisdom from some peacock-ruffled spinster in Georgia, there lies a country as home as it is frightening, seductive and unpredictable.

Another life indeed. A place where you can finish even a "Fatty" story. And for all its unanswered questions, this existence is a match for "some other life…over the phone". Defined by our "absence" from them, both are lives we crave and fear, as does Swift, betwixt and between. We find a sanctuary of our own devising, I suspect—the difficulty, as Swift implies, is whether we can recognize a "Kanada" when it comes at us sideways, as it so often does.

Home. All ours to write about…and certainly not a catch.

Jeff Zroback, Tammy Ho, Eddie Tay and Royston Tester / Editors and Guest Editor
Cha
18 August, 2009

Two Poems *by* Lillian Kwok

Departure

Here is the hot country, remember it.
Here is the pen where the chickens ran.
We killed them ourselves—
folded the wings back
grabbed the neck
and cut the jugular vein.
We drained the blood into a pan
and when it coagulated
we cut it in squares
and ate it like Jell-O.

Here are the legends, here is how you repeat them.
Here is the mountain where they grow the sweetest tea in the world.
Remember the taste of it.
Remember the sting of ginger,
the way to peel a lichee,
the rotting smell of durian.
Remember you can never go back.
Remember sitting on an orange crate
in a dusty Chinatown
chewing dried cuttlefish.

Elegy for an Old Man

Do you know, dead man, that you meant nothing to these islands?
Your death had not the least effect on the way the wind blows sweetly
here or on the clearness of the sea. The tourists still come in droves
and they don't notice the difference, the deficiency in their paradise.
Who misses your slow, shuffling steps? There are a hundred old men
to take your place, who are even now counting down to their deaths
as they hobble up Kapiolani Avenue. They all look like you. They
sleep curled on a tatami mat and leave their slippers outside their doors
at night, like you did. Here, you were silent and no one knew you.
Thirty years in this country and just a handful of English words.
I could never remember how to pronounce your name or write it out
in your twisting language. I never knew if you loved this country.
After all, it is an imported paradise, mapped out, stretched into place.
After all, they shipped in the sand, the palm trees, and the prostitutes
who walk the night streets of Waikiki. People die here without seeing
their native lands one last time. The ocean watches it all with placid,
dumb eyes. Here, old man—where the Filipina women smoke cigarettes
on the lanais—here, you saw me leave my tiny baby footsteps on this land.
You sat me on your lap and fed me Portuguese egg tarts, and your wife wove
hibiscus and plumeria flowers in my hair. I was crown princess of the islands
and you were my throne as I napped in the sea breeze. Yet, they tell me
you ranted and raved and slapped the maids, that you belted your children
and abused your wife. But by the time the years got to me, they got to you
and turned you back into a child, into a paper-man, whose eyes drooped
lower and lower like upside down crescent moons. Now that you're ashes
in a mausoleum, we eat banquets in your name at your favorite restaurant.
We shout at each other in our raucous language and we take up the entire
banquet hall. You used to look so surprised that we all came from you.

Four Translated Poems *by* Patrick Donnelly *and* Stephen D. Miller

SENT TO ÔE SUKEKUNI WHEN THE MOON WAS BRIGHT ON THE FIFTEENTH OF THE SECOND MONTH

the moon of evening
hid
behind the mountain edge

but the bright
resonance—
O, it leaves behind!

— Anonymous

Goshûishû 1183

yama no ha ni
irinishi yowa no
tsuki naredo
nagori wa mata ni
sayakekarikeri

By Buddhist tradition, the Buddha's passage into final Nirvana took place on a full-moon night on his eightieth birthday. Many Buddhists commemorate the event on the day of the full moon in February, or the fifteenth of February.

ON SEEING A SCREEN PAINTING OF A PRIEST SAILING INTO THE WEST FROM THE WESTERN GATE OF TENNÔ-JI

your voice singing

amida butsu

as your oar?

to row away

across the sea
of sorrow?

— Minamoto no Toshiyori no Ason

Kin'yôshû 647/691

amida bu to
tonauru koe o
kaji ni te ya
kurushiki umi o
kogihanaruran

Commentaries refer to a ceremony or contemplative practice, possibly accompanied by chanting, in which people would gather (probably at the spring and autumn equinoxes) to contemplate the sun as it sank in the direction of Amida's Western Paradise. "Amida butsu" is a shortened version of the mantra *namu amida butsu*, used by Amida's devotees. This poem is by the compiler of the *Kin'yôshû*, the fifth imperial anthology.

WRITTEN WHEN THE AUTHOR SAW OIL OOZING OUT OF THE EARTH at Tanikumi in Mino, while making pilgrimage to the thirty-three sacred places of Kannon

because the Buddha
appeared as a shining
on the earth

this lamp too
has never
gone dark

— Former Grand Archbishop Kakuchû

Senzaishû 1208/1211

yo o terasu
hotoke no shirushi
arikereba
mada tomoshibi mo
kienu narikeri

musn't signs
of the grudge they bore
be seen in the heavens?

over "throw-the-old-woman-away" mountain
moonlight shines

— Fujiwara no Atsunaka

Senzaishû 1241/1244

uramikeru
keshiki ya sora ni
mietsuran
obasuteyama o
terasu tsukikage

The poem refers to the fact that old women were abandoned at Mt. Obasute in Japan (literally, "throw old woman away mountain"). It also subtly refers to the Buddha's maternal aunt, referred to in the "Fortitude" chapter of the Lotus Sutra, whose name is left out when the Buddha says who shall attain supreme enlightenment. After this omission—in response to the aunt gazing at the Buddha fixedly—he promises her that she will indeed achieve buddhahood in an age to come.

NOTES ON THE POEMS, AUTHORS & TRANSLATIONS

Between the early 10th century and the 15th century, the Japanese emperors ordered the compilation of twenty-one anthologies of poetry, each of which contained anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand poems. These translations are of Buddhist-themed poems (*shakkyô-ka*)

from the *Goshûishû*(1086), *Kin'yôshû* (1124 - 1127), and *Senzaishû* (1183 - 1188), respectively the fourth, fifth and seventh anthologies.

Minamoto no Toshiyori no Ason (also known as Minamoto no Shunrai) was an active and influential *waka* poet from the middle of the eleventh to the beginning of the twelfth centuries. He participated in numerous poetry competitions at the Heian court, compiled the fifth imperial poetry anthology, produced an influential private collection of poems (more than twice as long as the imperial poetry anthology he compiled), and was partly responsible (along with his father) for introducing a new descriptive style to the writing of court poetry.

Former Grand Archbishop Kakuchû was born in 1118 and died in 1177. He became the Grand Abbot of Enryaku-ji Temple of the Tendai sect of Japanese Buddhism and lived on Mt. Hiei near present-day Kyôto. Twelve of his poems are included in the imperial poetry anthologies.

Fujiwara no Atsunaka was a *waka* poet during the second half of the Heian period (794 - 1185). He has three poems in the imperial poetry anthologies.

Most of the poets in the imperial antholgies, even the poet-priests, were connected in some way either to the aristocracy or the imperial court, and would have lived in or near the capital Kyoto, then called Heian-kyô.

Buddhism came to Japan in the sixth century, but because it was at first felt that literary pursuits and Buddhism might be mutually exclusive, it was several hundred years before poems began to be written on Buddhist themes. Once the conceptual barriers were surmounted, the writing of poems, especially Buddhist poems, actually developed into a recognized path to enlightenment. Gradually such poems began to be included in the imperial anthologies.

The compilers of the anthologies, in addition to arranging the poems under thematic headings like seasons, love, grief, travel, etc., gave many poems a short prose preface. These prefaces, which addressed the poems' thematic content or the occasions of their composition, are now considered aesthetically inseparable from the poems. In our translations, to join

preface to poem in a way analogous to English poetry, we've presented prefaces as titles.

The Japanese originals of these poems (like most poems in the imperial anthologies) are waka, the thirty-one-syllable form that was primary in Japanese poetics for over a millennium.

Notes Outside your Window *by* Gillian Sze

Love arrives and dies in all disguises
-Michael Ondaatje

I looked up at your window,
(so bright-eyed, poised and observant)
harmless
until you walked past its gaze.

How I wished I could mistake you for a stranger.

I watched the familiar bones of your hand
cup somebody else's yawn.

An ugly mouth with no right.
Those lips know no luck.

Then the window blinked.
A curtain swished a floral face:

two hanging pots for eyes,
their falling tendrils linked into a nose

the orchid on a table, a certain smile.

Two Haiku Sequences *by* Belle Ling Hoi Ching

Adventure in the countryside

Soles rasp mud, stench
flinches, bubbles subdivided—
footprints are carved.

Stunk curds, caked in milk jars,
tempt no one; flies discuss—
poo here.

Red berries—bread-pressed, blush
leaks, starry stains in the starless
night—shy in my palm.

Two unlidded bottles, slanted,
necks-clung: liquids linger,
exchanging secrets.

Crooked fingers on crossed
legs convulse in chill—
I, as Lotus, bloom on futon.

Catch the dark with sparks—
fireflies—outspread a sparkling net—
are the most artistic hunters.

A Sketch of Nihon

1.
Ginkaku-ji [1] perches under the moon.

Lanterns, tracking spirits,
ruminate in mantra's croon.

2.
Dense bamboo woods,
black heads subside,
breath deposits.

3.
Matcha [2], thick,
muddles incense. Temple bell strikes,
matcha ripples, pushes incense up.

4.
Sakura's [3] minor which Koto
plucks burdens history
with no melancholy.

5.
Sushi:
pressed lumps, gapless,
A neat craft.

6.
Fuji refines snow in smoke
Hot springs, under Fuji, remind
us of being nude in water.

7.
Geishas' snow-white cosmetic
cannot cover their blood-red lips.
Their time is man's.

8.
Pink blossoms scatter—
Nihon, a petalled mosaic,
is too beautiful to complete.

[1] Ginkaku-ji is the "Temple of the Silver Pavilion," a Buddhist temple in the Sakyo ward of Kyoto, Japan.
[2] Matcha is a fine, powdered green tea used in the Japanese tea ceremony.
[3] Sakura is the name of a traditional Japanese folk song depicting Spring.

Shenzhen, Three Times *by* Steven Schroeder

1. the torch, in the end

Sticky flags make faces in the crowd
an ocean of red laced with yellow
stars, every head that bows or nods a flag

waving. Every parade makes its own
army, and flags underfoot the day after
this one are reminders that an army
rarely knows what it is walking on.

A week after they have fallen, they are
gone. Their not being there is a sign.

Flags take place as though they have always
been in it, but in the end women on their knees
scrape remnants off paving stones
so no one will walk on the flag without thinking.

2. the calisthenics of rain

When they tell me old men
who use big brushes
to write in water
on public walkways
do it for exercise, I am astounded
at the calisthenics of rain.

Old men copy ancient poems
passersby know by heart
in delicate calligraphy
that will last until water
turns to air under the influence
of time and sun. Rain

writes new poems
in furious lines
that saturate the world
leave traces after floods
that remain on the tips of our tongues
though no one can say what they mean.

3. immersion

This city is
an old Baptist
preacher who insists
you must be buried
in living water
when it rains.

And here, to be sure,
you must do it over
and over and over

again until you're
shouting Hallelujah
and praying for
a break in the clouds
so you can see the light.

Shenzhen, Guangdong, Spring 2008

Of the Moth *by* Larry Lefkowitz

Of the great green gossamer moth
I will tell this once
Of the great green gossamer moth
suffusing the night with jade
As I, motionless
Under slowly beating wings
Wonder at the strangeness of it all
Wishing I were elsewhere
Yet held by that buffeting wind
Which prevents scrutiny of the moth
Leaving me satisfied with perfumed jade

Two Orchard Poems *by* David C.E. Tneh

Orchard Memories
(For grandfather)

Nonchalantly,
you walked with a watering hose
to shower the lime trees of your
precious toil. Trudging the cut slopes,
you drag the hose up the earth,
tugging the rubber and its
leaky joints that slowly uncoil
as you pull it up-hill.
The leaky tap under the zinc shed
strains to provide the pressure and
precious water drips from it,
forming a small puddle below the pipe.
Occasionally a spray of water
would shower the air.
A cold white mist would linger,
spectre-like, a multicolour streak.
Then, a phosphorescent of hues
would coat the sun's rays and
a bizarre gliding spectrum
would coat my eyes,
like a drop of colour in clear water.
A tincture of memories
made of water, light, and
the evening sun.

Orchard Dreams
(For grandmother)

My mothers' mother
always dresses in a floral sarong.
She tends to her ducks and lime trees
and feeds the loud birds with squashed snails
thrown over the makeshift shack with wire
fencing.

I would pace quietly behind,
dragging the long brown hose, watching her
showering her cherished lime trees while the
sound
of howling of dogs and jungle fowl fill the jungle
landscape.
On quiet evenings after the afternoon rains, she
would
stroll around her garden with a straw hat and
clippers.
Moving slowly among the various jambu trees
with a brown rattan basket,
she was silent. And so was I.
As the evening smoke sets in
and the sun wilts away,
her frail body rests on a rattan chair
while her deep eyes would gaze at her orchard.
I would hear her move again,
walking down the cement steps
and into the kitchen,
lighting the charcoal stove
in the sunset hours
of the smokey evening.

("Orchard Dreams" was first published in *Asiatic*, June 2009)

Two Poems *by* Ng Yi-Sheng

Wang Shi, or The Traitor's Wife

Should your word betray the Emperor,
out of envy, out of empathy for Mongols,

may a roadside hawker, furious at the news,
name us as two strips of dough;

cast us in a vat of oil, all screaming,
tell the hungry clustered by the green

forbidden walls: "Behold the lovers
seared in fat,

one sweaty ligament of skin," then fish us out
to cut our necks in twain,

to plunge in broth or soya milk. O may
the porous pockets of our flesh

absorb the fluid, may our error feed
the mouths of ages, drown the belly's anger,

may your guilt be never swallowed
cold or separate from my love.

(Note: The Song Dynasty official Qin Hui (1090-1155) and his wife Wang Shi (sometimes known as Lady Wang) are widely reviled as traitors, as they were responsible for the execution of the Chinese military hero and poet Yue Fei.)

The Queen of the Night

My mother begins the theme
to Shanghai Tan. I *bum-bum-bum*
my way along with her. Somewhere
somehow this becomes The Magic Flute.
She is my counterpoint.
My father drives through darkness.
I play the waiting game:
soon she will laugh,
break out of Cantonese into silence,
business English.
We pass the fairground lights.
I lose the thread: I do not truly love the opera.
That smile upon her face, my mother
conquers now the second verse, the third.
My father turns a corner,
hits a button, infrareds the gates.
The crashing waves, the rushing waves.
My mother finishes,
and we're home.

Me Rabbit *by* Les Wicks

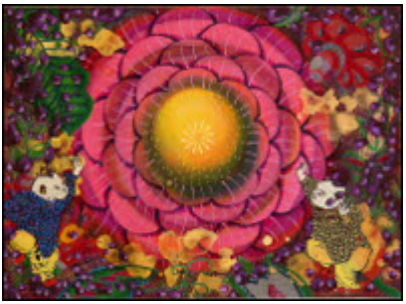
I forgot to be dirty.
In brocade & lemonade we courtiers must undress under sun,
yet another new life
new hands, hers strong from the gym I glide underneath
that smile while a gps sleeps in a corner snugged in cardboard.

The river wheezes.
Didn't think I had it in me
stupid love
our words are wigs -
in this cider light
they slip.

I do this for a living. Live
out of habit. Habitually life
fails to cooperate
& I am left standing penless in this teary wonder
that sparks green at the hem of my reach.

Two Poems *by* Luisa A. Igloria

Reptilian Chant #2



As a child I swung in a hammock
beneath two breasts. As a child
I leaned on the back of my father.

As a child I learned
the names for mother.

Then I sought the arms of desire.
Then I fled the roof and the floor's crust
of burned rice.

I hung my skirts on the doorpost.
I filled a gourd with water.
I walked in the direction of the sun.

(This poem is inspired by Amy Cheng's painting "The God Approaches"; Amy Cheng and Luisa Igloria began an informal painting-poetry collaboration after they met at a Ragdale Foundation residency two years ago.)

Who Is The Mother

of the severed
hibiscus heads
the children

pounded to a pulp
on the sidewalk,
those hot summers
when water

and dishwashing
detergent
were simply
not enough

for the bubbles
they desired?
Green-smelling,
prismatic,

lifting too
quickly away,
waving goodbye
and goodbye.

(This poem is inspired by Amy Cheng's painting "A Baiana Ana".)

Four Poems *by* Rohith Sundararaman

How To Behave At A Traffic Signal

As your car strands itself
before a red light, prepare
your fingers. Flex them. Curl
one set around the knob
and keep rolling like you
were winding up a clock.
Palms will press against
the window. Some will tap
the glass as if they were patting
the back of a choking person,
gentle and insistent till they get

the answer of life. Others will
half-cup their fingers over either
eyebrows in such a manner
that the nails of both hands
touch each other, producing
a silent music to the slow blink
of their eyes. But do not move
your head. Keep staring straight
at the road like it would disappear
in a moment of distraction. Train
your ears to catch the throb
and thump of the music from the back
of the car. If other sounds intrude, breathe
deeply. Count till a hundred and feel
the steering wheel peel away
from your hands. When images of old
women hobble across the windscreen,
read safety instructions. Turn till you find
the page on how to secure the seatbelt
across your heart as you plow into an accident
of lives. Fasten those words and lurch away
from the light. Adjust your rearview mirror
and slowly roll down the windows till half.
Now feel the air hit you.

Visiting Hours

The sky is turgid-black, a sulk
before dawn. The platform is near
empty, its tiled surface layered
by a thin wafer of water. A man
in orange overalls works under
the hazy glow of neon lights, his

mop a slush forest of bristles
nudging water over the edge.
A child in a green parka squishes
his way towards his grandfather,
who is sitting on a marble bench.
A small black carry-bag rests on
his lap, his fingers wrapped limp
around the handle. The boy climbs
up to sit by his grandfather, his feet
hovering over the ground. He says
something to the grandfather, who
then slips an arm over the boy's
shoulder. All the water has been
pushed over, and they lay waiting
between grooves of the rails. The man
removes his overall and scrunches it
under the armpit. The boy leans onto
his grandfather in his sleep, barely no-
ticing trembles that precedes the train.

Mountain Scenes

It is summer, the trees dirt-
brown flecked with green.
The mountain seems to go
nowhere, its swathe of trail
skin cracking into pebbles.
The slow incline to the top
is punctuated by sudden heaves
of dead gray rocks normally
seen as carefully wedged
upturned bowls, its content

guarded by hovering spit
of a frothy stream. But now,
they are parched reminders
of a secret self, a ledge for
prey and its kneeling cougar.
And as the sky burns up
the tree-line before turning
it ashen, trickles of blood puddle
to the beats of a sibilant night.

How We Found The Sparrow

My father reached out into
the crevice over our balcony,
a tremble running through

his flat-footed stool as the weight
of his self trickled down right knee
and under; his left leg inching airwards

like being drawn by strings. I squatted
next to the stool, the back of my neck
glued to the shoulders while my vision

followed his face – eyes crunched to nose
flare after lips sealed, all moving as if being
sucked into a vortex in middle. Then, they

squirt back like a wave scattered them
straight before a smile skirts around
the edges of his mouth, his hand retreating

from the dark cove above in form of a loose

fist which opens to show a boll of brown
cotton with two legs and mustard eyes, beaks

splitting to faint songs of a flock in the sky.

Two Poems *by* Vaughan Rapatahana

Xi'an Times

hellacious
black,
the colour,
of skies,

season
  indeterminate…

it might be Spring:

one would
never
know.

(they kept the weather under wraps.)

those
thin
coal-inspired
flecks,

        up

snorted ^
frozen nostrils,

as one
cycled
on icicled
days,

a reminder
of what might be

should
the penumbra
ever
wink
enough

to show
the scrawny butts,
shared sputum,
grafted
solid
to
snapped
pavement.

(they billed us automatic heating.)

& when
the bike
was pinched,
I stumbled
the mire,

feeling my way
myopic,

never sure
where
Xi'an
went,

where it wanted
to
go.

New Territory English

Kwok Li
    dozzzes,

bushy head d
        r
        o
          o
            p
              e
                d,
would not matter
awake:

knows no more,
cares
even
less.

some
  other
    gweilo

always

glibs & goes,

while

Shakespeare

never

came at all.

Mr Pang –

deskbound –

dreams
    downs
        t
        a
        i
        r
        s,

new N.E.T
    needed:

(so what)

only

his

roses
on a windowsill

in
Wan Chai

slip
^ his defences.

r
i i
asp ng
panel chair
can't
proply
pronounce
properly

&
Kwok Li
still
snoozes
any way.

no
one
uses English

here

no
one
ever
will.

new territory 1,
english 0

Two Poems *by* Divya Rajan

Factory Girls

The rules say, once in four hours,
so we, the ladies from the country
don't drink water. We wait to pee,
the stopwatch waiting to go tick.
The rules say, not more than ten minutes
in the bathroom total. So we sign in
when we enter and sign out,
when we leave. Ten minutes total.
Our minds and hearts lighter, after.
Sometimes we don't pee.
We take the pee- break
to peek out of the windows
up the narrow bathrooms, devouring
odors of acid salts and chimney fumes
sprinkled oddly with desiccated leaves
borne by acacias that might be still living
a mile away. From behind glass frames, scarred

with moth- like mausoleum fires, we
pore at tall steel buildings, megaliths
with stretched spines,
new ones preceding the old.
They kiss the sky with corroded lips
the shade of jaded gray.
They kiss and make love,
the dark fumes rising,
the smell dissipating, enveloping
skies that'll never be auburn again.
We see no stars in the gray spread,
no clouds. The sun, we cup
in our timid fists, let sprout, and sneak
into the work zone where we roll
tobacco leaves into origami cigars.
The inspector can tell
the leaves from right to left.
We try to be fast. We work hard
to kill people we don't know.
The ones who can afford
to die.

ganesha speaks

> "For those who believe, an explanation
> is unnecessary.
> For those, who don´t believe, an explanation
> is impossible."
> - St. Bernadette of Lourdes

the last time he was fed, he sucked up
all the milk little by little and it was all over
the news, milk cans disappeared like wild

storms in Sundarbans, skeptics breathed hard,
laughed at this mumbo- jumbo talk about ganesha
coming alive in temples and pooja rooms,
ever heard of capillary action, they winced
and sighed, oh these people, they can be so
utterly gullible and ganesha stopped drinking milk,
he didn't care a damn about the negative
attention, his benevolent belly craved for orange
pedhas, preferably stuffed with saline, roasted almonds,
and pedhas disappeared from devotees' carefully
laid silver thalis, his playful trunk swished in a jiffy
neatly lined pedhas and his dove eyes screamed peace, they
sang a song of six pence to believers who believed
and the skeptics didn't hear a ring, ever heard of faith?

Paintings *by* Amy Cheng

"Telescoped" is the (online) cover image of issue#8 of *Cha*

http://www.asiancha.com/issue/8/amycheng

The Skin is the Enemy *by* Nikesh Murali

She waited for him, scratching her arms, at dusk.

She had never had a man. No man would make love to her while her skin peeled away and floated in the air like parachutes over Normandy.

This one was different. He was keen.

She was honest on the dating site: *Have skin disorder. Am lonely. Need company.*

He had responded: *I am lonely too. Everyone shuns me.*

She woke up early that day and sat scratching on the bed for half an hour before heading off to the kitchen for breakfast.

While washing dishes, she caught a sympathetic smile from the lady next door who was pruning her roses.

"How pretty they look without their unwanted bits," she shouted over the fence.

She listened to old vinyl records, and for a few hours Mozart replaced the sound of nails scraping against her inflamed dermis.

She cleaned her wounds and watched a game show at midday, the one where the host never failed to shout, "Have we got a winner or what?" every time he picked a busty blonde from the audience.

She had pumpkin quiche for lunch and spent more time playing with the pastry than actually eating it. They always looked unappetizing once the top layer was removed.

She bathed in a tub filled with special minerals and once she had dried off, she smeared herself with gel to calm her skin. She put on a see-through cotton skirt and shirt, and checked her figure in the mirror. She powdered her tomato red skin and wore non-allergenic lipstick made from vegetable extracts. And finally, she said a little prayer to the silence in the house.

She waited for him at the doorstep in the approaching night.

Just as the title music from a fifteen-year-old soap opera came on the television sets in the neighbourhood, a tall figure holding a bouquet opened the gate and stepped into the yard.

She stopped breathing and listened to the beating of her heart.

He hesitated and shifted the flowers to his other hand.

She heard him scratching, and she smiled.

Pebbles *by* O Thiam Chin

I was once in love with a boy who was a bird. He had a shiny beak for a nose, a pair of wings for arms, and a body covered with soft cream and brown feathers. We were in Primary Four and he sat next to me in class. My classmates liked to call him ugly names, pushed him around, plucking feathers off his body, poking him with sharpened pencils. To me, he was the most beautiful creature I have ever set my eyes on.

So I drew a picture of him, and passed it to him during English class. He looked at it, and opened his beak, like he was smiling. His eyes shined as bright as polished stones, and he fluttered his wings in delight. My heart jumped in my chest, like a sparrow skipping. I drew him more pictures, and he in return, gave me small, pretty pebbles that he had found. I still have them with me, in a jar.

During recess, we would stay away from the school fields, where the boys played soccer and the girls tested their agility with zero-point, with ropes made of rubber bands, and lie under a mango tree and eat the snacks from our lunchboxes. I usually had fried rice with egg or a strawberry jam sandwich, while he had snails, earthworms and some berries. Sometimes, when I felt more daring, I would feed the slimy, wiggling earthworm into

his beak and he would tilt his head, swallowing them alive.

We would talk about our adventures, mine on land and his in the sky. I would tell him about stray cats with drooping bellies, a Hello Kitty hairclip I got for my birthday, and the delicious spring rolls my mother made, and he would regale me with amazing stories of trees that looked like broccoli from above, of him brushing his body against the underside of planes, and of rivers that unspooled like silvery ribbons. The pebbles that he had gotten me were from all the places he had been, near and far.

I asked him what flying was like, how it felt to be so high up in the sky, if the air cold. He said in a few years time, when his wings are much stronger, he would bring me up and I would know first-hand. He even gave me a feather as a seal of his promise.

Then one day, he stopped coming to school. Some said he was shot down by the officers of the Environment Agency who were acting on a complaint about stray birds attacking passersby. Others said he had migrated with his family further up north, where the climate was warmer, and there was an abundance of food.

I never heard from him again. Some nights, when I can't sleep, I take out the jar of pebbles and conjure up his sweet sing-song voice from my memory, taking flight with him, soaring into the sky.

Parable *by* Christopher Luppi

Over the weekend I hear the sound of a bulldozer and hammers behind the back wall and I pull myself up high enough to see over the top. A clapboard tin-roofed shack is going up about twenty-five yards back. This usually means some kind of construction is about to begin … The shack the first of many, I presume, to house the illegal Cambodian laborers who will fight back the jungle, dig deep, and lay concrete foundations for upcoming *Moo Ban*s, gated communities of identical houses to shelter Thailand's fast growing upper middle-class. I've been meaning to replace the barbed wire that tops the back wall for some time now and figure since we'll soon have a small village just over the wall I should do so sooner rather than later.

Before I begin stretching the wire, I have to jump the wall into the back field and cut some of the vines that have crept up into the canopy of the mango trees, smothering them it seems. About five minutes in, standing knee high in reeds, I suddenly begin to itch like mad, the lower halves of my legs, from the knee down, on fire. I hurry over the wall, run inside, drop my pants and head for the bathroom. My legs are covered in a sort of fuzz; some kind of spore that digs itself in like fiberglass insulation. The water isn't helping. I'm on fire.

Na comes in and takes one look. "Wait," she says and walks quickly out the back. Less than a minute later she returns with a clump of green leaves that she is mashing in her hands. "Give me your leg." She rubs the mashed green leaves over my legs, one at a time, squeezing juice from them, massaging it into my calves. The burning itch goes away almost instantly and I breathe heavily and shudder with relief. "What is that?" I ask. "Leaf from tree outside," she answers with a smile. "Work, *mai*?"

"Yes."

"My mother teach me. This tree for this," she says motioning at my red

legs with her face.

I get back out and stretch the barbed wire to replace the pieces that have fallen away with time. I can do this from the inside of the wall and don't have to worry about the dangerous botany outside. I tend to the task knowing full well that anyone who wants to get through it can and will, or could just as easily cross a neighbor's back wall, or come over mine via the mango trees that hang over it. But I know I will feel better with it there than with it not. Just as I'm finishing the job my eyes pick up some movement around the newly built shack and I focus through the head high greenery; sitting with his back to me, next to the shack, is an old monk. Weather-worn and sun-bleached saffron robes are hung over some nearby shrubs to dry. He appears to be in meditation. This is curious… perhaps there will be no laborer's camp after all.

... and so the old monk, his quarters having been humbly constructed, settled into his solitary existence of silent mediation. On the third day, hearing a sound of clipping and snipping from the wall behind him, that which separated his quiet place of reflection from the village of sense fulfilling laymen and women, he turned to see the face of a man stringing protective wire between the two places. And to himself he smiled, in a way imperceptible to the eye, and then turned back, focused again on the empty field before him, breathing deeply and knowing that he had chosen wisely...

This morning, coffee. *Kenny Loggins' December*, a Christmas special, is on the TV and I can't not watch it. At least for a few minutes. Kenny and Olivia Newton John sing "Have yourself a very merry Christmas" on a stage set to look like a cozy New England living room, fire in the background, stockings hanging from the oak mantle, a Christmas tree. The studio audience, hand picked to ensure that not one of them has any distinguishing characteristics of any sort—no unconventional haircuts or prominent noses or bushy eyebrows or disproportioned ears—all sit, hands folded on laps, contented smiles. Kenny and Olivia look each other in the eye and then turn to look into the camera, to make that connection

with me, the viewer, to let me know that it's OK and it's a warm time, a special time, a time for family and quiet chats and joy and love and holiday cheer. And then they go back to the fireplace where they are joined by Kenny's wife and famous country music star Clint Black and his wife and they all start talking about the first time they bought someone a gift, because Christmas is about giving, not receiving, and they're all chatting away, softly, sitting on two sofas facing each other, and it's all so warm and right and just as it should be and I feel as if I am right there with them.

Kenny MCs, his adoring wife at his side nodding and laughing where appropriate. Olivia talks of her struggle with cancer and how through that struggle she was given the gift of time and used it to hand paint cards for those she loves and everyone nods and smiles and approves and then Clint chimes in, talks about how one of his favorite gifts ever was a flossing tool from his wife because he'd always had a hard time flossing with the regular floss and this gift, though humble, showed how much his wife understood him and how thoughtful she was. Then Clint goes on to talk about the imagery of Christmas, the tree, he says, originating from an ancient stage play in which the director used a small pine to represent the garden of Eden, and the wreath a representation of the crown of thorns worn by Jesus on the cross, the red berries there to represent the droplets of blood drawn from the head of Jesus, and this brings the nods and *uh huh*s and *Yes, it is such a special times* and we all come to remember, together in that room with Clint and Kenny, their wives, and Olivia, that Jesus, in fact, *is* the reason for the season.

Two happily married couples, well into middle age, practically sexless, there to represent to all of us the power and the sanctity of marriage and the possibility and the promise of forming such a union. And then there's Olivia, the Mary figure it seems. If she has ever been married or even in a relationship, that is not how we remember her—that clean cut, blond haired, blue eyed, Australian lass who came dancing and singing into our lives so many years ago and has come back these many years later, having never to our recollection ever been involved in anything even resembling

scandal.

I sit smiling and watching, thinking about Olivia and Kenny and Clint and their nameless wives and America and Thailand and Na and me and the monk and Christ and Christmas and Buddha and the war and nationalism and entitlement and class and nature and walls and wire. They break for commercial and I turn the box off, take the last sip of my coffee, stand and walk outside. Na is next to her garden; basil, aloe-vera, and a small chili plant that hasn't been doing so well for the last few weeks. She is squatting, flat footed, in an intricately patterned earth toned sarong and a light blue T-shirt with the words "girl style magic" in glittery script written across the chest. There is a breeze carrying the scent of the sea and there is the sound of birds; dozens of birds. The morning sun sends angled beams of light through the canopy of the mango trees that line the back wall. Na is not aware that I am watching her. She is gently cupping a branch on the chili plant, fixated on it. After a few moments, she looks up, sees me, smiles with her whole face, and brings her hand down. In front of her, dangling from a thin branch near the top, is a chili; small, fiery red, brilliant, perfect.

Shanghai Stereotype #3 *by* Kok-Meng Tan

He went to boarding school in the UK because his father had decided it was a good idea. Strangely after he had left Hong Kong, he would wake up in his cold, damp dormitory room every Sunday yearning for the same weekly dim sum brunches with his family at the rowdy Causeway Bay restaurant which he had so dreaded in the past. With the gritted teeth and a practiced smile he had acquired back home at all those parties his mother had thrown in their mid-levels apartment, where he would be paraded out to showcase his not inconsiderable musical talent at the old upright Yamaha, he sat through tedious classes and boring canteen banter with

growing determination. Every Tuesday night, he would write long letters to his mother in Chinese detailing what he had done for the week, while keeping what he felt strictly to himself. Of course he had no idea that this regular maintenance of his grasp of the Chinese language would become rather useful later when he moved to Shanghai. Eventually he went down to London to study architecture because his father was a developer. University days quickly passed without event with the same smile affixed to his otherwise expressionless face, except for three months of distraction when he had a crush on a pretty Japanese classmate that he now deemed to have been silly and unwise. He sailed through his design projects effortlessly. He had a knack for knowing which tutors would give him a good grade, what they looked for in students' work, and he knew instinctively where to find ideas without others knowing where they had come from. So armed with his UK degree, and an accent that could pass for British if one didn't know better, he finally came to Shanghai. His old man had put him under the tutelage of a family friend who was renovating some old French-styled villas into swish homes for the super-rich. They made a deal: he would invest in his friend's venture in exchange for his son's fast-track education in the Chinese way of doing business. Our man in Shanghai soon found himself plunged into the world of five-hour meetings with forty eight silent people nodding in unison at two leaders cautiously encircling each other like wolves over a fresh kill, prodding each other with words like sharpened fangs. After a year, he became a skillful player himself. He learnt the art of deciding nothing, doing nothing, but still never being out of sight or earshot of everything that was happening. He found that he had a natural talent for it. It was in the genes his father had planted in him, he reasoned. He did not resent the destiny his father had plotted for him from the day he had come crying naked with nothing into this world. Now he could see that he was going to have everything, if he did not make any wrong moves. To keep his business associates entertained, night after night, he brought them to chandeliered Chinese restaurants, clanging with glasses and crockery, followed by the whirl of songs, tits and ass in loud sweaty dark karaoke rooms. When the last

staggering man was escorted back home, our man would direct the taxi back to his own Huashan Lu apartment, pour himself some gin, turn down his bedroom lights, put on his Japanese porn DVD, curl up in the soft folds of his comforter, and slowly pleasure himself to sleep.

A Tribute to Hong Kong *by* Lynn van der Velden-Elliott

See more:
http://www.asiancha.com/issue/8/lynnvanderveldenelliott

The Okinawan Coffeeshop *by* Anne Tibbitts

You matter as a human being while you sit in that chair and eat the homemade lunch made by an old lady whose hands have made a million before yours. You watch the cars out the window, see the buses, the people who'll settle for cold, too-sweet coffee from a sidewalk vending machine. This is not a place for people who want Maxwell House or Folgers. Here, you're in a different land, a faraway kilned world of knotty pine and blue glazed saucers to set the cup down onto and hear the little, familiar click or crack like sound that only pottery cups make on their mated saucer.

If you sit at the long six-chairs counter, the ladies wash plates right in front of you, grind ice for cold coffees, grind beans. You're part of a world here, the micro-cosmos of Brazil beans in burlap bags, an old light pink payphone that still takes yen dimes, and dials. A world of dim lamps and filtered daylight, tall green palm-like plants, hardback chairs, and the comfort and warmth of knotty pine walls. The iced tea is Earl Grey. At the counter, you sit so close to everything; when the beans go into that measuring cup before getting ground, the sound is as joyful and trinkety as wooden beads falling in a child's jewelry box.

Today when I went to the knotty pine coffeeshop, the girl who is always there to take orders came close to me and put her hand on my shoulder. "Ham-boo-a-guh?" she asked. "Yes." It was Tuesday and she had remembered that I always ordered that on Tuesday. Later, she knew to bring me hot-ta coh-hee, not iced. I always take the hot with the hamburger. On tofu days, though, I like the iced coh-hee. There on the counter sits like a temple shrine this great giant pale green ice grinder. Chunks of fresh ice are dropped into the vat and then one of the ladies turns the ice crank by hand, the sound so familiar and cool. Ice comes out broken into little pointy shards, and the thin copper iced-coh-hee cups

sweat beads while the hot goes over the ice.

The wall behind the counter sink area is covered by a custom-built cup case. There seem to be hundreds of tiny squares each just big enough for one saucer and cup set. All are different; there is not one identical pair. You see the cracked glazes of clay once held by an old man's expert hands, the cups holding coffee grown ten thousand miles across the deep ocean. You sit in the same chair day after day, drink the fresh roasted beans, feel the rush and sway of truly excellent coffee. Coffee that is more like nectar. Coffee that when you sip and swallow, elevates you to a higher plane. Sometimes, you aren't sure what will happen next.

One afternoon, a French gentleman came into the shop. He looked around as if to determine whether he would have coffee or a lunch or just move on down the street. But something caught him. He stayed. From where I was sitting, I watched him experience the coffee elevation, and indeed, he seemed to float out of his head toward some kind of coffee bean nirvana. After he finished his coffee, I struck up a conversation with him and discovered he was a photographer who'd come from Tokyo to do a photo spread for a slick city magazine. An unlikely place to meet such a fellow, but that's the kind of place this is—a beacon whose call cannot be resisted. If, that is, you are truly a coffee person of the finest, most delicate degree.

Only classical music is played in the knotty pine coffeeshop. Mornings are usually violin and after lunch there is always a symphony. It's good to go for afternoon cake and tea or coffee. The cake is chocolate layers cut in beautiful pointy triangles, covered atop with curled shavings of pure sweet dark chocolate. The cakes are made at home by a housewife, who brings a new cake in every second day or so. Her little car is white and weaves close to the curb so she can carry her cake to the case sand then dash away. When you eat that cake, you can see sunlight streaming through her kitchen window, smell clover in the grasses outside the screened door, watch a cat slink toward a gecko. There is silent magic in each bite of her cake: she has made them with devotion. The combination of this cake and

coffee from the pale grey cup and saucer set is like nothing else.

Traveling all over the world, seeing a million places, sitting on ten thousand chairs drinking from paper, plastic Styrofoam or china—nothing can match this bliss. It exists. Someday you could go there. Sit at the counter and gaze at the shelves full of pottery cups and saucers, see the girl grind ice, hear the beans clink through the funnel toward fineness. You could go on a Tuesday and order ham-boo-a-guh. You could suck iced coh-hee though a thin straw and chew rock sugar between your front teeth or eat spaghetti and look out the window to watch the tropical sun fall huge and orange into the ocean. You could drop a yen dime into the old pink payphone and call someone, anyone, and tell them "I'm here--at the Knotty Pine Coffeeshop. I've just tasted the nectar. I am elevated. I know I will never be the same."

Furious George: A Schwarzeneggerian Terminator of a Tale *by* Jonathan Mendelsohn

This is the harrowing story of one young *gaijin's* journey, his quest to get breakfast for his girlfriend and himself from a Japanese convenience store.

Baby, he said, leaving to get his woman some food, I'll be back.

* * *

The *gaijin* in question, a Canadian if you must know, had been teaching English in Japan a year, and was living forty-five minutes north of downtown Osaka in the suburb of Seiwadai at the time. Because it's a rather new development, hip and with it Osakan urbanites might laughingly refer to Seiwadai as "in the mountains" (read: pine-covered hills) because it is a fifteen minute bus ride from the nearest train station. Really, it's no more rural than any North American suburb. Within walking distance from the Canadian's place, there was a McDonalds, a post office,

a supermarket and a Lawson—the 7-11 of Western Japan. The three-minute walk to Lawson was not the harrowing part of the story. There was of course the obstacle of a large main street to cross, but with no red rover, red rover Tokyo type crowds to cross against. The Canuck (call him Gord if you like, though in truth he couldn't work a skate key much less play hockey) was the only person out there that time of morning (again, very suburban). The harrowing—the downright terrifying—portion of the story still to come, he made sure to look both ways before crossing.

This is not one of those cultural-differences-are-so-difficult stories. A year into his stay and our hero, Gordo, was not gonna have trouble navigating the Japanese convenience store experience. He was no longer taken aback by the shouts of greeting when he entered the store, or the odd mix of foods, Snickers and Pringles alongside prepared Japanese foods like *onigiri* (rice balls) and *oden* (soggy fish cakes swimming in brown water held in small aluminum containers and seated on convenience store counters across *Nippon*).

No. It was after the shaggy teenager working the cash (clearly an international phenomenon) bagged Gord's bread and orange juice, when he left the store to the usual chorus of *arigato gozaimasu* from the staff that the crux of our tale really begins. It was in morning sunlight walking across the parking lot when Gord caught sight of the monkey coming towards him. Oh, yes. Monkey. Now he knew there were monkeys in Japan, in the same way one might know there are grizzly bears in Canada or cobras in India: sure they existed, but not in a suburban parking lot. Yet there the furry creature was, hanging out like a bored adolescent, and a rather big and lumbering adolescent at that. He may not have been gorilla big, but he was, to be sure, the largest monkey Gord (as we're still calling him) had ever met outside a convenience store.

They say you mustn't stare when encountering potentially dangerous wildlife. They also say to stay still when confronted by grizzlies. Try accessing these pearls of wisdom in the moment. Gord, despite a goodly amount of time spent watching *Animal Planet*, sure couldn't. Because

when he saw that monkey, what did he do but stare. He stared good. Of course he did. He stared at that stupid simian. The stupid simian stared back. The harrowing portion of the tale comes right about now as the monkey, that had to this point seemed an ungainly, buffoonish creature, leapt up in a flash and grabbed at Gord's plastic bag of food. Gord didn't let go. A tug of war ensued, the monkey holding on for dear life, his hairy legs dangling helplessly in the air. But Furious George was a strong son of a bitch. It was with literally all Gordie's brute strength, the kind usually reserved for lifting small cars off of helpless infants, that he managed to pull hard enough to get the beast to let go and drop to the ground.

Moving quickly towards the main street and the girl he had waiting for him, Gord fast-walked it only to be confronted by a red light and a steady stream of traffic which prevented J-walking, jogging or even sprinting. Meanwhile, the monkey was bearing down on him. Our poor hero kept looking over his shoulder at the advancing creature.

The people of Japan are a profoundly patient people. (The monkey was closing in.) In Japan you are not to lose your cool. (The monkey was getting closer.) Like its people, the traffic lights of this ancient nation seems to be in no kind of rush whatsoever, changing as they do every quarter century. (The monkey was a few feet away and those hands had claws goddamnit.) F%$#$!

Gord kept turning around. The monkey was still coming. The damn light. A true suburban nightmare. A Schwarzeneggerian Terminator of a tale. When the light finally changed, our Canadian boy half-ran across the street excessively relieved to find the monkey hadn't crossed. He just stood there. He scratched his head.

Panting but unscathed, Gord returned home to his girlfriend (a girl he might, he hoped, one day marry), orange juice and bread for toasting safe and sound in the bag swinging at his side.

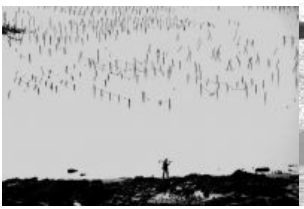
He told her. The whole thing. That he'd braved the monkey, baby.

A monkey, she said and burst out laughing. In the Lawson parking lot?

He said yeah! He then said that she couldn't have any breakfast.

A different version of this article was previously published in Canada's The Globe and Mail in the Travel Section on January 14, 2006.

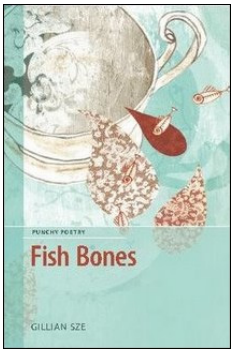
Bleak Shores *by* Franky Lau





http://www.asiancha.com/issue/8/frankylau

Artful Interactions: Departure and Transformation in Gillian Sze's Fish Bones *by* Viki Holmes



Gillian Sze, *Fish Bones*, DC Books, 2009. 65 pgs.

Winnipeg-born Gillian Sze suggests that her first collection is "ultimately a collection of conversations", and the Wallace Stevens epigraph that fronts *Fish Bones* acts as a further signpost—"for the listener…"

But poetry, as life, as art, is rarely as simple as all that. In this collection, the listener may be a distant lover, a family member, a departed friend, or things less animate: a cantaloupe melon, a jar, a bracelet of fish bones. For Sze's poetry is ***ekphrastic***; that is to say, she writes in reaction to pieces of art. And in doing so, her descriptions take on a life of their own. Ekphrasis comes from the Greek: to speak out, to proclaim—and here is where the conversations begin. For Sze, art is not static, no conversation is. Instead, her poems are a gleaming point of interaction between object and viewer. She looks to art, to other poems, to the relationships woven through her life, and expects a response, an answer.

Answers, however, are not always forthcoming. Dialogue is difficult; it is hard to speak, sometimes even painful. Only distance makes truth possible. Sze's collection opens with "Cantaloupe", an exploration of the frailty of words, the difficulty of communication. She begins with the conditional: "If you were here…" and the pattern of absence is set. For often the conversations that resonate are imaginary, or directed to the far, far away. It is fitting that the collection ends with a crown of unrhymed sonnets directed to an absent lover: a circular journey marked by the repetition of lines and the final return to where she began: "Take-off is always the difficult part."

And here again, that conditional "If you were here…" implicit within the entirety of the poem. Sze ends where she has begun, though the journey has changed her. And as much as she is always taking off, she is always leaving something behind: and so the subjects inhabiting her poems: a sister left behind, children moving out, a discarded stroller; the speaker in the poems so often leaving her flat, her apartment, her friend's house….

I enjoyed the tarot-and-Tennyson inspired "She Has A Lovely Face", with its shifts between past, present and future, and the pleasing aphorism: "No-one blamed Orpheus/for looking back, except Orpheus." An interesting association, this, blame and looking back—particularly as Sze devotes a poem to that other mythological figure whose inability to let go of what is past transforms her irrevocably: Lot's wife, turned into a pillar of salt as, against God's instruction, she turns back to gaze on the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

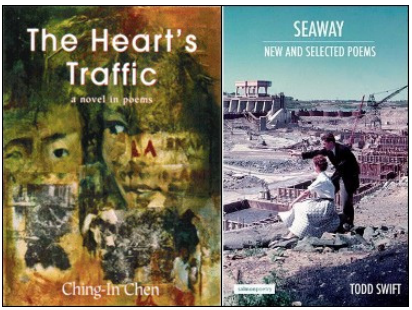
Departure and transformation: for art is nothing if not what is left behind: what links the past with the present, a record of life—like fossils. This for me was the significance of the bracelet of fish bones that gives Sze's collection its title and lies, gleaming, besides the heap of fruit at her aunt's table. In "Playing Fish Bones", the teacup at the poem's beginning, whose "mouth is a flattened moon" is a neat foreshadowing of the salmon bones strung together that form "a mouth forced open".

But these mouths cannot speak freely. Flattened, forced open, the objects surrounding Sze speak, or attempt to, but there is a sense of compulsion and negation, a kind of violence hinted at in "Tending Ice Gardens", where Memory is both "furious and suffocating". This violence appears more overtly in poems such as "fragmented" where Sze is attacked by the city, finding "bitefuls of me" on the curb—now it is the poet's turn to be consumed and interpreted.

It is clear that there has been much craft in this debut. Sze links her ideas and images with the delicacy of a woman threading fish bones together to make a bracelet. The art she perceives becomes a medium for exploring big themes: blame, loss, history, love, death. Sze's quest for meaning

results in objects of beauty. And there are times when this potent combination of beauty and violence makes the reader gasp. The worlds Sze creates; the worlds she perceives and makes her own, are complete, cohesive, self-contained. And there's the rub. The visions she presents can be like a beautiful circle, turning on itself: outside of time. Circles have no beginning, no end—and hence no point of entry. There were moments when I longed for my own ekphrastic epiphany, but found the poems so complete as to no longer require a response. Gorgeous and meticulous, but leaving me somehow untouched. But those moments are countered by an accuracy of perception in lines such as "I meant to write something that said,/Yes, I know what you mean." This opening line from "To John Lyman and the Portrait of His Father" (first published in issue #5 of*Cha*) for me conveys exactly why we write, what drives us: the very essence of what poetry is. So yes, Gillian, I know what you mean.

Identity and Re-Invention: A Review of Ching-In Chen's and Todd Swift's Poetry *by* Kate Rogers



Ching-In Chen, *The Heart's Traffic: a Novel in Poems*, Arktoi Books, 2009. 119 pgs.
Todd Swift, *Seaway: New and Selected Poems*, Salmon Poetry, 2008. 128 pgs.

Canadian Todd Swift's *Seaway: New and Selected Poems* and *The Heart's Traffic* by Ching-In Chen, a San Francisco-based poet, deal with issues of identity and re-invention of the self. But they approach these themes from almost opposite angles. As an expatriate, Swift follows his poetic heart in a variety of cultural environments, redefining himself as he

goes. As the daughter of immigrants, poet Ching-In Chen tackles the creation of identity quite differently.

In her debut collection subtitled *a novel in poems*, Ching-In Chen uses word play and forms such as the villanelle, pantoum and zuihitsu as well as persona poems to layer a narrative in four parts. The experiences of Xiaomei—an immigrant to San Francisco—drive the story from the start.

The poems are powerful; to quote Margaret Atwood, "Poetry is condensed emotion", and Chen's poetry is no exception. Loss is a compelling factor in the protagonist's search for herself. In "Xiaomei's First Heartbreak," in "Part II: Inventing the Island", the narrator's father has left: "Gone the clanging midnight door, perpetual raised voice. / Xiaomei wakes in the dew, the traffic of her heart missing."

In America, Xiaomei grapples with much which is unfamiliar after her father disappears. Her insights into the differences between Asia and the West are expressed succinctly: "into the black hole of America, / an odd place with beer-drinking, restaurant-opening aunties / and cousins who like cereal."

In "Part III: The Still Migrating Body", Xiaomei goes even further and focuses on her missing patriarch:

When I remember,
I will be a grown adult
with shiny smiles
searching for Grandfather.

Grandfather,
we have stocked the refrigerator
in honor of your smiles.
This legend of television
encourages each adult
to dis-remember

her own grandfather.
In each land, there is a refrigerator
filled to the brim with smiles.

The poem "Names" powerfully evokes the trauma connected with learning a new language. It captures how language, names and identity are intertwined:

First to let go
of the murderous tongue,
end of the intimate and divine source
of the esophagus,
trained in the schoolbacked
wooden chair of youth,
ruler whack of pronunciation
…the final journey, arrives in the first melting
where no memorized faces survive.

Then in the same section, Chen performs her own jazz riff on the word coolie—or labourer—first as *Ku Li*—in its modern Pinyin form:

cool Li?
Coolly
Coo/glee
Cooled ghee
Chew me
Cruelty
Gruel, tea
Cowrie
Cold feet
Coolie

She goes on to describe the exploitation of Chinese labourers who built the railroad in the US, but who "couldn't / go / to / the / party" in the short poem "Coolie: A History Report", presented in the style of a child's social studies presentation.

Chen then plunges into Xiaomei's history. "The TrueTale of Xiaomei" mocks Xiaomei's obsession with the past and those who elevate immigrants' stories to legends:

The Great Outlandish True Tale of my pathetic mother,
married off at age three,
to an evil rich man as second wife/concubine,
How she squeezed sorrow out of her pounding chest.
How she squirreled way like the workday ant, coin after morsel,
How one day the bus driver saw my fresh face and haggard one,
two sides of the mirror of time open onto his pale life.
He fell in love with such courage.

[…] that classic immigrant story that breaks their little Pilgrim hearts

As poets and story-tellers we so often eviscerate ourselves and read the entrails for meaning. Chen hits equally hard in the fourth and final section: "Onion Dreams". The first layer she peels begins with excerpts of an interview with Arthur Golden about his book, *Memoirs of a Geisha*. By interspersing quotes from the iconic subject of Golden's novel with his thoughts on writing it, Chen depicts Golden as being on a mission to write "the Great White Novel". In the following poem—"Two Truths and a Lie"—Chen shows how Western men can idealize Asian women like geishas and how this idealization diminishes and isolates those "exotic others".

In the final section, "The Heart's Traffic", there are sensual poems celebrating women loving women. Chen returns to Coolie as "Cool/li" and "Ku Li" and reflects on her roots. Appropriately, the collection ends with "Inventing the Tiger" in which Xiaomei's story evolves into myth.

Like Chen, Todd Swift is a perpetual outsider, choosing that identity instead of inheriting it or having it imposed upon him. In this collection which spans twenty years, Swift explores such themes as adolescence, sensuality, death, alienation, Hungary, England and France. His language is taut and beautifully crafted. In the first poem, absence is a palpable place: a

"white kitchen". In "Gun Crazy", tension and despair build:

Neon wakes me, I peel back blinds,
to jackhammer rain, shake a Lucky
from the pack…How can a man be made
from moments of early loss?

In "This Was How One Lasted", the narrator compares swimming with submerging the self: "I was thin and young with shivers // and would wait for something / to call me in…."

As a fellow overseas Canadian, I got a kick out of "Kanada Post": "I remember some other life as if it's mine. / My country has become a stamp, weather, / And what my mother says, over the phone." Later in the same poem finely-tuned images resonate: "My birth month is rain and light, a dancing pair / of skaters. The smell of winter breaking like glass."

"The Usher" skillfully begins with a teenage reverie about the romance of watching movies but expands into much more:

I could hug these images
into me, a pillow of nostalgia:
my parents traveling by
the kind of plane with propellers

over an itinerary of yellow seas,
missing, but in the absence filled
golden with a kid's love
of mysterious passages.

A child's bed is a narrow
strip to land a history of regret.

Many Canadians of both genders fill poems with bodies of water: it is our birth right. In "The Influence of Anxiety at the Seaside with Tea", the sea and the rain become sentient beings: "The sea is a grey-green, moon-led elephant" and the "rain pulled toads from its hat". Later we see, in the

three poems "The Lake", "Seaway" and "The Red Bathing Cap", a heart-rending beautiful depiction of his mother, a dedicated swimmer all her life. The poem is very heartfelt and this can be seen particularly in the following excerpt from the last two stanzas:

I want to go with you tonight,
Keep pace, but you always
Swam out alone, serene. Red Bathing cap—(brightened like
A pricked thumb)—how it goes
In and out of the going black

Steady as your pulse, a sewing
Needle, threading water
With your breathing stroke--
is like a light, a light to me
That says the where and why
Of home, of coming home.
I'll bring your blue towel as
You stand out in summer dusk.

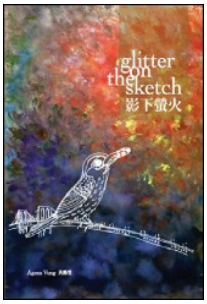
Swift inhabits unexpected people and places. In poems such as "Brando", "The Man Who Killed Houdini" and the notable poem, "Gentlemen of Nerve" (selected for *Best Canadian Poetry in English*, 2008), the narrator is voyeur, reconstructing the lives of his subjects:

a movie writer, a fellow who adores his wife;
The forty-year-old who walks slowly down the boulevards
In springtime, thinking of nothing much, sidling along

With a mumble, instead of a song, in his punctured heart.

As we can see, both volumes of poetry deal with issues of identity. While Chen engages with myth, Swift writes like a scavenger hunting for images of himself.

Where We are Living in: A Review of Agnes Vong's and Alistair Noon's Poetry *by* Pierre Lien



Agnes Vong, *glitter on the sketch*, ASM and Timber Publishing and Cultural Promotion Ltd., 2008. 85 pgs.
Alistair Noon, *At the Emptying of Dustbins*, Oystercatcher Press, 2009. 16 pgs.

I want to undo what I did
but I should have taken a picture
before I made the changes
– From "Sketch" by Agnes Vong

Of the things I've seen, the things I've claimed,
Which would you see? Which stairs would you climb?
– From "China (Reprise)" by Alistair Noon

Perhaps it is a question every poet must ask at a certain moment: why write? Perhaps it is also apparent that there never will be a correct answer. Some poets write to profess ideas, like how Wordsworth writes about nature; some simply enjoy writing; some never even have the thought of showing their poems to others, let alone publishing. The two poetry collections—*glitter on the sketch* by Agnes Vong and *At the Emptying of Dustbins* by Alistair Noon—share the same rationale: they would like to tell you *where they are living in*.

Asking someone to tell you where they live and where they live *in* are two very different things. To answer "Where do you live?", you must simply state the geographic location of your home. Answering "Where do you live in?" is more complicated. You have to describe a place in its full: the people, the environment, the politics, the sights and the sounds, the days and the nights, the propaganda and the superstitions. For Vong and Noon, their poetry collections are answers to where they are living in—they are about the scenes they witness, the people they meet, the inner struggles they have about what makes them a part of their country or city.

Vong's poetry collection is in a bilingual format—each poem has an English version and a Traditional Chinese version. It is very interesting to observe the similarities and differences between the two versions of each poem. Chinese words are known for their brevity—two Chinese characters can be the equivalent of ten or more words in English. However, just when you think you know what the characters in the Chinese poems signify, the English versions give you another perspective on their meaning, an insight to what they can potentially mean. Reading the two versions alongside each other in Vong's volume thus allows for a wider perspective of Macao.

Vong paints pictures in the mind with short and precise words. Entering the world of Vong's poetry, we are given a visual tour of "city macao". The tour begins where we see beautiful relics being blocked by the shimmering light of casinos ("a new bridge glows"). Then we hear the struggles of the persona's not knowing who she is. The memories of old Macao, where fishermen still sailed the sea and sought "Kun Iam" (the traditional Chinese goddess of the sea) for safe sailing, are fading. They are now shrouded by modernized bars like "Lan Kwai Fong Macao" that initially had nothing to do with Macao ("I pushed you away"). This struggle becomes more apparent as we go on to see that what used to be a simple and innocent city has been inundated with casinos, a change about which the people are basically "puzzled" ("three"). What used to be such an understated city has been irradiated by tourism.

Vong has a very vivid and sometimes satirical voice. Her humour makes us

think. She writes about Chinese superstitions about astrology and how "good Buddhists" should not eat meat because they are meant to be vegetarians ("why the dogs are all wearing jade rabbits this year"). She compares an old farmer feeding his cow to feeding a slot machine in a casino, making us think about whether we have improved our lives simply by modernizing ("a good reason").

On the other side of the stereotypically positive and golden image of Macao we are used to, is Vong's version of the city, a puzzled, frustrated and even tragic side. It seems that we usually only focus on the camera-ready moment—a fixed time frame, which we think will always be fixed, ignoring the adverse changes that are actually happening ("the moment"). Vong writes that, if she could, she would have "taken a picture" of old Macao and feasted upon the goodness of the past while living in this modernized tragic new Macao ("sketch").

As someone who has lived in Hong Kong for twenty-odd years, I found myself understanding Vong more than Noon. This is purely a subjective response, however, probably because the culture in Hong Kong is similar to that of Macao. Still although I am not as familiar with the locations in Noon's poems, Soviet Russia, Germany, Macedonia and even Mainland China (I failed Chinese history in high school), Noon has a charm in his writing that lures readers into finding out more about these places. In other words, Noon makes us want to be there and see for ourselves what is in store.

Noon's depictions are vivid and full of endless surprises. He shows us the end of the Soviet Union; its brainwashing banners, the soldiers from the barracks. Among tense lines, Noon fits in this mocking denunciation of the corruption of the Communists: "the white clouds send down [bread] crumbs", referring to Lenin's slogan of "peace, land and bread" ("At the Emptying of Dustbins").

We also experience China through Noon's eyes. We see the natural beauty of "The East Lake" being covered by "heat, fumes and humidity" from "a smokestack and cement works" ("Wuhan Incidents"). An ironic tone

creeps in when Noon says that "the water didn't look like a painting" ("China (Reprise)"). In a sense, perhaps, Noon is suggesting that China has lost its formal beauty.

Noon is best at depicting tension. "The Wolves of Brandenburg" offers a taut, tense description of Neo-Nazis in modern Germany, a frightening reminder of the country's past and possible future. I, however, thought the poem read equally well as a metaphor for East and West Germany during the Cold War. The characterization of soldiers as wolves in East and West Germany not only gives character to the soldiers, but to the Cold War itself—shows us that this world is but a forest full of wolves fighting endless cold wars.

There is one common rationale behind Vong's and Noon's writing: they do not want to forget. Perhaps this is why they write—to record memories. While Vong is perplexed by the unthinking modernization of Macao, Noon is concerned with the history of Soviet Russia and a changing China. They record events to tell us this—that we should never forget where we *were* living in. Be it a happy or sad memory, these recollections of history are what made us *us*.

Australian Voices: Adam Aitken's Eighth Habitation and Tom Cho's Look Who's Morphing *by* Eva Leung

Adam Aitken, *Eighth Habitation*, Giramondo Publishing, 2009. 153 pgs.
Tom Cho, *Look Who's Morphing*, Giramondo Publishing, 2009. 181 pgs.

Writing was sewing. Writing was taking an image–a ferry crossing the
Mekong say, and empty it of all significance until it became idea, an image
caught between memory and forgetting.
– From "Lines from The Lover" by Adam Aitken

British-born Australian poet Adam Aitken knits fabrics of images from the real and imaginary world in his exquisite collection of poetry, *Eighth Habitation*. In his debut collection of short stories *Look Who's Morphing*, Chinese-Australian writer Tom Cho sews two worlds together to present quasi-real, unforgettable images.

The back cover of *Eighth Habitation* informs readers that "Eighth Habitation" refers to the "Buddhist notion of purgatory, a mystic realm where the meaning of a human life is judged". Aitken phrases one of his own judgments on human life in the form of a proverb:

It took no time at all to learn what I needed
and years to realise what I'd learned
was what I didn't need.
("Essentials: Words and Phrases")

He extends his keen observations from matters of the heart to world issues. The collection is an array of postcards, painting a variety of landscapes and depicting various cultural scenes. He treads the grounds of different places in the world. He escorts his readers from "where Mimosa meets Palm" ("Cairns") to Malaysia ("The Curse of the Chicken Rice Hawker, Penang"); he witnesses the Songkhran in Bangkok and a Balinese purification ceremony ("Nyepi"); and he takes us to Cambodia where he walks along the Sivatha Boulevard ("Francais"), visits the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh ("S21") and tastes the smoked fish near the banks of Siem Reap River ("Postcards").

Then Aitken brings readers into imaginary landscapes, where Hindu gods meet ("Shiva, Uma, Ravanna"), where he wakes in "old 'Funan'" ("Aubade

2"), and where the condemned are tortured ("The 32 Hells: A Sampler"). His extensive use of imagery, combined with the diary format of "Archive" and the prose poem of "Lines from the Lover", presents a wide range of subject matter with rich cultural, historical and political references which demands a certain intellectual background from readers.

Aitken's readers will discover that he is not taking us on a mere sightseeing tour; rather, he wishes to share his thoughts and feelings. His is a voice of determination, and in the simmering social commentary of his lines, he does not veil brutality in his poetic language. Like a picture formed with a few strokes, he outlines haunting scenes to express concern over warfare:

A woman sheltering under a rattan mat
from a thunderous downdraft of Hueys
by the banks of the Mekong;
her last recollection of home.
("Postcards")

Then there was the sundowner,
then the bullet point recipes
for WW2 American cocktails.
("Nostalgia")

With the same force, he conveys his disgust with manipulative relatives:

You discover they lie
those siblings in the mother country, those parasites
who spend each hard-earned cent of your remittances
on Mao Tai and Fan Tan
and still beg for more –
("The Curse of the Chicken Rice Hawker, Penang")

As a counterpoint to such serious social commentary, Aitken also writes poems in a lighter, livelier tone to figures both real and imaginary. In "To My Double", he playfully addresses the other "half" of "himself". "For Effendy, Emperor of Icecream" humorously begins with "Effendy, I like the way you avoid work. It is saintly." In "Dear Henri" he goes on an

imaginary journey with the Anglo-French explorer Henri Mouhot, while "Coins Falling" brings us back to reality with a letter to poet Agnes Lam, in which Aitken responds to her work of the same title with this ironic opening:

Dear Agnes
How I wanted to respond
to your poem 'coins falling'
("Coins Falling")

Finally, in a tragically comical manner Aitken slips into the imaginary and speaks in the voice of "Bishma on a bed of arrows" who dwells in the sorrow of being:

[…] a good loser,
a man who's great
but not quite great enough.
("Aubade 5")

While Aitken builds imaginary dialogues and scenarios out of historical and cultural knowledge of the real world, Cho, in his short story collection, merges the real with the imagined. He takes readers by the hand and draws them into a realistic world of fantasy and a fantastic world of reality, where metamorphoses constantly take place.

The playful, bizarre and altogether amusing stories feature a young protagonist who shares the same name, age, and nationality with the author, Tom Cho. In the eighteen stories, he and the people around him undergo metamorphoses of all kinds: Tom Cho himself is a Muppet ("Pinocchio"), a robot ("I, Robot"), the Fonz ("The Sound of Music"), a guest of the television show ("Today On Dr Phil"), and later, Whitney Houston's bodyguard ("he Bodyguard"). Elsewhere we see that his transformations know no boundaries, no patterns, and in the title story "Look Who's Morphing" he morphs into Barbara Streisand, Richard Simmons, and Princess Diana. His mother becomes Olivia Newton-John ("Suitmation"), his Auntie Wei is possessed by a demon ("The Exorcist"), and a young girl killed by a group of ninjas returns to life to become a

deadly cyborg ("AIYO!!!").

In "Dinner with Auntie Ling and Uncle Wang", Tom Cho the protagonist first presents a perfectly ordinary reality: "I am going to my auntie and uncle's apartment for dinner. I like visiting Auntie Ling and Uncle Wang. They both love hosting visitors." However, this realistic scene soon transforms into fantasy when it is revealed that Uncle Wang has "a bi-directional interface between his central nervous system and a computer", and Cho's persona ends up opening up his head to repair him. While Aitken's juxtaposition of the real and the imagined is clear-cut, Cho blends surrealism and realism to add a grotesque but funny dimension to his stories. As the protagonist shares the author's name and the events involve his relatives and friends, the book seems to offer autobiographic narration, seamlessly morphing into the bizarre and outrageous, linking reality with fantasy, and further blurring the boundary between them.

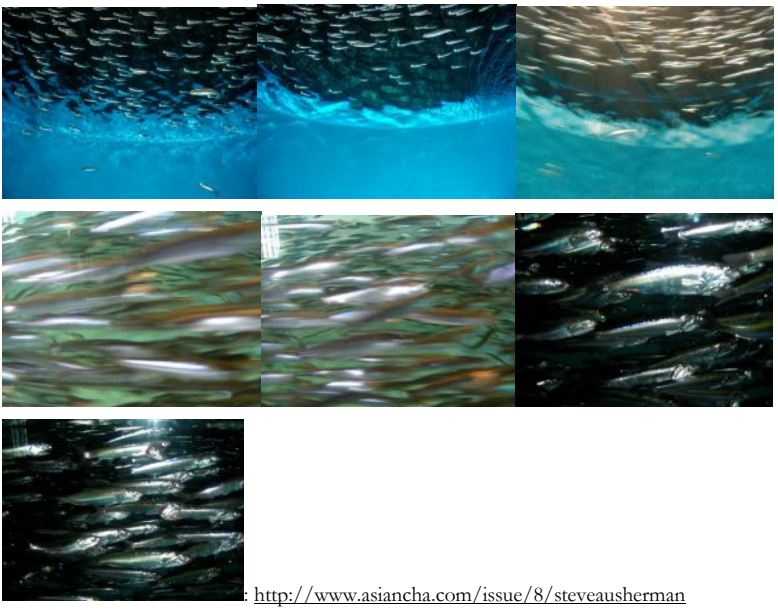
As Cho himself admits, the book is littered with personal responses to various cultural texts such as*Gulliver's Travels*, *Dirty Dancing* and *The Sound of Music,* as well as references to life in the 1980s. Cho's witty portrayals, however, allow readers to enjoy the stories as individual texts. "The Sound of Music" opens with the movie's opening scene: "an aerial view of mountains, then a green valley, and a lake, and suddenly an open grassy area". It is funny to imagine Tom Cho singing there instead of Julie Andrews, but readers without prior knowledge of the film will still find the subsequent scenes with Mother Superior and Captain von Trapp entertaining.

Cho's reader response to *Gulliver's Travels* in the story "Cock Rock" was, however, not my cup of tea. Here Tom Cho the character morphs into a 55-metre-tall rock star performing in Tokyo. I personally found the descriptions of him "enjoying blissful moments" with twenty young girls slightly too explicit; it struck me as a decadent exploitation of women. Yet the effect of this vivid portrayal demonstrates Cho's excellence with description, and I am certain most readers will enjoy the story as it pushes towards the limits of fantasy.

Ultimately, I read the book as a metaphor for life and the inevitability of change. Although Tom Cho is passive in most of the transformations, he is always in control of the situations he finds himself, which suggests that though we are often passive in life's changes, things will turn out fine—his transformations, however disastrous, never go without a happy ending.

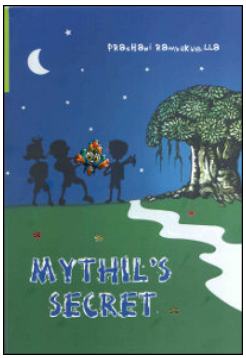
Spanning the years between 1963 and 2136, Tom Cho's metamorphoses provide a modern variation of Woolf's *Orlando*. Adam Aitken's moving poems lead readers through past and present with their lyrical language and lucid imagery. Both volumes sew the worlds of the imagination and of the real together, to inspire, to entertain, and to strike a chord that will echo the heartstrings of their readers.

Sardines *by* Steve Ausherman



: http://www.asiancha.com/issue/8/steveausherman

Excerpt from Mythil's Secret *by* Prashani Rambukwella



Prashani Rambukwella, *Mythil's Secret*, Perera Hussein Publishing House, 2009. 166 pgs.

'You sit down with me and tell me all about the yaka you saw, will you,' Archchi told Mythil with one of her sunny smiles.

'Don't laugh Loku Nona,' Seeli said. 'And don't call the spirits by their name – they can hear! The jungle is full of them. Especially at this time. And Podi Baby was eating kevili – I saw. You must always drink some water after eating kevili in the afternoon – especially if you're going outside. Yakas are attracted to the smell of kevili . . .'

'That's enough Seeli,' Archchi said sternly. 'Don't scare Podi Baby.' Seeli pursed her lips in a thin, obstinate line. 'It's true what I said,' she sniffed, flicking the kurakkan with a 'sruss' sound and grinding the grain of barley between her teeth as she walked away.

'Now don't listen to her nonsense,' Archchi said lifting Mythil's chin with her hand. 'Tell me what happened.'

So they sat down on the pantry steps and Mythil began to tell his grandmother what he had seen. One of Archchi's cats crept on to her lap with a wary eye on Mythil. It was soon purring contentedly and listening to Mythil's story with Archchi. Ammi stood behind them leaning against the lintel.

'How big was he?' Archchi asked about the yaka. Mythil forced his mind to re-conjure the image he had seen.

'Not very big Archchi,' he said. 'Maybe my size.'

'Then shall I tell you what you saw?' Archchi said with a comforting chuckle. 'I'm sure you saw one of the village boys playing in the jungle. He would have seen you and thought of frightening you a little for fun.'

Ammi turned away and went back into the house without saying anything.

'So you don't think I saw a yaka Archchi?' Mythil asked hopefully. He felt his earlobe gingerly. It still stung from whatever had struck it in the jungle. Perhaps Archchi was right. Yakas wouldn't throw stones at people would they? But a boy might.

Archchi laughed again. 'I'm sure it's just a village boy. Next time you see him tell him to stop scaring you or that old Jamis will beat him black and blue. Or tell him to come and have some rice if he is hungry. Then you will have someone your age to play with at least.'

'At first I was scared it was a snake,' Mythil told Archchi reaching out to pet the purring cat which now had its eyes tightly shut in feline contentment. He was eager to prove to his grandmother that he hadn't been completely fooled by the village boy. 'It could have been a poacher too couldn't it Archchi? Or a robber with grease on his face – planning to steal from a house?'

'Ah, that reminds me, have I ever told you the story of how I chased a robber?' Archchi asked.

'You chased a robber Archchi? On your own?' The cat opened its eyes and leapt off Archchi's lap with a hiss. It had just realised that Mythil was petting it. Archchi took no notice.

'Yes. Your Seeya was still alive then.' Archchi's eyes misted over as they always did when she spoke of her husband. He had died of a heart attack when Mythil's mother was still a young girl and Archchi had brought up her three children on her own.

She began her story. 'Seeya had taken Jamis to his hometown in the car and hadn't yet returned,' Archchi said. 'It was past midnight and I was waiting up till Seeya came back.' Mythil rested his head on Archchi's

shoulder picturing her patiently sitting in the hall till his grandfather returned.

'The house was in darkness. There was just one lamp lit in the front veranda. Then I saw a shadow moving in the garden.'

'Like from the corner of your eye?' Mythil asked. 'Like you weren't sure you saw something but you had to turn your head to see? That's just how I saw the yaka. . . I mean the village boy.'

'Yes, just like that,' Archchi said. 'Your Ammi and her brothers were sleeping in their bedrooms. Seeli was in the kitchen. I knew it couldn't be any of them. The person moved closer to the veranda entrance. When the lamplight fell on him I saw that it was a man with grease on his body. I knew at once it was a rogue then. I had heard they applied grease so that it would be difficult to catch and grab hold of them.' Mythil shivered deliciously.

'I slowly took down your grandfather's gun from where it used to hang in the hall. Then I walked out onto the veranda and pointed it at the man. I said, "Who's there?""

Archchi held out her hands as if she was holding an imaginary gun and said the words with force and menace. Her mouth was set in a firm line and her eyes shone fiercely. Mythil could imagine how scary she must have looked in the shadows made by the lamplight.

'The man jumped,' Archchi said, continuing her story. 'He hadn't expected anyone to be awake. In those days, before we got electricity to the house, we usually went to sleep soon after it got dark.'

'Were you scared Archchi?' Mythil asked putting his arm around her waist.

'My hands were trembling,' Archchi admitted. 'And I knew the gun had no bullets.'

'No bullets!' Mythil asked in horror. Archchi had had no real defence!

'No, with the children around your Seeya never kept a loaded gun in the house. So I had to be very stern. I asked, "Who are you man? Can you see

this gun?" and the man began to stammer. So I knew he was scared. And I said, 'If you want to live run away from here. Run away!' and he ran.'

'He got scared!' Mythil crowed clapping his hands together in delight. 'Archchi you are *so* brave.'

Archchi laughed. 'Now wash your face and come and have your tea,' she said getting up from the step with a little difficulty. Mythil put his arm around her to support her. She smiled at him and gently patted his cheek. 'You can help me make pumpkin pudding.'

She went inside to make the tea followed by the mewing cat and Mythil went to the half-filled bucket that stood by the well to have his wash. Seeli came and poured fresh water for him after he had soaped himself.

'All I am saying,' she told him in a low voice and with a glance at the pantry windows, 'is don't go into the jungle without a piece of iron. And don't call them by their real name – they are jungle spirits and when you say their name they are drawn to you.'

Mythil's Secret can be purchased online from Perera Hussein Publishing House.

Interviews with Anne Enright, Nam Le and Rebecca Rosenblum *by* Nigel Beale

The following excerpts are based on a series of separate audio interviews with writers Anne Enright, Nam Le and Rebecca Rosenblum for The Biblio File, a radio program/podcast hosted by Nigel Beale.

During each interview three people were in the room: the writer, the host, and Flannery O'Connor, in the form of her thoughts about the craft of short story writing culled primarily from *Mystery and Manners*, a collection of her "occasional prose."

Here's how the three authors responded to O'Connor, **who joins us here in bold type**:

The first and most obvious characteristic of a good short story is that it deals with that which can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted and touched.

NL: Given that writing is a form of communication which often draws on what is universal and common about our experience, it would be foolish not to incorporate the sensual. How much more common can you get than the physical body from which we're all forced to operate? All of us mediate our experiences through our senses. One not only achieves more vivid mimesis using sight, taste, sound, smell and tactility, their use also serves as a springboard to bounce us into more abstract territory. Creating as concrete, vivid and sustainable a dream as possible imbues the reader with a sense that they're moving inside this dream, that their will counts, and this in turn enables them to see what the story—this encrypted cage of words—signifies.

AE: We have no other place to live, other than in our bodies, and with the five senses. At least one sense must be present in every sentence. Sometimes description of one sense will trigger another. For example, the

noise of a colour in your head. Witness Emily Dickinson's "yellow noise." Or William Carlos Williams' "so much depends on…" (a red wheelbarrow).

Judgment begins in the selection of concrete details. Details convey a "reality" which is determined by what the author sees and how he sees it. Without detail, "the eye will glide over their words while the attention goes to sleep."

AE: The key for the writer is to make what is said matter. Look at this that happened, and this. To achieve intensity one must select and describe each detail as though it's important, even though it might be banal. The writing must be completely and absolutely particular.

RR: My goal is to create a world that could be here; that seems possible. Details provide plausibility; create a world not too far removed from the rational one we inhabit. Details about food, buses, girls' lives… are rendered small and precisely enough in order to ground the reader so that when something happens beyond her experience she's able to go with me that extra step, beyond what she already knows. Donald Barthelme, for example, stays away from the breakfast table. I don't.

NL: There is, of course, too much detail in real life to capture its entirety. Fiction writers select and discriminate to an extraordinarily high degree. In so doing they look to throw up nodes of significance, charged phenomena—while careful at the same time to avoid cliché.

George Orwell's idiosyncratic noticing of the way a condemned man steps around a puddle on his walk to the gallows in *A Hanging* provides a useful example. We apprehend the puddle, the physicality of avoiding it. We're hooked into archetypal images of hooded executioners, scaffolds. With simple sensory observation Orwell drives a wedge through corporeality into the rich and enormous realm of metaphysics, ideas and philosophy, where his notions of humanity, mortality, and absurdity, dwell. Given the right choice of detail, a crack—or, better yet, a passageway—can be opened up into an abstract and emotional space, through which the reader, depending upon her capacities and inclinations, may pass. In order

for a writer's work to be alive, it must be smarter than she is. That's where the good stuff lies…where the sense prevails that more is going on than the writer can understand; than her conscious mind can contain. Good writing taps into these charged, mysterious places and moments…this is where the writer gives the reader greatest scope to put their own experiences and thoughts into play.

In most good stories it is the character's personality that creates the action… In most poor stories the writer appears to have thought of some action and then scrounged up a character to perform it. You will usually be more successful if you start the other way around. If you start with a real personality, a real character, then something is bound to happen; and you don't have to know"what" before you begin.

RR: I always start off with the people. I know a huge amount about my characters… many of whom don't even appear in the final text. I make up a large portion of what comes before and after the story. I write a huge amount…more than anyone will publish. Then it's a winnowing process… the object is to get things down to a point where the reader will understand the story, and the rest of the iceberg. A lot of "story" lies in the ellipsis…

NL: This prompts me to reveal a fundamental operating principal: inhabit your characters as completely as possible. Sublate your own instinct as an author, as an experience of the world. Get into the consciousness and subjectivity of the character as fully as you can. Relinquish your writer's sense of ego. This means, for example, sometimes choosing not to use that detail which gives satisfaction, that perfectly turned lyrical sentence; it may mean foregoing the sweetest, most apt observation if it compromises the truth and circumstance of the character. Though the phrase may be plum or perspicacious, delete it if it doesn't suit the character. By imposing a knowing authority (leaving aside top-down cases of subjectivity with, for example, omniscient, satirical, or allegorical intent), or including too-perfect details, an author can unintentionally suck the oxygen away from

the story that needs to be told, can demean the consciousness that needs to tell it.

AE: All that has to happen in a story is for something to change. Any moment, for example, around which something becomes clear, is a good place to build a story. This change or clarification can be extremely slight. My stories are about re-inhabiting life.

I see characters as voice. Voice is the engine of a lot of my work, it's driven by the way particular characters speak the rhythms of their thought, first person usually, not spoken aloud in a room for example…but inner voices that are heard in their heads which are on the brink of being spoken. It's like talking to themselves…like a voice on the phone. Intimate, uncensored voices…not necessarily honest ones either. Writing is artificial. We don't think in fully formed sentences, or when we rant or monologue…my stories reside in these places.

My characters are very available to me. They're there as I write. The epiphany occurs as I write. You don't have to know what's going to happen before you begin. The creative process? You simply write. I don't think about the process. The wonderful thing about writing is that you, as O'Connor, one of my heroes, says, can be surprised…you can surprise yourself…my writing is about surprise. As the artist Paul Klee once said in another context, it's like taking the line for a walk.

There must be a beginning, middle, and an end to a story, though not necessarily in that order:

RR: Very challenging because it is artificial, relative to life lived…

NL: I'm interested in telescoping, microscoping, expanding and compressing time. One can't get away from the linearity—the teleological aspect—of reading. Of course there is a beginning and an end. I admire good short story writers perhaps more than most, because the temporal challenges they face are more urgent than those encountered by novelists. There's more scope for error. So that when a great story is pulled off, it's a tour de force. A much larger fraction than most people realise of the best

contemporary fiction in the world is being written, by short story writers.

When you can state the theme of a story, when you can separate it from the story itself, O'Connor tells us, then you can be sure the story is not a very good one. The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, made concrete in itself.

RR: I sometimes go back on third drafts to look for themes, to see if there are "organic" (and I'm dubious of this word) connections or patterns I can strengthen from the events I'm trying to draw.

NL: When the story is approached with thematic intentionality it tends to fall into the didactic or the polemical. The programmatic stifles the creative mess, the fortuitous diversion, the fruit of negative capability, in order to get its message across. Meaning should be intrinsic to every aspect of the story: plot, character, rhythm, language, structure, etc.

Meaning is a life force…the energy interchanged between reader and writer. Try to dam or channel this force and you risk cutting off the supply. What you're doing in the story is manipulating/ guiding/curbing/amplifying this energy so that it is maximally charged for emotional and intellectual impact…looked at this way, the goal is intensity. When theme is overemphasized, this energy is diffused. Writing amounts to the shepherding of energy…the challenge is to modulate momentum, to orchestrate suspense, and stream narrative. By the same token, though, you can't just hit readers with all this energy. The writer must always leave room for participation.

AE: Ideologies or themes are already distilled from life. They speak language that dies as soon as it's spoken. If you want to refresh the language, go before the label…go to primary sources…strip language back…to the individual, to the character. In one story of mine a woman falls in love with another…it's pure experience…she's before the label, behind the slogans. She doesn't think of herself as a lesbian. There is a moment of breaking through, before words, or labels, before knowing…this is a place where obscure emotions and blockages shift. A place where I want my writing to live. This character hasn't described her

love in a "social" way yet…all she has done is experienced it…It is good advice to follow the film writers' rule: theme should be in every scene, but never stated in any of them.

You tell a story because a statement is inadequate. When asked what the story is about, the only proper response is to tell your interlocutor to read it.

RR: It's true. When they work you, can't say or write these things shorter, or faster or better. Words, metaphors and commas are used to build something rational in order to try to effect emotion, to get a physical reaction. I'm motivated to write the story I want to write, the one that I can care for and treasure. To show life on the page, to shed light on life, to spread understanding. I'm also the "queen of qualifiers." It is very hard to impute emotion to someone else, to say this is how they feel…even if I'm their creator…I write to learn. Sometimes writing a fictional person can provide me with lessons about real people.

NL: Eliot once said that a poem can communicate before it means. Abstract meaning tends to be unilaterally imposed. Set in stone. The reader should be engaged, so the writing should invite that engagement. Short stories have to hook interest and find common places in the terrain between human beings. Among other things, readers bring colour, cadence, and new dimensions to a work that are unanticipated by the writer.

The fiction writer states as little as possible. The reader makes connections between the things he is shown.

RR: Often it's the things you don't say. Good writers will only give enough detail to make you want to fill in the blanks, to think about the rest of story after you've shut the book.

NL: The aim is to create an intense curiosity, a reaction…and to tap into larger felt mysteries. The novel's impulse is to contain everything. The short story must be spring-loaded. There isn't much time or space so the work must be geared for expansion. The desired reader response is a sense

of recognition: to do this one must first defamiliarise the reader from the things they are comfortable and familiar with. The thought process might go something like this: "There's so much out there I don't understand about other people…even though I thought I did…" this, followed by a sense of wonder and curiosity, then, contradictorily, "I know this person in the book. I'm not alone after all. I sense that the situation is not dissimilar to my own."

I'd like readers to be moved by my fiction…to experience grief, loss, redemption, joy, alienation, connectedness, estrangement…whatever it is the story is trying to make them feel… I want them to feel it as deeply as they are capable of feeling.

To listen to the interviews, follow the links below then scroll down:

Anne Enright:
http://nigelbeale.com/2008/12/audio-interview-with-anne-enright-by-nigel-beale/
Nam Le:
http://nigelbeale.com/2008/11/audio-interview-nam-le-winner-of-the-dylan-thomas-prize-author-of-the-boat-what-constitutes-a-good-short-story-2/
Rebecca Rosenblum:
http://nigelbeale.com/2008/11/what-constitutes-a-good-short-story-1-audio-interview-with-rebecca-rosenblum/

CONTRIBUTORS

Steve Ausherman is a photographer, poet, fly fisherman, traveller, potter and high school fine arts instructor who lives in New Mexico, USA. His photos have recently appeared in the journals *580 Split* and the *South Loop Review*. As well, his poetry has recently appeared in *The Aurorean*, *THE Magazine*,*Keyhole*, *Main Channel Voices*, *Avocet*, and the online journal *Roadkill Zen*. He has been teaching photography to high school students for the past eleven years and spends his summers traveling with his wife Denise.

Nigel Beale is a freelance writer/broadcaster who specializes in literary journalism. His articles and reviews have appeared in, among other places,*The Washington Post*, *The (Manchester) Guardian*, *The Globe and Mail*,*Canadian Bookseller*, *BorderCrossings* and *Canadian Art magazines*. In his role as host of The Biblio File radio program he has interviewed many of the world's most admired authors; plus publishers, booksellers, editors, book collectors, librarians, conservators, illustrators, and others connected with the book. Visit http://nigelbeale.com/ for more details.

Amy Cheng was born in Taiwan, raised in Brazil and the U.S.A. She received a BFA degree from the University of Texas at Austin, and an MFA degree from Hunter College, City University of New York. She has permanent public art installed in three American cities. Her paintings have been exhibited both in the U.S. and abroad. She is a Professor in the Art Department at the State University of New York at New Paltz. Visit http://www.amychengstudio.com/ for more details.

Patrick Donnelly is the author of *The Charge* (Ausable Press, 2003, since 2009 part of Copper Canyon Press) and *Nocturnes of the Brothel of Ruin*(forthcoming from Four Way Books). He has taught writing at Colby College, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and elsewhere. His poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Yale Review*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *The Massachusetts Review*. Donnelly and Miller's translations have previously been published in *Circumference*, *thedrunkenboat.com*, *eXchanges, Metamorphoses*, *New Plains Review*, *Noon: The Journal of the Short Poem*,*Poetry*

International and *Translations and Transformations: the* Heike Monogatari *in Nô*.

Viki Holmes is a widely anthologised and prize-winning British poet and performer who began her writing career in Cardiff as part of the Happy Demon poetry collective. She has been living and writing in Hong Kong since 2005. Her poetry has appeared in literary magazines and anthologies in Wales, England, Hong Kong, Australia, Canada, Macao and Singapore. She was twice a finalist in the John Tripp Award for spoken Poetry (Wales), and was a runner-up in Hong Kong's inaugural Poetry Slam. Her first collection, *miss moon's class*, is published by Chameleon Press (Hong Kong) and she is co-editor of the Haven (Hong Kong) anthology of world women's writing *Not A Muse*. Holmes's poetry has previously been published in issue #3 of *Cha*.

Luisa A. Igloria is the author of *Juan Luna's Revolver* (2009 Ernest Sandeen Prize for Poetry, University of Notre Dame Press), *Trill & Mordent* (WordTech Editions 2005), and eight other books. Originally from Baguio City, she is associate professor at Old Dominion University, where she also directs the MFA Program in Creative Writing. Igloria's poetry has appeared in issue #2 of *Cha*. Visit http://www.luisaigloria.com/ for more details.

Lillian Kwok is a second-generation Chinese American whose parents immigrated from Hong Kong and Taiwan. She was raised in southeastern Pennsylvania, and recently graduated magna cum laude from Pepperdine University where she studied English literature and Spanish. Beginning in August she will be teaching English in Yilan County, Taiwan on a Fulbright grant.

Franky Lau is a Hong Kong-based photographer and photo journalist. Though born in Hong Kong, Lau finds Sichuan and Xinjiang the most beautiful regions of China. He has photographed both areas extensively and is currently planning his sixth trip to Xinjiang in 2009. Recently, Lau has also started to focus his camera on the Hong Kong region. Subjects and locations such as Tai O's village life, Stanley's exotic mixture of East and West, Cheung Chau's dramatic contrast of present and past, the bygone Star Ferry Pier, *da pai dongs* and shops selling stinky tofu have all attracted his attention. Lau is determined to capture history and memories through images. While he feels

that he can speak through his photographs, Lau also enjoys writing and hopes one day to publish a collection of photography and text. His photography has previously been published in issues #4 and #6 of *Cha*.

The stories, poetry, and humor of **Larry Lefkowitz** have appeared in publications in the U.S., Israel and Britain. Lefkowitz is currently looking for publishers for two novels: the first one is about a 19th century Jewish peddler looking for the Lost Tribes of Israel among the American Indians, and the second one is about the assistant to a literary critic who, following the critic's death, is asked by his widow to complete an unfinished novel left by him. This second novel is replete with literary references. Lefkowitz's fiction has previously been published in issue #3 of *Cha*.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, **Eva Leung** received a BA with a double major in English and Comparative Literature from the University of Hong Kong. She is currently doing an MPhil in English Literature at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and is working on autobiographical fictional writings. Since secondary school, she has enjoyed writing both short stories and poems. Apart from reading and writing, she has a wide range of interests, including learning foreign languages, singing, playing the piano and horseback riding.

Pierre Lien is currently a Hong Kong local undergraduate, expecting to complete his BA in English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2010. His interests lie in linguistics, drama in performance, Shakespeare and creative writing. He likes to explore new forms of writing and is hoping to one day publish a poetry collection of his own. Contact: lien.feng.pierre@gmail.com

Belle Ling Hoi Ching is a graduate of the University of Hong Kong and has a Masters of Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Sydney. She has a special interest in writing poetry and short stories. Her favourite novelist is Haruki Murakami, and she admires poetry which has deep philosophical significance, especially the poems by Martin Harrison.

Christopher Luppi is from New York, but has spent the last fifteen years living in Asia. In addition to various columns in South East Asian d.i.y. punk rock fanzines, his fiction has previously been published in *Octopusbeakinc, Pequin,* and *elimae.* He is currently teaching English at a

university in the northeast of Thailand where he lives with his wife. He is now chipping away at what he hopes will be his first novel.

Jonathan Mendelsohn, an instructor of English at the University of Toronto, is currently working on his first novel. The book, which might just be a love story, is set in Japan, where he lived for five years. His work has previously been published in Canada and Japan, including a review of Haruki Murakami's *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*. Mendelsohn's creative non-fiction has previously been published in issue #3 of *Cha* and he will serve as the guest prose editor of the November 2009 issue of the journal. Visit his http://www.jonathanmendelsohn.blogspot.com/ for more details and other such monkey business.

Stephen D. Miller is assistant professor of Japanese language and literature at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is translator of *A Pilgrim's Guide to Forty-Six Temples* (Weatherhill Inc., 1990), and editor of *Partings at Dawn: An Anthology of Japanese Gay Literature* (Gay Sunshine Press, 1996). He lived in Japan for nine years between 1980 and 1999, in part as the recipient of two Japan Foundation fellowships for research abroad. He is currently working on a study of the Buddhist poetry in the Japanese imperial poetry anthologies. Miller and Donnelly's translations have previously been published in *Circumference*, *thedrunkenboat.com*, *eXchanges,* Metamorphoses, *New Plains Review*, *Noon: The Journal of the Short Poem*, *Poetry International* and *Translations and Transformations: the* Heike Monogatari *in Nô*.

Nikesh Murali's poems and short stories have appeared in ebooks, ezines, anthologies, journals and magazines all over the world. His works have been translated into several languages. He was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2007 by *Shalla Magazine*. He has a Masters in Journalism and Teaching, and is working towards a Doctorate in Creative Arts. He is a tutor and researcher at James Cook University. Visit http://www.nikeshmurali.net/ for more details.

Ng Yi-Sheng is a poet, playwright, journalist and gay rights activist. His first poetry collection, *last boy*, won the 2008 Singapore Literature Prize. He has

also published a non-fiction titled *SQ21: Singapore Queers in the 21st Century*, which was a bestseller in Singapore, and a novelisation of the movie*Eating Air*. He blogs at http://lastboy.blogspot.com/.

O Thiam Chin's short stories have been published in literary journals: *Asia Literary Review, Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, and in anthologies such as *Best of Singapore Erotica*, *SilverFish New Writings* 6 and*Body2Body*. His debut collection of short stories, *Free-Falling Man*, was self-published in 2006, and his new story-collection, *Never Been Better*, will be published in 2009 by MPH Publishing.

Divya Rajan, originally from Bombay, is a poetry reviewer for *Sotto Voce Magazine*. She is also currently involved in translating Modern and Post-Modern works of selected Malayalam poetry for *Muse India*. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Gloom Cupboard, Foundling Review, Poetry Friends*, *Read This*, *The Times of India, Ultraviolet*,*Femina* and other literary publications. Her artwork has been displayed at a suburban Chicago Art Gallery and is forthcoming in *Blue Fifth Review*. She blogs at http://napervillemom.blogspot.com/.

Sri Lankan born **Prashani Rambukwella** is a professional writer currently working in Hong Kong. She graduated with a BA in English Literature from the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, where she is known as a playwright and director. Prashani is an avid fan of children's literature. Her first book,*Mythil's Secret*, was published by Perera Hussein Publishing House in 2009.

Vaughan Rapatahana is a Kiwi (New Zealander) who lives and works in Hong Kong, and who has lived in many overseas locations for the last fifteen years. Previously, he has been published in several New Zealand poetry publications such as *Takahe, Blackmail Press, Deep South, Bravado, Poetry New Zealand*, *Landfall* and *Valley Micropress*. Rapatahana's is also the author of the poetry teaching resource series *English Through Poetry* published worldwide.

Kathryn (Kate) Rogers has twice been short-listed for the Winston Collins Best Canadian Poem Prize by *Descant Magazine* (Toronto) in January 2008 and February 2009. Her poetry, essays and reviews have been published in anthologies and literary magazines in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Canada, the U.S. and the UK. They have appeared in the *Asia Literary Review*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Dimsum*, *Pressed*, *The New Quarterly*, *Contemporary Verse II*, *Canadian Woman Studies*, *The Mad Woman in the Academy* and *Orbis International*. Her work also appeared in the anthology, *We Who Can Fly: Poems, Essays and Memories in Honour of Adele Wiseman*. Rogers is co-editor of the international women's poetry anthology *Not A Muse* (Haven Books, Hong Kong, March 2009); her poetry collection, *Painting the Borrowed House*, debuted at the Man Hong Kong Literary Festival in March 2008, is available on Amazon.com and from Proverse, Hong Kong. Originally from Toronto, Rogers has been teaching writing, literature and English for Academic and Professional Purposes for colleges and universities in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan for the past ten years. A bi-lingual Chinese and English collection of her essays about conservation, bird watching and culture in Taiwan, *The Swallows' Return*, was published in June 2006. Rogers currently teaches in the Division of Language Studies at the Community College of City University in Hong Kong.

Steven Schroeder is the co-founder, with composer Clarice Assad, of theVirtual Artists Collective (a "virtual" gathering of musicians, poets, and visual artists) that has published five poetry collections each year since it began in 2004. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *After Hours, Concho River Review, the Cresset, Druskininkai Poetic Fall 2005, Macao Closer, Mid-America Poetry Review, Poetry East, Poetry Macao, Rhino, Shichao, Sichuan Literature, Texas Review, TriQuarterly, Wichita Falls Literature & Art Review*, and other literary journals. He has published two chapbooks, *Theory of Cats* and *Revolutionary Patience*, and three full-length collections, *Fallen Prose, The Imperfection of the Eye,* and *Six Stops South*. He teaches at the University of Chicago in Asian Classics and the Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults and at Shenzhen University in China. Schroeder's poetry has previously been published in issue #5 of *Cha*.

Rohith Sundararaman is a poet based out of Mumbai, India. His work has been previously published or will appear in *elimae*, *Eclectica*, , *Two*

Review, *Edifice Wrecked*, *GUD Magazine*, and other places. Recently, his poem was selected as the best in a contest judged by Marvin Bell. In his spare time, Sundararaman likes to read a lot of Murakami, and go out on photowalks.

Gillian Sze was born and raised in Winnipeg. Her work has appeared in *CV2*, *Prairie Fire*, and *Crannóg*. She is the author of two chapbooks, *This is the Colour I Love You Best* (2007) and *A Tender Invention* (2008). Her collection of poetry, *Fish Bones*, was published by DC Books in 2009. She completed her Master's degree in Creative Writing and resides in Toronto, Canada. Sze's poetry has previously been published in issues #5 and #6 of *Cha* and she will serve as the guest editor of the February 2010 issue of the journal.

Kok-Meng Tan is a Singapore architect practising in Shanghai. In his spare time, he writes about architecture and urban life.

Anne Tibbitts lives and writes in Jefferson County, MO where she teaches part time at Jefferson College. Tibbitts's writings have appeared in several publications including *Mothering Magazine*, *Word Salad Poetry* and *Green Hills Literary Lantern*. She is 46 years old.

David C.E. Tneh is an academician and poet from Malaysia whose creative writings have been published in Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States. His poetry has been published in *Asiatic* and *In Our Own Words* vol. 7(2007). He is currently teaching English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Creative Industries, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR).

Lynn van der Velden-Elliott is a Canadian living in the Netherlands. Photography - particularly and almost exclusively medium format analogue photography - makes her very happy. In March 2009, she travelled to Hong Kong with her husband, a Polaroid 680, and a Great Wall DF-2 camera, and found beauty and inspiration everywhere she ventured. She loves colour and texture and light, and capturing those details not always apparent at first glance. Her images can be found on her website http://www.two-muses.com/ and here: http://www.flickr.com/photos/1muse.

Les Wicks' books are *The Vanguard Sleeps In* (Glandular, 1981), *Cannibals*(Rochford St, 1985), *Tickle* (Island, 1993), *Nitty Gritty* (Five Islands, 1997),*The Ways of Waves* (Sidewalk, 2000), *Appetites of Light* (Presspress, 2002),*Stories of the Feet* (Five Islands, 2004) and *The Ambrosiacs* (Island, 2009). Wicks has been a guest at most of Australia's literary festivals, toured widely and been published in over 200 newspapers, anthologies and magazines across twelve countries in seven languages. He runs Meuse Press, which focused on poetry outreach projects. Visit http://leswicks.tripod.com/lw.htm for more details.