

Malachi Edwin Vethamani (Ed). *Malaysian Millennial Voices*. Petaling Jaya: Maya Press, 2021. 177pp. ISBN: 978-9-83273-762-9.

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Malaysian Millennial Voices brings together the work of young poets under thirty-five who write in English. While many anthologies play a canonical function by reprinting already published works or prize-winning texts, the poems in this volume were selected from an open call. As described by editor Malachi Edwin Vethamani in the introduction, an anonymous review process by fifteen expert readers led to sixty-nine poems being selected out of an initial list of 530. The sheer volume of submissions stands in stark contrast to how Malaysian writing in English had, in the last decades of the twentieth century, dwindled to the status of a minor literature in a minority language. In *Malaysian Millennial Voices*, English as the chosen literary language of internet-savvy youth cannot be assumed to be the Globish of the digitally-flattened world. The distinctive tonalities and energetic lyricism of this collection originate from the deeply-felt experiences of the thirty-seven poets who are represented, thus remaking literary English as *rasa* Malaysian. On the back cover, glowing endorsements by established figures in the Malaysian English poetry scene, such as Wong Phui Nam and Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, intimate a certain urgency in claiming *Millennial Voices* as part of Malaysia's Anglophone poetic tradition, with Wong praising these young poets as having arrived as Malaysians by "making a home here for poetry in English".

Nonetheless, these young writers show themselves to be unconstrained by reductive and simplistic understandings of Malaysian national identity or intercultural frictions. Though the claim to being Malaysian, as announced in the anthology's title, is a tall order, these new poetic voices choose to inflect Malaysian identity implicitly, through everyday experiences as well as playful and generous imaginings of other Malaysian lives alongside their own. In "School by the Beach", Samantha Lim Hil Dong writes in a visually accented register after e. e. cummings, except instead of grasshoppers and blue-eyed boys, it is the scattering of biscuit crumbs and "b i t s of our lekor" that so evocatively calls to mind the freedom after the end of the school day. Referencing the "lekor" or fish crackers distinctive to the coast of East Malaysia, the poem is joyfully sensory. In Lim's poem as in many others, non-English terms function less as ornamental or conscious signifiers of culture and more as part of a seamless poetic idiom as hinted through the possessive "our". Many of the poems

are simply comfortable enough in their own skin to tackle themes and issues that are unrelated to national origins, though a number turn a wry, knowing eye on the rose-tinted images of an identifiably Malaysian childhood such as Kaiven Ng's "Oh Saudade". Ng's poem begins with the injunction to "tuck me in/ quilts of nostalgia" before presenting several taut stanzas where the quaintness of "*biskut* shops" and "a rattling *bas sekolah*" belies the unspoken economic undertow of "a mall/ perpetually foreclosing". The allusion to the Portuguese term for melancholic longing is not so much a gesture towards worldliness as an attempt to relocate the foreign term within the affective territory of a Malaysian childhood, while effecting a critique of such "rose-tinted eyes".

As is to be expected of a collection of varied voices, one gets the sense of several audiences being addressed at once. The struggles and emotional angst of growing up feature strongly, as does the ambivalent role of parental figures, who are depicted variously as guardians, tyrants, or as faithless absences. The most striking poems to deal with this theme do not depend on extended metaphor or extravagant imagery. Instead, pieces such as "The Essential Oil Inventor" by Farah Nadhirah binti Chairil Anwar and "Sighting of a Father" by Deepa Muniandy take up the challenge of depicting a parent, as filtered through the messy intimacy of intuition and outward observation. Farah Nadhirah's poem presents Mama as a builder and architect, whose "toil" with aromatherapy is invisible labour that leaves her with "rough hands" as much as it would "illuminate" the speaker's mind with "peaceful memories". In "Sighting of a Father", the central image of the speaker's father sitting by the stairs in the darkness, which "he loves", is a meditation on the uncertainties of absence and presence. Muniandy's verse achieves a sharp poignancy through its brevity, and each stanza hinges on a central clause that highlights the slippage between present and future tense. But what makes *Millennial Voices* an important collection, apart from the many examples of well-crafted verse on display, is how these young poets frequently speak as the voice of today's youth. To mention just one example, "Sons and Daughters in JB" is presented from the perspective of the children of Malaysians who travel daily across the causeway to Singapore to work and better provide for their family. What appears to be a short daily journey entails years of transience "entering and leaving the house like a hotel", an absence even more pronounced with current Covid-related border restrictions. Addressing the world, the anthology's youthful poems often speak of the injustice of inheriting broader environmental, political, and social failures, as with "A Globe Marked by Hopes".

Where these voices allude to inter-ethnic or political controversies, these are typically done with a deftly critical eye and an ease of craft that imbues the verse with gravitas and wit. In "A Political Story", Yee Heng Yah presents a series of general questions each beginning with "who" or "whose" and culminating in a last line that is likened to an owl's hoot consisting of several repeated who-s. The implicit conclusion here is that it is up

to Malaysians “who” must take charge of the political narratives that shape their lives. Other poems eschew the fault lines between the country’s three main ethnic communities to explore more nuanced identities beyond the lens of cultural essentialism. These include “Chindian is...” and “The Land of Unknown Grandfathers”. Still others exhibit an empathic and generous imagining of lives in between different communities, a tone set by the anthology’s two opening poems by Aisha Hassan which address a Chinese and then a Malay grandfather in turn. The masterful sequencing of the poems in the anthology juxtaposes broader social perspectives with more personal responses, so that the reader is never tempted towards a polemical or reactionary reading.

As earlier reviews have pointed out, it would be no surprise if a number of future giants in Malaysian poetry in English would have first appeared in this collection. However, some of the poems show that their creators are still in the process of developing their poetic voices. A number of pieces seem to rely on the poet’s admiration of other canonised writers, while others could have extended their exploration of their chosen subject matter through a few more revisions for a clearer distillation of the emotional and philosophical truths at hand. Still, bearing in mind that these are young poets, what they lack in polish is more than made up for in the uncovering of new perspectives and affective registers.

Malaysian Millennial Voices is an anthology characterised by hope, not so much as a sentiment that is expressed, but in the sheer energy of a body of work that registers the presence of Malaysian poetry in English. Accessible and timely, the collection would appeal to an audience under and above thirty-five, and calls out especially to potential readers who have not previously picked up a book of poetry.