

Jason Eng Hun Lee, *Beds in the East*. London: Eyewear Publishing, 2019. 90pp. ISBN 978-1-912477-82-1.

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Beds in the East is the debut poetry collection of Jason Eng Hun Lee. Sequenced in two halves, the first section, also titled “Beds in the East,” is followed by “The Edge of Vast Shores.” Alluding to Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* as well as Plato, who are quoted in the epigraphs to each section, these titles signal the ambition of Lee’s book, which puts recollections about his Malaysian childhood in conversation with further ruminations on being a wanderer in the world. Throughout the collection, the East, which has been relentlessly deconstructed by cultural critics as an exotic construct, receives a more generous embrace in Lee’s expansive negotiation of themes of departure, crossings, and becoming. Though primarily anchored by the speaker’s status as a diasporic person of Malaysian extraction, *Beds in the East* is less about identity than the melancholic and alienating insufficiency of national, racial, and cultural categories.

Many of the poems in the collection move towards a realisation about the self, crystallised through a personal recount of experiences in locations as diverse as a Chinese New Year lion dance and a rowdy English pub during a football match. Lee’s childhood poems are strikingly bereft of nostalgia and derive much of their emotional force from understated evocations of action and circumstance, which open, sometimes startlingly, towards a larger emotional or philosophical observation. For instance, the poem “Catching Grasshoppers,” that common trope of a carefree Malaysian boyhood, devotes two long stanzas to describing the pursuit with minute, affectionate attention. “Stroking the garden for grasshoppers,” the speaker and his companions stand in the grass, “knee deep in sweat-stained inspiration.” Yet the closing of the poem pivots to a sudden empathy with the captured creatures, whose “placid ways” lead to the speaker taking a “common stand” with the insects. Setting the grasshoppers free, he “strode against the shrieks of classmates,” becoming, briefly, one with the insects’ joy of flying “into the freshness of another world.” Reminiscent of Walt Whitman, though attenuated by an objectivist emphasis that recalls Wong Phui Nam’s *How the Hills are Distant*, the heroic “I” of the collection pursues his place in the world through poems such as “Becoming,” “Terra Incognita,” and “Arrivals.”

Beds in the East has, at its heart, the attempt to articulate a specifically Malaysian opening onto the entangled transnational spaces we call the “world.” While the titles of the opening sequence such as “Out of China,” “Family

Gathering,” and “Turtle Island” may appear overly conventional, the poems themselves reward a closer reading and rely on the tactical elision of expected cultural markers in locating the self. In “White Woman,” readers share the perspective of Malaysian villagers in greeting an *orang putih* (white person) with “curved smiles” and cries of “misse, you buy, you buy” while children put their arms against hers “shocked at the contrast of her colour.” The sharper surprise resides in the last stanza, when the speaker falls in the marketplace, bloodying his knee, only to have the white woman come over with a handkerchief—his mother. Readers are introduced to the speaker’s Malaysian Chinese father through another moment of perspectival contrast, this time, in “45 Belgrave Square.” Malaysians and Londoners alike may not immediately recognise the address of the Malaysian High Commission and this doubly alienated perspective is reinforced through the allegorical underpinnings of the poem, where the speaker and his father sit “under / the crescent gaze of a woman with sharp brows / and a glorious headscarf striped across her forehead,” the symbology emerging slowly even for those familiar with the Malaysian flag. Without the “right stamp,” the speaker becomes ambivalently English by default because of his British passport. Finding himself “attendant now in my own country,” the light irony of this expression is underscored by the closing reflection of “how truly mankind is press-ganged into service” towards the nation, even in the act of ejection from one. To say he does not belong anywhere is to do an injustice to the sting and fractiousness of such exits.

Disinherited in the very act of naming the various sources of his mixed heritage, the speaker takes flight into an enlarged register of exile and movement. The most striking poems in the collection adopt an epic tone to depict departures and arrivals on “vast shores,” thereby inscribing a genealogical locus to the dynamic of displacement. “Islands” hails “ancestor spirits” as “foamy voices” pounding like the surf on the edges of the land, “thrashing horizons near / and wide.” Refusing the easy cosmopolitanism of cultural labels, the poem powerfully maintains the cultural anonymity of the “I” who speaks thus to his forebears:

I greet them daily beneath chequered skies,
bid them goodnight in a foreign tongue
and rebound the ocean’s sigh.

The poem sequence “Crossings” represents an extended departure from a first-person voice in the collection and traces the evolution of civilisations and nomadic tribes in the steppes in 20 000 BC to the Great Wall in 1647, adopting the same expansive scale of an omniscient perspective to varying effect. That the epigraph from Plato, about “a small child wandering upon the vast shores of knowledge,” is itself a comment by Isaac Newton, though commonly attributed to the philosopher, perhaps further illustrates the collection’s perambulatory tendencies

(Frederic 68). However, what appears to be an energised lyricism of expanded space-time in some poems shades, in others, into generalised expressions that are less effective. “The Keris Speaks,” despite the innovation of being a shape poem, does not quite convey the charged mysticism that accompanies the blade as a spiritual tool in Malay culture, with expressions such as “I will undulate like *naga* in his dance of death” verging on the conventional. “The Wake” attempts, perhaps unsuccessfully, a depiction of stoicism and mundane grief in the tradition of Philip Larkin’s “Ambulances.” Lines such as “Somewhere, sometime soon, each of them will break / their resolve to scatter home in their wake / and shake to the unknown” oddly balances lyricism against the prosaic.

Still, there is much to savour in *Beds from the East*, which is important for articulating the condition of being a diasporic Malaysian in the new millennium, where one can “neither ‘write back’ to the former colonial centre, nor can ‘write back’ to the attendant language politics, cultural baggage, and problems of self-censorship that have affected writers of sectional literature in the Malaysian national literary canon” (Iyer and Lee 3). In this depiction of lives in-between, catch-all terms such as hybridity and exile do less than the tenderness of this collection conveyed in the last lines of “The Great Wall” for “simple lives forced / again, into unnatural walls.”

Works Cited

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