

uncommonly in the kind of childhood narrative Boey writes in some of the essays that constitute *Between Stations*, contemporary Singapore entombs a childhood lived in another time, another place. It is almost the same but not quite: "I point to a laminated reproduction of the Collyer Quay in the window and say wistfully, 'Old Singapore. Very beautiful.'" And then, a few pages on, he offers the kind of coda that resonates throughout the book, the ghostly voice of famous writers echoing his own: "Then, to quote Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.'"

As autobiography, the essays speak of a postcolonial personal and artistic sensibility that is a product of East and West, and Boey's erudite disquisition about exile and longing draws as easily on Chinese classic poetry as he does on the English Romantics or on famous names in travel writing, Bruce Chatwin in particular. In a telling moment, Boey recalls reading Keats as a child and then searching frantically through Singapore bookshops for his personal copy of a poetry that would mark him for life, as a person and as a writer. There are echoes here too of Michael Ondaatje's zany *Running in the Family*, the story of the dying glory of colonial Sri Lanka entwined with Ondaatje's family's own experiences. Reading Boey I thought also of V.S. Naipaul and Jamaica Kincaid. Like the former he oscillates between equally

intense affection and contempt for one's own birthplace. From Kincaid Boey borrows an angry melancholia of dislocation that borders on over-indulgent ennui; to emigrate is always to experience profound loss but it is also to benefit immeasurably from the encounter with other places and other peoples. As a would-be-migrant, in *Between Stations*, Kim Cheng Boey adopts the viewpoint and persona of a wandering Chinese to rehearse old ways of being for the insight they might offer into the world of the present and the life he anticipates in Australia. In the collection's concluding essay, the eponymous "Between Stations," Boey travels back from Australia to Singapore, now no longer alone but with his young family, himself a father.



Eileen Spencer

EMERGING WRITING FROM UNDER THE RAINSHADOW

The Tropical Writers of Far North Queensland, *Raining on the Sun: An Anthology of Writing*. ISBN 9780980420715. RRP: \$24.95. pp.154

Raining on the Sun is an anthology of writing by the Tropical Writers, a group of emerging poets and short story writers who are based mainly in Cairns, North Queensland. My first reading of *Raining on the Sun* was as a visitor to Queensland, who knew very little of the land and the climate or even the people. I came from Canada, a country that could not be more different from the Australia of Queensland, to visit my family, recently settled in the tropics. I was still unaware of the cultural divide and as I settled by the pool for a good read, I gradually realised what I was in for. The Tropical Writers certainly whet my appetite for life in the tropics.

Because of my circumstances, I was drawn naturally to the stories and poems in the collection that described the Wet and the ones that entranced me were those that evoked the mood and developed the tension around oppressive and explosive weather events. Stories like Diane Finlay's "Another Unmade Bed" that vividly pictured the effect of a terrible cyclone on a stunned woman who can think of nothing but making the beds to restore order, and Hazel Menhira's "Contrasts" in which she juxtaposes the Indian and Queensland experience of a tragically destructive monsoon in a photo exhibit into which she cleverly weaves the story of the photographer, plucked from the storm as a small child whose parents are destroyed by it. "Monsoon Two" is an equally evocative piece that

describes a Queensland monsoon and its aftermath — "All that is left are stumps and the fallen trees, already browning with death," and "[p]ieces of timber and steel balance on each other like a giant game of fiddlesticks." Another sad tale of loss in the Wet is "A Crying Kind of Day" which is a short but punchy tribute to a teacher who loses her life in the flood in order to save her students. "Taim Bilong Ren" describes a monsoon wedding in Papua and highlights the way that life goes on in spite of the severe weather.

Some of the poems are particularly effective in conjuring up the brooding humidity and the stultifying suspense when life appears to stop and wait for the rains to arrive. "The Storm" by David J. Delaney begins with the onset of the rainstorm,

"Light rain now falling
This heat so oppressive"

and builds to the height of the storm —

"Trees bending almost breaking
Leaves shredded in stinging rain"

And "Cyclic Dance" by Hazel Menhira captures the movement of the storm from a still, breath-holding stupor —

"The skin of the town is sticky,
damp.
Close sultry air hangs on its
shoulders
Like a drowning man

to the beginning of the rain —

“Three plops – another dance
begins,”

which is a relief at first —

“At last it’s here.”

but soon becomes terrifying —

“macabre dance out of control.”

And Glenis Francis suggests for me in the following lines from “Monsoon Pisces” that tropical paradise with blue skies and brilliant sun has a hidden ferocity hardly imagined by the unsuspecting visitor —

“Dance little Lady
Flow in feathers high.
Black Jack will burn your skin,
now pale as Summer sky.”

Another theme thoroughly explored in this collection is that of loss and exile from home which must often be felt by those who venture to such an isolated land far away from the dense metropolis. Bhama Daly’s story “Silverfish Dreaming” hearkens back to Malaysia as the writer returns in memory to her childhood and her decision to leave her family and study in London leading her eventually to a life in Queensland, “so very like the Malaysia of my youth and so different.” Another story by Daly, “Time is a Thief” is a haunting and lyrical tale of a return home for the terminal illness of a dear father after

a life of voluntary exile in the tropics, “We have lingered too long, I think to myself, haunted by guilt. We had planned on taking the children to visit their grandparents, but never found the time.” Daly’s language vividly conjures up the mixed feelings of regret and resignation inevitable to most emigrants’ experience.

Isolation from family, dislocated family, and the quest for lost family come up in several stories. In Oonagh Prettejohn’s story “A Matter of Relevance” Tif is rescued by a salty midget who offers to lead her to her father, whom she had assumed was dead. She chooses to remain a free spirit and not to reconcile with him — a choice, one suspects, that might be a common one among the backpacking and wandering spirits of the North. “Jacaranda” also deals with a family reunited but less than comfortable with each other just as in “The Accident” the author deals with regret after a family fight which causes a car crash killing the husband. And “Key-Change” shows a daughter unwilling to travel and visit her sick mother because she still harbors bitterness towards her. The poignancy and loneliness of old age are touched on in “Angus” and also “Behind the Gossamer” which is an imaginative encounter with the ghost of a soldier who reminisces proudly about the Great War.

Many of the more humorous and quirky stories deal with animals and it is not always easy to see how they fit into the thematic categories

of the collection. However, they do provide light relief from the intensity of much of the material and as such, enhance the rhythm of the work.

“Bokjoy,” the first story in the collection, by Susan Ascott-Evans, is the winner of the *Cairns Post* Short Story Contest. We are led up the garden path by a chicken whose identity we have to guess as the story is told from the chook’s point of view. The intermittent pain caused by the passing of the egg is the give-away for me (although I really hope the agony of birth is not as severe for the chicken as it is described here). The poetry winner of the same contest is another fun piece called “George W Puss” by the same writer. The piece alternates points of view between master and cat, and is hilarious in the disconnect. “The Dog” by Nell Hillard is an entertaining account of the love-hate relationship between owner and pet. “Moussaka,” on the other hand, is a geriatric mouse loved so dearly by his mistress in Nell Hillard’s “Julie’s Geriatric Moussaka” that she revives him with CPR on a daily basis.

The stories in this collection represent the writing talent of twenty-four writers who live in the far north, from Babinda to Port Douglas. It is the third anthology produced by the Tropical Writers Group of Far North Queensland. The styles and quality of writing are as varied as are the subjects but a

few of the writers show special talent. Hazel Menehira’s story “Contrasts” is an interesting narrative from the very first sentence which piques the curiosity. I am impressed by the natural flow of the conversation between interviewer and artist, the hint of mystery at the artist’s origins, the subtle revelation of back-story through the reporter’s jottings on the photographs and finally the solving of the mystery and the interviewer’s learning from the experience. The weaving of story and commentary with conversation, and the interplay of past and present cleverly and naturally deliver both reader and reporter from mystery to revelation.

“Five Greek Gods” a story by Chris Campbell-Thomson is cleverly devised with a shapely development. The dream at the beginning of winning at the Pokies is echoed by the reality of losing at the end and both are tied neatly together by the foreboding of the squeaking train wheels and Valhalla the dog’s howling. The exultation of the dream (in which our hero wins gloriously) is counterbalanced by the despair at losing in real life, and the twist of the knife is in the way the poor fellow loses. (Read it to find out.)

Bhama Daly’s two stories “Time is a Thief” and “Silverfish Dreaming” are both poignant and lyrical. I was moved by the eloquent expression of the immigrant’s dilemma. Both the stories haunt me with subtle hints of falling between two worlds, an unexpressed yearning for home which

is no longer the home of childhood but not yet the new country either. This is reminiscent of the kind of emotional disconnect hinted at by postcolonial writers like the Asian-Canadian Vassanji and a powerful expression of the negotiation necessitated by emigration.

Although some of the poems in the collection suffer from awkward and forced rhyming there are also some bright jewels like “Crystal Clear” by Nika-Atherton Soymonoff. This is a prism of sheer beauty. The phrase “the strangler-fig photocopies into the lake” is just one example of this poet’s eloquence. The work is like a photograph taken from above, mirroring every exquisite detail, vividly capturing a moment in the rich life of a lake abounding with life and poised in perfection. Diane Messervy is also a poet who uses words with great effect. “The Long Wet” powerfully expresses the oppressive weight of humidity and makes the skin crawl with its vividness.

So, as I finish reading this varied collection of stories and poetry with what impression of Northern Queensland am I left? It is clear first of all that this is a land of extreme contrasts. There is immense beauty in the landscape (“Christmas Decorations in the Rainforest,” “Crystal Clear,” “Forest Fantasy”) but there is also drama and fear in natural events (“A Mother’s Fear”). There is love of family and friends and a desire to be with them and nostalgia for old countries, but there is also a need to escape from family bonds and a reluctance to

return—a propulsion towards new adventures. The stories and poems deal with family love and family dissension, and travel that is both a quest for origins and for new horizons. This collection illuminated for me the richness of the land and hinted at its complexity, its beauty, its ferocity and its warmth.

This collection, then, is a wonderful and tantalising introduction for this reader to both tropical Queensland and to its emerging writers, many of whom represent the potential of this region to outgrow any kind of lingering regional or provincial stigma that might still dog tropical Australia. *Raining on the Sun* is an anthology of writing that showcases some best-kept secrets of FNQ.



Malcolm Tattersall

MASKS

John Hughes. *Someone Else: Fictional Essays*. Artarmon: Giramondo Publishing. ISBN 9781 920882259 ISBN-10: 1920882251. pp.184 Paperback. RRP: \$24.95.