

Review of "Scattered Vertebrae," by Jerrold Yam

Kim Lim

Among the debris of a life knocked to pieces, a body begs to be born. The beauty of the image of scattered vertebrae is how it incorporates the dual notions of destruction and creation—a backbone dashed to the ground, and an opportunity for a palaeontologist to enter, gather, and reassemble the pieces. The paradox in the case of Jerrold Yam's second collection of poetry is that both defacer and palaeontologist are the same person, one who destroys his mother's Chinese vase by "send(ing) it to the floor" precisely in order to recover losses from the shards. One who breaks apart traditional frames in order to remake the meaning of a single, special individual. This is Yam's project—building a home from the rubble of a former one that could not extend its roof over his head. Yam chips away at the walls of traditional values in the family, church, and society, and attempts through poetry to shapeshift the body, as if words could remould a life.

And words certainly do, especially those that emerge out of Yam's poetics. At the tender age of twenty-two, with two published collections out and barely a freshman at University College London, Yam makes one wonder what they have done with their life. I am even amazed at how Yam managed to push out so many poems, all sixty-six of them, impeccably written and edited, in the middle of what I am assuming were university applications, National Service, and the debut publication of *Chasing Suns* only a year before. What is this, poetic steroids? Yam's poems are densely packed with beautiful, precise language, and they are most often rendered in an unbroken, single verse, as if each constituted a chunk of the persona's soul. *Scattered Vertebrae* might not be the perfect book for the beach, but if it doesn't transport the reader away to a magical realm, what it certainly does is grab and push you beneath Yam's skin. This collection is a burning life force, the persona bled onto the page. It throbs with painful brilliance; it blazes overhead with its pleas; it spills the essences of the body in offering; it throws its yearning into the night. Yet, despite the visceral nature of its emotions, Yam's writing somehow remains measured, observant, mythic, and compassionate. This is brave stuff. So often confessional poetry aspires to wear its heart on its sleeve, but Yam calmly removes his clothes and invites the reader to gaze at the nudity of his poetry. He performs this so naturally that possible controversy in the subject matter ceases to be controversy, by virtue of the fact that we have entered the sacred space of the persona's private intimacies.

The poems are categorised into five parts, and cumulatively they chart out a larger continuous narrative of the "I," who struggles to put the pieces of the broken vases of family, religion, and sex together. Part One, a general introduction of the Yam household in a state of "family debris," begins the collection a little too modestly, and in my opinion inconveniences it. Our persona's voice seems muffled, disappeared under a systematic commentary of a family, and love's overtures are kept under tight wraps. However with the impact of "Invincible," and a string of dazzling poems that follow like "Piety," "Heirloom," "Feast," "Chocolate," and "Birthday," Part Two accelerates into the momentum that will sustain an impressive collection through to its close. It is not a coincidence that Yam frequently refers to eating and consumption as he ruminates about social expectations, religion, and desire. Older boys lift "his face as water to their faces"; his sister "rock(s), tuck(s), and kiss(es) the broken parts (of potato chips) before / bringing their salt to her lips"; "macerating" a grape reminds him of the "unripe / egg of the female before sperm tongue their way through." The act of ingestion transforms two separate bodies into a single entity, and this miracle seems to offer temporary insights to the paradoxes of adhering to social customs (an individual made into the communal), of worshipping and communion (the worshipper's embodiment of Jesus), and of desiring (the merging of bodies). Partaking is essentially an issue of claiming, and with the competing claims of family, society, and religion on his body, Yam fights back by questioning these institutions and formulating his own claims in defiance. In a touching show of candour towards his father, Yam comes out in "Foliage" by remarking how it is in fact impossible to come out "under this roof." He refuses to remain at home just as leaves from a tree "resist turning into soil," where they will be eaten, compacted, and digested back into the singular body of the earth. And yet, "leaving and staying / are imperfect solutions."

Which brings us back to the notion of how a single body should be shared when torn apart. Part Three climaxes into a gorgeous, excruciating picture of desire, as Yam divulges his sexuality with astonishing language. Consider this line in "Orbit": "I / saw the moon like a nipple of amber / crowning its chest of underwater dark," or "Assembly": "I took water from their mouths into my own, facial hair, underarms, water from their remotest parts, their clothed origins," or "Virgin": "the helpless / organism of myself as stem and shoot, / back hardening, hungry from the inside." Yet this ache of desire appears hand-in-hand with the burn of religious guilt: "your semen raw on my skin like the milk of a / cracked fruit, like punishment." Desire is again commingled with religion in "Psalm," when the persona surrenders his doubts to a divine epiphany. In fact, such examples of erotically-charged religious unions are hardly surprising: consider how the persona presents himself to God, "pure and unknissed, completely surrendered to / the fearfully and wonderfully made," and is positioned back into the "maker's womb," the site of creation; the womb, naturally, is also the site of desire's product. To Yam, the notion that guilt accompanies desire is an ethic intrinsic to his poetics—guilt and desire create even as they destroy. As the collection progresses, guilt leaves the arena of sexual desire and manifests in the inscrutable debt of the womb.

In spite of the homosexual desire present in these poems, Yam's most relentless obsession is gendered towards the female rather than male figure; the body of the mother in particular. (If the collection had been entitled "MATERNITY!!!", I wouldn't have been surprised at all.) I am not going to bother quoting lines about birth or motherhood, because they are in almost every poem, and they are all sublime. Actually, what the hell, I can't resist because they are all too good. His mother's "unguent life-force" is "distilled, poured down the chalice of her daughter's face." Her menstrual blood is described as an "elixir" (first, kudos to any guy who writes a menstruation poem, and in addition a nice crown for describing it as an elixir rather than a waste product), and he wonders, "What if they / had wanted to live, to be nurtured, / just like how I had no choice? ...// their vapours and fibres strung together in / the dark, in defiance of creation." The persona also imagines himself in his mother's body, "head grazing her womb's veined forestry, / Russian dolls yet unbroken"; and in "Ghost" Yam extends the image by transfiguring the persona into a foetus already established in relationship with its mother: "when it / became too much, even for two people, or two / things stranded in the script of capillaries, / I led you where a basin could house / all your body rejected." Finally in "Birthday," Yam turns the life-giving notion of maternity on its head: "She gave me lodging for nine / months and nurtured an eternal debt for it," and describes birth as the "flushing me out into being." Yam has taken apart the concept of motherhood and its common associations—maternal love, nurturing, milk, warm bosoms, swaddling cloths, gifts, etc.—and highlights the darker side of its reality. The truth is that maternity is also about remarkable violence and the blood pact established between mother and child who, initially moulded as one, through the process of childbirth are cleaved into two. Yam is haunted by this debt: how can he repay the blood link with his mother? How to repay her life force? The self-dividing act of birth—a mother pushing her child out of herself—is a mirror image of the incorporating act of communion, and together these paradoxes bind Yam's work in poetic harmony. And thus as a roundabout way of repaying his mother's debt, Yam replies debt with more debt, this time by mothering life himself—"Sometimes, when the earth prepares for rain, I think / of having a child. Like me / it shall not know, gathering life at another's expense / as cloud from lake, how cells become matter, how / generously it lowers into being."

Ostensibly, there is a narrative arc to the collection as our persona struggles with the demons of tradition and approaches reconciliation. Of course, concerns as deep and troubling as the ones Yam has raised can never be fully resolved—the end arrives only when it is willing, the impassioned soul ready to come to a standstill for the night. Yet, as Yam refashions the scattered vertebrae of a former self into a new being, he realises that the core of its skeleton is rooted to the old, same things; though the pillars of family, religion, and individual desire collide, together they prop up a person. Towards the end the persona takes part in and meditates on communion; he hears his mother utter "I love you" from behind a door (previously the phrase had only appeared sewn into a bookmark); and he responds to the grace of his sister in the middle of a crowd. Above all, he is ready to make his own life.

Born in 1991, **Jerrold Yam** is a law undergraduate at University College London and the author of two poetry collections by Math Paper Press, *Scattered Vertebrae* (2013) and *Chasing Curtained Suns* (2012). His poems have been published in more than fifty literary journals worldwide, including Antiphon, Counterexample Poetics, Mascara Literary Review, Prick of the Spindle, The New Poet, Third Coast and Washington Square Review. He is the winner of the National University of Singapore's Creative Writing Competition 2011, and the youngest Singaporean to be nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Purchase *Scattered Vertebrae* now. For more Jerrold visit <http://jerrydyam.wordpress.com/>.

Kim Lim is a newly minted UVA alum. Favourite foods (among many) include Maggi mee (soupy ramen noodles), Indomee (dry ramen noodles), and \$20 ramen noodles with oily broth. She (re)blogs at <http://loudamusementpark.tumblr.com/>