

encore

POETRY

‘Pop and go. Prozac on the Rocks’: The poetry of UCL’s Jerrold Yam

Jerrold Yam is a first-year Law undergraduate from Singapore. His debut poetry collection is *Chasing Curtained Suns* (Math Paper Press, 2012).

His poems have been published worldwide, in journals such as *Third Coast*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *nether magazine*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Quantum Poetry Magazine*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *Softblow* and *Washington Square Review*.

Projects and anthologies which feature his work include the *Singapore Memory Project*, *The Substation Love Letters Project*, *The Ayam Curtain* and *Moving Words 2011: A Poetry Anthology*. He won first prize and three honourable mentions in the National University of Singapore’s Creative Writing Competition 2011. His second poetry collection, *Scattered Vertebrae*, is forthcoming and will be available by the end of 2012.

Let’s begin with the general theme of your collection and your influences.

Chasing Curtained Suns is about the precarious tilt from adolescence to adulthood, and the countervailing tensions of growing up, letting go and leaving behind. I know; I should be on medication for this “Peter Pan complex”!

I am perennially fascinated by how the concept of ‘family’ changes as we grow older. Sometimes, that involves a realignment of priorities and relationships. For example, I now find myself gravitating towards my Dad and sister. I used to be a Mommy’s boy. These alterations carry with them myriad urgencies to make sense of disappointment; to superimpose adult sensibilities on teenage naiveté and to recognise entitlement for the fraudulent promises it makes.

Growing up in Singapore. National Service was also a part of your youth that not many share. How was this experience for you?

National Service was a high point for me. Aside from amazing friendships and finding a home

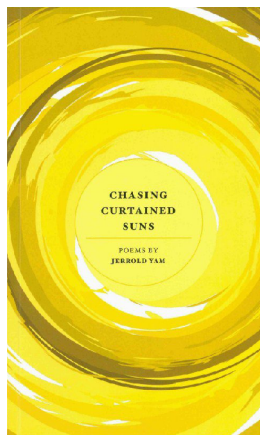
among truckloads of young men, which became its own metaphor for unbridled potential and the state’s intervention in remorselessly claiming the best years of our lives, I matured a lot during that period. My friends would dis-



agree on that point. But honestly, nothing wakes you up more than forest dirt, 5am runs and the responsibility of life and death at your fingertips. One mis-click of the rifle and someone’s teenage son could be gone forever.

What prompted you to poeticize your transition into adulthood? Did you begin with diaries or have you always worked through the medium of poetry?

I have problems with commitment, even to diaries. That naturally extends to short stories, plays, novels and law essays. I guess on a more subconscious level it was the immortalisation of experiences, especially the ones slathered in youth, which I was gunning for. Poetry has that



emotional intensity and clarity which always surprises. They say so much with so little. I want to remember even when memory fails me. (Okay, I take back that comment on commitment. Aren’t we afraid of the things we really want?)

You dedicate your first collection ‘Chasing Curtained Suns’ to your parents. Did you have any anxieties about them reading your poetry?

That used to trouble me quite a bit – the worrying about how people who are closest to me will become my most critical judges. A friend, also a poet, identified something that I had been doing in my earlier stages of writing – using imagery to conceal rather than reveal. There is always risk with honesty, and it would be hypocritical for me to say I’ve transcended this risk, but I’m working towards it. The first collection deals with more tangible, universal issues. The second collection, forthcoming by the end of this year, is its polar opposite.

This second collection, will it continue on from where you left off? How far are you prepared to go in your poetry when addressing such intimate themes? Do you draw any lines?

Scattered Vertebrae will house my most personal and honest poems, to say the least. I talk about issues which I don’t have the courage to mention here, even now, oceans away from home. These issues are not as simple as they seem; especially against the vanguard of a Singaporean childhood, when conformity is only second to success. I have learned that both are synonymous on many accounts. That’s what I love about poetry – it can lace even the most difficult surfaces with beauty.

Copies of *Chasing Curtained Suns* are available at a discounted price of £5 each for UCL staff and students. For inquiries, please email the writer at jerrold_yam@hotmail.com. Read more at jerryoldyam.wordpress.com. ■

Anniversary of Leaves

Each year I prepare fortnights by raking
in skin, littering their vagabond bodies
to melt through pavements, convinced
that consistency buries no sympathy
for judgment. Thistles too are barred
from chasing a temperate freedom,
every climb trimmed with homeward
glances, indulgent bows recalling how
an arc away, the sun’s autobiography is
no writing on a wing. Maybe you were
right—we live in rituals like days
cleaved from flocks of wayward winters,
moments unstrung as tribute to seasons
endured before. Outside, only pieces
of sky stiffening like a wound, tracks
pointing opposite ways, newspapers caught
in the clasp of ripening snow.

Dragonfly

When a teacher asked what I wanted to be in the future,

I thought of how two dragonflies in my garden
knew best, emerald hands climbing the pond
as one. Ten years on

ambitions would prove futile, a child’s
finger games, and when friends broke up

I would reap the child’s joy,
laughter like the buzz of dragonflies
fighting in air before landing
with each other,
the fighting also love.