

SCATTERED VERTEBRAE

By Jerrold Yam

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★★★★☆

"This is our game, guessing the worth of things to/find every answer lacking." This closing line of the poem Bargain in Jerrold Yam's second collection encapsulates the untenable position the poetic persona comes to occupy even as he



searches for his place in the world, and ultimately tackles the larger dilemma of the meaning and purpose of creation. This sentiment is articulated repeatedly, for example, in another poem titled Foliage where he writes: "leaving and staying/are imperfect solutions", as the narrator hits on a sudden conviction that it is impossible to come out "under this roof".

The poet's struggle to reconcile his same-sex desires with the expectations and values of his family and church is not quite apparent from the get-go, but the tension slowly gains momentum and becomes explicit towards the second half of the book. The mood is one of uncertainty and despair as the poet grapples with the improbability of validation by the institutions that he has been brought up in.

As the body and its sheer physicality becomes more than an inconvenient disruption, the narrative "I" recoils from the knowledge that notions such as "marriage, friendship, love" have as much potential for redemption as a capacity to wound and hurt. Desire, too, is always accompanied by guilt.

The recurring motif then, in this collection, is the dichotomy between wholeness and brokenness, and that of creation and destruction, which the title – Scattered Vertebrae – bears out beautifully. In the poem titled Archaeology, the poet digs deep into his history in a bid to understand who he is. He comes away with the conclusion that he is "ready for/the better nature of distance, I want to gather their/ashes before the plane reconciles with earth".

Perhaps distance will give him the perspective he needs. Yam is a 22-year-old law undergraduate at University College London and this second collection of his seems to be a deeply personal project that sears with its brutal honesty.

Not all his confessional poems work, but the gems are the ones that reach under the covers not to shock or titillate but to question and clarify.