

Second year... Second book published

Most of us are daunted by the idea of having to write a few essays a term, but UCL Law student and wordsmith Jerrold Yam has already gone and got two collections of his poetry published...

7 YEARS AGO
Life
LONDON

We had a chat to twice published poet and UCL undergraduate Jerrold Yam following the release of his cathartic second volume 'Scattered Vertebrae'...



Our man Yam.

First and foremost, what does this poetry collection represent for you?

Writing the collection was instrumental in helping me overcome the reluctance to openly admit my own sexuality. Poetry captures so much complexity that escapes a mere oral confrontation with, say, my parents. The collection deals with the improbability of reconciling family, religion and sexuality, and yet the persona finally draws strength from these countervailing tensions through a mixture of transcendence, catharsis and expectant hope.

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Just to explain the scale of your action to publish 'Scattered Vertebrae', can you please tell our readers a little bit more about the response to homosexuality in Singapore?

It's complicated in Singapore because the context determines the response toward homosexuality. From a legal standpoint, homosexual consensual sex is criminalized but not actively enforced. The recent rejection by the Singapore courts to repeal s.377A is a can of worms to which I am not informed enough to uncover. From a social standpoint, there is a huge dichotomy between the younger and older generations in terms of accepting homosexuals. Then, there are the psychological dimensions which a gay Singaporean inevitably confronts. Personally, I feel that people who believe coming out is an absolutely necessary process which validates your identity and without which you are not being true to yourself are missing the complexity of these issues. Sometimes, the coming out process as voraciously romanticized by media and campaigning is too self-indulgent to be the best foot forward. We are multi-faceted human beings. The world does not have to know you are gay for you to be yourself. If straight people don't feel the need to utilize their heterosexuality as a political and social weapon, are homosexuals then guilty of reverse discrimination?

How do you think perceptions of homosexuality will change in Singapore, if you do in fact believe they will change?

It is only a matter of time. The real question is, how long?

Your collection begins with a biblical epigraph from Ezekiel about the disembodiment of bones. Can you further explain its link to the title?

The title of the collection is a quote from an important poem in the collection, 'Archaeology'. On the other hand, the Biblical epigraph echoes the imagery of bones: dissociation and disembodiment, wholeness and brokenness, creation and the created. The collection is also about reconciling Christianity with homosexuality on a personal level, hence the choice for a Biblical epigraph.

How do you view this collection in relation to your previous work 'Chasing Curtained Suns'?

Looking back, the persona in 'Chasing Curtained Suns' is younger, more experimental and self-assured. The persona in 'Scattered Vertebrae' is plagued with uncertainty and defeat. I would say the second collection houses the sum of my collected fears.

If you had to pick one poem to represent this collection what would it be?

'Archaeology'. It represents a culmination of the concerns in the collection and also gives the collection its name. See the title poem below:

It was worth all the fighting, when I was younger,

the way land heaved apart, surrendering to land

greater than itself, the dirt's authority

over its pretty tenants. I saw tarmac

recede into a scrawl, my face turned away from my mother

as she braved another holiday. Then it

wasn't about control, or my sister's quiet shedding

I later conceded to be generosity

and loved her for it, these days I could build

cities on my mother's flesh

to deem her selfish. And from my seat

the lights persevere, thin

as scattered vertebrae, I am thinking of our family's

women as faraway bulbs, their history

with crippling loss, and

how I am pieced together, shell and sand,

from the spine of their collective strength. Who

knew. Something tells me I'm ready for

the better nature of distance, I want to gather their

ashes before the plane reconciles with earth.

I'm intrigued to know, were you writing these poems simultaneously with other work and how long you have been preparing for this collection? Why publish this collection now while living in London?

The poems were written after National Service and before life at UCL, i.e. January to July 2012. I didn't decide to publish now. It was rightfully my publisher's decision. In fact, the manuscript was submitted in July last year.

I understand your collection has had rave review. How has the reception been on home soil and if you don't mind me asking, with family and friends?

Thankfully, critical responses have been heartening. Here are reviews by UK publisher [Sidekick Books](#) and [Singaporean literary journal OFZOO5](#). Friends and family have been very supportive, but the parental frontier remains unconquered.

And the reception to your work here in London?

I am grateful for the responses thus far, especially from my readings at the London Book Fair earlier this year. I am also involved in a number of projects in London, such as contributing to the awesome Emma Press Anthology of Mildly Erotic Verse, due for publication at the end of this year. Jacob Sam La Rose has also generously inaugurated me into Burn After Reading, a group of Barbican Young Poets.

How do you find writing about such personal matters?

Cathartic. I am able to understand why I behave in such a way (especially when I was a child). Poetry allows me to launch an excavation into my deepest insecurities, locate the soil on which they bear fruit and flourish, and hopefully uproot them in final victory.

What is your next project? Are you currently working on anything?

Among other projects and collaborations, I am working on my third collection of poetry about the idea of loneliness, inspired by my living thousands of miles away from home in Singapore. Is loneliness a manifestation of fear and insecurity, or the reluctance to face ourselves?

Before we set you free, any poetic thoughts to leave us with today?

A friend dragged me to Epping Forest a while back, and I still am inspired by this little toadstool I uncovered among dense and overwhelming grasses. It reminds me that the things which thrive are the things which choose to remain invisible.

To get your hands on a copy of Scattered Vertebrae, order online at:

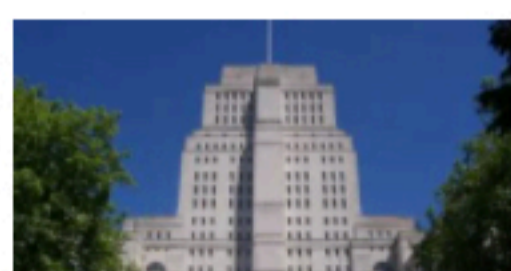
<http://booksactually.bigcartel.com/product/scattered-vertebrae-by-jerrold-yam>

Keep up to date with all things Yam with Jerrold's blog: jerryoldyam.wordpress.com

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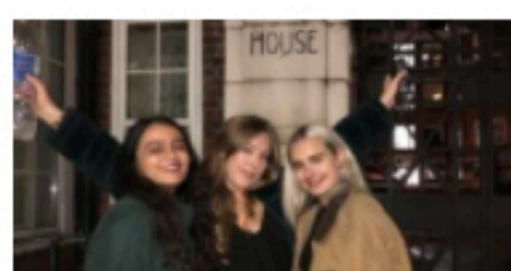


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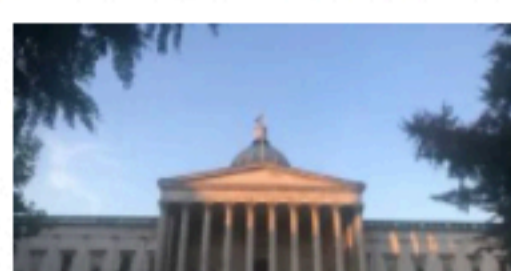
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