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Proust Questionnaire: 17 questions with Jerrold Yam

By Yeow Kai Chai

The Singapore literary scene is peopled with legal eagles who have fine-honed their gift for writing. Fictionists Philip Jeyaretnam, Simon Tay and Claire Tham are as adept at prose narratives as they are in court, while poets Aaron Lee and Daren Shiau demonstrate their lyrical dexterity with imagery on the page.

*And now, Jerrold Yam, still in his mid-20s, joins this illustrious coterie of lawyer-writers. Before he graduated with a first class honours degree in law from University College London in 2015, he has already authored three fine verse collections, *Intruder* (Ethos Books, 2014), *Scattered Vertebrae* (Math Paper Press, 2013) and *Chasing Curtained Suns* (Math Paper Press, 2012).*

*Besides a string of local accolades, he has also garnered acclaim overseas. Impressively, he became, at age 20, the youngest Singaporean to be nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2012. He was runner-up in the Poetry Book Society National Student Poetry Competition in 2013, and was highly commended in the same contest a year later. In 2015, he garnered a nomination for the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem, and this year, he was longlisted in the United Kingdom's National Poetry Competition. Most recently, he contributed a poem to *Letters to Shakespeare*, a roving National Library Board exhibition which commemorates the Bard's 400th death anniversary.*

Based in London, he will be joining Baker & McKenzie LLP as a trainee solicitor.

1) What are you reading right now?

Faithful and Virtuous Night by Louise Glück; so far so harsh, astute, unsettling. I've always admired Glück's ability to transform what typically makes for bland prose ("The night was very dark. / The moon rose. / I saw my aunt's hand gripping the railing.") so spectacularly epigrammatic, even severe in its straightforwardness.

I've also just completed Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, which is a must-read especially for millennials – the way we pride connectivity over connection, drama over perspective and how we defend most fiercely the things we have already lost.

A contributor's copy of the latest issue of *Hayden's Ferry Review* has arrived at my Singapore address, and I can't wait to roll up my sleeves and tuck in. The issue highlights how Singaporean literature encapsulates our inexplicable (and perhaps historically inevitable) regional role of being the crossroads between diverse racial and religious cultures. It features work from a selection of Singaporean writers, including Cyril Wong, Desmond Kon and Jee Leong Koh – another project made possible by our effervescent, well-acquainted Alvin Pang.

2) If you were a famous literary character in a novel, play or poem, what would you be and why?

The titular character in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, for her sudden and overwhelming sense of mortality in relation to routine, trivial occurrences such as going to the florist or hosting a party. The "Dalloway predicament" suggests that happiness is simultaneously wholly within and wholly outside our control – perfect for those Mondays when I feel my life is not in order!

3) What is the greatest misconception about you?

This is a hard one; it may be that I've presumably defected to corporate legal practice at the expense of literary pursuits, at least by those who believe ambitions to be reductively singular. The truth is I didn't expect to have enjoyed legal studies and practice so much, and certainly didn't anticipate the way it has enriched my writing. If poetry is about elucidating the quirks of human relationships, then the law is about regulating them and balancing the interests of different stakeholders in order to generate order, if not to escape Hobbesian chaos. Thus, both overlap in their doctrinal necessity of understanding human relationships.

As far as the point on opportunity cost goes, it really depends on one's priorities. Having received incredible parental support in all my endeavours, the prospect of financial independence is top of the table for me – just as how I don't feel that passions are singular and invariable, I also don't believe our loved ones should be made to bear the weight of our ambitions. In that vein, legal practice is like any other "day job" – teaching, editing, publishing. This is perhaps where institutional funding steps in, to carve a space where literary productivity transcends economic instrumentalism, but that is a complex political issue of resource allocation, a different arena in which opportunity cost also operates but where justification is not entitlement.

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[Jerrold Yam profile piece](#)
External link to *Poached*.

[Poems by Jerrold Yam](#)
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4) Name one living writer and one dead writer you most identify with, and tell us why.

Burnside for restraint, Borodale for consistency, Doty for perception, Olds for self-reflexivity, Carver for brevity, Larkin for clarity, Eliot for ambition, Pound for precision.

Perhaps it is because poetry hits too close to home that I can't be decisive enough about it; my favourite prose writers are far more clear-cut. I came across the works of Alice Munro and Marjorie Barnard as a teenager. Munro's story 'Child's Play' in her collection *Too Much Happiness*, with its expert shifts in tone and perspective, was formative in unlocking some heretofore unknown dimension in my imagination – a Eureka! moment not unlike Keats' well-documented ecstasy when he first imbibed the phrase "sea-shouldering whale" from Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. The same is true of *The Persimmon Tree*, in which Barnard superimposes the growth cycle of the eponymous tree onto a relationship between two female characters, from insecure budding to rapturous harvest and ultimately ruin.

5) Do you believe in writer's block? If so, how do you overcome it?

For me, inspiration (taken generally to mean the opposite of writer's block) stems from internal rather than external motivations: how one feels rather than thinks. If I do not feel like saying something, I don't say it. If inspiration is emotional or instinctive rather than purely intellectual, the writing becomes effortless. Of course, this depends on how a writer views the writing process: writer's block will be a very different phenomenon to someone who intentionally extricates personal involvement and resonance in his writing (like Christian Bök). Larkin once acknowledged that his writer's block stemmed from "being afraid of all emotions, and of trying to suppress them."

6) What qualities do you most admire in a writer?

Dynamism – when no one can predict what a writer will come up with next, except that it will be characteristically refreshing. Also, discipline, open-mindedness and honesty.

7) What is one trait you most deplore in writing or writers?

Myopia, in terms of the arrogance that one's benchmark for poetry is both authoritative and universal.

8) Can you recite your favourite line from a literary work or a piece of advice from a writer?

"Wherever we go we float untrammelled and extravagantly slow. In the night, we wake up singing." ('Whales', by Jo Bell) This is one of my favourite lines of recent poetry by a contemporary poet, which has, contextually, nothing to do with writerly advice. On hindsight, I guess – like all good lines that say whatever we want it to – there's something about our whalish, monotonous obstinacies and the way poetry breaks that surface in song.

9) Complete this sentence: Few people know this, but I...

like whales, love swimming. There's something so effortless (foetal?) about the body's movements in water, as if to finally claim what we have always sought from walking. Or maybe I just can't carry my own weight!

10) At the movies, if you have to pick a comedy, a tragedy, or an action thriller to watch, which will you go for, and why?

An unpretentious action thriller that does what it claims: with special effects, a veritable soundtrack and an attractive cast. I am too wary of walking into the trap of sentimentality smugly constructed by the director of a tragedy, the same way I find the best comedies to be spontaneous and not the result of board meetings with some Hollywood production team.

11) What is your favourite word, and what is your least favourite one?

My favourite's "sphere": adding consonants to "fear" instantly transforms it to mean whole, rounded, geometrically ideal – a reminder that even language symbolically interacts with itself to insist that our fears make us perfect, indestructible.

I really dislike "wanderlust": it's a slipshod portmanteau snatched from its hauntingly beautiful roots in German Romanticism ("a characteristically German predilection for wandering" coupled with the "German system of apprenticeship (the journeyman)") by 21st Century upper-middle class yuppies to justify the hedonism of thoughtless travel.

12) Write a rhyming couplet that includes the following three items: pelvis, trespasser, drapery.

What survives the skin's drapery: lash, pelvis, marrow,
fragments of a trespasser in the seam of a furrow.

13) What object is indispensable to you when you write?

As the empowered, capitalist product of the digital generation, I cannot stand writing with anything but my laptop (especially in relation to line breaking). That, and resilient visual stimuli, vats of green tea, a strong prescription of rain and generous silences to empty into.

14) What is the best time of the day for writing?

In the wee hours of morning, when one simultaneously feels most acutely the proconsul logics of loneliness and social consciousness, and exploits them as primitive tools to make fire.

15) If you have a last supper, which three literary figures, real or fictional, would you invite to the soiree, and why?

Lee Kuan Yew (the subject of many a literary work, while at the same time a prolific writer), George Orwell and Ayn Rand. I'd love to hear them tear each other's political philosophies apart, or will there be consensus before pie?

16) As someone who has lived in Singapore and the United Kingdom, how would you assess the poetry scenes in these two places? What can they learn from each other?

Leaving aside the historical advantage that the UK has over Singapore in terms of both breadth and depth of literary output (the luxury of time is a factual state of affairs as opposed to something that is earned), Singapore should learn that literary excellence cannot be achieved independent of a healthy reading and critical culture. The biggest broadsheets in the UK (The Times, The Guardian) regularly feature literary works by British writers, and those books (at least most of them) find their way into influential bookstores across the country. Additionally, literary prizes are well publicised on TV, radio and billboards. Whether career or hobby, writing is regarded as a respectable pursuit; like all social reactions, our reaction to writing can and should be cultivated in the right direction.

Where the UK can learn from Singapore is how we have organically developed a centralised, informal system of solidarity where writers of varying experience interact, and where more experienced writers can be approached for passing on knowledge and opportunity, while enriching dialogue and collaboration between writers. Perhaps by virtue of the relative size of our literary community (compared to the UK), aspiring and established writers frequent the same events and share publication space, independent of national initiatives (though they obviously play a huge role in developing our literary consciousness on a national scale). The present literary renaissance has resulted in more new voices being distinguished and nurtured; Singaporean authors debut poetry collections in their early twenties on average over the past few years, compared to the early thirties for UK debut poets. While this statistic suggests quantity over quality, it also hints at informal resources and opportunities in a thriving literary (dare I say marketable?) environment being allocated to the ones who seek it.

My first foray into writing was triggered at the launch of Cyril Wong's *oneiros* in 2011, where he generously extended his email address, to which I have sent garbage bags of poetry for salvage. Through Cyril, I was introduced to Kenny Leck of BooksActually, who was looking to publish full-length poetry collections in 2012; *Chasing Curtained Suns* became the first under the Math Paper Press imprint. Today, extra-institutional initiatives such as Ministry of Noise, Math Remedial, Speakeasy, LIVEpress, etc excitedly welcome new entrants to the literary community.

17) What would you write on your own tombstone?

Because an epitaph is vomit-inducingly self-referential, "Behold thy intruder's scattered vertebrae; slain whilst chasing curtained suns."

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