

Singapore Literature in Translation Special Feature—Part I



We're thrilled to share with you today another premiere at NTM: the first part of our **special feature on Singapore literature in translation** curated by **William Phuan** and **Dan Feng Tan** from the **Select Centre**—highlighting works of poetry originally written in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. Together with English, these four official languages reflect Singapore's major ethnic groups and its history as a British colony. The second part of the special feature will focus on prose at the end of the month.

Our friends at the Select Centre are celebrating their own Translation Month in Singapore, joining forces with us in September in our trans-continental and trans-cultural project. We thank William Phuan and Dan Feng Tan for guest editing and the **Select Centre** for its support.

We'd love to hear from you! Let us know how you like our posts, or attend one of our events throughout September. Open your heart to new experiences and the beauty of the world, and celebrate its cultures and new voices with us using #NTM2017. Happy National Translation Month!

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

Source Language: Chinese
Author: Wong Koi Tet
Translator: Lim Xiangyun

Wong Koi Tet started writing in his teens, publishing a collection each of poetry and prose before becoming a journalist. He quit journalism to pursue his Master's degree and wrote a series of short stories that integrated real historical events in a fictional framework. His stories explore the body as a social and cultural metaphor and the anxieties and obsessions of the common man in the face of change. Koi Tet currently lectures at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

Lim Xiangyun has a particular interest in translating contemporary works from the Chinese diaspora. She is currently studying at University of East Anglia, under an International Excellence Scholarship.

Sea Boy

When he was eleven, he nearly drowned playing on the pier. Since then, all it took was the damp breath of the ocean in the air for him to know when a storm was coming. No matter where he was, the wind brought the sea to him. It was not this ability that was talked about, however, but his fortune — fortune perceived so great there was fear he had stolen his way back from the land of yomi.

For it was rumored that the sea had swallowed him before help arrived, in a call that brought half the town rushing down. It was a spring tide that day, rising steadily as night fell, dissolving their footsteps in salt-logged sand. The villagers searched in silence, faces marked by fear and grief into masks as scarred as the surrounding cliff rocks. Billowing waves distorted the sunset into rays that pierced their vision; just when it seemed resignation was setting in, someone would spot a shadow. But it was a glimmer of hope to vanish with the light.

The story was the same no matter who told it: the sudden wave that surged towards the few brave men who dived in, and yet inexplicably receded before them, bringing with it him, seaweed-tangled and only just blinking awake, gurgling with the freshness of a nap in the ocean's lull. This was discussed over lingering tea conversations, as was the bountiful fish haul that came the year after and the early cherry blossom season, resplendent in its arrival. They were gifts in the wake of his fortune. He, though, remembered nothing. The only remnant of this incident was his acute sensitivity to the moods of the ocean.

"You, too, came from the ocean. And here we must stay, until it returns for us," Tousan said, as he sat in a stiff daze by the hospital bed. His voice was thick and briny, as if it had, like his son, just emerged from the sea.

Theirs was a town that had taken shape along the coastline over the centuries, like flotsam that came with the waves and stayed. They lived in the same house Tousan grew up in which stood exactly as it did generations before. Kaasan left shortly after he was born. At any mention of her, Tousan, already usually severe, would seize up like a threatened squid all ready to spew black ink. He soon grew wise enough to ask around and piece things together. Some said Kaasan had initially wanted to take him with her. There were those who claimed she had already passed on in a foreign land. Others suspected she was still alive, living under a new name in a land where neon lights and urban bustle left no place for the sea.

Then there was this Ojisan who fell into such a deep recollection it was hard to determine if his words were mere reverie: perhaps she was the one who brought you back to shore... she had such celestial beauty... and only an ocean goddess can do that... Years later, he glimpsed a shadow flitting in and

out of vision as if from a realm as distant as ebbing waves. Since then, he did believe Kaasan to be dead, but was also certain that she still walked this earth.

There hung in a cupboard at home an intricate blue floral kimono: Kaasan. When Tousan was out at sea, he often took the chance to reach inside and stroke its every crease and fold. He would even at times carry it out for his long-term suitor Oshima to don as he kneeled respectfully before her, palms over his face. That day, a typhoon raged outside as he watched through his fingers, hair cascading like black night down her back. The rattling of the paper-covered windows echoed the cadence of his heartbeat as he traversed the undulating form before him. Her back, Kaasan's silhouette.

Then he noticed it. The rip near her waistline, before that smell.

He rushed to the jetty as Oshima's angry cries faded in his ears. It was the first return since his incident. The water was still, yet tears pooled against his will.

News of Tousan's passing came three days later. No one survived the capsizing. All that was left was the boat, its hull punctured with holes that tore through its name: Yamada Maru. A dark blue porcelain urn, patterned with swimming koi, housed Tousan's ashes. He placed this carefully in the same cupboard next to Kaasan.

Knowing that they were finally together gave him the peace and courage to leave, and he moved inland, like other young people from the town, seeking jobs in more prosperous cities. The house was left under the care of his neighbors. And yet, there was a sense of finality that gnawed.

A decade passed, then more. Tousan, Kaasan, the town — they receded into the horizons of his memory. Just when they were about to fade into twilight, he found himself jerking awake one night, feeling like a buoy floating on a deep blue vastness. The neon glow of the city outside was strangely diffused and magnificent around him. There was again, that smell in the air, pungent and fishy.

He packed his luggage hastily for the next train, a ride that threaded through winding mountainous roads. Spring had come; the sakura trees were ready to bloom. Five hours later, he was back.

The house was exactly as he left it. He watched a large flock of seagulls skim the waves in the distance and understood. It was too late. He stepped into the house with his luggage only to be greeted with tremors. As the dust on the walls swirled into an increasing frenzy, all he could do was fall onto all fours and crawl slowly to the cupboard, pushing its doors open for Tousan and Kaasan.

He curled up with them in a tight embrace. Three cherry blossoms from the trees he saw on his journey back, full, bursting, and ready to fall.

“Let's go.”

Sirens rang through the town. His body rocked gently, cradled by the waves once more.

Source Language: Malay
Author: Amanah Mustafi
Translator: Tse Hao Guang

Amanah Mustafi is Assistant Vice President of Eaglevision, Mediacorp, in Singapore. She has received awards for her television and drama scripts, as well as her song lyrics and manuscripts. Her script "Gerimis Di Hati" was included in *TEKAD*, a Malay literature anthology (2012). She represented Singapore as a mentor in the South-East Asia Literature Council (MASTERA) Writing Program 2010 in Bogor, Indonesia. In 2016, she was chosen to represent Singapore in the Fall Residency International Writing Program in Iowa, USA.

Tse Hao Guang 謝皓光 is the author of *Deeds of Light* (Math Paper Press), which was shortlisted for the 2016 Singapore Literature Prize. He co-edits the cross-genre, collaborative e-journal *OF ZOOS* and is a 2016 fellow of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, USA.

Fata Morgana

Seething pain drains through veins of stone, sand
Dammed pained spirit, forced to hide
Petrified, dumb, locked deep underground
Heat shimmers, heartache bubbles up through dry air
Conjuring Fata Morgana in the parched Sahara
Illusion toys with the senses, confounded in chaos—
It is an image, the heart's ancient barren lake
Sharp shrieking, unnatural, within the grim grin
Since her aspirations missed the mark, trampled
Her possessions entombed, without a trace
Disappeared, from the mind, from everyplace
She can only remember, moan
In sleep, again and again nightmares
She's not sick of waiting
The riled-up night will not meet day

Source Language: Malay
Author: Ahmad Md Tahir
Translator: Ahmad Md Tahir

Ahmad Md Tahir (b. 1967) is one of the founding members of the Young Writer Literary Movement (Kumpulan Angkatan Muda Sastera – KAMUS). He has published two collections of poems in Malay – *Bunga Makna* (1992) and *Aisberg Kesimpulan* (2013). His poems have also been translated into English and published in various anthologies of poetry, including *Home & Nation* (1995), *Memories & Desires* (1995), *Rhythms: A Spore Millennial Anthology of Poetry* (2000), *Fire of the Spirit* (2002), *Verse of Angels* (2010), and *Moving Words* (2011). He has received commendations in the Saadon Ismail Award (Anugerah Saadon Ismail) and MBMS Literary Award (Anugerah Persuratan MBMS).

Ballad of Arowana

i.

An arowana –
his life among
four glass walls
filled with everything;
except freedom.

ii.

An arowana –
I return you
to the nature
that's promising;
entirety.

iii.

An arowana –
searching for entirety
swallowed by the impact of reality
for freedom;
in its birthright.

iv.

An arowana –
the essence of its freedom
self-annihilation
bought at a price;
of its existence.

Source Language: Tamil
Author: Saba Muthunatarajan
Translator: N Gunalan

Saba Muthunatarajan is the Executive Editor of Tamil News and Current Affairs at Mediacorp, Singapore's largest media broadcaster. Initially an engineer, Saba switched over to the media industry 17 years ago after realizing that his true passion lay in Tamil. He began work on his first poetry anthology after his mother passed away in 2012. The anthology, entitled *Ammaavukkaaga* (For My Mother), was released on Mother's Day 2014. His second poetry anthology is entitled *Ahathin Muham* (Face of the Soul). Saba is a member of the Tamil Advisory Panel of the Singapore National Library Board, the Singapore University of Social Sciences, and the National Translation Committee's Resource Panel, under the Ministry of Communications and Information.

N Gunalan is Head of Tamil News & Current Affairs at Mediacorp, Singapore's main broadcaster. His journalism expertise spans various platforms, including television, radio, print, and digital. Gunalan has served as an adjunct lecturer at several Singapore tertiary institutions, teaching modules in journalism and public relations. He is also involved in community work as a member of the Tamil Language Learning and Promotion Committee, which supports activities promoting the use of Tamil language. Gunalan holds a BA from the National University of Singapore and an MSc in International Politics of Asia & Africa from the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London).

Trash bin

Mum's a trash bin
A vessel to dump rubbish
We can throw unwanted things
We can throw leftovers
We can throw rotting food
We can throw waste
It will take in everything
We can scold that it stinks
Hold our noses to the bad breath
Speak irreverently
Twitch our faces to the nauseating smell
The trash bin will endure
Flies will dart about
Insects and some birds will,
For their part, make a mess
Ants will crawl
Dogs will lick and leave
Sometimes
In their hunger, they might bite off parts
But never once
Does the trash bin talk back

Source Language: Tamil
Author: Saba Muthunatarajan
Translator: Saaradhaa Muthunatarajan

Saba Muthunatarajan is the Executive Editor of Tamil News and Current Affairs at Mediacorp, Singapore's largest media broadcaster. Initially an engineer, Saba switched over to the media industry 17 years ago after realizing that his true passion lay in Tamil. He began work on his first poetry anthology after his mother passed away in 2012. The anthology, entitled *Ammaavukkaaga* (For My Mother), was released on Mother's Day 2014. His second poetry anthology is entitled *Ahathin Muham* (Face of the Soul). Saba is a member of the Tamil Advisory Panel of the Singapore National Library Board, the Singapore University of Social Sciences, and the National Translation Committee's Resource Panel, under the Ministry of Communications and Information.

Saaradhaa Muthunatarajan is an undergraduate at the National University of Singapore, pursuing a degree in Psychology. Having learned English and Tamil in her childhood, she enjoys literary works written in both languages. Saaradhaa's work with her father Saba is her first venture into the field of professional translation.

Request

To those who attend my funeral
I have a request
Don't cry for me

I am going to sleep
With no sorrow
Don't mourn for me

I am going to a place far away
With no betrayal
Don't chase after me

Be assured
For I am leaving pain
And suffering behind

Be happy
For I am leaving difficulty
And unease behind

Rejoice
For my spirit departs in peace
After experiencing all that I have wanted to

Be glad
For I have swum across
The sea that is life

Celebrate
For I have been released from
The prison that is life

Why should you cry when I leave this earth?

Send me off

With cheer

To the new world that I will enter

My soul will rest in peace

Source Language: Tamil

Author: Mathialagan Manimala

Translator: Mathialagan Manimala

Mathialagan Manimala aims to pass on her knowledge and passion for the Tamil language to youths in Singapore. As a member of the Association of Singapore Tamil Writers, Kathai Kalam, she has written several short stories and book reviews for which she has received several awards. She has also contributed four short stories to the *Tamil Murasu*, Singapore's only Tamil language newspaper.

The Realist

The man who solely seeks external beauty is blind;
for his superficial longing for eternal perfection,
provides him with nothing but
temporary bliss.

Is physical flawlessness still deemed
as indispensable in your eyes,
when the timeless deception of beauty
has ceaselessly destroyed lives?