

Diverse Modes

Tan Kheng Yeang

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This collection takes the building blocks of life—literally, a number of the chemical elements featured in the poems—and tries to make sense of them. For the most part, Tan Kheng Yeang paints a very dark picture of humanity; many poems end with death—suicide, murder, madness, decay. The author utilizes his extensive latinate vocabulary to describe his world, but beyond offering formal descriptions of events, he fails to imbue the majority of the poems with metaphoric resonance. The objects and actions described remain extremely literal.

Born in Malaysia, at the time the English colony of British Malaya, Tan Kheng Yeang went to an English school as a child and later became a civil engineer in Penang. He is the author of twelve books ranging in subject from philosophy to fiction.

In this volume, the language is the focus, but it is a distraction rather than an enticement to read further. In “Asphalt,” the author writes: “bitumen clasping torpid mineral matter / evolved by nature / in pitch lakes and bituminous rocks / or fabricated by man / bitumen from distillation of coal or petroleum.”

The language and description are quite literal, and the words are accurate, but they also feel a bit like an SAT prep course rather than an exploration beyond the obvious traits of the object. Most of the poems in the book suffer from this kind of literalism. They lack an imaginative leap. Readers are rarely asked to reconsider the object’s place in the world.

In “Circling of Island,” the speaker drives his car around an island. He provides a general travelogue but doesn’t offer any larger understanding of the experience. He ends the poem with, “This journey of forty-odd miles round the perimeter of Penang Island would not easily elude memory’s spider clasp.” The most original image of the piece is the “spider clasp,” but it is a rare moment of whimsy amid the plodding literalism of the rest of the collection.

Generally, the author maintains a third-person approach, but in a few poems he acts as the speaker. Often these pieces invoke nature, and they are the most imaginative of the collection. In “Flame of the Forest,” he writes: “Standing under its shady boughs / This warm resolute evening, / Leaning against its smooth bark, / I feel the rush of stormy force / That makes it wildly sing / Its lovely blossomy triumph.”

The highly intellectual language is eased here, the reader feels closer to the speaker, and the poem takes a metaphoric leap—resulting in one of the best moments of the book.

Ultimately, *Diverse Modes* offers both descriptive and narrative poems, though the former lack an imaginative turn and the latter almost invariably turn to a death thought deserved by the author. When the language relaxes and the speaker becomes a bit more personal, the poems are at their strongest.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (November 28, 2012)

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