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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ POETRY

Poems: Sun and Rain / The Flowery Country / Grains of Sand

Tan Kheng Yeang
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Tan Kheng Yeang, who was born in former British Malaya and attended an English school there, is a poet of exuberance and diversity. His latest volume, following a free verse book, *Diverse Modes*, gathers three collections that draw from traditional rhymes, nature, Chinese history, and other themes. Each collection presents a distinctive style, but together they convey passion for the flexibility of language.

"Sun and Rain" considers the majestic and mundane, from a storm to a glow worm. The speaker in these poems cautions against the "vacuous ways of the world" and looks toward "Sweet Nature's inspiring face" for solace. While the author's ecological stance and command for meter is noteworthy, the use of personification, rapturous descriptions, and unabashed exclamations will strike some as familiar exercises in homage. Still, Yeang's appreciation for enduring ideals that include love and harmony will likely appeal to readers who seek respite from the darker themes often found in contemporary work.

"The Flowery Country" presents "amorphous verse," a term coined by the author to describe prose poetry. This second collection is more richly conceived, gathering fifty poems that recount the founding of China, its dynastic ages, the Japanese invasion, and the Second World War and its aftermath. Here, dense description continues, but it reveals more of the author's engagement with harsher topics. The tone—almost oracular and distant—is suited to the tumultuous narrative.

In contrast, the poems in "Grains of Sand" present simpler, first-person reflections, and they return to more intimate concerns. Through declarative, transparent diction, a speaker who yearns for "my sweet ideal" charts the course from the early days of a relationship to marriage. These optimistic poems, in which a couple aspires toward a world that is "a fairy isle," are more sentimental and do not present the same imaginative range of the author's poems that evoke physical locales or that draw from folklore. The poems from "The Flowery Country" and the poems on Singapore, Blake Pier, Loping, Yunnan, and one titled "Reinforced Concrete" are the standouts in the book, melding formality with more refreshing perspectives.

Yeang tends toward reminiscence and fanciful turns of phrase. At his best, he allows bright surfaces to reveal subtler depths. Readers who value poetry with an uplifting tone as well as observations of beauty will find that this book offers a variety of topics from which to choose, with an effective amalgam of Western European and Asian sources.

KAREN RIGBY (November 28, 2012)

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