

Hotel

Cyril Wong

Cyril Wong has been called a confessional poet, according to The Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry (2013), based on "the brutally candid sexuality in his poetry, along with a barely submerged anxiety over the fragility of human connection and a relentless self-querying". He is the Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of poetry collections such as Unmarked Treasure, Tilting Our Plates to Catch the Light and After You. He has also published Let Me Tell You Something About That Night, a collection of strange tales, and a novel, The Last Lesson of Mrs. de Souza. A past recipient of the National Arts Council's Young Artist Award for Literature, he completed his doctoral degree in English Literature at the National University of Singapore in 2012. His poems have been anthologised in Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia and Beyond (W. W. Norton 2008) and Chinese Erotic Poems (Everyman's Library 2007), amongst various journals and publications across the world.

In the cupboard, bare hangers are skeletons
for future selves; a complimentary bathrobe
waits like a new and better, even purer, skin;
fresh pillows are the unformed bodies
of lovers yet to be born; bedroom slippers
become footwear for shuffling up
an airy flight of stairs free of this life.
Open the fridge, lean past the overpriced
chocolate and the smugly settled soft drinks
and tune in to voices from the god-realm,
where beings reminisce, not unfondly, about
past desires and mistaken attachments.
On the bed, our bodies stay unentwined

in rest because love is in a different room
in a faraway country; but beneath us,
cowering children press ears to the floor,
absorbing the footfalls of fathers retreating,
heads lowered in shame or shaking with disgust;
these trembling versions of us reach
for each other now, smaller hands taking hold.
In reality, the air-con sighs as discreetly
as possible; behind translucent curtains, night
slowly lifts; nobody expects the morning
to be spectacular; although my eyes are
reluctant to close, still hungry for the ever-new;
while another stranger beside me sleeps and sleeps.

Literature

Cyril Wong

When we dated, I was impressed
by how much you read: from Angela Carter
to Arundathi Roy; I thought it was cute
how you'd keep score, as if reading
could be a competition.
How do you live with yourself; I mean,
how do you live with contradiction:
Good Muslim boy and Mathematics teacher
in a "respectable" Junior College
with a voice lowered a few notches
by day; vain, ketamine-high slut-bottom
by night? Have all those narratives
taught you nothing? Sure, we all
have layers; but surely you could grasp
that the ones we wear on the surface
aren't real? These days, you're still
a private reminder that literature
can make no difference in the world.
Have you forgotten that bad trip
when we dragged you off the bed, naked,
and into the shower, as you chanted
Quranic verses, believing you were in hell?
(Your eyes were wide open –
this stayed with me for some time.)
The next time I saw you, long after
things between us went south,
you were at a café, reading,
the armour of your body thickened

by more muscles than I last remembered.
I left you with your books in a hurry.
The last instance was at the airport. *How clichéd*, I thought, sipping coffee
with another lover, as you walked past,
unseeing; the sight of you helping
me to part with you inside my head.
I wondered what novel you had been
finishing that day, or if you had given up
on books altogether. I saw
how as you hurried to meet whoever
you were late for, the mask of your face
was slipping; and under that page, another page
was rising, full of a darker realisation –
at that moment, I realised you'd become
the unhappiest man I'd ever known.

Mindfulness

Cyril Wong

There's the smaller mind
caught up in the operations
of tongues, hands and lower parts.
But what turns it off?
Just as somebody's finger is required
to flip the switch, surely the mind is incapable
of shutting itself down.
So I suspect there's a second mind
behind the first, a bigger mind
of sleep and deeper desires,
supervising the traffic of breath and blood
and the heart's continuous labour.
Eventually the first mind
must return home like a child from school,
the other mind like its knowing parent
waiting in silence at the door;
or the partner already in bed
but not asleep, as the lover who has strayed
slips back under the covers to enter his arms again.