

## 1<sup>st</sup> April '45, 42 Monk's Hill Terrace, Newton

*Edwin Thumboo*

After Easter Sunday Service

The walk home from Short Street

Is pensive. 'On the third day He rose'

Keep ringing in my head. I can't grasp it,

Am anxious, in distress. But He is God,

Phoebe says, for whom all things are possible.

You will know when you are older.

Then Sunny tricks us: Hello, 'April fool'!

We joke and laugh as we romp home.

Late in the afternoon I sit on my branch of

Our guava tree, still after-service, still unsure,

Sombre. I brooded over three Japanese years,

A stretch of suffering, from the day we fast-fled

Mandai driven by their shelling. The family got

Dispersed into a seemingly long sadness, split

Between Lorong 41, Minto Road and SGH.

In Syonan-To we younger ones grew fast. Only

Ten, eleven, twelve did earnest work, played less,

Our pre-war comforts stolen away. Tilled sweet

Potato, tapioca, bananas, plantains, yam, all easy

Growing. We had *kacang botol* and green peas,

Full of vitamin B, good top-ups against beriberi.

Neighbours shared, swapped seeds and saplings.

I herded Uncle Sinna's goats. More fun than

Digging or weeding. Sold two-bite curry puffs,

Rain or shine, at Mackenzie Road to Traction Co.  
Mechanics, then Jubilee Cinema, and finally  
Buyong Road's cluster of motor repair shops.

Bigger boys shoved me from my sport. One tough,  
Rough speaking foreman interceded when he saw,

Telling me to be careful of that bullying, nasty lot.  
Grateful, I took extra care when heading home via  
Clemenceau, wondering why they were unfair. So I  
Watch people, old, young; friend, stranger. Others  
Had similar adventures, moments of knowing in joy,  
In pain, in uncertainty; in little corners of our lives.

Days thus settled down into routine responsibilities.  
Papa taught school in Nippon-go. Uncle Hock Seng,  
Uncle Rama, and Uncle Ryan, fellow teachers, met  
Often after the bombs of last November,<sup>2</sup> before  
My birthday, I was hoping for a steel pang-see top.  
They chatted in the hall, whispered when saying  
Mountbatten, the big chief, King George's cousin.

There were many air raids. Shining silver planes in  
Groups were B 20-something, Papa explained, smiling.  
Bombed only the Japanese who claimed white-black  
Ack-Ack puffs corroded the planes. They will crash,  
En route home.

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<sup>2</sup> Eleven air raids on Singapore were mounted between November 1944 and March 1945, the last over 29/30 when the United States Army Air Forces – based in Kharagpur in north eastern British India – were in the final stages of moving to the Marianas. Only 29 Superfortresses (down from 119 at the highest) attacked Pulau Bukom, destroying 7 and damaging 3 of the 49 tanks. Despite flying between 5000 and 7000 feet, none of the planes was lost, revealing the tremendous decline in Japan's military power. The raids boosted civilian morale and were a strong indication that liberation was near....

Suddenly 'Eddie! Where are you?' Mama  
In that voice! Go get the vegetable! Enough *lengkuas*  
To *tumis* her special curry chicken for Uncles tomorrow.

A last look up before jumping down. Light of the South  
Is fading. I think I know why Papa and Uncles smile.

-- *A Gathering of Themes* (2018, Ethos Books)

## Jonathan before Gilboa

*Edwin Thumboo*

I live the shadow of two lives: Father's...  
David's... King... Brother... my necessities.

I face our final enemy. Yet you who beget  
Me, are still my deadly pain. One face love,  
The other hate. How they bite each other! Only  
Once you sought to punish me. Yet I suffered  
Rendingly.

    You psyched up tribes to cut down  
Philistines, and break their cities' trusty bones,  
The spirit of their gates. Yet snuggled Micha, us  
Boys, on your lap. Kissed. Showed nightmares off  
Or squeezed them into dreaming. Kept doing right  
With God, family and world. Blessed and praised.

Then you disobeyed.

Thereafter love leapt into frenzied raving terror.  
Griped and shook and bounced off walls and joists.  
Your tormented spirit writhed, coiled, soothed  
Only by that one harp. Yet hurled your spear at  
Him. Imposed code and law without circumstantial  
Mercy, second chance. Yet rashly ignored God's  
Will in Samuel's precise caring crucial admonitions.  
Impatience burnt that offering not yours to light.  
Thus withered those sublime promises in your  
Anointing, in that blaze of bright beginnings.

You made history; it marred you.

And David, poor David whose God-led heart  
Slew Goliath, hid from mounting praise plowing  
Poison into unwonted suspicious royal jealousy.  
Our souls are knit. He would be hunted. I saved  
My sister's man, a man of God, a man of people.  
A man of coming days. The chosen one. I knew,  
Through love, and walked more willingly behind  
Nobility, rough holiness, feeling comely gentleness.  
He will lead, not me, who strikes hard, speaks soft.  
My veins of pain lived overlong in turbulence.

Night falls. I have no shadows left. Only that empty  
Hush dallying with death before battle. I yearn for still  
Waters and that perfect Garden walk at Eventide. Sela.

-- *A Gathering of Themes* (2018, Ethos Books)

## Uncle Never Knew

*Edwin Thumboo*

I

He lived -if you could call it that - two streets off  
Boat Quay north. Tranquil as leaves left in a tea cup.  
Always alone but never lonely. The daily bustle  
Of barge and coolie ferrying rubber, rice and spice,  
All energy and profit, for towkays and Guthrie's,  
Slipped past without ripple or sound or promise.  
No enterprising cleverness to make his brothers  
Happy, as nothing drew him to our hot meridian.  
Often after rain, he would watch the day dry out.  
But if a few fine drops caught the sun and glittered  
Against that thinning blue strip of northern sky,  
He was back in Swatow. At his table preparing  
Ink and brush; fingering his father's piece of jade;  
Intoning Li Po, Tu Fu, and reading Mao. Sipped tea;  
Fed his carps, while waiting for his drinking friend.

II

Great houses are history, clan, essential unity; belief.  
A way of life which brooks no breaking of fidelity.  
Rooted comforts reaffirm; nothing is extinguished.  
Memory is full and whole: he was ensconced; secure.  
Many see this as overdoing; a few it's the only pulse.  
But not here, this little island Cheng Ho barely noticed.  
Post-astral, Uncle  
Stroked his undernourished beard. Spoke to clouds,  
Not people. Moonlight climbed roofs as he waited

For glow-worms to signify the darkening bamboos.  
Communing with self, he was his favorite neighbour.  
He could not hear migrant hearts change rivers,  
From big to little, smelly one. Or feel the dreams  
Gathering along Carpenter Street, down Telok Ayer,  
Up Ang Siang Hill, answering to calls of temple bells.  
The world was hard language, felt daily, as heart  
And will dropped into soft releasing opium working  
Up hungry lungs, as shadows flickered on the wall.  
Original from and digitized by National University of Singapore Libraries  
He never knew our age in full; had no transplanted way  
To name its joys, its follies. True exile, he denied this  
Home, till life do us part, in '51, leaving companions  
Marx, Engle and Mao, Lu Shun, the Li Sao, T'ao Ch'ien.  
When I am by your, river, I feel Uncle watching me.  
Much returns from inside of his spirit, his affirmations,  
As stories of the Old Country re-surface, tell their life,  
As the House I've never seen, tries to sketch itself.

— *Words* (2010, Ethos Books)