

## Prof's Feast

*Eric Tinsay Valles*

He's on time – as always --, his ashen hair and beard newly trimmed.  
Outside the wooden gate, his eyes light up as a grade schooler's.  
“What's your name?” he asks the cabby to find his dialect root, some common ground.  
He takes time to get into the yellow sedan, then out of it,  
making an excuse in a dulcet baritone that the cabby admires.  
He insists on paying, for he still receives a stipend from the university,  
where he was dean from when his children passed PSLE to when they obtained degrees.  
He asks access to the diner app on his phone for a free dish, earned from loyalty.

A sashimi platter at Ichiban Sushi, Bukit Panjang Plaza  
with him is a banquet of red and gold, the sea's bounty,  
served with stories of friends and foes to rival Scheherazade's in drama:  
his childhood escaping Japanese shelling on Mandai grassland,  
his father pleading with him in prison not to dabble in politics,  
once towering heroes now ghosts haunting his imagination  
loyalty and betrayal, opportunities grabbed or forsaken,  
one man's quest to throw off the white man's burden and write a nation.

After-lunch walks with him are a stride down the annals of man and country:  
From Government Hill, now Fort Canning, where Raffles planted cloves  
to the Bukit Timah campus with mentors and friends conversing all night.  
He lately buys chocolates and face masks for his wife and family;  
his daughter-in-law picks us up when no cabby takes our order.  
The Good Lord has taught him to number the years, and so he shares the same.  
He has given away his books, money and nuggets of wisdom to those younger.  
He asks me to say grace before meals; at some point, I call him “Father.”

Author's note on "Prof's Feast":

It will be no exaggeration to say that Prof. Edwin Thumboo is the father of Singapore literature. Through his curated anthologies, close mentorship and literary initiatives, he has made possible the flourishing of Singapore poetry and, indeed, the arts in Singapore. Prof's mentee and former colleague Kirpal Singh describes him as "THE primary source of and for reference" as regards Singaporean writing in English. Educator Lim Siew Yea agrees. At a briefing for the talent-grooming Creative Arts Programme that Prof. Thumboo established, she sums up his influence, especially on the first waves of Singaporean writers. She says, "If Edwin Thumboo says something, you respond, 'Yes, sir.'"

Indeed, as a writer, teacher, critic, promoter and university administrator, Thumboo has cleared the ground, nurtured Singapore literature and relished its flourishing. He built a poetic tradition and cottage industry around the trope of the Merlion. He located Singaporean or what he calls bazaar English in a network of world Englishes. He forged a canon by editing literature anthologies. He even spurred aspiring writers on with publishing breaks and handsome prizes. He continues to mould Singapore's future with prizes for creative writing and literary criticism.

In a conversation with Prof. Thumboo, I once mistakenly addressed him as "Father" the way I do a reverend confessor. But perhaps that was not inappropriate. Surely, Thumboo deserves to be honoured as the father of Singapore literature. His far-reaching vision has inspired many, including yours truly, to be receptive to the fire of the imagination, which is nothing short of divine. As a mentor and editor, he elicits reflection with pointed questions about ideas and language. As an interlocutor and critic, he engages with the mental acuity and linguistic genius that show glimpses of the best that we can be.

Over the years, whenever Prof. Thumboo asked me to do a small task such as contribute poems to anthologies, I found myself obliging, confirming Lim Siew Yea's claim, with a quick "Yes, sir." I am not the only one to give such a response. Yeow Kai Chai, Enoch Ng, Isa Kamari, Seetha Lakshmi and many of the bright lights of Singaporean literature did that for the *Reflecting on the Merlion* anthology. They did that again along with many more writers, even from beyond this little

red dot's shores, for *Words*. That response was not blind allegiance to some despot. It was really an invitation to transcend limits.

Prof. Thumboo's greatest achievement and bequest no doubt is his gift of poetry. His oeuvre offers a broad literary sweep of this island's history from when poetry was seen as a "luxury we cannot afford" through its becoming a touchstone for the Singaporean identity and, finally, to its critiquing the ills of modernity amid cosmopolitanism. It has been his role to effect a change in creative orientation from "exile to native," as Rajeev S. Patke puts it, for Singapore literature.

Prof. Thumboo has carefully crafted a sturdy literary home, even for migrants and schoolchildren, from the memories and traditions of the island's constituent cultures. It is a privilege to celebrate Prof. Thumboo's abiding inspiration for and lifelong commitment to writers and the nation.