

emptiness

asian poems 1998–2012

Emptiness: Asian Poems 1998–2012 gathers together for the first time work John Mateer has written and on occasion published in South-East and North Asia. From the teeming cities of Singapore, Tokyo and Beijing to the quiet of a Malaccan street, a Honshu mountain or a Malay cemetery in Cape Town, Mateer journeys out into the unknown world and deep into the mind.

His poems are patient investigations of language, selfhood and history. In the midst of an impressive oeuvre, *Emptiness* in particular complements and counterpoints its companion volume *The West: Australian Poems 1989–2009* and reveals the other side of life on our, eastern half of the globe.

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john mateer

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Mateer has published books of poems in Australia, Austria, Portugal and the UK, and smaller collections in South Africa, Indonesia, Japan and Macau. *World Literature Today* has called him “the most recent reincarnation of the international poet”. He has won the Victorian Premier’s prize for poetry and is a recipient of the Centenary Medal for his contribution to Australian literature. In Asia, he has been invited to read his work at Singapore’s Wordfeast, at the Ubud and Galle writers festivals and at Tokyo’s Festival of International Poetry. His latest books published in Australia are *The West: Australian Poems 1989–2009*, *Southern Barbarians* and *Unbelievers, or ‘The Moor’*. Forthcoming are volumes translated into several European languages and Malay.

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“What are the most difficult things to paint?”

“Dogs and horses.”

“And what are the easiest?”

“Ghosts.”

– Han Fei, 234 BC

MISTER! MISTER! MISTER!

Your mouth is your tiger.

– Malay proverb

TWO IMAGES

The Jamu Pedlar

Every evening that tukang jamu passes my window
on her creaking bike. Under her bamboo hat, blouse
and black trousers her movements are rhythmic and slow,
like a Tibetan monk performing the mudras. Every evening
she clicks out her bike-stand to wait across the street
for her sole client, the exhausted man in torn clothes
from the scrapyard next door. Every evening he buys a glass,
gulping it down quickly. She speaks to him, but appears
wordless, silent. To the accompaniment of clinking bottles
and a glugging throat she is the ancient image of Grace.

The Dream

She has full, soft lips and is beautiful.
How he knows she is beautiful who can say?
She may be the image of the Malay bride on the travel guide's cover.
But she is faceless, not frightening,
and her bones curve with devotional time.
He is kissing her. They are naked. Then she is singing
in the only African language he can understand.
Her voice is a young woman desiring a child.
She is singing the lullaby or nursery rhyme with an elusive melody
that he has heard before, years ago, in another dream.
The echoing of her song could undo him if allowed to,
but before he can summon a word they are inaudible again.

LOOKING AT A BOOK

The pembantu, being illiterate,
holds the book awkwardly
– *It's a strange thing.*

She is tilting the book, like a mirror
or a large, disembodied ear.

She and her employer, the foreign poet,
across inarticulable space,
are studying the darkening time of photographs.

Together, the pembantu and the poet
are speaking the rare language of amazement.

THAT VOICE

Is the voice that calls out
Mister! Mister! Mister!

(a memory)

separate from the images of the beggar
with withered legs whose arm reaches through the grille,

who grabs and grabs
at me across the space of

Mind?

BE CAREFUL,

be mindful if you wake someone here:
their soul could be away, wandering,

and mightn't return if you suddenly wake them
and they'd be left alone, insane, homeless.

Then you'd have to feed them as ghosts,
leaving bowls at intersections or outside your doors,

and they'd haunt you like an heredity disease
or the criminality of the invisible.

And then you'd have to attend to their graves
wherever you'd find yourself at rest,

and time's calm opposite would silence you with the vertigo
of all words returning, falling back into their mouths.

And your Self, in the senseless universe,
would be nothing but a photographic flaring.

Even though the sleeping may have been reincarnated already,
be careful: *Their worst nightmare is to be startled awake forever.*

AMOK: THE IMAGE

After the cloudburst, those leaves, glistening, sharpened,
are celestial machetes vividly mutilating space.

NO WOMAN ...

A photon ricochets through the wilderness of her skull.

Woman as cancer.

Her breath on any face is carbon monoxide.

Her flesh, haunting the world like a pornstar's,

is space.

~

Matahari, spy, sun, eye of the day who looks within!

You aren't a surrogate mother,
Avalokitesvara's arms,
nor this Ramadan moon slicing off my fist.

You are the unknown body giving birth,
the ear agreeable in silence,
that darkness staring straight through us ...

~

Under his alien Caucasian skin,
her narcotic scent.

The pribumi woman yells at him,
I love you,

meaning: *You do not understand.*

~

The laugh following is an imploding star.

TRANSLATED MAN

To hear myself think in this noisy city I plug my ears.
Even the minarets are sirens and the daylight a thieving.
Here female eyes shout volumes at me.
Beside what was my soul, wordless men pedal their gliding becaks.
Through a phrasebook I stutter, bargain for space, mask disbelief.
Momentarily recognizing myself as the Marlboro man,
I return to the invisible.

*In mimed song my lover's remembered voice taunts me.
Her dancing body is the universe; its axis always a zero.*

In the desperate theatre of speech I dream ok.
Under the polychrome statuary of Kali's temple in Kampung Keling,
I fade out ok.
The translated man I am is becoming numerical: *zero, ok.*

THE MONKEY-SELLER'S STALL

The monkeys in the TV-sized cage at the roadside
have the faces of old men confronting death.
Under their black velvet fur, a pale immanence.

They stare at me with a terrible awe.
I am huge, monstrous, while they are splitting
like cells, like the infinity of mirror images.

Behind my skin there are clouds of smoke,
underground fires and this smothered city.

Through the mirror, I am watching the monkey-seller stalking.
I am watching one monkey in the seizure of screaming,
his voice an emptying.

In his agate-black eyes I am immediate and loss.

THE ROCK

The volcanic rock on my desk performs solidly.
I identify its presence.
It returns me to this room, this desk, this body.
I observe the rock. It is an eye heavy with silence.
It is an ear consuming space.
It is a memory of a clear day on the island of Samosir.
It is returning me to this room, this desk, my body.
Like Uluru, it confounds the astral, stating,
You do not know what it is you are like.
Personality, igneous rock and oblivion are the same.

THIS PATH

Anyone can walk this path where the eyes have no moon.
Who is to say there's ground under your feet,
except the odd brick crawling like a knocked-over animal?

There's no light here only a dim sky hovering over the roofs.

Of the mouth that opens allowing the blackness in
– or the blackness out – your mind can only conjure
a vague angel.

~

Step carefully – there is a watery scattering of glass before you.

~

Have you never seen a mother sell an ulos for nothing?

Don't you understand that without a moon you, too, are ghostly?

~

Now, in the blackout, free of your silence,
you have turned onto a main street
and are starting to understand that there have been other ways...

No, there is no music, few sounds.

Though the sudakos prowl like illuminated cages,
all the people are hushed, calm.

Candles and lanterns are glowing in the warungs.

In the alcoves of restaurants and stark doorless shops
every shadow is as precious as Coke crates or the shrines of ancestors.

~

In a moment of pure blackness,
as this city narrows to an alley,
all around you, in gutters, ditches, potholes, the rainwater
is now being struck

like a huge bell

~

and you are waking:

TAKBIRAN

There is a night when all radios transmit like minarets,
when the chanting of engines and firecrackers
is as comprehensive as the space in any loved room.

It's the night when windows tremble like the walls of Jericho,
when unbelievers acquiesce to the silence of their wide-screen TVs.

That night is stalked by a fasting moon and its thirsty day,
and with vibrato and reverb is everywhere breeding voices
like engineered wheat or a mirage in an Arabian desert.

That night is pursued by the single-eyed sun who squints
at the field of newspapers where families have knelt,
and squints again at them on scooters speeding to their ancestors.

On that night all is awake to the sound of the one Name.

“BEFORE THE KA’ABAH”

– after Sutardji Calzoum Bachri

That black meteorite,
outside metaphor:

Paradise ...

ALLEYS

The Eye

Could say ‘His’, meaninglessly.

What matters is the convex, dark,
perfectly round eye, beneficent
only in that we are unreflected.

Around, aswirl, pixellations
of tiny feathers silver-edged
by morning.

*Remind us, caged bird,
of someone other than Allah!*

The Hand

It. Evokes hidden alleys
wherein polluted stars should be,

toothy mouths peopling
this walk’s depthlessness.

Her’s, illicit, is the warmth
of that congenial hand,

that moonlit, golden palm
and that – *imagined* – slap.

KRATON

Between the two banyan trees
in the Kraton Square
a rumour could pass, ghostly,

a man, blindfolded,
walking backwards. *But which square?*
Don't you know there are two?

One of that quartet of trees
shattered the night the Sultan died.
A heart attack is never a murmur.

“Yet a rumour can be a coronary, Blind Man,”
said three of the trees, simultaneously.

RAIN

The rain, body temperature and linear, unlike a maternal phantasm,
varnishes the yard's banana leaves, atomizes the blurry streetlamps,
infiltrating minds as a surging brown equatorial river.

The river, twisting between decaying buildings and verdant wasteland,
is metallic with topsoil, incandescent as lava, blinding,
like the crackling of electricity and bone under my pale skin.