



Writer-poet Yeng Pway Ngon's (right) collection of poems was "transcreated" by his wife Goh Beng Choo (left) and Singapore poet Alvin Pang.

Poems in translation

YENG PWAY NGON, 63

Previous works: Yeng has published 24 volumes of Chinese-language poetry, essays, fiction, plays and literary criticism.

Three years ago, Cultural Medallion recipient Yeng was diagnosed with prostate cancer.

The cancer is now under control, but the life-altering event made him realise, among other things, that he would like to have his translated poems published, even though the idea was mooted long before.

"I was really sick and that was when I wanted to quickly publish my works. If not now, then when?" he says in Mandarin.

The result is Titled Poems 1 [Rebellion], the first in a series of five books.

The book consists of a selection of his works published from 1967 to 1970, "transcreated" - as the book's cover puts it - by local poet Alvin Pang and Yeng's wife, former Straits Times journalist Goh Beng Choo.

In this first collection, Yeng's works deal with issues of consumerism, apathy, social decadence and cultural decay.

The Singapore Literature Prize winner in 2004 for his novel, Tumult,



also runs a bookshop, Grassroots Book Room, in North Bridge Centre, which specialises in Chinese books.

He says: "It's funny how my shop caters mainly to foreigners instead of locals. Singaporeans don't seem to read much Chinese anymore. The few locals are mostly students at the university."

"I also noticed that more young people are writing English poems, but not so many are keen on Chinese ones, unlike in the past, when Chinese poets were much more prolific," he adds.

Sometimes he also wonders why he is running the bookshop at all.

"I'm a writer and a poet, so I also have no idea why I'm still keeping this business which does not make much money. Yet, I can't bear to part with it," he says.

He lives in Bishan with his wife. Their 29-year-old daughter works at the Ministry of Education.

He continues to write regularly. "Writing is my life and I will continue with my life's work for as long as I can. Hopefully, one day, there will be a revival of Chinese creative writing," he adds.

Poems 1 [Rebellion] (The Literary Centre/2010/\$7.50) is available from Books Actually, Select Books and Grassroots Book Room.

10 years after winning prize

TENG QIAN XI, 27

Teng's first poetry collection, *They hear salt crystallising*, has been a long time coming.

She was the first non-Briton to win the British Poetry Society's Simon Elvin Young Poet Award in 2000 for *Waterlights*, a poem which gives a lesbian twist to the Chinese folk tale, *Madam White Snake*. In the poem, *Madam White Snake's* good woman friend, the green snake spirit *Xiao Qing*, expresses her unrequited love.

On her first poetry collection, Teng says: "It was a privilege that so many people were looking forward to my book and have been asking me about it since I was 19."

Ten years ago, as a student at Hwa Chong Junior College, she was thrown into the media spotlight after making known her displeasure at not being able



to read a "subversive poem about the Speak Mandarin Campaign" she had written at the 11th Creative Arts Programme Seminar, in front of the then Education Minister, Rear-Admiral (NS) Teo Chee Hean.

She laughs now as she recalls the incident. "I ended up being interviewed by the media and it was a life-changing thing for me. I got to know a lot of people in the arts and civil society scene," she says.

It was also around that time that first-fruits publisher Enoch Ng read one of her poems and contacted her through her school, now Hwa Chong Institution.

The duo have worked together since then to put together *They hear salt crystallising*, which has key themes of gender, family, history and memory.

"Usually my poems are inspired by things that happen or something that I read and it starts with an image in my head I cannot get rid of, and the poem crystallises and coalesces around it," she says.

Teng, the daughter of a retired elec-



trical engineering lecturer and a real estate agent mother, majored in comparative literature at Columbia University. Her works have been published locally and internationally, including Singapore's literary journal *QLRS*.

They hear salt crystallising (firstfruits/2010/\$25) is available from www.firstfruitspublications.com

Inspired by homesickness

GRACE CHUA, 25

If Chua had a chance to re-do her first collection of poetry, *The Stamp Collector's Wife*, she would take out half the poems.

"It still feels a little rough around the edges and I don't know if I'm ready to let the collection go free," she says.

The book cover features whales with wings of monarch butterflies, "all things migratory".

Most of the poems were written as part of her senior thesis in Dartmouth College in the United States, where she majored in psychology and literature.

Many were inspired by the homesickness that she felt being away from Singapore.

"I came home only once a year, during which I would be doing internships where I barely saw my family anyway. I started to dream about my family," says the environment and science reporter at *The Straits Times*.

Both her parents are doctors and her younger sister, 22, is also training to be one.

"It would be 5am or 6am and still dark, I would jot down my dreams and



then go back to sleep," she adds. "I think my parents often wonder which strawberry field they found me in," she says with a laugh, adding that they read to her a lot when she was a child.

The earliest writing in her collection was penned when she was 18 or 19. It was also then that she started writing seriously.

Poets who have influenced her include American-born English poet T.S. Eliot, and Canadian poets Anne Carson and Don McKay.

She also did a graduate programme in science writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

She hopes to have a second collection, but does not think it will be soon. "I'm very lazy, so if there is no one to push me to edit and rewrite, I seldom do that at all," she says.

The Stamp Collector's Wife (firstfruits/2010/\$25) is available from www.firstfruitspublications.com

Grace Chua's poems are inspired by her homesickness when she was studying in the United States.



Philosophical reflections

Chandran Nair, 66

Previous works: *Once The Horsemen And Other Poems* (1972), *After The Hard Hours, This Rain* (1975), *Poems Of The Last Lord Lee: A Translation*, with Malcolm Koh (1975)

Nair may not have lived here for the past 20 years, but he is still in touch with the writing scene here, often reading works of younger poets.

"I might be a little bit forgotten, but I was there from the start, promoting writers in the 1970s," he says. He started *Times Books International*, which was incorporated into international publisher Marshall Cavendish.

He now lives with his wife in Paris where, until his retirement, he had worked since the 1980s as a director



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHANDRAN NAIR

and mediator with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco).

His three grown daughters are in Britain and the United States, which is why he prefers to remain in Europe.

Reaching For Stones, his collected works, will be launched on Nov 20 at The Arts House by Professor Edwin Thumboo.

The poems deal with a variety of

issues, including multi-racial Singapore, but Nair prefers to see them as a reflection of his philosophy of life.

On why he still wants to publish despite the small market here and even though he has not lived here for a long time, he says: "There is enough of a market for publishers to keep on trying. You'll never get rich, but there are enough people who read."

Now, he mainly writes as and when he gets the inspiration.

"It is a misconception that you have to sit and write for a fixed number of hours a day. Maybe so, if you are a professional writer," he says on the phone from Paris.

But he admits: "I can write a lot more than I have written."

Reaching For Stones (Ethos Books/2010/\$19.26) is available at Books Actually, Select Books and Books Kinokuniya.



Qatar 'keen to buy' Christie's as Emir plans cultural hub

London - A possible Qatari bid for Christie's International would help its emir turn the country into a Middle Eastern hub of the global art market, dealers said.

Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani has bought artworks at Christie's and other auction houses, they said. Oil-rich Qatar has also bought the Harrods store and real estate in central London.

The emir said he may be interested in acquiring the London-based auction house, the *Financial Times* reported, after months of speculation about a possible Qatari bid.

"Qatar is interested in Christie's for three reasons," said Mr Philip Hoffman, chief executive of the London-based Fine Art Fund. "It wants long-term value in the art market, it's looking to diversify its economy and it's after advice."

Christie's is a private company owned by French billionaire Francois Pinault. The auction house was bought by his holding company, Groupe Artemis, for US\$1.2 billion in May 1998. It sold £1.71 billion (\$3.5 billion) of art in the first half of this year, a 46 per cent increase on 2009.



Art-buyers visiting a show (above) at Christie's in Dubai. Qatar is reportedly interested in acquiring the auction house. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Offerings of paintings, watches and jewellery in Dubai, where the company's Middle Eastern operations are based, raised US\$23.7 million.

"Artemis indicates that no sale process has been initiated regarding Christie's, the world's leading art business," Artemis said in a statement on Tuesday.

Controlling Christie's would enable Qatar, the world's biggest producer of liquefied natural gas, to enhance its status as a cultural venue. The emir told the *Financial Times* the auction house "has links with the stuff we are collecting for our museum".

The royal family of Qatar has been an active buyer of selected high-value works of Western modern and contemporary art during the last five years, said Mr Hoffman, a former Christie's director.

The Emir of Qatar and his wife, Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al-Missned, paid £9.7 million for Damien Hirst's 2002 pill cabinet *Lullaby Spring* at Sotheby's London in June 2007.

They also bought Mark Rothko's US\$72.8m painting *White Center* (Yellow, Pink And Lavender On Rose) at

Sotheby's New York in May 2007. The price was an auction record for a post-war work of art.

"Christie's is a trophy asset," Mr John Martin, a London-based dealer and co-founder of the Art Dubai fair, said. "Qatar buying the auction house could result in more international sales in the Middle East. Some sellers might see it as an opportunity and would prefer to sell in the Gulf than in New York or London."

To date, it has been Sotheby's, rather than Christie's that has held auctions in Qatar. The New York-based company raised US\$18 million at a series of sales in Doha in March last year. Two Hirst butterfly paintings estimated to fetch as much as US\$1.2 million each failed to find buyers. A second event, comprising Islamic calligraphic painting, will take place on Dec 16.

The Qatar Investment Authority, the country's sovereign wealth fund, owns stakes in financial institutions, including Credit Suisse Group AG and Barclays. The fund paid £1.5 billion for Harrods in May and invested US\$2.8 billion in Agricultural Bank of China's initial public offering in June.

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