

Diverse debuts

The first collections of poets Teng Qian Xi, Mika G. Yamaji and Grace Chua cover a range of issues

Hot Off The Press

Gilbert Yeoh

Poetry lovers were recently greeted with the unprecedented publication of about a dozen volumes of poetry within months.

Among this bumper crop are three poets putting out their first collections. All three debut poets are young women but this fact is less important than how they reflect a diversity of poetic voices.

Among these debuts, it is Teng Qian Xi's *They Hear Salt Crystallising* that resonates most with the dominant trends of Anglophone poetry in the 20th century.

Since the modernist movement of the 1920s, poetry in Britain and the United States has come to be characterised by the features of formal rigour, intellectual complexity and imagistic allusiveness. Teng's collection can be said to be affiliated to this tradition, if distantly.

Her poems exhibit strong formal craftsmanship and a delight in conceptual playfulness and allusive imagery. The intellectual cast is evident in her literary references, ranging from poets such as Sylvia Plath and Paul Celan to characters in Greek mythology and Chinese legend.

While they are intellectually distinctive, Teng's poems are also anchored in her personal life. They tell the reader about the poet, her family, her teacher-mentors and experiences with various individuals.

In this personal mode, Teng tackles her themes: self-realisation and liberty, shapes imposed by history and heritage, the weight of gender.

The personal mode is signalled by a prelude and a postlude to her family. The prelude comprises two poems about her parents, and the postlude two poems about her father and brother.

The opening poem on her father, with references to King Lear and its apt title *Eye And Tongue*, gives the collection a richly allusive start:

My father has one daughter
So I get to be all three
Girls at once. Between these
Three they lost
Their father's shadowy country.
I cannot to my father

Speak this line

I love you more than word
Can wield the matter

Teng's lines are terse and ironic, and the reference to King Lear imbues the poem with dense allusiveness. The reader learns that the poet's father is actually weak and "irresolute" and gleans the irony that, in contrast to King Lear, there never was much of a "country" to be inherited.

Indeed, in the poem in the postlude that revisits her father, Teng references a poem by her dad with wry commentary: "A conversation with a mountain in Malaysia written in the seventies. More exclamation marks than I heard him speak in my entire life."

Her echoes between these two poems generate stimulating thought for the reader - questions of a poet's "shadowy" inheritance from her father and from his writing, and what she can variously derive from speech, silence and poetic voice.

In contrast, Mika G. Yamaji's 86 *Benevolent Street* cultivates a poetry that is light and slight. The poems are slight in their brevity - more than a third here are four lines or shorter.

The poems are also slight in subject. The incongruously titled *A Heavy Plaid Overcoat* is trivial even as it is pleasurable:

I said I loved you
You said you loved me more
we speak only in platitudes
Until half past four

Yamaji runs the risk of appearing trivial though the trivial is part of her aesthetic.

With an awareness that the 21st-century world is a much trodden one, she implies that it can, even then, be re-experienced - not for its angst-ridden depths but for its small moments which she imbues with playfulness.

Poems such as a hope of delivery reinforce this affirmative playfulness:

And the scars that continue to itch
Life is a bitch

The bitch goddess screams and is lovely

Here the reader sees Yamaji's aesthetic of lightness (echoing Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams), and an affirmativeness contented with the slight.

86 *Benevolent Street* is a nod to the benevolence of experience, slight and capricious as it may be.

Grace Chua's *The Stamp Collector's Wife* presents another distinctive poetic voice.

It comprises four sections: Transmigration deals with her foreign experience, Threads with the family, while Tempest covers sexual maturation and relationships. Finally, Without Geography tackles existential issues of death and life's meaning.



Love, family and death are tackled in (clockwise from left) Mika G. Yamaji's 86 *Benevolent Street*, Teng Qian Xi's *They Hear Salt Crystallising* and Grace Chua's *The Stamp Collector's Wife*.

What is immediately striking is the poignance of the relationships she depicts. In the poem which gives the collection its title, she depicts the pathos of her young mum conducting a long-distance relationship with her dad in the United Kingdom:

He is a terse husband. Of few words.
But the stamps
on the letters he sends - a rainbow of stamps.

Winter and damp spring from each envelope stamped
with a foreign postmark: London.
Glasgow. Dublin... Keep the stamps
for me, he says. How can he love her
when he already loves stamps?

Chua's language is lucid and concrete, and it grounds the reader in an authentically felt and realised world.

What is more striking is how she goes beyond the human to embrace the world in its concrete materiality. Thus, alongside human relationship poems are poems on nature, climate, geography, fauna, planting and gardening, subjects depicted with an intuition of their inherent materiality.

The encompassing of the material world grounds her poetry and gives it an authentic vision. When she tackles existential questions, nature retains its independent materiality and is not sacrificed as metaphor.

In Submission, death is pondered amid a solidly material nature:

The summer's tomatoes
will have shrivelled on their stems,
plums to cherries,
cherries to stones,
and rain will have stopped
coming through this valley,...

and still I will be here
asking: Here is the body
I will not die in,
here is the grass -
is this not enough?

Death and loss are inevitable but a concrete and material present always persists - this latter alone suffices as a measure of life's satisfaction and authenticity.

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They hear salt crystallising (*Firstfruits*, 2010, \$26.75), 86 *Benevolent Street* (*Firstfruits*, 2010, \$26.75) and *The Stamp Collector's Wife* (*Firstfruits*, 2010, \$26.75) are available from Books Kinokuniya and from www.firstfruitspublications.com

bestsellers

Fiction

- (2) *The Lost Symbol* by Dan Brown
- (1) *House Rules* by Jodi Picoult
- (3) *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson
- (5) *The Girl Who Kicked The Hornet's Nest* by Stieg Larsson
- (6) *The Girl Who Played With Fire* by Stieg Larsson
- (4) *The Confession* by John Grisham
- (7) *Hell's Corner* by David Baldacci
- (8) *Safe Haven* by Nicholas Sparks
- (10) *Beatrice And Virgil* by Yann Martel
- (9) *The Finkler Question* by Howard Jacobson

Non-fiction

- (1) *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert
- (2) *Have A Little Faith* by Mitch Albom
- (5) *What The Dog Saw And Other Adventures* by Malcolm Gladwell
- (3) *Cooking For The President* by Wee Eng Hwa
- (4) *The Accidental Billionaires* by Ben Mezrich
- (6) *Orange Revolution* by Adrian Gostick
- (9) *The Facebook Effect* by David Kirkpatrick
- (7) *Why We Want You To Be Rich* by Donald Trump and Robert Kiyosaki
- (10) *Decision Points* by George Bush
- (8) *Dynamics Of The Singapore Success Story* by Ngiam Tong Dow

Children's

- (1) *Diary Of A Wimpy Kid #5: The Ugly Truth* by Jeff Kinney
- (2) *Thea Stilton And The Mystery In Paris* by Thea Stilton
- (3) *The Diary Of Amos Lee #3: I'm Twelve, I'm Tough, I Tweet!* by Adeline Foo
- (4) *Quest For Paradise - Return To The Kingdom Of Fantasy* by Geronimo Stilton
- (5) *Justin Bieber: First Step 2 Forever: My Story* by Justin Bieber
- (9) *Mr Mystery Special Edition: The Mystery Of The Christmas Killer* by James Lee
- (10) *Mr Midnight Special Edition #4: The Snowmen From Hell* by James Lee
- (6) *The Heroes Of Olympus #1: The Lost Hero* by Rick Riordan
- (5) *I'm Not A Supermouse* by Geronimo Stilton
- (8) *Pokemon Adventures #34* by Satoshi Yamamoto

This is LifeStyle's compilation of the bestseller lists from Books Kinokuniya, Page One VivoCity, MPH and Popular bookstores. The numbers in brackets are the previous week's positions.

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Guzaarish
TDY: 1.15pm

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