

Boey Kim Cheng, Arin Alycia Fong, and Justin Chia (Eds). *To Gather Your Leaving: Asian Diaspora Poetry from America, Australia, UK and Europe*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2019. 662 pp. ISBN 978-981-14-2037-5.

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In 1982 Salman Rushdie introduced us to what is now his indispensable analogy of the “broken mirrors” in his famous essay “Imaginary Homelands”. Using this analogy to defend his ideas about history and memory in what was then his newly published novel, *Midnight’s Children*, he spoke in metaphorical terms about the many routes the migrant writer would have had to negotiate and re-negotiate in trying to reclaim or remember his or her originary homeland, often in terms of the new land of abode. Rushdie explained that such an experience would have had to include the intricate ideas of what constituted his or her identity within a definite space and place, through what is remembered and what is not. The complexity of the analogy then extends itself to the ideas within a migrant writer’s consciousness of what is still present, or retrievable, and what is lost. Traversing these boundaries of time, space and place, such a quest in terms of memory and the many versions of “truth” that could be engendered by it could ultimately reveal ideas about rootedness, identity and belonging. These still remain as some of the most important themes in postcolonial writing today.

However, employing memory to locate one’s former homeland can be just as fraught as finding it in a writer’s newly adopted country, because mere memory, like the broken lines in the mirror, often cannot be relied upon to be a faithful device, to help see the complete picture. Rushdie then avers in the essay that the past is sometimes just as foreign a country as the present one. Ideas of such absence, the long passage of time, the inability to remember well or the want to reinvent memories which cannot be retrieved whole are precisely what many of the poets in this anthology are concerned with. And often when faced with such a difficult quest they are forced “to make the world over in their own image” (287) according to Rushdie, or simply give up in despair of not being able to, when the past is too difficult to deal with in the present. In this anthology many of the poets, exiled or not, adhere to such ideas found within the broken mirrors analogy. Many here reveal that such a quest often ends in either new meaning or futility. Some like Ocean Vuong aptly consider the endless paths that seem to merge bewilderingly in paradox, within the present. “The end of the road is so far ahead / it is already behind us,” Vuong

says in his poem, “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong”, from which we also get the title for this anthology (245). Jenny Xie voices similar ideas when she says in “Long Nights” that “Nothing is as far as here” (256).

Looking for continuity is just as distressing a quest as creating new realities, what more locating the self amidst such trauma and uncertainty. Exiled, migrant or expatriate writers all try to locate what is lost in the present, but most are haunted again and again in the end by an overarching sense of loss. But that is not to say that all the poets in this anthology only consider the past that is found in the migratory routes they have travelled. It is the “older” writers that often try to capture the fragmented, paradoxical nature of the self with regards to the past. The newer, often younger, poets here tend to eschew such notions of what is simply lost in memory, or that which remains irretrievable, and instead, offer up new notions of what the broken lines of Rushdie’s mirrors could also mean. If the older and more established American voices in this anthology tend to delve into more traditional migrant issues, I do notice that the far younger Australian and European voices capture just as many vivid cultural ideas in terms of new forms and more contemporary cultural points of view. The Australian poet Maryam Azam, for instance, teaches us in “A Brief Guide to Hijab Fashion” to literally tie the headscarf in a myriad of styles and for a myriad of occasions, as she confidently displays her pride for her own cultural traditions (320-321). Similarly, the English poet Rishi Dastidar would go so far as to celebrate the present and say that “#MyEngland is waiting for a new joint to arise” and “#MyEngland is the scene that celebrates itself” (523).

I think this is because the earliest diasporic Asian writing that found its way into “Asian” anthologies was first collected and published in America. These early voices often displayed the poetic concerns of wanting to belong to one’s originary homeland, of still wanting to contemplate the idea of “return”. So what I initially had come to expect as the only distinct facet of such writing is now challenged by anthologies like the present one which give newer meaning as well as newer ways of confronting the poet’s own Asian gaze into that metaphorical mirror. These new stirrings of form and meaning are often just as brave, and just as impressive, but without wanting to continue the theme of loss foregrounded by the older generation of Asian poets. These younger voices are strangely haunted by a sense of being free to interpret what is new. This might not amount to any new kind of broken revelation, for what is new is also contained within that gaze which is in the present. They are after all looking metaphorically at themselves in the present and not some irretrievable past. They can then breathe new life into Rushdie’s analogy, now almost four decades old, and re-enact a new way of seeing and viewing wholeness within the crazes of the mirror. No more is there a need to see the world in exilic terms — the present is more palpable than anything lost in the fissures of memory. Unlike the American poet, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, who says in “Riding to California” that “If you come to a land with no ancestors / to bless you, you have to be your own / ancestor” (140), affirming that the first generation poets still look for cultural links with the past, the second and

third generation Asian poets can now contemplate a very different gaze of themselves, often severing with the past altogether. Such a “homecoming” is to result in dropping the “migrant” tag and being fresh, new citizens of their country of birth.

In the end, older or younger, no one is able to locate what is exactly lost in the new homeland, but that is where Rushdie’s idea of the broken mirrors and imaginary homelands remains essential. Although we can never retrieve the past from the cracked bits of the mirror, we can nevertheless reconcile that unrecoverable past with the present. And as we create newer fictions in the present to replace the ones that were lost, we eventually gain newer perspectives, newer homelands of the imagination. Indeed, the paradox wherein the broken mirror is more valuable than the one irretrievably lost has always held true.

All in all, the editors of this anthology must be congratulated. For the first time we can trace for ourselves the different stages of the development of diasporic Asian poetry in each of, as well as across, the three continents of America, Europe and Australia, allowing for “a global comparative view of their trajectories” (18).

Works Cited

Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1992.