

## Reaching for Stones

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Chandran Nair, *Reaching for Stones: Collected Poems (1963-2009)*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2010. 151 pages. ISBN 9789810867171.

Chandran Nair was unquestionably a very important English-language poet in Singapore in the first half of the 1970s, producing two volumes of poetry, *Once the Horseman and Other Poems* (1972) and *After the Hard Hours, This Rain* (1975). He was also what might be called today a literary activist, editing anthologies of poetry, short fiction and conference papers on literature and even establishing his own publishing firm, Woodrose Publications.

However, unaccountably, after 1975, he became little more than a memory in the local literary scene, virtually forgotten as a Singaporean literary figure, due to his long absence abroad. But then, in 2010, his *Reaching for Stones: Collected Poems* suddenly appeared and revealed that he continued writing poetry in the three decades prior to its publication, but not as frequently as he did in the sixties and early seventies.

Most of the poems collected in the first part of the volume, and a huge segment of the second part, are works written in the earlier twelve-year period while less than a quarter of the whole volume is work produced in the thirty-four year period between 1975 and 2009. The first part (except for two omissions and two additions) largely corresponds to the contents of his first volume, *Once the Horseman and Other Poems*, and mainly appear in their original order. The second part similarly consists largely of poems published in his second volume, *After the Hard Hours, This Rain* (1975). However, unaccountably, these do not appear in their original order; nor are they either rearranged thematically or chronologically according to the date written.

The volume is also divided geographically: the first two parts were written in Singapore, the third in Karachi and Paris. While it seems he was more poetically productive in Singapore, and there was a decline in his literary creativity when abroad, closer examination reveals that a sudden decline in his poetic output had

already occurred while he was still in Singapore. Close scrutiny of the second part of his *Collected Poems* shows it to consist largely of poems published between 1972 to 1981, with the vast majority coming from his 1975 collection.

The division of the *Collected Poems* into three parts is thus helpful, as it is useful to know which of the poems were produced earlier, and which later. However, it leads one to compare and contrast the first two parts with the last part, although such judgment is not always clear-cut, for some of the earlier poems in the third part are comparable in quality to those in the two previous parts. The division also makes one look more closely at the third part, where the new, hitherto unpublished poems are.

The younger Nair of the two earlier parts, was interested in the larger questions of life. The beginning of "the sphinx (after cocteau)" is typical of some of the better poems here:

if not the sun, then the rains wash  
us into suffering, as always the gods  
forget, we are mortal after all  
capable of small lust, great expectation  
and contempt.

The later poems in the third part are relatively less interested in metaphysical concerns – which do crop up, but are treated as platitudes and not similarly probed.

Fine poetry can be written by dealing with the trivial and the mundane: in Singaporean poetry in English, for instance, Arthur Yap, practically throughout his poetic career, and Robert Yeo, in his more mature later poetry, deal with what are apparently trivial concerns, with some artistry and understated depth. But Nair seems to skim the surface without suggesting the more important underlying issues; or, the assumed underlying issues are a little too soaked in the formulaic or too imbued with clichés to make an impact. This is apparent in his poem written for his daughter Radha:

thus it has been since time began  
  
when a daughter is born  
you hold her tightly against your bare chest  
feel enquiring eyes slowly map your face,  
while fingers clutch safety  
  
then she smiles and you melt.

Nair appears to be better when he touches on the larger themes that are found in his earlier poems, such as in the eponymous "reaching for stones":

her mind sleeps within stones  
unimpelled by love and philosophies  
love falls between time and shadows  
as the desert closes light,  
diffuses dreams, undoes patterns  
dries up rain.

It is poems such as "reaching for stones" and a few others in the third section that make us hope that Nair will continue to write, and that in his case, the fear that when a poet produces his *Collected Poems* during his lifetime it signals the end of his poetry, is without basis.