

K.S. Maniam, *Two Heartbeats Away*. Petaling Jaya, Maya Press, 2019. v +88 pp. ISBN 978-983-2737-60-5.

Reviewed by Carol Leon

Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The passing of award-winning Malaysian author and academic K.S. Maniam on 19 February 2020 has left a gaping hole in the Malaysian literary scene. A prolific writer, Maniam was influential in shaping the course of Malaysian Literature in English. His last book, *Two Heartbeats Away*, is a compilation of poems which came out in 2019. It is a collection of thirty-nine poems written over a span of fifty-five years, from 1964 until 3 January 2019. The poems are arranged chronologically. There is no foreword or introduction in the collection; hence it is uncertain if the task of choosing these poems from Maniam's oeuvre was his or someone else's.

Maniam has written in the different literary genres but though he is revered for his novels, plays and short stories, he is not often acknowledged as a writer of poetry. However, as *Two Heartbeats Away* demonstrates, Maniam has a poet's eye for detail and for what is unseen and hidden. He possesses the poetic sensibility of being able to appreciate the myriad hues and dimensions of life and living. It is interesting to note that Maniam's first published work was a poem written when he was twenty-two years old. For me, it was tempting to see the first poem in the collection, "A Pack of Cards", as that very first published piece because it is dated 1964, the time when Maniam was a young student living in England. In many ways "A Pack of Cards" sets the tone for the whole collection. Here, life is imaged as a pack of cards read by a fortune teller, "to be opened, to be shuffled,/prised open, closed by a touch" (1). Though one can try to choose which path is best and "live philosophically" (2), ultimately the discovery is that everything is beyond human prediction and control: "Put back the cards now;/we will use them to waste our time,/waste our breath,/while away a life,/before it returns to its packet" (2). So it goes with the depictions and images of life in almost all the poems: human existence is shaped by a perplexing randomness which undergirds its complexities and uncertainties. In these poems, Maniam probes the inner workings of the mind and delves into the deep recesses of human emotions, asking questions about who we are, why we dream and fear the way we do, what are life's lessons. Placed in the context that *Two Heartbeats Away* was published just months before Maniam's passing, this collection then, especially the poems written close to the end of his life, takes on a particular poignancy.

The poems in this collection vary in style and carry different themes. Some are short and pointed, capturing an observation or the mood of a particular moment: the sadness of losing a beloved pet ("Alfie's Last Walkabout"),

the sudden appreciation of the beauty of an oft-reviled creature (“Crow Dignity”), remorse for the unwritten works of a deceased friend and fellow poet (“The Unborn”). Then there are the poems which meander and meditate on life, circumstances, relationships, ageing, death and loss, poems like “Living Silence”, “Mirror Moments” and “A Stellar Twitch”. But one overarching concern in most of the poems in the collection is the need to discover the inner self. It is only when the person can apprehend that self can he or she lead a meaningful, well-lived life. The persona in “An Intimation” looks to the past and reels when he recognizes his “towering menace” as a façade and that he is merely “a tiny particle of dust” (22). The social masks that he religiously puts on created an otherness which separated him from the rest and ultimately his own self. He goes searching for “that original/sense of the self/and the enigma of life itself” (23). For Maniam the quest for the original self does not amount to just going back to the past but translates into a relentless peeling off of the externalities that shroud that all-important self. “Departures” invokes the same message. Here the narrator mulls on the mutability of life. Something as natural as a falling leaf, coming “from somewhere” and “enroute to somewhere else” hints at the existence of another dimension, forces at play, forming and transforming (82). When a woman weeps, is it because she is “irredeemably broken” or awaiting “release into an immeasurable freedom?” (82). When a man alights from a train and seems “lost in the anonymity of the mass”, does he grieve “for the loss of his self or refashion himself?” (82). The last stanza tells the young boy to go deep into the stillness, “his Self” (83). Only in that “timeless Self” can he find glory. (83). What is that self? How can we get to it? Maniam’s poems do not offer graspable answers or closure. Instead, they compel us to pursue that self even as we embrace the mystery and uncertainty of the quest.

There are poems which speak to our immediate times. “Gargoyles” contains a sustained description of the corrupt politician who as he speaks, grows more hideous but ironically more alluring to his audience who are seduced by his grandiose plans. In “Colour Schemes” the persona, always “shocked, pleasantly, by colours” (45), now feels alienated from their beauty and asks, “Has something happened/to all that freshness and it-selfness?” (45). White, brown, yellow and black have imbibed political hues which destroy their aesthetic splendour. “Transience” captures the harrowing effects of mechanization and advanced technology on humankind – “The parents/watch, in universal horror, the dying flames of the human face” (79). In the title poem written in 2017, we once again are asked to reflect on the precarity of life. Maniam’s images seem to evoke the memory of the Bastille Day attack of 2016 when a driver of a lorry ploughed into a crowd of people celebrating the day on a promenade in Nice, France. Over eighty people were killed and hundreds injured. In seconds a celebration had turned into a scene of heart-rending tragedy. The motif of “two heartbeats” goes beyond the suggestion that it takes a heartbeat to separate the living from the dead. Hearts can also beat to rhythms which can either sanctify

or deny life. In the poem we see two men, two heartbeats, dealing with their darkness in different ways. One of them turns this inner darkness “into an outer light” (24). The other man could only find relief when he “flung/it from himself” (26), bringing blight to others.

An interesting inclusion in this collection are the poems which seem to hearken to *The Return*, arguably Maniam’s most beloved novel, often described as semi-autobiographical. *The Return*, first published in 1981, recounts the challenges faced by the Indians living in the estates as told by its young narrator Ravi. The poems “My Grandmother” and “Immortality” can be respectively read as moving tributes to the characters of Periathai, Ravi’s grandmother, and Naina, his father. It feels as if Ravi, now an adult, is looking back at his family and acknowledging their lineaments on his own person. “My grandmother fitted out my bones/with flesh/... nurtured in me part of herself:/she gave me life with her labour” (6). He calls out to his father, a simple, misunderstood man who possessed a vision of “a peace that surpasseth all understanding” (10). Maniam has always written so passionately about the Indian diaspora in Malaysia and these poems revive appreciation for the courage of this community as it faced insurmountable challenges to lay a claim in their newly-adopted homeland.

Other than eight poems, the rest were written from 2017 onwards and one is tempted to see some of the later poems as emerging from Maniam’s battle with cancer. “Transience”, “Self-Absorption”, “Departures” and “Not a Simulation” are explorations into this thing called “life” and some of the lines, which seem to describe Maniam, move the reader deeply: “I sit in this ageing body not as in a dreamless/space, but in the midst of haunting surprises... I can’t believe I’m a simulation, nor the pain in my heart,/yearning to be released from deep within, to be itself” (74-75). These poems reveal some of his “haunting surprises” and his relentless impulse towards authenticity. Right to the end, it appears, Maniam was searching for truths and understanding. These poems tell us so. Did he find them? We will never know. But we can be certain that his was a dedicated pursuit of self-knowledge and realization and we would do well to follow suit.