

An aerial photograph of a city, likely San Francisco, showing a large domed building (the San Francisco City Hall) in the foreground, surrounded by streets, trees, and other buildings. The image is in a sepia or light brown tone.

a city

a city is a violent soul,
with lightning on the rails
and thunder in the streets,
on walls, in marketplaces,

in every *chee bai* and *lan jiao*,
every *hong gan* and *ani kuan*,
pundeh and fuck spider,
in every *tiu lei lou mo*.

a city is a gremlin of seedy
hotel 81s and alcoholic wastrels,
tin pan alleys of sordid enterprises,
peddler of pedo pamphlets¹ and panadol.

pay me for your gigolos, your whores,
in odds and evens with fish porridge and *zi char*,
deciphering whether *guan gong* means clean or dirty,
tell me what it means to be a keong saik kitty.

an old man sleeps on a bench in bishan park,
a bangladeshi reads the Quran under moonlight,
two men kiss and tell of stars in boon lay bliss,
a girl sings k-pop while her grandma dies in the next room.

the city is a violent string of wires,
haunting — cable cars falling into the seas,
pedantic — wet blanket, white over graffiti,
only for graffiti to form again.

Crispin Rodrigues

ravencrispin@hotmail.com
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Poet's Exegesis

The inspiration for “a city” came from a Day 28 prompt from Singapore Poetry Writing Month 2016, which was to disagree with a statement or opinion, and include a swear word as well. However, more than just working within the parameters of the prompt, I wanted to capture the cosmopolitan nature of Singapore. I was thus more interested in local swear phrases, rather than more familiar English ones. I was more interested in the dinginess of living in Singapore, especially figures who are seldom, if not ever, captured by documentaries — such as foreign workers living in cramped dormitories and sex workers. (Although nowadays Keong Saik Road is more famous for hipster cafes and small eateries than its previous red light status.) The “graffiti” at the end of the poem thus implies the seediness that has been layered over and whitewashed, but new forms of expression will emerge organically from it. Echoing a form similar to Allen Ginsberg’s poems like “Howl” and “America”, I hope to show that censorship is not the end, but a challenge to find alternative ways for expression to develop.

¹The term “pedo pamphlets” refers to prostitution.

