

Tharman Shanmugaratnam the poet is something almost nobody knows about

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Someone who saw my article about public figures who read, such as Dr Chee Soon Juan, Sim Ann and the late Mrs Lee Kuan Yew, tipped me off about a Cabinet minister who — wait for this — wrote poetry.

This poet politician is none other than Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

Tharman penned four poems for a 1978 collection called *but we have no legends*. He co-edited the book with KC Chew and Yeoh Lam Keong, all then in National Service and part of the Young Writers' Circle at the National Library.



but we have no legends



But We Have No Legends was edited by three men working irregularly over a period of three months. They met at a house in Upper Serangoon, drank countless cups of coffee, and had violent quarrels over strange things like grammar, meaning, and whose poetic licence had expired. Chew Kheng Chuan, an inveterate *sng-buay* addict, was ostensibly editor-in-chief. His constant demands for clarity trimmed off much loose fat from this

book. Yeoh Lam Keong and Tharman Shanmugaratnam assisted with invaluable scorn, criticism and camaraderie. Peng Siang Huat helped with his teochew mui shop at sixth mile that opened after midnight.

This book owes itself to the rest of the Young Writers' Circle for their poems and their year-stretched patience.

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The titles (or first lines when untitled) of Tharman's works are: "a good sarabat stall has"; an extract from "the self and others"; "outside rex"; and "staircase, block 104".

Lower case seemed to be in vogue then! (See below for the text of the last poem.)

staircase, block 104
by Tharman Shanmugaratnam

variation of yesterday's game.
accusing shrieks challenging
laughter
and yesterday is no pakai.

and happiness is sometimes bought.

scrambling up
children's lives,
they too
shall learn the ways –
smother their responses, cultivate
the measure of nonchalance: they
too shall squeeze into lives
and live with it. and happiness
is often sold.

screaming past the lightning,
then smiling through a
missing tooth
in the dark turn of the staircase

KC Chew, who also had poems in the collection, was detained during the alleged Marxist conspiracy in 1987. He is one of Asia's most successful fund-raisers and is current chairman of arts centre The Substation.

Fellow contributor Yeoh Lam Keong, who was later Tharman's classmate at the London School of Economics, was the former chief economist at the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation and is now an adjunct professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Interestingly they crossed intellectual swords earlier this week.

As an economics undergraduate in the London School of Economics, Tharman also sent his verse to the University of Singapore Students Union publication "Singapore Undergraduate". A then-editor of the magazine told me that he was so impressed by a poem of the future Deputy PM that he placed it on the back cover of one issue.

"He was a very good poet. Not sure how much poetry he's written recently," Chew said. The book is unfortunately out of print, though available at the National Library and the NUS library.

To have a poet (or at least a former poet) in the Cabinet is unexpected. Tharman does not speak publicly about his literary past (perhaps it is just that no one thought to ask).

His artistic bent might have an effect on policy. An academic told me: "It was during his time as Minister of Education that Drama became an official subject at O-levels and the gates were opened further for Drama in schools."

Lee Kuan Yew declared that poetry was a luxury Singapore could not afford admittedly more than forty years ago.

On another topic, I wonder whether it would be fair to say that in this election Tharman has emerged to be many people's (even the Opposition's) — but not the PAP's — choice to be the next prime minister.

For that, I have written this rough Haiku combining several ideas:

Poet in closet
Crouching in the Cabinet
Biding time with rhyme

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