

common differences

I watch you sculpt poetry
with those silent, precious, moving hands
you draw meaning from the air
as easily as condensation forms sweat beads
on all in the crowded Metro

we call your language 'sign' – perhaps
because in your fluid motion
there is oneness between
signifier and signified

or perhaps because to listen you must see
and if seeing is believing, then in your lack
you signal some fundamental truth
to which we, with our fuller senses
have grown desensitised

or perhaps because when you laugh
as now you do
yours are the same joyous notes
that we make, who have encountered
notes, tones and dissonance

because you are signs
of some common human grammar
that teaches us the sounds of chuckles, grins and giggles
whether we stay silent, are orators or stammer

because you are emblems
of some essential person-ness
some unarticulated mystery
whose lips, even if speech were possible
would stay decidedly shut
but whose eyes would dance
with the movement of hands
with the sound of laughter

and, always
with unceasing merriment.

Inspired by a Child, Just Before National Day

6 August 2002

It takes starts, stammers
Before words finally burst
Through the barriers of baby babble
She waves the red-white flag, gurgling
“Sing – Ah – Pore... hear...
Lion... Roar...”

Syllables swell with newness
The corners of her curious smile
Propped by the unfamiliar feel
Of language on the tongue

Enough to make one wonder
If patriotism and belonging
Whatever the time or place

Can ever find more coherent shape
Than these halting pronouncements

Or if, like language and love
Such attachments are best left
To the stutters of a child –
The joy and unfamiliarity
Of a new word
Written on the face

Remembering Jalan Kayu

For Priscilla and Marianne

Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

– *W. B. Yeats*

(i)

I remember little of my first two years there
I've seen photographs, of course
They tell me the rented bungalow
Housed two parents, two great-grandmothers
And a lot of brown around me:
Sepia hues and haloes, the russet residue
Of relentless years

Without pictures, most of those earliest times
Are a pre-dawn, unremembered,
Just before the stirrings of woozy wakefulness
Can thoughts think, I wonder
And would they choose to float thus
At the morning of Memory's border?
Rising above recollection and remembrance
Might they also, somehow,
Avoid being forgotten?

(ii)

For as long as I remember remembering
Our playgrounds were never very expansive
Under the dining table, hiding in
Cupboards or making dried leaf rojak
In the rain outside: those were the games
Of our 1980s childhood, our created toys
Though we had our share of dolls and soldiers
Of kites and playing 'catching' in the field, mostly
We found that interiors were not inferior.
Before learning about size, shape or dimension
We discovered worlds etched in splinters, stones
And the sliver of light through nearly-closed doors:
Children's minds drawn to children's proportions
And the possibilities in small spaces.

(iii)

Your birthdays were always great fun:
Every child got a present too, but –
In that way reality has
Of tapping on the shoulder –
There were conditions. We had to sing,
Strut our stuff, perform
For parents, aunts, uncles, and
Whichever of you was turning older.

I remember one year
When I couldn't sing or say a thing.

Some thick silence scarfed my throat
And hard as I tried
To eke
Out note
Or lyric
The words seemed dried.

I knew little, then, about the dangers
Of relying on rascal rhymes and rhythms
So I stared, lips pursed
Wondering where they could be
And why the words were hiding
From a desperately seeking me.

(iv)

It was one of those equatorial afternoons:

Accumulated morning heat

Had pressed the air to stillness

The slightest tremor would topple

The equilibrium of convection

And so we waited, eager-nervous

To watch the storm as it swept

Past the road

Hoping with unseasoned faith

That we might outrun the pelting sheets

And make it indoors dry.

We barely did it, then
And sometimes I wonder what child's luck
I might rediscover, that gets me out of
Thundery weather just in the nick of time,
Lets me watch the rain through windowed safety
While wiping nothing more than water
From my eyes.

(v)

Some places permit only tentative steps
Into browning pasts: with 'kayu',
Wood of any kind, each footfall
Resonates with remembrance.
So we tread softly,
Respecting the silent store
Of thoughts unrecalled
And therefore unforgotten:
The stuff dreams are made of.
From which Memory sublimates,
Lessons crystallise, and lives solidify.

Moth, Caught in a Room

There's no controlling you
 No rest in
 Ricocheting incessance
Yours is the frenzied flight
 Of a bullet
You stain walls
 With the gold dust
 Of your gunpowder wings
 Till suddenly –
You discern a spiral that leads to peace
And come to rest,
 Momentarily:
More fusillade flecks fall
 Before you careen towards
 The liberation of a street lamp.

There's no room I know that contains
Inspiration's mothy wheeling.
It leaves the mind's window, and us kneeling,
Scavenging for gold dust: the poetry that remains.

Moving On

“Next stop, City Hall Interchange”
says the recorded articulation of my thoughts
as yet again, we travel on one of our outings.

Full of fun, we always agree:

so nice to met up after a
whole year of stress and work
and time-occupying activity.

Too much, perhaps, and too long
or maybe just too late,
we sit and wait,

fumbling

for words as if for loose change;
foraging for that term of affection, stuck
like the MRT card in my jeans.

We avoid conversation like those
Sanyo pamphlets or Bone Marrow
raffle ticket sellers – No
thank you, I bought just now already.

Just now seems so far away
as tears we don't have time to cry calcify in the gullet,
as you go West and I go East and
suddenly
our island doesn't seem so small anymore.

Query for Martin Luther King, Jr

Atlanta, Georgia, May 2002

Sitting in your church,
Listening to a crackling 60s recording of your speech,
I had a dream and remembered how potholes, decay
and the frightened child's eyes of poverty appeared
as I walked from downtown and neighbourhoods changed.

You must have known that some dreams
Don't "come true". Like rudimentary recordings
They can waver, weaken or go silent for a while.
Tireless energy sometimes gives us the comfort
Of a goal approximated, but mostly,
Targets are polymorphic,
Re-vealing shades, nuance and obstacles
Previously unperceived. Ideals
Need constant reinventing, new forms of being,
New pools of solace, new sustaining.

Yet listening again, I know too
That recordings can only be refined if they are already made.
And if our desire is Injustice unseamed
Then lone crackling voices must fist be heard,

And lone dreams dreamed.

Solat

In standing straight, bending
Down to touch my knees, then ending
Each *raka'at* in homage on the ground,
I find that spot beyond all sight or sound –

Around the body's pivot
The moments of each day
Find equilibrium and balance;
Stillness beyond dimension
In a fretful, twisting world.

Five times daily, some force
That both is and transcends
Mass, distance and matter
Isolates that point where all life's fulcrums meet:
Gravity suspends; perfect stability is wrought
In human hands, and mind, and feet.

Standing Still

Petra, Jordan, April 2002

Here, I learn that even stone
Has its language...

 Standing here, where
Rarefied mountain air slices bone
And evaporates the need for words
Except the toughest, most spare.

I discover how quiet eloquence can be
Hearing stone tease and immortalise
Civilisation's first, girlish blush...
Hewn pink, red, brown compel humility
As I pass treasury and tomb and
Know my own silence, watchfully preserved
Is born of something more than fatigue
Or breathless strain.

Standing here, I brush shards of realisation
That space is sometimes just the lack
Of sound; and why these spaces,
This stony syntax, is what God chose
For chronicle, canon and commandment;
Why, to places like this, we bring
Our most silent prayers and wordless pleas –

As if in otherworldly quiet
There is some whisper of what we seek
When, freed of the world's static
God's word grows loud
And the silences – His, mine – speak.