



SINGAPORE  
PIONEER  
POETS

**THE  
BEST  
OF  
ROBERT  
YEO**

Introduction by Ismail S. Talib

*“The wonderful thing is, as a poet working in mid-career at the height of his power, Yeo’s distinctive voice will accompany us into the next millennium, to gently remind us of who we are, where we are, where we have come from and where we are going.”*

**Aaron Lee**, *The Straits Times*, Singapore

*“I came across Robert Yeo’s poems as a teenager in the early 1970s. I love Robert’s poems; I find them engaging, conversational, not intimidating. Like beautiful traditional pantuns, his poems seem deceptively simple and gentle, yet they delve deeply into the many issues of the day and are thought-provoking. The poems act as a form of documentary of our times.”*

**Rasiah Halil**, Singapore

*“In a way, Robert Yeo is a writer because he is in the right place in the right time. Singapore’s dramatic ever-changing history from 1940 is Yeo’s history, and because his work constantly mirrors, critiques or applauds what is happening there, it is worth looking at his life, his work and his city’s development as interdependent strands which join to produce the fabric we see on the page.”*

**George Watt**, author of *Interlogue: Studies in Singapore Literature, Volume 5: Robert Yeo*

*“His poems are personal poems, reflections on observed reality. They chronicle the developments of an individual consciousness while at the same time they chronicle the developments of Singapore. The parallelism of the poet and the city is unforced but recurrent.”*

**Michael Wilding**, novelist and Emeritus Professor of English and Australian Literature, University of Sydney

*“Yeo’s creative talent, indeed, is conspicuously versatile and, accordingly, it is relevant to access, in relation to his poetry, the spread of Robert Yeo’s multi-genre output.”*

**Syd Harrex**, *CRNLE Journal*, Australia

*“His ability to freeze vignettes of Singaporean life in its dynamic state of flux places him among the island’s more important poets.”*

**Cynthia Peterson**, *The Sun*, Malaysia

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Yeo has published poetry and a novel, staged plays, written essays on cultural policy and theatre, compiled anthologies on Singaporean literature and co-written books on the teaching of literature in secondary schools. Currently, he teaches creative writing at the Singapore Management University and mentors in the MAP programme of the National Arts Council. In 1978, he attended the University of Iowa's International Writing Program and was a Fulbright Scholar in 1995. For more than a decade, from 1977 onwards, he was Chairman of the Drama Advisory Committee which helped to develop theatre in Singapore, especially English-language theatre, and for this work he was awarded the Public Service Medal in 1991.

His collection of poems *Leaving Home, Mother* was published in 1999 and his three connected plays were published in 2001 as *The Singapore Trilogy*. In October 2009, his second libretto titled *Kannagi*, a short chamber piece based on an Indian epic poem, with John Sharpley as composer, was staged in Singapore's Sri Mariamman Temple. His first libretto, a full-length work titled *Fences*, also with John Sharpley as composer, will be staged in August 2012. Yeo was awarded the South East Asian Writers Award in 2011.

**THE  
BEST  
OF  
ROBERT  
YEO**

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Introduction by Ismail S. Talib



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For my daughters

Sha Min and Sha En

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These poems are published in book form for the first time:

“Survival: Singapore”, “Abandoned Refugee Boat in Desaru, 1980”, “A Poem as a Fan”, “Friends”, “Happy Birthday with No Limits” and “From Belief to Wonder”. The arias and choruses from *Kannagi* are published for the first time.

The rest have appeared in *Leaving Home, Mother: Selected Poems, 1999* or in my four previous books of poems.

I am grateful to Dr. Ismail S. Talib for the introduction.

**Robert Yeo**

Introduction  
by Ismail S. Talib

Robert Yeo is a love poet. By way of explanation, I could perhaps begin with a quotation from Charles Baudelaire: “Si je commence par l’amour, c’est que l’amour est pour tous, —ils ont beau le nier—la grande chose de la vie!”<sup>1</sup>: “If I start with love, it is because love is for everyone—no matter how one tries to deny it—it is the great thing in life!” [my translation]. It is “the great thing in life” too for Yeo, except that, in spite of the underlying belief that it is for everyone, not all the characters of his poems partake of it in a fulsome or satisfying way.

Love forms an important thematic strand in the operatic libretto presented at the end of the volume. In fact, it is difficult to look for continuity between the libretto and the rest of the volume without looking at this aspect of Yeo’s work. It must also be mentioned that the libretto represents a historic development, as this is the first time that a local poet has included his or her libretto together with a collection of poems. Yeo’s text for the opera explores a theme that he explores in some of his poems, and which will be discussed again later: whether “the flush of first love when days were honey” can be sustained.

Yeo is of course not just a love poet. But like many other poets who have been labelled “love poets” (such as Shakespeare, Chaucer, Neruda or Baudelaire for that matter), poems dealing with love form an important part of his corpus. Going beyond his libretto, there is much in this collection of Yeo’s poetry that deals with love: from his sarcasm of a lady who returns from “wet” London with her virginity intact (“Climates”), to the other end of the scale, when the middle-aged persona of another poem, bringing his daughters along to East Coast Parkway, expresses his mild irritation that there is already a couple making love there, in broad daylight, at six o’clock (“Early Lovers on the East Coast Parkway, October 1982”).

The range of the persona’s attitudes to love, as seen in the two poems, may not seem to be reconcilable. Nevertheless, it is perhaps

best to think of Yeo’s takes on love as macroscopic rather than mono-thematic, even if they are effusions from the same persona. They represent a wider assortment of views because they are not monolithic, may be different from, or even disagree with, each other, in spite of the fact that there is a certain consistency in his views of love throughout the volume.

An important factor pertaining to Yeo’s poems concerning love is that they were not written at a particular time, but were spread out over a few decades. In his poetry, there is a contrast of views on premarital love and marital love. Premarital love, which, to Yeo, can be both irresponsible and idealistic, sometimes at the same time, will be discussed shortly. With marital love, which will be discussed later in the introduction, there is the nagging question of whether love of the romantic or idealistic variety—which may, indeed, be what love is—can outlast a marriage. Yeo’s views on love and marriage have a firm link, at least at the metaphorical level, with his views on history, which will be touched on towards the end of this introduction.

In the younger Yeo, there is the belief that love is an acquisition which, for various reasons, he cannot satisfactorily learn in his home country, where love and lust are lumped together for puritanical reasons. This is not what he finds in London:

Ooh London was so different. Love  
Was understood, lust was understood.  
No pretence. Rationalise the need  
If one must. ...  
 (“Coming Home, Baby”)

London in the sixties, at the time that Yeo was there, was the veritable centre of rock or hippy culture, with its reigning belief in free love. This apparent ethos in the English city led to his

annoyance with the pretty Singaporean girl who remained celibate in London, instead of letting her libidinal urge flourish:

What's an attractive girl like you doing  
 Keeping dry in London? Plagued by weather outside  
 When what bugs you is the weather inside.  
 ("Climates")

It is this "weather inside" that converts "boys to men" and "girls to women" and this lady "to someone I could really love." Looking at the poem more closely, one realises that it is more about the poem's persona than about this "tight-fisted girl" with a "medieval" taste in jewellery. It is more about his missed opportunity, with the convenient intrusion of London's lifestyle of the sixties for justification, than whether there is anything wrong with the lifestyle that she chooses to lead in London.

Another important place for learning about love, for the persona, is Bangkok. However, the Thai capital also has the unenviable reputation of being the vice capital of Southeast Asia. It is not the hub, certainly, of romantic love. If Yeo uses meteorological imagery for his take on love in London, he uses botanical images for Bangkok:

When Chiangmai roses are transplanted  
 To replenish hothouses in Bangkok,  
 Poor gardeners go wild anticipating  
 How northern buds will blister in the capital.  
 ("Thai Impressions: Northern Virtue")

There is a touch of tragedy here, where the transplanted "Chiangmai roses" do not bloom in Bangkok, but "blister." The metaphorical "gardeners" who see the predicament of the

"Chiangmai roses" for what it is, are too poor to be guilty of abusing them, even if they wanted to, and they simply go wild with righteous rage, not sensual excitement.

But the persona's time in Bangkok—where, just like the rest of Thailand, "needs are lusts because / They have no leisure to be otherwise" ("Thai Impressions: Udorn")—is also a time for reflection. It is in Bangkok that he could, at the age of thirty-one, have some distance not only from "Supersonic Singapore," in order "The better to view you from afar" ("Fragments from an Early Seventies Diary Kept Abroad"), but also, and more intensely, from a previous experience of love which did not lead to marriage:

He granted that she had the right to refuse  
 But how could she actually have declined?  
 They were in love and wasn't love enough?

After waiting for several months, he concedes that love "needs an attachment to things," such as "Presents, for instance, or a diamond ring" ("The Passing Years: Bangkok"). Of course, it demeans love if it is associated with physical objects, as he found out earlier in life:

In his second year, he carried  
 Seok Lin's bag to find  
 Love somewhat heavy.  
 ("Status")

As a love poet, Yeo does not only write about premarital love, which is the conventional notion of what love poetry should be. He is also concerned about the sustainability of love after marriage, or even, whether a loveless courtship can bloom into love during marriage. In "Old Beginnings," he ponders over a loveless

courtship that led to an equally loveless, but convenient, cohabitation, which passes off as marriage:

Overtaken, they became parents first before  
They found leisure to be husband and wife.  
It is doubtful if they were ever lovers.

Even with a loving courtship, the routines of married life may bog down or even frustrate the feelings of love. In "Coming Home, Baby," he describes matrimony as

...the event in lives  
Of subsequent non-event,  
Until the first baby  
    & the next.  
With baby in arms (her arms, not mine)  
And the usual cooing,

There is the yearning to go back to an earlier stage of one's relationship, in order to see love for what it is, and not let marriage disturb or even destroy it. In "Early Lovers on the East Coast Parkway, October 1982," he shifts his perspective on the untimely lovers from mild irritation to the wish that they "remain early lovers / For as long as youth allows." In "The Newly-Married", he specifies, putting the focus on marriage again as a dampener of romance:

It takes one year of marriage  
No matter how young they start;  
Some get the knack of it in two  
At the most three  
Before they change

To Yeo, romance might not be sustained after marriage, when it is likely that its "prior magic" and the dictum "Let love be first" will become illusions ("Old Beginnings"). This belief, together with the view that some marriages are effected as an instrument of protest ("Triangle") and the rebuff of his marriage proposal, led the persona to delay his own marriage. This results in a delay of his "Surrender to the tired majority" of married people ("Turn of the Decade 1969–1970"). Nevertheless, the pressure to get married in what was a rather orthodox society, as Singapore was in the sixties and early seventies, was there, as he found out upon his return from England:

'Are you married?'  
    I looked at her squarely  
And simply said 'Not yet.'  
    'What?' she pretended,  
'Who are you waiting for? Miss Singapore, Rosalind Ong,  
Mavis Young?'  
(*"Coming Home, Baby"*)

Love and marriage are not only seen from an interpersonal angle, but also from a political-historical angle, as seen in their use as extended metaphors in Yeo's "Singapore River." The following is from the second section of the poem, "River Before Raffles":

We were married before he came.  
I was not a virgin bride, but  
with his coming, we prospered.  
Children came and went. And stayed.

He now seeks another bride.  
I am too old, he says, too dirty,

too unchangeable in my ways.  
My children are sent chugging to the clean West.

O faithless husband, it seems,  
I am your bartered bride after all!  
O History, now that I'm empty,  
Shall I await another?

Although how the metaphors of love and marriage work their way in the poem may not be transparent, what is clear is their importance as tropes to Yeo, extending beyond their literal meanings, as seen in many of the other poems in the volume. That the metaphorical extension may not be exact is explained in the next section of "Singapore River," "River Rooted":

Not so my husband. He has fled,  
the only time he's gone. Once,  
and that's enough. Enough is once.

The Singapore River is more like a dirty foul-smelling whore who bears children, than a wife.

Nevertheless, there is a primordial permanence of the Singapore River which survives the mortality of its British conquerors. The British colonialists find their metonymical summation in the figure of Stamford Raffles, who stood as a statue near the river for decades, "Impassive in gaze as always" ("Coming Home, Baby"). Surely the "marriage" between the anthropological and the geological will result in frustration. It is a category mistake to associate the two distinct entities: one mortal and finite, and the other, enduring and endless, but it is a mistake that colours much of the history of colonialism throughout the world. In this light, Yeo is insightful in suggesting that it is the people who are closely associated with their

natural surroundings who consistently frustrate the colonialists. This was what he discovered in Vietnam:

'Is not our history like this bamboo here?  
Bent, bent, it will swing back despite what  
The Americans do. ...'  
("Saigon I")

Vis-à-vis the vastness of mother nature, the human attempt to reconstruct temporal similarity into segments of chronological change or "development," does not appeal to Yeo. The future is not something new, but an appeal or harking back to the past: "Nothing is new except what is forgotten." This means that you cannot create the future out of thin air. Indeed, there is no "future" without the "past": "the future's in the past," and "If you want a future, baby, / Go and get a past" ("From Belief to Wonder"). In this light, Singapore has always had a history, and its present and future are not separate from its past. Every Singaporean, even if he or she was born after 1965—when postcolonial Singapore was separated from Malaysia—not only shares this history, but it is constitutive of his or her identity as a Singaporean. In this sense, every Singaporean shares the persona's

...rather varied history of domicile:  
A Malaysian once and before that  
A British citizen resident in Singapore.  
("Leaving Home, Mother")

With this introduction, I hope I have filled a gap in studies of Yeo's poetry. In many of the poems, love and marriage are central to his vision. But academic civility might have prevented scholars from discussing them, and this can also be seen in my chapter on

Yeo in an anthology of criticism of Singaporean literature<sup>2</sup> and in a poem I wrote to celebrate Yeo's seventieth birthday.<sup>3</sup> This introduction does not repeat what I have done elsewhere. In order to get a more complete picture of Yeo's achievements as a poet, such as his interest in politics, and the postmodern bent of his later poetry, these works should also be referred to.

**Ismail S. Talib**

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O N E

**Works cited**

- 1 Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Marcel A. Ruff (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968), 263.
- 2 Ismail S. Talib, "Robert Yeo's Politics and Poetics," in *Singaporean Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, eds. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks (Serang: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press, 2002), 322–330.
- 3 Ismail S. Talib, "Robert Yeo's Seventieth Birthday: Poetic Reflections," *Asiatic*, 4.1 (June 2010): 139–142.



## Introduction

Defying the knocking fear—  
Experience will grip you hard.  
Contemptuous of society's leer  
Dismiss discretion long your guard.

Where can I pluck the courage  
To stone the heart's recalcitrance?  
I can't even work into a rage  
My gut-loose chords, afraid to chance.

The inward soul must never know  
Concoction of the mind upstairs.  
You little think when moved: to know  
Is to pay for the heart's repairs.

## Convocation

After such a morning, what can  
Night hold? And night must surely come.  
Yet come what may, unto this man  
Grant morning's glow, make night wholesome.

Conspire with her I have chosen  
How you may both, knowing where all  
Is suspended, the chilly omen  
Reverse, and bless the coming Ball.

The morning's gloom and the night's cheer  
Obey the motion of a spin;  
Complete the circle, and it's clear  
The morning will swing back again.

And how! Embroil me in a whirl  
That's not a dance but a twirl.  
Day will find me on the stair  
Wondering how to unfix my stare.

## Suicide, 1954

Crackle of logs in the crematorium:  
Was Thiru weeping?  
But we were, whipped by midday's sun  
And heart's mercury shooting our eyes.  
Which scalded most, between wiping,  
We could not but see how  
To the puppy yelping of fire  
The sky's blue silence passed  
Like some stranger's shrugging contempt.  
A haughty wind floated his ashes, white  
Upon our black impassivity.

## Masquerade

Misery is weary of merry masks.  
This week it's darling and dear.  
Between exchanging, their faces are bared.  
The truth on her face is not fear.

He's brawny. This wispy girl  
Leaving behind a broken mother  
Freely to Pulau Pinang paradise  
Eloped with her bruising lover.

All for love for paradise?  
Women in love have given more  
For less. But this despair—  
The *pelandok* cannot roar.

# Twilight Zone

Ten years. Ten years  
With half a husband  
And all this time, allowed to know  
Only a profile  
    or else  
A face with many masks  
None matrimonial.  
Half the time poring the pages  
Of my books  
Resigned to find compensation there  
In my possession.  
We married. There was no question  
Of possession.

Ten years in the twilight zone.  
Ladies and gentlemen  
The best years of my life  
    mostly  
In a dim place among shadows  
Ferried from bank to infirm bank  
By that old man  
Who merely rows and minds his own business.

When can I set foot on one slope  
And with some coins  
Badger that silent and squalid ferryman  
To row my decade's memory  
    across  
And bury it?

The world, now wiser  
How they will say 'I told you so.  
Matter of time only, what,'  
While we unknown, uncelebrated  
Contribute to the advancement  
Of language and literature  
Our own nuance of  
Incompatibility.

These are tears that louse my eyes  
And give away my heart  
A spilling hour glass.  
Even in broken dreams I am not spared.  
Lallang bent and sliced by wind and rain...  
Telegraph poles fallen...  
Reluctant worm on a bed of rocks...  
Steeple piercing clouds...

So much to feel the want  
So much to know  
    I could not go  
Because he wanted me at home  
But he did not restrain  
    did not stop me  
Because I was bored at home  
    and had to get out  
How have I erred?  
Am I less a woman than most wives  
Who reason not the need

But know instinctively  
How much to give and to receive  
When to give and to receive?  
Have I been  
                  overmuch woman  
And inadequate wife?

But tears are tears  
And these are scalding.  
I must now dry my resolution in the sun  
Rush my syllabus  
Wring my farewells, though they are few,  
And book my ticket to Beirut  
Where Pierre is waiting.

Leaving the certainty of an impossible life  
For the uncertainty of a possible life  
My country in its hour of trial  
For a no-man's land  
                  Profile  
                  for, I pray, a  
Full face.

## Engagement

FOR FOO SEE LUAN

K.L. was drab when you left for P.D.  
Because I took your laughter for granted  
It grew licentious to an overblown balloon  
Stringing my face now red with more than pain.

That bouquet to you both, despatched in earnest  
For what turned out to be a jest, withered.  
Just as well. At least it robbed of more laughter  
This friendship you've just crumpled into farce.

How could I smile? Yet this expense of courtesy,  
Incalculable, you offered to pay for,  
Cutting further what you meant to mend.  
You must await the logic of the heart

Let time purge pride to restore the complexion.  
For you must know, whose house was always mine,  
Who rang, cheerful, whenever you came home,  
You are much larger than your joke.

## The Newly-Married

It takes one year of marriage  
No matter how young they start;  
Some get the knack of it in two  
At the most three  
Before they change  
Saving only the faces that I know.

'I want to write,'  
One slim graduate, in a hurry,  
Said to me.  
One year later I met him  
At the races  
And he stroked his paunch  
And he ambled about horses and his son.

Two domesticated years after  
And one daughter  
I could no longer visit the Lims  
As I used to.  
'When are you coming to see us four?'  
Demanded the expectant mother  
Who's always had a sense of humour.  
I smiled awkwardly.  
'I've been busy lately—'  
'As if we are not; we are married, you know?'

## In a Temple

To entertain profanity  
Apart, in a pipalled sanctuary,  
Headbowed, feetbare, the incense strong  
The sing-song chants that seem so long,  
See suddenly the Lord Gotama  
Smoke *chandu* on a saffron sofa,  
Is the mind's law, the heart's regret.  
We cannot cage within a net  
Divinity, though saints may weave.  
Try drawing water with a sieve.

'Please enter on bare feet'—but the mind  
Is not a temple brow can bind  
Or cell enclose. We may keep free  
From mud or sand, that eyes may see  
The carpet neat, limbs feel how smooth  
The floor, and regulate the truth  
To suit all faculties of flesh.  
We may, but we can't the mind enmesh.  
We can resolve to sit no more  
Or see no more, if we know where  
We shall next go. We could go in disguise.  
But the mind is full of spies.

## Social Welfare Lottery

Why do your fingers neatly fold and keep  
Your fingers rough, nails chipped,  
In your unconscious pocket  
Your pocket torn and soiled,  
That numbered lottery  
After a shake of my friend's head  
Indicated your number is not there?

Perhaps from somewhere deep  
Subconscious air-conditioned office  
Of *The Straits Times*  
You hope to uncover hope  
Waiting in the common drawer  
Of another's error?

But newspapers always report  
JUST FANCY THAT  
Money only comes to money  
Not to a *mandore*.

Yes... you can't read.  
Just as well.  
So luck, to you, is lawless.

There will be another lottery  
Next month.

## Complex

Four feet eleven or so,  
But in his eyes, six plus.  
With an H.S.C., which he had scraped  
'That's all I wanted,'  
He prayed and tried for Arts  
But was offered Law.  
'I've always liked the legal profession'  
Was his explanation. He always had to explain.  
We cared, but did not find an explanation necessary.  
We were prepared to sympathise with his reasons,  
Whatever they were. But he would be heard.  
'I used to read Plato when I was young.  
Aristotle was his teacher.  
Now Russell's account of Kant is O.K.,  
But, I think...'

He flunked his first year Law.  
Next year, he crawled into Arts  
After having pestered all the Heads of Departments  
And the Vice-Chancellor twice.  
'I can always do Arts,' he explained.  
'I just thought I'd give Law a try.  
I'll do Philosophy, of course!'

Until he made us endure  
We did not care how short he was.  
It runs in the family. Can be embarrassing,  
We know. But some of us  
Have slight deformities which we accept.  
Menon has rabbit's teeth, which he accepts,  
And Hock's nose spreads like a Chinese fan.

Philosophy failed him. But, in a way,  
It didn't. For he turned his knowledge of failure  
Into insight for success.  
'I have suffered, I know.  
Listen to me, man...'

## Status

It was all planned—  
Not by Providence  
                  but by his parents  
Right to their last cent  
And his first degree: Honours in Economics.

Yet once a sinuous wind  
Nearly deflected his course.  
In his second year, he carried  
Seok Lin's bag to find  
Love somewhat heavy.

But his grandfather was a Chinaman.  
Drenched with Fukien's poverty  
He had unfurled to the monsoon  
And salvaged,  
Now, in their old Tiong Bahru home,  
Ancestral silverware  
And some family portraits  
                  aglow  
With rugged obstinacy.

No rest after his exams. Within a week  
This young man sailed out  
With \$650/- basic, plus allowance.  
Unlike grandfather, he knew what to expect  
When to bend with predictable winds.  
He was schooled in modern ways,  
The Managing Director of the Chartered Bank

Pleased with such climbing subordination  
Such up-to-date wind-knowledge  
Promoted him to branch manager at Selegie.

But it was not time to lean back.  
Moreover his paunch, which was beginning to show,  
Would show. It was not time.  
Next calculating his image  
He felt his arms hang rather loose  
As his pants grew tighter.

Rudder but insufficient sail.  
So took another graduate (Economics) to spouse  
And a cream Cortina.

But possession was only the image in profile  
Yacht sans name.  
So he took to bingo every Friday night  
And regular punting at Bukit Timah.  
Already he could blow rings  
With his Lucky cigarettes.

Yet still his material mirror  
Did not provide the right answer.  
So he joined the Rotary Club on recommendation  
And applauded at luncheon meetings.  
All in two years. A son and heir was born.

So it was time to shore.

## Words for E.T.

Words have found him again.  
After a decade's dearth, dry years  
Slogging with rice-and-curry numbers,  
Words now renew their faith desirous of gain.

Aridity behind, all is green now.  
What intervening scars there be  
Have enlarged voice and tone to a degree...  
Words have their way of being kind, you know.

Gestation for a second birth it was.  
Yet there was a time when he thought  
The desert was within, not without,  
And dejection had no ode, though it had cause.

Our climate is the insouciant sun.  
Winter has leisure for Santa Claus—  
But we, recovering freedoms robbed from us,  
Suffering, fuming for saviour or strongman,

Have little use for men or ideas  
That do not manifestly move, as Marx can,  
To stamp the Union Jack or shoot the Governor's man.  
The fault is History's, not yours.

He's at the roundabout and Nehru's gone.  
Our radio blares, the world is tuning in,  
Government and people keep their transistors trim;  
They both have volume but they need your tone



## 9th August 1965

Now to interpret and stress  
Searchlight a neglected alley  
Provide a tongue not hoarse with party  
To keep the individual warm and fresh.

Always to pull down national lies  
Hoisted abroad by those who presume to know;  
Record the rise and fall of towns through flux and flow  
Erect monuments in our memories:

Like the wave of merger and its undertow  
The age of Lee Kuan Yew, the red retreat  
The crunch of tractors, the sea's defeat...  
The driving euphoria, the sixties' glow.

You are now where you should have been  
After a second try, ten years too late  
In a department the most expatriate.  
One countryman left before another could come in

And then it is your turn... Ah, slow this process  
Of adjustment to the tropic tide  
Which had nineteen years to stride.  
But you have arrived at last. Yes.

Our careful scanning  
Of the cloudy sky  
Presaged, at worst, some rain.

So when it burst  
We three were soaked—  
Out of doors  
Playing  
Unprepared  
For this hasty hurricane.

The soil on which I stared  
My just-getting-to-know-you soil  
Pudu Road, Kuala Lumpur,  
Became suddenly my neighbour's.

Who moved the fence  
Decreed the new boundary  
Complete with barbed wire?  
I have two aunts down here  
Uncles and cousins in Johore.

How can I now drive up to the East Coast?  
I've never been soaked like this.  
The chill implodes,  
There's a clutching in my heart,  
My nose is dry as my throat.

Suddenly we solemnise  
Separate official shores.  
But to the sea  
Mangrove or coconut  
Changi or Mersing  
Is not land land?

We are not politicians  
Deciding. We are the  
Public accepting:  
The proclamation  
Of a subverted syllogism  
That will gnaw in private.

## The Search

He sought no nook to start his search, did not  
Even know he had begun till it was well  
Begun. Knowledge dilated his nostrils  
And every road became an appetite,  
The town and its people succulent food,  
A ten-course Chinese dinner with suckling pig.  
Everywhere was somewhere and everybody  
Was somebody. It was not time to choose.  
His diaries became thicker year by year.

On undulating loops of the trunk road  
Replenished by leisured tributaries,  
Surprise is far away. Yet still the journey  
Has charm enough to invite continuance.  
Here, one learns to like what one's accustomed to.  
Pleasure does not pall, though still one passes  
Interminable scenes... the rubber trees  
Inescapable almost as the forest is,  
Coconuts, pepper-trees, hills of oil-palm,  
Flats of padi green, mangrove and lallang,  
Abandoned mining-pools that won't be lakes...  
There are no inns down here, only villages,  
Small towns and big towns; the sun is everywhere.  
The signs are not always where they should be  
However; except, of course, *Selatan* and *Utara*.  
One is always travelling up or down.

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