

Four Poems

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The Wallace Line

For Angela Hijjas

It's Tuesday again, a week since the last real poem arrived. My desk pours with books of plants, of distant islands and Wallace the great scientist, not the poet, whom we've room to hate. You'd come to hate this room too, hate the difference between wearing a first and last name, as if in you would creep ghost

questions of art and science – which will last longer, which is much more useful with mothers. My mum didn't call me Wallace but something better. In a poet still we've hope for science. Not that sudden that too evolution shone true and I threw up my first feet, danced into old courtrooms. O ghost,

it's dark where I drown. Among the last of man, I am bound to vanishing forests with my tail light avenging on. Animals love Wallace, even the Malayan ones he's found, and we've been foreign to how out of print like books too they'll go. But it's different, how they disappear first into words, like poems when written become a ghost.

Maybe Wallace knew. That beauty in lines can last longer than dots spread out like a nest with thorns at the wrong places. O malarial Wallace, to catalogue and much more, who but you we've owed for *survival of the fittest*, that Darwin too could be jealous – of the letters which – to be first to find his name tarry, like a poisoned ghost.

I'm jealous. Of both your findings, the last survived the beauty of my homeland, with

flying frogs and fierce beetles, and the Wallace line marking the side I stood on, who we've come from – the philosophical and the magical, or too, the old and the new. Yet I am your descendent first, walking around with a book, seeking a ghost.

I'd wished there was more to be said, to last deeper than missing gaps in lines. Even with new compasses, can I still find what Wallace has drawn and recollect? Maybe it's time we've crossed further than he would've, could've too, carry his vision in jars, call out to animals first within the porous line, cuscus spotting a ghost.

At last, the white lady comes, crosses with marsupials of time the kind Wallace we've known: poet and artist too. Before the first multitude comes the hybrid man.

The Arsonists

“TERIMA KASIH UMNO/BN kerana menaikkan harga MINYAK”
– along Jalan Sungei Pelong (translates as “THANK YOU UMNO/BN for raising fuel prices”)

Muldoon, you've written nobly but
there's no anagram in “hoodlum.”
Reverse, and the streets here shout,
pure defiance in the dark.
Nothing is safe, only stealing rats

on mortar. They are robbed even;
our ground coined on sticks and dung.
Why precious Malaysian. Maybe petrol
prices have increased again. That
every house blest, risen from fire,

witnessed new leases on death, has
to be treason wet enough for arsonists
to disguise, short-handed, wrong
weapons of stone and rapier. But later
as they find nothing, since nothing is safe,

they feed him underwear like pity, before the wife
 gives up and dilates twice. Maybe
 the morning will bring neighbours calm
 with gossip and tears. And the mechanic,
 her brother, will forget, like a virgin

how the arsonists suffer power and more
 powerful arsonists, whose pockets leak oil
 they burn. As if now, working harder he could
 mock retrenchment under cars, and his own
 changeling from more taxes. In shifting

gears and tilting plates, the arsonists laugh –
 at their slash and burn, the more powerful ones –
 at the metal he welds by a different fuel. Oh thieves!
 Thieves! Thief! But your garment is loose!
 Fused with arson holes in every quarter

of our revolt, your white stripes are only fit
 for rags after the fire! Why precious arsonist.
 Every house blest, rises from fire. If you must
 blame I've combusted myself: poets feed
 the burning flame – when found finally,

I've started digging, under my house.

Clownfish

For the *rakyat*, written after the top two political scandals of Malaysia in 2008

You're all a matter of fac-
 simile on the run. Nemo
 would have transgressed
 the playground swing
 of my half-twin brother
 to find you again imposter
 behind grey ripples, jealous
 guard of your coat and rain
 check. I remember his aging
 father clinging onto sticks
 of his wit, like sex, while you

were still the witless nose
 rattling by, secreting mucus
 on my broken machine.
 Nemo's lucky fin was what
 really told me: *hold back*
your spikes. Take him in.

Now beyond the horny years
 of forts and sandcastles,
 protecting your pious dad
 with my sunflower teeth –
 from brittle stars and damsels –
 still remains the unsaid
 necessity. Dressing his fate
 as matriarch of my skies,
 fat concubine of the blue
 kingdom, I trusted in his tastes
 for the greater good, his
 stepping across the line
 into votive pregnancy. But
 in spite of his woman passion:
there is no starfish humour
in seeing all
your progenies male.

But that's beside the point
 of our gender dispute.
 Your father hated the other sort
 of childish deviance. Since
 transvestites can only exist
 one at a time, those waiting
 behind will accuse you with less
 extreme concordance; stop
 you from poking around, from
 confusing your gender until
 you learn how to court or fuck
 your subordinate properly –
 especially when you turn robust
 leader, meek beast with nothing
 to mourn for Shakespeare's fool.
No doubt, whoever races to the top
looks back and is fully clean.

Rocks and reefs hardly had
more agreement, when you,
coming next, owned the brothel
army. Though sex is death,
I'd never expect your inbred
betrayal, your exploding the facts
in your girlfriend's corpse, first
by executing the long-due
mummifying of your sex
into hers. To survive, you all
reject the female, forget how
your ancestors laid down
a pact, fused the gene-
alogical stunt of Oedipus with
his brooding return to Mother.
*Did your father leave and return
as female ghost, betraying a kiss?*

But let's not talk about dead fish.
Riding on life's soft blue ripples,
how many times can one swim
accused, before it fades into
fatherly sin? How long before
the old reforms itself in the crib
of sex? From the hairy nipples
that drape some endless
revolution, I can only foster so
many pieces in the eye
of the storm, so you're earnest
kept back from wrecking
your father's independence,
steal the lightning of my tent-
acles for rebuilding your greater
co-prosperity sphere. *For are
you not of the same anemone – me?*

Is our symbiosis not enough?
When you scrapped my genes
few months back, am I not shaken,
your loyal back-benching prawn?
It hurts, and I know in your love
for coral abuse, you babble ink-spot

entreaties, which I forgive, always.
But confusing me as enemy
of your concussed state, turning
your back when I am the one
who kept you in, does not befit
your folly, but the most unwise
cannon. Throw me captive
in the aquarium, and my lifespan
of fifty odd years bursts open like
a shooting star. *When Adam scoops me
up, you'll be sorry for sticking, son.*

Maybe there's more to learn.
Mutual dependence and the
monkey curse has gripped us all.
Does it mean we had to grow up,
choose one above the other?
Yes, we'd learnt to take sides.
Even when it's true that
all fish cannot cannibalize
in others the heart of which
it has none, but with its mouth
prod only dead fishes, bury
beneath the scales hair that
blow denser than ships, we have
misplaced the token eye and
waited for ferries to crush us all.
*Still waiting for heroes, in their
unchanging black of black capes...*

It's quaint, being anemone
here, to separate body politic
from my domestic sadness.
But did I? I'm just sick of anchors
and fibrous metaphors, how they
feed me unfiltered. No metaphor
is complete to be exploited, you know.
Even the metaphor of growing
up to choose yourself here – where
nets are all traps, not barriers – is next
to the most dubious thing. But I'll not
seduce the clownfish for the same

expedient reasons as you did
the politics of sex; if Tiresias had it
most natural as woman for seven
years, soon we'll all be shedding
fins, groping our way to heaven.

House and Man

Recently, my friend acquired an old
house in Penang, to be dismantled,
moved to Pahang, by his beach
site, its "former colonial glory" restored.
I used to be a keeper of coins,
but now, of photographs, mainly
black and white. Though once at 7,
I made blueprints of a miniature house,
for 4000 ice cream sticks to be stacked
on glue, lighting the circumference
of windows faded away. Later,
adults told me that even living in a tree
house was against growing up,
against the territorial instincts of man.
I gave in to that, for the world understands.
I started writing too, and was brought
in front of *Rumah Uda Manap*, standing
to smell the dust of its former hosts,
to hear doors creak shut after
the silence of the *azan*, pretending
that man and his past have formed
a perfect union on stilts. Suddenly,
this Malay house came to be the grand
mannequin, standing for all others
I've not seen, as if those would not exist,
like the pictures in *The Traditional Malay
House*, where different ones from Perak,
Pahang, or Negeri Sembilan (all shored up
in faded print) were washed together
by some river, with words like *beam*,
wattlework wall, *senggora tiles*, *tiang seri*

(with a coin underneath) captioned off
by a reticulated python swimming.
The house had found its new home
on another shore, rooted and restored.
The coins, so I read, were older, kept
beneath their bases. I was no longer
a keeper of coins, so no one ran the risk
of pillars crumbling before the house did.
But such fidelity finds no fortune, when
in this country, money is tucked straight
into pockets, never underground.

Nor would things be better
if I drew the layout of each Malay
house with words. Sound descriptions,
heroic structures plied into a shape
poem, such buildings will still furrow
under the thick bends of a paper clip.
Each brick will still be unpicked
in an architect's fallen dream, his forceps
falling from finger to fingerprint.
At the main house though, I could
sit on the edge of "steel and concrete,"
of the "traditional Malay timber
architecture," where green thickets
of *kemuning* overlooked the Malay
houses that once could've been there.
Whether design had faith, I'd still lift
my hanging arms from the loft, test
my own sustainability. Since here,
I've had to force myself from dying
friendships, and the wild question that
loomed ahead: why protect the dead
house, like a dead friendship? Many
from the past have left, and others
too, have grown tired of stilted alliances,
ruled out living in this ugly country.
Yet I am here, walking on a "covered
loggia," unsure of symbols, of what *Rumah
Uda Manap* behind me, restored, was
or is, a new world appraised by trees.

I believe earlier, I spoke of the friend who acquired an old house. He had built this place, *Rimbun Dahan*, and his wife still acquires it by planting local species. Praised for being “young” with “a sense of place,” I wondered if guilt would leave me scattered, old as the wind. Far out, monkeys danced their seconds away. I felt as if nature would swarm up as I swooned over gardens and history – stop fixing the watch I’d been wearing since 10. Like a curse, I’m taken back to Malacca and Penang. My chest had drooped while the shops showed up pitiful and shabby, until recently UNESCO relented and stamped them with the glow of a world heritage site. Once, I threw a coin into *Hang Li Po’s well*. I was 9, and I waited for its shadow to drop past my reflection. The coin had quivered down to the base, and so I returned, at 17, for *chendol* and pineapple tarts. Like all wishes, there was a sacrifice. I had to leave behind a Renaissance friend, and forestall the laughter of dumb mansions. In Penang, the one who took too many photos to *Photoshop*; he was next to go. Do you not know? To protect a friendship, never visit a dead house.

As for the end, what’s worth saving? My symbol of coins is pared down, and their metaphors run, simple as heads and tails. Trying to keep new coins, (flashpoint for modernity in tradition), I worry that I’d hoard the literal joke – to have more money or not. The coin that fell from eternity fell on my cheek. And I was struck blind to provision’s blindness, to how A.E. Housman gathered by, mist-eyes, perfect, rounded like coins.

I was afraid to spoil his Greekness,
those eyes which wept and flickered
lost time. They were real coins, I thought.
I guided him to the boat. He didn't flip
the coins off his lids, but fading,
cried, "Mo, where, where have you been?"
I picked up his tears as he slipped
back to shore. When I looked back, I saw
the Malay house, calm in the recent storm.