

## Ria

*Salleh Ben Joned*

‘and We know  
what his soul whispers within him,  
and We are nearer to him than the  
jugular vein.’

— *The Quran, L: 15-18*

*(Translated by A. J. Arberry)*

i

Moments that peeled my awareness  
were the times I remember you best:  
mornings in autumn, your gaiety dissolving  
the secret tension of light and air,  
lithely lispng the magic of your name  
into the smell of each falling leaf  
that clung to your hair.  
One such morning remains  
the clearest of all,  
like a thin slant of light  
in a dark musty hall.  
That morning the current of air  
touched your bone.  
You were standing on the slope of the path,  
your feet anchored to a mass of leaves,  
clinging damply to the earth.  
You saw me off with a sticky kiss,

sensing your moment in the slant of light,  
your bewildered voice lisping a wish  
I couldn't hear.

I jumped over the fence  
and left your voice to freeze  
in the light.

Two hours later,  
a casual voice clinically declared:  
'Your child is dead.'

ii

Light was everywhere  
when I came out of the dark;  
so much light slanting so simply,  
flooding my eyes, blinding them  
with the yesses of my senses,  
the nose of my knowledge;  
as on the day I buried you,  
an unblessed child in blessed earth,  
wind blowing dust  
round and round the bare hill,  
and the noonday autumn light  
steading in its slant  
a sweetness of honey in the air.

iii

Now you are dead, I want to dream  
your physicality  
back into this house

in which you hardly lived.  
Defiantly, I filled the rooms  
with your laughing faces, defiling  
the ritual of denial  
I'd been taught to observe.  
Discreetness of absence, my Ria  
cannot be  
in the space that was your hair  
between darkness and light,  
in the trace of your breath  
that my tongue must retrace.  
I can smell your body still  
in the thick mohair rug,  
my tactile little darling,  
you learnt the rub of things  
with the feel of fur  
on your checks.  
Your butterfly kisses  
on the side of my neck,  
on my scarred ageless face,  
taught me the joy you felt  
in the fact of the senses.  
Tauntingly physical  
was your being,  
testing mine and the world's  
With dark trembling lashes;  
that queer left eye  
(faulty delivery that doctor said)  
fluttering more than the other

the lashes of your joy in my joy  
in your realness.  
You were nearer to me, my Ria,  
than my own jugular vein.  
At times, your alertness  
quickened my sense  
of utility —  
as when, puzzled  
by my burning life away,  
you made a wild lunge  
and singed the lash  
of your troubled eye.  
At times, your alertness  
awakened my sense  
of what you meant —  
as when, heady  
with knowing curiosity  
you somersaulted onto our love-  
spent bodies.  
your crazy nose triumphantly sniffing  
the smell of rancid honeyed cheese  
through screwed-up sheets.

iv

Joy means your name, Ria,  
in the tongue of your blood.  
You were made for us to reaffirm  
the wild impulse of adolescence,  
to reconcile a past with a past,

an instant with an instant,  
and a tongue with a tongue.  
You gave a woman reason  
for a moment of hard acceptance  
of me and my inscrutable lusts,  
and would have taught perhaps  
my stubborn ancestral liver  
the needs of an unfamiliar heart.  
I grew to love you with my body love  
as you grew to feel me with your needs,  
but our mutual growth  
was blighted from the start.  
You came raw before the light  
burdened with all our hopes;  
your mind opened to a strange world,  
groping for a sense of self  
only to let in  
early intimations of estrangement.  
I came raw in pursuit of light  
from the place of sun and certainties  
into a chaos of new sensations;  
my mind opened to an alien world,  
the blood's blind urgings locked  
in the mind's dumb questionings.

v

The night of your burial  
was my sinless night of the soul,  
the gaiety that was yours

all the dream we had in you  
burst to a wake in a sudden song:  
an unwilling blasphemy  
affirming the will.  
But the morning after  
was a different matter.  
And the morning after.  
And the morning after.  
Each break of day my love  
is a break of day:  
my body athwart the slant of light  
across the emptiness hollowing my bed  
seeing an endless row of other beds,  
dreading all the mornings  
when I shall darkly awake  
to the harsh fullness of sheer light  
that knows no season;  
dreading the hangover  
of my days  
on this island of Circe,  
I my own Penelope,  
weaving and unweaving  
an endless moment,  
resisting the light  
of the hard sun  
that forged my existence,  
betraying my blood's vow  
to the living now.

vi

The scar, the scar's the thing —  
as darkly etched on my native flesh  
as the sunburnt line  
across your pale sewn-up breast;  
as clean as the lightning  
across the tropic sky  
I had forgotten.

vii

The room seemed suspended  
in the haze of the sea,  
the light a blend of dusk and dawn.  
You were sitting on the edge of my bed,  
in which so many needs  
were hurriedly buried,  
in which so many betrayals  
were joyfully consummated,  
true to the sterile sensuality  
of this time, of this place.  
It all seemed part of a floating world,  
the still silent sea below;  
your child face aged,  
your legs casually crossed,  
the way you crossed them  
when you parodied my pretence  
of being a man.  
Grace was yours, meaning was yours,  
as you shook the dipped vines of your hair  
over the floating form of another self;

no bitterness, all sweetness,  
as you breathed a breath of spring  
along the slant of autumn light,  
stirring the presence of warmth  
in the chilly dullness of the air.

It was a dream so physical  
I woke up to the feel of your breath,  
your sister kneeling by my side,  
her breezy greeting riding the light,  
the moment of your name alive  
in those honeyed eyes  
staring into the sun.

viii

Marking the days before my return  
with a burden of knowledge  
that doesn't make any sense,  
I sit here among my three thousand books;  
behind my back another autumn sun,  
shining so simply,  
rises over a strange familiar hill,  
brown and bare among bluish  
eucalyptus green.

I sit here, my pen bleeding words,  
gripped by fingers bruised  
from cutting your name  
into sandstone,  
feeling again the firmness  
of hallowed letters



sharply etched,  
following the contours  
of the only mystery  
truly mysterious.

ix

Joy means your name, Ria,  
in the tongue of your blood,  
a tongue I must learn again  
to sing the mystery of our pain.  
Be with me, my Ria,  
in the sheer light  
of my old sun.

**Salleh Ben Joned. *Sajak-sajak Salleh/Poems Sacred and Profane*. Teks Publishing, 1987.**

## A Hymn to My Sarong

*Salleh Ben Joned*

In the easy sensuality  
of your canopy,  
I sit here in the fading light,  
airing my shame and pride,  
marvellous golden mangoes  
of the sun, dangling loose  
in the tingling caress  
of the breeze:  
my feet to the horizon,  
my rump on the earth's.

Intimate of my bloody rites  
of passage:  
reassuringly protective,  
comically familiar,  
in you I feel continuity;  
cloistering and free,  
sacred and profane,  
in you I taste infinity:  
utterly sexual  
and beyond sex.

Like the acts that scaled  
the passionate concord  
between you and I:  
gushing fountains  
of solitary delight  
drenching the diaphanous sky,  
libidiously;  
secret rituals of kind

in the oasis of striped tents  
in the blazing heat  
of the desert  
of pubescent lust,  
and a mirage of virgin's eyes,  
the sun raining down  
its punishing rays  
lasciviously;  
riding high on the timeless tiger  
across the noon landscape  
of the now,  
your silky halter  
round the necks,  
rubbing against the jugular:  
two stringy bodies  
looped together  
coming together  
in the stretched noose  
of ecstasy;  
invisible chords  
vibrating  
the concu-  
piscence  
of one-  
ness-  
now-  
ness

**Salleh Ben Joned. *Sajak-sajak Salleh/Poems Sacred and Profane*. Teks Publishing, 1987.**

## Haram Scarum

*Salleh Ben Joned*

Drinking, gambling, lying, bribery, —  
and all kinds of whoring, too —  
all of them perfectly okay.  
And to hog it all's not taboo.

All sins of course; but nothing really  
a trip to the Holy of Holies  
cannot fix for Eternity:  
God blesses man's enterprise.

But that — that's different, untouchable!  
We're Moslems, and terribly Malay.  
Some things are just unmentionable;  
the rest are okay if we pray.

We'll go the whole hog if we must  
to redeem our pride as a race;  
like the giddy hare in a rut,  
we'll halal everything save that.

It's hogwash what those swines say:  
That we Bumis mount pig-a-back,  
like a pack of boars hacking our way  
up the slippery slope of success.

Our one dislike we have to keep  
to preserve our identity;  
so long as we hate pigs and pray,  
we'll remain Moslem and Malay.

**Salleh Ben Joned. *Sajak-sajak Salleh/Poems Sacred and Profane*. Teks Publishing, 1987.**