

Introduction to *how the hills are distant* (1968)

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These poems were to have been published as a collection in 1963. The publishing trade being what it is in this country, the book never quite made it. Most of the poems were published as part of an anthology of Malaysian writing, *Bunga Emas*.

Poor business aside, for our publishers verse in English is really a matter of courage. At the heart of it must be the anxiety that it is difficult to justify the claims of poems such as these on even the language in which they are written. But these poems need to be written. They are of a time, of a place, of a people who find themselves having to live by institutions and folkways which are not of their heritage, having to absorb the manners of languages not their own. Such little knowledge as comes to them of the human predicament is no less knowledge than what comes to other peoples in other times and places.

These poems will always have to suffer the misunderstanding of anthologists and translators with ample trust funds, who sleep untroubled on assumptions that the only valid Asian or African poetry must be poetry in the "native" languages; the misunderstanding of English critics who can read verse only in terms of what is happening in present day England. Poems in English do not necessarily have to be English poetry. The tradition lays down the ground rules as to how the language is to be used. But its assumptions about the image of man to himself, about his relationship to the State, God and the physical universe must be the beginnings of our difficulties. These are the received assumptions, yet we cannot affect with them the ease and familiarity of a true inheritance.

On looking back, I realise I have written these poems for those who truly understand what it means to have to make one's language as one goes along.

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