

## In Praise of a Gentle Poet

*Shirley Geok-lin Lim*

I met Phui Nam late in life, in 1994, at a conference Professor Syd Harrex, Director of the Centre for Research in New Literatures in English (CRNLE), organized at Adelaide's Flinders University. It was a happy coincidence, as I was already in Australia on a tour sponsored by a U.S. State Department Academic Specialization grant. I'd expected spending the weeks among Australian faculty, lecturing on postcolonial, anglophone, and U.S. ethnic and feminist studies. The four days in Adelaide, included in that travel/lecture grant, remains one of my happiest experiences in a long scholarly life composed chiefly of research, writing, and collaborating with other scholars, many like-minded and some competitively bloody-minded, because Syd (may his memory be blessed) had invited from Kuala Lumpur three of Malaysia's most illustrious literary personages, Lloyd Fernando, Kee Thuan Chye, and Wong Phui Nam. All three had already produced works that were celebrated in Malaysia and abroad as significant new anglophone works, provocative, authentic, and fully voiced contributions to a new national literature. Professor Fernando, despite his move from University of Malaysia's Department of English to law practice and his recent stroke, awed me still, decades after he had taught me in my undergraduate years, with his sharp, original, and generous intellect. Thuan Chye and Phui Nam attended the conference as writers, not academics. The conference was the first opportunity I had to hang out with these Malaysian writers after I left for my Ph.D. studies in the U.S. in 1969. I felt privileged and honoured to be accepted so warmly by Chye and Phui Nam.

CRNLE hosted multiple conference breaks, one being a sun-speckled lunch between rows of grape vines at a vineyard. This delightful afternoon led to the three of us deciding to take the day before our various departure flights (Prof. Fernando had flown home to K.L. a day earlier) for a road trip up the Adelaide Hills on a wine-tasting tour. Chye drove, and Phui Nam sat up front with maps, while I absorbed the changing views and watched out for wineries that beckoned around hair-curling bends. The vineyards offered a range of chardonnays, sauvignons, merlots, and more; brandies made out of plum, apricot, pear, etcetera; jams and marmalades, and cheeses and meats to accompany the flights of wine. This companionable leisurely day, an Australian version of Xanadu's pleasure-dome, sealed for me a bond among us that twenty-seven years later I still cherish.

What I did not share with Phui Nam when we were driving in the South Australian hills and valleys was that I had met him at a much earlier age, in 1966, in the English Department Senior Common Room. Then a rather dusty room a few doors from the staff and Department Head's offices, English majors could sit in the SCR to read outdated journals from England (e.g., *The Listener*, *Spectator*, *Times Literary Supplement*) that lecturers had discarded. An obsessive reader and curious about the arcane controversies the journals covered, I was usually the only occupant in the SCR. There I found a collated typewritten copy of *How the Hills Are Distant*, Phui Nam's acknowledged first publication. *How the Hills Are Distant* appeared as a *Tenggara Supplement* in 1968, but I am almost certain I found the typed copy in late 1966. I carried it as a literary curio back to my dorm and later to the U.S. In a similar manner, I had found Ee Tiang Hong's self-published collection, *I of the Many Faces*, in a bookstore in my Malacca hometown. I carried Tiang Hong's and Phui Nam's poetry texts, with a hard copy of Rabindranath Tagore's *A Flight of Swans* (purchased with an award voucher from Malacca High School in 1963), all through the years from Boston to New York to California. In short, the two poets who'd most influenced me as a Malaysian are Wong Phui Nam and Ee Tiang Hong. They form my *keki lang* poetic tradition, a tradition visible chiefly to Malaysians and Singaporeans.

Offering a tribute to Phui Nam on the occasion of his 86<sup>th</sup> birthday is an enormous challenge. I feel I should simply send him a large, showy, and expensive birthday card, for how does one celebrate a writer who has not ceased from growing his art since he drafted his first poems in his early twenties? I've reviewed Phui Nam's poetry, the last such essay for the *Quarterly Literary Review of Singapore (QLRS)* in 2007. I noted then that at 375 pages, the Maya Press publication of what is in fact his collected poems, *An Acre of Day's Glass*, composes "a substantial oeuvre [that] places him as the premier Malaysian English-language poet of his generation." This tribute, while inadequate for the occasion, still stands.

After the initial Adelaide adventure, I have met Phui Nam in other places and times, usually casual, social gatherings hosted by K.L.-resident writers, the latest in 2018 when Edwin Malachi invited us both for an Indian feast in Brickfields (see photograph). At every meeting, I glimpsed again and again his attributes as the first gentleman of poetry in Malaysia-Singapore. His modesty, subdued conversing manners, self-deprecating laughter, unhurried movements, and polite attentiveness create a quiet yet clear assertion among the loud assertive alpha males that customarily characterize poets lionized in international events. I joke that once given the mic at

a shared reading, male poets do not know when to give up that mic. Informed that with several readers at an hour-long program, they are allotted ten or fifteen minutes to read, they will read for half an hour, querying at some point, “If it’s alright with you, I have just another three poems.” A polite audience murmurs assent, and we remaining readers make quick decisions which poems to shed to keep to our diminished minutes. To be fair, I have also read with women poets who, once up on the stage, act like alpha males.



*Shirley Lim and WPN catch up in Bricksfields in 2018*

So, I am stunned when a famous poet graciously sets an example for the less anthologized among us, lined up to read after his crowd-drawing opening act. I will never forget Dana Gioia, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (2003-2009), standing up to read in a hall overflowing with his fans (some of whom left as soon as he ended his reading—American audiences often are openly star-struck and unwilling to be bored by little known poets) and declaring that, given the time restrictions and the number of poets he was looking forward to hearing read, he was going to read three poems. (On occasion, I had rejoiced when a poet noted he would read only two poems, and then, biting my lip, sat through his reading poems each fifteen or twenty pages in length.) Dana’s three poems were not epic in length. He finished his reading in five minutes, sat down, and applauded enthusiastically while we others read our five or six poems, taking the full twelve minutes promised.

All this digression is to frame my tribute to Phui Nam’s non-alpha male ways. The last time I heard Phui Nam read was at the Singapore Writers Festival in 2018, when he was honored with a reading slot totally devoted to his poetry. Yeow Kai Chai, Director of that year’s Biannual Festival, said of the vision for the 2018 Festival, “My team and I are very proud to present a rich line-up of authors and programmes which we believe speak to everyone who has a vested interest in the state of the world we live in. This year, in line with the Festival theme, we exhort everybody to survey the world around you and reflect on contemporaneous issues such as identity, multiculturalism, migration and climate change, and ask: “Who are we? What kind of world are we passing on to the next generation?” And indeed, Phui Nam’s poems, representing his pioneer generation of anglophone Malaysia/Singapore writers, addressed, albeit in Emily Dickenson’s style of “Tell all the truth but tell it slant,” the complicated identities and horrors/sorrows of Chinese immigrants failing at clear-cutting meaningful lives in the peninsular wilderness that netted their history. His reading was undramatic and un-declamatory; yet the hush that fell on the younger Singaporeans in the crowded room was genuinely respectful, a communal tribute to a survivor poetic voice speaking for an original generation to which they were, if distantly related, yet indebtedly bound.

I take this opportunity to offer my tribute both to and for Phui Nam, to record some of his influence on my own work. In my memoir, I distinguished my undergraduate vision of Malaya from the poetics of Phui Nam and Tiang Hong, whose poems were included in Commonwealth Literature course syllabus that Professor Fernando was teaching for the first time in the University of Malaya:

From my position of undergraduate superiority, I was pitiless in my criticism of these poets' separation from their national landscape. While their simple act of writing against colonial disparagement was to be admired, I puzzled over their images of displacement. Truly I loved the hibiscus bushes that bloomed all over the campus; I never tired of the delicious foods sold in the night food stalls all over Petaling Jaya, the suburb that had sprouted around the university, and even the steamy afternoons brought their own keen sensations of tropical languor and heightened sensuality. In contrast, in the poems of these pioneer English-language writers, Malayan identity was of something absent. I wanted to write a literature like Woodsworth's *Prelude*, but overflowing with native presence: writing should be an act of dis-alienation, of sensory claims. If we were not Malaysians, who could we be? (*Among the White Moon Faces*, 1996: 120)

Today, ten poetry collections later, my undergraduate superiority has long crumbled like a sand castle in the incoming tidal waves of change. I now read both Tiang Hong's and Phui Nam's poems with humility, scanning the courage taken to write Ee's fierce rejection of humiliations heaped on faithful Peranakans and Wong's poem-obituaries to Chinese cultural subjects and biographical figures. Their outcast national wilderness that I could not imagine before May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1969 now forms the cataracts through which a "Malayan" homeland shimmers for me in the dusty rear car-mirror—a specular landscape blurred in the distance. That is, the Malaya Ee and Wong inscribed, beginning in the late 1950's, post-Merdeka, against celebration, came from a prescient vision of the Malaysian landscape post-May 13<sup>th</sup>. The wilderness was always there, despite the hibiscus blooms, the love of the English language, the lyrical romanticism of the poems we were taught. They saw through the naïve dreaminess that powered my undergraduate superiority, and that still rises as an existentialist regret whenever I come "home."

Ee preferred late in life, an Australian citizen in Perth, not to look back. Wong never left. My tribute to Phui Nam is that when I look back, his poems are among the things I still see as "home." The hills may be distant for a castaway like me, but they were once home; and it is this gentle, warm, kind reminder I hear each time I meet Phui Nam.