

POETRY

At Eighty-six

Wong Phui Nam

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes...

At eighty-six, I am of an age
old enough to hear silence
in the winnowing in the wind of turning days,
hear it in dream, from intent listening –
perhaps, when I have passed on beyond all human help –
in the rumble of a mountain breaking asunder
in the self as it disintegrates.
Silence has been everywhere about us.
Yet few hear it, for it is drowned
in a tidal wash of noise
and quotidian busy-ness of living –
or its evasions. But for the old,
as acuteness of ear comes with age,
silence grows ever louder.
At eighty-six I cannot choose but hear.

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes...

Disquiet also comes with age,
as with an urgent sense that
I am and may not ever be
ready for the journey – for its demons,
its terrifying furies that rise out of imperfect hearing.
There is little comfort to be heard from assurances
these are but phantasmagoria thrown up
from unreached recesses of a closing consciousness.

At eighty-six I hear – yet barely
of *sure and certain hope*
that with the shutting down of the senses,
the snuffing out of thought and the turning up
of its deep roots – that after earth or after fire,
silence at journey's end is not an utter, unremitting nothingness
but a homecoming, a return to stillness,
stillness that is the origin of all creatures great and small.

Darkfall

Wong Phui Nam

First Voice

We wake this morning, this one hundred
and forty-eighth day of a troubled year,
to the sun failing, dying into faint halo
in a red haze over the mountains to our east.
We wake to an unwonted darkness catching,
while dawn still lies chill in the grass and trees
and see it blaze past noon towards midnight,
razing into a bare visibility all the neighbourhood -
trees, house-tops, phone-lines, and even streetlamps -
and into the distance, mountains and foothills.
The darkness closes us past noon in a featureless desolation.

Second Voice

From the year's beginning, we have lived
by a daily weakening, fast-fading sun.
The first surprise was in the crows roosting
in early-cooling afternoon, and in their fights,
their tumult and uproar that break out
like fires crackling in the unnatural twilight
that caught in the trees in all our streets.
The sun, when still young in the year, then began
to dim not two hours from crossing noon.
In these recent days of early encroaching night,
snakes die for the cold in underbrush and grass
and frogs in their ponds in webs of brown algae.

Everywhere in all our rivers, silvery upturned bellies
of warm-water fish glitter in the brief daylight
as they float with the carcasses of pigs and chickens
half-covered in mounds of rubbish going downstream.
Now dawn comes unlit by the twittering of birds
which long since have left for a sunlit world.
As day-hours are curtailed in which leaves
suck in warm light, our fields, wastelands, and jungles
turn a gradual and famished yellow.
Across the land, stray dogs overrun our cities' streets.

Third Voice

We have now drifted deep into a time of year
when unremitting night consumes the land.
It is an active darkness of an otherworld
that soon will be everywhere present about us.
A malign, voracious spirit, risen in our midst
with a vast appetite for the bounties of the land,
and fed large on mania for dominion,
has brought about its conjunction with our state.
He disturbed its virulent darkness when his minions
with the consent of his fearful and blinded legions
delved and mined, rooted up and overturned
the base and foundations of our civic order.
In making rubble of the defences that kept
us safe from depredations by him and others
grown powerful in our midst with him,
they have let the roaring darkness in.

All Together

We, who have been compliant, who have been content,
and made no complaint through all the waning days
of this half-year as darkness swept across the land;
we, who were fearful and disoriented like the ghosts
of the displaced and wandering new dead,
finding relief from safe comfort in blindness and silence,
wake this morning to a closed nightmare,
caught in terrain of the outer reaches of a lower world.

And here, at the opened doorways into nether earth,
we meet you... you... you... you... and you... So many,
we did not know that we would find here; so many like us,
who, through careless disregard, have let the darkness in.

TOK SETH

So goes the rumour. Tok Seth has returned.
After decades lying entombed in obscurity
in a back lane hemmed in by a looming city,
he has risen. There were those that night,
who swore a ghost from smouldering kemenyan
drifted down Almeida Street. A trail of foreboding
clouded every household that he passed.
Into de Jong Square, past the clock tower,
he caught the night wind that worked
through kebun, sawah, and grazing grounds.
And it blew all night. In the small hours,
many wondered, between sleep and waking,
if a shadowy visitant had not slipped into their dreams.

That morning on, days followed of bitter dissension,
an infection that caught and spread throughout the land.

Who owns the soil? Who owns the truth?

Who sows confusion? Seducing us with strange gods?

Who, of necessity, is to be silenced?

Tok Seth has risen. So the rumour goes.

The God

Wong Phui Nam

He is not a god of our village temple,
not of households blessed in the fragrance
of a presence, but one who goes about unseen,
watching us. People go missing,
leaving those who grieve to imagine the terrifying.
Demon, angel, or just a man, the people wondered,
or did he set unseen upon the taken.

Our received sacred text simply says:

Find where nothing is, but stillness.

After the last harvest of the year,
we, who are no longer householders, set out
for the temple by the old cremation grounds.
There we waited. Gathered each into his settling quiet,
attent lotuses adrift on dark waters,
on the wavering of oil lamps that we lit.
The painted black god with goose eggs for eyes
moved. Staying still, we passed moving shadows and dead stone,
passed all light... all darkness. There he came.
A few were struck down with terror,
one silenced into bliss. For the rest,
we came back, and when we were able to speak,
we had to say we remembered nothing,
making it easy for the people to believe us.
The god is still among us – still unseen, still terrifying.

The Hangman

Wong Phui Nam

Eberwein Hill, KL before the War

At dawn another hanging. My sixty-third.
And still it is hard... Feels good, lying down blind in a fog.
Life-saver, this. Here's to another swig.
It can't be easy watching these poor sods.
Every time you drop one in the bin –
you know the feeling – a man is despatched
out of his wits, trussed up and wet in the crotch.
Doesn't seem right. No good saying
it's your duty or they all deserve what they got.
Can't argue with that unease when you are done
for the morning. You broke a man's neck and made
of him a fine mess of bone and dead flesh
with a face still human, shockingly human.
And it starts all over at dawn. Who will answer...
Christ! It's cold in here. And dark. And I wander off again.
Yes, who will answer for me when all is done?
The lawyers, Justice Hepplewaite, Chief Warden Galloway?
They are all asleep. A few *mata-mata* and I keep watch.
It's really dark in here. Lights! Lights!
Cookie! Cookie! *Bangun! Sini, buka semua lampu. Terang, terang!*
There's nothing for it but to finish the bottle. And sing.
Sing till my lungs burst. Till I am out of my head.
Till the neighbours turn in their sleep and curse the demon
who shatters the night with graveyards and damnation.