

A Fire Easter (For Edwin Thumboo)

Wong Phui Nam

The hill looms, leaning so black
out of the shocked sky, I find myself
ascending still an abyss of dreams
into the morning heat. Day ignites
into a furnace upon the ridge,
laterite-lined, fired by the sun.
In its white blast,
the thief, the murderer wait.
Fires that smoulder in my bones
stick now like blue flies
on black skins around their wounds.
They eat into eyeballs and parted lips.
The soldiers wait, brittle
in the fires ... like coal In the ascent,
I faint into the fumes
of the three-tonner that bears me
in chains up the hill.
The sixth hour ... I become light
as my own flames leaping from the blood,
from skin and hair roots turned up
by the crown of barb-wire
woven round my skull. I am palms, soles,
peeling off onto the metal of the truck.
Where is the help now as I cry out
that I am only flesh in pain?
The ninth hour Am only a crushed throat,
gurgling and whistling queerly
into the air like these two

who sag from their cross-trees into mid-sky.
I would I melt quickly into the sun.
No vinegar ... hyssop ... bayonet probing
into my sides for life
Let the howling women fade.
Mariamma, the other Mary, rolling
onto the laterite in such savage grief.
Muthu ... John In the sword-dry lallang,
the others Upturned faces,
bruised fruit that are much handled.
And the jostling crowd, also of the dead ...
There shall be no winding cloth,
no myrrh, no aloes, no deception
this time of me risen in body

that passes through locked door and wall.
Let the fires eat me
from genitals, from the bowels
into the tree of flesh caught up in dreams,
in death Do not wait then
at nightfall at any crossroads,
or morning by rail-track, by mining pool,
or deep into the ferns beyond the estates
where once you had looked for me,
the dishevelled, mild, unattainable
man of miracles who,
by secret, snake-infested streams,
shared with you your rice and fish.
Except you come with me into the fire,
you will not return, with your own eyes
and in the ruined flesh see me raised in glory.

Extract from an interview with Wong Phui Nam on his dedication to Edwin Thumboo in his poem *A Fire Easter*.

MMOJ: Tell us about the context of your dedicating *A Fire Easter* to Edwin Thumboo.

WPN: I wrote *A Fire Easter* soon after the launch of *Ways of Exile* in 1995. That launch reminded me of a long overdue debt that I owed Edwin. His *Rib of Earth* came out when I was in my second undergraduate year. The quality of lyricism and the sure touch he had with the language were such as had not been seen before in poetry by a Malayan (Singaporeans were also Malaysians at the time). The *Rib of Earth* poems showed that poetry written in English by Malaysians could be taken seriously. The collection looked to be a harbinger of a Malayan tradition in poetry yet to come. That was great encouragement to me and a real inspiration. I had to put in a really serious effort into achieving poems that would not look too badly set against the standard Edwin set.

But what had a deeper and more long-lasting influence on me was the long talk on words and poetry writing he had with me on an afternoon at the Dunearn Road students' hostel where I was staying in my third undergraduate year. It started as a mild scolding over *Litmus One*, an anthology of university verse from 1948 to the year Tan Han Hoe and I put it together. Edwin was critical of our naive, irreverent and, I think loose use of language in the Introduction. For instance, he did not like the phrase "durian opener" which was to be taken to mean the introduction to the poems in the collection or in a wider sense, if I remember correctly, to mean that the anthology was an "opener" to future poems to come. (After that, "durian opener" became something of a private joke among us.) Edwin also questioned our reference to a Malayan tradition. He asked, "What tradition?", meaning that we presumed too much in referring to our work as a tradition. Almost as bad was the tone of the language of our Introduction which fell short in showing deference to our predecessor poets and seniors.

From further criticism of our indiscretions, the talk turned to some friendly advice on the writing of poems. I had need (without myself knowing it) of his advice, for my poems at time had earned all-round disapproval from both teaching staff and fellow students for their incoherence and wilful obscurity. I also wrote, in my naivety as an aspiring poet, with no real understanding of symbolist

writing. Edwin pointed directly to the source of my problem. I had no understanding that poems were made of words. He said a poem was crafted with words, not big ideas, sentiments, or imagery in and of themselves. A poet writing without thought or attention to words even if he thought he had important things to say would not end up with a poem. Till then I failed to see what seems now so simple yet essential point. He quoted Yeats as saying, "Words alone are certain good." Poetry was also written to be read aloud – as incantation.

I came away much chastened of course. But ruminating on all that I heard him say that afternoon over time I gradually arrived at a little understanding of the way words work for a poet. To get to know words, a poet has to be sensitive to their roots, their changes in meaning and register from usage over time, their power of association and allusion, the moods they create in context, and their metaphorical and symbolic fluidity. These make up the tone of voice of a poem which is a sure test of its authenticity. (We hear these days that words can lie with the truth, words are suspect, words are treacherous, words are totally devoid of meaning and so on. If a poet worried too much about these things, he might worry himself to a standstill.) But I need only the essentials for me to be authentic - a tone of voice for my poem that communicates exactly my feelings about what I have to say. As Robert Lowell claims in the Introduction to his *Imitations*, "Tone is everything in poetry". I have always had this mind when choosing the words to make up my poems. The origin of this care for tone goes back to the afternoon when Edwin talked to me about words and poetry.

Even after that, he continued to take an interest and encourage me in my writing. He visited me when he was in Kuala Lumpur and invited me to talk to his students and to come to Singapore for literary *conferences*. He published my poems in *The Flowering Tree*, *Seven Poets*, *The Second Tongue* and brought out my collection, *Remembering Grandma and Other Rumours*. He also helped get Ethos to publish *The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tauai*. For the debt I owe him, my dedication was very, very small as acknowledgement.

MMOJ: Why *A Fire Easter*?

WPN: The sequence I wrote years ago, "Candles for a Local Osiris", has a resurrected Christ-like figure, Osiris, who failed in the conditions he met with in this country. In later retrospect, I felt

that the conditions inimical to a risen Osiris as implied by the sequence should elicit a stronger response. I wrote therefore "A Fire Easter", a poem on another Christ-like figure. Though he does not return in triumph, what he says in the last lines of the poem tells us in essence that for many of us, when we know suffering, we will begin to know the stirring of desire for life unbound. As Edwin, I thought, had a particular appreciation of the "Candles" sequence, he would recognize this. So that was the poem I chose to dedicate to him. That is the simple answer.