

# **Southeast Asia**

## Singapore Morning Poem

*(a present for Gordon Yaswen)*

Because you wanted something with bright colors  
I give you this Boat Quay –  
the 2- and 3-story traditional shophouses  
painted in greens,  
bold yellows, linen whites  
mangoes, faded oranges, cimmarons,  
standing elbow to elbow  
along the slow bend of the Singapore River  
where you can still feel the old urge  
of the tropical river  
her jungle lassitude  
when it was palm fronds

– and not financial center towers,  
steel blues and blacks  
translucent glass grays –

that bent over the red-brown muds  
of her widening curve.

The river scarcely spends herself  
rounding the turn  
under sun-battered business district skyscrapers  
in the muggy morning heat  
    where you recognize  
the humid air that lingers  
against your cheek  
as the hot breath of your heart-lover  
    softly exhaled  
and the thunderstorm building over the harbor  
    as the brooding  
lush explosion  
of your wanting her.



## Jakarta at Dawn

the heavy air thick  
like a rich soup –  
a bouillabaisse or fisherman's  
stew,  
gray over the red-tiled  
kampung roofs –  
the air laden with burning garbage  
the exhaust of all-night  
traffic jams  
and so much moisture  
that one almost pushes off,  
swimming into it –  
walking out of the air-conditioned  
hotel at 6 a.m.  
suddenly surrounded by the warm,  
brackish  
swamp water of Jakarta's  
dawn.

## Night Rain, Bukit Hijau

a warm, fertilizing rain quietly  
energizes the earth.  
standing quietly awhile on the porch  
listening, I pull off my clothes  
and lay down in the yard,  
the warm drops quietly hit my body –  
what the earth feels  
or perhaps what a woman feels  
when she receives a man.

## Songket

silver thread woven through  
midnight lake, darkest blue –  
threads of moonlight shimmer

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*Songket* is a fine dark blue Indonesian fabric woven with threads of silver

## Gamelan

the music like honey-milk  
flows – not through the soul –  
but the soul itself flowing  
through its bed,  
sunlit stream over pebbles.

## Azen (Jakarta)

Azen wakes me at 4:30 a.m., shivering  
in the sheets of God.

The one wailing wants to unwind  
a long cloth of black lace –  
a winding sheet for the dead he pulls  
from his mouth. He wants  
something white to arise  
after he's unwrapped it.  
What waits in me  
waits centuries  
for this.

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*Azen* is the Muslim call to prayer, wailed from the mosque

## From the Window, at Lunch

the gardener at the Jakarta Borobudur  
sweeps windrows of red blossoms  
like deflated red apples  
unspeakable in their beauty  
sprinkled like moments over the sun-strewn grass  
but heaped, no more  
than any corpse.

## Modesty

stepping out of the hotel pool,  
the tall Indonesian woman in turquoise  
swimsuit immediately wraps  
a towel around her waist.  
in the garden, the long trumpets  
of tropical flowers remain closed  
to early morning strollers,  
their delicate blue petals  
dropped like a skirt around long legs  
protecting the lightly scented  
inner flower from view. one may  
see the graceful arch of the blue fingers  
clasp the closed center,  
admire the pastel shading that pales  
away from blue sky to earliest dawn  
at the edges, marvel at the pores  
magnified by drops of dew on light skin –  
but the flower itself  
opens  
only for the one it has chosen.

## Omen

two white dogs  
small and sharp-faced  
trot into the side yard  
one leading the other following  
tour the yard, turn and  
(never breaking pace,  
the lead dog carrying something fragile  
gently in its teeth) trot  
out of the yard and out of view.

