

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.

Hong Kong

continuous rain obscures Hong Kong
island across the harbor
from the hotel.

 clinging mist
waves lapping the cold beaches
of Communist China
visited by no one.
7 a.m.

 rain so hard
clouds so low
the crowded skyscrapers
opposite are lost.
crowds in the humid streets, electronics,
silks, books.
back in the yellow lamp-lit room
the view over fog-wrung hills
and rained-on harbor.
the construction site,
bright green crane on yellow mud –
two supervisors wade into a huge puddle,
confer in the middle,
their rubber boots overtopped, smiling.

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

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.

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.

Ruwatan for the West

The young man approaches his parents on his knees,
once more a child, receives blessings
gives honor. These ceremonies lost, civilization
cannot heal. The remorseful criminal
gains no readmission to society.
Only those who have worked long may try,
in whom elders, victims, and healers
discern genuine recovery of the human soul.
It must cleanse the soul.
In the human circle in which we started,
we stand considering whether we can reopen.
No one is safe
unless it readmits them to the human world
they have lost. It must take years.
The hurt soul can be healed
only when truly welcomed back to the human circle,
the circle that must surround the ceremony
expands to receive the criminal. Confused, in the middle,
imprisoned, in remorse, offering reparation and apology,
he breaks denial in public confession –
 only then, only then
the circle opens to take his hands on both sides,
rejoining humankind. It cannot be offered
more than once in a lifetime. Without such ceremonies,
we shall never heal.