

Eddin Khoo, obituary of T. Alias Taib

Read by Chris Merrill at the start of the 2004 residency, in memoriam

He constantly confessed that he was “uncomfortable” with language.

Poetry, he said, occurred when he was having a “quarrel with words.”

So when he set words on paper, they emerged awkward, idiosyncratic, highly personalized.

Perhaps natural to one born in a landscape dominated by the sea, the poetic life of Tengku Alias Taib was professedly full of “possibilities...limitless.”

He was often found quoting lines from his beloved Vicente Huidobro, “May my verses be like a key; That opens a thousand doors.”

But he was never prone to singing.

He opted, instead, for the staccato sentence, the jerk of an incident, senselessness of an uncommon experience.

And everywhere in his poetry is detail, a relentless digging.

He took on the dictum of Ezra Pound ~ “make it new!” ~ seriously; for he was born into a language that had still not “grown up.”

He held the pastoral evocations of old Malay close to his heart, loved its principal form ~ the pantun ~ yet strove to put the language on trial.

Like many among his generation Tengku Alias Taib broke away from the safe confines of small town life in Kuala Terengganu, on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, to “taste the life of the city.”

That city was Kuala Lumpur, recalled so fondly by Andre Gide as *Kuala L'impure*. In a moment a rare autobiographical reflection of days in a small town, he confessed, “I could never stay out after midnight. My mother would have a fit.”

So he attacked the city, “staying out late; smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee,” perfecting the subtle art of the prowler and the voyeur.

Strange things happened with this dislocation ~ mirrors talked back, whores beckoned, still-life's moved, worlds shattered...

And all the while, he was discovering a language, shaping and forging it as he went along. Modern Malay poetry began with two principal figures ~ the marvelous painter poet Latiff Mohidin who, as a student in Germany, began writing poems, in Malay, in the shadow of Trakl and Rilke; and Tengku Alias Taib, who looked further West, to the America he would now never see.

William Carlos Williams transformed his life. “That Wheelbarrow poem,” he would often say, and fall silent.

He repaid the debt, did a version of “that Wheelbarrow poem” in Malay.

Even as his poetic concerns and subjects shifted, he remained faithful to the seeds of candor and directness sown by Dr. Williams.

“He could make a poem out of anything,” Tengku Alias said of Williams.

And this he tried to emulate.

To “make a poem out of anything” the poetic life had to be one of loops ~ directionless and discursive.

“I never follow the straight path,” he would often say. “My path is crooked.”

Perhaps he embraced this notion all too tightly; for on Tuesday, 17th August 2004, having celebrated the marriage of his eldest daughter the Sunday before and preparing to join you all at the IWP, Tengku Alias Taib suffered a heart attack in the middle of the city, yet chose, again, to embark on the “crooked path” ~ a bus ride and a several meters walk ~ to return home.

He died while saying evening prayers.

A more direct path to the other place could not be found...

What could be said of his poems?

What was once said by another (American) poet he so deeply loved. From Carl Sandburg; “Poetry is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about what is seen during a moment.”

Tengku Alias Taib
3 Poems
Translated by Eddin Khoo

duniaku

kusimpan duniaku di dalam saku seluar
duniaku menyimpan seluruh perbatasan hidupku
kugolek duniaku melalui pintu hari
duniaku tiba-tiba bertukar
menjadi guli batu yang besar

kalau dipecah guliku
akan nampak peta seribu diri

terbentang sawah terbentang lembah
terbentang sungai menyerupai darah
mengalir di pinggir bukit gelisah

terbentang rimba purba tempat bercinta
segala haiwan segala kehijauan
terbentang juga malam yang hening
yang sekian lama menghilang
dari matak

jauh di tengah kota debu kering
dan angin keras bergulingan
jauh di tengah kota kehidupan menggelepar
tercekik di dalam
tembok luka

kalau dipecah guliku
akan kelihatan serpihan diri bertaburan

my world

i keep my world in a trouser pocket
my world keeps all of my life's borders
i roll my world through the day's door
my world transforms suddenly
becomes a large stone marble

if you break my marble
the map of a thousand lives will be seen

rice fields spread the valley spreads
the river like blood spreads
flowing on the edge of a restless hill

the aged jungle spreads love-spot
of every beast all the green

spreading also the quiet night
that for so long had faded
from my eyes

far in the heart of the city dry dust
and hard air trundle
far in the heart of the city life flails its wings
strangled in the
walls of a wound

if my marble is broken
the scatterings of a shattered life will be seen

Penggali Kubur

badai mengangkat mayat, kilat, guntur
dan angin ke sebuah gubuk di pinggir hutan.
jendela tersentak; beberapa bilah kilat
memacak engselnya. atap gementar digegar
guntur. ketukan menderu di daun pintu;
lebih tajam daripada kilat, lebih bergegar
daripada guntur, lebih kencang daripada
angin.

“sudah kaubina rumahku?” Tanya mayat sambil
menerjang pintu bagi badai yang menerjang
gubuk tua itu. pintu remuk, palangnya
terpelanting, mayat masuk menyeret badai
mengamuk. “rumahmu? tapi...” kata isteri
penggali kubur yang tinggal sebatang kara.
pelita di sisinya berguling. “suamiku,
penggali kubur itu, baru saja mati dan
baru saja menggali kuburnya.” sambung si
sebatang kara.

dalam gelap, kilat sempat melepaskan tiga
empat bilah cahaya tepat ke wajah pucat
mayat. mayat mengapung di laut ribut.
seperti sehelai selendang putih, ia me-
layang keluar melalui jendela, mencari
tukang rumah.

Undertaker

the storm carried the corpse, the lightning, thunder
and the wind to a hut on the edge of the jungle.
the window was forced open; flashes of lightning
broke its hinges, the roof trembled shaken by
thunder, a pounding wailed from the shutter door;
sharper than lightning, more thunderous
than thunder, harsher than the
wind

“have you built my house?” the corpse asked as it
assailed the door the way the storm assailed
that old hut, the door shattered, its beam
fell heavily. The corpse entered dragging the storm
going mad. “your house? but...” said the widowed
wife of the undertaker.
the lamp by her side tipped over. “my husband,
the undertaker, only just died and

only just dug his grave.” the widow continued.

In the dark, the lightning landed three
four flashes of light upon the pale face
of the corpse. the corpse floated on the sea of the storm.
like a white shawl, it flew
out through the window, in search
of a builder

Godot

Beckett mencipta debu jemu
dan dilepaskannya mundar-mandir
ke tengah omong yang bertele-tele
ke gelisah yang mulai mengerut
di wajah Vladimir dan Estragon
di bawah pohon kelabu itu
di pinggir jalan kelu itu

Beckett mencipta angin ragu
dan ditiupkannya ke gelisah mereka
sambil menunggu Godot
mereka dikelirukan oleh Pozzo
yang datang bersama Lucky
di bawah pohon bosan itu
di pinggir jalan sepi itu

Beckett mencipta teka-teki
sekitar kehadiran Pozzo dan Lucky
di tangan Pozzo sebuah cemeti
di leher Lucky terjerut tali
sementara di tanganya pula
sebuah kopor yang berat,
stool, bakul dan kot

di tengah jemu, ragu dan keliru
seorang budak lelaki muncul
katanya dia seorang sembala kambing
bekerja untuk Godot

katanya Godot akan tiba esok
bukan senja ini
dia pun hancur dihadap malam

Godot tidak jua muncul keesokannya
jemu menebal dan terganutung di pohon
anging menajam dan meruncing di tengah
percakapan Vladimir dan Estragon
yang berakhir dengan nol
Godot tidak jua muncul
yang muncul ialah Pozzo

tiada siapa yang tiba
tiada siapa yang berlalu

Godot

Beckett created dead dust
and scattered it in the to and fro
in the center of a senseless conversation
in the wrinkling weariness
on the faces of Vladimir and Estragon
beneath that gray tree
on the edge of the mute street

Beckett created the hesitant wind
and blew it towards their worry
while waiting for Godot
they were puzzled by Pozzo
who came with Lucky
beneath that weary tree
on the edge of the silent street

Beckett created a riddle
around the appearance of Pozzo and Lucky
in Pozzo's hands a whip
round Lucky's neck a noose
while in his hand
a heavy leather bag,
a stool, basket and cot

in between boredom, weariness and confusion
a boy emerges
he says he is a goat herd
working for Godot

he says Godot will come tomorrow
not this evening
then disappears digested by the night

the next day Godot still does not come
the boredom thickens and hangs from the tree
the wind sharpens and tapers in the middle
of Vladimir and Estragon's talk
that ends in nothing
Godot still does not come
the one who comes is Pozzo

no one arrived
no one passed by

"People's poet T. Alias Taib dies"

Utusan Malaysia, 8/19/2004, page 7

Tengku Alias Taib (T. Alias Taib), a prominent, versatile literary figure also known as people's poet, died of a heart attack after he performed the Maghrib prayer at his home in Lembah Keramat, Kuala Lumpur, yesterday. T. Alias, born in Kampung Pandang Engku Sar, Batas Baru, Kuala Terengganu, on February 20, 1943, received his higher education at Kuala Terengganu Teacher's Training College from 1960 - 1962.

Prolific since 1964, the poet also founded the Terengganu Young Writers' Association and a member of the National Writers' Association (PENA). The writer-poet was also a linguist who strived to set the tone for what is now known as Bahasa Melayu. In issues concerning the Malay language, T. Alias was a stickler for proper use of the language, struggling and striving to ensure that Bahasa Malaysia was technically sound, proficient and proper. He left behind an impressive body of work - poems, essays and features.

His best works are compiled in the following collection - *Angin Badai* (1975), *Kuala Lumpur* (1975), *Pemburu Kota* (1978), *Tinta Pena* (1981), *Pertemuan* (1982), *Bunga Gerima* (1986), *Bintang Mengerdip* (1985), *Seberkas Kunci* (1985) and *Puisi-rama Merdeka* (1986).

T. Alias' poems had a salient characteristic - social criticism that probed the problems faced by the Malay community. Using his unique perspective, T. Alias delved into issues of socio-economy, environment and humanities, always using the creative language for which he was famous.