

## The Hidden Papyrus of Hen-tai

(From the Second Scroll)

Wong Phui Nam<sup>1</sup>  
Malaysia

### VI

I have let you catch, a spirit in chrysalis,  
and grow in me into imago. Perfection of being,  
yet the severed half I lost in another life,  
and it is I who bear the wound raw,  
opened at each hallowed hour when I see you  
lead, a bronze god yourself, in the offering  
of praises at the marble feet of Aser,  
oblivious to the splendour painted and carved  
into the columns and the walls, and the hush  
as incense curls up to the ceiling of this great hall.  
And yes, of the all world and me in it.  
These hallways shadow my dreams wherein  
you walk by so indifferently. O Shepsesu,  
you witch me into bondage, in bone, in flesh.

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<sup>1</sup> One of Malaysia's most distinguished writers in the English language, Wong Phui Nam is the author of five volumes of poetry and two plays. His play *Aduni* was published in Vol. 2, No. 2 of *Asiatic*.

## VII

I had not known that flesh that lies strewn as waste  
when spirit unclothes itself could smell so vile,  
be so repellent to the touch as the clusters of coiled asps  
glistening and inert in the morning's cold at Isis' feet.  
That was Nefer-hetepes near her end. Limp in her sheets,  
on her patch of soft faeces, she gave herself over  
to be savaged by mortality. How could I not turn away  
my face, as I wiped the shine of sweat and urine  
off her thighs? How could I not turn my nose away,  
when I had my hand deep with damp rag into her crotch?  
But if I could not cup between my hands her unwashed head  
and kiss her cheeks, whisper comfort in her ear,  
I truly cannot love. And find no life, much as rotting corn  
that fails to come round again as young shots in spring.

VIII

I have not looked where no light is, no darkness,  
where there is no end, no beginning,  
and see I am that I am, where eyes do not see,  
bliss manifest not in and not outside of time.  
For I know only where light is, and darkness  
and time where that which I think I am is but  
shadow, woman in the shimmering mirror  
by the river burnished by white fire each day  
from the waking sun. I look in places else,  
in silver trays, in the temple's lotus pond,  
and grieve – the nose, too narrow, too close-set,  
the eyes. O Hen-tai, you are truly snared,  
a ghost in trays, in water, in the sheen of bronzes  
in houses of high-born ladies – beyond touch.

**IX**

If I were to be made visible to myself  
in other than clear bronze or the limpid face  
of still, dark water between lotus pads,  
I would, through the break in integument  
that binds our senses, find no presence: woman,  
small and nut-brown with long braids  
tied in the fashion of the old dynasty,  
and in whose eyes should abide *I am*.  
There is only faint trace, ghost, fugitive  
among remembrances. Who was it then  
who bled from gaping wounds of rejection,  
when Tepem-nefret, for grace and the beauty  
of her voice, was chosen to lead in worship,  
in the singing of praises to our lady of Re-a-nefer?

**X**

When Nefer-hetepetes died, I could not help  
but look askance across the room at sunlit windows  
as they cleansed her of dried secretions in her secret places.  
I sensed too well as death mined her, I was, with her,  
loose earth dredged up from the darkness beneath her skin.  
Too well I felt the maggots swim in rivulets  
that later oozed from gaseous ravines across belly  
and her swelling ribs. Unlike Pharaoh and the high born,  
I command no means to have me gathered up,  
ghost nurtured from figments of memory,  
and have it inhere in remains of tissue and of bone  
to live an eternity swathed and salted in linen.  
I, who looked away, and pharaoh, who would have  
life eternal in grave clothes, we have misunderstood death.

**XI**

When, for a term, I eased into a waning mindfulness,  
I let slip shadow<sup>2</sup> invoked from your sub-lunar darkness  
into the well-spring and origin of the dream I am  
as ghost to possess my day-thoughts, my sleep.  
In time, it transmuted dream into delusion:  
I was not whole, but a severed, unfinished part,  
bleeding and crying to be conjoined with you  
and be perfect, single in spirit, in bliss. I was sick  
for union with one appalled in beauty light as fire and air.  
It was, in truth, a half-life that fed on me for sustenance.  
My wasting frame and limbs were but the running wax  
to my dying inner flame. That I let you, Inty-shedu,  
to seduce my soul with shadows, showed I had hungers still  
not turned ashes, but were waiting embers to be re-lit.

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<sup>2</sup> The shadow is one of nine souls that the Egyptians believed every person has. It can leave a person's physical being while he or she is still living and do either harm or good – in this instance casting a love spell. Inty-shedu is a real name – that of a priest-magician.

## XII

Though I would, I cannot wake from our common dream  
to that clear light in dying that I may have life.  
I am as fly that dreams itself, dreams its own snare  
in a shimmering web sticky with the reality of the world.  
Awakening is stripped from its weave designed  
to catch all by their senses who ever have broken out  
into awareness from hard, dry chrysalid sheathes.  
Even Pharaoh in the majesty and splendour of his court  
and assured place of ascension to the heavens  
is but a loose strand dangling in shadow in a sunlit garden.  
I would, yet I cannot wake. Between sleep and dream I see  
death still as an incubation of unease in the bone  
which, on breaking out, is disruptor of all our buzz and bustle,  
devourer who terrifies for the baffling darkness of its maw.

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