

## Robert Yeo's Seventieth Birthday: Poetic Reflections<sup>1</sup>

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### 1.

No, we won't let his birthday pass us by  
Quietly, like a river meandering, unremembered.  
Robert has friends who did not forget.  
It is a birthday in his old age, hued by retrospection.  
But remembrance brings timely realization  
That he is seventy:  
Restless, romantic, silly, but married.

Nothing is new except what is forgotten.  
Since Robert is not forgotten, he cannot be new  
Nor can he renew himself.  
There is no future in nostalgia, Arthur,  
But with Robert, the future of nostalgia is secure.

### 2.

How does one portray the stubborn recalcitrant heart  
That's turned to stone?  
Must one wait for the heart's logic  
Even if it's parched and in need of repair?

Those are tears that louse your eyes  
And give away your heart;  
Take away, oh take away those scalding tears,

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this poem were read by the poet during the seventieth anniversary tribute to Robert Yeo held at the Singapore Management University. The tribute was held one day before Yeo's seventieth birthday, which was on the twenty-seventh of January 2010. Like Talib's previous poem published in *Asiatic* (on Edwin Thumboo), the poem is a contemplation on the writer's achievements as a poet. It is a reflection on some of the ideas and feelings in Yeo's poetry, which should be considered as part of his legacy as a poet.

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So that you can re-fix your stare,

And let the undistracted eye,  
After the tongue is silenced,  
Regain its primacy:  
For to see, is also to know.

Yet knowledge beyond the eye is what you yearn:  
Visual memory without language is directionless  
And the best knowledge, *nosce te ipsum*, is to know thyself.

But how can self-knowledge be garnered through time,  
When the only surety is age itself,  
And wisdom is not always harnessed with the years?

Yet Robert: you were wise even in your youth,  
For you knew intelligence had its limits  
Or indeed, that it might be inimical to wisdom.  
Age can't take that away from you.

You were wise, when merely intelligence was sought,  
When the logic of governance was in counting numbers.  
If bureaucracy was thrust on you,  
You became the most unbureaucratic of bureaucrats.

### 3.

Boundaries bother you.  
You carry your home wherever you go,  
For home is sometimes where you're not.

Poet of the commonplace:  
Eating cornflakes in Thailand was poetry for you.  
The ordinary is as poetic as the sublime.

From cornflakes to conflicts,  
Nothing is left out of your poesy's spell,  
Even the brutal barbed wire –

The instrument of fence building  
And the immovability of margins –  
Has a place too.

Your travels transcend the touristic.  
You desire to understand now-forgotten politics,  
To universalise them as lessons for posterity:

Truces are not meant to end wars,  
Bridges do not end deadlocks, but merely link them,  
Policies are negotiated through bombs,  
And wars are meant to be indefinitely deferred.

**4.**  
You yearn for histories of places visited,  
Yet you know that history  
Is sometimes concocted for tourist brochures.

But what has history got to do with time?  
Isn't history an understanding of the present?  
Only what is forgotten, is past?

Did Jayavarman II remain forever at Angkor Wat?  
Did the God-King have offspring too?  
Was he the precursor of elected devarajas?

But where is God?  
Divinity cannot be caged within a net  
Though saints may weave.

Where is morality?  
It slept in the sixties, I know,  
But is it awake now?

If it is, will it always be awake?  
Will the stirred conscience  
Blossom in the living room?

**5.**  
The geography of the heart  
Is more potent than the geography of the land:  
You know that the desert is within, not without.  
The journey worth travelling is the journey of the self.

Everywhere is somewhere  
And everybody is somebody for you.  
The man-in-the-street on-the-boat  
Is somebody too.

The Venice of the East has not recovered  
From the surprise of roads.  
With Bangkok's immoveable traffic jams,  
It's now in a state of shock.

Ah to think that we could move backwards!  
To remember to look back!  
To know that up is not the only direction!  
To see progress in bullock-carts along boulevards!

Without looking back, there's no progress  
Development is not merely moving forwards.

**6.**  
You're still ahead of the unrelenting overtaker:  
It's a preparation to be imbibed  
Which takes a lifetime to prepare.  
But so long as you have your poetry and your art,  
Nothing can overtake you.

Room in our affections is all you need  
As what you achieved cannot be lost in stone  
And neither needs nor fears renewal.

What has your birthday got to do with time?