

Postponing Truth

Baha Zain¹
Malaysia

I lie naked in bed
Gazing into a lonely mirror
My body agonizes, my skin pale
As if a century's suffering is squeezed into a moment
Soliciting destruction but postponing it
To a time uncertain.

Oh my beloved, brimming with life and lust
I've lied to you under the light of a pregnant moon
In a solitude that needs no word
Under the shelter of a moment of truth
And now those eyes in the mirror are taunting me
For I can lie no more.

I should be among friends
Or talking to diplomats, professors or lawyers
All prefer the same sport –
Lying to their woman, children and friends
I should no longer be writing poetry
It's better to roam the dark alleys
Or just lie on the breasts of women
Because for them lies and promises
never come true.

Trans. Muhammad Haji Salleh²

¹ Baha Zain (the pen name of Baharuddin Zainal) is an important Malaysian poet and critic who has to date published 5 books of poetry, the latest a selection in both Malay and English translation, *Postponing Truth* (2008). He is also a renowned blogger who takes on contemporary issues and considers them from an insightful and artistic stance.

² Muhammad Haji Salleh, poet and professor of literature, is one of the pre-eminent figures in modern Malaysian literature. He writes poetry, essays and criticism in both Malay and English, and has to date published more than 40 books. Winner of several national and international awards, he was conferred the title of Malaysian Literary Laureate in 1991.

Plea of the Asian Woman

Baha Zain
Malaysia

What else can I surrender now
All frangipanis wilt in the fire of the blasts
You have filled all wombs
 with your dollar
 with your V.D.

What else
What else
You have left me
Heir to germs and destruction
Let me be.

The prostitute at the Hotel Embassy
She cries,
“Hei, Jo, gip me you dolar
Not you napam, not yor gonoria.”

Trans. Muhammad Haji Salleh

You and I Looking at Independence

Baha Zain
Malaysia

You speak of independence
I speak of freedom
You speak of the nation
I speak of the motherland.

You speak of loyalty
I speak of the people's voice
You say yes
I say what.

You say the minister
I say the people
You say the future
I say the past
You say "Vision"
I say slogan.

You say national
I say power
You say politics
I say money
You say transparent
I say corruption.

You say to struggle for race and religion
I say why do you betray the language of the people?

Trans. Muhammad Haji Salleh

I am Kuala Lumpur

Baha Zain
Malaysia

On a restive morning
I parted the curtains.
Here the lights turn on automatically
Before the heady twin towers
I am Kuala Lumpur
In my moments of sanity
There's no jam,
The roads ahead are clear
The snatch thief is without his victim
The prostitute is still asleep
All is at peace.

I am Kuala Lumpur
Weighted down by each and every transaction
Of sin and tribulation.

Trans. Muhammad Haji Salleh

Name

Baha Zain
Malaysia

Without a name, how shall we differentiate
Between sand, stone, earth and wood?

Sand needs no name
Stone requests for no name
Earth does not ask for a name
Wood knows not its name
These are problems for human beings
Who crave names.

What difference would it make if we change names
Wood becomes stone, stone becomes sand and sand
becomes earth?
Nothing significant will happen
Wood will still remain wood, stone still stone, sand
still sand and earth still earth,
It's human beings who are faced with a problem
Their understanding blurs
Not being able to differentiate between a name and a thing.

Trans. Muhammad Haji Salleh