Salleh ben Joned, *Poems Sacred and Profane/Sajak-Sajak Salleh*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks, 2008. 192pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-22-6.

Very few poets can comfortably and confidently cross linguistic borders and still produce work of considerable power. Often a sense of inauthenticity will accompany the poetry of one language, rendering it ineffective. Thankfully, such a limitation is not evident in Salleh ben Joned's writings. In both his English and Malay poems, his wit and often daring irreverence are unmitigated and forceful, and this dual-language collection, *Poems Sacred and Profane/Sajak-Sajak Salleh,* is testimony to his linguistic mastery (some of the poems in *Sajak-Sajak Salleh* are translations of familiar English poems, such as "Kepada Kekasih yang Kesipu-sipuan" [Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"] and two sonnets from Shakespeare; others are translations into Malay of his own English poems), his nimble style, and his acute sensitivity to the socio-political situations from which many of his poems draw their concerns.

A predominant preoccupation with Salleh is sex and its vicissitudes. While some poems expose the carnal, earthy, and exploitative nature of the sexual act that leaves bodies sweaty and exhausted, and feelings bitter ("Obscenity," "The Woman who Said No," "Hantu" ["Ghost"]), other poems celebrate its quiet innocence that conjoins two entities into a sublime oneness. Here is the third stanza of "A Song of Love's Silence" that intimates the sexual act as a moment of mystery and discovery:

> Our talk, pillowed and unpillowed,
> is often small talk, but big enough
> in mute whispers of the body's tongue;
> you're an enigma of innocence, touched
> by the shade of the ancient twin-breasted
> mountain, in whose shadow you first saw
> the world; (85)

The (female) body is a geographical space yet uncharted, upon which the protagonist experiences as novelty; and yet, rather than objectified, the woman too is allowed a gaze from which to encounter their intimacy, which is for her also the unfolding of a new world. These lines are deftly performed, allowing the reader to pause at the word "saw" before she is finally confronted with "the world." Another poem that captures the beauty of such a private act is "Di Detik ini, Di sini" ("Here, at this Moment"). After recounting in short stanzas the meeting of breasts ("Dada dan dada") and fingers ("jari dan jari"), the fourth stanza reads: "Kejantananku/ mandi di mata air/ rimba purba kejenisanmu:/ tenggelam niat si musafir" (107), which can roughly be translated as "My malehood/ bathe in the well/ of your ancient forest:/ thus sinks the desires of a wayfarer." This is followed by a stanza that suggests awareness and an embracement of something earthy and yet primordial, thus conflating innocence and maturation as the paradoxical and simultaneous results of copulation. Indeed, for Salleh, sex is not the contaminating and tabooed activity which certain ideologies have sought to control

and repress. Sex, as some of the poems insinuate, harbours spiritual dimensions and its performance can enhance a sense of self-awareness and an inclination towards the divine. When two bodies abandon their clothed propriety, they are declaring their trust and exposing their vulnerability to each other. Only then can the two, no longer divided by suspicion or shame, truly attain singularity, like that "of the Yin and the Yang/ of the Lingam and the Yoni" ("Songs and Monologues" 7). Unsurprisingly, there is almost a tantric flavour in some of Salleh's poems, especially pronounced in the poem "Rasa" (dedicated to Ramli [Ibrahim?]) with its many references to Hinduism.

But Salleh also uses sex often as a metaphor for social commentary. In these poems, sex augurs the decadence of individuals who have prostituted their identities to materialism and class-consciousness. The bumigeois are especially targeted. In "Ménage á Trois," for example, it is not with another man that "The bored wife of Bumigeois" is having an affair, but the television, and more specifically JR and Bobby Ewing of the famed 80s soap opera, *Dallas*. The poem goes on to relate how every night, while "hugging her dummy hubby," she "pants for her heart's delight" as she imagines lovemaking with television characters even while her "Hubby keeps bobbing/ between her and Bobby" (48): hence the ménage á trios. A hilarious poem, it nevertheless reveals the depth to which materialism can disrupt relationships and empty a person out of her conviction and ideals, leaving only a bored, pathetic, and lusty shell. An equally witty piece is "Love Song of a Committed Lecturer" in which a university academic, in a sequence of rather playful declarations, complains of the coyness of his students that is obstructing his attempts at conquests. But the whole poem may be a metaphor that belies the more serious problem of students being unable to learn because of closed mindsets and a tendency to dismiss anything that would threaten their unyielding, monolithic worldviews.

In her astute introduction, Adibah Amin, echoing Salleh's own brief rumination of his Malay poems ("Sepatah Kata Selepas Kata" ["A Word after Speaking"], found on the last page of the collection), shows that in Salleh's poems, the profane and the sacred are not distinct entities with clearly drawn boundaries. In fact, what is sometimes considered profane can sometimes be deeply sacred, as many of the poems about sex attest, while there are areas regarded as sacred which actually causes a diminishment of the individual, and thus become objects of (self-)profanity. In the poem "Testament in Engmalchin," there is an indirect criticism against the privileging of one language over others, despite the multilingual nature of this country, which has led to a weakening and bastardising of *all* languages. Another poem, "Sajak Berjela untuk Sesiapa Saja" ("A Trailing Poem for Whoever"), relates the celebration of national literature amidst a polluted city and a trampled environment – suggesting that there is ultimately no "worth" in a national literature if it does not make us aware and appreciative of the world in which we live. The "dirty air of Kuala Lumpur" ("udara kotor Kuala Lumpur") may well be a metaphor for the dirty politics involved in the suppression of aesthetics and creativity in the name of ethnic and language privileging.

Between the extremes of the sacrilegious and the divine, Salleh's poems reveal a breadth of issues and concerns which are sometimes self-consciously represented (in

particular, the autobiographical "The Salacious Rhymes of a Self-Taught Prodigal"), ironic ("Spirit of the Keris"), or rendered with a mischievous tinge (the sequence of "Perempuan" ["Women"] poems). The brevity of this review cannot, regrettably, do justice to this exceptional dual-language collection, so I must trust the discerning reader to procure a copy and judge it for himself/herself. If your cup of tea is the puncturing of taboos and the celebration of trangression, then the reissuing of this collection is certainly not to be missed.

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