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# Portraits: Six Asian Poets

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*Satendra Nandan*

Satendra stares at his half-filled glass  
of Australian shiraz and wonders  
why just two glasses start him  
dreaming about wine and distance,  
kept afloat by a woody raft of memory.  
The third glass is when the anxiety's  
deflected. The languor remains.

*Charlene Rajendran*

Her critics complain that her poetry  
has little cerebral connection  
but she continues to recite her sing-song words  
and amorphous lines unflinchingly:

“So mush of me is / muddled”

and then the applause comes  
and the blent air of the whole afternoon  
surprises me as it resettles to reveal  
a peculiar, momentary acuity.

*Wong Phui Nam*

The sun rarely shines in his poetry; but if it did  
it would reveal some kind of raw, undisclosing self,  
bringing into relief an anxious landscape hovering  
just above our imaginations, neither fictive nor real.  
While there's no denying the enunciative power

of his verse, every reading of his ends up  
like a dramatic staging where the tickets return unsold.  
Yet he sits there, reading, turning the page, stroking  
his striations of pain, being Wong Phui Nam  
like nobody else would dare.

*Koh Beng Liang*

When Koh Beng Liang reads his poetry  
his words tangent off in a hundred different ways  
from his boyish, five-foot-something, bespectacled voice,  
almost as if he were ventriloquising from a distance.  
But the dummy on his lap is never to be seen.  
So sans dummy, the focal point of his phrasing  
lies somewhere beyond the thrust in syntax,  
beyond the divide between the known and the invisible:

and meaning reverts to unmeaning but just  
for a moment (like in all good poetry)  
and then our eyes search again for that voice's  
dummy's personified semblance and realise  
gosh, here we go again... seeking once more  
that disembodied expatriation from the real.

*Alvin Pang*

There is a moment  
when the familiar becomes lost...

and so Alvin reads his poem,  
with only memory guiding

a comfortable self within.  
I wonder: do words diverge

from an essential self or do they soar  
in parallel motion to the heart?

Uplifting. Questing. Unafraid.  
Some metaphors remain.

*Kamala Das*

I'm that little girl again  
sensing that sheer happiness  
is around the corner —  
with the exams just over,  
the holidays just begun.

I'm just a little girl with long  
black hair running home past  
the brothels and houses  
with my schoolbag and pigtails  
to the open arms of *Amma*.