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, undisclosed 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.
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.

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.
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.