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Writing Sample

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Sitok Srengenge

OSMOSIS OF ORIGIN

I ask the wind, 
whence does reverie come, 
the wind shakes the tips of leaves 
and I see the trees paint the cycle of years

I ask the tree, 
whence does time begin, 
the tree opens its flower petals 
and I see a bee alight down sucking honey

I ask the bee, 
whence does the cell that begets my body originate, 
the bee hums flying into a cave 
and I see a bat shut its ears upon a stonewall

I ask the bat, 
whence does sound emerge, 
the bat flaps its wings up to the night sky 
and I see dew glide down like a river

I ask the river, 
whence does the source of milk flow, 
the river shows off the mountain 
and I see a valley shrouded in mist

I ask the valley, 
whence does taboo, 
the valley raises its shroud 
and I see the naked earth swing in elegance

I ask the earth, 
who does give birth to Mother,  
the earth blushes, but I hear the sea answer, 
"She witnesses upon fact, yet is incapable of utterance!"

I ask the sea, 
who does contain her,  
the sea roars, yet is drained 
before fully breathing the Name

1995

(Translated by Hasif Amini)

1
ZEEDEJK

A kind of warning: a hand squeezing a breast
perhaps that of sinners, dumped, outside a church
In Zeedijk, a dam against the sea,
all that is beautiful seems hooked to death

A pretty city,
a sly hooker,
opening herself but shutting her heart
In her heart a frozen lake,
in its trough I want to reach you, a magic spell from the past

I summon you with love poems,
but the snow won't let them turn to echoes

The weather whizzing around with a myriad of bayonets
and the wind moving stealthily between the poplar trunks
Watching over jobless immigrants
and lurching at them with stabs of hunger

People in a parade, welcoming Santa Claus,
the name and symbol of love, gifts with crimson ribbons
But on the riverbank, where borderlines are fixed to the ground,
an Afro woman collects breadcrumbs

I greet you with poems of sorrow,
but my words clot in air

1996

(Translated by Hasif Amini)
FRANKRIJK

Like a bat
the nocturnal wanderer that you know from pictures,
or the ghostly prince from the dark chamber of Nosferatu's palace
who abducts virgins
into the fog and the howl of invisible dogs
I find peat marshes
in your piercing solitude
I see the desire lurking in the veins of your neck
like the fruit from the tree that has grown before the beginning of time
So bury all intention
to toy with eternity,
soon the bell will toll
from the peak of Anne Frank's tower,
siren's wails slashing the night:
somebody has just committed suicide

Dogs copulate with the cold,
you and I dissolve each other's soul into desire
Until someone with long hair,
who once called upon your dream,
opens the window
The fire in the furnace is out, charcoals crushed
into powder,
you and I
turn into ash

Driven by the winter wind I am cast into the ocean
becoming islands of the equator
you are left in your place, covered with snow
lumped into the past

Someday when the snow melts and the wind stirs the windmills,
you will be carried away by the water,
and at a certain point
will arrive at my side
Maybe embracing each other, then letting go of each other
heaven knows when

Maybe like a dream
Like a dream

1996

(Translated by Hasif Amini)
AHRWEILER

Before breath becomes fog
and fog
becomes snow
and on the willow twigs the snow
becomes tears, the fox lying on the bush path
no longer is the silent possession of the oak forest

In the valley of the River Ahr a thought becomes a stone
and the stone
becomes an old coat for the city that hides a wound
and the wound
becomes open fields,
where the veins are shattered
arisen as grape shoots,
children worm over, moaning with trembling lips,
"So cold out here. Open the door, please
don't let us die a frozen death."

Birds with wings of light kindle the stars in the sky
and their twinkling echoes a spectral sound:
Kling! Klingelingeling .... Like a groan from time immemorial,
yet not touching the ears
of the people
crouching with arms folded by the fireside

The wind turbines of winter quiver
driven into the altar
and children lump together like tropical islands
but no longer those of the mother who made the ocean with tears

Like an unexpected dream that makes one falter
during silent nights,
I come from an archipelago
But not one of yours!

1996

(Translated by Hasif Amini)
BY THE BANK OF THE RIVER AMSTEL

By the bank of the River Amstel, in a cafe,
you shake death off the coat, at dusk
The years gilding the longing,
your hair whitening
The current keeps crushing between the swans
and lines of light
Seventeen teals crowding in the passageway of a cheesecake shop,
seven glasses of alcohol spinning the coarse flannel of drizzle

Then you pry out that bit of exile: a flock of Peking ducks
driven to an alien land south of Nanking
where the sentries' whips
are ready to strip reason, to lash death
Between a tray of cannar meat slices and a pot of green tea
you snort out once more with hate the sacred words of Mao

And as wild as a stray seagull,
you arrange the memories, you follow the dreams, in confusion
to the heights of a whip-driven climb
up the parched cliffs of Manchuria

But at that dusk, Wispi, on the bank of the River Amstel
you shake death, once again, off the coat
For in your shrinking body
there are pulses of the sea soothing bitterness:
ideology, dreams of revolution
-the precarious faith that builds prisons

The dangling red shawl on your neck, Wispi,
is like a desire that never sees the light of day
Perhaps, I can't be sure,
you mention God with a sigh of a vein,
beneath the scattering powder of snow
through trees that withhold silence,
you row your weathering age to heaven-knows
where a crane stands dazed on the roof ridge, waiting for crumbs

Perhaps death has once called on Daltonstraat, one night
whiffing over the memories that you've recorded, blurry books,
traces of nicotine on the pipe, the echoing coughs on coffee grounds,
when you go on vacation to a country of illusions

1996

(Translated by Hasif Amini)
GENESIS

The snake man squats under the *bungur* tree
gathering a hurricane of dead leaves,
the snake woman bathes mesmerized
by the shadow of paradise at the bottom of the lake.
The man closes his eyes to dream of a thousand rapids,
as the woman stays awake for the next moon to come.

The roar of rapids breaks the silence of the stone,
as the lake sends out the river to split the ravine,
and the round moon guides the snake in its wanderings.

The stones are set into the shape of a mountain, the man climbs
The moons flock together to reach a year, the woman flies
To tear at the mountain for many years, the snake coils.

The man ends with rapids starts with stones,
the woman ends with the lake starts with the moon,
the snake man-woman start and end with heads with forked tongues.

The man aims a stone at the snake's head,
the snake's tongue calls to the lake.
The rowing with the moon runs ashore on the mountain with its rapids,
the anchor is cast into the ravine
where bananas and citronella grass grow.

The snake-like instinct emerges at the hips and the woman writhes,
the man's fingers grip the mountain.
The snake's glands creep onto the waist and the man tightens,
the women's hands reach for the moon.

The man of rapids splashes the bed of the woman lakes,
the snake strikes the moon amidst the stones.
The dream of the sleeping Earth becomes you,
when it awakes its consciousness turns into me.

1995

(Translated by Margaret Agusta)
OBITUARY FOR THE MOON

My child sleeps figuring the moon
and in class her eyes still keep the night
when the teacher speaks of the sun
My child draws a horizon, the ocean,
a ship with no pilot,
and the teacher's skirt is teased by the rising tide,
the teacher is eaten by fish

In bed my child weeps
the tears drop onto the notebook
full of scribbles of red, orange, yellow,
green, blue, indigo, purple
My child says it is a pool!
My child wishes to help the teacher,
so my child draws a small boy fishing
while looking at the moon above that pool
And after that, the fish in the first verse
becomes a snack for the teacher's dog

My child falls asleep again,
figuring the moon
in my child's eyes the night is held
but the dog keeps howling for the fish
My child quickly draws fish
inside eyes which contain the sea
but the fish whine for the teacher
My child quickly draws the teacher
in eyes that still contain the school
but the teacher is again teaching about the sun
My child repeats the drawing of the horizon, the ocean,
the ship without a pilot...
in my child's eyes the world is contained
but the teacher does not like this
and gives my child a score of five

In the following days,
My child fears drawing anything again
except for commemorating the small boy in the second verse
who longs for the moon above the pool

1991

(Translated by Margaret Agusta)
YOU, THE WIND

At first I thought you were a wave, but each time I dived in to swim, you would spin up like a wind storm. The sweat bursts and soul and body are restless, become a prayer of untouched Love. There, I find comfort in your breeze, once a while just before you blow away.

I hunt the voice of the flute in the distance, which I find are the rustling branches. I am dazed by the illusion of your moves, as silent as the stone within my longing.

Now I know there is no need to chase you. You live within and outside me. - there is no distance yet you are so far, so close yet not touching.

if it is true you are the wind I will breathe you in as I wish. Deep within the heart that beats, you are the new spirit of my life. Flows the blood, flows within the vein of my Love because of you, my Love.

1991 (Translated by Margaret Agusta)
MEMENTO MORI

In your pale countenance
I read a trace of hints:
the whip of winter wind,
rioters who return
with remnants of the Stasi troops’ rancor

The light is buried in the slumbering town,
children and women from the East
dream of a slice of bread and a gulp of wine

Surely, you served me
that night:
the burst of bones in the crematorium
and the withered buds of wheat

And the rest, a veiled blanket,
as soft and moist as mist
shaken by the struggling thunder
depth in the heart of the pine forest
And so we lie down,
and even our breath is choked
The room becomes as silent as a crematorium chamber
the dissolving moans scorched by the fire of desire

Behind your closed eyes,
a woman is burning Mein Kampf secretly
The mighty words of the Fuhrer shattered into husks,
like the ember of your body which crackles and dies out
History, crumbs, desire, shrink once more into the earth,
where the first and last steps fuse in one spot

"Even you who walk with imagination
soon will rest in an oriental region:
a cozy soul
in a span of Java.
But my spirit will always wander
looking for the promised land, somewhere."

As wide as you imagine, thousands of miles,
spread between Euphrates and Nile
But your people has been seizing,
but your vow has been snatched

Birds
pass through the dimness of the building's shadow,
but you see yourself, perplexed in the darkness
speaking in the language of the Southerner
The sky is like an invert of a winnowing tray
with the shivering of the Saturn’s ray
"I want to return, Mother. Your child is still immature."

1997

(Translated by Daisy Ekowati)
VIEW OF THE DUSK

So long
the child is preparing paper and pen
as if there is something to be written,
maybe something secretly desired:
a blister of lament, or of complaint,
from someone who falls

So long watching the twilight
perforating the sandalwood branches,
as if he understands its meaning:
in a moment the atmosphere will be gloomy,
maybe also scary,
because the night is never late
to spread hatred
Pillars of light faded
as a shooting star, the idol whose legs are wide open all the time
will be seized by shadows

Then he will find himself
laying on his back in the grass field,
looking up at the stars
Then he will enter the dream world, which he created
So long!

But he shivers there
and doubts his unusual sight:
a male cow is flying to the Southeast,
falls deep into the belly of the limestone hill
and the crows disperse
towards the crack of the tomb's entrance
For he knows there is no cow, there is no Southeast,
and neither the crows
Only the crushed hill,
where a circus clown is building a sarcophagus

He feels his fingers trembling,
between fear and fervor,
paper and pen are in his hand without a scratch of line, not even a point
Because he is stunned at the crimson sky:
there is no clap of a heron's wing, only cotton lumps
shaping a face:
an executioner who breeds boots and rifles
Instantly he spits snatched by dry wind
thrown to the center of the lake,
perforates into the plants
becomes green, becomes yellow, becomes red, becomes black
becomes restless, becomes risky, becomes curse, becomes vengeance
Then he hears someone cough loudly
overcoming the shriek of the Sphinx,
bursting siren, tear gas, bulldozer,
also rifle and panzer
The air is blackened by smoke,
the smell of burned flesh and goods
And as usual
someone is busy counting numbers, not lives,
because, he said, they are just villains
no more important than ruins

So long
that child is preparing paper and pen
as if there were something to be written,
maybe something secretly desired:
a gasp, or remorse,
from someone who falls

So long the paper and the pen are in his hand,
too full of scratches and crosses,
but he is powerless to write them
Not because of giving up, or fear,
he just feels, not hearing voices:
a scratch of scream, hurried steps,
or the sound of the soldiers' shoes
He doesn't see anything, except dusk and guns
So long!

1997

(Translated by Daisy Ekowdit)

12
Sitok Srengenge

YIN-YANG

When the bud of love breaks in the woman's heart
and the voice twists its bonds, becoming words
sliding towards the man,
the lake in her womb
overgrown with silent bamboo

When the words collide with the man's soul's cliff
and the echo thunders like a hurricane,
at that moment the bamboo's been bewitched
and the woman knows a life begins inside her

The woman walks around before sleeping
so dreams will guide her to the road's bend,
where she'll meet a man
and the light radiating from the East
There a mother prepares a place
for the new life beginning in the womb

In the woman's lake containing a rainbow
the man entwines himself
till all dismays perish
billows becoming fog,
his body redeems
becoming mirage
his awareness rising high
becoming the sun,
and the mind which always keeps the woman's face
spreads out becoming a sky of billowing clouds

And the woman walks around,
circling the lake of her own creation
She sees fog, sees the sun,
sees the sky of billowing clouds
She sees the mirage,
sees transience
Desire stands eternally with the man
becoming the rainbow's thickest colour

Through tears the man reaches the woman
and if the fog
wants to tug
the man sneezes
and a typhoon rises from the eyebrows' base
making the sun slip into the lake till it sinks
and his tears wink transforming stars
While taking a cat in her lap
the woman looks upwards into the clear night
and stars fall to the bottom of the silent lake
And the woman daydreams before sleeping
till the dream ends her wandering at the brink of waking,
then she watches the man's sweat dangling from the leaves
in the glare of light radiating from the East

1995-1999
MAASTRICHT

My eyelids are transforming a boat
grounded on your river's frozen surface
a heart etched
and the moon puffing behind an ice berg
together piling up mist
and the night melts
The border wind touches your lips
tulips' petals delay breath in the dust of snow
Three guys, noses pierced with gold rings
approach me asking for marijuana
"Because your hair's long and black and, well, you're brown!"
No. It's the instinct to exploit
a subordinated race

And I remember a waitress at a restaurant
overlooking a park,
where a flock of pigeons
fought over breadcrumbs,
allowing her breasts to spill from her sweater
as if ignoring winter
As she turned her cat eyes to me
half scolding half seducing
"Sorry, you can't smoke kretek in here. But, if you want,
we could do it together in my apartment."

And I drift off in a second floor room
an old red brick building
A wad of a sofa
facing a TV playing soft erotica,
Stella Artois from Belgium,
and a pair of goblets between them
You imagine Rome, I remember Yogya
who knows why
There's also Gauguin's blow
like the wind,
red and mustard-yellow embracing,
dark and reddish purple
Maybe desire trembles because of the mist
and the mountain night
You reveal a cover,
offer a heart beat
My thoughts return to a hungry morning,
the wing of a seagull among drizzles, the lake's edge
Handful of bread,
a nipple of raisins, melted butter
But still I hear, faintly, in the boulevard,
the season blowing and the last twig of linden leaf leaves
at the moment your nerves shake
between jittery movement and stammering voice

Then: silence!
But, there in a park
Venus and pines whisper, 
for they're wet 
soaked by 
January rain 

1996
FATAMORGANISM

Fingers of a mischievous season
Grab a small girl's hip,
Trembling butterfly waiting for the wind to pass
towards Buchenwald
I hold back a whistling heart,
behind the back of a beheaded statue,
before a government building's ruin
assaulted by the anger of the unemployed

Suddenly the city becomes a musty man
with whiskers and a beard thick as bushes,
tousled tangled
and his sight as blurred as the dusk's sun

The wind comes rustling
tousling his hair which full of grit
repressing memory of vociferous drizzle
dripping down far in the Simbirsk morning,
sprouting a clump of black grass
spreading wide as night
Then he hears a melancholy clap from the east, swallows
leaving behind a broken colour of twilight, a Soviet

"Fate is not as slippery as woven linen, Mr Lenin," the horizon's only empty
there's no sunrays, when he muttered the soliloquy

" Do understand, if there's no mausoleum for Mussolini,
after an ideology which took sides for common people
hardens to become cruel as an axe,
beheading the shoots of reason and instinct."

"And the workers, the workers, keep being hunted and killed
by the growing capital."

Half ripe words without echo without magnet,
but the sky screams its voice, creaks its beating
The man's body disappears with the twilight
falling apart as blurred as a fatamorgana,
his head sprawled among scattered rocks
and splinters of a pair of butterfly wings

Between the beheaded statue, a stonehead,
a corpse of butterfly, I'm dazed
watching hope's trot like a last train
to a concentration camp

1997