The Five Senses (from the writer's blogs)

Alfian Saat

The Five Senses 1: Sight

Kin Seng chides me for my vanity. He thinks that I have a coy conflict between putting on my spectacles (and looking bad, since I had never found a pair to agree with my face) and taking them off (and thus seeing badly).

'What a terrible choice to make,' Kin Seng tells me. 'To be vain and blind, or to be sighted and ugly.' Most of the time, it would seem that conceit wins me over, and Kin Seng has often rolled his contact-lensed eyes in exasperation as I obliviously pass by him in public appointment-places (I am always slightly phobic of contact lenses; for me any notion of a fingertip touching the cornea is the stuff of horror movies).

But Kin Seng doesn't understand the bizarre magic of myopia. Suspended in a 200-degrees limbo, where putting on glasses does not so much confer sight as sharpness, and taking them off does not so much plunge me into darkness but a benevolent haziness, I have learnt to navigate the streets without my cumbersome seeing aids.

Where sight fails, my dear Kin Seng, imagination takes over. How often have I strayed into my kitchen and spooked myself by believing that the socks hanging on my kitchen window grilles were a clan of bats, or skirted a safety zone around a pile of rubbish I had assumed to be a slumbering mastiff? During the army, how often have I dismissed white apparitions as nothing more than stray laundry, or even once, during one of those graveyard shift guard duties, as a kite trapped in the branches of a tree? As much as my half-blindness endows the innocent with menace, at the same time it mutes the malicious — the same eyes that prey on my superstitions also protect me due to my sheer faith in their fallibility.

And also, how many times have I waved to complete strangers, smudged into the shape of friends — a trick of refraction for sure, to bring distant images closer to me, to transform the alien into the ally.

The word 'short-sighted', for me at least, is a misnomer. A world constantly variable, misread and re-interpreted is a world more bountiful than that inhabited by those with perfect eyesight. When vision is challenged, the inner eye takes its first sips of the mutable light. Rather than shrinking my surroundings to the limits of my eyesight, my gaze is lengthened, stretching towards a series of curtains rising in front of me, each one unveiling more and more of the beyond. Is that a tree

shaped like a man or a man shaped like a tree? A star or an aeroplane, a diamond or a teardrop?

And you, Kin Seng, who is a likeness of Kin Seng, a dilution of the friend I know and love so well, or its perfection.

The Five Senses 2: Touch

Like the first people who invented the codes of hand gestures (mudras) in Bharata Natyam, that ancient interpretative South Indian dance form, I have often dreamed of creating a language based on touch. Conversations between people, much of which are based on establishing their relationships with one another, will be superfluous, replaced by the most economical acts of contiguities. With this exact lexicography, that oft-used phrase 'human contact' will have its dignity restored, wrenched back into the realm of the literal. It is a dream of perfect honesty.

1) Between friends: standing side by side, one places his or her head on the other's shoulder. The one with the hidden ear speaks; the one with two ears exposed will listen. However, this pact of confiding is conducted entirely in silence.

2) Between a mother and a child: the mother uses the back of her hand and places it on the child's neck. On the surface, the eternal image of care: the strong comforting the weak. But as the mother rests her hand she is also looking at what is inscribed on her palm, and realises that her love is inseparable from her mortality. The prayer of any true mother is thus: that she never be allowed to outlive her own child.

3) Between a father and a child: the father uses his hand to caress the shoulder of his son or daughter from behind. For some it is a stern gesture, almost as if the father is demonstrating the weight of the angel of conscience that sits on one's shoulder. But behind him is the father's own father, fossilised in the same pose, an entire generational line in fact, placing their trust on the ones in front of them. If there is any angel at all in the queue, it is the one standing in front.

4) Between lovers: a finger works its way to the skin right under the eyes, in a gesture of wiping tears which do not exist. It is a gesture of both repair and warning: wiping away the stain of past hurts, yet also preparing for future injuries, the way soil is studiously ploughed to sow the seeds of grief.

5) Between siblings: their two little fingers interlock, as if to seal a promise. Only the little finger is used: the one which has refused to grow along with the rest of its brothers, the one still detained in childhood.

6) Between enemies: a temporary gesture, of one's hand locked around the wrist of the other. This necessary gesture arrests the formation of other subsequent

gestures. Yet it does not so much declare the beginning of peace but provides the interlude between the first impulse, which is revenge, and the last of our impulses, which is forgiveness.

Then there are other ways of touching whose meanings will reveal themselves only after they are performed: a fingertip between the eyes, a palm placed flat against a sole, thumb against the heart's apex.

But in this universe of touch-signs, the absence of words does not mean the absence of violence. Nobody can tell if the mother will not strangle her own daughter, or the father push his son into the deep end of the pool. The brothers will start to turn their game of interlocking fingers into a cruel duel, and when one brother's finger is twisted he will shout out in distress. That sudden wail will rupture the world I have dreamed of: when touch turns to savagery, gestures turn superfluous, and the one true thing is that honest cry of pain.

The Five Senses 3 : Taste

We had just finished dinner at a coffeeshop opposite the Substation. Razak lit his cigarette and started to gaze dreamily at the tendrils of smoke signing their cursives in the air.

'We used to 'mandi hujan' in the old village, literally 'shower in the rain', and I would open my mouth to the sky,' he said. 'I used to just allow my mouth to gape, without swallowing, and the rain would fill it up, with water that was cool, and sweet.'

I was struck by what Razak mentioned about the rain being 'sweet'. I asked him if it was just a figure of speech, but he insisted that he had used the exact adjective.

'You didn't swallow the rain. So how can you actually tell if it was sweet?'

'That shows how old we've become, my friend,' Razak answered, slyly, 'That something has to be swallowed just for us to know that it's sweet. We don't trust the tips of our tongues anymore.'

The function of taste. Among most animals, taste is purely utilitarian, in fact, subject to a binary law — sweet things good, bitter things bad. But human taste buds are supposedly more delicate, being inextricable from gastronomic pleasures. A new game: Razak and I started listing things which left prints only on the tongue, not the gullet.

'Salt water. The breeze from the sea.'

'Chlorine from swimming pools.'

'The cold taste of keys. The spit-dampened wood of pencils. The poison of batteries.'

'Cigarette smoke. How could I miss that?'

'Rubber bands. Tissue paper, which gives the curious sensation of a moistureless palate.'

'The edges of pillows. Your own thumb. Rubber pacifiers. Teething toys.'

'Air. When you open your mouth, head out of the window, while your father is speeding down an expressway. Or when you're fasting and no food enters your mouth the entire day.'

'The frayed end of a sewing thread. Shirt sleeves.'

'The salty iron taste of blood, especially when you've got a bad tooth.'

'The crumpled hem of your sarong. Clenched in your mouth when you were being circumcised.'

'Directly: toothpaste. Indirectly: soap and shampoo.'

'Your sweat-soaked helmet strap in the army.'

'Mud. Gravel. Grass. Sand. Spat out the minute it is recognised.'

'Straws. Keropok plastic packaging, the kinds you have to tear open with your teeth.'

In my desperation to come up with more examples, I brought the back of my hand to my mouth and bit my own knuckle. And it hit me then: taste, the most intimate of our senses. I could look at Razak, listen to him, smell him, even touch him, but to taste him required a level of intimacy that I believed neither he nor I desired. A kiss took on new meanings for me: to taste someone who is simultaneously tasting you, to be both the taster and the tasted, ah, foreplay to mutual cannibalism. Lost in erotic reverie, I could hardly pay attention to what Razak said next.

'Skin,' he said triumphantly. 'The human skin, public or private, callused or sensitive, sweaty or dry, hairy or smooth…' Who knows which of us had thought of it first, but it was strange, how he had found the very words that were at that very moment, poised at the tip of my tongue.

The Five Senses 4: Hearing

On television, the telephone rings.

Oddly enough, my sister comes out from her room to answer it. She directs a furious glance at me, lazily reading a newspaper on the sofa, and reaches out for the receiver. On screen, the scene has moved to another, and the TV telephone has stopped ringing. My sister — subject of a strange prank — is caught standing

foolishly in that limbo between the reality of the television and the reality of our living room.

It is not the first time in my house that either of us has responded to imagined sounds. The porosity of high-density HDB living means that ventriloquism is rampant, and sounds originating from a neighbour's house will ultimately be perceived as domestic ones. The most common of these is the thump on the wall — most often interpreted as an injurious contact between skull and concrete — arousing my mother's deepest maternal anxieties. Her response: to visit one bedroom after another to check that none of her children has been hurt.

I recall also scampering into the kitchen when I was young, believing that someone had called my name. Very often, I would receive instead my mother's rebuff of, 'If I call you, you don't answer, but if I don't, you come rushing.' This would be followed by some sharp remarks about my deafness, about 'How long have you not been digging your ears?' And my mother's favourite: that it was a ghost who had called my name (because I am a bad child who doesn't clean my room, because I am never careful when I walk in public and had muddied a sacred site with my footprints…).

But one should be thankful to this phantom of false alarms. Such auditory hallucinations come from a basic need: to define our need for one another. They awaken all the elemental duties that we have stored within us; a stacked, tense pyramid in danger of neglect because no crisis has yet happened — a major illness in the family, an accident that will make visible all our umbilical dependencies.

Submerged desires create these sounds — counterfeit echoes from the future. The desire to be a mother causes one to hunt down the source of a thud. The desire to be children causes others to begrudgingly respond to the sound of their names (or rhyming variations of their names). It is also my desire to be loved that makes me think that a barely discernible SMS beep has emanated from my handphone, buried within the inscrutable depths of my backpack.

Each imagined sound is a fire drill, a mock exercise. Each one prepares us for the day when an actual summons — the ambulance siren, the wail from the bathroom — will arrive to demand from us a response that will test the limits of our resources. When that time comes we might find ourselves challenged, torn, exhausted. But it will come, striding towards us with certainty, and our ears will welcome it as if it were a god emerging from myth.

The Five Senses 5: Smell

It is 1820. We can imagine Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, founder of modern Singapore, taking a walk with his trusted scribe, the bilingual interpreter Munsyi Abdullah, down the bank of the Singapore River. Sir Raffles is still unused to

the tropical heat, the way it is burning the back of his neck and sending beads of perspiration down to sting his eyes.

'My God,' Raffles remarks, 'with the sun like this is it any wonder that the river learns to sweat?'

Abdullah is mystified by Raffles' comments. He gazes at the river and sees the exposed roots of mangroves like the phalanges of giant hands dipped in acid. The sun's glare bounces off the river's surface like signals from a morse-code mirror.

'It's the smell,' Raffles continues. 'It's that strange river smell. I don't know how to describe it. It smells of crocodiles, and rotting logs, and unwashed bodies.'

In his study of the English language, Abdullah was often struck by how a language so rich in some aspects could also be so poor in others. He was especially intrigued by how few words there were to describe something smelly. Of course, there was 'putrid', the smell of decay, and 'rancid' the smell of 'spoilt butter' (he didn't really know what unspoilt butter was, actually, much less the spoilt variety), and 'fetid' (for the river, perhaps?), but beyond those there wasn't much variety.

On the other hand, in the Malay language, there was *haring* or *hancing*, to describe the smell of urine, *hapak*, for musty garments, *tengik* or *pering*, for sourish foods (like cheese, but he didn't really know what cheese was, either), *masam*, for sweaty bodies, *hamis*, for fishy odours, *bacin*, for dried cuttlefish or even underclothes worn too long....

With as much deference as he can possibly conjure, Abdullah mentions his observations to Raffles, who nods solemnly. In defence of his native tongue, Raffles talks about the weather in his home country, its mild winds and subtle sunshine, how these combine to ensure that smells do not assault delicate English noses 'like battering rams' (which, admittedly, Abdullah has never seen before).

Secretly, Raffles is aware of how tenuous his argument is. Piss and fish smell the same in any part of the world. But language, as well as literature, is the mark of a civilisation. The more sophisticated the language, the more cultivated the society. And how can he begin any important mission here in Singapore if a fundamental is not established: that the converter is always superior to the converted?

Such hubris, such hubris. For this particular show of arrogance, entirely imaginary, Raffles will be punished, four years later. Scottish botanist Robert Brown, travelling in the jungles of Sumatra, will chance upon a flower, whose petals are the colour of rotting flesh. Even more ghastly is the flower's aroma, so putrid that it is perpetually surrounded by a black cloud of flies, a smell so legendary that the flower has earned the nickname of the 'corpse lily'. Brown decides to name the flower after the Governor of the Straits Settlement of Singapore.

And thus the Rafflesia was christened, a mono-floral wreath, pompon of the living dead, maggot-cauldron and supernova of gnats, whose fragrance would have assaulted the delicate nose of Sir Stamford Raffles, like a battering ram, or even two. But one can guess that even such a smell will not arouse Sir Raffles from his grave, to catch a whiff of this imaginary anecdote you are privy to, to bellow in anger and denounce the outrageousness of retribution: that the revenge for an incident entirely fictional would have to be too real, too utterly literal.