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Poetry and Minor Evil

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Panel: Literature of Evil

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John Mateer (Australia)

Poetry and Minor Evil

I decide to walk to Medan's Pizza Hut. I refuse the offers of several becak drivers and make my way down Jalan Parman, then Jalan Jenderal Sudirman, resting awhile on the bridge over the churning brown waters of the Babura River. From there I walk through a small park. On the roadside a man is seated alone behind a small hand-made cage. He gestures to get my attention. I nod in recognition, but I don't want to be hassled. Though I want to know what's in the cage, I don't want to stop.

Out of the corner of my eye I see that there are three small black monkeys in the cage. They must be young as they're very small. One of them is sitting on a branch slanted across the cage as a perch, and others are crouching in the corner at the back. None of them are moving. They resemble their captor. He is—as far as I can tell without looking directly at him—poor, a peasant. On seeing that I'm not interested in buying them he returns to gazing at the ground.

I wonder what could have driven him to do this, to cage those poor animals who clearly shouldn't have been removed from their mother, and to try sell them as pets, as toys for those who live in this part of town. Could his desperation in hunting these animals in the Sumatran jungle be the same as that which last year drove villagers in the forests to use fire to clear the jungle so that they could plant yet more crops? Their land-clearing created a screen of smoke that filled the sky, turning Medan into a town of acrid smoke whose inhabitants were told to either remain indoors or wear protective masks. That cloud blew across much of South-East Asia, closing airports in Malaysia and Singapore, and bringing industry in some places to a halt.

... [I] feel disconsolate thinking about the monkeys pining in their cage and I can't draw myself out of my silence...

- from *Semar's Cave: an Indonesian Journal*

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THE MONKEY-SELLER'S STALL

The monkeys in the TV-sized cage at the roadside
have the faces of old men confronting death.
Under their black velvet fur, a pale immanence.

They stare at me with a terrible awe.
I am huge, monstrous, while they are splitting
like cells, like the infinity of mirror-images.

Behind my skin there are clouds of smoke,
underground fires and this smothered city.

Through the mirror I am watching the monkey-seller stalking.
I am watching one monkey in the seizure of screaming,
his voice an emptying.

In his agate-black eyes I am immediate and loss.

- from *Loanwords*

~

Once at a writer's festival I was asked whether I knew just how much poor people suffer in Indonesia. The person who asked spends part of her year in Bali and part in Australia. She had recently read the poem and was supposed to interview me. I answered her question, giving examples of what I had seen during my stay in Sumatra. But as I spoke I felt resentful of her questioning me and I observed myself disquieted by my response. *But why? Hadn't she asked a perfectly legitimate question?*

The implication of her question was that, by writing about the suffering of the animals I was overlooking the more immediate and more pressing suffering of humans, suffering caused by malnutrition and the lack of what in the present day are regarded as the necessities of human life. This kind of suffering was plainly visible everywhere in that country. Maybe it would have been better for her to have asked me why I wrote about the pain of the animals instead of that of the human?

I'd directed her back to the section of text in my prose book which gave context for the poem. In it, as I pointed out to her, there is clear reference to my understanding of the situation in which a villager might choose to capture and sell animals: a village would be cash-poor and so any way of supplementing income could be pursued. This is the reason why those animals were on sale; the same economic reason so many children and young women are sex-"workers" in the so-called Third World. It is the consequence of the replacement of an agrarian subsistence economy by another, cash-driven, one.

(For those who know Indonesia, my representation of the situation is simpler than the reality, because it's thought that the prevalence of fires was encouraged, if not initiated, by a forestry industry that is concerned with clearing the jungle in preparation for logging.)

But my self-directed dissatisfaction could have also arisen in response to the second question, could have come to mind even if she had asked why I had written about the animals instead of the man, as I have the belief that affiliations in poetry shouldn't be explained.

Why I felt moved to write about the suffering of the animals can only be answered ontologically—with reference to notions of Being—by my saying that poetry is the making of experience, that the monkeys in their suffering, in their looking at me, made a poem of my existence. The evil of their—and I write this only for the sake of rhetoric—*minor* suffering exposed to me my own momentarily absolute presence.

Had they been slaves, in that moment I might have been their master. I recognized them as fellow beings, and in my acknowledging that, in my seeing their pain of aging and imprisonment as akin to my own experiences, there was pain only as a fact of existence and not as an instance of evil.

In looking down into the face of one of the monkeys, in seeing my reflection in his "agate-black eyes," the small being was purely poetic, and as likely to be a metaphor for The Poet as he was to be my God.