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A Letter – Translator’s Introduction

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The key challenge to translating this piece by the poet Sapardi Djoko Damono – whose lyricism pervades the prose – was to capture the idea of this being a response to another piece of writing. The translation thus needed to convey both the essence of the original letter and the response itself.

The author of that earlier piece – Seno – is mentioned in the very first line. For an Indonesian reader familiar with contemporary literature, the allusion to the writer Seno Gumira Ajidarma would be clear. For most English-speaking readers of the translation, it would be just a name. The translator’s dilemma becomes whether or not to explain who Seno is. I felt that the context of the piece gave enough information without needing the translator to step in in this way.

The letter to which the narrator is responding here has a dreamlike quality about it, a quality I felt needed to be captured in the translation of the response, which also has a conversational tone, including idiomatic expressions. Although the piece includes some quite short sentences, these do not interfere with the lyricism of the prose, as can often be the case. I had to choose language that didn’t feel abrupt and jarring. I was concerned, for example, that the one-word sentence “Intact” was too harsh. The Indonesian “Utuh” with the soft “h” ending felt gentler, less intrusive. On a more granular level, I agonised for some time over whether it should be “a slice of sky” or “a piece of sky”, opting in the end for the more sibilant and alliterative “slice”.

While the original letter asks the reader to believe that it is possible to cut a piece out of the sky and put it in an envelope, in this story the narrator is asking us to believe the perhaps even more fanciful notion that the sky can feel pain. This is a suspension of belief that the translator must preserve. I think it helped that the narrator poses questions about the sky’s pain, rather than presenting it as a given: *Please ask him if the sky whimpered in pain and bled when he cut it. Did it suffer convulsions on account of the relentless pain? Did it have to steel itself in order to hold back the tears?* I am still not completely happy with my choice of the adjective “relentless” here. The Indonesian “tak habis-habisnya” implies something going on forever, unremittingly. But I’d already used the adjective “unremitting”, and I found the English language wanting.

There are a lot of adjectives in this short piece of prose. As a translator, I often find adjectives problematic. It is not just because it is often so hard to find the right adjective in English to convey the nuances of an Indonesian adjective; it’s also because I have a bit of an aversion to adjectives in general. I recall the words of those formidable grammarians Strunk and White, in *Elements of Style*: “The adjective hasn’t been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place” (71). But as the translator, it is not my prerogative to do away with them. The colours of the rainbow were not such a problem – though they were listed in a different order in Indonesian than we usually express them in English – but does “pink” adequately convey the colour of the paper on which Seno’s letter was written? The Indonesian “merah jambu” alludes to the colour of the guava. “Pink” seems to cover a wider spectrum of colours.

I found this piece of writing to be clever and evocative, a flight of fancy that managed to feel grounded and realistic at the same time. I leave it to the reader to decide whether I have managed to preserve those features in translation.

Bibliography

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Surat
By
Sapardi Djoko Damono

Tolong sampaikan kepada Seno bahwa suratnya sudah kuterima. Lengkap dengan potongan langit yang diselipkan dengan sangat hati-hati di lipatan kertas suratnya yang berwarna merah jambu. Menakjubkan. Langit itu, maksudku. Dan warna surat itu mengingatkanku pada masa remajaku ketika kami suka menghubungkan-hubungkan warna dengan maksud tertentu yang disembunyikan di balik surat itu. Sepotong langit, serpihan mega yang mengambang, sedikit ujung bukit yang kena gunting, dan beberapa ekor burung yang kebetulan melintas dan tidak bisa menghindarkan diri dari guntingnya itu.

Sambil terus melihat lembaran potongan langit itu, aku melongok ke jendela dan kusaksikan – sungguh! – bahwa langit yang di luar sana masih tetap seperti biasa. Utuh. Lengkap dengan awan putihnya, sempurna dengan warna kebiruannya, dan sesekali dilintasi juga oleh beberapa ekor burung – entah apa namanya. Aku hampir tidak bisa membayangkan apa yang terjadi dengan langitnya, setelah sebagian digunting untuk diselipkan dalam surat yang dikirimkannya kepadaku ini. Aku membayangkan rasa sakit yang tak ada batasnya yang telah menimpa langit itu, sementara sebagian pesonanya diambil hanya untuk menyiratkan cintanya padaku. Aku masih perawan, namun sering mendengar dari ibu betapa sakitnya ketika melahirkanku. Itulah yang kubayangkan dirasakan langitnya ketika dimanfaatkannya untuk melahirkan cintanya padaku.

Katakan padanya, apa begitu perlu menggunting seserpih langit itu, kalau sekedar untuk membujuk – katakanlah, memaksa – seorang gadis seperti aku ini agar yakin bahwa cintanya

The Letter
By
Sapardi Djoko Damono
Translated by Pamela Allen

Please tell Seno that I've received his letter, complete with the slice of sky that had been so carefully inserted into the folds of its pink pages. It was spectacular. The slice of sky, I mean. And the colour of the letter reminded me of my teenage years when we would make connections between the hidden intent of a letter and the colour of the paper on which it was written. A slice of sky, scraps of drifting cloud, a little piece of hillside that had been nicked by the scissors, and some birds that happened to be flying past and had been unable to escape those scissors.

As I gazed at that piece of sky, I stole a glance out the window and noticed – no kidding! – that out there the sky was still the same as usual. Intact. A perfect shade of blue, complete with white clouds and the occasional bird of indeterminate breed flying by. I found it hard to fathom what would have happened to the sky after some of it had been cut out and tucked into that letter he sent me. I imagined the unremitting pain that the sky would have felt when part of its allure was stolen simply to symbolise Seno's love for me. I'm still a virgin, but my mother often tells me about the pain she suffered when she gave birth to me. That's what I imagine the sky would have felt when Seno used it to give birth to his love for me.

Ask him whether it was really so necessary to cut out that slice of sky purely in order to coax – one might say force – a girl like me to believe that his love is like the sky. How the sky must

seperti langit itu. Langitnya pasti menderita, tidak seperti langit di sini yang utuh dan entah sampai kapan tak habis-habisnya memandang dengan penuh kebahagiaan segala tindakan kita. Tolong tanyakan padanya, apakah langit itu merintih dan mengeluarkan darah ketika diguntingnya? Apakah langit itu kejang-kejang karena menahan sakit yang tak ada batasnya? Apakah langit itu mengeras menahan air mata? Aku tidak berani membayangkan penderitaannya.

Tolong katakan pada Seno bahwa aku sudah menghayati cintanya, tanpa potongan langit itu pun. Sudah. Hanya saja aku harus menghancurkan serpihan langitnya itu agar tidak memburu-buru bayanganku tentangnya. Tapi apakah itu sopan? Apakah itu tidak berarti mengkhianati cintanya padaku? Aku bingung, tapi bagaimanapun aku harus segera membakarnya, bersama suratnya yang berwarna merah jambu itu. Aku tidak tahan lagi membayangkan rasa sakit langit itu.

Malam ini kubawa surat dan gambar itu ke pekarangan sebelah; tak ada seorang pun saksi. Kurobek-robek surat itu. Kunyalakan korek api, tetapi kemudian aku tiba-tiba menjadi ragu-ragu. Kumpulkan kembali robekan-robekan surat dan gambar itu, kusun seperti teka-teki potongan gambar, lalu kuperhatikan – dan seketika rasa sakitku bergolak, seperti apa yang kubayangkan tentang langitnya itu. Aku harus tabah. Harus. Tak ada pilihan lain. Harus membakar surat itu agar langitnya yang indah itu kembali seperti sedia kala. Maka kunyalakan korek api itu lagi.

Nyala apinya seperti bianglala: merah, oranye, kuning, biru, hijau, indigo, violet. Tidak melengkung tetapi membumbung ke atas. Tetapi tiba-tiba saja aku merasa telah menjadi pengkhianat. Telah memusnahkan cinta, keindahan, harapan, dan masa depan. Telah menjadi manusia yang seburuk-buruknya di dunia, yang sejahat-

have suffered, unlike the sky here that remains intact and will forever happily watch over everything we do. Please ask him if the sky whimpered in pain and bled when he cut it. Did it suffer convulsions on account of the relentless pain? Did it have to steel itself in order to hold back the tears? I can't bear to think about its suffering.

Tell Seno that his love was already part of me even without the slice of sky. It really was. Only I had to destroy that fragment of sky to stop myself from dwelling on the images I kept conjuring up of it. Was destroying it a decent thing to do though? Did it not mean that I was betraying Seno's love for me? Yet, despite these uncertainties, I had to burn it straight away, along with the pink letter. I couldn't bear to think about the sky's pain for a moment longer.

Tonight I took the letter and the picture to the yard at the side of the house; not a soul saw me. I tore the letter up. I lit a match but then suddenly I began to waver. I gathered up all the pieces of the letter and the picture and I put them back together like a jigsaw puzzle and looked at it closely – and instantly the pain churned inside me, a pain like I imagined the sky had suffered. I had to be resolute. I had to. There was no other option. I had to burn the letter so the sky could be restored to its former state. So I lit the match again.

The flame resembled a rainbow: red, orange, yellow, blue, green, indigo, violet. It wasn't curved like a rainbow though; it soared into the air. But suddenly I felt that I'd turned traitor, that I'd destroyed love, beauty, hope and the future. I'd become the world's worst person, the most despicable. Who knew what other adjectives could be thrown at

jahatnya, yang entah apa. Aku tiba-tiba berharap agar dari asap itu muncul bayangannya, bagaikan burung phoenix yang dengan perkasa melesat dari kobaran api. Aku satukan jari-jari tanganku, kutengadahkan kepalaku. Kutatap tajam langitku yang dulu itu juga, yang tidak pernah mengkhianati harapanku. Tetapi api itu tetap membumbung, semakin mirip bianglala. Dan aku terus menunggu.

Sampaikan kepada Seno bahwa aku akan terus menunggu kobaran itu sampai diriku menjelma asap, menyatu dengan bianglala itu, membumbung ke langit yang setia, yang tidak pernah meninggalkanku.

me. Suddenly I wished that his image would emerge from the smoke, like a phoenix rising from the flames. I brought my fingers together and I gazed upwards at that sky of mine, the sky that had never betrayed my hopes. But the fire just kept soaring upwards, more and more rainbow-like. And I just kept watching over it.

Tell Seno that I will keep on watching over the flames until I become smoke, united with the rainbow, soaring into a faithful sky that will never leave me.