

## THREE POEMS BY TABAN LO LIYONG

### Ministers to the Toothless

When I am old and my teeth gone or rotted  
Let me age away near KFC or McDonald's hotel:  
Potatoes have no fibres and just disintegrate in the mouth  
When they are squared and fried hot you don't need teeth;  
Finger-licking good spring chicken eaten hot is swallowed whole  
The coleslaw in hamburgers is for additional salivation  
It softens the bread and your gums can pound the meat  
And you turn everything over in the mouth and swallow:  
Nobody knows if you chewed or just washed it down  
Especially as the salt on the potatoes, and drugs in the Coke  
Contribute a lot to the salivation and gunning down.  
The workers of the East with their poor dental care  
The poor of the world who buy silence with sweets and ice-cream  
Will keep McDonald and the General in business  
Regardless of ideology, change of regime, whims of the boss:  
When I have no teeth, apples are out, as are steak and ribs.  
Fried chicken, eggs, minced meat, coleslaw and bread—  
These I can eat with my gums, with my baby.

### Writing Classes in Singapore

My friend has a fine set of writing students:  
One has smuggled a cat into her dorm  
It keeps her warm on days human beings are unkind;  
One was on the editorial committee of the uni magazine  
It only came out once in a year full of law and lit students' stuff;  
One writes only when entangled in personal crises  
It helps him to work out his angst metrically aligned;  
One was quite serious and I found him munching sandwich  
It reduced his anxiety whilst waiting for prof with trepidations;  
One was disturbed because he could not impersonate  
It disturbed him that he was autobiographically writing himself dry;

There were one or two others whose writing impasses were minor  
But none of them had engaged in expanding words into prose  
Or attempted to put words into mouths of dramatis personae

These reducers of speech into syllables, metres, rhythm  
Had essays to write to identify mechanisms of reducing prose into poetic  
diction.

I babysat them for two hours and concluded:  
Fathers should not reproduce their kind  
Poets should teach prose  
And let their wards become poets  
In revolt.

## Parents Among School Children

*Part One: (1993, Unity High School, Khartoum, Sudan)*

We accompanied our children to their qualifying exams  
And dressed so nicely as if we were to be examined.  
The children were gloomy, infected no doubt  
By our fears of their failure which would reflect on us.

Upon our arrival at school, the kids scampered away  
Went in twos or threes to share sweets and the week's events  
Leaving the empty parents loudly greeting each other  
Or trying to curry favour with the dutiful teachers.

When the bell rang, the teachers shooed the children away  
And the women amongst us felt the emptiness in the womb  
And the men smoked and worried of failure or fees to be paid.  
After a while we all settled glumly to bear our trial:

Some child came out after a few moments and the mother—  
Well, because the child was older, he was taken to his age group  
Unfortunately he had started school a few years too late—  
The mother took home the child who had wasted no time in examining  
the test.