

Dismantling the Wayang* Stage

The struts fall to strike sound
Off poles below, those standing
Till their binding ties are cut.
Two men walk roofbeams crabwise
To strip the roof: uncovered, sheets swish
Down like waterfalls of blue-green cloth
To ravished stage where two more
Fold and roll many seasoned tarpaulin.

For three days and nights past, the temple deities
Have watched costumed players sing,
Declaim, their backdrops distant mountains
Or open mansions. Women raise and dip trailing
Sleeves, men handle horses with short sticks
Or brandish swords, striding wide,
Drums, gong and cymbals
Clashing in musicians' wing.

The loaded lorry leaves land to grass
Until the next feast summons
Stagebuilder and another repertoire.
After three days of lighted candles, giant joss
And burning joss paper, quiet returns
To temple. Two or three times a year, I walk over
For some of its evening offering.
Not comprehending Teochew, Hokkien
Noise and song, I hold out
For scaffolding's lasting parts,
Some ancient make-believe to pass —
Though sooner than later, my children stop
Watching to ask — when I'm ready to leave.

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* *Wayang*: a Malay word meaning show or theatre. In the poem's context, it refers to Chinese open-air or street opera, now often staged in conjunction with a temple's festive occasions.