



“Home is Elsewhere: Reflections of a Returnee”

by Boey Kim Cheng

from *Hearth: A Global Conversation on Community, Identity, and Place*

edited by Annick Smith and Susan O'Connor

There is a ghostly whisper in the air, an echo that feels braided of sight, sound, and smell, and which becomes more palpable as I walk around to the far end of the glitzy restaurant that is the current incarnation of Clifford Pier, the landing point for early immigrants and visitors to Singapore. Not more than three decades ago the greasy water around it was populated by huddled flotillas of bumboats and Chinese barges that ferried goods and passengers to and from the ships out on the sea roads; the moss- and barnacle-encrusted steps of the landing stage were laved by teal and tea-colored tides that brought in wrack, driftwood, the occasional coconut, and bracing smells of the sea, giving one the sense of expansive breadth, of horizons unlocked to the immense reaches of the Malay Archipelago and rumors of the world beyond. Once, just after turning eighteen, I watched *Death in Venice* at the British Council Theatre across the road and came to the deserted pier for a smoke; as I inhaled the nicotine and salt-sea air, I experienced a fleeting transcendental moment, being borne aloft on a sampan to the soundtrack of Mahler's adagio and glimpsing before me the moonlit waters of the lagoon, the lido, and the moored gondolas, like the bumboats at anchor on the murky waters, their dark bobbing shapes a semaphore of promise and escape. I felt then that I could love this country, forget my quarrel with it, and stray.

This was the last place in Singapore I visited before emigrating in 1997. I covered the waterfront, to borrow the title of one of Billie Holiday's signature covers, incessantly in the years before I left. My walks through the Change Alley across from the pier, a tarpaulin-and-zinc-roofed one-lane bazaar nestled between the Rubber House and the Winchester House, where you could buy anything under the sun, so the shop owners boasted, and through its upmarket neighbor, the Arcade, Moorish with its keyhole-arched windows and its twin onion-domed rooftops pavilions, and around the crumbling shophouses and godowns along the strong-smelling Singapore River, and then through the grand Doric-columned General Post Office and other colonial edifices around Raffles Place, savoring the poignant odor of decay, would invariably circle back to this point, where the Singapore River decanted into the sea, where you could feel and exhilarating air. It wasn't just the smell of diesel from the chugging sampans, tongkangs, and bumboats, and the riotous mix of faces and bodies floating on the pier, but it was as if the air held a whiff of the essence and key to the city in the meeting of water and seawall, the soothing metronomic lapping of tidal water on the stone foundations of the city.

Now the water is tame and drained of character, its tidal cadences stilled as the Singapore River and the harbor off Collyer Quay have been turned into a huge water catchment. Bridging the gap between long elbows of reclaimed land is the Marina Barrage, erected to keep the seawater out. It is a shock to anyone who lived in the country in the '70s and '80s and has been away the last two decades to see this drastic transformation. Back then you could track the bumboats and tongkangs out to the sea roads where freighters and tankers rested on the gently



heaving swell, drinking in the dazzling blue vista vague with hints of archipelagic islands; now the horizon is closed off, and the past has been eclipsed by the monumental three-towered Marina Bay Sands hotel capped by the longest rooftop swimming pool in the world and a plague of postmodern structures. Of the historical precinct around the waterfront itself, only a scattered few among the glorious colonial edifices have survived, like the Edwardian General Post Office, now a luxury hotel.

Previously, on return visits, whenever I came back for a walk around Collyer Quay, it was the ghost of the city I once knew that haunted my steps and hovered behind this global corporate stronghold. The Singapore of my childhood and of my father lay like a buried city, like the ancient Alexandria beneath the harbor, a pentimento only the X-ray vision of memory can glimpse. Now, as I arrive as an expatriate, it is something else. It is a strange word, *expatriate*, and I wear it like a mismatched shirt, or something I haven't grown into. I left Singapore a native and return a foreigner. I had to surrender my citizenship when I became Australian, as the Singapore government forbids dual citizenship – taking my place among the two million or more nonnative residents, new arrivals that the government has admitted to boost its falling and aging population. *Ex*, out of; *patria*, father land, home. Am I out of my home country or am I back home? My whole idea of Singapore, of home, started undergoing a process of revision and translation the moment I surrendered my Singapore passport. My idea of home has become mixed up in a way I could not have foreseen, in the years of living under a different sky, inhaling eucalypt-scented air, learning the varieties of gum trees, watching their leaves sieve the fierce sun, perceiving the pour of evening light on the Blue Mountains, the light strumming the scorched songlines of the ancient country, light that sometimes seems liquid, sometimes solid, lapidary, but always penetrating, pure, the light that bathes the harbor city in chords of didgeridoo-like chromatics. The light that hits you like homecoming as the plane enters Australian skies, and you realize how homesick you have been for it.

In the first few years of my life as a migrant it is clear to me that home was something I had left behind, and even as I renounced my citizenship and surrendered my Singapore passport, the rediscovered love of my place of birth seized me and filled me with pangs of misgiving and regret. Then, as the children arrived and I began writing about Singapore, reconstructing it brick by vanished brick, I found I could no longer keep the two apart, could no longer isolate that vast antipodean sunburnt country that is my adopted home from my place of birth. The two countries, two islands, really, not dissimilar in shape, have come together in some kind of emigrational drift, my memories of Singapore infusing the new experiences as an immigrant, the bleached colors of Australia seeping into the lush equatorial palette, dyeing and altering my perceptions of the past. I started to see bifocally, to feel palimpsestically, the vastness of the driest continent in the world contained in the tiny equatorial frame and the tiny island turning up everywhere in the olive-toned bush, in the outback, in the red interior, and in the city whose heart seems to reside in the gleaming cusps of the Opera House. An in-between land seems to have arisen like a new country from the depths where deep waters of memory, imaginations, and longing meet. In my travel memoir, *Between Stations*, I wrote about the liminal state of being a migrant:



You are an emigrant to those you left behind and immigrant to your new friends. But in between the tags fall off. You lose the certainty of the state you are in, as though you are on a train whose front half rests in one state and whose back carriages lag in another. In between you pass the same stations again and again, stations whose names blur and become interchangeable and you forget if you have a destination.

You get the sense that your whole life is a memory; you even remember things you have not lived through.

For an adult migrant who has spent half his life in his country of birth, the life in the new country can at times feel like an old story that is being revised or rewritten, rather than a new chapter or book waiting to be written. In the first few years of my settling down in Sydney, I had the impression that the life I had left behind in Singapore was still somehow continuing, that some doppelgänger was in my place, living the life I had decamped from, while I was reliving the past in a new life and country. It was supposed to be a clean slate, a fresh start, yet there were many moments that felt like déjà vu, where I was encountering the past anew, and lost home in an elsewhere that I must now call home. I couldn't say the word home without stabs of uneasiness and guilt. It had become an alien, difficult concept; it had ceased to be a fixed point of reference. It was hard to feel at home when home had become disembodied, and ineffable idea, elusive, spectral.

*

For five years after emigrating I did not visit Singapore, but Singapore visited me again and again, in dreams and waking reverie, I found myself not so much writing the present of new life in Australia as rewriting the past. I began to wonder if that is what all adult migrants do, reconstructing in memory and imagination the homeland they have forfeited, immersed in a project of remembrance of things past. Yet it wasn't so much a total recall as fractured, splintered memories, partial and unreliable, ghostly, coming in fits and starts, the most vividly real ones coming unbidden, seizing me by the throat or rising up in me so ineluctably that they must have been waiting for the right word or trigger to release them. One such involuntary memory occurred when I was walking on Pitt Street in Sydney, savoring the sensation of anonymity, browsing in the row of used music and bookstores that had adult shops discreetly sandwiched between them, the sidewalk awash with a dozen or more countries, the medley of faces and voices reflecting how far the city had come since the early '70s when Gough Whitlam's embrace of nondiscriminatory immigration opened the door to Asian migrants. My friend Andrew recalls that before Whitlam's open-door policy there were just a few Australian Chinese restaurants in the city outside of Chinatown, and the fare was invariably tailored to the bland Australian palate: sweet-and-sour pork, corn soup, Mongolian lamb, nothing too spicy. In the late '90s, Asian groceries and restaurants were starting to displace the porn, music, and bookstores on Pitt Street; one could sense the city was readying itself for the Asian century that was dawning. Something in the air on Pitt Street made me pause, tantalizing my sense, easing open the door of memory;



perhaps it was the way the shaded sidewalk contrasted sharply with the blinding sunlight on the street, or the musty air of the bookstores, or the mix of faces and voices of the shopkeepers, but for a suspended moment, I was neither here nor there, floating, adrift in space and time, and then it all came flooding back: I was in the covered sidewalk outside the row of shops on Bras Basah Road in Singapore, book hunting in the string of second-hand bookstores that was my place of discovery, where I encountered writers and books that changed my life forever. It was a Proustian moment, unsought, the involuntary memory taking hold of me so entirely that it felt like revelation, and epiphany that somehow telescoped the near and far, the past and present, where I am and where I have come from, into a shuddering self-erasing moment.

One day, while browsing the used DVDs in Lawson's Records on Pitt Street (its Malaysian owner reminds me of a bookseller on Bras Basah Road), I came upon Saint Jack, Peter Bogdanovich's film adaptation of Paul Theroux's eponymous novel. Theroux had left Singapore under controversial circumstances after three years teaching at the National University, and his book confirmed his persona non grata status. Until 2006 the film was banned in Singapore for its depiction of Singapore as the hub of the Asian sex trade. It was filmed entirely on location in Singapore, under false pretenses: Bogdanovich had submitted a different film script to the government, entitled *Jack of Hearts*, as he wouldn't have got its blessing otherwise. I had read the book but hadn't known about the film. The opening is a bold continuous three-hundred-sixty-degree view from a spot not far to the left of Clifford Pier, the camera pivoting to encompass breathtaking shots of the pier, the harbor, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, and the General Post Office. I like to think just outside the right border of the frame, as the camera turns from its seaward perspective, are the tiny figures of my father and me, for we had come upon the shooting in the month of June 1978. It was a week or two before my birthday and my father had surfaced out of nowhere and taken it into his head to buy me a watch. From where we stood we could see the film crew and a few spectators kept at a distance. Neither my father nor I knew what was being filmed, and later that day, after lunch at the now vanished Empress Place Hawker Centre, we chanced on Steve McGarrett (played by actor Jack Lord) and the *Hawaii Five-O* crew filming along Boat Quay. Strangely, *Hawaii Five-O* had come to town at the same time; unlike Saint Jack, it received a lot of fanfare and there was no objection to it portraying Singapore as the hub of the Asian drug trade. For years I thought it was *Hawaii Five-O* we saw that morning; watching Saint Jack thirty years later in a new life and country the scene came back in a kind of revised vividness, a double take and exposure that brought back my father and the boy I was to the home I had found in Australia.

There were many more such moments of rediscovery and involuntary memory. Visiting a Chinese medicine shop in Sydney's Chinatown, I would suddenly feel my grandmother's presence and could almost hear her ordering herbs in melodious Teochew. Holding my son up for a photography on the step of the Opera House I could feel myself held in my father's strong, calloused hands for a Kodak moment in front of the National Theatre. These are liminal moments of double exposure, when you inhabit an in-between space and feel at home, albeit fleetingly, accommodate to the state of being in two places and two moments at one time. Being an adult migrant means you carry a lot of baggage and are more resistant to the pressures to acculturate and assimilate; it also has its advantages: it is like being given two lives, having access



to two narratives. True, the strain of a double life can, at times, be telling, but as a writer it means having two sources of material to draw from. Straddling two places and two lives is part of who you have become, a mode of being, or rather, of becoming, and writing. In my early years as a migrant, my senses were honed, alert to a complex weave of reading of the new environment, and alive to the subtle intimations and promptings from the subterranean past.

These moment of *déjà vu* and bilocation were moments of conjunction anchored in time as much as in space, I was shuttled between the here and now and the there and then. I was learning to temporize, to move in time, and in doing so, I became aware of writing as movement in time, and writing as manipulation of time. If there is anything of value that a writer learns at all, it is that he has a unique ability to move time along a space continuum. In his essay “Temporizing,” the Alexandrian-American writer Andre Aciman observes that to “temporize” is to “forfeit the present” and “move elsewhere in time . . . from the present to the future, from the past to the present.” For the migrant writer especially, the malleability and fluidity of time is a gift, and time travel also means space travel. As he moves back and forth between two places in memory and imagination, the migrant realizes he can reshape space as much as he can revise time. Sometimes it seems the migrant writer has no choice – he has to temporize and extemporize. Between the life he has lost or forfeited, and the life to come, he floats in on a raft made of elsewhere, or inhabits a collage of memories and places that he must somehow turn into a narrative of home. In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino captures the liminal condition and task awaiting the traveler: “Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a past of his he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places.” In Australia, and in the places I had visited on a year-long backpacking trip before settling into my migrant life, I discovered again and again the Singapore that I had not known I loved.

When I started *Between Stations*, I had wanted to recreate my year-long trip that had begun with Calcutta and ended up in Morocco, but inexorably Singapore took center stage, and after my father’s death, the key to the work became clear: the restoration of the Singapore of my father and of my childhood. Even as news arrived of the disappearance of places and people that I loved, I began my salvage project. Singapore came to me in ghostly visitation, in whiffs and touches, the intoxicating smell of the Change Alley, the aura of the old colonial edifices around Raffles Place, the chugging of bumboats and the puffs of diesel fumes and the rainbow slicks of the salt tides slapping against Clifford Pier. One memory triggered another, one essay leading to the next, as street by street and building by building the architecture of memory came to life. There were gaps and blanks, but imagination come to memory’s aid when required in the process of narrative mapping. In my essays I assembled an imaginary homeland, to use Salman Rushdie’s words, a home that is lost, or one that perhaps never existed. Behind the cities covered in *Between Stations* – Calcutta, Alexandria, Xian, and Sydney – hovered an invisible city, to use Calvino’s words: Singapore. But it wasn’t the Singapore that had driven me into quitting it – the authoritarian government and its repressive policies, the relentless demolition of the past and the frenetic pace of change and living – it was a Singapore glimpsed through a kaleidoscopic screen of other places, especially Berowra, a bush suburb in the heart of the Ku-rin-gai National Park north of Sydney, where we had found a home.



From my favorite lookout, on a large sandstone shelf overlooking Berowra Creek, the bush fans out to the northern and western horizons in uninterrupted gray-green waves. Only the slightly elevated contours of the Blue Mountains arrest its march westward to the vast spaces of the interior, where early explorers dreamed of an inland sea. Down below, around the creek, you can find shell middens, faint traces of rock paintings and petroglyphs that lead back in the mists of unrecorded time. Sometimes in the wind among the eucalypt leaves, through the blue wren's flutterings and the currawongs' liquid notes, and the ragged cries of cockatoos wheeling across the evening sky, you can hear voices of the long-vanished Guringai and the Dharug tribes in the area, reverberating on the placid, sun-dappled channel of viridian water. You can feel the call of the songlines, a vast and intricate network of routes linking the vital places of an Aboriginal tribe's dreaming, a lyric directory of tracks coded in the words of songs recited as much orally as with the feet on walkabouts. But the songlines of another country beckoned to me as I sat on my sandstone seat, my shadow printed on the still-warm rock: the routes of memory laid in my childhood on long walks with my father around Raffles Place, along Collyer Quay, the waterfront, and the Singapore River.

It was part nostalgia – maybe it was mostly nostalgia, I am not ashamed to admit. In researching my master's thesis on travel writing a lifetime ago, I came across the etymology of the word *nostalgia*. It comes from the Greek *nostos*, homecoming, and *algos*, pain, first coined by the Dutch physician Johannes Hofer in the seventeenth century to describe a medical syndrome among soldiers fighting or students studying abroad: "The sad mood originating from the desire for return to one's native land." The word was an abstract concept then, but by the time I was writing *Between Stations* it had invaded my entire being. My postmigration work constituted a kind of nostography – writing about the return home. It wasn't that I discovered what or where home was as the book took shape – far from it. The essays were like a kind of homecoming practice but there was no epiphanous arrival; rather, what emerged was the realization that home was nowhere: it was lost the moment I decided to leave. The Singapore I had painstakingly resurrected in my work had no correspondence in reality. *Between Stations* elegized a vanished Singapore and the part of me that had disappeared with it. Further, it had become increasingly difficult to see Singapore apart from Australia. For me, home is always elsewhere, hovering in the liminal zone between two places, in the no-man's-land and in-between spaces that I have to map over and over each time I want to sort out my thoughts about home or who I am. Thus displacement becomes home, and I become nostalgic for the moments when the writing catches the fleeting idea of home and the words become the "resting-places for the imagination . . . like shadows which a man moving onwards cannot catch," to use Darwin's words.

The migrant learns to live and move in these in-between spaces. The medieval theologian Hugh of Saint Victor says: "The person who finds his homeland sweet is a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is a foreign place." In his 1937 classic, *The Importance of Living*, Chinese writer Lin Yutang adds: "A good traveler is one who does not know where he is going to, and a perfect traveler does not know where he came from." The true cosmopolite is at home anywhere; and the transnational in the global age enjoys multiple affiliations and attachments. But there will always be a longing to be grounded in an idea of home. As T. S. Eliot says: "The end of all our exploring / Will be to



arrive where we started / And know that the place for the first time.” In his essay “Dream of a Glorious Return,” Salman Rushdie speaks of the place the India occupies in his work. In all his novels, he confesses, the imaginary return to his homeland is the underpinning theme. He adds that the emigrant writer “can never really leave,” since the home country determines “the shape of the way you think and feel and dream.” Rushdie concludes: “Exile is the dream of a glorious return.” This is echoed in Milan Kundera’s novel *Ignorance*, where the only constant in the émigré characters’ fluid and uncertain lives is the dream of returning to Prague; they are governed by “the return, the return, the great magic of the return.”

Like Rushdie and Kundera’s characters, I have wakened to this call of return, to a yearning for beginnings, a sense of home that is bound up with tradition, roots, and origins, all of which might never have existed in the first place but which now form a polestar that for better or worse has redrawn the cartography of my reading and writing. The key of return has come to dominate my work a homecoming, or rather homegoing, tendency that is a ghost chord clamoring to be sung, but which remains ineffable.

When we finally made a trip to Singapore five years after I had moved to Australia, my Australian friends said, “You must be excited about going home.” My mind balked at the idea: Was I going home or merely visiting? I felt like an imposter, and interloper traveling on false papers. It wasn’t exactly the return of the native. I had changed; Singapore had changed. We had both become foreign to ourselves. There were the inevitable letdowns; the pace of change hadn’t relented, and places were still disappearing at an alarming rate – the National Library on Stamford Road, the National Theatre, all the old shophouses around Bencoolen and Brash Basah. I felt on that visit and subsequent trips very much like a tourist in my own country. Yet there were moments when I glimpsed my double and slipped into the life I might have had, as if I hadn’t left.

Now, I am in Singapore as an Australian expatriate, and once again the idea of home has to be renegotiated. Emigration and expatriation compel acts, or rather processes, of reevaluation; they make you adopt a bifocal lens, look at the here and now, and also look back, but with a revisionist lens. The word *revise* comes from the Latin *reviser*, to visit again. In the years I have been an emigrant my perception of Singapore and what home is underwent a sea-change; it was no longer the country I wanted to escape but one I was learning to come home to. In these last few months, since I began settling into my three-year work contract, I have sensed the ground again shifting, if ever so slightly, and the coordinates seem no longer valid, the lay of the land no longer matching the readings of the map. It is time to bring out the looking glass of imagination and memory again, and train it this time on the distant upside-down place under the antipodean skies. Here, the dusk is brief, quick, imperceptible almost, and the harbor lights come on eagerly, and the entire marina is lit up opulently, the water no longer dark, seductive, but wearing a giddy luminescence. Under this dazzling show, under the opaque veil of the equatorial night, I can glimpse the quiet glow of the last light on the Blue Mountains, the star-studded expanse of the southern sky, and in the silence I hear the silent call of the dreaming country around Berowra, the ancient land stretching out in bush-covered scarps and ridges to where the sky begins, and the scores of pathways inscribed in immense plains of red earth, mirroring the songlines of constellations over it.



The lens of migrant memory can be bifocal, can be stereoscopic, too; like the rotating three-hundred-sixty-degree opening shot of *Saint Jack*, it can pan across one scene, one landscape, the Singapore that I knew and lost, lingering on the busy harbor and the elegant art-deco shape of Clifford Pier, and then pivot to Berowra, that far country where I have written my own story, which seems abandoned, unfinished. I can see my double back on his Berowra sandstone lookout, silhouetted in the slanting, fading light, the sky above him fired up for a last glorious burst of crimson song. I can see him retracing his steps along the fire trail, putting on speed as the dark chill descends, back along the last street in Berowra, and walk up the steps to the little yellow house on a rise, and hesitating as he raises his hand to the door, wondering if there is someone home to let him in.