
I first met Boey Kim Cheng a few years ago when he was in Hong Kong. We had coffee at Causeway Bay. We were chatting and soon found ourselves on a street next to a wet market. He was intrigued by the raw meat and fish on display at the various stalls and took many photographs. “It’s not something you see often in Australia,” he said. As poets and academics, we have much in common. We spoke of living a life outside of Singapore, of our families and favourite poets. Hence, for me, to read a book by him is to encounter him all over again.

*CLEAR BRIGHTNESS* is in many ways an ironic title for this poetry collection, given that so many of the poems have to do with the travails of remembering. The eponymous poem tells of the association between the title and Qing Ming Festival (also known as Clear Bright Festival), a traditional Chinese festival during which Chinese people visit the graves of their loved ones as a demonstration of filial piety. Oftentimes, parallels are drawn via incongruous associations, hence foregrounding the persona’s struggle to remember. In the title poem, the anticipation of snow during Christmas calls to the mind of the persona his memory of incense smoke during a Qing Ming Festival (presumably in Singapore, the country of Boey’s birth) when the persona was at a cemetery. The persona is constantly reaching the limits of his memory: “I don’t remember whose grave/ it was we were tending, or Grandma telling us/ to pray”(1). Even more disturbing is that the actual physical geography of the persona’s memory has been eradicated. The poem tells us that the graves in the cemetery have since been removed “to make/ room for progress” (2). The past, for Boey, is literally another country, one that is rapidly disappearing – this is the overarching theme of the entire collection.

The poems speak of continuity and disruption. I especially like the title of the poem “La Mian in Melbourne” because of the alliteration which cuts across two languages and cultures. In the poem, the sight of a noodle-maker at work in Melbourne brings forth memories of Singapore, “of the country left behind:/ the wanton mee hawker in Tiong Bahru,/ the mee rebus man on Stamford Road,/ and Grandmother serving long life/ noodles for each birthday” (3). At the end of the poem, even as there is an acknowledgement that the past is a lost terrain that cannot be fully reclaimed, there is always the future to look towards: “You sit before [the bowl of noodles], enveloped in steam,/ chopsticks ready to seize the ends/ or beginnings, and start pulling them in” (4). The poems often evoke the presence of memory, and there are many confessional moments such as the following in “Ahead My Father Moves”:
Past Malacca Street to Raffles Places we walk,
a film reel I keep running; as long as I keep
it going, keep my father moving, he will be safe.
I know the moment when he will fish out
his Swallow matches and Consulate pack

and pause to light the cigarette that will keep
him going but also kill him, and I passive-smoke
the smell of memory and place… (16)

One cannot help but think that it is the persona’s memory of his father that
keeps him anchored to the psycho-geographical landscape of Singapore, and
with his passing, the persona is no longer tethered to a fixed place he could call
home.

Hence, the sonnet series titled “To Markets” becomes more poignant – it
is as if the poet/persona/traveller is locked in a conversation with himself even
as he is depicting other places, perpetually in search of images associated with
his childhood and home. In “Glebe,” the night market brings him back to his
childhood: “you are holding your father’s hand,/ the world before you, and you
don’t want it to end” (7) In other sonnets, we see a restless gaze that rests on
one object after another, the language touching the surfaces of trinkets, stalls,
foreign bodies, exotic souvenirs, seeking both to recognise and to be
recognised. In “Istanbul” the persona and his companion are “cruising for
charms/ that will be memory’s currency, tracing the songlines/ of carpets and
kilims, reading the ceramic weave/ for clues to the stir in the heart,” thus
creating “the story/ of longing we read over and over, almost like belief” (11).
Sometimes, the rhyming couplets at the end of the fourteen-line poems hint at a
closure of sorts; at other times, the casual rhymes seem to be reaching towards a
rhyme scheme before finally falling off. The overall effect is as if these memory
fragments are struggling to cohere, to seek a conclusion at places where none
could be found.

That a poem “Gleaning, Santa Barbara” is dedicated to the Asian
American poet, short story writer, novelist and academic Shirley Lim is no
surprise, given that she is a migrant like Boey. In her poems, she is often
looking back at Malaysia, her country of birth and this is a work of memory
familiar to Boey:

I understood the home you’ve made out of things,
the hoard of Chinese vases, tea sets, Kwan Yins
in manifold forms, and frayed Peranakan tapestries
made of forgotten, forbidden stitch, secreting
stories that bring Malacca back… (45)
One could see that Boey, like Lim, is writing out of a liminal space, caught between two worlds:

In the lost
spaces between home and home we glean,
afraid to lose and leave again, and accumulate
clues to the selves we never became,
the shadowy half-lives, collecting and being
collected by these found things. (45)

It is clear that this collection is haunted by what Boey calls a “geography of absence” in the poem “Archipelago” (41). The interview with Desmond Zhicheng-Mingdé Kon included at the end of the collection is particularly illuminating as it explores how Boey writes out of a lived experience of arrivals and departures, of unfinished business, and most importantly for a poet, of a life dedicated to the art of reading and writing.

Boey has the following to say concerning the work of some of his favourite poets: “You are not just reading the poem and admiring its craftedness, but encountering a person, a human being trying to make sense of a particular situation” (56). The same, I would argue, could be said of the experience of Boey’s poetry.

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