

Kim Cheng Boey, *Between Stations*. Sydney: Giramondo Publishing, 2009. 320 pp. ISBN 9-781-920-88-2501.

In 1997, Singaporean poet Boey Kim Cheng finally carried out his decision to emigrate with his family to Australia. His emigration took the unusual form of being preceded by a year of meandering travel, beginning from the then named city of Calcutta and ending in Marrakesh, Morocco, before finally arriving in Australia. The result of this enterprise is the collection of essays we find in *Between Stations*, a lyrically introspective and moving record of his travels. To be sure, *Between Stations* is as much travel narrative as it is autobiography; indeed, one might even see it as a *Künstlerroman* of sorts as it recounts the central forces that go into the formation of a poet growing up in Singapore of the 1960s and 70s – family, the nation, a diet of voracious reading from Rilke to Du Fu and from Cavafy to Heidegger. One can even view Boey as having chosen to write an autobiography though not straight autobiography but autobiography as it is recollected within the motions of travel, the fragments of memory and the evanescence of time. What perhaps emerges most preciously in *Between Stations* is the recounting of a life that one poignantly senses is rapidly passing even as it was lived. Similarly, even as *Between Stations* traverses the globe to span the continents of Asia, Africa and Australia, and recounts incidents in far-flung corners of a road trip, there is no mistake that this is ultimately a profoundly Singaporean text. Next to his relationship with his father, Boey's overriding focus lies in the obsessive recreation of Singapore's cityscape in the 1960s and 70s, a gesture that stems from his deep attachment to and anguished yearning for this vanished Singapore. Not only should *Between Stations* sit comfortably in any canon of Singapore literature one wishes to construct, it may even prove indispensable to one's canon even while it demonstrates how a Singaporean work can be both intensely Singaporean and refreshingly cosmopolitan. *Between Stations* shows how a Singaporean work can be about a cramped Tanglin Halt flat even as it may encompass Proustian recollection, Keatsian mellifluousness, Du Fu's friendship poetry and the bushfires of Sydney.

Readers may discern in Boey's act of emigration the idea of losing one's homeland though, at this point, the loss experienced is but the diluted form of a master trope that is in fact intensely and multiply inscribed in Boey's writing. Essay after essay in the collection circles around some form of loss – national, familial, personal or even literary – and loss is ultimately Boey's basic defining existential condition. One could suggest that Boey faces the always already lost and his writing is a self-conscious vain attempt at recovering this loss. Thus Boey observes: "My loss has no referent, or if it has, it has not yet identified itself" (203). The loss Boey mourns is the loss of the vanished cityscapes of

1970s Singapore – Queen Elizabeth Walk, the old National Library, the National Theatre, the Brash Basah bookstores – but, in his obsessive treatment of the subject, loss is ultimately conveyed as a fundamental condition of the Chinese Singaporean. Through Boey’s experiences as metonymy, diasporic Chinese Singaporeans, uprooted and displaced, are glimpsed as a people group who have always already suffered irretrievable loss. For Boey, this condition of loss is further multiplied by losses suffered in his thirty-odd year lifespan in Singapore (the loss of the old Singapore; the loss of Chinese dialect worlds; the loss of social customs) and further future losses as he executes his act of emigration. What deepens the pathos of Boey’s essays is in how national and societal losses are poignantly interwoven with his own private losses. We learn that the icons of old Singapore like the Satay Club or the National Theatre are intimately connected to Boey’s early experiences of familial happiness and their loss ultimately become indices of loss within a family that barely held together beyond Boey’s fifth year. Above all, old Singapore is connected to Boey’s memories of his father and its loss is bound up with the loss of his father. Thus Boey observes how a physical site like Change Alley “holds the key to my father, to the days when we walked the Alley together, and my attempt to resurrect it stems from a yearning to recover my father and the intimacy between us” (175). Indeed, the central gaping absence that lies at the heart of *Between Stations* is Boey’s loss of his father, a loss that again is multiply figured in terms of the loss of a father who abandoned the family during Boey’s childhood and, later on, the death of an aged father. In registering this deep personal loss, one senses that, beyond a travel narrative, *Between Stations* is also a grieving text, tearing quietly and perhaps inconsolably. If Boey’s aesthetics is an aesthetics of loss, then this aesthetics has its origins in the loss of a father: “[I]t sank into me at that time that life in always leaving, that things, time, people slide, and hobble like my father quietly out of existence” (159).

Loss being a basic condition, we find that Boey’s writing is further accompanied by two key tropes: the impulse to travel, which is a restless circling around the site of loss, and the act of recovery, which gestures towards the recapture of what has been lost. If unceasing, restless motion marks Boey’s text, then it is motion that seeks to recover a fundamental loss. As he ponders: “I have come to realize that if there is a centre to all my walking, it is the grid of vanished places of childhood and youth.” More crucially, “[p]erhaps all my wanderings and amblings abroad are attempts to recapture the intensity of the first walks with my father” (55). In the key essay “Ramblings on My Mind,” we learn of the few precious days young Boey spent with his father, chiefly through intimate father-and-son walks in the Civic District, “from the Padang to Raffles Place” (46). “[W]e were never closer than when we walked this circuit” (132), the reader is told and she can surmise that Boey’s future wanderings abroad – an extension of his first walks with his father – are an attempt to recover not

just the vanished places of the Civic District but the memory of his father. One paradox is that the centre Boey wishes to recover through his travels is characterised not by stasis and rest but by the unceasing motion of his original walks with his father. Boey contemplates this paradox – how “movement had become essential, a way of... making things stay a while longer” (55). Motion and travel are rich tropes in *Between Stations*, their deployment often marked by paradox, circularity and surprise. Boey’s itinerary can be deliberately circuitous, as if implying a faith in how he can by indirection find direction out. Thus, the eastward emigration from Singapore to Sydney begins first with a westward journey to Calcutta. Meandering, aimless travel can paradoxically be rewarded by a precious moment of recovery in the form of an unexpected epiphany. Standing listlessly on a balcony overlooking the Alexandrian harbour, Boey unexpectedly experiences, in Proustian luxuriance, a precious recollection of the old Singapore River and its harbour. “Now it all comes back in a flood” (207), the narrative gushes. In this poetics of indirection, Boey’s loosely planned itinerary around the global becomes a continual trigger for the mind’s recovery of old Singapore: Suzhou Creek takes Boey back to the Singapore River; Calcutta’s musty bookstores to the old Brash Basah bookstores; a desolate room in Cairo to a memory of his mother and him in a hotel room in Singapore’s Chinatown following her separation from his father.

Gestures of recovery are equally significant in *Between Stations* and, again, this trope is richly deployed in multiple forms. Boey’s act of writing and the essays themselves are conscious acts of recovery, resurrecting in loving prose a Singapore that no longer exists. The trope of recovery is also present in the constant references to memory. Boey ruminates on how smell can serve as a “powerful memory-trigger, [able] to ferry us across the oceanic wastes of time and space to the original moment of experience” (172). At times, recovery for Boey can be surprisingly unproblematic. The smell of a Calcuttan bookstore unproblematically recovers for him the smell of the Brash Basah bookstores: “It is exactly the same air I used to breathe in the old bookstores that lined Brash Basah Road in Singapore” (81). A crumbling plaster figure of the Chinese poet Du Fu chanced upon recaptures the original sorrow of this poet: “Here all the sufferings depicted in the poems had found their apotheosis” (112). More often, Boey is aware that recovery and memory are problematic procedures and the essays explore various complex dynamics: the evanescence of what is recovered, lost even at the point of remembering; the problematic pleasure of recovering what perhaps never was; the *mise-en-abyme* of experiencing a memory of a memory; the unpredictability of memory’s triggers. Boey is well aware that his writing of recovery is subject to these complexities. At the heart of Boey’s writing is the wish to recover the spectre of his father and this gesture is characteristically subject to the problematics of recovery. At one point, the presence of his father may be comfortingly felt: “For a few moments I felt that

he was there, a sad but peaceful and comforting presence” (124-25). At other points, the vain effort of recovery is admitted: “I begin to fear that the writing has not kept him alive, that with each word he slips away, becomes more distant” (261). “In death, as in life, he had eluded us” (262). The complex dynamics of recovery comes to a head in Boey’s interactions with his son upon which he feels, superimposed, the uncanny presence of his father and himself, a spectre that lingers even as it is lost: “As I hoist my son aloft, I recall my father’s hands, and in the same instant feel with a pang the already dead future, when the referent that is me is gone, when my son will feel the ghostly grip of the hands that now hold him like a trophy wrested from time” (120).

Between Stations is occasion for a minor celebration. Followers of Singaporean literature will recognise its preciousness in its demonstration of how a Singaporean literary work can be both intensely Singaporean and international. In its complex treatment of loss and recovery as circling gestures around ghostly absence and luxuriant plenitude, it shows what the Singapore of one’s mind may be like and what a true yearning for Singapore can be.

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