

## Bukit Panjang: Place-History-Poem

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### Abstract

Phoenix Heights, the first housing estate in Bukit Panjang, is where we lived longest, since 1975. I first came to know Bukit Panjang village, was when my father Jabez Thumboo had charge in 1940 of issuing identity cards to residents. My next contact with the area was when a group of us undergraduates living in Dunan Road Hostels hiked from Bukit Batok, where the Japanese had built the Chureito War Memorial for the soldiers, along Bukit Panjang down to where it ended in Choa Chu Kang Road, slightly west of the village. We bought our house in 1973 and moved in two years later. I saw the village grow in various stages. This end of Bukit Panjang became a major installation for the Ministry of Defence, as the PAP government expanded the British Cantonment that had been there on the eastern side of the hill, up to the top and down to the parts of the western portion. I had watched its developments and looked at some of them in the long poem, "Bukit Panjang," I wrote in four Parts. It forms the substance of this article. As I wrote the poem, I realised that some of the events that we experienced as nation, island and individual were not part of the living memory of the younger Singaporeans.

### Keywords

Singapore, People's Action Party (PAP), Bukit Panjang history, HDB Towns, literature in English, life and context

We moved to Phoenix Heights, the first modern suburb of Bukit Panjang, in 1974. Watched it grow, phenomenally, over the years. Phase after phase of construction followed, each timed to meet rising demands; part of integrated, island-wide planning. While the general layout was based on earlier developments closer to the old city, notably Queenstown, Toa Payoh, Ang Mo Kio, Marine Parade and Hougang, there were cumulative improvements, the result of feedback, better equipment, latest techniques and improved construction materials. And the benefit of better planning. Moreover, Bukit Panjang's varied topography offered opportunities as much as it challenged, thus adding to its distinctive character. Such success recalls the purpose of government. Two phrases come to mind, "maximum good for the maximum number"

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(“Utilitarianism”) and “of the people, for the people, by the people” (The Gettysburg Address”). Governments routinely pledge, especially at the time of independence, to improve the lives of all; grow their nation from Third to Second and, finally, First World. Very few succeed. Singapore is one, and often held up as a model. The Peoples’ Action Party (PAP) has been in full power since 1965 when Singapore became semi-sovereign (“People’s Action Party”). The problems it faced were enormous, complex and stark, with every prospect of failure. That it overcame them, ranks as a unique achievement in modern ex-colonial politics. For instance, our per capita GDP, was estimated at USD\$5000/- for 1965. The 2018 figure is US\$57,713/-, ranked 9th globally, an almost eleven-fold increase in slightly more than fifty years (Statistic Times). The GDP per capita Purchasing Power Parity for the same year is \$117,535/-, ranking 5th globally (St Times).

While Bukit Panjang has a long history, my intermittent association with it began in 1940. Europe was at war; the Far East tensed by rumours of war arising from the looming threat of the Yellow Peril. Starved of oil, tin, rubber and other essentials, Japan was likely to invade Southeast Asia to get what she was being denied, a practice now refined as “breaking sanctions.” As she had a well organised fifth column, the British decided to issue Identity Cards to all adults as a security measure. They used teachers and other government officers, and schools and police stations as registration centres. My father Jabez, then attached to Pasir Panjang Primary School, was roped in. He was especially useful as he spoke Tamil and Malay and knew Jawi. He used a temporary office in the police station that squatted on a small hillock overlooking the T-junction formed by Choa Chu Kang and Upper Bukit Road where Lot 1 now stands. Helped by police clerks, registration had started at the beginning of the December 1941 school holidays. All of eight, I was often with him, keen to explore a patch of nature that was neater, more parcelled out and trimmed than what I enjoyed at home in Mandai, with its dense belukar and small patches of secondary jungle behind our home. We often lunched in the village, the ur-Bukit Panjang. I saw some of its life go by. Then a long break brought on by the Japanese Occupation (Feb 1942-Sept 1945) and our not returning to Mandai, till early 1954. A few of us undergraduates took the Green Bus from Bukit Timah campus to Bukit Batok. We went past the remnants of the Syonan Chureito (“Bukit Batok Memorial”), the Japanese war memorial, pushed along the ridge of Bukit Panjang, skirted the British military area, and headed north as far as we could. A sweaty, lacerating, but memorable experience as we saw the colourful, richly varied flora and fauna. Apart from the train to Kuala Lumpur in August 1953 which went by a large stretch of the hill, I had no further contact till 1961 when I started driving. Bukit Panjang was the breakfast stop on trips to Malaya. The strong Hylam coffee plus roti kaya gave an excellent start to a long journey.

We moved to Phoenix Heights in 1975. Bukit Panjang became our kampong. Despite the demands of and distance from work and a growing family, we came to know it. What it lacked was available in the city; what it had was special. Weekends made the whole place extra lively, from the back lane zinc-roofed cinema showing second- and third-run films, mainly English, Chinese and at times Malay and Tamil, to the bustling market crowd. Fresh vegetables, fruits, pork and poultry apart, it was a meeting place. You bargained good-humouredly, bought, exchanged news and gossiped. A few men looked for pet birds, chiefly warblers, fighting cocks and small, brilliantly-coloured fish. People friendly and modestly multiracial, the common language was bazaar Malay. It had a special atmosphere and spirit, distinctive and embracing, but which, alas, cannot thrive in air-conditioned shopping centres. Some notable virtues survive: less rush, less impatience, more graciousness, two kilometres down the road in Bangkit on the eastern side of Bukit Panjang, curiously attractive despite its Housing and Development Board (HDB) brick and mortar. But car-park behaviour during weekends is bad, notably among Merc, Audi and BMW owners. A reminder that affluence and good manners do not always go hand in hand. So, too, consideration for others, notably the elderly and slow.

My interest in Bukit Panjang rekindled when the National Library organised an exhibition in 2012 on my poetry. The timeline was relatively long as I had started writing and publishing around 1950. Moreover, my generation experienced a varied and testing history: the coronation of George VI, WWII, Japanese rule, the Liberation from them, hard post-war conditions, a dying colonialism, nationalism, self-government, Malaysia, and finally, sovereign independence. Each phase a unique parcel of experience. Add the complexity of a multiracial population. I sang four national anthems, and of languages, lived through two imperial, one international/national and one regional: English, Nippon-go, English again, Bahasa Melayu. Today, finally, English, Chinese, Bahasa and Tamil.

As part of the occasion, Ms Michelle Heng, the Librarian who curated the exhibition, proposed a chapbook. We selected poems set in places that were close to Mass Rapid Transport (MRT) stations. The Down Town line, starting from Bukit Panjang, had been announced. There was no Bukit Panjang poem. Yet. Soon memories, thoughts, feelings and events over many years, some reaching back to 1940 Bukit Panjang, started to gather, arrange and converse with each other in my head. They grew and pushed themselves into phrases, images, some condensing into narratives and possible poem(s).

As I started composing, the poem(s) grew into one with four Parts. Broadly,

- i) takes up the physical presence and ur-history, sampling some colonial, national and regional moments, while tracing the full extent of “Panjang”;

- ii) touches on the months just before WWII when I was with my Father in his temporary office in the Bukit Panjang police station;
- iii) explores Bukit Panjang at the time we moved into Phoenix Heights, 1975, particularly the farms and the network of paths and tracts linking them; granite quarries, with observations of the village and kampong spirit; touches on the beginnings of serious development in 1981 which involved dismantling the village, relocating many families, and the considerable earth works widening Choa Chu Kang Road and pushing it east to meet the Bukit Timah Expressway (BKE; December 1985); the completion of the first blocks of flats in 1985, the most recent in 1995, with a few blocks ongoing;
- iv) Bukit Panjang's transition from village to satellite town and transport hub to serve a mix of HDB sub-estates and sub-condos; the first Singapore LRT, then the Down Town MRT with 14 stations in Nov 1999, since extended by sixteen more to the Expo Centre where it connects with the East-West Line over one stop to Changi International Airport.

A four-part structure best serves the quantity and mix of experience I was recalling, and the full range of urban conveniences of the potential satellite town. Each of the four has its own point of historical reference, character, thrust, foci, rhythm and tone, They are further differentiated by the length of stanzas, four lines in Pt I, irregular in Pt II, eight lines in Pt III (with 3 and 2 line variations), 3 lines in Pt IV except the final stanza which both concludes the poem and alludes to its opening to contrast Bukit Panjang's ur- and present roles.

Bukit Panjang is clearly the unifying presence. While it provides the parameters of place, what goes into the poem obviously draws on the totality of my experience, especially at significant moments and periods of my life. For different reasons and in different ways, these include the last eighteen months at school (1952-53), university (September 1953-May 1957) and my first four years in civil servicing. The embryonic awareness of how rulers matter that started during the Japanese Occupation, continued. I owe much to my teachers, in particular to Chan Chiew Kiat (our Chemistry teacher who insisted we go back to start from fundamentals), A.C. Shagran (our Hockey coach), Shamus Fraser (composing poetry), R.D. Jansen (Shakespeare), K.C. Owen (Ben Jonson, and the lessons on Welsh nationalism) and Major Fam Fong Hee (form teacher Standard 7, 1949). Both the Literary and Debating Society and the Civics Club expanded two very important worlds, one of words, the other of life beyond home and school.

By 1947, when I was in Standard VII, I was sufficiently aware of what – in addition to formal lessons – helped me grow, shaped my body, mind, spirit and

soul; helped me mature and adventure further. We learnt early. Like other children, I loved nursery rhymes, those in Teochew teasingly different from those in English. I accosted Lau Ee, grand auntie on my Mother's side for the first, my twin half-sisters, Phoebe and Evelyn, for the latter. Sound and rhythm, motion and gesture, were invariably different, say, between Oi Lang Oi and Ring a Ring o' Roses. Raised by the intervening years, such acts of learning grew robust between 1953 and 57 when I went up to the University of Malaya, staying in the Dunearn Road Hostels, the University's largest. Located in Singapore, the University had been formed in October 1949. How I learnt changed. I was increasingly more active, becoming equal to intellectual demands, then dominant. This strong inner confidence was kept under wraps, never revealed. A sense of sharing, of belonging to a unity was further aided more than ten years later, and in a modest way, by lines borrowed with revisions, but retaining their rhythm, from the chorus of *Those Were The Days*, popularised by Mary Hopkins in 1968:

Those were the days my friend  
 We thought they'd never end  
 We'd sing and dance forever and a day  
 We'd live the life we choose  
 We'd fight and never lose  
 For we were young and sure to have our way....

They are in the poem:

Pt I: Those were... the days... my friend  
       Not the ones... with... deadly ends.  
 Pt II: Those too were the days my friend,  
       I thought they would never, ever end.  
 Pt III: These are the missing days my friend,  
       They have rusted, met their end....

The timeline of these Parts obviously includes important personal moments, in particular the years at Victoria School, January 1948 to March 1953, then with less regularity to August.

From as far back as I could remember I had wanted to be a teacher, in a school, or at the University with which I was in desultory touch, firstly through my cousin, Walter Hosington then lecturing in Physics, and through a few friends consisting of Goh Sin Tub, who was by then in the Administrative Service, Wang Gungwu and Beda Lim. This was in 1951. I had become the editor of *Youth*, the combined Secondary School magazine. A year earlier, I had started writing poems, helped considerably by Shamus Fraser. I had already been introduced to Sin Tub, Gungwu and Beda. Sin Tub conducted a series of poetry workshops

which I attended and benefitted from. I saw Literature in English as an important area that needed broadening.

“YOUTH” THINKS IT IS TIME THAT SOME EFFORT BE MADE TO EXPLOIT MALAYAN THEMES. We have received few contributions that deal with Malayan subjects.... This neglect of local themes may be traced, in part, to the training given in some schools. Instead of being taught to see their country and people in the right perspective, they are dished-up with knowledge which, while it is sound as far as academic requirements go, tend to restrict their outlook.... This country is progressing towards self-rule, and its people are gradually submerging their individual race-identities and are beginning to call themselves Malaysians. THE YOUTH OF THIS COUNTRY HAVE A SIGNIFICANT ROLE TO PLAY IN THE SPEEDING UP OF THIS PROCESS.... Malaya provides a wealth of subjects of interest for budding writers. The modes of living of its many races, their varied reactions to the impact of Western culture, and their living harmoniously together: these are no mean subjects for essays. (Thumboo, “Editorial” 3-4; bold original)

I went on to urge the creation of “A GENUINELY ORIGINAL MALAYAN LITERATURE... specially urgent in view of the efforts being made towards the creation of a MALAYAN NATION (“Editorial” 3-4; bold original).

It was at this time that the University decided to have a two-year break after the School Certificate before tertiary admission. Very few took it. We sat an entrance examination in March 1953. I went up to the University on September 30th to read for a BA degree at the University of Malaya which was then located in Singapore. Interests I had acquired and partially developed at Victorian School, a sense of nationalism and politics, and more especially, the need for a national literature, were soon to broaden, deepen and consolidate. I majored in English and History, and did a minor in Philosophy for the BA and the fourth year Honours in English.

This choice of subjects was interesting. I had obtained one of the four open bursaries which did not require me to work for government. The English syllabus was interesting, taking me to go back to Geoffrey Chaucer. That meant looking at all the major poets, down to W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Cecil Day-Lewis. The History was disappointing. Apart from one course on world history, the rest dealt with European expansion overseas, looking at the work of various East India Companies which, over three years, covered the work of the Portuguese, Spanish, the English and Dutch, then the French, to complete the major expansions by the European powers from the 15th century. We studied the history of Asia, to the extent that it was involved with the colonialism of Europe. History was seen in terms of colonial expansion. In fact, I had to read on my own the history of India, China, Japan and the kingdoms of Southeast Asia, during the ten years from 1957 to about 1966. This additional reading was

part and parcel of the broadening of my interests. I had not written poems for seven years before I returned to teach. I had always wanted to be a writer but felt that the education I had, especially that in history, needed to be put right. For the sense of history was clearly the sense of peoples in search of their best destiny. And in our part of the world, open to the seas and oceans of Asia, it involved a coming of Europeans. And that coming formed the history of Asia responding to the presence of Europe, namely the English, the Dutch and the French after the Portuguese and Spanish.

One line that had erupted and expanded needed to be nurtured: the writing in English. It was years later that I realised the first part of the non-white world that created a new world Literature in Englishes was in the Philippines. We had been locked into the primacy of the British Empire, seen its expansion across the globe during the 19th and early parts of the 20th century before WWI. The last years of the age of Victoria were a central experience. By the time I was at University, the British Empire was reshaping itself into the British Commonwealth. The Anglo-Saxon expansions dominated. The United States was the first beyond its going to Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Britain had by then begun to become the chief nation in the world. Her position as number one was manifest in the late 19th Century and only now is she being confronted by China. Canada, Australia, South Africa and in their own quiet way, New Zealand, formed the Dominions. Pakistan, India, Burma and Sri Lanka were the first non-Anglo-Saxon nations to emerge. We – Malaysia and Singapore – belong to the rest that stretch from Aden to Zanzibar.

Our world view then was small, at least in terms of our realities. If we look at our own history, the Singapore history, our securing of independence was unusual. On one hand, we had the most difficult beginnings; on the other, we probably had the most considerable success. But for us who thought about a Literature in English, miles down the road the prospects were far from promising. But I believe that the urgency and pressure connected to our success in almost all the other areas of national development have come to apply with equal force. While our achievement in all the major areas of progress succeed, those in culture, in Literature especially, have expanded considerably. The National Arts Council (NAC) established in 1991 has done much – at times in most difficult circumstances – to advance literary development. And the larger number of institutions, from universities to arts colleges and courses, have encouraged creativity, from writers down to conductors. And the NAC has provided funds for the publication of anthologies and individual collections.

I followed my own advice. A poet in a multi-ethnic nation, writing for English knowing readers whose roots are simultaneously Chinese, Malay, Tamil and Eurasian, and emerging Singaporean, I sought to tap the meaning potential of an overlapping body of multi-lingual images and symbols. They surround us, deepen and embed discourse. Their very uniqueness and diversity, evolved over

centuries in a specific semiotic, a particular culture and environment, gave them different meanings and significations. One is challenged by such richness. Some of these meanings and significations, do not always sit easily with each other. In the most extreme instances their primary meaning, their denotative and connotative reach, are diametrically opposed. A classic, stark instance is the “dragon.” For Christians, it is Satan, most vividly assertive in the final battle in *Revelations*. In contrast, many east Asian cultures, notably the Chinese, it is revered and worshiped, embodying power and majesty, wisdom, a protective force, a guardian.

Nonetheless, I needed to tap them as a key aim of poetry is saying more with less, generating as much meaning – controlled, directed – as possible. Despite the initial discomfort of conflicting reader-response, I enlist this store of images and symbols available in Singapore cultures. There are sensitivities. What gave me courage, and creative faith, was the knowledge that we are a secular society that guarantees religious freedom, which is, moreover, overseen by an inter-religious council. Further, my intention is positive. This search and harnessing is evident at various points in the poem, one of the longest I have written so far. For me MinDef Bukit Panjang is both actual and symbolic guardian of Singapore’s recent past, present and future. Hence enlisting the dragon’s positive qualities which strongly resonate with our Chinese compatriots. It also helped that I was able to bring in the old British radar. Of unusual design, it nodded as it semi-rotated on its base, facing south and west, the likely direction of an Indonesian *Konfrontasi* incursions. It appeared to pay obeisance, hence “genuflexed,” with its Christian associations, to collocate with those of the “dragon.” A modest attempt to recalibrate symbol and gesture and clear a space for synergy. Invoking “sun” and “moon,” the two most dramatic celestial objects that regulate our sense of time and govern the rhythms of the year, pulls Bukit Panjang into a larger cosmic perspective. There is God and *gods* and *deities*, in Singapore. And in Bukit Panjang.

Still steady stately un-stressed, you  
 Our vigilant secret dragon saw further  
 Than Brit radars, tireless atop your peaks.  
 They genuflexed setting sun, rising moon....

These lines from Pt III should make the process clear:

Across nearby postal tracks, a highway  
 Dots unseen eyes to cut through granite.  
 Steel jaws open Earth by chomping hard,  
 Boneless, compacted beige Jurassic loam.

“Dots unseen eyes....” Big and small machines, some just out of crates, arrived. In some ways another new beginning. They were like dragons and lions whose

eyes were waiting to be dotted, metaphorically brought to life, to start swirling and dancing, start doing their work. They were machines; they were also images with moving, bending, swinging limbs, strong and efficient; they roared and purred, breathed smoke. Through the idea of dotting eyes, a tradition generally understood by most Singaporeans, I sought to link their construction to energies that better our lives.

Among what the language of the poem seeks – a key concern driving my work – is the possibility of linkage and unity within our four ethnic diversities, by bringing images and symbols to share and contribute to a common Singapore thrust of meaning, perhaps most vividly exemplified in these lines that conclude “Ulysses by the Merlion”:

Perhaps having dealt in things,  
 Surfeited on them,  
 Their spirits yearn again for images,  
 Adding to the dragon, phoenix,  
 Garuda, naga, those horses of the sun,  
 This lion of the sea,  
 This image of themselves. (70)

A linguistic remaking driven by that broad, encompassing desire for one nation, one people which the majority of the English-speaking pioneer generation envisioned and wanted. A notable few of Chinese, Malays and Indians shared this single, and singular hope, rising above the justified fears of how their compatriots would fare in the Singapore to come. We need only recall how the Chinese were treated in Indonesia after the 1965 coup that brought General Suharto to power.

## I

It struck me that going south on the old highway, low hills, largely on the right side, down to Rochor Road, are never far off. There is Bukit Timah, Singapore’s highest point, almost 300 million years old, on the left. Nothing else as big. Bukit Panjang is distinctive, perhaps the longest spine of our island, hence “panjang.” Metaphorically, and in reality, she is guardian:

Trying to spot *Konfrontasi*: a word, a fear,  
 A rant, an impunity that briefly sired a little  
 Neighbourly bloodiness. Pray wars have  
 Killed themselves, that skirmishes and riots

Miss our little red dot...

The mention of *Konfrontasi* and the rhetoric of Bung Karno should recall the MacDonald House bombing in July 1964. That killed three people and injured

more than 30. When saboteurs failed to destroy heavily protected military targets and public utilities, they set off bombs in various parts of the island to cause panic and disrupt daily routine. By the following March some 30 bombs had been set off. Those who fail to see how serious the current global terrorist threat is, had better think again. Singapore's status as a global city attracts a high volume of international visitors. However tightly we petrol our shores, it is always possible for the determined, trained intruder, to slip through. Moreover, destructive devices can be manufactured by terrorists after they arrive, using chemicals and electronic components easily available at our two Sim Lim electronic complexes. Consequently, public vigilance is crucial. Vigilance. Protection.

Granite, soil, sub-soil; beds of moss: you  
Flew our flag umpteen years; covenanted  
Ten faiths and more, aligned and bonded  
Immigrant syllables for our daily bread.

Various key associations are drawn into this stanza. Bukit Panjang headquarters of MinDef, our ultimate guardian. The first line is fact and metaphor, suggesting a combination of hard, middling and soft power. I had watched this northern section of Bukit Panjang transform, gradually iconise. One of the roads used by the contractors passed through Phoenix Heights Estate. Now and again, when the evening was right, enhanced by a full moon rising, I went up to see both construction and Bukit Panjang town spreading east below in the pre-moonrise glow. A quiet reflective experience, as you sat on a retaining wall in progress, a bolder awaiting removal, or the workers' makeshift lunch table, with the hum of traffic below. I saw tunnels being driven into the sides of Bukit Panjang hill, perhaps for special installations and command bunkers. I must have surmised correctly, for on what proved to be my last visit I was accosted by plain clothed men. Three of them. They flashed their IDs and asked me what I was doing there. "Enjoying the evening, like you." They said it was a security area. I asked them to follow me out so that I could let them see that there were no signs or other indication that it was a security area. Or were they bad hats puffing the golden dragon?

Under Bukit Panjang's shadow we can enjoy our daily bread.

## II

War and the rumours of war. The relative peace the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia enjoyed in 1940 was threatened by hostilities in Europe. Closer to home, and far more serious, longstanding Japanese imperial ambitions loomed. These had started far back, in the 1870s, with moves to wrest Korea from Chinese influence. After winning the Russo-Japanese war (1904-5), she gained territory and secured concessions, annexing Korea in 1910. After WWI she was mandated

Germany's far eastern island colonies. In 1937 she invaded China and captured Chiang Kai Shek's Nationalist capital Nanking. Many Chinese fled. My grand auntie, an uncle and a cousin came to Singapore. They brought terrible stories about the Nanking Massacre. War was already affecting us.

Of the opening lines,

If you seek how nations push and punish  
History, then know how one side's glory,  
Jacked high, is the other's killing field.

1940: families, places, weather too, felt  
Threats of war....

The first two remind us of how nations almost unendingly manipulate history to suit their purposes, both before and after events. Despite the passage of nearly 80 years, Japanese WWII cruelty is still the subject of unhappiness summed up in recent annual demands that it apologise properly for atrocities committed. And it is worth remembering the general assertion that history is written by the victors.

For a young boy, the threat of war in 1941 was visible. Identity Cards were being issued. Outside Bukit Panjang police station were moveable barricades wrapped in barbed-wire. There were blackouts. Sembawang airbase was not far away. I watched Brewster Buffaloes on training flights. Stumpy and nowhere as elegant as the Hurricane, they later proved no match for the Japanese Zeros. We constructed air-raid shelters. I heard my first bagpipes live when the Gordon Highlanders beat the retreat on the Padang, to boost morale and show imperial power. Indian and Australian troops arrived to boost Singapore, the impregnable fortress. Some of the troops were raw, untrained in jungle warfare. They manoeuvred in the Mandai area. I still remember an Australian soldier leaning his rifle against a coconut tree. He forgot to take it and came charging back. Here is another permanent lesson. On 10th February 1942, Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime Prime Minister, cabled General Wavell the Commander-in-Chief of the joint American-British-Dutch-Australian Command. In noting that General Percival had over 100,000 men, he asserted that

In these circumstances the defenders must greatly outnumber Japanese forces who have crossed the straits, and in a well-contested battle they should destroy them. *There must at this stage be no thought of saving the troops or sparing the population. The battle must be fought to the bitter end at all costs.* The 18th Division has a chance to make its name in history. Commanders and senior officers should die with their troops. The honour of the British Empire and of the British Army is at stake. I rely on you to show no mercy to weakness in any form. With the Russians fighting as they are and the Americans so stubborn at Luzon, the whole reputation of our country and our race is involved. It is expected that every unit will be brought into close contact with the enemy and fight it out. ("World War II Today")

Imagine the consequences of the Churchillian instruction.

### III

Months before, Father was busy issuing Identity Cards at the Bukit Panjang Police Station. I was with him, and enjoyed its compound. Well-planned and well-kept, it had a certain abundance, protected and policed. As the son of the *chegu*, I had free run of the place and took full advantage. Moreover, its fruity richness attracted my favourite birds and insects. A demi-paradise, it had

... chikus,  
 Rose-apples, guavas, rambutans; ripe,  
 Un-refrigerated; scrumptious, low;  
 Eyed by merbaks; occasional pairs  
 Of drongos, Golden Oriels; restless  
 Dragon-flies. I plucked I ate I juiced....

The threat of war was there in the plaintive wail of sirens. The conversation among my uncles and aunties, both Indian and Chinese, were about the Japanese invading us. I was old enough to understand not only from their discussions but also their facial expressions and gestures. Something serious was impending. Moreover, my Chinese grand uncle was part of a committee, which for many years, had been collecting and sending money to China to fight the Japanese.

Yet deep night-thoughts rehearsed relatives'  
 Uncertain lives on China's ravaged coast,  
 Grown skeletally bitter under a Nippon sun.

Yet many did not worry. Singapore was Britain's impregnable bastion in the East.

I excluded two incidents directly related to Bukit Panjang. The first had to do with the bombing of the oil tanks at the 11th mile. It was pre-dawn, 8 December 1941. Roused from sleep, I joined my family at the back of our house which stood on a knoll. Half awake, I saw the sky on the right glow reddish. That was not where the sun rose, and the glow pulsated. Papa was sure the oil tanks were burning, bombed by the Japanese. I remember him saying "Now the Four Horsemen are riding toward us." Lit by the eerie light, his grave eyes and the words are etched in my memory. The second involved Uncle Ah Fatt and his wife, perhaps the dearest of his friends. They had been killed in the same air raid. It hit him hard. Being the first estate abutting the village, Phoenix Heights still had clusters of fruit trees on the upper slope set aside for Phase Two. The farmhouses had gone, the families relocated. There was enough to remind me of life in Mandai. Occasionally, I walked close to these patches and heard insects that start a country evening. The nightjar's call rolled powerfully as ever, taking

me back to evenings with Grandpa, and the whiff of opium in his breathe. Bukit Panjang was beginning to change and grow, the old order giving to the new. The city planners specialising in raising satellite towns got going. From about late 1970, things started to happen.

Those PAP days were rapid fire; heaving.  
Planners with satellite towns itching  
In their brains, came super charged.

Each of the stanzas depicts a particular set of happenings, with the occasional insertion of memories interspersed with BP narratives. While work on the area now occupied by BP New Town was in its initial stages, and the present Bukit Timah expressway was being cut, I used to spend more than a few Sunday mornings – the Christian life lay in the future – walking for three or four hours with friends, colleagues and students. We discussed a whole range of issues, including various plans to help develop Singapore Literature in our four official languages. We talked shop. These groups included at various times Wong Yoon Wah, Dudley de Souza, Kirpal Singh, Max Le Blond, Elangovan, the occasional expatriate colleague and some other young poets. Academic friends included John Sinclair, Elton Brash and Bruce Bennett, all three no longer with us. I had John, Professor of Modern English, University of Birmingham, UK, visit our Department regularly from 1970. I needed considerable help when it was English Language matters. He was mainly responsible for the development of its academic study in the University. But that is another story.

There was no “modern” nightlife. The coffee shops served beer and *samsu*. And toddy, stale by that time. The life around the cinema were snippets of village evening life:

Where is the cinema, large zinc box,  
Just off the road, by the railway tracks?  
At times when hero and heroine are  
Poised to clinch, whistle blasts warn  
The level-crossing, shake their moment.  
And kway teow, lush with cockles, lard,  
Bean sprouts, sweet sauce and chillies  
For that special taste, alive, alive O?  
These are the missing days my friend,  
They have rusted, met their end.

Here was experience characteristic of the compromise between city sophistication and the village version. Apart from the passing trains, as the tracks were less than thirty metres away. Heavy raindrops too interfered with the drama on screen. Yet, there was a completeness to the evening. Ice-kachang, satay, rojak.

The char kway teow had lard, giving it that “special taste,” which for me recalls the Irish song “Cockles and Mussels” and Molly Malone. Positive, energising nostalgia. And Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew, Malay, Tamil and Hindustani songs.

While these tremendous improvements in Bukit Panjang and elsewhere are seen as necessary to raise the quality of life, some of the older generation miss the slower pace, the old images and the old rhythms of the village. These shaped expectations, satisfactions and reflexes. That is a permanent part of my upbringing, rooted as it was in Mandai, with all its instructive nature. It remains and is present even in the very act of recognising essential change.

What’s up? Getting townish, you? I should  
 Say! Regular brick blocks carefully aligned.  
 French tile roofs, sliding doors, tinted windows,  
 Traffic lights overseeing Upper Bukit Timah,  
 Choa Chu Kang and Woodlands. Double lines.  
 Road widening. Paid parking. Dispensaries.  
 Improvements? Perhaps. One thing’s certain.  
 You are getting plump with amenities

Such comprehensive, integrated improvements characterise new towns. Life has more to offer. There are community centres, libraries, parks with jogging tracks, benches and exercise machines, floral sections with terrazzo tables with matching benches, to rest or gather friends. The list, which goes on, means that there is more to do, that the pace of life is faster. The young are born into and grow up with it. The older generation often find the flow taxing. The older shopping centres are examined carefully to improve appearance, flow of traffic. What the shops offer, the kind of eating available. There is more movement, more contrasts.

Evergreen Primary School among them  
 (1999). Sometimes you find a shine.

The school was particularly forward looking. When I was Director, Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore, we had undergraduate groups, music and dance being the most active. The Harmonica Band was among the most inspiring. Still led by the remarkable Chua Chee Yong, School and Band put on a concert for an audience of more than a thousand at the University Cultural Centre. The Band’s main performer was Yasuo Watani, at that time a lecturer at the Hohner Konservatorium Trossingen, Germany. One can imagine what Chua had to sieve through before the concert included putting the primary school students through performances that demanded acute attention, coordination etc.

to ensure a good performance. Mr. Chua still continues his work as remarkably as ever. I still remember *Soiree 2003*.

#### IV

Parts I and II look back to life in Mandai before WWII. My generation is older than our nation, sovereign Singapore in 1965. Our experience of growing up precedes its birth. Self-government in 1954. A precarious, hopeless looking beginning. But we came through. The young Singapore faced and overcame successive and simultaneous travails and challenges. We had courageous, committed and determined leaders. Led by Lee Kuan Yew, they included Goh Keng Swee, Devan Nair, S. Rajaratnam, Toh Chin Chye and Ahmad bin Ibrahim (1927-62; Asst Sec-Gen. PAP Central Executive Committee and Minister of Health 1959; Minister of Labour 1961).

Thailand has always claimed to have kept its national independence. The first nation in Southeast Asia to gain independence was Burma/Myanmar on 4 January 1948, led by Thakin Nu, Aung San and others. Our colonial powers were America, the French, the Dutch and the British. The Americans had planned to ground Philippines Independence and did so soon after the end of World War II. Indo-China led by Ho Chi Minh and General Võ Nguyên Giáp had a more difficult time and only secured final independence when the Americans withdrew from Saigon in April 1975. Other major leaders include, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, President Sukarno. Timor Leste, the last nation in Southeast Asia to gain independence, is currently preparing to be a member of ASEAN.

Our journey from Third to First world is now far better known through the various narratives celebrating Singapore 50 and leading to August 9th 2015 and beyond. They continue to unfold; they distil, depict and remind; they aid and abet my revisiting the poem.

We grew in the flow of these narratives, doing the best we could, our lives having their own sequence in our little corner. We look back, sorting out what mattered, what did not; what were mistakes, what celebrations. It is memory, one of the most remarkable of our many successes that enabled us to evaluate this sequence of politics-history by separating the events and experiences, making them singular and self-contained. As we reflect on them their significances become part of us. A death; a birth; receiving a prize; a holiday; passing a driving test; falling in love. These are alive in our memory with much else. We shuffle and rearrange them at will. Here for Bukit Panjang the poem. We carry a tremendous store of pictures which our eyes take over the years. Some are detailed and in colour. Some fade. But the significant ones do not. We call them up, noticing what interests us at that moment, the other details there unnoticed.

The three-line stanzas of Part IV recapitulate, reiterate and extend themes in the earlier Parts. Among the main ones in the still-in-progress Singapore journey including national unity and identity, individual identity (in which our ethnic

differences are not only respected, but harnessed and harmonised with sensitive mutual appreciation), determination, commitment, resilience, adaptability, capacity to change and the central importance of the life of the spirit. Like the ripples from a pebble dropped in a pond, these themes spread and invoke others. The notion of travelling for instance, encompassing far more than just physical movement, underpins Bukit Panjang the hill and surroundings, notably the village, now gone, new town and its people. Or time linked to any of the themes mentioned. Take change. Time and change, either alone or in tandem, are fundamental shaping forces. Time never waits, not even for itself. It is busy watching and witnessing; it is the custodian of history:

Time rolls and curves upon itself.  
 Today is tomorrow is today. You  
 Dream draw and cast shadows,

Yours and ours. People come together,  
 Simultaneous, complicated, overlapping,  
 Merge life-styles. Make one out of many.

Change, or stagnate, decline; even perish. And Singapore has and does, as the last two line above declare. The stanza that follows ends with “multi-racial.” Its most magnanimous and far-reaching expression are the languages we use and the makeup of an increasing number of our families.

English bounces off the walls; Chinese via PRs;  
 Tamil chanted between pealing temple bells.  
 Days start with Majulah Singapura, shared

By long cherished neighbours: Kum  
 Kit-Fatimah, Cecil-Thana, James-Lee Fah,  
 And others on this walk with you, sub-city.

Including Chin and me, three cross-cultural couples; the fourth cross-religious. That was on the rise among the English educated, lifting its multi-ethnic profile. These are among the positive paths that evolve and consolidate Singapore, which is still travelling. So are we all.

I came to Bukit Panjang wanting more country, less city:

I escaped your big brother 40 years ago.  
 As you grew, so my irritations prospered,  
 Loosed by curt efficiency, sharp politeness.

Now I feel a creeping love, abetted by age,  
 Your sweet convenience, evergreen spirit,

Like the school down the road.

There is none, for the journey, the making and remaking continues. A little story instead.

A noticeable number of the older ladies returned to their farms in the area after they were relocated. Regularly. They returned to nostalgia and serenity. They looked at the world with eyes that had seen much. All of it, the good and bad; the ugly and beautiful. They must have had that peace within, wrested from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. They missed the old life. And there were fruits to be harvested; the old hard life to recall.

One Sunday morning, after coffee and kaya toast, three of us decided to visit the old farms again. The tractors had started to roar. HDB moved fast and soon they would be gone. Fairly deep into the area, we met an old lady. Seventyish, but still spry. When we first met – it was outside her home – she thought I was Malay. Her caution dissolved when I greeted her in Teochew. Properly. With decorum. She knew in the instance that I was an insider, and relaxed. From then on, she offered me coffee whenever I passed by. Simple, courteous hospitality. I saw my Swatow grand auntie in her as I lit my pipe, as she talked about her family and life in the past. That morning we met her on the path. She had durians, tied into 3s and 4s, depending on their size. 20 to 25 in all. She was wiping her brow. She must have carried them, three-four lots at a time, from point to point. Repeatedly, till she got to the market, 3 kilometres away. We moved to help but she said that there was no need as she took durians out daily during the season. She did not want to trouble us. Insisting politely, we carried the durians to the market, she, equally insistent, with a bunch in each hand. As we approached the market, friends greeted her, some curious to know who we were. Before we left, she picked 3 of the best, one for each of us. They would have fetched at least \$5, a handsome, useful sum. But we accepted out of respect for her gesture of thanks. I saw her twice before the HDB put up “Keep Out” and “Danger” signs. No matter. Ah Sim is alive in my mind, a force, a symbol of the qualities that built Singapore 50, that should take us to Singapore 75 and, hopefully, Singapore 100. She is in our journey, Bukit Panjang’s journey:

Soon the MRT arrives, me still travelling...  
 Long hill... way up, semi-north, time-adventurer;  
 Master of winds, culling our seasons, in all moods  
 And weather, as we glimpse your changing contours.  
     You will be here, expanding, when we;  
             Have gone.

## Bukit Panjang: Hill, Village, Town

### I

Long Hill...way up, semi-north:  
Time-traveller; master of winds: you  
Culled our seasons years before we  
Glimpsed your contours. You

Rolled south to be the tip of Mother Asia,  
Picking up names like Bukit Batok. You  
Finally stopped for tectonic breath, at Mt  
Sophia; your last spur is Fort Canning.

Still steady stately un-stressed, you  
Our vigilant secret dragon saw further  
Than Brit radars, tireless atop your peaks.  
They genuflected setting sun, rising moon,

Trying to spot Konfrontasi<sup>2</sup>: a word, a fear,  
A rant, an impunity that briefly sired a little  
Neighbourly bloodiness. Pray wars have  
Killed themselves, that skirmishes and riots

Miss our little red dot while we work to  
Push coasts against the tide, flats higher,  
Float IPOs, plant splendours-in-the-park,  
Though we are yet to parcel out the sky.

Granite, soil, sub-soil; beds of moss: you  
Flew our flag umpteen years; covenanted  
Ten faiths and more, aligned and bonded  
Immigrant syllables for our daily bread.

That we, too, did, as undergrads scouting  
Wild mid-50 ridges, skirting colonial camps,  
As butterflies rode winds, tilting to joust  
Fragrant moments as swifts snatched morsels.

---

<sup>2</sup> Indonesia opposed the formation of Malaysia that brought together Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and the already sovereign Federation of Malaya in 1963. Popularly known as *Konfrontasi*, it was not a full-scale war. Indonesian armed forces posing as volunteers conducted raids, a notable one being the bombing on 10/3/1965 of MacDonald House in Orchard Rd SG in which two people were killed.

When we got merdeka<sup>3</sup> and you, sub judicie,  
 We tickled your knuckles and your toes;  
 Bit and dressed them; trimmed; dressaged;  
 Progressed; installed occasional oddities.

*Those were... the days ...my friend  
 Not the ones...with....deadly ends.*

## II

If you seek how nations push and punish  
 History, then know how one side's glory,  
 Jacked high, is the other's killing field.  
 1940: families, places, weather too, felt  
 Threats of war, disturbing indicative ICs<sup>4</sup>  
 For security; black-outs; makeshift air-raid  
 Shelters; nifty camouflage; troops puffing  
 Bag-pipes; aircraft strafing for the ARP;<sup>5</sup>  
 Such fun for us kids, those games.

Papa in the MAS<sup>6</sup> had duties. I see  
 Station-cum- policemen, neatly kept,  
 Dreaming on a knoll, now flattened,  
 Concretised into Lot 1. It had chikus,  
 Rose-apples, guavas, rambutans; ripe,  
 Un-refrigerated; scrumptious, low;  
 Eyed by merbaks; occasional pairs  
 Of drongos, Golden Oriels; restless  
 Dragon-flies. I plucked I ate I juiced  
 My shirt. Leaf-wiped sticky thumb  
 And fingers, face beaming innocence.

*Those too were the days my friend,*

---

<sup>3</sup> Malay for freedom; the main nationalist rallying cry in South East Asia.

<sup>4</sup> Identity Card as a precaution against infiltrators.

<sup>5</sup> Air Raid Precaution. A UK based organisation set up in 1924 and expanded just before WWII, leading to branches in the colonies. Its Wardens – mainly “voluntary” as in the MAS (Medical Auxiliary Service) – ensured that black-outs were observed and sand, water tanks, pails, spades, hydrants and hoses were available to fight fires. As schools were spread throughout Singapore, teachers were a prime source of volunteers.

<sup>6</sup> Medical Auxiliary Service developed an extensive network in the period just before WWII to supplement the work of Hospitals, especially in patient care.

*I thought they would never, ever end.*

Village, you buzzed half-corralled  
 By make-shift barricades, barbed wire;  
 Ciphers of wars echoing from far away.  
 Yet deep night-thoughts rehearsed relatives'  
 Uncertain lives on China's ravaged coast,  
 Grown skeletally bitter under a Nippon sun.

### III

I watched you, our epicentre, from  
 Mid-seventies Phoenix Heights. Newly  
 Minted. Perhaps unconscious love saved  
 Small clusters of rubber, durian, Mango,  
 Tembusu, pulasan, mangosteen. Higher  
 Up the slope were vigorous tickets whose  
 Gloaming blew usual night safari sounds.  
 Nostalgia is a habitation with many names.

Below, our BPG Chapel,<sup>7</sup> *Nearer my God  
 To Thee*, where Dhana baptised me. Feed  
 Us Your Daily Bread, O Lord. Forgive;  
 Cleanse; fold us into everlasting love.  
*Your only Son, No sin to hide  
 But You have sent Him from Your side  
 To walk upon this guilty sod  
 And to become the Lamb of God.*<sup>8</sup> Amen.

Those PAP days were rapid fire; heaving.  
 Planners with satellite towns itching  
 In their brains, came super charged.

Across nearby postal tracks, a highway  
 Dots unseen eyes to cut through granite.  
 Steel jaws open Earth by chomping hard,  
 Boneless, compacted beige Jurassic loam.  
 Dishevelled, in the making, traffic-less,  
 Ideal for walking friends discussing

<sup>7</sup> Bukit Panjang Gospel Chapel where the poet was baptised by Mr. S. Dhanabalan.

<sup>8</sup> Lamb of God, a popular hymn.

Whatever strikes a spark to turn and burn  
A thought, or prime life's little ironies.

Often, alone among deserted farms  
Nesting in hill and vale, mist and dew,  
I am back in Mandai, on bunds dividing  
Ponds. Pooish air. A loo in a shaded corner  
Where softest pops implode when fish rise  
For air. I watch widening ripples fade.  
I turn. Where the Hill should be, stand.  
Rows of papayas, over-ripe, unplucked.

Old ladies return to hungry dogs, harvest  
Memories, whatever hangs, then head to  
Market to sell to chat to meet old friends.  
*'Has Ah Noi given birth? How much did  
You get for those ducks? These spectacles?  
Too modern?'* enjoying a circuitry grown  
Over years, but now declining, as another  
Wooden shed is shredded in just hours.

Where is the cinema, large zinc box,  
Just off the road, by the railway tracks?  
At times when hero and heroine are  
Poised to clinch, whistle blasts warn  
The level-crossing, shake their moment.  
And kway teow, lush with cockles, lard,  
Bean sprouts, sweet sauce and chillies  
For that special taste, alive, alive O?

*These are the missing days my friend,  
They have rusted, met their end.* Now,

What's up? Getting townish, you? I should  
Say! Regular brick blocks carefully aligned.  
French tile roofs, sliding doors, tinted windows;  
Traffic lights overseeing Upper Bukit Timah,  
Choa Chu Kang and Woodlands. Double lines.  
Road widening. Paid parking. Dispensaries.  
Improvements? Perhaps. One thing's certain.  
You are getting plump with amenities.

Evergreen Primary School among them  
(1999). Sometimes you find a shine.

#### IV

Chipped, levelled, upgraded; possibly  
Burrowed by modest MinDef air-cond  
Tunnels shyly hidden, you protect

While I stride memories, circle your  
Amplitude. You are a special spine  
To many things; Little Guilin; hip condos....

But it's not military readiness, or the past,  
As when a tiger purred to church, or  
Chu rei to and Cross raised to bravery.

Time rolls and curves upon itself:  
Today is tomorrow is today. You  
Dream, draw and cast shadows,

Yours and ours. People come together,  
Simultaneous, complicated, overlapping,  
Merge life-styles. Make one out of many.

Like our multiplexes. Fusion, now in vogue,  
Is one of 144 buzzwords. We change colour  
And rhythm; urbanise; always multiracial.

English bounces off the wall; Chinese via PRs;  
Tamil chanted between peeling temple bells.  
Days start with Majula Singapura<sup>9</sup>, shared

By long cherished neighbours: Kum  
Kit-Fatmah, Cecil-Thana, James-Lee Fah,  
And others on this walk with you, sub-city.

I escaped your big brother 40 years ago.  
As you grew, so my irritation prospered,  
Loosed by curt efficiency, sharp politeness.

---

<sup>9</sup> Singapore's national anthem which is in Malay.

Now I feel a creeping love, abetted by age,  
Your sweet convenience, evergreen spirit,  
Like the school just down the road.

Above all, in the House of the Lord, where I  
Grew again, am fed on the Word for that  
Eternal Journey which makes this a fitter one.

Soon the MRT arrives, me still travelling...  
Long Hill...way up, semi-north, time-adventurer;  
Master of winds, culling our seasons, in all moods  
And weather, as we glimpse your changing contours.  
    You will be here, expanding, when we  
        Have gone.

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Singapore

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