

## Ahead My Father Moves

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Ahead my father moves, his limp gait  
canted to the left, an iambic beat I trail  
after, urging him on, tagged to his shadow's wake,  
willing his legs on so that this city stays alive, keeps  
us alive, so its streets and arcades will not disappear.

Through Cecil Street he walks, his pace  
pained but unflagging, and a whole precinct  
rises from ash, the five-foot-way stirring to life,  
the bilingual shop-signs unspooling as if lit  
by my dad's passage, their auspicious Chinese

names scrolled in red or gold, the medical hall  
with jars of herbal cures, the goldsmith with its armed  
guard, the dried goods store retailing salted fish,  
the *chettians* auditing their ledgers, all restored,  
alive with the old-world chat of customer and proprietor.

Past Malacca Street to Raffles Place 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, the Arcade and Robinsons  
resurrected from the giddy smoke, each puff  
a genie's breath materialising the civic heart

of the city. It is 1970 and we have not lost  
each other or the city; we drift along the length  
of the Alley, the stalls signalling us on, the souvenir  
shops, the sundry goods, the moneychangers

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egging us on, giving us back the lost years.

We walk past the loan sharks, past his bankruptcy, past  
the accident and the limp, past the clot in the brain,  
and past the mistakes, to his prime, and he is carrying  
me on his shoulders, as I will my son a life  
and death ahead, and I am above the bazaar,

an eyrie from above his brilliantined hair.  
I ride him like a camel through the bustling souk,  
catching whiffs of worlds out there, prodding  
my father on with my silent pleas, the two  
of us travelling above the currents of time.

Then I am carrying him, as I will carry the fullpack  
and mines in the army, as I will carry his absence  
around the world. He urges me on with gentle  
kicks, a tired rider who knows we must not stop  
or the desert will close in, and night

will take him from his son. He walks me  
to the end of the Alley, past the place  
where my poetry has come from, past  
the end to the beginning, the beginning  
to end, then back again, to the close of time.

## Clear Brightness

Kim Cheng Boey

The house and yard dressed in a skin of ash  
when we return. It was raining embers,  
the night air thronged with giddy petals  
that swirled on the updraft, flared  
to incandescence before curling into papery  
ash, as we fled around midnight, my son  
bewildered in my arms, his sister bright-eyed,  
exclaiming, *It's snowing*, Christmas just weeks away.

We sweep the aftermath like penitents, the air  
acidic, shriven, ashen, as it was on the day  
of Qing Ming, Clear Brightness, in another life,  
when families filed to the tombs with broom,  
rice wine, boiled whole chicken and fruits, and stacks  
of paper money, gold and silver currency  
valid only in afterlife. The dead were fed,  
their abodes swept, and the filial queue  
of joss offered. Then the money was given  
in fanned reams to the flames, transferred  
to replenish the ancestors' underworld credit.  
Once Grandma brought us to the cemetery,  
dragging us in tow with armfuls of offerings,  
filing up and down the crowded ranks  
for the right address. I don't remember whose grave  
it was we were tending, or Grandma telling us  
to pray. Only a blurred oval photo of a man  
on the worn headstone, and the hundreds of fires  
around us, the air swimming  
with ash-drifts, the sun eclipsed in the smoke  
but its heat made more palpable by the pall  
that hung over the day. I imagined the ancestors  
catching the burned money like willow catkins, turning  
them into real millions that they could send back  
to bail my father out of bankruptcy.

We burned money too in the month  
of the hungry ghosts, when the gates of hell  
were opened, and tormented souls were let loose

to roam and haunt the living realm.  
On the fifteenth night, Grandma steered us  
down to the field below the flats to join the households  
already staking out their ground with planted  
joss, candles, and improvised burners.  
Into the furnace that Grandma had made  
out of an empty Knife Brand cooking oil can,  
we dealt the red and gold printed bills  
and prayed to Ti Gong to watch  
over us and keep the ghosts from our door.  
My heart caught to see the millions curl  
and burn, the greedy tongues of flames  
devouring, leaping with each handful;  
the dark sky curdled and grew sullen,  
sparks ghosting the billows of smoke.  
In my child's mind the two festivals bled  
into each other, a succession of days and nights  
that burned, turned grey, and left the streets  
strewn with an ashen aftermath.

Now the graves are razed, the bones unhoused,  
ashed, and relocated to columbaria to make  
space for the living, and the hungry ghosts  
are fed money from a communal burner.  
Grandma and my father turned  
Catholic, and have no use for paper money  
or earthly feasts.

Here the bush is charred, the trees  
splintered, pulverised like my dad's bones  
after cremation. The ash taste clings  
to the house, even after hosing and sweeping.  
It seeps into my dreams, into the new life  
I have made, and in my sleep it is still raining  
ash, flakes falling like memory, on my dead settling  
like a snow-drift of forgetting.