Ahead My Father Moves

Kim Cheng Boey
University of Newcastle, Australia

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 chettiars 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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1 Kim Cheng Boey has published four collections of poetry and a travel memoir entitled Between Stations. He teaches at the University of Newcastle in Australia.
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 acrid, 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.