Boey Kim Cheng, *Clear Brightness: New Poems*. Singapore: Epigram Books, 2012. 57 pp. ISBN 9789810741822.

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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