

Tiong Bahru

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However you may have intended it to be
a continuity from the ease of student life,
you knew that Jules had only conceded
when her arguments skipped banging tables
to knocking over chairs, and Jack's uncaring
fluidity, with which he picked up chicks in Rouge,
drew a yes without a thought from him, and I,
well, I wasn't there to make up the number.
That the Tiong Bahru flat was your granny's
and she in a home for senile dementia meant
we didn't have to meet rent, but to feed four
fresh mouths with no jobs and babyskin hopes
was enough to uncover unknown deaths in us.
We swallowed our prides in scrounging
used stock bones from the corner *zi char* stall
to top plain white rice with a dash of soy sauce.
Jack picked cigarette butts off the pavements
to roll slim blends we would pass around,
which even I could not resist. Evenings
we breathed out at the door, with the swishing
of the sweeps of cleaners scratching our ears
lightly. Dusk was hazily sad. I knew I could
go back, but if I'd imagined common suffering
would tear up the fabric that marked bedless space
and entitled no one to secret feelings then
I hadn't grasped how accentuated lonelinesses
could build to selfishness like an electric current
about to blow a fuse, and how, when you
found a job and moved out, it was as though

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by an unnecessary gesture you had set down
how sure you were what we had was not ours
to claim. I know now that I can think back
without hopelessly contained rage that you
were in your own confidence correct, that
we had come together in happy convenience,
and finally that some places and circumstances
don't belong to us now, maybe never did.

Photography in the Age of Digital

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The third time I went to Bangkok I didn't even bring my camera, which is not to say that I knew the place so well nor that it had suddenly lost what gave it colour, but that I was no longer in the same need of scrapbook memories. I went to my Bangkok tailor by a route I knew by walking, and the way he fussed over me brought me back to being a schoolboy in a camera shop in Peninsula Plaza, where the salesman who looked after me either thought of his own son or was glad just to have someone other than tourists to speak to, for he sold me my first Nikon for less than what he got from a Korean walk-in a few weeks later, when I dropped by. Or else he guessed I would make good use of it, would come back for telephoto and macro lenses – different ways of seeing the object I was training my eye on – or he already knew what it was like to have shot one's life in pieces, and to be a piece of someone else's life, however like an impression in shot silk, is not to be missed, whatever the lighting and the film speed, just as freezing things on silver halides is less important than what it says to have tried, for repeated trials tell the photographer all he needs to know about who he has been and where he is, and other such cheaply purchased knowledge.