

Walking between Land and Water: Pedestrian Poetics in the Poetry of Shirley Geok-lin Lim

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Abstract

“Walking between Land and Water” weaves an exploration of the tropes of walking and liminality in the poetry of Shirley Geok-lin Lim into an essay-portrait of the poet at her home in Santa Barbara. It tracks the poet as she takes her daily walk on the beach, and sees how this mundane act furnishes a mobile poetic that articulates the contradictions and complexities of her diasporic history and condition. Focussing on her most recent collection of poems, *Walking Backwards*, the essay also picks out the major shifts in her work, especially the change to a more transnational key.

Keywords

Asian American, Malaysian, diaspora, identity, migration, home

With her baseball cap and backpack, her red fleece jacket zipped up against the winter chill, her small, slim frame, and brisk, energetic stride, she cuts a singular figure, veering to avoid the lapping foamy tides, the scrambling beachhoppers and sandcrabs, and huge reeking piles of kelp deposited by the pounding surf. She pauses, stoops to admire, then bags a grapefruit-size turban shell, and then moves on. Out on the rollers wet-suited surfers are paddling and riding the curling waves; above them gulls lace the sounds of wind and water with their ragged cries.

She is in her element, at home here on Sand Beach, where Jim Morrison is said to have written “The Crystal Ship” on an acid trip. Behind the high chaparral-fringed bluffs the quiet neighbourhood of Isla Vista fans out to merge with the UCSB campus. Through the sun-splashed suburban sprawl the 60s counterculture had swept through, leaving in its wake a straggle of unkempt houses painted in psychedelic colours, ex-hippies smoking on the porch, and dreadlocked New Age youths walking barefoot on the tree-lined backstreets. Shirley gestures over a crumbling cliff to the place where in 1970 student riots resulted in the torching of the Bank of America building. Yesterday she brought me on a tour of the campus, a beautiful place of learning right on the edge of the Pacific. It was touching to see a queue of students waylaying her, young

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people of diverse ethnic and hybrid backgrounds who saw in this middle-aged Asian woman a source of inspiration and nourishment, generous with her time and advice, her formidable reputation as scholar-writer, her piecing intelligence, her untiring energy and zest, and her maternal concern making her one of the most sought-after professors on either side of the Pacific.

Here I have to keep up with this feisty woman poet, whose face brightens with delight at a gorgeous turban. She is still very much the child in the poem “When,” a few lifetimes and crossings away, the Malacca waterfront a distant but vivid echo:

When I was a child, I would watch the spray
Break phosphorescence at my feet then run away.
There was so much sea, always rhythmically
And gently pulling to the horizon. (*Listening to the Singer* 3)

The inexorable call of the horizon has led to an emigrant life here on a different coast, and the horizon, which runs like a meridian through Shirley’s work, has since acquired new and more ambivalent resonances, the horizon of the past shading into the more elusive, fraught horizon/s of the migrant. In the poem the child prefigures the emigrant woman, her departure from the beach foreshadowing the diasporic path of the grown-up: “till you knew it was time to be home soon,/ And straightaway left with no backward glance” (*Listening to the Singer* 3). The mounting irony is unmistakable in the last line; the idea of home is displaced from its Malaccan childhood setting into diasporic ambivalence, and the adult migrant who has spent a good half of her life in her place of birth cannot resist the “backward glance.” In her memoir *Among the White Moon Faces*, Shirley says: “The dominant imprint I have carried with me since birth was of a Malaysian homeland. It has been imperative for me to make sense of these birthmarks; they compose the hieroglyphs of my body’s senses” (341).

I can discern an echo of yearning in her eyes, as she takes her glasses to wipe the salt spray off: the longing for the irretrievable, a certain homesickness that is hard to distinguish from homelessness, is a dominant note in her works, even though she has made a home and a career here on the Californian coast. Although there is affirmation and even ebullience in discovering hybrid spaces and new formations in the adopted country, it is tempered by the knowledge that return is impossible; the pain of separation persists, along with the acceptance that there is no going home, in the way that those who have remained can. She has avoided using the word “exile” in her work, for the emigrant’s experience does not entail the irrevocability and pain of banishment, the punitive state that comes with involuntary exile. Still, emigration brings “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted,” to quote

Edward Said's reflection on exile. Said adds: "The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever" (*Reflections* 173). This bass note of loss is audible in Shirley's prose, academic and creative, and her poetry. In "Visiting Malacca" she confesses: "I am losing/ Ability to make myself at home" (*Listening to the Singer* 113).

Here on Sand Beach we pause and I follow her gaze out beyond the breakers to the horizon pegged at intervals by oil rigs, the border-line that is a no place, a threshold, liminal zone that is betwixt and between, to use the concept that Victor Turner borrowed from Arnold Van Gennep's *Les rites de passage*, in which liminality is delineated as having three stages – separation, whereby the individual is taken out of the community, then the liminal period of transition and change, followed by reassimilation. The concept, originally applied in anthropology, provides an illuminating paradigm for the migrant experience. That is why the beach and the horizon, potent images of liminality, anchor and determine the trajectory of Shirley's work. The coast is both a point of departure and return, and the walk along it reconciles past and present, coast and coast, loss and memory. Along its margins she has written her narrative of separation and loss, displacement and quest for coherence, rediscovering and reinventing her self and the past, finding on the Pacific coast "True reconcilings, dark, pacific words" (Stevens 144).

On the beach she is in her element, her paces walk-writing the margin, her liminal self operating on the margins of a predominantly white America and a predominantly Malay Malaysia; she also inhabits the margins of a patriarchal order and literary establishments where her liminal status renders her an outsider, and the fringes of academia because she is an anomaly – a scholar-poet-novelist who cross-writes. Victor Turner's anthropological category of marginals is useful here: "Marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity" (233). The coastline is thus a reverberating presence in her poems, the beach her domain, a place of shifting margins, an open, fluid site where the issues she has wrestled with in her creative opus and her academic oeuvre – displacement, migration, home, belonging, identity, nationality, culture – are played out in meditative walks. Coastal tropes recur, forming an imaginary littoral that reconfigures landscape and memory into a topos telescoping disparate geographies, cultures and languages into a narrative poetic. If the coast is a point of departure and flight, it is also a site of return and memory. In one of few elegies for a long-ago lover, "Cremation at Sea," the Santa Barbara beach becomes a memorial site, and the poet's walk a ritual that integrates the memory of a failed relationship into her emigrant life, thus turning absence into presence:

So now I look
 Out at the Pacific waiting for him
 To wash ashore here where I walk
 Each week, speckled in the grains
 That catch at my toes and turned-up jeans
 And that I will sprinkle in my garden
 In California, where he had never been. (*Listening to the Singer* 5)

In a poignant way this looks back at “Monsoon History,” where the father figure appears on the Malaccan beach: “Waiting for father pacing/ The sand as fishers pull/ From the Straits after monsoon” (*Listening to the Singer* 130).

In the poem “I Remember,” memory is hindsight, looking back comprehendingly at the child who was looking out at the sea: “I remember clearly child and sea./ With time both have grown surer” (*Listening to the Singer* 6). It is an act of self-reclamation, reconnecting with the child and the sea of memory: “I see her, now, the scene of a scene,/ Planted eminent as the sky,/ As sea she had enclosed in eye” (*Listening to the Singer* 6). Memory is an act of crossing, or rather, recrossing, and seeing what was invisible or not seen before, the routes and roots uncovered now with the benefit of retrospect. Real and imaginary returns abound in her work, back to Malacca, to Asia, and to the memories of her parents. These are journeys as much of atonement, reconciliation and acceptance as they are of exploration and self-discovery. While father poems like “Bukit China” and mother poems like “My Mother Wasn’t” memorialise the dead parents and heal the rift between parent and child, the work of memory is also forward-looking, providing the necessary reference points as she negotiates the liminal zone between past and present. She admits: “Buried in the details of an American career, my life as a non-American persists, a parallel universe played out in dreams, in journeys home to Malaysia and Singapore” and that from these return visits she derives “an ineffable sense of completion, a satiety of recognitions” (*Among the White Moon Faces* 305). James Clifford’s observation about the diasporic state is apt here: “Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (255).

Here on Santa Barbara beach we admire the gulls, their tenacity, and the alert and graceful way in which they hover. They are truly liminal creatures. If I were to find a totem creature for Shirley, it would be the seagull, most at home in the in-between zone, foraging, gleaning, waiting and riding the wind between land and sea. These liminal birds populate the strand of Shirley’s poems; in “Crossing the Peninsula,” they carry the freight of the longing to return to the place of birth: “We dream like grey gulls blown inland,/ Or as one-eyed ships, blow, espying/ The bright-shelled peninsula” (*Listening to the Singer* 7). In a later

poem “Horizon,” the gulls are less tethered to a destination; they are displaced and adrift:

The scene pierced by presences
 And absence that says nothing
 But changes you and the horizon
 And the gulls flying out of the horizon. (*Listening to the Singer* 134)

Here the gulls are emblems of loss, the preposition suggesting flight rather than arrival. The repetition of the word “horizon,” intended or not, underscores the doubleness of identity and the riven state of the migrant mind. The poet is on her favourite beach, waiting, watching, as if the past were not dead, and as if the father could wash up on an alien shore: “Eyes fixed on the eternal/ Horizon eternally wavering.” The horizon is a liminal zone of absence and presence, the paradox an inalienable fact of the migrant’s life, whose narrative is still tied to the deaths and absences of the remembered/forgotten home:

Today it’s white sky haze, cold
 Color, and I am newly
 Beset by trouble, turning toward
 The old and the new dead
 For news of future weather. (*Listening to the Singer* 134)

The horizon is never a stable reference point, but unsettled by contrary tides of memory and loss, departure and arrival, absence and presence. For the marginal who has chosen “to walk between water and land,” her life will “bend/ To the rapidly rolling horizon” (*Listening to the Singer* 8). It is a place of openness and change, of separation and connection, its meanings to be plotted by crossings, a trope that informs Shirley’s work from the beginning. Crossing as leaving, evoking the first crossing, the ancestral departure from China, across the China Sea to the Malay Peninsula; then crossing as double or re-migration, the descendent taking the diasporic path, across a wider water, to a more distant coast. Crossing also as a liminal act, the indefinite state between departure and arrival.

We are back at Shirley’s split-level, grey-rendered brick home in a middle-class suburb a few miles from the campus. We have walked to the shops about two kilometres away, and then walked back around a nature reserve. A Chinese family down the street is just back from Shanghai – a pair of secateurs and gardening gloves are scattered on the front lawn; the lemons have ripened on another neighbour’s tree, and the local bus is running late. Nothing escapes Shirley’s attention in this neighbourhood lined with eucalypts, oaks and California pines. Behind us the late-afternoon sun gilds the Santa Ynez Mountains, which in the morning is draped in a quilt of mist. Shirley has talked

about retiring to a ranch in the hills, but it is hard to believe she can wean herself from the coast. The burnish on the flanks of the mountains has a summerish feel to it, and one can easily forget that it is mid-winter, though beyond the mountains and in parts of Arizona and New Mexico where I travelled last week snow has fallen. In the poem “Memory Loss” Shirley says: “There are few winters in Santa Barbara,/ Only sun, blue skies, creamy surf most days” and it is easy to “lose/ Shades of father and mother,/ shadows of images in negatives” (22). That is why so much of her work is memory work, and walking is mnemonic practice, keeping things alive, the walks creating a spatial poetics informed by the dialectic between home and elsewhere, memory and loss.

Shirley is an inveterate walker, and on the few days we have spent together she has put me through my paces. One gets the feeling that walking is a necessity, perhaps even more so than writing, or perhaps each drives the other. She is in the company of walker-poets like William Wordsworth and Wallace Stevens, who have composed entire poems on their daily walks. Shirley says: “I was writing poems as I was walking. I was able to take that restlessness, that nomadic distraction, and use that distraction in the world and turn that distraction into observations and then into poems” (Newton 7). She takes in her stride the here and now, alert to the shifts and nuances of landscape and people, but is also attuned to an inner landscape of memory called up by the act of travel. Walking and writing become intertwined, twin acts that articulate and map out spatio-temporal relations, in the textual spaces of the landscape and body. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau observes: “What this walking exile produces is precisely the body of legends that is currently lacking in one’s own vicinity; it is a fiction, which moreover has the double characteristic like dreams or pedestrian rhetoric, or being the effect of displacements and condensations. As a corollary, one can measure the importance of these signifying practices (to tell oneself legends) as practices that invent spaces” (107).

Earlier we walked up and down the main street of Santa Barbara, from the old white-washed Spanish Mission at the top end to Stearns Wharf on the Pacific and along the city beach. She seems most alive on the hoof, her senses keen and her pace steady, practising the ethnopoetics that she outlines as an *ars poetica* in her seminal essay “Reconstructing Asian-American Poetry.” She points out the new Vietnamese restaurant, the Korean and Taiwanese grocery stores, the African and Hispanic shops, quick to pick out the multicultural colours and flavours that challenge and revise the Anglo-American bias of Santa Barbara. Yesterday we went to a Mexican swap meet in Goleta, where she revelled in the carnival feel of a Mexican fiesta, and bought *tamales* from an old Mexican with handlebar moustache and sad eyes, his bucket of *tamales* hung from the crook of his arm.

I am now in the upper-floor guest room of Shirley's house. It is snugly packed with bric-a-bracs collected from a lifetime of travelling. There are a few Tibetan *tankas*, and silk paintings and embroideries from Vietnam and Burma, and a teak trunk filled with souvenirs. There are also books ranged along the walls and piled on the floor. Downstairs the living and dining rooms are richly furnished with souvenirs and antiques from around the world: African masks, Mexican sculptures, Vietnamese tapestry, Chinese tea-sets, Buddhas and Boddhisatvas from Nepal and Burma. Travelling cultures. Of collecting Walter Benjamin says: "For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?" (60). He remarks of the relationship between the collector and his collection: "Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them" (67). Shirley's life is metonymically represented in the rich and varied collection of objects. Most striking and telling are the reminders of Malacca: the antique lacquer tiffins, the Peranakan embroideries, the Straits Chinese porcelain bowls and plates, and other curios that embody her hybrid heritage. Her eclectic collection also bespeaks a cosmopolitan mind, and an itinerant professorship; she spends half the year as a global academic on residences and lecture tours in Europe and Asia. Even as I read her latest collection of poems *Walking Backwards*, she is already discussing with her professor husband Chuck their travel plans for the summer and next year.

Walking Backwards, as the title suggests, is strewn with walks, the sense of movement more pronounced and intense than in previous collections. The trope of backward-walking can be found in "Huntington Gardens" from *what the fortune teller didn't say*, when the poet and her friend "walk looking/backwards" (69). Walking backwards implies taking a retrospective look, reviewing the past and returning to one's beginnings, letting memory take a long walk. In Anne Carson's prose poem "On Walking Backwards" the dead lag behind the living: "My mother forbade us to walk backwards. That is how the dead walk, she would say. Where did she get this idea? Perhaps from a bad translation. The dead, after all, do not walk backwards but they do walk behind us. They have no lungs and cannot call out but would love for us to turn around" (36). Shirley also turns back to look at her dead, making numerous return trips, actual and imaginary, to deal with them, in her memoir and earlier poems. Strangely, in this new collection where walking backwards would suggest an even more retrospective trajectory, there is no return in memory or fact to the place of birth, or to the parents who loom large in earlier collections. The walking backwards has more to do with *taichi*, where the movement achieves health and balance. Kierkegaard's paradox "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards" (164) also helps to illuminate the retro-movement. While the backward looks and return visits in her poetry and prose have set up a dialectic between America and Asia, and

created bifocal poetics of seeing one place in terms of another, *Walking Backwards* explores new territory rather than rehearse the old binaries, and thus Malacca and her father are tellingly absent. Instead there is a transnational poetic in action, the poems tracking the footloose poet from Puget Sound to Newcastle in Australia, to Hong Kong and China, Kathmandu, Pamplona and Innsbruck, with Santa Barbara as a cardinal point, and the walk motif as a constant.

The collection opens with the familiar figure of the poet scavenging on Double Bluff Beach on Whidbey Island in Washington State, collecting “shells and stones/ That weigh down my backpack” (5). It is inviting to read the act of the gleaning as a metaphor for writing, the poet composing her self on the wet margin of the beach as she picks her way, the spoils like found poems composing the poem and the poet’s thoughts. “Seaweeds” moves to Puget Sound, the poet walking “furthest out in the Sound” at ebb tide, “a quarter mile/ Of sand flats rippling on an on like washboards/ Laid end to end.” It is a poem of stocktaking, taking soundings of the place and the poet’s own life, as she says goodbye to her son. She admits her limits: “But I cannot walk/ These flats endlessly. I must turn back...” (7). In another Puget Sound poem, “Open Beach,” the location evoked by the title and the imagery, and the walk on the strand underscore the poet’s liminality: “I measure distances toward/ And between to find my place.” The few families picnicking on the beach only serve to enhance the loneliness of the landscape and the poet’s alienation, the rollcall of Asian destinations and their transnational diasporic networks failing to provide any connection:

Foghorns of a container shop bellow,
Trundling off the Sound toward a yellow
Sunset, across the Pacific, to Hong Kong
Bangkok, Singapore, Manila, Hanoi, Tokyo.
All Asia where the ocean stops is shadowless
In this picture. The waves talk louder, crest

As the tide turns. Soon all will be water
Where mother packs her picnic basket, father
Buttons his shirt. I begin in criticism
And end in absorption, staring at Rainier
Rising blue and white, with the children
Fatter than any cloud on any horizon. (9)

The poet remains an outsider, unable to connect with the landscape or people.

Walking Backwards can be read as a travel collection, an émigré poet taking soundings of foreign places and her liminal condition. The gaze shifts from one side of the Pacific to the other, to the waterfront city of Newcastle in Australia.

Here is where I met Shirley for the first time, as she took up residence at the Lock-Up in the historic heart of Newcastle. One evening I accompanied her on her daily walk to the beach, and she said how much she felt at home in Newcastle, knowing that California is over the horizon, the Pacific connecting the two shores “the Pacific,/ Her heaving bosom stretched between/ Rivals gazing from opposite shores” (27). We talked about emigration, about how you can never quite go home again, and I sensed one who had multiple attachments to places, but who was also detached and could be at home anywhere. I felt I was in the company of a traveller who has achieved the state that Said refers to, quoting Eric Auerbach, who in turn got the words from Hugo of St. Victor: “The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land” (*Reflections* 185). Said elaborates: “The more one is able to leave one’s cultural home, the more easily one is able to judge it, and the world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity of vision necessary for true vision. The more easily, too, does one assess oneself and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance” (*Orientalism* 269). This mix of intimacy and distance came across very strongly as we talked about Australia and California; she could as easily live here on this side of the Pacific as remain on the other, and this ambivalent attitude is discernible in the coastal poems in *Walking Backwards*:

Blue skies and ocean air
 The same as home, leaving home is mere practice
 For leaving all, all the leavings learned
 Again and again, until goodbye becomes
 Addictive, last look behind, first look forward,
 What you carry everywhere. (28)

Her cosmopolitanism is tinged with unease, the transitoriness of the traveller through the landscape deferring or making impossible any sense of homecoming.

Indeed there is in *Walking Backwards* a sense of displacement and placelessness that accrues from ceaseless travelling and temporary sojourns in Asia and Europe. The multiple attachments and affiliations to a diverse spectrum of locales and cultures that characterise her earlier work seem to have been displaced by a weary detachment, a deeper unresolved sense of homelessness, or homelooseness, James Wood calls it, “in which the ties that might bind one to Home have been loosened, perhaps happily, perhaps unhappily, perhaps permanently, perhaps only temporarily” (“On Not Going Home”). In the earlier collections, there is a chord of homesickness, in varying audibility, a need to return, but here in these nomadic, footloose poems there is little or none of it. In “No Place” the placelessness is evident: “Everywhere is

new and strange-familiar when there is nothing to return to... settling with no memory, an immigrant story” (68). Rather than celebrate transnational mobility and global citizenship, the poetry here seems to disengage and withdraw into liminality. In a bus to Kathmandu the poet asserts: “No longer Asian I am free to move either way: honoured by men, dishonoured traveller without father, husband, or brother” (66). This, and the numerous poems that are movement-driven, including the walking ones, suggest a state of transit, a liminal stage that does not seem to have any arrival in sight. In “Passport” the poet is walking towards the Chinese border, during a long academic sojourn in Hong Kong:

I am walking backwards into China
 Where everyone looks like me
 And no one is astonished at my passport
 Declares I am foreign, only
 Envious at my good luck. Speechless,
 Without a tongue of China,
 I remember Grandfather’s hands, Grandma’s
 Tears. On Causeway Bay, ten thousand
 Cousins walk beside me, a hundred
 Thousand brothers and sisters. (35)

The walking backwards towards in the direction of the poet’s ancestral homeland provides a fleeting sense of solidarity, as she almost loses her liminal outsidership in the throngs of commuters, migrants and travellers, a transient community that she identifies with. It is a brief celebration of cross-national mobility, a transnational moment in an in-between zone. But China remains an idea, and the poet’s ties to it are symbolic rather than actual, the only real link embodied in the memory of her grandparents. Her own hybrid nature, the entangled strands of her make-up, Peranakan, Chinese, Malaysian, Asian-American, with multiple attachments to places like Singapore and Hong Kong, and her own emigration, preclude any real homecoming. She does “not enter” the “celestial kingdom” and chooses to “sit here. Safe, on the wrong side/ Of the border” (38). The border is where she is at home, albeit temporarily, in her liminal self. And the long residence in Hong Kong ends in an ambiguous state: “Have thought hard about/ Where I am going. Lost./ And where I want to go. Home” (48), with the unsettled question of where home is.

Walking Backwards is relieved by returns back to Santa Barbara, which unsettles the notion of home and return. Earlier the return was back to the ancestral town of Malacca; now it is displaced by something less certain. In “After Forever” the daily walk through her neighbourhood yields a moment of respite and recognition, however transient, as she encounters her self, as she “was half a century and more ago/ Under an equatorial sun.” She embraces her immigrant past, and tries to align it with the present:

Like an immigrant
 Stopping to sit curbside,
 Trunk filled with clothing
 Five sizes too small, saved
 For decades while she waits to shrink
 Back to size, to return
 To someone else's residence, that first home
 Of the child's hand-me-down dress,
 Waiting then to devour
 The apple of this sunlit world,
 The scene after forever.
 When did I give up forever
 For the slow walk and goodbye,
 Steps pacing a street in late afternoon? (72)

The result is temporary accommodation and weary acceptance rather than joyful affirmation. The pain of severance, of irrevocable break and exile from "forever."

As I close the book and start to pack, I am already missing our walks on the beach and through downtown Santa Barbara, our bodies inventing a space of memory as I tried to keep with Shirley's nimble, assured and alert stride. Already I find myself walking backwards to that morning on Isla Vista beach, fathoming this woman poet's vitality, the source of her strength, her restlessness, her walking poetry. She peers in to check that I have all that I need for Mexico, and warns me again to be alert and adds that dinner is ready. I put my pen and notebook away, and follow her down to our farewell meal.

Gleaning, Santa Barbara

for Shirley

The storm had left a ragged marginalia
 of tangled, stinking kelp, primeval cables torn
 from the deeps, and scattered windfalls of shells,
 iridescent abalone, glistening scallops and cowries,
 vacant urchin huts, and those bulbous turbans
 scrubbed clean on the washboard of the beach,
 gorgeous mollusk whorls wound
 like a Sikh or Mameluke headgear.

The aftermaths of storms are best, you said,
 the ocean's largesse wildly flung and strewn
 for combers like you, armed with hat and bag.
 In the pounding Pacific light I see us now,
 measuring our tread in the salt and spume-laced air,
 you alert to the errant, overreaching wave,

pulling the wrapt me back, your other eye trained
to pick out the choicest shell and stone.

We talked, strayed, paused and stooped
to our dim forms on the mirroring sand to glean,
the patient plovers our fellow combers, while the gulls
and terns rode above the rollers, or stood unfazed,
their seaward gaze travelling past the waiting surfers,
the vague Channel Islands and the rig-pegged horizon,
west to the east we've come from. You handed me a turban
and I weighed its encrusted heft, traced its furrowed spirals

unravelling the routes, the migrant tides that have landed
you on this coast, and me washed up on the other side
of the Pacific. I heard the echoes that have travelled
across the years, the wave on wave that hands us back
to another sea, and on its shore the lives we'd left,
our dead, the stories that have gone on, to the young woman
anguished by love and politics, and the young man
not knowing what he wanted till it was too late.

As you marvelled at a hand-sized pebble, listening
to its veins and the vast spaces between its home
unplumbed fathoms away and where it rests on your palm,
I understood the home you've made out of things,
the hoard of Chinese vases, tea sets, *kwanyins*
in manifold forms, and frayed Peranakan tapestries
made of the forgotten, forbidden stitch, secreting
stories that bring Malacca back; and bamboo tiffin-

carriers, their scarred and faded red and black
lacquered tiers holding ghosts of feasts,
home-cooked food we crave. 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.

For a brief moment, so brief it must have gone
when I turned to you, I felt at home
among the tidewrack, the talismanic turban
in hand, between the tumbling cliffs
and the sea endlessly revising its script.
We turned back, buoyed by the morning's pickings,
erasing, rewriting the tracks we had made

between shells, stones, and between migrant lives. (Boey 44)

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