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BOEY KIM CHENG

First Singaporean edition with a new afterword

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BETWEEN STATIONS

Essays

BOEY KIM CHENG

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To my family, Wah Fong, Yen and Patrick.

First God invented the voyage—
then came doubt—then nostalgia.

Ulysses' Gaze,
a film by Theodore Angelopoulos

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O CALCUTTA

THERE IS A handful of places in my life that don't seem to change and Calcutta is one. It is the constant you come back to, against which you measure the changes in your life, the changes in the place you come from. While the only constant in Singapore is change, in Calcutta you can trust the buildings and people to be still there on your next visit. The things you noted in your journal on the first trip still hold. Dum Dum airport is in the same state: the dusky atmosphere in the customs hall, the same under-the-breath solicitation for baksheesh. It is like coming back to a beginning, the start of your first real journey.

When I left Calcutta in 1994, a journey terminated by a mysterious virus that took two months in Singapore to dislodge, I said never again. Now, three years later, riding the ravaged roads in a battered Ambassador cab, with a frozen speedometer and a door secured with wire, a stale marigold garland swinging from the rearview mirror, the faded pictures of Shiva and Ganesh on the dash, with an Englishman who looks a wreck here for a cure, I feel I am returning to an unfinished story. The squat, chubby Ambassador is a survivor, still roadworthy after twenty or more years of use, kept in shape with improvisatory repairs; I have missed its bouncy and spacious ride. The dimly-lit hovels lining the road from Dum Dum, the parched brown fields, the omnipresent mounds of refuse picked at by crows and mangy dogs, the stagnant drains and pools of malarial waters, the loitering cows and overburdened buffalo-carts, and then the familiar grimy tenement blocks, the garish Bollywood billboards and snarling traffic. The driver blasts his way

through a crowded street, takes a corner with reckless abandon, cleaving through dhotis and saris, trotting rickshaws and overladen carts pulled by abused bullocks or by an equally scrawny human team. As only happens in India, or rather in Calcutta, the driver gets out at a traffic light, opens the hood and feeds the thirsty engine with water. At another set of lights, he starts a chat with a neighbouring taxi-driver, gets out and walks over to his compatriot for a more intimate communication. Finally, his taxi, which has outshone all first-world Mercedes-Benzes in usefulness and lifespan, grinds to a halt and you are back on Sudder Street, the backpacker hub. It is the end of a winter day, the twilight giving the street a peaceful aura, and for a moment you have the illusion you have come home.

The street vendors are still there, their devotee backpackers ranged round for chow mein and chai. At street corners, in the lanes off Sudder Street, small groups of Bengalis and backpackers trying to go native confabulate, negotiating the ganja or sharing remedies for illnesses private and universal. Beside you a hand-bell clangs and a rickshaw wallah asks a hopeful "Rickshaw?" as though he has waited faithfully for your return.

After wishing the morose Englishman a good trip and shrugging off the cab-driver's routine demand for more money, I make for the landmark red front of the Salvation Army hostel. The moustachioed warden in a grey safari suit assigns me an upper bed in a dank room with a few straggling straws of light. I clamber on board. The structure trembles violently, its groans rousing the slumbering figure on the lower bed. Bodies persecuted by all classes of illness have ridden on it and the holey bedsheet is testimony again to the Indian ingenuity in making things serve beyond their natural lifespan. The cadaver below fumbles in his pack. I shift to find the best position.

An invigorating smell seeks my senses, an unmistakably Calcuttan odour that I find especially strong in the Red Shield hostel. A mustiness laced with strong disinfectant, dim mildewed rooms and damp mattresses, the odour of a place that has been inhabited continuously by shoestring travellers. It has been years but the odiferous tendrils bridge

all distances. Seven years ago I bunked here with a Japanese volunteer at Mother Theresa's, an American Japanese artist on a three-year trip around the world, and a Korean who with his mountain bike was attempting to travel overland from India to China via Nepal. In those days, the blackouts were more frequent, and we would sit around the candles and share our life stories. I wonder where they are now. How easy the friendships of the road are. Especially in India. It has a way of connecting people that no other country can.

Perhaps that is why I have come back, to connect or reconnect, to find a permanent solution to the restlessness in me, to my quarrel with Singapore and with myself. My wife and I have acquired permanent residence in Australia and this trip will be different from the others. I start from Calcutta and will finish the year's travel in Sydney. Emigrating is a blind leap, a desperate act rather than something planned. We don't know anything about Australia and are uprooting ourselves without any jobs to go to. Now that the long farewell has commenced, I wonder if

it is the right move. For all the faults I find with Singapore, there is too much I treasure, the few remaining favourite haunts and my friends. I am not sure what I want, beyond the immediate wish not to have to return to a place that I have to call home. To be gone permanently.

Perhaps this yearlong trip is to delay the landing, to cushion the arrival in the new country. Strange that I should be travelling westward from where I am meant to settle. Perhaps I am hoping that somewhere along the way, I will discover a sense of arrival, a turning point, the journey entering into a different stage, some kind of meridian, so that some day I will be able to look back on it and see my life rounding a corner, a falling towards rather than a flight from home.

Since graduation I had drifted from job to job. Disillusioned with what I'd seen of academia, and wanting to do social work but lacking the qualifications, I signed up for the Prisons Service and was assigned to a drug rehabilitation centre in Selarang. But I knew in the first week that I wouldn't last. As part of the job training and orientation, I had to witness a caning session. The sight of the inmates being queued up with nothing on but a loincloth, and the indifferent expressions of the officers and wardens as the razor-thin cane lashed the exposed buttocks of the inmate tied to a rack, told me I was in the wrong place.

And then I was brought on a tour of the death row. Most of those waiting to be hanged were drug traffickers, and the amount in many cases was just a little over the death-penalty clincher of fifteen grams. These were the most "privileged" inmates in Changi; they were well fed and had their own cells. They smiled and greeted me, but there was an indescribable look in their eyes that has remained with me: a mixture of embarrassment, remorse, peace and terror. One was sitting locked in meditation, his shaven head facing a picture of the Buddha on the wall. I was directed to a man sitting bowed in a corner of his cell. He looked up at me with a resigned but pained expression. He was a graduate and his involvement in a heroin-smuggling operation had been arguably minimal; he had arranged the flights for the carriers. At the end of the week, he would be dangling from the gallows.

My job as assistant superintendent was more punitive than reformative. Most of the staff were cynical about the idea of rehabilitation. The inmates were third-time offenders, addicts who had already been institutionalised twice, and were now in for three years. I managed the staff and did what little counselling I could to make the job bearable. Most of the time I was called to mete out punishment to inmates who infringed the rules: smuggling tobacco into the camp (smoking was forbidden), fighting, disobedience, sexual offences and so on.

The next job was more like a continuation of my Prisons Service experience, except that I wasn't required to wear a uniform. As a probation officer my clients were juvenile delinquents with the potential to graduate to prison or a drug rehabilitation centre. Almost all the case histories read the same: broken families, three-tier families packed into one-room flats, the abusive or absent father who spent most of his time in prison and the rehab centres, where one day they would meet their sons. Most of the youths were enlisted in some gang or other and congregated at designated discos and games arcades. They got in trouble with the law for fights, theft, robbery, drugs and incredibly, smoking cigarettes (a chargeable offence for those under eighteen). Those deemed serious cases were committed to the juvenile home, while the redeemable ones were entrusted to our supervision.

Trying to impart a sense of purpose to these youngsters who were either beady-eyed, flaring defiance or wearing a thin compliant veneer, I found myself preaching hollow words. My life was not more coherent than theirs, ruled by the impulse to get away from the pressure cooker that was Singapore. One of my theories about these kids was that there wasn't enough space in Singapore for them to grow. Most would spend their entire lives in flats bombarded round-the-clock by TV, radio talk shows, karaoke, mahjong games and family squabbles. Laying out maps and issues of the *National Geographic*, I tried to ignite in them some interest in the worlds beyond. I would drag them along on trips down the Nile, through the Amazon, the Sahara and into outer space. I was like a missionary from the first world showing deprived kids from an inner third-world city largely ignored by a government proud of

its anti-welfare stance, that it was still possible to get away. After all I had survived a broken home, the one-room flat and a largely itinerant childhood. The kids would be bored or feign interest; when I got to the heights of Machu Picchu they would still be in their world of triads and designer clothes. My creative writing workshops were doomed, since most of the kids were barely literate. They would stare vacantly, in their minds already on a gang outing or getting their next high from inhalants or amphetamines.

Once again my attempt at some kind of social work had failed. I didn't want the cycle: work, reservist duty in the army, travel, looking for work again. And trying to find space for writing. Getting a permanent residence in Australia seemed a way out. It would be a one-way ticket this time.

Calcutta is falling apart, or rather hanging together at the seams. But it looks as if it is going to survive for a few centuries yet and will probably be standing when the first-world metropolises have accelerated to common doom.

The same claptrap buses ply the routes, buses used in Singapore in the 1960s and early 70s, with the two conductors leaning out from the doorless front and back exits, shouting out the destinations of their route, banging the bus to slow down for passengers getting off or on.

The sidewalk on Nehru Road is again unearthed, the men clothed in *lungis* and dust go at it with shovels and picks. You don't see jackhammers and bulldozers. What you see is sheer human strength, the endurance, the ability to take all the blows that life deals you and remain standing.

Beside the Indian Museum, the hillock of refuse that I saw on my first trip is there still, with avian and human scavengers sifting it. Along the pavement the homeless have pitched their lean-tos out of cardboard, straw matting, odd bricks, plastic sheets, broken timber, anything they can lay their hands on. In the evenings, you can see their meagre cooking fires, parents, grandparents and children huddled around the warmth. On Sundays, a Hindu charity sets up a makeshift kitchen and flocks of children queue to get their ration of dhal and rice. The same charity also holds pavement classes; the few children sit around a volunteer with a pencil and exercise book, a reprieve from begging, or scavenging, or slaving away in the shops or restaurants.

Off Sudder Street is a Punjabi restaurant called Khalsa. It is my favourite eating place. A low-ceilinged affair with a kitchen dim as a cave. The troglodyte staff are boys in very well used singlets and shorts working at the fires, rolling out the chapattis and executing the orders. I recognise a few faces. They have grown a few inches. In India you cling on to your job for dear life and do not complain about working the whole day, seven days a week. At the counter an impressively turbaned Sikh presides, bellowing out orders without any show of exertion, adding up the bill on a board with white chalk, so customers leave impressed by Sikh honesty.

The Englishman who shared the cab is there, the grimace still on his face, poking at the food. So is Alain, my roommate.

Alain is a freelance photographer. And Calcutta is fertile ground for the camera's eye, every moment a photographable instant. He is trying to digest Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and gestures for me to join him.

"How goes it?"

"Good. Shot a lot of street scenes. I found a street where I sat the whole day and caught all the moods and characters. I come back every year for this, and the hash, of course."

"What do you do with the pictures?"

"Some I send for competitions. Some to magazines. Some I keep."

I try not to start a debate about the ethics of it all. Earlier I saw him approaching the lean-tos to get close-ups of the destitute families eating their only meal of the day. But Alain pre-empts me and starts to exculpate himself and members of his profession.

"I know it is mercenary. But it is also an art that bears witness. It is important the rest of the world knows what is happening. We are like messengers, you know, delivering their cry for help," Alain says, putting Barthes away in his daypack.

"I'm not too sure. I think photography turns suffering into something aesthetic. It's dangerous to turn pain into art, something we enjoy

looking at and want to possess because it makes us feel good, feel that we are capable of feeling."

No sooner is the indictment out than I wish I could have my dhal and chapatti in peace. I am also feeling guilt. From my first Indian trip in 1990 I produced some well-received poems about Calcuttan suffering.

"But without the pictures everybody would be in the dark about the suffering," Alain counters, producing a tobacco pouch and rolling a cigarette.

"I think we've had enough of these pictures. Mother Teresa and the City of Light. It doesn't strike a moral chord anymore."

"You are speaking for yourself. There are many who need to be informed." The antagonistic look in his pale green eyes softens as he exhales; I shift to avoid the Gauloises smoke.

"For me it is just another form of capitalist exploitation. Something you can't separate from tourism. It's an act of intrusion, a violation of privacy and the right to suffer without being captured on film," I say, annoyed at being drawn into this futile debate.

"If you prefer to argue that way, then you and I and all tourists or travellers, as some of us call ourselves, are guilty of exploitation."

"Yes. Not that the poor are putting up a strong resistance. Quite the opposite, they like to play the game. It's your dollars they are after and they don't give up. This morning I had a bunch of kids clinging on for half a kilometre. No father, no mother, baby hungry. Same story."

I hate my own cynicism. How different I was on the first trip; the poverty had shocked me, coming from an affluent place like Singapore, and I could not turn down each plea for help without stabs of guilt, sometimes retracing my steps to find the importunate beggar. The Indian poems came months later, after the trip, when I began sifting through my experiences. I felt guilty writing them but they answered a need to make sense of it all.

"The Howrah Station" begins with a visit to the main train station in Calcutta and registers my shock at seeing the number of desperate-looking people strewn all over the floor; there was literally only standing room. It ends with this encounter:

This morning I made a detour
to the museum. A man was on
the pockmarked pavement outside.
If you can call him a man,
you may as well consider him
an artist. Legs disappeared into the earth,
and short clubs for arms, fingers
no longer than the broken pastels they held.
Oblivious to the scorching sun, wrapped
in clouds of fumes and noise, he laid out
our Lord Jesus with a sacred heart, smiling,
peaceful on the uneven ground.
Consummate attention. Necessity
fusing prayer and art in perfect calm.
What I lack glowed in him.
He rubbed off the edges, precise,
exacting, insisting on clarity of vision,
and went on to produce a youthful Mary
from a soiled picture given perhaps
by the sisters at the mission, to carry him
through and earn his daily bread with.
I tossed an offering. The rupee rolled
onto the bleeding heart, its dull gleam
settling almost soundlessly home,
waking echoes
in an unplugged conscience.

Was I any less culpable, using words instead of the camera?

That night, while Alain and his fellow Frenchmen are sharing a joint, I lie wrestling with the bedbugs. My first stay was wonderful. There were good companions and the thrill of being in Calcutta for the first time. The Red Shield was a happy place then. Now it seems dank and less hospitable. One should never try to recapture lost paradises; that is a recurring lesson as one gets older.

The next morning I decide to return to the Hotel Maria. There I had holed up for two weeks on my second visit, incapacitated by a mysterious virus that would take months in Singapore to dislodge. And there she was, next bed to mine in a dorm housing an international community, a Japanese girl who every morning brought back a marigold for me from the New Market. Maybe returning to the place of agony will bring back her blissful touch.

Calcutta in the morning. The pavement hawkers are brewing chai for their first customers, men with shawls wrapped around their heads against the chill. Around a street pump whole families perform their morning ablutions, washing and cleaning their teeth with a twig-brush. Past the Blue Sky Café, the popular haunt offering cosmopolitan backpacker fare like pancakes, muesli, yoghurt and chow mein, the usual news vendors waving *The Times of India* at you, past Curd's Corner which has the best *lassi* in town, to the peeling wall of the Hotel Maria. It is a decrepit colonial bungalow with a disused driveway, a few *neem* trees and the denuding brick wall that renders it a haven from the anarchic street.

Oscar, the menial from Nepal who has the herculean job of keeping the place clean, is still buried under his blanket. He rubs sleep from his

eyes and says, "Yes, Mastah. Bed, no problem." He shows me up to the roof dorm. There are bodies tucked into sleeping-bags on the floor and a row of beds placed so close you could roll over into your neighbour's dream. He points to a spacious bench with an aura of majesty and privilege about it. "Mastah, you like?" "Yes, very much." It will be home for the next few weeks.

The dorm is rigged up from corrugated-iron sheets augmented with tarpaulins stretched between precarious poles. When the rain or wind comes, portions of the ceiling will sag or even fly apart and Oscar with our help will try to peg things down or coax the rain off, the cascades of water drenching some unfortunate travellers and their packs. But it makes us closer, its improvisatory nature giving it a camp-like quality, and facilitating friendship among the international cast of characters. Cigarettes are lit and shared, joints prepared like communion rites, tape recorders turned on, or the guitars, sitars, tablas and flutes come together spontaneously. Out come the candles when the blackout happens, and you lie there listening to the travel stories, picking up the latest news, finding out the hippest places to visit, the best exchange rates, the best grass.

Slumped against the wall are Jonathan, an American Jew who has been travelling for two years, and Raad, an Iraqi who fled Saddam and is now Australian. His friends had been arrested by Saddam's men, and he was on their list. He was studying art in Florence when he received a letter from home warning him not to return. He bought a Norwegian passport and worked his way to Oslo. There he lived for a few years, making enough money to resume his art studies, this time in Rome. For a few more years he lived alone, selling paintings and sketching caricatures for tourists. Then he had had enough and sought political asylum. He was given a visa to Canada but couldn't take the winter. He swapped it for Australia, the landscape and climate closer to Iraq's. Now he has a small farm and a studio in Queensland. Although he is no fan of Saddam, he is against the American policy towards Iraq. His theory is that the Americans are bent on destroying the oldest civilisation in the world. They want to plunder the treasures found between the Tigris and the Euphrates. This is a bone of contention between Raad

and Jonathan. Otherwise they get along fabulously. They are talking to Gaby, a German girl on her way home.

JONATHAN: How long you've been travelling?

GABY: Fourteen months.

RAAD: In India?

GABY: Ja.

RAAD: No problem with visa?

GABY: They give me five-year visa.

JONATHAN: Unheard of. They must like you. Where did you get it?

GABY: Bonn. But it's too long. Now I want to go back. Sunday I fly. I cannot believe I am going home.

RAAD: But after a week you will want to come back here.

GABY: Yes. I think I lose touch with Germany now. I cannot smell Germany any longer. I don't want to go back. I have no ground, no bed.

RAAD: Germany is boring.

GABY: Ja, the people are terrible.

RAAD: Why don't you live in Madrid?

JONATHAN: Why don't you go to Greece?

They offer a list of places, antidotes to the hatred of home.

Every evening, after the day's adventures, Raad, Jonathan and Gaby conduct absorbing conversations of similar import. One day, Gaby returns cradling a wounded baby crow. There are squadrons of them filling the Calcuttan sky and one infant death hardly makes a dent in their numbers.

RAAD: Maybe you give it antibiotics.

GABY: Ja.

JONATHAN: Some people can't take antibiotics. They have adverse reaction.

RAAD: Maybe you try whisky.

GABY: Antibiotics is good. Kill the bacteria. But also kill good bacteria. Makes body weak. Baby needs protein.

JONATHAN: Maybe it's a vegetarian bird.

GABY: No, baby wants egg. Tomorrow I mix the milk with egg and antibiotics.

She makes a bed for the bird and it is our brief companion for three days. After a dose of the aforesaid preparations and German *lieder*, it decides it has had enough and dies.

There is a spontaneous fraternity which presides over the dorm, despite its transient nature, the departures and new arrivals. At night, when we all return from our forays, there will be pockets of Japanese, Koreans, Germans, French, English setting up shop on their favourite spots, engaged in impromptu seminars. Political and cultural boundaries dissolve, worlds overlap and whole new varieties of English evolve. They describe travel plans, the best exchange rates, the best prices, travel travails, the near fatal encounters with landslides, landmines, bandits, malaria, dysentery, ratings for ashrams and guesthouses. I eavesdrop at the edge of these circles, having little to contribute compared to the veterans, many of whom have travelled relentlessly for more than a year.

The one who seems to have earned the most scars is Ansgar the German. Head-shaven, pallid and thin, he tells his stories in a deadpan monotone contrasting with the dramatic nature of his anecdotes. In Egypt he survived a bomb blast with a few scratches; in Kashmir he was held hostage for days by Kashmiri separatists; while crossing the Khyber Pass, he was robbed and almost raped; in Cambodia he had a close encounter with a landmine. Like many hardened travellers, he displays nonchalance towards his own well-being. In fact, like theirs, his routes are ruled by a perverse attraction to trouble. The journey is more real, their lives more authentic, in proportion to the degree of the difficulty of the journey and the travail undergone.

As the dorm fills up in the evening, a kind of corroboree happens. Yuki unveils her didgeridoo; her hair dyed in incandescent colours, she makes deep earth music. Jonathan starts drumming his tabla, and somebody has a flute. If you don't travel with an instrument, an empty Limca bottle will do, and soon we have a combo swinging. Floating above it is Angela's ethereal chant, rising and dipping above the dorm and the crow-haunted skies of Calcutta.

It doesn't take long to register the faces on Sudder Street. By your third

lassi in Curd's Corner, it seems as if you have lived in this neighbourhood for years. Everybody is namasteing everybody. The same procession of touts, drug peddlers, travellers, volunteers and beggars.

There is Ahmed and his brother, toothless servants at the Tourist Inn. They sit on the threshold of the entrance, looking woebegone and greeting the passing backpacker with "Sir, cheap room". In the morning Akhil shuffles to the chai stall and brings tea back for his silent brother. At night they curl up on the tiny floor space on the bottom landing of the inn, outside the door of a Mr Edmonds, an ailing Jew who takes his constitutional every morning and evening with the help of a cane. Akhil tells me, "He is very sick and lonely. No family."

Then there is Wong the Chinese Calcuttan, who comes to the Blue Sky Café every morning for breakfast. He tells me about the Calcutta Chinatown, about the Hakka community and their tanning industry. Squatting beside his rickshaw is Sanjay, who at thirty looks like an old man already, advertising his services so untiringly that one evening I relented and hired him to show me the nightspots in Calcutta. After a long canter, my guilt heavier at each barefoot step, we arrived at a block

of flats, where Sanjay said that the best Nepali girls could be found. Then there is Nando, slick in polyester shirt and pants, offering hash and the best black market rate for the dollar.

A woman in a green sari with a child on her hip and a milk bottle in hand swoops on passing foreigners: "Baby no milk. Please give money." I acquire immunity in no time and even ridicule the beggar children or the mother with infant and their familiar repertoire of "No father, no mother", "Buy rice, Masda, buy milk for baby". You think you have eluded the squad of children assaulting you with their pleas. Only for a brief respite. You stray into the territory of another group and it all begins again. In time you learn to distinguish between the truly desperate and the ones who are occupational beggars. You can't save all these souls. One rupee dispensed and the whole flock will descend on you. You can't afford that. Anyway, they have done alright without you, so far. Calcutta has survived. Yet, when you see a mother in rags and her two babies naked on the broken pavement, too dazed and weak to look up and beg, or the limbless man prostrate in the hot sun, mutilated probably at birth to improve his begging credentials, you feel the stabs of guilt and part with a few rupees.

I am walking along Shakespeare Sarani when a very cold hand grazes my elbow.

"Sir, how are you, do you have some time to spare?" Offering his hand, as if to let me confirm it is indeed very cold, he introduces himself as Roy, a Burmese stranded for the past ten years in the black hole of Calcutta. He doesn't look the least bit Burmese: leathery dark skin, puckered mouth with blackened and absent teeth, and rheumy red eyes. His shirt and *lungi* have seen better days. He has in tow a fellow who is a grade worse off with one eye glassed over.

He is about the most artful and articulate beggar on the Indian streets. Beginning with an enquiry as to my origins, followed by a eulogy of all things Singaporean, he launches into a resigned criticism of the Indian system. What ensues naturally is a long lament on the plight of people like himself and his companion. As if to support his argument, his wife

creeps up looking as anguished as possible. But when a smartly dressed young man with a briefcase comes to her with accusatory gestures, she is activated into a vigorous opposition, shooing the man off from the scene.

"Now, can you explain what that is all about?"

"Sir, my wife is very ill. Every morning she asks this man from the ministry for medicine but he will not give her. She is angry."

"Ah, I see. Her anger is not good for her health."

To augment their plight or shift my askance look from the wife, who really does not look very ill, he tells the story of his glass-eyed companion. A graduate in computer science, he came from Darjeeling to seek his fortune but is unable to make any headway without baksheesh. Roy has kindly taken him under his wing.

Now comes the crux. They want to go to Goa or even Singapore to work. But first they need passports. For that they need money. Would I be so kind as to sponsor them? I explain my own economic vulnerability. Would I then at least furnish them with the money for passport photos? A photo would cost thirty rupees. Sorry, I can only spare twenty rupees, no more, deciding that if this is a scam, it is so well scripted that it deserves at least twenty rupees. Motioning them into the dark cavernous foyer of a colonial building, I gingerly fish out two grimy ten rupee notes and deliver the money into cold grateful hands. I've learned from experience not to conduct monetary transactions on the street. In Bombay, on my first Indian trip, my wallet was snatched in a similar transaction.

The traveller comes to Calcutta carrying a romantic notion of poverty like an article of faith. Especially if he has seen the adulterated film adaptation of Dominique Lapierre's *City of Joy*. At first the shock, the disbelief, but it is as he has imagined it. He even feels uplifted, the compassion engaged. He has something to give these people. He volunteers with Mother Teresa or Jack Preger. Or the traveller is instantly repelled by the filth and poverty. He does the necessary sights and takes the express out. Then there is the seasoned traveller who feels at home with the homeless, chatting with them on the street, eating chow mein at the pavement stall, happy with not doing much, just sitting and watching life passing by on Sudder Street.

"What can be worse than to be born a dog in Calcutta?" Raad asks as we sit on stools at a hole-in-the-wall chai wallah, contemplating the fate of Calcutta's canine population in the guise of a scabrous flea-bitten mongrel scouring a pile of rubbish. They take what is left after the human scavengers have had their pick. Often you see a dead dog on the street and crows making a meal of it. "Crows rule Calcutta," Raad makes another unforgettable statement as we consider a faded print of Bruegel's famous winter scene that curiously adorns a peeling wall in the Hotel Maria. The crows are still, waiting on the leafless trees, watching like silent gods the human carnival in the village.

This morning Raad and I went hunting for an art supplies shop to equip him for his six-month journey through rural India. We found it after a long trek in the BBD Bagh along crumbling shopfronts and collapsing balustrades, the air clogged with diesel fumes, a dusky shop that looked like an old pharmacy, the materials stored in mahogany drawers lining the walls and creaky cabinets. Raad bought a box of oil crayons, the handiest medium for art on the road, he said. Yesterday, on the rooftop of the Hotel Maria, he did a sketch of the crows circling the sky, along with the TV aerials and washing lines on the roofs, and it caught for me the essence of the place. Raad is also looking to buy an Enfield motorbike and a tent for his odyssey.

Rolling his joint now, lacing the tobacco with a pinch of hash, he speaks of the vibrancy of Iraqi life, the coffee houses, the bustling bazaar in Baghdad compared to the bleached colours of an Australian suburb. His father had a carpet shop and he spent his entire childhood in the bazaar. Life was good, till Saddam came. Sunnis and Shias lived in harmony. He recalls the splendid restaurants and the cafés where Shias and Sunnis convened to talk art and politics, play backgammon and dominoes, united by the draughts from their hookahs.

Part of Raad's nostalgia is triggered no doubt by the street life here in Calcutta: the humble pavement stalls, the communal life in the dusty back lanes, the chai and spice shops, the milling crowds around the New Market, and the intimate feel at night, when the lights come on, and everything seems gilded and more alive. As he parades his vignettes of

Baghdad life, I feel the loss and longing of a displaced person. I see in him a kindred being. I too will be taking up residence away from my place of birth, though my path is in no way as involuntary or painful as Raad's. He was torn away from his roots, unable to go home, while I can return anytime. A few years ago, two of his brothers disappeared in one of Saddam's interrogation centres. His father died of grief. All this happened and he could not go back.

I listen to the stories of his childhood and his struggle to make a living from art in Australia. He does caricatures in the weekend markets and with the produce from his small plot is just able to keep afloat. It has taken him ten years to save up for this trip.

Like me, Raad is a mine of contradictions, the East and West all muddled up. He would give up his life for the Western ideals of democracy and freedom but values too much the Oriental values he has been brought up to respect: the strong bonds of the extended family, the values of communal living, the rituals, the reduced role of the individual. He deplores globalisation and consumerism, the forces turning every place into anyplace, and seems unhappy with his adopted home. In him I see too clearly the shadow of myself.

It is a full moon tonight and the transient residents of the Hotel Maria are not going to let slip an opportunity for conviviality. The beer is coursing through the conduits of their senses, the grass is opening the sluice gates. Joints are being rolled, making their passage around, and the stories are being passed on, the oral tradition which is the narrative mode favoured by the backpackers. Yuki, her hair a luminous glaze of green and purple, is leading an ensemble of flute, guitar, tablas and empty bottles. She is playing bass on the didgeridoo. The instruments sound each other out, encountering each other's strangeness, greeting the divine and the human; the phrases hang in the air, fumble, unsure of the country they are entering; then they hit a groove and travel together. Later in the set, we have a solo: the *shakuhachi* of Yamamoto stilling us with its lonely breaths. The piece, he explains later, came to him while watching a corpse burn on Manikarnika Ghats in Varanasi.

He had heard the skull splitting and the ensuing silence.

After the music, we sit listening to Kurt, a self-styled *sannyasin* who wears a saffron-pink tunic and pants. He regales us with his spiritual odyssey. Ten years ago he turned his back on a banking job in Vienna and came to India and has been its captive since. Except for short visits home to collect the gleanings from investments, he has been a resident or itinerant here, drifting from one ashram to another, spending months in Rishikesh and Manali, then Poona, where he undid the years of ascetic training, abandoned his body to the tantric teachings of Rajneesh Guru and then left. In a cave in Hampi, he found a guru whom he had met at the Kumbh Mela. Now this guru was not the usual trident-wielding ecstatic naked madman, but a refined ex-Trappist monk from Kerala. Kurt, who had a Catholic upbringing and had thought of joining a monastery, said he had a strange dream before meeting his guru. In his dream he had gone back to Europe and was beginning a retreat in a monastery. In the chapel, after vespers, he remained behind to pray. The declining sun limned the bowed head of a monk kneeling a few pews in front. When the figure turned he saw the ash stripes across his forehead, and a crimson *tikka* drawn between the brows. The eyes were concentrated slits of fire and ice. He was staring at his own image. So when he met the Catholic monk turned saddhu, he surrendered to the logic of his dream.

I think of my own dalliance with spirituality. The retreat in an ashram on my first trip. The visit to Taizé, the journeys to Mt Athos and Metiora. And the frequent meditation retreats at the erstwhile seminary in Ponggol in the east of Singapore, where a Redemptorist monk called Brother Casimir had set up a meditation centre after a long stay at the Shantivanam Ashram in South India following a spiritual crisis. Brother Casimir was from Perth and had been resident in Singapore for many years. He was gentle, self-effacing, and a great listener to the problems of others, but his ravaged face and body betrayed the tremendous suffering he had undergone to keep his faith and vocation. In the small meditation room adorned with only his favourite Greek icon flanked by oil lamps and sandalwood incense, he led us in the chants he had learned in India.

I made it to the Shantivanam Ashram in 1991, after an hour on the rickety local bus from Trichy. It is a cluster of thatched huts around a temple set close to the Cauvery River, which in winter dries to a rivulet. At dawn and in the evening, Westerners and locals gather for meditation on the wide riverbank.

Founded in 1950 by Dom Henri Le Saux and Father Jules Monchanin, the ashram grafted Indian *sannyasi* insights and techniques onto the Western contemplative tradition. After Monchanin's death and the departure of Le Saux (also known as Swami Abhishiktananda) for a Himalayan hermitage, Father Bede Griffiths arrived in 1968 to build on the efforts of his predecessors. A Benedictine monk and a close friend of C. S. Lewis, he had come to India to renew his Catholic faith and found it in the *Vedantas*, the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Under his direction, the ashram grew to its present shape and a liturgy was developed that includes Mass celebrated with Sanskrit verses, incense, *arati* lamps, flower offerings and *prasadam*. With Father Griffiths' charisma, and his eclectic and ecumenical approach, Shantivanam soon became a beacon to many, believers and atheists alike.

I had a *darshan* with Father Griffiths. He was quite ill then and rarely presided at Mass or the *pujas*. He lay on his narrow bed, propped up on pillows, his ascetic face framed by the familiar white beard and hair, the long body wrapped in his *kavi* (orange robe). It was a face that had made peace with life, with death.

We talked about Brother Casimir, how he longed to come back, and about the conflict between poetry and religion that I was experiencing. It was awkward, with me wondering if I should seek counsel at this first meeting. I was mesmerised by the distinct Oxford accent, the pale fire in his eyes, a benign humour, a compassionate understanding that didn't need words. In the end, it was a brief session, as he tired visibly.

Dawn. The dorm is a blue wash of a retreating dream, bodies half-submerged in the folds of sleep. Someone is dream-talking. There is gnashing of teeth somewhere and a duet of snores subsiding then picking up again. Strangely, communal living feels agreeable. In the army, I dreaded every moment of barrack life. The reveille signalled another day of meaningless toil, of acting out somebody's war games. You had to bury the shout of defiance, the cry to be somewhere else.

I am making an early start with Ian to Nabo Jibon, a Missionaries of Charity home on the other side of the Hooghly, in the Howrah section. On my first Indian trip, I had thought of volunteering but backed off after arriving at the Mother's House on Chandra Bose Road. I was troubled by the thought it was just my traveller's hunger for experience, to add volunteer work at Mother Teresa's to the list of things done. Mother's House is on everyone's lips: the backpackers recommend it; the locals speak of it with pride; the rickshaw wallahs brandish it like a tourist attraction; the self-appointed guides who pounce on those lost in the maze of the Muslim quarter peddle it like hash; and the beggars permanently posted outside the gate to Mother's House say with the usual histrionics, "Madah House, give money."

This time there is no retreating. Last week I was again walking through the Muslim quarter, old, dishevelled and grimy tenement blocks and shophouses, forced off the pavement cluttered with over-spill from the shops, pavement traders, rubbish, gobs of *paan*-stained spit and beggars, when a Scots voice addressed me, "Are you going to Mother's House?" If he hadn't spoken first, I would have taken him for a Canadian friend whom I had met in San Francisco a few years earlier. The chestnut hair combed back into a ponytail, a light beard and eyes beaming forth an energy that I had felt in James Binnie, my Canadian friend. I took it as a sign and fell in with Ian's jaunty stride.

Ian and I were assigned to Nabo Jibon by Sister Patricia, an Irish nun who was the spokeswoman for the community and who was tipped to take over from the ailing Mother. We were told that Mother was too ill to see us (she will die as I end my yearlong trip) and briefed on the volunteer schedule. Mass at Mother's House in the morning, breakfast and then proceed to the assigned home. As a token of appreciation we were given a Mother Teresa medallion with an attached prayer.

We skip Mass and take the ramshackle Howrah bus after breakfast at the Blue Sky. Ian worked in a fish and chip shop in Aberdeen and

part-timed in a home for the disabled. There he met a friend who had been to India and recommended Mother Teresa's as the place to test his vocational potential as a social worker.

Nabo Jibon means New Life, a place for physically and mentally handicapped children and adults. It is the least well known of the homes, most volunteers going to Nirmal Hriday, the place for dying destitutes next to the Kali temple. It sits on a busy street of ironmongers and auto repair shops, dusty and lined with cairns of rubbish. A queue of supplicants waits outside the high iron gate for food and medicine.

The home is divided into three sections: the first for children, the second for grown-ups and the third for those without hope. The common denominator is mental and physical handicap. On the right there is a tiny block designated for the dying, mostly tubercular cases, and behind it I see an unkempt graveyard.

We start with the adult section. Ian is immediately at ease, making his round like a doctor, listening to words he cannot understand, massaging this invalid, promising another to bring him *bidis*. Donning aprons, we set about the hygiene business, herding them into the yard for a hair and nail trim. Choosing a toothless old man with stumps where his legs had been, I begin snipping away. Then they are led back inside, to spend the morning doing craftwork.

It is with the children that we spend most time. There is a concrete yard in front of the two-storey building where they get worked out. We usher them here after cleaning up the mess from breakfast. There are about thirty children, most of them retarded and physically maimed. I have never held the handicapped, let alone orphaned or abandoned ones. In the few weeks here, I am struck again and again by how cold the hands of these children are. And how so many want to be held, clinging on to you when you lift them onto the bed, making inarticulate, heart-rending sounds.

There is Asha, a girl with shaved head and big bright mirthful eyes, a little princess in a shabby dress that keeps falling off her thin shoulders. She takes my hand and holds it tightly and it is hard to disengage from her; she loves the morning exercise, grinning up at me as I support her

on her polio-wasted legs. Some have walking frames but a few require the wheelchair, like Rahu, who has to be force-fed at meals.

The children have to take turns as there are not enough volunteers or assistants to walk them. The few resident Brothers make their rounds through the city in the morning, collecting abandoned and homeless crippled children who don't belong to begging syndicates.

I deposit Asha on the verandah and take Ravi, matching my step with his twisted stride. Most of them enjoy the workout, all contorted grins and dogged determination but Ravi has to be coaxed on, his cold hands weak and slipping, unlike Asha's tenacious grasp, his unblinking blind eyes staring up into the sky.

Anthony is the only able-bodied among the children, a deaf-and-mute with a dead eye. Wearing a red Chicago Bulls cap given by a volunteer, he is the captain of the team, helping the other children and guiding the new volunteers in the routine. He is keen to learn and always showing what he has drawn in an exercise book. Once he was berated by Ragu the assistant for drawing when he was supposed to be helping the other children clean up; he sobbed inconsolably and kept his eyes down for the rest of the day.

Ritsuko, a Japanese woman in her thirties, is doing the laundry. I take some of the soiled and well-worn pile and begin scrubbing. The children have to change every day to prevent infection and also because many wet and soil their beds in the night. Most of the clothes are in a sorry state, holey and beaten. It is an impossible task finding the right fit for the long queue of helpless children shepherded from the bath. They are accoutred in shirts held together by a single button, shorts which slip off thin hips and trip spindly legs, and the few dresses mean the girls end up looking like the boys, with their hair cut short for hygiene.

There isn't enough donation, Ritsuko explains, bemoaning the beaten pile of clothes that would be used as rags in Singapore, and also because there are no washing machines, as the Mother believes that washing machines detract from the spirit of volunteerism. A few years ago a donation of washing machines was redirected elsewhere.

Laundry is the part most volunteers shirk, Ritsuko complains. Water supply is unpredictable, so we have to conserve, making the cement trough of water do its utmost before changing it. The reek becomes overwhelming as the water turns murky. This and the cloud of mosquitoes make it a test for the volunteer. Ritsuko has been at it for six years now, coming back for three months each year, at her own expense.

She has lived away from Japan for a good part of her adult life. Now and then, cautiously, she will give away morsels of information about herself: a long spell as a piano teacher in Vienna; a few months in Singapore; and waitressing and hairstyling in Tokyo when she has to go back. There is a secret wound that has kept her out of Japan and coming back here for the children. She says she does not have any religion; her dedication, the way she holds the children and swabs the sores on their legs, doing the disagreeable chores others shirk, bespeaks a compassionate humanity free of religious motivation.

Only once does she complain about the Western volunteers who give the less pleasant tasks a wide berth, appearing only when the children are ready for their physiotherapeutic workout. She also laments that there is no professional help and that volunteers come only for brief stints.

Clearly there is more direction needed in the home. The Brothers are often away on retreats and conferences. Nobody gives the volunteers any briefing. When I come back nine years later, the only surviving persons, besides Asha, are the assistant Ragu and the cook. Neither they, nor any of the new Brothers, can tell me the fates of the children or whether Ritsuko is still coming back to help.

I have started leaving at dawn with Ritsuko. We love the cold but clean morning air before Calcutta becomes clouded in diesel fumes. One morning, on the way to getting the bus for Nabo Jibon, we come across a dead body on the street. He was hit by a car, according to a spectator. In India, any event on the street is a crowd-puller; a quarrel, a fight and you get instant spectators. For many it is the occasional entertainment in their largely miserable lives. Rarely does anybody offer help.

Here a ragtag of homeless from the Chowringhee area is looking on, exchanging gossip of the street. It will be hours before the body is cleared away; the police having more urgent matters to do than to investigate another homeless death.

Justin has a John Lennon face, the wire-rim spectacles perched on the long bridge of his narrow nose, his eyes miles away, lost on the hash fumes. His Yorkshire voice follows the conversation for a while and trails off. Spent months in Himachal Pradesh picking marijuana, first-grade stuff, he says. Smoke as you pick and pick as much as you want.

We are in the Bamboo Den, down the street from the Blue Sky Café. It is run by Tibetan refugees and offers *thukpa* and *momos*, a foretaste of Tibet for me. Raad and I are talking about art. Justin stirs from his reverie and says he has done some work in Nepal. Placing his expensive camera on the floor, he goes back to the dorm to fetch his sketchbook. We resume our talk of Uccello, della Francesca, Giotto and Raad's own work. No sign of Justin. We decide to return to the dorm, taking Justin's camera with us. He is propped against the wall, smoking ganja.

"Justin, you forgot your camera. You were going to show us something."

"What?"

"Your sketchbook."

"Oh yeah." He digs into his well-abused haversack and fishes out his sketchbook.

"Anybody could do these, you know."

"No, they're great," Raad approves.

The sketches progress from painstaking studies of landscape and people in pencil, charcoal and crayon, to searching abstract shapes.

"I like faces. This one is my favourite. A monk I met in Kathmandu. I think I got the eyes right."

"You should try colours."

"I haven't done oils or watercolours."

"It's always the first step that matters."

"Yeah. I'll have a go at it."

I give him directions to the art shop on Lenin Sarani.

"You know what I'm trying to do. I want to take so much of this stuff that I get sick of it and won't want to use it ever again."

I accept the joint from Raad and follow Justin on the slow glide into space.

Tomorrow I will take the train to Bodhgaya, where the Buddha found enlightenment. For our last meal together, Raad and I are going to Chinatown for dinner. It is bizarre, the idea of a Chinatown here. According to Moorhouse's *Calcutta*, published in 1971, Chinatown starts at Lower Chitpore Road in North Calcutta. But Wong, the Chinese Calcuttan who frequents the Blue Sky Café, tells us it has shifted to Tangra to the northeast. Wong is dark, swarthy and stout; at first I mistook him for a Nepali. Having completed college, he is now applying to study management overseas, and is trying to improve his English talking to the backpackers. We follow him in the Ambassador cab, marvelling at his fluent Bengali as he instructs the driver.

The first Chinese man called Atchew landed around 1780. He tried to set up a sugar mill but unlike most success stories of overseas Chinese, died a broken-hearted failure. Today his tomb in Achipur, a village he founded fifteen kilometres south of Calcutta, has become a shrine. The trickle of Chinese continued and increased during the lawless days of the Kuomintang in China. Driven by famine in central China, large droves of the Hakka community arrived, augmented by more immigrants from all parts of China with the Communist takeover.

In its heyday, Chinatown was a thriving community, the streets lined with shoe shops, hairdressing saloons and restaurants. There was even an opium den, Wong tells me. After all, the British sent opium from here to China in exchange for tea and silk. The mostly Hakka community prospered from the tanning trade, something the Brahmins could never bring themselves to do. The drains outside the tanning factories are all clogged with deadly chemicals and the foul odour hits you as you pass a tannery with low-caste Indian workers taking a break outside. To stop the pollution from worsening, the government is planning to relocate the two hundred or so tanneries elsewhere. It will change Tangra and hasten the demise of the Chinese community.

Already, the decline is evident. Wong says that the young are seizing every opportunity to leave, settling in Canada, the US and Australia. From twenty thousand in the 1980s the Chinese community has shrunk to seven thousand. Two of the four Chinese schools have closed and so have many restaurants and shops. Wong points out that the Chinese New Year celebrations are more subdued now, as we arrive at the main street. There are feeble attempts to mark the new year, strings of red lanterns and coloured bulbs, but the usual bustle in a Chinatown is absent. If it weren't for the Chinese characters and the few Chinese faces, it could be any small town in India.

Wong leads us to a restaurant next to a soy sauce processing factory. The walls are peeling and the décor is minimal: a few red rice-paper couplets on the wall, Chinese lanterns, an altar at the back. His cousin Loy joins us, a wan bespectacled young man who carries an impressive Nikon camera. He manages a restaurant in Toronto and has been coming back every year to record as much of Chinatown as possible before it disappears.

"There is no future for the young. No developments. It's hard to leave our parents, the place where our ancestors are buried but we have no choice," Wong says. "Only some of the older people are staying, like my father. He doesn't want to leave my mother's grave. All his memories are here."

Over an Indian Chinese version of wonton soup and chow mein Loy talks about how difficult it is, being a migrant, living a kind of double life, straddling the present and the past, the new and the old country. At times he feels the excitement of making a fresh start, the bewildering choices and opportunities; but sometimes the assault of homesickness can be so fierce that the only way to assuage it is to cook the dishes that he loved at home.

Like Loy, I am embarking on the emigrant path. Our families probably emigrated from China about the same time. Now we are moving again. The Chinese are always leaving home. To be as far from

the ancestral hearth as possible and then to pine for it. They say that the northern-most restaurant in the world, close to the Arctic Circle, is run by a Chinese, a Hakka, to be precise. Chinese poetry is permeated with longing. Du Fu, Meng Hao Ran, Wang Wei, Su Shi all wrote homesick poems. It is as if somewhere between exile and the longing to return, between leaving and homecoming, they find an answer to the restlessness in their souls.

We say goodbye to our Hakka friends and walk out to the road. The lanterns look dim, lonely, ghostly. Someone is playing a Cantonese pop tape. No, I am mistaken. A group of Indians are sitting under a tree, listening to Bollywood songs on a transistor radio.

I wonder how long it will be before the Hakka community disappears. In a documentary based on Gavin Menzies' book *1421*, which argues that the Chinese rounded the Cape of Good Hope and reached America before Columbus, the camera crew retrace the journey of the fleet of Admiral Cheng Ho through Southeast Asia, to India and then to the East African coast. Off the coast of Zanzibar part of the fleet was storm-wrecked and the survivors swam ashore and were absorbed into the local populace. The documentary zooms in on a few natives who claim to be descendants of the Chinese, their slant eyes, narrow chins, fairer skin and Chinese-sounding names supporting the claim. Also there are the Chinese porcelain shards used to decorate the doorways of the houses.

How much of the world I carry within me will survive the uprooting and translation that the act of emigration triggers? Like Loy, I feel a kind of homesickness already, an urge to salvage that which is disappearing even as I begin to say goodbye.

RAMBLING ON MY MIND

I FALL IN with the walking meditators, or meditating walkers, a string of pilgrims revolving around the Mahabodhi Stupa in Bodhgaya, its age-darkened stone-carved height proclaiming the place where the Buddha had attained enlightenment. This is an international community of differently paced walkers: maroon-robed Tibetan monks prostrating themselves at every step, saffron-clad Thai monks circling the stupa's base, the somber ochre robes of Burmese monks, the grey attire of their Taiwanese counterparts, and the lay followers from East and West, a motley group of spiritual cripples who have come for repair. Mindful of each step, we are learning how to walk and breathe again. Relearning the first steps.

I measure my steps to my breathing, relishing the cool stone path polished by pilgrim feet through the centuries. Walking is a way of being alive to the present, each press of the foot, each arch and levering of the big toe an ambulatory affirmation. It is a way of shedding karmic baggage, finding the path out of *samsara*, the Sanskrit for running around, slowing our pace in synchronicity with our breath. Soon my own mantra evolves and I am counting *life death life death* on each beat, wondering on which note the walk will end.

It is easy to walk into a kind of timelessness in Bodhgaya. The worn stone circuit, the deep intonation of the Tibetan monks, the circumambulatory pilgrims from all over the world, the frieze of the Buddha in different scenes and poses, the Tibetan prayer flags, the absorbed maroon and saffron robes orbiting endlessly, the flickering

oil lamps and candles and the winter twilight cohere in a pattern whose meaning you are part of. For the last three mornings I have experienced the fleeting moments of stepping out of time; but now it is something else, something more time-haunted. I am walking the steps of a dead man. The iambic measure, with the accent on the landing of the right step, is my father's signature, his impaired left giving more stress to the right. He does not appear as frequently in my dreams as he did the first year after his death, but when he does, he is walking, that maimed walk bringing him to life. It was the accented step that I listened for, as I waited for him to come home. I would stand sentry at the gate of the flat in Toa Payoh, where I lived with my grandmother and uncle, and wait for him.

> Five or six, I kept watch, when you started
> not coming home. An untiring sentry, I listened
> for your uneven step, your maimed left,
> or was it the right leg hobbling, after you were hit,
> drunk perhaps, by a car. I hear the pained step
> on the torn ground of my waiting, the ghost step,
> and would rush to the door to stare
> down a long shadowless corridor.
> Sometimes you would go out
> for a Guinness and smokes, and we would
> wait, wait for that broken iambic beat.
> The loser's gait. I hear it even now,
> fainter, but there, the absent step.

I am in step with my father. I am walking in his shoes (they were dark tan, creased and worn), am in him, as he walks. A certain rhythm enfolds us, my three steps matching his impaired stride, on the cobbled walk outside Robinsons, on the carpeted floor inside, along the smooth-tiled length of the Arcade, on the uneven and congested five-foot way of the shops around New Bridge Road and South Bridge Road, on the red-and-white pavers of the Queen Elizabeth Walk. Sometimes I lag behind.

I admire the broad shoulders, the silent strength of one who boxed and swam in his youth. But there is also something vulnerable, exposed, hurt, the carriage canted slightly to the side because of his bad leg (he had been knocked down by a car a few years earlier).

My father was an inveterate walker and before he walked out of our lives, he often took me along on his perambulations. There were the streets around the New World, the amusement park that came alive at night, negotiating the five-foot way of the two- and three-storey shophouses with their fascinating decorated stucco façade: inlays of Italian and English tiles, shuttered window bays with pilasters, Italianate balconies consorting with Malay and Chinese motifs, ornately carved timber and the garish menagerie of dragons, cockerels, dogs and snakes. We meandered along Sungei Road, Kelantan and Hindoo Lanes, festooned with laundry strung out on bamboo poles, whole

streets lined with stalls on wooden trestles, carts, or tarpaulin laid out on the tarmac, hawking fruits and vegetables, clothes, household items, toys, music cassettes, electronic spare parts and junk. Then we would head on to Race Course Road where we watched soccer matches over a *rojak* served in leaf-cones pinned with a toothpick. Many of the well-detailed terrace houses are gone now and the itinerant hawkers have long disappeared with tougher hygiene policing in the 80s. Recently, on a visit back, I brought an Australian friend who was hunting for a guesthouse on Race Course Road that in the early 70s was a haven for the hippie traveller. Here he had had his first love on the road, the memory of the woman and the ecstatic nights in Singapore coming back to haunt the well-heeled executive. Whether that guesthouse had been transformed beyond recognition or demolished, or his memory had misled him, it was hard to tell. Maybe it was just as well that we didn't find it, for what lives in the memory can be destroyed when we find out how it has fared in reality.

Often we would start from St Joseph's Institution, my father's alma mater, along Bras Basah Road, where the second-hand bookstores were, go past the old YMCA building, a squat Edwardian building with black-and-white gables added as if an afterthought (it was used by the Japanese as an interrogation centre during the war) and explore the arcaded shops in the Amber Mansions. I loved the blue Sivan temple, the *puja* within its enclosure, the whiff of jasmine and sandalwood incense, its diminutive size scaled against the Mandarin Hotel further up the road, then the tallest building on Orchard Road. We would move on past the Cold Storage and the Magnolia Bar, to the Heeren Building with its classical façade, cantilevered balconies and its distinctive corner angled to fit snugly into the odd junction. In the middle of the row of shophouses here was Beethoven Music, where I would come later as a teenager coveting the boxed sets of Mahler. Across the road was a car park which was transformed into a bustling hawker place with nightfall; my aunt would bring me along on her dates here for *siew yeh* or night snack, especially fried oysters and *Hokkien mee* served on *opeh* leaf (the inner sheaf of the bark of a betel nut palm). Next were the Specialist Shopping Centre and its adjoining mock-Tudor shophouses where I lingered at a toy shop with its window display of an elaborate toy train set and squads of Airfix soldiers all painted and poised in action. Inevitably we ended up at Fitzpatrick's for an ice-cream. Opposite was the Wisma Indonesia with thin spires needling the evening sky, and a canal running across the front. And adjacent to it were the Ngee Ann apartments that have stayed in my mind for the striped awnings that covered the balconies. It was the end of the walk. Father would return me to my grandmother, and disappear into his own life.

But it was the Civic District, from the Padang to Raffles Place, that was my father's favourite circuit. At the Satay Club, we would alight from the Hock Lee bus, a rattling tin affair with just a single doorless exit/entry in the middle (I loved being hoisted up to pull the bell-rope). Before the troubled years, we had come as a young family for satay on weekend outings, sitting on wooden stools around a favoured stall. I watched entranced as the satay man caressed the skewers with oil and fanned the grilling flames, and I told Dad that I wanted to be a satay man when I grew up. Minus my mother and sister now, we skipped the satay and mutton soup and went to Tan Kim Seng Fountain and Lim Bo Seng Memorial, where families spread themselves on the grass. I pictured us once more as a family, my sister and me running circles around the fountain, happy and free from the future.

How distant it had seemed then, even though it must have been just a year or two since my father left us, a young family, a little world unto ourselves. Yet even then I had some kind of child-premonition that it would not last. I was conscious of wanting these moments to last, my father to stay with us forever. Somehow the fountain and memorial became braided in my mind with that time, standing for the fleeting happiness that every child experiences.

Now my father and I stood at the parapet to feel the spray of the salt-tide, me on tiptoe to see the waves break on the embankment below. In the middle distance was the flotilla of sampans, bumboats, *tongkangs* and junks that would be swept away in two decades. We stood for a long

time, it seemed, till the tide retreated. (Years later, as a lost seventeen-year-old, I found myself reciting Shakespeare's sonnet "As the waves make towards the pebbled shore" here.) After the vigil, I hopscotched on the pavers of the Elizabeth Walk, trailing after my father as he walked into the underpass to Empress Place. I thrilled to hear my voice reverberating off its walls, and hurried past the beggar stationed midway to catch up with him. At the Empress Place hawker centre or its narrow Boat Quay counterpart across the river, we would pause for refreshments, my father ordering a *teh terik* for himself and a sugar-cane juice for me. Regaled, we had the choice of walking past the GPO either on its right flank or its sea-fronting side. With the first option, you sauntered past the public latrine with its naked bulb dangling in front, past the Taxation Office and the pavement letter-writers or self-styled tax accountants, their typewriters clattering outside the monumental grey hulk of the GPO. There was a urinous whiff in the colonnaded passageways, more pungent on the other side facing the curved façade of the Water Boat Office; this, coupled with the musty odour and sea breeze, made for a potent but inoffensive odour. Here, a few homeless souls had set up home. Clifford Pier would heave into sight, without the aerial bridge connection to Change Alley (that would only be built in 1972). As the day waned and a cool breeze relaxed the air, a squadron of hawkers wheeled their cart-stalls into position, deploying wooden tables and stools, priming their kerosene lamps. The precinct was transformed into Ang Teng or Red Light jetty, a congregation point for prostitutes to ready themselves for the sailors as they unloaded from their lighters at Clifford Pier to ride into town (the name Ang Teng originated when a beacon was hung at the end of Johnson's Pier, predecessor of Clifford Pier; it stuck with the locals and gained valid currency when it became a place to solicit sailors).

A certain yearning was visible in my father's eyes as we gazed at the boats huddled together around the Pier, and the ships further out. There were sampans ferrying the boat-dwellers to and from the *tongkangs*, the lighters and bumboats at anchor out there. They could have been the descendents of the *orang laut*, the sea gypsies who lived and died on

their boats at the mouth of the Singapore River before Raffles came. My father would light up a Consulate and tell me about life on the ships and beyond. His gaze locked into the distant horizon, where the ships beckoned. Often he would go off in his head and leave me bereft. Once he said he had been out on a ship. I have forgotten why he was out on a ship, what kind of ship it was, or whether he had worked on it. He had a way of saying things that didn't add up to much, that all sank into an enfolding silence. Somehow that yearning has been transmitted to me. Later I would come back to Clifford Pier obsessively, and light up and feel the same seizure of yearning, though by then the horizon had been closed off with land reclamation and the sea had stopped washing the Pier with the same tidal potency. But I could see his profile, his beautifully chiselled face turned to the sea and the ships out there, the cigarette taking him to a place I could never go.

My father, whatever troubles he was carrying, appeared peaceful on these walks. Walking was a way of being free, walking away from all cares. *Solvitur ambulando*, as St Jerome says. He was most himself when in stride, and it is with this image that I connect most. Walking for him was an act of catharsis, lightening, being away from it all. I sensed that as a child keeping pace with him; later, when I read Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*, I was riveted. *The Songlines* celebrates movement and the fact that the road is man's true home. Chatwin quotes Thoreau: "Man's real home is not a house, but the Road."

Thoreau tracks the etymology of "saunter" to the Middle Ages, when loafers roved about the country and begged under the pretext of going *à la Sainte Terre*, to the Holy Land. He also notes another possible source: *sans terre*, without home. The two meanings may be reconciled in the trope of walking. To walk into homelessness in the quest for home. This is the core belief at the heart of the pilgrimage. Walking is a way of disconnecting from the terrestrial to find the real home, the path towards self-renunciation and union with something transcendental. In India, saddhus and *sannyasins* take to the road, walking to the holy sites: Varanasi, Rishikesh Hardwar, Manasarovar. During Thaipusam the

kavadi carriers in Singapore walk pinioned by a metal frame crisscrossed with spears. In Tibet monks and lay people make slow and painstaking tracks over the punishing high passes, dragging their karma across the arid wastes to the Potala and Jorkhang. The walk is made more excruciating by the prostrations which punctuate each step.

Even for the atheist, walking can approximate a kind of spiritual rite. Werner Herzog, when he received news that his friend Lotte Eisner was seriously ill, "set off on the most direct route to Paris, in full faith, believing that she would stay alive if I came on foot". Herzog, like his Aguirre, was a man of enormous will and drive; he started from Munich in winter, turning the self-punishment into a kind of pilgrimage. The walk worked a miracle: Lotte was to live another eight years.

There is something comforting, simplifying, calming as one plants one foot in front of the other. Wallace Stevens says: "In my room, the world is beyond my understanding,/ But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four hills and a cloud" ("Of the Surface of Things"). No wonder philosophers have been known to be great walkers. The peripatetic philosophers of Greece, Socrates, Rousseau and Kierkegaard threshed out their existential angst in meditative tread. Poets like Wordsworth, Frost and Wallace Stevens composed whole poems on the beat. For Wordsworth, the great outdoors was his study. Coleridge looked forward so much to Lamb's visit and walking with him in Grasmere that when Lamb finally appeared and he was inopportunely incapacitated, the pain of not walking with his friend produced "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" which culminates in Coleridge vicariously walking beside Lamb and attaining a moment of epiphany.

There is no Grasmere or Windermere to inspire any country hikes in Singapore. Of the little countryside that is left, most has been requisitioned for military training or turned into golf courses. The jungle trails are littered with bad memories of army exercises, night marches where you hold on to the man in front of you, a straggling column of blind men walking asleep, muffled explosions of curses travelling down the ranks as someone trips and loses the man in front.

For a glimpse of the tropical idyll Singapore was, you have to walk past the causeway into Malaysia. Once my friend Rama led me on an expedition to Kulai, where his brother-in-law was the foreman of an oil-palm plantation. We were disenchanted civil servants and kept ourselves sane by reading Cervantes and tilting against windmills in the office. Once past the causeway we slid into a carefree rhythm, talking with senseless abandon, inventing epic adventures like children as we went along, pausing for smokes and drinks in dusty coffee shops, under Marlboro billboards, in rubber plantations. Then, as night fell, we hit on the ghostly plantation road into the oil-palm estate. Through the overhanging fronds, you could see the country skies, the constellations glinting above in all their splendour. We had exchanged the urban haze over Singapore for purer skies, for an unclouded time.

But it is mostly the urban circuit that I followed, the same walk day after day that kept me alive through the difficult years of youth. My mother had met a man whom we called "Uncle", and who arranged for mahjong sessions in our flat. The incessant click-clatter of mahjong tiles and the presence of "Uncle" turned me out onto the streets. After college, I would exchange my uniform top for a T-shirt and resume my itinerant life. I was a teenage nomad after school hours, ploughing the songlines my father had laid unwittingly when he took me on his ramblings.

A habitual route was from the National Library to the British Council. After listening to Mahler LPs in the Lee Kong Chian reference section, I would pass the ramshackle coffee shop at the foot of the Library, where earlier I had had the most satisfying *mee soto* or *wonton mee* for lunch, and strike out for the waterfront. Sometimes I stopped at the sprawling hawker place outside Capitol Cinema for a sugar-cane juice, before moving on to the Padang, where I paused to watch a soccer game. One day, I happened on a game with Bobby Charlton and Denis Law appearing as guests.

After a few contemplative cigarettes on the Elizabeth Walk, leaning over the rail and trying to blot out the Merlion and the Sheares Bridge, and the corporate towers that were beginning to multiply, I would head out to Clifford Pier, sitting on the steps to the *tongkangs* moored along

the river. Here, for me, lay the alluvial waters of the past, a stir of tide wrack, spilled gasoline and rotting bilge, a whiff that was the key to an understanding of the country and myself. It was the country's historical hub, the waterfront and streets fanning out from the river, but I was enthralled also because they formed the walkabout, the songlines my father had sown with his walks. I was retracing the long walks we had before he left us, the perambulation along North and South Bridge Roads, Chulia Street, Boat Quay, from the old Telok Ayer Market through Raffles Place to the Esplanade, encountering on the way the Sikh sweets vendor with his treats balanced on his head, the *kacang* and ice-cream men stationed along pre-Merlion Esplanade, all apparitions now.

I covered the streets and alleys between Chinatown and Shenton Way, reading the street names (a fascinating mix of Chinese, Malay and English words), taking in the moribund shophouses and the temples (Chinese, Indian, Sikh, Farsi), the rows of residential houses with dark rickety stairs, the old coffee shops that still carried spittoons and served coffee in a cup and saucer. At the beginning of Telok Ayer Street stood a dingy shophouse with a mahjong game in progress on the roadside; there were cages piled together, housing a menagerie of birds and a python coiled up painfully. Most of the old shophouses around Malacca and Market Street were slated for demolition by then, the Chettiars and trading houses long gone, along with the unlicensed street hawkers, ears cocked for the prowling police.

I walked the streets compulsively. Over and over the same paths around the Singapore River, back and forth along Change Alley and the Cavenagh Bridge, alone and sometimes with friends who strolled to the same beat, who felt out of place in this constantly changing city nation. I have walked the places into my being, recorded the before and after, the disappearances, the changes. I thought nothing of the changes in me; like the city whose changes I so resented, I was changing, transformed into somebody who was walking now not because he wanted to stay away from an unpleasant situation at home, but because movement had became essential, a way of keeping sane, making things stay a while longer.

Perhaps all my wanderings and amblings abroad are attempts to

recapture the intensity of the first walks with my father, just as the later books we write attempt to approximate the inspiration of the first book, or the subsequent affairs of the heart seek to recapture the passion of first love. In the walks abroad, I have come to realise that if there is a centre to all my walking, it is the grid of vanished places of childhood and youth. This may explain the attraction of cities like Shanghai, Calcutta and Alexandria to me. In them I have found echoes of the old Singapore. In Shanghai, the Bund was a parallel reminder of the Esplanade before the 80s, fronted with colonial edifices, all pomp and circumstance, the inescapable river smell and the barges, the shophouses and street stalls. Calcutta's lingering imperial air, the lively street commerce, the decay, the river and the godowns, the commons surrounding Victoria Memorial, the dilapidated ranks of shops and residential houses brought a sense of familiarity. Then Alexandria, its waterfront colonial architecture, the particular slant of the light through its salt-laden air, the invisible hub of the trade routes, held me with echoes of home. Cavafy writes about this inescapability, this home-haunted tonal chord to all our wanderings:

> You won't find a new country, you won't find another shore.
> This city will always pursue you. You walk
> the same streets, grow old in the same neighbourhoods,
> will turn gray in these same houses.
> You will always end up in this city.
> Don't hope for things elsewhere:
> there is no ship for you, there is no road.
> As you've wasted your life here, in this small corner,
> you've destroyed it everywhere in the world.

Each walk is a walk forward and backward in time, connecting paths that link different places and times, the place you walked away from and the place you are heading towards, and when you pause you wake to the junction where the streets of the past are aligned with those of the present.

In the last few years of his life, my father's limp became more pronounced, his injured leg more withered and intractable. We always thought that it was the accident years ago that had brought about the deterioration. It was only later, when he was warded in Woodbridge for alcoholic relapse, that we found out about the clot that had been embedded in his brain for thirty years. It had ticked like a time bomb, triggering spasms in the limbs, and a loss of the will to live.

I could have helped him to walk again before I left, could have walked with him again. Like Lazarus, he could have walked back into some kind of health or healing and maybe the story of our lives, father and son could have had a happier ending. But it was hard to talk; too much had happened or rather, not happened. Too many missing and unexplained years.

So in my dreams he walks away with his peculiar gait, that accented second step. Once I dreamed he was walking in front of me in Calcutta. He wasn't moving fast but somehow I was trailing further and further behind. I don't know whether it was my longing to see Calcutta again or my father that set off the dream. Or the vanished places in Singapore calling us to walk them once more, before my father disappeared for good.

HUNGRY GHOST

TODAY I SAW Granny in Sydney's Chinatown. Her hair pinned and tightly netted in a bun at the back, her arm dangling a rattan shopping basket. She was tugging a boy along in a slow, measured, purposeful waddle. At the combined medical and provisions store on Sussex Street, with a section filled with floor-to-ceiling drawers of herbs and jars of dried and wrinkled tubers and roots, they paused and Granny leaned over the reluctant five-to-eight-year-old and patiently communicated something to him, to make him enter the shop with her. I followed, feigning interest in the vast and strangely soothing store of Chinese remedies.

The voice and language undid the spell for me. Granny was Teochew and loved chatting with the Teochew owner of the Chinese medical shop that we frequented. I would be absorbed, poring over the glass counter in the herb-suffused air and tuning in to the soft mellifluous Teochew sounds, the unhurried friendly exchange between customer and shopkeeper that is no longer possible in this supermarket age.

After putting away the herbal packages in her basket, we would visit the neighbourhood provisions store. Here she would linger over the purchases, ensuring that the owner jot down the right prices as he clicked the abacus and packed the items into brown paper bags. The bags would be delivered by the scrawny young assistant who would later leap to his death from the tenth floor of the block where we lived because of gambling debts. Here was the hub of neighbourhood news. Here you

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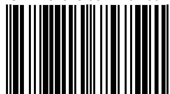
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