



CLEAR  
BRIGHTNESS

*New Poems*

BOEY  
KIM CHENG

## Additional Praise for Boey Kim Cheng

“No other writer from Singapore influences the country’s current batch of poets more than Australia’s new citizen Boey Kim Cheng.”

—GWEE LI SUI, editor of *Man/Born/Free*

“Boey Kim Cheng’s poems gather as they go powerful rhythmical force precisely by being rooted in the specifics of experience and feeling. They are deeply moving for their grand (and sometimes sorrow-shot) amplitude, as they take in the plurality of this breathtaking world.”

—JUDITH BEVERIDGE, winner of the Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal at the Mildura Writer’s Festival

“The best post-1965 English-language poet in the republic today.”

—SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM, author of *Among the White Moon Faces*

“There is no denying the power of his poetry, a poetry so often, one feels, energised by its need to break through.”

—LEE TZU PHENG, Singapore Cultural Medallion recipient for Literature

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Poetry

*Somewhere-Bound*

*Another Place*

*Days of No Name*

*After the Fire*

Memoir

*Between Stations*

CLEAR  
BRIGHTNESS

*New Poems*

BOEY  
KIM CHENG



EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

Copyright © 2012 by Boey Kim Cheng

All rights reserved.

Published in Singapore by Epigram Books.

www.epigrambooks.sg

“A Sense of Questing” originally appeared in *Cerise Press*,  
Spring 2010, Vol. 1 Issue 3, and is reprinted with permission.

Cover design by Stefany

Author’s photograph © 2012 by Boey Kim Cheng

National Library Board, Singapore

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Boey, Kim Cheng.

Clear Brightness / Boey Kim Cheng. – Epigram Books, 2012.

p. cm.

ISBN: 978-981-07-4182-2 (pbk.)

ISBN: 978-981-07-4183-9 (e-book)

ISBN: 978-981-07-4184-6 (pdf)

I. Title.

PR9570.S53

S821 -- dc23

OCN813204279

First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## Contents

Clear Brightness	1
La Mian in Melbourne	3
Dinky’s House of Russian Goods	5
To Markets	
Glebe	7
Change Alley	8
Kuala Lumpur	8
Calcutta	9
Varanasi	9
Xian	10
Kashgar	10
Isfahan	11
Istanbul	11
Cairo	12
Jerusalem	12
Tangiers	13
Fez	13
Marrakesh	14
Madrid	14
Poste Restante	15
Ahead My Father Moves	16
The National Theatre, Singapore	18
Amulet	20
Chinatowns	21
Pai Fang	21
Tang Ren Jie	21
Emperor’s Garden, Sydney	22

Melbourne	22
Sussex Street, Sydney	22
Mooncakes	23
New Year, Sydney	23
Wong Kei, London	23
L.A.	24
San Francisco 1	24
San Francisco 2	24
Calcutta	25
Paddy's Market	25
The Silk Road Restaurant, Sydney	25
Chinatowns	26
The Causeway	27
Soup	29
Lost Time	31
The Disappearing Suite	32
My Son Drawing	35
Marking Time	37
Take Five on the F3	39
Archipelago	41
Gleaning, Santa Barbara	44
The Migrant Ledger	46
No More	47
<i>A Sense of Questing</i>	49
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	57

## Clear Brightness

The house and yard dressed in a skin of ash.  
 It was raining embers, the night air thronged  
 with giddy petals that swirled  
 on the updraft, flared  
 to incandescence before curling into papery  
 ash, as we fled around midnight, my son  
 bewildered in my arms, his sister bright-eyed,  
 exclaiming, It's snowing, Christmas just weeks away.

We sweep the aftermath like penitents, the air  
 acrid, shriven, ashen, as it was on the day  
 of Qing Ming, Clear Brightness, in another life,  
 when families filed to the tombs with broom,  
 rice wine, boiled whole chicken and fruits, and stacks  
 of paper money, gold and silver currency  
 valid only in afterlife. The dead were fed,  
 their abodes swept, and the filial queue  
 of joss offered. Then the money was given  
 in fanned reams to the flames, transferred  
 to replenish the ancestors' underworld credit.  
 Once Grandma brought us to the cemetery,  
 dragging us in tow with armfuls of offerings,  
 filing up and down the crowded ranks  
 for the right address. I don't remember whose grave  
 it was we were tending, or Grandma telling us  
 to pray. Only a blurred oval photo of a man  
 on the worn headstone, and the hundreds of fires  
 around us, the air swimming  
 with ash-drifts, the sun eclipsed in the smoke  
 but its heat made more palpable by the pall  
 that hung over the day. I imagined the ancestors  
 catching the burned money like willow catkins, turning

them into real millions that they could send back  
to us to bail my father out of bankruptcy.

Now grave news from the living I have left;  
the cemeteries are dug up, razed, the dead  
expelled, their bones unhoused, ashed  
and relocated to columbaria to make  
room for progress. No more tomb-sweeping  
and picnicking with the dead.  
No such unrest for Grandma and Dad  
who went straight into the fire.  
Anyway they turned Catholic  
and have no use for paper money  
or earthly feasts.

Here the bush is charred, the trees  
splintered, pulverised like Dad's bones  
after the fire. The ash taste clings  
to the house, even after hosing and sweeping.  
It seeps into my dreams, into the new life  
I have made, and on my sleep it is still raining  
ash, flakes falling like memory, on my dead settling  
like a snowdrift of forgetting.

## La Mian in Melbourne

On Little Bourke Street it's the bewitching hour  
of winter dusk's last riffs playing  
long mauve shadows down the blocks,  
waking the neon calligraphy, its quavering script  
mirrored on the warm sheen of the Noodle King

where a man slaps and pummels the dough  
into a pliant wad. He takes a fist-sized ball  
and starts his noodle magic, stretching the bands,  
the sleight-of-hand plain for you to see,  
weaving a stave of floury silent music.

You stand islanded from the passage  
of bodies and cars, the art of *la mian*  
reeling you in to a music deep beneath  
the murmur of traffic, beyond the fusillade  
of a siren down the street. Between here

and wherever home is the noodles stretch,  
sinuous, continuous, edible songlines multiplying  
into a cat's cradle of memories, the loom-work  
of hands calling to the half-forgotten hum,  
hunger for what is gone, the lost noodle-makers

of the country left behind:  
the *wanton mee* hawker in Tiong Bahru,  
the *mee rebus* man on Stamford Road,  
and Grandmother serving long life  
noodles for each birthday, her deft hands

pulling three generations under one roof.

The noodles were slightly sweetened to ensure  
the long years came happy, not like Grandmother's  
difficult eight decades, the family dispersed  
at the end, the ritual of birthday noodles lost.

Now you watch the handful of hand-pulled  
noodles dunked in a boiling pot, then scooped  
with a mesh ladle onto a waiting bowl of broth.  
You sit before it, enveloped in steam,  
chopsticks ready to seize the ends  
or beginnings, and start pulling them in.

## Dinky's House of Russian Goods

Dinky the nostalgia trader, trafficker  
of lost time, lord of the Aladdin cave of memories,  
his hole-in-the-wall shop an archive  
stocked with used lives, spent epochs.  
Beneath his skull cap are the ninety-nine  
names of Allah and the city's memory  
of itself, the demolished buildings and streets,  
Change Alley and the Arcade stored like scrolls.

He sits behind a glass counter of stopped watches;  
Longines, Titonis, and defunct Soviet brands  
observing a past time. On the shelves and floor  
time's detritus is shored up: chronometers, clocks,  
gramophones, bronze statuettes of beasts,  
maidens and gods. A laughing Buddha sits  
next to a frieze of Chinese figurines  
in porcelain rapture, eternally coital.

Dinky offers you defunct currencies, the notes  
and coins from the age of dead grandfathers.  
You thumb the box of old Straits postcards,  
an accordion row of sepia and faded tints.  
A reel of vanished places comes to life  
and the sleek corporate towers are erased,  
shophouses and five-foot ways bustling again with trade.  
The verdigris rubbed off and the past held to light

and you are walking with your father  
who is no longer ash but faded Kodak colour  
across the Padang and soon you are hopscotching  
on the red-and-white pavers of the Elizabeth Walk.  
Dinky winds up a plain-face Seiko to your ear  
and your childhood is ticking past the roman numerals  
into life, on your wrist the ghostly strap  
and pulse of your first watch that your father bought

in Change Alley and now Dinky takes you  
into its carnivalesque length, the goods, the voices  
and smells reverberating in the tunnel between  
there and now. At the Alley's end a blinding glare  
waits and already Dinky and your father  
are losing their colour and stepping into sepia  
shade, distant figures in a faded postcard  
echoing in memory's junk shop.

## To Markets

for Wah Fong

### Glebe

It's Saturday and the stubbled schoolyard is packed  
with stalls, nomad yurts converging for trade,  
the trestle tables unsprung, the wares displayed.  
To be desiring, to want to want, you tack  
along with the procession, wired to a need  
that will pass you on to another want.  
From stall to stall you travel, your eyes scan  
the language of goods, the faces you read  
the herbs and scents you sniff, cadences heard  
in markets elsewhere, a queue of bazaars,  
Xian, Cairo, Marrakesh, back to your childhood  
where on Tuesday the night bazaar the stalls stretched far  
along the street and you are holding your father's hand,  
the world before you, and you don't want it to end.



## Change Alley

The world before, and you don't want it to end.  
The bustling bazaar rife with promise, spiced  
with the names of who you will become. Weekend  
in the Change Alley and you are keeping pace  
with your father's limping gait, and the giddy train  
of stalls and faces are your first atlas,  
intimating worlds out there, and you are certain  
your father will stay for good, that you will hold  
him from his errant ways, and help him lose  
his debts, his woes in this current of barter,  
the queue of vendors and shoppers, the dead years unrolled  
into stalls alive with souvenirs and silks, suits tailor-  
made overnight, bootleg cassettes unreeling the soundtrack  
to our walk into the future, the dazzle at the Alley's back.

## Kuala Lumpur

Fresh out of the army, the future a dazzle,  
your first solo trip to Kuala Lumpur  
you wander into Chinatown at nightfall  
and are sucked into the human flow  
past the fake Guccis, the Rolexes, the brands  
an empire of signs unreeling; you sense  
a whiff of the real, in thrall to the face and mind  
of one in the hostel, who that morning recited her log  
of two years on the road. You float  
on the river of bodies, from stall to stall, riding  
the current to something beyond the two and  
a half years trudging up and down the hills,  
toting gun and pack, to the lone traveller leaving or arriving  
as the first light breaks on the vanished stalls.

## Calcutta

First light gilding the awakening stalls  
of the New Market, and you warm your hands  
around the clay *chai* cup, the rousing calls  
of crows and vendors, the woodsmoke tuning  
your senses to your first Indian trip, the door opens  
to that first day as the dusk settled on Chowringhee  
and the pavement hawkers priming their lamps  
on polyester shirts, plastic toys and dusty books strewn  
on the pitted, betel-stained ground, and you are walking  
up and down past the Museum with your first friends  
of the road, in the backpacker lingua franca talking  
on a rickety bench at the mobile *chai* cart, the Rembrandt hue  
of their faces lit after these long absent years,  
the dim selves home among browsing locals and dusty wares.

## Varanasi

Weaving through narrow lanes of loitering locals  
and cows chewing garbage and belching dung,  
past the pungent alley of curd and cheese wallahs,  
the glittering lane of Varanasi silk brocade,  
bangles and trinkets, with Christmassy lights strung  
out for Shiva's festival, his jingoistic chants played  
over and over, night and day. Then, as if in trance,  
you see four men bearing a body in saffron shroud,  
and you follow, through the *chowk*, losing the *bhajans*,  
the commerce, till it opens on woodsmoke clouds,  
the sooty tower and pyres at the water's edge,  
two bodies in flames, three in the queue, the image  
as you wander back, of the attendant *Doms* and dogs kept  
burning, for days, years, keeping lit the dark peace on the ghat.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to the Australia Council for the Arts for a writing grant for *Clear Brightness*.

And deepest thanks to Winnifred Wong, for helping to make the book happen.

Some of the poems in the collection appeared in *Meanjin*, *HEAT*, the Red Room Company's Disappearing project, *Overland*, *Asiatic*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore* and *Coast: a Mono-Titular Anthology of Singapore Writing*.

“Boey Kim Cheng perseveres in drawing poignant bridges between a vanishing past and that ever-indifferent future. Each poem marks a destination that has disappeared, or is disappearing, marked by a sense of both public and intensely personal loss, accumulating in what the poet has himself described as a growing ‘list of the disappeared’—full of heartfelt inventory, difficult reconciliations and a thoughtful compassion. *Clear Brightness* is Boey’s best collection yet.”

—CYRIL WONG, author of  
*Tilting Our Plates to Catch the Light*

In poems that shuttle between Singapore and Australia, award-winning poet Boey Kim Cheng seeks to establish a new sense of self and home on the shifting ground between memory and imagination. A noodle-maker in Melbourne triggers connective threads to the poet’s birthplace. A train crossing over the Johor-Singapore Causeway evokes the dislocating experience of interstitial existence. After six long years, one of Singapore’s greatest modern voices returns with a work of profound insight and erudition.



**BOEY KIM CHENG** is an award-winning poet who was born in Singapore and migrated to Australia in 1997. His books include four collections of poetry—*Somewhere-Bound* (1989), *Another Place* (1992), *Days of No Name* (1996) and *After the Fire* (2006)—and a travel memoir, *Between Stations* (2009). He is a senior lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle, Australia.

ISBN-13: 978-981-07-4182-2



9 789810 741822

[www.epigrambooks.sg](http://www.epigrambooks.sg)