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
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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
acid, 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,
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.
In each poet, you can see something pressing, something that demands to be given expression in a poem. Someone once said that all that a writer needs for his/her entire career is just one theme. Keats and Stevens meditating on the imagination and beauty, Rilke on the spiritual power of poetry, Larkin on “the solving emptiness” under it all, Heaney on place and displacement, Bishop on questions of travel. These poets have tracked the theme to the furthest reaches of their lives and imagination, and fetched back the unsayable, something so profoundly beautiful, joyous or tragic that it can’t be explained. In the end, it’s a state close to music that the poem discovers and inhabits and through that, the experience is being communicated or embodied. I can read the ending of Larkin’s “The Whitsun Weddings” over and over—“there swelled/ A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower/ Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain”—and get a sense of solace from its rhythm, from what it is gesturing to. There are others I love—Cavafy, Du Fu, Mark Strand, William Matthews, poets whose work resonates with a sense of a lived life. You are not just reading the poem and admiring its craftedness, but encountering a person, a human being trying to make sense of a particular situation.

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"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.