

Do You  
LIVE IN?

Do You Live In?  
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# Do You LIVE IN?

SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM



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*For  
Wang Gung Wu,  
a guiding star—  
scholar, historian, poet and teacher.  
We are all grateful.*

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## Home Stretch

This collection marks a home stretch covering almost five years. First begun as a series of walking poems in Santa Barbara (poems that are now collected in a separate edition) as I was recovering from an illness that left me more vulnerable to the correspondences between an outside and a suddenly mortal inside, the walking poems continued during a four-month semester as the Inaugural Ngee Ann Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University Scholars Programme at the National University of Singapore and then as Visiting Professor at the City University of Hong Kong. While many authors seek residencies in extremely protected writers colonies such as Yaddo, much of my life has been spent as an academic, scholar and teacher. After a couple of rejections early in my career of applications to be admitted to these writer residencies, I never applied again (the Hedgebrook and Newcastle Lock Up residencies arrived as offers). Academic fellowships and visiting faculty appointments, however, have been plentiful, but usually entail research projects and teaching commitments. For the first time, however, in 2012 and 2013 I was invited to visiting professorships that permitted

a little more time for being a poet—a little more solitude, fewer academic writing deadlines.

I was able in Singapore and Hong Kong in 2012, 2013, and 2014–15 to be both a nomad and yet a 'home'-body—a resident alien without a permanent address, although sheltered—a temporary condition. What I learned anew was that the place of nomadism is more complicated, challenging and demanding than of settled people—an existential truth that refugees, migrants, expatriates, the homeless and many poor who are unsheltered live every day.

I inhabited such existentialist states at points in my life; but today, with the means to settle in a number of more or less stable nations as a desirable green card capital-contributor (the USA, Canada, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia to name a few such countries with these entry visas), why do I persist in what must appear to many as aimless wandering, an un-reasonable itinerary of jetting to and fro, here and there, which is neither the 'wanderlust' the German Romantics honored or the comestible pleasures that tourist agencies publicize?

The inevitable fact of my 21<sup>st</sup> century life, post 2000, is that migration is often indistinguishable from re-migration and expatriation. "Home," still endowed with plangent sentiment, has become fused/confused with the *unheimlich*; the nearing prospect of 'home' shifting inexorably to 'retirement' and 'nursing' home places

'homeland' in a radically different valence, one that approaching mortality frames in ever more austere territorial displacements. Perhaps there is a universal home for every sentient being, although the temporal places we had lived in or now live in are always already provisional and transient. Which does not make these places the less overflowing with feeling and meaning.

Written in the five years since my last collection appeared, the poems in *Do You Live In?* are not simply of wandering but also of settlement. Each site—Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong—offers a different national and cultural location, a different human and physical geography with distinctive flows and forms, flora and fauna, languages and histories. These geographies are not simply context or subtext but the very text of the writing. With poems, unlike fiction, the dialogical voice and scene are covert, suggested rather than dramatized. The poems here offer less dialogue among multiple social agents but imply their import in figures of speech, metaphoric flash of juxtaposition, and correspondence between observation of the external world—human-made and outside of human hands—and interior subject. They are poems of different homes, written in present tense of what is past, passing and perhaps never to return.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

January 3, 2015

## Narrow

In Malacca's narrow streets  
they sell gimcracks sugared snacks  
pieces of spiced-up history.  
So the guides claim, corralling  
fat tour buses toward the mall  
hotel catchment parking lots.

While in dark narrow houses  
they talk of daughters only sons  
slices of family memory.  
So the old folks claim, farewelling  
generations toward mall  
suburb sprawl of foreign countries.

## *Buah Keluak*

Uncrackable nut, poisonous nut  
of childhood my *Nyonya* mother soaked,  
washing mud to extract its cyanide  
signature. Case tough as teak, robbed  
gems for the five year old's treasure cave,  
which *shazams* years after the fruit's  
been picked in a Sumatran jungle.  
Ah, that little ball of sweet dark earth  
perfumes the mouth with delicious bitterness  
only defanged poison long laved in *rempah*,  
*buah keras*, *belachan* and chicken  
yields. Like the story of stone soup  
whose onions, cabbage, salt beef and thyme  
sate the page. Except the stone nut had opened  
its heart, except the mother had softened  
its core, except the pithy poison's leached,  
that the mouth so blessed also opens  
to praise the kitchen, so the dead will be  
remembered and blessed in the eating.

## City of Dislocation

Buffed marble reflects sky-  
lights in the resounding temple,  
noble and tawdry equal.  
Every chapel door  
is open. Worldly beauty's  
creoled shapes and colors  
invite ready money  
that disappears like a store  
of nuts thieved by magpies.

Like shadow and substance,  
city dwellers press through  
each other, eyeing each dance  
by ribbon and button; tread  
the year's black and white rules,  
flickering on glass, displayed schools  
of fish, unliving and undead.

## Hong Kong Pastoral, Shopping

### *In Here, In You*

The mall emblazons her theme  
on banners and posters, paints  
in large letters on walls blank  
of any other dream:

*In Here, In You*—you signifying  
me, giantess whose manifold-  
lit wombs embrace the all  
of you, Jonahs swallowed in

Leviathan's maw, dream gazers,  
opium eaters of narcotics  
that strip earth, crush mountains,  
for your grazing. You in her,

in here. You with eyes  
wide open in her wide  
thrumming belly, true earth  
lost, forgotten your true skies.



## Sister Exile

She sits on the first step of the stairs on the ground level mall, leading to the newly opened HSBC counters and ATM machines, not looking at anything, as if she has just woken up and does not know where, and in that brief second before her restless spirit returns to the stooped flesh, there is no caring. I walk past that head of wiry black hair, years younger than my close-shorn grey, careful not to stare, as if admitting her blankness into my glance would crack her delicate shell of isolation; and on my return circle she is still there, face in hands, as she weeps at the mouth of the emporium, having woken to its hard clarity in which tears are the currency of the exiled, who are permitted to pass through but not stop. I see and do not see myself in her. I'd sat on the step of stairs in another city, sick and afraid, but I had never wept—those salty fluids wrenched from the gut and chest would not rise for me; I'd clenched them till they evaporated, condensed into grains of words, word trails to show the way to a home where the table is set, the bed made, and I wait to welcome the wanderer who's walked away from the seat by the foot of stairs through which strange millions are passing.

## ABC

(at the university)

Instead of writing a poem I write copy:

agenda	appeal	appendix	
brief	brochure	bullet-point	citation
critique	defense	e-mail	form letter
lecture	memo	proposal	prospectus
reference	report	review	
summary	syllabus	finally	
			resignation.