

“In his precocious debut at eighteen, Kwek showed remarkable maturity of perception, accuracy of observation, lucidity of language and visual clarity in evoking striking vignettes of home. These qualities have been further honed since and are now carried by the music of the line, compelling cadences that embody the rhythms of travel and catch the nuances of encounters with a wide range of landscapes and people. Poem after poem brings back reports of the world out there in arresting images that subtly but inexorably provoke thoughts of where and what home is.”

– Boey Kim Cheng

“Beware the cunningly diffident title. Theophilus Kwek gains incredible mileage from his surrender to the proper stately rhythms of his muse. These warm, Anglophilic poems are large of heart and hold the ocean of a young earth that is feeling its every ripple.”

– Gwee Li Sui, poet and critic

“How much ground is covered in these thoughtful poems through the seen, unseen and in-between! Kwek speaks with the care and intimacy of a close companion, sharing the wonder in wandering. Here is the ‘heart’s geography’ (‘Edinburgh’), a search for meaningful connection on a journey that delights and inspires.”

– Lavinia Singer, Editor, *Oxford Poetry*

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

They Speak Only Our Mother Tongue (2011)

Circle Line (2013)

Giving Ground

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To Dad and Mom, again and always

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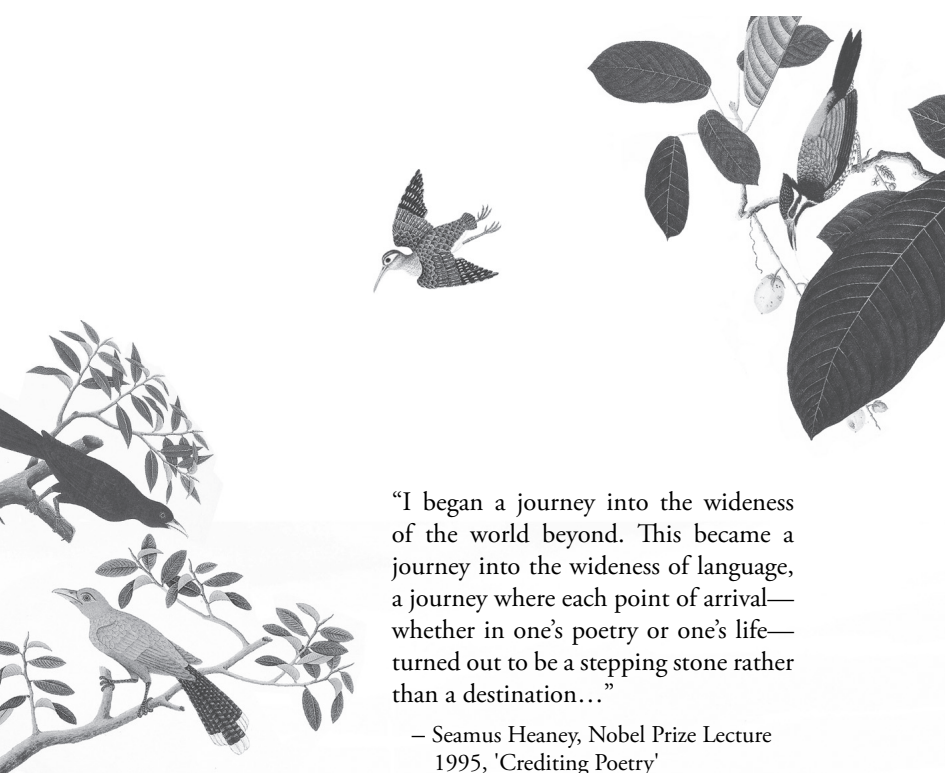
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“I began a journey into the wideness of the world beyond. This became a journey into the wideness of language, a journey where each point of arrival—whether in one’s poetry or one’s life—turned out to be a stepping stone rather than a destination...”

– Seamus Heaney, Nobel Prize Lecture 1995, 'Crediting Poetry'



A417

“This was what I had prayed for: a small piece of land with a garden, a fresh-flowing spring of water at hand near the house, and, above and behind, a small forest stand...

It’s perfect. I ask nothing more.”

– Horace, *Satires and Epistles*, II.6

Begin at the motorway. Between gravel and green find, in place of kerb, cleared dirt. Tall poplar rows, scaling birds. Song hedged against sound. Near a half-mile on, signs into town save one: *To Haffield*. Climb the wrought gate with the factory stacks. On the far side the circling path turns to give you time alone in uncut grass. Daffodils in clumps. Chestnut furl. Step forward, then sit. Watch as clouds curl.

Imagine you have enough time here for a meal. An afternoon. The sun does not set. Your phone does not ring. Either side, the valley is a somnolent sea, two pairs of cresting sails, the walls of your street, back home. Woods along both ridges peer into the centrefold. The silence is warm, unfenced; a parcel at the foot of the stairs. Today is none of the days of the week, so tuck your legs in. Listen for a creek.

Write nothing down. This is a day to need and keep within the heart’s hollow, one to allow for all others, otherwise spent: between two cities, or discontent in one you have always known. Perusing books in known languages, a safe distance from the moving crowd, where airports and platforms become one. Look how each branch above makes space for one more. See how they say: this is higher, this is not all.



ROAD WORKS

North Bridge Road

Days before leaving, we walk against traffic
past St Andrew's, Bras Basah with its used books
and signs on cracked boards: *Youth Books, Prestige,*
Evernew. More than convenience brings us
to be near these familiar friends, to employ
such pretexts as meals with new acquaintances,
even former teachers, trusting the best ones
to understand. Across the bridge, lanterns
keep Mid-Autumn, patterned after cloths and clothes
that are these streets' unseasonal trades. Distance
makes it hard to tell fixtures from the fixed,
we imagine, peering backwards, rows of lights,
sidewalks gone, like garnish on eaten fish,
or what we will return to in years,

if we are careful. But care has little
to do with it. Friends change, are changed, even
those that seem at first most prim, permanent,
pall. Ahead, the road bends north, then east, turns,
after the delta, into *Crawford, Lavender, Balestier...*
to follow any further will be to prolong conversation
with one who must be left, at last, behind.
Already the light has shifted, doubling
back we see all the buildings eclipsed, estranged,
and all it took was for us to have passed by,
against traffic, in the days before leaving.
Thus we learn, or are taught, tricks or truths
for the coming road: how to look, where to linger,
if only to know at length, and no longer.

Afternoon on 思南路

for Uncle Kenny

Sinan Road, in Shanghai's old French Concession.
"Sinan": to think of the South.

We have planned, this afternoon, a walk in the heart
of the city. It is a treat for us both, he, the architect,
to show me, the historian, these new-old mansions,
point out anachronisms, tell restorations from rows
fitted to colonial fashions. We study gables, awnings,
and hard grey brickwork, noticing in plantanes' shade
a recent truth: the road is double-carriage, re-paved,
wide for its time. Ten years, and he has shaped more
of this far city than his own, coaxed neighbourhoods
like these to abide modern occupants. By extension,
he refers to here as home, at least in habit; a house
for hearth and heart. We proceed, as the road pares
across a map of the place that peels onto my palms,
pass walls broken for refurbishment, draped in ivy,
and the less derelict, left standing. Our strides fall
equal, despite years in between. Later, over tea,
he will tell me of the plans to retire, build at leisure
a café like the one we're in: stone pillars, dark teak,
panels full of books. Miles south, the hours will turn
in another city where they await our arrival, watching
the same clocks. I think of the next twenty, thirty years,
or what it will take: a long winter, perhaps a bad fall,
before we are together again in that city without season.
Till then, the thoroughfare of this afternoon will suffice
to join for us what is here and there, in part, in parting,
beyond all departure.

Yerushalayim

“City of Peace”

*“I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem,
which shall never hold their peace...” – Isaiah 62:6*

Walls stacked on arches. Schools of dreaming
children, streams of bedrock that vanish
into a shock of markets. Armed men
at the junctions, burning cigarettes,
slanting stalls, crosses of olive carved
pocket-size. Vermillion sweets to whet
the tongue. Here in old Jerusalem
windows and rooftops without blemish
are swept each morning, and seem to sing

for the birds that do not fall hurting,
hurtling with haste as they do elsewhere
into lit rooms behind the curtains.
Gaps in the ground are for others to know
the city as it was, harried, halved
by more ancient walls, a mere peep-show
of what’s hardly past. Nothing brightens
the thought: all there is that is not there
rests from unaccustomed sight. For ten,

twenty shekels one might hope to light
upon something more authentic, go
with a guide beneath the Western Wall,
touch weeping stone, even wait to watch
as women pray. The shade is a salve
where outside the bright sun hurts the eyes,
and other people beyond recall
live normally until dark comes to plunder
veiled houses in the electric night.

Vatican

Quick as prayer: the train is gone, and we ascend
from a minute’s stretched silence into this near city.
It is Monday, and across the square another country
fills with purpose. We queue at the walls, pass stalls
of pins and pens, begin, dutiful, a route that leads
through the museum to the Sistine and St. Peter’s.
These do not disappoint—rows of statesmen carved
pale marble, reliefs of gods at war, and the still lifes
of others—while in the Chapel the Father’s hand
reaches across ceiling and misses man’s. But there
is too much for marvel, and by noon, far more
than enough for the day. What comes, unexpected
as we turn to leave, is wind sweeping wide to flood
all this with the city’s full breadth. Imagine: the roads
have come home, and the screech of jostling cars,
cameras, thieves, horses, *carabinieri*, shouting men,
is accompanied, from afar, by a fiddler whose song
will not be walled or willed. Finding for the first time
a new city where the old ends, not holy but filled
with signs, and with no lesser wonders, whole, we
set out again through the streets, intent as before,
to where all pilgrims go. Or walk as if we know.

A Growing Up

*for the children of Penyu & Mariya Orphanage,
Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria*

“Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up.”

– James Baldwin

Flights above an old town: your city of small steps with its gravelly yard. At the gates every morning we are led by our fingers through paths of leaves, the double doors swinging, down runways, roads, battlefields and hillsides, past cairns, ruins, moats, round squares. Along walls, where there are nocks of your heights and skirmishes. Here, your days, like their composite things, are to be hewn and tossed, chipped with hands, each implement for the next. There are no ends to such days. In the close hours we sit to catch your sunrises, several an afternoon in the ageless thrill of opened blinds. Or watch as the world ends, tilting us parallel to earth and sky, your bent swing still believing in its broken hinge. When there is sufficient space we even spin to lift you, soaring and centrifugal, and in the tense and boundless seconds become centres of one gravity. Who are we, stumbling and large, to receive such grace? Or such sorrow when we leave at evening? Tomorrow you will not greet us at the gates, as if from afar, and for the first time. In our colder city we will find such approximate words as these: *Let the days last. Let the swing hold. When at last the summer comes, let it rain without sound.* But here your own words will also keep these other things: the brevity of flights, and all our short comings.



DESIRE LINES