

Heng Siok Tian Phan Ming Yen Yong Shu Hoong Yeow Kai Chai



lost bodies

poems between portugal and home

Lost Bodies: Poems between Portugal and Home

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Of Losses and Absences: A Preface

There were supposed to be five of us on holiday.

We—these same five people—had originally wanted to visit Portugal in 2013. Thinking back now, we could not remember what had first ignited our desire to make the trip. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that none of us had been there before. Or the interest had stemmed from the mystique of the fado which we enjoyed listening to—perhaps, we had wanted to visit

the land and experience the culture that is tethered to such longing and sorrow.

But that year, our schedules did not permit a lengthy visit, and so we went to Siem Reap to explore Angkor Wat instead. From that trip, the four writers in the group eventually published a book, *The Adopted: Stories from Angkor* (2015), but that would be another story.

Then, four of us—Ming Yen and his wife Amy, Shu Hoong and Kai Chai—managed to get our schedules aligned again and the Portugal trip became a possibility. Due to her mother's illness, Siok Tian was initially unable to go. But after her mother had passed away, Siok Tian's sisters decided at the last minute that it would be good for her to make the trip. Unexpectedly, on the eve of our departure for Portugal, Kai Chai's mother was hospitalised. He decided to delay his flight and instead meet the rest of us in Porto, but later on, his mother's continuing illness prompted him to cancel the trip.

So the travelling party was back to four people.

Still, the original intention of embarking on a writing game remained. Just as what we had done with our Siem Reap trip, we had wanted to generate new writings from our visit to Portugal. The original plan was simple: We would write poetry as we soaked in the sights, sounds and scents of Portugal. We would write a poem on each of the 12 days we were there. Each day, one of us would suggest a stimulus, which would be a scene or an object to be documented by a photograph. These stimuli included a postcard sent to Kai Chai;

a leather grab handle on a bus we took in Lisbon; and even a sex shop that was near our apartment in Lisbon and listed as a to-go place in the *Time Out* magazine we bought. From each stimulus, each person would provide the first and last lines of a yet-to-be-written poem. Aside from the first poem, the opening lines of subsequent poems were crafted from choice words in the first and last lines in the previous poems.

Our first sight of Portugal was the vast plains of the Alentejo under the relentless glare of the summer sun. As we made our way from Lisbon to Évora, our first stop in Portugal, there was nothing in the never-ending stretches of vineyards, rows of cork trees and expanse of wheat fields to connect us with the romance of the Western world's first naval power which charted the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Perhaps, it was this idea of worldwide journeying, coupled with a sense of adventure, which prompted us to think of the image of the Atlas Moth as a possible theme for this joint poetry collection that we were hoping to compile from our writing game.

But, like the moth with the weight of the world imprinted on its wings, the absence of our fellow writer and traveller weighed heavily upon us. On our first evening in Évora, we wondered if we should continue with the writing project. We were already missing Kai Chai and we had bought a postcard for him.

Then, Ming Yen messaged him via WhatsApp: "In a postcard on its way to you is an early summer... just now, the light was good." These lines were crafted

from words he had overheard at a restaurant where we had dined on our first day, and from casual comments that one of us had uttered after snapping a photograph.

Kai Chai's reply was instantaneous: "Can I still participate in the writing project?" And so the writing game continued.

Over 12 days, we visited Évora, Porto, Sintra and Lisbon. Although Kai Chai was 12,000 km away and seven hours ahead of us, it was as if he was with us in both body and spirit. It felt like we were carrying out a long-distance love affair.

Kai Chai's mother passed away a month from the date we left for Portugal, two weeks after we returned.

It was only after we submitted the draft to our publisher that Siok Tian told us she had taken a photograph of her late mother along with her on the trip.

The poems are sequenced as a journey over lands and times: It begins with Ming Yen's set of poems, which are narratives largely inspired by Portuguese history, literature and the Catholic faith.

Next is Siok Tian's set where a daughter travelling in Portugal contemplates the loss of her mother and their lives spent together.

Shu Hoong's poems cross continents, covering genres and themes ranging from the seventh lunar month offerings to the burgeoning of sexuality.

Kai Chai's are that of a son in Singapore, sitting by the bedside of his ailing mother, imagining a trip to Portugal together with his friends.

Although the Atlas Moth had made its appearance in poems by two of us, it soon became apparent that "The Atlas Moth" may not be an appropriate title as we had initially intended. We later combed through other opening and ending lines, and came upon this line by Ming Yen:

"This body of lost confessions looking for sun."

We thought the idea of "loss" was appropriate here, since losses and absences—physical and spiritual—preoccupied our minds. There was the added connotation of getting lost in a country none of us was familiar with—which was quite apt in terms of poetry born out of travel.

And so, *Lost Bodies* became the title, and among the losses, something was found.

The Authors

The Leaping Cavalier
and the Girl

for Cassandra

Phan Ming Yen

The Leaping Cavalier and the Girl

In a postcard on its way to you
is an early summer
wrapped by your absence
and the lingering
stench of Spring's sudden death.

within the shadows of the city's walls,
still lost, is the face of the little girl
the leaping cavalier saw
as he raised his sword

history neither gives her name
nor tells how her blood flowed;

in this heat scarred by longing
unrelieved by an evening
of shrieking swallows
and a cathedral sinking
into darkness

we can only imagine that if she woke,
the girl must have seen her eyes on the blade,
his smile next to her mouth

for just then, just now,

the light was good.

Sacrifice of the Caracóis

summer light drives me inside a postcard café
where plates of uneaten caracóis
smile dead back at me,
their proud executioner waiting

how did time stop for them?

away from your blind words
sheltered from your unspoken gaze
nothing here tells me the hour any more

outside,
a stranger scurries
across the windswept square
to where
a rusty and forgotten
sundial lives as bones in a chapel

Simple Days

*remembering mother
in Portugal, June 2015*

Heng Siok Tian

Day 1

In a postcard on its way to you, is an early summer.
Not knowing words, you will not read
my scribbles but you read people, faces;
eyes now cataract-cleansed
look past colours, surfaces,
nuances you shape well
with clarity of age.
Mother, how might I learn your wisdom? How?
How do you bear your pain?
Suffering the silence only mothers see
in darkness but
just now the light was good.

Day 2

Summer light drives me inside a postcard café.
I carry your small photo with me on this trip—
something I never did, nor once thought of doing.
Now
your face a chapel.
Forgive me, mother, for all my thoughtlessness.
Forgive me, for all my silliness,
naughtiness, childishness, childlessness...
amidst my tracking, crossing, flying,
I never trekked the places you went;
your sunrises, your sunsets.

Sundial lives as bones in chapel.

The Hunger Pit

The kind eyes of the druggist opened wider and wider as he listened. Finally he threw his head back and laughed until tears came to his eyes.

Music from the Hunger Pit (1954) by Brother Roberto, C.S.C.

Yong Shu Hoong

Wish You Were Here

for KC

In the postcard on its way to you is an early summer, an azure castle we might have circumvented the day before, sans knowledge, in our aimless amble. It is, most likely, our retribution for sloth, for not having properly researched our destination before reaching the destination. This is, in all honesty, our collective sin. What we do not write about, we let the castle articulate. What's the sum total of all monuments in Évora (castle included)? And does the number equate the many ways we could've fallen in love with this slow city? The truth is: every monument here that we didn't know better to stop for adds up to the different ways we're missing you. Just now, we spared another thought for you. Just now, we walked past yet another igreja without pausing to ogle its columns or take a group shot—even though, just now, the light was good.

Only I Know How I Feel

Summer light
drives me inside
a postcard café—I refuse
to sparkle
in the Portuguese sun. *I am very*
logical and rational. Ignoring
the one-
euro latte and tacky
souvenirs, I pine for lunch:
how fresh the sangria
in brittle glass? A girl
walks alone at high noon
in cobblestoned alley.

Do I know
her? I watch
from the doorway
and decide
to give chase. She turns
a corner and heads
towards the Sé Cathedral. Dare I
follow—
and modify my nature to less
God-fearing? I trail the un-
suspecting prey
up the stairs
to the rooftop where stone
gargoyles
observe. Clouds congeal

in absentia

for my mother

Yeow Kai Chai

in absentia: the first day in évora

in a postcard, on its way to you, is an early summer,
where the portuguese sun is yellower and warmer,
and the plains are as dull and imperfect as tarmac,
and you can cast a dry eye beyond grey hospital,
hillocks of alentejo, a few stunted trees, culs-de-sac,
over them, through car parks, round flatted factories,
bridge with zigzag ramps for the physically handicapped,
vehicles stuck in opposite directions on simei avenue,
strays hiding in drains, people huddled at the bus stop,
flats in ecru and pale blue at bedok reservoir road,
taller than the burnished towers of évora cathedral,
except none of these flats are built with rose granite,
and you glean no fine gothic tracery in their windows,
no crenels in corridors, no exquisite arcaded corbels,
but in a blink, materialise my four parched travellers,
missionaries of hope, love, and eternal wanderlust,
stumbling through this field of dreams, robust
and sunburnt, scaling these steps into the building,
strolling past four evangelists in the cloisters,
fingering the choir carved in oak, featuring courtly rituals,
unearthly creatures, hunting parties, daily farm life,
past ecclesiastical gold, silver and bejewelled plates,
polished chalices, crosses, an ancient organ that's
outlived kings and queens, peasants and clergymen,
tourists and terrorists, a pair of butterflies fluttering
above my head, a moth which now perches on
the window sill of your empty room a week after,
and i smell the persistent smell of mouth wash,
talcum, faecal residue, blood smear, bed bugs,
and hear your laughter, those rotting, chattering teeth,
touch your browless face, and then, all is clear, rinsed,

drawn up for the sun to come beaming through
the rosette window, and for a second, we're all blinded
by the brilliance of diamonds—maroon, aquamarine,
lemon, emerald—set around the circle, whereupon
the hunger calls, despite your lack of appetite,
and responsibly we pick up the remains of the day,
exit the cathedral, but not before posing for the camera
in front of the building which slowly evaporates,
and all of you try to mouth something, to which
i, beached here in an armchair at the waiting area
outside the ward (where someone in limbo is watching
an afternoon rerun of an old drama serial), echo:
i can't hear you, but just now, the light was good

in absentia: waiting in a pasteleria

the summer light drives me inside a postcard café, where i'll order a cuppa um galão to share. it's milky, not dissimilar from a latte, or this warm soya bean milk i actually am stirring, standing in the hallway and watching the nurses draw the curtain around you for another diaper change, for the last time. shall we go for something stronger—an um bica (espresso)—although normally, you'd say, won't you rather settle for an iced lemon tea? instead, you nod, dozing off, too drained to make small talk. the midday sun is killing you, just like the pounding, knocking, drilling, jabbing. in no time, they will finish a new wing and you'll be done too, but for now you're transferred to another ward which faces inside, away from the sun, the noise muffled by merciful distance. what else would you like to have, ma? some cold chrysanthemum tea, you reply. i rush downstairs to the food court to get it before it closes. you eye a yeo's canned drink, look away, then ask the young lady to make a fresh hot chrysanthemum tea instead, and may i have a cup of ice cubes as well? she stares at me for half a sec, says nothing and obliges. minutes later, you gulp down the tea and a mammal, dunk in amniotic fluid, gasps for air. the birds are flying home. the haze won't arrive till weeks later, but there is no reprieve. no solids allowed. stir the tasteless soup. somebody topples a tray. a kid bawls. there is no absolute silence till the silencer comes. in this café, we banter with your room-mates, who are, like you, dressed in the same bandung pink gowns. the garrulous makcik arguing with her absent son on the mobile. the skinny ah soh, at least a decade younger than you,

is bent like origami, each touch radiating pain. ma, you look terribly ruddy in comparison. i smile. things taken for granted have a way of catching you offguard when you least expect it, and then you're taken by what the portuguese calls saudade, a sense of longing for something, someone not there anymore: how softly, like a thin veil, the light falls on these fine blue-and-white tiles, or azulejos, as they are called. did you know that azulejos came from the arabic word "az-zulayj", which means "polished stone"? to trace each geometric line is to recover its humble beginning. who is the creator who painted each stroke, glazed the skin and cradled each body? this too, in your hands, is a glistening tile, a humble piece i bring, together with your favourite yellow plastic bracelet we would later place inside in the jade urn, atop your bones and ashes. right this moment, reconstituted, you and i are enjoying pastéis de nata, quiches, lots of cakes, croissants, goreng pisang, a big tub of coke, as we amble through cobblestoned streets, thinking of how pa would feed the mynahs at the window, and reminding ourselves to get him some of these. the announcement comes on, all birds and shadows gone. time to leave. no one has a say. keep the mementos away. rivers rise and dry up, the moon is hung, and the sundial, the one four of you pose beside,

lives
on
as
bones
in the chapel

Authors' Notes

The authors wish to thank:

Kah Gay and Alexandra for their editorial input and efforts put in for the production of this book; Jaymz Yong of Superlative for the cover design; and Mr Fong as always for his continued belief and support.

...

Phan Ming Yen:

‘The Leaping Cavalier and the Girl’ and ‘Looking for Dias at the Caravels’ Graveyard’ are inspired by episodes from Portuguese history: the former by the conquest of Évora from the Moors by Gerald the Fearless in 1165 and the latter by the death of the explorer Bartolomeu Dias (1450–1500). ‘Little Schoolgirl’ references the Sonny Boy Williamson blues standard ‘Good Morning, Schoolgirl’. ‘Silence’ takes off from Shusaku Endo’s novel of the same name. With thanks to Kai Chai, Shu Hoong and Siok Tian; with gratitude to Amy for being the first and critical reader.

Heng Siok Tian:

Amy, Ming Yen, Shu Hoong and Kai Chai were the friends who unreservedly welcomed me to join them after they have finalised everything for the trip. The decision to travel was made on the first day of my mother’s wake, where they shared the details with me. I contributed nothing at the pre-planning stage, was ill once on the trip and nursed back to health by Amy. Their grace and the trip helped me through my daze. The use of 12 lines is for my parents—the cycle of the Chinese zodiac, a belief subscribed by them.

Yong Shu Hoong:

Heading for Portugal, as with my past expeditions, I left with my physical self in tow and the intention to lose myself in all the fun I could wring out of another experience of being away from home in a strange foreign land; yet a part of my heart remained behind in Singapore—this time, due to anxiety over my aged parents, and concern over the affairs of a fellow writer who, in the end, could not be with us. Why does guilt have this tendency to sneak into the many pleasures of life?

Yeow Kai Chai:

Writing the poems in ‘in absentia’ had been challenging, artistically and personally. How does one write about a place without having been there? The poems were also more autobiographical than my usual output—but they felt right this time. They *demand*ed to be written in a certain way—a mix of documentary realism and surrealism, to make up for what I would never really know, or get to experience. I thought about my friends who were travelling through Portugal, a place that became romanticised in my mind, and about my dear mum, alive and robust again—always here, never gone.

About the Authors

Heng Siok Tian has published five collections of poetry: *Crossing the Chopsticks and Other Poems* (1993), *My City, My Canvas* (1999), *Contouring* (2004), *Is My Body a Myth* (2011) and *Mixing Tongues* (2011). Her poems have been anthologised in publications such as *Journeys: Words, Home and Nation*, *No Other City: An Anthology of Urban Poetry* and *Moving Worlds*. She also wrote short stories and short plays. In 2015, her fiction was published in *The Adopted: Stories from Angkor*, an anthology of short stories featuring three other writers. A participant of the Iowa International Writing Program in 2000 (on a NAC Fellowship), she has also participated in literary events in China, Denmark, France, Sweden, the US and the Philippines.

A former journalist and magazine editor, **Phan Ming Yen** is the author of a collection of short fiction, *That Night by the Beach and Other Stories for A Film Score* (2012), one of the four writers of a collection of short stories called *The Adopted: Stories From Angkor* (2015) and co-compiler of *Edwin Thumboo: Bibliography 1952–2008* (2009). His writing has appeared in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, *The Epigram Books Collection of Best New Singaporean Short Stories: Volume One* (2013) and *Kulit: Asian Literature for the Language Classroom* (2013). He was also a contributor to *Singapore Soundscape: Musical Renaissance of a Global City* (2014) and was a featured writer at the Singapore Writers Festival 2015.

Yeow Kai Chai has two poetry collections, *Secret Manta* (2001), which was adapted from an entry shortlisted for the 1995 Singapore Literature Prize; and *Pretend I'm Not Here* (2006). His poems have appeared in publications such as the US-based W.W. Norton anthology, *Language for a New Century* (2008), and France's *La Traductiere* (2012), while his short stories are featured in *Balik Kampung* (2012) and *Twenty-Four Flavours* (2013). In 2015, he co-wrote a collection of short stories with three other writers called *The Adopted: Stories From Angkor*. A former journalist and a music reviewer for *The Straits Times*, he also edits creative prose for *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*. His third poetry collection, *One to the Dark Tower Comes*, is forthcoming.

Yong Shu Hoong has authored a poetry chapbook, *Right of the Soil* (2016), and five poetry collections—including *Frottage* (2005) and *The Viewing Party* (2013), which both won the Singapore Literature Prize. He is the editor of the short-story anthology, *Passages: Stories of Unspoken Journeys* (2013), and one of the four co-authors of *The Adopted: Stories from Angkor* (2015). He lives in Singapore, where he works as a freelance writer and teaches part-time at Republic Polytechnic and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). He was writer-in-residence at NTU from August 2013 to February 2014.

8AMin

Lost Bodies: Poems between Portugal and Home is a collection of poems written by Heng Siok Tian, Phan Ming Yen, Yeow Kai Chai, and Yong Shu Hoong over the course of a 12-day trip to Portugal. Each day, one of them would suggest a stimulus, and from each stimulus, another would provide the first and last lines of a yet-to-be-written poem. All this while, Kai Chai was writing poems in Singapore, responding to the same prompts.

The poets were in the same space, and experiencing the same day—yet each dreamed a different world with their words. This reflects how one’s individual timeline exists in parallel to everybody else’s. On a similar note, the *Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* had coined the word *Sonder*, or “the realisation that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own”.

Bringing these two thoughts together, we started **8AMin** to share the parallelism of our lives, for us to be aware of the presence of these connections and crossovers with the people around us.

Invite your friends to experience this unique feeling of parallelism and share a moment each day at 8 am together, alone, to be alone, together.

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Four writers.

Three travelling in Portugal.

One staying behind to care for his ailing mother.

One long-distance writing affair.

The passing of the mother together with memories of other losses and absences come together in *Lost Bodies*, a meditation on the transience of time and love and an invitation to get away—physically or spiritually—from worldly concerns to explore a different history, a different culture, a different light, laced with dreamy scents and the faint calls of fado.



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