

Clara CHOW

i.

People are often surprised when I tell them I am nocturnal in Singapore. I sleep during the day, wake at night. I go to 24-hour supermarkets at three in the morning; haunt karaoke bars 'til sunrise. Arriving in Iowa City, I am not jetlagged. I am in the right time zone. My astral spirit, avoiding light, exists always on the other side of the globe.

I thrive on being a little out-of-sync with the world. It sharpens me, keeps me curious. You see the gaps, notice the fault-lines, and that is the first step in the writer's job of trying to explain the unexplainable; bridge the unbridgeable; reconcile the impossible. *Tell the truth, but tell it slant*, said Emily Dickinson. Travel is my slant.

When I am at home, I create the conditions for that syncopation: I poke in gritty corners; eat breakfast when other people are in bed.

But in a foreign country, unfamiliarity is a given. Differences are magnified. Details acquire secret significance. In Chengdu, China, signs kept whispering of love to me: *I will wait for you here*, said a mural. *How to love?* in blinking neon at a cafe. Construction site boarding cautioned: *There is romance around every corner*. I had gone to China in search for inspiration, to visit the hometown of a fictional lover. It was research, but I didn't know it at the time. I am now writing a book about falling in love with an imaginary man.

All that feeds the writing.

ii.

Displacement, once said Singapore-born Australian author Boey Kim Cheng, "the feeling of 'not being at home'... is what makes writing possible and necessary." We need to move in order to find new perspectives, fresh modes of being. We need distance to see clearly, like how with age I need to keep the bill at arm's length to see what I owe.

All travel writing is self-portraiture. We travel in search of what we cannot find at home, but what we are really seeking is desire itself. Return home. Consult your notes, photos and journals. Experience small epiphanies. Look for patterns. Discover why you packed your bags to begin with.

iii.

What is a story? Someone once told me it is a series of tiny incisions in time. The pragmatic Singaporean that I am tries to think in mathematical equations, to extrapolate a set of hypothetical

relationships. If a story is Time x Character, then what about Space? A character is also a series of tiny incisions in space, the knife being a body. A person is also a place.

Wife and mother at home, I am free to reinvent myself as new characters when I travel. Feel new feelings. I learn how to be a different sort of human being. (I also flee from the mundane responsibilities which keep me from thinking deeply and writing non-stop.)

iv.

We, the writers in the IWP, have recently come back from our mid-residency travel. In New Orleans, a cardboard box, still crisp in the rain, said: *Hello*. I kept coming across koi painted on the sidewalk, like secret markers. My friend and I walk in circles in the French Quarter, telling each other stupid random things. We play pool with strangers in Bourbon Street, ride airboats in the bayou rife with gators, and manage to invite ourselves into Tennessee Williams' house. We are writers not writing, just living.

I want to write about this stuff, I say, on our last magical night. *But I don't know how to make sense of it.*

With time, he says. *Memory is an editor.*

v.

To travel is to be in a state of infatuation with the world. High, exhausted, alive. The traveller notices things about their beloved: the way dandelions spring up overnight in the Korean countryside and slowly age at different rates, depending on whether they bask in sunshine or nod in the shade; the patch of concrete you slipped on in Jakarta, and the rheumy-eyed man who laid it and his lack of complaint that you ruined his morning's work; the yellow oil slick worn by a karaoke rapper by the Yangtze River in mist-shrouded Chongqing; the sing-song chant of the New York subway conductor, telling you to board the last L – "You better get on. You better get on"; green mossy fur on a mussel from Iceland's fjord and black basalt sand from its beaches. Swallows wheeling to the sound of a distant waterfall on Mount Beauty in Australia. The slap of your best friend's flip-flops as she scrambles to the top of a long boat floating down the Mekong in Cambodia to retrieve your backpacks.

But there is also this: after the distance and clarity, diving back in.

Cleaning the apartment. Placing a conch shell given to me by a mermaid in Jeju on the windowsill to dry out the smell of the sea. The sound of a car drawing up to the driveway. And then my children, their father behind them, flying into my arms. And I am theirs again.