



DAPHNE MARLATT /
IN THE MONTH
OF HUNGRY GHOSTS

*We cannot retrace our steps,
going forward may be the same
as going backwards.*

— GERTRUDE STEIN

22nd July 1976

Bangkok 8:00 a.m.

Snakes. Woke up dreaming of the striking head of a cobra — pok — into me, my hand over breast. Snakes at the Temple of the Reclining Buddha where we stopt, latter part of the floating market tour. A snake pit, the “doctor” a young Thai in boots & white medical jacket, who poked at the snakes with stick, getting them to raise their heads, spread their hoods — cobras all colours from black to brown but with same diamond markings on hood. He’d pick up one by tail, slap it on table, poke it til erect & facing him, ready to strike, then wd fascinate it with one hand as he went with the other for its neck, grabbed, just below head, immediately flattening hood. Assistant handed him flat dish which he inserted in cobra’s mouth, forcing the edge of it back against the jaw & poison glands (you could hear the teeth scraping on the plastic) & squeezing the head so that drops of poison were forced out onto the plate — transparent liquid. Poison goes to victim’s heart & stops it, the announcer (an old grinning Thai with dirty turban & microphone in hand) announced, “and our doctor never misses, he is very quick, he has to be.”

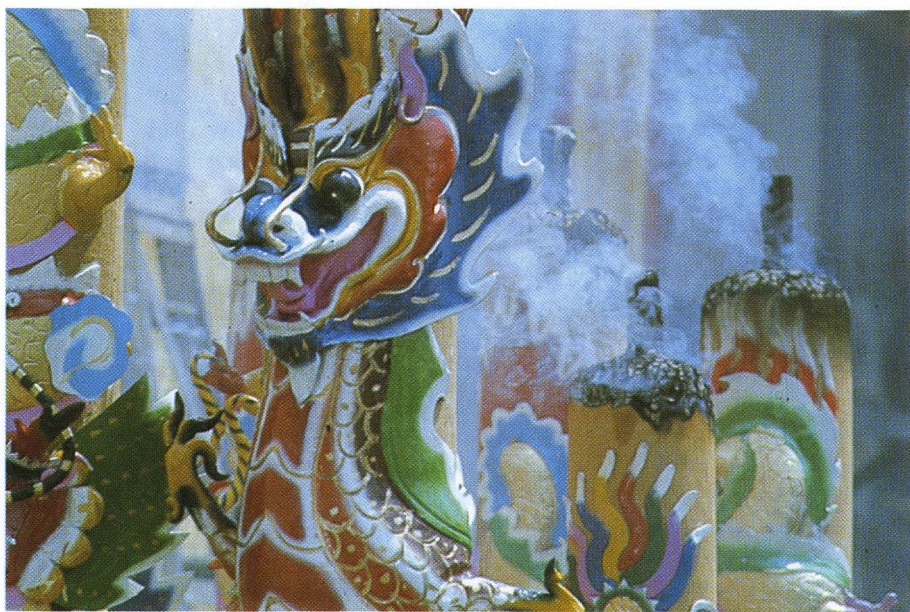
Then yesterday in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Keo) on the palace grounds, our guide pointed out a picture of Buddha sitting under a tree, his body wrapt in the coils of a snake & his head canopied by the 7 heads of the snake, a nagah, watersnake. When he sought enlightenment by meditation under the baobab tree, he vowed not to move, even though it rained so hard the rain came up to his navel & after a week of sitting the watersnake wrapt itself around him, holding its 7 heads over him to protect him & at that point he gained enlightenment. That's why, guide said, Thai temples always corner their roofs with heads of snakes, as protection (flaming? crests I'd thought). To be wrapt in that other, that so non-human, & not suffer revulsion but see the snake's gift of protection — must be what we call "grace."

Sitting on the floor of the temple with us, our guide slid quietly from politics to religion, a spontaneous sermon. A Thai who'd had the usual Buddhist training including 3 months as "yellow man" (monk) has for the last 4 yrs been studying Mormon teachings & teaches in the Mormon church. "Maybe you go by bus & you go by train & I go by plane but the important thing is our destination & that is the same point." A dualist, said Christ (pronounced Kreest) gives men a choice as to whether they follow him or not & so he stands for good in the world but Satan says you must follow *me* if you want power. Said that young men as monks are all taught to meditate & that meditation "makes you happy because you do not want food or clothes or objects, you are all the time happy inside" & that when you have meditated a lot you leave the city which is full of "objects" & go to the jungle where you have nothing because that is where you are happy.

He referred to the division amongst the Thai people between those who wanted the Americans to leave & those who didn't. Said the Govt officially wanted them to go but actually didn't "because they make corruption with them." Our afternoon guide spoke of the student upheavals, students pro-Communist & the rest of the people against them. The student headquarters, communist headquarters in Bangkok, had been burned. Police headquarters also burned to the ground. Said people didn't like Communists & if they were invaded would repel them: "We love our king." (how much of this is made-to-order propaganda?) But he also said the first democratization in 1932 when the absolute monarchy became a constitutional monarchy was sham & it's only been recently, as a result of protest, that real democratization has occurred.

The temples, their ornate imagery, colours, gilt, such a contrast to the rusted corrugated iron & wood shacks most of the people live in, live very simply, poorly ("we know no mattresses & pillows," our guide said yesterday, "only wood to sleep on," speaking of how poor the country is for bodily comforts — "inside we have enough, but not outside, for our bodies.") It's the calm in the temples, & the sense of many lives invested there — candles burning constantly, incense, flowers, food offerings, gilt leaf offerings pasted onto images & statues (temples are USED here), the strange displays of sacred power such as the 40 yr old body of the 20 yr old nun who'd died of malaria, displayed in all her white muslin garb, faded jasmine wreaths, skull on bent head visible, flesh of hand wrinkled & dark as if embalmed. Her not rotting seen as the sign of her spirituality —

Buddhism here in all its ritualism & ceremony honours the flowering of the body, even in deprivation, as it points to its invisibility — the tension of the 2 seen as the tension of life.



22nd July
Penang 11:30 p.m.

A cheecha running along the ceiling above makes a funny chirping noise — light brown almost pink legs, one beady eye upon me writing at this glasstopped desk. Waves of cricket & treefrog sounds continuously breaking outside around the house. Barking dogs in the distance. Hot. Dark.

Once out on the road by myself, walking down it — vague memories of walking down it as a child, knew where the golf course was where we used to pick mushrooms in the early morning — once out in that humming dark, the trees — one I did seem to know, spreading its great umbrella arms (sam-cha? the same?) writhing in the light (streetlamp), it's the *vividness* of everything here — I was afraid, had to force myself to walk — afraid of this life & what the night hides, bats? cobras? At the last house on the road (such huge gardens around each mansion) a tall frangipani tree dropping white blossoms on the grass (which isn't grass but a kind of low growing broadleaved plant). I came back to find Mr. Y in his pyjamas & Dad outside looking for me. Locking up. Then a to-do about locking the ironwork gate in the upper hall that separates the bedrooms from the rest of the house ("we've had a spot of trouble") . . .

Mr. Y moves like water in a conversation, either rushing forward with endless talk of company affairs or receding into not hearing much else. A habit of not directly answering questions, the servants do that too. Very kind. The old world courtesy, the constant talking about a thing to be done while doing it, the concern over little things like leaving a door open or closed — Yeats' lapis lazuli old man with a touch of the absurd. His passion is business, he's full of gossip about all the people whose lives have been involved with the company to any extent — & all the internal dissensions, inner politics — absorbing, the game business is, played with utter seriousness. He hints at many things yet overstates, "it was cruel" etc., which makes for a curious style of conversation.

Eng Kim: recognized her as soon as I saw her, but curiously didn't want to show my recognition immediately. She's hardly changed at all — so amazingly similar in appearance after 25 years. Still that almost shy, perfectly naive sweetness — how can she have lived these years so apparently untouched? She's "worked for the bank" (i.e. looked after the bank manager & family) most of the time. The perfect servant, neat & unassuming, quiet as a shadow — yet I catch a glint of humour in her smile. Will it be possible to know her better? It's so strange to be, now 25 years later, someone she serves.

O the disparities — how can I ever relate the two parts of myself? This life would have killed me — purdah, a woman in — the restrictions on movement, the confined reality. I can't stand it. I feel imprisoned in my class — my? This is what I came out of. & how else can I be here?

disparities

Song River
Cafe cuttle-
fish

dried flesh
in the dark

shine

water's edge

old bay
new road

strange
fish

res publica

each his own
how each does chant
his tributary note
to the great cantata
under the raintrees'
'thrice-canopied'

chirrup

cedes to the
trinng · trinng · trinng
bare feet pedal into
oblivion

23rd 7:45 a.m.

General sweeping going on — the kabun seems to sweep the grounds each day. sound of bamboo broom. chink of china (discreet) from kitchen. birds woke me at 7:00 with a tide of music. the old fans work well, our room cool all night tho thick with humidity.

How can I write of all this? what language, or what *structures* of language can carry this being here?

Flying in yesterday it was the size of the island that surprised me, not one hill but many, a range, all steeply wooded, overgrown. & Georgetown itself white in the sun, highrise crested now, sprawling. We came down from such a high altitude so fast the pain in my ears brought tears: the cost of re-entry? into the past?

Saturday the 24th

I have too much energy for this life, its do-nothing style — no real work to use storedup food energy. Always eating here: breakfast, lunch, dinner with tea (a meal in itself) in between. Then everyone goes to bed at 10:30. I want to get out, see the life not visible from these confines of a wellrun household. But how do it on my own? Even last night's walk with Pam down Jalan MacAllister brought us a car full of young men keeping pace with us asking if we want a ride, etc. & today Idris warns us as he lets us off for shopping alone to hang onto our purses. Tonight I have to ask Ah Yow to unlock the back door to let me in because I went out to record the chorus of frogs down the road after the house had been locked (they lock us in when they go off duty — a sealed fortress).



I'm finding out more about the taboos I was raised with, the unspoken confines of behaviour, than I am about Penang. Still, that's useful — it makes me see the root of my fears: either I obey the limitations & play safe, stay ignorant, or else I go off limits, play with "danger" & suffer the price of experience, wch is mostly unconscious anxiety that all the dire things prophesied will happen!

Saw a watersnake today in the brook I'd planned to wade down, see where it goes — about 3 ft long, striped in bands of brown & gold on black, coiling & uncoiling along the muddy edges of the stream rushing thick & fast with yesterday's rainy torrents. Snake again signals offlimits, danger to me. I can't get past the snakes in my life.

Went to market this morning with Ah Yow — lots of fish: catfish, red snapper, even shark, plus blue crabs, various types of prawns & shrimp, hermit crabs (brilliantly orange & black), squid too. Bought starfruit (yellow & ridged so that the green end forms a star), lonyons (small brown berrylike balls with flesh like rambitans & a black pip, very fragrant, delicate), a big avocado, more mangosteens (memory fruit, those hard black or brown rinds, redstaining flesh inside, inedible, then in the centre soft white segments, delicious, containing the seeds.) Little bananas here too (pisang mas), very sweet. Plus durians & some other brown fruit about the size of Yucatan papayas. Papayas here grow in the garden (along with purple & white eggplants & orchids), are large & deep orange inside like the mameys.

Another swim this p.m., all of us in the sea this time, its muddy brown waves lifting us onto coarse shale above sand where the surf comes in. No jellyfish yet, tho Dad told us not to touch the slimy bottom further out because ikan sembilang with poison spines lurk there. Pam & I swim lengths of the pool for energy, but it's the salt of the sea revives me, or memory, some further dimension. Stood in the clubhouse after with an ayer limau (fresh limejuice & water) & watched the sea breaking on the sand & rocks below, the foamy edge of wave curling around the rock, soaking into sand as it withdraws drawing lines immediately effaced, & the long recession of the wave only to be thrown up again & again, reminded me of some, the same, watching long ago. Must get out to the lighthouse at Muka Head.

* * *

Today was filled with birdsong — meditating at noon it was the birds came through, their shared public space a song arena where each declares itself, insists on its presence, full of life & brilliant there with (just jumped up in fright as a black beetle ran up my skirt!)

... liquid
& metallic rings, trills, calls . . . Mr. Y. comes by in pajamas & robe, looking for the paper . . .

Want to get this down: this morning such a beautiful awakening to curtains of rain falling around the house off the open verandah outside our room (which is the room we used to sleep in, the “nursery” — Pam recalls running around the verandah, it’s familiar to me too) & that wet noise dense with a thicket of birdsong, jubilant, joyous, in the wet, & the falling rain transformed into falling notes, falling & ascending, crossing the rain in darts of melody — wooden shuttle of the Thai silk weaver — running across & through the warp of the rain. I didn’t want to wake up but to rock there between sleep & waking in the cool, in that liquid & musical world, so deeply familiar I was hardly present anywhere, just to be, in that long child-being, sentient, but only just, skin (not even ‘mine’) merging with an air that is full of melody & rain-breath, breadth, sound enwrap —

“abandoned”

memory, *memor*, mindful
mer-mer-os, one
anxious thought

grey flats signal
not cement, not broken
glass

BUNGAH / banged up
sea, its glint
broken

waves coming in
sand shock, rock
'd asleep in the arms of
(murmurous

jellyfish
ikan sembilan & things
pinch in the dark
where feet go

landmark!

road coming up
at once unknown
& plain
as concrete

flower
's

BEACH

crossing by

yellow

Butter
worth

to

blue

George
town

ferry —

Pulau Pinang Pulau Jerejek Pulau Rimau

& the light plays
surface

Pulau blue distance leper haze, the Straits

of Malacca, your grandmother

silver rack for toast
for tennis, & the
gardens of night-blooming
kengwah

orchids, once every five years, the place

"we see with alien eyes"

"we walk with alien feet"

lifts /

no rickshas now but 'teksis'
& K. Tinderoomy found
in the railroad yard
his hand, his right leg severed

Butterworth a name

“we commit
to memory”

a life not of our own
making



mem sahib

“mistress
of her own
house”

loved
mah mee, ordered
chicken for dinner
eased

deaths & small
wounds, cure-all,
any sepsis, except
her own

still played, gaily
mummy, mah jong, didn't
know what to “do”

(it mattered
apart from the children's
small world to move into
& lost, finally, found off-
center, *mata*, her unruly
self

unloved, locked
up in a picture, trembling
under the mask

mata hari, sun
sun through all her rooms she
closed the curtains on

planters

liquid white latex
drips from the tree's
girdled trunk

no, he says, no
cause of death a
tapping, they
milk, these women in
gummy pants transporting
"even the women drive now"
churns

down those hill
sides he climbed
refusing a guard, knows
"his people" she
feeds
children of the crèche
cod liver oil each morning
legs so swollen now they
climb the drive, opening
mouths like
birds

"we'll carry on
til we can't walk
any longer"

as the buildings stand, *they*
fade into the land, unceasing
estate

*"in which the whole
household of nature swings"*

trees
they go on standing

Friday July 30th

This morning Mr. Chu from the office took the 3 of us to the Khoo Khongsi, the Khoo clan house, biggest in Penang & highly ornate, all intricately carved wood that's been gilded & the tall interior sides covered with magnificent drawings of the gods riding mythical beasts: unicorns, giant turtles with rhinoceros heads, winged panthers. The Sikh jagar (the Indians as a class seem to be watchmen & gardeners) turned out to be also the Scout commissioner for the island. Mr. Chu is small & round & loves Johnny Cash, which he plays loudly on cassette tape in his Toyota.

Yesterday we drove out to the Sungei Ara estate owned by a fine old English couple, must be in their 70's now, they've lived out here 50 years. She's a trained nurse & still administers first aid & looks after the health of the workers & their children on the estate. He speaks Malay and Tamil fluently. She probably does too as she established a day care ("crèche") for the children of Tamil workers who are mostly tappers. We watched 2 girls tapping rubber trees & later saw the liquid white latex (caught in drips from the tree by an inserted metal spout & clay cup) transported in churns to the factory where it is mixed with water & an acid that makes it congeal into long white sheets which are pressed & then smokedried, turning them amber.

Their "bungalow" a very airy open house, one whole wall of living room open to the outdoors, a lifetime of mementos & curios collected, from silver sailing trophies to a stuffed tree rat, pest on the estate as it eats into coconuts which are grown for sale, as are cocoa beans, nutmeg & cloves.

All the workers we met, in their facial expressions & manner of speaking, indicated affection & respect for him. He himself is very unassuming, they both are, & positive in outlook — doesn't worry about the "odd behaviour" of other races. When they were reminiscing about the war, we learned she'd sent her only daughter to friends up Penang Hill as the Japanese were advancing, to free her to set about finding rice reserves to feed their workers who had very little food. During the postwar emergency period when communist guerillas were setting up road ambushes & taking over estates, he refused to be accompanied by a policeman in his work about the place because the policeman "walked so slowly, just plodded along, I'd never have got to the top of the hills." They relied on their own guards about the house & the loyalty of their workers. One of them

reported being approached by a man who'd offered \$50 for information regarding Hugh's daily activities: "he said his tuan lived in town & only came out when he felt like it so he was very sorry but he couldn't oblige the man because he didn't know."

She's a tall gangly woman with poor hearing now & badly swollen legs but when I asked her whether they had any plans for selling the estate she said oh no, they were going to carry on until they couldn't walk any longer & then somebody else would do the work for them — they had no desire to go back to England. They seem to be more in touch with the land & the people than anyone else we've met — perhaps it's their age that stops them from the kind of social small talk of the others, a curious jaded brilliancy that seems quite rootless. She especially is silent, probably because of her hearing, but they both seem to fade into their land. It's a humanly dense world too, with its Malay kampong & mosque, Tamil housing, & Chinese stores forming a small village most of the buildings of which he himself has kept up or had rebuilt. They don't seem to close off from any of it, a kind of empathy that would probably make them vulnerable if they weren't British to begin with & committed to a paternalistic system (she still administers cod liver oil daily to all the day care kids who must walk up to the house to get it now she has difficulty getting around). They really do represent the moral best of the old system — what Mrs. Khoo complained of missing when she said the Chinese long for "the good old days of the colonial system where there was real democracy & the fittest man won, regardless of race." Which no doubt reflects more on the difficulties of Malay nationalism than the virtues of the caste system of British colonialism.

* * *

Palms so far: betel palm (the tree of Penang, sez Hugh), coconut palm (coconuts here are green), atap palm (they use for thatching roofs), oil palm (whole plantations of), toddy palm (toddy from flowers). & hands, palms — of the man sliding down the tree so fast, who with one blow of his machete offered us a drink — sweet, slurped from inside glistening walls, split to the light, of coconut well.



July 28th

Dear Cille,

... It's not so much a holiday as a curious psychic re-dipping in the old font, & most of the time I'm kicking against it. Because it's so insidious, the English habits of speech & perception, English patterns of behaviour. (Suppose I got the longest conditioning anyhow, of the 3 of us kids.) But what's amazing is that it still exists, much as it has done, tho obviously it's the end of an era. It ain't *my* era, or Pam's, tho everyone we meet seems to want to suggest it is, implicate us in it. I've never before understood what a big move it was for them, to come to Canada.

Sometimes I panic — I want to rush home, as if I might get trapped here, this honeyed land. Mrs. J. saying how she didn't want to leave Penang, "it's such a beautiful place." It is, & yet it all feels unreal to me — there's no authentic ground here for "Europeans." I want to rip out of myself all the colonialisms, the taint of colonial sets of mind. That's why as kids we hated everything "English" — not because it was English but because we equated what was English with a colonialist attitude, that defensive set against what immediately surrounds as real on its own terms — because to take it on as real would mean to "go native" & that was unthinkable to them.

July 29th

Dad speculates, as we peer over the bridge into the rushing darkness of the brook, cicadas trilling all around us, that in some previous life he must have been a rich Chinese in Malacca with a fleet of junks trading spices to China. Says he always feels at home here, loves the smell of camphorwood chests, the songs of birds, the plants. I ask him has he never felt alien, never felt there were places he couldn't enter, wasn't welcome in? He says only recently, with the political situation the way it is, but that before, the only animosity he remembers encountering was in the Indian temple where he filmed the Typoosum rites & he could understand that. That leads to the further comment that he's never liked Indian temples anyhow.

What we make our own — or separate from us. The interests of the Chinese middle class here as commercial as the British, & the same sense of formality, & pragmatism.

Earlier, as we rode a trisha down to the Chartered Bank Chambers, Pam wondered how people on the street regard white women (she herself thinks English women look "dumpy") & whether they found us sexual or not, commented on the looks various people gave us as we passed. We both felt separate & visible in our hired trisha pedalled by someone else (an incredibly skinny man) — uncomfortable parodies of the leisured class. Is this the only way to be a white woman here? Or is this the condition of being a member of an exploitive & foreign moneyed class?

& yet the sun shines on all of us alike — everywhere the flare of colour, glint of metallic thread running thru a sari, shining flesh, oil gleaming off black hair — we feel pale by comparison, & immaterial (living always in our heads?) It's the same feeling I had coming home from Mexico, that people walk the streets of Vancouver mostly as if they are invisible. Here people sleep on the sidewalks, piss in the gutters, women nurse their babies by the roadside, everyone selling food & eating it, or fingering goods, or eyeing each other (likewise tactile) — but not separate. The press in the streets is almost amniotic, it contains & carries everyone.

Today I've heard both an Indian (the cloth salesman in the market whose son is training to be a doctor in England) & a Chinese (Catholic convert, committed to both Christianity & the English language, living in a nation devoted to advancing Islam & teaching Malay) protest against the unfairness of the Malayanization policy of the govt (e.g. how 65% of all university entrants must be Malays, the other races compete for what's left) . & yet this *is* Malaysia & the largely rural & labouring Malays have a lot to catch up on, fast. I can't believe the stereotype passed on to us that they're "lazy," don't want to work, don't have a head for business, etc. & yet how long, how many generations these Chinese & Indian families have lived here, feel they belong, & then are separated off on the basis of race. All the separations.



BAHASA MALAYSIA

sungai, bukit, tanjung
river, hill, cape

“sometimes i panic
i want to rush home
as if i might get
trapped here”

pulau cantik
this beautiful island only
the coarsest of maps
show

jalan jalan, roads
to the heart of

(Ayer Itam, black
water

“all
*people know that
the sea is deep”*

red backers
bad hats

“I have not read the
newspapers yet”

i see
flame trees rain
trees still flower
unnamed, out of that earth

bumiputra
sons of,

inhabit

hujan, angin, ribut
rain, wind, storm
clouds are gathering

& the sacred island of Potoloka
Throne of Kuan Yin in
the China Sea of

T. Poh's Guidebook
to the
Temple of Paradise

is not, is overlaid
like Paradise itself
on this place

*"Dang, dang, kong
Kuching dalam tong . . ."*

"Raju also likes to read fictions"

& pulling
the cat out of
the well

name
what feet dig into
each day's sewage
& all that shit

inter-
national finance
leaves

a trail
under the trees
(*pokok pokok*

say, "Jalan Peel"

Penang
July 23/76

Love,

frangipani fading on the desk, Eng Kim just ran by in bare feet, so quiet in pajamas, it's 6 p.m., post-tea, post evening rain like a monsoon, mosquitoes out in the fading light (dark here by 7) & what i've tracked in the birdbook as the black-naped oriole (a yellow as brilliant as the saffron robes of the yellow men monks) trilling from the trees, flame of the forest just outside my window . . .

(dusky pink cheecha playing peekaboo behind a gilt frame, me not at all sure i want to feel those pale pink lizard feet suddenly land here, just shot up the wall to nab a midge then leap six inches onto a post & disappear to a ledge four feet above me) so much life here not even the walls are still . . .

it's strange being a princess again, the sheer luxury of this house, its spaciousness, its accouterments (every bedroom has its own bathroom), everything kept spacious, uncluttered, unlittered & clean by servants who pick up after you, wash your clothes, cook your food, do your dishes, ad nauseum (a little work would make me feel at home). & Eng Kim herself, oh Roy that is the strangest. I recognized her as soon as she came down the steps to greet us (old baronial family style), she's hardly changed in 25 years, still climbs the stairs with all that girlish quickness & like any good servant, utterly silent. But more her smile — it's as if i'd never gone away i know that smile so completely & love it, yes it's the love that astonishes me. That face told me as much as my mother's, by its changing weather, how the world was with me, or against, what i, as any rebellious child, was up against. I must have spent hours of accumulated moments watching it. & yet her face is not maternal in any way, at age 45 or whatever it's still utterly girlish & in our smiles i catch a little of the old mischief we shared with the servants, playing our own peekaboo with all the rules.

& my god, the rules of the house & how it's been explained to Pam & I several times that we mustn't "upset the routine," how difficult it is to finally "get things done the way you want them" (breakfast at such & such an hour, for instance, & how the toast or coffee should be etc.), & how "they" get confused if you alter things, so that the routine becomes itself a prison. As the women of the house, Pam & I are supposed to "look after things,"

give the orders, make sure the system functions smoothly. Both of us dislike the role &, like children, rebel by acting dumb. What we want is to break down the wall the separates us from Eng Kim in the very fact of our roles & yet we haven't quite figured out how.

Except that tonight we began by earlier expressing an interest in the terrible durian fruit whose stench has been much mythified since we were little (& the old durian tree in the garden where our dog was buried is gone, cut down). One of the Chinese men in the office said he'd be happy to bring some durians round for us to try tonight & kindly did so. Mr. Y., when told, requested that they not be brought into the house (haven't i learned the dialect well?) so our benefactor & Pam & I regaled ourselves at an old wooden table on the walkway from kitchen to servants quarters, as he chopped them open with a cleaver (they look like wooden pineapple bombs) & split the meat to reveal the butterycovered seeds: an incredible flavour, not fruitlike, something like coffee & bitter spices compounded with onions, really strong. Eng Kim & Ah Yow (the cook) love them & when we brought Dad down to try some a little while later, they were perched on the table happily eating away & watched with amusement Dad's valiant but obviously ginger chewing & swallowing — Eng Kim's amusement in her eyes tho she'd never speak it to "the tuan."



I'm going to stop this, being haunted by echoes of earlier (age 12 etc) letters & journals, that so stilted proper English. "To the manner born." How completely i learned to talk Canadian (how badly i wanted to), & how fast it drops away here. Wonder how it sounds to you?

July 25, Sunday & the frangipani blossoms on the desk have gone all brown. Hot today, hottest yet, tho it clouded over as usual (haven't seen a sunset, been mostly cool for here, & cloudy — waterfalls of rain the other morning, woke up to its wet descent all round the open verandahs of the house, the open windows — no glass on some, for breeze).

We drove up to Ayer Itam, the Buddhist hill shrine — driving is such a trip. I love winding thru throngs of brilliant sarong & sari dressed women, children, sellers of rambitans & chinese noodles, cyclists of all sorts, young chinese youths zooming by on honda bikes, cars trucks hundreds of buses all dodging the cyclists & the goats. Went up to the reservoir above the temple & walked a path thru jungle, o the smell came back so vivid, that deep sandloam fern palm dank smell. Everybody drives on the left here so the whole car is reversed, i keep reaching for an invisible gear shift & frightening Dad & Pam by turning into oncoming traffic. But i think i'm the only one who enjoys driving. Unfortunately it's a fancy Ford Cortina the company owns so i can't just take off in it whenever i want to.

My (hardwon) independence as a Western woman is being eroded every day & of course i'm seduced by my senses into just giving in — to the heat as much as to everything else. Finally let myself have an afternoon nap today, but the swimming — every afternoon the sea takes me in, old mother sea, sand dusky (no clarity like the Caribbean), & warm.

Mostly it's a struggle, an old old resistance against the colonial empire of the mind. For all the years that Mr. Y's been here he knows almost nothing about what surrounds him, what the trees or birds are, what the fruits

are — he doesn't like native food, exists on a kind of dilute European diet that includes lots of canned food. Private hedges of the mind as complete as the locked & bolted doors, the iron schedule of the house. Living in armed defensiveness against even the earth (don't go barefoot, nevah, nevah, for fear of hookworm etc.) I remember it all from my childhood, the same. Everything tells me this is not where i

belong (including the odd intense look from Malays, boomiputras, "sons of the soil") : the tourist experience compounded with colonial history. Europeans don't live here: they camp out in a kind of defensive splendour that's corrosive to the soul.

Aug 1st

Amah, age 74, in her sarong & shirtwaist, light gauze scarf hung round her neck, hair grey underneath the black, Amah, with her deep voice, expressive ways, "yah yah," enthusiastic confirmation when Pam turned into the right road, driving her home — home to the house she works in, still housekeeping. "Daphne mari, Pamela mari," exclaiming over & over on the fact that we'd come. A lovely resilience, living in the present, genuine affection for the "tuan," being herself a complete person with physical grace, even at 74, & dignity, not heavily insistent on it, only sufficient to herself. Her grace has to do with accepting what life brings & marvelling at it, laughing much, a deepthroated chuckle, & laying claim to nothing.

Buddhism says it is want that chains us to the world, us "hungry ghosts." & I see (just as I stands for the dominant ego in the world when you is not capitalized), that i want too much, just as, a child, i wanted affection. Growing sense of myself as a Westerner wanting, wanting — experience mostly. Anxiety arises from the discrepancy between my wants & my actual condition. Why plans so chain me — wanting too much from the day, wanting too much from others who can never be more than they are. In want : in fear. The "liberated" woman in me insisting on her freedom & in terror of its being taken away. Passive resistance a better stance. Say "yes" to restraints & simply do what you need to: act in silence.

STREET OPERA

(works, or
words & deeds

“the funniest story he told
was of going to see *Hamlet*
done as a Chinese opera”

satay

buah

mee goreng

these populous
night stalls
“*already existing*
web”

“*action*
acts into”

street
play

* *
godstick
dragon in an
old man's
sight

sharpens
all night

burnt paws
ashen ears
hear

it is 'seeing'
see

memory smoke

* *

wayang a
way in
no
shadow play
but neon, new on
the old

acts
“*can be told as*
a story . . . bios”
anyone’s

robe & drums

* *

the solitary hero
in his cups
jumps up,
challenged
god comes, that
audient

here
the act
enacts

here in the
din of the street
eating goes on
acting, speaking
heedless of all that
imitation

* *

satay cups array
god’s house fruit heaps
this full moon night

month of hungry
ghosts

“life” invites

* *

offer them food who
come to devour
the real
banknotes, music, fruit
we think we consume
a fury of action they
who pass beyond
"actor & sufferer" both
relinquish & remember

. . .
night stalls
satay, buah
mee goreng
relics
we transform
"acting into"



Pulau Pinang
August 1/76

Love,

how much of what we experience is made up by what we desire?! (& all my questions become exclamations, what is! or, but for the typewriter, a huge office Olympia, the other way around — what is?)

Questionings of the real, no quest. Tho it appears we're here for "the month of hungry ghosts" — a month full of chinese street operas, a form of veneration — shrines set a little way from the casually erected stages with money offerings, food offerings, & hundreds of josticks burning in sandbowls. What is strange, even precarious, is how this is also real, this that i wake up to every morning, & as the day progresses becomes so voraciously real it eats up all the other real where you & Kit & Jan are, so that even its strangeness has disappeared, i've recovered my own language & unusually today my own thought, & the world outside the window, thick with foliage & birdsong, looks like an embroidered backdrop or the painted canvas the chinese operas use — in a minute it will all roll up to reveal the next scene.

If the world is real

The word is unreal

If the word is real

The world

Is the crevice the dazzle the whirlwind

No

The disappearances and the appearances

Yes

* * * *

(Octavio Paz, fortunately with me)

Maybe that's why the chinese venerate snakes here, tho i was told it's because snakes recall the ancient dragons of the sky, & dragons perhaps like the toltec snakemouths with the appearing or disappearing heads of priests inside them, must signal a swallowing up of the real in another real. Anyhow i didn't think you'd believe i actually held a wriggly green viper, such muscular writhings in my hands, so Pam has taken a photo as EVIDENCE — tho that too means nothing as i've discovered the whole of the last roll of film & perhaps those before it were threaded in wrong & weren't winding forward (as time is supposed to do —

Well maybe that's it, the strange conjunctions of past & present, a past that undermines the apparent newness of the present, a present that unlocks the hidden recesses of memory or dream which have also coloured it — & do i see what i haven't in some sense dreamed?

driving out to Batu Ferringhi, a beach i remember from childhood trips (it's further round the island, & was, *then*, isolated, as likely as not to have malays surf fishing with their nets or selling rambitans from bicycle carts) we found, Pam & i, big american-style hotels & even the kampong houses become boutiques for tourists, & driving further, looking for the beach i'd dreamed &/or the beach i remembered, saw another quite different one & found myself saying this is it, even knowing where the path down was; tho to the *eye* it was all new, some other sense recognized it (some sense that has to do with location, even direction, or something as abstract as contours of land) despite its discrepancy from the picture i've carried in memory all these years.

I dream of you & Kit, believing you exist as you usually do in a world i know but can't escape to. Here a world is dreaming me as much as i am dreaming it, a dream that's been going on too long, i want to wake up. & at the same time learn, as usual, i want too much. My impatience, my curiosity as a visitor can't consume this world because, in a curious way, i'm part of it & must act out my role to reach its end. Everyone we meet assumes another life for me than the one i actually live (Lewis Carroll must have had this experience) & since i can't escape (can't literally act on my own but am always being acted upon as this network of people from the servants to Dad's friends shape the parameters of my behaviour in the form of a hospitality as binding as any dream in the dreaming) i only act out a parody of myself, secretly reserving a part that observes, fighting lassitude induced by the heat, to jot down these odd notes retrieved from the unreal:

i've drunk clear salty-sweet liquid from the inner well
of a freshly hacked coconut;

i've eaten fried cuttlefish & jellyfish at the Song River
Cafe;

i've swum in the murky heaving body of the sea, thousands
of tiny transparent fish, ikin bilis, jumping all around
my face, no bigger than fleas;

i've heard the chirruping language cheechas speak to each
other, late at night, as they wriggle blackeyed over the
white ceiling;

i've been seduced by the voices of the cloth sellers
murmuring in my ear;

i've smelt the woodsmoke of giant allday jossticks
burning behind the kitchen of the Lone Pine Hotel, whose
casurina trees lift & fall all day in the wind that
lifts the sea;

i've outraged a tamil woman squatting in the dirt of a
banana seller's stall by pointing a camera at her,
& learned something about dignity;

i've drunk the warm foamy juice of sugar cane pressed
by diesel engine under the neon light of a street-
vendor's cart;

i've cut into a rubber tree, a malay girl-tapper's hands on
mine, & watched the white blood ooze round its girth;

i've been stopped by a stranger in the crowded stairwell of
the Chartered Bank Chambers & told he used to drive me
to school;

i've watched chinese motor cycle youths, stoney-faced;
sikh families gracious in sari & turban; sleepy-eyed
children in pajamas; old malay men in sarongs, & the
lovers of all nationalities watching us & evening pass
as the sea rolls in on Gurney Drive

later:

Dinner on a terrace above the swimming club, yellow crescent moon shimmering above a rain tree, sunset trailing pinks across a rapid sky falling into night over the sea Rat Island punctuates with its light echoed by the other off the mainland, marks the edges of the shipping channel, & i'm engaged in conversation with the widow of a planter, a New Zealander who hasn't seen New Zealand for 25 years, who sleeps alone in a big house overlooking the beach afraid that if she falls down in the night no one will hear or care, & along with her servants & the few remaining Europeans, as old & eccentric as she is, she lives out her life in an alien country, drinking coffee, talking of shopping, of the way things have changed, in this tropical heat taking her hot water bottle to bed, waiting to die — tho in her bangles & beads & tinted hair, in her gestures at independence (paying for her own drinks), utterly dependent on her servants (her driver takes her everywhere), she'd never admit it. It goes on like this. The stories, the characters. A sense of melodrama pervades everyone's life, they keep track of everyone's "end," & their lifestyle, their values are so unreal to me that i listen in, fascinated by their reality to each other, while my own recedes. These are the ghosts, they offer ghost food, & if i stayed here & partook of it long enough i'd become a ghost too, like the woman Pam tried to talk to the other night who could only yawn.

Some of them speak of "going home," to England or anywhere, & some of them have nowhere to go. They haunt the place (a kind of addiction). Having tasted hunting, i see i've spent most of my life trying to live somewhere. Which perhaps means nothing more than being at home. Or some such notion of a public space as Hannah Arendt describes (*The Human Condition* has been my escape hatch to our world), where one's life takes place in a web of relations held *in common*. Plinius speaking of the effects of slavery so long ago, "We walk with alien feet; we see with alien eyes; we recognize & greet people with an alien memory; we live from alien labour . . ." could have been writing about the Straits Settlements, now Malaysia.

Cameron Highlands
August 5/76

You're either still in To. or back home — eating at Min's or the Delightful, reading the *Sun*, or gazing up at the blue (is it blue?) above the Coca Cola plant from your studio windows. It's strange to be living a day ahead of you, which means nothing since i'm not even in your world — i'm on the "roof of the world," 5000' up, mist rising off the hills in morning sun. Here they even grow strawberries, amid the tea plantations. There are still *orang asli* (aboriginal people) who live in the jungle, wear loincloths & hunt with poisoned darts & blowguns — which all the little stores in Tanah Rata sell, along with gigantic rainbow butterflies, the largest of which is named Rajah Brooke, after the 19th C. English adventurer who ended up as Rajah of Sarawak, in perpetuity, etc. & in between the Fanta & fried mee stalls, the dusters of dyed pampas grass & piles of Cameron Highland oranges, you'll hear American rock & roll on the radios, a la Beach Boys or Everly Brothers, & even the humblest tamil shacks in Bringchang sport TV antennae — everyone's been watching the Olympics in that exotic, foreign, Canadian town.

Here, here it's
 prayer fronds of
 tree ferns
 leaf hands
 i wave toward you
 through the
 stillness of
 blue air

“HANTU HANTU”

house up the Hill not far from the Crag Hotel,
no one slept in, or fell asleep & woke in the jungle she said —
we were shown its tile roof slanting up from the trees,
licked ices on the Hotel terrace & looked, our bodies
safe on scratchy chairs, definitely there, fretting under the
straps of our sundresses, white shoes tapping toward an
acrobatic gesture off the low wall (“don’t you dare”) into
that green massif of leaf cloud, swaying below . . .

AS A CUP FILLS ITSELF IN THE STREAM

undoing it, the clasp on the trunk . . . always there were voices calling to each other in another language rising through the house, full of incomprehensible import, intent on each other, saying something even in the chatter . . . what was being told she was excluded from? did she wonder? . . . is rusty & sticks, because of humidity, but pulling it open finally there is first the smell of must, moths, all it was designed to prevent . . . no basement there under the house, no damp concrete shoring up earth, no sawdust bins, no furnace. but two stone steps up off the earth & onto tile an inescapable light falls along, all those rooms light & aery, & when the sun comes in, unrolling the chicks, her hands on the white cord uncoiling it off the little cleat, & then the bamboo mutter of the blind unrolling shadow . . . but not anything dark, nowhere the sun *didn't* come, except perhaps their rooms at the back by the dark wall of the cliff where she went slippers slapping tile & the swish of pajamas against her legs . . .

"Betsy and Derek were making a plan to run away from the orphanage . . ."

lifting the old catch, a little stiff,

told to be careful . . . two mothers, two, but one mother & the other someone we had a claim to, we thought of almost as part of ourselves, her hands our hands to bathe us, dress us, & the gentle combing of our hair, & young — did we see her? & a third who cared for the house, Amah, had seven children "& they all died, my dears," who cared for us too, sloppy & merry & what did it matter? except what the Mem says. What the Mem says goes (sometimes). what the Mem says exists as a separate entity in the house, to be listened to & walked around, with suitable contrition if asked (giggling in the back rooms), but separate, separate from the way life moves, on. what the Mem says was meant to last. like mercurochrome on a cut. like the contents of a steel trunk . . .

"They both took out of the wardrobe all their clothes and they counted their money which was three pounds and they put it into their suitcases. They got dressed and packed their night clothes . . ."

lifting the lid

which was heavy, painted with the letters of her name in white, stencilled as all the linen was inked in black along one seam, the letters of our family

name & her initials, because she was the one who telephoned down the hill angry for lost sheets, shirts, handkerchiefs, "they'd rob us blind!" trying to make them understand, satu, dua, tiga, TIGA! clapping her hands, Amah! her voice & theirs, Mem? Mem?, swirling currents through the house, always something undone, always looking for someone, mana ada Eng Kim? Mum! Mum! always accident prone, tch tch, tumbang? . . . blood & mercurochrome & the big knives on the chopping block, big vats of steam, crabs lashed to the bamboo pole, slow moving pincers, slow white-eyed stalks turning, boil them alive? . . . "and here comes a chopper to chop off your head" . . .

"Derek went down to the kitchen and got thirty tomatoe, egg and honey sandwiches, all the cakes a whole tin of biskuits, a tin of tea (teh) two loaves of bread a pot of honey, a pot of jam, a block of butter, two bottles of milk and a tin of coco . . ."

lifting it there is first of all that smell, faintly mildewed (old shopping papers lining the bottom, her voice on the phone ordering Cowlac, ordering apples, *not* pisang mas, *not* rambitans), faintly mothball (Georgetown Dispensary wormpills & carbolic acid, alcohol), faintly the sweet (Chanel) smell of temple flowers gone brown. always both on her hands done with the day's ministration to the vase, to snakebite, to bloody knees. & always that stillness, rushing in to find (the dog! the chickens! my sister!) her, rapt in a bleeding fragrance of flowers' heaped cut stalks jagged toward her, setting handfuls of soft bloom in water . . . hers the "house of flowers," her first, rumah bungah, named in that talk that ran, knowing incomprehensible current from kitchen to kitchen . . . & quick angry words, impatient, & quick! emergency (kabun drunk & beating up his wife again, the dog run over, the child dying in the back room), the dying flowers, scorpion & snakebite, mad monkeys screeching in the trees, unexpected storms & penance & strange tension (always "incomprehensible") . . .

"The lady who was the head mistress was called Mrs. Granville. Betsy and Derek hated Mrs. Granville . . ."

against this,

saving (a life), saving (a dress), saving a future, to be passed into our eager hands lifting the sequined bodice, lifting the promise. army surgeon's daughter off to the ball, thai-dancers round her wrist, floating handpainted scarf. shantung silk, watching her be fitted, pins in mouth, "when you grow up" . . . Abbott & Costello, too fat, i'll never look like you . . . this tender flesh, perfumed & slender, bending to kiss, cannas & cannon & nightblooming kengwah. he waited in the wings as she said goodnight, he in white, auburn & smelling of English Leather . . .

“‘And we could call the stream whith the waterfall Rushing Stream and the pond Swimming Pond,’ said Betsy. So they put the tent up in Foxglove Clearing and went to sleep on some pillos in the tent with the door shut . . .”

naming, trying to steep me in it, with the order of the day, with tiffin, naptime, & while they all slept sitting up in the lounge with the doors shut, chewing the rubber end of a revolving pencil, transparent, shines like amber in the light, pushing lead across the lined pages of Penang Kindergarten and Preparatory School Exercise Book . . . past “ini, mini, minah mari” now heard faintly from upstairs . . . past the feel of little fish nibbling at my legs when I got in the goldfish pool with Amah hitching her sarong up around her thighs, giggling kissy kissy, fishy lips nibbling at my skin under the sundress. “we’re not supposed to do this.” “tida apa, tida apa” . . . lying on the bench by the summerhouse alone, feeling lips all warm, a bellyful of power so big i walked with a stick under, the witch loving me had done it, “tell-tale tit! your tongue will be slit” . . .

“‘O bother. Betsy you had better stay here while I get the tools oh yes I’d forgotten I’ll have to get the flannels to wash ourselves whith and our towels and swimsuits.’ ‘Alright,’ said Betsy because (because?) she did not like the idea of staying in the woods . . .” (di-hutan)

taking them off, these false promises . . . *because* the order changes, o my mother who should know. wetting the stems of cut zinnias against their death, their vivid heads lighting the tile in the dark heart of the house where *she* washed the dishes, staring through a little window at us in the summerhouse, Ungimah always angry. & it was always summer for us, the only dark theirs at the back, the stifling single sleeping rooms, the deep cement washpool where water was always lapping over. but *we* had words. & the words could not command their lives, only their hands . . .

“Betsy opened the two suitcases and found her paints and paintbook and started painting, but she could not concentrate . . .”

yours could not command mine, my disorderly desire, having given my word & yet sneaking out of the house . . .

“At last she put her paints away and started making the beds but she could not make them . . .”

leaving the garden, climbing the terrace where jungle was, climbing guilty toward that flower . . . but you *know* you weren't supposed to be out there! . . . for you, mother, to prove. orchids do grow wild on the terrace you said no flowers would grow. reaching to pluck, when the snake, shot across it . . .

WHY DON'T YOU LISTEN? having been told, having been told so often, such an old story . . . but it was you i lost in your word, firm as your will, your body your will, in filmy dress bending to break the spell of anger finally as you leave . . . white tulle . . . don't go . . . dress with the coffee-coloured beads . . . don't leave . . . embroidered silk, gold colour . . . "give me your word" . . . promise of the body i would grow into, if i listened, if i learned to stop breaking it, my word given to you, learned to keep to the house i was meant to inherit . . .

"At last
she went out shutting the door of the tent as she went . . ." *dan terbang pur . . .*

i broke my word,
i broke a new & muddy ground, i did, at last i went out, shutting the lid,
closing the door of your house as i went. but it was you i left. gone down
with the flowers, gone down in the mad wind of your anger suppressed. how
did you break? how was it broken in you? . . . "misi chukup chukup jahat" . . .
bad, bad with the curl, in the middle of your fore'ead . . .

"She ran out of
the woods and ran behind the bushes . . . *pokok pisang, pokok pisang . . .*

i will dance it out for you, when you left, turned out, turned out of the house
into the traffic, yes this & no that, you going the wrong way, you stay on your
side of the road, contrary, won't go along with, these proprieties. & so a
crash, so wild hysteria & the signals change, erratic. lift stout brown legs,
jump up & down for chaos in black satin bodice (o bother the hat) skirt a wild
swirl of colour, no i *won't* play it, *won't* say it, *won't* do it your way . . .
your way . . . driven down into that black river . . .

the old order
breaks, mother, those garden paths, seed beds, tiny trunks all split open at
last in the icy grip of anger, shine destruction, shine what spills over, shine
black ice all over the heart . . . & where it bubbles up, there, there at the heart
of the house a dark pool they ignored & taught you to, NOT because you thought it
was wiser, but caught, caught in the old ways, there mother-daughter, i call
you up through the spring of a new . . . word . seed . season . . . whole, it
comes back, it fills always where you were.

THIS IS NOT

this is not my world, i can't live here — lighthouse, on the far
strands i dreamt, i dealt myself a hand — this is where we were,
berthed in an alien place, light turning all around — for a while,

we were housed in it, walked *out* to it, mother, father, sisters
over the glistening sands & the light, welled out of the sky we
waded through, it shone on us too . . .

“we were never there, we never visited a lighthouse much less stayed.”

that is another world turning, o father, o ambush of the
sun . . .

THE LINE

Begin at the beginning, she thinks, there was no beginning, or only one dimly remembered from her place at the round teak table, highly polished, her sister sits opposite, a table so big they can't touch hands across, the hall (it was *all* big then they were so small) stretches its black & white tile pattern to the door, its white grille pale green plants stare outside of, staring into the amber light where they sit, inside, forming a square at the round table, her father to the left, their host to the right at what is, indisputably, the head of the table, tho it is round — he sits with his back to an electricpink screen that hides the kitchen entrance where the servants come, softly, in bare feet over the tile, carrying plates or removing them. & her father is not 'her' father, he is 'their' father, tho she thinks (like any child she is the centre of her world?) her sister looks far away, perhaps because she is not eating (eat up, she is told, eat up, tho that is not the word, not 'up' with 'eat,' that is Canadian, that is something they never said, her parents, tho now their grandchildren are spoken to in exactly those words), she sits, like a little girl in her short smock, this woman who has two children, little, her younger sister, middle, she sits in the middle of her own field of vision with her back to the door, & beyond her stretches the long hall — she remembers it dark under the stairs on her way to the door, she goes back, she remembers two bottom steps which are, inexplicably, stone after the flight of polished wood leading up, she used to sit, waiting for them to be ready, she used to sit with her feet on the black&white chequered tile, did she jump, from black to black? did she spend a long time waiting? at the bottom step, stone like those outside, & she wanted to go outside, into the world)



Are you sure you won't? he is asking, their host, he is passing the silver basket of toast to her to pass on to their father, this table so large they must pass from one to the other, & tho it is bare in front of her sister, as she requested (did she come down so as not to leave a hole in the passing?) he asks again, you won't? you absolutely won't? with that imperceptible shake of his head that is not a shake but, after all these years amid the doings of inexplicable people, a deploring & assenting nod, as much as to say, look here, she won't, she absolutely won't. & they look at her sister, they all do look at her resolute smile that glints under its grown politeness, glints with five year old implacability, even rebellion, she won't, she absolutely won't. It's the heat, he sighs, passing the salt he always passes, will you? take some? take lots of salt, & turning again, you must keep up your strength you know. She doesn't respond & her father assumes his usual role, there at the other end of the table, facing their host he explains, well you know we've all had so much to eat since we arrived that she feels she's been overdoing it a bit. Do you? he says with surprise, do you? I'm getting too fat, she says, glorying (ah she knows that glint) in the plainness of the fact.

Really! he says again, buttering the toast so white, so thin light shines thru, as it shines onto his skin, a palour of small wrists extended out of the cuffs of the silky shirt he wears with tie, a veneer of silk & silver, of silver knives that deploy the light, shining from the chandelier off his body's palour of years spent in the tropics, it's the manifest routine of silverware & glass setting his place, & theirs, each in deference to the others, a space rescued by light from the dark outside she nonetheless wants to go out in, & he, he wants the light uncomplicated by any irrational tremors, his 'really' only a punctuation mark as he lays his knife on the side of his plate & resumes his soup, resumes the conversation: that man, you know, spends all his life at the office, i should think he sleeps there (& the plants lean in from the white porch, attentive, opening pale green fronds as his voice assumes a confidential tone in the air that wafts thick & warm from the night, from the dark she hears, dimly, the sound of gongs & a drum, & glances across the orchids to her sister who seems to be listening), well, he has three wives you know, & i suppose the going gets a bit tough at home poor thing, with a smile at her, implying, you wouldn't want to be one of three would you, i mean, is it conceivable? Three! her father exclaims, are they still doing that? Well it's cruel really, he's living far beyond his means & this year he even asked for half his provident fund.

Can he do that? their father asks, frowning above the soup spoon poised halfway to his mouth as mental dossiers flick, she can see them, back thru the years (she remembers stories of stolen furniture, thieves at night, malaria — but where did it all begin, begin, when she was so small? the line that was drawn to protect them from the strange, to return them to a past she feels distinctly separate from, she & her sister, implicated at their source), o he's entitled to it of course, they all are at the age of 55 or whatever (simply then the company they keep? these two old friends from a remembered world, paid tribute to in the way he holds her chair, even her father has moved back to, a code that binds & separates as the table, at its polished surface, black, reflects the movement of their hands, these men at opposite ends who politely break their toast while outside, outside the cicadas hum in a deafening surf that crests) & yet (that falls) what can you do? he enquires of her, earnestly it would seem, they don't think of the future except as something that arrives in the end you know, without their lifting a hand so to speak — even her smile complies, complicit in its understanding. No she *doesn't*

understand, why is she part of this? except that she is here, her bare feet she is not supposed to have (hookworm, my dear, he said, you must wear slippers) flat on the tile, its black&white squares leading off where her eyes will go, over her sister's hair, her face averted, listening (is she? or dreaming of bed, bored) secretly feeling the tile that is cool, cool to her feet & worn, real. Or is that the temple of this afternoon they must take their shoes off in (& she wondered, maliciously, what he thought of hookworm *then* — unholy thoughts, she took it seriously, the tile those hundreds of feet were treading along with hers, no different, no other than, worn soles on the lotus buds their guide remarked, you too, like the buddha, dozens of buddhas, & if you pray to this one you will receive prosperity, to this good luck, to this good health, & each of them with alms slots) — well it's a gamble really, isn't it, as to which expires first, the fund or his years, & who knows what might happen, i mean they *think* this way, maybe he'll shave his head & put on yellow robes like his brother — his brother? — a director of the company mind you, just two weeks ago. Her father leans back in his chair & roars, his laugh like a thunderclap against the ultimate absurdity of things, while their host nods, that wink, that deploring shake of his head that affirms, he did, he did, tho he says, it's disgraceful really, we can't have monks running the company can we? Her sister grins, across the orchids she sees it, a grin that echoes pure delight in the breakdown of order (imp, at the edge of the terrace dancing, grinning, who long ago threw all the house keys into the jungle, Eng Kim's, from the corner of her eye she sees now hover behind the electricpink screen, dart forward in bare feet & black pants flapping at the ankles, trying to see, have they done with the soup, & should she signal, as acting Mem is there some sign she should give, as their absent hostess, as her absent mother would have done — a confusion of flowers, of roles, Eng Kim's i am so sorry (their being here instead of their mother?), & she knew the regret was real, felt, herself, a childish confusion of Eng Kim & mother extant, her sister, eyeing the orchids, where did mom learn to arrange flowers, these look so much like hers, & their father, sharp, it was your mother who taught Eng Kim, saying now, you see what an extraordinary country this is (& with that comment, clean, he separates what she wants to enter, asking how it enters her, her life which began its dim beginnings here).

Look at the mess that other one's got himself in, he says, so easy, beginning another story (& do beginnings inevitably shape what follows?), checked as she enters, who seem to fade away as soon as she leaves the screen, fade into the tile she treads, smile eclipsed in a small salute that says, excuse me, please carry on, while the hands that used to dress her deftly remove their soup bowls. *There* is a beginning, surely, a lost place, a dimly remembered space at the back of the house where the servants live & which they tiptoed round last night, whispering, two small children, i think she's disappointed in us, wondering why they couldn't pass thru polished surfaces of wood, of tile, to the dull-lit innards of the house, each with their own guilts, she remembers how i threw her keys away, she thinks i still want my own way. failing to bridge the divide



a tileroofed corridor covers, a place to hover where the washing hangs, hand done, & every afternoon in the heat of the day that heavy iron, must be antique, she said, failing to ask the right questions, wanting to ask, what was it like for you? who evades, it is not customary, or that was her private beginning, an English family. & with the English how custom persists: 'as Mary's away will you please look after the meals, give the orders.' who used to look after *them* & now, with her english

English, acts as translator for the other, Ah Yow, who stands firmly on her flat feet, a chuckle & a shrug, well what's to be done? The meals look after themselves they found, fridge door opening to reveal what was already frozen inside, each day of the week, now thrust before them, Ah Yow frowning down at the work of her hands, pork chops & roast potatoes ('she doesn't like to cook you know, but really she's quite good'), followed by Eng Kim with two bowls, o it looks like okra, & her father, what's okra? o i remember these (& the brinjals, baskets of, eggplant piled by the roadside, white eggplant growing by the stream), Eng Kim, he persists, what do we call these? ladies' fingers, she informs, with her delicate English accent. 'We,' what a strange fabrication & yet, leaning over the stone bridge into the rushing darkness of the, 'brook' they called it, that muddy ditch, coming back was coming home he'd said, in some previous life i must have been a rich Chinese in Malacca with a fleet of junks trading spices to China, & she'd disbelieved his possession of the place. Glancing over, she sees him chasing the ladies' fingers with a silver fork & spoon &, as Eng Kim lowers the bowl a little for him, she sees, in the very thrust of his neck, in the frown of concentration, impatient sigh that evokes her concern, Eng Kim's, who would do it for him, she sees the Tuan, father, head of the household she inhabited as a little girl waiting, one foot on the white square, one foot on the black, in her white socks & shoes, waiting for them all to be ready, Daddy was taking them out.

What she wanted was outside, on streets she wasn't allowed to walk or ride down, on her new bike, wobbly & nervous into a world the sound of a gong invokes even now, in the receding splash of cricket hum, treefrogs, the same frenzy to be out, out where she imagines the lights are & the people, a fury of ghosts, of drums, a world as foreign as the streets they have no map to (he, you'd think the government would at least provide the tourists with something, & someone else had said, but they don't want any accurate maps released because of the terrorists, as if the terrorists didn't already live there, bribes & threats, 'red backers,' they said, 'businessmen confess their part in giving aid.' That was today's story & it was somebody's version, & somebody else's naming as real, as the plate she now looks down on, somebody else will disbelieve (as she, if she looks up, will disbelieve his earnestness as he always says, their host, always the last to be served, will wave his hand in the air & entreat them, please, do carry on, as if it were something new they couldn't wait to set their

teeth to). Nothing has changed, there lie the same roast potatoes, the same pork chop, same carrots & okra her mother would have served, the chop cut up in pieces for them by amah in the kitchen, carefully cut up & soaked in gravy — a world contained on her plate. She glances at her sister who is looking at her plate with an amused smile, & in the arc their eyes extend to each other, an imaginary string of little stalls, mah mee, satay, poh peah, lit up at night by kerosene lamp & steaming, delicious smells, appetites of a crowd those operatic stories play to, living & dead, her eyes point their way to . . . *take away my wisdom & my categories* . . .

O look, her sister cries, just at the moment she becomes aware of, a motion, a beating of wings coming in from the space behind their father — bat? or moth? its too big furry body beating in blind necessity against the ceiling, walls, they all sitting up to watch its staggering progress toward their host who rises, as if to hold the chair for someone's entry: good heavens, it's only a moth. But its body's so huge, she says, & they agree, watching the swollen thorax & dark wings settle, finally, rest, like some breathless flag atop a white fluted candle. Well you see, he bends to pick up his serviette & sits down again, we have these creatures, smiles, with a wave of his hand at their plates, please do carry on.

* * *

Coming in late, it wasn't the frogs plopping out of the way of the car's tires on the curving drive, entry to the house, her sister said (she'd come to expect it, ten seconds after the hedge), slow down, those frogs —, or even the air that still surprised them when they stepped out into its warmth, heavy as hands about them crossing the unlit lawn. Their host had gone to bed & even the servants' quarters shone barely a light, wan & faraway piercing the airless air that surrounded the house & them, like thieves come in the dead of night to unlock, yes, they had the key, unthieflike, the white grille door, guard door, unbolt it top & bottom, ssh, don't wake them, grinding of iron on tile, to stick the key in the lock of the inner door, unbolt that too, & thus, letting themselves in, bolting & locking up, leave the key in the brass bowl on the table — it wasn't that, but the polished wood reminded her, expanse of black&white to the chairs, futile & bleak now, dining room with its air of unspoken civility, it was the black polish of the table reminded her: let's look at the moth.

& when they switched on the light, at first the white candle masked any penetrating glance, but there it was, still hanging there, close up near the wick, a moulted, furry, furtive brown, legs oddly precise, oddly tenacious in their grip on the wax where, in spirals, suddenly they both could see, look, a mass of eggs, must be dozens of them, o easily, almost a hundred, laid in & on & over but generally conforming to the upward spiral of the stick. That's why she's so huge, her sister says, leaning forward eagerly, caught in the grip of the moth's urge, o look where they come out. They both watch the white globule forming at the tip of the appendage that slowly tenses, squeezes, dropping it precisely next in line to its sisters. What a strange place to leave her eggs, she says, a candle! thinking of the giant josssticks burning by the opera stage, & the shrine with its dozens of smaller josssticks lit & waved by handfuls toward the deity who loomed there, who unlocked the gates of the underworld in the month of hungry ghosts, they said, looming over all those cups of sauce, those piles of fruit, those offerings. & it wasn't the notion of hunger that prompted her, but the simplicity with which those sticks were offered, smoking as they were, to some unknown, to some invisible circumstance having to do with return. We should light one to *her*, she'd said tentatively. She'd like that, her sister agreed, & she knew, delighting in the unexpectedness of that homage, it was an escape from their world they wanted to offer up, & they stood there torn by difference, knowing themselves as strangers having no right.

But she couldn't have chosen a better place, her sister said, still bent forward, you can hardly see them. I was thinking of burning, she says, she thinks, does she say? this moth, the light that could be lit, a burning of white wax, white eggs. But look! & when she bends forward she sees them too, tiny grey specks, beginning caterpillars.

COMING IN, WHO

used to live here, used to
the sweep of kabun's broom
edge of a tideline morning used
to run her energy along, alone
exulting in birdsong, liquid
trills, squawks

the long
reversible arc of his arm
swept up grass, not up, around
a kind of sortilege, kabun
at the bottom of the garden, not
looking up at the under
side of sky, in the easy
sweep of his arm, the long
advance of noon, a tide

poured through his broom
she ran, through crests of song
wave on wave, recede, while the broom
continues its faroff rush, like surf
coming in, she's gone

GETTING HERE

it wasn't you was it? you not here, underlining *To-morrow*, yourself interlinear. In 1935 he gave you Shelley you took to Malacca, & what i thought was "missing you" was "wishing you" a happy birthday, i not even born, not even thought of as you used to say. he spelled Edrys with an extra s, your brother, adding the kisses, dark x's after his name underlined, insistent, covering distance to get to you

*We look before and after,
And pine for what is not*

in tropic afternoons,
with a Welsh mountain for a name, you underlining loss or other nights differently spelled, eyes under older skies. & even the mountain named for some other mind Shelley knew "Shelley" was writing to, *Children of a sunnier star, / Spirits from beyond the moon*, unearthly in white (roses against their thorns), tennis racquet in hand exercising a lunar pull, closed lids & heavy lidded eyes of Shelley amid tin talk, gin-&-tonic talk of the market, sexual too, & surreal in the eyes of a wit no one saw in you

*Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught*

your mirror
caught a glimpse of that place i hid, country of origin, clouding it over with lipstick & powder, making mouths at the face going out to be addressed, assessed by dress & manners you saw thru — you, caught out in a language that sounded strange, stranger yourself, deprived of words that spoke what you knew

“they want my life” — always a
life for a life, yours for ours. sacrifice you knew they exacted.
pruning of the rose, a kind of tax on being, familial. at what cost,
we couldn’t hear the words for. erased, &

“In thy place ———”

“life’s cheat,”
deprived of any truth, as you, long in tooth & nameless, recede from
imagination: one cloud of thought, one word of no earthly use,
“mother” —

you knew the dark, conspiracy, how they
keep power in their hands, unnamed (you forgot, we give ourselves up to).
you taught me fear but not how to fight. you, misspelled, gave yourself
to the dark of some other light, leaving me here with the words, with
fear, love, & a need to keep speaking

“ . . . the thing we fled — To-day”

Vancouver 1979