



**BOEY KIM CHENG**

BOEY KIM CHENG (b. 1965) is a lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle in Australia. He has published three collections of poetry: *Somewhere Bound* (1989), *Another Place* (1992) and *Days of No Name* (1996). He was the recipient of the National Arts Council's Young Artist of the Year for Literature in 1996.

*calling the poems home*

I have avoided reading the poems for a long time. I have never asked myself why, after they were packed into a publishable form and dispatched to a life on the shelves, I have kept them at a distance, exiled them to the fringes of my consciousness. I think I have even unconsciously tried to dim and douse the awareness of their autonomous lives. For a long time, the poems and I have resided in different countries. There were even long spells in which I did not possess a single copy of the books.

Perhaps I have taken the idea of impersonality too far, that the writer is merely an instrument by which the book attains its life, and once that is done, the two should never meet again. This may be related to the half-hearted renunciation of art that I was drawn to from the beginning, a kind of displaced religious impulse. There may also have been a lurking superstition, that if I read them again, I would be trapped in the poems, shackled to the lives recorded there. And perhaps there was also the feeling that what is recorded in the poems would lose some of its meaning through re-reading, especially in public.

Now I am summoning them home. Or is it that I am coming home to them, being reclaimed rather than reclaiming, the prodigal author? The reasons for this are less tangled. I have resisted long enough this recall, this being called to poetry again. There is the fear that the poems will drift out of reach, that we become unrecognisable to each other. It is also partly the middle-of-life call for a retrospective, a time for accounting and recounting, reviewing the records of earlier lives to find out where to proceed from here. Perhaps I am hungering for the state of possession again, to be touched by the fire of words.

As my fingers connect with the pages of *Days of No Name*, I feel a certain current stirring, a frisson, an awakening, sensing and mounting from the hiding places, to quote Heaney. It was perhaps the most painfully intense of the three books, and the writing left me emptied, exhausted, anguished as to how to carry on after so much intensity. Looking back, I think the book broke me, shattered my being, took from me my name. And it has taken a good part of the last decade to put it together again, to name the loss, to read the poems and be named again.

Randall Jarrell once said that writing an inspired poem is like being struck by lightning, and in a lifetime of sitting out in thunderstorms, a poet can only hope to be struck five or six times. I have been lucky, I think. I recall being struck two or three times. I think the title poem of *Days of No Name* is one of them.

Except for the weather, there was nothing remarkable about the excursion that day and the place. It was an Indian summer day, fall settling in very slowly, reluctantly almost. The trip was to salve some of the unrest brewing in the corridor in the Mayflower building on the outskirts of Iowa City, where writers from all over the world came to be consigned to a sterile ward-like writing environment. It amazed me that they were so resigned to their fate. It took two or three of us disgruntled ones to raise the clamour for some action, and so the day outing was devised to appease the dissenting voices.

We were driven by Mark Nieson, a postgraduate nature-writer, to a place called Lake Macbride. I remember being unimpressed. It was quite nondescript, except for the glittering expanse of water that seemed unbounded on the far side. We deposited our writerly

selves on a sandy stretch and stared at the water. I think somebody forgot the picnic basket. Amir Or, who missed the Mediterranean surf of Tel Aviv, braved the icy water, and drew a few others in. They did not stay long in the water. We settled into splintered groups, into desultory talk. Win Pe and Lyonel had lit up and smoked in awkward silence. A while later, Win Pe withdrew to sketch the scene. He was to be the most important person I met in Iowa, and quite a few poems in *Days* record the moments with this most unassuming of artists, a friend and father to me in the Iowan days.

I wandered off to the shore where the sand gave way to limestone, to a rock ledge where everybody was visible and dangled my legs over lapping wavelets. The writers had retired into their own solitude. I sat there, watching, feeling the caress of the light. I was wondering what had brought us together, such an odd and motley crew. What did writing mean to each of us? Who were we? What were we doing here? My mind drifted out on the raft of the questions, then on nothing.

It came as though it had been there all along. Not the lightning flash of *satori*, but a deep dark breath of light. The dazzle of the water, the configuration of different figures, the fissured texture of the rock were imprinted and focussed at one point on the retina, igniting, triggering a blinding moment of seeing. I had an intimation of the different bodies there, glimpsed the mortal selves behind the writerly masks, the figures limned by a dark light. They were all loners, islanded in themselves, briefly connecting, meeting, then parting. Yet something stayed, something nameless holding them together. The moment was illumination but it also passed like a shadow, like an eclipse, and I was transfixed by the passage of that something behind the moment.

I knew the poem had already written itself, incised that moment on the dark plate of memory. As we bundled into the van and drove through the Iowan plains back to our captivity, I was possessed. I was trembling with the images. Back in the Mayflower, at the typewriter, the keys tapped out the words as though relaying Morse, ghost-keyed, taking down message from another world. Air, water, rock and the voices welded in the fire of my blood into a vision:

#### DAY OF NO NAME

*We are on a slice of land  
riding out into Lake Macbride, Iowa.*

*Poets, novelists, artists, people who try to make sense  
of our lives, today we've left our writing gear behind;  
we are simply men, women, the sun, the shadows linking our hands.*

*Marc Nieson, nature's acolyte, is reading the limestone shelves  
for clues to where we go when we die. He scans  
the cliff-edge, the treeline like a vellum of arcane script,  
the light ricocheting off the rocks like meaning.  
This year he is going to retreat into himself  
and learn the names of trees. He will befriend  
the silences and meditate on the one bald eagle  
circling, catching the fire in the skies of his mind.*

*Perched on a rock-lip are my poet-friends.  
 Amir from Israel wants to convert God  
 to the body's religion; sometimes his voice commands  
 the god who has spent too much time out in the desert  
 to say amen to the loneliness of bodies locked in lust  
 and strife. With him is Helena from the deep north of Finland.  
 Her poems travel far down into the earth to reach  
 the sun on the other side of night. To find her  
 you'd have to unwrap the images like boxes within boxes,  
 till you reach nothingness, or a stone storied  
 as the one I am holding now, veined with intimations  
 you can feel but not explain.*

*That man is trying to release the winter  
 in that woman's dream; he wants to hear  
 the brooks running, the dance of summer in her leaves.*

*Behind us Seona from Fiji is angling  
 with her camera to bait the sunlit moments  
 into the dark plate of her memory.  
 I think she will succeed.*

*Choi, from Korea, is afraid of happiness.  
 She does not want to touch the word which will set her  
 free. Sue from Australia is on a parallel trail,  
 wondering what she is searching for. Win from Burma,  
 Lyonel from Haiti, they are there,  
 measuring the time with cigarettes  
 at the edge of the woods. I feel  
 the sunlight make peace in their hearts  
 in these Macbride woods.*

*I am here on a limestone ledge, wanting to bless  
them. On my tongue are the sweet names: aspen,  
aster, sumac, prairie grass, friends Marc introduced  
this morning. Out on the lake a lone boat is transfigured  
in a broad belt of smashed sun, constellations all reflected  
in the single instant of our being here. The words  
of my friends, the distances in their stillness, the miles  
between their births and deaths, they are here. I feel  
a door opening on the edge of our lives. If I shout  
for them, they will not hear; the door will thud  
shut. Like a buddha of helpless compassion, I turn  
from the portal back to earth.*

*To name this moment, what this poem fails  
to name, I'd have to find a word embracing  
these words: sun, water, rock, trees,  
Marc, Helena, Amir, Choi, Win . . .  
and behind them the void  
shining, hurtless.*

Touching the poem, tracing its contours, I glean a sense of homecoming. It is of course the memory of that day, that afternoon, the particular behaviour of light, and the solitary writers, all coming back or me being summoned back to it. The faces of Win Pe, Mark, Amir, Seona, Lyonel, Sue and Helena all inscribed in the snapshot. But there is also homecoming on another level. I feel a shiver of light, a scimitar of recognition sent from years ago and travelling home. It is the seizure, the trance, there is no other word for it, as the poem manifested itself. The experience of writing as if your life depended on it, that you would be consumed with the words if you didn't deliver them. It was, as Wordsworth says, one of the spots of time. An epiphany by which something beyond words embedded itself in words.

As I write about this moment recollected not in tranquillity, but in a state of trembling rediscovery, it strikes me that perhaps I have stayed away from poetry because I have been afraid to be touched, torched again. Or is it the fear of not being struck again? One can only wait and see whether that flicker of storm on the horizon will travel this way again.