

**NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
UNIVERSITY**

SINGAPORE

**RED EARTH:
A COLLECTION OF POETRY &
A CRITICAL EXEGESIS**

**VINCENT ESTHER XUEMING
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
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**Red Earth: A Collection of Poetry & A Critical
Exegesis**

Vincent Esther Xueming


School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

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“Family tree” and “Albatross” were first published in *Southeast Asian Review of English*, vol. 57, no. 2, December 2020, <https://sare.um.edu.my/issue/view/1816>.

Date:	5 January 2021
Name of student:	Vincent Esther Xueming
Signature of student:	

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- *Red Earth* has been accepted for publication by Blue Cactus Press (Washington), forthcoming publication September 2021
- The unpublished manuscript, *Red Earth*, was a finalist in the Gaudy Boy Poetry Book Prize 2020 (New York)

The publication of individual poems is acknowledged below:

- “Pilgrims” and “Solar eclipse” were first published in *Portside Review*, (forthcoming 2021)
- “Crossing” and “The Blue Mountains” were first published in *Atelier of Healing: Poetry About Trauma and Recovery* (Squirrel Line Press, 2021)
- “Falcon” was a commissioned poem written for The Arts House Singapore’s *Note for Note 2021*
- “Family tree” and “Albatross” were first published in *Southeast Asian Review of English*, December 2020
- “Throw me in the landfill” was first published in *Open Your Eyes: An anthology of climate change*, Hawakal Publishers, September 2020
- “The Blue Mountains” was shortlisted for Catharsis 2020, organised by Singapore Poetry Festival
- “Inheritance” came in Second place for the National Poetry Competition 2020, forthcoming publication
- “Le Morne beach” was first published in @homeinsiberia, 7 August 2020 and later in *Portside Review*, 2021
- “Lost tongue” was first published in *Poetry Moves* (Ethos Books, 2020)
- “Sungei Buloh sonnets” was first published in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, Vol. 19, No. 1, January 2020
- An earlier version of “Red earth” was first published in *About Place Journal*, Vol. V, Issue II, “Roots and Resistance”, 2018
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- “Island city” was first published in *Split Rock Review*, Issue 11, Fall 2018 and later in *Contour: A Lyric Cartography of Singapore* (Pagesetters, 2019)
- “We have forgotten” (finalist for National Poetry Competition 2019) was first published in *The Stinging Fly*, Issue 39, Vol. 2, Winter 2018-19 and later in *Contour: A Lyric Cartography of Singapore* (Pagesetters, 2019)
- An earlier version of “Everything is perfect from far away” was first published in *Ghost City Review*, September 2018
- An earlier version of “And at once I knew, I was not magnificent” was first published in *The Remembered Arts Journal*, 2017

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SUMMARY

Red Earth is a collection of poetry that contemplates the meaning of human dwelling and being at home on earth. The poems demonstrate an ecofeminist poetics of home, and is founded upon a politics of relations and interbeing with human and non-human kin, and places. Drawn from memory and re-membered with imagination, the poems in *Red Earth* engage with memory, time, place, gender, nature/the environment, history, myth, culture and ethics to locate the female self within the world she inhabits.

Red Earth is a collection of verse that invokes the spirit of place by reinstating a woman's voice amidst the boom of machinery and economy in the context of capitalism, urbanisation and the ensuing alienation from nature. It seeks to establish the personal female voice within dominant patriarchal ideologies and narratives, and searches for home and belonging to the world as a daughter of the earth rather than as citizen of a nation. Tracing its poetic lineage to ecofeminist forebearers like Mary Oliver, Eavan Boland, Grace Nichols, Joy Harjo and Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, *Red Earth* is an ecofeminist act of solidarity with marginalised others (human and non-human person-beings) and an artifact of social and environmental activism. Located in Singapore and moving across geographies, *Red Earth* embodies a new planetary politics of relations that 'makes kin' with fellow person-beings (the elements, animals, plants, places, environments) to offer hope and healing in a time of state-sanctioned violence against the land and by proxy, its people, and increasing urban alienation.

The critical exegesis traces the theory and influence of my poems, with the first chapter discussing place and the making of home, and the second chapter focussing on ecofeminism.

Red Earth

Dream fruit

Dream fruit

I have seen the tree of my dreams,
branches dripping with the weight
of ripe fruit, shiny and inedible. In dreams,
nothing is as it seems. A tree is still a tree
even if its fruits are stones of the semi-precious kind.
In dreams, good and evil exist. I tend to have little control
over anything. Sometimes, this lack of agency
is deadly. I must have wandered off from my tree
when the noiseless phantom looters came.
But I could not see them so I could not stop
it from happening. Too late, and though
she never blamed me, I wake up always guilty.
The pain of unspeakable loss:
my inconsolable grief, that striking heap.

A different time

After William Matthews' "A Happy Childhood"

A field of grass. Common weeds of sunflower stock:

kanching baju's furry, golden head, common vernonia's soft
white breath and Cupid's shaving brush in bloom. I clutch

these wildflowers in my fist, a gift for my mother
who watches from the kitchen, as she peels the papery skin
of an onion, chopping it into deft cubes.

Tiger moths on a twig, on my finger,
on corridor walls. Wings that beat time
to a child's ragged breath. The thrill

of bathing, the tangle of arms and legs in water.
My sisters and I tunnel through cupboards for hidden
treasure, knuckles pink from knocking on solid walls.

A sand-filled playground reeks
with the memory of overnight piss.

Leaky condoms under a swing. I watch

wrestling on the TV one day.

At night, a pale, swollen face enters my dreams.

I hold my father's hand all night to forget

this nightmare. My mother hurls a porcelain cat

at my father. He grabs her slender wrists,

bruises accidental blossoms on her skin.

My sisters orbit unscathed,

jumping on my heaving sternum.

The tiger moths disappear for a time.

Hopping on the drains one day, I miss

a step, fall. As the wound heals,

the scab peels back into a keloid ridge,

the body's way of remembering.

My mother hands me a bottle of soap,

her ballooning cheeks sighing

into the plastic wand.

The heady, synthetic smell of gum

in tiny tubes. I squeeze a dollop,

spin it with a straw, puff.

Watch it stretch, tremble

in the sun.

Another birthday celebration.

Friends who freeze into old photographs,

tucked in the bottom drawer.

Before I turn thirteen, we will sell this flat, move out,

shut the gates to a place that will return

only in my sleep. Another family now breathes

in those rooms. The field overgrown

by another high-rise. Sometimes, the past is better left

to be unearthed in dreams, where I cross

familiar streets, turn each memorised corner,
walk the same red road tiles back home
to a different time, wildflowers still wet in my grip.

Brianna

Dream sister. You vanished one night
and I know they did it
because then they tried to take me too.
Bound supine, my hair started to blaze
with the patient heat of fire, the fear
of burning alive. That morning, a butterfly
flew past my window. What little wings, strong
ascension into the shelterless wind.
Symbol of the soul, of resurrection, of hope
and life, butterfly of my waking moments, sister
of my sleep. Were they afraid
of your resistance, no longer content
to submit? Forgive me sister. I fed you the embers
of dissent, stirring something within.

In this dream, we drove into the sea

I knew it was a dream, because for one, you were driving without a license, and two, I was comfortable enough to let you. I told you how nice it was that you were at the wheel, and I could just sit back. For some reason, we both knew we had to go into the water. The back window was down, and the car was starting to fill. Ealga was with us, our dog. The car kept moving forward underwater, but also downward. To be submerged and entrapped. *Let's get out of here*, I said, sensing a portal above which would take us home. You see, we'd been trying to return with Ealga the entire time. We tried a bus before this but had no luck. So now, the car. Swimming in the water, towards the sun. Holding our breaths before bursting for air. Yes, there was an opening. Relief that this time, we wouldn't drown. Home still distances away.

Island city

something is happening to my city
this body is leaking rain it goes on
for days like the pounding of angry fists or
drums of war I watched a video of cars
trapped by water along an industrial street
and recalled my dream driving into the sea
it beckoned a siren singing invisible and deep
but I could not stop I could not stop myself
from sinking the taste of rain yesterday
made me want to weep another video of green
trash bins white wooden paddle boats and
voices over the recording howling shrieking
at the beach screams into the unknown void
blown by a force impossible to measure
with an anemometer we don't get winds
like these here in this city of steel towers rising
we don't get rain like these here on this island
how do you sleep when your body your city is
drowning how do you reclaim a capsized past

Involuntary travel

See the Egg Moon's soft yellow glow,
that brush of grey cloud just hanging beneath,
against the midnight sky? The binoculars brings her closer
and her craters resemble the cracks
on the luminescent sphere in my palm, the stone
named after the moon. As I try to sleep afterwards, a void opens
and I am an involuntary traveller, curious and awake
on an unknown path. No shape, no form, no body,
just consciousness drifting in a black, bottomless
cave of being. No sight, smell or taste,
just soft voices conversing in echoes and hums
of another tongue. A dipping in and out of time.
Two open doors. The fear of being swallowed alive
if I let myself unfold into the night.

Whale dream

I enter the sea in my dream and a great humpback
swims in the deep. Legend tells of a giant
whose fingers were cut by her father Anguta.
Sinking into the sea, they took whale form.
Are you the goddess Sedna, Mother
of the Deep? Whale of my dreams,
I have seen you glued together by plastic trash
outside a museum. I have heard your song
under a full moon calling me. A heartbeat,
drumming into my bones, then the deep tenor
of your underwater refrain echoing
into the chamber of my soul. Great mother,
I dive into the depths of your being.
Will you come speak with me?

The art of meditation: In four parts

1 *The breath*

If there is one, I have yet to learn it. What I know
is the inconstancy of sensations. Sitting in the park, cross-legged
on a wooden bench, eyes closed, heart slowing down
from the sprint, ears reaching out to the buzz of traffic,
then tuning in to the nearby tree, where the oriole whistles
her deep-throated refrain, singing herself into the morning.
She is not alone. The wind is here too, and I feel
her breath on the hairs of my neck and arms.
A gathering of tremors from deep within, so faint
at first, erupts from the base of my spine, encircling
my body. Then, a loud hush. Through layers of rock and earth,
gravel and concrete, underground trains wheeze
their mechanical coming and going. I smile, holding
this tremulous secret in the still lake of my breath.

2 *Aura*

Still, the body finds a way to inhabit time.
The mind has a habit of wandering
to random thoughts, taking conscious effort to return
to the breath. Expand and collapse. The breath's journey

is cyclical, like Inanna's descent to the Underworld
where she dies and is reborn. Air fills you, leaves you,
and is changed by you. Thoughts do not matter; the body
was created to ensure its own survival.

This time, a tingling in my fingertips, and I sense
a storm brewing between my palms, augmenting
and diminishing with their shifting distance.

Turning my gaze from my hands to their shadow,
I search for colour and meaning against a white wall.

The blur of soft whiteness, the dispersion of fire blue light.

3 *Purple gate*

Beyond the woods of the mind there is a gate
and beyond that, a clearing. Not many find
this gate, some never know it exists.

The trees do a good job of hiding it.

Once, I lay down with my eyes closed and walked
out of my body, through the purple gate
and into a field of silence.

Everything seemed to vibrate
with meaning. I grew wings, becoming a moth
suspended in time, flitting in the dazzling sunlight.

I was a bat in an unlit cave, descending
into the rabbit hole of my mind.

Falling deeper into an empty well, then hauled
back into the armour of my body.

4 *Awakening the serpent*

The Hindus believe we are born
with a sacred gift coiled at the base of our spine,
the feminine divine, a sleeping serpent waiting
to be awakened. I begin my practice by shaking
my pelvis, letting go of my ego, feel my skin moulting.
A fire. It shoots to my crown, and I surrender
to its hot charge and release. Is this what it feels like
to lose control? To imbibe the universe, to free
the self from the heaviness of the body?

Ong namo guru dev namo.

A new sensation, of lightning and ice rising
within me, breaking wave upon wave of sweetness
and light, burning. A slow uncoiling, a tentative
hiss, a lustrous slithering from root to crown.

Nocturne

Again, the night. Again, the sleep
that does not come.

I grow tired of this cloud gathering
into an alert restlessness beside you.

In the living room, I turn on the lights,
try to read to forget my need
for sleep. I sit at the table and write a poem
about the night, sleep and song.

Chopin's nocturne.

I used to sit for hours at my piano, clumsy fingers
committing each note to memory.

But genius cannot be imitated, nor darkness
summoned at will.

I find I have drifted, so I return
to this room. A light wind wafts
in, blessing me with its touch. The lure
of open windows at night, the promise
of cricket songs and frogs after the rain.

The air hangs heavy outside this frame
and nothing is clear

in this light, where even resident trees
are made strange

by the park lamp's flicker

and my poor vision at night.

The only frogs I see in the day lie
with their bellies on top. They live
for the night, I think, for the moon's half
gaze, the silent gush of velvety wings
across a charcoal sky.

Crossing

A tribute, after William E. Stafford's "Travelling through the Dark"

The sambar deer in the photograph is folded
onto the street, red cloth over her eyes,
a bead of sweat hanging
from her lips. I see through my screen

how she is still alive, brown torso upright
after the hit, but by the time I read this news
her body is cold, she is no longer breathing,
put to death by a team of experts. A luckless way to go.

The article says she was *in great distress*.

I imagine the screech and crash, the great impact,
honkings and bright headlights, legs weak
and impotent. The stress of sitting still, waiting

for a dignified end. And though I never
knew her, I want to remember.

*

Imaginary friend, let me resurrect
your broken body from the dirt and ash.
Let your soul re-enter the world of the living

through this breath, as you rise again

to reclaim the earth with your quiet existence.

Perhaps you will choose to walk calmly

along a secluded road, or chew on grass

in a clearing, your head bowed low, eyelids soft

and content. Why do you share this forest, knowing

we will betray you one day? You do not speak, but look

at me gently, holding my gaze in a deep pool

of endless knowing. You teach me to forget my need

for words and language. You teach me to stay

in this delicate moment: in our eyes, our reflections crossing.

Red earth: Two variations

Awake

After a Raden Saleh painting of Java

Broken earth, you are a strange specimen,
unearthing along the streets of Batam like a cinnabar wave,
conjuring an old Javanese landscape

against the setting sun. Fading amber rays
of an apricot sky. A chain of ageless mountains.
Fine details smudge into soft lines, unfolding distances,

unrolling time. Finger, oil and canvas unveil
a forgotten world. Later that evening, I will drowse
by the pool, drawn towards the same orange sun

in his undressing. The silhouette of trees keeps a watchful eye
on transient visitors like me, our coming and going
constant as the pull of the moon on the sea.

This image is less poetic, and I am no artist, so I use words
to paint a scene of red earth, vast and unknowable.

Asleep

Red earth, you are a strange specimen.

Unearthing along the streets of Batam,

I cannot tell what minerals compose you,

or why your redness excites me.

You are known by many names.

Red bauxite ore.

Child of the Riau.

Blood. Bread.

Sedimentary rock.

Soil of the people.

Mother of the land.

But you are just the earth, red

earth, to me.

*

Once, I dreamt I was bathing in red earth,

sighing as I pushed my fingers deep

into the night of her abdomen, to uncover

the lost roots of felled trees.

To mine the subconscious. To enter the darkness.

The earth as a metaphor for my body,
vast and unknowable.

*

What I know asleep, how can I utter awake?

The earth grows redder
no matter what I feed her.

*

Wrap me in your thickening fog.
Let me crawl back into your hollow womb,
steeped in endless sleep.

Little Guilin

Skyscrapers tower behind you
as you sleep. You were here
in the beginning.

Before asphalt swallowed the ground
beneath you, before each brick
was laid, layer

upon layer rising above you.

Before you were given your name,
you were here.

But I have only now discovered you.
Let me begin then, at the beginning.

Walking from Bukit Batok Central,
forest foliage bordering the roadside,
we meandered through a park on a hill,

lured by bird song, cicadas
and rhythmic chants from a nearby temple.
We found you beyond the road's left spine,

a granite lotus hovering above water.

Time has turned you from stone
into myth; your weather-chiselled face—

rock grey, orange, chalk white,
is all that remains
of the millions of nights you have spent

under the moon's watchful light. A silence seeps
into my being, and I sense a quivering
hanging in the air.

Eyes closed, I trace in each gradient
of rock a forgotten layer in time.

With each breath, I reverse

every tectonic tremor, reshaping
land, returning to the beginning.

In the beginning, ancient norite collapses
into granite, sinking into the softness
of the earth's sternum.

Viscous and smouldering,
molten rock returns
to the ovum of unborn volcanoes.

Primordial mantle of fire and ice,
your lungs churn darkness and light.

In the beginning, there is a sound
the earth makes when her eyelids twitch
after a long slumber.

It is a rolling thunder I cannot hear,
a call so old I cannot enter.

Lavender

After “Tha Mo Ghaol Air Aird A'Chuain”

Months after the wedding, the musk
of lavender still retains

its potency, soaking the living room air.

The bouquet is dried by the sun

and the ceiling fan's breathy swirls,
initiating each bud into the afterlife.

Was it only last evening that I held your hand
in mine, sharing a glass of Kilbeggan

as we made our way towards the ivy arch?

Our hands winding that blue and golden cord

light and fast around our wrists, the weight
and measure of our love bound

into a single knot.

The faint scent of lavender whorling

through time into memory.

Now, you sleep to the song

of a woman from another time, singing
for her husband to return from sea,

in a language we can and cannot understand.

It is a song of longing, of a blue autumn

without her boatman, her rare and steadfast love
a bouquet of lavender, blue thistle

and soft green cinerea, beginning
as song, lingering as scent.

About love

About love, or a beautiful tree

After Eavan Boland's "Quarantine"

You write about love in a time of darkness,
a time of Great Hunger,

of a man who loved his wife more than his life,
he carried the weight of his love

and walked for miles north
into the cold, starry night,

her feet held against his breastbone.

The last heat of his flesh his last gift to her.

Teach me to write a poem about love.

One in which I carry the weight

of my love upon my shoulders,
scarred feet tucked into my breastbone,

as I walk into the freezing dark.

Teach me to be like the man in the poem,

giver of last heat.

Teach me to be you.

In this poem, we head north.

We walk until we find a place

to rest and bury our bodies, two trees

returning to the earth as flesh.

Roots growing into each other, twinning

underground. Fed by the elements above,

our branches seeking to inosculate self

into other with the patience of time.

Years pass and we forget

a time before rootedness, before love.

In time, wood too turns to stone,

and as our bones mineralise and petrify,

the weight of our love will crystallise

into fossil, grounding the heart.

Walk

For Ealga

The dog sits before me with a serious look, reminding me
there is a walk to be made, a circuit of streets, construction sites,
school zones, park connectors to be traversed, fresh and new

each day. She breaks into a trot, tongue out, eyes bright,
legs scissoring across concrete, leading me by that cord
binding my wrist to her neck. Like a kite in the wind, she drifts

away, closes in, moving by instinct and the curiosity of scent.

We navigate shifting distances, our bodies sharing one rhythm.

Wide cracks furrow the thirsty ground. Grasses browned

by the heat. We are alone in the field again, now a partial work site.

She strains eastwards, towards the cordoned-off canal, where she senses
an opening. I am learning to trust her, to lower my body down to the earth,

step into the canal's mouth, to occupy the space between control
and release. She waits, patient and still, fully present in this moment.

Her hazel eyes are freckled and deep with knowing, soft

as they tell me this truth: *Take your time, ready yourself. I am here*

to guide you. She looks over and I signal back. Back arched,

muscles taut, she pulls and springs across the chasm, her body

a noiseless white arrow, black diamond on her head.

Flvctvat nec mergitvr

I surrender my body to an ancient art, skilled hands marking
and wounding, needles entering layers of the psyche, transforming pain

into healing. The tattoo artist's hands rest on my right thigh as he bends
and labours over his art, my body, bringing me towards my becoming.

First, he shaves my skin, then carefully transfers the template,
tracing the black outline. For six long hours, the intermittent hum

and whirr of metal on wet flesh, lemon cake and toilet breaks.

Shading for depth and colour, which shocks and sears

my back, nerves writhing and pulling with each precise dip.

One learns to stay calm and breathe. One learns to ride the storm.

The body as a map to be written and read, navigating the shifting tides.

This is the path I have chosen, to chart a course into the open

with a purple compass, sea green anchor, frayed rope and the blessings
of two sea birds, wings outstretched, circling.

My father's hands

For my father

My father's hands are dark
from prolonged exposure to the sun.

With those hands, he fixes

air compressors forgotten at the back
of sweating factories.

His palms are red. I remember

wishing mine were red like his.

How we used to press
our palms together, to measure

how fast I was growing.

My father's hands guide me from pillar
to pillar as I roll on wheels, reaching

for the great beyond.

At twelve, he tattoos an anchor
in blue ink into the curve

between his thumb and forefinger.

He talks about removing it, and I touch
my right thigh, tracing seafoam green,

anchors searching for dry land.

Moored yet adrift

in the sea of our being.

*

In a lost jotter book,

my father pencils miniature animals

in lead: deer, bird, dog, cat.

He takes my hands and we roll over

the snare and tom-toms

in church, my father making it look

so easy.

Many childhoods ago,

my father caught spiders with his hands,

climbed over fences

and into drains to catch fish.

In an old photograph,

he carries me with two hands,

a young and handsome father beaming

into the future.

*

He keeps his tattoo.

He continues to work

with his hands, just as he loves

with his hands, ironing my dress,

clipping my nails, cutting an apple.

When I move out and my cupboard breaks,

he comes down with a spare hinge.

The dog is curious. He pats her soft head

with his right hand, the same hand

that held me to sleep during a nightmare.

My electric switch is faulty.

I text him, and he arrives with a new box.

Pass me the Phillips head?

I tilt my flashlight into the darkness

as he shows me how to connect

live to live,

neutral to neutral,

earth to earth.

Family tree

1

A past that remains out of my reach. Fractured
crown, my family tree leaves me wondering
about its gaping silences. My father's memory
only travels two generations in time to arrive

at an origin. James Nanayakkara from Ceylon
and his Tamil wife. My father recalls an anecdote:
his grandmother and father sprawled on the living room floor,
buzzing from cheap liquor on hot afternoons.

My father's mother, whose ancestry stops
at the "Gate of Hope", orphaned as an infant.
Raised by French nuns, she was christened Nelly.
Who was her mother? Why did she leave? The history

of my becoming in fragments. Three countries
and an ocean, harbouring lost stories of migration.

Forefathers and nameless women
who crossed the seas to build new homes
on foreign land. Elopements,
estrangements, women leading hard lives

as orphans, single mothers, second wives.
Men who changed their names to suit the climate
of the times. Lives that blur and coalesce
from the forgetfulness of bitter years, lines

reaching out across the white expanse
of time and space, in search of a history.
An exile to my past, I fill this void
with patchwork and guessing, my longing

bleeding from the margins of the page
into the tap root of my being.

Lost tongue

After Sujata Bhatt's "Search for my tongue"

Just as Sujata Bhatt searched
for her tongue
to find that she had not one
but two, the native more foreign
than the other, I too long to fill my mouth
with the lost vowels and sacred
consonants of my mother tongue.

Mama mokakda?

How do I translate
my desire to connect
with a language inherited in my veins,
one that never found its sounds?
How can I make sense of strange
graphemes that curlicue meaning
out of curious lines?

Memagin kumak veyida?

Today I learnt the merit of speaking
in idioms, for instance,
කණ කොකාගෙ සුදු පෙනෙන්නේ ඉහිලුනාමලු
kana kokaage suda penenne igilunaamalu
(the whiteness of a crane appears only when it flies)
which is to say, a thing's beauty emerges
only upon its leaving.

There must be a way
to accurately transliterate my sorrow
into the sound of regret. But after two tries
Google turns “sorrow” into “sorry” as in

I am sorry I do not know how to say this.

I am sorry I lost my tongue.

I am sorry I saw the crane only in time for it to take flight.

In this photograph

For my mother

1

It is 1982. She is twenty-one.

It is her birthday and she is in full bloom, generous
to friends who have come like bees, drawn
to the nectar of her youth, radiating

off the twirls of her skirt as she spins. I wonder
which song was playing over the stereo, what beats
she moved to, her limbs swaying to the rhythm
of carefree abandon, eyes half-closed.

Her red lips, smiling. She is a moving image
in white, her dress giddy at the folds
of her pleated skirt, her straight jet black hair cut
at the fringes into uniform bangs.

Dancing, drinking, she savours
each last fading beat.

2

Twelve years will pass.

She is now a mother of two.

A younger version of myself
clutches her right leg, my sister her left.

She is well settled into the role of mother—

pale, resolute, unrelenting.

We trust her with every decision,
from dressing us

in matching rainbow-coloured tights
or identical white flare dresses
to our bowl-cut fringes
that turn us into miniatures of her.

We sit on her lap, mute
and malleable as wet clay.

3

She is a moving image, changing,
shape-shifting with the seasons
but still the same.

I hear her voice and imagine

how she would have led that kampung life, a child
 throwing that bucket deep into the family well, the crash

of cold water. Then the slow haul up, bucket resting
 on stone, the tremble of its full liquid weight
up the hill on that small frame.

Her mother working from door to door
washing the undergarments of strangers
 till the water left her palms dry with cracking.

4

Mother, you are golden now
though your hairs have turned grey.

Your body spins slowly, and your spirit
is hard and soft at the same time.

Your voice no longer rings shrill
but when I talk you listen,

in this photograph that never yellows
with age or fades into memory.

You are an image both clear
and out of focus,

shifting yet still, brimming
with the blur of whiteness spinning.

Inheritance

At thirty-two, I am beginning to learn
that my story is not my own,
my body a birthing of inherited sorrow.

Pointing at a woman in a faded photograph,
my mother tells me great-grandmother was a cripple.
I see the wooden stump peeking out

from light blue cotton pants, where warm flesh
should be. I ask my grandmother about her.
Grandmother speaks in the lilting tones of Cantonese,

slurring her vowels. My mother mediates
our broken speech, something about stepping
on a rusty nail, the rot and swell of gangrene.

Great-grandmother's body maps a loss
my grandmother now inherits, both legs tethered
to a wheelchair. Once, during the Occupation,
grandmother's legs carried her across the Causeway,
her little brother on her back. She was only seven.
Those legs would never return

to her childhood home, but take root
here, as she walked from door to door in search of work
that would leave my mother at home, alone.

Now, my mother sits with her legs stretched out
beside mine. Spider veins like purple tributaries web
her calves. Skin like parchment from neglect.

Her left foot rocking to the steady tap
and hum of her vintage Singer, pedalling
her love into the seams of my dress.

Beside her, my feet are overgrown, marked
by rivulets of green. My right foot learnt to move
to a different kind of rhythm, my heel a pivot.

The step and release on the faded brass pedals
of my second-hand K. Kawai,
my feet a muddy echo of my mothers.

Fingers trilling black and white, I turn
the page, keep time with the metronome's steady
beat, tapping live, live, live.

The Blue Mountains

Twenty-one years ago, my parents sold
our four-room apartment so we could travel

south. I remember Sydney, the Opera House,
the Blue Mountains. Dogs furry and big

as grown sheep. The clear mist of mountain air,
the plunging cable ride to the Three Sisters, their stony,

ancient forms standing still and foreboding
in the quiet valley. I told my mother I would retire

there one day. Twenty years later, bushfires would sweep
across the mountains, not discriminating between bird

or tree, insatiable in its taking. Everywhere, fire
and smoke thickening, darkening the sky.

Millions die, their charred bodies lying side
by side on a scorched black earth while I sit unscathed

in front of a screen trying to process my grief.
Of all the photographs, this: a joey hugging

a wire fence, its charcoal face smiling at the camera,
its young leathery body now dusty and crumbling.

What bravery, what foolhardiness, what bliss,
to give death one final grin before the fire came for him too?

Australia is burning, and the mountains of my memory
are turning blue. I think how this poem

could be a leaking hose running out of water
to quench a dry and angry land. But I also think

how it could be brimming, undefeated, full
of life in its last breath before the raging dark.

Throw me in the landfill

For Pulau Semakau and Pulau Sakeng

Standing near the breakwater, looking out for miles,
no other land. The air cradles the briny perfume
of the sea, carrying memories of laughing children running
barefoot on makeshift boardwalks, diving like thirsty fish

into water, a kampung life long washed away from the shore.

Restless waves beat time against the rocks, waiting.

In time, the fire turns all things to ash in this landfill
whose blue lungs are fading grey.

To trade water for solid ground, a kingdom for a grain
of sand. Stolen memories of home, of a people forced
to give up their gills for breathing in exchange
for webbed feet that drag across dry land.

A city might forget, but the land,
she finds a way to remember.

*

Pulau Semakau, Pulau Sakeng,
now debris-choked
and dusty, pillaged

into a nondescript wasteland.

In time, your bunds will break,
the waters will rise
and you will launch your boats
back to sea.

But you already know this,
so you sleep for now, patient,
as a Brahminy kite circles out of your dreams,
sweeping over the sky

into my limited vision,
crying out a solitary *keeyew*.

Sungei Buloh sonnets

1 *Migratory birds*

A long drive in. Binoculars to help with seeing.
We are here for migratory birds flying in
from as far as Alaska, Siberia, Far East Russia,
arriving by ancient flyways like those that have come before.
They will stop, eat, gather their strength on this mudflat,
before some push further south. Born with migration
mapped into their genes, they listen to instinct,
departing for warmer climes, returning home in spring.
I turn the knob. A sandpiper perching on a river log,
happy in its solitude. At the lookout, whimbrels,
red and green shanks, stand motionless, indiscernible
to the human eye. Unperturbed by these visitors,
resident hybrid storks stretch their wings in lazy aerial circles,
signalling home, even if only for a time.

2 *The mangrove*

At low tide, the prop and pencil roots of the mangrove
are visible from the ground. This is how the forest breathes,
in sync with the changing tides. The boardwalk
brings us closer, yet separates us from this briny world

where crabs climb trees every day of their lives.
As the tide rises, more seek refuge on tree trunks.
I have never been this close to crabs in the wild.
The Teochews eat them in vinegar.
A heavy rustle. The sound of wings above the trees.
We follow the movement, binoculars to eyes.
Two juvenile sea eagles back from their hunt,
rest at the edge of the wetlands, looking out to sea.
The Straits of Johor marks the boundary between here
and there. Towering columns blur the horizon.

Nondescript

After Stephen James Smith's "Nightsky & Butterfly"

It is true. I used to catch
nondescript moths in plastic
bags & wait for them to die
from concussions. Conscious.
What happens when a palm hits
a bubble? Dust. That's
what coats the tips
of my fingers when I press
them tight, sweat chaffing
at grey wings. Yesterday, a black
butterfly flew into the iris
of my periphery, and I felt a lightness
in my step. Air expands.
Yes, I used to enjoy
taunting captive moths. I'd dizzy
their capsules & watch them catapult
into stale space. I was cruel. It is not
necessary to torment the tortured.
Hindsight makes you less
guilty but you cannot escape
the fluttering. Dead wings learn
to flap long after the breath leaves
the body. I know it was wrong

to kill. Forgive me.

Albatross

On illegal sand mining in Cambodia

A country is hungry to expand her borders,
so she sucks on the fat of another's land.

Machines like ravenous knives carve out tonne
after incessant tonne of sand, dredging the body

to the marrow. Stripped bare, the mangrove's prop
and pencil roots become useless bleeding stumps.

How can she breathe air that is iron and rust?

How strange to fill the sea with sand, to reclaim

water into unsinkable land. A country builds
another tower, a floating garden of imported
flora, a casino with a capsized boat.

To carry this albatross of guilt, my shame

of standing on another's land, the weight
of a body that was never mine to own.

State land

1

The field is claimed by the sign staked
into the ground: state land.

Blue nets line the edge, turning
communal space into exile.

Will the egrets return?

Will the land forgive?

2

I remember migrant workers playing cricket
on their day off.

They would lay out rope on the field

to mark off the boundary of their makeshift pitch,
then begin to play, each time
opening up the circle

to ease each newcomer into the game.

The kite flyers, mostly elderly men, found freedom

in the skies where their feet would never tread,

bodies forever anchored to earth.

How they would captain their kites into unknown winds—

an orange stingray, a golden eagle, a red fox.

Then, there were the Frisbee players, young,

sun-kissed fools running after spinning plastic,

playing through sun or rain.

*

Now there stand, two yellow,

silent cranes, waiting.

First, they took down the rude wooden fences

one hot afternoon, erecting new posts

to partition the field

into nameless plots with blue

ghost nets.

Nets that lure and lie, that enslave

an enamoured butterfly

who thought she could reach the sky

beyond the mesh of blue.

Next came the excavator

dredging up the belly of the earth.

I recall walking past fresh wet earth, thinking

so this is what sorrow smells like,

when a mother is forced to give.

We could learn from the mynahs,

who take from her only what they need,

or the egrets, who find temporary respite,

each migration uncovering new truths, of lost

places and changed faces, of strange ghost nets

that beach themselves on state land.

3

For days the silence

haunts me,

until one evening, after the rain,

it is broken by the beating of white wings

that arrive in the distance,
encircling the lonely field.

Walking out to meet them,
I find fourteen egrets still
in the moment of the hunt,
heads bowed,

treading softly as they dip
yellow beaks into the tall, wet grass,
unperturbed by onlookers,
they and I, separated

and bound
by a gossamer blue.

Falcon

The peregrine falcon has found its way
to its roost just across my window, fifteen storeys
above the ground. Perching motionless
in the afternoon sun, it stayed as the heat turned
into the shingle of rain. Perhaps it was resting,
tired out from its long journey South.
Or perhaps it was watching, patient,
waiting for the right time to dive for the kill.

Two days later, it flies to its roost with a half-eaten mynah
in its claws. This is the first time I witness a raptor eat
its prey in real-life, up close.

Binoculars to eyes, I see how it plucks
at the black feathers to get at the flesh.

I watch as they drift down to the road below,
and wonder at my own lack of sympathy.

I am rooting for the hunter, this wanderer
from the North, now feeding on the mynahs
and pigeons in our estate.

I think about bird devouring bird in a holy ritual
of predator and prey, a sacred cycle
of giving and taking.

The mynah bound to the falcon in death.

The falcon bound to the mynah for its life.

The giver releasing its spirit to another.

The taker honoring the hunt.

The falcon doesn't finish its meal,
but gathers its wings and launches off with the remains
into the evening light.

Each day, our eyes turn to the same spot,
hoping for a familiar shape. Medium-sized,
dark helmet, barred underbelly,
yellow eye-ring,
yellow hooked bill and talons.
Head-turned, the bird eyeing us in return.

Over time, we learn to decipher the clues.
Body parts of a bird, a chameleon's tail.
We read the signs like children learning the language of birds.
We admire the falcon's hard work and labour.
We yearn to inhabit its feathered body,
to ride the wind at dizzying speeds.

Earthbound, we imagine ourselves light
as paper kites each time the falcon
flies into our waking sight.
We dream ourselves winged, perching
on the tallest tree, jungle floor below.

We see with falcon eyes that we too can weather
intense heat and pouring rain.

That we can stand still
with a falcon's patience above the din of cranes,
the roar of construction.

We wear our barred plumage with the pride
of former juveniles.

We circle and drop into a well-timed death
to emerge on the other side of our dream, shrieking,
bursting with life from the tallest tree.

Pilgrims

Le Morne beach

After Linda Gregg's "Greece when Nobody's Looking"

The night is a new kind of blackness that surprises.

Infinite stars like crushed ice overhead. This is land birthed

by fire and water, millions of years ago. She asked,

Do you want to go and watch the sega?

Yes, he said, and they brought along the bottle.

Music on the beach, a crew directing sega dancers by bonfire
and spotlight. The sea crashing into the dazzling sky. A poetry
of blue lagoons, bleached coral and bonfires smouldering.

Pilgrims

Hiking up the Piton de la Fournaise

A bumpy ride across an ashy plateau, still misty
from the rain. The air is sulphuric, tinged with grey.

We are a motley crew of travellers, bodies shaking
in the heaving car with each cratered drop.

Ground marked by potholes reminds me of the moon.

To reach the base of the breathing volcano,
we must cross the Plaine des Sables.

The hike teaches us that the body has its limits,
that we must be patient and listen.

Carefully, we trek down the mountain's side,
on uneven steps carved out of solid rock,
an unforgiving drop to our right. Fellow hikers
daily traverse this path, treading land forged by fire, spewed
from the depths of a restless molten core, awakening
each year to remind us, it lives.

Strong, intermittent winds unsettling the dust.

As far as the eye can see, miles of dark brown rock, bulbous
and grotesque, rising towards the peak.

Rock braided into the ground like rope, gnarled
and twisted from the constant pressure of hot and cold.

I bend down to touch some porous fragments,
then wrap and keep them in my bag. Our guide
has gone on ahead, eager to make good time.

Each eruption leaves something behind, I think,
the fire giving even as it takes.

This time, we are lucky. We lose nothing but daylight.

A wandering mist swirls over the land,
taking its time to know each crevice,
name each surviving plant.

We climb the caldera, sit and eat amidst the ashes.

We shrink as the eye expands, pilgrims walking on fire.

Solar eclipse

Driving in the dark, we search for the moon
against a tall, grassy landscape. Behind,
the gaping black of a road lined with old trees.
Across the island, sugarcanes rise
and bend with the wind into the expanse
of a chalky grey sky, where the moon hangs
her round face low. The wild darkness changes
her into a strange thing, impossible
to understand. The same moon now mutely passing
between sun and earth, churning cloud and sky
into a blue phantasmagoria, turning day
to night for a time. Framed by the fronds
of tropical palms, look how the fiery sun burns,
sickle-shaped with the white brightness of his longing.

Spinning

The Ferris wheel spins,
a celestial glow-worm in the fading daylight.

Early winter in Tokyo, yet the cold cuts
four layers of fabric, chilling her bones

despite the sun. The wheel, unchanging,
draws a complete circle with each languid revolution,

marvellous machine of red and blue, defying time.

He grabs her hand and they are spindled

into the same carriage, their bodies growing lighter
with each lift, suspended in air, in time.

Down below, two rows of ducks waddle
on the grass, idly tracing their way back home

to the nearby lake, where a nonchalant black swan
stands on a rock, flapping and drying its wings.

Soon, it too becomes just another shape,
indiscernible chaos. Holding her close,

he points out landmarks, their world shrinking
to the width and height of their capsule.

See how this dome marks DisneySea,
her fictitious worlds. They could not know then

how the yellow lights of the caravan carousel
would lure them to the Arabian coast the next evening,

how they would ride around in circles
on plastic horses, giddy and young again.

As the wheel spins, they press their heads together,
shedding more of themselves—

until they are weightless and transparent,
floating in time, with only enough room

left for forgiveness.

A soundless ring

vibrates into empty space.

Time slows down into a moment

of stillness. Of a buzzing,
the confusion of distorted speech.

In that same moment, another spin,
the wheel continuing her revolution.

With each descent, the sky turns
a darker shade of orange, burning

and urgent in its setting.

Then, the cold blanket of night.

A puzzle stands on the bedroom dresser.

A photograph of the Ferris wheel

in 500 broken parts,

now form an unbroken whole.

Six winters ago, we were there—

There was a cat whisperer at the park bench,

silent in the company of three strays.

Holding on to the last breaths of light,

we ran to the observatory,
watching the sun burn itself into the sea.

An old couple on the beach,
quiet and still against a familiar sunset,

the Ferris wheel spinning
behind them.

Everything is perfect from far away

When I close my eyes,
the countryside is a happy blur
& a cool, dry breath.

A warm cup of coffee turning cold
in the subtropical morning,
the gentle Dalat winter stirring through it.

A scene comes into focus from our hotel patio—
green zinc roofs, red terracotta tiles,
the odd-coloured bungalow nestled

amidst conifers & blooming temperate greens
framed by distant hills, the countryside vanishing
into a hilltop pagoda.

Feverish from the midday heat,
we bought ourselves wings with loose change
in a pedalo on Xuan Hong lake

though our feet never left the water.

We laughed as we swatted thirsty mosquitoes,
dissolving into the lake & walking on water,

perspiring, pedalling & floating
into each other, as roadside pedlars looked on
into the honking traffic.

Do you remember the wayside flowers
painting their faces the colour of spring
all year round?

When I close my eyes,
the countryside is a happy blur
& everything is perfect from far away.

At the cable car, we re-enact a scene
from *Glück*. Bliss.

You held your scarf, flapping in the wind

as I took a snapshot. *Whoopdee*.

The whirlwind alpine coaster ride,
its thrill of speed & wind & fear.

Your arms & legs around my arms & body,
holding me in an unuttered promise
as we coasted through winding tracks

down to the heart of the waterfall.

Again, again, again.

We enter the Hang Nga Crazy House

knowing we will never return.

Le petit paris, when I close my eyes,
you are there in the fog

of my dreams.

An invisible door opens

& I enter its rooms on all fours.

Crouching on Elephant Falls in broken
slippers, trying hard not to slip
into the coffee cups of young lovers,

envious of how they trade eyes
with each other in one long, unbroken moment
of stillness, held together

by an endless spring
& a cup of coffee that never turns cold
in the swirling wind.

We wanted to hold on to the feeling

For Éire

of open skies and empty roads
that carry tractors into town.

Of monstrous waves crashing
against rugged white-tipped headlands

where seabirds circle and cry.

Of boarding a ferry to Inis Mor,

wind whipping our hair, piercing
through wool, as we spin through karst

country, slowing down

for curious horses, elusive seals.

We wanted to hold on to the feeling

of whispers in the wind

over fields of sleeping graves

and grazing sheep at Clonmacnoise,

of gulls above a Normandy ruin,

cawing superstitions about a river

and her name.

Of sheep bleats that echo

from hill to hill, the silence cast

by famine walls, separating

nothing, leading nowhere.

We wanted to hold on

to the feeling

of megalithic awe

at Brownshill dolmen,

of pressing our palms against cold,

ancient stone fallen in

and weathered by time.

Of running searching fingers

over each grain of barley

as we sway and dance

to the rhythm of the dolmen

in our mind's eye, evoking a song

familiar, forgotten, strange

on our tongues, the bittersweet

old religion. Of the electric

air crackling in the breeze,

so faint, almost imagined.

Montenegro in two scenes

1 *Perast*

The bus takes us into the old town.

The Bay of Kotor, where mountains
break dangerously into the sea.

We have seen her in our dreams,
and now we walk her cobbled streets, waving
at men who work to restore the old church.

Our Lady of the Rocks, flung off the coast,
she rests on the drowned bodies
of ships sunk with rocks.

To reach her, we speak with a weathered
boatman, who takes us for ten euros.
The little boat is bumpy but our boatman knows

the mood of the waves, and he rows, steady
over the choppy water.

Saline breeze, boot prints on stone.

Couples marry here today. We learn
of a tapestry, sewn by a sailor's wife

for twenty-five long years, she awaiting

his safe return, her dark hair stitched
into the votive turning grey, eye
to needle, eye to glass, her love immortalised

as the light weaved its way out of her eyes.
How she must have loved her boatman,
how tragic their lives, how lucky

we are, I think, as our little white boat tosses
on the fickle sea. The rain blesses us
in its falling, our boatman's smile

turning him into a young man
who would live to grow old one day.

2 Cetinje

The stray joins us mid-way on our tour, rolling over
for belly rubs, thick padded paws in the air. Digging

at earth, he sniffs, snorts, shakes his furry head while we try
to stay focused. At the monastery, he lies within the circle

of our feet, panting on his side, stretched out on stone.

Our guide returns with news that they will let us in on special terms.

The dog seems to know he has to wait, and wags his tail

when we emerge. I record him with my phone, his white tail curved high,

the sweetness of his trust, the bounce of his gait

as though he did not sleep in the cold at night, did not beg

for meals. We admire the embassies. An angry local walks by

cursing him. Goodbye is the hardest, but he teaches us

not to be sentimental. Sitting on the grass, he looks once, then turns

away as the car backs out, knowing we cannot stay.

Monsoon

The southerly winds have arrived,
and with them, occasional showers and thunderstorms
washing the afternoons down with the shingle of rain.

They will stay for four months, returning again

next June. Our plants rely on this gift of seasonal rain
to survive. We try to care for them, inventing a way
to collect the rain with a wooden pole and a small bucket,
fourteen floors above the ground. In another place,

you could walk above the water, barefoot
on wooden boards warmed by the sun. Buckets on land,
each distinctive clan making an incense offering
to the goddess Mazu, prayers coiling out to sea.

Birds on the wire signalling rain.

Fishermen's boats lie like forgotten relics berthed
along the pier, empty fish traps stacked like totems, watchful.
Plastic bottles floating in the canals, aimless and drifting.

A lone path funnels into the open straits,
where rotting wooden stumps remember old routes.

Before the storm, a grey seabird landed and folded her wings,
waiting, still. Next came the onslaught of wind and rain.

Remember how we took off our shoes, two unlikely pilgrims,
seeking shelter in the red-roofed temple,
as the rain licked away at the wood beneath our feet?
A red altar. A wrinkled orange. The temple keeper

in his shorts, his slippers, his well-poised
umbrella, lighting incense in a humble offering.

How he kept our shoes dry under a 'No Shoes' sign.

His kindness towards strangers, the lashing rain on zinc.

Yogyakarta triptych

Candi Sewu

Ruins of a temple ground,
designed to contain the cosmos.

A silence that echoes
in the sizzling heat.

I walk to feel the ground underfoot,
uncertain of what I am seeking
amidst the spiralling sand.

Dust all around. Broken universe.
I step inside the main temple and lose
myself in its chambers,
another traveller in search of
meaning.

Around, workers straddle the necks
of scattered temples, chisel
at stone,
restoring looted heads.

Prambanan

From a distance, the many faces of the
Trimurti tower
above us, rising from myth
into plain sight.

We scurry like ants between stone
and shrine,
incidental devotees
of the intermittent shade.

The sun makes his daily rounds,
asking to enter at noon.
Every day, temple doors oblige.

We leave, learning of gods that create,
preserve and destroy.
Like them, we too make and break
something each day.

Candi Borobudur

Elephants on parade.
Pilgrims with umbrellas float

like lotuses
along the divine path, seeking peace.

I miss the sunrise over Borobudur
but each elevation
promises renewed light.

Buddhas in stupas, many headless.
I read in the ornate bas-reliefs, poses
and eroded colours,
the tales of princes, thieves and
mere commoners.

The undying rain reminds me
of my mortality, each drop
a chip in time.
I arrive at the top still searching.

And at once I knew, I was not magnificent

How do I write a poem about memory?

Memory as image,

an image of you, up there,

untouchable, magnificent.

You stand on Arthur's Seat,

camera strap slung around your neck

like a noose threatening

to tighten, asphyxiate if not careful.

The image begins

with stepping through park gates, leaving

the city behind us to grow smaller

and smaller still

as we trek dirt roads uphill

and walk through green fields

to reach the mountain.

You capture each fragile moment—

scattered fort ruins,

yellow gorse dotting the hills, a remnant

of the Scottish spring,

the quiet valley below, a miniature city

far out of reach.

I recall your smile, young
and carefree, a strong spirit,
like a lone wolf or bear cosy in his skin.
Scaling each rock with care,
you retrace the steps
of a legendary king
to arrive at the peak.

This is what I remember.

Below, summer grass waving
up at the rocky cliff face, where a fellow pilgrim
makes his slow descent.
Standing at the edge, your smile curls
into my chest, its curve breaking
beyond the frame into the shocking white sky,
shattering any nocuous present.

Memory stone: In fragments

1 *Stones*

Stones can talk
but only to those who will listen.

To remember,
I collect a stone for each city.

2 *Dubrovnik*

Walking along ancient city walls,
we mark our descent
by strolling towards the jetty.

The waves come in, and rain starts to fall.

The ground gets wet, slippery
if not careful. You walk to the edge,

while I linger behind, curious
about a grey stone washed up
by the tide. Smooth, cold, it fits

into the curve of my palm.

This stone has seen rough days;
there are scars to prove it. See

how the sea has weathered
coarse edges round, twisting, scratching,
biting at hard rock. Her final gift,

a seaweed fossil pressed into
the stone's heart, a reminder of home,
before spitting it ashore.

3 *Pula*

Three hours in the Amphitheatre.
Before leaving, I slide three stones
into my pocket, light in my gloved hands.

White limestone fragments. My favourite
resembles a mountain range, with one sharp
and one flat peak. Jagged at the edges,

parts of it has turned grey from breathing
in the air of the tropics.

The second stone is shorter, broader,

like a quiet resting toad. The smallest
reminds me of an onion bulb or a Hershey's kiss.
Wobbly base, prickly tip.

Removed from their site of former glory,
these relics become ornamental.

I touch each imperfect piece—trace

the striated edges, indents in each rock,
and wake up again with the sun breaking
through white lace curtains,
Roman columns framed by the window.

4 *Motovun*

From this sleepy medieval walled town,
the stone I collect looks ordinary.

Grey, flat, shaped like an isosceles
trapezoid, parallel at two sides.

I turn it over, rubbing my thumb
and forefinger against its smooth face.

Like the place, this stone is a sleepy

checker piece, waiting for summer

and the film festival, where every empty space
turns into a camper's makeshift bed;

the dormant old town comes alive, swelling
with this heady influx.

But for now, it is December,
so we slow our walk to the hush

of the streets, pass by a church closed
for winter. We take our time

with a place we will not return to,
a town fortified in stone in time.

5 *Rovinj*

A crooked headland inches out to sea.

Of all the small ones, I love you best.

Smooth at the base, you are a rough-cut

wonder. Child of the Adriatic, fished
from her depths. In the old days,

fishermen's wives would gather

in the chapel to pray, only leaving

upon their husbands' safe return.

On the rocky shore, a white column keeps vigil

where the patron saint's sarcophagus

was reportedly found. Above the bell tower,

a weather vane's slow spin:

face to sea meant fair winds,

back to sea meant foul.

6 *Ensemble*

Now the stone from Dubrovnik sits

on my second-hand piano, beside a bundle

of sweetgrass. The smaller ones line

my living room console, sharing the weight

of their memories with dried pine cones from Dalat,

fallen leaves from a Japanese castle garden,

and bleached coral from the Mauritian coast.

Assorted objects that contain the history of home

away from home. Collected over time, they form

an ensemble of remembered places, a patchwork

of a traveller's sojourn through lands of eternal
spring, snowless winters, of drifting along the Adriatic
into the ocean's eye. Listen, undercurrents crash
beneath, waves breaking reef ashore.

INTRODUCTION

This exegesis situates my poetics within a broader framework of ecopoetry and ecocriticism, especially a woman's search for ground and grounding in relation to the places, people, non-human beings and world around her. The notion of home and belonging is not an unfamiliar theme in Singapore literature, and as a work of Singapore poetry, my work is concerned with delving into the intersections between the domains of gender, nature, culture, memory, time and place. In weaving these elements together, my work is cognisant of my place as a woman poet of third-generation mixed-heritage immigrant status. As an immigrant nation, Singapore comprises descendants of immigrants who have over time, grown native and forged deep ties with this place. The question of home then, and what constitutes home—be it the land of one's birth, the ancestral motherland(s) of one's forebearers, or the vast continents and oceans across which we traverse in the course of our migrations and travels, leisure, educational or otherwise—is vital to the formation of a cosmopolitan Singaporean identity and poetics.

The poetry of pioneer Singapore poets like Arthur Yap and Edwin Thumboo negotiate a national language and identity tied to national consciousness and the Singapore space. Alfian Sa'at writes about the politics of place along racial and class lines, while Boey Kim Cheng's poems deal with the displacement that comes with rapid urbanisation and change, the diasporic experience of place, and salient questions of home and belonging. Place and home have historically been on the Singapore poet's mind, as seen in Lee Tzu Peng's most anthologised poem "My County and My People", where the speaker expresses ambivalence towards controversial policies of nation-building. National policies are presented as relentless in altering the landscapes, relationships and ways of living for the people who call Singapore home, yet the speaker does not find comfort in

her citizenship, but more so, in the kindness and recognition of her fellow kin. To the speaker, where the country alienates, home is found in the tender relationships between its people sharing a common humanity.

More recent works of Singapore poetry like Lee Jing Jing's *And Other Rivers* and Theophilus Kwek's *Moving House* also engage with the themes of home, place and belonging to more than one time and place in a more transnational, fluid way. Borders and boundaries are blurred, and the self bleeds into the other as these writers negotiate new understandings of what it means to be at home. In the former, Lee traverses the domestic and familial through personal anecdotes to reimagine the lives of various others like Samsui women and early immigrants. Her poems flow through time, place, art and myth into the rest of the world to give the historically disenfranchised a voice. In making space for the victims of the Rwanda conflict and suicide for instance, the speaker makes a home that accommodates the diverse realities of less fortunate others, both in Singapore and abroad. Her compassion, which originates in the land of her birth, extends outwards, and in reading *And Other Rivers*, one notices how home is made through the memories of people and places, here and elsewhere, imagined and real.

Similarly, Kwek's "Moving House", the titular poem from *Moving House*, celebrates the spirit of home as a place imbued with meaning by its inhabitants. A house becomes a home because it is lived in, and contains living memories. Similarly, the unpacking of a home reduces it to a mere shell, a spatial entity devoid of soul and sustenance. The speaker's fear of change, of having to move to a new place and therefore make a new home (and by proxy, unmake old homes), reveal deeper anxieties about rootedness and belonging to places in light of constant movements, migrations, dislocations and displacements, voluntary or imposed. My work enters this dialogue

about home, place and belonging to present a locally resonant yet globally informed ecopoetics. My work asks if it is possible to situate our private struggles within the larger ecosystem of what it means to live ethically, responsibly and compassionately in Singapore, but more expansively, in the world. My work suggests that it is possible to dwell and stay with the places we inhabit in an intimate way. We are not doomed to remain outsiders, alienated and cut off from the earth.

It is to this end that my research becomes focused on the work of Martin Heidegger and Barbara Cassin, the former for his theory of language, building and dwelling as essential to what being human on earth means, and the latter for her inquiry into nostalgia, a theme pertinent to the discussion of home and belonging. Literary thinkers and writers like Seamus Heaney, Eavan Boland and Mary Oliver, through their essays and prose, have contributed to my understanding of poetry of place and one's relation to the natural world. In particular, these writers explore different ways of knowing place, the human need to know and belong to a place at a deep spiritual level and how a poet's distinct understanding of locale and place translates to an understanding of the self. Boland further locates the woman poet within a historically male-dominated literary tradition to reclaim silenced narratives.

Of particular interest too are the work of feminist, ecofeminist and ecospiritual thinkers and writers such as Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, Charlene Spretnak, Greta Gaard, Patrick Murphy, Robin Wall Kimmerer and Donna Haraway, who further sharpen my awareness of the need to move away from binary thinking towards more symbiotic ways of relating to the world. I have also drawn on the philosophies of ecofeminism and ecospirituality, which locates my work within a broader cultural framework birthed from the ecofeminist movement of the 1980s. In contemporary times, literature has revealed the merits of ecofeminism's intersectional approach,

described by Lori Gruen as placing the woman in an “entangled empathy” of social relations with her environment (“Ecofeminism” 68). As a woman poet writing in Singapore in the twenty-first century, I am interested in how my work integrates the abovementioned theoretical, cultural and literary influences to conceive of an ecopoetics of home that is glocally resonant.

Ecopoetry, according to Johnathan Bate, is “not a description of dwelling on the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it (42)”. An ecopoetry of home then, may refer to the making of home through poetry, a sensory, intimate, experiential poetics of home and belonging, and the experiencing of dwelling on the earth as home. An ecopoetics of home moves beyond writing about home to writing oneself home through poetry. Home expands from the intricacies of locale to encompass family, nation, region, world and cosmos. At the crux of such a poetics is a concern with relations, relationships and relating. I am interested in a poetics of relations as put forth by Patrick Murphy, in which the self relates to the other not in oppositional terms, but as a non-hierarchical ‘another’, always existing dialogically as ‘another’ for others. To see the earth as home is to relate as ‘another’ to the myriad inhabitants of the earth, human and non-human, as well as the places and ecosystems that one becomes an integral part of. This is most clearly seen in the desire to bridge the gap between self and other, and a movement towards relational ways of thinking and being that is characteristic of an ecocentric worldview.

I further define an ecopoetics of home as poetry that is founded upon memory and imagination, which Neal Alexander describes as working together to “coalesce in the double movement of remembering” (118). This “double movement” invites us to view memory and remembering as a creative endeavour, one which gives us the capacity to reconstruct the palimpsest of our selves, founded upon layers of re-memberings, re-visions and re-imaginings. The restorative

powers of memory then, lie in its ability to transform both the past and present—altering memory and experience even as they are simultaneously being re-constructed through the poetic act. In reconstructing a memory of an event with the linguistic and literary tools of words, sounds and images, poetry re-imagines the past. Yet, my work is not preoccupied with a nostalgic mood or theme. Instead, I am interested in how poetry allows the reader and poet to inhabit re-assembled places and moments in time through poetry. In doing so, each poem may be read as a search for home, a building of home, and a dwelling within the home (body) of the poem. Founded upon the autobiographical and imaginative, *Red Earth* could be described as anamnesis, from the Greek *anamnēsis* denoting remembrance, signifying the act of remembering and pointing to the poems as recollection themselves.

Charlene Spretnak describes the new ecologist movement of the 1980s as “carrying on extremely significant work, feeling their way out of alienation toward a way of being that is infused with ecological wisdom” (4). Indeed, late-stage capitalism and its emphasis on the economic over empathy and ethics have contributed to widespread feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement in its citizens, especially in a highly urbanised environment like Singapore. More than ever today, the question of home and belonging, of truly feeling at home in the place of one’s birth or residence, and truly belonging to one’s locale and feeling nourished by it, becomes increasingly problematic. The founding myth of Singapore and its rhetoric of scarcity and progress further alienate its citizens from connecting intimately with the land, and most indigenous practices, like subsistence living, have been eradicated by the state in the name of redevelopment.

The state justifies what Spretnak calls its “managerial ethos” (10), typified by patriarchal obsessions of domination and control. This is exemplified in the manipulation of nature on land

and in the sea, resulting in drastic alterations to the island's topography. In "Garden City" (*QLRS*) for instance, Singapore poet Gilbert Koh describes the government's tree-planting efforts in calculative, clinical terms, and likens the gardener in the poem (an allusion to the late Lee Kuan Yew) to an omnipotent God controlling nature with the use of the biblical allusion of the Judeo-Christian Creation myth. Within the infrastructure of "the steel and concrete of the expanding city", the trees lose their agency as they are "planted, replanted / transplanted, watered, fertilised, and groomed to grow / and grow" as "the man was pleased". Robert MacFarlane writes in "Invisible Cities" that "all cities are additions to a landscape that require subtraction from elsewhere" (138). Singapore is one such city that has been built by taking from its land and people, and more recently, from other lands and other peoples.

At home, forests and fields, along with the biodiversity of these habitats, are cleared for commercial and residential properties. Families are evicted from their homes, as was the case between the 1960s to 1990s, when the descendants of the Orang Laut, the indigenous people of Singapore, were forced to leave Pulau Sakeng and Pulau Semakau, now turned into an offshore landfill. More recently, the residents of the rental flats in Dakota Crescent, mostly the elderly, impoverished and marginalised, were forced to relocate from their homes when the government announced news of redeveloping the area.

On the topic of land reclamation, the purchase of sand raises global controversy. Documentaries like *Lost World* (2018) by Cambodian film director Kalyanee Mam pose important ethical questions of the lack of accountability and the exploitation of vulnerable communities that depend on the sand for survival and spiritual sustenance. It is ironic that after decades of state-imposed deforestation and clearing of land for economic gains, the National Parks Board released

its ‘City in Nature’ masterplan in June 2020, a greening effort that aims to “restore nature into the urban fabric” of Singapore. As citizens, we become complicit in the violence that accompanies the building of a city, and the matter of home as a personal space takes on political significance.

Apart from a changing cityscape, there is the issue of moving house and travel, which broadens one’s understanding of place and how we relate to places and people away from our childhood and familial homes. In leaving home, we forge new connections with other places, and we learn more about ourselves and how we belong to the world beyond local places and national borders. Places away from home may nourish us spiritually where the home may fail to do so, and we may feel a sense of belonging elsewhere. It is against such an ecological backdrop that *Red Earth* positions itself to write against state-induced alienation and violence in search of common ground through an ecocentric and place-based poetics of home. Robyn Eckersley defines ecocentricism as “based on an ecologically informed philosophy of *internal relatedness*, according to which all organisms are not simply interrelated with their environment but also *constituted* by those very environmental interrelationships” (49). My work situates the speaker within such a web of interrelatedness and re-imagines a new and intimate way of relating to place (and the organisms bound to them) so that the urban and rural, familiar and foreign are all equally viable concepts of home.

In my research, I turn to poets like Seamus Heaney, Eavan Boland, Mary Oliver, Grace Nichols, Joy Harjo, Boey Kim Cheng, Craig Santos Perez and Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner to find resonance and comfort. They engage with the themes of place and displacement, home and belonging, albeit in different ways. The poems of these disparate writers speak to the creation of home as tied to place, experienced through the body. They further present a keen awareness of

their relations to their cultures, contexts and material conditions of dwelling in these places, reflecting an intimacy with place that my work hopes to create. Drawing from memory, these poets enter the personal and historical past to offer the reader a hybrid, liminal way of being on earth through their poems. Their exploration of place as pertaining to home, natural and man-made, rural and urban, geographical and symbolic, comforting and violent, unifying and alienating, inspires my work's similar emphasis on excavating memory in search of the varying meanings of home as tied to place.

This exegesis is organised into two chapters. In the first chapter, I will discuss poetry of place and the making of home. I propose how ecopoetry as a genre serves as a subset of poetry of place, mediating and meditating upon the themes of home, and how we can belong to the local and cosmic in a familial way. In this chapter, I will draw primarily on the poems of Seamus Heaney and Boey Kim Cheng, whose poetics of place inform my own. In the second chapter, I will focus on the theme of ecofeminism and discuss its intersectional nature in light of the poems of Eavan Boland and Grace Nichols, whose work enter and relate to the natural world as home. They write from the margins (woman, immigrant, woman-of-colour), and foreground the connections between woman, nature, culture and spirituality to produce work that inspires my poetics. I will further examine the work of Nichols in relation to terms such as eco-cosmopolitanism, an ecopoetics of mobility and ecowomanism to highlight the resonances her work has with my poetry that is largely inspired by travel, mobility and movement. The exegesis will close with a conclusion summing up the key ideas and themes of my work, contextualising them with my personal experiences.

Red Earth is taken from a poem of the same title, and refers to the red bauxite ore found in

Batam, Indonesia, which I noticed on one of my travels. In Bahasa Melayu, red earth can be translated into *tanah merah*, a historical reference to the red lateritic cliffs that were once visible along the Singapore coast, believed to be an important reference point signalling the way to shore for the Orang Laut when out at sea. “Red Earth” also alludes to an intriguing Raden Saleh painting of Java which I saw at the National Gallery, and further symbolises the womb (incubator), the female body, or bloodied soil (nature that is corrupted by excessive exploitation), to name a few; it is a signifier with more than one signified depending on how it is read. The etymology of its name also hints at the interconnectedness and intertextuality of language and origins.

The collection embodies my desire to relate to the world in a more eco-centric way, where my speaker can feel like a daughter of the earth, at home anywhere. An ecopoetry of home may be read as an origin story, one that centres around the metaphorical birth of the speaker, and her entering into the world through the mother-figure. That said, I propose that an ecopoetry of home can never be completely written; home is a place in the making, its meanings always negotiable and in negotiation, especially in the context of Singapore. Like the earth that is restless, alive and constantly moving, whether in minute vibrations or seismic waves, home is a shifting sign, comprised of memories that morph with each re-remembering, never fully signified, always deferred in the process of its own becoming.

CHAPTER ONE: PLACE AND THE MAKING OF HOME

The origin of the word ecopoetry may be traced back to the Greek root *oikos* and *poiein*, which denote “house” and “to make”. From an etymological point of view, ecopoetry, which reflects on the human experience of living on the earth through an ecological lens, may be defined as the making of home through verse. Johnathan Bate presents a similar argument for ecopoetry in *The Song of the Earth*: “Ecopoetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making (Greek *poiesis*) of the dwelling place – the prefix *eco-* is derived from the Greek *oikos*, “the home or place of dwelling” (75). Ecopoetry that is defined as the making of dwelling place pays attention to one’s environment, and how one relates to the environment, and the entities and beings that inhabit this physical and cultural space.

Bate’s interest in dwelling places alludes to Martin Heidegger, whose philosophy of human being on earth is marked by the fundamental need to dwell on the earth through building. Heidegger further proposes that building and dwelling are done through language and thought, and that the poem, as the embodiment of language, thought (and I add, emotions), may serve as a space that allows for the essential unfolding of meaning:

What the word for space, *Raum*, designates is said by its ancient meaning. *Raum*, *Rum*, means a place that is freed for settlement and lodging. A space is something that has been made room for, something that has been freed, namely, within a boundary, Greek *peras*. A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its essential unfolding*. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon, the boundary. Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds. (250-1)

For Heidegger, space refers to a place of possibilities, of dwelling and building. Building on this, we can argue that the ecopoem opens up this space within the body and thought of the poem, to make room for the essential unfolding of what it means to dwell on the earth in an ecologically

engaged way.

Heidegger's pitfall however, as Kate Rigby notes, is his anthropocentric view that the earth and its non-human beings need humans to name them through language (and by extension save them), which grants them being. She refers to this way of thinking about human and other-than-human relations as "human racism" (433). Instead, Rigby argues for a more ecocentric perspective that

... allows to earth, sky, and divinities a plurality of voices of their own, it is not so much that things need us so that they can be named; rather it is we who need to name things so that we can share understandings about what we perceive and value, what we fear and desire, how we should live and how we should die. It is not for us to claim sole rights to the song of the earth, but rather to use our specifically human capacity for song in the widest sense—our capacity, that is, for artistic expression of all sorts—to join in the exuberant singing, dancing, shape-changing, many-hued self-disclosure of phusis. (434)

An ecocentric perspective is one that acknowledges the human capacity for knowing the earth and expressing this knowing through human language, which itself may prove limited and limiting. Eco-poetry then, as "plurality of voices", makes space for multiple, cacophonous modes of entry into what it might mean to dwell on the earth, through verse that celebrates not just the human experience of earth, or human dwelling on earth, but other-than-human beings and their dwelling on earth as co-inhabitants of a larger ecosystem of co-existence.

One way in which this larger ecosystem may be described is in terms of the environment or more specifically to this exegesis, place. Place refers to a space that is imbued with history, meanings and associations, and is usually subjectively experienced by both human and other-than-human beings. Lawrence Buell describes place to be "a configuration of highly flexible subjective, social and material dimensions" while John Agnew's definition of place suggests that

‘place’ can be understood as ‘a matter of (social) “locale”, (geographical) “location” and a sense of place. It combines elements of nature (elemental forces), social relations (class gender and so on), and meaning (the mind, ideas, symbols)’ (p. 60). While place can also evoke a physical relationship to the environment, or indeed ‘a physical site’, it also implies emotional and cognitive relationships – what Agnew refers to as ‘a deeply personal phenomenon founded on one’s life world and everyday practices’ (p. 60). (Williams 137)

Indeed, place is a highly charged word founded upon deeply personal relations and relationships, and as the quote above suggests, is intersectional in nature. The same place does not hold the same meanings for different people; the same place too changes in meaning for the same people over various moments in time.

For Brenda Hillman, place is qualified as “three-fold”: “The local bioregion is one kind of place that is very specific... Another place has to do with the symbolic realms, the worlds of spirit, myth, and dream... A third aspect of place for me is the site of the material syllable, the composition” (Hume et al. 764). While Hillman’s three-fold conception of place puts equal emphasis on the three types of places she introduces, I would like to draw a relationship between the three. I propose that the local bioregion, with its physical geography and cultural associations, is the foremost place of experience and inspiration to the poet, functioning as a gateway into the realisation of the symbolic meanings of place through verse. In thinking of place symbolically, and in representing place poetically, the reader is then returned into the poet’s local bioregion, which has now been transformed by memory and imagination into a liminal place that is part-real, part-imagined.

Hillman’s notion of place may be supplemented by Seamus Heaney, who writes extensively about place in his essays and poems. Heaney’s place-based poetics, founded upon reconciling the contradictory nature of place with his fractured sense of self, may further our understanding of what it means to belong to and feel at home in a place. Place connotes the

memories, feelings and associations of those who have lived in and experienced a place through the body and its sensate faculties. Poetry of place then, refers to poetry that captures, recreates and embodies a poet's intimate knowing of and belonging to specific, locatable places. More often than not, this desire to come to an understanding of one's relation to the places one inhabits is motivated by a desire for self-knowledge, as well as a desire to locate or place the self meaningfully in relation to the world. In "The Sense of Place", Heaney posits two distinct ways in which we may know and cherish place, the first being a lived, illiterate and unconscious knowing, and the second being a learned, literate and conscious knowing of place (131).

Heaney proceeds to delineate the role of the imagination in the creation of place: "... our imaginations assent to the stimulus of the names, our sense of the place is enhanced, our sense of ourselves as inhabitants not just of a geographical country but of a country of the mind is cemented" (132). Heaney's "the country of the mind" here refers to a place we inhabit in our imagination based on the narratives we have read about a place, which supplement one's geographical knowing of place. In marrying geographical and imaginative knowing of place, Heaney argues that one senses place in its most edifying and spiritually nourishing way. He proceeds to quote Carson McCullers, who says that "to know who you are, you have to have a place to come from" (135). It is evident that for McCullers and Heaney, place is intrinsically tied to the self, just as the self is inextricably bound to place. To know the self, one needs to know one's place. This ethos is echoed by Edward Said, who coins the term "imaginative geography" (181) to refer to invented and constructed geographical spaces from which we project our understanding of our selves, mostly in relation to the Other. While Said uses the term in the context of Orientalism and the construction of the Orient, I find this term useful in its juxtaposition of geography, memory and invention, which facilitates our understanding of how place is

remembered and re-imagined in the creative process of ecopoetry.

Heaney's famous sequence "Glanmore Sonnets" (109-18), written during the poet's four years (1972 to 1976) of rural living in Glanmore, demonstrates his poetics of place as grounded in an intimate knowledge of his local bioregion. "Glanmore Sonnets" is both a meditation on living closely with the land, as well as a dedication to a way of living that pays homage to place and its sustenance to the spirit. In the first lyric (109), the persona conjures a redolent farmland through distinctive sounds, smells and sights associated with springtime ploughing. The land is a hallowed ground for the persona whose "lea is deeply tilled", expectant in the sowing. The atmosphere of mist and snow, as well as the image of "a dark unblown rose" highlights the beauty of the countryside, and echoes Nicholas Allen's observation of Heaney's construction of place which "weaves weather, light and land into a tapestry of cultural and historic association" (173).

The cultural and historical in "Glanmore Sonnets" is accessed through the persona's domestic, private contemplations of place. In sonnet V (115) for instance, the persona recollects his time spent in the natural surroundings of the boor tree, and reminisces how "it was our bower as children". Growing up, he has since learnt to call the tree by a different name: "elderberry". The variations of its name, as "boortree", "bower tree" and "elderberry" reveal the mysteries and folk superstitions associated with this tree in Ireland, as well as the personal and political act of naming. The persona personifies the tree as the "etymologist of roots and graftings", illustrating his desire to reconcile his varied experiences and understandings of this tree, and by extension, his relationship to the cultural and historic associations with the place the tree inhabits and represents (Ireland) across time and place.

In understanding the tree's etymology, the persona hopes to understand himself as an

Irishman during The Troubles. When all else fails, he falls back to his tree-house and marvels at the shooting and flourishing of “small buds... in the hush”. The physical and symbolic place that Heaney recreates in this lyric, which works as a metaphor for the self, is deeply personal and cultural, private and historic, a “buoyant spawn, a light bruised out of purple”. In both instances, memory is anchored to place, and Heaney’s farmland field and boor tree in both sonnets operate as the loci of memory from which, according to Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, place is the “reference points of narratives, propositions and emotions; signs of the passing of time and the histories that mark it” (277). Heaney’s knowing of place in this sequence is an amalgamation of lived experience, illiterate and unconscious, and learned knowledge, literate and conscious.

The search for one’s place is closely linked to the search for home and belonging, as “Glanmore Sonnets” has shown. Barbara Cassin makes a case for the search for home as intricately tied to nostalgia, which is derived from the Greek root *nostos* meaning return home, and *algos* denoting pain. Nostalgia can therefore be defined as a painful desire to return home, locating the seeker of home as reluctant wanderer or exile, doomed to a life of unrest until the day of eventual returning. In her chapter “Odysseus and the Day of Return”, Cassin writes:

Nostalgia is what makes one prefer going home, even if it means finding there a time that passes by, death—and, worse, old age—rather than immortality. Such is the weight of the desire to return.

...

It is true, nostalgia connects space and time. But it chooses the mortal condition and anchors this condition in a place. (12)

Citing Odysseus as the protagonist of her argument, who chooses the pain of nostalgia over the gift of immortality, Cassin suggests that his search for home is in fact a search for his identity, which eclipses the love for elsewhere: “Odysseus’s entire journey, the entire *Odyssey*, sails under

the aegis of a quest for identity as well as the aegis of nostalgia” (15). Out at sea, Odysseus roots himself to the wooden boat, which connects him to memories of home, grounding his wanderings in the promise of returning to the familiarity of his island home Ithaca.

Cassin further highlights the paradox of nostalgia, characterised by “rootedness and wandering” (24). To feel nostalgic, one needs to first leave the home or wander away from home. This journey of self-discovery enables the wanderer to learn about her place in the world and her relations to home away from home. Oftentimes, this wandering leads to an eventual homesickness or nostalgic yearning for rootedness to home. The exile too is a type of wanderer, condemned to live apart from home. Wandering may typify traits of exile, which Cassin describes as being the “only way of returning home” and “a return to the origin” (“Aeneas: From Nostalgia to Exile” 33).

Rootedness, wandering or exile need not be confined to the literal sense, as one can nonetheless experience psycho-geographical displacement and symbolic alienation from one’s own home despite dwelling on the land of one’s birth. Relocation or state-sanctioned redevelopment may respectively alter the relationship to and the landscape of one’s home, and in doing so, change one’s memories of that place. Increasingly, the notion of a fixed, unwavering sense of home and belonging to place is destabilised by contemporary urban living, whereby nation-building efforts are tied to (typically violent and disenfranchising) topographical manipulations of land and sea, the home becoming a place no longer recognisable, continually shifting in shape and meaning with time.

In his article “Generation Anthropocene”, Robert MacFarlane cites Glenn Albrecht’s coinage of the term “solastalgia”, referring to a “form of psychic or existential distress caused by environmental change”. Associated with the pains of staying put or remaining in a place that

changes rapidly, solastalgia seems to be a more current and apt term to engage with themes of home as uncanny and unfamiliar, even inhospitable, due to state or corporate intervention. The poems of Australian-Singaporean poet Boey Kim Cheng examine said themes of nostalgia and solastalgia within the context of Singapore. In “Change Alley” (*Days of No Name*), Boey grapples with the pain of remaining in a place (Singapore) that constantly changes, and locates the site of his anxieties in a formerly bustling Change Alley. The persona laments the loss of “place names” and “places and times” in an unrelenting cityscape that has closed off the route to his past:

Alley of change utterly changed.
The name of the place names
the lost decades, the places and times
gone with our belongings, migrated
along the routes buried or closed
to the country of changelessness. (56)

The only way the persona can access this “utterly changed” place is through his memory and “dreams of home”, which allow him to reconnect with childhood memories of his father. The poem is both nostalgic in tone and solastalgic in mood, and alludes to Heaney’s “country of the mind”, an imagined place that the persona can inhabit and be nourished by:

the Alley packed its stalls and followed
the route to exile, its nomadic spirit
inhabiting now the country of the mind.
All is utterly changed, the map useless
for navigation in the lost city. Only an echo
remains, the man haunting and sniffing
where the Alley had been, measuring
its absence till the spirit of place returns,
till a door yields at the end and he walks
out free, changed beyond all changes. (58)

Displaced from the alley which serves as a metaphor for home, the persona finds the pain of remaining within his home country too much to bear. While the alley is forced into exile, the

persona chooses exile from “the lost city”, and in doing so, is haunted by “absence” and “the spirit of place” wherever he goes. “Change Alley” typifies the poetry of Singapore writers who feel estranged from their home, displaced by a place no longer recognisable nor nourishing. In the case of Boey, he migrated to Australia in 1997 and continued to write about home from the point of view of the diaspora in poems like “Stamp Collecting” and “Plum Blossom or Quong Tart at the QVB” (*After the Fire*).

Travels and migrations necessitate a reframing of home as mobile, transnational and transboundary, one that acknowledges the multiplicities of self, place and belonging. This calls for a need to dwell and stay with things at the symbolic level, returning to the restorative potential of memory—re-membering and imagination as essential, indispensable ways of building a home for the self as “a country of the mind” in poetry, and in doing so, of learning to inhabit the earth as our *oikos*. Many of Boey’s poems reflect his liminal status as a Chinese diaspora in Australia navigating his identity as Australian-Singaporean-Chinese searching for the meanings of home across the nexus of time and place. The poems of Guyanese-British immigrant poet Grace Nichols further demonstrate a cross-cultural, gendered negotiation of place and home within the postcolonial consciousness, and this will be examined in detail in the second chapter on Ecofeminism.

The role of poetry then, in building a dwelling place of anamnesis, founded upon memory and imagination, takes on added significance in envisioning a new way of being on earth, one that transcends temporal and spatial realities. Poetry of place offers us a way of returning home, a way of recovering and restoring lost or forgotten places, and in doing so, enables us to reassemble fragments of the self as tied to place. Ecopoetry and its commitment to the construction of place as a “country of the mind”, with the ability to nourish and nurture through verse, may offer readers

and writers hope in times of rapid urban change and ensuing urban alienation.

CHAPTER TWO: ECOFEMINISM

While ecopoetry may be said to examine the nature of human dwelling on the earth through a politics of relations between human, environments and ecosystems, ecofeminism may perhaps be described as an ecopoetics centred upon reviewing the place of the historically marginalised woman within her environment, with a focus on her relations with others within a male-dominated context of oppression. An ecofeminist framework looks at the oppression of women and the oppression of nature, and draws connection between the two, suggesting how the liberation of one translates into the liberation of the other. Yet, as Donna Haraway suggests, ecofeminism should look beyond the traditional conflation of woman with nature by finding alternative ways of relating to nature so as to transcend “reification, possession, appropriation, and nostalgia” (Forbes and Sells 21). This challenges ecofeminist writers to devise a new politics of relations, one that revises and re-envision the place of the woman within the natural world she inhabits.

According to Ariel Salleh, ecofeminism shares the tenets of deep ecology, which is concerned “about the oppression of all life forms” (98). Yet, they are distinctly different ideologies, the latter epitomised by two male figures of the 1980s, Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman, whose work gained popularity in the 1990s. Greta Gaard cites how Bookchin and Foreman’s notion of the “deep ecological self”, with its emphasis on describing the oneness experienced by humans with nature, was heavily criticised by ecofeminists of the time as being “narcissistic, androcentric and colonising” (“Ecofeminism Roots” 48-9). In contrast, ecofeminism prides itself as being a grassroots initiative with a collective consciousness, with no single woman antecedent laying claim to its conception. Rather, ecofeminism traces its roots to a plethora of marginalised female voices from varying contexts, cultures and climates to contribute to the spirit of activism

and social justice that pervades the ethos of the movement and its philosophies.

Greta Gaard defines ecofeminism as an

evolving praxis... that grew out of many women's interconnected sense of self-identity—a deep recognition of interbeing that bridges socially constructed boundaries of class, race, species, sexuality, gender, age, ability, nation, and more—and an “entangled empathy” (Gruen 2012) that brings both compassion and action to the task of alleviating conditions of eco-social injustice. (“Ecofeminism” 68)

One might argue that the intersectional nature of ecofeminism, with its commitment to an “interbeing” of relations, offers an expansive perspective to the reading of gender and the environment by taking into account other socially constructed notions of identity. As an “evolving praxis”, ecofeminism is concerned with theory and the enactment of that theory in the everyday lived experiences of the woman. Adrienne Rich delves into a similar issue of identity in “Blood, Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet”, stating how a poet's identity as a man or woman is inextricably tied to “the location of the self” within a historical time and place (181). To be fully embodied, a woman poet needs to be aware of her location, and from that awareness, write directly from her lived experiences as woman and poet.

Rich further elaborates about her own context, rallying for women poets to engage with other socially constructed markers of identity like culture and nation, whilst rejecting being co-opted into the dominant ideology: “As women, I think it essential we admit and explore our cultural identities, our national identities, even as we reject the patriotism, jingoism, nationalism offered to us as ‘the American way of life’” (183). For Rich, it is this very alienation, from “our own roots, whatever they are, the memories, dreams, stories, the language, history, the sacred materials of art” (185) that should drive the woman poet to utilise language and poetry for resistance and revision: “I felt more and more urgently the dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a

kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self” (181). Rich’s emphasis on the transformative power and collective potential of poetry as action is echoed in the ethos of ecofeminism, which interrogates systemic structures of domination and oppression, and advocates change along ecological and social lines.

The poetry and prose of Eavan Boland offer such meditations on the Irish woman’s alienation from her cultural roots, environment, nation and history, repeating an ecofeminist outlook on her poetics. Paul Ricoeur cites memory and remembering as “not only welcoming, receiving an image of the past, it is also searching for it” (56). It is this active searching of memory and creative exercising of imagination that characterises the work of Eavan Boland, whose writings examine the intersections between gender, nation, culture (myth), history and identity in the construction of the Irish woman in time and place. In doing so, Boland seeks to find her (and by extension the Irish woman’s) belonging to place, where she has been excluded, and where she can hope to build a home for herself and her kin.

Boland’s intersectional poetics is concerned with restoring the historically disenfranchised woman figure into the larger narrative of the landscape and history of Irish poetry, and its myth and nationalism. Resisting the mythologising of women and the feminisation of nature typical of Irish literature written by past and contemporary male poets, she reimagines a poetics where the mythological is domesticised, and the woman and nature move from the incontestable realm of myth into the natural, unromanticised, historical landscape of everyday existence. Boland delineates the woman’s understanding of her self with an understanding of her place (her locale, where she has lived, and where she has been placed within larger cultural forces) in “The Woman, The Place, The Poet”: “what we call place is really only that detail of it which we understand to

be ourselves” (155). Place becomes a proxy for the female self, and the more the woman understands her relations to place, the greater the likelihood of writing her way back into history.

Like Heaney, it is no coincidence that the geographical space that Boland occupies influences her poetics, which re-centres the woman. Having lived in cities all her life, she distinguishes between loving a city and submitting to it, and makes a contrast between city living and suburban living: “A suburb is altogether more fragile and transitory. To start with, it is composed of lives in a state of process” (“The Woman, The Place, The Poet” 160). The transitory nature and state of flux experienced by Boland, afforded by the landscape of the suburb, gives her the courage and space to find her voice and write herself (and the woman) into her poetry. The geographical flux characteristic of the suburb and its revolution around the private sphere presented her with a mirror to see the parallel domestic lives of women as equally consequent and worthy of poetic attention. Unlike the city, with its “finished and inevitable... architecture” (160) signifying fixity and rigidity, the suburban poet’s reverence of the domestic offers her a symbolic place to write against systemic poetic erasure so as to reinstate the place of women in poetic and national consciousness. In the suburb, Boland is liberated into what Anne Szumigalski describes as an “enabling psychological space” (Williams 142). She responds by putting into words what she observes about place and the dispossession of women, so as to locate the woman at home in her country.

Her poem “Anna Liffey” from *In a Time of Violence* (1994) is one such instance of writing as resistance against patriarchal oppression and its symbolic violence towards women through a male-inherited mythology and culture. Boland demonstrates Rich’s commitment to writing as an act of revision through this revisionist poem which reclaims both the Irish woman as well as the

Liffey River into a female literary tradition. The persona narrates the genealogy of the river and the Irish people, and in the first stanza, establishes the origins of the people as matrilineal: “The river took its name from the land. / The land took its name from a woman.” (*Time of Violence* 139). The woman and the power of her name is emphasised as the genesis of a nation, and this retelling of the myth of the river is an ecofeminist one that destabilises patriarchy and its deferral to patrilineal genealogy and naming. The next couplet that follows presents the woman and river as respectively occupying in-between spaces in the home and cityscape, sharing a peripheral status: “A woman in the doorway of a house. / A river in the city of her birth.” (139). The poem situates the woman and river as dwelling in liminal spaces, a terminus or borderland from which the self and its place within its “house” and “birth” might be negotiated.

While one might view this liminality as disempowering and marginalising, another way to read this is through the lens of Johnathan Skinner’s description of ecopoetry as “a kind of boundary work, about networks and crossing” (Hume et al. 760). From an ecopoetic perspective, the poem, as boundary work, becomes a way in which the woman negotiates her place in society. No longer bound to any one specific place (the home) or binary notions of place (home/not home, domestic/political), she is liberated to shuttle between spaces and occupy subjectivities that were previously denied her. Read as an ecofeminist poem, the portrayal of liminality in “Anna Liffey” becomes an empowering way of mediating the intersecting themes of gender, nature, myth, place, home and belonging. Woman and river, located in-between “doorway” and “city”, can now transcend the limiting constraints of the domestic and societal. Unfettered from gendered norms and expectations constituted by patriarchal narratives and ways of knowing (woman and nature), the woman and river are now imbued with creative agency:

Maker of
Places, remembrances,
Narrate such fragments for me:

One body. One spirit.
One place. One name.
The city where I was born.
The river that runs through it.
The nation which eludes me. (140)

“Anna Liffey” re-envisioned the woman and river as “One” in body, spirit, place and name, sharing a similar fate of dispossession, fragmentation and incoherence. At the same time, they are one in their collective regenerative power and consciousness. Through the course of the poem whose form mimics the body of a river, woman and river gather linguistic and symbolic charge, and this life force restores to the woman and river what history and culture (myth and literature) has denied them in life. The creative energy that surges through the poem may be compared to what Rich qualifies as a distinctly “female energy” possessed by women poets: “And, in the work of both these poets, it is finally the woman's sense of herself—embattled, possessed—that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will, and female energy” (“When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” 19).

Charged with this potent female energy, the persona asks the question, “Where is home now?” and the resolute answer she offers the reader in the ultimate line is, “I was a voice.” (145). Indeed, the poem searches for “the spirit of place” and suggests that the woman may find her home within her own voice, story and history (145). The river teaches the persona about home and journeying, since from its birth, it is always returning to the ocean. Likewise, a woman might find strength and sustenance, and more importantly, find her way back home into the literary and historical consciousness of her country and people. In rewriting the woman in mythology, Boland’s poetry maps what Jo Gill qualifies as a “new cartography — one which brings place, time and

subject position into convergence” (181). This act of tracing in herself the voices of other women who have come before her further calls to mind Virginia Woolf’s words in her seminal essay “A Room of One’s Own”, that as women, we think back through our mothers (64).

Where Boland is primarily concerned with the rapprochement of woman and nation in time and place, Guyanese-British poet Grace Nichols interrogates cross-cultural relations and identity as pertaining to the postcolonial Caribbean woman’s place in the world. In “Blood, Bread and Poetry”, to elaborate on the location of the woman poet, Rich quotes Woolf who posits that as, “a woman I want no country. As a woman I have no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (183). The poems of Grace Nichols embody Woolf’s allusion to belonging to the world in a way that defies conventional notions of identity as tied to the nation, suggesting a borderless cosmopolitanism as the inheritance of contemporary women poets. With colonialism, postcolonialism, globalisation, and increased movement across borders through travel and migration, the question of a fixed, stable place to call home becomes problematic and increasingly irrelevant. Nichols’ ecofeminist poetics could be described as an evolving praxis that engages with the aforementioned concerns.

Writing from the margins as immigrant, post-colonial woman of colour, Nichols demonstrates an ecofeminist commitment to an intersectional, transatlantic understanding of gender, race, nature and culture. Her poems grapple with themes of home and belonging, migration and identity, place and displacement within the wider discourse of an “ecopoetics of mobility” which typifies the way many individuals relate to place in contemporary times, defined as “a way of poetic world-making that conceives of natural phenomena and human-nature relationships in particular places as both ecologically suggestive and fundamentally geographically mobile” (Gerhardt 425). In such an ecopoetics, the fundamentally mobile nature of home removes the need

to make deep attachments to singular places or one's bioregion, and may perhaps be represented by a rhizomatic rather than an arborescent way of rooting oneself to places. For many, this can be alienating, especially if the geographical mobility they experience is forced upon them rather than voluntary.

Ursula Heise proposes that one antidote to the removal of place-attachment, or feeling at home only in one's bioregion, is to adopt an "eco-cosmopolitanism", which re-envision theories of environmentalism and ecology with globalisation, transatlanticism and cosmopolitanism (Adamson and Slovic 17-8). Gaard further cites Val Plumwood, who offers us an alternative way of envisioning an ecopoetics of mobility (and its ensuing alienating effects) by crafting a new way of relating to the land and earth, rather than nation, as home:

Plumwood suggests that we "belong to the land as much as the land belongs to [us]," a belonging and identity that is articulated in "the essentially narrative terms of naming and interpreting the land, of telling its story in ways that show a deep and loving acquaintance with it and a history of dialogical interaction" (230) ("New Directions for Ecofeminism" 657)

This loving attention to storytelling, naming and interpreting the land is at the heart of Nichols' work, which resolves to reconcile the woman to the land and world through movement rather than rootedness, which in the words of Haraway, "conceive[s] of place and sense of place as not threatened by or in conflict with, but in many ways constituted by, movement" (Gerhardt 425). Focusing on the transatlantic, cross-cultural relations between the Caribbean ancestral homeland and British motherland, poems like "Hurricane Hits England" (125), "Ink of Exile" (157) and "My Children Are Movers" (129-30) reimagine woman and nature relations, and move readers across oceans and cultures to conceive of the woman as belonging to a larger ecosystem of the earth.

Yet, Nichols' poetry can be described as firmly grounded in the landscape and a tangible sense of place of interwoven relationships and subjectivities:

“The poetry I feel closest to has always been the kind that also keeps an eye on the landscape [. . .] a sense of place has always been important to me as a writer.” For Nichols, place is more than the natural and visible world. It is a complex interweaving of history, community, authority and subjectivity. (Gill 179)

Echoing Gaard’s definition of ecofeminism, Nichols recognises the woman’s sense of self as tied to the multiplicities and complexities of place, which are fundamentally ideological in nature. Her sentiment is reminiscent of Edward Soja’s notion of “making geographies”, which characteristically “begins with the body, with the construction and performance of the self, the human subject, as a distinctively spatial entity involved in a complex relation with our surroundings” (Gill 166). For Nichols, the concept of “making geographies” is particularly resonant, and her poetics demonstrates a keen awareness of her history and place as a female descendent of slaves and immigrant within a postcolonial context. More so, her poetry could be described as the making of geographies in themselves, represented by the making of stories, histories, places, bodies and subjectivities that negotiate meaning within a complex environment of relations.

An ecofeminist reading of “Hurricane Hits England” reveals how Nichols employs the imagery of the hurricane to conjure the natural force, power and energy of an immigrant woman who is forced to confront the dualities, oftentimes conflicting, of her ancestral and postcolonial heritage. Navigating the intersections of gender, race, nature and culture, the persona encounters a refreshed way of relating to the earth, not as dominant or subordinate to the hurricane, but as its equal. The persona initially struggles to make sense of the hurricane in her adoptive homeland England, but soon learns that rather than resisting, fearing or attempting to subjugate it, she needs to learn to accept and relate to the hurricane as ‘another’ aspect of her self, a fellow being on earth (Murphy 316). The hurricane is a signifier of nature as well as the persona’s repressed parts of

herself, and the poem intimates that for the persona to fully understand herself and her place in the world, she needs to first ‘make kin’ with the hurricane, integrating her self with the other, rather than defining herself in contrast or opposition to it:

Tropical Oya of the Weather,
I am aligning myself to you,
I am following the movement of your winds,
I am riding the mystery of your storm. (126)

Calling the hurricane by several familiar names, “Huracan”, “Oya”, “Shango” and “Hattie”, the persona illustrates what Haraway elucidates in “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin” as ‘making kin’ with nature:

We need to make kin sym-chthonically, sym-poetically. Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with—become-with, compose-with—the earth-bound...

My purpose is to make “kin” mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy... Kin-making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans. (161)

In “kin-making”, the persona makes a person-being out of the hurricane, and in calling her by many names, the persona begins to understand herself as kin to the elemental forces in nature. This re-imagining of the relations of interbeing between woman and nature as kin is fundamentally ecofeminist in approach, enabling the persona to overcome her marginalisation and alienation as an immigrant and postcolonial woman of colour. In ‘making kin’ with the hurricane, the persona comes to a realisation in the final stanza:

Ah, sweet mystery,
Come to break the frozen lake in me,
Shaking the foundations of the very trees
within me,
Come to let me know
That the earth is the earth is the earth. (126)

By the end of the poem, the persona has not found her home in either places, ancestral or adoptive land, or in the problematic notion of national identity within a postcolonial discourse, but in the larger “ecological wisdom” of the earth as home (Spretnak 4). As hurricane, lake, trees, winds and storm are kin to her, so too then does she belong to the earth in a cosmic way as fellow person-being. Her home then is not restricted to social constructions of gender, ancestry, cultural affiliations or national identity, nor is it marked by geographical or geopolitical boundaries, but liberated by an intersectional politics of relations that crosses the borders of inclusivity, diversity, interconnectedness and belonging.

Additionally, Nichols’ poem may be read via a womanist ecopolitics, which traces its history to the lived experiences of Black and coloured women. Womanist ecopolitics “rest on notions of livingkind (all living beings are of a type), aliveness (all elements of creation are alive), luminosity (divine energy/power pervades all things), and Cosmic citizenship, as well as on love-, reverence-, and healing-based practices” (Maparyan 45). Reminiscent of indigenous worldviews, womanist ecopolitics closely resembles ecospirituality, and may be used to supplement ecofeminism’s intersectional approach. “Hurricane Hits England” epitomises an ecowomanist philosophy by engaging with the above notions of “aliveness”, “luminosity” and “Cosmic citizenship”, as well as the theme of healing through a reconciliation of the persona to the earth (her home).

From an ecowomanist perspective then, the hurricane could be said to take on spiritual significance for the persona, whose healing comes from being ecologically restored to the earth and its wisdom. In doing so, the persona rediscovers a new way of knowing herself and her place in the world, one that acknowledges a transatlantic mobility while maintaining a deep-rooted intimacy with the land. The antidote to alienation is integration, of the woman with the hurricane

(nature), and of deconstructing the popular self/other binary that separates humankind from the natural world. In doing so, the woman finds herself re-integrated into the earth as home, co-existing with other human and more-than-human person-beings as kin in an ecology of physical and spiritual well-being and oneness.

CONCLUSION

This exegesis argues for an ecopoetics of home that is place-specific and attuned to the complexities of one's bioregion. Fundamentally, as human beings, we possess an inherent need to dwell on the earth and to belong to place, especially the places we grew up in and the places we presently inhabit. As a point of origin, the local bioregion serves to ground us to a stable notion of home, and it is within this physical and symbolic space that we experience place through our corporeal body. Over time, especially due to urbanisation, places may change in topography, purpose and function, yet, for many who have formed deep ties with these places, their signification remains the same.

Places can conjure feelings of belonging or alienate us from feeling at home, and I examined how Heidegger's philosophy of dwelling and Cassin's inquiry into nostalgia may serve as tools to house and ground us in times of uncertainty and instability. More recently, Albrecht's coinage of solastalgia is an apt term to describe the situation in Singapore, where the country is constantly in a state of renovation, and consequently, its people in a constant state of displacement. Fundamentally, it is the individual's ability to return to the places of their remembered past or their "country of the mind" through memory and imagination that sustains them spiritually. Poetry of place may function as anamnesis, offering the writer and reader an entry point into a remembrance, reconstruction and reimagining of the past.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer points out that immigrants can never by definition be indigenous. She claims that "*Indigenous* is a birth-right word. No amount of time or caring changes history or substitutes for soul-deep fusion with the land" (213). Singaporeans, save the descendants of the Orang Laut, are by definition descendants of immigrants. According to

Kimmerer then, we can never be indigenous. The impetus for *Red Earth* lies in my desire to find an alternative narrative, one that will allow me to find my home and place in the land of my birth in spite of my history and ancestry. The love I feel for this place, and the desire to protect it must count for something, even if by Kimmerer's definition, I am a stranger estranged from the myriad homelands of my ancestors who hailed from various parts of the world.

Growing up in public housing in the east of Singapore, I formed genuine connections with natural spaces like the open field of my childhood, and I shared this field with non-human kin: tiger moths, butterflies and wildflowers. I did not feel like an outsider; instead, I felt myself to be a part of the field, relating to the space as 'another' being. I would soon move house and be removed from this field. In time, I would learn that the field had been built over by another public housing estate. The field's open space and its liberating geography, along with the opportunities it provided for me to imagine, dream and interact with nature, would no longer be physically available to me except through creative reconstruction. I would only be able to return to my "country of the mind" through memory, imagination and in my dreams. My poems "A Different Time" and "State Land" encapsulate the loss and displacement that comes with state-sanctioned redevelopments and changes to places that result in feelings of solastalgia. Both poems further demonstrate the notion of interrelatedness: one field, that of my childhood in "A Different Time", signifies another field in "State Land", the one beside my new home, also slated for redevelopment. Migratory birds from distant lands find temporary respite here each year, far away from their homes of birth, reminding us that we are all connected ("Sungei Buloh Sonnets" and "State Land").

To respond to the mood of solastalgia in one's homeland, as well as to recognise the bonds we form with the places we travel to outside of our local bioregion, I draw on an ecopoetics of

mobility, which resonates with my search for belonging to the world locally and globally. To be a citizen of the world, one needs a global consciousness that is both rooted to one's locale and that straddles regional and international borders and boundaries. The term "country of the mind" takes on new meaning for an eco-cosmopolitanism that is expansive and inclusive, embracing the world and earth as home. Poems like "Family Tree", "Lost Tongue" and "Inheritance" look back into history and ancestry to examine themes of identity and belonging as influenced by migration and movement, while poems from the last section *Pilgrims* travel across oceans and continents to search for home and belonging to places away from home.

In writing these poems, I experienced a strong awareness of my role and place as a woman writing about place, home and belonging from a woman's perspective, and it was this consciousness of my gender and my gendered ecopoetics that led me to my research in ecofeminism. I researched ecofeminism, ecospirituality and ecowomanism to understand my place as a woman on earth, and to better articulate my sentiments with regard to my politics of relations with other person-beings on earth. At the heart of my poetry is a desire to see myself, a woman living on earth, as part of the earth. This stems from a poetics of relations, which features strongly in my work. Ecofeminism's intersectional approach as defined by Gaard further calls for a renewed way of mediating the self in relation to other socially constructed notions of identity such as class and race, all of which contribute to the way I relate to home, place and world.

As a woman in Singapore, I write from a distinct point of view, albeit a historically underprivileged one, but one that has given me the ability to empathise with fellow person-beings that share similar oppressions by the state. It is this "entangled empathy" and Rich's notion of a female charge that undergirds my work, giving voice to otherwise voiceless, marginalised entities

and themes like roadkill (“Crossing”) and the environmental ethics of land redevelopment and relocation policies in Singapore (“Throw Me in the landfill” and “Albatross”). Other overtly ecofeminist poems like “Whale Dream”, “Brianna” and “Dream Fruit” blur the boundaries between oneiric and waking states of consciousness, and between animal/plant and woman relations so as to interrogate the ways we relate to other person-beings that share this earth as home.

While my work places a strong emphasis on social and environmental justice characteristic of an ecofeminist poetics, I also celebrate the earth and its unknowability and unsayability, which human language and thought can never fully comprehend. My hope is for *Red Earth* to function as a terminus, a new borderland and new way of knowing the earth, through a poetry that does not seek to represent the earth, but rather, that responds to the earth through a self-aware ecofeminist medium of words and language that nonetheless strives to envision the earth in a more eco-centric way. Poems like “Red Earth” and “Little Guilin” celebrate such unknowability and unsayability, and remind us that human dwelling, not to mention dwelling on the earth as a woman, is merely a fraction of the ways of being on earth.

Ultimately, *Red Earth* is a collection of verse that invokes the spirit of place by reinstating a woman’s voice amidst the boom of machinery and economy in the context of capitalism, urbanisation and the ensuing alienation from nature. It seeks to establish the personal female voice within dominant patriarchal ideologies and narratives, and searches for home and belonging to the world as a daughter of the earth rather than as citizen of a nation. Tracing its poetic lineage to ecofeminist forebearers like Mary Oliver, Eavan Boland, Grace Nichols, Joy Harjo and Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, *Red Earth* is an ecofeminist act of solidarity with marginalised others (human and

non-human person-beings) and an artifact of social and environmental activism. Located in Singapore and moving across geographies, *Red Earth* embodies a new planetary politics of relations that ‘makes kin’ with fellow person-beings (the elements, animals, plants, places, environments) to offer hope and healing in a time of state-sanctioned violence against the land and by proxy, its people, and increasing urban alienation.

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