

‘The art of being home’ Home and Travel in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s Poetry

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We are walking down the path from Shoreline Park, where Shirley has parked her silver Honda. On our right the Pacific is slate gray, dull green, wintry-looking under a sun-starved sky. The waves look muted, but a few surfboards are optimistically hanging out in the swells for a lift, accompanied by patrolling brown pelicans and gulls. Ahead of us Leadbetter Beach, fringed with foamy combers, leads to Stearns Wharf, where we are headed. Shirley and I pause to look out into the distance. Out on the horizon at regular intervals are the alien-looking oil rigs. The horizon, a recurrent presence in her poems, the liminal border that separates, is also the line that brings together. We turn towards the wharf, the white stucco and red-tile roofs of the city blurred in the marine fog which Shirley tells me is a constant feature of the summer here. Yesterday evening on the train from San Francisco I saw a gigantic bank of vapor, like a monstrous tsunami tide, rolling in from the horizon. The rising heat from the land draws it in and traps it, and takes the entire morning to burn off, to return the Californian sun and blue sky to the Mediterranean-looking town.

More known for her diasporic poems about Malacca, her place of origin, Shirley Geok-lin Lim did not evoke Santa Barbara, her adopted home, until the publication of *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (1998), and then more frequently in *Walking Backwards* (2010). In a poem called “Memory Loss” from the latter, Shirley remarks on Santa Barbara’s balmy climate: “There are few winters in Santa Barbara, / Only sun, blue skies, creamy surf most days.”¹ The relaxed voice, that of a someone who is at home in the landscape, is quickly displaced by one of dis-ease, and anxiety. There is still the long shadow cast by memory, by Malacca, and her personal and familial history. “Memory Loss” is about fear of losing that part of her life that has made her what she is today:

I'm at a loss here,
 Loosening my grip on yesterday.
 Should I continue in this vein I will lose
 Shades of father and mother, shadows
 Of images in negatives that silvered
 The poem as I knew her. (22)

In the "Afterword" to *Monsoon History* (1989), Lim admits that as an immigrant she has to struggle to retain her Malaysian self, that which makes her different, makes her distinctly Asian and American in her unique way.² In her memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996), she says: "The dominant imprint I have carried with me since birth was of a Malaysian homeland. It has been imperative for me to make sense of these birthmarks; they compose the hieroglyphs of my body's senses."³ She is afraid that the "sunny blue day" of Santa Barbara will erase the past, and cut her off from the source of her sense of self ("Memory Loss," 22).

In the overcast sky and the ubiquitous fog, there is no evidence of "sunny blue day," but Shirley assures me it will lift. There are three seasons in a day here in Santa Barbara, Shirley says. Morning is spring, afternoon summer, and evening autumn. In summer you will have to wait till around noon for the sky to turn an immaculate blue. Now the fog has all but shrouded the town and the hills beyond it, which climb into chaparral-covered cordillera. It has even crept into Lim's sensibility, in a recent poem published in *The Hudson Review*, entitled "Fog After the Thomas Fires":

Fog in topmost eucalyptus branches
 linger longer, long after it's lifted
 off pinyon and manzanita. Visitant
 at the door, no morning sun reproaches,

urges farewell. The entire high atmosphere
 bears moisture, cold blanket on a fevered
 body—foliage stripped bare, not barren.
 Pod, seed and nut, berry and shriveled

root, each spore, grain and budding ear
 by the scorched trail, blackened, sooty edged,
 green sprouts, every weed's welcomed. All praise
 to the fecund, the new born that suckle
 purblind, germy and damp in the blasted
 top soil, the corpse of their winter mother.⁴

The poem records the devastating wildfires that broke out in Southern California at the end of 2017, and put much of Santa Barbara County under threat. In evoking the aftermath of the fires, the poem reveals an ecological concern with drought and the

fragility of the environment and at the same time reveals Lim's deep love of her adopted home. The eucalyptus, as Shirley reminds me, is an import like her, a transplant from Australia that looks native here. In my foreword to *Ars Poetica for the Day* (2015), I noted the sparseness of diction and imagery in the poems, and a favoring of the lyric rather than narrative, which translates into an absence of the narrative "I."⁵ The self-erasure continues here, but in evoking a paradigm of the ecological destruction and regeneration, the poem may also offer an analogue for a personal regeneration—the poet's Yeatsian productivity after retiring from a career that had consumed a few decades of her life and after recovering from a life-threatening illness.

Shirley talks up the virtues of the town as we walk past a teenager coaching her young charges in kayaking. It is easy to see why she has chosen to settle here. There is her career path, of course—the position at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she achieved a reputation as one of the foremost scholars of Asian American literature to examine the Asian diaspora in America, and international acclaim as a poet and fiction writer. But I suspect there are affinities of landscape and culture that have appealed to her sensibilities: like Malacca, Santa Barbara is a coastal town, tropical-looking with its Mexican fan and Queen palms, and the Spanish colonial history here is not too distant from Portuguese elements in Malacca's history. She has written much about the postcolonial legacy of hybridity and heterogeneity in literary criticism and dramatized it in creative works. And her own mixed inheritance—her *Peranakan* make-up as a hybrid person whose Chinese forebears intermarried with the Malay locals—makes her akin to the mestizos who are part of the multiethnic weave of Santa Barbara, enriched by migrations from Latin America and Asia.

We stand on the beach and Shirley points to the pelicans, the terns, and the gulls. These are familiar denizens of her poetic habitat, creatures of a liminal world, of passage and in-betweenness. An indelible image from my visit here a decade ago is that of Shirley on the beach leaning into the winter wind and looking at the horizon, and it struck me then that the gull was the perfect emblem for her work, an embodiment of hovering and dwelling in between land and sea, between states of belonging. In the poem "Horizon," which begins with a drive on the coastal road of Santa Barbara, the gulls are untethered, adrift, in passage or transit in an unstable landscape:

The scene pierced by presences
And absence that says nothing
But changes you and the horizon
And the gulls flying out of the horizon.⁶

The poet has "Eyes fixed on the eternal / Horizon eternally wavering" (134). The horizon is a liminal threshold of absence and presence, the paradox at the heart of the migrant's life, whose narrative is bound by binaries of departure/arrival, the place of birth/adopted home, past/present. It is Lim's reference point, albeit an unstable one, a

constant in her work, for she has chosen to dwell in an in-between state, and to practice a mobile poetics which allows her “to walk between water and land,” and, like the gull, “bend / To the rapidly rolling horizon.”⁷ The emblem of the gull, and the idea of passage and motif of crossing occur early in the titular poem of *Crossing the Peninsula* (1980), in which the gulls carry the freight of the longing to return to the place of birth: “We dream like grey gulls blown inland, / Or as one-eyed ships, blow, espying / The bright-shelled peninsula.”⁸ It invokes a double migration: the first crossing, the ancestral departure from China, across the South Sea to the Malay Peninsula, as well as a remigration, the descendent taking the diasporic path, across a wider water, to a more distant coast.

Crossing as a liminal act, implying indefinite state between departure and arrival, is a dominant trope in Lim’s oeuvre. It informs her debut collection, *Crossing the Peninsula*, and sets the direction and thematic pattern for her subsequent works, with its motif of movement, of transit, of passage and travel. When I first laid my hands on *Crossing the Peninsula* after it had won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1980, I was puzzled by the title. To cross the peninsula suggests traversing the country from east to west, across the central highlands, but the deeper and wider connotations of the travel act resonated with me. I sensed something drastic in it, the irreversibility of exile. Later I came to appreciate the diasporic subtext and context and saw it as an émigré work, one of the first Asian diasporic poetry collections to deal with the themes of migration and travel. The word “crossing” is fraught with echoes of historical and ancestral crossing from China to Nanyang, the term that translates as South Sea and which collectively includes Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. It also carries the idea of “against,” of defiance and opposition, with its connotations of danger, risk, exposure, and transformation, describing a passage from one point, one shore and border, to another, with all the danger and uncertainty that it implies, and this is especially resonant in the context of Lim’s self-exile from a repressive, Malay-dominated Malaysia. Her troubled relationship with her country is evident in “Crossing the Peninsula,” which reads as a deferred homecoming poem, a travel poem that enacts its suspended state, a liminal condition that suggests uncertainty, ambivalence and ambiguity, rather than arrival and resolution. Even as landfalls are sighted and described, there is no excitement of arrival, the detached voice performing the act of mapping objectively—“First the sea, blue heart pulsing, / Spilling starts, nuts, and sand on / On Tanjong Bunga” (“Crossing the Peninsula,” 95). Even when offering closer observations of shoreline, the voice remains disengaged. The recurrent topography in Shirley’s poems, the beach, the shoreline, the coast, is almost devoid of human presence, except for the rather abstract “we” and the memory of going “footed as crabs” and “Hunting shorewards for sweet oysters / And mother of pearl” (95). Rather than initiating a process of reconnection and homecoming, the spectral memory reinforces the sense of distance and separation, and the poem ends with an image of flight: “We dream like grey gulls blown inland, / Or as one-eyed ships blown, espying /

The bright-shelled peninsula” (95). The peninsula here becomes more idea, more metaphor than an actual geographical entity, its contours only glimpsed in passing.

Crossing and recrossings, real and imaginary, especially transpacific ones, between California and Asia, and between Santa Barbara and Malacca, have given the routes and coordinates that have mapped Lim’s career and life. The motif of crossing occurs again in the titular poem of her second collection, *No Man’s Grove* (1985):

Crossing the China Sea, we see
Other sailors, knee-deep in padi,
Transformed by the land’s rolling green.
We cannot enter their dream.⁹

The poem mobilizes the crossing trope, the movement precluding any connection or arrival. Again the littoral landscape reinforces the state of transit and liminality, “the tidal zone” and “the rapidly rolling horizon” accentuating the restlessness and displacement. Her decision to leave Malaysia has cast her into this state of constant travel or exilic state in which one can neither return to the place of birth nor regain the state of wholeness, the intimate unquestioned relationship one had had with it, or settle and assimilate into the culture and landscape of the adopted country. *No Man’s Grove* is permeated with images of transit. There are three poems that pivot on the act of driving, or more accurately, the state of being driven, for the poet speaker, though behind the wheel, does not seem in control of her destiny. In “American Driving” the driver is “the only woman around ... drifting down ... headed into the interior.”¹⁰ She wants to pull over but cannot:

The car keeps moving,
It snarls in its own top
Wind. My mother’s hand is reaching

From fat autumn clouds. “Where
Are you going? Who are you?”
She moans through the windowed glare.
But I drive on, going too

Fast. If I don’t make an error
Or turn to a dead-end narrow
Road, I drive forever.
Or, at least, until tomorrow. (73)

Travel becomes an involuntary state; there is no destination, no arrival. Lim is an immigrant, a new citizen learning what it is like to be American, which she discovers to be a state of constant movement. “American” in the title operates as both personal

pronoun and epithet, both evoking an endless quest. Elsewhere, in poems like “Hands” and “Mother,” and in *Among the White Moon Faces*, she has written about her mother, who figures as a dominant presence or rather absence in her life. Here, she haunts her daughter’s journey with questions that the journey seems to be answering. In a later moving poem “Riding into California,” Lim declares: “If you come to a land with no ancestors / to bless you, you have to be your own ancestor” and “an immigrant without home ghosts / cannot believe the land is real.”¹¹ In this earlier poem, her mother appears as an apparitional guide to a life of unending travel, her ghostly presence a reminder that the past still shapes the present, that the new life the migrant has discovered for herself is still haunted with visitations from the past.

We are now driving around Santa Barbara, Shirley acting as tour guide in her adopted home. She possesses native knowledge of the place and seems confident behind the wheel. Yet, when she misses a turn, for a fleeting moment, her sense of not-belonging is exposed. Perhaps that is why there is so much driving in her poems, of being on the move. In “Slow Driving” the poet is still driving, albeit in slow traffic behind a car on a winding road, “going somewhere.”¹² Again the driver seems less in control than being driven, and though there is a brief glimpse of release—“blue wing / Whirled into light, a sudden glimmering / Above smoking engines of slow driving”—there is no reprieve, no release from the relentless travel (79). Shirley is a migrant endlessly negotiating a new landscape, suspended in a liminal space that she maps by driving, by being driven.

“The Windscreen’s Speckled View” is another driving poem that is actually a four-part elegy for the poet’s mother.¹³ Shirley’s problematic relationship with her mother is more fully recounted in *Among the White Moon Faces*, but here the grief is raw, the loss recent, the feelings of guilt, regret, and love deep and complex. The elegiac sequence begins with the collective first-person, reflected in “we” and “grief for a woman / who was once our mother,” evoking a universal and familial sense of grief before moving to the intimate second-person, as the poet works through the stages of her grief (90). The lyric suite is set in American soil, but the trajectory is that of return, oriented to that distant place where her mother lies dying. It is a lament as much for the loss of a mother, as it is for the loss of country, the past, and a sense of belonging. The poem ends in a drive home to Shirley’s suburban home in Santa Barbara, with all its appearance of suburban normalcy, of “[w]orkmen, joggers, mothers and children,” but the shadows of her mother’s passing, “the puff of crematorium smoke” and “mother, smoking, in the final blaze” are “asiatic reveries” that lurk “between unwashed windscreen / and some suburban park” (94).

We arrive at the street she lives on, and park outside the garage of a house with “a wide / low roof, faintly Japanese,” in a quiet middle-class suburb in the windward side of the chaparral-covered Santa Ynez mountains.¹⁴ There is a citrusy scent in the air; a few houses down a Chinese American is pruning his orange tree. The residents are a cosmopolitan mix; in the few days as Shirley’s guest here I have seen and heard, besides Euro-Americans, Blacks, Latinx, Greeks, Indians, Indonesians, Vietnamese, and

so many other ethnic faces and voices. It is the international, multicultural cast that Shirley celebrates in her poetry and prose, the global mix that happens quietly, naturally beneath the Spanish colonial façade, in the Mediterranean-like atmosphere that hangs over Santa Barbara.

The light is muted inside the split-level home, a welcome change from the brilliant, blinding Californian sun on the street. It is a comfortable home, the foyer leading to the dining room on the left and further on to the spacious living room, richly clad in furnishings from a bewildering array of sources. There are Buddhist *thankas*, Chinese tea sets, wall tapestries from different parts of Asia, antique tables and chairs, each different in provenance, carpets and kilims, wooden sculptures from Mexico and Guatemala, cabinets full of porcelain figurines and beautiful glassware, a beautiful bedspread hung on the wall of the living room, woven by Hmong women who could not speak a word of English when they fled from the communists to settle in California, a narrative of Hmong diaspora represented in stitched scenes of rural idyll succeeded by violent scenes of war and flight.

Moving through the house, you get the feeling of stories to be gleaned from the inventory of objects. You feel the travel stories, a narrative spun out of these souvenirs of travel. What have been assembled here are travel threads of Shirley's diasporic narrative, and I am reminded of James Clifford's idea of travelling cultures, how cultural identity is as much about roots as routes. Collectively this diverse assemblage of artefacts, souvenirs and art objects embody histories and narratives around Shirley's roots and routes and, like her poems, reflect a poetics of collecting and of travel that has animated her work. Clifford argues that collecting constructs a "dimension of our life that is both real and imaginary" and it is a natural extension of travel, of complex cultural and transcultural encounters that are located as much in time as they are in space.¹⁵ In as much as the gallery of artefacts embodies the past, history, and memory, the objects are in the true sense of the phrase *memento mori*, emblematic of personal and collective histories, and of Shirley's global outlook and transnational poetics.

In the dining room there are objects that Shirley prizes above all the others, a collection of Peranakan lacquer tiffin carriers, and a beautiful embroidered tapestry that she had found in Malacca. It is a Qing Dynasty stitchwork of imperial gold, red, and silver, the top panel featuring a scroll of lively deity characters and below a frieze of birds, flowers, and phoenix. It is made of the forbidden stitch, which Lim in her introduction to a groundbreaking anthology of Asian American women writers entitled *The Forbidden Stitch* (1989) describes as "an embroidery stitch which, while it resulted in a luxurious beauty, was so difficult to sew that it led to blindness in many of the Chinese artisans assigned to embroider the robes and altar hangings so beloved in feudal China."¹⁶ From the complex weave of the tapestry, Lim fashions a trope for her own hybrid identity, and for the diversity, the heterogeneity and irreducible difference of being Asian American. Shirley appreciates the diverse origins, the multiplicity and plurality of Asian diaspora in America, and for her "the experience of being an 'Asian

American woman' is an exemplar of living in difference" (10). She rejoices that "we 'Asian American women' are not single but plural" (10). This tapestry in the living room provides an apt analogue for Lim's multiethnic poetics: "If we form a thread, the thread is a multi-colored, many-layered, complexly knotted stitch" (10).

Around the house there are other emblems of Shirley's Peranakan heritage and origins, talismanic objects that hold lines of connection and communication with her ancestry and her place of birth: Straits Chinese vases and tea sets, batik, Peranakan porcelain, objects of nostalgia that reveal loss and displacement and a need to reconnect and return to the original homeland, if not in actual fact, then imaginatively. In my essay "I am here, and there, and back again," I noted the return motif and theme that dominates the work of Lim and her Malaccan compatriot Ee Tiang Hong.¹⁷ Shirley's early diasporic work rides on the binaries of Asia/America, home/not home, and exile/homecoming, departure/return. The dominant travel trope is that of a return visit to Malacca, of the émigré coming back to her place of origin. In poems such as "Visiting Malacca" and "Returning to the Missionary School," the act of travel follows the trajectory of return, as the native visits her place of birth and growth.¹⁸ However, the giveaway word is "visit" as the journey is a failed homecoming, and the temporary nature of the return is highlighted, the traveler's alien status accentuated. The return motif and trope recur with obsessive frequency, but there is little joy and sense of completion and arrival; rather the sense of disconnection and alienation is palpably reinforced, as the rupture and separation with the natal place is irreparable. Although Lim is not a political exile whose departure is irrevocable, and indeed she makes regular return trips to Malacca, there is a plangent note of exile in the way the poet looks at her natal place, and in the poems' sense of displacement, of not-belonging in the landscapes of her adopted country. There is an unbridgeable gulf caused by the act of emigration, which entails a drastic wrenching of the self out of its place, and an irredeemable breaking of ties. There is no flicker of recognition, no spark of reconnection, as the poet has become an outsider, a tourist in her own country. In "Visiting Malacca" the poet is back at her ancestral home in Malacca, its distinct hybrid architecture reflecting the Peranakan or Straits Chinese culture that has evolved over the centuries from the mixing of Chinese immigrants with local Malays since the first Chinese settled in Malacca from the time of Admiral Zheng He's fleet or even before that.¹⁹ However, the building is a ghost of the home it was; it has ceased to be *oikos*, the Greek word that embodies a coherent sense of family, family property and house, even though it is still inhabited, albeit by strangers. It is closed to the poet's return, and reveals no welcoming glimpse of the past, and the changes to the house hammer in the irretrievability of the past and the estrangement of the emigrant: "The well has been capped, / The moon-windows boarded" (93). The last stanza underscores the liminal status, the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of the visit and of the traveler:

I dream of the old house.
The dreams leak slowly like sap

Welling from a wound: I am losing
 Ability to make myself at home.
 Awake, hunting for lost cousins,

I have dreamed of ruined meaning,
 And am glad to find none. (93)

The sites of Lim's travel poems to Malacca are haunted with spectral presences and absences, suffused with a melancholy that arises from the wound, from the rupture with place, and from the litany of personal and familial losses. Dominating her poems in this period are the ghosts of her parents, and the motif of failed return shapes the elegiac register and melancholia of her diasporic work.

"Returning to the Missionary School" tracks Lim's visit to her alma mater, which she reveals as the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Malacca in *Among the White Moon Faces*.²⁰ The sight of the children in a "crocodile-line on the playing field" and the "Angelus peals" spark no childhood memory, no recollection that would reconnect the migrant adult with the school girl she was.²¹ There seems to be a willed suppression of past, of any memory that could undo the distance, the detachment that the persona has achieved, the distant perspective from which she observes her past, and what used to be intimate and personal. The poet is on a retrospective trajectory; the idea of walking backwards, broached here for the first time, will be developed into Lim's unique poetics and feature as the theme and title of her 2010 collection *Walking Backwards*. The retro movement is in the direction of the past, the path of remembrance, but the walker is facing the front, the future: "I walk backwards, measuring / How a tuneless tune can span / So many singing children."²² The visit ends in a liminal moment, with the poet poised like Dante at the start of *Inferno*, in the middle of her life, between past and present, a native turned stranger, unable to rediscover the native's birthright and sense of belonging:

Alone, in mid-life, I return
 To the parochial school, listen
 For that loud clamour in
 The sky—and hear children's jargon,
 The lolling bell, clearly
 Clap desire and old irony. (49)

In the afterword to *Monsoon History*, Lim seizes on Andrew Graham-Yool's "distinction between the whiners who had given up hope of returning to the homeland and those exiles filled with energy who worked surely towards the day of their return."²³ She admits she is a "whiner" who "can always return" (173). But the bass chord of exile underwrites all the journeys of return, for she can never truly and completely return and heal the rift between place and self caused by the diasporic turn she has chosen.

Lim's work rides the dialectic between travel and home, between the past and present, between Santa Barbara and Malacca. If the Malacca poems carry the plangent note of exile and displacement, her Santa Barbara and American poems betray an unease, hints of not-belonging. The motifs of driving and of transit are rife and littoral landscapes accentuate the mood of liminality. In "Horizon" the poet is again behind the wheel on a coastal road.²⁴ The sense of place wobbles, becomes destabilized, and home becomes uncertain and ambiguous, as intimations of another world surface in the Californian landscape:

I, I, I astride my carriage,
 Away from home and cemetery,
 Eyes fixed on the eternal
 Horizon eternally wavering. (134)

The coastal landscape is a recurrent topos in her work, coastal imagery and tropes forming an imaginary littoral that reconfigures landscape and memory into a topos telescoping disparate geographies, cultures, and languages into a narrative poetic. The repetition of the word "horizon" evokes a doubleness, its instability echoing another horizon. The gulls and horizon here answer to their counterparts in "Crossing the Peninsula" where there are "grey gulls blown inland."²⁵

The migrant has to negotiate a tricky, treacherous, liminal terrain, akin to a state of constant travel. Lim captures this predicament, this sense of displacement compellingly in her collection *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say*, which is split into two main sections—the first consisting of poems returning to the poet's premigration past, to her dead parents and her ancestral home, the second mapping her place in her adopted home. The title poem, which opens the collection, attempts to reconcile the past and present through the memory and trope of the Chinese custom of fortune-telling:

When the old man and his crow
 picked the long folded parchment
 to tell my fortune at five,
 they never told about leaving,
 the burning tarmac and giant wheels.
 Or arriving—why immigrants
 fear the malice of citizens
 and dull shutterings of those
 who hate you whatever you do.²⁶

The poem, and the collection as a whole, is a project of reconciling the poet's past and present, shuttling between countries, cultures, languages, and places. Though there are poems that make peace with the ghosts of her parents, poems of guilt, love,

atonement, expiation, the dominant register is of unrest, of displacement, and not belonging. The return visits to her past and to her places of birth and growth end in a note of exhaustion and defeat, unmistakable in the last poem that concludes this section of the collection, “Jet Lag.”²⁷ The poem is set in the airport at Subang, and renders a state of travel exhaustion:

Sometimes I wake up and do not remember
where I am. Jet lag is here and occurs
at any time. I forget for the moment
who I am. Lives long dead stir with power.
Faces, given up, return, asking recognition. (27)

The airport is, as Marc Augé observes, a “non-place,” a space that is traveled through rather than frequented or lived in, a limbo that suspends and erases all sense of identity and renders irrelevant issues of belonging.²⁸ It is a site of transit and passage that accentuates the transitory nature of the traveler’s presence, and this is conveyed in the last stanza:

We will never stop being overwhelmed
by history and race: what’s allowed
in the gleaming airport—exhaustion
of racial home-coming. (“Jet Lag,” 27)

Though set in Malaysia, the poem also suggests the racism, the discrimination, the irresolvable issues of identity that the poet as immigrant in the US faces, and the ethnic and racial belonging that she feels as an emigrant returning to her place of birth. This is the lot of first-generation migrants, which Asian American poets like Marilyn Chin and Lim began addressing in the 1980s. But what makes the latter’s case more complex is her postcolonial history—her ethnic hybridity, her Straits Chinese heritage, the diasporic history of her ancestors and of being an ethnic minority who chose to write in English in a multicultural nation dominated by the Malay majority. Instead of disowning her tangled and complex inheritance, Lim remains loyal to it, as she declares in *Monsoon History*: “To remain faithful to my origins, I must be unfaithful to my present. To be constant to my Malaysian identity, I must continue in the United States to be a stranger in a strange land.”²⁹

This fidelity to her origins contributes to the state of displacement that informs her migrant writing, acutely in a poem like “Immigrant”:

An immigrant, she’s
afraid of travelling,
stained invitation cards,
piss in the subway.

Highways shake
 like clog dances,
 the backroads mind
 their own business,
 and sidewalks grow
 between air-pockets.
 She dances. The landscape
 of newness nauseates.
 In her sleep she's lost,
 wakes up, five,
 under another moon.³⁰

The moon is a common image and the view of it a popular trope in Tang Dynasty poetry, a strong reminder for poets like Li Bai of home and the poet's homeless condition. The lunar trope highlights the migrant poet's sense of alienation and loneliness, inextricable from the marginalization that the immigrant experiences as an ethnic minority. Again, the travel trope reinforces the sense of displacement. Such dislocation can be paralyzing and crushing, but it can also be liberating; it allows access to a liminality that transcends categories of race, culture, language, and nationality. Lim notes: "In a nation of immigrants, there must therefore always be already that straining against the grain, the self that is assimilated and the self that remains unassimilable."³¹ Her poems, especially those set in America, ride the dialectic and tension between the two, and maintain what she calls a "double perspective" that allows her to see diasporic subjectivity and the migrant self as complex, composite, evolving, shaped by the present as much as by history and memory.³²

In the dining room where we sit among strong reminders of Malaccan heritage, Shirley looks revitalized by the walk. Her pace has slowed, her stride more measured than I remember from the few walks we had taken together in Santa Barbara before. It has of course been nearly ten years, and in the interim we have both aged. Her stride was quicker, her steps more energetic then, and on our walk in Newcastle in 2008, during her sojourn as writer-in-residence at Hunter Writers Centre, along the harbor front promontory to the lighthouse at Nobbys Headland, and further to the long, wide arc of the beach. She was looking out at the Pacific from the other side then, and that opposing perspective stirred something in her thoughts that were collected in poems about her Australian sojourn in *Walking Backwards*. "Past Danger and Drowning" is a paean to the Pacific Ocean, Shirley calling it "the ocean woman" "[c]radling her surfers past danger and drowning."³³ It is another morning walk poem, but this time on a different shore: "Mornings I set off for the Pacific, / Her heaving bosom stretched between / Rivals gazing from opposite shores" (27). The transpacific perspective gives her an enabling distance from which to see herself, her adopted home, past and present; she sees her other life and self gazing from the other side of the Pacific, and experiences a moment of clarity and calm knowledge:

I also adore her, threaded to her fine
 Eyebrow horizons. Shadowed swells raise
 My thirst no matter how much I swallow.
 I can never be a woman like her,
 Forever wet, incipiently
 Violent, even when calmed. In Newcastle
 Young boys and men throw their bodies
 Passionately at her each morning. (27)

The beachscape and culture at Newcastle bear a strong resemblance to that at Santa Barbara, and for a moment the poem holds the two lives and places together. For Shirley, walking is more than just physical exercise; it is a balancing act, and walking, more than the other mobility tropes like driving, train and bus rides, and flights, enables her to reconcile contraries, and straddle binaries of home/elsewhere, past/present, self/other. In another poem “Bogie Hole,” she is on a “walk up Newcastle Beach / To Bogie Hole,” a heritage-listed public bath hewn out of rock:

What has brought me to Newcastle no one
 Knows, least of all me. Blue skies and ocean air
 The same as home, leaving home is mere practice
 For leaving all, all the leavings learned
 Again and again, until goodbye becomes
 Addictive, last look behind, first look forward,
 What you carry everywhere.³⁴

The act of emigration or the first leaving is what has come to define her, the diasporic rupture that ensures she will never truly be home again, that for her the first and final departure from home underwrites all leavings to come. In a self-expulsion from her place of birth and growth, she has chosen to dwell in what Stuart Hall calls the condition of “dispersal and fragmentation” conveyed poignantly in the lines above.³⁵

It was after our walk on Goletta Beach on my first visit in 2010 that Shirley presented me with a copy of *Walking Backwards*. As I read the poems in the guest room furnished with antique carpets and *thankas*, I was struck by how much walking there is in the collection, that walking as a trope, theme, and strategy underpins the collection. In my subsequent essay, “Between Land and Water,” I tracked Shirley’s walking poetics, and discovered how walking for her was a strategy of dwelling in and mapping liminal spaces, a mode of self-mapping in a shifting and uncertain terrain.³⁶ Walking becomes a mode of negotiating what Shirley in an interview calls the “in-betweenness of the transnation.”³⁷ A walk in Santa Barbara calls up walks and landscapes elsewhere—Newcastle, the Puget Sound, Hong Kong, China, a global itinerary and roll-call that unsettles any certainty of place and location, mixing the local

and global in a travel poetics rooted in the walk. Shirley's walk opens up these in-between spaces that ultimately operate as coordinates in her quest for home. There are poets who are inveterate walkers, whose poems are composed on the beat and animated by the rhythms of their walk. Wordsworth is perhaps the most famous example, and Seamus Heaney has remarked that "Wordsworth, at his best, no less than at his worst, is a pedestrian poet."³⁸ There is also Wallace Stevens, who says: "Perhaps / The truth depends on a walk around the lake."³⁹ Shirley takes the walk beyond the local and immediate environment, and spins a multi-locale, transnational poetics of the act of walking; as she declares, "I measure distances toward / And between to find my place."⁴⁰ The dialectic between travel and home is given a new spin, as a new liminal poetics is explored, and tested in an itinerary that spans a diverse geographical spectrum. Shirley's transnational poetics unsettles any sense of belonging, any attachment to place and locale.

Shirley's walking credo and take on transnational poetics is best encapsulated in the title poem "Passport":

I am walking backwards into China
 Where everyone looks like me
 And no one is astonished my passport
 Declares I am foreign, only
 Envious at my good luck. Speechless,
 Without a tongue of China,
 I remember Grandfather's hands, Grandma's
 Tears. On Causeway Bay, ten thousand
 Cousins walk beside me, a hundred
 Thousand brothers and sisters.⁴¹

The poet's ancestral homeland provides not a destination but a mere point of orientation, becoming more an idea than a real geopolitical entity. There is a fleeting sense of solidarity, as she almost loses her liminal outsidership in the throngs of commuters, migrants, and travelers, a transient community that she identifies with. It is a brief celebration of cross-national mobility, a transnational moment in an in-between zone. But China remains an idea, and the poet's ties to it are symbolic rather than actual, the only real link embodied in the memory of her grandparents. Her own hybrid nature, the entangled strands of her makeup, Peranakan, Chinese, Malaysian, Asian American, with multiple attachments to places like Singapore and Hong Kong, and her own emigration, preclude any real homecoming. "Passport" recalls a much earlier poem "Identity No Longer" published in *Monsoon History*, where Lim celebrates the idea of global citizenship or what Aihwa Ong calls "flexible citizenship": "Identity no longer carried in a card, / her passport declares 'dare to believe' / Citizenness of the world, she approaches the Republic of feeling."⁴²

How distant Asia and the world seem as we sit in the patio next to the pool, savoring the freshly picked oranges, peaches, and plums from the fruit trees around the house. The garden has been well tended; Shirley has devoted much time to the house and garden since her retirement. She is at home now, or rather has made a home here. Home, a word that recurs with obsessive frequency in her work, is embodied in this house, all it contains and the garden, and of course in the devoted companionship of Charles Bazerman, her husband of more than forty years. Granted that her diasporic path means that home is never a given, and that her mobile poetics and her imaginary and real shuttling between Asia and California have created an ambivalent and uncertain sense of home, this home in Santa Barbara nevertheless provides a fixed point of reference, a center to which she returns and where she completes herself. This is where her homecoming practice has led her, a fixed pole to her all wanderings. In *Ars Poetica for the Day*, the word “home” occurs with telling frequency; the question of home, its irresolvable complexities and ambiguities, finds an answer in the domestic space of the house which gives the traveler a sense of destination and arrival:

Returning Home

to laundry, socks stained with dirt
 from another country, dust blown
 by winds out of an inside
 illegible to me, the art
 of being home now to be
 reassembled, when the door’s shut,
 lovely noises of foreign-ness
 silent, except for the strings
 and chords that pulse a music
 in a waiting room. ⁴³

The sense of homecoming is enacted in the flow of the title into the body of the poem, the sense of arrival palpably enacted in the enjambed lines forming a single sentence.

The summer sun is fading, and its last rays turn the top branches of the trees in the yard golden. Shirley drinks it all in, and there is a smile of content and peace on her face. I think of a poem she has recently published in *The Hudson Review*, “California Sun,” and how the stillness in it seems contrapuntal to all the moving, all the walking and traveling in her poems:

I’m looking at the afternoon
 sunshine outside the picture window, alone

 in a living room, watching pool water
 shining light strips, patio chair empty of sitter,

patio table crowded with houseplants, neglected,
waiting for evening which waits for night,

which waits for morning sun to find
the Santa Ynez Mountains and shine.⁴⁴

There is a remarkable composure here, in the steady attention not only to the domestic particulars, but to the space outside, the gaze shifting to patio, to the spaces between the interior and outside of the house, and then to the wider environs, to the natural landscape that overlooks the human habitat. I think of the distances Shirley's work has travelled to get here, the topopoetics of the walking and travel poems, their transnational and global reach, and find no contradiction between their mobile, fluid poetics, and this new sense of dwelling and being-at-home conveyed in these new poems set in Santa Barbara and her home. It is all of a piece with the displacement and dislocation that drive her earlier work, forming a continuum with the global mobility and border-crossing, all the walking and traveling which, rather than undermining or threatening this hard-won sense of home and being-in-place, underwrite it, and make it all the more precious and real. As the sunlight flares before it finally goes, I can see it written in her face and the small but determined frame of her body, the struggle and the peace, the quest for home taking her back and forth, between Asia and America, and leading to this place called home between the mountains and the sea.

Notes

¹ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Memory Loss," in *Walking Backwards* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 2010), 22.

² Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Monsoon History* (London: Skoob Books, 1994), 173.

³ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces: Memoirs of an Asian American Woman* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 1996), 341.

⁴ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Fog After Fire," *The Hudson Review* 72, no. 1 (Spring 2019), <https://hudsonreview.com/2019/05/fog-after-fire-the-wind/#.XUTcOJMzbow>.

⁵ Boey Kim Cheng, Foreword, in *Ars Poetica for the Day* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015), 12.

⁶ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Horizon," *Listening to the Singer* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Maya Press, 2007), 134.

⁷ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "No Man's Grove," in *No Man's Grove* (Singapore: Dept of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore, 1985), 37.

⁸ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "[Crossing the Peninsula](#)," in *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems*

(Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1980), 95.

⁹ Lim, “No Man’s Grove,” 37.

¹⁰ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “American Driving,” in *No Man’s Grove*, 73.

¹¹ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Riding into California,” in *What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 1998), 64.

¹² Lim, “Slow Driving,” in *No Man’s Grove*, 79.

¹³ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “The Windscreen’s Speckled View,” in *No Man’s Grove*, 90–94.

¹⁴ Lim, *No Man’s Grove*, 94.

¹⁵ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988), 220.

¹⁶ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “A Dazzling Quilt,” in *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women’s Anthology*, ed. by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, and Mayumi Tsutakawa (Corvallis, OR: Calyx Books, 1989), 10.

¹⁷ Boey Kim Cheng, “I am here, and there, and back again: The Poetics of Return in Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim Geok-lin,” *Amerasia* 36, no. 2 (2010): 91–106.

¹⁸ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Visiting Malacca,” in *Crossing the Peninsula*, 93; and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Returning to the Missionary School,” in *No Man’s Grove*, 48.

¹⁹ Lim, “Visiting Malacca,” 93.

²⁰ Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 99.

²¹ Lim, “Returning to the Missionary School,” 48.

²² Lim, “Returning to the Missionary School,” 48.

²³ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Afterword, in *Monsoon History*, 173.

²⁴ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Horizon,” in *Listening to the Singer*, 134.

²⁵ Lim, “Crossing the Peninsula,” 95.

²⁶ Lim, “What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say,” in *What the Fortune Teller*, 3.

²⁷ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Jet Lag,” in *What the Fortune Teller*, 3.

²⁸ Augé, Marc, *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1995), 101.

²⁹ Lim, *Monsoon History*, 173.

³⁰ Lim, “Immigrant,” in *What the Fortune Teller*, 38.

³¹ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "The Ambivalent American: Asian American Literature on the Cusp," in *Reading Literatures of Asian American*, ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, and Amy Ling (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992), 18–19.

³² Lim, "The Ambivalent American," 18.

³³ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Past Danger and Drowning," in *Walking Backwards*, 27.

³⁴ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Bogie Hole," in *Walking Backwards*, 27.

³⁵ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 394.

³⁶ Boey Kim Cheng, "Walking Between Land and Water: Pedestrian Poetics in the Poetry of Shirley Geok-lin Lim," *Asiatic* 8, no. 1 (June 2014): 72–84.

³⁷ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "'Survival—to keep writing,'" interview by Joe Upton, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41, no. 1 (July 2018): 558.

³⁸ Seamus Heaney, "The Makings of a Music: Reflections on Wordsworth and Yeats," in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–78* (London: Faber, 1980), 68.

³⁹ Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 212.

⁴⁰ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Open Beach," in *Walking Backwards*, 9.

⁴¹ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Passport," in *Walking Backwards*, 35.

⁴² Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999); and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Identity No Longer," in *No Man's Grove*, 69.

⁴³ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Returning Home," in *Ars Poetica*, 101.

⁴⁴ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "California Sun," *The Hudson Review* 72, no. 1 (Spring 2019), <https://hudsonreview.com/2019/05/fog-after-fire-the-wind/#.XUTcOJMzbow>.

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