

THE BOOK OF LONGING

theatreworks

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LONGING

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Fragments in Words and Pictures

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P R E F A C E

Being away from Singapore for a year filled me with a longing for home. Having a foot in two separate and distinct worlds – New York and Singapore – made me see my home for what it is. I often longed for a country which I could reach only in my imagination.

Longing for Singapore in New York took many forms: Longing for the food, familiar friendships, family, our theatre. These were tangibles, but the intangible formed a dull ache which could not be articulated. Just like when you stand on a hill and see and hear and smell a village. There is life there, but you are apart from it, and yet a part of it. And you long.

Ong Keng Sen
Artistic Director, TheatreWorks



THE DESIRE FOR LONGING

by Robin Loon

What is this business of longing? If you want something bad enough, go out and get it!! Where there is a will, there is a way! Why waste time pining and wishing for something!!! If you want to strike lottery, you still have to go down to the streets and buy a ticket, right?

Maybe that's it. It's hope. A hope that you will strike lottery, even when you know that there are probably one million people nursing the same hope of striking one prize. It is a sort of gamble. Longing gives you the hope to continue living, continue believing.

Too nebulous? I offer another explanation. Longing in Chinese is simply one word: 盼. Without going too deep into etymology and lexicography, the word is made up of two parts – the left side is a Chinese character for eye; the right is Chinese for split. A split eye – that's another way

of looking at longing. You see two things when you long, what you have and what you hope to have. A divided vision – one here, one somewhere else.

May be that's it. A yearning to be somewhere else, somewhere bound, doing something else, being someone else. A vicarious wish, a fancy.

May be that's it. A fancy that allows you to escape the present and go away. To your past? To return to the good old days? To reclaim something that is lost? To repeat a moment sunk in time? To somewhere in the future? To a place where everything is the way you want it to be? Perfection away from our imperfect world? In a country of our imagination? Perhaps longing inhabits the space floating between what is and what could have been and what may be.

Still too nebulous? Let's put it another way. You know the cliché that when you get what you want, it's always not as good as you thought it would be? Well, that may vary from person to person, but what does not vary is the longing – which is a guaranteed sensation of anticipation. It's

not always sweet. The longing for something impossible is nothing short of pain and anguish. The constant reminder of its unattainability, the self-denial of it.

Then why do it? It does sound like a ridiculous enterprise. But the impossible can only be possible in longing. Its like finding true love, you know exactly what it should be and how it should feel even when you know it will never be. But all of it is real in your longing.

Maybe that's it! The realisation of an unrealisable fantasy. Because its not a clear-cut either-or proposition when you long. Its the neither-nor situation. Its the split eye again. Being completely aware of two things that are mutually exclusive but not succumbing to either. Succumb to the practical reality and you become mechanical and dull; succumb to the fantasy and you become deluded and even mad.

Still too nebulous? My last attempt – its an ache, the bitter and the sweet, the happy and the sad, the pain and pleasure swelling into one you.



LONGING

*desire wish leaning fancy liking love
fondness relish want need anxiety solicitude
yearning yen hankering coveting eagerness
zeal ardour itch aspiration ambition appetite
hunger thirst lust greed craving passion*

Noble longing, indulgent, delicious longing

An ache which cannot be described

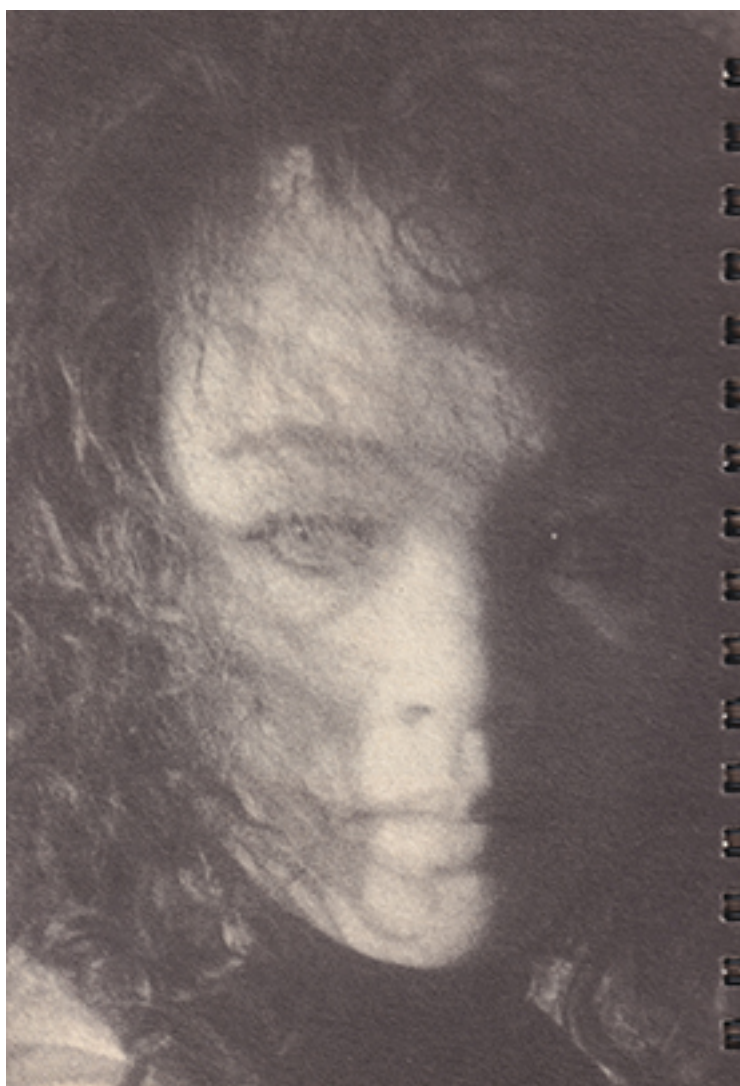
Painful, frustrating; a clinging, cloying longing

It drives you, is exhilarating, is loaded

Longing is like opium; living on the verge

Longing is much more beautiful than reality

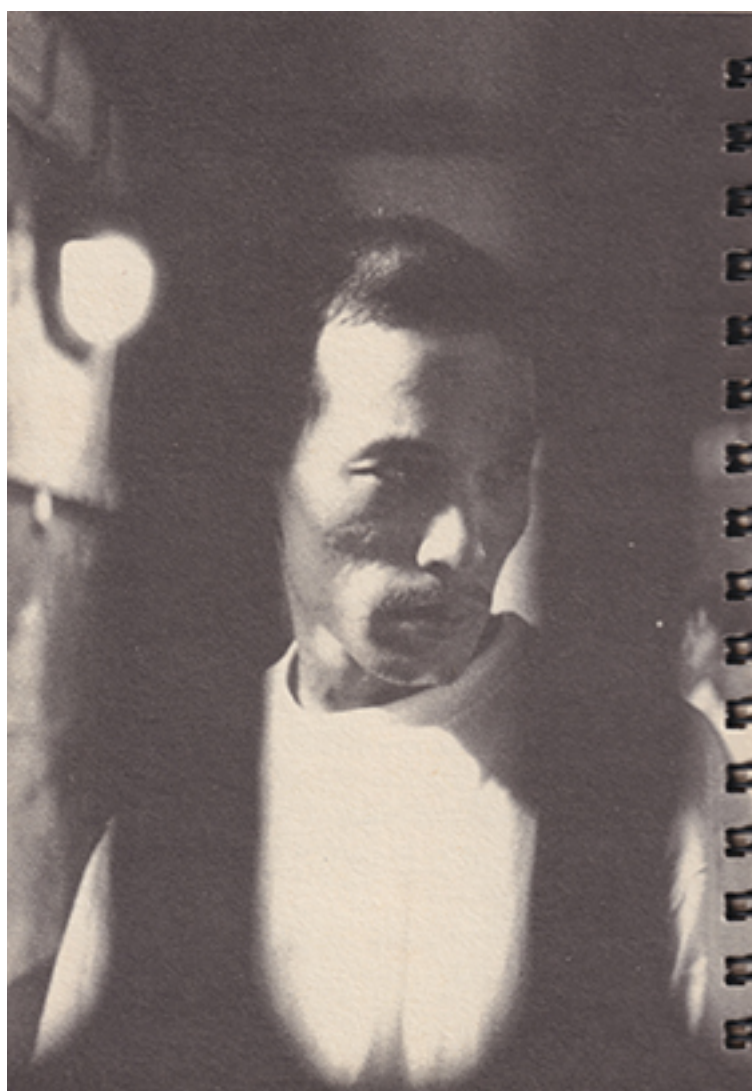
It expands, contracts, mutates, consumes
empowers



I HAVE HEARD IT SAID

And they all beheld a strange animal. It seemed to move with great speed; it had a red body and a black head; its breast was white; it was strong and active in build, and in size was rather bigger than a he-goat. When it saw the party, it moved away and then disappeared. And Sri Tri Buana inquired of all those who were with him, "What beast is that?" But no one knew. Then said Demang Lebar Daun, "Your Highness, I have heard it said that in ancient times it was a lion that had that appearance. I think that what we saw must have been a lion." And Sri Tri Buana said to Indra Bopal, "Go back to Bentan and tell the queen that now we shall not be returning, but that if she wishes to shew her affection for us, will she furnish us with men, elephants and horses, as we propose to establish a city here at Temasek."

Extract from The Malay Annals, Trans. C. C. Brown, OUP, 1970



DISPLACEMENT

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My parents always spoke English to me. My grandparents spoke to me in English as well. I'm purely monolingual and singly equipped. But nobody believes English is my mother tongue.

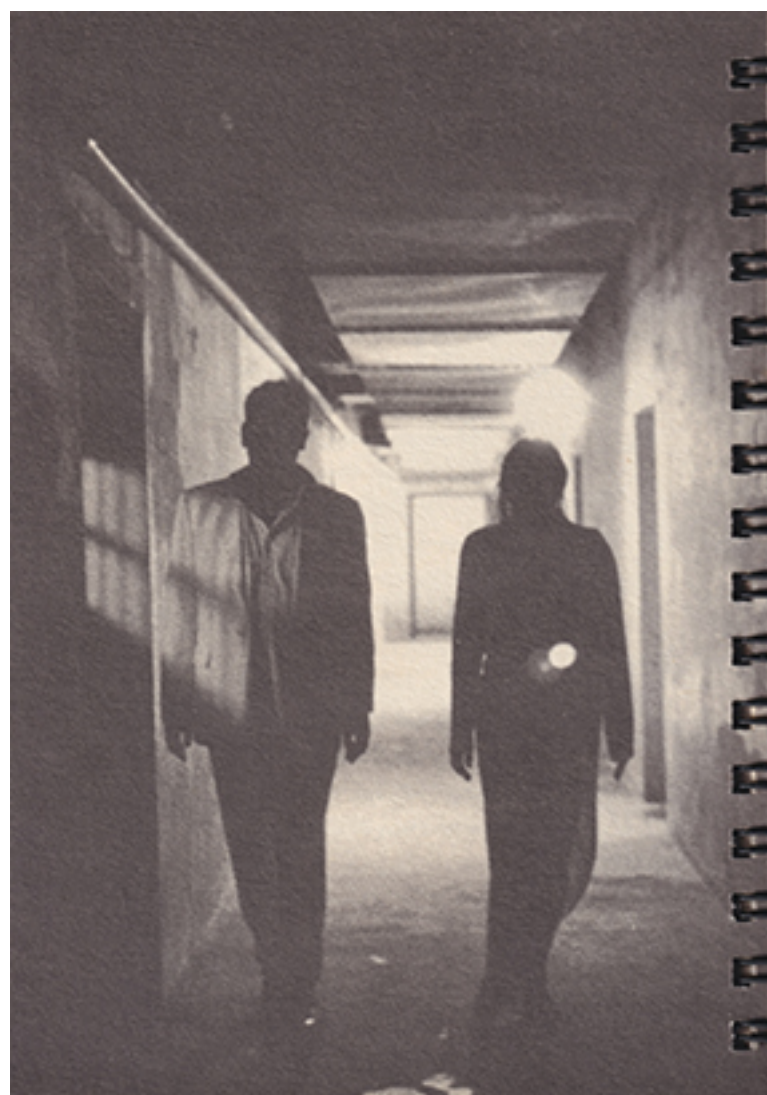
Hawkers, schoolmates, bus drivers used to swear at me. "You can't speak Hokkien or Mandarin to me, so you are a bastard son of the nation."

I never wanted to be some blond boy in England. Hey, I was the original Ribena boy: "What are you drinking?"

In my first week at kindergarten, everybody, including the teachers, noticed this little Chinese kid who spoke like Mark Lester. In the second week I started saying "lah, lor, wah, meh."

I guess it's become a way of life and now I don't mind it at all.

From a monologue written and performed by Lim Yu-Beng



EXILES

In the country of my imagination, the land runs wide and undulating. Red earth dry in the plains and hills, a deep blue-green in valleys and bottoms, out of the wind where sufficient water, from rain or small rivers, fuel good earth, and a yellow of a gentler sun in the slopes where only some water comes. From the hills in the back of the house in this country, I can look out over this all, barely making out on the horizon the meandering ribbon of fences which I have raised between my land and that beyond, between that which is mine, which is to be held closely, carefully within my palm and over my chest, above my heart, and that for which I have neither responsibility nor love. I have worked this land for a long time now, making it mine.

From 'Exiles' in Stand Alone, Simon Tay, Landmark Books, 1990



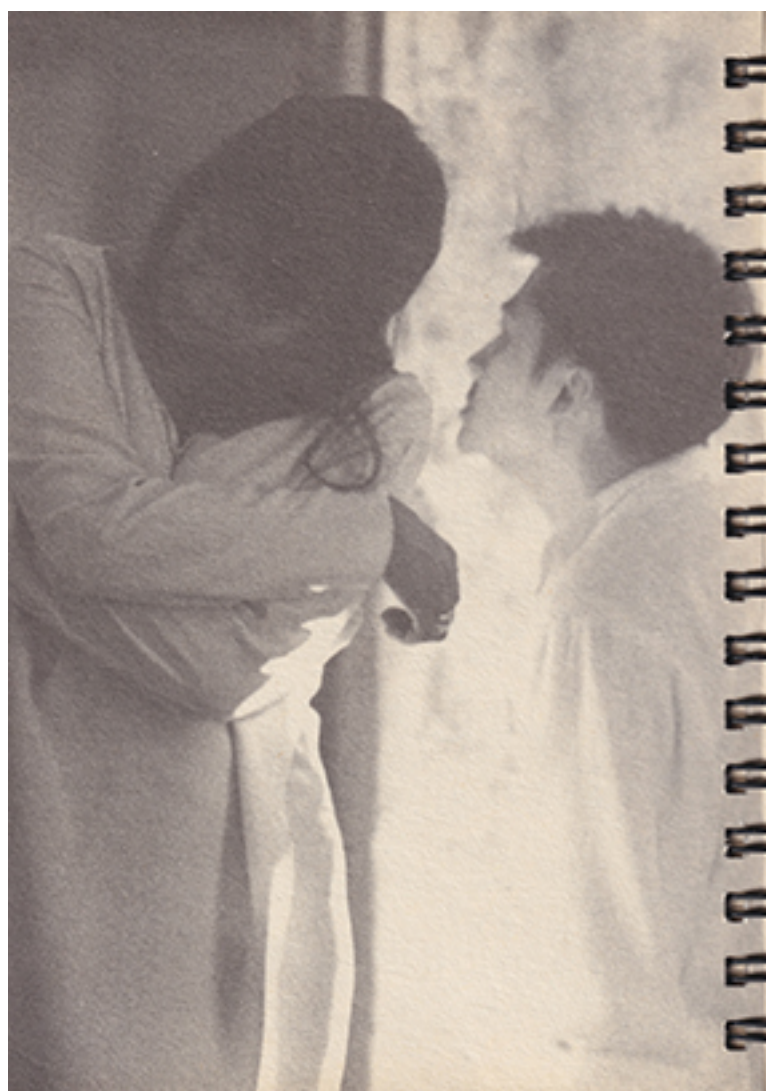
LISTENING TO THE RAIN

~

I can't remember anything my mother said in particular on those stormy afternoons when we sat in the library. I only recall her voice like a tune against the rain. I remember that.

I remember the cigarette smoke rising and the rain pelting against those windows, hard with the storm, breaking itself and trailing down the glass in strange, crying patterns. Maybe that afternoon the rain eased off in time for the sky to clear and for one bird to sing before dusk swallowed us up in darkness and the lights were switched on in the house. This sometimes happened but I'm not sure it did when my mother held and kissed me so strangely. Perhaps that is only a preference of my memory now.

*From 'Catherine Listening to the Rain' in Stand Alone,
Simon Tay, Landmark Books, 1990*



PIERCING THE VEIL

~

What is the most beautiful of sights?
The face of a young woman in love.
What is the softest of perfumes?
Her sweet breath.
What is the most agreeable of sounds?
The voice of a loved one.
What is the most exquisite of tastes?
The dew which moistens her lips.
What is the softest to the touch?
Her body.
What is the most pleasant picture a man can
conjure up in his mind?
That of her charms.
Everything about a young woman in love
is appealing.

From The Kamasutra



THE CRY OF BROKEN BIRDS

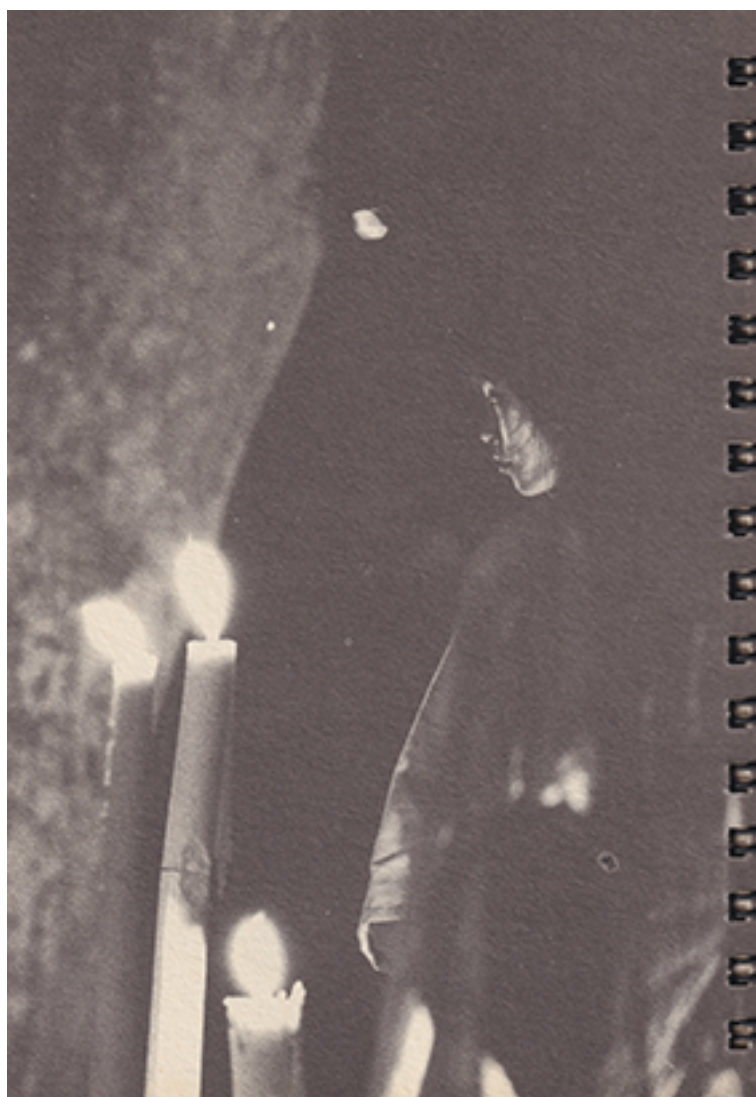
~

I learned from a Japanese gentleman, who lives here, that more than half this population are prostitutes.

I was reluctant to ask the next question, but I did anyway. Then, are there families here that sell their daughters for a pittance? The old man remained silent and quietly turned his head and stared at me. His face full of reddish-black wrinkles etched by the heat of the kiln, twisted into an expression that made me wonder if he was going to laugh or cry.

He then said, "I don't know if you know this or not, but when a blizzard hits the mountain, not a single bird can be heard to chirp. It seems that the birds know that the hills will be racked by the storm and they fly away somewhere. The birds in this village are like that too."

From Ah Ku and Karayuki-san, Prostitutes in Singapore 1870 - 1940, James Francis Warren, OUP, 1993



SONGBIRD OF SYONAN

~

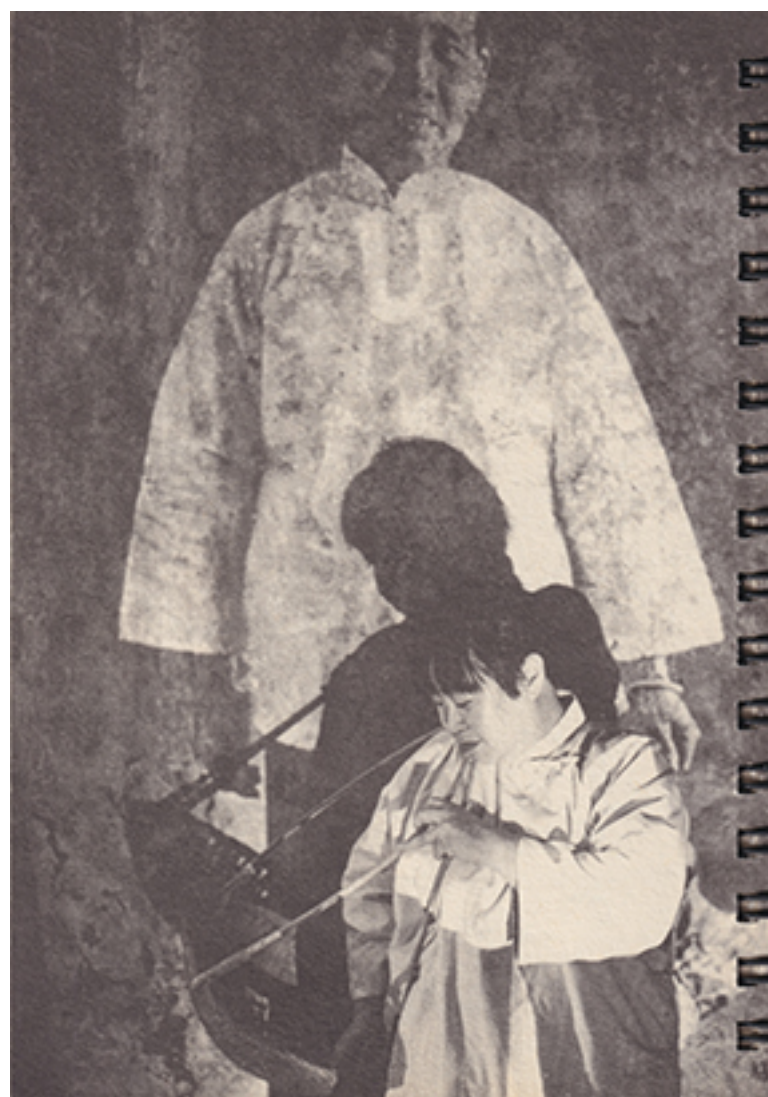
Songbird. The girl with the mesmerising voice. They can say that I am plain. They can say that I am cheap. But they cannot say that I could not sing. I am the village songbird.

In celebration of the liberation by the Japanese I was singing to the uniforms with shining buttons. They had no choice but to let me. They paid for my dress. The finest silk in crimson red. They begged me to sing, they wanted to please the enemy.

I could picture them: Like starving pigs rummaging through the vilest leftovers with appetites that grew stronger as they fed each other.

I wanted to laugh but a hand cupped my mouth pressing me to the ground. They reach into my mouth, wrenching my tongue out of my cavity. Red. Red hands. But why couldn't they leave me my voice?

From The Songbird of Syonan by Robin Loon



SISTERS

~

*Sor hei. Literally 'to comb up'. A vow of celibacy.
The desire for independence.*

They chose a lucky day. I sewed myself a new suit, white on top, black trousers. They found a priest to perform the prayers. I prepared the offerings of wine, fruits and rice. I prayed to the God of Heaven. Sought blessings from the Goddess Kwan Yin. There was no need to powder my face. Only brides use make up.

My hair was combed into a bun. A bun to represent being grown up. Being self-sufficient. No longer a child.

Friends gave me a hong bao; relatives gave many to my parents. I was not rich, there would not be a feast the next day. If I were, we would invite the whole village – just like a wedding.



TINTED PHOTOGRAPHS

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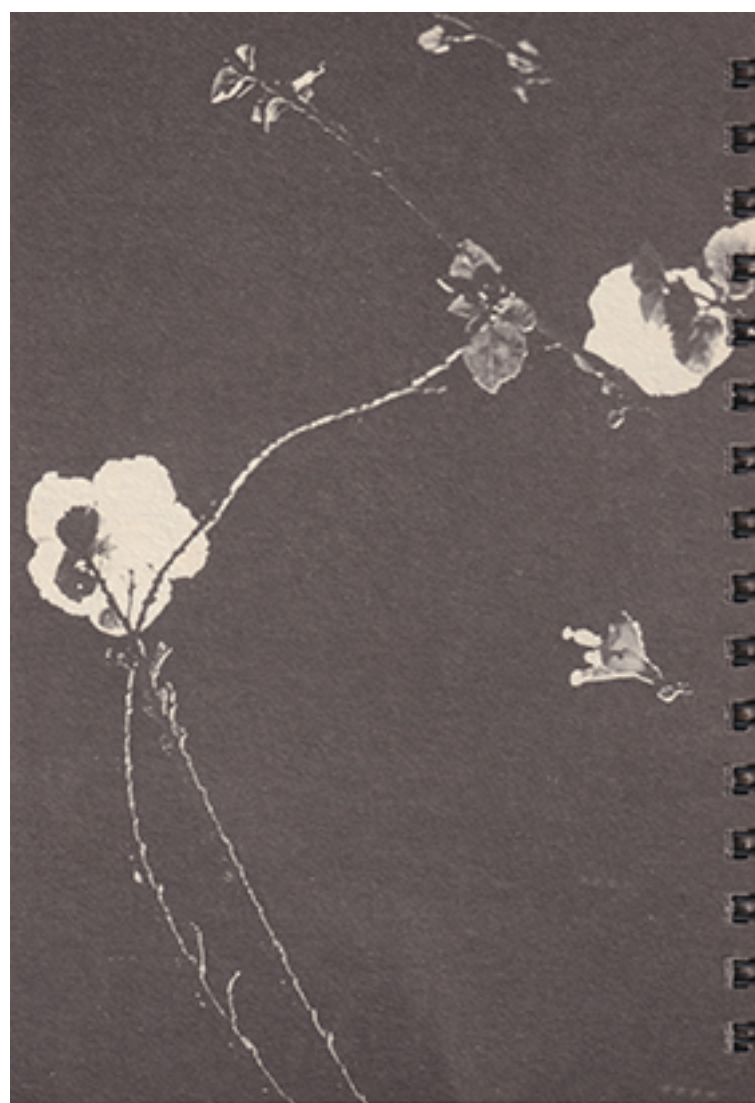
Paints and brushes are his basic tools. Sable or mink of various thickness. Booklets of powdered colour paper becoming the palest tint when lightly touched with a wet finger-tip.

He takes a leaf of the paper, cuts a sliver and lets it fall into a milk-white cup where it floats, and slowly dissolves into a swirl of ivory, tobacco or rouge.

He stirs it and the water is suffused with colour.

With brush in hand and employing deft strokes, he applies washes from the lightest to the deepest part of the black and white photograph to make it glow.

He is the master who would not take apprentices. "Even I can hardly make a living. Why would I want to ruin a young person's life?"



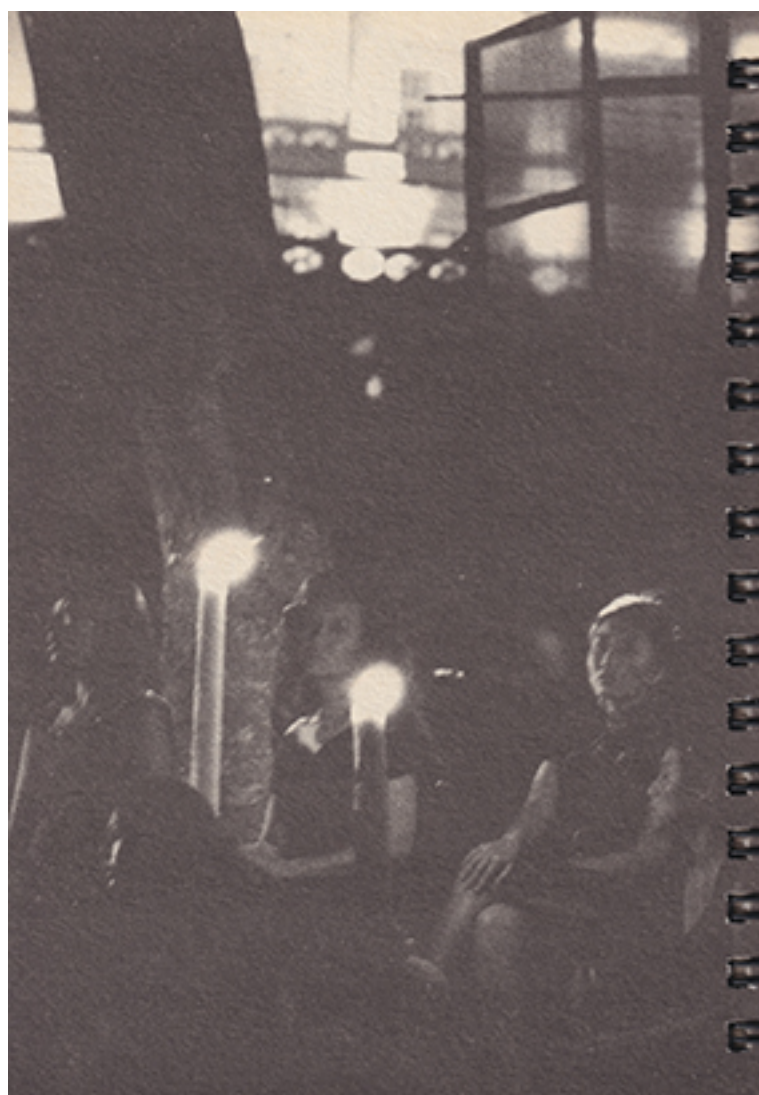
KAMPUNG

~

Zamry: I used to live at Kampung Geylang Serai Lorong Tiga. I was seven then. Life was all play for us boys. I can remember their names: Ahmad hitam, Wan selengah, Abu pendek and Ali gemuk. We were just drifting, some say. But no. We knew a lot of things. Important things. Like where the spiders would be hiding.

Noor: I first learnt Mandarin when I was five. My aunty enrolled me in a PAP kindergarten near my kampung. Most people I meet would automatically think I am Chinese. No one has called me "Eh Minah!" Ah Mui... Yes! No Minah. I thank my aunty for her far-sightedness, because people still mistake me for someone I am not. I enjoy shocking them: Wo bu shi hua ren. Wo shi ma lai ren. Ming jiao Noorlinah Mohamed.

From a performance by Zamry Kamis and Noorlinah Mohamed



K O - T A I

The ko-tai is an open-air show performed at night, on a stage set up in big fields or along the streets in the heart of the city.

The audience gathers in the open space. No chairs are provided. Those who live nearby bring their own while others watch, sitting by their door-steps. Children clamber on stage, eyes shining.

Spectators pass comments and imitate the sounds or motions on stage, praise the beauty of actresses or express their disgust with expletives. Cheh! There is chattering, laughing, shouting, even fighting.

After awhile, people wander to the hawker stalls which line the sides of the stage for drinks and snacks. Then they may linger to gossip, head home or return to relish the amusements of the road show.

Adapted from Ko-tai: A New Form of Chinese Urban Street Theatre in Malaya, Tan Sook Beng, ISEAS, 1984



POLAR CAFE

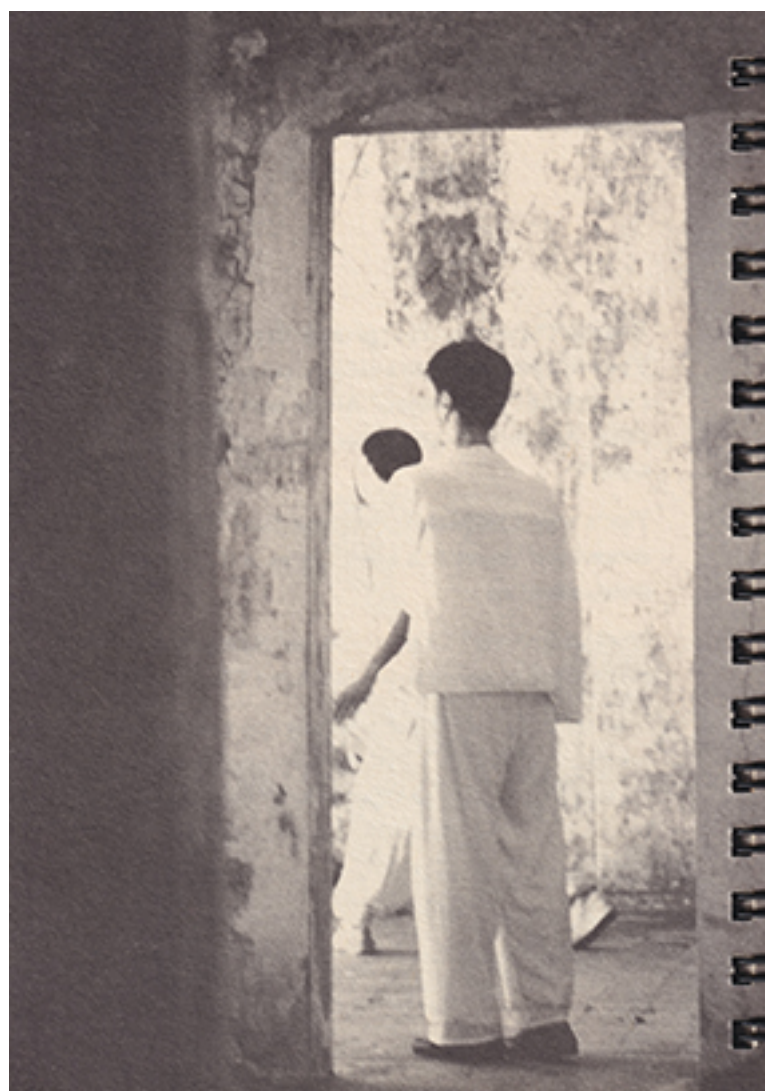
You can't be serious about going to Beauty World?
You can't just walk into a cabaret and say "Hello!
I'm looking for my father," All the men there will
panic. And how do you know which one is your
father?

That's why I'm thinking of going there to work
undercover. Maybe that way I can learn if anyone
knows anything.

Work undercover? Oh goodness, no! Nice girls do
not go and work undercover in a cabaret, Oh no, no!

I don't have a choice! That's the only way I can find
out about my past. I don't know how else to start.
If my father has some connection with Beauty
World, I will find some way of contacting him.

From the musical Beauty World by Michael Chiang and Dick Lee



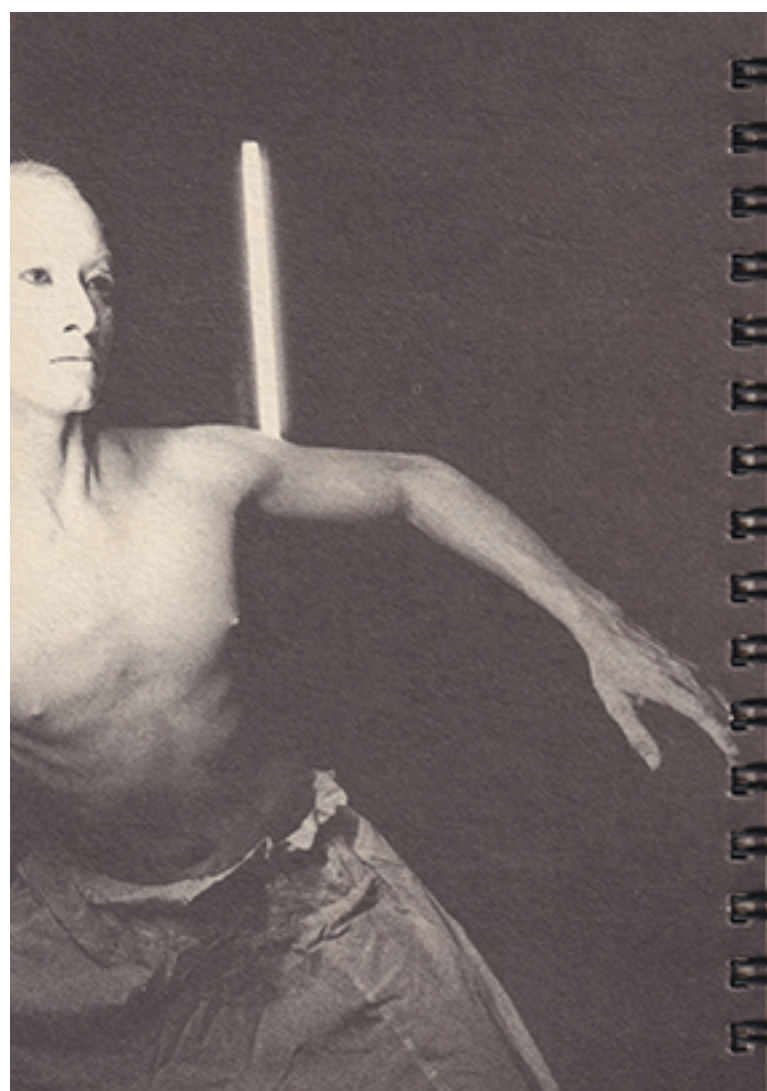
SHOWING MOVIES

I started peddling on a bicycle with a small projector and a screen strapped to my back. People followed me like moths which stick to the light from the projector. That is the power of cinema.

One day, a thunder storm forced me to hold a screening in an abandoned shed. It was a Harold Lloyd comedy, which made everyone irritated because they really wanted Chaplin. Apart from the sound of the rain beating down on the zinc roof, there was booing and hissing and soon people were shouting for their money. Two dapper gentlemen entered from the rain. They were both in white suits and they looked immaculate in spite of being drenched through.

One of them handed cash out and the other came up and said to me: "My name is Shaw and that is my brother, Shaw. We hear you are enterprising. We want to hire you."

From a monologue written and performed by Lim Kay Tong



THREAD OF MEMORY

~

"When I try to prove my own existence it is impossible not to follow the thread of my memories until I reach my mother's womb."

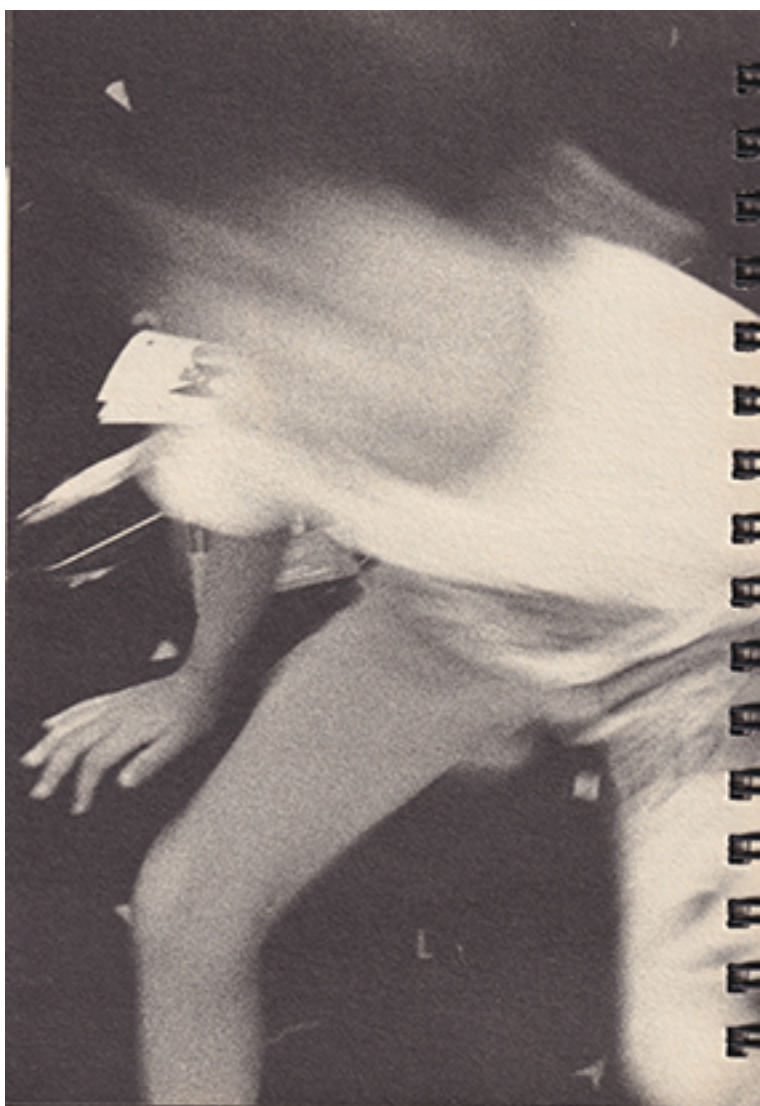
A vague rumbling, the sort of sound mass that a foetus might hear in its mother's womb. He lives... incarnation of emotions; images go through his mind: Childhood memories, a game played in the barn, a ship's mast...

He remembers his mother. She dreams of Ophelia, floating on the river. She does not follow the current, but goes upstream to the source.

"A flounder is swimming within me," she whispers in delirium.

Together they turn toward death. He carries his dying mother on his back. Over and over they cross the border which separates life and death.

Extract from Butoh, Viala & Masson-Sekine, Shufunotomo, 1988



PROJECT TO PROJECT

~

A plan, a design, a cooperative enterprise, a bubble company. No names to accommodate the natural shyness of our people. Multi-media folklore. Lion legends. Kampung nostalgia. Polar Cafe. Rosemary and Ivy. Soul. Soul and spirit. Black and White. Amahs. Black and White. Movies. Projector. Screen. Colourisation. Displacement. No direct contact. Contact. Sex. No sex. No contact. Call 245 748X. Project. Contrivance. Invention. Scheme. The projective quality of sound. Song. Voice. Songbird. B-flat. Ko-tai. Ko-tai. Listen. Listen to the rain. Snowfall. Projecting. Project to protect. Project to change. Transmute. Take a chance. Go away. Change. Change. Perform. Project. Project. Project.



LONGING was first performed in Fort Canning Park from 18 - 27 August 1994. It was conceived and directed by TheatreWorks' Artistic Director, Ong Keng Sen.

All pieces in LONGING were created by:

Jacintha Abisheganaden, Foo May Lyn, Zamry Kamis, Casey Lim, Lim How Ngean, Lim Kay Tong, Lim Yu-Beng, Lok Meng Chue, Robin Loon, Noorlinah Mohamed, Rani Moorthy, Ong Eng Chye, Ong Keng Sen, Rina Ong, K. Rajagopal, Nora Samosir, Cindy Sim, Tan Kheng Hua, Tang Fu Kuen, Alec Tok, Claire Wong and Sheila Wyatt.

The stations in LONGING were:

Thread of Memory

Performed by the Ensemble at the Grand Staircase

Songbird of Syonan

Written by Robin Loon

Performed by Claire Wong and Jacintha Abisheganaden in the Underground Bunker

Showing Movies

Written by Lim Kay Tong

Performed by Lim Kay Tong on the gates of Fort Canning
The film *The Final Cut* by Christine Lim

I Have Heard It Said

Performed by Ong Eng Chye at the Roundabout
Slides by Kenneth Leong

Longing

Cast: Casey Lim, Alec Tok, Lim How Ngean,
K. Rajagopal, Zamry Kamis, Cindy Sim, Sheila Wyatt,
Foo May Lyn, Tang Fu Kuen, Rina Ong and Ong Eng Chye,
with the Ensemble appearing in the video.
Venue: The Memory Shell

Tinted Photographs I

Lim Yu-Beng played The Wayang Kulit Dalang
Alec Tok performed Paper Funeral Offerings
K. Rajagopal performed The Parrot Who Tells Fortunes
Venue: the Sculpture Garden

Tinted Photographs II

Tang Fu Kuen played the Letter Writer's Client
Zamry Kamis played the Bomoh
Ong Eng Chye played the Photoartist
Lim How Ngean played the Barrel Maker
with Casey Lim as his translator
Venue: the Patio
Computer Graphics by Casey Lim

Listening To The Rain

Cast: Lok Meng Chue, Noorlinah Mohamed, Rina Ong,
Rani Moorthy, Nora Samosir, Cindy Sim, Tan Kheng Hua,
Foo May Lyn and Sheila Wyatt
Venue: the Grove
Adapted from Simon Tay's short story 'Catherine
Listening to the Rain' from his book *Stand Alone*
Dramatised by Robin Loon

Ko-tai

Assistant Director: Lok Meng Chue

Cast: Alec Tok, Casey Lim, K. Rajagopal, Lok Meng Chue,
Lim How Ngean and Tang Fu Kuen

Venue: the Courtyard behind the Fort Gate

Sisters

Performed by Nora Samosir, Lok Meng Chue, Rina Ong,
Claire Wong, Noorlinah Mohamed, Foo May Lyn and
Tan Kheng Hua

The cast in the video of Chekov's *Three Sisters* are
Cindy Sim, Rani Moorthy and Sheila Wyatt

Venue: The Old Fort Gate

Inspired by Kenneth Gaw's book, *Superior Servants*

Exiles

Assistant Director: Lim Yu-Beng

Cast: Lim Kay Tong, Lim How Ngean, Tang Fu Kuen,
Zamry Kamis, Casey Lim, Ong Eng Chye, K Rajagopal,
Alec Tok and Lim Yu-Beng

Venue: The Black Box

Adapted from Simon Tay's short story of the same title
from his book *Stand Alone*

Dramatised by Robin Loon

Project to Project I

Performed by Foo May Lyn at the Sally Port

Project to Project II

Performed by Sheila Wyatt and Jacintha Abisheganaden
on the Boulevard by the Grand Staircase

Piercing The Veil

Performed by Rani Moorthy and Cindy Sim in the Tent

Kampung

Performed by Noorlinah Mohamed and Zamry Kamis
at the 9-pound cannon

Slides by Jeannie Ho and Kenneth Leong

Displacement

Cast: Tan Kheng Hua, Lok Meng Chue, Lim Yu-Beng,
Rani Moorthy, Noorlinah Mohamed and Nora Samosir
The Ensemble appears in the video performing Chekov's
Three Sisters

Venue: The Gunpowder Magazine

Polar Cafe

Performed by Jacintha Abisheganaden and
Claire Wong in the Courtyard
From the musical *Beauty World* by
Michael Chiang and Dick Lee

THEATREWORKS

is an independent Singaporean theatre company which develops and nurtures professional theatre skills. It is dedicated to reaching a broad section of the community and taking Singapore theatre abroad. The company recognises its responsibility in encouraging awareness on human and social issues. TheatreWorks is inspired by and dedicated to sharing the Magic of Theatre.

TheatreWorks (S) Ltd is a non-profit organisation incorporated in 1985. The company has produced critically-acclaimed productions and is recognised for its refreshing interpretations of plays and its experimental approach. The successful fusion of Western and Eastern dramatic traditions has also earned its reputation as being an innovative company.

The company ensures a balanced repertoire and a varied programme for its audiences with plays ranging from the musical *Beauty World* and *Lao Jiu*, to alternative productions such as *Madam Mao's Memories* and *3 Children*. These four plays have successfully toured the SEA Festival and Tokyo International Festival; the Festival of Perth; the Edinburgh Festival and Japanese cities respectively.

TheatreWorks has also spearheaded training for theatre practitioners: Springboard, a comprehensive programme conducted by UK practitioners; the Writer's Laboratory and the Director's Laboratory. The company also tours schools with its Theatre-in-Education productions.

Besides working with the Singapore creative community, TheatreWorks has engaged in exchange programmes with companies from Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, the UK, United States and Canada.

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