A Few Thoughts on Multiple Identity

Let’s start with my brother. A the dinner table. He finishes his mouthful of rice and looks up. “Mum,” he says, “if you’re from Australia and Dad’s from Malaysia and he’s Chinese and you’re Caucasian and I’m an Australian citizen but we live in Singapore, what does that make me?” We all laugh. It’s finally hit him. The great family joke. My sister and I look at each other, “Lot’s of things,” we say at the same time. Lots of things, but how does it fit together? How does it work? Are you lots of pieces all at once somehow jammed into one not-quite-anything body? Once when I was feeling angry and confused I wrote a poem about a paper doll made of lot of different scraps and pieces who stayed stuck together by sheer force of will. I don’t think it always has to be like that—angry and confused. The pieces are there, alright, but they don’t have to be sharp and jagged, though they are sometimes. I tried writing another poem. This is for you, Tim.

What Is It Like?

A river. There is

There is a a river.

river with water A river with water

like smooth liquid mud that is wide choppy blue.

lolloping, loll lolloping On bright days

against thick the waters seem

and thin wooden posts wide as the sky,

that hold up the white houses,

the edge of a market. jostling for views,

The market leans small concrete specks

over the edge of the water, jumbled behind

wanting to swim, the billow of white yacht sails.

to let roti chanai and muturba At night

float to the surface boys with buckets

in fat oily rings, trail prawn-nets

to let kolo mee along its dark margins.

stream through the water The locals

like bright yellow hair. open a carton of beer.

Iban shops sell beads Girls lie with boys

and ikat cloth on blankets

perched over floorboards beneath a fringe

rich with thick green slime of long, narrow leaves.

on their undersides. We stand on the bridge

We stand on the jetty as the sun

waiting for the sampan man shines through jellyfish

to take us across gliding up river.

in his small, fish-like boat Eight lanes of traffic

to the other side of the water roar from behind.

where we’ve parked our car Hot on our bikes

in a carpark we watch, till

hidden behind the wind whips our sweat

a screen of dark, river-tree leaves. a salt trail of dry.

I wanted to write about how each place exists in the space of the same heartbeat, about how it boggles the mind that two different worlds can exist in the same space of time and not only two but countless, countless, others living moving churning flowing foreign familiar friendly frightening in the one space of breath. I wanted to write about you kicking a rugby ball in Singapore as I brush my teeth in Perth. But it sounded really twee in poetry, so here I am back in prose. What’s it like? That’s a little bit of it. It’ll be different for you, of course, and you’ll have to think of your own words to say it, but I think there’ll be some of the same. Do you mind taking my love and some silly sister words with you?

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From: *Against Certain Capture*
Publisher: Five Islands Press, Wollongong, 2004
ISBN: 1741280559