

Chen Cuifen

First Date

You took me to KAP Macs,
and bought six piece chicken nuggets to share
while I taught you quadratic equations.
We sat near the ball pit with the primary school children,
doing Ten Year Series until all the ice
in my large Milo melted. I still don't know
how to plot the law of diminishing returns
on a graph, even though
you took so long to explain
that even your crispy fries turned soggy.
We ate all of them anyway.

I can eat a whole box of six piece chicken nuggets
by myself now. There is a sign next to me
that says *No Studying*. On my other side,
four teenage boys in white shirts, using calculators
as paperweights. Now you can get fancy latte
from McCafe, but we are all still drinking large Milo.
Lasts longer. They know they'll be here
for hours. I don't remember
if you passed your A Maths in the end.
I don't know where you are now. My daughter says
I come here so much—
I must really love those nuggets. I tell her
she can try them when she's older.

Moving House

I opened a box and left it
in the middle of my room. When night fell,
I looked inside.

It was full of little dust specks.
It was full of air that blew in from my backyard,
damp with the afternoon storm, and the sticky smell
of a *cempedak* that fell off its branch, split open.
It was full of lazy chirps from sleepy crickets,
and the rusty squeak of the garden swing.

Most of all, it was full of light spilling
through my blinds:
light too big to scoop with my hands,
light gleaming across the mighty, muddy flood
that swelled the banks of the *longkang* outside my window,
sweeping up gravel, branches, tadpoles.

There was a yellowing pile of school books at my feet,
winter jackets and CDs I had to pack,
but there was no more space in that box.
I could have made a tiny house of it,
a boat to float me down the ditchwater current
towards the sea, towards
another island.

What My Net Dragged To The Surface¹

Bones of stingrays, bones of catfish,
and slippery, broken bones of eels were tossed
in a snarl of rope. I plucked out, assembled
bones of a seahorse, swept away by the current,
its tail still coiled
round dried-up kelp, clinging on
to a place it knows. Pressed in the mud,
I found bones of a leaf, torn from its branch
by a monsoon out of season. The skeleton veins
crumbled as I touched them, just like the leaf
you brushed from my hair on a brittle day.
There were pebbles: bones of the earth, knuckle-bones
that rattled a chorus of elegies
to the bones of a boat. The prow was curved
like a collarbone, splinters choking up its throat.
I spread my net on the shore, sifted through
bones of birds, bones of stray cats,
cigarette butts, crushed cans, a glass bottle
with a chip in its rim. You'd cut your lip
if you drank from it. You drank from it anyway.
Elbow-deep in the wreckage, I grit my teeth,
those little bones in my head,
digging up bones of a kite we unwound and lost.
The string in my palms was a twisted spine, its vertebrae
misaligned. The day it slipped from my grasp,
I ran after it. You watched me
from the riverbank. You had already let go.
We have been here before, you and I, drowning our bones
in the tide, making a memorial

of freshwater and ruins. I say
my net has dragged a graveyard to the surface. You say
I have unearthed a cathedral of us.

¹ This poem first appeared in the *Coffee House Poetry* blog announcing winners and place-getters of the Troubadour International Poetry Prize 2018.