

That Nostalgia

SAMPLER

Also by John Mateer

Poetry

Burning Swans  
The Civic Poems  
Anachronism  
(Echo)  
Spitting Out Seeds  
Mister! Mister! Mister!  
Barefoot Speech  
Loanwords  
Makwerekware  
The Ancient Capital of Images / Imaji no Koto  
The Brewery Site: Six Poems  
Words in the Mouth of a Holy Ghost  
Southern Barbarians  
The Republic of the East  
Elsewhere  
The Travels / Viagens  
Ex-white / Einmal-weiß: South African Poems  
The Azanians  
The West: Australian Poems 1989–2009  
Emptiness: Asian Poems 1998–2012  
This Dark Book / Este Livro Escuro  
Unbelievers, or ‘The Moor’  
João (sonnets)

Prose

Semar's Cave: an Indonesian Journal  
The Quiet Slave: a History in Eight Episodes

John Mateer

# That Nostalgia

SAMPLE

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The photograph on the front cover: Max Pam’s  
*Train Station, Coimbra, Portugal, 1991.*

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*“The present is so large, let’s not stray far.”*

—Carlos Drummond de Andrade

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# GODS AND PHOTOS

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(Malaysia. 2016)

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## On the Photograph

—for Jean DeBenardi

Of the spirit inside the person  
possessed, she, the anthropologist,  
and her local informant must ask  
permission to photograph  
the scene and its drama,  
at the small roadside shrine  
or in a family's tiled front-room,  
through the god's own idiom,  
must explain the machinery  
of the camera, its whispering  
glimmer and permanence. Local gods  
speak deep, archaic tongues,  
yet don't understand modern  
things. Even Datuk Puteh, who  
in a kampong Malay, says: "Boleh."  
But with the proviso she must  
promise to never pray  
to the relic of the photo.

## Intimations

### Alley

From under the box against the wall  
he lifts out the reluctant, elongating kitten,  
her clean fur a flash of white, face emphatic, leonine  
in heraldic agony. The man is holding her  
with one hand by the throat, his own face a paroxysm  
of ache. Turning his face away, he,  
two-fingered, inhales from the cigarette,  
then, through the cone of a hand, breathes  
his smoke, like a local god, into the cat's  
confused face. He, shapeless, homeless,  
is a spirit, creating a monster.

### Market

This man, asleep in the open shed,  
on an dirty beach chair, legs up on a crate.  
Between him and the street, cages of  
ducks, fleshy under slimy feathers,  
wriggling, mute. There's another cage  
of birds ready to be consumed too soon,  
all chicken-wings elbowing each other,  
futures crammed-in. Between the cages  
a quick rat is past the sleeping man  
and then into the vacant enclosure  
next to the ducks' cage, into its small fury  
of rats, their fattening, feasting at the bowl  
as if they, too, will be eaten, are next.



## Another, Familiar Century

—for Simryn Gill

A scene from Faulkner, maybe.  
The artist and I on the weathered jetty  
of a town the highway now by-passes,  
its streets possessed by sleeping dogs,  
its rows of shophouses all up  
for sale, and on the boat  
alongside the jetty two youths  
who could be waiting for fish  
or for the collapse of colonies,  
global, even those of bees. The stillness  
is tropical, as before a sunset. Here  
night comes – the imperial novelists  
used to write – like the pulling down  
of a blind. So those young men  
recline and wait, not eavesdropping  
on us, the visitors, on the artist's  
telling me that the mangroves  
there across the river are in Malacca,  
this is a border. Yap Ah Loy,  
the tin mogul who founded KL, came  
ashore here. We'd already visited  
a shrine housing warrior gods she  
hadn't seen elsewhere; there,  
off to one side, raked shelves held  
retired statues like dusty thoughts,  
and we'd seen the tomb of a fifteenth  
century sheikh, Islamicised, patched-up  
with cement, also three slender,  
upright stones wavering like flames  
or cobras, prehistoric, Indic. In  
her presence those sites once  
hallowed had reminded me of her photos

seen over the years: buildings  
megalithic in their abandonment,  
row after row of oil palms,  
and, in her shabby hometown's  
Chinese cemetery, that gigantic fig  
tree, a dark axis mundi. We are on the jetty,  
silent, recalling neither works nor  
words, watching the tide go out,  
its steady flow of smooth brown water,  
and the half-inflated plastic bags, papers,  
other rubbish, and now a marble-white  
jerry-can, like a chunk of civilisation,  
afloat and steadily approaching us  
from a new, familiar century.

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## Nocturnes

### The Cat

They're flood-lit, incompletely.  
Or the families and couples  
on the wall, ocean-side,  
smiling, nodding to  
passers-by, would be more  
silhouettes, and the mainland,  
Butterworth, less than  
illuminated industrial  
skyline, just memory.  
On the flood-lit Padang  
this evening, out of earshot  
of the hawker-stalls, other  
families and couples  
are roaming this ersatz dusk,  
stepping out of silhouettes  
into glimpses, haggling  
with the pedlars whose  
merchandise is on cloths  
spread out like a picnic.  
They are letting the children  
run across quick brightnesses  
to look up at whistling projectiles,  
toys, suddenly arisen, then falling  
like slow stars, encouraging  
the children to blow soap  
bubbles, drifting, rotating planets,  
at other parents and strangers.  
In the humid darkness  
they all are in a dream  
of Malay happiness, and

that white street cat  
is the only cynic,  
because he is asleep  
there on the Padang.

## Snails

These shells, large, alive,  
drawing us into a late  
midnight clarity. The tiles  
of the five-foot way swept  
clean by rain, side streets  
are sudden long lakes,  
and these spiral shells,  
seemingly dropped by  
a beach-comber, are attenuated,  
trumpet-like, but hollow  
for silence, a listening.  
These magnified snail-shells  
on silvery, puckering flesh  
are attentive, sliding on. This  
evening they have escaped  
from a door's rat-hole,  
behind which the ruined  
shophouse is jungle,  
and tomorrow they'll be  
hidden-in-sight, empty  
shells in those nooks  
at the foot of scaffolding  
and doorways, under the lips  
of thresholds. Tomorrow  
night, late, some of their kin  
will be up on these tiled walls,

sliding skyward. And  
behind that blue door  
there will be the jungle,  
fermenting, listening,  
immanent.

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## The Settlement, or “Medan Portugis”

There, at the Portuguese Settlement,  
after being told by the restaurant owner's wife  
that their Chinese shrine was dedicated,  
not to the usual gods, but to two brothers,  
spirits from the nearby islands, and,  
being Roman Catholic, that she doesn't understand  
why someone could be possessed there,  
by the spirits there, right there, at the shrine  
in the half of the restaurant that's vacant,  
open to the patio, after that we entered de Mello's, the village bar,  
its walls hung with crests of those Lusitanian noble clans  
that landed and conquered, their men marrying locals,  
hung with scarves of Benfica and Porto, those football tribes.  
And there in a corner is a yellowing newspaper cutting  
about Andrew's country-and-western band,  
famous in Penang in the 90s, Andrew who objects  
to his mother-tongue being called Kristang: "It's Malaccan Portuguese!  
I can speak with anyone who comes here from Lisbon,  
and they will understand. Even the former President of Portugal,  
now Secretary General of the UN. He was in my bar  
and we spoke together." Andrew de Mello, who years ago  
was notorious for sometimes dressing as a Sioux chieftain  
and who is now in red vest and matching jeans,  
his rockers' haircut Seventies-style. Face lit by  
his laptop screen, he's crooning obscure ballads  
to a poppy backing-track, being timeless, Portuguese,  
and at home.

## Pudu, KL

Midnight. Can't be the neighbour  
playing opera, that low humming  
less than half remembered  
from the dream that's woken  
me. Opening my window over  
the foundations of an unbuilt skyscraper,  
a shadowy, vast amphitheatre,  
I hear the singing as real, Cantonese.  
But not rising up from that concrete  
emptiness. No, this reverberance  
is from there, that nearby vacant, multi-storey  
carpark: a music only for spirits, or ghosts,  
at this KL hour when even the homeless  
are gone.