

ENTERING IN

The Immigrant Imagination

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THE TWO WORDS “IMMIGRANT” and “emigrant” have always fascinated me because of the gestures implicit in their prefixes, a leaving something behind (with its backward look) and an entering into something new.* The old-world nostalgia of the emigré must colour my notion of an emigrant imagination because i think of that imagination as rooted, bound up in, the place left, the “old country,” “home,” and preoccupied with recreating that place, whether out of nostalgia (a longing to return) or fury (that avenging spirit that cannot let go of old wounds). I think of Joyce and Marquez as two poles of the emigrant imagination.

The immigrant imagination seems to me, on the contrary, to embrace the new place it enters. It seeks to enter into its mystery, its this-ness, to penetrate it imaginatively even as it enters from outside. I think of Malcolm Lowry and Mexico, Audrey Thomas and Africa — does this mean all travel writing is writing from the immigrant imagination? Only i think when it genuinely struggles to pierce the difference, the foreignness, the mystery of the new place with its other culture, as it does in these two writers.

Looking back, i think that most of my writing has been a vehicle for entry into what was for me the new place, the new world. I immigrated to Vancouver from Malaysia as a child aged nine and spent many years trying so hard to assimilate, to speak and dress and behave as a West Coast Canadian, that when people asked where i came from i would say “Oh, North Van.” Though my parents’ house was filled with furniture and curios and articles of clothing from Malaysia, though they both spoke with British accents and shared a common wealth of memories from Penang days with us — “remember Eng Kim? remember Camrille?” — though we all wore Chinese slippers around the house (and i still do), out in the street i tried to look as much like a normal North Van. teen-ager as i could. For the sake of entry and acceptance i denied for years my history and that of my parents.

*From a talk given as part of a panel, “The Immigrant Imagination,” at a Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies session, May 30, 1983, at the Learned Societies Conference, U.B.C.

My mother came from a colonial medical family that had been in India for two generations: she was born there, as was her mother. She met my father in Malaysia where she had joined her parents after graduating from an English private school. My father came from a military family, had lived as a child in India and Malta, had gone out to Malaysia as a young C.A. and, except for the war years when Malaysia was occupied by the Japanese and he was serving with the Australian navy, he spent almost twenty years in Penang before immigrating to Canada. They both referred to England as home when i was a child, and yet they chose not to go home when they left Penang. I grew up with two nostalgias in our house: the nostalgia for England, which, having spent only some months there, i didn't really understand; the nostalgia for Penang, which i could share though it was effaced by my enthusiasm for *this* place here. I loved this place, loved the woods out our back door, the Grouse Mountain streets, the inlet and the sparkling lights of "overtown" at night. I dreamed harbour dreams and Stanley Park dreams and Lonsdale Avenue dreams and nightmares. I wanted to "belong" here, be "from" here, but i found there were differences not easy to bridge.

We came from a colonial multicultural situation in Penang where five languages were spoken in our house (English, Malay, Cantonese, Tamil, Thai) to a city which was then (1951) much more monocultural than it is today, decidedly WASP, conservative, and suspicious of newcomers. We spoke the same language but not the same dialect and were consequently made fun of at school. We wore different clothes, ate slightly different foods. I learned to say tomayto instead of tomahto, sweater instead of woolly, i learned to speak of catchers and basemen, i learned to square dance, learned to wear nylon slippers instead of woollen "vests," learned not to bring curry tarts to school in my lunchbox. Thirty years ago, American culture hadn't infiltrated the rest of the world as it has now. When i arrived, i'd never seen baseball (i'd never even seen snow), i didn't know what a parka was, or jeans, or a hamburger. I knew what orange squash was but not Mountain Dew or Dr. Pepper or Coca Cola. I'd never heard of bubble gum or jawbreakers or chickenbones. Here i heard country and western music for the first time and loved the stories in it. I discovered Mark Trail in cereal boxes and a completely new range of fauna and flora outdoors, from skunk cabbage to cougars (my little sister had nightmares about cougars for years). Where we lived in the last block of a street that stopped at a ridge too steep to pave, bears periodically raided our garbage cans. I was used to wild monkeys terrorizing our chickens in the garden in Penang and bears seemed much more exotic. Yet if i talked about the monkeys or the cobras and scorpions at school, the other kids thought *that* was so exotic i must be making it up. In this i experienced a turning upside down of the world, an inversion of values. It permeated everything. I had been taught politeness, "excuse me," and "thank you," as an essential oil to smooth the rough edges of

racial and class differences. Here it was taken as a prissy assertion of difference — “why do you keep saying ‘sorry’ all the time?” I learned that reading historical romances like *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, or reading Keats and Tennyson (my mother’s view of a basic education) taught me nothing of any social use if i hadn’t read Nancy Drew or heard of Bill Haley and the Comets.

So i bought rock ’n roll records, put away my mother’s copies of Keats and Tennyson, wore white bucks and jeans and pencil-line skirts. I loved the principles of democracy as we argued them out in school, loved Canadian history with its romance of the coureurs de bois, the Métis uprising, Simon Fraser tracing rivers, Pauline Johnson and Emily Carr recording a culture as exotic as any Malay kampong’s — yet here it had something to say about the plants and rocks and animals we lived and would go on living among. (I didn’t stop, then, to question the application of “democracy” to reservations.) Wanting to sing “O Canada” along with everyone else at school (we did in those days), i enthusiastically became a Canadian citizen.

Only later, years later, did i begin to feel that, like a phantom limb, part of me, that Penang past, not quite cut off, still twitched alive and wanted acknowledging. Twenty-five years after we had left Penang, i went back for a visit with my father and sister, living in the first house we had lived in as a family, sleeping in the same bedroom, finding in the amah of the house the same woman who had been our children’s amah back then. Out of that grew, for the first time, some Penang writing, as similarly going back to England five years later sparked in *How Hug a Stone* some English writing (an attempt to capture that voice, that ethos, i recognized from my childhood). Yet both returns were incomplete, intercut always with my present Canadian consciousness, so that neither writing is truly emigrant.

When i collected an oral history of Strathcona with Carole Itter (*Opening Doors*), i discovered how isolated my experience as an immigrant had been. Strathcona is the immigrant neighbourhood of Vancouver, has functioned as such for decades. It lies adjacent to commercial Chinatown and is now largely Chinese though it was known as Little Italy, once was the first Jewish settlement, once (before the war) had a school population that was sixty percent Japanese. I lived in it for six years and felt completely at home, felt as if part of me had been returned to the whole i’m still discovering. But what astonished me was how collective the immigrant experience was amongst the people we interviewed, whether they were Japanese, Chinese, Italian, Yugoslavian, or Jewish. Most immigrant children seemed to have grown up in extended families formed by the phenomenon of “calling over,” where one member immigrates and then gradually calls over other members of his family to the new country. In addition, there were numerous regional associations, from the Chinese tong or clan houses, to the

Italian district groups. All of this helped keep the original culture alive by celebrating festivals in traditional ways and gathering people together with traditional rituals at weddings, christenings, funerals, etc.

I can only remember one family we knew who had a similar background to ours and they ended up moving to Toronto. We children made friends at school, my father made friends at the office, my mother, being at home all the time, was more isolated. There were no relatives living a few blocks away. There were no neighbours to chat with who might have come from the same district in the old country, even the same town. In fact, my mother had no district in England her family could be said to come from.

So the nostalgia for England (where her parents had retired) and for Penang increased at home as our assimilation, as children, increased outside in the neighbourhood and at school. My mother wanted to keep up “English” in our values as we struggled very hard to become Canadian. This led to a deepening neurosis i could neither understand nor address, as it increased my determination to leave all that behind and completely enter into this place here.

It seems to me that the situation of being such an immigrant is a perfect seedbed for the writing sensibility. If you don’t belong, you can *imagine* you belong and you can construct in writing a world where you do belong. You can write your way into the world you want to be a part of (*Vancouver Poems, Steveston*), even as, from outside it, you witness its specific characteristics. (The first piece of writing i had published was a sketch i wrote in school in which i was Gassy Jack reminiscing at the end of my life on the growth of Gastown. It was published in a local PTA magazine, probably as an example of regional sensibility, but what i was doing was trying to write myself into the history of a city i wanted to belong in and felt i didn’t, quite.)

The sensation of having your world turned upside down or inverted also, i think, leads to a sense of the relativity of both language and reality, as much as it leads to a curiosity about other people’s realities (the kind of curiosity that makes you wander by lit rooms at night and invent characters who live in them — a basic fictional urge). It leads to an interest in and curiosity about language, a sense of how language shapes the reality you live in, an understanding of how language is both idiosyncratic (private) and shared (public), and the essential duplicity of language, its capacity to mean several things at once, its figurative or transformational powers. When you are told, for instance, that what you call earth is really dirt, or what you have always called the woods (with English streams) is in fact the bush (with its creeks), you experience the first split between name and thing, signifier and signified, and you take that first step into a linguistic world that lies adjacent to but is not the same as the world of things, and indeed operates on its own linguistic laws.

The sensation of living in *this* place with its real people and things, of being contained in it, but knowing that somewhere else there exists *that* place, with its real people and things which you can no longer go back to, the sense that the you you were in that place is not the same you as the you you are in this place, though the two overlap, produces a desire to knit the two places, two (at least) selves, somehow. I think that writers who feel this way are often interested in myth and symbol which are common to disparate phenomena and form a universal language underlying the specifics of the local — which is why, perhaps, so much early Canadian literature is full of myth and symbol. Now we make our exegesis of the difference using montage, using juxtaposition, knitting disparate and specific images from both places. Seeing the world as multidimensional as possible and ourselves present within it.

from TOUCH TO MY TONGUE

this place full of contradiction

a confusion of times if not of place, though you understood when i said no not the Danish Tearoom, the Indonesian or Indian, was in fact that place of warm walls, a comfortable tarot deck even the lamps pick up your glow, a cabin of going, fjords in there, a clear and pristine look the winds weave through your eyes i'm watching you talk of a different birth, blonde hair on my tongue, of numbers, nine aflush with cappuccino and brandy and rain outside on that street we flash down down, laughing with no umbrella, i see your face because i don't see mine equally flush with being, co-incident being together we meet in these far places we find in each other, it's Sappho i said, on the radio, always we meet original, blind of direction, astonished your hand covers mine walking lowtide strands of Colaba, the lighthouse, Mumbai meaning great mother, you wearing your irish drover's cap and waiting alive in the glow while i come up worrying danish and curry, this place full of contradiction — you know, you knew, it was the one place i meant.

houseless

i'm afraid, you say, are you? out in the wintry air, the watery sun welling close behind your shoulders i am following, the already known symmetry of your body, its radiant, bow-woman arched over

me, integrity straight as an arrow. blind with joy i say oh no, thinking, how could i fear with you?

and now it's dark in here, deep, my cave a house, you on the other side of the country, our country of sea with the wind blowing, our country of reeds and grasses under unfathomed sky. i huddle small, i call you up, a tiny point of light, memory small like a far-off hole — are you there? in all this smoke, fear, images torn from the wall requiring life for a life / that she take it all, mother of giving turned terrible mother, blood-sipper, sorrow Durga. turning her back, she takes back what she gives, as you might, or i might. giving myself up to fear. turning away (for "safety's" sake).

there are no walls. fear/love, this light that flashes over the sea surrounding us. signals danger, yes, my house no house. i can only be, no vessel but a movement running, out in the open, out in a dark and rising tide, in risk, knowing who i am with you —

creatures of ecstasy, we have risen drenched from our own wet grasses, reeds, sea. turned out, turned inside out, beside ourselves, we are the tide swelling, we are the continent draining, deep and forever into each other.

where we went

we went to what houses stars at the sea's edge, brilliant day, where a metal crab jets water catching light, heaven and earth in a tropic embrace joined upright, outside glass doors people and cars and waterglaze. city that houses stares, city that houses eyes, electricity writing the dark of so many heads figuring where we were. we knew so well i didn't even catch your eye as we stepped through and she brought out the rings for us to look at, silver, moon metal engraved in the shape of wild eyes by kwakiutl and haida hands, raven and wolf and whale and unknown birds not seen in the light city. creatures of unorganized territory we become, a *physical impulse* moving from me to you (the poem is), us *dancing in animal skins* in the unmapped part of our world. now you wear whale on the finger that enters and traces in whale walrus the horse you thought i was, shy of fences, running the edge of the woods where brought up short i feel the warmth of you, double you, wolf. i wear wolf and dream of your lean breast descending, warm and slow the fur that grows between your eyes fifteen hundred miles away in another city under the same moon.