

Foreword

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IT SEEMS SOMEONE switched David McKirdy's cradle and mine shortly after birth. It might have made our lives easier if they hadn't. He's lived in Hong Kong as an accidental occidental and I've lived mine in the West as anglo-accented oriental. We both get stared at a lot. People are as stunned by his flawless Cantonese as they are by my perfectly reasonable English. Home is where the heart is, they say. What if your heart belongs on an airplane? or a slow boat from China?

I write this thinking of the last time I saw Dave, in a small bar on the thirty-third floor of a modestly sized Hong Kong hotel, at the height of the SARS crisis, at twenty-some degrees Celcius. It's minus thirty here in Calgary. I'm laid up recovering from last week's snowboarding tumble, in my spacious if run-down apartment on the second floor of a squat brick three-story walk-up. Dave's heart and my heart are at home in some funny places.

There are all these signs of difference—on our bodies and on our landscapes—that mark us as strange. That strangers can't help but remark on. The body in space is a public object. It's open season for light commentary that keeps the unexpected body and itself always off-kilter, out of whack, discombobulated. That's where the urge to write comes from, I think, and where this remarkable collection of poetry and artwork comes from. It emerges from a desire to say "Hey, don't even begin to assume you know what you're looking at. This is what's really going on." What makes these poems extraordinary is their negotiation of fraught spaces—between Englishness and Chineseness, between illness and health, between family and way of life, between care of self and care for others.

His first poem "Abroad in England" is already conscious of its own irony. That someone called "David McKirdy" who looks decidedly more English than Chinese should feel like a traveller in the country of his forebears strikes us as odd, but in a way that forces us as readers to question why we expect someone who looks like Dave to feel at home somewhere where he's spent so very little of his life. Further, that he should recognise Blake's "green and pleasant land" as nothing more than a colonial myth, one that has disconcerted and angered many of the colonized, is also unexpected. But why should it be? He has been as deceived as any other "Asian." Our expectations of race and nation are thrown into contest only because they were faulty to begin with. Dave is pushing us to ask those questions.

Perhaps Hong Kong has already entered that "multicultural" moment we Canadians seem to pride ourselves in so much, even if we can't quite put it into practice. Perhaps it is time the term "British-Chinese" rolled off the hyphenated tongue with the same ease (and awkwardness) as "Chinese-Canadian."

This is not to parallel our situations any more than the English language, with its odd tendency to make equivalences of experience that are wildly disparate, already tends to do. These poems are grounded in a particular life—of recovery from serious illness, of motorbike racing, of negotiating friendships, partnerships and family relationships, of watching politics and culture, of saying yes, this is my world, all of it, and I have a stake.

These poems consider daily life at the level of experience, family, love, politics, health and belonging. They are located in a practice of humanity that is sometimes geographical, sometimes racialized, sometimes global, and sometimes fidgeting under the belly of a classic car. Enjoy them.

Larissa Lai is the author of two novels: When fox is a thousand and Salt fish girl