

# Ways of Remembering to Write Home

## Simone Lazaroo

### Summary

This article draws on my own and some of my family's search for home and belonging, exploring links between these experiences and the development of characters in my novels and short stories, mostly as migrants seeking meaning and identity at the intersection of cultures. I draw on my own cultural background of migration from Singapore to Australia with my Anglo-Australian mother and with my Eurasian father, whose lineage includes family from Malacca and Singapore descended from 16th century Portuguese seafarers' partnerships with Malay women. I will occasionally refer to aspects of the "Kristang" culture, the name for Eurasians descended from those partnerships; and to my father and his siblings' and parents' lives in Singapore during British colonial occupation and since.

I refer to family photographs and anecdotes, historical documents and excerpts from my creative writing to draw parallels between the "real" and the "re-imagined" contexts, including the influence of the British Empire and the White Australia Policy as they affect two generations of a family's capacity to feel "at home". I use Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" to help explicate how familial anecdotes and photographs inform some of my writing. Brief extracts from my published and current work-in-progress suggest further issues about home and belonging arising from migration.

### Opsomming

Hierdie artikel delf in my eie en sommige van my familie se soeke na 'n tuiste en om te behoort, deur skakels tussen hierdie ervarings en die ontwikkeling van karakters in my romans en kortverhale te verken, meestal as migrante wat by die kruising van kulture na betekenis en identiteit soek. Ek put uit my eie kulturele agtergrond van migrasie van Singapoer na Australië met my Anglo-Australiese moeder en my Eurasiëse vader, wie se afkoms familie uit Malakka en Singapoer insluit wat afstam van 16de-eeuse Portugese seevaarders se vennootskappe met Maleise vroue. Ek sal nou en dan verwys na aspekte van die "Kristang"-kultuur, die naam vir Eurasiërs wat uit hierdie vennootskappe gebore is; en na die lewe van my vader, sy broers en susters en ouers in Singapoer tydens Britse koloniale besetting en sedertdien.

Ek verwys na familiefoto's en anekdotes, historiese dokumente en uittreksels uit my kreatiewe skryfwerk om parallele te trek tussen die "werklike" en die "verbeelde" kontekste, insluitend die invloed van die Britse Ryk en die Wit Australië Beleid, in die mate waarin dit twee geslagte van 'n familie se vermoë om "tuis" te voel, beïnvloed. Ek gebruik Marianne Hirsch se konsep van "postgeheue" om te help verklaar hoe familiale anekdotes en foto's sommige van my skryfwerk inspireer. Kort uittreksels uit my gepubliseerde werk en werk in wording belig verdere vraagstukke oor huis en om te behoort wat uit migrasie voortspruit.

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## **Introduction**

Migration has fractured my Eurasian heritage, a heritage which I have known mainly through familial photos and anecdotes, memories that were riven with gaps and disconnections. By early adulthood, my growing awareness of this heritage triggered return visits to Singaporean and Malaccan relatives, and attempts to memorialise Eurasian family members and the sites where they dwelt in Malacca and Singapore. Around the same time, I sought to retrieve my immediate family's experiences as migrants of "colour" in Australia between the late 1950s-1980s and supplement my incomplete knowledge of this seemingly severed Eurasian heritage, caused in part by our migration when I was a young child. My search for familial memories coalesced with a desire to access the cultural memories of the Eurasian context through archival photographs and narratives, remains of the past that directly fed my work as a fiction writer. This article will explore some of the familial and cultural memories, narratives and photographs I accessed, but also consider how particular approaches to reconstructing those fragments of the past into my writing illuminates related concepts of longing, belonging, memory, memorialisation and home.

## ***Saudade***

My siblings and I might be considered "multicultural" rather than "bi-cultural", for our mother had English and Scottish grandfathers and two French grandmothers, and my father, his siblings and parents identified culturally as Kristang people, the name for Portuguese-Eurasians in Malaya and Singapore descended from those Portuguese who sailed to Malacca in the sixteenth century and partnered with local Malay women. Several histories address Captain Albuquerque's sixteenth century voyage to Goa, but neglect to mention that Malacca was another of his ports of call.



*Figure 1*

*Figure 1* is a photo of my great-grandparents, Simang Marbeck and Dolphine Varella of Malacca, with their children. Dolphine, then about twenty-three years old, wears the traditional Malayan sarong kebaya and three brooches very similar in shape to those worn in traditional Portuguese dress. But the clothes worn by Simang and the children seem to reflect the British colonial era in which they lived, except of course for the naked baby on Dolphine's lap. Presumably while they posed for this photo, the nappyless baby would've made Dolphine at least as worried about timing as the photographer would have been. The oldest daughter in the family is my paternal grandmother Rose, who married Daniel Lazaroo.

*Figure 2* (below) is a photo taken of my father with two of his three sisters and his parents, Rose and Daniel Lazaroo, in their family home a few years after the end of World War 2. Rose, (the oldest child in *Figure 1*) and Daniel, who was born near Kuala Lumpur, migrated with their offspring to Singapore several years before the war.

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*Figure 2*

Discussing this photo, my father added that despite the persistence of the British colonial government in Singapore until several years after the war, his parents and oldest sister remained reasonably fluent in the sixteenth century Portuguese dialect of their forebears, often referred to as the Kristang

language. This photograph and the parental narratives it generated informed my writing, as I discuss later in this article.

My father occasionally spoke just a few of those Kristang words in our Australian home, imbued with a kind of longing, it seemed to me, for the home and culture he had left behind. This contributed to my own childhood awareness of losing that familial and cultural heritage. My sense of loss partly accounts for the attempts during young adulthood to somehow memorialise those people and places lost. The urge to memorialise provided the initial impetus to write much of my fiction, and was linked to my preoccupations with the search for home and belonging.

This search for belonging in Australia began for my father when he first travelled from Singapore to Perth in 1954. Singapore, Malaya and Australia were then all part of the British Commonwealth, and my father's passport listed his nationality as British. My father became one of the British Commonwealth's Colombo Plan Scholarship students then. Singapore, Malaya and Australia might have been considered "members of the same family", so to speak, but aspects of the White Australia policy of 1901 were still evident in Australian Department of Immigration student questionnaire forms my father had to complete over those few years. Those forms made note of his "non-European" or "predominantly Asian" appearance.

Sent to the University of Western Australia to study engineering so he could help with building Singapore's infrastructure, my father's experiences with the Australian Department of Immigration at the time also included being directed to apply for registration as an alien under the Aliens Act of 1947. His application form for this is shown in figure 3. Together, these forms reflected the fact that the White Australia Policy's "explicitly anti-Asiatic sentiments", as David Pearson puts it (Pearson 2001: 85) continued to be apparent in Australian Department of Immigration policy in the 1950s.

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I.A.H. COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA  
 Aliens Act, 1947  
**APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION**

Form R.A.I. Certificate No. \_\_\_\_\_

Name (in full) LAZAROO KENNETH SYLVESTER  
(Surname or main name in Block letters) (Christian or other names)

Previous name or alias (if any) \_\_\_\_\_

Present address 410 University Commission Heidelberg  
(Phone WM2982. Mr Perry on.)

Federal electorate \_\_\_\_\_

Nationality British (Singapore) nationality (if any) Irish

Birthplace { Town or City Singapore Date of birth 9/1/34 Sex M.  
 Country \_\_\_\_\_

Married or single single Occupation Student

Name and address of firm or employer Commonwealth Government

Date of arrival in Australia 9/1/54 Port of arrival Singapore

Name of vessel or aircraft \_\_\_\_\_

Height 5 ft 8 1/2 inches; Colour of hair Black Colour of eyes Brown

Build Normal Marks \_\_\_\_\_

If registered under the National Security (Aliens Control) Regulations, number of certificate of registration \_\_\_\_\_

Date of issue \_\_\_\_\_ Place of issue \_\_\_\_\_

If married, details of husband or wife as the case may be and of children under the age of 16 years:—

Name	Address	Birthplace	Sex	Date of birth
Wife/husband _____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Children _____	_____	_____	_____	_____

220  
8/11/54

(Signature of applicant) [Signature]  
 (Date) 12/2/54

(Signature of witness) [Signature]  
 (Title) Registration Officer  
 (Date) 12/2/54

**THIS SPACE FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY**

Number of Certificate issued \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date of issue \_\_\_\_\_  
 Issued by \_\_\_\_\_

\* For instructions regarding the completion of this form see back hereof.

Figure 3

However, as the photo of my father on the form indicates, it was difficult to be sure what kind of Asian my father might be, based solely on his appearance. It seems Australian immigration officers used “Asian” as a kind of convenient administrative abbreviation when they had to answer on the student questionnaire form the awkwardly expressed question *Whether predominantly of European Race and appearance?*

Although my father’s Malayan birth certificate designates his parents and him as “British Subjects”, he was directed to re-register as an alien with the Department of Immigration each year he entered Australia to study from the mid to late 1950s. Other correspondence between my father and the Department of Immigration in those years shows they sometimes took months to approve this registration, a fact that caused him considerable anxiety. I only retrieved copies of some of these documents from the National Archives of Australia after my father died. I wondered if they partly explained why he had had recurrent nightmares and hallucinations about not having a valid passport, particularly in the months before he died. Those and his decades-long sense of “not belonging” inform the following extract from one of my current stories-in-progress, titled “Bodies of Water”.

After the nursing home matron rang me to say he was dying, my mother agreed to visit him for the first time since their divorce. She wore her best summer dress and lipstick, but my father’s eyes were closed when we entered his room; his head sinking into his pillow. Had we arrived too late?

“Dad?” I said softly. “I’ve brought Mum to see you.”

My father opened his eyes swiftly, reached out his thin trembling hand to her and gazed at her face.

“Hullo my love”, she said.

“About ... time. I’ve been ... waiting ... years for ... the dam to break”, he rasped. “Can you... stop my ... watch ticking ... so loud?” he asked me. The Rolex awarded to him in 1960 by the Singaporean government for designing the new water pipelines was smeared with pureed nursing home food. “How’s the ... garden?”

“Still growing.” Mum sat in the vinyl chair, stroking his hand. “How are you after all these years?”

“I keep dreaming ... I have no passport and cannot ... stay.”

“Here or in Singapore?”

“Both. The only place I ... belong ... is in those ... sewers I dug ... in Singapore. With Hantu Maligang.”

“That Malay ghost of the Underworld?”

“And of the afterlife”, he murmured.

My mother looked at me. “Give us some time alone together?”

Clutching his Rolex, I backed through the doorway into the corridor, but couldn’t stop myself from watching them.

“How do you feel?” my mother asked him.

His eyes widened with the effort of remembering. “I feel ... that I could do with ... some longevity noodles from ... that hawker near Singapore harbour.”

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She smiled. “Ah. Our wedding night.” She lowered her voice. “I am sorry I was never any good at it.” I had to concentrate to hear her words. “Something terrible happened to me when I was a small child, you see, which caused me pain when we .... “She glanced up, saw me listening, stopped talking”.

I took a few steps back. The corridor was warm with the end of another Perth summer’s day, but I couldn’t help shivering.

My mother murmured something to Dad that I couldn’t hear.

“Why ... didn’t you ... tell me ... all those ... years ... ago?” he rasped.

“I thought you wouldn’t want me if you knew.”

Their murmuring stopped. I peered through the doorway again. In the dim room, their gaunt old faces were only just visible. But I saw that my father and my mother understood each other more than they had when they were married. Through the window behind them, I thought I could just make out waves rising and spending themselves on the shore before returning and merging with the Indian Ocean.

“So much ... we haven’t ... told each other”, my father finally said.

“How many of our stories stay untold because we’re ashamed of them?” My mother patted the back of his hand.

“History ... never ... ends ....”, he replied vaguely. In the long pause, I heard his watch ticking.

“We had a beautiful child, didn’t we?” my mother said at last, more than loud enough for me to hear, glancing over at me in the corridor.

My father nodded proudly. “And ... clever. Swam like ... a champion, even in your belly. Birth-weight ... eleven pounds. What a ... monster.”

“The meeting of two civilisations, from which good things grow.” My mother smiled.

“How long ... will you ... stay ... with ... me?” he asked.

“How long do you want me to stay?”

“Endlessly”, he said, closing his eyes, gripping her hand more tightly and floating through the twilight with her into the deep.

It is possible my father could have experienced a less intense sense of “not belonging” in Singapore, just prior to coming to Australia. Myrna Braga-Blake outlines the sense of displacement suffered by Eurasian people in Singapore generally since World War II citing the omission of “Eurasian” as a separate racial and cultural category from national statistics since 1957 as an example of the further devaluation of Eurasians, this time by a government favouring Mandarin as the official language (Braga-Blake 1992: 19). She cites the post-Independence governmental policy of relocation of Singaporean Eurasians from the housing enclaves and kampongs they shared with other Eurasians as another factor contributing to their feelings of displacement.

In 1959, my father had returned to Singapore as a qualified engineer and my Australian mother, whom he had met at the University of Western Australia, followed him to Singapore where they married. As their wedding photo (*Figure 4*) suggests, my father’s extended family in Singapore were multi-cultural to an extent that would have been unusual in Australia at the time, despite its proximity to Asia.





*Figure 4*

Two of my siblings and I were born in the early 1960s, when the majority of Singapore's Eurasians, including my father and his siblings, had been re-located from the old Eurasian enclaves into dispersed apartments in large blocks shared with people from other ethnic groups. Yet, even after marrying people from other races, after the bulldozing of their parents' house near one of those old enclaves and subsequent dispersion to apartments, their sense of belonging to a Eurasian community endured. They continued to meet on Sundays with other Eurasians at Saint Joseph's (the Portuguese Mission Catholic church in Singapore they had attended with their parents), on

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celebratory occasions such as weddings, anniversaries and birthdays, and on numerous less formal occasions.

Our migration in 1964 ruptured such contact with other Singaporean Eurasians. In Australia, we knew no other Eurasians or people from other Asian countries, in part because aspects of the White Australia Policy were still being administered then. My Anglo-Australian grandfather, then a senior public servant with the Western Australian government, told me in my early adolescence that he had had to “pull a few strings” to enable my dark-skinned father and us to migrate to Australia, despite our Australian mother. I discovered only a few years ago when I tried to access my father’s Department of Immigration files in the National Archives of Australia, that the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) had investigated my father before he was granted permission to migrate with us to Australia. As Susan Strehle points out, “Bonds of attachment to nation and home are reinvigorated by perceptions of threat.” She goes on to argue, “As implied by the importance of enforceable borders and lockable doors, home and homeland are imagined communities based on the exclusion or assimilation of the foreign.” (Strehle 2008: 6)



*Figure 5*

My father and two of my siblings were the only people of “Asian” appearance living in our suburb until several years after we migrated. *Figure 5* shows me flanked by these two siblings, who bore the brunt of racist taunts in the schoolyard. However, there were a few Aboriginal families in the State Housing Commission suburb just down the road from us. This had unforeseen and unfortunate repercussions for my father. One evening, he returned home visibly shaken from a visit to the shopping centre between the two

neighbourhoods. I overheard him telling my mother that two policemen forced him against a wall there, accusing him of theft and insulting him with various racist terms sometimes used against Aboriginals.

This particular incident informed scenes in my writing, most recently in the extract from my current work-in-progress here:

The evening my father picked up his gleaming new white 1968 Valiant Safari station wagon, he drove it down to the post-box near the supermarket to send Christmas cards to his relatives back in Singapore. He'd returned with a carton of Jeye's Disinfectant, on special that week. Shaking, he'd put the box on the kitchen table and sat, head in his hands.

"Ah yah!"

"What's wrong?" Mum asked.

"Two cops pushed me against the supermarket wall, lah! Asked me if I was the boong who'd been stealing there."

"What's a boong?" I asked.

"A name no person should ever be called", said my mother, serving him a larger than normal serving of ice-cream with several heaped tablespoons of Milo on top. "Especially not you, my Love", she told Dad.

"Mercedes will be making achar pickle and curried devil for Christmas. *Saudade*," he said wistfully, before shovelling icecream into his mouth as if fortifying himself against future disasters.

"What's *saudade*?"

"A Portuguese Eurasian word for missing something. Daddy's missing home."

"But this is our home. Isn't it?"

After my father recounted this incident involving the two policemen, I sensed not only his homesickness, but also that perhaps there was something "wrong" in our neighbourhood with being dark-skinned. I had nightmares about running through its streets at night with him, trying to protect him from stones and bottles thrown by faceless pale-skinned people. In the mid to late 1960s, our first Australian neighbourhood provided houses but not always a sense of true home or belonging for people of colour, perhaps not even for the Australian Aboriginal woman who lived down the road from us then.

"Is this your home?" I asked her one day when I walked past her with my father.

She shook her head. "This is a government house. I was stolen from my family when I was a little girl like you."

I cannot remember how I responded to her. But I do recall her saying something like "Don't worry. Home is inside us. Home is what we carry in our hearts."

"What did she mean?" I asked my father after we had walked away.

"Maybe something a bit like *saudade*", my father replied.

I realised only in adulthood that old Aboriginal woman was not merely being sentimental when she told us “Home is what we carry in our hearts”. She was sharing one of her psychological strategies for surviving loss.

The word *saudade* resurfaced again later in my adult life. When I gave an informal talk about my published writing at a university in Singapore in 2015, the academic who had invited me presented me with a book entitled *Saudade*. Subtitled *The Culture and Security of Eurasian Communities in Southeast Asia*, it was written by Antonio Rappa, a Singaporean Eurasian (Rappa 2013: 8). Rappa’s book defined *saudade* as “a Portuguese idiom that symbolises a sense of belonging; a special attachment to a time and place, as well as a desire to retain its memories and hopes. For many Portuguese Eurasians, (...) it became ironic when most Eurasians of Portuguese descent in Southeast Asia eventually never saw Portugal itself” (Rappa 2013: 8).

I first visited Lisbon in 2015. Later, in Lisbon in 2017, one of my Portuguese friends greeted me with “Saudade!” When I asked her what she meant, she said she had missed me. Her use of the word gave me a sense of belonging, both similar to and distinct from, my Portuguese-Eurasian community of origin in Singapore and Malacca.

I subsequently looked up *saudade* in my Portuguese dictionary. I found three definitions:

1. longing; yearning; to miss someone
2. homesickness
3. nostalgia

(*Dicionário de Inglês-Português, Português-Inglês* 2008: 1095)

I found that not only the definitions, but the uses of the word *saudade* varied in Portugal over my three visits. I had lunch in a café named *Saudade* in Sintra, and a hotel I stayed in one night provided bottles of bath oil branded *Saudade*. At the time, no doubt because of my own idiosyncratic understanding of this word, it seemed to me that *saudade* had somewhat strangely yet aptly become co-opted by the hospitality industry in Portugal.

In the early 1970s, as the enforcement of the White Australia Policy relaxed and was finally abolished under the Prime Ministership of Gough Whitlam in 1973, several years after the two policemen abused my father at our local shopping centre, a Sri Lankan family moved in down the street, and an Anglo-Indian brother and sister came to our school. One of my Anglo-Saxon Australian classmates told me: “they’re darkies like your family. Where’d ya come from?”

In retrospect, I see that the writing of my first novel, *The World Waiting to be Made*, was partly an attempt to answer recurrent questions about “where we came from”. *The World Waiting to be Made* also included an incident of schoolyard bullying which was informed by my darker-skinned brother’s real-life experiences. Such incidents were traumatic enough to give my siblings and me nightmares in primary school, partly accounting for my first two

novels' representations of home as precarious and uncertain, and for my interest in writing about the experiences of individuals struggling for a sense of belonging and identity at the intersection of cultures. When I began writing that first novel, I drew initially on my parents' anecdotes about my Singaporean experiences. My parents also told me anecdotes about events in Singapore and Malacca that I had not participated in, or about people I had no recollection of. Such anecdotes loomed larger than my own very sparse personal memories of my Singaporean home, for my parents told these familial stories with such affective force that the anecdotes themselves had the power of strong personal memory for me. The various emotions that I discerned through my mother and father's facial expressions and voices as they told these anecdotes included affection, reverence and sadness. Their narratives about Singapore were imbued with a sense of nostalgia and sometimes, particularly in my father's case, a sense of mourning. However, my parents' narratives were not simply dismissible as yearnings for an idealised past, a defining characteristic of nostalgia, according to several critics identified by Leo Spitzer (1998: 378). Rather, they served to animate and highlight distinctive qualities of individuals and places in our Singaporean past, thus acting as often inspiring accounts of them. Thus my parents' nostalgia and affect-imbued anecdotes about that lost home had productive outcomes for me. I dwelt for years with those anecdotes about the past, before searching in my early adulthood for ways to memorialise the people and places in them. Finally, I decided to "represent" them through my writing.

## **Foundations of Imagined Homes**

It is not surprising, then, that familial narratives influenced the approaches I took to writing about our "lost home" in Singapore. My remnant memories of Singapore usually took the form of dissociated images. For example, I recalled a bespectacled, large bellied man with dark skin; a woman in a blue and white floral blouse; a balcony with a view of the sea. Sometimes my parents narrated their memories in response to my descriptions of those fragmented memory "images" of people and places. When I told my mother about my early childhood memory of a smiling bespectacled brown-skinned man with a big tummy, she guessed he was my Uncle Rene and told me he loved to eat and socialise, and that he took my sister and me around Singapore as he made his social rounds. Stopping off at friends' houses and street food hawkers, he fed us salted plums, candied paw paw, nasi lemak, and many other treats whose sources my mother was too polite to enquire about. One evening after an outing with him, I had refused my dinner and requested more of the snake I had eaten for lunch at a roadside stall with Uncle Rene.

Like several others, this particular anecdote from my mother spliced familial memory onto my own remnant of personal memory from our Singaporean

life. The anecdotes my parents narrated supplemented my own dissociated memory images.

Of course, anecdote is based on memory, and it is generally acknowledged that memory is unreliable. Nonetheless, as Jane Gallop asserts, anecdote is implicitly “a narration of temporally specific experiences from the past” (Gallop 2002: 2). Thus anecdote is linked to historical reality. While my archival research provided further information about places and histories from which I had become disconnected following migration, anecdotes from older family members in Perth, Singapore and Malacca were crucial for providing the kinds of detail so essential to writing fiction concerned to show the impact of historical circumstances upon individuals. Together, personal memory, familial anecdotes, photographs and archival research into Eurasian culture and historical events provided foundations of detail about the “real”, upon which I built imagined Singaporean and Malaccan homes of the past. Thus, my writing set in those places had a basis in “reality”.

Clearly, personal, familial and cultural memory constitutes a broad spectrum of memory. Each has potential for informing a more complex representation of the past. I would like to further explicate memory here by drawing on Marianne Hirsch’s work. She identifies a particular kind of familial memory she calls “postmemory”. Postmemory is a concept she evolved from her first essays in 1996 and 1997, through to her 2012 book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. She uses the term postmemory to describe a particular kind of cultural memory experienced by offspring of survivors of the Holocaust. Hirsch emphasises how “the power of mourning and memory, and the depth of the rift dividing their parents’ lives”, engenders “something that is akin to memory” (Hirsch 1998: 420). She needed a term to evoke this “temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory”, and thus invented “postmemory” to signify this secondary relation (Hirsch 1998: 420). In losing direct access to their parents’ “locus of origin,” children of such survivors have also lost direct access to the place in which their familial and cultural memory is embedded, as well as to the traumatic experience that continues to shape their parents’ lives. Thus, Hirsch uses the term postmemory to describe the particular kind of familial memory reconstructed by the offspring of survivors of the Holocaust from both parental narratives and affect-imbued silences about that lost locus of origin (Hirsch 1998: 420). Hirsch herself suggests postmemory might thus be considered a response of offspring to other kinds of diasporic experience besides the Holocaust (Hirsch 1998: 420). Offspring of migrants might also conceivably experience a form of postmemory, triggered by parental narratives which may help offspring account for parental mourning about their lost home.

Hirsch argues that Holocaust survivors’ affective responses to their loss informs their offspring’s construction of postmemory. It might be argued that my father’s silences, sadness and narrated memories of Singapore, particularly of the war and its effects on him, his family and friends, engendered a kind

of postmemory in me. Of course, I recognise vital differences between holocaustal trauma and the war-time internment and exile in Malayan jungle settlements experienced by my paternal grandparents and their offspring. The latter were by no means as devastating as the holocaust. Further, my parents, my siblings and I had not in the early 1960s been separated from Singapore by a “break of unknowable and incomprehensible persecution” (Hirsch 1998: 420), but rather by migration for economic and emotional reasons. Our experience of loss was a consequence of choice exercised by my middle-class parents, and our connection with Singapore was not totally decimated by migration, although it was ruptured.

Hirsch also suggests in an essay in her book, *Family Frames*, that family photos can act as a catalyst for familial narratives, paralleling my experience of listening to anecdotes about the Eurasian grandparents whom I had never met, as I shared family photos with my parents and Singaporean relatives. She suggests that family photographs can be “very particular instruments of remembrance, since they are perched at the edge between memory and postmemory”. Further, they can be read as “integral pieces of a life story, full of meaning and resonance” (Hirsch 1997: 22). As such, they can prompt the telling of anecdotes and other forms of narrative based on individuals and their relationships to others, engendering richer and more affect-imbued understandings of lost homeplaces and individuals who dwelt there.

Certainly family photos generated parental narratives that eventually enabled me during adulthood to create a representation of my father’s lost home in my writing. For example, the photo of my father, his parents and siblings in their post-war house (*Figure 2*), triggered narratives from my father that directly inform this passage from my current work-in-progress, “Bodies of Water”:

There were just a few mementos of my father’s Singaporean life in the box with three pairs of his discarded spectacles. A post-war photo of him wearing chino trousers and a white shirt, flanked by his sisters in their New Look dresses copied from an American fashion magazine by an ingenious seamstress in Little India. Seated in front of them, their mother wearing her remodelled best dress; and their father, miraculously returned to health after months of starvation and torture in Changi Prison during the war. All of them protected by the walls of their newly purchased British colonial house and by a print of Christ baring his heart in every room. All of them looking forward to a better future, despite the war still lingering in their eyes.

Such passages might be considered a kind of “imaginatively mediated memorialisation” of that lost home and the individuals who dwelt there. This term owes much to Hirsch’s theorisation of postmemory: “Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation” (Hirsch 2012: 5). This suggests parallels

with my process of reflecting on details provided by the kinds of familial narratives and photographs shown above and supplementing them as necessary with archival research, so that together they inform my written representations of individuals and places from the past.

Other theorisations are pertinent here. Migrants arguably share with exiles what Edward Said (2000: 177) calls a “fundamentally discontinuous state of being”, despite considerable differences in the causes of that discontinuity. He asserts that because exiles are removed from “their roots, their land, their past”, they feel a “need to reconstitute their broken lives”. Some of my personal experiences exemplify Said’s assertion, but one stands out. When I was about five years old, some school friends made fun of my oddly shaped left index fingertip and the white scar that encircled it. I had known this scar for as long as we had lived in Australia and knew it had somehow originated in Singapore, yet I had no memory of what had caused it. In a sense that scar became symbolic to me of my almost severed Singaporean past. When I asked my parents about its cause a few years after we migrated, they told me the story behind it. When I was about three years old, I had liked opening and closing the doors in the corridors of the Singapore apartment block where we lived. One day, a breeze slammed a door shut on my finger. When my father opened the door, my fingertip was hanging by a thread of skin. My mother held my fingertip onto my finger throughout the long taxi ride to a hospital, where it was stitched back on again by an Indian doctor as a Chinese nurse tried, using a toy monkey, to distract me from my pain. We migrated to Australia a few days later, where the stitches were taken out of my finger a few days after our arrival. My parents’ anecdote converted my fingertip’s scar into a corporeal link between our past home and our present, one of the few material traces of my Singaporean infancy. Because I had migrated so young, I relied upon their anecdotes for a sense of continuity between my Singaporean experiences and my present as I grew up. In my early adulthood, this particular anecdote also informed an extract from *The World Waiting to be Made*:

All this construction of roadworks and Housing for the People apartments in Singapore pressed spirits such as the Evil Genius Demons or hantus out of their hiding places in the ground, so they searched desperately for something they could hide in.

When the door of our Singaporean apartment slammed shut on my forefinger and sliced the top of it off the night before we left Singapore, displaced hantu spirits sniffed a new home. The Indian doctor in the chartreuse-painted public hospital stitched my fingertip back on and the hantu spirits in. While we drove to the airport, my arm was already hot with stowaway hantus.

This is how my father might have explained my transformation into a naughty girl in Perth.

(Lazaroo 1994: 24)



Although this passage is obviously fictionalised, it reflects aspects of my parents' anecdote. It also reflects the fact that in Australia, I lived two lives: my direct experience in suburban Perth, entwined with the indirect Singaporean experience narrated by my parents. There was a kind of complementarity to these two lives that reflects Edward Said's (2000: 186) following points, though they seem particularly apt for my father because he remembered more about Singapore:

For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.

Memory in its manifold constructions thus allows the new and the old life, the present and the past life to co-exist. However, as Strehle (2008: 5) asserts, "houses, apartments and other dwelling places are tangible, concrete places", but home can be "as abstract and invisible, as loaded with emotional and ideological investment (...) as the concept of nation". My childhood experiences of home became complex and loaded in ways perhaps familiar to many child migrants. I had at least three kinds of home: the brick and tile home in suburban Perth I inhabited with my parents and siblings; my lost home of origin and extended Eurasian family sensed in the discontinuous images of my own personal memory and memories narrated by my parents; and my imagined home of origin, based on my reconstitution and imaginative elaboration of those fragmented personal and parentally narrated memories. All those homes informed my ideas of where I had come from and of who I was. So home, a sense of belonging and personal identity were for me closely connected, and subsequently fed my writing of fiction.

Judith Butler (2003: 467) asserts that "loss must be marked". However, she also notes that "it cannot be represented", since "loss fractures representation itself and loss precipitates its own modes of expression". The urge to memorialise, or, to paraphrase Butler, "mark" what I had lost, has triggered much of my writing. No doubt I am not the only migrant writer left with little choice but to mediate fragmented personal and parental memories of lost home with imagined details and scenes. In this context, what might be almost forgotten can be as imbued with affect as what is remembered clearly. The following extract from my recent short story in progress, "Empire of the Forgotten", might help elucidate this point. After the British colonial government left Singapore, Eurasians were sometimes termed "the forgotten people", as the new Singaporean government led by Lee Kuan Yew tended to be pre-occupied with the much larger Chinese, Malay and Indian populations. This short story is a fiction that was triggered by my last visit to Singapore about five years ago, when two of my Singaporean Eurasian cousins and I discussed the impending loss of one of our favourite aunts, Dorothy, who in real life, was then in a nursing home in England. The sister of their mother and my

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father, she had grown up with them in Singapore when it was part of the British Empire. We had discussed the possibility of bringing her back from England to Singapore, as she had no children and her European husband had died recently, after expressing his wish that his and her ashes be eventually sent to Singapore. In this short story, the narrator is, like me, a middle-aged Singaporean-born Australian just briefly visiting her cousins in Singapore, and their Aunt Dolores is, like my Aunty Dorothy, a devout old Eurasian woman who lived in England following her husband's retirement. But unlike Aunty Dorothy, who remained in the English nursing home where she died shortly after I had finished an early draft of this story, the aunt in "The Empire of the Forgotten" spends her last months in her deceased parents' tropical British colonial bungalow near the Singapore Botanical gardens. She is visited there by her middle-aged Singaporean nephews and Singaporean-Australian niece. This extract concludes "Empire of the Forgotten".

The sun's low in the palm trees now, backlighting her silver hair. Someone's fading tropical dream. Blessed Aunt Dolores of the ever so slightly dented halo, painstaking follower of obscure Kristang recipes and prayers. How long had she waited, and how difficult was the waiting? I see the small colonial convent girl in her aging film-star eyes as she stares at me before she speaks. "God doesn't often answer our prayers. But prayer helps console ... for what we cannot have."

*But what if we don't believe in God at all?* I dare not ask her.

Edward looks towards the open front door. Anthony carries the dishes to the kitchen.

"You have to ... look inside," she murmurs to me. It almost seems she's answering my unuttered question. "You must never ... give up hope. Because if you give up hope, you give up searching for ... something better." She glances back as a warm breeze gusts from the Botanic Gardens, blowing leaves between the unwallied kitchen's broken flywire and eaves. She scoops one from the floor. "An oak leaf. The outside world's always ... invading." Edward sidles away. "Wait!" she calls. "This old British house ... won't shelter our family much longer. Before you go. I would like to talk about... funeral arrangements. I hear ... every kind of coffin ... is still available in Lavender Road. The lacquered Chinese ones with ... the bulbous heads ... the streamlined Western ones. Something simple for me. It'll all go up in smoke anyway. And scatter my ashes ... along the harbour. So the currents will carry me ... to all the places I've been. And haven't been."

"Not with Niall's and Mum's ashes in St Mary's columbarium?" Anthony asks. He switches on his iphone, shows us a photo of ceiling-to-floor numbered letterbox-sized doors. Only one of them is open, revealing a porcelain jar next to a Gladbag of pale powder. "There", he says, holding his iphone closer to Aunty Dolores's face. "Niall's ashes."

"Ah-yah! Is that where you're thinking of ... putting me after I ... die?" "Yours would be in the same niche as his. You could be together again, lah. I'll put your photos on the door."

She smiles. “You *are* a ... waste recycling expert, aren’t you? Looks more like an IKEA filing cabinet than ... somewhere to rest in peace. I’m used to bigger houses.” She crosses herself. “Forgive me. The end of my life and ... still unwise. Spent too much time ... shopping. Worrying about appearances.” She looks at me. “Instead of finding ... what really ... *matters* in life.” She puts her hands together in prayer and closes her eyes. Her long lashes are frosted and sparse.

“What really matters?” I ask. She doesn’t answer, and doesn’t move. Her eyes remain closed, even when the English grandfather clock strikes, hours out of time.

“Maybe she’s dying?” whispers Edward.

“No lah!” Anthony shouts, focussing his iphone camera on our aunt and me. “Not yet, Aunty Dolores!” She blinks. “That’s it, Aunty Dolores! Our two stolen goddesses. Open your eyes wide! Smile!” he exhorts us, pushing the button, bringing us both back from the empire of the forgotten, before we are completely lost.



Figure 6

The house in this story is partly based on my father’s accounts of my Singaporean grandparents’ colonial British bungalow (*Figure 6*), which was bulldozed before I had the chance to visit it. Rereading it now, I see writing this story was the only way I had at the time, to dwell with older family members in the lost family home I longed for but never visited, except in my imagination. But its writing was driven by more than nostalgia. It was driven by a determination to memorialise what had been lost or almost forgotten.

These days, whenever I feel unsettled or as if I do not belong in my home in suburban Fremantle, I drive for five minutes to Port Beach, where my parents took us in the first years after we migrated. There, on the shore of the Indian Ocean that carried us from Singapore all those years ago, I swim, walk and watch the ships from Asia and Europe arriving and departing. It is one of my

favourite places to dwell, especially now that my parents and their generation of Eurasian relatives have passed away. There and in my writing are where I most often feel I belong, on the edge of that ocean that connects us to Singapore and the rest of the world.

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