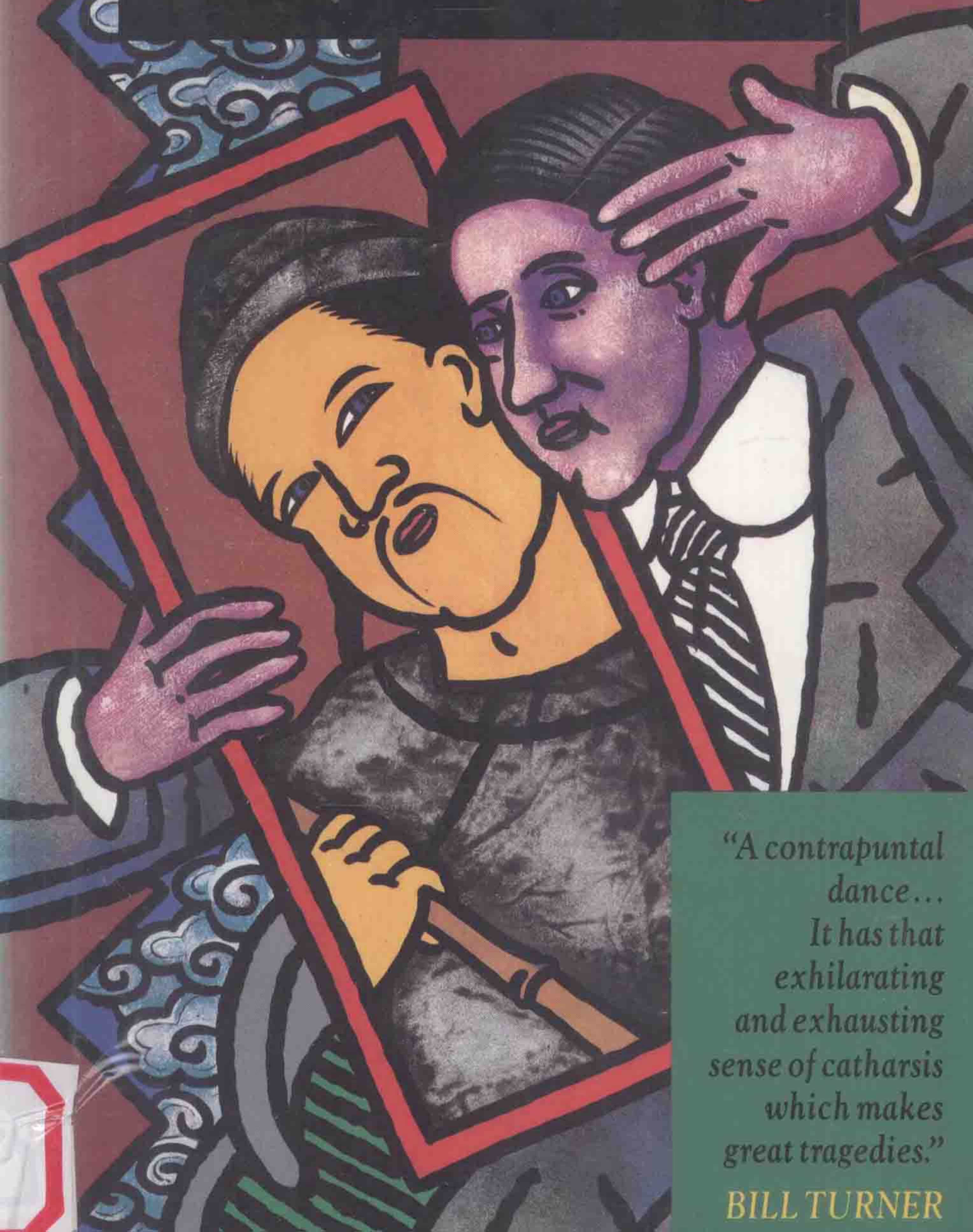


BRIAN CASTRO



# Birds of Passage



"A contrapuntal  
dance...  
It has that  
exhilarating  
and exhausting  
sense of catharsis  
which makes  
great tragedies."

BILL TURNER



# BIRDS OF PASSAGE

BRIAN CASTRO



*All characters in this book are  
entirely fictitious, and no reference  
is intended to any living person.*

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# 1 The other life

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*Kwangtung, 1856*

**M**Y name is Lo Yun Shan. I take my name from Tai Mo Shan, which is the Big Mist Mountain. The mountain is not very high by Chinese standards, but it is constantly shrouded in cloud and mist. No one has ever viewed the summit from afar, even on the brightest days. The village people say that the Buddha lives on the summit, and from there he maintains his indifferent gaze on the valleys below. If you climb the mountain from the east, you will see a small temple jutting out of the rock. In the interior of the temple you will see a huge Buddha carved out of stone. No one is permitted to climb higher than the temple. To do so would be disrespectful and, worse, would bring bad luck.

I have taken the climb above the temple; I have reached the summit and felt the moisture of the clouds. Time and time again I have gone to the summit in my youth. There I found peace. I also found evidence of other climbers . . . half-eaten bags of rice and vegetables, wrapped in banana leaves; fish bones; human faeces congealed in the cold.

I was a young teacher then. I had a certain iconoclastic view of life. To be a teacher in those times meant that you had a spiritual connection with the heavens. Your word was law among the ignorant. Given your knowledge, your power, you were almost expected to flout some of the rules governing the less enlightened. I was somewhere between a monk and an administrator. I sat on the village executive, I presided over minor judicial matters as my father's proxy. I



had been trained by the monks in the temple, and my family was one of the best in the province.

My father wore a long gown and received taxes from the villagers. I was his principal tax-collector, walking from farm to farm among the different hamlets of our region when the weather was fine. When it was wet I sat snug in my rocking sedan chair and listened to the squelching steps of the coolies, the box emitting a not unpleasant perfumed mustiness in contrast to the humid air outside, the harsh wetness glistening on the long poles and bare, heaving torsos, redolent of sweat. Behind was the barrow, filled with bags of rice, squealing pigs and flapping ducks.

My father sat in his house with his opium pipe. Before entering, I would smell the sweetness of the smoke from his room, and when there was a breeze in the summer I would hear the bells tinkle over the door and see the long pieces of prayer-paper tied to them fluttering in the wind.

My father, dressed in his long embroidered gown, would motion me in with his free hand. Sometimes he would stop me from speaking by presenting his palm in a salute and taking his pipe from his mouth with a sucking sound and a deep intake of breath. The pipe would sizzle and hiss. Then he would say:

‘Listen to the petals. The petals of the jasmine flower are falling.’

I accepted his eccentricities. I had no time for poetry or such musings; and in this I shared the characteristics of the Kwangtung people. We are businesslike; we want to get on in the world. We live for barter, trade, catties of rice — the essentials of society and communality. A poet like my father sets himself apart. It is a privilege. Starving peasants rarely become poets.

Allowing my father his half-minute of silence, I would then make my report: 20 catties of rice per holding (20 kans or approximately 27 lb.), 6 ducklings, 2 suckling pigs.

My father would nod, smile, and I would go out and deal with other business.

Every two months I used to make the short trip to the coast. I looked forward to this trip with boundless enthusiasm. I loved the sea, the bare hills dotted with boulders leading down to the sea, the windswept headland, the salt stinging my cheeks. These sensations I kept hidden within myself. They were my treasures, metaphoric vaults containing curiosity and excitement. But I realize now how the sea, which taught me so much about life, ultimately strangled my curiosity and led me to meaninglessness; led me to believe that human beings, intent on viewing the ultimate, see only as far as themselves.

*Sydney*

NAME: O'YOUNG, SEAMUS

*Nom*

Place and Date of Birth

*Lieu et Date de Naissance*

Height

*Taille*

Colour of Eyes

*Couleur des Yeux*

Colour of Hair

*Couleur des Cheveux*

Visible Peculiarities

*Signes Particuliers*

MY passport lies open on the table. Its empty pages marked with the word VISAS tease my imagination. My stub of a pencil trembles over them for it is here that I will begin my journey.

Beside me I have the fragments of a journal. I found them a long time ago, stuck to my memory like the remnants of a dream. I have read and re-read those words, translated and re-translated them, deciphering the strokes of the Chinese



characters, building up their meaning, constructing and re-constructing their sense. I feel the closeness of the situation the author is describing; I feel I am the counterpart of this man who was writing more than a century ago. The similarity of his situation to mine does not disturb me as much as the almost complete identification of his style, choice of words and tonality with my own. The only difference is his calm, in contrast to my frenzy and apprehension; a deceitful calm perhaps, in the discipline of those serene brush strokes. Perhaps the intervening years of decaying language and translation are to blame.

But why do I feel such an anxiety about the influence of his style, such a sense of guilt as I carry his writing around with me, the yellow pages already worn to the thinness of butterfly wings? (I have taken the precaution of enfolding them in contact plastic.) It is possible that these shards of the past have invested me with a responsibility for another life, demanding that I write honestly. But how can I when my mind is already dislocated by so many illusions, illusions that have sprung from my self-imposed solitude? At times haunted by this *Doppelgänger*, I have tried to exorcize it, imagining flames consuming the fragile written record, history coiled in those wisps of smoke climbing heavenward; but again the yellow pages have resisted obliteration. So now I carry them with me as talismans for other points of departure.

I hear the voices of children rattling the panes as another afternoon comes to its end. The shadows of leaves and patches of light dart about behind the curtains. A strong wind is blowing. I hope it will not rain. There is a strangeness about the coolness: the leaves, the night ready to open up its secret grottoes, all the fragrances of solemnity. In the sadness of this early evening I am aware of the shapes of dreams departing.

I recall now, at this stage of my journal, one of the first trips to the coast I made in that drought-stricken year.



Until that trip my mind had been enclosed by the village; it wandered around like a trapped tiger. Sometimes when I came home in the evenings I would see the shadow of my mother in a dark corner of the house. She would be sitting, having entered the solitude of her illness, waiting for her thoughts to regroup, to send them out again, testing the borders. My mind roared with anguish at the way her world had closed upon her.

I will never forget the first time I viewed the sea. I saw its soft green stretching like fields to the horizon. Never before had my eyes been tested by such distance. I believed that I had found the gateway to the world. Then I saw the port below me like something the sea had vomited up, rejected, cast upon the beach. The town was piled upon itself in a hotch-potch of shacks, shanties, two-storeyed wooden buildings in disrepair. Narrow alleyways and streets ran in no rational manner, some turning around upon themselves, like the people, who walked with heads turned backwards; poverty-stricken, belligerent, mistrustful. Children defecated in the streets. Old men, finding the squat beyond their years, and without a thought for modesty, urinated, thin, yellow streams pulsing from their cupped hands.

With each visit to the port I noticed a worsening despair on the faces of the people. They looked away from me when formerly they used to stare at strangers. Heads down, they hunched into their own preoccupations.

One wet day, while studying them from my box, a beggar came up to me and attached his grimy fingers to my sleeve, hobbling alongside, focusing the liquid whiteness of his bad eye on my face. I pulled my hand away, and ordered the chair coolies to increase their speed. The beggar kept pace, his shaven head bobbing beside me. I leant back into my box and reached for a coin, but then I hesitated, my warring conscience having reached a stalemate. The shaven head disappeared in a stream of curses.

Avoiding the puddles in the wet street, outpacing the cursing beggar and trying to keep away from the damp



walls, my coolies set me down before the wooden shack which was the goal of my journey. It stood before the reddish stone wall at one extremity of the town. Above the door, written in red letters was the name of my father's business partner. It said:

*Ship Chandlery*  
*So Ah Fung — Proprietor*

In the dark shop my eye caught a movement, a glistening of flesh in the corner. A figure approached me from among huge coils of rope. Gradually my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and I made out a woman holding a baby to her breast. Her dark hair was plaited in huge hempen pigtails and in between these two snakes was coiled her baby, asleep at the drooping breast, the nipple fiery and glowing. It was Ah Fung's wife. She nodded to me, her smile radiating into a crescent, revealing a row of golden teeth.

'Ah, Shan. You've come at a bad time.'

I didn't know what she meant.

'Perhaps I'll return later.'

No, she didn't mean the baby. She pointed her chin towards the door.

'There's trouble in town. Foreign soldiers.'

The baby squirmed, began to cry. Outside the coolies were playing checkers, squatting on the ground, shouting, slapping each other on the back.

'How is your mother?'

'Still the same.'

'Your father?'

'He's well. He sends his greetings.'

I resolved to stay no longer than necessary, my eyes transfixed by her pale breast, its nipple like the sunset. She went behind the counter, brought out two cloth bags, and opened them for me with her free hand. I took out some of the opium and sniffed at it.



'This will have to be the last,' she said, 'They are thinking of closing the port, of stamping out the smuggling.'

'Aiyeeee!' the coolies were yelling. The game had become serious. They spat into their hands, cursing and muttering. The baby screamed. Ah Fung's wife rocked it back and forth. She smiled at me and I gave her the bag of coins. She didn't count them, so I bade her farewell and left the shop.

My task completed, I took the bags, placed them under the seat in the box and told the chair coolies to wait for me. I then allowed my mind to take in all the aspects of the town.

I noticed particularly the presence of our soldiers, clad in their ancient armour, patrolling sections of the town. In one alleyway I saw an old man drop his baskets and the long bamboo pole attached to them and run quickly away in an absurd, bow-legged canter. At the other end of the alley two soldiers appeared, cutting off his retreat. He was seized immediately, and fell to the ground under blows from heavy clubs. I did not stop to look any longer. On the waterfront groups of pale-faced foreign sailors paced nervously up and down. Several Chinese officials, dressed in their long gowns and balancing comically in a bobbing sampan, were heading out towards the mouth of the river.

I am back at the edge of the sea; with the wind, with the water; my eyes burning, my mind confused; my knowledge suddenly exposed as a vast ignorance.

A tall ship appears in the drizzle under two small sails. Huge as a temple, like a whale surfacing among the sardine-shaped fishing-boats, it symbolizes the powerful ingress of a foreign race. I suspect immediately that their industry is a hundred times vaster and more precise than ours, that their penetration of China this time will be deeper and more violent.

The ship drops its anchor and swings into the wind. The officials on the sampan are approaching it with speed, the oarsman leaning with all his strength on the pole. A fluttering banner of red, white and blue is run up on the ship's ratlines as the officials clamber on to the gangway.



I didn't stay to watch the proceedings, to witness the Chinese officials lowering the Union Jack, to share that moment in history leading to the second war with the foreigners. On my way home, in my swaying sedan chair, it was difficult to imagine that what I had under the seat was the cause of so much trouble in China. I thought of our feuding clans, my somnolent father, the beating the old man had received. I felt my loyalties divide. On an impulse, I spat in the direction of the temple on the hill overlooking the town.

**S**EAMUS O'YOUNG. It's not my real name. I'm not Irish. I am in fact an ABC; that is, an Australian-born Chinese. Yes and no. I find your questions infuriating. People are always very curious about nationality. They will go to great lengths to pigeonhole someone. They think this knowledge gives them *power*.

I remember entering the UK at Folkstone on the car-ferry. The customs officer looked at me for a long time while holding my passport. In the next queue a black girl was shouting and screaming.

'You are bloody-minded,' she shrieked.

The customs man turned towards the shouting. Then he said to me, 'So you're one of these bloody Chinese-born Australians.'

Before I was able to correct him, he waved me through with his head turned. Behind, the shouting intensified.

Yes. ABC. The first three letters of the alphabet. It was a classification which straddled two cultures. Yes. ABC. I am a refugee, an exile. My heart and my head are in the wrong places. There was no country from which I came, and there is none to which I can return. I do not speak Chinese, but I am learning it. At the institute where I attend classes they think I am a little strange.

I believe my real name is Sham Oh Yung, but I am unable to find any records of my past. I am a truly stateless person.



When I go to Chinatown I feel at one with the people, but then the strange tones of their language only serve to isolate me.

I was an orphan, and I like to believe that I was tough, hard-boiled, as they say, when I was a kid. I never worried about being classified. I was in a special school because they thought I was mentally handicapped: on account of my appearance they had labelled me as 'Mongoloid'. When I grew older they realized their mistake, and I was transferred to a normal school. It was then that I was adopted by the Groves. It was also then that I began to think about my appearance. The pupils at the normal school called me names. At first I enjoyed it, as a clown enjoys entertaining others, sublimating the irony of laughing at himself. Then I began to invent fictions of my past.

I dreamt (usually in class) that my father was a visiting seaman (the pun unnoticed at the time) from Manchuria; that he was a descendant of a great Manchurian lord. I dreamt that he stepped ashore in Sydney, off his ocean-going junk which was furnished in the fashion of elaborate Chinese temples; that he was entertained by all the society ladies of the North Shore; and that he fell in love with one of them, a rich heiress with blue eyes. I dreamt that her parents forbade their marriage, and so they eloped and went to live in a grand house in Point Piper. While my mother was pregnant, lying in her feather bed, the descendant of the Manchurian lord weighed anchor and slipped out of Sydney. In despair and shame, my mother placed me in an orphanage.

It was always at this stage in my dream, with an idiotic smile on my face, that Brother Pius would crack me hard over the head with a ruler for daydreaming. Brother Pius, the Inquisitor, who could give six of the best and open boys' tender hands to the realities of life, for masturbation or just plain fiddling; Brother Pius, history teacher and choir-master, continually plagued with the voices of boys whose hormones refused to be regulated; Brother Pius, part-time



librarian, who handed out books by G.K. Chesterton, G.K. Chesterton and G.K. Chesterton, whose Irish breath smelt of whisky and who leant over me with the ruler under my nose.

‘What year was gold discovered in Australia?’ He tapped at my cheek with the ruler. I did not know the answer.

‘O’Young. What kind of a name is that?’ he asked.

You see, I have blue eyes. That is why I could not be completely Chinese. I used to think long and hard about this when I was a schoolboy. Every morning I used to look into the mirror at my blue eyes, and I used to think of where they could have come from. One day I asked my best friend in the playground to describe me. This is how he saw me:

‘You have a moonface,’ he said, ‘with black hair sticking out of the top and your eyes are slits. Your nose is flat and you have yellow skin.’

UPON my return to the village, my mother was in the third month of her long period of illness. She lay on the low bed in her room, her drawn face exhibiting the burdens of her life and the beginnings of her preoccupation with death.

My mother has been a shadow these last few years. She has kept apart from my father and myself. She lived, as a woman does, with the worries and anxieties that are incomprehensible in the world of men. Men live with the pragmatism of the self. For a man, his mind totally closed off by his self, it is difficult to understand that a woman can chafe over the terrible responsibility of love. I have heard my mother moan in the night. Hers is a silent moan which pierces the firmament.

Yet I was glad to return. At least in the village there is order, growing out of the necessity to live within a social framework that respects the seasons, work, and the sanctity of life. I was glad that I did not live in the town among the



fishermen whose harvest from the sea seemed to me a harvest of violence, of thievery, of piracy; for they do nothing for the sea. They are not in harmony with it, because they do not raise the fish. The abundant sea is for plundering, destroying. Perhaps this is why the boat people and the village people have never intermarried.

My mother's brother, Ah Fung, has been an anomaly. He went from being a farmer to a storekeeper at the port. Because he married a woman from the town, the relationship between him and our family was severed. My father, however, continued to do business through Ah Fung's wife. Since his marriage, I had never seen my uncle, though I was curious about his shadowy reputation. He was said to be a member of several secret societies.

When my father insisted on my buying more bags of opium, Ah Fung's wife relented and said that she would do what she could. She took my father's money and said she would have the opium on my next trip. When I arrived at the ship chandlery two months later Ah Fung's wife told me that he had signed the store over to her and he had gone off on a foreign vessel. She did not seem to know where he had gone. There was no opium and Ah Fung had taken all the money.

My return from the port that final time filled me with sadness. Upon reaching the house, I saw the banners of white cloth at the door. On them, the black characters announced the solemnity of a death within. I knew it was my mother. She had finally attained peace. I cannot remember exactly how I felt at the time. I followed, I think, the usual emotional channels within myself, seeking the meaning of their source. On the outside, I behaved according to the proprieties accepted by my people. Weeping was out of the question. A stoic resolution pervaded my senses, but every now and again I felt a gush of emotion I was unable to control. In retrospect I do not think it was sadness. It was a sort of claustrophobia, of wanting to be somewhere else; or, more precisely, of wanting to be



everywhere at once. It was an aching, breathless feeling, making me totally incapable of action. The smells, sights, sounds, coming from within the house limited and frustrated me; and yet they were the only means, the only windows as it were, through which I could escape.

Even before I entered the passageway to my mother's room I could hear the clanging bells and gongs of the monks. I was angry at these paid mourners, these vicarious purveyors of emotion and pathos. At the end of their solemn and bizarre performance by the side of the corpse, my father would hand out little red envelopes of money, envelopes printed with prayers in gold letters that would flutter up to the heavens; and then my mother would begin to be the object of our own worship and reverence. We would bring offerings of food to her grave periodically; food for the dead to keep the spirit alive. Then we would have a banquet there on the hillside, while the urchins waited patiently eyeing the food and, upon our departure, would leap on to the grave to devour what was left.

When I reached her room I could smell the strong scent of the incense. The chanting and the gongs were deafening. The room was filled with smoke. Seven monks lined the way to my mother's bed, their shaven heads glistening with sweat, their robes coming undone in their frenzy. When they saw me they intensified their mourning. I reached my mother's bedside. Her face had not changed dramatically from the time I left her; perhaps now there was more of an artificiality about it. Her grief was a sculptured one, and now her expression was fixed for ever, open to the interpretations of the viewers in the gallery.

Mother. My mother. The monks whipped themselves into louder appeals, their voices rising in pitch. The smoke brought tears to my eyes, and through it, across the bobbing heads, my father emerged, as though walking on a cloud, in his black and silver embroidered gown, his feet encased in silken slippers, his eyes painted, his fingernails an inch long. There was a solemn expression on his face beneath the cake



of white paint, and his red lips were pursed tight over the wispy beard. He held a fan to his chest, and as he walked he fanned away the smoke with dainty movements. He bowed and kissed the shining dome of the nearest monk, then he proceeded towards my mother, his face inscrutable and scandalous at the same time, licensed by the unspoken acceptance in our society of the transvestism of those who are spiritual. I left the room in horror.

‘WELCOME to the family,’ Jack Grove said, extending a huge hand the size of a shovel. He then handed me a whisky. I was twelve years old at the time.

I had come from a boys’ home to the Groves’s Sydney suburban cottage. It was a dark brick house with an iron roof that sloped down on to the oleanders near the front fence. By the front door there was a brass plate that said NIRVANA. I was curious about what that meant. I thought it was the capital of Cuba. There was a lot about Cuba on the news.

Inside the house it was always dark. There were two front bedrooms, Jack occupying one and his wife the other. I had the back room with its pastel-coloured walls and blue linoleum floor. In the living-room Jack’s rack of shotguns shared the wall with his wife’s glass-fronted bookcases. Porcelain ducks flew across the gunsights.

Jack and Edna Grove were well-meaning but incompetent foster parents. Jack worked at a shoe factory, making orthopaedic shoes. He hammered heels into shoes made for clubbed feet with his fists, fashioned and worked the leather with his fingers, pulled out nails with his teeth which had convenient gaps in the front. He got up at five in the morning, was at work by six, and by eleven he would have drunk almost half a bottle of whisky, which he kept on the shelf behind his bench. By one in the afternoon he would be into his second bottle. It was fortunate for him that his boss