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On Being Nomadic?
A Response



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To end as a nomad or migrant forever is a life-sentence without parole. So I'm wary. I don't want to be an expatriate or a stranger to myself, or a groundless prisoner condemned to wander the earth.

On the other hand this snapshot of me, taken by Sebastian Vang in Hong Kong during the SARS pandemic a few years ago, is more to the point. During the pandemic, we who lived in Hong Kong fled to the mountains, to the sea, to the forests. We avoided theaters, subways, and large groups. Fresh air, clean hands, and nature were good for you, the Health Ministry stated, on television and in the newspaper. Outside of the city proper, you could take off your white face-masks, and breathe.

Even the dim-sum teahouses made a point of placing clean dishes on large burners in the dining rooms so you could feel, if not know for certain, that heat would destroy the germs. The pandemic lasted from March until May, when the summer heat began to burn off the remnants of this mysterious virus that had gripped Hong Kong, Taipei, and Beijing.

This middle-aged man, in his early 50s, wears a loose white cotton shirt over his brown skin. Is he behind a window staring out to the sea, or does he stand in front of the broken glass, gazing? It is a window, nonetheless, that is boarded up, locking opaque memories behind it. Always in his eyes is the sea that surrounds the small fishing village popular with tourists in its heyday in the 70s and 80s. You can smell the salt of the sea on the cement wall, on the rusted corrosion of the window frame, and maybe salt on the man's skin from sweat and desire. From this salt, sweat, and desire the man can imagine that he is but an evolved species of fish, no more and no less. Desire to walk on land twisted ancient fins until they made their tentative walk onto the lowland mud.

Hiatus. Even the migratory poet must stop. Reassess his or her Path. Position. Direction. Live with—not emptiness—but more with a *ting dwun*—a pause between a set of movements, as in the Chen *tai chi* that he practices.

(So perhaps Ken Pobo is right in his observations: after all, my writing is obvious and I use simple words. I respond not intellectually but intuitively through a recent poem, “Tian Qiao”: a bridge, Taipei, an aborted Tsai Ming Liang film

moment, a cheap compass. The reader can decide for herself how the poem interlinks, or not, with the essay's themes: migration, identity, sexuality, age, nomadism.)

No, he has not changed much, but the words are rearranged slightly, shoved, jostled, jiggled around, abused a bit, amused, with a touch of the demon, dementia, respite after a fever or some exercise, maybe.

It is now 2008?

Salt, SARS, sex, spirit, and history burn in equidistant small fires dotting the shore outside this fishing village. Fast forward. The brown man in the white shirt, older now, walks under the barbed wire, past the abandoned stone buttress that once held British artillery, during colonial times.

He can taste gunpowder in his mouth, the fine gray grain on his teeth. He spits into the sea, clears tongue. He remembers, only a few days ago, when the policemen stopped him on the beach. Two, in fact. He was exercising in a shorts and T-shirt, but had forgotten his Hong Kong Identification card. He protested in Cantonese, switched to *putong hua*, and explained this and that. Finally he switched to English and the police let him go. Later, on the news, he found that he had been mistaken for a diasporic Vietnamese—one of several—who had landed that morning on the beach and had begun robbing people at dawn. In Hong Kong, he'd been stopped by the police many times: mistaking him for a Korean tourist, a mainland Chinese without a residency card, and now, even a Vietnamese. In the U.S., mistaken for a waiter, a hardware store clerk, an office messenger boy.

You can't escape race, place, or class. Like rain, dirt, or wind on your body.

Only these elements remain.

"But where are you?" he asks. First in Cantonese. Then *putong hua*. Then in English. He runs out of the languages he knows.

