Sample translation

Chapter 1, 11, 17, 26 & 29

Last Tango Home: The Search for Belonging

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Museo de la Inmigración

It is evening in a dancehall in Buenos Aires, and tango music rises to fill the lofty space, filtering out into the streets through open balcony doors and windows. Couples float across the worn parquet floor with self-assured elegance, closely intertwined. *Desde el Alma* – one of my favourite compositions – flows from the speakers. My body moves with the music, and my steps keep time with the rhythm as if this dance has always existed within my body. In the few, magical minutes that the music plays, I feel my partner's hand at my back. This – right here, right now – *this* is enough.

When the music stops, he mentions that the dance was created by the migrants who came to Argentina. I have been so busy thinking about the various new steps I need to learn that I'd neglected to give a single thought to where they might have come from. Those few words, mentioned only in passing, sow a seed of wonder within me.

With that in mind, a few days later I am pleased to discover that *Museo de la Inmigración* is located fairly close to the apartment I'm renting for a few weeks. Curious about the stories that might be tucked away within its walls – and exactly what tango has to do with migration – I decide to pay the museum a visit. I have no idea that this is to be the beginning of something much greater.

It is high summer in the southern hemisphere, which suits me perfectly as I flee the rapidly-plummeting temperatures at home in Norway. Map and terrain diverge as I attempt unfamiliar shortcuts, but all of a sudden it is there before me, a four-storey building with arched windows and slender pillars. This elegant building by the harbour was once the gateway to the future for so many in Argentina. It was here that travellers were welcomed after their long journeys, weary but filled with hope.

I hurry inside the building with the enormous windows and I am immediately shrouded in a cool, cathedral-like calm. Inside it is quiet and cool. It feels pleasant to escape the scorching Argentinian summer sunshine.

The echo of visitor footsteps on the stone floor calls to mind the many migrants that once walked here. Even before I reach the reception desk, I can hear her: a woman greeting visitors with youthful energy. She smiles and tells me that the exhibition on the floors above us documents immigration to the country, and that there is also an art installation with migration as its central theme. Argentina was one of the most important destinations for migrants at the end of the 19th century, second only to the USA. The country's revenue from the export of corn, meat and wool led to the well-known expression 'as rich as an Argentine'.

The museum has digitised its historical archives, and at the reception desk, relatives of immigrants to the country can find out their ancestors' date of arrival, the name of the ship they arrived on and with whom they were travelling. I see the faces of those receiving this information from the young woman light up. New information about their relations creates a slight shift in their own self-image, a glimpse of who they really are. Their expression changes – like a puzzle piece falling into place.

I take a deep breath and make for the stairs, ready to find out what is concealed inside the glass display cases. My hand glides along the cool iron railing as I make my way up the footworn staircase.

On the top floor I find myself facing a large wall chart presenting highlights from 1810 to 2010 across three rows: immigration, Argentina and global development. War, food scarcity and economic crises trigger mass migration across vast oceans. Europe sends huge numbers of people to

both North and South America. Between 1820 and 1924, 55 million Europeans, mostly men, migrate across the Atlantic.

I find myself drawn to a brief sentence on the top row about global development highlighting the discovery of gold in California in 1847. It states that many Chinese people crossed the Pacific to seek good fortune.

I stop.

I know that my great-grandfather emigrated from China. It is only now that I see the pattern: at approximately the same time as many Europeans are crossing the Atlantic, my great-grandfather pulls up his own roots, leaves his village in China and establishes himself in British Malaya. My great-grandfather. Far-off in both time and space. I don't know him, only his position in the family tree. All of a sudden, he steps forth.

The first exhibition vividly depicting the difficult conditions on board the ships to Argentina inspires a sense of curiosity within me. Most migrants travel on the cheapest tickets, squeezed into cramped quarters deep within the bowels of the vessel, no windows. Behind the glass are historical artefacts displayed alongside a cross-section diagram of the ship portrayed in great detail, a rich insight into how immigrants lived and ate on their long journeys. For those who want a closer look, more objects have been placed in drawers beneath the glass display cases: once the most precious things people owned, these personal belongings have since become quaint museum pieces. I open one drawer to find a faded shawl still bearing the traces of a hand-embroidered border of roses. The silk threads have become frayed but the roses still shine softly, red on black.

The exhibition offers an insight into the migrants' experiences upon their arrival. Registration and health checks awaited them, and for many, also meetings with potential employers who could decide their fate. Rows of the same bunk beds used at the arrival points give a candid insight into the spartan sleeping conditions. Photographs of meals being served in vast, crowded dining halls underline the simple measures taken by the authorities to manage the steady stream of immigrants.

Great-grandfather. What prompts him to leave his family and his home? I have no answer. There are almost no stories in our family about him. His journey from China and the beginning of our family history in Malaysia is an unknown chapter in which nobody has shown much interest.

I move through the exhibition, which seamlessly shifts from historical documentation to our own day and age, featuring video footage of more recent immigrants. Argentina's immigration history is extensive and still very much alive; nowadays it is immigrants from other parts of South America that dominate. I put on a pair of headphones by one of the screens and take a seat. The burden one carries as an immigrant – building a future in a foreign land, no local network to lean on – is one with which I am familiar. A life of adaptation, with separation and longing one's constant companions. The pathway that emerges through semi-informed choices and chance.

In a museum in the middle of Buenos Aires, strangers' stories touch my innermost heart. Seldom-recalled memories from half a lifetime ago stream forth, taking me back to the time I was a fresh migrant myself: bidding my family farewell in 1976 at the age of eighteen, my journey alone to Norway, a country on the other side of the world, and the way my heart tightened when I landed at Oslo airport in Fornebu.

I carry on around the museum, slowly making my way through the wide corridors and stepping into a dark room. Five large projections screens are lit up showing films on a loop. Scenes from days gone by show people in clothing reminiscent of another era. On each of the screens is a person reading words filled with sorrow and hope.

The artists, Adrian Paci and Roland Sejko, have created a video installation based on hundreds of letters written to migrants in Argentina by family members left behind in Italy. I hear voices in Italian, soft and subdued, while Spanish subtitles flicker on screen beneath the images. Some of the details escape me, but it is clear that souls are being laid bare on the delicate sheets of paper.

I sink down in an available seat, grateful for a break and some cool air, and I allow myself to become immersed in the installation. The tone is subdued in day-to-day updates from the lives the migrants have left behind. Nevertheless, the longing for those who have gone, and the hunger to be reunited, are raw; they quiver within each sentence. Melancholy fills the spaces between lines and the gaps between words. I feel the hundred-year-old letters inhabit my body and unfurl within me.

Towards the end of the performance, the audience learns that none of the letters from Italy ever reached the migrants in Argentina. Not a single one arrived. They were found in an old post office, dusty and unopened.

Nobody received those letters. Nobody replied.

I sit in silence in the dark room. I think of the words left unread, the stories without end, all of those who waited.

I am transported back to my first year in Norway, recall the way I would wait for the postman – day in, day out. In the background I can hear the films returning to the start, ready to play once again as people get up and leave the large room.

I sit there, caught up in the disarray of emotions that wash over me as warm tears make their way down my cheeks.

Memories are awakened within me, memories I have suppressed in my eagerness to be a successful immigrant – a useful and unproblematic member of society with a good command of the language. I fumble around for a handkerchief I don't have. The awkward young migrant still lives within me. The fact that she is still striving comes as a surprise to me. I look upon her with curiosity – and with fondness.

It is my own journey I see on the screens before me. The videos play from the start once again. Loss and reflection are woven together, a tangled web.

My thoughts wander to my mother. Her hair is grey now, her skin as thin as crepe paper. My brothers and I leave our hometown long before we actually depart. We set our sights ahead of us. We venture out to follow our dreams while she sits in silence following the death of our father. Nowadays my brothers and I each live our own lives in our own countries. I picture my mother's face, the lines that have deepened, and I recall the large kitchen in which she was once a queen, ruling over pots and pans. Where there once were five of us seated around the table, she now sits alone. She no longer makes the dishes she is renowned for. These days she prepares a simple soup of rice, fish, vegetables and an egg in the rice cooker.

'Less washing up,' Mum explains.

I hear the words left unsaid: she no longer expects us for dinner.

In the National Museum of Immigration, it becomes clear that I am far from alone in paying the price of emigration. Migrants leave a hole in the lives of those left behind. When lives are pulled up to put down roots elsewhere, those that remain must find ways of carrying on.

One of my mother's old friends calls me.

‘Your mother is starting to forget things,’ she says. ‘She’s asked me where you are three times now.’

I say nothing, but I am aware of the undertone, asking me to do something. She stays on the line, as if debating whether to say more.

What she does not say, perhaps to avoid the pain it might cause, is that I too am alone. My Norwegian husband, Eiolf, died a few years ago. I am a widow, no husband or children to take into consideration, and though I have a job in Oslo, the clear message is that I ought to return home to Malaysia. To turn back is the only right thing to do, an obvious solution that would be best for both my mother and myself.

In Taiping, people still view my time in Norway as an interlude, an incidental episode in my life.

‘Aren’t you coming back soon?’ they ask when we meet.

I don’t understand why it’s so difficult to say yes. I can find no plausible answer – for them or for me. The festivals and celebrations I so eagerly anticipated as a young girl are now mere echoes of a life I left behind; they once followed the lunar cycle, rhythmic and predictable, but now they drift by on a different timeline altogether, ordinary dates on a calendar with no concept of Malaysian festivals. I miss weddings and funerals. My connection to the places of my childhood on the opposite side of the world – exotic notions for those living in Norway – is suppressed.

I take my leave – turn my back on the old town, its attitudes, culture, everything that feels like a barrier to what life can be. But there is a paradox: the desire for what is new ultimately becomes a search for belonging. This search is so close to my very essence that I fail to see the irony: in pursuit of freedom, I also carry a longing for the familiar, the rituals that once shaped my days and gave them meaning. The immigrant dilemma – at the heart of every migration story – is an endless tug of war between excitement and safety. Like a Gordian knot, it occasionally pulls so tight that the body is unable to find a position in which to rest.

Slowly I make my way downstairs in the museum. My footsteps are heavy. When I sit on a bench in the café by reception, a sense of unease embeds itself within me. The sun shines through the windows, and the leaves on the trees outside create a living pattern of moving shadows.

I order a drink, though I’m not thirsty. I gaze out of the windows without properly taking in the view of the park that surrounds the museum. My thoughts wander and wend their way inwards.

For a long time, I adorn myself with the identity of a global citizen – at home wherever I may roam – and I am content with that description, secure in my position in the world. The multitude of daily tasks and future plans make it easy to ignore any deeper thoughts about who I am and where I belong. As a rule, these questions grumble faintly in the background, like a mild fever you learn to live with. Days, months and years come and go without them ever demanding a precise answer.

Having now lived longer in Norway than in Malaysia, my anchor to the country is something I take for granted. I’ve studied here, worked here, built a life. Everything is stable and secure. There is no doubt in my mind: I belong to Norway, and Norway belongs to me.

At once everything is cut adrift in the museum in Buenos Aires: friends, neighbours, colleagues, my daily routine and environment, everything that once represented a solid foundation. The pretence that I am a globetrotter without a care in the world suddenly feels so hollow. The notion of being a global citizen, once so enticing, now appears shallow and superficial. To be a global citizen is also to be divided – stretched into the splits between different worlds.

I stand at a crossroads where the map reaches its end. For the first time in a long while I feel it tightening its grip inside me – an unease I was sure I'd left behind me. I feel it before I think it – I must trust myself in a way I haven't done before. I must travel great distances without guard rails to guide me. It is there that my journey must begin.

I can no longer set aside questions of identity and belonging.

Where do I belong?

Older Second Cousin

I have considered myself the family's first emigrant. The first to put down roots outside of our home country.

But at the National Museum of Immigration in Buenos Aires, standing between old photographs and yellowed documents, I realised that my journey to Norway had roots of its own that I'd scarcely explored. I felt a spark of curiosity about my great-grandparents for the first time; they had traversed the ocean with their hopes and worries tucked away inside heavy trunks, on a journey that had lasted many weeks – long before I could dream of simply hopping on a flight.

When I later visited Malaysia, I got in touch with father's youngest brother, a kind uncle with an interest in family history. He helped me to track down a second cousin, the family's unofficial historian, said to have committed our family history to memory. Our grandfathers were brothers, but I'd had barely any contact with anyone from his branch of the family tree.

My second cousin and I arranged to meet in Klang, an important port town outside of Kuala Lumpur where my great-grandparents had settled. I hoped to learn more about the couple, who could scarcely have imagined their story being discussed more than a hundred years later.

I barely have a moment to run through all of my questions before my second cousin makes a punctual arrival. As he steps out of the car, I am struck by how tall he is. Perhaps it is his side of the family that inherited the height gene? His expression is open and friendly, and I greet him by name as he approaches me.

'*Boh Dong*,' I say, pleased to have remembered the first name my uncle used to refer to him.

But as soon as I speak his name, I see his smile vanish. I immediately realise my mistake: I should have said *Boh Dong ko*, 'Older Second Cousin Dong'.

In Chinese culture, kinship terms are more than mere formalities – they reinforce ties of blood. By signalling in which direction respect is owed through the correct use of titles, these terms serve to uphold the hierarchy. My brothers never simply call me by my name, Woon, but always *Jie*, 'big sister'.

My second cousin straightens himself up slightly and looks at me with a firmness I hadn't anticipated. After a few seconds of silence, he addresses me calmly and clearly:

'Given your younger years, you should refer to me as *Boh Dong ko*.'

He speaks kindly, but I feel the warmth rising in my cheeks. My second cousin and I are of the same generation, and he is only a few years older than I am – yet that is sufficient, he believes, to demand deference from me. It is an embarrassing reminder that I am no longer entirely well-versed in the local customs.

It bothers me that our conversation has got off on the wrong foot, but my reflexes kick in after my mother and father's endless drilling: older relatives should be addressed in the proper manner. An aunt is never just an aunt, the relationship must be further defined: is she an aunt on your mother's side or your father's, and what is her position within her sibling group? All of these things must be acknowledged. *Go Bo*, for example, would be the fifth aunt on one's father's side of the family.

How could I have been so careless with such a fundamental rule? I'm rusty when it comes to local conventions. Behaviour considered perfectly normal in equality-focused Norway can swiftly be interpreted as demonstrating a lack of respect, or worse still, as an indication of a bad upbringing.

Our meeting calls to mind another childhood lesson: form over substance. Personally, I find it a bit much, but I activate Malaysian mode, take a deep breath and look my second cousin in the eye.

'*Boh Dong ko*,' I say in a steady voice, hoping to smooth over the social mishap of my own making. 'Please tell me about our great-grandfather.'

My second cousin leads me over to the empty bench by the car park. We are high above the town with a clear view down onto Port Klang, which extends in every direction. The trees cast a pleasant shade, and a gentle breeze makes for a comfortable afternoon even though the sun is still high in the sky. My second cousin has clearly chosen the location of our meeting with care; he wants our conversation to take place with the town – so central to our family history – as witness beneath us.

He allows the conversation to flow, as if my curiosity is to be expected and nothing has gone awry.

'In 1890, our great-grandfather made the journey from China to Malaya,' he begins calmly, as if he's told this story a hundred times before.

This is the first time I am given a date – the year that the head of the family set out on a journey that changed our lives, yet which has somehow still been forgotten. It strikes me that for those early generations, life must have been centred on survival and securing a foundation for the future. An interest in the past and family history was a luxury no one could afford.

I don't know if my great-grandfather learned to live with the loss of his native country. Whether he ever felt at home in his new surroundings, or if rootlessness became the defining feature of his life – with a sense of belonging to the new country something he never dared hope to achieve. Whether the local language represented an insurmountable barrier to him, with the void left by the loss of the rhythm and tone of his mother tongue – the language closest to his heart – occupying too much space within him.

I have not seen a photo of my great-grandfather and I have never known his name, and until this point in time I had not thought about him. But all of a sudden, my great-grandfather is no longer just an abstract figure – he is an individual about whom I have questions.

My second cousin continues:

'Our great-grandfather was a businessman that travelled between China and Vietnam. He was involved with the Maritime Silk Road.'

I can't recall having read about this before, a fact that leaves me feeling even less acquainted with my great-grandfather.

'After the land route became too dangerous, the maritime route increased in importance. Ships left southern China and sailed from one port to the next carrying silk, spices and tea – through the Strait of Malacca and all the way to the Indian ocean and Persian Gulf. They would stick close to the coastline so they could easily call in at ports by the mouths of rivers.'

In my mind's eye I draw a map of Asia and follow the route he describes. My second cousin smiles, excited by my interest in the subject.

'Then our great-grandfather bought a plot of land near Klang and planted some rubber trees,' he continues.

I remember learning at school that rubber trees originated in the Amazon region. In the 1800s, South America was the leading source of natural rubber, and trade was strictly protected. The seeds were carefully controlled, but an English botanist managed to smuggle some over to England, where

they were then sent on to British colonies in Asia. This marked the beginning of the cultivation of rubber trees in Malaysia.

'The rubber trees had to be tapped in the early hours of the morning, before the sun rose and the rubber became too sticky. You would carefully cut the bark of the tree with a special knife – deep enough that the natural latex would flow for several hours, but not so deep that the tree was harmed.'

I picture the rubber plantation workers wielding their knives, latex running slowly down into buckets. Every day before the sun rose.

'Much like the migrants, the trees settled and became a natural part of life here,' he says quietly. 'But rubber is no longer so important,' my second cousin adds. 'The area has since been turned into a housing development.'

Why did my great-grandfather move on from his business ventures? What prompted him and my great-grandmother to settle in Malaya – a region with which neither of them was familiar? Was it an interim solution? Did they ever consider the possibility that they might die in this foreign country?

Historian Maya Jasanoff has pointed out that choices that might seem deeply personal are often shaped by greater, invisible forces. In the 19th century, migration gathered momentum, and many from China left their homeland during the final phase of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Chinese citizens who were recruited to work abroad were known as coolies ('kǔ lì', **苦力**, quite literally 'hard labour' in Chinese).

Chinese migrants first travelled to California in the hopes of finding gold, but were met with difficult living conditions. When the USA closed its borders in 1882, many travelled south – in the direction of British Malaya. When my great-grandparents emigrated, they were part of an enormous wave sweeping its way around the world. Were they aware of this?

Before the arrival of the British in 1824, the population of Malaya was relatively small. Nevertheless, by the time my great-grandparents arrived in the country, the number of immigrants measured against the population as a whole was higher than anywhere else in the world. Increased industrialisation in Great Britain created a growth in demand for raw materials from the colonies, and labourers from selected countries were permitted unrestricted entry to Malaya: Chinese migrants worked primarily in tin mines, whilst Indian migrants were recruited to work in the rubber plantations.

China, Malaysia, Norway and Argentina – countries with which I have a relationship of my own – were all central players in global migration history. As if by magic, the connection between this global phenomenon, my great-grandparents and me is revealed.

The journey changed not only their lives, but also the lives of those left behind in China and Vietnam – not to mention the generations to come in Malaysia. My decision to settle in Norway now feels part of a continued desire to emigrate that spans generations. My meeting with my second cousin – a relative I hadn't previously known existed – calls forth stories that are also my own.

A Foreigner Among Foreigners

I learn from my second cousin that my great-grandfather died young, just eleven years after leaving China. Before the birth of his youngest child.

My great-grandmother was 34 years old. All alone in a foreign country.

'Our great-grandmother was hard-working, she was made of tough stuff,' my second cousin tells me. 'She took over the running of our great-grandfather's business, buying and selling rubber and areca nuts.'

As a child, I would see older people in the neighbourhood sitting out on their verandas at the end of the day chewing betel leaves. Together they would make small leaf packets stuffed with thin slices of areca nut, slaked lime, cloves and cardamom – a culinary kinder egg – as they all chatted away. Very few people chew betel these days - it takes too long, and having to spit out orangey-red saliva is considered indelicate, not to mention the tooth discolouration it causes.

My great-grandmother and her four children lived on the family's plot of land in Kampung Jawa, which was planted up with rubber trees. The village was largely populated by Muslim Malays and migrants from Hainan and other regions of southern China. In the archives of the local Hainan Society, she is simply described as 'the Vietnamese woman' – she is likely to have been the only person from Vietnam living in the village, a foreigner among foreigners. Nobody in the family knows her first name. In the village she was known as Bo Hua's grandmother. Bo Hua – my father – was her oldest male grandchild.

As I write these words, I wonder if she ever asked herself the question: *Do I belong here?* Or was a sense of being at home a luxury she had neither the time nor the space to consider?

Life between worlds is my inheritance. On the rare occasion that I meet someone else who belongs in this unnamed, desolate place – between continents, countries, languages – it is a relief. Life acquires an ease. I am freed from having to explain things, to substitute words. I speak freely, undeterred by the sentinels keeping watch over language barriers.

Perhaps the infrequent nature of these meetings is what brings me to identify so closely with my great-grandmother's fate. I spend a long time looking at the only photograph the family has of her. Her face was already wrinkled. Perhaps this was the only occasion she was ever captured on film. She had gazed at the camera without smiling.

With only this very sombre photograph in my possession, it is difficult for me to imagine her as a young woman – one who laughed, giggled and guffawed, a twenty-something who took a chance on a new life with a stranger in a faraway land.

She never remarried. A single mother of four young children wasn't exactly a desirable option for those looking for love.

In order to learn more about her, I get in touch with the youngest of my father's five sisters, who I know as *Go Bo* – aunt number five on my father's side. I used to love visiting her when I was young. She had a passion for fashion and always matched her handbag with her shoes – a trip to see her meant a wardrobe upgrade for me, as she had a habit of passing on clothing she no longer wore.

Aunt Number Five describes my great-grandmother as a small, slender woman with white hair who dressed the same day-to-day as she did for any celebration: flowing black trousers and a shirt with a mandarin collar. I've never heard any mention of this before.

‘Your great-grandmother would line her shoes with newspaper when holes formed in the soles,’ Aunt Number Five tells me. ‘She would swap out the newspaper when the need arose. Nobody can see the soles of your feet, she would say.’

Back then, leather shoes were reserved for the well-to-do. My great-grandmother was careful with money, and sacrificed her own needs for her children’s future.

Aunt Number Five remembered my great-grandmother as a strong matriarch, feared both by her children and possibly also some of the adults in her life. She must have been tough to get by in a world of business dominated by men.

Even without schooling she understood the value of education. Her eldest son was educated in Mandarin, whilst her youngest – my grandfather – attended an English-language school at The Victoria Institution (VI) in Kuala Lumpur, the country’s oldest school, established in 1893. Her daughters also attended school, which was unusual. My great-grandmother’s decision to have her sons educated in different languages was a carefully-considered strategy. In a country where political relations were unpredictable, this represented a form of future-proofing.

My grandfather’s English education left its mark on him. He opened a shop on Klang’s main street called *General Store,* where he sold imported goods – milk powder, tinned foods and orange marmalade. He knew what his customers missed from back home. When the shop received bulk orders of dented tins he was unable to sell, he would bring them home and the children were able to try them. It was thanks so this that exotic orange marmalade became a firm family favourite.

At home, Hainanese was compulsory – the language of the colonial masters belonged only at school. Aunt Number Five and her siblings would often have to repeat two place names for great-grandmother: the name of the Long family village in Hainan, and the closest market town where the family shopped.

‘If you know where you come from, you know who you are, your great-grandmother used to say.’

She must have felt the struggle of connecting the old and the new. Many and various threads of life – from different eras and locations – must fall into place in an impossible web. There simply isn’t room for everything. Something has to give.

My great-grandmother sacrificed her mother tongue, Vietnamese. A nursery rhyme is all that remains. My father taught it to us when we were young. No speaker of Vietnamese would understand it these days; the words have become distorted through a game of Chinese whispers played out over generations.

When my mother and father would come home, we’d shout the first line at them and would only open the door if they could recite the next – our own little take on ‘Open, Sesame’.

In Hainanese, they say *nan nang* – ‘our people’ – when discussing others from Hainan. But after more than a hundred years in Malaysia, our family is no longer nan nang, not in practise. I do not speak fluent Hainanese, and only identify as nan nang through the few words I know – all while hoping that the conversation in Hainanese will come to a swift end.

When I was young, we had private Mandarin lessons after school. This was an obligation we didn’t exactly enjoy. All the same, like many Malaysian Chinese people, I carry a sense of shame for more accurately mastering the language of colonial power. Colonialism taught us that something else is better than what we have. As a consequence, I can neither read nor write Mandarin – and I can only get by in simple day-to-day situations. Can I really call myself Chinese? In China, they call us *hua jiao*, the Chinese diaspora – not real Chinese citizens from the mainland. Incomplete.

First generation immigrants fight to put food on the table, to survive. Those who come after face a different challenge altogether: combining their cultural heritage with life in their new homeland. Occasionally this inner burden can feel as heavy as the first generation's fight for survival on foreign soil.

I look at the photograph of my great-grandmother, the stern-faced woman. The Vietnamese language disappeared from the family, but not the desire to be understood.

Now, generations later, I have done something she never had the opportunity to do: I have written a book. In a language unfamiliar to her.

Perhaps this is why it feels as though I am writing for her, too.

‘Lidla Vonen’ and Other Versions of Me

My first name, ‘Litt Woon’, means Beautiful Cloud.

When I was young, I liked to hear my parents tell me the story of how I got my name. My mother always began with the romance between her and my father. Us children didn’t know how things actually came to pass, because we never got to hear my father’s side of the story. We were unable able to piece together two versions and split them down the middle to land on some semblance of truth.

From our mother we heard how our father, a university-educated teacher – and as such, a good marriage prospect in the turbulent times preceding Malaysian independence – cycled past the family home several times before one day stopping and inviting himself inside. He was mother’s youngest brother’s teacher, and used this as both an explanation and excuse for an unannounced visit.

According to mother’s version of events, their story started with this initial visit – where she served him tea – and proceeded directly to marriage. She felt that details from the phase in between were unfit for young ears.

All the same, there was a sense of inevitability about the whole thing.

As newlyweds, my parents lived in a bungalow at the top of a hill on the lower side of the railway by Bukit Mertajam. My father was the new teacher at Bukit Mertajam High School. He had studied at university in both Singapore and Edinburgh, and this qualified him for an official residence with its own tennis court.

The vacuum left by the British meant that government positions came with spacious official residences, often with large gardens. Behind the main house was also a row of dwellings for domestic workers.

Mother and father’s house had a panoramic view of open sky and clouds – which is where I got my name. To the west were the rice paddies that my middle brother was named after. And on the horizon, the mountains after which my youngest brother was named. It felt both inevitable and right that we be given names that reflected the central elements in the landscape of my mother and father’s love.

According to Chinese naming traditions, my surname, ‘Long’, is written first. In Malaysia, where the first Chinese migrants arrived in Malakka as early as the 16th century, this is unproblematic. In Norway, I have to explain this fact. Some go to the effort of learning a name – and a naming tradition – that is unfamiliar to them. Others do not. If I am attending a conference, my name badge usually needs to be corrected in pen. All the same, I insist on keeping my name without adapting to my local surroundings, even with the social costs this involves.

I previously considered myself a sort of ‘barefoot anthropologist’ carrying out her own personal public education project. I executed this project with the utmost patience and understanding in order to expand other people’s awareness of foreign naming traditions. They didn’t know any better.

But perhaps I cling to my name not simply as a means of educating the general public, but also for my own sake. Names are closely connected to identity. When I got married, I never considered taking my husband’s name. Why should I, when I have my own? It would be a betrayal

not just of myself, but also of my parents, who gave me this wonderful name to begin with. Having moved country and changed my nationality, it is good to feel that something is fixed.

On the Statistics Norway website, you can carry out searches by name. I type my own name in and find out – in mere seconds – that 'fewer than four people or none at all have the name Woon'. Throughout the years I've collected various misspellings, but I have no plans to 'Norwegianise' my name – it was once suggested I might like to be known as Wenche Lang, for instance, one of the more creative examples presented to me.

In Stavanger, famous for its distinct dialect, I was occasionally referred to as 'Lidla Vonen', which I liked very much: 'Litt' became 'Lidla', a local dialect word to describe something small, and 'Woon' became 'Vonen', meaning 'hope'. It was charming to be known as 'Little Hope'. As the Norwegian proverb goes, *alltid von i hengande snøre* – there is hope as long as your fishing line is in the water.

Nonetheless, I had to abandon my principle of hanging onto my name when I arrived in Buenos Aires. At a milonga, a lively gathering where people meet to dance the Argentine tango, my dance partners would look completely baffled when I told them my name was 'Woon'. The locals were unable to pronounce it; there was simply no point of reference for my name in the Argentine world. My dance partners would first fall silent, then attempt to continue conversation – all while avoiding ever having to say my name. I heard their omissions loud and clear. I was used to this.

My new tactic in Buenos Aires is to introduce myself as Nube, the Spanish word for cloud. My dance partners would wink. Nube perfectly suited both the poetic Argentinian sensibility and the tango aesthetic. I would immediately be complimented on my beautiful name. Some even remembered it when we next danced together. One very nearly got it right when he called me Nieve, 'Snow', the following week.

When I first arrived in Buenos Aires, I ended up quite by chance in the neighbourhood of San Telmo. San Telmo – the historic heart of the city, though considered rough around the edges by those living in nicer *barrios*. Nonetheless, whenever I return, I get to know it a little better. When I bump into Danny, a shoemaker, out and about in the streets, he greets me like a true *porteño* – with a kiss on the cheek. He lifts his arms in the air and asks how things are going with Sandokan, the fictional Malaysian pirate rebel with a huge following in Argentina. His gaze immediately falls on my new gold shoes, and he nods appreciatively. Had there been a mirror here, I'd have spun around, allowed my shoes to catch the light and shown how well-suited they are to dancing. I am on first name terms with the local bookseller Fernando, who I visit on a regular basis. The waiters at the local *bar notable* – a historic bar with fixtures and fittings dating back to the last century, all coated in an obligatory layer of dust – also know me well. On one occasion, one of them, Martín, had given me a bunch of flowers he'd hidden behind the cake counter, and had asked me if I would be his 'summer girlfriend', all while the rest of the staff watched on intently. I thanked him politely for the offer and gave him my usual, untrue answer: I'm already taken. In my experience, this is the easiest answer for Argentinians with a romantic interest to accept. Admirers have feelings too. In the same neighbourhood, a greengrocer, a baker and several others come together to create my own neighbourhood network. I am grateful for each and every one of them. They make the city less unfamiliar, and a little more mine.

A Fractured Hip

As I lie in bed early one morning in Buenos Aires, I hear the soft pling of a mobile notification. I glance sleepily at my phone and see that our family doctor in Taiping is in the process of writing another message. Dr Lim's father and my father were best friends at university, and our families have known one another for as long as I can remember. Now both of our fathers are gone, but the bond we share – stretching back to the days we played together as children – remains strong.

I realise immediately that something has happened to Mum.

'Your mother had a fall at home last night,' the brief message informs me. 'No head injuries, but she can't move her right hip. We need to take some x-rays. She's likely to need surgery,' Dr Lim writes.

It is the message we have dreaded. My brothers and I have long feared that something like this might happen. My mother lives alone, but she has refused every candidate interviewed as a potential source of live-in support. She greatly values her independence.

Between Argentina and Malaysia is an ocean, and no direct flight path. There is no shortcut home to my mother. But the greatest distance is invisible: the feeling of not being able to do anything.

On the other side of the world Dr Lim takes charge, admitting my mother to hospital. I feel a deep sense of gratitude for the community in Taiping that immediately steps in to help. On the first day of her hospital stay, her friends form a visiting rota. They stop by with fruit from their gardens, homemade delicacies and reassurance.

My siblings and I hold our breath. Updates trickle in via a Whatsapp group we have with the doctor. When the message arrives to let us know that the operation has gone well, we all heave a sigh of relief.

But our mother has to learn to walk again. Mother – who has always moved with a self-assurance that we've taken for granted – is now dependent on receiving help.

I picture my mother holding the parasol she always takes out and about with her. Not only does it protect her against the sun, but it also functions as an improvised walking stick as she wanders to the market to run errands, or to her favourite café on a nearby street to order a warm goat's milk with ginger, her little daily indulgence. The dual function of her parasol is her way of maintaining her independence and protecting her sense of vanity.

Now, as she lies there in her hospital bed, none of us knowing if she will return to her old self again, mother's freedom and independence feel distant and uncertain.

There is a great deal to decide. It is obvious that my mother can't go straight home once she is discharged from the hospital. As if that weren't enough, the pandemic continues to paralyse the world. Well-meaning family members offer advice and opinions. All the same, I cannot shake the thought that they are seeing the situation from their own point of view, and not in terms of what is possible for us, nor the limitations we face.

Now the final reckoning of migration is up for discussion: a mother who can no longer live alone, and her children all settled outside of her home country.

My mother is prescribed strong painkillers after surgery, which affect how stable and present she is capable of being. For us, it is critical that she does not take another fall. We find her a nursing

home. They assure us that they've helped many patients with rehabilitation after hip surgery. Our hope is that the care she receives there will give her the best chance of returning to her old life.

One of my brothers, the middle child, is the first to travel to Taiping.

Then it is my turn. Daily updates from the nursing home keep us informed about my mother's progress, but nothing can prepare me for the experience of seeing her with my own eyes.

'Ah, Woon, it's so lovely you've come back home,' my mother says, smiling when she sees me.

I barely recognise the figure before me. She takes my hand in hers, her fingers so slender, a grip that is strong and vulnerable all at once. When I lift my gaze, I see other residents sitting around us: some in wheelchairs, others gazing vacantly into the distance.

The contrasts between the nursing home and my mother's own house are striking. Worst of all is when she tells me she wants to go home. A hard knot forms within me.

Since she moved into the nursing home, we've looked into ways to get her back home. We cling to each suggestion for a while, trying to convince ourselves that it might offer a solution. But one by one, they slip from our grasp. We grapple with our desire to bring her home versus what we can actually accomplish – individually and together. Us siblings move at different speeds, but slowly we come to the same conclusion: the nursing home can offer more than we could.

The roles of mother and child are turned on their heads, and even though this has been clear for quite some time, there is now no way back. No more pretending. Mother is forgetting more and more. I realise that the dream of a family cookbook filled with my mother's finest recipes must be set aside; her forgetfulness hasn't only erased the ingredients and methods required, but also the memories baked into every dish. She wanders now through her own landscape of memories, where her parents and siblings – even those long gone – still live on.

My mother turns 90 in the nursing home. I rig my phone up on a little stand, check that the light is falling softly on her face and press record.

'What is life like at 90 years old, Mother?' I ask her, a little uncertain as to how she will respond.

She contemplates the question.

'It's good,' she says eventually. 'I can eat. Sleep. Use the toilet. I'm content.'

I let out a sigh of relief. At the same time, it is a little surprising to note what life has boiled down to for her.

Then she adds:

'I was lucky to marry your father. We've travelled. We've had three children. I couldn't ask for more.'

My mother is my living link – my strongest connection to the country in which I was born. She is the bridge back to my childhood: the sound of Hokkien, the taste of celebratory or day-to-day dishes, her manner of being – for better or worse. Now that my mother is changing, the vulnerable and delicate nature of this sense of belonging is made plain to me. My own childhood drifts further and further away.

I first felt it when my father died. When those who know me disappear, the vulnerability is all the more persistent.

But it is not only our elders who eventually fade. The town of Taiping has transformed. Not only does it now have traffic lights, but there are now occasionally also traffic jams. I stop by the restaurant Anna on Main Road, where the staff always used to ask after my mother. I would show them the most recent photos I'd taken of her on my phone. Things are different this time around. The restaurant has a new owner. The old interior has been replaced with garish curtains and multicoloured flashing lights. The loyal waiting staff are also gone. Nobody recognises me. Nobody asks after my mother. The experience is a stark contrast to my earlier visits, when a simple nod across the room ensured that my coffee arrived without a word needing to be uttered – no sugar, unusual in Malaysia.

My train of thought is interrupted:

'Ah, Woon, eat this,' my mother says, passing me a steamed groundnut she's just peeled.

My mother confuses events and people, but she remembers her role as a mother – a form of muscle memory. I bought a little bag of groundnuts from her favourite street food stall and brought them for her as a surprise. I know she'll light up, as she always does.

'Ah, Woon, let's take a walk in this beautiful garden,' my mother says, radiating a peace that suits the low afternoon sun.

She adjusts the hem of her dress, a gesture so typically her, even though it's only the two of us out on the terrace. Appearance has always been important to my mother. For years it has irritated me that she is so concerned about what others think. This one attribute – one that has always divided us – remains intact. My heart softens.

The sun is fading, so the timing is perfect. My mother can manage a few steps by herself, but the wheelchair is necessary for covering greater distances. She doesn't object; she looks to have made her peace with the wheelchair's place in her new life. When she confidently points out species of tree in the nursing home garden, I can see that her childhood knowledge – gained at a time when fruit trees were a source of nourishment and livelihood for my grandfather – lives on within her.

Over the fence in the neighbour's garden is a *belimbing* tree. We take a break on our little tour of the garden and stop beneath it. As we admire it and count the sour fruits, my mother recites the same recipe: very thinly-sliced belimbing cut crosswise, a little chopped chilli, sugar, salt and lime juice. She inhales sharply through her teeth as only those who love sour flavours can, as if to demonstrate how tasty it is. Then, with exaggerated clarity, she says: *sedap*, 'delicious'.

Our little tour of the gardens is more than just a stroll; it is a journey back in time, to her roots, where nature helps her to rediscover her old self, even if only for a short while.

Mother and I develop a daily routine: I push her around the grounds of the nursing home, and she inspects each of the trees and provides a running commentary. We also keep an eye on the nursing home's collection of smaller plants whilst out on our rounds, tracking their progress and noting the way yesterday's buds are beginning to open in the light.

'Look, can you see how many *jambu* the neighbour has on their trees?' my mother says, pointing at the property across the road.

I look in the direction she's pointing and together we count the fruits ripening day-by-day – each of them covered by a loose plastic bag to prevent the insects from getting to them. Now, as we walk side-by-side among the trees, I realise that it is from my mother that I inherited my interest in gardening and nature.

After Eiolf's death I attended a course run by the Norwegian Association for Mycology and Foraging, which brought me new friends and introduced me to new foraging locations in forests and

fields – as well as more firmly establishing my roots in Norway. Mother's eye for flora and fauna played a part in tying me all the more closely to Norway.

'Do you remember those dance shoes you gave me?' I ask.

'Your father wasn't keen,' she replies, her only remark on the matter.

I look at her, this little woman in the wheelchair, and try to picture her as a girl, twirling on the parquet floor. And even though I now dance in Buenos Aires in my own shoes, perhaps I do so for both of us.

'Did you miss it?' I ask.

She shrugs.

'That's just how things were.'

The birds chirp all around us.

'Sometimes there are eight, maybe nine birds that sit on that electrical cable up there,' mother tells me as we eat our lunch out on the terrace.

Changes in the natural world lend life a sense of motion – time passes, and no day is quite like another.

'I can come with you when the taxi comes?' mother says; a suggestion and a question rolled into one, almost as if it were quite by chance that she was in the nursing home.

I don't respond straight away.

She looks at me, waiting.

'You need to build yourself up a bit first,' I say.

She looks out of the window and changes the subject.

'Have you looked in the fridge at home? You'll need to throw out anything that's gone bad.'

I nod. She is still the boss in the kitchen.

'I don't need to go upstairs. I can stay downstairs,' she continues. Then she repeats her desire to go home.

'You could.'

She smiles feebly and looks down at her hands, as if she's trying to gauge what she can still manage. I say nothing, just try to meet her where she is.

One day when I visit, I can tell at once that she's feeling down.

'Mother, how are you?'

'I'm worthless,' she mumbles.

I take a seat beside her. Words fails her, so I simply hold her hand and stroke it gently. Mother's decline isn't linear – at times she is entirely present. Perhaps it is in moments like those that reality hits her. Does she suddenly recall, with painful clarity, how she once conquered life with every fibre of her being?

One day my mother asks for another piece of chocolate after we've already had one each; I've already placed the Norwegian Freia chocolate bar back in the fridge.

‘We can have some more tomorrow. We’ve had enough for today,’ I say. I can see at once that she doesn’t like the answer I’ve given.

‘Remember the doctor told us we have to keep an eye on your blood sugar levels,’ I add, a half-hearted defence.

‘You don’t need to come tomorrow. I don’t want to see you,’ she says firmly.

The words hit me hard. I don’t see them coming. All I want is to look after her.

I fall silent. I know that explanations won’t help. Not now. I know mother well enough to know that. I tidy away our glasses, which I do every day before I leave, but it feels different today. I arrange for a car to collect me. The minutes pass slowly, and when the car arrives, I try hugging her as I usually would, but she looks away. The knot in my stomach feels like cement. It is a long time since my mother triggered feelings of inadequacy in me.

When I wake the next day, I come to my decision quickly: of course I’m going to visit my mother. Once you’ve turned 90, you have the right to eat as much chocolate as you like. It’s the very least we can do for her.

I appear with treats from the market: crispy fried whitebait and *lala* clams with ginger and garlic. The plan is to eat lunch together on the terrace and to share each other’s dishes, as we tend to.

When I see her, I lean down and she kisses my cheek, as she always does.

‘I’m sorry I was unkind to you yesterday,’ she says.

I’m taken aback. It’s rare that she ever admits a mistake. Her words the previous day had been harsh but familiar. There is comfort in that.

The time has come for me to leave Mother. I’ve prepared her for this, so it won’t come as a shock. When the car arrives, we hug and kiss one another.

Mother waves. Her hand doesn’t go all the way up – her back is hunched – but she lifts her arm to the best of her ability.

I wave back.

Leaving her now, I carry with me more than just an empty space.

I recognise my bond with Malaysia changing shape; as it does so, I too am changing, as are my relationships.

On long journeys I put on my headphones and use a neck pillow. If I can find a suitable place to rest my feet, I relax – in transit between places I consider to be mine.

It is the act of travelling between my nearest and dearest, spread across different landscapes, that unites the innermost parts of me. I am the movement – against this subtle, imperceptible shift.

Much like in tango, it is not the choreographed, dramatic pose one strikes at the end that is most significant, but one’s presence within each step.

There, mid-flow, I find my feet.