REMEMBERING GRANDMA

i
When yellow deepened in the cheeks
of Mother's sharp, dry face, Grandma
knew. A canine instinct
nosed out all the soft parts
that death had already slightly smudged.
How would she conduct herself?
Mother would leave her to herself
in the impending wildernesses of our house.
How then would she conduct herself?
She was but old flesh persisting on the bone.
A son-in-law, improbable, yet Chinese.
Off-accent. His Malacca sister regularly rose
to plague him out of the ashes
of a painful past. Grandma had no claim
on their intense, murky quarrels in Malay.

ii
Grandma's window faced the kitchen.
Under her bed
stood always her night spittoon.
She kept folded in a trunk
her black silk trousers, those
she had on when first she came.
Above all she nursed that heavy belt
hammered out of silver melted down
from Mexican dollars and old Straits coins. Slung from the ceiling, it could take more than the weight of our rattan cradle. Nightfall. She frightened herself, spooning mush and orange juice to Mother’s mouth.

iii
Yet Grandma would not think of moving down to Uncle’s house in town. She would not consider it at all. She could not quite brace herself for the descent. Those walls were dark with photographs. How they escaped her, those cousins, those in-laws, their faces so durable and wooden. . . Uncle now would never shock the dead, bringing home his women.

iv
She was nothing, yet was more nervy than the cats she remembered in Uncle’s kitchen, kicked into the ashes underneath the range.
Grandma panicked at the thought.  
She was never much good,  
a bitter ghost forever coming back from corners  
to trouble Uncle;  
to trouble him when he was intent,  
sockets afire, at the mahjong table;  
to trouble him when he had no other wish  
than to think, to sit  
and ruminate on all the likely medicines for his sores,  
for that numbness — settling,  
it would lock stiff the hard base of his spine — like stone.

v

In those last weeks  
Grandma was much absorbed by dreams.  
She could not help but be concerned  
with them only. Each night  
she had to drag her way back  
from Sultan Street.  
Circular, descending, in her dreams  
it reached that level for the broken. . .  
One night  
it was only my Uncle’s daughter.  
Out of that unease  
she came— a kind of light,  
she faintly shocked the darkness of our house.  
In the morning, Grandma,  
inexplicably, was much relieved.
vi
Sometimes I wonder how it could have been
we too were there. Baba children,
animal and tartar,
breaking out in a strange babble of tongues.
Yet her grandchildren. In my head
still swims the otherworldly darkness
that held our house. We were then
only children. Nothing terrible would come to us.

vii
So I was that Father,
much looked up to for his Baby Austin 7,
that one person in our street
who could talk properly, flying
our vague asiatic complaints
in the pipe-smoke
in the office of the Comptroller, Mr. D. J. Wainright-Jones;
so it was that Father,
who, tiring of his shelf of Pitman manuals,
turned to the business
of grappling with his one real book,
Robinson Crusoe,
without quite realising when he did it
took to wife my mother’s niece,
and she barely fourteen.