

From *Unpolished Gem* by Alice Pung

“Migrant literature usually starts with people suffering a lot and then they come to Australia or America or Canada and they make it big. That is supposed to be the end of their suffering. My book doesn’t tell it like that; it tells it as it is for me and my family ... When we came here, my family were in awe of everything, every little thing was incredible, like a wonderland ...

Alice Pung,
The Age, Sept 3 2006



5 Wah, so many things about this new country that are so taken-for-granted! It is a country where no one walks like they have to hide. From the top floor of the Rialto building my parents see that the people below amble in a different manner, and not just because of the heat. No bomb is ever going to fall on top of them.

10 Here there is sweetness, and the refugees staying at the Midway Migrant Hilton horde packets of sugar, jam and honey from the breakfast table. So used to everything being finite, irrevocably gone if one does not grab it fast enough, they are bewildered when new packets appear on the breakfast table the next day. So they fill their pockets with these too, just in case. Weeks later, the packets still appear. The new refugees learn to eat more slowly, that their food will not be taken from them or their bowls kicked away. They learn that here, no one dies of starvation.

15 So in the beginning there are many wahs of wonder, and when my father returns home swinging his bagful of swine hocks, his ears are assailed with even more. “Wah! Look at this water from the tap!” cries my grandmother, handing him a steaming mug. “So clean and hot you could make coffee with it”. When they walk to the Western General Hospital with my mother to get the blood tests done, bitumen roads are a source of wonder. “Wah! So black and sparkling like the night sky! Rolled flat by machines and not by stones pulled by a hundred people!” When they catch the tram to declare Australian citizenship, the orderliness of the streetscape does not escape my father, who has proudly memorised all the names of the roads, and in the process the chronological order of this colonised country’s monarchs — “King Street, 20 William Street, Queen Street, Elizabeth Street.”

25 My parents became pioneers navigating a new land. Although they travelled through three Southeast-Asian countries by foot, nothing can prepare them for travelling up and down escalators. “Go down!” the rest of my family urge my mother. But she stands firmly at the top, blocking off entry for all the other embarkers. She stares down at her husband, her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law, who have already arrived at the bottom. “Ahhh, I’m scaaaared!” My father finally steps on, growing larger and larger as he approaches the top with a smirk pasted on his face, like a slow zoom in a cheesy Chinese film. “Just step between the yellow lines,” he instructs. 30 “Come on, you’ve gone up before, so you can come down too! Weeee, wahhh, see what fun!” Up and down and down and up they ride the escalators at Highpoint Shopping Centre — this 32-year-old man, his eight-months-pregnant wife, his 27-year-old sister and the old Asian grandmother in the purple woollen pyjamas. Every journey is one small step for Australians, but one giant leap for the Wah-sers.



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