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### **Chai Tiam Ma in Taman Betek**

Every evening at 6

Ah Gong would push me in a stroller

down two straight rows

of identical cement-coloured bungalows

before turning two rights and a left

to our taman<sup>1</sup> *chai tiam ma*<sup>2</sup>.

Along the road would be

a cacophony of uncles and aunties

discussing politics and gossip and

dishing out at us rapid fire

“*Chiak pa bui?*”<sup>3</sup>

like dinner invitations

rather than stranger’s questions.

Ah Gong would always ask me *lu ai chiak ha mik*<sup>4</sup>

knowing my answer would always be

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<sup>1</sup> Malay term for neighbourhood. Malaysians commonly use the term *taman* instead of “neighbourhood” in other languages.

<sup>2</sup> Hokkien term for traditional neighbourhood sundry shop.

<sup>3</sup> Translation: (Hokkien) have you eaten

<sup>4</sup> Translation: (Hokkien) what do you want to eat

biscuits with colourful icing swirls  
pink, yellow, white and green,  
and if he had no extra money  
then whatever else I could try for free  
from the large aluminium tins.

The walk home always seemed longer  
to make time for  
Ah Gong's unhurried leisure  
and my innocent wonder  
at fireworks jostling about in a plastic bag  
waiting to burst into pops of colour  
to paint to life the taman's dull scene

which I eventually escaped  
too late  
for six o'clock walks  
at a neon-flooded metropolitan.

The café macarons can't save  
the colours on my icing swirls draining  
off skyscrapers and billboards  
to something more lifeless

than burgundy awnings and grey walls.

Perhaps in my pitch-black sleep

I would dream of

icing swirls across my windows

bringing Ah Gong back into technicolour

asking me *lu ai chiak ha mik?*