

WHERE WE CALL *HOME*

Chirpy in the city

Botanic Gardens brings back fond memories for Catherine Lim, but she isn't one to weep over the changing cityscape

● Stephanie Yap

TO WRITER Catherine Lim, the Botanic Gardens will always be a place that inspires great poetry – though, admittedly, not her own.

The energetic 66-year-old chuckles as she casts her mind back almost 40 years, to one of the trips she and her former husband made with their two children, Jean and Peter.

The family used to visit the 52ha park in the heart of town every other weekend, toting a bagful of bread to feed the ducks, fish and turtles.

"We were walking out of the gardens and there was this gorgeous moon. Jean looked up and said: 'Moon, moon, shining bright, stuck in heaven like a cake'," recalls Dr Lim, cackling with delight.

"My ex-husband was so pleased and excited that when we got home, he made her repeat it. He wrote proudly: 'Jean Lim's poem, at age three years, four months'."

When the children got older, the family stopped going to the Botanic Gardens.

Jean, now 42, is a doctor in Hong

Kong, while Peter, 40, is a journalist in the United States. Dr Lim's former husband, George, whom she divorced in 1984, lives in Canada.

However, about 15 years ago, the writer started returning to the park on her own, and now visits about twice a month, enjoying a two-hour stroll in the evenings.

"I live in this little box in the sky, so it is absolutely refreshing to hear the chirping of crickets and other sounds you would never associate with urban life," she says. She lives in a condominium in Newton.

"It never ceases to amaze me that in the midst of the city, you can be in the midst of a jungle, doing a little jungle walk. It is almost like a luxury to me."

It is clear when you meet Dr Lim that she is an urbanite through and through.

She had mentioned over the phone that she would be wearing her exercise outfit, which turns out to be an off-the-shoulder black top with leggings, paired with a leopard print newsboy cap and a matching scarf.

The amiable writer is soon chatting away like an old friend as she steers you deftly along the most shady paths.

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CATHERINE LIM,
on Botanic Gardens



INNER LANDSCAPE: Buildings come and go but values must be preserved for the young, says writer Catherine Lim, who enjoys strolls at the Botanic Gardens twice a month.

"Sometimes, I sit on the bench and look at the water. I feel a little bit too abashed to bring bread to feed the fish, but I think one of these days, I will do that."

She nudges you playfully and gestures to a couple lying together on the grass.

"I once saw a couple with their limbs all entangled, rolling down a slope. Luckily, they were fully clothed. I remember I was so amazed, but they couldn't be bothered," she says, breaking into laughter again.

That amorous pair would not be out of place in the vast army of characters that Dr Lim has created over the past 30 years, from insensitive teachers and suicidal schoolgirls in her debut short story collection *Little Ironies* (1978), to her own philosophical, post-death self in *Unhurried Thoughts At My Funeral* (2005), a work of creative non-fiction.

Such a Singaporean literary icon is she that it can be easy to forget she was actually born across the Causeway, in the town of Kulim, Kedah, in then-Malaya. She immigrated to Singapore only at the age of 26.

"I did not choose to come here, actually. I got married to a Singaporean and he finally decided to leave Malaysia," she says.

Both teachers, she and her former husband spent most of their time working to support their young family.

Still, Dr Lim has vague memories of family outings to the Botanic Gardens, Changi beach, Glutton's Square and the old Robinson's department store at Raffles Place which was destroyed by fire in 1972.

But she is not one to weep over the disappearing buildings in Singapore's ever-changing cityscape.

"I am probably less sentimental than most. I am a pragmatist and I feel that sometimes these things have to go," she says.

"The external surroundings to me are far less important than the inner landscape. It doesn't matter if you tear down a building, but values must remain and must be preserved for younger people to be aware of."

That said, one place she holds dear is Singapore itself.

"I love Singapore – there's no question about that. This is the place where I am very happy," she says, explaining why she has chosen to remain here while both her children live abroad.

"I want to see the tulips in Holland and the cherry blossoms in Japan. But after a stay of less than a month, I am only too happy to come back."

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