Contents

List of Photographs viii
List of Poems ix
Acknowledgments xi

Prologue 1
1 Before the Web 5
2 The Soy Sauce Compound 15
3 Lane with No Name 23
4 Family Labels 27
5 The Odd-Job Man 33
6 Egg Noodles 37
7 Nursery Rhymes & Proverbs Cantonese 41
8 India Next Door 49
9 Chickens 53
10 Leila's Wedding 57
11 Hot Water 67
12 Grandfather Au 71
13 Grandmother Tries to Give My Sisters Away 79
14 Jadegreen Plumblossom 85
15 The Nuns 91
16 Of Monks & Feet 95
17 The Corner Coffee Shop 101
18 The Hole in the Wall 105
19 The Bad Widow 109
20 Chinese Medicine 113

vii
Contents

21 Earth Dragon, Metal Monkey 123
22 The Joyful Vanguards 129
23 The House on Palace Road 135
24 Chinese New Year 141
25 The Needs of the Dead 149
26 Final Days 161
27 The Lore of the Dead 167
28 Bare Feet & Broken Glass 173
29 The Writing Life 193
30 A Retrospective Interview 199

About the Author 211

Photographs

The Tham family in 1971, at the time of my marriage 4
Grandmother Tham 10
My mother at age 13 10
Wedding photo, 1943 11
Grandmother Tham 11
Father playing the saxophone 12
My parents in Penang, four happy days 12
Father as female lead in a Chinese opera 13
Myself at age 6 with boarder, Mr. Hung 45
Myself at age 14 with Mother and baby sisters ChoyNgor and ChoyChoy in the lane 46
Myself at age 7 with Mother and brother CheeLung in the lane 46
My mother at age 30 75
Mother, age 10, in her family photograph, 1938 75
Grandmother Au with baby Uncle Yuen 76
Mother and Grandmother Tham on a good day 83
Walking in the mountains: Visiting Grandmother Tham at her grave in the spring 89
My parents on a bridge, midway in their marriage 126
The family altar with ancestral tablet and Father’s favorite chair below it 144
College days 191