



JEE LEONG KOH

"A palinode or palinody is an ode in which the writer retracts a view or sentiment expressed in an earlier poem. The first recorded use of a palinode is in a poem by Stesichorus in the 7th century BC, in which he retracts his earlier statement that the Trojan War was all the fault of Helen." (Wikipedia)

Palinode V

Remember that construction
worker

run over
by the bus, setting off

a riot?
I see him

in every Indian here,
short or tall,

handsome
or devastated,

starving or sleek-headed
and satisfied.

I can't help it.
Why can't I

see Rajaratnam
our Deputy

Prime Minister or
the guitarist Alex

Abisheganaden instead?
I go up,



like getting on
a bus,

to every Indian here
and I ask,

are you
Sakthivel Kumaravelu?

And they say,
every one

of them, smiling,
or grimacing, or

furrowing
the brow,

Don't you wish
for me to be him?



Palinode VI

The war
accommodated

me to hardship—
rooting

for a sweet potato
in a ditch,

flying
from the soldiers—

as much
as the prosperity afterwards

accommodated
you to success.

You escaped
the draft

for nation building
and wrote

your poetry
books.

Much as I wished
to do likewise,

throw down
the weight of duty,

like a sack
of rice,

I could not
run away



from the sweet potato
I had eaten.



Palinode XI

Inside the heavy
canvas bag,

all greasy, sealed
with motor oil,

my handy pliers,
flat nose, round nose,

and needle,
my screwdrivers

of many lengths
and heads,

my ball peen
hammer,

the use of which
you never learned,

except
the measuring tape

I caught you
once

bandaging round
your biceps

and then
your unconcealed thighs.



BIOGRAPHY

Koh Jee Leong is the author of *Steep Tea* (Carcenet), named a Best Book of the Year by UK's *Financial Times* and a Finalist by Lambda Literary in the US. He has published four other books of poems, a volume of essays, and a collection of zuihitsu. His latest book is a work of hybrid fiction called *Snow at 5 PM: Translations of an insignificant Japanese poet*. He has been translated into Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Malay, Russian, and Latvian. Originally from Singapore, Koh lives in New York City, where he heads the literary non-profit [Singapore Unbound](#) and runs the Asian indie press [Gaudy Boy](#).