

AS WE WALK ON WATER

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SINGAPORE EMPIRE DOCK GENERAL VIEW OF BUKIT TAMPINES, BEFORE 1945



CHANGI, SINGAPORE POSSIBLY 1970s



EASTERN COAST, SINGAPORE POSSIBLY 1970s



SINGAPORE



SINGAPORE



CHANGI, SINGAPORE POSSIBLY 1970S



WESTERN COAST, SINGAPORE POSSIBLY 1970s





UNNAMED HILL POSSIBLY TAMPINES



SINGAPORE WILD ANIMAL







ULU TIRUM



SAND FROM ULU TIRUM



GALI BATU OVERLOOKING BUKIT PANJANG

## AS WE WALK ON WATER

IN THE 1960S, SINGAPORE BEGAN GOUGING THE SOIL FROM ITS TINY HILLS AND RIDGES AND USING IT TO RECLAIM LAND. THE ISLAND IS VIRTUALLY FLAT TODAY, FORCING THE GOVERNMENT TO BUY SAND FROM MALAYSIA, CAMBODIA, AND INDONESIA TO CONTINUE WITH ITS RECLAMATION EFFORTS.

IN THE EARLY STAGES OF EACH LAND RECLAMATION PROJECT, WHEN THE IMPORTED SAND SITS FOR SOME TIME, ENORMOUS SAND DUNES AND DESERT-LIKE LANDSCAPES BEGIN TO DOMINATE THE EASTERN AND WESTERN COASTS OF SINGAPORE, MAINLY IN TUAS, PUNGGOL, MARINE PARADE, AND CHANGI. WHEN THESE DESERTS STARTED APPEARING IN THE 1960S, THEY TOOK THE PLACE OF THE BEACHES THAT LOCALS USED TO FREQUENT. MAKING DO WITH WHAT THEY HAD, SINGAPOREANS FLOCKED TO THESE RECLAIMED SPACES ON THE WEEKENDS TO WALK TOWARD THE NEW SHORELINES, IN THE HOPES OF REACHING THE BEACHES THEY ONCE KNEW.

IN THE LATE 1990S, MY FATHER WOULD TAKE ME TO THESE RECLAIMED LANDS ON THE WEST COAST OF SINGAPORE. THESE PLACES WERE SO HUGE IT WOULD TAKE 30 MINUTES OF DRIVING BEFORE WE COULD SEE THE SEA. AS A YOUNG BOY, IT WAS ALWAYS A MYSTERY TO ME WHY SUCH LANDSCAPES EXISTED IN MY OTHERWISE-TROPICAL ISLAND HOME. THE CITY WAS ONLY 224 SQUARE MILES BEFORE THE RECLAMATION PROJECTS STARTED IN 1960. BY 2030 IT WILL GROW TO 317 SQUARE MILES.

A CASUAL VISIT TO THE RECLAIMED LANDS HAS BECOME NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE IN RECENT YEARS SINCE THEY ARE NOW FENCED UP. SO I NOW MAKE IT A POINT TO VISIT COASTAL DUNES IN OTHER COUNTRIES TO TRY TO RELIVE THE EXPERIENCE OF WALKING ON THE SANDS OF SINGAPORE IN MY YOUTH. THERE ARE GIANT DUNES IN THE MIDDLE OF SEVERAL CITIES TODAY, INCLUDING THE DUNE DU PYLA OF ARCACHON IN FRANCE, THE TOTTORI SAND DUNES IN JAPAN, AND THE DUNES UNDER FORT FUNSTON IN SAN FRANCISCO. I TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS IN THESE FOREIGN PLACES AND IMAGINE THAT THESE WERE THE KIND OF IMAGES I COULD HAVE TAKEN IN SINGAPORE WHEN I WAS YOUNGER. SOMETIMES I WISH I HAD A SOUVENIR OF THE DUNES OF SINGAPORE BECAUSE MOST OF US ACTUALLY FORGET THAT, AS SINGAPOREANS, WE ARE MOSTLY WALKING ON WATER, OR ON THE SAND OF OTHERS.