

# *Anak Sastra*

## Issue 45

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## **“Through a Glass, Darkly”**

by Janos Runan

We met that same evening, just hours after talking for the first time online. I was still unsure of her name, and when she told me I could call her Rita, as her friends did, I joked and told her that from that moment forward she would be known as Virgin Margarita. What little cool formality there was that lingered between us by that point dissipated like a glaze of ice on Mount Kinabalu under the Malaysian summer sun. And it never returned. We became inseparable, and neither of us, it seemed, wished for anything else.

Years earlier, she told me over spring rolls, she'd been a singer in an M-pop girl band, Gula-Gula Kapas. It hadn't been the life she'd really wanted though, so she found her way into real estate and was doing quite well in the business thank you, working for one of the high-end leasing agents in Mont Kiara.

“Marry me,” she used to joke during those first few weeks. “Sure,” I'd reply, “Let's go to the masjid. Be sure to call your mother.” By the fifth week, I could see that both of us were now only half-joking when we went through this routine, that certain were we that there was no need to keep looking for anybody else.

And so, in very short order, we melded into one, willingly bound together by an inebriating blend of passion and relief at having finally left the lottery of singlehood behind. I'd not felt this way in any of my previous relationships – those that I'd skipped lightly through during the fifteen years since I'd emerged into adulthood – those during which I'd assembled a compelling resume of social graces. There was some unseen tipping point along the course of those short and long-term couplings when I'd transformed into “the marriageable one,” the smart choice, the one who finally wasn't either a stunted child or a

jackass, the one who you eventually parted ways with on good terms and would still see every now and then for coffee, the one your parents still sent Facebook messages to on birthdays or holidays.

Not to sound too mercenary or narcissistic about my situation, but in retrospect all of those previous relationships now looked like my practice runs, opportunities to hone my demeanor and sand down the rough and ugly knots of my personality until I found now, in Rita, the one I'd been destined to be with all along. She was the first one with whom all of my separate parts aligned and locked perfectly together, and I was certain, beyond any trace of disbelief, that she felt the same way about me.

I was thirty-five when we met, Rita twenty-seven, and we had both seen enough of the other options available to close our eyes and plunge unreservedly into each other. Our first two months together felt like an extension of that moment when, on the precipice of sleep, you fall backwards into oblivion, or when you become so flushed with alcohol that your heart begins to palpitate, and as I was a foreigner in Kuala Lumpur, each new side street skirting Bukit Bintang, each unassuming *mamak* café, each secreted alcove in the Perdana Gardens became one of "our" places. Bounding down the oversized stairs of the park behind Suria KLCC and into a gazebo one afternoon, Rita smiled and let out a short, unbelieving laugh, turning to look at me and then back at the crowds lazily ambling along the esplanade beside the lake fountain.

She turned back to me, her eyes more liquid than usual from the September heat, still smiling. "Tom..." she started, her accent dancing along the edge between Malay and London English. I encircled her lightly with my arm, "Yes?" I said, fluttering my eyelids in mock innocence, "What is it, *gula sayang*?" "Stop!" she feigned exasperation, but I could tell that she was amused. She batted her eyes back at me and I melted inside a bit, drunk from the way the colour of her pupils shimmered between black and prismatic blue, like sunlight on a raven's wings. "Tom, we really are going to grow old together, aren't we? I mean, this is the final stop for both of us, right?" That was the moment, and I can remember it shuddering through me like a seismic ripple, that sealed everything between us. And it was everything I

wanted, beyond fear or doubt or worry, from now until doomsday. I dropped my joking tone and turned full toward her. “Rita. Love of my life, heart of my heart. Yes, it is.” She put her head onto my chest and we both looked back across the fountain, and there was the smell of lavender lifting lightly off her hair. “I wish,” I told her, “I could make the sun stand still right now. To keep things like this forever.” “Hmmm,” she offered, seeming to signal her agreement, and then murmured, “Baby, I’m hungry. I want noodles.” With that, we both sprang up and darted toward the cool air pumping out of the mall’s whooshing glass doorways, shadowed under the immense steel towers that loomed darkly against a butter-coloured sky.

Shortly after Rita and I married, I determined to settle in Malaysia for perhaps a lifetime. I opened a small coffeeshop near Chow Kit, in the shade of the Menara KL. Having served my time as a barista and café manager for four years during my undergraduate studies in California, I already had the skills and, with Rita’s family’s help, the connections to local distributors to make a go of small business ownership in my new foreign home. After checking against the names of other local cafés, Rita and I settled on “Sacred Grounds,” and she styled the décor as a Thai Buddhist garden, replete with miniature koi pond and a water system that misted the indoor tropical vegetation. Business, as I had expected, was terribly slow during the first six months. Other than my perpetual presence at the shop, I’d hired two young locals to help cover all shifts for the week: an ambitious Malay business student, Ery, and a cheerful Tamil boy getting his degree in computer science, Bandhul Devar. I felt liberated during my morning walks from the Bukit Nanas metro station to the shop as I watched traffic whoosh past me along Jalan Sultan Ismail.

To take the edge off the constant stresses involved in navigating the Malay bureaucracy and getting all the necessary paperwork and tax documents filed after filling my mornings with meetings with suppliers and tending the counter at the café, I began to nip a bit more than usual during cocktail hour, perhaps more than I would if I didn’t need to dull the caffeine haze that surrounded me at all hours. Just enough to sleep at night, I told Rita. My reward for keeping the business open another day, I told myself.

Two years out, in blissful self-exile, there were so many minor American cultural neuroses that I didn't miss. I remembered the zombies, young and old, women and men, screaming at each other in public, caroming into each other on sidewalks and in grocery aisles. Passive-aggressive, sarcastic, self-absorbed, bereft of shame. While glimpses of these same behaviours came up in the places that I'd light upon internationally, they happened at such a low rate of frequency that I fell in love with the way that I felt freer, less anxious than I was when back in the States.

And yet, when I first arrived in Kuala Lumpur, I found that there was a whole new, wonderful world of psychopathologies to explore, unique to the Malayan sensibility. After my initial adjustments, I learned to relish the more relaxed attitude toward punctuality, something that reminded me of time spent in Mexico, a "what's the rush?" approach to meeting with friends, but every now and then, I would encounter someone whose concept of time seemed utterly delusional. Going out to dinner with Rita and her family one evening at a Spanish taperia we'd discovered a few weeks earlier, we set our meeting time for 7pm, which meant that the two of us were able to stay and people-watch near the fountain outside the Pavilion Mall with our hazelnut lattes and mochaccinos for an extra half hour before mom and dad eventually arrived, big sister drifting along ten minutes behind. Our exchanges of "where did you park?" and "looking dashing, Tom" and "hey, sis, how are those babies?" were punctuated by messaging bleeps from Rita's phone. "Zul says he's almost here and not to get started without him."

"Should we go inside and wait at the tea garden then?" "Yes, let's" followed by another half hour of small talk that eventually dwindled, only to be revived periodically by an update as to which metro station Zul was approaching. An hour had passed, and Rita wandered off with her mother to go look at sunglasses, while I chatted with her father about the upcoming elections. "Do you think Mahathir has any chance at all?" and "that would really be best for the economy," and "when *was* he in office again last?" Eventually another half hour had burned away before the ladies strolled back, Rita taking long loping steps and swinging one hand clasped in her mother's. "Any updates?" I asked. Rita puffed out her cheeks and offered a light roll of her eyes. "He says five more minutes."

Later that night, back in our apartment overlooking the park in Sentul, one more glass of burgundy in my hand as we sat on the balcony, I looked to Rita and asked, “Now, just what the hell was that with Zul? He’s not even family.” She looked genuinely surprised. “It’s nothing, babe, he just lost track of time. Why?” “Well,” I said, and then my eyes softened because I was with her and the summer air was cool under the charcoal night as we looked back over the KL skyline in the distance, “I mean, it’s just that back in America, if anyone held up dinner for an hour and forty-five minutes, there’s no way that one person wouldn’t be leaving in an ambulance and someone else in the back of a police car.” She laughed and pulled me in close and we kissed, our eyes spinning hypnotically into each other’s and then we went back inside to fall asleep together on the couch while watching some forgettable romance on the giant screen.

With strange incidents like this, I had Ery at the café to give me a cultural insider’s perspective. He was young and slightly gruff and wouldn’t dance about in the dismissive and non-committal pleasantries of the very rich. When I explained what had happened with Zul the night before, Ery turned, squinting and gave a rapid shake of his head, his long hair leaping wildly about. “God! I hate those fuckers that do that. Gives Malaysians a bad name” and then went back to polishing the brass on the espresso machine, explaining that some of the less socially polished upper middle-class Malays would do this as a game of one-upmanship, likely learned from low level government ministers who reinforced their standing in the hierarchy by seeing how long they could make people wait for them to arrive at political functions.

Armed with this new cultural insight, I began to experiment in my dealings with my usual suppliers. A year into ownership of the café, with a steadier stream of clientele now frequenting the business during the morning and early afternoon rushes, it had begun to rankle me how much of my energy and attentions were wasted by the still mystifyingly complex machinations involved in simply coordinating timed deliveries. I missed the relatively reliable punctuality of business dealings in the States, which seemed to be a rare luxury in Kuala Lumpur. One distributor in particular, Mohd Zikri, my dairy supplier from

Susu Moo Farms, had a nettling tendency to insist on 10am meetings with me at the beginning of each month to sign off on invoices. In the twelve months since we'd been open, Zikri had arrived on time to precisely two of these meetings, more often coming in between 11:30 and noon, yet he insisted that we not push back our meeting time to a more reasonable hour. Always, Zikri would show up an hour and a half late, with a smile and a shake of his head, followed by "Sorry, there was traffic."

And so, in January, on the scheduled day of our monthly ritual invoice signing, I left the counter at 10:15 and told Bandhul to watch over the store and to have Zikri message me when he eventually arrived, then made my way to the stationary store on Jalan Tun Razak. As expected, at 10:43, just as I arrived at the print shop, my phone gave off a series of pings, and I looked down to see that Zikri had sent me four consecutive messages. "I'm here where you at?" followed by "when you coming???", "hurry back," and "need to get to other meetings."

I responded by setting off a cat-and-mouse game played strictly through text messages, informing Zikri I was at the printer's and requesting that he come meet me there. After picking up the new glossy take-away menus for the café, I headed back to the metro station and on to my next task, picking up fresh flowers from a shop near Masjid Jamek. After arriving, I looked down to see another message from Zikri, who'd arrived at the printer's, and followed it with my own, "sorry – couldn't keep waiting – now at Summer's Florist on Jalan Tun Perak. meet me here." I then began a leisurely walk back to the café. Now nearing noon and having just arrived at the shop, Zikri sent me another message, frantic. "Hey stop playing with me. I'm at the flower shop you're not here," to which I responded that I was waiting for him back at the café. When he arrived, now ten minutes past one, he was red-faced and enraged. "Sorry," I said when he huffed in through the front door, "There was traffic." Zikri slammed his clipboard down on the countertop, pushing it across to me for my signature, then whirled back toward the front door shouting, "Never again!" before rushing forward, late for his next meeting.

Some mornings were more jagged than others. After the debacle with Zikri and another bout of the dull nag of insomnia that I would occasionally experience, I slunk out of

bed without waking Rita, who remained unmoving, one arm stretched out from her purple silk night robe as if she were reaching for something from the glacial mountains of the peaked bed covers. I shuffled lightly along the carpet and went to the kitchen in darkness, carefully pulling a tumbler from the top cupboard and opening the refrigerator door, one hand pressing inward to muffle the noise. I slid a fifth of Gordon's from the icebox and placed it on the countertop, watching as trickles of steam rose from the bottle and small beads of sweat began to form over the crimson letters and canary background of the label. I twisted at the cap and tipped the bottle to the rim of the glass.

The ripple of liquor first touched the tumbler, pouring thick and oily, a straw tinted ocean, fragrant juniper rising in a cloud and carrying me back to the Alaskan pine forests of my childhood. I drank, the liquid first touching the back of my tongue, welling up into a steam of warm vapour that poured through the caverns and tunnels of my mouth and nostrils, coating along the back of my throat before warming down through my gullet. It had become easy to romanticize my drinking this way, long after any of the pleasant sensations had been stripped away and all that remained was catastrophe. I went to the balcony, taking the bottle with me, and drank in considerable gulps as I looked toward the city.

The next morning, I arrived at the café early, the morning air damp, not yet hot, sunlight spilling in too heavily through the street-facing glass. I checked the gauge on the espresso machine and saw that it had built up enough pressure. I filled one of the metal frothing pitchers with milk and a dollop of half and half and placed it under the nozzle, skimming just above the surface of the liquid, soothing myself with the low bubbling chirr that it made, a satiny froth gradually rising from the surface of the milk. I tamped espresso into one of the portafilters before wedging it into the machine, and watched closely to make sure the shot spouting downward took on the colour of burnt caramel. I poured the shot into one of the oversized mugs and thought for a second. *Fuck it*, I decided, and pulled a bottle of Torani butter rum syrup from beneath the counter, pouring a healthy dose over the espresso. *No liquor*, I thought, *but maybe the taste will do well enough to tide me over*. I bent down to put the syrup back in place under the counter, clanking it clumsily alongside the other

bottles, which rocked like bowling pins. A shout from behind caused me to spring up and stagger backward.

“HEY, boss!” accompanied by the sharp slap of a shoe against the tiles of the floor beside me. I turned to see Ery, standing with a smarmy grin, pleased that he’d caught me unprepared.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Ery!” I barked. My hand, I noticed, had reached up unconsciously and clutched at my chest.

“Why so jumpy?” he asked, clipping his syllables as he swung his backpack behind the counter with one hand and shovelled his long bangs back under a hair clip with the other, all in one fluid movement.

“Phhhhhh, yesterday didn’t go so well. Troubles with the milk distributor. The guy was acting like a jackass, so now I have to drive around today and find another supplier to replace him.” I bent at the waist and propped my chin atop the counter, stretching one arm out and carefully tipping the mug back toward my lips with the other. “There is a *lot* of bullshit in this world, my friend.”

“Ha, yeah, don’t need to tell me that,” Ery shot back, already moving to the espresso machine to foam himself a latte, “Bullshit, bullshit everywhere.” He stopped and looked up as if searching for something then looked back at me. “Rabbit shit better. Don’t smell as bad.”

“Well,” I nodded, trying to make sense of what he’d just told me, “Whatever type of shit I was dodging yesterday, it’s days like those that make me think one thing.”

“What’s that?”

"You see, Ery," I said standing up again and bowing my shoulders inward to stretch out the pain that ran along my spine. "I am the camel. Sobriety is my back. And that asshole from yesterday? He's the straw." Ery rolled his eyes and returned his attention to the frothing milk.

As the days drew out that long summer, everything started to become "the straw" for me. Four visits to the tax revenue office on Jalan Tuanku Abdul Halim instead of one, spinning the lottery wheel upon each arrival until it finally landed on a bureaucrat who felt like doing some work that day. Other times it would be a random auntie who'd wedged herself across the whole escalator, causing me to miss my train by seconds. Sometimes, the straw was simply that it was Tuesday. So, I'd find myself, after leaving Ery in charge of the café around two in the afternoon, walking two doors down to Mari Ristorante, where I'd have my usual bowl of salmon ravioli and two or three Beefeater martinis, expertly mixed by Calvin behind the bar. I began to plump out a bit that summer and things started to get ragged when I'd return home to Rita, exhausted and drawn from the combined baking heat of the Malaysian sun and the liquor that would inevitably stew me into a foul temper by the time I reached the front door. One morning, I caught myself muttering "shut the fuck up" to the geese who gabbed outside our condo tower as I walked past the Nepali security guards. I started to become punchy during any of the social interactions I had outside of business at the café.

It couldn't have been easy on Rita, dealing with this low-level mayhem on a regular basis. We still went to the movies or for late evening strolls under the banyans along Jalan Ramlee, but I could sense a distance between us creeping in. Time at restaurant tables was spent less in conversation and more in checking the sundry media channel updates competing for attention on our phones. Often, this silence between us became nettling, and I'd sit and seethe and torture myself, then dampen the irritability with a pint of beer, eventually feeling relief when the appetizers or peri peri chicken arrived.

One evening, sitting over a plate of Chinese dumplings that both of us had barely touched, Rita placed her phone face down on the glistening maple of the restaurant tabletop and gave a barely perceptible shake of her head before breathing in quickly to gather herself. "Tom, are you seeing someone else?"

“Huh?” A potsticker hung in midair before me, the chopsticks wavering from the irritating tremors that now perpetually inhabited my hands.

“Put the food down, Tom, I’m being serious,” and I now noticed tears lightly glazing her eyes. She looked away and dabbed at them with the back of her thumb and let out a short anxious laugh. “I mean, I don’t even know why I wouldn’t expect this. We’ve only been with each other for two years and it’s like we’re not even together anymore even when we’re sitting across the same table. Forget it. Forget it.”

“No. Noooo, Rita,” I said, placing the chopsticks back on the plate with as much care as I could muster and reaching out for her hand. “Why would you think I’d ever do something like that to you? To us?” In the moment, I understood precisely why, and I felt an immediate shame, thinking on the extended neglect with which I’d attended Rita over the past year. Afternoons, always “the last one” as I got sozzled in one of the sky bars at midday, looking out over the canopy of jungle vegetation that dotted the Kuala Lumpur cityscape. Hours at evening wandering about our condo in darkness, tending to one of my Winston Churchill martinis, long since graduated from cocktail glasses to highballs, while Rita slept in the other room. “I know. I’m spending too much time at the café. I’ll stop. I can hire a manager to take over.”

Rita had cooled a bit and turned back to look at me, face to face. “You and I both know that that is not the issue.”

And so, we resolved, the two of us, to take on my drinking in a way I could no longer manage alone. A scheduled visit with our general practitioner, a kindly old Malay man who had likely never taken a drop in his life, recommended I play racquetball or drink lemonade whenever the twinging for alcohol set upon me. This benevolently unhelpful advice was followed by visits to a therapist, a woman from New Zealand, Carla, who prodded me to open up about my history with drinking, my childhood, my feelings toward Rita, my daily routine. After three visits, and some slight progress in dampening the volume I was consuming after

a half-day at the cafe, she put a question to me in her light Auckland accent. “Why do you think you drink, Tom?”

There was a half-minute during which I looked about the room, puzzling to answer her. “The stress?” I offered, and we both sat in silence and looked across the desk at each other, a low, warm light pulsing from the lamp next to her. “I mean, I don’t really know what it is you want me to tell you.”

Carla cleared her throat, tapping her pen lightly at her notepad before placing it on the desk. “Have you considered that there may be no answer hidden at the bottom of the well that we haven’t yet discovered? Have you considered that perhaps there is no answer other than you simply like to drink but cannot at this point, or perhaps ever, properly handle it?”

“I don’t think I understand what you’re getting at.”

“Tom, we can continue meeting. I think that would be a good idea, in fact. But there’s not really much more that we’re going to unravel here, and I’d like to move into more of a support role if you decide you’re ready to sober up.” She pulled a teal sheet of paper from her desk and turned it in my direction, sliding it across to me. “That is a listing of meetings and phone numbers here in the city. I’d like you to look it over, talk with Rita, and then *go*. It’s much more likely you’ll make progress there than if you’re only coming to meet with me once every two weeks.”

And so, for the next three months, things began to brighten. A Tuesday evening meeting at a Lutheran church little more than a ten-minute walk from the café became my weekly refuge, populated with an even mix of local Malays, South Indians, and foreign expatriates like me. At the end of my first visit, after exchanging social media accounts with two of the old-timers, I was invited by Adam, the group leader, to join him for dinner at a Tamil restaurant a short walk away in Little India. Adam was local, married with three kids and a house in Titiwangsa. Worked as a city bus driver for twenty-two years. Sober for thirteen.

“So, tell me your story, Tom,”

“Well,” I hesitated. I wasn’t quite sure where to begin. My head was still foggy, so I kept it to the same basics he’d shared with me. Originally from the U.S., came to Malaysia for vacation in 2014 and decided to stay. Had my own business not far away. Wildly in love with my wife, and certain I’d lose her if I didn’t get things together.

“Do you want to stop drinking?”

I thought on it for a few moments. I really didn’t know the answer, but he was waiting for something, so I answered. “Sure.”

“Good,” he told me as he nudged a basket of naan across the table, “Then you’re one of the ones who stopped in time.”

For ninety days, my time in the wilderness, Adam offered me guidance and Rita became my salvation. She took a short break from her job at the leasing office and began managing the café, taking over the more stressful aspects while I worked to train new employees and tended the register. We began working out together at a rooftop gym in one of the high-rise hotels a short walk from the coffeeshop, productive work to fill the time in the early afternoons when I would previously start drinking.

Rita’s mother and father, as an advance gift for our three-year anniversary, surprised us with a trip to Borneo, a place Rita had told me her family used to visit every summer when she was a child, roaming along beaches then climbing into the mountain peaks where you could see as far as Indonesia. We drove to the hilltop town of Kundasang, winding along the two-lane highway from Kota Kinabalu until we saw Gunung Kinabalu looming above us, only a moonlit shadow in the twilight. On the eve of our anniversary, we walked around the small bordered pond in the town centre and had a candlelit dinner on the screened patio of a local restaurant before returning to the hotel room to sleep.

“Promise me we’ll stay like this forever, Tom,” Rita said, running her fingers lightly along my chin, the sound of crickets chirping and a party far in the distance that echoed faintly up through the canyons.

“Of course, darling,” I said, my mind wandering toward our future. What would there be? Children, old age, eventually slipping into darkness, then perhaps the rest of eternity together. I wasn’t fooling myself about loving Rita, immensely, profoundly, to the spinning core of my soul, some bright spark of God we both had within us, and I only desired my spark to be mingled with hers forever and forever and forever. What I had with Rita, whether it was to only last tonight and a bit into tomorrow, or whether it was to last until celestial horns blared out for the resurrection, meant more than anything else in this world. And it would have been nice to follow that sentiment through to the end, but there was an itch within, something that nagged at me, like the obsession to pick at a scab that’s just about to heal over if only to see what lies beneath, some self-destruct button that had been tempting me because everything in life was beautiful here, in this night, with her in my arms, and a lifetime of bliss waiting before us.

“I can’t ever go back to the way it was before, Tom,” she whispered, “Promise me this will last.”

At mid-morning, as Rita hiked into town to rent the scooter that we’d ride before sunrise the next day to the foot of Kinabalu, I walked aimlessly next to the pool on the planked deck beneath our room balcony, turning my vision from the hills that stretched off in a steep drop beyond the railing back across the patio to the bartender, in his crisp, tidy uniform who was arranging glasses at the start of his morning shift. He nodded my way as I walked along the length of the bar.

“You climb Kinabalu before?” I asked.

"Hmm, many times," he replied, opening a thin bottle of maraschino cherries and arranging them in geometric rows in his bar tray, "You?"

"No," I chuckled, "First time here. Wife's going to be our trekking guide tomorrow."

I watched as he took out a small wooden cutting board and began to slice thin wedges of lime, delicately, like a surgeon. Without looking up, he posed a question. "What you drink, my friend?"

"No, no, nothing. Just browsing," I offered, wobbling my head and running my fingers along the bar's edge.

"Hmmm, okay, you try something. House specialty. No charge. First-timer at Kinabalu," he looked up with a wink, quickly dabbing his hands at his apron.

"Well," I murmured, raising an eyebrow and purposefully shutting a door on the voice that spoke from a room at the back of my head, "At that price, I'm afraid I can't say no."

Three hours later, when Rita returned, I was splayed on the bed in our room, stripped down to nothing but my boxers, my right hand idly flipping through cable news channels on the wide-screen television, empty glasses littering the bedstand next to me. She stood in the middle of the doorframe, a bag of groceries hanging at her side, and her look – of realization that fell into disbelief – threw me into an immediate pit of gloom.

"I fucked up, Rita. I'm sorry. Sorry, sorry, so damn sorry."

\* \* \*

The shambles I'd reduced everything to be damned, we set out the next morning for the foot of Kinabalu. Rita hadn't spoken to me since the previous afternoon, simply setting out ahead of me without looking back. I wheezed my way up, chuffing along twenty steps

behind Rita the entire six hours to base camp at Panalaban, and she seemed to derive a perverse delight in putting me through these rigors in my hungover state. We stayed the evening in one of the unheated huts, shivering next to each other in silence, and rose at 5am for our summit attack, switching on headlamps with gloved fingers and setting off in the pre-dawn quietude, marching in a line with the others. I was still woozy from my bender two days prior and too little sleep the night before, but kept pace much better than I had the previous day. By sunrise, we stood on the peak of Kinabalu, looking out across the sweeping rocks of the summit plateau, sunlight sparkling through the dancing mists that obscured the valley below.

Near the edge of a rock ledge that jutted out from the summit, I had steadied my feet reasonably well, though my eyes seemed to telescope in and out over the vertiginous landscape. Rita brought her phone out to memorialize the occasion with our requisite victory portraits.

“A little to the left, Tom,” she proffered with an inching motion, “Come on, the sunlight is flaring off your forehead too much.”

“Very funny,” I shot her a wry smirk, “But you’re supposed to be the fashion model in this shoot. C’mon, your turn.”

“Noooooooooo, one more. Come on, move those old bones,” and again she motioned me leftward. As I shuffled over, still tremulous from the lack of sleep and dehydration from the past two days, my boot caught against a small rock and I teetered backwards, placing my other foot instinctively behind me. The footing that I expected to catch hold of in order to rebalance myself, however, dropped away into nothing, into empty space, and I pinwheeled my arms frantically, reaching out for a brief second to Rita, who reached out herself as if by reflex, a vanity of mirrored movement, she too I, considering the distance there was between us, until the full weight of my body followed my lost foot into the vacancy behind me.

There is a moment when you fall, a moment immediately following the abrupt realization that all is lost, when the world feels as if it is a massive machine coming to a heaving stop, everything suspended briefly in eternity. It is the same as in movies, a moment that lingers while the universe condenses and time is reduced from its usual torrent and elongated into a sludgy dribble, some trick of the mind produced by the instantaneous release of chemicals flooding into the chambers of the brain and surging through the body to numb everything before impact. In that short span of time after I fell, before everything lost speed, I heard, as if from outside myself, my own reflexive scream, an agonized howl of surprise. Of cosmic betrayal.

My flesh, soft in feeble contrast to the rocks where I landed, seemed to melt as it struck the granite beneath me, and in my final moment, the only conscious feeling that presented itself to me, brought forward like a murder weapon before a jury, was a profound sense of doubt. Even now, in retrospect, it's difficult to corner the precise sentiment and scrutinize it. It would oversimplify and alter the meaning into something it was not to say that it was a doubt as fundamental as *why*? At times, I have thought that it was *why* combined with *this is it*? But there was something more, something that runs off like a laughing ghost through a false door in my brain every time I chase after it. I can only say that this impression was the only thing there in my final seconds as I lay paralyzed on the rocks. I felt no physical sensation other than unbearable heaviness, as if a horse were sitting atop of me, before everything became clouded by darkness.

And then, as if I had been awakened immediately from a dream, I found myself on the edge of a lake, standing within arm's length of the water. I pivoted to scan the periphery, and realized in my confusion that my body was unbroken. I saw no life scrambling through the geography, not even the bubbling stir of fish beneath the lake surface. The landscape was stripped of vegetation, only rough sand and rocky soil for as far as I could see. A towering black monolith, the size of a small mountain, shaped like an arrowhead pointing downward, hovered some hundred meters above the water near the centre of the lake. The whole face of the rock was jagged, towering far upward into a bank of clouds darkened to the colour of

smoke burning above a gasoline fire, clouds that roiled like waves in a storm, clouds that veiled the brick-red sky that punched sporadically through the haze in erratic patches.

I watched as the wind stirred slowly over the soil by the lake's edge, all the while listening as the water murmured near my feet. Lapping, lapping, it licked at the rocks and pebbles on the sand. As the movement of air over the water picked up, I recognized the sound the wind made, hypnotic. It was something I'd heard years before, on a cliff overlooking a red-rocked canyon as I sat at dawn above the blackened wood next to a campsite in the American desert. A wind obstructed by nothing, it whistled past you and fluttered your clothing, shifting directions chaotically. The wind at lakeside blew upon the dry soil beyond the damp sand, turning first toward the reddened hills and then circling around again in the other direction, returning to its point of origin and then circling around once more, a dancing funnel of water, air, and dust.

In the distance, there emerged along the sullen skyline the outline of a body walking toward me. At first, just a silhouette, a dusky shadow emerging on the horizon. I stood frozen, unsure of precisely what was happening.

As the figure approached, I could make out a man, perhaps in his sixties, gray hair flying off in wisps in all directions, eyes wild and staring as if through me. Even from a great distance, I could hear him speaking. His arms hung directly at his sides, as he stamped forward in my direction.

When he reached a distance of perhaps twenty feet from me, maintaining his bulldozing pace, I began to back away. I understood nothing of what he said, a torrent of garbled ranting. The words sounded Slavic, and they came from him in a low roar.

As he reached within arm's length, the feral man grabbed at me and I stumbled backwards, falling to the ground. He pounced atop me, his legs straddling my stomach, his hands clutching at the cloth of my shirt at the chest, shaking me, his eyes still boring through me, his rant unimpeded.

“Off!” I yelled, wriggling in an attempt to free myself from his grasp, “Get off of me!”

“Hey! Hey! Pssht!” I turned and saw a second figure run toward us who set upon the wild man, hoisting him up from below the shoulders and throwing him to the ground. This new arrival looked quickly down at me, furrow-browed, “Get up, get up! Hurry!”

I quickly regathered myself and rose to my feet, brushing at my pant legs. The man who’d rescued me grabbed me at the elbow, “There’s no time for that, come with me.” He began jogging off at a rapid clip, still clinging to my arm, and spoke to me while keeping his eyes ahead of us, “You’re English?”

“No, wait – what’s going on here?”

“I’ll explain when we arrive,” and with this he looked back over his shoulder. I followed his glance. Behind us, the wild man had resumed his stamping pace in our direction, but quickly receded again in the distance. Despite this, the new man quickened his cadence into a brisk run. I kept pace and soon realized that I was unwinded, an absence of tension in my legs. No sensations at all in fact. The man who’d come to my rescue, I observed, had skin the colour of dark chocolate, close cropped hair, and was perhaps in his fifties.

“Quickly, quickly,” he spoke in a subdued tone, “We’re almost there.”

Ahead of us, over a small ridge, I saw a complex of several squat, long buildings, the colour of bleached bone. We arrived under an awning next to the door of one of the buildings.

“I am Abeo,” he motioned for me to sit, “What is your name?”

“Tom,” I muttered, still dazed from all that had happened, “Now will you tell me where we are?”

“You’re Christian?”

“No,” I answered, confused. “I mean somewhat. What exactly is happening? I need to go back and find my wife.”

“Thomas,” the man’s face settled into a look of concern, “You will not find her. Not here. Not in this place.”

“I don’t understand a thing that’s going on.”

Abeo asked me what the last thing was that I remembered before standing by the lake. I told him about the morning hike with Rita to the summit of Kinabalu, her taking my photograph, my fall.

“I see. Let me tell you something of myself,” said Abeo. He turned to look toward the ridge we’d descended before arriving at the compound, then returned back to face me. “Before I arrived here, I lived in Abuja. Do you know it?”

I stared blankly at him.

“It is in Nigeria. I had a wife, Binye, and three beautiful children,” he smiled, the skin crinkling around his eyes. “Yesssss, yes. Beautiful family. I worked as a banker.”

Abeo sat down, facing me, and pressed his hands symmetrically on his knees. “Beautiful family, beautiful job. And then one morning, sitting at the breakfast table, I was speaking with my eldest, Samuel. He was pestering me for a new phone,” and with this his smile grew broader, “Papa, I can’t do anything with this rubbish model.’ He was in his second year of college then.” I watched as Abeo leaned in, his smile drifting away, his eyes staring directly into mine. “Thomas, that morning, as my wife Binye was placing the ogi and plantains on their plates in the centre of the breakfast table, I had a heart attack.” Abeo snapped his fingers, “Like that!”

There was a long pause, and I listened as a light wind whispered, blowing dust along the compound walls. Abeo's glance had not faltered, still set on my own eyes, now searching it seemed. He spoke again.

"Thomas, I tell you, I did *not* survive that heart attack. Before my body fell from the chair and hit the earth, I found myself here. Just as you have now found yourself here today. That was in 2006."

Abeo's eyes had stopped searching and his face relaxed, an aspect of compassion washing over him. "You understand now, yes?"

"No," the word shot out of me, not from a lack of acknowledgement, but as a protest. I stared at the hazy crimson of the sky. In the distance, from the doors of another low building, emerged a woman, Indian I surmised by her dress. She looked in our direction, vacant eyes, then down to her feet as she plodded forward, walking off toward the ridge. I did, in fact, comprehend what Abeo had said and was waiting for the panic that I knew would geyser forth at any second. Nothing came.

Abeo gave a brief chuckle. "Yes, doubting Thomas, you do understand me. I can see. What have you eaten today?"

"This morning on the hike. We had some protein bars."

"And nothing else? That would be hours ago."

"No, nothing else."

"Yet you feel no hunger, do you?"

At Abeo's question, I realized that I felt no pangs in my stomach at all. A curiosity. I felt no tiredness, no hunger. No ache in my legs or lower back from having sat here during the entirety of his story.

"And you will feel none. No desire to eat, no feeling of thirst. No desire for sex." At this, Abeo tapped lightly at my knee with the back of his hand and chuckled again. "You are freed from all of that now. But I tell you, you will grow to miss those nuisances. And now, I will show you one last thing." Abeo stood up slowly and looked about him at the ground. He walked away, perhaps five paces, and picked up a rock, coated in tan dust, perhaps the size of a small grapefruit. Without warning, he spun, and with an athlete's deadly aim hurled the rock at me.

Caught off guard, I barely had time to flinch when the rock struck me with the force of a fastball, squarely on the forehead, before it fell to the ground in front of me. My head rocked back, but I felt no pain at all, not even a sense of being stunned from the blow. I had felt the pressure of the rock against my skull, but no sharper sensation than as if someone had nudged me back with the light touch of a finger. Abeo laughed.

"Pain," he said with a smile so full that it almost made his eyes disappear, "Is a nuisance you will not miss. Come now, I will find a room for you," and with this, Abeo walked back to me, offering his hand and lifting me to my feet. As we entered the low light of the compound and walked along a narrow hallway, Abeo spoke again, putting his hand on my shoulder, "You may sleep, although there is no need for that here. Other than to pass some time."

We walked along a corridor with several doorways. Some rooms I saw already occupied, most of the bodies within uninterested as we walked past. We arrived at an empty room, bare other than for a low rectangular bed made from the same dried mud as the walls of the compound.

"Sit here some time and think about what I've told you, Thomas," Abeo said, his hand pressing against the doorless frame of the entrance, "Our purpose in the past world was to honour

and please God in all things." He let his hand drop again to his side. "Our purpose in this world is simply to wait."

I sat on the bed and looked through the barred window at the landscape outside. Three or four people walked aimlessly about the compound, purposeless. I turned toward the bare wall facing me and closed my eyes. I may have remained there for hours. There was no sound other than that of the wind. No conversations, even distant. When I opened my eyes again, I saw that there had been no change in the cast of light through the window, just the same perpetual reddened twilight that had met me when I'd arrived at the lake. I walked along the corridor, counting the number of doors in the building. Twenty-four. I returned to my room and, sitting again, thought of Rita. What would she be doing now?

"Come," I looked to the doorway and saw that Abeo had returned, "There is one more place I need to show you."

The buildings of the compound, numbering twelve in total, formed a circle, with an opening facing farthest from the ridge we had descended earlier. A short distance beyond this opening, perhaps twenty yards further, was another building made from the same white baked mud, but circular. Abeo looked to me as we walked in the direction of the round building.

"This," he said, "Is what I call the vision room." We entered the open doorway and I could see that the room was darkened, no light shining in other than from the entrance behind us.

In the vision room, near its centre, mounted in a deeply-oiled hickory frame, there stood a tall oval glass, like a mirror, or a screen. But no, more like a window. The entire surface of the silvered pane had lost its clarity, frosted by a thick constellation of blotches that ran over the glass like algae on the surface of still water. Abeo pointed for me to observe the pane more closely.

"It lets you see someone on the other side."

I walked slowly forward and peered into its burnished surface. "Who?"

Abeo walked to my side and looked into the glass himself. "Whoever you are hoping to see. There's only one person who ever appears there for each of us, and from what I can tell, it is only when they touch some object that holds a connection between you and them. The one who appears to me is my wife. Who will it be for you?"

I remained transfixed on the dull black reflection of the glass that looked back at me. "Rita," I whispered.

"Then give it time," he said in a soft tone that offered a small flicker of hope, "She will be there. You will never know when. So come and visit now and then." He put his hand on my shoulder and motioned for us to leave. "The only thing we have here is time."

A ceaseless period of languishing monotony followed, with nothing to occupy my time other than the short fragments of conversation with those who could speak my language. "You," Abeo had told me on the day that I'd arrived, "are a lucky man. You speak English, which means most when they come here will be able to talk with you. If they have the desire to do so. Many of them don't." The older man who'd attacked me after my arrival, at this point likely several months prior, spoke a language that no one else here did, and without any means of communicating, nobody had been able to explain to him where he was, as Abeo had done for me. The confusion must have maddened him. I would see him on occasion, and most often he simply wandered about like the rest of us, muttering softly to himself. Every now and then, however, when a new arrival appeared, he would set upon them in desperation to find someone who could tell him where he was.

The first time I saw Rita at the glass, after an interminable stretch of futile hoping, occurred three years into my stay—time markers were gleaned from those newly arrived who would reveal the date they had passed over from the other world. I'd gone to the vision room often

when I had first crossed over, but had left without results so consistently, always in quiet devastation, that by now I would visit only once in what might be several weeks, a cursory chore to break up the nagging monotony of eternity. Each occasion when I'd visited before, the glass only cast a dull reflection, its hard surface staring back at me with frigid emptiness. This time, however, as I entered the room, I could see wisping electric tendrils emanating from the surface, a soft purple that shifted to pale green and then back again, rising like smoke just above the glass. I was startled, struck by the immediate knowledge that I would now be able to see Rita. If only for one long-stretching moment, there was fear, a great unsurety about what would meet me when I looked in the glass, of who she might now be. That brief moment of hesitation was quickly overtaken by a more animal terror, the thought that if I lingered too long, mired in doubt, then the moment would disappear. I rushed forward, my hands grasping at the sides of the immense frame like a child, and looked within.

Rita was older. Grey had begun to shade the hair above her ears. Heavier too, just different enough that my mind for a moment wondered in panicked confusion if it were really her. This feeling faded rapidly, and then an image from just below the surface slowly emerged: the Rita I remembered, the shade of a memory playing like a shifting holographic spectre that hovered above the actual figure in the glass. I could see, confirming Abeo's theory, that Rita was holding a mother-of-pearl hair-comb, patterned like tortoise-shell, that I'd bought her from one of the high-end stores off Jalan P. Ramlee. She looked idly at the comb, then paced slowly across the room, dreamlike, appearing as an actress moving on a screen, and I noticed that as she moved, ever so minutely, the focus of the glass followed her. A slow pan right.

Eventually, it reached the point when I was blind to the inevitabilities of age that began to weigh in on Rita. It wasn't simply that I saw her more frequently now, but that perhaps I had begun to view her through my past eyes, an illusion of the mind in which the reality of her image in front of me had become permanently glossed by a thin layer of the Rita I once remembered. Throughout her thirties, she moved deliberately in the world – tending to business accounts for the shop, attending social events with her family, eventually marrying again, this time to a Malay man who looked to be her same age. Handsome enough,

I'd seen him pop his head into their kitchen one morning as I watched Rita make tea in one of my old ceramic mugs, and from the relaxed set of her eyes I surmised that he treated her well. Children appeared. Rita stood one evening over a tiny shadow in a crib, dressed in the familiar silk night robe that was once half of a matching set we'd been gifted for our honeymoon, and then perhaps two years later, another baby, a girl who I would watch grow as if I were standing behind a glass wall at the zoo. Time was spent with Rita behind the counter at the café or speaking with distributors on loading docks near the Chinatown bazaars. I saw her with her mother once, laughing at some story I couldn't hear under the dappling sunlight on a restaurant patio, and I felt an aching tug of longing for the first time since I'd begun viewing Rita from beyond, an emotion that surprised me, the bubbling of water above dry earth in an otherwise lifeless desert.

And between my visits to the looking glass, these too-short periods of respite from the thirst I felt in the desolation of waiting, I shambled around lost, as we all were, across the red stillness of this ghostly plane. I moved about almost entirely in silent solitude. Those few occasions when I'd seek conversation with someone else, or they with me, were almost exclusively met with utter disinterest from one of the parties involved. We spoke to each other in broken fragments until only shaggy remnants remained of whatever social personalities we'd possessed while living. I'd known since that first terrifying encounter, moments after I'd arrived in this otherworld, that all of us were limited by the languages we'd spoken during our mortal lives, and this, too, frustrated any desires that many of us had of approaching any of the new arrivals.

Some, when they arrived, like the old man who appeared to me at the lakeside, couldn't communicate with anyone, simply because no one else existed who spoke their native tongue. With no shared language to use with the rest of us biding our time in this holding area, I couldn't imagine the magnification of loneliness that set upon those who arrived here from less dominant linguistic domains. All they could do was patiently wait for one of their countrymen to die, just so they'd have someone to speak with.

We could have learned each other's languages. All of us had nothing but dull, slow-dragging time while we were here, but there was something numbing in the atmosphere around the lake, a vapor that rose above the waters that filled us with lethargy and hopelessness, sapping our desire to do anything but wait. I remembered when I was alive, occasionally taking long bus rides or airplane flights, ones during which I'd take work or reading along with me and then do none of it, just staring out the window and waiting for the journey to be over. That is what our time in this place was. An interminable, cramped bus ride.

To occupy myself, to dull the constant restlessness that lingered with me like a toothache, I became obsessed with observation, filling file cabinets in my mind with precise details of every banality that passed before my field of vision, searching for patterns of meaning to stave off the insanity for a little while longer. How many steps did it take to circumnavigate the brackish lake? How many while walking backwards? What was the daily population of this place where we were all biding time? What if by nationality? By age at death? Who had arrived here due to disease, who from misfortune, who from bodily excess, who by their own hand? I had already noted, with slight surprise, what seemed to be an overrepresentation of those who'd died unnaturally. Had the world we'd arrived from really been that violent and dangerous a place? It was only after considerable practice sharpening these mental instruments of scrutiny that I began to make sense of one odd recurring event I'd taken notice of early in my stay. These occurrences offered me my only moments of reprieve from the long stretches of monotony between the times when I'd see Rita at the looking glass.

I learned that our time here was not, in fact, eternal. That all of us were simply serving a term that would one day expire. I had noticed already that some of the familiar faces would occasionally disappear from our midst, but had assumed that they just wandered further into the geography, setting up residence some distance away. It wasn't until one day, standing not far from the compound and staring across the waters of the lake, that I noticed on the periphery of my vision two figures approach one another, speak for a moment, and then completely vanish from sight. After I'd seen this happen once, I began to notice it with more frequency, two bodies coming together and then either melting or snapping into

nothingness. These occasional vanishings would have been obvious to me sooner had I spent much of any time paying attention to the routines of those around me rather than observing them as abstractions to be calculated toward some grander unified theory of meaning. Some of the new arrivals, it became apparent, were only here for moments before they disappeared again. Upon entering this world, they would materialize next to someone who had already served time here, someone with whom I surmised they'd had a living connection. The answer finally occurred to me: all of us who'd arrived and remained for any longer than a minute or two were *waiting* for someone else to arrive, someone from our past life sent to liberate us and ferry us off to whatever existed beyond.

And so, I began to wait for these appearances, watching more closely when anyone new arrived, testing to see whether they were someone destined to wait or someone sent with the keys to free one of us from our cell. After having observed perhaps twenty of these meetings, I began to notice a discernible pattern, filtering each encounter into one of two distinct categories. The first of these, the darker reunions, involved a new arrival who had somehow contributed to the death of one who had been spending time here waiting.

In these cases, the new arrivals always said the same thing, or some variation of it—"I'm sorry I did this to you." Fragmented though the conversations with my fellow wraiths most often were, after enough time you begin to assemble the bits of talk into a rough narrative of what circumstances had brought each of us here. In the previous world, sometimes these new arrivals had exacted grave physical cruelty upon their victims, an extended period of fatal abuse. Sometimes it had been the deliberate infliction of a deep-cutting verbal assault that contributed to their victim's suicide. Sometimes, they had committed murder. Always, and I knew this from having already heard the circumstances surrounding everyone's death, these events stood out to their victims as the deepest acts of betrayal. Always, there had been violence involved, whether it was the violence of words or of actions, and always, I noticed, there was the necessary ingredient of an intent to harm on the part of the perpetrator. Never, for example, did I see someone confront, at long last, a new arrival who had long ago contributed to their death through negligence or by accident. Never in these final meetings were there acknowledgements of a fatal drunk driving incident

or lack of caution with a loaded pistol. And thus, as a vital component in the resolution of these betrayals, there was always that one simple, unqualified acknowledgement: "I'm sorry I did this to you."

This elaborate arrangement, this ritual that I eventually became inured to because it was so common and repetitive, was directed and refereed by no visible agent, and yet there was always a lawyerly orchestration to how the dramatics of the scene would play out. There seemed to be an intuited understanding within each of the two parties, both victim and violator, as to the precise order of events that were to take place, how lines were to be spoken and with what inflection, what gestures or minor shadings of emotion were required at any given step in the process. I had seen this so often that I studied it the way an anthropologist might in spying on a foreign ceremony, noticing patterns that I believe neither of the participants were consciously aware they were performing in the moment. Always it would end the same way. "I'm sorry I did this to you," at which point both parties froze momentarily in tableaux, and then...literally nothing. Both of them would immediately vanish, without so much as a rippling of the air.

The rest of us, who stood as witnesses, awaiting our own eventual reunions with those with whom we had unsettled accounts, always spoke of these scenes with the same false optimism. Those who disappeared, of course, had now moved on to a next, better existence. And yet, and I sensed this quite deeply, we all feared the same thing. The shock and the swiftness of these disappearances produced such an impression of finality that there was dread among all of us that this marked the utter end of things. That those who vanished simply stopped being. In the absence in this place of any evidence of a loving god or even of a something beyond, we bore the same fear of annihilation that all of us had felt at one time about our own earthly deaths, before we had crossed over.

For others, like me, mired in limbo while awaiting ones we'd left behind out of love, these final encounters followed a less structured script. Both parties here, too, would vanish, but more gradually, like the slow dissolve or fade into black at the end of a film. The scene was suffused not with a sense of annihilation, but of resolution, and the feeling that washed

over those of us who stood in audience was one of hope, a to-be-continued transcendence for both players toward a higher plane.

Because of this, I found my strength in the deep-sworn hope that Rita and I, when we reunited, would have an eternity together in front of us. After she spoke her words to me, we would dissolve into wherever else our meeting would take us.

All time blurred into a morass, the angry crimson cast to the sky never shifting between light and dark. So, to say “One day such and such happened” would only be the result of a mechanical habit of language. Which is to say that one day, while sitting on the banks of the lake, with the arid plain behind me, I heard in the distance, someone in conversation. I turned and saw two men walking from the ridge above the compound toward the lake, at an angle from where I sat.

One of the men I recognized. Seventy years old, perhaps Chinese, but he walked like a much younger man and reminded me of Rita’s father. Kindly. Demure. I’d never talked with him, merely passed by him on our circuitous perpetual loop enough times in the two years since he’d been among us that to attempt to speak to him now, after such a long silence between us, would seem absurd. He had another man at his side, much younger, who spoke rapidly in what I assumed to be Mandarin. I’d not seen this one previously. Likely a new arrival receiving the deluxe tour. As they passed within closer earshot, I caught a phrase I’d heard before standing out from their encrypted dialogue – *kenapa kita di sini* – before his words returned again into a tongue I couldn’t comprehend.

When I returned to the compound, I saw the younger man sitting outside my building, legs propped up at the knee, reclining against the baked mud wall and staring off in the distance. As I approached, he looked at me, sullen. The range of emotions on his face, not yet smoothed over by the wearing abrasive of time, confirmed for me that he must be new.

“*Apakah khabar*,” I said, stopping a few feet away from him. Immediately, I saw a look of joy emerge, and he jumped to his feet, firing back with a stream of Malay spoken so quickly that I understood nothing more than a few syllables.

“Wait, wait,” I said, raising my hands in a motion for him to stop, “I’m not fluent, I just heard you speaking with the older man earlier.”

“Ha-ha, yes, okay, no problem,” he responded, “Understand in English too.”

“I’m Tom,” I said, “I assume he explained to you what we’re all doing here?”

“Yes, but don’t believe it. Think this is all a dream. I’m Alvin.”

I stooped down, remembering the occasional creak of my knees when I’d performed this action in the previous world. “So, you lived in Malaysia?”

“Yuh...” I recognized his distinctive Kedah accent, “Live with my mother Sungai Petani.”

Alvin was my first, my only companion on this barren plane. Abeo remained cordial when he saw me, but after our first conversation, he offered me nothing more than a ‘hello’ or a friendly nod as he walked about. He reserved his energies, I eventually surmised, to help shepherd new arrivals, as I once was. With Alvin, however, things were different. He was unlike anyone else I’d seen here, even myself. Most often, his overenthusiasm for conversation was something I wished to find shelter from so that I might simply pace about in silence, but his demeanour was such that it would more frequently draw me out from the crevasses of my interior cell and provide some solace in the camaraderie he offered. After he’d been with us for what may have been a week, he appeared at the door to my room.

“Want to go to lake?” He drummed his fingers on the wall.

"Not really, but sure." I had been lying there half in a daze, one leg stretched out in front of me, one knee bent up, feeling a dull ache within, trying to summon tears that wouldn't come, thinking of Rita with the abandoned desolation that I imagine a soldier at war or a prisoner must feel for the object of his love, investing all hope and desire for the future into the one he'll see when he's finally home. Alvin and I walked to the pebbled shore of the lake, a faint acrid aroma lifting, as it always did, from the water. I looked to Alvin, who was staring at the towering monolith of rock that stretched ever upward, his mouth slightly open and speaking silent words to himself.

"Hey, Alvin. Don't mind me asking, we all eventually talk about this. How did you die?"

I could see a seriousness settle in over his face, nothing pained or disturbed, but a thoughtfulness I hadn't seen in him before. "*Wen-yi*," he said, enunciating slowly.

"*Wen-yi*," I repeated back to him. I turned and looked across the lakeshore, dusty and cracked, the wind whispering like a devil above the red soil. "What is that?"

"You know in Malay. *Wabak*."

I turned back to Alvin, whose black eyes bore deep into my own, and I could tell after a few seconds of him searching that he realized I still didn't understand. After some thinking, his eyebrows pressed down slightly, and he asked, "When you arrive here?"

"Me?" I said, half grinning. "Summer of 2018. Fell off a cliff in Sabah. Splat."

His face lit up in a broad smile. "Really? That better than mine. Ha-ha, that good. Hmm, yes, like that one. I die in a hospital bed hooked up to machines. Couldn't breathe. Feel like I'm falling under an ocean. Can't even see my mother one last time. Miss her a lot."

I nodded, then turned, facing away from the water. We started walking back toward the compound, my feet stirring at the dirt to loosen up pebbles. As we arrived outside the

rippled stucco walls, I sat on the dry earth beneath the flat pavilion. “You know, I’m really curious about something else too. It’s like the ending of a book that I never got to finish.” Alvin remained standing, and kicked lightly at the wall, his shoe bouncing backward in a hypnotic motion. “Whatever happened after the election? You know, New Malaysia and everything?”

I knew enough not to butt my nose too deeply into local political affairs when I walked among the living in Malaysia. I was the foreigner there, and I had been particularly sensitive to the fact that the whole region had already had its fill of hundreds of years of white men arriving only to hold forth as the self-satisfied voices of final authority on what the country *really* needed to do to remedy their social ills. But here, in this place, all arbitrary past dividers – of nation, of race, of religion, of gender – were genuinely meaningless. There simply wasn’t anything to pull rank or construct hierarchies over. Resources weren’t scarce here; they were non-existent. Perhaps, as some inadvertent blessing in an otherwise damned place, all the stakes were removed from talking politics.

“Ha-ha, what you think happen?” Alvin dragged it out, teasing me, but I suspected I already knew the answer. “Six months go by, everybody behaves. Then one day, all the new government look around,” and with this, Alvin mimed with a melodramatic air a wide-eyed look, first over one shoulder and then slowly over the other, “And then they go right back to being Old Malaysia again.”

“Hot damn, I knew it!” I said, the first ripple of any interest I’d felt in...maybe it was the first time I’d felt anything like this since I’d arrived. “Nothing gets in the way of a government worker skimming a little bit off the top for the ‘tea fund.’”

“Hee-hee, yeah good one. Hey, you know what face of Old Malaysia is?”

“No, but I’d wager you’re about to tell me.”

“Face of Old Malaysia some forty-year-old *bumi* loser grumbling on the commuter train, coming back from the protest rally in a racist ballcap. Worthless.” When Alvin mentioned this, I suddenly remembered the surly faces that would occasionally glower at me with suspicious eyes on the transit system, for no reason other than that they perceived me to be a foreign interloper at their party. I remembered too the conversations across coffeeshop tables, infrequent though they might be, when I stood witness to someone in the group unabashedly holding forth on the inner nature of the South Indian or the *mat salleh*, as if enacting some anachronistic racial kabuki performance or reading a sermon or medical text written by a nineteenth century colonialist.

In the slow lurching passage of time in this place, a train moving in the dark, a day could have been a thousand years, a thousand years a day. So little existed to occupy our time with useful labour that we walked about, sat idly, stirred with restlessness, and eternity stretched on before us. For perhaps the same reason that all physical sensations had left us, the psychological torment of waiting never metastasized into insanity nor the reprieve it might offer. Mental pain, in a sense, was felt, but like the landscape around us, it was barren, worn by epochs of erosion, until the only thing that remained in each of us was a levelled affect, all emotional experience bereft of any complexity.

My solace, I found, came in the repetitive pilgrimages I took to the vision room, watching on the screen, enraptured even as Rita performed the most mundane of tasks. What I found in this ritual – meaning, or at least some variance from the meaninglessness of my otherwise existence – met its contrast in Alvin, who gained nothing from watching his mother through the glass other than a deepening frustration, wishing on her the death that he felt was long overdue. He’d been thirty years old when he’d transferred to this plane, his mother twenty years older. By his calculation, if he were lucky, he’d serve perhaps one or two decades among us before she would arrive to liberate him. He revealed to me that he had seen her more often than not when he visited the glass, but couldn’t bear to watch as she marched, always in good health, into old age, a perpetual reminder of how long he might remain here beyond what he felt was a just sentence.

My own time watching, waiting for the rare occasions when Rita would appear, had become wearying as well. What had begun as invigorating occasions that allowed me to remember the emotional universes I once contained within me had melted away to reveal a deeper desperation. I worried that she, with enough time on her side of the glass, might eventually forget me. And what would happen then if we reunited?

After living with this fear, tumbling into as deep a depression as the atmosphere of this netherworld would allow, which is to say not noticeably different than any other mental state I'd experienced since arriving, I entered the vision room and saw the dancing lights shimmering over its surface. I paced forward and pressed my forehead against the glass, peering within. Rita was there, in her mid-fifties now, perhaps older as she had always worn her age well, standing at a bookcase in a darkened room, her back facing away from my perspective. She now most often wore a *tudung*, taking on the aspect of a Malaysian Madonna, and I could see along the folds of the velvet cloth a light emanating from something she held in her hands, which I couldn't see.

"Rita, look at me," I whispered, even though I knew from experience that nothing I could do, whether it be pounding on the glass or screaming into it, would reach through to her side. What was she doing? I could see her shoulders trembling upwards, as if in laughter, subdued at first but gradually increasing. Some funny video on a screen, I suspected. This continued for perhaps a minute.

"Rita, please," I pleaded, "I need to see your face." On uttering these words, as if by dark magic, Rita turned in my direction and I could see that I'd been mistaken. She hadn't been laughing to herself, but weeping. As she moved toward the glass, exeunt stage right, I saw for a brief moment what she'd been looking at. It was a photograph of me, displayed on a small digital screen the size of a picture frame.

As I walked outside the vision room, I came upon Alvin, who'd been pacing the circular pathway in front of the compound houses. He looked at me absently.

"When you leave that room, you become a fool for three days. Stare at the wall. Stare at the floor. Can't talk to you like that."

"Fuck off, Alvin," I mumbled, but my mind was already adrift. Alvin was still talking – had in fact not fucked off – but all I could see now was the half-faded image of Rita at her bookshelf. In my mind's eye, the scene had already lost its sharp lines and detail, and yet I was in a trance thinking of her. She still cared for me, deeply and wildly. She, after all these years, still cried for me. My waiting had not been wasted time. I felt myself now moving forward, my body propelled in the direction of my room, a double-vision filling my sight, one replaying the reflection of Rita at her bookshelf – with the grain of the image slowly degrading – and one showing the vague shapes of the actual world underneath. Eventually, I found my way back to my bed.

I remained there for weeks. Perhaps it was longer. By this point, I wasn't so far gone that I couldn't see that my time at the mirror had begun to manifest itself in the same way that my drinking once did. I might spend no more than a few hours there drawing deep from the images, but the aftereffect was debilitating. My stints at the screen were like my binges with a liquor bottle. I consumed quickly, with insane focus, over a short period of time and then became consumed myself for weeks, collapsed in my bed in a state of dissipation, bled of all momentum and desire, drunk on the vapours of remembrance of what I had seen.

I was with Alvin, there with him the day that his mother crossed over, unannounced, and I could tell from the rapid change in his demeanour that her appearance was entirely unexpected. It had been years, by whatever vague measure I'd devised to quantify time, since Alvin had gone to the looking glass, so whatever lingering infirmity it was that likely brought his mother here would have been something of which he'd been unaware. We were sitting outside the baked walls of the compound, Alvin clumsily whistling a song I'd never heard before while I tried to land flat stones in a circle, I'd drawn in the earth some distance away. We both looked over and saw his mother standing no more than a few yards from us. Alvin leapt to his feet and ran to her, burying himself in her enfolding arms, and I felt jealous that in all the years he'd passed in this place, he'd still retained a humanity that had drained from

me long ago. I could hear his muffled voice speaking rapidly in Mandarin, and occasionally he'd lift his head so that I could see his face streaked in tears that trickled down into his thin moustache, before he buried his face again in her bosom. Her whole countenance was beatific. I hated seeing it, not from envy, but because I knew what would come next. She raised her son up, squaring his shoulders in front of her and said something to him very slowly that I couldn't understand, her eyes creased in...what was it? Pride? He wrapped his arms tightly around her, half stooped to meet her at her height, and both of them gradually faded from my vision. My eyes remained lingering on the spot where they'd stood, now filled with nothing more than air and space and blurred hills in the distance, stirred by the always circling wind. I turned back, dolefully lifting up another flat stone before flinging it again to the earth in front of me.

\* \* \*

A great deal of time passed like this. Years. Decades. My only sense of how long this interval lasted came from watching the lines deepen on Rita's face, her features becoming rounder with the accumulated weight of age. She was now an old woman, stooped and heavyset but frail, hair the colour of whalebone when it wasn't covered by her mourning *tudung*. Wrinkles crisscrossed the geography of her face like rivulets through russet-coloured soil, and she rarely smiled, only appeared to be waiting. Children ran through the rooms where she sat unattended, invisible in the way that women of a very advanced age most frequently are, someone to be checked absent-mindedly now and then, like a soup pot on the stove or a windowsill plant. I spoke to her from behind the glass, reassured her that I hadn't forgotten her even if her world had, and imagined she heard me. I became lost in thinking over what she might say to me in return. She now wore our wedding band on the same finger as the ring from her second marriage, and I held on to desperate hope that she'd been the one who'd made the decision to put it on and not one of the younger relatives in the family.

Even so, when she finally appeared, I had become so used to the unbreaking monotony of waiting that I was startled, lifting my shoulders rapidly from the ground where

I lay outside the compound doors. She stood above me, looking down silently, dressed in the same summer clothing she'd worn on that day in Sabah that was now an eternity ago. Our eyes locked in on each other's, my face registering dumb shock and nothing else. All the things I'd rehearsed to say to her, for decades, were torn from me. I lifted myself from behind and stood there, my lower lip hanging, the rise of my cheeks pressing upward from the tornado of emotions that churned within. "Rita," was all I could manage, and from her, only, "Tom."

And immediately, this desert of eternity that had stood between us, these years of fading in and out of her life like a puff of cloud, this endless agonizing midpoint between here and there, only viewing her as through a frosted pane, so maddeningly out of focus, this screaming into a void and never being heard – immediately all barriers were obliterated as we stood once more, for the first time in seventy-four years, face to face. All of the intervening years were lifted and she looked as she did on the morning when we were last together, when I was still alive. There was something there in her eyes, whether joy or relief, some unburdening, something elusive which I couldn't clearly discern. She ran to me and we brought each other in close, clutching on as if this were all an illusion and we'd be torn away from each other again, cast back into solitude.

"I hope you always knew that I would be here waiting for you, all this time. Waiting so you and I could be together again," I whispered, my voice rasped from a shiver of emotion. As I spoke, I could feel her hitching breath, a staccato of soft sobs into my shoulder as she grasped me tighter, her fingers needling deeply into my skin. And then she spoke, a phrase momentarily baffling as I fumbled to orient the words into meaning, until my confusion fell away into a torrent, first of realization, and then of horror.

"I'm sorry I did this to you."