

Alvin PANG***EPIC***

and this is the beginning of it all,
 in the middle of someone
 always someone else's narrative
 when one barges in, spewed like an
 interruption, our first cries dissonate
 (even science cannot make us, sans ciy)

and here i (he)
 am, was not born Joshua Michael David Chan Kwok Keong
 (Gúo Chiáng) nor
 Tan Ah Kow, that proverbial arithmetic
 Doggerel example, smacking of warehouses:

“Tan Ah Kow can carry a hundred and five bags of rice a day.
 The Taipan/Towkay/colonialist merchant/
 entrepreneur has three thousand bags of rice on his ship. How
 many days does it take Ah Kow etc.”

no 1 am no longer Ah Kow, nor the clerk at the foreign
 exchange newly shorn, in christian white, translator
 of teochew/hokkien/hakka/henghwa into currency,
 gu_ng t_ng yuán into cantonese dollars. We have gone past
 these relics and anxieties; I still speak english but no,
 (since you asked)
 Am no longer quite a
 (Christian)
 Man.

(Does that answer your question?)
 and here we land with strange initials
 so am I Joshua Chan, Michael Chan, Kwok Keong Chan, or
 K. Chan, K. K. J. G. M. Chan, even though
 I am none of these
 fictions, even though
 I could have been any of these.

No, I could not say that i (he) was legitimate
 But by common law (and sense) may be said to
 exist. In this story.

(isn't this how it's supposed to go?)

...and

So in this story, this

His story, he is a poor confused bastard

(except that he isn't poor, yes, Margaret, nor confused nor a bastard). But then again, the story of someone who thinks he is poor and confused, though not "Bastard", nor does he know the feeling and flavour of the word.

So our hero/wanderer/protagonist/swordsman/lover ventures forth unto distant shores/lands/inferni/Purgatori, encounters

women/snakes/demons/foreigners/the Evil' in his 'soul'/the Other poor bastard who's wandering around this meek, inherited earth

and eventually, his wins through/dies gloriously/both (no, these are not choices, they are not exclusive, they are all in there, somewhere) enters Paradise/Nirvana/the Kingdom of Death/Hell

enters the cycle of renewal to become hybrid to be bred again with other inventions, by other writers/authors/dreamers/saints/visionaries/people

(if he had a bastard's mouth he would bite)

and they will tell you that he/she/it is not them, they are not any of those fictions, so (just in case) they bite

as for me,

I withhold the ending (deliberately, knowingly)

I withhold all endings, and

without it you shall lose your way through me

you shall never find the moral to the story

IN TRANSIT

*between our arrivals and our
Departures, it is a strangely
guiltless territory*

- Marne L. Kilates

With my wife in her usual high-altitude slump, seat-belt fastened, the cabin lights dimmed and bad comedy on the movie channel, I slip into what one poet has termed the blameless country of air travel. I've ploughed through several novels this way, unperturbed, felt the heart-surge when a particularly rousing phrase of Beethoven's coincides with the exact moment of take-off. Sometimes the peace is so rare I wave off free champagne, and in Economy the meals are never worth missing the view for: sunset over the Grand Canyon, or the Pacific flowing like silk brocade. Now we enter the sphere of maps, a world abstracted and solid all at once. As settlements snuggle up to rivers, and paddyfields play endless checkers on terraced hillsides, there's space enough for long thoughts, wispy musings. Do clouds, for instance, discharge their burdens in relief, or do they, in their secret hearts, dream of the fallen? And which is the life we regret, what was left behind or the one to which we hurl at 800 km/h? Only at such giddy velocities might we savour the wonder of stasis, how the earth's rotation keeps us easily in place. Just as, if we knew the true evanescence of a second, it would stop us in our tracks – with indecision, if not physics. Yes, even in seat 34A, risking thrombosis, with barely enough room to clap, there's time to ponder unseen forces, the invisible lift beneath all our wings, only the first human century in history with this luxury of boredom. If the flight were any longer we'd resort to art. Plot new routes to godhood. No surprise the Pyramids (just visible beneath the cloud-cover on your left) had tombs built like departure lounges, since many of us too would opt to go to ground

this way – with such conducted ease, to the sound of our preferred music in the company of strangers. How good to set off so eager, yet unhurried, to arrive watched for, and welcomed at the gates.

*

INCENDIUM AMORIS

Burning incense could cause cancer according to a scientific study conducted by researchers from Taiwan, who found high levels of carcinogens in the smoke of incense burned in Buddhist temples.

- Assoc Press (2 Aug 2001)

I have groped my breast seeking whether this burning were from any bodily cause outwardly. But when I knew that it was only kindled inwardly from a ghostly cause, and that this burning was nought of fleshly love or concupiscence, in this I conceived it was the gift of my Maker.

- Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love* (14th C)

i.

Now we know our prayers
are killing us. Offer incense, set flame
to sandalwood, give your soul
to the votive glow of oil lamp and candle;
all it summons is this secret bird of prey,
silence fluttering beneath the rib-cage.
So the slow burn towards divinity
begins from within, after all: Ashes to ashes,
flesh expiring from smoke into grace.
Gather enough faith
and it could kill a city.

ii.

We sensed the bigger picture that day
on Jurong Island: Refineries humming
like desert temples; land gathered and burnt
for one purpose only. On the horizon

smokestacks tower like 7th month joss,
 under whose gaze even light wavers,
 cowed into sunset. Second after second
 the waste flares roar
 their fierce syllable of
 love
 love
 love

iii.

How often we fall to the naked gaze of fire,
 trusting the blaze of fact, faith, desire
 to light the way out from ourselves to wholeness.
 As if salvation is earned by becoming less,
 by feeding our dreams to the right combustion.
 Does the soul hide in plasma? Is God a question?
 The unsolved science of this calculable space,
 whose name resides in the geometry of light?
 Perhaps freedom gleams in answers which escape
 us, eludes our sense of what could be. In which case
 we are more than just a quantity of ash might
 hold, and what we seem to lose, released from shape
 only. Any day soon, we could stumble on paradise
 in the embers of here and now, and what we sacrifice.

*

THE MEANING OF WEALTH IN THE NEW ECONOMY

“Wealth ... is the means by which we fulfill our desires.”
 - Interview with Stan Davis & Chris Meyers, *Harvard Business
 School Publishing*

Hence the cat's languid stretch, its bullet spring, the
 puppy
 eyes of the one you love, asking undue favours
 you resent, yet relent to. The mercenary burst
 of bougainvillea, machine-gun clatter of rubber-seeds
 falling
 to hard ground as December comes, bearing fistfuls of
 rain.

Consider the lilies of the field, how like your pale
hunger,
the hollow in the gut that pulls you forward, the lust
to work, earn, mate, the same gravity that binds
water to sky, impels birds to song and blood, both.

Remember the electric twitch of a nerve
as skin kissed skin for the first time ever?
Every word you waste in trade for half-truths
you need to get by, turning the volume down on guilt
as you come home past midnight, head bowed,
rehearsing
lies, as you knock on the door. Every lapse in your
wellness
diet, stolen Oreos, prophylactic silences, each step you
take
away from the home of your childhood, thirsting for
road:

Nothing but riches, between the leafy congregation of
trees
and the echo of a single prayer down empty aisles, as
cars slam in unison and grumble one by one into gear.
A child's gurgle and squeal, the kind that brings parents
running
for a glimpse of joy, reward, and willing to pay for it with
love. In which case we have always known this bounty,
the means
to open a window and let the morning in for all it's
worth.

You hoard a little every time you put aside, in sleep,
your daily dying. The doubling, and doubling again of
years
of weight, of sorrow, that longing, for the one thing
you know you can never have, which keeps you alive.
In your dreams of being free, everything you've always
wanted
to be, you walk smiling and whole, away
from the infinite riches of the world.

*

ANGER

If I let this anger go, where would it go?
If into air, would it fall back
as thunder in the next storm rising?
If into water, who might drink it in?
I cannot bury it in earth, or it could sprout.
A forest of such rage would be too cruel.
It will not burn itself out; smouldering,
it does not flare nor fade. Holding it up
to the light, I cannot tell it from the light.
In the dark, keeping me from sleep,
it whispers loud enough to be heard
but not understood, holds me
like a chill. I want it to be still.

I want to sit and ease its grip
with song, its temper loosened from
belly into lap, all furred, bristling
with glares, but present as a chair,
seen for what it is. The clash of minutes
on a clock. Hope condensing on a knife.
Love divided into want and need.
I would listen to this fury speak
in its own voice, words that hold no
meaning but their being, discover
how it lives and why it came to me.

*

THE MEMORY OF YOUR TASTE

How easily you forget but it was I always
to stoop to the cup of you, lace lip
to lip, rehearse tongue-twisters like slurp
malleable laryngeal slither and o swallow
and you would wriggle in sibilants
delectable sheet scribbles every wet lick
on noisetip and earlobe the hollow of your

collarbone, sloped syntax of peak and peak, how
 the slick shimmies through plain towards forest
 of fingers tugging at air and hair there, there
 like bud shivering open in heat, like snowmelt
 at first touch of footstep in spring coming
 the same metal and moonlight tang and I eschew
 known names like nectar, mead, ambrosia when all
 bursts in drizzle-juice and ripe pear and pearl
 gumdrops and sweet black sauce and sweat
 mucus-honey and piss-wine and curd o the
 whole sweet cart of woe only the living
 remember to love.

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READING A FRAGMENT OF POETRY BY A MUCH YOUNGER SELF

*We were trapped
 In that tyranny of touch. How you
 Amplified silence into
 Nothingness as your tears fell.
 In your eyes the myths have shattered
 And you tread on broken glass,
 Each word a shard
 To burst your bubble heart.
 (circa 1992)*

How I long to reach back and put a fatherly arm
 around that young man's still taut shoulders,
 the unbruised strength of his limbs, as he weeps
 earnest ink on white copier paper.

I would tell him that his love survived
 its illusions, bloomed, if that's the word for it,
 into something ampler, more rooted than tyranny.
 If anything had died it was his futile innocence
 in believing intimacy was shielded from loss,
 could even begin without that first cleaving.

How quaint of youth to grouse of too much touch!
 And so much needless terror, the raw power

of feeling and language ungarbed all at once.
Such melodrama, I would point out, in his lines;
such histrionic diction – the sort of verse
he would later deride in others, regret in his own,
until he learns to feign a jaded, ironic detachment,
the kind often taken for gravity or wisdom.

I would make him a hot mug of cocoa, play
some light jazz on the stereo, instead of Chopin's
melancholic riffs, the brittle glass of his Nocturnes.
Tell him of our cats, the surrogate chaos
we breed at home, a life too ensconced to afford any
myth-breaking, the extravagance of passionate sorrow.

But I would let him write it all out, of course. No sense
in wasting a good bout of genuine heartbreak,
precious fodder for so much poetry, and scant enough
practice, as it is, for the griefs still to come.

*

THE SCENT OF THE REAL

(For Cyril, who said “real life, if there is a real life, is
boring, and therefore, not art.”)

Of course it isn't.
But there's that
one second between
dreaming and waking
when we can never be
too sure where
and which we are.

Now and then it follows us
into the bare room
of consciousness;
blanket sagged to floor
again, the bed wincing
in its regular creak.

With luck, there's someone
beside you, who doesn't notice

the slight glaze in your eye,
a fracture of the light
not attributed to lust, for once.

Go back to sleep,
you say, stroking
the oiled finery of his hair.
Or you locate
the fulcrum of his breathing,
unbalance him with the point
of a kiss, so you both fall
into a sea of your own making,
riding its extraordinary tide.

Even in the throes
of receiving
and expelling air
in quickening lapses
you succumb
to an unerotic prescience.

Already you envision
the harried buttoning,
frantic rush to road,
a claustrophobia of routine.
Lifted from one sweet immersion
to drown in another.

By now so far gone
into the commonplace
you've forgotten the shore
and shape of love,

the body's familiar narratives
retold in every touch, aching
for touch, two dying
creatures seeking equal ballast
in desire's mirror.

How many times
will you hear this story
in the quiet keeping of strangers
whose hearts you cannot know
but through the glass

of your own hunger?

As if the scent of the real
is simply found, and not
with each hour's singular musk
diffused, unmarked, into sunlight.

As if to bear clear witness
to your longing alone
isn't the only art
there is.

*

SHADES OF LIGHT IN HOLLAND VILLAGE

Say you just got a raise. The last good kiss
you'll remember for life is waiting to happen,
but you come here; Friday night, Saturday night;
the mock Latino bars that didn't last, bars that did,
cafes and coffee-shops that keep up.
The magazine stall on the corner must have turned 30,
the proprietors still furtively fingering
glossy foreign magazines like contraband.

What they're really selling
is ease. People come for love of mess, looking for a stab
of feeling, the suddenness of pain, any kind of
intoxication.

Well-kept bodies who leave each year
more regretful than the last. Running from silence
into noise. Even the rooftop balinese illusion of Café
211,
four storeys above ground, can't hide their boredom.

Isn't this the life? That languorous drowning of the
senses?

Isn't this defeat so subtle, our bohemian afterlife,
token as a piece of heaven, resounding in seclusion,
all the world will let you have
until the hunger you came from
dies from inside?

Say no to yourself. The old man on the void deck,

already forty when these streets were laid, still laughs
although his legs have jumped ship. Some night soon,
he says, I'll turn off the lights in my room
and never see the sun again. You tell him no
in your head. The taxi that brought you here
is still out there, running for what it's worth
to hunt down the kind of money
you can't even buy lunch with, your fatigue
and unclaimed grief mark the air with sighs
disguised as breathing, and it will kill you one day
no matter what you do.

So the struggle now is with the stiff
bolt on your front door, the stubborn wilting
of your balcony ferns, the straining of your neck
to catch one glimpse of the woman who loves you
in the best possible light.

*

S., WHILE IN THERAPY

Leapt another tall building today.
Never seem to tire of that stunt, only
the buildings get higher every time. The police
hailed me in for questioning, but since I didn't
break anything they let me off with a warning.
Didn't tell them about the dented train,
that near-miss with the 747. These days
I keep my habits private. I try.

Actually I've not stopped a real bullet
for some time now, not in this city. Since we
all went public. My rivals got day jobs.
Hear Braniac's new start-up is climbing
the Fortune 500. Darkseid's advising the
boys from Defence. And Lex has turned up

on the cover of Time. Again. Last week
they cut staff at the paper. My section.

You'd think a man who could do
anything, at least could keep
his woman. Two nights ago she left.
Said I couldn't open up, let anyone into
my weakness. Said she wanted children.
Used the word 'Freak'. I don't think
she's coming back this time.

I don't sleep anymore. I don't dream
I'm an alien. I remember less and less
of my childhood, the cornfields in Iowa
(or was it Kansas?) Sometimes I lie there
wondering why I was sent here of all places
instead of a war zone, a revolution,
another city that still needs a hero.

I've thought about moving. Of course
I've taken vacations. Tibet, my Arctic hideout,
the outer planets. I went to Mars once,
but there was nothing. Nothing there at all.

*

(an epitaph)

IN THE END

the things we love give back
our names. One handed me a
plain stone to carve into something
better. Another returned the long
lost user guide to my left brain.
Someone passed a slip of paper,
my inscrutable handwriting
on one side, and on the other
in bright colours, the words
"I Want It All". Others brought
flowers - irises, daffodils,
the soft unpeeled heart of a rose.
None of the clothes fit any longer.

I put aside the books I'd read,
and hadn't read, they took flight
as endless stairs, circling
beyond my years. But I loved
most of all the quiet
Sundays, when fingers of rain
would write themselves
on the clear page of my window,
dying to tell me their stories.

*

THERE IS A MOMENT

There is a moment
when the familiar becomes lost
and I am trying to find it.

It should be a gradual
process, the loosening of leaves
from the fold of bark. Instead

there is a clear point
of divide, between what is
and what you have known

like a boy who wakes up one morning
and clears his throat to find
his voice no longer his own.

It could be a similar instant
when a chick knows it is time
to tear down the walls of its shell

when an old man knows these
are the last monsoon rains
he will ever see.

We are blind beyond this point,
having come ourselves
from just such a moment as this.

So much time is spent

denying its presence, fending
it off with words, holding

back the sea with sand
castles as the tide comes in,
treating it like a stranger.

But when I find it I will ask it
its name, so that when it arrives
I can greet it and we can meet

face to face, equal and unafraid.
