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Two stories

Anonymous People

Half the earth is experiencing night, lit up brighter than daytime by gas lamps. The sky contains neither moon nor stars, the roads are empty of cars, and the skyscrapers seem more or less uninhabited. This isn't necessarily any city. Some might call this 'The Night Before Revolution,' with the protagonist being The People – although how a revolution would take place hasn't yet been revealed to anyone.

Some believe in words, others in logic. Some have faith in God, or in the Heavens, or the human heart. Some trust in the evidence of their eyes, or limbs or skin or ears, or how emotions sway them. Some would rather rely on their own judgment or that of others. Some believe in blood, but others are more willing to believe in tears. Still, in the end, they all come out onto the streets, wanting to know what The People will do in the next instant, and what they themselves are capable of.

In the midst of all these people, there is a role such as Lam Yu's, willing to believe but finding it all unbelievable. Words repeated over and over become meaningless, just echoing noise. God and the Heavens give no sign as they never have since ancient times. His heart is a cold, empty hole at the bottom of which everything repressed lies bound. The things he longs for will remain longed for. His arms and legs are no more than unwieldy body parts, and his skin is covered in several layers of clothing. His mood makes him want to get moving when he's sitting down, but to remain still when he's walking. He stops, unsure whether to laugh or cry, before a granite wall – a remnant of a building that was, itself, a relic of the previous regime. Overwhelmed by judging the judgments of others, he can only judge that judgment is impossible.

This is how Lam Yu becomes lost in a crowd. He comes to a road, not knowing what to do, like a cartoon character whose talisman has lost its magic powers.

For instance, as the masses clash with anti-riot police, magnesium light flaring out in poetic beauty, he resists for a long time but finally has to admit he needs a piss. Yet it's impossible to judge whether he should, at this moment, leave this spot to find a toilet. He doesn't want anyone to see him walk away from the formation in front of the police line – and of course, he happens to be sitting right in front.

He also longs to cross to the other side of the road, to see what's happening there – whether it's as other people are reporting, if the situation is grim or in suspension. But he is unable to tell if he should, at this moment, leave his position to explore the other side. He has no idea whether the words of others accurately reflect what they see with their own eyes.

If only he could get some fresh air, or sit a while on the grassy patch fewer than fifty paces away. The light over there is not as bright, and the soft grass would feel agreeable against his buttocks. Perhaps after resting there until he has calmed down, he'll spot a place to put himself and things will be fine. Yet instead, the next second he has somehow got hold of the microphone from the person in front of him, and is shouting without a pause the name of the road he wants to cross to, claiming he'll strike a blow for the brave fighters over there. But the road name is merely a transliteration of some chief bank manager's name, and he pronounces it wrongly as soon as he opens his mouth. The guy who originally held the microphone mistakes Lam Yu for someone else, and calls him by the wrong name too.

Lam Yu realizes now that The People has no name. No one facing off across the police lines recognizes anyone. *Arghh!* Names are yet to be matched with faces – not to mention the countless People sitting at home, watching a real-life drama on their TV screens. The mouths of The People open and close, but no sound reaches the site of history, yet these images are transmitted into every home, so absorbing everyone is leaving their TV dinners untouched. Not many people know who Lam Yu is, and as long as anyone believes it, he could be accused of being a plain-clothes policeman by anyone around him. The contacts saved in his phone could be construed to show he is a trouble-maker. And these days, the faces and voices of Lam Yu's friends seem to morph randomly in different situations, and his mind doesn't always recover quickly enough to recognize them.

Lam Yu suddenly thinks, how come there are no small children amongst The People? And not a single older person to be seen?

If everyone here were in uniform, or else changed into leisurewear or pajamas, the two sharply-divided halves would blur together, their differences fading. The sky hovers above land and sea, an island in the Asia-Pacific whose inhabitants arrived on foot from their ancestral homes – the so-called final showdown isn't real. It's not that everything is false, only that the truth hasn't yet been revealed. No one knows what will happen in the next instant. Right now, The People hover between belief and unbelief, numbness and feeling, while the activists have eliminated everything beyond the action...

At this moment, Lam Yu brims with the tension of an understudy about to step onto the stage, his limbs and buttocks clenched, his body clutched to itself, his smile piercingly bright, his hearing preternaturally attentive. Everyone is singing *The Internationale*, a song he finds tedious, but he turns this tedium into longing and sings along. At this moment, Lam Yu has no words. His fingertips touch the asphalt road, as if he has never done this before and just wanted to see how it felt... The sky hovers above land and sea. What is buried beneath this road? Is it earth? Is it the ghosts living underneath?

It is not yet midnight, but Lam Yu is already exhausted, so tired he wants to rest against another body, one which won't speak, if only so he can feel his own body again, by forming a connection with another person. But his arms and legs remain where they are, stiffened body parts, and he is lost. He cannot let go of himself, open himself to The People. He cannot come close to any of them. Yet he can hear everything. The voices the battle-cries the howls the mothers weeping the dull thud of bodies colliding with metal barriers and riot shields the sighs of city dwellers the thunder of footsteps. His mood rises and falls, crashing. He isn't calm but terribly, terribly sad. He wishes he could keep his heart soft, hopes it won't turn into stone, into metal, but he also knows this can happen at any instant, with the swiftness of thought.

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That Body, That Diffused Reflection, That Person

Reality reveals itself through its unreality.

When the old building collapsed – the one that always stood at the junction, opposite the 7-11 – people seemed struck deaf, nothing but blankness between their ears, and the piercing sound cutting through all that was solid went unheard. For an instant, terror surged like icy water into that suddenly empty space inside, while boiling blood agitated beneath frail skin... Perhaps everyone was like him, abruptly feeling everything before them was unfamiliar: the violently blue noontime sky, the scent of the air, the transparency of the light – everything seemed, in some strange way, to lay bare the secret brittleness of reality, the fragile equilibrium that usually props it up. Reality was vividly present, yet at the same time shrouding itself.

From his vantage point, he saw people turn suddenly to panicked flight – as a drowning man flails his limbs, desperate for the air above – terrified but unable to resist looking back, those at the rear unsure which way to turn within the yellow-grey cloud of dust and debris. *Just follow the street, then!* But the street was no more than a crack between buildings. In the dust they saw only dust, stumbling and falling onto the ground, the cries for help emerging from beneath the rubble going unheard... This was what he had not foreseen, could not have foreseen, that even as his feet brought him further away, step by step, he was unable to flee what lay around him. In an instant these people and their homes, the orderly lives they'd built as indentured laborers, were dislodged like the wind blowing dry leaves and overripe fruit from a tree, gone as surely as if they'd never existed. No one would be able to remember what this building had looked like before. Clutching his troubled heart, unable to still his agitation, he felt this wasn't real. How it resembled a nightmare – events recurring over and over, disaster and chaos falling away and returning, all embedded in the perfection of life, as in the eternal mandala... So this reality he was presently caught in also exiled him from everything he knew, cutting him off, adrift.

– People might call this misfortune, an accident borne of haste pending investigation, recounted in the manner so many accidents are, so 'coincidence' becomes the proof of 'inevitability': the day-to-day rates of murder and robbery are inversely proportional to major incidences of warfare during the same period of time, 'forming a straight line on the log scale that slopes downward to the right'.¹

The day was clear and cloudless. Everything else seemed normal. Lam Yu spent the afternoon running up and down the office block reporting to his superiors, popping in and out of air-conditioned rooms that were all sealed up, fluorescent lights in their ceilings, buzzing with the low hum of electronic transformers. Afterwards, smelling of dust, he took the subway to the mall, where he ate a dish of barbecued meat and rice at a fast-food place and drank a cup of iced milk-tea, then took a mini-bus down a stretch of asphalt until he arrived at the small park near his home, the one he passed by almost every day.

Here, he sat on a bench by the garishly-colored playground equipment on date-red felt, the setting sun casting long shadows, spotted doves looking rather like pigeons flying across the low rooftops. He didn't know why he was suddenly here, but was scared to go back. Even he did not understand what was going on in his mind. His body ached, exhaustion so overwhelming him it seemed to have morphed into the very mass of his body. He thought of the hordes he'd just been amongst, on their way back from work, yabbering on their phones as overhead news announcements assaulted him from speakers concealed in

1 Nick Lee. "Order In A Chaotic World." *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 22 Dec 2010.

the air-con vents, preventing his eyes from shutting. He could only sit limply, watching the elementary school student opposite him tackling her homework with an orange pencil, now and then brushing the paper with her free hand so eraser shavings tumbled all over the floor. The train, driven by some unknown person, dragged its wheels over old tracks that squealed piercingly in protest, the sound echoing down the tunnel and surging back through the cracks between the doors with the wind. He couldn't help recollecting the image of that body being lifted on a stretcher, shrouded in white cloth, the ambulance team probing through the concrete rubble with their feet, trying to find a way out. When none of the other by-standers were paying attention, he saw its left arm twitch, in the little gap of rumpled cloth between two straps, turning to the right along with its neck, making the body – the person – within the cloth look like it might actually struggle from its shroud and escape. The image disappeared with a little jolt and returned to the news anchor's upper body... Lam Yu felt like he knew that person, but was unable to say for sure without seeing his face. He could smell bleach rising off those white bandages, but was unable to turn his face away.

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The light swayed and flickered dimly, before shattering against the wall, smearing across your face.

It just so happened that a car came up the slope behind the flat, turning along the curve by the small park, its lights invading the shade beneath the old trees, catching the dangling branches and aerial roots so they cast shadows that hit the bathroom window and slid down the water-spattered shower stall, fragmenting and lighting up your face, absent of intent, absent of sound, then disappeared as if it had never been – Just an instant, the blink of an eye between you lifting the toilet seat cover and dropping your pants to sit down – You didn't hear the wheels churning against the asphalt, the thrumming of the turbine. The night was so quiet, frogs croaking lazily in the undergrowth, the wind blowing through grass and the tops of trees with the sound of waves near the shore, and you could only sit, feet pulled up onto tiptoe because the soles felt dirty, as piss gushed into the bowl from between your legs...

And so you remembered something, and tears covered your face. Warm streaks of water flowed, though the cause was unclear. You felt as if everything in the dusk was wavering slightly, and the air, the silence that propped up this space, was suddenly laid bare, transforming into something meltingly transparent, floating in that soundless atmosphere, complete, almost solemn, skin unable to tell whether it was inside or out, body growing weightless, elbow propped on a knee, the diffused images of half-light rippling through the dark. The deep reaches of the night hold something more silent and profound, unspeakably tender, incessant. And you within it; it wrapped you tightly.

But you knew that in the space of a thought, this moment in this night would easily be escaped, tumbling from a dusty corner in this claustrophobic house into a kind of intoxication, almost euphoric, almost oblivious. Without even turning away or taking a step, everything felt at this moment could be abandoned, this inert sensation of being merely alive without any sense of pain or pleasure, this imprisonment of the body, its longed-for sights and sounds, warmth and sustenance, freedom and lack of freedom... Here or in eternity, eyes open, or at least in the instant before shutting, lay a kind of pull that summoned only you, that could be sensed only by you, a drive that could destroy a person, and just like that, drag you away, throw you aside.

You'd thought it couldn't be remembered, that it was buried, but you still recognized the instant when your mind goes blank, the irrecoverable moment you slide along without hope of rescue, just as someone about to drown himself might see a premonition of his death in the elongated shadows other passengers cast on the deck as the sun strikes them. You suddenly realized that it's you who are in each moment experiencing

these sounds and colors, cold and warmth, contriving a world out of appearances and impressions. There was no other person – it was all just you. And yet the body remembered all the other bodies it had ever touched, all the dreams it had experienced, the years it had accumulated. It could not reject any of this, the pain, the pleasure, the aches, the exhaustion – it had its own memories, though they could not speak.

Yet you dared not look at the silhouette of the body in the mirror, nor even glance at your own face. A spine-chilling moment at the thought: that you might be the reflection, not the real person, that the scene laid out beyond the glass showed the bathroom you'd wandered into in the middle of the night, the gurgling of water from the tap also coming from the other side, impossible to tell which night this night was, thus the future becoming so drawn-out, now or forever, but at any rate blood continued to disperse through skin and flesh. You touched your nose and mouth, trying to feel your warm breath, when suddenly you understood, you sensed that behind you and all around, as well as immediately before your eyes, was the moment that you could see and no one else could, that you could touch and no one else could. And it hinted at despair and gratification, terror and silence, promised and opened up at the same time, forsaking and destroying. There is nothing to rely on in these white days and white nights in which human shadows proliferate. In the unhearing emptiness between the ears there are only the assault of vile noises and abuse. And inside, there are filthy, despicable changes that must not be observed – only they may not take place at night.

(And yet you stopped. Now that you'd recognized it, you wiped your hands, went back to bed and pulled the blanket over yourself, imitating how people live, savoring a life without pain or pleasure in their unworldly innocence, in the imprisonment of the body...)

Translated from the Chinese by Jeremy Tiang

'Anonymous People' first published in *Chinese University Student Post*, Feb 2009. p. 30

'That Body, That Person' First published in *Chinese University Student Post*, Jan 2011. p. 18

'Diffused Reflection' first published in *Chinese University Student Post*, Mar 2011. p. 24