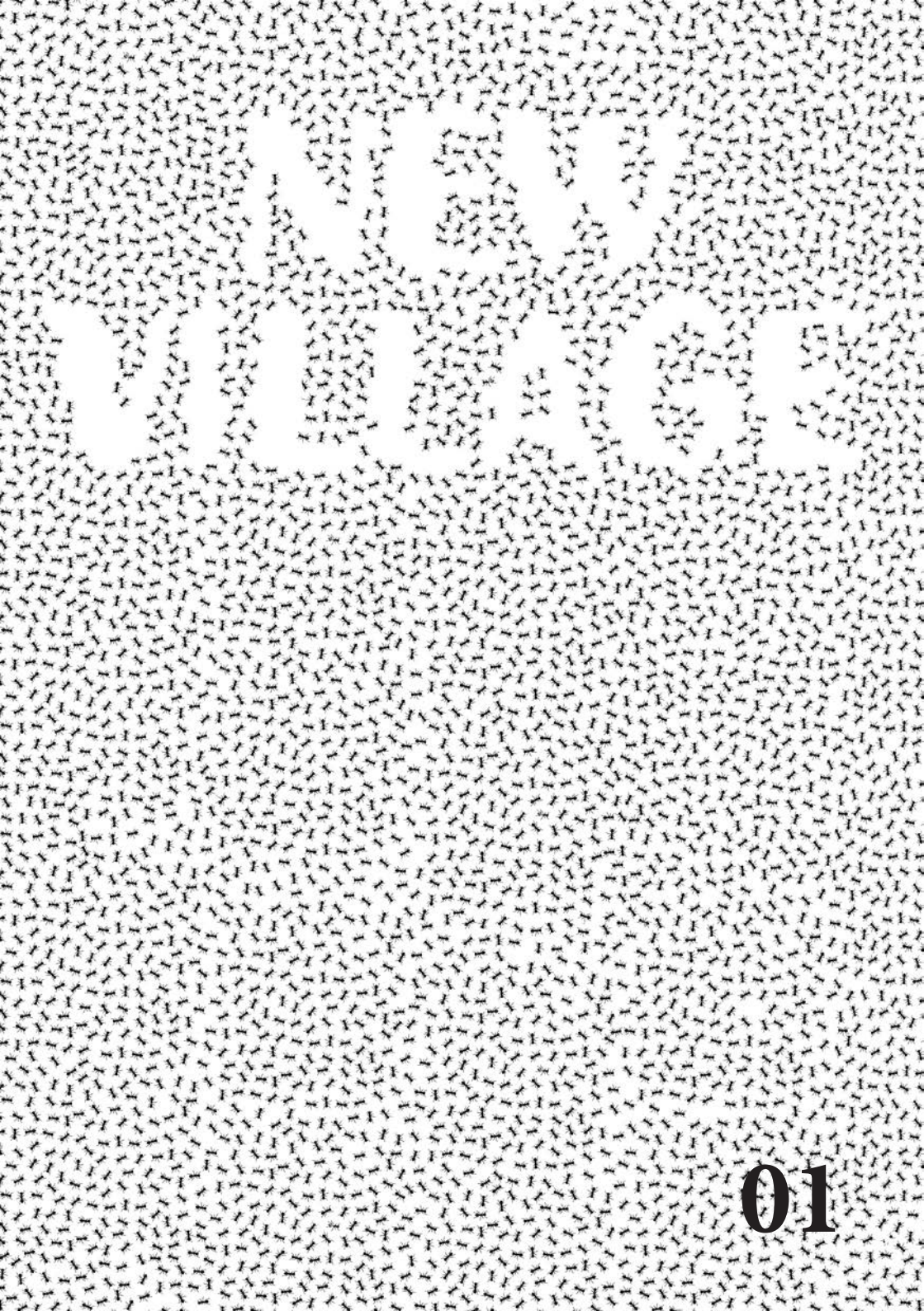

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Editorial

The name "New Village" is pertinent to this issue in many ways. Historically, we know that the new villages were settlements borne out of forced relocation, the result of British policies against Malaysian communism. But how did the inhabitants feel? We can only imagine the alienation that accompanies any forced movement (something that has by no means ended today), its psychological effects stretching past the moment of relocation.

In 1968, Lloyd Fernando wrote that there may be some forms of alienation which have yet to be explored. In that sense, alienation is nothing new. In another sense, though, alienation arises precisely out of the new, the movement of modernity that grants its subjects a sense of vertigo, and dislocation. Locally, one may trace this back to the new villages, their construction being a crucial moment of the modern invention of Malaysia.

A way of reading this issue, then, is as an exploration of the impact of the new. Here are representations and expressions of the current Malaysian moment, which poses questions amidst the flurry of modern signs (e.g. the shopping mall), and symbols of the "traditional" (e.g. rural representations, nature). As the name "New Village" implies, we feel that there is an unresolved mingling of the modern with the traditional, which does not fall into the usual dichotomies of modernity versus tradition, the urban and the rural—a central paradox (and source of creative potential) of Malaysian existence today. In other words, the new is in the village, the village in the new. Alienation persists, regardless of its location and form; history, too, reaches out to today's moment, regardless of our perception of its effects.

Fanon wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*, "Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity." The writer, theorist, and artist understand this existential question, and it is their attunement to the drift of Malaysia today that drives a publication like New Village. If there is something new to be said around here, it will be found in the opacities of reflection and expression, away from the usual headline-grabbing rhetoric and partisan confrontation, which passes for cultural discussion here.

Adele Minke

The New Year's End

by Catalina Rembuyan



Photo by Hanif Maidin

On Saturday morning, when Minerva had been planning to wake at eight but woke at nine instead, she turned to her alarm clock and realized that it had stopped around midnight. She got up, washed her face and brushed her teeth, prepared breakfast and threw her laundry into the washing machine. After that she checked the time by switching on her computer. It was ten. If she hurried she would be able to get to the mall before the cars rushed in and the parking lot became full. She decided to take her time. She read a few chapters from a book. She browsed Youtube and Facebook. After this she checked the time again, and this time it was noon. It was too late for her to go the shopping mall. There would be too many people, too many vehicles, all of them jostling for the sparse number of vacant parking lots. She waited until it was evening before she decided to go shopping for a new alarm clock.

On the way to the shopping mall Minerva began to think about the books that she had been reading. She had read several acts of Death of a Salesman and several more of The Crucible. Reading Arthur Miller was an activity that emerged as a consequence of her recent interest in Marilyn Monroe. How stunning Marilyn Monroe always looked like in those old movies: her eyes were full of spark and life. It was so strange and so sad that someone so beautiful could suddenly die. Arthur Miller was all about people dying. Just like in Death of a Salesman, with that guy—the father, what's his name—Willy, Billy. It was very unfortunate and so pointless, what he had done in the end. But she understood. She preferred Death of a Salesman over The Crucible. Not many will ever find the world stacked against them in symbolic forms of oppressive American government policies, set to trial by judges working within a theocratic state who accused them of witchcraft, but most have to or will end up spending their whole lives paying for houses.

Yesterday night, her friends celebrated the end of the year by answering a questionnaire that had been going around as a meme. What were the questions again—what did you do last year? What did you wish you had done? What did you wish you had done different? What have you never done before? What would you do again? Some had visited another country, someone had experienced giving

birth to a child, someone else had got a new job. Someone had children, some others knew someone who died, another person had paid off his credit cards, and two others made clearing them off a resolution for the following year. Inspired, Minerva had sat down and started to write her own overview and realized that she could sum up her life lived in the past year in a single sentence: there was not a day when she went to work without a sense of dread.

Why? Why the dread? She had been, as a child, intelligent. She had presided over clubs, chaired organizations, and won competitions. Her academic folder was rich with certificates: for championships, for public exams done well, for impressive violin performances. This present state that she was living in was an unprecedented future for the person that she was then. She was made for great things. She recollected the pride and the certainty she had when she left college: the photos taken with her college mates showed young women with big smiles and faces full of joy, each of them happy that they were going to be humans that mattered, stepping forth. Then she remembered Mr. Goh's face, how his sneering eyes would peer through his dark-rimmed glasses as they glazed over her work while she sat hunched before him, as she tried to hide herself behind the computer monitor.

Mr. Goh, Noreen, and Kamal—these were the names to the faces who judged her, occasionally acknowledged her, but largely looked upon her as a utility. She felt like a plastic spoon: made of material that would outlast generations and shaped into an object designed to be disposable. Mr. Goh with his crater-covered moon-face, dark rimmed glasses, Noreen with blue blazer slung over her kebaya and her red tudung (or was it yellow? blue? green? brownish perhaps?) and Kamal, who seemed to come to work wearing the same shirt every day, who was rather short or perhaps rather tall (Minerva could not quite remember) and who spoke with an annoying, yes-yes-I-understand tone that was supposed to be gentle but only sounded grating. All of them saw her as a number and a tool and not a human being. But she could not leave her work because she needed the money. She had a student loan to pay and the many hours that she spent in her office among people she disliked was simply a way of earning the loan's erasure. She

was choked with dread, desperation, and debt and she could admit none of this. None of this was permissible in adults. It was permissible for adolescents to whine about the aimlessness of life; as an adult she must get up and get along. She was effective and efficient. She was getting everything done.

Where were the alarm clocks? (She had parked her car. She had acquired a ticket. She had checked her vehicle to make sure that she had no belongings in it, and then locked it. She was getting things done.) The shopping malls were full of people. It was the end of the year, the next day was the New Year and the mall was full of people and many of them were clumped into families. Old and young, men and women, girl and boy, dark-skinned and fair-skinned, tall and short. Groups of four or five or three milled and mulled about. So many people! But she just wanted an alarm clock. It was the end of the year, and because New Year's Day fell on a Sunday she would have Monday off. So of course the shopping malls would be full of people, of all different skin types and colours and heights and weights, their voices uttering many languages all disappearing into a kind of incoherent and steady hum. But on Tuesday she would have to return to work again and she did not want to be late. There were many people who brought their children along and there were so many children walking around her that she had to watch her feet. She had decided to go shopping in the evening thinking that there would be fewer people around, but now the mall was going to close and no one seemed to be leaving. A long row of people were still lining up at the cashiers and beyond them she could see a slightly longer row of people lining up to purchase three-layered coffee with gelatinous bubbles (it was the latest trend, the newest sweet addiction). She still could not find her clock.

Still, the lights were very bright, and she liked this; she felt that if she could stop time she would pick this moment, and she would be forever shopping here, with all these people. Such merriment, so pleasant to imagine that life could always be this way: a few things desired and a few things to tempt you, and all of them always within reach. And plenty of money to get a few things one wanted. It was a moment as beautiful as a photograph for a fashion advertisement in a magazine.

She remembered Mr. Goh's face: big and moon-faced, lips pursed in judgment. She remembered Noreen's cackles, each of them like arrows that were thrown at her from directions as random as her unfunny jokes. And Kamal, kind Kamal, who listened to people and smiled and understood nothing.

In her youth she was not frightened of these things. Minerva would jump on a train with a one-way ticket and hop from one track to another, ride on buses that went anywhere, and walk to places she had never been to. The city, with all its dangerous corners and alleys full of unspeakable things, was a temple of sensations, a sanctuary of stimulation and delight. In daylight, when dust and smog covered the city, Minerva would join the throng of people pouring into its heart in the trains and the roads that functioned like vessels, like rivers; at night the roads were full of light, lit bright by headlights, as if they were currents slowly bearing lights down a stream. In the daylight and on the trains and buses there would be the crushing crowd from the mornings and evenings, full of people dressed in dress suits and staring into space. There were those in t-shirts, in jeans, in sandals and with backpacks slung across their shoulders. Buses boasted distractions in the form of flat-screen television that looped the same advertisements over and over. There was so much smog. There was so much colour. Signboards and advertisements in yellow, green, purple blared for attention. Minerva had darted in and out of the city in taxis and buses and trains, breathing, taking in every possible sensation. The city was a page of a love letter unfolding, full of surprise and endearments; the city was a feisty lover, seemingly unlikeable and harsh yet always the source of wonder and desire. It could also be a dangerous place. It was a city of old buildings and young rebels, of thieves and scoundrels, of the wealthy and the poor, and this whole city was surrounded by a donut of suburban neighbourhoods, sedate and dull.

Back then Minerva had been brave. She had thought that the worst possible thing to happen was death. What was death if not the ceasing of thought and sensation? The muscles stopped, the eyes darken from failing to register sunlight, sounds cease, and darkness falls. Nerve, brain, heart and body terminate operations.

She learned later that life did not let one go after one's passing. It clung on, sticking to the person in the form of numbers and countable things. It cost this much for a birth, with options for varying methods of delivery; that much for an education, a life; this much for the saving of your life from illness; that much for a wedding, and this much for death. Oh, but who would pay for the last? Not her, because she would not be around, but it would be done still, and all done in her name. So, thought Minerva, even after you have gone the numbers cling and become the cause of mouths to curse you.

The alarm clock that Minerva settled for was a small, red square object that gave a shrill beep. As the shutters of the shopping outlet were drawn and a voice instructing customers to make their last purchase played on the PA system, Minerva made her payment and left. Then she went to the parking lot. There she noticed that another line had developed: cars were now lining up to get out of the building, slowly making their way out of the only exit from the floor.

She could back her car up, get out of her lot, and join the jam as each car inched its way past the ticket reading machine. She could wait. She decided to wait. She switched on the radio and stared into space. Across her was an office block, all its windows were dark except for a few floors. These were kept bright.

Minerva sat in her car and watched the fluorescent lights in the office block across from the shopping complex parking lot. Across her and in the office block, straight within her line of view, was an entire floor lit up by fluorescent lights, with no one on it except for a solitary office cleaner who walked up and down the cubicle aisles. During the day, under the bright sunlight, this was a place where men and women went to war by sitting in their chairs and staring at computer screens. Hearts would pump as fingers typed and numbers rose and fell. People became fat in their seats. But at night the empty office floor, lit up with all its lights, was as silent as an artifact. Like a scene from after the apocalypse or a Hollywood movie, this place where people poured the time of their lives into—typing, cursing, having office lunches and throwing wads of paper into wastepaper baskets—looked serene and beautiful.

She leaned back in her seat and looked at the traffic jam behind her in her rear-view mirror while popular music played on the radio. It is ignorance to claim that popular music of the day is naive, apathetic, hedonistic, and empty. She knew this; in the many hours she had spent commuting she had become an unwitting and captive student of popular culture and her car was her classroom. The sense of fatalism in popular music was thick. It coated songs the way rot coated the paintings of overripe fruit in old paintings with hidden skulls.

Behind her were rows and rows of cars, all of them trying to get out of the parking lot at the same time, all of them inching and pushing their way towards the exit where the automatic gate slowly let the cars out from the building, one by one by one. In her car, listening to songs about partying until the end of the world, Minerva waited for the time to pass.

Working in the Selangor State Government

by Tricia Yeoh



A film still of the Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Building from Tricia Yeoh's 2012 short film "Rights of the Dead" (credit: Malek Abdullah)

I was working in a public policy think tank when the "political tsunami" of March 2008 took place. I remember the exhilaration I felt as I sat at a mamak table in SS2 on the night the results were announced. Having grown up in Selangor, especially Petaling Jaya, I was excited by the possibility that Barisan Nasional could have been defeated in my very own state.

Because so many of those working in the activist and civil society circles had been absorbed into the political system, by being either elected themselves or appointed as new aides, existing civil society groups had to re-group. My organisation, the ASLI Centre for Public Policy Studies,

began engaging with the coalition of good governance that worked directly with the Selangor government on initiatives like the Freedom of Information Enactment and the formation of the Ombudsman.

I remember visiting the Selangor government building for the first time during these meetings and thinking to myself this building looks like a spaceship. What one would imagine "futuristic" means, but a 1980s version of "futuristic." Large and looming, grey and bold, it also reminded me of the Communist buildings in Hanoi. Less than a year later, this building would be my very own office.

I received a call from Nik Nazmi, then political secretary to the Selangor Menteri Besar, inviting me to join Selangor to boost the research and policy capabilities of the state. I declined the offer and several others, but after a chat with my good friend Ong Kian Ming, I was finally persuaded to take the leap.

It was a good decision. I had been working on the fringes of policymaking, never having the experience to see how things work. This was a prime opportunity for me to be close to the decision-makers, and work for change from the inside. If I was serious about my commitment to this life's vocation, I could not miss this.

Of course I never went in with blinkers on. I realized from the start that there would be severe limitations to what could be done. I tempered my enthusiasm and passion with the thought that there would be teething issues within the political parties of PKR, DAP and PAS (as well as between them). I told myself that there would be great challenges coming from the opposing side. I knew I was entering a very bureaucratic government. And although I had set myself up to be challenged, I could not have imagined how frustrating it would be.

As a Research Officer in the Menteri Besar's Office, I was in charge of research and policy matters. Eventually, I was also in charge of certain projects specially parked under his leadership.

One of the major problems we faced was the civil service. Civil servants had to adapt to working for a new government altogether. We went through a fiasco where the state government's nomination for state secretary was not eventually selected. The appointment was made without the agreement of the

Selangor Menteri Besar, but it was theoretically legal because it falls under the jurisdiction of a federal body, the Public Service Department.

Because appointments and promotions of civil servants come under the federal government, it was difficult to get the co-operation of those higher up in service. They would continue to interact with the previous state officials, and possibly have favors to pay back that were owed from before.

There were documents being leaked out from within the state government. We knew this because pieces of information would get leaked out onto websites, and we would scratch our heads to figure out where the leak could have come from. It would have been impossible to constantly monitor photocopiers, fax machines, or even our dispatch boys from all 21 levels of the state building, in addition to the other building complexes. This was the tense environment under which we were operating.

It intruded into the work that we were doing. For instance, some people had installed a hidden camera in the Menteri Besar's Office. It was facing the opposite side of his desk, which meant it recorded anyone coming in to see him. Tan Sri Khalid was in a meeting with an officer when they heard a loud beeping noise. They searched high and low for where the sound was coming from.

They eventually traced the sound to behind the window curtains. The camera had run out of batteries, which is why it beeped. We checked the memory card, and lo and behold, very scandalous videos emerged of the Menteri Besar having briefings with his officers. A video of me had been captured where I have an arm sling (having broken my collar bone as a result of reckless mountain biking). My arm sling helped us identify the exact days on which the recordings were done. At least I got injured for a good cause.

We had to be careful with our documents. We had to lock our computers, our doors when we left. We had to make sure there were no bugs in the room. We operated as if the office phone and official emails were being monitored. We functioned as though it was a war zone. And in a sense it was. I was depicted as a biased "Chinese" Research Officer who tears apart Malay interests, in a book disparaging Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim that was circulated during

the Hulu Selangor by-election.

Because our government is so centralized, because the bulk of the key decision-making takes place at the federal government level, it was difficult to make a difference especially in key areas like traffic jams, public transport, health, education and poverty. A member of parliament from the South African opposition who visited our office remarked how little control our state government actually have. They had just gained control of a state themselves, but they had decision-making powers over health and education. Without control, we could not really prove that we were making a difference as a new government.

For example, the Federal Government physically removed the State Development Office from our State government premises, and to this day it continues to receive funding from the Prime Minister's Office, but the body doesn't give any information about its work to the Selangor government. We also heard of talk of stopping funds to projects within the Pakatan Rakyat states. This was ridiculous, it would be cutting the nose to spite the face. Selangor, Penang, Perak, Kedah and Kelantan being stripped of additional funds just because they were held by the opposition—this was the reality we had to work with.

There was the media battle. Press conferences were challenging, because Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian would take statements out of context. We were under pressure from some quarters to stop certain newspapers from attending the state press conferences.

A poorly administered system of public utilities was also inherited by the Pakatan Rakyat. Saddled with problems such as local councils having poorly managed budgets, an unsustainable solid waste management system, and so on, the new state and local governments would have to strive to correct these past errors—sometimes to their own detriment.

I was personally involved in having to negotiate with stubborn water concession companies Syabas, Puncak Niaga, and others. For two years the talks went back and forth. The experience of sitting in long meetings with the federal government ministry in charge of this was probably the toughest negotiation of all. I had to learn the art of being extremely polite (if not, they wouldn't listen at all) while saying something that

clearly stated Selangor's position.

I worked in the state government for two and a half years. The state government managed to push through the FOI enactment, formed a body to promote orang asli land rights, gave land titles to those who for decades had only temporary occupancy licences. But there is much more that I feel I could have done in my position if there had not been so many obstacles.

One thing is clear. Sitting on the outside, writing policy papers, statements and articles is comfortable and cushy. But being in there helped me realize how difficult it is to push through reforms. It's all in the process of things—having to manage difficult relationships with the civil service, political parties and their members, the opposition, the media, and so on. After my stint there, I now realize how tough it is for Najib Razak or any Prime Minister of Malaysia to agitate for reform within their own government—which is much, much larger in size.

I have of course benefitted from this exercise. My Malay has improved tremendously since all meetings are conducted in Malay. I have a deeper respect for civil servants. Most of them simply want to do their jobs well, and they are earnest in wanting to learn. Many are shy to speak English and all they need is a bit of encouragement. In fact, I've fostered very good friendships with a few of them, and I still keep in touch with them to this day.

I've learnt how to be more realistic about my demands of government and political parties. I've learnt that Malaysia is really a plural society, which requires a fine balancing act between different stakeholders. That sometimes you cannot satisfy everyone and one must make the best and wisest decision possible given the circumstances.

At a government function, a local council officer asked Member of Parliament Dr. Dzulkefly Ahmad a question. "Sir," he said, "what should I do if I receive different instructions from Putrajaya and different instructions from the state government?" The answer from Dr. Dzul was this: "Do the right thing."

Heart-of-the-City

by Zedeck Siew

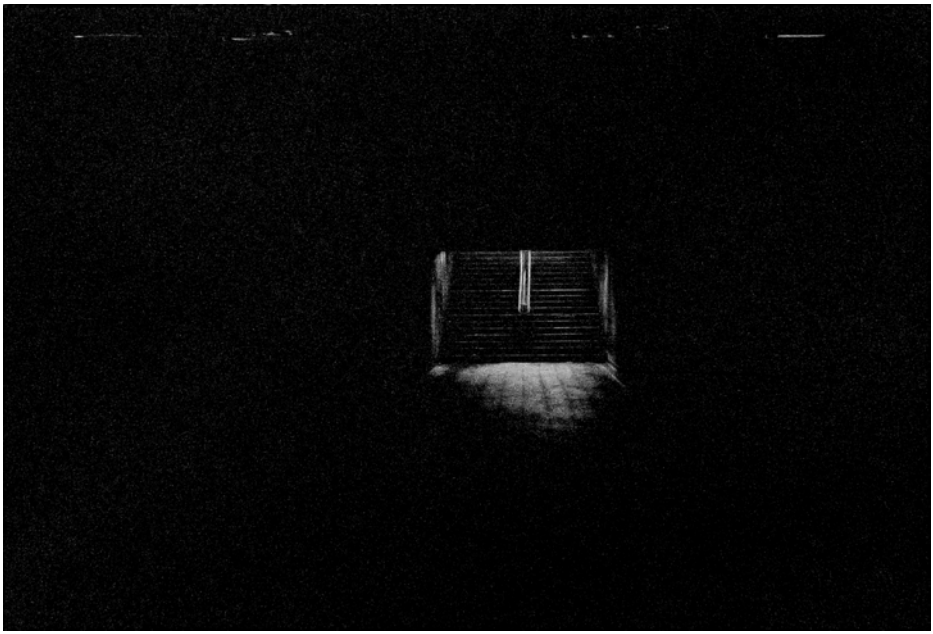


Photo by Andrew T. Crum

She jumped when she saw a shadow on the wall, but it was the shadow of her own head. "Micky, stop waving your light around!" she whispered. She was iffy about their assignment from the get-go, and being iffy made her jumpy.

Sure, it'd looked pretty straightforward in Powerpoint:

1. Disguised as contracted electricians, enter Cityview Mall via Loading Bay C.
2. Present employee cards at Security Checkpoints 1 and 2.
3. Descend to B3 and move north along the East Maintenance Corridor.
4. Break into electrical riser mains.
5. Remove Heart-of-the-City.
6. Extract through B2 Car Park via cargo van.

Duration: 30 minutes. Low chance of direct confrontation. Sidearms optional.

It'd looked like a straightfor-

ward corporate acquisitions job. Then again, anything in Powerpoint looked straightforward. She had insisted that they come armed. The occult-ish assignments always made her wary, and in this case, stealing a Heart—well, Hearts—was very, very occult.

They'd found it attached to the trunk cables, a dangling bunch of blood-filled muscle beating a quintuple-note beat—its veins growing out of the electrical wiring and its arteries growing back in.

They got to cutting it out: carefully, carefully.

A Heart-of-the-City was a delicate thing. It was difficult to make, very expensive, and essential for developers. You could build a mall without one, sure—but without a Heart, whatever you built would never be a centre of attention, like a KLCC or a 1Utama.

As they worked, they sweated. The Heart sweated. "Ew," Roshan said, his scalpel and his gloves covered in blood. "Ew" was the right word.

To make a Heart, you needed a famous shaman, the soul of a hantu raya, and the live hearts of five young girls.

The shaman you needed to work the spell. You needed the ghost as a binding agent, so that the magic took and the pastiche organ grew properly. The girls you had to abduct from a public place.

She'd been given photographs of this Heart's children: six-year-old Nuri, taken at a park playground in Shah Alam; Nadira in her little pink headscarf, walking home from school; the Song sisters, snatched in a Cheras night market; Nalini, led out of a MidValley boutique by a stranger, gone by the time her mother had come out of the dressing room.

She remembered those five in the news. That was what you wanted: the uproar, the manhunts—the interest. You put all that into the Heart, and the Heart pumped it into your shopping centre.

Then the papers forgot the missing girls and got excited about Cityview Mall.

"Hurry up," she said.

"Sorry boss," Roshan said. "All this blood's making it difficult to see. Come on, Micky, keep your light steady. Almost got it."

This assignment was because her company had decided that, rather than go through the fuss of

making one, it was easier to steal someone else's. Cheaper and arguably less immoral.

But the way the assignment was going—it was too easy. Security Checkpoint 1 had waved them through without checking their cards. No one manned Security Checkpoint 2.

After she saw that, she started feeling really worried. If this thing was so valuable, why wasn't it being guarded better?

When Roshan severed the last artery there was an explosion and a shower of sparks. Moments later she was picking herself off the floor. There was smoke in the air, and the smell of blood and fried flesh.

She shone her flashlight at Micky, who was slapping Roshan's face. His skin was badly burned.

Boobytrapped.

However jumpy she was, she was still a professional. Her priority was the Heart, so the first thing she did was scoop the thing up and stuff it into her duffel bag.

Then did she look at Roshan again. His skin was bleeding some sort of liquid substance. It looked like blood, but it was black. It was pooling and spreading rapidly. It had splattered all over Micky; the stuff was all over her hands, too.

"Leave him," she told Micky, dragging him by an arm. "Leave him! We have to go."

The explosion had knocked out the power; the East Maintenance Corridor was pitch black. They ran, flashlights flailing, footsteps echoing gunshot-loud. They stumbled up the steps. Out of the stairwell, in the B2 corridor they caught their breath.

She panted. "Hang on," she said.

She checked her duffel bag. Micky waited around the corner, his pistol and light shaking at the fire door through which they'd come.

In her bag the Heart was still beating though it was a feeble beat—two of the crimson fruit in that grotesque bunch had burst open. How much use the company would get out of it now she wasn't sure.

Someone snarled.

"Ah, shit!" Micky said, falling over. His gun barked.

She put a light on him. He was on the floor. Two security guards were holding him down; they were frothing at the mouth, and they were licking the Heart's black blood off of Micky's legs. One of them looked up at her, wild-eyed crazy.

"Help me!" Micky said.

She ran. Micky was not a priority. She ran through the corridor and out into the car park, where the van was waiting for her.

There were more people chasing her now—and not just the security guards, but shoppers. She heard them, grunting and growling: men and women who dropped their plastic bags and came after her, blind in the dark but drawn to the smell of blood and the Heart's spellbinding beat.

Melancholia

by Adele Minke



Photo by Andrew T. Crum

What they did not understand was how this and that building were related to one another. Against the backdrop of brick walls and dilapidated signs they sat alone, under the slowly circulating fan.

They were part of a larger contingent, now disappeared. A brief, violent shower had driven them into the kopitiam for refuge. It was endlessly brief, the rain—an outpouring known as the monsoon, which dealt in flashes of unpredictability. It emptied the streets of their usual passersby. They had scattered into the various establishments, of drink or food or goods.

This meant, too, that business was a series of spikes and falls; the kopitiam owner was used to this. An assortment of customers, each bearing the mark of their daily routine, had flooded the place; a

conjunction of business suits and fanny packs and school uniforms. For a short period the shop was filled with a mishmash of characters, whose origins were unknown. Yet they had remained seated as the others left, for home or otherwise.

It was not really a matter of them finding their way there. Their direction was set by these tropical showers. Given what was happening, thinking was a distraction. It made more sense to follow one's feet in practice—to discover the patterns that occurred as they were created, the steps visible through their flooding by water. Such a movement, defined by rain, happened everyday. The rain came down, hard, almost everyday.

The air smelled of trash, of stuck refuse. Water congealing in the black, plastic bags that wrapped the waste of lives on remote. In the concrete housing they did not have a choice—they threw things out just as they ate them. The elaborate habits of life escaped them. They were they because of what they were.

If this meant that the characters making their way to the coffee shop had their own stories (that could not be told) so be it. Let us focus on the two. Their lives had an elaborate sheen that reminded one of film gauze—the strip that distinguishes fact from reality, determined its truth. The existence of such a line made their lives one of endless fascination—their making as crucial as existing.

The fan kept on spinning, slowly. He said:

—I was reading Joyce the other day.

—Which one?

—The one where the boy becomes a man, or tries to become one, and wants to create something in his soul.

—The one with the artist is it?

—The one where the boy becomes a man. He said this with a slight ironic take, the lines visible on his creviced face.

—Why do you care so much? Just one of those boy-becoming-man stories. Masculinist fantasy. You think this place not man enough is it?

The cigarette smoke hovered between them, forming an opaque barrier that admitted neither. Rain continued to pour outside, interspersed by the staccato bursts of lightning and thunder. Amid the downpour, he continued:

—It's not that I care. I can't help but care. When was the last time you heard someone "forge in

the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race?" At your H.R. workplace, your advertising home?

Apart from this minor disagreement, they got along fairly well. In another of those encounters forced by rain, he had brought her home to the flat-screen TV and Ikea furniture. They had sat cross-legged on the couch, staring into the blank space that was his undecorated wall.

It was difficult to talk. The coffee percolated in the apartment space, inundating the gap between them with the faint sounds of bubbles condensing and being pierced. The conversation—it wasn't the right day to have it. Difficult to exchange what was on their minds, except the understanding that one was speaking to another in the back of one's mind. This escaped neither of them.

Instead of having it out as couples usually did, they kept it cool, quiet, the surface smooth like the unvarnished metal of his kitchen table. It wasn't easy to tell if this was deliberate or not—they had fallen into a routine of compromise, comfortable for the both of them. Neither of them believed in the old order to share their lives fully—they were happy to just make a fair connection, which did not require too much. Drifting as spirits in the stream of onrushing life; this was the effortless relation they sought from one another; this was what they dreamt about on their own, in their respective spots on his bed.

The problem did not arise at all in their usual, lazy days of being together; they made it out okay at the end of the day. It was as if this arrangement precluded the notion of sadness; it simply evaporated in the midst of the hazy tropical weather.

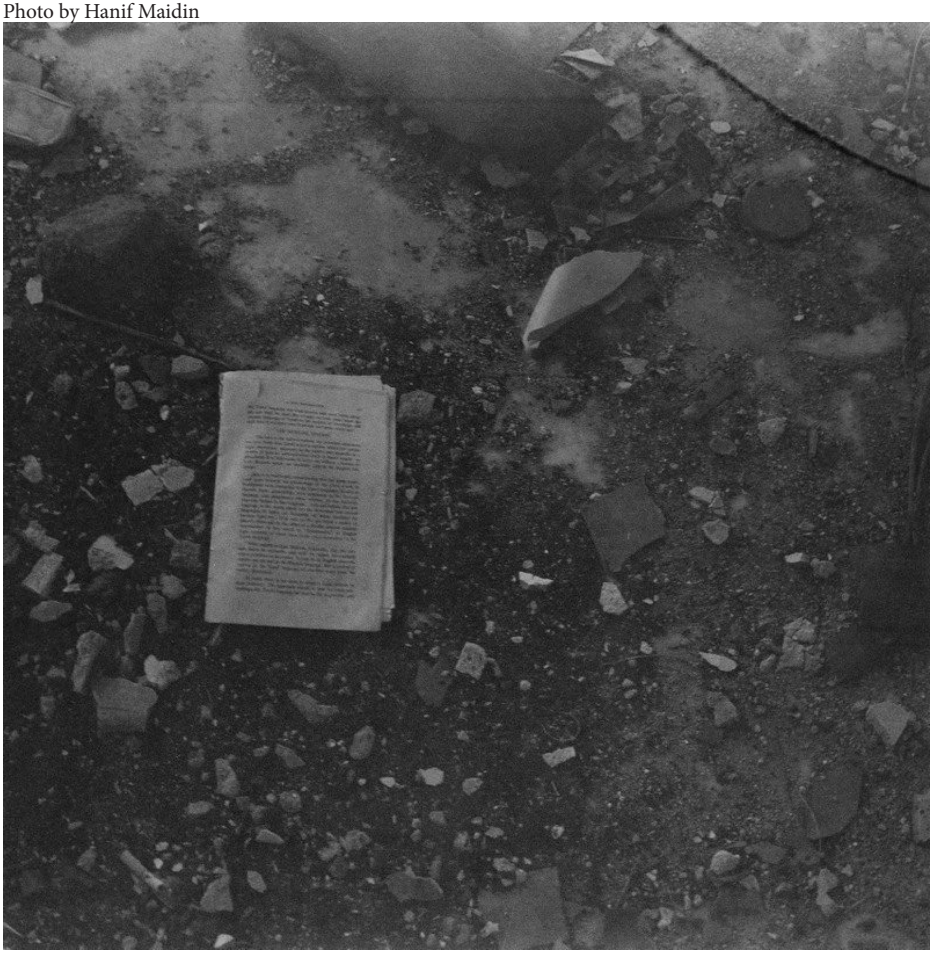
Would such an arrangement last? For the purposes of this story, it clearly could not, but perhaps there was a space outside of the text, that took this premise and found some form of life upon it, unclear but intelligible, nonetheless.

One day this strange relation came to a head; no longer could the story be deferred. Even as time went on without missing a beat, they knew deep in their hearts that the facts of life were about to interfere with this relationship. They did not converse much as usual, but the silence at the dinner

table no longer served as a source of mutual comfort. He was beginning to dislike the habitual making of rendang, the routine steaming of jasmine rice. It was as if the aroma of food, promiscuous in its mingling with other smells, now cast a cloud over their heads.

No one could have predicted how it began. He found himself in the shopping mall, staring at the TV screens that contained their own narratives, usually of sports or scantily-clad females. This was supposed to showcase the high-fidelity nature of those products; he was attracted to its kitschy uselessness, its lack of resemblance to anything called life. They apparently sold the viewer a guarantee of the sound and fury of life, but he did not grasp its

Photo by Hanif Maidin



dramatic interplay, not through the screen in a glass shelve. All he felt was this intense need to be part of the screen. He wanted to enter its flatly defined world.

Another day would go by and he would be there, standing in front of the reflected lighting. What was he looking for, in these images that moved by themselves, was seen by none, passed by by the never-ending streams of customers?

It got to the point that he did not go home. She who did not really exist for him now vanished completely, the ghost of a relation far away. Waiting for the bus back, her life flashed past her sight as if some foreign entity—she did not know who she was, much less him. Her understanding of the situation wavered with each of these bus rides: it was the stranger's fault, it was her position in the seat. She played a little game by herself in the backseat of the bus—red shirt meant yes, blue meant no; other colours meant ambiguous signals, impossible-to-understand signs. Still, nothing stopped her from not taking the bus to his empty apartment; perhaps this meant that she was somehow in love.

He looked at the screen for a moment more, then decided to move inwards, to the cinema. It was screening a faded Chinese film—he wasn't even sure what the characters meant on the advertising board, but decided that it was worth a watch anyway. And besides, there were always Malay subtitles that one could reference in times of need; he still remembered enough to understand words when they appeared.

The ticket counter was lined with people, mostly students on their break from school. It was Saturday. Instead of the plain uniform clothes that they were required to wear, they were dressed in a multitude of colours and styles—logoed t-shirts, short shorts, thin cardigans and the like. He used to dwell here, too, as a student; in fact, his first kiss had probably occurred somewhere here in line, surreptitiously. (This was important to avoid the stares that this gesture would inevitably invite.) It was all very playful back then: there was always the sense that him and her were just a temporary construct, despite the multiple declarations to the contrary. After all, no one really married his high school sweetheart, did one not?

He was waved at to make a

purchase. A credit card swipe later and the Indian attendant handed him his ticket to the show, smiling in the process. He made his way past the crowd that was between him and the entrance, showed his paper ticket to the other two attendants stationed there, who promptly tore the stub, and let him through with a courteous *enjoy the show*. Some escalators and popcorn and drink stands (more people) intervened before he finally entered the dark theatre room, and stumbled his way to his middle-row seat, all the while avoiding the mass of legs that had scattered themselves around the seats.

His seat felt cold. At the same time it was reasonably comfortable, and the darkness enveloping him quickly alighted with the advertisements now on screen. They flashed past with the intention of persuasion, though he never understood why the jingles were necessary. *For everything else... there's Mastercard*, one said, *enjoy responsibly*, the other noted. These were admirable moral injunctions, but why did they always involve smiling women and happy men in various configurations? The screen pulsed with life-as-it-should-be, rendering his own an imperfect copy. He definitely belonged in there, with the crowd-as-it-should-be. And the movie hadn't even started yet.

The lights dimmed even more, signalling the beginning of the film. Credits rolled as the image of a hurtling man with sticks jumped out of nowhere, and a musical interlude of the old kind started playing. An intertitle screened with the words "A Proudly Malaysian Production ©" subtitled, accompanied by a pop tune of the garden variety. It seemed that the movie was aiming for youthful energy, in spite of its nostalgic beginnings—it was actually a kung-fu comedy, the type that had been perfected by the Hong Kong industry.

The seat next to him was empty. It reminded him of the days he would play truant, and escape to the cineplex alone, or with a female classmate. Usually he was alone. The few times when he had gone to see a film with someone else, he had found himself distracted by the details of her hair, the dense layering that went into making that impossibly perfect coiffure. Another time, he had noticed the softness of her pale neck, how it lay hidden under layers of hair—a kind of mystery,

which attracted his reaching out to touch. Of course, he had been too scared back then to do anything as bold as that; unlike in the movies, where the male character usually discovered a way or two to induce kisses from the female character, he could only sit back and watch, as the film unrolled, its glow playing dimly on her nape...

Maybe he should have come with her, he caught himself thinking. And realized, as the men on screen crossed swords in exaggerated ways, that he hadn't been home for awhile. They rolled around like beetles, undone by the appearance of an unannounced character, who possessed some strange emanating power. *He hadn't been back since...* he couldn't even remember, *since he started going to the mall after work, or was it to work after mall?* There was a difference, maybe, and he had suddenly lost interest in the movie, even as a series of special effects erupted, played themselves out on-screen. Major explosions caused the beetles to be ejected, as if they were paper bags. He needed to pee. He groped his way to the rear exit through the dark mass of bodies, as a string of obscenities was hurled on screen, *diuleila*, *diuleila*, echoing in his head as he left the room, never to return.

If they had met at the coffee shop again it was entirely a coincidence. It was an unplanned meeting. They were spotted sitting across from one another, perhaps linking hands, perhaps not. It could have been them, or it could have been any of the countless other couples who were there at any given moment—there was no way to tell.

Yet insignificant as this was in the larger scheme of things, it meant the world to her. She caught a glimpse of his silent entrance, walking in as if stunned by the sunlight in his eyes. He had on his five-day-old Zara shirt, apparently unwashed, stained by cigarette ash from his chain smoking. Surely, he would recognize her...

He did not seem to notice anyone. Oddly mechanical, his gait resembled someone who had forgotten how to walk. It was as if his disappearance was a disappearance from the world—the kind that disrupted even the most basic functions necessary in order to live. Impossible, one might say—but to the viewer this was his character, this was (or would become) a habit. He himself could

not know this yet, of course. But his appearance perhaps hinted at something more.

Herself unwilling to believe her eyes, her first instinct was to avert his glance. She looked down into her ice-cold latte, tracking its swirl in an attempt to distract herself. The bubbles were green and collided, dissipated with each passing moment, each minor stir. They had almost taken on a life of their own. Without lifting her eyes, she spied his movement.

Nothing really happened. But his wandering was also directed at something. She could feel, sometimes, that she was nothing more than a pawn in his life, a little something that appeared and disappeared, like the cigarette smoke that clouded his eyes. If it were necessary to give this a name—they were *just friends*, with the occasional love-making. At least that was what they had agreed upon via tacit consent. It was not really something they had discussed, but what was there to discuss anyway?

The strange sensation in her spine tingled again. It was familiar, and unfamiliar at the same time. It was like one of those Disney movies you caught on TV—they made sense to you intuitively, yet you didn't fully understand them anymore. Her story had ended up in the bus going nowhere, the same concluded journey that led to the unanswered buzzer and to this spot, Old Town White Coffee. They must have known her by now.

She distinctly remembered coming here before; she distinctly remembered him. These were the conditions of their meeting—this was all their meetings were and would be about. When it happened it happened as naturally as it could be, like all the other times the simple greeting and nonchalant half-hug that said *nothing is wrong, nothing will ever change*... and yet this time there was something different about his disappearance. Looking worse for wear. Both of them spoke in ways that could only be described as cold, from a distance, but between them the air crackled with indifference, the impossibility of feeling. Each word was substituted for the next, as a cold shadow that hung in time, without resolution. But she knew what she was saying—*she thought he looked worse, he had disappeared for a long time*...

What now, why now? He was not saying what she wanted to hear, the occasion to do so was slipping away. She felt uncomfort-

able in her Couture dress, her Vincci heels that bunched her feet together. He was carrying a latte of his own, and took random sips to divert the talk—looking as if he were saying something, but nothing registered in her mind.

Go away, she heard herself utter, the words escaping weakly, like from a dying man's lips. *I never want to see you again*, *never again*, surprising herself with her boldness. It came as a minor shock to him, she could see, his eyes twitching with disbelief, at the words that had just been said. The air-conditioning suddenly felt very loud. All he could do was to continue sipping his latte, maintaining a frozen poise.

They stood for a moment, neither of them knowing how to respond. Was that what was on her mind all this while? She didn't really know. Yet she had said it, with a force that made him even more reticent than usual. She hadn't wanted to see such an outcome, but perhaps she hadn't known what she wanted before. An expiry date built into the distance between them. Something like that, anyway. But nothing could be closer and further from the truth—she was regarded by him at the current moment, she wanted nothing. The closer he was, the less she cared for him. She discovered the impossibility of wanting anything at all.

"So I came to this place, after a movie at the mall. I don't think I enjoy movies anymore. Especially not alone. I can't skip forward myself anymore—"

The music was floating around with advertisements as they decided to walk to the entrance. From the back they looked just like any other couple, her with the black tights and heels, him with the unpressed slacks coupled with leather shoes. You would have thought that they related with ease, in spite of the slight jaunt in his step, and her creeping discomfort (from the shoes).

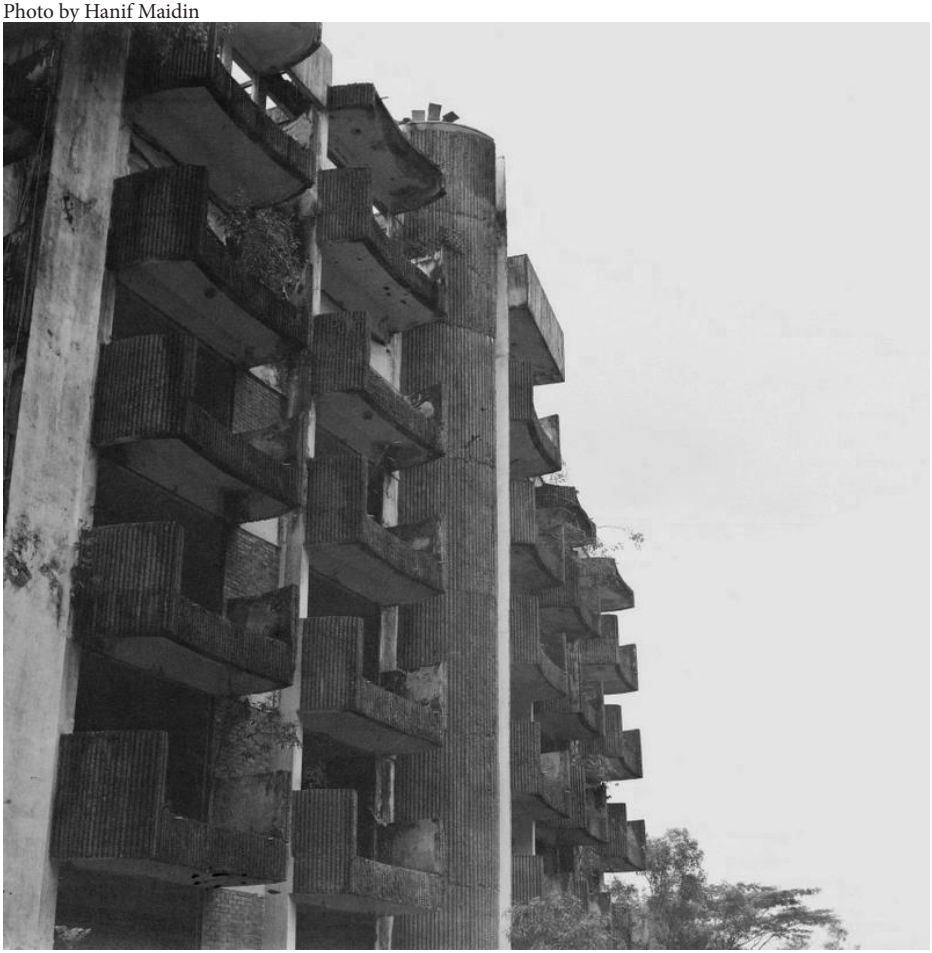
What had they said between themselves, a moment earlier? Such a question was not asked as they passed from shop to shop, the neon lights casting their benign glare on the two of them, rendering them in hazy opaque shapes. The marble flooring reflected their nervous steps as they shuffled aimlessly, discordant with the other

moving figures. Having no answer to the question, there was no place to go, no determined route for them to relinquish. It took a form of willpower for them to continue walking together, but was there any other option?

She didn't really know who he was, just like he didn't really know her. Familiar shops—they were at Midvalley after all—greeted her at every step, returned her to the days when she would enter each in a crowd, her pinafore skirt flaring with the brush of youth. Today she was walking with him, this strange narrative that had no beginning, no end, just a long, punctuated story which went on and on.

They stopped at the ice-cream stand. It was surrounded by youth on show, t-shirts and jeans, short

Photo by Hanif Maidin



skirts. They seemed recognizable, and yet were slightly unrecognizable, the mass of them preoccupied with their screens, nudging one another by the shoulder blades. Young and merely... different. The ice-cream guy was around her age, she guessed, and he handed out the cones with a cheerful manner. The kids moved on and she bought two vanilla cones, just for old time's sake—surely this was a shared memory. But it was a little silly to be standing there with these cones, somewhat naive of their own aged difference; besides, he wasn't saying much, not much anyway.

There was a fake garden that seemed like a more promising place to stop. Filled with rocks and benches, and some plastic greenery, complete with streams and the like, it replicated the natural faithfully. By the bench they posed as if in a TV advertisement. The music filtered out in teeny echoes, the mixdown of the original stereo blaring from the vent above people's heads. They did not choose to do so; it was instinctual, necessary, the product of years of responses. It felt right to them. In having such a response they were hardly alone, but theirs was the coming together of circumstances, which made it impossible to ignore. A pebble landed near her (uncertain of its origin), and took on a significance that made her pick it up to examine it. She flicked it away, the smoothness rebounding off her fingers, but leaving it far beyond their reach.

He turned towards her. With a sudden violence he pulled her towards him, and caressed her lips with his own. It took her by surprise, the sheer improbability of that gesture, but she quickly realized that this was his way of asserting business as usual. She tried to respond but it was difficult, he was stifling her, she had that strange tingle again, it was difficult to breathe. Fingers running down her back, this was the way his passion was expressed, their impossible tautness driving downwards, cold beyond words. Like a presence disembarking, they chose her body as the location. But she was willing, it seemed to him, she was willing for the sake of love.

No one could deny him the conclusion, not least she who was dressed in the uniform of a thousand fantasies. This had happened before, was happening again, and would happen soon thereafter. The passersby stared and gawked and left, those who consented to look

anyway. Most intended nothing, and saw nothing unusual in the interlocked bodies in the garden, their posture the same as the flipping figures in the LRT station. What was shown here for the passersby was simply its faithful replica, its pliant shadow that acted as rigidly as the original. Their gestures had been described by the click of the machine, but who could tell if it was here, or if they had seen it in their everyday routine, just passing through?

She could feel his breath upon her. It was warm. The texture reminded her of a passing wave, going through her in order to get to the other side. Later, when he would no longer hold her in such a manner, she would miss its salty touch, and what it connoted to her. At this moment it was painful. They did not talk about it, but it was true. From the automatic door the cool air wafted out and chilled her exposed thighs. It reached her as a breeze that was unnatural, the product of an imbalance. It did not seem to bother him even as she writhed in the midst of his grasp, an urge to escape, mutely communicated and dissolved by the crushing point of view. The man with no answers. And her body, ascertained with nothing that could become words, nothing that could be said. The question remained, even while she did not think.

"Let's go home," he said, the weight on his shoulders lifting. He did not have a reason for saying this, but it did not feel wrong. He moved his hands to his side. The friction of their contact with her was still evident, but he was not bothered by this. They seemed to have taken on a life of their own—his hands, that is.

She had been waiting to hear him say this, she realized, but now that it was finally out of his mouth, it had taken on a foreign quality to her. How else would it sound, if not as the words belonging to someone else? It was faint to her ears, yet resonated within as if through earphones. She did not understand how this had happened; she knew, however, that she had to act.

It was like a nightmare without a cause. He led her out of the garden, into the carpark, amidst the columns of vehicles, four wheels. Squares of machines which could come to life at any time, with the right configuration. He opened the

door to his BMW with a click. She scooted into the front seat without any feeling, just the sense of an inevitable end. He would drive her to his apartment, using the same route that she took everyday with the working bus. They would pass by the drains, the ramshackle atap houses, and it would lead her to the exact same spot, outside, where looking in, she would see no one. Except he would be next to her this time, behind her, able to open the door for her to enter with him. And she would go in.

Going in, it would all be the same. The dust still settled on his Ikea table, unmopped; the furniture remained the same, a day, a week, a month, a year ago. He was the only inhabitant of his world, the reign of an uninterrupted existence abandoned for the faint disappearances. She could not have imagined that it was untouched since the last time she was there, but this was the way it presented itself to her. In the span of time that he was away, it had been sufficient to dream about its cleanliness instead of him; the arrangement of the place that she had come to call her own, as well. She did this even though it seemed so far away, it did not belong to her. After the rain, the lovely smell that lingered around the windows did not stay for long...

They had enacted this in the bygone days of a bygone era, both of them in the photographs that were scattered across the table, their togetherness captured in the strip of smooth paper, reflecting light. On the sofa once they lay upon one another with the eagerness of young children in love. He put his hand up to block the glance of the camera hole; she held it with her own, pushing it gently away so that her other hand would have a clear snap of them both. The camera had gone off at the moment when it was placed right before both of them, the layers of hands preceding their faces, shuttered at the corner. It was not a great picture, but he had kept it there.

Another day, and who knew what it had meant to him before? It seemed like something that ought to have made them miss one another; she did not even remember the photographs. Slipping her fingers on them, she was struck by the layer of dust on film—a combined texture that gave it an unusual quality. He had disappeared into the kitchen. She wanted to ask about the photos. The hint of something different

was too strong, made her wish for its glossy existence. She wondered if it could be drawn out into the air that she breathed, the impossible confines that described her, the language of an invisible presence...

"I don't read anymore," she heard him say, as he re-entered the living room, and sat down on the sofa. As if she wasn't there. She joined him on the sofa anyway. There, they turned away from one another, each occupying their respective sections. It seemed natural to her now; it was natural to them.

The lights remained on, as the day passed them by.

Being Born

by Shivani Sivagurunathan

It's well known that we are born
Pablo Neruda, "Births"

Larger leaves turn
a piece forward,
the face, nigh
and elliptical,
penultimately empty,
you see,
it almost falls under,
nearly tilts to be always
hungry, and embarrassed
for the need
to slouch and pine for,
and loosen lips,

for a scene of sunlight,
warm with germs,
infection baptizing
the fever, amnesia

—the face's mouth
is a chick-beak,
open, shows the dry
pink within,
asks not for
a parent's find but—

more dots and
space and spare pages,
more lights and twins
and partners

for less than I have limited

under larger leaves
that turn a piece forward,

the face returns into mine,

stuccoed,
expanded,

we look again,

here we are marooned,
around us
fruits, water, insects,

our mouths opening.

Contributors

Andrew T. Crum (photos, pp. 14, 18) is a photographer and artist. He blogs at momentsoftruth.wordpress.com

Jin Hien Lau (comic, back cover) is an animator and illustrator based in Sydney.

Hanif Maidin (photos, pp. 2, 21, 27) is a photographer. See www.lomography.com/homes/hanifmaidin

Adele Minke ("Melancholia," p. 18) is a Ph.D candidate in Comparative Literature and posts at ade-le.tumblr.com.

Catalina Rembuyan ("The New Year's End," p. 2) teaches English literature to teenagers. She is currently working on an anthology of creative writing, slated for a 2013 release.

Zedeck Siew ("Heart-of-the-City," p. 14) has written for Kakiseni, The Nut Graph, and KLue. See zedecksiew.tumblr.com

Shivani Sivagurunathan's ("Being Born," p. 32) forthcoming collection of poems *Diorama* will be released later this year.

Tan Ray Tat (illustration, front cover) is the creator of Carbon Marrow comics. See carbonmarrow.blogspot.com

Tricia Yeoh's ("Working in the Selangor State Government," p. 9) book *States of Reform: Governing Selangor and Penang* is in stores now. Her documentary "Rights of the Dead" will premiere at the Freedom Film Fest 2012.

THE MOST DISTINCTIVE MEMORIES I HAVE OF MY ESL DAYS WAS TIME SPENT WITH THIS OBLIVIOUSLY CONDESCENDING SUBSTITUTE TEACHER



ONE OF THE THINGS SHE LOVES DOING IS TO LET US UNLEASH OUR CREATIVITY BY GIVING THE CLASS (AVERAGE AGE 17-26) STACKS OF A3 DRAWING PAPER AND CRAYONS TO HAVE DOODLE TIME WITH.

