

YEOW KAI CHAI / A Reprieve, or A Sunday Afternoon at the Padang

After Georges Seurat

They feel it, even before they see it coming over the horizon.

For a few hours, the view is clear, offering a glimpse of a vista beyond the marina, although no one can deny the other presence. Three dogs, eight boats and 48 people in a sprezzatura of afternoon bliss. From this vantage point, it is remarkable no one is really looking at anyone else in the eye, despite proximity. Most face sideways, in the direction of the waters, probably drawn in by the shiny, silvery behemoth rising from the other side, a crystal palace reflecting wave after shimmering wave of light . . .

Over here, us, stretched out on the green lawn, individuated so that each dot, each photon, is a single hue. Gradations of green, red and blue refracted off one's glasses, and once in a while, the humidity gets too much. Wipe your brow and those fogged-up progressive lens, and squint. What you can't see can hurt you. Approximately 3,456,000 particles are being sucked up by one's lungs as one speaks. . . . these tiny devils escape the nasal hair. Every few hours, the index rises and falls, its calculation derived from ozone, sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter measuring 10 micrometres or less (PM10). Plot the hourly ups and downs in an interactive graphic, where each incremental change could be tracked with a swipe. In forecasting the movement and spatial diffusion of smoke haze particles, the meteorologist is employing intricate mathematical algorithms, in order to predict the downwind concentration of haze particles from numerous sources, among which are folk eking out a livelihood on the land across the sea, slashing and burning to make way for the next harvest. Such moral introspection is rich, and neither is the one with the sickle absolved from it.

In another time, a queue snakes through the field, around tall angsanas and spruced-up heritage buildings, spilling over stone bridges, carrying flowers and cards, forming a heart map for the passing giant. One could plant oneself as a character in an augmented reality, and move through this *fête galante*, as if right

there, right now, reliving history till eternity. Still, it won't be the same as actually being there in the flesh, at that moment. Close in and each dot, each pore becomes larger. The irregularity is apparent. The outline is jagged, like that of a nimbus, a boil, or a comet; the human slipping out of the realist armature, as the pointillist takes over. Each neuron bristles with love, hate, sweat, pride, immanent beauty, and the price for speaking your mind. Hidden, the mind is ultimately an unpaintable thing. What flits between lobes, these houses with undetected residents? People talk, preen and walk their dogs, but you never quite know who they are inside, do you?

Towards the upper left side are two national servicemen standing side by side, hands locked behind them and buzz cuts covered by jockey caps. Their faces are two discreet daubs of ochre, so much so they look almost identical. Are they on duty, on the lookout for unattended baggage, shifty eyes, any abnormal activity? Or they have just booked out of camp, but . . . where are their female companions, who will absent-mindedly rub their hands over their heads? You beseech the men to move closer, so you could hear something, see something in their eyes, but the moment is permanently frozen. The distance lends the bromance a golden glow, burnished by dust and suspicion.

So stay exactly where you are, you with the walkie-talkie and the single-wire ear-piece with PTT (push-to-talk). What if all this is writ large as a card-changing feat by an army of miniscule elves at a stadium? Placards flip on cue, and the Big Picture can only be discerned from a mile away, after the dust has settled. Magnify the whole thing in 3-D. Raytrace every pixel into a volumetric display of voxels. Construct it using Lego blocks as an MOC ("my own creation"). And the effect would be just as staggering. If not more so, knowing how each part adds up to a texture-mapping polygon engine, a snowpiercer of sorts, seamlessly trudging onward, past the perimeter of one's good taste, past time, past the Old Parliament, past Fort Canning, past the Istana, across the Causeway, and god knows where and when it would all end, just like the scene where Lucy, played by Scarlett Johansson, high on nootropics, eventually vanishes into a spacetime continuum, leaving behind fabric and a gooey, octopean black supercomputer which spreads like

those umbrella-like canopies at Clarke Quay, rising above each and everyone and emitting cool air in an air-conditioned nation. Meanwhile, where is the misty spray

when you need it? You project this thought onto a smartly turned-out woman, who stands right in the middle of your vision. Peering towards her right, she's armed herself with a full-face dark visor as well as a UV-protection compact umbrella (the latter made from a specially treated fabric which reflects most rays, and keeps one cool in the strongest sunlight with a patented vented mesh system allowing the breeze to pass between the upper and lower canopies). She's accompanied by a girl dressed in white; likely her daughter, who stares, slightly perplexed, at another woman seated a stone's throw away, who, yes, looks somewhat like her mother. Even the two women's get-ups are not dissimilar—Those Darth Vader-like plastic visors, the parasols, these tight-fitting dresses. Behind the seated woman is a girl fingering a bunch of tiny flowers; each fatal petal so tiny and indistinguishable they may well be invisible spores, disseminules transported through air to find their next hosts. Is that the purpose of existence? To promulgate, to live long and prosper, to make a dent, however infinitesimal? Who knows. You do? I miss you. You, blessed with perfect hindsight and foresight, sitting pretty in a throne of glory or hanging around the cosmic axis, one moment idly watching Assyrian and Akkadian artifacts being toppled in Mosul, and the next whipping up aurora borealis, those magical, gaseous swathes of colour, on a midnight Reykjavik sky.

Whether it's white and gold, or blue and black, a rabbit or a duck, everything boils down to one's eyesight. Perhaps this tableau of relaxed elegance is itself a utopia . . . Zoom in and the picture yields some secrets. Here we have, in the foreground, a man and a woman oddly expressionless and too ramrod straight, standing perpendicular to the viewer. The couple are decked out in exquisite regalia—baseball caps fashionably distressed, light cotton blazers, their lapels with matching pins featuring the dragon playground or (fill in your Singapore icon of retro fetish). A cigarette, unlit, is wedged between the man's middle finger and index finger. Nothing is out of place. One can cut the tension with a butter knife. The couple look intently/blankly towards the horizon—unknowing clouds, verdant shrubbery, a flotilla of white sails in the reservoir, deftly avoiding a dragon boat fuelled by testosterone. Wait. Is that someone walking into the waters, torso half-submerged? Is he fishing for the catch of the day, or is there something subterranean we do not see? After all, the undertow pulls the unsuspecting in, taking out the strong and nimble, weak and decrepit, godly or earthly, democratically without exemption:

The animals: including a terrier frolicking close to you; a black canine sniffing grass, tail wagging; a macaque tethered to the said expressionless couple, another terrier (a Jack Russell) sniffing 10 metres away; a brown-dappled butterfly fluttering off centre . . .

The humans: among whom, a girl twirling a hoop; a man blowing a trumpet, emitting a long, low, respectful toot, or a mellifluous, celebratory trill, which is contingent on the turn of the dimmer; a hunky beardie (a burly construction worker?) in an undershirt, upper body propped on elbows, leisurely drawing on a pipe . . .

The vegetation: emergents, such as cattails, bulrush, sedges, bur-reed, blue-flag iris; floating leaves, and discreet submergents such as coontail, water milfoil, and bladderwort; but unless you have bionic eyes, none of this is verifiable. Whatever's beneath the surface, dear Quint, will eventually float to the surface . . .

and so it does, breaking secreting, sprouting through veins spidery or varicose, over everyone now reposing, in a trance-like spell in its penumbra. Not all is contained, with odd talons of fawn slipping out of sight, on the right side. What are they? Are they the dearly departed, spirits among us, dust to dust? Where does rigour end and rigor mortis begin? Arthur, there is no reply from the other side. Felix, I miss you. Father, I miss you. Dear leader, I miss you. We cling on to memories like painful polyps. Nonetheless, "pretty is what changes/What the eye arranges/is what is beautiful," goes a line in a Stephen Sondheim musical, based on the original Parisian. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and if so, the said girl in white isn't looking at the other woman, but is actually staring straight back at you. Once a mottled abstraction without a face, two grey halos now materialize . . . looking out of the frame, into you, through you, to the next visitor