

**FLOATS LIKE A MAGNET**

## Chapter 1

Tobias took a long hard look at the invitation. He was amused by how the T in his name was enlarged, followed by the rest of his name in markedly small writing as if nothing but that "T" mattered. Perhaps he's better off known just as T, the invitation suggested.

T was on a tour, one that had stretched so long and so far that it's made a nomad of him. He pondered for a moment upon the relationship between the words "nomad" and "monad" and wondered if they shared a common etymology, or just too obvious a linguistic trope to dwell on.

In his 30s, he started to wonder how much longer could he go on with such a lifestyle. He was on a train traveling through a chain of mountains. Sleep had turned the landscape into a series of sharp peaks and falls from the soft undulating dunes a nap ago. The grogginess from waking up as the train boomed into the tunnel made him feel as though on the run - from wakefulness, from daylight and from home. Emerging from the tunnel at such height made him feel adrift.

The train began to slow; the churning of the engines grows heavy as it approached the station. T steps off the train, suitcase in tow. The tiny platform an island amidst the gravel along the tracks. He turns around to the call of his name, a woman in her 60s, tall with long silvered hair, finely dressed and with a dash of makeup that gave her a regal-ness that belies youth. She was holding onto a piece of paper with just the letter "T" written on it.

"Nice to meet you", says Sissel as she leans in to greet T with a pair of kisses on his cheeks, "I'll be driving you today."

"Okay", he blurted.

This was the part of the journey that was a road trip.

The drive was a series of winding roads through the mountains, steep stone cliffs with splashes of green. A solid grey against the azure blue sky. T and Sissel had barely exchanged a word since the train station. A rare, comfortable silence between strangers that went on for perhaps too long. T surfed the radio only to find varying intensities of static.

It's broken.

It's just static, that's all.

Do you have any music?

I can sing.

Oh right...

T looked out the window. The mountains' grey a matching visual to the mechanical sound of the car coursing along to static. A trio of constants that seemed to go on forever, but for Sissel's voice seeping into T's ears. Lulled by his environment, T turns slowly to look at Sissel, thinking that she had called out to him.

She looks on upon the roads ahead. She sings. She had been singing. Her song buoyant in such manner that made the space glow. Holding onto and releasing each phrase such that her voice seemed to stretch. Her vocal a string strung by bow, as if sound that travels across mountains. An echo within itself. Hearing her sing, he understood mountains.

The songs were of the mountains, for the mountains.

T looked on, the lone audience to a singer in a car. He felt like one of the guys in those celebrity carpool videos he had seen on Youtube, except he knew not the lyrics to Sissel's song.

## Chapter 2

There's a story that I've re-told for a few years.

Speaking at a curatorial programme, a friend of mine, an artist from Singapore called Heman Chong played a video off Youtube saying,

"If one could watch a film scene and have curating explained to them, it'd be the opening scene of Bela Tarr's 2000 film, *Werkmeisters Harmonies*."

Those probably weren't his exact words, but then again this is my version of the story.

The film, as Wikipedia says, was shot in 39 languidly-paced shots. It begins with the protagonist, JANOS in a bar at night in an anonymous Hungarian town. Janos' friend had the men in the bar move the furniture to the sides. Janos grabs his friend and places him in the middle. "You are the Sun" he says. The friend takes one quick puff of his cigarette and drops it on the floor. A trail of smoke bellows from his nose. "The sun doesn't move. This is what it does." Palms out, friend's ten fingers point to the air and twinkle.

Janos walks over to grab Earth. He speaks:

(grabs man)

You are the Earth. The Earth is here for a start and the Earth moves around the Sun.

(close up, gesture fingers)

And now... we'll have an explanation that simple folks like us can also understand about immortality. All I ask is that you step with me into the boundlessness where constancy, quietude and peace, and infinite emptiness reign. And just imagine that in this infinite sonorous silence everywhere is an impenetrable darkness.

(begins to spin man)

Here we only experience general motion and at first we don't notice the events we are witnessing. The brilliant light of the sun always sheds its heat and light on that side of the Earth, which is just turned towards it. And we stay here in its brilliance.

(pauses, grabs another man,)

This is the Moon. The Moon revolves around the Earth.

(humming)

Perhaps we could look upon curating as the writing of relations, as poetics?

## Chapter 3

Could two person make friends based on their choices of pasta? T thought, looking at their plates in front of him. Sissel had order a plate of cellentani to T's conchiglie rigate. He thought that by all means they were awkward choices to have for a first meal together.

They were having dinner at a highway restaurant while contemplating whether to push on with the journey after. T had offered to take over the driving, but Sissel refused. He was running late on time, but a day's travelling had taken its toll. She suggested he use dinner to make up his mind.

What were you singing today?  
Songs, of this region.  
Are you from here?  
Yes.  
And you learnt them as a child?  
No... but I did learn them from a child.

T wanted to press on, but reckoned he'd best drop it. A glass of wine followed and they decided to call it a day.

T flicked the lights in the room on. It was a drab looking motel room, but the only one available. Sissel had offered to sleep in the car, but T wouldn't have it. She was stubborn, but relented when T said he wouldn't trust her with driving otherwise. The two single beds helped to avoid any added awkwardness.

T had showered first and sat in bed waiting for his hair to dry. Sleeping with his hair wet often gave him headaches, but his hair was long due a wash. Especially if he was to be presentable the next day on arrival. He was tired, but not sleepy. The timing of things, he thought.

Sissel walks across the space T was staring into, emerging from the shower without makeup in the same set of clothes she had been in the whole day. She had a relaxed air to her as she settled into bed.

T began, "What is it you do?"

I'm driving you.  
And apart from that?  
Nothing.  
Really?

I'm a collector.

(sleepily) Of?  
Experiences.

Which kind?

T drifts into sleep before her words reach him.

T's head was pulsating. There's a point that pain seeps into consciousness, or perhaps the other way round, where consciousness emerges from pain. The throbbing so strong, he could hear a low, echoed rumpling in his ear resounding through the core of his head. Dredged slowly through the liminal space that lay between sleep and wakefulness. He was discombobulated, surprised to feel the low hums that were vibrating through his body and the room.

Awake now, it dawned on him that the vibrations were external of him. It was coming from the neighboring room. A hint of a melody was barely heard, but the rapid bass was undeniably coming through. The thin walls barely an obstacle to the hard heavy beats from the impromptu dance party next door.

Sitting up, he opened his eyes to Sissel's silhouette from the moon beaming through the windows. Bathed in the moonlight, seated on the bed, her lean, but muscular physique cuts a hard, solid figure. Her silver hair glistens. Sissel stays motionless, her back to T as if unaware or unconcerned of his observation.

The music continues to throb, resonating the space, their bodies. T couldn't recall the next day how long he was left in thrall.

## Chapter 4

In the *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin wrote, “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. Ideas are timeless constellations...”

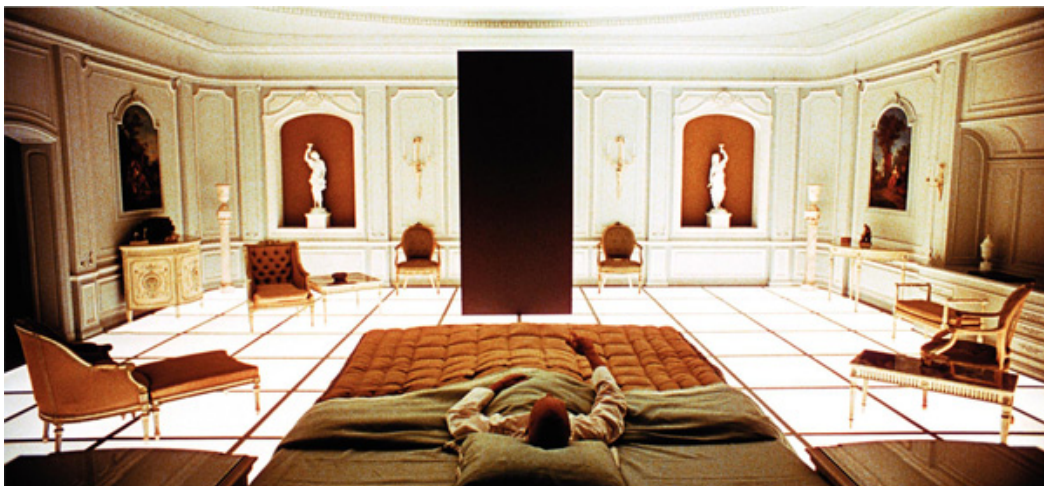
It was the first time that the idea of the constellations was floated in Benjamin’s writings. It was the start of a lifelong fascination with the constellation as (amongst other things) a schematic of how history might be observed. With each node and object an intersecting point in history’s web. It oughta be said that Benjamin’s constellation as a politicized rewriting of history is also fundamentally curatorial. Just as well as it could be said that he was a romantic.

In the constellation of celestial bodies strewn across the cosmos moving in accordance to their own gravity, Benjamin saw an image of history, of objects of vested relations calling out to one another, in a chorus, a silent song echoing out in space. In the expanse that is context, each and every object has in them the desire for connection.

Even objects wish not to be alone.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the analogy turned image is Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. We see the image of the magnet-like artefact floating across space – a source of enlightenment that miraculously evolved our primate ancestors into the sapiens we are today.

So what was the Monolith? Surely, you think, Kubrick never meant for it to be an artwork, but an alien artefact right?



Well, take a look. See how the marble Greco-Roman sculptures flank the Monolith centerpiece in that tacky penthouse suite with Hugh Hefner still in bed? It’s mise-en-scene meets curating. The Monolith may be alien and out of time, but it sure as hell was an alien artwork at that.

You know what’s else is associated with art and miracles? Magnets.

So now, take a look at the monolith again. Was it a coincidence that it looks just like a bar of magnet? It might not seem divine, but it sure as hell's otherworldly. And guess what else was happening in 1968? Minimalism. Someone told me that Donald Judd said Kubrick's Monolith was what spelt the death of minimalism.

An art historian and curator once said to me that "If artwork was sound, its writing would be the echo. Could the echo then, not too be judged on its own aesthetic terms?" Like the loving companion of a distinguished individual, the meticulous Japanese giftwrapping from shopping in Japan, or the shadow that follows one's light.

## INTERMISSION

Sissel noticed that her body had grown susceptible over the years. And while each of her senses had dulled with time, the impact they had was now more substantial. Sitting in bed, she could feel the sound wash over her. In the feistiness of her youth she might have stormed over to the neighbouring room, but that was a different time. She had since learnt to appreciate the intricacies of her own fragility.

She thought the music was crude, but tolerable. And it kept on in her long after it stopped.

Alberto Giacometti once described his work as sculpting not of the human figure but "the shadow that is cast". A garrulous figure, Giacometti over his years in Paris struck up friendships with artists and intellectuals. The surrealists before he was excommunicated. Then Samuel Beckett with whom he would hop around Parisian bars at night seeking the warmth that their poorly heated rooms failed to provide. And perhaps none more so than with Jean Genet who over the course of a close friendship of ten years often found Genet whiling his time away in Giacometti's studio.

It was this companionship that would become the basis of Genet's essay of Giacometti, succinctly-titled *The Studio of Alberto Giacometti*. Confident in its lack of intellectual posturing. It was a prototypical blend of observations, musings, interactions, intimacy and companionship. It's been referred to as art writing insofar that it achieves said purpose, but exceeds such goals by never having had them at all.

**Jean Genet to Alberto Giacometti:** One must have a strong stomach to have one of your statues in one's house.

**Giacometti:** Why?

*I hesitate to answer. My sentence will piss him off.*

**Genet:** One of your statues in a room, and the room is a temple.  
*He seems a little disconcerted.*

**Giacometti:** And you think that's good?



**Genet:** I don't know. And you, do you think that's good?

Jenet continues: The shoulders, especially, and the chest of two of them have the delicacy of a skeleton that, if you touch it, will crumble away. The curve of the shoulder – the joint of the arm – is exquisite ... (excuse me, but) is exquisite with strength. I touch the shoulder and close my eyes: I cannot describe the happiness of my fingers. First of all, for the first time they touch bronze. Then, someone strong guides them and reassures them.

Less a piece of art writing, but an exercise of considerate musing. Writing of his reverence for Giacometti's work in carefully considered prose, the writing deviates into conversations between the two men, amidst recollections of random Parisian encounters. Genet recalls:

About four years ago, I was on the train. Opposite me in the compartment, an appalling old man was sitting. Dirty, and, obviously, mean, as some of his remarks proved to me. Refusing to pursue an unfruitful conversation with him, I wanted to read, but despite myself, I looked at the little old man: he was very ugly...

... It was a gaze, drawn-out or quick, that was caught in my own and that made me aware of that. And what causes a man to be loved beyond his ugliness or his meanness. Do not misunderstand: it was not a question of a goodness coming from me, but of a recognition. Giacometti's gaze saw that a long time ago, and he restores it to us. I say what I feel: this connection revealed by his figures seems to be that precious point at which human being is brought back to the most irreducible part of him: his solitude of being exactly equivalent to every other human being.

## Chapter 5

Sissel awoke to the soft vibrations of her mobile. It was her alarm that had gone off silently. She liked the idea of her body being moved to wakefulness as opposed to being called. She sat up to the warm glow of the sun. Her body was stiff and her eyes took time to adjust to the light. She turned around to see T seated in bed, looking towards her and the window, mug in hand.

Tea? he asked  
Yes, thank you.

T walked over to the counter and poured Sissel and himself another glass of tea. She turned away from the sun's glare and sipped on her tea. It was sweet root.

T asks, "Did you hear the music from next door during the night?"  
Yes, did it wake you up too?

T kept quiet and went on sipping his tea, "It did." He stands up and walks on over to his suitcase. He rummages through it for a tiny toiletry kit and headed for the bathroom.

The room was such that Sissel could hear each of T's actions. To keep her eyes occupied, she looked at T's suitcase as he went about with his brushing, gargling, spitting and rinsing. Sitting besides his clothes was a bunch of objects and trinkets. There were some attempts at arranging them, but it was nonetheless a neat mess and she couldn't quite make out what they were.

T walked out of the bathroom and they had a brief exchange of glances. Sissel took it as her turn to use the bathroom. She took her time to stand up. Walking pass T as he stopped over his suitcase to get dressed.

So what is it that you do?  
Me? T replied, surprised.  
Yes.  
That's a matter of interpretation.  
What's your own interpretation?

I'm a river historian.

A river historian?  
Yes.  
Explain that to me.

Go wash up first.

Sissel came back to two maps laid out upon the beds.

What are these?

Maps.

Are they?

Well, think of them as diagrams then. Have a look at this symbol in the centre, what does it look like to you?

A source.

Exactly. So let's say we begin the story here with the Source. As with all rivers, the water diverges and moves on to different places.

So they become S1, S2 and S3s and so on?

Well that's lacking a bit of imagination. The waters take on a different name because of the people that encounter them. These are actually the Daila, Reisler and Loja rivers. And they each have their own stories. Reisler here (T grabs a tiny wooden horse from the suitcase and places it on the map) has for centuries been where lumber travels downstream to the mills. Daila here (takes a comb and places it on the map) has a tradition of great beauties. They have a saying there in the village by the river, that one's beauty is only as good as the water they drink. And Loja here (takes a pair of rings) bears a town of great lovers, where by the strangest of fates, visitors almost always find love.

What about the others.

Homa, Joris, and Nauma, but they could just as well be Daila, Reisler and Loja too.

What do you mean?

Perhaps they are all parts of an idea.

So you've been lying?

Well, you wanted to know what I do.

Sissel took pause and studies both maps again.

And what of these lines that runs to the edges.

They meet the sea as their story ends...

Sissel interrupts, "For you are merely a historian of rivers."

## Chapter 6

In *Werkmeisters Harmonies*, a circus arrives in town overnight. The carcass of a stuffed whale its centerpiece alongside other exhibits in a massive container that visitors entered with a ticket. The circus is in character, a cousin institution to the many archives, libraries and museums that sprung up in the 19<sup>th</sup> century's museological fervor at the height of colonialism. Emblems of colonial imperialism that showcased the rich and exotic exploits from faraway land.

By nightfall, the town square where the circus had pitched its (metaphorical) tent had become busy. Never a good sign, crowds of men had gathered. Our protagonist, Janos as required of all tragic heroes, returns and sneaks himself into the container with the whale. There, hidden amidst the shadows was a disfigured but charismatic figure referred to as The Prince. In the container, The Prince gets into a heated argument with the circus director about the events that were to unfold. His words, as if a supernatural force would (of all places, the circus) go on to ignite a revolution. The whale as we've guessed it, was the leviathan.

As the climax of the film draws close, the camera unfolds over a scene wherein rioters storm a hospital, thrashing the place and assaulting the patients. Rioters running in ahead, the scene begins with the camera slowly entering the hallway of the building.

The camera explores the mayhem unfolding amidst the brightly-lit corridor and the many rooms flanking its hallway. The camera reveals and takes in the escalating violence. A patient runs into the bathroom and gets dragged out. The camera swings right to reveal more men marching in, and follows. Darting left as rioters enter the ward and drag a patient off his bed. The patient struggles, clinging on to the bed, his body pulled taut into a straight line lunges forward. The camera turns right and a rioter beats rhythmically upon a machine as another patient is assaulted. The movements of violence choreographed an engulfing sight.

The camera takes a long track down, more men and more violence. We arrive at the large ward at the end. In the dimness of the space, we no longer see details, nor texture. Every man reduced to a silhouette, reduced to a cutout in the sparseness of light. The camera pirouettes and we suddenly come to a halt as curtains to the bathroom are torn away. Revealing an emaciated old man, hunched slightly while standing stark naked in the bathtub, staring blankly into space oblivious of the scene unfolding around him. Wrinkled and frail, he looks as if a work of Giacometti.

The rioters stop. The old man cuts a stark figure even amidst the chaos, it is a caesura within the scene - a moment of rupture. An event in the Badiouian sense. The old man is present, but removed from the scene, his body and old age a testament to something that far extends beyond the violence and revolution.

Struck by an epiphany the rioters seem unable to continue.

Perhaps they were wondering, was the hospital also a gallery?

## Chapter 7

The mansion was well hidden, tucked within the forest, it belatedly looms into view as the trees begin to spread out around the gates. Sissel had always felt uncomfortable about the place. It had an exclusiveness that bordered on being hermetic. Built at the turn of the last century, it was a blend of stone and bricks, with little ornamentation, but possessing a resoluteness that would far outlast both you and me.

The gate opens for the car to enter. Stopping at the driveway, T was quick to get out of the car to retrieve his suitcase. He turns back belated to Sissel and says, "see ya later". He had been quiet the majority of the drive from the hotel. Sissel had found that late in life silence no longer bothered her, but she felt an obvious sense of unease about T. Still it was not her place to probe. And with the wedding later in the day, there were more important things to be concerned with.

The wedding party was a low-key affair, with the newly-weds in their seventies, the moments that threatened civility were few. There was nonetheless a sense of desire between the married couple that Sissel admired.

She was having a reserved night, the sort where you're not working at an event, but was there because of work. She couldn't help but notice T throughout the night, seeing that he was by the bride's side much of the night. Probably the son, she thought.

As the party drew to a close, she found herself in T's company. He seemed to have sought her out for refuge.

"You seem like you had fun tonight." Sissel said.

I did, didn't I?

Yes.

Well I know how to put on a show.

How long is it since you last saw each other?

Just two years, give or take.

"You're from around here?" T continued.

I am.

Tell me about this place.

As you could see, it's a place gifted with mountains and water.

Gifted?

What about it.

You make it sound as if someone was being generous.

The path at the far side of the garden led into the forest. A forest where the crispness of the summer grass and fallen twigs was slowly giving way to the sound of the river's flow as Sissel and T retreated from sight. The darkness of the night met with the blue of the moon.

What are your plans after this?  
This this, or this tomorrow and after?  
After.  
Settle down maybe. Take root.

Where does the river lead?  
To the open sea.  
It does?

So home is where the forest, the mountain, the river and the sea meets?  
In a sense.  
That's a sweet deal.  
I know.  
Let's go take a look.

Sissel walks ahead of T in the forest's darkness, her pace slow but firm. Guided by a familiarity borne over time. The roll of the river slowly joined by the chorus of the waves.

I'll stop here.  
Why?  
The last stretch is a bit beyond me.  
So I walk on ahead alone?  
Or we walk back.

And what if something happens to me?  
I'll text on you.  
Alright then.  
Go on.  
"To where the story ends." T laughs.

Sissel looks on as T's faint outline fades into the wood. T walks on, guided by the sound of the crashing waves till he finally caught sight of the sea. A wall of sound in the darkness, its presence more heard than seen. He takes his blazer off, and piece by piece the rest of his outfit.

Clumsily he steps into the water, the chill a noxious cocktail mixed with anxiety. Knee-deep and feeling the rush of water, he leaps in, a stab in the dark before the river could take him. Letting out a shout just as he dives into the water.

T thought his mother looked happy tonight.