

Chapter I: Posits

Karrupiah had a thought and it stalled.

He looked at the queue that was forming up in front of the store, a line of men waiting for their turn to collect dinner. He recognised everyone; save for a young-looking South Indian man in a pale green polo T-shirt and jeans. He was quiet and reserved, but had a lively quality to him.

He scrutinised the young man a while more before spotting what he had been looking for – a long, freshly healed scar running along the inside of his right forearm. The scar is a dull red centipede that will long accompany the memory of his once broken arm, a sample from the vast catalogue of bodily brands that marked his initiation into this very transient brotherhood.

It looked like it was his first time here, Karrupiah was sure he'd never seen him around before. Someone should help the young man, Karrupiah thought; it was obvious he was clueless. He thought for a moment, but stopped himself. Before, whenever he had raised questions at the construction sites, he would be reminded that he wasn't being paid to think. He realised he hadn't come here to have his thoughts heard.

That was, until now. Karrupiah turned his gaze back at the man in

Maybe I hadn't thought things through enough.

I was walking along Cuff Road towards Isthana Restaurant. A no-frills open-air Indian eatery where errant migrant workers are provided with two free meals a day. What was I doing there?

It was around 2009/10 that we (I suppose I wasn't the only one) noticed a slew of local films being made about migrant labour workers that brought their woes to light. These films had coincided with a sudden massive influx of foreign workers across all sectors. The point of these films was straightforward enough - we were unscrupulously exploiting the migrant workers. We were an ethically deplorable First World population that didn't give a shit about their wellbeing. And yet whenever we caught one of these films we would allow ourselves to be surprised. Whether it was by our sense of guilt or the simple fact that we cared. Content that we had walked into a trap we set for our conscience, even though self-

front of him. He was a Chinese man somewhere in his mid to late twenties. He managed to wear his clothes well, despite dressing casually. As much as he could gather from whatever was translated to him by the volunteers, this man wanted to speak to him about a film he was making. He had never met the Chinese man before. His name was Kent. He seemed awkward.

Kent asked how he was and by that Karrupiah understood that he was referring to his left eye. Unlike his right eye, which was a healthy dark hazelnut in colour, his left eye was an impenetrable opal grey minus the sparkle. He smiled and said he was fine. He wasn't sure if the question had made him feel more awkward or less.

Karrupiah rested his hands on the table atop of his food. Conversing through the translations by the volunteer, the conversation was horribly stunted. While it didn't seem to bother him, the Chinese man seemed to be getting ever more awkward. The volunteer explained that the Chinese man was an artist making a film about migrant workers and would be keen to interview him for his research. Karrupiah realised it had been awhile since someone wanted to do this. Just a year or two ago, there had been many other filmmakers wanting to make films about him and his brethren.

He felt uneasy to have all the

righteousness is really worth Jack.

The plot was straightforward and we stuck to it. We economically exploit them, yet feel bad having watched a film where the filmmakers had nonetheless reproduced the very same exploitation, but of the migrant's image and agency to elicit a productive sense of guilt from us. We'll exploit their image to convince ourselves to stop exploiting them as labour, but *fail*. Thus, regurgitating the same sentiment and knowledge production over and over again.

What the hell, I thought, there's gotta be a better way to do this. As Jacques Rancière puts it, politics and aesthetics are forms of *dissensus*, which effects the disruption of bodies from their assigned places, and free speech and expression from all reduction to functionality. So why not take an innovative leap from the logic that typically governs human situation? Let's get creative with politics, chuck goodwill and political-correctness aside and poke at places they don't quite want me to poke at!

No harm no foul. No pain no gain, right?

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I was conscious of myself and of Karrupiah, the man seated in front of me. He's somewhere between his thirties and forties with a left eye that had gone dim. I was too self-conscious to look him in the eye and too self-conscious to

attention directed solely at him. The artist didn't seem at all interested in Maalavan who was seated right beside him all this while. Perhaps it was because he couldn't discern any obvious wound or scar upon Maalavan. He felt upset that nearly losing half his eyesight had increasingly made him the subject of people's gaze.

The conversation concluded with the artist asking for their mobile numbers hoping to set up an interview with them in the coming weeks. Karrupiah gave both his and Maalavan's number to the artist, just in case, which brought an evident relief to him. The artist bid them goodbye and left shortly after. Leaving without giving the impression that he had ever truly arrived.

Standing up to leave too, Karrupiah noticed the gentle warmth of his packed dinner of vegetarian curry and rice. He was reminded again how hunger was one of the best ingredients in any good meal.

avoid looking at it. He must have sensed it.

I felt nervous and out of place. I felt like an artist surrounded by a crowd of people with very real needs that was being served by a much smaller group of volunteers that only just managed. I wasn't even sure what I was asking him through the help on a volunteer translating for us. Probably questions that came off as rather *perfunctory*, which in case you need to know, etymologically stems from the Latin word that means *careless*. It's quite the linguistic double whammy.

Nonetheless, I tried to stick to the plan. I wanted to get Karrupiah's contact number. Just so that I could take whatever conversation that I wanted to have away from the crowd. Out of the open to somewhere less exposed. Eventually, it was through Karrupiah extending a courtesy that I had scarcely earned that I got hold of his and his friend Maalavan's mobile numbers. Rather than the exhibition of any confidence or charisma on my part.

I took my leave shortly after and walked away feeling weirdly like I had just chatted someone up.

Chapter II: The Interview, Part I

Kent: Are you still working now?

Karr: No, not because of the injury. That's why we've come to HOME to provide us with housing.

Kent: How do you sustain yourself here if you're not working now?

Karr: We can't! Basically we're dependent on HOME. HOME is the shelter that is putting me up. They provide us with food through donations from people. Here we cook based on donations. That covers the expenses, and shelter is here. We're waiting for the insurance payout. It usually takes quite some time. We will go back to India once the insurance is settled. Would you like to know more about the injury?

Kent: Yes.

Karr: It was at the work site and the supervisor asked me to open up a battery. Although we followed all the safety processes, somehow because it was an old battery it exploded. My eye came out and this is actually now an operated eye. I can't see anything from the left eye.

Kent: Your eye came out?

Karr: After I came back to Singapore in March and then ten days after starting the job it happened. I was in the hospital for seven days and then two months of medical leave. After the incident the Company offered me light duties, either sweeping or cleaning. You get the same pay, but it's not something you want. With my eye difficulty, I really wanted to go back home. The

Company itself could have done that for me, but what they offered was to give me 5000 Rupees to go back to India. It wouldn't be enough to pay off all the debt. That's when I saw the advertisements by lawyers in the Tamil Murasu newspaper. We could contact these people if we had problems. So I contacted the lawyer. Friends told us about HOME and that's how we ended up here. Once we start a claim, the employers won't allow us to stay in their hostel. So basically we have no housing. In fact there are some people that stay on the streets, right outside. HOME is helping with the legal issues and the claims.

Karr: They didn't gave me what I was due in terms of insurance, but they told me they'll continue paying me doing light duties like sweeping and other odd jobs. Yet I was scolded by the supervisor for earning the same thing by doing less. Sometimes I'd be called out to do more work, which was why I got frustrated and decided to end it all and go back.

Karr: I don't know yet. I won't know until they close the case based on the doctor's certificate. Even then the values differ. Some people manage to get a good amount depending on the injuries. We've had some China workers that got a good amount. It depends, we won't know. I started the whole claim process about four months, but I've stayed two months here at HOME. The

Kent: What did you want after the accident?

Kent: Would insurance be able to pay off your debt?

Company paid for all the medical expenses right till I was discharged.

Karr: They're not. They brought me to the hospital, but the operation is probably a small amount compared to what I rightfully should get.

Karr: Yes.

Kent: They aren't totally irresponsible.

Kent: I'm sure, but that's a good start.

Chapter III: Confines

“ஓ முலம் வர முடியுமா?”

The artist had someone text Karrupiah a few days ahead to ask if he could come by the shelter on Saturday. Karrupiah agreed. He didn't think there was any real reason to say no. The artist seemed harmless enough.

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It was two-thirty in the afternoon when the artist arrived. He was with another Indian man. The Indian man looked somewhat flashy, but fashionable no less. He was also tall and well built, albeit a little fleshy. Karrupiah was sure he wasn't a migrant worker. Local, he thought. They came in and the artist, translated by the Indian man apologised for being late. They shook hands as the artist introduced his friend, Peter to them.

Karrupiah brought them to the common room and sat on the floor. The artist was seated beside his friend opposite of Karrupiah and Maalavan. He noticed that the artist seemed more relaxed today.

The artist started speaking and when he stopped, Peter would in turn translate to Karrupiah and Maalavan, and then vice versa. The artist explained how he wanted to interview them to research on a film that he was making about

In 1833, Britain abolished slavery. Fourteen years after Singapore was founded. Now that's a scary thought, the fact that we were founded by a major slave-trading nation. It should of course be noted that during the tour of service by our dear founder, Sir Stamford Raffles, across the various Southeast Asian colonies, he had repeatedly made it a point to abolish slavery locally. Which meant that the Singapore polity since 1819 has never involved itself in slavery.

Phew. Doesn't it feel like we dodged a bullet there? That being said, I'm pretty sure most of us aren't even aware that there was always a gun lurking somewhere, metaphoric and not. Can you imagine how fundamentally it would shift the way we think of Singapore constitutionally, historically and culturally, had that very seed of violence been planted at our founding? Can you imagine the kind of rupture or radical epistemological shift involved if we were suddenly told otherwise?

Now then, let's give this another go: the Singapore polity since 1819 has never *legally* involved itself in slavery.

For crying out loud we were a Goddamn penal colony and before you start to think that I've got a potty mouth, let me categorically state that the majority of convicts brought to Singapore were from India. And to most of them crossing the *Kala Pani* -

migrant workers. He asked if it would be all right. Karrupiah and Maalavan readily agreed without giving it too much thought. But when the artist asked to record the interview on his audio recorder, Karrupiah and Maalavan were slow to respond. The artist must have noticed as he quickly reassured them that it was just for him to listen through the interviews again after. They agreed hesitantly.

The artist took out a small audio recorder and placed it on the floor between the four of them. The conversation got off to a weird start. He began by asking about their current predicament, whether they were working - no, and then wondering out loud how was it that they sustained themselves. The latter struck Karrupiah as a tad silly. The artist had met them for the first time at Isthana and now here in the shelter. He thought the answer would have been self-evident. It was plainly obvious that they were destitute and was only subsisting with the help of the different NGOs. He wondered if the artist was being naïve or rhetorical.

Nonetheless, he was surprised by the artist's line of question. He hadn't bothered with small talk. So Karrupiah figured he needn't beat around the bush either. He offered to speak about his left eye.

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The interview lasted for over an

the sea to Singapore was akin to a punishment worse than death. The British had devised a punishment that wasn't just of the body, but also of the soul. It was a taboo and it meant the loss of one's caste status, which was massive if you were Hindu. It meant one was cast out and forever expelled from kinship and community - exile. Much like the excommunication of Judeo-Christian tradition. Customs would suggest that one was indeed spiritually damned.

Here is what else you should know about Singapore as a penal colony.

There were six different classes of convicts. There were very ornate uniforms in the higher classes that accorded distinction and prestige amongst the various convicts. Convicts of the two lowest classes had to wear steel manacles. Some lived independently outside the prisons. Some convicts were also wardens. The Indian convicts were the closest affiliates to the British and deemed the most compliant. An impression that amazingly persists for Indian workers till this day. Prisons were highly racialised and segregated. The largest early public buildings in penal colonies weren't government offices, hospitals or churches, but the fucking prison. Singapore Management University is the site of Singapore's first prison. Convicts openly worked in public. They were paid and some managed to save enough for properties or start their own business after release. Coupling was encouraged between male and female

hour. Again, Karrupiah noticed that the artist seemed mostly interested in him, but he shrugged off the matter. There was however a strange dynamic between the artist and his friend. It felt like the artist had answers that he wanted to hear, but didn't, and questions that he wanted to ask, but couldn't. There was something repetitive about him that his friend seemed impatient with. Karrupiah had found it largely agreeable, but he wondered what Maalavan thought about it.

Nearing the end of the interview, Wang, another migrant worker from China staying at the shelter came back. Wang took little notice of the four of them, walking straight into the room. Karrupiah realise he couldn't explain to Wang what was going on even if he wanted to. It must have piqued the artist's interest though, as he began asking about the other occupants in the shelter.

Karrupiah decided it would be better to just show him around the premises, as respectfully as he could for the other occupants. It was brief as there was hardly anything to see. It was after the tour, just as the artist and his friend were about to leave, when the artist turned around and surprised Karrupiah with a question. The artist asked if he knew anything at all about Singapore's past as a penal colony.

Karrupiah didn't and wasn't sure he wanted to know.

inmates. Penal punishment was comparatively liberal by today's standards. Attitudes towards penal policies changed when the European public in Singapore disdained upon the common sight of convicts, and their proximity to residential areas lead to the reforms that would shape the modern day prison system. Mortality rate was high.

Lastly, what you probably knew from the start, that this was all business. As architectural historian, Anoma Pieris very succinctly puts it, "the convict's body was objectified, moved, placed in fetters, subjected to corporal punishment, and exploited through labour. The colonial prisoner had replaced the colonial slave." Consequently, they were in many ways the predecessors of present-day migrant workers.

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I had asked Peter over drinks to lend me his Saturday afternoon to help translate at the interview with Karrupiah. Peter's a gregarious character. A little gangsta maybe, but charismatic nonetheless. I wasn't sure if he'd be too *bling* for the context, but hey, you don't try you don't know...

Peter and I arrived at the shelter at Geylang. It was an old walkup. The shelter took up a whole privately owned apartment that someone had generously offered to HOME. The place was dark with barely any furniture. We sat on the floor throughout the interview. Peter was great,

though it did seem like he was interpreting rather than translating. I went fishing and only managed scraps. Towards the end, it caught me by surprise when a Chinese migrant stepped in and disappeared into one of the rooms. Karrupiah then gave us a tour of the shelter with its three rooms, kitchen and bathrooms. The Chinese migrants were all in one room. Somehow I had the impression that there were only South Indians around. Karrupiah and Maalavan had been there for six months. Free to roam about, but with no money, confined to their vicinity.

“You know they got me trapped in this prison of seclusion. Happiness, living on the streets is a delusion” What the hell I had Tupac rapping *Trapped* in my head as we left. Now I’m no fan of loud angry men, but you do take notice when a lot of men are loud and angry. Still, Tupac? Maybe Peter was rubbing off on me. The shelter smelt oddly of the history of incarceration.

Chapter IV: Accelerating Sex Drive

It's been awhile since Nathan last saw his wife. Nearly seven months now. He dearly missed her. Her scent, her gait, the contours of her voice, the shape of her curvy body. Her touch, his touch upon her and the intoxicatingly irresistible musk of her sex. What Nathan would do right now to be with her, but instead he finds his desire disrupted, waking up instead on the lorry slouched against Lingam.

Nathan wished she'd be real.

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Nathan had wanted to stop by Little India on Sunday. It had been a frustrating week of work. They would start work everyday just to have it start raining within hours. At which point work ceased and everyone spent hours waiting for the rain to stop. Hours that nobody was being paid for. Nathan had long come to realise that his body and his time was worth nothing here, unless it was for work. Waiting wasn't just mentally frustrating anymore, but physically as well.

They'll return to the dormitories when the rain persisted. Thirteen of them at the back of one pickup truck, with the rain drumming upon the aluminum canopy that managed only to keep their heads

William Heise's 1896 American film, *The Kiss* had the first ever-recorded kiss in cinematic history. The titular kiss and the film itself was based on the final scene of the stage musical, *Widow Jones*. Inconceivable now, the film had been released at a time when kissing in public was a prosecutable offence. The uproar was such that the Roman Catholic Church took umbrage, deemed it obscene and called for its censorship. "They get ready to kiss, begin to kiss, and kiss and kiss and kiss in a way that brings down the house every time."

Saucy.

No good film goes unpunished as it spawned a slew of imitators. Most significant of all was George Albert Smith's 1899 British comedy, *The Kiss in the Tunnel*, an amalgamation of *The Kiss* and the early phantom ride genre popular in the Anglo-Saxon world. The phantom ride genre pre-dated true narrative in film and consists of a continuous shot by a camera mounted in front of a moving vehicle as it traveled (often through the city). Thus, capturing movement by a seemingly invisible source. It was the perfect coming-together of elements emblematic of modernity - city, cinema and movement. It led to the later-development of the tracking shot and is a direct ancestor of Dziga Vertov's *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929).

The Kiss in the Tunnel depicted a couple sharing a kiss in a train carriage just

dry. They sat on plastic chairs with sawed off legs to keep their bottoms dry from the puddles of rainwater that collected. The seats though wouldn't stop the vibrations of the lorry from pulsating through their bodies. It was a constant source of anxiety. Even more so when the lorry accelerates. Yet with enough time the anxiety often gave way as the tension lapses into a form of lethargy. Huddled closely together, Nathan wasn't the only one to have woken up, body resting against a fellow worker.

The hunger for touch extends beyond the need for sex. Nathan had quickly noticed the physical interactions amongst the workers. Men would slap each other on the back, rub each other's necks and arms, hold hands and come up with all kinds of strange exercises to use each other's body weight. It was all an excuse for touch.

Nathan tried, but he couldn't recall the last time he had a conversation with a woman. It hasn't happened in Singapore and it wasn't just him. Few amongst the workers here spoke English. On workdays they were isolated from the general populace and only on their weekly off day would they make the trip into the city. Even then, the socio-economic distance that governs human interactions was too much a hurdle to surmount. Nathan was aware that some migrant workers were seeing domestic workers and would have their weekly weekend

as the train passed through a tunnel. The shot - the very first caesura of filmic time and space - was spliced between shots of the train approaching and entering the tunnel, and its exit. Spliced for spice; a progression of movement punctuated by a moment of bodily desire - rupture - that was deemed obscene. Who would have thought that narrative and continuity editing was the result of a furtive moment of passion between two passengers?

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It's not often that you find a migrant worker that's game to appear in front of camera for a filmmaker they know nothing about. I found Nathan standing alone at the sheltered walkway along Rowell road. He looked contemplative and truth be told, was staring at the crowd gathering around the staircase where sex workers worked. He's skinny and in his mid-thirties with a tinge of childish youthfulness to him. I decided to try my luck and approached him, and to my surprise he had a decent command of English. I was in luck. We had an interview with him and filmed him alongside his older brother, Lingam driving across the island on a lorry.

Now let me explain to you what riding on a lorry is like. It is an incredibly tactile and bodily experience. You feel the city. You are the *pulse* of the city coursing through its veins at its prescribed kinetic limit and damn it's rough. Yet as you enter its centre the skyscrapers loom into view unhindered,

tryst, but the idea lacked appeal to him. Nathan knew his turn with the ladies would come in Chennai. This place saw no such use for his body.

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Nathan wanted to drop by Little India on Sunday, but out of curiosity met with a local artist instead. The artist had approached him at Little India the week before, saying he was making a film on migrant workers and would like to interview him. He didn't realise what good providence it was till the next day. Because on Sunday, there had been a police raid at Rowell Road where many prostitutes and streetwalkers in that area were arrested.

He had wanted to make the trip to see Anjani, a transwoman sex worker he had come to patron every now and then at one of the shop houses along Rowell Road. On Monday evening, Nathan could barely hide the distress on his face when a fellow worker told him about the raid. Soon as he could, he ducked away to search the Internet on his mobile. He clicked on the first local news report that came up and browsed through it quickly. It was a short article offering little information, but it came with a video clip at the end.

The video was shot from the point of view of the camera. It glided up a staircase and faded into a shot

modernity's crowning achievement makes you take pause. All the while in fear of crashing. Just a few years ago that limit stood at 80kmh. It is 90kmh now. I reckon we'd hit 100kmh pretty soon.

Driving through the city on a lorry means getting intimate with the city's anxiety. Anxiety: that supposed core of psychoanalysis' study of affects. The word, *drive* points to an anxiety shared in this city. It alludes to a desire to be at a different place or state of being, and the fact that we are yet there. To Freud it is the manifest of a libido unfulfilled. The equivalent of having too much jizz.

Drawing a current between capitalism's effects on the body, Franco Berardi Bifo has an essay self-explanatorily titled, *Accelerationism Questioned from the Point of View of the Body*. In it he singles out acceleration as the requisite feature of capitalist growth: productivity increase implies intensification in the rhythm of production and exploitation. Few would disagree when I say Singapore as an institutional body is highly geared towards the production of capital, and that each incremental act of acceleration thus has its effect wrought upon the *desiring* body. Something hitherto unaddressed as if desire is an obscene word.

When we accelerate; production *and* exploitation intensifies, but in uneven terms across the population. Drawing a distinction between the two highlights the social striation between production

of a woman dressed in white seated on a bed with several condoms neatly laid out in a grid. Her back was facing the camera with her long black hair draping over her face obscuring it. You could hear her sobbing loudly. There was a series of quick shots of the grid of condoms and a discarded condom wrapper in a dustbin. Her crying continues as we see her again. Then two other women in different rooms, both desperately hiding their faces from the camera. It cuts into a close up of one of them as she glances over, only to realise the camera was right behind her. Then it was a shot of a woman's underwear on a hanger and a top shot of a half-eaten meal, before it cut to a second location. Four women were seated on the bed back facing the camera trying to hide their faces. The camera went around and framed the four of them head on. Then a close up of two women and their right hands being cable tied together. Then a different corridor and another shot of a bedroom with seven women head tilted down to avoid the gaze of the camera. A pan shot of their hands cut seamlessly to a pan shot of an empty bedroom. A shot of a drawer of scattered undergarments as another camera enters the frame flashing and taking photos. The scene cuts to the sound of shutter's release, transitioning to one last bedroom with a woman back facing the camera looking on as her items were confiscated by a police officer.

and exploitation caused by the vastly different rights conferred to the working populace. It is a biopolitics that at its extreme strips a sizeable number of their rights to reproduction. We seem loath to regard migrant workers as possessing the same desiring bodies as us and impose on them forms of socio-economic and sexual isolation. Whilst not directly impeding upon their desire, we certainly do well to restrict its outlets.

To grasp our current predicament, we ought to observe Walter Benjamin's claim that capitalism is, in reality, a religion. One that is the fiercest of all religions because it does not allow for atonement. It is a perpetual state of strife lurching from crisis to crisis, which ironically corresponds to what the Soviet Union used to call the 'permanent revolution'. To push Benjamin's analogy even further, as most religions seek to regulate bodies and sexuality, capitalism as a totalising religion regulates migrant workers through its own biopolitics of abstinence. A price migrant workers pay to partake in capita. The difference however, is that migrant don't so much abstain as they are neutered.

Accelerationism warrants mention due to its skepticism towards political efficacy when deployed in the aesthetic sphere. In laymen's terms, goodwill is all for naught. Accelerationism or not, we are already accelerating - it is the global trajectory - and we are all accelerationists now. In philosophy and political economy, accelerationism

Nathan was no filmmaker, but he could tell how slick the video was and how each shot seemed to be meticulously staged. It was as if someone had made a film amidst a crime scene while every woman on screen was in the midst of being arrested. It looked as though no one cared except the ones being arrested.

He was looking for Anjani, but she was not there. Nathan had never felt such violence.

merely offers us an exacerbated awareness of how we are trapped in a loop. Yet that awareness itself is paramount. As by now, we should have come to realise that crisis fuels the perpetuation of capitalism rather than its demise.

Steven Shapiro remarks: transgression no longer works as a subversive aesthetic strategy. Or more precisely, transgression works all too well as a strategy for amassing both “cultural capital” and actual capital. Transgression is now fully incorporated into the logic of political economy. Unlike modernism, aesthetic accelerationism forecloses the possibility of breaking free into a radical Outside to power. In fact, aesthetic accelerationism counterposed to politico-economic accelerationism doesn’t even claim efficacy for its own operations. Ethics or more accurately, my ethics would mean nothing here. It’s an *ism* that seems a lot like nihilism, but yet not. Goodwill doesn’t cut it and I’d have to own my fucking complicity.

Chapter V: A Ban

Karrupiah thought about his mother's sixtieth birthday in a month's time. He couldn't wait to go back to Pudukkotai for the celebration, but neither could he find a way to return. Things had been moving slowly. Too slowly, as he spent months waiting for the trial. Try as he may, he couldn't understand what was really going on anymore. It seemed to him that the trial was happening at all time, but also never.

His situation had gotten increasingly precarious since the accident. He needed to be looked after and he was. He had to rest, which he did. He needed to work and the Company provided. But when he wanted his eyesight to recover, it wouldn't. Afterwards, he wanted to be compensated as did the Company. While the Company wanted a settlement absolving them of blame, he refused. Then the Company wanted him to leave, when he really needed a place to stay. He wanted his eye to be treated, but no one would do it. He decided to put faith in law, but now half blind, he felt no more affinity to that lady blindfolded with the sword and scale.

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Before he returned for his second stint in Singapore, he had told his

Now let's explore the concept of the *ban*. Not the kind that pertains to the circulation of objects, media and language, but of the human subject.

The common English variant of the word commonly denotes a form of prohibition issued by an authority, such as the law or the management of a club or casino. But if one were to jump backwards through the historical roots of the word; from the Old French *ban* (to outlawry, banishment), to the Old Norse *banna* (to curse, to prohibit) and to the Old English *bannan* (to summon, command, proclaim) that came from the earlier Common Germanic *bannan* (to command, forbid, banish, curse) you would (1) find yourself amongst the distinguished company of a who's who list of old expatriate man at Orchard Towers on a Saturday night or (2) notice how he or she who is banned also comes to define an obverse to the authority of the issuant of the ban.

Now let's try to understand

family that he wouldn't be back for the celebrations. He upset them; his three sisters, one brother and mother were all caught surprised. His was a family that had been brought up by his mother since their father left them. He pretended not to care. He had made the decision long ago thinking his absence meant they could avoid the guilt of splurging his pay on the celebrations. Thinking back, he'd laugh at how superfluous his little scheme now seemed. Even if the joke was on him.

Karrupiah had weighed up his options. He could have signed the Company's agreement to settle for nary any compensation or he could pursue the matter legally, which however rendered him homeless before any settlement was reached. He had heard of stories far worse than his own involving injuries that went untreated, physical violence, forced confinement and repatriation. There had been many infringements and official complaints that never reached any legal resolution. Weighing things up, he knew his eye was the matter at stake, but yet he couldn't stop obsessing and see past the faulty car battery that had caused all this. He knew it made no sense, but this was a senseless situation.

He had been on a Special Pass since coming into legal dispute with the Company and losing his Work Permit. The system gave him the rights to stay, but not the

what was historically at stake back in the old days, when one was placed under a ban. The Germanic root in its original meaning was in fact magical, as its evocation carried the power to curse. One was basically condemned. These were Godly times after all, which in connotation and effect situates the ban right alongside excommunication and the *Kala Pani*. Meaning as a form of punishment, it carries the utmost severity equal to that of death, while remaining distinct from it.

In the Holy Roman Empire, once the Holy Roman Emperor declared someone under the imperial ban, he or she would lose all rights and possession. They were legally considered dead and could be killed with impunity. One would be alive, but just as well be dead. Yet oddly cannot be sacrificed to the Gods. One becomes a *homo sacer* - the sacred man. It demarcates the most severe limits within a polity, which precisely correlates to the limits of sovereign power in imposing the ban.

The ban is however itself an aporia. In that it expunges one outside of the sphere of jurisdiction, yet simultaneously captures it within the political order. Creating a zone of indistinction between exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside. Which had led Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to comment that sovereignty only rules over what it is capable of interiorizing. It is in this very exception that the relation of the ban constitutes the immediate referent of sovereignty

essential right to work. And without work, he had nowhere to stay. It was an impossible choice to make and it kept him awake on the last few nights that he had a place to sleep. Lying in bed late into the night, he found it disturbing having gazed into the very fractures borne from the divorce of his reality from law. It was in these gaps that he now saw his life encapsulated. Reality and law spoke different languages, none of which he felt equipped to grasp. That was the legal process and all he could do was be thankful he had a lawyer.

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When they met up again next, the artist asked him and Maalavan to appear in his film. They were reluctant. They weren't keen on making public figures of themselves whatever the agendas of the artist and his film were, which at this point rather eluded them. When the artist explained that the film would address migrant situation in Singapore, all Karrupiah could think of was "why me?" while nodding away. It was odd, like many of his countrymen he too was a fan of cinema, but the idea of appearing on-screen as himself held little appeal.

There was however a catch; the artist offered to pay them to be in the film. So while he had initially dismissed the idea, he nonetheless couldn't rid himself

corresponding to the old Germanic variant of the word that designates both exclusion from the community and the command and insignia of the sovereign.

So what exactly am I getting at? Just the obvious fact that Karrupiah hadn't simply been set outside the law, but *abandoned* altogether. He is, in the words of Agamben, "exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable." It is neither what Agamben calls '*bare life*' - the reduction of life to biopolitics, nor a qualified one. Here, in Karrupiah the originary relationship of law to life is revealed not as application, but abandonment. To be cast out *and* remain at its mercy. It is to be precarious.

Now as most of us are well aware, seeing the world through the lens of theory is a rather embarrassing thing to do. It's probably even worse than prescribing or attempting to apply it into practice within everyday reality. It does however make us sound smart to our friends, especially when you do in fact eloquently draw correlation between theory and reality. But then again it's like proving you have a talent for tragedy, because most symmetries between theory and reality are usually of unfortunate circumstances. Just think about it.

Again, Agamben puts it rather nicely when he remarks that if terminology is to be the properly poetic moment of thought, then terminological choices can never be neutral. Terminological choices are

of it. He couldn't quite concern himself with whatever purpose the film might serve, but the prospect of having money again was tempting. He had absolutely none left to his name, which had in fact, been the case for months now.

Even then, Karrupiah had difficulties coming to terms with his predicament. On the one hand he was absolutely destitute, yet somehow he had found a place to stay, fed two meals a day and occasionally given a travel card for him to move around. He had absolutely no means to procure anything else, which he noticed had the strange effect of removing temptation away from objects he once desired. It felt like he no longer partook in the activities of the city. It was a bare existence that he had come to accept as life.

Now, the artist's offer stirred in him temptations he hadn't felt in a long while. Temptations that seemed to have thoughts of their own. Karrupiah realised he now had a conundrum on his hands. The artist had promised two to three days of filming that paid Karrupiah SGD150 per day. It was a lot of money; especially with his daily expenses already covered he could practically pocket the full sum for himself. Temptation had brought a long-lost luster back to everything he saw. They could well be his. With the money, he could even return for his mother's birthday a month away. It was an offer he felt powerless to accept

incredibly personal. So when I look at Karrupiah and unfortunately think of him as being under a *ban* and having been *abandoned*, it kinda forecloses any likelihood of having a normal human relationship with him. Don't get me wrong, I totally empathise with him, but I also can't quite stop seeing theory through him.

Let's just say, there ain't no bleeding heart here. But theoretically speaking...

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There was something infuriating about Karrupiah's lack of anger. I'm assuming of course that there is some smidgeon of anger within him in light of his very unfair and (shall I state it already?) *Kafkaesque* situation. Btw, did you know that *The Trial* was inspired by an actual case Kafka worked on at the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia? In fact, his job was to investigate and assess compensation for injuries to industrial workers. This is prophetic surreal bureaucratic cyclical hell coming full circle. Yes, people really weren't shitting you when they say a thin line was all that separates comedy from tragedy.

Whatever Karrupiah had, it sure as hell didn't seem like anger. More like a deep profound sadness and loss. There I was trying to goad him into speaking up about his plight (in my film) and all I got was a polite refusal that he dished out with nary any thought. It left me stumped.

or refuse.

Karrupiah was at a loss when finally the artist pushed for his case. Looking ahead, he realised right then that the one thing he had left of worth was his own poverty. He was stupefied. He had to muster all his resolve and finally explain to the artist that he did not have the right to do it. The contract with the Company had included clauses forbidding his involvement on any media that was not authorised by the Company. If the Company were to find out, he would never ever get his compensation.

The artist went silent. His body retreating into himself. It worked. Karrupiah had convinced himself from taking the money. The artist turned to look away, lost and deep in thought. It was something he had never noticed of the artist – a cold and considered seriousness. He wondered how much he had spent the last few weeks scrutinizing him. And then, slowly the artist turns back and looks Karrupiah coldly in the eye, unperturbed he said, “no one needs to find out”.

The delivery so deft, I hardly felt the proverbial bristles as he ever so lightly brushed me off.

At this point, I suppose it's obvious to say that what Karrupiah really wanted was to get his compensation and run. It's disheartening. Deleuze wrote of how Nietzsche when confronted with something ignoble and disgusting would instead find humour in seeing fuel added to fire. Marvelling at how the exacerbation had at last made humanity interesting. It's a good fit for accelerationist art today. Intensifying the horrors of capitalism today does not lead to its implosion, but offers a sense of futility and relief knowing we've hit rock bottom. Though Karrupiah certainly didn't need no accelerationist art to come to that conclusion.

I was ready to step up. I was willing to test his resolve by tempting him with money, which quite frankly felt horrible. Money just isn't something you put out there right from the start. It's just kinda insulting. Of course, so was offering money only after he had said no. It's moments like these that you realise which side of the privilege divide you sit on. It's something I truly hope never to have to do again. Yet sadly at the same time, you'll be surprised what little it took me to put my humanity on the line as I hear him decline the money.

Chapter VI: The Interview, Part II

Karr: This Friday. I'm leaving for India this Friday.

Kent: When are you leaving?

Karr: I'm going to go back to India to seek medical treatment. While my case remains pending in Singapore, I can't visit a hospital. They said that they couldn't help me with my eye so I'm going to try in India to see if anything could be fixed there. I'm going to try to fix it with my own people, with my own doctor.

Kent: You managed to get the payout?

Karr: The Company paid for a one-way trip.

Kent: Who's sponsoring the flight?

Karr: I'm going to wait in India till the case is resolved. Once the case is resolved I will come back to collect the money.

Kent: What about the insurance case? Is it still ongoing?

Karr: I've hired my own lawyer with my own money. Previously the Company was sponsoring me with any legal issue, but the Company also wanted me to sign a disclosure that said it wasn't during the course of duty that I had lost my eyesight. I didn't want to sign it. So once I got my air ticket from the Company, I got out. Now I'm no longer working for the Company, hence I am not getting any representation. It's a pro bono service for now. I looked in the papers and this lawyer was willing to represent me.

Kent: You have someone representing you here?

Kent: What have you been doing during this period?

Karr: I've been doing nothing the last nine months. It's been nine months since the accident. After the accident I was with the Company for three months. After which I left the Company. So it's been six months that I've been unemployed. My job scope varied on a day-to-day basis. On the day of the accident my boss asked me to fix the car battery that blew up in my face.

Kent: Have you been moving around much?

Karr: No, because I don't have the funds. From time to time a friend helps me out and brings me out. It's only then that I get to go out. Other than that I have to stay in simply because I don't have the funds. If I stay in I get meals. If I go out I'm on my own. I would rather not incur the cost.

Kent: Do you feel you've been treated fairly?

Karr: The Company generally treated me well. They said that my eyesight would be restored based on the doctor's diagnosis. I would recover my vision after one month. When that did not happen, I required a lot of assistance with regards to mobility – going to the toilet, going to the room – because I started to have double vision. What they tried to do was to close my case without incurring any further payments. Getting me to sign a disclosure that meant I agreed that the injury did not occur during work with my Company. When I chose not to sign and left the Company.

Kent: How do you feel about it?

Karr: Generally they treated me

well. They bought me food. They took care of me. However, after the incident things soured and when they tried to coerce me to sign this disclosure I wasn't too happy about it. I tried means and ways to tell them that I would sign it, but to let me have somebody else vet it first. They insisted that I should sign it immediately.

Kent: What are your plans when you go back?

Karr: I am going to rest for a while. I'll seek medical treatment first. Maybe I will be out of work for a couple of months, because I want to see what I can do for my eye. After that when I'm more certain of my situation I'll look for work.

Chapter VII: Zoē / Bios

Karrupiah was surprised to see the message on his mobile. The artist wanted to meet.

~

It was Tuesday. The artist arrived at the shelter with his friend. This time round he had two bags of foodstuff in tow. Packs of butter crackers and jumbo packs of instant Milo. It was an odd choice Karrupiah thought, if ever there was a modest pairing of food *that* would be it. Oh, there were also instant noodles.

They sat on the common room floor. The artist and his friend, Karrupiah and Maalavan, side by side facing each another. Karrupiah was surprised how these sessions with the artist now had a familiarity of its own. Though the mood was different that day. For maybe the first (and only) time, the artist had seemed genuinely casual. Almost at ease. Perhaps realising Karrupiah was leaving soon, the interview no longer felt like a tediously long persuasion. Karrupiah was glad. He felt little need to choose his words. In the months after his accident, in his many exchanges with the Company, lawyers, officials, volunteers and the artist, he has had to learn the many nuances in avoiding disputes by first making his own claims indisputably. Speaking to

It seems frivolous to begin by stating this, but I genuinely like the word *zoē*. First of all, it has a nice ring to it and second, nice words starting with “Z” are almost a rarity. End of frivolity. Now all this came to an end when I finally learnt of its origins in ancient Greek. Here’s the very quick lowdown on the word.

The Greeks didn’t have one single word that encapsulated what we would mean in the word “life”. They instead used two terms, *zoē* and its more famous counterpart, *bios*. *Zoē* for its part indicates the simple fact of living, whether it is a fish, blade of grass, your pesky neighbor or a god. Seems rather egalitarian a word doesn’t it? Now hold that thought for a second. *Bios* refer to a form of living proper to an individual or a group. It denotes a *qualified life*. Aristotle in opposing the bare fact of living (*zoē*) against the politically qualified life (*bios*) proved fundamental to the political traditions of the West. It is in this very dialectic that we arrive upon the notion of *bare life*. It is a life that is diminished, reduced to its exigencies and included in the polis only to not have a place within it. It was Karrupiah.

assert yet exposing as little of oneself in the process. Speech was now a form of verbal gymnastics.

As you would assume, Karrupiah hadn't always been upfront with the artist. Karrupiah had spent months refusing the artist's request before he had outwardly asked. Little by little he steered the conversations to minimise his involvement. If anything, he had kept up these sessions only out of gratitude towards HOME. The artist *must* have realised. That of course never stopped the artist from hurling questions at him at any given chance. That day though, Karrupiah could feel himself opening up to the artist. It was a refreshing change to his months of protracted guardedness. He was set to leave, what was there to lose? Well, just his temper, as he found out when the artist asked, "If it was all worth it?"

It seemed like an innocent straightforward question, yet Karrupiah found himself hesitant to answer. He could have easily said yes and moved on, but he found something dubious about it. He was still in debt. He had earned nothing despite wasting a year there. He might gain a considerable sum of compensation, but that was perilously hinged upon the blindness on his eye. The idea that this was all a mere transaction for his left eye infuriated him.

Thanks to philosophy, "Zoē" seems much less an attractive word now.

~

I had unfinished business with Karrupiah. There was something incredibly unsatisfying about my last (in fact, all) meetings with him and something was just gnawing at me. I phoned Peter up to help with one last interview on Tuesday. Unfortunately it was a workday, which meant that I owed my advertising executive friend big time. Frankly, I was surprised he even said yes. I suppose somewhere along the way he must have struck up an appreciation for Karrupiah. Man didn't say it, but you could tell. I should have known there was something fishy with his translating.

We met up and bought some food for Karrupiah before going to the shelter. Peter was berating me and calling me cheap for only doing this now. He paid up at the cashier before I could and when I offered to pay him back, he just smirked at me. What can I say, dude's got heart beneath those bling-bling.

~

I couldn't wrap my head around how Karrupiah had dealt with the whole situation. He's been half-blinded, refused rightful compensation, made homeless and dependent while waiting for his case to be heard. If Lady Justice was the face of law, it makes you wonder what the face of bureaucracy might

Karrupiah was by now enraged. He called the artist a fool in a sudden, unrestrained surge of anger. He was vitriol. The anger so intense it felt like bodily violence, leaving everyone stupefied, particularly the artist. No one knew what to say. Karrupiah couldn't really tell what happened right after; his mind, singed with rage had blanked out on him. It seems redundant to point it out now, but he had been angry for months. Slowly he tried to gather himself. This eruption of emotion had left him utterly weak. Feeling rueful he says to the artist, "When I am here, life's only possibility was work. After the accident happened, there was nothing. The only possibility is to go back." It's a clumsy translation, but that was that.

There was, to be honest, no clearer moment to part ways. His departure had begun with his need to exorcise himself of this place. The tension died down, but a thick musk of awkwardness hung over the space. Slowly, the artist stood up as he apologised. It was right then that Karrupiah noted that there wasn't any sound recorder today. He realised this was probably the one real conversation that he had with the artist.

Karrupiah looked on as the artist and his friend walked down the staircase. He'll have nothing more to do with them he thought. He closed the door behind him and retreated back into the common room. Picking up his two bags of

be. What had happened to him was by no means just and yet there he was talking to us jovial and in good spirits seated across Peter and me. Don't get me wrong; I'm happy he is going back to India. Even though his case remains pending, I'm sure he'd take solace just being with his family again. Still I couldn't make sense of this. I can't. That's when it dawned on me what I was doing there. If I couldn't rationalise the situation then at the very least I needed some emotional closure. And that's how you make that very mistake in equating someone's life with a value and end up asking stupid questions.

What else was I suppose to do, take refuge in a position of pessimism? That's a horrible thought. I read an interview by Agamben lately. He talked about how Guy Debord (a figure never far from his thoughts) would often cite a letter of Marx, saying that 'the hopeless conditions of the society in which I live fill me with hope'. Agamben continues, "Any radical thought always adopts the most extreme position of desperation. Simone Weil said 'I do not like those people who warm their hearts with empty hopes'. Thought, for me, is just that: the courage of hopelessness. And is that not the height of optimism?"

I suppose what he's saying is to go seek a lost cause and fight it. Strand oneself in pessimism yet remain cocooned in an unassailable optimism. Sounds like a tantalising and valiant idea and a lot like martyrdom. Also sounds hard. It'll take a helluva emotional temperament to keep oneself

food, he wondered what finally made the artist do this. The goodwill was frankly too little too late. He had no time left to go through the food in his last days here. He reckons he'll have to leave it for the others in the shelter. Still, they looked appealing.

In the past, every once in a while when it rained and when his foreman was in a good mood, he'd buy them all drinks from a nearby coffeeshop. Rain pouring and having to idle time away; the drink would somehow soothe the edges off everyone's anxiety. The drinks were by no means a pleasure, but they did always taste sweet. Karrupiah took pause at that thought. It dawned on him that the food might not be for him at all.

from constantly drowning in anger and frustration. Definitely too big a call for me.

I can't deny I felt a pang of relief while I look on in shock as Karrupiah finally broke from his usual peaceful demeanor. It had been a long time coming. Truth be told, whatever might happen along the way, you'll find few migrants that will tell you that their time here has been a bad experience. It wasn't just Karrupiah. I guess there's really no point in doing that. I haven't kept up with him since then. Honestly didn't even try to find out what the outcome of his settlement was. I suppose that's rather callous on my part, though I doubt he'll care too much. On that note, I guess it's time now I stopped writing about him.