

“In the contiguous yet mutually distanced lives of his characters, *Aporia* assembles a space that is at once recognizable and oddly attenuated of ground. Tang’s youthful ‘voyage out’ from a middle-class Singaporean childhood to a university education in England is recalled through humour, ambivalence and, perhaps most memorably, the vague, outspread bruise of home-sickness — captured from a distance, Tang’s localised identity is recovered for readers as both true and obsolete. Tang’s suspended voice intersects with the belated self-discoveries of Professor K, who must undertake his own journey inwards, during the banalities of an academic conference on Homer in Athens. Through the prismatic worlds of Tang and K, dramas of domesticity and displacement are recovered as reflections of each other – in deceptively slender characterizations and through lapidary prose, Clive En-Kai enfolds his readers into a peculiarly evacuated, yet always familiar world of departure and recovery.”

- Tania Roy, Assistant Professor, English Literature, National University of Singapore

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Aporia

a novella

by Clive En-Kai

Aporia is a Greek philosophical concept that means an impasse in inquiry, usually involving triangulation between two strands of argument – pushing the subject into states of doubt and limbo – with or without the possibility of transcendence.

Chapter 1

Two Men Lay In Bed Just Before Midnight

*As the church bell began to toll,
a voice said, "Did you just tremble?"*

"I was falling," a second voice replied.

*"Funny." The voice waited for the fading of that toll.
"I can hear you breathe."*

The church bell hammered on, on – each one a nail into the obdurate body. *Then the knelling stopped.* They listened... to the echoes as they broke upon the deserted street. Trailing further and further away...

like death, thought K –
like a patient etherised upon a table –

but he only wished to dive through time to morning – to the *place* where he would know what to do – *there*, to rush between the bathroom and the kitchen, shifting this, shifting that, till time – in its trilling way – subdivided the minutes at the close of a car door whilst *he* continued to linger with

an espresso in hand; aware that he would have to leave the house for the university in fifteen minutes.

Those fifteen minutes.

God, he really felt it.

The punctured air oppressed him.

Every minute lingered like an unyielding ghost, insisting on making its inimical presence known. It was there when he touched the basin rag, there when he tapped his fingers on the rosewood. As if he needed the approval of the house to leave it.

You, House, I'll be back to put you in place, he could have said.

Then, in the evening, he would be the first to return. And upon entering through the front door, the usual need for something:

Water. Lights. Radio 3.

Jumpstarting the house was easy. He would let the water run, let it 'keep an eye', till he felt safe to spend a few solitary moments with *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in the next room. And, true: he might have been desperate for the last downed light of dusk. The fogged window-panes might have irked him. But it was only slowly that he realized: *his House had begun to slip!* Closing the cover, he would also be aghast by his shadow's commingling with the growing patina of darkness over the house.

He promptly turned on the light.

Another time...

... he heard movements.

He came to the living room, expecting to find J reaching for his usual glass of milk. But there was no one at the kitchen counter. No one in the bathroom. He called out J's name in the manner of a question. Twice the double vision scuttled across the silent floor. After inspecting the rooms, he found that the house was empty as an extirpated shell.

K knew there would always be times like these.

He learned to develop a sixth sense for them.

Once, in the study, while treating the leather sofa with mink oil, he was suddenly drawn to a photograph on the low shelf. He ignored it at first. He ignored it for as long as he could before picking up the wooden frame. Looking long and hard at the smiling faces of two men – who could be in London, Paris, or a Lancashire backyard – he knew that it wouldn't matter if nobody knew that they had turned the camera on themselves at the St. Mark's Basilica. That it was their first trip to the Continent. Or that he somehow remembered it was he who had taken the photo whilst facing the blinding sun.

Now, the faces seemed entirely estranged from the way he remembered them. To the point he felt nothing

You are not one of the two men. You are not.

Confounded by the colorlessness of it all, he replaced the photograph on the low shelf and returned to his chores.

J would be home.

There would be dinner.

For hours, they would resume their natural roles at separate tables – the professor (with glasses hanging halfway down his nose at the rosewood) and the accountant (with glasses sitting on his forehead at the mahogany). They would read. Occasionally, one of them would detect the smell of mink oil, wondering where that came from. But they would continue to read under the fluorescence from their green lamps.

All this time, who knew what the bed was doing in the dark?

Surely, it anticipated the two men who lay there daily at midnight?

It repeated an hour ago. It would be repeated.
Midnight after midnight.

Chapter 2

Place Like a Foreign Ship on Still Waters

A humming.

Across the table, Pamela. “What time?”

At first he went on staring at his hand.

“I need to check the schedule in my room.”

Louder. “What is it?” He felt like a buoy anchored by a deadweight in this desiccated room, which probably explained why he needed to leave.

“Tang, will you come?” Pamela was still staring. “Sainsbury’s has everything, I swear.” *The humming as pressing as...* “Wednesday?” ... *the words...* “Why Wednesday?” ... *falling into a hole.* “The free shuttles come to campus on Wednesdays. I just said.”

Wednesdays.

“Mind if I leave now?”

He noticed it for the first time when he heard her groan.

Shuffling down the stairwell, Tang reproached himself for walking out on Pamela like that. The doubts, the disappointments and the uncertainties of starting life as an international student could not be easy on her either! Emerging from the exit with a firm push of the door, he did not stop, not even at the sudden eructation of cool

air. Instead, he strode briskly down the cloistered walkway towards Bowland, hugging himself against the wind that was slicing at his face...

... and fossilizing his cheeks.

A foreign chill.

That, he realized, defined a sort of distance. For he was slowly forgetting the everlasting summer of Singapore. *The sting of heat on his skin. The irksome humidity. Even the relentless monsoon showers in September.*

When the desolate University Square came into view, he realized that he must have made a wrong turn at the Bowland archway. Standing before these steps, he was not sure what to do. Should he retrace his way to Pamela's college? Or should he stay on at this deserted Square, which was now hosting winds from the Pennines? Looking at the ghoulish patterns that were flickering on the ground, he realized that it was just like a scene from Victorian novels. And it did lend itself to the creation of a foreboding atmosphere. The wuthering wind continued to sweep across the Square with alien ferocity, whipping up a frenetic air.

He decided.

Moving across the Square, he headed for the library. It was where he knew he could find an old friend – in a passage, a phrase, a word. Sometimes, in the most intense prose, he could even find a home in the cadence of a sentence.

Coming to the philosophy section on the third floor, he found himself greeted with shelves and shelves of books that were cloaked in utter darkness.

He knew what he had to do.

Walking between the aisles, the sensor was triggered; fluorescent lights came on, giving a myriad of colors to the books. The permission to be touched.

Watching his hand move along the book spines, Tang doubted his ability to read.

Aesthetic and the Looks of Things. Against the Tranquility of Axioms. Analysis of Perception. Writing in the Margins. He picked out the latter, and considered its cover for a second before putting it back. *Anaxagoras and the Birth of Physics. Approaches to a Philosophical Biology.* He picked out *Human Identity and Bioethics*, turned to its contents page, and flipped to the chapter that said *Identity, What We Are, and the Definition of Death*. After reading a page from it, he replaced the book on the shelf. *The Art of the Soluble*. What did it mean? *Bolzano's Logic*. Who's Bolzano? The first article began with a quote:

“The old forms of existence have worn out, so to speak, and the new ones have not yet appeared and people are prospecting as it were in the desert for new forms.”

Saul Bellow

Tang took a deep breath.

What did it mean: the old forms of existence have worn out?

He tried to ignore the sound of silence that was buzzing in his ears. He thought about his ‘worn-out’ existence. He tried to remember the only existence he knew before he came to Lancaster. For sure, he missed his family and his friends. But naming was laborious. When listed: durians, kuehs, sambal stingray, laksa... the list became exhaustive, *false*.

If this was nostalgia, would it take the shape of a ‘desert’?, he wondered. Was being marooned on an infinite mass of shifting sands similar to what he was feeling now?

Panting heavily, the loner looked for an oasis, hoping to find something that was humanly erected, a “new form”.

Clutching the book close to his chest, Tang began to walk into the darkness which lit at his approach: *after all, only a portion of its effects gets to stay. Reading a book about identity, I feel myself a convert of existentialism. My Being is one moment impenetrable and stable, in another, at the approach of an acquaintance, liquefied. How long can one stand still in remembrance before the next tide sets in – and what will it be? It is this fatiguing uncertainty that is the real point of Being.*

Perhaps the haecceity of self cannot be reached.

Coming out of the library, Tang found himself back in the Square where dead leaves formed a careless pattern on the ground.

From the far side, a dark figure glided across the Square. It flickered in the wind for a second before disappearing into the Bowland archway. The chill reminded him once more of his foreignness in this desert.

He stood still and looked on.

Such a place. Such a forlorn space.

Chapter 3

The Titular Room In The Morning

The key fit.

The key turned.

09:30 on the desk clock.

Yesterday’s labor had vanished from the bright room...

As if one had never been.

Placing his briefcase on the table, he began to rearrange the files. As he flipped the books to their dog-eared pages, he toyed with the idea of discontinuing the research he had been working on for the past – *how many years?* – wondering if it mattered when the day came for him to abandon his work. Even if it ended his career.

But the day had not arrived.

He opened his briefcase and searched for his notepad.

Lowering himself into the black armchair, he leaned back on the headrest and began to read the last entry. *Yes, it was coming back.* He had to determine the latin root of that word. The Dante lecture was rescheduled for 10:30 – *where were the notes?* Looking at his table, the sight of loose sheets of paper conjured the mental image of a desert, demarcated by a clear division of sand and sky. In the distance, a man in