A Soft Slab of Fresh Clay: Musings on a Broken Land and a Funny Piece of Water

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> We are on a southbound journey, the train frenzied then slow starts to crawl along the faintest of littorals; to the East the earth loosens into mud, to the West the view is cool, blue, leached. The rocky leeward buffer to the East starts to disintegrate in the killing heat; now we are on a flat plain the width of a shimmering needle. The run off to the West which reduces solids to silt is in Hunan; the shabby dun-coloured water is the Gulf of Thailand. The sea to the East, buffered from the monsoon, retaining its leached blue coolness, is the Andaman. Prachuap Khiri Khan is the prelude to a knife-edge—the world's most narrow peninsula—where the train seems to hurtle along nothing. The Indian and PacificOceans could collide and engulf this littoral at any moment. The train that moves between seems barely connected to this earth like a "tightrope"; the railway track is a "flat thin wire." (71)

This is the start to the title story of Rattawut Lapcharoensap's collection, *Sightseeing*. A dramatization of the porous border which separates the Indian Ocean from the Asian Pacific, Lapcharoensap's story sets the tone for an exploration of a complex linkage of landmasses and islands which we've learnt to explain away as Southeast Asia. A geographical region whose distinguishing factor is the fungible and permeable relation of land to water, Southeast Asia, as it is understood here, is an imaginary zone defined first and foremost by the littoral. This is most strikingly affirmed by the fact that the interconnectedness of these islands supposes a maritime culture; that is, a culture defined primarilyby a set of watery or amphibian relations. This consciousness may have been repressed with the emergent sovereignty of air

travel and satellite technology; nevertheless, it remains that transactions across water, far more than those inland, have defined human contact and cultural meaning, so much so that the historian, Fernand Braudel, defines the shallow waters between the Indian and the Pacific the "human ocean" (256-7).

The phrase is a poignantly apt one, for it attests to a pre-modern symbiosis which, I argue, allows for a potent episteme or socio-cultural imaginary. This episteme, after the maritime historian, Michael Pearson, I've dubbed an "amphibian world." This world, defined by the embrace or snare of land and water, yields a way of explaining place and being which cannot be satisfactorily fixed by monadic regional formulations or belated nationalistic ones; rather, to read the interconnectedness of this world requires that admixture which Gaston Bachelard in *Water and Dreams* calls *la pate*. The admixture of earth and water, *la pate* forges a

> truly intimate materialism, in which shape is supplanted, effaced, dissolved. It presents the problems of materialism in their elementary forms, since it relieves our intuition of any worry about shape. The problem of form is given a secondary role. The union of earth and water provides an elemental experience with matter. (104)

Bachelard, here, anticipates Gilles Deleuze's notion of a geophilosophy, a geography of flows, for central to his thesis is the conceptualization of a materialism which precedes form. Anti-positivist, Bachelard's aim is to think between liquid and solid, and, so doing, give priority to liquid. "In this union (*la pate*) the role of water is obvious," he says.

> When the moulding is in progress, the worker can go on to consider the particular nature of the earth, the flour or the plaster; but at the beginning of his work, his first thought is for water. Water is his first auxiliary. It is through the action of water that the first reverie of the worker who moulds begins. Therefore it should not seem surprising that water is dreamed in active ambivalence. There is no reverie without ambivalence, no ambivalence without reverie. Now water is dreamed by turns in its role as softener and as binder. It separates, and it binds together. (104-5)

The priority which Bachelard gives to water is, I believe, vital to the understanding of a Southeast Asian maritime culture, for it is principally through water that we can best grasp the subtle admixture which makes up its

imaginary, or, after Bachelard, the "ontological density of oneiric life" (106). Located in the viscous world between liquid and solid, between the material and the formal, the imaginary I seek to convey Bachelard terms mesomorphic:

> The objects of mesomorphic dream take form only with great difficulty, and then they lose it; they collapse like soft clay (pate). To the sticky, pliable, lazy, sometimes phosphorescent—but not luminous—object corresponds, I believe, the great ontological density of the oneiric life. Those dreams in which we dream of clay are by turns struggle or defeat in the effort to create, form, deform, or mould. As Victor Hugo says: 'Everything loses its shape, even the shapeless.' (106)

Increasingly it is Bachelard who steers us to a better understanding not only of a Southeast Asian imaginary, an imaginary of the Eastern Seas, but also of the aesthetic such an imaginary provokes or inspires; for in turning to the writings of Rattawut Lapcharoensap, Joseph Conrad, and Angela Carter (whose focus is Japan), we will discover the repeated struggle with fixity or clear delineation. Rather, in each of these writers we find, after Bachelard, that "the eye itself, pure vision, becomes tired of looking at solids. It needs to dream of deforming. If sight really accepts the freedom of dreams, everything melts in a living intuition" (106).

This assertion is strikingly corroborated by Conrad for whom the "EasternSeas" provided "the greatest number of suggestions" (131). In *TheShadow-Line* he describes this viscous region as "a funny piece of water." Conrad qualifies as follows: "Funny, in this connection, was a vague word. The whole thing sounded like an opinion uttered by a cautious person mindful of actions of slander" (43). The word funny, here, suggests something queer rather than derisive; indeed, the word queer is repeated in *The Shadow-Line* to connote a state which is cognitively blurred. The reason for this, I'd suggest, lies in Conrad's apprehension of this "region of broken land" (42) as a place which, like the title of his novella—shadow-line—is caught in a distinctively amphibian world. This is stridently evident in Conrad's description of the river banks of Thailand's capitol, Bangkok:

> An expanse of brown houses of bamboo, of mats, of leaves, of a vegetable-matter style of architecture, sprung out of the brown soil on the banks of the muddy river. It was amazing to think that

> in those miles of human habitations there was not probably half a dozen nails. Some of those houses of sticks and grass, like the nests of an aquatic race, clung to the low shores. Others seem to grow out of the water; others again floated in long anchored rows in the very middle of the stream. (46)

Conrad, of course, is writing *The Shadow-Line* in 1916. Bangkok has changed. And yet Conrad's vision of "houses of sticks and grass, like the nests of an aquatic race" prevails, not merely, I would add, at an ontological level but also at a psychic or oneiric one. Responding to the charge that *The Shadow-Line* is informed by the supernatural, Conrad counters as follows:

> All my moral and intellectual being is penetrated by an invincible conviction that what falls under the dominion of our senses must be in nature and, however exceptional, cannot differ in its essence from all the other effects of the visible and tangible world of which we are a self-conscious part. (129)

It is here that Conrad anticipates Bachelard for whom dream and intuition is indissolubly linked as matter and as the deep structure of cultural expression. The charge lodged against Conrad that *The Shadow-Line* traffics in the supernatural is comparable to the charge lodged against Salvador Dali; a charge which Bachelard insightfully challenges:

> The "soft watches" of Salvador Dali stretch and drain from a corner of a table. They live in a sticky space-time. Like generalized clepsydras, they make flow an object subjected directly to the temptations of monstrosity. Let anyone meditate on *The Conquest of the Irrational* and he will understand that this pictorial Heracliteanism is dependent upon a reverie of astonishing sincerity. Such profound deformations must engrave the deformation in the substance…. These deformations are often imperfectly understood because they are seen statically. Certain *entrenched* critics too easily take them for inanities. They do not live out the deep oneiric strength found in them; they do not participate in the imagination of rich viscosity that grants, sometimes in a wink, the benefits derived from a divine deliberateness. (106)

It is not a metaphysic of which Conrad is speaking when he privileges the dominion of the senses within nature. Then again, neither is he speaking of a

kind of positivistic or empirical physic. Rather, like Bachelard, Conrad seeks that viscous and fungible world between the liquid and the solid—*la pate*. Both a material culture and a philosophy, *lapate* is defined first and foremost by the musculature and sensuousness of flows: '[The] hold which water has on matter cannot be fully understood if one is satisfied with visual observation. Tactile observation must be added to it" (107). By moving between the eye and the hand—the scopic and the haptic—Bachelard, like Conrad, seeks to draw our attention to quite another reverie:

> This reverie, which is born out of working with soft substances (pates), is also necessarily correlated with a special will for power, with the masculine joy of penetrating a substance, feeling the inside of substances, knowing the inside of seeds, conquering the earth intimately, as water conquers earth, rediscovering an elemental force, taking part in the struggle of the elements, participating in the force that dissolves without recourse. Then begin the binding action and the moulding, whose slow but regular progress brings a special joy that is less satanic than the joy of the union of earth and water. Another duration is then engraved into matter, an uninterrupted, steady, never-ending duration. This duration, then, is not formed. It does not have the different resting places provided by successive stages that contemplation finds in working with solids. This duration is a substantial becoming, a becoming from within. (107-8)

It is within this striking passage that we may find what I've termed a Southeast Asian cultural materialism, or rather, an ontological and oneiric imaginary informed by the shattered littoral which links the Indian Ocean to the Asian Pacific. Bachelard, of course, is not referring to this region with its broken land and funny piece of water, and yet, by probing more deeply, one can draw the connections I seek to make. What Bachelard terms "a special will for power" suggests the kind of aesthetic I find operative in the writing of Lapcharoensap, Conrad, and Carter, who, while stemming from markedly different points on this earth, nevertheless converge when attempting to write the region. This convergence stems from an acute sense of viscosity; of a cryptic relation between land and water that suspends a dialectical coherence of these elements. It is this resistance to dialectical closure which produces quite another notion of duration; a duration that precedes, impels, and disperses form. Because the apprehension is never quite objective, it is the *action* of seeing

which assumes ascendance; an action which—after Heraclitus and anticipating Deleuze—invokes duration not as a teleological process of accumulation but as an immanent and substantive act of becoming. What Bachelard brings before us, therefore, is an evocatively non-positivistic and non-dialectical conception of time, being, and creativity. At the core of this conception lies what I have termed a peculiarly amphibian episteme. This episteme, I've suggested, is not one that can be gratuitously dispatched by "entrenched" critics as something merely surreal or supernatural. Rather, after Raymond Williams, what Bachelard assists us in recognizing is quite another "structure of feeling".

If we are to effectively grasp this broken land with its funny piece of water, therefore, we will have to affirm the compelling indeterminacy of the relation of land to water; a relation, defined principally by clay, which, after Bachelard, informs its "dynamic hand" (108). This dynamism, this duration, is not merely a matter of geography; rather it informs and gives shape to the region's very consciousness and imagination. This is a large claim indeed. Returning to a latter day writer, Lapcharoensap, we find that his story, "Sightseeing," reaffirms my thesis. His Thai peninsula is a fragile isthmus which at any moment could be engulfed by a flanked oceanic upheaval. This fragility is looped all the more deftly into the psychological content or journey of the story. The journey it recounts is that of a mother and son, the mother a victim of a "migraine-induced retinal detachment" (77). They are from Bangkok; the trip is their first together; it may be their last. At any moment the mother could lose her sight; the threat of blindness, like the frenzied experience of the train along a dwindling spine, the possibility of a deluge, leaves little room for composure. If the mother is threatened physically, the son is psychically unstuck. Having cancelled her job for good—she'd never missed a day—the mother decides on the only destination she knows: Koh Lukmak. She wants to go there because her ex-boss has had a picture of Koh Lukmak on the office bulletin board for years. The son recounts:

> Ma said she wanted to see what all the fuss was about. The fine sand. The turquoise water. The millions of fishes swimming in the shallow. Her boss had called it paradise, and though I remember Ma telling me as a child that Thailand was only a paradise for fools and farangs, for criminals and foreigners, she's willing to give it a chance now. If paradise is really out there, so close to home, she might as well go and see for herself. (72)

That is if she can make it; actually arrive in time to *see* it. The story may be called "Sightseeing"; the question remains whether it will stay true to its boast. "Sightseeing, Ma said when we bought our tickets at the station in Bangkok. We'll be like farangs. We'll be just like the tourists" (72).

The irony sticks like a mote in the eye: the indigene going blind, becoming a foreigner. For if nothing had physically happened to her, then their lives, says the son, would have followed "their ordinary course, we would never have taken the time to notice such sights" (73). But theirs is no ordinary course; the decision to see has come at a price. The mother decides she needs a pair of "Real" Armani sunglasses. The question is whether they are real or fake. A price war ensues; she eventually gets what she wants at a price she would never otherwise have paid. They're still cheap; it's just that prior to this strange new course her life has taken she's never bargained. Now she wears her Armani's, smokes a pack of Benson & Hedges a day—another new development—and looks like a movie star: a farang.

With this daily minted self she pushes forward, closer to the picture postcard in her head. Like the foreigner she is developing an inner eye; seeing things she trains herself to see. Unlike the foreigner, however, the role the mother assumes is mock-narcissistic and mock-solipsistic. She is not the European tourist in Angela Carter's Tokyo story, "Flesh and the Mirror":

> And I moved through these expressionist perspectives in my black dress as though I was the creator of all and of myself, too, in a black dress, in love, crying, walking through the city in the third person singular, my own heroine, as though the world stretched out from my eye like spokes from a sensitized hub that galvanized all to life when I looked at it. (62)

If Carter's protagonist recognizes the absurdity of her solipsism it doesn't stop her from playing the femme fatale in her own picture-show. For Lapcharoensap's mother the movie reel has no lead and no focus. A bold expressionist perspective is killing for her; the world, spinning in and out of focus, pivots on no centre; bruising obstacles hurtle towards her; she has to watch her every move, or better, feel it. Her only remaining option is a vitrectomy: "taking [the] eyes out of their sockets, soldering the fallen retina back to the vitreous, putting them back in again" (77). Given the cost of flying a surgeon in from Singapore this is not an option. She chooses a holiday instead.

To get to Koh Lukmak they have to go via Trawen, an ex-penal colony. The sightseeing tour is starting to feel like a game of monopoly in which a life of comfort built on capital has its double, incarceration. Trawen is where "the government sent con men, Royalists, dissident writers, and communists" (89). After a prison rebellion in which the inmates murder the authorities the prisoners are left to die, their rations cut off; the naval patrol bar the *chaolay*—the sea gypsies—from coming to their rescue. This happens in the 40's. Now fishermen talk of "fires in the hills at night, tiny orange flames flickering out across the open sea, the rebels—or perhaps their children; or perhaps their ghosts—waiting to return to the mainland" (90), while the mother moves outward, away; a reverse journey; a voluntary exile she calls a holiday; she who does not possess a fisherman's keen eye, who barely sees what's in front of her.

She never gets to Koh Lukmak, her ex-boss's paradise with its glittering fish. They take a bungalow on the west side of Trawen, "a small crescent beach far away from the farangs" (93). The mock-identification with the foreign tourist is over; there is just her and her son, the memory of a failed rebellion, resignation. For the mother there is nothing tragic in this. Each day she works to reassure her son, while he struggles to understand what she is going through. Sinking beneath the water's surface, the son notes: "An indistinct seafloor rises up to meet me. I crash into the sand. Perhaps, I think, this is what Ma must feel in the grips of her oncoming blindness. These indistinct visions. These fragmented hues. This weightlessness" (94).

The separation could prove irrevocable. In the distance he sees his mother; he hopes she can see him: "I want to believe that she's waving back, that the red and the black flutter is the sign of a mother waving to her son. It's me, Ma. Me. I'm swimming back to shore" (95).

With its hunger and its sense of loss this moment triggers the story's closing movement. Later that night the boy wakes up to discover that his mother is gone. Stepping out of the bungalow he sees that it is dark and quiet. In the distance there is a lone "flickering flame, bright and orange, throbbing in the distance, moving across the surface of the sea" (97). Immediately the boy thinks of dead prisoners, fishermen's sightings, before he realizes that it is his mother he sees holding an oil lantern, that the tide has receded.

> The flame of the oil lantern gets smaller and smaller and soon it is merely a pinprick against the dark night. *It's my mother walking on water*, I think. It moves sideways now, moves along the bottom

> of the dark shadow across the bay, comes to a resting place. *It's my mother on an island with no name.*
>
> I walk towards the water, towards the flickering light. The flame is like an orange eye winking at me from across the divide. The sand is damp, soft as a slab of fresh clay, my feet sinking into its warmth as I walk.
>
> When I come upon the water's edge, I realize there is still considerable distance between where I am standing and the light of Ma's lantern on the island across the bay. Perhaps the water is shallow enough to walk across, but I remember from swimming here yesterday that the bottom quickly falls away and that my mother is not a very strong swimmer.
>
> And then I see it. I see a thin luminous line out of the corner of my eye. I see a thread running faintly across the bay. An opaque sandbar stretched between the islands like an exposed vein.
>
> I walk toward the sandbar, across the beach, my eyes fixed on the flame. I see that the path is no more than a meter wide, a white trail running across the surface of the water. The black sky turns a deep indigo, night slowly relenting to day, and I can make out my mother's small shape sitting beside the flickering lantern. I'm walking onto the sandbar, warm waves licking up across my bare feet, out to watch the sun rise with Ma, and then to bring her back before the tide heaves, before the ocean rises, before this sand becomes the seafloor again. (98-99)

"Sightseeing" introduces a number of concerns: There is sight, with its links to site and therefore the object seen; there is sight as an act and a cognitive impulse for seeing. Then again, given that the story hangs on the inevitability of sight's collapse, there is the matter of retinal detachment; the eye's disassociation from a world which can and cannot be seen.

The turbulence which Lapcharoensap factors into the scopic drive also accounts for another dimension: a dissatisfaction with objectives and with objectification; with the eye as the extension of a controlling consciousness. Instead, in the story it is the trouble with seeing which matters the more; a trouble mirrored by the erratic movement of Lapcharoensap's southbound train with its "windows rattling in their frames" (71); a carefully crafted detail which anticipates the story's core: retinal detachment.

Without a designated moment one can anticipate, the mother's incipient blindness and the fleeting possibilities for sight, point to yet another dimension: a stumbling upon insight. In this way objectivity, like a window rattling in its frame, an eye detached from its socket, becomes ungrounded, loose, open. Or, like Lapcharoensap's train with its erratic shifts in speed, its precarious plunge southward, across a strip of earth as narrow as a tightrope, a needle, a thin flat wire, this paper chooses as its contact zone those littoral formations—coast, island, swamp, peninsula, reef—which provoke unsettlement and invoke an altered perceptual state.

I have already noted the importance of the interplay of blindness-and-insight; the problem with objectivity and the need to skew its processes of operation. Nevertheless, it seems that a need for an object persists, in this case a resistant object; an object which resists its sighting, for littorals such as a coastline, island, isthmus, mangrove, swamp, reef, are never easily explainable. Irrespective of their naming or their cartographic fixing, these are geographies, physical and imaginary, that are always fungible, permeable, as the maritime historian, M.N. Pearson, reminds us, and therefore prove impossible to satisfactorily delimit. Thrust beyond cognitive strategies of containment, these littoral regions force us to find another process or operation through which they can be interpreted.

This is the business of Lapcharoensap's story. At the very outset one feels the fragility of the train, the fragility of those who inhabit it; the visceral sensation of the ground falling beneath one's feet. It is this sensation, akin to nausea, which the son later sees as "weightlessness." This sensation leads to the story's closing movement which, shifting in and out of clarity, brings us to the "luminous line" seen askance from the corner of the son's eye. The luminous line is a sandbar. Governed by the tides the sandbar shifts between earth surface and seafloor. At the moment the son rediscovers his mother the tide has plunged, disgorging a walkable surface which is damp and "soft as a slab of fresh clay" (97). Pliant, the clay-like sand beckons invention; creation; a texture that could become text. A substance both liquid and solid, the soft slab of fresh clay begs a mutation that is psychic and imaginative. Rather like Diane Johnson's "Great Barrier Reef" with its spongy "sucking and opening and closing" (21), the sandbar is a littoral engrossed in a delicate and intimate dialogue with earth and water. For Gaston Bachelard and Michael Pearson it is a dialogue that begs a new notion of being-as-becoming; a notion the first terms *la pate*, the second amphibian.

Treading this amphibian world, Lapcharoensap converts it into not only into the moment for artistry—he is writing a story after all—but into a moment towards which his story has been yearning: the moment when the son sees through encroaching blindness and recovers a love for a mother he must learn to protect. Arriving at the moment, it is crucial that the reader know that its possibility stems from the passing stage of the littoral—the sandbar—which, because it is fungible, permeable, allows for a momentary yet critical crossing. Earth floor and sea floor, the sandbar, like the seashore, the beach, or any other littoral zone, is a thing as substantive as it is ephemeral, which will separate as easily as it will connect. In Lapcharoensap's case it yields a promise of reunion. However, the sentiment is never cheap. Rather, both littorals—the "tightrope" of the Thai peninsular; the "luminous line" of the sandbar—when seen as threads along a complicated continuum, reveal the life-affirming potential which threat and risk possess. Because of its seeming marginality and extraneousness the littoral affirms the more its complicatedly compulsive allure; there is no raw meaning outside of the littoral, just as there is no love, no compassion; no possibility for understanding which does not quake upon a ragged nerve.

If Lapcharoensap's son, like Shakespeare's Gloucester, must stumble upon insight—Gloucester is already blinded when he discovers the enormity of his error while humbled before another littoral, Dover Cliffs—then Angela Carter, unused to self-pity and tragic reflection, except for the ironic variant thereof, chooses quite another route to explain the generative power of the littoral. True to form the central protagonist in her story "The Smile of Winter," unlike Lapcharoensap's son or Shakespeare's Gloucester, experiences illumination consciously and vicariously. Not for her the tragic mode; not for her the possibility of catharsis. Nevertheless, Carter conjures yet another dimension of this paper; a dimension more abstract though no less intensive or intimate. Her protagonist is walking along the shore towards a Japanese village; the weather is bleak though the insights are not. Enacting the adage that everything is solved by walking, Carter's protagonist learns to recognize that "different peoples inhabit the countries of the ocean." The phrase is telling; for Carter littoral folk are not defined by the terrestrial conceit of nation; theirs is a country spawned by and as easily reclaimed by the sea. This thought, or rather its "emanations," ignites not only the mind but the sensorium; producing logic that is as startling as it is perplexing: a logic of flows.

> I walk to the village on one of those rare, bleak, sullen days, spectral wraiths of sand blowing to various inscrutable meeting places on blind currents of the Alaskan wind. They twine around my ankles in serpentine caresses and they have eyes of sand but some of the other creatures have eyes of solid water and when the women move among trays of fish I think they, too, are sea creatures, spiny, ocean-bottom-growing flora and if a tidal wave consumed the village—as it could do tomorrow, for there are no hills or sea walls to protect us—there, under the surface, life would go on just as before, the sea goat still nibbling, the shops still doing a roaring trade in octopus and pickled turnips greens, the women going about their silent business because everything is as silent as if it were under water, anyway, and the very air is as heavy as water and warps the light so that one sees as if one's eye's were made of water. (Carter 46)

If Lapcharoensap draws us back to terra firma, while allowing us to recognize the sensation of existing between earth floor and sea floor, Carter, with an eye as defective as the mother's, allows for an imaginative confusion of these worlds. The result is an intensely felt misprision which allows for a palpable derangement of received sense. Carter's imaginative choice is not merely whimsical; rather, like Lapcharoensap, she asks us to inhabit an imaginary geography in which blindness is not longer mere pathology but a means to access through a skewed eye an exhilaratingly novel process of understanding life and art. This, of course, was also Joseph Conrad's experience of the Eastern Seas from which, he reminds us, he "carried away into his writing life the greatest number of suggestions" (131), as it was the key to Gaston Bachelard's "mesomorphic imagination" indeterminately caught "between the formal and the material": "To the sticky, pliable, lazy, sometimes phosphorescent—but not luminous—object corresponds, I believe, the greatest ontological density of the oneiric life" (106).

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