



Raphael Chim

knots of empty words (excerpt from  
*ontologically yours*)

Congregation-0.014%<sup>1</sup> approached the sheet hinged along a three-or-so-meters rail conjoined with two partially rusted cylindrical rings, otherwise known as a door, to a compartment or cubicle in one of the many reputable institutions known by the name of manga cafés, dotted across the archipelago of Japan. He had on his left forearm, with sleeve rolled back even against the full unrestrained blast of air conditioning overhead, a tray upon which was an imitation porcelain bowl of katsudon and a glass of what Congregation-1.23% in whose geekery had come to call a “sodium hydrochloride-ammonite concoction”. The lighting was subdued out of necessity: the walls of each compartment or cubicle were by design kept inches away from the ceiling, presumably to save costs. Congregation-0.0079% knocked twice on the door, received no response from within and opened it all the same. All the way out in the lobby was a wall adorned with

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<sup>1</sup> The visage of the character was shrouded under mosaic, the technical terminology being “fogged”, upon which the percentage of his name would be scrawled with rough arcing strokes, and from which certain features such as his eyes and nose and mouth and ears would emerge disembodied whenever he reacted to certain things.

innumerable amputated—which was to say, blank—clock faces. A night in a manga café was always by default without sound. Beyond the door was a bench with a monitor whose radiance was blocked out for the most part by the back of a swivel chair and its occupant, flanked by hi-fis which as far as Congregation-78% could recall had never been part of the café suite ensemble, and which were presently blaring with the excessively ecstatic moans characteristic of Japanese AV/hardcore pornography. An elongated arm stretched across the benchtop, with its tip resting upon a mouse with a red and blue LED on its left and right, and a puddle of slime beneath it. Two legs dangled under the bench and swung back and forth. The customer seated before the monitor spun around; after a quick glance up and down of the figure of the intruder, it tilted its head by ninety or so degrees such that its ear would face him and spouted a torrent of ink at him. Congregation-...% shut his eyes and felt the ink impact against his face and reeled from it for a moment, then stood his ground, and with an equanimity which was as ontical as it was ontological, thrust forth the tray. Another jet more pressurized than the last in the chest, and then a third in the face. The fourth burst past his sealed lips and for a split second he imagined himself impaled upon it. The ink was flavorless, though he could not tell if his palate had simply been numbed or crippled from the jets, or it was indeed the case. The ink coated him from head to toe. Its liquid gleam, the reflection of lamplights upon its earthwards flow, was all that kept him from receding into the gloom of the hallway. He thrust forth the tray and there was a tremor, a counter-thrust, ink overflowed. An arm lashed out and wound itself around his right arm and tugged him forward, and his biceps and triceps and tendons and neurons blossomed under his skin, and his joint popped out; the Congregation-man somersaulted a

few times through air and found the entirety of his body squashed against a surface glistening with what he hoped was merely perspiration and nothing else and which collapsed and swelled rhythmically beneath him. The tray rotated once, twice, thrice and struck the floor; the upturned bowl spilled the chunks of deep-fried pork chops interspersed with pellets of rice and ribbons of salad and okonomi sauces, all cascading, unfurling; the glass made a muffled noise as it struck the carpet and the greenish liquids within spread out into a puddle around the brims and were drunken unto nil by the fabric. An eye was fixated upon the face of Congregation-89.7% with its M/W-shaped pupil hyper-dilated and a white odorless viscous fluid trickling therefrom. When the customer opened its mouth, its lips, hitherto pressed and glued to his flesh, split his abdomen wide open and his intestines slid through gashes in the translucent membrane that encased them one inch at a time, and splatted onto the tongue of its mouth. Do you consider my existence parasitic? Congregation-547.133% could not bring himself to answer. There is no such thing as parasitic; a parasite is an entity which lives at the expense of another entity and no entity can truly live without the others. The arms gripped his shoulders and drew his torso inwards with everything under his pelvis held in place against what felt like the pelvis of the customer, and his spine snapped. If there were such a thing that could be called a parasite it would be everything and no one could ever bring him- or her-self to add that to his or her cheery mixtape of traits. He could feel his spinal fluid seep through the vertebrates and caress the sides of his lungs, converge around his heart and congeal over and around the arteries and veins, and he knew there was no way he could have felt anything fall or graze or even “touch” in the broadest sense, upon something as miniscule and bereft of sensory neural ends as his vitals; this

sensation was no more than the product of vivid imagination or recollection of films or TV shows, documentaries he must have watched. That is the issue here, don't you think? Marrow trickled out along with the final few inches of his intestines, to be lapped away by a tongue or two or three. This whole issue of labelling, of stereotyping, of all that shit. The way anyone can bring him- or her-self to call someone a parasite is parasitic; this someone is clearly parasitically living at the expense of the other, this someone is a parasite; it's the equivalent of rape—the analogy for this is not just jerking yourself off in someone's face, it's shoving your cock or cunt up someone's whatever-genitalia-it-is or mouth and being aroused from that and impregnating and/or desecrating that other fellow. This whole thing is from the premise pure bullshit. Don't you think? Don't you think? The customer sucked in the emptied husk of Congregation-111111% through its mouth and was mildly amused by the angle at which the body was bent, a little over three hundred and fifty degrees, the faint crunches and clatters, the sort that accompanied dices tumbling onto or across a table, as the body wedged its way past its molars and incisors and canines and down its throat and a shoe fell to the floor alongside a foot with toes unfurling postmortem. Crosscut to a corpse planted face-down in moss with skin peeling off bleached bones and a sapling squatting atop its torso, with ribs protruding out from beneath flesh and roots piercing all the way into the earth below. A signpost stood guard over it and upon it was etched "Stumbled and Died". Fish-eye lens close-up on its left eye socket and a lizard inside which leaps to its hind limbs and waves at the camera. FIN.<sup>2</sup> Starring.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It might be noted that the mode of depiction in this scene might not be as derogatory as one would readily and normatively paint it as; Japanese aesthetics (though now to a certain extent discarded in the archipelago's express

“It does seem to me, that’s the sort of thing Japanese filmmakers are obsessed with,” said N. from where she slouched in the dark of the theater, “Not so much a pseudo-deconstruction of tropes or this or that, as it is just a...statement, a personal statement, plain and simple.”

The silhouette to her right said, “But that doesn’t discredit, or like, reduce the worth of the films, right? The sincerity of the auteur is only another sort of ‘theme’; long as a theme or even something is conveyed, the films would have a certain worth, artistic merit, and so on.”

The silhouette to her left said, “Wouldn’t that turn the films into little more than an exercise in narcissism, or at the very least egocentricity? As I see it, most issues around the world, around us, and I’m sure most would agree, become issues because of some egocentric bastards who decide his or her welfare has higher priority over the others’.”

The silhouette behind her said, “Ha! You’re not thinking it through. What do you think films are from the beginning, from the methodological

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Occidentalism) had always placed an emphasis on transience and solitude, both of which were made manifest in the lifestyles of the manga café recluses, and those 引きこもり, with their rarely disguised renunciation of what they regarded as a transient—or at the very least, flawed—life (albeit in favor of a more fantastic one which they adored with an off-putting fanaticism), and their preference for a solitary life (albeit one primarily and for the most parts reliant upon the finances of one’s own family): and while this might amount to a certain romanticization of misanthropy, even world-weariness (See David Foster Wallace for a critique of this very phenomenon), it nevertheless adhered (if one neglected a few vital aspects of said lifestyles) to the Japanese aesthetics of 侘寂.

<sup>3</sup> *Verwandlung 2.0: Part IV*, written, choreographed, and directed by Oshima Hajime, distributed by Nikkatsu and which received generally decent reviews from Western audience; the last cinematic episode of the cult horror series evidently inspired by the author to whom the title of the tetralogy itself “alluded” with a nudity bereft of any auteur-ly shame: F. Kafka and his *Die Verwandlung*.

premise—that is, how they are made, who made them? Whoever wrote the films, and whoever directed the films, would always have to some degree infused a chunk of their souls, so to speak, into the products. There is no way films would not be a, like you called it, exercise in narcissism.”

The silhouette before her said, “Does that mean though that just because every film is an exercise in narcissism, narcissism in filmography in general is acceptable? I don’t think so. That is no more than a lame rationalization of how things are. If films are, to generalize in generality, produced by narcissists, that should be ground enough to eradicate the media of film, instead of letting it be and ruin lives, tolerating it.”

Left: “That is a highly moralistic standpoint, and we can all agree moralists tend to be the most egocentric; the fact that they would dare to declare so and so as moral and so and so as immoral, is a sign of self-righteousness; and it is upon this self-righteousness that they deal out judgments. This self-righteousness is itself built upon an egocentricity. Just look at the mobs in the French Revolution, or any political movement.”

Back: “You don’t seem to realize though by making such a statement, you are being plenty self-righteous yourself; and of course, beneath that, you are being quite the narcissist. There is no escaping egocentricity, and this is proof of that. Artists, filmmakers, auteurs who embrace that, are, far as I’m concerned, the only people leading truly authentic lives, and the only people who are free.”

Right: “The both of you generalized a ton. Not every film is a personal statement. Some are just pure fun, formatted fun, explosions, gore, jump-scares, action, fists, guns, and all those, and some are experimental, but not in an overly personal way; and then some are personal, but not all of them.”

Front: “Well, so we now have three categories instead of one, which is fine by me, but let’s see: explosions, excitement, et cetera, et cetera, how does that benefit the lives of the common folk? How does that advocate societal harmony? Before we can be idealistic, we must be pragmatic, and pragmatically the first category of films fails at that. At worst, they might even provoke kids into bombing schools, staging mass shootouts; at best, suicides, mass suicides. Moving on...”

Left: “At best, suicides? Really now?”

Front: “As I was saying, category two. Experimental films that are not personal. Those don’t exist. Period.”

Right: “You’ve got to be kidding.”

Front: “No auteur is ever not egocentric. That applies to average directors too, you know. It doesn’t really matter how you categorize, one thing is certain beyond doubt: no film is ever a non-selfish production.”

Back: “Can’t deny that, but go on with your rant on the greater good.”

Front: “It’s not a matter of the greater good, or any of that. It’s for the happiness of everyone. Selfish folks like you would never understand, that individual happiness is possible, and it is only genuine when what gives rise to this happiness gives rise to happiness for everyone else as well. People like you have forgotten about that.”

Right: “We are not talking about happiness or anything of the sort. If you’ve watched any film, the formulaic Hollywood tearjerker, just to name one genre, you’d know not every film is intended to inspire happiness in the audience.”

Left: “Technically even tragedies can bring relief to the audience through catharsis, works cited, Aristotle, Sigmund Freud.”

Back: “Let’s just settle down on just how irrelevant the whole issue of happiness, for either the auteur or the audience, is, and move on with things.”

Right: “My point is just that not every film is a happy film; and if you wish to judge a film by the degree of happiness it could inspire in the audience, then you’d have to rule out at least eighty percent of the films out there.”

Front: “And you think that’s not what I intended to do?”

Back: “Of course, a better world at the expense of everyone in it: a world that is parasitic upon the people in it. Can you imagine that? You would think that someone who praises the greater good would realize that the greatest of goods, or the greatest container for the good, the world, would have to be tailored in accordance to the needs of its people. What you’re doing is just plain wrong, counter-intuitive.”

Front: “That! That is the mindset keeping our world from making any progress.”

Left: “No, it’s not a matter of progress if you’re trying to censor, ban, put a stopper on, the freedom of thought. It’s to keep the world from existing in the first place.”

Right: “That’s assuming it’s even possible in the first place, which it isn’t. You can keep on trying, thinking you’re doing good by the world and the people, but you’d always fail, and the people would rebel out of nostalgia for innocence...”

Overhead: “That makes me realize it is fairly difficult to place modern media, forms of



entertainment in one particular position in relation to the self. I wonder if they present in some sense, an Other? But even then not a human Other. Even if the creators of said works are in some sense embodied, or represented in their own works, very often I notice people do not care for the creators' own intentions (if they even exist). The works themselves seem to encourage a certain thoughtlessness, if thought is defined strictly as 'thoughts concerning the intent of a work as conveyed by its creator *via* the work'. What is it precisely, I wonder, that captivates the perusers of these works? It would not merely be the emotions the works could invoke in the users; there is, I think, likely a purer form of 'fun' that underlies emotional responses to modern entertainment. I imagine in such an instance, the word 'fun' might actually be more appropriate than 'pleasure', considering how the latter already has a more-or-less fixed set of connotations and connections to other things. As to what this 'fun' is though, I am not sure. It seems so many slangs today are intentionally kept ambiguous. They are either ambiguous from the moment of their conception open bracket the Japanese '萌' close bracket, or modified to the point its original meaning becomes lost open bracket fun close bracket. I suppose history itself is filled to the brim with ambiguous words, but I'd say it is in the 21st century when the ambiguity of words is made explicit and becomes something that is actually for the first time loved. At least in the case of '萌', the subcultures which seemed to have devised it seemed to take pride in specifically not defining it, and coming up with several origins for it, to add to the whole ambiguity. I suppose the cause for such deified ambiguity could be that most people have means to speak their mind for all to hear, which naturally would entail conflicts over the meaning of certain signs, and so the only real and effective way to maintain a community and the discourse which

binds the community together is to keep the subcultural jargons ambiguous. So on the flip side, we've got 'trolls' and other subspecies of netizens—"

N.: "None of you seem to realize that nothing you said was of any merit whatsoever. Not one word you have uttered is uttered without groundless presuppositions which you never thought to clarify or validate. Your terminologies are far from rigorous. You brandish them with neither signification nor meaning. You did not take into account everything that could be and as such ought to be taken into account. That is why you could say anything, make assertions, with such haste and certainty. There is no horizon to any word you have uttered, not even an *absence* of horizon. You fluctuate between a contemplation of the temporality of an art-work, a critique of its moral 'value', and a sketch of the self-Other correlation; none of it was ever taken to their fullest extents. You delude yourselves into thinking yourselves philosophers, your words 'wisdom' when you are barely even qualified to be a marijuana-junkie. Your 'philosophy' is one founded upon the sensationalist choice of words. In giving voice to such words, you forget first, that what you wish to convey has already been conveyed a great many times before, because the thought of unoriginality goes against that 'physio-biological urge' of yours for specialness, and second, that you are the one who chose each word, and that you are not speaking on behalf of some Platonic entity withdrawn into the super-demiurgic and ineffable ethers which itself lacks the capacity for speech—that you're not voicing some universal, transcendental truth. There are indeed few things as appalling as seeing one lose one's self to one's self, to find grandeur in one's own manner of Being, this grandeur being auto-correlational but also grounded as much in the presence of the self as in the Other; one speaks as if

one's Being has been chosen for one's sake, and one is marveling at the choice of some transcendental entity out there, above one's scalp, at a certain 'destiny' suspended among a multitude of abstractions. One renounces existence in favor of something un-existential, of noumena never to be within one's grasp *not* because they are 'inherently so', but because one has set them to be so, of things so un-thingly they could at best merely appear as 'things'. It is as though one has not already lost track of the world as such in severance beyond perinatality, in one's be-coming or coming into being: you now have to withdraw yourself even further, and for no other cause beyond that of *maturity*."

N. ver. 2 scribbled in her notebook, "The writer who is called into post-scribing sincerity always has death in mind: in her contemplation of the morbid un-graspable she sheds tears and writes into a past which is by no mean precedential. From the onset, she dreams solely of becoming a memory to those who would read and not living onwards as existent", and wrote twelve more times with four threads of her hair.

Your eyes sprouted legs and feet and stomped a path across the page. They took leave of your skull. You lowered your face such that the tip of your nose grazed the hard- or paper- cover of the book. You could no longer see and so you must feel your way around with the tips of your appendages. You did not know that with each stride taken by your eyeballs, obelisks and pillars spiraled forth, and then ridges and palazzos and acropolises upon them; ants and innumerable nameless species of insectoids swarmed up and down the liminal spaces in between the structures and such spaces gained the name of "streets"; they paused before one another and went their separate ways; a few clashed and amber fluids were spilled; at one point, and you did

not know when, an ant stood up whereas all its brethren crawled around on fours, and clicked its mandibles and they congregated and hearkened; those who did not were quartered and the chitins donned by the standers; in time every ant had its own chitin; they all stood, saluted the eyeballs which still roamed the page but which bore them no heed, and swept their arms from side to side; at the edges of the page, three armadas of triremes made landfall and two-limbed silhouettes flooded into the city; and obelisks were ripped down and heads crushed against walls, or earth and shacks torched with its residents fleeing, caught by with the more Herculean of the two-limbed silhouettes, and tossed to the ground and their mandibles drawn apart until the ants' mouths broke in halves; lesser two-limbed ones polished the jagged edges of the mandibles with knives and conveyed it back to the armadas; the defanged wept and hid their faces behind their six arms but the two-limbed ones grabbed whips and lashed at the ants until their two lowermost arms fell off. The amber fluids which burst forth from the stumps turned to crimson and struck the earth; two of the two-limbed ones sat swinging their left arms up and down with nothing in their grips; an ant stood before them with a stake from its mandible-less mouth and at the top of the stake a banner; dozens of ants marched out of the city onto the triremes awaiting them and upon setting one foot on the decks their heads rolled from their shoulders; over their relieved shoulders dangled feet spinning at random to one of the four cardinal directions; the triremes burned; the two-limbed ones dragged the charred insectoid forms out from beneath the wreckages, poured water down upon them, and lay flat against the bloating forms and peddled their ways back home; ants began to rise from amidst the smoke and took off their chitins and revealed pale flesh beneath and limbs with four extremities each; they fished and spread across the

island and erected shrines and straw huts; the ant on the stake blossomed into a mangrove, its roots extending towards the edges of the page; the eyeballs rested in its shades, and bands of four-limbed ants converged at their feet and lay down and snored and drooled; they rolled over from root to root, collided with one another, and bounced back and repeated; the sclera of one eyeball withered and its legs ceased to move and roots slithered up and around them; the ants slumbered without end; a wall was raised around the mangrove; the eyeball with the paler iris and intact sclera leapt over it to the consternation of the ants and left its comrade behind to dissolve into the dirt and was never seen by and on its own again; within decades the triremes would return, and the two-limbed ones would trot down gangplanks swaying from arm to arm with feathered helms and lances and scuta and swords sheathed behind them. In the expiration of all the ants and eyeballs and two-limbed ones, your eyes shall be delivered back to their sockets in your skull, but until then you must navigate the world with the tip of your nose.

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*ontologically yours* is a plotless novel comprised of vignettes and essay excerpts.

Raphael Chim is pursuing a MA in Creative Writing at University College Dublin. His work has been published in *Cha: an Asian literary journal* and *Aaduna*.