

China Airlines

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She's seated in a window seat on China Airlines flight CI0052 between Sydney and Taipei. It's nighttime and the aircraft is passing over Papua New Guinea. The darkness of the night will last roughly two hours longer than it would if she'd remained on the ground in Sydney. Owing to the earth's rotation and the movement of the plane across longitudes.

There are fires burning on the ground in Papua New Guinea but there's also cloud cover that's obscuring the firelight when viewed from above. Her window screen is open but it's dark enough that the reflected light of the cabin replaces any view of the sky outside. There's an LCD screen embedded in the headrest of the seat in front of her, displaying in-flight entertainment of her own selection. The film *Tree of Life*, directed by Terence Malick, with a Taiwan release date of 17 June 2011. The film is directly in front of her but she's looking through the screen as if it's transparent. She's alternating her gaze between the screen and a notebook that's open on the tray-table in front of her.

She's piecing together the scenes but there are no distinct plot lines yet. She has her character and she's able to navigate through him but at the moment the story is mostly formless and she's just assembling various moments and instances. She knows that there will be a point where the instances form a kind of chain or more like a net and then the story will have some directionality to it. Some completeness or coherence. Some readability.

Her gaze is towards the television but her mind is formulating its own images. She's thinking about her character and where and who and what exactly. How he might enter this or that space and

what everything might then look like. What the feelings and atmospheres will be. Whether there are things to taste or smell or touch and what shape she might give to those descriptions. How the shapes will all fit together.

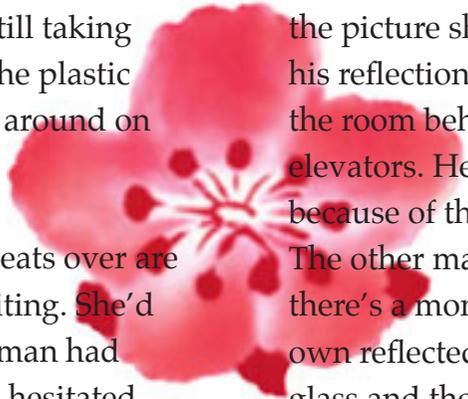
There's a woman two seats to her left but the place between them is unoccupied. The vacant seat is sprawled with the other woman's belongings. A red vinyl shoulder bag bulging with who knows what. A red scarf and matching gloves and a blue acrylic shawl. Petroleum based fibres. A large bottle of mineral water. She's not paying any attention to the woman now but she had been impossible to ignore during takeoff. Every 30 seconds or so the woman lets out a sharp sigh, either the result of stress or as a deliberate outward expression of stress for those in her immediate vicinity. It's a quick exhalation, not a full breath but just the surface of it. Each sigh seems to collect the air from her throat and mouth whilst the rest of it remains humid and stale in her lungs.

It's a shallow sigh and a shallow anxiety. The woman two seats over is holding a semitransparent blue ballpoint pen and tapping its plastic rapidly on her teeth. The blue plastic tapping against her teeth and her mouth opened into a kind of perpetually twisted unconscious gasp. She's tapping the pen against her bleached blond hair and scalp. In a cycle that seems roughly scheduled with the shallow sighs she brings the pen down towards a spiral-bound notepad of lined paper and writes frantically for a moment. It's as if whatever thought she's transcribing is so fleeting that she won't retain any of it unless it appears on the paper whilst she's thinking it. She's left-handed and her thinking is happening roughly every thirty seconds. She's holding her hand above the lined paper at

an acute angle as she writes, so that the tip of the ballpoint pen is pointing towards the base of the page frantically longitudinal. The large bottle of mineral water appears empty but she's still taking occasional sips with a swift flick-of-the-wrist motion. The plastic crinkling and the last drops of mineral water splashing around on the inside.

She's aware that both herself and the woman two seats over are holding a pen and also evidently both thinking and writing. She'd been considering writing after takeoff but the other woman had been first to withdraw her spiral-bound notepad. She'd hesitated for quite some time about whether or not this meant she should refrain from taking out her own pen and paper. Writing materials. So as to avoid any direct associations with the woman and remain somewhat of a counterpoint. She'd browsed the in-flight entertainment instead, as a way of distracting herself, eventually selecting Tree of Life. She'd been watching for maybe ten minutes before becoming aware that her mind wasn't following her vision and that she was formulating her own scenes and images independently from the screen. She found herself with a clear image of him in mind, generating a scene in which he's waiting for an elevator in some kind of corporate business tower. He's on maybe the 14th floor. It's mid-autumn outside and he's looking through the glass at the half-strength sunlight falling directly onto the flat rooftops of the buildings below. There's no exterior sound audible on the inside but the wind is moving through the trees and the leaves and he's knowing the sound without really having to hear it.

She's picturing him waiting for the elevator and his vision is shifting away from the exterior view and refocusing onto the sur-



face of the window. He's becoming aware of his own image reflected in the glass. She's picturing him seeing himself and inside the picture she's finding herself looking into the glass and seeing his reflection in place of her own. There's another man entering the room behind him, walking across the granite tiles towards the elevators. He's not turning around but he's aware of the presence because of the sound of shoes and the sense of a body in motion. The other man is becoming visible on the glass as he walks, and there's a moment where the other man's image passes through his own reflected image. He's looking at his own image reflected in the glass and the image of the other man is approaching and then passing right through his own as a kind of overlay. There's a feeling of immense satisfaction as the transition takes place - the other man's image coalescing with his own, two fluids mixing for a moment. He's feeling the immense satisfaction lingering as if it's a liquid or a fragrance or a revelation. For her it's only a conscious projection but there are cracks in her consciousness and the feeling is dripping onto her everywhere without even touching her skin.

The elevator hasn't arrived yet but she's finding herself somewhat suddenly aware of the screen in front of her and also the film. At first she isn't sure why exactly because presently the images on the LCD display in the headrest seem to be homogenous with all of the preceding images. But then she's noticing something textual at the top right corner of the screen that maybe hadn't been there before and recognizing it as a semi-translucent logo for China Airlines. She's seeing the words China Airlines overlaid momentarily before dissolving into the background scene of epic prehistoric natural beauty. Dinosaurs moving through that barely conceivable space-time. Two seats over there's still the presence of the other

woman sipping and sighing and frantically writing occasionally who knows what.

She's imagining him in the elevator now and the other man too. The two men aren't talking and the elevator is descending through the centre of a steel and glass building built by a corporation that designs and produces digital interfaces and innovative imaging technology. He's leaning against the rear wall of the elevator and looking at the hair on the back of the other man's head. Hair that's neat and freshly cut or appears to be freshly cut. He's thinking about lawns now and the smell of freshly mown grass. He's thinking about the smell of freshly cut hair and the grey matter on the inside of the skull. He's thinking about the man and the chip implanted into the grey matter beneath the freshly cut hair and the skull. The implanted chip that's sending electrical signals through neurons in such a way that the man is perceiving multimedia directly in his field of vision and his hearing and other faculties and altogether bypassing his external sensory apparatus. He's thinking about the other man's stimulus and how the perceptual experience is altogether invisible when viewed from the outside. He's imagining a wireless transmission linking the other man's chip to his own chip so that they're both receiving the same signals and images and stimuli. He's thinking about the ultimate subjectivity of the perceptual experience.

She's unintentionally becoming aware of the LCD display and she's looking and seeing China Airlines again written momentarily over images depicting microbiology and macro photography. Sensual images that look like thinking. Images that depict emotions. She's remembering reading an interview with the special effects

artist who worked with Malick on Tree Of Life. She's remembering how it was the same effects artist who worked on Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. How the effects man had said that he used the same techniques as he'd used in the 1970s instead of the latest digital tools. How he'd worked with chemicals and paint and fluorescent dyes, lighting, smoke, liquids and CO2, flares and spin dishes, fluid dynamics and high speed photography. She's looking away from the screen - through the gap in the seats towards the front of the cabin. She's seeing lines of LCD screens in headrests, each with their own unsynchronized selection of in-flight entertainment. She's looking at the screens and imagining them each as the individual conscious projection of the other passengers in the aircraft. She's darting her gaze back and forth between the individual screens, absorbing moments of the myriad images and feeling as if she's remixing a collective reality.

The elevator is still descending and the going down is taking much longer than she expected it should. She's wondering how long is the descent exactly and how high would the building need to be in order that the going down is still going down presently. She hadn't intended to imagine it taking so long and she's regaining her control of the scene so that finally the elevator is reaching the base of the building. They're exiting the elevator at ground level and the other man is stepping out first - walking towards a bar on the other side of the lobby. He's following the other man into the bar and there are glassy surfaces everywhere and soft blue neon lighting. The other man is approaching the black granite bar and ordering a drink. He's passing the man and the bar and moving instead towards the glass doors that open onto the exterior. He's passing through the glass doors and emerging outside and now there's the



wind and the sound of the trees but it's closer than it should be as if he's listening through headphones. He's standing stationary for a few moments to better account for the air and the light and on his left there's a group of women whose uniform suggests they're flight attendants from a discount airline. They're all drinking cocktails with semi-translucent plastic stir-sticks in various colours. Plastic sticks topped with shapes like palm trees and pineapples and cats and hats and bicycles. One of the flight attendants is telling the other flight attendants a story about her colleague, a young Russian girl with an irritating air of distraction. How she once saw the young Russian flight attendant standing motionless bent over at an angle like at least 45 degrees and staring out at the clouds through the small window in the cabin door. How she must have been standing there for like at least five minutes just staring outside. The story is ending there and the colleagues are laughing at the image of the girl. But his thinking is remaining in the aircraft and he's looking down on the topography of the clouds as seen through the thick double Plexiglas of the cabin door. Vapourous white topography resembling the surface of skin or maybe internal organs seen through a powerful microscope. Fine lines and creases and undulations adhering to some indescribable formula.

Her thinking is drifting into the first person and she's forcing herself back into the third person. Thinking how it's him who's perceiving and her who's conceiving. Remembering reading that article about how the statistics clearly show that novels written in fiction and in the first person are the most likely to sell.

There's a light breeze blowing and the metallic rattle of a chain-link fence surrounding a construction site. Plastic bags of various

hues are blowing against the fence, plastering themselves motionless for a moment before circulating airborne again and sticking against the fence at a different spot repeatedly. It's mid-autumn and he's thinking about the seasons. He's thinking about the transition between one opposite and another and how the intermediary phases have somehow been given names. He's thinking about the rise and fall between two counterpositions and the two names given to the intermediary phases. He's imagining myriads more intermediary phases, and to what extent you can pinpoint individual moments in a perpetual transition. Interminable divisions and subdivisions. He's thinking about how many different names you could give that are all referring to the same single thing. He's wondering whether there's a single word that makes reference to a thing that no other words can make reference to. The cloud is thick above him but the light is breaking through at a very sharp angle at certain points on the horizon. The light's breaking through at sharp diagonals as if God's appearing to someone in the distance.

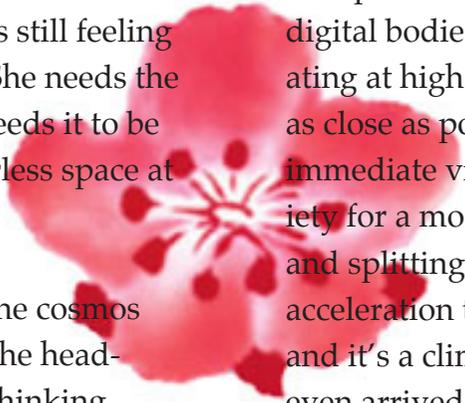
China Airlines is appearing before her again and she's regaining awareness of the screen. There's faintly operatic music and slow-motion shots from a camera or the idea of a camera tracking through the hydrodynamic cosmos. She's seeing the fluid colours and forms and the semi-translucent lettering of the airline logo fading up momentarily in the top right corner before fading away again. The logo appearing momentarily against representations of the cosmos like some kind of transcendental advertising. She's thinking about special effects and the construction of images. She's thinking about the difference between the images she's forming of him and the images that he's forming in her images of him. She's thinking about his and mine. She's thinking about mining images.

Mining Gold. A gold bar resting atop a plastic tray table. A gold bar falling from high altitude and landing in a fire on the ground in Papua New Guinea at night. She's remembering reading maybe David Lynch once saying how Transcendental Meditation is like if you imagine a huge glass skyscraper filled with junk. Hoarders are living in every room on every floor of the building and filling it completely with plastic and paper and metal and electronics and organic matter and human waste. Products and packages and stray hairs and flakes of dead skin. Corpses. And then you take the elevator all the way into the basement. You go way down into the basement however long it takes and if you go far enough you'll find so much gold that you could empty out all of the junk from the rooms and replace it with the gold and fill the immense building again in its entirety. She's recalling this imagery and finding herself entirely unsatisfied with the gold. It's heavy and it's utterly still and utterly object and there's no space for her to move in. She wants the space to be empty. Totally empty. She's emptying the rooms with her imagination and now the rooms are empty but she's still feeling that it's not enough space and not enough movement. She needs the walls removed. She needs the building removed. She needs it to be borderless space. She needs to occupy an utterly borderless space at the highest possible altitude.

There's the LCD display and the macro images of the cosmos and the operatic sound design that's just audible from the headphones that are hanging down around her neck. She's thinking about the cosmos as a special effect. She's seeing it not as pure energy or vacuum or dark matter but rather as chemicals and paint, liquids and gasses, fluid dynamics and high-speed photography. She's feeling the weight and the substance and she's hearing his

voice without deliberately meaning to be hearing his voice. At first it's just an idea and an image of the movement of his mouth but then it's both the mouth and the voice as weight and as substance and he's telling her that he wants to split open her soft glossy lips. His mouth is moving and she's also hearing his voice and he's saying that he wants to split open her soft glossy lips. She's feeling something like a mix of anxiety and arousal and she's lost all connection with her vision. The LCD display is still carrying Tree of Life but she's only seeing her own involuntary thinking and feeling her own involuntary feeling feeding back and reflecting innumerable. She's feeling him getting closer or the image of him getting closer and it's barely perceptible but it's heavy and it's accelerating. At first it's just her own soft glossy lips but with his lips in close proximity and his heavy breathing and his hot breath. But then there are also the digital images of the bodies with limbs moving back and forth repeatedly and involuntarily and her lips again and his lips moving towards her lips. There are the glossy eyes of the digital bodies and the pale lifeless skin and his lips and he's accelerating at high speed towards her but without getting any closer. He's as close as possible but still accelerating and he's diffusing in the immediate vicinity like chemical weapons. She's feeling total anxiety for a moment and thinking of his lips impacting her own lips and splitting them open and releasing chemical weapons. There's acceleration towards impact and splitting open and blood and pain and it's a climactic explosion and she's conceiving of it before it's even arrived and she's not going to let it arrive.

He's arriving and nobody's there. It's steel and glass and it's completely empty. He's completely alone. No objects, no others. He's arriving home and everyone's there. He's entering all of the



rooms at once and everyone is embracing wholeheartedly. Everyone is one wholehearted embrace. She's alone with him and he's saying to her, I've never been here. You've never seen me.

The wind is blowing like crazy. It's the same wind blowing like crazy through the trees and against the glass of the office tower and at higher altitudes and through all of the rooms and through the fires burning on the ground in Papua New Guinea. It's blowing ferociously and carrying all of the energy in the universe. You were never there. You've never seen him.



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