

STRANGER

By Muriel Leung

Perhaps when they said it, they meant it as a resolution to all things with us that seemed to go on without end. After five years and the assured quality of my body's indentation on their mother's couch, they told me that I performed so excellently as a stranger in love. I hung on their words for many years after, thinking of my body as a theater.

The goal was this: to commit oneself to an act so faithfully that feeling would adorn the body shell and eventually wear its way into the body. Of this devotion, director Wong Kar Wai was a master. It was said that in the making of *Happy Together* (1997), Wong was intent on having his actors Tony Leung and Leslie Cheung, who portrayed two expatriate lovers, execute a closeness that required repeated takes. As two lovers in a new city where loneliness sits on every corner, it is not enough to love, but to really love with the fastidiousness of two bodies enclosing upon one another. Wong kept insisting that the two actors practiced the tango, a dance that weaves through the film as both the revival and turmoil of their on-again, off-again relationship. Two men pressed together and never quite close enough, Wong critiqued, and he would have them start over and over again. What does it mean to want? Wong seemed to be asking, in the sense that wanting as a part of queer love is a feral thing that we must learn through perpetual exercise of belief. It was not that the intimacy of this dance rehearsed in behind-the-scenes footage was any less convincing than the final scenes themselves, but that the process of getting there mattered too.

I watched the two men onscreen hold each other in a blue room and thought their bodies moved like a single boat across languid water, each one keeping the other afloat. Perhaps such acts of grace are reserved only for the mediated experiences of film, though I recall that once, I would fall asleep next to someone I loved to the sound of sirens. We slept in a room that was not a room but a small space partitioned off from the living room. Their mother's snores fell on top of us from the next room. We were always reminded that we were being watched either by sight or sound. Sometimes I would bury my head into them, followed by hands and then feet in an imperfect act of submersion. "Why?" they would bemoan, and I would tell a scientific lie about how bodies in sleep transmogrified into gelatin, a substance that is a close cousin to bone glue, and it is exactly as it sounds. What would happen if this were true? Would they have stayed?

I woke up one day in a different city. There, the trees hung their heads, weighted with a history of loss. When it rained, the division between sky and ground would become a slate gray blur. Yet, people were rarely afraid. During a storm, I ran into the flooded road and fell down a five-foot hole filled with water after confusing it for ground. On a nearby porch, men chain-smoked and did not help. I flailed for several seconds before pulling myself out, bemused by the cartoonish quality of this accident. I recount this story often, much to the horror of my listeners, and it is always in response to their mouth agape that I assure them that in the moment, I believed myself to be with the water and please do not worry — I was not alone.

Then night arrives and I will myself into a new belief.

It is possible, it seems, to achieve such affinity for a bodily practice that the act becomes a part of everyday life. I hug the interior of my body house that has known so many names. I thank its weariness for its daily work, particularly for a writer's work, which is always a labor in feeling. To that end, I wake up sometimes not crying but feeling the water well up in the cavities of my body. I dream of vehicles that propel forward without me, and in my nightmares, I am always still in the eye of every catastrophe. Even now, when asked about the cruelest word, I cannot even say it aloud, but would point to my chest as if it means something — the gesture — as an approximation of what was.