

PEAK

Winning Entries in the 2023 Taiwan Literature Awards
Selected Excerpts in English

National Museum of Taiwan Literature

The National Museum of Taiwan Literature (NMTL), founded on October 17th, 2003, is the first national museum dedicated to the literary arts. The NMTL records, organizes and explains Taiwan's literary heritage. Archives and displays include examples from indigenous Malayo-Polynesian cultures as well as from key periods in Taiwan history – from the Dutch, Ming/Koxinga, Qing and Japanese periods through modern times. Educational activities promote awareness of Taiwan literary traditions. The museum includes library as well as Literary Wonderland designed to both educate and excite. In helping spread literary knowledge and appreciation, the museum hopes to make reading and the literary arts a "friend" for life.

<https://www.nmtl.gov.tw/en/>



Taiwan Literature Awards

The Taiwan Literature Awards organized by the National Museum of Taiwan Literature is an indicative literary award of Taiwan emphasizing the artistry and creativity of literature. The Awards recognize outstanding works in all literary genres, including fiction, nonfiction, prose, and poetry. There are two competition categories: Taiwan Literature Awards for Books, and the Taiwan Literature Awards for Original Works includes Taiwanese, Hakka, and indigenous groups, and opened up to novel, prose, and poetry. The Dramatic Script category, meanwhile, is recognized every year. It is universally recognized as one of Taiwan's most influential literary honors.

<https://award.nmtl.gov.tw/>



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Preface

Over the past several years, the National Museum of Taiwan Literature (NMTL) has promoted three major initiatives to help build greater international awareness and appreciation for Taiwan literature and culture. Each program, including Taiwan-Literature-in-Translation, Authors/Translators-in-Residence, and Cross-National Bilateral Exhibitions, is designed to be both a window for Taiwanese readers into the literature and culture of other nations and a platform for Taiwan literature to participate in the global literary conversation and discourse.

The 2023 Taiwan Literature Awards program accepted 191 entries in three categories: novels, short stories, and poetry. Of the thirty finalists, the judging panel selected only seven to receive the *TLA Golden Book Award* and three for the coveted *TLA Golden Grand Laurel Award*. These winning works spotlight the exciting, substantive strides being made by authors today in the realms of national history, multigenerational family epics, local culture / sentiment, social movements, and existential introspection. Beyond giving an unvarnished and authentic look at life, they offer biting insightful perspectives on society and the human experience.

By promoting new literary works in translation via PEAK's regularly published journal and online platform, we hope to bring a growing worldwide audience to read, enjoy, and share good works of Taiwan literature as well as to facilitate the adaptation of homegrown literary content and characters. NMTL looks forward to participating in more international book fairs and exhibitions in the future as a vehicle to bring Taiwan literature into the circle of world literature.

Taiwan Literature Today:

Concern for, and Criticism of, the World and the Current State of Humanity.

Translated by Mike Fu

The list of nominees in this year's Taiwan Literature Awards is awash in works that are brilliantly written, compelling, and bold, making the process of evaluating and choosing TLA finalists exceedingly difficult yet exceptionally gratifying.

The authentic and simply told narrative, exploration of history and heritage, and descriptions of deeply personal experiences in this year's entry by accomplished essayist Chen Lieh poignantly reflect his deep concern for the human condition and challenge readers to recall and reflect upon Taiwan's decades under the "White Terror". His essay resonated most deeply with the panel, earning for Chen this year's TLA Million Dollar Prize.

Brother, a work told through the lens of a brother-sister relationship set against the backdrop of Hong Kong's 2014 Umbrella Movement was this year's closest contender for the top prize. Malaysian-born wordsmith Zhang Guixing again demonstrated his magical literary touch by further extending the cultural and natural history canvas underpinning his previous work *Eyelids of Morning* into his latest Borneo-centered effort *A Century of Loneliness*. The perspective on islands taken in this year's short story entry *Mooyi* contrasts starkly with that in *Eyelids of Morning*, exploring the everyday difficulties of island life and its tangle of social and interpersonal relationships. The author's crisp, stream-of-consciousness technique, simple plotline, and practiced writing style gives the narrative an immediate air of authenticity while at the same time a kaleidoscopic profusion of captivating goings-on.

The original trilogy *The Lost River*, the first published work by young author Han-Yau Huang, emotively narrates the protagonist's experience doing survey work along a river-delta wetland south of Taitung City and highlights his personal, professional, and spiritual growth along the way. Similar to *The Lost River*, *Late-Night Patrol of the Abandoned God* builds an expansive literary narrative that weaves between traditional and non-traditional literary forms. The latter, inspired by the eponymous 2021 music album, weaves a lively, credible, and, most importantly, magical landscape of childhood framed by the familiar colors and flavors of traditional Taiwanese folk beliefs about ghosts and gods. Reading like a modern-day *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Spent Bullets* plumbs the difficulties and struggles of today's youth through following the emotional twists and turns of a group of gifted youth to their extreme ends, using a direct and strong narrative technique to convey its memorable message. *I'll Sip, You Try to Keep Up* is a warm and familiar work written in Hokkien about the protagonist's experiences as relatively recent resident of Danshui as well as good introduction to written Hokkien for Hokkien speakers.

A common thread connecting many of this year's TLA finalists is the call to collective national and ethnic memory as well as reminiscences on family, coming of age, ecological outreach, and social activism. One thing that has particularly impressed me is the exceptional creativity and imagination of this year's crop of new young authors. Raised in an age of animated cartoons and video games, they are creating magical and surreal stories and characters drawn from traditional folk beliefs that break the mold of traditional literary form and logic while bringing new levels of reading pleasure and satisfaction to readers. While literary realism and fantasy may seem worlds apart, they share at least one important thing in common - concern for, and criticism of, the world and the current state of humanity.

2023 TLA JUDGES' BIO

羅智成 Lo Chih-Cheng

A poet, author, and media specialist, known for his mystical and dynamic style, he has published numerous collections of poetry and essays. Holding a Bachelor's in Philosophy from NTU and a Master's in East Asian Studies from UW. Lo distinguishes himself with his intellectual rigor and epistemological training—tools that allow him to delve into a wide range of controversial issues in contemporary life and culture, in pursuit of what he has described as building a “plentiful disposition.”

吳介禎 C. J. Anderson-Wu

A Taiwanese writer who has published two collections about Taiwan's military dictatorship (1949–1987), known as the White Terror: *Impossible to Swallow* (2017) and *The Surveillance* (2020). Currently she is working on her third book *Endangered Youth—to Hong Kong*. Her works have been shortlisted for a number of international literary awards, including the Art of Unity Creative Award by the International Human Rights Art Festival.

郝譽翔 Hao Yu-hsiang

Ph.D. in Chinese Literature from NTU, is a Professor at NTUE, specializing in creative writing and language. Her works include short story collections like *Nether Story* and *That Summer, The Most Peaceful Sea*, prose collections such as *Sadness Taken Away by the Spring*, *A Blinking Dream: My Travelogue of China*, and research on Taiwanese literature. She also edited *Tutorial of Contemporary Taiwanese Literature: A Fiction Reader*.

馬世芳 Shih-Fang Ma

A renowned broadcaster and author, has won six Golden Bell Awards. His essay collection *Subterranean Homesick Blues* was nominated for a Golden Tripod Award and named one of "The Best Books from Taiwan" in 2008. His book *Lend Me Your Ears* won the China Times Kaijuan Good Book Award. Ma edited and translated Bob Dylan's "The Lyrics: 1961-2012" into Traditional Chinese. He was also nominated for Best Variety Show Host at the Golden Bell Awards for "Music Viva Viva" on PTS.

張亦絢 Nathalie Chang

Born in 1973 in Taipei, Chang earned a Master's from Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle in Cinema. Her debut, "Domestic Affairs," won Unitas's New Author Award in 1996. Chang's collections like *When Things Decay* and *The Best of Times* are taught in Queer Studies. Her novel *Not in Love for Long* was a 2012 TiBE Book Prize nominee, blending Taiwan's politics with Jewish life in France. Named among "the 20 best Sinophone writers under 40" by Unitas Magazine in 2012, Chang also directs and writes.

謝旺霖 Hsieh Wang-Ling

He had taken his family's advice and enrolled in politics and law at university when he received a grant to allow him to ride through Yunnan and Tibet. Having faced such a perilous journey and survived, he decided upon his return to pursue his dream and become a writer, while studying for his PhD at the Institute of Taiwanese Literature at National Chengchi University.

羅毓嘉 Rob Lo Yuchia

Born in 1985, Lo is a millennial poet, author, and online financial reporter. A Crimson Hall Poetry Society member, he earned his BA in Journalism from NCCU and MA in Journalism from NTU's Graduate Institute of Journalism. Preference for a staid life indoors led him to his career in wordcraft. He has published five poetry collections, including *Infants Crossing Ponds*, and four essay collections, including *Unorthodox Aunties*. He is a recipient of the Chinese Literary Prize for Global Youth and the China Times Literary New Writer Award.



TLA Annual Golden
Grand Laurel Award

The Book of Wreckage

《殘骸書》

The author made the difficult return to Jingmei and Green Island—both memorial parks dedicated to remembering the horrors of Taiwan’s White Terror period. The memories of that day it began and its tangled cacophony of smells, sounds, temperature, and light weighed heavily upon his heart. A survivor, he could now revisit, reevaluate, and examine the cruelties that had wrecked his body and soul, his rights, his hopes, and his life. Survivors strive to block out the noise, but remember the resistance, the resolve, the freedom, and the dignity of those comrades who shared in their struggle.

Non Fiction

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Chen Lih

陳列

Chen holds a bachelor’s degree in English from Tamkang University. He served for two years as a junior high school teacher before being locked away for nearly five years as a political prisoner. He now lives in Hualien on Taiwan’s East Coast. Notable works include *Of Earth, Time and Tide*, *Eternal Mountain*, *Impressions*, and *Song of Hesitation*.



Judge Commentary by Shih-Fang Ma

Translated by Jeff Miller

This work marks a milestone in contemporary essay writing not only as a testimony to a difficult page in modern Taiwan history but also as a work that will continue to disquiet and provoke readers for generations to come. Drawing on his own experiences as a young man during the White Terror Period, the author provides a brilliantly written personal account of his four years and eight months in prison that bleeds into the lived experiences of other, earlier political prisoners locked away on Green Island. The author’s steady, controlled narrative conveys the pains, humiliations, and transgressions that most in today’s Taiwan have all but forgotten. He also deconstructs and analyzes ideas such as authoritarianism, martial law, and ‘white terror’ that, while but distant memories now, shaped the face of postwar Taiwan society for decades. This work ably pieces together the temporal and spatial contexts framing the real human experiences and stories described.

Foreword

Translated by **Sylvia Li-chun Lin and Howard Goldblatt**

I've thought about writing a book on the White Terror for many years. Not just because I was directly impacted by it, swept up in this span of history, but because I traveled to Green Island in May of 2010. During my brief stay on that tiny island, I experienced a sense of loss as I walked around the site of its penal colony, known as the "New Life Reeducation Center," a forsaken place from which the people and events are long gone. Over the years since, indistinct feelings that were imprinted on my heart from that time have surfaced nightmarishly when least expected, a frequent troubling reminder for me to write.

Over a fifteen-year period, some two thousand individuals were forced to live an absurd communal life in that place. Although I shared a connection with them in terms of life experience, my understanding of that historical era was, at the time, quite limited and superficial, verging on neglectful disinterest. More fundamentally, I seemed to have subconsciously swept this fairly recent slice of history, along with my own past, from my mind.

Imbued with a sense of surprise and a stricken conscience, I attempted a walk into the past by reading victim memoirs, research and treatises by scholars and experts, as well as a variety of public discussions and reportage. And yet, year in and year out, I hesitated to begin writing. For one thing, it became clear as I read that I simply did not know enough and that I had trouble reflecting more deeply. Beyond that, I knew that in recent years more and more people—victims of political persecution and

those who study and analyze the historical era—had spoken publicly and expressed opinions of all sorts and from all angles. Compared to them, there was little I could contribute that was illuminating, and whatever I offered would merely echo the views of others, nothing new or valuable. Besides, how much of this narrative actually penetrated people's minds and hearts?

But what really has kept me from moving ahead, something I've slowly come to understand, is that memories are painful. When I go in search of people and events that have faded beyond the outer edges of consciousness with the passage of time or have touched upon my or my predecessors' victimization, it is invariably tormenting. I cannot help but doubt the need to go back in time to a territory of grievous wounds, of darkness and misery. Maybe best to let amnesia accompany the few remaining years of old age, glossing over the past to keep peace and staying aloof from anything that might create unpleasantness.

And so, for the longest time I more or less abandoned any thoughts of writing.

But then the National Human Rights Museum's Director, Chen Junhong, spoke to me about a Writer-in-Residence position. I was hesitant at first, but eventually I accepted the offer, mainly as an encouragement to take up a task I knew I should stop avoiding, one I must confront and complete.

When I compare my experience with other victims of my and earlier generations, whether in terms of length of sentence, case details, arrest, or the torture during interrogations and incarceration, what I went through was neither special nor noteworthy. So even though I will touch upon what I went through, my intent is not to write a prison memoir, but to find a way to comprehend the past, in other words, a long, distant, and

unending quest, a trek that can be tiring and harrowing as I walk around Jingmei and Green Island, the current sites of White Terror memorial parks, and wander through an even larger space of relevant times and places. Traveling with me are people who are still around and many more who have left us, scattered ghosts of wounded souls; the narratives and comments in articles by others; and the changes and disappearance of many things. From this fragmented past, I sometimes pick up the dust-covered scattered wreckage of lives to touch and examine it before gently putting it back down. The wreckage of wills, the wreckage of bodies, the wreckage of power, the wreckage of lost memories, and the wreckage of time . . . I take stock, laboring to examine my own heart, while looking back on the past with trepidation, evasion even, struggling to overcome that past and forcing myself to look to the future. At times, I draw close to locating and identifying clues, hoping to find an explanation for my personal experience and the age in which it occurred. But at other times, I maintain a distance in order to imagine and to perceive, wanting to capture the dark shadows and rays of light that frequently enter my mind, and then find a way to record them. I tell myself this is not an attempt to revisit my personal miseries and suffering, or to expose the oppression and humiliation I endured, not even to excavate memories, but to discover if some of those memories, such as challenges to authority, aspirations, and a quest for freedom and dignity, are meaningful.

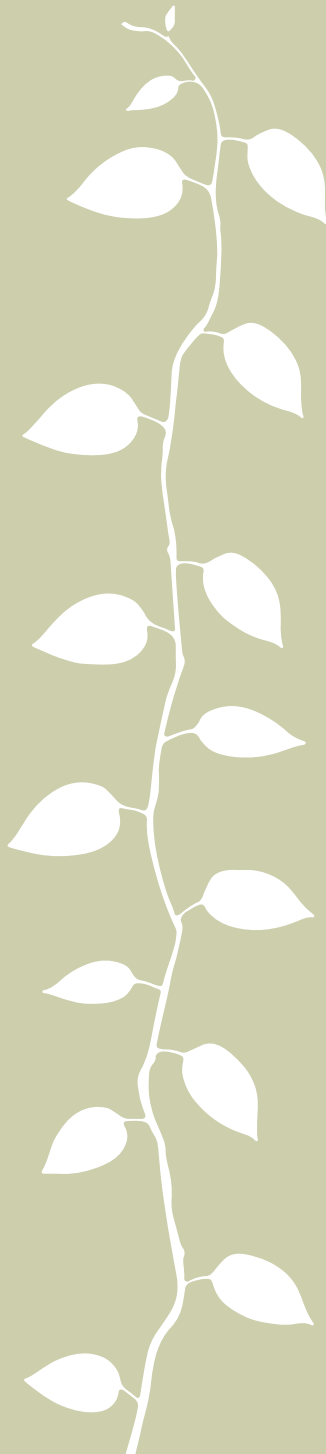
These accounts are properly fragmented, trivial, incidental, and scattered, with no obvious sequence or fixed logic, often intermingling and overlapping. What is revealed here, in truth, are my disjointed, faintly painful, and often contradictory thoughts and feelings, a heart I once thought had found peace and tranquility, though I now see it as a repressed, agitated and resentful heart that cannot be put at ease, that the agitation will persist.

I have neither the intention nor the capacity to chronicle, sort out, or illuminate that history. And yet, while the process of connecting and restoring the wreckage I found appears itself to be splintered and broken, my hope is that maybe, just maybe, I can, in some imprecise way, point out a workable attitude to deal with it all, a sort of passage to the two White Terror memorial parks, a means of knowing about and commemorating the history of the White Terror, and, as a result, having an empathic understanding of those many who died deep in the fog of the era (calmly with ideals, sternly with a determination to resist, or bitterly over injustices), or have long been adrift, voiceless, broken in body and spirit, and yet who might retain a sliver of hope.

It was a day that never ended.

As the train pulled out of the Tai-tung station at 12:05 A.M., I took off my shoes, pulled shut the curtain, and lay down on a lower bunk, fully clothed. It was the Hua-lien-Tai-tung train that ran both ways each night at the same time. It was an add-on sleeper car that I recall had eight bunks, upper and lower. I'd taken this train many times over the previous two years, always falling asleep soon after boarding and not awakening until we'd reached our destination, just as the sun was coming up. It was my favorite route. But not this time. As before, I lay down and covered myself with the thin blanket, but sleep would not come as a welter of thoughts clamored and scurried through my mind. In the darkness, amid the monotonous clickety-clack, I pondered with misgivings what this third all-day interrogation might foreshadow.

For a while I'd thought the matter had blown over. Well, I was wrong. In early January, a squad of men had come up the mountain to my Buddhist Temple in the early hours to arrest and then detain me in a small



interrogation room. Someone believed there was a radio transmitter hidden on the mountain, one I frequently used to pass on secrets and plots to certain individuals or organizations. In order to clear myself, I decided to end my original plan of secluding myself on the mountain to prepare for graduate school exams, and live like any normal person with a normal occupation. Thanks a friend's intervention, I luckily landed a teaching job that would start in the second semester of the school year. In February, not long after the semester began, I was summoned to the office, where the principal candidly admitted that the students' level of English in his vocational school was quite low, and he hoped I'd stick around to prepare some English teaching material suitable for them. No problem, I said. Then in mid-March, he called me in for another talk. Candid as before, he complimented me on my talents and said that spending years at a remote vocational school in the mountains did not promise a bright future. He urged me to move to a major urban center for better prospects. This time I said I'd be taking the graduate school exams in May and was confident of being accepted, so I planned to leave after the summer vacation. "Don't worry, Sir, I'll be out of here." I knew the secret police had been to see him. A man in civilian clothes who said he was a police officer had come to the bachelor dorm a week earlier to inform me that I was to appear for another round of questioning, even confirming with me which train to take.

I bought a sleeper ticket a few days before I was to leave. Too restless to stay put the night before my departure, I left my dorm room and walked the streets for a long time, until, as a diversion, I decided to take in the movie *Melody*, a second-run romance I had no real interest in seeing. After it ended, I continued walking the town's empty streets and byways, only to sense my worries and feeling of wretchedness getting jumbled and boundless along with a sense of foreboding. I considered defying

the summons by getting on a bus that night and heading south, in the opposite direction.

In the end, I dutifully boarded the stipulated train.

In Hua-lien, I saw through the window that some of my previous interrogators were pacing the area beyond the ticket checker, so I hopped off on the other side of the platform, crossed a series of tracks and a concrete barrier, and exited through a familiar railway employees' gate. Then I went out to get some breakfast at a roadside eatery. When I returned to the station, they were fuming. "Where the hell did you go? What have you been up to?" The big guy who had led my interrogation was livid. "Our men in Tai-tung told us they saw you board this train."

They'd come in three cars, an unnecessarily grand display of force. When we arrived, instead of taking me upstairs, like the previous two times, they led me into a small ground floor reception room, where four, maybe five men sat or stood around me. The big guy sized me up with a perplexed look. "You didn't bring anything?" He said. "Not even a simple change of clothes or toiletries?" I held up a book on translation I'd brought along and shook my head. They looked incredulous (upon later reflection, what I saw was actually expressions of people who thought I was either incredibly stupid or foolishly reckless). He informed me that his superiors in Taipei wanted to see me to clear up some matters. "You'll be back tomorrow, or the day after, or at most probably the day after that," he said. "But the day after tomorrow is a Monday," I replied. "What about my classes?" He sent someone to fetch a sheet of lined paper and told me to write a letter asking for a day off for an emergency. "Don't worry, we'll deliver it for you, and they'll approve it, no problem," the big guy said.

Two of the men then took me to the airport.

They disappeared after I deplaned, replaced by strangers who sat me

in a black sedan with wire-mesh-covered windows. As we drove along, I tried looking out to get an idea where we were and where we might be going. No luck. I saw only that after a while we were following a stream whose flow told me we were heading southwest.

We stopped after passing through a gate with armed guards. I was taken into a large room with a "Military Court" sign on the door and told to stand at a center spot behind a wooden railing. A moment later, two men came out through a door in the white wall behind a platform up front, and unhurriedly took their seats (I later learned that one of them was a military prosecutor, the other the court clerk.) The interrogation got underway, starting with my name and place of provincial origin, and then they asked if I admitted guilt. Everything up to that point was a repeat of the two previous times. What I heard over and over was, "Do you admit guilt?" No matter how I defended myself, the questioner appeared not to hear anything I said. I even saw the clerk nod off from time to time.

What I could not understand was, didn't judicial officers enjoy the prerogative of learning everything about a case?

When it was over, I was taken to a lockup and told to surrender my shoes, belt, and whatever money and valuables I had on me. Then came a body search. I was placed in a room with four or five men who were curious about what I was in for. When I told them, they said I'd get seven years. That was a shock. I said nothing should happen to me, that I'd be out in no time. "Don't be an idiot," they said unanimously. "That's just how it is."

They were right.

The day was April 22nd in Republic year sixty-one [1972].

Everything I experienced on the day I entered prison, from early morning, was a first for me, and impossible to forget: the flight from Hua-lien to Taipei under the close watch of two men, just like a hostage; the perfunctory interrogation formalities in a military court; the walk through a prison gate; being ordered to take everything out of my pockets and submit to a body search, and then being placed in a cell at a detention center; finding the other inmates' expressions and looks at me hard to read, plus their curious questions. On that first day inside I learned from my fellow inmates the true impact of the terms "arrest," "detention center," and "cell."

Hardest to forget was how helpless and defenseless I was, under their total control and restraint, from start to finish, feeling an overwhelming sense of powerless, leading to terror and anxiety as the reality of being in prison hit me. And yet I had to try to compose myself to avoid the embarrassment of losing self-control and falling apart in front of them. Those emotions are still visceral in my recollection, and when I think about it now, I am struck by overwhelming sadness, pain even.

After many years, or maybe a simple passage of time or my having grown older, I've slowly come to recognize what a momentous impact that first prison experience has had on my life. For the longest time afterward, some aspects have faded away, but others have kept silently, furtively multiplying and gnawing on me.

The many portals I passed through that first time have also left a deep impression on me. There were the gate with two armed soldiers we passed through in the police car from Songshan Airport; the yawning gate in the high wall I was led through and which separated me from ordinary society; the side door beside a barred entrance in the lockup I

was marched through after a cursory interrogation; the low opening in a high wall I had to duck through after the body search in order to keep going farther in; and the iron plate door in the cell they put me in, one that would seldom ever open again.

These doors were not in a straight line, but turned and veered off in different directions, and were all quite different in style. As I moved forward, they got smaller, more isolating, and more concealed and menacing. They were increasingly intended to make me submissive and feel I was being forced into an unknown, unfathomable, and irrefutably deep, dark cave, with a greater sense of death at each step. All those portals were impenetrable barriers, for in reality, they permitted entry only, no exit, and were intended to instill despair.

The areas inside them looked and functioned differently, and all were new to me, beyond anything I'd ever known. None of it made sense. I was reduced to going where I was told, zombie-like, from time to time glancing around—mindlessly, dully, hesitatingly.

When the cell door shut with a dull thud behind me before I knew what was happening, I was dizzy for a moment, then time seemed to stop. That sound hammered into me the heaviest blow I've ever felt.

Nearly fifty years have passed, and I've pretty much forgotten those three years in prison, but I still clearly recall so much of what happened on the day I entered the lockup, a day for which I should have felt only emotional turmoil and mental distress, but I can still recall a great many details. How strange. To this day, the distinct memories of a day that never seemed to end are still important to me.

After the slapdash interrogation at the court, I was told to wait outside.

Probably owing to having been dragooned at midnight and moved around endlessly in a courthouse where I was treated as something other than human, I was fading fast. Feeling like a lost soul, vulnerable, beaten down, I lay down on a bench outside for a few moments. I recall that as I lay there, I looked up at the slanting eaves extending over me and at the street in front of the courthouse, where the other side was bordered by a stand of tall trees, including coconut palms, and some structures that were partially visible among them.

I've never forgotten that scene, since it filled my eyes during the brief time I was on the bench.

But there are no eaves on the flat roof of the concrete military courthouse these days. Nor is there a bench or similar surface to lie on. I've asked around, discreetly asking fellow sufferers who were sentenced and served time in this building what image they retain of it. Most of them said it looked like it does now, while others told me they never paid attention to it or can't remember, and find my interest in its appearance of silly and comical. I wasn't about to give up. In fact, I went to examine some blurry aerial photos from the 60s and 70s, and by comparing changes in the location of other buildings in the area, as well as differences in rooftops and building hues, I was finally able to surmise with some accuracy that my memory of a courthouse with a sloped roof and eaves was probably correct. But I kept looking for proof.

I then learned of a Dr. Chen Zhongtong, who was imprisoned two years before me and spent ten years in that very building. A prisoner who could work outside the infirmary, not only did he treat sick prisoners in the cellblock, but as a doctor who saw prison officials and their families as patients, he could leave the lockup and see the entire compound. (After completing his medical training in Japan, Dr. Chen was arrested only fifteen days after his wedding. During his confinement, he was allowed

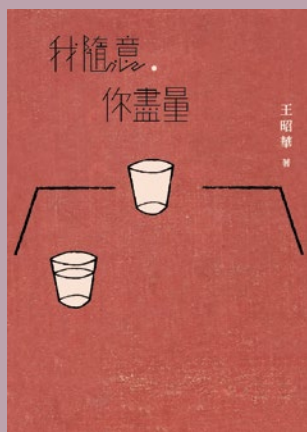
to leave the compound to see his family and assisted in the compiling of a list of political prisoners, which found its way overseas, gaining the attention of international human rights organizations that offered help.) He told me the original courthouse was indeed a wooden structure with a sloped roof.

With what I learned from him, I was finally able to put my mind at rest. It was as if a sloped roof, the street, and the trees and houses I saw as I lay disheartened on that dismal bench all those years ago one day at noontime, my last image of a world I was loath to leave, were an uncommon but key sight, for once I was able to pin it down, most of my memories of those blank three years now had a solid basis for their existence, a reference point from which I could affirm a solitary presence in an absolutely unfamiliar place, that it was no phantom illusion in a dream.

After verifying all this, a lost or fractured time seemed to slowly flow again and I could confirm that at the age of twenty-six, on a certain extraordinary morning, I was alone, defenseless, and terrified; at the same time, I could look back at my relationship with the world at large and see I had left my mark in the passage of time, however insignificant.

Similarly, I could finally gain confirmation and acceptance of a totally unforeseen yet significant life experience, as if by possessing it, I could now excavate that day, return to it and find a proper place for it, meaning that so much of the bewilderment and the troubles that had been with me for years could gain relief and consolation.

(.....)



Here's to Us, Bottoms Up 《我隨意，你盡量》

"I'll sip, you try to keep up!", a common expression said before drinking in the northwestern Taiwan town of Danshui, rings similar to the author's approach to literature: "I'll keep writing to my heart's desire; you (the reader) try to keep up!" The first half of this book is a journal of the author's time in Danshui. This section vividly narrates local folktales; offers up traditional descriptions of local specialties such as Huwei Sesame Oil, water spinach, and freshly picked persimmons; and otherwise guides the reader through the "ins and outs" of this historically important seaport town. The second half, covering the author's stay in Taipei, takes the reader through truly "local" highlights such as sampans on the Jingmei River, Yangmingshan's Balaka Highway, Zhuzihu's japonica rice, George Mackay's Mt. Guanyin, and Wugukeng.

Non Fiction

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Chiau-Hôa Ông 王昭華

The author, a Danshui resident from 1990 to 2014, published her first collection of works in Hokkien (Taiwanese) in 2006. She is the recipient of a Taiwan Literature Award gold medal (Hokkien Essay category). She currently writes primary-school textbook content and serves as a Hokkien consultant for Taiwanese language programming produced for the PTS Taigi Channel.



Judge Commentary by **Nathalie Chang** Translated by **Jui-Chuan Chang**

The prose in this work draws on sources ranging from life experience to knowledge and folk culture. The author absorbs the strengths of each to create something greater than the sum of its parts. The elegance of this work benefits further from the author's use of scientific writing principles to deftly and naturally weave knowledge and literature into a coherent whole. Her writing, while restrained, is intriguing because of the natural charm inherent to the humanities. The names of people, her anecdotes, and the memories of art history she brings to play manifest effortlessly the solid foundation she has firmly secured.

I'll sip. You try to keep up!

translated by Jui-Chuan Chang

Each of the myriad hills between Tamsui and Sam-tsi is traversed by a country road prefixed by the Chinese character for “North” (北). With adventure in mind, I would turn at a fork down one of them, then follow fork after fork, up and down the slopes. I might end up at a Taiwan acacia forest or at a landscape of ponds and terraced paddies. Sometimes I would even find people living in these remote places, far removed from more well-beaten paths.

After I moved to Tamsui, I went to an outdoor banquet with a friend. It was part of a worship ceremony at a temple, with the food served afterward in the evening. It was so dark on the way over that I nearly lost my way. Just as I began wondering if I had my directions straight, I caught sight of lights beaming brightly not far ahead, hinting at the happy, festive atmosphere ahead. “This was the place!” I thought.

Just a few households, all of which shared the same clan name, lived on this isolated terrace in the middle of nowhere. The front yard here was huge ... more than enough to accommodate several large round tables. They had hired a professional chef, who had, fortunately for me, just begun setting dishes on the tables. Back then, while restaurant banquets were not uncommon in the cities, banquets in small sleepy towns were still regularly thrown outdoors on the street. Moreover, rural families with their own yards would often host banquets at home under the stars. But, this was all new to me. This was my first banquet with such a “homey” feel.

My friend's classmate, a Tamsui native, was the reason my friend and I were invited to join in on the fun that evening. At the time, I thought it truly disrespectful to be following a friend to a feast when I had no idea which god they were worshipping. Quite brazen of me! It was only toward the end that I learned the name of the deity. It was Tāi-tō-kong (Pó-seng tāi-tè, the god of medicine), and that day, the 15th day of the third lunar month, was his birthday.

The electric atmosphere of temple banquets is different from that of wedding receptions. The latter, of course, centers on the bride and groom. Also, the lavish party they throw comes at a price for invited guests, who are expected to pony up generous, culturally mandated gifts of cash to the couple to pay for the expenses and then some. Banquets thrown to celebrate the birthdays of gods work by different rules. Hosts want to express their sincere gratitude to the gods they worship. Generous and unsparing, they do not send out invitations but simply announce, “Just come have fun! You're invited to the banquet!” Joining in a temple banquet is thus a great way to observe the folk culture and feel the sincerity of a place.

The Triennial Lord-Welcoming Festival and Lord's Ship Burning Festival, both hosted at Tang-káng Lord God Temple, are the biggest, most lively religious celebrations in my home county of Pîn-tong. Unfortunately, I don't know anyone from Tang-káng and was always jealous of those classmates who were invited to those banquets. Although the Temple of the Three Mountain Gods and the Banyan God in my hometown of Tiô-tsiu also holds celebrations, it's just once every three years, so it has been a long time since I last joined in on those festivities.

Like Tiô-tsiu, Tamsui has been around for centuries. Towns like these always have a big temple at their center surrounded by the original main street (today's Old Street). Má-tsóo Temple (Hok-iū Palace), Tshing-tsuí

Monk God Temple, and Liông-san Temple all have long histories. Tamsui's old Presbyterian Church is also famous. These are places that, while I was a student there, won warm and permanent homes in my heart. My Tamsui is the authentic Tamsui known mostly to natives of the town! But there is also a Tamsui for tourists.

As a pseudo Tamsui native, I am used to maintaining an air of indifference to the touristy side of my town. However, I sometimes have mixed feelings about it all. Fine ... Old Street? You (tourists) can have it! Tamsui Pier? You can have it! Our historic parks? You can have them! Tamsui riverside? You can have that too. If Fisherman's Wharf is not enough for you, you may have Soa-lün as well. I'll wait to emerge from the shadows until you've all gone back to Tâi-pak after finishing with your fun. My thoughts on this are complicated indeed ... an amalgam of common courtesy to outsiders and disdain at the thought of being mistaken as one of their own.

Especially on sunny weekends or holidays when I have to stay home and work, I am nagged by a voice in my head, goading me. "Come on! Let's go to the Tamsui beyond the crowds ... to the Tamsui we needn't share with anyone."

Each of those asphalt-carpeted country roads with a name starting with "North" has a white line on both sides and no line down the middle. These roads are all mine to enjoy ... no need to share. Those small trails I turn into at random are also mine as well. None come to challenge my isolation. The massive area between Tamsui and Sam-tsi ... the slopes over the cordillera of Mount Tuā-tün ... hill after hill ... hills built up by soil carried from the North Coast on monsoon winds ... refreshing spring waters spill into manmade ditches leading from mountain heights to irrigated fields and rice paddies. By the time I had moved here, farming was already a profitless endeavor in Tamsui. Although a handful of farmers

still plant rice each year, many have switched to water bamboo. Because red-husked water bamboo grows really tall, we ignorant southerners often still mistake the plants growing in these paddies for sugarcane.

Tamsui's "backyard" is where I like to escape and hide. This is where the parade "Tâi-tō-kong of the Eight Villages in Tamsui and Sam-tsi" marches and is also where I attended that banquet during which giant pigs were slaughtered as an offering to Tâi-tō-kong. Each of the eight villages takes its turn to host the festival and to treat relatives and friends to the pork after offerings are made.

So far, I've seen only photos of "divine giant pig" competitions. Those roly-poly balls of swine are so distended that it's hard to recognize what they even are. Only the head framed by two distinctive pig ears give it away. I realized that the entire pig's skin with meat was draped over a huge rack from underneath. It was held in place by red straps with decorative tassels and topped by national flags stuck into its back. A beautifully glammed up giant pig, indeed. Does the god really want such a ginormous pig? Times are changing. Is it still necessary for us humans to show gods respect this way? We humans are similar to these pigs, you know. The food and information we stuff ourselves with bloat us just like those obese pigs awaiting the butcher. We too are bloated and powerless balls lying prone and stock-still before the god of fate.

The term "Eight Villages" refers to the eight largest villages in this area. I like to think of them as sticky rice dumplings connected by string in the middle, keeping these villages connected and looking out for one another. Although these tiny hamlets have names you've probably never heard of and are inhabited by only a few households, don't make the mistake of discounting them. Their residents have worshipped Tâi-tō-kong and received his blessings for more than two centuries!

Before moving to Tamsui, I didn't know much about "Tāi-tō-kong." My only impression of him was from the phrase "Má-tsóo Brings Rain, Tāi-tō-kong Brings Winds" in a story I'd read in *Taiwan Folktales* when I was little. Is this the follow-up to that story? While many big, permanent temples have been built for Má-tsóo, Tāi-tō-kong has been left to wander the hills here from village to village over an eight year cycle, staying each year in the house of the new censer host. On the ninth year, the cycle starts all over again. Like we mortals, Tāi-tō-kong always finds a way through, but has no place he can truly call "home".

Modern Tamsui Town is covered in buildings, while its *feng shui*-rich hilltops are carpeted in graves and columbariums. Temples here compete against each other for wealth, size, and number of lit joss sticks. Competing for more buildings and space seems to imply that no god should "have territory but no temple." It is all planned to perfection, right? No! Tāi-tō-kong of Tamsui's Eight Villages and Sam-tsi is a god that to all intents and purposes seems to have "missed the bus" and failed to gain mainstream acclaim.

The banquet that night a few years ago was my first experience sitting with so many of Tamsui's "mountaintop people" at the same table. A drunk older man visited our table. Upon hearing I was a local classmate's friend and had not visited before, he became very friendly and asked me to drink more, filling up everyone's glass with beer and letting his own spill foam over its brim. He held up his glass and invited everyone to drink up together. Pausing, he squinted at me and informed me that Tamsui locals had their own special way of giving a toast:

"How is ours different?" he said. "Other people usually say, 'Bottoms up for me. You can sip,' right? Well, that's not what we say here. We're different. We say, 'I'll sip. You try to keep up!'"

So ... "I'll sip" literally means I'll drink the amount I want. However, the "sip" is almost always bottoms up anyway to show the host's sincerity. That's an unwritten rule.

As for the person being toasted, "you try to keep up" makes it clear that it's up to them how much they drink ... or if they drink at all.

That's a phrase that conveys the same meaning, but more brilliantly. My sincerity, your amount ... Sincerity and amount, implied yet undefined, allow both toaster and toaster the freedom to enjoy in subjective comfort.

"I'll sip. You try to keep up!" I feel this is something Tāi-tō-kong might say as well. "I am spontaneous and free, and am used to moving to a new village each year and to patrolling all the eight villages. No need to build me a big temple. As for preparing the worship ... meh. I know you'll do your best ... and that will be good enough."

This toast makes sense for me to say too ... When I drink with others ... when I'm writing in Taiwanese. I pour sincerity into my writings which, honestly, is fairly difficult to read. Ha! Please try to keep up too, my readers.

Hue-tiânn Tsiò-ji't (blog), July 2nd, 2006. Revised 2022

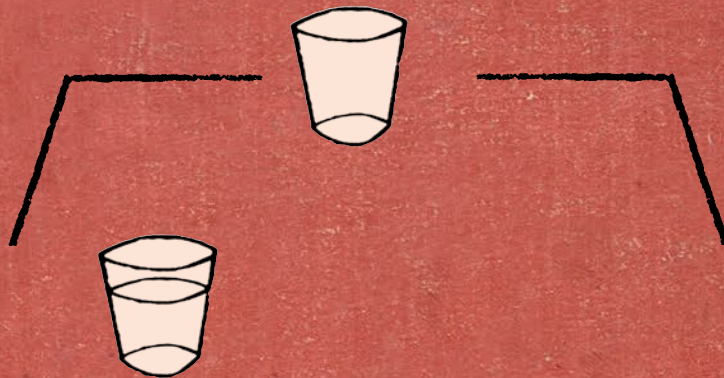
Memoir of Upper Tamsui

1

After becoming unemployed in the summer of 2005, I no longer needed to make the daily commute between Tamsui and Tâi-pak. So, naturally, I began spending much more time in Tamsui.

Quite coincidentally, a breakfast restaurant nearby my home reopened under new ownership and started hiring. The half-day shifts were exactly what I wanted then, so I wasted no time to learn more about the work. The owner of the restaurant also owned the building, so she had taken over the establishment when her tenant didn't reup their lease. She thought she could handle the cooker herself and just needed a part-time assistant to come in at 5:30 a.m. each day and work until closing time around noon.

During those years, I moved from the student housing area on Tsuí-guân Street into a flat on Sin-bîn Street. It was a unit in one of those new-build condominiums and was owned by a friend's friend who had left Taiwan to explore the world, find love, and start a new life overseas. They surely must have found it difficult to part with such a beautiful place. The apartment was on the twelfth floor and had three bedrooms and two living rooms. After renting it, I sublet the master bedroom with its own bathroom to help out with my rent payments. The owner sold me the dining table and living-room sofa set as well as the sling chair and round table on the balcony. A place resembling "home" took shape organically without needing to spend time shopping for this and that. After wandering



in Tamsui for fifteen years, I had finally bid farewell to my days of living in “shacks” and began life in a “home” with a living room and kitchen.

The sliding glass door to the side of the bright living room opens onto a small balcony. In one corner is a scraggy-looking plumeria, also left by the owner, in a pot with far too little topsoil. The sling chair on the balcony offers great views of Mount Kuan-im, the Tamsui River, and a pair of high-rise buildings that, while partially blocking my view, remind me of the paired dragon and tiger paintings in temples. I like to think of them as side panel paintings framing and accentuating the beauty of Mount Kuan-im and the Tamsui River. Not bad at all!

To witness the piece de resistance of this condo-living experience, take the elevator to the 14th floor and climb the stairs to the roof. Push open the door of the emergency exit and feel the strong sea breeze swarm in, messing up your hair and giving you the look of a crazy person. I understand that, at other condominium complexes, women going up on to the roof is a point of concern for security guards. Luckily, our security staff seem less on edge about such behavior. Our roof is best when no one else is up there. You can see Mount Kuan-im stretched out before you ... completely relaxed. The Tamsui River’s estuary stretches into the distance and you can see everything. When the weather is good and the wind blows in strong from the Strait, whitecaps make the river shimmer and glint like sea fish scales or the sequins sewn onto the cheongsams worn by Sapphire Nightclub singers. The sky has no hint of clouds and the sea unfolds to the horizon, at which point both join seamlessly together.

While living there, I learned that a then-unreleased documentary entitled *The Green Horizon* needed its director-written script translated into Taiwanese for narration by Lim Giong. A friend contacted me about the project on behalf of the director, who was out of the country at the time. *The Green Horizon* ... what a coincidence! It must have been fate

that brought that project to me ... After all, I had been watching the horizon from my roof long enough! But, I wondered, why would anyone want their film narrated in Taiwanese? While fairly common today, the idea was still quite unusual back then.

The Green Horizon narrated the story a group of teenage Taiwanese workers in Japan during the war. The Japanese government, which still ruled Taiwan at the time, recruited over 8,000 teenage workers from Taiwan between 1943 and the end of the war. Although told they were going to Japan for work-study, they were assigned to tedious, dangerous jobs in the war industry. After a short, rigorous training, they were dispatched to factories throughout the country to work on fighter aircraft production lines. The difficult, exhausting work left no time for anything else. As the war around them intensified, they increasingly worked around the clock every day, even when they physically and mentally couldn’t take it anymore.

(.....)



The Lost River

《沒口之河》

Along Taiwan's southeast coast, river estuaries, open to the ocean throughout most of the year, transform into dry land during the winter, seemingly leaving their still-flowing rivers to disappear just a short distance from the Pacific. The Zhiben Wetland is located on one of these disappearing rivers. Author Han-Yau Huang carefully surveyed this reputedly barren landscape, making note of its flora and fauna, including stands of chinaberry and beach casuarina trees, wild sugarcane grass, and birds like the white wagtail and ring-necked pheasant, to document its ecological importance in order to derail plans for development. The author also discusses the movement's ties to both indigenous rights and national energy transformation priorities; introduces the area's history and wisdom of Zhiben's indigenous Katratripulr Tribe; and explores questions central to the essence of both nature and humanity.

Non Fiction

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黃瀚嶠

Huang graduated from NTU's Department of Forestry and is currently engaged as an illustrator, eco-educator, and community college lecturer. He is the recipient of a China Times Literary Award (first place award, novel group). *The Lost River* was awarded the Best General Nonfiction Book by Openbook and Liang Shih-Chiu Award in Prose in 2023. And in 2024, this book won the Best First Book Award by TSMC Foundation.



Judge Commentary by Wang Ling Hsieh

Translated by Jacqueline Leung

This work chronicles the formation and subsequent natural development of the Zhiben Wetlands. The author blends nature writing and reportage with chorographic and ethnographic research to document his observations of local species, geographical changes, and indigenous tribal stories. The narrative describes the long-running interactions between local residents and the land and weaves together a cogent argument against moves at the time to cover the wetlands in solar collectors. One of the most brilliant aspects of this book is its inventive structure. Each of its seven chapters is named after a plant indigenous to the region, with each plant used to frame and move the narrative forward in terms of space and time as well as social and cultural perspectives.

Chapter 4.

Taitung Firethorns

translated by **Jacqueline Leung**

(.....)

If I had to describe Sakan in one sentence, I would surely say it is the place where you can still find Taitung firethorns. To my knowledge, other than the one firethorn shrub in Kinkuwangan, Sakan is the only place in the entire alluvial fan area where Taitung firethorns still survive in the wild. After all, Kinkuwangan and Sakan were supposedly connected to one another long ago.

From my very first excursion there, Taitung firethorns has indelibly shaped my overall impression of Sakan. Firethorns and Sakan are invariably linked in my mind, underpinning my sense of that place.

Firethorns, or *Pyracantha*, are a genus of shrubs in the Rosaceae family. Their flowers are small and white, blooming hydrangea-shaped in flat-topped cyme inflorescences. They bear bright, red fruit that attract birds and mammals to eat and then disperse their seeds. Fresh shoots appear initially as spikes before unfurling new leaves. This is the origin of the Chinese name for this genus, “fire prickles,” and the Taiwanese name, “fire thorn bushes”. Horticulture enthusiasts also know this plant as “Scholar’s Red.” Every tribal elder will undoubtedly tell you “Scholar’s Red” once grew in abundance across these fields. Interestingly, “Scholar’s Red” is a botanical name used by Han Chinese to describe multiple species of red-

fruited plants, which means that, by the time the tribe knew halidimdim (the Pinuyumayan name for Taitung firethorns) as “Scholar’s Red”, these plants were already in high demand on the botanical market. In fact, it may even have been the commercial buyers of these plants that first introduced the name “Scholar’s Red” to the tribe.

Fewer than ten Taitung firethorn shrubs now grow on the alluvial fan, and it is quite likely that most of these were originally propagated from the same plant. The decline of the firethorn population here over the last century has been disastrous indeed.

It was in mid-February when Ya-Ting, a few other friends, and I took this route for the first time. We walked under New Zhiben Bridge, veering off from the agricultural road Chin had earlier taken us down. We proceeded along the river until we reached Sakan.

Sakan’s fields had been neatly grazed by cows. The yellow grass of winter had yet to be replaced by new, verdant spring blades, and the low-cut grasses continued to show the work of those hungry cows. Any survey of Sakan would probably have shown its economic value as coming primarily from livestock farming. I don’t know if or how diligently Jay Tee Ler International Company would drive cow herders away from Sakan, but this area was regularly grazed by some sixty cows belonging to at least three households. The cows kept the grasses low, making those vast, open fields invitingly easy to walk across. The only obstacles along the way were brambly shrubs like the chest-high lantanas with their spiky interwoven vine-like branches. The profuse blooms of these lantanas cast hues of evening vermilion across the landscape during the months when winter gradually surrenders to spring.

Negundo chaste trees and white popinacs grow here as well. Herds of cows rest in these thickets, and egrets gather and breed among

their branches and leaves. Chinaberry trees and paper mulberries are peppered across this area, and you can hear the cries of black-naped orioles from time to time. The untold number of nightjars and ring-necked pheasants hiding in the deep grasses here are easily startled into flight by approaching footsteps ... which startles us as well. I was working to formulate my discourse on the ecology of the alluvial fan area at the time and, with the information gathered in interviews with the locals, I ultimately described Sakan as a wildlife corridor connecting the valley forest to the mouth of the river.

The electric fence that Jay Tee Ler International had installed to encircle the grasslands had since been reinforced by the herders to ensure their cows couldn't wander off. The herders were happy and laid-back. They had only to let their cows graze. With woods here offering shelter after dark and ditches and ponds dug by tribespeople long ago, these herders didn't even need to build livestock shelters.

We used the fence as a readymade transect for our research. That day, we walked along the fence with our binoculars and collected data on the natural vegetation. Reaching the middle section, we saw in the distance a cluster of unfamiliar bushes adorned with many white flowers shimmering in the waning afternoon light like open cups. Captivated by their brilliance, we crawled through the wire fence, passed by the grazing cows, and arrived upon the heart of Sakan. We discovered that what we had spied at a distance were Macartney rose bushes in full bloom. Macartney roses have the largest diameter flowers of all Taiwan's wild roses. Their bright, yellow stamens readily attract bumblebees, and each petal is shaped like a heart. Although once common in low-altitude rural areas across Taiwan, they, like many other lowland wild plant species, have become increasingly rare with the decline of agriculture and

increasing competition from invasive species.

It was then, right next to those wild roses, that we discovered a small cluster of wild Taitung firethorns.

Like the Macartney roses, those firethorn shrubs were about waist-high. However, their prolific bundles of white flowers were considerably smaller and more subtle than the roses. Some were already bearing green, unripe fruit that, with the onset of summer, would turn flaming red in color. Diminutive firethorn shoots were just then starting to sprout, appearing as thorns emerging from the springtime soil.

I couldn't help wonder, what was it that made firethorns evolve such a prickly defense? Although sika and sambar deer, its main natural predators, have not been seen in the area for a century or more, the firethorns have still jealously kept their weapons at the ready.

For sure, their pin-straight spikes and the hooked spikes on wild roses are useful defenses against today's plant-hungry cows. Along this landscape, only these prickly bushes and Negundo chaste trees (which excrete volatile oil as chemical defense) rise above knee level. Maybe these cows had stumbled their way into a mutualistic relationship that will continue to sustain plants' riverside strategy for millions of years.

These branches are really quite prickly. The first time I collected samples, several thorns broke off and punctured my skin. If I were a cow, this would have definitely curtailed the appeal of this plant. Typically, only insects feed on their leaves and flowers, while birds are happy to carry away their fruit. But even shrubs as plucky as the Rosaceae are no match against excavators, earthmovers, and fires.

According to historical data, Taitung firethorns are an endemic species found only in certain parts of Taiwan's East Rift Valley. The species makes



its home mostly along wild stretches of gravel-strewn riverbanks and coastline, often growing directly on embankments. Commercial demand for Scholar's Red has led to its near disappearance from the Rift Valley, and finding Taitung firethorns in the wild today is extremely rare. A senior field researcher who specializes in the conservation of endangered plants told me he had conducted a thorough search of Hualien County and had found no trace of Taitung firethorns in the wild.

In the city, however, you come across these plants from time to time in the form of Scholar's Red planted in manicured rows; their red berries conjuring up images of newly strung festival lanterns. But many of those you see will actually be Chinese firethorns, a species imported from southern China that looks quite similar to our Taitung firethorns. In fact, the two are so similar that botanists have published articles focused on informing readers of their miniscule differences. One example is that, while Chinese firethorn leaves have fine-toothed margins and a rounded tip, Taitung firethorn leaves have untoothed (smooth) margins and a notched tip.

These distinctions between margins and leaf shapes are so minor that even I have had difficulty classifying bushes encountered in Taipei. It wasn't until I came across this species in the wild for the first time on the grassy fields of Sakan in Zhiben that I finally had a clear picture in my head. Only then did I appreciate the look of that leaf with smooth edges and a notched tip. The true secret of plant taxonomy is seeing the plants for yourself. Seeing with your own eyes always wins out against any description you might read.

Next to Taitung Railway Station near the Chii Lih, a hotel catering to mostly Chinese tourists, is a manicured lawn filled with Scholar's Red. Primly pruned and blooming regularly, their fruit is coral red ... but they are all Chinese firethorns. By contrast, in the yards of some of the old

houses in remote indigenous villages outside of Taitung City, you can still find untamed, brambly Taitung firethorns, some over two stories high, laden with white blossoms.

However, finding a Taitung firethorn in the wild is a different experience altogether, seasoned by the excitement both of a plant enthusiast and of the chance of uncovering a precious part of tribe's shared memories. Finding a specimen in the wild revs the gears of my imagination, thinking of the agrarian and foraging cultures of so many centuries past, of herds of deer running across these fields, of the gray delta seen in the aerial photo. All memories of Zhiben river seem to be compressed in these shrubs. It is an almost spiritual experience ... an instant connection to an infinitely large space and time.

Soon after that first encounter with a wild Taitung firethorn shrub, I wrote a poem of remembrance for the wetlands. For the last stanza I wrote:

*Willfully, firethorns pierce
my arms in the river terrace*

*Like oils of the savanna
they make me cry*

*Thorns and scents
they are*

*Deer herds galloping across the alluvial fan
a secret reminiscence*

(.....)

The following year, in the spring of 2019, I paid my second visit to Sakan.

As I headed under New Zhiben Bridge, I was shocked to find that the sand-gravel mound, three stories high and nearly a kilometer long last year, had vanished completely. In its place was a messy maze of tire tracks clearly left by dump trucks. The mound had been dug up and hauled away to be used as concrete aggregate. The land now seemed so empty. It was flat enough to take my scooter across, follow the electric fence, and ride straight out into Sakan.

In the distance, cows were resting in groups amidst the sparse greenery, and further on, Pana, the valley slope next to the village, still looked as overgrown as I had remembered. As before, I scanned the fields with my binoculars, and, sure enough, new wild rose blooms were shimmering in the sunlight. I thought to myself, how is this scene different from the one I saw on my first visit here?

I crawled through the wire fence, which wasn't electrified after all, walked past smooth rattleboxes and lantanas, and arrived at the wild rose bushes. The two bushes were now three, and the original two had grown from tendrils crawling on the ground into big, tufted bushes with quite a few large flowers. Bees weaved happily amongst their mature branches. Beside them were several bushes - all Taitung firethorns - that were also in bloom and nearly as lush and thorny as the ones I'd first encountered. If not for the tire tracks and barrenness of the landscape, I might be convinced that the huge mound I'd scaled but a year ago was a figment of my imagination. Knowing of its existence, however, its removal was a tragedy that weighed upon my mind, and my memories of it kept rushing back in waves into my consciousness. The landscape, both then and now, are part of an endless cycle.

Social progress saw Taitung firethorns cut and dispersed across our cities in a pattern similar to how the people of Zhiben have dispersed and scattered, their tribal culture lost and revived over several generations. The Zhiben River as well, which once governed everything across the alluvial fan, has been divvied up into canals, ditches, paddy fields, fish farms, ponds, wetlands, creating a landscape that is broken and schizophrenic. The Taitung firethorn seems an apt metaphor for it all. The tribe is like the firethorn: tenacious and armed with spikes, adapting to things as they come, while flourishing along the riverbanks of history. Despite the tribe being felled and dispersed multiple times, its new shoots keep sprouting from every spike over every part of its body. The river is also like the firethorn: dammed and excavated, blocked and buried; but the water flows on, sometimes a surge, sometimes an undertow.

There was a time when the riverbed shone white with wild sugarcane grass and the terrace was dotted with Taitung firethorns heavy with crimson red berries. These memories, now dispersed throughout the alluvial fan like broken branches crushed into the soil, offer hope that, maybe one day, they will emerge again and grow quietly into new bushes.

If all we see in our world are fragments of history in a perpetually flowing stream, just a perpetual distortion of reality, which of these fragments truly need to be remembered and kept? An old hunter once half-jokingly told me that Taitung firethorns should be planted back in tribal territory. The underlying reason for his suggestion may be the answer to my question. We should treat all fragments in the stream of history with compassion and kindness, and try to engage with them in earnest. After all, we are too, in the end, just fleeting fragments of history.

No matter how much we would like it to stop or slow down, history's march progresses steadily onward. We can miss what is now past, and it is our reminiscences passed from generation to generation that allow

“history” to exist. It is like how the history of Zhiben River is remembered and celebrated in its alluvial plain wetland.

The river rises and falls, and vegetation continues to flourish.





Brother 《弟弟》

Listening to those pithy, nostalgic remembrances of old streets, shops, and life stories, I discovered Hong Kong to be a font of engagingly finespun stories. No ... not thrilling tales peppered with cliffhangers, but, rather, cozy nostalgia-laden walks down memory lane. The resonant significance helps bring us all closer together. Accompanying my brother from infancy into adulthood, made me also an author of our collective memories of a city that was changing with no hope of return. However, it is the dust of the bricks of that time that remind us we still need love and must care for one another.

Fiction

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Wai-Yee Chan

陳慧

Chan was born and raised in Hong Kong and currently lives and writes in Taiwan. She has many years of experience as a film, television, and stage scriptwriter and has written and published several dozen novels and essays. Chan is a recipient of a 5th Hong Kong Biennial Award for Chinese Literature.



Judge Commentary by **Hao Yu-hsiang**

Translated by **Darryl Sterk**

In telling this tale of a kid brother and his big sister, the author deals deftly with the drastic changes that Hongkongers have experienced since the return of their territory to China. Thus, what on its face seems to be a bildungsroman is actually an epic exploration of social trauma and identity, with the “kid brother” standing in as a metaphor for post-1997 Hong Kong.

Chapter 23.

The night the world split in two

Translated by Darryl Sterk

1

Cola needed a helping hand to make it through a break in the barricade before sunrise. Everyone had their reasons for staying or leaving. Cola's was a twisted ankle. He'd misjudged a leap the night before.

After a long night in the square, he limped over to me. I had taken off my heels and was crouching with my back against a *sek bok* ... those temporary concrete barriers installed in the street. I stood up in silence, unsure what to say, and hugged him tightly, burying my face in his chest. I caught a pong of pungent sweat, but I didn't pull back; I just kept holding him, and let myself cry. I felt like we were displaced people, like I'd just reunited with a long-lost relative. I'd never forget the sounds, smells, or stickiness of that night.

Reluctant to leave, Cola stared down at his swollen ankle.

Everyone advised him to see a doctor. Those he knew and those he didn't promised him they would stay the course ... remain there in his stead.

It turned out that, while he could stand the pain, the stifling air was a different story. He was willing to leave with Michael and me because he wanted to go home and take a shower before paying a visit to the *dit da* doctor, the bonesetter. There was a TV in the clinic, turned to a live news

broadcast. The doctor was rubbing a grown man's calf while commenting on the unfolding "catastrophe" in the square. By square, he of course meant the rectangular green space called Tamar Park in front of the Central Government Complex. That man must have skipped his warm-up before soccer practice. Without saying a word, Cola stood up and limped towards the door. The doctor stopped him. "Hey, what's the hurry?" he asked. "How'd you hurt your ankle?" Cola turned around and pointed at the TV. "I twisted it by jumping off a railing," he said. He resumed his limp towards the door. Michael and I jumped up and helped him out.

Two shops away, we could still hear the bonesetter cursing at Cola.

We ended up in a nearby hospital's emergency ward. The queue was over five hours long, which gave Cola time to catch up on sleep. Bored, Michael left ... perhaps for a cigarette or maybe a coffee. When he came back, he showed me a photo. It was a long shot he had taken of me and Cola with his cell phone. Cola was fast asleep, leaning on me, while I was looking, unwittingly, towards the camera lens. I seemed a bit tired and confused. I liked the photo so much that I made it my wallpaper image. Michael seemed a bit jealous.

Mom called to ask where Cola was. Cool and collected, I told her Cola hadn't gone anywhere near Admiralty. Tamar Park? Nope, he was miles away. He had sprained his ankle playing basketball, I added, and was waiting to see the doctor. She sounded relieved.

She said she was leaving the next day to *baan fo* ... to buy products for her company. She would be away for five days.

I thought of a classmate who had gone abroad for secondary school. He left in June and had come back for a visit the following December. He said that what bothered him the most was the change in airport. He'd taken off at the old Kai Tak in Kowloon and landed at Chek Lap Kok off Lantau.

Never again would he swoop down over that row of low-rise bungalows. The new airport was big and bright, but something was missing, and a cycle couldn't be completed. The more he thought about it, the stronger the sense of loss became. He seemed at a loss for words.

And yes, Mom came back five days later; five days ... a hundred and twenty hours. But Hong Kong would never be the same. She would never be able to make up for what she had missed. And she wasn't the only one. Those who had lost, or those who were lost, would never in a million years be able to imagine how intense it felt, and how bizarre it seemed, for those of us who were there. It was like nothing in the hundred and fifty year history of the island. Five days later, it was as if we were living in a different Hong Kong.

2

I'd received a message at midnight that the Occupation, a thing that had been bandied about since the previous year, was finally going to happen. It'd been a long time coming, and, since we'd asked for it, without even a chance to negotiate, this was how Occupy, Hong Kong-style, was going to happen. I tried to wake Cola, but he was sleeping too deeply, maybe due to the analgesics he'd taken. I went to get ready, and Michael shook Cola a second time. Cola babbled a bit, but fell back asleep.

I had to leave a note for him, telling him we were off to Admiralty again. Michael and I put on our backpacks and set off at dawn.

When we arrived at the park, there weren't many people there. The morning sun was warm, and the air was calm, without a hint of anxiety or

unease. It gave me a false sense of complacency ... like this could be just another weekend outing.

It was only after noon that a crowd began to gather and that the people there started to make some noise. The growing crowd quickly spilled over onto the sidewalks, and late-comers had to stand on the shoulder of the road. The numbers continued to rise until some folks stepped out into the middle of the road and began shouting. Everyone followed them. That's how it went down.

That's what happened.

There was no one in charge, everyone just walked out into the road of their own accord. That's what I saw. Michael and I were among them. We weren't particularly concerned ... or afraid in the least. We weren't trying to pick a fight with anyone. It was just that there were a lot of people and we wanted space for ourselves, that was all.

Boy was it ever raucous. I ran into Aa Cou as well as colleagues, classmates, and friends I hadn't seen in the longest time. We were all there ... together.

The sun was setting. Messages, too many of them, had drained my cell phone battery; I was running on empty. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten to bring a power bank. The crowd still didn't have a clear orientation. *We just want to stay, don't tell us to go away.* I kept wiping the sweat off my brow. I remember looking back at Michael and saying, "It's supposed to get cooler after sunset, isn't it?" Suddenly there was a commotion up ahead, it seemed that something terrible was going down. Then something that looked like gun smoke enveloped us.

Michael tried to drag me out of there, but there was such a press that I couldn't react. All I could hear was the sound of gunfire and the shouts



and screams of people ahead of us in the crowd.

I finally realized it was tear gas.

—*What’s to become of us?*

Is anyone hurt? Or arrested? Beats me. Is Cola here? I don’t know.

The commotion died down and people sat down on the road, passing supplies along and asking one another: *Are you all right?!* Nobody was following anyone’s lead. We were all in deep shock after that humiliating and hurtful assault ... Who could have imagined? We were part of a gathering of anonymous individuals whose destinies were now interconnected. We stayed together, we left together, and, from now on, no one could tear us apart.

Before midnight, I borrowed a stranger’s phone to call Cola, but there was no answer.

Michael was asleep, lying on his side on the road, his brow furrowed. I took out pen and paper. I had to write down the events of this Sunday afternoon. But after putting “28 September, Fair” at the top of a blank page in my notepad, I couldn’t write any more.

Chapter 24.

28 September, Fair

1

Although I’d never been in the habit of keeping a diary, I felt I needed to document what had happened on that particular Sunday. I didn’t want to upload a photo to Facebook to let people know I was there. But I did need to write what I’d experienced down as a private record, just for myself, to calm my nerves and steel my soul.

But when I began to write, I fell into a daze. Looking at the countless strangers in front of me, I tried to segue back to what we’d experienced, but I didn’t know where to start. It had surged, was bigger and more complicated than I had imagined, but had no discernible cause or effect. It was terrifying. I couldn’t gather my thoughts or sort them out. Even when I convinced myself to write *something*, I just jotted down disconnected phrases like “we were so excited” or “I thought I was going to die.” Then, I realized that if I couldn’t find a way to recount what had gone down around dusk, I wouldn’t be able to file this away in either my mind or my soul. It would live forever in its raw, unprocessed form, so that, whenever I thought of this Sunday, it would present itself to me live, as it happened, in the heat of the moment—commotion and indignation machine-gun staccato, tear gas canisters, acrid smoke everywhere, snot, tears, panic, screaming ... *RUN! Am I gonna die for this city tonight?* Every time I think about it, these sounds and smells ... these emotions and images emerge anew, flaring up over and over again, like a sneak attack.

Dusk on that fateful day shrank into a lump that sank into the deepest recesses of my heart.

It--will--never--ever--pass--away.

After midnight, some in the crowd began to leave. Some out of fear that the rumours were true; many because their families were telling them to come home; others due to exhaustion ... tired of being on the streets for days on end. Many said they were going across the harbour to Mongkok ... Everyone had their own reason to stay or leave. It was enough that we were of one heart and mind.

Those streets now filled with tens of thousands of people were surprisingly quiet late at night. I hadn't slept a wink. I put my windbreaker over Michael. In the distance, I noticed a small group of people still awake. As I got closer, I realized they were praying. I joined them. Religion was another habit that had never quite stuck, but, at the moment, I could find no reason not to join in. I needed the strength of serenity. Before dawn, I remembered there was a chapel along a side street not far away where an early morning Mass was held. It had a beautiful name, Star Street ... like it was some sort of beacon. I quietly got up and walked in its direction. "Are you leaving?" someone whispered. I said I was going to Mass. To my surprise, several got up to follow me. None looked like regular churchgoers.

I'd attended Mass in Catholic primary school, but hadn't been in a church, not even for a wedding, since grade six. You can imagine my surprise, then, when I found I could still do the calls and responses in cadence and knew most of the songs. Memories long mothballed were dusted off that

morning. Whatever had been given unto me would never be forsaken, right? It would always remain hidden, stored in the folds and creases of my brain ... buried under all the seemingly more important things that came afterward on life's ever-unfolding timeline. So, how could so many Hongkongers seemingly have so easily forgotten the beautiful things they had experienced?

"Lord, my heart isn't worthy to receive you, but just say the word, and my soul shall be healed."

Mass ended at half past seven. Some of the people who had come with me left for work, promising to come back if anything happened. A few others walked with me towards Harcourt Road as naturally as if we were going home.

We didn't speak, we just walked. Suddenly, I no longer wanted to go back to the same place. I wanted to see what was going on at the other gathering points, so I walked up Harcourt Road onto the flyover.

I walked up and up and up ... and there it was, Connaught Road Central, free of cars and full of people. Suddenly, in the morning light, I saw Cola at the top of the flyover, walking slowly down towards me.

I wanted nothing more.



Eyelids of Morning

《鯉眼晨曦》

After the mysterious disappearance of the British royal crown and coronation treasures, seven close friends embark on a peril-filled search for the renowned “Star of Sarawak”. The Sarawak People's Militia, locked in a life-and-death struggle for independence from British colonial rule, will risk everything to steal these treasured symbols of wealth and power, which are now somewhere on Borneo. Elsewhere on the island, a shadowy, red-haired woman and pipe-smoking giant are following clues in search of the world's largest diamond. Four rival forces are bearing down on each other on the world's third largest island in an intrigue-filled struggle for diamonds and treasure.

Fiction

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Zhang Guixing

張貴興

Born in Sarawak on Malaysian Borneo and became a Taiwan citizen in 1983. His works center on life in the familiar rainforests of Borneo and the challenges faced by ethnic Chinese living in Southeast Asia. His writing is poetic and known for its rhetorical flair and richness. Zhang is a recipient of the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature, among other awards.



Judge Commentary by Wang Ling Hsieh

Translated by Christopher Rea

Eyelids of Morning, set in the author's home region of Sarawak, may appear to merely extend Zhang Guixing's South Seas rainforest writings. As before, Zhang elaborates on the dense ecology, enigmatic brutality, and enveloping darkness of Borneo's tropical rainforests while weaving a plot haunted by the specters of colonialism and revolutionary guerilla warfare. Yet in this work, Zhang's writing surpasses his previous splendid accomplishments. Through the author's resplendent display of poetic rhetoric, intertwining of rich historical and fictional details, and mobilization of his formidable knowledge of science and pseudoscience, *Eyelids of Morning* manifests a new and radically original creative vision.

Eyelids of Morning

Chapter 2.

Translated by **Christopher Rea**

3

Amidst the sounds of flowing water, chirping insects, and rustling leaves and branches, the Bornean canopy resounds with the calls of over a thousand species of birds. Then, one particular bird begins to sing, prompting all of the others to fall silent. That songbird, whose melody moves the very river to stop flowing and dying leaves to exert their last ounce of strength to keep from falling from their branches, is the straw-headed bulbul.

When not in song, the straw-headed bulbul's plumage is a drab brown tinged with yellow. In flight, it resembles a piece of bark stripped from a tree by the large beak of some nesting hornbill. When perched on a fence, the most notice it is likely to attract is from a hungry wildcat. But when it begins to sing, its call turns into a paintbrush that adds colors to its plumage, like the magic wand the Creator uses on sunset clouds during the dry season south of the equator. In the withered, yellowed wild grasses, the straw-headed bulbul is a brilliant red fireball; while stalking the riverbank, it is a white narcissus; when perched on a branch, it is a golden apple; while soaring the skies, it is the flowing robes of an angel. Hopping along a narrow path among the wild grasses and wildflowers, this bird embodies the beauty and sorrows of a lovelorn girl. But a straw-

headed bulbul in captivity is always dull and colorless, for a caged bulbul will not sing.

From the jungles of Borneo comes a legend about the straw-headed bulbul. A crocodile was once about to attack a muntjac when a straw-headed bulbul began to sing, and either the exquisiteness of its song or the endlessly variegated colors of its plumage prompted the hungry predator to forget its hunt and allow its prey to make an unhurried escape. As those who have heard the singing of the straw-headed bulbul know full well, in the jungle one typically hears but does not see this beautiful warbler. So, the crocodile, its eyes fixed on that muntjac drinking water on the bank ahead, also could well have heard the straw-headed bulbul's song without seeing it. Whether it was the song, the bird's unpredictably changing feather colors, or both that saved the muntjac's life became the subject of a fierce but inconclusive debate among ornithologists.

Residents of Luntu, Sarawak have tried everything to get a caged straw-headed bulbul to sing, once even resorting to keeping a caged female of the species, which never sings, nearby. Yet even then, the trapped songbird hung its head in silence, its drooping feathers lifeless. The first Luntu resident to keep a straw-headed bulbul in a cage returned home one day to a series of remarkable discoveries. Not only had the sea hibiscus in the yard extended a green tendril through a window into the living room, but that tendril had produced yellow flowers that bloomed for three days before withering. The typical lifespan of a sea hibiscus flower is but a single day: a yellow bloom appears at dawn, turns orange by afternoon, red by dusk, and withers by nightfall. The owner also noticed that the chestnut fur of his young female cat had suddenly taken on a mackerel tabby pattern. Moreover, the spray of a surging waterfall depicted on the massive floor-to-ceiling Chinese landscape scroll hanging in the living room seemed to have wet the entire wall, reminiscent of

how Fong Woo's legendary harmonica playing was said to have coaxed a white crane in a painting to take flight and soar off. Realizing that the caged straw-headed bulbul sang only when no one was around, the man recorded its song on a tape recorder. When played back, however, the birdsong failed to add to the duration of his sea hibiscus blooms, enhance his cat's beauty, or animate the mists of the ink-wash waterfall.

Whenever his grandfather Gim Fung described the British Crown Jewels to Gim Su, his voice would become as gentle and affecting as a lullaby, making the boy feel like he was being cradled in amniotic fluid and mother's milk. The Queen's refreshingly unconventional voice, Grandfather remarked, reminded him of the straw-headed bulbul that sang for the crocodile.

"The bulbul's song always ceases at some point," Gim Fung had said. "But the crocodile's hunger? . . . never."

Chapter 3.

1

One dusk in July 1885 under a Tecoma tree by the banks of the Gambir River, a twenty-one-year old Tien Gim Fung killed a six-meter long saltwater crocodile with two blasts of his shotgun. He laid the croc corpse out on a riverbank covered in meadow foxtail, hacked off its feet, and sliced open its abdomen. Jumbled up in its large, slippery stomach he found a makeup box, a corset, a full-length linen dress, long lambskin gloves, a small parasol, and a wide-brimmed hat decorated with feathers and a ribbon. On the hat brim perched a small yellow bird made of cotton with its neck extended and tail perked as if in song. Apart from the bird and the makeup box, which contained a stick-on beauty mark, a comb, and a mirror, pretty much everything else in that reptilian stomach had been thoroughly masticated. Still, Gim Fung was able to recognize the elegant face of a woman belonging to the family of a high-ranking British officer. So too could he discern from the breasts squeezing out of her bustier and her attractive thighs a once charming figure. Three days before, a sampan had capsized at the mouth of the Gambir River and a crocodile had dragged off the English girlfriend of a young British military officer. Within the hour, the government had set up a dozen or more fishing nets at a bend thirty kilometers upstream and launched an expedition of soldiers, policemen, and every crocodile hunter in Luntu. A crocodile, they estimated, would not be able to travel thirty kilometers within an hour. But it was indeed that very croc that Gim Fung killed seventy-two hours later under the Tecoma tree eighty kilometers from the

mouth of the Gambir.

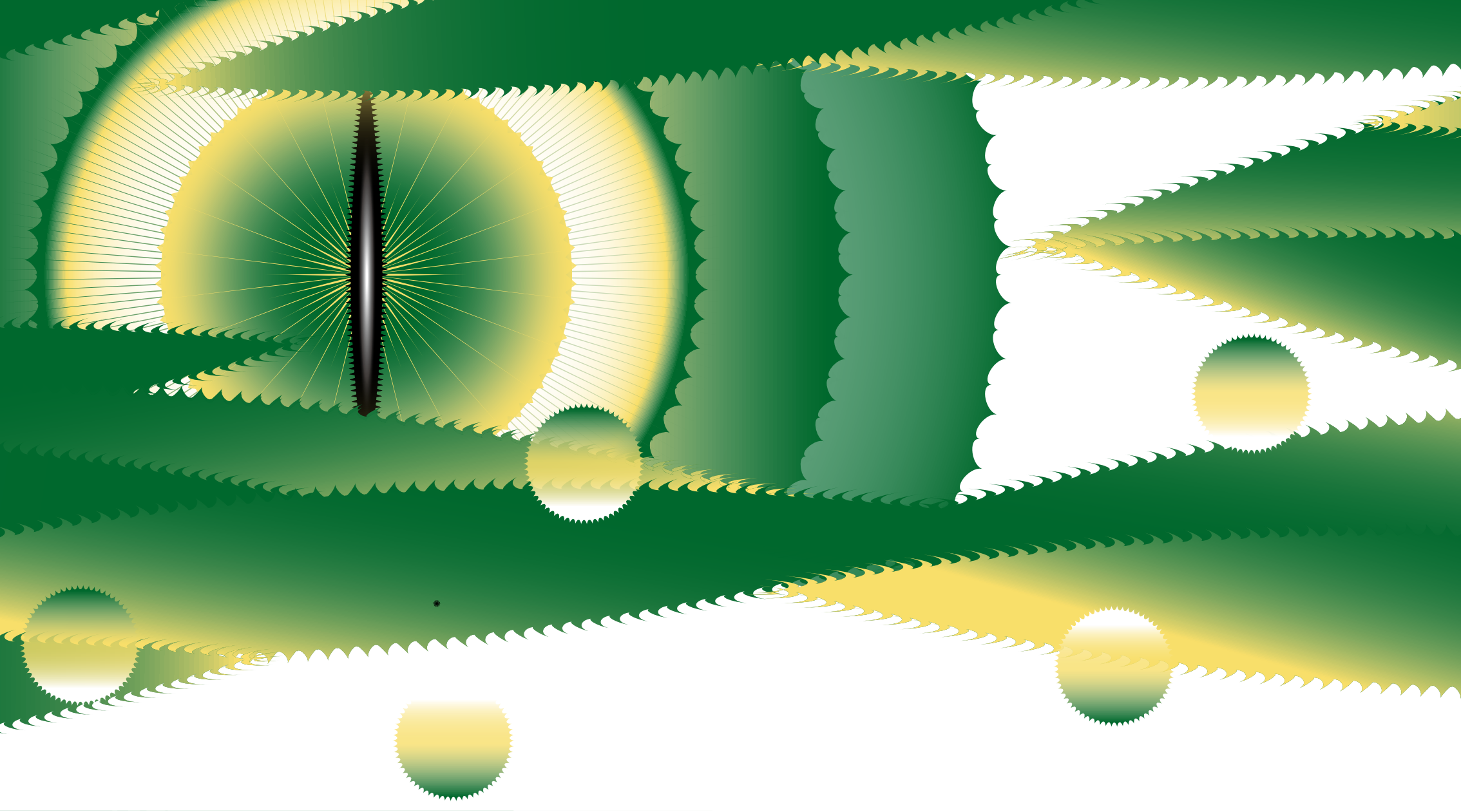
Poor girl. Gim Fung sighed as he tossed the four crocodile feet into the rattan basket on his back. Skinning the croc would be too much trouble, so he left the hide. As Gim Fung was kicking the croc corpse back into the water, a silver-colored rectangular metal object lying next to the lambskin gloves caught his eye. He picked it up and rinsed the fat and blood off in river water. It was a harmonica. Harmonica-playing had become popular in the elementary and middle schools of post-war Luntu. The trend was said to have been started in the mid-twentieth century by a group of young British military officers. The instrument was cheap and portable, and today every family's kids could manage at least a few tunes. Gim Fung lifted the harmonica to his lips and blew a few notes. A breeze sent bell-shaped flower petals floating down from the Tecoma tree like small red parasols. Schools of fish vied with soft-shelled turtles nibbling at the crocodile corpse as petals of Chinese hibiscus fluttered down from the sky and wild birds flew back to their nests. The crocodile's eyeballs, glimmering in the light of morning, were plucked out by a peregrine falcon. Back in Luntu, Gim Fung learned from the townsfolk that the British girl had been a talented harmonica player, and that it had been her beautiful, melancholy playing that had invited the attack by that massive crocodile.

2

A twenty-meter cargo ship laden with local produce sailed slowly downstream toward Luntu as macaques called to each other from opposite banks. The boatman holding the rudder paddle squatted in the stern smoking a corncob pipe, which was common among the locals. He

wore a conical hat made of oil paper held together by bamboo splints, the wide brim of which reached down almost to his shoulders. His black beard was visible underneath. A bulbul stood on the boat's hut of woven dried palm fronds, which flew a white flag. At the bow stood a woman in black trousers and a white shirt holding an oil-paper umbrella whose canopy was painted with a classical beauty in repose dressed in cotton pants and a short-sleeved silken blouse half-open to reveal her snow-white breasts. The beauty's jade-white body defied the normal proportions of a human figure, looking like a snake coiled around the umbrella ribs, with her toes touching her forehead and her eyes staring at her toes. The light of the setting sun on the umbrella accentuated the luxuriance of several painted begonias, whose petals seemed about to fall into the river.

Gim Fung stopped his haphazard harmonica playing and stared. The woman was petite, maybe just under five feet tall, and her small buttocks, as tight as a crab's apron, were visible under the rim of the umbrella resting on her shoulder. Gim Fung picked up his shotgun and followed the boat along the riverbank for about thirty meters until his left foot suddenly sank into a mud pit. Yanking it out with too much force, he fell back butt-first into an even larger wallow. The boatman and the girl eyed Gim Fung suspiciously as he stood up and went to the river to wash the layer of mud from his arms, legs, and gun. He saw a face spattered with gobs of mud and flies buzzing around it reflected on the water's surface. As he scooped water and scrubbed his face, he watched the bulbul fly in low circles around the cargo boat as, under a setting sun refracting two coral red rays like the arc of a rainbow, it slowly disappeared around the riverbend. The woman's facial features were hard to make out in the twilight, and the harder they were to discern, the more desperate Gim Fung became to get another glimpse of her. What left the deepest impression on his memory was not her face but her dainty figure, like that of an underage



girl, peeking out from under that umbrella like a snail from its shell.

Under darkened skies, Gim Fung walked toward the sampan moored three kilometers downstream. Stars flickered both singly and in clusters against a curtain of bluish purple, the clouds as fresh and moist as slugs. That night, he dreamt he and the oil-paper umbrella beauty were coiled together under the begonia flowers like copulating spring snakes, her small cherry mouth latched onto his penis, her nipples as translucent as morning dew, her belly button the newly-formed embryo of a mermaid, and her pubic mound an apple.

3

A century before the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, a nineteen-year old pigherd from Guangdong province in southern China named Tien Gim Sag had boarded a long-distance steamer in Swatow bound for the South Seas. Upon reaching Singapore, he was sold into indentured servitude in Singkawang, where he spent two years clearing land, another two years tapping rubber, and another year raising hogs before his ankle shackle blisters earned him his freedom. He then took a canoe to the Bau mines in northwestern Borneo where he did back-breaking labor for five years before the boss lent him a little money to start a small business. Tien Gim Sag set up a thatch hut by the road to the mine selling fruit, drinks, and sundry goods. Once he had saved up a bit of capital, he again approached his old boss for a loan . . . this time enough to purchase the eight hundred acres of grassy wasteland behind the hut and hire twenty Javanese to plant sugarcane, cassava, and corn. After inspecting Tien Gim Sag's estate, James Brooke, the first White Rajah of the Brooke Dynasty, granted him reclamation rights to an additional five thousand acres and authorized

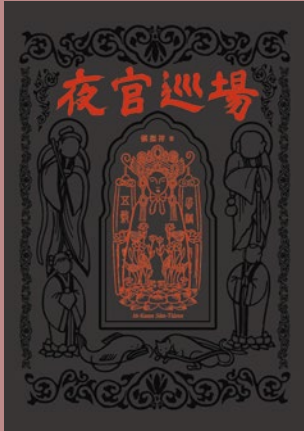
him to import farmers from his hometown in Guangdong to establish gambir and pepper plantations. Three years later, Tien Gim Sag founded the Chun Shun Kongsí, under the auspices of which he sold local produce and founded a sago powder factory before expanding into gold and silver mining. In 1863, Tien Gim Sag beat out his competitors to acquire a twenty-year monopoly over opium, tobacco, alcohol, and gambling. In Luntu he established a hundred stores selling local produce, alcohol, jewelry, and canned foods, as well as an opium parlor, a gambling hall, and a brothel, eventually elevating himself to become one of the three richest men in the Kingdom of Sarawak. In the morning, Tien Gim Sag would sit in the town's head office smoking a long ivory pipe inlaid with pearls and agate and, in the afternoon, escorted by a subordinate and accompanied by Charles Brooke, the Second White Rajah of Sarawak, and with a kris dagger bestowed by Rajah Brooke at his waist, Gim Sag would inspect his business territories by horseback. Each year, he would regularly remit to the national treasury a hefty sum. In 1878, Tien Gim Sag retired with his great wealth to his hometown in Guangdong, where he built a mansion with carved beams, painted pillars, and ornately painted tiles, dispensed charity to the poor, provided free medical care and coffins to locals, established schools and temples, and built roads and bridges. When he ascended to heaven in 1882, the local magistrate reported his philanthropic activities to the royal court, and the Emperor issued a decree bestowing upon Tien Gim Sag the posthumous title "Grand Master of Glorious Happiness" and upon his first wife in Luntu the title "Lady of the Second Rank." The following year, the fire of the century burned down Chun Shun Kongsí's hundred shops, sparing only a pair of family heirlooms: a wooden hall tablet with "Residence of the Grand Master" engraved in golden calligraphy bestowed by the Qing emperor and the kris dagger bestowed by Rajah Charles Brooke.

Before he had turned twenty, Tien Gim Fung had slept with every prostitute in Luntu, local and foreign, and learned from them all sorts of strange and unorthodox lovemaking positions. Upon inheriting control of Chun Shun Kongsu at age twenty-one, he had presided in the head office for less than one day before losing in that terrible fire not only his birth mother and all of his property but also control of the opium, tobacco, alcohol, and gambling monopolies his father had held for two decades. Remembering that his father had crossed the seas as the lowliest swine or cur on the chopping block, Tien Gim Fung strapped that flame-licked “Residence of the Grand Master” hall tablet to his back, shouldered a double-barreled hunting rifle, and, with his kris strapped to his belt, walked with head held high to the outskirts of Luntu. By the roadside he built a hut for shelter, and, following his father’s example, set up a thatch hut from which he sold fruit, local produce, grain, and game he’d hunted himself.

After his glorious return to his home village, Tien Gim Sag had bestowed his kris upon his only son, Tien Gim Fung, with all the solemnity due a gift of the Rajah. As a young man, Charles Brooke had followed the previous rajah, his uncle, James Brooke, on a campaign against rebel troops during which James led his thousand-strong force of Malays and Chinese that captured a Dayak mountain stronghold and rescued the kidnapped daughter of a Malayan noble. The Malay prince thereupon produced one of the rarest items in his treasury—a kris—and made a gift of it to Rajah Brooke. The kris, a wavy blade of welded meteoric iron unique to the Malay, is known, along with the flat patterned blades of Damascus steel in the Islamic world and the flat, repeatedly-folded, black-and-white mottled katana of Japan, as one of the three great blades of the ancient world. This type of dagger had been a standard weapon in the thirteenth-century Majapahit Kingdom. Some had been forged of pure meteoric iron, while

others were of steel alloy. Traces of nickel in the meteoric iron make the former virtually unbreakable and create a characteristic pamor pattern on the blade. Meteorites regularly pummeled the Sunda Islands between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, scattering meteoric iron in the form of hundreds of billions of meteorites across Java, Sumatra, and southern Borneo. This set off a nearly three hundred-year war for control of this resource among more than a thousand Malay and Javanese lords of the Majapahit Kingdom that resulted in the extinction of over two hundred states and two and a half million deaths. *The Kris War*, a two thousand-page tome written in Javanese, details those lords’ bloody, brutal battles for possession of meteoric iron and how that war mired the history of the Majapahit Kingdom in the tears of adventurers, the blood of heroes, and the shit of cowards.

(.....)



Late Night Patrol of the Abandoned God

《夜官巡場 Iā-Kuan Sîn-Tiûnn》

This novel, the author's first, mingles childhood memories with local legend, goddess faith, and the 228 massacre to create a literary work rooted in earthy Taiwan tales of the weird and strange, and presented in gripping, lively prose. These stories are written in remembrance of Tiunn's hometown of Changxing in Pingtung County and for the numberless encumbered ghosts there and their corporeal counterparts still eking out a living in this remote community. Tiunn mingles Mandarin and Taiwanese music and words both so that all trapped spirits may be comforted and can join in and so that the living may ponder more deeply upon life's realities.

Fiction

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Ka-Siông Tiunn

張嘉祥

Tiunn, born in 1993, holds a degree in Sinophone Literature from NDHU and is currently enrolled in NTNU's graduate program in Taiwan Culture, Languages and Literature. Tiunn writes and produces music, writes and publishes works of literature, hosts a regular podcast program, and is the owner-manager of Tsng-Bué Culture Sound Studio.



Judge Commentary by **Shih-Fang Ma**

Translated by **Jui-Chuan Chang**

By blurring the boundaries between dream and reality, the dead and the living, and the spiritual and mortal worlds, Ka-siông Tiunn creates in “Burning Village in Bîn-hiông of Ka-gī” his own “Northeastern County of Gaomi” (by Mo Yan) or “Macondo” (by Márquez). The author leverages multiple styles, including chorography, family history, and fantasy, to effortlessly infuse child-like perspectives, local unofficial history, folk religion, and actual history into this work.

Chapter 7

Bîn-hiông Haunted House

translated by Jui-Chuan Chang

Everyone coming to Bîn-hiông has the same two things on their mind. One is Bîn-hiông's Goose Street. I'm always asked which vendor serves the most delicious goose meat. My answer is always the same: Everyone that still has a shop there serves delicious goose meat! The other thing they ask about is whether Bîn-hiông Haunted House is really haunted.

I usually tell them, "If you're interested in a cup of coffee and live "singing saw" performances, I'll take you myself to Bîn-hiông Haunted House." The house is not far from National Chiayi University, the students of which have explored every inch of the place. If they're looking to see a Western-style mansion, Chen Shi-hua Mansion is the best preserved house of this style in the entire Bîn-hiông area

So, is Bîn-hiông Haunted House really haunted? I figure it's an unanswerable conundrum similar to the question about whether the "Floating Madam" is a man or a woman. But rumor has it that the "Night Official" has been spotted on cemetery hill above Floating Madame Temple. The Night Official is said to be the incarnation of Lord Bodhisattva, who is himself the incarnation of Avalokitesvara - the god that the fairy wraith is said to fear the most.

The fairy wraith is said to most fear being washed away by the cleansing bottle in Avalokitesvara's hand. Her filth makes her the bane of the

children in her village, and she is the kind of ghost that, although not overtly mean, is feared and loathed by all. She's a poor ghost who has lost an arm and a leg as well as her memory. She's a hungry ghost, a garbage ghost, a toilet ghost, a wall ghost, and a disgusting ghost ... one that everyone bullyrags. Different from Lord Bodhisattva, who, in the form of the king of vicious ghosts, terrifies the fairy wraith, people say that the Night Official protects all wandering ghosts. He is a wild god clad in a black robe and gauze who carries a red lantern. He is half-animal and half-god, and wanders between darkness and goodness. When a wandering ghost is scared, the Night Official covers its ears until all is calm again. The fairy wraith fears mortals in prim and proper attire almost as much as those who appear set on doing her harm. The Night Official is the god the fairy wraith seeks out ... and relies upon. It is said in Burning Village that Chou Mei-huey is the reincarnation of the Night Official, and only reasonably, the fairy wraith apparition follows Chou Mei-huey around like a tagalong.

History of Lord Bodhisattva Temple: High Street in Tánn-niau has been home to Lord Bodhisattva Temple since the 1700s. Prior to that, throughout "ghost month" in lunar July, an evil pall was said to descend every year upon the town, bringing the cries of ghosts echoing on the wind and scaring residents and passersby alike out of their very wits. Lord Bodhisattva had appeared several times in the town. Clad in red armor and standing nearly four meters tall, he had horns on his head, a blue face, and a mouth brimming with dagger like teeth. The evil winds halted and ghost cries were muted whenever Lord Bodhisattva was seen. Witnessing his power to quell the evil afflicting their town, residents dressed an idol of Lord Bodhisattva in red satin began worshipping him on the first day of the seventh lunar month.

Ever since, sutra chants praying for the release of wandering ghosts from their suffering have echoed across High Street for three days every year.

The residents of Burning Village stopped their worship of the Night Official long ago, and no one remembers ever having a temple for him there. So then ... Why does everyone in Burning Village know about him? Every household there that observes House Guardian Lord worship keeps an uninscribed wooden plaque in a secret spot. I asked my mom which god our plaque was for. She said it was for the House Guardian Lord ... but later told me it was for the Night Official. When I asked who the Night Official was, she said she'd misspoken ... "The plaque is for the House Guardian Lord." After moving away from Burning Village, I found House Guardian Lord worship elsewhere wasn't as formalized, nor were plaques used. Was the focus of worship at Burning Village really the House Guardian Lord?

Although the graves on cemetery hill in Burning Village seem to be in a disordered jumble, local residents know there's a logic behind their arrangement. The graves are older the closer they are to the southwest side. Back when burials didn't cost anything, this was where most Burning Village residents, including our ancestors, were interred. For our family, and especially for Grandpa, annual "tomb sweeping" rituals are both sacrosanct and a tiresome burden ... in other words, a reluctantly borne necessity.

Grandpa was adopted as a small child. But it was not because his family couldn't afford to raise him. He had been born into the Tsai clan, a prominent family in the Bîn-hiông area. Because his mom believed a fortune-teller who had told her that her newborn son would grow up to be a curse upon the family and lead to their financial ruin, she gave

Grandpa up to my great-grandfather Chang, a bull breeder in Burning Village. Grandpa said he could never bring himself to forgive his birth mother. What he wanted most of all was to study and read, but it wasn't to be. Great-grandfather Chang treated Grandpa well, making sure he was well fed and taken care of. However, because he feared Grandpa might run back to the Tsai family if he attended school, great-grandfather Chang kept Grandpa close by at home. Also, great-grandpa Chang made Grandpa promise to continue diligently keeping the Chang family graves well kempt and attended after his death.

I didn't understand Grandpa's true feelings about all this when he led us through those ceremonies at the foot of great-grandpa Chang's grave. He rarely spoke about himself, but was certainly more talkative than my local yokel dad. Grandpa always finished the worship up quickly, gave his incense to my dad, and had him collect everyone else's incense to place before the tombstone. Grandpa always made sure Dad found time to clean and pay his respects at the family gravesite - even when his factory needed him to work overtime. I felt it was probably an obligation grounded in some promise my father had given long ago. Great-grandpa Chang's grave is near the southwest side, while Great-grandma Chang's is further southwest in a spot beautifully surrounded by hills and streams. You can see what was once a pond from the front side that, unfortunately, had been covered over in red soil and planted with pineapples when I was still in junior high. The whole field there had become a full pineapple plantation by the time I was in senior high school.

Aunt Ah-zi's mental health declined precipitously when I was in fifth grade. She became paranoid and hysterical in a manner that I imagined a fairy wraith might act like. Aunt Ah-zi is the mother of Ah-zhe, my elementary school classmate. He said it was Burning Village that had made his mom that way. Burning Village is so backward and closed-



minded. Although their house was right next to the police station, the century-old mango tree between their two buildings blocked their house from sunshine, making it dark and gloomy day and night. Ah-zhe told me it was the reason why his mom divorced his dad. He always said their house was bad luck . . . was haunted by a lingering ghost.

Ah-zhe claimed that the ghost's appearances became more frequent after his dad left. He sometimes would see a long-haired lady ghost glide above the bed. His mom saw it too, pointing into the air cursing, talking, and crying. But when he asked his mom, she would pretend like nothing was amiss. Asking who she was talking to would make her mad. "You kids stop talking nonsense." She would say it was all in her son's imagination and that it was only he who had seen the ghost.

Ah-zhe had been playing piano since he was little, and his mom still made him practice every day. Watching him tinkle the ivories, I had no doubt he was the best pianist in Burning Village. But he always pushed back, saying he wasn't any good. He told me that one time while practicing alone, he sensed a woman standing in the corner behind him, intently watching him play. He wanted to finish quickly, but had more left to practice, so he played faster and faster. That time, he finished 20 minutes of practice in just ten. After hitting the last note, he spun around to see a woman standing right where he had imagined. In the blink of an eye, she vanished. But had seen her face. He told me it was his mother!

After Aunt Ah-zi returned home from work that same day, Ah-zhe stared at her with fright in his eyes. He wouldn't let her get near him. He called me and asked if he could crash at my place. I didn't even want to stay at my place—how could I let him? And there was no room for him to crash anyway because our house was a cluttered mess. Only our living room was available.

After hanging up the phone, Ah-zhe said he had snuck a glance into Aunt Ah-zi's room. She was sitting on the bed again with her head tilted down toward the floor. Without warning, she looked up and, snapping her head toward the door, yelled, "Ah-zhe, why did you practice piano so fast today? Why?"

"Come in here! I work hard to make money to pay your tutor, but you don't take your lessons seriously!"

"You want to be like me and your dad? You want to be stuck in Burning Village your whole life like a good-for-nothing?"

Finished with her scolding, she took a hanger from the closet and whipped Ah-zhe's bottom. Honestly, I'd always seen Aunt Ah-zi as a kind and tender lady. When we'd hang out with Ah-zhe, she would serve us all fresh fruit. I used to be jealous of Ah-zhe having such a wonderful mom. "What are you talking about?" he would snapback. He told me he was jealous of his older sister who had moved away from home for college. It was then he rolled up his pantleg and showed me the bruises.

Ah-zhe liked to have friends over to his house. More people, he believed, gave the house more positive (*yang*) energy and kept his mom from becoming possessed. But some people were scared off by his bruises, so fewer and fewer people were willing to visit. I wasn't scared. I was happy just to be out of our house, and a haunted house wasn't enough to keep me away. But that was before I saw Aunt Ah-zi possessed with my own two eyes.

One Wednesday afternoon, Ah-zhe and I cycled back home from school. Not wanting to go home directly, I asked if I could hang out at his place for a while. He quickly and happily agreed. We got to his house and he took his key out to unlock the sliding glass door. He was surprised to

find it unlocked already. We walked in and found Aunt Ah-zi sitting in the living room staring at us with her eyes open eerily wide. A book of piano sheet music and a hanger were on the table. I anticipated her usual warm greeting, asking if I'd like something to eat or drink.

But on that day she just kept staring at Ah-zhe, and talking as if I wasn't there.

"Ah-zhe," she said, "your piano teacher told me you've been unfocused and that you are talking back during your lessons. You think you play better than your teacher, don't you? Play for me now, and let's see if you really play any better!"

She walked over toward us, closed and locked the sliding door. She pulled Ah-zhe by the scruff of his neck into the adjacent piano room. I had no idea whether to leave or follow. I just stood at the open door to the piano room and watched, not daring to set my schoolbag down.

Aunt Ah-zi would sometimes open the windows in the piano room to let fresh air in and share Ah-zhe's music with the neighborhood. Ah-zhe was probably the best pianist in Burning Village and their neighbors always enjoyed his beautiful melodies. Today, however, Aunt Ah-zi closed the drapes, stood behind him in the corner of the room, and commanded him to start playing. He was nervous and flubbed a few notes soon after beginning. It wasn't a good performance ... even I could tell. Aunt Ah-zi began mumbling indistinctly to herself. Increasingly nervous, Ah-zhe continued messing up. Aunt Ah-zi hung her head, picked up the hanger and told Ah-zhe to stand. "I won't hit you on your hands. Those are for playing piano. Stand up straight!"

She raised the hanger and whipped Ah-zhe's calf, not saying a word.

Tears streamed down his cheeks, but he dared not make a sound or run away. I was looking at Aunt Ah-zi beating Ah-zhe so ruthlessly. I wanted to make my escape, but I was even more afraid to make a sound that might remind Aunt Ah-zi of my presence. I thought I could see an apparition appear behind Aunt Ah-zi. Its form reminded me of a bad dream I once had when I was seven or eight. It was a recurring nightmare in which a woman in white pulled me over to a brick wall of an apartment complex garden. While we sat together, she cryingly told me in great detail about how she had met a bad man, how they had gotten into a fight, and how he had killed and buried her. Whenever she began talking about her death, however, she became focused and calm. It seemed as if she wanted me to remember every word she was saying. But I felt terrified. I froze in place. Although I knew I was still lying in bed and that my mom was sleeping next to me, I felt helpless. I didn't dare to move.

(.....)





Mooyi 《魔以》

This work narrates in flowing prose the sense of disorientation and desolation shared by modern society. The author leaves heartfelt signposts for those familiar souls who have never been truly remembered. While sounds evoke nostalgia, we can never truly return. True meaning lies between the lines and is hidden in plain sight, sighing softly in the response, restrained yet trenchant and delicately embroidered one thread at a time, creating from the jumble of everyday details a brilliant tapestry. Blaze a path across an overgrown island pass; condense a milieu of worries into a panorama of a thousand flavors. The affairs of humankind disperse in their own natural course across heaven and earth leaving behind the charming lilt of flowing poetry.

Fiction

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Shu-Yao Chen

陳淑瑤

Chen was born in the Pescadores Islands and now lives in Taipei. She depicts the feathery nature of the swamp oak in her works, which include *Cloudy Mountain* and *Book of the Tides*.



Judge Commentary by **Nathalie Chang**

Translated by **Lin King**

Can creativity form connections with all living things? How do our senses reach the periphery of the modern world? These ethical reflections are made possible through the cultivated, expansive, and literarily inventive language that pervades this book. Its narrative queries the years of life that none inquire after; the intertwined coexistence of the *chi* of the earth and of human beings; the selection of and purposive shifts in perspectives and rhythm. All of this is presented via precisely executed techniques that occasionally break into surprising, unconventional, and disruptive strokes. At their extreme, the thrills and sorrows of this “novel gone mad” unhesitatingly peel open the dulled nerves of contemporary lethargy.

Chapter 1.

Self-Command

translated by Lin King

“Kim chuan...gin chuan...chuan kim...dai gin...”

Creek of gold...creek of silver...decked in gold...decked in silver...

The cement sky, as oppressively gray as a seawall, pressed down on the little village that strained to keep holding it up. The village was like a weightlifter; his arms shaking under the strain, holding out until, after some time, they, as well as his trunk, began to fill with concrete ... congealing until they were as heavy as fossils and as shadowy as the scuttling of unseen animals. That weightlifter's eyes too gradually became sightless, and only one small slab remained wet and soft within his hardened brain. Outside, someone was shouting, their voice growing louder and louder; a dog was barking, louder and louder.

“Kim chuan...gin chuan...chuan kim...dai gin...”

Creek of gold...creek of silver...decked in gold...decked in silver...

It was her name, shredded to pieces yet still discernibly hers: Chuan Kim ... Golden Creek. Hearing that name repeated both forward and in

reverse kept her from sinking into oblivion completely. A sudden bout of rain revived her before her head had fully alchemized to metal, calling for her to wake up, crawl out.

Chen Shu called for her again and again, shouting her name out forwards and backwards, not quitting until Chuan Kim emerged. Way back when, Chuan Kim had left home after graduating from junior high to go earn money. She could still recall the first letter she'd ever written of her own volition -- those pretentious and sentimental words she'd mailed back to their hometown. Chen Shu had written back in her small, formal script; each stroke etching a beautiful petal on the page. Chuan Kim's landlady handed her the envelope, telling her after finishing a cursory examination of the carefully written address that "It's from your dad." Chen Shu had competed in calligraphy contests since they were kids. She said it was because it had gotten so much more difficult for trade school students like them to compete against people from regular high schools. She used to regularly practice writing three hundred characters every day.

At the door, Chuan Kim felt for her buttons with her fingers. Her heart settled only after her fingers had finally touched each of the hard, round pieces. Chen Shu was peering into the courtyard over the fence, her sunglasses pushed up on top of her hair, which was as blonde as a doll's. Chuan Kim didn't open the front gate, but instead pointed toward the front corner of the yard. Chen Shu headed toward the lower side gate and cocked her head inquisitively. Chuan Kim pointed again, her arm at a forty-five-degree angle.

Stepping into the yard, she noticed suddenly that one of her buttonholes had loosened from years of wear, leaving its paired button dangling. She bent down, picked a blade of grass, and looped it through the button and buttonhole, fastening them together with a double knot. Chen Shu would often say, "You're the most conservatively dressed person I've ever seen!"

You should just wear pullover shirts.” She was the only one who noticed Chuan Kim only ever wore clothes with buttons. Even as a child, Chuan Kim had hated the feel of taking off pullover shirts ... pulling those tight little collars up and over her whole head felt like wrestling a turnip from the soil. That fusty darkness ... that feeling of having her skull coiled into her gut gave her a sense that she’d vanished or that the world outside had disappeared and everything was upended.

The fence got progressively shorter as they walked, and Chuan Kim was now inside her own paddy. Chen Shu shouted out with a grin, “Do you know why I’m here? Guess how many years it’s been since we graduated from elementary school? A whole—”

The dog didn’t tolerate conversation at this volume and barked more frantically than ever.

“A whole...” The words caught at the phlegm in Chuan Kim’s throat. *Whole* was such a scary word.

“A whole forty *years*,” Chen Shu said again, stressing each syllable.

Even forty seconds with her head stuck in a t-shirt was enough to make her panic. Forty *years*? Hmph. She scowled, then shook her head to remove the frown from her brow. When the world came into focus again, it seemed to be swaying, quaking, different from before, a little changed in color, even the rippling grass, even the coastline...Chuan Kim dragged her feet as she walked, lowering her eyelids and lashes entirely.

When she opened her eyes again, they were already at the end of the paddy. She saw Chen Shu turn the corner onto the asphalt road along the shore. With a patch of weeds now separating them, Chuan Kim took notice of the circle of golden sparkles on the front of Chen Shu’s black top, which, when she squinted, looked like the face of a menacingly fanged

tiger. Chen Shu’s denim shorts, their hems frayed with white whiskers and revealing gashes along the side, made it seem as though she’d gone for a dive and been mauled by a coral reef. Chuan Kim couldn’t help but laugh.

Every time they reunited, they would spend a good amount of time laughing at one another. Chen Shu was laughing too: at how Chuan Kim’s clothes seemed to grow organically from her body like a lion’s mane, or as wildflowers from the earth. The north of the courtyard house was connected to a paddy field, and this weedy patch lay along the paddy’s southernmost boundary. Chen Shu asked Chuan Kim why she hadn’t tamed it. Chuan Kim laughed: “Because they look like your jeans!” She bent down, plucked a stalk of purple gromwell, and tossed it onto a bush. “I know, I know! There’s a reunion the day after tomorrow! I’m busy.”

“You’re always busy! When the apocalypse comes knocking, you’ll tell it: ‘I’m busy.’” Chen Shu tugged at her clingy shirt as she spoke.

Chuan Kim kicked at the withered grass that the south wind was blowing in her direction, slowly forming the beginnings of a hay roll. She held up her face, sniffed, frowned, and looked around. “Do you smell something weird?”

“Only you can find a problem with air like this,” Chen Shu said.

Whenever they wanted to get in touch with Chuan Kim, they did it through Chen Shu. Chuan Kim was only ever directly invited for her village’s elementary school reunions. Her junior high school was in a larger school district that covered multiple villages and towns, and held alumni gatherings of all sizes. It didn’t matter who called her on the phone or knocked on her door: no meant no. She wouldn’t go.

Chuan Kim was the only female member of their class in her village. To the others, it didn’t seem as if she’d ever left. That year, the year of their



big milestone reunion that nobody could miss, she had already been back home for four months. She'd returned home then for mourning ... a family funeral for her mom marked more by anger than anguish. The family's fury had risen like a tsunami, the water thrusting inland and flushing away the kinship ties that had once held together the constellation that was their family. Chuan Kim's mom had been prone to autumnal heat rashes, which she would ease by rubbing her back against a stone pillar. Chuan Kim felt her mother was doing the same inside her quaking coffin.

Three years after the funeral, her dad would still complain about how much country bumpkins loved to gossip, "Especially," he said, "here, on our little island off the big island." In earlier days, there was no easy way of escape. But after those two long bridges were built, the "small island" was inextirpably strapped to the "big island", and it seemed from that point on even more like a clock the two hands of which never stopped ticking. Her father kept trying to defeat the long memories of the villagers with his capacity to shame and demean. Unsurprisingly, these attempts always failed.

The family's fight had arisen over the form her mom's funeral would take. Chuan Kim wasn't particularly religious and could thus stay above the fray. However, her relatives who'd returned for the funeral all had different faiths, and each was staunchly devout. Some banded together to veto Chuan Kim's paternal aunt, who was used to being in charge. This "betrayal of blood" so outraged her that she vowed, unless the funeral was done her way, she would never again in this life step foot in the village. "I swear to the gods...!"

Angry vows always call for more angry vows. Chuan Kim's relatives also swore on their lives or their limbs. Chuan Kim left them to their screaming and, on her knees, hand-wiped the floors of her mother's house. She didn't get the superstition that forbade families in mourning

from sweeping with brooms, but it did let her miss out on the rest of her extended family's swear fest. Later, some of them told her facetiously about how everyone seemed to have something to swear after her aunt's dire promise. It was her eldest uncle's wife, they told her, who had made the scariest vow: "If I come back after I die, I'll make everything rot wherever I go!" How impressive! She'd managed to curse herself as well as everything she touched.

After calming down, most renounced what they had said in anger. But, Chuan Kim's paternal aunt was famously pious and prim. She'd always been the role model for fellow believers in the village, and was known for her unwaveringly regular visits to the temple, where she would offer fresh flowers and pristine fruits and kneel silently before the gods. Out of principle, she couldn't allow herself to just swallow her words.

Offended by her family and having bet the entire village against them and lost, she took her leave of the village. However, in many ways, her presence seemed to linger, pacing to and fro in the family home she had shared with Chuan Kim's parents. With shirt pulled up and over her face, her breath huffy and voice muffled, she was most often seen in the evening after Chuan Kim had come home from work.

She always called when Chuan Kim was getting ready for bed, flooding her sleep with thoughts of having to meet her aunt the next day. From the vantage point of her pillow, both time and distance appeared linear, and nothing could stand between Chuan Kim and her aunt, who seemed to loom over the foot of her bed, inescapable even in her dreams.

Her aunt would call to ask Chuan Kim about possessions she'd left behind: How large is that painting of koi fish on her bedroom wall? Is there an even number of koi? Are they bright orange? Would the painting make a suitable gift? "Me, I'm just so bad at giving gifts!" She asked Chuan

Kim if there was a red envelope with old banknotes in her drawer, which she never locked no matter how much money it contained. "Me, I'm just so bad at hiding money!" She drew a conclusion from every conversation, and it always seemed to be about how she just wasn't cut out for the inane rituals of human society: "If I'd been born in ancient times, I'd have been a female warrior!" She said a colleague who collected antique banknotes wanted to buy hers, but said that colleague was retiring soon. She needed Chuan Kim to go take a look in that drawer "immediately!"

Chuan Kim's protests were useless. Her aunt wouldn't shut up until she complied. Chuan Kim's exhausted body was like her aunt's wind-up toy, her metal legs flapping against her will and the voice on the other end of the line trailing closely behind. Her aunt could always still "see" what was going on in the house through the familiar sounds it made. If she didn't hear the sound of a door creaking open, she would ask, "You couldn't even be bothered to shut the door?" When Chuan Kim flicked the light switch in her aunt's cave-like bedroom, the objects within that room would seem to jolt into place, as though startled by the sudden brightness. One day, after the room's lightbulb broke, Chuan Kim mastered a new trick: hitting the wall created a sound suitably similar to turning on the light.

Being in her aunt's room made her deeply uncomfortable. Her abandoned belongings would forever be the clones and minions of their owner. There was a stack of oracle "chien" sticks in the drawer near the window. These sticks, arranged mystically around a long rectangular box, were etched with four lines of seven characters each that could be read easily in the dim moonlight. Chuan Kim's aunt, through her irregular calls and interrogations about the state of her room, managed to confirm to her own satisfaction from afar that all in her room remained as it should be. Sometimes, however, she egged Chuan Kim on to convert the room

into a storage closet—but not for storing food, because her room always had the worst fengshui, what with the west-facing window that drowned her in sweat on hot days. “Me, I just have incredible endurance!”

Chuan Kim followed the instructions without responding to her aunt’s passive aggressive loyalty tests. Her aunt had worked in the same prefectural government agency job since she was young. Although a contract employee, rumor had it that she was better positioned in the office than many full-time hires because she’d made a successful match for a powerful couple many years ago. She had never been demoted or transferred or asked to leave, and everyone in the village, including her own family, assumed she had passed the civil service exam and was an official employee.

This was in part because, for many years, she was always complaining she was too busy studying for the public service examination to get a haircut. According to Chuan Kim’s mother, her aunt’s hair had gone uncut for at least four years, until the tips touched her buttocks and individual strands could be mistaken for slithering snakes. Her older brothers’ wives liked to tell a story about how her aunt once ran into a young colleague at a wedding banquet during her “hag” phase. While in the restroom, Chuan Kim’s aunt half-jokingly asked the younger woman to swear she wouldn’t tell people at the banquet about what she did at work, fearing they might wish her ill. Chuan Kim didn’t believe the story at first, but her sisters-in-law insisted that, upon being so accosted, the silly girl *really* raised her right hand and swore that selfsame promise into the bathroom mirror.

Whenever Chuan Kim offered to bring her aunt the possessions she kept calling about, her aunt would invariably reply, “We’ll see . . . Not now, not yet.” It was her control over Chuan Kim’s limbs and eyes, her ability to make her do pointless labor, that brought her joy.

Her aunt would drive her silver sedan across the bridge, do a U-turn, and park by the railing. She would bring things from the big island and call Chuan Kim to go pick them up at the bridge. This was her way of showing the villagers she was a woman of her word and would never break her vow of no return.

She’d sit smiling in the driver’s seat, gazing out on the sea while stroking her mala beads, exuding a leisurely haughtiness that proved how unaffected she was by the curious gawks of passing villagers. But this all changed after Money Granny came onto the scene. As soon as her aunt parked, the old woman would pounce on her car like a bear drawn to a golf cart. Her aunt begged Chuan Kim not to make her wait, but instead of admitting she was scared, she claimed it was Money Granny’s hands that had dirtied her car.

Chen Shu wouldn’t stop pestering Chuan Kim about going to the reunion. She told Chuan Kim rumors about people in the classes below them who’d already passed away and that it was a small miracle their own class wasn’t missing anybody. She wouldn’t take no for answer. The next day, Chen Shu came prepared to end whatever resistance Chuan Kim put up. She donned a set of farm clothes reeking of stale old sweat. After tightly wrapping all possible parts of her body and head, she said mockingly that she looked ready for a moon landing.

Chuan Kim told her, “Don’t plan around me—I don’t make plans with anyone. How am I to know if I’ll be free that day . . . or if I’ll even still be alive?” She fantasized about saying this to her aunt too.

The dog chased after Chuan Kim’s moped, barking at her as though she was a thief, though he never barked at her when she was on her bicycle. The clear sky cast a layer of greasy film across the sea’s purple-hued surface. Concrete blocks shaped like Chinese checkers were stacked

along the shoreline, breaking swishing waves into a gray-white mass. The recently filled moped tires made the seat feel higher and made Chuan Kim herself feel a bit more buoyant. As she approached the bridge, however, it got harder to advance, and the asphalt crunched under her wheels.

Chuan Kim pulled to a stop and, still gripping the handles, stood at a street corner to wait for her aunt. She was neither near nor far from Money Granny, who was at the bus stop. According to the women from the oyster farm, the old granny with the fancy wide-brimmed straw hat never ceased to ask anyone within earshot for money. Not even bothering to create a backstory, she would just thrash her arms wildly at passing cars. But cars really would stop, and the drivers really would offer money. They didn't regret it until their accidents later on.

(.....)





Spent Bullets

《子彈是餘生》

The nine short stories in this book follow the interconnected trials and tribulations of a group of gifted friends. It is the death of the protagonist, a seemingly unapproachable individual and the object of both adoration and vilification, after falling from the 23rd floor of a hotel that triggers the start of journeys of mourning interspersed with jealousies, desires, hatred, uncertainties, humiliation, and impotence. Why would a genius who had everything choose to end his life? Does life still have meaning when the person you could never even dream of holding a candle to checks out first? Are such conundrums the fate of genius, or simply trouble invited foolishly upon oneself?

Fiction

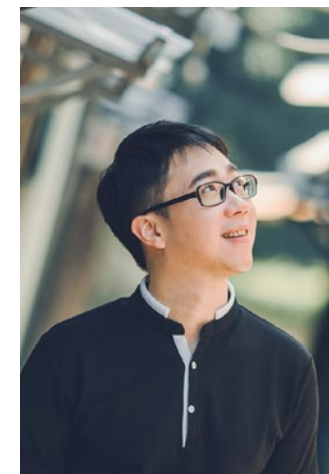
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Born in 1988, holds a degree in Information Engineering from NTU. He has worked as an engineer for 8 years at Google in MTV, Taipei and Tokyo. His works have earned two Lin Rong San Literary Awards and he has been twice published in Chiu Ko's annual "Collected Essays" compilation.



Judge Commentary by Hao Yu-hsiang

Translated by Kevin Ke Wang

The author's restrained and cool-headed approach to this work not only outlines how "survival of the fittest" is the name of the game for us all in this age of global capitalism but also asks the question: For those who make it to the top, what does survival really mean? Under the boring California sun, the winners of the capitalist game can't extirpate themselves from the rat race, and spiral into dull and lonely existences. They lose their self-identity, warmth, and individuality and are left unable to taste meaning in life or to find and share love.

One of Those Immersive Couples' Retreats

Translated by Kevin Ke Wang

(.....)

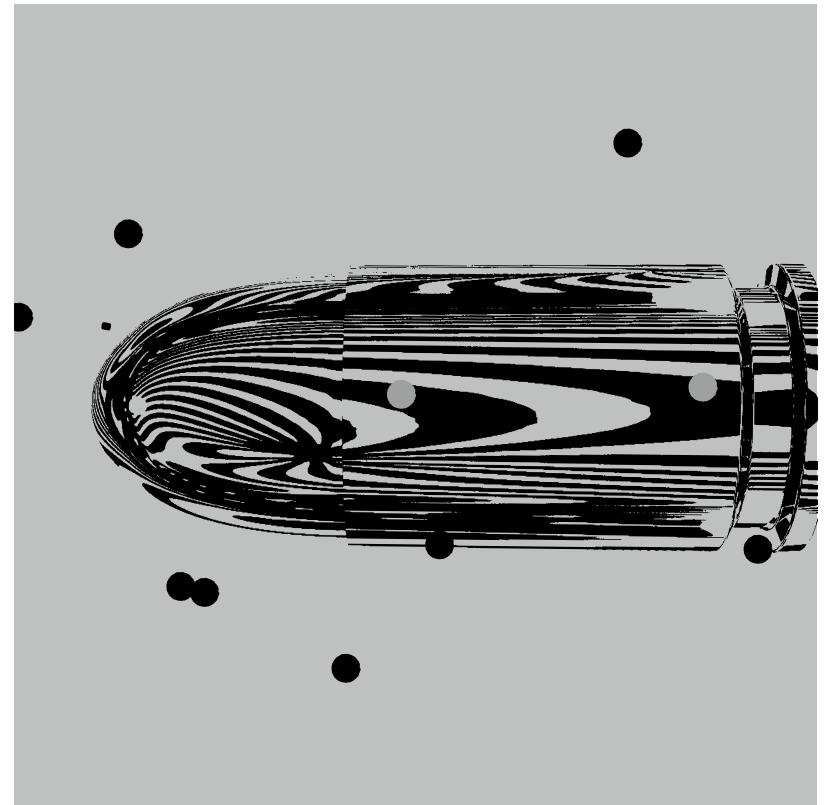
The silvergrass under the midday sun exuded a pungent smell that reminded me of warmed over herbs. With each inhale, this thick, overpowering aroma seemed to penetrate the marrow of my bones. My head grew heavy, and my feet struggled to keep their hold on the ground. When I tumbled forward again, I told her I couldn't go on.

"Just a bit longer," she said. "See? I'm still going."

"I can't move anymore."

She turned to look at me. Her face was also covered in sweat, dirt, and bits of grass. Her bangs stuck to her forehead. She tried to brush them aside with the back of her hand, but they did not budge. I panted to catch my breath, and my revulsion at the smell of the silvergrass grew worse. We sat down on the slope, using our bags as backrests to avoid scratching our faces and necks. I focused on my breath, one after another, trying to calm the roiling waves of nausea. Hsin-Ning squatted down and faced the same direction as me. We were in the same position we had been in during the *Fifty Questions* game.

"What's something you'd like to do with me that you've been too embarrassed to suggest?" I asked.



“What?”

“The question from before. It’s your turn.”

Hsin-Ning glanced at me. “Get a frontal lobotomy,” she said.

“What?”

“Get a frontal lobotomy ... both of us. Ugh, never mind.” She said, “Your way is easier. You’d just blow your brains out with a bullet.”

“My way?”

“Oh, stop pretending,” she said. “You think I don’t know what was going through your mind when you bought that gun?”

“Then why do you insist on these bonding activities?”

She sighed. “I guess I was stupid for thinking this was at all salvageable.”

The wind was gusting stronger, as though it wanted to pull us skyward. The silvergrass rubbed against one another like ten million paper shredders operating dangerously past top speed, enveloping us in its roar as though it meant to tear up everything in this world.

“Take your gun out,” she said. “It’s in your backpack, isn’t it?”

I looked at her without moving.

“Shoot me first, then shoot yourself.” She motioned toward her head and mine. “Just the way you’ve pictured it in your dreams. Come on.”

She turned her back to me and faced the hills, and shouted into the empty expanse ...

“I give up.”

“I surrender.”

“I concede.”

“Fuck your Silicon Valley.”

“Fuck your founding fathers and your beautiful country in the ass.”

She was facing the wind, and by the time her words reached me, they had warped into a tinny blur. Stretching on before us was the great American landscape: barren hills, grayish-brown plains, lifeless valleys, and an empty road with dashed lines down the middle. If the wind were just a bit stronger, it might be just enough to sweep all this detritus away.

I finally couldn’t take the smell of silvergrass any longer and keeled over to puke. I hadn’t eaten much for breakfast and could only throw up water and stomach acid. At the end of this drawn-out task, I even managed to bring up some yellow bile. It took a long time before my breathing settled down. The whole time I retched, Hsin-Ning stood steadfast, her stance unchanged, with her back to me. I couldn’t tell if she was still waiting for a bullet to pass through her skull.

“Let’s go,” I said.

She turned around slowly, looking at me with disdain.

“I can’t die with the taste of puke in my mouth,” I explained.

We continued to crawl on our hands and knees toward our destination in silence and exhaustion. The sunlight roasted our backs, heads, and arms. The silvergrass still stank, but I didn’t fall again, nor did I vomit. It was only after our underwear had already become saturated in sweat, imprinting their soggy outline on our trousers, that we finally caught a glimpse of the retreat center.

Stacks of handbooks and cans of wine greeted our arrival in the lobby. We took the freebies and made straight for the door again. I pictured



the antics of the host waiting for us, wearing the face of a visionary while asking us to reflect on the adversity we'd just overcome: "Share your feelings honestly and without judgment." Honestly? I'd rather the world would just explode already.

Hsin-Ning followed me quietly out of the venue, ignoring the staff shouting after us. I tore open the wine and guzzled it, finishing mine and then hers, until the taste of vomit in my mouth and throat were replaced by a sickly sweetness. Walking along the shoulder of the road, I called the roadside assistance service that was included in our credit card agreement. I said, "Before I die, I want to go for a ride." She nodded in agreement. Sitting on the guardrail around a bend in the road, we suddenly had all the time in the world.

Roadside assistance quickly dispatched a rental car that they told us we could return the next day. Streaking along the Pacific coast, I raced every car that was in our way. First, I honked from behind and passed with our windows down, telling whoever was in the car to go home and fuck themselves. After getting directly in front of each, I would pump my brakes, flip them off, and lastly throw a handful of coins backwards to land noisily against their hood and windshield.

On a particularly straight stretch of the road, I set the cruise control and reclined all the way back, steering with my feet on the wheel. Hsin-Ning was busy touching up her makeup in the rearview mirror, probably making sure she looked good before she died.

The road was long. Too long. Even after a few hours, we had barely gotten anywhere at all.

As the sky darkened, we finally crashed. It was just a minor collision. We hit a car on our left side as we were merging onto another highway. I hadn't seen anything in the rearview mirror when I switched lanes. The other car had blended into the dusk like a shadow, their headlights seemingly broken. After the collision, the airbags sprang out. Hsin-Ning and I both suffered a few scrapes ... but nothing serious. We got out of the car and met the other driver. The squinty-eyed white man sized me up and noticed I reeked of alcohol. He flashed a smile that made every inch of my body crawl. "Buddy, you're in big trouble."

He suggested settling this privately. "It's no good if the cops come. The punishments for drunk driving are pretty serious, you know." He opened the calculator on his phone and waved an outrageously large number at us. "Let's all just act in good faith."

I laughed out loud and walked straight to the trunk where my backpack was. Inside was the gun that now stayed with me day and night. The time had finally come for it to make an appearance. I reached for the holster at the bottom of the bag as if on autopilot. I would shoot his ankles first ... not the kneecaps, so I could still order him onto his knees to beg for mercy. Then I'd shoot his elbows and his eyes. I would stuff all kinds of things into his anus and pull his fingernails out one by one. A whole movie played in my mind: the recoil of the gun, his cries as I drenched him in gasoline, the stench of burning human fat, the barely perceptible sound of shell casings dropping onto the grass.

My life, which up to this very day has felt like some immersive retreat, would at last come to an end.

Yet, just as I felt the grip, Hsin-Ning grabbed my hand. She hadn't made a sound as she came up behind me. Her body pressed tight against my back and her arms held my wrist, still in the backpack, firmly down. I felt the heat of her breath on my ear. Her fingers dug into my flesh. Her hand was as scalding as the sun hanging high in the California sky ... the same as that day we first met.

She said, "I'm sorry, but I changed my mind."

The night wind had tossed her hair into a mess. She looked like a ghost that had just crawled back from the underworld. That taste of death had changed her ... She was no longer the same person.

Within a fraction of a second, she turned around and screamed at that man with the squinty eyes. "I was the one driving, idiot. Call the cops then. Go ahead." She continued. "Your headlights don't even work. God knows if your car is stolen. Motherfucker."

I watched this all unfold with my hand still wrapped around the grip. The gun was getting soaked in my sweat, as if all of my body heat was pouring into it.

Hsin-Ning was the one who ended up calling the cops. She was perfectly composed as she told them that she didn't see the other car because he had his lights off. The man protested loudly, accusing her of lying and insisting that I, not Hsin-Ning, had been driving. But the officer, looking exhausted, told him to stop wasting time and show his third-party liability insurance papers.

Our experiences that day did change some things.

A week after the incident, we decided to “seize the day” rather than wait for the right time. We didn’t have work on their National Day and drove all the way to Las Vegas to register our marriage at the drive-thru. It was my first time driving that route without listening to Chieh-Heng’s favorite songs thirty times over.

During the vows, after saying “I love you” in English, I added in Mandarin, “I don’t love you.” She replied, “Me neither.” Hand in hand, with a last-minute notary that charged twenty-five an hour to be our witness, we completed the necessary administrative procedures.

Later on, whenever invited to speak as a distinguished NTU alumnus, I would always say to the students in the audience that, in Silicon Valley, you must die first in order to live.

After becoming lawfully wed, both Hsin-Ning and I were promoted. Our company’s stock soared as if there was no tomorrow, which terrified even the most loyal employees. We bought a single-family home with a backyard pool in Palo Alto. We filled that pool with salt, just like at Hsin-Ning’s last place. I began suffering from chronic insomnia, and only her sleeping pills would let me drift off to sleep. I also started suffering the side effects of sleepwalking, waking up sometimes in the backyard and sometimes on the staircase, navigating purposefully over each step. A few times, I even woke up holding that gun in my hand. My dreams always returned me to that dark highway with its green signs and endless silvergrass fields. The squinty-eyed man reprised his role many times, mocking me . . . reminding me that not firing my gun at him had made me

a total loser.

It was in one of those dreams that I finally decided to destroy him once and for all. As I drew the trigger back, nearly past the point of no return, I was stopped by an unseen, unstoppable force. I woke up with a start to find Hsin-Ning holding my hand. We were standing in the backyard pool nearly waist deep in water. The gun in my hand was aimed point blank at my toes.

“You owe me twice,” she said.

I climbed out, turned around, and emptied the entire clip into the water. The blasts of those bullets, their spin, and their trails through the water reminded me of the puncture holes I’d left in the paper targets at the shooting range—captivating . . . yet so misplaced. We left the bullets where they landed at the bottom of the pool where they would surely pit and rust with time until they would become unrecognizable. Hsin-Ning picked up one of the casings: “Let’s keep this as a memento.” She set it on the dresser inside in a glass box. In the box, the salt crystallized on the surface of the bullet casing, forming a miniature forest. Unlike its companions in the pool, this one would never rust away or tarnish.

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