Twenty years ago, when my father first went missing, it occurred to us that if we could find his bicycle, we might find him. Only then did we discover that his bicycle was gone, too—that Pa and his iron steed had left us together.

A writer embarks on an epic quest in search of his missing father's stolen bicycle and soon finds himself caught up in the strangely intertwined stories of Lin Wang, the oldest elephant who ever lived, the soldiers who fought in the jungles of South-East Asia during the Second World War, and the secret worlds of the butterfly handicraft makers and antique bicycle fanatics of Taiwan. *The Stolen Bicycle* is both a majestic historical novel and a profound, startlingly intimate meditation on memory, family and home.

PRAISE FOR

The Stolen Bicycle

Taiwan Literary Award, 2015

China Times Open Book Award, 2015

Eslite Bookseller Award for Author of the Year, 2015

Highly Recommended, Dream of the Red Chamber Award, 2016

UDN Grand Literary Award, 2016

'One of the most eagerly awaited novels of the year...
A work of astonishing energy.' *Thinking Taiwan*

'Inspired by his love for bicycles and Taiwanese history,
Wu brings readers back to a simpler time when life
moved more slowly.' *Taipei Times*

PRAISE FOR

The Man with the Compound Eyes

'We haven't read anything like this novel. Ever.'
Ursula K. Le Guin

'A haunting and evocative tale, beautifully told...
this work will be a classic.' Hugh Howey

'Rich, dense and dripping with life. The book sings in the
key of fable, but with the timbre of reality.' Charles Yu

'Reminiscent of Haruki Murakami, twisting the dreamlike
into the curiously credible.' *Times Literary Supplement*

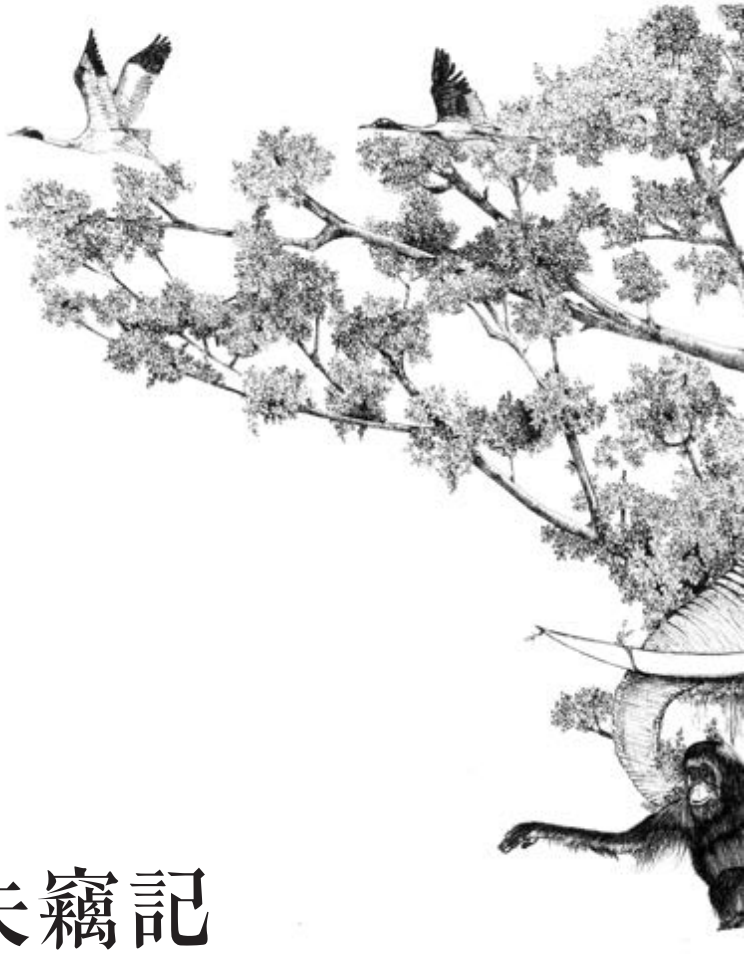
'Wu's writing occupies the space between hard-edged realism
and extravagantly detailed fantasy, hovering over the
precipice of wild imagination.' *Guardian*

'A wonderful novel which deserves a very
wide audience.' *Independent*

'A heady dose of realism, surrealism, and
magic realism, with several shots of allegory.'
Library Journal (starred review)

Award-winning novelist WU MING-YI is also an artist, designer, photographer, literary professor, butterfly scholar, environmental activist, traveller and blogger, and is widely considered the leading writer of his generation in his native Taiwan.

A long-time resident of Taipei, DARRYL STERK has interests in Taiwan's local literature and indigenous cultures. He translated the first of Wu Ming-Yi's novels to be published in English, *The Man with the Compound Eyes*.



單車失竊記

The Stolen Bicycle

吳 明益

Wu Ming-Yi

Translated from the Mandarin by Darryl Sterk

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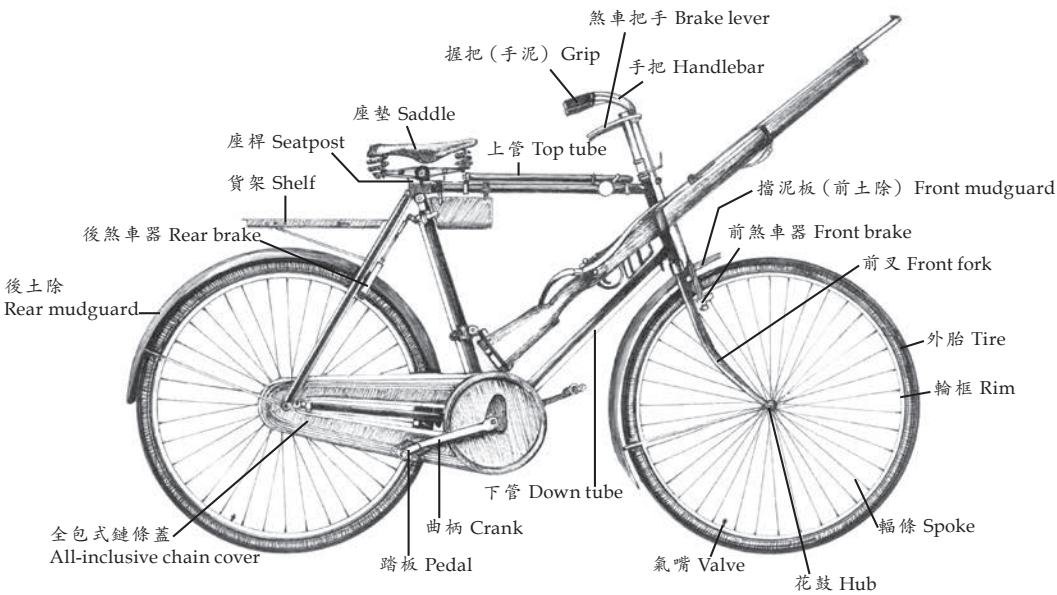
Parts of the Bicycle



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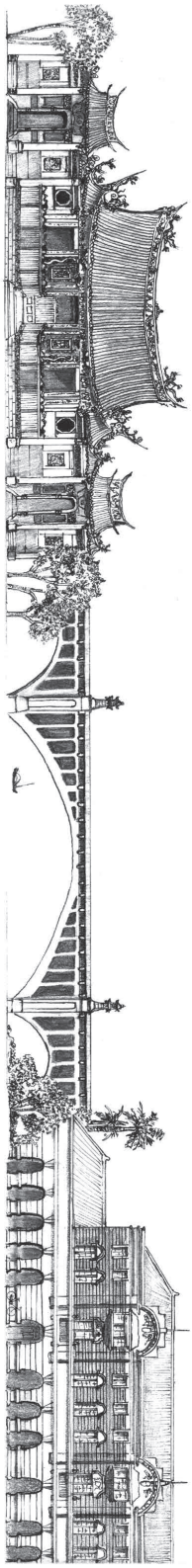


One Hundred Years in Taipei

1901

The first Meiji Bridge is completed

Construction begins on the Chokushi Boulevard

1905

Taiwan Nichi Nichi Shimpō prints Taiwan's first story about a stolen bicycle on 27 September

1916

Maruyama Zoo officially opens in April on the south bank of the Kee-lung River

1919

Shizuko is born

1926

Mr Ichiro the orangutan and Miss Mā the elephant arrive at Maruyama Zoo

1941

Pasuya is enlisted in the Silverwheels

1942

Singapore and Rangoon fall to the Japanese

The elephant transport team is formed in Burma

1947

Ten thousand are killed on 28 February when an anti-government uprising is violently suppressed

1970

Habitat destruction and over-harvesting send the butterfly handicrafts industry into decline

A-hûn rides to Taipei

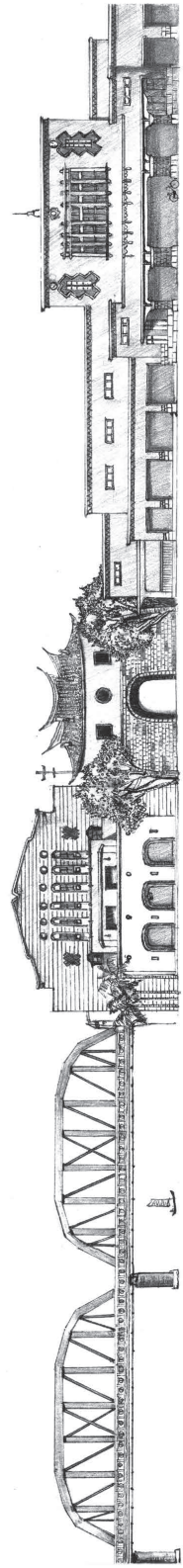
1992

The Chung-hwa Market is torn down

Our hero's father goes missing

2002

The Meiji Bridge is destroyed



Before Time

I must describe that morning for you, because every time something is described anew it becomes meaningful anew. I must start by letting the dawn spread out, the morning light stroll over the land. I have to take the trees, the houses in the village, the local school, the fields with their medleys of colour, and the little fishing boats swaying with the wind at the seashore, and place them one by one like chess pieces in the landscape.

There's no smoke puffing from the chimneys of the houses, so the air is fresh and sweet. The countryside looks so clean, like every stalk of rice was washed by rain the night before. Stand here and you'll see, way over there, a wistful, simple, lonely-looking village of farmers and fishers. Beyond the village is a sandy beach, beyond the beach the sea.

The sound of the sea brings a desolate loneliness that paces on the breeze through the village to the fields, pressing waves into the rice. Dawn's faint light shines on arcs of grain, new ears of rice that from afar appear eerily still and fine.

Darklight birds—night owls and herons—are returning to the

roost in scattered formations, while the early birds tweet and chirp. On a distant ridge appear several black dots, which get bigger and closer, until we see that they're kids, running towards us through the fields. Four of them, all in pants, all short-haired, so that only when they run close enough do we see a boy and three girls.

The boy is dark, his features plain, but he's long-limbed. Two of the girls seem to be twins, alike in appearance, in skin tone, both wincing as they run, even breathing with the same rhythm, but if you look close, one moves like there's no tomorrow, as if she has a plan to go carry out, while the other is a bit knock-kneed—although her most striking feature, even when she's not smiling, is her pronounced dimples. The last in line is small and seems to be the youngest. She's running hard, as if afraid of getting left behind. Their clothes are a bit worn, a bit too big, but fairly clean.

As the children draw near, they huddle together to talk something over. Then they split up and run to different corners of the closest field. Soon, like swooping skylarks, they vanish into the grass. The rice field shelters them.

'Yay!' the children call to one another, their voices shrill with delight.

Crouching in the field, the children are hidden, but soon four scarecrows who've been lying around all night stand up and start to sway. This is their job for today, to scare away the grain birds—little sparrows—who come to eat the rice. It's the time of year when ears of grain grow bristles—they'll be scything the rice soon, you know. Until then, they have to stop the grain birds from eating the rice. But wouldn't you know it, those grain birds are too smart to be afraid of scarecrows who stand there stock-still: they'd soon see through the ruse and eat up every last grain, blithely cocking their cute little heads, chittering about the taste of this year's crop.

Now that everyone in the village can take a break from farm work until the grain is ripe enough to reap, the grown-ups always tell the youngest children to go sway the scarecrows. Then the men go out fishing while the women stay at home to tend their gardens. It's a division of labour on which a family's livelihood depends.

Still crouching in the field, the children shout back and forth joyfully, each voice wafting the scent of rice to another's hiding place. They take turns calling out and waiting for a reply. But sometimes all they hear for the longest time is the sound of the wind, because some kids fall asleep.

After a burst of talk and laughter, the little dimpled girl sees not far in front of her a tiny nest on a rice stalk. It's the home of a no-yellow-belly-oh, another bird that eats rice. Father told her. Father usually plucks the nest and crushes the eggs or kills the hatchlings, not out of spite, but to protect his crop. The little girl peers in. Inside are a few birdies, who crane their necks at first and cheep, assuming the commotion means their mama has returned. When they discover she has not, they quieten down and crouch low in the nest.

'Ooh! Four little birdies!' says the girl with the dimples. She doesn't plan on telling Father about her discovery. At this age her sympathies still lean more towards the birdies than the rice. She tilts her head back to look at the scarecrow she's holding. Worried that the mama bird won't dare approach, the girl slowly withdraws. The sun gets brighter and brighter. From afar comes a queer rumbling sound the girl has not yet noticed. She looks up at the glistening dew in the sunlit paddy. She finds it beautiful and a bit...well, disconcerting. She'll have to wait till she's a bit older before she'll hear from her mother's mouth the word *hi-bî*—forlorn. Maybe the other kids are all asleep, she thinks. She lets herself fall asleep, too.

*

Time passes, who knows how long. The girl with the dimples wakes up and smells something strange on the air. Her head feels heavy—she's never felt like this before. She tries to speak but can't hear her own voice, which seems to dart about, like a bug, without ever reaching her ears.

She gets up, stubs her toe on the fallen scarecrow, runs out of the grass and sees gaps in the green horizon, like chunks of land have been inexplicably dug away. There are clouds in the sky, dark, leaden. 'Is it nearly evening now?' the girl with the dimples wonders.

No, that's impossible! It just felt like a short nap. She looks around and again calls the names of her companions—no answer. Nothing. Not even the sound of cicadas, or the *glub glub* of the little fieldclams who live in the field. It's like they've been gagged and dragged away. At first she feels like running back into the grass to look for her friends, but the field has become so strange, so threatening. It intimidates her. The little girl feels frightened, but the dimples have not disappeared. She starts running, not knowing where she is going, or even that she is running. Is this the way she just came? Is it?

'Run on home, quick,' says a voice in her heart. That was what her mother told her: if anything happens, run on home and find a grown-up. She hurries at the thought, but soon trips and falls. She scrambles up and sees a shiny black bicycle—that must be what tripped her. One time she saw a Japanese policeman chasing someone on a bicycle just like it. How fast he went! If she rides it, she can make it back to the village, quick.

'Go on home!' say the charred rice stalks.

'Go on home!' say the cattle egrets, flying in single file.

'Go on home!' say the trickling irrigation ditches.

The bicycle is so big and tall it seems like an iron horse, impossible to lift. But from somewhere she finds the strength, so great is her desire to go home. Gripping the handlebar stem, she drags the bike upright and then pushes it forward with an *ooomph*, sets the wheels turning, runs along beside it. The hub, the axle, the chain—the whole bike follows the rhythm of the girl's running, gathering speed and growing lighter. *Click clack, click clack, click clack*. The little girl isn't tall enough to mount the seat; even if she could, her feet wouldn't reach the pedals. With a surge of animal instinct, she sticks a leg through the bicycle frame so that she can reach the left pedal. It's a way of riding a bicycle the children call *sankakunori*—triangle-riding.

Hi, ya! Hi, ya! She starts pedalling. *Hi! Back to the village! Yak! Hurry! Hi!*

A black rain begins to fall. No, look closely, and you'll see it's a sooty, almost granular haze that's blocking the sun's rays and wrapping the land in ashen gauze. It's not really rain, just looks so much like it.

A History of the Bicycles My Family Has Lost

No matter how I tell it, this story has to start with bicycles. To be more precise, it has to start with stolen bicycles. 'Iron horses have influenced the fate of our entire family,' my mother used to say. I would describe my mother as a New Historicist: to her, there are no Great Men, no heroes, no bombing of Pearl Harbor. She only remembers seemingly trivial—but to her fateful—matters like bicycles going missing. The word for fate in Mandarin is *ming-yun*, literally 'life-luck' or 'command-turn'. But 'fate' in my mother's native tongue of Taiwanese is the other way round: *ūn-miā*. It belies fatalism, putting luck in front of life, suggesting you can turn the wheel of fate yourself instead of awaiting the commands of Heaven.

Sometimes I wonder if I can really call myself a bicycle fanatic. Maybe not. To be honest, there are things about bicycles I like, and things I can't stand. I love their geometric simplicity, the double triangle design with a wheel at each end. Could there be anything finer than two chain-driven wheels turning ceaselessly down roads and paths, through forest and farmland, by lake and bay? But I hate the sore bum I get from a long ride. I also hate cyclists posing in

sunglasses and all the pro gear, thinking they're cool when they couldn't even pedal up the modest slope of Yang-teh Boulevard. You know the type: guy with a bulging gut who parks his expensive bike by the side of the road to show it off. Whenever I see a guy like that, I hope his chain falls off. Or that he gets a flat or a broken spoke.

Sometimes I think what fascinates me isn't bicycles per se but the names people have called them by, and all those names imply. Monsieur Pierre Michaux et fils, the guys who invented the machine, called them 'fast feet with pedals', *vélocipèdes à pédales*. Another Frenchman, Pierre Lallement, modified the design, producing the modern 'bicycle', meaning 'two circles' (a bilingual compound, from the Latin *bi* and the Greek *kyklos*).

For as long as I can remember, I've asked everyone I meet who speaks a different language how they say bicycle: *bike*, *vélo*, *cykel*, 자전거, велосипед, *jízdní kolo*, دراجة... I can only speak two languages, Taiwanese and Mandarin, but I can say bicycle in thirty-six. When it comes to bicycles, I'm a polyglot.

In the world I grew up in, the word a person used for 'bicycle' told you a lot about them. *Jiten-sha* ('self-turn vehicle') indicated a person had received a Japanese education. *Thih-bé* ('iron horse') meant he was a native speaker of Taiwanese, as did *Khóng-bîng-tshia* ('Kung-ming vehicle'), named for an ancient Chinese inventor. *Tan-ch'e* ('solo vehicle'), *chiao-t'a-ch'e* ('foot-pedalled vehicle') or *tsu-hsing-ch'e* ('auto-mobile vehicle') told you they were from the south of China. But everyone uses these terms now, so they're no longer a reliable way to tell how old someone is or where they come from.

If you ask me my own preference, it would have to be *khóng-bîng-tshia* and *thih-bé*, spoken by my mother in Taiwanese.

Especially *thih-bé*—iron horse. Such a beautiful expression, evoking both the natural world and human endeavour! Imagine

the Creator laying down seams of iron-rich rock for people to mine and cast into carbon steel in the shape of a horse. What a pity *thih-bé* is now in decline. That's just life: something may be inherently superior but end up getting replaced anyway. So has it been with *thih-bé*, replaced by *tan-ch'e* or *chiao-t'a-ch'e*. It's foolish, if you ask me, a kind of cultural devolution.

Another thing I find intriguing about bicycles is how each machine is unique to the era in which it was built. I believe someday someone could write a history of the iron horse, with each era named for a particular model. *This was the year the Fuji Monarch was released. In this year endeth the reign of the Kennet. This year witnessed the ascendance of the Lucky Three Speed Hub Racer.* From this point of view, you could call me a Historical Materialist: the world would have evolved in a different way if the iron horse had never been invented.

As I was just saying, to tell you the story of my family I've got to start with all those stolen bicycles—with one theft in particular, which took place in the thirty-eighth year of the Meiji era, the tenth year of the Japanese period in Taiwan: 1905.

If you dabble in history, then you'll know that in January of that year the Russian troops who had been holed up at Port Arthur on the Liaodong Peninsula in Manchuria for 157 days finally surrendered. Not long after, Russia lost the Battle of Mukden, the last battle of the Russo-Japanese War. Japan's victory might have started to warp its national military ambitions. Soon after, a massive earthquake in Kangra, India, claimed nineteen thousand lives, while the Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-sen, then in exile in Japan, was founding a secret society dedicated to overthrowing the Ch'ing dynasty. At about the same time in Britain, the keel was laid on the

HMS *Dreadnought*, which ushered in a new era in naval history. Also in 1905, Fritz Schaudinn discovered *Treponema pallidum*, the pathogen behind a dark disease which had tormented countless thousands of people: syphilis.

It was also the year in which my maternal grandfather was born.

His birth was not a historical event by any stretch of the imagination. There was no notice in the newspaper or anything like that. But in my mother's memory, my grandfather's birth has always been tied to a newspaper, and a bicycle in a picture in that newspaper. Ma used to say that Grandpa had vowed as a young man to buy a bicycle of his very own to carry the rice harvest and tools into town—even, someday, his pregnant wife, when she went into labour, so she could give birth in a clinic. This was a vow he never forgot as long as he lived. And what prompted this vow, if you can believe it, was a page from an old newspaper, the *Taiwan Nichi Nichi Shimpō*, Taiwan's first daily newspaper, dated 27 September in the thirty-eighth year of the Meiji era.

I'm told my maternal great-grandfather, who couldn't read a single word, had found the newspaper while selling fish in town that day and brought it home as a gift for his newborn son. To him, that newspaper was a symbol of social mobility: he hoped his child would one day get an education. My great-grandfather folded it up to the size of a handkerchief, wrapped it in two pieces of sackcloth, and put it in a kind of iron box that was still quite rare at the time. He even went to town to ask a *sian-sinn*—a teacher or doctor or simply someone who could read—to read him the news. So it was that my grandfather came to know what had happened on the day he was born like the back of his hand.

According to my ma, the first time she saw the crisp, yellowed newspaper, my grandfather pointed to the bottom-right corner, at

a news story he considered particularly significant. The headline read: *Self-Turn Self-Turns*. It was about how a well-known doctor from Tainan lost his metal steed while making a house call. One day he leaned his two-wheeler against a wall and rushed inside to see a patient, who ordered his boy servant to go out and wheel it in—but when the boy went outside it had already been ridden off. 'Like the yellow crane,' the newspaper said, 'the steed of the immortal gives flight, going who knows whither.'

People who've studied the folk history of the Japanese era in Taiwan might know that a bicycle then was like a Mercedes-Benz today. No, it was more like owning a house. If a bicycle was stolen, the newspaper would report it: that's how important it was. To my grandfather, the news of this particular theft was poignant. As he put it, 'To think that in the year I came into the world there were already people who had iron horses for people to steal! Really makes a man feel hard done by.'

My grandfather died in the prime of his life. It was in 1945, the year the war ended—after an American air raid. The cause of death was a stolen bicycle. Again, the bicycle wasn't his. Grandfather never had a bike of his own, his whole life long: he died without fulfilling his youthful vow. Every one of his nine children was delivered at home by the village midwife, and they'd all survived, every one. For a poor farming household with so many mouths to feed, losing the head of the family was really unfortunate.

Of course, if you talk to my mother long enough, sooner or later she'll tell you about the third time the theft of an iron horse featured in my family's history. The iron horse in question actually belonged to my father this time: it was his very first bicycle. Brand unknown, model unknown.

My father made western-style suits. Later on he also sold jeans, but my mother said making suits suited his personality better, because he was *é-káu*—the quiet type. As long as he had scissors, pattern paper, needle and thread, he could work the whole day without saying a thing. All we would hear was the *swish swash* of the shears flowing like water across the fabric, or the *click clack* of the treadle like a mine car trundling down a track. My mother was a factory girl, trained in fabric edging. Having spent such long periods focused on a fixed point, her beautiful eyes always looked like they were dreaming.

My mother had given birth to four daughters in a row, which made my father despair even more than poverty. He wanted a son, and he made my mother a proposition. They would take a gamble and have another child. If it was a boy, their child-bearing years would be done. If it was a girl, they would give her away and give it another go. 'She'll have a better fate,' he said. In Taiwanese, this was *ē khah hó-miā*—the same *miā* as in *ūn-miā*. Out of an ill-advised faith that *ūn-miā* would not make a fool of her, my mother agreed. And wouldn't you know it, she had another girl. Ma had always been resigned to whatever fate sent her way, but this time she wasn't going to grin and bear it. Father, his own heart uneasy, did not press the matter, and there was no further talk of giving the baby to our aunt in the country. They had not, however, given up on their desire to have a son, not by any means, and since they hoped the next child would not be another girl, my fifth sister was named A-muá, meaning 'full'—or 'Enough, enough!'

The latest addition to the family meant they had to work harder and harder, to throw themselves into their work all day long. But they could hardly rush the tailoring process. From taking the measurements to the basted fitting to adjustment and delivery, even a

modestly priced western suit required several weeks of work. To help make ends meet, my mother did piecework for a garment factory. According to my eldest sister, there was a time when all Ma did was make pockets. She filled every corner of the house with stacks of the exact same kind of pocket, tens of thousands of them. Ma and Pa both worked from dawn till dusk, and often much later, but come evening their longing for a son remained unsatisfied.

Ūn-miā guarantees nothing, though, except that nothing people promise is for sure. A year later Ma gave birth to my elder brother. With an extra mouth to feed, the family could barely scrape a living, and my father, who now had the son he'd always wanted, decided that five girls in the house was one too many, one more than had been allotted by fate.

Early one morning, just after my mother set out for the market, my father took A-muá in his arms and without saying a thing left for Taipei Station, planning to take the first train to the countryside to deliver her to our barren aunt. Having had her midnight meal of thin rice gruel, A-muá was fast asleep in her bamboo basket. The early summer sun had risen, and the city was coming to life. Meanwhile, my mother had carried my brother all the way to the farmers' market before realising that, with the paltry change in her purse, she couldn't get much of anything but a pair of sore legs. So, despondent, she came home early to find First Sis tending the fire with Fourth Sis on her back, Second Sis rinsing rice, and Third Sis wiping the display windows. Brother had bawled the whole way home on Ma's back—well on his way to a career of annoying everyone around him to no end.

My mother quickly discovered that our A-muá was not at home. She asked her eldest and found out that Pa had gone out, taking A-muá with him. Those conversations they'd had, night after night,

flashed through her mind. 'Oh no!' she cried and rushed out into the street. But with my brother weighing her down, there was no way she would make it in time to catch my father before he departed on that train. So she came back and gave my brother to her eldest. Then, with single-minded determination, she got the key out of the secret compartment of the cabinet and opened the four-corner spoke lock that Pa oiled every day. Nobody knew why Pa hadn't taken A-muá to the station on his bike that day. Maybe carrying her in his arms hinted at his irresolution?

By my mother's own account, this was the first time in her life she'd ever ridden an iron horse. And the last. (She must be misremembering, or maybe deliberately neglecting to mention her true first time.) Incredibly, she grasped the principle by instinct, in just a few seconds, just like she knew how to lean into the wind in a rainstorm, her broad bamboo hat pulled low as she planted the rice seedlings, just like she knew how to nurse her children, just like she knew how to grit her teeth and bear all pain. She rode the iron horse through the Chung-hwa Market, where we were living, travelling north beneath its covered walkways, then right at the roundabout around the North Gate, onto Chung-hsiao West Road, which she took all the way to the locomotives.

If you happened to pass by Taipei Station that day, you would have seen her fly by in a floral print dress so sweaty it stuck to her back, her white slip billowing in the wind behind her like a blooming flower (Pa had made that dress for her). My mother, who couldn't read a single word, didn't bother looking at the departures board but went straight for the ticket window, pushing and shoving her way through the hordes of desperate ticket-buyers trying to flee the city to ask when the early train that her husband might be taking was leaving. And from which platform!

When my father saw her, he was initially shocked, then ashamed, and finally enraged. He sighed a long sigh and handed A-muá, who was howling at the ride around the roundabout her fate had taken, to his wife. Then he walked, silent as usual and with his hands behind his back, out of the train station. My mother, also silent, trotted close behind. Anger had lengthened my father's strides, meaning my mother had to scurry along to keep up. In her haste, she forgot all about the iron horse. As a result, they lost the bike—worth several months' takings from the shop.

Nobody knew how my father really felt about this episode, because he never expressed any opinion, just like he never commented on current events when he read the paper, never shared his memories and never chimed in when my mother shared hers. It was like he'd sold the right to reflect on his life to someone else. It was as if none of this had anything to do with him.

The incident has always made me think about the two aspects of time: the concrete and the abstract. In concrete terms, the train was a minute late that day, and by riding the bike my mother was twenty minutes faster than she would have been if she'd gone by foot. Those twenty-one minutes ensured that A-muá remained in the family. This fact is part of my family's history. But in abstract terms, those twenty-one minutes never passed, for in the following decades my mother has recounted them over and over, complaining to A-muá and reminding us all how she suffered. It's one of the topics she turns to when trying to claim the sympathy she sees as her due. Those twenty-one minutes, and my father's shamefaced look, were her proofs of how poor and pathetic the family was at the time, and testament to her love for us all.

And the one who almost sent A-muá packing, usurping her place in the bamboo basket as the baby of the family, my oblivious

elder brother—well, he was the reason my father lost his *second* bicycle. But that happened sixteen years later.

The loss of my father's *third* bicycle had to do with me.

I'm the youngest child in the family, by far—I was a 'tail baby', born unexpectedly fourteen years after my mother vowed never to have another child. As a result, all the anecdotes I've been relating are hearsay—mainly my mother's, with some supplementation from my sisters. They aren't my own personal experiences and couldn't possibly be.

Yes, I was born long after that—my parents had me when they were both past forty, a whole generation behind my older siblings. Too young to remember their shared past, I never felt part of my family's story. They always liked to tell me what the Chung-hwa Market was like in 'back in the good old days', what a struggle it had been, how poor they were, and the conclusion would always be, 'You're so lucky'—*lí siōng hó-miā*. Which always seemed so unfair. Why had *I* been denied the chance to experience the golden era my parents had lived through or endure the dire poverty my siblings had known, their only amusement high-jumping over an elastic band on the roof? Who were they to sneer at me as 'lucky'?

As an adult, I found a way to be part of those times—to grow up alongside my siblings, or even my mother—by listening to their stories and recreating 'the good old days' in words. I could suffer with them, laugh with them. I couldn't grow up with my father, though, because he said so little about himself, which was a shame. His life before he married my mother was a blank. I know about as much about it as we do about the tribal history of the mysterious little black folk of Taiwanese tribal myth.

To my surprise, I became so accustomed to recreating the past in my own words that I ended up writing stories for various magazines, and have even been called a writer on occasion. Of course, my mother was initially contemptuous of my profession (she always hoped I'd be a lawyer), and even now she's doubtful. (To her, anyone who doesn't make their living by producing something concrete is dubious.)

Sometimes I wonder what kind of job it is, being a writer, and why society allows a particular group of people to take writing—a semiotic system humanity invented for entirely different purposes—and use it to make their living telling stories. And how do the people who do this job get away with bending, forging or casting words so as to excite, haunt or even torment their readers?

I must admit that I have my mother to thank the most for whatever feeling for language I have as a writer. It was she who initiated me into the power of words, and the true meaning of abstract terms like 'love'. The way she used the word love, the meaning she gave it, couldn't be found in the dictionary. When she told me stories about how hard she had it when she first married my father, she'd always end by saying, 'None of you'll ever know how much I sacrificed.' Of everyone I know, she's the most given to taking stock, and her assessment, freely offered, is that she has made an enormous sacrifice for the family—and that we must love her and care about her as much as she has loved us and cared about us.

Only much later did I start to understand that when my mother said 'sacrifice', she meant love. *Sacrifice = love.* That is the profound, solemn, obscure equation she's spent her whole life teaching me. As a result, I've always, as an adult, been afraid to say the word love or even hear it, because whenever it appears, sacrifice will follow close behind. If someone makes a sacrifice for you, you won't feel all of a

flutter inside. Likewise, when you make a sacrifice for someone else, they're not likely to feel like celebrating. Sacrifice is a proof of love and love is the result of sacrifice, and vice versa. I wonder if this is why 'I love you' has always been difficult for me to say.

My ma said that before I turned eight I was truly hard work. I spat up milk, was a picky eater and got the chickenpox and the snakes (our word for shingles). I was always falling down. But after the age of eight I grew strong and tall as a birdcrap banyan.

Two things happened when I turned eight. The first had to do with death, and the second with life. No, it'd be more accurate to say that life and death were intertwined in one and the same event.

When I was about seven, I had to learn to go to the bathroom on my own, because I had already started school. As none of the shops in the market had its own toilet, we all had to use the public restrooms at either end: the men's toilet was at one end, the ladies' at the other.

What genius designed the cubicles in the men's room? The doors were only 140 centimetres high, providing no privacy: they were just slat doors, the slats nailed none too flush. When you squatted inside, you could look out at an angle, and anyone squatting at a certain angle outside could peep in. Later on I learned that the design was supposed to stop people from hiding inside and sniffing crazy glue.

To celebrate my eighth birthday, my mother splurged on a chicken leg, and she even went to the western-style bakery to buy me a one-twelfth wedge of chocolate cake, with a bottle of Yakult yogurt drink to wash it down. Even without candles, I was happy to wolf it all down after my brother and sisters sang 'Happy Birthday', but I gave myself a terrible stomach-ache.

I had to go to the bathroom on my own, of course. When I started school, Ma had told me that any schoolboy who went to the ladies' room with his mother would be called 'birdless'—'bird' being our word for dick.

I could see what a loss of face this would be, but humiliation paled in comparison to my anxiety and fear about going to the toilet on my own. I'd never told my parents the real reason I didn't dare go by myself. On my first solitary trip, I'd witnessed something utterly bewildering, which got me in the habit of resisting the urge. My record was going seven days without taking a number two.

When I'd first started making 'practice' trips, my sister would wait outside for me until I was done. Later, my mother told her she should let me go on my own. The day I got up the courage to go to the public toilet by myself, grasping a wad of paper in my hand, I chose, as was my custom, the least filthy cubicle, at the very end of the row. Soon after I crouched down, an unfamiliar middle-aged man wearing a floral print shirt walked in and stopped at the urinal directly opposite. I watched his back as he pulled down his fly. Soon another man, wearing a green jacket, walked over, and they seemed to look at one another. (I couldn't see their heads, which were blocked by a slat.) Then the man in the green jacket knelt before the other's open fly, cupped the erect penis that jutted from his black pubic hair (something which, never having seen my father naked, I had never seen before), and started sucking it. I couldn't help but stare, and for a while I didn't know what to do. I didn't dare stand up, flush and leave. I forgot that I could close my eyes.

That evening, I came down with something. I was struck by an inexplicable high fever for two days and left constipated for an entire week.

At first I thought it had been an accident, that it wouldn't happen again. But time after time, the same 'accident' recurred. In retrospect, I think maybe they waited until I went in, so they could follow me and put on a 'show'. Indeed, I think it was a deliberate performance with only a seven-year-old boy for an audience because every so often the faces blocked by the slats seemed to glance in my direction. In my imagination, both men smiled obscenely.

From then on, going to the men's room was torture. My mother had to nag me into going to the bathroom every day. I would run up onto the skywalk—a pedestrian bridge that crossed the road—clutching a wad of paper, wait the time it took to take a dump, toss the paper in the bin and run back home.

The day I ate a chicken leg and a wedge of chocolate cake, drank a bottle of Yakult yogurt drink and got diarrhoea for my birthday, a strange man, maybe new to the market, came in wearing a pair of grey flares and a Hawaiian shirt—the height of fashion at the time. Nobody else followed him in, but when he was still standing there long after he should have finished peeing, I got a bad feeling.

Then he turned around and faced the cubicle I was crouching in. The slatted door prevented me from forming a complete picture of him, but I could still see his penis, seemingly chopped into two equal lengths by one of the slats, headed right for me.

Then he squatted down, looked at me with puffy eyes so narrow it was almost surreal, and said, 'You'll only live to forty-five.' He said it so calmly and softly that he could have been patting my head and saying, 'Good morning, little boy.'

When I got home, I felt dazed, my head heavy. I came down with another fever. The age of forty-five seemed as far away as Mars back then, but the man's eyes and his smile gave me a feeling I had never felt before, like an ice-cold needle working its way through a

vein towards my heart. I had a high fever for three days, slept fitfully for another three. I kept talking in my sleep. Years later, my mother would frequently remind me of it. She would always say that there were two saviours in my life: the first was the Holy King, and the other was Dr Lîm.

For the first two days of my fever, my parents didn't take me to the doctor, because it was simply too expensive. My father went to the pharmacy to buy me something over the counter, to see if we could 'press the fever down', while my mother went to the Holy King for a paper charm, which she burnt to ashes, mingled with water and had me swallow.

I still remember that druggist's, a space so cramped only a single person could pass through its narrow aisles, so filled with poultices and pills, one stack after another, that it reminded you of a grocery shop. I remember the owner, too, with his thick-lensed spectacles and his head that was bald except for a fringe of hair at the sides. You just told him your symptoms and he would prepare you a prescription. The residents of the market had never asked him to show them any kind of licence or permit. He was so self-assured, taking his time picking up the bottles and pouring out the pills with a clatter, his movements so nimble as he wrapped up the medicine, that we never doubted his credentials as a healer.

Back then, we had to go outside the 'city wall'—an expression that had survived the wall's demolition early in the Japanese era—to see a real *sian-sinn*, a real doctor. My father had to ride with me on his iron horse past the Benevolence, Filiality and Loyalty buildings (he would turn his head and tell me, 'We're at Pún-ting!') to the North Gate (where many years before Ma had taken a right to try to make it to the train station in time to save my sister A-muá). We rode around the roundabout, through the

neighbourhoods the Japanese had named 'Eiraku' (Eternal Happiness) and 'Taihei' (Peace), all the way to the Taipei Bridge. By the time we got there, his shirt was soaked with sweat. I could feel the heat steaming off him from my place in the wicker chair mounted on the front of the bike.

We went all that way not because there were no doctors in the Westgate neighbourhood, but because my father only had faith in one particular paediatrician, who had treated every one of his children from my eldest sister on down to me, the seventh child. Even my elder sisters' children were taken to see him, from birth to adulthood. He was practically our family doctor. Even today, if my mother gets sick with something that cough syrup can't cure, she'll insist on a visit to this paediatrician's clinic.

The decor had not changed in many years. A chequered glass door pushed open onto the waiting room, basically a bench along a wall. There was a frosted glass window with an arc cut into it so that paperwork and medicines could be passed back and forth. From the first time I went there, the nurse was a puny, sad-looking middle-aged man. I really liked to watch him mix the medicine. He'd pour the powder into a little plastic container and add lukewarm water. Then he'd hold the container next to his ear and shake it, as if he was listening to a kind of music, until the water turned a faint red.

Then he would write my name on a piece of rice paper. His handwriting was beautiful, looping up and down like a bridge. (I'm really sorry, but that's the only image I could think of, and I thought of it because the street the clinic was on was right by the bridge.) He would also write 'three times a day, after meals' and then, whipping the glue brush so fast you couldn't possibly see it clearly, he'd stick the rice paper label on the plastic container,

on which the following words were printed in a sober, regular typeface:

台北橋小兒科
TAIPEI BRIDGE PAEDIATRICS

My mother says I only stopped crying and making a fuss when we went to that clinic, where I let Dr Lîm insert a suppository into my rectum.

The third day, in the middle the night, my father took the thermometer out of my mouth and saw the mercury had hit forty-one degrees—a dangerously high fever. He decided that he'd take me to see the doctor, no matter how much it cost. He pulled out his iron horse, attached the wicker seat and placed me in it. My mother took another charm, burnt it, stirred it into hot water and made me drink it, before perching herself on the back of the bike. That iron horse carried us, a load of 130 kilograms, all the way to the clinic. It was closed, of course. My father frantically pressed the bell until the sad-eyed male nurse opened the door. Shortly thereafter Dr Lîm appeared, woken up but wearing a smile, and a stethoscope around his neck. Without saying a word, he picked me up and sat me down on the examination table and made me sit straight, as if I were going to meditate. Then he took cotton gauze, dipped it in alcohol and vigorously rubbed my back and chest. My mother says my skin was as red as a cooked shrimp in its shell.

'Has he had a bowel movement?' said Dr Lîm. He spoke in Taiwanese, but his accent was different from my parents'.

'I don't know why, but nothing for these past three days.'

So Dr Lîm gave me an enema. I could feel the cool liquid flow through my hot anus up, up into my belly. Then my mother carried

me crying into the bathroom, where I shat out a putrid filth that reminded me of nothing so much as fish guts, until there was nothing left. The doctor recommended that I sleep in the clinic, so he could keep me under observation. My mother sat on a stool by the cot and watched me all night long, while my father slept on the bench in the doctor's surgery. Just before dawn, my fever broke, and when he woke up Dr Lîm used his little flashlight to check my eyes and my throat. He told my parents to take me home, give me my medicine punctually and keep me under observation.

'Can you spray me with that stuff?' I asked Dr Lîm.

He smiled and gently sprayed sweet cough medicine down my throat, which I found infinitely satisfying. I felt like it'd really been worth it to get sick just for that.

Day broke when we walked out of the clinic door. The iron horse was nowhere to be found.

My father slapped himself in the face, so hard and so loud that Dr Lîm came out to see what was the matter. I remember my father walking up and down the street a dozen times before giving up. It was like he'd lost one of his own legs.

My mother always gave half the credit for my recovery to Dr Lîm and half to the Holy King. '*Mā ài jîn, mā ài sîn*,' she would say—it took a man, and a god. That afternoon she took me again to the altar of the Holy King, near the Shuang-lien Market. She thanked the deity and asked him where we could find the bicycle. The Holy King said that we should count ourselves lucky either way—if the bike could be found, or if it couldn't. But he still drew a couple of charms for her. One was for my father to drink, the other for the whole family.

Maybe because the Holy King had mercy on us in our poverty, he magically returned the iron horse to us two weeks later. That

second-hand bike (for which my father had reluctantly parted with a small fortune after his previous bike went missing during my brother's joint college entrance exam) was the same one I wrote about in another novel, the very same Lucky bicycle that was left parked at the Chung-shan Hall after the Chung-hwa Market was torn down and that disappeared without a trace.