

DIRTY THINGS

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With this first short story collection, one of Taiwan's most celebrated contemporary writers, Chen Po-Ching, dissects the provocative status of gay men in society through eight stories that weave together fact, fiction, sex, and politics.

Dirty Things, the first short story collection from author Chen Po-Ching, collects eight queer tales spanning 1960's Taiwan under martial law to the present era of democracy and legal same-sex marriage. More than just sketches of individual affection and desire, these stories are a microcosm of the modern history of sexual minorities in Taiwan. With incisive and unadorned prose, Chen Po-Ching confronts readers with the ambiguous nature of his literary enterprise: is *Dirty Things* an unvarnished depiction of natural desire? Or, of the ways in which natural desire has been systematically thwarted, denied, and repressed by society?

The first four stories take place in contemporary times. "The Stomach of the World" weaves together sexual and culinary fantasies in the milieu of a gay sauna in Thailand. When a man intent on death spends the night with the idol of his youth in "How to Die Young in Tokyo", will the fulfillment of his dream result in exaltation or misery? Taking place at a time when homosexuality was still grounds for exemption from military service, "Off-Base Oracle" looks at the various ways that young soldiers attempt to "pass" as something they are not. "A Brief History of Robin" uses comic book allusions to probe the boundaries between male friendship and desire.

Introducing elements of Taiwan's unique historical circumstances, the final four stories highlight the societal pressures imposed on gay men while excavating the silent voices of the past. In "Good Night, Mr. President, Good Night", a challenge to authoritarian rule unfolds against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis. In "A Man Is Born", the racy short films secretly shown midway through main features in post-war Taiwan provide an unlikely avenue for a homosexual projectionist to



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bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

out himself. The freedom that is sought in “The Anti-Communist Wives Club” turns out to be the freedom to love as one chooses, regardless of gender. Finally, “A Complete History of Taiwan’s Star Wars Program” uses the metaphor of games to explore issues faced by homosexuals in the era of authoritarian rule.

With its seemingly offensive title, *Dirty Things* challenges the conventional social order while bringing a soothing warmth to the wounds of the past. Projecting himself into unseen corners of society, author Chen Po-Ching casts a spotlight on hidden failures and repressed desires. Transcending its “queer literature” label, *Dirty Things* is a book that gives voice to anyone who has ever felt confined by the narrowly defined roles in which society permits them to live.

Chen Po-Ching 陳柏青

Born in 1983, Chen Po-Ching is a graduate of the National Taiwan University Graduate Institute of Taiwan Literature, and recipient of the Global Youth Chinese Literary Award and the United Daily News Literature Award. Writing under the pen name Yeh Fu-Lu, his novel *Small City* was awarded the Chiu Ko Fiction Prize and a Chinese Nebula Awards Silver Prize. *Unitas: a Literary Monthly* has named him one of Taiwan’s most promising novelists under forty.

DIRTY THINGS

By Chen Po-Ching

Translated by Mike Fu

The Stomach of the World

Change countries for a change of weather. Change names for another identity. Sometimes you have to become someone else to be more like yourself. It's the day of the water festival. The street's full of beautiful gays. All of them looking to get wet.

Mu Shu's going to tell Hsiao-Ho about his first time here, so many years ago. They're clinking glasses in the canteen of a sauna. They were drinking separately until Mu Shu reached across the table to stop Hsiao-Ho. Hey, that's not how you drink Thai liquor. How do you drink it then? You mix it with something. Whiskey and soda, beer with ice cubes. Thai people use bottle caps, Mu Shu says. They dilute their drinks one capful at a time. And then the guy goes on to order a bottle of Chang beer, popping it open. A plume of cold smoke wafts out, the rush of being in a distant land hitting in an instant.

Mu Shu pours one out – the canteen still uses the same cheap plastic cups as it used to – telling Hsiao-Ho that he was around the same age the first time he came to Bangkok, around twenty years old. Thrumming with energy. He'd come because he'd heard about how fun the water festival was. Know what I mean, he winks at Hsiao-Ho. People can get wet legally and get naked in public during the water festival. The more naked people you see, the wetter you get. Everyone's got a water gun shooting load after load in the street. The street's full of quivering pecks, pink nipples trembling with droplets of water on the verge of falling. The best part is that all the bodies are so wet that you can't tell what's sweat and what isn't. Bake under the Bangkok sun a bit longer, and it's absolutely transcendent when the heat and moisture trapped beneath your skin escape through your pores, offering sweet relief.

And on top of that, there are the gays. Bangkok in these moments is the stomach of the world, Mu Shu says.

What do you mean by that?

You definitely know what I mean.

It's always like this. No matter how many pics there are on the hookup apps, how many partygoers, faces red and eyes glazed on the dance floor, swarms of ripped men in chest harnesses and short shorts grinding and grinding, each and every one drinking themselves into oblivion, drinking till they puke on the street, an Instagram Story of a flock of men screaming their heads off as they cross the street...

Hashtag water festival. Hashtag BKK. Hashtag you are loved.

But then you put down the phone, and come back to reality. Reality is the plastic cup in Mu Shu's hand, filled to the brim until it reaches surface tension. While everyone else is flowing. Everyone's wet, in pairs or foursomes or fivesomes and sixsomes, haphazardly coupling up, except for you all alone, you're always the last one left.

Why don't they choose me?

Why is it always me, only ever me left all alone?

That was the moment, Mu Shu tells Hsiao-Ho, yes, on the night of the water festival so many years ago, that he decided to come to the sauna.

It was a rash decision, of course, and a kind of gamble, with himself as the bargaining chip. All his chips on the table. The young Mu Shu counted up his coins and pushed them across the counter. In return he got a key, and stuffed everything about who he was before this day into the locker. He pulled his underwear up, then pulled himself up, and with a brusque movement of the hand he poured himself into the depths of the room like upturning a bucket of water.

That was my first time in a sauna.

Mu Shu says the space was different than he'd imagined.

But he couldn't really say what a sauna should have looked like either. He discovered then that he didn't know where the bath was or anything. It was a labyrinth in there, with so many tiny rooms like grottoes. Skin taut in the blast of air conditioning. A modern sauna isn't a water village of Chinese antiquity after all, more like the caves of Dunhuang, so dry they make you thirsty. Inside each cave was a stone Buddha with his face shorn off, a man's face covered in shadow. If you had a Dharmic connection, he'd take you on a journey, bring you to the brink of oblivion and then back again. Even if he didn't fill you with enlightenment, he'd still make you feel right as rain.

Mu Shu found out back then that the sauna had a canteen. Hearing this, Hsiao-Ho says he read online that they hired a chef from a five-star hotel to run the kitchen. The canteen's buffet was advertised on the website. The boss really knows what his customers are looking for. If you can't win over a man's heart, you can at least satisfy his stomach, it's always good to eat your fill.

But isn't this absurd, Mu Shu cuts in. Who would hire a five-star chef just so people could stuff themselves? Who cares, replies Hsiao-Ho. People don't come here looking for food. The patrons all know where the real buffet is.

The performance was on Thursday night at 8 p.m. That's what it said on the flyer Mu Shu saw by the entrance. The flyer was an advertisement for an 0 party, which Mu Shu read as a 0 party, zero being the colloquial term for bottoms. Naked boys coming down the ladder one after the other, bodies bold and bare, the texture of the cages along the walls imprinted on their skin when the lights flicked on, making them appear as though they were in chains, so everyone reached out their hands. The main stage was like a runway that spanned the entire room, Mu Shu also reached out to touch, like the rest, so many hands in the darkness, bodies given form by touch, tall and short, high and low, crevices and protrusions, from surfaces to lines, pec lines to v-lines, then again from lines to points...

The emcee introduced the boys on stage. Let's welcome boy number one, Godzilla. Godwillya look at those incredible arms, that sexy waist, this hornet, who's horny? Take a good look, let's not even talk about his long-lasting, destructive, hot hot flame, oh oh, he's about to blow.

Next, we have boy number two, Angkor Wat. That's right, my hungry bottoms. And-for-what? A boundless sea of suffering, we need an old monk with a stick to save us. Daddy, please come here to satisfy your boy.

Actually, he was garbling entirely in Thai, Mu Shu couldn't understand a lick of it. But the gist of it was probably something like this. A boy looking for his daddy, a bottom waiting for his top, the Holy See of Men, Dick Nukem, Bottom and the Beast, Helena Bottom Carter. An epic poem, a comeuppance, hubby I want some more, homonyms and linguistic transferences, everything but a hint. Reading between the lines is a survival instinct for gay men.

So is a 0 party full of bottoms? Hsiao-Ho asks.

Right when the young Mu Shu also had this thought, the formation changed on the runway stage. Go-go boys in pairs, penetrating one another. A kind of classical mechanics, piercing and being pierced, the energy of action and reaction, molten metal flowing out from a shattered silver vessel. Two people together simply fuck, a group of people together is a fuckfest.

Mu Shu felt a dry heat, he couldn't tell whether it was excitement or not, but the shame was clear. He understood in a flash that what had been written on the flyer was not 0 party, but O, it was an O party. O for orgy. Intercourse between everyone and anyone.

A man on stage suddenly reached out a hand to Mu Shu, his fingers long and slender, in a composition like Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*. Mu Shu unconsciously reached a hand back toward him, and the moment they touched he felt as though he were ascending to heaven.

He was about to join the paradise above him.

This should have been the climax of the story.

But right then, Mu Shu tells Hsiao-Ho, I felt someone from behind me hold me back. In an instant there came surface tension. I couldn't go up or come down. The go-go boy on stage didn't need him after all, how quickly and easily he loosened his grip.

So happiness didn't need to come from him, after all.

So, someone cockblocked you?

Yeah. Which one of these bastards was it?

He was so close, but I couldn't make him out.

But Mu Shu did hear a voice speak clearly into his ear. "I'll be waiting for you in the canteen."

That was how Mu Shu ended up barging into the canteen. Since many years ago, you know, people have been eating human flesh with knives and forks outside these doors. It was a feast of the living, gnawing on ribs while yearning to snatch out someone's heart, as though that would make someone call you the apple of their eye. Until someone pushed open the front door to the sauna, and the brisk Bangkok breeze would blow and blow until you were left with no more than bite marks on the meat of your hand. The sauna was full of wonders, preening peacocks, most amazing of all was who would think to put a canteen inside a sauna, right?

Mu Shu raises his glass high, miming a toast to all the people inside the booths around him. That's right, the canteen back then looked just like how it is now, he says to Hsiao-Ho, a long and narrow space with two large rectangular tables in the middle, the light all warm and soft, open the lids of the catering trays and you'll find Thai, Chinese, Western dishes. I bet you that even this many years later, the menu hasn't changed much at all, it's still those same few dishes. Starting over there on the right you've got moon shrimp cake, jasmine rice; then it's sautéed cauliflower, shumai, spinach with tofu, seafood salad...

You're totally right. Hsiao-Ho sizes up the dishes. Mu Shu in his story from many years ago picked up a bottle of Coke and sprawled onto a random seat, looking for the man who spoke in his ear like he was searching for a dish.

He recognized him right away. The man at the table across from him was gazing at him, holding a plastic cup, the bridge of his nose giving his eyes a murky depth. Mu Shu felt as though he'd been sucked right into them.

The man waved at him. He thought he was being invited over, didn't expect that a waiter in uniform would emerge from behind, meander into the kitchen, then come back with a plate in hand.

The plate was plastic, of course, and it had the Thai-style barbecue pork slices that had just been on the table. But something was different about it, beneath the pork were slices of red onion, there was also a dipping sauce, and because of this plating, the brown meat and red onions all fanned out, the scorch marks on the meat were a bit different from what was on the counter, it was obvious that it had just been heated up, a lovely aroma and presentation thanks to this extra bit of effort, a roadside stall instantly transformed into five stars.

That gentleman wants you to try some of this, the waiter said.

Mu Shu could tell that the plate had been taken into the kitchen to be jazzed up, then brought back out.

So, what did the guy want? Hsiao-Ho asks him.

The story continues: Mu Shu looked up uneasily at the man and the man raised his glass to him. Mu Shu felt compelled to pick up his chopsticks, so as to not be rude, and start eating.

How did it taste?

Mu Shu just shakes his head. It was so long ago that he forgot whether the meat tasted good or not. For whatever reason, he remembers the taste of red onion, which was so pungent that it brought him back to reality.

Snap out of it, time to snap out of it, Mu Shu suddenly thought. What was he even looking for? He should have had his fill already at the O party, where even the go-go boys were going after him. He'd extended both his sense of confidence and his peacock feathers, enough stories to last him a while back in Taiwan. Just like Leng Tzu-Hsing made a speech about the splendors of the Rongguo Palace in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Mu Shu would talk about the sauna, how he'd inadvertently stumbled upon the stomach of the world, like Tang Seng entering the Cave of the Silken Web, so many black holes staring out at him, those fingers like withered limbs like spider

legs threatening to pull him in. Right until the moment that someone grabbed him in a movement as swift as the Monkey King slamming down his metal staff...

There would be more sex in his future. He was only in his early twenties, he needed stories to tell. It would be an adventure. Maybe it was all a matter of confidence. The night was still young, he could have a better body if he worked out, he could get a man if he just looked for one...

Actually, the whole point was just to make him eat those red onions.

That piercing sharpness in the throat, and all of a sudden that something became nothing. And because of that nothing, he suddenly knew what he wanted.

A piquant aroma slipped out from his nostrils. He choked, but it only made his eyes all the brighter. Mu Shu made a gesture at the man across the table with his empty plate. The man lifted his empty cup in reply.

The waiter came by again, it seemed he'd been watching Mu Shu eat the whole time. The next dish was ready for him. What was brought to him this time turned out to be a bowl of soup. It wasn't the corn chowder or clear beef soup from the long table, but surprisingly it was a Thai-style soup, a hot and sour tom yum. Even a first-timer like Mu Shu could recognize it, every Thai restaurant in Taiwan had it, what was it called, tom yum kung.

Mu Shu scooped some up with a little spoon, only then did he discover that this soup had also been taken from the main food table and enhanced a bit. The shrimp inside the soup had probably come from the plate of cold shrimp on the metal table. As for the cherry tomatoes and straw mushrooms, well, they probably came from the salad. The soup itself was a clear yellow, indicating that the sauce from the pork curry at the warm food station had been added. He tasted a spoonful, it wasn't spicy, there was even a touch of sweetness to it.

It wasn't until years and years later when he was older, and wiser, that he gradually became more discerning about flavor combinations, authentic tom yum kung required fish sauce and coconut sugar, these were things that he would only come to know over time, love was sweet and sour, oh, there were five flavors to it. But the Mu Shu back then who only ate 7-Eleven wouldn't have been able to tell you what was fine or coarse, he only knew that it tasted fresh, galangal and lemongrass enhanced the flavor, there was a kind of heat in his body, even the tip of his nose was sweating, a warm feeling gradually moving from his stomach to his chest. That was the real sauna, the hours before had meant nothing, that was just heat, it took him until now to realize that heat had layers, he used to think of it all as desire, but now he could make the distinction, this is dry heat, this is roasting, this is called a blaze, this is called a boil. Some kinds of heat lingered in the throat, couldn't be spat out, so you had to stick out your tongue to dissipate it, other kinds stayed in your chest, you needed someone to knead it away, yet other types of heat remained in your abdomen, below your waist, couldn't be cooled by a gust of breath, it had to come spattering out roiling hot.

He drank every last drop of soup in the bowl, even ate the shrimp tails. In those few minutes, he'd completely forgotten about the man's existence, the whole world was in that bowl, his trembling tongue lapped at his lips, his body felt like it had been gently pried open, flowing

continuously into ever deeper parts, past his heart, into his lungs, perhaps it had gone into his stomach, after all.

Then he looked up again. Tears blurring his vision, of yearning or satisfaction he couldn't tell. Didn't know if he felt gratitude or confusion.

The man signaled him with a gesture. He touched his own lips. Knock, knock.

What does that mean? Hsiao-Ho asks.

It took Mu Shu a few seconds to realize what he meant back then. He cupped a hand to his mouth and blew into it. Ugh, onion and ginger, curry and shrimp, a mix and mess of flavors, his mouth all fishy and acidic, how could his breath not smell awful?

Forget about sex, there was no way he could even kiss someone right now.

Mu Shu unconsciously covered his mouth. It hit him then why all the dishes at the long table were mostly bland, all moon shrimp cake and jasmine rice, sauteed cauliflower and shumai, spinach with tofu and seafood salad... What was it all for? It was all so bland, bland as a motherfucker. Men came to the sauna for a fuck and not for the food, and now you've gone and made yourself into a dish of your own, your lips shiny with oil, as if the customers here were foodies flitting around street stalls.

I fell for the trap, Mu Shu thought. This man had blocked him from moving farther. This night was over.

He'd spent several hundred baht on the entry fee for nothing, he'd gorged himself but wouldn't find the gorgeous man of his dreams.

And now the waiter was coming over to give him a cup. It was a Chang beer like this, you know. Mu Shu watched as the waiter poured him one capful at a time, the plastic cup brimming with surface tension, the unhappiness within him swelling up and piling together like bubbles in the beer. Mu Shu glugged down the entire cup without a second thought.

Did he slip something into the beer? Hsiao-Ho asks. No, Mu Shu waved his hands, it was an ordinary cup, the beer just ordinary beer. Exactly like tonight. The only thing that was different, Mu Shu discovered, was that the waiter brought the drink over on a coaster. He wiped his mouth and, paying no mind to the imprint of the cup on the coaster, turned it over, bingo.

A few numbers and a street name were written in pen on the underside of the coaster. By the time Mu Shu looked up again, the man was nowhere to be seen.

Mu Shu also wanted to leave. It was his first time in a sauna, and he figured it would also be his last. But that was only because he was young, he always thought this way back then. He committed everything about the man to memory, though, that first course he'd been served in order to wake him up, the second course to fill his belly, the combination of the two curtailing his cravings, the third course to give him hope, this was the story of what happened to Mu Shu in his youth, here in the stomach of the world.

So, did you go to the address on the back of the coaster?

So, did you find the man?

Hsiao-Ho presses him further. Mu Shu will tell this story to countless people in his life. It can only be a story. This deepest and furthest room of his heart has somehow, over time, become

a façade, it's always been like this, whenever he's gotten absolutely blasted and convinced himself there's no tomorrow at a roadside bar or dinner party, when those throwaway lines like "I also had my heyday" and "I was once madly in love" suddenly turned into the heavy artillery fire of an arms competition in front of younger men, showing off that he had life experience, was proud of what he'd been through, in those humblebrag heart-to-heart girl talk moments, the sauna story that became true love. A story about cock turned into one about the stomach.

But ultimately, there was no love story.

Nope. There was nothing there. It had always been a road to nowhere. A blank door plate. No one answering the door even after the bell rang and rang. And so, he never saw the man again.

In the years following, as Mu Shu learned the ways of the world, he would make himself out to be more and more naïve, he knew to be vigilant, not to drink what was given to him by a stranger, not to put any odd thing in your mouth, so he would describe the locally tailored food served at the sauna in terms reserved for the cuisine of the Thai royal palace. Adding ingredients and souping up the details, the depth of field growing more profound.

He came to understand what it was to eat.

Eat, oh, he could eat. He became something of a gourmand. Other people may follow the Michelin Guide, he followed his boss – he excelled at fawning and flattering, his colleagues said he'd become someone else after coming back, stooping and bowing before the big boss, following him every which way – but all he wanted was to go with the second and third-in-command, who wore jackets like Chiang Ching-kuo and cheap leather shoes, who scrimped even on parking fees, would rather walk even far distances, eating the maw of so-called "wild-grown mullet" with their uteruses intact. Each of them with lips trembling and eyes brimming with tears beneath the light, mouths overflowing with something thick and white and viscous...

Eat, but also transform himself into something to be eaten. He worked out. Triceps and biceps stretching the width of his shoulders, pectoral muscles quivering, slim waist and full ass, a body like that of a Greek statue. He trained himself like a pheasant in the wild, and on top of that he had to learn what ingredients to cook with, laser hair removal, laser keloid removal, plastic wrap and coffee grounds for stretch marks on his butt, getting massages twice a week to clear his meridians. "Would you like me to press harder anywhere?" He got those meridians kneaded and cleared, one after the other. Rebuilding and bulking the muscle fibers that had been torn by weight training, occasionally brushing away his trainer's wandering hand, decisively shaking his head and refusing when asked, "Care for some special service?" For the first time he understood that the food chain for gay men was reversed: the more others wanted to eat you, the higher up you were on the pyramid.