

BYCATCH AND WILDLIFE

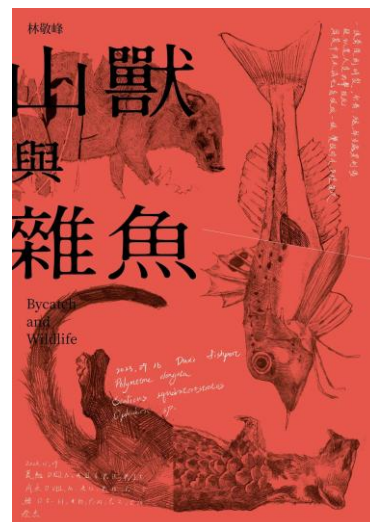
山獸與雜魚

Wildlife spotting, rummaging through harbor bycatch for fish specimens, fixing meals in his “no flames allowed” dorm room, and preparing specimens in a natural history museum are all part of the extracurricular “everyday” for this set design student. Disparate fields and pastimes intertwine effortlessly in Lin Jing-Feng’s essays.

Apart from building models, familiarizing himself with “the theater”, reading scripts, and hanging with his dormmates, theatrical costume design student Lin pursues another life – far off the expected script. He regularly takes off into the mountains, trekking lonely trails, walking wild streams, observing ants, and making fish and wild animal specimens with another school’s zoology department. He also dallies around fishing harbors, sifting through the bycatch delivered from fixed net fisheries.

The four sections in *Bycatch and Wildlife*, The Beginning, The Great Outdoors, The Sea, and Knives, include over thirty essays interspersed with the author’s own scientific illustration-like drawings. “The Beginning” opens on a narrative-framing conversation the author has in an izakaya. “The Great Outdoors” touches on the author’s encounters and observations of mountain boar, pangolins, bats, ants and other wildlife. “The Sea” shares his adventures searching for interesting specimens among harbor bycatch and noteworthy experiences cooking meals in his makeshift dorm kitchen. The final section, “Knives”, explores how sharp scalpels and animal carcasses can create emotively soul-searching dialogues.

Straddling the realms of the humanities and natural sciences, author Lin Jing-Feng invests his singular knack for science communication into ongoing dialogues with nature and its myriad of creatures. His



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bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

lively writing style vitalizes his thoughts on a wide range of subjects, turning even the “mundane” into topics worth examining and exploring further.

Lin Jing-Feng 林敬峰

Born in mountain-fringed Puli in Nantou County, author Lin Jing-Feng is an ardent conservationist. *Bycatch and Wildlife*, the author's first published work, brings together a collection of essays written by Lin while concurrently studying theatrical costume design at Taipei National University of the Arts and moonlighting at the National Taiwan University Museum of Zoology as a taxidermist. His other writings are occasionally featured in the *News & Market Supplement*.

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By Lin Jing-Feng

Translated by Hongyu Jasmine Zhu

My Side Quests

The automatic doors slid open without a sound, and I stepped into a late-night izakaya. We had just finished taking down the art show, and the after-hours meal was on my boss. I played it safe and, after flipping back and forth through their two-page menu, ordered the two cheapest items: grilled shiitake mushrooms and chilled tofu.

My boss, who had been outside smoking, came in a step behind me and took a seat. She was a capable woman; we had worked together twice before. Though “worked together” is a stretch – at best, I was just the muscle hired to move heavy things around for her. At the izakaya counter, we sat in rank order: the boss, myself, and a colleague I was meeting for the first time.

“Go on, introduce yourself,” my boss said. “She doesn’t know you yet.” During our earlier jobs together, she had already sussed out my various “side quests” and now dangled them as intriguing table talk.

“I’m currently studying at TNUA. Ah, right. No, no, not the one in Banqiao – we’re up in Guandu. Taipei National University of the Arts, Department of Theatrical Design & Technology. I’m majoring in costume design.”

“Yes, I study theatre. No, I don’t perform on stage; I’m not an actor. I just do design work, behind-the-scenes stuff.”

After that fluster of explanations, I finally managed to make myself clear. I’d never been used to being the focal point of dinner table talk.

“Tell us about your side quests, then,” my boss said, her eyes alight with interest.

*

First, I head into the mountains.

I wander the ridges and the woodlands, following the lay of the land, flowing water, animal tracks, hunters’ paths, and tales of the countryside.

I set up an infrared camera to spy on the creatures that leap and dash through those woods: muntjacs locking horns, crab-eating mongooses shepherding their young, and also the Taiwan whistling thrush that glared down my lens and just pecked and pecked and pecked until my camera tipped over and fell.

I watch ants the way birders watch feathered friends. Up in the mountains, I am always drawn to these orderly insects, and crouch on the ground or perch up in a tree to observe their tidy marching lines.

And, every once in a while, I tag along with the lab on field trips too as their designated “pack mule”.

*

Then, I head to the sea...or more precisely, I should say, the fishing harbors.

I listen to the auctioneers in the fish market calling out prices in rapid-fire cadence, onetwentytwentytwentytwentytwentyfifteenfifteenfifteenfifteen. My attempts to pick apart that stream and imitate it invariably sound clumsy and stumbling.

I watch the fishing boats motor in from the set-net fishing grounds and then unload their catch which, all glinting silver, slip and slide across the decks. I shove and scramble through the crowd, picking up a remora, only to have an old uncle snatch it from my hands and toss it back into the sea. “No good to eat,” he says.

At the trawl harbor’s bycatch section, I wave to the big guy handling the catch, then pull on rubber gloves, and sink my hands into baskets full of dead fish – digging through for scarce odd fish to turn into specimens.

*

And then, I make specimens.

I’m lucky to have interned at the Endemic Species Research Institute in Jiji, Nantou where I learned to prepare mammal study skins and witnessed animals of all shapes and sizes mounted in all sorts of post-mortem conditions.

Later on, I volunteered occasionally at National Taiwan University’s Museum of Zoology, where I continued to dissect and skin.

All told, I’ve personally handled the carcasses of maybe fifty wild animals, give or take. Not exactly a big number, by any measure.

*

Finally, I suppose I can say I write. After all, this book exists.

I simply take the world I see, hear, and encounter; mix in a few of my own odd ideas; and put it into words.

*

“What the heck?” my colleague said, clearly confused.

“See? I really don’t get this guy,” my boss chimed in. “Why did you go to art school in the first place?”

“I-I-I-I...I don’t know,” I stammered whenever I got nervous, and being the center of attention at the table was definitely one of the most stressful things ever. “I just...just...just wanted to do stuff. When I get a chance to do something, I...I just do it.”

“So how did you even start doing all this?” my boss pressed.

“Uh...because...it’s fun?”

“That’s not your real answer,” she shook her head.

“Because...I feel like I have the right to understand things I want to understand. Sure, books and the internet have tons of info, surely enough to let me ‘know’ everything. But, I still believe in experiencing things for myself – feeling with my own senses and looking for every new encounter, whether that’s with mountain beasts, various and sundry fish, or people from varied walks of life. And writing...writing is just a way to communicate, to share; a way to reinterpret fieldwork in words.” I rattled off the whole thing in one breath.

Finally, my boss let me be, and I ducked my head back down and dug into my cold tofu.

The topic wandered away from me, but the chat went on, eventually circling back to work.

“Tomorrow we load in Kaohsiung, then unload in Miaoli. After that, are you heading back to school?” my boss asked.

“Yes, I have class tomorrow.”

“Alright, then I’ll get you a ticket from Miaoli to Taipei Main Station.”

Rain

“Buy yourself a motorbike,” my brother said over the dining table. “You’re constantly running off into the mountains. With a bike, you won’t have to deal with public transport giving you attitude.”

“True,” I agreed. “But I don’t even know what kind of bike I should get.” My brother knows bikes. I don’t.

“Depends on what your needs are,” he said, and then spouted a string of brands, models, and specs that meant nothing to me.

“As long as it runs, I’m good.”

“Then just go grab a second-hand.”

*

Following my brother’s advice, I snagged a second-hand old motorbike from an online group for an unbelievably low price. The engine roared like crazy, but it wasn’t fast. Every time I wanted to start it, I had to pull out the kick start lever and give it a few solid kicks before it would, grudgingly, turn over and grumble all the way onto the road.

But rainy days were different. My old bike loved the rain. Whenever it poured, water would seep into the seams of the frame and, when I turned the key and pressed the usually useless starter, the bike would squeal like the sound of a cat caught under its wheels, hack and cough for a moment, then burst into a cheerful roar, charging forward without a second thought.

“This is my motorbike.” From then on, I’d always tap the old bike’s front while showing it off. “This baby only wakes up properly when it rains. If the rain isn’t heavy enough, it refuses to start.”

“Piece of junk,” my friends would reply.

*

Evening. I drove the old bike into a sheet of rain in the mountains above Taipei City, hunting for a dead pangolin. The pangolin, only a blurry coordinate on the map in my phone, was curled up somewhere in forest shadows enchanted with cicada calls and owl hoots. The old bike gleefully splashed through puddles, letting out its usual strange squawks.

By the roadside, a pack of stray dogs sprawled under a square pavilion. Propped on their front legs and resting their heads, they claimed the small dry patch sheltered beneath the pavilion’s roof. At the forefront, one dog stood on alert, ears pricked straight up, fixing its glare on me. Under taut skin, their muscles coiled and ready, their coats flickered with every twitch – some black, some white, some yellow – black as a moonless night, white as bleached bone, yellow like the sandy pits they clawed from the barren earth, scraping away every trace of grass and root.

I pressed on through the growing downpour, spurring the old bike past the pack, and a few startled barks erupted in my wake.

*

The pangolin, curled into a tight ball, lay dead beside the embankment of an industrial road. I slipped on gloves, grabbed its tail, and lifted it up. Slowly, it unfurled in my hands, revealing a soft, white belly and the dark red wounds peppered across its underside like a constellation of stars.

The mountain rain, now warm and feather-light, fell solemnly onto the pangolin’s body, draining the blood from its wounds and seeping silently into the soil from which tiny shoots of grass were beginning to sprout.

The rain birthed thousands of maggots that burst from tight clusters of fly eggs, their bodies swelling in the blink of an eye. Linked head to tail and pressing close together, they slithered like water through the pangolin’s hard scale seams and traced the contours of its limbs. From the outside in, the maggots nibbled bite after bite, shaping themselves into undulating muscles, throbbing veins, and a brain tangled with thought. The squirming, heaving swarm conjured the uncanny phantom of a living, pulsing body.

I placed the pangolin into a bag, but its five claws hooked stubbornly onto the opening. As I eased its front paws away from the bag, hundreds of maggots poured from between its claws and under the upturned scales, crawling over my entire palm.

*

The pangolin had been killed by a pack of dogs. I slipped its body into my bag, revved the engine, and thought: I've seen so many who've died by teeth marks like these, and those deep, staring wounds always give the same answer in ragged howls of grievance.

I rode on, my eyes darting – no sign of the dogs. They'd probably moved off, leaving behind a lifeless creature with no explanation. Packs like that one don't hunt for food; they're already full. What they consume is human overabundance, blind sympathy, and obsessive protection. Well-fed, they sprint through the wild on strong legs and whip up spiraling winds, howling as they crush every living thing encountered.

Raindrops were still hammering the visor of my helmet and soaking my clothes. After a while, I shivered; the exposed fingers of my hands had swollen and gone pale. The persistent rain was like a mother fly, laying eggs in my thoughts that hatched into maggots called *if*, which wriggled and burrowed into the shattered phantom of my body.

The *if* maggots crawled into my legs, sending me in search of the howling dogs; the maggots burrowed into my arms and throat, bunched my muscles and rattled my vocal cords, smashing the pack with furious fists and beastly roars; at least the maggots wriggled into my eyes, watching a beautiful silver-scaled creature shamble away. The *if* maggots overflowed into disaster. If only there were an *if*, if only, if only the pangolin had lived long enough for me to get to it, if only I had arrived before the dogs to shield pangolin, if only there had been no dogs—

*

"Tsss tsss tsss!" The jet of water rinsed away the fly eggs and maggots still clinging to the pangolin. A mass of larvae writhed as it swirled down the drain of the specimen lab sink. Stripped of its covering of parasites, the pangolin looked naked, its scaled armor now revealing startling glimpses of pink flesh in the gaps. Its formidable hide had proven no match for the repeated gnawing of the dogs and was shattered into jagged edges, breached by canine teeth that had torn through to the bloody, mangled flesh beneath.

I had thought myself sufficiently accustomed to such deaths – that I was able to look upon such mauling with steely composure. But through my gloves, I felt the texture of the pangolin's ruined scales, their uneven edges grating against each other with a *ka-ka-ka* sound, and unexpectedly, a well of tears pooled in the corners of my eyes.

My thoughts returned to the way the pangolin's front claws had caught on the edge of the bag and how, when I released them, a scatter of pale maggots had spilled loose onto my palm.

So let this rain fall without end. Let the raindrops wash clean the puncture wounds stained with unaccounted blood; let the rain soak the yellow sand pits dug out by the pack and quench the spiraling fires they whipped into the air; let the *if* maggots grow in the rain and transform, break free from their pupae, take wing as a skyful of dancing flies, and lay clusters of eggs in more brains; let the rainwater seep into the seams of the old engine and coax the first mournful roar out of its exhaust pipe like a dragon's horn; let raindrops pluck the strings of entangled vines and ring the divine bells of budding blossoms, and I would take the dead pangolin by the hand, start the old motorbike, and drive forward over grasslands and across soil roads of red and black, breaking barrier after barrier and crossing narrow bridges, until we reach a new mountain range where no more silent white bones pile up in the yellow sand.

Parasites

"You still hitting up Daxi these days?" When that upperclassman from another school pinged me, I was curled up in the cramped student dorm, rifling through materials for next week's design class on my laptop. The dorm wasn't spacious to begin with and, after four guys had moved in, the clutter was piled up so high there was barely enough floorspace left to plant a foot.

"Yeah," I typed back. "Actually, I'm going tomorrow."

"Could you see if you can find some fish parasites for me? Someone in our lab needs them."

"Sure thing," I shot back. "But they're not too easy to come by – I've only ever seen one and I accidentally flushed it down the sink."

He didn't reply again. Just sent a blue thumbs-up.

I peeled myself off the chair and looped my arms around my roommate, Skinny Shen, who was sprawled across the table, his shoulder-length hair hanging and scruffy beard splayed below his chin. He was absorbed in work on his stage model.

"Guess what? Someone's asked me to help pick out some fish," I said, jolting his neck back and forth with my arms. "Tomorrow's Daxi trip is a *mission!*"

"Oh... yeah, cool," Skinny Shen said slowly, unamused. "You just broke the chair in my model."

*

The next day was a holiday. At the crack of dawn, I left Skinny Shen still sleeping, probably recovering from a late night spent finishing his model, and leapt out of bed and began assembling my fish-picking gear.

My rain boots were wedged into the narrow gap between the wardrobe and the wall, squashed under sketchbooks that Taipei's damp had turned clammy; the ice bucket was stashed under the wardrobe, buried under a messy pile of scribbled scripts; the iron rake and drafting tools were crammed in the same box; the rubber gloves were tossed in with my theater work

gloves; and my assortment of resealable plastic specimen bags were scattered everywhere – on the desk, on shelves, tucked into stacks of design plans, even draping over my stage model. They all huddled in the shadows, all permeated with a faint, telltale smell of fish. I pulled on my workpants streaked with dried white fish slime, slid into my tall rain boots permanently encrusted with fish scales, stuffed everything else into the ice bucket, and stretched my aching limbs, letting my joints crack and pop.

“You’re making a mess in here,” Skinny Shen mumbled groggily from the top bunk.

I glanced at the chaos I’d made on my bed and at the way I’d overtaken his space with sprawling clutter. I was too lazy to tidy up at that moment, and offered a promissory “I’ll clean up later” as the clanging and clomping of my rain boots conducted me out of the dim, stuffy room.

Exposed to the sunlight of Taipei in this gear, I ceded control of my body to a self other than the one who normally drew at the desk. I was ready for an unusual mission – I felt a slight twinge of nervousness.

Motorbike to Metro, Metro to the train. The steel shell carried me straight to Daxi.

*

Not long after I tumbled into the bycatch shed, Daxi opened its skies. First, a drizzle; then rain grew into a proper downpour, as gusty sea wind slashed in to boot. With nowhere to hide, I stayed among the fish heaps, poking, prodding, and shooting the breeze with the big guy.

“Lemme get this straight – you go to art school?”

“Yep.”

“Not bad, kid. Come help us pick fish – it’s good stuff!”

He muttered something under his breath, then shuffled back to a corner protected from the splashing rain to scroll on his phone. I dove back into the fish piles, flipping dead fish, prying open mouths, lifting gill covers, rifling through scales – everything for a parasite, but nothing in sight.

Then I unearthed a sad little fish: eyes blank, body dull, fins shredded, tail ragged, gill covers puffed up like tiny balloons. I lifted the gill cover, and there it was – like a pearl in liquid light. It was an isopod parasite, clinging quietly to the gill.

“Plunk!” Back in the upperclassman’s lab, I dumped the ice-filled plastic bag into the sink. Eight fish were inside: a cusk-eel, two grenadiers, and morid cods. The latter, the most common of the batch, was the species where I’d found that first parasite. After spotting one, I went full-on parasite detective – scouring the same species as well as others who lived in similar depths. I ended up with a decent specimen haul.

The parasite was pale and plump. Rather than merely sitting atop the fish gill, it had carved out a groove of its own design through delicate nibbling and gnawing and then snugly settled itself inside. It made itself a piece of the fish’s flesh – separate yet inseparable. The fish thrashed, shook, flailed – but the uninvited nightmare rode along, and it had no choice but to drift through the seabed carrying its stowaway, meeting death together in the eventual netted fate. The parasite

couldn't leave the armored vehicle of blood and flesh. Having pulled off this quiet caper, it was content to live the remainder of its life in the gill.

Tweezers in hand, I lifted it out. Its belly was absurdly bloated, legs splayed and squished to the sides. The swollen sac was layered in translucent membranes. I lifted them with tweezers, as carefully as flipping through the delicate pages of a book, and uncovered thousands of tiny black eyes beneath. The parasite was quietly carrying new life.

As I hoisted the fish, ready to toss it in the cooler, a strange thing popped out. It was a thin, male parasite that had been lodged in the fish's throat this entire time.

*

I kept one of the specimens for myself and scribbled a label on the jar:

Gadella jordani, 2020.06.18, Daxi Fishport, 300±50. (Cymothoidae parasite)

I preferred calling this fish by its scientific name, *Gadella jordani*. Scientific names belong to a realm I can't fully reach – a world of professionals, not ordinary mortals, who need this distant Latin to piece together nouns and adjectives to describe every single species. It's a precision beyond the comprehension of anyone who lumps all similar-looking fish of the Ophidiiformes, Gadiformes, and Siluriformes under the same clumsy vernacular. A scientific name is a spell, a signal, a code. I rolled the syllables around my tongue, biting out the words *Gadella jordani*, and felt a rush of forbidden pleasure.

Gadella jordani – I chanted it to myself on my walk home, singing it softly, letting the beautiful sound flow through my throat and mouth, my cheeks tingling with the delight of new life.

*

Back in the dorm, I was greeted by the wreckage I'd left behind that morning.

"Hey, you gonna clean this up or what?" Skinny Shen complained again, waving at the battlefield that used to be my bed. "It's basically the end of the semester anyway – you might as well tidy up the room."

I muttered something under my breath, dragged out a few cardboard boxes, and started shoving all the scattered clutter inside. Drafting rulers, charcoal sticks, sewing needle and thread, fabric swatches, watercolors, sketchpads, brushes, paint, scripts, reference books – everything went into three boxes stacked haphazardly into a little tower.

On the desk sat the jar of specimens I'd just brought back. I reached into one of the boxes and shoved the clutter to one side, making a little space – ah, perfect, exactly the size of the specimen jar.