GHOST TOWN
鬼地方

*** 2020 Golden Tripod Award**
*** 2020 Taiwan Literature Award (Grand Prize)**

Sharp Objects *meets Flannery O'Connor in Garcia Marquez's Macondo – or rather its Taiwanese equivalent – in this bestselling literary tour-de-force.*

Yongjing, a small town in central Taiwan and whose name means "Eternal Peace", is anything but. It is the birthplace of Chen Tien-Hong – youngest of seven siblings and result of parents who desperately wanted a son but instead got only daughters. Yet he turns out to be gay, so of course he had to run away.

The story begins many years later, when Chen has just been released from prison for killing his boyfriend in Berlin. He is about to return to Yongjing, now a poor and desolate place. With his parents gone, sisters married (to wrong guys), mad, or dead, there is really nothing left for him here. So why is he coming back? What happened more than a decade ago that tore this happy family apart? More importantly, why did Chen kill his German boyfriend?

Told in a myriad of voices – both living and dead – and moving through time with deceptive ease, *Ghost Town* weaves a mesmerizing web of family secrets and countryside superstitions, the search for identity and clash of cultures.

Kevin Chen's first novel in twelve years is a sumptuous read, an irresistible fusion of Gothic family saga, bildungsroman, and magical realist mystery.

Kevin Chen 陳思宏

Kevin Chen began his artistic career as a cinema actor, starring in the Taiwanese and German films *Ghosted*, *Kung Bao Huhn*, and *Global*

Category: Literary Fiction

Publisher: MirrorFiction

Date: 12/2019

Rights contact:

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Pages: 344

Length: 136,000 characters

(approx. 88,500 words in English)

Rights sold:

Korean (Minumsa),
Vietnamese (Nha Nam),
World English (Europa),
Italian (E/O),
Japanese (Hayakawa),
French (Seuil),
Thai (Amarin)

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GHOST TOWN

By Kevin Chen
Translated by Darryl Sterk

Written for my hometown, a non-existent Yongjing

1. The First Row of Townhouses

"Where are you from?"

That was the first question T asked him. T gave him a lot: a German passport, a new home, a chance to flee, and a lot of questions. Right from the start, T liked to ask questions. What's your home like? How many brothers and sisters do you have? How hot does it get in the summertime? Are there cicadas? What about snakes? What do the trees look like? What are they called? Are there any rivers? What about canals? When is the rainy season? Are there ever any floods? Is the soil fertile? What all gets planted? Why can't I go to Taiwan with you to attend your father's funeral? Why go home? Why not go home?

The question marks caught on his hair and nicked his skin. T's questions were hard to answer, so he didn't. He dodged, or lied, until his made-up biography was full of holes and contradictions, like a badly written novel. And so he tried to write one. The first chapter opened with a table on which a few objects had been placed: one gun, two knives, and three diaries. The gun would have to be fired in a subsequent chapter, the knives could be used to dismember and flay, and the diaries should solve the riddle at the heart of the story. But the novel of his life was a total mess. He wrote and wrote and forgot about the gun, the knives, and the diaries. Instead, he obsessed over an assortment of trash that was strewn on the table and littered his narrative with irrelevant clues, like posters pasted up on a factory wall, a pair of bright red shorts, and a face with a plastic bag over it. When a person is rotten, his novel will be rotten, too, and full of holes.

He was a guy who was all holes from head to toe, holes he stuffed with everything he didn't want to talk about – all the incidents that had made a mess of his memory and which he claimed to have forgotten. When the holes ripped, as they did from time to time, sundry stories would come tumbling out.

How could he tell those stories? Or write them?

Unable to tell them, he could only keep writing: I come from a small town.

His home, Yongjing, was a small town in central Taiwan. It was first settled by people from Guangdong Province in China early in the nineteenth century. They built their settlement, a main street with homesteads around it, on level wasteland. The land around town was soon traversed by artificial waterways that probably resembled the "Kanäle" that T talked about. The oldest of

these “canals”, many of which were mere “ditches”, had drawn the muddy waters of the Zhuoshui River, the longest in the country, since the eighteenth century, for farmers to irrigate their fields with. Early on, there were brawls between immigrants from different parts of Guangdong, as well as never-ending disasters, both conflagrations and floods. No wonder the first settlers of the town he grew up in called the place Yongjing. It was an expression of their aspiration for eternal (*yong*) peace (*jing*).

The terrain around Yongjing was flat, but gazing East you could see green hills and mountains in the distance. Gawping West, you couldn’t see or even hear the Zhuoshui River, but the old-timers used to say that if you walked West you’d eventually hit the Taiwan Strait. Few did. The inhabitants were farmers who seldom left this patch of prairie. They never went mountain climbing, and never saw the sea. The soil retained moisture well and could be called fertile. The local produce included flowers, betel leaf, and rice. After several centuries of settlement, it still looked like a farming village. The barns and homes were low-slung, single-story buildings. Several of the old-fashioned three-wing compounds were declared national heritage sites, but not many tourists made the trip. Prosperity hadn’t arrived yet.

In the 1970s, a contractor came to Yongjing and obtained a piece of land to build a row of townhouses, the first in the township. Ten townhouses, three stories each. The project was supposed to be a prelude to prosperity for the town. When tall buildings start going up it means that a place is going to escape from poverty. At the time, many people had never seen buildings that high before, buildings with reinforced concrete, terrazzo floors, and flush toilets. He grew up in one of those townhouses. It was fifth from the left, his home. The sixth from the left used to be his eldest sister’s house, but now it was sitting empty. The seventh was once a VHS video rental stop, but now the whole building was charred black. There was a “For Sale” 出售 sign on the balcony. The place had been “For Sale” for years. A few of the strokes in the second character 售 had fallen off, leaving a yawning “mouth” □ that transformed “For Sale” into “Way Out.” The telephone number on the bottom of the sign was too mottled to make out.

He stood looking at the sign, lost in thought. After being incarcerated for many years, he could really use a way out. Today he’d actually come back here. He knew better than anyone else that this place could never be a way out, not for him. Could that mottled “Way Out” sign lead him all the way back, for instance, to those bright red shorts?

His eldest sister was the only one who stayed. She now lived in the fifth house from the left, his old home.

The small town was also a ghost town to him.

A “ghost town” is deserted. His hometown was indeed out of the way, remote from civilization. Nobody had heard of it before. When Taiwan’s economy ran wild in the 1970s, Yongjing didn’t keep up with the pace of development. There was a brain drain. When young people like him left the countryside they didn’t come back. They forgot the place, even forgot what it was called. They left behind an aging generation that could never leave. Originally an aspiration, the name has become a curse. Intended to signify Eternal Peace, Yongjing had come to mean Always Quiet. It was really, really quiet.

The summer he got out, there was a drought in central Taiwan. The roads were furnaces in the afternoon. He wouldn't need to fire up the gas stove – he could fry eggs, stir-fry rice, or simmer congee right on the road. It'd been so many years, but everything matched his memory of the place. Certainly the weather did. Boy was it hot! The afternoon heat could slow the second hand of the clock. The trees took an afternoon snooze, the wind died down. If you held your breath and listened you could hear the earth snore, the thick, heavy sound of hibernation. Until the next rain the land would refuse to wake up. When he experienced this kind of weather as a boy, he would find a tree and fall into a deep sleep under it. The crowing cock, the throbbing cicada, the squealing pig, the hissing snake, the baaing sheep – nothing could wake him. After he grew up, he often suffered from insomnia. In prison the scarcest commodity is noise. You can't hear the rain fall or the wind blow. The falling leaves are inaudible. He told the prison doctor it was too quiet, how was he supposed to get to sleep? Would medication help? He even considered asking if there were a pill that let you hear the rain. Back home, whenever the rain struck the iron roof sheeting, playing a bright, brassy, percussive symphony. If he heard it, he could fall asleep for sure.

He came back because he really wanted to hear the sound of the rain.

What he heard now wasn't the sound of the rain but the clatter of a sewing machine.

That was his eldest sister.

As her feet worked the treadle, the television beside her showed a midday soap opera: the nasty mother-in-law had just slapped her poor daughter-in-law on the cheek. Chickens clucked, electric fans whirred. He heard the faint sound of firecrackers from the next neighborhood. He hadn't slept in quite a few days. He'd taken quite a few connecting flights. His head was so fuzzy he didn't know quite where he was, but the sound of the sewing machine was unmistakable. He'd really come home to this godforsaken place, this ghost town.

Ghost towns are deserted, but where are the ghosts? Are there any?

There were a lot of ghosts in the countryside, living in people's oral accounts. Folks used to tell him never to go near the clump of bamboo out in front of the townhouse. There was a female ghost lurking in there, a poor daughter-in-law who was driven out of her husband's home after her chastity was compromised. She walked into the bamboo and hanged herself from a branch. She had haunted the grove ever since, lying in wait for young men to seduce. When the dogs howled at the moon, they were "blowing the dog conch" according to the Taiwanese idiom, meaning that the beasts had seen a ghost. So go to sleep, Mother would say, and don't open your eyes; if you do, you'll see something you shouldn't. Even if you see it you can't say it. If you see it run away – try to outrun it if you can. The kids said the most ghosts were to be found in the willow trees that line the irrigation channels. Don't touch the leaves, kids used to say, or you'll get mixed up with a ghostly maiden. You're certain to get zero on every test, and the only way out of the mess would be to tie the knot. His friends said that the maidens in the willows were lonely old spinsters waiting for some unlucky sod to come marry them. There was another ghost in an irrigation channel, a beautiful lady who was abused by a Japanese soldier. She jumped in a well and was rescued, but then got raped by the doctor she was taken to. In the end she drowned herself in the Zhuoshui River, but instead of being washed out to sea, she got stuck in the irrigation

network, then floated all the way to Yongjing, where she settled down. The kids said that the moss along the waterline was fresh green blood from her ghostly body. The channel reeked so bad because she lived in it. As for the mushrooms budding all over the banks, don't touch them, let alone eat them, those are her nipples. Touching one will bring you bad luck. If you eat one, your guts will turn into a haunted house. You'll die, blood spraying from your pupils, within a week. If you see a red envelope on the road, don't go anywhere near it. It contains the eight characters of that lady ghost's birth, the secret to her destiny. If you pick it up hoping to find money inside, you'll have to take her to wife.

Later on, there was even a lady ghost from his own family. She ran around disheveled, yelling her head off, until she drowned in an irrigation ditch.

When he was a kid, if a pet cat or dog died of old age, then you "hung the cat in a tree" or "threw the dog in the stream". One time Mom rode her scooter with him on the back and a pet dog in his arms. When they got to the irrigation ditch, he was supposed to toss it in. Afraid of the water ghost, he cried and cried. His mom told him to hurry up. Here, the ditch was actually a slough, clogged with dead dogs and hogs, rotten watermelons, old scooters, even a betel nut stand. Everything stank in the hot sun. A million flies celebrated, enjoying an all-you-can-eat feast. He made out the putrid carcass of the neighbor's dog, Yeller. Crying, he refused to toss their dog in. He said he wanted to bury it and erect a grave marker. Mother grabbed it out of his arms and threw it into the dead water with a splash. The flies scattered, then returned to buzz in his ear as if to say thanks. They hadn't finished with the rotten meat and here they'd been served fresh.

How was he to tell T? That this was the kind of ghastly place that he was from?

How was he to tell T about his absurd upbringing? Five elder sisters, one elder brother, a father who never talked, and a mother who never shut up. A snake-killing next door neighbor, a guy named Nut who wore tight red shorts, irrigation ditches, his sister's wedding, a sacred bishopwood tree, a mansion called the White House, a hippopotamus, the Eternal Prosperity Pool, a secret basement, a starfruit orchard, the Lady at the Foot of the Wall, the Tomorrow Bookstore, and a silver water cistern.

In jail he often dreamed about Nut and about the dog cemetery behind T's family home. When T was young, he raised three dogs, which he buried one by one in the back yard. On each wooden grave marker he pasted a picture. That was the kind of dog burial he had fantasized about growing up in Taiwan. He'd finally seen it in Germany. He also dreamed about the slough Mother threw the dog into, but he didn't see a shadow of a ghost in his dreams. Now that he was a grownup, he didn't believe in ghosts anymore. He was no longer afraid of them. Ghosts weren't scary, people were. The living were the cruelest, not the dead. In his dreams the irrigation ditches didn't stink. The lotus flowers bloomed, the mushrooms grew in dense mats, and from the warmth and the color of the willows and the silvergrass he could tell it was high summer. Drawing water from the ditch to irrigate the fields, his father was a white-toothed, dark-skinned youth, the most respectable eldest son in town. He smiled in the sun, teeth twinkling. The lotus flowers were all bashful in his presence.

Pity that he killed T.

If T were still around to ask, he would point to that row of townhouses and say: “This is where I’m from, this god-forsaken place, this ghost town. It’s Ghost Festival today. The ghosts are coming. I’ve come back, too.”

2. Stuffed in the Crack in the Floor

“What do I do?” His fourth sister, Barbie, hollered over the phone. “What do I do? What do I do? Mom’s gone missing!”

Big Sister Beverly hung up the phone and collapsed on the floor. She knew it didn’t matter whether she hung up or not; Barbie wouldn’t even notice. She’d just keep hollering “Mom’s gone missing!” into the receiver. The summer heat raged, without rain or cloud. The sun was scorching. But she couldn’t bear to turn on the aircon; she forced herself to save on electricity because she hadn’t gotten enough work done this month. The terrazzo floor was nice and cool. She pressed herself against those terrazzo tiles to give her sweaty, aggravated body some relief. A big crack had appeared in the floor during the big earthquake a few years back. She decided not to repair it. Everything breaks down in an old house, no matter what. The wall cancer – mold and peeling paint – had metastasized. Rats ran rampant. The pipes were often blocked. Sheet metal shingles had gotten blown off several times. She still remembered what the house looked like when it was brand new: off-white tiles on the exterior, snow-white paint on the inside walls, the freshly waxed terrazzo floor tiles bright and shiny. The tiles looked pebbly, like they would poke your feet, but actually they were smooth to walk on. The floor was like a slide.

She rolled over and eyeballed the crack. Today was Ghost Festival; that meant that the Ghost Gate lay wide open. Maybe if she looked into the crack she would be able to see Hell. It was right by her sewing machine, a sign of vitality. Every time she looked at the floor, the crack seemed to grow a bit bigger. She made a point of looking a few more times, hoping to see it widen. Maybe one day it’d get so wide she’d be able to stuff herself in. Then nobody would be able to find her. She remembered the day of the earthquake. Her husband Little Gao tore into the backyard without a glance at her. He grabbed a few potted orchids and ran out. She hadn’t gotten up at all. She kept working at the sewing machine. She had a batch of garments to deliver the next day. The earthquake didn’t matter. The walls could fall, the house could collapse, she didn’t care. But please don’t let the power go out. Because then the sewing machine will stop working and I won’t be able to fulfill the order or get paid. She hadn’t paid the bills that month. The only other thing she was hoping for was that her husband would keep running with those orchids all the way out of town, to disappear and never to return.

When she was young, she wished she was an orchid. But after the earthquake, she felt sorry for those orchids.

How old was this house? The year baby Keith was born, they finally left the three-wing compound and moved into one of the new houses in this row. Counting on your fingers, it was the fifth from the left. Back in the day, the ten townhouses were a construction project to welcome

the future to the small town. Out back there was a fishpond, in front, a rice paddy. The contractor said the feng shui was ideal, that it was a den for dragons, a place to raise a family and make a fortune. After moving in you'd take off, just like the town. The small town would grow into a big town, then a city. Tall buildings would go up in the fields, neon signs would flash. At the time Father was making deliveries around the clock in a beat-up pickup – watermelons, potted tree seedlings, garments, you name it. For a time he got more work delivering betel nut and leaf than anything else. He discovered there was a huge demand for the stuff. Commercial opportunities were everywhere. All the men in the neighboring towns had blood-red mouths. He started chewing, too. He chewed his way to a commercial blueprint, a bloody good business plan. Local farmers grew tons of betel leaves, and although the quality and mouthfeel didn't compare to the leaves from eastern Taiwan – Yongjing leaves were thinner and not as flavorful – production was steady and they went cheap. The betel stands in central Taiwan depended on the fields of Yongjing for their leaves. Father reached agreements with the farmers. He became a wholesaler. The farmers sold him their harvest, which he drove around selling to the stands. He negotiated the price and pocketed the profit. Less than a year in, all five daughters' tuition was paid on time. There was white rice and pork on the dinner table. At the beginning of the year his first son was finally born and at the end of the year, his second. Seven kids couldn't continue to crowd together in that cramped room in the three-wing compound, so Father got the down payment together and bought one of these townhouses. He bid his mother farewell and moved out.

Beverly carried her baby brother in on moving day. That was the first happy day she could remember. Mom was happy: she finally had two sons and didn't have to face Grandma every day anymore. Beverly was happy, too. She walked around in a house that was more than one story high for the first time in her life. There were stairs leading up. There was even a third story. My goodness! She had her own room. The first evening big brother Heath slept with Mom and Dad, while Beverly and the second eldest Betty took care of Keith. They were both too excited to fall asleep. They snuck out of bed, picked up their baby brother, and sniffed the fresh paint on the wall. They went up and down the stairs. They rolled around on the floor. They kept stroking the first phone they'd ever had at home, picking up the receiver and listening to the dial tone. They put the receiver to Keith's ear and he smiled, it sounded like cooing. There was even a sit-down toilet. They sat down and peed, how comfortable it was compared to the old outhouse over that smelly cesspit. They used to have to run out in the middle of the night when their tummies cramped up. They'd see snakes writhing on the door in the moonlight. Actually snakes weren't scary, the scary part was the female ghost of the outhouse that everyone talked about. In the bathroom of the new house you could lock the door. You just pressed a plunger and the filth was gone in an instant. Everything was fragrant. There weren't any snakes or ghosts. When Keith cried in the middle of the night, the two sisters made a formula from milk powder. They had no idea how to do it. All they knew was that it was "top notch" Japanese powder according to the pharmacist. They thought the thicker the better; the thicker it was the more nutritious it would be. So they went easy on the water and added a couple of extra scoops. After Keith had wolfed it down he barfed it all back up again. Beverly and Betty thought he looked funny when he did that.

They'd never been anywhere. They'd certainly never seen a waterfall before, but when Keith spit up that milk, it was the most amazing waterfall they had ever seen.

Suddenly Beverly thought about her baby brother. How was he doing? Every time she thought of him she would get a hankering – a hankering to smoke a joint.

Right, today the gate to the underworld was wide open. She couldn't see any ghostly revelry through the crack in the floor, but she could hear Barbie's ghastly shrieks over the phone. It suited the occasion. Beverly looked up at the table she had set with lavish offerings in front of the door. She hadn't eaten the whole day; putting on a feast for all these spirits had turned her into a hungry ghost. The lonely ghosts and wandering spirits should have eaten their fill now that the sticks of incense had burned all the way down. She crawled up off the floor, opened a packet of crackers, and started munching. They were god-awful. She couldn't understand why they were so popular when they tasted as dry as cracked earth in the hot sun, and when one bite of the sweet kind gave you diabetes, two bites of the salty flavor kidney failure. She hadn't bought them herself, of course, Little Gao had brought them home from the superstore in the next town. She told him, buy anything for the offerings, just don't buy that brand. And wouldn't you know it, he bought a whole bunch. She knew he did it on purpose. They tasted like bricks – why were folks so keen on eating bricks? Brick by brick, the crackers had been stacked so high they had turned into the White House, the only mansion in town.

They tasted terrible, but she made herself finish. Can't waste food. Chewing for her had never been about enjoyment, it was a burning compulsion. No matter how gross it was, she had to swallow it. Even food that's well past the expiry date is still edible. Spoiled sticky rice cakes from New Year's? Just cut off the moldy part and you can still eat them. She remembered the bitter flavor of hunger. It was a bottomless privation, a lifelong fear.

In the three-wing compound Beverly lived in when she was a girl, her mother, as the eldest daughter-in-law, was in charge of making meals for Grandma. Grandma often belittled her cooking. Once, Grandma tossed hot soup on her, and suggested she try feeding it to the pigs to see if they'd eat it. Carrying the soup out, Mom heard a few of her daughters call out in hunger, so she dumped the whole pot on them. Beverly didn't think it was scalding, just that it was a pity. They'd had nothing to eat the whole day. That pot contained enough soup to fill their bellies. She licked the hot soup off her skin, wanting to get down on all fours and drink the trickles that were spreading over the dirt floor. She recalled those hard times after Barbie was born – *another* girl. Father's brothers all had boys as their first baby, but her mother kept having useless girls. The failure of several business ventures had left Father totally broke. The table was sparsely set, without rice or meat. Back then Grandma kept a big black dog. Beverly's second sister Betty was responsible for taking care of it. Sometimes Grandma would feed it a second helping. It had more to eat than they did! Later on Grandma slaughtered that dog, fried it up with garlic in the wok, and braised it. Father's nephews were called over to eat a bite, while his own daughters were ordered to remain in their room. They cried when they smelled that intensely meaty smell. They didn't know if they were crying out of hunger or because they'd seen Granny knock the dog unconscious with a brick and drop it in a boiling cauldron. The brick, which was stained with the dog's blood,

got tossed in front of the spirit chamber, the room in the compound where the family altar was kept. From then on, every time Beverly saw a brick she would hear the dog's pitiful whines.

Considering that it was Ghost Festival, Beverly felt fortunate that she was the only daughter in the family who'd inherited the full set of her mother's rituals. She'd prayed and performed rituals with her mother since she was a girl. She was familiar with all the taboos around the different festivals. Of course she knew what to do for Ghost Festival. The big folding round table had to be set up in the entrance and set with chicken, pork, duck, instant noodles, dried foods, and an incense burner, facing out. In front of the table, a little towel was dipped in a pail of water so that spirits passing by could wash their hands and feet before enjoying the food. Three sticks of incense were stuck in every dish. The more deprived the family had been that year the bigger the feast had to be. Then spirit money had to be burned, and any ghosts who might be passing by beseeched to leave you be. She also knew that you couldn't dig, move, or travel during Ghost Month. One year she wanted to switch jobs, from one garment factory to another. The pay and the environment were so much better but her mother absolutely forbade it, reminding her that any girl who switched jobs during Ghost Month would spend the rest of her life picking duds. She was sure to marry the wrong guy. If Beverly hadn't obeyed and stayed, she wouldn't have met Little Gao.

The heat had woken her up at four in the morning. The ancient air conditioner died after operating for two hours. You had to tap it over and over, and reason with it, and it took its own sweet time about turning on again. Why not get up, Beverly thought, and slaughter the chicken? They raised a few in the back yard. The day before she'd chosen it and tied up its feet as advance notice of execution. It was a cock with glowing feathers. Mean and boisterous, it often flew over the wall and fought with the neighbors' dogs. The neighbors complained about it left and right. It made a racket every morning, rain or shine. By slaughtering it as an offering to the spirits, she could let everyone have some peace and quiet. The cock knew its time was up and struggled mightily, pecking her arms and squawking. While she tied its legs up tight, the other chickens voted with their feet, staying as far away from the unlucky cock as possible: they knew it was dead meat. Her mother taught her how. Grab its neck, slit its throat, and let its blood drip into a container filled with rice, to make blood pudding with. Pluck the feathers and scald it. Then go to work on the fine hairs with the tweezers. A few friends were always saying that she was thick in the head but clever with her fingers. She'd grown her brain in the wrong place or it had grown in the right place and then moved to her fingers. She was good at patchwork, sewing, and alterations. She was swift and nimble when she defeathered a chicken. It would end up smooth and shiny, prettier than a market-bought one. But what good is a clever pair of hands? She knew that she was an old-fashioned girl, a reject from an older era. She'd dropped out of school at fifteen years old to go to the Shalu area of Taichung City to work as a seamstress. Now she was in her sixties, her hands callused. She did piecework at home. If she sewed a hundred garments for export to Europe, she still couldn't buy a single piece of clothing for herself. She often wondered what Europeans were doing in the clothes she had sewn. Drinking coffee by the side of the road? Taking a river cruise? Smoking a joint? Window shopping on vacation with a brand-name purse in hand?

No way, Keith said, Europeans were just like her, working hard. But how could she believe him when she'd never been? At least they could afford the clothes she made, unlike her.

So she got out of bed at four in the morning and washed her face with soap made thirty years ago. She'd found it a little while ago sorting out the mess on the top floor. The packaging was smudged, but stick a magenta bar in the water and you still got suds. The sickening artificial floral fragrance didn't waft, it barged into your nostrils. One year Little Gao said he was going to invest in a soap factory, another of his get-rich-quick schemes. He put all their savings in, and a few days later he got a phone call to say that the factory had stopped production. The investment evaporated. All they got out of it was some boxes of strongly scented soap. She hated that soap. But couldn't toss it, it was useful. You could wash yourself, the dog, the floor. The whole house reeked. One day the following year on a visit to the supermarket, she discovered an entire shelf of the stuff. The factory hadn't stopped production at all. She confronted her husband, who admitted the investment was a ruse. The money had gone to pay his gambling debts. There was no factory, no investment; he'd bought those boxes himself. She remembered her husband's expression during the interrogation. It was as if to say: "Is there anything you wouldn't believe?" That evening she put the soap in his soup. It was a bizarre color, not to mention the aroma, but he just slurped it down, without any change of expression. He didn't get sick or die. All he did was belch.

Her husband was immortal. If Beverly knew anything for certain, that was it. There was no help for it, he couldn't be killed. Or could he? This was her biggest reason to carry on. She went on living to see her husband die with her own eyes.

3. A face without a plastic bag

I can't remember her face.

Without a plastic bag.

I can't recall her face without a plastic bag.

Memory drifts, volatile, deceitful, self-expunging, distorting facts. But my memory is stuck to skin. In the hot sun of the seventh month of the calendar in central Taiwan, sweat erupts, and a plastic bag is stuck to my youngest daughter's skin, blurring her face and silencing her forever.

I do have a good memory for certain facts, especially numbers. I remember the first phone number in the new house we moved to when we moved out of the three-wing compound. I remember that I was the first son in a country clan and that I had three younger brothers, five daughters, and two sons. I remember that I got married once. I remember how much a certain customer owed me in a certain year and how many big cargo trucks I owned. I remember my liver function index before I died.

I've completely forgotten her face. Did she have a prominent nose? How far was her hairline from her eyebrows? Big or small eyes? Thick or thin lips? The arrangement of her teeth? I have no idea.

But I remember the numbers of her life. The day, month, and year she was born. That she was the fifth daughter of her family. The score she got on her high school entrance exam. Her scooter license number. That she slept on the third floor, in a room with a view. That she always sneezed when she woke up in the morning, a record fifteen times. That she'd been in hospital six times on suicide attempts before she finally did herself in. That she was 165 centimeters tall.

I only found out her height after I ordered a coffin next door. The coffin maker came over to measure the corpse. "165 centimeters," he said. "She has good bones and a good figure." The make-up artist applied lipstick and eye shadow. I'm sure it looked good, but at the time all I could think of was the plastic bag.

We were the first family to move into this row of houses. And I was the eldest son from a clan that lived in a three-wing compound. Before the Japanese left in 1945, Mother used to walk me to the public school. Holding my hand, she would point out all the fields that belonged to our family. We've received a share of the crop from those fields for generations. We've never gone hungry. All you have to do is study hard and it'll all be yours. After the Japanese left, I was sent off to boarding school for junior high. Then the Nationalist government carried out land reform. When I came home after graduation, we weren't rich landlords anymore. The family fortune was in decline. Yongjing at the time couldn't be described as barren, but the meadows were weedy, the roads muddy, the snakes fat, the mosquitoes nasty.

The contractor came out of nowhere with truckloads of rebar and cement, gravel and sand. It was an omen of civilization. A thicket of bamboo in front of a fish pond had to be cut down and turned into a construction site. Ten townhouses were about to be built. The contractor advertised for temp workers to clear the bamboo. I signed up and followed the foreman like everyone else. Everyone said there was a lady ghost in the thicket, but there only ended up being a bunch of dead cats hung up in there, along with colorful, lustrous snakes. A thicket of bamboo that had stood there for a century disappeared almost completely in a week, leaving a small clump. Who in those days wanted a view of bamboo? It was just a smudge of green that signified underdevelopment. Worthless and inedible bamboo was replaced with rebar. Smoke and dust billowed from the construction site. I took a deep breath and got a noseful of metal powder. Boy, it smelled good. This must be the smell of progress.

When I picked up my paycheck, I asked the foreman: How much are these houses selling for?

They were three stories, partitionable. Master bedroom for me and Cicada, a room for each child. When we died we'd leave it to our eldest son.

At the time I had a premonition that this was the house for the Chen family to make a fresh start in. We were no longer a big landowning family. I was an eldest son with little money. But I believed that this house would be the beginning of our escape from poverty.

We were the first household to move in. The second was the coffin maker. Not long thereafter, a hardware store opened. When a daughter married out or in, we would go to the store to buy the necessities for the ceremony: a pair of "double happiness" cushions, satin streamers, colored ribbons, nametags, and gift baskets, as well as candles and the rest of the Twelve

Ceremonial Observances – we could take care of everything in one purchase. When an elder died we could go to the coffin maker to select the wood and the style. It was great. I had five daughters who would be married off and two sons who would bring home daughters-in-law home. It was so convenient to have the hardware store right next door. When I arranged my mother's funeral, and when I myself kicked the bucket, there was no need to go far. Life and death, all in the same row. There was no need to go anywhere. We could live here and die here.

Who would have thought that the first funeral I arranged would be hers?

I have no recollection of her face, but I remember everyone said my youngest daughter was the prettiest.

The year I married Cicada, the matchmaker said she was the prettiest in the village.

Our youngest and prettiest daughter looked the most like her mother: big eyes, big chest, thick eyebrows, pale skin. They looked the most alike and hated each other the most.

The murderer of my little girl was actually my wife.

So it's for the best to have forgotten my youngest daughter's face, though that means I have also forgotten my wife's.

4. Household Registrar Chen

Betty had gotten off work and walked out of the office before realizing that today was Ghost Festival.

Many stores set out tables of offerings and braziers of burning spirit money. Betty hadn't done so in years. How was she supposed to, living in a small apartment in Taipei? In the first few years after moving here she'd put a little table out on the balcony, but it was too narrow to burn money on. She was afraid she might burn the whole building down. Her only offerings were chicken boiled salty chicken and seasonal fruits. Without lighting incense, she placed her palms together to pray for good luck and a good life for the family. The family in the apartment across the narrow lane was also praying, but they sure weren't afraid of a fire. Theirs burned vigorously over a pile of spirit money until a sudden gust of wind ballooned the flames out of the balcony, inundating the narrow lane with ash. Betty noticed a tableful of those crackers. Why was it that everyone loved to buy that brand for spirit offerings? The crackers from the White House reminded her of her fifth sister Plenty's funeral. The spirit money was piled up into a little hill. Father lit the money and the blaze began. The other sisters threw Plenty's clothes into the fire. The flagrant tongues of flame sucked greedily at her tears. "Plenty," Mother yelled in Taiwanese at the edge of the fire, "remember to come back and get him after you become a ghost!" Mother's mourning had a melody, probably because she'd been in the sutra recitation group for such a long time. "Come back and get him" kept repeating, with a different tune each time, and "him" got more and more strident. The sound was high and ringing, like a long, sharp, flathead screwdriver was twisting a hole in her eardrum. The fire burned a few hours until a squall blew up and the ash went flying, swirling all over the sky. Mother didn't break, didn't tire when she ate a mouthful of

ash. Her *dantian* opened wider, allowing her to belt out "him" even fuller and brighter. Talk about a chest voice. "Him" flooded the countryside in waves. Where was he? He was in the White House, too far away to hear, but maybe the ash would find him. It wafted with Mother's wails on the wind, tainting every low-slung abode, every betel tree, and every ditch. But the ash avoided the White House entirely – the fence wall, the columns, the roof, everything stayed just as immaculate as before, without a speck of dust. It glittered with a golden light.

The ground was wet, had it rained today in Taipei? Betty had been so busy all afternoon apologizing to angry callers that she hadn't heard the sound of the rain at all. She looked up at the sky. The heavy black cloud bore down menacingly, giving advance notice of another big shower. She had always liked the sound. In the countryside the raindrops poured down as if from a pail, striking the earth so hard they forced various critters out. The smell of grass floated in the air. Rat snakes rolled around in the mud. Spiderwebs glistened with millions of water droplets. Sheet metal roofs were ubiquitous in Taipei, too. A storm sounded like an air raid. Bombs exploded in the air and debris clanged on the roof, burying the traffic noise and the bustle of the city for a while. She'd asked her brother Keith, Is there anything you miss from Taiwan? I can send it to you in Berlin. In his reply he wrote that he didn't know why but he missed the sound of the rain in the countryside and in Taipei. There weren't any sheet metal shingles where he was, so you couldn't hear the sound of the rain when you were inside. It was so quiet, too quiet. How could you buy the sound of the rain? She wanted to record it on her phone and send it to him, but he wasn't allowed access to email. The truth was that she had no idea how to get the audio file from her phone onto the computer. How could she send the sound of rain?

Waiting for the bus, she stepped in a big puddle on the sidewalk to dodge a cyclist. The dirty water buried her ankles. It was really murky. She imagined the dissolved dust and filth and acid rain overwhelming her leather shoes, seeping into her socks and inviting fungus to take up residence between her toes. But she didn't want to leave. The scorching hot summer weather made the foul water feel surprisingly cool. They'd implemented energy-saving measures at work, limiting the use of the air conditioner. The whole day she soaked in her own sweat. Stepping into the mud puddle reminded her of jumping in the mud as a girl, sometimes stepping on a slippery stink snake. She'd spent the whole day in a muggy office and the only consolation turned out to be a mud puddle. A sour reek of decay wafted from the armpits of the male colleague who sat to her right. To top it off, he'd eaten two boxes of stinky tofu at his desk for lunch. When the female colleague to her left took her shoes off, her feet kept putting shots of stench at her nasal cavities, one precise hit after another. The odor was strong enough to annihilate civilization. From the mouth of the balding director who yelled at her for not being adaptable enough flowed a garbage-laden river of halitosis. The superior who consoled her had only to scratch at his scalp to pour a pail of slops for the hogs. The citizen who stuck his finger in her face and accused her of disrespecting animals stank like a dog. Body odor is a deadly weapon, a blade all these people had been slitting her throat with all day long. She didn't actually mind dogs, not at all. The wild dogs in the countryside reeked even worse. She always liked burying her face in a dog's belly or grabbing its paws and getting a good sniff. In the three-wing compound she lived in when she was

a girl, Grandma had raised a black dog that she was responsible for feeding until Granny killed it with a brick, cooked it up, and ate it. She knew Granny didn't especially like dog meat. It was because of her that Granny had slaughtered the dog.

Her home now was a small apartment in Taipei. Three bedrooms, one family room. With her husband, daughter, and son, even another cockroach would make it seem insufferably crowded. There was no way they could raise a dog. Her daughter was out of work, her son out of school. They waited for her to come home every day and make them dinner. She liked dogs. But today she'd gotten into a lot of people's news feeds because of them. She stood accused of discriminating against dogs.

Her window was for household registration. She updated registers, issued transcripts, and replaced ID cards. It was simple work, a perfect job because it was all of a piece and the pay was regular. It wasn't complicated. Once you got the hang of it, the tasks you had to perform from day to day didn't change much. This was the kind of life she wanted. She got up at six every morning and made breakfast for her family. She had to be out the door before seven-thirty to catch the subway and make her bus connection. She got to work before eight-thirty, sat down with a freshly steeped cup of tea, turned on the computer, and waited for the public to come in. People took slips of paper and waited for their number to be called. Everything was so orderly you could take it for granted.

But in the past few years, her "ideal" had gone out of order. There were many new changes in what was obviously a simple job. Civil servants of her generation had to learn to use a computer as adults. Technology crashed like a tidal wave. She had to meet it head-on by learning how to use the new word processing software. After everything went fully electronic, the pace of work increased. A volume of work that once took several days now had to be done in an hour, so people wouldn't complain about "inefficient civil servants." She could go quicker, but she couldn't get used to all the cameras. They were ubiquitous. Many citizens would turn on their cell phone cameras when they came to the window and discovered they couldn't get the document they wanted. They were "gathering evidence," they said, to show the whole world how awful Taiwanese civil servants were. Everyone carried a camera around and could start recording at a moment's notice. The threat was that if she didn't hurry up, they'd upload it to the internet or hand it over to the media.

One time a pretty young woman with big, shining eyes and long hair came in. She reminded Betty of Plenty, her fifth sister. She looked bashful, like she hadn't seen too much human filth. She was there to apply for the maternity grant but hadn't brought all the required documents. There wasn't any way they could get it done for her that day. She lost it. She started throwing documents at the window and yelling: "I'm going to give birth any day now! I don't have any money, why won't you people help me!" It was actually just a brief outburst. Betty and a few colleagues came out from behind the counter to comfort her. They steeped her a tea and had a friendly chat. They told her what to watch out for when she went into labor and what to pay attention to during her month of postpartum recuperation. Congratulations, by the way! They recommended obstetricians. They talked and talked and she smiled, her big eyes shining even

brighter. She said she would come back the next day. That evening the crying girl made it onto the television news. A lot of people waiting in that room had shot her outburst on their cell phones and uploaded it immediately. The spectacle of a girl who was out of control sent some sparks out into the tedium of daily life. Videos got ten thousand views in no time. “Pregnant ladies are the toughest customers,” said one title. She got doxxed. A journalist went to the open-air market where her mother worked, focused his camera on her, and stuck a microphone in her face. “Did you know your daughter is expecting? Have you seen this clip?” The reporter got out his tablet and played the viral video of the daughter screaming at the household registration office. The mother looked shocked. She was still holding the chicken neck she had just cut. Fresh blood kept spurting out.

Betty hid in the bathroom and watched the video over and over, thinking about Plenty.

The pregnant girl didn’t come the next day, or ever again.

Later, lest the public shoot videos to “gather evidence,” her boss demanded that in addition to the CCTV cameras in the office everyone on staff had to record each interaction for self-protection.

That morning, Betty forgot to turn her camera on.

There was a sudden disturbance in the waiting area. A child burst out crying. Betty was at the photocopier. She came out from behind the counter to see what was the matter. A man had brought five big dogs in, gotten a number, and was now waiting for it to be called. A child who was afraid of dogs happened to be waiting with his mother, who took one look at Household Registrar Chen and demanded that she deal with those dogs. My son is terrified of them. Isn’t this a public agency? Shouldn’t dogs stay outside? They can’t be allowed in, can they? When she went up to communicate with the guy, he got out his cell phone, turned on the video, and said loudly, “These are guide dogs, I’m a trainer.” She thought he was visually impaired and offered an immediate apology. She wasn’t expecting him to raise his voice. “You think I’m *blind*?” he asked, disgusted. “Didn’t I just tell you I was a trainer? Not blind. I have to let the dogs follow me around to train them. They can’t stay outside. I’m going to lodge a complaint that you’re not seeing-eye dog-friendly.”

The man yelled, the dogs stayed, the child sobbed. Betty went back to the photocopier and didn’t think too much about it.

A few hours later, and calls for “Household Registrar Chen” started coming in. Soon her extension was ringing off the hook. People started yelling as soon as she took the call. A reporter showed up. He shoved a microphone in her face and asked: “Why do you hate seeing-eye dogs so much?”

It turned out that after leaving, the trainer had immediately uploaded his video to a seeing-eye dog society’s social media account. Betty’s colleague played it for her. The guy had edited it and added a special effect, a red arrow pointing at her face, and a subtitle: Household Registrar Chen, no friend to seeing-eye dogs. The editing was excellent. The part when he said he wasn’t blind was edited out. With her frown and furrowed forehead, she became the face of discrimination. One shot was of his terrified dogs, the next was of her apathetic expression.

The insults hit her like a tsunami. Bitch! Trash! You got no fucking respect for dogs! Taiwan can't get ahead because of civil servants like you. Weevil! Your salary comes out of my taxes. Resign if you know what's good for you. Rotten bureaucrat. Lousy old lady. I'll loose my dogs on you, they'll tear you to pieces. You have no sympathy. Don't you know that furballs are man's best friend?

The last call she got before clocking out started out with a dog barking. Then someone said: "Fucking bitch! You better watch out after work."

All her regular work got put on hold. Her boss told her to write a report and hand it in the next day. She knew it was a letter of repentance. This year's performance review was probably beyond hope. That director patted her on the shoulder. "Miss Chen," he said, "you're something else. You didn't even cry." She was thinking, for what? I grew up getting yelled at. What's so bad about this?

The bus was taking forever to come. Betty couldn't help it, she turned on her cell phone and watched the clip again. She paused it at the close-up of her face. So that's how she looked now. A collapsed lob and an icy gaze. What a contrast she made with those excitable canines. No wonder everyone thought she was a bitch who discriminated against dogs.

Shops all along the street were burning spirit money. Her eyes scanned every table of offerings. There were White House crackers on almost every one of them. They were inescapable. Two years before she'd gone to China on a group tour. As they took in a sea of clouds from the peak of Huangshan, the local guide got out those crackers and asked, care for a treat from Taiwan? A taste of home? Nobody took him up on it, until he said they were complimentary. Then everyone grabbed one, as if they were afraid there wouldn't be any left. Strolling down a lane in Hongcun in Anhui Province, to the southeast of the mountain, they saw a little girl eating the same kind of cracker. Dining on crab on West Lake several hundred kilometers to the east, you guessed it, she saw those crackers again. Last year, she found a shelf full of them in a Japanese pharmacy while buying vitamins for her husband She wrote a letter asking Keith if they had this kind of cracker in the jails in Germany. She wouldn't be surprised if they did. Wasn't everyone talking about globalization?

A small group of high school girls by the bus stop were watching videos on their phones with the volume turned way up. She had no trouble making out "Household Registrar Chen." It appeared she had gotten famous that afternoon. She stepped out of the puddle to get close enough to listen in. She overheard them cursing "that terrible civil servant who hates man's best friend." One of those girls eyed her, as if to say: "What's this old lady doing getting so close to us? Her feet are filthy!" They didn't recognize her as the star of the clip they were watching. She'd been worried that after a day spent getting yelled at over the phone there'd be no way to escape insult in her daily life. But she squeezed on the bus, took the MRT, and went to the evening market to buy vegetables, and absolutely nobody recognized her along the way.

She told the butcher to give her the same as yesterday. He looked at her, searching through the faces of his regular customers in his mental database without finding a match. That's funny,

don't I come here to buy meat almost every day? Betty wondered. He obviously doesn't know how to do business.

She had no idea that she was colorless and transparent, the easiest kind of existence to overlook in a crowd.

A few days before she was doing yoga stretches on the floor of the bedroom. Her husband walked in and didn't even see her. Picking up the tablet, he lay down on the bed, found an adult video, pulled his pants to his knees, and started jerking off. She held her upward-facing dog, not daring to breathe aloud. Her husband moaned and wiped himself off with the blanket. Soon, his moans turned into snores. She stood up as quietly as she could and, not daring to look at him, tiptoed out of the room. The covers and the blanket will have to be steam-cleaned, won't they? Why didn't he notice me? I was lying on the floor by the bed! Not that it wasn't a good thing that he didn't.

As she was leaving the evening market with the pork, her cell phone started yelping. She looked down at the screen. It was her fourth sister, Barbie.

She took the call and heard Barbie crying: "Second Sister? Betty! Come home right away. *What are we going to do?* Mom's gone missing!"

She took a deep breath. "Mom's been dead a long time," she said in her most indifferent tone.

Barbie wasn't listening. "Hello? Hello? Betty? Hey, come home as soon as you can. Didn't you hear, Mom's gone missing!" Betty had no idea that Barbie hadn't heard her reply. She didn't know that she was colorless, her voice too soft to hear. Transmitted through the phone, it was light as a feather, weightless even, and unable to reach her sister's ear. "Mom's dead," she kept saying. "Quit yelling. I'm busy at work in Taipei, I don't have time to go home." But her sister just kept yelling, not having heard a thing.

Household Registrar Chen was like a ghost, floating formlessly about. Her existence was automatically edited out of people's vision and hearing. This was actually the lifestyle she wanted: to be invisible in a crowd, blending in with the background. She saw no reflection in the mirror, left no prints on the ground. She hadn't disappeared yet, but she didn't fully exist anymore.