

ON MY WAY TO THE END

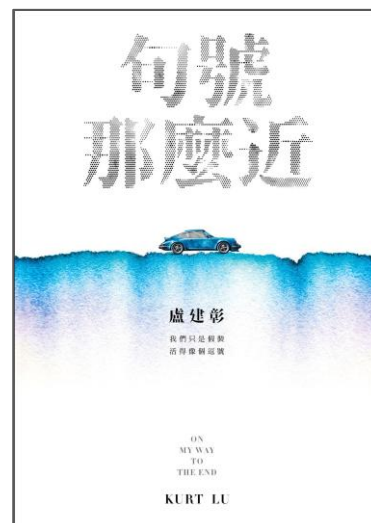
句號那麼近

A flight-of-fancy road trip across Taiwan taken by the protagonist and his recently departed bestie and dog (which only he can see) wends, as might be expected, between reality and imagination. As in life, exceptional encounters are experienced and absorbed along the way.

This pseudo-autobiographical travelogue follows a protagonist who, while never identified, shares a background similar to the author's. Both are from Tainan, lost their fathers at a young age, have a mother with dementia, and have a best friend named Michael who died on a mountain trek and a recently departed pet dog named Fruit. The underlying premise of this story is: *If I took off on a road trip now with Michael and Fruit, what adventures might we have?*

It is because Michael and Fruit, who died just a few weeks from each other, oddly continue lingering around that the protagonist decides to take them on a road trip. While uncertain of what to expect, he is intently curious about what they'll be discovering together. Along the way, besides interacting with locals such as an indie bookshop proprietor and country doctor, they cross paths with individuals like "Ms. Huang", who can see Michael and they suspect of being a yellow-throated marten in human form, and "Leopard Cat", a beautiful woman who drops by a café looking for someone to jump rope with. With each encounter, the protagonist ponders another facet of life and death.

As the narrative unfolds, we learn his thoughts on life and death spring from awareness he has brain cancer and his decision not to seek treatment. He is making this trip as one last "hurrah" on the way to the "full stop" of his life. But, will this increasingly off-the-rails vacation help or hinder our protagonist's plans to depart this life with no regrets?



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Weaving together iconic Taiwan scenery, character, and culture, this highly imaginative travelogue follows a lonely and damaged protagonist through a series of whimsical encounters peppered with nuggets of philosophical insight and wisdom.

Kurt Lu 盧建彰

Kurt Lu is an author, poet and advertising director whose career accomplishments include stints as creative director at both Ogilvy & Mather and J. Walter Thompson. He is the author of over twenty published works spanning poetry, essays, novels, and marketing tutorials. And he has used current affairs, public issues, and sporting events in his novels – *Library Before the Prosecutors Office: A Troubled Time*, *You Are Sick*, *The Dark Cloud*, and *The Ace of the Bench* – to frame his contemplations on Taiwan’s future. *On My Way to the End* is his fourth novel.

ON MY WAY TO THE END

By Kurt Lu

Translated by Petula Parris

To die is to be strong. But to love, that's even stronger yet.

—Michael Lin

1

Coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*): An evergreen member of the Aceraceae family, with a single, upright trunk free of spines and internal growth rings. Historically a valuable cash crop, it is also popular as an ornamental plant.

“I’ve noticed something, you know? Detective novels always seem to kick off with a death, while in *other* novels, characters always die, or are pretty much ready to snuff it, at the end.”

After divulging this information, I eye Michael, who gives me a slight nod.

Fruit is ensconced in the rear seat of the car. Michael has the front passenger seat. I hold the steering wheel firmly and keep my eyes trained on the road.

The three of us are taking a trip.

The sun is out in full force.

As Fruit stares ahead, the brisk wagging of her tail produces a brushing sound against the leather seat. You might easily mistake that sound for waves crashing over and over, endlessly.

I dial back the sunroof and sunlight streams in, straight onto Fruit’s intent face. The rays of light form a patch of gold on the top of her head, turning the brown fur there white. She looks incredibly wise all of a sudden. If you keep travelling down her forehead to just above her eyes, you’ll find a Cintamani pearl.

The Cintamani pearl crops up in one of Louis Cha’s wuxia novels, *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils*. There’s a character (he seriously overestimates his martial art skills, by the way) with a small lump on his forehead. In Buddhism, there’s also a deity named after the Cintamani pearl.

(I’m guessing most people won’t know what I’m talking about. But that’s not going to stop me from talking...)

Sitting beside me, Michael sneaks a grin. Just like before.

Fruit is a canine, with a lumpy growth on her forehead.

We’re in no great hurry. The road unfurls ahead of us and the blue ocean to our right plays a game of peekaboo as I navigate each turn. Whenever the ocean ducks out of sight, everything turns completely green. It’s the mountains.

This stretch of our journey is all blues and greens, a stark contrast to Taipei at this time of year.

Michael has a smile on his face. The sun probably teased it out of him, I tell myself.

I'm not the slightest bit tired. I need to stay focused on my driving, for sure, but I'm also enjoying hanging out with my two companions. Then there's good old Miles Davis, with his brassy jazz melodies providing the perfect accompaniment to a gloriously sunny day.

As white road markings slip away silently behind us, the green mountains forge on in front, bulging like a quilt on a bed. Smooth and inviting.

When I pull into the ocean-facing car park, the emerald blue sea and sky take up the entire expanse of my windscreen. This would be such a romantic place for a date.

In the parking spot in front of me, a woman (I reckon she's in her sixties) stands with a wide stance, cellphone in hand. She appears to be taking a photo of her friends. The view is, without a doubt, picture-worthy. The problem is, she seems to have neglected the fact she's standing in the middle of a parking space, which is not a particularly safe spot for taking photos.

I bring the car to a halt with the nose only about a third of the way in. My rear end is hanging outside the grid line, exposed. I'm left with little choice but to wait.

With my hands still on the wheel, I study the blue strata in front of me. Then, my neck slightly stiff, I slowly turn my head to one side.

"Are you done yet?!" a voice booms, making me jump in my seat. Fruit also springs to attention in the back seat and looks fearful.

It then dawns on me that the voice is coming from right beside me.

It's Michael.

Michael is hollering through the car window. His expression belies a man of high morals, although it's also possible he's just angry... The woman, apparently blissfully unaware of anyone else's feelings on the matter, has occupied the parking space for nearly a minute already.

Outside the window, said woman is still glued to her phone. She doesn't seem to have heard a thing. In a rush to roll the window down, Michael fails to locate the right button, which sends his fingers flailing over the entire door in a desperate search. All in all, it's a pretty chaotic scene.

"Don't worry! I'll handle it," I say, raising my right hand to calm him. Behind me, Fruit responds with a "Mmm...", seemingly also in an attempt to soothe Michael.

"Don't fret, Fruit, let me go speak to her." I reach back to give Fruit's head a gentle stroke, but my hand touches a waiting tongue. Not really in a mood to be licked, I retract my hand hastily.

As he watches this, Michael cracks a grin and nods toward the dog.

I figure I'd best get out and confront the woman before Michael does.

I undo my seatbelt and push the door open, all the while pondering what I should say to her. How would "Excuse me! Could you hurry up with your photo?" sound? Or would, "Sorry, I need to park. Do you mind moving?" be better? I simply can't decide which would be more appropriate.... I guess there's another one that might do the trick, "Hey! Are you blind or something? Get out of my way!"

If I *did* go for the latter, I'd probably elicit the same response as Michael would.

I shake my head and keep walking.

Looking back, I see Michael's stern stare through the windscreen. I give him a wave.

Even when I'm standing right beside her, the woman's attention to her phone doesn't waver. I see that the faces on the screen are largely obscured by messy blasts of hair blown in all directions. That said, I can still just about make out their ages. Again, around sixty-something. So, I guess I should call them "Elder Sisters..."?

I take a step forward, say a few words to the woman, and they all walk off. Just like that.

Feeling triumphant, I return to the car, nudge it into Drive, and complete my journey into the parking space.

"What did you say to her?" Michael asks impatiently.

"I said, 'Could you guys show a little more common decency? How about considering the rights of others when you're taking up parking spots?'"

Michael nods his approval and smirks.

Or, should I say, this is my imagined version of events...

Now. Please allow me to reach back and stroke my dog's head for a second. Then, I'll tell you what *really* transpired.

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Having finally detected my presence, the woman turns to look at me.

"Elder Sister... Do you need some help taking your photo? I can take a hundred for you if you'd like, or maybe you need a thousand? Oh yes, and would you be interested in joining my online investment group? It's a LINE group. I'll just need to take your account details."

Feeling no shame whatsoever, I contort my face into a smile. I must look like a freak. Luckily, I'm standing with my back to Michael, so he can't see.

The woman stares at me with disgust and mutters "psycho" under her breath. She grabs her two friends with the hair-devoured faces, and they stride off together.

"Sorry? Did you say your LINE ID is 'Psycho'?" I take another step toward them, which sends them scurrying.

I glance back at Michael and Fruit and flick a peace sign at them.

A line of sturdy, towering coconut trees stands before me, so erect they appear to be holding up the sky. No, let me rephrase that.... What's really happening is that they are pushing against the blue ocean, and parting it, so as to *form* the blue sky.

Magnificent. Like a picture on a postcard.

No wonder that lady wanted to take a photo here.

*

To one side of the trees is what appears to be a hotel. I've already lost track of how many days we've been travelling, but the weather today is splendid. A spotless blue sky. The blue ocean. A perfect place to spend the night.

Michael passed away at the end of September last year.

Fruit left the world in late December.

Was this supposed to signal a change of season?

My happiness, it seems, was also displaced by this seasonal transition.

But displaced by what exactly?

2

Gray-faced buzzard (*Butastur indicus*): A medium-sized raptor measuring 41-48 centimeters in length. Featuring a distinct central throat stripe, dark brown plumage, a black beak, white supercilium, yellow eyes, grayish cheeks, and tightly spaced, dark brown barring on its breast and abdomen.

Was it sorrow? Or loneliness?

Or both?

I ponder this question as I watch the waves froth.

In Chinese, "pass away" and "be born" are both written as two characters.

No, actually, they can each be expressed using just *one* character.

Birth, shēng, 生.

Death, sǐ, 死

*

My first-floor room is the only one left. Just like me.

Room 110 comes with an impressive floor-to-ceiling window, outside of which is a small, private garden adorned with a few rocking chairs on a jadeite green lawn. Beyond this lies the sandy beach.

An unfettered ocean view.

I plonk my luggage down and push open the enormous window through which the call of the ocean sails in to greet me. Unable to resist, I head straight outside and take my place on a rocking chair. I sit facing the sea with my legs outstretched. Swaying back and forth, I imagine I'm sitting on a swing atop the waves. I toss away everything for good.

Then, I spy a green blob on the beach.

Could it be the People's Liberation Army? My head whips around to look at Michael. "Look! What the heck are we supposed to do now?" I blurt out.

For a second, I completely forget Michael is my senior.

All island residents know full well that China's military, the People's Liberation Army, might show up at any time. But not everyone will get to witness their arrival. I certainly never expected to, especially not while simply minding my own business, gazing out at sea...

(That said, the odds of spotting the PLA while staring out to sea are obviously higher than when not because, presumably, that's how they'll travel over from their side.)

If I'd known this, I would have made a point of looking at the mountains instead. What mountains are around here, anyway? Is it the Shizi Mountain range?

While still deep in thought, Michael gets up and yells, "Look! Let's go fight him!" In just a couple of strides, he's already left the grass and is sprinting down the beach. You'd never guess he was already in his seventies.

For some reason (I'm not entirely sure why), Michael's movements gradually lose momentum until he's running in slow motion. While I can tell he's pumping his thighs with all his might, his progression is painfully slow. A live recording of Mal Waldron's "Searching in Grenoble" 1978 solo piano concert becomes his soundtrack in the moment. Jazz progressions scatter down around me. Some parts sound like a flurry of mistaken notes, while others are played with the utmost care and precision. Surely, wouldn't anyone listening be moved to tears?

Beneath Michael's orange shorts, I can clearly make out the contours of the muscles in his bare legs as he kicks up a bluster of sandy dust.

Fruit is not far behind, with her little legs, sleek brown torso, and tail held high. On the tip of her tail is a pinch of white fur.

*

Just as Fruit leaps down from the rocking chair, I feel a sudden tremor closely followed by a loud muffled noise in the distance. Cannon fire?

My mind drifts back to the famous Hakka singer I met a while ago who liked to boast about being a master marksman during his army service days.

"The first time I took a shot, I got clipped on my head," he told me.

"What do you mean?"

Breaking into a smile, the man explained, "After I missed that first shot, my company commander told me to aim again while he watched. As I was trying to aim, he whacked the back of my head, all the while cussing me out. 'I knew it!' he screamed at me. 'Who taught you to do it like that?! You have to take your specs off first, so you can get your eye right up close.' It's like this. Look!"

The singer popped off his frameless glasses and curled his right hand into a cylindrical shape. He held it up to one of his eyes to show me.

As I watched him, I couldn't help wondering if any of his fans had seen him perform this particular party trick...

"See? You press your eye right up to the scope inside the tank, like this. Then, you use your hand to rotate it." He squinted one eye shut and tried to demonstrate with his hands in mid-air.

"So you were a tank gunner?"

"Sure was. A tank gunner. Back then they liked to use college grads for that," the singer said as he put his glasses back on.

"How do you actually aim it, though? I mean, how do you control the direction of the cannon?"

"Actually, there are two controls. One is for moving it up and down, and the other moves it side to side. Like this..." The man started to draw circles in the air with both hands. One hand moved vertically, while the other moved along an invisible horizontal line below. It looked a lot like someone playing a video game, or like the synchronized hand moves cheerleaders do at baseball matches.

Watching him made me realize that people who at first appear all prim and proper can also have a playful side.

"You should get people to do this dance during your shows!" I said.

"You think? I do think concerts nowadays could benefit from a bit more levity. But I've realized making people laugh takes skill, too."

"Yep. Just like Chairwoman Chen!"

"Exactly! That's who I'm taking lessons from! Hah! It's truly a lot harder than it looks..." The singer couldn't stifle his smile when talking about Chairwoman Chen.

Chairwoman Chen, a lady well into her seventies, was this guy's mother. Aside from showing the grit typical of Hakka women, she was also hilarious in her everyday life.

Someone once told me about the time she went to the afternoon market to buy a fish, only to discover the fishmonger was too busy to descale it for her. Chairwoman Chen simply squatted down by the side of the road, took out a small crescent moon-shaped knife she had on her (which was barely sharp enough to slice a banana), and set about descaling her aquatic purchase.

A fellow villager who happened by on his scooter couldn't help but poke his nose in. "Hey! Your knife isn't up to that job!" he cried.

Still crouching, Chairwoman Chen raised her head ever so slightly, and immediately recognized the speaker as her busybody neighbor. After flashing him a cool smile, she refocused her attention on her purchase and sent her hands back to work. "This knife could kill a person, you know? Do you need me to demonstrate?" she muttered.

Rendered mute, her terrified neighbor zoomed off as fast as he could.

As she watched her neighbor vanish in the distance, Chairwoman Chen let out a quiet chuckle. I imagined this exact scene: the late afternoon sun setting behind her, casting her long shadow across the ground, until it dwarfed the entire village...

But, I've digressed again.

This has been happening a lot recently.

And although, of course, I *know* why it's happening, that doesn't mean I can do anything to stop it...

So, back to where we were before...

Fruit, who has now already caught up with Michael, shows no signs of stopping. In a flash, she's overtaken him and is racing straight toward the PLA soldier. It's all happening so quickly that there's no way for me to stop her.

It's just like most goings-on in this world. I'm utterly powerless to stop them.

I decide I should probably look for somewhere to hide and watch to see how things pan out. I search around for something that can double as cover. Perhaps a palm tree will do the trick?

I try my best to squeeze my body behind a coarse, ring-crowned trunk. Then, as I attempt to hunch down, I spot a cluster of squat bushes and decide it's probably best to lie flat against the ground.

I hear a garbled message coming through a wireless radio. The voice of a middle-aged man, squashed flat by the radio waves, could be heard. "Seven-Niner-One. Seven-Niner-One... Seven-Niner-Two..."

Not far ahead of my hiding spot, with his back to me, stands a male figure in camouflage attire. I watch him place a long piece of apparatus on the floor. Wait! Is that a machine gun?! He then pulls a black walkie-talkie from a side pocket on his trousers and yells impatiently toward the lower half, "Respond please! Seven-Niner-One!"

Before I realize it (and I'm not quite sure how or when he got there), Michael is lying down flat beside me. He has a finger to his lips, warning me to keep quiet.

"Seven-Niner-Two, reporting. No visual on target. Over." The man's pancake-flat voice makes its way through the airwaves once again, accompanied by the rhythmic beating of the ocean in the background.

"Copy that. Thank you. No sign of any action today. Over." There is something off about the unnecessary volume with which Camouflage Man is addressing his walkie-talkie.

At that moment, a gust of wind blows through, sending Camouflage Man's wide-brimmed camo hat flying.

"Shit," he curses, as he tries to grab it but misses.

The hat lands on the sand roughly five meters in front of Michael and me. "Look!" I whisper. Should we try to escape? Or what?

It's too late. Camouflage Man is already walking over.

The good news is... he's left his long firearm on the ground in its original position.

Michael and I exchange glances and agree to stay put. I pray silently we aren't spotted.

Boom!

Once again, a cannon fires somewhere in the distance.

*

The huge explosion makes my whole body shiver and I inadvertently brush against the bush I'm cowering behind. Camouflage Man appears to have noticed something. He bends down to pick up his hat, lifts his head, and trains his eyes in my direction.

Shit, I curse (silently of course). What am I supposed to do? Should I make a grab for the gun he left lying on the ground?

Just when I'm thinking things couldn't get any worse, our eyes meet through a tiny gap in the foliage. Talk about unlucky! I glance over at Michael on my right. He shakes his head. Clearly, he doesn't have any solutions up his sleeve.

"Hey! What are you doing over there?" Camouflage Man calls out.

I'm not sure whether to reply or not.

"Hey! You!" he shouts for a second time. "What are you doing?"

Strangely, his Mandarin betrays no trace of an accent.

That's weird. And why should I even answer him? If this guy really is a PLA soldier, shouldn't I be the one doing the asking?

"Uh... nothing. Why? What are you up to?"

"Me? I'm birdwatching! If you're not doing anything, then why are you lying on the ground like that?"

Birdwatching. Yes, that would explain his attire and the missing accent... But what about his firearm? I peer over at the lengthy object sitting in the distance, which now looks remarkably like a tripod.

Shoot! So, now what? There's no way I'm telling him what I'm doing on the ground. It's too embarrassing.

"Huh? Me? Oh, I was just doing a plank," I say, thinking on my feet. (Actually, it would be more precise to say that, now I know the guy isn't really a PLA soldier, I've relaxed to the degree I'm talking nonsense.)

"Planks of what?" Camouflage Man asks (or do I now just call him Birdwatcher?). The way he asks this makes him sound just like any other random old Taiwanese guy.

"Just planking ... working my core." But why I am still down here? I stand up hastily, still managing to pat the grass off my clothes on my way up.

"Juxtaplanking? What kind of planks are those?" Birdwatcher asks, circling the same topic.

"So what birds are you on the lookout for?" I ask in an attempt to redirect the conversation. But, I'm genuinely curious as well.

"The Chinese sparrowhawk. Some of my birdwatching pals glimpsed one yesterday. But no luck for us yet today."

"Where can you see them?"

"Over there. It migrates across the island around National Day. Almost the same time as the gray buzzard, just a bit earlier. And it's smaller, at around 30 centimeters."

"How long is the gray buzzard?" I ask.

"By gray buzzard, I mean the gray-faced buzzard, which can get up to fifty centimeters long with a wingspan of up to a meter. Here! Lemme show you the photo I took last year." Birdwatcher

produces his cellphone and locates the picture in just a couple of clicks. He gestures for me to take the phone.

I assume this is a well-practiced routine. While accepting the phone, I discover I harbor no more hard feelings toward his camo gear.

On the screen, against a blue background, is a large bird with its wings outstretched. Its intense gaze can only be described as... badass. Michael also leans his head in to take a look, nodding appreciatively.

“My, what a beauty!” Michael says. But, of course, Birdwatcher doesn’t hear.

Fruit places her two front paws on my leg and cranes her body forward. She probably wants to take a look too. I tilt the screen down a little in her direction. Birdwatcher seems to notice me acting strangely. Probably fearing I’m about to drop his phone, he snatches it away from me.

Thankfully, Fruit has already seen the photo. Wagging her tail cheerfully, she returns her front paws to the ground.

Fruit saw the bird, even though Birdwatcher couldn’t see Fruit.

“Would you like to hear its birdcall? I’ve got it right here.” Birdwatcher opens up a new tab and taps on an audio file. A longish waveform-like shape begins to play a two-note whistle – a short, staccato chirp, followed by a much longer note. Both are high-pitched.

“That’s her? It’s gorgeous. Did you record that yourself too?” I ask.