

# THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MY BROTHER 滌這個不正常的人

\* 2020 Taipei Literature Award

*Ti has not spent a single day working outside the house since he graduated from university over a decade ago. To outsiders he is a jianjuzhe, or "cocoon dweller". To his sister, poet Mi Liao, he is the subject of an intimate prose experiment in which she records his every interaction with family members, hoping to gain a better understanding of Ti's inner world.*

Spending all day at home became the norm for many of us during the pandemic. However, for some, staying at home is a way of life. They avoid social contact, and refuse to work or go to school. Some have no interest in maintaining any kind of social relationship whatsoever. The phenomenon first came to light in Japan, where they are labeled *hikikomori* ("withdrawing"). In Taiwan, they are *jianjuzhe*, or "cocoon dwellers". As their ranks swell, they have become a social issue of increasing public concern and debate.

The phenomenon is poorly understood, because even meeting a cocoon dweller presents obvious challenges, to say nothing of interviewing them and understanding their viewpoint. Poet Liao Mi, however, had a unique opportunity to study a cocoon dweller. Her younger brother Ti had been living at home with their parents since he graduated from university over a decade ago. 37-year-old Ti never leaves the house during daytime, avoids meeting others, and is hyper-sensitive to any kind of intrusion. Unexpected sounds are unbearable to him: the turning of front doorknob, the sound of the television in the living room, the scraping of a chair being moved upstairs. Cigarette smoke wafting in from outside sets him screaming.



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In a household where no one knew how to reach Ti, Liao Mi undertook a writing project which became the turning point in her relationship with her brother. For one year she recorded every interaction her family had with Ti. Through first person interviews and reflective writing, Liao Mi distances herself from her role as big sister to objectively document how each family member views Ti, and how Ti, in turn, deals with them. In representing each interaction and conflict Ti has with his family, Liao Mi interrogates conventional definitions of “normalcy”.

With the same warmth that inhabits her poetry, Liao Mi’s records of everyday social interactions help shed light on an often ignored social issue. Her flowing documentary-style prose brings readers straight into her home, where they witness a healing journey enacted through one-on-one dialogue.

## Liao Mi 廖璉

Liao Mi studied industrial product design and journalism at university. After becoming acquainted with a local poetry society, she began writing poems and innovated a new medium, negative poetry, in which poetry is printed on film negatives, and read by slowly unwinding the roll of film from its canister. Her poetry collection *Useless Things* was published in 2015. *There’s Something About My Brother*, her first collection of essays, received a grant from the Taipei Literature Awards in 2019, and won the Taiwan Literature Award in the following year.