

THE SHADOW

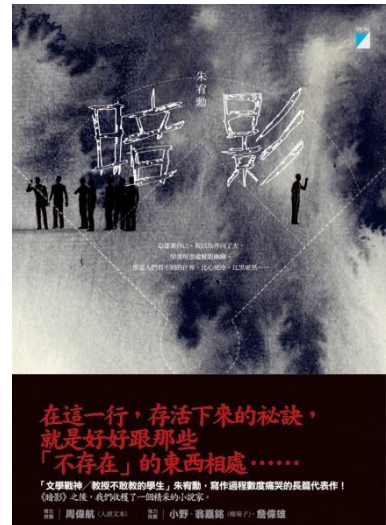
暗影

The Shadow intertwines the stories of baseball player Shi-Chen and super fan Fido. Just as he is about to retire, Fido invites Shi-Chen to join a secret group to help unveil the bookies and players who throw games for money. Despite his misgivings, he agrees, but before long, his decision to betray the sport he has made his life begins to haunt him and the whole plan begins to unravel...

Inspired by a real match-fixing scandal that rocked Taiwanese baseball in 2009, Chu spent four years writing this novel in part due to his own rage and disappointment that the sport he loved so much had been so thoroughly compromised. His writing had previously been characterised by a tendency to rather obscure symbolism, but *The Shadow* marks a new phase in his artistic development, using knowledge of baseball and a more straightforward prose style. The effect is a moving exploration of the passions and disappointments inherent in playing or following sport.

Chu Yu-Hsun 朱宥勳

Chu Yu-Hsun is considered one of the most promising active young writers in Taiwan. He fell in love with literature at a young age, but studied sociology at university. He went on to pursue graduate studies in Taiwanese literature, but has kept a concern for social issues at the heart of his writing. As well as writing novels, he is also a magazine editor and regularly contributes articles on current affairs online and in print.



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THE SHADOW

By Chu Yu-Hsun. Translated by Jeremy Tiang.

Every moment I've spent on the baseball field, I've been profoundly aware that there's such a thing as 'non-existence.'

I'm a thirty-five-year-old Taiwanese professional baseball player. I don't know what this age means to most people, but in the world of Taiwanese baseball, it's decrepit. If you flipped through the league yearbooks for the last thirty-odd years, you'd realise most professional players have short-lived careers, perhaps even shorter than trapeze artistes or stuntpersons, sword-swallowers and the like. The averagely-talented player joins his first team at twenty-two or three, but more than half of these leave the sport within two years, because of insufficient stamina, untrustworthy coaches, accidental injury, mindsets too advanced for the Taiwanese baseball scene, or simply a lack of a suitable position on the squad. The official term is 'released'—just like when water boils, it bubbles up from the pot, no longer able to remain with the rest of the liquid.

If you're accomplished or lucky enough, you become the lead player of a team, and for three to five years get to enjoy the screams and cheers of the fans. Too much cheering. Because you wind up on the field too often, your strong arms or back turned into raw fuel. You're up today, you're up tomorrow—you momentarily forget you were up yesterday too. This is something those unlucky bastards who leave within two years never experience. Around the fifth year, your still-sturdy arm develops an obstruction in a place no one can see, a bone or joint, or else a ligament. All of a sudden, those muscles aren't any good to you at all, your pitches move even slower than when you were seventeen. In the end, you leave by the same exit door as all the other unlucky bastards, just a little later than them.

You really ought to believe a member of that rare species: a thirty-five-year-old baseball player still in the starting line-up.

Let me tell you the secret of my longevity: you have to make your peace with that thing known as 'non-existence.'

The things that don't exist are always more important. Take your muscles and joints—an inflamed rotator cuff will heal, your obliques can be improved through training, but there are areas where no amount of effort can help, not even with dumbbells.

I started playing in the league aged twenty-three, and although I've changed teams a few times, I've never left the sport. Thirteen years is a long time, you know. A famous batter who started a few years before me (he's retired now, but you've certainly heard his name) once said, 'I'm learning to co-exist with my injuries.' That's right, that's the most important thing—it's not enough to understand the existence of 'non-existence,' you also have to co-exist with it.

I'm thirty-five now, which in baseball terms means I'm on my deathbed. It could be next year or this, but someday I'll receive the simple text message: 'Because of changes to the needs of the team, we're terminating your contract. Thank you for your many years of service, with best wishes for your future life.' And if I attempt to respond, my phone will tell me 'reply not possible,' because the message will come from some system-generated code rather than anyone's actual number. But at least this hasn't happened yet.

You could say my greatest skill in this lifetime has been delaying the arrival of that text. But I know it'll come sooner or later—no one can avoid it.

There's only one possible exception.

After so many years, I may never have been able to live up to that famous batter, but I've been selected for the national team, won the grand championship, and been named the king of the home runs. In the annals of my career, there's not much left to aim for. Only one thing remains: I'd like it too all end on the field, not with a text message.

A match that crowns my name, one where my every move and gesture matters more than which side wins or loses.

'Hsieh Shi-Chen's farewell match.' A moment to be remembered forever by my passionate fans. There'd be a ceremony beforehand, and floral bouquets during the match. The commentary I couldn't hear from the field would recount dozens of times that evening my records and accomplishments. Then afterwards, in my anticipated last time at bat, I'd knock the ball out of the park—and no matter what the outcome, every paper would report my 'glorious retirement.' I believe I deserve this. On every front—including the 'non-existent' ones—I surely counted as a first-rate player.

But at the end of the day, in the thirty-odd year history of a sport which doesn't have much truck with honouring players, over thousands of games, there've only been seventeen such farewell matches. So it would seem this isn't, in fact, the treatment I deserve. Because after all, I'm just an average player in the Taiwanese professional league.

I've always been able to see you. There's no need to be so shocked—I think I've already said enough about 'non-existence.' The first time I saw you was in senior high. At that point, I felt I'd already been playing ball for long enough, almost an entire lifetime. Ever since I started playing the junior league in elementary school, I've spent on average four or five hours a day training, long enough to ensure my collected knowledge comes to nothing apart from baseball. But on the field, it felt like precisely the opposite was true—as if nothing new could happen here to arouse my attention. Of course, I was wrong.

I had no idea then that I would become one of the most senior players in the Taiwanese professional league; I couldn't even predict what would happen a few minutes in the future. It was just a regular day of training on the school field, with players going up in turn for a 'free batting' session. From behind an L-shaped practice net, the coach lobbed balls into the strike zone, while the batters stood next to the home plate and attempted to hit them, ten tries each.

Only the catcher looked different. Wearing a helmet, visor and other protective gear, he squatted behind the home plate. If any of our bats missed their targets, he'd catch the ball and pass it back.

Behind the plate that day was Hsu Jen-Yu, the lead catcher of our side.

Hsu Jen-Yu was also my best friend on the team—we'd been close ever since elementary school.

But you already know all this. It was in the instant of the batting accident that I saw you for the first time.

I've heard that the highest recorded speed of a Taiwanese batter's swing is two hundred and fifty-one kilometres per hour. Which is to say, the tip of my bat would set out from my left shoulder at this velocity, describing an arc across my front, ending up behind my back to the right. So when that tip struck the side of the catcher's helmet, I didn't even have time to wonder: can a traditional baseball helmet withstand a thirty-five ounce bat moving at two hundred and fifty-one kilometres per hour?

I have no idea. Perhaps I'd been swinging even faster than that?

Baseball is often like that—training and the actual game are completely different.

Perhaps they'd never thought such a thing could happen, and only carried out tests with a ball.

Who on earth would hit the right side of a catcher's helmet with a bat? In the normal course of things, the only object likely to hit a catcher was a ball that could be caught in one hand, with a maximum speed of no more than a hundred and sixty kilometres per hour...

Those in charge of testing such impacts would surely be absolute baseball fanatics, and therefore likely to presume they'd seen it all.

It's as if you were born from that swinging bat.

The bat started moving, slicing downwards a little, speeding up as it moved in a horizontal arc across the front, and at the end the tip swung upwards behind my body. Because this was a strike (although, strictly speaking, I did hit *something...*), I stopped moving with my body turned completely to face first base. That's when I saw a tiny, tiny you squatting next to first. In the midst of all the confusion, I didn't stop to wonder why someone looking like an elementary school student would have appeared on a senior high baseball field, particularly during training, when outsiders were prohibited.

I was still a little confused—what did that cacophony have to do with the strange sensation now reaching my hands?

Everyone was crowding Hsu Jen-Yu, so I turned and entered the scrum. He was lying down, his protective gear scattered. There was a crack in the round earflap of his helmet. I don't know how many times I said I'm sorry or are you all right, because with him in that state, it didn't matter what I said, it wouldn't do any good...

It's as if you were Jen-Yu's replacement. After the incident, whenever I stepped onto the field, I saw you—amongst the spectators, on a broken chair in a corner of the locker room. During batting practice, you appeared to squat in the same position I first saw you in, hugging your knees and staring straight at me. I've always been terrified of ghosts and the dark, and even in a dorm room with a dozen other players, I never dared go to bed later than Jen-Yu, afraid of the murky shadows that rose as I stared at the bunks. But from that moment, I no longer had any fear.

It was like I suddenly understood that there were certain things only I could see, that I had to co-exist with.

After so many years, you still appear at every baseball game I play, still looking like an elementary school child. At times, I think you look like Jen-Yu as a kid, and wonder if you've come for those ghost story sorts of reasons, 'destiny' or 'a grudge'? This thought doesn't scare me, but rather gives a kind of hope, as if I were about to go somewhere warm. But you've never said anything, nor done anything in particular, just stared at me.

What on earth do you want?

You keep looking at me, and so we've co-existed like this for many years, in silence. And now I've reached the age at which I can start planning my 'farewell match.'

Today's the first time I'm seeing you off the field.

As you won't say anything, let me start.

There are many things Jen-Yu couldn't have known. And even you, constantly watching me, couldn't know. Listen to what a thirty-five-year-old player has to say. I'll be honest with you—won't try to conceal anything. This isn't a chance that comes along often. All sorts of people make their living from baseball, but the naturally frank aren't amongst them.

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There are some things only those who've stood near the home plate can understand. For instance, the strike zone.

The umpire, catcher, home plate and pitcher are arranged in a straight line, with a point to one side. This point is the batter, the position I'm most familiar with.

From the perspective of the pitcher, I'd have been on the left side of home plate, in the batter's

box used by left-handed batters. But in fact, when a southpaw is actually up at bat, his left arm would be to his rear, and it'd be his right shoulder facing the pitcher. All the baseball manuals—although in Taiwan, coaches and players believe more in instinct, I secretly read a few, such as Ted Williams' book—will tell you that the ideal batter leads with his shoulder, his body pulling the bat into motion, the bat leading his eye, watching as the ball shoots off into the field. If you're strong enough, like me, you might see the ball enter the field and then leave it, landing amidst the turbulent crowd behind outfield.

But all of this will already have been decided long before the swinging of the bat.

Because of the strike zone.

This question will test your understanding of baseball: What shape is the strike zone?

Yes, that's right, the width of the home plate, the height of your knees to your armpits. Sure, that's a perfectly accurate definition, but I wasn't asking for a definition. I asked: What shape is the strike zone?

A rectangle, right?

Have you actually seen a rectangle on the field?

Just as most people can't see you, no one has ever seen this rectangle. This was actually a trick question, because the answer is: it has no fixed shape. Every player's height is different, meaning the length varies. But that's not the most important thing, the main point is that every game has a different umpire, and even within a single game, the same umpire has a different relationship with every player and the team they belong to.

And so, everything changes.

You don't see this? Of course not, no baseball fan ever does. As always, your eyes are focused on the wrong place.

Every player practices on the field long before appearing on television, whereas every fan watches the game on TV before they know to come see it on the field.

It's this sequence of events that's pulled the wool over everyone's eyes.

Your gaze alights first on the pitcher, occasionally shifting to the catcher's lightning-quick code gestures. But in any case, in the first few seconds before the ball is thrown, your eyes jump to the pitcher. You watch him lift his leg, take a step forward, wind up his arm, spin and swing downwards, the ball shooting out—and then you zoom across to the catcher's mitt, and the ball nestling within it. But if you were more of a veteran, in that half a second, you'd already have quickly gauged the spatial relationship between the mitt, the pitcher's knees and home plate, and then you'd think: Did that go past the line? Was it out of bounds?

And then the umpire raises a hand to indicate: Strike!

So you think: Ah, it was okay after all.

After several more pitchers have been up, the ball ends up in a similar position, but the umpire, remaining unmoved, calls it out. You might be confused to start with—really? How was this different from the last decision? But your eyes are, at the end of the day, not video cameras, and are unable to do an instant replay, so you can only adjust quickly your own memory. You must have seen wrongly. Perhaps the ball really did take a different trajectory. And after a while, you get used to the idea, and tell yourself this must be the 'grey area,' where any sort of call is possible.

All of which means you never realise your greatest error: you invariably wait for the ball to stop moving before delineating the strike zone. And you think the pitcher, batter, catcher and umpire, huddled around the home plate, think in the same way.

Which is why I say, you have to be close enough to see what's going on.

Especially with things that practically don't exist.

We've seen thousands, maybe tens of thousands of balls in motion, the umpire most of all. He's the least replaceable person on the field, having seen more strikes than anyone else. To him, even as you are now, hugging your knees and squatting in a corner, he could take one look and

accurately work out, from the curve of your back and the length of your thighs, what your personal strike zone would be.

Even if he gets it wrong, everyone else on the field has to go along with it.

But I knew a person with an even more accurate understanding of strike zones.

He was the lead catcher of Min-He High School's team, and my close friend from even before I became a batter, Hsu Jen-Yu.

I can't talk about strike zones without bringing him up.

After the accident, I stopped pitching.

This might sound strange; after all, it happened during batting practice, but what I lost was the half of me that was a pitcher. Each time I stepped up to the mound and looked at the person waiting for the ball, the person facing me was no longer that familiar catcher, sturdy as a brick wall, and I'd feel a fierce anxiety reaching from my heart into my fingertips. You could only pitch with your utmost strength when looking at a wall in front.

Without that wall, my shoulder, arm and fingers were no longer able to 'see' the strike zone as they did before. They seemed to have shut their eyes the same moment Hsu Jen-Yu did.

A few days after the accident, I told my coach about a dream I'd had.

I was standing on the pitcher's mound, the highest point on the field. I looked behind me, and the players dotted across the in- and outfields were all me. And there I was again in the batter's box, on the left-hand side.

Finally, I looked at the catcher. It was Jen-Yu.

Through the bars of his catcher's mask, I could see his plump, dark brown face. Perhaps the colour was too dark, or I was too far away, but I couldn't quite make out the few pimples remaining on his forehead. Yet I could dimly see the scar beneath his right eye, left by some opposing team's pitcher sending the ball so close it grazed his cheek, a spinning missile at a hundred and forty kilometres per hour. He signalled to me—his right middle finger pointing at the ground, then his thumb jerking left. He was calling for an outside slider. Then his hands spread wide, and he was once more an impassive wall.

Those hands, in that space where nothing existed, had clearly sketched out the strike zone for me.

Without hesitating, I lifted my leg, took a step forward, swung down...

It all happened very quickly. My other selves in- and outfields held their breaths and knelt down, the me on the pitcher's mound flung the ball, which from its central position slid to the outer edge, and the me in the batter's box, caught off-guard, swung the bat and missed. The ball continued to spin gleefully outwards, while Jen-Yu swiftly knelt down in that fraction of a second, ready to grab the ball. Simultaneously, the me on the pitcher's mound watched batter's box me as his bat kept moving, not losing momentum, smashing backwards... as Jen-Yu's helmet was struck, it let out an enormous dull thud, a sound was clearer than a home run, so penetrating that a shiver ran from the ear directly to the heart. And Jen-Yu tumbled like a peg being hammered into the earth. From both outfield and infield, I let out a cry of terror. As the pitcher, I looked at myself the batter, equally terror-stricken. The distant versions of me sprinted towards the huddle of people around Jen-Yu next to home plate, and several people were talking, but pitcher and batter me could only look at each other. After a short while, the other selves looked with anger at the batter, and several of me pushed me roughly, loudly demanding something. I couldn't hear, not clearly, the only sound that reached me was the untimely, delayed radio broadcast, 'The next batter to take the field is number fifty, Hsieh Shi-Chen.'

I told my coach the whole dream, sobbing, 'Why me?'

Which me?

The coach told me to take a few days off and not to think too much.

Several months later, he told a reporter (but not me) that I was suffering from Steve Blass

Disease. A fairly long news item duly appeared, and being busybodies, they speculated which professional league teams might now have lost interest in me, and how much I might have lost in signing bonuses. Steve Blass Disease: when muscle memory vanishes for no clear reason, colloquially known as ‘pitcher’s cancer.’

That’s the article by your shoulder. No matter how many times I move house, I always hang it in my living room.

But I didn’t complain about what my coach had said. This way was fine too, giving up early, since I didn’t want—or didn’t dare—to keep trying. Before entering the professional league, I’d occasionally stood on the pitcher’s mound when I had a moment to spare, walking back and forth, swinging an arm. But from that angle, from your squatting perch to one side, you looked more and more like a scrawny version of Jen-Yu. No matter how I tried to imagine a batter standing there, visualising the distance from his knees to his armpits, the width of home plate, I couldn’t see the strike zone.

And that’s how you turned your face up to me.

I don’t know whether I actually had Steve Blass Disease, but I certainly couldn’t pitch any more, so it wasn’t totally wrong to say so. Tseng and Ling, pitchers who started in the professional league several years before me, apparently had terrible cases of Steve Blass Disease, the real thing. They’d both been the ace players of their teams, and afterwards spent four or five years trying to recover, before finally being released. By giving up early on, at least I ensured I wouldn’t end up like them, no hope left but not daring to despair.

In any case, all I lost was myself on the pitcher’s mound.

Just as a blind person develops better hearing to compensate, as a batter, I suddenly gained the ability to see the strike zone accurately. Of course I wasn’t really ‘seeing’ it. Rather, when the ball spun from the pitcher’s hand, in the infinitesimally tiny amount of time that followed, I would immediately know if the ball was a strike or out of bounds. And that’s not something that can be seen, I know, because even if I were to shut my eyes during the process—going against what every batting manual advises (‘Keep your gaze fixed on the ball till the last possible second’)—I could still, in the purple-black darkness, visualise the exact trajectory of each pitch.

This version of me went from being a pretty good batter in senior high, to the highest profile young left-handed batter in the whole country. People who’d written about my Steve Blass Disease began creating more stories, saying that after I accidentally injured my teammate, I begun sprinting for the top. In one report, my coach quoted me as saying, ‘Now that Jen-Yu can’t finish his journey, I want to carry him with me as I achieve our dreams.’ These words made their way into the headlines when our team was in the finals of the E SUN Cup National High School Baseball Championship. Sports commentators began to notice me—they reckoned I had an excellent batting speed (there was proof of this now, apart from the helmet incident), superb balance, and a batting accuracy that ‘unerringly finds the centre of the ball.’

There wasn’t anything untrue about all of that. After all, I couldn’t ask them to see what my own eyes couldn’t.

I only knew there was no point trying to hit those impossible-to-reach out of bounds balls.

Fair balls come closer to the body anyway, but not too close, and are easy to hit.

No, this isn’t what’s known as a ‘batter’s eye,’ what you’re talking about is a precious skill and talent—a matter of making rapid calculations based on the eye’s perception and the brain’s calculation.

But that’s not what I do. Even with my eyes shut, I’m just as accurate.

I’ve felt uneasy about this too, suspecting this ability doesn’t truly belong to me. Will there be a day when I stand in the batter’s box, and find that just as with my pitching, I’ve lost the ability to find the strike zone?

Can the cells of baseball cancer spread?

Still, I'm thirty-five this year, an old man in the world of baseball, and this sensation hasn't gone away. It propelled me into the professional league, and in the first year I received the trust of my coach. That's why I'm one of the lead batters even today. And because of this sensation, I've been better able than other players to make my accommodation with those 'non-existent' things.

I've never told this to a single soul, except you. I don't think anyone else would believe me.

