

# FLOATING

## 懸浮

The first work of fiction in six years from acclaimed critic and essayist C.F. Hu, *FLOATING* is a novel in stories that explores the fleeting and incidental linkages that characterise modern urban life and how we experience the city in our disparate yet hyper-connected world.

These stories traverse national borders, taking us from Taipei, to Hong Kong, through Macau, Toyko and New York. As readers, we drift along with the characters. A death by morning's first light, the private reflections of a middle-aged author, a chance meeting far from home of a widow and her daughter, a retired man and his embittered wife, the eternal graduate student, a book shop owner coming home but unable to find his roots, a grand dame residing in one of the world's most expensive hotels, an ambitious young manager the night before a business trip... These characters may not know each other, but they are related in more profound ways.

Despite the floating quality of the prose, these characters are substantial and the book takes on concrete social concerns such as intergenerational justice, gender equality and gay rights. Life can be desolate, but light comes from our smallest decisions. Their stories are a reminder to us all; freedom to choose your own way of life is a fundamental human right.

### C.F. Hu 胡晴舫

C.F. HU, novelist and essayist, was born in Taipei and has lived in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing and Tokyo. Now based in New York City, Hu explores the solitude of urban life and contemporary cultural identity in a globalised world. Her book, *THE THIRD PERSON*, received Taiwan's Golden Tripod Award for the best literary publication of 2013.



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By C.F. Hu. Translated by Helen Wang.

## Chapter 5: Ever After

Ah Hai walked away, leaving his love in the bookshop. I'll never be able to go back there, he thought. If only it would go bust. It would save him the bother of having to avoid it. Save him the worry of inadvertently passing this way again, of rubbing salt into the wound.

Mei Mei wanted an explanation, but Ah Hai had little to say.

He delivered his plaint softly, a sadness in his eyes: 'You know better than anyone what you've done to me. I may be well into my thirties and still living with my parents, but that's because the thesis is dragging on and I can't finish until I have completed the research. And I may only be working in a bookshop for pocket money, but that doesn't mean I have to accept love as a form of pity.'

'But if you leave me, what will I do?' said Mei Mei. 'There'll be no one to look after me.'

'You could start by learning to grow up and look after yourself,' Ah Hai replied stiffly.

Mei Mei burst into tears. She was young and had a natural beauty. For her, love meant being held in the palms of men and being their princess. She cried with the same diligence one sees in a small child's handwriting homework, unconcerned that the bookshop was still open and they were still standing behind the counter, working. She was wearing the sleeveless lemon dress she had just bought in New York. Pale smooth arms of white jade. Ten perfectly painted nails peeping through her flip flops. Silky black hair swaying like willow by the river. Her face glistening with a scattering of tears. Didn't he love her any more? she asked. His smile was bitter. How could he not love her? Even the immaculate way she cried touched him. He didn't reply, didn't say that her tears fell like acid on his heart, hissing as they melted one tiny hole after another, deep, endless black caverns. It was a critical moment and sweet words would only make the break-up harder to bear.

'Then don't leave me.' Mei Mei started stamping her feet.

There was only one person left in the bookshop: a young guy with a rucksack on his back, standing in the travel section. Ah Hai glanced at Tony, his boss, who kept peering out of the office at the back to check that the customer wasn't helping himself to their stock. An elderly woman had just walked out wearing a big overcoat despite the heat and Ah Hai had seen her brazenly stuffing Li Han's debut novel into her pocket. He hadn't stopped her, in fact he'd even exchanged a few words with her. It would have been a different matter if she'd taken a copy of the romance novel by the American housewife; he would have called the police, mostly because he'd already had to place two orders for that translation this week and he had no desire to phone the arrogant distributor again. But also because they never sold any copies of Li Han's early novels and it was just lying there gathering dust and if someone wanted to waste their

life reading it, then that was fine by him. The novelist had even killed himself, but not before offering his wife's body to the chopping block of criticisms of his writing. The writer's approach to art was too intense, but as a reader you had to read a few lines to show your respect. He felt well disposed towards this elegant thief with her elevated taste, not least because her eyes were so beautiful when she smiled, despite her advancing years.

Tony didn't know that Ah Hai and Mei Mei were at that moment breaking up. He winked at Ah Hai to tell him to keep a close eye on the sole customer in the travel section. Tony was still suffering from jet lag, making him drowsy in the afternoons. Two weeks earlier, on the pretext of needing an assistant to help him at a book fair, he had taken Mei Mei on a business trip to New York. She had been delighted to be invited and brought back a suitcase full of booty: European film posters, second hand German books that she couldn't read, strappy Roman sandals, a silver crucifix necklace and the outfit she was wearing now. Not long before that she'd also been to a literary conference in Tokyo with the poet who often came to the bookshop to chat with Tony. They'd been away for six days and five nights, including one night in Kyoto and another in Osaka, where she'd bought souvenirs and a selection of Japanese gizmos. Mei Mei and Ah Hai were on the same wages and he didn't know she could possibly have so much money. But as he never invited her to go anywhere with him, he couldn't really ask. The whole thing made him feel a bit left out.

'I can't go on like this,' Ah Hai announced.

'What do you mean like this?' Mei Mei released another teardrop.

Oh, Mei Mei, Mei Mei, not again! Her feigned girlish innocence was a weapon of mass destruction.

'Either we both resign, or we split up,' said Ah Hai.

'Why do you always have to be so extreme? Neither of us has any money, we can't both be out of work at the same time.' She made little gasps for air.

Tony strolled out of his office and passed behind the young guy, making a point of stopping for a few minutes to make him uncomfortable. But he was completely unaware of his presence as flicked through *A Guide to Hokkaido*.

Moments later, Tony was standing before them and Ah Hai realised Mei Mei's face was completely dry. No trace of the tears. Vanished like dewdrops in the sunlight.

It was just after six. The bookshop would close in another hour or so. Every day at this time Tony would come and ask them if they'd like to go for a drink at the bar next door. He'd suggest that he and Mei Mei go first and Ah Hai could come and join them after he'd locked up. Mei Mei would hesitate, look at Ah Hai and flutter her eyelashes, her eyes sparkling with life, like a lamb unburdened by decisions. And he would wave his hand feebly and tell them to go ahead, he'd be there later. At which she'd grab her handbag and emerge from behind the counter. She'd follow Tony out of the shop without once glancing back. They'd be waiting for him next door, she said loudly. As soon they were outside, they'd behave like a pair of lovers who had waited all day to share their innermost thoughts with the person they held closest in the world.

By the time Ah Hai had pulled down the metal shutter, cashed up, put the day's takings in the security

bag, taken it to the back office, put it in the large middle drawer of Tony's desk, left the shop through the side door and gone into the bar to look for them, it was almost always pushing nine. They'd usually gone by then—because, as Tony would explain the following day, Mei Mei was hungry and couldn't wait any longer and he had to take her to eat. Or his poet-friend had phoned and invited them on somewhere else. Tony's brow would crease into a deep V above the black rims of his glasses. The image of a kind, considerate person. The grin. The hypocrisy made Ah Hai want to throw up. The implication being that a real man has a responsibility to feed his girl, that it was a sin to let her go hungry. Those conversations always made him uncomfortable.

And if they were still there, then Tony's poet-friend would usually have joined them. Their loud little group in the corner of the bar, chatting and laughing, without a thought for anyone else. Mei Mei would drink herself into oblivion, vomit and collapse, her body reeking, every last touch of femininity gone. Reduced to a mouthful of meaningless words. A fallen woman, a drunk. By that stage she could no longer distinguish between Ah Hai and Tony. She would kiss whoever put his arms around her, pressing her chest against him. The next day at work, she would nurse her headache and drink the coffee Ah Hai made for her and complain endlessly that their boss and his literary friend had deliberately got her drunk. But the truth was she liked it. Their own relationship had started over drinks and developed from there. Ah Hai liked the way she drank—straight forward, unabashed. He loved the way her slender body would fall against his when drunk. Like the other men, he loved Mei Mei because she was beautiful and not because she could recite every one of the *Three Hundred Poems of the Tang Dynasty*.

Ah Hai propped his head against his hand, struggling to keep his eyes open while he waited for the last customer to leave. The ones who lingered until closing time were mostly the lonely ones. When the time came, they had to tear themselves away, as though the moment they left the bookshop they would never see another book again. Yet, they must have had homes full of books, never enough bookcases, he guessed, each shelf stacked two rows deep, with yet more books strewn across the floor until there was no space to move. And yet whenever they left the house, they wouldn't be able to resist purchasing another to take home. Never mind its age, content. People who take in stray dogs must think the same way, he thought. They start with one, then another, knowing perfectly well their own limitations. That they don't have enough time, or space, or money, to take in every dog they see. That's enough, they tell themselves. Just this one, then no more for the time being, you can't take in all the world's stray dogs... But they can't stop themselves. It's like an addiction. So a once dazzling home becomes a kennel, filled with dogs large and small, barking, howling, peeing. A pervasive stink of animal. Heaven for dog lovers, who accept these things as par for the course, but enough to make others keel over and have a heart attack. For those who love books, a bookshop is like an orphanage, each volume an orphan waiting to be adopted. To leave books in a bookshop is to turn one's back on children starved of affection, to refuse them a loving home. Walking out of the bookshop is like cruel abandon. Completely unbearable.

If they knew these orphanages might one day disappear forever there would be nervous breakdowns, he feared. The brutal truth would be difficult to accept.

The young guy with the rucksack left without buying a single book. But Ah Hai knew he'd chosen.

He'd taken a photo of it on his phone so he could buy it online when he got home and enjoy the lower price (thanks to reduced logistics costs) and the service (free delivery to his door). Did anyone still buy books in bookshops? They were doing so badly that Tony had already set up a table in a corner selling gift bags, fancy notebooks and T-shirts printed with slightly misquoted English sayings like 'Art Is a Dirty Job But Somebody Has to Do It' and 'Stay Calm and Start a Revolution'. The written word was no longer for reading, it was for wearing. Recently Tony had been thinking about getting rid of the classical literature section. If he kept only the popular fiction, he could replace the shelves with a couple of tables and sell coffee.

The young guy was the last customer. The sun slipped behind the tall building opposite, casting the entire street in shadow. Yet for some reason there was a delay before the street lights came on and the bookshop remained in this Judgement Day gloom.

Ah Hai mechanically pulled down the iron shutter, put a few stray books back in their places, emptied the till, put the cash in the white security bag, wrote down the date, then, dragging his heels, went back to Tony's office. He pulled out the large middle drawer and put the cash bag inside. Just as he was closing the drawer, he spotted a brown envelope.

Instinctively, he reached inside the drawer and pulled it out. When he ran his finger under the seal, a stack of old photographs spilled out over the desk. He caught his breath.

Mei Mei. Lots of Mei Meis. Naked. In one photo, Mei Mei wore nothing but a pair of red high heels, draped across a bed, her right hand pushing her right breast up to her red tongue, poised to lick her own nipple. Another Mei Mei, standing at the window, hands on the window sill, legs apart, looking back at him. Her spine traced an exquisite curve down her back. Her eyes summoned him. Take me. Another Mei Mei straddled a stool, pouting. One after another. Mei Mei, Little Mei. Mei Meis familiar and unfamiliar.

His head was spinning in disgust. He felt sick. His instinct was to turn the photos over, to cover them, to look away. How could it be that looking at pictures of strangers having sex filled him with pleasure? Online, he couldn't take his eyes off them. Yet naked photos of his own girlfriend distressed him so much that he couldn't bear to see them. Times had changed and it wasn't that he was old-fashioned or that he minded his girlfriend baring all in photos. So why were his insides knotting together? Why was his head so heavy and his feet so light that he could hardly stand?

He couldn't help looking back at them. He turned them over one by one. It's unbelievable quite how much humans are attracted to corpses and naked bodies. Beauty is not the only thing that attracts the eye. In fact, quite the opposite: the more shocking, the more abnormal, the more bizarre, the harder it is to resist. The body is to society what rotting flesh is to flies. People are drawn by the stench. Their eyes are fixed on the meat just as they persist in condemning it, holding their noses, screwing up their faces, clicking their tongues in delight. The crazy fascination with lewd photos of celebrities is merely an extension of the European freak show—the two-headed dwarf, the African woman with the giant clitoris, the elephant man, the hermaphrodite covered in scales—so rare, so unusual, terrifying yet compelling, the more repulsive, the more desirable, enjoyable and exciting. Why not pay a little more to reach out and touch, to demonstrate your extraordinary courage? They are the bodies of other people, exposed,

vulnerable, unable to defend themselves, unable to resist the invasive eyes running over them, arousing a secret pleasure and a sense of superiority in the observer. My eyes wander over every inch of your body, and you cannot say no. Stripped of clothes, those naked bodies are locked in the photos, like animals caged in the zoo, their only function to provide pleasure for men, devoid of all dignity. For a time, the crowds forget that their own lives are similarly base, that their own flesh is declining with the relentless passing of time, distressed by sorrow and physical labour, distorted by obstacles and assaults, decaying by the minute, by the second, heading for ruin. And during that time, that other body seems weaker, more useless, more vulnerable than their own. My broken shell is suddenly less bleak, less alone. In life, no one is superior to anyone else.

Ah Hai put it down to power. Watching was a willful violation of the person being watched. I look at you and my eyes penetrate the domain of your body, intruding into every inch of your personal space. You have no way of resisting or refusing, have no choice but to let my eyes occupy you at their will, until I am tired of looking and stop.

He stared at Mei Mei in the photos and felt that, just as in real life, Mei Mei was not his alone. The photos were hazy, the lighting was dim. They appeared to have been taken in a hotel room with an automatic camera. There was a naivety about the girl in the photos; her crudely drawn eyebrows, the way she dressed, her funny expression, the exaggerated length of her limbs. But they were Mei Mei's eyebrows, it was Mei Mei's chest, there was no mistaking Mei Mei's long slim legs. As he looked at Mei Mei he imagined the men who had seen these photos standing as a group looking at her, each claiming her, even if not solely for himself. But she had them. She had their attention, all of it. She spread her legs to hook them in, as attack. This was not only for the photograph, but also for the photographer behind the camera, for Ah Hai who was looking at the photo now and for all the men she imagined looking at them. She wanted Ah Hai to love her forever, had begged him not to leave her, but was his love enough? It seemed she also needed Tony's love and the poet's love and the love of yet more men and women. People who examined her elegant carcass from their own corners their eyes gleaming, burning with desire.

Looking Mei Mei in the eye in the photo, he spoke to her silently; 'What are you going to do with all their love?' Mei Mei arched her back and pouted, but she didn't answer. Poor Mei Mei, even when she was trying to look sexy it was mechanical and dull, lacking in creativity. She had turned herself into a cheap porn star. Ah Hai sighed. His own credentials were not much better. Porn and love were similarly lacking in new imagination. Candlelight meant romance, diamonds meant commitment, knickers meant sex, bikinis meant sex appeal, female bodies were sexy, male bodies virile. If you love me, you show me your body. And if you love me, you don't show your body to other people. This is the unstated code, the basis of a whole cultural semiotics.

He put the photos back in the envelope, pushed it firmly beneath the cash bag and carefully closed the drawer.

He left by the side door and set off in the opposite direction to the bar, his hands in his pockets. He

picked up speed as he walked. His mum was always telling him to make time and come home for dinner and today was the ideal opportunity. He thought about his father and mother and how they had been living in the same house for thirty odd years. A thought: perhaps he should look for an older lover. Someone who'd seen something of the world, was financially independent and had saved a wealth of life experiences, someone he wouldn't have to look after but who might look after him. He desperately wanted to grow up, but was scared. Because he didn't know what growing up meant, or what he should do when it happened. If Mei Mei's way of showing she was a woman was to take off her clothes, presenting her perfect bosom like a farmer displays his ripe fruit, how should he prove he was a real man? Should he hurry up and graduate, leave college and find a job? Become socially productive? Let his work define him? In that case he would no longer be Ah Hai, he'd be the engineer, the professor, the sales assistant, the electrician or the plumber. A man who ought to know how to look after his girl. He is supposed not to let her take trashy photos like those to satisfy the fantasies of strangers, but would require her body to engage only in housework and providing him with children. Recalling the sexual innuendoes contained within Tony's man-to-man advice, he suddenly realised how wild and brutal was this so-called world, without boundaries, primitive yet pulsing with life, where the law of the jungle reigned supreme and one survived by whatever any means one could. It was not the world of films or mobile phones. It could not be explained by academic theory. It was not a series of lifeless screen images. It was not printed on a stack of pure white paper. The people who lived in it were not French philosophers scented with perfume and spouting their *ennui*, or American tech upstarts interested in money who simultaneously pretended to want to change the world. It was an uncivilised boor acting on instinct, oozing sweat and body odour, speaking only the language of sex and money, who raises his fist and is willing to punch anyone in the face. The blood is real. The lost tooth is real. The humiliation, especially, is real. That is our so-called world, our society, our human civilization. It wasn't a matter of being advanced or backward, they were all as rough, overbearing, unreasonable, led by the convergence of male desire and female vanity. Whoever is able to harness these two dominant forces holds the balance of power.

As the last glimmer of twilight faded and the street lamps glowed in the dark haze of the city and the river of cars flowed on, it dawned on Ah Hai that he was already grown up. He was still at school, he was a student, he wore shorts and flip flops. He divided the world into 'them' and 'me.' He had nothing but contempt for 'their' feeble hypocrisy. He had nothing in common with 'them.' He was thirty-three and had spent thirty solid years living as a member of this society. He had seen himself as observer, not participant, as uncorrupted inside this little bookshop. But in fact he had, without realising it, begun to live a scaled-down version of real adult life. Love matures you and Mei Mei had made him take that step into adulthood. Girls always matured earlier. He was living completely in that world, he just hadn't been living at the centre of it. Because as far as that world was concerned, his goodness in which he took such pride was the same as Mei Mei's gorgeous body. If it couldn't be converted into some kind of currency then it didn't count. Mei Mei's naked photographs were, in her imagination, a currency, her passport into that world.

On the other hand, he had left behind a thousand books, each volume the essence of a human brain. But if they could not sell a single copy, then it would be as if it had never existed. They couldn't even suffer the fate of being forgotten, because in order to be forgotten there must first be memory and no one had ever read nor paid attention to these books. That leaves only the lewd photos of celebrities that circulate online and the sex diaries of novelists exposed before their deaths, many of which exist only in mankind's memory bank. Over time they will become social history, a part of our civilization, and no one will ever doubt their validity. Because these days people only look for information online. Websites command more authority than our oldest libraries and our wisest brains. If it's on a website, it must be fact, the history of the world wars, macroeconomics, atmospheric sciences, sports guides, weight-loss recipes, bomb-making formulae, religious miracles and legends, are all at the tip of your finger. Information has replaced knowledge. The network's search function determines the contours of our knowledge map. People think that knowing which restaurants to go to is living a full life, that hitting the like button on Facebook is upholding social justice, that writing a couple of responses to some news items is a cerebral activity. Even with this vast information at our fingertips, for eyes that only wish to stare at a tiny screen on a phone, an image is worth a thousand words and a picture of Mei Mei's chest triumphs over the thousands of words Cao Xueqin used to describe the Twelve Beauties in his *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Thanks to technology, images have become the new century's common language. The new dynasty is imminent, or perhaps has already been born. Ah Hai was a loyal follower of the fallen dynasty before it. His martial art was writing, which he practised day in day out, selecting his words, creating his sentences. But by the time the fighter finished his training, would there still be an empire to defend? Perhaps with the change of dynasty, new weapons would replace the traditional arts of war and the complexity of Ah Hai's hand and foot combinations would be no match for the simple force of the bullet.

Night hung heavy over the city. In the dim urban haze, he quickened his step and broke into a jog. He pulled further and further from the bookshop. He had abandoned his frontier post and before him the empire gates were wide open. The foot soldier thought only of running, of leaving it all behind. He didn't want to say good bye. He never wanted to see any of it again. Bookshops and their like were going to disappear eventually anyway.