

NOTES OF A CROCODILE

鱷魚手記

The crocodile is a living iceberg: a great presence that hides nine-tenths of itself underwater, with only eyes and nose breaking the surface. To the young university student Lazi, she and those who feel as she does must live like crocodiles, as their sexuality forces them to present a face to the world that looks nothing like their entire selves.

Qiu Miaojin, author of *Last Words from Montmartre*, displays her mastery of the personal voice in another dark and highly complex story of love between women in an oppressive social context – the first years after the lifting of martial law in Taiwan. A series of eight diary entries tell the story of Lazi’s relationships with others looking to find themselves as she is, and particularly with Shui Ling, a senior classmate with whom she is in love.

This book, dubbed by some as Taiwan’s best novel about sexuality and queer identity tells the hidden stories of dreamers escaping an age of enforced homogeneity. It speaks of pain in the “I” that Qiu Miaojin crafts better than anyone else.

Qiu Miaojin 邱妙津

Qiu Miaojin was a landmark writer, as well as a literary pioneer for building positive queer identities in contemporary Taiwan. Born in 1969, she grew up in the later years of the White Terror, a time that greatly influenced her work. She began writing serious fiction in college, after which she moved to Paris to study psychology. Her literary creation never ceased, and she won several domestic prizes for both novels and novellas. Terms she coined, like “Lazi” and “crocodile,” were taken up by Taiwan’s queer community and made a part of that culture. Her longer works, such as *Last Words from Montmartre* and *Notes of a Crocodile* have been sold to the U.S., China, Japan, France, and Spain, and published in English as part of the New York Review of Books Classics Series.



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By Qiu Miaojin

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Excerpt courtesy of New York Review of Books

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In the past I believed that every man had his own innate prototype of a woman, and that he would fall in love with the woman who most resembled his type. Although I'm a woman, I have a female prototype too.

My type would appear in hallucinations just as you were freezing to death atop an icy mountain, a legendary beauty from the furthest reaches of fantasy. For four years, that's what I believed. And I wasted all my college days—when I had the most courage and honesty I would ever have towards life—because of it.

I don't believe it anymore. It's like the impromptu sketch of a street artist, a little drawing taped to my wall. When I finally stopped believing in it and learned to leave it behind, I wound up selling a collection of priceless treasures for next to nothing. It was then that I realized I should leave behind some sort of record before my memories evaporated. I feared that otherwise it would be like waking from a dream, when the inventory of what had been bought and sold—and at what price—would be forever lost.

It's like a series of roadside warning signs. The one behind me says: DON'T BELIEVE THE FANTASY. The one ahead of me says: WIELD THE AX OF CRUELTY. One day it dawned on me as if I were writing my own name for the first time: Cruelty and mercy are one and the same. Existence in this world relegates good and evil to the exact same status. Cruelty and evil are only natural, and together they are endowed with half the power and half the utility in this world. It seems I'm going to have to learn to be crueler if I'm to be-

come the master of my own fate.

Wielding the ax of cruelty against life, against myself, against others. It's the rule of animal instinct, ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics—and the axis of all four. And the comma that punctuated being twenty-two.

3

Shui Ling. Wenzhou Street. The white bench in front of the French bakery. The number 74 bus.

We sit at the back of the bus. Shui Ling and I occupy opposite window seats, the aisle between us. The December fog is sealed off behind glass. Dusk starts to set in around six, enshrouding Taipei. The traffic is creeping along Heping East Road. At the outer edge of the Taipei Basin, where the sky meets the horizon, is the last visible wedge of a bright orange sun whose radiance floods through the windows and spills onto the vehicles behind us, like the

blessing of some mysterious force.

Silent, exhausted passengers pack the aisle, heads hung, bodies propped against the seats, oblivious. Through a gap in the curtain of their winter coats, I catch Shui Ling's eye, trying to contain the enthusiasm in my voice.

"Did you look outside?" I ask, ingratiatingly. "Mmm," comes her barely audible reply.

Then silence. For a still moment, Shui Ling and I are sitting together in the hermetically sealed bus. Out the windows, dim silhouettes of human figures wind through the streets. It's a magnificent night scene, gorgeous and restrained. The two of us are content. We look happy. But underneath, there is already a strain of something dark, malignant. Just how bitter it would become, we didn't know.

4

In 1987, I broke free from the draconian university entrance-exam system and enrolled in college. People in this city are manufactured and canned, raised for the sole purpose of taking tests and making money. The eighteen-year-old me went through the high-grade production line and was processed in three years, despite the fact that I was pure carrion inside.

That fall, in October, I moved into a second-floor apartment on Wenzhou Street. The leaseholders were a married couple who had graduated a few years earlier. They gave me a room with a huge window overlooking an alley. The two rooms across from mine were rented by two sisters. The young married couple was always in the living room watching TV. They spent a fair amount of time on the coffee-colored sofa. "We got married our senior year," they told me, smiling. But most of the time, they didn't say a word. The sisters would spend all night in one of their rooms watching a different channel. Passing the door, you'd hear bits of lively conversation. I never saw my housemates unless I had to. Just came and went on my own. Everyone kept to themselves.

So despite the five of us living together under one roof, it might as well have been a deaf home.

I lived in solitude. Lived at night. I'd wake up at midnight and ride my bike—a red Giant—to a nearby store where I'd buy dried noodles, thick pork soup, and spring rolls. Then I'd come home and read while I ate. Take a shower, do laundry. In my room, there was neither the sound of another human being nor light. I'd write in my journal all night, or just read. I became obsessed with Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer. I devoured all kinds of books for tortured souls. Started collecting issues of the independence movement's weekly. Studied up on political game theory, an antidote to my spiritual reading. It made me feel like an outsider, which became my way of recharging. At the break of dawn, around six or seven, like a nocturnal creature afraid of the light, I'd finally lay my head—which by then was spilling over with thoughts—down onto the comforter.

That's how it went when things were good. Most of the time, however, I didn't eat a single thing all night. Didn't shower. Couldn't get out of bed. Didn't write in my journal or talk. Didn't

read a single page or register the sound of another human being. All day long, I'd cry myself sick into my pillow. Sleep was just another luxury.

Didn't want anyone around. People were useless to me. Didn't need anyone. I started hurting myself and getting into all sorts of trouble.

Home was a credit-card bill footed by Nationalist Party voters. I didn't need to go back. Being in college gave me a sense of vocation. It exempted me from an oppressive system of social and personal responsibility—from going through the motions like a cog, from being whipped and beaten by everyone for not having worked hard enough and then having to put on a repentant face afterward. That system had already molded me into a flimsy, worthless shell. It drove my body to retreat into a self-loathing soul, and what's even scarier is that nobody knew or seemed to recognize it. My social identity was comprised of these two distinct, co-existing constructs. Each writhed toward me with its incessant demands—though when it came down to it, I spent more time getting to know my way around the supermarket next door than I did getting comfortable in my own skin.

Didn't read the paper. Didn't watch TV. Didn't go to class—except for gym, because the teacher took attendance. Didn't go out and didn't talk to my roommates. The only time I ever spoke at all was in the evenings or afternoons at the Debate Society, where I would go to preen my feathers and practice social intercourse. All too soon I realized that I was an innately beautiful peacock and de-

cided that I shouldn't let myself go. However lazy, a peacock still ought to give its feathers a regular preening, and having been bestowed with such a magnificent set, I couldn't help but seek the mainstream of society as a mirror. With that peacock swagger, it was hard to resist indulging in a little strutting, but that's how it went, and it was a fundamentally bad habit.

The fact is, most people go through life without ever living. They say you have to learn how to construct a self who remains free in spite of the system. And you have to get used to the idea that it's every man for himself in this world. It requires a strange self-awareness, whereby everything down to the finest detail must be performed before the eyes of the world.

Since there's time to kill, you have to use boredom to get you to the other side. In English, you'd say: *Break on through*. That's more like it.

So she did me wrong. If my old motto was *I'm sentencing her to the guillotine*, my new motto contained a revelation: *The power to construct oneself is destiny*. If only it weren't for you, Shui Ling. In spite of everything, the truth is I still can't take it. I can't take it. Really, I can't. No matter how far I've come, it's never far enough. The pattern was already in place.

It must have been around October 1987. I was biking down Royal Palm Boulevard and passed somebody. I remembered it was their birthday. It was at that precise moment that all of my pent-up grief and fear hit me at once. I knew more or less that I'd been rejected, and that was

the bottom line. But somehow, I was convinced I had to get even.

She'd just turned twenty. I'd turned eighteen five months earlier. She and some friends from high school walked past me, and I managed to glance at her. But as for what significance that glance held, it was as if my whole life had flashed before my eyes. Though they were off in the distance, I could still feel the glow of her smile. It left me with the acute sense that she never failed to elicit the adoration and affection of others, that she was someone who radiated a pure, childlike contentment.

Even now I'm still in awe of her innate power to command such devotion—not only her charms but how it felt to be deprived of them. She maintained only a handful of friendships. In the past, the people around her had clung dearly to her, giving her their entire attention. She didn't need any more of that, but she didn't have

much of a choice. She was trapped and suffocating. Whenever I was

around her, I'd become clingy, too. If I wasn't by her side, I felt distant from other people, when in fact she was the one who was distant. That's how it worked. It was her natural gift.

I didn't see her my entire senior year of high school. I was careful to avoid her. Didn't dare take the initiative, though I longed for her to notice me in the crowd. An upperclassman and my senior, she was an ominous character, a black spade. To shuffle and draw the same card again would be even more ominous.

6

The lecture hall for Introduction to Chinese Literature was packed. I got there late and had to sheepishly lift my chair up higher than the rostrum and carry it all the way to the front row. The professor stopped lecturing, and all the other sheep turned and gawked at me and my antics.

Toward the end of class, someone passed a note from behind: *Hey, can I talk to you after class? Shui Ling.* She had sought me out. I knew it would happen. Even if I had switched to a different section, she would have sought me out all the same. She who hid in the crowd, who didn't want anyone to see her with her aloofness and averted eyes. When I stepped forward, she stepped out, too. And she had pointed with a child's wanton smile and said, "I want that one." There was no way I could refuse. And like a potted sunflower that had just been sold to a customer, I was taken away.

This, from a beautiful girl whom I was already deeply, viscerally attracted to. Things were getting good. There she was, standing right in front of me. She brushed the waves of hair away from her face with a seductiveness that painfully seared my heart like a tattoo. Her feminine radiance was overpowering. I was about to get knocked out of the ring. It was clear from that moment on, we'd never be equals. How could we, with me under the table, scrambling to summon a different me, the one she would worship and put on a pedestal? No way was I coming out.

"What are you doing here?" I was so anxious that I had to blurt something out. She didn't

say a word or seem the least bit embarrassed.

“Did you switch to this section to make up a class?” She didn’t look up at me. She just stood there, dragging one foot behind her in the hallway, and didn’t say a thing, as if this one-sided conversation had nothing to do with her.

“How’d you know I switched?” Abruptly, she broke her silence. Her eyes were shimmering with amazement, and I could finally meet them. She was now looking right at me, wide-eyed.

“Well, of course I’d know!” I didn’t want her to think I’d been noticing her. “You finally said something!” I said, heaving an exaggerated sigh of relief. She smiled at me shyly, even teasingly, and I let out a huge laugh, relieved that I’d made her smile. The glow on her face was like rays of sunshine along a golden beach.

She told me that she’d started to feel nervous as soon as I walked into the room. She wanted to talk to me, but didn’t know what to say. I pointed to her shoelaces. She gingerly leaned forward to tie them. She said when she saw me, she couldn’t bring herself to speak, and then she didn’t want to say anything, so then she just stood there. She threw her purple canvas backpack over her shoulder and crouched on the floor. As she started talking, I felt the sudden urge to reach over and touch her long hair, which looked so soft and supple. You don’t know a thing, but I figured it all out in an instant, I told her silently in my heart. I reached over and held her backpack instead, and feeling mildly contented by the closeness of its weight, wished that she would go on tying her shoes.

It was already six when class ended. Shadows had lengthened across the campus, and the evening breeze lilted in the air. We grabbed our bikes and headed off together. We took the main thoroughfare on campus, keeping with the leisurely pace of the traffic on the wide open road. I didn’t know if I was following her, or if she was following me. Within a year, the two of us would come to cherish our ambiguous rapport, at once intimate and unfamiliar, and tempered by moments of silent confrontation.

“Why’d you come over and talk to me?” In my heart I already knew too much but pretended to know nothing.

“Why wouldn’t I talk to you?” She sounded slightly irritated. The dusk obscured her face, so I couldn’t read her expression. But as soon as she spoke, I could tell she’d had a tough freshman year. There was a curious note of dejection in her answer. I already knew her all too well.

“I’m just an underclassman you’ve seen, like, three times!” I nearly exploded.

“Not even,” she said coolly to herself.

My eyes were fixed on her long skirt as it wafted in the breeze. “Weren’t you worried that I wouldn’t remember you, or wouldn’t want to talk to you?”

“I knew you weren’t like that.” Her reaction was perfectly composed, as if everything to do with me was already set in stone.

We reached the school gates, not quite sure what to do next. She seemed to want to see where I lived. The way she suggested it conveyed a touch of familial kindness, like a tough but pliable cloth whose inner softness made my heart ache. Besides, as they say, if the floodwaters are rushing straight toward you, what are you going to do to stop them? This was how she treated me, for no apparent reason. I took her toward Xinsheng South Road, back to Wenzhou

Street.

“How’s this year going?” I tried to break through her gloom.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” She squeezed her eyes shut and grimaced slightly, lifting her chin in a hopeless look.

“You don’t want to tell me?” I was practically edging her onto the road. I was sure she was going to get hit by a car.

She shook her head. “I don’t want to tell anyone.”

“How did you get this way?” It pained my heart to hear her speak such nonsense.

“Yeah, well, I’ve changed.” Her eyes flickered with a haughtiness, underscoring the boldness of her statement.

Her answer was so immature that I felt tempted to tease her. “Into what?”

“I’ve just changed, that’s all. I’m not the same person I was in high school.” I could detect a note of self-hatred in the viciousness of her tone.

Hearing those words, “I’ve changed,” made me truly sad. The traffic had illuminated Xinsheng South Road in an opulent yellow. We followed the red brick wall that enclosed the school grounds, pausing to lean against a railing. To our left were the city streets, whose bright lights seemed to be calling. To our right was the dimly lit campus, teeming with the splendors of solitude. There’s nothing that won’t change, do you understand? I said in my heart. “Can you count the number of lights that are on in that building over there?” I pointed to a brand-new high-rise at the intersection.

“Uh, I see lights in five windows, so maybe, like, five?” she said brightly.

Just wait and see how many there are later on. Will you still remember? I asked myself, answering with a nod.

7

The first semester she was my lifeline. It was a clandestine form of dating—the kind where the person you’re going out with doesn’t know it’s a date. I denied myself, and I denied the fact that she was part of my life, so much so that I denied the dotted line that connected the two of us and our entire relationship to a crime. But the eye of suspicion had been cast upon me from the very beginning, and this extraordinary eye reached all the way back to my adolescence. My hair started to go gray early. Life ahead was soon supplanted by a miserable prison sentence. It was as if I never really had a youth. Nonetheless, I was determined at all costs to become a person who would love without boundaries. And so I locked myself and that eye together in a dark closet.

Every Sunday night, however, I was forced to think about her. It was like a chore I dreaded. I’d resolve not to go to Intro to Chinese Lit, and every Monday I would sleep in until almost three, waking up just in time to rush to class on my bike. Every Monday after class, Shui Ling would follow me matter-of-factly back to Wenzhou Street, as if she were merely passing by

on her way home. Afterward, I'd wait with her for the number 74 bus. There was a bench in front of the French bakery. Our secret little rendezvous were tidy and simple. They were executed with the casual deftness of a high-class burglary: bribing the guards with one hand, feeding a criminal appetite with the other.

The rest of the week, we barely spoke. She was an apparition seen only on Mondays. On Mondays, she would appear like the answer to
a dying man's prayers—roses in hand, draped in white muslin, bare-

foot and floating, come to grant me a reprieve. In a primal mating dance, eyes closed in rapture, she scattered rose petals into the wilderness. Roses every week and she didn't even know it, and it was amid roses that it seemed I might live after all. I reached for those roses, and for a new life, only to discover a glass wall. When I extended my hand, so did my reflection. When Monday ended, the glass that stood between me and my reflection thickened.

The room on Wenzhou Street. Elegant maroon wallpaper and yellow curtains. What did I even talk to her about in there? She sat on the floor, in the gap between the foot of the wooden bed frame and the wardrobe, with her back to me, almost silent. I talked non-stop. Most of the time it was just me talking. Talking about whatever. Talking about my horrible, painful life experiences. Talking about every person I'd ever gotten entangled with and couldn't let go of. Talking about my own complexities, my own eccentricities. She was always playing with something in her hands. She would look up at me in disbelief and ask what was so hard to understand about this or what was so strange about that. She accepted me, which amounted to negating my negation of myself. Those sincere eyes, like a mirror, hurt me. But she accepted me. In my anguish, about every third sentence out of my mouth was: You don't understand. Her eyes were suffused with a profound and translucent light, like the ocean gazing at me in silence, as if it were not necessary to speak at all. You don't understand. She thought she understood. And she accepted me. Years later, I realized that had been the whole point.

Those wrenching eyes, which could lift up the entire skeleton of my being. How I longed for myself to be subsumed into the ocean of her eyes. How the desire, once awakened, would come to scald me at every turn. The strength in those eyes offered a bridge to the outside world. The scarlet mark of sin and my deep-seated fear of abandonment had given way to the ocean's yearning.

8

I am a woman who loves women. The tears I cry, they spring from a river and drain across my face like yolk.

My time was gradually consumed by tears. The whole world loves me, but what does it matter since I hate myself? Humanity stabs a bayonet into a baby's chest, fathers produce daughters that they pull into the bathroom to rape, handicapped midgets drag themselves onto highway overpasses to announce that they're about to end it all, just to collect a little spare

change, and mental patients have irrepressible hallucinations and suicidal urges. How can the world be this cruel? A human being has only so much in them, and yet you must learn through experience, until you finally reach the madden- ing conclusion that the world wrote you off a long time ago, or accepting the prison sentence that your crime is your existence. And the world keeps turning as if nothing had happened. The forced smiles on the faces of the lucky ones say it all: It's either this, or getting stabbed in the chest with a bayonet, getting raped, dragging yourself onto the highway overpass, or checking into a mental institution. No one will ever know about your tragedy, and the world eluded its responsibility ages ago. All that you know is that you've been crucified for something, and you're going to spend the rest of your life feeling like no one and nothing will help you, that you're in it alone. Your individual circumstances, which separate you from everyone else, will keep you behind bars for life. On top of it all, humanity tells me I'm lucky. Privilege after privilege has been conferred upon me, and if I don't seem content with my lot, they'll be devastated.

Shui Ling, please don't knock on my door anymore. You don't know how dark it is here in my heart. I don't know who I am at all. What's ahead of me is unclear, yet I must move forward. I don't want to become myself. I know the answer to the riddle, but I can't stand to have it revealed. The first time I saw you, I knew I would fall in love with you. That my love would be wild, raging, and passionate, but also illicit. That it could never develop into anything, and instead, it would split apart like pieces of a landslide. As flesh and blood, I was not distinct. You turned me into my own key, and when you did, my fears seized me in a flood of tears that soon abated. I stopped hating myself and discovered the corporeal me.

She didn't understand. Didn't understand she could love me, maybe that she already did love me. Didn't understand that beneath the hide of a lamb was a demonic beast that had to suppress the urge to rip her to shreds. Didn't understand that love, every little bit of it, was about exchange. Didn't understand that she caused me suffer- ing. Didn't understand that love was like that.

She gave me a puzzle in a box. She put the pieces together patiently, one by one, and completed the picture of me.

9

"I'm not coming to Intro to Chinese Lit next week, but I'll be there the week after," I said.

Shui Ling and I took the number 74 bus together at seven in the evening. She was headed home and I was going to private tutoring on Changchun Road. We sat together in a double seat; she had the window and I the aisle. She was wearing a white scarf. With the window halfway open, she rested her head on the ledge, her body tense, her eyes fixed on some far-off point in the dusk. Her isolation was apparent. I felt the distance between us.

"Okay," she answered in a tone that showed her waning enthusiasm. I wanted to leave,

and she knew it.

“You’re not going to ask me why?” I felt a twinge of regret. I was hesitant to be on my own.

“Fine. Why?” she asked me indignantly, with her head turned to conceal her wounded pride.

“I don’t want to have a steady relationship with anyone. I’ve gotten used to seeing you every week, and I can’t handle being tied down like this. It’s a bad pattern that I have to break,” I told her guiltily.

“Okay. Whatever suits you.” She turned away again. “Still mad at me?” I felt sorry for her.

“Yes. You’re selfish.” She had turned her back to me, but her reflection in the glass revealed her loneliness and dejection.

“How am I selfish?” I tried to make her say what was bothering her. It was so hard to get her to talk.

Finally, after thinking for a long time, she aired her resentment.