

THE OFFSHORE ISLAND BIBLE 外島書

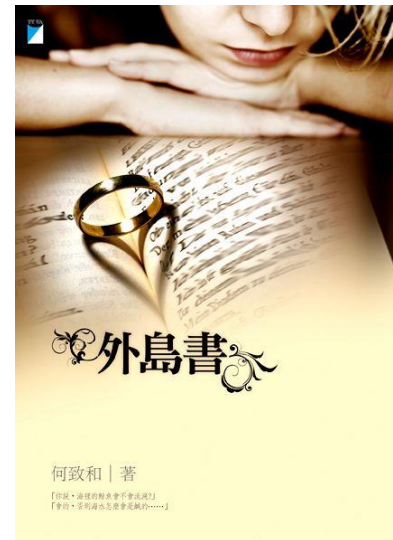
The earth was brown and sky was blue when space was young and time was true. On his breast a sewn on word and in her heart a dream of love deferred.

This is the story of a young man and two islands. He is a conscript sent to serve his mandatory military service on the faraway Tongyin Island, part of the Matsu archipelago. Like many young soldiers, he leaves behind a lover, but those sent offshore are in particularly dire straits because they have to wait many months before they can see their girlfriends again. Many relationships fail along the way. Sent on a mission of national importance and personal drudgery and misery, peacetime conscription is nevertheless somehow invested with spiritual profundity. Though this is a story of disillusionment, it is not a counsel of despair, but rather a contemporary Taiwanese bildungsroman, one man's bible through everyman's struggle.

Ho Chih-Ho 何致和

Born in Taipei in 1967, Ho Chih-Ho earned his MFA degree in Creative Writing from National Dong Hwa University. In 2002, he published his first book, a collection of short stories, *The Night When the Night was Lost*. Huang Chun-Ming, one of Taiwan's best-regarded writers, gave it an exceptionally positive review. His first novel, *The Melancholy of the White City*, was a finalist for The China Times' Books of the Year and earned him the reputation as one of the country's most promising writers. His 2008 novel, *The Offshore Island Bible*, is considered an essential read for all young men about to embark on their compulsory military service. A second printing was issued after ten days, breaking all sales records for Chinese-language novels in Taiwan.

Paralleling his writing career, Ho also works as a literary translator. He has published many translations, including Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, which sold 500 copies in one day on books.com, Taiwan's biggest online bookstore.



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THE OFFSHORE ISLAND BIBLE

By Ho Chih-Ho. Translated by Darryl Sterk.

I. The Lottery

The squad leader's attitude had done an about turn. Menacing and merciless for the previous month, now he was Mr Nice Guy. He called me into the company office right after I drew a lot for the offshore islands in the service lottery. He tore open a pack of military-issue Long Life cigarettes and offered me one, dangling another from his lips. We faced each other across the desk but didn't have too much to say to each other. I'd finished the whole cigarette and he was still halfway through his, so I helped myself to another without asking and he gave me a light without comment. I'd smoked another half a cigarette and still there was no conversation. Whatever he had on his mind, I was still thinking about the scene in the mess hall, where the lottery had just been held.

There weren't that many lots this time for the offshore islands, only about half. Sixty-four guys in my lottery, thirty-four lots for bases in Taiwan and thirty lots for the offshore islands. I was standing eighth last in line. Up ahead, a few guys seemed to be having a string of terrible luck. Two out of three were bound for the islands. Like the others, I was looking over at the poster hanging over the podium, which had a chart showing how many lots there were for each region. Instead of clapping or cheering when someone called out a lot for the offshore islands, we would only mentally subtract one bad ticket from the total. Or one good ticket. And when Kuo Cheng-Hsien called out the number forty-two, I knew he was one of the lucky ones. Kuo Cheng-Hsien was from the old neighbourhood, one of my five best buddies in junior high school. We used to play basketball in the park. He got into the best high school in the country, while I went to a school near the city limits, but we still went to the roller rink in Hsimenting together to try to pick up chicks. When we took the college entrance examination, he got a very respectable 384, a score that qualified him for a number of prestigious departments. But when we went to turn in our academic preference forms I discovered he'd only filled in eight options, including the Department of Nuclear Engineering at National Tsing Hua University.

'Even eight is too many. And for the last one I'm choosing the university not the department,' he said, with total faith in himself. I lowered my head and looked at my own list. I'd used a 2B pencil to fill in four densely written sheets with the codes for 162 departments. Having barely made the qualifying marks for any university, I couldn't limit my options. Now I had a strange feeling that Kuo Cheng-Hsien wasn't my friend from junior high school anymore. He was a scholastic mutant, created by God to do nothing but study.

'Too risky!' I said. 'Fill in at least twenty.' We got into a fight over it. I don't know what he was trying to prove, or what I was trying to prove. In the end, he penciled in two more. 'I'm only adding these out of respect for your feelings,' he said.

When the names of the successful applicants were published in the newspaper, he was admitted to the last preference on his list: the Department of Transport Management.

Maybe I'm the one who changed the course of his life? I often find myself thinking that. If I hadn't made him

fill in those two extra preferences, he might ironically have become an academically outstanding reject. He would have ended up on Nanyang Street close to Grand Central Station, where all the students who don't make the grade go for a year of remedial. He wouldn't be here with me now serving his military service a year late because he'd delayed graduation like me. We wouldn't have been assigned by coincidence to the same company and then to the same lottery.

In the mess hall, I watched attentively as Kuo signed up for his serviceman's ID, turned away from the personnel officer presiding over the lottery and stuck his right hand behind him into the box.

'Fourteen,' he called out.

I didn't have to check the chart again to know that fourteen meant Taipei City, probably the Guandu Division. Of all the bases in Taiwan, this was the closest to our neighbourhood. He smiled. I hadn't noticed if he had been smiling like that before drawing the lot. He looked over, but before he had the chance to show me the victory sign the non-com assisting with the draw pushed him out of the hall. I watched as he joined a group of conscripts horsing around outside. I had the same strange feeling I'd had five years before when we were filling out our university forms.

We'd both had steady girlfriends at university and they had become good friends too, despite living at different ends of the country. The day before we were enlisted the four of us had held a dinner at a seafood restaurant in the night market. After we'd downed a six-pack, he proposed a bet: if either of our girlfriends took off during our two years in the service, the jilted lover would have to treat the other guy to a meal when we were discharged.

'What if they both leave us?' I asked.

'Then we'll both pay. We'll be able to afford a feast.'

Kuo Cheng-Hsien looked at me with slightly glazed eyes.

When he chose the lot for Taipei City, he'd already taken a big step towards winning that absurd bet. Now there were twelve guys left in line. We went together to the podium. According to the chart, there were only four lots left for the offshore islands, so I had a good chance of being sent somewhere on the main island. But when the four guys ahead of me reported their lots, they turned out to all be on Taiwan. I shuddered, but I noticed that when they stuck their hands into the box the personnel officer was tilting up, they had all picked tickets right from the bottom left corner instead of mixing them. Now it was my turn. There were four left for the offshore islands and four on Taiwan. I had a 50-50 chance, the same as at the start. In the moment, I forgot whether I was going to use my left or right, and on instinct alone, pulled out the first lot I felt at the bottom left corner, just like the guy ahead of me.

The number didn't look right.

'What are you waiting for! What is the number?' the personnel officer barked behind me.

'Th... thirty... number thirty-six,' I stammered.

The personnel officer pointed at an item on the chart with his baton. 'Number thirty-six: 90674! Next!'

I too was pushed out of the hall. Kuo Cheng-Hsien was smiling as he approached, but by the time he reached me the smile had vanished.

That was when the squad leader took me aside, led me into the company office, and offered me a cigarette.

According to regulations, new conscripts like me were not allowed to smoke in the training centre. The reason

he made an exception was because out of the twelve people in our squadron, I was the only one who had drawn the number thirty-six. And because I'd just been crying outside the mess hall. This was the first time in my life I'd bawled in front of so many people. I hadn't meant to, but when I saw Kuo Cheng-Hsien waiting for me outside the tears came like a child that holds it in after a fall until his mother comes into view. I wasn't playing for sympathy. I was thinking about the bet we'd made at the seafood stand in the night market and about my girl, who'd have to spend the next two years alone.

'What were you crying for?' The squad leader finally spoke after he put out his cigarette. 'You want to stay on the main island? Why didn't you join the cadet corps like I told you? You were afraid it'd be too hard. So you decided to test your luck? So what now? If you don't want to go then you can sign for a transfer.'

Right. New conscripts had three ways of wriggling out of being sent to the offshore islands. The first way was a service transfer: you signed on for four and a half years of voluntary and after a short training course at the academy you could choose a base close to home. The second way was to join the cadet corps here at the training centre. After you finished three months of initial training you could stay on as an instructional squad leader. The third was to get chosen in one of the personnel selections. That way you wouldn't have to take part in the lottery. The squad leader was perfectly correct, except that I didn't want to sign on for a service transfer that would more than double my two years of military duty. I was also afraid of the three months of inhumane training I'd have to undergo to become a non-commissioned officer and I hadn't been chosen in either of the two big personnel selections. Hence my present predicament.

'Forget it then. Amor fati. If you think that your chick will be less likely to leave you if you stayed on Taiwan, stop dreaming,' the squad leader said. 'Take a look at this.'

He lifted up the transparent plastic desk cover, took out a photograph pressed underneath and handed it to me. It was a shot of a man and a woman by a stream. The man was stripped to the waist and his jeans were rolled up past his knees. He had long hair in tight curls. The woman was wearing a white blouse and slim gray capris. A pair of sunglasses, which served as a hair band, reflected the brilliant sun. The man was squatting on a rock behind the woman, holding her waist from behind. His head rested on her shoulder, his fair-skinned face smiling, bashful. She was beaming, holding her slender arms straight out with her delicate fingers extended, a pose a soprano might adopt while accepting a standing ovation.

'Every week there was no letter, I ripped up another photo. By winter, I only had this one left. Her smile in this photo was the happiest of them all. I couldn't bring myself to rip it up. You do it for me.'

The squad leader's story left me a bit taken aback. I'd lived with him night and day for a month and had never heard anything about a girlfriend. He had five months left in the service. If what he'd just said was true then the girl in the photograph must have dumped him less than half a year after he went in.

I looked up and examined his face. It was swarthy and his scalp was shiny under his freshly cropped hair. He didn't look at all like the guy in the picture. I noticed that the rectangle where the photograph had been pressed under the cover was greener than the surrounding area, which had faded to gray. It was a conspicuous and abrupt scar on the big plastic cover, like the mark left behind when you tear off a bandage. I could imagine the squad leader over a year before, having just finished three months of torment in non-com training. He'd returned to the base with a buzz cut and skin tanned dark as coal. But while he enjoyed strutting around with the corporal's insignia, he'd had

to face the awful news of his girlfriend's betrayal. At this thought I suddenly felt I was being ridiculous. I was facing a future tense, a hypothesis. Every soldier's greatest fear had become his reality after only a few months of being conscripted and I'd been crying over something that may or may not come to pass. It seemed foolish.

I returned the picture to him without a word. He took it and tossed it back on the desk, then lit another cigarette. He said nothing more about his girlfriend and instead started telling me about the offshore islands. The training centre had a rule that when you draw your lot you only get to know the P.O. Box number of the unit you've drawn. The name and location of the unit was supposed to be strictly confidential, but the leader told me anyway: I'd been assigned to a unit called ACNSC located on Tongyin. 'What's ACNSC?'

'The Anti-Communist National Salvation Command,' the leader said. 'Don't get it mixed up with the Anti-Communist National Salvation Corps. That's strictly for do-gooder college students.'

'Where's Tongyin?'

'It's one of the Matsus. The northernmost point of our national territory. It's about a hundred nautical miles from Keelung, not that far, really, only about the distance from Taipei to Changhua.'

That was the first time I had any idea about the place I would be living for the next twenty-one months. I had never heard of Tongyin before; our geography textbooks never even mentioned it. The squad leader had never been there either, but he'd heard from people who'd returned that apparently it was small, barren and arid. It got hot enough in summer to make you want to tear your skin off and cold enough in winter to make the pipes freeze. It was hard to imagine what kind of place it might be and who knows why the Ministry of National Defence would want to send me there. The squad leader said guys who'd drawn the offshore islands in the lottery would be sent to Weichang Ridge tomorrow. Weichang Ridge was another military base, a halfway house for conscripts bound for the Matsu archipelago. It was situated on a hillside in Keelung. Maybe there would be a couple of chances for relatives or friends to visit, but he didn't know when I'd get be getting on the boat for Tongyin. Some guys end up waiting a week there, others leave the same day. It all depends on the boat schedule.

'Anyway, when you get to the offshore islands, there's nothing to do and you lead a simple and peaceful life,' said the squad leader. That was all he had to say. He handed me the rest of the pack and let me go.

I walked out of the company office and looked across at the squad-mates I was closest to waiting outside. There was still an hour until dinner and there were still some guys in the company who weren't yet back from the lottery. The guys who had already drawn their lots now had some rare time for R&R. I waved the pack of smokes and the six of us went up to the roof of the two-storey barracks where the clotheslines were. We sat up there and smoked by the water tower. 6th Squadron, 2nd Platoon, that was us. Twelve guys in total, but just six of us lined up side by side in formation. Bunkmates. No. 62, who was sat beside me, was my best buddy. He'd graduated in veterinary medicine. On visiting days when other guys looked forward to seeing family and girlfriends, he would just be waiting for his golden retriever bitch. No need for the family to visit, just bring him the dog. 'You know what? A dog truly is a man's best friend,' he used to say, and that was only the beginning of the string of canine lore he used to spout at me. Enough to have filled a whole book. One time we ducked into the canteen for a rest after completing a public mission and he started up again on the dogs. I'd had enough.

'Seriously, stop it. It's such a cliché, especially for a vet!'

For a moment he was stunned. He scratched the pimples his golden retriever had given him by licking his face

and said, 'At least I can guarantee that my dog would never leave me while I'm doing my military service.'

'How very insightful! It clearly follows that dogs are more loyal than humans, or at least that female dogs are more loyal than female humans,' said No. 64, a philosophy major, shaking his head.

'Bullshit! How do you know that? What if that bitch of yours gets screwed by a couple of male dogs while you're away?' retorted No. 65, the dentistry major.

'Hey Dentist, wash your mouth out with soap, it stinks,' said No. 62, baring his canines.

As members of different branches of the medical profession, 62 and 65 often fought over trivial matters like this. No. 61, who was trained in the law, interjected that the operant principle was, different are the ways of man and beast,' but he was immediately corrected by No. 67, the Chinese major in our midst, who said, 'Don't abuse the apothegms of the ancients. The dictionary says, different are the ways of man and ghost.'

'Exactly. I'm the man and he's the ghost,' said No. 65, clapping with glee.

The six of us sat side by side in a row and watched the sun setting over the flagpoles on the platform by the drill field. They had all just inquired into where they'd be serving. The lawyer and the philosopher would be staying on the east coast. The vet would be in Taipei. The dentist had been chosen by one of the military hospitals to serve in their personnel selection, so he didn't have to participate in the lottery. The Chinese major hadn't been able to find out where he was going. Someone said he was going to be a paratrooper. He said he'd rather be assigned to an offshore island—but the lawyer elbowed him before he could finish his sentence. I knew they were all trying hard to think of things to say to cheer me up, but actually I wasn't as sad now as when I'd first found out. Or I'd redirected my sorrow, transferring part of it towards the squad leader and another part of it at my departing comrades. I was going to tell them about the leader's girlfriend, but on second thought I resisted the urge. The leader had never mentioned it to the others and tomorrow we'd all be going our separate ways. Telling them wouldn't do anyone any good. I watched the sun setting and smoked my cigarette like everyone else. We'd been in the conscript training center at Jinliu Grange a month and only on the last day did we have the chance to appreciate the sunset over the Lanyang Plain.

But we college boys had actually lived the easy life in our month there. Before our service had started we'd all heard the verse that had terrified many young souls about the nature of conscript life:

There'll be blood at Guandong Bridge.

Your back will break at Chelong Plain.

Grown men will bawl at Jinliu Grange.

Only after we got there did we discover to our great surprise it was even easier than the compulsory boot camp for college bound high school graduates at Victory Ridge five years earlier. Actually, we'd been worked pretty hard at Jinliu Grange, but only for the first three days. It was all thanks to a new soldier who started in the service at the same time as us. He was in 2nd Platoon, 7th Company and he died of heatstroke on the third day of training. The next day his mother came to the base and made a big scene, but the results of the prosecutor's investigation and the coroner's autopsy showed underlying physical problems, a combination of hyperhidrosis and body odor. His mother worried that his peculiar smell would hurt his popularity, so before he'd been enlisted she'd given him special antiperspirant pills to take. As it happened, we were drilled for three consecutive days under a blistering sun, but in all that time he did not sweat a single drop. The third evening he went into shock and died. Though there was no

question of excessive action, the division commander still broke into a cold sweat when a trainee in his unit dropped dead after only three days. So now there was a new order from command: if the outdoor temperature went above thirty-two degrees Celsius, all training activities would take place indoors. Every morning for the first few days after the order was issued, we put on our metal helmets and gun belts and lined up on the field in formation with M16s in our hands, ready for battle training, and watched as our squad leader with a thermometer in his hand ran a loop around the company assembly grounds, before reporting how high the mercury had climbed. If it was too high, the whole company would get led into the Sun Yat-Sen Hall and shown videos with the fans on full blast. We'd gone in on August 1, in the middle of high summer, when the temperature rarely stays below 32 degrees after ten in the morning. We spent almost every day that month in the hall with the electric fans blowing, watching training videos we'd seen over and over, and surreptitiously wrote letters to our girlfriends. Whenever he got the chance, the squad leader would call us college pigs. According to No. 61, who came from Guanhsi on the outskirts of Hsinchu on the west coast, the sacrificial pig his family raised every year spent time every day cooling off under the electric fans or it wouldn't fatten up.

'Such is the lottery of life! So unfair...' the dentist said.

'What are you complaining about? You didn't even participate in the lottery,' the vet said.

'He's right,' said the lawyer, attempting to arbitrate, 'God knows, this situation is hard on everyone.'

'And God knows who can't get a hard on,' the philosopher responded.

'Yeah—anyone who didn't have to take part in the lottery,' the vet said.

'What's that supposed to mean?' the dentist asked angrily.

'God knows you guys can always come up with some kind of innuendo,' the lawyer complained.

Intending to comfort me, the five of them had ended up quarreling again and they were still at it when the squad leader blew the whistle for the six o'clock assembly. Not saying anything, I followed everyone down the stairs. My steps felt light as air, as if something massive inside my body had escaped. I always got a bit spaced out when I was feeling blue, like I'd been split into two. Standing in the rank and file, I was just a hunk of flesh, an empty husk. The true me was standing off to the side, coldly observing the man I had become, a slack-faced fellow with a blank look in his eyes. I glanced at my buddies standing beside me and felt ten times sadder. Tomorrow we'd be split up just when we were getting to know one another. We wouldn't see one another again or even keep in touch. Besides me, nobody knew what unit I'd been assigned to, so even if we wanted to write to each other we wouldn't know where to send the letters. You'd think we'd note down one another's home addresses and telephone numbers, but two years from now when we were finally discharged, the rapport of a month together at Jinliu Grange would have faded. All those names and contact information in the address book would be nothing more than a string of markings you couldn't tie a memory to. Yet the friendship we'd cultivated during this month had been real, so real that I kept thinking about the perks I could enjoy if we maintained the friendship until after our service ended. If my teeth started to rot I could go see No. 65 for treatment. If someone sued me I could engage No. 61 as my defense attorney. If I had psychological problems I could go get therapy from No. 64. If I raised a dog knowing No. 62 would be like having a pet health insurance plan. No. 62 really was a swell guy. He had more empathy than No. 65, who made people open their mouths only so he could yank their bloody teeth out.