

THREE WAYS TO GET RID OF ALLERGIES

去過敏的三種方法

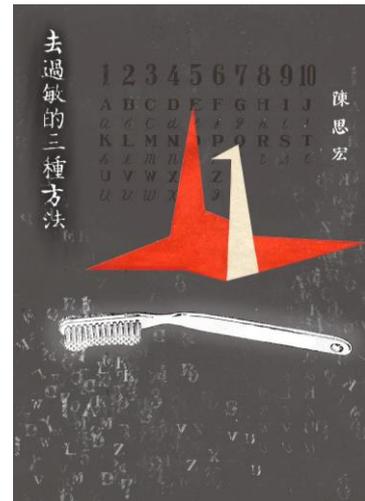
Three Ways to Get Rid of Allergies takes us on six adventures into locked or broken spaces. We peer into the dark houses, haunted toilets, and cracked bedrooms of the author's rural hometown of Changhua, where we find squelched desire, unspoken pain, and frustration on great and small scales. Flannery O'Connor would have understood and admired Kevin Chen for all the uncomfortable humanity he has found beneath the surface of the mundane.

The six stories of *Three Ways to Get Rid of Allergies* explore several different areas in which "the injury of the other," as one critic claimed, is clearly felt. We witness an old woman's slow descent into insanity in her lonely house ("Ghosts in the Toilet"), participate in the bitter clash of egos among school children, and feel the frustrated desires of a transgendered individual in a town too small for anonymity. Chen celebrates the stunted and unfinished – or, if he doesn't celebrate it, he accepts it as an inevitable aspect of human life.

Prepare for a strong dose of rural reality in Kevin Chen's first collection of short stories since his celebrated novel *Attitude*. The only way out is escape.

Kevin Chen 陳思宏

Kevin Chen began his artistic career as a cinema actor, starring in the Taiwanese and German films *Ghosted*, *Kung Bao Huhn*, and *Global Player*. Now based in Germany, he is a staff writer for *Performing Arts Reviews* magazine. He's published several novels and short story collections, including *Attitude*, *Flowers from Fingernails*, *Ghosts by Torchlight*, the essay collection *Rebellious Berlin*, and other titles.



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GHOSTS IN THE TOILET

By Kevin Chen. Translated by Jennifer Feeley.

1.

The locksmith was grating on his nerves: if only he'd just open the door already. The mouth chewing betel nut kept opening and closing. He tightened his shoulders and bent over; what began as a low, metallic grumbling deep in his throat erupted without warning into a flood of diatribe before the locked metal door, blasting red question marks all over the ground.

Oh, you haven't been back in a while? It's been a long time since your mom's gone grocery shopping, huh? You don't even remember me, your uncle? Your mom used to sell fruit in the market – my shop was next door – have you completely forgotten? How come you don't have a house key? It's not that I don't want your money, but don't you want to try calling again – maybe your mom has the air on and is fast asleep? Have you tried ringing the doorbell a few more times? It's so hot, maybe your mom doesn't feel like moving, doesn't feel like opening the door – who'd want to?

It was hot, really hot. He rang the doorbell again and tried the phone one more time. He pounded on the metal door, his palms leaving prints of sweat on its surface, but still no answer. The old lady next door sat in her wheelchair, fanning herself as she surveyed the scene. In a small town, it was rare to see such commotion – way more exciting than afternoon television. In her days, this row of houses was the newest construction project in town. The mayor lived in one of them. During his years in office, his so-called political achievements included chopping down the old bishopwood and banyan trees, bulldozing a traditional three-sectioned house, relocating the Shrine of the Earth God, widening the road in front of the new houses, building a concrete-floored public park, blocking off the road on Monday evenings for the night market, and screening movies outdoors during the weekend. Now the road was in a sad state of disrepair. This morning it must've rained heavily, as mangy stray dogs were rolling around in potholes filled with stagnant water. Local flower and betel nut farms had failed to keep any young people around, leaving all the houses in the hands of the elderly. The night market and the outdoor movies both disappeared. Some houses didn't even have windows or doors, their verandas piled high with old furniture, emitting a musty odor on hot days.

It really had been a long time since he'd come back. He'd called home on Tomb Sweeping Day, the Dragon Boat Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, and the Lunar New Year; after a brief exchange of greetings, his mother had said everything was fine, *it's okay if you don't come back*. Mother and son both knew that an over-the-phone relationship provided the best kind of distance. After he'd left for Taipei, his mother had begun living alone. *Being alone is great*, she once said to him, her tone even, practically emotionless. Only her son knew her words were heartfelt.

Last month he'd gone to Finland. The hotel gave him a free postcard, but he couldn't think of anyone to send it to, so he ended up writing down the address of his old home. When he came back to Taiwan, he called his mother: no one picked up. Maybe she'd gone on a pilgrimage? Maybe she was visiting relatives? But his mother hated crowds, and didn't like going out; living alone gave her peace of

mind. Last year when the family next door had moved to the city, his mother had happily said: *Good, one less family – that baby made such a racket!* Last week, when she finally answered the phone, she said she'd received his postcard from a decade ago – she'd never thought that she could still receive it ten years later. The next-door neighbors' landlord wanted to kick them out so he could take back the house, harassing them by phone every day. She expressed her support for them, and so her own phone now rang nonstop. The kitchen range hood was broken, but that didn't matter since she didn't feel like cooking anyway. She'd heard that the guy who'd built the high-rise was coming home to host a wedding reception for his son. *I think it's better if you don't come. A lot of bad people are out at night. Make sure you lock the door and don't kick off the blankets. Don't eat banana peels. When Taipei gets droughty remember to head home a little earlier...* His mother kept jabbering – the story seemed somewhat connected but was beyond his comprehension.

Mom, I'm coming home next week.

His mother didn't answer but kept on rambling. *You musn't go to the free wedding banquet. There are a lot of bad people. If you eat you'll get fat. There's a typhoon – something could fall and crush you to death.*

He'd asked the coffee shop where he worked for some time off. He didn't bring anything with him, planning to return the same day. His hometown seemed mostly unchanged. The fields lay untended. A half-built farmhouse stood nakedly in the middle of a field. The traffic light was out and hadn't been fixed. There were considerably fewer shops on the street, and only the coffin shop was doing regular business. He walked home from the bus station, looking at the betel nut fields. Far beyond the rice paddies stood a high-walled, flickering gold palace. He didn't have time to confirm whether this was a hallucination – he'd hurry home, make sure his mother was okay, then grab a meal and say he needed to rush back to Taipei. His apartment there was a studio with an old air conditioner that spat out noisy ice-cold air when switched on. At least it made enough noise to muffle the sound of the cars outside and the lovemaking of the university students next door, allowing him to sleep soundly, without dreaming.

For two hours he shouted in the hot sun, but to no avail. His mother didn't answer the door. The old lady in the wheelchair next door phoned the locksmith, saying she'd occasionally see his mother go out to buy food, but hadn't noticed her recently.

The locksmith got to work. Ocher rust spots had devoured the sky-blue overhead door of his childhood memories. Sky-blue as the sunny memories of his childhood. His father was preparing to go to China. His mother sold produce at the market. His family had just purchased a large TV. In elementary school he often won awards that he'd tape to the wall when he came home. Sky-blue was always bright, at least until the ghost in the bathroom appeared.

The locksmith spat out a few profanities along with another mouthful of betel nut juice. The stubborn old lock loosened, and the metal door rolled up. What a stench.

A hot, foul stench escaped the building and assaulted them. The locksmith said a few more dirty words. The odor wasn't just thick, it burned – he felt like all of his nose hairs had been singed. The living room was on the first floor, lit dimly by sunlight. His mother's bike had fallen over. The floor was strewn with carry-out boxes, plastic bags, and uneaten food that had rotted in the hot and stifling space. He noticed excrement on the sofa. A dog emerged from under the sofa and charged outside. He covered his nose and went in quickly, stepping over the trash, and hurried up the stairs. His mother's bedroom door wasn't closed, and that room stank, too. His mother lay flat on the bed, windows shut tight. He shook her. *Mom, Mom, Mom, it's me.* The locksmith also came up, asking if they should call an ambulance.

His mother's eyes suddenly opened. She saw the locksmith, recoiled sharply, then saw her son. A

dry croak came from her throat. He gave her water, opened the windows, and fanned her, looking closely at her face and body: all skin and bones, severe hair loss, eyes unfocused. But she still recognized him.

The locksmith said if everything was fine, he was going to head out. Today they were putting up a big tent in the road out front. The truck was due to arrive any moment, and he was going to help out. *Just because they're successful doesn't mean they've forgotten us. They've come back to put on their son's wedding, and they're paying good money to those of us who are helping.*

He had no idea what the locksmith was talking about. He stared straight at his mother, all the while thinking about that little studio apartment in Taipei.

The locksmith took his fee for unlocking the door, chuckling: *Oh, have you forgotten? Your next-door neighbors from when you were a kid, the former mayor – they built a big department store in Taipei. Didn't they just have their grand opening? My daughter says the shopping's good, lots of people. Their only son is getting married. Tomorrow they're coming back for the wedding banquet. You came back just in time. No need for wedding gifts – everyone's invited.*

A large truck loaded with round tables pulled up and stopped at the gate, surrounded by howling stray dogs. He looked down from the second-floor window: the scale was immense. They'd already set up at least a hundred tables.

The locksmith covered his nose and left, leaving the room quiet. His mother suddenly got up and asked in a loud voice: *Where'd your Dad go? Don't go to the wedding tomorrow. Tell your Dad to take care of the money. He said he wants to eat fish tonight. The dogs outside need to be fed – there's one that's gotten really skinny. Your Dad's gotten too fat. He says he's going to kill me.*

2.

He took his mother to the only clinic in town. Before the exam, she told him the doctor there violated medical ethics and wanted to kill her. The doctor said she was slightly dehydrated and malnourished, but her blood pressure was normal: she needed to pay attention to her diet and get enough exercise. He grabbed the medication and left his mother in the waiting room, telling the doctor: *My mom's acting strange – she's talking nonsense.* The doctor was busy reading the gold-embossed, bright red wedding invitation on the table, gushing about how considerate the family was, how they'd come back to build such a large house, even decided to have the wedding here. *Are you going to take your mom to the wedding tomorrow? It's right in front of your home.* The doctor saw him staring blankly and said: *Don't worry; your mom's getting on in years. She'll be fine after having a few good meals; at the wedding banquet tomorrow, have her eat a bit more.* The perfume on the wedding invitation overpowered the medicinal smell of the clinic.

His mother refused to take the medicine, claiming there was a ghost living in the pills. If she took them, the ghost would invade her. There had been a period of time after his father left when his mother liked to scare him by talking about ghosts. *There's a ghost in the bathroom – if you don't behave I'll lock you in. There's a ghost in the refrigerator – don't open it too often. There's a ghost in the books – stop reading. There's a ghost on the rooftop – you can't go up there. There's a ghost in the coffee – you're not allowed to drink it. There's a ghost in the box – you're not allowed inside. There are surely even more ghosts at school – just don't go this term.* About a year later, when they got the news that his father's body had been found, his mother stopped talking about ghosts. He was unclear about a lot of things from his childhood, but he remembered that Sunday morning. His mother started cleaning. She pulled

down the curtains and tossed them in the washing machine. She dragged the mattresses into the street to bathe in the sun. Every room smelled of soapy water and disinfectant. He was hungry, and pleaded for something to eat, so his mother locked him in the bathroom. He kicked the door with all his might, crying: *There's a ghost there's a ghost Mama you said there's a ghost in the bathroom.* Outside the door, his mother calmly replied: *There's no ghost, no ghosts at all – I lied to you, I've been lying to you this whole time. Your dad and I both liked lying to people. The ghosts are all gone. Tomorrow's Monday; you'll go to school.*

There was a ghost living in the pills the doctor gave her. The old doctor had paid more attention to the wedding invitation than to his mother. He threw together a prescription for her, and if she refused to take it, oh well. They sat down at a food stall – his mother was starving – for noodles with broth. By the time she'd finished, her body was drenched in sweat: her summer blouse clung tightly to her skin, and she wore no bra. When the vendor saw, he spilled broth onto the floor. The vendor asked him: *You haven't been back in a while – are you married? What do you do in Taipei?* The vendor directed his questions to him, but his gaze remained trained on his mother.

He hadn't remembered the vendor's face, but the taste of the noodles was familiar. He'd grown up eating them. He said nothing, but simply paid and walked his mother home. He hadn't deliberately not answered or meant to hide anything – he just had nothing to say. He was nearing forty, still working in a coffee shop and as a copywriter. He had several filmmaker friends who asked him to buy carry-out for the film crew and do cleaning; occasionally a director would ask him to fill in as an extra. In fact, these “filmmaker friends” couldn't really be considered his friends at all – they weren't in regular contact, and the reason they asked him for help was that he was cheap and didn't say much. Once he served as a body double for someone jumping into the ocean. They ran him over time without paying extra, but he didn't complain. His Facebook account wasn't much to look at; he had no incentive to post pictures, and no one chatted with him, “poked” him, or “liked” anything on his page. His cell phone was an older model; once in a while it'd ring faintly, but it always turned out to be other servers from the coffee shop asking him to cover a shift.

The coffee shop kept its air conditioning on high, and served as a refuge for all sorts of crowds – a quiet crowd all wearing big headphones, giggling and typing away on their laptops; another loudly discussed their boyfriends' and girlfriends' big dicks and big boobs; yet another group that recited poetry were part of a university literary society. None of the noise, chatter, or poetry had anything to do with him. His skills were neatness, making coffee quickly, carrying piles of dishes without shaking, and standing quietly behind the counter when no one was ordering – a pale, thin presence, ignored by everyone, feeling totally free.

Once when the coffee shop owner got drunk, he interrogated him: *Who are you really? You never said where you're from, or even if you like men or women.* He didn't answer. He was asexual: he never had morning erections, didn't lust after anyone's body, didn't masturbate, didn't feel sexual desire. After his savings account reached a certain amount, he'd buy a plane ticket and go somewhere far away, though he felt no particular love for traveling. In the past ten years he'd gone to several countries, always by himself, and had taken no pictures. Cheap, dirty hotels satisfied him as much as the slightly more expensive hotel in Scandinavia had. The Mediterranean sun that burnt his face and left freckles wasn't bad, and neither was North America in the cold of winter. He'd silently set off, arrive at his destination, and then leave. In his area of Taipei, no one remembered or missed him, and in a strange land he could leave no traces at all – he was most comfortable going about in this manner.

After getting home, his mother quickly bathed and then fell into a deep sleep. He started

cleaning. The toilet didn't flush very well due to low water pressure; mold had spread everywhere; ceiling shards, fallen during a past earthquake, were still there; clumps of dog hair hid in the corners; long-disused idols were covered with grime, and his old books and various possessions had been relegated to the rooftop. He stood on the roof, stepping over his own old junk and books, wanting to ask how, after so many typhoons over the past few years, these things hadn't been blown away, and what would he do with them now? Gazing down, he saw dozens of parked trucks, several workers beginning to set up the wedding tent, and a garishly festooned truck, complete with a stage and electronic keyboard. He decided he would just clean the first-floor living room – the neighbors who would attend tomorrow's wedding banquet might come check on his mother, and so he'd clean up the living room so that it'd be suitable for receiving guests, then head back to Taipei.

He cleaned the first floor quickly, filling up several garbage bags and dragging the pee-soaked sofa to the backyard. The stench inside gradually dissipated. His mother suddenly came down from the second-floor bedroom, neatly dressed and clearly wearing a bra, looking at him in surprise. *Why are you home? When did you get back? How could you not call me first? I'm going grocery shopping; your dad said he wants to eat fish tonight. How'd you get in? You don't have a key.*

He and his mother set off for the market. The workers setting up the tent greeted her. His mother nodded without answering, and walked briskly on. The whole way there she mumbled: *Who are those people? All these thugs...it's terrifying.* His mother was past seventy, skinny, gray-haired, and with swollen feet, but she walked so fast that it seemed as though someone were pushing her from behind.

The old market used to bustle with activity, but now the vendors selling colorful socks, clothes, meatballs, squid chowder, and beef noodle soup were all gone, leaving behind a few elderly people selling vegetables from small stalls. There weren't any fishmongers. His mother's eyes lost focus; facing the vacant lot, she asked: *Where are the fishmongers?*

Then she looked farther, at flashing gold beyond the lot.

So he hadn't hallucinated earlier. A large, ornate white house stood in the middle of the rice fields. The roof was gold, and the hot sun beat against it, producing a constant shower of sparks.

His mother's eyes blazed. *Assholes, they're all assholes. That's our house. Assholes – that whole family can go to hell.*

3.

His mother walked home quickly, completely ignoring the townspeople who greeted her on the way, saying she wanted to go to sleep. She began snoring the moment she lay down.

He wanted another look at that gold house.

The outdoor wedding tent had been set up, and the round tables had begun to be arranged. A news van had shown up, its crew interviewing some of the workers who'd set up the tent. The workers cheerfully said: *When you set up tables outside, rain's your first worry, but a hot sun isn't good for the bride either, so the best solution is to raise a tent so everyone can enjoy the wedding banquet without worry.* The reporter asked: *Are you close to the groom? I've heard he often comes back to pay respects to his ancestors?* The workers giggled at the camera: *That's right, that's right; we've often seen the groom out in the field. Ancestor worship is important – you need the protection of your ancestors to make you rich! They have the best gravesite, and we've heard they're number one in the mainland.*

He set off toward the house, passing betel nut fields, wasteland, and the abandoned farmhouse, heading toward the gold. Dusk fell, and black mosquitoes foraged for food. He hated the mosquitoes and flies in the countryside – he'd forget a lot of things after returning to Taipei, but the red, swollen bites on his arms wouldn't go away for a long time. The brain's memory can be deleted, but the skin is unwilling to forget.

More news vans sat outside the gold house. The reporters found a few townspeople standing by the roadside and instructed them what to say to the camera. The vicinity was entirely comprised of fallow or wasted farmland, discarded rice planters turned upside-down on the field, weeds growing wildly, ditches packed with trash – he didn't know which families were still farming. The air was filled with pesticides that burned his nose. His hometown was flat, just like he remembered. The grain-drying yard of the three-sectioned house had no grain to lay out in the sun; it was only good for sunning old men and old ladies. The bankrupted shoe and sock factories slowly fell into ruins where stray dogs gathered. He smelled firewood. There was very little civilization, and no vibrant color in sight: everything in the field had been faded by the hot sun. But now a huge mansion emerged from the flat horizon, its walls milk-white with fresh paint, windows framed in gold, and surrounded by a towering red brick wall adorned with numerous cumbersome gold decorations. He'd seen very similar façades at a palace in France. The most striking aspect was the roof: nothing but row on row of gold-lacquered tiles. The owner wasn't so concerned with so-called architectural aesthetics but rather with creating an imposing air: everything stacked high, filled out, the trees in the courtyard lush and sturdy. The more the better, the bigger the better.

Of course he remembered the family – the neighbors from his childhood, the former mayor who'd invited his father to invest in China. Several security cameras hung on the outer wall, and the main gate stayed tightly locked. The reporters prepared to keep watch through the night. He looked at the surveillance equipment, listening to the heavily made-up female reporter nearby speaking to the camera. *Tomorrow, the son of Taiwan's richest man will get married. The ceremony won't be held in Beijing, nor Shanghai, but instead in his hometown in Taiwan. There will be two hundred tables at the wedding banquet to entertain the locals. It's been said that this is a sacred ancestral site. We've invited a geomancer to provide us with a careful analysis of how this piece of land ended up creating the richest person in Taiwan.*

Exactly when had this towering mansion been built? He had no television, didn't read news online, and did his best to keep his distance from the world. But he couldn't completely escape. The buffet restaurant at the end of his street had a television tuned to the news channel, and rows of magazines stood on display at the convenience stores. People frequently posted online about how much money the family made in China, what kind of car the son bought, and how the family returned to Taiwan to join the department store battle, build high-rises, and speculate in real estate.

The sky darkened, and the mansion's lights went on. He shifted his gaze to the outer wall: through the floor-to-ceiling windows, he spotted an ornate chandelier suspended several meters from the ceiling. He wanted to leave, right then and there, go grab the hourly bus that stopped through, and then transfer to the train back Taipei.

He saw absolutely no need to stick around for his mother's sake.

When news of his father came, they heard he'd been in Gangu, in Gansu province, his body found in a hotel. His mother asked the police: *Gansu? Gangu? How do you spell that?* The police officer scratched and shook his head. It was unclear whether it was a homicide or suicide. His mother told him to go upstairs, and he refused, so she sent him to the bathroom with the ghost.

His mother never really explained what happened to his father. The body never got shipped

back to Taiwan. From then on, his mother never mentioned him. She ripped the map of China off the wall, and even now, he had no idea where Gangu was. This morning when she'd said that his father wanted to eat fish, it was the first time in many years that she'd spoken of him.

While he was growing up, his mother never looked at him. A few years after his father had passed away, his mother started selling produce at the market again, and on weekends he'd help out. Once, the person who sold sugarcane in the next stall told his mother: *Your son has grown so tall*. His mother glanced at him for a brief second, then immediately turned away, her eyes filled with horror. Her expression burned him, and so he no longer looked at his mother, either. A few years ago, he'd come back to help his mother take care of some things. While organizing the photo album, he noticed his father's youthful appearance, almost identical to his own: spindly legs, narrow shoulders, long face, pale, thin, and tall, nothing like a country boy. They looked a lot alike, uncannily alike. Finally, he understood his mother's expression back then.

At eighteen he left for Taipei, and mother and son could finally set aside their tenuous relationship.

They were polite on the phone, but he seemed to never return home. How'd he end up coming back this time? He'd come home, now what? His mother seemed confused, but it was also possible that she had no desire to see him at all.

The mansion's gold-colored main gate suddenly opened. The reporters' cameras flashed wildly. A black car crept out, and the reporters gathered around. The window rolled down: a red-faced man in the back seat waved to the media.

It was him. The only son.