

# A-GA

## 花甲男孩

\*Shortlisted for Taipei Book Fair Award 2011

\*Shortlisted for Golden Tripod Award 2011

\*Adapted into hit TV drama *A Boy Named Floral A* in 2017

Yang Fu-Min's breakthrough collection of short stories, rich in narrative color, tells tales of those who seek and do not always find. A "prodigal" son who leaves his rural home to study and build a career holds the dream of returning in his heart; a father who lost his son to a car accident becomes a bus driver in order to transport children his son's age safely to and from school, yet in the end remains alone; an elderly woman, whose dying husband had many long-term affairs, rides her pink bicycle into town in order to pray for his soul.

Yang mixes Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese, and internet slang in a highly experimental narrative that shines like a kaleidoscope of image and experience. The term "stream-of-consciousness" doesn't quite describe the unique integration of absurdity, whimsy, and empathetic description that defines the work.

These nine short stories of contemporary Taiwan earned the praise of renowned author Pai Hsien-Yung, who states in the book's preface that Yang Fu-Min is filling the shoes of Huang Chun-Ming and Wang Chen-He as the new voice of local fiction in Taiwan.

### Yang Fu-Min 楊富閔

Yang Fu-Min is currently a doctoral candidate at National Taiwan University, where he researches post-World War II Taiwanese literature. He has been named an outstanding young writer by Books.com.tw, the island's largest online bookselling platform, as well as by The Almanac of Taiwan Literature.



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By Yang Fu-Ming

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Bibi

"Bibi says she's going to show me the world!" Bookworm Grandpa spoke in a child's voice, drumming on his wheelchair.

"Go to hell! I deal with your shit all day long, just lay off me!" Aqua Grannie jumped on the bed and tried to hit him, but Sophia stopped her, pleading: "Boss-lady, Bibi has tormented Boss-man too, you know..." Indignant, Aqua Grannie said to Bookworm Grandpa, "You want crazy? You're always telling me that I come from a family of wack jobs, well I'll give you crazy!"

—

During the afternoon of the twenty-ninth day of the sixth month of the lunar calendar, Aqua Grannie heard Sophia say, "Boss-Man isn't eating." Immediately, she threw down the student uniforms she had been sewing and picked up her road bike with the bright pink frame. She threw on her white, sweat-wicking cycling top, black cycling capris, and strapped on her thirty-holed helmet, which glowed a luminescent alien neon yellow. Her full suit of armor successfully transformed her into a pheasant-tailed jacana. Her girlish figure now fully on display, she hit the road.

Presently, she arrived at the Hui-An Temple, and went inside to speak to the Goddess Mazu. Decked out in her finest, she took her place inside the solemn shrine. Muttering, she held three sticks of incense in her hands, passing them on to Sophia as she pushed her semi-rimless glasses with transition lenses up to the top of her head. They perfectly accessorized her seventy-five-year-old, weather-beaten face, which was tiny and blessed with the best complexion of all the grannies and grandpas. All she ever cared about, though, was making sure her sunglasses didn't obstruct the bodhisattva mole on her forehead. She turned to her grandson, who stood in front of her with a digital video camera, and said, "This is grannie's GPS. A satellite navigation system." Aqua Grannie liked keeping up with all the latest lingo.

She had forgotten that Sophia wasn't familiar with Taiwan's incense customs, and was surprised to see that she had placed the three sticks upside down in the brass pot. She teased Sophia, telling her, "Putting three sticks of incense upside down means that I'm sending an invitation of war to Mazu. That sounds about right!" Grandson chirped back, "Yes, take your chances with Mazu!" The camera stopped on Sophia, and she clapped her hands, saying "Boss-Lady, have a safe trip!"

The three of them exited the temple and entered a square with yellow prayer ribbons tied everywhere. Aqua Grannie looked around her, and felt as though hundreds and thousands of charms had fallen from the sky. Loud clapping noises erupted like the thunderstorms of southwest Taiwan. Aqua Grannie hopped nimbly upon her trusty little pink bike without telling anyone where she was going. Shouting as if the Goddess Mazu was hard of hearing, Sophia and Grandson yelled: "We wish Taiwan's most badass grannie good luck on her bike trip. Bon voyage!"

Good luck and bon voyage.

—

Welcome to "Our People."

Aqua Grannie found herself absent-mindedly cycling through the Fujianese-style gates of "Our People" on her little pink bike. First, she squatted outside the homes of "Our People" and threw up into the gutter. Once she had finished, she announced that she was looking for someone. Unable to tell the difference between a nursing home, a hospice, and a rehabilitation center, she walked her bike through the entryway of every building. She carried herself the same way she did when she came to Tainan many years ago to look at property on behalf of her son, surprised to find so much of the space inside the gates done up nicely. The nurse came out to tell her that she had to register as a visitor, and that they didn't have anywhere for cyclists to rest or inflate their tires.

Aqua Grannie spoke politely, telling them, "I'm looking for my youngest brother-in-law, but I don't know his name. My husband is about to pass on, and I've come to tell his younger brother. This is our custom in the countryside." Wearing uniforms from the Tzu Chi Foundation, the nurse clasped her hands and bowed to Aqua Grannie, invoking the Buddha's name. She pointed at a hedge covered in orchids that ran along the mountainside: Pass through the Mountain Plum conservancy, cross Zengwen River, and make your way through the model salt fields of Chiku village. You'll find the Sinon pesticide store, you'll know it from their displays of Yuching mangoes without a single blemish. The only inhabited place is the physical therapy center. There's a shrine to the Earth God that dispenses nostalgia like an ATM dispenses cash. It's built into a still and winding corridor, so long you can't see to the end. "The person you're looking for is there, in the audiovisual center." The lady from the hospice stood on her tiptoes and made inscrutable gestures into the air.

Aqua Grannie was astonished by the strange world she'd come to. Somehow it felt familiar – was she entering purgatory? In the distance, she caught the sound of a dharma teacher worshiping at an altar, and she followed the noise. This time, she'd truly entered the "City of Innocent Deaths" – the six hundred and fifty square meters of the audiovisual center. "Uncle! It's me, Aqua. I've come to see you." Her voice echoed through the thick air.

Immediately, a thousand heads turned to look at her, their expressions calcified like so many funerary statues. Following the sounds of the dharma teacher at worship, she'd discovered a room full of youngest uncles. Aqua Grannie saw a crowd arrayed rapidly around the TV, stirring occasionally only to brush off blowflies that had settled on their knees. "I can't believe there are so many people here!" she said. Two hundred wheelchairs stood in her way. The humid air brought

perspiration to her nose, and she made her way through, apologizing constantly as she searched for her uncle. She gasped and cried out.

"Uncle A-Chao, I thought you'd moved! But you've been living here!" Aqua Grannie held up Uncle A-Chao's listless head with both hands. Then she turned. "What, you're here too, Teacher Li? I thought you moved in with your son after you retired. But you're here too!" One by one, Aqua Grandma started recognizing everyone around her. "Su Mama, Big Brother Li, Auntie Clam, you're all here!"

"My God!" Aqua Grannie stumbled onto the floor, and sat. "Great-aunt, Great-aunt, I thought you'd died! I hadn't heard from you in so long, and you're still alive." Speechless, Aqua Grannie looked from person to person. Everyone in the audiovisual center was silent except for long, raspy breaths that rattled out from deep within like mist coming off a river. Aqua Grannie splashed her way across.

Mustering all her strength, Aqua Grannie heaved a sigh and stood up, as if she were pulling herself out of the wetlands of Chiku. She had chronic anemia, and felt dizzy as soon as she stood. She grabbed the nearest wheelchair for support and saw who it contained. "Youngest Uncle, it's you!" She howled. "It's me, Aqua, Aqua. Your sister-in-law." Youngest Uncle's head jutted out, and Aqua Grannie knelt on one knee, her right hand grasping his wheelchair. "Youngest Uncle, it's Aqua. I've come to tell you that your brother is not long for this world...."

*Bibi-beep.*

The hospice staff came out told Aqua Grannie that her little pink bike was blocking a red zone and was about to be towed, *bibi-beep*. She needed to say goodbye and leave immediately. Aqua Grannie said to herself, "Don't say goodbye whatever you do, don't, you can't say goodbye when you've come to announce a death." She stumbled out of "Our People," feeling like she were leaving Uncle forever. Would they ever have the chance to see each other again? The towing crew blared their horn at her and she was engulfed by the noise, a faint echo in her ear.

As soon as Aqua Grannie left she felt overcome with dizziness, and immediately pulled onto the side of the road. She bought a bottle of water from a betel nut stand and gulped it down. Honks of *bibi-beep* drew her back onto the road with her bike, and once again she followed the sound, sobbing as she clawed her way back into the world of the living.

"He'll be gone soon." Aqua Grannie suddenly felt very calm. She knew the way back home, following the main road back to town. Bike manners were human manners, and she'd put off a follow-up visit to the hospital and two trips to physical therapy for her kneecap to go on this trip. She'd been consumed with thoughts of the funeral, mentally preparing herself for it. Cycling along at a steady clip, she suddenly realized she was in no rush. She felt overcome by the shock of leaving "Our People."

"He'll wait." She was sure of it, and her bike was steady.

Aqua Grannie had always felt guilty about her children. When her marriage started having problems, she swore that she wouldn't let them grow up without a father. But she also couldn't tell a lie, and so when she ran into friends or acquaintances, she would say bluntly, "He's off traveling

around the island. He loves Taiwan. He loves it more than he loves me.” Fortunately, she had raised good children. They had their own families and led comfortable lives. They each wanted their mother to move into their home, and argued amongst themselves over it, telling her “I can’t forgive that man.” But Aqua Grannie refused their offers and stayed at home to look after “that man.”

When Sophia arrived, she put the extra time to good use. She started learning about organic vegetables, led a choir in the village, and volunteered to serve as a crossing guard after school. She wanted to take a Japanese class, as she’d forgotten much of what she’d learned before. If I ever have the chance, she thought, I’ve got to do a tour of the island. She also wanted to see it, and to see everything that Bookworm Grandpa had seen. Bookworm Grandpa had traveled around Taiwan once. He’d conquered mountaintop after mountaintop, escaped disaster by the skin of his teeth, been with every kind of woman, and written a few poems. But when he returned to Kuantien in his later years, it was Aqua Grannie, the plains aborigine, who kept him company, holding hands with the lunatic. Still, all Bookworm Grandpa could say was, “Bibi’s going show me the world, shining shimmering splendid.”

*Bibi*, that’s right. Aqua Grannie felt pressed forward by the world around her.

The little pink bike pulled into a police station on the side of the road, where she took a look at her tires. The blue skies above Tainan were as beautiful as those above Kenting, and the cops were astonished by how fit she was. Without reserve, Aqua Grannie replied back, “I came to tell someone about a death in the family even though the head of household hasn’t died yet. Does that make me crazy?” The little pink bike continued on, merging onto the expressway. From behind her garnet-colored lenses, the pitch-black of the freshly paved road, the blue skies above, and her little pink bike looked like a world caught on fire, like a new life.

Before returning home, she entered a stretch of road lined with miles upon miles of mango trees, their fruit falling to the ground. Aqua Grannie stopped and peeled a mango with her bare hands. As she ate it, her strength returned. She heard the familiar sound of water flowing through a drainage ditch, and saw joyful yellow ribbons, yellow ribbons, yellow ribbons! The water chestnuts she knew so well, vim and vigor, a lifetime of troubles erased, her mind cleared.

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Day 30 of the sixth lunar month. Grandson used to go to bed when the sun came up. This time, he and Sophia stayed up cleaning the living room. They took out the leather sofa, wine cabinet, and physical therapy equipment (were they preparing for the funeral?). Bookworm Grandpa was in a great mood and shouted for Bibi. His script hadn’t changed for three years: Bibi is going to show me the world, shining shimmering splendid. Grandson pushed his wheelchair, and by eight or nine the light was strong enough for Sophia to take out an umbrella for shade. It looked like a scene where a casket was being moved. Bookworm Grandpa didn’t look like someone who was about to die. He kept saying *Bi-bi-bi*, and neighbors he hadn’t seen for years remarked, “Oh, you’ve come out to get some sun!”, or “How lovely of your grandson to take you out on a walk.” Every now and then Sophia

massaged the acupressure points on his neck and shoulders, and measured his temperature with the palm of her hand. "All good." Grandson tossed his flip-flops to the side of the road and walked barefoot with Sophia following along. In fluent Mandarin, she said, "Grandpa, we can travel the world without stepping foot off the ground!" Bookworm Grandpa said, "Bibi."

Back at the public school where Bookworm Grandpa had been a student, they saw the ruins of a Japanese shrine. Grandson clapped twice and said they'd arrived in Japan, they were in Japan. They slapped together an itinerary quickly, stopping first in Japan and then to Southeast Asia. Passing through an industrial road, they found a food stall made from sheets of aluminum with graffiti on top: oppression. Sophia said, "Grandpa, we're in Vietnam! We're in a food stall in Vietnam!" True to form, Bookworm Grandpa said "Bibi," and his eyes followed his grandson's pointed finger. *Bibi*.

Panting as they pushed the wheelchair through the arcade, they began looking for a place to shelter from the sun. Luckily, they walked past a family watching a Yankees game. Grandson squatted in front of the wheelchair and said, "Grandpa, we're in New York! Look! Chien-Ming from Tainan is pitching!" Bookworm Grandpa's *bibi* calls became fainter, and Sophia jumped up – they had to go right now! Grandpa's *bibi* perked up again. Grandson took his black-framed glasses off to wipe away tears. "Grandpa, we're going to stop traveling now. Stop saying *bi-bi*, and stop pushing me around. Grandma's on her way back."

He didn't listen, and Grandson searched hurriedly for a phone. Sophia could see Grandpa's eyes fill with sadness, the lower lid twitching, and began pushing his wheel chair back home in a rush. Passing the Hui-An Temple, the red, white, and blue tarp covering the temple courtyard had already been set up for the ghost month. Sophia persisted in finding a way through, pushing him past the goddess Mazu as she looked for place for him to pass on.

They would have their chance to see each other again.

On Bookworm Grandpa's journey, before the gates of hell would open for him, he had to encounter a madwoman. When Sophia and Grandson saw Aqua Grannie before them, dazzling in all her splendor, they shouted, Grandma, you're finally back! A bag of gifts hung from the handlebar of the bike (she had time to pick up souvenirs?); Grandson wondered, was it burial clothing? Black smoke rose from big brass incense burning pots, next to two stone lions with contorted faces gifted to the temple during the Chen Shui-bian era. Countless yellow ribbons still filled the air over the temple courtyard. They rustled like waves. Aqua Grannie didn't want to take her garnet-colored sunglasses off. She looked like an outsider.

Laughing through tears, Grandson said, "Grandpa, we've arrived in outer space! Look! There's an alien in front of us!"

Once again, Aqua Grannie looked like a water pheasant, standing there in all her magnificence. "I came back. Are you better? Aren't you going to rag on me? Don't you want to push me around? Why aren't you ragging on me? You always say I'm crazy, and it's true, I am acting insane. I'm using your death as an opportunity to bike all over. I'm having fun, isn't that right? Do you think that's crazy or not?" Inside the temple courtyard, Bookworm Grandpa opened his eyes

slightly. Sophia said, "Grandpa's temperature is rising again." Memories of fifty years of marriage ran through Aqua Grannie's mind, and she could barely stop herself from crying. She'd left the village, biked there and back, and still he hadn't died. Aqua Grannie had already begun preparing herself.

Sunlight reflected off the red, white, and blue cloth, casting color on each member of the family. Bookworm Grandpa's two lips were sealed together, and Grandson said, "Grandpa wants to *bi* again, he wants to say something!" Aqua Grannie stood two feet away from him and held onto the canopy of the temple to support herself. She felt like she was going to collapse. She looked at Bookworm Grandpa's face, furrowed in concentration. "This is what he looks like when he's writing poetry." The crowd of spectators formed a wall around him; atop that wall sat a demon, biding its time.

An immense crack of thunder. The crowd gaped and covered their ears.

Suddenly, Bookworm Grandpa said, "Thank you for the last fifty years."

Thank you for the last fifty years. Like poetry.

Aqua Grannie took off her sunglasses, her eyes red and swollen. She approached Bookworm Grandpa and knelt before him, taking out a half-filled bottle of water from her bicycle. "This is water I brought back from Long Kou. When you were young, you were always saying that Long Kou's water could cure all kinds of disease." She dabbed some water on her hands, and lightly touched Bookworm Grandpa's lips. "May it bring back your appetite, so you'll have the strength to go out. Otherwise with just one leg, it's going to be hard for you to walk. I'm worried you'll have trouble walking."

Immense grief.

Sophia cradled Bookworm Grandpa's head. "Boss-Lady, Boss-Man's temperature is dropping. His temperature is dropping."

Grandson took control of the wheelchair and moved through the crowd, hurrying home.

Had all the onlookers overheard?

Bookworm Grandpa had traveled widely. After he fell ill, he'd learned a new language, and he'd used it to express himself to Aqua Grannie. This must have been the poem that he wrote for Aqua Grannie: "Thank you for the last fifty years."

—

Day 1 of the seventh lunar month. Bookworm Grandpa is a newly minted ghost. It was also Ghost Month, an inauspicious time for burials, so Aqua Grannie decided that she would wait a month before interring his body.

Sophia and Aqua Grannie sat under the funerary canopy on the side of the road folding paper lotuses. Sophia had adopted the Taiwanese custom of wearing black clothing, and it touched Aqua Grannie deeply. The funerary canopy had the same red, blue, and white canvas cloth as the temple in Jiali on the day she left. She could hear the constant ringing of the temple bell; it felt like ever since she left home, she hadn't stopped hearing burial hymns sung. She had very willingly

spent seven thousand *yuan* on the arrangements. During the summer, the air was full of the scent of bouquets of lilies that lined the way. They had been sent by the village representative. Grandson and a few other grandchildren who had flown back to Taiwan knelt around the coffin. The dharma teacher wanted to take Bookworm Grandpa's spirit to the West to meet the Buddha. The hall echoed with the sound of children seeking their irresponsible father, their faithless grandfather, asking why, why, why?

Aqua Grannie burned a paper lotus and addressed Sophia: "So your boss can travel around the world, even to Western Paradise, aboard the lotus." She also asked Sophia to get her embroidery kit from her room, and to cut a piece of cloth from the armoire. Putting on her bifocals, Aqua Grannie passed golden thread through the head of a big silver needle and again through the red silk. Sophia took in the sound of the burial hymns and chiming bells. Confused, she asked, "Boss-Lady, what are you doing?" Aqua Grannie didn't answer her question directly, replying, "There's no one to push me around." She stood and walked out of the funerary canopy, toward the flower displays, facing the high speed rail in the distance, way out west where the sun sets.

"There's a big, big purple water chestnut field over there, with three or four boats docked in the water. I thought we would wait for the harvest together," said Aqua Grannie.

She had her back to the funeral hall, to her children and grandchildren, and leaned over her little pink bike parked outside the canopy. "Sophia, I want to embroider an obituary. I'll make it stitch by stitch with my own hands. Then I'll put it on top of his coffin so that he'll know how many people he's survived by. I want him to know that in his life, I was the one who helped him write down the last word."

Sophia asked, "Boss-Lady, the other women that he saw, will you embroider them too?"

Without hesitation Aqua Grannie said, "Of course. I'm going to embroider the name of every place in Taiwan that he went, and every person that he met, including you, Sophia. I'm not going to differentiate by nationality, or who came first and who came later. I'm going to record the names of people from all walks of life. That was his life."

—

The coffin had been closed.

Aqua Grannie did nothing but sew and chant all day long. She'd pricked her fingers ten times, and Sophia helped her disinfect the wounds and put on Band-Aids. Grandson wore a black cotton t-shirt, and brought dinner over to Aqua Grannie. She hadn't eaten for a few days. She said, "Has your Grandpa eaten or not? He only has one leg, he won't stand a chance against others."

Grandson put down his bowl of rice and picked up his digital video camera. Recording, he said, "Grandma, do you remember that day at the Hui'an Temple when Sophia put the incense in backwards, like she was inviting Mazu to war?"

Aqua Grannie nodded her head in the frame.

As if he were a journalist, Grandson asked, "Do you think you won?"

"I didn't win or lose." Aqua Grannie hadn't put any make-up on.



Holding his video camera, Grandson brought Aqua Grannie through the mourning hall into the backyard, which was awash in moonlight. Pointing to the organic vegetable garden, he said, "That day we buried Grandpa's poop right here in the garden. Grandma, we should plant flowers here in remembrance of Grandpa."

"All right," Aqua Grannie said. "When the flowers bloom, it will seem like he's back. He'll be the man in the garden."

Grandson used a long shot to film the garden. He found a firefly blinking inside the organic vegetable garden. Frogs croaked, and a streetlamp nearby shone brightly.

"Grandma, when I have kids, what should I tell them about Grandpa?" Grandson zoomed in on Aqua Grannie.

"They should leave like I did. Go see the world like he did. If they do that, they'll be able to understand him, and they'll know this corner of the world."

"Do you think Grandpa did wrong by you, Grandma?" Aqua Grannie was on the right side of the screen, and the extension they'd built onto the house where Bookworm Grandpa had lived occupied the left.

Aqua Grannie said, "No. But after that day, I thought of him often, and I felt strong emotions from my skin to my bones."

"What emotions?"

"Regret," said Aqua Grannie.

*Bibi-beep.* The video camera's battery went out, *bi-bi.* The recording cut out, and Grandson turned off the camera. Aqua Grannie left the frame without expression. At the end of Ghost Month, she would start her retired life at seventy-five years old. Aqua Grannie said, "So long as I can still move, it's not too late."