BECOMING BUNUN
成為真正的人

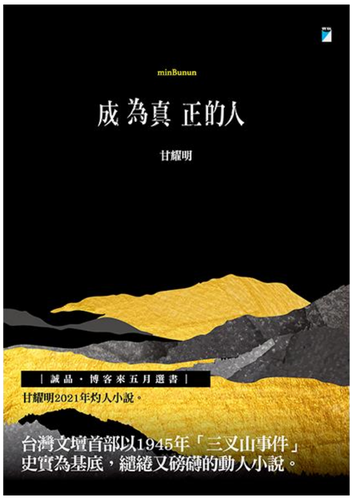
*** 2021 Openbook Award**

By the summer of 1945, the defeated Japanese are leaving Taiwan, and young Halmut dreams of leaving his tribal lands in the mountains behind for a career in professional baseball. Yet when a plane carrying American POWs crashes on the precipitous Sancha Mountain in south Taiwan, the ancestral knowledge of Halmut's people – the mountaineering Bunun – is called on to save lives. Kan Yao-Ming weaves a touching story of self-discovery and strength in difference amid the events surrounding the crash of the USS Liquidator.

As a teenager, Halmut leaves almost everything behind to pursue his dream of being a pitcher. Yet after riding the bench for an entire season, his moment of glory is ruined when he forsakes the field to chase someone who accidentally steals his backpack, in which he carries the ashes of his best friend. Halmut's team loses, and he doesn't make the call-up lists. He returns to his tribal community in the mountains as if in defeat.

Unbeknownst to him, the storm of world history is about to sweep him up. On September 10th, two US planes carrying prisoners of war out of combat zones go down over the South China Sea. One of them, the USS Liquidator, crashes into Sancha Mountain, just north of Taitung. The experienced mountaineers of Halmut's Bunun community, which has inhabited the mountains for millennia, are called upon to form a search party and save any lives they can.

Becoming Bunun is a bildungsroman of both open and secret self-discovery, set amid the epic backdrop of true events in world history. The substance of Halmut's life, from his early training as a hunter under his grandfather's eye to the quiet discovery of his homosexuality and his relationship to tribal identity as a young adult forms the beating heart of award-winning author Kan Yao-Ming's



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Rights sold: Simplified Chinese (Guangxi Normal University Press), Chinese Audio (Mirror Voice), Japanese (Hakusuisha) momentous tale. As Kan takes us up the steep mountainside life, he invites us to think about whom we carry with us as we find out who we are.

Kan Yao-Ming 甘耀明

Winner of the Taipei Book Fair Award, Openbook Award, Taiwan Literature Award, and Golden Tripod Award, Kan Yao-Ming is hailed as Taiwan’s foremost "Neo Nativist" writer, successfully mixing farce, tall tales, folk legend, and collective memories to create his own uniquely magic realist world. Like a magician of words, he writes with a highly experimental but always accessible style.

BECOMING BUNUN

By Kan Yao-Ming

Translated by May Huang

"World War II is over, so why aren't the deaths?" Lieutenant Mark of the United States Armed Forces pondered this question as he flew a B-24 Bomber into the southern airspace of Taiwan, entering the golden seventy-two hours of rescue time. Cloud coverage was ten percent, visibility extending to ten miles, and Mark could see his fellow search and rescue teams in the distance. The sky was vast, the land tipsy with early autumn. Emerald mountains stretched as far as the eye could see. Mark prayed he would find the sign of life he was searching for – the bomber that went missing the day before, carrying Allied prisoners of war, with his friend Thomas onboard.

After the war ended, President Truman ordered that the liberated prisoners be first to reenter the country. The prisoners were thus transported out of the active theater of operations with great urgency from Japan to the Philippines, where the US Forces had more logistical support, before boarding an ocean liner back home. But when Typhoon Ursula struck on September 10th, two airplanes and the fifty passengers they carried went missing, while another plunged into the ocean. It was the biggest human tragedy not caused by weapons that took place after the war. In the days that followed, the US military mobilized for a search and rescue mission, scanning the water for lifeboats or coloring agents, and the land for any reflection of aircraft skin. The bulk of the effort focused on Taiwan.

Mark searched for his friend Thomas at the base of Taiwan's mountains. Before Thomas was captured by the Japanese, he was a bomber pilot in Mark's fleet. They were stationed on Angaur, where they drank coffee nicknamed motor oil, bared their chests in the sweltering heat, chewed cigars, played poker, and swapped dirty jokes they'd just invented. Thomas would obsessively workshop the same crude joke over and over until, on the seventh day, he finally made everybody laugh. Then he would fly off to the Philippines and casually drop a bomb, cutting down everything as if he were simply trimming his front lawn back home in Kansas, since neither dead humans nor leaves can cry out in sorrow.

Had there been no war and therefore no need to worry about its fatal side effects, the pilots would have enjoyed flying even more. On one operation, as he flew through heavy anti-aircraft fire, Mark saw his wingman get hit, catch fire, and fall. The plane resembled a metal butterfly struggling to flap its wings. This fear of anti-aircraft warfare would reappear in his dreams even twenty years after he retired. He would dream that he lost control of his plane, that pulling the rudder was helpless, and it was better to follow death's path than resist it. The fall drove him unconscious, skipping over the pain of death.

Did Thomas and the other missing passengers die such a peaceful death? Mark wondered.

But where could the airframe have landed?

"Reflection sighted on the mountains, nine o'clock, could be aluminum," said the radio operator.

"Mountains, nine o'clock." The navigator made a tentative mark on the map.

The glitter was coming from the eastern foot of Mount Qilai. Below a hundred or so meters of falling rock, the exposed surface of the schist glistened in the sun; even the refracted light was penetrating. The crew quickly ruled out the possibility of it being aluminum, rendering the reconnaissance fruitless. Mark radioed the team to turn back. As the plane was about to change direction, Mark remembered the last time he banked without warning at this altitude; the engine mechanic in the middle of a piss got his thing stuck to the metal urinal, frozen in the shape of something that had just come out of a factory.

The plane descended to three thousand feet, preparing to deliver its payload over Hualien. Along the uniform streets, black-tiled roofs resembled a pack of rats scurrying eastward, crawling over the crowded railway station all the way to the Pacific coast. It was truly a beautiful, plain town. At the sight of another American plane, the townspeople ran after it and waved their arms ecstatically. The crew noticed an eight-year-old boy fall down, and waited until he got up before they dumped their stacks of propaganda.

The roar of the descending plane captured the residents' attention. They saw the star-shaped emblem of the US Army Air Corps on the metal bird excreting clouds of paper from its rear end before rising once more, the light bouncing off its steel skin, and heading towards the Pacific Ocean.

"The airplane is back to take a shit," the children cried.

The "airplane shit" referred to the propaganda that the Allies spread after the war. Stacks of paper drifted apart and fluttered in the wind through the city, turning over in the sky. When they got tired, they'd find their own spot to lie down. Some were swept away by Meilun Creek, or picked up by the sea, while others fell asleep on the tiled roofs, or hid inside the ruined houses once bombed by American troops. The delivery of propaganda flyers always incited much commotion, and today's mass fitness program was to snatch the tissue-thin paper that descended from the sky. The children loved to compete; if they weren't the first to catch one, they would rather tear up whatever they got. The grown-ups also put on their clogs and tiptoed towards the sky, desperate to catch even half a piece of paper to relieve the pent-up helplessness inside their hearts.

So the flyers floated leisurely through the air, making sure to catch the wind and fly even further away, for there was too much sorrow in the world, and it wouldn't do to be born here.

Thirty thousand white butterflies flew and danced through the city….

At the Hualien Huagang Mountain baseball field, the game was tied and dragging into the twelfth inning.

Halmut had waited four hours to play, and was still waiting. If he didn't get the chance to stand on the pitcher's mound even in a back-and-forth game like this, his life may as well be over.

He would have to return to the Bulbul village where the Bunun people lived a hundred kilometers away, with its endless cold winds, wild boars, and patrols. His life began when he escaped that place. Time tormented him; every second was a knife slicing through his anxiety. He clutched a baseball made of pigskin, his thumb digging into the stiches on top. He asked his coach for the eighth time whether it was finally his turn to go on. But his coach only shook his ugly, Hyottoko-like head.

Halmut glanced at the scoreboard. A black-bellied tern perched atop it. The bird's crown was black, its cheeks white, and its body a pale gray. It stood in the wind, its feathers ruffling from time to time. Halmut recalled that when these migratory birds visited in September, even the shadow of a cloud would frighten them. They'd take off from the river mouth, circle in the sky a few times, and fly south to chase the sun without any lingering sense of attachment.

Was the tern lonely? What was going through its mind?

"Perhaps he's come to watch me pitch?" Halmut wondered before coming to a more self-deprecating conclusion: "Or maybe he's here to watch the crowd!"

The baseball game had lasted from nine o'clock in the morning to one o'clock in the afternoon, which was long enough; the two hundred plus spectators gathered in the stadium were so tired they sat anywhere. Halmut stood up and stretched. He didn't know how much longer the game would go on. Would it go even longer than the game between the Kano baseball team and Taipei Tech? That one lasted three days and forty innings before a winner emerged. The longer today's fateful showdown went on, the less inclined the coach would be to switch out pitchers, for fear that doing so would break the deadlock. At this moment came scant applause, marking the end of the twelfth inning. The scorekeeper drew an "O" on the rarely-used playoff scoreboard, causing spectators to clap fiercely. The scoreboard was filled to the bottom, and the scorekeeper had to start from the top.

The black-bellied tern perched on the scoreboard flew into the air, occasionally flapping its wings, but more often beating them against the wind to stay aloft. In the end, it settled on the scoreboard again. Now there were even more spectators in the field, all in an uproar, for the war made their long-repressed anger explode. Two kids standing under the scoreboard even got into a scuffle over some chalk. But the tern stayed still, ignoring the commotion; he surveyed the ballgame as if he were the eyes of autumn itself.

What are you thinking, tern? Halmut wondered.

He walked to the blackwood tree where he kept his things, unzipped his mesh backpack lying on the ground, and pulled out antique Zeiss binoculars made of brass. The right lens was broken, so Halmut removed the left barrel and peered through it. Looking through the binoculars, he could clearly see black patches on the tern's abdomen, its slender red feet, and two beady eyes glistening on its black head. Halmut was certain that those eyes were observing him, too.

After all, it was a beautiful idea, and the tern was simply standing there, beautiful by itself.

Then his coach walked over, patted Halmut on the shoulder, and asked him to practice throwing a few balls, for he'd be pitching the second half of the inning. "The game is about to end. We won't win or lose anyway, so just throw a few balls for everyone to see." Halmut's moment had finally arrived. He stowed his binoculars and went to find a teammate to practice with. Each throw was perfect; his moves were clean and precise, and attracted a small group of onlookers who cheered him on. Halmut couldn't wait to go on; he had waited for this moment for four years.

After the Battle of Midway four years ago inflicted heavy damage on the Japanese imperial navy, the colonial government in Taiwan banned all recreational sports as punishment. Halmut lost the chance to play the most important game of his life, and from that moment on continued to lose one important thing after another. Today marked the first high school game of the autumn season, a chance to be scouted by one of the local corporation teams. If he had the chance to be selected for the sugar (factory), steel (roads), or revenue teams, he might even be hired for a contract position afterwards. The corporate match was scheduled for two in the afternoon, meaning that the middle school game had to end, win or lose – and Halmut would be the one to decide it. He treasured this opportunity. He gently held the baseball in his glove and pitched, channeling the energy from his shoulder blade into his wrist, watching the ball land with a thump in his partner's mitt.

Halmut had a good touch today; a delicate current ran through his fingertips. Catching his breath, he went to take a swig from his water bottle and in that moment realized that his bag was missing. But Hainunan was inside; Halmut had put him inside a light green jar so he could watch him play. Hainunan was quiet and light, yet would forever be the heaviest thing weighing on Halmut's heart. Halmut abandoned the game to pursue the thief, who surely couldn't have gotten very far away. He sprinted down the mountain from Takasago Road, pausing to observe the activity at each intersection – Shinjo, Tokiwa, Tsukushi, Irifune, Yayoi. Yet Halmut couldn't find the shadow he was searching for in the crowd. He rushed forward again, then stopped at Kasuga Pass as if he had stolen a base. Halmut felt his rapidly expanding lungs press against his ribs, as his nose caught the stench of banknotes burned during the war.

He looked at the next intersection. There was the culprit, pedaling his bike across the Tsukushi bridge a hundred feet away. "Stop right there," Halmut yelled.

No use. The man sped through the intersection, leaving a handful of pedestrians to watch him go.

Halmut continued his pursuit, wondering as he ran whether the man simply didn't hear him shout, or was ignoring him on purpose. They were on two streets a hundred meters apart, and Hamult wasn't certain that shouting at the next intersection would help – unless he could hit the guy from afar with his baseball.

He rushed to Black Road and stopped. This was a Japanese-style street, built by the Japanese to resemble home. Banks, wafuku stores[1], companies, bakeries, convenience stores, and the city hall were all located here. On this street that had been bombed by American troops, the first things to return were the odors of ramen and fermented vegetables, and the music of wooden clogs on the street. Halmut's quick breaths filled with the aroma of miso and pancakes. Then he saw the man he was looking for, a hundred meters away, preparing to cross the ten meter-wide Tsukushi bridge. There he was.

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[1] Wafuku and kimonos originated during the Three Kingdoms period, as trade activity between Suzhou and Japan introduced textile techniques to Japan.

Halmut got into position, did his run-up, leaned on one foot, and with a great shout, swung his right hand forward with all his might. The pigskin baseball in his hand flew eighty-two feet in a perfect arc – the distance a softball center fielder has to throw in Japanese-style baseball to put out a baserunner at home plate.

The ball hit the ground, hopped once, and hit the runner, who was so surprised he lost control of his bike, bumped into a telephone pole, and fell off. When he stood up, there was a muddy stain on his pants, an outward sign of his inner humiliation. Once he gave up trying to brush the mud away, he quickly located the cause of his public embarrassment.

Halmut walked over, and quietly observed the man.

He was wearing a short *hanten* coat and cropped black trousers. Halmut's bag hung off the back of his bicycle. The man's hat had fallen off, exposing an angry face further ignited by the autumn sun. The scale of his anger matched his authority: he was Captain Higuchi of the Hualien Police department, considered the leader of the "local patrol". He typically wore a uniform with a three-foot-long white scabbard blade hanging from his waist, and walked with his head held high. No wonder the image of this plainly dressed bicyclist confused Halmut.

Halmut stepped forward, for he needed to retrieve his things. If this were an ordinary day, he'd lower his voice, but the captain had power. He could detain suspects at will and even beat criminals in broad daylight. Rumor had it that if he caught a fly snacking on his pastries, he'd pin it to a plank with a needle and tear off its antenna and legs one by one.

"You're the one who threw the baseball, aren't you!" the captain barked.

"That's right, you took my backpack." Halmut pointed to the bag on the back of the bike. "I've got really important things in there."

"You're the one who attacked me."

"Well yes, but…"

"No one but you would dare do such a thing," continued the captain with great restraint, "you bear-murdering *takasago*." He flung Halmut's bag to the ground, picked up his bicycle, and walked away through the crowd.

"You stole my stuff – stay where you are!" Halmut yelled, emphasizing the word "stole" to embarrass his opponent.

"I would never do such a thing," the captain replied angrily.

Halmut believed him; police weren't thieves, so there must have been some misunderstanding. Someone must have wanted to play a trick on the captain by putting Halmut's bag on the back of the captain's bike. And yet, Halmut's grudge was already deeply entrenched, and he couldn't let go of the chance to teach the captain a lesson. "But you did steal," he yelled, "You stole something very important to me and you have to apologize."

"You're talking nonsense."

"Thief!"

Halmut's heart thumped in his chest but he stopped talking back, choosing to confront the deadlock with silence. A string of memories raced through his mind: the captain chasing him through vast paddy fields, catching him mailing love letters and humiliating him with the police department, arresting him for playing baseball. He held infinite resentment in his heart and felt blood rush to his head. The ringing sound in his skull grew louder and louder, booming and oppressive. He thought he heard a roar inside his head – but that turned out to be real, for a B-24 bomber was passing just overhead, its four turbocharged engines emitting a high-decibel bellow as its shadow crossed Halmut's face. Not long after, the flyers began to descend, dancing lackadaisically in the wind, enjoying the sunshine. Thirty thousand white butterflies threw the whole city into a frenzy. Everyone looked to the skies and gave chase, leaving Halmut and the captain at opposite ends of a battleground with only anger, animosity, and butterflies between them.

As they faced each other, a madwoman in the middle of the uninhibited, grasping crowd sidled over lithely, plucked the captain's hat, and placed it on her own head. Then, she picked up Halmut's backpack and began to dance between both men. This woman dressed in red was the living ghost of the city; no matter the state of the world, she only cared about dancing, making a scene and relishing in it, idling the days away in this erratic way. The captain didn't bother snatching his hat back from the lady, and simply let it be. As he was about to leave, he was stopped in his tracks by another woman, a Korean lady who frequented the red-light district just south of the train station. She wore a heavy layer of makeup and so much Kintsuru perfume that she resembled an incense burner. Korean women often complained that they were forced to come to Taiwan. On the surface, they were always respectful towards the patrolmen, and put up with all sorts of harassment in the brothel while pleasing the insatiable pigs. Yet in private, they vented their anger onto the cutting board, such that even the sound of chopping kimchi echoed through the alleys.

"What's in the bag, young man?" the woman asked Halmut. She waved at the madwoman to bring it over. The madwoman remembered people who treated her well; when she scavenged the restaurant dumpsters, the bar girls would often bring her food on plates.

"A glass box," replied Halmut.

The Korean woman opened the bag to check, and it was true; she retrieved the box, shook it a few times, and heard a rustling sound.

"This box carries something that weighs heavy on your mind, doesn't it?"

"Don't open it."

"Ah, young man! I of course know that one's thoughts are not to be pried open."

"My friend's ashes are in that box. He's dead."

"It's something you treasure, which is why you were so desperate to get it back." The woman was silent for a while, then said: "There are no winners in war, and the losers are often miserable."

The captain himself was miserable. The woman bent over forcefully, flung her shoes at him, then called others over to curse him out. After Japan's defeated, many liberated locals glowed with national pride, but hesitated to seek out conflict. Nonetheless, given the opportunity to give some Japanese a piece of their mind, they would seize it, as the Korean woman did now. This woman from the red light district, nicknamed a "black cat", displayed the feline disposition of toying with prey before eating it. The captain, already backed into the corner of the arcade, had completely accepted his fate as her mouse.

Backpack in hand, Halmut raced back to Huagang Mountain for the game. He began to wheeze from the effort, and his pace slowed until eventually he had to put a hand on the wall, his back drenched in sweat. He was injured, too; the long-distance throw at the captain wrenched his right arm. He leaned on a breadfruit tree by the side of the road, its thick leaves fanning him with a cool wind. Halmut looked up at the sky, fragmented by the leaves, and all he wanted to do in that moment was pray, even though it had been a long time since he lost his faith.

He murmured some words, then murmured again:

It's noon now, what's on your mind?
I think of Huagang Mountain when you were still here
Joy and sorrow were both beautiful back then
Just as today, joy and sorrow are both so lonesome
Today, autumn is too much of a tease
I almost lost you on the city's outskirts
There were no waves there to remind me
To study the way they weep to the coast
If you worry, if you worry, then come back to me
Turn into a rogue tern and come back....

Halmut left the breadfruit tree and ran back to the baseball park. "Do you hear that?" he muttered as he ran. "Applause is coming from Huagang Mountain, I've got to get back to battle." When Halmut returned to the park, the clamor coming from the crowd seemed to suggest that he didn't need to rejoin his unit. Turns out, the tides of battle had turned; a member of the white-clad team had stolen second base, and gained them the upper hand. An advantage like this may disappear quickly, for every game has its sublime, ephemeral moments that wilt like flowers with the applause. And yet, if Halmut didn't go on, he'd never have the chance to bloom at all.

The coach gave Halmut a good scolding. He wasn't there when they called for him, and now needed to get to the mound at once. The previous pitcher, who held on for ten more minutes, was spent. Halmut gave people the impression that he arrived late on purpose, causing quite a few players to boo. Halmut grasped the situation: no one was out, and they had walked a batter to first who subsequently stole second base. Nicknamed "The Engine", this Taroko player was an amateur player, and relied on brute force to advance to the next base.

After Halmut took a few practice throws from the mound, the game commenced. All the opposing team needed was a single run to win. Though Halmut's right arm still hurt, this was his last chance; a graver injury was worth trading for a new opportunity. The game begun. Halmut alternated nods and shakes of the head to perform a dance of false signals with his catcher while his right hand gently gripped the ball in his glove. The position of his fingers on the seams would determine how the ball traveled; even a simple fastball could include many small adjustments. Halmut threw hard and dealt with one batter, in exchange for even greater pain in his right arm.

To finish the game, Halmut knew he would have to change his pitching style. He wouldn't be able to throw a fastball with this injury. If the ball couldn't move quickly, it would fly slowly, so slow that it would made the batter hallucinate; this was Halmut's plan. Halmut pressed his fingers into the ball and took a deep breath; picturing cherry blossoms floating to the ground, he sent the ball gently into the air. The ball soared, flying more leisurely than usual over the home plate.

The batter swung and missed with eyes wide open; even the catcher and referee were astonished to see the ball drift by almost in slow motion, so still you could see the stiches on it. The pitcher hadn't thrown a fastball, but rather a weird breaking ball. The umpire called a timeout to inspect the ball. It weighed as much as a normal ball, though it was a shade darker than cowhide and its 108 red stiches were slanted, with scratches caused by countless throws and tumbles – no doubt the reflection of Halmut's hard work over the years.

"This ball is odd, isn't it?" asked the umpire.

"My grandmother made it out of pigskin. It's never caused any trouble all the other times I've played with it," Halmut explained.

It was common to see homemade baseballs during the war when resources were scarce. Any animal skin would work. Game balls were often made of the skins of black bear killed in zoos during the war, but cats and dogs were used as well. Even the skin of dead sharks stranded on the beach would work. Unable to find anything wrong with Halmut's ball from the outside, the umpire asked: "Aside from pigskin, what's inside the ball that we cannot see?"

"The bark of the abemaki tree."

Abemaki was the Japanese word for cork oak, a type of tree that grew at low altitude and had a thick, yet pliable cork layer. The umpire decided it wasn't the ball that was the crux of the matter, but Halmut's pitching technique. When he asked Halmut to demonstrate, his point was proven. Yet Halmut's coach denied responsibility. "I never taught him such a move," he said. For a high school student to cast such a pitch, he was undoubtedly using some sneaky tactic.

"This pitch is called 'floating cherry blossom'," Halmut explained. "The ball doesn't rotate in the air, but moves with the wind. It's also called a knuckleball." Halmut then explained where the technique came from. "I learned this from Mr. Kubota from the kamikaze unit. I practiced it on my own many times." After hearing the name of someone from the special attack unit, everyone fell quiet for a while, and tacitly accepted the use of this technique in the exhibition game.

To Halmut, however, this wasn't an exhibition game, but the most crucial game of his life. He returned to the mound, took a deep breath, and emptied his mind of its tangled thoughts. The most beautiful thing in the world wasn't the cherry blossom, but how the petals looked as they fell, fluttering in the wind – this was the essence of "floating cherry blossom". Halmut did his best to take Mr. Kubota's teachings to heart. Falling petals were *wabi-sabi*, imperfect, drifting briefly, perishing with the wind. An age-old philosophy of the spirit. Halmut gripped the ball with his knuckles and, without forcing anything, relied on muscle memory to send the ball out. The ball moved unhurriedly, knowing how to drift past an even faster ball. The audience gathered behind the referee to witness this miraculous pitch, gasping with surprise.

Stay calm for just a while longer, Halmut told himself, *and strike the batter out*. He focused all his attention on the batter, completing forgetting about the runner threatening him from second base. The runner came from a tribe on the Liwu river. His ballhandling was so bad, it was like watching someone attempt to pick up azuki beans with chopsticks. And yet, when he ran, he was more agile than beans bouncing off the ground. One more good pitch, Halmut told himself, and they'd be in the endgame. Beneath the blue sky washed clean by yesterday's typhoon, a single flyer still floated in air, as if it were too preoccupied with something to fall into the mortal world. Halmut observed the direction of the wind based on its movements.

A breeze blew from the coast over Huagang mountain, bringing a salty taste. Halmut pitched the "floating cherry blossom", letting the ball follow the wind. The baseball waited until it was in the mood before flying over the mound, floating like it were bewitched, then shyly ducked the touch of the baseball bat, leaving a hazy silhouette behind.

Three strikes! The third batter was out, but the game wasn't over.

The ball was still in the air, descending as it flew, too relaxed to land in the catcher's glove. It hit the ground and rolled all the way to the banyan tree. A passed ball on a third strike allowed the game to continue and the batter to run to first base. The catcher cast off his helmet, retrieved the ball, and threw it to Halmut, who was charging home base to tag out the runner.

It made for a spectacular play at the plate. Halmut summoned the strength of the hundred-step snake winding around stream rocks,[2] bracing against the force of the entire Liwu River during the summer floods. As he caught the ball and turned to make the out, Halmut collided with the charging baserunner so hard he was knocked several meters through the air. He hit the dirt, and the ball rolled from his glove.

"*Safe*!" The umpire spread his arms wide as he yelled the English word that had been prohibited during the war.

It was a spectacular ending, too much for the crowd to handle – they rose in a frenzy, and Huagang Mountain erupted in cheers.

The fallen Halmut had failed. He gazed at the autumn sky. The black-bellied tern had finally flown off. A single flyer floated down, covering his face.

By the time Halmut pushed aside his cap to look up at the sky once more, it was an afternoon two days later.

When Halmut woke from his nap, he had to think about his whereabouts. He was still alive, but nothing seemed worth celebrating. Halmut thought that the river lived a plain life, as did the waves, ebbing and flowing on repeat every day. His days were ebbing every day, too.

He heard the black dog Maru quarreling with something from afar, probably a water bird. Halmut's mind hesitated on the edge of wakefulness as it mulled over the dream he just had.

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[2] Known today as the Samuluh River, which drains into Taitung's Haiduan township. Samuluh can mean "hundred-step snake."

There's no life or death in dreams, and many people appear. He couldn't see faces clearly, but knew who was who. In dreams, ignorance cannot be broken; even when something feels weird, the show goes on without leaving a trace. In dreams, there are looks as well, silent gazes, vague thoughts that someone has died, and someone else still lives, until the only thing left is a stream of tears.

As tears ran down his face, Halmut awoke. He had fallen asleep by a small riverside just south of the Tropic of Cancer, lying in a pool of tranquility underneath a paper mulberry tree. A sandbar gave him a place to nap, and Maru was somewhere far away. He gazed at the sky beyond the trees; its piercing blue seeped into his eyes. Not far off, the garrulous Xiuguluan River flowed endlessly like the tears in his dreams. Dreams weren't real, but tears were. If the small stream by the mountains didn't sleep, and his tears flowed into it, what would a river of tears dream about? Would it dream of fossils, or the freedom of once being a cloud, or would it simply sing to the rhythm of the earth's ups and downs?

Halmut rose, brushed sand from his body, and looked out at the smoke-gilded horizon. Five years ago, he had watched a locomotive pass through the vast fields, carrying away smoke and steam, folding into the horizon as it left only trails of smoke behind. Back then, he and Hainunan (the most promising young man along the entire Hundred-Step Snake River) would walk the tracks together. The tracks went on forever – just like their footsteps – and at the end of it all lay their dream city on the shores of the Pacific Ocean. Nowadays, only Halmut remained. Two days ago, he had ruined the baseball game, and wasn't picked to join any of the other teams. His dreams had finally been dashed on a small hill by the sea next to Hualien City, and it was time to return home. With his backpack over his shoulder, he began to head south, accompanied by a five-year-old black dog, slowly squeezing himself into the horizon.

This was the first autumn after the war. The train station had collapsed into rubble, its tracks stretching endlessly southward. Sometimes you'd come across tracks that had been twisted into iron tendrils by the bombs, usually by a bridge, where things were difficult to repair. Halmut rolled up his pants to cross the river, slinging his jika-tabi shoes over his shoulders. His dog swam across first, then shook itself dry on the opposite shore, spattering water onto nearby stones. When the water stains on the rock where Halmut was standing had dried, a rotund, lead-colored plumbeous redstart flew back to its original spot. It sang as it ruffled its feathers, its voice permeating the sound of rushing water so clearly that Halmut turned back to look at it through his binoculars. The bird waited until the next traveler came to cross the river before flying back into the silvergrass for cover. Losing sight of the bird, Halmut noticed in the distance the vague outline of a scrapped train on the tracks. Legend told that it had been bombed by a US fighter jet.

"Onward, Maru," ordered Halmut, putting down his binoculars. "The US army is on its way."

He rushed into the sea of silvergrass, creating a gash in the field that the wind smoothed over like a scab. After the silvergrass came endless paddy fields, where Halmut surprised a flock of warbling white-eyes, whose frenzied flight attracted the attention of people nearby. These villagers who had dispersed into the country to dodge the bombings had no intention of returning to the city just yet; they planned to wait until the autumn harvest was over. One urban farmer watched the young man and his black dog run further and further along the dimly lit tracks, until their shadows blurred together and dissolved into the train compartment.

Halmut lay on the floor of the carriage, catching his breath. He was about to pass the tail-end of the Xiuguluan river, and the water itself seemed to wag like a dog's tail by the riverbed, exuding the smell of coniferous trees. Halmut entreated his dog to stop licking him, but Maru only wagged his tail. Then Halmut suddenly felt like something was approaching; an enormous thing that quickly flitted across the sky. *The bomber has come, hide, quickly*, Halmut yelled. But it was too late; the carriage was stranded on old and rusted tracks amid the overgrowth, and couldn't move any more. Halmust climbed onto the wooden bench and looked up. On the other side of the moss-coated window, the enormous entity was launching its second wave of attacks. Then he heard the fierce flapping of wings, as twenty or so warbling white-eyes landed on top of the carriage, singing songs of peace.

Sitting on the bench, Halmut whittled the time away. He wanted to think good thoughts, but the death of the carriage kept resurfacing in his heart. Time elapsed and sunlight streamed in from the bullet holes, filtering down rays that slanted more and more until the sun was covered by the mountains. Halmut climbed to the roof of the carriage. The birds had flown off. He gazed at the horizon over Huadong Valley. Another day had died in this world, and his days passed the same way. *Where are you?* He yelled with all his might. Sadly, the world was too big to pay attention. So, he thought quietly to himself:

It's evening now; what's on your mind?
In the graying sky, a star is born
Is that you?
You seem sad
A wisp of cloud leaks from one corner of your eye
Flows into the embrace of a trainless horizon
Do you see the stars?
Or me, the teardrop mole on the plains, in the carriage
Never dry…

Nightfall came, enveloping the clouds in the sky.

Halmut lit a lamp and sat in the carriage, eating dried egg noodles with fried shallots. A few lights burst forth on the horizon, some flickering, some still, until shimmering stars dotted the whole sky. Halmut wrapped a blanket around himself and lay on the roof of the train to stargaze.

After being woken from his second dream by the cold, Halmut went back inside the carriage to sleep. People had died in here – perhaps in the very spot where he lay, their bodies pierced by bullets from a machine gun. With his cheek pressed to the floor, Halmut could see the gray seeds of the shell ginger plant; he chewed on the cool taste of peppermint, cleared his sinuses, and caught the lonely odor of rust. That was the rotting stench of dead iron. Halmut wanted to know what death was but didn’t know how much longer he’d have to live to find out, for he was only seventeen. His whole world was baseball, and though baseball wouldn’t kill anyone, it could kill his dreams.

The next morning, Halmut rose early while it was still dark outside and no silhouettes could be seen. A ray of morning sun crept over a mountain ledge in the east. Halmut lit two candles on top of the carriage, jumped off, and ran along the railway sleepers, which were wet with dew. His dog ran even faster. When Halmut was far enough, he turned back to look at the carriage, hoping to wait until the candlelight had extinguished before leaving this place. Under the red cedar tree that was hardly discernable in the distance, morning light flooded in from the mountains, so violently it made all living things turn out from the darkness. The carriage came into view, sunlight reflecting off the glass, and the candles went out. At this moment, Halmut realized that he had arrived at the Hundred-Step Snake River. The water here sounded like it belonged to the Bunun tribe. At noon, he took another nap by the creek, the sand receiving his body, the tears from his dreams flowing out.

How many times had he cried until he lost his voice, wanting to hide in a corner where no one could find him so that the tears in his heart could flow? At one point, Halmut noticed a dark shadow swim into his tears. Maru was holding something in his mouth – a spot-billed duck. A common sight in the water, spot-billed ducks were strong fliers and made a bright sound when flapping their wings. Yet the farmers saw them as evil geese and paddy thieves, and would bind their wings and tie the birds to a bamboo cross as a warning. Sometimes, the farmers would rush the nest to scare off the mother duck before beating the remaining ducklings to death.

“Maru, that’s your food.” Halmut yelled.

Maru looked at Halmut with his innocent eyes while the duckling in his mouth flapped its wings in struggle. The last raw food this city dog ate was sashimi. He would bark at noises from the kitchen but be frightened by the mice running out. Many times, he mistook himself for a cat, and loved basking in the winter sun, crawling around stealthily.

“Maru, be a hunter! Kill that duckling.”

But the innocent dog only wagged its tail and released the duckling in its mouth.

“No, you have to kill it.” Halmut grabbed the duckling by the neck and strangled it until it emptied its bowels and stopped breathing. “Now eat it,” he said.

But the dog didn’t understand, and simply wagged its tail.

“You’ve got to eat it. Now that you’ve come back to the Hundred-Step Snake River, you have to become a hunter, otherwise you’ll make Kakalang really disappointed.”

Kakalang was Halmut’s grandfather.

Kakalang used to say that names have a spiritual power that awakes when they are called. River water likes to move slowly, and can only rush upstream when it wears a powerful name. Named after the Hundred-Step Snake, the river climbed higher and higher, making a bulbul sound as it roared through the valley to create the bulbul tribe; soon after, the river used wild loquat

(Litu)[3] to help catch its breath while climbing, so the Litu tribe came to be; afterwards, the river had a choice to chisel through lime (Halipusu), or through a canyon (Masaboru)[4] to gain another name.

"Which one would you choose? Would you wear the limestone's clothes, or the canyon?" asked Kakalang.

"I'd wear the canyon's clothes," Halmut's brother Bacingul was the first to respond.

"You're a brave boy," responded Kakalang. He turned to Halmut. "And you?"

"I'd rather wear the limestone's clothes."

"Why's that?"

"The sambar are over there licking the limestone, they like to eat it," said Halmut.

"You're a brave and clever hunter, then, to know where the sambar's salt cellar is."

"No, I just like to watch them eat."

Kakalang laughed, as did Bacingul. Halmut pouted angrily. The river is braver than we, said Kakalang. It chooses both names, like adopting a pair of twins. So the river separates into two streams, carrying its rushing sweat, climbing three thousand meters above sea level to the Sakakiran Mountain[5]. With great difficulty, Kakalang brough his twin grandsons here, watched them walk over the endless garrison road, asking about the river's antler-like bifurcation. It was April then, and spring was on its way to the mountain peaks. It was so cold that the twins clung to each other for warmth as they watched a brown bullfinch fly overhead. Kakalang wanted them to pay attention to where the bird was heading, a garrison road built along the Hundred-Step Snake River. Large tophi had formed around the river's joints: police posts built for surveillance in the Koyo, Haliposon, Haimus, Matengulu, Litu, Bulbul regions, and so on. Blood would seep from these tophi, which turned into cherry blossoms that bloomed inside these posts. What was beautiful to the Japanese was the suffering of the Bunun people, and it was their blood that flowed there.

"Do the Japanese flowers travel by boat? Do they get seasick? Did they also arrive here on foot?" Eight-year-old Halmut's questions were as numerous as shrimp eggs and always meant to rile up his brother. "You clearly have no idea," Halmut said, wrinkling his nose.

"They travel by boat, but can't climb up the mountain; someone has to carry them up."

"Have you seen this?"

"Yes, I once saw a Japanese woman carried up on bamboo."

The twins bickered for a long time, and Kakalang enjoyed their childish squabble, knowing that they would soon be enrolled in the Indigenous primary schools taught by the local Japanese police. The children's memory of traditions would be slowly poisoned by civilization, and their ears would be able to distinguish between the sounds of various coins falling to the ground but not the rustle of hulled grains. The twins argued for a while, yet arrived at the same question. "Can trees walk?" they asked.

That's as true as sweat flowing down and the Hundred-Step Snake River climbing up, said Kakalang. "Let's talk about history. Come on! Down the mountain we go, we'll walk and talk at the same time.” Kakalang held the twins’ hands, and once again told them the story of the walking trees; a long, long time ago, all the kindling would walk into people’s homes on its own, and the cork oak near the houses would make its own way to the firepits. Back then, animals would walk to the house and live inside pots and pans. Grains of rice were so plump that a single grain could turn into a whole pot of rice. The fire was obedient, too: it lived between cracks of charcoal, and would dance like a swarm of fleas so long as you fed it some hay. All living things came to the Bunun people’s houses as friends, until one day, when a metal walking stick with one large, pierced ear and a slender, unspeaking mouth came bounding along. The Bunun people let him in to shelter from the rain. All the other creatures warned them to not welcome the metal walking stick into their homes, for he was the evil spirit known as Banban-laingaz. So the Bunun farmers rubbed two sickle blades together, letting out a horrible screech to scare the spirit away, but this sound scared the creatures so much they pleaded for the farmers to stop letting the iron tongue sing its song. Yet the metal walking stick was unafraid, which proved that it wasn’t really an evil spirit. When the Sowing Festival arrived, the Bunun people curiously went to tug on the walking stick’s ears. The men in the Bunun tribe pierced their ears to prevent evil spirits from yanking their ears and dragging them away. So why did the walking stick pierce his ears?

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[3] The Litu tribe is the largest tribe along the eastern stretch of the Nanheng Highway.

[4] The Haliposon and Masibor rivers, which are from the Bunun language, are tributaries of the Xinwulu River.

[5] Mount Pinuyumayan (Beinan Zhushan)

Every living thing made as much noise as possible, Kakalang continued, as they begged the farmers to not pull on the metal walking stick’s ears. The fire roared, the millet scattered onto the floor, the firewood tumbled around, and the animals tearfully entreated them. But the Bunun man swore that it was only dangerous for evil spirits to pull on someone’s ear, and he was a man. So, he went to tug on the metal walking stick’s ear. *Bang!* The metal walking stick let out a violet cough, and from his slender mouth spat a steel wad that hit the wild boar. The millet shrank in fear, while the firewood and animals fled. The wild boar was dead. And yet, as if it had a life of its own, its blood gurgled from its wound, putting out the flame of the three-stone stove and seeping into every nook and cranny, to warn everyone with its foul smell that the gun had arrived.