

BEFORE WE WERE MONSTERS

成為怪物以前

* *Perfume* meets *The Silence of the Lamb*

* Official "Shoot the Book" Selection at Cannes

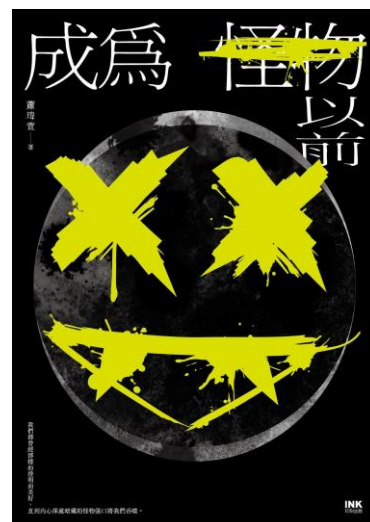
Crime scene cleaner Eve likes to work alone because the scent of death is the only thing that restores her lost sense of smell. When her actions unwittingly land her as the prime suspect in a murder case, she must do everything she can to find the killer and clear her name, even if it means enlisting the aid of a serial killer, and becoming something less than human herself.

Crime scene cleaner Eve used to be a "super smeller", that is, someone with an extremely sensitive sense of smell. All of that changed with the death of her brother, when she lost the ability to distinguish odors – except when triggered by the scent of death. Afterwards, she took to visiting crime scenes alone to try to stimulate the return of her olfactory super-powers.

When Eve's office receives a call for a suicide clean-up, they are temporarily understaffed, so Eve decides to handle the case alone. What she doesn't realize is the suicide was actually a murder, and her clean-up job destroys all evidence at the crime scene, leaving her as the prime suspect.

Now, Eve must prove her innocence by tracking down the murderer, and her only clue is the scent of a vaguely familiar perfume. Desperate to clear her name, Eve contacts a notorious serial killer, hoping to gain insight into the mind of a psychopath, but even that might not be enough to uncover the motive, and the culprit – to hunt down a monster, Eve will have to become a monster herself.

The astonishingly confident debut novel from screenwriter Katniss Hsiao, *Before We Were Monsters* can only be described as "cinematic"



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Film

in its deft construction of visual detail, narrative arc, and pacing. Chock-a-block with surprise twists and creeping tension, this dark and searing crime thriller is a crossover hit that never scrimps on literary style.

Katniss Hsiao 蕭瑋萱

Novelist and screenwriter Katniss Hsiao holds a BA in history from National Taiwan University. A lifelong film buff and fan of crime fiction, she is currently a project manager at Outland, a film production company based in Taipei. *Before We Were Monsters*, her debut novel, was shortlisted for the Taiwan Literature Award and the Taipei Book Fair Award, and was named one of the best books of 2022 by Eslite and Readmoo, Taiwan's largest brick-and-mortar and e-book platform. In 2023 her debut screenplay *Flare* was awarded with Excellent Screenplay at the Golden Harvest Awards.

BEFORE WE WERE MONSTERS

By Katniss Hsiao

Translated by Darryl Sterk

Chapter 1: Scene of the Crime

Whales, you said.

I gazed out to sea, but there wasn't anything there.

You wouldn't be able to see them from here, I said, raising my voice to try to talk over the wind.

You looked disappointed, but I didn't know how to console you. So I just stood there with you on the embankment, at some distance from the sea. With fields of flowering miscanthus grass at our backs, there were waves ahead of us and waves behind. Another gust whooshed past our ears, scraped our cheeks, and shook the grass, which resigned itself to the traction of the wind, even though it looked wildly unkempt.

Let's go, you said.

Where? I didn't ask out loud, just watched you slip out of your shoes, slide down the rocky wall of the embankment, climb over the concrete tetrapods, and stride resolutely onto the beach. With every step, you curled your toes deep into the sand, as if you were trying to enfold every grain into your flesh.

I staggered along, trying to follow in your footsteps, one after another. It took me a while to realize you weren't walking in a straight line. You were tracing an arc towards an unknown realm.

Your prints were soft and moist, and whimpered faintly when I stepped in them, like the whine of the sea in a conch shell. You stepped into the sea without any hesitation. You said the sea spoke the language of sand and wave, in words that shattered as soon as they were uttered. No human could ever understand.

The waves pushed and pulled at your calves, making you sway. Droplets of sweat and seawater coalesced on the sides of your neck and twinkled in the twilight. The brine on the breeze was bracing, as if all the scent of the world had suddenly taken on hue.

I only dared to dip my toes. When the frothy water beat against my sole and inundated my foot, I immediately withdrew it and retreated to the beach, like a naughty child. It was so cold. The sandy foam sucked at my skin.

Now you were at the edge of the sea, now in its midst. The sea was so close to you, wrapping you tightly, as if you'd always been part of it. Broken, yet whole: that's what a wounded

sea is like. I could read your emotions, but that was all. I felt like the sea spray that can embrace a boat without necessarily being able to hold it up. Love is not enough.

Where do people go after they die? You'd asked me this one dreary afternoon when there was nothing to do, though the only people who would know what, if anything, we actually got up to are me and you. When you opened your mouth the words gushed out, like a hole had been poked in the sea and the sea was bleeding back into the air, returning to where it belonged.

I didn't answer.

Some people believe in karma, others in reincarnation, and if it's true, maybe you'll discover a diary like this one, or a letter, stashed in a secret compartment in a desk or wardrobe somewhere. Will you think of me in that future? Will you think of us, of all our embraces? Will you remember those days of reckless, shuddering delight, and the wind at night?

If so, perhaps you'll understand how sad I felt the day I made up my mind to kill you.

You'll know how drained I was, and how I cried.

1

A draft snuck in through a gap between window and frame, causing the beige curtain to flap, like it was being sucked at by the world outside. Wintry afternoon sunlight seeped through the fabric and leaked onto a little bedside clock, which was chipped and cracked and short a second hand. She could hear it rattle around at the bottom of the clock whenever she picked it up and turned it like a pellet drum.

Time was like a toy in her hand.

Reality slowly took shape. Time and space were meaningful, and complementary. They had been woven into everything under the sun. She blinked, once, then twice. Her circulation restored, she slowly moved her tingling hands, wrists, elbows, and arms, like fragments of memory coming slowly back. She held her fingers in front of her eyes and examined them, as if seeing them for the first time. She stared at them eagerly yet fearfully, as if this was the only way to make sure she existed.

She struggled to prop her aching body up, and then to straighten herself, with the motor control of an infant who has only just learned to sit. She had to get reacquainted with everything.

She breathed in, attentively.

As always, the first breath she took was accompanied by a stabbing pain.

She heard her heart race. It sounded like it was about to burst out of her chest, reminding the owner that she was still alive. She reached out a trembling hand to grab the clock and confirm the time: 11:37.

It's 11:37, she recited, my name is Eve Yang. I'm in my bed at home. I just woke up.

She took a deep breath.

Her catastrophic seizures were becoming more frequent, and lasting longer, each as terrifying as the first time. She put the clock down, threw off the covers, and put her feet upon the floor. It could have been dry ice. The tiles conducted cold relentlessly.

Damn winter. She sighed. November in the north of Taiwan was gray, wet, and chilly, as usual, and ineffably desolate. Unable to find her slippers, she would have to brave the cold in her bare feet. She kicked away crumpled tissues, plastic instant noodle bowls, and piles of clothes as she bulldozed her way towards the bathroom. Spicy Cheeto crumbs crunched in a bag, cheese powder stuck to her soles. She shook it off and scanned the room for a shark jaw hair clip.

Looking at herself in the bathroom mirror, she realized that November in Taipei wasn't the only thing that looked bleak.

Her eyes were bloodshot, and the bags below them were nearly blue. Every pore oozed exhaustion. Her mucous membranes burned with every freezing breath she took. She'd scratched the sweat rash on her neck until it bled, and picked at it when it scabbed over. There was dandruff from her forehead to the corners of her eyes. When she rubbed her temples, dry flakes rained down. She was all of twenty-eight years old and her skin was completely shot.

Her cheekbones were high, her features chiseled, without a single smooth or supple line. But the harshness of her face gave it an arresting, statuesque beauty. Over the past few years, she had sculpted herself into a lean jackal, without an ounce of flab. Once merely hollow, her cheeks were now gaunt. Once snug, her thermal underwear sagged.

She was short, five foot two at most, and slight, the sort of person who gets lost in a crowd. Even so she exuded aggression, every inch of her, like a wiry predator.

It was only after washing her face with hot water that she felt like herself again. She was no longer going to be swallowed whole. She had been dragged back up from hell. It felt like popping a suction cup or unclogging a pipe.

Her wet hair was stuck to her cheeks and to her neck behind her ears, so she yanked a towel off the rack and absent-mindedly squeezed the water out. Then she walked out of the bathroom to pick up a jacket off the sofa and drape it over her shoulders. That's when she heard the television. She'd left it on all night.

"... Once juvenile orcas are able to handle themselves in the surf, they have to learn to hunt. They begin by practicing with seaweed. However, seaweed won't flee when attacked, so eventually they have to find live prey to practice on." The male narrator had a penetrating voice. "First, they set a trap. Hiding their dorsal fins, they ride a wave into shore and clamp their jaws onto an unsuspecting sea lion. Then they drag it into the water."

They weren't going to kill it. Not yet.

The terrified sea lion fled into the open ocean, only to be encircled again and again by the practicing pod, in a vicious cycle. *Know your prey. Eve seemed to hear the whisper of a killer whale. Be aware of currents and depth. Bide your time. Don't get stranded in the shallows.*

She wished she could stop the sea from pouring into the room, but couldn't find the remote in the small mountain of clothes on the sofa. Enervated, she managed to dig her cell phone out of the crevice between cushion and armrest.

“... As an apex predator, the orca is clannish and clever, and it possesses consummate hunting skills. An orca will kill its own kind, or pay any price, to protect its family.” The sea pulsed within her, beating with her blood. “But not even the toughest hunters are immune to grief. Recent visitors to Vancouver Island in Canada have seen a living example in J35, an orca cow who was renamed Tahlequah, meaning ‘two is enough’ in Cherokee. She was observed carrying her dead calf’s body through the sea for days on end...”

Eve shivered and blew her nose. The moment she put her phone in her jacket pocket, it vibrated violently. Howard Hsu floated up out of the depths of the screen. She muted him and skated over the ice-cold floor into the kitchen.

A dozen bottles were strewn on the counter. A few fruit flies were sucking at the glass, drawn by the droplets of white liquid at the bottoms of the bottles she hadn’t rinsed out. In a ceramic bowl lay a yellowed *mantou* – a steamed bun – that looked freeze-dried. She gave it an indifferent glance. Then she lifted the lid on the pan on the gas stove. The food in it was sticky and fizzy. It didn’t look like miso soup anymore, if that was in fact what it was. Eve scrutinized a spoonful. The wakame was pale and moldy. She hesitated for a few seconds before putting it to her nose.

The fridge was empty, and there was no other food in the flat. She looked around, at the garbage that was piled around the living room. It would take quite some effort to clean up, she thought, irritated. What day was it? Thursday or Friday? She wasn’t sure. Her phone vibrated again, a steady rumble. It was Twig. This time she took the call.

“Hey, Eve, you said to call if there was a case,” he said, under his breath. His voice was shaking, like he was afraid of being discovered. “It’s in the Wanlong neighborhood, just across the river from your place. An old twenty-ping flat on the third floor. The body has been disposed of. Here’s the location—”

His voice suddenly cut out. There was a commotion in the background. Eve listened intently, but all she heard was a high-decibel scolding: “Jesus H. Christ, everything I say goes in one ear and out the other. Didn’t I tell you she needs her rest? You don’t think she’s got enough to deal with? And what about me?”

Eve was just about to say something when he unleashed his fury on her. “Hey, Evie! Listen up! If you try to take this case, if you even leave your place, I’ll fire your ass. You’re going to just stay put and rest, and that’s an order. You’re not working yourself to death on my watch. I’ve assigned today’s case to Twig and Shirley. Yes, Shirley’s going to be there, so don’t you dare show up and cause a scene.”

He hung up without waiting for a reply, as imperious as ever.

“... ceaseless, unrestrained mourning. It’s an incomprehensible obsession.” Tahlequah wailed faintly through the sea, like an undertow of sorrow beneath the light-speckled waves spilling into the room.

Eve could not stay in the sea a moment longer, or her flat. She put on two pairs of pants, grabbed a ring of keys with a whale charm, and headed out the door.

The November sky was a miserable gray. The listless sun reflected dully off window glass and iron siding, as if there was nothing to do and nowhere to go – as if people were being melted down or destroyed day by day, and everything was destined to be thrown away.

The slanting red days of Autumn had just ended, and winter seemed just as uninspired. It, too, was just waiting limply for its time to pass. *At least it's not raining*, Eve thought. Best that she could hope for in the Yonghe District suburbs of Taipei. Pedestrians rushed past, mostly mute. Later on when the local elementary let out it would be a different scene entirely: parents swarming on scooters and honking their shrill horns while lollipop ladies blew their whistles and children screamed and scampered about. Eve wanted no part of it.

She lived in the Liuhe Market, a layered maze of twisting alleys and side lanes that all led sooner or later to the dark heart of the market, a covered tunnel where vendors set out their wares. Everything in the market seemed connected, but unrelated. The iron door on the ground floor thudded shut behind her. It was just as old and decrepit as the rest of the walk-up apartment block, with a rusty latch that would only engage if she slammed it. She gave it a few yanks to make sure that it was really closed. Then she swiftly navigated the maze to her motorcycle, which she had parked by a street lamp.

There she went, bundled up like Winnie the Pooh, but shivering all the same. She stuffed her hands in her coat pockets and withdrew most of her neck into her turtleneck sweater. Her khaki boots completed the look: she looked like a cartoon character clad in a cotton comforter. She was wrapped up so tightly that a few scantily clad aunties and grannies she passed along the way couldn't help but stop and stare.

The office was not far from home. Wolong Street, around the corner from the largest mortuary in Taipei, was the ideal location for a company that profited from death. For Eve, it was just across the bridge, a few stops by bus, convenient and hassle-free. But people in her line of work rarely take the bus. She walked up to her old black 125 cc motorcycle, adjusted the mirrors, double-checked that her jacket was zipped all the way up, and breathed warmth into her palms. Then she opened the seat compartment and took out her helmet and leather gloves in preparation for the toughest test of winter: the ride over the bridge.

The loose chin strap snapped against her collarbone and cheeks, and the waspish wind stole into her helmet, pricking her scalp and stinging her eyes. It puffed up her jacket, too. With the whistling of the wind and the flapping of her jacket in her ears, she finally made it.

She managed to squeeze her two-wheeler between a power pole and a little lamb – a 50 cc scooter – and lean it on its kickstand. Then she took off her helmet and walked into a nondescript apartment block with a peeling pink façade.

Two gaudy posters were stuck to the walls of the elevator. "We'll clear away your trauma, and spare you all the drama." And: "Don't worry, leave everything to us: Next Stop Company." There was a silhouette of two people embracing against a sunset, with an address and phone

number at the bottom. Eve didn't get the tacky slogans, like a real estate company might use, but couldn't help looking, and feeling disgusted, every time she rode the elevator. It felt like opening a Russian doll and finding another inside, one inside the other in an endless series. Or were they proliferating?

Next Stop specialized in crime scene clean up. According to the internet marketing, Next Stop "liberated crime scenes, disposing of death, so that you and your loved ones, both the living and the dead, can start a new chapter." Why was it called Next Stop? The boss said the English name sounded "international", and would attract a more diverse clientele. *Whatever*, she thought. But there was no mistaking his slick style: smooth talking, or glib.

The first to fifth floors were occupied by the True Kindness Funeral Home, a company the boss had invested in. Next Stop was in the basement. Eve pressed B1, and in less than five seconds, the metal box had sucked her down into a very different space.

The company had been in business for many years, but the boss ran a tight ship, keeping the staff small. The past few years, her, the boss, Twig, Andre, and Shirley had been working shifts. It was a capacious office for a skeleton crew. When you opened the glass door and walked in, you found yourself facing a wooden standing table on which a finely wrought gilt incense burner had been placed. The rising smoke drew your attention up to a huge plaque: Unleash the Merciful Buddha Within, in gold lettering on a black base. It was nearly ten feet wide.

Turning right, you saw four office desks set side by side. Eve tossed her bag on her desk, which she had left almost bare: no potted plants, no sticky notes, no books, no paper, and no pens. The only decoration, in fact, was a solitary bright blue mug hunkered down in the corner. It was illustrated with a sea turtle flipping the bird next to the words: "Don't fucking touch me!"

In addition to the plaque, the mottled walls were covered in calligraphy scrolls, framed photographs, and newspaper and magazine clippings, with only slivers of negative space between them. As a result, whatever its true dimensions, the basement felt cramped. A concave *bagua* mirror and a copper bottle gourd had been placed according to feng shui. Perhaps the boss had been hanging around too many oldtimers, or maybe he'd been too reckless in his crazy youth, but the older he got, the more abstemious and superstitious he became. He'd hire a spirit master to perform annual office exorcisms around New Year's Eve. Or, perhaps all businessmen are generally afraid of falling when they climb to a certain height. Eve chafed under all the rules and regulations, and particularly detested the bags of polished stones and colored crystals that hung on red threads in the corners of the room. She found them crass.

"Hey Eve!"

Eve walked into the kitchenette, opened the refrigerator, unscrewed a carton of milk and chugged it like a thirsty beast. Twig followed after her, fidgeting.

"About the milk..." He stared at the empty carton she had tossed in the sink, as if he expected it to sprout or mildew.

Eve smacked her lips, wiped her mouth, and opened the fridge again to have another look. There were no directly edible options, such as rice or bread, only a nearly empty jar of Wei Lih

noodle sauce, a tin of red miso that was years past its expiration date, a can of Fuyuan peanut butter with only enough left for one more slice of bread, and a bottle of 76-proof sorghum liquor.

"The boss is out, isn't he?" Eve reviewed the inventory, torn between the red miso and the peanut butter. She wasn't sure if one would be enough.

"He's upstairs trying to sort out last month's accounts with the bookkeeper." Snapped out of his contemplation of the carton of expired milk, Twig kept his voice low and his shoulders hunched despite himself, looking very hard done by. "He must have eaten TNT for breakfast this morning. He was nasty."

Giving up, Eve closed the fridge and continued the search on the counter.

Twig muttered something, probably about how mean the boss was, or his girlfriend, but Eve didn't hear, or care, to be perfectly frank. She rummaged around and found a half dozen packs of Twinkies on, of all places, the glass dish in the microwave. She gasped, tore a wrapper, and wolfed down a Twinkie.

She used to find "the golden sponge cake with a creamy filling" revolting. The cake was as tasteless as the cream filling was saccharine. Even if you could finish one in two or three bites, it left an awful aftertaste. *Soulless* food, she used to say. But now here she was, ripping open the third pack.

The boss had hid the treats in the microwave to go with his afternoon tea. Twig was going to say something to stop her, but seeing her devour them one after the other he held his tongue. *There'll be hell to pay, either way*, he thought, grimacing.

"Is the client there yet?" she said, her words muffled by a mouthful of processed goodness.

"Not yet. The parents hired us, but they're still on the way up from Changhua. We got the keys from the landlord. He said to go ahead. It smells too bad to wait."

"Brief me."

"According to the police report, a teenage male slit his wrist in an old twenty-ping flat and lay in a pool of blood for about three days before discovery." He took a mug from the holder and filled it with lukewarm water. "The body was disposed of this morning. The boss went to have a look. It ain't going to be easy."

He was done. Eve licked her lips, purely by reflex, because she couldn't taste anything. Twig offered her the mug. Eve gulped it. At least she could still tell it was wet.

"You were going to send me the address," she said. She put the mug down, tossed the last Twinkie wrapper on the counter, and walked out.

"Are you sure about this?" Twig scrambled to clean up the wrappers and catch up with her. "You've been working for weeks. If you don't take a day off—"

"How long have I got?" she asked, interrupting him.

Twig scowled. "Shirley's at home. It'll take her about thirty minutes to get here. I'll mix the formulas. After we load the equipment and drive over, you're looking at about an hour."

"You bring the tools, I'll wait on site." She went into the equipment room to pack her gear – hazmat suit, mask, shoe covers, countless pairs of gloves, and her hip pouch – then walked up to Twig and held out her hand.

Twig looked up and met her eyes. He knew what she wanted. He opened an iron box and took out a key chain, which jangled when he dropped it in Eve's palm. She gripped it and left without looking back.