

GROUND ZERO

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Winner of the 2013 Wu Zhuoliu Literary Award

Author chosen as one of the Sinophone 'Top 20 Under 40'

Author nominated for 2007 Man Asian Literary Prize

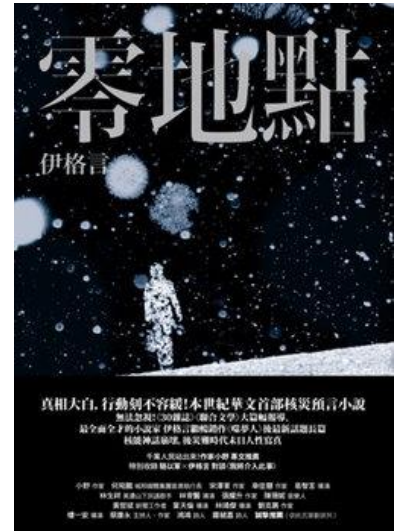
October 19, 2015. A level seven major accident at Taiwan's No 4 Nuclear Station has devastated northern Taiwan. Patients are flooding northern Taiwan's hospitals, displaying classic symptoms of serious radiation poisoning. Two weeks later, one of the station's engineers employed to check reports of faulty cooling systems and poor maintenance is found in hospital, suffering from severe memory loss. He appears to have been wandering in the exclusion zone.

April 27, 2017. This very same engineer, Lin Qun-Hao, is still being kept under surveillance and is undergoing a radical new treatment called Dream Image Reconstruction. Dr Li Li-Ching is under instructions to help him piece together what happened. That is, until the machine captures an image from Lin's sleep. Dr Li makes a copy before promptly being told to stop treatment. They must have come across a vital piece of information, and someone wants them to stop digging.

Alternating between the months before the disaster in 2015 and the lead-up to Taiwan's 2017 presidential elections, *Ground Zero* is a suspenseful journey through our notions of 'civilization' and the lengths to which those in power will justify sacrificing their humanity and even human life for their own gain.

Egoyan Zheng 伊格言

Egoyan Zheng holds an MA in Chinese Literature, alongside degrees in psychology and medicine from Taiwan's top universities. He is one of Taiwan's most acclaimed young writers, having been selected for several prestigious short story collections and prizes. He has also won international recognition, having been shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007 and the Frank O'Connor short story award in 2008.



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GROUND ZERO

By Egoyan Zheng. Translated by Darryl Sterk.

(Paipaiiiii. Paiiaiaia. Papapaiiii—)

(Screen on)

‘We interrupt the scheduled program to bring you a breaking news story.’ The image is noticeably blurred.

The anchorwoman at the news desk drags a strangely coloured doppelganger behind her. Like a ghost. ‘According to a news release issued earlier today by the North Taiwan Nuclear Accident Response Committee, the Mennonite Christian Hospital in Hualien City reported an incoming patient from the Exclusion Zone. The man had been left alone. He was ill and incoherent. It was unclear whether he had suffered radiation exposure. An ID check indicated that he was from the Exclusion Zone. Therefore, on the basis of Article Eight of the President’s Emergency Decree, he was committed to hospital.’

‘According to official figures, this is the 197th case of failed evacuation since the North Taiwan Nuclear Exclusion Zone Enforceable Evacuation Order was issued and the eleventh case of non-psychiatric medical commitment. After reviewing surveillance camera footage, police suspect that the patient was accompanied to the hospital by a family member who assisted with registration but promptly left without a trace.’

‘It seems this patient is no ordinary evacuee. He is thought to be an engineer working in one of the teams at the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant at the time of the accident. He has been unaccounted for ever since and his name appears on the government’s official list of missing persons. In response to this incident, President Ma has, in his capacity as Chair of the North Taiwan Nuclear Accident Response Committee, issued another appeal to citizens who remain in the Exclusion Zone to comply with the government’s policy and evacuate immediately. Under no circumstances should anyone stay in the Exclusion Zone.

‘Coming up next: domestic food safety.’ The anchorwoman turns towards another camera. The image is flashing intermittently and now the screen starts filling with snow. ‘It remains impossible to keep livestock products from the Exclusion Zone off the market, or to screen produce and supplies to ensure that no radiation contamination has occurred between farm or factory and shop front. Therefore, the North Taiwan Nuclear Accident Response Committee has reached a resolution on which basis it has issued a recommendation that citizens purchase radiation detectors. At a press conference held at noon today, the Office of the President Spokesman Yin Wei noted that the North Taiwan Nuclear Accident Response Committee has also resolved that the authorities concerned shall be responsible for conducting research into a long-term food safety program. Any further results will immediately be released to the public...’

(Paii. Paiaiaiaipaiiii. Paaiipaiiaipaiiiiiipapapppppaiaiaiii—).

(The image is flickering constantly now.)

(Fade to black)

0 Ground Zero

A deserted city.

A ghost town. The sky above is bright. In broad daylight. By the time Lin Qun-Hao passes through, the city has obviously been abandoned, a long time ago. Behold the works of man: high-rise office buildings and gated luxury apartment communities by the riverside; landmarks made to light up the evening sky like supernovae, playing melodies of artificial illumination, variations on the theme of light, the Ferris Wheel and the revolving rooftop restaurant, and spheres and prisms of monumental sculptures and communication towers; residential districts in the ghetto at the edge of town with cramped old apartments, little parks, fragmented properties, lit but untended shabby newspaper stands and shacks with corrugated metal walls and black-tiled roofs; the squatter settlements in the watercourse area outside the embankment and the unmanned factories in the suburban industrial zone; and empty bus shelters under the skywalks and broken down vending machines submerged in a cold, bluish light. Everything is eerily still, out of commission. Like a vast street set for a feature film, true to life in every detail.

No one.

Not a single soul.

But Lin Qun-Hao knows that Lily is there.

In one of those houses.

He hurries on. His expression bleak and woeful, his hair disheveled and windblown. Wrinkles creep over his unshaven face like vines. The wind hisses through the dust-invaded streets on which anxious eddies of litter swirl. He steps around overturned garbage bins, traffic signs and power poles, around the scuffed chairs and the skewed awning of an outdoor café. Finally, at the corner of an urban green around which rust-wrecked cars are parked bumper to bumper, he finds the apartment block.

He opens the front gate (which creaks like a faulty machine), passes through the small courtyard (which is filled with stale air), walks up the switchback staircase and arrives at the door on the third floor.

He knocks. (Knock knock. Knock knock knock KNOCK.) (Knock knock. Knock knock knock KNOCK.)

She opens the door.

An old white-haired woman. But Lin Qun-Hao knows it's Lily, no mistake. That's her manner, those are her features.

Lily pulls him into the gloomy room with its filthy old burgundy carpet. They embrace, her white hair scattering on his shoulder. She tells him, panic-stricken, that there are men outside who have trailed him here.

We can't let them find us, says Lily.

Lin Qun-Hao's mind reels. This is an empty city, isn't it? He walks over to the window, opens the curtains and is shocked to find it is already evening. The ruined metropolis outside soaked in a viscous darkness.

Don't look. Quick, close the curtains. Lily says.

Lin Qun-Hao is sure he hears people outside, at least four or five of them.

They walk across the deserted road, open the front gate, trot up the switchback staircase and knock on the door.

(Knock KNOCK. Knock KNOCK.)

Lily begins to weep.

(Knock knock KNOCK. Knock knock knock knock knock knock knock knock KNOCK—)

Too late, Lily says, tears flowing down her face, her shoulders heaving. They clutch at each other.

Too late!

They start at the door. (Bang—) (Bang—)

They knock it open in no time. A gang of them walk into the room (which is plunged into an amorphous light).

Lin Qun-Hao and Lily cower in the corner, too scared to make a sound.

But Lin Qun-Hao soon discovers that none of them have eyes.

No eyes among them. There, in that room, which is advancing ceaselessly towards night, in that city, which seems to have discarded the lingering daylight, they are blind. Two bottomless holes where their eyes should be. They look but they do not see.

Lin Qun-Hao holds Lily tight and closes his eyes, sensing the tears running down his face.

He touches his face with his fingertips. . .

. . .and is horrified to discover that he too has no eyes. Tears trickle out of two equally deep, unearthly cavities—

Lin Qun-Hao wakes. He feels cramped, like he's been stuffed inside a bottle, as if he's been dipped in a giant vat of glue. His heart is pounding, his breath short, his shirt damp and cold with sweat.

A furtive draft lifts the curtain. Like a wandering spirit on the boundary between being and non-being.

He cranes his neck to look up at the luminescent clock at the head of the bed.

'Sir. . . sir!' A girl's faraway voice. 'Sir, are you awake?'

Lin Qun-Hao sits up. He feels the outlines that have been unraveling around him swiftly converging again. Like a reflection on water gradually stilling.

'Sir, are you alright?'

'Uh, yeah, I'm okay.'

He rubs his forehead and sees himself sitting on a blindingly white bed. A girl with a ponytail gives him a glass of water. 'You rest a bit. I'll be back in a little while to detach the cable,' the girl says.

Lin Qun-Hao has a sip of water, massages his face and feels the cable sticking out of the back of his neck. The skin around the plug is rough to the touch, like a rope. Callused tissue. A huge scar like a lip print.

He dislodges the cable, tries to knead the tension out of his shoulders and lies down.

Exhausted, he closes his eyes and slips again into a now familiar liminal state, neither asleep nor awake.

I Below Ground Zero

April 27, 2017. 4:17 pm. Tainan, Taiwan. The North Taiwan Nuclear Accident Response Committee Affiliated

Medical Center.

556 days after the north Taiwan nuclear disaster. 156 days before the 2017 presidential election.

‘Alright, let’s start with yesterday’s dreamscape. Mr Lin, please sit.’ Dr Li Li-Ching opens an image file and swivels the monitor around. ‘This is one of the captures. Does it look at all familiar?’

An abandoned building in a wasteland of crude concrete construction, with a flat roof. Like a worker’s shelter. It seems to be a lone edifice, stranded there in the middle of nowhere. There are two dark openings on the wall. Bestial, vacant eyes.

Lin Qun-Hao shakes his head. ‘Nothing comes to mind.’

‘Really? What if we blow it up.’ With a glide of the mouse the doctor selects a detailed view and drags it around.

The image is now fuzzy. Vein-like patterns cut across the raw concrete.

‘I don’t know.’ He shakes his head again.

‘The resolution isn’t great.’ Dr Li Li-Ching smiles. ‘Actually, most people’s dreams cannot stand as much enlargement as yours. They’re fuzzy to begin with. But no matter. The important thing is, does it remind you of anything?’ The doctor glances at Lin Qun-Hao. ‘Anything at all?’

‘Well...’ Lin Qun-Hao cocks his head. ‘It’s like one of those temporary buildings workers stay in or like a shed on a farm. I used to see buildings like that growing up in the countryside.’ He feels out of his element.

‘Hmmm... anything else?’

‘I—’ he pauses. ‘... I’m not sure.’

‘Okay, doesn’t matter. Let’s look at another capture and maybe come back.’ Dr Li opens up another image file. ‘What about...this one?’

It seems to be the very same building. In the same wasteland. Greyscale. But this time the right side of the building has collapsed.

‘This one was taken after the one we were looking at just now?’

‘No, before.’ The doctor looks at Lin Qun-Hao again. ‘According to the time stamp of your dreamscape, it’s chronologically earlier. So? Remember anything now?’

He looks down and shakes his head. ‘Nothing. Still nothing.’

‘Okay, no problem. Then let’s talk a bit about the dream itself. Do you remember the plot?’

‘Not really,’ Lin Qun-Hao hesitates. ‘It was disturbing, it seems.’

‘Was it?’ the doctor asks. ‘Then close your eyes. Breathe deeply. Deeper. Good.’ Lin Qun-Hao closes his eyes and feels faint red rays beaming through the lids. Like tracks of blood.

‘Good. Now please concentrate on that emotion. Or on images from the dream. Alright. Another deep breath—are you okay?’

‘Well, some of it’s coming back to me—’

‘What?’

‘Some men were chasing me.’ Lin Qun-Hao opens his eyes. ‘They were trying to kill me.’

‘I see. Please continue—’

‘I didn’t know who they were, or why they were coming for me. I was terrified... I panicked and I guess I ran

out of a room. I ran and ran, until I arrived in front of this ruin—'

'Uh huh, I understand. Please continue.'

'Well... ' Lin Qun-Hao says. 'That's about it. Maybe something else happened while I was running, but I don't remember what.'

'You mean you have an inkling that there's something else? That you're forgetting something?'

'Yes. Something else happened. But I can't remember.'

'Okay, I understand.' Dr Li Li-Ching gazes at him, falling silent. 'Well... let me see. You've been receiving this course of Dream Image Reconstruction Therapy for quite some time now. I remain optimistic. But lately, it seems to me, we haven't made much progress.' The doctor pauses. 'What's your assessment of the situation?'

'Meaning?' Lin Qun-Hao shakes his head. 'No comment.'

'No comment? But you claim to be an engineer from the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant.'

'Yes, I have no doubt about that,' Lin Qun-Hao sighs. 'I remember my job. We've been over that. But I really don't remember what happened after that.'

'Alright,' Dr Li Li-Ching smiles, revealing a row of blindingly white teeth. Her smile is rather sweet. A silver pendant hangs, butterfly-like, at the hollow of her neck, along with a few stray strands of hair. She glances at the clock. 'Doesn't matter. I was just asking your opinion. We have plenty of time to try and figure things out. What is it? You seem reluctant.'

Lin Qun-Hao smiles wryly. 'I really don't have the slightest clue. And I don't know how much longer I have to be kept under observation like this.'

Dr Li smiles, avoiding the question. 'It's half an hour until my next appointment,' she says. 'Let's at least look at another capture from your dream.'

Lin Qun-Hao falls silent a moment. 'I'm sick and tired, you know—'

The doctor, too, falls silent. 'Fair enough. How are you sleeping?' she asks, changing the topic.

Lin Qun-Hao does not reply.

'Doctor, be honest,' he blurts out. 'You think it's reasonable for them to restrict my freedom of movement like this?'

'Well—' the doctor looks away and stares at the monitor. A cool bluish light shines on her delicate face. 'I don't think it is.'

'Easy for you to say.' He feels extremely upset. 'Dr Li, tell me, don't you feel like an accomplice?'

The room falls silent. 'I guess... I am,' she replies. 'But I also... I think I've tried my best to help you—'

Lin Qun-Hao looks down at his hands.

'Still feeling depressed?'

Lin Qun-Hao has not replied. Yes, he thinks. Seems I don't even know whether I'm depressed or not. Or whether I was a happy person before all this happened.

'Coming to see me is of some help to you, no?' Dr Li Li-Ching asks, softly. 'You feel this way. So do I. So let's try to remember something together—'

'That's what they want.'

'Yes. But regardless of whether or not you remember anything else, at least we can work together to improve the

quality of your sleep and your general state of mind,' the doctor says, emphatically. 'That concerns me as well. It's my job.'

Lin Qun-Hao looks up. 'Doctor, how much longer do you reckon I have to be kept under observation like this?'

'I have no way of knowing. Maybe keeping you here was justifiable before they'd ascertained whether you'd suffered radiation poisoning.' Dr Li Li-Ching continues what she's doing on the computer and polychromatic dots of light appear in her eyes. 'But not after they confirmed you hadn't. I personally think they should have released you, a long time ago.'

'Then how dare they keep me here?'

'You know exactly how, don't you?' Li Li-Ching smiles. 'You know your legal status is based on the Emergency Decree and the Interim Constitution. In theory, at least until the new president is elected at the end of September, they've got the legal right to keep you here. I don't think it's reasonable, but there's nothing I can do about it. I can only try to act within my sphere of responsibility to—'

'I'm asking for your personal opinion,' Lin Qun-Hao interrupts her. 'What do you think, doctor? How dare they keep me here?'

'They are just keeping you 'under observation', no?' She looks him straight in the eyes. 'It's not a detention. I think there are people who'd like to see you locked up. But for now they don't dare. Partly this depends on you. You say you're an engineer from the Fourth. If so, you must have been physically inside in the plant when the accident happened. But you're still alive. And guess what? You don't remember anything. Don't you want to figure out what happened?'

'Course I do,' Lin Qun-Hao replies. 'Nobody wants to more than me.' He looks defeated. 'Alright. I know they doubt me. Everyone doubts me. Maybe even you—'

'I don't doubt you,' says Li Li-Ching, cutting in. 'I believe you. I don't think they should keep you under observation. It's just... I can also understand their rationale.' She keeps moving the mouse. 'Not that I think they're in the right, of course—— okay, found it.' Li Li-Ching looks over. 'Let's discuss this capture, shall we?'

'I think I'll pass.' Lin Qun-Hao suddenly stands up and gives a slight bow. 'Sorry Doctor Li, but I'm really tired. I've got something to do later.'

'Alright then. Let's not force it if you're tired,' she says. 'But I'm going to print out the pictures we went through today. Take them home and hang them up. Somewhere conspicuous.' Li Li-Ching stands up and opens the door. 'Maybe one of these days you'll take a look and remember something, right? That would be a good thing...'

'Of course. That'd be just great.' Lin Qun-Hao chuckles, putting on his windbreaker. 'They'd be thrilled if I could come up with something, right? He looks back. 'Maybe I should just make up it up? Tell them what they want to hear?'

2 Above Ground Zero

November 11, 2014. 9:22 am. Taipei, Taiwan. Yangming Mountain.

373 days before the north Taiwan nuclear disaster.

The first thing he feels is her touch.

Lin Qun-Hao opens his eyes and sees Lily sitting at the edge of the bed, running her fingers through his hair.

Lily grins. She is wearing a thin white slip with a pastel bra underneath. Behind her, brilliant sunlight has crashed into the cozy little room through the wide open window.

A solid, almost tangible block of light. Lily has her back to it. It silhouettes her waist beautifully.

'How's your headache? You don't look well.'

'Ugh. It still hurts.'

She looks amused. 'Were you dreaming?'

'How did you know?'

'Because you were talking in your sleep.'

'Really? What was I saying?'

'I couldn't tell.' Lily smiles and says, 'You were mumbling. You know a lot of people mumble in their sleep. But it didn't sound like a pleasant dream. Do you remember what it was about?'

Lin Qun-Hao gives his head a shake. 'All I know is that my head hurts. Ouch.' He knits his brows.

'I'm not surprised. You had too much to drink last night.' Lily puts her palm on Lin Qun-Hao's forehead and holds his hand. 'Poor you. This is the first holiday you've taken since you started. It's been a month.'

'There's just too much work to do.'

'Hey, are you radioactive?' Lily gives him a ceremonious smack with the back of her hand. 'You do clean yourselves off every day when you leave the Fourth, don't you? You better not pollute me.'

'Did all the polluting I needed to do last night—'

'Hey! What's that supposed to mean?'

'Care to come back to bed?' Lin Qun-Hao squeezes Lily's hand. 'I could use some more company.'

Lily lies down beside Lin Qun-Hao. Looking over her soft, warm body into the little yard outside, he sees the small basketball stand with the backboard painted aqua, squatting where it's always been. The spare branches and sparse foliage of a few alpine cherry trees hide the mountain road in the distance.

Lin Qun-Hao giggles.

'What's so funny?' Lily asks.

'Nothing. Just laughing at my own joke.' Lin Qun-Hao laughs again. 'I said I did all the polluting I needed to do last night. You didn't seem to mind.' He yawns. 'Internal exposure. With the emphasis on internal. You know what that means? It's a thousand times more dangerous than external...'

'My goodness! Disgusting!'

'Don't worry, I get detoxed every day when I leave the plant and didn't I take a shower after we did it last night?'

'Hey, first you take advantage of me, then you insult me!' Lily sat up. 'I've heard quite enough. I'm going to make coffee.'

'Oh come on—' Lin Qun-Hao clasps Lily's hand. 'Please don't go.'

Lily lies back down at Lin Qun-Hao's side. Pale bell-shaped moonflower blossoms lie spread out across the blue sheets.

'I was serious about internal exposure,' Lin Qun-Hao says as he contemplates the ceiling. Through the window, the branches of the trees outside cast shadows on the paneled wall. Like a pencil-sketch dream. 'That's how this Russian spy got knocked off. Internal exposure. He escaped to England, claimed asylum. One day he ate a sushi combo and started to feel sick. Three weeks later he croaked.'

'For real?'

'For real. The killer did a slick job. They think he snuck some polonium into the kitchen, sprinkled it into the seasoning, wrapped up the sushi and gave it to the spy to eat. The thing is, how'd you think the guy managed to get the polonium to the sushi place?'

'In a lead lined box?' Lily suggests.

'No need,' Lin Qun-Hao answers. 'Radioactive levels of polonium are so low that if it's outside your body you can protect yourself with a few sheets of paper. All the guy had to do was wrap the powder in paper, problem solved. But if you ingest it, the effects are much, much more damaging. That's the difference between internal and external exposure.'

'Hard to believe.'

'Yeah, it's pretty scary. First your bone marrow and kidneys give out, then all the organs in your body fail, which means you can't make new blood. All the mucous membranes covering your organs get peeled off, maybe even vomited up. Pretty soon you die. You can still find a picture on the Internet of him on his deathbed. Honestly, he didn't look human anymore.'

'How horrible! But nothing's going to happen to you, right? You know my activist friends say that you can't believe anything they say about the Fourth. I saw the Chernobyl documentary they recommended on YouTube. And wasn't there a nuclear disaster novel called Ground Zero that came out just over a year ago? By—'

'I'll be fine.' Lin Qun-Hao caresses the fair skin of Lily's shoulder. 'I'll be just fine. We're still doing the comprehensive inspection. The company's hired an experienced American consultancy to oversee it. I'm a professional, you know.'

'But didn't your company also hire that nuclear power expert to do a safety inspection and he ended up quitting because he couldn't stand it anymore?'

'Don't worry about Lin Tsung-Yao,' said Lin Qun-Hao. 'Lin's specialty is operational testing, not safety. Now we're working with an American contractor with lots of plant building experience, the V Corporation. They built the First Nuclear Power Plant on a turnkey basis. They were involved long before Lin Tsung-Yao came on the scene. I think they will do more thorough job than him, not to mention a safer one. And it's not like this is the first time Taiwan has built a nuclear power plant—hey! Look!'

The dog is barking. They look out and see a thick white mist like cotton candy lingering in the yard, halfway up Grass Mountain, just north of Taipei.

A sudden visitation, a miniature cloud.

They smile. 'Blackie's anxious. He thinks it's an enemy—'

'Clouds are our enemies,' Lily says. 'We can't go out and play when it's raining.'

'That's okay. Maybe the rain means,' Lin Qun-Hao says, embracing Lily around the waist, 'that we can do it one more time? Well?'

'Oh my!'