

LAST_YEAR@ALU.BAR

去年在阿魯吧

*A bleak prophecy for the younger generation!
Our 'real lives' may be no more than computer constructs. No more authentic than science fiction, more fantasy than reality!
I must be drunk. I can see her silhouette glowing in the air bubbles rising from the bottom of my glass of Belgian beer. I went to prison for her, kidnapped a prostitute for her and even lent her my own 'body.' In return, all she's given me is a memory chip, ironically called 'love.'*

A young man sits in a bar, drinking, chatting and flirting. Except that the bar exists only in virtual reality. This is a story of love and separation that will leave you smiling, even as it opens a hole in your heart for the cold wind to blow through.

Ho Ching-Pin 賀景濱

In Taiwanese literary circles, the name Ho Ching-Pin is synonymous with deep erudition and strange genius. He broke onto the literary scene in 1990, when he won the China Times Literary Award for 'Story of Speed.' Though not especially prolific, his stories never fail to explode like a bomb in the imagination. Self-styled as a 'literary hacker,' he is continuously attacking the image of the novel, breaking down and rewriting the programming that defines our understanding of literature. His unrestrained, often indulgent prose is a pleasure to read, and entertains just as it asks serious questions.



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By Ho Ching-Pin. Translated by Riccardo Moratto.

1. Where Should You Put Your Johnson?

When I entered, Headless was already sitting in a corner.

No. I should say: he had put his head in his left hand and was filling it with beer with his right.

'Hi,' I waved to him. I had to admit, the windbreaker he had on with the stand-up collar looked good, but the empty section at the neck still made him look weird.

'Hi.' He put the head on the bar and turned to me. He must have been using the 3.7 version of the VR digital toolkit, since he could separate his limbs and trunk...

I am a virtual citizen of the virtual city of Babylon. My user ID is AK47#%753\$@~TU, and my English handle is Leave Me Alone (LMA). My password is the same as everyone else's: * * * * * . Ever since I was born into my virtual life, I've come here every night to kill time.

Happy Hour at Alu Bar is eight to ten p.m. Buy one get one free!

But why is the happy hour at every bar so lonely?

It must still be early, I thought. Behind the bar, Jack the Bartender (JTB) spread his hands and asked me what I wanted. I spread my own hands, as if to say anything would do. A Belgian beer, St Feuillien, suddenly appeared before my eyes in the manufacturer's original flip-top stein. No one ever complains about the first drink JTB gives them. One look at your sobriety value when you walk into the bar is enough for him to know what you want.

I glanced down at the nametag on Headless' sleeve and discovered that his actual username was Out of Head (OOH).

'If your dick weren't where it usually is, would it be a good or a bad thing?' I sniffed my glass of beer and caught the scent of flowers.

'If it were on your hand, say, you could suck yourself off, but you could burn it when frying fish.'

'And what if it were under your armpit?'

'Then your balls would complain all the time.'

'How about on your back?'

'Then you couldn't jerk off. Sucks for you.'

'I guess there's no better place for it than where it is.' I drained the first glass of beer of the evening. So good.

OOH meditated on this for a while. 'If your dick had a will, would it be happy to stay in a place with no light?'

I took a moment to think. 'If your dick could put itself in front, it would probably evolve towards increasing size, and you wouldn't be able to find any cute little dicks anymore.'

'Why?'

I rapped on OOH's head. You moron. If your dick were visible to all, who would go after small ones to procreate with. 'Unless...'

'Unless the guy were wealthy. That would be the only way to ensure he could procreate,' added JTB, who had just come over to us.

'Exactly.'

'So... wealthy people are having small dicks?'

'That is correct.' At once JTB ran to the piano and played a tune called *Rich Little Dicks*:

〈Andante〉

Even though my dick is small, I have high ambitions;
With all the money in my pockets, I got girls for kissing.

〈Intermezzo〉

Even though my dick is small, my wallet's near to bursting;
I can have two or three girls at once, if I'm really thirsting.

〈Intermezzo, adagio〉

Although my wallet is so fat, my dick is still so tiny;
When lovely ladies see it, they grow sad and really whiny.

Who knew that making fun of wealthy people could be so entertaining? It must have been our shallow, insipid proletarian leanings. I turned towards OOH: 'Aren't you tired of carrying your head around with you everywhere?'

'The head should be designed to be used independent of the body.'

'Why is that?'

'So that when you fight you can put it down.'

'Then how do you control your dick?'

'With the bluetooth.'

'No wonder you can only drink digital booze.'

Although digital alcohol can be made to resemble the real thing very closely, it's still not quite the same. Digital virtual reality toolkits can create a lot of different looks, but I'd still prefer to enter Babylon on an analog client. It's just more authentic.

People always used to say, if only the digital sampling frequencies were a tiny bit higher, we would eventually reach virtual simulation Heaven. It was bullshit. I took another sniff of my beer; its fruitiness had already started to develop. Apparently I'm a hopeless believer in analog. Perhaps high-fidelity computers will stage a comeback over the next generation, and people will fully grasp the meaning of analog virtual Heaven.

'Drinking digital booze won't give you a hangover,' persisted OOH, whose face was already red as a beet.

Our conversation had become sporadic by the time Professor Know No (PKNO) walked in. OOH's head avatar had begun to deteriorate: his facial nerves seemed to be twitching continuously, and the surface lines of his right hand were flickering in and out. Maybe the code for his new client was still buggy.

'Hi, LMA. Long time no see.' By the looks of his expression, the Professor had a good buzz on. By his side stood a blowjob doll, with pouty lips and bulging cheeks, called Suck off Service (SOS). I assumed it was the professor's latest experimental product.

'Hello, LMA,' blurted out the beer stein before me. 'You haven't touched me for thirty minutes. If you don't drink, this glass will disappear.'

'For Heaven's sake, leave me alone.' I said. Chips, chips everywhere. Even the beer glasses have interactive dialog chips installed in them. If this you put one of these in every woman on earth, and had them shouting out 'you haven't touched me in thirty minutes, if you don't touch me soon, I'll leave,' all the men on earth would go insane.

'It was just a friendly reminder, that's all,' said the stein. Christ, have you ever met a computer chip that could pout? I tilted my head back and downed the beer.

1. Cooter that could smile

JTB opened a bottle of Tripel Karmeliet, and poured it slowly into a tulip glass. When the frothy head reached the brim, he passed it to me. PKN wanted a glass of St. Idesbald instead. I had heard he used

to be a specialist in high-energy physics; no wonder he liked strong flavours. The blowjob doll didn't seem interested in the Belgian beer at all, but she stared intently at my waist, as if I had forgotten to zip my fly or something. I wanted to tell her that I had a hard object in there, and didn't know what to do with it.

This time it wasn't the glass that spoke, but the yeasts inside: 'Hey, neighbours, where are you all from?'

'We're from Belgium too,' said the yeasts in the professor's glass, and the two started laughing together.

'Shut it!' The professor and I yelled in unison. These noisy yeasts were violating our virtual human subjectivity.

Since the discovery of neural transmission systems in the last century, the latest news was that a Poliovirus with a mental disorder was flirting with immune cells.

However, I still think that those old monks who brewed beer in Belgian monasteries were a suspicious lot. Allowing enzymes to ferment in the bottle is one thing, but why did they let them exchange information? Were they spies? The more you look at that old monk on the St. Idesbald logo, the more he seems like a Templar undercover amid the descendants of the Masons. The monk on the Watou logo has a dubious look, too. Maybe they were holding the secret treasures of the Crusaders. Up until today, these secrets were scattered, hidden in beer yeasts to ensure they could be copied and passed down from generation to generation. If this were not the case, why would there be so many monasteries brewing beer in Belgium? Hiding secrets in asexual cells is safer than concealing them in people's bodies. You couldn't capture and torture yeasts to unveil a secret.

'You know what?' JTB asked quietly. 'Last night three 'cells' were killed.'

In Babylon, cops were called 'cells.' Their full title was AntiVirus Patrol (AVP). They could appear everywhere in different forms. You never knew, for example, if the clock on the wall was really a clock or a Babylonian policeman in disguise, especially if it always ran on time.

'What happened?' I drank a mouthful of Karmeliet. Oh, it was good. That's what we call real beer.

'Something to do with some kind of invader.' JTB shrugged. 'Anyway, no one can escape the cell search.'

Being a bartender had the advantage of always knowing a bit more than everyone else.

'I have a way to escape the raids,' said PKN in a satisfied tone. He had his left hand around SOS's waist as he leaned his bald head on her right shoulder. His right hand moved back and forth on her thigh like he was using a mouse. I could feel the air fill with female pheromones like Italian pigs in heat for the first time, lest they get lost in a truffle-filled forest on a winter night.

JTB looked at the professor with genuine interest. 'Let's hear it.'

At that point, I noticed OOH's head sway a bit at the corner of the bar. Hadn't he been drunk for a while now?

It was difficult for the Professor to escape the pull of female pheromones, to sit upright, look straight ahead, and express his ideas in an orderly fashion. He said that, according to string theory, there's more to this world than just the four-dimensional time-space that we can see. For example, Schwartz's string theory posited ten dimensions.

So, what were the other six?

'We can't see them, because they're curled up too tightly.'

'You mean they're curled up like dust bunnies and hidden under the carpet?' I wasn't hearing him right.

'Hmm, I guess you could say so. You can eliminate them with compacted mathematics.' As he spoke, the professor was trying to get SOS to take off the panties under her skirt, which she eventually did: purple with a lace border. My guess was Victoria's Secret Unveiled, Series 0 Girl.

'Have you carefully observed the creases of the labia?' Professor had just pushed them aside when JTB darted over to look. 'See this undulation on the upper part of the labia, so many delicate layers, such a richness of expression.' At this point, the professor used his fingertips to squeeze the labia into a slight smile, causing the SOS to moan softly. Even I wanted to say hi.

'If you step back and take a look at these three-dimensional folds again, they become a one-dimensional string.'

'So?'

'So, as long as you're small enough, you won't be caught by the cells.'

'How small?'

Professor tilted his head and thought about it. 'If you can stay smaller than 10^{-13} centimeters, a particle accelerator probably won't catch your trajectory. Still, if you run into a superconducting collider, you'll still have trouble. Anyway, I think as long as you're smaller than an electron, you should be able to avoid the cells.'

Seriously... what was he talking about? I swear, these theory people are out to lunch. Imagine someone saying to you you: 'Honey, I've turned you into an electron!'

It was idiocy.

SOS put on her thong and stared at me with those pure eyes, gesturing with them as if to say she knew whether my dick was one or three-dimensional. I wanted to tell her that if you looked at it from Mars it would be as small as a string. A vibrating string. So, while it would seem one-dimensional from far away, it was actually four-dimensional.

The professor was excited now, and talking himself into a froth. Whenever he got this way, the middle finger of his right hand would twitch involuntarily. He ranged from the conflict between general relativity and quantum theory, to gravity and the infinite, and then went on to non-renormalisable infinities. It sounded like a new tongue twister. When final started talking about particles – chiral particles, spinning particles, odd-dimensional and even-dimensional right and wrong – my head started spinning like a particle itself. By this time, I had only one question to ask. I wanted to charge over to SOS and ask her to help me solve a 'hard' problem.

But I didn't have the guts.

In the virtual world, I was a coward and an insipid proletarian. A loser.

So I stood up, drank the last bit of Karmeliet, and paid the bill.

As I was leaving JTB put on another song: 'If you want to go to pubs, don't be scared to get drunk.'

A soft, sentimental male bass voice resonated in the air.

2. Looking for pretty girls in the nail salon

If you take a left out of Alu Bar, then take a right two blocks later, and proceed straight on you will come to to Babylon Boulevard. Walk along the tree-lined boulevard alongside the canal and you will come to the rotary intersection with Tower Avenue, which is the center of the city. Just the inner circumference of the rotary is twelve kilometres long. In the centre, tall and imposing, stands the Tower of Babel. No one has ever been to the top of the tower, but they say the world's most advanced cloud processor, which is the entrance and exit of the entire virtual city, is stored there. This is where we all come in and go out. At the southeast corner of the rotary is a philosopher's path. If you walk to the end, you will find the oldest municipal library on your right-hand side. Of course, there isn't a single book left inside, because it's all online. In front of the library is a public sauna and bathhouse, where one can find crowds of licensed prostitutes. The two buildings are connected by a tunnel; people say that the original purpose of the design was so that you could tell your wife: "You go to the market first, I'll just go to the library to read the newspaper."

I passed through the market, as JTB had instructed. Then I turned down a labyrinth of lanes and narrow alleys that twisted and turned for a good long while before bringing me to Xian Xian eXotica Salon (XXX). The manicure business was only a cover. Their shop-front advertising claimed they used only organic pigments and that their floral designs would change according to your garment and mood. In other words, if you wore a miniskirt, your nails wouldn't display noble flowers like peonies, and if you were in a good mood, the blooms on your nails wouldn't shed their petals.

From the outside one could only see women in twos and threes, sitting on stools and attending to other people's fingernails. What was interesting was that even though the light was bright inside, you

could still only see hands and feet; the rest was refracted into a mosaic.

As I walked in, Son of 3-Seven (S3S) immediately hustled over, bowed, and passed me a cigarette: 'Sir, are you here for a manicure? One hand or two?'

Oh, cut the crap. Don't you just mean half or full service?

I looked all around and immediately understood. They were all together, customers and manicurists alike. Even if the AVP watched at the door all day long, they'd still never catch a trace of evidence.

In a virtual city, you never see anyone's real face. While it's not hard to find interesting-looking men, you almost never see an ugly woman. The New Darwinists anticipated this situation a long time ago. And yet in the corner I noticed a woman with a scar on her left cheek.

I gestured with my head to S3S and he said: 'Oh... you've got a good eye. She just came in today. She works here part-time. Guaranteed to please.'

As she led me to a private room, I saw that her name was Remember Me Not (RMN). What kind of woman would enter Babylon with a scar on her face?

'How do you want it?' RMN broke our silence in the darkness.

'I've got a really 'hard' problem.'

'Hard problems should be resolved through soft measures.'

Awesome. I just love meaningless small talk. Like saying a hot plug must be cooled off before being handled, a thermal expansion must have a soft landing. It followed naturally that hard problems had to be resolved through soft measures.

'You have two hours,' she touched the timer by the bedside. 'What do you want to start with?'

'Let's start with Thales, shall we?' After all, all problems begin with Thales, don't they?

'If we start with Thales, we'll inevitably have to continue to Plato and Aristotle.'

'So? Is that a problem?'

She switched on the bedside lamp and went through the price list.

'Talking about Plato will cost you fifty BB. Aristotle is a little more expensive, a hundred and twenty. But you can get 20% off if we do both.'

Babylonia Boo (BB) is Babylon's currency. What did you think it was? Even though it does sound a little like some flavor of ice cream.

'Who's the most expensive?' Here it was again. They always lure you inside and then eat you alive.

'Obviously, Lao Tzu is the most expensive.'

'What about Confucius?'

'Sorry, we don't sell ethics here.'

'Why not?'

'Because ethics is basically just a Darwinian survival strategy.'

Perfect. I figured I'd go for it. I grabbed the phone and shouted to S3S: 'Get me a dozen beers.'

I'll be honest the way she sat with her legs crossed was very attractive. I wanted her to switch off the light. If philosophy was looking for a non-existent black cat in a dark chamber, I hoped she was that cat.

'Or are you more interested in mathematics? If you want Fermat's theorem, I'll go look for someone else.' RMN tossed her long hair, then, with an ambiguous smile, added: 'Or do you want a threesome?'

The air was heavy with hair perfume. I guessed it was VOS's (Vanity Odor Seduction) latest interactive shampoo. The smell would follow your hormonal flow and become sexier accordingly.

We started from Thales' cosmology, and it didn't take long to see she had a thorough understanding of Socrates' concept of 'definition.' By the first beer, we had already moved to Plato's theory of ideas.

'Wait, do you know the origin of Platonic dualism?'

'Everybody thinks it comes from Pythagoras, but I believe the Orpheans' influence was greater.'

God Almighty. I was moved to tears. Where can you find women willing to talk about the Orpheans nowadays?

RMN drank a little bit more than she could handle and lay down at my feet. In the darkness, only our heavy breathing was perceptible. I knew my time was almost up, I had to move faster to save time on the foreplay, and skip bullshit like Aristotle, St. Augustine and Kant.

'Tell me the truth: have you ever read Schroedinger?'

As expected, she gave a gentle moan. 'You mean his wave equation?'

'No, I mean the work he did to find a material basis for the soul.'

Her breath caught in her throat and she started panting: 'He said... genes... are aperiodic crystals.'

'He also used physics to prove that time cannot destroy your soul.'

She sang out a high C in the Italian operatic fashion.

She was having a digital, laddered, intermittent orgasm.

She dug her nails into the palm of my hand.

I thought I saw a quiet sparkle on her fingernails.