

LIGHTLESS

烏暗暝

This edition of *Lightless* reprints together two collections of short fiction by Ng Kim Chew, one of Malaysia's best-known authors. *Lightless* and *Dreams, Pigs, and Dawn*, originally published independently in 1994 and 1997, are brought together into a single volume containing the best work of a crucial voice from the international Sinophone world.

After years of studying classical Chinese literature at university, which he described as “shuffling through the remains of a dead culture inside an abandoned tomb,” Ng filled his stories with vivid scenes of contemporary Malaysia – forests of rubber trees, dark nights in the countryside, urgent dreams of human desire. These works, energized by stylistic experimentation and the anxieties of ethnic identity, set the Malaysian literary world on fire when they first appeared. And while the author, looking back twenty years later, has expressed dissatisfaction with his own writing, readers from both within and outside Chinese and Malaysian writing traditions will be deliciously surprised.

Stories like “M’s Disappearance,” “Death in the South,” and “A Sick Young Girl” transport the reader to a Malaysian homeland of Ng’s experience and imagination, where difficult dramas of tragedy, intrigue, and even farce are enacted.

Ng Kim Chew 黃錦樹

Prize-winning Malaysian Chinese author Ng Kim Chew was born in Johor, West Malaysia, and currently teaches Chinese literature at National Chi Nan University in Taiwan. His literary talent first came out into the open as a college student, when he published his first short stories, which by now fill nine published collections. A previous recipient of literary awards from the *United Daily* and *China Times*, he most recently received a Golden Tripod Award for his latest collection, *Rain*.



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By Ng Kim Chew

Translated by Mary Bradley

“M’s Disappearance”

The bamboo poles of the bridge reached up in a series of connected Vs like the ribs of a giant dinosaur skeleton. The poles, each one thick as an arm, supported the thigh-thick “spine” that rested at the base of the Vs, as well as bamboo poles above and parallel to it. Hemp lashing held the entire structure together and secured it at one end to two soaring rubber trees. At the other end stood a house on stilts.

Yang stood beside the two trees. He stretched out a hand and ran his fingers over the heavy hemp lashing ropes, feeling how sturdy they were. He looked everything over with great care while he flapped a moldering newspaper to drive away tiny black midges. Beads of sweat had crawled over the exposed parts of his upper body and soaked his shirt, and the large bag he carried on his shoulders had left him breathing hard. Moments later, he pulled out two newspapers, spread them on top of dead leaves, and sat heavily. He unfolded another section, marked “South Malaysia News” at the top. A news item outlined in red in the lower left corner, just to the left of an ad for imported condoms, caught his eye. The headline was “Young Man’s Strange Disappearance in Payoh, Whereabouts Unknown.” The article read: “(Reported on 19th of xx) An unidentified stranger recently built a stilt house three miles outside the city’s center and lived there for just over three months before he suddenly disappeared two weeks ago, according to local rubber tappers. A police investigation concluded that his departure was voluntary. Some suspect the man was a drug addict, although there seems to be no evidence of this. Locals discovered several sheets of manuscript paper in the house. He may have been a minor writer of no particular importance....”

Yang had first seen a copy of this news item just after his return from visiting Fang Hsiu in “Lion City.” At that point, his head was full of literary history, but few of the clues he had hoped to find while in Singapore. Like a sudden electric shock, the report had suffused his entire body with inspiration and an energy that swept away months of exhaustion. He had promptly filed the report away, in a three-foot wide cabinet that overflowed with similar material. After more than an hour in a bus, he had traveled by foot up the narrow mountain trail, asking people for directions along the way, feeling his way toward his destination.

“This bridge...”

He’d never seen anything like the bridge, and it made a deep impression on him; half-suspended over the swamp, it seemed permeated by illusion. The sounds of cars and people had disappeared the instant he left the city, replaced by the calls of birds and animals at rest in the underbrush, and the noise of monkeys passing through the forest trees. He looked around him with the avid gaze of an explorer, using the handrail to steady himself as he stepped onto the bridge’s narrow walkway.

Eyes fixed on his feet, he moved forward step by step, rocking and swaying. A miscellany of rank grasses grew in clumps below the bridge, the clear, bottomless swamp visible in between; in the water, small fish swam vigorously, and dragonflies laid eggs. The swamp grasses led him forward, toward his destination. After a lengthy interval, the scenery below him changed, and he saw the reflection of the attap wood house. He hop-stepped onto its floor, making it sway, and then wiped away his sweat. He turned to look back at the bridge. He thought it now looked even more like a dinosaur skeleton, the color of a fossil.

He knew the house was empty, but even so he moved with some haste to knock on the door. The door wasn't latched, so that a single knock caused it to swing open with a creak. The failing afternoon light had left the interior of the house nearly dark, but he could see a box of matches and an oil lamp on the floor. He wasted no time removing the lamp's glass shade and lit it; the room filled with instant light. He put down his bag, stripped off shoes, socks, and shirt, then groped hastily for the insect-repellent incense. He lit this too, and the swarm of midges finally began to disperse. He opened both windows, rolled a newspaper into a stick to clean the cobwebs from the room's corners, and swept the floor until he felt somewhat more secure. Books were scattered haphazardly across the floor, some still spread open. He glanced at the covers, astonished to see they included Li Yongping's *Retribution: The Jiling Chronicles* and *A Latzu Woman*, Chang Kueihsin's *Sons and Daughters of Keshan*, Pan Yutong's *The Stars Last Night*, and Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*. In addition to these, there was a small number of novels in English, Japanese, and Malay (including the romanticized history known as *The Malay Annals*). Stacked in the corner with some toilet paper were Fang Peifang's *Tree with Deep Roots*, Fang Hsiu's *Draft for a New Literary History of Malaysian Chinese Literature*, Ma Lun's *Group Portrait of Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese Authors*, and a well-worn copy of the *Tao Te Ching*. On a low table, along with ink, fountain pen, and typewriter, a chunk of wood held down several pages of dusty notes.

Scrawled in an uneven hand across the first of these pages were these lines:

*As though beneath your female dignity
You pay my melancholy's every left forgotten bloom no heed*

Deeply puzzled, he flipped through the whole stack. Other pages contained strange mathematical formulas, such as $M = M1 + M2 + M3 + \dots + Mn$, and mystifying numbers like *22/505*, *NEW, 23 22+1*, and so on. He took out his notebook and recorded these one by one. The very last page was a shopping list. On it was written (his notes inside the parentheses): 25 May, tea, 1 package (Famous Chinese tea); insect-repellent incense, 1 box (Goldfish brand); soap, 5 bars (Lux); talcum powder (Pureen); toothpaste (Darlie); sausage, 300 g.; eggs, 10; rice, 5 kg; oil, 1 bottle; salt, 1 bag; laundry detergent (Quick White); shampoo (Follow Me); facial cleanser; kerosene.

In a crack in the floor, he found a withdrawal slip from Bank Negara Malaysia for M\$500 and a package delivery receipt. The house had no separate rooms. In one corner, simple cooking utensils were set out.

Making do with what he had, he washed out a pot, hastily rinsed some rice, and started a fire with the dry kindling that was left. There were still a couple of sausages, and an egg.... Through the open window he saw a bamboo pole extending into a clump of trees in the water. He supposed that was where the toilet was. To bathe, he could climb down the steps and rinse off in the water. He felt as if he were seeing stilt houses from an entirely new perspective.

Night fell. He tidied everything and then set about creating a summary of possibilities, suggested by his investigations over the past several months. First thing tomorrow morning, he would make a final round of inquiries in the area. If that didn't produce results, he would be forced to admit defeat and give up. Among the dense black of the trees, he could just make out a faint yellow light. He thought it might belong to the household that had reported the disappearance to the authorities, and it made him wonder, what would they think, seeing a light here again? Everything seemed pre-destined. At a fork in the road, he had relied on intuition and chosen the path that led here, had found this place that matched the report in the local news section of that paper. He opened his sweat-speckled notebook, closed his eyes, and marshalled his thoughts.

The whole business had begun with an interview.

On July 8, on the second floor of the Kuala Lumpur Hilton Hotel, an urgent meeting of the "National Literature Symposium" was convened, every last one of the some three hundred participants a Malaysian writer. The lights were bright but soft, tasteful and poetic, and everyone who wore batik looked exceptionally solemn. As chairperson, author A could speak first, though everyone there had already heard his news as rumor: an esteemed colleague, writing under the pseudonym "M," had written a novel (*Kristmas*). This novel had attracted critical regard in the US, including the attention of *The New York Times*. In fact, it had won such significant acclaim that a university professor was thinking of recommending it for the Nobel Prize in Literature, and this had prompted *The New York Times* to send someone to investigate the writer's identity. The result of this investigation, however, was the discovery that M "might be anyone." The manuscript had been sent from West Malaysia, and the author's remuneration had been donated to the Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies. This information provided the first clue: M was Malaysian.

Accordingly, *The New York Times* had immediately contacted the Malaysian Writers' Society and the Association of Chinese Writers and told them that Americans wanted to know who M was; if they could also have the author's detailed biographical information and all of his published works, all the better. Malaysians had finally received the good news awaited since the founding of their national literary history: a "great author" had appeared. At this point, Mohammed (the chairperson) boiled down their problem to two points:

- (1) Who was this writer? And what was his ethnicity?
- (2) Could a work published in English be considered "national literature"?

Placed at each table where participants sat was a copy of a thick, brick-like book with a bronze *Kris* sword on its front and a blood-red dragon on the back.

At first, everyone assumed the author might be sitting there among them. Every head turned to look at everyone else present, and at a few people in particular who were known for

writing novels (like Anwar Ridhwan), or who had received multiple national literary awards. All the poets felt some mild heartburn at there being “zero probability” it could be any of them; still, they hoped someone would step forward and confess since it would be good to have this question cleared up (and a statement made denying the person was ethnically Chinese). Yet they also hoped M wasn’t on the scene, thus leaving everyone on essentially “equal” footing. The whole venue was silent for a long while, with everyone looking at everybody else and giving each other knowing, awkward smiles. No one was able to suppress a sigh, or to keep from uttering the doubt, “Could M actually be Chinese?”

After that, the discussion became a bit one-sided, as most of those who favored the patriotic cultural perspective held that national literature had to be written in Malay. This was to say that even if someone were to obtain favor in international literary circles with an “English edition,” it couldn’t be considered national literature because only a text written in Malay met the criteria.

“It’s the principle of the thing!” K shouted. He was a novelist, too.

Usman Awang saw the situation was getting out of hand and promptly took the floor to steer the discussion onto “how to promote Malaysian literature’s stature in international circles,” and other similar questions. As a reporter, Yang absorbed random snatches of the ensuing rhetoric. Then, having spotted the bent head of the furiously writing reporter from the *Nanyang Business Daily*, he made “let’s go” gestures at him and his other colleagues. At the door he flagged down a taxi, and hurried over to the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall.

The old and much renovated Assembly Hall was brightly lit, and already crowded with people. In the entry, a red cloth with white lettering proclaimed “Malaysian Chinese Writers Association, Malaysian Chinese Literature Symposium.” He squeezed to the front and took a group photo of Yuan Shang-Tsao, Yu Chuan, Hung Chuan, Fang Hsiu, Fang Peifang, et al. A single sweeping glance told him that almost all the important writers had arrived together, including the East Malaysian “Rajang Riverbank poet” Wu An.

Wen Jenping, pushing up his thick, black-framed glasses, asked in a thin voice: “Why didn’t any of us know about this colleague?”

Everyone wore shirts and slacks, except for Wen Jenping in batik, Woon Swee Oan in a western suit, and Fu Chengde in a traditional *cheongsam*. Woon Swee Oan, a martial arts novelist, spoke up cautiously to say that, on the basis of the information at his disposal (including rumors), M was very likely one of the people present – but then again, maybe not.

“Based on the text,” he said, taking a copy of *Kristmas* from his briefcase, “we can probably make a rough guess at the writer’s background. Only three conclusions are possible.” These he proceeded to analyze one by one. “First, he was a child from a poor family who had no formal education, an autodidact who has relied entirely on his own hard work to succeed. He has kept at it, writing nonstop for many years. Writers who meet these criteria are Ting Yun and Yu Chuan.” These words moved both Ting and Yu considerably, and before long their eyes were red-rimmed. “However, in light of what Mr. Ting and Mr. Yu have published so far, neither of these gentlemen has achieved such a high level.” Both men flushed a deep crimson. “Second, he’s probably a graduate of Nanyang University, currently 40 to 50 years old, who leaned left in his

younger years. His writing crosses multiple literary genres. Representative writers would be Fang Peifang and Meng Sha.” Both Fang and Meng looked pleased. “However, these writers put undue emphasis on realism, with excessive reporting and insufficient art.” The sound of gnashing teeth came from somewhere in the crowd. “Third, he studied abroad in Taiwan. While there, he experienced the fully ripened fruits of Taiwanese vernacular literature, and took nourishment from European and American literature. It’s even more likely this person comes specifically from a department of foreign languages. Representative writers are Li Yongping, Chang Kueihsin, myself, Pan Yutong, Shang Wanyun....” At this point Wen Jenping eased slightly away from the microphone toward his seat, his face the green of oxidized copper. Woon Swee Oan went on, glowing with enjoyment:

“As for me, my English isn’t very good, so we can certainly put me aside for now. Pan Yutong is possibly...”

“It isn’t me!” A tall man stood up to interrupt him, then sat down again.

“Forgive me, Mr. Pan. I was saying that the possibility of your being M exists, not that it is in fact you.” Woon turned toward the group once more. “However, Pan’s work isn’t inclusive enough, and the limitations of Ms. Shang in this respect are even more obvious. I’d say the only remaining writers of account, writers with both good English and work of any significant success, are Chang Kueihsin and Li Yongping. I’ve been in touch with both, and their feelings for the Chinese language make writing in English unacceptable to them. Mr. Li takes pains to avoid publication in any foreign language. Report has it he now plans to write in seal script as it is the ideal combination of form, sound, and meaning...” Again the sound of gnashing teeth.

“As for me—” Hissing erupted. “This—” His voice was almost inaudible, but he persisted. “Umm...er...ah...” His voice was eventually drowned out entirely. Meng Sha, from the realist camp, grabbed the microphone. He expressed the view that it didn’t matter how good the book was; if it wasn’t written in Chinese, it couldn’t be considered “Malaysian Chinese literature.” “I flipped through it, and it’s not written just in English! It’s got Malay in it, and not just modern Malay, but a whole bunch of classical Malay, and Jawi, Arabic, Pali, German, French, and oracle bone script besides. Honestly, what *is* this thing?”

Tan Swie Hian, one-time leader of the modernists, saw his way was clear to come get in on the fun. He seized the microphone left open by Meng Sha – of the opposing camp – a small piece of paper in his hand:

“In the opinion of American critics, this work has for the first time crossed the Malaysian ethnicity barrier. The writer has rolled several of the world’s important language families into one to create a unique literary genre. The diversity of its elements make it “untranslatable” and, strictly speaking, not written in English. In form, it imparts the flavor of *The Malay Annals* and is in addition intriguingly like *Ulysses*. It has absorbed several cultural traditions, such as Hindu, Chinese, and Greek, combining the strongest aspects of these into a style all its own....” When Tan had finished reading this, he disappeared back into the middle of the meeting space, pursued by hissing.

The modernists and realists began giving it to each other in equal measure, arguing over practically the whole of Malaysian Chinese modern literary history. Finally, Fang Hsiu issued a public appeal as a “historian”:

“Quiet, everyone...quiet, please.... What’s the point of fighting? What’s important now is to find M, and if possible, his ‘Chinese edition’ – if you believe he must have written it in Chinese first.” Only then did yet another boring dispute over Malaysian Chinese literary history come to an end.

The notebook lying open in front of the oil lamp could hardly be considered a novel, compiled as it was page by page. He closed it, rubbed his aching eyes, crossed his arms behind his head, and lay back on the floor. After the two “symposia” had ended – already several months ago now – the media gradually cooled. He received permission from his editor-in-chief to take three months’ vacation only after some difficulty, and searched everywhere for M. He had gotten in touch with almost every single Malaysian Chinese author, gone to see each of them, spoken face to face with them. He withdrew years of savings from his bank, and in October had trailed along with several old women headed for Taiwan as “an overseas Chinese returnee to the homeland.” He had met up with Li Yongping in Yangmingshan, then gone to Yilan to see Chang Kueihsin. Both men received him warmly. Li accompanied him on a visit to the burial place for a number of the Republic of China’s high-ranking generals, and introduced him to more than a little of Taiwan’s most famous fresh air. Li’s build and general appearance had surprised him considerably. Had he bumped into him on the street, he might have taken him for a butcher or a fishmonger. He would never have guessed such a tall, burly man was actually a literary figure. Li indicated he’d heard about the M business, and I – uh, not I – *he* said quite frankly to Li that very few Malaysian Chinese writers had the linguistic ability to write *Kristmas*. In addition to being highly accomplished in English, the writer was well versed in Malay and foreign languages (like Latin and Sanskrit). And on top of that, there were those two pages in oracle bone script! Li gave him a vague smile. His tone was light:

“Don’t waste any more of your time in pointless searching. Perhaps it’s some foreign sinologist playing a trick. This sort of thing doesn’t mean much.”

Li made himself very clear. He preferred to write his own works in “untranslatable Chinese.” He felt it was beneath him to curry favor with naïve American scholars, or to chase after some nonsensical Nobel Prize for Literature. Still reeling from Li Yongping’s arrogance, Yang had arrived in rainy and humid Yilan. The humidity there made him feel as if his whole body had sprouted the moss that grew in Northern Taiwan.

Chang was a quiet man of average build who wore thick glasses; both his distinctive bone structure and dark skin proclaimed his East Malaysian indigenous background. The two strolled on the grassy strips between fields, umbrellas in hand. Chang’s smile resembled Li’s only in its effect. His tone was grave and quiet:

“Who else cares? Is it worth expending so much mental and physical effort?”

Yang lowered his head to ponder this for a while. When he finally answered Chang, he spoke slowly:

“I don’t know.... I just feel this business is very important to me. Maybe you aren’t aware that even though I’m a reporter, I’m very interested in creative writing. I’ve secretly written a few novels and poems of my own.... I don’t know. I just feel that if I’m determined to go on writing, or want to be sure that Chinese creative writing has a future in Malaysia, I need to find an answer.”

Yang sent transcripts of the Li and Chang conversations to the *Nanyang Business Daily* for publication. During his last few days there, he visited some of Taiwan’s most emblematic attractions: Taipei’s Longshan Temple, the Confucius Temple in Zuoying, the National Taiwan University campus, the Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall. In several very old Tainan temples, he meditated, contemplated, and was to some extent enlightened. Naturally, he had suspected the possibility of a dirty trick by the Taiwanese writers – but given their biases about localization, Americanization, and sinicization, anything like that was simply impossible.

Before he left, he visited Professor Chen Peng-Hsiang in the English Department at National Taiwan Normal University. As soon as he heard Chen’s strange, booming laugh, he knew it was time to go home.

In a miasma of mosquito-repellent incense, the boundary between reality and dream dissolved. His entire body felt light and buoyant, as if he were lying on a cloud. He lay on his stomach, looking down as he floated past each of the places he had visited.... North Malaysia, South Malaysia, East Malaysia, even Singapore. After a while, he lay on his back in a boat that drifted gently over water. Moonlight from the window wafted over his upper body like gauzy fabric. The boat floated past a plateau and out into open water. The moon had followed him all this time, and he sat up when he realized the boat had drawn close to the bank: a shore of fine white sand, overlaid with dark brown ribbons of withered leaves. He stepped onto the sand, his feet bare, and felt an exquisite sensation of damp softness. The tall trees encircling the beach became dark woods. He observed carefully as he walked, and was suddenly aware of white, jellyfish-like creatures scattered over the brown leaves. He leaned over to pick one up. He spread it open – it looked exactly like a face. He draped it over his own features and crouched down by the edge of the water to look. Someone else’s face appeared there. He examined the face with care; to his great surprise, it was Shang Wanyun. He tried again: Chen Kung. He tried again. And again. He was astonished when the face of a young boy with short hair and thick eyebrows appeared in the water – his younger self. The shock woke him, and he discovered the sole of one foot was damp. A thick fog filled the area outside the window; inside, even the lamp’s flame appeared beaded with moisture. Even so, the tiny light continued to shine there in the haze, and a tiny but irrepressible thread of warmth floated up into his heart. As if he’d just then remembered something, he got up and began to search through everything in the house. In addition to *Group Portrait of Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese Authors*, there was also a large pile of photos. These, too, were of various Singaporean and Malaysian writers. He gazed at the portrait of a young writer from southern China, Tieh Ko; a luminous talent, he had had the misfortune to die young at the hands of those war-crazed Japanese monsters during the Nanking Massacre. He spent several moments heaving deep sighs. His continued search revealed a young Woon Swee Oan. He recalled the potential in Woon’s essay, *The Dragon Cries*

for a Thousand Miles, and for a long while he stared with unseeing eyes. Then he lay back and let his thoughts drift as they liked. Within moments, his body began to float again. *Who exactly was M?* he inquired of the dark. Every writer in recorded literary history had been put under the lens, yet it seemed not one of them was a possibility. All those who were had come forward personally to deny it. Was it actually possible that M wasn't an ethnic Chinese? Was M Malay? Or Indian? An indistinct face rose up in the dark. It shifted, from blurred to clear, from black and white to color. It was a man's face – Yu Dafu.