

NEW GODS

新神

* 2019 Openbook Award

Five interconnected novellas tell the stories of new gods, born out of the confluence and conflict of cultures, subcultures, ethnicities, and faiths that mingle in Taiwan's unseen spaces.

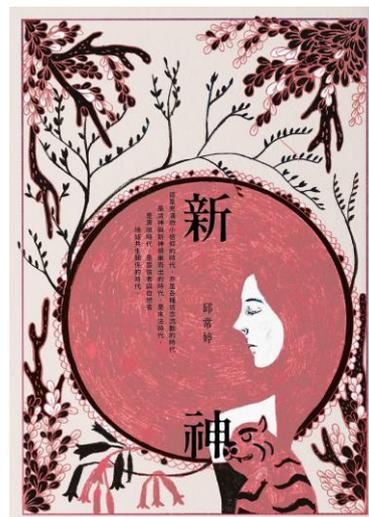
Taiwan has long been a site of contact between wildly different peoples, missions, and beliefs. In *New Gods*, five interconnected novellas tell the stories of new deities and demons born out of the confluence and conflict of cultures, subcultures, ethnicities, and faiths that mingle in Taiwan's unseen spaces.

If, as Ezra Pound once said, "a god is a permanent state of mind", then these five tales are rituals for invoking a new spiritual consciousness. Elemental features of the natural landscape – fire, water, mountains, flora – seem to inhabit and inspire the characters amid their struggles. A young girl who lives amid fish tanks has an explosive encounter with a rebellious boy whose flesh has been mortified in Taoist rituals; a young hotel prostitute meets the "flower spirit" of her grandmother's stories in the gaps between reality and memory; a tribal police officer and a priest team up to find indigenous children lost in the mountains after a windstorm.

These five novellas, which can be read independently or all together, bring us into the presence of danger and change personified, and the spirits they conjure are prepared to lead us in a new direction.

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By Chiou Charng-Ting

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1. A Million Scars

A muffled explosion came from the far end of the asphalt road. She remembered it being both alarmingly quiet and alarmingly loud. In the ocean of darkness, the bright glow of streetlamps illuminated only the crowds standing beneath them. In this moment, when everyone was waiting in the darkness that was quiet yet loud, Alisha suddenly remembered that when she was young, she had to plug her ears with her index fingers. If she didn't, the sound of the approaching explosions and the pain in her body would make her wail.

What were they waiting for? Alisha's father, his countenance undisturbed, held onto her with a big, warm hand that restored her equanimity, and let her keep her gaze obediently fixed on the end of the road. A group of the strangest people Alisha had ever seen swarmed up the road towards her. She had forgotten most of the sounds, other than the explosions, as well as most of the body, other than the scars.

At the front of the group was a middle-aged man who was sweating profusely and bleeding from his shiny forehead. His gaze was steady but detached, like he were hypnotized or intoxicated. He intermittently hit his head with the cudgel he was holding, causing more fresh blood to flow.

He was closely followed by a man with an iron rod between his teeth. As he approached, Alisha realized that he wasn't biting the three-centimeter-wide rod; it had been driven straight through his cheeks. Strange enough, the holes in his cheeks were not bleeding. He winked at Alisha.

In Alisha's childhood memory, the man with the rod in his mouth had told her the trick to this: He rubbed his cheeks with vinegar every morning and evening, and over time the skin became numb.

How had he spoken to Alisha with an iron rod in his mouth? She had forgotten. She only remembered that this was the creepiest group she had ever seen. They were like deep sea fish, strange shapes moving through the darkness. From time to time, firecrackers exploded around them and more bleeding men with self-inflicted wounds roamed about at their own distinctive pace. Last in the group, surrounded by glittering sparks of fire and smoke that stung the nose, was a naked boy on a platform carried by four men. Even though the lower half of his face was wrapped in white cloth, it still glowed. The crowd was throwing firecrackers at him from all sides. His body was covered in scars, and his mouth glistened with fresh blood. Occasionally, he used branches from a banyan tree to bat away firecrackers. He looked different from the gods Alisha

had seen before. Even though he was standing on the platform above, he seemed bored. Suddenly his glance met Alisha's, and the mouth under the white cloth grinned, or appeared to. But before she could see it clearly, he was already moving away, swaying back and forth on the platform.

The morning she left home, Alisha stayed awake for the entire ride on the nearly empty train. The passenger in the seat in front of her was reading a newspaper article about the latest developments in the case of the Dong Yu ship incident. Curiously, she peeked through the gap between the seats. A few years ago, when she was still a little girl, she vaguely remembered having boarded a boat and setting sail in the night just after a typhoon had passed.

The landscape outside the window flew by, and the Fuxing high-speed train they boarded in Taitung going north vibrated violently. Mai had fallen asleep with his head leaned against Alisha's shoulder, but Alisha could feel his muscles stiffening, and she saw that the screen of the phone in his pocket kept lighting up. Mai's dad was definitely looking for him. The man had hidden all the family's money in his son's bank account, so when he lost at gambling, he could just throw up his hands and claim to have fallen into poverty. Mai simply withdrew the huge sum of money and stuffed it into his empty backpack. When they departed, their hometown was engulfed in morning light like a golden fire.

Where would they go next? How far would they be able to go? She hadn't thought that far ahead by the time they left, and now Alisha felt helpless. As morning light poured in through the train window, Mai woke up and blinked. As if he had suddenly made a decision, he said: "How about we go to Yilan?"

"Yilan?"

"Yeah, have you ever been to Yilan?"

"No." Alisha felt embarrassed. Her fingers held the hem of her dress tightly, wrinkling it in her hands.

"There are hot springs in Yilan, in Jiaoxi, let's go to Jiaoxi. You like fish, and there are fish in the hot springs there that kiss your feet." While talking Mai took a packet of Mineshine milk tea out of his backpack, pierced the top with the straw and sucked for a long time.

Mai was three years older than Alisha, but when they hung out together, Alisha felt like a mother, or at least she saw Mai's existence and spirit in a way that felt old. Only if he entered "that" world, Mai would change.

It was a long journey. They covered their legs with their thin coats, under which their hands were clasped tightly together. Watching the morning sunlight filter through the clouds onto the ocean – the shining ocean, untouched and azure blue – they didn't say a word, and they could almost hear each other's heartbeats.

From the start of their friendship until now, Mai didn't seem to have changed. His dyed blond hair, the "swish swish" sound when he sucked on the straw of an empty Mineshine milk tea packet, and the dark skin were all utterly familiar to Alisha. Alisha often left home to see Mai. The adults in the neighborhood all said that he was ruining her – a small tragedy that often happened in small towns. "Well...look at what happened with her dad...", "After all, the kid has seen that kind of thing before...." They often added a sentence or two, wanting to seem like they knew more.

Alisha hadn't seen Dad in a long time. She lived quietly in the old house with only her grandparents. They left the house at 6:00 a.m. to work in the fields up on the mountains and came back in the evening. Back at home, they listened to the radio instead of watching TV. The old people seemed like a giant tableau of dolls, and Alisha understood that this feeling was mutual. To her grandparents, Alisha was also like a doll, only useful for reminding them that they had once had a good-for-nothing son.

One day, Alisha wandered around the city carrying a fishing net. Following memories of being with Dad, she walked through the street where they had seen that strange parade, and then she saw Mai by a temple.

Mai was playing with bang snaps coated in white powder, which were popular with kids from elementary school to middle school. There was nothing unusual about it, it was just the kind of annoying thing kids did. However, there was something unspeakably mysterious about Mai that drew Alisha in, just like the moon pulls the ocean tides. The motion with which Mai threw the bang snaps was unexpectedly graceful, and Alisha saw potential in it.

A snap exploded on the ground and sparks glittered like small white flowers. Mai saw Alisha and rudely gestured for her to go away. Alisha's thin, ugly knees trembled. The sound of the explosion and the light were incredible. The sparks weren't only around Mai's hands and on the ground, but moved as if they had a consciousness of their own. It was like during the parade of that strange group that night when the sparks of fire had bloomed on the skin of the naked boy, making him look absolutely extraordinary.

Mai began throwing bang snaps at Alisha's feet, making her cry and dance in the fire. Mai laughed. He stopped, waiting for Alisha to run away, but she didn't. Mai stopped smiling and whipped a bang snap onto Alisha's pale thigh, leaving a rosella-flower-shaped mark, but still she didn't run away. Mai's eyes were so focused, just like when he had been on the platform. His hands moved like passing clouds and flowing water, and dazzling light exploded all around them. Alisha's skin was scratched by the bang snaps and blood flowed. Alisha remembered that at the time, she had had a strange feeling in her heart.

In the summer when she was thirteen, during the summer vacation, when the chirr of the cicadas came and went in waves, the principal of Alisha's middle school gave a long speech warning students not to hang out with school dropouts. According to the principal, Mai, with his dyed blond hair, smoking habit, and penchant for drifting with his motorcycle on the melting asphalt, was a bad guy. Everyone who knew about it thought it was Mai's fault, but nobody would have ever dreamed that it was Alisha who had started it all.

During the few seconds when she was surrounded by the exploding bang snaps, an image from the end of the semester appeared in Alisha's mind. In her class was a very beautiful girl with big eyes which didn't even close fully when she was taking a nap. Because half a trembling eyeball was always showing, the boys teased her and called her "bugeyed goldfish". The girl was tall and had fair skin, and her calves were especially slender and beautiful. One day, nobody saw her during several lessons in a row. Later, before school was over, she was helped back into the

classroom by another female friend. Alisha saw that her naked calves below her sport shorts were covered in red, bloody welts.

Allegedly, a female gang leader outside of school hadn't liked the bug-eyed goldfish and had called her out for a lesson. She lay her chest on the table and cried silently, but Alisha couldn't look away from the legs covered in the artful cuts of the knife. Seeing the destruction of something beautiful gave her a nauseating, yet faintly exciting feeling.

The smoke gradually subsided. Alisha's eyes were full of tears, but she did not avoid Mai's inquisitive gaze.

The next second, the boy opened his mouth and laughed out loud. He put the last snap into his mouth and bit down on it like on a betel nut. His dark mouth suddenly lit up. Bleeding a little bit, he spat on the ground. After this, he walked into the temple. Inside the temple it was very hot, and a giant electric fan was circulating the air. An old man sat on a plastic chair, waiting for the gods to finish eating the fruit and snacks he had given as offerings. Alisha followed Mai to the break room of the temple staff. Mai took two packets of Mineshine milk tea from the refrigerator. He asked Alisha: what was her name, and where did she live? Which school did she go to?

"Thirteen, huh? Quite young." Soon after Mai and she had finished their drinks, he was called by an adult to do something. Alisha looked at Mai's naked back when he took off his shirt. His sweat had pooled into a river, reminding her of the heavy rain from a typhoon pouring from the mountains down to the ocean, which made her to feel cold.

Alisha also thought of fish and the wet. Next to the faucet on the wall she found her fishing net with the long handle, and she ran to the port to catch minnows.

When Dad was still around, he often took young Alisha to catch fusilier fish. They raised the fusilier fish in a three-foot tank and when they were grown, they killed and ate them. At that time, Dad was raising all kinds of different fish, except for regular fish that could be found in streams and rivers. He invested all his money in his hobby of raising ornamental fish. He especially loved ancient fish. In large and small fish tanks he raised ancient giant gourami, small dinosaur eel and gar fish. There was another kind of fish that looked like an insect. Seen from the bottom of the fish tank, it floated close to the water surface, gliding along with its fins open like it was ready to fly. Alisha thought it looked very beautiful and very strange. Dad had said that they are called ancient butterflies, or toothed butterfly fish, and that their physical form had not evolved for a long time. In the ocean, there were countless fish that looked stranger than them.

As time passed, Alisha gradually understood what Dad had meant. She wore her grandma's sun hat and sleeves, went to the river and the coast, and waved her small net through the water. Whenever some of Dad's former fishing friends saw her, they were always happy to give Alisha a few small fish that she could use as bait. Among the fish she caught, there were indeed fish that were even more exotic than the ancient butterflies – just like the people here, who had all been raised to take strange shapes by the mountains and the sea.

Besides the three-foot tanks, the largest fish tank Dad had left was six feet long. They used to fill the drip box together with filter materials, white cotton, wool fleeces, ceramic rings, quartz rings, coral bones... Layer upon layer, stacked on top of the six-foot tank. She asked what the tank

was made of, and Dad explained to her carefully: glass, very sturdy. There are more acrylic tanks in Japan because Japan often has earthquakes, but when regularly cleaning those huge acrylic fish tanks, their surface can easily be scratched, making it harder to see the fish in the tank.

The six-foot tank held only one Red Arowana. They had tried to raise stingrays in the tank at the same time, but those were difficult to care for and quickly died. Young Alisha spent a lot of time wandering around under the fish tank, which gave the Red Arowana a “drooping eye” and drove Dad to forbid her from getting under the tank. One day, taking advantage of the fact that Dad wasn’t there, she lifted the aquarium cover and tried to look at the Red Arowana from above. For Alisha, this was a special experience. The giant, beautiful Red Arowana, always isolated behind the glass of the aquarium, suddenly became an object to be caught. Alisha was fascinated by this perspective, she even stretched out her hand to touch the fish’s back fin.

Young Alisha fell and caused a small splash. Alisha had almost no memory of that time she fell into the water. She only remembered that time and light moved more and more slowly, and that the Red Arowana swam around surprisingly calm next to her, calm and aloof. The fish’s body glowed under the light of the aquarium lamp, like a ghost, and its downward gaze gave Alisha the feeling that he was looking at her with disdain.

Out of the water, Dad laid Alisha flat on the ground. She breathed slowly, with water running from her eyes, nose and mouth. Alisha’s sense of time came back, and with it the pain, burning like fire in her chest.

That was the first time Dad beat Alisha. He used a rattan cane – maybe it was split bamboo – to strike her body. The sound it made was very loud, and Alisha forgot whether she had cried or not. She only remembered that the whole time Dad was beating her, he was smiling a little bit, which made Alisha feel like this kind of thing was not a punishment.

How wonderful it would be if people could live under water. Alisha later thought: If people could be the same as what it is like under water, everything would be slow, and the sight of Dad leaving would also slow down.

The day Dad had left, Alisha was dreaming. She dreamed that Dad had a fish tank that was all black inside. He was raising butterflies in the tank, but it was actually an imitation of butterflies composed of many pieces of different creatures, some of which were highly poisonous. The butterflies’ wings scattered light and shadow as they drifted silently through the black water. The poison killed an ancient giant gourami in the fish tank, but Dad said it didn’t matter, that’s how this kind of fish was raised and the fish carcass didn’t need to be taken out. Every once in a while, Dad added new fish, and the new fish would soon die and become beautiful butterflies. He never took out the fish carcasses. Alisha did not dare look at the fish tank, thinking it was filled with disgusting fish corpses. She did not know what it looked like or what to do with it, so she only dared to glance at it from a distance.

Every time she looked at the black fish tank turning transparent in the sunlight, she saw the blurry but brilliant wings of a butterfly. When Alisha woke up, she happened to see Dad leaving home and walking into the sun, as if he were being eaten by the sunlight.

Alisha waited until her grandparents came home in the evening to tell them what had happened. They silently carried out their nightly activities as if they had not heard her: washing, cooking, tidying up. They ignored Alisha, neither speaking to her nor even looking her way.

Alisha was not sad, or rather, she had already been sad before. But now she no longer hoped for her grandparents' attention. She got plenty of attention elsewhere, some of which she wanted and some of which she didn't want. They were all furtive glances, just like from the fish waiting for her to feed them. From this day onward, the fish would always gape at her.

Seeing Alisha's fish, Mai bluntly declared in his smoker's growl that he wanted to fish. "If I catch one, I'll cook it and eat it."

Mai was amused by Alisha's long face, and his fingers with the cracked tips gently slid across the surface of the glass fish tank. A walking catfish chased the shadow of his fingertips like bait. The entire house smelled of sludge gas, the ceiling was covered with moss like a mustache, and the walls were full of mold. Alisha's hair was drenched and her eyes glowed.

"Do you get into fights?" Alisha asked.

"Yeah, sometimes." Mai replied.

"What do you fight with?"

"Hands, or other things."

"Do you have a knife? I heard you have a bat."

"I have a bat, there's some blood stuck on it"

"Show me, I want to see, show me." Alissa begged.

Mai walked out of the house. When he pushed open the screen door, it made an "eeeeee" sound. Alisha remembered that he had come to the house not long ago to let Grandpa and Grandma know that they could join the activities of the old people's club at the temple. Alisha saw Mai standing outside, gently knocking on the fragile, generally unlocked screen door. He knew that the door could be opened very easily, but he still knocked gently and politely. The screen door made the sound it usually did when the wind was blowing.

Mai took out a metal bat from the box beneath the footrest of his motorcycle. Alisha took it in her hands. The cold surface of the bat was uneven, and indeed it had dark red marks. Alisha swung it gently, feeling its weight. At that moment, the clock rang the hour, distracting her, and the bat accidentally hit a fish tank. The glass broke, and along with the water a betta fish splashed on the ground.

Of course, it was unintentional at first, but Alisha suddenly felt that this was also right. Mai was in her room full of fish tanks, and she was holding Mai's bat. Everyone who walked into this house would disappear into the sunlight in the end. Alisha hit the glass fish tank with the bat. Not very easy, she thought. Especially the six-foot tank with the Red Arowana, that aloof gaze that came from above. Alisha increasingly felt inexplicably frenetic. The metal bat hitting the glass surface gave bursts of loud noise, and Alisha felt painful shocks in her hand, but this feeling, this feeling....

Alisha was lifted into midair, her wet back pressing against Mai's warm chest. He took the bat, turned, and pushed open the screen door.

Staying about one meter apart, they walked from dusk into the night. Mai didn't say a word the entire time, and he walked quickly with large steps. Alisha followed behind. She was very tired from walking and soon wasn't able to keep up. But Mai can ride his bike, right? Alisha thought. If Mai really wanted to leave her behind, he could get on his bike and disappear like a wisp of smoke.

As the night darkened and the shadow of the day dragging behind her became an increasingly huge monster, Alisha's legs trembled, and she couldn't walk anymore. She sobbed loudly, but the monster kept pushing her from behind. It was as if a chain were hooked below Alisha's stomach that closely connected her to the desire behind her body. Yes, that monster was called desire, and that made Alisha cry even harder.

"Don't cry! It's annoying," Mai barked. Alisha sulked and remained silent for a long time. Her tears ran from her eyes to her nostrils, and together with the clear snot ran into her wide-open mouth. She suddenly remembered Dad teasing her that when she opened her mouth too wide, she looked like a goldfish waiting to be fed.

"Why don't you beat me?"

"I don't want to beat you." Mai murmured, "Why should I beat you?" As Alisha cried and shivered, he slowly and carefully said: "Do you want me to beat you?"

Alisha felt like ten thousand fish were flying around in her heart.

"I will beat you, don't cry like this." Mai comforted her.

"How will you beat me?"

Mai thought of his mom who ran away from home. His dad always followed the same routine before things began.

Mai thought of Alisha and himself, one without a mom, one an orphan. Wasn't it fate that they had met?

...Always the same routine: just a few slaps at first, then a few more. Mai thought it was like foreplay. As suddenly as he would later stop, Mai slapped Alisha hard.

Mai hit Alisha's ear, causing a burst of loud ringing.

"Don't hit my ears," Alisha said quietly, her face tilted to the side, hair messy. Mai nodded, his lips pressed into a firm line as he raised his hand.

There were no lights on the streets at night. Wild dogs barked in the distance. One sound after the other lit up the place, like a firecracker igniting and extinguishing, forcing you to concentrate on it. Alisha couldn't think, her head tilted this way and that, her consciousness becoming misty. Every time it took away her brain's ability to think clearly. What kind of deeds can let one person take away another's ability to think? Having even forgotten the reason for crying, Alisha had a feeling that she was a happy little anubias plant in the water, shaking her body gently with the current.

"Are you okay?"

Alisha wanted to speak, she wanted to nod her head and ask him to continue, but she couldn't do anything anymore. Her cheeks were swollen and hurt. If possible, she hoped to die

like this. She wanted to be beaten to death. As she looked up, she could see the huge silhouette of Mai radiating anger, shining brightly, as he once did on the platform.

As suddenly as he had started, Mai stopped, and his whole body became still. Only then Alisha recovered and realized how scared she had been just now and in how much pain she was.

But Mai lightly touched Alisha's face and grinned. Alisha no longer looked worried. They were like a drop of water flowing from the grass to the river and into the ocean, unstopably, steadily and accurately. Shoulders touching, they walked back to where Mai had parked, as if they had discussed to do this a long time ago. Mai put the bat into the carton and said a brisk goodbye to Alisha. Before leaving, he looked at Alisha's home. He hadn't known that Alisha lived here before stepping through the screen door. He even forgot to let Alisha's grandfather and grandmother know about the activities in the temple. Not wanting to go inside again, Mai stood outside watching Alisha unsteadily go through the screen door into the warm light, the squeaking door vaguely letting out the smell of sludge gas from the fish tank water, reminding him of silky moss.

Before he left, Mai was sure that they had been destined to meet, just like an iron rod in the cheek, and firecrackers on skin.

During the Lantern Festival, communities from other temples came from far away for ceremonies. It was the busiest time for Mai's dad, but Mai wasn't too sure what it was his dad was doing, exchanging bows with every strange man in uniform and earnestly holding their hand while muttering to himself. After the show for the tourists had finished, his father joined the gambling table. The sound of mahjong tiles hitting each other rang louder than the sound of firecrackers. Mai would deliberately go far, far away to look at the five weapons used by the medium in the spiritual ceremonies, the sword, the halberd, the thorned club, the saw, and the flail, or at the long iron needle pierced through the tongue and cheek of the medium which was sometimes so large that it would distort the whole face.

The days before and after the turn of the millennium had been the best, and the performances in the night parade had been the fiercest, with blood running down the mediums' waists and legs. Having grown up seeing these performances, Mai time and again had tried to convince himself that he didn't like it very much, that the mediums didn't need to torture themselves cruelly only to prove the existence of the gods.

But when a medium really had their cheeks pierced by five or six steel bars, their facial features were deformed, and this inhuman form fascinated Mai. He sucked the packaging of the Mineshine milk tea and felt that his face looked like that of the god in his heart, like the red, green and white face of the deity Han Dan Ye. Mai's mom had also had that face, a suffering face, covered in bruises, her eyes leaking pus, and the corners of her mouth cracked so that the blood ran every time she smiled. The mother in Mai's memory was like that, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember what his mother had originally looked like.

The strange thing was that his father had never beaten him. Maybe he had wanted to beat him once but been stopped by his mother, and never tried again. After his mother fled home, he wondered whether if he had plucked up his courage to protect his mother, everything would have been different?

In Mai's heart, there was only one unspeakable regret.

Before every Lantern Festival, he was extremely excited, especially before he turned thirteen. When he was seven or eight years old, he was fascinated by the bright light of the firecrackers in the night, but the moment he really fell for firecrackers was in middle school, when he went for a night ride up in the mountains with his friend who gave him a firework.

They were drunk and drove Mai's father's blue minivan up the mountain. Initially, they hadn't felt very drunk, for which they blamed the tasteless plate of sunfish stir-fried in sesame oil that they had just eaten. They had ordered a lot of liquor to help the fish go down, and suddenly felt the urge to go night hunting. Mai went even crazier and stole the statue of Han Dan Ye from the temple, casting moon blocks to divine whether Han Dan Ye wanted to come with them for a drive? When the moon blocks said yes, Mai was overjoyed. He hid a shotgun in the car. They laughed together as they made their way, winding up the unlit mountain roads. Mai was playing with the firework. There was only one, it was like their only shot. The car turned left and right on the road. They saw a black shadow, and Mai's friend stepped on the gas pedal to try to hit it. Rhesus monkey, blue bellied pheasant, or grouse, he muttered. Mai tilted his head up to look at the spinning stars and trees that looked like ceaselessly rotating black rags and white holes. He felt dizzy, and when he knew he had to vomit, he stuck his head out of the window to keep everything clean.

The shotgun was placed in the passenger seat, close to the gear shift, with the muzzle facing upwards, and when his friend shifted gears, he bumped against it. Mai somehow felt that that was the wrong place for it, but he didn't say anything. The statue of Han Dan Ye witnessed their foolish behavior with its piercing gaze.

At the next corner, in the middle of the street lit up by the car's headlights, a panther crouched on the side of the road.

Mai's friend screamed and shifted gears with force, hitting the shotgun too hard in the process. The crudely made shotgun did not need to be asked twice: a shot rang out on the spot, and the truck's motor went out immediately. Mai recalls that at the time, his heart was racing, but he still did the only reasonable thing: He pulled the handbrake. The small truck that had been slowly rolling downhill stopped on the side of the road, and the whole world fell into black silence. No, not silence – they heard mysterious sounds that had been masked by the engine earlier, sometimes like human gasping, sometimes like laughter, sometimes like frogs croaking, or insects rubbing their wings, or dripping water. Meanwhile, Mai and his friend were awed by the moonlight flowing from the bullet hole at the top of the truck, which was thick and slowly falling onto Mai's shoulders like liquid.

Soon enough someone was knocking on the car window, and they got out of the car to talk to the police.

"Someone reported that they had heard gunshots, now I come across you on my patrol, what are you doing?"

"We're messing around with fireworks, no big deal."

The gun was very hot, but fortunately it was hidden in its previous hiding place, Mai thought.

“Playing with fireworks? For how long? Have you lit many?”

“One, just one! It’s really no big deal!” Mai’s friend spat. “Do you know how scared we were just now? There is a black panther in that curve there, do you understand? A black panther!”

The man that looked like a policeman just smiled and did not say whether there were any black panthers in Taiwan. Smiling, pressing the flashlight onto his notebook, he carefully wrote down a few words.

“You said you lit up a firework.” He said: “Does that mean you only brought two fireworks up to the mountain?” Mai saw his arrogant chin nod towards the only firework in the car.

“Yeah.”

“But just now your friend said that you only had one.”

They started trembling a little.

“Two, he meant that originally there were two, and we lit one, so one is left.”

Mai turned his head to double-check on the firework, just as the moonlight writhed out of the bullet hole again like a long parasite. Mai thought of a dog he owned a long time ago, which he originally thought was a Dachshund but turned out to be a Shikoku. Mai called him Ang Ang. Ang Ang was small and fat, with very short legs, but man, could he run. He would shoot out of the house to greet Mai when he came home from school. His dad also happened to leave the house at this time, but whether he saw him or not doesn’t make a difference. With one step he kicked Ang Ang away. Ang Ang howled and rolled to the bottom of a deep ditch. Was he dead? Mai asked Mom. He asked her to go check, and she said he wasn’t dead. Then when will Ang Ang come back? Mom shook her head with a tired smile and walked back into the house to make dinner.

A few days later, Mai finally mustered up the courage to look down into the ditch from the road above. Ang Ang lay belly-up like a fish; his gut had swollen to several times its normal size and the skin of it turned translucent. How did he know that? Because there had been several very long worms twisting and writhing inside Ang Ang’s big belly. It had looked like the secrets of the universe lay coiled up in it.

Mai inexplicably recalled the situation at the time, and suddenly realized that what had been in Ang Ang’s stomach was actually the twisting moonlight. Mai thought that it was because he had drunk too much that he saw the bizarre vision and remembered his old dog Ang Ang. These unrelated things are linked by booze, which made people nostalgic. He hoped that the police wouldn’t see the moonlight worm crawling out from the bullet hole.

“Where did this statue of Guan Yu come from?”

Mai’s friend rolled his eyes and said, “This is Han Dan Ye. We borrowed him for our trip to the mountains. There are a bunch of fairies and ghosts in the mountains that only he can keep in check!”

The man that looked like a policeman smelled the alcohol on their breath while they were answering his questions, and, unsurprisingly, gave them a breathalyzer test. When he had stopped them, the engine of their van had been turned off, so the three of them were caught in a long, unsolvable confrontation. Mai knew that the two of them looked like two children who had done something wrong, the word "guilty" written on their foreheads, sunken into their flesh and

blood, carved into their bones. If the man in front of them had been able to pierce things, to look into their innermost yearning to be understood, he would have been willing to give in immediately, and appreciated the understanding that came from others. But the man could do no such thing, and his eagerness slowly dissipated. He scratched his head and said to them, "You just mentioned that there were two fireworks?"

"Correct."

"The other one has been lit?"

"Yes."

"What about the debris?"

"What?"

"There is always some debris left after lighting a firework. Go and pick up the red debris, and I will let you go."

Mai and his friend spent the entire night looking for the remains of the fireworks in the mountains. When they returned to the place where the minivan was parked, the early morning sun had risen from the sea, and the abstract blur of the night gradually became clear. They did not see the man who claimed to be a policeman or the black panther again. The trees on the mountain, the van, and the birds jumping on the branches were all the same as when they had come up the mountain.

"Shit, what the hell," his friend said with a shudder.

Before leaving, Mai ignited their only firework in front of Han Dan Ye. The moment the firework exploded, he opened his hands, and before his eyes everything turned white.

After that, Mai moved the bang snaps, butterfly firecrackers, and fireworks sold in the grocery store around his body like a juggling monkey. The flames bloomed with a flick of his finger. If it was a string of firecrackers where the flames eat their way upwards and you didn't throw them away immediately, your fingers might be blown off. That sound, color, and light were a kind of power, and Mai realized that when he had firecrackers in his hands, people didn't bother him.

"Sorry!" When Mai got the chance to secretly take the statue back to the temple, he clasped his hands and said, "I got drunk and accidentally offended you, but still, thank you very much." The idol's face was part blue-green and part red, which really made Mai think of his mom.

On the Lantern Festival, with his dad busy bowing again, he walked back and forth along the debris of the firecrackers. Mai quietly watched the men for a while: those carrying the platform, the man who played the god of the earth, the man with the cake on his neck and the man with makeup on his face. He met the temple staff with whom he discussed everything, he took off his clothes, put on red shorts, stuffed his ears with cotton, and covered his face with a wet towel. He stood on the bamboo platform, slowly moving with the people and swaying in the smoke.

When they threw firecrackers at him, his nose burned from the smoke, his ears rang from the explosions, the fire scorched and curled his body hair and cut his skin open. Mai didn't seem to be Mai, but someone else, something better. Shit, hell yeah, he was a man who had seen a ghost. Think about it, the night when he saw a black panther and the moonlight writhing like worms, and they searched the mountains for the remains of the firecracker.

In the crowd, a little girl stared at him dumbfounded, and Mai grinned at her.

Alisha recalled the real beginning – not the firecrackers thrown by the temple, or the sharp slap on the street at night, but the fish. Because of fish, there is love. That's what Alisha's father had said.

The broken fish tanks were leaking stinking water, which had risen to an inch high on the floor. Her grandparents waded through the dirty water and glass shards in plastic rain boots, coming and going like they couldn't see it, continuing their peaceful lives.

Alisha put on the only dress in her closet and sat in the hallway to repair the broken fish tanks with a hot glue gun. Fortunately, she had swung the bat randomly at the time. A few large fish tanks just had cracks on the reinforced glass surface. The only fish that had died were a young dinosaur eel and several even cheaper betta fish that had been in small fish tanks.

The fish corpses had to be turned into specimens the way her father had taught her. Alisha put the dinosaur eel on the Styrofoam board she had picked up, cleaned away the mucus on the surface with a brush dipped in water, and fixed the shape of the fish with formalin – especially the fins, which had to be opened as if they were still swimming. She injected formalin in the fish's mouth and excretion hole with a syringe, and a few bubbles came out of the small body. Alisha finally soaked the dinosaur eel in a 10% formalin solution. After a week, the fish carcass could be taken out and kept in a glass bottle filled with 75% alcohol.

Alisha wanted to go out and pick up a few glass bottles to bring home, or glass fish tanks that others didn't need. She remembered Dad saying that those who bought glass fish tanks usually couldn't keep fish for a long time. Their expectations for raising fish were all invested in a beautiful, perfect glass fish tank. When they bought a fish tank, regardless of the size of the tank, and whether they managed to find their favorite fish, eventually the fish would die and the owners wouldn't buy new ones. What was left was only a fish tank that took up space. Yes, Alisha thought, even though glass fish tanks were nice to look at, they were useless. Except for raising fish, they didn't serve any other purpose.

Alisha once wandered the streets looking for glass fish tanks. Unexpectedly, almost every store and household had an empty and unwanted fish tank. They put the fish tanks under the outdoor tap to wash the dishes, or filled them with garbage. Those were her shimmering treasures in the alleys.

She picked up large and small fish tanks from the street and gradually filled the entrance hall at home. When she took the fish tanks from their original spot outside people's homes, she would find a square white mark with mold around the outside. Especially when the rainy season was near, the humidity inside the house rose, and strange small flowers bloomed among the mold. Their delicate and drooping pink petals swayed on the black, rancid wall.

After a few tanks had been repaired and the fish in them were swimming around again, Alisha repaired the other fish tanks while peeking at the screen door. She heard that a typhoon was coming, and in the strong wind, the screen door kept making a banging sound. It startled Alisha every time, but there was no one outside. The only thing she could do was drop her head in disappointment.

Out of all the fish tanks in the room, only the six-foot tank remained fully intact. Alisha had always felt that she couldn't crush the huge structure by herself. The Red Arowana looked down indifferently, which made Alisha cower, but still, she often glanced at it.

The Red Arowana was so beautiful. In the past, Dad had taken Alisha to the creek to catch pot-bellied fish to add to its meals. She saw the Red Arowana swallow them whole and watched the shiny silver pot-bellied fish shooting around like bullets trying to flee. The Red Arowana hunted the small fish, and when he ate them, he made a sound like a faraway gunshot. His uniform, pink scales emitted a ghostly glow under the light of the aquarium lamp. Dad had hugged Alisha and let her sit on his lap to look at the fish. It was the most incredible moment in her life.