

NINE DAYS AND NINE NIGHTS

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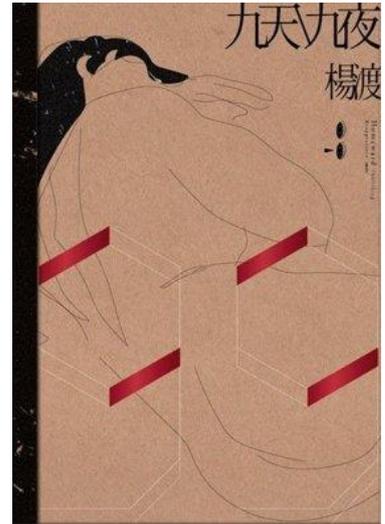
The White Terror – almost forty years of political repression and military rule that stood as the longest period of martial law in modern world history when it was lifted in 1987. It pre-dated and pre-defined Taiwanese democracy, shaping the consciousness of everyone who endured it. Yet, as with all great and terrible events in history, trends, periods, and other proper nouns tend to efface the individual psychologies that drive and destroy them.

In *Nine Days and Nine Nights*, Yang Tu is opening those pathways for us again. Four short stories delve into the human depths of the 1980s, invoking the horrors of fragility, loneliness, passion, and human limitation. The title story depicts a provincial election near the end of the Terror, to which a young student, Chang Nien-Tsu, has dedicated his last few months before going abroad. The election is conducted like a war – bribery, intimidation and fraud are rampant. Working feverishly, Chang finds himself moving closer and closer to Tzu-Yu, the daughter of an important backer of the favorite candidate, who works as an assistant to the campaign. Their passion explodes amid the surrounding chaos; yet love and plans are not always compatible, and time waits for no one.

In an age of marches and movements, Yang Tu writes the silent heart. With this first short story collection, we begin to meet a writer who knows people as well individually as together.

Yang Tu 楊渡

Yang Tu engages with many forms of popular expression. He is a poet, essayist, and fiction author who has published collections of poetry (*In the South*), essays (*A Handful of Friends*), and reportage (*The Force of the People*, *The Upheaval of 1945*). He has edited literary magazines and served as assistant editor-in-chief of the newspaper *China Times*. He is also active politically, making his voice heard for democratic as well as literary causes.



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By Yang Tu

Translated by A.C. Baecker

Dusk fell quickly in the fall. It was only five thirty but already a beam of gold light passed through the chestnut-lined glass windows by the bookshelf. The light fell onto a crystal award in front of the bookcase, where it was refracted back onto the desk in a star-shape, traveling across stacks of books by the study door. The unexpected gleam of light on the desk made Chang Nien-Tsu squint, and he lifted his head. He realized it was already dusk, and that the light carried the golden hues of the sunset. In a second it would become orange.

“It gets dark so early in the fall.”

The bookshelf was packed so densely with books that the shelves had run out of space, and more books were piled on top of the ones already on the shelves. A stack of articles lay behind the desk along with a few papers he hadn't gone through yet. Books he would never finish reading, articles he would never finish writing, ideas for research he still wanted to explore – there would always be too much to do and not enough time to go do it, so he just passed it onto his students.

As he arranged his books, he thought about the close to twenty-five years he had spent teaching. Next year, he would qualify for retirement, and he planned to start teaching at a new university in the east to earn a little extra on top of his pension. He wanted to travel, and with the extra money he could afford to go see the world.

“Life passes so quickly!”

A few years ago, his wife had retired from her middle school teaching position as soon as she qualified for it. Only a few years over fifty and still in good health, she'd become obsessed with tantric Buddhism. She had studied meditation with some Rinpoche and later went to receive initiations from a Tibetan incarnate master, eventually traveling to India and Nepal for spiritual cultivation with a group of other followers. She went two or three times a year, and could afford the trips with her retirement benefits. He didn't mind the quiet when his wife was gone. At the very least he didn't have to eat all that strange Buddhist food. He always drank and ate red meat as he pleased. His wife wanted him to become vegetarian, to which he retorted: “The only vegetarian thing that I like is fermented fruit, like wine.”

Before retiring, he hoped to edit his publications into two or three volumes of collected work, the culmination of nearly a lifetime's research. Not too long ago, his research assistant had dug out an early article of his, and asked if he wanted to include it. It was old research on regional political parties that he'd written during the period of martial law. The content was a bit underdeveloped, the writing style unsure, and the theoretical citations somewhat flimsy, but using firsthand observations of local elections as research material had been ground-breaking in his field at the time. He pushed the dissertations he still needed to read aside, deciding to look at them next week. Tang's phone call came just as he was putting his publications into chronological order.

“Hey, off work yet?” said Tang.

“What work? I've been done with class for a while,” he laughed. Tang was his classmate from high school, and they'd attended university together in Taipei. After graduating, he'd gone to Kaohsiung and canvassed for local political campaigns for a while. Eventually he got married, and settled down there,

first working as a journalist for a few years before opening a print shop for books on culture. He had a good life.

“Are you free this evening? I’m in Taipei, let’s catch up.” They’d been friends for a long time, and Tang sounded like he was in a good mood.

“Your timing’s perfect – you called just as I was just looking over that article you helped me with on regional political parties. You know, we’re both in Taipei. Let’s go get a drink,” said Chang Nien-Tsu. Today was Friday, his wife was gone, and his kids grown up and living on their own, so who cared what he got up to? Tang had come at just the right time.

“How about this then, I’ll take the late train back. I have something I want to tell you,” said Tang.

“Whiskey or wine?”

“For tonight, whiskey.”

They arranged to meet at a Japanese izakaya place on Linsen North Road that was well-known for its grilled eel, and close to the train station so Tang could catch the train back. They hadn’t seen each other for a few years; Tang’s hair suddenly seemed to have more grey in it. Chang Nien-Tsu thought his own hair probably looked similarly grey and sparse, but they were old friends and that was to be expected.

Chang Nien-Tsu opened a bottle of twenty-five-year-old Macallan, and said with a laugh, “All these years you’ve only come drinking once, so drink well.”

“At our age, we should drink less wine and drink better wine. That’s fine.” Tang laughed and said, “Last year I almost bit the dust.”

“What? How did that happen?”

“One day, I got up after my wife had already gone to work, and my kids were at school. I smoked a cigarette and went to the bathroom. As I was sitting on the pot, all of a sudden I felt my stomach seize up, and I couldn’t breathe. I thought to myself, this is bad, am I having a heart attack? I have to go to the hospital.”

“Did you drive yourself?”

“Yeah, it took everything I had. I couldn’t breathe and could barely move my body, but I dragged myself there. I got to the parking lot and into the car, which is thankfully automatic. My house is only five minutes away from the hospital so I drove to the entrance of their emergency room and shouted at them to get a stretcher because I couldn’t get out of the car. They came quickly and lifted me onto the stretcher. The doctor there just asked me one question: Where does it hurt? I pointed to my heart. He pressed on it and then said, ‘You just barely pulled through.’ Then I blacked out.”

“And you just came back to life?” Chang Nien-Tsu looked in astonishment upon his friend’s slightly leaner face, fearing on his behalf.

“Yeah, life and death in a split second.”

“Fuck, so can you still drink?” Chang Nien-Tsu asked with concern.

“It’s fine, they put in three stents. I just can’t get drunk, my heart can’t handle it.” Tang laughed good-heartedly.

“Take your time then, don’t force yourself to finish.” Chang Nien-Tsu raised his glass. “Here. To your new lease on life!”

“That’s right, a life returned.” Tang took tiny sips. “Twenty-five years, this whiskey smells wonderful!”

“I brought this bottle five or six years ago, so if you do the math it’s at least thirty years old – as old as our friendship.” The thought that death might have forbade them this moment inspired a surge of gratitude.

Tang ate his grilled eel with a wild garlic and clam soup. He chuckled, saying, “We thought this food was so great when we were young. But now it’s harder on our systems, so we just have a little bit.”

"It's fine, drink wine once every lifetime." Chang Nien-Tsu thought of a line from an aboriginal poet, gesturing to the bottle as he said the words.

"I should work out a bit when I get back." Tang said, "You still seem to be in good shape, do you get exercise?"

"Sometimes. At school we get together every week to play ball. I'm still in decent shape."

"Aren't you close to retiring?" Tang asked.

"Very close, next year. The university wants me to stay on for a few more years and retire at sixty, but another university wants to hire me. They've asked several times. I'll start taking my pension next year, and move to the east to teach once I've retired."

"That sounds great. The eastern coastline is beautiful," said Tang.

"Oh, you said you wanted to talk about something earlier. What's up?" Chang Nien-Tsu asked. He knew Tang wasn't the type to ask for help and was worried he had something to say that he wouldn't bring up on his own, so he asked.

"Do you still remember Tzu-Yu? The girl you met when you went south to electioneer 19before you went abroad?"

"I remember her. Where'd she go? I was never able to track her down again. Is she back?" Chang Nien-Tsu's voice became anxious. Tang's heart attack flashed through his mind, and he was worried he'd hear similar news.

"She was in France for a long time. She studied there, and had been living in Europe." Tang spoke slowly: "A little while ago I heard that she'd studied art management and wanted to come back to Kaohsiung to teach. Do you remember the old county commissioner's family's school? It's become a university now, and she was supposed to come back to head up the art institute."

"And is she back?" Chang Nien-Tsu asked anxiously. He had an ominous feeling as he looked at Tang's face. Chang Nien-Tsu felt himself hanging on Tang's every word, and as his friend came to those fateful last sentences he wished he were a director who could film the scene in slow motion and drag everything to a stop. But Tang finally said, "The day before she was supposed to return, she passed away."

"Oh, Tzu-Yu!" A pang of grief crossed his heart, and he cried out for her in silence, though outwardly he could only mutter, "How can this be?"

"She had traveled to Africa to research primitive art and religion or something, and came down with some kind of virus. She had the symptoms of a cold and a constant fever. Her doctor didn't know what she had or how to treat it. Less than a week later she died suddenly."

"What strange African disease was this?" Chang Nien-Tsu asked with a tremble in his voice.

"The autopsy said her entire immune system had collapsed, and she died of E. coli. E. coli is one of the most common intestinal bacteria. It's in everyone's bodies, and we come into contact with it all the time, but because her immune system had completely collapsed, it became a deadly infection." Tang sighed.

"Oh Tzu-Yu, why didn't you fight back?" Chang Nien-Tsu asked Tzu-Yu silently, but all he could do was hold his whiskey without speaking. He said nothing for a long time.

He remembered a trip he'd taken to France to attend a conference. At his hotel, he'd seen the silhouette of a woman who looked like Tzu-Yu, only she was wearing a black silk blouse of European design, with a burgundy silk scarf draped over her chest. Her make-up was immaculate and her skin pale. Even though she had Asian features, her cheeks were full and she seemed sophisticated. Chang Nien-Tsu turned the memory over in his mind a few times. Yet he hadn't dared to go talk to her.

When he had finally gathered the courage to find her, she was already gone.

And yet he still couldn't understand how the young girl he'd known with the tawny skin and bright eyes of an aborigine, a dimple on her cheek when she laughed, a soft voice and sweet temperament – how could this be? She was gone, truly gone.

"But she was so young, how could this have happened?" He asked Tang despondently.

"After she came back, I was planning to invite you both to come south so we could get together. When we were electioneering, waging war together, we all got along so well." Tang said, "We would get drunk that year, and stay up all night working on campaign material. She'd be making tea and talking...I had no idea this would happen, *ai!*"

Chang Nien-Tsu poured himself another serving of whiskey. "How could this be? She was so young." He felt his throat suddenly go dry, and drank his glass.

"May she rest in peace." Tang downed a glass with him.

Chang Nien-Tsu could never forget that voice he knew so well, her gentle murmur, the warmth of her laughter, the huskiness of her moans....

Chang Nien-Tsu looked around him. The small izakaya restaurant was full of customers, the smell of roast barbeque floating through the air. A smiling girl in a leather jacket pointed at the barbecued skewers she wanted, while whispering into the ear of the man beside her. On the other side of the restaurant, a table with two middle-aged men who looked like businessmen sat with two young girls. They lifted their beer and toasted in Japanese. How could the world carry on like this? This world was so routine, so tedious, so mediocre, so utterly ordinary – how could you not be here? Tzu-Yu, why aren't you here? Chang Nien-Tsu thought. In a daze, he thought she must have been an illusion from the 1980s. Under the repression of martial law, people spoke of resistance to each other only in whispers, and true feelings could only be revealed during midnight dreams shared with the most trusted. Accumulated passions only had one night to spring forth, transforming into connections that staved off death before silently departing....print

"Tang, thank you for asking me to join the campaign, for allowing me to meet Tzu-Yu...." Chang Nien-Tsu drank as he spoke. "I learned so much from the experience. I've been looking over my earlier research recently as I prepare for retirement, and reading an article I wrote back then. It feels like yesterday...." His voice went hoarse, and he couldn't continue.

"We were all young back then, so brazen and willing to risk everything." Tang smiled, trying to move the topic away from Tzu-Yu. "We had a pretty good time during martial law. When we were out, we were monitored by agents from Garrison Command, and when we were inside they sent their lackeys to get in our business. It was really rather exciting. Now, everything is so normal."

"But that's an improvement." Chang Nien-Tsu tried to steady his voice.

"My wife used to say to me: 'You know, you guys think the democracy movement is so exciting. Everyday you criticize the Kuomintang and write campaign material. But once things democratize, we'll be like the U.S. and we won't be into politics anymore. We'll all be like Americans, raising little turtles to race and doing boring things to pass the time,' Tang said with amusement.

"That's right, things are just like that now." Chang Nien-Tsu laughed as he said, "The two parties are just like turtles racing. Everyone's going to be disappointed with the results."

"Go to the door with me and smoke a cigarette," Tang said laughingly.

"You just had a heart attack and you still want to smoke?" Chang Nien-Tsu said with surprise.

"I'll quit soon. Or I'll be dead soon." Tang laughed irreverently and sucked at his cigarette without lighting it. Chang Nien-Tsu gazed at the crowd in the alley full of people just getting off work, busily searching for their path. A few young women wearing miniskirts laughed noisily as they walked by, smoking and sashaying. But he? He was thinking of a question Tzu-Yu had once asked him long ago: "What do you want to do with your life?"

What did he want to do? At the time he'd just said, "First I want to study abroad. I'll figure the rest out after that." But now, Tzu-Yu, my life has already led me here, and there's no more need to make plans. I'm about to retire, and the golden light of dusk will quickly turn orange. In a moment, the final magnificence of red clouds will flash and fade as night approaches. But back then, we were so young. In the south back then, there was so much sunlight. The sun shone so brightly we could wear short sleeves in December. Those nights at campaign rallies, passions rose as thousands of people shouted at the candidates and canvassers. Packed crowds stank of sweat, betel nuts, cigarettes, and sausages roasting on a fire nearby. It felt as though all those smells still lingered. That night at the rally, it was so crowded and your body was pressed against mine, your full and firm breasts pushed close against my back. All I could do was shout "Elect! Elect!" along with the crowd, even as I became more and more distracted. Your arm wrapped around my waist, and I couldn't help but put my hand behind you and held you to me. You drew me closer in your arms. My pulse quickened, and I brought you around to the front with my left hand so that we switched places, and I was holding you from behind. My arm was under yours, brushing slightly against your breasts, and my palms stroked your abdomen. Your full pelvis was taut between your two legs, your butt raised backward, pressed so closely against me that I couldn't help but feel myself swelling. A burst of percussion rose to the sky as the candidate for county commissioner prepared to take the stage. I could barely hear anything there but you raised your head and said softly to me, "She's about to speak!" Your cheeks were red and hot, pressed against my face. I said into your ear, "With everyone so excited, we're definitely going to win."

A peal of drums and gongs sounded, and a string of fireworks exploded. The microphone shouted, "Elect! Elect!"

"We're definitely going to win, right?" You raised your head and looked at me, asking in a tender voice. In this world overflowing with noise, with firecrackers and shouting, I could only hear your voice, its sound like a warm current passing through my body....