

# THE ECSTASY OF GALAXIES

## 天河撩亂

\* *The Danish Girl* meets Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together*

\* China Times Open Book Award

*20th anniversary reprint of a classic work of Taiwanese queer bildungsroman fiction. Wu Jih-Wen tells a tale of family secrets and maturation that crosses oceans, lives, and presumed genders.*

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Sumi's family is broken in many different ways. When he was still very young, his father took him from Taiwan to Japan, where he grew up at odds with both domestic society and his own parents. Meanwhile, Sumi's family back in rural Taiwan has other shadow members: his eldest uncle, who vanished into the Malaysian jungle; his aunt, also an immigrant to Japan, and her twin brother. Their names and faces have been scrubbed from the history of this otherwise tight-knit clan.

Growing up in Japan is a tumultuous process for Sumi, especially as he discovers his attraction to men. His aunt, who runs a high-end nightclub in Tokyo, becomes a refuge from feelings of neglect and rebellion, and the two become fast friends. During Sumi's last visit to the club before he returns to Taiwan, he is made privy to his aunt's secret – her transgender identity. As she continues to move away from the family that rejected her, he returns, re-entering a society that nearly drives him to suicide.

This tale of fraught becoming, of rejection and acceptance, describes the journey of several marvelous figures in a time of equally tortured political change. Its relationship to memoir widely accepted, the authenticity of the novel's first-person perspective rings true. It is being reprinted twenty years after first becoming a classic of Taiwanese queer fiction.



**Category:** Literary Fiction

**Publisher:** Aquarius

**Date:** 9/2017

**Rights contact:**

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**Pages:** 320

**Length:** 105,000 characters  
(approx. 70,000 words in English)

## Wu Jih-Wen 吳繼文

Born and educated in Japan during the 50s and 60s, Wu Jih-Wen later became a famous figure in Taiwanese literary circles as both author and editor at *United Daily News* and the *China Times*. He has written many works of his own, as well as translated for several famous Japanese authors, like Yoshimoto Banana.

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By Wu Jih-Wen

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

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Sumi became aware of his aunt's secret in the most extraordinary way.

Thanks to Koji's influence, Sumi had developed a certain distrust and scorn for extracurriculars, grades, and his GPA. He read obsessively and widely, but disdained those books that seemed to exist only for the classroom. His grades took a nosedive. By the time he was a junior in high school, his father was so worried about college entrance exams that he began to put even more pressure on Sumi, which sent their relationship into a nosedive too.

Sumi started to think about going back to Taiwan, for no other reason than to escape all of the pressure. But because of Koji, he couldn't face making a real decision.

He hadn't imagined that Koji would bring the issue up first. Without giving any clear reasons, Koji said that he wanted to quit school again and get as far away from Tokyo as possible.

With that, Sumi felt released and he responded quickly, as though in retaliation: "That's perfect, because I'm thinking about leaving too."

He immediately went to tell his aunt that he wanted to go back to Taiwan. He wanted to hear her thoughts on the matter, but he also needed her support when he told his father.

His aunt expressed sympathy, and even somehow managed to convince his father to let him go. His father likely had already given up on him anyway.

His aunt's help didn't end there. Sumi and his father hadn't left the country through normal channels, so the question of how to get back into Taiwan was a complicated one. The contacts his aunt had cultivated over her many years in Japan came in handy. A conservative member of the parliament with deep connections in Taiwan helped out, and Sumi and his father both obtained new passports and entry permits. Sumi had first seen this member of parliament soon after he'd arrived in Japan and was still staying at his aunt's house. He'd been out late, and happened to glimpse Murou drunk and sprawled across his aunt's lap in a cab. Murou had been elected to the legislature at a young age, and was reelected many times before becoming part of the cabinet as a deputy minister at the National Development Bureau.

In mid-April before Sumi left, his aunt invited him and Koji to her club for a farewell dinner. Although Sumi was fairly confident that he knew his aunt's line of work, she had never discussed it with him, nor had she invited him to the club before.

By way of invitation and explanation, his aunt told him, "It's legal now that you're eighteen. Congratulations! Wear your nicest outfit to dinner."

His aunt's club was in Daikanyama, in a quiet residential neighborhood not far from the overcrowded Shibuya shopping area. Sumi and Koji went together. The place wasn't hard to find. His aunt had told him that her street was the only one lined with French plane trees.

It wasn't quite dark out yet, but light shone through many of the windows. Following the address, they went up to the second story of a large commercial building. The sign on the club looked like a miniature version of Rodin's "The Gates of Hell": A plate of darkened bronze a foot square, bearing a sculpted relief of graceful bodies and contorted faces. The name of the club – "ANTI-SUTTEE" in peacock blue above a silvery "ADULT" – was written in fluorescent lettering in the middle. Sumi grimaced at Koji.

As soon as they entered, an attractive dark-skinned hostess led them solicitously to their seats. It really is that kind of place, Sumi thought to himself, where the price of even opening a bottle of alcohol was like highway robbery.

The club was decorated in cool colors, but the carefully-arranged lighting made the room feel comfortable and inviting. Aside from a row of stools at the bar, there were only a dozen or so tables, separated by sofas in dark upholstery. Two tables were already taken, and his aunt was seeing to the customers. The bar stood to the right of the entrance, while the back of the room featured a small stage.

After a short while, a slightly bony girl in a form-fitting strapless black evening dress came over and sat down beside them with a smile.

"I'm Tina. It's a pleasure to meet you." She looked at Sumi and said, "You must be Mr. Sumi. I've heard you're a handsome kid, even if you've still got a baby face."

Sumi quickly shook his head in embarrassment. Koji let out a snort and Sumi shot him a look.

Tina asked, "And this is...?" She seemed to speak Japanese with a slight accent.

"I'm Kawakami Koji. Pleased to meet you."

Sumi saw that Koji had suddenly straightened up and couldn't help but chuckle.

Tina said, "Mama will be over in a bit. Have something to eat first."

They studied the menu for a long time, mostly discussing the prices, even though tonight Sumi's aunt was paying. They both ended up ordering a Mediterranean seafood set meal. His aunt sent over a bottle of white wine, and they drank and nibbled on appetizers. They were already mostly full by the time the main meal arrived, but fortunately the food was simply prepared and delicious, and they could fully enjoy fresh seafood and the fragrant olive oil. Sumi's aunt came over a few times to chat for a moment before rushing off again.

They started on wine after they'd eaten, accompanied in turns by a beautiful girl – Tina, Anna, Helena, Regina....

"Can I ask you a question?" Sumi said to Tina. "Is my aunt also called something that ends in 'na'?"

"Taiwana," Tina answered casually.

"Really?" he said, surprised. "Isn't that a little weird?"

"Yes, it is a little weird," she said seriously. "I was named 'Philippina' before." Seeing how taken aback the two men were, she let out a peal of laughter and added, "I'm just kidding. She's named 'Mina,' but we usually just call her Mama."

Sumi had no idea that his aunt Sei-Kei's "working name" was Mina. Tina lowered her voice and whispered hastily in Hokkien, "I'm from Yilan."

Customers came in a steady stream, but none were as young as Sumi and Koji. Everyone spoke in low voices, and the atmosphere was pleasant. At eight o'clock, a band got up on stage and began to play reggae. There was a Japanese man on double bass and one on hand drums, while a third man who appeared to be from the Caribbean played piano. By nine o'clock the place was full, with only a few free stools left at the bar.

Sumi's aunt came over and he waved to her, crying, "Hi Mina!" His aunt gave them a long-suffering smile and sat down between them.

Koji said, "Is business always this good?"

"You must be good for business," she said. "But when the economy is bad, things go downhill fast. These last few years have been fairly steady. There's a guy in Roppongi who's looking to open a place twice as big as this, and he wanted me to go in on it with him. I turned him down without even thinking about it."

"Why?" Sumi asked.

"Why? It's simple. I'm straight-up prejudiced. There are just too many white people in Roppongi. I don't know why, but I've always preferred people of color."

"Isn't white a color?" he said.

She pinched his cheek. "Don't get cute with me. The show is about to go on. You two should watch." And with that she was gone again.

The show began at 9:30, and it proved to be merely a few pretty girls in heavy makeup, dancing and singing chanson and ballads either solo or in a chorus. On closer inspection, they were all the *na*-named hostesses from before. But many of the guests seemed totally smitten, clapping and yelling out *brava!* Sumi felt disappointed, but he saw that Koji was watching attentively, although he might have been acting out of politeness.

His aunt suddenly appeared again and bent down to ask, "How is it? Do you like it? Sumi, you seem a little bored."

He responded hurriedly, "Not at all! It's terrific. Isn't it, Koji?" Koji nodded his head emphatically.

His aunt turned around. "They're all boys, you know," she added, before heading to another table.

Sumi and Koji looked at each other in shock, then turned back to the stage. This new information gave him a completely new impression of the scene, both stimulating and embarrassing. But now he began to experience the different moods of the songs, and the delicate seduction of the actresses' movements in the spotlight. It was still the same people up on stage, with the same makeup, doing the same dances, and singing the same songs – so why after learning their gender did he suddenly have a very different response? Sumi felt confused.

When Tina returned to their table, Sumi and Koji had lost their casual bashfulness, and now stared at her like she were some rare animal. But aside from having a slightly lower voice than most women, Tina didn't seem to have any male characteristics at all.

Tina winked at them. "What are you staring at? Do I have horns growing out of my head or three breasts or something? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Koji quickly turned away, but Sumi still stared with his head tilted and eyebrows knit.

"Oh, I get it. Mama told you our secret, didn't she?"

Sumi nodded. Tina grabbed his hand and slipped it inside of the bodice of the dress.

“Male or female?”

“Female.”

Tina drew his hand between her legs, and Sumi flinched.

“And here?”

“Male.”

“It’s a bit awkward, isn’t it. I’ve been taking female hormones for a while, and the doctor says everything’s going well. At some point I’ll become a real woman.” After a moment, “she” switched to Mandarin and said, “Just like Mama.”

“What?” Sumi exclaimed. He sat up and let out a gasp. Ignoring Koji, he said in halting Chinese, “Are you...are you saying that my aunt...she’s...she’s like you?”

This time Tina seemed surprised. “It was a long time ago. She isn’t really your aunt. She’s your uncle. You really didn’t know?”

Koji was eavesdropping voraciously, and seemed to understand what they were saying. He could likely guess much of it.

Sumi muttered something to himself and then said, “How could I have known?”

Indeed, his aunt had never appeared in family photo albums. Relatives must have removed her photos, since she was still a *he* back then.

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On the night Sumi’s aunt revealed her secret to him, she quit work early at eleven o’clock. Koji said goodbye to them under the “ADULT” sign at the door. It felt like a permanent farewell, and a cold night breeze seemed to knit a parting sentiment between the three of them.

Sumi and his aunt walked side-by-side along the increasingly deserted street before hailing a cab. His aunt told the driver an unfamiliar address, but somehow he felt that they were headed toward the ocean. They got on the Second Capital Highway, where the lights shone dizzily bright. The traffic flowed smoothly despite all the cars on the road, and soon they were back in the quiet darkness of the coast. The cab finally stopped at an aquarium ringed by trees. Sumi wasn’t sure what they were doing there so late, but his aunt had always behaved a little strangely, and he was used to it. Now that they were already there, it wouldn’t do much good to ask why.

He caught the faint sound of footsteps, and someone opened the door and invited them in. It seemed his aunt had already made arrangements.

As they walked, his aunt made introductions, explaining that this was Nan, and he had been born and raised in a fishing village in Yonaguni, Okinawa. He’d been her swimming coach, and worked as a technical consultant for the aquarium. Yonaguni sat off the western border of Japan, about a hundred miles from the east coast of Taiwan. Each year there were a few especially clear days when the people there could see the tall, blue-green mountains of Taiwan. For them, Japan was a far distant other country.

Nan knew that his aunt loved the ocean and water and fish, and had agreed that for her – and only for her – he would open the aquarium after hours. Sumi thought to himself that they must have an unusual friendship.

Nan was dressed very simply, with the taciturn earnestness of someone who spent a lot of time in nature. Elegant in stature, he had the body of a lifeguard, muscular but nicely proportioned.

The aquarium was built like a domed glass yurt, tall as a ten-story building. From afar it looked like an enormous bubble emitting a dim blue light into the night. As soon as they walked through the main entrance, they could smell the warm, damp aroma of the sea. Nan turned on the lights, and they finally saw what surrounded them: a transparent aquarium built in the shape of a donut, appearing from the darkness like in a sci-fi film.

Nan had prepared two chairs in the center so that they could sit and observe for as long as they liked. He turned off the main light and left the tank lights on as he politely took his leave. Before he went, he told them that 1,500 large fish like tuna and bonito lived in the two thousand tons of water in the tank.

With most of the lights off, the stars reappeared behind the glass above their heads. They sat silently, watching the fish float around them between earth and sky as though in a dream.

Sumi finally broke the silence after a long while. “Do fish never sleep?” His voice echoed through the room.

His aunt didn’t answer at first. Then he heard her say, “How could they not sleep? You think fish need a pillow and blanket before they get in their pajamas to count sheep? Is that the only thing you’d call sleep?”

“It must be nice to sleep in water.”

“Of course it is. Why else would babies cry so hard when they’re born, after sleeping in the fluid of the womb for nine months?”

Their eyes hadn’t left the water tank.

His aunt began to speak slowly and deliberately. “Look at these fish. I think their shape is perfect, their colors are so pure, so fluid. No one can capture that kind of color, the way it shifts with the light even as you watch. You can’t pause its changes, and even if you try to paint or photograph or video it, you can’t reproduce its true luster.”

“There’s no way to reproduce the way it makes you feel,” Sumi said, nodding.

His aunt took a flask of whiskey out of her handbag. She opened it and handed it to Sumi before taking a sip herself.

“Back when I was a student, I worked really hard. I was so eager to understand the world. I spent every day in the library, thinking that if I read all the books I could find, I’d understand everything. Naïve, right?” She looked at him for a moment. “But a hundred libraries aren’t worth as much as the silence of a flower or a fish.”

Sumi closed his eyes, and fish-ghosts flashed across his retinas.

His aunt said softly, “People really are a lesser kind of organism.”

“Yes. At least, no fish would ever envy a human.” He added, “Even among mammals, a whale can swim underwater for an hour before surfacing to take a breath. Plus it can use the vibrations of water to transmit calls eight hundred or even a thousand kilometers away.”

His aunt nodded. “Birds are amazing too. Even putting aside their beauty, they’re able to fly wherever they want to. Humans can only use clumsy machines that burn up natural resources and make noise and pollution before we can even approximate what birds can do. Birds can fly on a breeze and travel the oceans with just a bit of light. During the migratory season, a slender little swift can cross half the globe through all sorts of bad weather. What can people do? Born with just a naked body, we’re not pretty, fast, or graceful – the clumsiest and the weakest of all the animals, needing to eat three times a day and sleep all night just to survive.”

“People depend on intelligence to survive, don’t they?”

“Intelligence? All I know is that people’s brains are too complicated. What I mean is, people are all crazy. What sort of animal uses empty slogans or foolish doctrines to destroy others of its kind?”

Sumi thought of what Koji had told him of the Japanese army’s mass hysteria, and had to add, “Only ‘the wisest of all creatures’ could do such a thing.”

“One of my friends said it best. When the fiercest lion catches his prey, he tears it open with his teeth and claws, and eats it right away. When his stomach is full, everything is peaceful again, and he won’t catch something else for dessert. But people don’t work that way, even though we’re still only filling our stomachs. But people fatten up the animals first before they kill them. They keep them in slaughterhouses and use tasers and shiny knives and boiling hot water on them. Then in the kitchen, they carefully cut them up and boil them, and they want to keep changing the taste, saying it’s *cuisine*, it’s *food culture*. Who’s more cruel, would you say?”

“Now I’m going to feel guilty every time I eat meat!” Sumi said, a bit dramatically. “I’ll say to every mouthful: Brother, I’m sorry, you should kill us off when you have the chance!”

“We’ll kill ourselves off on our own. Truth be told, a species that depends on language to communicate and has to eat all the time to survive can’t be said to rank high among animals. Look at plants. All they need to produce gorgeous flowers is sunshine and water. And they support other life with their fruit and leaves. Some trees even grow over a hundred meters tall and live for five or six thousand years. They’re incredible. Unlike animals, just eating and shitting.”

Suddenly Sumi understood why his aunt was telling him all of this.

“Auntie,” he said, “just because I know about your body’s...” – he caught himself before he said *problem* – “...your secret, I would never think less of you.”

A barely discernible smile floated across his aunt’s face.

Many years later, Sumi would still clearly remember how his aunt’s eyes had remained gentle and her voice calm as she talked. Surrounded by the circling schools of fish and beneath that silent, nearly sacred night sky, a person could only speak from the soul.