

THE FOG CATCHER

捕霧的人

“The highest goodness,” the philosopher Lao-Tzu said, “is like water,” penetrating every crevice, filling, covering, and leveling, able to take the shape of any container. Young writer Huang Wei-Ting, who writes with the power of water, shows us many human and natural containers in *The Fog Catcher*, her inaugural collection of short stories. A young boy who feels rejected by his family builds a moisture net to catch water after their water supply is cut off, and in doing so reshapes his relationship to his father; one young woman casts off the inconstant affection of her female friends and goes in search of lasting attachment, while another, who has sacrificed job and health security to do the work she loves, negotiates her fear of the city. Clouds, mist, and underground rivers echo and inspire the anxieties, hopes, and desires of her characters, many of whom are “fog catchers” in their own right – individuals engaged in a desperate pursuit of something that seems ephemeral, yet condenses slowly into reality.

Huang Wei-Ting writes with a clear-sighted realism that brings voice and environment together through vivid, seamless descriptions of outer and inner lives. Reading her stories, we follow the human spirit as it is driven from its many sources to the ocean, passing through all sorts of gullies and canals on its way.

Huang Wei-Ting 黃暉婷

Though still a new voice on Taiwan’s literary scene, Huang Wei-Ting has already garnered serious attention. This student of the celebrated author Wu Ming-Yi (*The Man with the Compound Eyes*) began her postgraduate career as an editor, yet has already begun writing full-time, and has already won several awards.



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THE FOG CATCHER

By Huang Wei-Ting

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

Secret Society

She'd never thought that one day a landlubber like herself would get past her internal struggle and slip happily into the river, feel the powerful current sweep past her body, and catch blurred glimpses of the spray blossoming on the eyelashes of her trembling, half-closed eyes.

The chill of the water invaded her body through her skin. Her back was supported by the many rocks and pebbles along the bottom of the river. She held her breath, her heart thumping from elation and the pressure of the water. The bone-numbing cold couldn't compare to the shock of the water pounding against her eardrums. Still, her excitement overpowered everything, and she felt only her wild heartbeat.

He lay along the riverbed, the man about the same age as her father. She had been pressed down by the weight of the current from his body. She looked at him with curiosity and amusement. His large shoulders showed above the water, and he looked at her with moist eyes.

Listen.

He mouthed the word to her. Shifting onto his side, he pushed away some pebbles and pressed his ear against the riverbed. He'd said before that at the bottom of the river, beneath a layer of loose earth, an underground stream moved parallel with the river's surface, flowing past tree roots, plains, rice paddies, bridges, towns and cities, and at last emptying out into the sea. Every river carries its own secret shadow, these underground rivers that covertly run their own secret society. They had come to lie there on the riverbed to hear the hidden sounds of this underground river.

His strange expression amused her. Bubbles escaped from her nose and from between her teeth. She reminded herself to hold her breath, and to imitate his movements, focusing on her aching eardrums and listening carefully to the invisible fluctuations of energy beneath the riverbed.

Do you hear it?

She closed her eyes and pushed her ear closer, her hands pressing flat against the riverbed. Beyond the rush of the water, the colliding pebbles breaking into pieces, the tiny sound waves brushing over her body, underneath the earth's surface throbbed a deeper, less noticeable rhythm that beat faintly against the river and slowly formed its own flow. Her eyes suddenly flew open and looked in surprise at his similar expression.

An underground river. The secret society. She had heard it.

Chelsea let out a lazy yawn, then bent her head and pretended to categorize the documents that had just arrived. She hurriedly wiped away a few teardrops that had oozed out at the corners of her eyes. If she wasn't careful, her section head would notice her. He liked to cause her trouble, and she'd surely be in for another scolding.

The whole district office overflowed with a boredom born of uselessness. To one side, her soon-to-retire colleague spread out his third newspaper, and used a magnifying glass to read the already dated news. Behind her, another older colleague had just finished a midday nap and was chatting on the phone. Sitting diagonally in front of her was a young man who had chosen to work as his alternative to military service. Still young and immature, he dared only to tilt his head down a fraction to stare at

messages on the cell phone in his lap. In a small town, a government office was like an unsightly skin tumor showing through the top layer of skin. The moment it broke open and spread, it would leave reddish moles that hindered blood flow, difficult to remove and impossible to cure.

A middle-aged man in a uniform suddenly walked into the idle office, carrying a box in both hands and glancing about. No one paid attention to him, or even asked him who he was. Looking up, Chelsea happened to meet his eye.

"I'm from the Express Mail Service." As though grasping onto a lifesaving floatation device, he locked eyes with Chelsea.

She didn't catch what he meant at first. "You mean you're from Direct Mail?"

He nodded, and his unfastened helmet wobbled on his head. His red cheeks and moistened lips looked familiar, as did the bulging, slightly cloudy eyes behind his glasses. Chelsea stood up from her chair, puzzling over her feeling of knowing him from somewhere, trying to remember where they might have met.

"Did you use to deliver things for Link Power Tech? I feel like I've seen you before." Then Chelsea remembered: when she had worked for her old company as an assistant, he had picked up parts and models from her for delivery.

Confused, he scratched his head. "Maybe. Where's that company? We deliver from a lot of different places."

Chelsea briefly explained. He remembered that failing company, but he didn't recall the woman behind the front desk, so all he could do was force a laugh to cover his awkwardness. She signed for the package, and noticed that he had an anti-nuclear flag tied to his bag. Chelsea smiled approvingly. A few weeks before, she had joined in a march and bought the same flag. It was hanging on the wall of her house.

"Does your company let you display things like that?" Chelsea asked as she handed over the receipt, pointing to the eye-catching flag.

"Why not?" He put the receipt into his waist pack and pulled the zipper shut. Then he added calmly, "I'm a person, I'm against nuclear power, what's the big deal? Why do you government officials only think about money? Even section heads and magistrates and ministers and the Head of the Executive Yuan shouldn't just be riding the coattails of Big Business - don't forget you guys are just people too."

Chelsea stared in astonishment, then looked back anxiously at her useless colleagues. Fortunately, they were all lost in their own little worlds, and showed no reaction. Her hot-tempered section head had stepped out for a cup of tea and wasn't in his seat. She looked back at the earnest middle-aged man with some warmth and a newly favorable opinion. "You're quite an interesting man."

"My name is Chih Tai-Chuan. People call me Dachuan, but you can call me Nice Guy if you want. In any case, I'm just a man," he said lightly. "And what should I call you?"

"My coworkers call me Ms. Liu, but you can call me Chelsea."

"Chelsea - what a cold-sounding name," Dachuan dropped his eyes bashfully, then glanced up at her one last time. "I'll remember that."

His swarthy face seemed to redden. Then after a brief polite thanks, he left the district office, climbed on his motorbike, and rode down the mountain without looking back.

The acrid exhaust from his engine lingered in the doorway. Chelsea stood there with the package, thinking of how it was impossible to predict the probability or providence of running into someone. Happy, she went back to her seat, making an inventory of the government brochures the firm had sent over. The dull words were stirred by her fingers and flew past, but her vision was occupied entirely by the image of that bashful figure imprinted on her retina. Her boss milled around behind her, rebuking her harshly for slacking off, but she didn't seem to hear, lost as she was in that strange and

wonderful hint of fate.

As though propelled by an invisible hand, Chelsea took off her helmet, locked her motorbike, and walked toward the group, keeping her eye on the broad shadow that stood out so conspicuously amidst the crowd of young people.

“Dachuan?” She was eighty percent certain of what she’d seen, hoping to set eyes on that familiar, weathered face.

Dachuan turned toward the voice, hesitantly at first, then in surprise. “Shirley?”

“Chelsea.”

“Oh! I’m getting old, my memory isn’t what it was.” Dachuan patted his head underneath the large-brimmed cap. “So you’ve come to help clean up the river too?”

Chelsea nodded. She saw a shy smile rise in Dachuan’s dark eyes, and couldn’t help but feel a little shiver go through her. They both turned to look at the river as though by some agreement. This was a highly symbolic river. Its origin and outlet were both in the same jurisdiction, so naturally the locals felt a strong attachment to it. They stood near the middle and lower reaches, which fortunately still showed some dynamic wildness. Once it passed under the bridge a bit downstream from them, it would flow by the dense cityscape of buildings and people. There, the torrents were tamed by concrete banks and became mere lifeless scenery.

Chelsea stole a glance at Dachuan’s deep eyes and the slightly upturned corners of his mouth, and descended into giddy disbelief. She’d never thought that in the perpetual explosion of announcements on Facebook, Dachuan would see the same modest solicitation and volunteer to clean up the river that day. She knew he was against nuclear energy, but she hadn’t thought he’d also be so interested in other environmental issues he would join the efforts personally. So he wasn’t just a grumpy middle-aged man; his passions could still rule his body.

The organizer finished calling roll and gave each person a pair of waders, waterproof gloves, and long metal grabbers, all donated by people who couldn’t participate that day. They put on the rain boots they’d brought and rolled up their sleeves, waiting for the organizers to divide them into groups. Chelsea and Dachuan stuck close to each other and ended up paired together. He carried a burlap trash bag, and she followed behind him, stepping carefully over the slippery riverbed out into the spot they’d been assigned. Sunlight glinted in the ripples. Although protected by their waders, the deep water’s unfamiliar chill penetrated down to their skin and made them shiver.

They started out by gathering the flotsam visible on the surface: plastic bottles, slippers, a drying rack, medicine bottles, plastic folders, a beat-up old basketball, face masks, deflated bicycle tires. There was even an old wedding photo and an used pregnancy test, still clearly showing two purple lines.

“How can there be so many plastic bags?” Dachuan was sparing no effort to grab the trash that had gotten caught along the rocky shore and among the waterweeds, draining the water out of each bag and stuffing it into the trash bag, which was getting heavier and heavier.

“Don’t lots of people call the president a jellyfish? Well, I think he’s a plastic bag. Jellyfish may not have brains, but at least they’re food for the turtles and sunfishes, and that makes them a necessary part of the ecology. Whereas plastic bags are a thousand-year curse. Not only do they not degrade over time, but they’re poisonous to the sea creatures. They can hurt them or kill them, and isn’t that just like our brilliant ‘nine-percent-approval’ president? Let’s not insult the jellyfish anymore. We should start a new trend and rename the president a plastic bag.”

Chelsea was tickled by the joke, and she laughed so hard that she had to put a hand on her aching stomach and steady herself on the uneven riverbed with the grabber. “You’re a real netizen, it’s hilarious!”

“Sorry, I really shouldn’t talk about your boss that way, huh,” he said, feigning a nervous apology,

though his amused expression never changed.

"I'm not a public servant. I'm just a contract employee...."

"Really? Then you must come from some special kind of background. You're not a general's daughter, are you?"

"I don't have any special background. I just got lucky. The head of personnel is my school friend's uncle. So."

"So you do have connections, you bigwig."

She pretended to be angry and whacked Dachuan's arm. His muscles looked slack, but the feel of them comforted her, and her hand unconsciously lingered there. He didn't object or subtly resist. They kept their light contact, their attention slowly shifting from the litter in the river to their conversation. The development of green energy. Unfair social policies. The "black box" economy. Ideals vs. reality. Dachuan used all the youthful catchwords when he talked about current affairs, couching his realism with dark humor. He was not nearly as stolid or staid as his age suggested, and his dark eyes gave hints of a hidden world. Moreover, most of his values were perfectly in line with Chelsea's.

They continued to chat as they picked up litter. Perhaps it was excitement, or thirst, or leaning over and standing back up, or the stifling wading pants, but the summer heat clung to Chelsea's skin; she began to feel more and more overheated, and less and less like herself. She stood up and turned her face to the sky. The intense sunlight overpowered her, and she suddenly felt dizzy. Her legs weakened, and became no match for the current. She began to fall toward Dachuan.

He caught her, and found that her body was hot and dry. It was likely heatstroke. The organizer was up ahead in the middle reaches, and the other volunteers were concentrating on the trash in their sections and hadn't noticed anything amiss. Dachuan put an arm around Chelsea's waist and propped her up under the shoulder as he helped her slowly up the bank. He sat her down under the thin shade of the nearest tree, and took off his cap, depositing it on Chelsea's head. "I've been sweating a lot, so it kind of smells."

A scent like rotting wood descended on her. Her sense of smell went a bit dull, but she didn't mind the odor. She looked blurrily at Dachuan, and murmured her thanks. She noticed with shock that his newly revealed head was completely bald. His wide forehead spread back unimpeded to his delicate scalp that showed not the slightest trace of hair – not even a hint or hope of it, just a tangle of white around his ears like a thick, unbecoming headband. It was the first time she'd seen Dachuan without his hat, and it turned out he was balding. All at once, he seemed pathetic.

Dachuan noticed Chelsea's look and joked, "Baldness isn't some rare disease! You don't have to stare at it so hard."

Chelsea quickly dropped her rude gaze. She'd never seen a man's bald head up close before. She didn't mean to be malicious. She was just curious.

"Your dad isn't bald? Well, he must not be very manly then. I'm this way because I have too much testosterone," Dachuan said in a self-mocking tone. He walked over to the water's edge and stuck a hand into the river, wetting his bald head and wiping the cool water off with a contented expression.

"I'd love to take a drink. Too bad it smells weird and has bacteria in it. You could just drink from the underground river below it."

"Underground river?" This was the first time Chelsea had ever heard of such a thing.

"Yeah, underneath the river is an underground stream that flows through the water table. As the water filters through all those rocks, it gets very pure, even clearer than the river water, like water from a mineral spring. No one knows anything about it – a pure secret society."

Chelsea could almost taste it herself. She wanted to ask more, like where the underground river flowed to, and whether a heavy rain would make it overflow, and how people could enter this secret society.... But at that moment, a shrill whistle sounded, and the cleaning efforts came to an end.

Volunteers slowly gathered around the organizer, their bags loaded up with garbage. Chelsea followed Dachuan, her legs still weak. She kept her head lifted and tried to stay upright, and couldn't help but stare at his naked scalp. Perhaps it was some kind of illusion, but after she'd looked at it for a while, that bald head filled her with an indescribable comfort. It was like looking at a newborn animal; she felt a motherly urge to caress it.

The volunteers inspected the litter they had collected, voting on which kind of trash they'd collected the most of, and which had been the messiest to clean up. They also chose the most unlikely trash that had been found. Everyone agreed that plastic bags were the most annoying and harmful. A few extroverted volunteers shared their experiences and what they'd learned from the river, and the organizer had made a moving speech about how to move forward. Everyone returned the equipment, and the event was over.

They walked to the parking lot together. Chelsea paused when she reached her motorbike. Dachuan noticed, and stopped as well. "Are you okay? Can you make it home on that?"

She nodded. She knew he was waiting for her to return his hat. She took it off. There was a faded sweat stain around the brim. Her hair was marked where the hat had sat, and smelled strongly of sweat. The two smells blended into one strong complex odor: the faint heat coming out of her pores and his sticky, oily dandruff.

"The hat..." Chelsea lifted her head to look at Dachuan, who was waiting for her to give it to him so he could leave. Suddenly, she had a thought. She gathered up her courage and pressed the hat nervously to her chest. "Give me your number and I'll wash it before I give it back to you."

Fate had surely played a trick on them. The instant Chelsea woke up that morning, she frantically searched under her pillow for her cell phone to check her messages. Nothing new. The message she'd sent the night before had been read, but nothing had come in response. She went back through the conversation, guessing at the feeling behind every picture, each brief message, each platitude.

After she and Dachuan had added each other on their phones, Chelsea was constantly aware that a message could come at any moment, and she was always mistakenly thinking that her phone had buzzed or lit up. She checked it repeatedly, glancing at her messages over and over. She sighed impatiently and got out of bed, holding her overheated cellphone, and went into the kitchen where breakfast was waiting for her.

Her father had been there for a while eating a bowl of steaming oatmeal. He'd made it with water caught in the fog catcher that her brother Gene had set up, although the flavor seemed no different from tap water. If she really compared them, the water caught in the fine net left a nearly imperceptible sourness on the tongue. It wasn't exactly pleasant, but it did bring out the flavor in certain foods. Not long before, their water had been cut off without warning, and they'd relied even more heavily on this new source. She thought again of the secret underground river Dachuan had told her about.

She layered some alfalfa sprouts and a fried egg between two pieces of toast and poured on some ketchup. Her father sat across from her, and seized the opportune moment to ask with false casualness: "So, have you found a boyfriend?"

Chelsea was thrown off guard by the question, and she let ketchup drip onto the table. She got up to find a rag to wipe it up. The first thing that floated through her head was an image of Dachuan.

"No, how could I? Did Gene say something?"

"Nope, but you're smiling a lot, thinking about something, playing with your phone."

Chelsea blushed and denied it. Her father nodded but didn't press the issue, going back to his bowl of slowly diminishing oatmeal. She looked at him. He was an honorable man, scrupulous and methodical. Reserved, introverted. Somewhat clumsy, never witty. No one could get too close to him; he

kept his distance. Chelsea thought, Is my father lacking something? Humor? Confidence? Enough life experience? A bit of harmless aggressiveness? If he were bald, would people like him more? How did other girls her age look at her father?

And how did she look at that other man who was the same age as her father? At each encounter, she'd felt an entirely new excitement and happiness, a kind she'd never experienced with boys her own age. But Dachuan had never mentioned his own family, how many children he had, what they did for a living, how old his wife was, what kind of person she was.... Their conversations always revolved around the chaotic political situation, or involved some clever pun. Given his age, he must have a family, she just didn't know anything about it. If she knew about his family members' personalities and lives, would her own confused emotions clarify a bit? Would it make her be more reasonable?

As she thought about it, Chelsea's spirits sank inexplicably. In the chaotic torrent of her feelings, she had lost her life's anchor. She'd just moved back to her hometown from the city, and taken a dead-end job as a low-ranking paper-pusher in the district office. She'd wanted a job with no long days, which would allow her to throw her energy into environmental protection and other social movements. But her thoughts had somehow gotten caught up in a different whirlpool, and she couldn't seem to extricate herself from its depths. There was a voice in her head that she'd couldn't get rid of, warning her to grab onto the rocky shore and pull herself out. But she was weak. All she could do was let the current take her.

Ride the motorbike. Go to work. Enter the stifling air of the office, and begin another dull day. Chelsea looked at the documents and letters on her desk, and of their own volition her eyes slid over to her cell phone beside the computer mouse. It didn't make a sound. There were no messages. Maybe she would try to not contact him for a day. She took in a slow breath. Don't splash through the water. Just stand in the river quietly, and wait for the water to change on its own. Perhaps once the angry torrents had passed, she would be able to emerge from the river on her own.