

THE LAND OF LITTLE RAIN

苦雨之地

Man Booker-longlisted author Wu Ming-Yi finally presents us with a collection of short stories three years in the making, in which humans, nature, and technology invade and shape each other's worlds in many ways at once.

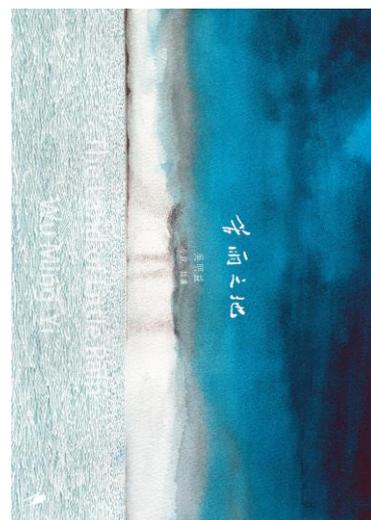
Prizewinning author Wu Ming-Yi, author of *The Man with the Compound Eyes* and *The Stolen Bicycle*, brings forth his newest literary creation, three years in the making: a collection of six short stories that uncover the energy, agency, and complex interdependence between humans, nature, and technology. Crafted with Wu's singular eye for detail and emotional connection, this collection reminds us why Wu is such an important voice in this era of climate crisis.

Within these tales, we meet a host of complicated, conflicted characters, many of whom have been saddled with difficulty or trauma for their entire life: a retired lawyer who loses his wife to an indiscriminate murder, a doctor with Asperger's, a worm biologist with congenital arthritis. These wounded humans find energy and challenge in a natural world that speaks to them in ways the human world cannot. Meanwhile, technological metaphors for nature like virtual reality and "cloud" computing recreate worlds with their own balms and dangers, like a virus that can analyze cloud content, create profiles of users, and give other people access to said profiles.

There are no blank canvases, no true wastelands in Wu Ming-Yi's literature. Nature is not a resource; it is a living complex of agency, change, and deep consciousness. That potentiality imbues his writing with a magical quality that is also completely natural.

Wu Ming-Yi 吳明益

Wu Ming-Yi is a writer, artist, professor, and environmental activist. Widely considered the leading writer of his generation, he has won the *China Times* Open Book Award six times and his works have been



Category: Literary Fiction, Short Stories

Publisher: Thinkingdom

Date: 1/2019

Rights contact:

booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

Pages: 254

Length: 95,000 characters

(approx. 62,000 words in English)

Rights sold: Japanese (Kawade)

translated into over ten languages. In 2018, his novel *The Stolen Bicycle* was longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize. He teaches literature at National Dong Hwa University. Wu's works have been translated into English, French, Turkish, Japanese, Korean, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Swedish, Vietnamese, Thai, Polish, Ethiopian and Indonesian.

THE LAND OF LITTLE RAIN

By Wu Ming-Yi

Translated by Darryl Sterk

Black Night, Black Earth, Black Range

The day before winter arrived, time stood still in the town. As the sun inched along its shallow arc and slowly set, the land braced itself. Going on dusk, it started snowing, thickly, and the snow only tapered off the next morning. By then the ground was covered.

Sophie had spent the whole night looking out the window, watching the snowflakes swirl in the beam of her flashlight like sparks from a hearth. When it finally stopped she put on her overcoat and trudged through the snow down the path, which she could still make out by memory. The path ended among thickets of trees that gathered into a dark wood. But at her approach, the shadows began to scatter and the light to spill down into a demesne of oak and elm, onto the plants that grew in layers like the strata of memory, drawing her nearer and nearer, until she was in.

Walking through the wood, she noticed fresh fox tracks leading towards the waterfall. She took off her gloves and pushed aside the snow, exposing the pebbly clay below, in which she poked a hole with her finger. Looking down, she whispered something into the hole, pulled her finger out, and rubbed it with her thumb.

She took a breath, the cold, clay-tinged air jabbing like steel wire into her sinuses. She recalled a book that described a forest as a place where innumerable mysteries are revealed, but that now struck her as false. It seemed to her now it was the forest that asked the questions.

Sophie hadn't told anyone that she could remember the sound of crying the moment after she was born. Maybe it wasn't a memory, but a fantasy rehearsed in her imagination in which she heard her mother crying until she herself joined in. Besides the sound of crying she had no recollection of her birth mother.

Sophie's earliest memory was of this cabin in the southwest of the town of Murrhardt that was home to her parents, her elder brother, and her yellow-skinned self. On winter mornings, they huddled around the brick hearth enjoying fresh milk with the Black Forest ham sold at Herr Wagner's shop as they baked the bread and pasteurized the milk for the cheese it was their responsibility to supply, in limited quantities, to the town.

Herr and Frau Maier were the masters of the cabin. They had a calico cat called Dugong and a small field for a few milk cows. Herr Maier was a gaunt but keen-eyed retired professor of theology. Now, in addition to attending the Gospel Church, he was a baker and a cheesemaker. Frau Maier, who had a taste for bread and cheese, had grown so large in middle age that she could

have stood in front of one of the family cows and completely blocked the view. After several years of trying to have a child of their own, they'd adopted eight-year-old Jay and two-year-old Sophie.

Sophie was a spritely little kid. Her hands were small, as were her feet. She had calves that rose and fell like little hills, and a belly button like a deep whorl, or like a well. Jay was quite a contrast. He had big palms and long shins, dark skin and thick lips. He looked stubborn and aloof. Strangers might be surprised when she called him *bruder*, but the locals weren't. Everyone knew everyone else in town. They knew about the Maiers' son and daughter, and that Herr Maier had lost part of his left leg. They knew how Frau Maier had gotten so stout.

They also knew about Sophie's love of dirt. If you had taken a stroll in the woods, the fields, or the pastures close to Murrhardt you might have seen a girl holding a small rake; that was Sophie. She had fallen in love with dirt because of a special gift Papi Maier gave her for her fifth birthday. When he put it into her little hands, she undid the bow with her stubby fingers to reveal a colored box printed with Chinese calligraphy in a fancy, even cartoonish font. In the box she found a glass jar, a pouch of dirt, and another pouch containing powder. Papi Maier explained to her what was written on this pouch of amazing dirt (he couldn't actually read Chinese, but he could tell her the translation he'd read on the internet):

Just add water and your faith in love, and little fish will grow from this earth. That's why it's called the Earth of Love.

Sophie begged Papi Maier to get his cane and go with her to the waterfall. She did not want to use water from the tap. They carried Dugong through the wood to the splashing falls, where Sophie ladled a bit of water into the jar, swirled it around, and carried it carefully home. There she held the jar to the light of her wrought iron desk lamp, closed her eyes, and thought of Jesus's love for all creation. Half an hour later she fell asleep holding Dugong in her arms. When she woke the dirt in the jar had settled, and the water had cleared. Blinking her sleepy eyes, Sophie saw little wriggling things inside. She took a closer look, and saw they were transparent fishies, each the shape of a comma.

"Wow! One, two, three, four, five!" Sophie happily showed the jar to Papi and Mami Maier, Dugong, and Jay, to celebrate the life that had been nurtured under her hand. Her parents and Dugong were all welcoming, but Jay looked dubiously at the water in the jar with his striking black-and-white eyes without saying a word. That didn't detract from Sophie's excitement. She didn't sleep that night. When she thought of it she fed the fishies some powder from the second pouch. That powder turned out to be eggs: if you added a little salt to the water and aerated it, they hatched into brine shrimp, which were small enough for the fishies to swallow.

But three days later the fishies died, their transparent bodies sinking one by one into the black dirt out of which they had come. Sophie wailed so loudly and so long that the neighbors came over to ask what was the matter. When they heard it was over a few little fish, they were quite amused. Most of the residents of Murrhardt had quite a different view of death than a five-year-old child, as they were old enough to peer into the mists at the frontier of human life. At dusk, Sophie asked Papi Maier to accompany her back to the waterfall in the wood to send the dead fish off.

“Why not bury them in the flower garden?”

“It’s because...the water there, it awakened them,” Sophie sniveled. Herr Maier was astonished. What a precocious child! Indeed, wherever you come from, there you should return.

The fishies had come to her sleeping in the earth. After calling them awake, she had let them die. Was it for the best that she had awakened them, or should she have just let them sleep? Sophie asked the stars in the nighttime sky.

Most people eventually realize the truth of experience, that everything fades but leaves something behind, like the spiral impression of a shell in stone. The hard lesson of the death of the little fish left something behind in Sophie, an enduring love for the earth and everything it engendered. On her walks with Papi Maier, she would squat down and poke her fingers into the dirt. Even Mami Maier, who seldom went out with them, noticed. The next year for her birthday, Little Sophie received a small specimen jar and a finely made three-toothed rake with a long wooden handle. Sophie ran around raking up everything in sight, discovering a world of insects, seeds, and worms in the soil. Sometimes a toad would crawl out of a patch of apparently barren ground. She also discovered that the dirt in the yard was different from that of field and forest in terms of color, feel, and smell. Sophie would even taste it when Mami Maier wasn’t looking.

Though she had no doubt that Papi and Mami loved her, there were two things that really bothered her. The first was about Jay, who often stepped on her shoulder or head when he was climbing down from the top bunk. Sophie knew it wasn’t meant as a joke. Like animals, people have instincts, primarily hunger and fear. Love comes later. Sophie was afraid of Jay, but loved him, too. Sometimes he would express his love for her. When she got bullied, Jay would stand up for her. But most of the time he was a volcano – outwardly calm, but holding down an anger that grew from somewhere in him, nobody knew how deep.

Many years later Sophie would still be making the unscientific inference that Jay’s treatment of her somehow made evolutionary sense, that larger creatures like Jay would tend to want to step on or squash small fry like herself. This inference was related to the second thing that bothered her. The older she got the smaller she seemed standing next to her peers, and the more out of proportion her features. When she looked in the mirror, she started to dislike what she saw. Her head was too big, her nose too flat, her chin too long, and her fingers were too short, though Mami Maier still said she was the most beautiful child in the world. “My Sophie is Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*,” her mami said.

Sophie had read the book. When Alice drank the bottle labeled *Drink Me*, her body shrank, but the antidote was nowhere to be found. Lucky for her, she didn’t have to worry about drowning in the Pool of Tears, for the Dodo would surely appear to run away with her on its back and dry her eyes.

At school, it appeared as if everyone treated her like any other kid. But Sophie could tell she was given “special treatment”. The teacher’s attentiveness depressed her, as if she were a quaint porcelain antique that was only to be handled with kid gloves. One time she got knocked over by a boy who sprinted by when she was looking down at something moving in the ground. She suffered

a mild concussion that kept her at home for two weeks. When he was questioned by the teacher, the boy blurted out: “She’s too small, nobody would’ve seen her!” Sophie confirmed with a classmate that that’s what he’d said. He wasn’t joking or being intentionally nasty. He’d said it matter of fact – as if everyone would agree that she was a little runt who would never grow up.

The event stayed with her after she recovered, and she began unconsciously to pay more attention to the ground than before, keeping her eyes downcast when she read, spoke, walked, and ate. In bed, she curled up like a shrimp to sleep. Sophie hated everything she had to look up to see, things like sparrows, kites, and clouds.

She kept herself busy digging, discovering more and more things hidden in the dirt: moth cocoons, fox scat, cola cans, coins, or dolls, along with things that she couldn’t identify but which were treasures just the same. It wasn’t that she’d never longed to be a part of the outside world, but that her longing turned from light to night the moment when she fell in love with worms.

Sophie spent so much time after every rain crouched on the ground observing the worms that her classmates took to calling her the Rainworm Girl behind her back. (The German word *Regenwurm* is also a compound of *rain* and *worm*.) Sophie imagined digging like a rainworm into the mud, meeting seeds, scarab larvae, and moles (at the time she didn’t know moles eat rainworms). Rainworms are annelids – soft, wet, eyeless, limbless. To most kids, a worm is a strange creature indeed, without the dignity of a snake or the adroitness of an insect. But the more worms she dug up, the more she discovered that they, like other creatures, have different senses. They have such a simple sense of pain and pleasure in bodies that are so vigorous and exuberant. They are so well adapted to the obscure world below the ground that they can even swallow dirt and absorb the invisible nutrients therein. Worms have childhoods and go through puberty.

When Sophie concentrated on dirt, she could ignore the sticky chewing gum on her desk, the water the boys flung on her on the way back from the bathroom, and the feet that might suddenly stick out from who knows where and trip her up. Of course, none of this could compare with the nasty comments, which stuck like arrows in her heart: “What a shriveled-up little freak!” Worms didn’t seem to bother about such things. All they worried about were moles and night herons.

At the age of ten, before graduating from Grundschule, Sophie got two honorable mentions in science competitions. She’d calculated the speed at which worms digest different kinds of human detritus, from coffee grounds to rotten beef and different kinds of Maier cheese. She got Papi Maier to teach her how to use a saw; having made a frame, she went to the hardware store in town to have glass panels custom-made for her very own worm observation chamber. With it she shot a video of worms mating, which got her an interview with the children’s edition of a science magazine. The journalist was delighted to discover how diminutive she was, because it gave him an idea for the title: “The Littlest Scientist”.

But Sophie cried when she saw it. She cried for herself and for the dodo, because in the same issue, she read a report claiming that the dodo went extinct because it didn’t know to fear human beings. (And that the bird probably got its name from an old Portuguese word for “simpleton”.) Reading the report, Sophie found that the words *ausgestorben* and *ausgelöscht*,

“extinct” and “exterminated”, left her tongue-twisted. Had the dodo just gone extinct, she wanted to know, or had it been exterminated?

Papi Maier cleared a corner of the storeroom for Sophie’s laboratory. In that corner she laid out her specimen bottles, her worm observation chamber, and three aquariums. Sophie hadn’t forgotten that the fishies that emerged from the dirt were the source of her love for the earth. By now she knew that the “fishies” were a kind of killifish, a large and complex clade of species that live oceans away in certain seasonal streams and sloughs in distant Africa and America.

In their native habitat, year-old male killies display their beautiful fins and rainbow bodies when it rains, hoping to impress the female of the species. If they’re impressed, the female killies will release their eggs in the water. The males then fertilize them and bury them in the humus-rich soil before it dries out. Each foetus waits out the dry season in the egg, only waking from its torpor with the first rain of the new year.

Sophie asked Papi Maier to go online and buy her batches of wild killifish eggs. Each time it was like playing the lottery: you had no way of knowing what species of egg you were getting. Keen Sophie discovered that killifish hatched at slightly different times and in subtly different ways according to the stream from which the eggs originated.

In the wild, only a few eggs hatch with the first rain. In the brief dry spell that follows, the stream bed dries out and the hatchlings die. When the rain falls again, their corpses become food for their millions of siblings, who only hatch *en masse* with the steady precipitation that follows several alternations of wet and dry. That is how its life history has evolved, because that is the habitat the killifish have adapted to.

Sophie discovered that the hardest part of raising any organism is modeling its environment. The knack to raising killies is to avoid adding too much water at first. You add just enough for the decomposing organic matter to stay moist for a day or two, then you let it dry out to emulate the “first rain”, in which only a few of the eggs hatch. She would sequester the first hatchlings and care for them separately. Only after a few wet and dry spells would most of the eggs be induced to hatch. Then the real work of caring for all the hatchlings started. Any carelessness on her part would doom the whole army to annihilation. Sophie held Dugong to show her the killies. Though poor old Dugong’s joints were deteriorating, she was still as curious as a kitten; she would open her beautiful nocturnal animal’s eyes wide and watch her master arrange everything for the creatures she was raising. Sophie had gone online to look up killifish habitat. It was an environment composed of stream, rain, and mud that determined the coloration a killifish displayed. The miniature rains and floods she created in her aquariums were her gifts to them. Neglect would mean certain annihilation. Sophie recalled again the first Chinese character on the box, whose complexity she found mystifying. It was 愛, the character for love.

The winter of Sophie’s final year at the Gymnasium, Papi Maier, who’d long suffered from sleep apnea, finally passed away. The earlier symptoms were like rehearsals; this time it was for real. He really did forget to breathe in the middle of the night.

During the vigil, she thought of all the stories her papi had told her, the tales which always drew her in just as a rainworm's burrow could now. The story she found most compelling was about how the Titan-spawn Prometheus had created humankind. When Prometheus realized the dry clay was impregnated with the spiritual energy of the god of the sky, he mixed the clay with water from the river and formed a man in God's image. Then he took the good and evil from the spirits of the animals and mixed them into the breast of the man whom he had formed from clay.

"He must not have used very much clay when he was making me."

"Nonsense!" At that, her papi breathed upon her head, like Athena, who breathed on the mud figures to imbue them with life. "The point isn't how much clay is used. What's important is what's inside the breast of someone formed in God's image."

Mami Maier fell sick right after Papi Maier's funeral. When she caught her breath she started rummaging through the storehouse of her life, putting it in order. At the dinner table she kept repeating how she met Papi Maier in mythology class, how impressed she was when he told her the story of Tchaikovsky's *Undina*, and how they broke up and got back together over several years of secret courtship until Papi Maier lost a length of his leg on a trek in Taiwan. After that he decided to quit teaching. He returned with her to the town, where they would spend the rest of their lives together.

"Why'd you adopt us?"

"It wasn't our decision. You and Jay were gifts to us from God." Sophie had asked the question many times already, but her parents always replied by suggesting it was better to look forward to future days than back into the past. They wanted a child, and there were these two children who needed a family, that was all.

"Before your papi broke his leg, he was a wanderer who thought he'd keep wandering forever. He often said that living was like walking – no matter whether you're making progress or falling behind – you've just got to keep putting one foot in front of the other."

Jay had no patience for such pieties, which he'd heard too many times already. He didn't want to apply for university, and he had abandoned his apprenticeship in carpentry. He just roamed around the town every day like a restless jaguar locked up in a cage. He longed for the life in the city. "The old man is dead, you should let me go."

"Alright, you're both grown up. It's time to turn you over to God, He'll look after you," Mami Maier said.

Many years later Sophie reflected that maybe Mami Maier had chosen to let herself go after her husband's death. How else could a lady of three hundred pounds shrink to two-fifty, two hundred, a hundred and fifty, until in the end she was only ninety? "It's the will of God," her mami joked. "He wants to make it easier for you to carry me downstairs when my time comes." The doctor couldn't find anything in particular wrong with her. Her immune system had simply surrendered, and various symptoms had stolen in.

"In the Spirit is our salvation, for He has called us, not because we deserve it for our deeds, but according to His will and grace. This grace is a gift given to us in Jesus Christ when the world was young." The day Mami Maier died was just like any other day. She recited a few psalms and

sang a few hymns after lunch, then went to sleep, her skin the color of wax, or ash. Only when she failed to rise for dinner did Sophie realize something was wrong and call the hospital.

When the medics arrived to collect Frau Maier's body, Sophie rushed to hold up one corner of the gurney. She was barely taller than it was, but she wanted to help somehow. Mami Maier had gotten so light that the medics were surprised when they lifted her. Sophie didn't tell them that her mami was standing in the enlarged doorway, her old self again: a lady whose girth could stop a galloping horse. When the stretcher passed by, she smiled and stepped aside to let them carry her body through.