

TOMATO STREET AND OTHER WAR ZONES

番茄街游擊戰

This trilogy of novellas tells tales of the Philippines in the voices of Chinese immigrant children. The first two, “Tomato Street and Other War Zones” and “My Yellow Brother,” take us through the streets and back alleys of Manila, where young students from a Chinese-language private school fall into traps set by themselves and by others. The last story, “Lovers,” describes the sex trade of small, by-the-hour hotels, the effects of prostitution on families, and the turbid waters of early sexual awakening.

Based on the author’s own experience teaching Chinese in the Philippines, *Tomato Street* takes us on a tour of emotional battlefields, like personal and collective identity, ethnicity, culture, and sexual orientation. His writing surprised Taiwan’s literary world with its boldness, distinctive voice, and piercing insight. This is a book for everyone who has not known how to answer the question *Who am I?* – which is to say that it’s a book for everyone.

Lien Ming-Wei 連明偉

Young author Lien Ming-Wei taught Chinese for one year at the Philadelphia School in the Philippines before beginning his career as a writer. He has won nearly every single important prize for literature in Taiwan, including the China Times Open Book Award, the China Times Literary Award, and the Lin Rung-San Literary Award.



• Category: Literary Fiction, Novellas

• Publisher: Ink

• Date: 2015/8

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• Pages: 392

• Length: 210,000 characters
(approx. 136,000 words in English)

TOMATO STREET AND OTHER WAR ZONES

By Lien Ming-Wei. Translated by Natascha Bruce.

Names

My name is Dela Cruz, Albert Bradford T.

I live on a little alley off Tomato Street. Every morning, Tomato Street is crammed full of jeepneys spewing out filthy exhaust fumes, turning the air black. With so many people and so many cars, I've often thought, if we squeeze many more in, we might actually squeeze out some tomato juice.

Tomato Street is on the north side of Dalayan village. If you head southwest, you get to Manila, which all the newspapers call Metro Manila. Going east leads to Munous, a mid-sized town and transport hub where there are a lot of thieves and gangsters. I call it Boob Grope in Chinese, because it sounds the same when I say it out loud, *Mo-nai-zi*. Also on the east side is Frisco, a tiny town I call Thief-Go, *Huo-li-si-kou*. I hate all these screwed-up English names, and I hate how so many of the words here come from Spanish, with all those rolled "r's" and the words running together like some blathering rap song. I really don't understand how the natives can remember them so easily. Back when we first moved here from Taiwan, everything was totally unfamiliar and the language made no sense. The streets around here are a mess and I got lost all the time, so I remembered places by sounding out their names in Chinese.

There are no tomatoes growing on Tomato Street.

"How come it's called Tomato Street?" that lard-ass Seung-seon once asked me. Alicia and Peter gave me a look, because obviously they knew. I mean, anyone who lives on Tomato Street knows: the road is officially called Delmonte, which is a famous brand of tomato sauce. Hence the nickname Tomato Street. Idiot fatso Seong-seon was the only one who didn't know.

During the day, it gets baking hot and there's nothing much going on. Back then, I would head for Tomato Street, or wander into Dalayan in search of something fun to pass the time. That's where my school was. In English, our school was called the Philadelphia School, but its Chinese name was Shang Ai High School, which translates as the "Noblest Love High School." When I first started, I thought it was weird; why would a school be named after an American city? And, even weirder, why didn't they just use the Chinese word for Philadelphia in the Chinese name, rather than this totally unrelated "Noblest Love"? It was a school for overseas Chinese, which means the fees were higher than normal public schools and they taught Chinese, on top of English and Tagalog. It's also a bit weird to say it was a high school, because it actually had kids from kindergarten all the way on up. It was a huge, noisy melting pot, a total mash-up of all ages. A lot of my sixth grade classmates were ethnic Chinese. A few were from South Korea, and there were a few the Chinese teacher from Gansu referred to as "purebred natives."

I found out from Peter that the school's name came from the New Testament of the Holy Bible, from Revelation, Chapter 3, Verse 7, and actually had nothing to do with the American troops stationed in the Philippines. Peter knew this because he went to the Bible Study class run by the headmistress. The old bag explained that the name came from two Greek words, "Phileo" meaning love, and "Adelphos" meaning the familial affection between church members. I never understood why Peter kept going to those classes; apart from the cheap cookies and powdered juice the old bag handed out at the end of the sessions, there was nothing to gain. Especially since, if he was hungry, all he had to do was climb a tree

and pick a green mango or a star apple.

Peter would just frown and say, “My mom makes me go.”

I didn't dislike Zhang Xin, Peter's mom. She was pretty cool. I called her Auntie Zhang. She had very white skin, her hair was permed into big, bouncy curls, and she liked to wear really short, skin-tight jean cut-offs, which clung to her big ass. Her high heels clicked when she walked, and she always smelled faintly of artificial roses. It made me dizzy whenever I caught a whiff of it. Her Chinese wasn't too good, so she would speak to me in Hokkien – but her kind of Hokkien wasn't all that similar to Taiwanese, and I could only understand about half of what she said. When I was tired of trying, I'd just switch to English. Auntie Zhang didn't like speaking English, though, and usually just carried on speaking to me in her incomprehensible Hokkien.

Whenever I went to Peter's house, she'd bring out Taiwanese snacks for us – things like *Wang Wang* brand rice crackers, ginseng candy, and *Kuai Kuai* cookies. These snacks are really expensive over here on the Native Island; they don't sell them in the ordinary grocery stores, so you have to go to the import shops in Chinatown. Auntie Zhang would also offer me Lipton milk tea, *I-Mei* milk tea and *Hey Song* soda, making sure I knew they were all imported from Taiwan, insisting that this meant they tasted better. She'd bring all the sweets out very proudly, totally convinced that, if they were from Taiwan, they were bound to be delicious. I liked going over to Peter's house. Auntie Zhang smelled so good and the house was very beautifully decorated, every room done up with white ceramic tiles. Plus, there were two maids for us to order around and Auntie Zhang with all those Taiwanese snacks. It reminded me of the old days.

Seung-seon, Peter, Alicia, and I decided that, in the summer, we'd go on a rowing trip to a secluded creek. Alicia said it wasn't too far from Quezon, only an hour's ride south on the bus. She and her mom had discovered it on a river cruise. She told us the riverbank was lined with fishermen's huts, the water was a lush emerald green, that you could catch a dozen big fish with one cast of a net and that there were two big waterfalls upstream. The fishermen lived in their boats, rocking back and forth all day, like those pirate ship rides in amusement parks. Alicia said that when summer came we should tell our parents we were going away to camp for three days and needed two thousand pesos for travel expenses. This way, we'd get out of filthy, noisy Quezon, and be free to explore the river. We could row our boat, look at the stars, and eat barbecued fish.

“We need to get a little boat,” she said, her imagination running wild.

She said we could either let ourselves float downstream or put some effort in and paddle upstream against the current. The three of us stared at her, her hair pulled back into a ponytail, as though she'd just dropped down from outer space. She told us not to worry; it wasn't like there were any scary animals like tigers in the jungle or any headhunting tribes. At worst, we might run into a couple of crocodiles, or a python. She laughed at us, making sure we were scared, and then she kept shooting us sneaky glances, as though to say, I know you don't dare, you bunch of chicken-shits. I thought it was a great plan, though, and immediately started to join in, saying we should build ourselves a boat – then it would really be summer.

Summer hadn't even arrived and we'd decided to build a boat.

The Headmistress & Mr. Yan Ping from Gansu

That term, two new faces appeared at school. One took over as Director of the Chinese department, a position which had been empty for a while. The other was Mr. Yan Ping, a volunteer teacher from mainland China. The Director was Taiwanese. He was about fifty, potbellied, double-chinned, and boorish; from a distance, you could mistake him for an angry lion. I heard he'd married a native. Mr. Yan Ping was a young guy from Gansu. He had very dark skin, and a flat, featureless face. He looked like a farmer, even when he was wearing the school uniform, which was pretty respectable. He had been specially requested by the headmistress, who wanted us to have a Chinese teacher from China. He had been on all sorts of joke teacher training courses, each of which came with its own sketchy certificate.

Mr. Yan Ping taught Chinese to the fifth- and sixth-grade students. When he first started, he was

very enthusiastic, trying everything to hold the class's attention. It was no use. Before long, students were taking naps in class, or stretching out their toilet breaks by stopping in the cafeteria to buy cookies. Or, at their most brazen, taking out homework for other subjects. Mr. Yan Ping couldn't really speak English, and he had no Hokkien at all, so in class he was like a chicken trying to speak to room full of ducks. It made a terrible racket – him doing his thing, trying to talk over us as we did ours. He used to press me into translating his Chinese into English and Hokkien for my classmates. I didn't like doing it because it made me seem like a teacher's pet, and no one likes one of those. Before every class I had to yell "Stand up!" "Sit down!" "Salute!" and so on. My classmates always completely ignored me, and I certainly didn't need that. Mr. Yan Ping's Chinese wasn't very standard. He didn't have those crazy "r" endings to his words like Beijingers do, or the soft "s" of a Southerner. He spoke a crude inland Chinese that sounded like someone chewing sand, or talking with a mouth full of boiled eggs. And he talked fast, with machine-gun speed, and it didn't take long for him to gun down the whole class.

Peter and I thought he was an idiot. How could he teach Chinese if he couldn't even speak it clearly?

One afternoon in Chinese class, the headmistress suddenly burst in out of the blue. She threw open the doors and eyed every student in the room. Then she pointed at Ji Xiang and asked him, in her punchy Chinese, "How many people in your family? How old are you? What's your favorite color? What time do you go to bed? Are you a boy or a girl?" Her questions were really basic, but there was something odd about them. In Taiwan, I would never just ask my friends "are you a boy or a girl." Her questions creeped me out. Alicia and I exchanged a glance; clearly, more of us would suffer. Sure enough, after the headmistress had picked on several other classmates, it was Seung-seon's turn. He was huddled in a corner and stammered over his words the way a fat mouse gnaws on food, eventually getting out that there were five people in his family. Then the old bag asked who they were. He said there was him, his dad, his mom, his little sister—

"So there are only four of you?" The headmistress stared at Seung-seon, and then started to hurl insults at Mr. Yan Ping. "What are you teaching them? Why can't they even answer these simple questions?" Then she turned on her heel and stormed out. The Director skulked out behind her, giving us a look that said we'd better watch out. Chinese class got a whole lot harder after that.

After school, Alicia, Peter and I pressed against the outside of the Chinese office and stealthily cracked open the door. We wanted to find out what punishment had befallen our classmates. Mr. Yan Ping, Ji Xiang, Seung-seon and the rest of them were standing in front of the Director's desk, heads bowed, brows furrowed, looking as sorry for themselves as if they'd had their faces rubbed in cow shit. Even once Seung-seon was let go, Mr. Yan Ping was still there being yelled at. I handed Seung-seon a Dalayan star apple in an attempt to calm him down, telling him that the headmistress was probably just depressed because she was going through menopause. He looked miserable, his eyebrows drawn tightly together and his narrow, squinty eyes looking almost like they'd been sewn shut. Alicia and I dragged him along to the school basketball court, and asked what exactly the Director had said. Seung-seon ripped open the star apple and licked out the white juice, then devoured the rest of it. He told us that, before the weekend, he had to memorise a twenty sentence presentation about himself, otherwise he'd have to stay behind for a cram class on Saturday. Peter went to get four milk ice creams; these cheered Seung-seon up. As we ate, we drilled him in Chinese; we couldn't let a silly little thing like this hold up the much more important matter of building our boat. At five-thirty, Seung-seon's family driver was by the school gates, standing very straight in his western suit, quietly insisting, "Young sir, it's time to go home." I fished out some chocolate biscuits from my bookbag and gave them to Seung-seon, while Alicia produced two pieces of mango candy from her pocket. We didn't want Seung-seon to stress over some meaningless twenty-sentence presentation in Chinese.

Alicia's Market Cry

Seung-seon, Peter, and I walked over to Thief-Go. Once out of Dalayan, we followed the dead-straight Tomato Street due east, crossing the filthy San Francisco River and heading towards Frisco Place, up a

steep asphalt road. A row of tricycle taxis waiting for customers crowded the left shoulder, the drivers lazing across the back seats, yawning and lethargic. To the right quite a few little lanes led off to Damayan and San Francisco del Monte. Both these areas are technically part of Thief-Go, although they aren't officially recognized as such: they aren't properly enclosed, don't have twenty-four hour guards on duty, and there's garbage strewn all over the place. Peter's mom was always warning him not to go there; she said it was a dangerous slum and an easy place to get robbed.

I walked ahead, with Seung-seon and Peter trailing nervously behind. We turned down one of the small lanes on the right. Thief-Go is definitely not a slum, just a place where a lot of the natives live. They let the pavement and houses fall apart, let their trash spill out in the street and go to the bathroom wherever they feel like it. It was a hot day, and the local men had stripped down to their underpants. The women were more restrained, but still went around in crop tops and tiny shorts that showed off their sturdy thighs. And the little kids were running about bare-assed, not a stitch on them. As we got closer to Thief-Go, the jeepneys started to thin out, while the crowds of tricycles and people increased. By the side of the street, an old man hugging a pile of fresh coconuts napped underneath a telegraph pole, while another group of old people pushed tricycles loaded with bananas into a shady corner. The women who ran the grocery stores were cooling off in front of electric fans. Greasy black smoke rose up from the barbeque stands, filling the air with the delicious smell of roasting meat.

"It's so hot, let's take a break." Seung-seon's cheeks glowed red and his whole body poured with sweat.

"I keep telling you, you have to lose weight, but you don't listen! If you're tired after this tiny walk, then you really are useless," I berated him.

We picked an internet café with air conditioning and went to stand by the door, where we could catch a blast of the cold air.

"Peter, go get me an ice cream, will you, it's just over there," said Seung-seon.

"If it's so close, why don't you go? Carry on like this and you'll turn into the king of all the big fat pigs."

"I'm getting sunstroke, and it's all your fault. I told you I wanted to stay home and play video games." Seung-seon spoke in a loud voice and plonked himself down in front of the door, blocking anyone from going in or out.

"Fine, Lord Piggy, get your money out." Peter grabbed a twenty-peso note and crossed the road to the ice cream shop. He stood there for ages, staring into the deep freeze.

"Are they out?" I yelled.

"What kind do you want?" He yelled back.

"I want chocolate, the kind with walnut and cookie pieces inside," shouted Seung-seon.

"You idiot, any flavor is fine," I told Peter.

We ate our ice creams sitting in front of the internet café.

The crowds were getting bigger. I fished in my pocket for change and ran across to the ice cream shop to buy a milk-flavored one for Alicia. We left the internet café and turned into the market. Even though I'd been there many times before, I could still never figure out where all the little alleys went. The market was covered with rotting wooden planks, with the stalls selling eggs, fish, fruit, vegetables and last season's clothing all joined together underneath. Alicia once told us that you could get secondhand clothes there for cheap, but that you had to inspect things carefully before buying, because a lot of the clothes were stolen from dug-up corpses. There was something a bit comedic about the very serious expression she used to say all this, so I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to laugh or take her seriously. She also said that, although all her clothes came from the market, she chose them very carefully and only picked items cast off by rich people, things they'd worn once or twice and thrown away. After she told me that, whenever I saw her I imagined her wearing a dead person's clothes, stinking of rotting flesh. She spent most of her time in Thief-Go, sometimes working a stall inside one of the alleys, other times in front of the lines of vendors at the market.

Alicia certainly had a charming market cry. She stood out like a billboard in the middle of the market.

Once, when I went to the market to buy some eggs for my granny, I saw Alicia there. She had

tied her hair up and wrapped a white towel around her head. Her left hand rested on her hip, while her right hand waved a fly swatter over a stand of cut fish. I almost believed I was back in Taiwan, at the New Year's market on Dihua Street. There's no one else like her there. On that occasion, a group of people were huddled round to look, eyes wide with fascination. Alicia was beating the swatter in a quick rhythm, and it was hard not to get caught up in the energy of it. Another time, I saw her standing outside a shop that sold phone cases, dancing to the pop music that pumped out from inside. The song was a local favorite: "Just The Way You Are" by Bruno Mars. Alicia was swaying to the beat, shaking her tiny ass, twisting her hips, and mouthing the English words: *When I see your face, there's not a thing that I would change. Cause you're amazing, just the way you are. And when you smile, the whole world stops and stares for a while. Cause girl you're amazing, just the way you are.*

Alicia sold a lot of things in the market. She worked in a shop selling buns filled with cream, chocolate, and custard; at little stands selling green mangoes, yellow mangoes, fat bananas, sliced-up little pineapples, star apples and coconut juice; in the vegetable stalls, hawking cherry tomatoes, summer radishes, runner beans, jicama yams, little bitter melons, cucumbers, and so on. Her methods for selling vegetables, fruit, or whatever it was, always surprised people. Once, I asked her why she stayed out there selling stuff from morning till evening, joking that maybe one day she'd even sell herself. She replied, "I'm poor." She smiled a little as she said it, and I couldn't tell if there were sadness behind her words.

By the time we found Alicia that day, we were all exhausted, and had long forgotten about the supposed danger. Peter had found a vendor selling pirated DVDs of the One Piece and Gundam anime series, and Seung-seon had come across a refreshment stall that sold silken tofu pudding. This time, Alicia was selling fertilised duck eggs, which the natives call "balot." They were very cheap: one egg for less than twenty pesos.

I gave Alicia the melting ice cream, and she gave me and Peter a duck egg each.

"That's not fair, I want one too! Why don't I get one?" said Seung-seon.

"If you keep eating, you'll turn into a big-winged elephant," I said.

"Why would an elephant have wings?"

"Because it died of fatness, and needs them to fly to heaven."

We all fell about laughing.

The eggs were keeping warm in a bamboo basket, which was placed on a wooden chair so that customers didn't have to bend down to make their selection.

I put mine in my pocket.

"Eat it now, it'll be no good cold."

I looked awkwardly at Alicia, racking my brains for an excuse.

"I, I... I want to take it home for my granny."

"Duck eggs are delicious," said Peter.

"You don't have duck eggs in Taiwan, do you," said Alicia. "Are you scared to try?"

"No way, Taiwan has everything – it's not backward like here. Every day after class I used to go and get a duck egg from a stand next to my school."

"It's best when it's piping hot." Peter peeled back the shell on his, revealing half a duckling head in the middle of the egg. I felt a bit sick. Peter stuck out his lips and slurped the broth, then added some salt and bit into the downy head of the duckling. "Mom says it's really nutritious."

Seung-seon wanted one too, and started to tussle with Peter.

"No need to fight!" said Alicia, smiling, and handed over another egg.

To eat a whole duck egg was an enormous challenge for me. But I knew Peter and Seung-seon would make fun of me if I didn't do it. Trying to keep cool, I knocked my egg on the bamboo basket and cracked off the shell. Then, copying Seung-seon, I sprinkled on some salt. I took a bite, swallowing it quickly without chewing. I wanted to show it was no big deal, just a duck egg, that's all. I added more salt and went at it one big bite after another, trying my hardest not to think about the fact I was eating a duckling.

"Told you I wasn't scared." My mouth tasted awful.

"Your face is totally white," said Alicia.

"But I'm not scared. In Taiwan, we eat duck blood, pig blood, stinky tofu, and even chicken testicles and intestines." I looked at them defiantly.

"I'm not arguing with you. Where are you guys going after this?" asked Alicia.

We looked at each other. No one had a plan.

Sheung-seon was crouched on the floor, saying he wanted to go home. Peter said he wanted to look for more pirated DVDs.

"How about looking for wood?" asked Alicia. "Didn't you see on your way from Dalayan? They've cut down two cotton trees by the exit to the Savemore store. I heard they're going to build a little guard hut there. In any case, they're not doing anything with the trees, at most they'll burn them to get rid of the mosquitoes. Go ask if you can take it."

I looked at Peter and Peter looked at Seung-seon, who was down on the floor hugging his belly. Seung-seon looked up at us with a pleading expression in his squinty eyes.

We decided we would take the trees home.

The guard was piling cut wood against some iron railings. He had chopped the trees into logs, and now he was stacking them like firewood. An axe was stuck into the side of a tree trunk.

It was getting dark. The guard used some of the smaller pieces to start a fire, creating a plume of grey smoke.

"Is this firewood any good?" I asked, tentatively.

The guard looked me sternly up and down, thought it over, then said no, it wasn't. "Is there a problem?"

"I was just wondering."

The guard threw on a bunch of twigs and dried leaves, then flapped his hands around his ears to chase away the mosquitoes. The fire suddenly grew.

Sheung-seon and Peter tugged on my hand; they wanted to leave. I walked a couple of paces then stopped, and found myself drawn to the piles of logs. I tried to think what a proper thief would do.

The guard looked at us suspiciously. "Are you from the village?"

We pushed Peter forward.

Peter timidly stated his address, and the guard became much more friendly.

It was dark by the time we left. We hadn't even made it as far as Peter's house when his Pekinese dog, Toby, started to bark.

"Tomorrow after class, we'll go steal the wood," I said.