

“Exile begins as soon as we leave the womb.”

“One’s mother should be one’s true homeland. Only death finally frees us from this final belonging.”

“The return to the homeland is but a return to the mother’s grave.”

– Norman Manea, *The Hooligan’s Return*  
(translated from the Romanian by Angela Jianu)

I grew up, and came of age, along that lane. The first apartment house we had after arriving in Taipei was on that lane, as was the second, about a half a kilometer away. The lane was where my wandering first began.

Now almost thirty years have passed, and the lane hasn’t changed at all. It’s still narrow and winding. People still bustle down it dawn to dusk; it’s a secret stream gurgling along the city limits. Returning now, after all this time, I’m surprised to see my departure and Taipei’s skyrocketing property market haven’t changed it much. The apartments to either side are still as old, if not even older. The paint on the window grilles is spottier than before, the dull rust from so many years plainly visible.

I stood at the entrance of the lane, and even with my eyes closed I could see its winding outline. The roads on either end of the lane haven’t changed at all. The names are still the same: Tradition Boule-

vard and Wisdom Avenue, a moral exhortation at either intersection. I don’t know how many times in my harried adolescence I rushed between those two ethical poles. No, nothing has changed, except the people walking down the lane, strangers all. But this time the true stranger was me. I walked down the lane, while distant memories came alive on my tongue, one taste after another.

I started down the lane. The woman at the corner selling squid stew had vanished, years before I left. I used to dream she would come back. Every time I passed by, I would see the bare red brick wall in front of which she used to sit, feeling nostalgic despite myself. I’ve never had such a tasty stew anywhere else in my life. She would slice the squid, dip the slices in starch, and put them in the bamboo steamer, then take them out and put them—steaming hot, translucent—on a wholesome bowl of noodles. I still remember her face, as white and smooth as the squid she sold. I also remember how she’d cook with her head slightly bowed, the beautiful arc of her neck obscured by clouds of steam. That steam was like sweet perfume! I used to think I’d sell noodles after I grew up, that this was the best job in the world.

I walked down the lane until I came to the covered walkway by the watch shops, where the stand selling breakfast noodle soup, pig’s blood, and oily bean curd used to be. What I remember most is how the hawker used to cut the preserved eggs with a special tool—a white thread with a coin tied to one end, suspended from the stand. When there was a breeze, the coin would tinkle against

one of the iron poles. I continued walking down the lane to where there used to be an old makeshift market constructed out of whatever old wooden boards and corrugated plastic sheets were available. I remember at the entrance on the left hand side a stand selling Taiwan-style tempura, i.e., little balls of boiled fish paste. Every time I went I would wolf down a bowl of tempura, just to hold the empty bowl out to the proprietor and ask him to fill it with delicious broth. But the old market was filthy and it stank. The slaughtered fowl left the floor covered with feathers and innards, which mixed with the shiny scales from the fishmonger's stall. A brackish runoff would ooze by my feet. Now, the market has been torn down, and the tempura shop has vanished along with it, like the lady selling squid stew at the entrance to the lane.

I was shocked to discover a couple of familiar faces. It was like running into a friend I hadn't seen in years. I was secretly thrilled. Except I recognized them, but they didn't recognize me. I saw at the far end of the lane the lady proprietors of the two bean curd pudding stands, which faced each other across less than ten meters of asphalt. The boss ladies looked so much alike, their faces like fine white silk, with black shoulder-length hair combed neatly behind the ears. At first glance, you might think they were identical twins. The first time I ever walked to the end of the lane I saw them sitting there, behind their respective stands. They're still there today. Neither has gone bust; each has gone on selling bowls of dessert bean curd as if nothing was more natural, as if they'll keep selling it until the end of

time. When business was slow, each would sit on an iron stool, legs crossed, a novel open on her lap, and read quietly. They compose a frozen tableau at the end of the lane despite the changes around them, and as time goes on inexorably, day after day.

I use food to remember the lane along which I grew up and came of age. Because my guts are the most authentic storehouse of memories; memories of food don't change, nor do they lie. Each warm and short-lived moment of bliss stored in my body is like a bright streak of fire etched on the night sky.



We went five hundred meters along the lane, past food stands, by the market, moving from one dim apartment to an even dimmer one, a tenement I guess you could call it. It was on the first floor. My mother used wooden sandwich walls to partition it into ten rooms, leaving a single corridor down the center. There was no ventilation—a moldy smell hung permanently in the air. Nor was there natural light—even in the middle of the day you couldn't see your fingers at arm's length in front of you.

The tenement only had one window, but because it was right on the lane there was no opening it. The architect must have discovered the problem too late, and drilled a well through the center of the building to let sunlight in from above, but it was no use, for someone had covered it over with a sheet of metal for a roof and sided it with wood, turning it into a kitchenette. When it rained, the drops rattled on

the metal roof, like a troop of cavalry galloping by. If the rain got heavy, the roof would leak and we'd have to cook our meals under an umbrella. There was always a puddle of water on the tiled floor, and everyone would end up with muddy feet. But nobody ever bothered to wipe it up: you could never wipe it dry.

I lived in that tenement for eight years. I spent most of elementary and junior high school there. I promised myself I was going to leave it, that place where you had to share everything, including the soap in the communal toilet. There didn't seem to be any doors or walls there. It was somehow wide open. Anyone could walk into my most personal space, and see all the grime and glory I'd buried there. It was a place without any purity or poetry, without anywhere to hide, without any room for ambiguity. There was only the naked reality of daily life, in your face every second of every minute of every day.

All these years later, I can't forget it. I can't forget that dim honeycomb of spaces, like a black hole hidden in a corner of the city—a city within the city. Still less can I forget the tenants the entrance of the tenement swallowed and vomited out, the people who came out of nowhere and vanished without a trace. They were denizens of a fourth world: foreigners, migrants, of unknown walks of life. The turnover was high; folks never stayed for long. Some came without divulging their identities, and left without paying their rent, let alone saying goodbye; they simply took all their clothes and slipped out. We would have to trouble the precinct policeman

to pick the lock, and when the door was flung open, we would see heaps of garbage, old newspapers, empty lunchbox containers, unwanted clothes. But it was like they all still missed their masters, because they would reek of their smells.

I often wondered where all those people went. Had they found a place to settle down? Or were they still drifting? They who wandered the margins of society—their next stop was often prison. My mother rented rooms to a lot of fraudsters or guys who had contravened the Negotiable Instruments Act, which in those days was a criminal offense. Once there was this middle aged man living in the room by the kitchen, who made it onto the front page of the society section: it was headline news! The story claimed he'd been going all around Hong Kong and Taiwan faking documents and scamming folks for money and sex. In the black and white photo in the paper, the serial offender was hanging his head, his hands cuffed, a compliant expression on his face, just like the one he had when he watched television in the common room. Another tenant, who'd just gotten out of prison, said his cellmate had been a tenant as well, and that they recognized each other immediately. The tenant and eventually his cellmate returned from prison, a world of mystery even darker than the tenement itself, bringing the spores of sin down upon our heads, spreading their iniquity like the plague.

The bad luck they brought back even dragged down a young couple with a bright future: the husband was working in a state corporation and the wife was a kindergarten teacher. When the wife dis-

covered she was pregnant, the couple happily started getting money together to buy a place of their own. But then there was a kickback scandal at the corporation, and he was the fall guy. He went to jail for over a year. Folks said he'd been treated inhumanely in prison, had a mental breakdown, and was released on medical grounds. After he got out, he would sit every day in a pair of shorts on a wicker chair next to the screen door, reading the paper by the faint light that washed in from the lane, wearing the same white vest with a big hole, and when he'd finished he would pace that dark corridor down the center of the tenement. He was really tall, and his towering figure would be swallowed by the darkness and spit out, over and over again. His wife was always bringing her baby boy into our room and sitting by the bed and pouring her heart out about the trial. But he himself never said what happened to him in prison. He didn't even tell his wife. He'd basically gone mute.

I can never forget them. Those tenants were like duckweed, gathering in our tenement and soon scattering, silently, one by one, borne every which way by the currents of life; but in the eight years I lived there I met a lot of folks, more than the sum total of all the people I've met in later life. I sometimes even had the misapprehension that I was one of them. To this day, I feel as if trapped in that dark corridor, swallowed by the sandman and spit up again, over and over, unable to ever find a window of escape.

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The folks who rented from us were usually newcomers to Taipei. They weren't the bohemian artist type, but rather pale and anemic figures who were struggling to make ends meet in the midst of Taiwan's economic miracle. I even remember the first tenant we ever took in—a handsome salesman who left for work each day at dawn, wearing the same freshly pressed white shirt and black tie. One morning not long after he moved in, we discovered him passed out in the bathroom, foaming at the mouth, arms and legs in spasms, eyeballs turned up. Turned out that he was having an epileptic fit. When the seizure was over he quickly picked himself up off of the brick floor, shut his mouth and wouldn't say a thing. His shirt was all wet, but there wasn't time to change, so he rushed off to work like that. Over the next few weeks, he had a number of seizures, all in the morning, and before the second month was up he quietly moved away. He'd come alone and left alone.

There was another salesman, a recent college graduate over six feet tall. We heard he used to be a campus celebrity: he was on the basketball team and captain of the judo club. Every day, he put the machine he was trying to sell in a corrugated fiberboard box, tied it to the back rack of his Wild Wolf 125 c.c. motorcycle, put on a helmet with red stripes and vroomed away. In the evening, he'd remove the box and take it back to his room. Day in, day out. Morning and night, he moved the same box in and out. But he just couldn't sell that machine. Until

even we were feeling pressure on his account. Near the end of the month when rent was due, he would duck into his room, his face ashen, holding the box to his chest. He might have been able to talk his way out of the rent, but not long thereafter my mother found a medicine packet in the trash can: he had tuberculosis! Well, that did it. He had to go, no question about it. Nothing anyone could say could stop my mother from evicting him. So he ended up moving, almost unbearably sad, head bowed, hugging to his chest a machine he couldn't sell, and a few pathetic possessions, all strapped to the rack of his motorcycle. He then put on his helmet and vroomed away, vanishing into the night at the end of the lane.

Then there was a young couple from Ilan, not yet twenty years old. They had quit school after junior high, and were renting the cheapest room, in the very back of the tenement, jutting out illegally into the fire access behind the building. The room was so small there was barely space for a double bed, a little table, and a cheap cabinet—a metal frame covered in fabric. There was certainly no space to move around in. To save money, my mother didn't even install a wall or door, just a plastic curtain and a little brass padlock. It was an improvised room, if you can call it that. And that 'room' was almost an appendage to the back of the building on the other side of the access. It happened to face the kitchen of a Hong Kong-style barbeque pork place. The vent pumped out oil and smoke-laden air all day long, and the acrid smell seeped into the tiny room, so intense that your eyes would smart and you'd

want to gag.

The husband was a cement mason. His skin was dark from long hours in the sun, his eyes severely jaundiced. Other than that I can't remember what he looked like, just that every day he'd come home after work smelly and sweaty, head bowed, never greeting a single person. He would just hurry into the lightless depths of the corridor. That wife of his, II, on the other hand, I remember very well. She was tall and slender and had skin like Snow White as well as a pair of big, bright eyes. She holed herself up in that greasy room all day long, holding a one-year-old daughter to her breast. Very rarely did she leave her bed. Although still a toddler, her daughter was a knockout, her features finer than her mother's. The daughter was called Yiping, named after the abandoned heroine in the Chiung Yao novel *Misty Rain*.

I don't know if it was because of H's beauty, but she never seemed to fit in, like she didn't belong in that cramped and mildewed old tenement. The other tenants even looked down on her. Only then did I realize that the tenement was a class society, that the people at the back were always the worst off. Maybe subconsciously everyone assumed that beauty wasn't something folks in the tenement could aspire to, so they rejected it on sight, almost instinctively. They couldn't care less about her, and would ridicule her poverty right to her face, and call her dumb, clueless, and even a slut: they'd share knowing glances when H nursed her daughter without closing the curtain in the summer heat, and insinuate she was a bitch in heat. Someone said she'd

put a piece of pork in the freezer two days before and thought H must have pinched it. She even went to see what kind of food H had left out on the table. Someone complained about H's fondness for pickles, the kind that country bumpkins eat, and even said that she 'must of' added something, something sour that had stunk up the whole tenement. Even us kids knew we could pick on her. When she carried her little baby girl into the kitchen, we would immediately fret our brows and pinch our noses and yell about how she reeked.

But H never got angry or said a word in return. She talked fainter than a mosquito, humming more than speaking, so nobody clearly heard what she had to say. She would just widen those big bright eyes that only the ill-fated heroine of a Chiung Yao novel would have and stare back at us uncomprehendingly, panic-stricken. Then she would hold her daughter to her chest and without another word scoot back to her room and sit down on the bed. And now in no time thirty years have passed and I can still see H sitting there, left leg crossed over right knee, her right calf hanging over the edge of the bed, exposing skin smooth as porcelain. The summer sun and the exhaust vent from the kitchen on the other side of the fire access are roasting the air in the room, but, like a fairy girl with skin of ice and bones of jade, H doesn't sweat. She quietly unbuttons her blouse and sticks a dusky nipple in her daughter's mouth and nurses her, until she notices me. Like a woman in a Vermeer portrait, she looks up, and time pauses a dreamlike moment in her eyes.

I can't forget her. Maybe it's not because I can't forget her beauty, but because I can't forget how cruel I was to her, and cruel for no good reason. The people living in the tenement didn't have to conspire to gang up on her; it just kind of happened, and I was an accomplice to her persecution. Who says poor people always look out for one another? In that tenement, poor people stepped on people even poorer than themselves.

There were many things in the tenement I wasn't able to understand. In one of the rooms of the tenement, K's life began one night, and from that day forward, he was fated to stare, even from the womb, at the rumors flying through the partitions, rumors about some scandal his father had been dragged into, about how his daddy would do time, as his mother had to drag her pregnant belly all around on account of the legal proceedings, protesting in vain that her husband was just a scapegoat, that it was his superiors who were corrupt. She eventually had to change her kindergarten job from full to part time. In the last trimester, her calves swelled way up, and every night she'd sit at our bed, telling me and my mother about how the case was going while she massaged her taut shiny blue-veined skin, raising her dress to let me see the stretch marks tearing up her belly. But she never cried a single tear in front of us, and even forced herself to smile.

His daddy was still in jail when K was due, so his mother went to the hospital alone. When his father finally got out, K was almost a year old. She thought

the worst was over, that they would have a happy family reunion. She never expected that the worst was yet to come. The local gossips speculated K's father had been raped in prison. What else could account for his mental breakdown, or his expression when he saw his baby son for the first time—not a hint of happiness on his face? He wouldn't hold him, or even look at him longer than a glance. He didn't say anything either, just sat by the front door reading the newspaper for the longest time. K looked like any other child, but didn't act like one: he was fond of bashing his head against the wall. He was a baby boy who'd barely learned to sit up, and already seemed inclined to self-harm. He'd hit his small, soft head against the wall, and wouldn't listen to us, no matter how hard we'd tug at his arm. And his father would sit in the big wicker chair, expressionless, even stupefied as he took everything in. Their eyes never met, as if both were trapped in their own worlds, while K's lonely mother was struck outside.

At the age of three K was diagnosed with autism, but even before, we had our theories, that maybe he was taciturn just like his dad, or maybe there was something wrong with his intelligence, though neither theory seemed to fit. He was quicker than the other kids. As soon as he came in the door he would scamper around, touching everything, looking everywhere, and then like a little doggie he would go smell all the furniture. It was like there wasn't anything he wasn't interested in. Only later did we discover that only objects grabbed his attention, that when it came to human beings and their concerns,

he didn't care at all.

Later on, they moved away. To the place they'd been planning to buy when K was first conceived, when it was still one of those advance sale apartments. They'd imagined decorating it in different ways, clutching the construction company's brochure. K's mother would never give up on that apartment, no matter what. She clenched her jaw and made the first mortgage payment, like she'd never given up hope that someday her husband might snap out of it and K would suddenly open up to the world. She often came back to visit riding a scooter, letting K stand on the floorboard in front of the seat. She would stop at the entrance, take off her helmet and call out our names. We always hoped to hear good news, but there never was any. K's mother just came back to chat with us. She was as cheerful as ever and always smiling, but there were more shadows in her smile now. There was this one time when she seemed especially happy, when she held my mother's hands and confided that she finally understood why her husband and K had turned out like this: "It's Karma," she said, with certainty. Unlike the law or medical science, religion seemed to give her a fair answer. She even said my mother would know just what she meant: "We're sisters, you and me. We share the same fate."

K never called Mommy, or Daddy. He didn't know how to use language, but was particularly sensitive to smells. I've heard that kids with the kind of autism he had often only need to smell something once to remember it forever, so all the smells, a mixture of mildew and BO, in that unventilated

tenement must still be residing in his nostrils to this day. That's how he remembered things I guess. Or how he expressed whatever love he had his heart. He was always holding his mother's head, burrowing his nose deep into her hair, and then biting her hair and saying: "BITE you! BITE you!" Turned out that when K was young his mother liked to take his arm and nip at it playfully and say: "I'm gonna take a BITE out of you!" Somehow he remembered. And "BITE you!" was the only thing he ever learned to say.

About the translator:

Darryl Sterk studies the representation of Taiwan's indigenous people, both Han Chinese representations and self-representations. He is also interested in the Austronesian language Seediq. He teaches translation and contrastive linguistic analysis at National Taiwan University, in the Graduate Program of Translation and Interpretation. He is also a literary translator. His first book length translation, Wu Ming-Yi's novel *THE MAN WITH THE COMPOUND EYES*, was published by Harvill Secker in 2013. He blogs at <http://shidailun.blogspot.tw/>