



Sagaranda Tien

# 和尚, 貓 MONK, CAT

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## Author's Note

During my trip to Asia in early 2020, the severity of the pandemic started to sink in. I left for Taipei with a friend in late January and the trip was uneventful. I was used to the long flight and fatigue crossing the Pacific, traveling East and West. Nevertheless, traveling is enjoyable, especially knowing that I am going home to a country where I was born and spent my youthful twenty-something years.

My friend and I stayed at a short-term rental apartment in the suburbs of Taipei City where there are countless narrow alleys filled with local markets, eateries, restaurants, and shops bustling with people full of energy like numerous capillaries busy pumping blood for oxygen. A tiny little erythrocyte circulates half a globe and squashes itself through the narrow veins in order to release the molecules that it carries. From time to time, on Taiwanese news media or Western online media on YouTube, stories played about an unknown disease spreading in the country across the Taiwanese Strait less than a hundred miles away. Yet it felt as if it occurred on a planet further away, like Benetnasch for me. After a weeklong meditation retreat in Southeast Asia, I felt tranquil, delighted, and recharged like I could take on the world once again.

Things started to change but I was not aware of it at the time. Frankly, I thought that tenuous voice in the back of my head that kept repeating 'āturam bahusaṅkappam'<sup>1</sup> was the sequelae of my daily chanting. On my way back to the U.S., I had a three-day layover in Taipei, my hometown, the object of my nostalgia, my homesickness. It was at this time when a little crown-wearing virus started to serve as a condition, conjoined with my thought, and gave rise to my consciousness. First, it was the face mask worn by the host of the motel that I stayed at. That innocent goose yellow-colored face mask, and the friendly, yet suspicious, pair of eyes hiding behind it. I spent three days at a motel just a stone's throw away from Taipei Main Station, in the heart of city, usually jam-packed with international and local tourists. Yet I was the sole occupant.

Things have certainly changed, and in a blink of eye.

*Did all this take particular people to turn the world you and I live in upside down? Did it take a mindless virus, or mindless persons to give rise to the disarray? Truly, what is this chaos about? As my tale begins, indeed I've already forgotten exactly when, or if, I'd ever really encountered you in my life.*

Sagaranda

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I don't remember how this begins, I believe, certainly, I have never met you in the past.

我忘記故事是怎麼開始，我相信我過去從來沒有見過你。

You, who exist in the realm darker than the darkest night, set out to search for a perfect island more than perfection itself.

你在比最黑的夜還要更黑的夜裡，出發去尋找比最完美還要完美的島嶼。

Let me confess that the tale I am going to tell you actually has never happened before.

我要告訴你一個從來沒有發生過的故事。

That where the half-inch wide alleyway sandwiched between a Tudigong temple and a Christian church at the southern district of the city, that when the midnight of tomorrow has not darkened and the dawn of yesterday has yet cracked, that very moment very spot you sharpen your claws with the futon on the shrine as if it is your scratching pad.

在城市南邊的土地公廟連接著基督教堂的牆中間那一條僅有半吋寬的巷子，當明天的夜還沒有黑透緊鄰著昨天的太陽還沒有生起的那一刻，你在那個神桌的蒲團上奮力地磨著爪。

I am utterly sure the story I am telling you was told by my grandaunt, on the third day of that Chinese New Year, about a vixen and a Coolie who cohabit in an ancient mansion demolished a day before Chongzhen Emperor hung himself at Jingshan Park.<sup>2</sup>

我拍胸脯保證這故事就是姑婆在年初三說的那一個關於狐狸與長工住在明思宗拜訪煤山前一天落成的宅子裡的故事。

At exactly twenty-three hours fifty-seven minutes and seventeen seconds prior to every full moon night, the old monk living behind the gate starts to take a bath.

每個月圓日的前二十三個小時五十七分十七秒，門後的住持和尚就會開始洗澡。

When I pat dry the last drop of water from my right ankle, a tail grows from my last vertebra. When the wasted bathing water carrying the scent of soap commingling with the smell of sweat from the left armpit of the female butcher shop owner next door, brewing the aroma of pig lung pig heart pig brain pig stomach pig kidney pig liver rice noodle rolls, gushes to the underground sewer line, my internal clock suddenly comes to a stop. Life and death, beauty and ugliness, bliss and sorrow, noise and silence, dream and reality, sperm and ova, existent and non-existence, all suddenly come to a stop. I am not going to hedge all my bets on this tail.

當我把最後一滴水從我右腳腳踝上抹乾的時候，尾巴自我的最後一節脊椎長出來。當洗澡水混合著肥皂的花香味與隔壁肉攤老闆娘左腋下的汗水味，和著豬肺、豬心、豬腦、豬胃、豬腎、豬肝、豬腸粉的味道一起流入衛生下水道的那一刻，我的身理時鐘煞然停止。生與死、美與醜、歡愉與憂愁、聲音與寂靜、夢境與真實、雄性與雌性、有與沒有、全部煞然停止。我試著不去把我的尾巴放在是誰讓他煞然停止的問題上。



At the very moment when that metallic deadbolt enters the lock box as your left front foot steps out that gate of vermillion, the gate equipped with the WiFi connected, electronically driven lock assembly that you can control on your smart phone, this is the beginning of the tale about a monk turning into a cat.

當左前腳踏出那扇妳可以用智慧型手機遙控電子感應晶片的朱紅色大門，就在等著電子鎖重新上鎖的那一刻，這就是傳說中和尚變成貓的橋段的開始。

This tale could take place in the alleyway in a southern district of a city, or possibly in a rustling sound as the monsoon blows through a Spanish moss hanging on an oak tree in a southern college town at the other end of the ocean. Or possibly in the tangy smell of the excessive alcohol stored in an emergency room of a hospital located in the east side of a river. Or possibly resting on the corpse of a dead rat laying on the subway rail of a station at the borough limit of a bustling metropolis, or as well, resting on the sour and bitter taste of a Salak growing in a tropical rain forest along the equator. Or, in the bathtub of a student apartment in the center of a city of thousand years history, waiting to be scrubbed away. Or possibly in the odor left on an edge of an empty shot glass of which a veteran just lost her last penny to a casino located in a native reservation in the Midwest. Or very well be on the carpet of a jetway in an empty international airport on the early morning, August 1st. Possibly this, or possibly that, or possibly...

這個橋段可以發生在城市南邊的陽光永遠照不到的小巷子的陰影中、或是大海另一岸大學城橡樹上隨著季風沙沙作響的西班牙苔蘚上、或是河東岸小鎮的酒精味撲鼻的急診室角落、或是世界金融中心城市邊緣地鐵站軌道上的死老鼠、或是赤道上熱帶雨林中蛇皮果的酸味、或是千年古都中心學生公寓的浴盆、或是中西部原住民保護區賭場剛剛輸光了退休金的退伍軍人喝乾了的酒杯邊緣留下一絲絲的口水味、或是很可能發生在八月一日清晨一個人都沒有的國際機場的空橋的地毯上、或是、或是、或是。

Before yesterday's sun goes under, that scent as tribute, liberating from a sandalwood incense lighted by that temple warden, paid to Tudigong. That loud bang, a dewdrop on that vermillion petal slipping to the bottom of that censer.

昨天太陽下山前，廟祝給土地公點燃的檀香。豔紅的花上的那一滴露水滑下花瓣落入香爐中的那一響。

As the cat walks at the left side of the sidewalk, finds himself or herself or yourself or myself staring at the sign 'Homo Behavior Path.' He or she or you or I or it ponders whether he or she or you or I or it is only qualified to walk on the other side of the street.

當這貓在道路的左側行走時，發愣地盯著路邊的指示牌，似乎是提醒他或她或妳或我或牠：「人行道」。他或她或你或我或牠停下來思考著他或她或你或我或牠是否走錯了邊。

My revolver that my grandpa left me, holding mine against my mind. Taking my backpack, I leave, but what am I supposed to fill it with, everything which belongs to me? Everything I want to carry, so long as not perished nor moldy. Pain exists, and pain finds delight in me. I do not want it; I yearn for it. Throwing away or carrying away, another choice? Desperation, anything to hold. Home? Destination? Dying in a rundown emergency room, or being in a floral hospice? Does it all boil down to a white stool?



我拿起我的祖父家傳的我的左輪槍，頂著我的下顎。抄起我的背包，我要離開，但是我要在背包裡面裝什麼，所有都屬於我的？我試著抓住任何我想要，想要抓住任何的東西，只要還沒腐爛的、沒有發霉的。痛存在，痛喜歡我。我不要，我很想要。房子裡面的，丟不開，也提不起。絕望，有什麼還可以放。家在哪裡？最後的歸宿？在老舊的急診室病房裡死去，還是活在充滿花香的安寧病房？白色的大便。

I thought I have passed through the portal which transcends the realms of existence until I meet that caracal with face of a 24-years-old, curvy shape, female crocodile, strolling, wordless. Does she go to the same private elementary school in the southern district of the city as I do? I ask. Silence. No replies. The water-filled lungs, Kūkai<sup>3</sup> and Saichō<sup>4</sup> lying on the seabed of the Taiwan Strait.

我認為我已穿越橫跨三界的密道，直到遇到一隻迎面而來的有著女性線條鱷魚臉的24歲貓，一言不發。貓鱷魚還是鱷魚貓是否像我一樣在城市南邊的同一所私立小學讀書？我問。安靜。她沒有答案。積水的肺，躺在台灣海峽海床上的空海與最澄。

The sound that I would like to listen to, the voice that I actually speak. Debt repayment? Debt? Creditor? Trembling. What to exorcise? That incubus in the living room. Leave! Bhaisajyaguru dharani.<sup>5</sup> Trance. Nightmare, phone call, how do I please myself if I do not understand how to please myself. Hate regrets rue. Have ever you craved? A castle with thick heavy walls. Marital status. Occupation status. Gender status. Health status. Skillful and unskillful karma in the past three lives. Lunatic and insanity. Not fear cold. Intravenous drip. A physician. Four o'clock in the morning. No treatment. Shiatsu. Two hundred, blood pressure. Ambulance. Forty-four hours. Drug action, kicking in.

我要聽我要聽的聲音，我要說的聲音。還債？債？債權人？發抖。我要抓住那個東西？客廳裡的鬼。走，藥師咒。夢。惡夢，電話，不了解怎麼愛自己。恨恨恨。你有曾經愛過他嗎？城府很深。婚姻狀況。職業狀況。性別狀況。存在結果。健康狀況。過去三生三世的善與不善業。神智不清。不怕冷。打點滴。找醫生。清晨四點。不治療。壓脊背。血壓兩百。救護車。四十四小時。藥效發作。

What should I eat for supper? Heart.

晚餐要吃什麼呢？心臟。

Seeing the infinite crosses is just endless repeating itself on a hot asphalt, the cat recalls the watermelons that I and my mummy friend ditched at the furthest corner of the private elementary school at the southern district of the city he and I went to that humid summer night, germinate and grow into a tree.

直到那隻貓看到熱柏油路上無限的十字架其實只是不斷自言自語的結果，我突然回憶起那潮濕的夏夜和我的木乃伊朋友扔在那間城市南邊的私立小學最遠的角落的西瓜們發了芽，並長成了一棵樹。

I try to follow that thin green line on a road as if it will lead me to my mummy friend at the end of that thread. The final journey. Death beyond. Friendship, thirty years. Solitude.

The turning wheel of Samsāra?

我沿著道路上那條綠色的細線，彷彿希望能夠在線的盡頭找到那個木乃伊朋友。最後一程，死在外面。三十年的朋友。孤獨。

輪迴之輪？

The whisper behind the gate, I, an outcast, cannot perceive. The thunder beyond the gate, I, an outcast, can't hear. With that key with the induction chip left on that table, deadbolt and gate unite. Pastor. Oblivion. Marriage, marriage, marriage. Fugitive, fugitive, fugitive.

門裡的秘密，門外的我不知道。門外的風雨，門裏的我聽不見。那支有著內建感應晶片的鑰匙在桌上，門鎖與木門交歡。牧師。遺忘。婚姻婚姻婚姻。逃亡逃亡逃亡。

When that city in the air rises up in this city in the air, you set out for your Dragon Mountain Temple while I bypass my Methamphetamine Safe Bridge. When my internal clock stops ticking at that one of the twentieth second, again, all that remains to me is just being a cat.

I rush to the divine dwelling where the Tree Goddess forever celebrate lives for the last 1146 eons as if I am about to miss the most important conference meeting at a Fortune 500 company, all I see is the expiration date of Awkward, the sacrifice to the Goddess, says 1999.

當那個看不見的城市在這個看不見的城市中崛起時，你去你的龍山寺，我會通過或繞過我的安平橋。當我的生理時鐘再次開始不走動的那個霎那，所有剩下的我僅是一隻貓。

我匆匆忙忙茫茫匆匆地跑進神壇女樹神長慶過去一千一百四十六個大劫存在的地方，就像是我要錯過了財富500強公司的最重要的電話會議。我看到神壇上供奉的「乖乖」的食品安全日期，1999年。

When you tell me that you are going to leave that brick house by that riverbank, to find me at the shore on the other side of the world, I by myself toss and turn on a bed in a hotel room next to an amusement park all night.

當你跟我說你要離開從河邊的磚房去找尋在世界另一頭的河岸的我輾轉在遊樂園旁邊的旅館的床上獨自翻滾了整晚。

Turning left, feeling icy sensation from my left sole, as it taps that asphalt. On the signboard where the faded characters used to be, I suspect that I am neither a monk nor a cat. Cats hunger for canned tuna. Monks delight in pig heads, fish heads, and lobster heads, especially, that broth made of pig blood cubes sold in the basement of the bazaar in the village south.

我向左轉，感受左後腳掌接觸柏油路後傳來的冰涼。就在巷子裡的青草店招牌上，我不知道我是隻貓還是個和尚？貓愛罐頭。和尚愛豬頭、魚頭、龍蝦頭，尤其是在南方村子裡傳統市場地下室的豬血湯。

Because I, who exist in the realm darker than the darkest night, set out to search for a perfect island more than perfect.

因為我在比最黑的夜還要黑的夜裡，出發去找比最完美還要完美的島嶼。

Slowly, I turn the doorknob, which has never been lubricated in the last full moon night, exactly twenty-three hours, fifty-seven minutes and seventeen seconds ago. I loathe the rusty smell yet aroused by the inextricable fascination of the squeaky noise, when the two pieces of oxidized metal rub their shoulders. When that gate is shot once again, I find I could see the forged signature on my elementary school grade paper when I am nine; I find I could hear that Xiangsheng playing on the large speakers in my living room out of the hearing aid worn by me, at 71. I find I know the thoughts of the pet turtle belonging to my neighbor when it emerges from hibernation that very springtime.

我慢條斯理地轉動著從上個月圓日前二十三個小時五十七分十七秒之後就再也沒有上過潤滑油的門把，我討厭鐵鏽的味道但對於兩塊金屬因為鐵鏽摩擦時產生滋滋喀喀的聲音有著不可自拔地迷戀。當門再次被關上的時候，我發現我可以看見九歲時候的家庭聯絡本上的偽造簽名、聽到我七十一歲戴上助聽器前客廳的大音箱裡面播放的對口相聲、知道鄰居陽堂上寵物烏龜那一年春天從冬眠起來之後心裡頭的念頭。

When the tentacles of the afternoon sunset crawl through the keyhole of the copper padlock hanging on the wooden window frame, nearly shut, I decide to put on my preferred bumblebee yellow tie around my neck. That cloth is measured at 13,413 kilometers long, just enough to reach the only branch of the banyan tree by that door of my house. I determine to fasten my memory with your memory with the tie, resembling those entangled, black and blue tongues entangling my neck. Certainly, I know that I can pull the trigger of that revolver.

當傍晚的夕陽的觸手伸入不知何時忘記關緊的木門窗框上的銅鎖的眼睛，我選擇戴上我最喜歡的那一條淺黃色火麻材質織成的領帶。領帶足足有一萬三千四百一十三公里長，剛好的可以繞過家門口那棵榕樹的唯一的樹枝。我選擇用著條領帶綁著你的記憶中我的記憶，就像圍繞著我的脖子上的那條深紅黛紫與淺黃色領帶交纏的舌頭。我知道我能扣下左輪槍的板機。

What I have just told you is a story that had probably never happened. Possibly, the real story is still missing, and yet, it is exactly about that time when Kūkai and Saichō, separately and jointly sank to the bottom of the ocean, silently.<sup>6</sup>

我知道我所說的是從來沒有發生過的故事。就是隨船沉沒、隨船沈默的空海與最澄。

Samana Sagaranda  
沙門海樂

#### Notes

1. The words mean 'miserable many-thoughts,' literally in Pāli, referring to the physical body which is subject to various sick thoughts, ill intentions, and miserable mental formations.
2. Emperor Sizong was the seventeenth and last emperor of the Ming Dynasty, and the last Chinese Han emperor to rule China. In 1644, when Li Zicheng broke through the city gate of Beijing, Emperor Sizong hanged himself on a tree branch in Coal Mountain Park (Jingshan Park) in Beijing.
3. Kūkai 空海 (774 – 835 CE), also known as Kōbō-Daishi (the Grand Master who Promotes Buddha Dharma), a title awarded posthumously by the Japanese emperor then, is a Japanese Buddhist monk and founder the Esoteric Shingon school of Buddhism.
4. Saichō 最澄 (767 – 822 CE) is the founder of the Tendai school of Buddhism and was awarded the posthumous title of Dengyō-Daishi (the Grand Master who Propagated Buddhist Teaching).
5. Bhaisajyaguru dharani or the mantra of Medicine Buddha, which reads:  
*namo bhagavate bhaisajyaguru vaiḍūryaprabharājāya  
tathāgatāya arahate samyaksambuddhāya tadyathā:  
oṃ bhaiṣajye bhaiṣajye bhaiṣajya-samudgate svāhā.*
6. In 803 CE, Kūkai and Saichō traveled to China by the fleet of Emperor Kanmu's diplomatic mission to the Tang Dynasty of China. According to historical records, there were four diplomatic ships. Due to strong winds or typhoon during the initial diplomatic mission, these ships were forced to turn to Fukuoka, Japan for a period of time. When the four ships set sail for China again, they encountered another storm. After the storm, only two ships separately carrying Kūkai and Saichō survived the turmoil and arrived at the coast of China. The other two ships went missing, never to be found.

#### Author

**Venerable Sagaranda Tien 海樂** is a Buddhist monk juggling with his Eastness and Westness. Born and raised in Taiwan, Tien came to the U.S. for graduate studies in engineering where he earned his Master's and Doctorate degrees. While settling down in his research and engineering career, he encountered Buddhism by "accidentally" attending meditation retreats. The experience with meditation gradually changed his perspective on his career goal and life. In 2010, he decided to dedicate his life to practicing Buddhism by receiving monastic ordination in Southeast Asia.

Tien is a resident monk and the Secretary of the U.S. Zen Institute located in Germantown, Maryland, a Buddhist organization promoting Buddhist teachings and meditation. He considers himself a student of religion, literature, philosophy, art, and science.