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White Deer: Four Columns

Translated from the Chinese by Elaine Wong

—based upon a myth and traditions of the Thao, a Taiwanese indigenous tribe whose ancestors were said to have chased after a white deer for half a month from Ali Mountain to Sun Moon Lake. Among the fourteen aboriginal tribes recognized by the Taiwan government, the Thao is one of the smallest, with a population of a few hundreds. Due to the construction of a hydro power plant in the Sun Moon Lake area by the Japanese colonial government in the 1930s, the whole Thao village was submerged under water, forcing the tribe to move. Their home was devastated again in the 921 Earthquake in 1999.

Perhaps the white deer leaps from a dream...
In a golden afternoon, as we wake from a nap
under the tree, a white bolt of light flashes
before our eyes, prompts us to run forward.
Compared with the white deer's liveness and
fancy, our flesh-and-blood hound is too heavy
a shadow. Toiling far behind, his four limbs
switch to touch the ground. The white deer
is a reflection of moonbeams. At night, when
we search along the creek and take sips from
the cold mountain stream, her milk limpidly
ripples on the water, a sudden reminder
for the young hunter, leaving home for the
first time, of the *mochi* that he put on the

younger sister's breast before departing. An old hunter says, the New Year is approaching; we got to catch it, we must catch it. Catch it even after another sunrise, another mountain crossed. Catch it even if night darkens again and the way home gets longer and longer, like a linen thread unrolling. We slash grass and cut tree branches, marking the way as we go.

I remember neither the weight of clouds nor the tincture of dreams. Don't ask me how we mountaineers walk into the basin and reveal a page of myth yet to be written. The white deer is pure light that illumines the wordless book of heaven. When we are tired of reading birds' and beasts' body languages, tired of making archers' gestures, it unveils to us a new vocabulary: is that the sea? Brilliant as the sun, as the crescent moon, a watery mirror hall where resonating green colors shine about. The young hunter throws the insides of the muntjacs he caught into the mirror. Exhilarated, scores of shimmering mirror goblins rush forth. Let's call them fish, water creatures that transform heavy shadows on

land to fluid gleams. Gently, they enter my gut, my dreams, spreading an abstract fishnet to gather old snow, new sprouts, spring rain, autumn songs. The old hunter says, fiction, fiction is the sturdiest fishnet—fiction is

good...The white deer swims to the center of the water, then sinks, not leaving a single crack on the mirror, as if a ray of light fused into another. We are left behind on the shore to ponder. We have not caught the deer, nor have we lost it. We imagine and recall what we could have and couldn't have. The ripples moving in layers are our illuminating thoughts. We learn how to slash-and-burn, pound rice, create floating islets with rafts to catch fish, carve boats out of camphor trees. We make bamboo fish traps and float hooks, trade salt and tobacco with other tribes, and wait for the grey-cheeked fulvetta to sing on our left side. We will meet a young anthropologist who, arriving with photography equipment, will take our pictures and measurements of our bodies. We will hear him say, oh, hurry, these tribes will be extinct soon. We will hear

our sisters' pestle song boom all over the basin. Our village will be the new reservoir.

In the very center of this big island, where mountains surround and water blends with sand, we raise a fantasized white deer and a bright mirror. The young hunter ages and eagerly bootlegs liquor, diluting all too heavy shadows into moonlight in his canoe. All constructions inside and outside the mirror might one day sink to its bottom, traceless. The mirror reflects, witnesses our existence. You ask our name? Like those residing on the south-eastern mountain who call themselves Bunun, like those in the east with tattooed faces who name themselves Seediq, we give ourselves the name Thao, meaning *human*. We are human, a sign, a posture, an archeological noun simplified to be a synonym of *oblivion* and *ambiguity* in the dictionary, a proper noun mispronounced and misspelled. We are a noun, and a verb too, following the white deer, leaping out of the dictionary...