

- a picture holding the whole ocean, and how does this image relate to the origami of a white crane?
3. How does the last image relate to the romantic and optimistic elements of the poem's other images?
 4. Examine the poem as a post-Cultural Revolution expression and point out and discuss its various images that suggest oblique social and political commentary.



CAN XUE

Can Xue, also known as Deng Xiao-hua (b. 1953), was born in Hunan Province. In 1957, her parents were condemned as ultra-Rightists. In 1959, the family of nine was moved to a tiny hut at the foot of Yueyusban Mountain. Can Xue graduated from grade school in 1966, early in the Cultural Revolution, and went to work in a factory for ten years. After her marriage in 1978, she and her husband established themselves as tailors. "Hut on the Mountain" is from her first collection of short stories in English translation, Dialogues in Paradise (1989). It falls in the tradition of allegorical treatments that express a criticism of China's social and political failures.

Hut on the Mountain

On the bleak and barren mountain behind our house stood a wooden hut. 1

Day after day I busied myself by tidying up my desk drawers. When I wasn't doing that I would sit in the armchair, my hands on my knees, listening to the tumultuous sounds of the north wind whipping against the fir-bark roof of the hut, and the howling of the wolves echoing in the valleys. 2

"Huh, you'll never get done with those drawers," said Mother, forcing a smile. "Not in your lifetime." 3

"There's something wrong with everyone's ears," I said with suppressed annoyance. "There are so many thieves wandering about our house in the moonlight, when I turn on the light I can see countless tiny holes poked by fingers in the windowscreens. In the next room, Father and you snore terribly, rattling the utensils in the kitchen cabinet. Then I kick about in my bed, turn my swollen head on the pillow and hear the man 4

locked up in the hut banging furiously against the door. This goes on till daybreak."

"You give me a terrible start," Mother said, "every time you come into my room looking for things." She fixed her eyes on me as she backed toward the door. I saw the flesh of one of her cheeks contort ridiculously. 5

One day I decided to go up to the mountain to find out what on earth was the trouble. As soon as the wind let up, I began to climb. I climbed and climbed for a long time. The sunshine made me dizzy. Tiny white flames were flickering among the pebbles. I wandered about, coughing all the time. The salty sweat from my forehead was streaming into my eyes. I couldn't see or hear anything. When I reached home, I stood outside the door for a while and saw that the person reflected in the mirror had mud on her shoes and dark purple pouches under her eyes. 6

"It's some disease," I heard them snickering in the dark. 7

When my eyes became adapted to the darkness inside, they'd hidden themselves—laughing in their hiding places. I discovered they had made a mess of my desk drawers while I was out. A few dead moths and dragonflies were scattered on the floor—they knew only too well that these were treasures to me. 8

"They sorted the things in the drawers for you," little sister told me, "when you were out." She stared at me, her left eye turning green. 9

"I hear wolves howling," I deliberately tried to scare her. "They keep running around the house. Sometimes they poke their heads in through the cracks in the door. These things always happen after dusk. You get so scared in your dreams that cold sweat drips from the soles of your feet. Everyone in this house sweats this way in his sleep. You have only to see how damp the quilts are." 10

I felt upset because some of the things in my desk drawers were missing. Keeping her eyes on the floor, Mother pretended she knew nothing about it. But I had a feeling she was glaring ferociously at the back of my head since the spot would become numb and swollen whenever she did that. I also knew they had buried a box with my chess set by the well behind the house. They had done it many times, but each time I would drag the chess set out. When I dug for it, they would turn on the light and poke their heads out the window. In the face of my defiance they always tried to remain calm. 11

"Up there on the mountain," I told them at mealtime, "there is a hut." 12

They all lowered their heads, drinking soup noisily. Probably no one heard me. 13

"Lots of big rats were running wildly in the wind," I raised my voice and put down the chopsticks. "Rocks were rolling down the mountain and crashing into the back of our house. And you were so scared cold sweat dripped from your soles. Don't you remember? You only have to look at your quilts. Whenever the weather's fine, you're airing the quilts; the clothesline out there is always strung with them." 14

Father stole a glance at me with one eye, which, I noticed, was the all-too-familiar eye of a wolf. So that was it! At night he became one of the wolves running around the house, howling and wailing mournfully. 15

"White lights are swaying back and forth everywhere." I clutched Mother's shoulder with one hand. "Everything is so glaring that my eyes blur from the pain. You simply can't see a thing. But as soon as I return to my room, sit down in my armchair, and put my hands on my knees, I can see the fir-bark roof clearly. The image seems very close. In fact, every one of us must have seen it. Really, there's somebody squatting inside. He's got two big purple pouches under his eyes, too, because he stays up all night." 16

Father said, "Every time you dig up the well and hit stone with a screeching sound, you make Mother and me feel as if we were hanging in midair. We shudder at the sound and kick with bare feet but can't reach the ground." To avoid my eyes, he turned his face toward the window, the panes of which were thickly specked with fly droppings. 17

"At the bottom of the well," he went on, "there's a pair of scissors which I dropped some time ago. In my dreams I always make up my mind to fish them out. But as soon as I wake, I realize I've made a mistake. In fact, no scissors have ever fallen into the well. Your mother says positively that I've made a mistake. But I will not give up. It always steals into my mind again. Sometimes while I'm in bed, I am suddenly seized with regret: the scissors lie rusting at the bottom of the well, why shouldn't I go fish them out? I've been troubled by this for dozens of years. See my wrinkles? My face seems to have been furrowed. Once I actually went to the well and tried to lower a bucket into it. But the rope was thick and slippery. Suddenly my hands lost their grip and the bucket flopped with a loud boom, breaking into pieces in the well. I rushed back to the house, looked into the mirror, and saw the hair on my left temple had turned completely white." 18

"How that north wind pierces!" I hunched my shoulders. My face turned black and blue with cold. "Bits of ice are forming in my stomach. When I sit down in my armchair I can hear them clinking away." 19

I had been intending to give my desk drawers a cleaning, but Mother was always stealthily making trouble. She'd walk to and fro in the next room, stamping, stamping, to my great distraction. I tried to ignore it, so I got a pack of cards and played, murmuring "one, two, three, four, five. . . ." 20

The pacing stopped all of a sudden and Mother poked her small dark green face into the room and mumbled, "I had a very obscene dream. Even now my back is dripping cold sweat." 21

"And your soles, too," I added. "Everyone's soles drip cold sweat. You aired your quilt again yesterday. It's usual enough." 22

Little sister sneaked in and told me that Mother had been thinking of breaking my arms because I was driving her crazy by opening and shutting the drawers. She was so tortured by the sound that every time she heard it, she'd soak her head in cold water until she caught a bad cold. 23

"This didn't happen by chance." Sister's stares were always so pointed 24
that tiny pink measles broke out on my neck. "For example, I've heard
Father talking about the scissors for perhaps twenty years. Everything has
its own cause from way back. Everything."

So I oiled the sides of the drawers. And by opening and shutting them 25
carefully, I managed to make no noise at all. I repeated this experiment for
many days and the pacing in the next room ceased. She was fooled. This
proves you can get away with anything as long as you take a little precau-
tion. I was very excited over my success and worked hard all night. I was
about to finish tidying up my drawers when the light suddenly went out.
I heard Mother's sneering laugh in the next room.

"That light from your room glares so that it makes all my blood vessels 26
throb and throb, as though some drums were beating inside. Look," she
said, pointing to her temple, where the blood vessels bulged like fat earth-
worms. "I'd rather get scurvy. There are throbbings throughout my body
day and night. You have no idea how I'm suffering. Because of this ail-
ment, your father once thought of committing suicide." She put her fat
hand on my shoulder, an icy hand dripping with water.

Someone was making trouble by the well. I heard him letting the bucket 27
down and drawing it up, again and again; the bucket hit against the wall
of the well—boom, boom, boom. At dawn, he dropped the bucket with a
loud bang and ran away. I opened the door of the next room and saw
Father sleeping with his vein-ridged hand clutching the bedside, groaning
in agony. Mother was beating the floor here and there with a broom; her
hair was disheveled. At the moment of daybreak, she told me, a huge
swarm of hideous beetles flew in through the window. They bumped
against the walls and flopped onto the floor, which now was scattered with
their remains. She got up to tidy the room, and as she was putting her feet
into her slippers, a hidden bug bit her toe. Now her whole leg was swollen
like a thick lead pipe.

"He," Mother pointed to Father, who was sleeping stuporously, "is 28
dreaming it is he who is bitten."

"In the little hut on the mountain, someone is groaning, too. The black 29
wind is blowing, carrying grape leaves along with it."

"Do you hear?" In the faint light of morning, Mother put her ear against 30
the floor, listening with attention. "These bugs hurt themselves in their fall
and passed out. They charged into the room earlier, at the moment of
daybreak."

I did go up to the mountain that day, I remember. At first I was sitting 31
in the cane chair, my hands on my knees. Then I opened the door and
walked into the white light. I climbed up the mountain, seeing nothing but
the white pebbles glowing with flames.

There were no grapevines, nor any hut. 32

*Translated from the Chinese by Ronald R. Janssen
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STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Describe the narrator's relations with her family members. How are her relationships different from the idealized constructions of the family in your society?
2. The father has an obsessive dream of retrieving a pair of scissors from the bottom of the well. What criticism of the older generation, the generation that participated in the Communist Revolution, can you read into this passage?
3. What is the mother's response to the daughter's actions, that is, to her intellectual activism? Does the story present the mother's character in a realistic way? Explain your answer.
4. How is the narrator different from her parents and sister? What criticisms of Chinese society are expressed through her thoughts, actions, and point of view?
5. What is the symbolic function of the hut on the mountain? Discuss the significance of the story's conclusion.



WANG XIAONI

The literary career of Wang Xiaoni (b. 1955) illustrates the politically charged nature of writing in late-twentieth-century China. A graduate of Jilin University in northern China, she is a member of the Chinese Writers Association of Jilin. Because of ideological differences with the state authorities, she and her husband, the poet and critic Xu Jingya, were unable to find jobs in Jilin. As a result, they are now living in Guangdong Province in southern China.

Dark Night on a Southbound Train

On this night
dark as pitch
countless black wheels
pump through
invisible space.

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