

殘雪：山上的小屋

The Hut on the Hill

By Can Xue

Translated by Michael S. Duke

Introduction

Can Xue is the pen name of Deng Xiaohua 鄧小華. Born in Changsha, Hunan in 1953, she began writing in 1983, and was first published two years later. “Mud Street”, her first story, establishes the basic theme which informs all her writings—an isolated world whose hidebound characters are completely unaware of their condition. Can Xue pursues her vision single-mindedly, revealing a pathological, ingrown world, a world without relief.

“The Hut on the Hill” is part of a series of short stories begun in 1984 after “Mud Street”. Other notable titles in this series include “The Skylight”, “The Ox”, and “Dialogues in Heaven”. These stories, stripped of any pretense at plot development, reveal the author’s pathological vision within tightly controlled limits and exhibit much greater force and creativity than “Mud Street”. Her most recent works, “The Hoary Old Floating Cloud” and “The Apple Tree in the Hallway”, may be seen as an attempt to return to the longer format of “Mud Street” without sacrificing the intensity of her shorter pieces such as “The Hut on the Hill”.

Can Xue’s work has appeared in various literary magazines in China. In addition, her stories have also been published in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

—Jon Solomon

ON THE barren hill behind my house there is a hut built of wooden planks.

At home every day I clean up my drawer. When I’m not cleaning up my drawer, I sit in a big armchair, put my hands on my knees, and listen to the whistling

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sounds: the wind beating fiercely on the pine plank roof of the hut, the echo of wolves howling in the valley.

"You never ever finish cleaning up your drawer," Mama says, looking at me with a phoney smile.

"Everyone's hearing's gone bad." Holding back my anger, I continue: "There are so many thieves pacing around outside our house in the moonlight. I turned on the light and saw that someone had poked countless holes in the window. In the next room the sound of you and father snoring was unusually loud, causing all the bottles and jars to jump around in the cupboards. I pressed my feet against the bed frame, turned my swollen head sideways, and heard the person locked up in the hut pounding furiously on the wooden door; this sound persisted until dawn."

"Every time you come into my room looking for something I tremble with fear." Mama stares at me cautiously as she retreats toward the door. I notice that one side of her face is twitching ridiculously in fright.

One day I decided to climb the hill and see what is really up there. I started out as soon as the wind stopped. I climbed for a long time, the sun beat down making me dizzy and blurring my vision, every pebble shimmered with tiny white sparks. Coughing, I reeled around on the hill. The salty sweat on my eyebrows dripped into my eyes. I didn't see anything. I didn't hear anything. When I got home I stood outside my room for a while and saw that the person in the mirror was wearing shoes completely covered with mud, and that her eyes were ringed with two black halos.

"This is some sort of disease." I hear my family laughing furtively in some dark corner.

By the time my eyes adjust to the darkness of the room, they have already hidden themselves somewhere—laughing as they disappear. I discover that they took advantage of my absence to tip up my drawer and make a big mess out of it, dumping several dead moths and dragonflies onto the floor; they know very well those are my favourite things.

"They helped you clean up your drawer when you weren't here," my little sister tells me with a blank stare, as her left eye turns green.

"I hear wolves howling," I say, deliberately trying to frighten her, "a whole pack of wolves running back and forth around the house. Some of them can even stick their heads through the crack in the door. These things come with the dark. When they're asleep in this house, everybody's feet break out in a cold sweat. Look how damp the quilts are."

My mind is in a turmoil because some of my things are missing from my drawer. Mother lowers her eyes and pretends to know nothing about it, but I can feel her hostile stare on the back of my head. Whenever she stares at the back of my head, the point on my scalp she stares at tingles and swells. I know they have buried my box of *go* pieces next to the well out back; they've done this countless times before. Every time I dig it up in the middle of the night. While I'm digging, they always turn on the light and poke their heads out of the window, unmoved by my resistance.

At dinner I tell them: "There's a little hut on the top of the hill."

They are all noisily slurping their soup with their heads down and probably don't hear a word I say.

"There was a whole pack of rats scurrying frantically about in the wind." I raise my voice and put my chopsticks down. "Gravel from the hillside came crashing down against the wall behind our house and you were all so frightened when you heard it that your feet were covered in cold sweat. Do you remember? Just look at your quilts and see. As soon as the sun comes out, you hang them out to dry; the clothes-lines are always loaded down with your quilts."

My father glares at me suddenly with one eye, a very familiar wolf's eye. I have a sudden revelation: every night my father turns into one of those wolves that runs around our house howling mournfully.

"There's dazzling white light everywhere." I dig my fingers into Mother's shoulder and shake her. "It's so bright that it makes my eyes water; you can't see anything at all. But as soon as I return to my room, sit in the big armchair and put my hands on my knees, I can see the pine plank roof so clearly. That image is so close, you must have seen it too. In fact, everyone in the family has seen it. There really is someone crouching in there; he's got two big purple smudges under his eyes, too, from staying up all night."

"Every time you make that noise digging at that granite by the side of the well, your mom and I are suspended in mid-air; we shiver and shake all over, feeling around with our bare feet, but we can't touch the ground." Father turns his face toward the window to avoid my gaze. The pane is pockmarked with fly specks. "There's a pair of scissors I dropped at the bottom of the well. In my dreams I secretly resolve to fish them up. But when I wake up I always discover that I've made a mistake, that I never really dropped any scissors; your mother always swears that I made a mistake, but I can't get those scissors out of my mind; the next time I remember them again. I'll be lying down and suddenly I'll feel a sense of regret because the scissors are rusting at the bottom of the well; why don't I go fish them out? I've been worrying about this for several decades now, you can see the wrinkles on my face are like knife cuts. One time I actually tried to lower the bucket down the well, but the rope was heavy and slippery, my hands went limp, and the bucket made a tremendous racket as it plummeted into the well. I ran back into the house, glanced at myself in the mirror, and saw that the hair on my left temple had turned completely white."

"The north wind is so fierce." I scrunch up my shoulders, my face breaks out in black and blue blotches. "Little pieces of ice have formed in my stomach. When I sit in the big armchair, I can hear them endlessly clinking in there."

I always want to clean up my drawer properly, but Mama is always secretly against it. The tap-tapping of her footsteps pacing back and forth in the next room makes me imagine all sorts of weird things. In order to forget that sound, I take out a deck of cards and start counting: "One, two, three, four, five . . ." The pacing stops suddenly, however, and Mother pokes her little blackish green face into the room and says in a low drone: "I had a very vulgar dream and my back is still covered in cold sweat."

"And also the soles of your feet," I add. "The soles of everyone's feet are

covered in cold sweat. You hung the quilts out to dry yesterday. It's quite common."

Little Sister sneaks in to tell me that Mother always wants to break my arms because the sound I make opening and closing my drawer drives her crazy. That sound hurts her so much that she sticks her head in cold water; she soaks it until she catches a terrible cold.

"That's no accident." Little Sister's gaze is always a perfect blank; it pierces through me and makes the back of my neck break out in little red bumps. "Take Father for example; he's been talking about those scissors for twenty years or more. Everything has a long history."

I oil the sides of my drawer and open and close it very gently until it makes absolutely no sound. I try this for several days and the sound of pacing in the next room ceases. I've fooled her. It appears that you can get by deceitfully in many things as long as you are a bit careful. I become very excited and set out to work energetically through the night; my drawer looks like it's just about to be completely cleaned up, but suddenly the electric light bulb goes out. Mother snickers in the next room.

"The light coming from your room irritates me so much that my veins are pounding like a drum. Look here," she says, pointing to her temple; a fat round worm is lying there. "I would rather have scurvy. There's something drumming inside me all the time, making noises everywhere; you've never had such a feeling. Your father even contemplated suicide because of an illness like this." She reaches out and rests her fat hand on my shoulder; her hand feels as if it had been frozen, it never stops dripping.

Someone near the well is up to no good. I can hear him letting the bucket down over and over again; it makes a loud clattering sound as it hits the sides of the well. At dawn, he slams the bucket down and runs away. I open the door to the next room and see Father sleeping soundly; one of his hands, bulging with dark tendons, is painfully clawing the edge of the bed while he moans miserably in his dreams. Mother, her hair in disarray, is mechanically sweeping the floor. She tells me that at the crack of dawn a big swarm of long-horned beetles flew in the window, smashed into the wall, and fell all over the floor. She got out of bed to clean them up, but when she was putting on her slippers, a beetle hiding in one of her slippers bit her, and her entire leg has swollen up like a lead post.

"He," Mother says, pointing at Father sleeping soundly, "dreamed that he was the one who was bitten."

"In the hut on the hill someone is also moaning right now. The black wind is blowing some wild grape leaves around."

"Did you hear that?" In the half-light Mother concentrates her entire attention and puts her ear to the floor. "These creatures knocked themselves out when they hit the floor. They burst in just at the crack of dawn."

That day I actually climbed up the hill again. I remember it perfectly clearly. At first I sat in the rattan chair with my hands on my knees, then I opened the door and walked into the white light. When I climbed up the hill, all I could see were the sparks from the white pebbles; there were no wild grapes, there was no hut. ☐