

布衣之诗

Song of Coarse Clothes

By Cai Dong

One

Meng Jiuyuan stood with the old man in the yard, by the west wall where honeysuckle, forsythia, snake gourd, and flowering plum used to grow.

All that was left was a pomegranate tree, planted in early spring twenty years before. When it flowered in May, the neighbors said, With a tree in the yard, it's like someone's home. The tree had been there twenty years, but with nobody to tend it, it was just growing wild, flowering and fruiting by season. Now, at the beginning of autumn, the fruit was not yet ripe, the skin still a shiny green.

The gate to the chicken coop was open, opened by who knows what breeze on what day. The old man closed the gate and said, The house sure has gone to hell in a hurry with nobody living here.

The two strolled around the yard, and, just like last time, their gazes ended up converging on the next-door neighbor's roof, the neighbor whose house faced theirs. Meng Jiuyuan's lips were quivering, the old man's mouth hanging half open. Neither of them said a thing. Silence is better able than speech to contain complex emotion.

Grass poked through roof tiles, a few of them broken, showing the wooden beams within.

The old man pursed his lips and said, You go up and weed the roof. Who knows? The Yus might move back one of these days.

Every time he brought his father back to the old house, he would climb up and weed the neighbor's

roof before he ever swept his own yard. He crouched on the roof and looked down at the yard, in which there had once been an almond tree and a parasol tree, now a parasol tree stump. Three years before, a bunch of scavengers had felled it and sold the wood. In Meng Jiuyuan's memory, the parasol tree was always associated with summer. On free and easy summer days, retirees would sit along the wall, and a dog would stretch out on its side. Leafy branches would hang over the wall and shade the alley. Meng Jiuyuan would never forget. It was so vivid he could almost slide his gaze along the branches and enter the scene of a serene summer afternoon. But now the parasol tree was gone, the almond tree dead. Its dry bark was like a wrinkly hand, old and gray, that stretched out its fingers, grabbing Meng Jiuyuan's arm and dragging him back to the past. There had been a flower patch in the yard, planted with golden plum, plantain lily and cockscomb. A fluffy yellow cat used to snooze on the windowsill or lurk in the holly grove. Now the trees, flowers, the yellow cat had all disappeared, and the coal shed had collapsed. The wormwood growing through the cracks in the floor bricks exuded an intense air of dilapidation.

Meng Jiuyuan gazed down at the yard, which seemed a decrepit organism spluttering for breath. Its emaciation and exhaustion slowly evaporated, thickening the air. It almost seemed as if it might crumble away under the weight of his gaze, at any time.

One evening the previous week, the old man had sat down on the sofa. Give me CCTV-1, he'd said.

When he moved in with his son, he wasn't so

familiar with the television, and was almost afraid of the remote control. He could never figure out how to change channels or switch it on and off. The digital kettle was also bothersome. He would hit buttons at random to try to get it to give him hot water. To this day he found the newfangled devices a mystery.

He stared at the screen and said, I want to go home for a visit, you book the tickets.

And so they had returned to the old house one ash-blue afternoon.

The old man shook out two thin bedspreads, spreading a musty spell. He frowned, put the spreads on the clothesline and patted them once or twice.

While the spreads were sunning, the old man looked up and said, I'll go look for Jinsong. Meng Jiuyuan looked over and asked, Not again? Dad, you stay put.

The old man shook his head and went out on his own. Soon, Meng Jiuyuan heard the neighbors greeting him, then laughter – insincere, flippant laughter. He stood up on the roof and saw the old man with his hands behind his back walking towards the river. A few idlers went back to their folding stools, but kept pointing at the old man's retreating form.

He descended the ladder, went out through the gate and walked over to stand in front of his old neighbors.

Teacher Xue opened his eyes wide and said, Oh, you're back. His eyes narrowed into some kind of indescribable polygon.

Teacher Xue, do you remember Fang Jin? Do you know where he's living at? He regretted asking immediately.

In the city. Hasn't been back in years, not even for holidays. Xue spoke really softly like he was afraid of startling something. By his feet was a low wooden table with a lidded mug and thermos. The old men would sit here every fair afternoon, spring, summer

and autumn, sipping their tea. Thus slipped the days imperceptibly away.

Meng Jiuyuan reached the river and discovered the old man dozing against a ginkgo tree, whose leaves cast fan-shaped shadows on his face. Meng Jiuyuan sat down with his back against the tree. His gaze crossed the river to a small mixed grove, out of which small birds would fly from time to time, drawing fine lines on the still surface with their long, thin beaks. Several willows trees dipped the tips of their branches in the water.

His eyes widened. On the other side of the river, behind the willow branches, stood a swan goose.

There were no other geese in the sky. It was alone. It bent down to take a sip from the river, turned its head to preen its light gray feathers, then lay still in the grass.

He kept gazing until a mist on the water gradually obscured the bird, the river, the grass, and the trees.

Evening was released from the sky, the colors of dusk spreading out little by little, flooding the homes, the river, the junipers, the magnolias, the amorpha. There was a chill in the air, though the sun still lingered above the southern horizon. He saw those same rays angling into the room onto his desk, onto the news story he was working on.

Meng Jiuyuan nudged the old man and said, Dad, let's go home. The old man opened his eyes and said, I dreamed of Jinsong. He was wearing that white tank top. Meng Jiuyuan looked at his father, took in his drooping eyelids, his lost expression, his pallor. Perhaps a troubled old man would not find it so easy to lose himself in a dream. Maybe he hadn't been dreaming. Maybe he called Jinsong to mind as soon as he closed his eyes.

The old man had again failed to find Jinsong. Nor had Meng Jiuyuan managed to find out any news about Fang Jin. When they left the next day the clouds

were piled up into a heavy mass, as if the sky was about to fall. The bolt passed the lip of the slot, the shackle went through the ring and clicked into the groove of the lock: home had been sealed behind two wooden doors. Father and son followed the walled alley out of the old residential district. Meng Jiuyuan looked back to see the homes seem to press darkly together like a tarnished piece of silver. In his eyes they were woven into a rope, a rope that kept drawing him back time and time again.

Two

Just calling the waiter over to take away the towelettes, Meng Jiuyuan recalled a short separation from his wife Zhao Chan the year before.

That evening, Meng Jiuyuan had taken his college classmate out to dinner at an upper mid-range Cantonese restaurant. They had not been close in college, but Meng felt touched that an acquaintance on a business trip to Shenzhen would want to reconnect. To him, every opportunity to talk to an old friend in this city was precious. His wife rushed over from work and took over ordering the soup and seafood dishes. Dinner conversation was a bit awkward, but in just the right way, appropriate to the nature of their relationship. Their topics of conversation were not commonplace; nobody mentioned national affairs or international politics.

It was the perfect evening. Too good to be true, it made Meng Jiuyuan worry something bad was going to happen. They had almost finished the meal, and it looked like host and guest were about to part, when his wife raised a wet towelette packet, complained about the quality and told the waiter to get rid of them. She took another packet out of her handbag and said, These are “Vinda” brand towelettes. I bought them in Hong Kong. They won’t split when wet, and

they’re exceptionally pliant. Meng Jiuyuan glanced at her and found her smile a bit strange. Then he felt it, a conspicuous kink in the fluent arc of the evening.

When it came time to pay the bill, she asked to take the leftovers home. He interrogated her with his eyes, as if to say, What’s gotten in to you? Will you eat them when you get home? Will you? Avoiding his gaze, Zhao Chan got up to go settle up. Soon the waiter came back over to collect the wet towelettes. Meng Jiuyuan put his hand on his towelette and asked, What are you doing? The waiter withdrew his hand and explained, The lady said to take away the ones you hadn’t used. His classmate picked one up and said, I’m not used to such napkins, take it away. With exaggerated movements, Meng Jiuyuan pulled open the plastic packaging of the towelette he was holding and said, I’ll use mine.

The classmate managed a smile, bracing himself for the impending connubial catastrophe.

On the way home they did not complain, much less argue. They fell silent, both sad and confused. Everything had gone to hell at the last moment, as if she had indulged some self-destructive impulse. She had always been a generous and understanding wife, he an easy-going husband. What exactly had gone wrong? They kept sending memory’s sentries back to the scene just now, finding it muddled and indistinct.

Four whole months later, she moved back in the house. Finally they could have a real conversation about that peculiar evening.

That day, she had again won the prize for the Most Restrained Teller at the Fuhua Road branch. She reached out and accepted the prize certificate with the red velour cover. Unsure what kind of expression would go with the prize, she suddenly became aware of all of the nerves in her face, and her facial muscles started to cramp. The branch manager announced, Miss Zhao, you always respond in the most appropri-

ate way when dealing with an irate customer. You are truly a star of forbearance. Then he came close and said in a low voice, Don't worry, your year-end bonus will be your reward! His body language breathed temptation, like arcane innuendo, or like subtle coercion. All she could do was yank the certificate out of his hands, pull apart the stiff covers to expose the pliant inner leaf, and then pose for a photo with a proud expression on her face. As if she had really been given an extraordinary honor.

That day, Meng Jiuyuan had gone to the office and had been grasped by the arm by another supplicant, who knelt down in the concourse just inside the entrance and stared at him imploringly when he turned to look, another unfortunate soul he was unable to help. He extricated his arm and turned, entered the elevator, stood with his back to the door, and did not look at the kneeling man again. He was afraid he might not be able to forget the way he looked.

Come evening, they'd assumed they could control their emotions, and entertain Meng Jiuyuan's classmate as if nothing was the matter, as if they could reminisce happily with exactly the right amount of warmth, as if neither host nor guest would suffer. When they looked back on that evening they discovered a variety of negative emotions, not to mention exhaustion, repression, self-pity, all of which was ultimately expressed in a warped and disturbing way.

Now another waiter was coming to collect another set of wet towelettes. Another restaurant meal was over. He and Zhao Chan stood up and walked out, the old man following behind. When they got home, Meng Jiuyuan sat in the family room for a while. He talked to his wife and watched a miniseries with his father, playing the leading role in the public space of the home. When he felt his wife and father were satisfied with his performance, he crept away and turned into his study.

He pressed down on the flexible gooseneck of the table lamp to distribute the light evenly over the two off-white pages of writing paper. During the separation, a few new college graduates arrived in the office, an opportunity for him to transfer out of the city news department. Before then, his life in a nutshell had been 'rushing to the scene.' He would wolf down his rice, always ready to charge out to witness the most painful scenes in society and try to snatch a few tidbits of news. When he got back to the office he would write under the demanding eye of the editor, covered in sweat by the time he finished. Then he would go and have a midnight snack, half asleep. The next day he would not dare read the newspaper. He had written the two drafts now sitting on his desk since becoming an editor. He finally had the time, the mood and, he felt, the wisdom to untie the knot in his heart. When he dipped into the murky events of over a decade ago, he discovered the best approach was to write them up as a news story. As soon as he picked up the pen, power coursed along the tungsten wire in his mind, awakening his professional passion for the facts. He was like a strong young fish swimming up the stream of his memory until arriving at a certain space and time.

He decided to write it out, not type, shining every word like a pearl before consigning it to paper.

He remembered the first draft, all of a couple of sentences, had taken him three full days to write.

This is how it turned out. *Exclusive report (by Meng Jiuyuan). Recently, two families in the city of Liuzhou had a dispute on account of home renovations. The Yu family had raised the roof, to the annoyance of their next-door neighbors, the Mengs. The two families got into an argument and there was a physical altercation. The Residential Committee is now mediating a settlement.*

It was a few months before he came back to this handwritten report. A lot had happened in the meantime: he had brought his father home to live with him,



Illustration by Yuan Chong

mended relations with his wife and got some nice new furniture and home electronics. What with his newfound desire to enjoy his daily life, the report had slipped his mind.

Only when his father proposed making a trip home did he vaguely recall what he had written. He got out the draft from underneath a pile of papers and read it through several times. When he had finished writing he had felt relieved, as if he had gotten something out of his system. When he read it again the tone did not seem quite right, especially the first sentence.

Having been a reporter for four years, he knew

there were a number of ways to write up the facts of a news story.

He quickly wrote the second draft: *Exclusive report (by Meng Jiuyuan). Recently, two families in Liuzhou have had a dispute on account of home renovations. The Yu family raised the height of the roof, to the annoyance of the Mengs. During the dispute one Mr. Yu hit and injured a member of the Meng household. The police are investigating.*

It still wasn't right. There were three people involved in the incident. And he was one of them. In the first sentence he provided readers with all the information they needed to understand the incident. It

seemed a flawless opening. But as an eye-witness, he felt stifled. In the catacombs of his memory, he was at an impasse.

Half a month previously he and his father had made the trip. The day they left the sky was so low it was almost scraping the roofs of the houses in the distance. In the airport bus, the old house kept on receding until it vanished. Several hours later, the plane took off. He enjoyed the moment when the nose of the plane pulled powerfully up. Light, he relaxed back into the air. The plane soared past the clouds, and he looked out and saw how bountiful the sunlight was. A bright world faced him, flowing swiftly toward him.

Three

Half-asleep, Meng Jiuyuan's body was already in his ankle-length morning robe. He tied the belt automatically, as if he were still half-asleep. Only later was he sure he was the only one in the house. Zhao Chan was at work and the old man must be in the park doing his exercises.

He had his porridge, watched a documentary about wildebeest migration, watered the flowers with cooled tea and had another bowl of oatmeal. After the old man came back they played a game of Chinese chess. He knew that the third draft of the report was close, but he wanted to take it slow this time. It wasn't something he could just sit down and write. Maybe he was getting into the mood, maybe waiting for a flash of inspiration. He dimly perceived it was also possible he was secretly afraid, that he was putting it off.

Even if he didn't write, those lines had taken possession of him. If he busied himself in some task his motions would slow and his mind would wander until he forgot what he was doing.

In the evening the old man retired to his room after cleaning his false teeth. He only left the study

when he heard the sound of snoring. He saw Zhao Chan leaning on the armrest of the sofa with *Dream of the Red Chamber* at her feet. She'd never managed to transfer away from the teller counter, and her prize certificates with the red velour covers would appear from time to time in the trash bin. He fished the latest one out and saw she had torn off the name and ripped it up, scattering the scraps among the fish bones, the leftover rice, the tea leaves. Her fury at that moment was palpable, maintaining a hard material presence in the trash bin. But most of the time she was quiet. Maybe the book by her feet was one of the only ways she had of calming herself down.

He sat down by her side. She squeezed his hand and softly said, Let's have almond milk tea. She walked to the cabinet by the dinner table and got out two cup-and-saucer sets. The rims of the cups were edged with silver, faint, bright rings. It wasn't extravagant, but it was somehow uplifting.

Every once in a while she would buy an assortment of little cakes, take the English country village roseate treat rack down from the top shelf, put the cakes on the shelves of the rack, and make a pot of black tea. The two sat quietly, not eating much, not saying much. The teacups were steaming, spreading a tranquil air through the room. There were moments like this that allowed one to feel an infusion of the poetic, that made a day special, different from any other. What she most liked using was the Wedgwood china with the Peter Rabbit design, with fresh flowers, country meadows, leafy woods, foxes and bears and voles, a grassy slope, a log house with the white picket fence, gate open – all in soft, warm colors, a scene that would whisk one away into a fairy tale, a European hamlet time had forgot. Every time she had the inclination, Meng Jiuyuan would play along with her, never spoiling her mood. There were many ways in which she deserved his sympathy. For instance, she had to wear

a full uniform to work. And before she went to sleep she had to check the alarm clock over and over, even though she knew full well it was working properly. She had a recurring nightmare in which the battery on the alarm clock happened to die at the same time as her cell phone failed. By the time she woke up it was already too late. The nightmare had become a waking fear, growing realistic and vivid, to the point that once she even convinced herself the hands of the alarm clock had stopped at 3:40 a.m.

As the sweet almond scent wafted away, Zhao Chan sipped her tea. She said, I was flipping through *The Dream of the Red Chamber* this evening and noticed some new details, like when the author arranges for the servant Zhou Rui's boorish wife to deliver silk flowers to all the young ladies – it's really a beautiful touch, when you think about it.

Meng Jiuyuan nodded. His favorite scene was when Baoyu visits Daiyu on a rainy day for no particular reason – he just wants to see her no matter what the weather. There was something about the scene that was particularly heartwarming and reassuring, something of the eternal simplicity of daily life interspersed with moments of intense beauty, flashes of effortless elegance.

When Zhao Chan picked up her novel, Meng Jiuyuan took the opportunity to ease back into his own corner of the house.

But he just could not calm down. His mind was a blank, but also oppressively full. He sat there helplessly, until finally managing to finish a sentence.

Exclusive report (by Meng Jiuyuan). Recently there has been an assault in Liuzhou City.

This was quite a breakthrough, compared with the second version. Excited, he kept going. *The Yu family raised the height of the roofs while doing home renovations, to the annoyance of the Mengs, their next-door neighbors. The ensuing argument turned violent. Fists were thrown,*

and a member of the Meng family was injured. The local police station has assigned an officer to investigate.

He was coming to the crux of the story.

He consciously paused and took a deep breath. When he picked up the pen again the paper seemed to have a slope, down which the next sentence practically tumbled. *According to the preliminary results of the investigation, Mr. Yu is suspected of deliberately injuring Mr. Meng and has been taken into custody.*

He had managed to write it. Weakly, he let his mouth hang open and rested his forehead on his hands. He saw him, young Yu Jinsong wearing a white tank top, with bushy eyebrows, dark shining skin, and high cheekbones. If Jinsong were still alive he would now be middle-aged.

At this point came a sound he should have heard an hour previously, the sound of his father cleaning his false teeth through the crack in the door. He was startled, a thin film of cool sweat forming on his back. The sound disappeared. He shook his head and a faint, sharply metallic sound rang in the depths of his ear canals, a ringing that, when he listened carefully, turned into a yell that pressed in from his skull. He took up the pen again and crossed out the last sentence, character by character, filling in the gaps.

Four

Hope for a better life appeared one afternoon when the real estate agent called. The agent had found a place for the old man in a nearby apartment complex.

Hanging up, Meng Jiuyuan had a cigarette on the balcony, puffing slowly. He finished and lit another and took a few drags before putting it out. He quickly walked into his father's room and said, Dad, we've found you a place, a place of your very own.

The old man stared at him and said, We're not go-

ing to live together?

Meng Jiuyuan said, You'll feel more comfortable living on your own. He immediately regretted saying it. Had he been too direct? Maybe he should have shot the breeze with him before segueing into the topic of old folks living on their own and then, very delicately, suggesting a new, separate, living arrangement.

The old man did not lose his temper, nor did he express reluctance to leave. He immediately opened the closet and started arranging his things. It appeared he wanted to get it over with.

Meng Jiuyuan let out a sigh of relief and said, No rush, no need to pack your things right away.

Some time ago, a couple of single rooms had come available in their complex, the tower opposite theirs. He and Zhao Chan had talked it over but eventually decided to wait for something else to come up. The two anticipated some upsetting scenes. Like the old man suddenly appearing on the balcony of his new place to stretch his neck and shoulders. Or like the two of them running into the old man on the quiet path through the community garden, nobody able to think of anything to say. What difference would it make for a trio of ghosts living in the same apartment to turn into a trio of ghosts living in the same complex? What was the point?

The day the old man left Meng Jiuyuan had a clear sense that their daily life had a future to speak of, the same feeling he had had when he switched to the literary supplement from city news. He would always remember a car accident he had reported on. The story only took up half a palm's space on the page, but only he knew what he had had to see to write it up: a middle-aged woman who had been dragged to death, her breasts scraped off, leaving two black holes, seeping with blood, like eyes weeping over the inconstancy of the world.

Now, once again, he felt physically relieved, as if

he had shed his skin, extricated himself once again. He and Zhao Chan rediscovered each other's bodies. When he embraced her from behind she was like a snowdrift by a stove, melting into his arms. He held her tightly, but it was like embracing a flow of water. Unable to get his hands free, he kicked open the bedroom door. When she turned her head her eyes were shut, and there was a sweet taste on her breath. They sometimes took the opportunity to vent their frustrations, feeling where each other's boundaries were so that they would know where to stop before crossing the line. The two had undoubtedly found the most hassle-free way of getting along. Both felt at ease, as if they could live together a lifetime as husband and wife.

His report on the old house had somehow gotten tossed to one side in the peace and quiet of recent days. He had tried to write the crucial third character into the fourth draft. Several times. Without being able to find the right place for him. Discouraged that he couldn't clearly state a matter of fact, he had discarded the draft.

The weird thing was that the old man hadn't proposed another visit to Liuzhou. Like most men his age, he cherished life, and feared death. Meng Jiuyuan thought it over and decided it was for the best. Living in Shenzhen, he was separated from the yard in Liuzhou by the Nanling Range, the Pearl River, Poyang Lake, Tianzhu Mountain, and the Huai River... Today, he was separated from the incident by the birth of Dolly the artificial sheep, Lady Di's death in a traffic crash, 911, the bankruptcy of the Lehman Brothers.... No matter how he looked at it, it was really a long way away.

A random feeling of frustration beset him, besieging him. Meng Jiuyuan went limp. He read the *Analects* of Confucius. He read poetry by Fan Chengda of the Southern Song, Zhang Dai of the Ming-Qing transition, and Bai Juyi of the Tang, who wrote:

*Alas, you had it worse, even worse than them,
at thirty years of age, in coarse clothes till the end.*

Day after day, except for the sound of him flipping pages, there was silence all around. He flipped to a riddle by Zhang Dai:

*In shape, a tusk,
white as snow,
tender as lotus,
sweet as cane,
I cooked it and had a taste:
Words failed me.
I felt ashamed,
to think upon the sages of antiquity,
ashamed in my drunken gluttony.
Have you not heard?
Long empty Master of Reserve Zhang Qian's cup,
never full Master of Erudition Du Fu's bowl.*

He read and read and imagined himself in old age. He could almost see his present self falling towards his elderly self, the two selves gradually merging into one. He looked out the window and the leaves of the trees, covered by a thin layer of dust, were a grayish-green. It seldom rained, and the days were getting shorter. The feeling of fall in the south was hardly intense. This was as autumnal as it would get. He gazed into the distance and the skin of his face felt taut. He wasn't sure what he was waiting for. He read out loud, as if talking to himself:

*Another snooze, at dawn a cup of wine,
whatever happens in the world, I'm fine.*

And:

*Of the world my heart has long been free,
what has the world to do with me?*

And:

*Slight not, passerby, a pair of mossy stones,
a man is rich who nights beside a stream.*

He suddenly regained his calm. How nice it would be to keep passing the time reading couplets by Bai Juyi.

Five

Meng Jiuyuan didn't knock, just opened the door to the old man's residence with his key to find him inside eating noodles. His father glanced at the calendar and said, It's not Sunday.

Meng Jiuyuan shook his arms and said, They're tearing the house down, I just got the call. This time it's different. It's for real this time.

The old man swallowed a mouthful of noodles, as if unable to react.

Dad, let's go back.

The old man sat there, a vacant expression on his face. In a loud voice, Meng Jiuyuan said, Fang Jin will go back for sure.

The old man looked confused. He thought a while and asked, Who is Fang Jin?

Meng Jiuyuan's heart sank, finally intimating what might be the matter. Wouldn't you go back to see Yu Jinsong? he asked quietly.

As expected, the old man replied, Jinsong who?

Jinsong who?

Meng Jiuyuan pointed at the old man's false teeth and said, Your teeth. The one who punched out your teeth.

Warily, the old man shook his head and looked his son in the eye, as if to say, I'm an old man, didn't my teeth just fall out?

Meng Jiuyuan sat down by his father's side. Things had been happening in waves the past few years. After

Mother died, Father started to inquire after Jinsong's whereabouts, eventually becoming an infamous elderly stalker. On the phone relatives would beat around the bush until they could no longer avoid telling him what had really happened. Meng Jiuyuan finally realized he should bring his father to Shenzhen to live with them.

His father had handled the incident in stages. The first few years he went around saying, Jinsong punched out my teeth, it's his own fault he got put in prison. Later, no matter how people made fun of him, no matter how hard they laughed, he insisted Jinsong was still alive, but had moved somewhere else. After Mother died, he started asking everyone he met in all seriousness where Jinsong had moved to.

Obviously he'd been looking for, and now had finally found, in a mysterious or even miraculous form, closure.

Meng Jiuyuan snuck a glance at his father, who was still intent on his noodles. He bit into a piece of fried egg and selected a strip of pickled vegetable with unfeigned enjoyment and happiness on his face. In the past six months he'd gone a bit deaf. Most things he didn't hear properly or bother to ask about. He just smiled.

Meng Jiuyuan thought of Zhao Chan. Every time she ripped her name off the Most Restrained Teller award, she would start muttering to herself, Hurry up and let it go, or how will you be able to keep doing your job?

He watched his father suck up the noodles. He felt like patting his shoulders and saying, Dad, you've managed to forget. You've made it. From now on, everything will be alright.

And as for me? Meng Jiuyuan asked himself. He forgot, but can I?

Meng Jiuyuan took another look. His father was looking at him, but immediately looked away. Meng Jiuyuan's gaze did not move, though; he stared at

his father, as if to confirm something. In the end he couldn't.

Forget it. Just assume he's really forgotten.

This time, Meng Jiuyuan went back alone.

Old residents who'd moved away many years before came back with their kids to witness the demolition. There was no sense of sadness in the air. Occasionally a few sighs carried, but sounded distant, fleeting, hollow, and aloof. Indeed, this residential district hadn't been livable for a long time. It did not exude any nostalgic ambiance of the olden days. It had no aesthetic value. There was no reason to preserve it.

Holding an umbrella, he arrived at Fang Jin's place, only to find the gate to the yard shut tight.

It was the rainy season. He liked the fog, the drizzle, the color of night that slowly descended on the western sky, causing the waking world to lose solidity. In the fog, in the rain, in the night, the cityscapes were hazy, silent, soft of line, no longer distinct and hard on the eyes. The neighborhood was no longer so deprived as to make one despair. The noise of day had also disappeared. Farther off, the houses and trees were blurry, like a daub of monochrome ink on rice paper seeping out into a fuzzy silhouette. The whole district was hidden behind a screen of rain and smoke. The stark defeat one saw by day had softened into an eloquent desolation.

The next day it was still raining, but the sound of the rain was drowned out by barking and laughter. Meng Jiuyuan walked by one group after another and kept hearing about the same few topics. It's worth celebrating that the area's finally gotten the appreciation it deserves. I've got every confidence in the developer, a great benefactor of our community. They couldn't wait for the cacophonous banquet to begin.

Meng Jiuyuan walked swiftly past, infuriated that he was stuck in such an uninspiring scene.

He came again to Fang Jin's place to find the gate

just as tightly shut. He lingered there and looked at the old houses in an endless row in the rain. Obviously, she wasn't one of those beautiful elderly ladies unwilling to give in to old age. She had given in to old age. She had given in to everything. Not even when she went out shopping or entertained friends would she wear a tight dress or put on a jade bracelet or lipstick. With her collapsed face, her vacant expression, and her faded clothes, you wouldn't be able to tell from a distance if she were a woman or a man.

To avoid these people holding forth in the rain, people whole-heartedly looking forward to progress, he went for a walk to the riverbank, where he saw the place where the lone swan goose had stood, along with bunches of blue bellflowers. Every petal was taut with rainwater. The blue got even richer and brighter, flashing a satiny sheen.

He pushed his own gate open and walked in, but stopped after a few steps.

There was a bird in the yard. It wasn't a resident bird, a bird that would winter here in the north, a wood grouse, hawfinch, collared crow, red-billed blue magpie, or any other bird he was familiar with. Of course it wasn't a migratory bird just passing through. It was two years ago that he had seen the lone swan goose by the river, a lone swan goose he had found painful to look at.

Here was a swan, a mute swan. There was a mute swan in the yard, wings furled, lying on the ground like a drift of freshly fallen snow.

On Ulansuhai Nur in Inner Mongolia he and Zhao Chan had seen a flock of several hundred mute swans strolling in a wetland. When they took flight it was like a cloud floating out of the water. Husband and wife delayed their plan to go to Ulaan Bator and stayed the whole day by the translucent blue lake. At dusk he reclined by the lake while Zhao Chan piloted a small boat past the setting sun. He saw her enter the

sun, as if she were a figure in a still life painting, accompanied by a mute swan standing quietly on a rock in the last moment before the sun set, head lowered. Its feathers were pure white, its posture serene.

He walked to the mute swan's side but didn't know how to help. It must have lost its way on its way through the north.

It was late now. The dim yellow of the electric lights leaked through the gate and fell on the lost swan. After so many years, his feelings for the old place had faded. He could now frankly accept its decline and disappearance, though he also felt any ruin deserved some atmosphere of tragic solemnity when the final curtain came down. It shouldn't be like this, without the least shred of dignity.

But he was glad this lost bird had landed in front of this ruin. It was fantastically evocative. There was an aura of indistinct beauty in the air above the slum, a beauty that was soul-stirring, somehow visceral.

A thousand years ago was this a waste, a bog or a wood? People might have lived here, worked here, eaten three meals a day here, had children here, weathered spring rains here, and gazed up at full moons here. The moon had set, the sun had risen, the rain had fallen – for how many years? How many times had it rained? And what would appear and disappear in the next thousand years? Meng Jiuyuan was lost in thought.

He caught sight of Fang Jin selling junk. He had rehearsed meeting him in his imagination many times. Now he had appeared but Meng Jiuyuan didn't dare walk near. He felt hollow inside, waves of vanity washing up from his heart. He had found Fang Jin but so what? He should say that of the three parties to the incident Fang Jin had witnessed – Yu Jinsong, his father, and himself – now he was the only one left. What should he do? He felt all the more distressed.

He walked hesitantly over and stood in front of

Fang Jin, who stepped into a yard just when Meng Jiayuan had been about to greet him. Fang Jin's gaze had only lingered a second, without recognition.

He kept waiting until Fang Jin had sold all his junk and stuck a wad of faded bills in his wallet.

Fang Jin looked up and the two faced each other in the weak light of an indecisive dusk.

Fang Jin asked, You're back, too?

He nodded and said, Everyone is. Except, except.... What about the Yu place? Has anyone come to do the paperwork?

Fang Jin turned, locked the gate and said, There's a regular procedure for this kind of abandoned house: they'll post an announcement; maybe a distant relative will see.

Then he said, very faintly, How is your father getting on? Don't let him go making a fool of himself no more. It was only an accident. Nobody could have imagined Yu Jinsong would have a hemorrhage in prison. His father and mother were old, and bound to die sooner or later. Birth, old age, sickness and death, that's all it is.

Only an accident? Could he let it go at that? Was that really the end of it?

Meng Jiuyuan's breathing became labored, as he tried to get everything off his chest, without managing a single sentence. In his consternation, the dim lamp-light assaulted his eyes. When he came to, he looked out the window to see the mute crane still resting in the yard. He suddenly figured it out. He hadn't needed to come here and see Fang Jin. The trip was unnecessary. It never had been.

It was pitch black out. Meng Jiuyuan climbed the ladder onto the roof. After dozing for many years, the yard opened its eyes, shining in the night like a star. Jinsong's parents had escorted their apoplectic son into the house and bolted the door behind them. A gust had blown through the yard, scattering soft white

almond flowers like rain. With a few petals on his hair, Meng Jiayuan's father had covered his bloody mouth with his hand, unwilling to leave it at that. The on-lookers dispersed, leaving only Fang Jin kneading his chin and shaking his head. Then, inexplicably, Fang Jin said, You got hit for nothing. Fang Jin eased over and whispered a few forbiddingly specialized terms in his father's ear. His father's face shone. Then Meng Jiuyuan saw the most mystifying scene in his entire youth: his father's fist shook in the air a couple of times before swerving bizarrely towards his gums. A tabby cat screamed. A luxuriously quiet lifestyle had tamed it, but in that instant its belly grew tight as a drum, its back arched and its tail stood straight up.

It was almost light. He came back down the ladder and discovered the mute swan in the yard was gone. He stood a long time where the swan had been, until threads of rain started weaving tightly together in the air.

That morning he took a highway bus to the nearest seashore, to the closest stretch of beach, found a shell to write a poem in the sand, climbed a hill and watched the waves wash the lines of verse away.

Translated by Darryl Sterk

Translator's Note



Darryl
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The first poem the narrator quotes from is by Bai Juyi about a friend of his named Deng Fang. In the couplet the narrator quotes, “you” had it “even worse than them,” meaning that Deng Fang was even more unfortunate than the two famously unfortunate High Tang poets Du Fu and Meng Haoran. Deng Fang was even more unfortunate because he died young. He died soon after passing the imperial examination, never donning an official’s silken robes. Bai Juyi was certainly not happy that his friend died wearing a commoner’s coarse clothes (buyi). But the title of Cai Dong’s story (Buyi zhi shi), suggests another interpretation. In the late Ming dynasty, poets talked of the poetry in coarse clothes, shi zai buyi, where buyi was a metonym for the common people and, by metonymical extension, for everyday life. For a full translation of Bai Juyi’s poem, by Burton Watson, see Renditions 49, p. 52-53.