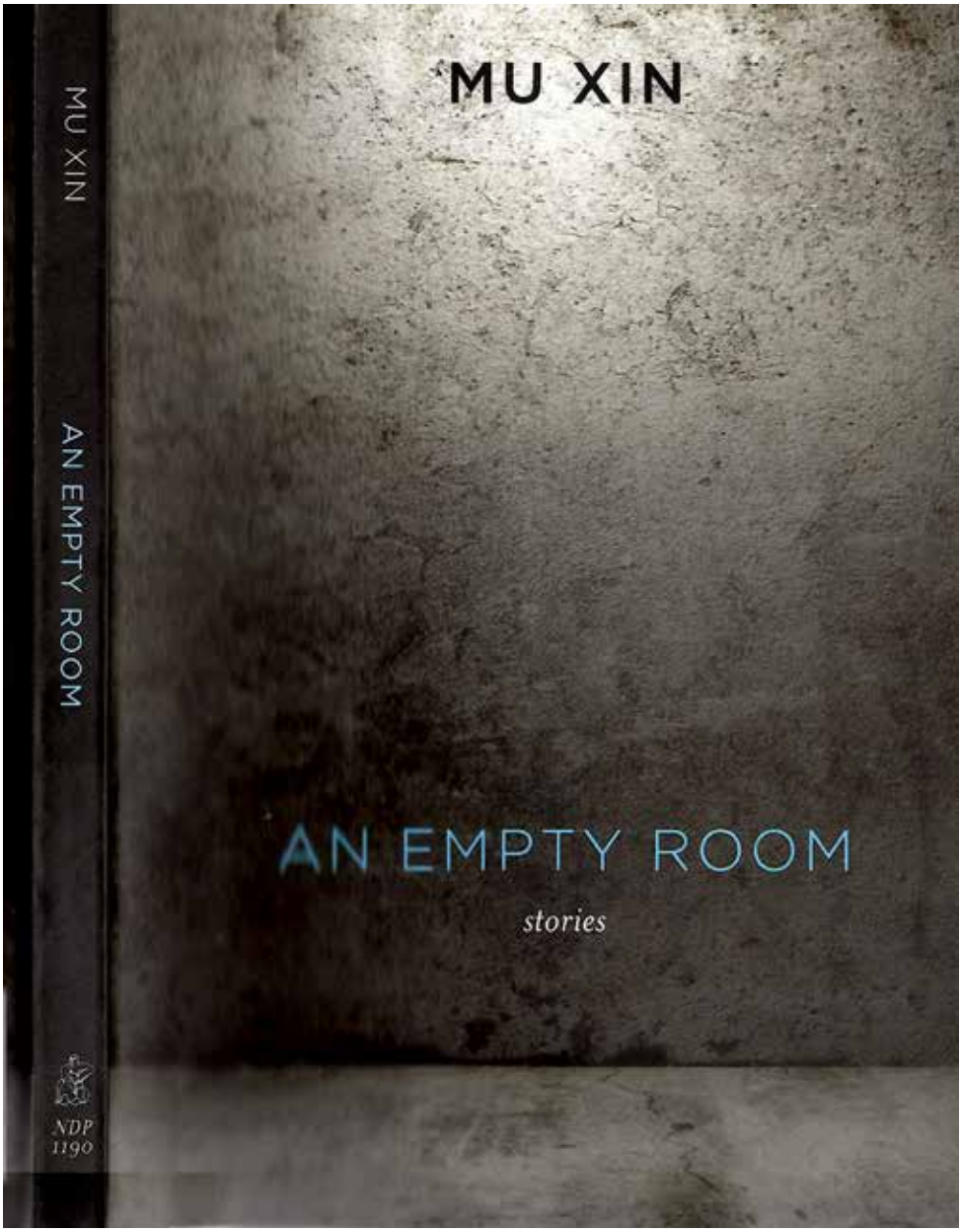
MU XIN
AN EMPTY ROOM
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AN EMPTY ROOM

Mu Xin

Translated from the Chinese by Toming Jun Liu

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AN EMPTY ROOM

The Moment Childhood Vanished

IF A CHILD KNOWS what he should know and does not know what he should not, his childhood will be very happy. But when I was a child, I did not know what I should know, and I knew what I should not, hence all kinds of bewilderments continue to follow me today.

Before I was ten years old, I already knew the nuanced differences between the seven types of Buddhist temples: *si*, *miao*, *yuan*, *chan*, *guan*, *gong*, and *an*. That year I followed my mother and the whole retinue of my paternal and maternal aunts to Mount Mo-An for a Buddhist service. I didn't complain when we passed a temple at the foot of the mountain or when we reached another one halfway up. But when we neared the Shizi Mian An (Sleeping Lion Nunnery) close to the peak, I asked, "Is this the place?"

"That's right, we're here," said a porter who was carrying our luggage on a shoulder pole.

I turned to my mother. "So nuns will perform the rites for us?"

"Oh no," she said, "the leading monk here is a great master. Believe it or not, he's in charge of eighty-two temples around here."

I was even more puzzled. "Then, how can he live in a nunnery? The Sleeping Lion *An*?"

She was silent, then said softly, "Well, perhaps ... perhaps they recently moved here from somewhere else."

The temple gate was plain, but once we stepped inside the grandeur expanded: after the First Mountain Pass was the Second Mountain Pass; then there was the Palace of Great Majesty, the dining hall, meditation rooms, and the guest house. Indeed it was a magnificent temple in the ancient style! With so much to explore, I soon forgot the mystery of the temple's name.

My family never failed to honor the Buddha. It was for the purpose of worshipping our ancestors and burning *shu-tou* that my mother had decided to make this trip. As far as I could explain then, *shu-tou* was the written penance sent to the dead ancestors "by water route and by land route," the entire rite involving an elaborate performance. Or, as I understood it, a kind of bank check with a high monetary value acceptable in the other world, an otherworldly currency for penance. People in the world of Yang supposedly paid for the benefit of the people in the world of Yin. Many monks were involved in this extravagantly observed rite of complicated procedures as if it were a grand drama acted out in sequential segments with monks reciting the scriptures and kowtowing on the ground. In the splendor

sustained by bright candles, endlessly burning incense, and incessant Buddhist music and chants, the service continued for seven times seven days and nights in order for the prayers to be completed in a formal fashion.

For a child, it was a curious spectacle to observe at first. But after seven days I grew weary. There was only so much to see on the mountain, and I only had to look at the Buddhist vegetarian meals to feel repulsed. I even got tired of teasing a crazy monk who was locked up in a cave behind the temple. So I sighed deeply, thinking how very difficult it was to release your dead ancestors.

I pestered my mother about going home every day until she replied, "Soon, soon. We'll go home the day after we receive *shu-tou*."

That day was finally about to arrive. I was giddy at the thought of eating regular food, kicking balls, flying kites. At the same time I worried about the instructions I had received from a hunchbacked monk. He had told me that I would kneel in the Palace tomorrow, carrying a wooden plate. He said that my hands should be extraordinarily clean and I should quietly hold the plate while waiting for the head monk to finish his *shu-tou* chant. Out of frustration I asked, "How long do I have to kneel?"

"About as long as it takes for someone to smoke a cigarette."

"What brand of cigarette?"

"Something like Golden Mouse or Beauty."

I felt better, relieved that it wouldn't take as long as the

burning of an incense stick at the altar. I even laughed, imagining the hunchbacked monk hiding in a room and smoking a Golden Mouse or Beauty.

The receiving of *shu-tou* came and went. It didn't seem to take as long as smoking a cigarette, but I itched all over while I kneeled, holding the redwood plate while monks' robes and temple flags surrounded me. I felt it a great injustice that I should be suffering for ancestors whom I had never known. Still, the recitation of a monk standing to my right piqued my interest: "... aai ... the twenty four altitudes ... aai ... in the Clear Breeze Village of the ... aai Phoenix Tree and Mulberry County in the ... aai Luck River Province in the Capital ... aai ... of the King of the Under ... ai-hi-yi-ai ... world, ai-hi ..."

I was amused. So on the large folded yellow paper called *shu-tou* was written an address? But what could he mean by the twenty-four altitudes? Was it where *shu-tou* was sent to or sent from? Was there really an underworld? Was the underworld also measured by altitudes? As I considered these strange thoughts it was over before I knew it. I felt relieved to stand and straighten my back. As soon as I received *shu-tou* in a large envelope with a large seal on it, I rushed over to my mother.

"There is an address on *shu-tou*. It's the twenty-four altitudes in the Clear Breeze Village of the Phoenix Tree and Mulberry County in the Luck River Province. And it's addressed to the King of the Underworld," I told her with pride.

My aunts stood around my mother, not letting their opportunity to tease me slip by.

"Aha! A ten-year-old can understand a monk reading scripture. Who knows what lies in store for him in the future!"

"At least he'll be the favored disciple of a great scholar."

"Well, it seems he'll enter the world of Dao and be in charge of eighty-two temples."

My mother said with a smile, "He should at least know the difference between a village, a county, and a province. Otherwise how can he find his way home?"

I had not meant to show off and felt their teasing was unjust. After all, I knew not only the difference between a village, county, and province—I could also name seven different types of temples.

It was time to go home!

Porters carried our luggage on their backs or with shoulder poles. My female relatives were dressed in bright red and green and draped with lustrous jewelry. I followed everyone out of the gate. Taking a last glance back, I once again saw the lintel inscribed with those words: Sleeping Lion *An*. How could monks live in this place meant for nuns? Such a temple shouldn't be so big. And why didn't my family ask even a single question?

Our family teacher was an erudite scholar who had passed the imperial exam of the Manchu Dynasty with high honors. I was a piece of stone too hard to be carved

into any desired shape. As he taught me, I would nod just to make the days go by. It wasn't that I couldn't memorize books or write poetic couplets. It was that I always wanted to read books that were classified as inferior. In those years, especially in my family, "forbidden books" covered such a wide range of writings that even Tang and Song poems were excluded—they were simply "not for someone your age." Precisely for that reason, I particularly enjoyed the sound and sense of two lines of Li Bai from a collection of annotated poetry, which read: "When rain stops the sky clears / Where clouds open colors merge." One day I was staring at a pale pottery vase on my teacher's desk and somehow murmured these two lines. My teacher heard and scolded me: "Where did you learn that? Remember, sentimental poems weaken your will!" Frustrated, I suddenly felt that in his dark study the rain would never stop and the sky would never clear. I dipped my middle finger in water and wrote the word "escape," though I had no strategy as to how to accomplish this. All I could do was watch the character dry up. A sour vindication filled my heart.

More than anything else I dreaded writing essays. Topics for assignments were so dry: "On Great Courage and Small Courage," or "Su Qing Tries to Persuade King Hui of the Qing on the Need for an Alliance but the King Does Not Accept: An Essay in Assessment." I know now that the idea was to deform the mind of a child as foot-binding deformed girls' feet. I had to improvise without any confidence. After a while, I would count words. If I had about

a hundred words, I would feel relieved. With about two hundred words, I would feel like Li Bai's "boat sailing light, leaving behind a thousand mountains." My essays would be handed back to me all marked in red, like "a pink face mirroring a peach blossom." I would feel embarrassed, and then vengeful. The teacher's heavy editing of my essays made it seem that he was writing about the topics he had assigned himself. In case my mother asked to see these essays, I always made clean copies, leaving out the teacher's negative comments. After reading one, she would smile and say something like, "Well, you *are* capable of making something out of nonsense, although I must say it still lacks depth." I was secretly amused that my teacher was really the one whom my mother alluded to unknowingly as "capable of making something out of nonsense" and who lacked depth.

A boat full of people were waiting in excited anticipation to leave when I suddenly realized I had left my special bowl in the temple.

At home each of us had our own cup-and-bowl set. If someone accidentally took another's during tea or a meal, we would wait until the mistake was rectified. I was even given my own tea cup and rice bowl during our stay in the mountains. My tea cup was designed with one of the twelve zodiac symbols corresponding to the year of my birth. I didn't particularly care for the cup. But my rice bowl was a different story. As I didn't like Buddhist meals, the elderly master gave me a small bowl fired in a famous

kiln as a gift. The bowl had a delicate cobalt-blue glaze. Any food served in it somehow became more appetizing.

"The master is a master after all," my mother said. "He knows the temperament of this little monkey."

I recited in reply, "When rain stops the sky clears / Where clouds open colors merge."

"That's right," she said. "This bowl is part of a long tradition of ceramic making. Look at its color. Only a master monk can afford such an extravagant gift. Make sure you don't drop it."

After each meal I would wash it in a brook and carefully put it away. The night before we left, I had wrapped it in soft cotton paper and placed it next to my pillow. But I woke up dazed the next morning as everyone hurried to prepare for departure. Somehow I forgot to pack the bowl. It would have been better if I had completely forgotten about it. Now that I did remember, the boat was about to leave shore.

"The bowl!" I said.

"What is it?" My mother didn't know what I was talking about.

"That bowl, that special bowl, the gift."

"Where did you put it?"

"Next to my pillow."

My mother knew I could never forget about a lost object that meant so much to me. The only way to ease my mind was to possess it again.

"We can buy another one when we get home."

"No, we can't. It wouldn't be the same one." I was certain that the bowl was unique.

"What then? Must someone go back and get it?" She implied that I should forget about it since it was impossible that the boat should wait for one person to climb to the temple and back.

I walked across the landing plank, sat on the stump to which the boat was tied, and lowered my head to stare at the river.

People in the boat were stunned and started whispering to each other. No one came ashore to talk to me. They waited for my mother to force me aboard. She did nothing of the kind, and instead whispered to a muscular young boatman who picked up his padded jacket, flew across the landing plank, and ran up the mountain path.

Mountain dwellers call azaleas "red reflections of the mountains." Azaleas—mostly red ones, some white—were in full bloom. I wandered to a bush, picked a flower, and sucked it. A honey-like taste stung my tongue. In this way I waited.

The whisperings in the boat faded. Each found something to do—some played chess or cards, others ate sunflower seeds. A few opened the fruit boxes that the monks had given them and beckoned me to eat with them on board. I waved a "No thanks." There were plenty of interesting things along the shore: pebbles of myriad hues, green snail shells, transparent gray shrimp shells.... I felt a pang of regret. I didn't think it would take so long.

Mountain partridges cooed and cooed in the distance. It had rained last night.

"I'm coming...! Coming...!" rose the voice of the young boatman, although we couldn't see him.

He emerged from a small path and slowed to a stride. As he neared, I saw him empty-handed and felt defeated—the bowl was lost! Perhaps he couldn't find it or it had broken.

With a broad smile he slipped one hand inside his padded jacket that was tied with a belt and took out the bowl. The cotton paper was torn and soaked with sweat but his face was free of any perspiration. I received the bowl with both of my hands, thanked him, and walked across the plank, holding it carefully.

The boat rocked slightly until there was a gradual, rhythmic evenness of rowing. The river unfolded like a huge expanse of silk. The pace of the boat breaking the waves and the occasional words exchanged between the boatmen at the oars created a rare tranquility. I didn't feel like going into the cabin and sat alone at the bow. It had indeed rained heavily last night. I remembered hearing thunder. Mountains, now refreshingly green in the distance, blurred in the water reflections. A mild breeze caressed my face. Where was my mother?

Slowly the river became even broader and the mountains flat. I thought I should wash the bowl.

With so many people on board, the waterline was quite high. I barely had to bend my arm to touch the river. So I filled the bowl with water and poured it skyward. In the

sunlight, drops of water looked like pearls. I stood up and tried to throw the water a bit farther away when my fingers slipped and the bowl dropped.

In the swirling river, the bowl, face up, was a lotus leaf separated from its stem, floating up and down, quickly disappearing toward the stern, further and further away....

I watched something vanish, as if I was in a dream from which I couldn't wake.

What could I say to my mother? And to the boatman?

She emerged from the cabin, carrying a saucer with dim sum.

I told her what happened.

"Someone will find it. Even if it sinks, someone in the future will recover it as long as it doesn't break.... Eat something. No need to think about it. When you are done with your snack, come inside for some hot tea.... Such things won't be rare occurrences in the future."

She spoke the last sentence very softly. What could she mean?

Looking back, I find my mother's words an ominous prophecy. Such things are indeed no rare occurrences in my life. Many things and people, far more precious than that bowl, have been lost. Some broken.

At that moment, with the floating bowl, only my childhood vanished.

Notes from Underground

I FIRST MET HIM *at his art opening in Boston in 1985. Then ten years later, under unexpected circumstances, I finally learned about his "notes." He invited me to visit him in his apartment in the suburbs of New York one winter evening and brought me to his study. His manuscript was stacked next to his lamp on his desk—sixty-six handwritten pages on thin rice paper that had yellowed; the red-stamped letterhead indicating a certain work unit that existed during those times which I too experienced. Each piece of paper was filled on both sides with tiny, graceful words handwritten in blue ink. A feeling akin to religious awe washed over me, though I'm not religious, nor is the artist. He explained to me that that the manuscript was composed as a story in the style of prose-poetry, but that he now calls it his "notes." It would be difficult to restore the story as a whole, considering the pages weren't numbered in the first place and much of the writing was faded to a point that it was impossible to discern. I persuaded him to let me transcribe a few selected paragraphs so that he could pass on to*

posterity some evidence of his resilient spirit and preserve a part of our historical memory that is fading faster than the blue ink on the thin sheets.

The story of how the author was locked in an underground prison and how he was able to write the "notes" is remarkable. His underground is not a basement in nineteenth-century St. Petersburg but one in twentieth-century China. The prison was an abandoned air-raid shelter in Shanghai where our author was confined as a solitary prisoner for ten months from 1971 to 1972. As terrifying as this may sound today, it was one of many illegal prisons in those days and he was one of many "prisoners" whose "crime" was belonging to a certain "undesirable class" (in his case, he was classified as an "intellectual with decadent thoughts"). Such people were imprisoned without trial, without sentencing, without a court of law. This period of Chinese history seems too complex for foreigners, or even subsequent generations in China born after the 1960s, to truly comprehend. For it is extraordinarily difficult to explain certain phenomena that were common then. Suffice it to say that the artist experienced the kind of imprisonment which was imposed on him by "rebels" (zaofanpai) in his work unit. The charges against him: "dangerous and decadent thoughts."

So for ten months the artist was confined underground, in an abandoned air-raid shelter flooded with dirty water, dwelling in total darkness save for a dim gasoline lamp. His immediate family had died and his remaining relatives thought he was dead. Those who left him in this underground hole provided him with paper so that he could write down and submit his "confessions." He secretly used some of the sheets to write his book. He then carefully

folded the manuscript and sewed it into his cotton-padded winter pants to avoid detection. Then, one day, he was released, and miraculously he walked out in those pants, with the manuscript intact.

The artist's reasons for writing the "notes" are personal. But he did reveal one thing to me: "It was my way to stay alive." The following are a few excerpts from his "notes."

I. Death of a Diva

It's ironic that in this dungeon, forced into the life of an ascetic, I should feel like St. Anthony. As long as I can mentally resist the temptation of illusions, I will have my respite; yet I know that another storm will come, and that the punishment will continue, so that in the future when I remember the here and now, I might even call it the "good old days." In front of me is a dark blue inkbottle and a gray ashtray made of fine china. The ink bottle is provided by the work unit. Being public property, it is perhaps "socialist" in nature. The ashtray used to be a sugar bowl, part of a tea set made in England that I brought here with me. I guess that makes it "capitalist" in nature. When I first came to the dungeon I would smoke a pack of cigarettes a day; recently I have cut down to half a pack. With a wave of my hand, the matchstick with which I light my cigarette goes out. This, I discovered some time ago, could be used for my entertainment. All I had to do was plant the stick gently into the ashes in the ashtray and watch it burn from top to bottom,

a tiny bright-red pillar of flame. The pillar would then turn gray, bend, break, and become a circle of ash among ashes. For several months I have been successfully directing the same drama: the ashtray resembles a circular stage on which the matchstick, like a legendary diva, sings her swan song before she slowly falls to the ground and dies.

II. People on the Road

I enjoy watching men and women silently walking on the road, their faces expressionless, their attention undivided. A person on the road seems absorbed in self-respect, as if he would explode at the slightest provocation. His carefree look is but a façade behind which his instincts stand on guard. That he is on the road means he is in "transition"—he could have just come from doing something, or he could be on his way to do something, or perhaps what he has to do requires his attention in two separate places. Thus he is between one thing and another thing, which is a state of neither good nor evil. You cannot say with certainty whether a passerby is good or evil; he embodies the concept of "human." But when he (or she) meets someone he knows, when he says hello, then stops and makes conversation, all of a sudden he is transformed from a conceptual human to a specific human with his own individuality. When the two part ways again, he promptly reassumes the identity of a "passerby." It now seems conceivable that the thing he is going to do could be

good or bad, or that he has just done something good or bad. But since he is on the road and is no longer involved, it is still difficult to say if he is good or if he is bad. Since I am imprisoned, I no longer have the pleasure of watching people walking on the road. My connections with the world have been reduced to such a minimal degree that even if I were on the road I could only see but not talk. I have no need to cherish the memories of any relatives or friends. So I devote my nostalgia to men and women endlessly walking on boulevards and in streets, innocent of good and evil. Whether their past or their future is good or bad is unknown to me and of no concern.

III. Tiny Tassels

Life can drive the young to hopelessness as it can drive the middle-aged to hopelessness, but who grieves more in their hopelessness? It would seem that the youth would grieve more, but it is the middle-aged person who really gives up and no longer dreams. Because hope is the premise for life, hope will endure in the subconscious if it is destroyed in the conscious mind. In this way the life of humans can be distinguished from the life of animals. The hopelessness of animals is a biological and instinctive feeling of the end, but the hopelessness of humans is a final judgment based on reason and conscious thought. A young person retains more of the animalistic quality, while a person aware of

aging is being transformed to a "human being" in a purer sense; he is learning precisely those fatal points that render hope hopeless. I don't have the good fortune of living in the nineteenth century. But I once saw a picture of the room in which Lermontov was imprisoned: there was a round table covered with a thick, solid tablecloth, a table lamp with an opalescent glass shade, a brass teakettle, and two high-back chairs. The poet-prisoner, in his military uniform, was allowed to receive visitors, such as Belinsky. If I had lived in Lermontov's times, I wouldn't have been thrown into this dungeon flooded with filthy water. I feel profoundly relieved that Lermontov was more fortunate than me—Lermontov with his teakettle so authentically Russian, and his tablecloth with its rows of tiny tassels hanging from the sides.

IV. Who Is Truly Fearless?

"I have not yet loved you in the way it's expressed in music"—suddenly I remember these words. Now that I'm in prison, I cannot possibly find Wagner's original text, although I believe this is more or less what he said. Music is a form of art constituted by its own vanishings. In its essence and depth music is thus closest to "death." Before I turn forty I have no plan to write my memoirs, but I'm quite impressed with Rousseau's late work *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Turgenev's *Literary Memoir* is so slim a book that I

once thought it couldn't be a must-read. But it turned out to be utterly engaging. As for myself, I still follow Flaubert's advice: "Reveal art; conceal the artist." When catastrophe sweeps through your political life, economic condition, love life, or your pursuit of art, you are reduced to a miserable and ridiculous state of existence. Your patience and endurance are not enough for you to overcome the adversity. Consequently, you are forced into the underground, that is you have to fight even if you don't want to (as you must live to avoid death). Mayakovsky was forced into such a desperate situation that he had no other option but suicide. Before he took his own life, he had to fake the failure of love as his reason, saying that "a small boat of love runs up on the rock of life." He was neither a collectivist nor an individualist. A thorough individualist fears nothing. As far as my feelings about the world are concerned, I will say, in Wagner's words: "I have not yet loved you in the way it's expressed in music."

V. Happiness

"Why is it that some humans are Persians?" It was Montesquieu who asked this most interesting question. Mérimée then asked: "Why is it that some humans are Spanish?" So he went to Spain and wrote his letters and travelogues that described bullfighting, robbery, and the death penalty. His doubts vanished. But what question am I left with? I

venture the view that "happiness" is so esoteric a body of knowledge that it virtually cannot be articulated. It is a trick that you can perfect only through trials and tribulations. From such examples as the facial make-up techniques of the ancient Egyptians, the schools for training prostitutes in ancient Greece, the design and display of bedrooms in ancient Arabia, and the all too exquisite body language of ancient India, it seems that humanity has tried to create "happiness" and manipulate it. Historians have construed such stories as "golden ages" or "prosperous periods," but they have compiled no record of any specific "happy individuals." An individual who knows what happiness is and is good at it is a genius. The genius of happiness is not an innate genius but a product of deliberate cultivation. I may not be presenting my thoughts in the most lucid manner here, but clearly see that such cultivated geniuses once existed in the world but never wrote anything like a methodology on happiness. They did leave behind, though, some mind-boggling cooking recipes, some bizarre stories of spirits and angels, and a few compassionate yet paradoxical axioms. The legacy of Epicurus seems quite humble, for he proposed "friendship, discourse and gourmet foods" as the three ingredients of happiness. But this still doesn't get to the semantic core of happiness. Can we find a specific instance that embodies "happiness" so that we can see it with our own eyes? Yes, we can. We might ask: What does "happiness" look like? Answer: It looks like a painting by Cézanne. Happiness is painted one brushstroke at a time. Cézanne himself, his wife, they were not happy....

The Boy Next Door

AS FOR CHILDHOOD PHOTOS, well, such photos will always become more precious as time passes. When you see someone's childhood photos next to those of his adulthood, you gradually discover that this child is indeed this youth, and indeed this middle-aged man and this elderly man. This process of intuitive identification is nothing short of magic, despite the rare exceptions when the person trying to process the identification is either inept or his own failing eyesight prevents him from doing so.

It is equally fascinating to look at the childhood photographs of your dearest love. You think to yourself: That was a different time, we were both children then, we didn't know each other, and how could I possibly know that I would later meet you, this exquisite you? Or perhaps the two of you became friends as children. Photos of both of you together then would be extraordinary. You'd say: Ah, yes, that was how things were, don't you remember? But I do.

A young man doesn't really know the value of his own

Translator's Afterword

More than twenty books by Mu Xin—an internationally renowned writer and painter—have been published in Taiwan and mainland China. The thirteen pieces of *An Empty Room*—his first collection of stories to appear in English—were specifically chosen by the author from three of his books: 《散文一集》 (*Collected Sanwen: Volume 1*; 1986), 《温莎墓园》 (*Windsor Cemetery*; 1988), and 《巴珑》 (*Baron*; 1998).

Each story not only stands on its own as an individual work of fiction, but the collection as a whole can be read as a short story cycle, or a linked bildungsroman, written in varying first-person personae, each "I" embodying a different race, gender, history. This paradoxical coexistence of fragmentation and cohesiveness in one book is of course not an uncommon practice in modern literature, though it is essentially informed by Mu Xin's own aesthetic principle, namely: the self, the artistically transformed and

transforming self, must live through others so that others can live through him. The other referring not only to another person but also to an other time-space, an other reality, an other experience. Mu Xin's style, which is influenced by both Chinese and world literature, and is simultaneously poetry, essay, and fiction, brings to light this relational other. It evokes the spirit of innovation in contemporary world literature and connects Mu Xin to the Chinese *sanwen*, a genre that freely crosses the boundaries of poetry, meditative essay, and fiction. Indeed, some of his texts were written in both prose and verse forms. In the Chinese tradition, Mu Xin admires the work of the eight great *sanwen* authors of the Tang and Song dynasties: Han Yu, Liu Zongyuan, Ouyang Xiu, Su Xun, Su Shi, Su Che, Wang Anshi, Zeng Gong. He also includes Nietzsche, Emerson, Rousseau, and Montaigne as some of his favorite authors that exemplify the *sanwen* spirit. In the best sense of the word, Mu Xin himself is a *sanwen* writer.

Mu Xin was born in 1927 in Wuzhen, Zhejiang Province. In his early years, he was exposed, through voluminous reading, to both the Chinese classical literati tradition and to Western artistic and cultural traditions. Part of this education was completed in the private library of Mao Dun, who was Mu Xin's distant uncle and a major figure in modern Chinese literature. From 1949 till 1982, Mu Xin lived in China, and as an artist survived some terrifying experiences, including an eighteenth-month imprisonment in an abandoned air-raid shelter. Bizarre as it

may sound to us today, Mu Xin's case was commonplace in that time period. A person could be imprisoned without trial or sentencing and even without a legal court if he or she belonged to the "wrong" socal group (e.g., intellectuals) or showed "decadent" tendencies in thinking. Few works of Mu Xin's literary and artistic creativity from that period have survived. From 1982 till 2006, Mu Xin lived in the United States. This was a period of prolific and profound artistic and literary creativity in his life. I met Mu Xin in New York in the late 1980s when his literary works began to arouse great interest among diasporic Chinese intellectuals. In the following decades, his writing and paintings won great admiration around the world and established him as a revered artist-intellectual. During those years, I twice interviewed him on his life and art and subsequently published those interviews. In 2006, the year when he returned to China to live in his hometown, his works, previously unpublished and largely unknown in mainland China, were re-issued and became such an event that the publishing world in China called 2006 "the Year of Mu Xin."

I feel privileged that I've been able to work closely with Mu Xin to complete this translation. For the past decade or so I have continuously consulted him on issues relating to this book and have received direct advice from him about what details should be changed and what should not. Decisions in translation often concern details that initially seem trivial but are ultimately significant. In consultation with

Mu Xin, for example, I decided to use "Fong Fong," in the story "Fong Fong No. 4," as the English transliteration instead of using the strictly Chinese *pinyin* rendition of "Fang Fang," as the latter might cause confusing connotations in English. During the various stages of working on this collection, many other such choices were made, not to deviate from the original, but to try to capture the spirit of Mu Xin's stylized, elegant Chinese.

Over the years, Arthur F. Kinney, Donald Junkins, John Parker, Vilma Potter, Susan Harris, Ruben Quintero, Roberto Cantu, Timothy Steele, Chen Danqing, and Hugo Liu read parts of the manuscript in English and generously offered suggestions and comments. I am grateful to the literary agent Joanne Wang for making the publication of this book possible. Last but not least, Jeffrey Yang from New Directions gave the entire collection a patient and thorough editing that graces my translation. I wish to acknowledge my heartfelt thanks to all of them.

TOMING JUN LIU
JANUARY 1, 2011

MU XIN, born in 1927 in the south of China, is the author of twenty collections of stories, poetry, and essays. He is also an internationally renowned painter. During the Cultural Revolution much of his work—manuscripts and paintings—was destroyed. He moved to the United States in 1982, living in Queens, New York, until 2006. He now lives in his hometown, Wuzhen, in Zhejiang Province. The thirteen stories in this collection were composed while Mu Xin lived in New York.

TOMING JUN LIU grew up in China and received his education in China, Britain, and the United States. He was a translator at the United Nations Secretariat in the early 1980s. He is now Professor of English at California State University, Los Angeles, and holds an endowed professorship at Hangzhou Normal University, China.

FICTION

TRANSLATED BY TOMING JUN LIU

"Mu Xin is a solitary, an aesthete who resembles those Chinese artists of long ago who, exiled from the turbulence of their own times, studied earlier art and dreamed of a better past. Like those figures, Mu Xin cultivates the whispering power of reverie. Familiar with both Asian and Western ways—he's also a man of our day—he creates an art of communion, one that brings together the masters of each tradition and unites past and present."

MARK STEVENS, **NEW YORK MAGAZINE**

An Empty Room is the first book by the celebrated Chinese writer and artist Mu Xin to appear in English. A cycle of thirteen evocative stories written while Mu Xin was living in exile, the collection recalls the structural beauty of Hemingway's *In Our Time* and the imagistic power of Kawabata's palm-of-the-hand stories. From the ordinary (a bus trip) to the unusual (Buddhist halos) to the wise (Goethe, Lao Zi), Mu Xin's wandering "I" interweaves plots with philosophical grace and spiritual profundity. From indelible elements—a small blue bowl that becomes a symbol of vanishing childhood; notes scribbled by an imprisoned painter in a race against fading memory; an abandoned temple room, the site of a mysterious love story—Mu Xin builds an astonishing, linked bildungsroman. *An Empty Room* showcases the creative mind of one of China's most extraordinary living writers, a writer who "has rejuvenated the Chinese language for our times" (*Beijing Daily*).

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