SOARING
翱翔

A short story by
Mo Yan
莫言

Winner of the
2009 Newman Prize for Chinese Literature

If I were to choose a Nobel laureate, it would be Mo Yan.

- KENZABURÔ ŌE, Winner of the
1994 Nobel Prize for Literature

COMPETITION ANNOUNCEMENT:

Newman Young Writers Award

$300 and a certificate will be awarded to the Oklahoma high school student whose short essay responds the most thoughtfully to some aspect of the writings of the winner of the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature. This year’s Newman Young Writer’s Award, therefore, will be given to the student whose essay best responds to any aspect of Mo Yan’s work (including this short story, “Soaring”).

Deadlines:

Students, submit your essays to your teachers by Monday, Feb. 23.

Teachers, please select your high school’s best essay and e-mail it to uschina@ou.edu by Wednesday, February 25.

The winner will be announced on Friday, February 27, and honored at the Newman Prize Awards Dinner on Thursday, March 5.

To be awarded March 5, 2009 in Norman, Oklahoma

Transcribed by Howard Goldblatt for the collection, Shifu, You’ll Do Anything for a Laugh (Arcade, 2001)

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For additional copies of this booklet, please e-mail uschina@ou.edu.
After paying respects to Heaven and Earth, Hong Xi, a big, swarthy man, could not contain his excitement. His bride’s veiled face was hidden from him, but her long, shapely arms and willowy waist revealed that she was more beautiful than most girls in Northern Jiaozhou Township. Forty years old, and badly pockmarked, Hong Xi was one of Northeast Gaomi Township’s most prominent bachelors. His aging mother had recently arranged for him to marry Yanyan in exchange for his sister, Yanghua, one of Northeast Gaomi’s true beauties, who was to marry Yanyan’s elder brother, a mute. Deeply touched by his sister’s sacrifice, Hong Xi thought about her bearing children for the mute, and amid his confused emotions was born a hostility toward his new bride. Mute, if you mess up my little sister, I’ll take it out on yours.

It was noon when Hong Xi’s new wife entered the bridal chamber. A cluster of prankish children had poked holes in the pink paper window covering to gawk at the bride as she sat on the edge of the brick bed. A neighbor woman patted Hong Xi on the shoulder and giggled, “Pocky, you’re a lucky man! That’s a tender little lotus bud you’ve got, so handle it gently.”

Hong Xi fidgeted with his trousers and snickered. The marks on his face glowed red.

The sun hung motionless in the sky, as Hong Xi paced back and forth in the yard, waiting for night to fall. His mother hobbled up with her cane and said, “Xi, there’s something about my new daughter-in-law that bothers me. Be careful she doesn’t run off.”

“Don’t worry, Mother. With Yanghua over there, this one’s not going anywhere. They’re like locusts tied together with a string. One can’t get away without the other.”

While mother and son were talking, the new daughter-in-law walked out into the yard accompanied by two bridesmaids. Hong Xi’s mother muttered disapprovingly, “Whoever heard of a bride getting up off the bed before dark to relieve herself? That just shows that the marriage won’t last. I think she’s up to something.”

But Hong Xi was too taken with his wife’s beauty to share his mother’s concern. She had a long face, fine eyebrows, a high nose, and slanted eyes like those of a phoenix. But when she spotted Hong Xi’s face, she stopped in her tracks and, after a long quiet moment, let out a screech and took off running. The bridesmaids reached out to grab her by the arms, and rip, tore her red gown to reveal the snowy white skin of her arms, her slender neck, and the front of the red camisole she wore underneath.

Hong Xi was stunned. Rapping him on the head with her cane, his mother shouted, “Go after her, you fool!”

That snapped him out of it, and he staggered after her.

Yanyan flew down the street, trailing her loosened hair like the tail of a bird.

“Stop her!” Hong Xi shouted. “Stop her!”

the history of modern Chinese literature, Jiu guo (The Republic of Wine). In true Rabelaisian fashion, Mo Yan launched an attack against and parodied aspects of Chinese society (most notably, gourmandry, here including cannibalism, and an obsession with alcohol as a cultural commodity).

Among Mo Yan’s more recent novels are Tanxiang xing (Sandalwood Torture), a love story amid savagery cruelty during the Boxer Rebellion, and Shisan bu (Thirteen Paces), his venture into high modernism. The author’s success with satire in The Republic of Wine was followed by Sishiyi pao (Forty-one Bombs), a novel in which meat replaces liquor as the vehicle for an examination of contemporary society; it is filled with puns, allusions, and varying prose styles, common features of much of Mo Yan’s fiction.

These early novels differ in style, content, and effects from one another. But recently, Mo Yan has undertaken the ambitious project of chronicling 20th-century Chinese history in two blockbuster novels. Cited as “Mo Yan’s grab for the brass ring, i.e., the Nobel Prize for Literature” (Washington Post), Fengru feitun (Big Breasts and Wide Hips) focuses on a family of women in a generally unflattering romp through the first half of the 20th century, and a bit beyond. His latest novel, Shengsi pilao (Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out), narrates the second half of the century, with all its tragic absurdities (and absurd tragedies). Characterized as “a wildly visionary and creative novel” (New York Times), it puts a human (and frequently bestial) face on the revolution, and is replete with the dark humor, metafictional insertions, and fantasies that Mo Yan’s readers have come to expect and enjoy.

Most good novelists have difficulty maintaining a consistently high standard in their writing, but not Mo Yan. Each of his novels has been universally praised, and each demonstrates the depth and breadth of his exceptional talent. He is a master of diverse styles and forms, from fable to magic realism, hard-core realism, (post)modernism, and more. His imagery is striking, his tales often bewitching, and his characters richly appealing. He is, quite simply, one of a kind.

“I venture to say,” Mo Yan has written, “immodest though it may seem, that my novels have created a unique style of writing in contemporary Chinese literature.” Indeed! His impact on readers and societies and his stature, domestic and international, have been affirmed by a host of prizes and awards. He will reach a significant new height later this year, when he delivers an invited keynote lecture at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association in San Francisco, the first Chinese author to be so honored.
Mo Yan (1955- )  
Nominated by Howard Goldblatt

No one reads a literary text more closely than a translator, who must deal with every single word and how that word relates to other words. I have translated novels and stories by dozens of writers from China and Taiwan, and while many of those writers would make fine Newman fellows, Mo Yan stands out as the most accomplished and creative novelist of his era. I venture to say that no literate urban Chinese and few foreigners who read about China will be unfamiliar with his name. They will likely have read his 1985 Hong gaoliang jiazu (Red Sorghum) or seen the movie. Widely referred to as post-Mao China’s “breakthrough novel,” it is often linked with Gabriel García Márquez’ One Hundred Years of Solitude as creative milestones. Since then Mo Yan has published prolifically. But numbers tell only part of the story. The quality and diversity of his fictional output, by any literary and popular measure, is extraordinary.

In 1988 Mo Yan followed Red Sorghum with a passionate metafiction that exposed a heart of darkness represented by corrupt, venal local officials in Tiantang suantai zhi ge (The Garlic Ballads). It was removed from book shelves during the 1989 Tiananmen confrontation for fear that it might further incite the demonstrators. Then came the most uproarious and biting satire in 10

His shouts brought villagers swarming out of their houses into the street and drew frantic barks from a dozen or more big, ferocious dogs.

Yanyan turned down a lane and headed south into the field, where wheat stalks bent in the wind, their flowered tips dipping like waves in an ocean of green. Yanyan crashed through the waist-high waves of wheat, their green contrasting with her red camisole and milky white arms, a lovely painting in motion.

A bride fleeing from her wedding disgraced all of Northeast Gaomi Township. So the village men took up the chase with a vengeance, coming at her from all sides. The dogs, too, which leaped and bounded in the waves of green.

As the human net closed in, Yanyan dove headfirst into the waves of wheat.

Hong Xi breathed a sigh of relief. The pursuers slowed down, breathing heavily; grasping hands, they moved with great care, like fishermen tightening a net.

As anger gripped his heart, all Hong Xi could think about was the beating he’d give her once she was in his grasp.

All of a sudden, a beam of red light rose above the wheat field, startling and confusing the mob below, who fell to the ground. Then they spotted Yanyan, her hands flapping in the air, her legs held together like a gorgeous butterfly, as she rose gracefully out of the encirclement.

The people froze like clay statues, gaping as she flapped her arms and hovered above them, then began to fly, slowly enough for them to keep stepping on her shadow if they ran after her. She was only six or seven meters above their heads, but, oh, so graceful, so lovely. Just about every oddity you could think of had occurred in Northeast Gaomi Township, but this was the first time a woman had taken to the sky.

Once the shock had passed, the people recommenced their pursuit. Some ran home and returned on bicycles to take up the chase of her shadow, waiting for her to land so they could grab her.

The flyer and the people below acted out an engrossing drama of pursuit and capture amid the shouts of people all across the fields. Out-of-towners joined passersby in craning their necks to watch the strange event in the sky. The woman in flight was mesmerizingly graceful; her pursuers below, always having to look up as they ran, stumbled through the rutted fields, falling and crashing into one another like a routed army.

Eventually, Yanyan settled into a grove of pine trees surrounding the old graveyard on the eastern edge of town. The black pines, covering nearly an acre, kept watch over hundred of mounds under which Northeastern Gaomi ancestors lay. The trees, all very old, stood straight and tall, their tips piercing the low-flying clouds. Together, the old graveyard and the grove of black pines were the township’s scariest and most sacred spot. Sacred because...
it was the resting place of the township’s ancestors; scariest owing to all the ghostly incidents that had occurred there.

Yanyan settled onto the tip of the tallest and oldest pine tree, in the very center of the graveyard. The people below followed her there, then stood and looked up at her, as she rested lightly on the slender topmost branches of the tree, which easily supported her, even though she must have weighed over a hundred pounds; it was a cause of wonderment to all who gazed up at her.

A dozen or more dogs raised their heads and bayed at the levitating Yanyan.

Hong Xi shouted, “Come down, come down from there this minute.”

The dogs’ baying and Hong Xi’s shouts fell on deaf ears.

Yanyan sat there nonchalantly, rising and falling with each passing breeze.

The crowd below soon grew weary of standing there helplessly, except for a few rambunctious kids, who shouted, “New bride, hey, there, new bride, let’s see you fly some more!”

Yanyan raised her arms. Fly, the kids shouted, fly, she’s going to fly. But she didn’t. Instead, she combed her talon-like fingers through her hair, like a bird preening its feathers.

Hong Xi fell to his knees and wailed, “Uncles, brothers, fellow townspeople, help me find a way to bring her down. You know how hard it was for me to find a wife!”

Just then Hong Xi’s mother was led up on a donkey. She slid down off the animal’s back, groaning in pain as she stumbled to the ground.

“Where is she?” the old woman asked Hong Xi. “Where is she?”

Hong Xi pointed to the treetop. “She’s up there.”

Screening her eyes with her hand, the old woman looked up to where her daughter-in-law was nestled atop the tree and screamed, “Demon, she’s a demon!”

Iron Mountain, the township head, said, “We have to find a way to get her down, witch or not. This has to come to an end, like everything else.”

“I have to do something. If you’re just going to stand there hemming and hawing, hand me that bow and arrow.”

He handed the bamboo bow and a feathered, razor-sharp arrow to Hong Xi, who took them from him, but merely stood there deep in thought. “I can’t do it,” he said, suddenly realizing what was expected of him. “I can’t, I won’t. She’s my wife, isn’t she? My wife.

“How can I fly?” the policeman said, “you lack the ability to fly long distances, which means it’ll actually be easier to catch her if she leaves the grove.”

“But what if her family won’t go along with our plan?” Iron Mountain said.

“Let me handle it,” the policeman assured him.

He went over and told some of the youngsters to escort the mute and his mother out of the pine grove. The old lady, having cried herself into a state of lethargy, offered no resistance. The mute, on the other hand, grunted his disapproval, but once the policeman flashed his service revolver, he walked off meekly. Now the only people left at the scene were the policeman, Iron Mountain, Hong Xi, and two young men, one with a pole, the other holding a net.

“A gunshot might alarm the people,” the policeman said. “So let’s use a bow and arrow.”

“You people,” the policeman said with annoyance. “Can’t you do anything? If you’re just going to stand there hemming and hawing, hand me that bow and arrow.”

He holstered his revolver, took the bow and arrow, took aim at the shape at the top of the tree, and let an arrow fly. A muted thud told them he’d hit the mark. The treetop rustled, and the men watched as Yanyan, an arrow imbedded in her belly, rose into the moonlight, only to crash into the canopy of a short tree nearby.

Obviously, she could no longer keep her balance. The policeman fitted another arrow to the bow, took aim at Yanyan, who was sprawled atop the short pine, and shouted, “Come down here!” The second arrow flew before his shout had died out; there was a cry of pain, and Yanyan tumbled headlong to the ground.

“You fucking bastard,” Hong Xi shrieked, “you’ve killed my wife . . .”

People who had withdrawn from the grove came up with their lanterns and torches. “Is she dead?” they asked anxiously. “Are there feathers on her body?”

Without a word, Iron Mountain picked up a bucket of dog’s blood and splashed its contents over Yanyan’s body.
down from there.”

Just then, Yanyan’s mute brother began grunting excitedly and flapping his arms, as if mimicking his sister’s flying motions.

Yanyan’s mother was in tears. “What did I do in a previous life to bring this down on my head?”

“Try not to cry, old auntie,” the policeman said. “Concentrate on getting your daughter down from there.”

“She’s always been a strong-willed girl. She might not listen to me,” Yanyan’s mother admitted sadly.

“This is no time for modesty, old auntie,” the policeman said. “Call her down.”

With mincing steps on tiny, bound feet, Yanyan’s mother moved over to the tree where her daughter was perched, tilted her head back, and called out tearfully, “Yanyan, be a good girl and listen to your mother. Please come down . . . I know you feel you’ve been treated badly, but that can’t be helped. If you don’t come down, we won’t be able to keep Yanghua, and if that happens, the family’s finished . . .”

The old lady broke down and wailed at this point as she dashed her head against the tree trunk. A scratchy sound descended from the treetop, the sort of thing one hears when a bird ruffles its feathers.

“Keep talking,” the policeman urged.

The mute waved his arms and grunted loudly to his sister, high above him.

“Yanyan,” Hong Xi shouted, “you’re still human, aren’t you? If there’s an ounce of humanity left in you, you’ll come down from there.”

Yanghua joined in the weeping: “Sister-in-law, please come down. You and I are both sufferers in this world. My brother’s ugly, but at least he can talk. But your brother . . . please come down . . . it’s our fate . . .”

Yanyan glided into the air again and circled the sky above the people. Chilled dewdrops fell to the ground—maybe they were her tears.

“Move out of the way, give her some space and let her settle to the ground,” Iron Mountain said to the crowd.

Everyone but the old lady and Yanghua stepped backwards. But things did not turn out as Iron Mountain had hoped, for after circling in the air above them, Yanyan settled back down onto the treetop.

The moon had slipped into the western sky; the night was deepening. Fatigue and cold began to overtake the people on the ground. “I guess we’ll have to do it the hard way,” the policeman said.

Iron Mountain said, “I’m worried that the crowd might drive her away from the grove, and if we don’t catch her tonight, it’ll be that much harder later on.”

for all you’re worth. The way she’s acting, I’m pretty sure she’s possessed. We’ll have to go back to town and kill a dog so we can have some dog blood at hand when we need it.”

The crowd broke up and headed back to make preparations. Hong Xi’s mother insisted upon staying with her son, but Iron Mountain was adamantly, “Don’t be silly. What can you hope to accomplish by staying here? If the situation turns ugly, you’ll be caught in the middle. Go on home.” Seeing it was pointless to argue, the old woman let herself be boosted up onto the donkey’s back and left the scene weeping and wailing.

Now that the tumult had died down, Hong Xi, who was known as one of Northeast Gaomi Township’s bravest souls, found the quiet unsettling. As the sun set in the west, winds swirled and moaned amid the trees. Letting his head droop, Hong Xi massaged his sore neck and sat down on a nearby stone tablet. He was lighting a cigarette when a sinister laugh floated down from above. His hair stood on end, and he felt chilled all over. Quickly extinguishing the match, he stood up and backed off several steps to look up at the treetop. “Don’t pull any spooky tricks on me. Just wait till I get my hands on you.”

With the setting sun as a backdrop, Yanyan’s red camisole seemed to be on fire, setting her face aglow, as if gilded. There was no sign that the sinister laughter had come from her. A flock of crows returning to their nests flew past, their gray droppings falling like rain. Several warm blobs landed squarely on his head. Spitting on the ground, he felt he felt that bad luck had befallen him. The treetop was still radiate with light, even though the pine grove was turning black and bats had begun flitting nimbly in and among the trees. Foxes barked in the graveyard. His fears returned.

Spirits were everywhere in the grove, he could feel them; his ears filled with all sorts of sounds. The sinister laughter kept coming, each burst causing him to break out in a cold sweat. Biting the tip of your middle finger was the best way to drive away evil spirits, he recalled, so he did it, and the sharp pain cleared his head. Now he could see that the pine grove wasn’t as dark as it had seemed just a moment before. Rows of grave mounds and headstones stood out. He could make out the tree trunks, streaked with dying rays of sunlight. Some young foxes were frolicking amidst the grave mounds, watched over by their mother as she crouched in a clump of weeds, every so often acknowledging his presence with a toothy grin. The next time he looked skyward, he saw Yanyan, who hadn’t moved, being circled by the crows.

A pale little boy emerged from between two trees, handed him a gong and a mallet, a hatchet, and a large flat cake. The boy told him that Iron Mountain was overseeing the making of bows and arrows, that people had been sent to Northern Jiaozhou, and that the township leaders were taking the incident very seriously.
they would be sending someone over soon. Hong Xi was to satisfy his hunger with the flat cake and maintain his vigil. He should beat the gong if anything happened.

Once the little boy had left, Hong Xi laid the gong on the memorial stone, shoved the hatchet into his belt, and began devouring the flat cake. As soon as he was finished, he took out the hatchet and shouted, “Are you going to come down or not? If not, I’ll chop down this tree.”

Not a sound from Yanyan.

So Hong Xi buried his hatchet in the tree, which shuddered from the force. Still no sound from Yanyan. The hatchet was buried so deeply he couldn’t pull it out.

Is she dead? Hong Xi wondered.

Tightening his belt, and removing his shoes, Hong Xi began to climb. The rough bark made for easy going, and when he’d climbed about halfway, he stopped to look up. All he could see from that vantage point were her legs hanging down and her buttocks resting on the branch. I should be in bed with you right about now, he thought angrily, but instead you’ve got me climbing a tree. His anger was translated into strength, and as the trunk narrowed, more and more limbs branched off, making it easy to hoist himself up into the canopy, where he anchored his feet and reached out furtively to grab her. But no sooner had he touched the tip of her foot than he heard a long sigh and felt the branches above him rustle; flecks of gold flew into the air, like the golden scales of a leaping carp. Yanyan flapped her arms and lifted off from the canopy; then, with all four limbs in motion and her hair floating in mid-air, she glided to the top of another tree. Hong Xi was alarmed to note that her flying skills had obviously improved since the last time he had seen her.

She sat atop the new tree in the same posture as the first. Facing the rosy sunset, she presented a sight as moving as a new rose bloom. “Yanyan,” Hong Xi called out tearfully, “my dear wife, come home and make a life with me. If you don’t, I won’t let Yanghua go to the bed of your mute brother—”

His shout still hung in the air when he heard a frightful crack beneath him, as the branch snapped and sent him crashing to the ground like a hunk of meat. He lay there for a long while before getting to his feet by propping himself up on the carpet of decaying pine needles and taking a couple of tentative steps by leaning on the trunk. Except for the expected aches and pains, he seemed okay—no broken bones. He searched the sky for Yanyan and saw was the moon, which sent watery rays filtering down through the pine branches to fall on a part of a grave mound here, the corner of a headstone there, and an occasional clump of moss. Yanyan was bathed in moonlight, a big, beautiful bird perched for the night on the top of a tree.

Someone beyond the pine grove called his name. He shouted back. Remembering the gong on the memorial stone, he picked it up, but couldn’t find the mallet anywhere.

A noisy mob entered the pine grove with lanterns and torches and flashlights, casting their light in the spaces between trees and pushing back the moon’s rays.

Among them were Yanyan’s aging mother, her mute elder brother, and his sister, Yanghua. He also saw Iron Mountain and seven or eight able-bodied men from town, with bows and arrows slung over their back. Others came equipped with long poles, or hunting rifles, even bird nets. A handsome young man in an olive-drab uniform cinched at the waist with a wide leather belt was holding a service revolver. Hong Xi recognized him as a local policeman.

Noting the bruises and welts on Hong Xi’s face, Iron Mountain asked, “How did that happen?”

“It’s nothing,” he said.

“Where is she?” Yanyán’s mother asked loudly.

Someone aimed a flashlight at the tip of a tree, shining it directly on her face. The people heard the top branches rustle, then watched as a dark shadow slipped silently from that tree to the top of another.

“You bastards!” Yanyan’s mother cursed. “I know you’ve killed my daughter and made up a story to trick this old widow and her orphaned son. How could a girl fly like an owl?”

“Calm down, Auntie,” Iron Mountain said. “We wouldn’t have believed it if we hadn’t seen it with our own eyes. Let me ask you, did your daughter ever study under a master? Learn any unusual skills? Associate with witches? Sorcerers?”

“My daughter has never studied under any master,” Yanyán’s mother said, “or learned any unusual skills. And she certainly hasn’t associated with witches or sorcerers. I never let her out of my sight when she was growing up, and she did as she was told. The neighbors all said what a nice girl I had. And now this nice girl spends one day in your house and turns into an eagle on a treetop. How did that happen? I won’t rest till I find out what you did to her. Give me back my Yanyan or you’ll never get Yanghua back again!”

“That’s enough bickering, old auntie,” the policeman said. “Keep your eyes on the treetop.” He aimed his flashlight at the shadow atop the tree, then snapped it on, training its beam of light on Yanyán’s face. With a flap of her arms, she rose into the air and glided to the top of yet another tree.

“Did you see her, old auntie?” the policeman asked.

“Yes,” Yanyán’s mother said.

“Is it your daughter?”

“It’s my daughter.”

“We don’t want to take drastic measures unless we have to,” the policeman said. “She’ll listen to you if you tell her to come