

# Objects of Obsession: Interpreting Can Xue’s “The Ox”

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Can Xue’s “The Ox” is a true nightmare: disturbing, confusing, discombobulating, and exhausting. Contemporary Chinese writer Can Xue is acclaimed for writing surreal, nightmarish short stories that challenge readers to find any semblance of clarity and meaning, and “The Ox” is no exception. Reading one of her stories “is like running downhill in the dark; you’ve got momentum, but you don’t know where you’re headed,” as the *New York Times* writes. While reading “The Ox,” one certainly feels this way, as finding accessible meaning in any part of the short story is a difficult task. The surreal imagery, perplexing storytelling, and strange characters throw the reader straight into confusion and bury them deep in the disarray.

This paper presents one interpretation of the overwhelming disarray in “The Ox.” The short story is about a wife and husband who are fully consumed by their personal obsessions to the point of isolation. The unnamed narrator obsesses over a mysterious purple ox that haunts her as it circles around and around her house. The narrator’s husband, Old Guan, obsesses over his cavities, which he blames on imagined mice. While Old Guan’s obsession is of some focus in the story, the purple ox is the central image and psychological nightmare of the piece. And yet, it is the purpose and symbolism of the purple ox that is most complicated and difficult to decipher.

Determining *what* the purple ox represents and *why* the narrator is obsessed with it is challenging—like running downhill in the dark—and is the purpose of this essay.

Acting as a guide, this paper walks the reader through one interpretation of "The Ox," which concludes that the purple ox symbolizes death, specifically the death of the narrator's mother. First, through analysis of the narrator's interactions with the mirror, window, door, and walls of her space, the reader can visualize her developing obsession over the purple ox. A visualization of the narrator and her obsession helps place reality in a surreal piece and makes interpreting the motifs slightly less daunting. Once the visualization is intact and the reader can imagine how the narrator relies upon the objects in her space to feed her obsession, the reader can extrapolate the symbolism of the ox to that of the color purple. Visualization of the piece allows for the reader to experience the piece and serves as a useful tool in deciphering the details of the story. The details in the narrator's memories, conversations with her husband, and glimpses of the ox are the keys to the story, determining a connection between the color purple and the theme of death.

Scholarship on Can Xue's writing often focuses on deciphering her symbolic stories, such as "The Ox." According to Tianming Li, "these stories are composed in a symbolic mode and are replete with many of Can Xue's private symbols. Reading them is really 'as difficult as deciphering some secret code,' as Can Xue herself admits. However, her remark reveals another aspect of these stories: since they are written in a so-called 'secret code,' there certainly exists a method to decipher the 'secret code,' otherwise the stories will be totally meaningless" (46). Li proposes one specific method for deciphering the secret code of "The Ox," which will be addressed later in this essay; however, this essay proposes a different method, revealing a different code. For the structure of this paper, a series of numbered and bolded passages from "The Ox," translated by Ronald R. Janssen and Jian

Zhang, are included to serve as a guided reading. Each passage is followed by analysis of and commentary on that specific part of the text.

It was drizzling that day. In the wind, mulberries were falling from the old tree into the crevices between the tiles. In the big mirror on the wall I saw a purple light flashing outside the window. It was the rear of an ox which had just passed slowly by. I ran to the window and poked out my head. (71)

At the start of the story, Can Xue immediately introduces the mirror and the window.

Both of these objects bring the purple ox into the narrator's reality and force her obsession with the purple ox. At its core, the purple ox insights curiosity in the narrator, but also invites an obsession with determining the meaning of the purple ox. The narrator first sees the ox as a purple flash of light reflected in the mirror. When looking in a mirror, one sees an imperfect reflection of reality—a *mirror* image, not an identical rendering of what actually exists. In the article "The Aesthetics of the Transportation of Reality, Dream and Mirror: A Comparative Perspective on Can Xue," author Chen Jianguo focuses on Can Xue's literary relationship with mirrors, writing that in her work, Can Xue:

is suspicious of the truth of the reflected object in the mirror. Since there is no absolute reality, any claim to represent an objective reality is only an illusion. The uncertain nature of human existence makes Can Xue believe that reality is made of mirror images.

Because of this she is more interested in how mirrors can re-

shape our normal vision of reality and how they may enable us to reach beyond ourselves for new interpretive possibilities. (368)

This analysis of mirrors and reflections in Can Xue's works supports the claim that the purple ox in the narrator's mirror is simply an illusion of her reality. The reflection of the purple ox seems odd, imaginary, perhaps an imperfect reflection of reality, and raises the question of whether or not the ox is real. Is it a mirage? Is it a figment of the narrator's imagination? With Chen's argument, the narrator's mirror acts as a tool for the narrator to use to reach beyond herself and reshape her vision of reality. The reflection of the purple ox, thus, is only an illusion of her own objective reality.

The window makes viewing the purple ox accessible to the narrator, turning the ox from illusion into reality. However, the window also determines her separation from the ox, restricting her from freely seeing and confronting the animal. The window confines her physically indoors and separates her from the ox. It also confines her mentally in a space where this obsession can indefinitely circle her. She is trapped behind the window as the ox walks past and has no way of seeing it more clearly. Thus, her obsession with seeing the purple ox begins as the window exaggerates her separation from it. The window implicates her in a state of wanting. Wanting to see the purple ox, the narrator becomes reliant upon this object to give her access to the purple ox. The window blinds her in a state of obsession. Obsessed with seeing the purple ox, the narrator must rely upon the window to give her a closer and clearer image than the reflection in the mirror.

While the narrator obsesses over the purple ox, the color purple becomes a central motif of the story. As the key characteristic of the narrator's obsession, what does the color purple mean in relation to

the story and protagonist? Questioning what the color purple represents is critical in the reader's understanding of the story, as purple objects continue to appear in the story. For example, in this passage, the color purple is shared between both the purple ox and the mulberry tree, and suggests a possible symbolic connection between these two objects. The mulberry tree produces a berry, which can be white, black, red, or purple (CRFG). Between the purple fruit and the purple ox, a pattern of purple objects begins to repeat itself. Furthermore, as an important object, the mulberry tree is a recurring symbol throughout Can Xue's oeuvre.

Tianming Li, in his article "A Tormented Soul in a Locked Hut—Can Xue's Short Stories," observes that the mulberry tree, willow tree, tuberose, and water are all symbols related to love and sex in Can Xue's symbolic stories. In many of her short stories, the narrator and her husband or lover live in a house under a mulberry tree (47). In the passage above, the reader only notes the mulberry tree as an indicator of where the narrator lives. The mulberry tree may identify where the narrator lives and what her environment looks like, however, it is still too early to identify if it symbolizes love and sex, as Li suggests.

It came again in the afternoon. I was eating my lunch in front of the window when the familiar purple light flashed through a crack in the wooden wall. A horn poked through the hole – it had pierced the wooden wall. I stretched my head again and saw its smooth, round rump. It was going away. Slowly it moved on, crushing the cinders, which moaned mournfully under its hooves. (71)

As the narrator interacts with the window, her obsession over the purple ox intensifies and the window becomes the central inhibitor of her obsessing. The window is her eye to the outside and to the ox,

and as she physically places herself closer to the window her dependence on the object intensifies. The window promises the narrator the possibility of seeing the ox without ever providing her with a clear image of the beast. It grounds her in a state of perpetual waiting, which consequently cements her state of obsession. Her questions about what the ox looks like, what the ox is doing circling her house, and why she cannot see it clearly all build to the singular obsession that rules her life: obsession over what the purple ox means to her. The ox invites the narrator to search for meaning, just as it invites the reader. The ox is always just outside the window but disappears from her line of sight, driving the narrator mad, and fueling the obsession.

When the purple ox rams its horn through the wall—an object originally meant to separate the narrator's space from the outside—the wall transforms into an object that allows her to interact more closely with the ox. The reality of what a wall is warps. The ox causes this object's reality to warp, and thus causes the narrator's reality to warp. As the wall is penetrated, so is the narrator's once isolated space. By puncturing the narrator's physical space, the ox actively forces its presence into her reality, and thus it appears that the ox wants to interact with the narrator. The obsession wants the narrator to confront itself, but, as the ox walks away, still aims to keep the narrator at a distance. If confronting this obsession were an easy task for the narrator, she would have already seen the ox head on. Instead, there is an element of avoidance toying with the narrator's obsessive state, illuminating the fact that the narrator, perhaps subconsciously, is avoiding this obsession. But how does one avoid an obsession that borders on paranoia? To avoid one's obsession is seemingly paradoxical, and in the case of the narrator and the purple ox, clearly avoidance of the obsession is counterintuitive.

"I've seen something," I told him vaguely. "A strange purple color. This seemed to have first happened long, long ago."

"Look here," he was showing me his black teeth. "These holes

could have been dug by field mice." Our bed stood against the wooden wall. When I was about to fall asleep, the horn poked in through the hole. I reached out to caress it, but what I touched was the back of Old Guan's head, cold and hard, it shrank and wrinkled. (72)

Now punctured, the wall transforms from a barrier to a passageway, allowing the purple ox to enter the narrator's space, this time further penetrating into the boundaries of her reality. Reaching out to touch the horn, she yearns for any tangible experience with this ox, which has only ever left her watching it walk away. If she feels the horn in her hand, then a part of her obsession will materialize and lose the mysterious and intriguing quality it possesses. A part of her obsession will fade because she will have finally confronted it. But some of her questions surrounding the ox will be answered. Wanting an answer, she grabs the horn—but she does not feel the ox. Instead of the horn, the narrator feels the head of her husband, Old Guan, and the edges of her reality continue to blur. Was the horn Old Guan's bald head all along? Are there actually any holes in the wall? Is the entire ox a figment of her imagination? Is Old Guan the ox? Her reality—living with Old Guan—has broken through the mental isolation caused by her obsession, and momentarily she wakes to her forgotten reality.

Keeping in mind the secret code Can Xue writes and the method of deciphering such a code, this passage provides a perfect example of using visualization of the space and the narrator's interactions within it to better understand the secret code. The reader should imagine the narrator falling asleep, and then jolted awake when an ox's horn comes ramming through the wall next to where she sleeps. The image is a violent one, and the reader can surely imagine in themselves the shock and surprise of the narrator. The reader should also imagine the curiosity the narrator feels in this moment, as her tormenter, this purple ox, has penetrated her personal space and is within her reach. Fi-

nally, the reader should imagine, feel, and visualize the disappointment and return to reality that the narrator feels when she realizes that in her hand is not the ox's horn, but her husband's cold, bald head. Through imagining, visualizing, and feeling the narrator's experience, the reader better understands her motivations and her obsession, and shares in the narrator's desire to identify what this purple ox represents.

Someone knocked at the door with three very light, hesitant taps. Perhaps it was only my imagination? I pushed the door open, only to see the round smooth rump of the ox. The beast had passed by and was moving away, encircled in a broad aura of dark purple. "Outside the hut where we used to live, there was a big Chinaberry tree. Whenever the wind blew, the dry, withered berries would fall down pit-a-pat." Old Guan was talking in his dream, agonizingly baring his teeth. He hadn't had any crackers for two nights. Every time he went without his nightly snack, he'd rave in his dream. "For years a white sheet had been hung under the tree. It was meant for wrapping up mother's body. Sure enough, it turned out to be very useful finally." "One day," I too began talking, without realizing what I was doing, "I looked into the mirror and found that my hair had turned snow-white and a green secretion was oozing from the corners of my eyes." (73)

Now at her doorstep, the purple ox moves further into the narrator's physical space, altering her state of reality to an even greater degree. After hearing the knocking sound on her door and opening it, the narrator, once again, is too late and sees only the rear end of the ox walking away. A door is an object that provides entry in and out of a space, and yet this door acts as a barrier between the narrator and the outside. This door keeps her within her isolated, obsessive state. If she has the physical ability to walk through the door and out to the



ox, why does she never leave her house? The reader can imagine themselves being in a doorway quite easily but must work a bit harder to imagine why they might be *stuck* there. Perhaps what keeps the narrator from walking through the door and confronting the ox is the fear of disappointment in reality. If she faces the ox and her understanding of it changes, then her sense of reality will change, and she will awake. The purple ox both pushes and pulls the narrator away and towards it, the door emphasizing the duality of her obsessive state, as both excruciating and exhilarating.

The purple ox moves away from the door and the narrator's husband, Old Guan, rambles in his sleep about the Chinaberry tree and wrapping mother's body. The Chinaberry is a deciduous tree with dark purplish bark, producing lilac-like flowers and fruit that is poisonous to humans and animals (UF/IFAS). The image of a purple tree is not new, as the mulberry tree (section heading 1) was previously mentioned at the start of the story. The image of a purple tree has now repeated itself twice, marking the color purple as a significant characteristic of what surrounds the narrator's obsession.

There is intention behind the color purple as it appears in the narrator's space and memory. At some point in the narrator's life, she had an experience with a purple tree—one that is poisonous—and has been reminded of that memory whilst being tormented by a purple ox. In this passage, Old Guan mentions a white sheet underneath the Chinaberry tree that he eventually used to wrap up the narrator's "mother's body." The reader now knows that the narrator's mother is dead. The reader is learning about a point of trauma in the narrator's life. And, the reader can now make an assumption about the color purple, which has tormented her since the ox first appeared as a glimmer of purple light in her mirror. The juxtaposition of the purple tree (with poisonous fruit) and memory of the mother's death emphasizes the intertwined relationship of the two, thus implicating the color purple to death.

The image of a tree with purple fruit appears at the start of the short story. The mulberry tree is one of the first objects the reader identifies in the narrator's space. As was previously mentioned, one possible interpretation of the mulberry tree is that it represents love and sex (Li 47). An issue in identifying the mulberry tree as a sensual symbol is the connection the mulberry shares with other similar objects that do not suggest a sexual connotation in this interpretation. Because of the purple characteristic of the mulberry fruit, it bears a physical similarity to the Chinaberry tree, a symbol that reminds Old Guan of death and much less of sex. This analysis suggests that while reading love and sex into the image of the mulberry tree may be a plausible interpretation in another reading, the reader can also interpret the mulberry tree as a symbol of death, based upon the similarity in coloring that it shares with the Chinaberry tree. With the symbolic correlation now made between the color purple and death, the reader can now apply such symbolism to the purple, reading its presence and purpose as another reminder of death.

A final detail to note in this passage is the mirror. After listening to Old Guan sleep talk, the narrator remembers a time when she looked into the mirror and a horrifying image reflected back at her. In the mirror, the narrator saw a green secretion ooze from her eyes and noticed that her hair had turned white. This reflection reeks of death and rot, which echoes Old Guan's description of mother's corpse. Now, from this section, the reader can determine another tangible link between the color purple and death, and identify an unforgettable moment from the narrator's past: the death of her mother.

It came again, butting and bumping against the wooden wall, making a loud noise. I opened the door and was forced to shut my eyes by the dazzling flash of purple light. "It has gone," I dropped my hands in disappointment. "It will keep circling us forever. Cold sweat is dripping from my armpits." . . . It has not come since yesterday, when I stood at the win-

dow the whole day, combing my short hair, which is parched like hay, with a broken comb. In the pane, I could see clumps of hair between the teeth of the comb. (74)

As the obsessive relationship between the narrator and purple ox continues to intensify, the narrator's reality strays further into a surreal state as if her trauma is violently boiling over and melting everything that it touches. The purple ox becomes more aggressive as the narrator becomes more emotionally invested in it. Constantly plagued by this creature with no moment of reprieve, no moment of clarity, no moment of peace, the narrator falls victim to the obsession, with the color purple becoming a louder reminder of illness and death. "It will keep circling forever" (74) and she will never be free from it—physically or mentally. The purple ox is her everything, having destroyed and replaced the narrator's coherent state of mind with trauma that refuses to leave. It consumes her and she is left emotionally dependent on it, as the reader sees through her yearning to reach out and touch the horns, through her obsession the window. The reader can visualize her obsession and feel it for themselves. She is both physically and mentally bound to the purple ox, obsessed with the dazzling flash of purple light. The purple beast disappoints her when it leaves but blinds her when it stays, yet it never fails in fueling the narrator's obsession.

While the window has always been her eyes out of her space, in this passage it functions as a mirror, reflecting back an image of the narrator combing her hair. In the story, the mirror reveals a warped truth of reality, such as when it reflected the first image of the ox and the zombie-like reflection of the narrator. But the window has only served as an object to be looked through not at, and this new shift in function, reflecting back the image of the narrator, symbolizes a bending of her reality. Windows are mirrors, walls are passageways, and doors are barriers. Reality is simply not what it seems. The narrator's reality changes the moment the purple ox appears in her mir-

ror, on that "drizzling that day" when the "mulberries were falling from the old tree into the crevices between the tiles" (71). On that day, when two purple objects appear in her space, the narrator's reality is slowly penetrated by death and trauma. Death, disguised in shades of purple, changes the narrator's reality, bending the constraints of her psychological bounds and stability.

"It hasn't come since yesterday," I told him. "Those things happened long, long ago – the mulberries that fell into the crevices between the tiles. There was a rattlesnake hanging from a branch . . . Whenever I see purple, my blood boils. I've just bitten a blister on my tongue and now I taste nothing but – ugh – blood." "What shall we do if our room is flooded? I wonder if the glass jar under the bed will be washed away. I have six teeth preserved inside." "The roses outside are beaten down by the rain. This you must have heard? Someone wearing boots passed through the rose garden and left deep footprints. One day I saw you in the mirror trying to fill the cracks between your teeth with arsenic. Why?" "I wanted to poison the field mice. They torture me. Is that why you're always looking in the mirror?" (75)

Through this exchange between Old Guan, her husband, and the narrator, Old Guan identifies the greater role of the mirror in the narrator's life, as well as its role in linking purple and the past together. The narrator asks Old Guan why he stood by the mirror one day filling his teeth with arsenic. To provide deeper context, just as the narrator has been obsessed with the ox, her husband has been obsessed with his cavities, which he blames on mice. His response to her question is simple: he is filling his cavities with arsenic to poison the field mice. Though completely ridiculous in all actuality, Old Guan is being pragmatic and self-motivated in ridding himself of what tortures him, using the mirror as his aid. He attempts to end his mental

turmoil. He shows a sense of free will and urgency, unlike his wife. Turning around, he asks her if that is why she looks in the mirror—to get rid of what tortures her. Is she obsessed with the mirror because it will release her from this mental imprisonment? Or is she obsessed with the mirror because it keeps her imprisoned? Constantly distraught when the ox walks away, but stressed by its constant presence, she cannot live peacefully with or without it, and thrives off of the obsession. If the mirror does reflect her reality and she is not using it to rid her of her obsession, she will not rid herself of this ox, and the reflected truth will continue to haunt her.

With the mulberries falling off the tree, a memory of purple emerges in the narrator's mind—and not a fond memory, as she thinks of the color and her blood starts to boil. Right after, the iron taste of blood floods her senses. Thus, the color purple initiates both physical and emotional discomfort. Now, to better understand the source of pain, the reader should notice what was mentioned before the narrator's physical and emotional reactions. A previously mentioned point of emotional pain is her mother's death, which Old Guan mentions when recounting his own memory of a purple tree. A Chinaberry tree with a white sheet for wrapping up a corpse; a mulberry tree with a venomous snake hanging from the branches. These are mirrored memories of purple which both evoke the theme of death. Between the repeated image, the presence of the color purple, and the mention of the past, purple represents the death of the narrator's mother, and thus one concludes that the purple ox represents that death. The death of the narrator's mother lurks in the background of her mental space, as the purple ox lurks through her physical space. Grief is a process, and perhaps because the narrator never processed the death of her mother, she has developed a compulsive obsession over this buried grief, now manifesting through images of a purple ox.

I went to the window and suddenly that day in May came

back to me. He entered the room, supporting my mother with both hands and reeking of sweat, with a zebra-striped dragonfly resting on each shoulder. "I've brought the scent of the fields," he told me bluntly, revealing his shiny white teeth. "The dentist says I show symptoms of decaying teeth. What nonsense!" He was taking sleeping pills regularly then. One he left a bottle of them on the table. My mother took them and never woke up afterward. "The old woman had an odd fancy for western pills," he told the coroner. I could see far, far away in the mirror. A huge beast had fallen into the water and was splashing and writhing in the throes of death. Black smoke was belching from its nose, dark red blood spurted from its mouth. Panic-stricken, I turned around, only to see him raising a big hammer high above his head and swinging it toward the mirror. (76)

The connection between the narrator's trauma and the purple ox is further defined in the final passage of the short story, where scenes of the ox dying and the mirror breaking immediately follow the memory of her mother's suicide. Through the window, she sees a memory of her dead mother in her husband's arms; in the mirror, she sees the purple ox dying a most grotesque death. The ox thrashes in the water, blood and smoke flowing from its orifices. A nightmare unfolds in the mirror, just as the nightmare of her mother's death unfolded many years ago. The juxtaposition of the memory of her mother's death and the death of the ox further emphasizes the inherent connection between her mother's death and the purple ox, between death and the color purple.

Outside is chaos, as the purple ox thrashes in his bloody death, but inside is no less unhinged. The narrator's husband, Old Guan, swings a hammer at the mirror, attempting to end the narrator's state of torture. His singular goal is to destroy the mirror. Old Guan pre-

viously notices the narrator's obsession with the mirror, wondering if she uses it to help expel her anxieties, as he had with his own. She never answers if the mirror calms her mental state, but through our reading of the story, we know that the mirror actually fuels her obsessions. The mirror locks the narrator in her own mental prison. Revisiting what Chen Jianguo declares, Can Xue's opinion on mirrors is that they do not reflect a true reality but an illusion, a warped image of reality, because in there is no absolute reality. Following Chen's argument and our reading of "The Ox," the mirror-reflected image of the ox can be interpreted as an illusion of the narrator's mother's death. And the narrator cannot rip herself from the mirror, from the purple ox. She is unable to take her eyes away from the purple ox, and thus unable to forget and move past the grief from her mother's passing. It takes Old Guan, an outside actor, to destroy the inhibitor of the narrator's obsession-warped reality. It takes Old Guan to destroy the mirror and end the obsession. When the mirror is gone, then the narrator has the opportunity to confront her past— not through a reflection or windowpanes, but in her own reality.

This interpretation, that the purple ox symbolizes the narrator's mother, is simply one possible interpretation of "The Ox," one way to decipher Can Xue's secret code. A contrasting and popular reading that challenges this suggests that the ox represents the narrator's lover, not her mother. Tianming Li makes this interpretation, basing his analysis upon declaring that the mulberry tree, snake, and ox are symbols of or relating to sex and love. The mulberry tree symbolizes love and sex, and denotes the place where a wife and husband, or a wife and lover. The snake symbolizes sex and the sin of sex. The ox symbolizes an ideal lover or a part of the female's desires (Li 47). Looking at the final scene and death of the purple ox, Li writes, "with a tragic scene when the husband learns of his wife's affair. With a big hammer he smashes the mirror from which the bull appears. Panic-stricken, the heroine sees far, far away in the broken mirror, a huge beast falling

down and writhing in the throes of death with dark red blood spurring from its mouth. This scene can be viewed in terms of an erotic event giving rise to violence" (66). Sex, infidelity, love, and violence take center stage in this interpretation. In an act of cuckolded rage, not in protection of his wife, the narrator's husband Old Guan shatters the mirror and the reflection of her lover, thus ridding himself and the narrator of the extramarital affair.

This interpretation is not wrong, as Can Xue's writing inherently invites different readings. However, in ignoring the color purple and its relevance to the story, I believe the reader misses something in the text.

Perhaps Can Xue intended the story to be about sex, love, and infidelity, or perhaps she intended the story to be about death and grief. Zhou Shi suggests that *who* or *what* the ox represents is not a necessary part of deciphering the secret code of "The Ox." He states that the ox could symbolize a lover from the narrator's past, or her dead mother, or something entirely different. He suggests that "The Ox" is a story about a lack of mutual understanding between people and the sense of loss that is contributed to two people growing apart from each other (Zhou 72). As each character grows deeper obsessed with their own fantastical nightmares—the ox for the narrator and the cavities for the husband—the two grow distant from the reality they once shared and the relationship they were once devoted to. Only when the obsession is quelled, the nightmare ended, can their loss be remedied.

Can Xue, in her forward to *Dialogues in Paradise*, writes "What I have to say is something beyond ordinary consciousness, beyond ordinary talk." What Can Xue writes is beyond ordinary consciousness, ordinary talk, and ordinary writing. She certainly does write stories that send her reader running downhill in the dark. "The Ox" is fantastical, nightmarish, terrifying, and discombobulating, reading like



no other piece of modern Chinese literature. Her reading places "considerable demands on readers," so much so that some readers lose patience with her pieces (Foley 1). Can Xue's pieces are to be read, yes, but they should be visualized and experienced to gain deeper understanding and appreciation. Each reader will create their own imaginary visualization of a Can Xue piece and should rely upon this visual for successful comprehension of the text. If Can Xue writes a fantastical landscape, the reader must see that landscape, must hear, smell, taste, experience it.

In a 2013 interview with Can Xue, she remarked, "I never base my writing on concepts; I base my writing on feelings" (Suher). When reading "The Ox," the reader should feel the obsessions of the narrator, feel the excitement she feels when she's about to touch the ox's horn. Feeling the disappointment and frustration each time the ox walks away, the reader should come to understand the narrator's motivations, and understand the meaning of the purple ox.

Visualizing the ox walking around and around the house and imagining the reflection of a bloody, purple ox thrashing in the water, the reader can place their own concept of reality in a surreal piece like "The Ox." The beginning step in creating the visualization is in understanding the space and reality of the short story. When the reader stops to consider the walls, the door, the windows, the mirror, they equip themselves with an understanding of the piece. Then, the reader can visualize more colorfully, more clearly. They can identify small details and grab onto hidden clues. They can identify symbols and make inferences in patterns. Through visualizing and imagining, the reader experiences the words of Can Xue, rather than getting lost in them. They become a part of active deciphering, and perhaps will decipher their own, original secret codes.

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