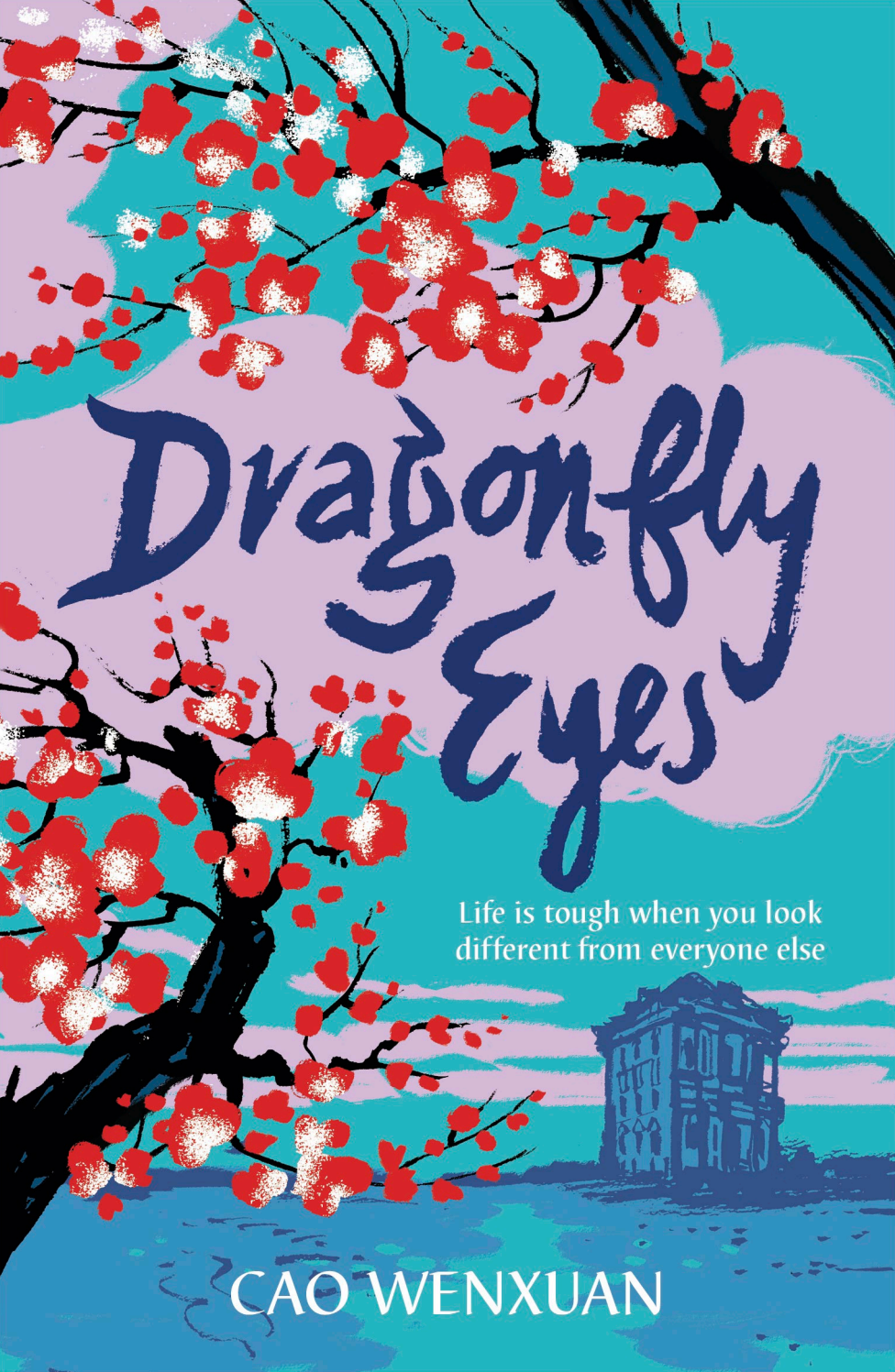

Dragonfly Eyes
Life is tough when you look different from everyone else
CAO WENXUAN

Dragonfly Eyes

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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Dragonfly Eyes

CAO WENXUAN

Translated by Helen Wang



WALKER
BOOKS

CHAPTER 1

The Café

Ah Mei looked different from other children; she *was* different. Wherever she went, silent eyes stared at her from all directions. She would appear a little shy and embarrassed, but inside she would feel a deep swelling of pride. She would rise very subtly onto her tiptoes, push her slender neck forward and raise her head. Then her little white face would turn very subtly, scanning the crowd, as though searching for someone.

People stopped talking the moment they saw her, as though caught by surprise, as though while taking a stroll by the river, mindlessly watching the flow of the water, a sudden chill had swept up from the surface. One by one, they stopped, until they were all standing there, spellbound – countless pairs of eyes watching her every move, without a moment's thought as to how it might make her feel.

It was as though this little girl had floated down from heaven, and the people around her were caught in a trance.

Ah Mei had known this gaze for as long as she could remember, this combination of surprise, curiosity, fascination

and appreciation that followed her wherever she went.

And she knew it was because of Nainai.

Nainai was French. Born in the famous port city of Marseilles, she had grown up by the bright blue Mediterranean Sea. Nainai was her grandmother, and without Nainai, Ah Mei wouldn't exist.

Ah Mei lived in Shanghai. At least, she lived there until she was thirteen.

From the time Ah Mei came into this world to the year Nainai passed away, when Ah Mei was fifteen, Nainai never stopped telling her stories about her life with Yeye, stories filled with adventure and romance. Nainai poured her heart and soul into the tales, even when Ah Mei was still very young. She didn't stop to wonder if Ah Mei could understand or not – as long as those bright little eyes kept watching and blinking, Nainai would carry on talking, her soft-spoken Shanghainese dotted with beautiful French words. Eventually, she'd remember that Ah Mei probably couldn't understand what she was saying. Then she'd laugh, and continue telling the stories anyway, pouring her heart and soul into them once again. Deep down, she knew she was telling the stories for her own benefit. She'd talk as she pushed Ah Mei's pram into Beijing West Road, as she held Ah Mei's little hand while they walked slowly beneath the apricot trees, and as she lay down on the bed with Ah Mei, their two heads sharing the same pillow. She told the stories in no particular order, and she repeated them too often to count. But for Ah Mei, it was like hearing

a new story every time, and she was constantly asking, "What happened next?" They were like shiny beads each offering a glimpse of the bigger story.

Over the years, Ah Mei strung the shiny beads together, and the sequence of events began to take shape in her mind. But there were gaps, and it was clear that Nainai was holding back certain parts. As Ah Mei got older, she could guess what they were. She understood, in a naïve kind of way, that there were some things that Nainai did not feel comfortable sharing with her. She would never forget Nainai's look of embarrassment when those awkward moments arose. Then Ah Mei would peer into Nainai's deep blue eyes, and wag her finger playfully before running it down Nainai's nose. Nainai would pretend to bite at the finger, then pinch Ah Mei's cheeks, or hug her so tightly she could hardly breathe. As soon as Ah Mei tried to pull away, Nainai would giggle and let go. Nainai laughed differently from all the other ladies Ah Mei knew. Nainai had been in Shanghai for a long time – she belonged there and spoke Shanghainese fluently – but when she laughed, she was French.

Du Meixi was born into a wealthy family, a very wealthy family. Their money came from the family silk business, which reached halfway round the world to Europe. It was Du Meixi's father who had set his sights on Europe, and, to that end, had entrusted the running of the Shanghai business to his cousin, and got on the boat himself. Having travelled the length and breadth of Europe, he had finally settled in France, and established the European side of the business

in Lyons. It had flourished and expanded: his Chinese silk company became well-known in Europe and its products were highly sought after.

When Du Meixi was twenty-five, his father had wanted him to join him in Lyons and take charge of the business there. He had refused, on the grounds that he was still grieving for his late wife, who had died of an illness. His father knew that was not the real reason: it was he who had insisted on the marriage, but Du Meixi had never been happy. He had always been a strict father, but this time he would not force his son against his wishes. He simply turned around, and, with his back to Du Meixi, sighed and said, "As you wish."

The past few years had been oppressive for Du Meixi. He had felt sad all the time, sometimes even desperate. But he had realized that his old life was over, and was determined now to start a new life. With a friend's help, he cast aside everything from his old life, and, holding his head high and pushing out his chest, he climbed aboard a steamer and became a sailor. The ship belonged to a French company, and sailed back and forth between Shanghai and Marseilles all year round.

Du Meixi loved being at sea. He was enthralled by the boundlessness of the water, the wind driving the clouds across the sky, the continuous rise and fall of the waves that rolled over the surface of the water, the islands in the distance floating like mirages, the gulls dancing in the spray behind the boat, the fish leaping in the brilliant moonlight, the merging of sea and sky. He had never known air so fresh. The world had never seemed so deep or so vast. Life on the steamer was simple, yet full of all kinds of unexpected danger. His

previous life seemed even duller in comparison. Doused in the salty tang of the sea, he was happier than he had ever been. He learned the skills he needed on the job, and soon rose to assistant helmsman, and then to second in command.

Meanwhile, the family silk business continued to flourish and expand. It had spread across Europe as smoothly as a cloud floating across the sky. And now, having covered Europe, it was heading towards the Americas.

But Du Meixi, by nature drawn to freedom and a life free of restriction, was still not interested.

His father looked up at the sky and sighed. As long as the family in Shanghai were looking after Du Meixi's children – a little boy and a little girl – then he could spend the rest of his life drifting about in the wind and the waves, if that was what he wanted.

Du Meixi's steamer docked at Marseilles. He had been there many times, and knew what to expect.

It took several days to unload a full ship, and once unloaded, the ship would need to stay in dock while a series of inspections and repairs were carried out. This meant he would have time on his hands and could go and enjoy himself. Marseilles is an ancient port, with a history going back thousands of years. There are traces of the past everywhere. They catch your eye, and before you know it, you are caught in a daydream, lost in thought. It happens time and time again, and you never tire of it.

The cobbled streets – some wide, some narrow, some long, some short, some winding, some straight – were lined

on both sides with little shops selling an assortment of items from all over the world. The seamen wandered aimlessly in and out of these little shops, not to buy anything, just to pass the time. Of course, they were much more interested in the restaurants. They had been at sea for weeks, and the food on board was bland and monotonous. Here, in Marseilles, as soon as they saw food their eyes lit up and their mouths started watering. The sight of Parma ham, sliced wafer-thin, whetted their appetite. The aroma of calamari, lightly fried with parsley and garlic, tickled their tastebuds from a hundred steps away. Pasta with scallops, in a squid and fish sauce, stopped looking strange when the delicious smell reached their nostrils. But what they really looked forward to every time they came ashore was bouillabaisse, the rich fish soup for which Marseilles is famous all over the world. Made with at least four different types of fish cooked slowly to draw out their flavour, it is probably the best soup in the world. No matter how difficult things get, when people eat bouillabaisse they feel life is worth living.

Du Meixi and a few other seamen had spent the whole day strolling around town. They could see from the sky that it was getting late, so they went into a very small restaurant. Naturally, they ordered bouillabaisse. As a huge pot of the soup was brought to their table, the group bent their heads over it. The flavours were intense, and when Du Meixi ate his first spoonful, he closed his eyes and sighed with delight, "Ah! This soup is delicious! My tongue's almost hanging out of my mouth!" There was a round of slurping. Naturally, they ordered wine – how could they not! They were seamen, after

all, and seamen have a natural affinity with alcohol. And this was Marseilles. They spent the evening eating and drinking, and by the time night had fallen and the sky was dark, they could neither see straight nor walk straight – all except Du Meixi, who had resolved to stay sober. He knew they were in no fit state to roam around town, so he had everyone link arms, and he led them back to the ship. Then he waved goodnight from the shore, and went for a late walk. He had always thought that the true face of a town, its soul, reveals itself only at night, and that this was especially true in a city like Marseilles which held so many secrets.

Du Meixi wandered down streets that were thousands of years old, walking slowly over uneven cobbles.

Eventually, feeling a little tired, he loosened the collar of his coat, and stepped inside a café on a street corner. He could never have imagined that his entire life would change the moment he stepped inside that café.

Du Meixi was tall, and well built. As he walked towards an empty seat, the golden glow of the candlelight swept his shadow over a Frenchwoman who was sitting in the corner.

She had a cup of coffee in front of her, and was reading a book. She felt the black wings of his looming shadow glide over her, and instinctively looked up. She saw his face. He saw only the empty seat.

He sat down and ordered a cup of coffee.

The Frenchwoman sitting in the corner glanced up at the Chinese sailor. His weatherbeaten face was the colour of old bronze and in the flickering candlelight there was a slightly cool sheen to it. There were bags under his eyes,

but the eyes themselves shone with life beneath black bushy eyebrows. His hair was black, and a little dry and scruffy, like wild grass. The tiny table seemed out of proportion beside his large body. His open collar made his chest seem even broader, a chest that was the same attractive bronze colour as his face. And as the Frenchwoman studied him, she could not help smiling.

He was not exactly handsome, she thought, but rather majestic – in the way that a statue is majestic.

Du Meixi was tired. It felt good to sit down and relax, and he drank his coffee with a mind free of all thoughts.

The Frenchwoman watched him from behind her book.

As Du Meixi stirred his coffee, he started to reflect. *I have plenty of time. Should I pay a visit to my father?* he wondered. He realized that deep down he missed his father. The spoon went round and round, clinking against the side of the cup, and it was not long before his eyes started to moisten and mist over.

The Frenchwoman kept her eyes on her book, as though she had already forgotten about him.

Du Meixi turned his head to look out of the window, and finally noticed the Frenchwoman, at the very same moment that she happened to glance up at him.

Their eyes met, crashing in the quiet of the café.

The Frenchwoman remained in the café until very late. Du Meixi stayed even later. He spent the entire time after she had left staring at her empty seat.

The next day, at the same time, Du Meixi returned to the little café on the corner of the street. As he stepped inside,

he saw the Frenchwoman. She was sitting in the same seat as before.

He greeted her with a quick nod, and she smiled in return, rather shyly.

For three days in a row, Du Meixi went to the café at the same time every night. Before going inside, he would walk around the neighbourhood for a while, wondering if she'd be there again. Of course not, he told himself. But when he opened the door, he would see her straight away, as though she had been sitting there for years. He gave her a little wave, and she gave a little wave back.

He noticed that she was always reading the same book, and always seemed to be reading the same page.

One day he arrived early, but the Frenchwoman was still there before him. This time, however, she was leaning against the railing outside the café, as though she was waiting for him.

Many, many years later, when Nainai told this story to Ah Mei, the little girl would blink at her and ask, "Were you waiting for Yeye? Or was he waiting for you?" And Nainai would say, "He was waiting for me, of course."

"But Yeye says you were waiting for him."

"That's men for you. They're not always very good at remembering the important things."

When doubt flashed across Ah Mei's eyes, Nainai would say, "Who do you believe? Me or him?"

Without even pretending to weigh up her choices, Ah Mei would answer immediately, "I believe you, Nainai!"

Sometimes Yeye would be standing near by, listening to every word. He wouldn't offer any protests, just a smile, as he handed Nainai a cup of freshly made coffee.

From there, Yeye and Nainai's story developed very smoothly. There were no cliffhanging moments, no twists and turns. They walked along the coast of the bright blue Mediterranean from early morning to late at night; they went to Provence and saw fields of lavender stretching to the horizon.

Nainai did not take Yeye home to meet her family right away, but she did take him to a small wood, where she pointed to a distant house with a red-tiled roof and a garden. "That's my house," she said. And Yeye took her on board his ship.

All in all, they spent fifteen days together. During those fifteen days, they walked and walked. It was a beautiful journey of love.

One day when Ah Mei was eleven, she was secretly reading a novel under the desk at school and came across the expression "love at first sight". At the time, the teacher was writing words and phrases on the blackboard and asking the students to use them in sentences. Ah Mei mentally added "love at first sight" to the list, and in an instant had written: "The day Yeye and Nainai met in a café in Marseilles, it was love at first sight."

On the sixteenth day, Yeye and Nainai met at the café again. They sat there, facing one another, for a very long time.

On the seventeenth day, they set out for Lyons.

CHAPTER 2

Yeye's Port

When Océane appeared in front of Du Meixi's father, it felt as if a curtain had been swept open, and a dazzling shaft of sunlight had come flooding in through the window. Du Meixi's father almost lost his balance, and was ready to raise his hands to shield his eyes. Océane was twenty.

The big bright lounge was suddenly filled with youth and promise, so much so that for a while Du Meixi's father forgot to look at his son. He hadn't seen him for a very long time, but instead of examining him head to toe, he was looking at this young woman. "Her eyes are so blue!"

"This is Océane," said Du Meixi.

His father quietly repeated the name to himself: "Oh-say-ann… Oh-say-ann…"

"Like the sea," Du Meixi explained.

"No wonder her eyes are so blue."

The older man took a good look at Océane. She tried to sidle behind Du Meixi. Her naturally rosy cheeks had turned a very bright red.

"She doesn't seem very French. She seems more Chinese than French." Du Meixi's father was beaming. He could barely contain his delight.

When Du Meixi moved aside so that Océane was standing in front of his father, she tried to hide behind him again. This time, he slipped his strong arm behind her and gave her a gentle push, so that she was standing in front of his father.

She felt uncomfortable at first, but as they talked, she began to relax.

Eventually, the conversation turned to Du Meixi's future. "You're not going to keep drifting about at sea all year and leave Océane behind, are you?" his father asked.

"I've handed in my notice."

Du Meixi's father was astonished by the power that this young woman held over his son. "You know, I tried so hard to persuade you," he said, shaking his head, "but it wasn't enough. I couldn't make you change your mind. And now, this French girl comes along and just like that she brings you to shore. Incredible!" He looked at Du Meixi, at the hard life that was written in his son's face, and felt a rush of emotion. *I can see that these past few years have not been easy for you,* he wanted to tell his son.

"I've found my port," said Du Meixi, looking at Océane. "Here she is."

His father let out a long breath. "Does this mean I can go back to Shanghai?"

Du Meixi smiled.

His father couldn't have been happier. "It looks as though

I'll be able to say goodbye to Lyons after all."

"If you feel confident enough…"

"You've changed your mind so suddenly! I'm still trying to get used to the idea," Du Meixi's father teased.

"Yes, it's all happened very quickly," said Du Meixi, glancing at Océane.

Du Meixi's father walked over to the window, opened it and gazed out at the blue sky over Lyons. "All right," he said, looking back at his son. "But it will be hard to leave this place."

"Then stay."

"No," said Du Meixi's father. "You have your own lives to live, and I don't want to be in the way." Du Meixi having found Océane was like the story of the Prodigal Son. His son had come home, and that was all he had ever wanted.

That evening, Du Meixi's father called his son into his bedroom, opened the wardrobe and took out a beautiful little sandalwood box. He lifted the lid and carefully opened up the cream-coloured silk that was wrapped around two knobbly little balls. He took them out and lay them in the palm of his hand. When he held them up to the lamp, they glowed different colours.

The effect was magnificent.

"Look at these!" said Du Meixi's father.

The strange little balls were about two centimetres in diameter, and slightly oval. One was a dark blue colour, patterned with white rings, and within each white ring was a light blue ring, which glowed more brightly than the darker

blue. And in the middle of each light blue ring was a small magenta ball. The other one was a red colour, also patterned with white rings, but within each white ring was a green ring, and a little orange ball.

"They look like eyes," said Du Meixi.

His father nodded. "Dragonfly eyes – that's what they're called." He looked at the two beads in the palm of his hand. "They're made of glass. The earliest ones appeared in Western Asia and Egypt in 2500 BC, then they spread to China. The imperial family and the nobility adored them. It was a complex process to make even one of these beads, and there was such a demand for them that at some point in the Warring States period, Chinese glassmakers started to produce them. They created beads that were quite different from those of Western Asia, Egypt and the Mediterranean. Can you see all the different layers? Don't they look like dragonfly eyes?"

Du Meixi's father held his hand up to the lamp again. The beads seemed to come to life, twinkling as they caught the light, like a dragonfly that has landed and is turning its head.

"They're precious, aren't they?" Du Meixi asked.

"Priceless," said his father. "I got them from a collector a long time ago. I want you to have them."

"You want to give them to me?"

Du Meixi's father shook his head. "No, I want you to give them to Océane. Find a good jeweller, and have these two beads strung together with gemstones to make a necklace. On the day of your marriage, give the necklace to Océane. I like this girl. I liked her from the moment I saw her." Du

Meixi's father looked at the beads in his hand. "It's strange. I could easily have left these in Shanghai, but for some reason I brought them with me to Lyons, as though I was meant to give them to you both here. It must be fate."

Within a few days, Du Meixi's father had handed over his European business to his son and was on his way back to Shanghai. Before leaving, he said only one thing to Du Meixi: "You're right: you've found your port."

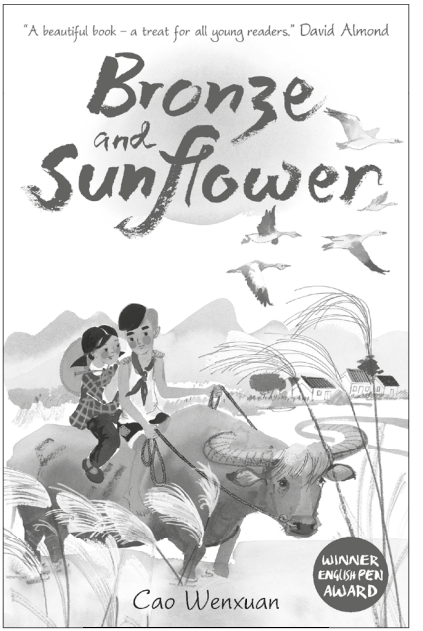
Historical Note

Dragonfly Eyes is a fictional story, set in France and China from the 1920s to the late 1960s. It follows the family life of Du Meixi, a Chinese man from Shanghai, and Océane, a Frenchwoman from Marseilles, their four children and ten grandchildren, against the background of war and political upheaval, particularly in China. The historical events are mentioned only lightly, but their impact on this international family is devastating.

After several idyllic years in France, the family relocate to Shanghai to help with the Du family silk business. When they first arrive, Shanghai is a thriving international city. But war in the 1930s and 1940s – first with Japan, then civil war – takes its toll on China, Shanghai and, therefore, the Du family. War ends in 1949, when the communists establish the People's Republic of China and start to rebuild the country: the New China. When political movements become especially heated during the 1960s – the Cultural Revolution – suspicion rises against the family, particularly against Océane, who, in many people's eyes, will always be a "foreigner".

Cao Wenxuan is one of China's most acclaimed children's writers: he has won several of China's most prestigious awards for children's literature, and in 2016 was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Award. He is a professor of Chinese literature at Peking University and has in turn taught some of the country's best young writers. Many of his books have become bestsellers, including *Bronze and Sunflower* and *The Grass House*, and his works have been translated into many languages, including English, French, Russian, Japanese, Italian, German and Korean. Note that "Cao" is his family name and "Wenxuan" is his given name; in China, Cao Wenxuan would be addressed as Mr Cao or, more respectfully, Professor Cao.

Helen Wang studied Chinese at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, and is now a curator at the British Museum. In 2017 she won the Marsh Christian Award for Children's Literature in Translation, in the UK, for Cao Wenxuan's novel *Bronze and Sunflower*, and a Chen Bochui Special Award in China. She lives in London.



Bronze has not spoken a word since a terrible fire swept through his village when he was small, and he is often alone. Sunflower has moved to the countryside with her father, but there are no other children near by and she, too, is lonely – until she spies Bronze on the far side of the river. As they become friends, new worlds open up for them both. However, life in rural Damaidi is hard – and Bronze and Sunflower must work together to survive.

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Winner of the Marsh Award for Children's Books in Translation, translated by Helen Wang