

## THE AGRICULTURE TEACHER

My pupils do not respect me, though it can be said that I've made a certain name for myself in my field, and have even won several awards. To them I'm a scorched, dry stalk of corn, and when I face the class in my working trousers and stained apron, I have no idea what I should do to win them over. Then, all the richness I experience in bed with Chinese poetry books is falling away, vanishes and slips from me until completely beyond my reach.

To my mind, teaching is a loathsome profession, despite its possessing some beauty as an idea. However, I'm dependent on the plot of land that was assigned to me by the administration on the school premises. Without it life wouldn't be worth living. True, I'd still be able to pile up dozens of Chinese poetry books in my one-and-a-half room apartment, stick my nose into their pages and sally forth at dawn with the ancient poets, climbing in their straw sandals towards tiny rice paddies hidden among a confusion of ragged peaks, or plod behind them at evening, as they return from their exertions, bent under bundles of fresh grass tightly wrapped around their shoulders. But without a creation of my own, I would shrivel up and wither away.

Perhaps I should explain: two forceful passions keep a tight grip on me, like two tall conjoined mountains between which I squeeze myself to pass, Chinese poetry and applied agriculture. Intricate links exist between the two, and the pupils, stuck in the middle, complicate things even further. I cannot imagine my life without a plot of land in which I'm realized, coming into being; still I must admit that the pupils too could not be dismissed, as many hands are needed to work the land.

At home, in bed, buried under my sketches and plans for cultivating the plot, while reading Hsieh's fourth century poems and comparing different translations, I find myself likening my pupils to his many tenant farmers whose labour he made use of to realize his vision of landscape and poetry; digging ditches, flattening hills, building others in their place, cutting twisted pathways and tunnels through the mountains, carving steps and terraces into slopes, setting up partitions in valleys, constructing dams to guide wayward streams, often making light of the very lives of his farmers. But, lo and behold! In the classroom my pupils seem to regard me as a servant; in their presence I become slightly stooped and I no longer know where the truth lies and who's enslaving whom.

What a pity one cannot teach from one's bedside, wrapped in blankets to keep warm, my voice hushed, or for that matter, even remaining voiceless, speaking to my pupils telepathically. But the innate nature of the teaching profession is its announcing itself like a trumpet, and a good teacher is the one who's in love with the voice he produces out of his own throat. As years go by, and as I find myself immersed in reading and tilling the soil, it gets harder to chisel out words. Loosing my respect for the skill of eloquence, I have come to see it as an illusion, castles in the air, evaporating no sooner than they are created. Singing is far better and places less strain on the vocal chords. From my bed, I imagine grand, sweeping gestures, full of vigour and inspiration in the open air, but when I'm there at the plot with my pupils, I'm alluringly drawn to the real landscapes in bed.

I wish to have pupils who would thirst for my silence, sitting a step below me, raising their trusting eyes toward mine, sunken under wrinkled eyelids as they are. We could be sitting and sighing together: Oh and Woe. But I have no patience for the sighs of the dull ones among them. Sighs should have wisdom. But really, young as they are, how can I

burden their shoulders with my heavy existence? I should be walking among them joyfully and lightly. Never be frail and feeble. They have nothing in common with the pupils of the monk Gensei who tended him on his sickbed and wrote for him the collection of poems ‘Inquiring about Illness.’

I wish I could bring them an offering of all the riches I gather during my long evenings, reading deep into the night, but as I face them, I become tongue-tied. Despite having dipped into profound happiness the night before, with periods of history and breadths of geography spread out in front of me in the spacious bed, and so easy to traverse; yet with the first light, a dawn-anger grinds my teeth, and no residue is left from my yesterday’s generosity. The tremor of my private life beneath my thin blouse, my faltering private skin, my private blood that flows within my private thin veins — all these cause such havoc that I can no longer hear the poet’s voice. Add the pupils’ deafening commotion, then from all this tumult inside and outside, which has no meaning or direction, a meaning must be extracted, hunted down like an elusive butterfly. I find it hard to concoct a meaning, as other voices claim to the absence of meaning. I must be alone for meaning to be heard, see it floating in front of me, assuming a form. But around the noisy breathing of others, sounding like a clutter of foreign languages, each breath claiming its place, let alone the youthful effervescent gasps of my pupils, how can I possibly glean some meaning? In my family, during my childhood and youth, meaning did not approach us; it did not open its gate to welcome us into its domain.

At night, when my little home glows in the light of the reading lamp, stooped over diagrams and plans, botanic drawings and drawings of beneficial insects, dried flowers and leaves collected over the years, poetry paragraphs and lines, roots of different species, samples of earth and rocks, I feverishly plan my next class. A pile of books is a small hill,

a stone-hard root I place in a cup to stand for a tree trunk, leaves picked from hedgerows along the street display the variety of greens, pickle green and poison green, chartreuse and shamrock, almost mustard and one grooved with purple veins. Dispersed among them are scraps of coloured paper, a dim echo of flowers. I draw connecting lines between words and deeds; the stanza of a poem — with its paths running faithfully east and west, coiling and meandering among fields, encircling pools and enclosing ravines, slithering like snakes down mountain slopes — I copy to our plot of land, and along with it, the long tendrils, extending and spreading, climbing and entwining, aspiring for heights. The line "Nobody can stop me from writing poems about the mountains and rivers of Wu," backs me up, and the line "I clap and urge the mountains to dance" imbues me with confidence. Ideas flood my swelling head, adding here, whittling down there, filling the sketches with footnotes, with poem samples, I'm exultant and full of strength.

By midnight I turn off the light. In the dark, leaning against my pillow, as the furniture rises and floats, gradually taking form, my body is as if dead under the covers (I smile, *Live your life as if you were dead*) and only my eyes can still see; a car's headlight that sweeps the long room for a brief moment. And only my ears are intent on the music, playing the last phrases of a tune. My mind is like a worldwide web, like an Internet, and yet my body has already dissolved. I'm sinking.

\*

Morning brings gloom and nausea, carrying me toward the bus that leaves northwards to the Sharon. This journey into rural Israel turns my stomach; the countryside was contaminated long ago by the youth movement trips and our family outings in the car on Shabbats. The transition from yesterday-night's freedom to today's demanding morning, and from a reclusive life to a social one, forces me into a wooden brace

and invites self-flagellation. And now, at seven forty-five, as I wait for my slow-to-come pupils, I shrink and shrivel. The cardboard file, so heavy when I left home, now seems weightless. They will not join me, they will not come along—and as for their thoughts—who can fathom them? The daily poem, which only yesterday moved me so, now I feel ashamed of it and it withers between my fingers. When I finish reading, they look so bewildered, so bereft of speech, that I hardly know how to arrange my body, my hands, on the chair. Light and lifeless as autumn leaves my thoughts are falling away.

At the end of the classes, tattered and wasted, not a trace is left of my glorious existence alone in the darkness. Dependent on the tender mercies of my pupils, I look around for someone to bring me closer to the city. Now that the time of lectures is over, I exert myself to lead a conversation like any other human being. With my pile of books and work tools, the wet apron over my arm, holding my rubber boots, I stumble out of the car that has dropped me off by a deserted provincial town, and into a darkened bus. I'm all body, breathing despite myself. It's hardly my intention to tire my readers or to burden them with the cumbersome existence of an aging heavy-footed spinster whose heart is brimming with resentment. I intend these circumstances to serve just as a background to that unique, one and only evening in which someone, a man, whom I once met at some unimportant social gathering, came to take me home in his car of his own free will, just like that, me, the agriculture teacher. But all in due course.

Carried along in the darkness by the jolting bus, my deprived spirits are slowly restored to me. As I smooth down my unruly hair with my dry palms, I can feel the grooves where the mud has sunken. Mud has seeped into the hems of my trousers and into my shoes; my heart, too, is covered in mud, brown and moist. And from the murkiness of the mud and the

jolting of the journey, which rocks me like a lullaby, the white linen of my bed rise and appear like the only promised garden, tolerant and comforting. I picture two steep-sided wooden baths, one boiling hot, the other cold, with a pile of folded towels along their wide margins. Intertwined wild weed grasses for scrubbing the skin, soft sponges for the face, olive-oil soap, fingernails and skin scissors, a nail-file, cones for cleaning the ears, cold cream for the face and foot cream, all arranged in a row. Clogs stand ready on a wooden latticework on the floor. The warm vapour, like a misty landscape, is calling me.

\*

A row of tall eucalyptus trees on the east is closing off the plot of land that slants downwards and westwards from the schoolyard, and thus separates and blocks it off from sight. A long shadow is cast over half of the plot during the morning, getting shorter and shorter by noon, and under it the little saplings that have just sprouted are sheltered in summer, and shiver from the cold in winter. I don't know what moves me more, these dense, upstanding, fine, trees, with their sharp-scented leaves, or the line "my neighbour to the East has a grove of aspens," that I pull out of the red "New Directions" book of Chinese poetry. What is it that makes the East that is referred to in the poem a clear entity that confidently points to a familiar region, while in reality the east is so nebulous, and its exact direction ever unknown? This short line, taken from a poem, seems to be planting the heavy-trunked trees in an ancient realm in an illuminated part of the mind, and thus anchoring existence and tangibility around them.

Hsieh, a stubborn and furious nobleman with iron willpower, a spendthrift and a generous and completely uninhibited man, one whose heart was set upon a reclusive life, who treated public office with carelessness and ended up beheaded in the market place, is our guide. It is

him and his life-work that I wish to reconstruct here with my pupils a thousand and six hundred years later, here in this plot near the school in the Sharon, how absurd. Hsieh's great passion, besides poetry, was mountain climbing, and more than anything else, his reputation is based upon his invention of the "Hsieh boots"—those clogs with the removable studs in front and back, when climbing you use the back ones, when coming down, the front ones. Equipped with these, and with a wide-brimmed hat, a knapsack on his back, a walking stick in his hand, he wandered for days on end in the wilderness, following in the footsteps of one of his eccentric ancestors, who was reported to have said: "Others may outdo me in court etiquette, but no one surpasses me when it comes to understanding mountains." He wrote highly solemn poems, thundering with rage, like psalms of Nature, with no God.

'Understanding mountains' is what I'm trying to preach to my pupils. They face me in their lovely T-shirts, and their baseball caps that cast dark shadows over their eyes. They have no need of poetry to get close to nature. Unlike me, they certainly know this country's mountains well, and some of them have even travelled widely to exotic parts like Nepal or Tibet. They are a spontaneous garden, pure and simple, effortless. And as for me, with my slight contempt for natural talents, I try to raise up mountains for them behind our plot of land with the help of Hsieh's poems. I invite the mountains to come from China and from Jerusalem, to loom up between my bed and our plot in the Sharon, to come and establish Jerusalem in the Sharon, over here, all the way from the China that dwells between the lines.

Secretly, I harbour a desire to use my pupils as limbs of my own body, to knead them into a single body, all of it intent upon realizing the vision; a crowd of tiny figures in the service of the great plan. Their youthful muscles, rippling gently beneath their tanned skin, show a

tremor of resistance, and the more I sense their resistance, the more I find my anger building, and I wish to break their will, to show them how weightless their petty lives are in the face of this grand undertaking. I insist on directing their gaze to a place where there are things to be seen, not to waste their senses on worthless and dithering activity, they should look beyond, towards the mountains. Although it's not an endeavour that carries with it a social or economic redemption, and is even superfluous from any practical point of view—yet just because of this, I assert—it is worthy of love and nurturing. Just because it is strange and useless, like a huge ball of thistles tossed about by the wind; all of it the fruit of a personal caprice, budding from private whims, the source of which is unclear, and scarcely as sharp as Hsieh's revelations.

And perhaps, justifiably, the other teachers at school steer clear of me. They must think that under the pretext of my agriculture class, furious and impatient, I'm given to the weirdest behaviour. Not that they've ever tried to catch a glimpse of what we're doing on our plot of land that slopes down from the avenue of eucalyptus trees, where we spin a dense net of landscape to entrap poetry.

*Higher and higher I shall go, Hsieh waxed lyrical, Would that I were the charioteer of the sun! This alone would bring solace to my soul.* And although he said: *From all the world I choose simplicity*, as he was climbing the mountain, he was still lamenting the court position he relinquished, *Stupid and slow-tongued, I had no hope of vain renown.* For, what is poetry if not this vacillating movement between the small and the great, between rocks and letters? From the gravel of letters Hsieh built a fortress of poetry, and from pulverized boulders, his tiny hut at the edge of a cliff. This hut, so remote from any other dwelling place, was a mysterious abode of utmost emptiness, like mist, wild plants were hung around it, flowing waters rushing and dashing against the rocks all



around. At times, the sun would peer through the clouds, illuminating delicate petals, carried by the wind and scattering lightly over the stream across the path, while the enshrouding mists loomed up like mountain peaks. The recluse-poet is the one to stride across the four seas with his inch of heart. Hsieh the vegetarian, who preached seclusion from worldly affairs, takes and appropriates mountain ridges and streams, the sky's huge expanses and its winged fowl; all the fish and the vastness of the sea, the entirety of creation, he subdues under his feet.

\*

After the summer vacation we find our plot of land covered with thistles and shrivelled plants—milk thistle and globe thistle, spotted golden thistle and knapweed, meadow foxtail and goat's beard. We don't clear it entirely: in accordance with the plans that I spread out, we allow the weeds and the thistles to grow wild in crescent-shaped beds spread all over the plot. Around these crescents we erect slim poles prepared from slender branches and tie them with invisible threads. This hard work lasts for a few lessons, but when it is over, even the most indifferent pupils are proud of these crescent-islands that we call 'moon plots' and which we use as greenhouses to breed snails and certain species of insects. At sunset, they will shine with a silvery glow standing out among the plethora of fresh foliage.

North-westward to the centre of the plot, formless and tilted sideways, a touch-me-not mimosa, which retracts its leaves at the slightest touch, has been standing there for years. The pupils delight in provoking it. Next to it, like its contrastingly upstanding partner, but as ascetic and as solitary, we build a miniature mountain. Old school benches taken out of classrooms and discarded at the yard's edge, now faded from exposure to rain and dew, we use as its base. On top, we pile up sand and stones, and as a cairn, we firmly press down a cone of red

earth. When I want my pupils, scattered all over the plot—some of them busily digging channels, making holes with a cultivator, clearing away stones or planting, and most of them hanging about, trying to look busy—to listen to me, I climb up the stairs we’ve constructed from broken bricks, settle myself at the edge of the cone, brandishing and waving my mud stained sketches and plans. At the top of the mount, in rubber boots and shabby overalls, with my stained apron, mud-splatters on my cheeks, and my straw-hair gathered up in a dishevelled bun, I recall the words of Yu Hsuan-Chi, over one thousand years ago, “How I hate this silk dress that conceals a poet,” and I don’t know whether I am reluctant or eager to exact revenge on her behalf. After all, with the coming of spring, I will surely covet the lovely dresses of the flowers.

From the top of the mountain, with outstretched arms, I outline circles and rectangles, triangles and lines, as if weaving the colours of the plot into the hues of the sky on a huge cosmic loom. I mark out the beds of flowers and vegetables, urging my pupils to prepare the earth for the seeds of baby marrows and gourds, for seedlings of pepper trees and tomatoes, pansies and alyssum, cosmos and snap dragons, Chinese cloves and bindweed. Among the tiny and delicate ones one has to dot the ground with tall, splendid ones—with yellow sunflowers, dahlias with heads as red as wine, and rose bushes in pale yellow, orangey pink, white and red. Purple rows of sugar cane should be planted to protect the seedlings from wind, and serve as a backdrop for the orange zucchini flowers. Branches of split bamboo will serve as structures for water cooling and sprinklers, I also explain how to tie and put them together to construct delicate trees for birds to perch on and as beds for grasshoppers.

As for the truly lofty mountains, I argue, we will raise them by the sheer power of poetry, set fast mountains by our strength, being girded with power. From stony ground we shall elevate words, heavy as rocks,

pile them up, one atop the other. We will carve jagged cliffs, and whet sharp edges. All around them, we will carve rounded hillocks and myriads of mounds clustered together. Shoulders of hills we shall even out, planting dense groves. Tumbling and toppling stones down the slopes to the south, and noisily unleashing cascades and dropping roaring waterfalls, all along crags in the north. We will quarry steep walls into escarpments and ravines for the passage of water. In the concealment of hill ridges we will set our place of habitation, and gather roaring springs together in a heap, to close it in. As we climb, we will take sweet counsel together, combed by the wind, and washed by the vapour of clouds. Look at Hsieh, I tell my pupils, skipping from one peak to another with giant strides, look at Hsieh as he sends his soul heavenward, calling: *Flee as a bird to your mountain.*

\*

In the school lavatory, I can't avoid my face in the mirror. Like a munched sugarcane, it acknowledges me. An old notebook in which insults, disasters and a whole plethora of damaged character traits are all etched. It was from agriculture that I had hoped to assuage the hardships of love that are drawn like a detailed map upon my face. Carrying along the face, bring it to streets, to doorsteps of shops, to school, to my pupils, is harder than lifting mountains. If it is the soul's mirror, then a soul hard as a rock with jagged edges capable of wounding, has crystallized in me, against my will.

\*

At the end of February, after an illness, when I return to the plot of land, signs of an early spring are underway. I find first petals nodding to the sun, and with avidity, as if sipping of a healing potion, I gaze deeply into the eyes of the flowers. How modest they are, with their lowered heads. Green stalks adorned with red cups bend in refined bows. White

collars of gauze rest gently on a bed of fresh leaves. Spring brings with it new tasks, thinning out seedlings, trellising; transferring plants from sprouting boxes, turning the soil. I read aloud to my pupils poems of convalescence by Hsieh. His sickbed made him blind to the seasons, but when they threw open his doors, he could gaze up into high mountain peaks, his ears picking up the murmuring of distant waves. The sun, mild and warm, came to his bed, unravelling the winds of winter. Lakeshores were newborn into spring grasses, and garden willows became carolling birds. Today they are more attentive, my pupils, they respond to me. My heart suddenly softens when I see them immersed in their work, doing their chores with a kind of obedience that stirs my compassion, concealed among the bushes, their hands sunk in the earth, pruning or tying strings. I am flooded by a sense of communion and joyfully, docilely, I conduct this symphony of live intricacy that we have melded together. A big laugh tickles my nose, I would have liked them to join me in a thunder of rolling laughter, to stir a ripple in the rows of flowers and foliage and make waves onward to the beyond, and all the way to the horizon. *Oh my sons and daughters, who are more desired than much fine gold and sweeter than honey and honeycomb, how hard it is to go from me to you and from there back to me.* Towards the end of the day's classes, one of the girls is carrying under her arm a clay Smiley face, the size of a human head, which she has made at her pottery class. It is to be buried under the cabbages at the centre of the plot of land, in memory of Hsieh's severed head, and from the goat's beard bush we will take some fluff and stick it to its chin in memory of his goatee, which before he died, he donated to one of the sanctuaries to adorn the image of Buddha.

The following week, the return of murky rainy days, wreaked havoc in the plot. Trampled flowers, broken branches and uprooted fences, all covered in mud. I urge my pupils to knuckle down to the task

of repairing things. But then, a spirit of despair and rebellion is rising inside them, and on the background of my hoarse shouts, they toss mud pats at each other which scarcely miss my head. With a sinking heart, stooped over the flowerbeds, immersed in mud up to my ankles, I go from flower to flower, trying to revive the dead. Waves of anger flood my limbs as I become exhausted. The insult hardens like a plaster cast around my embittered, sour face. How am I ever going to be able to drag myself through the long day that stretches ahead? If only it were possible to disappear or to evaporate or, body, head and all, sink into the sticky mud, never to be seen again.

At twilight, crushed and dishevelled, I drag myself to the parking lot, "Hello!" I hear but don't look up. "Hello," I hear a man's voice near me. It takes me a few seconds to recognize him, standing there next to the car, we met only once. "I had a free afternoon, so I came," he laughs, inviting me to get into the car. I sit next to him in the front seat, and only then do I sense the weight of the mud that has caked to my boots. He apologizes for the slightly wet seat from a window that was left open.

"There's a Chinese poem where a snowfall drifts into the room of the poet, who left his curtains open. The snow piled up over the bedcovers like heaps of salt."

"So, is this the kind of thing that brings you to life?"

"I once had a Japanese boyfriend who told me that 'he fell in life with me.' He was drunk when he said it."

"Is that so..."

I have no idea why he came. But my cheeks are getting more and more flushed in the darkness, from pleasure, from a sweet lassitude that has spread throughout my body. Sitting next to him, the silence is pleasant, and I don't know what devil goads me to continue: "He died from excessive drinking..."

“Is that so...”

“His brother, who came all the way from Japan for the funeral, poured wine on his grave very liberally. Then I thought that had it been me, though already dead, I wouldn’t have granted him that bottle of wine.”

“Why?”

The question hangs inside the car, as it slowly sails ahead. I would have liked to nurture the silence, to delight in the muffled rustle of the sliding car. I am right here now, gliding back with you from the countries of the East, from paper mountains to the real. You are really real, I think. With you I glide to the lowlands, and to the coastal plain. Thin rivulets of water course from the corners of my eyes, trickling over the wasteland of my face, to my chin, to my neck.

“After that I noticed that a glowing, velvety-green moss had grown in the places where the wine was spilt, and as an experiment I asked my pupils to bring leftover wine from Friday night meals and from weddings. We sprinkled it over the south-west edge of the allotment, forming the letters of the name of the poet who was our mentor from a distance of a thousand and six hundred years ago: Hsieh Ling-Yun.”

“And what came of it?”

“Nothing.”

“Perhaps one needs a fine wine,” he laughs.

“You know that you can improve wine by nourishing the vine plants with fish?”

“Is that so...”

“Researchers have found that fish that are fed on the nutrients of the north Pacific, which are rich in carbons, nitrogen and phosphorus, incorporate these chemicals in the tissues of their cells, carrying them upstream in autumn and winter to rivers along whose banks vineyards

grow. The fish that die after spawning are thrown onto the banks, and from there they get to the vineyards by scavengers, whether through their faeces, or directly by carrying fish bones and laying them at the foot of the vines.”

“Is that so?!”

“In wine production, nitrogen plays a vital role in the fermentation of the yeast and sugar, and it’s been found that twenty-five percent of the nitrogen that grapes contain in these parts comes from the nitrogen of the salmon.”

He brings me home. I shut the car door without slamming it, as quietly as I possibly can, and disappear in the shade of the large ficus tree at the entrance, which paints another layer of darkness above the darkness of the evening.

Translation by the author based on a former translation by Aloma Halter & Judith Reich