

The Good Neighbor / Nurit David

Unlike in the neighboring garden, in our yard no delicate flowers like Sweet Peas, Cosmos, Zinnias or Dahlias are growing. Instead, in two straight rows near the fence and by the house, black stubborn Kana bushes are standing, their flowers like fire, their stems hard, not meant to be picked; they don't need tending and when you want to get rid of them they grow even stronger. For some reason, my mother, with her fair hair and her pink freckled skin prefers the tall Kana bushes; Snapdragons, Pansies she considers minuscule, too small to catch her eye.

Our neighbor, a small broad-shouldered man of Samurai stock, is kind and good. From time to time, standing on tiptoes, he raises over the fence wine, jam or olives prepared from the fruit of his garden as a gift for us. We are not generous and we even criticize the gifts of our neighbor. Behind the habitual wide smile of my father, meant to expose his straight and strong white teeth, somber words hide, stuck in the dark of his throat.

Our neighbor's house leans against a tall hill from which his yard inclines and slopes downward. In his garden he dug a small lake in which a tiny islet is floating turned into a garden of rocks and succulents, with a miniature rice field slanting towards its edge. Through the hedge that separates the two yards our eyes spy on him while happy and content he is carrying stones, setting up fences, pruning, sipping wine from a tin cup. He rules this small kingdom that contains a mountain and a lake and cultivates it in soft roundish carefree movements.

My mother calls him *Mr. All the Best* or *The Good Samaritan*, her smile tinged with contempt; and in Hungarian in which a donkey is called *Szamár* she calls his kingdom *Szamárei* (rhyming with *Schweinerei*, reminiscent of a pigsty, a word that serves her when furious to describe our home), meaning a kingdom of country bumpkin Samurai toiling like donkeys. He has no idea about our past, it was recently that we arrived and no sooner we'll be gone. Our yard, our house and our hearts are prey to natural forces that sow them with dry nettles, yellow thorns and weeds. Our trees were never trimmed and their branches grow in gnarled curves fighting each other. A strange grove separates us from the village, made of rows arranged according to their height from tall to short. Like in a class picture, standing one behind the other are a row of squat Knotted Willows, its twigs used for weaving, a row of Royal Poincianas, a row of Cypresses and finally tall She-Oaks covered in

Mistletoe that turns them into a dark green wall that fills us with awe mixed with horror.

Sometimes, without any care or watering, a remnant from previous tenants, a pumpkin would swell to huge dimensions, its inside empty and its meager flesh dry as sawdust. But other times a tree would ignore the fact of getting no water whatsoever, not to speak of fertilizers, its having no circle dug around its trunk, and its fruit not being wrapped in brown paper bags, and lavishes us with plenty of radiant juicy fruits that we gobble down with gusto while they drip on our cloths.

On our side the landscape is bare and we kick and trample sand on a leveled plain. When we wake up in the morning, from every window in our house the mountain in our neighbor's estate looms, to rebuke and remind us of how low and idle we are. Our house borders on low sand dunes, but the landscape is misleading: if you turn left behind the back balcony to the paved road that twists and twirls towards the village center, then camouflaged by bent trees, gaping like a trap, a steep narrow road suddenly descends down down, and you discover the underside of the rocks our house is standing on, as if suspended in mid air.

Under the rocks, three houses are squeezed and sheltered by the walls of the crater, one of them is our old aunt and uncle's, the seamstress and the hunchback. Many times we feared that my little jackanapes-of-a-brother will break his neck there. Most of the day their house is hidden in the darkness beneath the rocks, but from its windows, such a wonder, a square apricot orchard is spreading forth towards the sun, illuminated like a piece of golden foil. On its background the black figure of the hunchback is outlined, busy as he is in grafting peach branches onto apricot trees and in his devotion he looks as if he is lighting tall Hanukkah lamps. His grafting skills made him a name in the village just like his tales that glided in soft *Samekh* and *Shin* letters from his delicate mouth set in his pleasant face, adorned with round tortoiseshell glasses. His stories were no lesser masterpieces of grafting, and in our imagination they all took place in the orchard seen from his window; so much so that the branches of apricot trees entwined in the branches of peach trees we thought of as sentences, and the *Samekh* and *Shin* letters came to be apricots and peaches devoured eagerly by us.

Sometimes in cold evenings in a moment of warmth and intimacy, we climb arm in arm, my mother and my sisters, walking back home from our

relatives. There, in the black of night, my mother, unusually gay and talkative, feels grateful at heart to the cold and the darkness and the steep road for bringing her daughters close to her, to nestle together.

My father was the first to bring a car to these districts, rattling along the narrow paths. The car allows him to ignore the village dwellers while they walk the paths loaded with sacks and baskets; otherwise he would have to devise all kinds of ruses to avoid greeting them. In first meetings my father shows a kind face, but still from every pore of his skin, from every bristle of his greenish moustache his sense of superiority oozes. His constant cares and chagrins distort his movements, twist his mouth, furrow wrinkles upon his forehead. His troubles are not of this world, being tailored especially for him, however in our family for some reason we all wear them. These are absolute troubles that muddy the water in our faucets, force our dogs to bite the passerby, grow our teeth crooked to break our smile. When she hears the rattle of the car my mother breathes a sigh of relief, for each and every evening she is worried lest he might never come back and leave us penniless in this remote village, far far away from the big cities of Europe.

When evening comes, an urge to huddle together should follow – back home, to the kitchen, to the fireplace, to bed. A husband should return to his wife, join his family, dine at the table. From among the animals which ones have homes and which have their beds in open air? Dim fragmented mooing sounds of the herd led by men with firm shins, they pull the ropes while walking backwards, their heads turned back in the direction of their movement; Hee-Haw Brrrr... a whistle, a clank and a knocking sound.

It's only a hedge that separates our yard from our neighbor's. But to the wayfarer passing from one yard to the other a new land is revealed as in a revolving stage. Geography turns on its axis, folds in on itself, regrets and betrays itself. The ground coiled and squeezed rises like a spool to erect a mountain with a wall climbing and dividing it to trapezoid-shaped plots, cypresses mark their corners. Even the sky of our neighbor is different from ours; around his mountain clouds crowd while our skies are white and empty. Installed on the mountain are a weather forecast device, a weather vane and a small waterwheel whose constant roaring sounds like the warm breathing voice of the mountain itself. The neighbor's sons and daughters grew up under its comforting shelter. When circling the mountain it served them as a guide, when in bed as a lullaby.

We, on the other hand, live under the fickle sound of the rattling car, coming and going, we prick our ears to distinguish between its approaching and departing. When will father come? When will he go away? My little brother in a toy car, a minuscule twin of the other, evokes my father's presence by imitating the rattling sound in his absence; as if by remote control the small car is calling out to the big car. This brother of ours is the apple of my father's eye, a reminder of his own loose promiscuous childhood, days he needed not provide for a wife and children. Driving, rattling in his red car among the sand dunes, rattling and rattling to compensate himself for bloody adulthood and its troubles. My little brother is a miniature replica of my father, grasps his trousers and climbs up to his shoulders like a young monkey. My father grumbles while relishing the moment, keeps his lips tight to avoid showing his smile; for many years he was awaiting a son. My mother on the other hand wonders how come this little devil was the fruit of her womb. My father looks at him, sees himself and melts. My father and my brother, birds of a feather; my brother in his frolic fulfills my father's innermost hankerings, runs his running, shouts his throat, hits his knees till bleeding. This little one carries out my father's schemes, things he dared not dream. He sneaks in to the neighbor's yard through a gap in the fence, eats from his fruits, scares the frogs by venturing into the pool, imitates their squawks, thrusts sticks between the paddles of the waterwheel on the mountain, upsets the order of the shoes standing in a straight line near the entrance, knocks on the door and runs away.

Our goodhearted neighbor laughs at his mischiefs, his tolerance inherited from his ancestors. They molded his character for long years. Their resolute customs, though their meaning lost long ago, guide his conduct at work, as head of family, as a comrade to his fellow friends, to the last detail, like what to say, what to wear, what to eat and in what dishes in each and every event of life. He is a hard working man, his skin suntanned and his hands rugged from the toils of field and garden. Rich in enterprises, his commands are given naturally, all his deeds are reasonable and well thought out.

Therefore was it truly surprising to see him so skillful at dancing. While dancing a flower opens in his heart and he crosses over to another, otherworldly realm. His dance is a bow to his ancient ancestors, to continuity, to all that exists; a gesture of content and friendship addressed to the universe. It is as slow as the opening of a leaf, or as sprouting and reveres all that is mute and tiny. His movements are so subtle: slight rhythmic movements of fingers and toes while his foot hardly touches the

ground, quivers of his eyelids. This robust man dances like a virgin, lowers his eyes like a shy girl. As meek as she he imagines himself combing his thick hair in front of a mirror, tying it up in a bun, his masculine nape metamorphoses into one as white and graceful as a crane's; his cheek, as if turned smooth, blushes like a buttercup's petal. Just as trees dance while standing in place so is the dance of the Samurai, yet in its modesty it should rather be likened to herb of the field. But all along he has his sword with him, bashfully hiding in the folds of his garment. He dances the dance of climbing down the mountain on a narrow strip of land where the mountain meets the plain; he dances in a small clearing in midst of the cornfield, its stalks taller than himself and the small crowd that gathers to watch him. But all along he has his sword with him, hidden in his gown, as if bent, drooping. He dances the smallness and gentleness of young girls and children, dances towards them, apologizing for his thickness and crudeness. His hand palms turn into wings of a tiny bird while the accompanying Samisen softly twitters. But suddenly, a thrust of the sword drawn abruptly marks the end of the dance, cuts time and air in two, announcing the end of playtime, the return to reality and the resuming of manhood. As if awakened from a delusion, he has no recollection of what has just happened, he turns his back and climbs the mountain with heavy strides.

We do not dance, in our family there is not a trace of this skill. But since the hunchback told us the story of *The Lady who Loved Insects* we, the sisters, invite insects to our yard to dance and sing for us. *The lady who loved insects lived next door to the lady who loved butterflies. "Why do people make so much fuss about butterflies" she used to say "and never give a thought to the creatures out of which butterflies grow? It is the natural form of things that is always the most important." She collected all kinds of reptiles and insects...keeping them in various sorts of little boxes and cages. Among all these creatures her favorite was the common caterpillar called Kawamushi. She hated anything that was not natural. Consequently she would not pluck a single hair from her eyebrows growing black and bushy. People...were frightened of her and kept away... if anyone showed the slightest distaste for her pets, she would ask him indignantly how he could give way to so silly and vulgar a prejudice, and as she said this she would stare at the visitor under her black, bushy eyebrows in a way that made him feel extremely uncomfortable... A man who was curious about the rumors watched her from her gate and sent the following poem: "Forgive me that at your wicker gate so long I stand / But from the caterpillar's bushy brows I cannot take my eyes." To the servant's scolding, urging her to write back,*

she answered: "If you looked a little more below the surface of things you would not mind so much what other people thought about you. The world in which we live has no reality, it is a mirage, a dream. Suppose someone is offended by what we do...does his opinion make any difference to us in the end? Before long both he and we shall no longer even appear to exist." But after everyone urged her to write something...very reluctantly she sent the poem, "By this you may know the strangeness of my mood. Had you not called me Kawamushi, I would not have replied."

Our hunchback uncle would pronounce *Kawamushi* with utmost softness, and this answer became a habitual slogan with us, and was part of the insect worship initiated by my older sister who fashioned herself since after the model of the lady who loved insects, and we two, the younger ones, followed suit. Only one thing caused her anguish, making her envy me, the middle one, her eyebrows did not grow as black and bushy as mine. In our neighborhood we came to be known as the insect lovers, and they became our companions and bosom friends and even our occasional entertainment artists. We built elaborate devices made of sticks, threads and tiny water bowls to allure them, we made a system of paths for each specimen, we perforated the mosquito nets on our windows to invite them inside, we scattered cake morsels in hidden corners as refreshment to their delicate souls. In diligent needlework we embroidered flies and mosquitoes on our handkerchiefs. And ceremonially, whether to the point or not, we used to declare, while bowing and gesturing, time and again: *Had you not called me Kawamushi, I would not have replied.*

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Just like every year at the end of summer, when everything around is hard and dry, in our neighbor's yard, preparations are made for the annual performance. The play he adapted from an old Samurai legend concerning one of his old ancestors, a famous swordsman, is the pride of our neighbor. *That old ancestor visited a daimyo at his mansion. A rōnin, a master-less samurai, who happened to be staying there, was confident of his own swordsmanship; upon learning who the visitor was, he asked him to teach him some fighting techniques. "Teaching" here is a euphemism for a serious match. The old ancestor declined. But the daimyo showed interest, and at his urging the old ancestor finally agreed to fight with wooden swords. Out in the garden the two men faced each other and a*

moment later struck – with their wooden swords hitting each other’s body, apparently simultaneously. The old ancestor said, “Did you get that?” The rōnin said, “It was a draw,” looking exceedingly pleased that he’s had a draw with a famous swordsman. But the old ancestor calmly said, “No, I won.” Upset and angered, the rōnin asked for a rematch. He got it, and exactly the same thing happened. The two men’s blows appeared simultaneous. Exactly the same exchange occurred again: The rōnin said it was a draw, and the old ancestor said he had won. The rōnin became outraged. And the daimyo showed greater interest, half disbelieving what the old ancestor had said. The rōnin now insisted on another match – this time with real, steel swords. The old ancestor declined but is again overruled by the daimyo. But as soon as the two men face each other, the fight is over—with the rōnin keeling over, his head split in two. The old ancestor, only part of his outer jacket is slightly cut.

In our neighbor’s adaptation the play is turned into an elaborate and refined musical, making use of the best of martial arts in which our neighbor is a master. In the last moment of the performance, with a skill accumulated through many years, two stagehands swiftly carry in a wooden doll in the shape of the rōnin to the tune of the well known song:

*As for my neighbor Semmatsu,
He went to the war in Omi,
One year passed, he did not come back;
Two years passed, he did not come back;
When three years passed, his head came back.*

This doll is made anew every year, for at the end of the performance it stands alone on the stage, her head split in two.

The day of the performance, planned for Saturday night, even my father walked around restless; seeing the festive atmosphere of the neighbor’s house, he was eating his heart out. There everyone was washing and scrubbing, tying ribbons and polishing buckles, gathering dry leaves. They even put up a stage and a curtain among the trees, and spread checkered blankets on the lawn, while my father, loitering around was pursuing all kinds of pastimes in vain. The mountain in the neighbor’s garden seemed to grow even higher and looked like a dish of rice stew rich in fresh vegetables

and seaweed, seasoned with delicious *Miso* sauce, whereas our home was still open to the same chain of bald hills, reminiscent of our dull food.

In the evening chains of colorful light bulbs were lit and we drew near the fence to peep at the show. Gleeefully we followed the swords, moving in exact arc-like moves in the hands of the two warriors wearing their ancient armors. Their bodies for a moment wrapped in each other, and the second moment slither one above or behind the other in firm and flexible yet light moves, their legs fixed in place. With our mouths agape we saw how the *rōnin* substitute doll is dragged along to the stage in unparalleled agility, and how the sword in a second misses the *rōnin*'s head, while he quickly escapes to behind the curtain, and comes down on the head of the doll.

But alas, woe is us!
 Inside the doll our rascal brother hides
 He is the one to be dragged ceremonially forth
 To under the master's sword
 And his small and thin cry
 Is hushed by the theatre's big cry;
 And then silence, not a sound.

In his playful innocence the good neighbor put an end to our reckless presence in the village, and our family, like dandelion puffballs scattered in all directions.

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- *The Lady who Loved Insects* from Donald Keene / *Anthology of Japanese Literature*, from the earliest era to the mid-nineteenth century. p. 170

- The Samurai story from introduction to Hiroaki Sato / *Legends of the Samurai*

- Poem of *Semmatsu* from Lafcadio Hearn / *Japanese Miscellany* p. 176

All these sources were somewhat modified.