

## 那棵树举了一冬天的笔

我们小区门口有棵玉兰，高过两层楼。冬天它是最难看的树，枝子光着，只有枝头立着一支支笔头样的苞，外面裹一层灰绿的绒，风吹不动，鸟也不碰。别的花木都等着春天，它倒好，大冷天就把花苞举出来了，举一整个冬天，不开，也不掉。我在树下进出了一冬天，看那些笔头从黄豆大长到指头长，绒壳慢慢裂开一条缝，露出里头像玉一样的白。它不着急。冷它受着，暖它也不急着谢。

满树白是在一个礼拜天早上忽然出现的。前一天路过，树上才开了三五朵，第二天出门，整棵树全白了，白得发亮，一朵压一朵，从最低的枝到树顶，没有一片叶子陪着，就那么自己开着。我在树下仰着头看了很久，脖子都酸了。那白不是淡的，是厚的，一朵有一碗大，花瓣立着，像举起来的手掌。路过的人都在看，谁也没说话。那种静不是被吓住了，是被那棵树安顿下来了。

花落的时候更静。玉兰谢不是一片片碎，是整朵整朵地落。有天早上我出门，树下一地都是完整的花，白里带着一点褐，一朵一朵躺得很端正，像自己放下的，不是摔下来的。我捡过一朵，花瓣还硬挺，托在手里沉甸甸的。扫花的环卫师傅说，这树的花落得干净，不烂在树上，也不零碎，好扫。他说这话的时候有点夸它的意思。

后来我想，那棵树举了一冬天的笔，写出来的就四个字：不慌，不忙。该结苞的时候结苞，冷也不收回去；该开的时候一夜全开，不试探，不扭捏；该落的时候整朵落地，不拖泥带水。它没有叶子衬托，也不借香味，就那么站着，开自己的，落自己的。我现在每天从它底下过，脚步比从前慢。人挤在早高峰里，心里急的事多，可一抬头看见那棵树，就想起它举了一冬天笔也没开，想起它一夜开满也没吵。它什么也没说，路过的人自己懂了。

## The Tree Held Up Its Pens All Winter

There is a yulania tree at the gate of our compound, taller than two floors. In winter it is the plainest tree of all, branches bare, only pen-nib buds standing at the tips, wrapped in a gray-green fuzz, unmoved by wind, untouched by birds. Other plants wait for spring, but this one brings its buds out in the coldest days and holds them all winter, neither opening nor dropping. I passed under it all winter and watched the nibs grow from soybean size to finger length, the fuzzy shells cracking open a seam to show a jade-like white inside. It was not in a hurry. It took the cold, and when warmth came it did not rush to fade.

The whole tree turned white on a Sunday morning, all at once. The day before, only three or five blooms had opened. The next morning when I stepped out, the entire tree was white, shining white, bloom pressing bloom from the lowest branch to the top, not one leaf in attendance, just opening by itself. I stood under it with my head tilted back so long my neck ached. The whiteness was not thin but thick, each flower the size of a bowl, petals standing upright like raised palms. Everyone

passing looked, and no one spoke. That silence was not shock. It was being settled by the tree.

When the flowers fell, it was quieter still. Yulania does not fade petal by petal. It falls whole. One morning I found the ground under the tree covered with complete flowers, white touched with brown, lying neatly one by one, as if they had set themselves down rather than been dropped. I picked one up. The petals were still firm, heavy in my palm. The sanitation worker sweeping them said this tree's flowers fall clean, not rotting on the branches, not shattering into bits, easy to sweep. There was something like praise in his voice.

Later I thought: that tree held up its pens all winter, and what it wrote comes down to four words, unhurried, unanxious. It forms buds when it should and does not take them back in the cold. When it is time, it opens fully in a single night, no testing, no coyness. When it is time to fall, it falls whole, no dragging. It borrows no leaves for backdrop and no scent for help. It simply stands, opening its own opening, falling its own falling. Now I pass under it every day, and my steps are slower than before. People are packed into the morning rush with so much to fret about, but one look up at that tree reminds me that it held its pens a whole winter without opening, and filled itself full in one night without making a sound. It said nothing, and everyone who passed understood on their own.

## 美术课在玉兰树下上的

美术课在玉兰树下上，是三月的事。我们教学楼后面有一棵老玉兰，听说建校时就有了。美术老师带我们围着它画，第一节课画的是花苞。那时树上还没有开，枝子光光的，每个枝头一支毛笔头，灰绿色，毛茸茸。老师说别嫌它难看，让它进画。我画了很久那些苞，画它们怎么在光枝上立着，风摇枝子，苞一动不动。有个同学问，光画苞有什么意思。老师说，等一个星期再来。

一个星期以后再去，满树全白了。画纸当场换掉。那天的课没人说话，只有铅笔在纸上走。玉兰的白不好画，白里有一层一层的影子，花瓣厚，边上有光。我画了一朵半开的，像一支朝天的笔。抬头看整棵树，几百朵一起开着，没有叶子，枝枝都是花，天是灰蓝的，花白得往上浮。老师走过来看我画，说别涂背景，留白，它自己会站住。我照做了，那张画后来贴在教室后墙，贴了一学期。

花落是四月中旬，前后不到二十天。玉兰谢得整齐，整朵整朵落，落在草地上，落在跑道上。体育课自由活动，我们几个去捡落花，一朵一朵都完整，花瓣外面白，背面有一条淡紫的印。我把一朵夹进字典，留到今天。落花那几天树下反而最静，花开时人围着看，花落时没人扫，也没人踩，都绕着走。

后来我常想，那堂课其实教了我们三样东西，都是那棵树教的。含苞的时候画它，学会了等。满

树开的时候画它，学会了看。花落满地的时候捡它，学会了送。它开得不吵，落得不惨，从苞到落，前后一个多月，每一天都是那天的样子，不装，不拖。我现在写作业写到心烦，会想起美术课上那些光枝上的苞，风摇枝子，苞一动不动。它让我知道，安静不是没有事发生，是事情正在里头长。

## The Art Class Held Under the Yulania

The art class was held under the yulania tree, back in March. Behind our teaching building stands an old yulania, said to have been there since the school was built. Our art teacher took us around it to draw. The first lesson we drew the buds. Nothing had opened yet. The branches were bare, each tip carrying one brush-nib bud, gray-green and fuzzy. The teacher said do not find them ugly, let them into the picture. I drew those buds for a long time, drawing how they stood on the bare branches, how the wind shook the branches but the buds did not move. A classmate asked what the point was of drawing only buds. The teacher said, come back in a week.

A week later, the whole tree was white. We replaced our drawing paper on the spot. Nobody talked that day, only pencils moving on paper. Yulania white is hard to draw. Inside the white there are layers of shadow, the petals thick, light running along their edges. I drew one half-open bloom, like a brush pointing at the sky. Looking up at the whole tree, hundreds of flowers open together, no leaves, every branch all flower, the sky gray-blue, the whiteness floating upward. The teacher walked by, looked at my drawing, and said leave the background blank, the tree will hold itself up. I did, and that drawing hung on the back wall of our classroom for a whole term.

The flowers fell in mid-April, less than twenty days after opening. Yulania falls neatly, whole flowers at a time, onto the grass, onto the running track. During free time in P.E. class, a few of us picked up the fallen blooms. Every one was complete, white outside, with a faint purple mark on the back of the petals. I pressed one into my dictionary and still keep it. Those days of falling were the quietest under the tree. When the flowers were open, people gathered to look. When they fell, no one swept them, no one stepped on them, everyone walked around.

I often think that class actually taught us three things, all taught by the tree. Drawing it in bud taught me to wait. Drawing it in full bloom taught me to see. Picking up the fallen flowers taught me to let go. It opened without noise and fell without tragedy. From bud to fall, a little over a month, and each day was truly itself, no pretense, no stalling. Now when I get frustrated with homework, I remember those buds on bare branches in art class, the wind shaking the branches, the buds not moving. They taught me that stillness is not nothing happening. It is something

growing inside.

## 外婆院里的白玉兰

外婆院里的白玉兰，是我见过的最沉得住气的东西。它跟别家不一样，花苞入冬就立上了枝头，一支一支，裹着灰绒，站在光枝上挨冻。别的花草外婆都搬进屋、盖草帘，只有那棵树，她说搬不了，也不用。有一年冬天特别冷，我担心那些苞冻坏，问外婆要不要包点布。她说这树在她嫁过来之前就有了，冻了一辈子，没冻坏过一回。

开是在一夜之间。寒假在乡下，有天清早起来，推开房门，满树全白了，白得院子里都亮堂。前一天傍晚才开了两三朵。我站在院里看，外婆在屋里喊我吃饭，喊了两遍我才动。那花开得大，一朵一捧，花瓣厚实，立在枝头朝天开着，不垂头，也不挤。花香是走到树下才闻到的，不迫人，人走近它才给。外婆端碗出来也抬头看，说今年开得多，是个好年成，说完就去喂鸡了。她看这树，像看一个熟透了的亲戚，不稀奇，但高兴。

花落是清明前后。乡下清晨，我先听见院里扑扑的轻响，出去看，地上一朵一朵整朵的白花，花瓣还硬挺，落在青砖上，落在石磨上。扫院子的外婆把它们一朵一朵拾进簸箕，说完整的能摊在纸上收着，压在枕头里香一夏天。我帮她拾，一簸箕装了十几朵。落满地的清晨不凄凉，反而干净，白花配青砖，像谁摆出来的。

外婆前年冬天走了。今年寒假回去，玉兰又立上了苞，一支一支站在光枝上，跟往年一样。我在树下站了很久，想起她说的冻了一辈子没冻坏过一回，想起她说今年开得多是好年成。那棵树不声不响，苞举一冬，开一夜，落一地，年年这样，把日子过得又稳又清楚。我现在遇到急的事，会想起院里的玉兰，想起外婆在树底下喂鸡、扫花、把整朵的花拾进簸箕。她们都不快，但都没误过事。风一过，枝头的苞轻轻点了一下头，像应了一声。

## The White Yulania in Grandmother's Yard

The white yulania in my grandmother's yard is the most patient thing I have ever seen. It differs from other trees. Its buds set on the branches at the start of winter, one by one, wrapped in gray fuzz, standing bare in the cold. Grandmother moved every other plant indoors or covered them with straw mats, but not that tree. She said it could not be moved, and did not need to be. One winter was bitterly cold. I worried the buds would freeze and asked if we should wrap them in cloth. She said the tree was there before she married into the family, had weathered a lifetime of cold, and never once been hurt.

It bloomed overnight. I was spending winter break in the village, and one early

morning I opened my door to find the whole tree white, so bright the yard glowed. Only two or three blooms had opened the previous evening. I stood in the yard staring. Grandmother called me to breakfast from the house, and I only moved on the second call. The flowers were large, each one a handful, thick petals standing upright on the branches facing the sky, neither bowing nor crowding. The scent reached you only under the tree. It did not chase people. It gave itself to whoever came close. Grandmother came out with her bowl and looked up too, saying there were many blooms this year, a sign of a good season, then went off to feed the chickens. She regarded the tree like a well-known relative, no surprise, but gladness.

The flowers fell around Qingming. In the village mornings I first heard soft thuds in the yard. Outside, the ground held flower after flower, whole white blooms, petals still firm, fallen on the blue bricks, on the stone mill. Grandmother, sweeping the yard, picked them up one by one into a dustpan, saying the intact ones could be dried on paper and tucked in a pillow to scent the whole summer. I helped her. The dustpan held a dozen. The morning yard full of fallen flowers was not desolate but clean, white blossoms on blue brick, as if someone had arranged them.

Grandmother passed away the winter before last. This winter break when I went back, the yulania had set its buds again, one by one on the bare branches, same as any year. I stood under it a long time, remembering her saying it had weathered a lifetime of cold without harm, remembering her saying many blooms meant a good season. That tree, silent and unhurried, holds its buds a whole winter, opens in one night, drops to the ground in whole flowers, year after year, living its days steady and clear. Now when something urgent comes, I think of the yulania in the yard, and of grandmother feeding chickens under it, sweeping the blooms, lifting whole flowers into her dustpan. Neither of them was fast, and neither ever missed what mattered. A gust of wind passed, and a bud on the branch nodded once, like an answer.