

唱歌的人

《草房子》的药寮里，所有人的眼睛都看着桑桑喝药。没人注意唱歌的人。我想把眼睛挪过去，看看温幼菊。

温老师是矮小的，瘦的，嗓子以前应该很好，书里说她唱起来调子又稳又长。她自己也喝药，喝了很多年。她的病不响，像屋里的霉味，慢慢渗进墙里。她每天生火，熬药，把碗递出去，一碗给桑桑，一碗给自己。她不谈病。谈病的人显得可怜，她不想让药寮里多一个可怜的人，尤其不能让桑桑看见可怜。

所以她唱歌。那天桑桑捧着碗不动，她看见了，没说话，把火拨了拨，开口唱。她唱的是从小到大会的调子，词早就忘了，忘了正好。她唱的时候不看桑桑，看火。她要把这件事做自然：唱歌不是为哄孩子，是灶边本来就会发生的事，像柴响，像水开。桑桑若是听出这是安慰，就要难为情了；喝药的孩子需要的是平常，不是被心疼。

书里写桑桑一口一口喝完了。没人写温老师那天自己的药是什么时候喝的。我猜她等桑桑走了才喝，一个人对着冷下来的火，也许还接着那段调子。她把力气省给别人的碗，把自己的苦留到没人时咽。这就是我觉得她最了不起的地方。她安慰桑桑用的不是话，是她活出来的样子：病着，也生火，也熬药，也唱歌。

后来桑桑好了，走了。药寮空下来，温老师的调子还在屋里。我读完整本书，替油麻地记着这个人。她没做过什么大事，没说过一句漂亮话。她只是在一个孩子端着苦碗不敢下口的时候，坐在灶边，把日子哼成一段没有词的调子。可这就够了。多年以后桑桑想起药寮，先想起的不是苦，是那段调子。唱歌的人赢了苦。

The One Who Sings

In the medicine hut of Grass House, every eye is on Sangsang drinking his medicine. No one watches the woman singing. I want to move my eyes over and look at Wen Youju.

Teacher Wen is small and thin. Her voice must once have been fine, for the book says her melody runs steady and long when she sings. She drinks medicine too, and has for years. Her illness makes no sound. It seeps into the walls slowly, like the smell of mildew in a room. Every day she lights the fire, simmers the medicine, and hands the bowls out: one to Sangsang, one to herself. She never talks about illness. People who talk about illness look pitiful, and she does not want another pitiful person in the hut. Above all, she will not let Sangsang see pitiful.

So she sings. That day she sees Sangsang holding the bowl without moving. She says nothing, stirs the fire, and begins to sing. She sings a tune she has known since girlhood; the words were forgotten long ago, and forgetting suits it perfectly. While singing she does not look at Sangsang. She looks at the fire. She wants the

thing to seem natural: singing is not to coax the child, it is something that simply happens by a stove, like crackling wood, like water coming to a boil. If Sangsang hears it as comfort, he will feel embarrassed. A child drinking medicine needs ordinariness, not pity.

The book writes that Sangsang finished the bowl sip by sip. No one writes when Teacher Wen drank her own medicine that day. I guess she waited until Sangsang left, then drank alone facing the cooling fire, perhaps still carrying that melody. She saved her strength for other people's bowls and kept her own bitterness for the hours when no one was watching. This is what I find greatest about her. Her comfort for Sangsang was not words. It was the way she lived: ill, yet still lighting the fire, still simmering medicine, still singing.

Sangsang recovers later and leaves. The hut falls empty; Teacher Wen's melody stays in the room. Having read the whole book, I remember this woman for Youma Di. She did no great deed and never said one fine sentence. She only sat by the stove when a child held up a bitter bowl and dared not drink, and hummed the days into a tune without words. But that is enough. Years later, when Sangsang thinks of the medicine hut, the first thing he recalls is not bitterness but that melody. The one who sings defeats the bitter.