

药寮里的无词歌

《草房子》里有一间屋子，终年飘着苦味，叫药寮。屋主人温幼菊老师自己也病着，瘦，说话轻，走路也轻，像一阵风就能把她吹走。桑桑病了，天天来喝药。药是黑的，稠，苦得舌头发麻。桑桑端着碗，先不动，看着碗里那一团黑。

温老师不催他。她坐在灶边，看着火，忽然开口唱歌。没有词，只有一个调子，起起伏伏，像水波，又像风穿过草顶。她唱得很小声，好像不是唱给桑桑的，是唱给自己，唱给那碗药，唱给这间屋子。桑桑后来就端着碗喝起来了，喝一口，停一停，听她唱一段，再喝一口。碗底见了底，苦还在嘴里，可桑桑说，那是他喝过的最不难喝的药。温老师也不夸他，只把空碗接过去，在罐沿上磕一磕，说，明天来。第二天桑桑真的去了，进门先坐下，等那支调子起来。

我读这一段读了三遍。第一遍看见药苦，第二遍看见歌轻，第三遍才看见唱歌的人。温幼菊自己也在喝药。她的歌里没有词，我猜她是不想把苦说出来。有词的歌要说清一件事，无词的歌只要把气吐出来，跟着火苗一起一伏。她教给桑桑的，其实不是勇敢，是挨着苦坐下来的办法：不必讲它，哼着它，一口一口，它就见了底。

桑桑后来好了，离开了油麻地。药寮还在，灶上的罐子还咕嘟咕嘟响。我合上书，耳朵里留着那个调子。它没有名字，没有词，可我知道它从哪儿来。它从一个瘦瘦的女人的嗓子里来，从一个满是苦味的屋子里来，从火苗和药罐的响声里来。它告诉我，有些安慰不讲话。它只是坐在你旁边，把苦的日子哼成一段调子，等你把碗喝空，它才停。

The Wordless Song in the Medicine Hut

There is a room in Grass House that smells of bitterness all year round. It is called the medicine hut. Its keeper, Teacher Wen Youju, is ill herself, thin, soft-spoken, soft-footed, as if a gust of wind could carry her off. Sangsang falls ill and comes every day to drink his medicine. The medicine is black, thick, so bitter his tongue goes numb. He holds the bowl and does not move at first, staring at the dark mass inside.

Teacher Wen does not hurry him. She sits by the stove, watches the fire, and suddenly begins to sing. There are no words, only a melody, rising and falling like ripples, like wind moving across a thatched roof. She sings very quietly, as if not to Sangsang but to herself, to the bowl of medicine, to the room itself. After a while Sangsang lifts the bowl and drinks. One sip, a pause, one stretch of her song, then another sip. When the bottom of the bowl shows, the bitterness is still in his mouth, yet Sangsang says it was the least terrible medicine he ever drank. Teacher Wen praises him either. She takes the empty bowl, taps it twice on the rim of the pot, and says, come tomorrow. And Sangsang really goes the next day, sits down first, and waits for that melody to rise.

I read this passage three times. The first time I saw the bitter medicine. The second time I saw the light song. The third time I finally saw the woman singing. Wen Youju is drinking medicine too. Her song has no words, and I think it is because she does not want to say the bitterness out loud. A song with words has to state one thing clearly; a wordless song only asks you to breathe out, rising and falling with the flame. What she taught Sangsang was not courage, really. It was a way of sitting down beside suffering: do not talk about it, hum along with it, sip by sip, and it will show its bottom.

Sangsang gets well later and leaves Youma Di. The medicine hut is still there, the pot on the stove still bubbling. I close the book with that melody in my ears. It has no name and no words, yet I know where it comes from. It comes from the throat of a thin woman, from a room full of bitterness, from the sound of flame and medicine pot. It tells me that some comfort does not speak. It only sits beside you and hums the bitter days into a tune, and it stops only after you have drained the bowl.

那碗药，那支歌

要是我是桑桑，我最怕的不是病，是那碗药。《草房子》里桑桑每天走进药寮，还没进门，苦味先扑进鼻子。药在砂罐里熬了一夜，黑得像屋梁上吊着的陈年酱。他捧着碗，碗烫，苦更烫。他想过闭眼灌，想过捏鼻子，都不管用，苦会从牙缝里钻回来。

救他的是温老师的歌。那天他正跟碗较劲，灶边的温老师忽然唱起来，没有词，一个调子慢慢起伏，像药罐里冒泡，一个泡破了，又一个泡起来。她唱她的，火照着她瘦瘦的脸。桑桑后来在书里说，他听着听着，就把碗凑到嘴边了。喝一口，调子高一点；停一停，调子低一点。他不是在看药，他是在跟着一段歌走，走着走着，碗就空了。空碗放在灶台上，温老师拿抹布把碗沿擦一遍，倒扣着晾着，像擦一件顶平常的物件。桑桑出门的时候，苦还在舌根上，可他觉得那一上午并不长。

我喜欢曹文轩写这段时不写大道理。温老师没说孩子你要坚强，没说病不可怕。她只是唱。她自己也病着，她的调子里有她自己的药味，可她没让那味道跑出来压住桑桑。一支没有词的歌，正好。有词就要讲道理，没词只剩陪伴。苦这个东西，最怕旁边有人把它哼成平常的日子。连苦都过成了平常，苦就没有地方可待了，只好自己走。

书往后翻，桑桑的病好了，他抱着纸月哭，又笑。药寮的日子过去了。可我替桑桑记着那间屋子：记着砂罐的咕嘟声，记着碗沿的烫，记着那段没有名字的歌。人这一辈子总会端起几碗苦东西，没人能替你喝。到那时候，但愿心里也有一段调子响起来，不高，不亮，慢慢地起伏，像灶边的火，像那支无词的歌。

That Bowl of Medicine, That Song

If I were Sangsang, the thing I feared most would not be the illness but the bowl of medicine. In Grass House, Sangsang walks into the medicine hut every day, and before he crosses the threshold the bitterness hits his nose first. The medicine has simmered in the clay pot all night, black as old sauce hanging from the roof beams. He holds the bowl. The bowl is hot, the medicine hotter. He tries gulping with his eyes shut, tries pinching his nose. Nothing works. The bitterness crawls back through the gaps in his teeth.

What saves him is Teacher Wen's song. That day he is wrestling with the bowl when Teacher Wen, sitting by the stove, suddenly begins to sing. No words, just a melody rising and falling slowly, like bubbles in the medicine pot: one bursts, another rises. She sings her own song, the fire lighting her thin face. Sangsang later says in the book that without noticing he brought the bowl to his lips. One sip, and the tune lifts a little; a pause, and it sinks a little. He is not drinking medicine. He is walking along a song, and walking, the bowl comes empty. The empty bowl goes back on the stove top; Teacher Wen wipes its rim with a cloth and sets it upside down to dry, as if wiping an utterly ordinary object. When Sangsang leaves, the bitterness still sits at the root of his tongue, yet that whole morning did not feel long.

I love that Cao Wenxuan writes this passage without any grand lesson. Teacher Wen does not say, be brave, my boy. She does not say illness is nothing. She only sings. She is ill herself, and her melody carries the taste of her own medicine, yet she never lets that taste overpower Sangsang. A song without words is exactly right. Words would argue; no words leave only company. Bitterness, you see, fears most of all a person nearby humming it into an ordinary day. Once even bitterness has been lived into ordinariness, it has nowhere left to stay, and can only leave on its own.

Turning further in the book, Sangsang recovers. He hugs Zhiyue and cries, then laughs. The days of the medicine hut are behind him. But I keep that room for him: the bubbling clay pot, the hot rim of the bowl, the nameless song. In a lifetime we all lift a few bowls of bitter things, and no one can drink them for us. When that hour comes, may some melody sound inside us, not high, not bright, rising and falling slowly, like the fire by the stove, like that wordless song.

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.