

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.