[fiction] This morning the tree-man came. (an excerpt)

“This morning the tree-man came,” she said.

Before stepping inside, I noticed a ring of soil on the left side of the yard—dark brown, loosened. Through the window on the right, there was no sign of anyone or anything moving. My peeking felt a bit indecent. Then again, I wondered why I had never noticed this window and got curious before.

The tree-man? Before I blurt out the question, I got what she meant. I turned to look at the window above the sink. The blinds were still open; the yellow halo of the porch light refracted through the glass, and the sky blue had deepened —— the tree outside the window was gone.

“Ah, the tree-man.” I repeated, half in surprise, half in jest. Not long ago, on the phone, Dai said she’d been so bored lately that she’d started watching superhero movies every night. I didn’t comment on that. I watched them too, actually. I’ve always wasted time on things like that.

“Yes.” Dai laughed. “Kim likes to call him that. The other afternoon she picked up her phone and said, ‘Let me call the tree-man.’ Then last night she left for another flight shift.”

“But why? What happened to the tree?”

I forget her exact answer. Something had to do with the tree bothering the little ecology of the left lawn. It could be a pest infestation. It could also be about the Feng Shui, the way that tree blocked the view from the window. The motivation could also come from outside the household. Like, the tree’s position violated some municipal or neighborhood committee’s regulation. It is also possible that I invent every and each of these reasons, and the real one in oblivion.

When Kim, Dai’s landlady, bought this little bungalow at the corner of Green Street and Methodist Street, she got inspired by the street’s name and painted the whole façade a creamy, grassy green, making it the only representative building on the Green Street. Later, when Dai told me that Kim had packed up everything, taken the dog with her, and driven her car with a dented bumper all the way to California, I realized that painting the house green might have been a spiritual Californian gesture.

I remember the tree. It was a fruit tree, round-crowned if viewd from front, close to the house but not touching the structure. Not big enough for you to sit under for shade in high summer. In the morning, a little patch of its shadow fell over the small yard on the right. When you were tired from playing with the dog and sat down to rest, you might look at it. From the side, the crown looked quite shapeless, ordinary, not as neatly trimmed as how it looked like from the front.

Dai once said that, during the months she was on leave from school, she would sometimes just sat there under a single tree for half a day. Just watching the tree and meditating on death.

It was a funny thing to say. I mean, I despise all that pretends mystical. Vain. And what she said only reminded me of the cliches from ancient Chinese philosophies about “surveying the nature of things,” or the existentialists’ obsession with the questioning of death, all that.

But Dai is my friend. So I listened. I must assume — in fact, I believed — even though she might be thinking of the same sets of abstract references, her

though she might be thinking of the same sets of abstract references, her words were but genuine without pretention. I listened carefully, not making any comments. In that while, I noticed the fruit tree, really seeing it for the first time. I saw the way its main branches stretched outward: one pointing toward my head, another twisting from the trunk and veering toward the left side.

On cloudy days, the branches looked blue-gray, speckled with brownish gray. The leaves were then tinged with yellow. Sitting outside to five or six in the evening, the layers of color would flatten into a silhouette, permeated with unevenly fragments of the porch light.

It was getting cold. Dai stood up and quickly stepped inside. I did not know whether she went to grab a pullover or was done for the day. I lingered, playing with Callen. Then the dining-room light was turned on and shone through the glass pane on the side door, from behind which Dai then waved at me. I stood up, stretched my sore knees, called on Callen, and followed her inside.

The tree watching thing interested me because it mirrored something earlier. During the half year I took off from school and idled in my small hometown, there was this one hot afternoon. I was walking across the center square of the city, circled by malls and busy roads. And at a particular moment, I saw three or four pine trees, like a row of soldiers, inside a fenced patch of grass. Their dark needles forming a dense wall. I felt an unease, as if I had glimpsed something from a different, harsh reality. I wrote in my notebook:

In the summer, trees are an irony.
I look at them, and fear death.

To which Dai had responded, I don't understand. Very deep.

"So they moved the tree to another spot," Dai concluded.

"Sound like a bad day for the tree, though," I commented. "displacing the roots"

"Is that so," she said, in a tone that could mean *really?* or *I guess so.* "Well, the treeman, he seemed confident. He also added some soil from an extra bag for the replanting, and told me it wouldn't need any special care. Just let it be."

I paused to think about the absurdity here, to let a tree be. Trees live and die on their own in nature. It was sad this one already had something unnatural about it, that it needed the tree-man, needed his permission to be let be.

Students from the new philosophy department, myself included, have the knack of flipping any given relation to create a new dialectic. I once went to a book talk. The author, also a professor of ours, spoke that he wanted to model literary writing after the production of automobiles. Later, a fellow student questioned, "That's interesting, but I wonder—if we invert it—what it would mean to make cars in the way we make literature." I've forgotten what the author said. I also never understood neither of their points. But that idea of inversion haunts me all along.

If you flip *tree-man* around, you get *man-tree.* And that could mean a lot of things: a tree like a human; a tree that behaves like a person; a tree that lives with people; a tree that needs saving by a tree-man…

After I returned to school from my leave, I decided to take a course called Nature's Future. We read a kaleidoscope of fashionable theories, about the anthropocene, the actor-network, posthumanism, eco-fictions, and so on. The avant-garde environmentalists seemed to be arguing that everything—plants,

animals, objects—is an agent in the world, and we need to stop thinking as if humans are the center of it all.

I am never quite sure if this thesis truly reaches me. I tried to appreciate the relationship between humans and nature differently, although I found it impossible to think without being the center of thinking. One of my creative assignments may help show this:

I lie on the ground, cheek pressed to the loose humus, embracing the earth. The air above the soil mixes the smell of dirt and fallen twigs, but it is not damp or decaying. The sun gives off light and heat, drying the surface; the soil is warm and pliant, like freshly dried laundry. We fear the ants, the beetles, but they pose no threat. Of course, that depends on how familiar you are with the land. You need knowledge of nature to settle in it, just as living in a city requires knowing traffic rules. To resettle in the forest is not easy, nor can it be done alone. The original tribes have nearly vanished, or hollowed by tourism, and no one can truly resettle without a community. Adventurers, or the purest naturalists, may seem far apart from the society. Yet they rely on instruments and gears manufactured by modern industry to survive. And even the most self-sufficient naturalists must return to the "real world" to restock every now and then. Most of all, it's not a question of subsistence but of productive relations. One person's settlement in nature won't change the general understanding and conditions of human-nature relation. We have entered a time when humanity is not dependent on nature. Both the explorer and the naturalist touch only the surface of that changing relations, their knowledge narrow in practice.

I mentioned ants because the professor of that class once made a comment on them when she tried to make a point on accepting what you might not like if you didn't want to just talk the talk. She herself practiced natural ways of living, which meant, among other things, that she could often saw ants crawling inside her house. And she would tell herself, okay, I may not like it, but the ants are here for a reason, they have their necessity, so I better let them be.

It was a funny thing to say. I know. But in a seminar, it sounded rather serious and legit. The professor was young, progressive, and practical. She worked on an organic farm every week and took us there once for experiential education. She encouraged us to post our class writings and projects online, to "publish something out there," "a little blog post is a publication is publication." She was passionate about experimental pedagogy, like holding a hackathon-like session for how to colonize Mars sustainably, or inviting an environmental activist to share her story of systemic drinking water pollution in poor communities in the South. She was great.

She was great, despite the class's grave sense of moral urgency — about big problems, and how to act on them. The professor encouraged an idealism. "You should all be part of the solution. If you have an idea, go do it—even if it sounds unrealistic. If not you guys, whom?" I'm not saying our discussion went without critical thinking. We debated what kind of politics was effective when pushing for changes. i.e., how activism could often times be futile efforts. But it was only a matter of methods. Some values and emotions were not up for challenging. There might be better ways, but in spirit, you should readily accept living with ants in your home.

Kim's house was, in its own way, quite natural. Callen would roll in with dirt from the yard, and no one would stop him from jumping on the sofa. I sometimes wondered how often the place got vacuumed, and how Kim and Dai divided the domestic chores. Once, I went to find Dai to borrow a book on cosmos. The front door was open, but no one was seen around. The sliding door behind the sofa—usually closed—was open. I went over, looked down and saw the two women trying to move a headboard up from the basement, stuck halfway up the stairs.

“Need a hand?” I asked.

They both looked up.

“Ah, perfect timing! But it’s okay. I can handle this. You can catch it up there.”

Dai had the wooden headboard tucked under her arm, her fingers pressed at the carved indentations. The headboard was longer than her height. I helped at the end, steadying it against the wall.

A few days later, Dai didn’t show up to the 8:30 a.m. modern physics lecture. After class, I texted her that I finally understood one point—the idea that energy is in discrete units. It was first found through the so-called ultraviolet catastrophe, which was a paradox: if energy were continuous, the curve would go quickly to infinity, which wouldn’t match observed data.

She texted back shortly. She had just gone to the hospital with Kim, whose sudden back pain might need a surgery.

My first thought — and I hated myself for it — was that when Kim fell so ill that she had to go to the hospital, it was her temporary tenant who’s by her side. As far as I knew, Dai could not even drive.

“You called a taxi?” I asked.

“No, Kim drove.” she replied.

If I were in Dai’s position, I would have no idea how to act—sitting in the passenger seat, nothing I could do, while my landlady in pain driving herself to surgery. I didn’t know what to say.

“Kim will go stay with her sister after the operation,” Dai texted. “Come over this weekend, we can cook soemthing together.”

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