

9/8/23: NATURE ON EDGE

Nature, the great outdoors, was among the few safe spaces during the pandemic. At the same time, we are inundated by news of the imminent collapse of the natural world. Are plants, animals, storms, heat, dust, present in your writing? What description, literary or scientific, of nature has left a special mark on you?

1. **SUO ER (PRC)**

It seems like a joke: Until I was seventeen years old, I had never set foot outside my hometown, which has as small a postage stamp as Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County. In Faulkner's setting, Yoknapatawpha (Yok'na pa TAW pha) comes from the Chickasaw Indian language, which means "the river flows slowly through the flat land." My hometown was similar. Six and a half million years ago, lava flowed, and ashes shaped the terrain into vast maritime plains and hills after volcanic eruptions, and the tropical monsoon forest climate and long-term weathering gave the soil a thick layer of rusty red.

Therefore, in my childhood impression, the flat land of my hometown is like a red mirror. For as long as I can remember, my father would take me on hikes, or sometimes I was on the back of his motorbike, riding through the gleaming ponds, patchwork fields and scalding coastal roads. Curiosity and interest in nature was probably planted in my mind at that time. Perhaps because of familiarity or a native emotion, before I left my hometown, I naively thought that the rest of the world was just like my hometown, with its red plains, its unfading banyan trees, coconut trees and banana groves, its fishy damp sea breeze, the perpetual drought and oppressive heat hovering overhead.

People's initial memories are valuable, regardless of whether they see mountains and canyons in the ensuing decades, immortal bones under the ice of Antarctica or iron dust when flying on Mars in the future, in the deepest part of consciousness, what remains is the scenery recorded with the eyes of a child. Memory is like a bomb: you never know when it will detonate. In my first novel, *Night of the Felling*, the lychee garden is the main place where the story takes place. To be honest, I didn't have a strong consciousness and motivation to choose "lychee" as the image of the work at the beginning. I only remember that, when I first came up with this idea, I was on the way back home from other provinces by train. When I was about to arrive, I happened to pass slowly through a lush lychee forest. Their growth was savage, and they caught my eyes immediately. They, those dark green branches and leaves mixed with the afternoon sun, reveal a warm and shiny texture. At that moment, I was shocked by their vitality, and the sleepiness after eight or nine hours of travel was swept away. I thought: I was born in this land, and I am used to seeing lychee trees, but I have never seen such a beautiful side of it. Why don't I write a novel about lychee?

So, after writing, dawdling, turning over and over, completing, revising, and publishing, after finishing all these, when I looked back, I suddenly realized: what better symbol of the south of Five Ridges than the lychee? It is something that is here and not elsewhere. As early as thirteen hundred years ago in the Tang Dynasty, its reputation had penetrated the thick barrier of Nanling miasma. In that

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era without refrigeration and express delivery, it was carried by horses and sent thousands of miles to the imperial palace of the Central Plains Dynasty, as a treasure for aristocrats to taste.

In the novel, I wrote:

我紧跟在他后面走，跟着他不断地在枝干间绕圈。我仍然觉得举步维艰。但其实植株间的距离是一致的，从外边到里面，不存在越种越密的情况，我明白。过了一会，我的头顶、脖子边、肩膀上、胳肢窝、腰间、大腿边和膝盖边仿佛都长出了荔枝叶子。在可见的范围里，成片的树叶像是镀上一层厚蜡，把绿的色彩变得不那么尖锐，就算是反射着阳光，也不会显得太过刺目，而是给人以钝重、沉静感觉。有些枝干肆意地往四周扩散，像漆黑的八爪鱼的腿，八根腿里面有的呈直线上升、有的呈曲线垂下，有的呈水平角度向左或右拐弯，相互间紧紧交缠在一起。它们这种生命力有点太让人嫉妒了。

(I walked close behind him, following him constantly in circles between the branches. I still find it hard to walk. But in fact, the distance between the plants is the same, and there is no such thing as growing more dense from the outside to the inside, I understand. After a while, lychee leaves seemed to grow on my head, neck, shoulders, armpits, waist, thighs and knees. In the visible range, the leaves are as though coated with a thick layer of wax, making the green color less sharp, even if it reflects the sun, it will not appear too dazzling, but give me a dull, heavy, calm feeling. Some of the branches spread freely around, like the legs of a dark octopus, some rising in straight lines, some falling in curves, some turning horizontally to the left and right, and they were tightly intertwined with each other. Their vitality is a little too much to envy.)

In another one of my short stories, “The Female Heir,” I included the typhoon as a motive for the development of the plot, thus creating a vague misunderstanding between the two heroines. Although it is not a special one among the thousands of southeast coast typhoon narratives in China, for those who have lived inland for a long time, the specific typhoon is still a hard thing to imagine, especially on the more subtle level of spiritual experience. It’s like when I went to big cities in the north when I was an adult, I marveled at how those trees grew so tall, but the trees in my hometown couldn’t, because every summer and autumn, there would be seven or eight typhoons blowing over the Pacific Ocean and tearing the trees apart. Those typhoons are all called various strange foreign names, resembling the monsters that caused the twilight of the gods in Norse mythology. Every time they cross the border, the streets are littered with green broken arms and legs of trees. As a child, I did not understand the feelings of agricultural workers (including my relatives!) whose crops were destroyed. Every time the observatory said that there would be a typhoon, I was only very excited because the school would be on holiday. Although I couldn’t go out to play, at least I would have a day or two free from the torment of schoolwork. When the typhoon came, the power would be cut off as usual, so we used candles instead of electric lights, chatted together, and spent the noisy stormy night with the candlelight reflecting swaying shadows on the wall. For our simple family of three, those were precious “states of exception” and moments of intimacy.

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Interestingly, when I once shared this experience with a friend from the southwestern Hengduan Mountain region, she blinked and gave me a different kind of inland narrative: When she was a child at school, her class would be interrupted by a sudden earthquake, and the chalk on the platform would even jingle and jump onto the blackboard, and then the teacher gave the order and drove them to the playground. Like everyone else, she squatted or sat, with her body pressing against the earth, and felt the throbbing of the earth's heart from hundreds of kilometers away.

This was her/their "state of exception."

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