

Planter

Once in a dry dusty field there toiled a man with dark taut skin and a very bright smile. His skin had been toughened by years of squatting down in his field every day and praying for green buds to push through the surface. Very often they didn't, and in those years he would walk for days into the city to sell himself as a pusher of carts or a stacker of bricks or a runner of errands.

But his favorite job was to stare down and plead with the dusty soil. He had a broad hat that he'd made from dried leaves and a small gourd that he filled with wine. He would drink wine and reflect the sun with his bright eyes and smile and sing to the earth, and his songs (which rhymed in his own language) usually went something like this:

ohhhhhh, little plant:
just breaking your seed
i am waiting in the air and sun
for you to weave up through the dust

ohhhhhh, little seed:
just freeing your stalk
you are a tasty morsel I could cook in a mash
but if I plant you-you will blossom

and then we all will eat eat eat!
and then we all will eat eat eat!
and save your children for more plants
and save your children for more plants

At this line, he would stop and drink from his wine, thinking of his own children, two small ones in the village and two older ones already working and living far away in the city, working very hard and living in congestion, encased in the bricks and concrete.

And he would occasionally stop and think to his ancestors, buried under the same soil under the nearby hill. He wondered if their spirits were also pushing up through the earth.

One day, he came to his sitting spot and found a prick of green escaping the dust. Quickly he smoothed away the dirt around it. You, the first of the season, he sang, welcome, welcome to the world. Just then he noticed a car moving up the road toward him, creating a windblown plume of dust as it came. It was noisy. Reminded him of the city. The car stopped nearby and out stepped two men in white suits. They were dark men like him, but their clothes were clean, white, stiff. They talked awhile and gestured. The man sat and drank some wine. He looked at the tiny plant.

The men walked over to him, talking all the while. When they reached him, they squatted down, carefully hiking up their trousers as they did so. His two sons. Hello, hello, our father! they said. My sons! he replied. Why are you so dressed? He laughed. It looks silly. Father, they said, we have been working very hard in the city for many years. We are ready to move into 'management'. What is that, asked the father, and they laughed. He laughed with them. That is like a boss, they said. Ah, my sons, bosses? the man asked. Really. He scowled. What of it? What does it mean? We will be going far away, they said, and we will be bosses of many men. We came to say goodbye. If we ever see you

again it will be long. What, said the man, of your brother and sister? There was a long silence. We, said one brother, shall take them with us. It will be better for them. They will be raised with every comfort.

The man looked around. There was the dale and the trees so old they were no shorter when his two eldest sons had squealed as whelps in the birthing hut. There were the far clouds and the high sun and the unimpeded winds. There was the village, restive in the afternoon heat. There was the savannah, a million hands waving in the slight breeze. There was the great, calm ancestral hill. Come, said the man, stay a night in the village and pray. Tomorrow we will know what to do.

The grown-children looked at one another and nervously laughed. We are busy men now, and look at us, we cannot sleep on mats in these! They gestured to their clean suits. Besides, we must be off today. There was silence; long silence. The man stayed seated on the ground and his sons stood, raising themselves up with palms on their knees.

See, said the man, the first of the year is born. He pointed to the tiny spike of green that peeked out from the dirt. They looked at it and nodded. The man held up his drinking gourd and said, well have a drink of wine. One son took the gourd and put it to his lips. The dried gourd had a smooth texture and the cusp of the opening was rough. It made the wine seem smooth and rich, yet it was sharp with alcohol. He finished drinking and pulled down the gourd, and he looked around at the countryside. When he exhaled he could smell the trees and the earth and the dried leaves of the huts, and even it seemed the sweet rich scent of the land as the wind swept over the hill. We will sleep in the car tonight, he said. Tomorrow we will know what to do. The man smiled. His sons grinned back at him. A light rain began to fall. They went back to the car and waited inside it while the rain fell. The man sang to his young plant in the rain and drank some more wine. He laughed and waved to his sons in the car.

It rained all night, and in the morning the car was gone.