



Crab Soup

In front of me a dark gray sea overwhelms my senses. The stench of its muddy water disgusts me more than the icy sea of the savages of the cold northern isles who have no need to fish because they feed on the seabirds and carrion thrown at them by its hostile sea.

In the waves near the shore the metallic shimmer of the scales of a multi-tonne sardine school reminds me that I have ate nothing but tofu and wine for the last thirty-four days.

That is how long I have lived in this isolated bay that can only be reached if some boat owner thinks it is a good idea to bring a stranger to the site where he fishes almost every day, and no one has ever brought all the members of his family. Several bottles of the best liquor have made my way to where I am now painting and drinking in front of a dirty sea under a dark sky that has always been about to rain since I arrived, but it hasn't rained yet.

The liquor and the magic word "Pearls" have managed to convince someone (who would lie to their mother if she ever asked him about the best location for the traps or the best fishing spots) of the convenience of bring to his secret bay a guy who can't swim, or fish, or do any of the chores.

I have tried not to bother too much and I think even the dogs have gotten used to my presence.

The idea is that I am rich because I deal in pearls, I know where oysters can be grown and the procedure to make them produce pearls. That's why I can afford to travel with a baggage of ten heavy suitcases, and do nothing except paint and drink like a thirsty horse.

I have been exiled to this ugly corner of the empire, I have lost a bureaucratic competition and my adversary has decided to push me away to avoid taking the most appropriate solution, not out of pity but to save face, since he calls himself "The Benefactor".

My mission is to collect taxes, I can return to the capital of the empire if I can increase the collection here, he told me, I saw a suppressed laugh disguised as a cough being wrapped in a silk scarf with the initials of the one who defeated me.

I'm supposed to be able to do something my adversary considers impossible so I can return to my regular place of employment to continue my career in the Imperial bureaucracy.

It is not my intention to bring profit to the organization that allows my efforts to be wasted and my merits ignored, I have voluntarily come to this place to execute another phase of my revenge against the empire.

To take revenge on my opponent would be to take revenge on the finger of the person who has offended me, it is the empire that I want to punish, there have been several years in which I have been little by little executing my revenge.

I have been a translator, for twenty years I have been busy translating into the official language of the empire the oldest texts written in the stammering primordial language of the tribe that founded it. I have polished and adapted them to the modern language.

I have translated the song of our first poets, their astonishment and hope, what they imagined of us, the great-great-grandchildren of their great-great-grandchildren, what our prophets dreamed of us, what they predicted to us.

My job was to save from oblivion and translate into modern language, bamboo manuscripts that I myself took charge of making illegible.

The faithful translation rested in three large trunks of my luggage, in the imperial archive is what my humble ingenuity in free translation considered appropriate to share of these sacred texts with the empire that has the luxury of ignoring my effort and rewarding those who punish me unfairly and only for vain pleasure.

I have been burning the papers that were in those three trunks, today I finished.

When I happened to discover my father's poems in the pile of recycling paper in the empire's archive, I realized that poetry is neither important nor necessary to the empire, and I have resigned myself to this because that may be true, its banality is notable, although that does not prove its uselessness.

My Revenge is really an experiment to find out if that's true, for the first few years I was motivated by spite, but over time I've given in to beautiful but dispassionate scientific curiosity.

In the same way that I turned our first penal code into a false epic of a mythical hero of my own creation, and into a hymn to the sun a chronological compilation of our first twenty kings, I intend to disguise this confession that I keep with my favorite texts for improve it in this voluntarily chosen retirement, I am sure that the imperial bureaucracy will find a space for it in its archives for a while and then it will go to the paper heap for recycling.

I sense in this some important and interesting truth that I must discover in this place, facing this earthy and always gray sea.

Today a woman gave me a basket of crabs, I rewarded that kindness with several glasses of wine, she wanted to stay in my hut to cook, I like her company, I loved the crab soup she cooked, I hope she wants to stay longer time, I'm tired, I've worked too long on my revenge that is useless as all of them, I think I should rest, and spend more time of my life to live with no other purpose than to enjoy life.

A teacher taught me that things produce poetry through people, that a flower, a star or a baby's hand will always find the way to reach a text, a painting or a song. I believe him.

Another taught me that there are things that by mandatory necessity have to be created in any society and that many peoples without knowing each other have invented them, for example flutes, bows, and arrows, and that there are texts that are repeated in many cultures. I also believe him.

And another taught me that there are really less than ten stories and that the ones we know are only permutations of them and that all the poems are only approximations to the only poem that is, which is eternal, inexorable, and has a single sign that humans never we will come to understand. I profess that faith.

There are those who believe that history is useful and produces the experience that is the basis of knowledge, and there are those who believe that oblivion is the place where everything that has already happened should go. I know that forgetting is inevitable, that experience is useless in the face of new things, and that knowledge can be a heavy ballast to swim with innocent happiness in the ocean of convenience

and complicity. I think that having dedicated twenty years of my life to this experiment may attract the sympathy of some grandson who reads this, that's why I'm going to disguise it as a gastronomic text, hopefully it will reach my grandson before it falls on the pile of paper to be recycled.

Li Tao Po

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