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HAYSTACKS

and Other Selected Writings



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Preface

Literature may reflect the ethos of a country or a nation, while at the same time it can transcend the limits of time and space to most widely resonate a truly universal humanity. Literary works of art that move hearts may even inspire the compassion of strangers toward a people or country...

This "Panda Series" of books, expertly translated into English, compiles the works of well-known modern and contemporary Chinese authors around themes such as the city and the countryside, love and marriage, minority folk stories and historical legends. These works reflect the true spirit and everyday lives of the Chinese people, while widely resonating with their changing spiritual and social horizons.

Published from the 1980s, through more than 100 titles in English, this series continues to open wider the window for readers worldwide to better understand China through its new literature. Many familiar and fond readers await the latest in this "Panda Series." This publication of the "Panda Series" consolidates and looks back at earlier released literary works to draw new readers, while stirring the fond memories of old friends, to let more people share the experiences and views of the Chinese people in recent decades. We express our sincere appreciation to all authors, translators and editors who have engaged in their dedicated and meticulous work over the years to bring out these works. It is their passion and endeavor that have enabled this series to appear now in luminous distinction.

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Author's Preface

"WHY are you interested in writing fiction?" I have been asked. My answer is that I always have something to say.

To me literature is an understanding and a grasp of the world, an exploration and a comprehension of human destiny. Though everybody has his own ideas, I would like to have my fiction depict, grain by grain, what mankind may feel in common.

Here are ten pieces, written between 1982 and 1987, in which people both young and old, whom I am familiar with, are the protagonists. What I describe is usually to do with the relationship between human beings and nature, between human beings and the world. I am interested in describing young people because I am one; I am concerned with the old because someday I will be. Maybe in the world we live in no ideal life exists to be found, but that is the world we have to live in together. We have, through hope and despair, to understand the meaning of life, to search for tenderness between human hearts.

This book takes its title from "Haystacks", a reminiscence of the loess plateau where I lived many years ago. Male and female, we moistened the soil with our sweat. As the wheat gave good harvests we cut it with sickles, and haystacks, old and new, male and female, have gone forth and multiplied. They rise up between

heaven and earth, sloppily and obstinately. They look to each other in the distance or lean close, breathing the breath of time, longing, brooding, concealing, gazing. Maybe theirs is an old family, existence transcending ordinary life. Many stories are buried beneath haystacks. Hidden there, they have called to me and emerged one by one to charge my writing with their vitality and joy.

People can never, in any age, be clear to themselves. The purpose of literature is not to make them so but to effect understanding through it.

I hope I understand you.

I hope you understand my fiction.

The beginning of the Year of the Dragon, 1988

Ah, Fragrant Snow

IF trains had not been invented, if nobody had laid railway tracks into remote mountains, small villages like Terrace Gully would never have been found. The village and its villagers, in fifteen houses, hid in the deep wrinkles of an old mountain, silently accepting the willful mountain's tender caress and brutal temper.

But now, two slim, glittering railway tracks stretched over the mountain. They bravely spiralled halfway up, then quietly felt their way further, wound and curved before finally arriving at the foot of Terrace Gully. Then they made their way into the gloomy tunnel, dashed ahead to another mountain, and hurried away into the mysterious distance.

The villagers jostled to watch the green dragon whistling past. It carried an unfamiliar, fresh wind from some strange place beyond the mountains, and hastened away from poor Terrace Gully. It went at such a pace that the sound of the wheels rolling on the tracks was like an eager voice: can't stop, can't stop! It had no reason to stop at Terrace Gully. Did anyone in the village need to go on a long journey? Did someone from beyond the mountains want to visit relatives or friends at Terrace Gully? Were there oil deposits or gold mines? Terrace Gully had no power at all to invite the train's attention.

Nevertheless, a new stop was added to the railway

timetable, "Terrace Gully". Perhaps some passengers had made a suggestion, and one of them who had some influence was related to the village. Perhaps the train attendant, a jolly young fellow, had noticed the pretty girls of Terrace Gully. Every time the train passed, they would come in groups, stick out their chins, and stare at the train with greedy eyes. Some pointed at the train, and occasionally you could hear coy screams when they poked each other. Perhaps none of these was the real reason. Perhaps Terrace Gully was just too small — so small it made your heart ache, so small that even the gigantic dragon couldn't bear to stride proudly ahead without stopping. Whatever the reason, Terrace Gully was on the railway's timetable now. Every evening at seven o'clock, the train from Beijing to Shanxi would stop here for one minute.

One minute, so fleeting, yet it threw Terrace Gully's peaceful evenings into disorder. It had been the custom in the village to go to bed right after dinner, as though everyone heard the old mountain's mute order at the same time. The small stretch of stone houses would suddenly become completely noiseless — so quiet that it seemed the village was silently confiding its piety to the old mountains. But now, the girls of Terrace Gully served dinner in a flurry, absent-mindedly grabbed a quick bite and, soon as they put down their bowls, went straight to their dressers. They washed off the dust and stains of the day, revealing their rough and ruddy complexions, combed their hair, and then vied with one another in wearing their best outfits. Some girls put on new shoes which they were supposed to wear only for Spring Festival; others even secretly put

a little rouge on their cheeks. Then they ran to the railway, where the train passed. Fragrant Snow was always first; her next-door neighbour, Frail Phoenix, followed right behind.

At seven o'clock, the train slowed down as it approached Terrace Gully, gave a loud crash and a shake, then stopped. The girls rushed toward it, their hearts thumping violently. As if watching a movie, they looked into the cars through the windows. Fragrant Snow hid behind her friends and covered her ears. She was the first to come out of her house to watch the train, but retreated when it arrived. She was frightened by its gigantic head. The monster spurted out magnificent white smoke, as though it could suck Terrace Gully into its stomach in one breath.

"Fragrant Snow, come here!" Frail Phoenix dragged Fragrant Snow to her side. "Look at those golden rings in that lady's hair. What do you call them? It's the lady in the back seat with that big round face. Look at her watch, it's smaller than my nail!"

Fragrant Snow nodded. At last she saw the golden rings in the woman's hair and the tiny watch on her wrist. But soon she found something else. "A leather schoolbag!" She pointed to a brown leather satchel on the luggage rack.

Fragrant Snow's discoveries usually did not excite the other girls, but they still rushed up around her.

"You stepped on my toes!" Frail Phoenix cried out and complained to another girl who was pushing to the front.

"What a loud voice! You want to show off so that white-faced man will talk to you, don't you?"

"I'll tear your mouth off if you repeat that!" Frail Phoenix cried, but couldn't help looking over to the gate of the third car.

The fair-skinned young attendant stepped down from the train. He was tall and had jet-black hair, and spoke with a beautiful Beijing accent. Perhaps this was why the girls called him "The Beijinese" behind his back. "The Beijinese" crossed his arms on his chest, kept a distance neither too close to nor too far from the girls: "Say, young ladies, don't hold onto the windows, it's dangerous!"

"Oh, so we're young; are you so old?" the bold Frail Phoenix retorted.

The girls broke into laughter. Somebody gave Frail Phoenix a shove, and it made her almost bump into him. Instead of embarrassing her, this boosted her courage.

"Hey, don't you feel dizzy staying in that train all day long?" she asked.

"What do you do with that thing hanging on the ceiling? It looks like a broadsword," another girl asked. She was referring to the electric fan in the railway car.

"Where do you heat the water?"

"What if you run into some places and they haven't got any roads?"

"How many meals do you city people eat every day?" Fragrant Snow asked in a small voice, hiding behind other girls.

"Bah, I'm at the end of my rope," grumbled "The Beijinese".

They wouldn't let him go till the train was about to start. He glanced at his watch as he ran toward the

train, and shouted back: "Next time! Next time I'll answer all your questions." He had long, nimble legs and stepped on the train agilely. Then, the green door shut with a bang. The train dashed into the darkness, leaving the girls beside the ice-cold tracks. For a long time they could still feel the slight quiver in the tracks.

Everything became quiet again. On the way back home, the girls quarrelled about trifles.

"She's got to bind the nine golden rings together first, then stick them in her hair."

"No. She didn't do it that way."

"Sure she did."

"Frail Phoenix, why don't you speak up? Still thinking about that Beijinese?"

"Get lost. You talk because it's you who's thinking about him."

Fragrant Snow didn't say a word. She just flushed with embarrassment for her friend. She was only seventeen and had not yet learned how to rescue someone from this sort of talk.

The same girl kept teasing Frail Phoenix, "I know, you like him but haven't got the nerve to admit it. He's got such nice skin!"

"Nice skin? That's from staying in that big green house all year long. Let him try Terrace Gully for a few days," someone in the shadows said.

"There you go. Those city folks all hide in rooms from the sun. They should see our Fragrant Snow. Our Fragrant Snow was born with this pretty skin. If only she did her hair into a bunch of curls like those girls on the train."

Frail Phoenix had no response except to let go of

Fragrant Snow's hand. Frail Phoenix couldn't help feeling defensive about the fellow, as if the girls had belittled someone related to her. She firmly believed that his fair skin was not from hiding in rooms. It was natural.

Fragrant Snow put her hand back into Frail Phoenix's. It seemed to her that she had somehow wronged her friend, and she was asking forgiveness.

"Frail Phoenix, have you lost your tongue?" the same girl attacked again.

"Who's lost whose tongue! You girls look at nothing but whether a fellow's got nice or ugly skin. You like him, why don't you go with him?"

"We aren't the right match."

"Don't you think he's got his own girl?"

No matter how heated these quarrels were, the girls would always part amicably because an exciting idea would arise in everyone's mind: tomorrow, the train would pass again and they would have another wonderful minute. Compared to this, a little quarrel was nothing.

Ah, that colourful minute was filled with the joy, anger, grief and happiness of the girls from Terrace Gully.

As the days went by, the girls added a new dimension to this precious minute. They began to carry rectangular wicker baskets full of walnuts, eggs and dates, and stood under the train's windows to quickly strike up bargains with the passengers. They stood on tiptoe and stretched their arms all the way up to raise basketsful of eggs and dates to the windows, taking in exchange things that were rare in Terrace Gully; fine dried noodles, matches, or the girls' favourite: bobby pins, gauze kerchieves, sometimes even richly coloured

nylon socks. Of course it was risky to take the latter items back home, for they might get scolded for making decisions based purely on their own fancy.

The girls seemed to have a tacit agreement to assign Frail Phoenix to "The Beijngese". Nobody else but Frail Phoenix, basket in hand, would ever go to him. It was amusing to see how she made a deal with him. She always dawdled on purpose, then put a full basket into his hands just when the train was about to start. The train began to move before he had time to pay for her eggs. He put the basket in the train, and made gestures to explain something to her, while she stood by the train feeling happy; she was glad that he took the eggs without paying. Of course the fellow would bring money to her next time, along with a bundle of noodles, gauze kerchieves, or something else. If the noodles weighed ten *jīn*, Frail Phoenix would insist on taking out one *jīn* to give back to him. She felt this was only fair. She wanted their contact to be a little different from a regular business sale. Sometimes she would remember the girls' remark: "Don't you think he's got his own girl?" As a matter of fact, whether or not he had his own girl was not Frail Phoenix's concern, because she never thought of going away with him. But she wanted to be nice to him. Did she have to be his girl to treat him nicely?

Fragrant Snow was taciturn and timid, but her sales were the most successful of all the girls. Passengers loved to buy from her because she looked at them so trustingly with her pure, innocent eyes. She had not learned how to haggle over the price; she simply said: "You offer as you think fit." They looked at her face that was as pure as a new-born baby's, her lips as