

HOW WANG-FÔ WAS SAVED

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The old painter, Wang-Fô and his disciple Ling, wandered the roads of the Han Empire.

They advanced slowly since Wang-Fô would stop at night to contemplate the starry firmament and during the day, the dragon flies. They carried little since Wang-Fô loved the image of things, not things in themselves. No object in the world seemed to him worthy of possession if it weren't for brushes, pigments, jars of lacquer and rolls of silk or rice paper. They were poor; Wang-Fô traded his paintings for a bit of food while despising even small silver coin.

His disciple, Ling, walked heavily under the weight of a bag full of sketches; he doubled his back respectfully as if he carried the firmament of the skies; as that sack—to Ling's eyes—was full of mountains covered in snows, with rivers in spring and the face of the moon in summer.

Ling hadn't been born to walk alongside the old man in whose power was the aurora, was caught the twilight. His father had been a dealer in gold; his mother the only child of a jade dealer whose estate and legacy he had left her with a curse, at her not having been the son he wanted. Ling had grown in a house where riches did away with insecurities. That existence, carefully tended, had turned him timid: he was afraid of insects, of storm and tempest and of the features on the faces of the dead.

When he reached fifteen years his father found him a bride and he chose the greatest beauty since the idea of happiness she could provide his son was a consolation to an age when night had turned to no purpose but sleep.

Ling's bride was as fragile as a reed, infantile as milk, sweet as saliva, salty as tears. After the wedding Ling's parents took their discretion to the point of dying and their son was left in the house painted with cinnabar, alone with his bride who never left off smiling and the plum tree that flowered pink every spring.

Ling loved that woman of limpid heart just as one might love a mirror never blemished by steam or an amulet that never failed to protect. He went to the tea houses as was the fashion and favoured, moderately, dancers and acrobats.

One night in one of these fashionable tea houses he found himself accompanied at his table by Wang-Fô. The old man had drunk in order to put himself in a state that permitted him the ability to capture in paint—the drunk. His head inclined to one side as if to better judge the distance between his hand and his cup. The rice wine untied the tongue of that ancient and taciturn artisan; that

night, Wang talked as if the silence were a wall and his words destined to spread it with colour.

Thanks' to him Ling understood the beauty reflected in the faces of the drinkers, blurred by the smoke of the hot drink, the toasted splendour of the skin and meat, licked by the tongue of the fire that lit them. The exquisite rose stains of spilled wine on the tablecloths like withered flower petals. A gust of wind blew open a window and the storm penetrated the room. Wang-Fô quickly ducked down so that Ling could admire the livid beauty in the seam of lightning and Ling, astonished, never again feared the tempest.

Ling paid the old painter's bill; Wang-Fô had no money nor bed nor dwelling, Ling humbly offered refuge. They walked together, Ling carried a lantern whose light projected a surprising flash and sparkle in the puddles and that night Ling realized with astonishment that the walls of his house were no longer the red of cinnabar as he believed but rather the colour of an orange that has begun to rot.

In the courtyard Wang-Fô pointed out the shape of a delicate bush that no-one had noticed before and compared it to the silhouette of a young woman drying her hair. In the hallway he walked slowly with faltering step, as he was distracted from his purpose by the wavering path of an ant along the length of the cracks in the wall; and Ling's horror of those little creatures vanished. Then, in that moment, Ling understood Wang-Fô had given him a soul, a new perception. He put the old man to bed with respect in the room his own parents had died.

Wang-Fô had dreamed for many years of painting a princess of old, playing the lute under a willow. No woman ever seemed unreal enough to model but Ling could be, since he was not a woman. Later Wang-Fô talked of painting a young Prince tensing a bow under a tall cedar. No youth of his time was unreal enough to model but Ling sent his wife to pose with bow and arrow under the plum tree in the garden. Afterwards Wang-Fô painted her as sprite among clouds and she cried as this was a harbinger of death.

Since Ling preferred Wang-Fô's portraits of her to herself, her face withered like a flower fighting the wind or the summer rain. One morning they woke to find her hung by her neck from the plum tree in full rosen bloom: the length of the silken scarf that strangled her mixed in her wind-blown hair and she seemed more svelte than ever, as pure as the beauties sung by poets in times gone, and Ling never again feared the face of death. Wang-Fô painted her one last time because he admired the greenish tone that dead faces acquire. His disciple, Ling, ground his paints and the job required such application that he forgot to shed tears.

Ling eventually sold his slaves, his jade and the koi fish of his fountain to provide his master jars of violet paint brought all the way from the Occident. When the house was emptied they left and Ling closed the doors to his past. Wang-Fô was

tired of the city where the faces could teach him no more secrets of beauty or ugliness and, together, master and apprentice, they roved the walks of the Empire of Han.

Their reputation preceded them in the villages, the verge, the thresholds of the fortified castles and beneath the lintels of the temples where refuged the restless peregrines at the fall of dusk. It was said Wang-Fô had the power to give life to his paintings thanks' to a last touch of colour he added to their eyes. The bumpkins turned up to supplicate he paint them a guardian dog and the lords to ask he paint them soldiers. The monks honoured him as a wise man while the people feared him like a witch. Wang was pleased by these differences of opinion that allowed him to study the different expressions of gratitude, fear and veneration.

Ling begged their daily food, watched over the sleep of his teacher and took advantage of his euphoria to massage his feet. As the morning threatened and his master still slept he would go out to look for timid landscape behind the thicket or reed. At night when the master, disconsolate or disappointed, threw his brushes to the ground Ling picked them up and put them away carefully till the inspiration recaptured Wang-Fô's soul. When he was sad and talked of his old age Ling would smile and point to the robust trunk of an old Oak. When he was happy and spoke with light-hearted silliness, Ling would pretend to listen with humility.

One day, as evening set in, they arrived at the outskirts of at the Imperial city and Ling looked for accommodation to pass the night. The old man wrapped himself in his rags and Ling lay down beside him to offer the heat of his body; springtime had just arrived and the clay floor was still frozen. As dawn broke heavy footsteps resonated in the hall of the inn, the fearful whispers of the inn-keeper were answered in a barbarous shout. Ling stretched and thought of the rice cake he had stolen for his master's alimentation the day before and didn't doubt they came to arrest him and he wondered, who would feed Wang-Fô on the morrow? Who would help him ford the next river?

The soldiers entered lanterns first; the light filtered by the coloured paper threw red and blue patterns over their leather helmets. The string of a bow vibrated on a shoulder, and, suddenly, the most ferocious growled without any reason at all. One put his heavy hand on the nape of Wang-Fô's neck who couldn't avoid noting how the colour of his sleeve didn't go well with the colour of his jacket.

Helped by his disciple Wang-Fô followed the soldiers, faltering over the uneven ground. The tight group moved forward and the soldiers laughed at those who would, most likely, soon be decapitated. At Wang's questions only wild and threatening faces offered response, his tied hands hurt and Ling, desperate, looked

to his master with a smile—a mannerism that was to him, more gentle than crying.

They arrived at the doors of the Imperial palace whose violet walls stood in the plain light-of-day like a piece of twilight. The soldiers obliged Wang-Fô to cross innumerable square or circular rooms each a symbol of the seasons, the cardinal points, the masculine and the feminine, their length the prerogative of power. The doors turned on their hinges emitting a musical note, their disposition such that one could traverse them all from the rise of the sun in the east to its fall in the west; everything concerted to imply a super-human power and subtlety; one could perceive the appalling orders given, and one knew their terrible content was as definitive as was the wisdom of the past.

Finally the air became more rare, more scarce, the silence became so profound that not even the tortured would have dared shout under its weight. A eunuch lifted a curtain, the soldiers trembled like girls, and the small group entered where the Son of the Sky sat on his throne.

It was a hall without walls upheld by columns of blue stone. A garden flowered at the other side of the pillars and each little copse was made of rare species brought from over the seas but none was perfumed for fear their aroma might disturb the meditation of the Dragon of the Skies. Out of respect for the silence that bathed his thoughts no bird was admitted to the interior of the quarter, indeed, even the bees had been expelled. A tall wall closed off the garden from the world with the purpose of keeping the wind that passes over the burst corpses of dogs and the cadavers on the field of battle, from brushing even the sleeve of the emperor.

The Master of the Sky was seated on a throne of jade and his hands were wrinkled like those of an old man though he couldn't have been more than twenty. His clothes were blue to simulate winter and green to remember spring. His mien was comely but inscrutable like a mirror set so high it only reflected space—implacable and inexorable sky.

To his right was his Minister of perfect pleasures and to his left his adviser of just torment. As his courtiers, lined up by the columns, stretched their hearing to catch the least of the Emperor's utterances he had acquired the habit of speaking always in the lowest of voices.

Oh Dragon of the Sky, addressed Wang-Fô, prostrating himself: I am old, I am poor, I am weak. You are the summer I the winter. You have ten thousand lives while I have only one and soon it will be over. What have I done to you? They have tied hands that have never done you harm.

You ask what you have done to me old Wang-Fô? Said the Emperor.

His voice was so melodious that upon hearing it one wanted to cry. He raised his right hand and the reflection of the floor of jade turned it to a moss of the sea. Wang-Fô marvelled at those long thin fingers and tried to remember if at some time he had done a portrait so mediocre he merited execution. But not only couldn't remember such a crime but thought it highly improbable as he had hardly stepped into the environs of the court, always preferring the huts of farmers or, in the cities, the hovels of prostitutes or the taverns of the piers where the longshoremen fight.

You ask what you have done to me old Wang-Fô? Pursued the Emperor, inclining his thin neck toward the old man who listened to him: I will tell you. But like poison that cannot enter us but by our nine orifices, to put you in the presence of your guilt I will have to trod the halls of my memory and tell you of my whole life. My father reunited a collection of your paintings in the most secret rooms of the palace because he felt the paintings must be protected from profane stares from which they are not able to lower their eyes. In those rooms they educated me old Wang-Fô, disposing of a great solitude in which I was permitted to grow, with the object of avoiding splashing my candour with the agitated waves of my future subjects.

No-one was allowed to pass before my doors for fear their shadows might extend until they grazed my person. The few servants that were allowed me, showed themselves as little as possible; the hours turned in an interminable circle. The colours in your paintings resuscitated with the dawn and paled in the dusk. At night I contemplated them when I couldn't sleep. During ten long years of consecutive nights I looked at them... and looked at them...

During the day, sat on a rug whose design I knew by heart, resting my empty hands on the yellow silk of my knees I dreamt of the pleasures my future promised. I imagined the world with the Empire of Han at its centre similar to the plain of my palm cut by the fatal lines of the five rivers. Around it the five seas where the monsters are born and further still the mountains that sustain the sky.

To help me imagine all this I had your paintings. You made me believe the sea looked like the vast layer of water in your paintings—so blue that a stone that fell into its depths couldn't but turn to sapphire. That women didn't but open and close like flowers similar to the creatures that advance, pushed by the breeze along the walks of your gardens and that the young warriors of slim waist that watch over the borders in our fortified castles were like arrows that could pierce our heart.

At sixteen I saw opened the doors that separated me from the world, I went up to the terraces to see the clouds but they were less beautiful than your twilights. I

called for my litter and along the roads was shaken by the rocks and dust I hadn't foreseen. I travelled my provinces without finding your gardens filled with women like lightning bugs—those women you painted whose bodies were themselves gardens. At the ocean's rim I was disgusted by the sharp rocks and forgotten shells. The blood of the executed was less red than the painted pomegranate of your sketches. The parasites in the villages impeded my ability to enjoy the beauty of the rice paddies and the live meat of women revolted me as much as the dead meat hung on hooks at the butcher's while the uncouth laughter of my soldiers made me feel nausea.

You lied to me old impostor: the world is no more than a mass of confused stains thrown to the void by a foolish artist, erased without cease by our tears.

The Han Empire is not the most beautiful and I am not an Emperor. The only Empire worth the ruling is the one you penetrate, old Wang-Fô, by the walk of a thousand turns and the ten thousand colours. Only you rule over mountains whose snows never melt, over fields whose narcissi never wither.

With this, Wang-Fô, I have found the torment of your curse, am disgusted by all I own and wish for all I cannot have. To lock you in the only cell from which you cannot escape I have decided to burn your eyes since they are the magic doors to your realm. And since your hands are the two roads with their ten bifurcations that lead you to the heart of your kingdom I will have them cut off. Do you understand me old Wang-Fô?

Upon hearing the sentence the disciple Ling pulled a gap-toothed blade from his belt and threw himself on the Emperor, but long before his lunge reached the Son of the Sky two guards caught him up and the Dragon-king smiled as he added in a whisper: I hate you also old Wang-Fô because you have been loved—kill the dog!

Ling quickly jumped backward so as not to offend his master with the splashing of his blood, and one of the guards lifted his sabre and Ling's head was separated from his body like a plucked flower. The soldiers picked up the pieces of his body and Wang-Fô, though desperate, couldn't none-the-less, avoid admiring the gorgeous scarlet stain juxtaposed against the green jade floor.

The Emperor made a slight sign and two eunuchs cleaned his eyes.

Listen to me old Wang-Fô, said the Emperor, dry your tears, it is not the moment to cry. Your eyes must remain clear for the purpose that the little light left to them must be put to, a use that mustn't be ruined by the mist of sorrow. I do not want your death because of rancour, nor for cruelty do I want to see you suffer. I have another project, old Wang-Fô. Among my collection of your paintings I own an admirable but unfinished sketch in which is reflected the mountains in

the river's estuary, infinitely reduced it is true but with an evidence of their truth that overwhelms the thing in itself, like figures looking at themselves through a glass sphere. But this work is unfinished Wang-Fô, your masterpiece no more than an outline. Probably you were distracted in the moment you sat in a solitary valley by a bird that flew by, or the boy who chased it or the bird's beak, or the child's cheek, made you forget the blinking purple waves of the sea. You did not finish the shawl of the sea, nor the hair of the algae on the rocks.

I want you to use the hours left to you finishing this painting that will lock the accumulated secrets of your long life in its beauty. I do not doubt your hands, so near to being separated from you, will tremble on the silk and the infinite will penetrate your work. Nor do I doubt your eyes so near being annihilated, will discover relationships at the limit of human sensibility. Think that this last desire of mine is a benevolence on my part as I know the cloth is the only lover you have ever caressed; think of my offering you some brushes and pigment as akin to a charitable offering of a lover to a man about to die.

At the lifting of the small finger of the Emperor's hand two eunuchs brought the unfinished painting where Wang-Fô had sketched the sea and sky. Wang-Fô dried his tears and smiled at the sight of the old sketch that brought back memories of his youth. Everything about the few lines drawn on silk testified to a freshness of soul old Wang-Fô could no longer aspire to, but at the same time it spoke of something essential that was missing—at the time of its execution Wang-Fô had not contemplated duly the mountains, nor the rocks that made up its naked flanks nor the water of the sea that wet them. Nor had he been soaked sufficiently by the sadness of twilight.

He chose a brush among those offered by a slave and began painting some broad strokes of blue over the water while a eunuch squatted at his feet and ground colours for him, a task he did rather badly and Wang-Fô missed Ling more than before.

He began adding a tiny point of rose to a cloud that rested on the mountain, then added some wrinkles to the surface of the sea which did no more than accentuate its serenity. The jade floor on which he stood began to become distinctly humid but Wang-Fô, absorbed in his work, did not notice.

The fragile boat in the foreground now filled the whole first plane of the silk scroll and the sound of oars splashing in the water could be heard in the distance but came closer and closer and grew louder and louder, till it filled the hall of the Son of the Sky. Then it stopped and only the melancholy dripping of the raised oars broke the imperturbable silence. It had been some time since the red irons heated to close old Wang-Fô's eyes had gone out and become cold in the hot coals of the executioner's brass bowl. The courtiers, immobilised by the etiquette of the court, stood on tip-toe reaching for breath above the waters that filled the room without walls.

The water finally reached the Imperial chest and Ling, for it was Ling who rowed the boat, a tear in one sleeve still un-darned since it had been ripped that very morning by the soldiers at the inn, wore around his neck a strange red scarf. Wang-Fô said to him with sweetness as he continued to paint: I thought you were dead. While thou lives, how could I die?

He helped his master into the boat. The green jade ceiling reflected in the still waters and the braids of the courtiers floated beside their heads like serpents while the pale head of the Emperor floated like a lotus above the wetness.

Look my disciple, said Wang-Fô with melancholy, these poor unfortunates will drown if they haven't already, I didn't know there was enough water in the sea to drown an Emperor, what can we do?

Don't worry master, they will soon be left without even a memory of having been wet, only the Emperor will retain a bit of marine bitterness in his heart as memory of this moment. These people weren't made to lose themselves in a painting.

And he added: The sea is tranquil and the wind favourable. The marine birds are making their nests; shall we be underway Master, to a country the other side of the waves?

Let's embark, said the old painter. Wang-Fô took the tiller and Ling bent over the oars, their cadence filled once again the room without walls, firm and regular as a heartbeat. The water's level lowered around the majestic vertical rocks that turned back into pillars and very soon only puddles on the floor remained and a little sea foam on the Emperor's sleeve.

The roll of painted silk sat on the low table and the boat that filled its foreground receded slowly in the sea of blue jade invented by Wang-Fô, until it became so small only Ling's red scarf and the Master's long beard could be divined.

Translation: Paul Herman