

Pear Blossoms

Some years ago a man came round selling saplings, and I bought a pear tree from him. The man selling the saplings was middle-aged, with bulging eyes and an unprepossessing appearance—but as appearances had nothing to do with pot plants, this didn't bother me particularly. When I looked in the trailer the man had carted along, I saw it was packed with fruit trees: persimmon, peach, apricot. I don't know why that was all he carried.

I've heard that you're not supposed to plant fruit trees in your garden, but mine isn't the sort of garden where it would matter much. Anyway, I hadn't bought the pear tree because I wanted to gather the fruit. The idea was to see the flowers. A long time ago, I had read Bai Juyi's *Song of Everlasting Regret*, and I remembered the line "Like a pear blossom bathed in springtime rain". It was a passage about that famous beauty Yang Guifei, blinded by tears on Mount Penglai—but unfortunately, I had never seen pear blossoms. And because I had never seen them, I couldn't very well picture this woman whose face shone with tears and whose beauty caused rulers to abandon their duties. Anyway, I think I bought the pear tree because I was somehow fond of that line and it had stuck in my memory. I was sure that in spring, when a gentle rain fell on the blooming flowers, they would have an air of elegance. I planted the tree and hoped I would soon see the blossoms.

The sapling I had bought was a thin and weedy thing, somewhere between four and five feet high. Although I wanted to see flowers as soon as possible, it was a tree I was dealing with after all, so things didn't go as planned. Before long several twigs had sprouted, and I was just thinking that perhaps there might be flowers sometime next year when one day, unbeknownst to me, the old man from the pot-plant shop came along and pruned the tree.

"But if you cut the branches the flowers won't grow, will they?"

"No—but if you don't, it won't be good for the other trees roundabout. And your tree won't fruit properly, you know."

When I told him I didn't care about the fruit and I just wanted to see the flowers the old man made a strange face. Maybe it was because he hadn't planted the tree himself, but he didn't seem to have any particular affection for pears.

One spring, I've forgotten how many years later, the pear tree bore a smattering of lonely white flowers. The blossoms looked particularly cheerless, perhaps because they were

so sparse. They were feeble flowers, but I was just delighted that they had bloomed at all. In the evening I drank by myself, gazing at the lonely flowers floating white in the dim twilight. Seen at dusk, I think those melancholy flowers had at least a little elegance. Every year after that the tree bore flowers, but somehow or other they were always sparse and frail, and the tree never once bloomed in abundance.

One rainy day I remembered Yang Guifei and looked out into the garden at the pear tree. The few flowers were hanging their heads dejectedly, dampened by the rain, and they were in a much worse state than I had expected. Several days had passed since the flowers had bloomed, so they may have been starting to wilt. They looked somehow as though they were crying, but no matter how much I exercised my imagination, I just couldn't see in them the profound, refined grace of a beautiful woman in tears, or anything like that. Last year, we transplanted the pear tree when the house was rebuilt, and it withered and died. Maybe it was just bad timing. The previous year it had borne three tiny fruits, about the size of walnuts; the final gifts from the tree to its carer.

(March, 1973)

Java Sparrow

I asked an acquaintance with an interest in birds to bring me a bush warbler, and after a short while they brought me one. On closer observation, I saw that they had brought another garden bird along with it; this they gave to me, saying "This one's a free gift."

"What's this? A Bengalese finch?" I asked, and was told it was a Java sparrow, and that it was still black here and there because it was just a chick, but when it grew up it would become as pure white as snow and its beak would get even redder. I listened dismissively, not at all impressed. For one thing, you don't feel that excited on being told something is a free gift. If you get a free gift when you're shopping, it's never anything more valuable than the item you've actually bought. So perhaps I only afforded the Java sparrow the value of a free gift.

I had been looking forward to hearing the bush warbler's chirping cries, but almost no time at all had passed before the piteous bird died suddenly. I didn't know why it had happened, but I resigned myself to the fact that it was dead and there was nothing I could do. As a result the Java sparrow, only supposed to have been a free gift, suddenly became the bird of the house. I imagine it was like a supporting actor taking on the lead role.

This Java sparrow was supposed to be the type of bird that would perch on your hand, and so it seemed to have it in its head that I was its natural companion and playmate—as though it viewed me, its human owner, as an equal. When left alone it would clamour for attention. If I put out my hand, it would jump onto my palm and then climb up onto my shoulder and peck my ear, which tickled awfully.

“Oi, don't get carried away.”

Whenever I scolded the Java sparrow it chirped, *pi, pi*, cocking its head and fixing its black eyes on my face. Who knows what was going through its mind?

The person who had given me the bird told me that Java sparrows get lonely, and that I was supposed to put it where it could see people. I put the sparrow's cage in the living-cum-dining room on top of the dining table. I left the cage door open of course, and the sparrow left the cage whenever it pleased to hop about on the dining table, defecate, and get up on top of the cage and groom itself all over.

Once, when a few visitors were over and we were drinking and getting lively in the next room, the Java sparrow surprised me when it came fluttering along the corridor. It wasn't that it wanted to be included as such, but it did seem to like being in lively places. The problem was that it had terrible manners. It would take the millet out of its food bowl and scatter it all over the dining table. I decided that there was nothing for it but to place the cage in a large, shallow box—although the inside of the box was soon covered in millet too.

An Oriental turtle dove had been a regular visitor to our garden for a while, and my wife had taken to throwing the millet that had been scattered about in the box out into the garden, where the dove pecked at it delightedly. The dove had become very tame, and when the door was open it would come right into the house, cool as you like. It used to eat hemp seeds from the palm of my hand, but these days it's a bother and I don't do it anymore.

On one occasion, the dove came along and ate the millet in the garden and then

hopped onto the veranda and up into the dining room, looking as though it wanted more. I picked up the millet from the Java sparrow's bowl and scattered it on the floor, where the dove pecked at it busily. I suddenly thought I would have a go at introducing the Java sparrow to the dove. I took the sparrow down from on top of the table and placed it on the floor near the other bird. At first, the Java sparrow hopped about the place as though it was confused.

I'm not certain if the Java sparrow realised before long that the millet the dove was pecking at was its own food, but it puffed itself up and, to my amusement, made to threaten the dove, which was at least ten times its own size. That wasn't all: to my great surprise, the sparrow thrust itself at the dove. The dove continued to peck at the millet as it ran away, looking as though the sparrow was more of a nuisance than anything else—but perhaps it had been surprised by the sparrow's ferocity. At any rate, it fled the dining room.

(July, 1976)

Loaches

At one time or another, my wife came back from shopping and said, "I bought some loaches." It wasn't that I particularly liked them; I think it was just that when she went shopping they happened to be selling them, which was unusual, so she brought some home. They piqued my interest somehow, and I went into the kitchen and peered into the sink where the black, whiskery things were writhing around chaotically inside a large pot. My wife said she was going to make them into Yanagawa hot pot, so in a short while the loaches would be going into the pot and departing this world for the next. While I entertained this thought, I had the notion that I would try taking a few of the loaches and releasing them into the pond.

I suppose it might have been more methodical to ask the loaches which among them would rather go into the pond than the pot, but it wasn't possible of course. Even if I could do it, if all of them volunteered themselves for the pond then we couldn't have our hot pot, and the little pond would be heaving with loaches, which would be an awful nuisance. So I dispensed with that idea and just picked out four or five that looked particularly lively. I dropped them into the garden pond where they quickly sank out of sight. I can't say whether

those loaches should be considered lucky or not. There are about ten goldfish in the pond, but as to whether goldfish and loaches fight, there's no need to dwell on that.

“Are the loaches swimming?”

“They've completely disappeared...”

I somehow felt like I had done an awfully pointless thing.

The pond, adjoined by a brick terrace, wasn't even two feet deep. The base of the pond was concrete, but several pots of dwarf water lilies were submerged in the water, and the soil from the pots oozed out; over a long time the silt had built up, forming a muddy layer about two inches thick at the bottom of the pond. It looked like the loaches had found this delightful and had buried into the mud.

For the first two or three days I kept thinking about them and peering at the pond now and then, but the loaches showed neither hide nor hair of themselves. Our daughter visited, and I heard her talking to my wife.

“There are loaches in the pond, you know.”

“Really? Where, where? Oh, I can't see them...”

Listening, it seemed to me like a very silly conversation.

I went with a friend to a loach restaurant in Fukagawa, and we were having a drink and eating loaches when I happened to remember the loaches in the pond. I really must have forgotten all about them, given that that was what it took to remind me. Upon remembering I told my friend about them.

“You're keeping loaches, eh?” he said. “That's something you don't hear very often.” His expression suggested he was poking fun at me. “Eating loaches comes up in *Country Teacher*, doesn't it..?” he said, which confused me somewhat. I knew Katai's *Country Teacher*, having read it a long time ago, but I couldn't remember whether or not it featured loaches.

“Oh really—there were loaches, were there?” According to my friend, the main character in the story was sickly and had to make sure he got plenty of nutrition, so every day he'd dress loaches, crack an egg on top, stew them and eat them. I thought that yes, that did sound familiar. I expressed admiration at my friend's sharp memory, but he acted nonchalantly, saying it was just that he'd had to read it again recently. Maybe that was why he had made the unusual suggestion out of the blue that we go to a loach restaurant. Of

course, the names of plants come up a lot in *Country Teacher* too, and at some point the conversation turned to that topic, leaving the loaches forgotten in the mud.

Perhaps a year had passed since I had released the loaches into the pond, when one day there was an evening shower. The rain had stopped and I was idly gazing at the garden when I saw something black jumping around in the soil. The loaches had never showed themselves, so I had forgotten that there were any in the pond at all.

“Hang on, what’s that?” I called to my wife, and was greatly surprised when she replied, “Well, it’s a loach.”

It looked as though the loach had been washed up when the evening shower had caused the pond to overflow. I quickly returned it to the pond, and I felt quite chipper when it turned out that the loach, for whom it had been touch and go, was alive and well.

I’ve forgotten how long after that it was, but one fine day my wife shrieked for me, and when I went to her I saw there was a loach in the pond. The single loach was upright, wobbling around unsteadily, face turned up to the water’s surface. Maybe the fine weather had caused it to aimlessly emerge. As we watched, it spun itself around so it was facing downwards and, tail upwards, it wriggled off back down again and disappeared.

“There’s something nice about loaches...” my wife said with feeling. I had been ready to tell her off for raising such a shriek about nothing more than a loach, but I forgot all about it. Maybe it was because I did have to admit that there was something nice about loaches?

(February, 1977)

Tadpoles

Last spring, about mid-March I think it was, toads laid eggs in the tiny pond on the terrace for the first time. I had seen toads in the garden many times, but they had never laid eggs there before. Why did they start last year? Well, I suppose you would have to ask them.

A young acquaintance was visiting me and we were in conversation when my companion said, with an expression of surprise, “Oh look, a toad and its baby! That’s rare, isn’t it?”

I looked and sure enough, at some point two toads had appeared and were sitting stock still in the corner of the terrace, one on top of the other, the little one on top of the big one. It tickled me somewhat to hear them referred to as a parent and child, but maybe my young friend knew that expression—something or other about a parent turtle carrying its child on its back—and that association had caused him to judge that that was what they were.

“Yes, they’ve been like that since morning, walking around there and getting in and out of the pond.”

As the two of us watched the toads, we were joined by another young acquaintance, who looked at the frogs on the veranda and said with amusement, “They’re mating, aren’t they...”

The two youngsters were friends.

“They’re not parent and child?”

“No, they’re husband and wife.”

“What, really..?”

That was the general thread of the discussion. A little while later we looked at the terrace again, but there was no sign of the two toads; perhaps they had gone off somewhere.

Toads may lumber around and seem sluggish, but they can disappear out of sight in a flash. I occasionally catch sight of a toad in the garden and think, ah, there’s one. But when I go off somewhere for a moment and then come back, it isn’t there anymore. Even if I search around the place, reasoning that it can’t have gone far, I won’t find any trace of it. Toads disappear so suddenly that it’s beyond mysterious. Do they know the art of the ninja, perhaps?

And then by chance, just when you’re not expecting it, they show themselves. Some time ago when we had a raspberry bush in the corner of the garden, I was reaching out to pick the crimson berries from the drooping branches when all of a sudden something poked the tip of my finger. I looked and was surprised to find a toad, biding its time, a supercilious expression on its face. I thought I had been poked by something, but it might be that the toad had licked me with the tip of its tongue. As to what it was thinking at the time, I haven’t the faintest idea. I hardly think it was a friendly greeting.

The day after my young friend had come to visit, I woke up to my wife telling me that the toads had laid eggs, and I rushed out to the pond and laid eyes on toad eggs for the first time. They took the form of a long, gelatinous string about two centimetres across, inside which were dotted little black things. There were several pots of dwarf water lilies submerged in the pond and the eggs had been laid on top of one of the pots, coiled up in a heap. But it didn't end there: they extended along to the next pot, where there was another pile. I couldn't begin to guess at how long the string was. The pond looked rather dirty and I wasn't particularly pleased, but there was nothing to be done, so I resigned myself to leaving it as it was.

I don't recall how long passed, but the next thing I knew the tiny pond was heaving with tadpoles. The little black things were swarming all over the place. What on earth would happen when they all grew into proper toads? A sudden sense of unease accompanied the thought. It was all very well seeing one or two toads, but what would I do if the little garden became overrun with them and I couldn't even place my feet down anymore? Watching the tadpoles, I felt very gloomy.

Soon enough, the little black things grew arms and legs and became somewhat more toad-like in appearance, and I remember watching them leave the pond and go off one after the other—but after that, I never once met any of the toads' children in the garden. Fortunately, the garden didn't end up swarming with toads—but perhaps that meant that they had all died? Great tits and other little birds frequently visit the garden, and I wonder if they pecked the toads up.

This year the flowers in the garden bloomed about a week, perhaps ten days later than last year, and the toads, too, arrived later. Two of them showed up around the end of March. The little one was sitting on top of the bigger one as before of course, though I couldn't say if they were the same two as last year. They were trying to climb up onto the terrace, but they kept falling over backwards in an undignified way, the one still clinging to the other's back. I made a step for them using an old brick, and after that they managed to get up onto the terrace.

Now there are lots of tadpoles swimming in the pond, just like last year. I have a look now and again, but I'm not worried now that I know there is no danger of the garden becoming infested with toads. Unlike last year, I'm watching with peace of mind.

(April, 1978)

Nest Box

For a while now there has been a segment of bamboo pipe hanging from the branch of a tree in the garden. When I put beef tallow in it, the great tits come and peck at it delightedly. They usually visit as a pair, and one of them will peck at the beef tallow while the other hops around on a nearby branch. Because they come as a pair I think they must be a couple, but I don't know which is the husband and which is the wife. At one time or another somebody told me how to tell which is which, but I was drunk at the time and soon forgot. In any case, I can't say I'm too worried about knowing.

For a long time, the beef tallow in the bamboo pipe was eaten exclusively by the great tits. However, at some point the sparrows and bulbuls, having previously shown no interest in the beef tallow, started eating it too, which I couldn't understand.

"The sparrows are eating the beef tallow," my wife said one day. Thinking that couldn't be right, I went and had a look at the bamboo pipe in the garden and was surprised to see the sparrows alighting on it and pecking at it. I was even more surprised to see the bulbuls chase the great tits away from the bamboo pipe and monopolise it in an imperious manner.

Maybe the great tits had been so obviously enjoying the beef tallow that the bulbuls wondered what it tasted like and decided to try it out. Who knows—perhaps they unexpectedly got a taste for it? Things are pleasant enough when the sparrows join in, but with the bulbuls it's a different story. They spear the chunk of beef tallow with their long, sharp beaks, pull it out of the bamboo pipe and make off with the lot. This unreasonable behaviour is a great nuisance. My wife was astonished too.

"I *thought* the beef tallow had been running out quickly lately—and now I know why..."

I can't say whether the bulbuls like the taste of the beef tallow, but watching them, I think they get a sense of pleasure from stealing the tallow from the great tits. It seems to me their behaviour is deliberate and mean spirited, and I don't like it much. I could get angry and chase away the bulbuls, but it would never do if the other little birds misunderstood.

There is also a bird table in the garden, and I used to put out grains of rice and breadcrumbs for the doves and sparrows. Once I decided to put out sunflower seeds based on the advice of a friend, and the great tits seemed to prefer those to the beef tallow; since then, they always peck delightedly at the sunflower seeds. They alight on the bird table and pick up a seed in their beaks, then fly off into a bush in the garden, where they hold down the seed with both feet and peck at it busily, splitting open the hard outer layer and eating the inside.

Once I started putting out sunflower seeds, we began to get visits from Oriental greenfinches, which I had never seen before. I have no idea why the sunflower seeds on the bird table in our little garden should have caught the eyes of the greenfinches. Usually around five or six greenfinches come along and land on the bird table, where they play and quarrel. When they bicker and flutter up into the air, I can see that their wings are a beautiful translucent green. Sometimes the bulbuls also land on the bird table and side-eye their surroundings, but no matter how haughty they try to act, their beaks just aren't made for picking up sunflower seeds. Apparently not finding this very amusing, they soon go off somewhere else.

I don't remember when it was, but I was once talking to a friend about the birds in the garden when they gave me a nest box. I think it was made by the son of their acquaintance, or something like that.

"Well? Nice and rustic, isn't it?" my friend said with pride, giving it to me. Indeed, it wasn't a bad nest box, sturdily built of unvarnished wood. Straight away I fixed the nest box on the trunk of the Himalayan cedar in the garden and waited eagerly for the great tits to come and nest in it. I wanted to put up one of those diagonal "House for rent" signs, but I decided not to in case people thought me odd.

Apparently, great tits will build their nests anywhere. I once read a newspaper article about great tits that had built a nest inside the stone lantern on the roof of a certain department store in Shinjuku.

I have an acquaintance with a holiday home in the woods of Shinshū Oiwake. One summer they went to the house, and when they tried to open the shutters something got caught on them. Apparently they took a look, wondering what it could be, and found that a pair of great tits had made a nest inside the shutter casing. It was a long time ago that I heard the story, but I remember the pleasant sensation that I could almost see that house in the woods in my mind's eye. And that brings me to recall a day in late autumn when I went to Oiwake myself and saw great tits chirping away merrily in the bare treetops, Mount Asama towering beyond.

A nest box must be a far more comfortable place to live than a stone lantern or a shutter casing. I don't know what the little birds think, but the person who puts up a nest box certainly wants to think so. Not too long after, I was delighted to catch sight of the great tits landing on the nest box time and time again and entering through the hole.

“What do you think of this house?”

“Well, it's not too bad...”

I couldn't help picturing the two birds having this discussion. How perfect it would be if the great tits settled in to the nest box and maybe even had a chick.

One day, I idly looked up at the nest box and was surprised to see a cat sitting on the branch above it, frozen in a crouch and fixated on the box. It looked as though the cat had caught sight of the great tits going in and out and was waiting for them there. That made me angry, and I yelled “Hey!” and rushed out into the garden. The cat looked taken aback, and it panicked and scrambled down the tree before running away at full pelt. I might have shouted rather loudly. My wife looked out, a surprised expression on her face.

“What on earth is going on?”

All I can say is that it was careless of me to have been so taken up with the nest box that I forgot all about cats. Even if I put up a “House for rent” sign, there would be no tenants. Great tits are no fools, and they certainly wouldn't think of starting a family in the kind of place likely to be targeted by a cat. And sure enough, those great tits never made their nest inside the box. It wasn't only that year, either: since then, even up until now, the box has been a vacant house, never once occupied. The nest box with its unvarnished wood has become old and shabby, but I feel now that it ties the garden together, and I don't intend to take it down just because there are no tenants.

I think it was autumn two or three years ago when, for no particular reason, I put a ladder up against the Himalayan cedar and tried lifting the nest box off. A little “plunk” came from inside, and, wondering what it was, I turned the box on its side. I was surprised when a single acorn rolled out of the hole. Who had put it in there? Great tits are too small to pick up acorns, so I wondered whether it could have been a bulbul that had carried it over here and dropped it in for a prank. I remember the pleasant feeling that I had received an unexpected autumn gift.

(September, 1978)