

Milk Medicine

by S F Ho

Milk trickles out from the wounds of the world with promises of song and sleep. Nightmares soften into malleable objects. Objects soften into a soothing primordial quietude. It is possible to drink this opacity, bathe in its thickness and consume the dreams that it offers. The dreams are sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet. Milk finds sympathy in the structure of crystals, in the formation of clouds in the sky and in the tides of the moon. Milk appears in tall fields of unripened grain. Nascent seed heads are pinched and squeezed to exude drops of white sweetness that calm frazzled nerves and nourish tired bodies. Milk leaks out of the pores of fruit not yet to be picked. It pushes through the white veins of thorny thistle leaves. We scratch at the skin of roots pulled out of the stony earth to suck out more bitter milk.

A slash of silver unfurls into thin powdery leaves edged with frivolous curls. A light, sturdy stem supports large silky petals of red, dark purple, pink, lavender and white. A bulbous pod cradles an endless number of tiny black seeds. The top of the pod is decorated with a tiny crown. When cut, it emits a deeply pungent, fresh and spicy odour. White milk seeps out of the cut, which dries and oxidizes into a brown resin.

Milk flows through an imperceptible network of whispers and hearsay that divides and subdivides itself underground. The soil of the land is laced through with this delicate mesh. Loaded with pheromones and minerals, milk becomes a conduit for exchange between various symbiotically connected organisms. They trade in dreams and memories. Milk becomes mother brother sister father to legions of children who are far from home or never had one in the first place. The children sleep in empty places, while they dream of impossibilities and omissions. Buoyed by a blissful vision of belonging, they return again for another sip. As a vessel for this milky substance, the flower is understood to be sacred. The infinite seeds spilling from the pregnant pod are a

token of fertility. The resin is incorporated into ancient ritual. Much like other sacred plants, in the mirrored world of capital, this sacredness translates into a kind of value that promises destruction.

Milk arrives from the oceans of the east and migrates along ancient trade routes in the west, integrating over centuries until it is indivisible from culture and land. Countless hands tend vast fields of these fragile blossoms. As an object of value, the flower is exchanged to obtain other desirable objects of value. Sometimes the desired object is a case of tea, sometimes it is a gun. The flower, as an avenue to obtain other desirable objects, also happens to start a war, one of many wars. From this struggle, a tiny piece of land is taken from one state and assigned to another. As the states writhe and convulse, this tiny piece of land becomes something else. It fluctuates in a sort of queer in-between where it cannot entirely correspond to either of the forces that caused its separation. This place becomes and surpasses what it needs to become in order to survive. The irrevocable disjuncture of separation and attempted return drives people away from this tiny piece of land to only arrive again into another complex set of conditions.

The milky substance of the flower gradually comes to be associated with the peoples of this land. Plant, people and substance are seen as simultaneously seductive and repulsive, merging into a single fearful category that is described in the language of warfare. That which elicits fear must be destroyed. A system of management is developed to better accomplish this process of elimination, which is then amplified and extended to other peoples, plants and substances that elicit a similar feeling of fear. When the first arrest is made it is a person from this initial category. This event is part of a larger framework that targets, controls and kills outside forces that threaten the population.

Through the eradication of that which is understood to be an external threat or disease lies the hope of returning to a pure state that in actuality has only existed in imagination. It is impossible to travel backwards in time to conserve an absolute fiction. Instead this fiction becomes a means to construct a futurity that is cleansed of undesirable elements. A return facilitated by death is a

return to a fate shared by both humans and flowers. This state can be described in terms of chemicals, molecules and minerals—the DNA of the land. Living in constant anticipation of death impairs the capacity to strategize around what is to come. There is no future or past. The only truth is in this elemental kinship.

A set of delineated volumes could also be called a world, or a body. Everything that enters this body becomes a part of it and also changes it. Vague or inadequate words are used to describe these very specific changes. One kind of action is to put something inside the body. Another is to act from inside the body you are already within. Larger bodies shape the bodies within them. A long chain of relationships, forged well before the formation of the body that stands here in the present tense, conditions its existence. The work of genius and of time is to engineer a break that renders these connections invisible, so that a new set of relationships that are also invisible might now form around a particular volume.

For example one can turn to a set of great power, the milky code that forms our unfurling flower. This set is separated from backwards notions of—let's say—the sacred and put to use. Severance hones in on the analgesic and euphoric effects produced when certain alkaloids bind to certain receptors when inserted into certain bodies. Through this separation the set transforms into something else entirely, an unrecognizably refined version of what it once was. In a mirrored world of pure value, its power takes on a different kind of effect. Abstracted from itself, still the set retains a trace of its obscure past. The new form strains to remember the burning meadows and bloodied soil that once nourished this particular configuration of atomic and chemical attraction.

A gentler illustration of this chain of events considers the smell of a rose, an odour that conjures deep-seated associations of romance, love and desire. The obvious response to such profundity is to meticulously deconstruct it into chemical components such as damascone, rose oxide,

phenyl ethyl alcohol, geraniol, citronellol and eugenol. The scent of love is then tailored to our liking—a bit of lemon here, some darker shading there. The calyx of this carefully designed blossom holds emptiness, a simulation, a puff of air. It is a container for possibility.

To enter into one of the above described relationships with our unfurling flower, or a freshly refined version of it, conjures a string of conditioning moral stances as it continues to belong to that ever-expanding fearful category. In this world bodies are pathologized according to an idiosyncratic standard of measure. It is impossible to fit within these groundless definitions of health, wellness and normalcy. In another existence, dreamed of in hallucination, all bodies have power to flourish outside of these categories. But here, the flower and its descendants become a tool in this pathologizing process. This process is called medicine, which means that it is a way to define and align the physical body in accordance with that idiosyncratic standard.

Milk becomes both poison and medicine, terms that are defined by cultural norms. A totalizing culture purports to define these terms for everyone. In another place that exists only in some kind of delirious imaginary, culturally specific and spiritual approaches such as employing ceremony, emetics, purgatives or inducing fever are woven into practices of healing. Here, such methods are derided as toxic, ignorant, dangerous and regressive. Totalizing substances such as those used in chemotherapy or as pesticides are employed as both toxin and cure. In the struggle to categorize what is good and evil, the flower's capacity to soothe pain is eclipsed by the effects of its habituated usage and the moralization of its capacity to bring euphoria. Questions around what is the source of pain continue to be ignored.

The grandparents often would say, "Treat the root of the cause, not its effect." Getting at the root of pain means speaking to sociological factors that affect the overworked body, the malnourished body, the disciplined body and how these factors distinctly affect specific, historically-defined populations. It means speaking to the protection and poisoning of the ecological body in which these smaller bodies are contained. The fear of death and suffering can also become a pathological force. Seeking the root of pain must also acknowledge that some pain

is untreatable. There are some forms of anguish and entropy for which there is no cure. They become a part of you, or they always have been.

(An aside: She sits at a kitchen table while the news plays in the background and recalls her adolescence in that tiny place. She talks about how you are never really yourself, like, a true free person. “On the one hand you are under the restrictions of a party who were brutal at the time, but on the other hand you are a second-class citizen. Either one is not really good, you know,” she says. “At the time when we were brought up, we were not taught to have any political views since all our lives we were under colonial rule. So life kind of catered to that.” We go back to eating dinner.)

Plants and animals inherit the category of invasion from a culture of war. The metaphor of invasion extends to the category that holds the flower, its derivatives and those certain peoples who carry the flower on them like a scent, a waft of smoke. The invasion of an exotically inscrutable, backwards species of sub-humans is a virus, a sickness, a multitudinous swarm. On both sides of the water the flower and anyone who touches it is reviled, with each side pointing to the other as the source for this contagion. Undesirable elements are expunged by naming them as hostile and foreign. Sitting between two opposed but identical positions of prohibition, in that tiny place that dreams of its autonomy and that was born out of this ever expanding war, foreignness is merely a de facto and perpetual state of being. The image of a border that protects evil from leaking and sneaking in is illusory. The root of what is feared was always a necessary part of these conditions.

The contagion category widens, threatening to engulf societies and nations in an undercurrent of primitive violence. The invasion spreads to many fronts, some of them not so distant. Symptoms sprout up across domestic, metropolitan and suburban settings. Alongside our flower, even more plants and animals, with their parts dissected and refined into biological tools, join

the side of the enemy in this war. The category extends to peoples who are seen as an even more terrifying threat than those exotic sub-humans from that distant shore. The mounting suspicion of attack by illicit forces demands the development of a robust program of counterattack, surveillance, restriction and incarceration. The medical and prison industrial complex intertwine. In this world, the flipside of an invasive people is a people that can be harnessed for economic value. Incarcerated and institutionalized, these formerly threatening subjects are an ideal population for the pharmaceutical testing of everything from hormone therapy to syphilis injections to skin patch tests for consumer goods.

Seeking to care for the body through the medical industrial complex summons a specific collection of knowledge, one that values the segregation of infinite ways of being so that they may be owned by a privileged few. This care summons the hands of those who conducted and administered research experiments. It is served by the coerced or non-consenting bodies of those who were experimented upon and made into something less than human. The question of whose hands do the healing, whose bodies stood trial to develop this knowledge, and what places these substances and practices come from is obscured or deemed irrelevant.