

The Ugly Stone

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I often despaired over that ugly lump of rock right by the front of our house. There it sprawled, a great black, murky mass, with an appearance both bovine and ungainly. Nobody knew how or when it exactly had been left there, so everybody simply ignored it.

Only, come harvest time, when the front yard would be piled high with wheat and crops, Grandmother would notice it and exclaim: “This unsightly rock — look how much space it’s taking up! We’ve got to get rid of it sometime.”

Therefore, when Uncle’s family was building a house, we thought of using it to pile up a side of the house wall. This proved to be impossible, however, since the rock was of an extremely irregular shape, possessing neither sharp right angles nor any smooth, flat surfaces. We could have used a chisel to break the rock up, but one could be bothered to expend such a great deal of effort over it; the riverbank was only a short distance away, and any old rock that we brought back from there would have been easier to use than this one.

Then, when the house was nearly completed, and we were looking for something for the front steps, Uncle didn’t think that the rock was even good enough for that.

Another time, we had a stonemason come to grind a millstone for us. Grandmother again persuaded: “Why don’t you just use this piece of rock, and save yourself the trouble of hauling another piece over from somewhere far away?”

The stonemason took a good look at the rock, and shook his head: he thought the rock’s texture too fine, and unsuitable for making the mill. Yet it wasn’t as if our rock were fine like white marble, out of which intricate characters and delicate flowers could be wrought; nor was it smooth and polished like black granite, and could be used to wash linen and beat cloth.

No, it just lay there silently in our yard. Even the expansive shade of the locust tree did not care to spread itself to cover and protect this homely rock, and flowers no longer blossomed beside it.

Weeds began to sprout and flourish all around and about the rock, invading every crack and crevice, and encroaching upon the surface. Splotches of green moss and mottled black then further marred its already homely face.

And we, the children, began to view it as a terrible eyesore. Once we even tried to haul it off the premises, but we weren’t quite strong enough. No matter how we cursed it and scorned it, though, there was nothing we could do — so in the end we had to let this ugly rock be, leaving it to lie there on its own.

If there was any slight comfort to be found in this ugly rock, it was the existence of a concavity, a hollow in its surface that was

neither too large nor too small, and which would be filled to the brim with water on rainy days. Often, even after the rain had ceased for several days and the ground had already dried, the hollow in the rock would still be brimming with rainwater, and the chicks and hens would scurry up onto the rock to sip and drink from it.

Every so often, on nights of the fifteenth when we would wait outside for the full moon to appear, we would also climb on top of the rock, and from its height, gaze hopefully into the dark sky. Grandmother would always come out and scold us, worried that we would fall off.

And once, exactly as she had feared, I slipped off from my rocky perch, badly scraping my knee. Everyone jeered at it, dubbing it “The Ugly Stone.”

And, truly, it was as ugly as ever a rock could be. Finally one day, an astronomer came to our village. As he passed our front gate, he suddenly spotted his rock — immediately he stared at it intently.

He never left again, and proceeded to live with us.

Soon after many others arrived, and declared that this homely rock was actually a meteorite. They explained to us that it had fallen from the sky, and had landed here on earth as long as two, maybe three hundred years ago, and that it was a great and wondrous object.

A truck appeared, and the rock was carefully transported away. This turn of events startled us all a great deal! To think that this strange and ugly rock had actually descended from the heavens! It had once made up part of this vast sky looming right over our heads, suffusing it with warmth, glowing with heat and light.

Our forefathers had perhaps gazed up at it, and it had given them light and clarity, promising them a haven for their aspirations, their yearnings, providing a space for their dreams. And yet it had fallen from above, only to land here in the earth's muddy depths, amidst the weedy undergrowth, for a visit that had lasted several hundreds of years.

Grandmother signed: "You never can tell, can you? That this ugly old rock would turn out to be something so special, when it couldn't even be used to pile up a wall, or lay down a few lousy steps?"

"It really is too ugly," the astronomer said. "Yes really, too ugly... But that is precisely wherein its beauty lies," he explained. "Within its ugliness, this rock harbours a great and unearthly beauty, like a diamond in the rough."

"Because it's ugly it's beautiful?"

"Yes. Ugliness in its extreme is beauty in the extreme. Precisely because it's like no other rock, it cannot be made to pile up walls or be molded into a few front steps, and it cannot be carved or

sculpted, or be used to beat down linen. The rock is from the heavens — it was not meant for such petty, banal purposes. And as a consequence, the world mocked it.”

Grandmother blushed, and so did I. I felt my own baseness, as I also felt the goodness of this ugly rock. I even blamed it for bearing silently all the abuse and scorn for so many years. Then, I began to recognize and respect the greatness of its stoicism in the face of misunderstanding and lack of appreciation, and the strength of its forbearance in the face of a vast and eternally lonely, solitary existence.

Translated by Gladys and Xianyi Tang.