

METAMORPHOSES

When we settled in the French countryside, over a decade ago, my urban mother's first question was: "But what in the world are you going to be doing with yourself all day?" Little could she have known (or I for that matter) that these past years have been the most hectic years of my life.

Partly, the hecticness comes from the fact that I'm not at home all year round: work forces me to travel, as if I were living under the curse of Cain whom God despised for being a settled crop farmer, not a nomadic herdsman like his brother Abel, and whom he punished by forcing him to wander. Consequently, when I'm at home, work accumulates. Other than my reading and writing, there's looking after the house and the garden (I cook, my partner is the gardener), and making sure that the ancient stones remain in place. We have always had the sense that, rather than own this place, we have been made its custodians, and are supposed to see to its well-being: mend to the roof, nurse the trees, play with the dog, protect the birds, feed the stray cats, rescue hedgehogs that fall into the pool and see that the big snake that lives deep inside the crypt can come and go undisturbed.

Partly, it comes from the state of constant changes of which we are privileged witnesses. In a city, paradoxically, in spite of the frantic rhythm, change is slow, almost imperceptible: as in a torrent of white water, the rush is too great for whatever is swept away to be distinctly apparent. In the country, instead, changes seem fast and furious, perhaps because the rhythm of their flow is so much slower. In the hesitant transformations of light, for instance, that brighten or darken the lawn,

the appearance of a new bird or the fall of an old branch is obvious, unmistakable. The days on which the bread is delivered, the arrival of the post in the mornings, the tolling of the church bells, the hours during which the Town Hall is open (twice a week), the passing of the market bus (every Wednesday), lumber by with elephantine stubbornness, so that any stumbling, any tardiness, any alteration hits you powerfully in the senses. The ear notices the wrong number of peels on the tremendous evening when the mechanism of the bells breaks down, the eye catches a foreign patch of colour the afternoon on which an unfamiliar species of bird lands on the rim of the bathing-trough, the foot trips on a parcel left by a supply postwoman at an unusual spot by the door.

The countryside lulls you into a false sense of constancy, but nothing is as old as the hills, not even the hills. A new house is build on the slope of the hill just ahead, where a tower can be seen that is mentioned in Rabelais's sixteenth century *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Fields of fluorescent yellow stain the land that Balzac described as "the colour of broth." In a farm that for centuries bred Jersey cows or Poitou donkeys, South-American llamas now dream nostalgically of the heights of Machu Pichu.

And even in the changed landscape there is change, and change of change. In the town where we do some of our shopping, the nice greengrocer and his wife divorce at the unreasonable age of sixty and close shop, without once considering our needs. The young man who holds the tobacco concession in a nearby village, who kept a wine cellar on the side and used to teach us about wine, leaves for Tours, without asking for our consent. The onion lady who had a stand with many kinds of onions at the Poitiers Market, and who used to give us recipes for

cooking onions in dozens of different ways, becomes ill and stops coming. The big hardware store at the entrance of the highway, where we bought the bits and pieces we needed to fix up the house when we moved in, shuts down without a word of apology. A retired metro operator in Paris, whose house was on the other side of our driveway, who gave us wise counsel on how to manage the vegetable garden and brought us gifts of fresh eggs, falls sick and dies. Likewise a friendly neighbour who greeted us on our arrival in the village with chocolate cake and coffee. The wiry woman who came to the door to sell goat's cheese and milk stops coming. The restaurant where we used to go to see in the New Year moves to somewhere far away. In the countryside, change is always a *memento mori*.

As a child, I used to love a large picture book that showed, on a double page, "The Four Seasons in the Country." A tree, a hillside, a farmhouse were transformed from season to season with sharp, obvious and circular changes. Those stately transformations pace now my everyday life, like shifting backgrounds for all others, in and out. Outside, the countless, minute, niggling changes like the once I mentioned, undermining at my efforts to seek constancy, nibbling at my determination to sit still. Inside, of course, as if I were inspecting one of those medieval statues of Vanity that show, from the front, a graceful woman and, from behind, a carcass crawling with worms and toads, I know that things are slowly falling apart, inklings of that last change which I won't witness.

In the seventeenth century, Luis de Góngora reproached his friend Licius for not paying heed to the evidence of change, large and small. The last verses of the sonnet run like this:

Carthage confesses it. And in your case?
You're in danger, Licius, if you insist,
pursuing shadows and deceitful ways.

Nor will the hours show mercy for your tears,
the hours that are grinding down the days,
the days that go on gnawing at the years.

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