

The walker

During the time of lesser cold

According to the agricultural calendar for 2019, the time of lesser cold begins on the 5<sup>th</sup> January. And so it did without and within: temperatures rose and bodies that had arrived at the end of 2018 began to acclimatise. Practicalities like where to find the various ingredients for laying a fire; how to glide into sleep assisted by an electric blanket and – more puzzling to some than others - what to wear in order to stay asleep, had become routine. The most precious amongst these routines is letting the new day emerge in the company of Lao He whilst holding the inside of our outstretched hands close to the flames of the fire in the kitchen. The only sounds apart from the crackling of fire, are those of Xuemei's hands kneading dough.

It took a few walks before I reconnected to the me, I had left in November; the me that had begun to learn from the landscape. My ability to perceive had entered a new relationship around October time, when the maize that I had seen planted in zigzag lines back in May, was being harvested. Something had begun to unravel, as I was able to weave episodes into a sequence; undo stitches and wind them into a ball. Now, during the time of lesser cold, most maize fields have been ploughed over, the plastic sheeting is hanging loosely off tree branches to scare away the geese that have come to overwinter on Lashihai. During these two weeks before the time of great cold, small fires in the ditches burn maize stalks and leaves that have dropped off the back of women as old as grandma on their way from the field to a small scooter truck. Carpets of green wild peas cover the shallows between rows of apple trees. As fires exhaust nitrogen at the edge of fields, a new source emerges on the fields. There is another overflow of maize.

Back in October, everyone who had a moment to spare would sit by a red canvas roof stretched across the compound of the new studio buildings. The roof protected the maize cobs harvested from a field measuring 34 by 185 paces. Small stools and empty baskets invited any passer-by to help wring off the sheaths from the harvested cobs. A novice like me would knock the bottom part of the cob against a hard edge and then twist, with the broken off chunk would come the sheaths. Professionals knew how to knock the lower part off without any extra implement. Cleaned up cobs were tossed into baskets and once full, the basket would be emptied onto the porch in front of the projection room. Erge lined the cobs in rows and carefully build them up into walls. These cobs are grown for pig food, not for human consumption. I was touched when I saw Grandma picking up individual corns that had fallen off the cobs and placing them into a drawer of an old desk that served as a loading bay from which Erge, Xuemei and Grandma would sling the full baskets onto their backs and empty them on the porch. By January the cobs had gone. Instead there was a mountain of maize corns on the porch. Once the corns had dried sufficiently they were bagged and taken into storage. Around the area where the grain had been shovelled into sacks the gravel below the porch had become dotted with individual corns. Spillage I thought. But then I saw Grandma sitting just there with a basket and picking out the corn from the gravel. I joined her until she sent me off to eat: long enough to become absorbed in the act of gathering; of being awed by the immensity of a life that within such abundance had no track<sup>1</sup> with a word like spillage.

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<sup>1</sup> Tracktivism. ['traktə.vizəm]. noun A field of activist performance that utilises walking and moving and talking in rural landscapes to address issues of environmental, social or political concern (Jess Allen)

