

Ways of Talking

By Ha Jin

We used to like talking about grief
Our journals and letters were packed
with losses, complaints, and sorrows.
Even if there was no grief
we wouldn't stop lamenting
as though longing for the charm
of a distressed face.

Then we couldn't help expressing grief
So many things descended without warning:
labor wasted, loves lost, houses gone,
marriages broken, friends estranged,
ambitions worn away by immediate needs.
Words lined up in our throats
for a good whining.
Grief seemed like an endless river—
the only immortal flow of life.

After losing a land and then giving up a tongue,
we stopped talking of grief
Smiles began to brighten our faces.
We laugh a lot, at our own mess.
Things become beautiful,
even hailstones in the strawberry fields.

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Source: *Facing Shadows* (1996)



Ha Jin, born in Liaoning Province, China, grew up during the Cultural Revolution when schools were closed and books were burned. While serving in the army, Jin educated himself and studied English and literature when the schools opened in the 1980s. He came to the United States to earn his doctorate from Brandeis University, and decided to remain in this country after the massacre of students at Tiananmen Square. Jin writes solely in English, focusing mostly on Chinese culture.

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