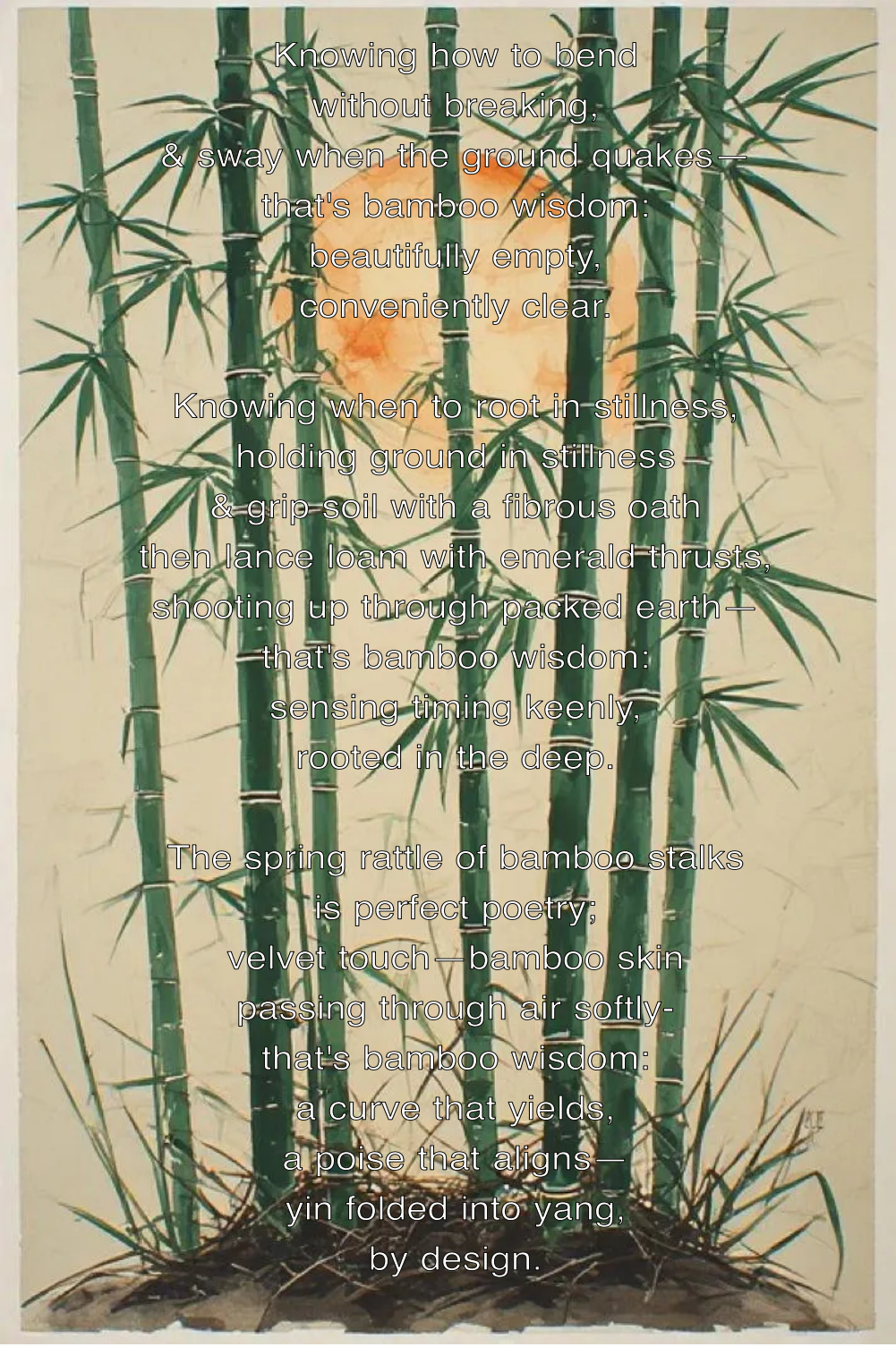


NEURAL BAMBOO:

The Aesthetics of Obedience

A painting of several green bamboo stalks with dark joints and thin, pointed leaves. In the background, a large, glowing orange sun is partially obscured by the bamboo. The overall style is traditional East Asian ink and wash, with a focus on natural elements.

Knowing how to bend
without breaking,
& sway when the ground quakes —
that's bamboo wisdom:
beautifully empty,
conveniently clear.

Knowing when to root in stillness,
holding ground in stillness —
& grip soil with a fibrous oath
then lance loam with emerald thrusts,
shooting up through packed earth —
that's bamboo wisdom:
sensing timing keenly,
rooted in the deep.

The spring rattle of bamboo stalks
is perfect poetry;
velvet touch — bamboo skin
passing through air softly —
that's bamboo wisdom:
a curve that yields,
a poise that aligns —
yin folded into yang,
by design.

The poem hung in the air a moment, then An-Yi scanned the table at the poetry reading, then sighed. "Isn't this just Taoist-flavored fluff?" she asked while leaning back, chair creaking. A few scattered chuckles flickered and died around the table. She smeared a smudge of grease from her cheek with a tattered sleeve while sipping bitter coffee. "Soft roots. Yielding fronds. That's a luxury aesthetic for privileged toffs who can clock out get to 'bend.' Most working poor don't bend—we have to absorb impact."

Daiki leaned forward, the rusted joints of his chair shrieking in protest. He drummed his fingers on the table in a dry, vacant rhythm like a machine losing calibration. "Nothing new here," he muttered. "Same polished clichés as usual. Philosophy sanded smooth until it says nothing at all."

Across from them, Bhāraté smirked, swirling the dregs of a drink that had long since gone flat. "Maybe that's the point," he said. "Less friction, less resistance. Easier to process." He tilted his head toward An-Yi. "Perhaps you're too sensitive, An-Yi? Is your neural-feed spiking again? Perhaps it's time for a Central Command tune-up. They have a lovely 'inner peace' patch for that." An-Yi shot him a sharp look, but said nothing.

Chariya, who had been dissecting the room with a clinical gaze, finally spoke. "An-Yi is right. Ideology is just a sedative," he said, his voice dropping an octave. "When the Command feeds us 'bamboo wisdom' to keep us flexible, they aren't teaching us resilience—they're ensuring we don't snap. A pause, then Chariya continued, "They want us flexible enough to absorb force, but too fluid to return it." The table quieted.

Chariya's expression then softened, and looked at his friends regretfully. "Anyway, anything I say doesn't really matter. However, it is good to remember most forests around us don't happen naturally," he added. "They're managed. Culled. Optimized. We're could be likened tiny bamboo shoots in a managed forest. And the forest doesn't mourn yesterday's fallen trees. It sends out new shoots and tentative tendrils for green tomorrows."

The poet began speaking again, voice smooth, unbroken, perfectly pitched, offering another inane verse. At the table, no one listened.

- T Newfields

Beg.: 1995 Shizuoka Fin.: 2026 Shizuoka

Note: This piece was partially generated with AI tools for styling and ideation; human editing was then applied.