贴着树干听水声

去看纪录片那天，全班坐了三部大巴。片头一开始我就睡着了，前一晚补作业到十一点，眼皮实在撑不住。我是被灯亮惊醒的，一睁眼，前排几个同学回头看我，我假装在揉眼睛。

回座位的路上我干脆不睡了，逼着自己看。纪录片拍的是沙漠边上治沙的三代人。真正让我坐直了的，是中间一个镜头：一片枯死的白杨林里，老场长把耳朵贴在一棵死树的树干上，听了很久，直起腰对年轻人说，树里面还有水。他在树旁边重新挖，挖到三米深，起开土，树根果然拐了个弯，朝着地下水的方向。老场长捧起土拍了拍，说：树没死，它是找水去了。影厅里没有人说话，我听见自己旁边有人轻轻出了一口气。

我想起爷爷院子里那棵柿子树。每年冬至前后，爷爷都要给树裹一圈草绳，绳子勒紧，下摆压实。开春以后，他常把耳朵贴在树干上听一听，或者用指关节敲两下，侧着耳朵再敲。我小时候问他听什么，他说听树喝水。我觉得好笑：树喝水，哪听得见？爷爷不辩解，敲完在树根周围培一圈新土，回屋坐在门槛上抽他的烟。

坐在影院的红色座椅里，我忽然明白他在干什么了。他不是在听一个响儿，他是在确认那棵树还活着，还在往上顶。老场长贴着树干听的那几秒，和爷爷敲树干的那几下，是同一件事。

纪录片最后，老场长的孙子大学毕业，回到沙地，接着种树。镜头拉远，一条绿色的带子压在沙漠边上。字幕说，这片林子种了五十一年，还在往外长。

回家的路上我借同学的电话给爷爷打了一个，问他柿子树今年发芽没有。爷爷说发了，叶子小小的。我没有说我听懂了什么，只说过暑假回去，帮他给树缠草绳。

Listening for Water Against the Trunk

The day we went to see the documentary, our class took three buses. I fell asleep as soon as the opening credits started; I had stayed up until eleven the night before finishing homework, and my eyelids simply would not hold. The lights waking me startled me awake. When I opened my eyes, a few classmates in the front row turned to look at me, and I pretended to rub my eyes.

Walking back to my seat I decided to stop sleeping and forced myself to watch. The film follows three generations of people holding back the desert at its edge. What truly made me sit up was a shot in the middle: in a stand of dead poplars, the old foreman pressed his ear against the trunk of a dead tree, listened for a long time, then straightened up and told the young men there was still water inside the tree. He dug again beside it, three meters down, cleared the soil, and sure enough the roots had bent, turning toward the underground water. The old man scooped up the soil and patted it, saying: the tree is not dead, it went off looking for water. Nobody in the hall spoke; I heard someone beside me breathe out softly.

I thought of the persimmon tree in the courtyard of my grandfather. Around the

winter solstice each year, he wrapped a coil of straw rope around the trunk, pulled it tight, and pressed the skirt of rope firm. After spring began, he often pressed his ear to the trunk to listen, or knocked twice with his knuckles, tilted his ear, and knocked again. As a child I asked what he was listening for. He said he was listening to the tree drink water. I thought it funny: how can anyone hear a tree drink? Grandpa did not argue. He finished knocking, mounded fresh soil around the roots, went inside, and sat on the doorstep smoking his pipe.

Sitting in the red seat of the cinema, I suddenly understood what he had been doing. He was not listening for a sound; he was making sure the tree was still alive, still pushing upward. Those seconds of the old foreman against the trunk and those knocks of my grandfather on the bark were the same thing.

At the end of the documentary, the grandson of the old foreman graduates from college, returns to the sandy land, and keeps planting. The camera pulls back: a green ribbon lies pressed against the edge of the desert. The subtitle says this forest has been planted for fifty-one years and is still growing outward.

On the way home I borrowed the phone of a classmate and called my grandfather, asking whether the persimmon tree had sprouted this year. He said it had, with tiny leaves. I did not tell him what I had come to understand. I only said I would be back at summer break to help him wrap straw around the trunk.