水塘边的一个暑假

那年暑假，我被送到乡下外婆家。汽车在村口停下，外婆的竹篮已经摆在石阶上，里面是六个还带泥的鸭蛋。她领我绕过老屋，说：看，水塘。塘不大，塘边一圈芦苇，风一过，叶子互相敲出细碎的响声。水面浮着睡莲，莲叶底下黑绿的水一动不动，像藏着什么东西。

第二天午后，表哥把裤腿卷到膝盖，朝我扬了扬下巴：走，摸螺蛳去。我跟着他踩进塘边的浅水，脚底的泥软软地包住脚踝，凉从脚心一直爬到背上。我蹲下，把手插进水草底下，指尖碰到一颗硬硬的小壳，螺口上那层薄薄的盖片一碰就缩回去。我捏着它举起来喊：摸到了！表哥头也不抬：轻点，别捏碎。

塘边的太阳把水晒出一层暖，深处却还是凉的。手在泥里往前探，碰到一颗，再往前，又一颗，像摸到一串别人藏好的珠子。水草缠住手腕，我甩开它，手心全是滑滑的绿。表哥摸得快，指缝间全是螺蛳，壳上挂着泥，一颗一颗往桶里丢，桶底响成一片。我不服气，也学他把两只手都插进水里，结果摸得太急，捞上来半捧碎壳，表哥笑弯了腰。

日头偏西，蜻蜓低低地贴着水面飞，一圈一圈。芦苇的影子从塘这头慢慢铺到那头。外婆站在塘埂上喊：回来喽，饭熟喽。声音顺着水面飘过来，比平时慢，也比平时亮。我和表哥提着半桶螺蛳往回走，桶晃一下，水就泼出一点，打在脚背上。狗跟在我们脚边，鼻子凑着桶闻。

外婆把螺蛳倒进铁盆，剪去尾巴尖，下锅一炒，葱和蒜的气味从灶间冲出来，漫过整个院子。一家人把小方桌搬到门廊上，外公拿一枚针挑螺肉，吸得啧啧响，故意说：城里的伢儿挑不出这个。我抢过针，一挑一吸，螺肉带着辣味在嘴里炸开。外公笑了，把最后一颗让给我。

夜里，螺壳在门廊上堆成一座小小的山。我指甲缝里还嵌着塘泥，洗了三遍也没洗干净。鹅在塘那边叫，一声长一声短。我把脚丫伸出竹床，听着那些声音睡着了，梦里还蹲在塘边，手插在泥里，摸到一颗，又一颗。

开学前一天，我把脚最后一次伸进塘里。水凉得像换了季节。我拎着装满螺蛳的竹篮往回走，外婆在门口接着，说：下次暑假，塘里的螺蛳还长这么肥。我没接话，只把篮子递给她，心里已经把下一个暑假排好了。

A Summer by the Pond

That summer, I was sent to my grandmothers house in the village. The bus stopped at the village entrance, and a bamboo basket of hers was already waiting on the stone steps, holding six duck eggs still dotted with mud. She led me around the old house and said: look, the pond. It was not big, ringed with reeds along the bank, and when the wind passed, the leaves tapped out soft, broken sounds against each other. Water lilies floated on the surface, and the dark green water under the leaves lay perfectly still, as if something were hiding in it.

The next afternoon, my cousin rolled his trousers up to his knees and tipped his chin at me: come on, lets gather river snails. I followed him into the shallow water at the edge of the pond. The mud under my feet softly closed around my ankles, and the coolness climbed from the soles all the way up my back. I squatted, slid my hand under the water grass, and my fingertips met a small hard shell. The thin lid on its mouth flinched away at a touch. I held it up and shouted: I got one! My cousin did not even look up: gently, do not crush it.

The afternoon sun warmed a thin layer of the water, but the deeper part stayed cold. My hand reached forward through the mud, touched one shell, then another, like finding a string of beads someone had hidden. Water grass tangled around my wrist; I shook it off, and my palm was slick with green. My cousin worked fast, snails filling the gaps between his fingers, mud still clinging to their shells, and he dropped them into the bucket one by one until the bottom rang. I refused to lose, and plunged both hands into the water the way he did, but I grabbed too wildly and hauled up half a handful of broken shells, and my cousin doubled over laughing.

As the sun leaned west, dragonflies skimmed low over the surface, round after round. The shadow of the reeds spread slowly from one side of the pond to the other. Grandmother stood on the ridge and called: come home, supper is ready. Her voice drifted across the water, slower than usual and brighter than usual. My cousin and I carried half a bucket of snails back. Each time the bucket swung, a little water splashed out and hit the tops of our feet. The dog trotted at our heels, its nose pressed to the bucket.

Grandmother poured the snails into a metal basin, snipped off the tips of their tails, and stir-fried them in the wok. The smell of scallion and garlic rushed out of the kitchen and crossed the whole yard. The family moved the small square table onto the porch. Grandfather picked the meat out with a pin and slurped loudly, pretending to tease: a town child cannot manage this. I snatched the pin, picked and slurped, and the snail meat burst in my mouth with a spicy kick. Grandfather laughed and gave me the last one.

At night, the empty shells piled into a little mountain on the porch. My fingernails still held pond mud; I washed three times and it stayed. The geese called on the far side of the pond, one cry long, one short. I stuck my feet out past the edge of the bamboo bed and fell asleep listening, still squatting by the pond in my dream, hands in the mud, touching one shell, then another.

The day before school started, I put my feet in the pond one last time. The water was cold, as if the season had changed. I walked back carrying a basket full of snails, and grandmother met me at the gate: next summer, the snails in this pond will still grow this plump. I did not answer, only handed her the basket, while inside I

had already marked down the next summer.

表哥的塘

表哥叫水生，打小在塘边长大，闭着眼都能从塘这头摸到那头。那年暑假，城里来了个表弟，瘦瘦的，站在塘埂上不肯往下踩。水生把裤腿卷到膝盖，先自己下去，踩了两脚，回头说：泥是软的，跟踩豆腐一样。表弟伸出一只脚试了试，缩回去，又伸出来，整个人晃了一下，还是站住了。水花溅起来，落在他的白鞋上，他低头看，忽然笑了。

摸螺蛳要蹲在水里，手贴着塘泥往前推。水生示范给他看：五指微弯，像耙子。表弟学他的样子把手插下去，抽出来时手心躺着一颗螺蛳，壳上挂着青泥。他捏得太紧，咔一声，壳碎在掌心里。水生没笑他，只把自己桶里最大的一颗捡出来，放进他手里：这颗赔你，接着摸。

表弟渐渐放开了。起先他只敢在浅水蹲着，后来跟着水生往深处挪，水漫到腰，他两只手在空中乱抓，抓住水生的胳膊。水生的脚在泥里站得稳稳的，说：脚张开，抓地。表弟照做，水到腰也不慌了，反而仰起脸让太阳晒头顶，说凉得舒服。有水虫从他胳膊上爬过去，他看着，没甩。搁一个钟头以前，他能吓得跳起来。

日头往山后掉的时候，两个人的桶都有小半桶了。水生把桶提起来掂了掂，说：够了，回去。表弟还想摸，回头看了一眼塘，水面平平的，睡莲收拢了一半。他跟在水生后面上塘埂，泥从脚趾缝里挤出来，一步一个脚印。走到田埂上，桶里的水一晃一晃泼出来，螺蛳顺着水滚出两三颗，表弟蹲下去捡，抱在怀里，壳上的泥蹭了他一身。

外婆在门口支起锅。螺蛳倒进盆里，滋滋地响，水汽混着葱姜味冲上屋檐。水生挑螺肉挑得快，一挑一个准，表弟还在跟一颗螺蛳较劲，针尖戳进去，转半圈，吸出来，螺肉断在壳里，只剩半截。外婆给他夹了一颗大的：慢点，这个要转着挑。表弟学着转，这回整颗出来了，他举起来给水生看，水生用桶边磕了磕自己的碗，算是回应。

夜里凉，门廊上摆开竹床。水生的脚上还留着白天泡白的皮，他一边挠一边讲塘里的讲究：螺蛳白天藏在草底下，晚上才爬到石头边上，所以夜里下塘摸，比白天肥。表弟听得眼睛亮了，问：那今晚去不去？水生想了想，说：明晚去，今晚先把脚上的泥养干。

第二天傍晚，两个人又回来，裤腿一样高，桶比昨天沉。表弟走在前面，步子比昨天稳，狗认得他了，绕着他的腿转。塘在暮色里变成一块暗青色的布，两个人站在埂上，谁也没说话，先各自笑了一声，然后一起把脚伸进水里。

The Pond Belonged to My Cousin

My cousin was called Shuisheng, raised by the pond since he was small; he could

grope from one end to the other with his eyes shut. That summer a little cousin arrived from the city, thin, standing on the ridge refusing to step down. Shuisheng rolled his trousers to the knees, went in first, stamped twice, and said over his shoulder: the mud is soft, like stepping on tofu. The city boy tried one foot, pulled it back, put it out again, wobbled his whole body, and still stood. Water splashed onto his white shoes; he looked down at it and suddenly laughed.

Gathering snails meant squatting in the water and pushing the hand along the pond mud. Shuisheng showed him: five fingers slightly bent, like a little rake. The city boy put his hand in the same way and pulled out a snail with green mud hanging on its shell. He gripped too hard, there was a crack, and the shell broke in his palm. Shuisheng did not laugh at him. He picked the biggest snail out of his own bucket and placed it in the small hand: this one replaces it, keep going.

The city boy loosened up little by little. At first he only dared squat in the shallows; then he followed Shuisheng toward the deeper part until the water reached his waist, both hands grabbing wildly in the air, catching hold of Shuishengs arm. Shuishengs feet stood firm in the mud, and he said: spread your toes, grip the ground. The boy did as told, and even with water at his waist he no longer panicked; instead he tilted his face up to let the sun warm the top of his head and said the coolness below felt good. A water bug crawled across his arm; he watched it and did not flick it off. An hour earlier, that would have made him jump out of the pond.

When the sun dropped behind the hill, both buckets were nearly half full. Shuisheng lifted his and weighed it: enough, lets go home. The city boy wanted to keep searching; he looked back once at the pond. Its surface lay flat, the water lilies half closed. He followed Shuisheng up the ridge, mud squeezing between his toes, leaving a footprint at every step. Out on the path the bucket sloshed water out, and two or three snails rolled along with it. The boy squatted to pick them up, hugged them to his chest, and the mud on their shells smeared all over him.

Grandmother set up the wok at the gate. The snails went into the basin hissing, steam mixing with the smell of scallion and ginger all the way up to the eaves. Shuisheng picked the meat out fast, one pin, one snail. The city boy was still wrestling with one: pin in, half a turn, slurp out, and the meat snapped inside the shell, only half of it coming. Grandmother dropped a big one onto his plate: slowly, turn it as you pick. He tried turning it, and this time the whole piece came out. He held it up for Shuisheng to see, and Shuisheng tapped the rim of his bowl with the bucket edge, which counted as applause.

The night was cool, and bamboo beds were set out on the porch. Shuishengs feet still showed the white wrinkled skin from a days soaking. He scratched at it while explaining the ponds ways: snails hide under the grass by day and climb to the stones

at night, so a night hunt is fatter than a daytime one. The city boys eyes lit up: so do we go tonight? Shuisheng thought a moment: tomorrow night. Tonight let the mud on your feet dry out first.

The next evening the two came back again, trouser legs equally high, the bucket heavier than the day before. The city boy walked in front, steadier than yesterday; the dog recognized him and circled his legs. In the dusk the pond turned into a piece of dark blue cloth. The two stood on the ridge, said nothing, each laughed once on their own, then put their feet into the water together.

半篮螺蛳的傍晚

开学以后，我书桌的笔筒里立着一只空螺壳，壳口朝着台灯，里面干干净净。同桌问哪来的，我说外婆家的水塘。她问好玩吗，我想了想，没答上来，只跟她讲了那个傍晚。

那天午后下塘摸螺蛳，我和表姐各占塘的一角。水草底下另有一个世界：小虾贴着叶子倒着游，一根水草上挂着一排米粒大的卵，手指一碰就轻轻晃。我把螺蛳一颗一颗丢进腰上挂的篮子里，篮子渐渐往下坠，带得整个人往那边歪。表姐在对面喊：别往深里走，草会缠脚。我应了一声，脚下却碰到一块滑滑的石头，石头边上果然是一排螺蛳，比草底下的还大。

摸到兴起，日头就斜了。水面先是亮得睁不开眼，然后一层一层暗下来，芦苇从金色变成青黑。蜻蜓停在芦尖上，翅膀在暮色里发白。我直起腰，腰上那只篮子已经坠得厉害，数一数，小半篮。表姐也上岸了，她的篮子比我的还沉，她把自己的一半倒进我篮里：帮我提一段，你外婆家近。

回家的路沿田埂走。稻子抽了穗，穗尖扫过手背，痒痒的。田里的水映着天，天从橘红褪成灰蓝。蛙声先是一两声，试探着，然后连成一片。篮子换到我另一只手，胳膊酸了也不肯让表姐拿。路过石桥，我把篮子放在桥面上歇脚，低头看：螺蛳的盖片一张一合，在篮底慢慢爬，爬到边沿又掉回去。表姐蹲在旁边数：三十七颗。我说别数了，快走，外婆喊过两遍了。

灶间里，外婆剪螺蛳的尾巴，剪刀咔咔响，剪好的堆在搪瓷盆里。铁锅烧热，油一冒烟，螺蛳倒进去，刺啦一声，白汽顶开灶上的木盖。外婆颠两下锅，撒一把辣椒和紫苏，香味顺着烟囱倒灌回院子里。我蹲在灶门口添柴，火光照得外婆的白发一亮一亮。

门廊上的夜宵是一盆炒螺蛳、一碟腌黄瓜、一锅绿豆汤。外公把收音机搬到门槛上，戏曲声混着蛙声。我挑螺肉挑得满嘴辣，吸溜吸溜地喝绿豆汤。表姐忽然说：明天还去吗。外婆头也不抬：去，篮子我洗好了挂在那边。

讲到这里，我跟同桌说完了。她问：就这？我说就这。那天傍晚没什么大事，螺蛳也不值几个钱。可后来我把那只晒干的空壳留在笔筒里，暑假回村那天，我又把它放回塘边的石头上。水面平平的，睡莲底下，螺蛳还是一颗一颗地长。

The Evening of Half a Basket of Snails

After school started, an empty snail shell stood in the pen holder on my desk, its mouth facing the lamp, clean inside. My deskmate asked where it came from, and I said from my grandmothers pond. She asked if it was fun. I thought for a moment, could not answer, and only told her about that one evening.

That afternoon we went into the pond to gather snails, my cousin and I each taking a corner of it. Under the water grass lay another world: tiny shrimp swimming upside down along the leaves, a row of rice-grain-sized eggs hanging on one blade, swaying softly when a finger brushed them. I dropped the snails one by one into the basket hung at my waist, and as it grew heavier it pulled my whole body off balance. My cousin called from the other side: do not go too deep, the grass will tangle your feet. I answered her, and my foot found a slippery stone; along the edge of that stone sat a row of snails, bigger than the ones under the grass.

When I got carried away gathering, the sun was already slanting. The surface of the water first shone too brightly to look at, then darkened layer by layer, the reeds turning from gold to blue-black. A dragonfly rested on a reed tip, its wings pale in the dusk. I straightened up; the basket at my waist hung heavy, and a count showed nearly half full. My cousin came ashore too, her basket heavier than mine, and she poured half of hers into mine: carry it for a stretch, grandmothers house is closer from here.

The way home followed the field ridges. The rice had headed out, and the tips of the ears brushed the backs of our hands, ticklish. The water in the paddies mirrored the sky as it faded from orange-red to gray-blue. The frogs started with one or two cautious calls, then merged into a whole field of sound. I switched the basket to my other arm; it ached, but I would not let my cousin take it. Crossing the stone bridge, I set the basket on the bridge to rest, and looked down: the little lids of the snails opened and closed, and they crawled slowly across the basket bottom, reached the rim, and fell back in. My cousin squatted beside and counted: thirty-seven. I said stop counting, lets go, grandmother has called twice already.

In the kitchen, grandmother snipped the tips of the snails, the scissors going click-click, the trimmed ones piling in the enamel basin. The wok heated up; once the oil smoked, the snails went in with a roar, and the white steam pushed the wooden lid off the pot. She tossed the wok twice, scattered a handful of chili and perilla, and the fragrance flowed back into the yard through the chimney. I squatted at the stove door feeding firewood, and the firelight made grandmothers white hair flash bright, then dim.

Supper on the porch was a basin of stir-fried snails, a dish of pickled cucumber,

and a pot of mung bean soup. Grandfather carried the radio over the threshold, opera voices mixing with the frogs. I picked snail meat with a mouth full of spice and slurped mung bean soup in between. My cousin said suddenly: are we going again tomorrow? Grandmother did not look up: yes, I washed the basket and hung it over there.

That is all I told my deskmate. She said: thats it? I said, thats it. Nothing big happened that evening, and the snails were not worth much either. But afterward I kept the dried empty shell in my pen holder, and when I went back to the village the next summer, I set it back on the stone by the pond. The water lay flat, and under the water lilies the snails went on growing, one by one.