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.