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.