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.