瓜棚里的那个雷雨夜

那年暑假，我缠着爷爷去瓜地看瓜。瓜地位于河滩，看瓜的就是田头一个棚：四根木桩，几层茅草，一张木板床，床腿泡在浅水里防蚂蚁。爷爷起初不肯带我去，说夜里雷打得地皮颤，你受不住。我拍着胸脯保证，结果保证只撑到天黑。

前半夜还好。爷孙俩躺在木板床上，听青蛙叫，听河水响，爷爷给我讲哪只瓜是头茬、哪只是压秧的，讲着讲着他先睡着了，鼾声跟河水一个节奏。后半夜，一道白光把棚里照得透亮，紧接着雷就在头顶炸开，雨不是落下来的，是倒下来的，棚顶四处漏，水顺着茅草的筋往下淌，正好淌在我脚边。

我吓得坐起来，爷爷一骨碌翻身下床，比白天还利索。他让我挪到棚角，把唯一的塑料布展开压在床板上接水，又摸出铁丝和半卷旧麻袋，钻出棚去压迎风那面的草。我在棚里举着手电给他照，手抖，光圈在棚柱上跳来跳去，爷爷喊：照稳些。我咬着牙把光圈稳住，才发现自己不怕了。

折腾到后半夜，雨停了。爷爷掀开帘子看瓜地，招手叫我过去。雨后的月亮从云缝里漏出来，满地西瓜卧在垄沟里，一个个湿淋淋的，被月光照得发亮，像一地没睡醒的月亮。爷爷蹲下去看泥地，手电一照，一串梅花样的小脚印从垄沟头一直进来，又原路出去。他说这是獾，专吃蝗虫和地老鼠，不偷瓜。他捏起一坨泥闻了闻，又补一句：今晚它替咱看了半宿瓜。

天亮回家，我困得在自行车后座上点头，一路梦见獾排着队给瓜盖被子。奶奶问看瓜好玩吗，我说好玩，就是雷不好玩。爷爷在旁边笑，说棚顶的草他上午就去割新的，下回你还来不来。我说来。这回我没拍胸脯，我就是应了一声，声音不大，但是是真的。

开学以后，同学问我最长的一个暑假经历是什么，我说是给西瓜守了一夜。他们问偷瓜的来了吗，我说没有，来了一只獾，它替我们看了半宿。同学说獾怎么会看瓜，我说它不吃瓜，它吃蝗虫，蝗虫要是多了，叶子就完了，瓜也长不成。这话是爷爷教的。说的时候我自己都愣了一下：原来那个雨夜我学到的，比胆子多。

The Thunderstorm Night in the Melon Shed

That summer I kept pestering grandpa to let me watch the melon field with him. The field lay on the riverbank, and the watch post was a shed at the head of the field: four wooden posts, layers of thatch, a plank bed whose legs stood in shallow water to keep off ants. Grandpa refused at first, saying the thunder at night shakes the ground and I could not take it. I thumped my chest and swore, and the oath lasted until dark.

The first half of the night was fine. We lay on the plank bed listening to frogs and to the river, and grandpa told me which melons were the first set and which came from pinned vines. He fell asleep before his story ended, his snoring keeping time

with the river. In the second half of the night, a white flash lit the shed through and through, and the next moment thunder burst overhead. The rain did not fall, it poured down. The roof leaked everywhere, water running down the ribs of the thatch, right to my feet.

I sat up frightened, and grandpa rolled off the bed in one motion, quicker than in daylight. He moved me to the corner of the shed, spread the only plastic sheet over the bed board to catch water, then found wire and half a roll of old sacking and crawled out to weigh down the windward thatch. I held the flashlight inside to light him, my hand shaking, the circle of light jumping from post to post. Grandpa called out: hold it steady. I clenched my teeth and steadied the light, and only then noticed I was no longer afraid.

We worked until the rain stopped near dawn. Grandpa lifted the curtain, looked at the field, and waved me over. The moon leaked out between the clouds, and melons lay in the furrows all over the field, wet and shining under the moonlight, like a field of moons that had not woken up. Grandpa crouched over the mud and shone the light: a string of small plum-blossom footprints came in along the furrow and went back out the same way. It is a badger, he said, it eats locusts and field rats, it does not steal melons. He pinched up a lump of mud, sniffed it, and added: tonight it stood watch for us for half the night.

Going home at daybreak, I kept nodding off on the back seat of the bicycle, dreaming all the way of badgers tucking blankets over melons. Grandma asked whether watching the field was fun. I said it was, only the thunder was not. Grandpa laughed from beside us and said he would cut new thatch for the roof that morning, and would I come again. I said yes. This time I did not thump my chest; I just answered, quietly, but truly.

After school started, classmates asked about the longest thing I did that summer, and I said I guarded watermelons for a night. They asked whether melon thieves came. I said no, a badger came, and it stood watch for half the night. They said how could a badger stand watch. I said it does not eat melons, it eats locusts, and if locusts multiply, the leaves are finished and the melons never grow. That line was grandpas. Saying it, I paused myself: that rainy night had taught me more than just courage.

吃西瓜比赛，我赢了籽

暑假的院子一到傍晚就凉快，井水镇过的西瓜抬出来，一刀下去咔的一声，红瓤露出来，籽黑亮黑亮的。那年我们院里几个孩子正式办了个吃西瓜比赛，表哥当裁判，规则是他现编的：一

人一块，吃完为准，籽不能吞，吞一颗加赛一轮。

我报名报得最早，想得也最美。我平时吃饭在桌上是出了名的快，一块西瓜不在话下。比赛开始，表哥哨子一响，我把西瓜举起来对着嘴啃，汁水顺着胳膊肘往下流，红瓤以肉眼可见的速度消失。二娃在我对面啃得满脸花，三妹斯文，用小勺挖。我眼看就要先见底，心里一飘，手一松，最后一口连着十几颗籽一起吞了。

表哥举手：吞籽，加赛一轮。我愣在原地，嘴里还含着半口没咽下去的。加赛的那块西瓜是我自己挑的，挑的时候还嫌小，这会儿看着跟一座小山似的。我硬着头皮啃，啃到一半实在撑不住，举手投降。那一轮我名次垫底，二娃笑我，说我的胃是仓库，专门存西瓜籽。

表哥看我不服气，眼珠一转，改了规则：最后一局不比吃，比吐籽。一人三颗籽，吐过墙根的算赢，越远越赢。这个我熟啊——夏天在树荫底下，我们拿西瓜籽当子弹崩脑门，崩了整个暑假。我捏起一颗籽，舌头抵住，腮帮子一鼓，噗，那颗籽飞出去，越过墙根，掉到墙外那条道上。第二颗更远。第三颗我换了个姿势，侧身，眯眼，籽飞出一道看不见的弧线，落点没人看清，只听墙外铁皮垃圾桶当啷响了一声。

这一声把全院子都安静了一瞬，然后炸出满堂的喝彩。裁判表哥宣布，第三颗判定为最远，冠军是我。我举着剩下半块西瓜站在院子中间，接受几个孩子的鼓掌，表情尽量绷住，绷不住，嘴角怎么都压不平。

后来那半块西瓜我坐在台阶上慢慢吃完了，吃得很慢，没人比赛，籽一颗一颗吐进手心，再弹进垃圾桶。井水镇过的瓜，慢慢吃反而更甜，这个理我那年就懂了，虽然懂得不深。

再后来，院里办过第二回、第三回比赛，规则换了一堆，吃瓜冠军始终是二娃，吐籽冠军始终是我。我们各拿各的冠军，谁也不服谁。多年以后想起来，那个暑假的傍晚，井水、刀声、满手的西瓜籽，还有当啷那一响，比任何一块西瓜都解渴。

The Watermelon Eating Contest, and I Won the Seeds

The courtyard cooled off at dusk every day of that summer. Watermelons chilled in well water were carried out, and one stroke of the knife cracked them open with a snap, red flesh showing, seeds glossy black. That year several of us children held a formal watermelon eating contest. My cousin was the referee, and he made up the rules on the spot: one slice each, finish first to win, seeds must not be swallowed, and swallowing one seed means one extra round.

I signed up earliest and dreamed the biggest dreams. At the dinner table I was famously fast, and a slice of watermelon was nothing to me. When the referees whistle blew, I lifted the melon to my mouth and bit into it, juice running down to my elbow, the red flesh vanishing at a visible speed. Erwa across from me ate with his whole face in bloom, and Sanmei ate politely with a small spoon. I was about to finish first, my head got light, my grip loosened, and my last bite went down together with

a dozen seeds.

The cousin raised his hand: seeds swallowed, one extra round. I stood frozen, half a mouthful still not swallowed. The extra slice was one I had picked myself, complaining it was too small at the time; now it looked like a little mountain. I gnawed on stubbornly, and halfway through I gave up and raised my hand. That round I came last. Erwa laughed and said my stomach was a warehouse for storing watermelon seeds.

Seeing I was unconvinced, the cousin rolled his eyes and changed the rules: the final round would not be eating but seed spitting. Three seeds each; anything past the base of the wall counts, farther wins. This one I knew well — all summer under the shade trees we had used watermelon seeds as bullets to flick at foreheads. I pinched up a seed, pressed my tongue behind it, puffed my cheek, and pfft, the seed flew over the wall base and landed on the path outside. The second went farther. For the third I changed my stance, turned sideways, squinted, and the seed drew an invisible arc; no one saw where it landed, but outside the wall a tin trash can rang out with a clang.

That clang silenced the whole courtyard for one moment, then it burst into cheers. The referee declared the third seed the farthest, and the champion was me. I stood in the middle of the courtyard holding the remaining half slice, accepting the applause of the other children, trying hard to keep a straight face, failing, the corners of my mouth impossible to press down.

Afterwards I ate that half slice slowly on the steps, no contest, seeds dropped one by one into my palm and flicked into the can. Watermelon chilled in well water tastes sweeter eaten slowly — I understood that principle that year, though not deeply.

The courtyard held a second and third contest after that. The rules changed a dozen times; the eating champion was always Erwa, the seed-spitting champion always me. We each kept our own championship, neither yielding to the other. Years later, thinking back, those summer evenings — the well water, the knife sounds, hands full of seeds, and that single clang — quenched my thirst better than any slice of watermelon.

我学赶牛，牛学赶我

那年暑假在乡下，二叔带我去耕地，让我学赶牛。牛叫大黑，四十来岁的人牵着它走了十几年的地，脚踩得垄沟笔直。二叔把树枝递给我，说你就站它左后边，喊驾，它就走，走歪了你拿

树枝指指方向。说得轻巧，我接过来就上岗了。

大黑根本不理我。我喊驾，它耳朵一甩，赶苍蝇似的；我喊第二声，它尾巴一摆，继续走它的，走的全是斜线。二叔在地头抱着胳膊看，不吭声。我急了，想起电视里赶牛都抽一鞭子，就抡起树枝朝它屁股抽了一下，不重，啪的一声。

大黑停下，慢慢地转过头来。它看我那一眼，我这辈子忘不了，不是凶，是琢磨，像在算一笔账。下一瞬它朝我走过来，我往后退，它加快，我转身跑，它小跑起来追我。我就这样绕着打谷场跑了一整圈，书包在背上一颠一颠，里面两个红薯咚咚地响。二叔在地头笑得直不起腰，喊都喊不住——他后来承认，他是故意不拦，让我知道厉害。

跑完那圈，我扶着膝盖喘，大黑站在打谷场中间慢悠悠嚼草，像什么都没发生。二叔走过来，把树枝从我手里抽走，拽起大黑的鼻绳，冲它喊了一声短促的号子，大黑抬脚就走，一步一步踩回垄沟里。二叔把鼻绳递给我：它不是不听话，它是不认识你。它听的是号子，认的是鼻绳，你拿树枝，它记仇。

我重新上岗。拽着鼻绳，学着二叔的调子喊号子，一声长，一声短。大黑走它的，我跟着它的步子走，走歪了不抽它，把鼻绳往回轻轻一带，它自己就拐回来了。一上午过去，我们从地头走到地尾，垄沟里的脚印多了我的一双，歪歪扭扭，但是跟着大黑的脚印走的。

中午歇晌，我坐在树荫下啃书包里的红薯——跑那圈没跑丢，就是颠软了。刚啃两口，大黑不知什么时候凑过来，鼻子拱我的书包，鼻息喷得红薯渣乱飞。二叔说它认准你了，你书包里有它惦记的东西。我举着红薯跟它对峙，它不抢，就是看着你，眼神诚恳，看得你自己想把红薯递过去。

收假回城，我把歪脚印的事讲给同学听。同学问牛到底怕不怕你，我想了想，说它不怕我，它后来是喜欢我——喜欢我书包里的红薯。这话一半是玩笑。另一半是真的：那个暑假我学会的最要紧的一件事，是做事不能光靠手里的树枝，得先找到那根绳、那句号子。

I Learned to Herd the Ox, and the Ox Learned to Herd Me

That summer in the countryside, my second uncle took me out plowing and let me learn to herd the ox. The ox was called Dahei. A man in his forties had led it across the fields for over a dozen years, its feet walking the furrows straight as a rule. My uncle handed me a switch and said: stand at its left rear, shout gee and it goes; if it drifts, point the switch to guide it. Easy for him to say. I took the switch and started work.

Dahei ignored me completely. When I shouted gee, its ears flicked as if chasing flies; at my second shout its tail swished and it kept walking its own crooked lines. My uncle stood at the head of the field with arms folded, saying nothing. I got desperate, remembered that in films herders always crack a whip, and I swung the switch at its hindquarters. Not hard, just one slap of sound.

Dahei stopped and turned its head around slowly. The look it gave me I will never forget: not fierce, but thoughtful, like a man working out an account. The next instant it walked toward me. I backed up; it sped up; I turned and ran, and it broke into a trot after me. I ran one full lap around the threshing floor, my schoolbag bouncing on my back, two sweet potatoes knocking inside. My uncle laughed so hard at the head of the field he could not straighten up, and his shouts could not stop it — he admitted later that he let me run on purpose, so I would learn my place.

When the lap was done, I leaned on my knees gasping, and Dahei stood in the middle of the threshing floor chewing grass unhurriedly, as if nothing had happened. My uncle walked over, took the switch out of my hand, lifted the nose rope of Dahei, gave one short call, and the ox lifted its feet and walked, step by step, back into the furrow. My uncle handed me the nose rope: it is not disobeying, it simply does not know you. It listens for the call and respects the nose rope; if you come at it with a switch, it holds a grudge.

I went back to work. Holding the nose rope, I imitated my uncles calls, one long, one short. Dahei walked, and I matched its pace; when it drifted I did not strike it but drew the rope back gently, and it swung itself back into line. By the end of the morning we had walked from one end of the field to the other, and the furrows held a new pair of footprints, crooked, but following Daheis.

At the noon rest I sat in the shade eating one of the sweet potatoes from my bag — the run had not lost them, only bruised them soft. After two bites, Dahei came over without a sound, nosing into my bag, its breath scattering crumbs. My uncle said it has marked you now; your bag holds something it cares about. I held up the potato and faced it off. It did not snatch; it just looked at you, eyes sincere, until you yourself wanted to hand it over.

Back in the city after vacation, I told classmates about the crooked footprints. They asked whether the ox was afraid of me in the end. I thought a while and said it was not afraid of me; later it simply liked me — liked the sweet potatoes in my bag. Half of that was a joke. The other half was true: the most important thing I learned that summer was that you cannot rely on the switch in your hand; first you have to find the rope and the call.

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