外婆门前的那条河

外婆家在河边。土墙的房子，后门出去走十几步就是河滩，河滩上三块大石板，是被村里人洗衣的棒槌捶出亮来的。

暑假一到外婆家，我就把鞋甩在门槛外。脚丫踩上河滩的沙子，白天晒过的沙烫一层，底下却是凉的，越往下挖越凉。挖到一半还挖出过半只螺壳，外婆说早年河水就涨到脚边这个位置。我蹲在石板边上把脚伸进水，河水漫过脚背，暑气从脚趾缝里一根根抽走，我舒服得直叹气。

外婆在石板上洗衣，棒槌一起一落。她搓一把，在河里涮一把，水花跟着她的手落在石板上，亮一下就没入石头的纹路里。皂角的气味顺水漂过来，混着河草的青腥。我泡着脚看她洗衣，一看就是一个上午，谁也不说话，河水替我们把话都说完了。

中午外婆拿木桶挑水，两只桶晃着走，水面在桶口荡出水花，一路洒到院里的石榴树下。我跟在后头扶桶，水花溅上我的脚背。院里的石榴树刚坐住果，青的小石榴挂在枝上，被洒到的水珠亮了一下。她说这河水甜，井水硬，烧水结垢，河水不结。我那时不懂什么叫硬，只觉得这河连喝水都替人想着。

傍晚河上浮起蛙声。外婆搬了竹椅在河边乘凉，我们看对岸的灯一盏一盏亮。萤火虫也从草里飞出来，这边一个，那边一个，跟灯对得上号。她讲她小时候也在这些石板上洗过衣裳，脚丫泡的是同一条河。我低头看水里自己模糊的影子，影子脚边是河，河那边是她的六十年前。

后来我到城里读书，暑假短得像别人的一顿饭。有一年夏天回去，石板还在，棒槌换成了塑料盆，河水浅了一截。我把脚伸进去，凉还是那个凉。原来有些东西一直在原地等，等你把脚丫重新放进它的水里。

The River in Front of the Door of My Grandmother

The house of my grandmother stood by the river. An earthen-walled house; out the back door and a dozen steps was the riverbank, where three big stone slabs had been beaten glossy by the washing bats of the whole village.

Once summer vacation brought me to the house of my grandmother, I flung my shoes outside the threshold. My bare feet met the sand of the bank: the layer the sun had baked all day was hot, but underneath it was cool, cooler the deeper you dug. Halfway through I dug out half a snail shell, and grandmother said in earlier years the river rose right to this edge. I squatted at the edge of the slabs and put my feet in the water. The river rose over the tops of my feet, and the summer heat was drawn out of my toes strand by strand until I sighed with relief.

Grandmother washed clothes on the slab, her bat rising and falling. She scrubbed a handful, rinsed it in the river, and the splashes from her hands fell on the stone, shining once before sinking into the grain of the rock. The smell of soap pods drifted over on the water, mixed with the green raw scent of river grass. I soaked my

feet and watched her wash, and a whole morning passed that way. Neither of us spoke; the river said everything for us.

At noon grandmother carried water with a pole and two wooden buckets. The water swung at the mouths of the buckets, spilling splashes all the way to the pomegranate tree in the yard. I walked behind steadying a bucket, and droplets landed on my feet. The pomegranate tree in the yard had just set fruit; small green pomegranates hung on the branches, and the spilled droplets made them shine for a moment. She said river water is sweet, well water is hard, kettle scale forms in it, but not in river water. I did not know what hard meant then; I only felt the river even thought of people while they drank.

In the evening frogs rose on the river. Grandmother moved a bamboo chair to the bank to cool off, and we watched the lamps on the far shore light one by one. Fireflies came out of the grass too, one on this side, one on that, answering the lamps. She told us she had washed clothes on these same slabs as a girl, her feet soaking in the same river. I looked down at my blurred reflection in the water, my reflected feet beside the river, and on the other side of the river her life sixty years ago.

Later I went to school in the city, and summer vacations were as short as a meal of other people. One summer I went back. The slabs were still there, the washing bats replaced by plastic basins, and the river had grown a notch shallower. I put my feet in, and the coolness was the same coolness. So some things wait in one place all along, waiting for you to put your bare feet back into their water.