屋后的菜园

乡下的房子后头有一片菜园，一道竹篱笆围着，篱笆门上挂着一截旧麻绳，绳圈里常年插着一根拔菜的铁钩。从这门进去，左手边是一排豆角架，竹竿搭成人字，豆角藤绕着竿往上缠，架子底下阴凉，蹲着人乘过凉，地上还留着半个画歪的粉笔圈。右手边是六畦菜，畦与畦之间踩出窄窄的土路，路两边的土被脚底板磨得发亮。再往里走，靠墙立着一口黑釉水缸，缸口盖着木板，板上一只豁了口的瓢。菜园不大，从篱笆门到水缸，我数过，二十一步。

我在那儿待了一个暑假，眼睛最后全落在辣椒上。辣椒种在靠墙的畦里，一共七棵。六月底它们开花，花小，白的，五个瓣，落一朵花，枝丫里就顶出一枚朝天的小辣椒，青绿色，指头肚那么粗。七月的雨一场接一场，辣椒一天一个样，有的弯得像月牙，有的直得像钉子。最热闹的是八月的枝头，同一棵上，青的、半黄透红的、红透的挤在一处，红的那种颜色沉，像上过漆，太阳一照，油亮。我踮着脚摘过一根红的，咬一口，辣气从舌根冲上来，眼泪差点下来。外婆在边上笑，说辣椒要摘就摘红透的，半青的留着，明天它就红了。从那以后我每天早上去看那七棵，看它们一天红几根，像数日子。

菜园里最忙的人是外婆。傍晚她提着水瓢从水缸里舀水，从最外边的畦浇起，一瓢一瓢，水落在土上，土色深一块浅一块。她浇到辣椒畦会慢下来，把水浇在根边的土上，不冲叶子，说晌午冲叶子，太阳一晒，叶子要烂。浇完她顺手掐掉两根歪长的豇豆，扔进腰间的布袋。她在畦路上走，脚落在哪块土上不用看，哪块土松、哪块土滑，她比谁都清楚。有天夜里打雷，她披了雨衣去菜园，把豆角架上的竹竿又绑了一道。第二天架子好好的，她的鞋糊满了泥。我后来在城里吃过很多菜，舌头老想起那七棵辣椒。菜园还是那个菜园，篱笆门、豆角架、六畦菜、水缸，一样一样都在原地，只是提瓢的人，一年比一年矮了。

The Garden Behind the House

Behind the house in the village lies a vegetable garden, fenced round with bamboo. On the gate hangs a piece of old hemp rope, and in its loop stands an iron hook for pulling vegetables, there all year round. Entering through this gate, on the left is a row of bean trellises, bamboo poles leaned into A-frames, bean vines winding up the poles. Under the trellises is shade where people have squatted to escape the heat, and on the ground remains half of a chalk circle, drawn crooked. On the right lie six vegetable beds, with narrow dirt paths trodden between them, the soil on both sides of the paths polished smooth by shoe soles. Farther in, against the wall stands a black-glazed water jar, its mouth covered with a board, a notched ladle resting on the board. The garden is not big. From the gate to the water jar, I counted twenty-one steps.

I stayed there one summer vacation, and my eyes ended up resting entirely on the chili peppers. They grow in the bed by the wall, seven plants in all. At the end of June they flower, small white blossoms with five petals; when one flower falls, a small upward-pointing chili pushes out from the fork of the branches, blue-green, as

thick as a fingertip. The rains of July come one after another, and the chilies change from day to day, some curved like a crescent moon, some straight like a nail. The liveliest sight is the branches in August: on one and the same plant, green ones, half-yellow turning red, and fully ripe red ones crowd together; the red ones carry a deep color, like lacquer, and shine oily in the sun. I once stood on tiptoe, picked a red one, took a bite, and the heat rose from the root of my tongue until tears nearly came. Grandmother laughed beside me, saying that if you pick chilies, pick the fully ripe red ones, and leave the half-green, for tomorrow they will turn red. After that I went to look at those seven plants every morning, counting how many turned red each day, like counting the days of the month.

The busiest person in the garden is Grandmother. In the evening she carries the ladle, scoops water from the jar, and starts watering from the outermost bed, one ladle after another, the water falling on the soil, which darkens patch by patch. When she reaches the chili bed she slows down, pouring the water on the soil around the roots rather than over the leaves, saying that water on the leaves at noon, baked by the sun, will rot them. When she finishes she pinches off two straggly long beans and drops them into the cloth bag at her waist. Walking along the bed paths, she never looks at where her feet land; she knows better than anyone which soil is loose and which is slippery. One night with thunder, she put on her raincoat and went out to the garden to lash the bamboo poles of the bean trellis one more time. The next day the trellis stood firm, and her shoes were caked with mud. Later, eating many vegetables in the city, my tongue still often recalls those seven chili plants. The garden is still that garden; the gate, the bean trellises, the six beds, the water jar, each still in its place. Only the person carrying the ladle grows a little shorter each year.