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.

爷爷的西红柿架

爷爷在菜园靠墙的地方立了一排西红柿架，八根竹竿，绑着八棵苗，像给它们一人发了一根拐杖。他跟我说，西红柿是站着结果的作物，得扶。我那时刚上初一，暑假回去，天天往菜园跑，看来看去，看入了西红柿。

六月中旬，苗上开黄花，一穗一穗，花心是深的橙。花谢了，底下结出青果，硬邦邦的，顶上带个五角形的蒂。爷爷蹲在架前打杈，指头一掰，叶腋里冒出来的小杈就掉了，他说杈不打，养分全喂了叶子，果子就光长个不甜。他打杈极快，一棵十几下，打完拍拍手上的土。绑蔓用的是玉米皮撕成的条，绕一圈，打个活扣，他说死扣勒手，藤长粗了会疼。我问他藤会疼吗，他说

种了一辈子，看什么都像会疼。

七月底西红柿开始转色，从果肩上一圈淡红起头，一天红过一圈。爷爷想了个办法，在每穗果旁边插一小截香烟盒纸，写上日子，说这样就知道哪穗该摘了。我替他念纸上的字，念到第三穗，他摘下一个还带点青的，说这个挂到屋里，一周自己就红。挂在窗钩上的那个真的一天天红了，红得比地里的慢，但匀。八月中旬的一天早上，架子上的熟果一齐到了时候，红得发软，太阳照过来，果皮上一层亮。爷爷摘了一捧，在褂子上蹭两下，挑最红的一个直接递到我手里，说甜，咬。我站在架边咬开，汁水顺着手肘往下淌，沙瓤，甜里带一点酸。爷爷看着我笑，自己也拿了一个，不蹭，直接咬，说地里的果子干净。

后来那排架子拆了，竹竿收进柴房。我在城里写作业的夜里，偶尔想起那截插在果穗边的烟盒纸，一小条白纸上写着铅笔字，像给果子记的账。爷爷一辈子没给家里记过账，倒给西红柿记过。妈妈说他现在种得少了，八根竿换成四根，还是靠墙立着，每年六月开花。我打电话回去，他说今年的头一穗红了，给我留着。我说留着干什么，他又说了一遍，留着，你回来摘。电话那头有风，吹得架子上的绳响。我知道他递菜的手还是那样，蹭两下，直接塞过来，什么也不多说。

Grandpa's Tomato Trellis

Grandpa put up a row of tomato trellises against the wall of the garden, eight bamboo poles tied to eight seedlings, like handing each one a walking stick. He told me tomatoes bear fruit standing up, so they need support. I had just entered seventh grade that summer, and every day I ran out to the garden, and whatever I looked at, I ended up lost in the tomatoes.

In mid-June the seedlings opened yellow flowers, spike after spike, the centers a deep orange. When the flowers faded, hard green fruits formed beneath, each topped with a five-pointed calyx. Grandpa squatted before the trellis to remove suckers, flicking his finger and snapping off the little shoots from the leaf axils. He said if the suckers are left, the nourishment all feeds the leaves, and the fruit grows big but not sweet. He worked fast, a dozen flicks per plant, then dusted the soil off his hands. For tying the vines he used strips torn from corn husks, winding once and finishing with a slip knot, saying a hard knot cuts into the hand and the swelling vine would ache. I asked him whether a vine could ache. He said after farming a lifetime, everything looks like it could ache.

At the end of July the tomatoes began to change color, starting with a pale ring at the shoulder of the fruit, reddening one ring deeper each day. Grandpa hit on a trick: beside each fruit cluster he stuck in a small slip of cigarette-box paper with the date written on it, saying that way you know which cluster is ready. I read the pencil marks for him, and at the third cluster he picked one still slightly green, saying hang it indoors and in a week it will redden by itself. The one on the window

hook really did redden day by day, slower than those in the ground, but evenly. One morning in mid-August, the ripe fruit on the trellis all reached their hour at once, red and soft, a sheen on the skin in the sunlight. Grandpa picked a handful, wiped one twice on his jacket, chose the reddest, and handed it straight to me, saying it is sweet, bite into it. Standing by the trellis I bit open, juice running down to my elbow, sandy pulp, sweet with a thread of sour. Grandpa watched me and smiled, took one himself, did not wipe it, bit right in, saying fruit from the ground is clean.

Later that row of trellises came down, and the poles went into the woodshed. On nights doing homework in the city, I sometimes think of that slip of cigarette-box paper beside the fruit cluster, a narrow white strip with pencil writing, like an account kept for the tomatoes. Grandpa never kept accounts for the family, yet he kept them for his tomatoes. Mother says he grows less now, four poles instead of eight, still against the wall, still flowering every June. When I phone home he says the first cluster this year has turned red, saved for me. I ask what for. He says it again: saved, come back and pick it. There is wind on the line, rattling the ties on the trellis. I know his hands passing over vegetables are still the same, wipe twice, press it into you, and say nothing more.

菜园尽头的萝卜畦

萝卜是立冬前起的。那天早上霜还没化，爷爷已经在菜园尽头的畦里蹲着了，棉袄外头系着那条洗白的围裙。我提着筐走过去，鞋底踩在霜上，咯吱咯吱响。从篱笆门到萝卜畦，要经过一排豆角架、六畦菜、一口水缸，这条路我闭着眼都能走，可那天我睁着眼，因为地里的萝卜在等我。

那畦萝卜是九月撒的种。起先地里只有一片锯齿边的叶子，趴在地上，看不出名堂。十月底叶子底下拱出一点白，是萝卜的脑门。爷爷用手把脑门周围的土扒开，露出小半个身子，说露露头，晒晒太阳，甜。从那以后我隔两天就去看它们长胖没有。叶子还是那些叶子，地底下的东西却一天一个尺寸。有一回我抓住一撮叶子往上提，纹丝不动，反过来差点坐到地上。爷爷在畦那头笑出了声，说萝卜没长够个，拔它就是跟地较劲。

起萝卜那天，爷爷的手法是握住叶子根部，身子往后坐，一边晃一边拔，萝卜带着一蓬土出来，他把叶子拧掉，扔进筐里。我照着他的样子拔，第一根拔断了，半截留在土里。他拿小铲顺着土插下去，一撬，那半截也出来了，说半截的留着自己吃，完整的卖。一根萝卜在案板上掰开，断面是淡蓝的芯，爷爷递给我半截。我坐在畦边的石头上啃，脆，甜，带一点辣。爷孙俩一人半截，谁也没说话，地里安静，只有远处鸡叫。

那天下午我们起了小半畦，剩下的盖上稻草，说留着过年再吃。晚上奶奶炖了半截断萝卜，汤是奶白的。我趴在桌上看那碗汤，忽然想起萝卜脑门上晒过的那些太阳。爷爷坐过来，往我碗

里添了块萝卜，说下回起完这畦，开春种豆角，还是靠篱笆门那排架子。我说好。他手背上有新裂的口子，贴着胶布，胶布边上也沾了土。我那时上初二，已经明白一畦萝卜从撒种到上桌要过多少道手，每一道手都是他那双手。菜园尽头那畦萝卜后来在开春前吃完了，一根不剩。爷爷站在空畦边上看了会儿，翻土，耙平，说这块地歇一歇，就该忙下一样了。

The Radish Bed at the End of the Garden

The radishes came out of the ground before the Start of Winter. That morning the frost had not yet melted, and Grandpa was already squatting in the bed at the far end of the garden, his faded apron tied over the padded jacket. I walked over carrying a basket, my shoe soles crunching on the frost. From the gate of the fence to the radish bed, you pass a row of bean trellises, six vegetable beds, and a water jar; I could walk that path with my eyes shut, yet that day my eyes were wide open, because the radishes in the ground were waiting for me.

That bed of radishes was sown in September. At first there was only a spread of saw-toothed leaves lying flat on the ground, showing nothing. At the end of October a little white pushed up from under the leaves, the crown of a radish. Grandpa raked the soil away around each crown with his hand, baring half a body to the light, saying let it show its head, let it have some sun, and it will turn sweet. After that I went every two days to see whether they had fattened. The leaves were still the same leaves, but whatever lay under the ground changed size by the day. Once I grabbed a handful of leaves and pulled upward with all my strength; nothing moved, and I nearly sat down on the ground. Grandpa laughed out loud from the far side of the bed, saying the radishes had not grown big enough, and pulling them was quarreling with the ground.

On the day we lifted them, the method of Grandpa was to grip the base of the leaves, lean back, and pull while rocking side to side; the radish came out trailing a clump of soil, he twisted off the leaves, and tossed it into the basket. I tried to copy him and snapped my first one in half, the bottom left in the earth. He slid a small spade down along the soil and levered it, and the half came out too, saying the broken half stays for us and the whole ones are for sale. One radish was snapped open on the cutting board, its cross-section a pale blue core, and Grandpa handed me one half. I sat on the stone at the edge of the bed and crunched into it: crisp, sweet, with a touch of pepper. A half apiece, the two of us, neither speaking; the field was quiet except for a rooster crowing far off.

That afternoon we lifted a little under half the bed, covered the rest with straw, and said the remainder would wait for the New Year. At supper Grandmother stewed the broken half-radish, the soup milky white. I lay on the table looking at

that bowl and suddenly thought of all the sun those radish crowns had soaked up. Grandpa came over and dropped another piece of radish into my bowl, saying that after this bed is finished, they will plant beans in spring, still on the row of trellises by the gate. I said all right. On the back of his hand was a fresh crack with a strip of tape over it, and the edges of the tape had soil on them too. I was in eighth grade by then, and I already understood how many passes of a hand a bed of radishes makes from seed to table, and every one of those passes was made by his hands. The radishes at the end of the garden were all eaten before spring, not one left. Grandpa stood at the edge of the empty bed and looked for a while, then turned the soil, raked it flat, and said this plot would rest a little before getting busy with the next thing.