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.