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.