老陈先生的菜园课

老陈教了三十年科学，退休那年没去儿子住的小区，守着老屋，屋后留了半亩菜园。孙子读一年级那年，他开了个周六菜园课，只收街坊的孩子，不收钱，规矩一条：七点前到，先帮着浇水，再开课。

课堂没有黑板。老陈把人带进园子，先一人发一副手套一把小铲。那天讲翻土。他先示范：铲子下刃到深，手腕一翻，土块翻过来、磕碎，碎土里还能瞧见蚯蚓。孩子们轮流上，一人分一小畦。一小会儿就有三个蹲到畦边歇着，手套上全是土。老陈不催，让他们歇，说：地又不会跑，用不着追。

认菜是他最来劲的一段。他拔起一棵，让他们看根：须根一把一把的，直根一条往下扎，各长各的样子，各干各的活。他问：豆家的根上为什么挂小疙瘩。没人答得上。他摘下一个疙瘩捏破，叫他们看里面发红：氮，庄稼要吃氮，豆子自己会造，所以豆后底下肥。孩子们蹲成一圈，比任何教室里的距离都近。

采摘是期末考。入秋他出三道题：辨生熟，摘时不伤株，末了过秤比筐。有个女孩摘了一筐番茄，里面混着两只青的。老陈不扣分，让她回地里站到株前，把青的和红的各看一阵，回来说清差在哪儿。她说：青的肩上有一圈白。打那以后她再没摘错过青的。

街坊笑他，说这叫什么课，就是玩土。老陈说：我要教的不是种地，是知道东西从哪儿来的孩子不会糟蹋，拎过土块的孩子懂得歇，也懂得别人也累。

多年以后，头一批学生里有一个在报考材料里写：我上过的第一堂生物课在菜园里，老师叫老陈，教室没有墙。有人把这段念给老陈听。他听完没言语，出门浇园子，浇了很久。

The Garden Class of Uncle Chen

Uncle Chen taught natural science for thirty years. The year he retired he did not move to the estate where his son lives; he stayed in the old house, with half a mu of garden behind it. When his grandchild entered first grade, he opened a Saturday garden class. Only children of the neighborhood could join, no fee, one rule: arrive before seven, help water first, then the class begins.

The class had no blackboard. Uncle Chen led them into the garden and handed out gloves and small shovels, one each. The lesson that day was turning soil. He showed it first: the shovel goes in to the depth of the blade, turn the wrist, the clod flips over and breaks. The children took turns; before long three of them squatted at the edge of the bed to rest. He did not push them. He let them rest and said: the land does not run, there is no need to chase it.

Knowing the vegetables was the part he liked best. He pulled up a plant and had them look at the roots: fibrous roots in handfuls, a taproot going straight down, each with its own shape, each with its own job. He asked: why do bean roots carry

little bumps. No one could answer. He picked one bump, crushed it, and showed them the inside turning red: nitrogen; crops eat nitrogen, and beans make it themselves, so the land after beans is rich. The children squatted in a ring, closer than in any classroom.

Picking was the final exam. In autumn he set three tasks: tell ripe from unripe, pick without wounding the plant, weigh the baskets at the end. One girl filled a basket of tomatoes with two green ones inside. Uncle Chen took no points off. He sent her back to stand by the plant, look at the green and the red for a while, and come back to say how they differ. She said: the green one wears a ring of white at the shoulder. After that she never picked a green one wrong.

People of the neighborhood laughed and said this was no class, just playing in dirt. Uncle Chen said: what I teach is not farming. It is that a child who knows where food comes from will not waste it, and a child who has lifted a clod of dirt knows what rest is, and knows that other people are tired too.

Years later, one child of that first class wrote in an application paper: the first biology class I ever had was in a garden, the teacher was called Uncle Chen, and the classroom had no walls. Someone read the passage to him over the phone. After listening he said nothing, went out to water the garden, and watered it a long time.