爷爷菜园的一年

三月还没暖透，爷爷已经在菜园里忙了。他蹲在南头，用锄头柄在土里划出一道道浅沟，沟不深，一指节那么长。他抓一把小白菜籽，手抬得高，撒得匀，籽落在沟里，几乎听不见声音。撒完，他用脚把两边的土扒过来，盖住沟，再拎起水壶，水浇下去，土面颜色立刻深了一圈。

我问爷爷，小白菜什么时候能吃。他直起腰，捶了两下背，说再等一个多月，让你先看着它长大。我不太懂，他就拨开一点土，露出几粒湿透的籽，说籽喝了水就醒，醒了就往上拱，土压不住它。

四月，菜畦真的绿了。叶子小得像米粒，一排排站得整齐。我蹲下去数，数到一半就乱了。爷爷下地间苗，把挤在一起的拔掉，留下的间隔开。他说挤着的菜长不好，都抢那一口阳光，谁也不让谁，最后谁都长不大。

五月，番茄苗到了小指高，爷爷搬来竹竿，一棵一棵插好，用布条松松绑住。豆角籽点在篱笆根，隔一掌一粒。他告诉我，豆角自己会往上爬，不用人管，它认得方向。

夏天，爷爷每天清早提两桶水进园，井在屋后，来回一趟他歇都不歇。太阳底下，菜叶亮得反光，黄瓜今天早上还拇指长，傍晚就有胳膊长。他中午不歇晌午，蹲在垄沟里拔草，草带出根，根上还挂着湿土。他的手被豆藤磨得发红，指缝里全是泥，洗了几遍都洗不净。

九月开学以后，我再回菜园，它整个熟了。辣椒由青转红，一串一串垂着。南瓜趴在地里，皮上蒙了一层白霜似的东西，爷爷说这叫老。他掰玉米，苞叶一撕开，玉米粒碰在一起哗啦响，他举着那穗玉米给我看，粒颗颗饱满，顶上还带着一点甜腥气。

十月过了霜降，叶子枯了，卷起来，一碰就碎。爷爷把秧子割掉，翻地，把它们埋进土里。他说这些东西烂在地里，明年就是菜的好饭。地翻过以后一块一块，冻得硬邦邦，他坐在田埂上看一会儿，抽一支烟才回去。

十一月风硬了，他给剩下的菠菜盖上一层稻草，说盖了草，霜就咬不动它们。我在城里给他打电话，他第一句总是问期末考不考，第二句才是园里的菜。

十二月，我在城里阳台的花盆里种下他给我的一小包种子，天天看，天天没动静。打电话他说别急，籽在土里睡觉，到点自己起。我守着那只花盆，等一场发芽，也等过年回他的菜园。

A Year in Grandpa's Garden

The warmth had not yet fully arrived in March, but Grandpa was already busy in the garden. He crouched at the south end, drawing shallow furrows in the soil with the handle of his hoe, no deeper than a knuckle. He took a handful of bok choy seeds, held his hand high, scattered them evenly, and the seeds fell into the furrows almost silently. When he finished, he raked soil over them with his feet, then lifted the watering can. The moment the water went down, the surface of the soil turned a shade darker.

I asked him when the bok choy would be ready to eat. He straightened up, punched his back twice, and said we would wait a little over a month, and that I should watch it grow first. I did not quite understand, so he loosened a bit of soil and showed me a few soaked seeds, saying that a seed wakes up when it drinks water, and once awake it pushes upward, and soil cannot hold it down.

In April, the beds really turned green. The leaves were small as grains of rice, standing in neat rows. I crouched to count them and lost track halfway. Grandpa thinned the seedlings, pulling out the crowded ones and leaving gaps between the rest. He said cramped vegetables never grow well, because they all fight for the same mouthful of sunlight, and if none gives way, none grows big.

By May the tomato seedlings reached the height of a little finger. Grandpa carried over bamboo poles and staked them one by one, tying them loosely with cloth strips. He dotted bean seeds along the foot of the fence, one every palm-width. He told me the beans would climb on their own without any tending, since they know which way is up.

In summer, Grandpa carried two buckets into the garden every morning. The well was behind the house, and he never rested between the trips. Under the sun the leaves shone. A cucumber the size of a thumb in the morning was as long as an arm by dusk. He skipped his midday rest and squatted in the furrows pulling weeds, the roots coming up still holding wet soil. His hands were rubbed red by the bean vines, his finger gaps full of mud that would not wash away after several rinses.

When I returned after school began in September, the garden had ripened all at once. The peppers had turned from green to red, hanging in clusters. Pumpkins lay on the ground with a whitish film on their skins, which Grandpa called being old. He snapped off corn; the husks tore open and the kernels clattered together. He held an ear up for me to see, every kernel plump, the top still carrying a sweet, raw smell.

After the Frost Fall in October, the leaves withered, curled, and crumbled at a touch. Grandpa cut the vines, turned the soil, and buried them. He said that once these rotted into the ground, they would be the best food for the vegetables of next year. The turned earth froze into hard clods. He sat on the ridge and watched it for a while, smoking one cigarette before going home.

The wind turned harsh in November, and he spread straw over the remaining spinach, saying that under straw the frost cannot bite them. When I called him from the city, his first question was always about the final exam, and only his second was about the garden.

In December I planted a small packet of his seeds in a pot on my balcony, checked it every day, and saw nothing every day. On the phone he told me not to rush, that

seeds sleep in the soil and wake on their own time. I keep watch over that pot, waiting for a sprout, and waiting for New Year, when I will go back to his garden.