菜园里的那双手

周五下午放学，我坐班车回到镇上，书包没放下就先去了屋后的菜园。爷爷正在翻地，锄头举起来，落下去，一块板结的土翻开，露出底下深色的湿土。他翻得不快，每一锄都齐着垄边下，翻完一垄，用锄背把土坷垃敲碎，再用手把碎土抹平。我站在田埂上看他的手。那双手冬天裂过口子，指缝里嵌着泥，指纹的沟里也是泥，洗过很多次，也洗不净。他翻土的时候不看我，像是知道我会来。翻到第三垄，他直起腰，把锄头立在地上，说土要趁太阳翻，日头落了就不酥了。我接过来试着翻了两锄，锄头偏了，差点刨倒一垄萝卜。他把锄头接回去，没有说我，只说地不嫌人慢，多翻两回就会了。翻完地，他去摘菜。他摘菜不用指甲掐，拇指往瓜柄上一压，咔一声，黄瓜就下来了，顺手在褂子上蹭两下，递给我。我在菜园边咬黄瓜，他在一边看着，问甜不甜。我说甜。他点点头，又伸手够第二根，说这根留种，不摘。番茄他挑红透的摘，茄子专拣皮发亮的，豇豆要长的，短的不要。摘好的菜堆在垄沟边，他一样一样码进布袋，把袋口折了两折，走过来塞到我手里。袋子压手，番茄的温热从布袋底下传上来。他说，拿回去给你妈，菜放不住，趁早吃。我说知道了。他又不放心，把袋角在我手腕上套了一下，说路上别晃，番茄经不起晃。我拎着袋子往回走，回头看了一眼，他还蹲在地里，给番茄绑枝。那双手那么糙，碰着嫩藤的时候却轻。我以前只觉得那双手老，现在才明白，它一辈子只做三件事：翻土，摘菜，递给我们。菜园只有半亩大，经它手的东西，都到了我们饭桌上。

Those Hands in the Vegetable Garden

Friday afternoon after class, I took the bus back to town and, before putting down my schoolbag, went straight to the vegetable garden behind the house. Grandpa was turning the soil. The hoe rose and fell; a piece of hardened earth flipped over, revealing the dark, damp soil underneath. He worked slowly, each strike lined up with the edge of the ridge. When one ridge was done, he broke the clods with the back of the hoe and smoothed the crushed soil with his hands. I stood on the field ridge watching his hands. They had cracked in winter; dirt sat in the gaps between his fingers and in the ridges of his fingerprints. He had washed them many times, yet the dirt stayed. He did not look up while turning the soil, as if he knew I would come. By the third ridge he straightened up and set the hoe upright, saying the soil should be turned while the sun is on it, for once the sun goes down it will not crumble well. I took the hoe and tried two strikes. The blade went off line and nearly toppled a row of radishes. He took the hoe back without scolding me, only saying that the ground does not mind a slow person; turn it a few more times and you will learn. After the digging, he went to pick vegetables. He did not pinch with his nails. He pressed his thumb on the stem, there was a snap, and the cucumber came off. He wiped it twice on his jacket and handed it to me. I bit into the cucumber at the edge of the garden while he watched, asking whether it was sweet. I said it was. He nodded and reached for a second one, saying this one stays for seed. For tomatoes he picked only the fully ripe ones; for eggplants he chose the glossy-skinned; for long beans he wanted the long ones. He stacked the picked vegetables along the ditch, then

packed them one by one into a cloth bag, folded the mouth of the bag twice, walked over, and pressed it into my hands. The bag was heavy, and the warmth of the tomatoes rose through the bottom of the cloth. He said, take it to your mother; fresh vegetables do not keep, so eat them soon. I said I understood. Still worried, he looped the corner of the bag over my wrist, saying not to shake it on the road, for tomatoes cannot take shaking. Carrying the bag back, I looked once over my shoulder. He was crouched in the garden again, tying tomato branches to their stakes. Those rough hands were so gentle when they touched the tender vines. I used to think those hands were simply old. Now I understand that in a whole lifetime they have done only three things: turning the soil, picking the vegetables, and passing them to us. The garden is only half an acre, yet everything those hands have touched has found its way onto our table.