下午的尽头是一碗姜茶

先说那碗姜茶。傍晚六点，厨房的灯最早亮，姜在锅里翻滚，辣味顺着门缝爬满整个屋子。男孩端着碗，灌一大口，辣得龇牙咧嘴，哈出一团白气，眉毛上还挂着没化完的雪粒。他父亲端着另一碗，站在旁边看他，看得有些走神。这碗茶不是凭空来的，它后面站着整个下午。

把下午往回倒。倒到四点半，花园里只剩一个歪脖子雪人，脖子上围着一条红围巾。围巾是男孩临上楼前解下来给它围上的，围的时候踮着脚。雪人的一只眼睛是石子，另一只是瓶盖，鼻子是一根枯枝，站在一整片白里，像谁随手插的一根旗杆。它等着明天有人下来把它扶正。

再往前倒一刻钟，雪仗正打到最凶。说是雪仗，其实是单方面的：父亲的雪球不是砸偏就是砸轻，儿子的雪球砸在胸口跟挠痒一样。中场他们蹲在地上重新定了规矩，父亲站着挨打，儿子躲闪还击。儿子眯一只眼瞄准的样子，被二楼那扇亮着的窗看得清清楚楚。打到儿子手套湿透、手指通红还不肯走，喊完最后一颗又有一颗，最后是父亲连拖带拽把人弄进楼道。

再往前，下午两点，雪还在下。父子俩从单元门出来，一个羽绒服拉链拉到下巴，一个帽子都没戴。他们先堆雪人，儿子负责滚头，雪球滚两次散一次，急得跺脚，后来改成推，头越推越大，抱不动，一路摔过来。父亲在旁边说，摔了也是它的一部分。这句话没什么道理，儿子也没听懂，两个人都笑了。

再往前倒，是一顿午饭和一句扒着窗户的央求，然后门一开，雪就涌进整个下午。

现在回到六点，回到这碗姜茶。辣味冲上来，父亲忽然认出这个场景——三十年前，别的家的窗下，别的场的雪，他母亲也是这样把碗塞过来，嘴里骂着，手上又给他擦头发上的雪。他当时也龇牙，也哈白气。原来一个人这辈子喝的热姜茶，是小时候那碗的延长。

男孩喝完茶，趴回窗上找雪人。红围巾在楼下白色里显眼得很。他说，明天去把它扶正。他父亲说好。雪又下起来了，把歪脖子雪人重新描了一遍边。

At the End of the Afternoon Stands a Bowl of Ginger Tea

Begin with the ginger tea. At six in the evening the kitchen light came on first, ginger rolling in the pot, its heat creeping through the door crack into every room. The boy held his bowl, gulped a big mouthful, grimaced at the burn of it, breathed out a cloud of white vapor, grains of unmelted snow still hanging on his eyebrows. His father stood beside him with another bowl, watching him a little absent-mindedly. This bowl of tea did not appear out of nowhere. Behind it stands the entire afternoon.

Now rewind the afternoon. Rewind to half past four, when only the crooked snowman was left in the garden, a red scarf around its neck. The scarf was the boy's own, untied and wound on just before going upstairs, on tiptoe to do it. One eye of the snowman was a pebble, the other a bottle cap, its nose a dry branch, standing in all that white like a flagpole someone stuck in on a whim. It waited for someone to come

down tomorrow and straighten it.

Go back another quarter of an hour and the snowball fight was at its fiercest. A fight in name only, really: the father's snowballs either went wide or landed soft, while the son's struck the chest like an itch. At halftime the two crouched down and rewrote the rules - the father would stand and take it, the son would dodge and return fire. The way the son squinted one eye to aim was clearly visible from the lit window on the second floor. By the end the son's gloves were soaked, his fingers bright red, and he still would not leave, promising one last ball and then producing another after every last one, until his father half dragged him into the stairwell.

Further back, two in the afternoon, the snow still falling. The pair came out of the building door, one with the zipper pulled to the chin, the other bareheaded. They built the snowman first. The boy was in charge of the head; his snowball fell apart after two rolls, and he stamped his feet, then switched to pushing, and the head grew until he could not carry it and it tumbled all the way to the body. The father said, the falling apart is part of it too. The sentence made no sense, the boy did not understand it either, and they both laughed.

Further back still: a lunch, and a plea pressed against the window, then a door opening, and the snow pouring into the whole afternoon.

Now return to six o'clock, to this bowl of ginger tea. As the heat rushed up, the father suddenly recognized the scene - thirty years ago, under someone else's window, in someone else's snow, his own mother pressing a bowl into his hands, scolding with her mouth while wiping snow from his hair with her hands. He too had grimaced then, too breathed out white vapor. So the hot ginger tea of a man's whole life is an extension of the one bowl from childhood.

The boy finished his tea and pressed back to the window to find his snowman. The red scarf stood out sharply in the white below. He said, tomorrow I will go straighten it. His father said, all right. It had started snowing again, redrawing the outline of the crooked snowman.