我们家的西瓜大王

要问我爱吃什么水果，我第一个喊出来的是西瓜。它又大又圆，穿着绿条纹衣裳，往桌上一放，像来了个胖大王。

昨天傍晚，爸爸从菜场抱回一个真正的西瓜大王。它有十几斤重，爸爸两只手抱着，肚子都挡没了。我绕着它转了一圈，看它的样子：瓜皮是深绿和浅绿相间的条纹，一条一条，像西瓜自己画的斑马线。瓜顶上有一截干枯的瓜藤，卷卷的，像猪尾巴。爸爸把瓜放到我面前，说：来，先考考你，挑瓜要听声音。我学着爸爸的样子，用手掌拍瓜。砰砰砰，声音又闷又实。爸爸说，不对，这种是生瓜。我又拍，这回找到一边，拍出来嘭嘭嘭，声音又脆又空，像敲一面小鼓。爸爸点头：就它了，熟得刚刚好。

妈妈把西瓜大王请上餐桌，按住它，爸爸握紧菜刀。我紧张得大气不敢出。刀尖刚扎进去一点点，就听啪的一声轻响，西瓜自己裂开了一条缝，好像早就等着这一刀。爸爸顺着缝往下切，咔的一声，瓜分成两半。哇，红瓤黑籽，红得像傍晚的天边，黑籽一颗一颗嵌在里面，像谁撒了一把小瓜子。汁水顺着刀口流出来，滴在案板上，空气里一下子全是甜甜的味道。

妈妈把两半瓜切成月牙，一人一盘。我端起盘子先闻，一股清甜直往鼻子里钻，忍不住舔了一口，沙沙的，甜到舌根。我咬下一大口，红瓤在嘴里化成水，籽也顾不上吐，咕咚咽下去好几颗。妈妈说吞了籽肚子里会长西瓜，我吓得住嘴不动，过了一会儿摸摸肚子，什么也没长，全家都笑我。

吃到一半，我们开始比赛吐籽。爸爸一用力，籽飞出老远，钉在窗帘上。我也不服输，瞄准垃圾桶，噗噗噗连吐三发，中了两个。妈妈笑得最响，她的籽最短，全落在自己盘子里。

一盘瓜见了底，我的肚子圆滚滚，像自己也变成了小西瓜。冰箱里还剩最后一块，妈妈说明天中午吃。我抱着肚子躺下，闭眼全是那个红瓤黑籽的西瓜大王。夏天最好的东西，我看就是它了。

The Watermelon King of Our Family

If you ask what fruit I love best, the first word out of my mouth is watermelon. It is big and round, wearing a striped green coat. Set it on the table and it looks like a fat king has arrived.

Yesterday evening, Father carried home a real watermelon king from the market. It weighed over six kilos, and his two arms could barely hold it, hidden behind its belly. I walked around it and studied its look: the rind has stripes of dark green and light green, one after another, like zebra lines the watermelon painted on itself. On top sits a piece of dried vine, curled like a pig tail. Father set the melon in front of me and said: let me test you first. To pick a melon, you listen to its sound. I copied him and knocked the melon with my palm. Thud thud thud, a dull,

heavy sound. Father said wrong, that kind is unripe. I knocked again, and on one side I found a spot that went boom boom boom, crisp and hollow, like tapping a small drum. Father nodded: this one, ripe just right.

Mother invited the watermelon king onto the dining table and held it steady while Father gripped the knife. I did not dare breathe. The knife tip had barely entered when, with a soft pop, the melon split a crack by itself, as if it had been waiting for this cut. Father cut down along the crack, and with one crunch the melon fell into two halves. Wow: red flesh, black seeds. The red glowed like the evening sky, and the black seeds sat embedded one by one, like someone had scattered a handful of tiny melon seeds. Juice ran out along the cut and dripped on the board, and the whole air turned sweet.

Mother cut the halves into crescents, one plate each. I lifted my plate and smelled first, a fresh sweetness diving into my nose, and I could not help licking one bite. It was grainy and soft, sweet down to the roots of my tongue. I bit off a big mouthful, the red flesh melting into water in my mouth, and I swallowed several seeds without noticing. Mother said a watermelon would grow in my belly if I swallowed seeds. I clamped my mouth shut in fear, then patted my belly a while later. Nothing had grown, and the whole family laughed at me.

Halfway through, we started a seed-spitting contest. Father flexed once and a seed flew far, sticking in the curtain. I refused to lose. I aimed at the trash bin and spat three in a row, hitting two. Mother laughed loudest. Her seeds flew the shortest, all landing in her own plate.

When the plate ran empty, my belly was round and full, as if I had become a small watermelon myself. One last piece waited in the fridge for tomorrow noon, Mother said. I lay down with my belly hugged by my arms, eyes closed, full of that red-fleshed, black-seeded watermelon king. The best thing about summer, I decide, is this.

井水镇过的西瓜

我爱吃西瓜。要数吃得最痛快的一次，是在奶奶家，那个西瓜在井水里泡过。

七月底，我跟爸爸妈妈回乡下看奶奶。中午热得狗都趴在门洞里吐舌头。奶奶从井台边提上来一个网兜，里面装着她早上吊进井里的西瓜。她说天太热，瓜在井水里镇了一上午，正好吃。我凑过去看那个瓜：它比我家买的小一圈，圆溜溜的，皮是浅绿的，带着深绿的波浪纹，被井水泡得凉凉的，摸一下手心全是水珠，像刚从冰箱里拿出来，又不一样，它的水珠是活的，一颗一颗会滚。

奶奶把瓜放到砧板上，拿起菜刀。她切瓜跟别人不一样，先在瓜顶上开一个圆盖子，像揭锅盖。盖子一揭，一股凉气冒出来，红瓤黑籽露出来，瓤中间还裂着几道缝，奶奶说这叫沙瓤，甜。她把盖子扣回去，又顺着瓜把整个切成瓣，一刀一刀，汁水顺着刀背流，砧板湿了一大片，闻着又清又甜。

我们坐在院子里的老槐树下吃瓜。我捧起一瓣，先咬中间最甜的那一口，凉丝丝的，甜味从舌尖一直走到嗓子眼，瓤是沙的，一粒一粒在嘴里化开，籽不多，黑亮的几颗排在边上。爷爷吃得快，一瓣瓜转眼见了白。我学他的样子，把红瓤啃到只剩一层白边，白边也啃掉一小口，苦苦的，不好吃，我呸掉，爷爷大笑，说瓜皮是好东西，能炒着吃。

后来我们比赛谁能把籽吐进墙根的鸡食盆。我连吐四颗，中了三颗，奶奶拍手，说俺孙子眼力好。鸡真的过来啄那些籽，啄得头一点一点。

最后一瓣瓜，奶奶留给我。我抱着它从树荫这头走到那头，走得慢，舍不得吃完。瓜汁顺着手腕往下流，黏黏的，太阳底下亮晶晶。

下午我睡午觉，梦里还在啃一瓣永远啃不完的西瓜。离开奶奶家那天，我把井台看了好几眼。后来在城里吃过冰镇西瓜、切好的西瓜盒，都没有那个味道。我知道差的不是瓜，是那口凉凉的井水，和奶奶揭锅盖一样揭开瓜顶的那一刀。

The Melon Chilled in Well Water

I love watermelon. The most glorious time I ever ate one was at Grandma's village home, a melon that had been bathed in well water.

At the end of July I went back to the countryside with Mother and Father to visit Grandma. At noon the heat made even the dog lie in the gateway with its tongue out. Grandma lifted a net bag up from the well, and inside was the watermelon she had lowered into the well that morning. She said the weather was too hot, so the melon had taken a bath in well water all morning, just right to eat now. I went close to look at it. It was a ring smaller than the ones we buy at home, round and smooth, its rind pale green with wavy dark stripes. Chilled by the well water, it felt cool to the touch, and its beads of water were alive, rolling one by one down my palm, not like anything from a fridge.

Grandma set the melon on the chopping board and took up the knife. She cut it differently from anyone else, first opening a round lid on the top, like lifting the lid of a pot. When the lid came off, a cool breath rose out, showing red flesh and black seeds. The flesh had a few cracks in the middle. Grandma said this is sandy flesh, the sweet kind. She put the lid back, then cut the whole melon into wedges, stroke after stroke, juice running down the back of the knife, the board wet all over, the air clear and sweet.

We sat under the old locust tree in the yard to eat. I lifted a wedge and bit first at the very center, the sweetest point. It was cool and thin like water, and the sweetness walked from my tongue tip all the way down my throat. The flesh was sandy, grain by grain melting in my mouth. The seeds were few, a few glossy black ones lined up at the edge. Grandfather ate fast, and one wedge turned white in a flash. I copied him, gnawing the red flesh down to only a white rim, then took a bite of the white rim too. Bitter, not good. I spat it out, and Grandfather roared with laughter, saying melon rind is a fine thing, good stir-fried.

Later we had a contest: whoever could spit seeds into the chicken feed bowl by the wall. I spat four and hit three. Grandma clapped and said her grandson has sharp eyes. The chickens really came over to peck those seeds, their heads bobbing.

The last wedge, Grandma saved for me. I held it and walked slowly from one end of the shade to the other, unwilling to finish. Melon juice ran down my wrist, sticky and sparkling in the sun.

At nap time I dreamed I was still gnawing a wedge that could never be finished. On the day we left, I looked at the well many times. Since then I have eaten iced watermelon and cut melon boxes in the city, none with that taste. I know what was missing was not the melon. It was that cool well water, and the cut Grandma made when she lifted the top of the melon like the lid of a pot.

西瓜摊的小掌柜

我爱吃西瓜，因为我爸爸在街口看一个西瓜摊。别人吃瓜是买，我吃瓜是守着整座瓜山，近水楼台。

星期六，爸爸让我当一天小掌柜。早上卸完车，瓜山码好了：一层一层，每个都穿着绿衣裳，深绿浅绿的条纹从瓜蒂一路画到瓜脐。爸爸教我挑瓜先看相。瓜形要周正，不能一头大一头小；纹路要清晰，条纹越散开说明瓜越长足；瓜脐那个小圈圈，凹进去的比凸出来的甜。我蹲在瓜堆前挨个看过去，看熟了眼力，看哪个瓜都觉得它肚子里是红是生。

看相还不够，爸爸拍瓜给我听。他手掌一抬，啪啪啪，声音脆生生的，像拍熟透的鼓面。他又挑一个拍，闷闷的，他说那是生瓜，摆回去。我接过一个拍，力道不对，声音不脆也不闷，爸爸笑我手太轻，像拍棉花。我换了手掌根，用腕子发力，这回嘭嘭嘭，成了！我举着瓜给爸爸看，他点头，说可以出师一半。

验瓜要开一刀。爸爸按住一个瓜，刀口直直切下去，咔，瓜裂成两半，红瓤黑籽，瓤沙得能看到一粒一粒的边，汁水立刻涌上刀面。爸爸把开出来的半个递给围观的阿姨尝，阿姨咬一口说甜，当场挑走两个。我闻着那一刀开出来的味道，清甜清甜的，直冲鼻子，比家里冰过的瓜味更

冲，那是现开的味道。

中午人少，爸爸切了块瓜给我。刚开的沙瓤，还带着太阳的温度，不冰，可甜得更直白，一口下去舌头整个被甜味包住，籽都懒得吐。我三两口吃完一块，汁水顺着手肘流，下巴亮晶晶。爸爸递毛巾，说小掌柜的工钱就是每天一块瓜，我嫌少，他说明天两块，我立刻同意。

傍晚收摊，剩下三四个瓜。爸爸开了一个我们俩分。夕阳照着瓜摊，照着红瓤，也照着他胳膊上被瓜皮蹭破的一道口子。他吃瓜吃得快，白边都啃了，说种瓜人惜瓜。

回家的三轮车上，我抱着最后一块瓜，边走边吃。街口那个瓜山空了，明天还会再堆起来。我爱吃西瓜，别人家的孩子等夏天，我守着夏天。要问我西瓜到底多甜，我说，比我当小掌柜那天，爸爸多给我的那一块还甜。

Little Keeper of the Melon Stand

I love watermelon, because my father keeps a melon stand on our street corner. Other children buy melons; I eat them while guarding a whole mountain of them, living right beside the water.

On Saturday, Father let me be the little keeper of the stand for one day. After the morning unloading, the melon mountain was stacked: layer after layer, each melon in its green coat, dark and light stripes drawn from stem to navel. Father taught me that choosing a melon begins with reading its face. The shape must be even, never fat at one end and thin at the other. The stripes must be clear, and the wider they spread, the more fully the melon has grown. The little circle at the melon navel, if it sinks in, is sweeter than one that sticks out. I crouched before the melon hill and studied them one by one, and my eye grew sharp. Every melon I looked at, I could guess whether its belly was red or green.

Reading faces is not enough. Father knocked a melon for me to hear. His palm rose and fell, pat pat pat, a crisp sound like striking a ripe drum skin. He knocked another one, dull and heavy. That one is unripe, he said, put it back. I took one and knocked. My force was wrong, the sound neither crisp nor dull. Father laughed that my hands were too light, like patting cotton. I moved to the heel of my palm and drove the wrist. This time it went boom boom boom. Done. I held the melon up for Father to see, and he nodded, saying I was half a graduate.

To test a melon, one cut is needed. Father held a melon down, and the knife went straight in. With a crack the melon opened into halves: red flesh, black seeds, the flesh so sandy you could see each grain edge, juice rising on the blade at once. Father handed the opened half to an auntie standing around to taste. She bit, said sweet, and picked two melons on the spot. I breathed in the smell from that single

cut, a clear sweetness shooting up my nose, stronger than melons chilled at home. That is the smell of a melon opened on the moment.

At noon the crowd thinned, and Father cut me a piece. Fresh sandy flesh still carrying the warmth of the sun, not iced, yet its sweetness spoke even plainer. One bite wrapped my whole tongue in sweetness, and I could not be bothered to spit the seeds. I finished the piece in three bites, juice running down to my elbow, my chin shining. Father handed me a towel and said the wage of a little keeper is one piece of melon a day. I called it too little. He said two tomorrow, and I agreed at once.

At dusk we closed the stand, with three or four melons left. Father opened one for the two of us. The setting sun lit the stand, lit the red flesh, and lit the scrape on his arm where melon rind had rubbed the skin. He ate fast and gnawed even the white rim, saying melon growers respect the melon.

On the tricycle home, I hugged the last piece of melon and ate as we rode. The melon mountain at the corner stood empty; tomorrow it will be stacked again. I love watermelon. Other children wait for summer; I stand guard over it. If you ask just how sweet a watermelon is, I say sweeter than the extra piece Father gave me that day as my keeper bonus.