外婆院里的桃

七岁那年暑假，爸妈把我送到乡下外婆家。院子当中立着一棵桃树，树干是歪的，树皮裂开一道道口子，渗出琥珀色的胶。外婆说，这棵树比妈妈的年纪还大。

清明刚过，外婆搬来竹梯，让我递报纸和细铁丝。她把报纸裁成巴掌大的方块，一个个套在青桃上，用铁丝拧住袋口。我问为什么给桃穿衣服。她说，虫子咬，鸟啄，套上袋子，虫子进不去，鸟也认不出那是桃。我仰着头看满树的小纸袋，风一吹哗啦哗啦响，像树在鼓掌。

等桃的日子漫长。我每隔两天就扒着袋子看一角，里面的桃还是青的，硬得像石子。外婆笑我，桃没熟，急也没用，太阳一天一天晒，它自己就甜了。

头一个熟桃是在六月底发现的。纸袋被风掀开一角，露出的皮白里透红，像抹了一层淡胭脂。整颗桃子还带着绒毛，凑近了闻，有一股清甜的香，不浓，得仔细才捉得住。外婆把它摘下来，在井水里浸了浸，递给我。

我咬下第一口，汁水顺着手腕往下淌，滴在脚背上。果肉软，靠近核的地方带一点酸，核上粘着细细的红绒毛。外婆把树上最大的一颗留给我，自己吃小一些的。邻居王奶奶送来自家包的粽子，外婆转头摘了半篮子桃回礼，还叮嘱人家放两天再吃，硬的不好吃。

傍晚，外婆在树下铺开旧床单，坐在小马扎上摇蒲扇。蝉在头顶叫，桃子的香气混在晚风里，时不时有一颗熟透的桃落地，闷闷的一声。

七月末，外婆开始做桃子罐头。她给桃削皮、掰成两半去掉核，加冰糖慢慢煮，装进洗干净的旧玻璃瓶，倒扣过来放凉。一整个夏天，就这样从青桃装进了熟桃，又从熟桃装进了罐头。

后来我回城上学，离那个院子越来越远，也吃过许多桃子，超市里摆得整整齐齐，个个一般大。可我总觉得，最好吃的一颗始终留在记忆里——被井水镇过，被太阳晒过，有人特意留给我的那种甜。

The Peach Tree in Grandmother's Yard

The summer I turned seven, my parents left me at my grandmother's house in the village. A peach tree stood in the middle of the yard, its trunk leaning, its bark split into seams that oozed amber gum. Grandmother said the tree was older than my mother.

Just after Qingming, she set up a bamboo ladder and had me pass her newspaper squares and thin wire. She cut the paper into palm-sized pieces and slipped one over each green peach, twisting the wire shut. I asked why the peaches needed clothes. Insects bite, birds peck, she said; inside a bag the insects cannot reach them and the birds no longer recognize them as peaches. I looked up at the tree full of little paper bags, rustling in the wind like applause.

The waiting was long. Every other day I peeked into a bag, but the peach inside stayed green and hard as a stone. Grandmother laughed at me. An unripe peach cannot be hurried, she said; the sun ripens it one day at a time.

The first ripe peach was found at the end of June. The wind had lifted the corner of a bag, showing skin white blushed with red, like faint rouge. The whole fruit was fuzzy, and close to the nose it gave off a clean sweet scent, so light you had to hunt for it. Grandmother picked it, dipped it in well water, and handed it to me.

My first bite sent juice running down my wrist and dripping onto my feet. The flesh was soft, a little sour near the stone, and the stone wore a coat of fine red fuzz. Grandmother always kept the biggest peach on the tree for me and ate the smaller ones herself. Neighbor Grandma Wang brought over zongzi she had wrapped, and Grandmother answered with half a basket of peaches, telling her to wait two days before eating, that hard peaches taste like nothing.

In the evenings Grandmother spread an old sheet under the tree and sat on a small stool fanning herself. Cicadas sang overhead, the smell of peaches drifted in the night wind, and now and then a fully ripe peach fell to the ground with a soft thud.

At the end of July Grandmother began making peach preserves. She peeled the peaches, broke them in half to remove the stones, simmered them slowly with rock sugar, poured them into washed old glass jars, and turned the jars upside down to cool. The whole summer was packed away this way, from green peaches into ripe ones, and from ripe ones into jars.

Later I went back to the city for school and grew farther from that yard. I have eaten many peaches since, lined up neatly in supermarkets, all the same size. Still, the best one has stayed in my memory, cooled in well water, warmed by the sun, and the kind of sweet someone saved on purpose for me.

一颗桃的夏天

我是一枚桃子，住在院子中央那棵歪脖子树上。清明前后，小主人还在树上开过花，粉白的花瓣落了我一头。后来花瓣谢了，我和兄弟姐妹们一个个从青豆子大小，长成了拳头大小。

五月初，外婆架起竹梯，把我和一个纸袋一起安顿下来。袋口用细铁丝拧着，只留一条缝透气。起初我闷得慌，外头的声音都变了样，蜜蜂落在袋子上，嗡嗡声像隔了一层水。外婆隔着袋子摸了摸我，说，再等等，还硬着呢。

我在袋子里数日子。白天太阳晒热纸壁，我身上一点点发软；夜里凉下来，露水顺着铁丝缝渗进来一点。我闻见自己身上的味道一天比一天浓——那是甜在往外走。袋外头，蝉从第一声叫

到了一片叫。

袋子里我也没闲着。我听见树下的日常：外婆清晨扫院子，笤帚一下一下；小主人蹲在树根写作业，笔尖沙沙，写错了就抓头发。有时他仰头朝我的袋子喊，桃熟了吗。外婆在屋里答，没熟，别老拽袋子，拽坏了虫子正好进去。

六月底的风掀开了我的袋口。我头一回看清外面的天，蓝得晃眼。紧接着，一只粗糙的大手把我摘了下来。外婆凑近闻了闻，对树下的孩子说，熟了，井水里镇一镇再吃。

井水凉得我打了个哆嗦。再被递到小主人手里时，他咬下我的第一口，汁水溅出来，顺着他的手腕淌下去。他喊，甜！我在他的牙齿间听见这句话。他啃到靠近我核的地方，有点酸，停了一下，还是把我吃完了，只留下一枚带红绒毛的核。

那颗核后来被小主人埋到了院墙根下。外婆看见了，也不挖出来，由它去。第二年春天，墙根冒出一芽红褐色的嫩叶，叶子还没长开，卷着，像攥紧的小拳头。

我不知道那算不算我的后代。我只记得那年的夏天：纸袋里的闷热，井水的凉，还有孩子咬下第一口时喊的那声甜。树上的桃子年年都结，可被记住的，总是被咬开的那一颗。

One Peach's Summer

I am a peach, living on the leaning tree in the middle of the yard. Around Qingming, blossoms opened all over my branches and the little master used to shake petals onto my head. Then the petals fell, and my brothers and sisters and I grew one by one from the size of a green bean to the size of a fist.

In early May, Grandmother set up the bamboo ladder and settled me inside a paper bag. The mouth of the bag was twisted shut with thin wire, leaving only a crack for air. At first I felt stifled; every sound outside changed shape. When a bee landed on my bag, its buzzing came through as if heard through water. Grandmother felt me through the paper and said, wait a little longer, you are still hard.

Inside the bag I counted the days. By day the sun warmed the paper walls and my body softened bit by bit; at night it cooled and a little dew seeped in along the wire crack. I could smell my own scent growing stronger each day, sweetness moving outward. Outside my bag, the cicadas grew from one voice into a chorus.

I was not idle inside the bag either. I overheard the life below the tree: Grandmother sweeping the yard at dawn, the broom one stroke after another; the little master squatting at the tree roots doing homework, his pen scratching, pulling at his hair whenever he made a mistake. Sometimes he looked up and shouted at my bag, are the peaches ripe yet. Grandmother answered from inside the house, not yet, stop tugging at the bags, tear them open and the insects will walk right in.

At the end of June the wind flipped my bag open. For the first time I saw the sky, blue enough to dazzle. Then a rough big hand picked me. Grandmother sniffed me and told the child under the tree, ripe, chill it in the well water first.

The well water was so cold it made me shiver. When the little master bit into me, my juice splashed out and ran down his wrist. He shouted, sweet! I heard that word between his teeth. Near my stone the flesh turned a little sour, he paused, then finished me anyway, leaving only a stone wearing a coat of red fuzz.

The child buried that stone at the foot of the courtyard wall. Grandmother saw it and did not dig it up; she let it be. Next spring a reddish-brown sprout came out by the wall, its leaves still rolled tight like little clenched fists.

I do not know whether that counts as my descendant. All I remember of that summer is the stuffy heat inside the paper bag, the cold of the well water, and the shout of sweet when the child took his first bite. The tree bears peaches every year, but the one remembered is always the one bitten open.

菜市场东口的瓜摊

老周的水瓜摊摆在菜市场东口，一辆三轮车，车斗里垫着旧棉被，瓜就躺在棉被上。每天下午四点，他拿一把小刀，靠瓜皮的颜色挑瓜：皮色发乌、纹路撑开的熟，皮色发亮、纹路挤得紧的还生。他拍一下，侧着耳朵听，听个闷响才放进秤。

放学路过的小学生林小满，是摊上的常客。她不买整个，只买切开的零块，五毛钱一块。老周切瓜有讲究，先削掉一圈白皮，再顺着纹路切成月牙，红瓤上黑籽排得整整齐齐。他把瓜递过来时总说一句，闻闻，生瓜我收回去。

林小满接过瓜，先不看，先闻。一股清冽的甜气从瓤上冒出来，混着点青草味。她咬一口，沙瓤在舌头上散开，甜里带着一点点凉，汁水从嘴角漏出来，滴在校服袖口上。她一边嚼一边往家走，走到巷口，手里只剩一片发白的瓜皮。

林小满曾跟着老周学过一手。老周让她抱来一个瓜，教她看瓜肚上那块黄斑，黄得深的是在地里晒足了日子的；再让她把瓜翻过来看瓜脐，脐眼收得小、四周光滑的，皮薄。她照着挑了一个，拍起来砰砰响，像敲一面小鼓。老周说，这个行，切开尝尝。瓜一刀下去自己裂开，红瓤绷得紧紧的，甜气一下子涌出来，围观的人都点头。那回老周没收钱，只说，学的。

有一年夏天，瓜摊迟迟不来。第四天傍晚终于来了，老周却只卸下几个小瓜。他蹲在车边，给人挑瓜的手有点抖。后来大人们小声说，瓜地淹了，大半的瓜烂在地里，这几个是高处抢收的。

那天收摊，老周把最后一个瓜切成八块，摆在车斗边上，谁路过都递一块。林小满也接了一块。那个瓜不算甜，瓤有点面，老周自己先咬了一口，咂咂嘴说，凑合，水大。他还是把最大那

块塞给了林小满。

开学以后，林小满在作文里写秋天的水果，写的是苹果和橘子。可一到夏天，她还是四点十分放学，绕到菜市场东口。老周的瓜摊还在那儿，棉被旧了一层，他挑瓜还是先看皮色，再拍，再听。

林小满举起一块瓜闻了闻，清冽的甜气扑上来。她咬下去，汁水又滴在校服袖口上。她想，明年夏天，这里应该还会有瓜。

The Melon Stand at the East Gate

Old Zhou's watermelon stand sat at the east gate of the market, one tricycle with an old quilt padded in the bed of the cart, the melons lying on the quilt. Every afternoon at four he took a small knife and chose melons by the color of their rind: dull skin with the stripes stretched open meant ripe, shiny skin with the stripes packed tight meant still green. He gave one a pat, tilted his ear to it, and only weighed out the ones that answered with a hollow thud.

Lin Xiaoman, a schoolchild who passed on her way home, was a regular. She never bought a whole melon, only cut pieces, five cents each. Old Zhou cut with ceremony: first he pared off a ring of white rind, then sliced along the stripes into crescents, black seeds set in neat rows across the red flesh. Handing the piece over he always said the same line, smell it first; if it is underripe I take it back.

Lin Xiaoman took the melon and smelled before looking. A clean cold sweetness rose off the flesh with a hint of grass. One bite, and the sandy flesh broke apart on her tongue, sweet with a thread of cool in it, juice escaping at the corner of her mouth onto the cuff of her school uniform. She walked home chewing, and by the mouth of the lane all she held was a rind gone white.

Lin Xiaoman once learned a trick or two from Old Zhou. He had her hug a melon up and taught her to read the yellow patch on its belly, the deep yellow meaning long days of sun in the field; then to turn it over and look at the navel, a small closed navel ringed by smooth skin meaning a thin rind. She picked one by the book and patted it, and it sounded like a little drum. Old Zhou said, this one will do, cut it open. One stroke of the knife and the melon split itself, the red flesh stretched tight, sweetness surging out, and everyone watching nodded. That time Old Zhou took no money and said only, tuition.

One summer the stand was late. It finally came on the fourth evening, but Old Zhou unloaded only a few small melons. He squatted by the cart, and his hand trembled a little as he picked them out for people. The grown-ups said in low voices that the

melon field had flooded, most of the melons rotted in the water, and these few had been rescued from the high ground.

That day at closing time Old Zhou cut the last melon into eight pieces and set them on the edge of the cart, offering a piece to anyone who passed. Lin Xiaoman took one too. That melon was not very sweet, its flesh a little mealy. Old Zhou bit one himself, smacked his lips and said, passable, mostly water. He still pushed the biggest piece into Lin Xiaoman's hands.

After school started, Lin Xiaoman wrote a composition about autumn fruit and filled it with apples and tangerines. But when summer came she still got out of class at four ten and detoured to the east gate of the market. Old Zhou's stand was still there, the quilt one shade older, and he still chose melons by looking at the rind first, then patting, then listening.

Lin Xiaoman held up a piece and smelled it, the clean cold sweetness rising to her face. She bit in, and the juice dropped onto her cuff again. Next summer, she thought, there should be melons here again.