瓜摊前的黄昏

太阳落到楼后头去了，暑气还没散，瓜摊的灯泡先亮了。二十来个瓜码在车厢里，底下垫着旧地毯，一张纸板斜靠在车轮边。卖瓜人站在车边，胳膊搭在车厢沿上，喊一声西瓜，沙瓤的。声音不高，却把整条街的嘈杂压出一条缝来。

先停下来的是几个摇蒲扇的老人。蒲扇搁在膝盖上，有一搭没一搭地摇，眼睛却盯着瓜。一个老头弯腰拍了一个，侧着耳朵听，摇头说这个空；又拍一个，点头说这个中。卖瓜人笑着应和，夸大爷好手。刀往瓜腰上一碰，瓜自己咧开嘴，红瓤翻出来，汁水顺着刀沿滴到地毯上。灯光照着那一片红，沙瓤一粒一粒，像浸在糖水里的细珠子。

小孩是闻着甜味来的。他们不拍瓜，只围着看切，看卖瓜人把瓜心那一块递出来。递给了最小的那个。大的也不恼，仰头看天，等下一刀。蒲扇的老人买走了半个，用网兜装了，扇着扇子慢慢走，走了几步回头叮嘱，明儿给我留个小的。留着呢，卖瓜人应得爽快。

街对面的水果店开着冷气和彩灯，瓜切好装在保鲜盒里，贴着价签。可这边摊前的人不走，他们要听那一刀下去瓜裂开的声音，要挑一个自己拍过、自己听过响的。卖瓜人不恼，吆喝一声比一声慢，反正夏夜长，西瓜管够。

卖瓜人自己不吃好瓜。切开的瓜他先递人，剩下的边皮他坐在车沿上啃，啃得慢，籽吐回地毯上，排成一小堆。有回我看见他啃到瓜心那块，停了一下，掰成两半，一半揣进兜里，说明儿带给他闺女。灯泡的光照着他背影，蒲扇的老人看见了，也没说话，第二天特意多带了把自家烙的饼给他。

收摊前，卖瓜人把最后一筐翻过来，挑出两个裂了口的，切成块，摆在车沿上，给凑过来的街坊随便拿。灯泡熄了，纸板收了，卡车发动，吆喝声跟着车走远，变成巷子深处一点模糊的响动。蒲扇的老人还坐在原处，摇着扇子，说明儿再来。

Dusk at the Watermelon Stand

The sun had dropped behind the buildings, but the heat had not cleared when the bulb at the watermelon stand lit up first. Two dozen melons were stacked in the truck bed on an old carpet, and a cardboard sign leaned against the wheel. The seller stood at the side with one arm on the bed rail and called out, watermelon, sandy flesh. Not loudly, yet the call pressed a seam through the noise of the whole street.

The first to stop were a few old people waving palm-leaf fans. The fans rested on their knees, rocking now and then, while their eyes stayed on the melons. One old man bent down, tapped one, listened sideways, and shook his head: this one is hollow. He tapped another and nodded: this one is right. The seller laughed with him and praised the old gentleman for his good hand. The knife touched the waist of the melon and the melon opened its mouth by itself, red flesh turning out, juice dripping along the blade onto the carpet. The lamplight fell on that red, the sandy pulp grain by grain,

like tiny beads soaked in sugar water.

The children came following the sweetness. They did not tap melons; they just circled and watched the cutting, watching the seller hand out the heart piece of the melon. It went to the smallest one. The bigger children did not sulk; they tilted their heads to watch the sky, waiting for the next stroke of the knife. The old men with fans bought half a melon each, put them in string bags, and walked away slowly, fanning, and one turned back after a few steps to say, save me a small one tomorrow. Will do, the seller answered readily.

Across the street the fruit shop ran cold air and colored lights, with melon cut and packed in plastic boxes under price tags. But the people at this stand would not leave. They wanted to hear the melon crack open under one stroke of the knife, and to choose one they had tapped and listened to themselves. The seller did not mind; his cry grew slower and slower, and anyway the summer night is long and there are plenty of melons.

The seller himself did not eat the good parts. He handed out the cut melon first, and sat on the bed rail gnawing the rind edges, slowly, spitting the seeds back onto the carpet in a small pile. Once I saw him reach the heart piece, pause, break it in two, and put one half into his pocket, saying he would bring it to his daughter tomorrow. The bulb lit his back, and the old man with the fan saw it and said nothing; the next day he brought an extra flatbread baked at home for him.

Before closing, he turned the last basket over, picked out two that had split, cut them into pieces, and set them on the bed rail for whoever came near. The bulb went out, the sign was packed, the truck started, and the cry traveled away with the vehicle until it became a blurred sound deep in the alley. The old men with fans still sat where they were, fanning, saying, come back tomorrow.