冬天的橘子

入冬的第一批橘子上市，我在菜场挑了十斤。摊主问够不够吃，我说够，一家人围着炉子，一冬就着话吃完。这话脱口而出，说完自己愣了一下，原来吃橘子在我这里，从来不是一个人的事。

小时候的冬天是从剥橘子开始的。母亲把橘子放在棉袄袖子里焐，放学回家她掏出一个，还带着体温。我剥皮，指甲掐进橘蒂，一圈剥开，皮雾像白汽一样喷出来，呛得打个喷嚏。母亲说慢点，皮别扔，晒干了过年泡水。我把皮掰成花瓣状，摆在窗台上一排排晒着，比橘子本身还像风景。

橘子上的白丝，归祖母管。她吃橘子极慢，剥完皮还要把白丝一条条撕净，说留着上火。我嫌她麻烦，她笑笑，把撕下来的络堆在小碟里，说这东西药铺里也卖。那时我不懂，长大后才明白，一个人肯为一瓣橘子花这些工夫，是把日子当回事。

围炉是冬夜的正经节目。父亲生一只小煤炉，坐上水壶，橘子搁在炉沿上烤。烤过的橘子皮香得发甜，满屋子都是。一人一瓣地传着吃，话也一瓣一瓣地传。父亲讲他年轻时的事，母亲插嘴纠正，我负责添煤。炉火映着三个人的脸，橘子不酸，冬天也不觉得长。

如今我在城里也有了自己的炉子，电的，干净，可惜没有煤烟味。女儿吃橘子学我小时候的样子，把皮掰成花瓣摆着，只是不晒，说留着做手工。她不吃橘络，我学着祖母的样子替她一条条撕，撕到一半自己笑了，当年嫌麻烦的人，如今嫌得心甘情愿。

前几日回老家，母亲八十多了，还在棉袄袖子里给我焐橘子。我剥开，白雾还是那个白雾，呛出的喷嚏还是那个喷嚏。橘子从童年滚到白头，一路都是剥皮的手、撕络的手、递到嘴边的手。冬天再冷，只要炉子还温着，橘子还一人一瓣地传，这个家就还是那个家。

The Tangerines of Winter

The first tangerines of winter arrive at the market, and I buy ten jin. The seller asks if that is enough for the season. I say yes, a family around the stove, eating them through winter one talk at a time. The words come out of me without thinking, and I pause afterward, surprised to find that eating tangerines has never been a one-person business for me.

Winter in childhood began with peeling a tangerine. My mother kept them warm inside the sleeve of her padded coat, and when I came home from school she took one out, still holding the heat of her body. I peeled mine, my nail digging into the stem, opening the skin in one unbroken spiral, a mist from the peel puffing out like white steam and setting me to sneezing. My mother said slow down, do not throw the peels away, dry them for New Year water. I broke the peels into flower shapes and lined them on the windowsill to sun, a row of scenery more beautiful than the fruit

itself.

The white threads on a tangerine belonged to my grandmother. She ate them very slowly, tearing off every pale thread before eating, saying the threads caused heat in the body. I found it a fuss. She only smiled, piled the torn threads on a small dish, and said the medicine shop even sold them. I did not understand then. Grown up, I know now that a person willing to spend such care on one segment of tangerine is taking life seriously.

Around the stove was the proper show of a winter night. My father lit a small coal stove and set the kettle on it, tangerines roasting on the rim. Roasted peel smells sweet, and the whole house filled with it. We ate one segment at a time, passing them around, and the talk passed the same way. Father told stories of his youth, mother interrupted to correct him, I was in charge of feeding coal. The stove light shone on three faces, the tangerines were not sour, and winter did not feel long.

Now I have a stove of my own in the city, electric and clean, sadly without the smell of coal smoke. My daughter peels tangerines the way I did, breaking the peels into flower shapes and laying them out, except she does not dry them; she says she will use them for crafts. She does not eat the white threads, so I learn the patience of my grandmother and tear them off for her, one by one, and halfway through I laugh at myself. The one who once found it a fuss now does the fussing gladly.

The other day I went home. My mother, past eighty, was still warming a tangerine for me inside her coat sleeve. I peeled it; the mist was the same mist, the sneeze it brought was the same sneeze. The tangerine has rolled from my childhood to white hair, all the way a hand peeling, a hand tearing threads, a hand passing to a mouth. Winter can be as cold as it likes; as long as the stove is still warm and the tangerines still pass one segment at a time, this home is still that home.

炉边的一瓣橘子

巷子东头的老周，入冬必生炉子。炉子一坐水，整条巷子的孩子都闻得见，放学书包一撂就往他门口聚。不为别的，为他那炉沿上烤着的橘子。

老周分橘子有规矩：一人一瓣，自己剥。孩子接了橘子学他剥，指甲从橘蒂转一圈，皮雾喷出来，有个女孩打了个喷嚏，满屋子人笑。老周不笑，说橘子皮别丢，教孩子把皮掰成四瓣，摊在窗台上晒，说晒干了泡水消食。孩子们照做，晒了一排，像给冬天镶了圈金边。

他挑橘子还挑橘络。别个嫌白丝麻烦，他偏让孩子把白丝撕下来收着，说这叫橘络，晒干了

是药材。有个小子偷懒，把带络的橘子直接塞嘴里，老周也不恼，让他尝尝络的味道，苦的。小子咂咂嘴，回头老老实实回来撕。孩子们在他炉边学会的头一门手艺，就是把一瓣橘子吃干净。

炉边的夜晚长。老周话不多，孩子讲学校的事他听着，偶尔插一句。有一年冬天，一个父母都在外地上学的男孩天天来，老周不多问，橘子照分，炉子照生。男孩长大后来谢他，他只说那年他一个人剥橘子冷清，多个人热闹。这话传遍巷子，各家大人听了都记着，第二年冬天，炉边的孩子更多了。

我搬离巷子那年也是冬天，炉子还坐着水。老周塞给我一兜橘子，说路上剥着吃，皮吐干净别弄一车。车开出去很远，我剥一个，白雾喷出，呛得眼都湿了。巷子里的炉火、晒着的橘皮、撕得整整齐齐的橘络，都跟着那口喷嚏回到了身上。

前年回去，老周的炉子换成了电暖炉，烤橘子的味道淡了些，规矩没变：一人一瓣，自己剥，络撕净。他的孙子替他把络收进小布袋，说要寄给上大学的姐姐。我站在炉边，忽然明白这条巷子这些年靠什么暖着——靠的不是炉子，是那一瓣一瓣传下去的规矩，和规矩里不肯说破的心。

A Segment of Tangerine by the Stove

Old Zhou at the east end of the lane lit his stove every winter without fail. The moment the kettle sat on it, every child in the lane could smell it, and after school they dropped their schoolbags and gathered at his door. Not for anything else, but for the tangerines roasting on the rim of his stove.

Old Zhou had rules for sharing tangerines: one segment each, and you peel your own. The children took a tangerine and learned to peel like him, nail circling from the stem, the peel mist puffing out. One girl sneezed and the whole room laughed. Old Zhou did not laugh. He said do not throw the peels, and taught the children to break them into four petals and spread them on the windowsill to dry, saying dried peel steeped in water helps digestion. The children obeyed and lined them up to dry, as if fitting the winter with a golden border.

He was particular about the white threads too. Others found them a nuisance; he made the children tear them off and save them, saying these are the tangerine threads, dried they are medicine. One boy got lazy and popped a thread-covered segment straight into his mouth. Old Zhou did not scold him; he let him taste the thread, which was bitter. The boy smacked his lips and came back obediently to tear them off properly. The first craft the children learned by his stove was to eat a segment of tangerine clean.

The nights by the stove were long. Old Zhou was not talkative; he listened while the children told school stories and put in a word now and then. One winter a boy whose parents worked in another city came every day. Old Zhou asked nothing, shared

the tangerines as always, and lit the stove as always. Years later the grown man came to thank him, and Old Zhou only said that year he had been lonely peeling tangerines alone, and more people made it lively. The words spread through the lane, the grown-ups each remembered, and the next winter there were more children by the stove.

The year I moved away from the lane was also a winter, and the stove still had a kettle on it. Old Zhou pressed a bag of tangerines into my hands and said peel them on the road and keep the peels tidy, do not litter the bus. Long after the bus pulled out, I peeled one, the mist sprayed up, and my eyes went wet from the sting. The stove fire of the lane, the peels drying on sills, the threads torn neat and saved, all came back to me riding on that sneeze.

The year before last I went back. Old Zhou had switched to an electric heater, and the taste of roasted peel was thinner, but the rules had not changed: one segment each, peel your own, tear the threads clean. His grandson gathered the threads into a small cloth bag for him, saying he would mail them to his sister at university. Standing by the stove I suddenly understood what had kept this lane warm all these years. It was not the stove. It was the rules passed along one segment at a time, and the hearts inside those rules that no one ever said out loud.

我教学生剥橘子

我在小学教语文，年年冬天都带一届新的孩子。去年冬至那天的班会，我抱了一兜橘子进教室，说今天不上课，分橘子。孩子们欢呼，我以为这事简单，没想到一只橘子把手教出了名堂。

橘子发下去，多数孩子张嘴就咬，连皮带肉。我喊停，说橘子要先剥。会剥的几个演示，指甲掐进橘蒂，转一圈，皮揭起来像掀盖。不会剥的急，抠得指甲缝里全是汁。旁边会剥的凑过去手把手教，教室里一片橘皮的清苦味。我站在讲台上没帮上什么忙，忽然有点惭愧：这双手的活儿，我早忘了是怎么学的，孩子们却正在彼此传递。

剥开之后问题更多。白丝，一半孩子嫌苦要抠掉，一半直接连丝嚼。我没讲道理，借了教室后面的暖炉，把橘子搁在炉边烤。烤过之后白丝不苦了，橘子还甜。有个女孩问我为什么，我说大概是热气把脾气磨掉了。她想了想说，跟人一样。全班笑，我也笑，这句是那天最好的造句。

围炉分橘子那节课后来出了名，别的班来问，我照方抓药：自己剥，丝撕净，一人一瓣传着吃。高年级的男孩起初嫌幼稚，剥得比谁都快，吃完主动去撕下一位的丝，嘴上说不为别的，就为看着乱。我记在观察日记里，没告诉家长。有些变化说出来就轻了，让它自己在橘子上一瓣一瓣长着。

期末散学，有个孩子的母亲塞给我一兜橘子，说孩子回家让她别扔橘皮，说老师晒过橘皮泡水好喝。我道谢收下，回家摆在窗台。水没泡，皮慢慢干了，卷起边，颜色沉下去，像一页书签。

今年冬至，我又抱了一兜进教室。指甲掐进橘蒂，转一圈，皮雾喷出，前排的孩子打喷嚏，全班笑。我站在讲台上等这阵笑过去，心里踏实：课本会翻过去，手序不会。一兜橘子教不会多少道理，可剥皮、撕络、让一瓣先给别人，这些会在他们手里存很多年，像橘皮的香，呛一次，记一冬。

I Taught My Students to Peel Tangerines

I teach Chinese in an elementary school, and every winter I get a new class of children. Last year on the winter solstice I carried a bag of tangerines into the classroom for the class meeting and said no lesson today, we share tangerines. The children cheered. I thought it would be simple. I did not expect a tangerine to teach a lesson about hands.

When the tangerines went around, most children bit straight in, peel and flesh together. I called stop and said a tangerine must be peeled first. The few who knew how demonstrated: nail into the stem, one turn around, the skin lifting like a lid. The ones who could not peel grew frantic, digging until their nail beds were full of juice. Those who could leaned over to guide the others hand over hand, and the classroom filled with the clean bitterness of peel. I stood at the podium useless, and felt a flash of shame: I had long forgotten how these hands learned their work, while the children were passing it to one another right now.

After peeling came more questions. Half the children picked off the white threads, calling them bitter; the other half chewed them on. I did not lecture. I borrowed the heater from the back of the classroom and set tangerines by it to roast. After roasting the threads stopped being bitter and the fruit turned sweeter. A girl asked why. I said perhaps the heat files down the temper. She thought a moment and said, just like people. The class laughed, and so did I. That was the best sentence made that day.

The stove-side tangerine lesson later became famous. Other classes asked, and I followed the same recipe: peel your own, tear the threads clean, pass one segment at a time. Boys from the upper grades first called it childish, then peeled faster than anyone, and after finishing went on to tear the threads for the next person, saying it was for nothing, they just hated seeing mess. I wrote it in my observation journal and did not tell the parents. Some changes grow light if spoken of; let them keep growing on the tangerine, one segment at a time.

At the end-of-term dismissal the mother of one student pressed a bag of tangerines into my hands, saying her child told her at home not to throw the peels, because the teacher dried peels and steeped them for drinking. I thanked her, took

them home, and laid them on the windowsill. I never steeped them. The peels dried slowly, edges curling, color deepening, like a page turned into a bookmark.

This winter solstice I carried another bag into the classroom. Nails into stems, one turn around, peel mist spraying, the front row sneezed, the whole class laughed. I stood at the podium waiting for the laughter to pass, feeling settled: textbooks get turned past, but the order of the hands does not. A bag of tangerines teaches few great truths, but peeling, tearing the threads, letting one segment go to someone else first, these will stay in their hands for many years, like the smell of peel: one sting, and the memory lasts all winter.