隔壁院子的西瓜诗

老周把竹床搬到院里，蒲扇搁在肚子上。六月的夜风从巷子那头过来，带着谁家晒的皂角香。隔壁小院亮着灯，那家人在瓜架底下乘凉，他听得见他们摆碗筷的动静。

忽然隔壁传来一个童声，一字一顿：绿瓜躺桌上，怀里抱个夏。老周的扇子停了。接着是女人的声音，伴着咔嚓一声脆响，瓜开了：刀进轻轻，瓜笑开怀。童声笑成一串，数瓜籽，数到十几就乱了。

老周听得出，那是孩子在念诗，念给大人听，也念给瓜听。他想起四十年前自家的瓜地。父亲蹲在地头，挑瓜拍着听声，拍这个，太生，拍那个，正好。母亲把挑好的瓜吊进井里，说晚上捞上来冰着吃。那时候没人念诗，可父亲把瓜从井里吊上来、水珠往下滴的那一下，老周觉得比什么诗都好。原来诗是这么回事——好日子过到头上，人就忍不住一句一句往外说。

隔壁的声音没停。女人说：大块给爷爷。男人接：小块给我吃。童声拔得高高的：最甜的那块，给心里想着别人的人。然后是抢着挑块的嬉闹，碗碰了盆，盆碰了桌。老周想象那个场面，嘴角自己往上走。他小时候也是这么分瓜的，奶奶总说她不爱吃甜的，把中间那芯让出来，让了四十年。

童声忽然背错了句，卡住了，安静两秒，大人没催。孩子自己接上：咬一口，夏天甜；再咬一口，全家人都甜。接得又快又响，像从井里捞上来的瓜，稳稳落在盆里。老周鼓起掌来，隔壁听见了，童声隔着墙喊：周爷爷，你也听我们的诗呀！他扬声答：听见了，好诗，比戏文还好。

那晚老周睡得香，梦里是井水镇过的瓜，一刀下去，凉气冒上来。第二天一早，他让孙女小禾抱一只自家院里的瓜过去——他今年也种了一只，就为这个。小禾回来学：那家的姐姐说，谢谢周爷爷，我们的诗下一首写你，写一个听诗的爷爷。老周背着手在院里转了两圈，没说话，扇子摇得比平时快。

打那以后，一到夏夜，隔壁念诗，老周就在竹床上坐着听，像听一档固定的节目。有一晚孩子念：井里的瓜，滴着凉；隔壁的爷爷，摇着扇。老周的扇子停了半拍。他不知道这句诗里有他，只觉得那晚的夜风，比往常又甜了一点。

The Watermelon Poem from the Yard Next Door

Old Zhou moved his bamboo cot into the yard and laid the palm fan on his belly. The June night wind came down from the end of the lane, carrying the scent of soap pods drying at someone else’s door. The small yard next door was lit up; that family was cooling off under the melon trellis, and he could hear them setting out bowls and chopsticks.

Suddenly a child’s voice rose from next door, word by word: A green melon lies on the table, holding a whole summer inside. Old Zhou’s fan stopped. Then a woman’s voice, followed by a crisp crack as the melon opened: The knife goes in softly, the melon opens with a laugh. The child’s voice broke into a string of laughter,

counting the seeds, losing count somewhere past ten.

Old Zhou could tell the child was reciting a poem, to the grown-ups and to the melon. It reminded him of his own family's melon field forty years ago. His father crouched at the head of the field, tapping melons and listening, this one too green, that one just right. His mother lowered the chosen melon into the well on a rope, saying they would fish it out at night, chilled. Nobody recited poems in those days, yet the moment his father lifted the melon from the well, water dripping off it, old Zhou felt it was better than any poem. So that is what a poem is, he thought. When a good day lands on a person, the lines come out of the mouth by themselves.

The voices next door went on. The woman said: The big piece goes to grandpa. The man took up: The small piece to me. The child's voice climbed high: The sweetest piece goes to whoever thinks of someone else. Then the scuffle of choosing pieces, bowls bumping basins, basins bumping the table. Old Zhou pictured the scene, the corners of his mouth lifting on their own. He had divided melons this way as a boy too. His grandmother always claimed she did not care for sweet things, and gave away the heart of the melon, for forty years.

The child's voice suddenly mixed up a line and stalled. Two seconds of quiet, and the grown-ups did not hurry her. The child picked it up herself: One bite, and summer is sweet; another bite, and the whole family is sweet. She picked it up fast and clear, like a melon hauled from the well, landing steady in the basin. Old Zhou applauded. Next door heard him, and the child's voice called through the wall: Grandpa Zhou, you are listening to our poem too! He answered loudly: I heard it, good poem, better than the opera.

That night old Zhou slept well, dreaming of melon chilled in well water, opened with one stroke of the knife, coolness rising off the cut. Early the next morning he had his granddaughter Xiao He carry a melon over to them, one he had grown in his own yard this year, grown for just this. Xiao He came back reporting: The big sister next door said thank you Grandpa Zhou, and our next poem will be about you, about a grandpa who listens to poems. Old Zhou walked two slow circles in the yard with his hands behind his back, said nothing, and waved his fan faster than usual.

After that, on summer nights when the neighbors recited, old Zhou sat on his bamboo cot and listened, like a favorite radio program. One night the child recited: Melon in the well, dripping cool; grandpa next door, fanning slow. Old Zhou's fan missed a beat. He did not know there was a line about him in that poem; he only felt that night's wind was a little sweeter than before.