老屋的柚子树又结果了

父亲在电话里说，院子里的柚子树结果了，结得沉，压得枝条去够地面。他说这话时语气平常，像在通报一件迟到的旧事。可我握着手机站在写字楼的窗边，楼下是车流，我却满鼻子都是那股清苦的香气。

那棵树比我记事还老。树干粗，皮裂成一块一块，像老人手背。夏天它在院里撑开一大片荫，母亲在树下摆竹床，我睡在荫里，阳光从叶缝筛下来，落在脸上碎成铜钱大小。柚子成熟是在秋末，青黄的果子挂满枝头，风一过，整棵树都在轻轻晃，像攒了一树的心事要说。树下纳凉的日子结束了，柚子把秋天正式交到了人手里。

摘柚子要上梯子。父亲把竹梯靠在树上，踩上去，人高出树冠半头。他一手扶枝，一手拧果子，手腕一转，柚子就落进下面张开的布袋里。我在树下拽着袋角，看他在梯子上挪动，影子投在地上，比人长得多。他摘得慢，每个都要托起来看一看，歪的、有虫眼的留下自己吃，周正的留待送人。有一年他失手滑了一个，柚子砸在草地上滚出老远，我们全家追着跑，像追一个逃逸的月亮。

分食柚子是在晚饭后。最大的那个摆在桌子正中，父亲用刀在顶上划一个十字，四只手顺着把皮往下掰，白汽腾起来，满屋都是那股又苦又清的香。瓤衣要剥掉，母亲剥得仔细，一瓣一瓣码在盘里。柚子是微酸的，带一点苦，小孩舌头挑剔，往往嫌它不如橘子甜。可一家人围着桌子，一瓣接一瓣地吃，谁也不说话，只有剥皮的声音。那时我不懂，如今才懂：那种安静就是好日子的声音。

我在城里买的柚子皮薄肉甜，反倒吃不出那个味道。今年霜降后，我学着父亲的样子，在顶上划十字，四瓣掰开，白汽腾起的一瞬，我忽然站住了。原来有些味道是指针，一拨就回到旧年的院子。我给父亲回电话，说明年柚子红了，我回去，梯子我扶。

The Old House Pomelo Tree Bore Fruit Again

Father said on the phone that the pomelo tree in the courtyard bore fruit again, heavy fruit, bending the branches down toward the ground. He said it in an ordinary tone, like reporting an old piece of news running late. But I stood holding the phone at the window of an office tower, traffic flowing below, and my nostrils were full of that clean bitter fragrance.

The tree is older than my memory. Its trunk is thick, its bark cracked into patches like an old man’s knuckles. In summer it spread a great shade over the yard. Mother set the bamboo bed under it, and I slept in the shade while sunlight sifted through the leaf gaps and landed on my face, broken into copper-coin pieces. Pomelos ripen at late autumn: green-gold fruit hung on every branch, and when wind passed, the whole tree swayed gently, as if it had gathered a season’s worth of thoughts to

say. The days of resting under the tree ended; the pomelos formally handed autumn over to human hands.

Picking pomelos requires a ladder. Father leaned the bamboo ladder against the trunk and climbed until his head rose half a head above the canopy. One hand on a branch, the other twisting the fruit, a turn of the wrist, and the pomelo dropped into the cloth bag spread open below. I held the corner of the bag at the foot of the tree, watching him shift along the ladder, his shadow stretched on the ground, far longer than the man. He picked slowly, lifting each fruit to inspect it: crooked ones and insect-nicked ones kept for the family, well-shaped ones saved for gifts. One year he slipped and dropped one. The pomelo struck the grass and rolled far off, and the whole family chased after it like chasing an escaped moon.

Sharing the pomelo happened after dinner. The largest one sat in the center of the table. Father scored a cross on its top with the knife, and four hands peeled the rind downward together. A white mist rose, and the whole room filled with that fragrance, bitter and clean at once. The pith must be stripped; Mother did it meticulously, segment by segment, stacking them on a plate. Pomelo is faintly sour with a touch of bitterness. Children's tongues are fussy and often find it less sweet than tangerines. But the family sat around the table eating segment after segment, no one speaking, only the sound of peeling. I did not understand then. I understand now: that silence was the sound of good days.

The pomelos I buy in the city have thin rinds and sweet flesh, yet somehow taste of nothing. After this year's Frost Descent, I imitated Father, scored a cross on top, pulled the rind open in four sections, and in the instant the white mist rose, I suddenly stood still. So some flavors are compass needles: touch them and you are back in the courtyard of old years. I called Father back and said: next year when the pomelos redden, I am coming home. I will hold the ladder.

母亲腌的柚子皮

秋天的柚子在南方人家从不空着手离开。果肉吃完，皮也绝不肯进垃圾桶——母亲会把四瓣的大皮摞起来，压在门后的缸盖上，说还有用。小时候我对此深不以为然：皮有什么好吃？别人的皮是垃圾，我家的皮是待用。

摘柚子那天全家出动。树不高，父亲托我，我骑在他肩上，双手抱住果子拧。柚子沉，摘下来得两个人接力往下传，从树上传到屋顶上，再递到母亲手里，母亲在墙根接，接住就往怀里拢，像接一个新生儿。那年的柚子格外多，缸摞满了皮，母亲又拿绳子把皮串起来挂在屋檐下，一串串黄澄澄的，邻居路过说，你家在晒灯笼。

腌柚子皮是道工序，母亲做得郑重。皮要先泡，每天换水，泡足三天，把苦气逼出去；再切细丝，焯水，挤干，拌上白糖和麦芽糖，上锅小火熬。熬的时候人不能走开，糖汁起了小泡要搅，搅慢了糊锅。我在灶口添柴，母亲在锅前搅，糖香混着柚皮的清苦从锅里漫出来，整个灶间都甜了。熬好装进罐子，倒扣过来晾凉，罐口那一圈糖渍像给罐子描了边。

起初我是嫌弃它的。同学吃橘子糖，我家吃柚子皮，咬起来筋筋的，甜里总藏着一线苦。母亲不劝，只自己吃，早起含一片配粥。转折在离家那年。我在异乡的冬天感冒，喉咙干痛，翻行李翻出那罐母亲塞进箱底的柚子皮。含一片在嘴里，那股熟悉的清苦漫上来，苦后回甜，我的眼泪毫无道理地下来了。原来我嫌弃了二十年的味道，被母亲提前腌好了，一路带在我身边。

如今我也学着腌。泡水的第三天，我会捏起一根皮丝尝尝，苦味淡了，就轮到糖上场。我这才敢承认：母亲这一辈子就是柚子皮的配方，苦是要去掉的，去不掉的，就用糖慢慢熬着。去年回家，屋檐下没再挂柚子皮，缸也空着。我把一罐自己腌的放在她手里，她尝了一片，点头，说熬得可以。她不知道，我熬一锅的时候，搅的是记忆。

The Pomelo Peel Mother Preserved

In southern households, autumn pomelos never leave empty-handed. Once the flesh is eaten, the rind certainly does not go into the trash. Mother would stack the four big sections of peel and press them under the lid of the jar behind the door, saying they still had use. As a child I strongly disapproved: what is good about peel? Other people’s peel is garbage; ours is material in waiting.

The whole family turned out on picking day. The tree was not tall. Father lifted me and I straddled his shoulders, arms wrapped around the fruit, twisting. Pomelos are heavy, so a picked one passed down by relay: from the branches to the roof, then into Mother’s hands at the foot of the wall. She caught it and gathered it to her chest, like receiving a newborn. That year the crop was unusually heavy. The jar overflowed with rinds, so Mother threaded more onto string and hung them under the eaves, strand after strand of golden yellow. A neighbor passing by said: your family is drying lanterns.

Preserving pomelo peel is a craft, and Mother treated it with ceremony. The rind must soak first, water changed daily, a full three days to drive out the bitterness; then it is sliced into fine shreds, blanched, squeezed dry, tossed with white sugar and malt sugar, and simmered in the wok over low heat. No one may walk away while it cooks. When the syrup raises tiny bubbles, it must be stirred; stir too slowly and the bottom scorches. I fed firewood at the mouth of the stove while Mother stirred at the wok. The sweetness of sugar mixed with the clean bitterness of pomelo peel spread out of the pot, and the whole kitchen turned sweet. Done, it went into jars, turned upside down to cool, the ring of sugar candied around the mouth like a drawn border.

At first I disdained it. Classmates ate tangerine candy; my family ate pomelo peel, chewy in the teeth, with a thread of bitterness always hiding inside the sweetness. Mother did not argue. She simply ate it herself, letting a piece dissolve over morning porridge. The turn came the year I left home. In a foreign city one winter I caught a cold, my throat raw, and rummaging through my bag I found the jar Mother had tucked into the bottom of my suitcase. I let a piece sit in my mouth. That familiar clean bitterness rose, and after the bitterness came the sweetness, and my tears fell for no reason at all. So the flavor I had disdained for twenty years had been preserved in advance by Mother, carried along at my side the whole way.

Now I too am learning to preserve. On the third day of soaking, I pinch up a shred and taste it: when the bitterness fades, it is sugar's turn to enter. Only now do I dare admit it: Mother's whole life followed the pomelo-peel recipe. Bitterness is meant to be removed; what cannot be removed is slowly simmered with sugar. Last year when I went home, no pomelo peel hung under the eaves, and the jar stood empty. I placed a jar of my own preserving into her hands. She tasted a piece, nodded, and said the simmering was good. She does not know that as I stirred the pot, what I stirred was memory.

女儿在柚子树下踮脚

我在城里的院子种柚子树，是七年前的事。那时女儿刚上小学，总问我秋天是什么味道。我答不上来。城里的秋天只有桂花香，甜得太客气。我想让她知道一种又苦又清、苦尽之后回甘的味道，于是挖坑，栽苗，浇水，像把一个南方的秋天埋进北方的土里。

柚子树在北方长得慢，头五年只开花不结果，第六年结了三个，被冬天的寒流冻掉两个。第七年秋天，树上挂了七个柚子，青里透黄，一个个沉甸甸地坠着。女儿每天放学先去数一遍，从七个数成七个，她不满意，问为什么不多几个。我说树还年轻，它得先学会活，再学会结果。

摘柚子那天，女儿踮着脚够最矮的那个，够不着，回头喊我。我把她举起来，她两只手抱住柚子拧，拧得脸通红，喊爸爸它不听话。柚子终于脱枝，落进她怀里，她抱着不撒手，抱着走了十几步才想起来放进篮子。那个瞬间我恍惚了一下：三十年前，我也是这样抱着一个柚子，在老家的树下，父亲的手在我背后，稳得像一堵墙。如今换我做那堵墙。

分食在傍晚。七个柚子摆上桌，我学着父亲的样子在顶上划十字，女儿学我的样子掰皮。白汽腾起来，她凑近闻，说像把树叶和糖放在一起的味道。我说对，柚子的香气就是树攒了一年的话。我们一人一瓣，剥掉瓤衣。女儿那瓣酸，她皱着脸灌了口水，又去拿第二瓣，说再给它一次机会。她妈在旁边笑，说这话像她外婆说的——三十年前，我的母亲也是这样，把不甜的柚子让给全家，自己吃最酸的那瓣，还说再给它一次机会。

晚上女儿在作文里写：我家的柚子树今年会结果了，明年会结更多。我把这句话抄进我的日

记。树用七年学会结果，人用三十年学会懂一颗柚子。秋天年年都来，它不着急。它知道总有一个孩子会在树下踮起脚，接过上一代人递下来的、微酸带苦的那一瓣，然后抬起头，笑。

My Daughter Stood on Tiptoe Under the Pomelo Tree

I planted the pomelo tree in our city yard seven years ago. Our daughter had just started primary school then and kept asking me what autumn tasted like. I could not answer. Autumn in the city offers only osmanthus fragrance, a sweetness too polite. I wanted her to know a flavor that is bitter and clean, sweet only after the bitterness passes. So I dug the hole, set the sapling, watered it, as if burying a southern autumn in northern soil.

Pomelo trees grow slowly in the north. For the first five years they flowered but bore nothing. The sixth year produced three fruits, and the winter cold snap knocked two off. In the seventh autumn, seven pomelos hung on the branches, green shading into gold, each one heavy with intent. After school our daughter counted them every day, seven again becoming seven, and she was not satisfied: why not more? I said the tree is still young. First it must learn to live; then it learns to bear fruit.

On picking day, our daughter stood on tiptoe reaching for the lowest fruit and could not reach it, turning back to call me. I lifted her up. She wrapped both arms around the pomelo and twisted, her face red, shouting: Daddy, it will not behave. At last the fruit came off the branch and fell into her arms. She would not let go. She carried it a dozen steps before remembering the basket. In that instant I was dazed: thirty years ago, I too held a pomelo like that, under the tree in the old hometown, my father’s hands steady as a wall behind my back. Now it is my turn to be the wall.

We shared the fruit at dusk. Seven pomelos on the table. I imitated my father, scoring a cross on top; our daughter imitated me, peeling the rind back. When the white mist rose, she leaned in to smell it and said it smells like leaves and sugar put together. I said yes: a pomelo’s fragrance is the tree’s year of gathered speech. One segment each, pith stripped. Hers was sour. She screwed up her face, chased it with water, then reached for a second segment, saying: I will give it another chance. Her mother laughed beside us and said that sounds like her grandmother. Thirty years ago, my own mother did exactly this: gave the least sweet segments to the whole family, kept the sourest for herself, and said: give it another chance.

At night our daughter wrote in her composition: our pomelo tree bore fruit this year, and next year it will bear more. I copied that sentence into my diary. A tree takes seven years to learn to fruit; a person takes thirty years to understand one

pomelo. Autumn comes every year, unhurried. It knows that someday a child will rise on tiptoe under the tree, accept the faintly sour, faintly bitter segment handed down from the generation before, and then look up and smile.