稻穗弯腰的时候

天刚亮，爸爸就喊我起床。今天要跟爷爷去田里收稻子。我趴在窗边一看，好家伙，田里的稻子全黄了，一大片一大片，像谁把太阳碾碎了撒在地上。

走到田边，稻穗一个一个弯着腰，脑袋垂得低低的，离脚尖只差一点点。我伸手摸了摸，谷粒硬硬的，扎手。风一吹，整片田哗啦哗啦响，黄浪从这头滚到那头，几只蜻蜓被惊起来，又落在穗尖上。我捏住一个稻穗想把它扶直，手一松，它又弹回原来的样子。爷爷说，穗子越饱满，腰弯得越低，空壳的才昂着头。我低头看看自己，今天可得向稻穗学学。

中午，收割机突突突开进田里，声音大得我捂住耳朵。它前面吞进去稻子，后面吐出碎稻草，一会儿就吃掉一大片。机器惊起一群麻雀，落在远处的电线上，歪着头看。爷爷跟在机器后头，弯着腰捡掉下来的稻穗，一捧一捧塞进蛇皮袋。他说漏掉的也要拾回家，一粒都不能浪费。

我在田埂上跑。田埂窄窄的，两边都是稻子，我张开胳膊保持平衡，像走一根金色的独木桥。稻叶划过手背，痒痒的。稻茬戳脚底板，硌人。我跑到田埂这头，回头再看，爷爷的田少了一角，割过的地方平平整整，没割的地方稻穗还在弯腰。

爷爷从田埂头的水壶里倒了一缸子水递给我，水是凉白开，我咕咚咕咚灌了半缸子，剩下的浇在头上，凉得打了个哆嗦。爷爷把装满的蛇皮袋口拧成麻花，往肩上一甩，让我帮忙拎另一小袋。那小袋有二十来斤，我两只手抱着走，走三步换一次手，稻粒在袋底磨得沙沙响。爷爷走在前头，步子又大又稳，扁担在他肩上一起一落。

我扯着嗓子喊：爷爷，明天还来！风把稻香送过来。那香味是甜的，混着太阳晒过的味道。爷爷直起腰，冲我笑，脸上的皱纹一条条全挤在一起，像田埂一样多。

When the Rice Ears Bow

Day had barely broken when Dad called me up. Today I would go with Grandpa to harvest the rice. I pressed my face to the window and saw that all the rice in the fields had turned gold, patch after patch, as if someone had crushed the sun and scattered it over the ground.

At the edge of the field, the rice ears all bowed, their heads hanging low, just a finger’s width from my shoes. I reached out and touched one. The grains were hard and pricked my hand. When wind swept through, the whole field roared like water, yellow waves rolling from one end to the other. A few dragonflies started up and landed again on the tips of the ears. I pinched one ear and tried to straighten it, but the moment I let go it sprang back to its bow. Grandpa said the fuller an ear is, the lower it bends; only the empty-husked ones hold their heads up. I looked down at myself and decided I should learn from the rice ears today.

At noon, the combine harvester rumbled into the field, so loud I covered my ears. It swallowed rice at the front and spat out chopped straw at the back, eating up a wide strip in no time. The machine startled a flock of sparrows that settled on the distant wires, tilting their heads to watch. Grandpa followed behind the machine, bending to pick up the fallen ears and stuffing handful after handful into a woven bag. Whatever the machine drops must be carried home, he said, not a single grain wasted.

I ran along the field ridge. The ridge was narrow, rice on both sides, and I stretched out my arms to keep balance, like walking a golden tightrope. Rice leaves brushed the backs of my hands, ticklish. The stubble poked through my shoe soles. I reached the far end of the ridge and looked back. A corner of Grandpa's field was gone; the cut part lay flat and neat, while in the uncut part the ears were still bowing.

Grandpa poured a ladle of water from the kettle at the head of the ridge and handed it to me. It was cooled boiled water; I gulped down half of it and poured the rest over my head, shivering with the chill. Grandpa twisted the mouth of the full woven bag into a rope, swung it onto his shoulder, and let me carry the smaller one. That small bag weighed twenty-odd jin; I hugged it with both hands, switching sides every three steps, the grains rustling against the bottom of the bag. Grandpa walked ahead, his strides long and steady, the carrying pole rising and falling on his shoulder.

I shouted at the top of my voice: Grandpa, we are coming back tomorrow! The wind carried the scent of rice to me. It smelled sweet, mixed with the smell of sun-baked straw. Grandpa straightened his back and smiled at me, the wrinkles on his face squeezing together line by line, as many as the field ridges.

田埂上的小雅

秋游的大巴停在水库边的公路旁，一下车，全班都愣住了。公路对面是一整片稻田，黄得发亮，一直铺到山脚下。老师喊别跑远，话音还没落，同学们已经散开，像一把撒出去的豆子。

小雅没有跟着跑。她蹲在田边，盯着一株稻穗看。那稻穗弯着腰，穗头沉甸甸地垂下来，谷粒一颗挤一颗，绿黄相间的地方还留着一道边。她数了数，一串上有三十多颗。风过来的时候，稻穗晃两下，又垂回去，像点了个头。她忽然想起科学课上说的，果实成熟就会低头。原来稻子真的会低头。

田那头轰隆隆响起来，一台收割机开进了田，铁轮子碾过稻子，稻子成片地倒，吞进去，吐出来，地上多了一行整齐的稻茬。几个男生嗷嗷叫着往前凑，被老师喊回来。小雅也站起来看，

机器走过之后，空气里全是青草和谷壳混在一起的味道，呛人，但是好闻。

收割机走远了，剩下的稻子还在风里弯腰。小雅踩上田埂试了一步，埂面只有两只脚宽，左边是稻子，右边也是稻子。同桌在埂子那头冲她喊：来比一场！她张开胳膊，小跑起来，稻叶扫着手背，稻茬从鞋底一下一下顶上来。她跑得歪歪扭扭，鞋帮上沾满了泥点子，先到的是同桌，先到的是谁不重要，整条田埂都是她们的喊声。

集合前，老师把大家拢到田边，指着稻田说，我们每天吃的米饭就是从这里来的。同学们叽叽喳喳，有人说稻子比她高，有人说谷壳扎手。胖墩从地上捡起一把掉落的稻穗，举起来要交给老师，老师说捡的就自己留着吧。他把稻穗塞进书包侧兜，稻芒支棱在外面，像插了一撮金色的羽毛。

回大巴的路上，小雅摊开手心，掌心里躺着两粒捡来的谷子。她把谷子夹进语文书的最后一页。汽车开动，那片金黄的稻田往后退，退成一大块，退成一小块，最后退进山后面。她隔着车窗挥了挥手，像跟一整片弯腰的稻穗告别。

Xiao Ya on the Field Ridge

The field-trip bus stopped by the road along the reservoir. The moment the class stepped off, everyone froze. Across the road lay a whole field of rice, shining gold, spreading all the way to the foot of the hills. The teacher called out not to run far, but before her voice ended the class had already scattered, like beans thrown from a hand.

Xiao Ya did not run with them. She squatted at the edge of the field and stared at a single rice ear. It bowed, its head hanging heavy, the grains crowding shoulder to shoulder, a rim of green-yellow still along the seam. She counted more than thirty grains on one strand. When the wind came, the ear swayed twice and hung down again, like a nod. She suddenly remembered what the science class had said: a ripe fruit lowers its head. So the rice really does bow.

A rumble rose from the far end of the field. A harvester drove in; its iron wheels rolled over the rice, whole sheets of it falling, swallowed in, spat out, leaving a neat line of stubble behind. Several boys whooped and edged closer until the teacher called them back. Xiao Ya stood up to watch too. After the machine passed, the air was thick with the smell of crushed green stalks mixed with rice husk, sharp but pleasant.

The harvester moved off, and the remaining rice kept bowing in the wind. Xiao Ya stepped onto the field ridge and tried one step. The ridge was only two feet wide, rice on the left, rice on the right. Her deskmate shouted to her from the far end: race me! She spread her arms and ran, rice leaves brushing the backs of her hands,

stubble poking up through her soles again and again. She ran all wobbly, her shoe sides spattered with mud. Her deskmate got in first; who got in first did not matter, the whole ridge was filled with their shouting.

Before gathering, the teacher brought everyone to the edge of the field and pointed at the rice, saying that the rice we eat every day comes from places like this. The class chattered away: someone said the rice was taller than her, someone said the husks pricked the hand. Fatty picked up a handful of fallen rice ears from the ground and held them up to give to the teacher, who said whatever he picked up he could keep. He stuffed the ears into the side pocket of his backpack, their awns sticking out like a tuft of golden feathers.

On the way back to the bus, Xiao Ya opened her palm. Two grains she had picked up lay in it. She pressed them between the last page of her Chinese textbook. The bus started, and the golden rice field moved backward, shrinking from a big patch to a small one, until it slipped behind the hills. She waved through the window, saying goodbye to a whole field of bowing rice ears.

稻茬地里剩下的秋天

稻子收完的第三天，田里只剩一茬一茬的稻桩，整整齐齐，像给大地剃了个平头。我踩着稻茬往田中间走，脚底板一下一下地被顶。走到昨天收割机停过的地方，我看见几株漏掉的稻子还立在那里，稻穗弯着腰，黄里透绿，穗尖上落了一只小虫。

我把那几株稻子扶起来。就在手握住稻秆的一瞬，我想起前天它们还是一大片。前天，整片田都是弯着的腰。我站在田边就能听见穗子互相碰的声音，沙沙的，很轻。风一来，稻浪一层压一层，从水渠那边一直滚到公路那边。我伸手拨开一垄，谷粒挤在我手心里，圆滚滚，硬邦邦，有几颗还带着尖尖的芒，戳得我掌心发痒。

再往前想，是收割机进田的那个上午。突突突，突突突，声音从田头一路碾过来，地都在抖。机器肚子前面张开一张大嘴，稻子整排整排地倒进去，不见了；机器屁股后面喷出碎草，纷纷扬扬落一地。我和爸爸跟在机器后头捡稻穗，它吞一片，我们捡一片。爸爸腰快弯断了也不歇，说机器有漏的，人就得补上。那天中午我们捡了小半袋，谷粒在袋子里哗啦哗啦地响。

机器收工走了，田少了一大半。我沿着田埂疯跑，埂子窄，我张开胳膊，两边金黄的稻穗扫过我的衣服，扫得袖子沙沙响。跑到埂子尽头我摔了一跤，膝盖磕在软泥上，没哭，爬起来接着跑，鞋底粘着泥，一步一个响。

现在，我手里攥着那几株漏收的稻子，往家走。稻茬地在脚下平平地铺开，田埂还是那条田埂，只是两边的稻子没了。晚上，妈妈把白天新碾的米下锅。饭香从厨房漫出来，漫过院子，漫到我鼻尖。我扒了满满一碗，粒粒都是甜的。我含着那口饭想，明年秋天，那片田还会把腰弯下

来的。

The Autumn Left in the Stubble Field

Three days after the harvest, the field held nothing but row after row of rice stubble, cut neat and flat, as if the earth had been given a close crop. I stepped over the stubble toward the middle of the field, the cut stalks nudging my soles again and again. Where the harvester had stopped yesterday, I found a few missed hills still standing, their ears bowed, yellow touched with green, a tiny insect resting on the tip of one ear.

I straightened those few hills. The instant my hand closed around the stalks, I remembered that two days earlier they had been a whole sea of them. Two days earlier, every inch of the field was a bowing waist. Standing at the edge, I could hear the ears brushing one another, a soft sifting sound. When the wind came, wave pressed wave, rolling from the irrigation ditch all the way to the road. I parted a row with my hand and the grains crowded into my palm, round and hard, a few still wearing sharp awns that tickled my skin.

Further back still was the morning the harvester entered the field. Rumble, rumble, the sound crushed toward us from the headland, the ground trembling. The machine opened a great mouth at its front, and rank after rank of rice fell in and vanished; from its back it sprayed chopped straw that fluttered down over the ground. Dad and I followed behind the machine gathering fallen ears. It swallowed a strip; we gathered a strip. Dad kept bending until his back ached but refused to rest, saying the machine misses some and people must make it up. By noon we had collected half a small bag, the grains rattling inside it.

The machine finished and left, and most of the field was gone. I ran wildly along the field ridge, arms spread wide on the narrow path, golden ears on both sides sweeping my sleeves into a rustle. At the end of the ridge I fell, my knee hitting soft mud. I did not cry. I got up and kept running, my soles sucking at the mud, each step a small report.

Now I hold those few missed ears and walk home. The stubble field spreads flat beneath my feet; the ridge is still the same ridge, only the rice on both sides is gone. In the evening, Mother puts the freshly milled rice from the day into the pot. The smell of cooking rice drifts out of the kitchen, across the yard, to my nose. I eat a heaping bowl, every grain sweet. Holding that mouthful of rice, I think: next autumn, that field will bow its waists again.