掰玉米的手

玉米地里的叶子全卷了边，秆子还直挺挺地站着，比我还高半头。爷爷递给我一只手套，说今天你掰，我装。我学着他的样子，左手攥住玉米穗，右手握住穗子往下一压一拧，咔的一声，玉米掉了，掌心被硬壳硌得生疼。掰下来的玉米棒子比我的手腕还粗，须子黄黄的，一缕一缕贴在壳上。

我越掰越快，胳膊却越来越酸。玉米秆划过后颈，火辣辣的。地里的空气又闷又干，吸一口，嗓子眼发痒。我掰的玉米堆成小山，爷爷把它们一个一个码进麻袋，码得整整齐齐，像给麻袋装砖头。装到半袋，爷爷把袋口一提，喊我拽另一头，两人合力把麻袋拖到田埂边。麻袋在地上拖出一道浅沟。

中途我还掰断了一根嫩秆，汁水洇出来，黏黏的。我有点慌，回头看爷爷，他蹲在地头，拿根树枝把那截断秆插回土里，说插深点，缓两天它能自己立起来。我记住了这个动作，后来再掰断的秆，都照他的样子插回去。

爷爷说歇会儿。我们坐到田头的大榆树下。爷爷把草帽摘下来盖在脸上，靠着树干，不出声了。我听见他的呼噜声一起一伏，混着地里叶子碰叶子的沙沙声。树上有只知了有气无力地叫了两声，又不叫了。我盯着爷爷的手看，那手背上青筋一条条鼓着，指头粗得像老玉米秆，虎口的老茧黄亮黄的。

歇够了，爷爷站起来拍拍屁股上的土，问我累不累。我摇头，其实腿有点软。下午我们装了第四袋，爷爷扛上一袋往路边走，腰弯得像一张弓，步子却稳。我跟在后头抱着两个散棒子，玉米粒在袋口哗啦哗啦地响。

回家路上，夕阳把玉米地照得金红。我回头看，地里还剩一小片没收，风一吹，秆子齐齐点头。爷爷说明天接着收。我把最后一根玉米棒子搂得紧紧的，壳上的须子扫着我的下巴，痒痒的。

Hands That Snap Corn Ears

The leaves in the cornfield had all curled at the edges, but the stalks still stood straight, half a head taller than me. Grandpa handed me a glove and said: you snap today, I bag. I copied him, left hand gripping the ear, right hand closing over it and pressing down and twisting with a crack, and the ear came off, its hard husk digging a ache into my palm. The snapped ear was thicker than my wrist, its silk yellow, strand after strand clinging to the husk.

I snapped faster and faster, and my arms ached more and more. Corn leaves slashed the back of my neck, stinging. The air in the field was stuffy and dry; one breath and my throat itched. My snapped ears piled into a little hill, and Grandpa stacked them into the sack one by one, neatly, like loading bricks. When the sack was half full, he lifted its mouth and called me to pull the other end, and together we

dragged it to the field ridge, the sack plowing a shallow furrow in the dirt.

Along the way I snapped a young stalk by accident, its juice seeping out, sticky. I panicked and looked back at Grandpa. He crouched at the field edge, took a twig, and pushed the broken stalk back into the soil, saying: plant it deep, give it two days, it will stand up on its own. I remembered that move, and every stalk I broke after that I planted back the same way.

Grandpa said let us rest. We sat under the big elm at the head of the field. He took off his straw hat and laid it over his face, leaned against the trunk, and went quiet. I heard his snoring rise and fall, mixed with the rustle of leaves brushing leaves in the field. A cicada on the tree called twice, weakly, then stopped. I stared at Grandpa’s hands. The veins on their backs swelled in ridges, the fingers thick as old cornstalks, the callus at the tiger’s mouth of his palm yellow and shiny.

When the rest was done, Grandpa stood and patted the dirt off, and asked if I was tired. I shook my head, though my legs felt soft. In the afternoon we filled the fourth sack. Grandpa shouldered one and walked toward the road, his back bent like a drawn bow but his steps steady. I followed hugging two loose ears, the kernels rattling at the sack’s mouth.

On the way home, the setting sun lit the cornfield gold-red. I looked back. A small patch was still unharvested, and when wind blew, the stalks all nodded together. Grandpa said we would finish tomorrow. I hugged the last ear tight, its silk brushing my chin, ticklish.

玉米堆上的对话

石头钻进玉米地，头一穗就掰歪了，玉米棒子卡在秆上，他两手抱着使劲，连秆带穗拔了出来，泥巴甩了一鞋帮。爷爷在后头笑：别硬来，一手攥稳，一手往膝盖上一磕，它自己就断。

石头照办了。玉米棒子磕在膝盖上，咔，断了。他举起来给爷爷看，爷爷点点头，说这穗长得沉，是个好棒子。石头把它扔进身后的堆里，又去掰下一穗。地里的声音很杂，咔、咔，叶子哗啦，脚底下的干土咔嚓咔嚓。

掰到晌午，爷爷开始装麻袋。他把石头掰来的玉米滚到跟前，一个一个往袋里码，顺手把几个虫蛀的、掉在地上的挑出来丢进脚边的筐。石头问为什么单挑这些。爷爷说，虫眼大的留作种子，明年开春种房后头那二分地，好棒子进仓，差棒子喂鸡，一根玉米分三个去处，谁也不委屈谁。

石头把这句话记住了。后来他掰得慢了些，眼睛多看了两遍，虫蛀的往左扔，好棒子往右滚。爷

爷不夸他，只是装袋的时候把他扔错的悄悄挪回去。

日头爬到头顶，地里的土晒出了热气，玉米叶却纹丝不动。石头的背心湿透了，贴在背上。爷爷从沟里提来一暖壶水，先给石头倒了一盖，自己直接对着壶嘴喝。水浇在垄沟的干土上，冒出一小团白汽，眨眼就没了。

田头休息，爷孙俩坐在化肥袋上。爷爷从兜里摸出手机，按了半天，说今年的玉米一斤八毛六，比去年少两毛。石头问那还种吗。爷爷把手机塞回去，指了指地：地不歇，人也不歇。他拧开水壶递给石头，自己仰头灌了一口，水顺着下巴流进衣领。

太阳偏西，最后一袋玉米扎了口。爷爷解下裤腿上的草屑，对石头说，走，回家蒸玉米。石头走在前头，回头看见爷爷背着那筐种子玉米，走得比扛麻袋还轻快。晚风从收割过的地里穿过来，剩下的玉米秆哗啦啦地响成一片。

Talk Over the Corn Pile

Shitou crawled into the cornfield and snapped his first ear crooked. The cob jammed in the stalk; he hugged it with both arms and yanked, pulling the whole ear out with the stalk, flinging mud up the sides of his shoes. Grandpa laughed behind him: do not force it. Grip firm with one hand, knock it against your knee, and it breaks by itself.

Shitou did as told. The cob struck his knee, crack, it came off. He held it up for Grandpa, who nodded and said this ear hangs heavy, a good one. Shitou tossed it onto the pile behind him and reached for the next. The field was full of sounds: crack, crack, leaves rustling, dry soil crunching underfoot.

By noon Grandpa began bagging. He rolled the snapped ears to his feet and stacked them into the sack one by one, picking out the worm-eaten and the fallen and dropping them into a basket at his side. Shitou asked why those were set apart. Grandpa said the big wormholes stay for seed, to plant next spring in the two-fen plot behind the house; the good ears go to the granary, the poor ones feed the chickens. One ear of corn has three destinations, and nobody gets shortchanged.

Shitou kept that sentence in mind. After that he snapped more slowly and looked twice with his eyes, tossing worm-eaten ears to the left and good cobs to the right. Grandpa did not praise him; he only quietly moved the mis-thrown ones back as he bagged.

When the sun climbed overhead, the soil gave off heat, yet the corn leaves did not stir at all. Shitou's undershirt was soaked through and stuck to his back. Grandpa fetched a thermos from the ditch, poured a capful for Shitou first, then drank straight from the spout himself. Water spilled into the dry furrow raised a

small puff of white steam that vanished in a blink.

At the rest by the field head, the two sat on fertilizer sacks. Grandpa fished his phone from his pocket, tapped at it a long while, and said this year’s corn sells for eighty-six fen a jin, two mao less than last year. Shitou asked whether they would still plant. Grandpa tucked the phone away and pointed at the field: the land does not rest, and neither do people. He unscrewed the kettle and handed it to Shitou, then tipped his own head back for a swallow, water running down his chin into his collar.

As the sun leaned west, the last sack was tied shut. Grandpa brushed the grass bits off his trouser cuffs and told Shitou: come on, home to steam some corn. Shitou walked ahead and looked back to see Grandpa carrying the basket of seed corn on his back, walking lighter than when he shouldered a sack. The evening wind came through the harvested field, and the remaining stalks rustled all at once.

最后一穗玉米

晚上，奶奶在灶台上煮了一锅玉米，满屋子都是甜香。我捧着最大的一穗，先递给了爷爷。爷爷摆摆手，转手塞给了奶奶。奶奶笑骂他老不正经，还是咬了一大口。就是这一口甜香，把我拽回白天的玉米地里。

白天，太阳刚爬到电线杆顶上，爷爷就把我喊进了地。玉米秆干得发白，一碰就哗啦响。爷爷示范掰玉米：左手攥穗，右手往下一压，手腕一拧，咔，棒子到手。我头一穗拧了一半，卡在秆上晃悠，费了好大劲才揪下来，手心勒出两道红印。到后来我摸出窍门，攥、压、拧一气呵成，咔咔的声音跟上了爷爷的节奏。棒子在我脚边越堆越高，金黄一片，须子乱蓬蓬地支棱着。

爷爷不知什么时候开始装麻袋了。他把棒子一根根码进去，码一层踩一踩，装到袋腰就把袋口拢在肩上，喊我搭把手，两人一前一后把麻袋挪到路边。麻袋沉得挪一步喘一口，粗布把我的手心磨得发热。装到第五袋，路边码成一堵矮墙。

爷爷说到田头歇晌。榆树荫底下凉快，他枕着麻袋躺下，草帽盖住脸，呼噜声很快就起来了，一起一伏，跟地里风声一个拍子。我睡不着，就数路边那堵玉米墙，数到二十几袋，又从头数。阳光从树叶缝里漏下来，斑斑点点落在他的鞋上。

醒来时日头偏了，爷孙俩接着收最后一垄。收完最后一穗，爷爷把它掂了掂，扔进袋里说，明天开拖拉机拉回家。回家的路上我满手玉米味儿，指甲缝里都是黄的。

现在，这穗玉米就在我手里，烫得倒来倒去。奶奶又给每人掰了半穗，爷爷的那半穗他没吃，掰成粒喂了院子里的鸡。鸡抢得扑腾翅膀。我嚼着甜玉米想，明天开春，房后头那块地，也该点几粒种子下去了。

The Last Ear of Corn

In the evening, Grandma steamed a pot of corn on the stove, and the whole house filled with its sweet smell. I held the biggest ear and offered it to Grandpa first. He waved it away and passed it straight to Grandma. She laughed and called him silly, then took a big bite. That single bite of sweetness pulled me back to the cornfield in the daylight.

Earlier, when the sun had just climbed to the top of the utility pole, Grandpa called me into the field. The stalks had dried pale and rattled at a touch. Grandpa demonstrated the snap: left hand grips the ear, right hand presses down, wrist twists, crack, the cob is in hand. My first ear half-twisted and dangled from the stalk; I wrenched it off with effort and two red marks appeared across my palm. By and by I found the knack, grip-press-twist in one motion, my cracks keeping time with Grandpa's. The cobs piled higher at my feet, a golden heap, their silks sticking out in tangles.

At some point Grandpa had started filling sacks. He stacked cobs in layer by layer, tamping each one down, and when a sack reached his waist he gathered its mouth over his shoulder and called me to lend a hand, the two of us shifting it fore and aft to the roadside. The sacks were so heavy that each step cost a gasp, and the coarse burlap warmed my palms. By the fifth sack the roadside had become a low wall.

Grandpa said it was time to rest at the field head. Under the elm's shade it was cool. He lay down with his head on a sack, straw hat over his face, and his snoring started soon, rising and falling in time with the wind in the field. I could not sleep, so I counted the corn wall at the roadside, got past twenty sacks, and started over. Sunlight leaked through the leaves in dapples, landing on his shoes.

When I woke, the sun had swung west, and the two of us took up the last furrow again. At the last ear, Grandpa weighed it in his hand, tossed it into the bag, and said the tractor would haul it all home tomorrow. On the way home my hands smelled of corn, and my nail crevices were stained yellow.

Now that very ear is in my hands, too hot to hold, tossed from palm to palm. Grandma broke half an ear for each of us; Grandpa did not eat his half but rubbed it into kernels for the chickens in the yard, who fought and flapped over them. Chewing the sweet corn, I thought: next spring, a few seeds should go into the plot behind the house.