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.

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