田埂上的野菊花开了

放学回家的路要经过一条长田埂。稻子收完有些日子了，田里只剩一茬一茬的稻茬，整整齐齐立着，像谁把大地的头发剪短了，还没剪匀。

野菊花就是这时候开的。起先只有一两朵，在田埂的草里探头探脑，谁也没在意。等我们放学走过一次，它就开了一片，黄的、白的，一小簇一小簇，从桥头一直开到老槐树底下。风一过，细碎的花点全在晃，像田埂上落了一层会跳的星星。我们几个女生每天放学都要放慢脚步，一人摘几朵，摘下来又不知道拿它做什么，就是攥在手里，让那股又苦又清的香味沾满手心。

有同学贪多，想下田去摘埂那边开得最大的一丛。她刚跳下去就叫了起来——稻茬看着软，踩上去硬得很，一根一根顶着脚底，像踩在无数个小木桩上。我们在埂上笑得直不起腰。她一瘸一拐上来，鞋底下扎了两个小眼，第二天她穿了一双厚底鞋来，理直气壮地又下田了。

奶奶也爱野菊花。她不摘着玩，她摘。每天傍晚她拎一只竹篮到埂上来，专挑开得最盛的那几簇，连茎带花掐下来，说晒干了泡水，一整个冬天嗓子都不疼。她掐花的手法又快又稳，指头一捻就是一枝，竹篮里的花越堆越高，香味浓得招小虫。我帮她提篮子，篮子的边沿上沾满碎花瓣，走一路掉一路，掉在稻茬田的小路上，像给小路撒了花钱。

夕阳是慢慢压下来的。它压到西边的山头上时，整片稻茬田被照成红铜色，一根根稻茬的影子拉得很长，长到互相搭在一起。田埂上的野菊花被夕光照得透明，花瓣边缘亮亮的，像镶了一圈金。我们坐在埂上，把白天摘的菊花用草茎编成花环，戴在头上，谁也不笑话谁。远处有人赶着牛回家，牛的影子从稻茬田里斜斜地穿过去。

后来我长大，见过许多名贵的菊花，公园里的、花店里的，一朵就有碗口大。可我总记得田埂上那些野菊花，小，密，不要人管，一年一年自己开。夕阳一照，整条田埂都在发光，我们头顶着歪歪扭扭的花环，把秋天的影子拉得很长很长。

The Wild Chrysanthemums on the Field Ridge

The road home from school runs along a long field ridge. The rice had been harvested some time ago, and the fields held nothing but stubble, row after row standing neatly, as if someone had cut the hair of the earth short and not quite evenly.

The wild chrysanthemums bloomed just then. At first there were only one or two flowers, peeking out from the grass on the ridge, unnoticed by anyone. After we walked past once on our way home from school, they opened in whole patches, yellow and white, in small clusters, from the little bridge all the way to the old locust tree. When the wind passed, all the tiny flowers trembled, like a layer of jumping stars fallen on the ridge. We girls slowed our steps every day after school and picked a few blossoms each, without knowing what to do with them once picked. We just held them in our fists until our palms were filled with their bitter, clean

fragrance.

One classmate, greedy for more, climbed down into the field to pick the biggest cluster on the far side of the ridge. She cried out the moment she jumped down. The stubble looked soft, but underfoot it was hard, each stubble poking up at her soles like stepping on countless tiny wooden stakes. We doubled over laughing on the ridge. She came back up limping, two small holes punched in her shoe soles. The next day she came wearing thick-soled shoes and, without the least embarrassment, climbed down into the field again.

My grandmother also loved the wild chrysanthemums. She did not pick them for play; she picked them for use. Every evening she came to the ridge with a bamboo basket, choosing only the fullest clusters, pinching off stem and flower together, saying she would dry them for tea and my throat would not hurt the whole winter. Her fingers were quick and sure, one twist and a stem came off, and the flowers in the basket piled higher and higher, their fragrance strong enough to draw tiny insects. I carried the basket for her. Its rim was crusted with petals, which fell out all along the way onto the path between the stubble fields, scattering coins of flower along the trail.

The setting sun pressed down slowly. When it reached the hills in the west, the whole stubble field turned the color of red copper, and each stubble cast a long shadow, so long that the shadows leaned on one another. The wild chrysanthemums on the ridge glowed transparent in the evening light, the edges of their petals bright, as if rimmed with gold. We sat on the ridge and wove the flowers we had picked into rings with blades of grass, wore them on our heads, and no one laughed at anyone. Far off, someone drove cattle home, and the shadows of the cattle slanted across the stubble field.

Later, when I grew up, I saw many prized chrysanthemums, in parks and in flower shops, each blossom as wide as a bowl. But I always remember the wild ones on that field ridge, small and dense, needing no care from anyone, blooming year after year by themselves. When the setting sun shone on them, the whole ridge glowed, and we, with crooked flower rings on our heads, let autumn stretch our shadows long, long away.