

花坛边的那堂课

三月的最后一个星期二，科学课没有去实验室。老师抱着一沓纸说，今天在外面上一节观察课，地点是教学楼前面的花坛。我们排着队下去，心里都在猜要看什么。

花坛不大，边上砌着一圈水泥，里面种着红叶石楠和几棵小树。老师停在花坛东边那棵桃树前面，问我们：这棵树和上周有什么不同？我们你看我、我看你。上周它也是光秃秃的，这周好像还是光秃秃的。有个同学小声说，没不同。老师没反驳，只让我们分成小组，每组盯住一根枝条，从根部往梢上看。

我们小组盯的是中间那根斜着长的枝条。看第二遍的时候，有人叫起来：这里有包！是花苞，一个挨着一个，靠梢头的那几个已经发紫，越往下越小，最小的要眯起眼睛才看得见。老师走过来，让我们把手垫在枝条下面，轻轻托起来凑近看。花苞外面包着两层壳，壳边上有一圈毛，顶上裂了一道细缝，缝里露出一一点粉。老师说，这叫花苞，花瓣就在里面叠着，还没长够个头。

老师问，你们猜一朵桃花从花苞到开放要几天？有人说一天，有人说一个星期。老师说她也不确定，让我们自己数：从今天起，每天来看一次，记下花苞的变化，直到它开。我们蹲在花坛边，把日期写在纸上，又画了那个花苞的样子。画得不像，壳上的毛画成了锯齿。

第二天我们去看，花苞没大多少，可是颜色深了一点。第三天，靠梢头那个花苞的缝变宽了，能看见里面一层一层的花瓣，挤在一起。第五天早上，我们几个刚进校门就跑去花坛——开了，最上面那个花苞开了，花瓣还是卷的，颜色比晚上看照片里浅。我们几个蹲成一排，谁也不说话，后来还是值日生喊我们回去早读，我们才站起来，膝盖上全是土。

又过了四天，那根枝条上的花苞开了大半。那天课间，同学们围了一圈，从看花变成找花，这个说这根枝上有六个包，那个说我数的是七个。老师站在圈外面，不数，只看我们。

后来我在观察纸上写了一句话：我以为花是一夜开的，其实它准备了很久，只是我们没天天看。科学课结束的时候，老师把我们的观察纸都收了，说下学期花苞再鼓起来，我们还去花坛。

The Lesson Beside the Flower Bed

On the last Tuesday of March, science class did not go to the lab. Our teacher carried a stack of papers and said, today we have an observation lesson outside, at the flower bed in front of the teaching building. We lined up and walked down, guessing what we would look at.

The flower bed was not big, edged with a low cement border, planted with red-tip photinia and a few small trees. The teacher stopped in front of the peach tree on the east side and asked us: what is different about this tree from last week? We looked at each other. Last week it was bare, and this week it still seemed bare. One classmate whispered, nothing is different. The teacher did not argue. She just told us to split into groups, each group picking one branch and looking from its base to its tip.

Our group watched the slanted branch in the middle. On the second look, someone cried out: there are bumps here! They were flower buds, one after another. The ones near the tip had turned purple; the lower ones were smaller, and the smallest could only be seen by squinting. The teacher came over and told us to put our hands under the branch, lift it gently, and bring it close. Each bud was wrapped in two layers of husk with a ring of fuzz along the edge. A thin crack ran across the top, and a bit of pink showed through the crack. The teacher said, these are flower buds; the petals are folded inside, not yet grown big enough.

She asked us to guess how many days it takes a peach flower to go from bud to bloom. Someone said one day, someone said a week. The teacher said she was not sure either, and told us to count it ourselves: come and look once a day from today, write down how the buds change, until they open. We squatted by the flower bed, wrote the date on paper, and drew the bud. The drawing was not quite right; I turned the fuzz on the husk into sawtooth lines.

The next day we went to look. The bud had not grown much, but its color was a little deeper. On the third day the crack on the topmost bud had widened, and we could see the petals inside, layer upon layer, packed together. Early on the fifth morning, the moment we passed the school gate we ran to the flower bed. It had opened: the topmost bud was open, its petals still curled, its color lighter than in the photo we had taken the night before. We squatted in a row, nobody talking. Only when the duty student called us back for morning reading did we stand up, our knees covered in dirt.

Four more days later, most of the buds on that branch had opened. During the break that day, classmates gathered in a circle, and watching the flowers turned into hunting for flowers: one said this branch had six buds, another said I counted seven. The teacher stood outside the circle, not counting, just watching us.

Later I wrote one sentence on my observation sheet: I used to think flowers open in one night; actually they prepare for a long time, we just did not look every day. At the end of the lesson the teacher collected all our sheets and said that next term, when the buds swell again, we will go back to the flower bed.