十三岁读不懂的杜小康

十三岁那年读《草房子》，我是在被窝里打手电看完的。当时记住的全是热闹：桑桑把碗架拆了卖鸽子，秃鹤在会操里出洋相，纸月亮一样的屋顶在风里哗啦响。杜小康我也记得，可记得的是他家阔气，有一条皮带，谁都觉得他神气。

前几天收拾书架，那本旧书从两摞杂志中间滑出来，书脊上还贴着当年图书馆的标签。我坐在地板上翻，翻到红门那几章，忽然就坐不住了。杜小康家败了，他跟父亲去放鸭，在芦荡里迷路，回来以后在校门口摆一个小摊，大人小孩从他面前走过，他低着头招呼生意。

十三岁的我读到这里只觉得可惜，像看一件好东西被打碎了。四十岁的我读到这里，看见的是他低着头还要把生意招呼下去的那股劲。我想起自己失业的那年，也是在校门口一样的年纪上，蹲在人才市场的台阶上，递出一份又一份简历。原来杜小康没有哭的那一段，是一个大人咬着牙把日子接住的那一段。书里还写他在芦苇荡里给父亲找掉落的鸭群，天黑水凉，他找到鸭子时脚上全是血泡。十三岁的我嫌这段长，四十岁的我读得手心发热——那不是一个孩子在冒险，那是一个家在把最后的指望交到他手上。

那晚我读到很晚。桑桑生病，杜小康把最值钱的东西留给桑桑，两个孩子在城墙根底下坐着，谁也不说话。我年轻时以为这是写友谊，现在才知道，这是写两个都挨过生活的人，互相认出了对方。

合上书，窗外天快亮了。同一本书，十三岁读和四十岁读，看见的完全是两个地方。书没变，是读的人走过了书里那些路。要是十三岁的我知道自己有一天会读懂杜小康，他大概会吓得把书抱紧一点——可也正因如此，这本书值得每个人在长大以后再读一遍。

The Du Xiaokang I Could Not Understand at Thirteen

I read Grass House at thirteen by flashlight under the quilt. What stayed with me then was all the lively parts: Sang Sang taking apart the cupboard to sell his pigeons, Bald Crane making a fool of himself at the marching drill, the paper roof roaring like a moon in the wind. I remembered Du Xiaokang too, but only that his family was well-off, that he had a fine leather belt, and that everyone thought him grand.

A few days ago, while tidying the bookshelf, that old copy slid out from between two stacks of magazines, the library sticker still on its spine. I sat on the floor and turned to the chapters about the Red Gate, and suddenly I could not stay seated. Du Xiaokang's family fell on ruin; he followed his father away to herd ducks, got lost in the reed marsh, and came back to keep a small stall by the school gate, calling out his business with his head lowered while grown-ups and children walked past him.

The thirteen-year-old me read that part and felt only regret, like watching

something fine get smashed. The forty-year-old me read it and saw the stubborn strength in a boy who kept calling out his business with his head down. I remembered the year I lost my job, squatting on the steps of a job market at an age not far off his, handing out résumé after résumé. So the passage where Du Xiaokang did not cry was the passage where a grown-up clenched his teeth and caught the days as they fell. The book also tells how he searched the reed marsh at night for the ducks his father had lost, in the dark and the cold water, and when he found them his feet were covered in blisters. The thirteen-year-old me found this part too long; the forty-year-old me read it with burning palms - it was not a child on an adventure, it was a family handing its last hope into his hands.

I read late that night. Sang Sang fell ill, Du Xiaokang left him his most precious possession, and the two children sat under the old city wall without saying a word. When I was young I thought this was a story about friendship. Now I know it is about two people who had both been beaten by life recognizing each other.

I closed the book; dawn was coming outside the window. The same book read at thirteen and at forty shows you two entirely different places. The book has not changed - it is the reader who has walked through the roads inside it. If the thirteen-year-old me had known that one day he would understand Du Xiaokang, he would probably have hugged the book tighter. And for that very reason, this is a book worth reading again after you grow up.