天暗下来之前，蚂蚁已经出发

那天放学，我走到小区花坛边上的时候，天忽然暗了下来。不是傍晚那种慢慢暗，是像有人把一块灰布从楼顶那边拉过来，把太阳整个盖住了。风也变了味道，闷闷的，带着一点土腥气。我抬头看，西边的云压得很低，楼顶上那排电线被云衬着，像挂在灰墙上的黑绳子。

就在这种天底下，我看见花坛水泥沿上有一条宽宽的、流动的黑带子。不是平时那种细细的蚂蚁线，是宽的一指头的黑带子，密密麻麻全是蚂蚁，朝着花坛后面那个小土坡的方向走。

我蹲下去看，发现每只蚂蚁都不是空着身子的。有的嘴里叼着一个白白的小颗粒，圆圆的，像一粒泡大的米。我后来才知道那是蚁卵。有的叼着半片菜叶，有的叼着一粒饭，还有的两只蚂蚁合叼着一只死掉的小虫。它们走得急，谁也不停，黑带子像一条不肯断的河。

我顺着黑带子往回看，源头是水泥沿上一个旧洞。洞口堆的土比平时高，洞口呆着一排蚂蚁，触角朝着土坡的方向，像是在指挥。我再往土坡那边看，坡上草底下有一个新洞，洞口比旧洞小，但是洞口周围一圈新土，还有一小群蚂蚁在往里钻。

天越来越暗，风把梧桐叶吹得哗啦响。我有点想回家，可是腿不肯走。我从来没见过蚂蚁这样搬家。它们排的队伍有的地方挤成一团，可是挤成一团的地方也不乱，后面的蚂蚁会自己绕开，绕开以后又排回队里。

雨先落下来一滴，正好砸在我手背上，凉了一下。紧接着雨点密起来，砸在水泥沿上溅起小坑。我看见最后几只蚂蚁叼着蚁卵跑进新洞口，洞口那排蚂蚁这才闪身进去。几乎就在它们进洞的同时，雨大了起来。

我打着伞回家，路上一直在想，天是它自己暗的，云是它自己来的，蚂蚁怎么先知道要下雨的？晚上我去翻书，书上说，下雨前空气里的湿气重，蚂蚁的洞又低又闷，它们的身体能觉出湿气变大，所以提前把家搬到高处去。蚂蚁不是会法术，是它们的身体就是最灵敏的天气仪器。

等到雨停的那天，我去看那个土坡。新洞口安安静静的，旧洞被雨水灌成了一个亮亮的小水洼。我站在太阳底下想，天气预报要卫星要雷达，蚂蚁只要一身细小的触角，就把雨的消息提前告诉了自己。大自然里最小的东西，往往藏着最老的本领。

Before the Sky Grew Dark, the Ants Had Already Set Out

That day after school, when I walked to the edge of the flower bed in our neighborhood, the sky suddenly grew dark. It was not the slow darkening of evening. It was as if someone pulled a gray cloth over the whole sun from the direction of the rooftops. The wind changed its taste too, stuffy, with a smell of damp soil. I looked up. The clouds in the west hung very low, and the row of wires above the rooftop, set against the cloud, looked like black ropes hung on a gray wall.

Under that sky, I saw on the cement edge of the flower bed a wide, flowing black band. It was not the thin ant line of ordinary days. It was a black band as wide as a

finger, packed with ants, all walking toward the small dirt mound behind the flower bed.

I crouched down and saw that not one ant carried an empty body. Some held in their mouths a small white pellet, round like a rice grain soaked big. Later I learned those were ant eggs. Some carried half a leaf of vegetable, some a grain of rice, and some two ants together carried a dead insect. They walked in a hurry, none stopping, and the black band was like a river refusing to break.

I followed the band back to its source, an old hole on the cement edge. The soil piled at that hole was higher than usual, and a row of ants stood at the mouth, their feelers pointing toward the dirt mound, as if directing. I looked toward the mound. Under the grass on the mound there was a new hole. Its mouth was smaller than the old one, but it was ringed with fresh soil, and a small group of ants were diving in.

The sky grew darker, and the wind made the plane tree leaves rustle loudly. I wanted to go home, but my legs would not move. I had never seen ants move house like this. In some places their column crowded into a knot, yet even the knot was not chaotic. Ants behind would circle around, and after circling they fell back into the line.

When the first raindrop fell, it landed right on the back of my hand and chilled it for a moment. Then the drops thickened, pitting the cement edge as they struck. I saw the last few ants carrying ant eggs run into the new hole, and the row of ants at its mouth slipped in after them. Almost at the same moment they entered, the rain grew heavy.

I went home under an umbrella, thinking the whole way. The sky darkened by itself, the clouds came by themselves. How did the ants know the rain was coming first? That evening I looked through books. The book said that before rain the air is heavy with moisture, and an ant hole is low and close, so their bodies can sense the moisture rising, and they move their home to higher ground in advance. Ants do not have magic. Their bodies are the most sensitive weather instruments.

The next day the rain stopped, and I went to look at the dirt mound. The mouth of the new hole was quiet, and the old hole had been filled by rainwater into a shiny little puddle. I stood in the sun thinking. Weather forecasts need satellites and radar. Ants need only a pair of small feelers, and they tell themselves the news of rain ahead of time. In nature, the smallest things often hide the oldest skills.