侦察蚁回来了，带着一整支队伍

放学那阵子，我每天都故意走同一条路回家，因为三号楼的墙角有一个蚂蚁洞口。不知道它们是什么时候搬来的，洞口那堆细土很新，颗粒分明，像刚被人用手掌拍实过。

那天放学，我只看见一只蚂蚁。它走得很乱，几步一停，触角贴着地面碰来碰去。我把半块饼干放在它前面。它凑近，碰了碰，退开，又凑近，围着饼干转了一整圈。我以为它要开始吃了，它却转身，径直朝洞口回去。

后来我在书上看到，这样的蚂蚁叫侦察蚁，不负责搬东西，只负责探消息。可那天我不知道这些，只以为它看不上那块饼干，有点失望地准备走。

十分钟左右，它回来了，身后跟着一条黑线。黑线排得很整齐，像有人沿着地砖缝弹过一条墨斗线。队伍里的蚂蚁和它迎面相遇时用触角碰一下，谁也不停，全都朝饼干的方向赶。

搬运队伍分成两拨。到了饼干边的，围着饼干站开，有的抬前角，有的撬后边，饼干真的挪动了一点。搬着碎屑回洞的走队伍左边，空着身子赶去帮忙的走右边，两个方向互不挡路。我蹲着看了将近四十分钟，腿麻了也不想挪。

障碍出现在有人把电动车停在路线前头的时候。最前面的蚂蚁停下来，触角乱晃。我以为它们会掉头，它们没有。几只顺着轮胎边缘往上爬，试了一下，滑下来，再试。很快整支队伍绕过后轮，绕出半米多远，又在地砖的另一条缝上接上了原来的路线。新路线弯弯的，但没有一只蚂蚁撞到一起。

等我回家，饼干只剩下几粒碎渣。我一路想着那条线。没有人下命令，也没有人记本子，可每只蚂蚁都清楚自己该干什么，撞上障碍就改道，改完照样走得整齐。我们小组做课题，十来个人常常拧不成一件事。蚂蚁的脑子只有芝麻大，却做到了我们没做到的事。墙角那里没有老师，可每天都在上课。

The Scout Ant Came Back with a Whole Column

For a stretch of afternoons, I deliberately took the same road home from school, because at the corner of Building Three there was the entrance to an ant nest. I did not know when they had moved in, but the pile of fine soil at the mouth was fresh, its grains sharp and clear, as if a hand had just patted it firm.

That day I saw only one ant. It walked in a crooked, hesitant way, stopping every few steps, its antennae brushing the ground. I set half a biscuit in front of it. It came close, touched it, backed off, came close again, and walked one full circle around the biscuit. I thought it would start eating. Instead it turned around and headed straight back to the nest.

Later I read in a book that such an ant is called a scout. It carries nothing;

its job is news. But that day I knew none of this. I assumed the biscuit had been rejected, and I was about to leave, a little disappointed.

Some ten minutes later the scout came back, and behind it came a black line. The line was laid out neatly, as though someone had snapped an ink line along the crack between the paving stones. Each ant in the column touched antennae with the scout as they passed, none of them stopping, all hurrying toward the biscuit.

The carrying column split into two groups. Those who reached the biscuit formed a ring around it; some lifted the front corner, some pried at the back edge, and the biscuit really moved a little. Ants returning to the nest with crumbs kept to the left side of the line, while empty-handed reinforcements kept to the right, and the two directions never blocked each other. I squatted there watching for nearly forty minutes, my legs going numb, and I did not want to move.

The obstacle appeared when someone parked an electric bike right in front of the route. The ants at the front stopped, their antennae swinging wildly. I expected them to turn back. They did not. Several climbed along the edge of the tire, slipped down, tried again. Before long the whole column swung around the rear wheel, detoured more than half a meter, and rejoined the old route at another crack in the paving stones. The new path was crooked, yet not one ant bumped into another.

By the time I went home, the biscuit had shrunk to a few crumbs. I thought about that line the whole way. No one gave orders, no one kept notes, yet every ant knew exactly what to do, and when blocked they simply changed course and kept walking in perfect order. Our study group has a dozen people, and we often cannot pull together over a single task. An ant brain is the size of a sesame seed, yet they managed what we could not. There is no teacher at that street corner, but a lesson goes on there every day.

没人踩那条线

那节体育课，全班在塑胶跑道跑八百米，老师在直道尽头掐表。操场旧，跑道边靠树坑的地方有一道裂缝，蚂蚁把高速公路修在了那里。

搬运队伍在上课铃之前就出发了。一队蚂蚁排成线，把白色的幼蛹一只一只举着，从树坑往台阶下的高处搬。搬家的原因后来才弄清楚——早上园丁给树坑周围浇了水，水渗进了洞里。

侦察蚁前一天就露过面。它在跑道边来回跑，碰这里的缝，碰那里的土。看到的男生踢土玩，谁也没当回事。等到全家都动起来，大家才明白蚂蚁早就做好了决定。

第一个跑的男生差点踩上那条线。运动鞋落下去之前，他看见脚边那条黑线，硬是把脚踝一

拧，踉跄着扑到草皮边上。他后面的人全都绕开了。有人踩上草皮，有人跳过裂缝。没有人喊过一句，可没有一个人踩上那条线。

真正的障碍是喷水器留下的一小滩水。搬运线被水洼截断，最前面的蚂蚁停住，互相碰触角。队伍顺着跑道沿绕出去两米多，在一块干的裂缝上重新接上。举着幼蛹的没有一只放下怀里的东西，迎面来帮忙的蚂蚁和它们碰一下触角就继续往前。绕行的路线被课间几十双脚踩得模糊，可下一回蚂蚁出来，还是沿着那条绕远的线走。

老师后来发现了，他没有让我们把裂缝填平，只说了一句别踩，让人家搬完。队伍闹腾了一阵，很快安静下来。到最后一节课，裂缝空了。蚂蚁把全家搬到了台阶下的干土里，洞口重新堆起了新土。

后来我总想起八百米跑道上的那一幕。四十多个人都在跑，全都躲开了同一条线。蚂蚁的分工写在触角里，我们的默契写在同班三年里。两条线不一样，却落在同一个地方——没有人下命令的时候，每个人都知道该往哪里落脚。

Nobody Stepped on That Line

In that P.E. class, our whole grade was running eight hundred meters on the plastic track while the teacher timed us at the far end of the straight. The sports field is old, and along the track edge near the tree pit there is a crack; the ants had built their highway right there.

The moving column had set off before the bell. One line of ants carried white pupae, one at a time held high, from the tree pit toward the higher ground under the steps. The reason only became clear later: that morning the gardener had watered around the tree pit, and the water had seeped into the nest.

The scout ant had shown up the day before. It ran back and forth along the track edge, touching this crack, then that patch of soil. The boys who saw it kicked dirt at it, and nobody paid attention. Only when the whole family started moving did we understand that the ants had made their decision long ago.

The first runner almost stepped on the line. Just before his sneaker came down, he spotted the black thread at his feet, twisted his ankle hard, and stumbled out onto the grass. Everyone behind him swerved. Some stepped onto the grass, some jumped over the crack. Nobody shouted a word, yet not one person stepped on that line.

The real obstacle was a shallow puddle left by the sprinkler. The route was cut clean in half. The ants at the front stopped and touched antennae with each other. The column swung along the track edge for more than two meters and rejoined at a dry crack. Not one ant carrying a pupa set it down, and each reinforcement coming the other way touched antennae and kept going. Dozens of feet during the break wore the

detour path faint, but the next time the ants came out, they still followed the long way around.

The teacher noticed in the end. He did not let us fill the crack in. He only said: do not step on it, let them finish moving. The class buzzed for a moment, then went quiet. By the last period the crack was empty. The ants had moved the entire family into the dry soil under the steps, and a fresh mound of earth stood at the new entrance.

I keep returning to that scene on the eight-hundred-meter track. More than forty people running, and every one of them avoided the same line. The ants' division of labor is written into their antennae; our understanding is written into three years in the same class. The two lines are different, but they meet in the same place — when nobody gives orders, everyone knows exactly where to put a foot.

我挡在它们路上的那块纸板

轮到我值日那天，我负责冲墙边那条走廊。拖把桶推到墙角裂缝前，我停住了——一条密密的蚂蚁线正横穿走廊，拖把带过去的水肯定会把它们拦腰截断。

负责保洁的陈伯正好路过，摆手拦住我：等一下，让人家搬完。他说他看了这些蚂蚁好几年，勤快得很，断了人家的路不好。我把拖把放下，蹲在他旁边。

侦察蚁打头。它跑到队伍前头，碰地砖，碰门框脚，最后碰上一支不知谁掉的铅笔。它围着铅笔转了一圈，回去用触角碰了碰后面的两只，队伍就改了方向，从铅笔旁边兜过去。

搬运队伍搬的是死蝉的翅膀和虫卵，一只嘴里一口。大件由几只合抬，前面那只领方向，后面的用后腿往前推。陈伯说，那些来回跑、见谁碰谁的，是在传话：这条通，或者那条堵了。

我起了个坏念头，从垃圾桶里抽出一块纸板，横着挡在路线中间。前面的蚂蚁停住。有的往上爬，纸板光溜溜的，滑下来；有的想绕，纸板太宽，绕不出头。我以为这条路算被我堵死了，几只蚂蚁却贴着纸板的边往上爬，脚勾住撕开的毛边，一只一只翻了过去。后面的跟着，整支队伍从纸板上翻了过去。

我把纸板抽掉了。陈伯笑：你看，人家自己找出路了。蚂蚁们也不在意纸板没了，接着走刚蹚出来的新线。等整队过完，我才提起拖把冲走廊，绕着那条线。

教室里的黑板报还没画完，我正赌气，怪队友不听我的。看蚂蚁翻过纸板，我忽然想：它们从不吵谁的方案好，路堵了就先绕，绕过去再论谁带谁跟。蚂蚁的分工不是贴在墙上的规矩，是每一只都在队伍里找到自己的位置。回到教室，我拿起马克笔，画的是没人领的那一段。

The Cardboard I Put in Their Way

The day I was on cleaning duty, my job was hosing down the corridor along the wall. I stopped the bucket in front of the crack at the corner — a dense column of ants was crossing the corridor, and the water from my mop would surely cut them in half.

Grandpa Chen, the cleaner, happened to pass by and waved me to wait. Hold on, he said, let them finish moving. He had watched these ants for years, he told me; they are hardworking, and it would be wrong to cut off their road. I set the mop down and squatted beside him.

The scout ant led. It ran ahead of the column, touching the floor tiles, touching the base of the door frame, and finally touching a pencil someone had dropped. It circled the pencil once, went back and tapped antennae with two ants behind it, and the whole column changed direction, swinging around the pencil.

The carrying team hauled the wings of dead cicadas and bundles of eggs, one mouthful each. For the heavy pieces, several ants lifted together: the one in front set the direction, the ones behind pushed with their hind legs. Grandpa Chen said the ants running back and forth, tapping whoever they met, were passing word along: this way is open, or that way is blocked.

A mean idea came to me. I pulled a piece of cardboard out of the trash bin and laid it across their route. The ants at the front stopped. Some climbed; the cardboard was too smooth and they slid down. Some tried to go around; the cardboard was too wide. Just as I was sure I had sealed the road for good, a few ants climbed along the edge of the board, hooked their feet on the torn fibrous border, and crossed over one by one. The rest followed, and the whole column went over the cardboard.

I pulled the cardboard away. Grandpa Chen laughed: see, they found their own way out. The ants did not seem to notice the board was gone; they kept to the new path they had just broken. Only after the last ant passed did I pick up the mop and rinse the corridor, giving that line a wide berth.

Our classroom blackboard poster was still unfinished, and I was sulking, blaming my teammates for not listening to me. Watching the ants cross the cardboard, it struck me: they never argue over whose plan is best. When the road is blocked, they detour first, and sort out who leads and who follows afterward. The division of labor among ants is not a rule posted on a wall; it is each one finding its place inside the line. Back in the classroom, I picked up a marker and painted the section nobody had claimed.