我在花坛边蹲了一个钟头

科学老师布置了一项观察作业，要求写一种小动物。同桌在花坛边绕了半圈，回来说蚂蚁又小又多，两句话就把作业打发了。我不服气，第二天放学，搬了块砖，在花坛那道裂缝边上坐下来，打算跟蚂蚁耗到底。

头十分钟，什么新鲜事也没有，还是那些蚂蚁，还是那条线。我差点也起身走掉。我忍住了，把眼睛再压低一点，近到能看清一只蚂蚁的六条腿轮流往前倒。

看清动作是在第二十分钟。一只蚂蚁发现了一粒米饭，它先用触角敲了敲，再试着从前面抬，抬不动，又转到侧面推，米饭转了个方向。它回身走了几步，又回头，再走，最后干脆钻进米饭底下，用背把米饭顶起来，一步一步往后退着走。

路线是后来才看明白的。蚂蚁不是乱走，它们全沿着地砖之间那条最深的缝，缝就是路。走到墙根，队伍分了岔：搬食物的往左，回洞的往右，还有一小撮贴着墙往上爬，去够一只死掉的飞虫。三条线各有各的走法，谁也不挤谁。

一个钟头快到的时候，我数出这条队伍至少经过四次碰触角：碰一下，前面的蚂蚁就停下等一等；再碰一下，后面的就补上来。我不懂这是什么意思，只把它们记在心里。

回家路上，问题一个接一个冒出来：米饭那么重，它怎么知道回去叫人？缝是谁挖的，还是天生就该走？碰触角是在说话吗，说的什么？我越想越多，比同桌那两句话多出一百个问号。

第二天交作业，我写了满满两页，写米饭怎么被顶起来，写墙根的三条线，写我答不上来的那些问题。老师在我的本子边上写：这才是观察。我把那块砖又搬回花坛边，作业交了，可我的观察没有完，那些问题还等着我接着蹲下去，一个一个问明白。

I Squatted by the Flower Bed for a Whole Hour

Our science teacher assigned an observation task: write about a small animal. My deskmate circled the flower bed once, came back saying ants are tiny and numerous, and finished the assignment in two sentences. I was not convinced. The next day after school I carried a brick over, sat down beside the crack at the flower bed, and decided to see it through with the ants.

For the first ten minutes nothing new happened — the same ants, the same line. I nearly got up and left too. I held on, and lowered my eyes until I could see six legs of one ant tipping forward one after another.

The movements only came clear around the twentieth minute. An ant found a grain of rice. It tapped the rice with its antennae, tried lifting from the front, failed, switched to the side and pushed, and the rice turned a quarter circle. The ant walked a few steps away, turned back, walked again, then finally crawled under the grain and hoisted it on its back, walking backward step by step.

The routes made sense only later. The ants were not wandering; every one of them followed the deepest crack between the paving stones, and the crack was the road. At the foot of the wall the column forked: food-carriers turned left, nest-returners turned right, and a small cluster climbed the wall itself to reach a dead fly. Three lines, each with its own traffic, none crowding another.

Near the end of my hour, I counted at least four antenna-taps along the line: one tap and the ant ahead paused to wait; a second tap and the ant behind moved up. I did not know what it meant. I simply kept it in mind.

On the way home, questions came one after another: the rice was so heavy — how did the ant know to go fetch help? Who dug the crack, or is it simply born to be a road? Are they talking when they touch antennae, and what do they say? The questions multiplied, a hundred question marks more than my deskmate's two sentences.

When we handed in the homework the next day, mine filled two pages: how the rice was hoisted, the three lines at the wall, and all the questions I could not answer. My teacher wrote in the margin: now this is observation. I carried the brick back to the flower bed afterward. The assignment was turned in, but my observation was not over — those questions were still waiting for me to squat back down and work them out one by one.