蹲在蚂蚁窝边的四十分钟

周六下午没有作业，我下楼散步，在空地的水泥缝边发现了一个蚂蚁窝。洞口不大，周围的土堆成一个小斜坡，像给洞口修了个挡水的堤。我本来只想看一眼，结果蹲下来就没走。我看它们进进出出，发现一个怪现象：从洞里出来的蚂蚁大多空着身子，走得急；进去的蚂蚁大多嘴里叼着东西，走得慢。洞口像一扇门，门里门外是两种节奏。我掏出手机想看时间，怕爸妈喊我吃饭，结果一看已经蹲了半个多小时。腿麻了，我换了个姿势接着看。

看得最久的是两只蚂蚁碰触角。它们在洞口迎面碰上，停下来，头对头，触角搭在一起，停了大概两三秒，然后各走各的。我数过，四十分钟里这样的碰面发生了很多次。我猜它们是在交换信息，就像书里说的，蚂蚁靠气味和触角说话。可我忍不住想得更远：它们碰一下就知道对方要什么，不用吵，不用解释，不用发一大段消息再补一句你误会了。我们班搬书那次，四个人抬一摞，因为谁先走谁后走吵了半节课。蚂蚁碰一下触角就分好了，我觉得这比我们有办法。

回家前，我在窝边坐到了天擦黑。我想的事情有点跑远了：这个洞里的蚂蚁，没有谁给它们排班，没有谁检查卫生，可洞口没有堆垃圾，路线没有堵死，下雨前它们还会把家往高处搬。它们靠什么管着自己？我想了半天，觉得答案可能就在那些碰触角里——每个个体都把自己知道的一点点告诉别的个体，加在一起，就成了整个窝的本事。我们总说集体要听一个人的，可蚂蚁好像不是这样组织的。这个想法我不敢说一定对，先写进日记里。我在末尾写：明天把生物课本里社会行为那一章提前看了，再看看它们和我想的一样不一样。

Forty Minutes Squatting by the Ant Nest

On Saturday afternoon I had no homework, so I went downstairs for a walk and found an ant nest beside a crack in the concrete of the open ground. The opening was small, and the soil around it was piled into a little slope, like a levee built to keep rain out. I only meant to glance, but once I squatted down I could not leave. Watching them go in and out, I noticed a strange pattern: most ants coming out were empty-bodied and hurried; most going in carried something in their mouths and moved slowly. The opening was like a door, with two different rhythms on either side of it. I took out my phone to check the time, worried my parents would call me for dinner, and found I had been squatting there for over half an hour. My legs went numb; I changed position and kept watching.

What I watched longest was two ants touching antennae. They met head-on at the mouth of the nest, stopped, heads facing, antennae resting on each other, held still for two or three seconds, then each went its own way. I counted: in forty minutes these meetings happened many times. I guess they exchange information, the way books say ants speak through scent and antennae. But I could not help thinking further: one touch and they know what the other needs, no arguing, no explaining, no sending a

long message and then adding you misunderstood. That time our class moved books, four of us carried one stack and spent half a period quarreling over who walks first and who walks last. Ants split the job with one touch of antennae. I think they have a better way than we do.

Before going home I sat by the nest until dusk. My thoughts had wandered far: in this nest nobody makes the schedule, nobody inspects the cleaning, yet there is no garbage piled at the entrance, no blocked roads, and before rain they move their home uphill. What keeps them in order? I thought a long time and decided the answer may lie in those antenna touches. Every individual passes on the little it knows to other individuals, and added together it becomes the skill of the whole nest. We always say a group must listen to one person, but ants do not seem to organize that way. I dare not say this thought is certainly right, so I write it in my diary first. At the end I wrote: tomorrow I will read ahead the chapter on social behavior in the biology textbook, and see whether they match what I imagined.

两只蚂蚁碰了碰头，我想了很久

晚饭后我带狗下楼，它在水泥地缝边趴下不动，鼻子嗅个不停。我顺着它的鼻子看过去，是一个蚂蚁窝。洞口有一小圈松土，蚂蚁从里面排着出来，绕开狗的爪子。狗想伸爪子，我拽住了牵引绳，只好蹲下来替它看。蚂蚁窝边上的世界很小，可看进去就不太走得出来了。我看它们搬一粒米，八只蚂蚁围上去，没有一只指挥，可谁抬哪一头好像天生就知道。米走到洞口卡住了，外面的把米往里推，里面的蚂蚁退出来让路，让完再回去接着干别的。

真正让我蹲到天黑的，是两只蚂蚁碰触角。它们在米粒旁边碰上，触角搭在一起，一动不动，像两个头碰头说悄悄话的孩子。我盯着那两三秒，脑子里忽然冒出同桌。我和她已经三个星期不说话了，起因是借一块橡皮没还，谁也不肯先开口。我们每天坐在一张桌上，笔袋挨着笔袋，可中间像隔了一条水泥缝。蚂蚁碰一下触角，两秒钟，事情就传开了，该搬的搬，该让的让。我们要是也有触角，那三天的冷战大概当天就结束了。我又想到，人和人麻烦就麻烦在话多：一句话出口，能歪成三个意思，越解释越远。蚂蚁的两秒钟里没有解释。

狗在旁边打了个哈欠，催我回家。站起来的时候我发现牵引绳在手腕上绕了两圈。最后看了一眼那个洞口，一只蚂蚁正从里面出来，触角先探出来，像先派个信使。回家上楼，我在日记本上写：今天看了四十多分钟蚂蚁，主要看它们怎么说话。写完这句我停了一下，又加了一行：明天上学，跟同桌说一句话，不用触角的那种。我不知道这行字算不算想明白了，但它是我蹲在蚂蚁窝边四十分钟里，最实在的一个念头。上楼时狗回头看我，大概觉得我今天有点怪。

Two Ants Touched Heads, and I Thought for a Long Time

After dinner I took the dog downstairs. It lay down by a crack in the concrete and would not move, its nose sniffing nonstop. I followed its nose and found an ant nest. There was a small ring of loose soil at the opening, and ants filed out around the dog paw of the dog. The dog wanted to reach out with its paw, so I pulled the leash tight and had to squat down and watch for it. The world beside an ant nest is tiny, but once you look in, it is hard to look away. I watched them carry a grain of rice: eight ants gathered around it, none giving orders, yet each seemed to know by birth which end to lift. The rice got stuck at the opening. The ants outside pushed it in, the ants inside backed out to clear the way, then went back to their other jobs when the way was clear.

What kept me squatting until dark was two ants touching antennae. They met beside the rice grain, put their antennae together, and stayed perfectly still, like two children with heads together whispering. I stared at those two or three seconds, and my deskmate suddenly came to mind. She and I have not spoken for three weeks, over an eraser that was borrowed and never returned, and neither of us will speak first. Every day we sit at one desk, our pencil cases touching, yet between us there seems to be a concrete crack. Ants touch antennae for two seconds, and the news is passed, what needs carrying gets carried, what needs yielding gets yielded. If we had antennae, our three-week cold war would probably have ended that same day. Then I thought: people are troublesome precisely because they talk too much. One sentence out of the mouth can twist into three meanings, and the more you explain, the farther apart you get. There is no explaining in those two seconds of ants.

The dog yawned beside me, urging me home. When I stood up I found the leash wound twice around my wrist. I took one last look at the opening: an ant was coming out, its antennae reaching out first, like a messenger sent ahead. Upstairs, I wrote in my diary: watched ants for over forty minutes today, mostly watching how they talk. After writing that line I paused and added another: tomorrow at school, say one sentence to my deskmate, the kind that does not need antennae. I do not know whether that line counts as figuring something out, but it was the most solid thought out of the forty minutes I squatted by that nest. Going up the stairs, the dog looked back at me, probably thinking I was a little strange today.

值日那天，我在操场边看了很久蚂蚁

轮到我值日那天，我主动揽了扫操场这活，因为操场边上有一个蚂蚁窝，我早就想细看一次。别的同学扫教室，我拿着扫帚慢慢往墙根挪，扫两下停一下。那个窝的洞口在跑道边的排水沟盖上，洞口的土堆被风削掉了一角，蚂蚁在缺口处来回补土。我蹲下去看，发现它们补土很有章法：谁叼来一粒，就放在缺口最薄的那一段，放完就走，不回头检查。我盯着那个缺口看了十几分钟，它一点点被补圆了。

看得最入迷的还是触角相碰。排水沟盖上蚂蚁多，碰面的机会也多。两只迎面碰上，触角搭一下，分开；再走两步，又一只碰上，触角搭得久一点，大概四五秒。我试着数，十分钟里碰了三十多次。我猜短碰的是让路，长碰的是报信。它们把消息一路碰过去，就像往一条绳子上打结，结打到洞口，整个窝都知道了。我想到我们班大扫除那次：班主任只说了一句把教室弄干净，剩下的没人安排，擦黑板的自己去，摆桌椅的自己去，谁看见地上有纸就捡了。当时我们没碰触角，可那天的配合跟蚂蚁那天差不多。

扫帚靠在我肩上，我坐到天快黑才回教室锁门。路上我一直在想一个问题：蚂蚁的窝没有班长，可它们不乱；我们班没有谁下命令，大扫除也没乱。这是巧合吗？也许秩序不一定需要一个头，可能每个人把自己看见的那一点补上，秩序就自己长出来了。这个念头让我有点兴奋，又有点不确定，因为考试里问谁组织大扫除，标准答案肯定写班主任。我在日记末尾写：秩序也许是从底下长出来的，不是从上面压下来的。写完我把这句话圈了起来，打算哪天生物课讲到社会行为，拿这句话去问老师。

On Duty Day, I Watched Ants by the Playground for a Long Time

On the day it was my turn for classroom duty, I volunteered to sweep the playground, because there is an ant nest at its edge and I had long wanted a close look. While others swept the classrooms, I took my broom and moved slowly toward the wall, two sweeps then a pause. The nest opening sat on a drain cover beside the track. The soil mound at the mouth had been shaved off at one corner by the wind, and ants were shuttling back and forth repairing the gap. I squatted down and found their repair work quite methodical: whoever brought a grain placed it on the thinnest stretch of the gap, then left without looking back to check. I watched that gap for over ten minutes, and it rounded itself out bit by bit.

What fascinated me most was still the touching of antennae. The drain cover had many ants, so meetings were frequent. Two would meet head-on, touch antennae briefly, part; two steps later another pair met, touching a little longer, four or five seconds. I tried counting: over thirty meetings in ten minutes. I guess a short touch means make way, a long one means pass the news. They tap the message along the line

knot by knot, and when the knot reaches the hole, the whole nest knows. It reminded me of our big classroom cleaning: our homeroom teacher said only one sentence, get the classroom clean, and afterward nobody assigned tasks. Whoever wipes the blackboard went on their own, whoever arranges desks went on their own, and anyone who saw paper on the floor picked it up. We had no antennae that day, yet our teamwork was much like that of the ants.

With the broom resting on my shoulder, I sat there until near dark before going back to lock the classroom. On the way I kept turning one question over: an ant nest has no class monitor, yet it does not fall into chaos; our class had no one giving orders, yet the cleaning did not fall into chaos either. Is that a coincidence? Maybe order does not need a head. Maybe order grows on its own once everyone fills in the little they can see. The thought excited me a little, and left me a little unsure, because if an exam asks who organized the cleaning, the standard answer surely says the homeroom teacher. At the end of my diary I wrote: order perhaps grows from below rather than being pressed down from above. After writing it I circled the sentence, planning to take it to my biology teacher on the day we study social behavior.