一条线的秩序

菜市场的墙根有一条蚂蚁线，卖菜的人见惯了，踩过去也不停。只有我蹲下来看过一次，就再也假装没看见过它了。那条线从墙根的洞里出来，沿着墙脚走十几米，到一堆烂菜叶跟前散开。线的前半截是空的，走得快，像赶早班车的人；后半截都叼着东西，走得沉，像下班回家的人。空手的和搬货的在一条窄路上交错，谁也不挤谁，错身的地方各自让半个身位。我看了二十分钟，没有看见两只蚂蚁打架。市场里人来人往，吵成一团，墙根这条一寸宽的线却安安静静，各走各的，各干各的。

它们也有难处。有一回，一根筷子横在路线中间，对人是抬手的事，对它们是横倒的树干。队伍没有散，最前面的几只顺着筷子往上爬，爬到顶端，再翻下去，后面的跟着翻，翻过去以后在筷子另一侧重新排好。整个过程没有谁指挥，也没有谁掉头放弃。我在旁边看着，忽然觉得脸上有点热：我们遇到一根筷子那么小的障碍，绕开都嫌麻烦，它们翻过去，还顺手把掉在筷子底下的菜籽也搬走了。

雨前的市场最忙，人也忙，蚂蚁也忙。天阴下来，蚂蚁线忽然变宽了，从一条线变成一片，全都往墙根的高缝里赶，叼着卵的、叼着幼虫的、空着嘴来帮忙的。卖藕的大姐把泡藕的水盆往边上挪了挪，说蚂蚁要搬家，别堵了人家的路。她说话的时候，那一片蚂蚁正从她脚边过，她抬了抬脚，等它们过去才放下。雨落下来那天，市场收摊，墙根的高缝口干干净净，卵一颗都没湿。我后来常想起大姐抬脚那个动作，和蚂蚁翻筷子的那个动作，觉得它们是一回事：再小的生命，也有自己的一套活法，认真到让人不好意思打扰。

The Order of a Single Line

At the wall corner of the vegetable market runs a line of ants. The vendors are used to it and step over it without breaking stride. Only I looked once, crouched down, and after that I could no longer pretend not to see it. The line comes out of a hole at the wall base, follows the wall foot for ten or twenty meters, and fans out at a pile of rotten vegetable leaves. The front half of the line is empty-handed and quick, like people catching the early bus; the back half carries loads and moves heavily, like people heading home from work. Empty hands and loaded backs pass each other on a narrow road, neither crowding the other, each yielding half a body width at the passing spot. I watched for twenty minutes and saw no two ants fight. The market roared with people coming and going, yet this one-inch-wide line at the wall stayed quiet, each going its way, each doing its job.

They have hardships too. Once a chopstick lay across their route. For a person it is a lift of the hand; for them it is a fallen tree trunk. The column did not break. The front few climbed up the chopstick, crested it, dropped down the other side, and the ones behind followed, reforming the line beyond it. No one commanded the whole process, and no one turned back to give up. Watching, I suddenly felt my face grow warm: when we meet an obstacle as small as a chopstick, we find even going around a

bother, but they climb over it and carry off the vegetable seeds that had fallen under it as well.

The market is busiest before rain, people busy and ants busy. As the sky darkened, the ant line suddenly widened, from one line into a whole sheet, all hurrying toward the high crack in the wall: some carrying eggs, some carrying larvae, some arriving empty-mouthed to help. The sister who sells lotus root shifted her soaking basin aside and said the ants are moving house, do not block their road. As she spoke, that sheet of ants was passing by her feet; she lifted her foot and set it down only after they had passed. On the day the rain fell, the market packed up, and the mouth of the high crack at the wall was clean, not one egg wet. I have often thought since of the sister lifting her foot, and of the ants climbing the chopstick, and felt they are the same thing: even the smallest life has its own way of living, so earnest that one feels ashamed to disturb it.