墙角的小生命

老屋的墙角有一窝蚂蚁。墙皮剥落的地方，砖和泥之间裂开一道细缝，那就是它们的家。我小时候在那道缝前蹲过无数个夏天午后的时光，如今回去，缝还在，蚂蚁还在。它们的世界以毫米计算：一粒米是粮仓，一滴水是湖泊，一道门槛是翻不过的山。可就是这样一个以毫米计算的世界，它们活得比谁都认真。我见过它们搬一只死掉的飞蛾，十几只蚂蚁从各个方向下口，把翅膀、把身子拆成小块，一小块一小块往缝里运，从午后运到黄昏，没有一只停下来歇凉。

搬家的队伍是一条会动的线。线从墙根出发，越过砖缝，绕过落叶，一直伸到台阶那边的高处。队伍里每一只都叼着东西，白色的卵、虫子的残肢、不知从哪儿捡来的种子壳。它们不排成笔直的一列，却也不乱，前面的慢了，后面的自己绕开，绕开之后再归队。我蹲在旁边看久了，心里生出一种奇怪的敬意：没有谁发号施令，这条线却比许多队伍走得整齐。风把一片槐叶吹进队伍，队伍停了一小会儿，几只蚂蚁合力把叶子拖出去，线又接上了。

要下雨之前，它们搬家。天还晴着，空气里只有一点潮气，人毫无察觉，可墙角的蚂蚁已经全巢出动了。卵被一只只叼出来，排着队往高处走，墙根的旧洞口渐渐冷清，台阶的缝隙里新洞口热闹起来。等雨真的落下来，墙根积了一指深的水，台阶上的新洞口却滴水未进。我站在屋檐下看雨，想起它们提前一天就收拾好了家。人靠天气预报，蚂蚁靠空气里一丝潮的味道。雨停以后，我去看那个旧洞口，一只蚂蚁站在洞口试探，触角朝着天，像在确认雨真的走了。那个小小的剪影，我到现在都记得。

The Small Life by the Wall Corner

There is a nest of ants at the corner of the old house. Where the wall plaster has peeled away, a thin crack runs between brick and mud, and that is their home. As a child I squatted in front of that crack through countless summer afternoons, and going back now, the crack is still there, and so are the ants. Their world is measured in millimeters: a grain of rice is a granary, a drop of water a lake, a doorstep a mountain they cannot cross. Yet in a world measured in millimeters, they live more earnestly than anyone. I once watched them carry a dead moth. A dozen ants took hold from every direction, dismantling wings and body into small pieces, hauling one piece after one piece into the crack from afternoon until dusk, and not one stopped to rest in the shade.

The moving column is a line that moves. It starts at the wall corner, crosses the brick seam, skirts the fallen leaves, and reaches all the way to the higher ground by the steps. Every ant in the line carries something: white eggs, bits of insect limbs, seed shells picked up from who knows where. They do not march in a perfectly straight file, yet they are not chaotic; if the one ahead slows, the ones behind go around on their own and rejoin afterward. Watching for a long time, I felt a strange respect:

no one gives orders, yet this line moves in better order than many a procession. Wind blew a locust leaf into the column. The line paused briefly, a few ants dragged the leaf out together, and the line joined up again.

They move house before the rain. The sky is still clear, the air holds only a trace of damp, and people notice nothing, but the ants at the wall corner are already out in force. Eggs are carried out one by one and filed up toward high ground; the old opening at the wall grows quiet while a new opening in the crack of the steps grows busy. When the rain truly falls, water a finger deep gathers at the wall, yet not a drop enters the new opening on the steps. I stand under the eaves watching the rain and think of how they packed up their home a day ahead. People rely on weather forecasts; ants rely on a hint of damp in the air. After the rain stopped, I went to look at the old opening. One ant stood at the mouth testing, antennae raised toward the sky, as if confirming the rain had really gone. I still remember that small silhouette.

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.

蹲下来，看见另一个世界

那天我被工作搅得心烦，接女儿放学回家，她在楼下忽然蹲住不动。我以为鞋带开了，低头一看，她盯着墙根，说：爸爸，你看，它们在排队。我本来只想应付三秒钟，可既然蹲下来了，

就看得久了一点。就那一点，把我从工作里捞了出来。墙根的缝里住着一窝蚂蚁，一条细线从缝里出来，绕过石子，爬上台阶。女儿屏着呼吸，我屏着呼吸，我们两个人为一条蚂蚁线让了路，站在两边等它们过完。

它们搬运的样子让我这个大人惭愧。一粒比它们大得多的瓜子壳，七八只蚂蚁围成一圈，有的推，有的叼，走三步退一步，绕开一块碎砖。没有一只偷懒，也没有一只抱怨走错了路——它们大概根本不知道什么叫抱怨。我想起自己这星期为一份改了四遍的方案赌气，说这活没法干了。可墙根这七八只蚂蚁，搬的就是它们没法换的东西，一步一步，绕也要绕过去。女儿数着：一、二、三……数到七只的时候，瓜子壳翻上了台阶，她小声欢呼，像它们赢了比赛。我也笑了，心里那块堵着的东西松了。

傍晚天阴，风里有土腥味。蚂蚁线忽然慌了起来，从一条线散成一片，往墙根上方一条更高的缝里涌，叼着白卵的跑在最前。女儿拉住我的衣角，说它们要搬家了，要下雨了。话音没落，雨点就砸下来。我们跑上楼，隔着窗户看，墙根积了水，那条高缝的口上却有一只蚂蚁在来回走动，像新家的守门人。雨停的时候，女儿说：它们比咱们还早知道要下雨。我嗯了一声，心里想的是另一件事：我蹲下来不过二十分钟，蚂蚁给我上了一课——扛住眼前搬不动的东西，把路让给该让的人，在雨来之前先把家挪到高处。这三件事，我三十几岁才从一窝蚂蚁身上看懂。

Squat Down and See Another World

That day I was tangled up with work, and I picked my daughter up from school. Downstairs she suddenly squatted and would not move. I thought her shoelace had come undone, but looking down I saw her staring at the wall corner, saying: Dad, look, they are standing in line. I had meant to give it three seconds, but since I had squatted, I looked a little longer. That little bit fished me out of my work. A nest of ants lived in the crack at the wall base, a thin line coming out of it, skirting a pebble, climbing the steps. My daughter held her breath, I held mine, and the two of us gave way to an ant line, standing on either side until it had passed.

The way they carried things shamed me, a grown man. A sunflower seed shell far bigger than them: seven or eight ants ringed it, some pushing, some gripping, three steps forward one step back, going around a broken brick. None slacked off, none complained about the wrong road. They probably do not know what complaining is. I thought of my own sulking this week over a proposal rewritten four times, saying this job could not go on. But these seven or eight ants at the wall carry exactly what they cannot swap out, one step at a time, detouring if detour they must. My daughter counted: one, two, three. When she reached seven, the seed shell crested the step, and she cheered in a whisper, as if they had won a race. I laughed too, and the knot in my chest loosened.

In the evening the sky clouded over, and the wind smelled of earth. The ant line

suddenly grew frantic, scattering from one line into a sheet, surging into a higher crack above the wall base, those carrying white eggs at the front. My daughter tugged my sleeve and said they are moving house, it will rain. Before the words finished, the drops came down. We ran upstairs and watched through the window. Water pooled at the wall base, yet at the mouth of the high crack one ant paced back and forth, like the gatekeeper of a new home. When the rain stopped, my daughter said: they knew about the rain sooner than we did. I grunted yes, while thinking of something else: I had squatted down for only twenty minutes, and the ants gave me a lesson. Shoulder what you cannot move today, yield the road to those who should have it, and before the rain comes, move your home to higher ground. I am past thirty before I understood these three things from a nest of ants.