六十六次尝试

数学月考试卷发下来那天，我捏着不及格的卷子，坐在操场边的台阶上。台阶沿上有一条蚂蚁线，正搬着一段蚯蚓往前挪，挪到台阶的立沿前面，停住了。

一只大蚂蚁想把蚯蚓的前头抬上立沿。它抬起一次，蚯蚓滑下去；再抬一次，又滑下去。我低下头替它数。数到六十六次，前头终于搭上了台阶的边。

后面的蚂蚁一只接一只往前推，蚯蚓一寸一寸往台阶上爬。中间一阵风把一片枯叶吹到蚯蚓上，几只蚂蚁把枯叶抬开，又回到原来的位置，接着抬。整个过程没有一只蚂蚁停下来歇很久，也没有一只掉头走掉。

我一直捏着那张卷子。卷子上最后一道大题，我只看了两行就放弃了，在空白处写了太难两个字。蚂蚁不知道自己的活儿有多难，它只知道再试一次。六十六次这个数字，换在我身上，一道题都没试过。

台阶沿上的太阳晒得我脖子发烫，我换了个姿势接着蹲。旁边路过的同学喊我走，我摆摆手。那会儿我心里就一个念头，想看它到底能不能把蚯蚓搬上去。蚂蚁没让我失望，一次不行就换角度，角度不行就换位置，位置不行就再叫两只来。

蚯蚓段最后翻过最高一级台阶，消失在草丛里。我看了一眼手表，距离下课铃已经过去四十分钟，台阶沿上又排起了新的队伍，搬的是一粒米饭。

我回到座位，把卷子摊开，照着老师讲过的思路，在最后一道大题上画第一条辅助线。那天我明白，我缺的不是聪明，是六十六次尝试的勇气。蚂蚁不喊口号，它们只抬下一次。

后来我仔细想过，蚂蚁的坚持并不盲目。抬不动的时候，它们会改成咬住蚯蚓段的中部斜着拖，或者从另一边再试。坚持不是把同一个办法重复到底，而是绝不离开那件事本身。这大概就是小生命里的大道理。

Sixty-Six Tries

The day our math monthly test papers were handed back, I sat on the steps beside the playground, holding the failed paper in my hand. On the edge of the steps a line of ants was carrying a piece of earthworm forward, and it stopped in front of the vertical edge of the stairway.

One big ant tried to lift the front end of the earthworm piece onto the step edge. It lifted once, and the piece slid down. It lifted a second time, and it slid down again. I bent my head and counted for it. When I reached sixty-six, the front end finally caught the edge of the step.

The ants behind kept pushing one after another, and the piece climbed the step

inch by inch. In the middle, a gust of wind blew a fallen leaf onto the earthworm. Several ants carried the leaf away together, then returned to their places and lifted again. During the whole process no ant stopped to rest for long, and no ant turned around and left.

I had been holding the test paper the whole time. The last big problem on the paper, I had looked at two lines and given up, writing the words too hard in the blank space. The ant did not know how hard its task was. It only knew to try once more. The number sixty-six, applied to me, did not even appear once in a single problem.

At last the earthworm piece passed the highest step and disappeared into the grass. I glanced at my watch. Forty minutes had gone by since the bell, and a new line was forming on the step edge, carrying a grain of rice.

I went back to my seat, unfolded the paper, and drew the first auxiliary line of the last problem the way the teacher had explained. What I lacked, I understood that day, was not intelligence but the courage of sixty-six tries. The ants shouted no slogan. They only lifted the next time.

I thought it over carefully later. The persistence of the ants was not blind. When lifting failed again and again, they changed to biting the middle of the piece and dragging it sideways, or tried from the other side. Persistence is not repeating one method without end. It is never leaving the thing itself. That, I think, is the big lesson inside a small life.

水洼上的桥

暴雨放学那天傍晚，操场角的排水沟涨起一层水，把一条蚂蚁线拦腰截断。水和沟沿之间留着一道窄窄的水洼，宽不过两指。线这头的蚂蚁背着米粒、背着虫腿，急得原地转圈。

先是一两只蚂蚁爬到水洼边上，站住不动。接着更多的蚂蚁爬过去，一只挨一只，把身子搭在一起。我们几个没带伞的男生蹲在沟沿看，谁也没有说话。那道水洼上，慢慢出现了一条细细的、会动的桥。

背米粒的蚂蚁从桥上过去了。背虫腿的几只走不稳，桥就停一停，等它们挪过去。水从沟里漫上来，最外边的一只被水冲得打了个转，旁边的蚂蚁立刻补上它的位置，桥没有断。

桥上有蚂蚁停下来，掉头往回走，原来是桥这头一只背米粒的蚂蚁走岔了，和回来的那只顶在一起，两只触角碰了碰，各让半步，又都继续走。水洼里的倒影被风吹碎，桥就在水面上晃，看着随时要塌，可它就是没塌。

我看得手心出汗，想伸手拿片树叶搭过去，被周志远一把拉住。他说，别碰，它们自己会弄好。果然，水洼不深，桥撑了十几分钟，线那头最后一只空着身的蚂蚁也爬了过去。

后来水退了，桥散开，蚂蚁们抖抖身子，重新排成一条线，往坡上去。整个过程没有谁指挥，也没有谁站在旁边不动。每一只都往前一步，桥就搭起来了。

我想起上周的小组合唱，我们五个人唱不齐，互相埋怨，谁也不肯先跟着对方的调子改。蚂蚁搭桥的时候，没有谁抱怨水洼太宽。它们只是看见缺口，就把自己放上去。

那天在排水沟边，我把协作这两个字重新认识了一遍。它不是写在黑板上的口号，是缺口出现时，有人往前迈的那一步。回去的路上我一直在想，下次小组排练，我先去唱第二声部，把别人的空补上。

The Bridge Over the Puddle

On the evening of the day the storm let school out early, the drain ditch at the corner of the playground filled with water and cut a line of ants clean in half. Between the water and the ditch edge lay a narrow puddle, no wider than two fingers. On this side of the line, ants carrying rice grains and insect legs ran in small anxious circles.

First one or two ants climbed to the edge of the puddle and stood still. Then more ants crawled over and pressed against one another, joining their bodies together. A few of us boys without umbrellas squatted on the ditch edge and watched, nobody speaking. Over that puddle, a thin moving bridge slowly appeared.

The ants carrying rice grains crossed on the bridge. The few carrying insect legs walked unsteadily, so the bridge paused and waited for them to shuffle through. Water welled up from the ditch, and the outermost ant was spun around by the current; the ant beside it at once took its place, and the bridge did not break.

On the bridge some ants stopped and turned back. An ant carrying a rice grain on this side had gone off course and bumped head-on into one coming back. They touched antennae, each gave half a step, and both went on. The reflection in the puddle broke apart in the wind, and the bridge swayed over the water, looking as if it would collapse any second, yet it simply did not.

My palms were sweating from watching. I wanted to reach for a leaf to lay across the puddle, and Zhou Zhiyuan grabbed my hand. He said, do not touch, they will fix it themselves. Sure enough, the puddle was not deep. The bridge held for more than ten minutes, and at the end even the last empty-handed ant on the far side crawled across.

Later the water receded, the bridge came apart, and the ants shook themselves and formed a single line again, heading up the slope. Nobody commanded the whole process, and nobody stood aside. Every one of them stepped forward once, and the bridge was built.

It reminded me of our small-group choir rehearsal the week before. The five of us could not sing together, blamed each other, and none of us would be the first to follow the pitch of the others. When the ants built their bridge, nobody complained that the puddle was too wide. They saw a gap, and they put themselves into it.

That evening by the drain ditch, I got to know the word cooperation all over again. It is not a slogan written on the blackboard. It is the step someone takes forward when a gap appears. On the way home I kept thinking that at the next rehearsal, I would sing the second voice part first and fill the space the others left.

老井台边的蚂蚁线

周志远是在村口老井台边蹲了半个钟头的。他本来在等公交车，一条蚂蚁线从井台的石头缝里出来，背着一只死蟑螂，往坡上的玉米地去。他就跟了过去。

蟑螂比蚂蚁大得多，二十几只围着它，前头拉，后头推，两边扶。走到一个三岔口，队伍停住了。左边的路被一块枯叶盖着，右边的路是上坡，中间的路横着一条砖缝。蚂蚁们没有开会，也没有谁发号施令，队伍自己分成三股，各试各的路。

试枯叶的那股把叶子抬开一角，从底下钻过去。试上坡的那股把蟑螂翻了个身，头朝坡顶重新排好。试砖缝的那股绕了过去，多走了半尺。最后走通的是上坡那一股。周志远后来跟全班讲这段的时候说，它们不是只认一条路，是三条路一起试，哪条通了就走哪条。

我也蹲下去看过一次那条线。蟑螂的须还在动，蚂蚁绕着它转。周志远把我拉起来，说别挡着它们的路。我们退到井台后面，从那儿看它们把蟑螂往坡上抬。坡很陡，扶边的蚂蚁滑下去两只，立刻有别的补上。

那阵子班里排课本剧，周志远演一个只有两句台词的角色，一直不高兴，觉得自己没用。看完那条蚂蚁线，他把两句台词背得比主角还熟，因为道具组缺人，他又去管了道具。他说，蚂蚁搬蟑螂，拉头的和扶边的力气不一样，可缺了谁，蟑螂都过不去那个坡。

公交车来了三趟他都没上。回家他跟他妈说，他在井台边看了电视剧那么久，看的是蚂蚁。他妈说他魔怔了，他笑了笑，没有辩解。

期末班会，班主任让每人说一句这个学期懂得的道理。周志远站起来说，小生命里没有主角，只有位置。全班安静了两秒，然后鼓起掌来。那条蚂蚁线早就不在了，可他把从它身上看见的东西，

用到了自己身上。

The Ant Line by the Old Well

Zhou Zhiyuan once squatted by the old well at the village entrance for half an hour. He had been waiting for the bus when a line of ants came out of a stone crack in the well platform, carrying a dead cockroach toward the cornfield up the slope. He followed them.

The cockroach was far bigger than any ant. More than twenty of them surrounded it, pulling in front, pushing behind, and supporting it on both sides. At a three-way fork the line stopped. The left road was covered by a fallen leaf, the right road went uphill, and a brick crack lay across the middle one. The ants held no meeting, and nobody gave orders. The line divided itself into three groups, each trying its own road.

The group on the left lifted one corner of the leaf and crawled underneath. The group on the right turned the cockroach over and re-formed with its head toward the top of the slope. The group in the middle went around the crack and walked half a meter extra. The uphill group was the one that made it. When Zhou Zhiyuan told this to our whole class later, he said the ants did not believe in only one road. They tried three roads at once, and took whichever one opened.

I squatted down to watch that line once too. The whiskers of the cockroach were still moving, and the ants circled around it. Zhou Zhiyuan pulled me up and said, do not block their road. We stepped back behind the well platform, and from there we watched them carry the cockroach up the slope. The slope was steep. Two ants on the supporting side slid down, and others took their places at once.

Around that time our class was staging a textbook play, and Zhou Zhiyuan had a role with only two lines. He was unhappy about it for a long time, feeling he was useless. After watching the ant line, he memorized his two lines better than the lead actor memorized his. When the props group ran short of hands, he went to manage the props as well. He said that pulling at the front and supporting at the side take different strength, but without either one, the cockroach would never pass that slope.

Three buses came and he did not board any of them. At home he told his mother that he had watched a show as long as a TV drama, and the show was ants. His mother said he had gone strange. He only smiled and did not argue back.

At the final class meeting, our teacher asked everyone to say one lesson learned

that term. Zhou Zhiyuan stood up and said that in small lives there are no leading roles, only positions. The class was quiet for two seconds, then burst into applause. The ant line was long gone, but he had taken what he saw in it and applied it to himself.