我学赶牛，牛学赶我

那年暑假在乡下，二叔带我去耕地，让我学赶牛。牛叫大黑，四十来岁的人牵着它走了十几年的地，脚踩得垄沟笔直。二叔把树枝递给我，说你就站它左后边，喊驾，它就走，走歪了你拿树枝指指方向。说得轻巧，我接过来就上岗了。

大黑根本不理我。我喊驾，它耳朵一甩，赶苍蝇似的；我喊第二声，它尾巴一摆，继续走它的，走的全是斜线。二叔在地头抱着胳膊看，不吭声。我急了，想起电视里赶牛都抽一鞭子，就抡起树枝朝它屁股抽了一下，不重，啪的一声。

大黑停下，慢慢地转过头来。它看我那一眼，我这辈子忘不了，不是凶，是琢磨，像在算一笔账。下一瞬它朝我走过来，我往后退，它加快，我转身跑，它小跑起来追我。我就这样绕着打谷场跑了一整圈，书包在背上一颠一颠，里面两个红薯咚咚地响。二叔在地头笑得直不起腰，喊都喊不住——他后来承认，他是故意不拦，让我知道厉害。

跑完那圈，我扶着膝盖喘，大黑站在打谷场中间慢悠悠嚼草，像什么都没发生。二叔走过来，把树枝从我手里抽走，拽起大黑的鼻绳，冲它喊了一声短促的号子，大黑抬脚就走，一步一步踩回垄沟里。二叔把鼻绳递给我：它不是不听话，它是不认识你。它听的是号子，认的是鼻绳，你拿树枝，它记仇。

我重新上岗。拽着鼻绳，学着二叔的调子喊号子，一声长，一声短。大黑走它的，我跟着它的步子走，走歪了不抽它，把鼻绳往回轻轻一带，它自己就拐回来了。一上午过去，我们从地头走到地尾，垄沟里的脚印多了我的一双，歪歪扭扭，但是跟着大黑的脚印走的。

中午歇晌，我坐在树荫下啃书包里的红薯——跑那圈没跑丢，就是颠软了。刚啃两口，大黑不知什么时候凑过来，鼻子拱我的书包，鼻息喷得红薯渣乱飞。二叔说它认准你了，你书包里有它惦记的东西。我举着红薯跟它对峙，它不抢，就是看着你，眼神诚恳，看得你自己想把红薯递过去。

收假回城，我把歪脚印的事讲给同学听。同学问牛到底怕不怕你，我想了想，说它不怕我，它后来是喜欢我——喜欢我书包里的红薯。这话一半是玩笑。另一半是真的：那个暑假我学会的最要紧的一件事，是做事不能光靠手里的树枝，得先找到那根绳、那句号子。

I Learned to Herd the Ox, and the Ox Learned to Herd Me

That summer in the countryside, my second uncle took me out plowing and let me learn to herd the ox. The ox was called Dahei. A man in his forties had led it across the fields for over a dozen years, its feet walking the furrows straight as a rule. My uncle handed me a switch and said: stand at its left rear, shout gee and it goes; if it drifts, point the switch to guide it. Easy for him to say. I took the switch and started work.

Dahei ignored me completely. When I shouted gee, its ears flicked as if chasing flies; at my second shout its tail swished and it kept walking its own crooked lines.

My uncle stood at the head of the field with arms folded, saying nothing. I got desperate, remembered that in films herders always crack a whip, and I swung the switch at its hindquarters. Not hard, just one slap of sound.

Dahei stopped and turned its head around slowly. The look it gave me I will never forget: not fierce, but thoughtful, like a man working out an account. The next instant it walked toward me. I backed up; it sped up; I turned and ran, and it broke into a trot after me. I ran one full lap around the threshing floor, my schoolbag bouncing on my back, two sweet potatoes knocking inside. My uncle laughed so hard at the head of the field he could not straighten up, and his shouts could not stop it — he admitted later that he let me run on purpose, so I would learn my place.

When the lap was done, I leaned on my knees gasping, and Dahei stood in the middle of the threshing floor chewing grass unhurriedly, as if nothing had happened. My uncle walked over, took the switch out of my hand, lifted the nose rope of Dahei, gave one short call, and the ox lifted its feet and walked, step by step, back into the furrow. My uncle handed me the nose rope: it is not disobeying, it simply does not know you. It listens for the call and respects the nose rope; if you come at it with a switch, it holds a grudge.

I went back to work. Holding the nose rope, I imitated my uncles calls, one long, one short. Dahei walked, and I matched its pace; when it drifted I did not strike it but drew the rope back gently, and it swung itself back into line. By the end of the morning we had walked from one end of the field to the other, and the furrows held a new pair of footprints, crooked, but following Daheis.

At the noon rest I sat in the shade eating one of the sweet potatoes from my bag — the run had not lost them, only bruised them soft. After two bites, Dahei came over without a sound, nosing into my bag, its breath scattering crumbs. My uncle said it has marked you now; your bag holds something it cares about. I held up the potato and faced it off. It did not snatch; it just looked at you, eyes sincere, until you yourself wanted to hand it over.

Back in the city after vacation, I told classmates about the crooked footprints. They asked whether the ox was afraid of me in the end. I thought a while and said it was not afraid of me; later it simply liked me — liked the sweet potatoes in my bag. Half of that was a joke. The other half was true: the most important thing I learned that summer was that you cannot rely on the switch in your hand; first you have to find the rope and the call.

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