

A Ladybug

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When I was a teenager, maybe fifteen or sixteen years old, I was sitting on the couch in the living room when I saw a ladybug run across the corner of a table. The sight filled me with a sudden and strong sense of horror. The ladybug was tottering madly about, its body halfway squashed, its dotted orange shell cracked like a pistachio to reveal an almost completely flattened abdomen. It stumbled forward in a sort of crazed and horrible dance, running at an alarming speed for the extent of its injuries. I couldn't look away from it. I remember wishing that it would die immediately and be put out of its misery, as well as regretting my luck that this disturbing scene had ever crossed my eyeballs. It's just a ladybug, I know. It's just a beetle with barely any brains. But you would have understood if you'd seen it too—the way that it had walked, the way that it dragged its twisted wings and the horrible way its legs moved like a broken mechanical puppet.

I remember this ladybug, may it rest in peace. I remember the spider my karate teacher smashed on the mats with his bare foot in 2016 and the fat, buzzing beetle that struggled for days in the bathroom, hanging by one leg from a spiderweb. There was that upside-down cicada I put back in a tree. There was that friendly cricket in the basement that I fed a piece of pumpkin to. And, of course, there was that enormous fly, years ago, that rode into the house on my dad's back and sent me and my siblings running and screaming from the kitchen. The fly was biting him, but no one would help because we were all terrified out of our minds. It was about the size of a thumb. It's very funny when I think about it now.

When my siblings and I were younger, we used to play with the ants that lived on the patio in our backyard. My dad would make a bonfire every few months, and we'd pick through the ashes for pieces of charcoal to draw with. We drew extravagant mansions, complete with

restaurants and classrooms and theaters, for our ants. It was a grand time. We smashed grapes and berries where we wanted them to go, then watched with interest as more and more of them trickled into our rooms, outlining our offerings with their dark bodies. Black, red, brown, shiny, fuzzy, smooth, fat, winged, slender, big, medium, small—they all came to feast in the great, glittering city.

I've always been more fond of the littler ants. The big black ants that seem to grow fuzz on their bodies and become hairier and hairier the older they get have always disgusted me a little. I'm not sure why. I suppose I don't like it that they're large. I don't like it that they look almost blue in the sunlight. I don't like their skittery, skittery legs and the fact that you can feel the weight of them as they run up your arm.

I remember one of these guys in particular. One sunny day, I'd turned on the tap to wash the dishes when I saw, too late, six or seven of them struggling at the bottom of the kitchen sink. Most were clear of the water, but one was right in the middle of a puddle, wandering around in circles. It was not the first time I'd rescued an ant in such a situation, and I moved with practiced efficiency, tearing off a corner of a paper towel and turning back to the sink to fish it out. But when I returned, I found it curled up. Its body, so active a few seconds ago, was lifeless and unmoving. I prodded it. I picked it up. I stood there with the paper, unable to believe it. A life had gone, just like that? A few seconds had made all the difference? I remember feeling disappointment and a little guilt. If I had moved faster, if I had grabbed the whole paper towel instead of stingily tearing off a corner, if I had stuck my hand in to rescue it instead of looking for something else...

I'm afraid I'm revealing myself as somewhat of a sentimental idiot. Who cares so much about an ant dying? Or a ladybug? There are people starving in the world. There are people at

war and children fishing through garbage dumps to find scraps to sell for their families. What is a bug to that? Why even bother? It seems so stupid when I write it out.

Perhaps a bug is not so much. I remember the waxworms I used to fish. I remember the wriggling earthworm that I cut into pieces as a child to feed to a baby bird we'd found in the grass. The bird died. I remember getting the flyswatter for my dad so he could get rid of the many maddening flies buzzing incessantly in our living room (and good riddance too). I remember when I was maybe seven or eight, when I would search for acorns at the park while my dad fished in the pond. Some of these had holes in them, and inside would be an interesting treasure—a small white worm, surrounded by the mush it had made out of the acorn meat. For hours, I diligently cracked nuts, looking for these. I put them in a plastic bug-viewer which I took home and filled with various plants. Then, that night, I found an even greater treasure—a little frog. Out I went and dumped my worms onto the dirt to make room for my new pet. A couple years later, after we had moved into our new house, we had a ladybug problem. Ladybugs perched on the walls and ran across the tables and died flipped-over on the windowsills. When my mom brought it up, I wondered aloud if we might use the vacuum cleaner to get rid of them. When I got home from school, the vacuum cleaner had been used, and the ladybugs were gone.

Or perhaps bugs are something. I remember my freshman year of college, when I found a green worm in my salad in the dining hall. I brought it to my dorm and snuck lettuce out of the dining hall for a month for it to munch on. And munch it did. It grew fatter and lumpier, until one day it stopped moving entirely and became a cocoon. I removed it from the cup I'd been keeping it in and placed it on the shelf above my desk. Occasionally, I'd check in on it to see if anything had changed. One day, I returned to find the cocoon empty. The moth or butterfly—I never found out which—had emerged while I was away. It probably starved to death somewhere

in my dorm hall, never to find its way outdoors. That particular bug meant something to me, and I had failed it. I wish I'd not taken the cocoon out of the cup.

I remember a spider that I accidentally tangled in its web one day while I was sweeping. It was my fault. I stepped on it to give it a quick end. I remember a big brown beetle, one of those lumbering and slow-looking fellows that bump against the window screens in summer, that had gotten itself stuck in a spiderweb in the corner of the bathroom mirror. I'd developed my own principles for dealing with bugs stuck in spiderwebs. If I saw no spider, I took it down. If there was a spider, I left it. There was a very small spider occupying this web. I couldn't imagine how it would possibly eat such a large beetle, but for two days, the beetle dangled there, buzzing. Sometimes, it looked as if it were almost about to get free. I kept waiting for it to die or to fall out of the web, but it never did. Finally, I couldn't let it be anymore. I took it down from the web, hoping that it was not too late. It had earned its life with its endurance.

I remember the attempted rescue of another worm, this one from just a couple of years ago. I was visiting my mom in Kansas when I found an earthworm blistering on the sidewalk. It was one of the victims of a spout of rain, which had come and gone before it'd completed its journey across the cement. It was shriveling in the sun, attacked by ants. I picked it up and carried it back to the house, using my hands to shade it. Learning from the times when I did harm through good intention, I searched the internet for expert advice on dried earthworm rescue. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I found none. Doing my own amateur best, I made a moist bowl of dirt, placed the worm on top, and placed a wet paper towel over the top of the bowl. In a couple of hours, it was moving a bit more, its skin moistening up. But it looked pale and swollen and unnatural, and by the next morning, it was dead. In the same house, during that same summer, my dad brought home some catfish in a tub. They were alive and still struggling. I hated to see

them moving their gill flaps, trying to breathe the dry air. I had the urge to grab the tub and run back to the pond where they'd come from and dump them back in the water. If they'd been my fish, I would have. But what would my dad say? Wouldn't that hurt my dad, who had worked so hard to fish them? I thought about taking a knife or a big stick and ending their struggle quickly. But wouldn't that make me more responsible for their pain than if I had just left them alone? For a long time, I couldn't decide. I stayed in the kitchen, watching them, and cried. In the end, I did decide to leave them alone. I craved clarity, a simple world where I could keep from culpability by just refusing to take part. Perhaps if I never caused pain with my own hands, that would be enough. But the next time, when my dad brought home a large bass, I took the back of a cleaver and tried to kill it with one blow, the way I'd seen in Asian supermarkets. But I'm too small and weak, and it didn't work. I hit it several more times to put it out of its misery, and by the end, there were thin lines of blood on its scales.

There are tears in my eyes as I type this. I feel so small and confused, like a ridiculous clown. Regret for the bird. Regret for the fish. Regret for the bugs I chose to kill and the ones I didn't. A hypocrite for the pain I caused on purpose and for the pain I caused from neglect. For the pain I'm still causing. You can be forgiven for your thoughts. You can be forgiven for the pain you cause yourself. But the pain you cause to others is the one thing you can truly never take back. It is always there, unerasable. Some days I think I care too much. Some days I don't care enough. Maybe I should have never brought home the bird. Maybe I should have left the worm on the sidewalk. Maybe I should have smashed the struggling ladybug, which I sat and watched crawl on its miserable way until it disappeared from my sight.