A Stain on my Page

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As I flip a page in my book, I noticed an orangish splatter on the new page: the remnants of a life squashed. I have killed a bug. No appendages or wings or flattened body remain, so what kind of bug I’ve killed is a mystery. The kind, frankly, is insignificant. Whatever the bug was, it is now dead.

Hesitantly—who wants to touch guts?—I place my thumb on the stain and rub. It doesn’t come out. I lick my other thumb and rub again. It’s still there. A mixture of sadness and annoyance has surfaced; these emotions are maybe one-fifth for the bug and four-fifths for the page, which will never again be white and pure. Mostly, though, I feel surprised. How often do I kill without intent? Often, I’d wager.

Human traffic—whether bipedal or vehicular—constitutes the greatest daily threat to world life. Each movement, especially steps, has the power to crush and crunch. Antz is the greatest artistic rendering of this fact. And I’m currently taking step after step while walking down Beauford Avenue in Gettysburg. Had I stepped on the bug, unless the crunch of its shell alerted me, I wouldn’t have noticed that I killed something. I’d estimate that I don’t notice at least ninety-five percent of bugs that cross my path, whether they pass unharmed or otherwise; the stain is the only reason I noticed the one that landed on my page, albeit posthumously.

Surprise and annoyance have subsided. Regret now grows; this stain is stubborn. I have tried to finish the same line four times now, but, before I reach the period, the orange dot the size of a thumb tack steals my attention.

I close the book, keeping my index finger between the pages to mark my place. This line must wait.

My relationship with bugs, like most people’s, has never been the best. While most of my insecticide has been unwitting, a fair portion of it has been deliberate.

Last night, for instance, I was in my friend’s room when she noticed a cricket on the floor near her fridge. While I have nothing against crickets (as long as they don’t touch me), my friend has mild orthopterophobia. The word phobia is slightly disingenuous; all phobias are a form of bigotry. This cricket was the third I’d encountered while in her room. As with the previous three, I took my shoe, moved towards the cricket, and smacked it with the sole. The cricket’s crunch was decisive and divisive; the sound induced satisfaction and a fleeting pang of guilt. I picked up its oozing body with a paper towel, wiped away the yellowing goo on the floor, and flushed it down the toilet. Throughout this process, I was careful not to get anything on my hand.

My recent cricket-killing was nowhere near the most gruesome or vile of my sprees. The worst, by far, came in the summer of 2007, the summer after sixth grade. Tent caterpillars had infested Eastern Pennsylvania. Infested, if

1 For the curious, I am reading William Hazlitt’s “On the Pleasure of Waiting.” I can’t make this up.

2 More specifically: eastern tent caterpillars, or Malacosoma Americanum. These
possible, may even be an understatement. Tent caterpillars overwhelmed the region so completely that it was impossible to find a tree without a swarm of them. Some trees were so covered by tiny-haired, black-and-yellow bodies that their bark vanished, replaced by a slithering, fuzzy surface. Driving along the road to my house included a cacophony of pistol pops as our tires exploded caterpillar bodies across the blacktop. Silky, white cocoons like cotton-candy covered whole swaths of boughs, making a new canopy of their own.

If Tacitus lived today, he would mark that summer with one word: rampage. Each day I went out and slaughtered tent caterpillars en masse, sometimes with an old, rusted hatchet, sometimes with a stick, sometimes with a rock. An interest in how long I could kill raged inside me, and, like Carol Oates, I learned I could kill for a long time. I scoured my property and slaughtered all I could find until I grew bored with my power and went inside; after some hours, I would feel reinvigorated and renew the cause, piling new mounds of bodies before the old ones disappeared. Decapitation, dismemberment, blunt force: these were my primary means. I derived distinct enjoyment from one manner of killing. I placed a rock on a caterpillar’s tail end, applied pressure, and scraped across the abdomen and ended at its thorax, bursting its yellow-green guts from its head in a pop. The induced feeling was singular: satisfaction. In one especially sadistic case, I tested the limits of a caterpillar’s life. I dropped the caterpillar in a puddle that had pooled in the bed of my mom’s black pickup and held it there until it stopped squirming. Then I pulled it from the water and set it down. Kneeling in the bed of the truck, I prodded and poked the caterpillar, daring it to move, to display some sign of life. Invariably, it moved. After this sign, I placed the caterpillar back in the water and held it under even longer. Only when the caterpillar failed to move for several minutes did I end this torture. Whether it drowned or grew too exhausted to move I’ll never know, for I took my rock and severed its head. It didn’t wiggle while I did this.

My parents cheered me on in this endeavor. Tent caterpillars ate trees, and this new infestation threatened to engorge on whole forests one millimeter bite at a time. I was the sylvan savior. Genocide, of course, always has its roots in the belief of self-preservation.

Mostly, I killed the caterpillars because I enjoyed it and because they were so different than me.

I have made it across the road and turned past the Post Office. My book remains wrapped around my finger, the line unfinished. Railroad tracks spread in either direction before me. Somewhere nearby a cicada buzzes, and I scan the ground, without stopping, in a small effort to ensure I don’t step on it.

Between that summer of tent caterpillars and last night’s cricket, I’ve come a long way. I no longer wholesale slaughter insects of any variety. I generally do what I can to avoid them, but, of course, this is an unachievable task; bugs are numerous and everywhere. Two chief aspects of the encounter factor into my response to insects, decide whether they live or not. The first is where we meet. Caterpillars are most noteworthy for their social nature.

3 Eastern tent caterpillars have been linked to mare reproductive loss syndrome, so I was also saving any nearby horses’ chances of procreation. I didn’t know this at the time and won’t lie about my motivations.
If I encounter an insect outside, like the cicada, I’ll almost always avoid it. The only exceptions occur because a bug has come too close, touches me and/or surprises me, or poses a threat. In these instances, I do my best to remove myself from the situation, whether that means jolting out of a seat, schizoidly slapping at my forearm where the ant managed to climb, or wandering away from the bug’s vicinity. In extreme instances resulting from the listed exceptions, I may still end up killing the bug, such as slapping the ant on my arm too forcefully in my panic.

If I encounter a bug inside, I rarely ignore it. I won’t always kill it, though. Instead, I may try to move it outside. Inside, no matter what, is unacceptable for the bug.

This effort to move the bug outside has its limitations: I must be able to catch and transport the bug within a reasonable distance and timeframe. If removing the bug requires too great an exertion, I kill it or ignore it, dependent on the bug and its proximity to me; I may also ignore a bug for a time before killing it, as its persistent presence may become bothersome—a fly’s buzzing, for instance, will erode my patience. Some bugs, such as stink bugs, are exempt from any form of mercy and must always be killed and/or flushed.

This latter point brings me to the second principal factor in my response to bugs: my value judgment of the bug itself.

4 With a tissue or through a window, of course. Skin contact is still a no.
5 Ignoring it, over the long term, effectively dooms it to die as well.
6 The flushing obviously kills it, too.
7 Here’s a rough, representative hierarchy of bugs, ranging from the best (ones I find least offensive) to worst (ones I find most offensive):
   • Ladybugs: This is the only bug I will seek contact with. I will still slightly spasm and huff/grunt if surprised by a ladybug touching me. Butterflies belong here as well. These are the only bugs I ever willingly touch.
   • Praying Mantis: They’re just neat. Seriously, have you seen one lately? There’s a whole style of Chinese martial arts that mimics the mantis. Still, I’d prefer if it kept a distance of at least three feet. Most caterpillars belong around here, though typically less cool and/or badass.
   • Crickets: Not cool or desired but harmless and only annoying if I’m inside and trying to sleep or through my friend’s own annoyance. Flies also belong here, except for horseflies, who join bees/wasps/etc. below.
   • Bees or Wasps or other stingy ones: Not on the bottom because they rarely make their way inside, alert me when they’re nearby, and will bother those who wear brighter colors than I do. I think it’s clear why they’re here, though, on the downward half.
   • Spiders: The bigger the spider is, the worse it is. Tiny spiders on my wall can be ignored if far enough away—say a few feet. Gluttonous, rotund spiders must die, no matter the circumstances or the resulting mess. Daddy Long-Leggers (or cellar spiders / pholcidae) are exempt from this position and fit closer in with crickets.
   • Stinkbugs: The name says it all. That inexplicable stench lingers, man, all around anything nearby. Plus, they have a habit of buzzing just long enough to let you know they’re nearby but not long enough to let you find them. They also infiltrate my house more often than the CIA did South and Latin American gov-
When I say value judgment, I mean a bug’s value to me, not its value writ large. Every bug is valuable in its own way; even mosquitoes, the peskiest of insects, are vital to aquatic environments, as their eggs are a vital food source for other insects and small fish.

My judgment of a bug depends on three factors: (1) threat posed, (2) annoyance, whether through scent, sound, etc., and (3) aesthetics. (1) and (2) are self-intuitive and have already been discussed, but (3) requires further explanation. Essentially, the more aesthetically pleasing I find a bug, the less likely I am to kill it.\(^8\) I don’t find many bugs aesthetically pleasing—butterflies, certain caterpillars, ladybugs, dragonflies, and the more decorative of grasshoppers comprise the full catalog. All other bugs aren’t aesthetically pleasing, many being quite the opposite, and they subsequently miss this checkmark on my list, perhaps fatally, depending on their other attributes and the situation.

My sentiments regarding bugs boils down to this: on the whole, I fail to notice bugs, but, if I do notice them, their survival depends on our location, how annoying and ugly they are, and how inconvenient it is for me to help them if inside. Based on these criteria, most bugs I knowingly cross survive, but many don’t.

Somewhere deep inside I know I should care more about bugs, feel guiltier over my apathy towards my unintentional killing of them and guiltier over my premeditated slaughters. Others—people who seem nearly as alien to me as the bugs themselves—have learned to love insects. Some, such as Thoreau, have even learned from bugs, something I can’t do considering any notice equates to avoidance or violence.

Despite this knowledge, I find myself unable to care about bugs enough to stop me from killing them. They’re too insignificant and foreign for me to care deeply. Their only real chance to survive an encounter with me is to be in the right place at the right time and/or to please me through arbitrary, completely not-up-to-them means while not posing too great an inconvenience, again in ways they cannot control. They should not be too noticeable, too sneaky, too daring, too small or too big, and too gross. This is all I ask. Is that too much?

I have reopened my book and found the line the gut-smudge interrupted earlier: “I bear the creature no ill-will, but still I hate the very sight of it.” And I do hate the sight of it, the sight of the stain on my page, and it won’t be the last, and the others won’t come off as well.

\(^a\)Yes, spiders are technically not bugs but arachnids, but neither are ladybugs (beetles), and they have the word bug in their name. The word bug is just easy and colloquial.

\(^8\) Even a cursory glance at my list, without reading the explanations, makes this clear.