

Saga of the Sugar Ants

by John Olson

They're persistent, I'll give them that. They keep coming. And coming and coming. Their little black bodies. Legs like little black hairs. Most of them are dead. But some continue to move, to wriggle, to persevere, to struggle, to labor forward in the quest for food. These few, these happy few, these bands of brothers, are less than exuberant. The spirit is there, but not the capacity. Their movements are slow and sluggish, their direction uncertain, their agitations vain and absurd. It astonishes us how they manage to penetrate the thick, gooey Maginot line of dish soap and powdered cinnamon that we've applied between the metallic trim of the carpet and the tiles of the kitchen floor. It suggests a power of will that towers above my own. We're confronted with an alien intelligence, a formidable aporia.

I imagine a labyrinth of tunnels under the floor, of galleries and corridors snaking through the sandy soil, each passage teeming with ants in busy, fervent endeavor: unwearying, unwavering. inexorable. We spend hours on our hands and knees searching for little black dots, the convulsions of a miniscule being in its death throes, a tiny life with a gargantuan appetite in a desultory funk, going in circles, giving up the ghost. It amazes us that they persist. Where is the logic? Rarely do we see one trotting its way merrily across the floor in mindless triumph. The scouts make their way to the surface and die. Or so we think. So we hope.

We study their behavior. We search for patterns. For cracks and fissures, ports of entry. It isn't amusing. Maybe a little amusing. Amusing in a curious way. Amusing in the way that a pain or a disquiet can simultaneously keep one company while also burdening and fatiguing one's spirit.

Whose planet is this, anyway? The sun shines equally on all things great and small. This does not, however, ameliorate sentiments of estrangement. One finds comfort, sometimes, in the peripheries. It's in the margins that life feels less argumentative. At least until

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hunger and desire take hold. It is this dialectic that we share with the ants. Desire is universal. Hunger is unavoidable. Sooner or later even the most ascetic among us must emerge from the shadows and find some form of nourishment, reproductive gratification, or redemption from the crazy, distant stars.

I add a little more soap to a crack in one of the tiles beside the stove. Do ants have eyes? Yes, two compound eyes and three ocelli (simple eyes) on the top of their heads which can distinguish intensities of light and polarization. Eyesight is poor. They mostly rely on their sense of smell, on pheromones by which they make their trails when a source of nourishment is discovered.

Aren't these sentences a form of trail as well? What is thought if not a catastrophe of words laid carefully in a path of hungry meaning? There is sense in sensation. Words with little legs. Words with hungry black bodies. Words in perpetual quest. In quest of what? Transcendence? Order? I don't know. But there goes another ant. Just barely making it out of a line of goo.

