

Insect Ethics

by John Olson

Let's get one thing straight: I'm not a Jain. This isn't about attachments or aversions or divine liberation or following a path of non-violence toward all living beings. Ok it is. But not really. It's about that, but not about that. It's not about ants either. Even though it is clearly about ants. Obviously and manifestly about ants. It is not about ants. It's about not stepping on ants, but not for any of the above reasons. Let's just say I'm pissed. Indignant. Angry about living in a universe that appears to be utterly amoral. Bereft of anything remotely resembling a structure based on morality. On caring. On giving a shit. On giving a shit about the creatures that live in it. Which would include you. Me. And the ants. The ants that I generally try not to step on. And they're everywhere this time of year, late July, the sun shining down most of the time, warming the sidewalks, where the little mounds and rills the ants have created become evident. So here I am out for a run. Huffing and puffing along. A man in late middle age, a man, one might say, on the threshold of old age, out running, attempting to squeeze as much life as possible out of his existence before it inevitably decays, fails, and sinks into oblivion. I'm running along and look down and see the little creatures carrying one with something that very much looks like deliberation. Like purpose. Like determination. Determination to do what I can't say. Sometimes they just seem to be going in circles. And yet it looks purposeful. Don't ask how it just does. Bees are that way too. Always busy. Busy as a bee, as the saying goes. They're not furtive like cockroaches, disgusting like flies, annoying like mosquitoes or reactionary like ticks. They're actually quite wonderful. Ants, too, are wonderful in their own way. Who doesn't admire them? Even though they're a little scary when they get out of control and eat everything in sight. You've got to admire their organization and tendency toward self-sacrifice. I'm a little abashed by it. Humbled, even. But that's not why I refuse to step on them. Given a chance. Much of the time I don't see them until it's too late.

And the little bugger is gone. One minute busy, determined, purposeful, the next minute gone. And that's what bugs me. No pun intended. Ok, pun intended. But that isn't why I'm going a little overboard here to explain why I avoid stepping on them and why that represents a small victory against a cold, indifferent, amoral universe. Because each time I do happen to spot on them and take quick action to hop over the little bugger and risk a sprain to my ankle it is just that: a triumph. A restoration of balance. And one more ant is allowed to go on his or her way seeking food or hoisting a bit of crumb or grain to a labyrinth of tunnels, a network of activity conducted in the dark, beneath the sidewalk, under the rhythm of my pounding feet.

