

The Ant

I was sitting in a wooden chair – oak – with an oblong, upright backboard and four cylindrical legs upon rubber stoppers. The sun was beaming down, engulfing the garden of my holiday home in which I sat, in a blanket of bright, piercing white. I had to squint with constricted pupils to see the patio, the lawn, the flowers, the trees. Birds were whining, insects nattering.

That was when I saw it.

Grotesque in its miniature form was an ant. Its bulges for head and body were indistinguishable from each other such that I could not tell which direction the ant was facing, much to my distress. Its six spindly legs were discernible but did nothing to clear up this ambiguity. There were six more shadows of those legs cast upon the hot patio slab where it sat.

I couldn't tell you why, but I wanted to kill it, to end its life, to stop its heart beating, to pulp its body with the rubber sole of my shoe and leave a small stain of its blood against the ground. I wanted to make it suffer in the moment before its death. I wanted to take vengeance upon it for every other member of its genus who had bitten me with those malevolent mandibles.

No one would know; in the garden there was only me, the ant, a self-indulgent bird, a preoccupied squirrel. It would have been so easy...

But something was stopping me. Because when I closed my eyelids, amongst the red blotches of light shining through them, I saw visions. I saw people, having witnessed my insectular murder, scolding me, shouting at me, calling me a psychopath, a killer, accusing me, ashamed by me, all the while reveling in their self-proclaimed moral superiority. The visions continued, projected upon their eyelid screen. Friends became enemies, relationships shattered, all because of one tiny murder of one tiny and with its tiny body and its tiny limbs.

I opened my eyes, filled with fresh resentment, and stared down at the ant.

Every bone in my left leg and foot somehow shuddered, somehow quivered anticipatorily: my femur, tibia, fibula, talis, calcaneus, cuboid, navicular, cuneiforms, metatarsals, phalanges. Every bone was afraid of the act that it might commit at the hands of its commander. But just as I was about to send the assassination order, I heard a high-pitched screeching voice: 'Don't do it!'

My pint-sized, imaginary fairy godmother was hovering in front of my face, kept aloft by shimmering silver wings. Her deep green eyes pierced my own. Her long, lustrous hair blew wildly. Her glittery, green dress billowed. She shouted again, 'Don't do it!' so vehemently that a spray of her spittle misted my countenance.

'Huh?' said my conscious mind.

'How would you feel if a creature a million times your size decided to squash you flat? How would you feel? How would your family feel!? Do you have no empathy!?' And with that she hit me square across the temple with a flabby, whip-like hand, and then disintegrated into a million tiny particles in the wind.

She left my head thudding and pounding. The deluge of decibels in my mind soon dimmed down to a din and I could hear my own thoughts once again.

‘Ants don't have feelings, do they? Ants don't have emotions, let alone consciousness.’ I heard the voice of Jean-Paul Satre in my head saying ‘consciousness is nothingness’ and ‘consciousness is freedom.’ It did nothing to clear up the matters. Then Rene Descartes piped up with ‘I think therefore I am’ in a similar french accent. ‘Perhaps my own mind is all that I can be certain really exists and everything else is but a construction of my imagination and therefore justifiably exterminable?’ I asked them hopefully. They shrugged. They were playing cricket. Why were they playing cricket? Whack. The hard ball reverberated around my skull.

I tried to focus. ‘Ants don't have feelings. They don't truly suffer. They are unautonomous, nothing but drones, members of a colony, eusocial, instinctual, pheromonal, hive-minded.’

I lashed out with my left foot to kill the ant, sitting arrogant and impassive on the hot patio slab. My foot was a decimeter away, then a few centimeters, a few millimeters –

I stopped short, for out of the corner of my eye I saw something remarkable.

A tiny black form was whizzing towards me, like a miniscule bullet, but then stopped short a few feet away, suspended in the air. Another did the same. Then another. Then a hundred more. And all of a sudden there was a whole swarm of flying ants forming a menacing dark cloud – so many that they formed a thick wall of black, blocking out the light of the sun, opaque and constantly shifting, mutating, this dark and buzzing wall, this living wall.

I looked down but the ant of my previous attention had gone, had likely scurried off into some dark crevice.

I looked back up at the looming wall of flying ants. It was definitely real: I could hear the compounded buzzing of every fragile wing – the result was deafening; I could feel heat radiating off each ectothermic body, multiplied a million times – the result was sweltering.

The wall of bodied glided forwards, slowly enclosing, encroaching upon me. I leapt back, off my wooden chair, and scurried away across the patio towards the house. I scrambled to open the sliding glass back door, and hurried through, shutting it swiftly behind me. All the windows were closed. I could breathe.

I watched through the glass door as the chair was engulfed by the wall as it continued moving forwards, but then stopped. And just as suddenly as they had appeared, the flying ants dispersed, the chair revealed, the sun shining once more.

I stood behind my glass door for a few minutes, replaying the scene in my mind: my helplessness, my feeble humanity in the face of individuals ever so small.