

9/8/23: NATURE ON EDGE

*Nature, the great outdoors, was among the few safe spaces during the pandemic. At the same time, we are inundated by news of the imminent collapse of the natural world. Are plants, animals, storms, heat, dust, present in your writing? What description, literary or scientific, of nature has left a special mark on you?*

**1. Reetta PEKKANEN (Finland)**

One of these mornings, I was walking down the stairs of the Iowa House Hotel. On one of the steps, I saw a bug – a rather repelling one, really: a curved, brown body of hard chitin, buzzy wings, a countless number of legs – laying helplessly on his back. As I approached, he wiggled one of his long legs slowly in the air, as if in the most delicate request for my attention. As I started walking past him, he began to flail all his legs around furiously.

For a moment, I was going to leave him. But I knew that would stay with me on my morning walk, pinching me with annoying, little big questions: Why was it that I didn't stop to help him? Was it his size, the number of legs, strangeness of the chitin? Or was it just my own ignorance?

So I took the hotel key card from my pocket, carried him out on it and dropped him in the bushes; for my own sake, as much as his.

A small bug also plays a big role in the famous novel *The Passion According to G. H.* (1964) by the Brazilian author Clarice Lispector. In the novel, G. H. is cleaning her former maid's room, when she gets scared of a cockroach creeping out of a wardrobe. In a fit of anger, she slams the wardrobe door on the cockroach. The door cuts the roach's body in half but fails to kill him. G. H. becomes mesmerized by the repelling encounter, and as hours and pages go by, the cockroach becomes a gateway for her to explore the origins of existence.

"Take what I saw: because what I was seeing with an embarrassment so painful and so frightened and so innocent, what I was seeing was life looking back at me. How else could I describe that crude and horrible, raw matte and dry plasma, that was there, as I shrank into myself with dry nausea, I falling centuries and centuries inside a mud – it was mud in which the roots of my identity were still shifting with unbearable slowness" (51). Ultimately, G. H. overcomes her utter disgust and horror, and here comes the unforgettable catharsis: she takes the white paste that is slowly oozing out of the cockroach's crushed body and puts it in her mouth.

I have always greatly enjoyed the phrase "you are what you eat." The appeal for me is in the combination of how commonly and light-heartedly it is being used, and how profoundly true I find it to be. Lispector writes about the metaphysical intermingling of matter and consciousness, the eater and the eaten, so vividly that it's almost unbearable to read. Her dazzling, dizzying sentences make me

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Aigerim Tazhi (Kazakhstan), Suo Er (PRC), Reetta Pekkanen  
(Finland), Yashika Graham (Jamaica)

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experience this strongly: the most accurate description of reality is not a clear picture of a clear thing, but a very blurred image of something that is fundamentally blurred.

“Because rising to my surface like pus was my truest matter – and with fright and loathing I was feeling that “I-being” was coming from a source far prior to the human source and, with horror, much greater than the human” (52).

So by licking the bug’s crushed body and immersing herself with his innards, does G. H. become the cockroach? No, not exactly. How I read the novel is that G. H. arrives to a profound realization that they, her and the cockroach whom she had violently cut in half, were the very same thing to begin with.

Lispector is a master of un-seeing and un-writing categories, such as those drawing lines between human and any other organism. This is why I think her work is needed today more than ever. We live in an era of ecological grief, caused by a great and fatal illusion: an illusion of being a separate, independent unit, both as a species and as (super)individual human beings. What reading Lispector (and good poetry) can do at its best, is give us tools for recognizing, embracing and – ultimately – falling in love with the ambivalence and paradoxicality of the (every)thing that we call nature. It can help us form a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of our existence: of all the beauty and horror, grief and distress; ours, and that of the cockroach. Perhaps then we can start un-seeing the gap between the self and the other, the eater and the eaten, just like happens to G. H. Perhaps the most relevant question, then, is not how we are treating others – regardless of their species – but simply: how we are. For our own sake, as much as anyone else's.

Lispector, Clarice: *The Passion According to G. H.* (2012). New Directions Books. Translated by Idra Novey. Originally published as *A Paixão segundo G. H.* (1964).

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