

The Adored, Buzzing Around Us

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I AM FORTUNATE to live in an area where the stink bug, also called the darkling, pinacate, or clown beetle, is common. About an inch long, with a jet-black carapace and long walking legs, the stink bug is nothing out of the ordinary — except when startled. Then the insect bends its front legs, extends its rear legs, raises its posterior almost vertically, and emits a powerful odor. It is meant to be the scariest headstand in the world.

A pinacate beetle can brighten my day. I connect to something nonhuman and am knocked happily out of myself. Many of us have this experience when we see a charismatic mammal like a deer or bear, raccoon or moose. Birds can have the same effect. Hawks, cranes, ravens, hummingbirds — they give us a thrill. They say: stop! look at how beautiful I am, how different from you. They make us feel grateful for being on such an interesting planet.

Insects can do this, too, if we shift our attitude — and spatial perspective. Insects are also wild creatures and have the advantage of being everywhere. If you are a lover of insects, you have many opportunities to love, and you will feel less lonely and discouraged than if you have chosen only to adore the vanishing Siberian tiger or your local threatened predator. You may become a connoisseur of anthills — or intrigued by spiders. Even the most familiar or seemingly insignificant insect can surprise you. (Viewed up close — I promise — the oak treehopper will make you gasp.)

Another beetle example (as the naturalist J.B.S. Haldane noted, God must have had an inordinate fondness for beetles since he made so many different kinds): Tiger beetles are often brightly patterned and look like small jewels. An Australian species is the fastest running insect in the world, going nine kilometers per hour or 170 body lengths per second. After a successful chase, tiger beetles cover their victims in a corrosive liquid that begins the process of digestion. Tiger beetle larvae are equally ferocious; these white grubs have horns on their backs, which they anchor to the sides of their tunnels, allowing them to lunge out and pull in prey with a single powerful motion.

In their way, tiger beetles are as charismatic as their mammalian counterpart. *In their way*. That's the rub. The truth is that insects usually inspire repulsion more than admiration. They scurry away with an unpleasant sound. They have disgusting eating habits. That compound eye gives us the creeps. All those reflections. And all those legs! Mouthparts that drink blood? Hairy distended abdomens? Not before eating, please. For most of us, insects are just too far outside the human aesthetic — alien, brutal, and

uncuddly. This is also good. Because this is nature, too. I have learned (somewhat slowly) that if I want to have a relationship with the natural world, it can't just be with the parts I pick and choose. The gorgeous mountain view makes my lover's heart ache. But I also have to admire the rejuvenating aftermath of a forest fire, as "ugly" a landscape as any on Earth. I have to get to know the parts of nature that make me wince and turn away. Because turning away is not really what good lovers do.

So I'm paying more attention to insects. It usually requires getting down on my knees, much lower to the ground. A new perspective. And, inevitably, another beetle — this time, the giant North American rhinoceros beetle, with its jaunty horn and ability to lift its own weight hundreds of times over! Right here on my front porch! I feel that thrill of gratitude. I live on such an interesting planet.