

Five Excerpts from *Insect People*...a work in progress.

By Rich Ives

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Elegant conceptual structures arise in this extraordinary biosemiotic collage where insects and human beings, each assuming characteristics and qualities of the other, pupate into a new, synthetic reality that is a lateral equation to our own space-time experience. We love experimental writing because of the myriad artistic opportunities it offers. But though the parameters are extended it takes that much more skill, more understanding of the possibilities of craft, to create something of literary substance instead of word goulash. In these excerpts Ives's talent is writ huge and given monumental ambition. His antithetically directed springboard imagination, his idiosyncratic artistic vision and the translucency of his impossibly beautiful prose result in a superlative reading experience that we think is bull's-eye and beyond. Quote: One woman claims she birthed several hundred eggs in June, and Lucas asked her to wrap them in two or three greenish cocoons, which she did. Then he asked her to weave a nursery web for two molts until the children fleshed out and dispersed. No one really believes her story, but many comment on how many youngsters look like Lucas. And this pyramidion sentence all of us wish we had written: 'Right now I think I'll head down to the riverbank and forage a bit, kick back a little flotsam, smoke a little jetsam, but you never heard me say that.' Five stars.*

Failed Terrorist Interrogation

Migratory Grasshopper

Let's start with the pods, Marcus. How do they survive the winter, and why so much invested in the "eggs" in them? And you're erratic to boot. Why only two in some and a hundred and twenty in others? We've watched your partner inserting them around the crown areas and the roots.

I believe you can observe that I'm medium-sized, blue-green and a little reddish in the hind tibia. What makes you think I intended that?

Why, Marcus, do you travel the United States and southern Canada but avoid Texas and Florida?

A breeze stirs the air to departure. I'm like a curator. Some exhibits are self-evident.

Why do you travel so much then, and visit abundance?

The leafless broomrape perhaps, or excessive dim-witted growth progressions?

What does your partner have to do with your travel patterns? Why is she so reluctant to speak?

His self-knit sweater was paused with lint, as if he had been kept in someone's pocket.

What do you think happens to the “eggs” when you abandon them like that? Don't you realize they cannot all survive?

Breakfast babies are meat before they're born. You just have to wait for birth and predators to choose the survivors.

Back to the pods, Marcus. What are they made of? How do they send messages to your compatriots?

Which of these questions have anticipated themselves? Which answers have something more to say?

No, the pods, Marcus. What are they?

You arrived at them before you left. The crown areas and the roots. Begin.

Fallen Leaves

Raft Spider

Swamps and peat bogs harbor the “cunning,” the “fringed” Lucas. He's working out in the hinterlands. His “boxing gloves” are built in. He was born with them, and he learns to use them as he grows. It's a painful bite.

Down at the pier, he dangles his legs on the water's surface and waits for the prey. He's learned the motions that attract the larger swamp fish. His feet are so wide and flat and his body so light and fit that when dinner arrives to check out his teasing motion, he can launch himself on the water and “run” a ways along the surface to get to it. Then he dives in and heaves the prey out of the water. When he's down there he has air bubbles trapped in his hairs he can breathe, and he can stay under a long time. Some say he hides underwater in aquatic vegetation for up to half an hour.

Lucas is a smooth one. He shakes his legs one at a time to attract a female. He can transform the same masticating limbs he eats with temporarily into mating organs. Some people say he's only a tall tale, but some have seen him, and the women tell the story with flushed faces.

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If you smell the undersides of fallen leaves when they're slick with several rains, you know the swamp. Turn them over and soon they become only another toy for the wind, but in the swamp, turning something over makes it even more swamp. It's the kind of intimacy a taxidermist knows.

If you'd ever lived here, perhaps you might insist on another life, but some find that other life right here. You can certainly see what's in a few of those faces, and it can't last, but some things don't die in a straight line.

Family

Common Flea

I have seven brothers and only four of them can face me. One is so similar I believe he mocks me and has influenced the other three, who also mock a brother. Both of my parents are short and less flexible. Thanks to taking opposite sides, we accomplish more. We still sleep in the same bed with a chosen parent. What holds us apart also holds us together. If one is a thief, then we all are. If one is an insult, he rises up alone. But if one is challenged to a fight, we curl up and attack from two sides. If two are bound together, it is called a wound, if three or four, a fin, or a paw. If all eight of us are bound, the game is like a prayer, and our parents lie on top. If one brother is lost, a false one may take his place, but if we are all but one lost, the perpetrator is easily found. His punishment wouldn't match the crime unless he has already received it.

Yes, we frequently act without thinking, but just as frequently think without acting, so how can we know what directs us to reveal our purpose, a purpose without equal or apparent cause? Twenty different versions of our story lie on human beds, each one feeding, as an adult, on the tale's blood. We have no wings but we can leap a hundred and fifty times the length of our bodies. Imagine, if you must, a standing broad jump of a quarter of a mile. You would call what we do reaching an acceleration twenty times that of the Apollo moon rocket. We don't think of it that way. We're busy and ordinary. We're very itchy.

Pierce the skin, suck the blood. It's that simple. Bites are attractively clustered in groups of two or three, especially around the delicate ankles and legs. Each of us carries an elastic protein, called resilin, and lives in a tough, hardened shell, called an exoskeleton. The top and the bottom are flattened, side to side, for the obvious reason of easier travel among the hair trees.

My host travels and hunts, and I've learned from these forays that my relatives preferring rabbit homes have managed to coincide their own cycles with the rabbit's birth cycles to give their children more choice of habitation upon the baby bunny hosts. The children, I admit, are clever and disgusting, spinning sloppy sticky cocoons that dust and dirt adhere to. Haven't you ever

noticed what you might call a “sudden infestation” when you move into an empty apartment. We call it a “housewarming.” We’re willing to share the host’s space. Don’t be afraid of the Oriental Rat member of the family who spread the Bubonic Plague. He’s only a messenger. Nobody believes he did it on purpose.

Farmer Alphonse Decides to Rotate His Crops

Alfalfa Looper

Gaubert and Solange seemed gray. Usually their demeanor had a peculiar brownish tone to it, accompanied by pale gestural markings and an occasional silver spot, but today they appeared gray. The children were eating cabbage and other low-lying succulent plants. It was all they could reach. They looped along in their distinctive childish fashion that seemed so delightfully unique. Gaubert could hardly believe it when Solange said she had heard there were other children just like them and apparently all throughout the country and beyond although there were said to be subtle nuances, and a few didn’t even seem to be their kind, despite the way they motored along in that distinctive loop. Solange had heard it was hard to tell the difference. She didn’t believe that at all. All this talk of the larger world made Gaubert despondent and even grayer. She hadn’t touched her cabbage. Their little corner of the garden was probably just like millions of other gardens too. Why bother?

Then one day while looping along, Gaubert came upon an idea that looked a lot like cabbage, but it was not. It tasted like something new and fresh and you could nibble on it one day and the very next day it would be back looking just like when you first found it. Actually it was more an attitude than a plant, and when Gaubert looked around himself more carefully, he realized even those who knew of the larger world were eating it, and suddenly he was very very hungry. They circled the idea with their looping progress and soon they were right back where they started. The new idea tasted different, but it was cabbage wasn’t it?

Just because your parents are French and were named after a plant you’ve never even tasted that probably doesn’t even exist, it doesn’t mean you can’t be happy with cabbage although there was indeed a tiny little twitch like a hitch in their looping that continued to disturb them. Once they even spoke of it. They decided they didn’t believe their parents’ folktales. They were probably really just another Susan and Robert in the endless cabbage patch beside the old farmhouse and what would be so awful about that? Turning gray and making up stories was just a part of old age, wasn’t it? Even the farmhouse was doing it though they couldn’t quite understand its

language. They assumed its stories were about other farmhouses, but there was really only one and it certainly hadn't been anywhere more interesting than right where it was.

Fatherhood

Caddisfly

I built the cabin in '47 but I only live there in the summer. Crosswise logs. It's got the lake on two sides. Sometimes I wish I had a camper I could take with me wherever I wanted to go that made me feel like that cabin does. I kind of got carried away. It was supposed to be movable. At first I thought I was going to make it out of stone and cement on a platform with wheels, but I kept thinking about more space inside. One night I dreamed I made it out of silk and carried it on my back, across the lake, on the bottom. A huge lake trout was watching me. I think I must have been moving suspiciously or he would have gobbled me up.

I crawled around all over the logs getting them to fit right. I made a little model that looked like a horn. I really don't know what that was all about. It wasn't anything like what I ended up with. What was I thinking? It carries you away, you know. All you need is a few sticks and leaves to set your mind to wandering.

While I was walking across the lake bottom, I thought of just setting the thing down right there on the bottom and living like that in the sand. That made me think about snail shells. And then I thought about making several little house sleeves right there, long and thin and smooth, like fingers made out of silk. I could spin nets to catch passing insects and crayfish and snails and live on that, little crustacean snacks. Something weird about it just made me think that if I swam to the surface, I'd be able to fly, so I did.

No, I don't mean I really was a fly, but I could fly anyway. You've probably noticed I'm kind of a hairy guy, and I had hair all over me coming out of the water, even on my wings. It was dark, nighttime, and I was fascinated by the lights on the shoreline.

That's all I can remember. Now go ask your mother where she wants me to put that gelatinous string of eggs she made. There must be a thousand of them little buggers. Right now I think I'll head down to the riverbank and forage a bit, kick back a little flotsam, smoke a little jetsam, but

you never heard me say that. You ever want to know what it means to be a hero in Iceland, you just tell your mother somethin' I told you not to tell her.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I began the growing work by writing flash fictions that forced me to contain more in a shorter space with the behaviors and differences in species of insects as the character development starting points. As I wrote more and more of these, I found myself using character names to help provide clues to the personalities of the insect people that were appearing, and I concentrated on their differences. The complete work is five 530 page books, a quintet, and I had to spend a lot of time considering and using differently from story to story the widely varying names of the characters. More than 3,000 appear in the completed work and the styles for each needed variety in both style and theme development. I spent nearly ten years building it in stages. Each volume took me to a different part of the main character's (Irwin) personality as filtered through a different family member. While Irwin wrote all the stories, and they very slowly reveal his deeper reality and development, each volume also views him from a different family member's perspective until the final volume returns to Irwin's point of view to reveal what he has learned and changed about himself by writing the stories. The style influences are from numerous widely varying sources, with both poetry and foreign writers included, to help expand the range of what I needed in the changing functions of the story parts to develop such a lengthy character study of a complex man.*

BIO: *Rich Ives has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, Artist Trust, Seattle Arts Commission and the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines for his work in poetry, fiction, editing, publishing, translation and photography. He is the 2009 winner of the Francis Locke Poetry Award from Bitter Oleander and the 2012 winner of the Thin Air Creative Nonfiction Award. His books include Light from a Small Brown Bird (Bitter Oleander Press--poetry), Sharpen (The Newer York—fiction chapbook), The Balloon Containing the Water Containing the Narrative Begins Leaking (What Books--stories) and Tunneling to the Moon (Silenced Press--hybrid).*