

Small Friends

When I was a child, nothing delighted me more than discovering an inchworm slowly making its way across our lawn. I was mesmerized by the way it tested the path ahead, delicately probing the unknown with one slender end while the other remained firmly attached to a blade of grass. It wasn't only inchworms, either. I felt a special fondness for all things small. There was some strange satisfaction earned by poring over the miniscule. You had to lean in and look closer to appreciate the details; you had to scrutinize. I enjoyed scrutinizing.

When my sister begged for a puppy, I wanted one of those miniature aquatic frogs that sit like rocks in a tank of water, legs splayed. Since we couldn't agree upon which pet was better, my father arranged a compromise between size and furriness: he gave us a pair of gerbils we dubbed Cinnamon and Nutmeg. They were mates, and every month Cinnamon would bear a litter of six or eight naked babies, like a handful of pink thumbs. Once, I came home from school to find a baby dead, its limbs nibbled off by one of the parents. As I swaddled the tiny body in toilet paper in preparation for its burial behind the garage, I couldn't help but cry a little.

Though the gerbils brought tears and smiles in the winter months, I began to forget them as the weather warmed and I could play in the yard. By the time summer came, my attention had turned to the small things that I could only find outdoors. I spent hours crouched in the grass, dissecting crisp maple helicopters or peering at the ants that

crawled over our peony blossoms. From a few inches away, I could make out the delicate green veins of a clover leaf and the individual legs of the caterpillar atop it.

Although I rarely tired of playing in the backyard, sometimes my parents treated me with a trip to land we owned just outside of town. I remember visiting the land once when I was six years old. While my mother sat reading on a checkered blanket, I explored my own patch of wilderness stretched between a sparsely traveled highway and the banks of the Aroostook river. My father moseyed after me, quietly keeping watch. He would occasionally break his silence to comment on a plant or insect I had just spotted.

I did not linger in the empty field bordering the highway. There were no trees to soften the sun's glare, and the dry, yellow landscape seemed lifeless and still. As I walked, sharp blades of dry grass itched against my legs and triggered thoughts of unseen insects on my bare skin. Although little caught my eye when walking in the barren field, I did occasionally happen upon something of interest. Here was a wild strawberry hidden among the thick grass, and I popped the tiny, red fruit into my mouth without hesitation. And there was questionable glob of white, bubbly spittle nestled between the leaves of a goldenrod.

"That's from a spittlebug," my father said when he saw me pause in confusion. "Their young live in that liquid while they mature to adulthood."

After crossing the field, I started down a steep gorge framed on either side by trees and shrubs. Only prickly thorn bushes and burrs grew between the loose rocks, and I found few handholds to help me down. Although I rarely escaped the ravine without scratches on my legs or spiky balls stuck to my clothing, I preferred it to the field.

Trickles of water hinted at the river ahead, and I liked to save the rose-colored stones I found scattered among the gray. After a few minutes of stepping cautiously from stone to stone, the slope leveled and the ravine opened upon the river bank.

Here tufts of green grass grew between worn stones, and I sat to rest after my long hike. Dappled shade from trees above and a light breeze cut the summer heat. While I could wade or skip stones to pass the time, I mostly enjoyed capturing the small creatures that inhabited the bank so that I could closely examine them. Minnows darted in the shallows and an occasional pair of frog eyes broke the water's surface, but I ignored them. Today, grasshoppers were my chosen companions.

"Here's your jar," said my father, emerging from the ravine. He placed a pickle jar, its lid poked with air holes, on the ground. Then strolled a few yards to a large, flat stone and sat to quietly observe the scenery. Left by myself, I was determined to capture as many playmates as possible. Unfortunately, their spring-loaded legs proved swifter than my six-year-old reflexes, and it took twenty minutes of scrambling to force a single grasshopper into my glass jar.

"If you catch another, don't hold them too close together," my father cautioned me. "They could start eating each other."

"Yes, Papa," I responded absently as I examined my new subject. He crouched at the bottom of the jar, wings folded neatly over his rocket body. His broad eyes were dark, nearly black, and I couldn't tell where the grasshopper was looking. Did he even know I was there? I tapped on the glass beneath him, hoping to provoke some response, but he remained motionless, composed. Thinking he might be hungry, I ripped a handful of grass from the ground and dropped it in the jar. It remained draped over his still body

for a second, and then he released the hidden force trapped in his wiry legs and leaped. He smashed forcefully into a glass wall, then lay quiet again. I shrugged and turned to the pursuit of another grasshopper.

My hunting skills must have improved from my first catch, and I clutched my second grasshopper in one hand only a few minutes later. He was almost a twin to the first, and I couldn't tell the two creatures apart. As I reached for my collection jar, I thought of my father's warning. They wouldn't really eat each other, I told myself. But I wondered. Almost by impulse, I plucked my first prisoner from the jar. A squirming grasshopper peeked a dull olive head from each of my fists. The dark eyes still seemed blank, and their quivering antennae seemed to match the quick beat of my heart. I slowly brought my hands together.

Without a moment's pause, one of my victims seized the other's antenna in its jagged mandibles and began to gnaw at it hungrily. I stared in fascination for a moment, but the feeling quickly soured. Repulsed by the sight of the insect eating its twin, I turned to the river and launched the grasshoppers away from me. They flashed once in the glaring sunlight, and then the water caught them. As the current dragged their bodies away, I wiped my sweaty palms on my shirt.

Glancing nervously over one shoulder, I saw my father still seated on his stone. He was gazing down the river undisturbed, and when I breathed out, the tight sensation in my stomach subsided. Not much had really happened; there was nothing to explain. Just then, I heard the buzz of another grasshopper. It landed on the ground close to my glass jar, daring me to respond. I turned away. I had shared enough viciousness that day.