



JEAN-HENRI FABRE and His Entomological Emotions

We enter the room, candle in hand. What we see is unforgettable. With a soft flick-flack the great moths fly around the bell-jar, alight, set off again, come back, fly up to the ceiling and down. They rush at the candle, putting it out with a stroke of their wings; they descend on our shoulders, clinging to our clothes, grazing our faces. The scene suggests a wizard's cave, with its whirl of bats. Little Paul holds my hand tighter, to keep up his courage.

Jean-Henri Fabre,
Souvenirs Entomologiques, Vol. 7

The bodies and lives of insects are marked with an inexhaustible strangeness. In the same sense that Sun Ra comes from Saturn, insects were conceived on Mars. If it were not for the problem of scale, it would be instantly clear that the mantis possesses a gaze far more fixating than the most gleaming python; and her startle-display, in which she rears up, spreads translucent wings and opens her clutching forelegs, often to reveal splashes of flame, is a pure, soundless, impenitent shriek. If not for the problem of scale, no one would ever mistake the mantis's attitude for prayerful. Likewise, the hunting wasp's search is restless and burning beyond that of the most maddened tiger, while the serene motion of caterpillars is invested with spines and ripples like no dragon's. The strangeness of insects' motion emanates from their peculiar form, a body encased in jointed armor, often shining.

Insects form a large majority of animal species. If only for this fact, then, the daily observation of insects would be a necessary part of the surrealist

discovery of the world. Like dreaming and poetry, bug-watching must be done by all.

The modern era of bug-watching was introduced by Jean-Henri Fabre (1823-1915). He did this by surrendering to his lifelong desire to penetrate beyond the superficial "insignificance" of insects' to unfold for the first time the forms and consequences their motions, and by using his accessible and passionate language to make this unfolding a common property. At the same time, he showed by his methods that anyone can participate in unfolding this strangeness, so that it *can* be done by all.

In the structure of his life, Fabre resembled Joseph Cornell. Except for some few years in Corsica, he was never outside his small part of southern France for more than a few days. From 1878 he lived outside the village of Serignan, a law unto himself, shunning most human society and nearly unknown to his neighbors. Although he held advanced degrees and was for a time a professor, even then he was a scientific outsider. Living in extreme poverty until his last years, he eked out a living by writing science textbooks, and spent nearly all his time discovering and chronicling the lives of insects. At a time when bug-watching (entomology) consisted almost entirely in the study of specimens pickled and pinned, with occasional deadpan recitation of accidentally observed behavior, Fabre's method was a radical departure. He undertook the patient and intimate study of the whole animal in all its phases. Some of his investigations spanned twenty years. One of his biographers (Revel) observes that from

the time he quit his last job and moved to Serignan, "Fabre's life becomes purely a long series of entomological emotions."

The communicated result of his restless desire consists of a few articles in scientific journals and in the ten-volume *Souvenirs Entomologiques*²—published between 1879 and 1907. This massive work is a narrative of strikingly original research and a cornerstone of modern entomology, but it is also much more. It is, in the best sense of the word, a *popularization* of bug-watching, a kind of autobiography of his entomological emotions. Fabre made no attempt to eliminate, from the factual reports of his findings, the tantalizing details of his methods and passions, which abound on every page. It is also an autobiography in the sense that it contains a fairly complete account of the external events of his life.

Integral to Fabre's method was the use of numerous amateur assistants, including village workmen and especially his own children. Although never baldly stated, the conclusion is inescapable that, in Fabre's view, bug-watching must never again be an elite activity, alienated from ordinary, "talentless" people. This is reinforced by his account, in volume 2, of being hounded out of Avignon by the clergy and authorities and thereby forced into retirement, for having dared to give public (and very popular) science lectures for women and girls!

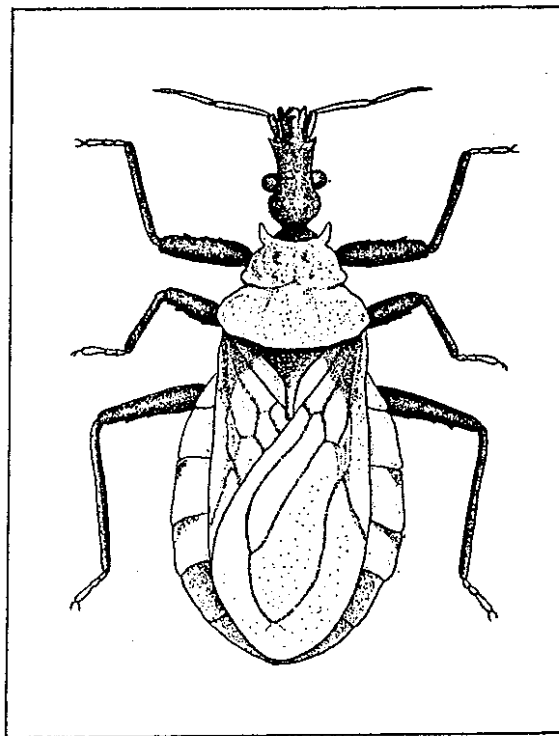
I have never known a child who, not yet infected with the common adult revulsion for living things, was not a marveling bug-watcher. This is generally tolerated in children, before being gradually forced out of most people in favor of "serious" activities. In the first volume of *Souvenirs*, Fabre declared that "as far back as I can remember, I see myself in ecstasy before the splendor of the ground beetle's wing cases or the wings of the swallowtail butterfly," and he disdained the biblical injunction to give up these "childish things," which rarely add to the gross national product and tend to make one unfit to be a wage slave. Insects, moreover, rarely make good pets and cannot be taught to do tricks.

Although a devout Catholic, whose writings are furthermore filled with religious exclamations, Fabre's bug-watching is singularly untainted with God and is, indeed, thoroughly materialist. He himself might have vehemently opposed such a view, but it cannot be denied that his observations are honest, and he certainly treated insects as autonomous beings. His comments on "God's plan" can therefore be regarded merely as irksome interpolations or footnotes.

The process of the realization of poetry must include the embrace of the strangeness of insects, a return to bug-watching. To facilitate this development, I propose some simple procedures which can be followed by all:

1. *Always carry a hand lens with you.*

It is absolutely necessary to begin by seeing insects clearly enough to abolish the illusion that they are nothing but small dark things which sometimes move. This is the problem of scale. With the regular



Assassin Bug

use of a hand lens, one can enlarge all but very small insects enough to see them eye to eye and meet them on their own terms.

2. *Watch every kind of insect (e.g., different species, larva as well as adult, different sex and caste) for at least one minute.*

If it does nothing in that minute, feel free to go on to another, but never watch for less than a minute.

3. *Smell insects.*

Unlike ourselves, stinks and smells are for insects an important part of the sensory world. Smelling them is one way of getting to the other side of the looking-glass.

4. *Carry tweezers.*

Whenever you see an insect eating something, try to break off a piece and taste it. This rule need not apply to mushrooms, as many are dangerous, and when the insect's food is excrement or carrion you may find it sufficient just to smell a piece. When the food is a fresh bug, however, always sample it.

5. *Watch bugs at night, too.*

It is at night, for example, that spiders build their most Martian webs.

Christopher K. STARR

1. Fabre's accomplishments are the negation of the view foisted by the famous biologist and blockhead Buffon, who had earlier dismissed insects as petty vermin. It is ironic that Buffon's main sphere of activity was among the petty vermin of the royal court.

2. Around 1910-1920 the chapters of the *Souvenirs* were regrouped in fine English translations into volumes with such titles as *The Life of the Fly*, *The Mason Bees*, *The Life of the Spider*, and published by Dodd, Mead & Co. These books are long out of print, but were very popular and so can often be found in libraries.