



STEPPING ON A CICADA

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By Matias Travieso-Diaz

In the evening of a late spring day, a secret army emerged from the ground in neighborhoods all over the state. They were nymphs, adolescent insects that took advantage of the night's protection to secure themselves to some vertical surface. There, they molted into final adult form and remained stationary while their wings and exoskeletons hardened.

Days later, I was awakened (as were many others) by a stupendously loud sound, a mixture of chirping, wailing, and ticking, coming seemingly out of everywhere. The sound, which continued with varying intensity for the rest of the day, was emitted by a horde of male insects, gathered in large numbers to sing in chorus to attract females for mating. Males in these choruses would from time to time fly from one tree to another in search of receptive females, filling the air with the sound of their buzzing. It was cicada season.

The cicada invasion continued for about six weeks. At first, it was only the mating cry that was annoying, but as the days wore on the bodies of dead and dying insects began to be seen everywhere: on the ground, on the sidewalks and driveways, on the streets, on top of parked cars. For fastidious homeowners, keeping their properties clear of cicadas became a daily chore. Dog and cat owners strove to keep their animals away from the cicadas, for even though they were regarded as harmless, nobody could be certain that consumption of the creatures would not be detrimental to a pet's health.

I paid little or no attention to the cicadas during their mating season and attempted to ignore their deafening calls. This proved difficult at times, but I felt the harmless insects were entitled to their short time in the sun.

The sun was not shining that morning, however. It had been raining overnight and the skies remained foreboding. I took my dog out for our early morning walk, stepping gingerly to avoid both the puddles on the sidewalk and the bodies of countless cicadas whose life cycle had ended. It was all going well when the dog smelled something – perhaps a nearby fox – and suddenly lurched ahead, propelling me out of balance.

At this point in my life, I am quite afraid of falling, so I went through a desperate pirouette to regain my equilibrium. I succeeded in remaining on my feet but, in the process, I slid several feet, leaving behind a line of squashed cicada bodies. They were all dead already, I told myself, but looking down I noticed that at least one of my victims was still in the last throes of

existence: its translucent wings with orange veins fluttered feebly, and its red eyes stared at me with what I thought was a mixture of pain, reproach, and regret.

My first impulse was to bend down to console the creature I had unwillingly slain. Then, realizing that it would have been ridiculous for a grown man to apologize to a one-inch black bug, I sighed, tightened my grip on the dog's leash, and moved on.

That night I had a strange nightmare. In my dream, I was confronted by a cicada, very much like the ones that I had stepped on, only much larger, almost the size of a pony. Through the magic of dreams, I found myself conversing with my victim, whose thoughts and protestations penetrated clearly into my brain.

"Do you realize what you have done? You thwarted the sole purpose of my life!"

I began to ask for the particulars of my crime, but the accusing cicada cut me off: "I was a healthy, mature female. After a day of copulating, I was getting ready to start cutting slits in tree twigs to insert the fertilized eggs that filled my abdomen. I had hundreds of those eggs, which in a few days would have hatched; my children would have dropped to the ground, burrowed, and started a growth process that would have taken many, many seasons. None of these will ever see the light of day, none will experience the brief joy at the end of their lives that makes our long maturation worthwhile. And, in turn, those of them that were female, would have laid hundreds of eggs that would have brought to the world even more of our kind. You are a murderer!"

"I am sorry, it was an accident!" I protested.

“There are no accidents” replied the cicada.

I woke up, my spirit filled with confusion.

The words of the cicada continued to resonate in my mind as I began to wonder what my purpose in life was and whether I had accomplished it, or was on my way to doing so.

Looking at animals like cicadas for guidance did not help, for they are bound by their inflexible survival instincts. They do not have the ability to investigate their past or contemplate their future. We humans must go beyond those basic instincts. We are able to discern what is true or false, what is beautiful or ugly, what is good or evil. Not only do we have that power of recognition, but an urge to see that truth, beauty, and goodness prevail.

It is wrong, therefore, for us to conduct our lives like non-rational animals do. We should rather begin as they do but end where our nature allows. This endpoint is not singular, but unique to every individual. I must find a truth, a beauty, an ethic that is my own and, once these are found, dedicate the rest of my life to pursuing them.

Thus, the humble cicada I unwittingly squashed taught me an important lesson. The purpose of my life, or what remains of it, is to know myself better, act on that knowledge, and pass along what I know for others to consider after I am gone. I do not exist only to enjoy the world, but also to help our species evolve in better harmony with it.