

The Bug Ceremony

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She scours the perimeter of my house overturning stones to gaze at the harvest of pill bugs, millipedes, and red and black ants beneath. When we encounter them she points to what they do. “That worm is dancing,” she says.

It is an October afternoon and my two-year-old niece and I are on one of our bug hunts in the yard (perhaps her favorite activity). The ground is canvassed with the ambers and bright yellows of fallen leaves. A dog yaps at the mailwoman down the street. We walk along the flowerbed on the side of the house.

On our third lap Mila approaches a rock I hadn’t noticed before. Blue-grey with a white quartz stripe, I kneel to admire its beauty, becoming lost in its ridges and curves, chips and sparkles.

I turn to my niece and realize she has vanished. I find her in the yard collecting sticks. Squeezing them in her hands and underarms, she runs back to me with as many as she can.

We continue our search. When we come across a rock she is drawn to she asks me to overturn it. When I do we admire the speckles of life wriggling in the light. She squats down and speaks to them. She tells me which are sleeping, which are dancing, which have crawled underground “to see their mommy.” She then gives each creature a twig from her bundle. “They need it,” she says. Laying it beside them, she returns the stone with two hands.

We do this three or four times before we hear the helicopter. Mila covers her ears and cries. Off in the distance, it doesn’t seem to be the chopper’s volume that disturbs her but its unavoidable presence.

She asks me to hold her. I pick her up and press her against my chest, cupping my free hand over her blushed ear. When she is ready, she will continue the ceremony.