About Ants

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About Ants

JEAN POLAND

As she watched, a large black ant scurried up between his two fingers and on to the sleeve of his torn plaid shirt. Its movements were cautious yet random in their direction. "I wonder if it's the kind that bite," she said half aloud. Someone had once told her that you could confuse an ant by casting a shadow in its path thereby changing its course of direction because ants moved in lines with the position of the sun.

As she watched the ant, two men picked up her brother and, balancing the body between them, began to walk toward the house. She watched for a moment and then looked up into the tree. The gnarled grandfather apple tree had branches which formed a perfect ladder to the top. A few broken limbs dangled limply by strings of bark from their broken stumps.

The crown of the tree was one of her favorite places of retreat and comfort; a good way to look at the world when you grew tired of ordinary things. Each step up was a beat of imprisoned wings suddenly finding freedom from the cage. In the tree you didn't need anything to be happy, not money, or food, or people to listen to you talk. All that existed was wind that sang you a song and rocked you teachingly as you clung to a branch. It whipped your hair against the side of your face so you could catch it in your mouth to taste its dryness and crunch it in your teeth.

Nothing, when you were up there, was higher, not birds or houses or walls. Everything could be stepped on if you wanted to.

From above, the grass beneath looked like smooth leather even though you knew that when you lay on your stomach in it each blade was a finger with straight veins, and black ants ran up the finger and then down again with cautious step.

The way ants built their hillhouses was interesting to watch. Up from a hole each ant came with a piece of dirt, placing it in some pre-arranged spot and returning to the hole. Within each hole was a palace of winding chambers and storehouses. Ants measured their wealth by the number of hanging columns suspended from these chamber walls. After the food was mashed between their jaws it was formed into grey wads which resembled stalagmites.
But up in the tree none of this was visible. Only little people and
the birds that screamed and dipped around their threatened nest and
children. She worried about the young birds because, in their blind-
ness, they sometimes stretched stringy, naked necks precariously
near the edge of the nest in their frantic plea for food.

"Come up into the tree with me, Peter, and I'll show you an
apple that has no seeds," she said. Coaxing him, up and up they went
until they were alone with the wind. Pink blossoms, blooming apples.
"Peter, apples when they're blooming don't have seeds. Reach for
one, hang on to my hand and reach."

"Peter, who will scream and dip frantic wings when you fall?"

Now there would only be three of them, and she could ask for
the things she wanted. They would give her money that was for
things for him. She could tell them the beautiful things she had seen
from the top of the tree and they would only have her to listen to.

Bending down she took a fallen blossom and stuck its stem deep
into the ant hill. But she didn't even wait to watch the ants scurry
blindly, but cautiously, away.

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**Spring Again**

Drunk with the day
And with daffodils
That filled blue pitchers
On window sills,

I held my breath
As a robin talked,
Kicking stones ahead of me
As I walked.

And discovering everything
Over again,
I couldn't help wonder
Where the world had been.

*TONI JANE MORRIS*