

Ants. Not ants in the pants, no; more like ants potentially in the underpants. Or even the parts that go in underpants--underparts?

It's dry here, and hot. Summer is officially over but the sweltering Africa heat inside my house from 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. would indicate otherwise. Sugar cane stands upright and yellowgreen in the fields around my neighborhood, undisturbed by the winds that usually make the 10-ft. high stands of sweet grass ripple like a vegetable sea. The ceiling fans are the only wind makers in my house, and I never let them rest. Spiders build their optimistic webs up in the corners of the walls far away from the whirring blades, and the little dried bodies of their meals lay on the floor in the mornings like so many tiny bits of blackened spider popcorn. The circle of the fan blades. The circle of life.

The rodent that was foraging in my wall, crunching the hours away, seems to have expired in the wall behind the stove. Even without the stove on (which I never use, since you could bake a pie on my living room floor at noon) it must be breath-stoppingly hot inside the walls there. The mouse/rat could have gotten trapped, confused and overheated. It died within 2 feet of the life-giving waters of the kitchen sink. The house smelled like death for a day or two and then the heat cauterized even that, and I imagine I have a rodentid mummy in the wall now. Let that be a warning, I suppose. An Edgar Allen Poe story for small mammals.

A few weeks ago I notice ants like I've never had ants. They sometimes seemed interested in food, but mostly made their busy chains to the kitchen and bathroom sinks. The minute I spilled water they'd appear, as if I'd activated an invisible dried ant starter kit on the counter with my careless water fallout. They don't bite (me, anyway) and there's no water standing around on my bed, so, no worries. I knew they'd potentially disassemble and carry away any dead geckos behind the fridge or under the furniture, whisk away dried insects, and maybe even de-crumbs the counter overnight. There are ways to live peaceably with wild animals in a win-win situation, you know.

But then one morning I noticed a whole convention of ants in great long trains coming in through the bottom of the bathroom door (my

bathroom door leads to the outside shower), marching resolutely up and over the straw mats and rug, laboriously ascending the toilet (ceramic has GOT to be tough to climb vertically) and disappearing under the toilet tank cover. A few disoriented ants, somehow lost from the convoy, careened wildly over the lid bonking into sea shells and a candle and each other. I “powdered my nose”, stood up, and flushed. To my amazement, the flush activated about 37 million ants, all of which had been apparently holding a deeply meaningful relocation town meeting under the tank lid, and they flowed out like a black tide of poppy seeds. Some carried eggs, all were VERY agitated, and I stood back to watch the sheets of ants and eggs surge over the lid, black on white, like a wave on the shore in a black and white photo.

Well, it was all very interesting, but I’ve got limits. I placed, with much guilt, reluctance, and self-flagellation, a little plastic ant bait thingie on the tank lid and left for the day. The package announces triumphantly that these baits are carried back into the colony, shared around, and fed to the queen like so much royal birthday cake. I hated the image. I hated my complicity. I hate being a hypocrite. But I was already sharing the sinks and most of the rest of the house. A Black Sea, with eggs, living in the toilet and provoked to furious swarming with every flush seemed a little on this side, the human side, of juuuuuust too much sharing.

When I returned that evening to my House of Throbbing Heat there was not an ant to be found in the bathroom. I experimentally and guiltily pushed down on the flush lever. Blue disinfectant water crashed into the bowl, and with it flowed the millions of specks of heartlessly poisoned ants. They swirled robustly around the bowl and then sucked out to wherever it is that the water goes--down to China, I guess.

I put the ant bait thingie on the floor by the door, in case of latent stragglers from the colony remnant outside, did the bedtime prep routine, and went to bed to sweat on top of the sheets under the ceiling fan. Sometime in the night I woke up thirsty, dreaming of the walls closing in around me and of the sound, somewhere, of water running like the sea.