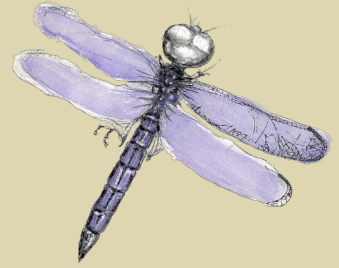
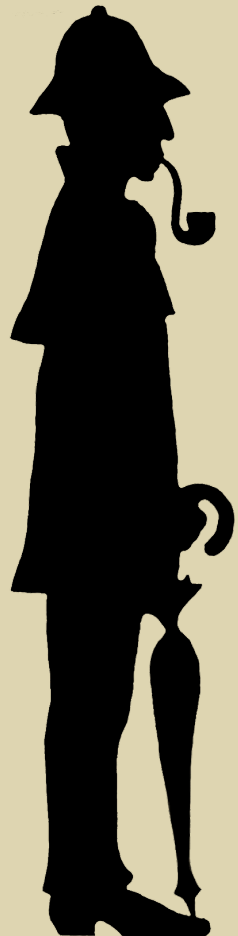


Sir Reginald F. Grump XXIII presents...



THE JOURNAL OF UNLIKELY ENTOMOLOGY

Valentine's Day Issue
February 14, 2012



With Stories by
E. Catherine Tobler • D.K. Mok • Donald Jacob Uitvlugt

www.grumpsjournal.com

The Journal of Unlikely Entomology
Issue 2.5
The Valentine's Day Mini-Issue
February 14, 2012

Edited by
Bernie Mojzes and A.C. Wise.

Art Direction and Web Site Design
Linda Saboe

The Journal of Unlikely Entomology © 2012 Unlikely Story, LLC

All Stories copyright their respective authors.
All Art copyright their respective artists.

Table of Contents

Editors' Note	4
Green They Were, and Golden-Eyed by E. Catherine Tobler	5
Love Letters by Donald Jacob Uitvlugt	8
Goodbye Beetle by D.K. Mok	10
Contributor Bios	14

Editors' Note

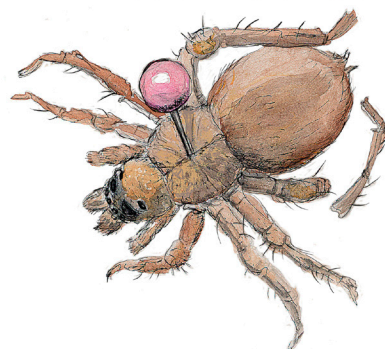
Ah, February!

The month when human thoughts turn oft to lust and/or love, and insectile nervous systems turn to whatever their particular mating and/or life-cycle entails. In this, our very first mini-issue, you will find tales of love and loss.

Valentine's Day, as dictated by various card companies, candy-makers, jewelers, and florists, is a holiday to celebrate one's ability to purchase the affection of one's object of desire, and/or one's willingness to be purchased. Depending on the traditions you hold dear to your heart, it may also be the holiday to celebrate saints' heads being distanced from their bodies.

Such is the way of the world. And, truth be told, as Lady Mantis slyly reminds us, these things are not so far removed as one might imagine.

At the *Journal of Unlikely Entomology*, it is a day to celebrate fiction in short form. As it turns out, it is also a day to celebrate love stories touched by sadness. That is not to say there is no such thing as happily ever after, only to say that we tend to prefer our romances with a touch of melancholy. And on that note, we wish you the happiest of mating-cycle-phases, romantic holidays, and/or decapitation-for-your-beliefs days.



Green They Were, and Golden-Eyed

by E. Catherine Tobler

He had no name and supposed that neither did she, for such was the way of their kind, but from the moment he first tumbled down the length of dead twig, to know the brush of his wing against the coral edge of hers, he may as well have been called Fool, for she was Love, and he was enthralled.

If only the doctor would shake the twig again.

With gleaming, buttery eyes, Fool looked from where he perched — for his place was the tip of the twig, the broomed edge which had been broken by lightning and which still bore a tang of metal to it — to seek her color amid those of their companions. Together they formed an intricate blossom along this dead wood, a blossom with assigned seating for each of its petals; a blossom which was not meant to become smitten with another part of itself.

They all looked alike, came the complaint of one visitor to the doctor's lab. Fool had only shuddered at the notion. They certainly did not look alike, nor did they smell alike when one got right down to it. He prided himself on the hint of lightning he carried with him. His neighbor told him it did nothing for him, really — that stench of brimstone! — but Fool cared not.

Love looked like no other in their grouping, of this Fool was certain. Her wings were the most delicate he had seen, edged with a thin line of coral that had surely been drawn by the smallest paintbrush known to the world.

And her filamentous arista... Well. He supposed

one did not think overly long on such things, being that he could not presently reach her for further explorations.

Instinct, he decided, was a terrible thing. While he longed to crawl down to her and confess his heart, instinct told him to stay where he was, for surely when he moved the birds would have at him. Never mind that he and his companions occupied a forest without birds. Theirs was an artificial world, built by the doctor's own hands. No birds, no threats, yet still he could not willingly move his legs from their perch.

In frustration, he oozed a stench to keep birds at bay.

Days would pass like this. Days where Fool supposed he should be occupied with hunting for food. Yet, he had no need, for the air around him dripped with sweetness from the aphids and ants who passed overhead, shadow forms skittering across branches and vines. This sugar-sweet rain fueled thoughts of Love, of the way the coral dripped over the edge of her wing, to the underside where he could not see.

He vowed he would.

As if some divine maker watched over him, later days brought to their forest the doctor and a colleague. Fool had little interest in them beyond their hands, for hands could claim twigs and shake them. Hands could cause a storm of fluttering planthoppers. Fool pined for those hands.

Those hands moved on.

Fool sank onto the twig tip.

His neighbor didn't miss the opportunity to tell him exactly how foolish Fool was being. Straining only lead to weakened legs, legs that could not perch as they needed. He had chosen his name well then, he supposed.

He peered down the length of twig and—

Her eyes were like the sunrise. The most stunning hue of gold greeted him and made him feel the need to stretch his wings into that light, but—

She was looking at him.

Fool did not move. He grit his antennae together and tried to force his legs off their perch, but still they clung. Instinct held him tight. When he looked back down, her eyes were no longer upon him, or if they were, he could not see; her entire face was covered by the stretching wing of her topmost neighbor. He sagged against the twig.

Idiot, his neighbor said.

To that, Fool could only agree.

Three days later, the forest fell apart.

Fool was minding his own business if with some difficulty, determined not to look down at Love. She would be there, he knew, but was she looking at him? Of all the stupid things to wonder.

He perched, being the best blossom tip he knew how to be, his compact green body poised, antennae stretching up as far as they could, and then—

The forest fell apart. It had never happened before, so Fool could not explain it in better terms than this. Surely, their twig had been shaken before, usually to demonstrate the way their flower might fall apart and reassemble, but this was unlike that.

The dead twig fell from its stand, into the undergrowth that filled the display. Every one of his companions tumbled free and Fool, in free fall, shrieked. His wings fluttered, and his legs flailed in a desperate attempt to maintain his hold on the twig. But the twig was gone and Fool panicked.

Idiot, said his neighbor as they plunged.

Fool fluttered down, down, into the narrowing mouth of another plant, sweet with nectar and warmly

colored in magenta. He tried to grab hold but in his panic could not, and landed with a *glub-glub* in the wetness that pooled in the plant's belly.

No!

Fool struggled to upright himself in the plant pond, dripping in nectar and who knew how many already-dissolved bodies. His mouth gaped open in a silent scream and he reached for the side of the pitcher. Then—

The edge of Love's wing stroked past his own.

Love had fallen!

No!

He stared at her as her slick legs moved over him, seeking purchase. The pitcher ceased to matter for Fool and there was only her, only the gold ommatidia of her wide compound eyes and the heady loam scent of her. Her wings were delicately ribbed to look like leaves — spring leaves, these, dripping with coral on their edge.

Fool, she said.

And she knew his name!

Love, he said.

Her slick tarsus poked him in the eye. Fool flinched, but withstood it as she tried to climb up. She could find no footholds along the slick wall of the pitcher plant and, exhausted, she slipped down. Fool spread his wings wide to keep her above the level of liquid in the pitcher's belly.

Instinct called him upward. His place was not at the bottom, but the top. He craned to get a look up the long neck of the pitcher, and thought it hopeless, but then...

Companions!

Fool looked at the pond, counting how many had fallen into this trap. Of course, he didn't understand numbers or math or that the shortest distance between two points was a straight line — what was a straight line in a world of softly rounded coral wings? But an idea still rose in his small mind, once he pushed thoughts of Love to the side and tried not to focus on the way her body draped his own. A glance told him that yes, yes, the coral line on her wing did slide completely underneath.

Idiot, his neighbor said.

Idiot perhaps, but Fool guided his companions, insisting they form a chain as instinct commanded them to. It did not matter that their dead twig was lost. He was the tip of this blossom and its other parts *would* assemble! Slowly, they heeded instinct's call, dripping water and nectar as they went, slipping and sliding and generally looking like a small coral and green avalanche as they worked.

Fool had no idea how long it took, for the walls of the pitcher were slick and unlike any twig they had known. Many perished in the struggle, bobbing in the pool below, dead for the sake of Love. When finished, they did not resemble a flower so much as a chain, reaching ever upward. Love made to move from his wings, but sticky nectar held her firm.

Love, he said, and began the long climb upward to the tip of the pitcher.

Fool, she said.

He slipped and he stumbled and once they fell back into the pool with a *glub-glub*, but Love held tight and Fool carried her onward. Ever up.

On the lip of the pitcher, they toppled. Drained, they plunged headlong to the forest floor, where everything was new and strange yet again. Fool could only lay there, staring in a daze at the distant sky above them.

Then, Love's tarsus slid over his eye, up along his antennae, and her fluttering coral wings covered him, and for a long time, this was all he knew. She tasted like sweet nectar, she tasted like death narrowly escaped; she was neither warm nor cold, she was everywhere all at once. She was the moon and she was the sun and she was—

Scampering away.

Love!

Fool, she said.

Idiot, said his neighbor, who shuffled along after Love. Fool supposed that all things considered, he was

fortunate he had not been eaten. He picked himself up and scuttled after the pair, seeing in the distance what they likely saw. A dead twig!

The twig was covered with their companions already, each trying to slide into the place they belonged. Vari-colored together and corals together and all those in between, so that at long last the blossom would shiver into being yet again. And he the tip! The green and gleaming tip.

Fool picked his way over his companions, pausing beside Love; Love who looked at him with those golden eyes, dipped an antennae, then curled into her proper place. Instinct, he thought, and couldn't help but walk his way over everyone to the tip of the twig, smelling ever of sulfur. He settled there and exhaled. He looked down the length of the twig and oh, she was looking at him.

Love, he thought.

Fool, she thought.

The twig never returned to its upright position. Fool never saw the doctor's hands again. He could not explain this, though he wished to, especially when he saw his children borne of Love. Their vari-colored children, swarming in a mass that threatened to overtake the entire twig.

Their own companions, as did happen, had long since mated and died, and when Love also succumbed to this fate, Fool knew his days were likewise short.

Amid the children, there was one wholly green, and Fool smiled to look upon her. She had her mother's golden eyes and her father's instinct, for she climbed up and up and up, and when Fool perished, it was she who clung to the tip, she who breathed in the scent of sulfur, stretched her antennae, and dared look down from whence she came.

She met an emerald gaze and knew he looked like no other among their companions. Though she had no name, she may well as have been called Smitten, for he was Lust and she was enthralled.



Love Letters

by Donald Jacob Uitvlugt

Zavir rested his head against the concrete wall, his eyes focused on a point just past the naked yellow light bulb. His captors liked to turn the bulb on and off at random, just to disorient him, to disrupt his sense of time. Not that it mattered what day it was. He knew he was going to die here.

He wasn't going to make it easy for them, though. There was more food here than the thin soup and hard bread they served when they wished to. One had only to be clever, clever and not too squeamish. Zavir lay as still as he could, not even twitching a finger. There. Movement out of the corner of his eye. They didn't like the light, but hunger drove one to do foolish things. Even when one was a cockroach.

It approached tentatively, testing the way with antennae aquiver. It could not resist the tantalizing morsel in front of it. Human fingernails. It moved closer.

Zavir's hand shot out. The cockroach tried to squirm away between his fingers, but he brought up his other hand. Each time the cockroach wriggled out, thinking it had escaped, he took hold of it in his other hand. The irony of what he was doing did not escape him, the prisoner become the captor. But he needed to eat.

He brought his meal to his mouth. He blinked. No, he was imagining things. He brought the insect so close he could feel its legs twitch against his lips. He pulled it away. The letters were still there. He squinted to make out the words on the cockroach's back:

*Your name from hence immortal life shall have,
Though I, once gone, to all the world must die.*

Zavir mouthed the words as he read them again, tasting them. The archaic diction gave them an exotic flavor, a spice sizzling on the tongue. He certainly knew what it meant to die to all the world. He read the words a third time. The dull red-brown letters barely stood out from the brown of the cockroach's body. He knew that color all too well. Dried blood.

Zavir repeated the words in his head until he had them memorized. He brought the cockroach to his lips and swallowed it with the words. He chewed, taking the message apart, breaking it down. Making it his own. It warmed him to the core.

Only after eating the roach did Zavir start to wonder who had written the message, and how, and why. He did not envision his captors planning anything so elaborate. Their usual methods were much less subtle. It was unlikely the roach had traveled from outside the prison. Thus the message had come from someone inside. He knew the writer was a woman. No man had such penmanship, such a delicate touch with the brush. Was she writing a love letter to a fellow captive? Words of encouragement thrown like a bottle into the ocean? Or writing only to keep herself sane? Zavir did not know.

Zavir envisioned her plucking her hairs and tying them together to make a brush dipped in her own blood. Was the wound self-inflicted or caused by their captors? Zavir imagined the words burning inside her, boiling in her blood, forcing their way out.

Would she write again?

Zavir kept the words inside him. They warmed him through the cold nights. They kept him company when the lights were off. They were the secret strength within his bones when his captors questioned him. He

had a name. Even though he didn't know what it was, the woman who wrote on the cockroach had a name. That could not be taken away from them.

He lay on the floor of his cell, shivering, but with a smile on his face. He dozed off, he did not know for how long. When he awoke, there was a cockroach right in front of his nose. This one also bore a rust-brown message.

*From hence, your memory death cannot take,
Although in me each part will be forgotten.*

He studied the words, tasted them, treasured them. He saw the cockroach for what it was only as it started to crawl away. He sat up and snatched at the insect, but it scurried away through a crack in the cinderblocks. Zavir rested his head against the wall. He touched his face and found he was crying.

It took him a moment to figure out why. It wasn't that the cockroach had gotten away. It wasn't even that he had missed the words, though he longed to take them into himself and nourish his heart with them. He wept for their writer. What had happened to her since last she wrote? The mention of each part made him think that their captors had hurt her, seriously. Would this be the last message he received from her?

That was not the only reason he wept. The writer's words were like a kiss in the dark. He had made contact with her, if only for a brief moment. To not eat her words left them unfulfilled. He whispered the two sets of words to himself and let his tears flow freely. At the very least he would not forget them.

One of his captors had seen him cry. They thought they had gotten to him. They began questioning him

in earnest. He started so strong, so very strong. But without the nourishment of the second set of words, he broke. He bled and he wept and he talked. He bared his soul to his captors, laid open to them the deepest secrets of his heart.

He recited the phrases from the cockroaches over and over again. He felt as if he had betrayed their writer. As if he had exposed her to the rape of their ears and recording devices. But he could not keep his traitor tongue from speaking the words.

Those words were not what his captors wanted to hear. They beat him until he could not stand, beat him until he could not see, beat him until he could not speak, and then they threw him back into his cell to die. His head hit the floor and he fell unconscious.

Dried blood flaked from his eyes as he blinked them open. He felt insects crawling all over his body, tasting his toenails, nibbling on his skin, feasting on his scabs. He was dying. He knew it, and he welcomed the cockroaches to their feast.

A cockroach crawled across his nose. It could not be, but it was. His jaw could not move but he sounded the words in his head.

*Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read.*

He let out a soft moan. The cockroach scuttled down Zavir's face and into his slightly open mouth. Zavir swallowed. The words went down into him and he died. He died, but he was not alone. He died with a smile on his face and warmth in his heart. He died, but he was loved.



Goodbye Beetle

by D.K. Mok

She said goodbye with a beetle.

No note on the dresser, no message on my phone. Just her toothbrush gone, and a dried up Christmas beetle placed carefully on the windowsill, staring bleakly at the humid Sydney morning.

Sophie and I had been together for almost a year — we'd met on the lawn outside the Museum of Contemporary Art, where I'd escaped the concrete hive of AMP Plaza for an apple danish break, and she was taking photos of dead seagulls.

We hadn't talked about settling down, but I thought we were happy. I was thirty seven, and dating had stopped being fun years ago. I was tired of starting over, tired of the dwindling procession of new faces asking the same questions.

I stared at the rotund, butterscotch beetle, its iridescent green tarsi like long, furry socks. I remembered Christmas beetles from childhood summers, when they buzzed clumsily around the fairy lights. In my second year of primary school, one of them nailed me between the eyes like a chitin bullet. I swear it left a bruise.

I didn't know much about bugs, but I knew Sophie. And the beetle was a message.



I met up with Tate over a bowl of cheap pho. Tate was my best friend from university, and she'd studied conservation. She was a childcare assistant now, but she preferred the term Human Larvae Wrangler. She saw her job as rescuing skinks, snails, and bugs from the mouths of children.

I showed her the forlorn Christmas beetle, its glossy shell already losing its lustre. After an evening of too much beer and Jeff Buckley, I'd put the beetle in a matchbox, and sewed it a tiny pillow using the kit I reserved for button emergencies.

"I'm sorry it didn't work out, Ryan," said Tate. "Sophie was always a bit flighty."

"Free spirited," I said.

"Yeah, that," said Tate. "Are you sure the beetle didn't just die there? Windowsills are like the insect equivalent of nursing homes."

"*Anoplognathus chloropyrus*," I said. "I haven't seen one of these since I was a kid."

No, the beetle was Sophie's way of telling me why she left. Why I was still alone.

"You're not carrying that around, are you?" said Tate.

I tucked the matchbox into my pocket, and maintained a dignified silence.

"You know, Ryan," said Tate. "Being single

doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you. Some of us find the right person. And some of us die alone. It doesn't have to be a three act tragedy."

The tragedy was never knowing why. But Sophie had left me a six legged cipher, and in this at least, I wouldn't fail.



Beetles had been the tanks of the Permian, invincible when the world was half an inch high. Now, they were crunched by kittens or immolated on chai scented tea lights.

Maybe I was an outdated relic of a forgotten era. The more I pored over entomological texts, the more I realised that just as flowers and gemstones had their cultural codes, beetles were also rich with meaning.

The spiny leaf beetle — *Hispellinus Multispinosus* — could easily mean 'You're too prickly.' Ladybugs, with their promiscuous habits, meant 'You get around too much.' And Khapra beetles — *Trogoderma granarium* — were clearly the mascot for teenagers, with their tendency to eat everything, live anywhere, and shed hair and skin with oblivious abandon.

As summer crept towards autumn, I reluctantly started dating again. I changed my introductory line from 'I like your shoes' to 'What's your favourite beetle, and why?' My callback rate nosedived, but the conversations I had were far more interesting.

I stuck a picture of a bombardier beetle on my office thermos: the propensity of *Pheropsophus verticalis* to emit boiling chemical explosions from its rear clearly meant 'Don't Touch'.

I started signing my reports with a sketch of a conscientious scarab rolling a wad of paperwork, and I urgently improved my technical drawing when Peony from IT took offence at an ambiguously scribbled rhinoceros beetle on my 'Thank You' note.

Still, the meaning of the Christmas beetle eluded me. They were sociable, docile, and festive. They were occasionally implicated in the destruction of crops, but that was beetles for you.

Eventually, I ended up demoted to data entry when my feedback memo to Human Resources,

decorated with tersely inked pie dish beetles, didn't go down too well.

"Talk about hypersensitive," I complained to Tate. "Malcolm's such a radar beetle."

"Don't you think you're taking this beetle thing too seriously?" said Tate.

"What am I supposed to do?" I said. "Curl up like a *Clambus simsoni* and roll away from the truth? I'm getting close. I'm getting into the beetle brain."

"Beetles don't have brains."

"I'm getting into the beetle ganglia."

Tate paused thoughtfully.

"You're a nice guy, Ryan," said Tate. "But you're getting kind of creepy."

From someone whose job was thirty percent mucous management, that stung.

"It's getting cold," I said. "I'll see you later."



My matchbox interred friend was becoming brittle. Its elytra were dull and wrinkled now.

When I was moving from my last apartment, I found behind my couch several tiny piles of brown powder, each perfectly shaped like a cockroach in repose. Their bodies hadn't rotted into maggoty goo, like ours did. It was as though they'd just sighed out of existence.

I looked around at my walls, pinned with photos of raspberry gold stag beetles, grey black whirligigs, and diamond speckled weevils.

Perhaps Sophie had meant that of the millions of species of Coleoptera, of the trillions upon trillions that had lived since the Permian, perhaps I just wasn't the beetle she was looking for.



Tate was working through a plate of free range fries at Happy Carbs when I slid onto the bench across from her.

"How was your day?" I said.

"I had to pull a gecko from Susie's nose this morning," began Tate. "Don't know where she got the gecko. Don't know how she got it up her nose."

A pair of traumatised reptilian eyes peered out from Tate's cotton jacket.

"Just out of curiosity," I said. "What's your favourite beetle, and why?"

"I prefer the larvae," said Tate. "They're disgusting and often parasitic, but it's what you experience as a larva that defines the kind of beetle you'll become. Not the species, but the kind of beetle. You only moult as a larva. Once you become a beetle, you stop growing."

I mulled over this for a moment.

"Feel like going for a walk?" I said.

Tate polished off the last of the fries.

"Sure."



We buried the Christmas beetle in the shallot scented community gardens, beneath rows of butter lettuce.

"Summer's almost over," I said.

"Autumn's not so bad," said Tate. "It'll be guava season."

Sophie's beetle may have been a parting shot, or a parting gift, but her disconnected phone line said more than the beetle ever could.

In the end, it had meant 'Goodbye'.

"You know," said Tate. "They're discovering new species of beetle every day."

I shrugged.

"I hope Sophie finds what she's looking for," I said.

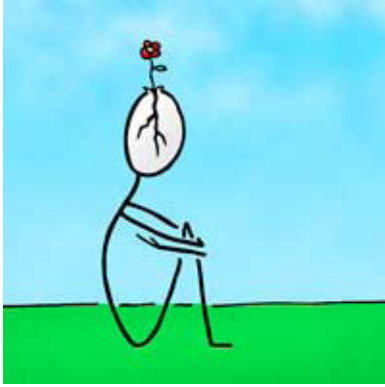
"And you?" said Tate.

I took a breath of damp, earthy air, and tossed the empty matchbox into a recycling bin.

"I guess I'm not done growing," I said.



Contributors



D. K. Mok is a Sydney based writer, with a degree in Psychology, and a fondness for the quirky, the strange, and the fantastic. DK's favourite fossil deposit is the Burgess Shale. (www.dkmok.com)

E. Catherine Tobler lives and writes in Colorado. She is the senior editor at *Shimmer Magazine*. For more visit www.ecatherine.com



Donald Jacob Uitvlugt lives on neither coast, but mostly in a haunted memory palace. His short fiction has appeared in a number of print and online venues, including *ChiZine*, *SpaceWesterns.com*, and *Necrotic Tissue*, as well as the anthologies *Cinema Spec*, *New Dawn Fades*, and *Silver Moon, Bloody Bullets*. Find out more at his blog <http://haikufiction.blogspot.com>.



www.grumpsjournal.com