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## Swarm

Dana Diehl

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## Swarm

### Abstract

The bag worms were the first thing to go wrong. It was July. Late morning. The girl and boy woke to webby nests ghosting the branches of their apple trees.

The boy and girl were new to commitment, only seven days married. They still marveled at the mountain-valley shapes their bodies made beneath the sheets. They were still growing accustomed to each other's smells. She thought he smelled like upturned earth. He thought she smelled like freshly cooked pasta. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder at the window, peering out through the screen.

"Where do they come from?" the boy wanted to know.

"How do we get rid of them?" the girl asked.

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# BOOTH



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## Swarm

Fiction by Dana Diehl

The bag worms were the first thing to go wrong. It was July. Late morning. The girl and boy woke to webby nests ghosting the branches of their apple trees.

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"Where do they come from?" the boy wanted to know.

"How do we get rid of them?" the girl asked.

Up close, they saw that the nests swarmed with small caterpillars: black, the size of poppy seeds. Cradled in the heart of their nests, the caterpillars looked like they were swimming through a fog. The boy thought of astronauts untethered but unafraid. The girl thought of stubble on the boy's chin, hairs scattered and wiry, sharp enough to leave the skin around her mouth raw after they kissed.

She took a branch off the ground and imagined wrapping the webs like cotton candy and feeding them to the burn barrel. But the boy placed a hand on her arm and pulled the branch free of her fist.

“Let’s leave it,” he said. “It’s not hurting anyone.”

He leaned the branch against the tree, like it was a problem solved.

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The months before their wedding had been all excitement and newness. The girl’s friends took her to a pole dancing class in the city where she discovered the secret strength of her thighs. The boy’s friends took him quail hunting in Appalachia. The girl went for her first bikini wax. The boy started doing tricep dips on the dining room table before breakfast.

Together their lives were objects accelerating without fiction. Their parents gifted them Pyrex, dish towels, comforter sets. Words that, side-by-side, sounded like items in a recipe. The boy and girl found a small ranch miles away from their apartments—a house on a hill that overlooked a creek and a scattering of homes and miles of Amish farmland—and purchased it using money they’d saved in their mid-twenties for a price the realtor said was unusually low. The reception was held in a fire hall strung with white Christmas lights. The boy and girl danced the foxtrot, the electric slide, the conga, the macarena. A firefighter drove them around the block in the engine and let the girl flip the siren when they went through an intersection. In their tux and dress, the boy and girl looked sexy; they looked unlike themselves. They posed for photos. They smeared icing on each other’s cheeks.

They left the city for their new home still in their wedding clothes. They drove through the dark, learning their new town through the silhouettes the trees made against the sky.

“I would do anything for you,” the boy said in the girl’s ear as they pulled into their new driveway.

“I’d do anything for you, too,” is what she said.

For the first time in weeks, the girl’s phone wasn’t ringing, wasn’t filling up with messages from the florist, the caterer, the photographer, the bridesmaids. She turned the phone off, unnerved by its silence.

That night they made love loudly. The girl felt disconnected from the act, and the more disconnected she felt, the louder it seemed she had to be. She felt the boy's shoulder blades, hip bones, the animal fur of his thighs. She felt the gritty sweetness of icing residue on his cheeks. She felt the hill under their home. She felt the Amish family at the bottom of their hill—even the girls' knuckles thick as roots from pulling stubborn carrots from soil every summer—tucked under covers. She felt the creek and the quiet mud-creatures asleep under its current.

This is mine, she thought to herself. This is mine.

...

The day after the bag worm nests appeared in their apple trees, the girl started noticing them everywhere: in the neighbors' vegetable gardens, on the underside of mailboxes, spilling out from the inside of birdhouses. Each nest containing a fist of black baby worms. She tried to look beyond them, to the haystacked hills, to the fields plowed by wide-shouldered horses. She couldn't explain to her husband why each time she looked at the nests, she felt a dark, slimy thing turn her gut.

"It's because you don't understand them," the boy said.

They had decided to spend their three-week honeymoon at home, their new home, to save money, to spend time together instead of next to strangers on planes. The past eight days had blurred into one. They slept late, bumped shoulders in the hallway, mixed up their toothbrushes in the bathroom drawer, still figuring out what marriage felt like.

The boy went to the living room and dug through the still-packed boxes until he found a wildlife encyclopedia. He returned to the girl and flipped it open in her lap. He pointed to a photograph of a black caterpillar, yellow striping its back like a spine, body covered in small hairs like morning stubble.

He read that they weren't really worms, but caterpillars, and after they were caterpillars they'd become moths. Their Latin name: *Malacosoma*. He read out loud. He read that their nests were called tents, and that their tents were made of layers of silk that formed tiny rooms, and that in the early mornings the caterpillars would gather together in balls to keep the cold at bay. They might live their entire caterpillar lives in their tents with their brothers and sisters. Then, when it was time for them to become moths, they'd crawl out of their tents, across branches, down tree trunks, to the forest floor to spin their solitary cocoons.

The average tent caterpillar would complete its life cycle in a little over two months. The caterpillars were driven by something in their DNA they couldn't control. Their actions controlled by the angle of the sun, the temperature of the ground, the twist of a gene. The whole of a female moth's life—mating, laying eggs—might take place in fewer than 24 hours.

The girl thought, If our marriage is successful, we'll still be together fifty years from now. How do you fill fifty years? It scared her, this thought. She felt the slope of her life plateau. Getting married had been so easy, everything moving toward it, marriage the next obvious step, no one asking what happened in the after.

Later that day, the boy suggested they walk down the hill, so for the first time in a week and a half, they slid on their walking shoes, locked the windows and the back door. They held each other's hands, sweat gathering between their palms. They passed between houses with swings in the front lawns, plastic deer statues in the gardens, snagged screens and silver satellite dishes. Collies chained to trees, a cardboard sign for "fresh eggs." They reached the creek, deep and swift-moving. A bridge crossed the water, and a half dozen kids sat on the guard rail in bare feet, in swim suits and cut-off shorts and wet T-shirts stuck to ribs. The boy and girl stood by the creek and watched as the kids took turns jumping, cutting through the humid air, the shimmering heat, and disappearing into the water below. They emerged screaming with cold and adrenaline. They were wild kids.

The boy smiled at them, waved, and the girl pulled on his elbow to turn back. As they climbed the hill back to their home, the boy pointed to a splinter of movement on the road ahead. The girl saw that it was a bag worm, full grown, like the one in the book, inching along the curb, probably looking for a place to spin its cocoon. They found dozens more, scattered across the black pavement. The girl accidentally stepped on one, spread it across the sole of her shoe. She wiped it against the curb. Inside, the worm was green. She hadn't even felt its body break.

...

The boy pulled into the driveway with a canoe tied to the roof of the car. "Happy honeymoon," he said. The canoe looked used, its bottom a maze of scratched and nicks. He told her he bought it from a guy in the next town over. The canoe had been sitting in the man's front lawn with a For Sale sign taped to its side. The girl slid her palm along the canoe's underbelly and pulled back with spider webs tangled around her fingers.

"Want to give it a try?" the boy asked.

For two hours the girl had been alone in the house. The boy had left for groceries, and for the first time in days she found herself alone. She took a shower just to feel the heat rolling off the water, refused to worry about the water bill. She allowed herself to think thoughts she'd feel guilty thinking around the boy. How yesterday had been her ex-boyfriend's birthday, the boyfriend who played hockey, who she liked for shallow reasons: his hockey gear like plates of battle armor, his slap shot quick and deliberate. How once an older man had asked her to move to Thailand with him and she turned him down, how sometimes she'd check the weather in Bangkok and think, In another life I'm wearing a sundress and sipping Chang beer poolside. She was dizzied, thinking of how many paths she didn't follow to their ends.

"Let's go," the girl said.

They drove down the hill to the creek, parked next to the bridge. The boy held the canoe steady in the water as the girl stepped in. She felt it sink under her weight, the water moving to fit the canoe's shape. The boy pushed it into deeper water and leapt in. The girl had never paddled a canoe before, so he taught her how to move the skin the surface of the water, how to steer into the current instead of against it.

They paddled to the bridge. The kids, who always seemed to be there, bare feet dangling, hooted down as she passed underneath. The boy looked up, hooted back. When he saw the kids with their dirty callused soles, he saw his future. He saw Christmas trees hung with tinsel, scabbed knees that fit in the palms of his hands, warm pancake mornings.

"Should we turn back now?" she asked. She was afraid the kids would start jumping, disrupting the surface of the water.

The boy shook his head. "Paddle on."

The creek led them away from the road, away from the houses. Birch trees, oaks, aspens, sassafras trees leaned over the water. A heron flapped on a pebbled riverbank. Gnats clouded above half-submerged logs, fish moved like phantoms under the canoe's belly. The girl could see a line of white at the next bend, rapids frosting the surface of the creek.

"We've got this, don't worry," the boy told her.

He wanted to feel the river muscle them. He wanted to feel it spit against their faces. The canoe rocked and steadied as they entered the rapids. The canoe scraped against a rock, invisible under the foam. The girl looked back at the boy, who grinned in

response. The canoe broke free from the rocky creek bottom and shot forward. The girl's hands ached, but she realized she loved the speed. They were flying. A slick boulder reared out of the rapids, and they steered around it, only to scrape against another, smaller rock. Before they could fight it, the canoe had tipped, and they were dumped.

The girl never went completely under. She clung to the rock that tipped their canoe, fingers vice-like, feeling her shorts and bra and shoes balloon with water. When the current finally pulled her loose, she flipped onto her back, kicked off her shoes. She let the creek pull her, tug her. She paddled toward the bank, arms pebbling with goosebumps. She pulled herself up onto the reedy shore, gasped for breath.

Only then did she remember the boy. She looked out over the creek, its loud, white surface. The canoe, belly-up, bobbed downriver. No boy. No top-of-head. No hands-grasping-for-air. She was not a girl with a boy any longer. She was a girl starting over. She was a girl back on top, the slope of her life tilting before her. Free to go to Thailand, to sell the ranch on the hill. So easily she could climb, dripping, out of the rapids that pulled him under.

Downriver, the water was still. It was there that the boy emerged, thrashing and shirtless, kicking off his waterlogged shoes. The girl watched him breaststroke to the shore, watched him collapse on the opposite riverbank. Lying in the mud, he was hardly recognizable as her husband. He could be a drowned muskrat, or coyote, or baby deer.

She ran barefoot down her own bank until she reached shallow water. She used the big rocks to hop across the creek. She approached the boy as he was coughing water onto a dry stone.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry."

She was still imagining him gone. She was frightened by how easy it was.

The boy coughed up creek water. His spine ridged against his wet T-shirt. He coughed until he laughed.

"So maybe that wasn't the best honeymoon present," he said.

The canoe was gone. The girl imagined it following the river to its mouth, slipping into the Atlantic. She imagined it finally filling with water and sinking. Sliding along the Mariana Trench, crabs nibbling at its frame, eels nosing at its scraped-up bottom.



The boy and girl, barefoot, half-dressed, walked back home.

...

That night in bed they embraced in the dark, their hair still wet. The girl realized that she didn't notice the boy's smell anymore, couldn't smell him when she tried.

Through the part in their blinds, the girl could see the bagworms' nests like small moons stuck in the branches.

She said to the boy, "Why did you want to marry me?"

He didn't ask why she wanted to know. He told her that when they'd first started dating they went hiking at Bald Eagle Mountain, hoping to find a red fox that was rumored to be living in the forest. Almost immediately they found it, drinking from a pool, nose wet and paws muddy. It felt to him like a fairy tale, when the heroes go into the woods and find what they're looking for without even trying. He told her that he liked having her with him over the holidays, playing chords on his parents' piano and teaching his young cousins how to play "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

As he spoke, she thought of the creek frothing with foam, so much colder than she would have expected. If she had been the one to be dragged under, he would have saved her. She knew this. She thought of him underwater, tumbled by the creek. Even then, he must have been reaching for her. While she was saving herself, he was trying to save her. This made the girl unexpectedly angry. Angry at herself, or angry at him and his lack of doubt.

"Where do you see us in the next twenty years?" she asked.

She felt him shrug. "Well," he said. "Here. Happy. Doing what makes us happy."

The girl sat up in bed. She told the boy she was going to get the snack. She didn't turn the lights on as she moved through the hall, finding her way with a hand against the wall, trying to see the house in a way she never had before.

Once in the kitchen she rummaged through the junk drawer. Her fingers found the box of kitchen matches. She took them with her through the front door and onto the front stoop. She stood barefoot, letting her eyes adjust to the night. There was a full moon and she could see the slither of the creek below the hill and the sharp point of roofs.

She approached the apple trees. Up close, she could see that they were almost empty. Only a few caterpillars left. The rest had crawled to the ground, looking for hollow logs or curled leaves in which to weave their cotton-candy soft nests. By the end of August, the yard would be full of moths. The last month of summer would crisp the grass. It would shrink the creek, exposing its rocky underbelly, exposing sandals lost by the bridge children, crawdad skeletons, a rusty paddle wedged between stones. Moths would mate mid-air and lay pearly eggs in the crook of trees.

She didn't want their future. Every season following the same predetermined patterns, their power of choice taken away.

The boy had told her to leave the nests alone, and maybe next year she would, but this year she couldn't.

She took a match out of the box. Struck it. Listened for the whoosh of heat.

She wanted the boy to kneel in their bed and part the curtains to watch her. She wanted to act and not know how he would react.

The first match went out, so she lit another and cupped it in her palm. She lifted it to the lowest nest, held it there until the small flame became a big flame. She blew it, gently, to life. One-by-one, she lit the caterpillars' nests until the apple trees were alight with isolated balls of fire. She stood back and watched, relieved by the sight of the nests curling into nothing.

She heard the boy at the door. "What are you doing?" he asked.

The flames clung to the branches like orange, hungry birds. The girl joined the boy in the doorway. She breathed, smelled smoke. She waited.

Dana Diehl recently graduated from Arizona State University with an MFA in Creative Writing. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Passages North*, *Swarm*, *PANK*, and elsewhere.