

## Chitin

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*Jason P. Holtman*

Isaac stood at the kitchen door, wondering at the moth hour, waiting for the car to come. The cobalt air, percolated by the sound of insects and strung with red-beaded clouds, reminded him of dark rooms with tapestry, smoke clinging to the sound of a sitar. The door chain gently tapped on the aluminum, pushed by the evening breeze. The odor of wild onion lay heavy on the dusk. The house was quiet. A bat dove out of the sky, jagged sharply three feet from the ground and darted back into the night, a small, unseen meal in its jaws. Alone on the one side of the screen, Isaac could smell the night through the rusted, wire mesh, telling him that the mountains were still far off and how deep the dew sat in the brush pile out back.

He stood in the light of his back porch--moths dancing in the orange glow--staring at the tire tracks in the gravel. The eight inch furrows stopped at the edge of the patio and began somewhere in front of the house, out by the road. Karen had come the past two nights, always leaving before he had time to wake up and make coffee. He stared for a few minutes longer. Attempting to count the gravel, he lost track as the stones blurred together. Karen must have put new tires on the car; he could see the zigzag ridges twirling through the stones like licorice. How much did four tires cost? Karen never bought retreads. The fingers of his right hand rolled on the jamb, callouses thrumming on the whitewashed wood. He flicked the ash from his cigarette with his left, not noticing until he tried to take a pull, that he had knocked it out as well. The cherry burned a hole in the linoleum before he could step on it. He ex-

amined the cigarette and moved away from the door back into the kitchen. He lit another.

The kitchen was spare. A spring arm lamp was mounted into the table and a fluorescent tube shone bare above the sink: the only light in the room. Old nails marked where ornaments used to hang. Where a clock once ticked, a thick-headed screw protruded from the wall. A double-boiler clattered on the stove, gas hissing beneath it. Isaac smoked absently, tapping ashes into a colander in the sink. The wax in the double-boiler was nearly melted. He took some pans from beneath the sink. The pans were the size of notebook paper, stacked inside of each other, dots of baked grease in the corners. He had bought them from a bankrupt soup kitchen when he came back from Madagascar. He couldn't imagine what they had used them for: too wide for bread, too small for cake, and too shallow for just about everything else. He used them as molds for his pallets; they were the perfect size for collection slabs. He had not had to buy any since his return, just wax by the pound.

He removed the lid. The wax would be done soon, only a few white lumps floated in the hot, clear liquid. He returned to the table and laid the trays out in two lines. Finishing, he moved to the door, waiting for the wax to melt.

The fence row was grown over completely with kudzu from the neighboring lot. He could barely see the vines themselves in the near dark, only the flat shape of their collective mass tumbled out over the fence rails. He would have to clear it soon, maybe even dig a small ditch around its periphery and fill it with chlorate. He hated to do that. It would scorch everything under and around it: fiery chemicals dripping through the capillaries of the soil.

Smoke swirled from his nose as he exhaled. He closed

the inside door and looked out the windows back into the yard. Fireflies were beginning to sparkle on the tree line at the back of his property. Isaac watched them thicken the dark band of black forest with their tiny luminescence, each bright wink punctuating the inky brush behind, defining it, making it move and creep along. *Photuris pennsylvanicus*, elongated, flat--the list was begun out of habit--flashing once every two or three seconds while in flight, three overlapping generations per season, diet consisting of various soft-bodied insects.... He shut the burner off, sat down at the kitchen table, and pushed aside the wax molds. He was running out of blocks to pin specimens on, but these could wait until tomorrow along with the kudzu. He hadn't done anything all day and could feel his inertia holding him in the chair. He knew he was flagging and did not care.

Slumping against the chair, his legs stretched and crossed beneath the table, he thought about his daughter. Last summer, Isaac had taken Becky out to the back of his property, and they had emptied the beetle traps together. They dug through the compost piles he had placed back in the woods, all the while finding beetles and grubs which Becky had never seen before. She had giggled nervously when he brought his hand out of one of the traps covered with checkered beetles. He had explained how the tiny beetles killed gall and horntail wasps and kept the oaks from being overrun with their larvae. He told her the names, subspecies *cymatodera*, *Tremex columba*, *Palmodes dimidiatus*, as the slender bodied beetles wove in and out of his spread fingers. She liked the name *cymatodera*--even though she would not touch the beetles themselves--and chanted it all the way back to the house: simon-toad-era, simon-toad-era. He had enjoyed himself that day and thought Becky had as well.

Her blond curls had been matted by the end of the af-

ternoon, and Isaac, who had never looked forward to his weekends with her much before, felt regret when her mother came to pick her up that evening. He gave her a hug and detected the traces of scent the shower had not been able to rinse off her: the woods, compost, and sugar solution he used for bait. She had waved at him from the front seat as the car pulled back out the gravel driveway. He had waved back. Karen only looked behind her, her arm stretched over the back of Rebecca's seat as she maneuvered around the puddles and pits in the drive.

Becky was somewhere in upstate New York right now, and had been since Sunday. Since Karen had called to inform him of her plans, he had not been able to work. The secretary at the college had called him after three missed days. He had forgotten what he told her, but she had not called back. Somehow the thought of his thirteen-year-old daughter at a camp bothered him. She didn't like such things, did she? He took another lungfull of smoke and ran his nail across the edge of one of the aluminum pans: the wax bunched up under his nail and cracked away from the sides of the pan, creating soft, white needles on the formica tabletop.

He had not been to school, emptied the traps, or cut the kudzu yet. He ran his tongue along the roof of his mouth. His palate was raw from all the cigarettes he had smoked during the past week, and he could feel the thick film collecting just below his nasal cavity.

Karen had been dressed up when she came to get Rebecca. She had worn dark glasses even though the day had been clouded over. He picked more wax off and pictured Becky eating in some dining hall with girls her age. How long had Karen said camp lasted? He jammed his thumb into a large roll of wax and felt the flat edge bite under his nail and go under the skin. He turned off the light, locked

the door, and walked down the hall to the bathroom, tasting blood as he sucked his thumb.

The wax already hardening into a thin disc across the surface of the double-boiler, Isaac went to bed.

In bed, Isaac turned and pulled at the sheet until he was wrapped tightly.

In his dream, the car pulled up around the backside of the house. Before the red hood came into view, Isaac knew who it was and went into the back rooms where he kept the terrariums. He liked the smell of this side of the house. The low lights in the first room gave it a wet, soft odor which reminded him of the dark forests of Madagascar. Spiders and slugs cluttered the corners, and a large glass box in the center held close to twenty elephant stag beetles, *lucanus elephus*, his livelihood and fame. This was the room where he worked. Behind a large plywood divider was a desk cluttered with folders and half-used legal pads. A single lamp sat on the desk with its stand pinned under a tall stack of denim binders. Within one of the drawers of his desk—one of the only ones that still opened—he kept a tape player and a collection of beaten, dirty tapes. Music to soothe the beasts—*beast*. Around the confines of his cubicle, memos from the university hung alongside pictures of his friends from Africa. A few of the pictures contained Karen, but most were of trees and nests.

The amplified crunch of chitin as it bumped into glass or scraped against itself came from the terrarium. Often he thought there could be a pattern in the rhythmic, crusty sounds of his study. Karen and Rebecca had never bothered him while he worked.

The car stopped, and he could hear Karen walking across the concrete patio as he fumbled through his tape

drawer in the dark. He didn't know why he wanted music. He couldn't turn on the light because of the study he was conducting on the stag beetles. He could hear them as well as Karen. They were aware of his presence and a few of them had begun flying into the top of the terrarium, their large bodies causing the screen to click and buckle as they hit it. Isaac began to wonder if they might damage their wings ramming the screen as they were. He knew a lot about them, but doubted even in his dream—whether he could mend any of them if they caught themselves in a corner or broke one of their tusks.

He found the tape he was looking for, identifying it by the loose label, peeling off the top like a tiny scroll. He got it in, pushed play, and rolled the desk drawer shut. The steel front clanged unevenly against the sides of the desk. Something began to play from inside the thin metal drawer, but Isaac could not place it. The beetles, alarmed by the sound of the desk, jumped harder and Isaac moved to the door. The music from the drawer was garbled and incoherent. He thought the tape broke by the time Karen walked into the study and flicked on the overhead light.

"Honey," she said. She touched him, her hands cold and slick like the abdomen of a wasp.

He woke halfway off the bed, his arm dangling to the floor and the tip of his middle finger shaking against the hardwood floor.

The next day, Isaac found some old gloves and a spade, determined to do something about the kudzu in the back yard. Nothing had changed.

The morning air was already thick with the heat of the oncoming day. Isaac had to squint to see clearly through the bright, blue light. Coming from the back rooms where he had worked all morning, the glare of the sun stung his

eyes and forced tears into their corners.

He talked to himself as he worked. His discussion was about *lucanus elephus*. Two of the males had fought that morning, and Isaac had spent three hours watching them try to tumble each other onto their backs. One of them had finally gained a steady hold on a twig and rolled his opponent, and once the fight was over, the victorious beetle turned and crawled up the twig onto a larger branch. It wasn't necessary for the more powerful beetle to complete the battle, the loser would never be able to right himself in the wild—at least not soon enough to avoid a hungry bird or lizard. Isaac had righted the vanquished creature and noticed that it was momentarily disoriented, as if it had never expected to live: *lucanus e.* twirling its six legs wildly, clicking its jaws in thick, desperate resolution. Perhaps he should have run it through with one of his long pins, fulfilling its expectation. He would go back into the room tonight and not know which of the males it had been. All of them would wave their tusks, and throw themselves at the sound of his body in the room.

It took him another three hours to lift the blanket of heavy weeds off the splintered fence slats. On top they were shingle upon shingle of dark, broad leaves; but underneath they had tightly curled stems which held fast to their purchase. The matted kudzu ripped like velcro as he tore it off the posts and rails. By the time he finished, his arms ached and his hands were slick from the fluid in the stems. He went inside and cleaned himself off, then returned outside. Before lunch he had dug a small ditch in front of the fence and sprayed it with chlorate, enough to keep the vines from crawling into the yard again.

For lunch he had a cigarette and a bowl of soup. He finished the last spoonful when the phone rang. He reached behind him and picked it up.

"Hello," he said, setting the receiver into the crook of his neck.

"It's me," said Karen. "How are you?"

Startled, he didn't reply.

"Isaac, it's me. Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"I'm coming tonight. Before I leave to get Becky." Her voice sounded deeper on the phone. He could hear her breathing.

"No, you're not."

There was another pause. He imagined her licking her lips the way she did when putting on lipstick, her tongue wet against the sticky, red wax.

"All right." She sounded like a coy lover. He pictured her dipping her head down, making plans anyway.

"Isaac?"

Her voice called his name twice before he hung up the phone.

He knew what the red-bodied stag had felt, tumbled over under the cold, florescent lights, looking up at the screen, expecting to see treetops and a yellow sun.

Waiting for the car again, he collected the aluminum pans he had left in the kitchen. As he found each—for he had left some in the cabinets and others under the table—Isaac removed the wax block from its belly, stacking them in the center of the table. He then took the wax slabs into his study, being careful not to crack any as he walked down the hall and turned the corner. The desk was clean now. Isaac had gotten rid of all the binders and legal pads leaving only the lamp on the desk.

Karen was trying to play with him, get him to want her again as he had years ago, on another continent. Sending Rebecca to camp was a ruse: a game to infuriate him.



He pulled the tops off of a number of coffee cans before he found what he was looking for. He dumped the canister of long pins out onto the desk's surface. It was not going to happen tonight.

He walked out of the house taking the smoke canister, it was the same one he had rigged up in Madagascar, a cross between a tea kettle and an oil can. The woods were just beginning to paste over with the gray light of evening. The moon was rising. From the pond deep in the back lot, Isaac heard the high, punctuated bell-buzz of peepers-*hyla crucifer: boreal, mixed deciduous, oak-hickory; congregational, extremely common*. The front of the tree line was already flecked with lightening bugs, and Isaac doubted he needed the smoker. With their density, he could scoop them up alive in a seine-bag with only a few passes through the air.

But he did not want to retrieve the net from the house, so he let out the contents of the smoker in a large flourish covering nearly twenty feet from side to side. He heard the tiny particles settling on the trees in front of him and to the sides. The mist whispered as it touched the waxy leaves and fell on the stems and branches. Coughing once, Isaac looked into the black he had created. The forest was empty. It took him a moment to realize that the peepers were still ringing. At his feet was a thick line of weakly lit insects. He had made aerial collections before, but had not expected the number of *photuris* he found in front of him now, all fallen in to a neat, foot-wide row.

He stooped over to gather some into his bag, scooping the bodies up by the handful. When he was finished, he turned to go back to the house, anticipating Karen. She would find him in the study later. Not tonight, he said to himself again.

Halfway through the yard, he moved through a cloud

of gnats. Snatching out at them with his free hand, Isaac made little effect on the whispering annoyance. The wet grass began to soak through the front of his shoes. Moths spun in cracked orbits around the orange porch-light. He left the door unlocked and walked down the hall into his study.

Once there, he pinned each of the tiny bodies to the wax. Counting, making tiny numbers for each. The width of the pins was suited for his work with *lucanus e.*, so almost a third of his quarry became too cracked and ragged to hold on the sheet: these he would wipe off with a cloth leaving a tiny streak of glowing yellow. He worked furiously at first hoping that Karen would come in. He wanted her to see him like this, when she put her head around the plywood divider. It would make her leave: a tight checker board of bodies pithed with surgical steel ten times their size.

After a while, he abandoned the cloth and began to drag the shells off the wax with his fingernail. He thought of Karen seeing him and began to draw large ditches through the specimen board. She would not sleep with him again. Coming three hours drive to see him, press against him with her car-tired body: this he could not stand again. He wanted to hate her. Be jealous of her. Do anything but want her the way he did. He could not accept her again.

He listened as he pulled insects from the bag, his fingers pushing through them like sunflower seeds. All he heard was the sound of the stags behind him, crashing into one another with their too large heads and under-balanced jaws.

His eyes stung from the sweat collected under them: the sockets deep, black crescents he wanted to scratch. He

had finished four of the slabs: five across, seven down--three hundred pins.

Isaac left his study. It was late. The crunch of the car tires had not come.

He went to the kitchen door and lit a cigarette. His lips ridged around the filter, hard and tight. The yard was still. A mat of clouds pressed down on the tops of trees. He drew heavy, deep; the ember glowed, then grayed. Crickets chirped—*oecanthus nigricornis* --and Isaac stared through the screen into the dark yard, his eyes half-closed as he took another pull.