

[Home](#)

[Current Issue](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Autumn 2007](#)

[Summer 2007](#)

[Spring 2007](#)

[Winter 2007](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

[Summer 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Contact](#)

BIG, BLACK, & NASTY

BY MICHAEL WOLMAN

COPYRIGHT 2009

Supposedly the cockroach is the second-oldest extant species on earth, younger only than the horseshoe crab. It first appeared over 280 million years ago, during the Carboniferous era. Then, two years ago, when I was living in Thailand, it appeared in my bathtub.

I'm not particularly squeamish--growing up, I used to trap spiders with tennis ball cans and release them into the suburban wild. But cockroaches are a whole other story. They really bother me. And this one wasn't your garden variety Manhattan roach--you know, the juiced-up beetles you find in your shoes in your East Village walkup. This was a Bangkok roach--the tropics, man--and it was huge. Really fucking big. The size of a linebacker's thumb. And against the polished white glaze of the tub, it somehow looked even bigger, even blacker, even nastier. That's what I named him: Big, Black, & Nasty.

Big, Black, & Nasty sat there and waved his antennae around in little ellipses, clearly awaiting my response. I wanted to kill him--Theravada Buddhism had not yet taken hold with me--but I wasn't about to go the route of the shoe or the rolled-up newspaper. I couldn't bear the thought of the ensuing crunch. I also couldn't bear the thought of the ensuing cleanup. I had to shower later that night, and doing so while standing in cockroach remnants was another image I couldn't bear. Indeed, there were many points related to the smashing of--and resultantly smashed--Big, Black, & Nasty that I couldn't bear.

I therefore decided to drown Big, Black, & Nasty. I figured that if I could just douse him long enough, he'd eventually drown, or at least lose the will to live, and I'd be able to force his legs and antennae and other extremities down the drain. After enough showers, I assumed, the rest of him--his head and thorax--would eventually just sort of disintegrate and melt away, and I wouldn't have to deal with either cleanups or audible crunches.

Roaches are feisty little fuckers, however, and when I aimed at him and unleashed hell's fury--the greatest water pressure a developing country's plumbing technology can offer--Big, Black, & Nasty fought like a tipsy Irishman. He scrambled up the walls of the tub with furious urgency, his little two-knee legs pistoning at 4,000 rpm. With each dash he made up the walls, a stream of water was there to meet him and send him back down. He went left, I went left; he went right, I went right.

Soon, though, I had him pinned in the drain. He was helpless and no longer flailing about, so powerful was the stream of water pounding him from above. Unfortunately I had one of those drains with several little gaps instead of one with a single hole big enough to fit, say, a drowning cockroach. So rather than flowing neatly down the drain and meeting his eventual

doom in the ghastly entrails of the ignominious Thai drainage system, Big, Black, & Nasty instead had his body wedged halfway down one of the holes, his torso hanging vertically, like in those cartoons of fat guys getting stuck in their toilet seats.

I continued assailing him for another 10-15 seconds or so before stopping the flow and assessing the damage. Big, Black, & Nasty appeared to be a beaten bug. His legs had also been forced down into the drain, and his antennae no longer jutted out tall and proud, at attention. Instead they swayed sadly back and forth, like tree branches in a light wind, as if to say, "Michael, I surrender. These are the best simulacra of white flags I can render as a mere cockroach. Humans are clearly the superior species, and furthermore, I am your bitch."

Of course, if I'd known better, I would have recognized Big, Black, & Nasty's gesture not as a sign of capitulation but rather as a wily stratagem. He was actually telling me: "In truth, I am neither bushed nor battered. I am just putting on this pathetic show in the hopes that you, foolish human that you are, will falsely assume I am finished and will thereafter leave the bathroom and continue on with your meaningless existence... while I, Big, Black, & *Brilliant*, crawl happily back from whence I came."

Well, I was not about to be outsmarted by an arthropod, so I waited the clever bugger out. Sure enough, after a minute or so, Big, Black, & Nasty, foolish insect that he was, made his move. "Back for more, eh?" I said to him, and then let loose another torrent. Big, Black, & Nasty immediately reverted back to Scared Shitless Insect mode, clambering up any wall he could find. I couldn't believe it. It was as if he was surprised by my actions, even though I'd been trying to kill him throughout the duration of our relationship. I mean, what did he think I was going to do at that point? Call a truce, pick him up, and take him on as a pet?

It's been said that if or when a nuclear holocaust annihilates life on earth, only two life forms will remain: cockroaches, and Keith Richards. Well, I can neither impugn nor confirm the part about Keith Richards. A cockroach, on the other hand--that, I now believe. If my confrontation with Big, Black, & Nasty taught me anything (aside from how *not* to kill a cockroach), it taught me that we should treat other species--big and small, nasty and pleasant alike--with empathy and respect, if not mercy. At some point in our fracas, I developed a real admiration for *Blattella asahinai*, a creature that has thrived on this planet for approximately 279 million years longer than we humans have. It was an esteem bordering on kinship, I'd say, and one I'd never experienced with a lesser life form.

It was at this contemplative point that I unleashed my *coup de grâce*. Having once again trapped Big, Black, & Nasty in one of the drain's gaps, I pushed the shower head within inches of him and really let him have it. It was the entomological equivalent of being trapped underwater beneath Niagara Falls. (I'd like to see Keith Richards survive that.) And yet, unbelievably, the little shit persisted. I furrowed my brow into a scowl and screamed, "*Die, fucker!*" (Luckily my Thai neighbors weren't bothered; in Thai, "*die, fucker*" means "now we eat rice.") Big, Black, & Nasty, however, did not obey. Instead he pressed on, Darwinist instincts in his primordial protocerebrum and Gloria Gaynor in his heart. How was this possible? How could he take such punishment? Even if the force of the spray didn't do him in, wouldn't he at least have drowned by now?

I continued the assault, but by this point I was in pain myself. I just wanted the carnage to end, to put the poor guy, who had so earned my respect, out of his misery. I squinted in empathic agony and turned my head away as I fired, and it was at this moment--and not three minutes earlier, when I embarked on this ridiculous, elaborate plot instead of just squishing the thing, or in seventh grade, when I stood at the side of the gym trembling in fear instead of asking Ashley Barnett to dance--that I realized I was an enormous pussy. I was a pussy, and Big, Black, & Nasty was a valiant soldier who deserved to die a soldier's death, quick and proud. I holstered

my arms and peered down, hoping to find the Captain expired. It appeared he was. Big, Black, & Nasty was stuck upright in the drain, just as before, but this time he was not moving even a little.

Still, after the last near-death experience, one couldn't be sure, and so I remained vigilant, eyes aimed intently downward, shower head in my hand at the ready. I was so sure he would suddenly pop back out, alive again, like Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*, and scare the living crap out of me. After two more minutes of suspenseful quiet, still breathing heavily and sweating profusely, I dropped my weapon and declared victory. I saluted my vanquished foe, returned to my room, and collapsed into bed, happy that I was a human and not a cockroach that had inadvertently wandered into the territory of a clearly superior enemy.

The next morning, when I walked into the bathroom, I was surprised to discover that Big, Black, & Nasty had survived after all. Not only was Big, Black, & Nasty not dead, but he had escaped. And not only had he escaped, but he had left a path of--I shit you not--*blood* tracing his exact escape route! Yes, cockroaches bleed, and they bleed red, just like us (Keith Richards excepted). Splotches of blood the size of quarters trailed out away from the drain. As for Big, Black, & Nasty? Nowhere to be seen.

And as for me? Well, I didn't sleep well after that, I can tell you that much. Every time I crawled into bed, I could just see Big, Black, & Nasty scuttling about, those menacing little eyes, those antennae waving around, slowly, threateningly, in that way of his. I moved into a new apartment three weeks later, and two months after that I was chased out of Bangkok entirely. But that was by an insanely jealous Thai husband, not a cockroach. (That's a story for another day.)

I may be 9,000 miles away now, but I can still picture him, frolicking amidst the innards of that drainage system, plotting his revenge, and swearing to his little cockroach friends: "I don't care if I have to wait another 280 million years... The next time Michael Wolman comes to Bangkok, I'll be waiting. Oh yes, I'll be waiting, and I'm gonna get that son of a bitch, if it's the last thing I do."

Well, let it be known: I have a message for him, too.

Now hear this, Big, Black, & Nasty, you smug little shit, and hear it well: Careful what you wish for, cause I'll be ready, and next time it won't be a fucking shower head. So bring it on, smart guy. Bring it on.

Copyright 2009, Michael Wolman. © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.

Michael Wolman has a Bachelor's from Duke University and an MFA in fiction from Sarah Lawrence College. In 2007-08, he served as the editor of *Lumina*,

Sarah Lawrence's graduate literary journal. He lives in New York.