



Tempra Board

Murder in the Garden

It all started with the aphids. Aphids on her last remaining dinosaur kale. The aphids were small and seemingly weightless, without the usual crunchy outer shell that makes squashing larger bugs so disconcerting. She launched an air attack, coming in from the top and smashing them between her thumb and index finger, or sometimes against the leaves themselves. Then she noticed they were jettisoning off the kale buds and onto the ground, so she began cupping her left hand underneath each leaf, as she continued to squish with her right. When she was done, she examined her hands, which were now covered in thick bluish-green kale-aphid juice, wedging underneath her rings.

Though this was a nuisance, it was easily addressed with a nearby garden hose. The earwigs, she knew, would be more challenging. They definitely crunched. And not only that, when

you smashed their heads they reflexively reared up from behind, their giant pincers waving in the air long after their heads were gone. Much like, as she'd heard, a chicken might continue to run with its head newly removed. But the earwigs could not be allowed to go on as they had, feeding on innocent dahlia buds. She knew that she wasn't brave enough to squash them with her bare fingers, so she used the dahlia's own leaves to close around their ugly segmented bodies and pressed, trying to ignore the snapping under her fingers, watching their pincers flex uselessly.

The carpenter ants, too, she thought, should be stomped on sight. No good would come of letting them scurry back and forth across the porch and onto the home's new cedar siding. She tried to make a clean kill, but between the tread on her sneakers and the pebbled surface of the concrete step, she kept missing the ants' heads. She had to stomp several times until their curling, writhing bodies finally stilled. Even then, their antennae often continued to twitch.

She wasn't sure how it came to this. There was once a time when she considered collecting all the snails in her garden and transporting them a few blocks away, to the riparian area along the creek that flowed through town. But the inconvenience of this quickly overwhelmed her, and she resorted to throwing them as hard as she could against the fence instead. She started to wonder what the snails felt as their shells exploded on the wood, then put it out of her mind.

One morning as she was watering her sungold tomatoes, which had just started to flower, she noticed that nearly half of one entire plant has been stripped bare. Nothing but empty stems. Then she saw what appeared to be black poppy seeds sprinkled on some remaining lower leaves. She brought her head closer to examine the seeds.

They were not seeds. And just as that realization dawned, she saw it— inches from her face—a wriggling mass of chubby green pupa, as thick around as a finger and almost as long. She jerked her head away with a tiny, involuntary scream. The exact color of the tomato leaves, it was well camouflaged for being so big. Despite the reflexive fear and disgust at the sight of the tomato hornworm, she was also riveted. It was really just one giant gut with two rows of tiny grasping hands, attached to a round, eyeless

head that housed a constantly gnawing mandible. It moved itself along the stem by rolling its bulging stomach ahead of it.

After she recovered, she did the only thing she could think of. Fishing out the hand shears from her back pocket, she steeled herself, then chopped clean through the middle of the writhing mass, its tubular green insides oozing out like toothpaste.

She wasn't always a killer. In college she was righteous. She read *Diet for a New America* and disavowed meat. She read of India's wandering ascetics, who walked bent, brushing the ground before each step, lest the smallest sentient being be needlessly trampled underfoot. She sought to do no harm and leave no trace. But she grew older and less severe. It was just so hard to stay pure.

Perhaps, as the Buddhists believe, her garden killing was filling up a bucket of bad karma. But she wasn't going through the trouble of growing flowers and vegetables for the benefit of insects. Well, except maybe bees. *That's right*, she thought, *if the insects didn't want to be killed, they should try being more like bees. Find a way to be useful.*

Satisfied with this rationalization, she replaced the shears and wiped her hands on her faded Carhartt's, stood, and turned to find her golden retriever, Buddy, in the process of tunneling through a row of her grandmother's heirloom damask roses. She saw the mounds of bent stems and shredded pink petals, and the feverish whisking of Buddy's feathery blond tail. Her eyes filled with tears. Taking him by the collar, she pulled him out of the flower bed and slowly led him out to the toolshed, where the hunting rifle was kept.

A grant writer from northern California, Tempra Board received her BA in English from Humboldt State University and her MA in English from Colorado State University. Her poetry, essays, and articles have appeared in *Sun Magazine*, *Flumes*, *The Haberdasher*, and *The Sea Ranch Soundings*. She has written an educational book in the series *Politics Today*, published this year by Cavendish Square, and she co-led a workshop at Butte College's 2016 WordSpring Writers' Conference. In her spare time, Tempra attempts to grow vegetables and flowers in a seaside garden surrounded by hungry gophers.

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