

# Thousands of ladybugs

## An Epitaph | By Matthew Vollmer



Matthew Vollmer

***Author's Note:*** *This is an excerpt from inscriptions for headstones (Outpost 19 books) a collection of thirty short essays, each crafted as epitaphs, and each unfolding in a single sentence.*

### Epitaph IX

oh sleep in eternal rest man who once drove from a town in Indiana to another in Iowa so as to search for a place for his family—his wife and his two-year-old son—to live, and once he'd arrived at his destination, and after following a realtor to

possible habitations, he settled (more or less) on a craftsman-style house, one with white exterior walls and blue trim, a house that the deceased would subsequently—and, no doubt, *stupidly*—agree to rent without his wife having had the chance to see it—that is, by the time she signed her name to the lease, she would have viewed only the dozen or so photos that the deceased had taken (using a cheap and rather cumbersome turn-of-the-millennium digital camera), a fact that the deceased’s wife would bring up whenever she discussed the shortcomings of this particular house, which turned out to be quite often, since, from the very first time she entered the house she disliked it, not only because the rental company had neglected to have it properly cleaned, which meant that the corners were coated with dirt and dust and grime, but because it was, in many ways, a house that had seen its better days, a house whose basement utility room was puddled with mud and standing water, which meant that if one wanted to keep one’s feet dry during laundry retrieval, one would have to walk from the rickety and unsafe-seeming stairway to the room where the decrepit washer and dryer lived by following a series of wobbling wooden planks placed strategically along the floor, and furthermore it was not clear whether the paint on the front porch—or anywhere else in the house, for that matter—had been the kind produced with toxic lead, a chemical that—if ingested by their two-year-old son—could cause brain damage and lead to a host of other developmental problems, but these things were only the tip of the proverbial iceberg, as the family would soon discover that the floors creaked and the loose window frame whistled with cold air and many rooms lacked overhead lighting and thus languished in various degrees of darkness, and furthermore, every fall the house’s bright white façade reflected the warm October sun, thus attracting thousands of ladybugs, who, thanks to the many cracks and openings in the house, found their way inside, releasing musky pheromones or whatever it was they released if you touched them or attempted to vacuum them up, which the deceased did on a number of occasions, not understanding that any interference at all with the ladybugs would trigger this aforementioned musk-release, thus attracting more ladybugs, and yet enduring this nightmarish plague of beetles—a swarm through which the family would

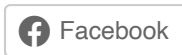
have to travel whenever they entered or exited the front door of their house, squinting their eyes and batting the insects from their sleeves and hair—was infinitely preferable to the agonies the family suffered during the months of December through March, when the weather turned cold and damp and icy

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*To read the rest of this and other inscriptions for headstones, order the book from **Outpost 19. NER Digital** is a creative writing series for the web. **Matthew Vollmer** is the author of Future Missionaries of America, a collection of stories. He is co-editor, with David Shields, of Fakes: An Anthology of Psuedo-Interviews, Faux Lectures, Quasi-Letters, “Found” Texts, and Other Fraudulent Artifacts. He teaches in the MFA program at Virginia Tech, where he also directs the undergraduate creative writing program. His work “**Keeper of the Flame**” appeared in NER 33.1 and was a Top Pick of the Week at longreads.com.*

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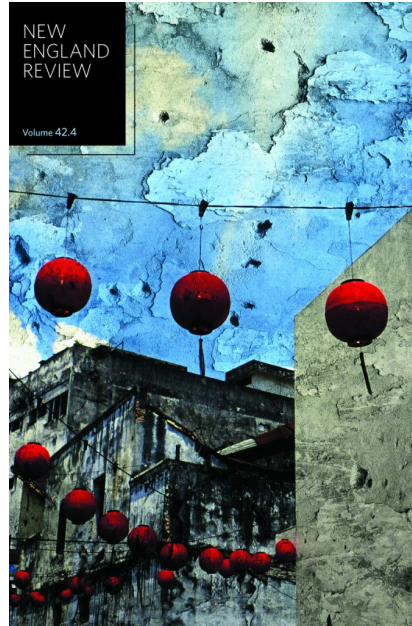
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