

By Matthew Francis

*After Robert Hooke*

All afternoon a reddish trickle

out of the roots of the beech

and across the lawn,  
a sort of rust that shines and dances.

Close up, it proves to be ant,

each droplet a horned  
traveler finicking its way round

the crooked geometry

of a grass forest.  
A finger felled in their path rocks them,  
amazed, back on their haunches.

I see them tasting  
the air for subtle intelligence,  
till one ventures to scale it,

and others follow.  
They are fidgety subjects to draw.

If you sink the feet in glue

the rest twists and writhes;  
kill one, the juices evaporate

in seconds, leaving only

the shriveled casing.

I dunked one in brandy. It struggled

till the air rose from its mouth

in pinprick bubbles.

I let it soak an hour, then dried it,

observed the spherical head,

the hairlike feelers,

the grinning vice of its sideways jaw,

the coppery armor plate

with its scattered spines.

Some draft stirred it then. It rose to all

its feet, and set off across

the rough miles of desk.

Source: *Poetry* (October 2014)