2012

Flies

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol20/iss1/2

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The Man With the Pen

Zeke Fetrow

He sits in his chair, the ink from his pen dripping down across the page.
Truly dripping, a river of black running from the page to the desk.
From the desk to the floor.
The ink should be a river where all the words blossom into bright yellows and blues.
Tall trees, lush fields, and wild daisies all breach the ground where the river runs,
A majestic life bringing stream of water.
The water makes the artist's garden grow, but the man has only ink.
The man with the pen sits in his chair.
Praying for water.
No one can force the pen to flood his page.
So the man must wait for his thoughts, his ink, to turn to water.
Until then, he is like all the other men sitting in their chairs, dripping black ink on everyone else's garden.
Destroying the soil and polluting life for those whose pens have turned to fountains.
The man sits in his chair, waiting, while he drowns in his own ink.

Flies

Jacquelyn Anderson

There is something about raw meat that has always appealed to Linda. She has stood for ten minutes chilling internally in the deli department at the grocery store. The buzzing of florescent light bulbs acts as soundtrack for her deliberation. Surveying the chunks of dead animals displayed for the hungry shopper, she is like Goldilocks. This one is too fat, this one is too lean, but this one is just right. Frank has gained 50 pounds in the last five years and felt heavy as of late, so Linda adds lean cut steaks, crisp heads of broccoli, slightly soggy carrots, and a red box of brown rice to her cart.

As she scans her purchases, oily blood drips onto the conveyor belt from her grade-A Oregon beef which she realizes is improperly packaged. Linda knows how hard it is to get out a bloodstain. Mesmerized by the cyclical motion of the rubber conveyor in the checkout line, she watches the oily spot pass by her over and over again. Lost in the dark stain, Linda snaps back into reality as a fly buzzes too close to her ear. She swats it away, shocked by the cashier's too loud voice and whooshing sound of her credit card swiping in the machine. Her thoughts retreat from the din of the real world as the wary cashier stares at something just below Linda's left eye.

Packing the trunk of her tan librarian-dependable Accord, Linda retreats into its safe cocoon in a hurry. The heavy Oregon drops beat down on her metal roof and Linda is hypnotized by the calming effects of a steady rain. She spends the drive home immersing herself in the smells of her purchases, envisioning the dinner she will make for her husband. As she looks into her rearview mirror at the shiny Hummer following too close, Linda sees her face for the first time in what feels like forever. The swelling has diminished and she can open her left eye once again; the colors of her bruising have been brilliant this time. Usually her black eyes fade from eggplant to a soft baby pink, but this time they remain a rotten green. Linda's face is the same color as a hamburger patty she once found in the back of her crisper drawer. Frank had gone out of town for the weekend, so Linda decided to clean out the refrigerator. She had gotten rid of all the...
expired food, but she left the moldy hamburger patty sitting right on top of Frank's box of Coors Banquets. It was beautiful. The flies had laid their eggs in the rotten meat, and small white wiggling worms had begun to make the mashed up dead cow their home. Frank had not thought it was beautiful like Linda had.

In grade school, Linda had learned that flies only live for 24 hours. She had thought a lot about flies in her ten years married to Frank. Their buzzing was comforting, knowing that something inside her house was alive. There were perfect days when Linda wished she only lived for 24 hours too. Days when Frank was kind, with gentle hands. Linda loved Frank, but everyone told Linda that Frank didn't love her. She didn't believe them, so she stayed. Better sad with Frank than sad and alone. As Linda pulls into her driveway, she tries to remember the word her mother had called her once. She thinks it might have been co-dependable? Or co-independent? Co-dependent. That was it. She wasn't sure what that even really meant.

Frank stays in his recliner in the living room, eyes suctioned to today's Jeopardy. Alex Trebec shouts out today's topics. "Famous Couples. Insects of America. Weapons of War. Femme Fatales and Political Assassinations." Linda had turned the TV up before she left; Frank's hearing was getting worse. She passes the thermostat beside her garage door to ensure the heat is kept at 72 degrees; Linda was always cold. Frank would turn it down, she would turn it up, and then they would fight. He didn't even get up to help her with the groceries, but then again he never has. As she unpacks her groceries, flies settle on the lean beef she plans to cook for dinner tonight. Although the days have been cool, there are more flies than usual in her house. Linda enjoys their company. As she stabs the vegetables, she remembers the days when Frank would shout all the wrong answers at their TV. Their house is silent now. Linda takes out her sharpest knife and punctures the taut plastic skin covering her raw steaks. The oily juice drips out of the gaping wounds in the meat packaging. Linda removes each steak from inside the plastic casing, setting it gently down on the green cutting board. Once, Linda had attended a party and tested knives. There was a demonstration on how to cut filet steaks like a Cutco-expert and Linda could not tear her eyes away from the rough hands of the man who so carefully handled the raw meat. She had left that day with 400 dollars' worth of razor-sharp cutlery.

Like the Cutco-man, Linda cradles each steak in the palm of her hands and the trembling blade gently splits the fat from the juicy red meat. Linda gathers a small pile of beef fat at the corner of the cutting board, an offering to her fly friends. By now, the balding chubby man has won Jeopardy answering the final question correct. "This condition, often experienced under duress, is named after the Norrmalmstorg robbery of Kreditbanken." The balding man answers "What is Stockholm Syndrome?" to win the day with 18,500 dollars. Frank's silence throughout the episode remains a pleasant surprise to Linda.

The smell of grilling steak mingles with other scents wafting around her main floor. From the kitchen, Linda hears that Wheel of Fortune has come on. Frank doesn't like Wheel of Fortune, so Linda wipes her bloody hands on her Kiss-The-Cook apron and goes to change the channel for him. Frank loves to watch COPS, so Linda turns down the volume two clicks so as not to be disturbed during her cooking. One anniversary 8 years ago, Frank had given Linda her last present. He had bought her a crisp white apron and a new pair of crimson baking gloves that she could not bring herself to throw away. Linda had always had a problem getting rid of things, like the green hamburger patty from her crisper drawer. Everything had value, everything had somewhere to be, and everything should be in its place.

Taking her thinnest blade from the wooden block on the counter, Linda makes an incision into the thickest steak. Rare and bloody is how she likes hers, but she cooks one well-done for Frank; he likes a bit of gristle. "Dinner is ready," Linda calls into the living room to her husband Frank, who remains immobile in front of the shining television. Wiping her hands on her bloodstained apron, Linda walks to the recliner and shoves Frank into the upright position. She hitches her arms under his armpits and forces him to stand. Assuming her position, Linda hoists his bulk and starts toward the dining room. He drags his feet, but Linda manages to
maneuver his limp weight into a rubber covered dining room chair. As she reaches for the belts she keeps on the dining room table, she swats a fly away from her ear. With great care, she straps his lifeless body into a sitting position. Linda hates when he falls forward and dips his face into his dinner. At the beautifully set table, she looks lovingly through the candle centerpiece into Frank's rotting sockets. She tells him about her day, her trip to the grocery store, her hair appointment, and Linda feels like he is really listening.

Getting Frank up the stairs to bed is always the hardest part of Linda’s day. When his body had been cold and stiff, she could pull him along like a giant suitcase. Now that he has become squishy with decomposition, she wraps him in a dear drop doth and climbs the 14 stairs to the bedroom. Tonight his extremities are too limp to maneuver into pajamas, so she dresses Frank in his favorite night shirt and tucks him into his side of the bed with a kiss on the forehead. As she falls asleep, Linda can hear a fly bumping uselessly against the glass of her bedroom window until it is silent. She will clean up its tiny corpse in the morning.