

THAT FLY AND I

By Michael Ventura

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I fussed, I straightened the living room, but it can never be straightened, not really. It's doomed to be untidy, what with its piles of books; three laptops on wood TV trays; two printers; and lord knows what on a door converted to a workbench; videos and CDs everywhere; piles of downloaded news stories – and my crowded bookcases, monuments to my rebellion against alphabetical order; and, atop them, my long cluttered altar (with 20-some candles). And the walls, just as cluttered: paintings and drawings by friends, photos of people I know (and of dancers, my favorite L.A. street, silent-film stars, the Brooklyn Bridge, two nebulae), spotted with scattered thoughts scribbled on scraps and scotch-taped anywhere handy, crawling with yards of tendrils from my companion of 30 years, “The Plant That Ate the Bronx.” It seems I've projected my psyche onto my walls, myriad images chaotically juxtaposed. Since I live inside my psyche and inside my work, I like them to surround me visibly, the paraphernalia of memory, dreams, and longings. Helps me work, and work is home. For an artist, work is the only real home – it's the home you leave every other home to find.

But I didn't want to work. Rare for me. Didn't want TV or music. Wasn't depressed; I don't get depressed these days. Rather, I was oddly elated but with an energy that wanted my mind to stay out of the way. So I did the dishes, accompanied by my pet fly.

In the hot months, no flies got into this apartment, but these last few cool days there's been this one fly. I'll kill a roach or mosquito on sight. Flies, too, in the plural. But it seems mean-spirited, in the worst way, to kill a single fly. This fly, it disappears for hours then suddenly shows up on the rim of my cup (ugh) or dive-bombs me (playfully?) or flits around my computer screen. It's gotten used to me, because it doesn't dart off when my hand nears it -- as though it knows it's safe. It's like a cat, but it's a fly.

Flies are odious to me. In my novels, they're images of horror. More than one reader says they closed the book (or threw it across the room, no kidding) at one of my fly scenes. I find no poem more frightening than Miss Emily's peculiarly punctuated “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died... There interposed a Fly -- ... Between the light – and me/ And then the Windows failed – and then/ I could not see to see.” That the last thing one is conscious of, ever, might be a fly -- that's more horrible than Poe.

But this fly -- while I washed the dishes it hung about last night's beer glass, stepping here and there, doing what a fly does, and though my hands were quite near, it never darted off. Out of consideration, I saved that glass for last. Just before I was to wash it, without my making any gesture, the fly departed for a nearby roll of paper towels on the counter, and, I swear, watched me wash its favorite glass. Then flew off -- disappeared.

I brewed a cup of white tea and read my devotionals. It came to me that I should type up some readings to be spoken at my funeral. I made a list to type up later. (Not morbidly. Matter-of-factly, if a bit weirdly.) Then, suddenly, some concepts spoke themselves to me. I wrote them in a wonderful unlined pocket notebook, quality paper, velvety cover – a gift:

I am not my thoughts. I am not my feelings. I am not my body. They each are segments of a larger entity that I am. I am not the various aspects and faces of my personality. They are each segments of a larger entity that I am. I am not my history. That too is part

of a larger entity that I am. I am not even my deeds -- my deeds are not nearly the whole of me, though my deeds are the visible trail I leave behind. But each deed is itself only an aspect of a larger entity that I am.

I am not my apparent color. I am not my apparent gender, nor am I any gender that I may enact and assume. I am not my desires. I am not even my love. All these, all, are aspects of a larger entity that I am.

I am not even that traveler from a distant place, my soul, though my soul includes me and I include my soul. My soul, that wayfarer, will one day travel on from me, taking a part of what I am with it, but it, too, is not all I am. I know what I am, but it is a knowledge for which there is no language, so I cannot say what I am. Only that I am. And that I am what I seem and not what I seem.

I am happy to have a name, because that makes things easier, but no name is wholly one's own (it becomes what people make of it). The larger entity that I am has not been, and cannot be, named. I am I, and I am not-I, but that in me which says "I" -- that, too, is part of a larger entity that I am. And yet, amid all this, the larger entity that I am is specific, is here, is me, is the entity writing these words, employing an "I" that I am and am not. And so it is with everyone. These truths are always on the move.

Then I prayed and meditated, as I do every night. Then, as I also do every night, I got drunk. I love drinking. Sometimes I sing.

The next morning I noticed the absence of my fly. Hadn't seen the insect since I'd done the dishes last night. Went to see Clint Eastwood's *Changeling*. He's a master director, terrific camerawork, the acting as good in bit roles as in major roles (which is the mark of a master). A wonderful recreation of Los Angeles, circa 1928. I wish I'd never seen the damn film. Eastwood is a gentleman, the soul of good taste, he shows nothing his story doesn't require, nothing unnecessarily sensational. But child-murderers, murdered children, vivid mental hospital scenes showing exactly the kind of joints my mother and brother were in, including those good old-timey electric shock treatments -- I didn't need all that, but I got it. Shook me. That night, my fly was back -- and it was a comfort!

I re-read those notes about what I am, "larger entity" and all. The words felt right to me, but it was like somebody else wrote them. And the fly had something to do with it -- I mean, when you're feeling *friendly* toward a fly, well, that's not the universe I usually live in. I thought of the elements of that evening: the presence of the fly, my strange elation, unwillingness to write (so rare for me), and readings for my funeral (pretty ludicrous, in retrospect). And then, *I am not my thoughts, I am not my feelings*, etc. As poet Juan Ramon Jimenez might put it, nothing and everything had happened. I don't know why. But I feel it wouldn't have happened if I'd hurt that fly or if I'd felt differently about that fly. Without my doing anything, for some reason an emblem of my horror became a kind of small joy, and suddenly I was privy to concepts larger than my common awareness.

One day, not long after, my pet fly was gone for good.

A few weeks later, I spent some time in Austin and read to Janet what I'd written that night. She said, "When you say 'the entity that I am,' that freezes it in time a little too much. It's always evolving. I'm starting to love this one thought: it's so slippery, that entity, it's completely slippery, and, even remotely, we can't hold onto it. Writing it confines it somehow."

Well, that bothered me but sounded true. Spoke of it to Joe and Sharon the next day. Joe said, "Writing it down confines it, or reading it back? I think reading it back confines it. Writing it down is just throwin' a rock in the river."

That's what I do for a living, I guess. I throw rocks in the river.

Feels to me that Janet and Joe are both right, and, paradoxically, those words that came to me are right, too, as far as they go. Now, once again, and as always, it becomes a matter of living it out.

Whatever it all means, for a little while I had a pet fly. I really did.

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