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On Not Hurting a Fly: A Memorial

> *. . . fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement. . . a piece of the body torn out by the root might be more to the point.*
>
> —James Agee

I'd like to look at the issue seriously, since I've got a fly here and it's past being hurt; since, now that I'm looking, it's really a horse fly I smacked against the window weeks ago. A *horse fly*, which means I've stopped to ask questions. A horse fly, making the scene specific, just right for this discussion.

Why haven't I cleared it away? Like an old hurt or slight, it has softened and darkened, curled in upon itself. Small presence at the edge of sight, in a spot of sun. Sometimes when I'm working these days, deeply working, I'll glance down at my watch and see only ciphers, as if the numbers, worn smooth and blank as river stones, had nothing to do with time—or as much to do with it as the grainy whorls in this desk, distant, unreadable now. I go back to work, head bent, caught up in the moment, unmarked.

In the past few weeks I've overlooked the fly as if it, too, were a cipher, a nick in the sill, or a small, indigenous dropped thing: an acorn, a seed pod half-hidden in brush. I've grown accustomed to it, just off to the side, bent into the shape of a comma, half-stasis, brief pause before continuing on.

Here is a joke: a rabbi, a priest and a minister are asked what they would hope to hear at their funerals. The priest hopes to learn he was a spiritual leader of great comfort to his parishioners; the minister hopes it might be said that he inspired many to a life of service and godliness. The rabbi when asked, hopes someone will say "Hey, wait! I think I saw him move!"

Sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, I think I see the fly move. Even after so many weeks. Because its body remains, I startle first and ask questions later. Because the fly has grown porous by now,

and brittle, the softest breeze sifts its papery wings. The air, passing over like a gaze, enlivens, inhabits, suggests.

This summer I met someone who kept a jar of dead flies on his porch. Whenever he found one he put it in; it took only a month or so to fill the jar completely up. He's a remarkable writer whose frightening childhood grew ever more bizarre as he got older, though I doubt this has anything to do with the flies. He simply likes clean, uncluttered surroundings. I want to emphasize again that he doesn't kill the flies and isn't trying to build a collection. But there they were on the little table, contained and ready for easy observation, the jar merely organizational, a place to keep things-of-a-kind, as he kept papers filed, books neatly stacked. By mid-summer when the jar was full, the bodies were beginning to compact, the whole mass settling like a snarl of hair. I wondered what the effect of a jar of dragonflies would be, the lace of their wings complicating the scene, making the ravaging more useless still. Why crush, even in death, the dragonfly that eats mosquitoes, gnats and moths and does not bite us? Whose head is nearly covered with eyes, whose wings are sheer, as fragile as tatting, and beat a hundred times a second. Whose body is emerald, periwinkle, cobalt—electric colors of a falling sky.

(Though of course the bumblebee, too, is beautiful: ample and furred. And cicadas are airborne, humming spectra. And aphids weigh not even a breath and potato beetles outshine anthracite in sun . . .)

Have you heard this before: war does not kill thousands of people; one person dies thousands of times?

That at last count there were 59,939 names engraved in the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C.?

I've always been puzzled by the phrase "she wouldn't hurt a fly." It never minds the effort required to actually swat a fly, and moreover, the fly becomes a wee, small thing to which no harm should come. Speaking the words, one suspends one's feelings about the fly—a droning, disease-carrying, nerve-rattling pest. Meaning fractures. The fly stands in for "a thing not to be hurt," corresponds not at all to our perception.

That is, we disembody it.

I have a friend who won't swat even mosquitoes, though he, too, gets bitten. It's as if his capacity for annoyance has simply run out or perhaps he has run it out of his body. He focuses a placid eye on the world, exists in quiet brotherhood with all things and so mosquitoes don't distract him from his work any more than the bitter cold of winter and heat of summer he works through, doing all kinds of jobs. He drives a pickup truck all over town. Once I found a chipmunk he hit and killed on the road.

And so, because of what his regret would be; because the animal was completely flattened, its body a pool for flies in the heat. Because I will never tell him I saw the eyes aligned on a single plane, the mouth open and grains of teeth pressed like a zipper into the earth. And for the time it takes to see the things in front of me. For the whorls in the table I work on, for the nicks and gouges, rings and years, erasures and grime—I will look again at the fly on the sill:

Its three-part body. Its pair of wings and sets of legs—six, haired legs that end in claws—attached to the center segment. Its shovel-like mouthparts. Its hard outer covering. A black that, back-lit at the end of the day, is flecked with furred gold. Enormous, multiple eyes-in-a-grid, the size of its head. (I used a magnifying glass.) The hair-like antennae between its eyes.

I am following the body back to itself. The body as guide, as map to trace: from mouthpart to head, upsloping to wings, my looking moves moebus-like over the joints and segments, the sharp parts, the soft transparencies.

The wings askew. The missing leg.

And though I failed to see it at first, *thanks* now to the body, its constancy. Though I let it wait and it waited: dependable matter. Thanks to the wings, which are gently veined like a fine pen drawing of tributaries. Thanks to the bead of its head, the bristles and faceted eyes like velvet. Thanks to the body for permitting return to what I once knew urgently:

her body is mine. 1972. I saw the burning girl, stilled, on TV, motionless, running, running and crying and knew that was me in Vietnam.

I knew as I ran to the kitchen and pressed my face to the pearly snaps on my mother's jeans as she washed the dishes, and I couldn't speak, I knew I was burning on TV. The flames were behind me, were black and white and I was stilled and I was running, my clothes torn off, and it was snowing on TV though it was summer and I was breathless and sweating.

That was Kim Phuc and we were almost 9 years old.

I'm following the body.

At the Vietnam War Memorial my finger traces, from my hometown: Howard Martin Gerstel. That stands for his body. (*Jewish, Married,* I look up. *Casualty Type: Hostile, Gun, Small Arms Fire, Ground Casualty.*) I loop around the letters . . . I was three when he was killed. I was four when Robert George Hufschmid, also from my town, *Married, Catholic,* died: *Hostile, Artillery Rocket, Mortar, Ground Casualty.* Four when my uncle, in the Peace Corps instead, raising chickens in southern India, nearly died of measles. I am asking him about the year, exactly, because my son is four now. Because his body is still of my body, and we go on like this, daily, my arms containing the smallness he makes of himself when he curls in my lap. My arms around him, bracketing him, enclosing the ribs and the taut, delicate skin between them. Though I know it will not go on like this always.

"It goes on," I say, "*forever,*" when I first see the wall. But it's not forever and I am annoyed at my own hyperbole. It's only enormous, a cut, polished edge that holds the earth back. The wall starts in the ground, reaches an apex and narrows back down, something like an open book propped on the belly of earth. As we pass, our bodies are reflected in the black, buffed surface. It looks like a printer's case gone wild, kicked and reset, as the eye blurs over so many names. There are the ancient ones: Ham. Abel. Isaiah. Behind the memorial, maples reach with their colors; it's a bright November day. The names rise above our heads as we walk down, down imperceptibly, as if into a tomb. Visitors rub the names onto paper the concession guys give out for free. Circle the names with their fingers and hands, sit and stare and tell their stories. Tell their kids "Hal commanded D company." Israel. Samuel. And as you ascend, the names trickle to a close at the triangle's far point. The names of the dead are the names of the living and in that way, too, go on: Herrera, my

friend in California. Figueroa, my friend in New York. Carotenuto, my student, Boudreau, my old art teacher. Schwartzkopf. Kennedy. Abraham. Jeremiah. People take pictures of everything: the phone-book-sized map of the names' locations, their home towns and death-dates. Therein are the places of my life, too: Hewlett, Oberlin, Iowa City, Baltimore. It takes me no time to find my birthday, and it is no one's death day.

The pamphlet I picked up says "By virtue of its design, the memorial puts a human face on a divisive conflict."

But there are no faces here at all. Or the faces are fleet, sheerest outlines we conjure back into mind. Private faces. Singular faces. Except as metaphor, war, "conflict" does not wear a face.

Yes, stories come out.

Stories kindle forth a moment.

But that's not the body.

And neither are the figurative women, bronzed, in the Women's Vietnam Memorial, bodies. They are larger than life, in the posture of *tending*. *Pained* by the soldiers in their arms, dying. They lean like italics into the virtues they mean to portray: *bravery, duty, compassion.*

But that's not the body.

Nor do the bodies rising out of the flames of the Katyn Memorial burn like bodies. In Baltimore, at President Street and Aliceanna, the Polish soldiers climb flames like stepstools, their gilded forms lofted, on righteousness, up. The fire itself is sturdy and trusted; it becomes the mens' legs and thus they are "enduring in memory," and mean to be the spirit unbroken. The spirit rising.

But this is not the body in flames.

And in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, even the bones themselves are not the body. Are a portion standing in for the whole—*synecdoche*—not meant to be Michael J. Blassie, shot down in An Loc in 1972. Though it *is* he, the DNA test now tells us. The medal of honor, though it hung over him for fourteen years, does not, it was ruled, belong to him. He lent his body to an idea.

"We really believe the medal should follow Michael," said Captain Patricia Blassie of the Air Force, his sister.

But it can't. It must not be allowed to attach to a body. Must remain: clean. Rapturous. Dignified.

In perpetual anonymity.

The titles of Goya's etchings in *The Disasters of War* are amazingly simple. #22—"All This and More." #23—"The Same Thing Elsewhere." #37—"This is Worse." And here, I stop. Soldiers rest in a grove of trees, but here, impaled on a jagged stump, as partial and perfect as any Greek statue: his body, his shapely calf, the shadings of thigh and muscled back and, filling the space where his forearm was hacked, a darkness in the background flowering.

I did not know a man could grow from a tree, until I saw precisely how.

I did not know the ways, precisely, a neck goes taut with fear, until *Guernica*. Did not know a mouth, uptilted as simply as a cup, could fill so easily with black cries, or the many ways animals could scream. That growing from a neck, a leg can arc around and pierce the neck; a kneecap weigh so much upon escape it drags along the floor, or breasts go sharp. That triangles spurt. That from the hilt of a sword a twisted flower might grow like a mangled fist.

Mississippi. 1954. Emmett Till, 14, is murdered for whistling at a white woman in a store, his body thrown into the Tallahatchie River. "All beating was concentrated around his head" said his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, describing the body when it was returned to her in its coffin. "It looked as if they had taken a nut-picker and picked the left eye out. The right eye was about mid-way to his cheek, his nose looked like they had taken a meat chopper and just chopped along the bridge of the nose. Where they tied that gin fan around his neck, the weight of it had choked his tongue out. I did not know a human tongue was so big."

His nickname was Bobo.

His face was strip mined. A ditchful of flux. A pile of slag.

A sand dune sliding. A plate of meat. Mushrooms sprouting. Mushrooms in a field of rain.

I was not yet born at the time, so I looked up the face in *Jet Magazine*.

At the funeral, the coffin was kept open. His mother said she "wanted the world to see what they did to my boy."

DaVinci flayed the human body to better understand, to draw "sweet fleshiness with simple folds and roundness of limbs." "Do

not" he said, "make all the muscles of your figures apparent... limbs which are not in exercise must be drawn without showing the play of muscles. And if you do otherwise, you will have imitated a bag of nuts rather than a human figure."

I did not know muscles wrapped in bands from chest to shoulder, tucked into the upper arm and folded under. That below the sinews and tendons, muscles moved like the staves of a basket across the chest. Until I went to see how autopsies are done, I did not know how small and pale the stomach was, that the lungs are not light but will flop like fins when turned over, the two-lobed right one and the three-lobed left. That intercostal veins thread through the chest like perfectly basted hems. The epiglottis purses like the lip of a pitcher and when the pituitary gland is lifted free of the brain it pops out with a neat little sound.

Fat is so yellow.

Veins are not blue but a soft, pearly gray.

A memorial can happen anywhere.

As it did, just recently, at a friend's farm. I was walking through the yellow-brown stubble in early fall, after the last hay was cut, when I saw a deer. It was curled in a grassy depression just before a stand of trees. The deer was so small that I startled, thinking it was sleeping in a little nest. But when I moved toward it, it didn't stir and I saw near the jaw a quarter-sized hole. The body was perfect except for the hole, which was terribly precise. The hole was deep, and the blood hadn't slipped in runnels all over but dried black at the rim. I had never seen a deer that close. So I stayed.

I circled around. On one side the body was perfect, but then on the other, when I crossed over, there was the hole come upon like disbelief, the perfect jawbone pierced through, collapsed in. The hole like a cave. Like a cup. Like an ear, half-drowned and mud-filled. The darkness there seeping pink. The pink underneath was—I couldn't tell what. So I stayed with the body. So I kept looking in.