

EMILY WEINSTEIN

*The Fly*

A sad thing involving an insect happened on the Rouge River this summer. I was paddling in my brother's raft on a perfect early-summer late afternoon. The rapids were behind us and the current was with us and soon we'd pull into camp, splash the sun-warmed rafts with water, and lie back on them with ice-cold beers, dangling our feet in the river as one of the year's longest days ended slow and golden.

"A bee!" someone exclaimed, and my brother slapped at it reflexively, but it was not a bee and he did not kill it. It was a fly and he only maimed it.

"Sorry," my brother joked to the guests in his boat. "This is supposed to be a nonviolent trip!" He placed the fly on the edge of the raft and resumed rowing.

I bent over the fly, intending to flick it into the river, but momentarily looked closer. One of the fly's legs was crushed and one of its wings, though still attached, wasn't working. I put down my paddle and picked up the injured insect.

I tried to gently nudge the broken wing back into place, surprised it didn't crumble into dust when I touched it. The more I touched the fly, the more I realized that it wasn't really so fragile, just very small. I observed its distinct and perfect parts, orange eyes and shimmering white body, translucent wings and wriggling antennae, details of great precision and complexity beyond the simple facts of buzz or bite. The longer I looked, the more valiant the fly's struggle appeared, and the more tragic and irreparable its destruction. It was helpless, and I was helpless to help it.

When we got to camp I jumped hastily out of the raft and hurried the fly away, as if separating it from all the activity, the tying and unloading of the boats, would somehow heal or pacify it. I placed it on a rock and it tried to crawl and fly away, flipping over and unable to

right itself. It was dawning on me that the fly was never going to fly again and could hardly walk and would soon die of its injuries or be eaten by its predator and the humane thing to do would be to kill it and put it out of what I assumed was its insect misery.

But I couldn't bring myself to squash the fly and end the life it was fighting so hard to keep. I would choose a moment and reach for a rock (I had for some reason decided that the deed should be done with a rock and not my bare hand), but the fly was still so pathetically alive that I could not reconcile myself to my own power, even if it was the humane thing to do. Even though the fly was suffering and dying it was still alive now and who was I to change that?

The fly was in the state it was in due to instinct and reflex, but in trying to finish it off I was stuck in rumination. In applying all this human thought to a simple fact of nature, I had undone my instincts to the point where I could not act on them.

I couldn't decide whether I was Mother Teresa or Dr. Menegle, whether I was keeping the fly company while it suffered or cruelly observing its pain from a scientific remove that had gone beyond inquiry toward sadism. I didn't want the fly to feel alone and yet I couldn't really share its pain. I didn't want the fly to suffer and yet I did not have the courage to end its suffering. And so I was both very kind and very cruel, not unlike how we understand nature or God to be.

Despite the warm sunlight and cold beers I and the afternoon of alternating rapids and calmer stretches with no flat water, a cold, dark sadness came through me, a sadness not to do just with me but with all things, and the circumstances under which they live and die.