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# HOW TO KILL A DUSKWING BUTTERFLY

Stephanie Hohn

It was the first thing my father ever asked me to kill, but before the duskwing, I had already killed a butterfly.

It had been an accident, but that didn't make the cabbage looper not dead. I crushed it in the transfer from net to Mason jar, its white body falling onto the glass bottom with a little *tink* sound. Usually butterflies *tink tink tinked* themselves against the inside of the jar, but this one just lay crumpled, leaving a brown stain behind on the glass when I poured it out onto the ground. A dead butterfly seemed like it should still be beautiful and light, like a leaf before winter, but this was wet and messy.

By then I had already seen a lot of dead things—birds my cat had killed and deer my father had, squirrels hit by cars—but they had all had a sort of featureless quality to them. The deer had seemed especially unreal, hanging in the garage to drain as skinless as an anatomy drawing. I'd poked one in the eye once to feel the way it gave.

The worst dead things were when it rained and all the worms came out to keep from drowning and got smashed by shoes or dried out in the sun, because there was no way to stop it, even if I left for school an hour early and picked up all the ones on the way.

I'd known, abstractly, that handling butterflies was a form a violence. It knocked some of the dust from their wings, kept them from eating, made them scared. But they were beautiful, and I wanted to look at them up close.

Most of the ways I knew how to love things were destructive. I loved flowers, so I put them into cups of water to wither and die. I loved my cat, so I carried him around by his neck.

This was in keeping with the way my father loved wild game by boiling their skulls and mounting them on the wall. There was already a place reserved there for my future accomplishments, when I turned 12 and could apply for a hunting license. At five I could already deadeye a pop can from across a field.

My brother was almost old enough, but no one had much hope for Andrew's capacity as a hunter. "Your brother is soft," our father said in

disgust, more times than he said almost anything else. “Lie, cheat, and steal.”

The word under all those words, the one he really meant, was “weak,” which was the worst thing you could be. In our family we liked roller coasters, didn’t scream at horror movies, and carried all the groceries inside in one trip. Andrew got sick on the yo-yo ride and threw up. He stole half of the peanut butter cups I’d been saving from Halloween and hid the wrappers in his pillowcase when he could have just asked to share. He fainted during the school play. The idea of spending long hours in the woods with that caliber of boy brought our father no pleasure. He was relying on me.

“I’m sick of you wasting your time fucking around with those bugs,” he told me on the way to the hardware store to buy chloroform. “The next one you catch we’re gonna mount, if you have to do it.”

He had followed the proclamation with a demonstration, soaking cotton balls in the chemical and dropping them in a jar with complete confidence that his money and time weren’t being wasted. I had never disappointed him before—I was the one who didn’t cheat at cards and helped with the raspberry bushes without complaining about the scratches. “Honest, tough, generous.” We were best friends, reading books together and sneaking out for doughnuts before everyone else got home.

I didn’t know how to say a “no” he would hear—I’d never had to do it before. I stopped catching butterflies. They still tempted me, but now seeing them up close was the same thing as crushing them into that wet pulp. When I thought about doing it, it felt like something was pressing hard at the center of my chest.

Then, in the garage where we hung the deer and kept the bench grinder my father used to sharpen his gardening tools, I found it.

The garage was dirty in a way that didn’t feel bad, the kind of dirty that smelled like sawdust and oil, and I usually liked being there. I especially liked taking snacks folded up in the bottom of my shirt up to the second story so I could lay on the wood floor and imagine things, like that the backyard was full of tropical fish.

That was what I was doing when I saw it trapped in a spider web, walking up the stairs with an apple in one hand and a chunk of sharp cheddar cheese in the other. The web was in the window, and the butterfly was black, outlined in creamy white that glowed in the sunlight.

I loved it instantly, the way people fall in love in movies, so clean against the smeared layers of dirt that covered the glass. It was still mov-

ing.

Trying to be careful with its wings, I unstuck it from the web and took it outside on my hand. The warmth of the light made it open and close its wings, but it seemed too weak to fly.

I gave it a stick to stand on in a jar while I found a thimble to fill with sugar water, but it seemed to prefer to lick it off of my hand. It was the most lovely thing I'd ever seen up close, and all I wanted was for it to fly away.

"It's going to be okay, you're okay," I told it, wondering if the spider had gotten a chance to liquify its insides while it was trapped, but it didn't seem to be in pain. I kept whispering to it that it was going to be okay, that it was wonderful, that it seemed so weak and I didn't want it to die, peppering my speech with little terms of endearment like "honey" and "sweetheart," trying to cajole it into health so it could flutter off before my father saw it.

It didn't. It was too exhausted to move much, barely able to lap the smallest bits of sugar water off my skin. I was afraid to leave it alone in case a bird came along and tried to eat it. I sat in the grass for hours with my shorts absorbing the moisture from the ground, until the hairs on my arms stood up from the chill and my father found me.

He helpfully prepared the chloroform and dropped it into the jar I had tried so hard to make a welcoming place for the butterfly, then walked away. He wanted me to do it myself; this was my project.

It would have been so easy to drop the butterfly into the jar. It wouldn't have even struggled, just given one little *tink*. It might even have been merciful, since it was so weak. I asked it what it thought, if it was suffering, if I would be putting it out of its misery. It was the most horrible feeling I'd ever felt, thinking about telling my father that I couldn't kill butterflies on purpose because it felt like ripping up something important. I just wanted to look at them for a while, and then let them go. I knew, the way you knew things would fall to the ground if you dropped them, that he would love me less if I did.

But I sat with the butterfly, and fed it sugar water, and called it darling, until it flew away.