

The Lepidopterist

I rap on the front screen door
and press my forehead
against the wire mesh to see inside –
smelling Pall Mall smoke
and hearing that dry creak of chains
from the porch swing dangling on the eave.
There, on the seat:
the *Echium Daily News*,
open to the obituaries
because the lepidopterist always starts her day
by checking to see if she made it through the night.

She had a stroke a few years back,
smoking Pall Mall cigarettes on the front porch –
one moment flicking burning ashes into the grass,
and the next:
pitching over the rail,
some little artery in her brain
erupting like an overfilled water balloon.
Only her left side survived.
Her right has been dead ever since.

The rubber tip of her polished, mahogany cane
meets the linoleum of the kitchen floor.
I listen to her approach:
the thump of her cane;
the drag of her leg;
the rasp of her breath.
Ithonia Brushfoot hobbles toward me
on a path etched into the carpet
like tire ruts on a dirt road.

Thump.

Drag.

Rasp.

It is as if the line between Heaven and earth
has been drawn down the middle of her body,
and after all this time
she still doesn't know which place she would rather be.
Lucky for me,
she cannot seem to leave Echium for good.

The lepidopterist,

you should probably know,
is the closest thing to a real friend I have.

Under Glass, Inside a Frame

She smiles her half-smile
and mumbles something ambiguous –
Hello, or, Let's go –
while I pause to inspect the clusters of butterflies
lining her living room walls.
They look so alive I am almost surprised
they don't flutter away when I stir them with my breath;
but these ones are dried and pinned –
because Ithonia Brushfoot seems to like them best
under glass, inside a frame.

You can't always tell what she is saying,
ever since the stroke
left her tongue lolling inside her lopsided mouth
and pushing out words like marbles
that half the time fall to the floor
and roll away as marbles sometimes do.

But once,
when I found an old brass-framed photograph
on a table beside her bed
and asked,
Is this YOU?
she nodded her head –
a little to the left,
as if she was jostling water from her ear –
and told me,
clear as day,
I wasn't always like this, dear.

The Killing Jars

Ithonia Brushfoot needs me
for everything that takes two hands to do –
cutting grass and changing pillowcases
or even the simplest things
you never knew
you couldn't do
with only one hand until you actually tried:
opening envelopes or bottles of aspirin
and twisting the lid off a tube of toothpaste,
a gallon of milk,
or any one of the thirty-six killing jars
the lepidopterist keeps lined up
on a shelf inside her garage.

There's a sun tea brewer, #9,
which smells of spearmint and chamomile
and is for the swallowtails so massive
you'd think their shadows were cast by birds;
and there's an apricot baby food jar, #23,
which fits perfectly inside the palm of your hand –
just like the tiny Colorado hairstreak.

Their cyanide-speckled cakes of sawdust and plaster
crumble like old cement at the bottom;
and Ithonia Brushfoot's wobbly,
old-fashioned handwriting labels each one –
permanent ink
on a single strip of masking tape
that time has curled and yellowed
into some stage of decay.

Thirty-six jars.
Thirty-six ways to smother a butterfly dead.

But don't try to convince her it's inhumane.
She'll just glare at you through her one good eye,
muttering something ambiguous like,
And what's YOUR hobby?
or,
Just try to stop me.

Killing Jar #37

Ithonia Brushfoot's garage
smells of stale Pall Mall smoke and poison –
and so I hold my breath,
like always,
making room on the workbench
littered with the tools of a lepidopterist:
straight pins and scissors;
tweezers;
screwdrivers;
rubber cement;
glass magnifying lenses.
And then there is Killing Jar #37 –
a Strong Shoulder Mason
with a wide-open mouth and gritty zinc lid.
Quart-sized.
Smelling of dill.
Pickles, probably.

Ithonia Brushfoot glares at me
through her one good eye
as I measure out a single serving of crystalline cyanide.
A sharp, bitter smell wafts up around me
when I sprinkle it into the bottom of the jar.
More,
she orders,
leaning forward on her mahogany cane –
and so I add another pinch.
The truth is
the difference between one spoonful of poison
and two
doesn't mean a thing to a butterfly.

I've already peppered in a layer of sawdust
and a glob of gypsum plaster,
plus a sheet of crumpled tissue paper
to absorb moisture
and give her specimens a soft place to die.
Across the garage,
Ithonia Brushfoot nods –
a little to the left,
like always –
and the killing jar is complete.

I still get heartsick,

every time a butterfly dies.
What effect it has on Ithonia Brushfoot
is more of a mystery –
because ever since the stroke
you can only be sure of half
of what you think you see on her face.

Sometimes,
her eyes betray her guilt;
but then she ruins it
by mumbling something ambiguous –
something like,
Go find me some pins,
or,
Like you've never sinned.

Doggone If She Leaves Me

I caught her today
with her nose inside the jar –
sniffing deep breaths
of poisonous fumes
and trying her best
not to cringe.
She heard me gasp;
hollered, *Don't sneak like that!*
or,
Go get my net!
and lit a cigarette
so she'd have a reason
to ventilate the space
now that she wasn't alone.

But I saw what I saw.

And so when I let
that terrible jar
slip like a knot
through the crook in my arm
it's on purpose –
I don't care
if she knows.