

20190124_slowdown_20190124_128

Wed, 9/30 1:31PM 5:00

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

window sill, fly, smith, stippled, poem, slow, killing, flies, hand, book, swatting flies, natural habitats, austin, feel, kitchen, old westerns, praying mantis, armrest, fastidious, evaporating

00:06

I'm us Poet Laureate Tracy k Smith. And this is the slow down.

00:23

My son received an insect activity book for Christmas that contains facts about nature, and stickers he can use to place bugs, butterflies and bees and pictures of their natural habitats. He has asked me to read it to him every day since it arrived. And every time I do, I feel an immense discomfort at the description of the housefly, which the book assures me is fastidious and clean with godlike eyes that allow it to take in all directions at once. The Fly unsettles me more than the rapacious praying mantis, or the shameless dung beetle. See, I think of myself as an animal lover and a pacifist. But come summer, I can roll up a magazine and strike a fly dead without thinking twice. I take flies buzzing, there bothersome circling as a taunt as an invitation to show the filthy buggers who's who. It's not simply a matter of defending my kitchen from attack, a fly, even simply minding its own business humming to itself on the window sill is a Marauder, an intruder, whatever its business might be. its presence sends me into attack mode. Suddenly, I'm like Clint Eastwood and all those old westerns, mercilessly eradicating some dead in town of all the rotten to the core types who straight up need killing. But well, what does that say about me? No, really? What does it say about what I'm willing to overlook? in the service of my own comfort? What am I letting myself off the hook for that? in another context would be inexcusably wrong. Today's poem by Austin Smith begins with the memory of swatting flies, but it covers ground quickly darkening and shifting scales, so that by the time it's over, it's hard for me to go on thinking of any violence as small swatting flies by Austin Smith. You think of yourself now as having been a sweet boy, the kind of kid who wouldn't hurt a fly. But let us not forget that in summer, you kept a swatter nearby. You liked the feel of the wire handle in your hand, how easy it was to wield light and nimble as a riding crop. The business and was a square of blue plastic mesh stippled to let the air pass

through, so that in the act of wrath, you didn't fan the fly to safety. Granted, most days the killing you did was passive. Sometimes you even swatted your own bare calf, leaving a red welt, you felt vanish, like the ring of condensation, evaporating off the armrest of the chair, in which you sat reading, Lord of the Flies. But don't you remember those afternoons something that had nothing to do with the flies incited you to slaughter them? Then you had no sympathy for the ones who wrung their hands among the breadcrumbs in the kitchen, begging you for mercy, or the ones you found making love on the window sills in the upstairs bedrooms are they had believed themselves safe. The only thing that stopped you killing them was when the blue square grew so clogged with a dead, the living felt a breath of air that made them take flight. Like people who flee a house moments before the drone strike.

04:39

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