

Almost a year now

Stephen Sexton

I have let the butterfly be
on the floor of my childhood bedroom. The MDF
has bubbled in the heat where the sun,
prosecuting its duties, bores into it each afternoon
and leaches what's left of amber and ochre
from the painted lady's dorsal side.
It's been dead ten times longer than it was alive.
Insectivorous things – shiny beetles, ants by the colony –
might have, I should think, borne it away piece by piece
as I have done my father's clothes in bin bags
to the tilt-chute of the textile bank,
but they have either moved on too – perished

with the autumn or the winter – or they're inclined
to treat the body as I do: with morbid curiosity,
as if it were a kind of demigod; one of the cherubim.
I shush the Hoover at the threshold of that room,
where lint recompacts into something material,
and study for a moment each new degradation:
how the olivescient abdomen has withered,
how the wingtips have furred with a steel-blue dust
not unlike the swarf that accrues on the edge of a knife
when it's ground against the whetstone; what molts off
to give the blade its burr. All the keener for being less.

Sunday mornings, invariably, I find myself
sharpening knives next to the sink, just before noon
when the sun arrives at such an angle of incidence
the good light falls between our neighbours' houses.
And I must confess this: once, years ago, not long after
we were married, we were chased room to room for a week

by the same butterfly, lost on its vast migration.

It jittered, weaved, crashed into clocks and ficuses,

struck each of us in the face. It would not leave.

We switched off every lamp, opened the kitchen window,

took a torch outside and lured it into the darkness.

I was a second moon that night, or a near star,

or whatever tricked the thing's magnetic compass

and drew it out into the cold. How long,

had we let it stay, might it have lain in our house

weirdly preserved? Longer than you think. Almost forever

in the formaldehyde of metaphor, but that is by the by.

It's the real thing I'm thinking of, which lies in the room

I dreamed in, among orphic teenage artefacts:

a single bed, a lava lamp, CDs in their wooden rack.

The house is so quiet now there's no one living there.

Every few weeks I come to make a little noise, observe

the body – such a heavy word for so slight a thing –

lying in state. No longer can its wings inaugurate hurricanes

along Hurricane Alley, if you believe in that kind of thing.

And if you do, perhaps the inverse is also true: the little

that happens here is littler still somewhere far away.

Stephen Sexton

Stephen Sexton's first book, *If All the World and Love Were Young*, was the winner of the Forward Prize for Best First Collection in 2019. He was awarded the E.M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature in 2020. *Cheryl's Destinies* was published in 2021 and was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Collection. He teaches at the Seamus Heaney Centre, Queen's University Belfast. A third book will be published in 2027.

A recording of this piece can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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