

Stink Bug War, 2010

Kristy Mangold - Creative Non-fiction

It was late spring in 2010, during that nervous time in between paying rent on the first and getting paid on the fifth. I was nineteen years old and living all by myself for the first time. I was working at a coffee shop, and barely scraping by. My house was on the western edge of Charlottesville, down by Ragged Mountain Reservoir, on the right just after the pavement turns to gravel. The Craigslist ad had contained those magic words, “no credit check required,” and so I’d met with the old shifty-eyed landlord Arthur and signed the hand-written lease. The rent was high for such a shabby place, but I was willing to pay up if it meant I was out from under my mother’s roof.

The house was round and twelve sided, with the door on one side and large windows on the other eleven. The unusual shape is how I learned the word “dodecahedron.” The outside had wood siding, unevenly stained dark brown. The yard had patches of grass choking in a fine layer of gravel dust. Inside, the floors were sanded plywood painted bright, primary blue. The walls had vertical white siding stained brown in places by years of nicotine build-up. There was a Barbie stove, a tan refrigerator from the 70’s, a miniature bathroom, a bed, a sagging futon, a coffee table, a chair, and a Beatles poster tacked to the wall. It was my slice of paradise.

The day of the war I got home from work around four. I walked in and almost

immediately heard a crunch under my shoe, and got a whiff of something sour. It was citrusy, pungent, and foul.

The utter amount of them amazed me. They were half an inch long, with a mottled brown shield shaped back. They weren't totally unfamiliar to me. I'd heard the stink bugs had come across the ocean, from China, or Vietnam, a foreign invader with no natural predators in Virginia. Since none of the windows sealed all the way, the little critters were nothing new. Being a lazily tolerant person, a few bugs and I coexisted pretty well. But this was different. This was a full-scale invasion.

Their dry corpses were piling up in the window sills. Above their dead comrades several more ambled aimlessly on the window glass, drawing little looping trails behind them. They were crawling through the cracks in the windows and the space under the door- up through the spaces where the floor didn't connect completely with the walls. There was a constant whirring like miniature fans, and I'd watch them drunkenly fly around in meaningless circles. With sharp taps they'd bounce off the walls, off each other, off the side of my face. Everything smelled musty and buggy.

Despite never seeming to do anything, they were annexing my house with sheer numbers.

For all the undeniable grossness of my current living situation, I was still hungry. They were, after all, just little bugs. I went to the Barbie stove and made a lackluster dinner of beans and rice. As I was stirring the pot I heard that now familiar buzzing, getting closer. The stink bug dive bombed, pinging against the back of the stove and ricocheting right into the pot, where the mottled brown body camouflaged itself perfectly with the pinto beans. I fished it out quickly, looking down into the pot. Maybe it wasn't ruined? I

peeked into the cupboard. A single generic can of cream of mushroom soup glared at me. So I tasted the beans and rice.

It was awful. There was the taste of beans, and rice, and a bitter, oily taste cutting through it all.

That's when I snapped. These buggers were going down. They didn't pay rent. Now was the time for action. I noticed how they were attracted to light, how they seemed to congregate lazily on the sunny windows and in the light fixtures. It was sunset when I implemented my counterattack. I turned on only the overhead light, opened all the cupboards and the bathroom door, and sat back on the lumpy futon, watching and waiting.

As it got darker outside, the single light seemed to grow brighter. The stinkbugs started moving toward it, walking upside down on the ceiling in little streams, reaching the light and falling into the shallow glass bowl of the shade.

I watched this procession for a couple hours, mesmerized as they marched to their demise. Steadily they crawled up the twelve walls and onto the ceiling, moving towards the exact center of circle.

By nighttime there were hundreds of them in the bowl, a dense mass of bugs crawling over and through each other. I turned on the roaring vacuum, teetered on the edge of the coffee table, and, grinning like a crazed person, sucked them all up. It felt amazing, such instant gratification. I was merciless. In under a minute all my enemies were swept down a dark tube and into the belly of the beast.

I wrapped the vacuum bag in layers of plastic and dropped it in my neighbor's trash, a half mile away.

Laying in the dark, in the silence after the war, I thought about how good it felt to have an enemy to fight against. Something concrete I could win against, me versus them, a war. It was nothing like the slow trudging battle of existing young, broke, and directionless. I daydreamed of what I'd get when I got paid. Steak and potatoes, vacuum bags, and duct tape too.



FINAL PROJECT
Annie Richardson