

ASSEMBLY – Fly and Butterfly

One morning, I found a barn swallow dead beneath the window in my home. I placed it on an open shell in a branch of Skullwillow, and began to document the decomposition process. A couple days later, I became distracted by the buddleja bush in my garden on my way to the forest. It was covered in butterflies suckling nectar with their spiral tongues. Sometimes multiple butterflies and bees would work side-by-side on the same cluster of flowers. I spent the better part of an hour capturing footage of this feast.

When I finally climbed the hill and arrived at the willow, I found the swallow already well carved into and bursting with flies and maggots. It wasn't until my way back down the hill, full up on grotesque macro photography, that I was struck by the similarities between these two scenes. My default human response had been to praise the work of blissful butterfly, and to revile (though not without morbid curiosity) the swarm of the fleshfly. Yet both are fundamentally sites of similar organic transformation: death, sustenance, and rebirth. Both involve feeding and reproduction. Both hungrily employ proboscis to probe for nutrients. Both dances contribute to the production and reproduction of the feeding organism, and ultimately to the reproduction of plant-matter, though the feast of flies is many more steps removed. The butterflies and bees are direct pollinators; but the carrion of the bird nourishes the soil and flies are involved in this process, first by breaking down tissue to accelerate decomposition, and second through their larvae (along with the bacteria/fungi they carry) who release nutrients into the soil. Additionally, while many plants have co-evolved with butterflies to attract pollinators, a few plants have co-evolved to attract flies by producing smells resembling rotting meat.

Meanwhile, butterflies lay their eggs on leaves. Flies actively copulate on and then lay their own eggs inside the bird's corpse. Hatchlings of fly and butterfly alike will feed on the animal/plant flesh where they emerge. Though the bird's death catalyses this process, the flower's death follows soon after pollination. And yet, how often would one refer to a caterpillar with such a disturbing word as *maggot*? How much easier is it for us to see dying flowers and consumed leaves as part of a natural productive process? The death of a bird, on the other hand, feels mournful, heartbreaking, disgusting... Is it because we identify more with bird than plant? Because we are also made of meat?

The diverging language here involves contrasts of connotation, affect, and sensory experience (in particular, sight and smell) that, it could be argued, correspond with our agrarian interests. Our affinity with animal life, with the symbolic significances of birds in flight, and with the bright

colours of the butterfly triggers a pathos contrary to the more disturbing behaviour of the “dirty” fleshfly.

And yet, both flower and bird are nodes situated within an insect-mediated network of bio-organic energy and nutrient flows. In the context of a posthuman phenomenology of grief and mourning, this experience and resulting photographic/videographic juxtaposition explores tensions between anthrocentrism and ecocentrism in terms of how we respond to death and to associated processes across a spectrum of species. These encounters foreground how socially determined affectual reactions shape, and are shaped by, experiences of grief and the norms surrounding practices of mourning.