

## On Fruit Flies

In the first week of 2016, Lowell was near empty.

I was back on January 1<sup>st</sup> to work on my thesis; all the windows were dark. By the 2<sup>nd</sup>, however, it was clear that I was not alone. There were fruit flies in my room. Four or five when I arrived. Then 10. 20. Let me be clear—there was no food in my room. Yet there they were, landing on the rim of my glasses. Reading over my shoulder.

There are three schools of thought about do-it-yourself fly traps. Here's the system I found to be most effective: take a tall vase. Tape the cover of an old New Yorker into the shape of a cone. Leave a small opening at the tip. The flies can follow a smell through a cone, but they won't be able to find their way out. Before you put the cone in the vase, pour in half an inch of grapefruit juice mixed with dish soap—this is your bait, where the flies go to drown. I spent whole minutes sitting next to my trap, watching as the flies inched to their death. Any that didn't die, I killed the next morning by filling the trap with hot water, slowly, so I could watch them get nervous as the water rose.

But I wasn't even making a dent in the population.

At the same time, I was finding so little to write about in my thesis research that I was reduced to scouring footnotes for a hint of something, anything, arguable. In that unsteady time, I felt myself anchored by the experimental work of devising the best fly trap. If hours passed without advance towards an argument, at least I had killed something.

As the flies multiplied, I was trying out possible thesis statements, to see what could carry a chapter. While I worked, I worried about the flies' food source. The two problems began to blur in my mind. If I didn't know myself well enough to remember where I had left the food that was feeding the flies, how could I know my arguments well enough to eliminate their flaws? The only way to prove I was a functional adult, and a functional scholar, was to exterminate the flies.

You know, fruit flies have a very simple nervous system. But they do have pain receptors. They are undeniably alive, and trapping and killing them had become the highlights of my day.

And it wasn't even making a difference.

Two weeks in, I gave up. There were many of them, and only one of me. I have more neurons, but those had gotten me nowhere in this fight. These flies were being born and growing and exploring and having sex in my room; I was doing none of these things.

Maybe this wasn't my room anymore. Maybe I should move out.

I sat with this thought for an afternoon; my research sat on my desk, untouched.

Then I remembered: There are books in six different languages in my room. One explanation is that I can read six languages. Another is that I like other people to think I can.

Neither version of me was about to lose to fruit flies.

So I filed a work order. I bought out Dickson's entire fruit fly section. I read directions. I set up traps made in China. Capitalism, bureaucracy, infrastructure coursed through my veins.

I returned to my research. I was chasing down a source I had found in a footnote. An argument was growing; it had started to seem not only viable, but field-changing.

A couple days later, I talked to Bob, our building manager. He told me that other students had forgotten to throw out some fruit when they left for break a month ago. The fruit flies were coming from their room, not mine. There was a crack under a door somewhere.

I'm not naming names, because Bob didn't tell me who it was. You know who you are.

It was after this conversation that I became aware of the field in which I was writing my thesis, of the scholars whose arguments I was evaluating, who were building a web of knowledge around me. This is what research is about: ideas are born with one thinker and then show up, uninvited, in another thinker's mind. Learning is built on experiences like mine, when a footnote that one scholar forgot to delete becomes, for another, a swarm that will not die.