The Mourning Cloak
KENNETH VANDERBEEK

David was not a careless driver, but he was not an exemplary one, either. For as long as he had had his license, he had operated his cars much the same way he had maintained them: with a tethering detachment. To have preserved—to have truly cared for—Bertha (as he called his old sedan) would have been to wrongfully interfere with fate and the forces of nature and time and their own good speed. So he had been content to treat her with a kind of benign negligence, giving to her, as he once had to himself, just enough without exceeding the limits, financial or otherwise, of a sensible responsibility. Once a year he had taken her to the shop, had kept her hubs clean and the dash polished, and had always put her in the garage just before it rained. But that had been the extent of it. The only time he had ever risen above these basic charges was on that April morning in his flagging youth when he had brought her home: the day he had given her her once and only waxing. —But that was then, and like many feelings and visions and perceptions which seemed to have changed so abruptly since then, his car seemed to have changed abruptly, too. She was no longer just old, she was ugly; her creeping rust was like a burning fuse—and it was his fault, as if it were he who had spoiled her once fair and gentle beauty, as if it were he who had caused this decline which was her sadness; and with a grand mingling of guilt and desire he touched her suddenly (more like tapped), as if he were testing water, with a hand that felt neglected itself from the quivering. And he could not move.
His children saw this; they traced the whole familiar performance with trailing eyes, studied the impotent stare and the hesitating dance of fingers upon the icy blue hood. Gillen, the younger, who had just turned eight, tried as usual to usurp his father's sadness by pretending that he was just catching his breath or something, and with his head cocked in that inquisitive bent from which the eyes seem to inflect as the head settles upon the shoulder, he tried to twirl a pout into a smile. And then there was Demi, his ten-year-old sister. She already knew something about the complexity of sorrow, and as she looked at her father tears bloomed in her eyes and she was stuck again between two desires, the one to help, the other to hide; and it wasn't until she had completely flushed her nose and Gillen had jumped on her like a rodeo cowboy that some of the resiliency which is every child's savior returned, and like so many other times in the past four months her little brother was suddenly helping her get her breath back again and thinking maybe he might hop on his father, too—not to console but to tickle, as he was often apt to do when David fell into these strange silences; and he would have, had Demi not turned and put him in an arm-lock and dragged him to the open trunk, where there were bags to unload.

David did not have to look to realize that Gillen had come upon the box. As if a gun had gone off, the bright red sky and taupe earth became instantly clear again and he was racing to the rear of the car. "No, Gillen!" His arms darted like snakes. "No, Gil. Dad will get it." David was panting a slow deep pant like a fish and his face was as red as the horizon, and with sweating hands he grabbed the box and cupped it like a butterfly, protecting it as a child a favorite toy. As
his breath came back he opened his hands just enough to peek, and with the end of a fingernail tipped the lid as if it were connected to a detonating device. And then he lost his breath again. Inside, on a bed of Styrofoam and covered with a blanket of fine white paper strips, lay the beautiful, solitary butterfly.

Gillen tugged his arm. “Let me see,” he said.

“No—!” David wheezed, spinning around. Suddenly he felt ashamed. “Well, all right,” he said. “But you have to promise to God, Gillen, that you won’t touch!”

“Touch what?” asked Demi.

“The butterfly—.”

“The Mourning Cloak,” Gillen interrupted with a grin.

“Oh, that,” said Demi.

Indeed, the Mourning Cloak, *Nymphalis antiopa*, a work of art: this little Japanese fan with the black and amber wings for which he had traveled ten and sometimes twenty miles an hour slower than the speed limit the whole way home, as if for the entire sixteen hours he had had to navigate obstacles rather than highways and had confronted countless crossing wildlife and hazards in the road, scanning the blacktop continuously for mines, his grip having tightened with every new bump, his dreadful silences enriching the trip’s already ponderous and melancholy mood.

He had handled the car like a tray of crystal, fearing that the mere time and distance that often make disasters inevitable might nullify at any moment this agonizing effort to avoid one. At every stop, while his children had played in merriment at the side of the road or had gone to relieve themselves or fetch a snack, he had stayed behind to tend to
the little parcel in the trunk with a jeweler's scrutiny. Once, when duty
had called him, too, he had nearly wet his pants in his rush to finish,
and had returned to the trunk like a frightened peacock, fearful that
the little box had been removed or ransacked in his absence; and even
then his children had regarded him with their growing suspicion and
concern, as if to say, "Here he goes again" or "Please God, help him."

Not two weeks had passed since he had sat down to assemble the
butterflies he had collected with his children for as long as they could
remember, in the field behind their home. Over many springs and
summers they had netted some thirty-five to forty species of all sizes
and shapes—some smaller than a thimble, others as large as a bird—
and all of every color of the rainbow. The outings had been like picnics
and carnivals and everything else they loved most in life, and though
it was he who had done all the work—all the stalking and running
(more like lfiting) and the eventual netting—his children had always
accompanied him anyway, if only to giggle at all these silly maneuvers
and the seriousness of it all, and to root him on.

For years he had kept the growing quarry protected in small plastic
bags and covered by scraps of old sheeting at the top of the bookshelf
in the den, having kept them there with the intention that one
day—when he had collected enough of them—he would mount them
behind glass and frame and hang them proudly over the mantle. But
then four months ago this all changed. His books went into mover's
boxes, and so did the butterflies.

For a time he had forgotten about them. Then one day an idea
had manifested itself in one of his desperate attempts to find order and
permanence again. He must finish this task he had set himself to so
many years before. He must finish the collection.

With just two days to vacation, he had gone in search of the butterflies in the countless boxes with no labels that he had stacked in his bedroom. To the faint glow of a small yellow light—to the vibrant memories of a lost innocence—he had embarked upon the final process of ordering and assembly. For nearly three hours he had labored with sweaty palms and shaky fingers, first to remove the paper strips he had used to mount the wings, then to place as gently as he could on a bed of cotton these three dozen manifestations of his own fragility. Yet in his desperation, their beauty had vanished before him; their onion-paper wings had become but pieces of his brittle self and of the love he had lost.

Now, as he pranced like a pantomime up the steps to his apartment, balancing the little box with his latest hopes as if its contents were a king’s ransom, he suddenly tried to imagine how his friends might react to the collection—and particularly to this last and greatest prize—and he imagined that they might look upon it in awe, amazed that it was he who had put it together, and not some gallery or museum. He tried to take some delight in this. But he could not. For from the moment he had hung the collection up, he had been unable to look at it.

“Where should I put these, Daddy?” his daughter called, shrugging behind the trunk with two pillows under her arms and a bag half her size in her right hand.

“Just a second,” her father called back. He was trying to open the front door with his shoulder.

She began lumbering up the steps to help him.
"I can get it," he said.

"You're making me feel sick, Daddy," she said. Little tears like daisy petals sprouted in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" he said.

She stared at the tiny box in his palms which seemed to possess the weight of all their luggage.

"Oh, don't you worry about this," said David.

"But it's making me sick, Daddy—."

He bent down on his knees. "It's just a butterfly, Pun'kin," he said.

"It's hurting you," Demi said.

"Now, now—"

"It's making you strange."

He stood up. As he looked away, everything vanished as it had before. He wiggled his head to look for Gillen. "Your sister isn't the only one around here with responsibilities," he called into the heavy night air. Then, as if he had never paused, he turned and resumed his effort to open the door.

At times like this, he was actually afraid of himself. Yet his fears would always be acknowledged by only wisps of attention before his mind would skip to something else—usually to another problem hastily fabricated, such as this which suddenly consumed him now: that in his hurry he might bump into a wall or slip and fall. And in his mind's eye he saw his life ending again as the problems he so overmagnified filled his stomach like scalding water.

"Daddy—?"

Barbs of sweat cut a path across his chest, the box suddenly cowering to it now.
“Daddy?” Demi said again, tapping him.

“Yes, Pun’kin.”

“Why is this thing so important?”

He tried to straighten. “It’s no big deal, Pun’kin.”

“Yes it is,” she frowned. “I know it is, Daddy.”

He shifted the box in his hands and tried to hold it more casually.

“Well, this is a pretty rare one, you know,” he said, “the only one that had really ever eluded me.”

“But we could always get another,” she said.

“Probably not,” he said.

“But it’s a butterfly, Daddy.”

“That’s true, Pun’kin,” he said.

In the quaint lobby he tried to purge his thoughts, and he smiled
at her for her wisdom. He asked her if she wouldn’t mind going into
his pocket for his keys and opening the door. She put her bag and the
pillows down and did as she was told. Then he sent her away with
a squeeze on the neck and instructions to give her brother a good
talking-to for him.

Relieved finally to be inside, he so quickened his steps that he
nearly fell—over the mail. He kicked the week’s pile of letters so
hard that they swirled through the kitchen like leaves. Just one thing
mattered anymore: to get to his bedroom.

Opening the box was like setting a trap. His breathing sputtered.
Clusters of scrap metal seemed to have wedged between his ribs. With
both hands he searched for the sheet of Styrofoam onto which he
had pinned the butterfly. When he felt it, he lifted it slowly with two
fingers on each side. He had suffered the whole day for this moment.
But glory be: The butterfly was unscathed! Its perfect wings were untraffled, none having moved so much as a hair out of place; and all the colorful scales were intact! Fate had been kind to him! Oh, how happy he felt! How relieved!

—But then a rather strange thing happened. As he began to leave the room, all ready to share the joy of this triumph with his children, he gazed at the collection on the wall, and he noticed that one of the hindwings had a thimble-sized bald spot on it. He turned away with a gasp, praying that this discovery was just an illusion. Yet as he renewed his examination, the flaw was not only still there, it was larger! Again his breathing stuttered. This was not the first time he had noticed these missing scales; he had detected them almost from the instant he had swooped the butterfly off a railroad tie years before. Yet the flaw had never disturbed him. —Now it hissed with razor fangs.

His children were calling him. “In a minute!” he shouted. His eyes were tracing the entire collection now, making long scratch marks.

“Dad, the cooler’s leaking,” Gillen called.

“Get a mop, then!”

Three times he started to leave the bedroom, and three times returned for one more awful look at the imperfect creature behind the glass.

When he had finally managed to walk away from it, a dozen thoughts flooded his mind, as if trying to weld themselves into a reasonable idea of what it would take to make reparations.

He nearly knocked Demi over in the hallway. “What have you been doing?” she asked.

“Where’s the cooler?”
"It's not that bad," she said. "Gilly got a sponge."

David hastened away. This was not her father Demi saw.

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All night he lay awake tossing. At work the next day, he accomplished very little. He spent the whole day in a kind of mourning, unable to concentrate on much more than his vision of the blemished butterfly in the collection, as if its flaw were his own.

In his urgency to determine how the butterfly might be repaired, he thought first of simply replacing it with the Mourning Cloak. But he quickly discarded this idea. For one thing, the solution was too easy. And there would be problems, too. Because the Mourning Cloak was only half the size of the flawed specimen, it would create around itself an area of negative space, therefore throwing the whole collection out of balance. And there was also the issue of motive, for David had never intended to include this last and greatest prize in the collection. It would have its own, solitary mount.

Finally it was clear that the only reasonable course to take was to try to repair the damage. For the remainder of the eternal day, he prepared for the impending task just as he had once prepared as a schoolboy for an athletic confrontation: utterly detached from all other concerns.

After work, as soon as his children were occupied, he went to the bedroom. His hands were shaking. As carefully as he could, he took the collection off the wall and put it on the bed, near the middle. As he stared into the glass, he felt his forehead constrict.

He heard Gillen, who was forever running in and out. "Stay outside!" he shouted.
"I want a drink," Gillen said.

"You can have some milk or orange juice—no soda!"

Suddenly David froze. It was dinnertime!

It was almost dark now, as if several hours had already passed. He turned on a light. For a moment he looked about the room as if he were lost. He tried to concentrate. He fetched his daughter's makeup kit from the bathroom. In it he would find everything he needed for the operation: blue eye shadow to fake the lost scales, a set of tweezers to steady the butterfly, clear nail polish to seal the repair. As an afterthought, he also grabbed the saline solution that offered some sort of benefit to fingernails or eyelids or something, but which he would use in the end to polish the glass.

As he reentered the bedroom with these things ordered by priority in cupped hands, his breathing deepened.

Though only fifteen minutes would elapse, he felt that there was no end to the operation. When he stood up and straightened his aching shoulders, it seemed that the morning had come. At first his eyes fluttered across the collection as a stutterer over words. Then he examined it closely. He felt neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. He was finished!

Ever since he had discovered the flaw, David had hoped to keep this, as all miseries, a secret to himself. But now he was so eager to share with his children his sense of relief that as soon as he had put the collection back on the wall he merely nodded at it before racing out of the room.

From the kitchen window he called them in for dinner.

Demi was the first to arrive. "Who was it?" she asked.
“Who was who?”
“On the phone?”
“Phone?”
“I’m hungry—.” Gillen tugged his father’s pants.
“What took you so long?” Demi sniffed the kitchen air.
“Oh, yes, about time I set to making some dinner, huh?” said David.
“What took you so long, Daddy?” Demi repeated.
Well before the refrigerator he froze and stared at his daughter as if she, too, had just turned to stone. “Actually, why don’t you guys go ahead and pick out something for tonight,” he forced a smile.
A fish-pout scalded Demi’s mouth; Gillen stomped out the door.
“Gillen Michael, get back here!”
Demi flopped down in the kitchen-table chair closest to her humped father. “Are you O.K., Daddy?” she asked.
Her father shuffled to a cabinet and opened it, looking up and down for something to grab. “Listen,” he said, without looking back, “why don’t you go fetch your brother, and the two of you can make yourselves a milkshake. Then I’ll call for pizza.”
Gillen peeked into the kitchen and let out a howl of approval. Demi stood up and walked over to her father. “Are you all right?” she laid her head against his stomach.
“I’m all right, Pun’kin,” he said.
“You seem lonely,” she whispered.
“I’m not lonely—.”
“Is that why all these little things like broken butterflies bother you, Daddy?”
David stiffened. Suddenly everything blurred.

“You’re not getting weird again, are you?” Gillen asked atop a counter.

David tried to talk. He placed an arm on his daughter’s shoulders and with her shuffled over to Gillen and said, “I need to ask you guys something.”

“After we make the milkshake,” said Gillen, yanking open the cabinet door to the cocoa and sprinkles.

“I’m going back outside,” said Demi.

“No, Punkin, please,” he gently restrained her. “It’ll only take a minute. And then you can make the milkshake,” he smiled at Gillen, “a big milkshake.”

“We’ll make it now,” said Demi.

David shut the cabinet door, almost clipping Gillen’s arm.

“Not fair!” said Gillen.

“Please, both of you!” David stiffened....

All the way to the bedroom Gillen rode his father like a rodeo cowboy, singing, “Me like chocolate, me like sprinkles, me like burps and potty tinkles...” And all the way David felt his head beaten by the boy’s beautiful voice.

When they arrived, he stared at the collection for a moment in silence as his son dangled upside down and his daughter leaned against his stomach with her eyes closed.

“Well, what do you think?” he asked.


David shook his head. “Come on guys, what do you think?”

Demi leaned away sternly. “Why do you want me to share your
interest in these dead creatures?” she said.

“I’m just asking you what you think of the collection, Pun’kin.”

“It’s very nice,” she said. “We’ve seen it before.” The words faded before he could process them.

She started to walk away. “Wait, I’m not finished,” he said. She flinched under his grip. “Please, Daddy—!” “Last question,—” he started. “Please, don’t make me feel sick again,” she said, wrangling free. She fled the room.

“Wait!” David pursued her, “what about this butterfly?” He had pointed so quickly at the latest subject that Gillen wasn’t sure which one.

“You mean this one with the crooked body?” he called.

“What crooked body?” David suddenly returned.

“This one,” Gillen pointed.

David peered so closely through the glass that his nose touched it.

“The Common Blue?”

“No, the Monarch,” said Gillen.

David contorted under a shrill gasp. His hair knotted as he yanked it.

“Is this why Mom left you?” said Gillen.

His father stood mute; only his eyes moved.

“Is this why Mom left you?” Gillen repeated. He tried to jump again on his father.

“What’s Mommy got to do—?” David choked. Gillen turned away from the tears.

David blinked through the water to find his daughter. “Why, Demi?”
“That’s not fair, Daddy!” she started crying.

“But why don’t you care, Demi?”

“I’m hungry,” said Gillen.

David fell on the bed gripping his head, and Demi simultaneously into him like a body dropped from an intolerable height. “I don’t, I don’t like you so sad, Daddy!” she wept. David’s numb fingers sidled to her head, the palms pulling her close. Gillen jumped on him.

The father squeezed shut his eyes in the darkening, formless room; his nostrils flaring. “I’m hungry,” Gillen whispered in an ear…

After several moments a bright light passed over David’s eyelids, and he opened them to behold a golden star. —It was the most magnificent butterfly of them all, the one he had caught the previous summer during the last vacation he would ever take with his family as a whole; its broad silken wings opening as he slowly rose before them: this, which had held him spellbound that morning it had pursued him. Now again, the beautiful creature awakened the colors of the rainbow; the light of a thousand lights. “Look,” said David, “look at that!”

He tried to snatch one more look as his children pulled him at both sides into the hallway. Having taken his arms around them they led him to supper, and he pressed his face hard against theirs as he did his best to keep his legs moving.

After his children, he had never beheld anything else more beautiful. ☠️