

English 121: Styles of Academic and Professional Prose  
Professor John Loge  
Kathryn Culhane

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Kathryn Culhane

### Collecting Time

by Kathryn Culhane

Twenty-four hours is an absurd amount of time. It is short and unwarranted. It slides through your life like water through a sieve. It refuses to conform or compromise. You cannot catch it with a net because it has no shape.

~~~~~

My grand-daddy used to catch butterflies with a net. He bounded through exotic jungles with my mom and waved his wooden-handled net as if he were speaking semaphore to the wind. I do not know if his net was actually wooden-handled: I have never seen it. I have only seen his collections of colorful butterflies, caught many years ago in Malaysia, or Liberia, or Kenya. For each butterfly, my grand-daddy inscribed a label with the date and slipped a pin through the thorax. He pinned the delicate butterflies and their scientific epitaphs in rows along the bases of slender boxes. The boxes are wooden: this I know. They have smooth glass lids and little metal latches that hinge open with soft clicks. They smell like cedar.

My grand-daddy caught butterflies as a hobby—to kill time, you might say. He liked looking through his medley of flying colors, which he kept in a back room under the stairs. The room had no windows, but its walls were lined with rows of shelves of wooden butterfly boxes. When I was young, I sat in the room and whispered to the butterflies, asking them where they

came from and why they had so many patterns. It never occurred to me that the room was a multicolored graveyard.

Although most of the insects my grand-daddy collected were butterflies, the graveyard held other colorful corpses as well: smooth iridescent beetles and fluffy brown moths, which looked like the butterflies except for their thick woolen bodies and furred antennae. They are all gone now, and the shelves of the back room are empty, grey, and desolate. The wooden boxes are scattered, donated to museums or given to family members. My mom has some of the beetles and moths and butterflies, lined up in neatly symmetrical rows behind the glass fronts of two wooden boxes. The boxes are hung behind the door in the downstairs bathroom of my home. You can see them when you close the door and sit down on the toilet. Some of the beetles have improbable black horns protruding from their foreheads; they are called rhinoceros beetles. The rhinoceros beetle is extremely strong for its size, although it can barely pick up a grapefruit. It can carry eight hundred and fifty times its weight, and lives its short life with unwarranted power. But rhinoceros beetles can only live for three years; rhinoceroses can live for forty five. Their lives are incomparable through the lens of time.

Life as an insect is unfathomable. Everything is intensified, like a ray of light through a magnifying glass. Size is amplified and time is condensed. Every second matters because every second is a day. Lifetimes are measured in weeks. Twenty-four hours is enough time to change the world. I guess you could change the world too, if it consisted of only a few blades of grass and a couple square feet of dirt.

~~~~~

One of the beetles in the wooden case in our downstairs bathroom is named Peanut: a smooth oval the color of dirty white paint. My grand-daddy caught Peanut in Malaysia, when my

mom was nine years old. He let my mom keep him for a couple of days as a pet. She made intricate mazes in the dirt and gently prodded Peanut through with a stick. Then my grand-daddy took Peanut back and put him in a jar of ether. Now Peanut has a pin through his smooth thorax. Instead of killing time, my grand-daddy killed an insect and made time survive ages. The short days before Peanut's death must have seemed like an eternity.

~~~~~

You cannot catch time, but can you chase it?

I am restless; I am terrified. I am running through the jungle with a wooden-handled net, chasing time. It slides between the trees and hides in the shadows, and I can't seem to find it although I know it is everywhere. I hear the rasp of crumpled wings like the tick of a clock. I think I can see time flying by, but I am mistaken. Each minute is only a colorful butterfly.

Animals and people crunch clumsily around me. We run through the jungle together, tripping and swearing. I catch a glimpse of my grand-daddy through the scrambled branches. He is being chased by a black rhinoceros carrying a jar of ether. My grand-daddy's net has lost its mesh, and only the wooden handle is left. He uses it as a cane as he stumbles through the tangled roots.

I lose sight of my grand-daddy as I dodge around a giant trunk, trying to keep track of a ticking butterfly. I lose the butterfly as well, as I start to feel an intense burn on my uncovered head. I look up and see the sun, magnified a thousand times bigger than it should be. I try to use my net to ward off the light, but the wooden handle falls from my grasp and is lost in the snarl of underbrush. I close my eyes, but the sun is too bright and I can see it even through my eyelids. The world is orange and crimson through the delicate blood vessels. My skin peels from immediate sunburn and I choke in the scalding heat. I am turning to ash. I want to run but my

legs are unable to move from heat fatigue. Steam rises from the damp ground and I fall onto my back. I am surrounded by the wooden walls of trees, looking up through a giant sheet of glass.

Give me another second—I would like to live a lifetime—

What happens if time catches you?

~~~~~

Several years ago, I started a bug collection of my own. My bugs aren't from Malaysia or Liberia or Kenya, but they are all painstakingly pinned and lined up in neat symmetrical rows in a wooden box that my grand-daddy gave me. My favorites are the fuzzy bumblebees that used to burrow into the ground under our rhododendrons. They grew as large as grapes and were colored rusty orange like sunsets. They never stung me. I didn't like killing the ones I caught, so instead I gathered the dried out bodies that fell onto the windowsills in my garage. Spiders caught them in their dusty webs and left the fuzzy corpses hanging in the corners among the disintegrating exoskeletons of moths and flies. I pulled the bumblebees out and brushed off their auburn fur. Sometimes their legs or antennae were broken off, and sometimes they were a little squashed, but I took them anyway and put little pins through their desiccated thoraxes.

I still have my collection of fuzzy bumblebees, and my mom still has Peanut. We do not have my grand-daddy. He is in a jar in a church in Tucson, Arizona, lined up with a row of other jars that hold the ashes of people who ran out of time. The jars are hidden behind stone plates so that you can't see the ashes. The date my grand-daddy died is inscribed on his stone, but instead of an epitaph there is a carving of a butterfly.

~~~~~

We try to pin down time with a date, like a collected insect in a wooden box. We end up with a desiccated exoskeleton, a jar of ether, a wooden-handled net. We end up with a carving of a butterfly. We end up with nothing at all.