

This is a story about moths and wasps, but lately it's felt like a parable for building a career as a writer (or any kind of creative). Bear with me. Two years ago, my quarantine energy took the form of digging up my front lawn and sowing a prairie. This year, it took off. I got zillions of blooms. It looked incredible. I started to see all these pollinators too--bumblebees and butterflies. One day I noticed a couple flowers where the petals were stuck to the head, and I was like, "oh that's cool, that must be a little house for an insect!"

A few days later, though, nearly every flower was stuck together like that! And some that had been stuck over before were completely devoured! What's more, something was getting inside the buds of flowers and eating them before they even had a chance to bloom!

I researched and discovered the culprit: sunflower moths. Dinky, little, nondescript pests that eat the heads of all kinds of coneflowers--tickseed, echinacea, cosmos, black-eyed-Susans. One moth can lay more than 300 eggs, and each caterpillar can destroy multiple blooms.

Within days, nearly every one of my thousands of blooms was folded up, mutilated, devoured. I wanted these fuckers dead. Farmers spray BT, but that kills ALL caterpillars, even ones for big, pretty butterflies. Plus once the worms are in the flower heads, they're protected.

I...lost perspective. One day, driving down my street, you may have seen me hunched over, pulling apart flower petals, picking caterpillars out of flower heads and smushing them on the concrete. For HOURS. And I barely made a dent in my tiny pocket prairie.

We tried releasing ladybugs, which sometimes eat caterpillars. But even though we released them at night, following all the instructions, every single one of them had flown away within hours. It was fun though--my kids liked seeing 300 of them crawling around their little bag.

Later I found out, ladybugs can't even get these bastards, because of how they burrow inside the cones of flowers. The only predator that can get them? Wasps! One day, I watched a wasp pierce its stinger into a burrow, drag the caterpillar out, and eat it. Hell yes!

All my life, I've flinched at the sight of wasps. Now every time I see one headed for my flowers, I'm like, fuck yeah! You GO, you beautiful, sexy warriors! Kill the bastards! Get 'em all! In the wild, in a balanced ecosystem, wasps kill 50% of sunflower caterpillars.

One day, as I was obsessing, a neighbor walking by called out, "looking good!" And suddenly it hit me how badly I'd lost perspective. It DOES fucking look good! Most of my flowers get devoured before they even had a chance to bloom, but enough make it to be beautiful!

And I'd set out to create a pollinator habitat, hadn't I? And look! I'm feeding zillions of lil pollinators. Farmers call them "pests," but they're native to this region! These flowers evolved to be their favorite food! And they bring in the wasps who help pollinate them!

They just weren't the pollinators I'd had in mind. I'd dreamed of clouds of monarchs--and I do get them--but mostly I preside over a kingdom of moths and wasps. And that's fucking great too. These flowers are meant to be food, an entire ecosystem, not sterile and perfect.

BACK TO THE METAPHOR, sometimes I lose perspective on my career the same way I lost perspective on the prairie. You have an idea of how it's supposed to look, perfect, 6-figure deals, selling at auction, NYT bestseller list, sold-out signings. Perfect blooms & swallow-tails.

But let's be real, most of us won't ever see that kind of success. However, if you plant something authentic, you'll attract the right kind of readers and publishers--folks who belong with you! For me it's been small presses w/great editors and queer, climate-obsessed readers.

You too can preside over a kingdom of moths and wasps, and I hope you will love it! This is me, walking by, shouting, "Looking good!" And as long as they are TRUE, your books will contribute positively to the ecosystem of our culture in complex ways you can't begin to imagine.

