

# PAPER FRAGMENTS

*by Debra Fox*

It turns out, without its workers, a wasp nest undergoes irrevocable change. Although still beautiful and delicate, the nest begins to degrade. Its skin is no longer impervious to moisture, and it starts to cave in on itself. What the living wasps were doing to keep it vibrant, I don't know, but without them, it withers into nothingness. What was once so teeming with life is inexorably in decline and this is what I am having difficulty reconciling myself to.

Without the Queen wasp the nest wouldn't exist at all, because it is she who scavenges her environment in early spring for wood fiber and other materials naturally occurring in the environment, such as plastic from pools, or nylon from trampolines. She chews these materials thoroughly with her strong jaws, and then spits out a papery substance and molds it into a swirling circle with distinct bands. Inside are hexagonal cells that will house the rest of the colony. She builds the nest until it is the size of a walnut, then lays her eggs, and fertilizes them with dormant sperm she stores deep within herself. So important is the construction of the nest, that she has no need to be preoccupied with the business of mating. Once the sterile females hatch, they finish construction of the nest, making way for the next generation.

Wasps put me in mind of twelfth-century Puebloans who chiseled into the sandstone cliffs of Mesa Verde to build intricate villages. For nearly one hundred years they labored, resulting in the construction of a myriad of rooms, passageways and alcoves, while still farming the mesa tops. A prospector named S.E. Osborn, trudging through a pinyon and juniper forest on a snowy day in 1884, happened upon what is now called "Balcony House." With forty rooms, it contained chambers and plazas and passageways. Much to Osborn's dismay, however, the structures were in varying states of deterioration from centuries of water, wind, freeze/thaw cycles, and a variety of animals. Evidently, even edifices made of stone require upkeep if they are to endure.

Like the cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde, a wasp's nest can support a population of up to ten thousand. Once the sterile females get the nest to the size of a small Japanese lantern, they go out into the world, inject venom into spiders, bees and flies, paralyze them, and then deposit their eggs inside of them. The unwilling hosts stay alive just until the young wasps reach maturity. With a new generation of wasps comes a greater need for more cells in the nest.

Last summer, a wasp stung my husband as he was trimming our Japanese Maple. Without realizing, he severed the branch from which the nest hung. The elegant papery sphere bounced along the sidewalk until it came to a rest. Despite his hesitation to destroy the colony, he sealed the hole from which the wasps came and went. The next day, and for days after that, groups of wasps, in twos and threes, hovered where the nest once dangled, seemingly mystified. Soon after, I noticed a handful of dead wasps scattered on the sidewalk, their bodies almond shaped, with translucent wings. My dog avoided them, wouldn't even lean over and sniff them. A clutch of sparrows alighted next to the wasps, and first tentatively, then more confidently, pecked at them. The next day the wasps were gone. The nest, however, remained, and started to sink into itself, and I wondered what I would find if I cut into it.

Strangely, I couldn't walk past that nest without thinking about my father-in-law. True, he died on an oppressively hot June day, not unlike the one when the nest fell. And like the nest, there was a "sinking in" process underway, especially around his eyes, when I first saw him at the funeral home. An unstoppable change was transpiring, because no living face could possibly be caving into itself, deflating in quite that manner. Whatever life-force was left within him was slipping inwards, until it was no more. I kept repeating the words "sleeping death" to myself in the funeral home. Yet I knew these words didn't belong together, didn't quite line up with what was happening to him. Sleep implies one will eventually awaken, and my father-in-law, dressed in that tweed sports coat and knit tie, clearly wasn't going to blink back to life. Whatever the equivalent process is of sparrows to wasps, he would soon experience it. There was no interrupting his collapse.

Queen wasps typically live one year. As the days begin growing shorter, and the autumn chill sets in, Queens run out of stored sperm and they die off. Their hard exoskeletons weaken; their delicate wings go dusty; their eyes begin to dry out. The young Queens are left behind to hibernate.

Perhaps the Sioux Indians had it right when they placed their dead on burial platforms. They set four posts firmly into the ground and connected them with cross pieces of wood hewn to one another for security. The platform was elevated six to eight feet off the ground. The tribe would then witness the natural deterioration of its members, helped along by exposure to rain, wind, freezing temperatures, and wild animals. I sometimes wonder whether I would have the fortitude to watch a human being decay, that is, go from recent death to total decomposition, the way the Sioux did.

Now that all but a few papery fragments are left of the nest, I find I miss examining it, watching it wither day after day. But I am not as troubled by the nest's destruction, as I was immediately after it hap-

pened. Being privy to the process of degradation has quenched something inside of me, closed a loop that has settled my restless mind. Before long all vestiges that it existed will be gone. It will snow, and a soft white veil will coat the sidewalk. But I don't think I will soon forget the wasps, their yellow and black striped bodies lying inert on my cement sidewalk, looking from afar as if dressed in tweed jackets.