

Luna Moth · *Michael Wilkerson*

MR.. PETERS SHOWED us two specimens from his boyhood. They were louse-riddled, encased in glass-covered Riker mounts that had allowed the incandescent light of his study to fade the wings to grey and white mottled with clear spots. Rick turned away from the long-dead moths, and I followed him to the bicycles. He had caught Luna moths before, while I had stayed home, ill and envious. Mr. Peters walked outside with us. The moon had come up, and in its light he saw the moth first, flapping its great wings slowly against the dark green spruce tree in the center of the huge yard.

“There’s a Luna now,” he said, violating the awe of the moment with his tone of voice, his shrug, his turning away toward the indoors. The nets were on the other side of the porch from us; instead of getting mine, I watched the Luna moth relay the moon’s white light through its faintly green wings, its long curved tails carving a brilliant flight path in orbit of the spruce. My brother returned with a net, but this moth was not to be caught; it vanished while I stared at the spruce, vaguely troubled. We rode the quarter-mile home, avoiding the dark places that by day were chuckholes in the chip-and-seal roads. All the way we searched the pavement for dead moths that might have been victims of cars, but found none.

We spent part of the Christmas of 1968 with an aunt and uncle in Franklin, Indiana; Borman, Lovell and Anders sent us their carefully orchestrated *Genesis* against the stark backdrop of the televised moon. Aunt Bonnie, then 80, said repeatedly, “It’s a hoax, they’re not really there, why, they’ll never go to the moon.” The simulated moon that Walter Cronkite showed was back-lit incorrectly, my uncle claimed. “It looks like something you could catch in a net,” Rick said. In the morning we got up early to search the woods for cocoons. Unlike those of the other moths in its family, the Luna’s cocoon separates from the trees on which it is spun and mixes with the dead leaves on the ground.

There was a new kind of light in Indiana in the early 1960’s. We moved west 40 miles, from Columbus to Bloomington. I cried all the way. Mother described the workings of the brilliant blue-white “mercury vapor light.” We counted the bulbs we saw at businesses and farms along Highway 46. “You have to rent it from the power company,” she

said. "Four dollars a month, forty-eight dollars a year. A lot of money." My faint tears and as-yet-undiscovered myopia made the lights shimmer; I wanted one.

The place to which we moved in Bloomington was a graduate student apartment building; Dad sought a doctorate in education. I looked out from the balcony at the mercury lights in the parking lot. The night John Kennedy died, we went for an aimless drive in the rain. We had just acquired a fading Oldsmobile with curving, sculptured fins. In spring my brother and I collected leaves for school. The teacher did not allow shoes in the classroom. Our mother knitted us slippers of grey-white yarn. In them, we shuffled quietly around the classroom, mounting and preserving our accumulated leaves.

Rick and I were also fossil hunters in Bloomington; the bedroom was filled with jars of crinoid stems we had taken from the neighborhood ditches that cut through the grass and bared the blood-red clay soil. We learned in class that Bloomington was the world capital of crinoid stems. We considered our collections of grey-white sea plants an investment, hard and unbreakable like promises. Crinoids were most easily found at night, when the mercury lights would accent them against the clay.

Illinois was our next home; we joined 4-H to fill the summer and hunted insects in the fields around the housing developments. Dad worked at the university in a limestone administration building that resembled a castle at night; spotlights were trained on it like sentries. We were day hunters then, chasing Giant, Tiger and Zebra butterflies through the alfalfa blooms. The mysteries of moths would come later. Fishing, I caught a snapping turtle in Teachers College Pond; it came to the surface heaving and covered with dark green weeds that displayed beads of water to the sun.

We left Illinois after only a year, transferring to Terre Haute as if in flight. We bought a two-story brick home that had once been a stop on the Underground Railroad. Underneath it, a tunnel led to Honey Creek near the Peters' home. We found farm artifacts there: square cobbler's nails, blades, decaying knives and saws. The rural mercury lights drew moths and beetles in far greater numbers than the old yellow-tinged incandescents. We read that blue was the best color for attracting moths, and that white was second. Mother, though, would buy

only incandescent lights; we commented on their uselessness. The future was mercury. In less than six months, we knew the location of every mercury vapor light in the southern half of Vigo County. We bought large mesh nets from the Farm Bureau and made friends with homeowners who had paid the extra rent to the power company.

The best place to hunt was the Hacienda Motel—inside were aging waitresses with pale cracked makeup on their white features, a bar with a pool table, and moon-faced twenty-year-olds gathered to rage against the draft and to dodge the state alcohol police. The moths displayed themselves, spreading their wings on the juniper bushes beneath the motel's blue neon sign. Biting dobsonflies made the hunt dangerous. Metallic green attack beetles impeded our progress. Large cars came in and out of the driveway to the cabins at odd times. We caught the myth-named Saturniid family one-by-one; *Cecropia*, *Promethia*, *Io*, *Polyphebus*—all of them oversized, slow, delicate and winged in prominent hues of brown and purple. The last still uncaught was the green Luna.

One night I stayed home with the flu, watching the shimmering light of the new Magnavox TV—our family's first color set. I chased my mother's cat with a flashlight beam while Rick went to the Hacienda. The next morning, the breakfast table was covered with the faint green dust of Luna wings. I was thirteen years old. That night, Rick went to a friend's house, telling me I was "too young" to accompany him. That same month he began to demand that we stop calling him "Ricky." Mother brought me a pale green shirt from a sale downtown; I made her take it back.

On the day that Bobby Kennedy was to be shot I brought home a perfect Zebra Swallowtail—a butterfly with determinedly fascinating habits, found only in small hollows and roadsides in certain areas of the Midwest. It was a whitish-green specimen with long, razor-straight tails, more fragile than those of the Luna; it was striped with jagged slashes of black. Dad's graduate assistant stayed with us that night, while our parents went out and the California election returns came in. In the morning the red pilot light of my radio glared; there were sirens in the background of a man's tired voice. Dad's graduate assistant was a Catholic and told us he was unable to talk about the shooting. "There was a

large green moth on the porch last night,” he said. “Right before I went to bed, when the primary ended. It kept banging against the screen trying to get in the house, but I shooed it away.” I went to the porch and stared at the screen, seeking any evidence of the moth I could find. I watched the incandescent floodlight; for numerous minutes, I stood inert on the empty porch and tried to imagine the scene he had viewed.

Moths have a certain number—usually one to three—of hatching seasons per summer. These seasons, called broods, are like volatile windows during which the adults are plentiful. They disappear in days. Despite their long tongues, called probosci, most adult moths do not feed, including the Saturniids. The Luna’s broods are in late spring and early to mid-August. Mating is the sole purpose of the adults. The August brood of the Luna has a more pronounced blood-red stripe on the forewings; in the early brood, the stripe is a fresh hue of purple. Walter Cronkite once told us of the few times when the Apollo rockets could be launched. “If we don’t make this three-day window, we’ll have to wait for another time when the moon is an accessible target,” he said. I watched the landing of Apollo 11 on the big Magnavox. I took a picture of the set when Neil Armstrong stepped on the lunar surface, but it came out glowing, gray and indistinguishable.

Having conquered all the Saturniids, Rick turned his attention to other orders—Coleoptera, the beetles, primarily. “Spotted dung beetle,” he’d say, slamming a jar on top of a crawling, round, black object. “Caterpillar hunter. Carrion beetle.” One day he brought home from the woods a greenish-white apple borer with long, curved antennae that wavered for about twenty minutes after the insect should have died from the carbon tetrachloride in the jar. “I wonder if it’s sending out a message with those antennae,” Mother said. “Maybe it’s crying.” “Bugs don’t feel pain,” I said.

My great-grandmother was 98 when she died in 1975. “You boys stop killing those poor bugs,” she had said four years earlier. “How do you know they don’t hurt?” Not bugs, I thought. Surely not bugs. Senile and riddled with a slow cancer, she was taken to a nursing home. We picked gooseberries on her property; they were round and sour. At her funeral my great aunt—her daughter—said, “She was so out of it she didn’t feel anything those last few months.” I swallowed. A bitter taste flavored my saliva.

All the turkeys in Turkey Run State Park had been killed long ago, and now the land was a hilly, wooded refuge for campers and hikers. We drove up the gently curving pavement of Highway 63 to hunt moths there. The mercury lights dominated the parking lot. We started eagerly, wasting the daylight hours filling cigar boxes with the wings of dead moths—wings that were scattered on the grass medians of the parking lot. Mother and Dad walked in the woods. At dinner we had white chicken meat and green beans under yellow candle light. Dad spilled red wine on his chicken. After dinner, Mother and Dad retrieved an army blanket from the car and went to the outdoor theatre to watch a state-sponsored melodrama. I hated melodrama—the villains too villainous, the heroes too heroic, the faces too pasty and made-up. Like my brother, I preferred to stand in the parking lot with net in hand, feeling its rough wooden handle, tracing the wind-changed curves of the green mesh netting, waiting for the Luna moth to flounce its sculptured, mercury-lit shadows on the pavement. “God I hope we get a Luna,” I said. Rick asked, “Have you seen how my Lunas are fading? I need one too.”

The first big moth to fly in that night was a Polyphemus: common, huge and almost entirely dusk-brown. It came from the west like a weather pattern and flapped near the lightpole. We blocked out the bulb by lining the handles of our nets in front of our squinting eyes. We saw the moth circle the brilliance of the white-blue aura twice, then fly to the north. We pivoted, tracking it, and saw a rush of blackness followed by the four moth wings’ slow drift to the pavement. “Bats,” Rick said. “They take the body but don’t eat the wings.” We interred the Polyphemus in the cigar box and waited. I saw it first—a beetle, enormous and one-horned, rutting across the stripes of the parking stalls beneath the light. “A Unicorn!” Rick said, averted at something I had found for the first time since the Zebra. The Unicorn was about two inches long and almost an inch wide; its legs scratched my fingers. I dropped it into the killing jar, and its huge body almost took up the entire surface of the jar’s false bottom of card, through which the carbon tetrachloride fumed. The beetle was spotted—dark brown on a field of green that I knew would fade to black in a few months. As I watched it die, Rick caught a Luna moth.

“God damn you!” I was nearly in tears, enraged. “You promised the first one to me.”

“There wasn’t time, it would have flown away or the bats would have gotten it. Anyway, you got a Unicorn. Everyone has a Luna; almost no one has a Unicorn.”

I did not answer; unable to look at him, I somehow sensed the hollowness of my rage. I went to another side of the parking lot where the hunting did not seem as good. All the coveted moths stopped first at Rick’s brighter and better located light. He caught two more Lunas in the next hour. Then the melodrama ended, and Mother and Dad shooed us into the car for the trip home. I watched the little moths and beetles fly into the headlights of our white Chrysler, for which we’d traded the Oldsmobile. The headlights distorted the size of the tiny half-inch millers and made them seem gigantic, larger than Lunas, overly large for my failing collection. Drained, I slept until we hit the Holiday Inn and Honey Creek Square, whose neon and mercury lights gave the pavement a desolate moonscape quality. At home, I tried to give the Unicorn beetle to Rick, but he refused.

We spent the summer of 1970 in Nebraska, still hunting. I fell further behind Rick in my overall collection. I was thinking more and catching less. The excessive sun dryness made the alfalfa fields pale. At night, we didn’t know where many good mercury lights were in that strange, new territory; driving to an over-illuminated power plant, we crossed a set of railroad tracks that reflected the rays from a row of harsh orange-pink bulbs. No insects approached these lights, and we wondered what they were. For me, Turkey Run had rendered the hunt of the Luna joyless, but I did succeed in Lincoln that summer. My Luna was a perfect specimen, all four quadrants an exact and brilliantly haunting shade of green, bright as a young apple, but more translucent. Pale dust wafted off the furry body into my hands as I gently touched the long-sought insect. I put it in a special box for our trip home to Indiana in August. Proud but somehow annoyed, I displayed the Luna that month at the Vigo County Fair.

All the buildings at the fairgrounds were of pre-fab aluminum; the exhibit hall had been painted green, which was the dominant color of 4-H. “I pledge my head to clearer thinking,” I said. “My heart to greater loyalty, my hands to larger service, and my health to better living for my club, my community, and my country.” People continued to make

remarks about my Unicorn beetle. I stayed at the fairgrounds until the last possible hour of every day, talking with other 4-H'ers about Apollo 13 and the upcoming Junior Leader elections. "Don't you guys ever talk about girls?" said a friend of a friend, who then, in the near-total darkness of the new moon, gave an exhaustive account of his premeditated exploits with young women. Uninterested, Rick and I took our nets to the Speedway, where the Midget races had drawn spectators in great numbers. We looked for beetles and found only dropped dollar bills under the incandescent lights near the Midway.

I finally did put my net away in 1971, when we moved again to Bloomington. There were other things to collect in that place—money, recordings of music, plans, scripts, tools. Rick had enrolled at Purdue as an Entomology major. He transferred to Radio and Film after one semester. The radio station posted his lottery number one night in September, after the second brood of that year's Lunas had exhausted itself. Mother sat by the radio and cried. Along Jordan Avenue, trees stayed awake 24 hours a day under the harsh influence of proliferating sodium-vapor lights. A friend's father bought a moon-gray car from Mr. Peters in Terre Haute. There were too many mercury vapor lights to count; the moths had no way of knowing where to congregate.

I spent a summer counseling at a conservation camp, where I taught entomology. I had a net and no killing jar and slept in a green canvas tent. One night during a new moon, some campers and I set an insect trap of beer and sugar water beneath a parking-lot mercury light. We checked it about 11:30, after a campfire during which I'd performed a medley of outdated protest songs. In the trap, swimming and soon to drown, were two Luna moths. Their blood-red wing stripes seemed less prominent than I had remembered. The male waved feathery antennae at me. "He's talking to you," one of the campers said. "That's a romantic notion," I replied. "He's receiving sex impulses from the female." There was no more talk. To the south, I pointed out the orange sky of illuminated Indianapolis. I fought and defeated an urge to keep the Luna moths. I had given my collection and my brother's to the state nature center; I was not interested in preserving the past. I freed the struggling moths and led the way through the jungle-like trail back to camp. Something flew close to my face and made a flapping noise. A woman counselor, who had sung harmony to some of my protest songs, took

my hand in the darkness and asked what the flying object was. I said I didn't know, that I had missed it. Maybe I had tried to avoid seeing it. I think Rick would have pursued it, but I held my fellow counselor's hand and led the group back to their tents; like everyone else, I had already been to the moon.