Skein of Skin

The website photos resemble constellations, except the orbs are blue. The bluest of all bioluminescent insects, *Orfelia fultoni,* is a fly species that in their larval phase light up stream banks and cave walls in the Appalachian Mountains and Cumberland Plateau like a band of blue stars. Before learning about them, the only bioluminescent insect I knew existed were the fireflies that spangle the Blue Ridge Mountains where I grew up. Now I am falling for an entomologist who, although we have been together less than a year, holds the promise of becoming a life partner. Don has long wanted to see these glowworms in person, so to celebrate his birthday, we pack overnight bags and head toward Dismals Canyon, Alabama, to join other ecotourists at the best public viewing site for their namesake lights.

In his console is a new tube of my favorite beeswax lip balm. “Can I use some?” I ask.

“I got it for you,” he says. I dab some onto my bottom lip, asking “Why did some insects evolve bioluminescence?”

“Different reasons. Fireflies flash to signal mates. Dismalites are predators, so their luminescence lures gnats into sticky webs they spin around themselves.”

“Tricky,” I say.

Don and I were both in long-distance relationships before we started dating—a protective measure after divorce split his family and broke his heart while my only sibling’s death shattered mine. We, on the other hand, live three miles from each other

and are now going on our first trip as a couple, risking the fear and exhilaration of loving again.

At Florence we stop to pay our respects to the indigenous tribe who constructed an earthen mound 1700 years ago on the banks of the Tennessee River, holding hands as we climb. Near the top is a willow oak whose bark is marked with two past lovers' names. "Heart-carved tree trunk, Yankee bayonet," Don sings from memory The Decemberists' song about a girl from Oconee and Civil War soldier parted by death. Because we are near gravesites and the young woman is sure a "skein of skin" cannot keep her from her beloved, I think of my brother's sweetheart, Mindy. When he died at age twenty, she tattooed a line from a letter he had left on her windshield onto her forearm in his handwriting: *I will wait for you*. She was still in her teens.

My brother never got to meet Don, a fresh loss that pricks the old wound. By the time he hits the last line with his rich baritone, "Look for me with the sun-bright sparrow," my eyes are misty.

Monuments commemorate the Woodland people who built this 230- by 310-foot mound one rivercane basketful of soil at a time. I imagine the kind of promise required to sustain a project of this magnitude and kneel to touch the ground.

Before we leave Florence, Don suggests we visit the Rosenbaum house. Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture is compelling in photographs, but in person the play of light between alcoves transforms their domestic space into a sanctum. Each glass corner and sunken floor feels intentionally designed to disrupt our patterns of attention, to encourage us to spend it more wisely. Enclosed by windows that frame the surrounding landscape like works of art, you would be drawn again and again back to the alive

present, the curated space romancing your focus while the woodgrain walls embraced the sunset.

I swallow and ask, “Can people live like this without a million dollars?”

Don puts his arm around me and says, “Did I ever tell you I am a thousandaire?”

Back in the car, the road stretches before and behind us while I remember those high windows. Don drums on the steering wheel in time with a Toumani Diabaté cd and tells me about his graduate work in West Africa.

We check into the hotel and drop off our belongings before heading toward the park. When twilight falls, we make our way into the canyon along with a group of homeschool families and retirees. To maximize visibility, Don scheduled our tour for the night of a new moon. Our flashlights bounce down wooden steps into the dark. We snake single file over a trodden dirt path that winds between trees and over a plank bridge. We grow quiet as we walk, concentrating on the trail, until we come to the moss-covered rock wall where the luminaries live.

Our guide instructs us to cut the lights and let our eyes adjust. We stand in night so thick I lose the form of our group. I flip my hand over and cannot make out the shape of my own palm. Then, blue bulbs gradually emerge from the darkness. Their glow is faint but spectacular, a distant stellar nursery.

Like many insects, *Orfelia* feed primarily as larvae, but the similarity ends there. Their bioluminescent systems evolved separately from other light-emitting insects, like fireflies. Different enzymes create that bluest shade, which emerges from a lumen, or tube, akin to the glands of silkworms. Instead of silk, however, *Orfelia* spin fluorescence as blue as Rigel, in the constellation Orion. When their hunt shifts in adulthood from

food to mates, most lose their glow. We know better than to touch them. We are on an 86-acre National Natural Landmark that protects the largest population of this fragile species. Their diffuse gleam shines brightest when you look at them sidelong, using your rods rather than your cones.

The dismalites have recently shed their exoskeletons and are tender bodied in this incandescent larval phase. Naked against the moss, more aura than defined lines, they pulse subtly. To see them is to see inside them. I find Don's back in the dark and press my hand against him.

On the return drive, we detour along the Natchez Trace Parkway, stopping to walk up a tapering tributary of the Duck River. We slip off our shoes and wade in a waterfall carpeted by algae and snail shells. Don identifies dwarf irises, evening primrose, and Solomon's seal. When he names crimson clover, I break into an off-key rendition of Tommy James and the Shondells. "I don't hardly know her," the song begins, and I realize how few flowers I can name relative to the many on this planet, let alone the ferns, fungi, and insects.

A woodpecker knocks on a nearby trunk and Don identifies it as a pileated, which is smaller than the ivory-billed woodpecker now thought to be extinct. To pay homage to what we find in such preserves is to acknowledge what no longer remains.

Don spots an eastern tiger swallowtail resting on a branch and points out the powder blue dander that limns the golden wings that distinguish males from females.

"Over and over," the song keeps playing in my ear. When the swallowtail departs, a twilight train of stardust goes with him. Despite the grief wound into each knot of wildlife, I want to know everything.