

Backyard Bugs

Lily Langstaff

—Essay Competition

Love feels so good when it's at home.

And home feels so good when there's love.

I dream about it sometimes, waking up in a cold room after being somewhere warm in slumber. I would say, *imagine*, but not even I could do it justice. Though I'll try.

North Mississippi, sheer suburbia. Something irreplaceable. I think mostly of the backyard I spent all of my time in. The sun melted into lavender and baby blue, darkening into black, velvet studded with stars and lightning bugs. The lightning bugs were largely symbolic to my childhood, encouraging words into my brain that just felt and still feel right.

Chemiluminescence. Entomology. The little creatures would land on my finger, lighting up like the rides at the Delta fair, or the string lights that come with December. They brought literal light into my life, and it didn't stop there. In that same backyard, on the same lightning bug lawn, I stalked down butterflies and daddy long legs. They were such

small, delicate beings, and I admired them like my own mother admired my chubby baby cheeks and incoherent babbles. A primal instinct resided in me, telling me to protect them, to save them, to befriend them. The feeling was love. I harbored nothing but love for all of these things, for the jumping spiders and the tail-dropping lizards and the millipedes and ladybugs. I loved them like they were my friends. I named them. *Mustache* was the black caterpillar I befriended at five. He went everywhere with me for about a week. *Corndog* was the granddaddy longlegs I found in fifth grade, holding him in small fingers, wondering how anybody could ever *hate* or *kill* something so small and innocent. Harvestmen spiders do not bite—they have fangs too small to. So why are they so terrifying? Carpenter

bees are big and buzzing, but they're just stubborn babies. Male ones can't even sting, they'll just aggressively kamikaze into you, and they're a bit clumsy. It's cute, really. It was with no fear I coexisted with bugs. I refused to put them down until my mother's eyebrows knitted together in the same old angered frustration. She'd stand at the screen door, watching my hands to make sure they didn't hold any friends. But she's an arachnophobe, and so is everybody else. And I apologize, to every person reading or hearing this, that their home isn't my backyard. I shared a home with such magnificent creatures and it was *glorious*. People don't even notice bugs until they're slapping a mosquito from

their arm or chasing down a fly with a dollar store swatter. Bugs are the greatest secret of our backyards. And they make my backyard the homiest place in all of Mississippi. There's a reassuring familiarity in watching a cricket jump from one blade of grass to another, in studying a praying mantis and wondering why God made it like that, in admir-

ing the wing colors of the butterfly on your finger, in naming beetles. I can close my eyes and be home in my own backyard, with humid wind blowing and bare feet on grass greener than envy. I realized, recently, how important it was that I was raised with a big backyard open to woods. It's shaped me to be a true entomophile, for lack of better words. It's in the little things, from my collection of bee socks to my inability to step on an ant. No matter how small, we must always remember that compared to the rest of the universe, we're infinitesimally tiny. It must be terrifying to be a bug under a sneaker. I've developed habits of watching my step and looking closely at trees and bushes, at cracks in the sidewalk, at the sky. They're everywhere, more present and closer than one might think. As all arachnophiles

**"No matter how small,
we must always
remember that
compared to the rest
of the universe, we're
infinitesimally tiny."**

Color-Changed Collar

Shelby Tisdale

know and appreciate, no person is more than a few yards away from a spider, wherever they may be. Isn't it lovely, to know there's no such thing as really being alone?

Now, as a junior, living away from my backyard and my family and everything I've ever known, it's clear that old habits die hard. I chase butterflies into busy roads, hold my breath to listen to cicadas, and stop to observe every spider web. At least once a week I sweep up a dead ladybug or moth and I just can't throw it in the trash. No matter how much I try not to think about it, I always end up behind the building I live in, letting them rest under the same tree, under the same sky. I think I accidentally killed a little beetle once, and I wept over him for longer than I should have. But everything needs and deserves loves, and who else would love something so unnoticed and hated? Whenever I let free a spider that found its way into my bathroom or into my room, or pick up a ladybug, or watch an ant and wonder where he may be going, I think of the backyard and the bugs that raised me. △



Dragonfly

Second Place—Photography

Michael Lu

My father's hands unnerved to calloused fingertips,
so that oven mitts were not as necessary
as scorching brew
in garage sale coffee pot at sunrise,
strong enough to compensate
for enlarged, aching knees
and black as the beard on his chin.
He said he cleaned carpet,
but vacuum cleaners could not paint scars and bruises
under his blue striped collar tinted by mold and sewage.
Chemicals and machinery darkened creases
under drained eyes of my bedside motivational speaker,
preaching value of work ethic and praying
at late arrival home while I feigned sleep.
Now scarred arms of manual labor
hide beneath polo shirts and desk chairs.
Nonprofit grants bleached his collar white,
dimmed his tanned neck to the same shade.
He interviews men under bridges,
asks, "Sir, where did you sleep last night?"
His calloused hands enter data one letter at a time
while driving rented sports cars down the Interstate,
laptop on khaki pants.

He achieved a practiced perception toward his homeless
clients
and specialized in reading the fine print of people.
Sometimes treks through the woods
bring him home with muddy shoes
that blemish the kitchen floor like spilled coffee
and its bitter taste that lingers like my father
during overworked hours in a salary job,
like the heat of burns my father doesn't feel.
The mud reminds me of the way
they say he will never be promoted
without a degree,
the way he smiles at the stubborn work ethic
I sculpted to put his sacrifice on a pedestal.