

Streaking Across Summer Skies

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We had been hiking trails lined by three-hundred-year-old oak trees at Nine Eagles State Park all afternoon. Exhausted, we immerse ourselves in the cold blue stillness of its lake, and emerge refreshed, ready to embrace the warm August night. My father and I had traveled six months and three hours to get here. The anticipation of today helped get me through the harsh, seemingly protracted, winter.

Petrichor is rising around us; actinobacteria living in harmony with the cicada nymphs as they spend seventeen years underground, feeding on tree roots. The smell of the earth carries the memory of the cicadas sleeping inside it. The moon has set early, all anew, and as dusk cloaks us, the cicadas awaken from their annual slumber. Their warm, buzzing drone in the hot air feels muggy and humid against my skin.

For weeks the nymphs have been tunneling upward through the soil. They stop just below the surface, their bodies ancient thermometers, waiting for the soil temperature to reach a balmy sixty-four degrees Fahrenheit, and then they begin to push. A small, crumbling hole about the size of my thumb appears in the soil. The nymph is brown-gold, armored, alien-looking, like E.T. It smells of deep earth and moves quickly onto a tree trunk. There's a whole army of them. I can feel them moving past my fingers, climbing in the dark, one after another. High up on the tree they uncloak and emerge naked and vulnerable. Time and the world harden them. They are fully baked by the afternoon sun and then the males are ready to announce themselves, the drum-like tymbals on their sides vibrating in a rising, pulsatile, electric summer sound.

Cicadas are edible and reportedly delicious. My grandfather came to visit when the periodical brood emerged two years ago. They have the consistency of milk chocolate, with a mild, nutty flavor like roasted almonds, and are surprisingly tender he would say, daring me to try one. Chefs and foragers have been collecting them for dishes like cicada-stuffed pasta or kimchi, and the *New York Times* dubbed them "the noisy lobsters of the trees." Cicadas contain over fifty-five grams of protein per hundred grams, more than chicken breast and double the amount in beef. I had been spending a lot of hours at swim practice trying hard to make it on my school's varsity team. The protein content of food weighed heavy on my mind.

Baba-bozorg is a retired entomologist, full of factoids, at first seemingly quite

interesting to my younger self, and then as the years passed, my sister and I would roll our eyes and marvel at their apparent uselessness. I haven't seen him for two years now, and I don't know when I will again; it is difficult to imagine either of us traveling to see each other at this time. After the recent events in Minnesota, I now keep a carefully laminated birth certificate along with the car's registration and proof of insurance in my glove compartment.

Dad and I settle down on our blanket. Dew is forming on the grass beneath us. We are at the highest-rated stargazing spot in Iowa, with a Bortle Scale level two rating from the International Dark-Sky Association, level one being the best. He reaches for my hand. Our eyes are gazing up at the sky, now fully dark, ancient trees silhouetted against the Milky Way. We can see Perseus rising in the northeast. Legend has it that Perseus, son of Danae and Jupiter, was sent to bring back the head of Medusa the Gorgon whose gaze turned anyone who looked at her to stone. Using Pluto's helmet of invisibility, he approached undetected wearing Mercury's winged sandals and guided by the reflection in Minerva's mirrored shield was able to avoid Medusa's gaze and triumphantly beheaded her. The constellation is a lopsided Y, an outstretched figure with one arm raised holding a sword and the other downward, holding Medusa's severed head. That head is now Algol, the demon star. It brightens and dims every 2.87 days, its winking deeply unsettling to our ancient forbearers.

The cicadas' chorus reaches a crescendo as we watch the bright fireballs with long glowing tails radiating from within Perseus, replaying annually that ancient battle; the Earth passing through the debris trail of Comet Swift-Tuttle. As Perseus flew back home victorious on his winged horse Pegasus, he came across the beautiful and helpless maiden Andromeda, chained to some rocks, waiting to be devoured by the sea monster Cetus, payback for her mother's sins. Perseus raised Medusa's head; one look and Cetus turned to stone. Perseus then rescued Andromeda, and together they had seven sons and two daughters, one of them Perses, the legendary founder of Persia. My ancient lineage frozen in the night sky for all eternity. The Andromeda Galaxy is the faint smudge right next to Perseus. It's the most distant object a human eye can see without a telescope. Light from it left 2.5 million years ago, before Homo Sapiens, around the time the cicadas first started to sing.

I try to fill my mind with random facts hoping they will push into a corner the image of my grandfather, alone and lonely, 0.002 light years away, a cosmic blink yet insurmountable.

Sweat is collecting across my brow and drips onto my lips, salty, not unlike tears. As midnight approaches, the intensity of the Perseid showers picks up, and they now streak across at about 100 per hour; debris from a distant origin, chased by unknown demons, rushing toward a brighter tomorrow. My parents long wait to lawfully immigrate is the result of per country limits; there's too many from where they came. We want different kinds, the right kind, just not your kind.

In many ancient cultures, cicadas are a symbol of resurrection and immortality. They disappear underground, seemingly dead, only to burst back into the world transformed. I could never bring myself to taste one much to my grandfather's amusement. They remind me too much of us.