

## An Entomologist's Love Letter to the Universe

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It was the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July, 1999. Aside from the headlights of your pickup truck, the only light I could see came from a McDonald's sign in the distance, hovering like the broken halo of an angel. *Heaven Is a Place on Earth* sounded through the stereo as you played the mixtape I had made for your birthday.

We put the world behind us and parked at the top of a hill. The hummingbirds had gone to sleep in the surrounding orange groves. You carved our initials into one of the trees with your pocketknife. I set up a telescope on the cargo bed of the truck. As we waited, we made up our own constellations. We filled in the distance between each star with stories. I peeled an orange and handed half of it to you.

Then she came. You pulled away from the telescope as a flash of fire lit up behind the lens. Columbia tore through the sky like Zeno's arrow. The space shuttle had one more mission left before she would burn up in Earth's atmosphere and kill a crew of seven. But in 1999, Columbia would bring her astronauts home. We watched as she departed Kennedy Space Center beyond the horizon.

As you pointed out her blazing tail, you told me that your favorite color was red. "The first color of the rainbow," you said, as if it were the first color the Big Bang or the gods or something else had come up with. Space is mostly void, but in 1999, Columbia brought red into our solar system. There were four ladybugs on board, named after the Beatles: John, Paul, George, and Ringo.

As the shuttle grew fainter, you told me, "The same way wolves raised Romulus and Remus, I was raised by ladybugs."

"Did you also kill your twin?" I asked.

“No, only my shadow.”

“What for?”

“I couldn’t let myself be defined by it anymore. Just like ladybugs refuse to be. We call them ladies, but they aren’t always. We call them bugs, but they are much more—they are hunters, pilots, keystones.”

“Then who would you like to be?”

“Anyone, as long as I don’t shy away from the world. The ladybugs taught me to belong fully. To captivate with flamboyance. To let your enemies know that you are not afraid to be seen.”

“But if they won’t shy away from this world, what are they doing up there?” I pointed to Columbia’s trail of smoke scarring the sky.

“You can’t define something that won’t let you. They show us that even if you’re small, you can still achieve greatness. Anyone can aim for the stars.” You went on to explain that if the quartet of ladybugs were able to hunt aphids in zero gravity, they could be introduced to gardens in space. Inevitably, we had started to think about planting flowers on the moon, making our home on Mars, building Noah’s Ark. You picked a white blossom from the branches of an orange tree and put it in my hair. The petals tickled my ear.

You wanted to know where I had been, how it could have taken me so long to find you when Earth is so small. In 1999, when light years had yet to grow between us, I told you I came from the color blue. I said, “Where I’m from, they say that if a ladybug flies from your hand, you should make a wish.” On the night of July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1999, we tasted milk of the galaxy and the citrus on each other’s lips. When we looked to the stars, we made four wishes each.