

FIREFLIES by Kathe Koja

Kathe Koja's new novel, *Going Under*, will be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in September. She lives in the Detroit area with her husband, artist Rick Lieder. In her first story for us since November 1992, she takes a look at more than one dark side of the universe.

Look, he said. Look at all the stars.

Steep back steps, less porch than stoop, rusting wrought-iron railing and barely room enough for two, but they had once been lovers and so it was easy to sit touching, hip to thigh. His head back against the screen door mesh, looking up; on her right arm a fresh bandage, white and still, like a large moth waiting with folded wings.

They look like fireflies, she said. Awkward, left-handed, she lit a cigarette; without being asked, the man opened her bottle of beer, an Egyptian beer called Stella, *star*. He had just come back from Cairo; she was going somewhere else.

Fireflies? he said. He had a kind of accent, not foreign but not native either: unplaceable long vowels, sentences that curled up at the ends, like genie's slippers, like the way they talk down south. One big backyard, to have fireflies that size?

Think of the grasshoppers, she said, and laughed, winced, dragged on her cigarette. The smoke rose in the darkness; it was very late. Or the dragonflies.

Or the June bugs, he said. His own beer was almost empty. What'd the doctor say?

She did not answer. The cement of the steps was damp, clammy against the backs of their legs; like a slab, a tomb, tombstone and Esperson called, she said. He told me they were taking my paper.

The, the vacuum one? Oh honey that's great! He pressed her leg, the bare skin below the edge of her cut-offs; his hand was warm, with long strong workman's fingers, small hard spots like rivets on the palm, his skin a topographic map of his days: cut wood, carry water, name and number and know all the plants in the world. Sometimes she imagined him out there in the green aether of the woods, any woods: mending a split sapling, digging arbutus, testing the soil. He the earth, she the void and When does it come out? he asked. When will you--

When do you leave again? she asked. Where are you going?

Montreal, he said, but not till December? or maybe the new year, I'm not sure. It depends on--It depends. When did Esperson say--

Look, she said, one hand out, her left hand with its tubed coal of cigarette. Fireflies; look. Above the dark drenched grass a ballet of on and off, little lights delicate, sturdy, irregular. From the porch they watched together in silence, a long wondering silence; he put his hand on her leg again, and squeezed, but absently; he sees this all the time, she thought. In the woods.

Your paper, he said. Tell me what it's about. In layman's terms?

Shifting a little on the steps, trying not to move her right arm. Basically, she said, it's about how most of what's out there, most of what's here--tapping her chest--is vacuum energy. The cosmos is one-third visible and dark matter, two-thirds vacuum energy.

He flicked away an insect, a mosquito, some tiny night-borne pest. I thought nature abhors a vacuum?

This kind keeps the universe expanding, she said. It resists the gravitational pull of the galaxies, and so--
And what?

She said nothing.

What's--hey, are you okay? Are you--

She did not answer; he looked into her face, peered through the darkness then at once looked away, his own mouth twisting down one-sided, like a stroke victim's, its curve the felt echo of her pain and You wan' go in? he asked, voice soft with alarm, his accent more pronounced. You wan' lie down, or--

No, harsh, fighting it, fighting herself; the hand with the cigarette trembled, its light like a firefly trapped in a jar until The doctor, he said at last, when she had finally calmed. He called me.... I'm still the emergency contact, you know?

She did not answer.

He said--

I know what he said. She took a last drag on the cigarette, let it drop and roll down the porch steps to the grass, dying red in a sea of silent green. We had a nice long talk.

There are things you can do. There are still things that you--

I'm not doing anything, she said. While you were in Cairo I was *doing things*, and what the fuck good did any of them do me? I'm sick of all that. She reached for the pack of cigarettes, but her grasp was unsteady and in her lurching motion her right side, right arm struck the black iron rail and she cried out, a brief excruciating cry; and he moaned, low and helpless, a noise unwilling as he tried to right her but No, she said through her teeth, no don't touch me, *don't*.

Silence: night sounds: when her gaze had cleared she saw that he was weeping and Don't, she said, unsteady, and put her left hand on his arm, just above the elbow, the way she always had. It's okay, it's all right--but still he wept, face up toward the night, the wet fierce glottals of a child until Don't make it worse, she said, to make him stop and he did, slowly, sucking in his breath and Get us another beer, she said, to help him.

When he had gone into the house again she laboriously lit another cigarette, sat smoking in the faint noises from inside: water running, the glass clink of bottles. The fireflies were back, as if her pain and his had scattered them like the shadow of some dark beast, but now in the beast's departure they were free again, to play, to go about their amatory errands and It's the males who light up, he said, back on the porch stoop, handing her a fresh beer. They do it for the girls? To get them to notice?

It must work, she said, or there wouldn't be fireflies.

Wonder if it's the same up there? pointing with his own beer into the starlit sky. Light matter and dark matter, you said? Like blinking on and off?

No, she said.

And the, the vacuum, it's what keeps them going, right? Keeps everything going?

Expanding, she said. It increases the rate of expansion.

Like this? he said, and touched not the bandage but the skin above it, so lightly it was almost no touch at

all: and she stared at him through the dark, breath gathered in astounded and furious hurt but before she could speak You're expanding, he said, aren't you? Getting ... more diffuse. Like a plant does, with seeds? Like these trees right here, poplars--when their pods split open, and all the seeds float away everywhere? That's you. With your work, and your articles, and, and who you are.... It just goes on. *You* go on. Resisting the pull, right?--But like poplars out *there*, pointing at the darkness. With the big fireflies?

She said nothing. Her throat felt full and tight, like a seed pod, ready to burst.

Big poplars, he said. Big seeds.

Neither spoke; her left hand took his right; their fingers linked. Finally: Read my paper, she said. When it comes out. Okay? Read it for me.

He squeezed her hand, squeezed it slow and twice and Yes, he said, I will. But I won't understand it.

You understand plenty, she said.

A breeze touched the leaves of the poplars. Past them, past the porch the fireflies moved, in the stars and the breathing night.

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