

Rage, Rage Against the Dying of the Light

By Kathy Wei – Bethesda, Maryland

Summertime used to feel like magic, where the air itself shimmered with excitement. Anything was possible. You could feel it in the smell of dew through an old screen door, the sound of tattered sneakers kicking up dirt in the yard, the taste of a sticky popsicle as it melted down your arm. It was humid enough that just standing still caused a thin layer of sweat to settle over your skin. But rather than feeling oppressive, the heat was pure freedom.

Maybe it was because school was out for months, which at the time felt like forever. Maybe it was because Mom and Dad were busy, so the kids were left to ourselves. Maybe it was because there was nothing to do inside, and so much to see outside. Whatever it was, the magic was strongest at night. The dark of summertime is soft, like a velvet blanket. It nestles quietly overtop everything it touches, dulling each of your senses. Your eyes are muffled by a deep orchid tint, your ears dulled by the constant chatter of grasshoppers, your body slowed through the thick air that clings to your every movement. Summer nights are sluggish. The harder you try to fight it, the more the heat weighs you down. And when you are too tired to look forward and keep going, you lie down and look up.

When the sun dips under the horizon, only the faint glow of the sky lights your way. The concrete sidewalk fades beneath your feet. The road you follow instead is above your head, a vast plain broken into paths by the silhouettes of the treetops. It is under this cover of darkness that a society emerges. The neighborhood children meet after dinner under the gnarled old tree in the apartment complex's courtyard. James picks the first game, because he is the oldest and the tallest. They race each other up and down the road until it no longer holds their interest. Panting,

they lie on the grass and begin to trade their treasures. Three acorns go for a smooth pebble. A forked stick for a bouquet of dandelions. Two children argue angrily if a noisy brown toad is worth four or five muddy crystals fished from the creek. All of a sudden, they stop. The real prize has arrived.

Twinkling lights appear in front of their eyes, floating lazily in meandering loops. The stars have come to down to play. The children swiftly swish their jars through the air, lids already sloppily poked to allow their captives to breathe. They marvel as they do the impossible, holding pure light in their hands. Long ago, people looked to the night sky and read patterns in the millions of stars. By the time we were young, those stars had all but disappeared from our view. But it didn't matter to us, because had stars we could touch. No one thought to ask: what do we do when the fireflies are gone too?