

Dust, Light, Life

Jacqueline Kolosov

Again, somehow, one saw life, a pure bead.
- Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth*

I.

“Why are there so many moths near the lamp, Mama?” my five-year-old daughter Sophie asked, as we sat at our patio table a few weeks ago, the purple-rose of twilight of late April having by now given way to night.

“They’re attracted to the light,” I said, registering the dozen moths circling the porch lamp. Moths are common enough here, especially at this time of year; still I would have expected two, four at most.

“I think they like Tiva’s locust tree,” my husband Bill said, and sure enough, a zigzagging flurry of dun bodies could be seen against the sky near that tree.

We ate our ice cream at the patio table as moths fluttered against the glass casing housing the lantern.

“What will happen if they touch the fire?” Sophie asked.

“They’ll die,” I said.

She scrunched up her nose, frowned. “Why do they do it then?”

“Like I said, they’re attracted to the light,” I replied, aware that this was not a very good answer.

A little Internet research helped me to discover the ‘why’: moths fix their flight by maintaining a constant orientation to the moon. Artificial lights—from candles or lamps—confuse that response, in part because the lights are so close. They create an unnatural situation, and cause the moths to “spiral to the source.”

Over the course of the next few days, the number of moths around the porch light escalated. The turning point came once again after

dinner when I returned inside to find fifty moths swarming around the sunroom lamp, where we’d forgotten to place the screens in our aging windows. “You’ve got to see this,” I called to Bill.

“Moths?” he asked from the other side of the house.

“Yes,” I said.

“Well,” he called back. “Why don’t you have a look at what I found?”

I walked down the hallway to him. “What?”

And then I saw him standing in the bathroom where the brightly lit mirror was covered with moths, their dun-colored bodies battering themselves against the vanity’s bulbs.

The blockbuster newspaper headline—“Biblical Plague of Miller Moths in Lubbock, Texas”—took me by surprise, but the religious symbolism did not; how could it in a town of some two hundred thousand residents and perhaps two hundred churches?

By Lubbock standards, ours is an older house in the 1930-1950s-era neighborhood of Tech Terrace, not far from the university. The playa landscape is traditionally devoid of trees, but here the streets are filled with live oaks, locusts, cottonwoods, and especially the heavy-branched pecan trees. At harvest time, it’s easy to fill your pockets with the fallen nuts scattered across sidewalks and along the edges of lawns. What I didn’t realize was that our foliage-rich neighborhood would prove the ideal breeding ground for this year’s moth infestation.

The Miller moth, another less symbolically charged article said, is actually the army cutworm or *Euxoa auxiliaris*. It gets its name from the fine scales on their bodies that rub off; the powdery dust that remains is like the flour-covered clothing of a miller.

The reason for the so-called “Biblical Plague of Miller Moths” seemed to be the mild winter, for the army cutworm spends the winter as a caterpillar and it’s only in the spring that it burrows into the soil to pupate. With the lack of freezing temperatures this year, most of the population seems to have survived.

What the Miller moths needed to do now was fly west to higher elevations, specifically to Colorado, where there is an abundance of nectar plants, a journey in which I inevitably found symbolic

resonance. Don't heights suggest a wider perspective, a more expansive view?

How many are actually going to make it? I asked, as I swept up dozens of dead moths from shelves and windowsills and the floor over the coming days and weeks.

II.

Some eight months earlier, in late August, around the time the Miller moths were laying their eggs in my neighborhood, the academic year resumed at my university.

Once again I taught a three-hour graduate literature class, this one on Tuesday evenings. On one of these first evenings, just before class, I found my sixty-nine-year-old colleague Trudy in the mailroom, her left hand braced on the counter, as she struggled to reach the book bag on the floor at her feet. "Can I help you?"

From her stooped position, she turned her head to look up at me. "I'm afraid I'm stuck."

"Here," I said, pulling up a chair, and helping to ease her into it, no small effort since her body had gone extremely stiff, rigid.

She looked up at me, her brow furrowed, her brown-black eyes clear, direct. "Quite the situation," she said, matter-of-fact.

I smiled at her and said, "Hold on, I'll be right back."

I rushed down the hall to the classroom where my six graduate students were gathered around the big oval table, chatting. "There's a bit of a situation," I said. "I have to help a colleague."

They stared up at me, their easy conversation turned to silence.

"It's a bit of an emergency," I said.

"Do you need any help?" Maia asked.

"I think I'm okay," I said, unsure of how Trudy would feel if I brought another person, especially a student, into the picture. "But thanks. I'll get you if I do."

Back in the mailroom, Trudy remained in the chair, handbag on her lap, book bag at her side, just as I had left her.

Thunder crackled in the distance, and through the windows I saw it had begun to rain.

"I suppose we'll have a storm," Trudy said.

"Looks like it." By some small miracle there was an umbrella in the lost and found bin.

With Trudy leaning on my arm, I led her to the elevator and then outside to the parking lot, carrying her heavy book bag as I tried to shelter us both from the rain, and simultaneously asking if she was in any condition to drive—she still couldn't bend down, for God's sakes.

"I'll be fine once I'm in the car," she assured me, matter-of-fact.

Getting Trudy into her car—a big white truck that she needed to step up and into—proved no small challenge given the rigidity of her body. "Here, lean on me," I said, as I tried to guide her right leg up and into the driver's seat, hoping that somehow her left leg and she herself would follow.

I still have no clear idea of how I finally managed to get Trudy into the truck, but some twenty minutes later I stood in the rain and watched her drive off, wondering if I'd done the right thing. Or did my actions amount to the height of irresponsibility? (And I was simultaneously aware that I would have to spend the duration of my three-hour class in an absurdly air-conditioned seminar room wearing damp clothes.)

This was the first of many times that I helped Trudy's body to un-stick itself. Yes, that's how I came to think of it, as if she were the Tin Man (or tin woman) in Oz after a rain. It was a more than fitting comparison since the Tin Man's quest is for a heart that he already possesses.

Trudy was the sort of person who might, on a first impression, appear to lack a heart, or at least that expected emotive feminine personality. She didn't chit-chat or gossip or fuss over anyone's baby. For as long as I could remember, she'd worn black or navy pantsuits to work, with white blouses and sensible shoes.

Trudy was a scholar of the English Renaissance and held strong opinions about the role of the classics in our increasingly digitized department. Perhaps the eldest member of the faculty, she proved level-headed, fearless and plain-spoken at meetings. Not once can

I remember Trudy backing away from a confrontational situation, if the issue showed the signs of injustice or suspicious behavior. A few of my colleagues feared her, and one said, “There are people who’ve been burned by Trudy. Of course, that was before my time.”

“It must have been before my time, too,” I said, though I doubted that Trudy would “burn” anyone without just cause. “She’s always been absolutely fair to me,” I added.

Over the years, our brief exchanges about Renaissance literature and poetry had taken on increasing warmth. We talked about Elizabeth I and Christopher Marlowe—I’d earned my masters in Renaissance Drama—and I often quizzed her about Charlie Chaplin, her secondary specialty, though I never directly asked her what about him had piqued her interest.

III.

Some two weeks later, Trudy stood right outside the mailroom trying to pick up her keys with the cane she’d recently begun using. “Here,” I said, stooping to fetch them, “let me help.”

Trudy smiled. “I suppose I should get a cane with a hook on the end.”

“That might not be a bad idea,” I said, unable to imagine the frustration I would feel if the most fundamental actions—like bending down—were suddenly to become momentous challenges.

In the coming months, those challenges only escalated.

It was around mid-October that Trudy stopped driving and her husband began coming to pick her up. Often, I’d find her sitting on a bench outside the elevator where she was waiting for him, unable to stand without some assistance.

“Hello,” her husband would say to me, polite and dignified in his khaki pants and button-down shirt, his face partly hidden beneath a wide canvas hat that he wore regardless of the season. He was Japanese and had been a professor at the university, too—in the sciences I’d heard—though he’d long since retired.

“Hello,” I’d say, and get up before he helped Trudy to stand.

Not once did I introduce myself, and neither did Trudy’s husband, as if by not formalizing our meetings we could overlook

the uncomfortable situation or at least move past it, the way I would move past my daughter’s tantrum over some desired object at the store, or the way my neighbor would look away when Bill and I argued on the front lawn.

The semester moved forward, and by early November the leaves on the trees had yellowed, and the daylight ended ever earlier; all the while, my encounters with Trudy continued. Generally I’d help her when she left the building, which coincided with the start of that Tuesday night class. The fact that the course focused on women poets and liminal experience (or experience outside of physical or spiritual boundaries) seemed an ironic, even troubling connection, as Trudy was in a place of profound physical transition, shuffling slowly down the hallway in the orthopedic shoes she now wore, her body stooped, so that a five minute trip from her office to class would routinely take her three times as long.

Near Thanksgiving I realized that Trudy was spending a good part of her office hours sitting in one of the orange hard-backed chairs in the common area, rather than in her office.

“Are you okay? Can I do anything for you?” I asked the first time I found her there, a hardback volume of Shakespeare’s complete plays open on her lap, her handsome gray head set at an awkward angle.

Startled, she raised her head, blinked at me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, suddenly self-conscious. “If I’m bothering you, just tell me to go away.”

“You’re not bothering me. It’s just hard to get up out of my desk chair,” she explained. “The wheels slip out from under me, and I can’t get my balance. So I’m sitting here.”

“The department should just provide you with a proper chair, right, Michael?” I said, as our Old English colleague emerged from his office. I felt sure that he, too, must be aware of what was happening to Trudy. “We could help you get a proper chair up here, right?”

“Well,” he said, leaning against the doorframe, “if it’s a registered disability, the state has a legal obligation to accommodate Trudy.”

IV.

It was as if someone had taken a tiny bead of pure life and decking it as lightly as possible with down and feathers, had set it dancing and zigzagging to show us the true nature of life.

—Virginia Woolf, “The Death of the Moth”

With the start of spring semester in January, I continued to encounter Trudy on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and often early in the afternoon in the minutes before I taught my senior-level course on the History of the Essay.

During one of the first meetings, my students and I discussed Virginia Woolf’s “The Death of the Moth,” an essay I have been reading and rereading since my mid-twenties when I first fell in love with Woolf’s work.

The essay, which is not more than seven hundred words, enacts the writer’s meditation on a moth—“a tiny bead of pure life”—that is initially “set...dancing and zigzagging to show us the true nature of life.” I emphasize *initially* because in the course of this intensely focused narration, the moth finds himself “in difficulties,” and the creature’s struggle to stay alive enables Woolf’s simple and simultaneously sublime closing declaration, “O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am.”

... [The little bay-coloured moth] could no longer raise himself; his legs struggled vainly. But, as I stretched out a pencil, meaning to help him to right himself, it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death....Stillness and quiet replaced the previous animation. The birds had taken themselves off to feed in the brooks. The horses stood still. Yet the power was there all the same, massed outside indifferent, impersonal, not attending to anything in particular.

In the crowded hallways and on the stairwells between classes, students and teachers bustled past, talking on cell phones, texting, eating, laughing. Occasionally, a blind student would navigate his route more slowly with a guide dog, and of course there were

the inevitable students with feet in casts; but generally the pace between the ten-minute pause was brisk—and if not indifferent, the people hurrying by were not attentive to Trudy, who continued, with increasing frequency, to get stuck in awkward places.

“At least once a day,” she told me when I found her in the lounge, a banana peel at her feet, her slacks having slipped down so that her white high-waisted panties showed, for she had lost at least ten pounds over the Christmas holidays and seemed to grow thinner as the spring semester wore on, while her back became more bowed, and her balance increasingly shaky.

One sleety evening in early March when I sat down beside her on the bench outside the elevator while she waited for her husband, Trudy fixed her sharp brown-black eyes on me and said, “You’re being so kind—why?”

I no longer remember how I replied, though my mind focused on my own parents, now in their late seventies, and living two thousand miles away in the North Shore suburb of Chicago where I grew up. Yes, my mother, at seventy-seven, still practices yoga and can hold a headstand for five solid minutes; even so, her own spine has developed a pronounced curve, and she has shrunk some three inches and two clothes sizes in the last ten years. As for her hands, they are spotted with age and gnarled from arthritis. Yet she rarely complains.

And my father? At seventy-nine he is as healthy as one could expect, despite the fused discs in his spine and the chronic pain in his knees and back that the doctors treat with injections and nerve freezes that temporarily provide some relief. Ten years ago, he was still playing tennis and cross-country skiing. Today, he counts it a good day if he can walk a mile around the local botanic garden.

Did I tell Trudy that this was fundamental to my interest in her? Not exactly, though I did say that I’d like to think that someone would look out for my own parents if they needed some help. “Karma, you know?”

She nodded.

V.

Some ten days into the Biblical infestation of Miller moths, the situation showed no sign of abating. The articles said that the moths would leave an arid region as soon as possible—within ten days to two weeks at the most—once they were hatched. Thing was, the mild winter that seemed to allow them to hatch in huge numbers had given way to a surprisingly rainy spring. Arid west Texas wasn't so arid this April, especially not in my garden, where I usually devoted hours every week to watering the extensive flower and vegetable beds I'd begun establishing four years earlier when we moved into this house.

To try to keep the moths out of the house, I took to turning off all the lights near the entryway at the back and at the front of the house. It took me a few more days to hang stockings filled with mothballs—my mother's suggestion—at every door.

Still, the moths persisted.

Inevitably they got trapped in the garage, so we'd have to be vigilant about keeping the door to the kitchen closed, something that was difficult given that Bill had removed the lock on that door after Sophie had locked us out—on purpose. (Only later did I read that Miller moths avoid daylight and so are drawn to dark places like garages during the daytime hours.)

In late April, in the midst of this moth infestation, I found Trudy in the second floor lounge, her head bowed over that same tome of Shakespeare. "Are you okay, Trudy?" I asked. "Do you need any help?"

"No, no problem," she said, though she was no longer able to raise her head so that she could look directly at me. Instead, for the last few weeks, at least since the March department meeting, her head remained tilted at an almost ninety-degree angle to the left.

"You're sure?" I said, unable to imagine how she was actually going to make it to her class.

"If I need something, I'll call you," she said.

"Okay," I said, and gestured at the Collected Shakespeare, if only to show that I could still talk about something other than health concerns with her. "What are you covering now?"

"*Antony and Cleopatra*," she said. "I'm afraid I'm behind in my preparation for today."

I imagined that the debilitation of her body—the length of time it took her to do anything, that she was reading the book with her face bent some eight inches from the page—had everything to do with the reason she was 'behind.'

I said, "You must have taught that play dozens of times. I'm sure you can simply go in and talk about it."

She smiled, a little uncertainly, or so I thought.

"You sure you're okay?" I said.

"No problem," she said again.

If I didn't leave now, I'd be late for my History of the Essay class. "Okay," I said, telling myself that other people would inevitably come into the lounge over the course of the next half hour.

As I climbed the stairs between the second and third floors, moths lingered everywhere in various stages of dying.

"This is just too depressing," I told my students. "Wherever I look, moths; I just know that the moth I passed on the way upstairs—the one struggling to right itself—is going to be dead or smushed by the time I walk down the stairs again. And that doesn't count the number of moths that find their way into my office—and die."

A few people laughed.

"I vacuumed dozens of them off my screen door last night," practical Katie said.

More laughter.

Someone pointed to the floor. "Oh my god, look—"

Sure enough, a moth was trying to regain its balance on the dirty linoleum.

"It's like that essay I read in some class, the one about the dying moth," Taylor said.

“We read ‘The Death of the Moth’ in here,” the always prepared Jenny corrected, “at the start of the semester.”

“Oh yeah,” Taylor said, and rolled her eyes. “It’s been a long couple of months.”

How could I have forgotten? Me, with my self-described Woolf-ian sensitivity?

Would Woolf have been able to write the essay had she been confronted with a moth infestation rather than the struggle for life of one moth? I asked myself, as I side-stepped around one powdery struggler on the stairwell after class. Would she have maintained her luminous, lyric sensibility if there were moths in her toiletries, nestled in her potted plants, and laying dead—their tiny legs tucked tight against their bodies—in corners and in dresser drawers?

As I neared my office, my other neighbor, Caroline, stepped into the common area, her eyes swollen, her face flushed and damp with tears. “Are you okay?” I asked.

Caroline just shook her head and continued to cry.

In the four years I have known her, Caroline has always been high-spirited and consummately professional. What was going on?

“It’s Trudy,” she cried.

My thoughts flashed back to how I’d left her in the downstairs lounge some two hours ago—*I shouldn’t have left her. My students would have understood.* “Trudy?”

“I was in my office, and luckily I had my door open, and I heard this voice calling, ‘Help me, help me.’ It was Trudy. She couldn’t move.” Caroline continued to cry. “What if I hadn’t heard her?”

“But you did hear her,” I said, gently taking hold of Caroline’s shoulders. “You heard her, and you went to help, right?”

Caroline nodded. “She was in her chair, and her body was all twisted up. I can’t imagine how long she had been sitting there like that.”

“Where is she now?” I asked.

“Her husband came to get her.”

I enfolded Caroline in an embrace, and then Rachel, the medievalist, joined us, and Caroline went through the entire narrative again.

“I shouldn’t be falling apart like this,” she said. “I’m a total mess. It’s just that it reminded me of my mom—she was so helpless. I was so helpless.”

And then I remembered: Friday, tomorrow, would be the sixth year anniversary of Caroline’s mother’s death from breast cancer. We’d talked about how she felt about losing her mother, how much she missed her. The very idea of losing mine terrified me. I knew enough about loss to understand that other events—like that moment with Trudy—could trigger a resurgence of grief such as Caroline’s.

VI.

“There’s something I should tell you about Trudy,” her closest friend in the department, fifty-something-year-old Margaret, another Renaissance scholar, told me some two or three days later.

She’d called in conjunction with the gift certificate for a massage that I’d begun organizing on Trudy’s behalf, convincing myself that such a gesture would somehow matter. At the very least, it would show that we cared.

“Yes?” I said.

“I just don’t know if a massage will do any good. You see, there’s a reason for what’s going on with her. No one else knows in the department. If I tell you—”

“I won’t say anything.”

“She has Parkinson’s.”

“Oh,” I said, recalling a neighbor from my childhood, a man whose hands shook when he walked with his cane; whose head craned forwards, like a turtle’s emerging from its shell. That man was in a wheelchair before he was sixty.

“She’s been dealing with it for the last five years,” Margaret continued, “but it’s become truly debilitating only this year.”

“Yes,” I said, almost adding that the disintegration from January until now—late April—was dramatic, like a steep roller coaster ride. Simultaneously, I felt real awe at Trudy’s perseverance. *She never complains.*

“That’s why I’m not sure the massage makes sense,” Margaret said.

“At the very least it will get the blood flowing in her body,” I said. “That will be good for her.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

We talked for a while longer about other possible strategies for Trudy’s future; apparently, Trudy had telephoned Margaret more than once when she’d gotten stuck in her kitchen and her husband wasn’t home. And there had been another incident in some public place—

“Trudy needs a support network,” I said, though even as I spoke, I was unsure if I wanted—if I could—commit myself to being a part of that journey.

VII.

On the last day of classes, I led Trudy to the elevator, then out onto the bench facing the parking lot where I helped her to sit down. “My husband doesn’t want me to be alone for a minute,” she said in her usual matter-of-fact way. “What he doesn’t realize is that I usually just have one crisis a day.” She smiled.

For now, I thought, what Margaret said reverberating through my mind. In the interim, I’d read that Parkinson’s eventually impacts one’s cognitive and not just one’s physical abilities. I recalled the remarkable essays Trudy had written, the prestigiously published books, the praise from her former students. How long before Trudy’s scholarly, rational mind would be affected? Had the process already begun?

She thanked me again for the handmade card—with a picture of Charlie Chaplin—and for the gift certificate. “I’ll need to write you all thank you notes.”

“No, you don’t,” I said. “You don’t need to thank us. Really, Trudy—”

“I’ve never had a real massage,” she said, and laughed. “My husband’s no good at them.”

“Are you going to call him now, your husband?” I said, checking my own watch, for it was nearly 5:20, and I had to pick up Sophie at preschool within the next half hour. She hated being the last child on the playground.

Trudy nodded, but instead of reaching for the phone, she began telling me about the physical therapy she would start on Monday. “They want to stop me from plopping,” she said, and I understood that she was referring to the way she dropped, like a heavy sack, into a chair.

I looked down at her deeply veined hands, the knuckles enlarged like my mother’s, at the scratches on her forearms. How had she gotten them?

“I really do have to go and get my daughter, Trudy,” I said, touching her arm.

“I’ve seen her with Bill. She’s a real chatterbox, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” I said.

“My own son was quiet; at least that’s what the doctor said. Yet even he was too much for me.”

I stared, eager, despite the hour, to learn more, for it was hard to picture Trudy being overwhelmed by a small child; even harder, though, was picturing her as a woman close to my own age. Since I’d joined Tech, Trudy had been salt-and-pepper haired and the oldest member of the department. What had Trudy been like in her forties?

“Now my grandson tears around the house. That one,” she grinned, “is a real handful. I can’t imagine how they handle him. My poor daughter-in-law runs—”

“Trudy,” I said again. “Would you call your husband? I really do have to go. Sophie’s waiting.”

She reached into her handbag, found the phone, sent a text message—something I don’t yet know how to do.

“We’ll get together soon,” I said, looking directly into her brown-black eyes, as I had that first Tuesday evening last September.

“I’d like that,” she said, “as long as it’s at your house. My own sink’s full of dishes.”

“Of course,” I said, checking my watch: 5:35. I scanned the road for that white truck I’d helped Trudy into back in the fall.

“You know,” she said, just as that truck came into view, “I think this is going to be my last year of teaching.” She rubbed her brow, her eyes level with my own—despite her crooked head. “Question is—what next? The nursing home?”

“You’re far from that,” I said, far too easily, for what did I know?

She leaned into me then, and I breathed in her powdery scent mixed with the day’s heat and something greener, like spring.

Again, somehow, one saw life, a pure bead, Woolf writes as “The Death of the Moth” reaches its inevitable close. The moth gives up its fight—its body relaxes and its wings cease their shuddering—and in that moment, itself a bead of light secreting an inevitable darkness, Woolf sees life. Always, that ending creates a shock of recognition in me, the remarkable truth of it, the fact that the end of a living creature’s journey sharpens one’s knowledge, not just of death, but of life itself.

As I walked towards my bicycle, looking back just once as Trudy settled into the passenger seat of the white truck, a feathery thrumming buffeted my hair, and then a single moth escaped into the warm, evening air. ☞