

A MOTH FLIES IN BROOKLYN

by Thomas J. Campanella

Were an official tree chosen for Brooklyn, the honor would no doubt go to *Ailanthus altissima*—stinking ash, tree-of-heaven, ghetto palm, the tenacious weed of Betty Smith's 1943 novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. As a child raised in the Flatlands section of the borough, I never had to wander far to come upon a clump or specimen of ailanthus. Down by the Belt Parkway was my favorite stand, a venerable grove which filled an entire embankment near Exit Eleven, beside the Flatbush Avenue overpass. The ailanthus there reached bravely and greenly skyward, in spite of the carbon monoxide and road-salt and the indelicacies of highway maintenance crews. And these hardy trees were, unbelievably, home to a vigorous population of *Samia cynthia*—silk worms descended from creatures brought to America in the late nineteenth century, in the hope of creating a native silk industry. The venture failed, but the worms survived and their hosts gained a secure foothold in the new land.

As an avid chaser of butterflies and moths, I was fascinated by *cynthia*. It was not just a lost rustic, but truly a child of the city. My beloved Golden Nature Guide, *Butterflies and Moths*, was quite clear on this: the *cynthia* moth, it said, is "found mostly near cities from Boston to Washington, D.C." (Its range has since spread, presumably along with that of the ailanthus; the latest edition of *Butterflies and Moths* describes the moth's territory as stretching "south to Savannah, and west to Indiana.") The Audubon Society *Guide to North American Insects and Spiders* delineated *cynthia's* domain as "Major metropolitan areas...where ailanthus is found." I had found a bit of urban nature that seemed in a different league than the starlings and pigeons and other common urban creatures. The *cynthia* moth was enigmatic, rarely seen, and remarkably beautiful.

One afternoon, I took several of the plump, horn-studded caterpillars home and placed them in an old dry fish tank. Every few days I would replenish their supply of ailanthus leaves, until one day I found that the caterpillars had tucked themselves into husklike brown cocoons. Several weeks passed, and then one morning my breath was taken

away: the cocoons had opened. Dewy-winged *cynthia* moths were resting on the twigs, their discarded hatcheries nearby. The insects waited for the fluids in their plump bodies to pump wingward, to unfurl the powdery sheets like petals in the morning sun. Hours passed and the big moths slowly took form. Their regal wings spread nearly five inches now, painted in pastel pinks and browns, marked with the beautiful, haunting "eyes" characteristic of the family Saturniidae. Fine antennae, like newly unfurled fern fronds, hung at their heads. It seemed decidedly uncouth to name these magnificent insects "moths"—a term which brought to mind holey winter woolens and the grandmotherly aroma of moth balls.

I kept them only long enough to show my parents and friends what had become of the "worms," and then I released them into the Brooklyn sky. There were six or seven moths I let fly that day, all females. But one I kept behind.

I had always been thrilled to find traces of nature in my city. A cardinal on a neighbor's fence, a wild pheasant in the Gerritsen salt marshes, a flock of Canada geese hunkered down on the tawny March ballfields of Marine Park—these things I never expected to encounter as a Brooklyn child. When I did, nature, even in these wonderful forms, seemed reticent, on the defensive; it had to be searched out and flushed. And then, one night during the summer of the moths, nature in all its wild mystery came to me.

I had built a small cage for my last moth, from a section of coarse wire screen tacked to two wooden disks. That evening I took the cylindrical pen and placed it on a table in the garden. The moon silvered the staked tomatoes, and pressed bold shadows of them into the russet-brown garage wall. I sat and waited and watched, hoping that the newly emerged insect would attract a mate from the moonlit city sky. My Golden Guide, or some other trusty text, had hinted that such a thing would happen, that from as far as five miles away a mate would be called to join the female and together stoke the engines of life. As optimistic as I was, I suspected that the writers of my well-worn Guides had not Brooklyn (nor any city, for that matter) in mind when they wrote their evocative little essays.

I had fallen asleep, on the chaise-lounge in the backyard. My mother had placed a blanket on me and let me be with my moth. It was deeply quiet and still when I awoke; the moon was low and dim, but I could see in the pale of light that my companion was no longer alone. Through the wide gaps in the wire screen, the caged moth was locked in procreative embrace with a male she had lured out of the night sky. Her pheromones had conquered Brooklyn; a tiny bit of wildness had slipped into my presence, into this one small garden in the city. Led by its frondlike antennae, the visitor had glided over the tarred flat roofs of Flatlands, over the idling buses and parked cars to be with my moth. It may have come from as far away as the Rockaways or Prospect Park, though I suspected it was

just another lost child from Exit Eleven.

In the morning I set the last moth free. She would wander toward the ailanthus, I imagined, searching from a prospect high above the streets after the sun had gone down behind the rowhouses of south Brooklyn. Or maybe it was that the moth was simply heading home, guided by some unseen force to bed down her offspring in the rough grove by the acrid rush of the Belt Parkway. ●

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