

*James Carbaugh*

**Nature's Aeronautical Bounty**

Nature's aeronautical gifts were a constant in the lives of my four brothers and me. We had a fascination with all things that could fly or be flown. Through experience, we had discerned that many things aeronautical occurred naturally in our small world. They were self-propelled, and hence, in our eyes, wonders of nature – wonders that provided us with hours of entertainment. There was nothing artificial about them and there was never any cost involved, meaning no reliance on the local five-and dime. We invariably turned the air time of any of nature's gifts into some type of competition - perhaps the longest or fastest in flight, the most accurate in reaching a specific target, or even the most beautiful.

Nature's easiest prey was a June bug. It was neither menacing nor dangerous and was small enough for my four brothers and me to catch. Tying a string, or better yet some thread onto June bugs was occasionally difficult, but on the best days, highly satisfying, even as they tried very hard to escape their temporary detainment. They buzzed a great deal during the process but once ensnared, they were ready to entertain, zipping around their universe and causing us to move quickly from place to place as we held their tether ever so tightly. The name of the flying bugs was derived from the month of their prevalence, although we knew that their tenure was more prolonged, many times extending from the month of May into at least the first two or three weeks of July. My brother BB was usually the most successful in commandeering the bugs, sometimes having three or four of them attached to different fingers. He was the "head" bug man. Those uninformed and uninitiated observers into the world of June bugs appeared to think that we "June buggers" looked bizarre. Why were we making so many unstructured movements and howling with laughter at the flight of our particular bug, or bugs? When we decided to create a race, it was difficult to promote the bug of choice in the correct direction. Once again, BB, always a winner in any competition, seemed to have a magical touch with his June bug or bugs. Our mother, MamaLu, citing her visual limitations due to blind spots on her eyes, stayed clear of our competitions because she felt as if the flying participants were taking aim at her face. It was a sad day when our fun bugs disappeared, perhaps going elsewhere to entertain other children; but, then there were always butterflies. They presented an entirely different aesthetic than June bugs. They may have seemed to be an easy catch, but MamaLu emphatically banned us from collecting them. They were too beautiful and fragile. They were also plentiful because we had numerous plants of butterfly weed growing in our yard. They lighted on them and were also fond of the bachelor buttons and lilies that we had borrowed from the ditches and fields near our house. A yellow butterfly in the midst of blue bachelor buttons was a visual gift beyond compare. Butterflies were to be admired - not secured in empty mason or mayonnaise jars nor any other container, much less attached to a piece of thread. On rainy days when we could not be outside to observe them, MamaLu would bring out some paints and several blank pieces of cardboard retrieved from our father's laundered shirts and ask us

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

to remember the most beautiful butterfly we had seen recently, and then, to produce it artistically on our mini-palettes. Mine always had a preponderance of blazing blue and yellow. BB preferred the black and yellow variety. My other brothers used whatever color they liked at the moment, whether or not they had ever actually seen their particular combination in our back yard. Curt used the colors of events, orange and black for Halloween and red and green for Christmas, even though the butterflies were not to be seen at these times. Paul and Johnny had a passion for purple, sometimes adding red or pink to the configuration. The final works of art were put into various places in our house, even some displayed on the always memorable mantel piece in the living room.

Humming birds were in the same untouchable category as the butterflies, observed but not disturbed. They were so amazingly beautiful and exciting to watch. We spent hours tracking them as they darted from flower to flower, staying at each one for merely seconds at a time. They were so limited in their landings that it was difficult at times to discern their colors because of this innate flightiness.

Other birds were additions to the aeronautical world but it was strictly verboten to even think about catching one, even the smallest wren. Robins, blue jays, and mockingbirds seemed to abound in our neck of the woods. We were to observe their beauty, to watch them build nests and search for worms, and to delight in their successful birthing of future generations. On many occasions we witnessed a mother sending her babies out of the nest and into the larger world. We felt very cautious because our cats, always at least four or five, wanted to catch the young before they had a chance to fly. It was always an exciting day, regardless. Once we reported to MamaLu the momentous event, we would celebrate. She turned on the largest burner of our tiny apartment-sized stove, poured in some Mazola oil and popcorn kernels in the largest pan we possessed, and produced a gigantic pot of yellowish-white popcorn, which we sprinkled with salt. We celebrated joyously our baby birds, downing our popcorn with iced tea and lemon wedges. It was a glorious event!

Grasshoppers seemed to fly occasionally but were never airborne for a significant amount of time. They seemed to jump quite a distance but landed and when we caught them, we immediately had a jumping contest to determine who had the grasshopper with the longest jump. Frogs were also in the same category as grasshoppers and they were able to traverse the landscape in beautiful jumps. Occasionally a neighbor would stop by and ask us to catch several for him. He removed their legs and tossed them in flour, salt, and pepper. Then he deep-fried them and served the final product as hors-d'oeuvres for his invited guests. We did appreciate the money we earned, but we could assuredly state that the legs never appeared on our MamaLu's plates. She just could not imagine that they were edible. And, we came to understand that in some countries grasshoppers were also considered delicacies. We did not have any requests for them from our neighbors, nor did we entertain the idea of eating them.

Although flies, mosquitos, wasps, yellow jackets, bumble bees, and other insects were aeronautical we did not consider them worthy of our appreciation (honey bees were an exception). It was a travesty to put the

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

others in the same category as June bugs or butterflies, even grasshoppers and frogs. Honey bees were appreciated for their honey – but we did not have the knowhow to encourage them to produce for us. A neighbor had several hives, and he provided us with an ample supply. We enjoyed many breakfast biscuits with butter and honey.

Aeronautical wonders were not limited just to the animal kingdom for my four brothers and me. Falling leaves were a transcendent aspect of September, October, and November, tinting the landscape with a variety of colors. Sometimes they just fell through the air, but at other times they twirled and engulfed us in their paths. Red leaf maples were our favorites with their red, yellow, and orange colors. We had contests to determine who had collected the largest number of red ones within a designated time period. If short on red, we searched for soft yellow ones from the silver maples. This activity provided hours of fun and handfuls of leaves in the cooler days of fall. We saved our treasures and used them in a small bonfire in the evening, perfect for roasting marshmallows.

Waking up to a snow-covered world was a treat only hoped for in the Piedmont region of our state. It did not snow often but the occasional flurries and heavier snowfalls provided us with the joy of catching snowflakes. We would make claims that we had the most intricate design or the largest – if we could hold them long enough before they melted. MamaLu would give each of us a small plate that she had placed in the freezer to use to display them for longer than a few seconds. We also made snowballs and built snow people using a carrot as a nose and two rocks for eyes. They provided hours of fun as we ran about within the snow scape and the falling white canopy, soaking ourselves with the white precipitation.

In the heat of the summer, rain became our very good friend. It cooled the air, our bodies, the trees, and other flora, including our usual eight to ten tomato plants. It was understood that we could strip down to our underwear and splash among the puddles. We didn't have to worry about shoes because we never wore them in the summer – and resented having to put them on when school started in September. MamaLu summoned us only when lightning and thunder made unwelcomed visits. Sprinkling rainfall was not as exciting as the heavy type, where we could actually feel individual drops hitting us on different parts of our bodies. On rainy Saturday afternoons, MamaLu would appear with a bar of Ivory soap and washcloths, imploring us to get cleaned up for Sunday's activities. We wouldn't have to take a bath later that evening if we succeeded in getting at least some of the dirt and grime off of our bodies. "Don't forget to lather up your hair and let the rain rinse it well," she reminded us. We stripped off our underwear and became five naked boys laughing, joking, and running about in nature's shower. We were shameless. MamaLu always placed a towel for everyone on the tiny back porch. Once we were showered and had on our shorts, there was not to be any more outside activities! We could polish our Sunday shoes and then play inside games or watch television. The appearance of hail was very rare, but we would sneak outside and try to play in the usually brief storm, using our metal trash can lids as our armor.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

Some of nature's aeronautical bounty was not airborne unless the wind was blowing and/or we used our hands and arms. Maypops, the green egg-like fruit of the plant with the same name, made the most wonderful weapons when thrown at the enemy of the moment, perhaps another brother or a nearby neighbor. They would pop and explode upon landing on their targets, emitting a gooey, sticky, substance. And, sometime we ate the insides if they seemed "ripe" enough. They had a taste somewhat similar to cucumbers.

Sling shots were also a tactical weapon which sent nature's pecans, walnut, stones, and other items through the air - but they were banned as such because the ammunition was too dangerous. They could do serious damage! We could only use them if we created a clearly defined target area, usually on the trunk of a large tree. There were usually a can or cans of leftover spray paint which served the purpose of demarcation, including some unusual colors - pink, army green, black, deep red - but they served their purpose.

The wind was more effective in the flying of paper airplanes and kites. They did not have to be purchased. A piece of notebook paper could be easily converted into an airplane of some type. When thrown into the wind, they could travel quite a distance and sometimes do flips, turns, and all sorts of feats. BB excelled in creating them and he tried to teach the rest of us how to master that art. The same was true for creating kites. Yes, they were available at the five-and-dime stores if any of us had cash. The answer usually was "no," so we were left to use newspaper or saved wrapping paper for the kites themselves as well as their long tails. The internal structure was provided by thin sticks from nearby trees. The wrapping paper varieties were very attention grabbing, the colors being so dynamic; and there was always some string available somewhere in the house as it was a standby for so many household fixes, causes, and other miscellaneous purposes.

The wind was always a must for the exciting display of blowing bubbles. We saved the wands and bottles whenever we purchased them. That way, we didn't have to rely on a new bottle every time we went on a blowing bonanza. We just concocted a soapy solution using whatever soap was available - usually Ivory. The bubbles were always beautiful and on windy days traveled quite a distance.

A clear night was always full of celestial magic, imagination, and wonderment. My brothers and I slept many nights on army blankets in our back yard where we examined the vast nightscape. We searched for brilliant shooting stars and were amazed every time we saw one. It seemed that some nights were actually meant to be observed as we could barely keep up with the large number of those flaming meteors blazing across the sky. Equally as fascinating were the phases of the moon, especially those rare occasions when there was the awe-inspiring super moon. We created all sorts of stories to explain its existence so close to us, giving us a rare atmospheric brilliance. Much closer to earth, in fact in our own back yard and within our reach, there were equally entertaining lightning bugs twinkling about. They were wonders of bio-luminescence. They were most evident at twilight when we captured many of them and put them in empty mayonnaise jars which we had filled with grass and punched holes

### Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

in the lid. We watched these amazingly electrifying insects as we drifted off to sleep. MamaLu did not like for them to be incarcerated, so as she checked on us as the night progressed, she emancipated them. We knew that this would happen, but we certainly enjoyed them for a brief period of time.

On each and every day and night, Mother Nature provided us with countless aeronautical treats, by way of flora and fauna, atmospheric and meteorological phenomena. As MamaLu made the rounds saying “good-night” to my four brothers and me, she reminded us of the joy we had experienced through nature; and she urged us to be thankful for all those things so “bright and beautiful” as we said our prayers for the evening. Nature’s aeronautical bounty always had such a calming effect on us – a serenity that was ever present, always entertaining, and always appreciated.