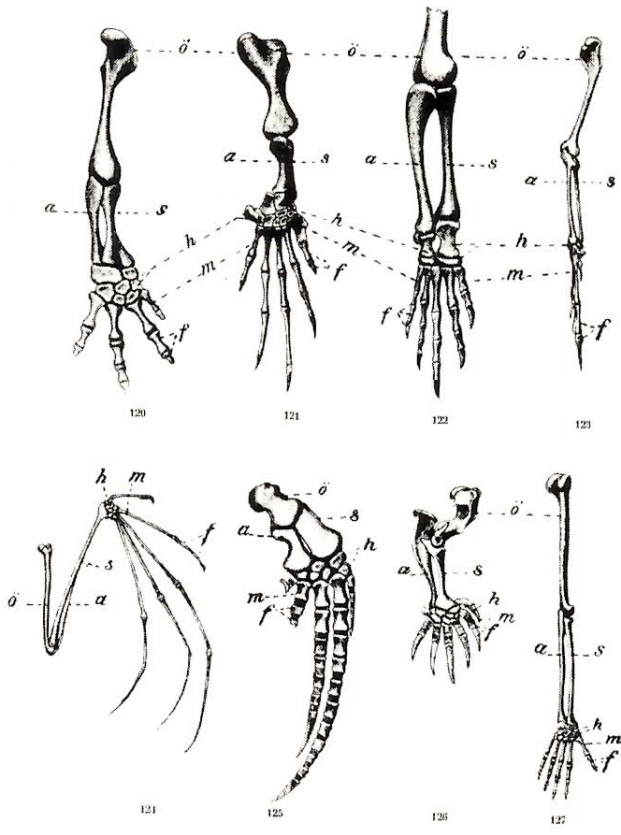


*Luna Moth*  
from *Feather Beard*  
Frank Carter, IV

The feathers I keep in the folds of these letters give the words wings so that they can take flight in dark places. After reading them again, I finished my ascent of Roane Mountain through the tunneled gardens of rhododendron, the path strewn with their pink and red and white blossoms. I climbed from Roane over the grassy balds of the highlands where my heart opened to the sky and I was transformed. The knee-high grass, filled with fragrant wildflowers, tickled my legs and made them itch. I lost the trail for three miles following the beauty of stone islands, masked in orange and luminous green lichens that capped the sheer ridgelines.

I walked until dusk, my feet throbbing, my body aching from a long, hard day. The terrain resembled the angst I carried on the inside: the troubled, steep, and challenging landscape of the mind. After twenty miles and weary, I found a camp on the east side of a grassy ridge: Little Hump Mountain. The site was beneath three apple trees above a group of boulders. As I climbed the ridge to camp, the sun was setting, and the light cast my walking shadow on the scrub and trees in the distance. My shadow climbed with me. I pitched the tent under the apple trees and sat on the boulders to watch the sundown. Unspeakable beauty. The light seemed to run through me. The world vibrated, it hummed, it sang out in its splendor, radiant and on fire. All things called me, beckoned me to listen, to empty myself of the heaviness I was carrying, and to open my heart to the moment so that the world could pour into me. I was offered a gift: to begin again, to be born in a new moment, to relinquish the angst, the frustration, the pain, to let it flow out of me like a river spilling over a cliff—in breath, in blood, to surrender.



I stood atop the largest boulder. A mist rolled in from the distant mountains and moved toward me like an apparition. The fog funneled around the light, veiling the sun in a sort of eclipse—a blood-red sphere I could stare directly into without burning the retina. I heard gasping and purged exhalation like the sound of breaching whales blowing air from their spouts. A mother whitetail and then another and then another: all around me they rose from their grassy beds to see me in secret—to watch me, to warn one another of a possible threat. I froze in place so as not to startle them, and then a fawn stood and then another and then another, all covered in spots and shrouded by the fog. I was camped in a nursery among the mother whitetails and their newborns. More exhalation and I realized the outward breaths were a language, a way of communicating location and condition, a way of finding one another to lie down and nurse.

A mother deer darted into the brush, the only cover on the mountain, and her little fawn followed weary and wobbling. The high grass was alive with their respiration: families of deer hidden in their soft beds. It was as if the mountain were breathing, quaking with life. The fog cleared with a strong breeze and lightning flashed in a thunderhead in the distant east over the smoky blue ridges. The gloaming made the mountains glow purple and blue: ridges stacked behind ridges stacked behind ridges until the world met the horizon. I watched the dark edge of the most distant ridge where the sun would sink and dip beneath the Earth.

I was overcome with tears, with thankfulness and forgiveness. I felt cleansed and full. The deer went quiet in their breathing, and the owls stirred in the cloak of night, hooting and whooping back and forth across a holler below me. I walked to the mountaintop to watch the moon rise and the stars burn. The last of the sun sent color into the scattered fingers of clouds and then night and a crescent moon: bright white light, a sideways grin. In this moment, the minutes between what are the remains of a day and what is night, an object flew from the dying color of the sun directly toward me. A bat, I thought, a swift. It flew into my chest above my heart. It stuck to me: a luna moth the size of my hand: its soft, emerald wings aglow like two burning embers, its antenna like a pair of raven feathers, and its proboscis a delicate, curling spiral readied for the nectar of the Gray's lilies who lift their heads to the moon in the darkness.

The luna moth lives in a threshold space. She represents the in-between: born of the setting sun and alive in the light of the moon. I

placed my hand beneath the moth's front legs, and facing down, she crawled onto my hand, covering it completely, in a instant taking flight, up and up into the darkness and gone. Shivering in my coat, I walked down the path and crawled into my tent.

The fog blew in again, and this time it set in for the night. I slept in a cloud. I awoke once to urinate and stepped outside. I could not see two feet in front of me.