

Firefly



Liliane Giraudon

For Geoffrey Coppini

—translated from French by Nicole Halmi

Luciole glows.
Not a firefly, but still Luciole glows.
Eyes made up.
Mouth coated with a slick of cocoa pomegranate.
There's no need to hurry.
Everyone will get some.
It's not time, not yet.
Those waiting are patient.
They're not worried.
They've paid for their seats.
They know that the man they're addressing is style personified.
Luciole might be a woman.
But not quite.
It's the reason they've hired her at Vegas for the season.
This season will settle all debts.

Luciole isn't a coleoptera.
Neither glowworm nor firefly, she'll nevertheless remain associated in
memory with these small, rhythmically blinking herbaceous predators.

Like them, she glows in the female night, her chaotic and fragile
 memory registering long after their disappearance.
 Her real name is Lucien.
 Later Lucie.
 And in Vegas, Luciole.
 The O glows most.
 It rules the movement of the silver heels on which she's perched,
 gliding.
 She's staying at the hotel on the lake for the season.
 She loves the lake and the lake loves her.

Alice had a mirror.
 Perseus, a shield.
 That summer, we had nothing.
 So each night we walked towards the lake to drink tepid beers in a
 miserable club called Vegas.
 Because at Vegas, there was Luciole.
 A blind stripper.
 All the guys and girls my age wanted to see Luciole.
 All the guys and girls knew that Luciole was neither a stripper nor blind.
 Some of them had caught a glimpse of Luciole's very white body
 plunging into the lake.
 A real trout, they said.
 Others laughed about the size of Luciole's feet.
 The artificially vacant eyes.
 But all of them came back.
 They formed a group.
 A constellation.
 And inside their pack, like a sort of battalion: a nucleus.
 The offspring of a lady and a swan.
 That's what was forged that summer.
 Four.
 There were four of us.
 Two guys and two girls.
 Avid readers of horoscopes, and unwitting occupants of shapeless
 positions.
 Already suffering, like common beasts, from the plague.

Except that this plague was still invisible.
It slumbered in each of our hearts like a little sleeping animal.
Taking years to spread through the psyche.
There unleashing its gangrene.

Faced as we were with confused and insignificant dreams masquerading
as real dreams, something of a real dream or an anti-destiny played out
for the four of us that summer.

The paths that led to the lake were overgrown and we had to bring
flashlights when the night was too dark.

The sand on the paths muffled the vibration of the walkers' steps.

The whole of the nocturnal journeys produced an imperceptible
strangeness and gave the landscape (as sonic as it was visual) a
clandestine air.

Wasn't it a matter of not being fooled about what makes a man and
what makes a woman?
Of becoming one?
This is what was at stake that summer, not far from the lake.

Male and female he created them.
A ravishing scale model.
The subject's introduction to the world.
And later, its dispersion into it.
Each little horde would be governed by a robust male with unlimited
power at his disposal, all of the females belonging to him.
It was up to the sons to band together to destroy this father and devour
him.

This attempt at identification through killing and devouring did not
seem like mere fable to us, but like the transmission of information
necessary to our survival.
There were four of us.
Two guys and two girls.

United since childhood as siblings of our own choosing.
 Our bonds were based on a perfect permeability.
 What one of us thought was immediately grasped by the other—
 the intensity of our attachments were deepened further still by the
 complete chastity that governed them.

Two guys and two girls.
 Entirely absorbed in the *noms de guerre* we gave ourselves.
 Castor and Pollux for the guys, Helen and Clytem for the girls.
 Neither a faithful copy nor a true imitation, but a forgery taken straight
 from children's stories on which we modeled our bodies, as foreign to
 us as the swans and their cries further down the lake on stormy nights.

Writing these lines, I see that I can no longer bar from this page this
 other heroine, having come (why and in search of what enlightenment)
 to feed off the reenactment of an old episode, reemerging from the
 night-memory to which time had reduced her.
 Unless, of course, she had been hastily made up (like a table and with
 perfect fiction) for the purposes of this narrative.

Hilda Doolittle enters.

Nude, with small but high breasts, she crosses through the light in an
 Italian garden.
 Or else the scene could take place at Corfu.
 Or else seated on the out-dated Victorian canapé in a hotel room on a
 Greek island.
 Bruised and apart.
 Projecting terrible images on a wall.
 Or else even in Vienna.
 Hilda doesn't find any fresh gardenias to deliver to the Professor.
 Too bad.
 He'll get everlasting orchids.
 Maybe you're not happy said the Professor, who she now calls Papa.
 The professor doesn't like cats or apes.
 During their sessions (she reclines), he spins a signet ring around his
 finger.

She remembers having left New York during the summer of 1911, but she can't recall if her meeting with Frances had been the year before, the year of the comet.

He eventually reveals to her that she had two things to hide: on one hand, she was a girl, but on the other, she was a boy.

She writes to Bryher, "I am never, except at certain hours of writing and certain hours in which I forget writing, free. Let me write, then let me forget that I write..."

To forget that one writes whatever comes, when what comes emerges quickly and strikes, imposes an unexpected body that abruptly departs, disappearing like it appeared.

Just as not all dreams are foreign to the dreamer, the lake that summer was foreign to neither Luciole, nor to our foursome.

It is outside of the show that Luciole glowed.

Even the texture of the lake and its luminosity, like a metallic flatness covering it, were upset.

And each night, the alternating glimmers from flashlights along the paths that led up to Vegas seemed to weave a network of mysterious significations.

Below, the world, immersed.

Higher up, the grotto of revelations.

Like oblivion, that secret desire, the foursome's constitution seemed to outsiders to be as hermetic as it was incongruous.

Its rituals closed off a little world surrounding it, and what we called "the government of the living" could only be imposed on us in a fatal confrontation.

Ape's kin, Helen aped Castor: to penetrate or to be penetrated seemed to us a dirty exploit.

Saying more than we knew was a common practice where a feeling of stalemate quickly became cruel.

The pattern of lines on a palm told us more about the reality of our desires than did the wild rectification imposed by the laws that weighed on everyone.

I won't reveal to anyone the character I assumed: Castor, Pollux, Helen, or Clytem.

Moreover, the roles were deliberately made to be exchanged.

At the moment of my attempt to make this disappeared episode resurface, the other characters are dead.

The acutely distinctive smell of the lake, both bland and oil-polluted, comes back to me in successive waves like the spectacle of young bodies being exhibited amid laughter.

Snatches of singing, of breaths.

One night lumped with the others, then the mornings and our swimming like ennui, terrible—only the perspective afforded by a visit to Vegas could appease it.

Did existence weigh as heavily on others as it did on us?

Only the sporadic presence of Luciole, the execution of her lamentable but deeply moving number, saved us.

Without knowing it, we had jumped the track.

The strangeness of our resemblances no longer seduced us.

The similarity of our thoughts, this telepathy that worked in such a miraculous manner, everything seemed to have been dipped in a glowing dye bath.

The lake itself became a character and the typography of the paths aided in the destruction of our group.

If it takes five thousand fireflies to produce the light equivalent to the flame of one candle, that summer, a single character had divided and become four teenagers.

By fall, our group had burst.

Without a word.

And with it, the bodily refusal that had been built on it.

Elsewhere, Hilda Doolittle finally succeeded in bringing Freud the gardenias that he loved so much.

But this time it was in London, in the big house with the garden, his exile.