



The Darkest Place is Around the Light

Anthony Schneider

The first kites were flown in China about three thousand years ago; they were made of bamboo and silk. I think about kites when I should be studying biology. Pistons and stamens, sporangia, alkaloids. I have trouble memorizing stuff, which is why my uncle pays for Jimmy the tutor. He's in college and lives in a house off-campus. It's only a short walk, and my mother thinks it's good for me to get out. She thinks I'm depressed, even for a teenage girl. Duh. Jimmy the tutor is tall, dark, handsome. At least to me. Actually, he's skinny, like he hasn't quite grown into his body yet, or forgot to eat for two months. He has a long nose that looks Italian (others might say Greek schnoz) and dark wavy hair that he pushes out of his eyes all the time. Like I said, he's in college, so he doesn't have pimples like the boys in my school. He lopes more than walks in his faded Levi's or frayed khakis.

Jimmy is teaching me how to cheat. He recommends using a pin to scratch words into the side of a pencil. You can take a few pencils into any exam. The trick, of course, is which words to scratch. He calls that the strategy. The other trick is being able to read the names scratched into the side of a pencil without looking like you're trying to read something scratched into the side of a pencil. He calls that tactics. One is no good without the other. He smokes pot. Jimmy tells me this, but he won't smoke with me or even give me a joint. He says I'm too young. He looks at my boobs sometimes. Not that they're so big or anything. Peg, my sister, has the good rack in the family. Still, boys seem to like breasts. I stare at him with my mouth open. I imagine kissing him and wonder what he thinks I'm thinking about. I don't try to stop myself. We sit at Jimmy's kitchen table, textbooks open, a row of highlighters and pencils and coffee or iced tea. It's getting warm now and the windows are open most days, and often there's a fly caught between the window and the screen, buzzing up and down, round and round. *Musca domestica*. Flies are idiots. They flap this way and that, over and over, following the same stupid flight pattern, until eventually they get lucky or die from exhaustion. I wonder if a fly feels pain

when it bangs its *arista*, *antenna* or *occhio composto* into glass. Biology hasn't taught me this.

Fact: no one really knows why flies are attracted to light. One theory holds that they are guided by the moon, and they think a lightbulb is the moon and keep trying to fly by its light. Flies don't have Google Maps. Another hypothesis says flies are nocturnal, so they fly toward the dark, away from the light, but the darkest place is around the light, so they get confused. Here's what I think: flies are idiots. You don't need very much wind to keep a kite aloft. Deltas, diamonds and dragon kites fly well in light winds. Box kites and parafoils require stronger winds.

I can't decide if I want to be friends with Jimmy or have sex with him. I don't have a lot of friends and I've never had sex, so there's no control experiment. We sit at his table and review the different kinds of vascular plants. I know my *xylem* and *phloem*, can tell an *arborescen* from an *anacardium*. You just have to memorize, figure out mnemonic tricks, or carve the thing you can't remember into the side of a pencil. I stare at his hands and sinewy forearms, and imagine carving blood red hearts in his skin. The Chinese word for kite is *fengzheng*. Wind whistle. My Dad taught me all about kites. I knew how to fly a kite when I was just four years old. We'd stand on the beach together, me wobbling along beneath my little plastic kite in the shape of a frog, Dad with his massive tetrahedral that looked like a flock of origami birds in close formation, all white triangles and slices of sky. Like fractals. God might exist in plankton and molecules, but man was not meant to fly.

Jimmy and his roommates have a cookout, and he invites me over. Probably he feels sorry for me. My life hasn't been easy lately. Whose is? Just ask a protozoa. Peg is away at college. A few years ago, she taught me how to play blackjack and poker, gambling with matchsticks, and led expeditions during my parents' parties to steal cigarettes or abandoned martinis. I think males are not aware of anything below the level of buildings exploding, but they are aware of female virginity; it's the one area where they're quite sensitive. Virginity is like a lone animal on an open plain: it scares some away and incites others. Jimmy is aware of the virgin animal. I just don't know if he's scared or incited. Big Bang or Steady State. No one can agree.

As dusk descends, there's a small group of us drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. The sky is cough syrup purple. The hamburgers are all gone. A few abandoned hot dogs sit oozing grease on a green plate. Music plays

from inside the house; I can see the speakers in a dim bedroom window. One of the roommates is talking about a play she saw recently.

After a while everyone goes inside, and I follow Jimmy to his room. The walls are shellacked brick, decorated with two posters and a crowded pin-board, and the room smells of shampoo and damp towels. A Korean Navy Admiral used over 300 kites to direct his fleet when the Japanese invaded Korea at the end of the Sixteenth Century. Japan eventually lost the war.

I sit down on Jimmy's bed. He bends over to put on some music. I don't know about Jimmy, but I've had a few beers and a cigarette or two and I'm feeling loose-limbed. I will eat Tic Tacs before walking home. Jimmy takes forever clicking through songs on his iPod. I stretch out on the bed, leaning on my elbows. I can see the curve of his back, the loop of hair above his faded blue t-shirt. The breeze carries the smell of leaves and charcoal embers. A song starts, a guitar strums, and Jimmy straightens, but then he hits pause and bends over again and the room goes quiet. Dark branches bend slowly in the windows. I think about flies, even though there aren't any, about how short and futile their lives are, and how they never ever know when they're going to get trapped or die, and about how long and leisurely this moment is, and I decide that now is a good time to do something. I take a deep breath, and slowly, quietly, unbutton my shirt and wriggle out of it. I unhook my bra and drop it on the bed beside me. I feel like a statue. My nipples tighten.

There's a click and then another song starts and Jimmy unfolds again and glides toward me.

He stops inches away, close enough to smell the rosemary conditioner in my hair. The singer sings; nothing moves. I can feel the air around me. Jimmy looks at me for a moment, touches the side of my head, then says gently, "Hey, put your shirt back on."

More than anything I want him to sit beside me and touch my breasts with his strong thin hands. I want to kiss him and bury my head in his hair. I close my eyes and imagine that he is touching me, holding me. But when I open my eyes, he is standing, not close, not looking at me. I'm drunk enough that I don't fumble or say something stupid. I simply reach down and pull my bra on. I am still buttoning my shirt when he gives me an awkward hug.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Want to walk to the deli and get ice cream or something?"

"Yeah, okay." I'm sorry too. I'm thinking, vanilla Swiss almond. I'm

thinking, I love you Jimmy the tutor.

My Dad built his own man-lifting kite and had flown it successfully many times before that day he demonstrated it for the local news. We were all on the beach—me, Peg, Mom, the news crew, friends, strangers who'd gathered to watch. Dad pointed out the fabric, the carbon fiber spars, the ten-foot wingspan. The kite flapped about on the sand, big, red and white, making riffling noises in the wind. We helped hold it in place, then ran behind Dad, who ran beneath the kite until the wind tugged him into the waiting sky, legs akimbo, getting smaller. No one knows what happened exactly. His arms and feet got twisted in the rope until he could no longer maneuver the kite and it veered off and smashed him into the rock cliffs. When one of the assistants came running over to tell my mother, people were already gasping and shrieking. Bad news travels fast, and I realized my father had died without telling anyone what I wanted for my birthday, without breaking even a single kite-flying record and without time to say good-bye to anyone. It was all caught on video, but the TV station didn't air the footage that night, or ever.

I button up my shirt and nod and try to smile. Jimmy is waiting at the door.

Interview

Anthony Schneider

When did you write "The Darkest Place is Around the Light"?

I wrote a draft in 2010, and then played around with it slowly and not too surely for over five years before feeling it was finished and submitting it.

Did you have a difficult time deciding the title of your work? Were there any other titles you were considering?

The story didn't have a title for a long time. I saved it as "Kite Story." I didn't really consider another title, or rather I considered a few but couldn't come up one that I liked. The story, though short, has multiple strands, and "The Darkest Place is Around the Light" is the only one that seems to capture all of the threads.

What inspired "The Darkest Place is Around the Light"? Are any of its themes inspired by your own life?

Many years ago I heard the devastating story about a man who flew a kite capable of lifting a person and crashed into rock cliffs. I did not think, "Aha, I'm going to write a story about that," but it's such a powerful image that it stuck with me until it found its way into a story.

What was the hardest part of writing "The Darkest Place is Around the Light"?

I wanted to be in the head and heart of a girl who has suffered a tragedy and can't see through that tragedy— an unreliable, grieving, teenage narrator.

Which part of "The Darkest Place is Around the Light" was conceived of first?

Girl, then flies, then kite. It started with one of the more mundane threads, a girl doing homework and daydreaming about a boy she likes, kissing, sex. Pretty soon after that came an image— a fly flapping around on a window screen in summer, buzzing up and down. Then came the kite bits, which float through the story, like a kite.

Was there anything in your original conception of the story that did not make it in?

A bunch of false starts. More detail about the history of kites than you need to know.

Do you primarily write fiction?

Yes. And whether long or short, my fiction seems to have a somewhat serendipitous structure or genesis. I recently published a novel that, like this story, began with threads and patches that didn't initially seem to cohere, but after a while I realized they were in fact part of the same story.

Is there anything unique about your personal writing process?

I have a day job, so I binge more than other writers. I'll write for days on end, or hole up for a weekend or, when I'm lucky, go to a writer's colony for a month. I just spent three months in South Africa, so I was able to write in the mornings before my US co-workers and clients start their day.

Tell us about your revision process regarding this work.

Haphazard. The threads of the story were there, the voice was there, the main character was there, but they kept falling apart. It was like a jigsaw puzzle but the edges of the pieces keep blurring and dissolving. So there were false starts, and there was a lot of rewriting as I figured out whose story it was, what this girl was doing and why. At the very end came some terrific editorial direction from the *Driftwood Press* gang, like a splash of secret sauce.

You have several image patterns weaving together quiet brilliantly here; could you discuss some of the difficulties you faced in writing these?

Shucks. Yes, it was difficult to keep the images, and the threads, in balance. Whichever bit I was working on kept trying to assert itself too much and pull away from the story, yet I knew it wanted to be a short short; dense and spring-loaded.

How much research went into this story— regards biology and kites?

Quite a lot, but it was pretty easy research. Thank you, Google.

Who are some of your favorite authors? Which authors influenced "The Darkest Place is Around the Light"?

Favorites: Too many to list.

Influencers: Mary Robison (especially *Why Did I Ever*), Jennifer Egan (especially *A Visit from the Goon Squad*), and Anton Chekhov (everything).

Where can readers find more of your work? Have you been published before?

My novel, *Repercussions*, was recently published by *Permanent Press* in the US and *Penguin* in South Africa.

What drew you to *Driftwood Press*?

A writer whose work I know and enjoy was published in *Driftwood Press*, and I liked his story and the fiction and poetry surrounding it. There is a wide range in style and subject matter in the fiction, but the prose is consistently strong and arresting. Plus, the covers are wonderful.

Landscape
Rachel Slotnick

