**Skippers**

Lisa Novick

Nine-years-old, I am barefoot on the Bermuda lawn in the backyard of my family’s new home in Orange County, California. The lawn is green and dense, evenly mowed, its edges perfectly clipped. Hundreds of small orange butterflies—skippers—are fluttering across the lawn’s surface. About an inch-long with wings shorter than their bodies, the skippers fly in erratic bursts, landing briefly again and again on the grass. This is the first time in my life I have ever seen so many butterflies at once. The sheer abundance of them seems like magic—something conjured, something impossible in ordinary life.

An empty coffee can is in my hands. My father tells me that skipper caterpillars eat the grass and damage it.

I look at the grass and skippers and see only beauty.

“Damage it how?” I ask.

“Make it blotchy, patchy-looking,” he says.

My mother says, “We don’t want to use poison because that could harm you and your sister. Dad and I will give you a penny for every butterfly you catch.”

The whole enterprise feels wrong to me, but that feeling collides with my sense of familial duty. Even though I am only nine years old, I understand that the house and all its trappings are my parents’ greatest financial achievement, an incredible accomplishment for two people raised in hardship during the Depression. In Pennsylvania, when they were my age, my father was robbing pillars of coal in abandoned mines to bring in extra money for the family; my mother was surviving on mustard sandwiches for dinner, at home with her sister while their widowed father, a construction worker by day, worked the night shift at a mortuary.

From my parents’ stories of hardship, I understand the imperative to protect their investment. To keep it perfect, pristine, intact.

A skipper lands on my foot. The skipper’s touch is almost imperceptible, its feet the tapered ends of hair-thin legs. The skipper stays very still, watching, the big dark globes of its eyes outsized for its tiny furry head. I reach down to catch the skipper, but it darts away. I feel relieved. I have never been so close to so much wild beauty.

This is my first experience of abundant creatures other than people. And it’s happening in the backyard of this new home in a tract of houses carved out of an orange grove carved out of native grasslands and coastal sage scrub.

“Remember, a penny for every butterfly you catch,” my father says.

The money is enticing. I am saving for a new bicycle. I dream of exploring the wild lands of Orange County, of venturing far beyond my neighborhood of neat tract houses and into remote canyons shaded by sycamores and studded with outcrops of weathered sandstone—canyons I’d glimpsed from the back seat of our family’s big-finned silver Chrysler.

When we’d lived in West Los Angeles, I was limited to riding my bicycle on the sidewalk and doing circles around the block. Here in Orange County, there are more roads than sidewalks and not many cars. And now that I am nine years old, the same age at which my father robbed pillars and my mother slept at home without a parent, I am old enough to start riding in the street, to start having adventures independent of my parents if I can just buy that bicycle. If I can just bring myself to suffocate skippers in a coffee can.

I feel such regret, such horror, at what it takes to be a good daughter.

I catch dozens and dozens of skippers. I bend up the plastic lid on the coffee can and, one by one, drop the skippers inside. Scales from their wings cover my fingertips like dust. Scales cover the shiny inside of the can, too, as the skippers frantically fly against it, trying to escape. I’ll never forget the feel of the can reverberating in my hand, skippers softly thudding against the metal, desperate to find a way out, desperate to live.

Afterwards, I could never bring myself to count the skipper carcasses, and I couldn’t bear to empty them into the trash. The thought of mixing their furry little bodies, hair-thin legs and delicate wings with old cat food, greasy paper towels and other detritus seemed like sacrilege. In my bedroom, I hid the coffee can of dead little bodies behind some books on a shelf. Each time I glimpsed the can, it felt like a reproach.

My parents never asked me to catch more skippers.

Later, I was told not to play on the lawn for certain periods. Those must have been the times my parents applied the poison.

Now, a half century later, I rarely see skippers, though there are still plenty of lawns in Southern California. I wish I could bring those coffee-can skippers back to life. I wish, I wish, I wish. I would set them free on the native bunch grasses in my yard and take pleasure in every chewed, less-than-perfect blade of grass.

There is something deeply wrong with a landscape aesthetic that requires the annihilation of life to achieve that aesthetic. Something deeply wrong with an economic system that not only sanctions but encourages the killing of butterflies and their larva to supposedly protect the value of an investment. How much will that investment be worth with poison in our water, our soil, and our bodies? How much will that investment be worth with a food web so tattered that it helps usher in environmental collapse? What are we teaching our children every time we choose to value a sterile, static landscape over one that is fertile and animated with creatures for whom that landscape should be home?