**Nightlight Wargames**

Maggie Lerum

Wendy, a small girl, carried her surfboard over her head as she marched up the hill. Tall grass swished along her knees. When she reached the top, she smushed her board down over the grass and beat it down until it was even. Twilight struck after the sun sent out one last beam, and Wendy laid down on her board and waited for the stars to come out.

Back home, when she’d go out on the water like this at night, the waves would rock her to sleep, and she’d wake up to a sky full of stars. Here, they popped out one by one, slowly, so slowly. She looked back at her parents’ new farmhouse and huffed. The white paint was peeling, and the adjoining greenhouse was overrun with vines. The yard was filled with old metal junk from the previous owners and an old chicken coop lay caved-in and dilapidated on its side.

Wendy pointedly turned away from it. Only two more stars had joined her. She crossed her arms and huffed again. Pops of light sprinkled around her, but Wendy watched the dark sky, seeing nothing. A long, little bug settled on her nose and the space between her eyebrows creased. The bug flashed bright yellow.

Wendy shot up off her board and into the matted grass. All around her, bugs popped in and out, in and out, flashing on and off. The sky was mute in comparison.

Wendy flipped her dark hair out of her way and crawled toward a firefly bouncing on a bended blade of grass. She crept closer, raised her hand, then snatched at it.

Its light went out and, with its dark disguise, fluttered out of sight. Wendy, on the other hand, now unbalanced, fell forward into the wall of grass.

Wendy sat up, her head and shoulders just above the waves of green and sneezed the pollen off her nose. Fireflies popped up all around her, but she settled on the dark one, the one she had imagined gotten away from her.

This certain firefly bumbled all around. Wendy watched it intently and followed it as it meandered down the hill. She lost it a few times, but if she unfocused her eyes she was able to see a dark dot moving against the lighter grass.

Wendy and the bug wandered into a yard of cut grass, upon which a little ranch house with a single porch light lay. Wendy walked through the swath of yellow the porch light made and crouched down next to the boxwood bushes on the edge of the property. The woods just beyond them loomed dark and wild and completely soundless.

But Wendy didn’t notice. She was watching the firefly that had settled on a boxwood leaf. She cupped her hands and brought them up slower this time. The firefly moved. Wendy hesitated, keeping her hands just below the leaf.

Then the firefly walked right into her open palms and finally flashed its light.

A boy leapt out of the bushes. On his forehead and under his eyes, his face was glowing. Wendy jumped and closed her hands over her bug. The boy pushed her down and dropped to the ground himself.

“What are you doing here?” he asked her.

“I don’t know.”

The boy nodded towards her hands, “What have you got?”

“Nothing.”

He snatched her hand and scooped the firefly out.

“Alright, you got one!” And he squished the bug between his fingers and smeared the glowing goop under his eyes, adding to the goop that was already there. This must’ve given him courage because he stood, screamed, and ran after some other boys.

Wendy heard more screams, but she didn’t stick around to see who would surprise her next. She ran all the way back up the hill and dove under her surfboard. After the screams started to die out when the boys moved into the woods, Wendy peaked her head out. She grabbed her board and ran back to her farmhouse, the screen door slamming behind her.

She emerged a few minutes later, pulling a little red wagon filled with mason jars her mother had given her down the rickety, wooden back steps. She grabbed a jar and ran back to the grass, hunting, scooping, and packing away fireflies.

When all the jars were full, she dragged her wagon to the greenhouse. She had to pull away some vines to find the door handle. After a few hard yanks, the door busted open, and Wendy brought her wagon in.

The greenhouse was filled with the old owner’s plants: orchids, lilies, gazanias, wide ferns, cascading strawberries, and tomatoes hanging from the ceiling. Hot, stuffy air clouded the room and soaked the glass walls. Each plant was still dewy. Careful to shut the door so they wouldn’t escape, Wendy released the fireflies jar by jar. They filled the greenhouse—popping on and off, on and off.

From the kitchen window, her mother called, and Wendy abandoned her project for the night. On the rickety, wooden back steps, Wendy looked back to the greenhouse. The thick vines hid the fireflies’ popping lights. No one would know they were there. Wendy bid the fireflies a good night and disappeared into the farmhouse she didn’t think was so bad anymore.