

FORWARD

Third PRIZE

# THE IGNIS FATUUS

## I

Men marvel at her hair, corona bright,  
the color of a waning winter moon,  
for she is strange and wild, a child of night  
who loves the swamps where twilight lurks at noon.  
I followed her until she disappeared  
through sedge and slimy pools of brackish black;  
she always raced ahead where ravens jeered,  
past dying pines and past the diamondback.  
She led me faster, luminous and lithe,  
through devil's darkness cleft with wisps of fire.  
Behind me came another...with a scythe...  
but still I stalked her in footprintless mire.  
Men say her eyes fluoresce with blue-green flame.  
I must embrace her once, must know her name.

## II

Come searcher, learn the real will-o-the-wisp.  
Come slog among mutated mud-grown trees  
and wait for wind's unwinding snake-tongue lisp  
to wrinkle stagnant water near your knees.  
Here, latent night seduces natural time  
though fronds of sun still penetrate tall ferns,  
while strangler figs and chokeweed greenly mime  
your myths and struggling gods, your snarled concerns.  
Again illusion spreads elusive light,  
a solar trick, not worth your risks to see.  
Stay braced for total dark and call it right:  
the ignis fatuus, lure's apogee.  
Hold fast to scientific explanation  
as lambent flares ignite mind's conflagration.

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## III

Old Jonas knew the country called "Big Deep"  
that muddled up the margins of two states.  
He served as guide for forty years to keep  
adventurers from snakebite/quicksand fates.  
Then Jonas went off fishing. New teams tried  
to cross the slough, explore the worst quagmire.  
Three members wound up hurt, another died.  
When Jonas heard, he vowed not to retire.  
He knew the jack-o-lanterns danced out there,  
those freakish flames that made men lose their way.  
He knew the legends, knew the truth to spare,  
enough to be the expert of his day.  
Still, men pursued the elf fire, watched night burn...  
till legend won. The guide did not return.