

There Was Sweetness in the Blackened Stems

By Sidney Craig

The road forgets itself and the hush rushes in—
charred wiregrass bristles, a burnt green machine,
three-awned seeds cocked like tiny tripwires,
only flowering after fire, flaring out of a choir
of cinders whispering again, again through the stems.

Liatris lifts out of that singed sea too,
violet ladder laced through wiregrass waves;
skippers and fritillaries jittering node to node,
insect Morse code pulsing up the spike.

In that dappled light, netted pawpaw palms its cards:
leaves like green maps with raised-vein roads,
no blossom yet, no custard-sweet fruit,
just zebra swallowtail caterpillars cutting
pale parentheses through each blade
and resting on wiregrass spires when the wind picks up.

False foxglove threads itself into the same grid,
stem fine as a rumor,
pink with borrowed light,
half sun, half siphon,
tapping wiregrass, pawpaw, pine—
bell-mouths ringing.

Where the ground dips, the burn scar darkens:
fetterbush throws red-twig loops, glossy leaves,
linking pine to puddle to pawpaw thicket;
gallberry leans in at the rims, fire-scored holly
still shouldering soot, shrugging black drupes
like loose coins bees come to mint
into smoke-sweet honey, then zigzag back
to foxglove throats and liatris spires.

Roots braid under all this, trading sap, swapping ash;
wiregrass barter with foxglove,
pawpaw trades shade for swallowtails,
gallberry and fetterbush sip the same slow seep;
all gossiping in fungal hush
until their names blur where the ecotones do,

where one hunger becomes another,
fire into flower into fruit into wing.
I walked out with nothing in my pockets
but the way their names kept slipping and sliding into one
another—liatrispawpawfoxglovesetterbushgallberrywiregrass—
like a single long word the land keeps saying
through fire, through flood, through us,
whether or not we are listening.