

--William Greenwood Wright was one of the first lepidopterists in Southern California, but he earned his income from bootlegging in San Bernardino.

Those years before she came were quiet ones,  
spent alone, but good for work and profit,  
heaped with winter rain and a good hatch in spring.  
Sometimes my net took fifty at a cast.  
One month so thick they tumbled down a hillside,  
blown like bright leaves across the sage.  
Booting and whooping through the chaparral,  
I nearly scooped them up by hand.

The year she came my barn was papered—beam to beam—  
with wings: dark buckeye, checkerspot, hairstreak.  
Some skippers. Cloudy copper, too. And as each batch  
of doublings bubbled through the thumper,  
I'd lean against the planks, by the still's light,  
and watch the shadows flicker on their wings like wind.

Someone who'd seen it told of me, I guess.  
Else why this naturalist from San Francisco?  
Sneezing and picking hay from her black dress  
she eyed the butterflies, and then the fire  
under the still. *One spark takes everything,*  
she warned, and ran her thumb along a bale.

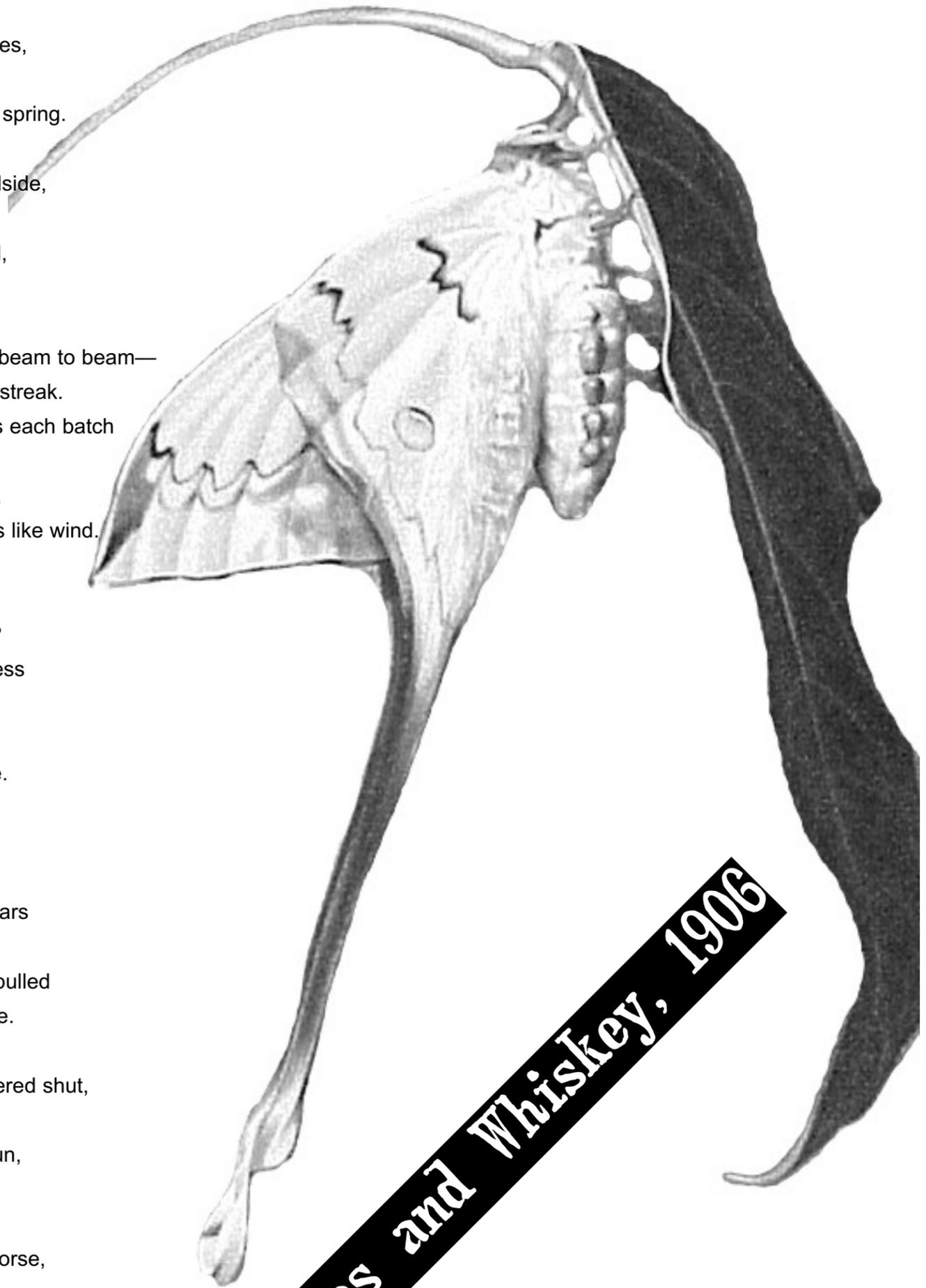
But I refused. What did she know?—  
a woman fallen off some carriage, lost  
in the scrub, no doubt. More than twenty years  
I'd made mash there. °  
I told her. She just cleared her throat, then pulled  
a silver flask from her boot, asking for a taste.

By morning, crates were packed and hammered shut,  
lined with hay for the long train up north.  
While boulders glowed like whiskey in the sun,  
our bootsoles crunched on frosted grass,  
and the wind cut sharp as high-wine.  
She wouldn't take a hand in getting on the horse,  
but took the jug I'd offered her instead.

Never cared much for letters, but I wrote a few  
that winter, and she told how they pinned wings  
under glass and that I ought to visit soon.  
I didn't though.

Come April the quake hit,  
and after it the fire. I've heard from some  
who saw the flames that it charred bricks and swallowed stone,  
took whole blocks like wildfires take dead brush.  
Heard from others her museum burned, but nothing  
from her.

Barn's thick now with spring gnats and flies,  
and the room reeks of sour mash and spent beer  
waiting to be strained. I haven't worked for weeks.  
I pace the barn and stare at the bare boards  
and the still's fire, remembering how she dabbed her lips  
against her wrist. And when the moths bank past my lamp,  
I can't stop watching how they arc and flip,  
and wonder what makes a thing choose one way,  
but not the other, when it flutters down to feed.



**Butterflies and Whiskey, 1906**

## Brett Myhren

Brett Myhren received both an MFA and an MA from McNeese State University in 2003. While teaching English at Loyola Marymount University, he is completing his first poetry manuscript, *Far Shore*. He recently won Waasmode Fiction Contest from *Passages North* magazine, and he has a poem in the latest edition of *Rattle*.

