

TO THE FLAME, TO THE FLAME

Insects are the best chemists, he said,
and so in nineteen sixty six a guy came

from Phelps, with the right heads, and
he taught us to raise cabbage leaf looper

moths, nis we called them, for Trichoplusia ni.
Doc showed the coeds to tell male from female,

not so easy in moths, you know, and then
it was a great day, when we pumped

the air from a cage of sequestered females,
you can imagine, seeing one peak swim out'

in the gas chromatograph, Z-7 dodecenyl
acetate, sure it wasn't cubane or buckminster-

fullerene, just a chain and a kink,
but still a pretty simple molecule to show off

to the pheromone crowd. A few years later,
we got a shock (here he swirled the Lagavullin,

sixteen years to get that smoky taste, oh),
these Germans wrote up a new bioassay,

just like them to pin the male moths
in a windtunnel, their antennae wired

to a scope; so they found a second component,
and our pretty story fell apart, but then

a graduate student looking hard at the way
the nis made them, pretty green things they are,

he said how about trying some of those
(the molecules they make on the way). Doc

laughed, but Jim and I tried it anyway,
with Tom Eisner's help we rigged up

the wind tunnel to end all tunnels,
pinned a 4711 ad to it, and Jim, well

he had a nose for the right stuff. In the end
there were six compounds., cousins to each

other, the prettiest biosynthetic story you
ever heard, a nis' blend, six for sex in the air.