

Compound Lace
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Once upon a time there was an old woman who loved to crochet lace. She was finishing up a pineapple lace doily on her front porch, overlooking a field. She was bored with the pattern, even though she had designed it and thought it beautiful, as she had already made seven of them for place settings.

She looked up out at the field in the bright sun, and as she turned back to her work, she noticed a bug landing on the broad arm of her chair. At first it looked just like a flying ant, but then she noticed the greenish tint of the wings, and the long skinny body. She took a closer look, and it just sat there. It looked, she thought, like a tiny preying mantis. She wanted to look even more closely, so she carefully snuck her hand into her crocheting bag to pull out her magnifying glass, moving slowly and quietly so as not to disturb the insect. What she saw on the wings was a green, lacy pattern, so open and clear in between that she was not sure if there was anything filling in the lace. Could a bug fly with only open lace for wings? She didn't think so, but for all her peering through the magnifying glass, she couldn't detect anything solid filling in the spaces in the lacy green wing.

Finally, she sat back and took stock. She took out her notebook where she jotted down pattern ideas, and things that she noticed. She drew the elongated loop, and started to fill in the lace pattern from memory. She took up the magnifying glass once more, comparing her rendering with what she saw, made one adjustment, and put down the glass. The bug had not moved – it seemed almost hibernating. In retrospect, she noticed that when it had alighted on her chair, it had seemed to almost drift onto the chair and settle like a loose feather. In any case, she was curious to look at it more closely.

So once more, carefully, she moved. This time she rose up from the chair and went inside to her study. Out she came with a small microscope, a slide and a piece of paper. She set up the microscope on the porch table, and went back to the chair arm. Leaning over slightly, she gently scooped the bug onto the piece of paper. It didn't move, and she was able to slip it off onto the empty slide.

She fit the slide under the edges of the two metal slide holders, and shined a flashlight onto the mirror. As the light shone up through the wings, she focused the lens and could see the beautiful dark emerald green outline of the lace-like structure. She refocused to look at different depths of the wings, and moved the slide around to see different parts. Still she couldn't tell if the spaces were filled in. Finally, she took the flashlight and shone it directly onto the bug. Immediately, she smiled. There was a clear film filling in the spaces in the lace. As if it were a film spun of spider's silk and clear as glass, it held tiny debris from the bug's travels. They were real wings, not just lace.

She looked down around the lens at the bug lying there. She noticed the antennae, and what looked like the shape of an eye. She moved the bug so the antennae were under the lens, then looked through the eyepiece. She had trouble seeing with the flashlight shining on the bug, so went back to reflecting it off the mirror. When the antennae jumped into the image, she marveled at how big and solid they seemed in comparison to the green structural pieces of the wings. Then she moved the slide along the antennae, following them until the eye started to enter the image as well. Her own eyes were so pleased they widened and almost jumped out of her face along with her cheeks bulging with a broad grin – she'd never seen such a beautiful thing. It was a compound eye, reflecting all the colors of the rainbow off of its geodesic dome. She looked up at the sunset beginning its rapture of colors, and flushed with delight. To capture this, she knew she would need her special pens, and she ran back inside. She came out with a shimmering collection. Later she would trace the outline of the geometric shapes that made up the eye, but for now she simply lay color next to color, wanting to reflect the spectrum and shimmer.

An image was forming in her imagination as she drew: her next project. To capture that shimmer and color would take embroidery with very special thread, thread with a sheen. Then she would crochet the lace of the wings into elongated, overlapping, rounded isosceles triangles. It looked like a comet flying through space with two tails.

Suddenly she was drawn back into the moment – a flicker of movement by the antennae. But nothing more. Then, she noticed that as she shone the light on the bug more and more, it was moving more and more. The antennae started to wiggle, and the wings started to flap. She realized that, for a bug, the flashlight must be awfully hot, and perhaps that heat had made the bug lurch out of its reverie. She turned off the light, fearing that the insect was uncomfortable, and watched it slowly coming back to itself. The antennae twitched, then the legs, and finally the wings started to flicker, then bat back and forth as it righted itself. It cocked its head at her, and flew away. She watched it disappear, a black speck in the sunset, which was already incorporating shades of gray. As dusk approached, she wrapped a sweater around her shoulders and sketched and closed her eyes and imagined her work in its final form.

She worked with thread and cloth and yarn that she selected from a million shades and textures and reflectances at the craft store. For the next three months, well into winter, she imagined and sewed and crocheted in all her craft time. And in the end, the bright spring sun beamed through her window and shimmered off the wall as a compound comet with two lacey green tails raced through its path.