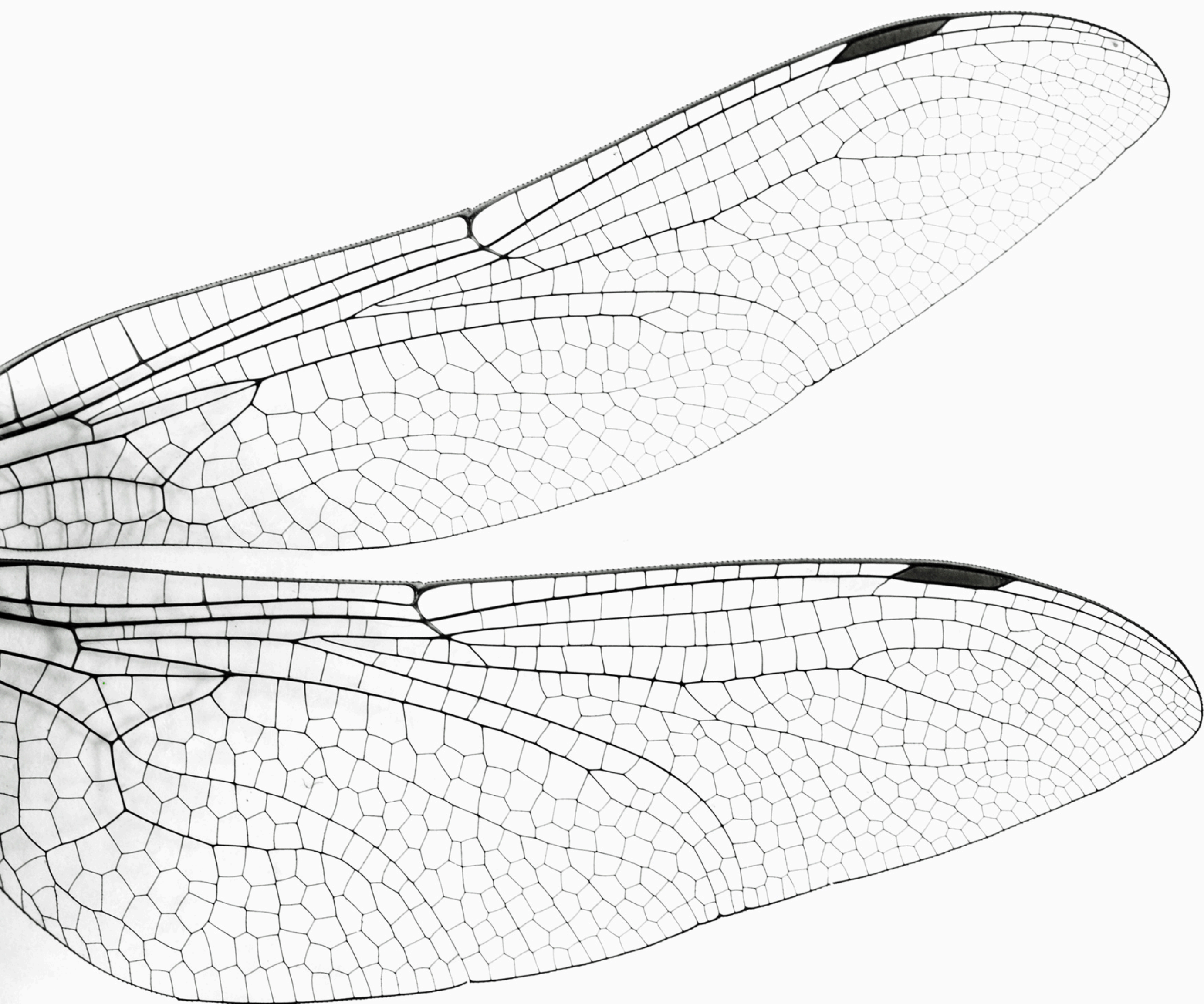


The Damselfly

By Jasmine Ravel Schwam



The San Fernando Valley boils in July. The swollen sun rays blush the tips of noses, and asphalt stings feet. The California winds barricade the neighborhood from Santa Monica's cool ocean breeze, trapping heat in the mountain's embrace. The Valley has no trees to block the growling rays. The city swelters more than the surrounding areas, so the urban heat island effect takes storm. My home was one of the hottest—and fastest-warming—areas in Los Angeles.

It was peak July, and the dry, hot air was suffocating. The only relief could be found in crisp, cool water. I was 4 years old, and the world was new and shiny.

My Dad cradled me in his arms in our pool on one of these hot summer days, like a buoy keeping me from slipping under the water's surface. As I held on, a jet plane b-lined for me. It had wide, intimidating wings and black, bulging eyes as it unpredictably flew all around me. I was terrified.

I leaned on my Dad's chest out of fear. Then, he shifted my perspective.

“Look how beautiful its wings are, Jasmine. Isn't it magical? Isn't it incredible how it dances over the water?”

My emotions shifted from fear to curiosity, then awe. I was suddenly fascinated.

Its iridescent wings hypnotized me. The damselfly became my favorite animal.

A damselfly moves like a quick line of color in the air. Its body is thin and straight, almost as if it were drawn in a single stroke. Some are bright blue, others a sharp green. When it lands, its wings fold together above its body. They're clear and light, lined with small veins that catch the sun for a moment before the insect lifts off again.

The head looks oversized compared to the rest of the body, with two dark eyes that fill most of the space. Those eyes pick up every small motion around them. When a damselfly lifts off, the whole thing turns into a quick flicker, so light that it barely leaves a shadow at all. Damselflies are close kin to dragonflies but smaller, lighter, and quieter in the air. They spend most of their lives underwater, breathing through gills and hunting small prey. When ready, they crawl out, shed their skins, and take flight. Damselflies see the world through compound eyes made of thousands of tiny lenses. Each lens captures a shard of motion, so nothing sneaks up on them.

Their story began more than 300 million years ago, long before dinosaurs. Back then, giant ancestors called Meganeura ruled the humid skies, wings wider than dinner plates. Over time, the line divided. Dragonflies kept their size and speed. Damselflies became slender and delicate, learning to move like whispers above the water. Stand by a still pond and you'll hear the air buzz with them. Sunlight hits the surface and breaks into small mirrors. Blue and green flashes skim across. A male guards his cattails, striking at intruders. A female tests the edge of his patience, then lowers her body to the water to lay her eggs. The surface quivers but holds. Beneath it, their young wait—tiny hunters that breathe through gills and feed on mosquito larvae.

Damselflies tie air and water together. Their young keep the pond balanced, never taking more than they need. When they rise into the air, they carry that balance with them. Birds, fish, and frogs rely on them. Each life feeds another, one element trading breath with the next. Watching a damselfly is watching the world talk to itself.

I talk to myself, too—especially right before doing something scary. When I was 11, I faced a fear of my own. It was my turn to be the damselfly.

I was a swimmer, and it was time for my first meet. I stood on the starting block, legs shaking, preparing myself to take flight. I used all the muscles in my body to shoot myself forward, when my stomach started burning. I belly flopped instead of diving—hit the water flat, loud, and wrong. The whole pool seemed to wince with me. I was not as graceful or agile as a damselfly.

For a moment, I stayed underwater, heat blooming across my stomach, embarrassment rippling through me harder than the splash I'd made. Part of me wanted to stay there, suspended in the blue, where no one could see how badly I'd fallen short of flight. But even then, something nudged me upward. Maybe it was instinct. Maybe it was the same small spark that once made me loosen my grip on my dad's chest to watch a damselfly instead of fearing it.

I kicked toward the surface, swam, and by the time I touched the wall, the sting had softened. I ended up winning that race, and the water became my home. I would stink of chlorine, and my hair would crunch from being in the water so long. The pool left faint red marks around my goggles, bleached the tips of my eyebrows, and carved soft strength into my shoulders. I was growing my own damselfly wings.

Damselflies spend most of their lives submerged, breathing through feathery gills, moving slowly through reeds and murky light. They practice patience before they earn speed. They build strength in the cool safety beneath the surface, hidden from the heat and noise of the world above.

Swimming became that place for me. In a Valley built of concrete and heat, the pool was the one environment that softened everything—my fear, my self-consciousness, even the relentless July sun.

Now, whenever I see a damselfly skimming over the water, I take it as a good omen and a sign that I belong there. Seeing one hover nearby feels like a quiet nod from the past, a small sign that I've grown into the wings I once envied, and that the water will always be a place I can return to and rise from.





Jasmine Ravel Schwam is a Environmental Studies and Science Communication student at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She uses her love for nature to simplify the complexities of our ever-changing environment.