

MINNOW LITERARY MAGAZINE



EDITION 2 : WINTER 2021

Minnow Literary Magazine fishes for minnow-sized literary works and visual creative works that make a big splash. We accept Micro-Poetry (150 words or less), Flash Fiction (500 words or less), Short Personal Essays (1500 words or less), and Visual Art. Nature-themed works are encouraged, but all genres are considered.

This issue includes works from 8 countries on 4 continents: Australia, Canada, El Salvador, England, Germany, India, Kuwait, and the United States (7 different states represented).

Edited by:
Aubree Tillett, MLIS, MA
David Sula, MFA

Designed by:
Sara Meeter

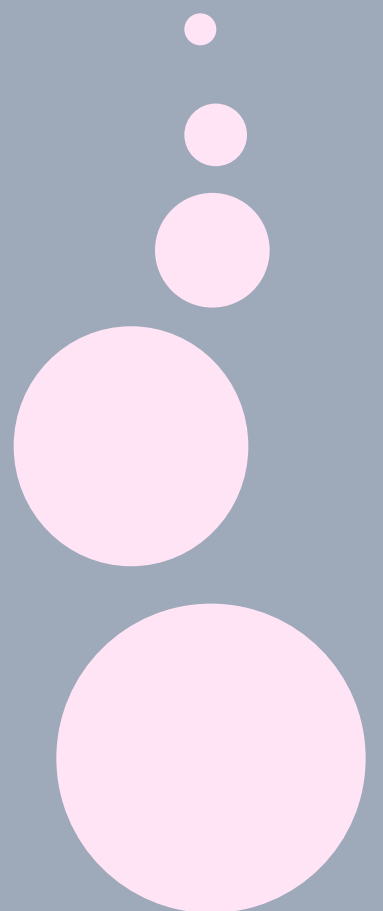
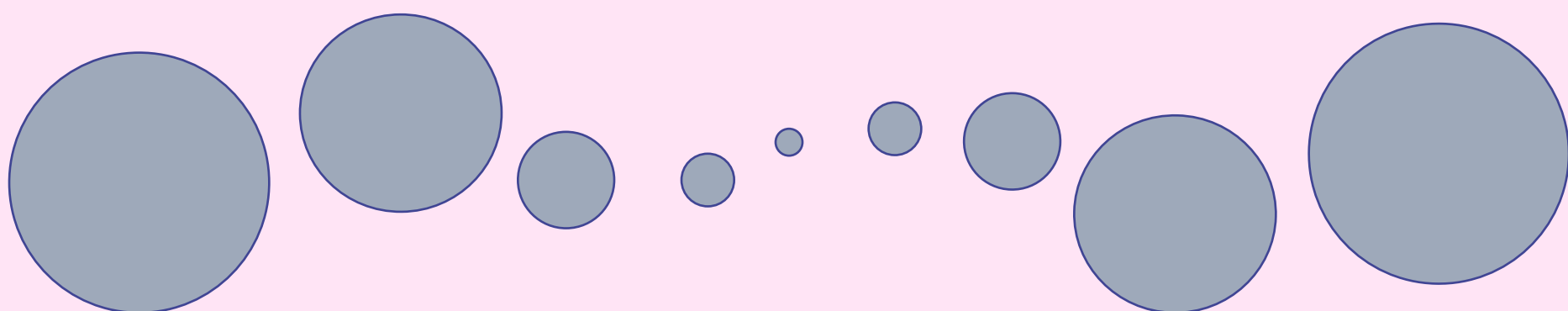


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Fireflies

Nhylar

A walk on the countryside road,
a cool summer breeze,
a dusky lavender sky,
my dangling ass
moving along with
the marijuana smoke.
It joins the glowing balls of energy
as if an orchestra just emerged:
a representation of my stoned mind.

When I feel the THC shutting off,
the default mode network of my brain
enabling new signals to pass through,
the orchestra begins; for some reason
it's always a jazz troupe
a dinner party-esque situation
attendants, all the grey matter tenants
what an incredible reality we find when the ego takes a break
to think that fireflies exist in this same moment as me
is the kinda shit that makes it worthwhile

Nature's Way

Niles Reddick

The iced tea felt cool to my tongue and inside cheeks and helped wash the bites of fried liver and onions down my throat. The tea also helped cover the metallic flavor of the liver. I imagined it tasted like blood the times I'd pulled teeth. The tea also helped cover my belief the onions might be worms because they were slippery and felt wiggly going down my throat. I couldn't bring myself to chew them anymore than I could eat the catfish my grandmother had caught using red wigglers down at the pond. Worms were inside the fish, just like they were inside the bird that was rotting in the woods on the path to the pond. I'd almost vomited, but Granny said, "Stop that silliness. It's nature's way."

Granny was old, crooked from arthritis, and had onion paper skin stretched over bones, but I didn't think she had worms. She moved quickly and demonstrated strength because when the chunk of liver got stuck in my throat, she leaped out of her chair, stood behind me, put her arms under mine and gave me a jolt. The chunk of liver flew out of mouth and landed on the table. I imagined the onion slithered on the liver.

"I've told you a thousand times you've got to chew your food at least thirty-two times."

"Yes ma'am," I said. I went to my room and lied down and wondered how close I had come to death. Granny hadn't been able to save my mom when she choked to death on that chicken bone at the church picnic, but I don't hold that against her because she was inside singing shape note hymns with the rest of the choir while I was at the creek catching tadpoles in a jar to grow frogs. Granny hasn't sung since and stopped teaching me the Do-re-mi-fa-so or however it goes.

I continued to have problems swallowing, getting choked, and Granny rubbed my head, scratched my back, and gave me milkshakes with protein to build up my throat. I figured when she got through, my throat would be a regular Tower of Babel reaching toward Heaven, and maybe I'd be able to communicate with my mom.

The chocolate milkshakes were better than the vanilla, but they tasted like that pink, chalky Pepto medicine she gave me the time I had that virus and vomited. I told her maybe I should go to the doctor, but she said "You just need to rest and heal. A doctor can't do that for you. You have to do it yourself. It's nature's way."



Kristina Berrier, *Let it Be*, 2020, Relief Print

Matins

Carol Casey

Dawn has broken a morning cloud
over stirring trees, like an egg
that spills a yolk of sunlight
into a white winter bowl.

Wednesday

Matthew J. Andrews

I wash my thirsty hands in the basin
and feel the dry skin crack and bleed.

Lips press down wet on a lover's back,
but she, a furled body, does not wake.

The burning wick of morning sun
dims under a woven basket of fog,

it's light, through the bedroom window,
halved by slants in the shutters.

The Solstice

Anthony Salandy

Dried lemons denote solstice aromas
where scorching fields bore sweet fruit
on to earthen hands

that gently plucked from veiny leaves
where ripened sunshine
began to ooze nectars godly.

But fast approaching harvest
meant that darling birds
began to whisper of far-off lands

where verdant paths
grew restless in expansion
beyond frontiers constructed.

and seasons distorted by consumption.



Kristina Berrier, *Manifest*, 2020, Mixed Media Collage, Texas.

A Desert Pea

Daria Goroshkova

She sets up the camera trap on the ashy trunk of the mulga tree. The camera faces the log in question. It may or may not be the home of an echidna. There's no hurry to find out.

Dry Australian winter wind sweeps away the days, hums in the tin roof of the ranger's shed at nights. Here, in the desert, time is slow and viscid. A rare camper van wanders through the red dirt, seeking out the seclusion of the outback. The ranger greets them with the routine warnings for the open fire, snakes, and spiders. They ask for the nearest water hole and invite her to share a scarce beer.

The camera shows that an echidna does reside in the log. The ranger names the echidna Amy. Some years ago, Amy's relatives helped an ecologist find out that echidnas hibernate, lowering their body temperature to match the shaded soil. The ultimate goal of life is to survive. Echidnas hibernate, numbats evolve long tongues to catch desert termites, pig-footed bandicoots have long legs to dig burrows and hide.

The ranger thinks that her mind hibernates too, in a way. She tunes in with the stillness of melting dusk, with the fiery bursts of high noon. She's red as the vast plains; she's blue as the sky. She sees no water, but water is all around: in every thorny shrub, in each thin, withered blade of grass. The soil—which looks so dead, covered with a patchwork of cracks, crumbling, ancient—has everything, and so does she. When the time comes, the desert blooms in purple and red, unfolds the fields, and unleashes the rivers.

She worries about change. Only the most specialized systems of adaptations can stand the harsh conditions of life here. All variables have to come together to comprise the equation of life. If a single thing is altered, and evolution doesn't hurry to catch up, the whole mechanism fails.

Some days, kangaroo hunters stop by the ranger's station. The thick-legged bodies hang from the dusty utes, and the guys complain that it's getting harder to sell the exotic meat. The ranger knows that kangaroo has been long declared a pest species, but she looks away, keeps quiet, and wanders off away from fire and talking and beers. She goes into the bush, guided by her imagination and the light of the purple Milky Way. In the transparent darkness of young night, she sees the first stars of white flowers peeking from the low shrubs. The air smells of honey and carrion. Silver leaves of the brigalow tree tremble in the wind, and her world is at peace once again.

She is never alone here; she never feels stranded. The desert fills the void. Millennia of iron firmament guards her. Soft, whispering songs of the centuries embrace her, accept her. She is one with the ephemeral rivers that flowed here once, invisible now but still flowing within her.

Mojave Desert

Katie Kemple

Billboard mirage
big juicy burger
floats above sand.

Wind turbine garden
white metal petals
cartwheel in place.

Sneakers vine around
a fence, forgotten
soles come to rest.

Railroad track,
names spelled in coal,
monuments along the road.



Inna Malostovker, **The Observer**, 9/4/2020, Digital photography, Miami, FL.

Monsoon in Kerala

Lakshmi Krishnakumar

When I look out of the window, it is green. The monsoons are here, and the room smells of humidity. The previous day, I'd walked to the beach a couple of kilometers away and watched the clouds roll over the Arabian Sea. I wasn't alone; a small crowd milled about on the sands to size up the heavy grey clouds gathering over a churning sea, the colour of muddied waters. The whole town waited in anticipation for the onset of the monsoons. Fishermen were already rigging up their boats; there wouldn't be fishing trips for a few weeks.

As I walk back home in the afternoon, a bleak sun shines through the manjadi trees of the town park. Young couples seek to kiss furtively under the trees, away from the eyes of retired men taking their strolls. Umbrellas hang by clotheslines strung on store-fronts. Each year, a new innovation is introduced to the umbrellas: four-fold umbrellas that fit in the palm of your hand, umbrellas with a whistle at the end, umbrellas that can (ironically) spray water. As if the deluge from the skies wasn't enough. In a region where people are loyal to specific umbrella brands, the advertising of these new designs takes up valuable broadcast time at the end of April.

Every school child in India studies about the monsoons. The country is subject to two monsoon cycles each year: the summer or the south-west monsoon and the winter or north-east monsoon. The former forms out of a depression in the Arabian Sea, and the latter in the Bay of Bengal. Kerala, where I come from, is the first region to be hit by the south-west monsoons, which make landfall by the end of May or the beginning of June. Edavapathi, it's called, for the rains arrive at the mid (pathi) of the Edavam month. The Meteorological Department announces well in advance the expected date of the monsoons, and the whole country waits with bated breath, for this brings the rains that determine the agricultural output and food availability for a whole year. For a few days, the eyes of the nation are focused on a tiny state on the western coast of south India, trained to look for the first rainfall, and then, to track the monsoon as it moves upwards along the coast and across the country, showering water on a land which desperately needs it.

Apart from the agricultural and the economic significance, the kaalavarsham, as the summer monsoons are called in Malayalam holds immense cultural and social meanings. The Ramayana is read during the days of the heaviest rains. Books are written about life during the monsoons, and these rains are etched into the collective psyche of the Malayali as something with nostalgic definitions, of romance, of old songs on an old radio in a grandparents' house, of dusks spent in the warmth of a candle because of power cuts, of the last mango before the rains hit, of new raincoats and umbrellas, and of the sudden spurt of delicate white thumba flowers everywhere.

At home, my mother has tied a clothesline in my bedroom. The incessant rains make it impossible for clothes to dry completely, and only a few hours under the ceiling fan would take away the musty smell off the clothes. New slippers have been brought: ugly rubber flip-flops which do not snap no matter how much you wade through water with them. On the TV, there are constant warnings against going out to sea, and advice on how to protect oneself against monsoon maladies such as malaria and dengue.

The next day, as predicted, the rains begin. "SW Monsoon makes landfall in Kerala," says the headline on a news channel.

It rains for days on end. There are short breaks when the rains thin down into a drizzle, before resuming with all its strength. The whole house smells damp, and I wonder how many Malayalis die premature deaths because of the mold that may be a constant feature of our households. Clothes are spread on lines, armrests of chairs, and on the dining table at night. This, for me, is the first image of a monsoon: clothes spread out all over the house.

At night, the power goes. There is a stillness between the rains. You know to savour this calm because it won't last long. Nocturnal noises saturate the air. The croaks of frogs drown the chirps of crickets. From afar, I can hear the sea, the swish of angry waves against the land.

In the dawn, I see a rain-drenched squirrel reach for a fruit on the wild almond tree outside my parents' window. Through the haze of the drizzle, the sun shines meekly, a cameo performance. According to a fable, when the sun shines as it rains, the fox and the crow are getting married somewhere.

My mother and I sit at the table, ironing underwear to dry them completely. I snicker at the absurdity of our actions. There is a light drizzle outside, but there is a noise like the trample of wild horses, the herald of a heavy downpour, the fall of fat raindrops, beating down with immense strength on the jackfruit and mango trees in our yard. I think of Tagore's lines: The wind is roaring and struggling among the bamboo branches like a wild beast tangled in a net.

Except this is no wind, this is the rain.

That night, the power lines go off again. My mother and I eat rice gruel by the light of a lamp. She tells me that these months are also called panja maasam, months of scarcity. For all the lushness of Kerala, and for all the fertility promised by the monsoons, during these months, people in the past had to stick to minimal diets. Hence the Ramayana readings, she adds. There were little opportunities for amusement: no pilgrimages, very few weddings, and so the reading of the epic tale of banishment of the king in the jungle, a monkey god, and a ten-headed demon king was the only entertainment.

The next day, I go for a walk. Dark green carpets of moss spread on every wall, wild fern sprouts in crevices. Tumba plants have grown everywhere, their delicate white flowers still standing, in spite of the heavy rains. I have been warned of snakes. More frogs mean more food for snakes. At the beach, the sand drops not in a gentle slope but in an abrupt cliff into the sea. The waves have chipped away the incline. From a nearby mosque, the call for prayers has begun. I sit on an unused pier and take in the view: the gushing sea underneath, boys playing football on the beach, and men collecting mussels from rocks that jut into the sea. Afar, over the sea, a column of water. It's raining over the sea and the winds are bringing it towards the shore.

Back home, my mother is back at that monsoon ritual: finding new places for the damp clothes to dry. I ask her if she ever gets tired of the rains. After all, this is her life for at least three months in a year. She shakes her head.

When I was a child, I liked listening to my mother talk about the day she got married to my father. "It was a sunny day, but just as the ceremony ended, it rained heavily. We couldn't even take proper pictures after the wedding."

"Wasn't it a terrible inconvenience?"

"No, it's a good sign. The rains always bring good fortune."

Haiku

Stephen Lang

Post-rain softness brings
Grackles down to yank up worms
Somehow unbroken.



Seraphina Sol. **Solstice**, 2020. Herbal ink on paper. Toronto, Canada.

Stone Bench at Noon

Paul Bluestein

Cloistered at noon in a Zen garden I sat
cross-legged on the centered stone bench
while a fence-sitting squirrel
on the lookout for danger, stood watch.
The whistle of the Southern-Pacific
in the distance and an airliner descending
along its flight path, swirled
tranquility and quiet contemplation
together with 21st century chaos,
but I was glad just to be in that place,
shaded by the tulip trees.

Pitcher Plants

Kenneth Pobo

My smartphone,
seems silly here
where birds make
the only calls needed.
On the camera, I try
to focus on three
pitcher plants,
just out of range. Maybe
if I walked to them?

My foot drops through
sphagnum moss
into water—a moat
protecting plants
from electronic
giants who interrupt
their morning
bug watch.

The Sweetness and The Sting

Cynthia Ezell

The lemons languished in an antique crockery bowl scavenged from my dead mother-in-law's kitchen. It was uncharacteristic of me to buy the entire sack. Since reading Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* several years ago, the pleasure of eating fresh fruit in winter has been fouled. I can't help but consider the distance my food has traveled before it ends up on my plate. The lemons had likely been grown in California or Florida and had jostled about for days in the bowels of a fossil-fueled eighteen-wheeler, degreening on the long journey to Tennessee. Their purchase exposed some ambivalence in my locavorian intentions. I typically purchase lemons prudently, one or two at a time, discreetly slipping them into my grocery cart like contraband.

Perhaps their sunny-yellow color and their whisperings about long summer afternoons and creamy pies with golden meringue mountains seduced me. It was November, the long die-off toward winter well underway, and I felt sad about it. The lemons were a hedge against the death of summer, a small, futile resistance to the inevitable.

Of course I couldn't use them all. Tangy and acidic, the small citrusy flavor bombs were aging, the flesh softening, their skins thinning and acquiring brown spots like old women's hands. Whatever culinary concoction they had originally been intended for had not come to pass. The extravagance of their purchase constituted a rare and forgivable indulgence, but letting them go to waste was unconscionable.

Channeling Kingsolver and her kin, I realized that preserving the lemons in a mixture of sugar and salt would set all aright. In the right proportions, the salt would accomplish its preservative deconstruction, and the sugar would work its sweet magic, embalming the cut lemons for a brief perpetuity. A Pinterest recipe touted preserved lemons as a source of *Umami*, a taste said to "round out" the flavor of foods in a "subtle, yet powerful" way. Just speaking the word out loud evokes sensual associations. Try it. *Umami*. To utter the word is to kiss the universe and summon the maternal in one breath.

Measuring out the salt to pour over the lemons resurrected a memory of my father's rough palm, offering me a salt-sprinkled tomato in our backyard garden on an August afternoon when I was five or six years old. The tomato was a Big Boy, his favored variety. He brushed a patina of soil off the fruit with a handkerchief that hung like the tail of a kite from his back pocket. The other pocket bulged with a small round saltshaker. He bit into the warm flesh of the tomato, ripping open a bleeding hole. The juice sluiced down his chin and onto his shirt collar. Then he shook some salt on the raw spot and offered the tomato to me. The salt ran into the little cuts around my fingernails searing the moment into my memory. I have never forgotten that mixture of sweetness and sting.

With a father who gardened and a mother who baked, gastronomic joys were commonplace in my childhood. Each Saturday morning our small house exhaled the aroma of the communion bread my mother made for the Sunday church service she insisted we attend. Communion "bread" is a humble concoction of flour, oil, and water mixed and rolled into thin sheets before baking and represents, to the penitent supplicant, the body of the resurrected Christ. When the bread of heaven emerges from your own oven, the mysteries of the Eucharist are forever altered. My mother sprinkled sugar over any wafers that had broken and ran them under the broiler before giving them to me. I came to believe those sugared wafers, burnished and sweet, were my mother's apology for making me go to church. Our church was evangelical and fundamentalist, two factors which combined to produce a hyper-vigilance about transgressions: hence my guilt about buying the lemons.

My dilemma with the lemons was a private one, as local as the small kingdom of my kitchen counter and my environmentalist's soul, but the metaphor of the recipe reached beyond the sphere of domestic indulgences. The combination of salt and sugar, sting and sweetness, is necessary for preserving lemons, but also for the development of a resilient human being. The continually oscillating balance of disappointment and gratification, loss and love, struggle and triumph, builds a healthy psyche.

Like a fresh cut that throbs with each heartbeat, pain is a constant theme in all our stories. Loss, illness, marginalization, and the niggling awareness of our future deaths are some of the stings sprinkled amidst the sweetness: feeling loved securely, the joy of new beginnings, kindnesses bestowed, and goals accomplished. Without the sting of pain we miss the challenges that grow the ligature of resilience. The magic is in the mixture. If the scale tips to the side of sweetness, even slightly, we consider ours a good life. When the long darkness of suffering relents, and we are touched by the light of kindness or comfort, our capacity for joy can be expanded.

When my children were young, a Mary Engelbreit magnet held photos to our refrigerator door. Under the picture of a plucky girl in calico were the words, "The only way out is through."

My deliciously extravagant lemons, quartered and pressed close into jars, cuddle among the pickles and chutney in the refrigerator. Bathed in salt and sugar, the lemons are transforming, their flavor growing richer, more complex. I tested them last week, finely chopping one wedge and stirring it into a pan of chicken gravy. The *Umami* flavor worked a magic on the gravy that surpassed the explanations of mere chemistry. The change was subtle, yet powerful.



Inna Malostovker, **Pollinator**, 10/13/2020, Digital photography, Cedar Rapids, IA.

In the Enchanted Cottage

Marcia Arrieta

the stopped clock no longer bothered her.
Here she was beyond time surrounded by books
& verdant groves of oaks. The quilts covering
the chairs were old, colorful,
& the light came through the paned windows.
Thoreau, Austen, Jung, & Klee occasionally came
to converse, as did the elk & primordial
bird with golden wings.

Sonnet to a Magpie

Jasper Cheriton

My friend, with coat of shiny black and white,
your laughter wakes me on a winter's morn.
I watch you leave, your fingers spread in flight,
tomorrow you'll return at break of dawn.

We share a love of silver things, my dear,
that sparkle, glitter, shine in the sunlight.
Collect your treasures, hold them ever near,
keep things that make you happy in your sight.

An omen to a superstitious man,
I may believe in fate, but I'm no fool.
Yes, "One for sorrow," so the song began,
but, "Two for joy," is seen to be more true.

My feathered friend, you always make me smile.
Don't leave so fast today, please stay awhile.

Birdsong At Sunset

Jasper Cheriton

The sun doth shine its gentle golden glow
It softly warms my arms upon the sill
A blackbird chuckles on the ground below
The garden lies before me, silent, still.

The blackbird joins me up upon my perch
Stays silent as his fellows sing farewell.
The night will draw in closer as I search
For words of nature's beauty, how to tell.

Shadows dance as branches jump and sway
And lazy light whispers my soul to sleep.
A summer's eve outshines a summer's day
So calm and full of peace that I could weep.

Sweet birdsong on the breeze and in clear skies
And yet an unknown sorrow clouds these eyes.

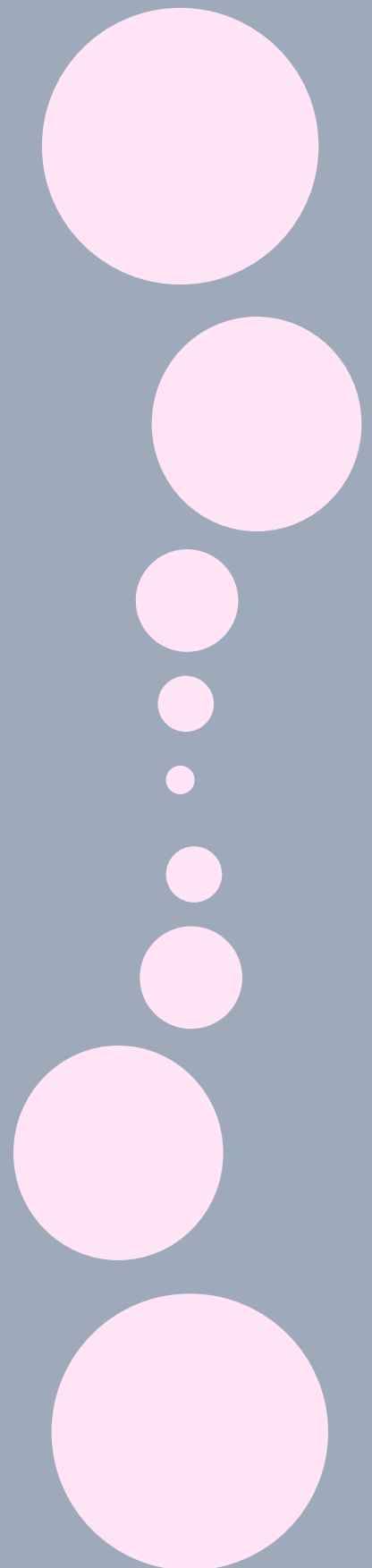
Replacement

Carl Colvin

Clouds glide across the sky,
silhouetted against reds, pinks,
and oranges from a setting
sun. The dying light seeps
toward the stars, fuels them,
and passes the burden
of emitting light

only to find themselves
competing in brightness
with a shining blue marble
below that seems to grow

more black than blue,
blending into the surrounding
darkness as it attempts
to reach the stars' level
of heat with its own synthetic
source of light.





Kimiya Javan, *Insight*, 2020.



IN THE BEGINNING

Chila Woychik

Start at the beginning of everything: fresh, ideal, blue sky. Everything love. Everything soft. Everything warm cookies. Everything forward. Everything yet.

Eve

The prototype wilderness woman ranged across miles of celibate terrain scratching for answers. Would she need a truck to carry all the newness? How did she get there – waking up with amnesia, and no childhood memories?

First fruit. A peach? First drink. Crystal clear and certainly clean. First sex. Was he big? Was it good? Was he gentle, fast, slow, frequent? First storm. Did it scare her? (We should ask that about the sex too.) First sunburn. First tree climbing? First period. First load of laundry. Wait. No clothes. Lucky. First sunset. First vision of a speckled night sky. First morning sun to streak across her face. First time washing her face, her hair. How did she cut her toenails, fingernails? What did she use for toilet paper, for tampons? Did everything feel like a training op, a test determining destiny? Was she stuck there so far from everywhere else? Did she make it to the other side, take the untrodden trails? Or did she merely shadow Adam, an empty exoskeleton, a receptacle for his desires? No, she had a mind of her own.

Adam

All the firsts first. That's kind of substantial.

Why that one cloud fluffed and pretty sticks together like that, is what he wants to know, and if there's another version of it. If this is the world's edge or its middle, and what made everything jump, and who's ringing that bell. Lights, lights, flung so freely. But mostly, eventually, he wants to know if so much beauty is meant to give weary eyes and spent spirits hope.

Was she the cheerleader you hoped for? And before her, were you the first poet to sit in a corner with only your hands for company? Were you? Did you?

What did they argue about? Finances? No chance. And it's hard to overcook the meat when you're vegan.

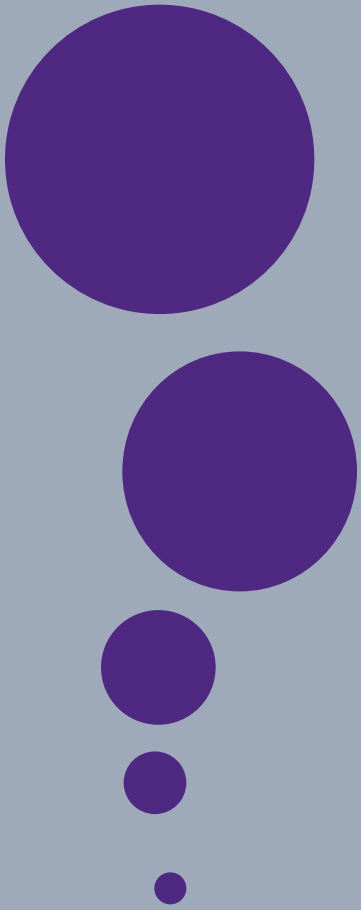
Did you speak in special strains, sweet and soft, or did you forget a promise? Did your vocal cords learn their volume? Surely, the salt in your sweat corroded conversation.

Did he kill the spiders, swat the flies, chase the rats away?

Can I get you something, Adam? Courage? Perspective? You discovered you can't hide forever.

In the End

Everything changes. Everything will fall into place and be fine, though casualties will be extensive. Maybe I'm not being clear. We listen to the branches when the wind blows. We rent a shack on the beach and watch the tides hug the earth, sway with the pulling of the moon. And then we go off Book off Book far off Book to make the prophecy sometimes, sometimes, come true.



be more than a drop in the ocean

WINTER 2021