FLASH NONFICTION

In the Time of the Caterpillars

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"Monarchs" by Atzin Garcia

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There were four of the caterpillars the first time I noticed them. The milkweed had been growing throughout the summer but still wasn't of remarkable size. The monarch caterpillars, black and yellow, were devouring long leaves and orange flowers, and I was proud rather than worried.

Two mornings later, there were five of them — I must have neglected to notice one — and the milkweed's stalks were bare already. Where to find more of it? Taking the dog around the block, I noticed that the neighbor had several hardy plants, but each was likely supporting several caterpillars too. A nearby nursery would probably have some, but the sun was barely up and it was too early to find out. What else could I give them? Butternut squash would do in an emergency, at least for caterpillars in the final stage of development, although it wasn't ideal as the squash lacked vital toxins and nutrients. I needed to sustain them for a week or two, and I was woefully unprepared. I could let nature simply run its course but I'd attracted the monarchs who'd laid their eggs on my plants and I felt responsible. The monarchs had lately become a welcome diversion, an antidote to the political chaos of daily life in the United States since the last election, and I'd never considered them a source of stress before — not until that morning.

The internet was helpful, and it wasn't. Some people suggested allowing a year for the milkweed to mature — too late, and inaccurate based on what else I later learned. Tropical versus native milkweed — there was a difference, and the distinction was important. It was vital to know that tropical milkweed should be cut back in winter if it didn't die back on its own. Not only could a perennial milkweed plant become host to the parasite *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha*, some argued that a year-round food source for the monarchs interfered with their migration patterns. Captive rearing was cruel and unhelpful, especially in large quantities, and while keeping caterpillars safe from predators, including the quietly treacherous tachinid fly, it also exposed them to parasites and weakened the monarch population overall. Few well-intentioned humans bothered to consider whether the surrounding habitat could support a population reared in a vacuum. At least I wasn't one of *those* people. Scientific facts trumped personal feelings, which I knew wasn't the case for so many Americans.

My nightmare morning, entirely self-induced, was worsening. Stepping into the yard several times a day became several times that hour. I wondered if some bird would pick off a caterpillar or two — unlikely, since the milkweed made them toxic. Finally, I sliced up some butternut squash and set it at the base of the decimated plant. Within minutes, one of the larger caterpillars began to eat — a relief. For the moment, that was enough. Watching them, I relaxed, and for a second, a minute, an hour, forgot about the country's rapid descent into

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fascism — a forbidden word, although the boxes have all been checked. Our rights are being trampled and our neighbors are vanishing, being kidnapped or gunned down in the streets by untrained and irresponsible hooligans. Someday we will all have been against this, even those who didn't say so at the time.

I accidentally stepped on a roaming caterpillar that evening, and so became an inadvertent adversary to my own endeavor. Having read of people putting motionless caterpillars out of perceived misery, I wondered how they could be sure. There's currently a motionless caterpillar clinging to the side of the house and I'm determined not to touch it. No, it isn't lost. No, it isn't starving, and it doesn't need my help deciphering its own instincts. Whether it's molting, or pupating, or even if it's ill and dying, I will never be a better caterpillar than a caterpillar is. And so I return focus to my own sad species, and the nightmare that is the state of this country.

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