

A Magic If

By Jonah Scott Mendelsohn

If you were a caterpillar,
from the moment you hatched, you would be hungry –
very hungry indeed - but you heard that one when you were three.
Nibbling insatiably, eight tiny pairs of feet clutching,
wiggling, climbing the edge of a leaf, your tiny mandibles –
feel them - what would they feel like? -
biting and chewing away at the green on which you stand –
the only world you'd have ever known. You'd whittle the edge
into nothing, and then on to another leaf. All you'd eat
would turn into weight, growing flesh swelling
until you molt, shedding skin like a pair of skinny jeans.
And then you'd eat more. Leaf after leaf,
skin after skin, five times or six you'd
leave your shape behind, eat and repeat until -
in just a week – you'd devour a whole canopy of green.

(You wouldn't be alone. Your egg into creation was one of
three or five hundred –if you were born into captivity,
maybe more. One of many, you'd swarm, grasping,
greedy sacks of life, hoping to prove fertile, not fertilizer).

Two weeks later - that's twelve in caterpillar years,
the length of an education - you'd stop. It's time.
The race with your fellows is over, and you'd make yourself a room,
a studio, a place to be alone, a cocoon. You'd commit
to a spot on the branch you've been eating and weave -
with tiny threads of yourself - sticky structure.
It doesn't offer much protection, but it would have to do.
This is where you'd learn what you're made of.

If you were a caterpillar,
you would fold
inward, inside;
drop your skin
to the bottom
like a robe,
finally private
and naked.
And you would
digest yourself:
enzymes melting
the stripy tube
and tiny legs
that grasped green,
into a protein soup,
caterpillar memories
floating throughout.

Matter matters
no more.

All that remains are
imaginal disks,
a pattern for
cell division –
50 cells into 50,000,
just to make
one of the four wings.
You slurp yourself to fuel
an explosion of life
inside a pocket
hanging upside down
from a leafless branch.

Does light shine through?
Does sound penetrate?
Can you feel the branch shake?
Or is change your entire world
until the cocoon cracks?

Spindles emerge - legs to lift you out of the shell,
Holding you still as wet things unfold and take form.
Flat, they start to dry – elaborate, but functional.
You never had appendages before. Is this you?
Snap! You open and close yourself, testing the air,
flashing the world for the first time, signaling for takeoff.

If you were a butterfly, you'd lift yourself up.
Appetite no longer rules, no more binging on leaves
like a bottomless bag of chips. You'd glide and sip,
tasting the flavor of many different flowers.
Your patterns and hues would help you hide,
and the wing spots on your back stare down predators,
leaving you free to dance forward, to drink, to chase
a trace of pheromones on the wind.

Of course you're not a caterpillar.

Metamorphosis is not guaranteed.

But what if you were?

Appetites would drive you, fat and molting, until you stopped –
stillness and sticky stuff in ample supply, spinning
a pocket of dreams as safe as silk in the wild.

- for Jon G.