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Late Summer

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BIG SKY, SMALL PROSE FLASH CONTEST 2021

The Big Sky Small Prose Flash Contest is *CutBank's* annual prose competition for pieces under 750 words. This year's contest was judged Daryl Scroggins.

Daryl Scroggins will be judging this year's Flash contest. He has taught creative writing and literature at The University of Texas at Dallas, The University of North Texas, and the Writer's Garret, in Dallas. He now lives in Marfa, Texas. His fictions, poems, and creative non-fictions have appeared in magazines and anthologies around the country and abroad, including *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Blink-Ink*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *CutBank*, *Dime Show Review*, *Egress*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *KYSO Flash*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *New York Tyrant*, *Northwest Review*, *Quick Fiction*, and *The Portland Review*. Nominated for a Pushcart Prize several times, his flash fiction and prose poems have also won a number of contests and awards. He is the author of several poetry and fiction chapbooks, as well as *Winter Investments*, a collection of stories (Trilobite Press), and *This Is Not the Way We Came In*, a collection of flash fiction and a flash novel (Ravenna Press). One of his microfictions was reprinted in *Flash Fiction International* (2015; in the Flash Theory section), and another microfiction has been included in *Best Microfiction 2020*.

The following pieces are this year's contest selections.

ELISABETH ADWIN EDWARDS

LATE SUMMER

- *Runner-Up: Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest* -

I turn on the oven, perhaps for the last time until fall. Soon these California nights will cease to deliver a reprieve from the heat of days. Even in the wee hours of morning, no cooling will come, and our skins will seem like too much clothing; we'll dream of peeling them off as we stand naked before the box fans. Already the neighbor's yard is browning in the sun. That was the way you preferred your favorite vegetable, cauliflower: oil-drizzled, roasted till golden brown.

As a child growing up in Massachusetts, I both cursed and relished the bright, stifling days of summer. Relished exploring the thirteen acres of woods behind our house, cursed the humidity. Relished the samaras of the maples I split and sap-glued to my nose, but cursed the mosquitoes. I relished the peonies, the coconut scent of your suntan oil, the cool relief of your homemade popsicles.

And how I loved watching you in the garden, where, crouched down or bent over, you worked, your long, tanned legs tattooed with dirt, a bandana wreathing your head.

I've a recurring dream in which I walk out of that house to discover you standing naked, a vine-ripened tomato in each hand, arms laden with zucchini, beans, carrots, more zucchini. You're shivering. I call to you, but you don't seem to hear, and then I wake up. You were always giving vegetables away. You were always giving yourself away. People took freely.

Almost two years and a month have passed since you died. I've been smearing across my mouth a coconut-scented lip balm you left behind. I keep it in a drawer in the kitchen. It's old now and yet it seems to last forever, a small gift that keeps on giving. It smells and tastes like you, or a memory of you. Are those two things the same?

After quarantine went into effect, we subscribed to a produce box. It took weeks to get our first delivery, but when it arrived, neatly-taped and dropped at our door, it felt like Christmas. *Collards! Nectarines and berries! A cauliflower! Lettuces!* and *Oh*, I exclaimed, nose flaring, *zucchiniis. Well, we can't throw them out*, my husband responded. I diced them, cooked them down with onion until unrecognizable, and added the mixture to a pot of beans and corn.

Those old summers, you served zucchini nightly—sautéed, steamed, deep-fat fried. I ate and ate until I gagged at the sight of a green gourd on the kitchen counter. And some of the garden's specimens grew to the size of small children. After watching *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* at the local theatre, I became convinced an alien-me, or an alien-you, was developing inside one of them. What if woke up and I wasn't me? Or you weren't you? Witnessing Donald Sutherland smash his squash-hatched clone with a pipe terrified me. I vowed never to eat zucchini again. But forty years later, as my family and I devoured that dish, I thought of those summers, and surprised myself by requesting zucchiniis be added to our box for the following week.

Tonight I palm the the ruffled bulk of cauliflower, pare away the brown spots, lay it down to cut into steaks. The serrated knife saws through it easily, and each, with its bit of stem, looks like a flat, white tree. On the day of your death, a man held your head in his hands. You'd given away the last of yourself, with the hope a cure for the disease that killed you, and so many others, might someday be found. The pathologist sawed through your skull, lifted the top clean off, snipped and tweezed. With great care he placed your brain into a styrofoam cooler and sent it across the country, where a neuroscientist, after shaving it into mandolin-thin slices, examined it under a microscope, the dark, blooming vines inside becoming, at last, visible.