Monarch Days

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When I was a child I searched
The wild fields by the side of the dirt road
That wound its rutted way through cow pastures
Past summer days of
Dust and heat and grass
Spent hours looking for milkweeds
Home to the exquisite yellow, black and white striped creatures
That dined exclusively on the sticky bitter milk of their leaves
Spent more hours watching them patiently chew
Those summer days away

Before the winds picked up the nose-biting chill of fall
Or more than a hint of the impossible brilliance to come
Had painted its way onto the trees along the fence row
I knew summer was cresting
When the striped pyjamas disappeared and in their stead,
If you were very lucky,
You’d find the waxy caves of impossibly delicate green
Crowned with impossibly tiny nuggets of finest gold
In which my summer fellows laid themselves down

I'd visit my waxen treasures
Watch as they slowly lost their opalescence
Turned dark and faintly sinister
Hinted at something mysterious and painful and beautiful
Tried to catch the moment when the protective shell
Could no longer hold the transformation it had nurtured
Became too sheer, too brittle, insufficient
When curiosity got the best of those who watched and those who waited
And something new, something blackly velvet, still packed tight
Would pull itself into the world again, wetly vulnerable
Inflate tightly wadded wings with sour blood no bird would taste
Hold them up to the world unfurled to harden into windsails
And launch themselves into that world
Colour the air with rhythmic strokes of black veined orange

Was one of those strong beats, delicate though it seemed,
The last gust of air needed to fuel a hurricane somewhere?

They stayed long enough to gather strength
Before beating their way to Southern coasts
To winter in other summer lands
Fulfilling their turn of the generational spiral
Making trees heavy with the accumulation of their light wings
Leaving me to watch as gold and crimson stained the world
As milkpods burst and downy parachutes scattered seeds to the wind
In a red sweater, with snowflake pattern
I’d visit the scene of next year’s drama
Find hints of discarded wrappings
Shredded under leaves, now withering too
In preparation for a winter’s respite
Knowing school was around the corner
And that it would be the interlude until the next time
Summer filled the world with
Monarch days

About the Author

Karen Hawkins is a graduate student with the University of British Columbia’s Centre for the Study of Curriculum and Instruction. Following undergraduate work at Queen’s University, Karen taught English, Drama, Math and Science in Ontario schools before moving to Vancouver and taking a post with the B.C. School Trustees Association. She is currently the Senior Director, Board Development for the Association.
Special thanks to Janet Elliott, Kingston, Ontario for permission to publish the Monarch butterfly photographs from her collection.