You are eight years old, and the soft pads of your hands are beginning to form calluses that scratch against the rusting metal of the fire escape as your dad sits, the smoke of his cigarette curling up into the sunset-stained sky. His glasses reflect the orange tint of the sky, the sun hidden behind the blanketing clouds, and his cigarette burns red-and-black like the wings of the monarchs he tells you about as he takes a drag; how they will make their way across the Texas skyline all through October, leaving the autumn air crisping and pinching in their wake.

He tells you how long they live—*not long*, it turns out, and you glance up at him as the sun sinks behind the silhouette of tall buildings that manage to make even your dad look small. You ask him how they find their way.

He doesn’t respond for a moment, ashing his cigarette on a pot you made him in the second grade for Mother’s Day that he keeps out on the fire escape (you’d had a lady who was all smiles and sharp lines bus your class out to a pottery studio and let you all dirty your hands with thick clay, her mouth not moving in sync with her words when she said something about *under-privileged kids*, and when you’d first handed it to your dad with those same words on your tongue you feared that, with such a hardness in his eyes, he might smash it on the kitchen tile). It was made to be filled with packed dirt and not the embers of his cigarette. But, you reckon, it was also made to be given to a mother.

The silence thickens as the hiss of his cigarettes stills, and that’s when he finally answers you.

“They’re born knowing where to go, kid,” he tells you, “It’s a generational thing—they pass it down.”

He tussles your hair, which you can’t help but flinch away from, and he leaves you outside to watch the sun sink as it runs into the night with your back against the brown brick of your apartment complex, red starting to bleed through the thick blanket of clouds.
Sundays are spent in heavy silence.

Most families will attend church services today, but your dad works late on Saturdays and he tells you that he doesn’t plan on waking up for anyone, not even God.

Even though he says this, he still manages to get up when you shake him awake so he can mark your height on your bedroom door frame in bright red Sharpie which he does the first weekend of every month while you prattle on about butterflies ad nauseam.

Did you know they can perceive colors that humans can’t?

Did you know that their wings flap slower than those of other butterflies?

Did you know that they store cardiac glycosides, a poison, and that’s why all of those birds didn’t try to eat the one we saw on the roof the other day?

And your dad will listen. Not in the way adults usually do, with the endless ‘uh-huhs’ and ‘yeps’ and total indifference as if you’re a white noise machine they can only stand to deal with if they tune you out, but like the breath you waste prattling on about monarchs is worth hearing. He doesn’t interrupt, and he lets you stumble and correct yourself and spend so many words saying absolutely nothing at all because you’re far from being a wordsmith, and when you stare at him expectantly he hits all the right beats: “ain’t that neat?” or “where’d you hear that?”

“You’re getting tall, dude,” he notes when you step away from the door, “Soon enough, we’ll be eye and eye.”
Somehow, you are eight years old again, and you’re wide awake as the door to your bedroom creaks open.

You pretend not to be.

The monarchs descend gradually, not in a cascading wave overhead like you’d so often imagined when you were a kid. In the city, it’s especially difficult to catch sightings of the butterflies, but you manage to every once in a while. You wish you could ask them questions, sometimes; childish inquiries as to how it felt to fly, maybe, or if they knew they were going to grow into butterflies at all.

As you watch them flit between wires in a chain link fence on your walk home from school, though, you almost feel like there are a million more important things to ask. Things you didn’t even know how to find the right words for.

For your birthday, several years later, you’ll ask your dad for one of those butterfly raising kits you see boasted about on infomercials. Later still, you’ll ask if he knew that the monarchs who fly south will never return home.

“You look just like your dad.”
Your best friend is a kid who wears glasses so bulky that it makes your own pair look almost invisible in comparison. You raise an eyebrow at him, and he raises one back.

“I’m serious! You could be his twin,” he pauses, and continues with a snarky grin, “If you were taller…”

You bump your shoulder into his and he dissolves into laughter. “What were you saying in bio earlier?” he goes on, “About the butterflies, I mean. The parents pass down their knowledge of migration to their children, like… genetically, right? Maybe you’re going to inherit the rest of your dad’s personality, too, and then you’ll really be clones of each other.”

The small smile growing over your face twitches. You hug your books a little closer to your chest.

“Too bad humans are different than butterflies,” you tell him, “You should pay better attention in class.”

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You feel like you don’t age like your classmates do. Maybe you’re more like a monarch than you want to admit: soon you’ll go to sleep as a kid, you think, and wake up a genuine teenager who understands all their quirks.

Of all the things you don’t quite get, you do know that you’re supposed to rebel, and many of your classmates love to chat about how they do this. Staying out past curfew (which you’ve never had), fooling around with their secret girlfriends behind their parents’ backs (which turned your stomach to think about), and stealing alcohol to brag about having done it. That was always what excited them the most, you noticed every sleepy Monday at the lunch table, the drinking.

You know the tricks— handing money off to stragglers at gas stations, finding the places that don’t card, or just stealing what’s already in the cabinet and filing back up a drained bottle with water so it looks
untouched (you poured all your dad’s alcohol down the drain when you were eight, and the reaction you got wasn’t awe).

You relate to them in small ways, you guess. There are times you wish you could drink every last drop of alcohol in the house just to know what it is your dad feels when he does it, his flushed face going as red as yours does when it meets the back of his hand.

Once, when you’re young, and he’s drunk, you tell him about the monarchs. He doesn’t interrupt, like always, but his eyes are glassy and distant and his mouth is set in this hard, unmoving line as he stares at you, like he doesn’t know how to look at you anymore.

It only takes one night of frost to kill an entire generation of monarchs.

He stops listening, and you stop speaking.

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You steal one of your dad’s cigarettes after he knocks out one of your teeth, one of your adult teeth, on the corner of the bathroom sink when you were climbing out of the shower. You run your tongue over your gums between drags, head tipped back against the unwashed brown brick, transfixed with the heat of the lighter that you’d cupped your hand around to spark up.

You put it out on the same pot you’d made so many years ago, and the night feels so small.

έκκσ

You’re his kid. You’re his little man, his dude, his champ or his son or his favorite guy.
“Asav,” he calls you, then, and he holds onto you like you might slip away if he doesn’t even though he is the one breaking—his voice rough, his eyes blown wide, his hands ice-cold against your arms.

You pull him close against you, dig your chin into his shoulder, and you hold him back. There is something so fragile about him at that moment and, although some part of your mind tells you that you should be scared, you can’t make yourself feel much of anything at all.

You stare at the marker on your doorframe.

Your throat closes on itself when you try to fill the silence.