

The New Criterion

Poems May 1990

Prelude

by Paul Mariani

In the graygreen firs of the high Sierra Madres
the thundering multitude of monarchs, having navigated
on battered brilliant wings the moraines, bluffs,

the islands, inland seas and valleys,
the commons, pastures, towns, the choked Passaic,
the Onondaga & the Sound, having braved

the broad Chesapeake and the lower Mississippi,
the Alleghenies & the Allegash, the lush deltas
& the Okeechobee, the windwhipped Keys and the waters

of the yawning Gulf beyond, at last touch landfall,
settling by the millions in the sunsoaked mountain clearings
to begin their well-earned rest.

On my mother's peach gauze blouse, the one
I gave her as a present, we pin the simple
inlaid butterfly she loved to wear,

and fold her hands, right over left,
the unfamiliar rosary wrapped about them,
and place the asymmetric, brightwinged black

& orange butterfly her grandson Lenny crayoned
upright beside her in the open casket . . .
For the first time, dismantling the crumbling carapace

of her room, I note her few possessions:
her nurse's uniform & her K-Mart shoes,

her dogeared aa bible and her cardboard trinket box.

And now, now that she is gone, even I,
who never learned to sing for her alive,
can see them settling everywhere: on walls and curtains,

on the backs of cherished photo albums,
on her ten-times-daily coffee cup, on her green brass
rusting bracelet, on so many scraps of Lenny's drawings

those day-by-day reminders of the coming changes,
of the promise she saw lighting everywhere around her:
butterflies, butterflies, a million butterflies and more.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 8 Number 9 , on page 41

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/1990/5/prelude>