SANCTUARY By: Alison Hawthorne Deming

In Mexico where the eastern monarchs  
gather for their winter sleep  
a tide of fluttering orange and black  
sweeping over the border and into the trees  
of the central mountains, there is  
such hunger that the campesinos,  
though their fathers and mothers  
believe the butterflies are  
spirits of the dead returning,  
must cut the forest for fuel and cropland.  
Brush smoking, burned pits of stumps,  
scrawny pony, burro tethered in the cut corn.  
So much of the sanctuary has been lost  
that experts have begun to issue  
the usual decrees—how many years to go  
before centuries of habit genetically  
sealed in butterfly cells will be gone.  
In the lofty remains of the cloud forest,  
*vigilantes*guide the pilgrims under the dark canopy  
of ancient trees and into the wind of butterfly wings.  
In the heat of the afternoon  
monarchs come down from their sleep  
to huddle on the edges of streams and  
meadow pools, trembling to stay warm,  
and they sip, then sit, they fly off  
until the air is a blizzard of orange.  
The pilgrims watch quietly, lines of  
schoolchildren from Mexico City,  
scientists from Texas and California,  
old women in rebozos leaning on the arms  
of adult sons, tourists lugging  
cameras and binoculars. And together  
the visitors drink in the spectacle  
with the great thirst they have brought  
from their cities and towns, and it is  
a kind of prayer, this meeting of our kind,  
so uncertain about how to be  
the creature we are, and theirs,  
so clear in their direction.