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.