



FULVIO ERVAS
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FULVIO ERVAS
LITTLE BOOK OF PRODIGIOUS INSECTS

translated from the Italian
by Jamie Richards

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TRAVELERS

Monarch butterflies, where did they go? Where did they fly off to when the cold Canadian winter hit? No one could say.

It was the long work of one couple, Norah and Fred Urquhart, that enabled us to find out. That there was a migration, that much was certain, but its destination was unclear. The monarchs glided down the Americas and then seemed to disappear.

The researchers' last name refers to a castle on Loch Ness where a shy monster lived under the water.

Meticulously gathering information, talking to scholars and listening to enthusiastic accounts, tagging butterflies with tracking devices like pebbles to mark a path, the Urquharts discovered their point of origin in the mountains of Mexico.

Almost halfway across the world.

If you go chasing butterflies, they'll always take you across the world.

1.
FLYING

Red-braided itty-bitty Daisy unfolded the map and set her finger on Canada, then closed her eyes and pictured those lands from up above. She dreamed of soaring over the treetops, meadows, hills, and slid her finger down the United States to Mexico. How easy it seemed, only a moment.

Yet for a monarch butterfly, the journey, that journey, took four generations: a great-grandmother, a grandmother, a mother, and a daughter. Three of the four generations were consumed on the way there, and the return was up to the fourth generation. So it had been given a life eight times longer than the others, more life so as to return to a place it had never seen, never taken in. A place that had been embedded inside it ever since butterflies were invented.

To Daisy, the life cycle of the monarch butterfly was a wonderful story and there was no need to know

biology, genetics, or any other mysterious sciences to find it fascinating. Just imagining the flutter of wings over the vast mountains, plains, and forests was enough.

Daisy felt like such a powerful story had to be shared with the whole gang: Red, Imre, Ebony, Peter, Saul. Imre would definitely understand, she was sure. He was always ahead of everyone else. Or off to the side, which was another vantage point for understanding.

The gang always met in Peter's dad's garage, surrounded by shelves packed with boxes, bottles of homemade beer, and a fermenter giving off alcoholic fumes. Peter had promised his father that, in exchange for the hospitality, he and his friends would tidy up, dust, and clean out the old magazines. A promise that was never kept.

Daisy threw open the garage door and found them all sprawled out, the way boys do, without the least style.

"What's this about butterflies?" Peter asked straight off, craning his neck like a flamingo.

"How do you come up with this stuff? Why not stick with flies and ants?" asked Saul, leaning against the garage door.

"No butterflies in sight! We might as well keep pinning roaches," Ebony said, standing up from her chair for attention.

“Let’s hear what she has to say!” Red declared, silencing them.

Red was the leader of the group, the oldest, and you could tell because he already wore a solid-colour oxford and knew how to sit with the correct posture.

Stick straight and curious-eyed, he stood before Daisy, who gave him a small nod of gratitude.

Daisy had only brought a map of the Americas and a newspaper clipping. She lifted them, pointing to the group of bright-coloured butterflies.

“These are monarchs,” she said.

“Right, monarchs! Why not emperors?” Peter tried to mock her, but Ebony rebounded fast. “Isn’t there a butterfly president of the republic?” triggering laughter from Saul and even Peter.

Daisy felt a pang of irritation. She watched as Imre held open the map, displaying it for the others.

She geared back up, not allowing herself to be intimidated. She was going to talk to them about the air and the sky. Use imagination to lift them up from the sidewalks, cars, traffic lights, all those straight lines, the dead eyes of the tall buildings. Get the crew out of the grey and noisy city. Four generations flying through the air, in the blue skies, guided by a memory stronger than thought.

Daisy told that story, with its air of mystery. She was impassioned. Afterwards, the group was pensive.

Peter burst out, incredulously: “How can the daughters of the fourth generation up and go back to a place they’ve never been?”

Daisy said she didn’t know.

Red, who had been silent the whole time, nodded and concluded that in the city, as everyone knows, you only see ants, flies, roaches, and little else; there are no butterflies in the city, only in the collections hanging on the walls of some bored moneybags, all mail-order junk, not real insects, just glue.

“It’s nice to dream, but you’ve got to keep your feet on the ground, too,” he added.

Daisy realized that one meeting wouldn’t be enough. The war of the butterflies was about to begin.

1.
ALL READY

Mr Greenway scurried into the study, carrying under his arm the beloved journal of the Royal Academy of Horticulture, the best on the subject of comestible vegetables, agronomic techniques, and refined and delicious recipes, a combination he appreciated as much as the art of uprooting carrots and radishes.

He threw his jacket on the desk, settling into his beloved

evening chair. With some trepidation he began to leaf through the pages of the journal. He was looking for something specific, though he diligently glanced at every article.

For over a year now, the editorial department has granted space, as part of their column devoted to reader contributions, for unusual literary creations. They appeared alongside how-to pieces about

exterminating green aphids, tips for storing potatoes west of the Greenwich line, and lively protests against importing tomatoes from the Mediterranean. Still, those marvellous little gems must be relevant to the journal's mission, which aimed to spread the passion for gardening, along with love for the universe of botany and entomology.

Mr Greenway could admit that florid accounts of the production of wool jumpers for weeping willows didn't merit the space they'd been given, that they too hastily published drivel about balcony gardens, and that the titbits about his own cats and dogs didn't warrant particular enthusiasm. Yet to his astonishment, he found among those pages stories that delighted him. He smiled with satisfaction: another one! He switched on the old turntable and a lamp, and a golden light illuminated the page. Before reading, he began singing along with The Beatles. "In Penny Lane..."

"Mr Greenway, excuse me..."

A young man had tentatively cracked the door to the office.

"What is it, Melchiorre?" he asked, halting the turntable.

"Everything is ready for tomorrow, Mr Greenway."

"Did you follow my instructions?" said Greenway.

"I did. To the letter.."

“Have you divvied up the garden plots?”

“To the millimetre.”

“Have you prepared the metal plaques for each planter?”

“Yes, I painted them yellow. Emily is ready too.”

“Emily is always ready.”

“Mr Eugene said he’s not interested in the newcomers. In fact, he wishes they’d go home.” Melchiorre shook his head, signalling his disapproval.

“It takes a great deal of patience to deal with Eugene. Don’t worry.”

“Will the new guests be a lot of work?” asked Melchiorre.

“As much as the others,” Greenway replied.

The young Melchiorre displayed a certain apprehension every time new guests arrived.

“What will you say to them?”

“Would you like to hear?”

“Yes.”

“Here is exactly what I’m going to say: ‘You’re not here to practice gardening, but horticulture. You’ll be working with solar energy and its transformation, with matter that becomes nourishment, with a form of metabolism that lays the foundation for every thought, every aesthetic or literary digression, because first comes the sugar that feeds the brain, and then its

exercitations. This is a necessarily practical universe, and therefore, I'll give you dirt, shovels, and rakes right away. Each of you will receive the same planting space. You'll have to till the soil and then follow all the necessary procedures over the course of a full year, this spring to next.' What do you think?"

Melchiorre smiled, more relaxed.

"Excellent, Sir, excellent."

Greenway, once he was alone, set down the journal of the Royal Academy. He could devote himself to reading it in the coming days.

He stood up and went to the window. Darkness, a faint light behind the trees, a near-full moon up above, the moon lasts almost one solar month.

The right amount of time. Tomorrow, soil, work. Then to sow. A cycle, another life cycle.

THE FIRST NIGHT

Mr Greenway hadn't failed to notice the sparks flying between the two tables during dinner.

Sure, he thought he'd heard Mr Boyle grumbling, attempting to exorcise the very word "children," or Mr Darwin, whose pullovers and jackets had surely struck him as cut-rate. But on the whole, he felt he could say that they liked each other. He couldn't tell if that was a positive or negative thing, worrying or reassuring. He'd never had such an experience, just as it had never occurred to him to combine the first months of the year and the last lines of the calendar.

He gazed out the dormer, taking in the air, a mix that changed day to day: swirls of pollen, blooms, wingbeats, storms over the sea, decomposing leaves.

"Mixtures, like all our lives," he thought.

The kids waited for silence to fall over the villa. A silence trimmed with ticking, squeaking, and the cries of birds that filtered through the forest all the way to the building.

With great circumspection they all gathered in the room with their four mattresses, gliding down the hallways like ghosts. The two single rooms were occupied by Daisy and Ebony, who turned Imre out with the excuse that he shouted in his sleep, though he was worried that someone would go through his rucksack, where he kept Grandpa Catfish's gun. When they were at the pier, before they boarded the ferry he'd had an urge to hurl it into the dark water, letting it make its way to the sea floor, where the currents would deliver it to the great White Whiskers, who'd know what to do with that magic pistol.

They had managed to get in, Red's trick had worked—but Ebony and Peter were convinced that the elders wouldn't drink it.

"They're staring at it!" they said.

"They're not dumb..." Daisy granted.

"Did you see their faces?" Saul said. "They look like a bunch of lawyers."

"That one's dressed like he's going to a wedding," Peter commented. "The only one who worries me is that Melchiorre," he added.

“I wonder why they’re here,” muttered Imre.

“Must be on holiday,” Red said.

“Good for them. But Red, how will we get to stay, Red? Do you have a plan?” asked Saul.

Silence.

Then Peter spoke. “We’ll make them!”

“How?” Imre asked.

“We’ll force them to, we’ll say if they don’t let us stay, we’ll...” Ebony trailed off.

“We’ll what?” followed Red.

“We’ll set the villa on fire.”

“Uhh... that’s scary, Ebony! That would spook them for sure!”

Red shook his head, incredulous at such nonsense.

“We have to be nice, cosy up to them.”

“Make them laugh,” Daisy said softly, as if to herself.

“Okay, but for how long?”

“Just a day or two, Saul. Long enough to figure out how to steal the butterflies. That’s why we came here. That’s the objective. All right, people?” said Red.

Everyone nodded.

“Can we erase that line, though?” asked Peter.

“Which one?” asked Red.

“The one on the board in the dining room: ‘Uncertain time, uncertain place.’ It’s awful. What does it mean?”

“What do you think?” asked Daisy.

“That we don’t know anything about anything.”

Daisy lay back on one of the beds and looked up at the ceiling. Everyone looked at Daisy and everyone nodded when she declared, “This is heaven.”

Then she said, “Let’s see what the night is like here.”

They tiptoed out of the room. Saul strained not to make too much noise.

They went out the door in single file, stopping on the veranda for a moment to observe the darkness. Real night, not neon, toothless streetlamps, car headlights, the thousand miniscule fractions of night in every house, every pub, every road, every square; no last buses, drunks, loners, stray cats, insomnia followed by the alarm clock. There, it was all one, immense night.

They cautiously descended the stairs, their eyes growing accustomed with every step, and the trees, surface of the lawn, and the stars up above, came into view.

“The stars!” Ebony exclaimed, spinning in circles until she collapsed in the grass.

They went exploring, each with their own compass, their own confidence with the dark. Red ventured all the way to the forest; he would have gone further but it seemed too complex compared to the squares and streets he was used to.

Peter sat on a bench. He observed the others, thinking up stories about ghosts, traps—he was electrified. Saul

saw that the willows on the lawn didn't jut upward like the oaks at the forest's edge. In fact, one of them seemed curved, as if its branches weighed more than its roots, and the boy, content, leaned against the trunk and started to push. He could feel the trunk respond, elastic; they understood each other at once. Saul pushed with all his might, making it sway to and fro.

Daisy and Imre went further down the path, and the others, noticing their absence, quickly followed. The hedges were fragrant barriers, and like the walls of a maze, guided the kids in a specific direction. Imre spotted another path on the left, and they took it, discovering that it led to another house, much smaller than the villa.

"Stop. Careful," Red said, motioning for them to turn back.

From a corner of the lawn they could make out a glow: it looked like a candle suspended in a bubble, and they saw it rise, slowly, swaying, and go higher and higher, like an earth star returning into the sky.

"Hurry, hurry! Turn back!" Red urged, not wanting to risk their absence being noticed.

The kids' little outing, however, hadn't escaped the sleepless residents at the villa.

Madame Lamarr had caught sight of them through the ajar door to her room. "They stick together, like all

young mammals,” she thought. “They keep each other warm, communicate, calm each other. A beautiful thing.” And she curled up in bed, still listening, imagining their words and remembering her own from when she was a girl, with her family, in the streets.

Mr Darwin had heard creaking in the hallway, had turned off his lamp, put on his robe, and closing his door, saw the kids filing out. It had to be a secret meeting! But the matter didn’t worry him. Those rugrats didn’t bother him; they wouldn’t witness his death because for days he’d felt a certain vigour, and he counted on sticking around the planet’s circumference for a few months yet, at which point they would already be gone, back to their families, their games, their dense illusion of time.

Greenway knocked softly on Madame Lamarr’s door, knowing he would find her still awake. The woman was sitting at the writing desk, which was dimly lit. She motioned for the man to come and take a seat on the bed.

“What do you think?” Greenway whispered.

“Good, I think it’s good,” she said.

“You don’t think they’ll create a disruption?”

“So what if they do?”

Greenway realized there was nothing to add.

He knew Madame Lamarr’s idea of life: it was a flight, not a road. The image of the road is misleading;

it suggests that there are predefined paths, fixed destinations, anyone can stop at their pleasure in the shelter of a tree or can ride piggyback on someone else for a while. Whereas flight is a blend of force and lightness, it's the gaze lost in the blue sky, it's a state of grace.

Madame Lamarr sat down next to Greenway. She smiled faintly.

“Let's try keeping them here for a few days,” she said.

Greenway nodded.

Fulvio Ervas

The Little Book of Prodigious Insects

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A gang of children fascinated by insects and disappointed in adults. A villa filled with pensioners and butterflies.

Daisy, Red, Imre, Ebony and Saul: out-of-the-ordinary names for out-of-the-ordinary children. Children who feel stifled in their grey home town with its distant and rather hopeless adults. Only the strange exoskeletons and preposterous iridescence of insects arouse the gang's enthusiasm. In the search for new specimens to add to their collection, the kids set off towards the villa in which, it is said, a huge butterfly house is to be found. Emily, Melchior, Mr Flood, Madame Lamarr and Greenway, the time doctor, are the villa's not-so-youthful residents, and each one of them is there for a precise and secret reason. This is the story of the extraordinary things that happen when the melancholy patience of old age encounters the hopeful, hungry urgency of youth. In describing the tiniest of nature's creatures, this is a book that talks about us – because life's tough carapace can and does crack open, revealing wings ready for the miracle of flight.

FULVIO ERVAS is a science teacher and a writer. In 1999 he was joint winner of the Premio Calvino, sharing the prize with Paola Mastrocola. Since then he has published a host of books, including *Tu non tacere*, *Follia docente*, *Nonnitudine*, the eight Inspector Stucky novels, from which a film starring Giuseppe Battiston was made in 2017, and the much-loved and much-translated *Se ti abbraccio non aver paura* [*Don't Be Afraid if I Hug You*] which in 2019 became a film (*Volare/Tutto il mio folle amore*) directed by Gabriele Salvatores and starring Valeria Golino, Claudio Santamaria and Diego Abatantuono.

The new novel by the best-selling author of Se ti abbraccio non aver paura (Don't Be Afraid if I Hug You), translated into 9 languages and made into a film.

A novel about the passing of time and the force of nature linking generations.



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