

For weeks I found paired monarch wings, bodiless, on the grass or on the road. I collected one such wing and freed it of its scales; first I rubbed it between my fingers, and then I stroked it gently with the tip of an infant's silver spoon. What I had at the end of this delicate labor is lying here on this study desk: a kind of resilient scaffolding, like the webbing over a hot-air balloon, black veins stretching the merest something across the nothingness it plies. The integument itself is perfectly transparent; through it I can read the smallest print. It is as thin as the skin peeled from sunburn, and as tough as a parchment of flensed buffalo hide. The butterflies that were eaten here in the valley, leaving us their wings, were, however, few: most lived to follow the valley south.

The migration lasted in full force for five days. For those five days I was inundated, drained. The air was alive and unwinding. Time itself was a scroll unraveled, curved and still quivering on a table or altar stone. The monarchs clattered in the air, burnished like throngs of pennies, here's one, and here's one, and more, and more. They flapped and floundered; they thrust, splitting the air like the keels of canoes, quickened and fleet. It looked as though the leaves of the autumn forest had taken flight, and were pouring down the valley like a waterfall, like a tidal wave, all the leaves of hardwoods from here to Hudson's Bay. It was as if the season's color were draining away like lifeblood, as if the year were molting and shedding. The year was rolling down, and a vital curve had been reached, the tilt that gives way to headlong rush. And when the monarchs had passed and were gone, the skies were vacant, the air poised. The dark night into which the year was plunging was not a sleep but an awakening, a new and necessary austerity, the sparer climate for which I longed. The shed trees were brittle and still, the creek light and cold, and my spirit holding its breath.

## III

Before the aurora borealis appears, the sensitive needles of compasses all over the world are restless for hours, agitating on their pins in airplanes and ships, trembling in desk drawers, in attics, in boxes on shelves.

I had a curious dream last night that stirred me. I visited the house of my childhood, and the basement there was covered with a fine sifting of snow. I lifted a snow-covered rug and found underneath it a bound sheaf of ink drawings I had made when I was six. Next to the basement, but unattached to it, extended a prayer tunnel.

The prayer tunnel was a tunnel fully enclosed by solid snow. It was cylindrical, and its diameter was the height of a man. Only an Eskimo, and then only very rarely, could survive in the prayer tunnel. There was, however, no exit or entrance; but I nevertheless understood that if I—if almost anyone—volunteered to enter it, death would follow after a long and bitter struggle. Inside the tunnel it was killingly cold, and a hollow wind like broadswords never ceased to blow. But there was little breatheable air, and that soon gone. It was utterly without light, and from all eternity it snowed the same fine, unmelting, wind-hurled snow.

I have been reading the apophthegmata, the sayings of fourth- and fifth-century Egyptian desert hermits. Abba Moses said to a disciple, "Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything."

A few weeks before the monarch migration I visited Carvin's Cove, a reservoir in a gap between Tinker and Brushy mountains, and there beside the forest path I saw, it occurs to me now, Abba Moses, in the form of an acorn. The acorn was screwing itself into the soil. From a raw split in its husk burst a long white root that