

The Butterfly Effect

By **Dominique Browning**

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Dellarobia Turnbow is about to fling herself into a love affair that will wreak havoc on her placid life, and she's worried about what she's wearing. She's frantic with desire, frantic with passion, also frantic for a cigarette. Her boots, bought secondhand, "so beautiful she'd nearly cried when she found them," are killing her. It's the wettest fall on record in southern Appalachia, and she has to be hiking in pointed-toe calfskin on a steep, muddy trail to a deserted cabin for an illicit rendezvous.

All sorts of "crazy wanting," both prosaic and earth-shattering, are shot through the intricate tapestry of Barbara Kingsolver's majestic and brave new novel, "Flight Behavior." Her subject is both intimate and enormous, centered on one woman, one family, one small town no one has ever heard of — until Dellarobia stumbles into a life-altering journey of conscience. How do we live, Kingsolver asks, and with what consequences, as we hurtle toward the abyss in these times of epic planetary transformation? And make no mistake about it, the stakes are that high. Postapocalyptic times, and their singular preoccupation with survival, look easy compared with this journey to the end game. Yet we must also deal with the pinching boots of everyday life.

Those boots are practically the only thing Dellarobia can call her own. Her children are constantly snatching things from her hands: her hairbrush, the TV remote, "the soft middle part of her sandwich." Her husband, Cub, has become oblivious to Dellarobia's sharp, flame-haired beauty. They've been together since she got pregnant at the age of 17, derailing her plans to attend college and escape their small Tennessee town.

And then Dellarobia's life is upended, not by a tryst but by an insect. She is stopped in her tracks by a valley blazing "with its own internal flame." As she gazes in frightened awe, words of Scripture come to mind. Whatever else it is — and, naturally, she isn't wearing her glasses — it's a miracle of "unearthly beauty." In fact, it looks to Dellarobia "like the inside of joy." She turns around, "seeing straight through to the back of herself," abandoning her lover. The vision turns out to be of such enormous consequence that the world will soon arrive on her doorstep.

One of the gifts of a Kingsolver novel is the resplendence of her prose. She takes palpable pleasure in the craft of writing, creating images that stay with the reader long after her story is done. The church choir sings a hymn, "dragging it like a plow through heavy clay"; the pastor uses "his hands to push and pull his congregants as if kneading dough and making grace rise." Dellarobia walks under "this mess of dirty white sky like a lousy drywall job." Her husband's gentleness is "merely the stuff he was made of, like the fiber content of a garment."

The region's almost biblical rainstorms have the local people invoking Noah. Rivers overflow their banks, trees are uprooted, slabs of mud slide down mountains — and then comes the miraculous arrival of a colony of migrating monarch butterflies, its flight plan, evolved over centuries, thrown off by the chaotic weather patterns of a warming Earth. Now nothing is on firm ground.



Barbara Kingsolver Illustration by Sarah Maycock

Dellarobia has learned to be wary of the subject of climate change; she doesn't "believe" in it. She feels, at first, that the butterflies are a gift of the Lord's grace. (However, she does believe in grammar, and resents the minister's use of "covenant" as a verb.) Before too long, though, she's forced to sort out matters of faith — and science.

The arrival of the butterflies is of enormous consequence to Dellarobia's town. Some want to exploit it for sightseeing. Some want to sell the woods to pay off a looming debt. As the media exploit their unsophisticated subjects, Dellarobia notices that "nobody was asking why the butterflies were here; the big news was just that they *were*." And she begins to wonder why everyone is talking right past one another, hearing only what they want to hear.

There are miracles, but there is also daily life to be lived. Throughout her fiction, the exigencies of work, and the classes of people who do that work, have been among Kingsolver's great subjects. Here she deftly handles the relentless labor of sheep shearing, yarn dying, even child minding, with all those sticky fingers and sodden, sagging diapers. A scientist named Ovid Byron arrives to study the monarchs, or King Billies, as locals have called them since colonial times, after the royal colors of the Protestant settlers' prince, William of Orange. The monarchs, a unique "super insect" unlike anything else on earth, have been Ovid's lifelong obsession. He introduces Dellarobia (and her young son, who has the makings of a scientist) to an entirely new kind of work.

Ovid is an entomologist and an ecologist — which, he acerbically reminds her, means he studies "biological communities. How populations interact. It does not mean recycling aluminum cans." He is measuring the butterflies' response to an unreliable climate. Their habitat in Mexico is threatened, but in Appalachia they're also threatened, by unrelenting rains and freezing temperatures. As he watches the unfolding of what's shaping up to be a mass extinction, he explains that the only thing scientists disagree over is "how to express our shock" about climate change.

For caustic wit, nothing tops the tone-deaf environmental activist exhorting Dellarobia to shrink her family's carbon footprint: "Fly less." No one in Dellarobia's family has ever been on a plane. But perhaps the most touchingly contrasting scenes involve the costs of things in different people's daily lives. On a Christmas shopping trip to buy presents for her children at the local dollar store, most of what Dellarobia finds is too expensive. But when she helps the scientists unpack crates of finely calibrated equipment to construct a field laboratory, they casually toss out price tags: things cost "maybe a few thousand dollars" and "in the neighborhood of two grand."

When Dellarobia presents him with a scheme to save the butterflies by shipping them to a warmer place, Ovid recoils. "That is a concern of conscience," he tells her. "Not of biology. Science doesn't tell us what we should do. It only tells us what *is*." But Ovid isn't always so clinically detached. He wonders, as he explains to Dellarobia about diminishing coral reefs and dying insects, "What was the use of saving a world that has no soul left in it."

Kingsolver makes it obvious that Dellarobia is also a kind of ecologist, concerned with the way she and the other members of her community adjust — or don't — to their unusual circumstances. What behavior is hard-wired? When and how do people have real choices?

Ovid enlarges Dellarobia's world. "Every day she rose and rose to the occasion of this man." An unanchored line of poetry, a vestige of class time with the one good teacher she ever had, drifts into Dellarobia's mind: "*Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*" Dylan Thomas's villanelle bears a message for all of us in these difficult times: "*Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rave at close of day.*" Dellarobia will always sail on a wing and a prayer — that is how she is — but the monarchs open her heart to a crazy wanting to protect something larger, nothing less than this gorgeous endangered world of ours.

FLIGHT BEHAVIOR

By Barbara Kingsolver

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