

Reaching for Butterflies

Margaret Campbell

1

a - b - c - d,
she chants the letters dutifully,
small child, pig-tailed and afraid.
By rote the knowledge grows—
ruler-beat and punishment
punctuate her learning; her exams
echo all her teacher taught.

At home, seen and not heard,
she dreams butterfly dreams
but, obedient, she knows
that girls are made for marriage
and motherhood.

2

Clitter-clatter,
the chatter of trunk line calls.
She's schooled by voice,
and fingers competent on cords and plugs.
Here she knows her place.
When the magic of boy meets girl
dances her through rock and roll
and quickstep, she flits
to the altar. She's easily replaced.

3

Wife now, she's learned
to back her man. She has subdued
her dreams, and motherhood
challenges her creativity. Her children
learn at school; a community
of mothers learns school politics and rules.
She haunts the library,
challenges her knowledge and unfamiliar books
on children's projects, vets homework,
questions the generation gap, the changing values.

Eclipsed by her children,
she carries the weight of their achievements—
but she can think two steps ahead of any teen.

4

Children gone to university or jobs—
she works part-time. But where are her wings?
She volunteers, treads the maze of committees.
The neighbourhood house offers classes
where ideas and cultures
celebrate their differences
in stories and sharing food.
The joy of learning—
she stirs within
her chrysalis.

5

Grandmother,
she's considered wise—
experience a treasure gathered by her years.
Grandchildren cluster. She swaps them
wisdom for computer skills,
and their achievements
rise like butterflies.

Drawn by the shimmer of wings,
she's back at school, no punishment, her rules.
University beckons. She'd never reckoned
on making real those wistful dreams,
but now, entranced
by the lightness of learning,
she revels in her freedom.

At last she knows
the triumphant flight
of the butterfly
spiralling upwards.