

Mariposa
Jasmina Kuenzli

The sunlight has turned the pool deck almost white, and it highlights the monarch butterfly, which has alighted on the edge of the pool. Its spindly legs walk it along the edge while its wings raise for balance. It extends its proboscis into the water, looking as ridiculous and ethereal as an angel alighting upon Earthly ground.

But I'm not really paying attention to the butterfly.

I'm paying attention to Lalo, who has knelt down next to it, his native Spanish flowing from his lips like water from a fountain, bubbling and bursting all over the place.

His face, always cast in the devil-may-care nonchalance that has had me chasing him for the past week, has been replaced by glowing wonder. His dark eyes are bright, his sunglasses pushed haphazardly onto his forehead, making his hair stand on end. He is a five-year-old, distracted by a sudden gleam on the playground, his attention flitting to the butterfly with such unabashed awe that I don't even care he's forgotten he was talking to me.

When it alights on his arm, he gasps.

Oh God, I think. You can't do this. This is too much.

I can translate snatches of what he's saying. Words like "hermosa" and "casa" pepper out, sprinkled with sentiments I catch the breath of on the wind. His words rise and fall like ocean waves, a melody that does not so much interrupt the butterfly's presence as enhance it.

And then he turns to me, the butterfly on his hand. Our eyes meet, and he sees the way my lips are tugging into a smile.

He blushes.

I shake my head before he can apologize. "It's okay—I understand." I say, which is true but isn't.

"At home, in Mexico," Lalo says, his words slower now. In spite of the fact that his English is near-perfect, its status as his second language is revealing in the slight hesitation of his phrases, the accent that lengthens his words.

"I used to see them by the thousands. You couldn't see the ground!"

He holds out his arm, and at first, I want to step back. This is his moment, and I've intruded.

But I think I'd hate myself forever if I walked away.

And everything is so bright.

I focus on his forearm, where the butterfly waves its wings enticingly.

I hold my breath when I extend my hand until it reaches his, and the butterfly wanders from his hand over to mine.

Lalo's hand brushes mine for a second, and the sun stings my eyes.

The butterfly's legs barely register on my skin. I look up at Lalo, who looks at the butterfly.

His breath stirs my hair, and I feel a leap in my stomach that has nothing to with the tiny pinpricks of black legs on my skin.

I want to look away, want to step back and stop the tears that have started, turn away from the sun, the full brightness that is near-pain, near-blinding, but I can't.

Lalo's eyes flick to mine, and there's this breath between us. A measure of space where there is nothing but us, and the brightness, and the butterfly.

A bubble of possibility.

"Is that a butterfly?" Someone yells from behind us, and it immediately flies away, over the pool and into the woods beyond.

A cloud passes over the sun.

The world darkens.

I drop my hand, and Lalo smiles apologetically.

Then his sunglasses fall back over his face, and he smooths his hair.

"I guess." He shrugs before sauntering away, one last secret smile hidden in the corner of his cheek.

He leaves me there, staring after him.

With the tiny pinpricks of a butterfly's legs still tracing over my skin.

Jasmina Kuenzli is an author of poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction and has been published with *Capsule Stories*, *Pidgeonholes*, and *Hecate Magazine*, to name a few. When she isn't writing, Jasmina can be found weightlifting, running, and holding impromptu dance parties in her car. Her life goals include landing a back flip, getting legally adopted by Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, and being a contributor on Drunk History. She would like to thank Brenna and Sarah, who hear all these stories first, and Harry Styles, who is sunshine distilled in a human being.