



### Before You Read

The Canadian prairies were once covered with wildflowers and grasses. Many species almost disappeared when settlers cleared the land. While monarch butterflies are rarely seen in some parts of the prairies, they are not an endangered species.

This story is told from a young girl's point of view. Young children often develop strange perceptions of the world and how it works.

Think about something you misunderstood when you were very young and use your memories to complete the stem: I used to think that . . . because . . .

### Try This

Look at the title and the illustrations. Read the opening paragraph carefully. Try to visualize the scene and the characters. Ask yourself questions.

- Who is telling this story?
- What is it about?
- Where is it taking place?

As you read the story, try to form mental pictures that allow you to see what is happening and where it is taking place.



# The Monarch

by Bernice Friesen

**M**y brother Albert was a catcher of butterflies. That's what Mom said to relatives who lived far away from Grassbank and had never seen us. Albert put his trophies in clear plastic cases, the still wings crisp and delicate on cotton fluff like the soft inside of white bread.

Dad says the first week Albert started grade one, I had chased the bus. I remember crying because I wanted to go with him; it wouldn't have mattered where he was going, either. I had already been to the dankest corners of the basement with him, and would have gone with him to jail, or even the dentist.





\*Pause and Think  
Who is telling  
this story?

At six, two years older than me, he was already a man of science in my eyes: brown plastic-rimmed glasses, carrying a book bag and an orange lunch kit. I did finally get to go to school with him, but he was always in a different grade anyway.\*

Life began at four o'clock when we got off the bus. In spring we had an after school routine. First, we checked on the chickens, making sure that Blind-eye, the half mad rooster, and the hens were fed. Then, if Mom and Dad weren't looking, we'd sneak the old hedge clippers out of the shed to cut alfalfa for the rabbits. It was harder to pull it up by hand, but not even Albert, who was already ten, was allowed to touch the clippers. After dumping a nest of alfalfa into the hutch, it was time for the hunt — for cabbage butterflies and swallowtails, and if we were lucky, the monarch. Sometimes we saw only one monarch in a summer.

The best place to go was the unbroken prairie next to the slough. I wanted to catch butterflies too, but Albert would never let me. He told me that it was his net and so it was his job. My job was holding the mayonnaise jar with the hole-punched lid. So instead of butterflies, I gathered flowers as we went, bunching the stems of bluebells and shooting stars in my fist. This made me lag behind, but he would run back to me to lock his fluttering prisoners in my jar: blue and yellow and russet, pattering softly against a sky of glass. He killed them inside the house on the edge of the bathroom sink, after asking Dad for the bottle of high-test gas. He'd put a drop of it on their heads and hold their wings until they were still. He'd pin the little dead things to the cotton.

**slough** A reservoir of water created by rain or snow melt.

**high-test gas** Gas that ignites at a low temperature.



\*Pause and Think  
How are Lila's ideas  
about the world  
changing?



I gave up flowers one July. I had proudly shown a blushing pink lady's slipper to Dad and after looking it up in his book, he set me sadly on his knee.

"Now Lila, this is very beautiful. It is also very rare. That means that there aren't very many of them." He paused. "So, what happens to flowers when you pick them?"

"I put them in the encyclopedia and when they're flat, I tape them in my book."

"Yes, but what happens to the flower, Lila? It dies. Some flowers are so rare, they shouldn't be picked at all because there might never be any more. You can pick flowers that we have lots of, but not these. Do you understand?"

I nodded. I had disappointed Dad — and I was a flower murderer.

I slipped off his knee and went to my room. In my scrap book, last year's flowers were crumbling and the tape had yellowed. I opened the encyclopedia and shook out yesterday's flowers, gathered them, soft and wilted, and planted them among the irises near the back door. I did not want to be responsible for the death of beautiful things.

That afternoon, Albert handed me the mayonnaise jar. "Come on!" he said, and I followed him to the field.

Suddenly he pointed. There was a monarch, red and black, shining in the sun. He snatched it off the thistle with his net, then pinned the weak and fiery wings with his fingers. He put it into my jar and clapped the lid on top. We ran back to the house because he was afraid it would tear its wings, beating them against the glass. He wanted to kill it while it was still perfect.

I stood behind him at the sink.

"What if it's the last one?" I said. "What if there aren't any more — ever?!"\*

Before supper, we went to cut alfalfa for the rabbits. It was tall and ripe, ready to be rolled into the huge round bails that looked as if they could tumble off the hill if you pushed them hard enough. The blossoms were a thousand different purples, yellows, and creams, and the air was hot and thick with them. To me, they were hardly flowers at all; Dad had fields and fields of them: a harvest of them. Albert chose the tuft with the deepest purple flowers. I hacked away at the tough wad of stems with the clippers while he held them still.

Suddenly, he screamed. When I looked up, he was already running from me, crying "My fingers! My fingers!"

What if I had cut them off? I ran after him but I didn't want to know.

His hand was dripping into the bathroom sink and Mom was looking at it. His face was red and furiously wet. He screamed "You cut off my fingers!" and I ran, terrified, up the stairs, through the first door I saw, slamming and locking it. Albert's room. I could hear Mom calling after me. "His fingers are fine. They're just cut. Lila? Come back!"

I stood still, crying. There, on Albert's desk, was his pile of treasure cases. The monarch was on top, wings drying, spread open to the ceiling. I hesitated, wiping my eyes, then pulled the pins out of his wings. I opened the window and blew the monarch out like a flame. \*

**\* Pause and Think**

Why do you think Lila blew the monarch butterfly out the window?



### First Reaction

1. Write or sketch a quotation or image from *The Monarch* that stands out in your mind. Explain why it stands out for you.
2. List three to five questions you have about the story and the characters.

### Look More Closely

3. The story is told from a young girl's point of view. Find and record at least two details that tell about:
  - Her relationship with her brother, Albert.
  - The strength of her feelings about the natural world.
4. Why do you think the author has included the incident in which Lila cuts Albert's fingers with the clippers? How is it connected to the butterfly?
5. How do you think the events in this story might change the kind of person Lila becomes and how she sees the world?

### Develop Your Ideas

6. Put yourself in the role of Albert. Write a letter to a friend telling about the day you caught a monarch butterfly.

### Think About Writing in Role

7. As you write your letter, keep the following criteria in mind.
  - Is the voice of the character clear and consistent? Does the letter sound like it was written by Albert?
  - Are the events accurate?
  - Does the letter include opinions about Lila and her actions that are logical from Albert's point of view?
  - Does the account feature some interesting or unusual details or language?