Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Butterfly Alley

John Brantingham · Wednesday, August 26th, 2020

My favorite surprise in downtown Riverside is Butterfly Alley, which has surprised me several times. I forget it for a while and then I'll be walking downtown, going to a restaurant or meeting friends, and I'll come around a corner and rediscover it, and it's a place of beauty and whimsy that I love. What I love is the way that it captures the beauty of the monarch migration that moves through California every year. Twice a year actually as the butterflies go south in the winter and north in the summer. To me, that migration is magical from the fact that it takes four generations of butterflies to make the round trip and they are compelled by instinct to make this journey to the fact that they can fly way far up in the atmosphere where they catch winds that speed them along their way.

Coming around the corner the other day in Riverside during this time of COVID, the alley reminded me of this and the way that we are united as a global family through nature which does not recognize the concept of borders. Borders are philosophical statements created by people, but science breaks them down. Nature shows that they are foolish. Butterflies do this too, and those creatures that we love and that come through Riverside and all of California understand that the United States and Mexico are not two different places. It is only we who see them that way. It reminded me too of a piece I wrote a few years ago for Iron Horse Literary Journal. I've included it below.

The Fourth Generation of Migrating Butterflies

It takes four generations for monarch butterflies to complete their migration from Mexico through the United States and back again, the fourth generation coming south to survive the winter, flying sometimes near the ground to find a roost, sometimes up seven, eight, nine thousand feet to catch the breeze where it can do the work, and today they are flying right over the 5 freeway past San Diego to the border where Billy, a border patrol agent, is participating in the banal tasks of processing people he will never see, never know, conscripted somehow into a war he never had an interest in, Billy, who wanted to be an artist, Billy, who has no hatred for the enemy in this war.

The breeze that carries the monarchs carried their forebears over the oblivious heads of John Fremont and his men as they fought their little war, Fremont who would not take unarmed people prisoners choosing to execute them instead, Fremont who planted an American flag in the Rocky Mountains somewhere and that made the West the property of the United States.

The breeze today pulls the monarchs over the gray wolf stalking a pocket mouse that's hiding in a San Diego thornmint, this gray wolf who does not know about the wall that is going to make her and her species extinct, as it will do to the pocket mouse as it will do to the San Diego thornmint, as it will do to the Mexican flannelbush, the Yaqui chub, the fountain darter, the ocelot, the Texas hornshell and eighty-five other species we know of and one hundred twelve species no one has yet discovered.

It pulls the monarchs over Felix whose wife will have a baby next month in El Centro, California, and so he has been thrust into this war against Billy, whom he does not know, whom he would love like a brother if they ever met, bonding over baseball and family and art. Both have the souls of painters, but neither have been able to find the time, caught up in the complex chores of survival. In another, more beautiful universe, they are colleagues who work together on murals on the walls of buildings in their towns.

The monarchs eventually come to roost in Mexico to create the next generation of butterflies, the generation that will begin a new migration. Those yet uncreated butterflies will awaken to a world essentially different from the world of their parents. It will be a harder world, more barren. It will be a world where Billy has grown to hate those he fights because he is confronted every day with the humiliating task of saying no, and he turns that frustration toward its easiest target. He will stand in his backyard and curse them unaware that Felix, who has never seen his baby and probably won't for years, curses him back.

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