

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Rumi

Robert Wood · Thursday, August 16th, 2018

It was dark. It always was dark, in the Americas, in Oceania, in Africa, in Asia, even in Europe with its darkest of dark ages. How might we know what the dawn is when our eyes have become so accustomed to the inky night? What does it look like when it becomes light? How might we teach those who still in caves how to fly to the sun?

In the labyrinth of solitude that is Mexico City, I was never lonely, finding in its sunny crowds some idea of 'the public' that was warm and welcoming. It may have had something to do with my body belonging there or the return to the real that happens after being in 'America'. It may have something to do with the place itself. It had a deep image texture, a relaxed confidence, an ability to find a way to *be* independent after the Spanish had been expelled. It would, of course, be naïve to think that people there were somehow more free than in other places, or that it was truly egalitarian. But, in the convivial atmosphere of the streets one could learn what civilisation was in order to take back a more reconciled social contract to my home continent. Despite the drugs on the border, the violence in the jungle and all the ills that I had been taught to focus on, here in the Mexico City *zocalo* I could see that this place was a centre of some attractive new world.

I sat and took notes, wrote poems as the world went on its way – people eating corn with chilli and lime and mayonnaise, the soldiers taking down the immense flag that dominated the skyline, the balloons of all hues and colours stuck on sticks for the kids to take home as a treat of being in the city. I toured the streets, was taken in by the artefacts and Neolithic dolls of the Museo Nacional de Antropología; I snapped happily the paintings by Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera; and mused about the possible future from where El Che and Fidel planned on how to reclaim Cuba. I travelled down to Chiapas and, after paying off Zapatistas, made my way through the Lacandjon Jungle, swimming in crystal clear lakes and sleeping under the stars, finding out later I had crossed the border into Guatemala. The border though, like all borders, was arbitrary. I was in that jungle, crossing over without knowing if I was in Mexico or Guatemala. What I remember most of all there were the birds – birds I had never seen before. Parrots, toucans, macaws, even if they were unseen, these birds of the imagination seemed to belong there. I saw birds everywhere. I had a jungle fever that was feathered.

I recalled all this as I walked through Dubai Airport and saw a man carrying a cage with a pair of lovebirds. We had lovebirds growing up when my grandparents lived with us, and I have been told, they need each other to simply live. Like a writer without reading, they are better understood together. The hope of reading and writing reconciled in the hope of language is the hope of life itself. And in those genesis myths, in those literatures, fables, openings that came with being in

different places, one could reflect back to oneself what it was to write in a notebook in private, what it was to belong to oneself in the *zocalo* in the light on the other side of the world.

I turned then to Rumi because he seemed like a fellow traveller in the world as it mattered, that in his poetry there was a new sun, a jungle, a bird of paradise. Although his readers in the West seem akin to the ‘world music’ we know from hippy cafes and California sweat lodges, there was, in his writing, a starting point for gathering into the library of my mind a new paradigm. It was not the canon or the lessons I had received down there in the colonies, but the teaching I was seeking out as I toured Mexico City and that if I looked hard in the airports of Dubai, Doha, Abu Dhabi that I had to pass through to get there so far from home.

There was talk of a wall being built between the United States and Mexico, a wall that was as real as it was symbolic, to divide the line between what was ‘yours’ and what is ‘ours’ just like they had put up between Palestine and Israel. But it is hubris to assume the power flows the way it does, that we know what is right, have settled in on sides from which there can be no movement or flow or *solidaridad*. We can, of course, refuse such bricks in the wall, refuse such sureness along the borders that are policed, and that is what the classics do for me. It is all a soup grown from the stones that we hide in our pockets hoping someday that the fire will not only be about warmth but light also. That fluidity, which is there in works of literature that are part of the world, that helped birds take flight, means that we must learn to live with a type of insecurity that is conceptual while at the same time remaining certain to refuse the violence that occurs wherever it does so. We look towards the sky then from Mexico to the Middle East to here in Australia, and think then of the words of Rumi:

*Birds make great sky-circles
of their freedom.
How do they learn it?*

*They fall, and falling,
they're given wings.*

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