

Homero Aridjis, Mexico. A thematic essay which speaks to Principle 1 on the value of all forms of life

Saving the Landscape of our Childhood and Backdrop for our Dreams



Homero Aridjis is one of Latin America's leading writers, many of his thirty-five books of poetry and prose are translated into twelve languages. His work has received important literary prizes in Mexico, Italy, France, the United States, and Serbia. As president of the Group of 100, an environmentalist association of writers, artists, and scientists

he founded in 1985, he has been honored with the United Nations Environment Programme Global 500 Award, the Orion Society's John Hay Award, the Presea Generalísimo José María Morelos, *Latin Trade* magazine's "Environmentalist of the Year", the Natural Resources Defense Council's Force for Nature Award, and the Green Cross/Mikhail Gorbachev Millennium Award for International Environmental Leadership. He is a former Mexican Ambassador to Switzerland and The Netherlands, and a visiting professor at Columbia University. He was President of International PEN, the international writers organization, 1997-2003, and currently is President Emeritus. He has been an editorial page columnist since 1994 for the Mexican newspaper *Reforma*.

"The Monarch Butterfly"

*You who go through the day
like a winged tiger
burning as you fly
tell me what supernatural life
is painted on your wings
so that after this life
I may see you in my darkness*

The town of Contepec, in eastern Michoacán, is surrounded by hills. The highest is Cerro Altamirano, and every year the monarch butterfly, *Danaus plexippus*, arrives from Canada and the United States to the Plain of the Mules at its summit. Drawn to the microclimate of the oyamel fir pine forests in central Mexico, the monarch is believed to have existed two million years ago. When the sun shines in the clear, bright days of winter, millions of butterflies, layered like tarnished gold on the trunks and branches of the oyamel trees, burst out of their

heavy clusters. As the day warms, their flight above and among the trees becomes more frenetic, peaking at noontime when the sky comes alive with a flapping of tigerish wings that rustles like a breeze of dry leaves in the deep silence of the woods. As night falls, the butterflies roost on the trees, disappearing into the perfect camouflage of darkness. As spring nears, a sea of butterflies swoops down the slopes of Altamirano Hill in search of water, turning the streets of Contepec into aerial rivers. Toward the end of March, the colony heads north, only to return, different and yet the same, the following November.

An Indian legend has tried to connect the arrival of the butterflies to the return of the souls of the dead on November 1-2, the Day of the Dead, linking the insect's presence to the ceremonial rites which pay homage to man's ghostly passage on Earth. Coincidentally, the ancient Greeks used the same word, *psyche*, for butterfly and soul. I think this legend was concocted to answer reporters' questions about the existence of Nahuatl, Mazahua, or Tarascan stories mentioning the monarchs.

I was born in Contepec, and from my house I could see Altamirano Hill, like a bird with outspread wings always about to take flight. We who were used to seeing the million-strong colonies of monarchs each year had no idea the butterflies came from Canada and the northern United States in a migration of several thousand miles, flying at an average speed of nine miles per hour, covering between seventy and ninety miles a day, and that each butterfly was the great-grandchild of a butterfly that had flown away the previous spring. It was only in 1975, following years of research by Canadians Norah and Fred Urquhart, and Americans Lincoln Brower and William Calvert, that Kenneth Brugger happened upon one of the colonies in Mexico and solved the mystery of where the monarchs overwinter.

When I began to write poetry, I would take long walks on Altamirano Hill, home to owls and hummingbirds, coyotes and rattlesnakes, skunks and alicantes, and so the hill became the landscape and the substrate of my memories. At seventeen, I went to Mexico City, and then lived in the United States and Europe until 1980, but every year I returned to Contepec during

the winter months and climbed to the butterfly sanctuary. Peasants told me about logging and fires. Each year more oyamel trees were felled in the Plain of the Mules, and fewer butterflies came. The natural beauty which had inspired my writings was ravaged and the images which had nourished my childhood were destroyed. The possibility that Contepec could become a wasteland ringed by bare hills, like so many other towns in Mexico, made me desperate; and, the lack of respect for the forest shamed me as a human being. We revere man-made masterpieces in museums, but we blindly destroy the masterpieces of Nature as if they belong to us and we have the right to decide on the survival of a species which has been on Earth since time immemorial.

I understood that for people living in the region it was hard to think about saving butterflies and trees when they had their own urgent needs to satisfy. I also knew that professional loggers were doing more harm than local residents who cut down trees. Once the trees were gone, the people were as poor as ever; but now their surroundings were ruined. The loggers who were breaking the chains of life were committing a social and moral crime by destroying the forest, polluting the water, and eroding the soil – all in the name of economic progress. But what kind of economic progress cripples ecosystems and makes the land barren and unlivable?

I dreamed about Altamirano Hill becoming a national park, although I knew a decree was no guarantee of survival for the butterfly sanctuaries when even the forests on the Popocatepetl and Iztac Cihautl volcanoes were being destroyed. In April 1986, a year after the Group of 100 first spoke out demanding an end to the environmental degradation of the Valley of Mexico, I convinced the government to give the butterfly overwintering sites official protection. The news was announced on Children's Day, April 30, as a gift to Mexico's children. Weeks later, I was summoned to a meeting and I learned that only the core – and not the buffer zone – of each sanctuary would be fully protected, and obviously not the entire hill. Worst of all, Altamirano Hill was being left out because a conservationist at the meeting didn't know about the Plain of the Mules. I succeeded in getting my hill included in the presidential decree published on October 9, 1986, designating the areas known as Chincua Hill, Campanario Hill, Huacal Hill, Pelón Hill, and Altamirano Hill protected for the migration, hibernation, and reproduction of the Monarch Butterfly. The core zones were meant to provide the indispensable habitat necessary to ensure "the continuance of the migratory phenomenon...and the gene bank of the various species which live there." A "total and permanent ban on logging and use of the vegetation and wildlife" was decreed. The buffer zones were to "protect the core zone from outside impact, and productive economic activities were allowed, within environmental norms."

However, the felling of trees and the setting of fires continued, even after the official decree. In the winter of 1989, after a fire

and unchecked cutting of oyamel trees on Altamirano Hill, the butterflies came but did not stay. They avoid cleared areas, so I felt sure that the delicate balance between climate and habitat had been upset, that the spirit of the place had departed, and that the butterflies would never come back to Contepec. Near the other sanctuaries, the only sound heard at dawn was the buzz of chainsaws, and the only industry which seemed to flourish in the state of Michoacán was lumbering. Smoke-belching trucks piled high with logs hogged the roads.

In the unusually cold winter of 1992, a massive butterfly die-off took place, and up to seventy percent of some colonies perished. We blamed this alarming mortality rate on excessive deforestation. As the eminent monarch butterfly expert, Dr. Lincoln Brower, said, "The oyamel forest, which shields the monarch butterflies from severely inclement weather, had become a blanket full of holes."

At a meeting of scientists and environmentalists in February 1993, we drew up recommendations for conserving the oyamel fir forest, and we predicted the possible collapse of the overwintering phenomenon in Mexico within fifteen years if cutting of trees in the reserve was not stopped. However, five months later, new permits were issued for logging in the sanctuaries protected under the 1986 decree. When I toured the region by helicopter with government officials, my conversations with the ejidatarios, the peasants who earn their livelihood by chopping down the trees, left me with two overwhelming impressions: that they are wretchedly poor, and that they have a prodigious number of children. In the Asoleadero ejido, family size ranged from eight to fifteen children. The head of the Rosario ejido boasted he had fathered forty-five children. When I asked the men how they supported their families, they replied, "By chopping down trees." And when I asked them how their children and grandchildren would survive, they answered, "By chopping down trees." And when I asked them what would happen when there were no more trees, they said, "We'll go to Mexico City or to the United States."

In the aftermath of 1997's severe drought, lack of water forced the butterflies to leave Contepec almost immediately after their arrival. In the 1998-99 season, the monarchs returned to Altamirano Hill. On a visit to the Plain of the Mules with the Mayor of Contepec, among the stumps and wood chips of freshly-cut trees, we saw thousands of crushed butterflies littering the forest floor. Later, I learned that the ejidatario charged with guarding the forest was selling wood to potters in a neighboring town. In 1999-2000, the butterflies came to Altamirano, but did not stay; and the cutting went on, with burros dragging logs to the brick makers at the foot of the hill. Since then, monarchs have been scarce in Contepec, and on the Plain of the Mules the oyamel forest is thinner every year.

During negotiations for the North American Free Trade Agreement in the early 1990s, I suggested the monarch butterfly as

the ideal symbol for a partnership between the United States, Mexico, and Canada, elevating environmental protection to as high a priority as business and trade. Preventing the monarch butterfly migratory phenomenon from disappearing in the coming decades is up to these countries.

In 2000, the government greatly enlarged the size of the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve to nearly 140,000 acres. In 1996, Brower and I had suggested another possibility for saving the forests: buying or leasing them from their owners, mostly peasant communities, making it more profitable in the short- and long-term to preserve the trees rather than cut them down. The new decree also approved the establishment of a multimillion-dollar trust fund to compensate the owners for not cutting down trees, and payments have been made for several years. However, nineteen years after the first decree, small- and large-scale illegal logging continue; cattle graze in the forests; ecotourism is ravaging the sanctuaries; the human population keeps growing; and the government seems unable or unwilling to enforce protection of the Reserve. What was once an almost continuous forest has become fragmented and degraded. The 2004-2005 winter population of monarchs in Mexico was at its lowest since monitoring began in the late 1970s.

Principle 1 of the Earth Charter addresses the challenge of protecting the monarch butterfly overwintering phenomenon in Mexico while ensuring a livelihood for human beings in the region. If the people living around the sanctuaries could be helped to understand their own interdependence with the forest and the monarchs, and be brought to value the continued existence of the butterflies and the trees, they would be more concerned about preserving the sanctuaries for future generations. Much depends on sincerity and political will on the part of local, state and federal officials, and their ability to foster true participatory democracy among the local communities. Having a genuine and guaranteed stake in preserving their surroundings would encourage residents to realize their full potential and to act in environmentally responsible ways.

In a world where tigers and orangutans may become extinct, where rhinoceri are slaughtered for their horns and elephants for their tusks, where crocodiles are crushed by bulldozers, where thousands of birds and monkeys are captured and sold illegally every year, where nameless organisms disappear en masse, perhaps a hill and a butterfly are not that important. But if we can save the monarch butterfly and Altamirano Hill, the landscape of our childhood and the backdrop for our dreams, from the depredation of our fellow men, perhaps other human beings can save their hill and their butterfly; and all of us together can protect Earth from the biological holocaust which threatens it. Because, after all, is not the long journey of this butterfly through earthly time and space as fragile and fantastic as the journey of the Earth itself through the firmament? ●