

Conversation Amongst Rocks with Sun Dew by Rosmarin

One day Sun Dew and I walk down to Min Min Mount, so called because mysterious min min lights occasionally appear in its environs. From the foot of the granite dome we pick our way up wallaby tracks to its broad pate. There we sit with our backs against a giant boulder and gaze across to the main mountain, Birrabimurra, a little distance across the plain.

From a thermos flask I pour some green tea for both of us. We sit for quite some time, our heads propped against the rock, our eyes half closed, absorbing the archaic vista that Birrabimurra presents in that otherwise rather drab landscape of bleached wheat fields and sheep paddocks. On all sides boulders and outcrops march toward the granite heaps and coils that make up the great eminence that is Birrabimurra, of which Min Min is a minor outlier. Birrabimurra has the shimmer, the shifting lights, the ethereality of mythic sites, its almost transparent cloak of appearance flung so loosely, so casually, over its contours, concealing another, inner sanctum—the home the initiate, worldwide, forever seeks.

Still, for all the numinosity of this semi-transparent veil of appearance, there is, in the detail of this landscape, something amiss. Many of the older trees, who have withstood a century or more of erratic climate with all its rigors of periodic drought, are dying. Many are already dead, their skeletal hands reaching up in gestures of final anguish from the hardier scrub. I am heavy at this moment with the awareness of these deaths. And this is not all. There is a slight blur across the sun and an edge of smoke in the air—heart-sickening evidence of recent fires, not here, but nearby. These fires have claimed hundreds of human lives and multitudes, countless multitudes, of animals. My imagination is not spared the horror of the animal deaths in all their individuality, for in the past I have ventured into burnt country immediately after fire, and seen the dried bodies also fixed in postures of final anguish. Images of small dead creatures crammed into inadequate hidey-holes in dam banks or curled helplessly in the upper branches of gums or simply smeared, a darker patch in white ashes, are stamped in my memory. And never will I forget the mother koala still hanging onto a burnt sapling with one claw, her child collapsed on the ground at her side, its little paw reaching out to her in death. Nor is this all. Although today the temperature is mild, I cannot forget the dragon's breath of the day the fires broke out, the hottest day ever in the memory of these parts, when even without fire grey-headed flying foxes died in their thousands, dropping like end-of-autumn leaves from the trees, and in the city possums staggered out onto the open streets to die of dehydration. The animals, though native, are not adapted to these new conditions.

Blinking back tears, I try to retrieve myself. Sun Dew? I venture. She does not turn her head, but picks up her tin cup and sips her tea. I am aware that our time together will be short. It is years now since we first met, among serpentine granites in remote country on the far side of the continent. There is so much I have needed to ask, so much I have needed to know, and I am pierced by the certainty that soon she will leave me, finally, to travel who knows where? But how relevant anyway are my questions now? Sun Dew—whose birth name, before its anglicization, was Sun Lu Zhu—is my guide into the unknown. It is she who has instructed me in the mysteries of Dao and pointed me toward the portals, the turnstiles, through which one may

pass into the realm of the immortals. It is she who has called me here to Birrabimurra, where the veil of appearance flutters so lightly, so luminously, between the realms of spirit and matter. Now is my chance, with her beside me, to twitch that veil, to slip into the deep-dark stream of emptiness and emerge on the other side.

But now, with the known world dying before my very eyes, does my heart still yearn for the unknown? Can I still care about the mysteries of spirit realms when the mortal, material externality that is the outer realm itself proves vulnerable and begins to break up? Is the quest for the spiritual, for the revelation that lies on the other side of nature, premised on the assumption of the given-ness, the certainty, of nature? And Dao? Isn't the idea of Dao premised on an assumption that nature unfolds reliably according to an inner principle ensuring that life endures? Or perhaps the assumption is merely that *left to its own devices*, nature unfolds reliably according to this inner principle. And clearly nature has not been left to its own devices. Hijacked and harnessed to human purpose, nature is unraveling. Unraveling, how can it serve as a template for Dao and hence as a template for our own life process? When animals fall dead from the trees under the dragon's breath of a distressed climate, and plants cook in the soils in which they stand, Dao has departed from the world. And if Dao can depart, was it ever here? No matter how hard I blink my eyes, they fill again and again with tears.

Finally Sun Dew turns to me. She touches my cheek gently and gazes at me. Remember when we met, she says. Remember when we walked along the spine of Wongalara and found that hollowed-out boulder? Ah yes, I think to myself, I remember it well. I had in fact found the boulder long before Sun Dew joined me on that vast serpentine rock in the midst of the western rangelands. I had been exploring that outcrop and its neighbors for weeks before I awoke one day, after a nap under a kurrajong tree, to find her sitting and smiling beside me. Well, she continues now, taking my hand, let's close our eyes and imagine. Let's stroll again along the ridge of Wongalara and hop into that boulder. I lean back, obediently closing my eyes, and am transported back to the great, uninhabited shrublands of the West Australian hinterland. I am seated in an alcove in a boulder high on the ridge of the rust-red, dark-striped granite island or inselberg that is Wongalara, looking out across plains of red earth and acacia scrub. In one direction lies the indigo bulk of a stony range; in another, the blanched expanse of a vast salt pan. Otherwise, the gray-green scrub laps and glints in every direction to the horizon. What do you see? Sun Dew whispers eventually, not opening her eyes.

What do I see? On the plain I see the endless glinting acacia scrub, colored here and there with stands of limier eucalyptus, and to the north, the first silvery coppices of mulga. Around the base of Wongalara a darker variety of acacia congregates, with black twisty branches and long exclamatory tufts of spikes pointing skyward. I call these broomstick trees, tutelaries of the underworldish aura of the rock. As I roam in imagination over the stripy rock itself, I see many boulders, some hollowed out like ours, others weathered into figurative shapes and Wongalara faces. There is nothing human about these blunt profiles, with their unexplained protuberances. They are primitive, premammalian, though not quite reptilian either. But they are definitely faces, the blind protean faces of a sentience that has not yet condensed into the specifics of any animal form.

In fissures in the boulders, clumps of rock violet sprout, and in the shade of overhangs, rock ferns furtively flourish. Here and there in the contouring of the mounds, I see voluptuous wave formations, where the rock walls are washed smooth and flesh-pink, with a few dark striations. In indentations in the carapace of the rock, right across its many mighty mounds, are ephemeral pools, or gnammas, in which mud-brown tadpoles can be seen, together with minuscule crustaceans and water boatmen, making the most of a recent, rare rainfall. In some of the pools, tadpoles have already turned into frogs, rusty mottled frogs, with Wongalara stripes and, again, Wongalara faces. Turquoise dragonflies that match the brilliant sky patrol the pools.

Between the great bare mottled mounds are herb fields and stone creeks. Here and there too on the baked surface of the rock lie piles of white bone litter. Death is not removed from view in this landscape. Animals are as much at home here in death as they were in life. On fault lines between slabs of rock, an occasional kurrajong stands sentinel, its bob of bright leaves an annunciative beacon in the rockscape, beckoning the seeker. In rock gardens, up wind-hewn steps and terraces, amid wild statuary entangled in tiny white everlastings, one can catch the flash of yellow butterflies and hear the dry click of grasshoppers with red legs and black-and-white-striped abdomens. Best of all, in hidden shelters are troupes of silver-spangled dancers, the ornate, miniature *Eucalyptus lata*, stars in their tiaras, wands in hand, tossing silver dust into the air, their heart-shaped leaves billowing in the light like layers of gauzy tutu.

As I roam in imagination back toward the anchorage, I see a rock dragon—a dapper homunculus in black-and-white attire—darting, its body upright, across the carapace. Farther up, on top of the highest mound, a dove-gray groundbird is scooting about, in avian imitation of the lizard. Far below, at the entrance to a grotto, I spot several biggada, the rufous wallabies that inhabit the rock, thickset, shag-furred, fat-tailed, with broad padded hands and feathered fetlocks. The folk of Wongalara, to whom this ancient rock city, with all its lookouts and innumerable cavernous apartments, truly belongs.

What do you see, Rosmarin? Sun is nudging me gently. What do I see, I ask, a little dazedly. I see my rock, my long-lost and long-ago, my well-loved, my miniature holy land. It glows like an illuminated map in a desert manuscript. I am a pilgrim wandering across its miniaturized wastes and mountains, its rocky plains and stony rises, its pools and statue-studded gardens. I am inside the spell, Sun Dew, inside the dream . . .

And what is the dream, Rosmarin? What is the spell?

I can hear it, Sun Dew. Not with my ears, but with my insides. It is like the sound of breathing, a humming, even a low multitudinous singing, an underthrumming in the deep silence. There is a dancing, a joining of everything with everything, a linking of hands.

Tell me more, Sun Dew murmurs.

It's a sea of blending, Sun Dew, a slow-motion morphing of one thing into another, from the rusted domes of rock to copper butterflies to rufous wallabies to frogs and lizards with the color and markings of the reef underfoot to stars overhead to the silver-spangled dancers. On and on the forms permeate, everything partaking of the same essence, everything finding its own articulation of the same theme, improvising, elaborating, harmonizing . . .

Ah yes, says Sun Dew dreamily, the great cohering, the very soul of beauty. But, she adds with a jolt, opening her eyes and calling us both back from Wongalara to the actuality of Min Min, from the coherence, the hum, the deep drumbeat of the rangelands, how do we get to the disjointed noise and dissonance of those regions of the world now occupied by the invading armies of humanity?

I pause and think, readjusting to the vista of drab farmlands surrounding Birrabimurra. Well, in the beginning there was, I suppose, just the singing of the world. In that world there were indeed people, with the usual human capacity for self-consciousness or reflexivity, but they revered the song and were content to live inside it—they were content to shape themselves to the requirements of the song. Then, however, a new people arrived. With their reflexivity they questioned those preestablished requirements. They said, we don't have to live this way! We can grow vegetables at our back door rather than foraging for them in the wild. We can have a back door! We can build houses rather than relying on the leaky, draughty shelter that nature provides! We can husband animals rather than trusting to the vagaries of the hunt. Ignoring the affordances of their environment, which had given specific form to their desires, they dreamed of new possibilities of comfort and amenity, possibilities that could be actualized only through artifice.

Sun Dew signals to me to stop. What do you mean by "affordances"? she asks.

Affordances make up the livelihood that a life-system can offer its creatures consistently with its own ongoing self-existence and self-increase. In the singing world, desire is conditioned and limited by the affordances of the environment. So, for instance, emu desires, not ice cream, which is unobtainable within the parameters of its native rangelands, but rather quandong fruit. And when this fruit passes through emu's intestine, the nut emerges, at the other end, properly chemically treated and ready for germination. The desires of emu are not arbitrary. They are not purely self-referencing; rather, they are conditioned by the needs of quandong. Emu and quandong in this sense participate in harmonies that contribute to the same tune. Their desires, and hence the entire patterned directionality of their existence, are in phase. Humans on the other hand, thanks to the reflexivity that enables us mentally to reduce the environment to abstract elements and reassemble these in new, imaginary ways, tend eventually to get out of phase. We imagine possibilities of satisfaction that in no way reference the specific affordances of our life-system. When this occurs, as it has in modern cultures, our desire is no longer merely one chord in a complex chorus but rather a disjointed solo. Instead of quandong, we desire ice cream. Instead of natural shelter, we desire McMansions. Instead of walking, we prefer to use four-wheel drives. Soon the entire landscape, which had until then been orchestrating itself into richly variegated but coherent existence, starts to break up into

dissonant bits and pieces: houses, lampposts, vehicles, roads, garbage, and innumerable other items of artifice and its consequences, none of them conditioned by the needs of our fellow creatures.

When you speak of song, Sun Dew asks (dropping articles in her usual Chinese-inflected way), is this merely a *figurative* way of describing coherence that maintains physical conditions for life's existence? Or is it more than this? When there is coherence, does it really cause a kind of singing? Is there humming in a literal sense?

Yes! I exclaim. Yes, definitely. That hypnotic hum, that palpable underlying rhythm that we experienced at Wongalara, don't you remember it? Don't you remember how it filled our bodies and magnetized our senses? Isn't it this that distinguishes sung country from unsung, the experience of reality as a psychophysical field from the experience of it as an arbitrary assemblage of disparate, unmatched, mere things? Where there is coherence, where everything is in phase, there is not merely the interconnectedness of ecology, with its assurance of ongoing existence for the components of ecosystems. Something else happens: the ecosystem itself comes alive. A pulse is born in it, a pulse of life, of feeling, of psyche. Like individual bodies, which vibrate with psychophysical life because all their cells and organs are coherent in intent, landscapes too, when their parts are in phase, become psychophysically charged.

And how does it feel, Rosmarin? How does it feel to be inside that psychoactive hum?

I look at Sun Dew quizzically. She, more than anyone, knows how it feels. But this is the style of conversation she affects with me. Well, I say, it feels . . . timeless, it feels like . . . eternity! To enter the hum, to be inside it, is to be taken off the tightrope of personal time and placed inside something expansive, something without temporal boundaries.

So to be inside the psychoactive hum is to be *immortal*? Sun Dew asks.

Not exactly. It's not that entering the hum spares our bodies from eventual death. The "eternity" inside the hum is not immortality in that linear sense. It is, rather, about opening into the infinite inner dimensions of the present moment . . .

Sun Dew gazes at me, smiling quietly. So, she says, the choice for humanity is either to exist isolated as self-referring particle of sentience in a dead and ruined world or to exist like . . . she searches for words . . . fish in a shoal: by tuning its movements to others, a fish makes of the entire shoal a sentient thing.

Indeed. For a moment, however, I do not speak. I am wondering whether the people of today could ever recover the shoal, the coherence. Surely modern people would never choose to return to a pretechnological society, gathering foodstuffs and suchlike from the wild. Even if they were willing to do it—which, again, they never would be—there are no longer enough wild

resources to support even small populations, let alone the populations of present-day mass societies.

Picking up my thought, Sun Dew remarks that an economy doesn't need to be pretechnological to conform to the affordances. It merely has to adapt its technology to them.

How would this work? I ask doubtfully.

Well, she replies, the economy of course starts by plugging into the same inexhaustible power source as the rest of nature: sun. Sun is the absolute premise of the life-system on this planet, and it must be the premise of the planet's economy. After plugging into sun, the new economy must work on a principle of "eye for eye, tooth for tooth." Whatever we take from the life-system, we must compensate in equal measure. Fundamental resources of the system must not be stolen. If we take clean water for industry, we return clean water. If we take oxygen, we return oxygen. If we remove nutrient from soil, we return nutrient. If we displace vegetation by building cities, we provide new opportunities for vegetation—perhaps we make rooftop gardens a feature of city design. But compensation is not only "eye for eye, tooth for tooth." Flows of compensation undergo transformation. This economy imitates no-waste production systems and cycles of nature—in taking what it needs, one part of the life system gives back not necessarily the same but what another part needs. We devise such circular methods of production, Sun Dew concludes, by observing manners of nature.

Ah yes, I sigh, the circular economy. But to reintegrate our production systems into the generative cycles of the biosphere would take more than closing the resource loops. We would have to reprogram human desire so that it conformed to the affordances. Like emu, we would have to consistently desire the equivalent of quandong rather than ice cream. And I cannot imagine modern consumer societies even beginning to submit to such an altruistic recalibration of the desire that defines them.

Sun Dew pauses, out of respect for the depth of my skepticism, before responding. Society *can* choose to dedicate production to biosphere, she eventually declares quietly, but only by reawakening that force for altruism that has always been cornerstone to culture: religion. Religion takes many forms, but all point toward the state of coherence that exists before the fall into separateness that comes with self-consciousness. Religion is a lingering intuition of the state of cohering-with-whole that was our birthright, as creatures, before that Fall. Isn't eternity—the very thing which, as you say, exists inside the hum of coherence—always the object of religious quest? Isn't that quest also always for meaning, meaning that arises through psychoactivation of reality, which results from coherence? Isn't that psychoactivation an opening of reality into myth, into interior, and isn't it out of that interior that reality responds—with oracular communication—to our call? And isn't the quest of religion always also to ease our separateness, to restore to us a sense of belonging to universe, the very sense we lose when we fall out of coherence with reality?

I think about this. With its half-memory of our original state of cohering, hasn't religion indeed consistently reeducated desire, directing it to the forms it would have taken prior to the Fall into separateness? So it has prescribed material simplicity and trust in the providence of the immediate environment—a regime of simple, natural diet and basic, no-fuss amenities—a livelihood, in other words, in accord with the affordances. And are not its universal spiritual practices, such as meditation and chanting, techniques for temporarily and, as it were, experimentally re-creating in our own bodies experiences of coherence?

When we realize that religion is the half-memory of the state we enjoyed, effortlessly, before reflexivity gave us freedom to opt out of coherence, then we can peel away the wrappings of superstition and recognize the Earth-truth that lies at religion's root. This Earth-truth is completely consistent with science yet, at the same time, opens up to us possibilities of experience—of eternity, meaning, and belonging—that vastly exceed science. This Earth-truth is thus surely both scientific and spiritual: scientific because it is a truth about the organization of the biosphere, and spiritual because such organization psychoactivates reality, making the world sing. When we grasp this Earth-truth, we understand the impulse that has perennially been carried by religion. In light of this understanding, we can consciously submit to the reeducation of desire that religion has traditionally entailed, since we now appreciate the purpose of that reeducation: to restore coherence. It is our deep and ever-recurring human nostalgia for the experiences that accompany coherence—experiences of eternity, meaning, and belonging—that provides the incentive we need if we are to submit to the discipline of repatterning desire.

But Sun Dew is speaking again. At this moment in your planet's history, she is saying, nothing less than such conscious return to the Earth-truth at the root of religion will suffice. Without it, your world will fall, forever, into a heap of inanimate rubble. You cannot tie these bits of rubble back together again with external string. Only by inwardly retuning one desire to all desire can world be made whole. Retuning desire taps into potential for communication that exists deep in nature. And when retuning happens, reality is psychoactivated: self opens into continuous communion with world. What I mean, she adds for emphasis, is that for life to exist at all on this planet is for it to exist *for all time*. It is for it to exist in a space and time of dreaming that is inseparable from the space and time of what you call physics. There is no in-between. There is no life without this larger and inner coherence that ties each of us into a whole that is, at the same time and by virtue of coherence itself, terrain of the psychophysical.

I gaze at Sun Dew, stunned at the light-handedness of her simultaneous demystification and reinstatement of religion as simply the unconscious memory of a biospheric norm that it is now time for us to reassume consciously. How could she have known? It is Dao, she says, with a gesture of self-deprecation. In China we always know this. When world is left to itself, there is coherence, there is Dao. When human people disrupt coherence, Dao goes. What you feel at Wongalara, that is Dao. There is Dao here, she adds, gesturing around us, because rocks magnetize their surroundings and in that way create a portal into eternity. When we enter that portal, we are absorbed into an interior universe as familiar to us as our own subjectivity. But outside, she throws up her arms, all over the modern world, Dao is gone. And when Dao goes,

winds blow harder, fires run hotter, floods rise higher, animals fall dead from trees, seeds burn to ashes in ground. World unravels. Survival of the material world is tied to Dao, and Dao is tied to coherence. Spiritual is same as material . . . This is something that indigenous people know . .

Sun Dew stands up. She takes my hand and draws me gently to my feet. Now is the time, she says. This planet is being called into consciousness of the real impulse at the core of religion, consciousness that eternity and meaning and belonging are made actual not merely by practices of hermits and monks but by activities of entire economies. Human people are being called to devise new industries that re-create the sacred hum, Rosmarin. Technology must become the instrument of spirit and economy the expression of sacred order. Spiritual must no longer be province of recluse in cloister but must become the main game of society. Spiritual is not what you do after bread is buttered; it is, rather, the way both butter and bread are produced. Spiritual is producing butter and bread in ways that preserve the hum and expand the breath of this singing planet . . .