

CONVERSATIONS, Robin Satterfield

The conversation was lively and deep at dinner that night, spinning mostly with words I know, but also with some I don't. I looked down at my plate and tried to seem absolutely fascinated by avocado. Really, it was quite astonishing just for the sheer mass of it. I prayed my captivation with this fruit would justify my silence.

I was out of my comfort zone sitting in a dim room at a large table with people much more powerful than I, both in position and in personality. We were in this land's version of a large city where the entire collection of people I knew gathered around this table. I couldn't even escape in my imagination.

"I know that," said the bishop. "But we have to remember that he has free will."

I had heard the words 'premillennial dispensationalism' before, even used them in my own conversations back in America, but, honestly, I don't know what the phrase really means. However, I'm pretty sure that was the topic being discussed.

I had been well aware of conversations all around me on this journey. Sometimes I would join in the movement of the exchange. Other times I would sit in the background, wishing to say something. Mostly, though, my desire to be heard was stifled by hesitation.

Say something, I would tell myself.

And I would hesitate. My silence became the elephant deafening the room, or, at least, deafening me. My heart would ache with fear and disappointment. Fear of being heard. Disappointment for not.

Say something.

“Robin, how is your salad?” The bishop’s wife asked, disturbing my anxiety.

Here we go, I thought. Say something, I told myself.

“It’s wonderful. Thank you for the suggestion.” I said, grateful to not stumble over such simple words.

I wanted to contribute to the conversation. Maybe not the dispensation—whatever, but the one on the other side of the table about the vegetable garden might be more my speed.

Say something.

But I hesitated. I sat silent with conversations all around me, words I knew, some I didn’t. I just wanted to go back to my small room that had been my home in this strange land.

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In the morning I awoke to noises common to a city like this. I heard a rooster outside and a car on the dirt road in front of the house, both breaking up the stillness of the morning. My room was bright and made to seem even brighter by the white mosquito net. Words from the dinner spun in my dreams throughout the night but by morning, my mind was silent, anticipating the sunrise. I went out to the porch with my coffee and waited for the sun to peek out from over the hill opposite ours.

I wanted the time to myself, but as I waited for my sunrise I heard stirring in the house. One of my traveling companions stuck her head outside.

“Good morning, Robin. How did you sleep?”

Say something.

“I slept alright.” I tried not to show my disappointment that the solitude of my sunrise vigil was disrupted.

She came out on the porch, coffee cup in hand, and sat on the chair beside mine.

“You were awfully quiet at dinner last night.”

“I’m always quiet,” I answered, the reply that I’ve used so often in my life that I can say it without hesitating.

“Why is that?” she asked. “Robin, you’re very intelligent and you have such a way with words. People want to hear what you have to say.”

My heartbeat quickened. This reply would be a bit more involved. The truth was people just never shut up long enough to let me in. There had to be a nice way of saying that.

“I didn’t want to interrupt.” That was good. Short. To the point. Still polite.

“Robin, interrupt!” The force of her statement surprised me. “If you speak, people will listen. But, first, you have to speak.”

Say something.

“I just...,” I hesitated. “I just get so nervous, I can’t think of anything to say. And when I do finally think of something to say, everyone has moved on. I think it’s just better if I sit quietly and listen.”

This speech was the most I had said at one time this entire trip.

“Robin....” She sighed. “If you want to be heard—and I know you do—then be heard. But we can’t force you.”

We sat in silence then, drinking coffee and keeping vigil for the sunrise. The beauty of mountains kissing clouds in this land was no match for the new day’s light rising over the hill. I took in a deep breath to steady myself. I had survived an exchange in which I had actually participated. As the sun climbed, so did my hope that trepidation would not always control my interactions.

A few days later, we boarded a plane headed home. I was silent on the plane, pretending to be lost in a book when really I was lost in the conversations of my mind, conversations in which I spoke freely and without hesitation.