



The Festival Experience

Thomas Bunstead

THE RESTAURANT WAS in a cultural centre that had once been a monastery and, to accommodate the fifty or so writers, a long line of tables had been placed end to end the length of a former cloisters. The twilight: whitish, pinkish. When the meal began, the heat of the day was still rising up from the cobblestone esplanade outside; by the time it finished, blankets had been brought to ward off the old stone chill.

We ate ceviche and talked about where on the planet we were from. About books and global politics. Obama and Putin and China. I could barely speak.

Outside, pocketsized Mexican vans rattled through the night.

There was talk of literary politics. The overlaps between the experience of such an international cast. Publishing mergers, Jeff Bezos gorging. The never-to-be resolved structural crisis of global capitalism. How a Latin American writer makes it into English, wetbacks, greenbacks, how English helps you get somewhere, but what is that *where* like?

On either side of the columns between us and the courtyard outside, there stood tropical plants in massive pots, so that when the blue-aproned staff entered from the pavement, where one of the kitchen doors was, they emerged from between the dense, head-height fronds as if out of the cloud forest canopy. I could barely speak.



There was no one in the once-a-monastery-now-a-restaurant but us. At one point a young couple came in with their baby, only to leave after a hushed conversation with one of the waiters. I thought I saw one of the festival helpers exchange looks with the waiter — maybe the festival had booked out the whole restaurant, which, though odd, didn't strike me as out of keeping with the general oddness of our presence, a globetrotting cohort of writers and translators, in this off-the-beaten-track, midsize Mexican city.

The restaurant special was a chilled chocolate dessert in a ramekin, a little like Aero bar that had been blended up and frozen. There was insistence from some quarter that everyone try one.

Then someone discovered a balcony at the west side of the no-longer-monastery; the restaurant was at ground level but a tranche of earth had been excavated to form a sort of dry moat between the restaurant and the busy street on that side, creating a sense of ground-level elevation or of being at the prow of a ship. We smoked out there and were provided with more margaritas. Even less speak.

At one point, we, the sequence, the sequence, we, were interrupted: a small, wiry old male poet who was a native of the city jumped up – he actually stood on his chair – and began a fulminating recital of a poem by Borges. No one had noticed the poet until now. He seemed to have appeared out of thin air. He seemed angry. He all but shouted: *I think of a tiger!* He recited the whole poem. *Powerful, bloodstained, innocent!* There was electricity in his small body. *An arrangement of human language!* The waiters and waitresses all stopped and, for a short while, people put down their phones to listen. *An arrangement of human language!*