On that long westward morning, all Mexicans still dreamed the same dream. They dreamed of being Mexican. There was no greater mystery.

Only rich men, soldiers, and a few Indians had wandered far enough from home to learn the terrible truth: Mexico was too big. It had too many colors. It was noisier than anyone could have imagined, and the voice of the Atlantic was different from the voice of the Pacific. One was shrill, worried, and demanding. The other was boisterous, easy to rile into a frenzy. The rich men, soldiers, and Indians were the few who knew that the east was a swoon of green, a thick-aired smell of ripe fruit and flowers and dead pigs and salt and sweat and mud, while the west was a riot of purple. Pyramids rose between llanos of dust and among turgid jungles. Snakes as long as country roads swam tame beside canoes. Volcanoes wore hats of snow. Cactus forests grew taller than trees. Shamans ate mushrooms and flew. In the south, some tribes still went nearly naked, their women wearing red flowers in their hair and blue skirts, and their breasts hanging free. Men outside the great Mexico City ate tacos made of live winged ants that flew away if the men did not chew quickly enough.

So what were they? Every Mexican was a diluted Indian, invaded by milk like the coffee in Cayetana's cup. Afraid, after the Conquest and the Inquisition, of their own brown wrappers, they colored their faces with powder, covered their skins in perfumes and European silks and American habits. Yet for all their beaver hats and their lace veils, the fine citizens of the great cities knew they had nothing that would ever match the ancient feathers of the quetzal. No cacique stood atop any temple clad in jaguar skins. Crinolines, waistcoats. Operas, High Mass, café au lait in demitasse cups in sidewalk patisseries. They attempted to choke the gods with New York pantaloons, Parisian petticoats. But still the banished spirits whispered from corners and basements. In Mexico City, the great and fallen Tenochtitlán, among streets and buildings constructed with the stones of the Pyramid of the Sun, gentlemen walked with their heads slightly tilted, cocked as if listening to this puzzling murmur of wraiths.

They still spoke a thousand languages — Spanish, too, to be sure, but also a thicket of songs and grammars. Mexico — the sound of wind in the ruins. Mexico — the waves rushing the shore. Mexico — the sand dunes, the snowfields, the steam of sleeping Popocatépetl. Mexico — across marijuana fields, tomato plants, avocado trees, the agave in the village of Tequila.

Mexico. . . .

All around them, in the small woods, in the caves, in the precipitous canyons of copper country, in the swamps and at the crossroads, the harsh Old Ones gathered. Tlaloc, the rain god, lips parched because the Mexicans no longer tortured children to feed him sweet drafts of their tears. The Flayed One, Xipe Totec, shivering cold because priests no longer skinned sacrifices alive and danced in their flesh to bring forth the harvest. Tonántzin, goddess of Tepeyac, chased from her summit by the very Mother of God, the Virgen de Guadalupe. The awesome and ferocious warrior god, Hummingbird on the Left, Huitzilopochtli. Even the Mexicans' friend, Chac Mool, was lonely. Big eared and waiting to carry their hopes and dreams in his bowl as he transited to the land of the gods from the earth, he lay on his back watching forever in vain for the feathered priests to return. Other Old Ones hid behind statues in the cathedrals that the Spaniards had built with the stones of their shattered temples. The smell of sacrificial blood and copal seeped out from between the stones to mix with incense and candles. Death is alive, they whispered. Death lives inside life, as bones dance within the body. Yesterday is within today. Yesterday never dies.

Mexico. Mexico.

From the novel The Hummingbird's Daughter by Luis Alberto Urrea