

To See the Sun the Other Way Around

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Kunsang is resolute: her hard-set mouth hints at an optimistic smile as she turns her head to look unflinchingly into the camera. Defined against the vast Nepali sky, she walks out of the frame even as I scrutinize her features, hoping to see some similarity to my own. Her journey does not stop even for Phil Borges's photographs. She carries her six-month-old son on her back; his tiny hand resting on her shoulder neither grasps for comfort, nor clings for safety. Rather, the photograph reflects the seriousness in the child's eyes as he presses his palm, tiny and soft, into Kunsang's shoulder as if to give her the strength to keep plodding on towards freedom in India. I imagine that her feet must be swollen and bruised, that she and her son haven't slept in a proper bed for weeks, that they must hold each other tightly each night to keep out the biting Himalayan cold, and I marvel that the fatigue hasn't overcome her yet.

It is about to overcome me. Exhausted, I curl up on my hard bed in the spartan volunteer apartment I share with whomever passes through this cold Ecuadorian orphanage, and I listen to the children on the other side of the thin wall. A marble drops and bounces, someone screams like a fire engine, and the planks that hold up the little boys' mattresses clatter as the older boys throw them to the floor. The day's challenges press on my temples persistently—the children have not listened, they have not learned, one has even peed on the floor, it is too much. I am so tired, so frustrated, and all I want is to leave these children to their misery and go back to the life where my greatest responsibility was passing my exams. I stare resentfully at the wall in search of something that will motivate me to get out of bed again at 5:30 the next morning, put my feet on the cold tile floor and put a pot of water on the stove to give the smallest boys a bath before school. Kunsang's resolution taunts and inspires me. I do not want to keep going. I want to go home.

Of course, I won't. I can't. What Kunsang finds in her son's tiny, soft palm pressed calmly against her back, urging her on, I will also find in one of the children hiding behind my door to scare me after calling me to dinner, in their housemother's grateful grimace when I bring her a cup of instant coffee, or in a sweet misspelling of my name in one of my student's English books. We have the same beautiful demon driving us, Kunsang and I: determination, though it looks far nobler on her drawn, unfamiliar face. I wish for a resolve as pure as hers. It is impossible for me to imagine that her flight might not be as glamorous as it looks in this three by three square of selectively toned black and white.

Why do I romanticize her so? Why does the unfamiliarity in her face and her surroundings suggest beauty to me? Why do characteristics that even I possess look so much more genuine on her? Determination is a cross-cultural characteristic—it could be depicted by anyone, really, doing anything they consider difficult and important. But set against the stark Himalayan landscape, in the larger context of the Tibetan plight, it looks far more vivid and noble than it would in my own context. I am fascinated, it seems, by what is different, unfamiliar, exotic, foreign, other.

It's a feeling of great optimism and possibility to arrive in an unknown and unfamiliar city, not knowing exactly where you are or what you'll find there, or what it will provoke in you. It's very possible that you'll hate your momentary surroundings—you will have to engage with them to find out. You'll see something on the walk from the Greyhound terminal to your friend's dorm that will fascinate you—a couple of junkies waking up in front of a coffee shop, mumbling to themselves indignantly and unintelligibly as you stumble inside to clear the fog from your head, an ornate European church for rent as a parking lot—and you'll make assumptions and guesses about what you have seen. You'll wonder, isn't Canada by far our superior in terms of social services? Why are there so many homeless people? And are there so many cars and so few Christians in Montreal that the churches must become parking lots? The image of another homeless man waking up hooded and dark in front of another ornate church, his morbid silhouette so starkly defined against the intricate stone wall, will strike you as pure poetry; you'll stare at it greedily in hopes of remembering it forever. You'll be alive like a child, discovering this unknown city, any unknown city.

But pretty soon, nothing will be novel anymore, unless you keep moving. The beautifully painted bike chained to the parking lot/church fence will be nothing more than a fixture, and you will look with disdain as, on your way

to work, you pass a disheveled, American-looking girl with a backpack taking a picture of it. Curiosity will fade into fact, and the junkies outside the coffee shop will soon be no more remarkable than the parking meters they lean against, although their craggy features once sang to your eyes like the peaks of the Himalayas do to Phil Borges. The gaps in your experience of this unfamiliar place will fill themselves in, in the honest and natural way that they do, and the full, familiar picture will be nothing short of disappointing when you compare it to your prior illusions, if you even think to. As your surroundings become more familiar, they'll become less fascinating. You will lose interest and abandon them, drawn, again, to the unfamiliar.

My fascination with the unfamiliar is deliciously uninformed. Would the sight of a bum sleeping on the lawn of a church merit a photo at home in San Francisco? I think not. But then, it wouldn't either in Montreal if I stayed long enough for the fascinating to become routine and dull. Perhaps Borges asked Kunsang to incline her head and set her lips just so, perhaps she feels frustrated and even resentful towards her child at times. Maybe she's human, after all. But this is not the way that I've chosen to color in the empty spaces in my knowledge of her situation, and the unfamiliarity of it gives me great license. I'll paint her as noble and admirable. I'll paint Montreal as classic and thought-provoking. It's a bit like unrequited love—you're lovely, and I know a little bit about you, but not enough. So I fill in the gaps with sweet frosting between our momentary interactions. I persevere, confident that you are perfect and beautiful. I don't understand you well enough to see your flaws. But then, if I woke up next to you every day, your snoring would probably irritate me, your fascinating stories would seem dull, you'd be painstakingly familiar. Likewise, Kunsang's unfamiliarity makes her remote, so I only see her saintly determination. Montreal's otherness piques my curiosity and lets me believe that I'll find something charming at every corner. It is what we don't understand about the other that makes it so beautiful, and remarkable.

It's not just the beautiful that blends so easily into the familiar, dulled by the routine; the true and the ugly often lack definition as well. New Delhi, November 2004: six sweet classmates and I stumble wide-eyed off a train into the chaos. I have never seen such raw poverty. The sun is just rising and so are the hundreds of souls who call the filthy station platform we totter onto home. Bedraggled children skip towards us with outstretched hands and scolding eyes; a man reaches the stump of his arm towards me, and I wonder how I could give him a rupee even if I wanted to—my heart gasps. The girl

next to me lets her backpack drop to the floor; it falls with a nervous and insignificant “thump.” Her brow is knitted, and her eyes are horror-stricken. “It’s just all so terrible,” she says.

“Yes,” I say. “But this is kind of what we came here to see, isn’t it?”

Home for Christmas in San Francisco, I pass the storefront around the corner from my mother’s house where the same man has slept for as long as I can remember. My heart gasps and flounders. Suddenly, I am in India again, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes and picking my way among the stirring bodies. Before now, I’ve never seen this man more vividly than I’ve seen the mailbox on the corner. But really, the ground is as hard in San Francisco as it is in New Delhi, the sky in the morning the same shade of gray, though dulled by familiarity. My heart’s drowning gasp is the same. Why did I need to feel it first so far away? Why did I need to go to the other side of the world to learn what I could have learned in my own neighborhood? Is it right, as Elizabeth Bishop asks in the poem, “Questions of Travel,” “to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theaters?” (16-17).

Perhaps the wiser among us are those who are not, in Bishop’s words, “determined to rush / to see the sun the other way around” (19-20), when we can see it perfectly well from where we are. Indeed, all that I saw in those strange theaters I’ve been so lucky to visit I could have seen at home, too, had I not been so blind to it. In unique and differing incarnations, determination, poverty, and beauty exist everywhere, including our own backyards. The homeless man sleeping in the storefront around the corner from my mother’s house was always there, but I couldn’t see him until I had been 7,685 miles away. “What did you do in Ecuador?” the customs officer asked me.

“I taught English,” I replied.

He laughed. “There are plenty of people here who don’t speak English, you didn’t have to go that far! Welcome home, sweetheart.”

Yet, says Bishop, “surely it would have been a pity / not to have seen the trees along this road / really exaggerated in their beauty” (30-32). Surely I would not be the same had I not seen the familiar and universal truths so starkly and boldly etched against unfamiliar landscapes, “exaggerated” in their meaning—surely something would be missing. Surely Kunsang’s expression never would have rung so true to me if I had not gone to Ecuador and so desperately needed a determination like hers. But then, perhaps it would have; who’s to say that I wouldn’t have found that missing something here, heard the same story told in my own language? The same sorrows and the same joys

exist everywhere, so why could I not see them against the backdrop of my own culture?

I suppose I wasn't looking hard enough. I wasn't looking at all. I didn't expect to see anything important. I saw the man sleeping in the storefront around the corner every day, and he was to me only as extraordinary as the blue trim on our neighbor's house. Whose heart would gasp at something so routine? The beggar children in Delhi, however, were like extra-large text for the vision impaired, or trees "really exaggerated in their beauty." I was looking for them, of course—how could I travel to the other side of the world and not study it voraciously, with full attention? Against the breathtakingly unfamiliar Indian background, I could finally see and understand the familiar details I'd been looking at disinterestedly all along. Elizabeth Bishop's weary traveler asks, "Is it lack of imagination that makes us come / to imagined places, not just stay at home?" (62-63). Perhaps it's not lack of imagination, but rather lack of observation, of appreciation. Bad eyesight.

There's beauty in all corners of this world, and tragedy too. Their colors are bright, they are harsh, and they are extreme. Yet when a specific incarnation of beauty—or tragedy or determination or poverty—becomes routine and familiar, like spoiled children we cease to acknowledge and appreciate it. Knowing that the world is bigger than our own backyards, we set out to see the world, to learn from unfamiliar teachers the life lessons we suppose we will not be whole without. Smugly, we return home to find that quieter, subtler teachers have long been demonstrating the same concepts we are so proud to have discovered.

Home again and I almost feel guilty for the frivolousness of my mad rush "to see the sun the other way around" (Bishop 20). But then again, is curiosity such a terrible crime? It may not be necessary to see the sun set on the other side of the world to know that it can set the sky ablaze with a million fiery colors at home. My error was not in celebrating the unfamiliar, in learning its lessons with rapt enthusiasm, in exploring the other like a wide-eyed child. Rather, my error was allowing the familiarity of my own home to lull me into apathy and disinterest.

I left Montreal quickly, too quickly, quickly enough for all the colors to remain vivid and bright. I waited nervously in line for the eleven o'clock bus to New York, my present American home, and the soothing hum of the road lulled me to sleep long before we reached the border. The next morning I was in New York again, fumbling for a Metrocard, hoping for a shower before my eight o'clock math class, dispassionate, unimpressed, and unengaged as I

plodded up the subway stairs. A look over my shoulder surprised me—the morning light illuminated a tall building in a particularly beautiful way. I remembered that I still had one more photo on the roll of film I had brought with me from Montreal. I rummaged through my backpack for my camera. How silly, I thought, to take a picture of something just a block away from where I live. The tide of people flowing out of the subway seemed to agree with me, with their downward gazes and hurried footsteps. Is it though? The photo came out beautifully—the sun-washed building, slightly to the right of center, is an oasis of warm light in a drab gray sky. This sort of beauty surrounds us, yet we carry on with downcast eyes, smirking at the tourists with their cameras and awestruck gazes. Why do we let proximity so diminish our surroundings? Maybe we need only remember that there’s a world right here that we can touch, as brilliant as any fleeting destination may be in our imaginations.

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