

Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019

2013

Antipodes: Ways To See The World

Brenda Sallee
University of Central Florida

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)
Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd>
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

STARS Citation

Sallee, Brenda, "Antipodes: Ways To See The World" (2013). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019*. 2968.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/2968>

ANTIPODES:
WAYS TO SEE THE WORLD

by

BRENDA SALLEE
B.A. Western Carolina University, 2007
Graduate Certificate Multnomah University, 2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2013

© 2013 Brenda Sallee

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of the geographical oddities of my past, the process of transitioning between worlds, and the kinds of relationships that survive those transitions.

In a world where I can fly from Atlanta to Beijing non-stop in fifteen hours, I sometimes convince myself that geography no longer matters. I was born in the tropics, raised in the arctic, and became a dual citizen of the same two countries twice. I could distinguish gunshots from fireworks by age five and have ridden the Trans-Siberian Railroad in both directions. I have milked a water buffalo and played Tchaikovsky's piano and been interrogated by a Maoist by firelight on the top of a mountain at the far western edge of the earth. I have seen the Louvre and the Hermitage and the highest point in Iowa and The Pit, the outhouse that connects directly to Hell.

I sometimes believe I can go anywhere. See anything. Befriend anyone. But I deceive myself. Some places are so far away, it takes years to settle, to adjust, to reach a level of familiarity where the world outside your window, and the people in that world, no longer shock you. I have seldom stayed that long.

The transient life does not get easier, but you *can* get better at it. I have gotten better at it. Distance is a matter of perspective and convenience and desire. The farther two places, or two people, or two lifestyles are from each other, the subtler and more intricate the connecting lines. My contentment and sanity and relationships depend upon deciphering those lines. This is the story of what I've learned.

These stories are dedicated to the people who lived them with me
and dare to be my friends anyway.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With gratitude to

Mom, for distinguishing genres.

Dad, for letting me believe the bulldozer was huge.

Abby, for insisting on hugs.

Grandmom, for all those Clif Bars.

Grandma, for coming back to us.

Ruthie, for staying family.

Bethany, for simplifying my options.

Jewel, for being confident when I wasn't.

Amy, for caring enough to wonder.

Eunmi, for jumping. Eventually.

Fran, for sharing the journey.

Heidi, for the Reese's and Pop-Tarts. Especially the Reese's.

Brian, for remembering Kool-Aid.

Santosh, for making a place in your heart.

Nirmala, for patience.

Asmita, for not letting me take the hotel.

Deepak, for being both scary and kind.

Becca, for mastering my dialect of Foreign.

Namrata, for trekking in sparkles.

Pratik, for not telling me how scary you were.

Umesh, for going back.

JDeeH, for accepting sentences beginning with conjunctions as part of our story.

Jenny, for not tattling on me to the elephants.

Natka, for saving all of our lives.

Laurel, for being open to new normals.

Chris, for braving Rolpa, even after Dang.

Tuan, for not mistaking adventures for inconveniences.

Bridget, for laughing along.

Kedar, for offering a helping hand. Just that once.

Madelienne, for being stubborn Velcro.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Disclaimer.....	1
CONTOUR LINES	3
Premise.....	4
Family Matters.....	6
Contentment.....	16
Coming Back.....	19
Expectations	20
Intersections.....	36
ANTIPODES	37
Orientation.....	38
Plausibility.....	42
Storytelling.....	44
Hype.....	47
Once	48
Want.....	51
Inevitability.....	52
PROJECTIONS	55
Faith.....	56
Devotion.....	66
The Simple Life.....	69
Communion	74

Polite Conversation	82
Foreign Conversation	83
Kathmandu Fitness Club and Spa	84
Causes of Death	87
Possibilities	94
LEGENDS	95
Game On	96
How to Buy a Bus Ticket in Kathmandu	100
What Trekking is Like	104
Trekking: An Illustrated Primer	114
The Girl Version	118
Initiating Right	126
Containment	141
GREAT CIRCLES	145
Inconveniences	146
Anticipation	149
Stereotypes	151
Speaking Foreign	153
Self-Interest	166
Bonding Agents	168
Nectar of Life	180
Ways to Say Goodbye	183
Velcro Friendship	187

WRITING LIFE ESSAY	195
READING LIST	206

Disclaimer

A Nepali friend once told me, in his mother tongue, about a journey he had just completed. He told me his team had struggled on foot across the barren hills of far western Nepal, more than a two-weeks' walk from a road. For one whole day they didn't find any food to eat. My mind filled with images of these friends, weak and hungry, labouring up and down what they called hills and I called Himalayas. I wrote a story. I said they didn't find any food for one whole day.

And then I reconsidered. In Nepali, the word for food is frequently interchanged with the word for rice. Was it not more likely true that in a wilderness where people do, indeed, live, they had simply found no rice? So I changed the story.

And then I considered again. What would western readers imagine when I told them that my friends had walked a whole day without eating rice? Would they feel the deep, quivering muscle weakness and disorientation that accompanies severely depleted blood sugar levels and grasp with what incredible determination these men had continued on? Would they know that the Nepali word for food is equated with rice because rice is almost always the only available food with any sort of substance? Or would they imagine the team enjoying a plate of pasta for a change of pace? That would not be true.

To complicate the issue, rice itself is a many-varied substance. Raw, beaten, dried rice, which has sharp edges and gives you a stomach-ache if you eat more than one handful at a time, has its own special name in Nepali and is usually not interchanged with the general word for food. Maybe they ate that, in which case saying they didn't eat rice would not be true. Or maybe they were in one of those destitute districts whose tenacious residents exist off of a wheat or barley-based porridge that is considered to be low-caste food that most Nepalis would never admit to eating. Maybe they

ate that. Maybe what they didn't find in the hills would more accurately be labelled a *meal*, but that's a word I didn't know in Nepali, and definitely was not the word my friend used. Or maybe they didn't eat at all. Maybe I should have asked him, but by the time I realized my conundrum he was gone again, off to another district, many kilometres beyond the reach of cell phones. And is it truthfully a meal if you eat a single handful of organic shrapnel?

What was the truth? Six men walked for seventeen days across some of the most difficult terrain in the world. They returned thin, hungry, and exhausted. Food or no food, they deserved a story. In the end, I wrote one that didn't mention rice. It was a true story. Probably.

The following stories are true in the same way and to the same extent (subject to memory, translation, and misunderstanding), with the exception of the names, which I have transcribed, altered, substituted, and misspelled liberally.

CONTOUR LINES

contour line [kon-toor lahyn] *noun*

1. a line joining points of equal elevation on a surface.
2. the representation of such a line on a map.

Allow me to unwind a few snarled, tousled strings related to my marvellously boring past.

Madeliene

Premise

My life is a series of geographical oddities.

Some mornings I wake up, and I can't remember where I am or why. I roll over and wonder how far until my feet touch the floor. And when they do, will it be rich carpet? Cool concrete? Sculpted mud? One morning it was grass crimped between my toes. Mountains steeped in Himalayan fog and my breath hazed the sky.

I was born in the tropics, raised in the arctic, and became a dual citizen of the same two countries twice. Every significant event in my life has been accompanied by a physical move. I have moved because of my parents' jobs, because of my jobs, because the commute was too long, because the cost of living was too high, because of illness, because of medical care, because of language schools, because of college, because of seminary, because of churches, because there were no churches, because the apartment was bigger, because the metro was closer, and once because my dad was on a regional rebel leader's hit list. Let's just say that my life has been erratic and religious and geographically diverse.

I could distinguish gunshots from fireworks by the age of five; I have ridden the Trans-Siberian Railroad twice; lobster has sometimes been my cheapest meat. I have milked a water buffalo and played Tchaikovsky's piano and been interrogated by a Maoist by firelight on the top of a mountain at the far western edge of the earth. I have made children cry with my terrifyingly white skin and stopped traffic with my somewhat-blonde hair. I have seen the Louvre and the Hermitage and the highest point in Iowa and The Pit, the outhouse that connects directly to Hell.

I grew up believing that America was an island, somewhere far away from everywhere else. Somewhere disconnected and comfortable and still. Somewhere people looked and talked like me but didn't think like me. Somewhere I was expected to fit, and didn't, and didn't want to. Somewhere that could fall off the edge of the earth and no one would notice.

Sometimes I still think I was right, even though I have learned to connect the points of similarity between languages, continents, climates, and cultures. All my life I have been a cartographer, etching concentric patterns in the surface of foreign lands, because every land is foreign and wonderful and strange. The lines help me cope, categorize, and prepare, and they explain why some places are harder and more exhausting to navigate, while others flow smoothly along horizontal planes. The drawing of the lines itself is an adventure. And the circles never close.

Family Matters

I sometimes tell people that, while I have never been to South America, I have family there, which is technically true and makes me sound very international. What I have in South America is a grandmother I never met who is buried in Suriname in an overgrown field under the wrong name. My grandmother went by her middle and married names, but graves in Suriname are identified with the deceased's birth names. So, her grave marker was inscribed with a title none of her friends would recognize. But it doesn't matter anymore because the cemetery is not maintained and the letters of the wood marker have probably worn away and been buried beneath lush South American greenery.

No one in our family has been to her grave except for my grandfather, who had to bury her sooner than anyone could arrive. When the family gathered to watch a video of the funeral service, my cousin, who was maybe five at the time, kept asking over and over, *Why is Grandma in that box? I don't think Grandma would like it in that box if she can't walk around.* The five-year-old had a point. No one in my family has ever been content to stay in one place.

§

My grandfather worked forty-five years for the New York Central Railroad, Penn Central, and Conrail. He was the first in his family to marry a non-Dutch and the first to leave the Chicagoland area. Our family has been geographically challenged ever since. My mother's generation spent their adult lives in the Philippines, Haiti, Russia, Suriname, California, South Dakota, Ohio and New York, maintaining the ties that bind, more or less, without the benefit of reliable Internet or

phones. My aunt says they never fought because they only saw each other once every five years. My grandmother said they treasured the moments together because of the years apart.

As a child, I enjoyed the intermittent closeness of my extended family, the airmail letters, and Thanksgiving dinners twice a decade. It's not as if I didn't know my relatives at all. They were present for family get-togethers, with appropriate amounts of coaching by my parents beforehand. *Which of these [three-year-old school portrait photos] are your cousins from New York?* A cousin even asked me to be a bridesmaid at her wedding, wearing a pale yellow chiffon dress and carrying a basket of fresh flowers, which had been filled with more water than the green Styrofoam block inside was qualified to absorb, and which I subsequently tipped and spilled down the front of said pale yellow dress during the family photo shoot in the sanctuary before the ceremony. I walked down the aisle slightly damp and arm in arm with the bride's brother, who asked me, as we stood poised at the entrance to the church, not what my name was, which would not have surprised me, but *What are we supposed to do again?*

My family maintained just the right level of proximity until six months ago, when I found myself living in Orlando with not only my parents, but also first and second cousins, both removed and not. I don't remember meeting the second cousin, Abby, before last year, and struggled to remember the name of her son, who was almost three. She chose an unusual name, Holden, because when she married, her last name changed from Smith to Brown and she wanted her son to at least have an interesting first name. She gave him an unusual middle name, too, both family names, which was short-sighted because she is now pregnant with twins—boys again—who will need interesting names of their own, and all the best family names have already been taken.

Abby only recently moved to Orlando, where I have legally lived a full year longer than I have physically been present. I established my state residency with a hard-won driver's license (hard-

won because I lost my social security card in a previous move and a passport is evidently not as authoritative) obtained on a three-week visit and a photo of my belongings stacked in a closet in my parents' home as proof of my intention to live here someday. At the end of the three weeks I moved to Nepal.

But Abby, this second cousin, moved to Orlando legitimately, rental truck and uniformly-sized cardboard boxes and new license plates and everything. As a cousin, and as someone who moves as often as other people take vacations, I felt obligated to help her unpack. She would, of course, have benefitted most from my packing prowess (I moved to Nepal for a year with a single suitcase containing all my necessities and a down sleeping bag) but she moved to, not from, Florida, and therefore had to make do with my less brilliant unpacking skills.

I arrived at her new home, a sort of pale orange—more than pastel, less than melon—colored rental house on the opposite side of the city from the rest of the relatives. The house was slung low across the front of a shaded property on a two-way street too narrow to permit parking on the shoulder. I stopped my rugged little car in front of the single-car driveway, perplexed. Is it acceptable in America to pull into a stranger's driveway? What about a stranger who is a cousin, or a second cousin, whom you have met maybe twice and who is expecting you, but might also be expecting relatives that matter, like parents, who are more deserving of driveway parking privileges? In the end, I pulled in, partly because a car came up behind me, partly because her parents were out of town, and therefore not likely to arrive, and partly because I was a cousin, and cousins are family, and family parks in driveways.

It didn't actually matter because this turned out to be the sort of driveway that projects a single-car-only image on the street the way mobsters use legitimate-looking restaurants to launder money. I had seen just the front of the driveway that continued past the side of the house and

opened out into a broad turn-around, doubling back on itself into a concealed two-car-plus garage facing away from the street. I left my car in the obvious part of the driveway, announcing to all the world, at least the world of that particular backstreet, that I belonged at this droopy house.

Abby met me at the door with an awkward hug (awkward both because I don't hug strangers and because she was pregnant with twins; is it ok to side-hug a cousin?). She suggested I tackle the kitchen while she scoured and unpacked the master bathroom. Why do people let strangers unpack their kitchens? Are they desperate to be able to prepare something for dinner besides a peanut butter sandwich? Or do they not find it awkward to let someone paw through every item of a room that in much of the world is not considered a public space? In Nepal my lack of a recognized social category made me an outcaste, untouchable, unclean, and banned from the kitchen in many homes.

I opened a box. Abby's instructions were simple, but imprecise: *food goes in the pantry; dishes in the cabinets, but not until they're washed.* The dishwasher, crooked at an angle under the counter, was already grinding away at a load of whatever Abby had extracted from the boxes so far, and the counters were mounded with extra whatever that hadn't fit in the dishwasher. I unpacked cups and silverware and stacked them precariously in horizontal spaces not already occupied by boxes or more dusty dishes. Clearly, there would be no more unpacking until the dishes were washed and put away. It would be faster to wash them by hand, but where would I set them to dry? I turned in a circle from the box to the counter to the sink to the dishwasher and decided that it would be like one of those games with sliding squares that make a picture, but there's only one open space with which to manoeuvre. I hate those games.

Three hours later, the sink was cleared, the dishes washed, the boxes empty, and the counters a little less than half full. I congratulated myself and unrolled shelf-liner in the bottom of the cabinet I had reserved for drinking glasses, which I had not managed to locate. I called Abby

away from her bathtub scrubbing and gave her a summary of my accomplishments, demonstrating how the dishes were housed directly above the dishwasher for convenient storage, how plastic containers would be at eye level next to the fridge above an open expanse of counter for easy left-over disposal, and how her collection of candles fit snugly in a drawer across from the drawer containing lighters, easily accessible for power cuts, which didn't seem to happen very often in America, but you never know.

I was pleased not only with my kitchen assembly skills, but also with the fact that I had functioned for an entire afternoon in a strictly adult capacity. Many of my relatives were three or four years behind in my life, asking *What are you majoring in?* long after I graduated college. Abby represented both a relative and a clean start. She let me organize the most adult space in the house, chitchatting between dishwasher loads about sonograms and Brillo pads and other womanly subjects.

“Some people wax eloquent about cloth diapers,” Abby vented to me while refilling her water bottle from the sink, “but if they think I’m going to wash diapers for twins, they’re crazy.”

And I nodded, not because I necessarily agreed—I haven’t formulated strong opinions on diapers—but because I sympathized, and because I wanted the conversation to continue without disintegrating into *What year are you in school?*

Abby surveyed the kitchen, complimented my work, fixed me a drink, and gently informed me that *these* dishes were not the ones they used every day (*these* dishes would be stored in the garage in a box much like the one I had just removed them from), that they didn’t use glass glasses with an active two-year-old in the house and weren’t likely to start with two more on the way, that the Tupperware had to be in a bottom cabinet so Holden could play with it while she cooked dinner, and that the movers had stacked another entire series of kitchen boxes in the dining room.

§

I returned the next day to pick up where I'd left off. This time my mother came along and Abby assigned her the other bathroom and the linen closet. She finished both and moved on to clear out the guest room and make the bed with appropriate linens. My moving skills are nothing compared to my mother's. She might have unpacked, painted, and stencilled the twins' room that afternoon as well if I hadn't interfered. Abby came into the kitchen for something innocuous like a plastic bag and found me in a befuddled state between an open box of dishes that needed to go in the cabinet to the right of the sink and yesterday's dishes that were already in that cabinet and needed to be packed into the box holding today's dishes that still needed to be washed. I had already given up the counters as lost and pots and pans were distributed around me on the floor, reflecting the glare of overhead fluorescent lighting back up into my bewildered eyes.

Abby looked at me, looked around the kitchen, and asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I answered, "I'm just not sure what to do next."

She paused. "Would you like your mom to come help?"

"Yes," I finally admitted. The one relative who knew me only as an adult, who entrusted me with her kitchen, who cared about where I thought the frying pans should be located, now knew that no matter how many cross-continental moves I made, Himalayan treks I led, or visa offices I maneuvered through, I still occasionally needed my mother. An hour later, the kitchen was complete, the cabinets orderly, the counters wiped, the dishwasher empty.

As I left, Abby thanked me for my help during another awkward moment at her front door. “I don’t mind unpacking,” I said, “A lot of people have helped me move.” I paused. “And this is what family is for, right?”

I added, “I’ve never lived near relatives before,” which wasn’t exactly true. I had lived near Abby’s family for several years, near meaning we were both in Haiti, which is significantly smaller than Florida. Abby’s dad was a pilot and I have a photo of an airplane and Abby’s family and my parents and a child. My parents disagree about whether that child is me. They can’t identify the setting, either, which is a dusty airstrip that looks like every other dusty airstrip on the Haitian half of the island.

Abby’s and my families must have visited each other, but Haiti wasn’t the sort of country where you could drop by for Sunday dinner. My family lived in the mountains on the northwest peninsula where there were no airports. The field my dad cleared and levelled so my brother and his friends could play soccer doubled as the emergency helicopter-landing site the embassy required us to maintain. We even had our own designated pushpin on a map on the embassy wall that unfortunately marked a site a considerable distance from where we lived. When the evacuation order came, we drove out over the salt flats.

While my family usually lived only theoretically near to other relatives, my grandfather and his second wife did come to visit us at our house in Haiti. In my favourite photo of this grandmother she wears an old-lady-length skirt, gold-rimmed glasses, and has crisply permed, translucent white hair. She is standing on a step stool holding up one end of a gutter that my dad is attaching to the edge of our sloping tin roof. She looks beautiful and stately and entirely out of context, like someone photoshopped her out of a church picnic and into the brilliant Caribbean sun.

My other living grandmother and a great aunt travelled to the opposite side of the world to visit us after we moved to Russia. We took a train to St. Petersburg, or really two trains because there weren't enough seats for us to go together. My parents sent my brother, maybe eight years old, off as a translator for my great aunt, whom we knew even less than my grandmother, but who had travelled extensively and knew how to hail taxis and not get mugged. Our trains arrived at different times at different stations. My parents and grandmother and I reached our hotel in time to watch my brother and great aunt ride by obliviously in a taxi as the sun set over a city none of us had ever been to and would likely never leave, since we would now wander the bleak, heartless streets forever searching for each other in the perpetual glow of the arctic summer.

The taxi circled back eventually when the driver realized he had passed the hotel. We were reunited much quicker than later in the week when my grandmother wandered off alone in the Hermitage and waited for over an hour at a red-carpeted spiral staircase before noticing that no one else was there, indicating that this was not the grand entry staircase—our designated meeting place—after all. So she joined a passing tour group and wandered all through the cavernous galleries of the palace-turned-museum before gracefully descending the plush red steps to the main lobby from which we had been frantically sending out search parties for hours and pooling ransom money just in case.

After four years in Russia my family returned to the US, landed in Texas, and drove to New York to meet waiting relatives for a family reunion at the Finger Lakes. I fell asleep at sundown one of the days of driving and woke up the following morning still in the car and could not understand what had happened or where we were going. My parents were too exhausted to explain and my brother wouldn't tell. Literally, I suppose, we did re-unite with the extended family, but it felt more like an onslaught of names and faces, worse than strangers because no one expects you to recognize

strangers, and there are no quizzes with strangers. *I bet you don't remember me*, they say, and they don't seem pleased to be right.

§

My grandfather died the week before Christmas. Aunts and uncles and cousins drove in from all over the East Coast and met for a private graveside service in a saturating rain. I hugged them as they got out of their cars, genuinely glad to see them for maybe the first time ever. My oldest cousin's four-year-old daughter snuggled on my lap during the service, oddly content in the arms of a stranger.

At the house where we stayed for the next few days she introduced me to her stuffed animals while her older sister emptied the contents of my purse across the floor of the adjoining room and the littlest one giggled in another cousin's lap. The girls had trouble manoeuvring through the skirted and trousered legs of the accumulated family members milling around the house, dressed and ready for the public memorial service, which would begin one minute early in honour of my grandfather's railroader punctuality. My mother's generation clotted together, chatting about family memories and cherished traditions, the aunt who remarried at eighty-seven and the cousin's twin grandsons on the way.

My generation roamed around reminding each other of how old we were and where we lived and whether we were still in school. We were subdued, vague, unsure how to make smalltalk with related strangers, already too familiar for the conversations that lead to relationships. And yet we still chose to be together as family, even though some of those relationships we could no longer explain. Like Ruthie, the niece of my dead grandfather's second wife. Ruthie became a cousin when her aunt

married my grandfather at age sixty, but I never thought of her that way. What mattered about Ruthie was that she had a black Labrador retriever named Emmi who chased red laser pointers. Ruthie came to the house after the death of my grandfather, whose passing technically separated our families. Can you be an ex-cousin?

My mother's cousin spoke at the memorial service, remembering my grandfather as a much younger man than I had known, back when he stood tall in the pews of the church the entire extended family attended, and how he bellowed out hymns in a heavy voice that contained its own harmonies. The family—my family—sat neatly pleated in the front three rows of the packed auditorium, remembering the only thing we all had in common, a man who was now gone.

Contentment

Wherever you are, be all there.

Mom

My mother started to assemble a photo album of my childhood. The album sat half-finished and boxed in my grandparents' house until they moved to a retirement home and transferred my parents' stored belongings to a neighbour's attic. Five years later we happened to live in the same city as the neighbours and unpacked the dingy boxes covered in pink insulation fibres. Mom finished the album with a high school graduation photo eight years later and four states away. I sat with her in our newest living room paging through the accumulated images of my life.

Me all red and wrinkly on the clinic delivery table. Me with Mom. Me with Dad. Me meeting my older brother. Mom handing me off to a neighbour lady riding by on her donkey. Did you worry she'd run off with me, Mom? Can you disappear if you're the only white baby anyone has ever seen?

My first chocolate cookie face. Oreos hand-carried from the States. Me helping Mom make bread in the shade of our thatched front porch. Me and Dad picking up gravel to mix in the concrete foundation of our new house. Dad pulling someone's Land Rover out of a mud pit. I believed you could do anything, Dad, you and an electric winch.

The dazzling Caribbean coast where we escaped for weekends, where we were stranded the day the truck battery died thirty kilometres from the deserted pirate lairs of Tortuga. Where Mom and Dad tried to start the truck, and I thought they would push it into the sea. Where Dad took the drinking water and left to walk twenty kilometres home and I thought I would never see him again. Where we ran into the waves for relief from the heat. Where we were attacked by swarms of sea lice.

Where we whimpered in the shade of a tarp in the back of the truck until Dad came back with the four-wheeler and a spare battery. Where Dad once bought a pink pearl from a peddler on the beach and gave it to Mom, and it was a kind of pearl that can't be artificially cultured. Do you know that's why I always ask you to wear it, Mom?

Mom and Grandmom helping Dad hang gutters to funnel water into the cistern so we could pump it to the roof and let it run through a maze of pipes painted black and fall from the faucets as hot running water. Dad driving the bulldozer I was convinced was massive until I found out as an adult it had the same power as a riding lawnmower. Why does it look so small in the photographs now, and why do I still think that my dad can do anything? Is it because you carved roads into the wild and survived a brown recluse bite without medical care and talked down the mob that wanted to burn the clinic? Is it because you used to strap me to your chest with a kidney belt so I could safely fall asleep to the drone of the motorcycle engine?

My mother doesn't have the answers to these questions and neither do I. All we have are stories and memories and photos.

Me on skis at the edge of Siberia. The lake—almost three kilometres wide—that we walked across one winter. Do you remember the silence at the centre? Mom and me on a horse-drawn cart, bundled in down parkas. A family portrait by the Kremlin, where a curator once took us behind the velvet ropes, back to the tombs of the czars. Ice cream bars at twenty below zero. My rabbit fur hat with the round bunny tail perched on top and flaps pulled down around my cheeks and tied under my chin. Do you still remember how to wrap a scarf just right, with no cracks for the cold to seep through?

A series of favourite pets. The parrot who ate pancakes and hung upside down from a piece of driftwood. The Doberman I always thought was poisoned, but found out later was clubbed to

death by intimidated neighbours. The hawk we rescued and fed with an eyedropper and carried on our shoulders until his parents returned and they flew away together. The cat that disappeared, most likely eaten by gypsies. How could we know for sure?

A yellow house in Pennsylvania that I thought was a mansion because it had two stories and an attic. Me holding a basketball, pretending to enjoy an American sport. Me at my high school graduation in a bright red gown and gold cords. Me tossing my cap. Me holding my diploma, ready to launch into the world. Is there always more to discover? More to remember? More to miss?

At the end of the album dozens of blank plastic sleeves wait for the photos that represent the rest of my life. I keep them blank on purpose. The rest of my life belongs in its own album. Series of albums. One made of leather, one of dried palm fronds, two more with plastic sleeves, a three-ring binder, a collection of xD memory cards, an external hard drive. I divide my life into geographical categories that make sense to me, if not to other people.

Where are you from? someone asks, and the answer is everywhere I've ever been. Because I have been connected from birth to the Caribbean, but remember more of Russia, and am more comfortable in strange cities than the one I live in now. Without Spain I would never have gone to Casablanca. Tunis was almost impossible because of the taxi strike in Marseilles. Kathmandu is not really as far away as Sfax, but Jajarkot is farther than everything, except America, which is the farthest away of all.

Someday I'm going to be able to answer the question *where are you from?* without lying or stammering or bursting into tears. And when that day comes, it will mean I have given up a part of my identity. The truth is I'm not *from* anywhere. I just *am* somewhere. Here. When that stops being enough, then my world will collapse under the weight of loss and sadness and regret. And there won't be anywhere left to stand.

Coming Back

I said goodbye to my mother in the church parking lot under a brilliant Carolina sky the summer after my first year of college. I'm not sure why. It must have been a Sunday. Dad drove me to the Newark airport. After a one-month study abroad programme in Spain I would immediately begin a job in New Jersey, hence the round-trip flight from an airport a thousand kilometres from home.

Dad helped me check in, print my boarding pass, and drop off my suitcase. He walked with me through the sprawling airport metropolis up until the start of the security line. That's where we said goodbye. The start of a whole month without a single familiar face. I sobbed in front of the TSA desk. The guard, a tall, intimidating black man who must have seen dozens of crying college girls every shift, waved me through the checkpoint with the words, "It's ok. You'll come back."

Which is what we fear, isn't it? That we won't come back? Because at the point in my life when I boarded a plane to Madrid alone I had never come back to anywhere. When my family moved, we moved forever, sometimes without warning, occasionally without goodbyes. We moved over and over again. This was the first time I moved internationally alone. Even for a month.

I did come back. To New Jersey, and then eventually Carolina. But not until I had spent my first night in an airport—Amsterdam Schiphol, which is massive and has comfortable orange couches for weary overnight travellers. After I wandered Madrid with my guidebook, moved into a stranger's home, and got locked out on the streets of Granada in the middle of the night. I rode buses to new cities, hiked in new mountains, swam in a new sea. And I came back again, different like they say you should be, glad to have done it, glad it was over. Mostly glad to know that sometimes people do come back. Even people like me.

Expectations

My father built me a wood sign one Christmas carved with the word *HOME* to ensure that I always have one. I finished college, moved away, completed a graduate certificate programme, and began looking for a job near an aunt in Pennsylvania. This was my fourth time moving to the keystone state. After a week of calling and interviewing and dropping off resumes in response to classified postings in a state I had hoped not to live in again, I followed in the oft-mocked footsteps of generations of English majors: I got a job serving oversized burgers to overweight people for less than minimum wage plus tips.

People joke about burgers and fries and English majors because all they learned in high school lit was how to write bibliographies on index cards. I joke about it because it happened to me. I even did everything right: graduated college, did a business internship, passed math classes. In the end I survived. Most of us do. English majors have a secret coping mechanism the rest of the world wonders about with longing and fear: we write it all down.

§

I have a theory that you can tell the personality of a US state based solely on its highways. Crossing from West Virginia into Maryland on I-81 the speed limit drops ten mph. Crossing into Pennsylvania it drops ten more and grassy medians become concrete barriers. The entrance ramp onto the PA Turnpike ends with a stop sign.

An ad in the local paper announced high-paying post office jobs with benefits. The nice lady on the other end of the phone verified my eligibility and, in a pleasant, scripted voice, explained that

I had to take some employment tests. Memory, address comparison, etc. She was adamant that I should prepare, as there was a waiting period before I could retake them if I failed. *How do you prepare for a memory test?!?* Not a problem, she had a packet of information, advice, and practice tests. How would I like to pay the \$123.99?

I was actually hoping to not pay to apply for a job that I was beginning to doubt actually existed. No money, no packet, no job, so I hung up and went to the post office website. They offered no such packet, required no such fee, and had no job openings within a four-hour drive. Score one for the English major: I could spot dangling modifiers *and* employment scams.

A Red Robin ad in the paper read like a scam, but the job had potential:

We're looking for Team Members who can live and instil our VALUES of Honor, Integrity, Seeking Knowledge and Having Fun every day. We deliver an unparalleled experience to every guest which keeps them coming back for more. Having any more Fun than this wouldn't be considered work. Come and see the fun for yourself.

The restaurant was still under construction and the interviews took place in a singlewide in the parking lot. I went in, picked up an application, and checked out my competition: one late-twenties blonde in business attire and a scruffy high schooler in torn jeans and an untucked shirt. While I filled out the paperwork, the blonde went in for her interview. I was trying to decide which address to write on which form when she and the interviewer burst out laughing in the other room. She left smiling and chortling. The high schooler had disappeared.

A manager summoned me into the interview chamber to sit in a metal folding chair and look like someone who should be hired for a job with the word *fun* three times in the description. He asked me if I had ever worked in a restaurant and I said no. Now the question I had been dreading:

why do you want to work at Red Robin? *Well, I'm an English major who just finished half of a master's degree. This is what we do. If I said this was my life dream, would it scare you?*

I took a deep breath and quoted the carefully crafted answer written on the application he was staring at. Something about good food and good service. He didn't look like he cared. He asked if I'd ever eaten at a Red Robin and I said yes. I didn't tell him it was only once in Oregon while visiting friends from Pennsylvania and California. Shockingly, he invited me back on Thursday for a second interview.

§

I decided to apply at a local home health agency while I waited for my Red Robin interview. No experience necessary, just a valid driver's license. Eight pages of application later the HR person informed me that not only must my driver's license and car insurance be valid, they must also be from Pennsylvania. My car was registered to my parents in North Carolina. Did I plan to change my car registration? Not if I could help it, and I was pretty sure I could. I was an experienced geographical oddity. I had rented a movie in Oregon with my Pennsylvania Blockbuster card and North Carolina driver's license. I was about to start my third year in a row with out-of-state plates, and almost all of it had probably been legal.

I didn't have a PA address yet. I didn't pay rent. I didn't get bills. I did intend to pay taxes, but I was pretty sure I'd fill the form out wrong. Actually, I'm pretty sure I fill it out wrong every year. At the bottom where you sign, it says the information is accurate *to the best of your knowledge*, and that loophole is how I sleep at night.

The job was a bust, but the lady wanted me to interview the next week anyway. The next week I would be eight hundred kilometres away. She looked confused, handed me her card, and told me to call her if I ever actually lived there.

§

I pulled into the Red Robin parking lot five minutes before my scheduled interview on Thursday. A different, more powerful manager greeted me, sat me down, and went through the same questions as last time, with slight variations. He commented on my English major and asked what I wanted to do with my life. I told him that right now I wanted to work at Red Robin. He asked if I thought I would be a better server or hostess and my mind flitted through everything I knew about either position, which didn't take long. I told him I had no idea and thought I could learn either. He asked if I could come back one more time next week. The next week I would be in North Carolina. He looked confused, but not as dismayed as the home health lady, and gave me a timeslot at 4:00 the next afternoon.

Now I had a serious problem. This would be my third interview with the same company, and I only had one suitable outfit within a day's drive. To make the situation even more complicated, that outfit involved black capris, but I'd worn the soles off my black dress shoes in Washington State and thrown them away. So I paired a dressy brown top with my black capris and brown shoes the first day, and looked quite presentable. I went shopping for black shoes and didn't find anything both appropriate and affordable, but I had recently bought a moderately dressy shirt that could run interference between the black pants and brown shoes. But now I was all out of ideas.

I attempted to drive to the local farmer's market to meet a friend for dinner, but, when I arrived, the market and the rest of the shopping centre were mysteriously missing. I called my aunt, got directions, found the market, apologized, ate at a favourite restaurant, and told my friend I intended to write down my Red Robin stories, if I got the job, as catharsis for irritating customers. Then I called a different friend and begged to borrow a shirt to wear to my interview the next day. We met up and I dug through her closet and found the four-leaf clover: a blouse with both black and brown stripes. It even fit. The only problem was that it was polyester and it was June, but my friend suggested that I wear a cami to Red Robin and put the shirt on right before I walked in to the interview so that the sweat didn't have time to pool.

Just to complicate the day of my final interview, I planned a quick layover in New Jersey to visit a friend on my way to the restaurant. It was less than a three-hour drive, so I could arrive by 10:00, leave before 1:00, and be at the singlewide in plenty of time. My aunt, my friend, and my dad all warned me not to follow the GPS, whose name was Jill, to New Jersey and back, as she would take me through downtown Philadelphia. Jill did not understand the concept of rush hour. I stayed on the turnpike until she recalculated to an acceptable route. As I drove, I tried to imagine myself pulling up to multiple tollbooths in nothing but a cami, and quickly decided that I would have to wear the blouse and crank up the air conditioning on the way back.

After a pleasant lunch I changed into my professional clothes and headed out for Red Robin, watching carefully for where to turn off Jill's route in time to skirt Philly. Traffic grew heavier and heavier, which I guessed was normal for Friday afternoon. When I started seeing signs for the Ben Franklin Bridge I knew I was in trouble. I had followed Jill too long and missed my turn toward the NJ turnpike, placing me in downtown Philly at 3:00 on Friday.

One hour and two stalled vehicles later I was sitting in the underbelly of Philadelphia. Literally. I was encased on both sides, above, and below with the drab concrete entrails of a transport system built for half as many cars. I called my dad in tears, who reminded me that he'd told me twice not to do this and gave me the phone number for Red Robin. They didn't answer. I cried more. It didn't matter, because it would take me at least another hour to get there, which was plenty of time for my eyes to recover.

At 4:50 PM I pull into Red Robin's parking lot, gathered myself, and headed inside to face my fate. Is it still firing if you haven't technically been hired yet?

Inside, I found my two interviewers in their office. They didn't remember who I was, why I was there, or what time I was supposed to arrive. I started into my planned explanation about Philadelphia traffic in New Jersey because Jill's an idiot, but they didn't care. Apparently this wasn't an interview—they just wanted me to stop by and sign the papers. I wrote different addresses on different forms and hoped they didn't notice.

I drove to my aunt's in a bit of a daze and found that my grandparents had been waiting for me for an hour to eat dinner. They asked when I started work, how much I'd make, what I would do, and if I liked my manager. I had no idea.

§

Fortunately, Red Robin was easier to get to from my house than from New Jersey. The city of Reading is entwined in a web of monotonously named highways: 422, 222, 442 business, 322, 222 business, etc. and the directions on the signs have nothing to do with geography. According to some, the Reading highway system was the original inspiration for the Philadelphia pretzel. To get to

work, I drove East on 222 North, passed the exit for 222 North, kept straight onto 12 East and got off onto 422 East going South. 422 East might be the worst stretch of pavement I have ever driven on in the US. I had to adjust my rear-view mirror twice every time I made the trip because of the jarring of the potholes. But, despite the name-direction discontinuity, it was an easy drive and I had no more transportation trauma.

For two weeks before the restaurant opened the new servers played with the POS computer terminals, drooled on sample food, practiced greeting each other, and sang birthday songs. Once we theoretically knew everything about being a server we gave free food to invited guests for four days of practice before the grand opening. My first shift I didn't get to actually serve anybody food. Instead, I was stationed as a "buffer" in the parking lot to tell people who didn't have reservations that, as the giant full-colored sign in front of the restaurant said, we didn't open until Monday, and they weren't special enough to get free food. Of course, I said this with a great deal of charm. My charm worked on everyone except one grumpy lady parked in a handicapped spot, who complained, *if my money isn't good enough to buy food today, how do I know it will be good enough another day?* Instead of responding that perhaps on another day the restaurant might actually be open, I offered her a manager, who told her essentially the same thing. She left, most likely never to return. I congratulated myself on weeding out one grouchy customer.

Parking lot duty was off to a great start, especially since a manager offered me a free cold drink to take outside with me. We didn't get free food as a rule, so this was very exciting. At least, it was until the storm clouds opened and the rain broke loose in sheets. The restaurant entrance was not designed to protect parking lot buffers from the rain. There wasn't enough room for me and arriving guests to all stand under the overhang while I looked for their confirmation number on my list. I was supposed to meet them at their cars so that if they weren't invited, they didn't come all the

way up to the restaurant and smell the food and then get kicked out, but that meant we all stood in the parking lot in the rain. My solution was to try to meet people before they got out of their cars so they could sit inside and give me the code. That left me standing in the rain with the clipboard. By the time the shift was over, my carefully highlighted list had smeared so badly it was impossible to tell which lines I had marked, and the paper itself had dissolved into a pulp embedded in the fibres of my sopping wet navy blue polo shirt.

§

Once we opened, the rest of my shifts consisted of table after table of hungry people who should have been at home eating dinner with their families. That may sound judgmental coming from someone who occasionally eats out, but that doesn't mean it's not accurate. I perfected the art of judging people based on how they order food. Who exercises authority in decision-making? Are the kids independent enough to choose their own meal? Are the parents united and consistent enough in their discipline to both refuse refills on those kids' rootbeers? Is the boyfriend more interested in impressing the girl with his wallet (Prime Rib Dip) or manliness (Wild West Buffalo Burger)? People forget that what they consider to be a private dinner is the feature presentation for an entire staff of professional people-watchers.

I could tell the personality of a table from the way they respond to the first three words of the night: *welcome to Red Robin*. It had to do with eye contact, and whether my value as a server was above or slightly below that of the cardboard coasters that occupied the attention of so many guests while I greeted them.

Some customers, however, were a little too affectionate. The first time I got a phone number on a receipt, I wasn't entirely prepared. A high-maintenance group of college kids sat at table 94 and made my life difficult. One of the boys left his phone number and a "call me" note on his credit card slip. The rest of the table paid in cash and left a tip in coins on the table, or, more accurately, scattered across the trash-strewn table. I would have thrown the tip away rather than stoop below my already sub-human server status, except that I really needed the coins to make change for the rest of the shift. I picked the money out of ketchup-stained napkins and soggy sugar packets and wondered how I could have let that catch slip through my fingers.

My second phone number came from table 32, my first customer on a quiet lunch shift. When I asked if he had eaten at Red Robin before, he responded that he had once, a few weeks ago at a family reunion after he came out of the coma he'd been in for the past several years. I really just wanted to know if he needed a tour of the menu. In addition to a burger, he consumed two cups of coffee and more than thirty packets of sugar. He said he wanted his coffee to be as sweet as me. He paid in cash and left a scrap of paper with a phone number rolled up and stuffed in the dessert menu. I wondered if I should be flattered, but decided probably not.

§

I found great amusement in the inner workings of Red Robin and its guests. Our tickets were full of orders like "melon slices: sub apples" or "raspberry limeade: sub cherry" or my personal favourite: "kid smoothie: sub Hawaiian Heartthrob." Who wouldn't love to substitute a Hawaiian heartthrob on a moment's notice? One lady spent ten minutes asking questions and making modifications to her meal and ended up with an unseasoned chicken breast on top of plain penne

pasta. I took copious notes of everything she didn't like to eat and consulted with the kitchen manager to ensure that her food was as unflavorful as possible. For this she paid \$15 and tipped \$1.25. I didn't understand, which is probably because I was a waitress.

Waitresses are stereotypically dumb. There really are dumb waitresses, and maybe a disproportionate number of high-school dropouts compared to other professions, but the system also works against us. To do the job properly, waitresses have to appear just slightly dumber than the customer, and sometimes that's stooping pretty low.

Taking food orders is often somewhere between a fine-tuned art and outright mind reading. When people ordered their burgers we asked how they want them cooked. Most people used the allegedly straightforward medium, medium well, or well done. But those terms are arbitrary markers on a sliding scale between raw and burnt. To complicate matters, we had to translate the guest's nebulous specifications into Red Robin's binary code: *pink* or *no pink*. Generally, medium equalled pink and medium well was no pink. We also had a *well-done* option, which we always had to explain didn't mean burnt. At least, we had a well-done option until they added the Peachy Keen drink to the system. After that we only had pink and no pink. Nobody knew why.

I used to just ask people if they wanted pink in their burgers, but their responses proved baffling. Statements like "just a little pink" or the always irritating "cooked" were unhelpful. What I needed to know is how long the cooks should leave their burger on the Marshall. No one was cutting into them to make sure there was or was not a tinge of pink in the centre.

And the pink/no pink system got more complicated yet. A few weeks after opening we had a rash of no pink burgers with hints of pink in them. So we were instructed to explain to customers that no pink sometimes has a little pink in it, and if they really literally didn't want any pink at all in their burger, we should put it as well done. Then the conversation went something like this:

Me: Are you ready to order?

Guest: Yep. I want a cheeseburger.

Me: So you want the Red Robin Gourmet Cheeseburger?

Guest: Uhhh. What does it have on it?

Me (in my head): If you're too dumb to read the menu you don't deserve a burger.

Me (for real): Mayo, lettuce, tomato, onions, pickles, pickle relish.

Guest: I don't want any of that. I just want a cheeseburger.

Me: So you just want a burger with cheese?

Guest: Yep.

Me: What kind of cheese?

Guest: What do you have?

Other guest: Dude, it's written on the menu.

Guest: Oh, ok. American I guess.

Me: How would you like it cooked?

Guest: Done.

Me: Blank stare.

Guest: Maybe like medium well.

Me: Ok. That may have a tinge of pink in the centre.

Guest: I don't want any pink.

Me: I'll put it as well done then to be sure.

Guest: But I don't want it burnt.

Me: It won't be burnt.

Guest: Does it come with fries?

Me: Yes, unless you want to substitute something else.

Guest: What can I substitute?

Me: A salad, melon wedges, steamed broccoli, apples, carrots, rice, mixed vegetables, coleslaw, or soup or onion rings for an extra charge.

Guest: No, I want the fries.

Me: Can I get you anything else?

Guest: How about a million dollars?

Me walking away pretending not to hear.

Try going through this a few hundred times and see how your IQ holds up.

Once we had the order, we proceeded immediately to a POS terminal to ring it in. The computer system was color-coded and the abbreviations made the food names more interesting. *SPIN DIP* is way cooler than *creamy artichoke and spinach dip*. Over time the kitchen staff morphed the POS abbreviations that printed on their tickets into a unique dialect of the English language. BBQ was pronounced *barbie*, as in, *I need a barbie burger*. Peppercorn smothered steak (SMTH STEAK) became *smith steak*. French onion soup was simply *fron*. *Louie sauce* was what went on the buffalo wings, but none of us knew why.

When I needed a refill of our world-famous golden-brown piping-hot perfectly seasoned bottomless steak fries, I called for a *bottomless*. Never mind that “bottomless” is an adjective describing an assortment of Red Robin foods (sodas, teas, kids’ pastas and sides). If I needed garlic fries, I called for a *garlic fill*. Other unique expressions floated in and out of the kitchen and prep line during a shift. Recently printed orders were *walking in*, the first check in line was the *lead*, emergencies that leapfrogged the priority chain were *on the fly*, and distressed servers were *in the weeds*.

If you walked by the expo line window at any particular moment, you heard something like this:

*Two barbies walking in! I need a bowl of fron on the fly! Drop me a half bag of fries. What's my lead?
Smith steak waiting on a bruschetta. I need two bottomless! I need a runner soup first to 34! I can't I'm in
the weeds. Bruschetta's up. Ticket! I need fries to sell. Runner! Low call o-straws! Fries sell! 2 bottomless
please! As soon as I sell these burgers. Cold side I need a single O! Echo that! Somebody run this
@(!)\$(# soup!*

Add in a little sweat, a lot more cussing, and welcome to my new world.

§

A few months after opening, Red Robin decided that the servers were going to be paid by direct deposit. I filled out the paperwork and handed it in to a manager. *Your husband lives in North Carolina?* she asked, staring at my voided check. *I don't have a husband*, I answered. I didn't tell her that my dad's name was on my checks because my life was geographically tenuous and I never knew when I might need someone to write a check thousands of kilometres away from wherever I happened to be. I didn't tell her that the direct deposit form was bogus anyway because my parents were in the process of moving from North Carolina to Florida and my driver's license, checks, and car registration were about to become invalid. I also didn't tell her that I was quitting in six weeks to move to Florida on my way to a job on a Christian ministry ship.

Red Robin was the least of my problems in my upcoming series of moves. The immediate crisis was my car, which my parents had to register in Florida within thirty days of their move. The insurance agent had to see the car in person, and I wouldn't arrive for at least sixty days. My options

were to drive an unregistered car for a month and hope no one noticed or have a police officer come to my house and look at my car and sign some kind of inter-state vehicle registration trauma waiver. The lady who answered the phone at the police station was sympathetic, but when the police officer arrived he was perplexed. He gave me the same look as the Canadian border agent when I tried to drive my North Carolina car across the Washington border to British Columbia after telling her I lived in Oregon.

“Why didn’t you register the car in Pennsylvania?” the officer wanted to know, opening the possibility that my driving habits might be illegal in more than one state concurrently.

“Because it’s not my car. I mean, it is my car, but it’s registered to my parents, and they lived in North Carolina. I can’t change the title without being in North Carolina, and my parents are in Florida, and I live here, but only for six months, and I read on the Internet that I don’t have to change my registration unless I’m here longer than that. I promise that I try to be legal most of the time.”

The officer still looked confused. “Are you going to live in Florida now?”

“Not exactly. I’m taking my stuff to my parents’ house and then I’m moving to a ship.” Now he gave me the same look as the lady at the travel clinic when I tried to get my pre-ship immunizations.

“Where are you traveling to?” the lady asked, trying to reconcile my list of requirements with her chart of international diseases.

“I’ll be on a ship,” I explained.

“Travelling to which countries?”

“I don’t know. Probably mostly Asia.”

“So, you want vaccines for every disease in Asia?”

“No, just these diseases on my paper. I’ll take my chances with the rest.” She looked vaguely concerned but gave me the shots and signed my yellow immunization booklet. The police officer signed my car paper too, and I mailed it to my parents and none of us got arrested. Two weeks later, I gave notice at Red Robin, and, the week after that, I received an email that the ship I was about to join was being decommissioned. Something about changes in maritime safety laws. It was an old ship.

I refused to beg for my job back at Red Robin and couldn’t keep driving my car in Pennsylvania and didn’t want to live in Florida, so I made the logical choice and exchanged my maritime plans for a writing assignment with the same organization in landlocked Nepal. First, I looked it up on a map. Next, I told my parents, who had no better ideas. Then I told my grandparents, who were thrilled. The cloistered Christian ship always sounded like a terribly dangerous proposition. They were relieved I was going somewhere safer. Like Nepal, home to a simmering Maoist insurrection, an expiring constitution, and the most extreme mountain terrain in the world.

The only way I knew to prepare for such a transition was to buy the most expensive hiking boots and winter jacket I could find, and I was more likely to find them in Pennsylvania than Florida. I left Red Robin on a break between shifts and drove to the high-class outlets on the outskirts of Philly. I found an outdoor outfitters store and told the clerk I needed hiking boots. He looked at me, still dressed in my Red Robin uniform, and suggested hiking shoes.

“They’re lighter. Will you be on pavement or gravel?”

“I’m going trekking in the Himalayas,” I told him.

He stared at me, considering, then pointed toward a wall of intense-looking footwear.

“Whatever,” he said.

§

During my last shift at Red Robin, as I rolled silverware up in paper napkins, another server asked me why I was leaving.

“I’m moving to Nepal,” I told her.

She looked over at me. “Is that near Harrisburg?”

“No. It’s a country between India and China.”

“Oh.” She returned to rolling napkins. “That’s nice. You’ll be back. People always come back.”

“Maybe,” I conceded. “But I doubt it.”

Intersections

The earthquake strikes Port-au-Prince January twelfth, the day I arrive in Germany from the US on my way to Nepal. Six time zones and two decades away, Haiti no longer matters to me. It is just an island—half an island—whose scraggly landscape and political volatility make for interesting family memories. My mom once winched a bridge down, once ran over a pig on her motorcycle. My dad drove a bulldozer and talked down an angry mob intent on killing him.

I barely remember Haiti, the country we evacuated when I was four. I can picture my parents calking the crack under the front door to keep insects out. Everything else I know from photographs and stories. I have lived in a dozen homes since Haiti. I am moving to my fourth continent, my fifth language. I don't have friends in the Caribbean anymore. I don't cry when I read about the earthquake, the death toll, the decimated suburbs, the homeless thousands, the crumbled schools. It's too far from my current world.

§

In October, cholera breaks out in Haiti. Seven thousand people die from two strains of the disease. One of the strains most likely originated in Nepal, brought halfway around the world by UN peacekeeping troops. In November, hurricane Tomas threatens to renew the epidemic and devastate tarp cities housing hundreds of thousands of earthquake survivors. I read about the cholera and the hurricane on the Internet from Kathmandu. I read that a quarter of a million people have died in Haiti in eleven months.

And I sob over it. Because now these two worlds intersect.

ANTIPODES

[an-**tip**-ub-deez] *plural noun*

1. places diametrically opposite each other on the globe.
2. those who dwell there.

I'm worried that I'll end up only knowing the plastic surface of this country, without hearing the heart.

Madeliene

Orientation

The orientation staff say you need to be dis-oriented from your old culture before you enter your new one. There are many others from many countries in this unsettled state at a ten-day conference in a youth hostel in the snowy German countryside. You all volunteered to work cross-culturally in dozens of different countries and you are just now realizing how many cultures you will have to cross. Your breakfast buffet includes granola, meat slices, and chocolate spread. You have a Singaporean cough, Venezuelan sore throat, South African fever, and German medicine. You stand up in public and say that you're moving to Nepal and no one thinks that's odd. You don't live anywhere at the moment and feel ok about it most of the time. You try to explain this to your friends in America.

Your friend Bethany emails you back and says she doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. You don't know either. You do both. Your American roommate has a temperature of thirty-nine degrees Celsius and neither one of you know if that is good or bad.

Another friend, Jewel, writes, *I am very confident you are going to be a blessing to many.* You peel the airline tags off your luggage and use the sticky part to de-fuzz a dirty sweater before giving it to a new friend who lost her luggage in France and was on her way to Montenegro. You wonder why Jewel is so sure.

You fly for thirty hours through a series of countries and are picked up at the Kathmandu airport by strangers in a silver van. The van stops by a potholed alley on the outskirts of the city. The strangers lead you to a three-story brick building and tell you that you are home. They tell you that they are your roommates, and that they will be your friends. You learn that you can take

showers every other day and flush the toilet sometimes. It is too cold to take showers. You heat water on the stove and take bucket baths by candlelight through the cold months.

In the spring your new friends tell you they are taking you trekking in the far west. You will distribute Christian literature on foot in one of the poorest districts in Nepal. You try to explain this to your friends in America. You send them maps of the far west. Amy writes, *aren't all those blue squiggles rivers? Are there really a bloomin' zillion villages amongst all of those REAL mountains? Are the villages really less likely to be by rivers than away from them?* Amy says she will look up the answers at the library. You wish you had a library with answers.

You survive the far west with your trek-mate, Eunmi. The bus takes twenty-four hours to get home and stops once for food. You share the last of your granola bars and brush your teeth with your head out the window of the bus. When you get back to Kathmandu you eat chocolate and soak your clothes in pesticide. You sit by the heater and drink tea with Eunmi and reminisce about the night you met your first Maoist by firelight on the top of an impossibly steep mountain with a water buffalo bathing pool and a bloodstained religious shrine. Eunmi says she was afraid too. You think maybe you can be soulmates. She writes to you in an email, *I am so happy because you are my friend.*

Everyone gets sick after the far west. You have not eaten in six days. You spend all of your pocket money on crackers and chocolate milk and something you think might be cream of wheat. You drink the milk on the street because you don't have the strength to ride your bike home. At home the kitchen is full of dirty dishes. There is no water to wash the dishes. There is no power to pump water. You try to explain this to your friends in America.

Mom writes, *books describe it as a simpler life ... but those books are FICTION!"*

Your friend Fran writes, *seeing the world through your eyes is like being on a grand adventure through life's little irritations. You always brighten my day.*

You are exhausted. You are overwhelmed. You want to go home. Your friends in Nepal tell you that this is home. You don't believe them.

You write to Heidi, *I kind of need a hug in American.* Heidi writes back, *I want to send you a little care package. ... Any special requests?* You ask for Reese's and Pop-Tarts and foot-soaking crystals. Brian sends you Kool-Aid and Ziploc bags. Mom sends you batteries and vitamins.

You write to Mom, *I came home with a very strong desire to crawl into a dark place and cry. I have no idea why. I think Eunmi is making something delicious for dinner.*

You start to eat again. You learn to kill leeches with salt. Monsoon season brings rain and electricity. You wash your hair on the roof during a thunderstorm and realize that you have survived culture shock.

You decide to go trekking in the mid-west. You travel twenty-two hours west by bus and two and a half days north on foot to find people you have never met in a village that is not on your map. A twelve-year-old carries your backpack up a three-thousand-metre-mountain. You show a friend how to kill leeches with salt. You eat nashpattis and corn stalks and skip rocks across a water buffalo pool.

You return to Kathmandu and eat peanut butter and fried chicken. The weather cools. You start buying fresh meat from the butcher instead of frozen packages from the supermarket. You don't look at the chickens in the cages when you place your order. You write to Mom, *I decided last night that every other day is way too often for bucket baths—it's too stinking cold.* You often forget to turn lights on, even when there is power.

You ride on tractors and the roofs of buses in the flatlands of central Nepal with local students. You get lost in the dark together. In the moonlight the packed trails glow white against the rice paddies. You ford shadowed rivers barefoot. Six of you sleep side by side on the mud floor. You realize that you are soulmates with strangers. You watch the sun rise over the Himalayas.

With the students you cook for a hundred and fifty people outside in the dirt. Smoke burns your eyes and chilli peppers burn your fingers. You rub your eyes with your fingers and your face turns red and you start to cry. You don't know the word for *burning* so you say *spicy* over and over until someone makes you eat a spoonful of salt. You try to tell them the pepper juice is in your eyes, not your mouth, but they don't understand.

The time comes to go back to America. You tell your Nepali friends that America looks like a hand turned sideways and Florida is the thumb pointing down. You get off the plane and there are no mountains and no leeches and no water buffalo. Instead there are palm trees and alligators and white people everywhere. There is electricity all the time and you can flush the toilet whenever you want. Everyone speaks English and drives only on one side of the road. You drink water from the faucet, take two showers every day, and sleep for twelve hours every night.

You are glad to be back. You try to explain this to your friends in Nepal. Santosh writes, *really u make more place in our hearts*. Eunmi writes, *I miss you so much. I am really looking forward to that we can meet someday somewhere*.

You are exhausted. You are overwhelmed. You want to go home. Your friends in America tell you that this is home. You don't believe them.

Plausibility

My fascination with Nepal is related to its irreconcilable features. In Nepal, a child in a remote village may poke at your pale skin to determine whether you are ghost while a hunched grandfather speaks to you in perfect English with an Irish lilt. The intellectual dissonance calms my mind like white noise.

The microbus was crowded that evening, as vehicles in Nepal typically are. I sat towards the rear, my shoulders pressed between the flabby arm of the woman beside me and the vehicle's steel frame. I breathed in the smells of heat and exhaustion and sweat. Inside the van, bodies everywhere: mothers clutching infants bound in blankets like tourniquets, toddlers mashed between adult knees, bodies stooped over other bodies, heads pushed against the metal roof, arms braced against dark vinyl, hands gripping steel bars. Outside, just a few kilometres from the capital, sunset in a village composed of bricks and rice paddies and women weaving carpets by hand on wooden looms. Chickens scavenged instant noodle packages in ditches along the side of the road and plywood shops offered warm soda and single-use shampoo packets.

Then I saw, in the foreground of a passing temple, the women in the wrap-around sunglasses. Two old ladies dressed in the red and green fabric of village saris, the loose cloth wound about their wrinkled bellies instead of draped across their shoulders, murky hair worked into woollen braids embellished with plastic beads, silver ornaments, and strands of yellow straw. But most incredible were the grasshopper sunglasses, black plastic frames pushed over half of their worn faces, polished surfaces reflecting a world of extravagant disparity.

Where, I wondered, had these old women found these ridiculous sunglasses? The two sat in perfect serenity, reclining in front of the shrine, watching the sun descend behind the walls of another crumbling structure. Beside them a young woman spun wool into yarn on a spindle braced between her bare toes and goats gnawed at bony shrubs. When the microbus passed on, leaving behind the two village grandmothers and their hip-hop eyewear, it was we who moved beyond the realm of the plausible.

Storytelling

As a writer with less than six months of language school in a foreign land, my story material depended largely on friends whom I persuaded by pity and chocolate and personal charm to translate for me. The first time I attempted to collect stories in Nepali from public reports the task of interpreting for the helpless foreigner fell to Nirmala, a delicately built Nepali woman with shiny black waves cascading down her back. She was beautiful, kind, patient, and would have been more confident translating from English into Nepali than vice versa.

Students cleared seats for us in the back row of white moulded chairs, moving to cushions on the floor and watching me over their shoulders in fascination until the presentations began. Nirmala perched on the edge of her plastic seat, and we leaned towards each other, as if proximity would help with the transmission of knowledge.

“Nirmala, who is presenting first?”

“We will see. Ah. This is Asmitapun.”

“Like this?”

“No. Asmitapun.” She scribbled in the margin of my notebook, “Like this: *Asmita Pun.*”

“She said something about a woman.”

“Yes. Jyoti. She suffers from a ... a ... gust.”

“A gust?”

“Yes. Like this: *ghost*. The team was eating dinner and she was laughing.”

“Why was she laughing?”

“I didn’t hear. Now Asmita is telling she fell down on the ground and she moved like a snake.”

“Why?”

“Ah ... how you say?”

“I don’t know.”

“Now she is telling about the books.”

“Did they give out many books?”

“Yes, but people were telling better to sit beside the road.”

“Did they try that?”

“She didn’t tell.”

The students applauded as Asmitapun sat down. Apparently those were the highlights of her three-week trip. A woman laughed and moved like a snake and someone suggested a roadside bookstand. On to the next student leader, a man this time, which was usually easier for me to understand.

Nirmala leaned closer, “This is Dineshtamang. Dinesh. Tamang. The district is Makwanpur. Mak. Wan. Pur. Yes like this. It was Mahima Church. Pastor’s name is...”

“I don’t need the names. The people I write for don’t recognize the names.”

“Ok. They preached in fifteen villages. Seven people are interested in Jesus. Now he is telling their names. Sanomaya Ta—”

“I don’t need the names.”

“Now he is telling, two brothers from that village hit their sister and threw her from the mountain.”

“Christian brothers, or actual brothers.”

“He didn’t tell.”

“She is suffering pain all over her body. She had fever all the time. The team, they prayed for her much, and next day she came to church and she was totally recovered.”

“Is that the women who was thrown from the mountain?”

“I didn’t hear. Pastor said, ‘Your team is very good and you have taught us many things.’”

“Did he say what things they taught?”

“No. He didn’t tell. That place needs much help.”

The next report was from Deepakgautam, Kailali, Basauti, Syun Church. They stayed twenty-one days. They attended three marriage ceremonies. They taught drama, but “it didn’t work because the youth wouldn’t do it.”

“In this church they didn’t know Nepali.”

“Really? How did the team teach?”

“In that place they speak Chaudhary, so they don’t understand Nepali. But they pray in Nepali.”

“How do they pray in Nepali if they don’t understand it?”

“He didn’t tell.”

A few hours later I sat in my office staring at my laptop screen as if I could generate coherent thoughts by sheer willpower. My boss walked in.

“I heard you were at the centre today.”

“I listened to their reports.”

“What happened on the outreach?”

“They didn’t tell.”

Hype

Waiting for a bus on a wooden bench in eastern Nepal I fingered an earring absentmindedly. The back of the earring slipped loose, the gold stud slid out, and both pieces disappeared into the waves of fallow dust around my feet. I shook out my clothes and told my Nepali travelling companion, Asmita, that I had dropped an earring. She crouched to examine the ground. An old woman noticed our searching and came to help. Asmita told her I had lost a gold earring. A motorcycle sped past. The old lady mumbled that they drove too fast and caused accidents. Other gathering old ladies agreed. Children protruded from behind a police checkpoint. They poked long sticks in the dirt beside the women.

A policeman from the checkpoint joined the swelling crowd. Was everything okay? An old woman told him that I had lost my earring when I got hit by a motorcycle. A gold earring. The policeman said people steal gold all the time.

A shopkeeper came over. The policeman told him I was robbed by a gold thief. The children were still poking in the dirt. Two roosters started to fight in a ditch. The shopkeeper sauntered across the road to watch them. The children followed. The old ladies hobbled away. The policeman flagged down a truck to inspect. Asmita and I boarded the next lumbering bus, simple travellers again, no longer victims of hypothetical crimes.

Once

*pain. ram. chaffing. ropes. cords. restraints. stinging. muscles contorting. throbbing. defeated. can't move. can't turn.
can't. won't. never. again*

The old woman rocks slowly on her heels as she considers her guests. They are young, charming, beautiful Nepali girls dressed conservatively in brightly colored khurta-surwals and shawls. Long black hair swept up into braids, hanging loosely around shoulders, tossed absentmindedly away from faces. These are good girls, even though they are not Brahmin. Are not high-caste. Are not even Hindu. She shouldn't have let them into her home. It will bring only bad karma. More pain. More shame. Except

*pain. burning. twisting. exhausted. cracked lips. dry throat. voiceless. empty. never heard. never understood. no words.
no voice. nothing. ever. again*

the girls may be strangers, but already they know. Everyone knows. A grandmother's greatest burden. A boy who cannot speak, who must remain tied or he becomes violent. Throwing dishes, throwing water. Precious water. Attacking his grandmother, anyone within reach. So he remains inside, tied, where he cannot hurt anyone, but where he hurts, and where his grandmother hurts for him. He is only twelve and already everyone knows. Everyone says he will always be this way, like he is now, like his father was. Unless

*footsteps. voices. strangers. gasping. straining. pain. ropes. cords. knots. restrained. weak. imprisoned. again. always.
again*

these girls are Christians too. If they carry with them a power greater than the idols in the grandmother's shrine. If it is like when they bring the boy to church. Like when his father went. Then he could speak. Only for a time. Only at church. Never at home. Never before those idols. If these girls have this same power, if they brought it with them. If their god is stronger. If he is willing. If he is good. Maybe

footsteps. closer. louder. stronger. voices. words. closer. stronger. louder. cracked lips. dry throat. empty voice. silent. again. always. until

it will be enough. They want to untie him. But they don't know how it is. How it always is. He will fight, rage, attack. The girls don't know that he is so strong. The grandmother refuses to untie her grandson. The girls can pray while he is tied. It doesn't matter whether he is tied if it is really true that the strength of their god comes with them. If he can do what he does at their church. They stand around her grandson. They begin to pray, all together, all at the same time, all aloud. They use a name again and again and again. Jesus. The same name she has heard at church. The name Christians always say. Again and again and again. Jesus. They are near the boy, and they aren't afraid. If he attacks he will be too strong for them. If

"Jesus' prayer."

the grandmother closes her eyes, she hears another voice with the girls' praying. A voice she knows, but has heard only a few times. Only

"Jesus' prayer."

a few times in church, her grandson spoke. When people talked about Jesus. When

“Jesus’ prayer.”

Christians prayed. It never lasted. When they came home, when they passed the shrine in the yard, he didn’t speak anymore. The Christian god lived at the church. He was strong there. Her idols were stronger here. Once

Want

No one loves me, not even my husband.

You want to disagree with her, to wrap her in your arms, see her face brighten with a smile. You want a moment of embrace to carry her through long days of pain. You want to tell her that her husband will grow to love her, that her marriage will be restored, that someday she won't have to pour out her heart to strangers like you. But you don't.

I even gave him a son, and still he doesn't love me. He is in the army stationed in Butwol. I know he doesn't love me because he left me with his parents, and they beat me and make me cook when my leg hurts so much. They want to separate us. Maybe he wants that too.

You want her to be wrong. You want her emotions to be distorted, twisted out of perspective by the pain of her injured leg. You want her mother-in-law to sweep in the door and urge her to lie down, fix her a meal, tell her what a wonderful son she is raising, and how he is proud of his father being a soldier, and how someday they will all be together again. But she doesn't.

You have to go soon. If my mother-in-law comes home she will be angry. She will beat me and chase you away.

You want to stay, to face the mother-in-law, to argue with her until she sees this beautiful, fragile woman, longing to be loved. You want to make her promise that her grandson will never become like his father. You want to leave them weeping in each other's arms, tears of remorse, and forgiveness, and joy. But instead you say goodbye. Walk away. Eyes down. Don't look back. Because there are so many of her, and you can't hurt for them all. Just this one.

Inevitability

The sides of the bus were already smeared with vomit as we watched our backpacks being lifted to the roof. I gazed out the window from my seat by the door, trying not to think about the last person who had sat in this same seat and left the sticky evidence of their suffering dripping down the side of the rumbling steel beast that would take me home. Twenty-four hours of misery and then a shower, a pillow, and familiar, nourishing food, like peanut butter and fried chicken.

I wasn't afraid of throwing up because I hadn't eaten anything except a granola bar in three days, ever since that roadside plate of rice with rocks and lentil sauce that I failed to convince myself was supposed to be green. As the bus rocked over the rutted road I closed my eyes to block out the swaying and the reek, hoping for sleep instead of nausea. The descent out of the mountains began and the bus lurched around hairpin turns with increasing speed, swaying between lanes and around vehicles with less brazen drivers. Our driver tried to slow the bus's descent and I felt him riding the breaks kilometre after twisting kilometre as my father's warnings about mountain driving and boiled brake fluid flashed through my mind and a decidedly mechanical stench wafted back from the snarling engine.

The smells and rocking became hypnotic and I was drifting towards the relief of sleep when the bus jolted violently to the left, towards the drop-off, with the vicious grind of steel on steel. The narrow shoulder of the road disappeared from view and out my window I saw only air and trees and a river hundreds of metres below me. My heart ached with its own pounding and the muscles in my hands and arms spasmed, but the bus was still.

Someone, maybe me, asked if everyone on my team was ok, but none of us moved until we saw other passengers step off the bus and not plummet to their deaths. Then suddenly we all had to

get out, had to stand on solid ground, had to stare at the bus with vomit-smearred sides and all four tires amazingly still on horizontal road. I sat for a moment on a rock until the nausea and burning in my chest eased. Eventually we all walked around the bus to see the truck with its left front tire knocked into a ditch. The two steel beasts had collided on an angle; the bus must have been heavier, holding its ground and forcing the truck off the road on the uphill side. No one was injured. Someone in my group had hard candy—lemon flavouring solidified with vitamin C—and our bodies flooded with relief as we collapsed back on our reassuring rock, the fear forgotten in our gratefulness to be alive and stationary.

The attack started on the other side of the bus. A crowd massed around a man, probably the driver of the truck, and surged toward us with him in its midst. He struggled against a dozen clutching hands, braced his feet, slid down to the ground, but was lifted by the mob and dragged to the door of the bus where he made a final effort to free himself, clinging to the doorway with his hands and feet, his body forced into the bus, his limbs pried loose one by one.

I never saw if they beat him. I never saw blood. A few months later I read in the news that a bus hit and killed a three-year-old girl who had been playing near the tires. A mob formed, dragged the driver from the bus, beat him senseless, and threw him into the river, where he drowned. His body eventually washed up on shore and the bus drivers' union protested with a strike that shut down transportation in the entire region, stranding thousands of travellers in the inhospitable mountains.

Watching the mob surge against the terrified truck driver I didn't know yet that mobs ruled the roads, that police weren't necessarily trustworthy, that gentle, hospitable people could turn murderous in a single instant. I had never before seen the face of a man who thought he was about to die. Never thought about what I would do, what would happen if I—a foreign woman—stepped

between the rage of the mob and the terror of a single man. If my intervention would have changed anything for the man who may or may not have caused an accident in which no one was injured, who could have sent an entire bus full of men and women and children to our deaths on the rocky banks of the river far below, or who may have saved us from that fate by halting our hurtling descent, cooling our break fluid and diverting our driver's frenzy.

A Nepali man who hadn't joined the crowd urged my friends and me toward the door of the bus. The fury subsided; the mob became an orderly line and we returned to our seats. The driver of the truck sat hunched on a low stool in the aisle beside my seat. His hand gripping my armrest was ice cold when my elbow bumped against it. His knuckles were white, and the veins in his arms prominent and pale blue. He trembled with the fear of men who don't know if they have escaped imminent death for a deferred, more horrible fate.

In a few hours we reached the flatlands. During a brief stop in a village men stacked the aisle with strands of rebar stretching all the way to the back row and looping again toward the front. No one tied the rebar into bundles and the jumbled mass of steel clashed in metallic thunder against the floorboards every time the bus shuddered. The passengers handed the truck driver over to the police at a checkpoint, barely pausing long enough to explain what had happened and that the truck was still blocking most of the narrow road. In the next sixteen hours we stopped once for food that few of us dared to eat and once for gas on a desolate stretch of road in the darkest part of the night. A friend and I stepped down onto solid ground, turning away from the blinding headlights of traffic, turning away from the vileness coating the sides of the bus, turning in miserable circles until the engine roared to life again and the journey continued. My body trembled with exhaustion and the fear of what hadn't happened, but could have happened, did happen, would happen again.

PROJECTIONS

[pruh-jek-shuhn] *noun*

1. a representation of one thing onto another, such as a curved 3-dimensional surface (like the Earth) onto a flat 2-dimensional map

We shared the same bedbugs: which, I admit, is possibly the grossest of all our collective experiences, or was it the “den of a thousand flies?”

Madeliene

Faith

1.

Monsoon season shrouds the world in a mantle of shifting vapour, water in all its yielding forms. Monsoon is damp, lathered, liquid air. I am travelling north out of Kathmandu with Becca, a Swiss teammate who speaks little Nepali but can generate friendships out of thin air. Our boss sent us to meet and interview Deepak, a Nepali man leading a Christian outreach team in a district with such a high rate of human trafficking that entire villages have been emptied of young girls.

An hour outside Kathmandu we pass the carcass of a passenger bus on the wrong side of the road, perched on the rim of a fog-filled abyss, long since abandoned by its terrified passengers. I see the bus from the opposite rim of the canyon and its glazed eyes follow me along the ribbon of road trailing the edge of the precipice. Sunlight escapes the sodden earth through chasms in the fog.

Becca and I share a torn vinyl seat near the door of a mostly-empty bus and Namrata sits behind us, leaning against the window. Namrata has been married for two weeks to the head of the programme Deepak works with. He assigns the teams to partner with village churches all around the country, and he encouraged Namrata to come with Becca and me to help with translation and see the programme first-hand.

Monsoon falls on us as we turn onto a mud track leading to the untamed hills, strafing the bus with surges of rain. The roadbed turns to open, bleeding clay and the jungle to our right plummets hundreds of metres to a distended river. The bus slithers in a way steel shouldn't, sliding towards and away from the drop-off, rocking in and out of ditches, pitching Becca and me against each other.

I pull my raincoat from my backpack and we huddle beneath it, shielding from the rain that penetrates the bus window, unable to talk over the roar of water on glass. I clutch Becca's arm, and beneath our plastic protection we begin to giggle because we believe we will die in the horrible, roiling, slithering bus, and statistically we may very well die, and no one will ever find our bodies, and so we laugh, because what difference does it make, and isn't it better to die laughing?

Becca and Namrata and I finally step off the bus at a village and begin to untangle our shawls and backpacks and to smooth out our tunics. Deepak is there to meet us in a white T-shirt and Hawaiian-print shorts. He is tall for a Nepali, with thick spikey hair, intense eyes, and the stance of a fighter. He asks us about the trip, and Namrata says we were afraid, but we arrived safely. She doesn't tell him that Becca and I giggled hysterically under a red and white rain jacket. Namrata is too graceful to say things like that. Namrata wears sparkles on trek.

Deepak takes her backpack and leads us to the church to meet the rest of the team. They all call Namrata *Miss* because she is married to a *Sir*. Becca and I become *Missharu*, the English title combined with a Nepali plural ending. The team sleeps on the bottom level of the pastor's home, formerly used as a goat pen. The pastor and his wife live in a small room on the upper floor and they build a mosquito net tent for Becca and Namrata and me in the centre of the church sanctuary, stringing corner points of the net to nails and rafters all around the room.

We wake early because the floor is uncomfortable and because Deepak is singing and calling instructions to his team. We hear, "Bring this tea to the Missharu. Hallelujah! Careful, don't spill. Amen," and then a young man pops his head up through the opening in the floor to the lower levels of the house. He slides a tray of hot tea and sugar cookies across the rug toward us and then disappears. We disentangle ourselves from the mosquito net and sleeping bags, drink our tea, adjust the draping of our shawls, and meet the team downstairs for the first day of ministry.

For the rest of the morning we walk from house to house, shadowing team members as they meet villagers on their front steps and ask if they have heard of Jesus. Most have not, and so the young men tell the story, a story of hope and redemption, about how sin can be washed away and replaced with holiness. Monsoon menaces the hills as we listen, cringing against the red earth, wringing mist from the branches of looming pines.

On our way back from the second morning of outreach Deepak and Becca and I walk ahead of the others, who are veiled from our sight by the clotted rain and heavy air. The road contorts beneath our feet, red clay deeply scarred and oozing thickly from beneath the forest floor. Mud clutches our sandals and slashes red on our exposed feet.

“Deepak,” I turn to him, forming my words carefully in an unfamiliar language, “tell me your story. How did you become a Christian?”

“My story?” he hesitates, responding with careful English words. “Until two years ago I was bad boy. I ate everything,” he watches my face to see if I understand, lifts two fingers to his lips, “drugs.”

I glance toward Becca. Her face tenses. We understand.

“I was killer.”

The air thickens, congeals where my feet press into the clay.

Becca speaks, “You mean you killed people?”

“Yes.”

We pause in the road, enclosed in water and ether.

“And now?” I ask.

“Now,” he hesitates, turns away from my gaze, “I don’t know.”

His silence is cold against my skin. I have spent two days listening to explanations of redemption and the power of the blood of Jesus to wash away sin and satisfy the justice of God and transform a believer into a new creation. Watching Deepak's dark eyes in monsoon season on a deserted road on the side of a mountain in a strangely hostile country, it feels like a new theology, one that I've spoken a thousand times but am not sure I ever really understood.

"Now," I begin in Nepali, wrestling with both the language and the idea, "you are holy," because I think I believe that, and because I don't know the word for *righteous*, and because I have to say something to break the tension. Deepak shrugs a little and smiles a little and starts walking again, either confused or uncomfortable or touched, I have no idea which, and Becca and I follow, because we have made so many leaps of faith in the past three days that this one suddenly doesn't feel so dramatic anymore.

2.

In the cold season I travel to visit Deepak a second time in a different district with the following directions: *take a bus from Sindhuli along the river. When the bus stops, get off. Walk until you see a bridge. Cross the river and look for a tree. One of us will meet you at the tree.* Becca has returned to Switzerland and Namrata is not available, so I travel with Asmita, a young Nepali woman who has led outreaches like Deepak's for two years and has agreed to travel with me from team to team across the eastern part of the country in near silence because she doesn't speak any English and I have to rest the Nepali-language part of my brain after each round of interviews.

Sindhuli is a barren stretch of ground in the floodplain between two cerulean rivers. Three-sided plank shelters line the road in a tentative stance, as if anticipating summer flash floods. The

whole landscape shimmers noncommittally—somewhere between grey and brown, between dreary and bland.

A bus rumbles into view and Asmita and I press halfway down the aisle, through a mass of clutching hands and jostling elbows and silken shawls, over sacks of rice and tangled feet and awkward luggage. I grip the ice-cold bar above my head, bracing as we lurch over riverbed rocks and through gullies torn by last year's rains.

The bus stops. A woman jostles in the aisle behind me and squirms towards the front with a child in her arms. After a minute she gives up and hands him through the back window to a man outside. The kid squats in the dust and is handed back. The bus reels forward to a steeper section of the road, a series of one-lane switchbacks still being carved out of the mountainside. I have travelled enough roads like this to know to keep my eyes on the rocks and shrubs on the uphill side of the bus instead of the raging Sunkosi River hundreds of metres below on the left. We lurch past construction vehicles, workmen, and three hundred-metre drop-offs with no guardrails, traffic cones, or orange barrels. The road peaks at a skyline village and then sways back down the mountain to the river. Asmita and I get off and follow the crowd.

Our path skirts the river and here the embankments are covered in smooth stones. Sunlight plays against their rounded surfaces and we step carefully, trailing behind women wrapped in bright saris. Beyond the river, hills rise against the horizon, stippled with thatched roofs and vegetable gardens. Beyond a curve in the trail we see a bridge, and beyond the bridge, a tree, and beneath the tree, members of Deepak's outreach team.

Deepak does not come outside to greet us because he is in bed with typhoid. The village has no church and the house where the team stays is still being built. I want to stay in a hotel, but Asmita insists this village is too dangerous for us to stay alone. I don't know if she's right, but her

worry tinges the stares of the men in the street with malice, and I agree to stay with Deepak, who has strangely become the safer of my options. While Asmita and I wash our faces and hair at a spring, Deepak directs his team to build us a tiny room on the upper floor out of loose boards and chicken wire and they carry our backpacks up the narrow stairs to our new accommodations. Our beds are two straw mats spread across a clean sheet of plywood.

The team cooks us a hot, delicious dinner of rice and vegetables and fried potatoes. After we eat we gather downstairs with the men for evening devotions. They sit on plywood, wrapped in blankets and sleeping bags against the cold, and they sing and pray in a chaotic, passionate, out-of-tune way that makes the whole world insignificant except this little half-built house in a village I can't find on my map.

By now Asmita and I have slept on wood and mud and concrete for so many nights that the straw mats feel luxurious as we settle in our little guestroom at the top of the stairs. We wrap our shawls around our bodies as blankets and we are ready for bed. In the morning we wrap them carefully around our necks and then we are dressed.

On this second visit I insist to Deepak that I am not a Miss because I am not married to a Sir. Asmita and I become *Didiharu*, older sisters, even though I am not convinced that either of us is older than him. I interview team members as they cook us a breakfast of rice and lentils and leftover fried potatoes. Pratik is from India, and his face has the same hardness as Deepak's. He tells me his family is Christian, but he was a troublemaker in his village. One of the Sirs pursued him and convinced him to come to this outreach programme. The Sir tells me later that Pratik is a deserter from the Gurkha army who can't go home because there is a price on his head.

“What is the most important thing you have learned here?” I ask Pratik.

“Love,” he answers immediately, “I used to have a terrible temper. My teammates taught me what love is.”

“That’s right,” Umesh adds, “he used to be mean and always angry, and now he is such a gentle friend.”

“What about you?” I ask Umesh, who can’t be more than fifteen and has a perpetual goofy, sideways grin, “Are you from a Christian family?”

“Oh no,” he answers, “I am the only Christian in my village. When I converted my neighbours wouldn’t let me get water from the pump, and my parents threatened to cut off my hands and feet. He makes slicing motions to ensure that I understand. I ran away to a city with a church and the pastor sent me here.”

“What are you going to do when you finish the programme?”

“I’m going back to my village,” he says without losing the grin.

“Why?”

“Because they don’t know about Jesus and I’m going to tell them.”

Asmita and I go on outreach with the team after breakfast, and Deepak feels well enough to come with us. Standing on the riverbank he begins to point to villages I can barely make out on the peaks of distant hills. “We preached at that village. And that one higher up. And I sent the team there when I was too sick to walk, and we heard that there is a Christian just over that ridge and we will try to find her next week.”

We stay with the team another night and then make the precarious journey back to Kathmandu. When the programme ends I ask the training staff for months for news of Umesh but no one has heard where, or how, he is.

The next cold season, forty-one people die in Sindhuli district when a bus skids off the edge of a narrow road in a construction zone and plunges four hundred metres into the Sunkosi River less than a kilometre from where an earlier accident killed fifteen. The cumulative death toll is so high, and the carnage so concentrated, that the government shuts down that stretch of road until the construction is complete. One thousand seven hundred and thirty-four people die in bus accidents the year I am in Nepal.

3.

In dry season, the chill has left the air and millions of subsistence farmers wait for the life-giving monsoon rains. Dust, rather than mist, swirls in eddies around the irresolute structures of village life. Jenny, an American new to the team, peers around the legs of a drunk man sitting on the roof of the Jeep, dangling his feet in front of the windshield. Jenny and I make five adults in the front seat, our bodies so compressed I doubt we would be injured in an accident. This is Jenny's first trek, but we're on our way to our fifth team and much of the shock has worn off. Namrata is with us, crushed somewhere in the back of the Jeep with a dozen other travellers.

Deepak waits for us at the next village under the branches of a spreading tree, only his eyes visible above a striped scarf wrapped around his mouth and nose. He looks as intimidating as ever. Once Jenny and Namrata and I have disentangled ourselves from the other Jeep passengers we begin an hour-long walk to the village where his team is staying. The Jeep was delayed, and dark is falling, so Deepak hurries us along the trail, insisting that this area is not safe at night. A private SUV roars behind us and Deepak flags it down for a ride. We climb into the back storage space and the vehicle races on, weaving erratically around corners and slamming over the potholed road.

Jenny leans against me to whisper, "Are they drinking?"

Three high school or college-age boys in the back seat pass a glass bottle between them. I search Deepak's face in the dark, but I have never been able to read his emotions, even without the scarf. I decide that if I see the driver drink I will demand that he stop and let us out. Then I realize I have no way to make him stop and no idea where he might be taking us.

The SUV brakes suddenly, and Jenny's weight crushes me into the back window. Namrata and Deepak sit facing us. Out of propriety, I do my best not to let my knees touch Deepak's, but everything in me wants to cling to his hand and make him promise that he remembers how to fight, and that his reputation as a killer remains intact in this district, and that he will make the driver stop at the church so we can tell people that Jesus loves them and has a wonderful plan for their lives.

The ridiculousness of my own thoughts distracts me from the immediate danger. Dark settles heavily across the horizon and the interior of the vehicle. Deepak calls to the front and the car stops on a curve of road between darkened rice fields. The three of us pile out of the back and Deepak thanks the driver while Jenny and Namrata and I stand behind him in the swirling dust.

"Were they drinking?" Jenny whispers again.

"Yes," I tell her, "Don't ever get in a private car like that again unless you're with Deepak."

"If you hadn't told me he was nice I'd be terrified of him," she says.

"Fortunately for us, he wasn't always so nice," I say, but I don't mean it. I trust Deepak so completely now that I am suddenly unsure of my initial fear.

Did he really say he killed people? Were we actually alone? Did the mist swirl through the hills like a creature possessed? I ask Becca these questions more than a year later, in a calmer, safer setting.

"What did you think of Deepak the first time we met him in Nuwakot?"

“I was so scared,” she answers, “especially when he said he killed people, and the fog was so heavy. I didn’t imagine he could be so nice.”

On my third visit to Deepak’s team, he begins to slip, calling me *Babini*, little sister. I never did hug him, and, when I said goodbye for the last time, his eyes were still dark, his face was still intense, and I would still trust him with my life.

Devotion

In an ancient city near Kathmandu, men worship stones, proffering incense to stolid gods draped in bright fabrics. By the river they burn bodies, washed clean, fallow skin draped in white. Just outside the tourist district I saw them lay out the form of a man in the sunlight on the stone steps. I didn't stay long enough for the flames, the wailing, the scattered ashes. I passed on to a temple beyond the river.

A man waited for me in a room devoted to the memory of instruments with no English names. Glass cases displayed *bansuri*, *jhyali*, *tungana*, *kin*. *Damaha*, *madal*, and *tabla* drums hung from leather straps on wooden pegs. "Kedar Nepali," his card read, "Sarangi Teacher, Music Dept. of Kathmandu University." He spoke English well, but with discomfort. His preferred language was music, pressing thought from the strings of an instrument I had seen only once before, in the hands of a travelling minstrel on a long-distance bus.

The *sarangi* is different from a violin as the temple was from a cathedral: rough-hewn, ancient, transcendently sad. Its music is carved by hand from a single piece of wood and covered with dried sheepskin. No frets, no metal parts. Wooden tuning pegs tunnel deep within its body. Fingers press against the neck at unmarked intervals. Four strings tuned by ear a fifth apart. Three positions each for index, middle, and ring fingers. Strings gasping at the touch of a horsehair bow. The *sarangi* is said to closely resemble the inflection and resonance of the human voice.

For my first lesson we sat on the floor of an attic room, a blue cushion for each of us on twisted straw mats beneath stooped rafters. He sat cross-legged, his right foot inverted in the crook of his left knee. "This is a yoga position," he explained, "but also so the *sarangi* does not slip." He held an instrument carved from deep black wood, braced its base with his bare toes, and leaned its

body back against his chest, wrist flexed, fingers poised. “*Do re mi fa so la si do*,” he sang in English. “*Sa re ga ma pa dha ni sa*,” the sarangi sang back in Nepali as the bow shifted across the strings.

He handed the instrument to me and positioned my fingers around the bow and along the strings. “Very smooth,” he explained, “don’t let the bow slide up and down.” When I drew the bow across the strings the sarangi emitted an agonizing death rattle. He grimaced and repositioned my fingers. “*Do re mi fa*,” he coaxed, and the sound softened to a vaguely musical pitch. He endured my scratchings for ninety minutes, struggling to draw notes, and then scales, and then simple melodies from my inexperienced fingers.

The following week I found him in the same pose on the blue cushion on the straw mat. He held a different sarangi, the wood red-toned, the neck laced with patterned impressions, the hollow of the body scaled with chisel strokes. “All from one piece of wood,” he said, holding it out to me. “*Do re mi fa so*,” he instructed, and the sarangi scratched out a hoarse “*Sa re ga*” before the sound warped into a squeal. After class I paid him five thousand rupees, laid my sarangi in a zippered case and carried it against me back down the path where the shrines watched the river.

For seven months, he taught me to play the sounds he wrote from memory on the pale lines of my notebook, each note doubled in English and Nepali, dashes marking rhythms, hasty lines separating measures. He beat out the cadences of folk songs, hymns, and lullabies on the tabla, aligned my fingers on the sarangi’s strings and bow, and called out instructions first in Nepali, then in English.

After seven months, I could play a single string or drone a harmony, pluck a crisp note or massage a tone from the vibrating strings. My fingers memorized their unmarked positions, slipping less often into dissonant tones. I learned to wear *surwal* pants, loose fitting from hip to ankle and

more comfortable than jeans for sitting cross-legged on the floor. I began to hum folk tunes as I walked each week along the river between the temple and the bus.

Kedar Nepali still holds classes among the temples of Bhaktapur and carves instruments in a muted little shop beside the Swayambu shrines. He plays the music of wood and leather, the songs of straw mats in dusty ruins, the lyric of men who burn bodies and worship stones.

The Simple Life

If life is simpler without technology, it should be simpler still without electricity. Or plumbing. Or motorized transport. At least, that's what you might tell yourself if you take on a volunteer role with a religious organization in a third world country. Feeling the contours of the earth's surface as you fall asleep in the raw darkness of pre-industrial life, waking to primitive sunlight streaming across the wilderness, these are moments of connection with natural splendour, unhindered by the developments and complications of mankind.

Of course, if you decide to heed the call of natural splendour during your night of raw darkness, you will need a battery-powered headlamp to avoid walking off the edge of an uncultivated landslide. And two Alevs in the morning, as the earth's contours are seldom kind to the sleeper. If you attempt to read your Bible while enjoying the majesty of a clear night's sky, you'll want to use a red light to protect your night vision, but the words of Jesus will vanish from the page, so better stick to the Old Testament. When the primitive light of early morning becomes the violent emissions of a raging sun through a thinning atmosphere, you'll want something chemical to protect against it, or to at least soothe your skin's suffering. If you decide to quench your thirst in a pristine mountain stream you'll need a polyethylene water bottle and a vial of iodine, a chemical that would naturally kill you in large doses. Used in moderation, iodine defends against giardia, typhoid, and a host of other nasty diseases that live out a feral existence in all the undomesticated parts of the globe, making life miserable, and often short, for millions of people with limited medical resources.

But let's say that you attempt something less extreme, like washing dishes in your home in a city of almost two million people with electricity about half the time. It's dark, most likely, because

daylight is precious so you work late and eat by candlelight. Washing dishes in yellow, flickering light is a hygienic liability, but those headlamp batteries are fading, so what choice do you have?

Unfortunately, you have probably run out of water in the kitchen and must have electricity to pump from your underground cistern to the tanks on the roof, and the electricity won't come on again until tomorrow. You will need any water remaining in the bathroom pipes to wash the organic grime off your face before bed, so you go outside and open the cistern cover and lower a plastic bucket on a rope into the depths, but not too far or you won't be able to lift it out again and haul it up the stairs and down the hall to the kitchen sink. Now you have water.

If you've mastered dishwashing and venture off into the true wilderness, you should know that packing a thirty-litre backpack for a trek in the Himalayas requires approximately eight times the mental acuity of throwing together an overnight bag in a more developed setting. There's the weather to consider, which you can't predict without satellites and radar and other complex gadgetry, which you don't have. Better take the raincoat just in case and the heavier sleeping bag and the sunscreen—and your backpack is already half-full.

Then there is the very real possibility of injury and disease with medical care a day's walk away or more. Enter a standard first-aid kit bolstered with extra Imodium, salt for leech removal, and an ace bandage for all other injuries. And vitamin supplements and protein bars, necessary supplements when you expect to eat nothing but rice and lentils and potatoes grown on mountain slopes too steep to retain the nutrients your body is accustomed to. By the end of the first week your immune system will lose its ability to heal cuts and bruises. And because you will be at least a day's walk from a store and a significant bus ride from any sort of comfort, you will probably throw in a little chocolate, and an extra T-shirt, and then you will spend an hour and a half trying to decide if the remaining twelve cubic centimetres of space would be better filled with an extra pair of socks or

one more set of headlamp batteries, or could you squeeze them both in if you took out the salt and pulled the leeches off by hand.

If you take a guided tour through a national park, the rest of your journey will consist of a relatively straightforward cycle of walking and eating in teashops and sleeping in small hotels placed intermittently along the designated tourist trail. At least, this is what the brochures advertise. If you want to trek the natural, spiritual, spontaneous way without the guide and park passes and trekking fees and reservations, you simply pack up and go, from church to church, home to home, without a schedule, directions, or accurate map.

After a bus ride of between four and twenty-seven hours from urban Kathmandu into the lower Himalayan mountains, and once you've identified the particular mud-thatched village from which you intend to begin your journey into the wild in earnest, things become more complicated.

You may intend to wander wherever curiosity and nature's splendour inspire you to go, but you will soon learn that the trails go only in certain, and often the less attractive, directions. And that villages with food and drinking water are located only near the trails. And that off the trails you are likely to encounter landslides and water buffalo and stinging nettles and poisonous snakes. You must factor all of these things into your journey calculations, especially the drinking water, which is far from a simple task. For example, if you wish to reach a particular mountain pass with, say, a panoramic view of snow-capped Himalayan majesty, or, perhaps, an illiterate pastor who needs an audio Bible player, you should work out your travel itinerary according to this equation:

travel speed (in kms per liter of H₂O)

$$\approx \frac{\text{distance (in km)}}{\text{backpack weight (in kg)}} - [\text{fitness level} \div \sqrt{\text{elevation change}}]$$

As you travel by the most primitive means of transportation, by foot, you will also find the laws of nature to be slightly more complex than you remember. While you know from grade school that *for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction* and that $E=mc^2$ you may not be aware of a lesser-known corollary:

$$\lim_{\text{time to destination} \rightarrow \infty} \left(\frac{\text{sanctification}}{\text{blood sugar level}} \right)^1 = 0$$

In simpler terms, the limit of $\frac{\text{sanctification}}{\text{blood sugar level}}$ as *time to destination* approaches *infinity* is *zero*. In still simpler terms, you are no longer as nice of a person as you were when you started this journey, and it's only going to get worse. Snow-capped skylines elicit awe on day one and meanness every day thereafter. Inconveniences you can at first overlook compound until they corrode your soul. Your teammate's quirks that used to be endearing will soon be aggravating. The adorable local children who charmed you with their smiles will eventually harass you with their stares. Plan accordingly.

While your saintly qualities may be in jeopardy, your Bible exposition skills will likely increase dramatically in a simpler environment. For example, a small group study of first Corinthians ten's instructions, "But if anyone says to you, 'This is meat sacrificed to idols,' do not eat it," will be much less theologically complex if you all expect to be literally offered meat that has been sacrificed to actual idols in the very near future. It takes all of the interpretation and contextualization right out of the discussion.

The prophet Isaiah's tirade against idolatry will ring clearer, simpler, if you have watched a man bow in worship to his car, witnessed a monk robing a stone statue with bright-colored fabric, and walked past men lashing together the wheeled structure holding the wooden statue of

Machhendranath, the god of rain and plenty. Men who believe that if the tower topples the monsoon rains will be meagre. If you have seen a flat stone on the top of a mountain ringed with prayer flags and stained the deep red of a slaughtered animal's blood, not yet blackened by time, then the Old Testament sacrifices will no longer sound so foreign, so intricate, so far-fetched.

When you have climbed in the sun for eight hours and your water bottles are empty and your body is no longer producing enough sweat to cool your feverish skin, and you reach the home of an impoverished Christian surrounded by hostile neighbours, and you tell her you are a believer, and she brings you a cup of cold water in Jesus' name that she has carried up the mountain from the river, you don't have to think, or calculate, or explain, you just know that she will not lose her reward, and that you will not get giardia even if you skip the iodine and gulp it down immediately.

When you have walked farther, and higher, than your body's ability to endure, and your worries and your fears and your needs and your plans have been simplified to things like water and rice; when you are deprived of the emotional energy required to hide, to pretend, or even to present yourself in the best light; when you have become limited to binary options: cynicism or hope, sulking or discipline, hysteria or poise; then what you believe and how you live become the same. Stripped of the facades you've grown accustomed to hiding behind, you live out whatever authenticity or integrity or selfishness or pride or self-control or moral fibre has always been lurking beneath the surface.

Thousands of kilometres from familiar social constraints, you no longer have the strength to filter your thoughts, emotions, or words, and you might just find that life is not so complicated after all.

Communion

§

...the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me."

I Corinthians 11:23-24 NASB

§

In Nepal, I didn't go to church on Easter Sunday and sing resurrection hymns with an organ. I went to church on Saturday morning, Nepal's national day off, the day that Jesus was still dead. New to Kathmandu, I found a church by riding my bike through my neighbourhood until I heard singing. I followed the sound of what I assumed to be a hymn to the second floor of a concrete building above a donut shop. The smell of deep-fried goodness drifted in through the windows as I removed my shoes in the hall and stepped into an empty space as unobtrusively as is possible for a semi-tall white woman.

Thirty of us sat on rugs on the floor, bunched together shoulder to shoulder, women on the left, men on the right, with an aisle down the middle. We stood to sing more songs, which I supposed were Easter songs, but I hadn't mastered the Nepali script well enough to sound out the words in time to the music, let alone understand what they meant. The experience was less than meaningful even before the pastor began to preach. And preach. And preach. I have no idea about what. My legs went numb from sitting cross-legged. The pastor was still preaching. I shifted to bend one knee up towards my chin. The preaching continued. I started timing my squirming manoeuvres:

five minutes of blood flow to my left leg, then five to my right, then five more cross-legged. He kept preaching, cycle after cycle.

§

Where the traditional elements are unavailable, substitutes that retain the symbolism may be employed.

Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, Second Edition

§

The service ended, eventually, with the taking of communion. Evangelical churches typically take communion on Maundy Thursday to commemorate the Last Supper Jesus shared with His disciples. He passed the bread and the wine as symbols of His body and blood, which He was about to sacrifice for the sins of the world. My church in America passed crackers and grape juice. On Easter Saturday the church in Nepal passed flatbread and orange Fanta.

They served the soda in familiar American clear plastic communion cups. I stared down at this bizarre representation of blood, struggling to find the metaphor of suffering and redemption in a cup of orange fizz.

§

The use of bizarre substitutes simply for variety should be avoided. Potato chips and cola, for example, bear little resemblance to the original.

Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, Second Edition

§

Six months later, when I could read and pray and worship a little in Nepali, I took communion at a training programme for Nepali Christians. A hundred and fifty youth sat cross-legged in neat lines on thick red carpets in a concrete block room. The women's side blazed with colour: pink sequined tunics, vivid green pants, red shawls, stripes, designs, embroidery, beading, glossy black braids, and ponytails. The men's side dulled to greys and blues and browns: khakis, jeans, button-down shirts, and patched jackets. The foreign staff clustered in the back in less precise rows. We represented a dozen countries, and probably as many religious traditions, from staunch Baptists to enthusiastic Pentecostals.

An American and a Nepali led the service and moved smoothly between Nepali songs, multi-lingual prayer, and a translated sermon. Then it was time for communion. One of the leaders unwrapped a loaf of bread from a cloth and laid it on the front table. The other produced a silver pitcher. Just a silver pitcher. No accessories. They bowed their heads together in what could have been prayer, but was actually a discussion over how to serve the wine/juice/soda to almost two hundred people without any cups. I panicked.

In Nepali culture human saliva is considered unclean. No one shares water bottles, cups, or even eats from the same plate except with extremely close friends, and certainly never across genders. Nepali people have a highly developed congenital skill for pouring liquids from containers into their mouths without touching the rim. I do not possess that skill, especially not when I'm nervous. The idea of standing in front of two hundred people and pouring an entire pitcher of unidentified liquid into my mouth, over my face, and down the front of my tunic removed all remnants of spiritual thought from my mind. This was going to be a disaster.

§

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.

I Corinthians 11:27 NASB

§

The leaders continued to confer while I squirmed in my row at the back of the room. One of them vanished into the kitchen and I worried more. There weren't enough cups in the kitchen even for just the uncoordinated foreign staff. The leader returned with a spoon and motioned for the first row of students to stand. They approached the front single file. The Nepali leader tore pieces of bread from the loaf and placed them in the left hand of each worshipper. The American ladled a spoonful of liquid from the pitcher into each person's right palm.

No one dared to walk to their seats with a palm full of metaphorical blood, and you're supposed to eat the bread first, so the line moved slowly, pausing as each student, and then staff, thoughtfully ate their piece of bread and then slurped the divine symbol of Christian unity from the palm of their hand.

I wasn't the only one to find the proceedings amusing. More than a few Nepalis and foreigners cracked smiles, and by the time my turn came, most of the shoulders in the room were trembling with constricted, sanctified laughter.

§

A balance should be sought between, on the one hand, repeating the act with so little variation that we participate routinely without awareness of its meaning, and, on the other, changing the procedures so severely that we focus our attention on the mechanics instead of Christ's atoning work.

Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, Second Edition

§

My last communion in Nepal came during a trek in a politically unstable district in the lower Himalayan ranges. I followed a team of Nepali youth deep into a cool canyon of striated rock carved by an icy stream. We shuffled over the water on worn wooden bridges. They were leading me to a village not on my map for a district-wide gathering of Christian youth. We staggered up a mountain of rice terraces and at least one landslide, touching our hands to the near-vertical trail as we bowed under the weight of backpacks and water bottles and exhaustion. And then we arrived at the very peak of a mountain ridge whose flat top housed a village, school, and church.

Young men and women from the dozen churches within a day's walk crowded into the mud and brick sanctuary, pressed into rows on the floor, shoulder-to-shoulder, knees folded, legs falling asleep before the service even began at 7:00 in the evening. The worship teams of several of the larger churches led the musical portion. Most people present could not read, and hymnbooks were scarce and didn't include notes. No one was sure of either the words or the melodies of the songs, and so our worship rose in a glorious cacophony of dissonant sounds somewhat unified by the clash of tambourines and *tabla* drums and an out-of-tune guitar.

One of the team members preached the sermon. I didn't even attempt to follow along because it was almost 9:00 by then and I don't understand foreign languages after dark. I watched

him pace the stage, nervous and emphatic. The length of his argument undermined the sincerity and urgency of his message. His words droned on, pleading for our full attention, but not really expecting it at this hour of the night. Even the Nepali woman beside me was uncomfortable on the hard dirt floor and struggled to uncurl her legs from under the sleeping baby in her lap without waking him.

§

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”

John 13:34 NASB

§

The woman shifted her weight and extracted a leg, stretching it out into the aisle and covering her foot with her shawl to avoid dishonoring the people around her. The child slept in the crook of her other knee, but he fussed when she tried to shift him to the hard-packed floor. I leaned over and motioned for her to pass me the child. I cradled him in my arms, absorbing the peace and comfort embodied in his fleshy infant cheeks. When he squirmed and opened his eyes I covered his little face with my shawl so as not to terrify him with my whiteness.

The service ended after midnight. We were going to show a movie afterward on the projector I had carried through the mountains, but church members had started falling asleep sitting up in the service, so the team called an end to the gathering and sent everyone off to bed. I don't know where the hundred or so youth slept. Probably on the floor of the church wrapped in shawls

and blankets. I returned the baby to his mother and stumbled outside to the pastor's house, where he had reserved a narrow plywood bed for me.

In the morning we gathered back at the church, beginning the service over again with chaotic singing and mob prayer, everyone crying out to God simultaneously in whatever language or words they deemed appropriate. The local pastor preached forever, and there were no babies nearby to cuddle, so I massaged my blistered feet and twisted the tassels along the edge of my shawl.

Two and a half hours into the service the pastor introduced communion. We would come forward one by one, he said, alternating men and women. The line in the aisle blocked my view of the symbolic elements until it was my turn to stand in front of the pastor and swallow a small piece of flatbread. The wine was a bottle of lemonade, pale and refreshing. The pastor poured a few drops into the bottle cap and I took it gently, tilted my head back, and dripped the liquid into my mouth without touching.

Lemonade. The symbol of our unity in the Body of Christ. I had travelled so far and risked so much to worship with these people only to be disoriented by their lifestyle and endurance and faithfulness. I thought they spoke too fast and preached too long. I missed organs and padded pews and saltine crackers on silver trays. I missed familiarity. I missed comfort. I missed grape juice.

I returned to my seat, filing past the line of worshippers waiting to share in the memory of our common Saviour. Weathered hands cupped in preparation to receive the ordinance. Faces bowed in reverence beneath tasselled shawls. Lips whispering earnest prayers. Women in my row had shifted from sitting cross-legged to kneeling, exposing the soles of their calloused feet.

§

“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

John 13:35 NASB

§

Nothing about Fanta or a bottle cap in an impoverished village on the top of a mountain is any weirder or less comfortable than the very first communion, when God introduced the symbol of His own body and blood, an awkward, tragic, glorious sacrifice that cost, and mattered, a lot more than my aching knees and blistered toes. Communion, for me, will always be best symbolized by watered-down juice and carbonation. A memorial, yes, but a commitment too. So I sat through another hour and a half of church service cross-legged on a mud floor. And I sang, although I didn't know the words or the tunes, either. I didn't do it for tradition. I did it in remembrance of Him.

Polite Conversation

Me: Hi.

Other: Hello.

Me: How are you?

Other: I'm fine. How are you?

Me: I'm fine.

Foreign Conversation

¹ It's a five-minute walk. I caught a microbus right away so I have extra time. I'll stretch it to ten. That should be enough time to plan. I'm going to be bold and initiate the conversation, even though भोजⁱ—which I think means *party* (Could his name really be party? Better stick with भाइⁱⁱ because he calls me दिदीⁱⁱⁱ unless he just says that because I'm a foreigner and he thinks I'm important. How am I supposed to know how old he is? What if I offend him? Better say दाइ^{iv} instead just in case.) unless his name is बोज^v which sounds the same and means something else [half-way down the right column of last week's vocab, but I don't remember what it means] unless it's the other way around—is from a small village [has never learned classroom Nepali, which is all I speak] in a hill district [has the same accent as the vegetable seller who screeches outside my window every morning प्याज काउली आलू^{vi}. आलू, I know that word. Potato! All these stupid months I've been racking my brain and he's selling potatoes.]

² Don't mess this up. And don't look in his eyes because he's a guy.

³ Why is he smiling? Did I really just mess up the simplest sentence in the Nepali language? Is he trying to be encouraging because he thinks I'm an idiot? Is he amused because I think he's older? Is he flattered? Does he actually think I'm old? Little punk.

⁴ Oh shoot, I've got to say something else.

¹ Me: नमस्ते दाइ ^{vii} 2	ⁱ Pronounced <i>Bhoj</i>
	ⁱⁱ <i>Younger brother</i>
	ⁱⁱⁱ <i>Older sister</i>
	^{iv} <i>Older brother</i>
	^v Pronounced <i>Bojh</i>
	^{vi} <i>Onion, cauliflower, something else</i>
Other: नमस्ते ^{viii} 3 4	^{vii} <i>Hello, older brother.</i>
	^{viii} <i>Hello.</i>
	^{ix} <i>Are you well?</i>
Me: ⁵ सन्चै छ? ^{ix} 6	^x <i>I'm well. And you?</i>
	^{xi} <i>Yes.</i>
	^{xii} <i>Yes.</i>
Other: सन्चै ⁷ तपाईंलाई ⁸ नि? ^x	^{xiii} <i>I'm fine.</i>
	^{xiv} <i>Fine.</i>
	^{xv} <i>You; pronoun indicating respect</i>
Me: ⁹ हजुर ^{xi} ¹⁰ आ. ^{xii} ¹¹ सन्चै छु ^{xiii} ¹² ¹³	^{xvi} <i>Any kind of candy</i>
	^{xvii} <i>Perhaps</i>

⁵ This is awkward.

⁶ ¿Qué más puedo decir?

⁷ Of course he's सन्चै^{xiv}. He has me to amuse him. Must be a great way to start the day.

⁸ Finally. I get to be तपाईं^{xv} today after all, at least to one person.

⁹ Yes I am fine. I got to sit down on the microbus and didn't get cheated on the fare. Arrived early enough to avoid most of the children screaming for *chocolate*^{xvi} from the foreigner. Greeted भोजⁱ / बोज^v with minimal awkwardness. So far.

¹⁰ Except, I think that was the wrong language.

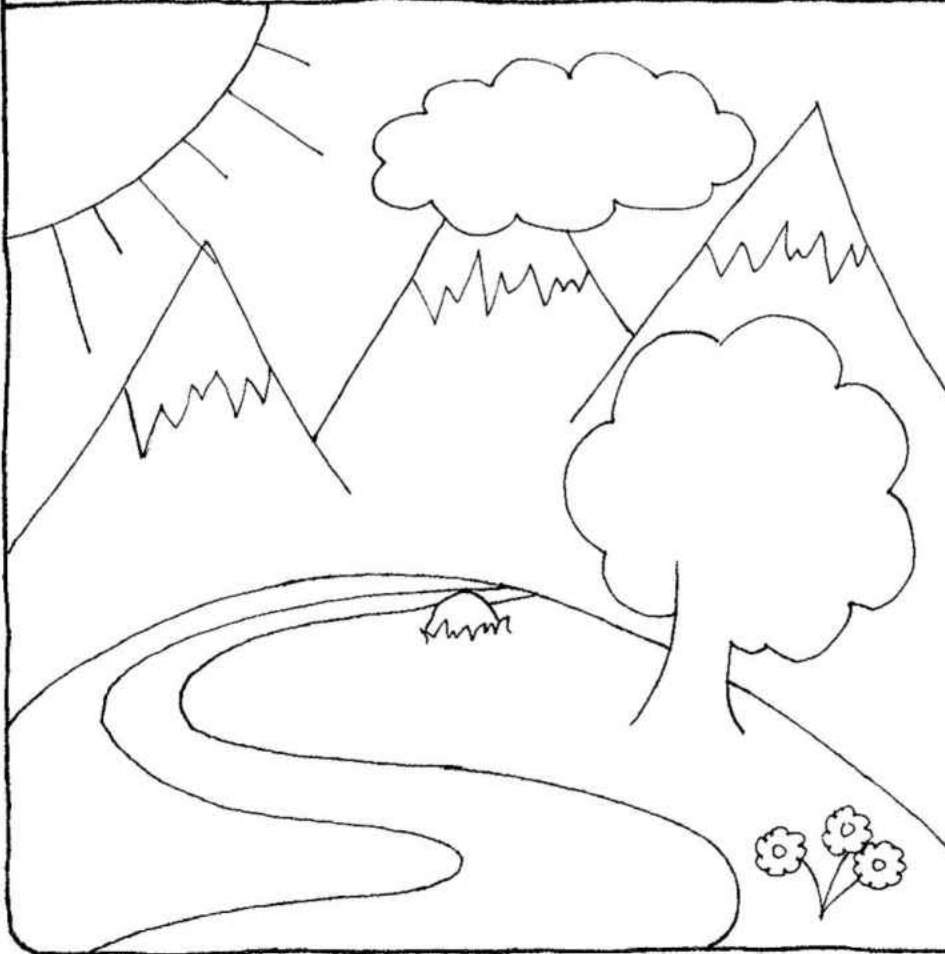
¹¹ No. Maybe that was the wrong language. He looks confused. What language was that? Did I accidentally look him in the eye?

¹² Isn't that what he said? No, he just said सन्चै^{xiv}. But that's an adjective. Don't you need a verb? A pronoun? Does he even know how to speak this language?

¹³ One conversation down. Forty-seven to go. It's going to be a good day. होला^{xvii}

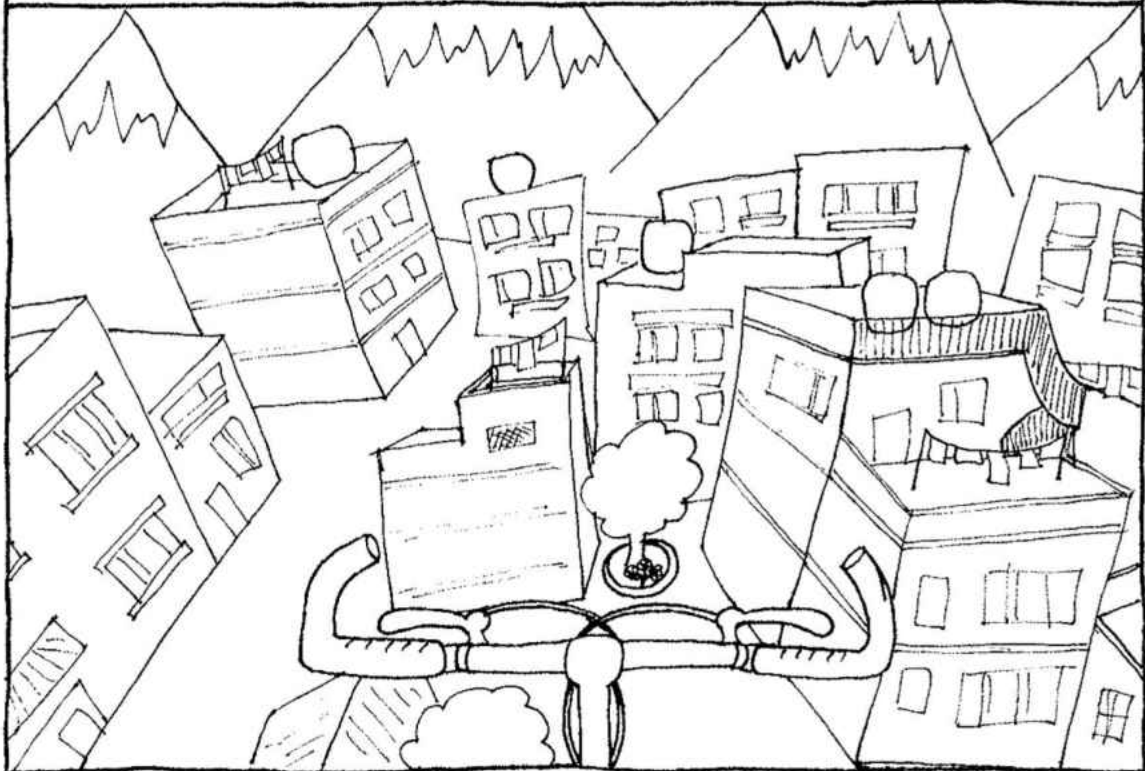
Kathmandu Fitness Club and Spa

Scenic Adventures: Break free from the treadmill and build endurance and muscle mass on our challenging courses through the foothills of the Himalayas. Our trails provide opportunities to climb and descend varying degrees of inclines and improve balance on non-standard bridges, all while enjoying the scenic beauty.



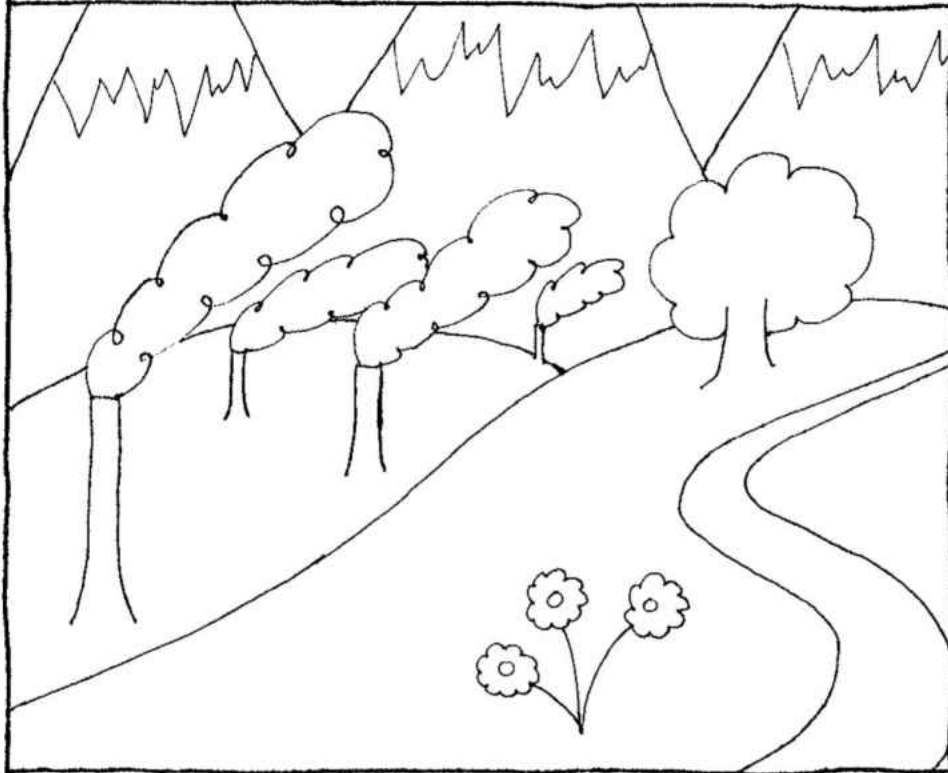
Digestive Cleansing: The Kathmandu Fitness Club and Spa offers an alternative to traditional purging and cleansing programs. We recommend a consistent diet of rice and naturally-coloured yellow lentil sauce to purify your digestive system. For best results, combine this two- to three-week cleansing program with a Scenic Adventure.

Urban Cycling: Watch your quads turn to steel as you peddle up and down the hills of Kathmandu in search of homes and businesses without the aid of street names or addresses. As if that weren't enough, you will sharpen your reflexes and refine your balancing skills as you dodge potholes, motorbikes, and cows on Kathmandu's congested streets. It's like an obstacle course, but way more practical!



Consumable Goods Relay: Lest you think Kathmandu Fitness lacks incentives, you will participate periodically in our continuous Consumable Goods Relay. For one-week stints, you will transport enough edible products for between four and thirteen people using only your strength, skill, and bicycle handle-bars. Your hungry teammates provide a constant source of motivation during this demanding challenge.

Skin Conditioning: What's the point of toning and firming your body if you're not taking care of your skin as well? The Kathmandu Fitness Club and Spa program incorporates periods of extensive pore cleansing through natural perspiration. By washing only every other day, you will allow an organic layer of sweat, dust, and natural body oil to nourish and hydrate your skin.



Organic Hair Treatment: No longer will you stifle your hair's true splendor with constant liquid and chemical cleansers. Let your hair's natural beauty shine for days at a time beneath a protective layer of unprocessed sweat and body oil.

Lung Conditioning: Your lungs will become less dependent on oxygen as you diversify your breathing environment to include bus exhaust, garbage fumes, brick kiln smog, and finely ground Kathmandu Valley dust. Add in 1,500 metres of altitude, and you have the ideal conditions for maximizing your respiratory resilience.

Causes of Death

Kathmandu was darkened that winter by fourteen-hour-a-day power cuts. At our apartment, candles burned from dusk late into the night in metal bowls laced with white drippings. Nepal, which electrifies itself with hydroelectric power, processes only half the water necessary to fuel the capital, and half of that is lost to waste. After dark we lived in the small domes of light we carried with us, wreathing ourselves in the imaginary warmth of our simple fires. We could afford a limited number of candles, each light balanced strategically on the edge of a cabinet, bookshelf, or top bunk—anywhere high and not immediately flammable—so the light diffused through the rooms and seeped out into the hallways.

§

The first time our apartment caught fire that night, I was in the bathroom rinsing my toothbrush with a plastic cup of filtered water. A candle flickered in its bowl balanced on the soap holder, casting an oddly cheerful tone on my reflection. The handles of the sink elicited only an empty gurgling from the pipes. I scooped icy water from the reserve bucket on the floor with a plastic pitcher and poured it over a washcloth to wipe the grime from my face.

Natka, my Czech roommate, sat with her own candle balanced on cushions on the living room floor. The light reflected up from her open notebook, the flame illuminating her hunched body from below. One leg bent up to support the arch of her neck and her face hovered brightly against the dark background of her thick hair. Eunmi, our Korean counterpart, studied in her room, a tall, fresh candle secured directly onto the enamel surface of her desk with a drop of melted wax.

In another bedroom Laurel, an American, huddled in her sleeping bag, new to the country and battling her first round of intestinal parasites.

A dim thud pulsed through the bathroom door, as if someone had dropped a heavy item on deep carpeting rather than our concrete floors. Natka's voice followed tenuously a moment later, "Brenda? Eunmi? Fire?"

I wondered which book she had been reading and whether the flames had spread to the cushions or living room rug. The curtains had already burned once, along with a miniature Christmas tree and a Malaysian roommate's silken hair. The small plastic pitcher was still in my hand and I plunged it back into the water bucket, ignoring the splashed droplets numbing my arm. I slid the lock on the door and opened it. Natka stood in the hallway, half of her body illuminated not by the arched glow of a candle, but by stronger, denser light from inside my room.

When I reached the bedroom doorway I saw a pillar of fire rising from the top level of my bunk bed and pounding against the ceiling. The brilliant orange and white blacked out the rest of the room and distorted my sense of direction and scale. How long before the ceiling paint ignited? How long to unbolt the front door? Long enough for Eunmi and Laurel to run past the flames to the only exit? For a single heartbeat I was warm for the first time all winter, my whole body thawed from Himalayan frost, but at the next beat my arm was flying forward, water arcing from the pitcher, a burst of sounds, total blackness. I realized first that I had flung my only supply of water without aiming it, and second that I had been successful in extinguishing the fire. The cold returned with the same fury as the flames.

In the hallway a white glow and a rasping noise echoed off the smooth floor. A huge red bucket—the fifty-litre backup water supply for the kitchen—was being dragged towards me by Eunmi's shadow. Her headlamp revealed only the bucket, her extended arms, her slippers, and the

tips of her nose and chin. She reached the door and turned towards us, lighting the terror on Natka's face.

"It is finished?" she asked, as if this were a nightly ritual over too soon. I stuttered something about water and pitchers and flames on the ceiling. We entered the bedroom together, climbing on the lower bunk for a better view of the wreckage. The foam mattress of the top bed was cratered down to the plywood base. Embedded in the foam remnants we found a metal bowl, candle wax, and the mutilated remains of a butane lighter. All the components of a bomb, evidently. We emptied half of Eunmi's red bucket, ladling litres of water over the upper bunk and soaking the mattress and sleeping bag below, which was where I usually slept. Eventually we pulled the burnt remains out into the hallway and draped the floor with towels. We worked by the light of Eunmi's headlamp, moving in the stark brightness, pausing in the dark that fell instantly when she glanced away.

A sweep of the light revealed Laurel in the hall squinching her face against the sudden glare. "What happened?" she mumbled sleepily.

"There was a fire," I told her, trying to control the trembling in my voice. She looked at the soggy towels on the floor by her feet and the decimated mattress against the wall. "Oh," she said, "ok. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," we said. Laurel had been in Nepal long enough to realize that her life had taken on a new standard of normal, but not long enough to know what that standard included. Toasting mattresses before bed was not outside the realm of possibilities.

Eunmi looked over her shoulder towards my smouldering room and Laurel disappeared into darkness. When Eunmi looked back she was gone. With the bedroom deconstructed but adrenaline still pumping, I paced the living room with Eunmi and Natka, vowing to never again buy a lighter.

The burnt mattress smelled vile in the hallway so we slid it out the front door and leaned it against the wall of the landing.

Eventually Natka took her book to her room and Eunmi returned to her desk. I finished washing my face and lay down on the couch, wrapped up in blankets in place of my sodden sleeping bag. My hands still trembled and I sat up every few minutes to stare into the darkness, listening for a thud, watching for a glow, jealous of Laurel's peaceful sleep. When deep breathing and happy thoughts failed to calm my mind and heart rate I resorted to a more drastic measure: I called my parents, who were home in the US eating breakfast and very surprised to hear from me.

“Isn't it late there?” My mom asked.

“Yeah. It's been kind of an eventful night.” I explained that we had been lucky, the fire hadn't spread into the hallway to block our only exit, and we didn't die with our charred limbs flailing through the steel bars on the windows. As far as we could tell by headlamp light, the bedroom ceiling wasn't even burned. If we had to light the apartment on fire, this had been the simplest and least destructive scenario, and now there was no mattress on the top bunk, so a candle set there to illuminate the room was no longer in danger of tipping over. My life was safer than ever.

I hung up the phone, having transferred a great deal of anxiety from my mind to my parents'. It occurred to me that exploding lighters are only one of many health hazards of third-world living. I began a mental list of interesting ways to die in Nepal, all of which stemmed from personal experience, but none of which had actually killed anyone I knew. Ideas came quickly:

1. Install steel bars on all your windows. Light a candle and place it on a foam mattress beside a butane lighter in the room next to the only door out of your flat.
2. Leave the smouldering remains of the mattress on the floor in your hallway. Breathe deeply as toxic fumes from the melted foam fill the air.

3. Plug your laptop into a non-grounded 220-volt socket while standing barefoot on a concrete floor that has recently been mopped.
4. Snap the handbrake off your bike at the top of the longest hill in Kathmandu. Continue on your journey anyway, relying on the soles of your rubber flip-flops to slow your descent as you slalom between motorbikes, tuktuks, and microbuses.
5. Trek to a remote village to visit a Christian team composed of former gangsters, murderers, and drug addicts who have just recently reformed their lives. While there, say or do something to trigger a relapse.
6. Trek during monsoon season far from roads or hospitals in a district best known for its record-setting cholera outbreaks. Forget whether iodine takes twenty or thirty minutes to purify your water. Be thirsty.
7. Slip your foot off the edge of the twenty-centimetre-wide trail and plummet two hundred metres to the river below.
8. Throw yourself deliberately off the two-hundred-metre cliff to escape from a raging water buffalo.
9. Avoid the cliff and be gored instead by the raging water buffalo.
10. Be eaten by the tiger that was about to eat the raging water buffalo, but decided you would make an easier meal.

What I should have been thinking about as I drifted off to sleep was a little talk I heard at the fire station in elementary school about how pillows and mattresses that catch on fire can harbour coals deep inside and spontaneously reignite themselves hours later, even after being thoroughly doused with water.

The second time our apartment caught fire that night was after I had finally lulled myself to sleep, dreaming of the days when I still thought candlelight was romantic. In the morning it wasn't the cool winter light crinkling in through the lace curtains that woke me. It was a sort of shrill, hysterical screeching—the voice of our Filipino neighbour—accompanied by gaspy breathing and pounding on the stairs.

“She must have seen the mattress,” I mumbled to Eunmi when she stuck her head into the living room from the hallway.

“There was another fire,” Eunmi answered, and vanished.

By the time I untangled myself from the blankets and slid down the hallway in my woollen socks a crowd had gathered on the landing. Eunmi was there, and the Czech woman who lived above us, and the landlord, and the whole family from the top floor. They were talking in at least four different languages, and the only thing that made sense to me was the trail of soot and charred foam beginning at a black triangle singed into the wall. The wreckage stretched across the landing, down the stairs, out the gate, and into the dirt alley. I added a line to my mental causes-of-death list:

11. Place the smouldering remains of the mattress outside in the stairwell, centred between the building's electrical box and a spare gas bottle.

On that specific night there was no backup propane tank chained to the landing railing, and so there was no explosion, and no death, and the house still stood, and the electrical system really wasn't that great to begin with anyway. We promised the landlord we would paint over the campfire silhouette on the landing wall and any smoke damage on the bedroom ceiling. Everyone calmed down and went home to drink tea and cook lentils.

In the daylight I found another casualty of the fires—a pink plastic comb that the explosion had thrown off the top bunk and melted into the bedroom rug. I snapped the handle off trying to pick it up and left the rest soldered to the carpet fibres as a warning to future residents that safety is an illusion. The remains of the second fire smouldered in the empty lot next door for another four days, consuming almost all the mattress foam and spewing black toxins into the already-dismal sky.

Possibilities

I could be out trekking in the Himalayas. It's August and I should be out in the western—far western, even—districts, walking in the eternal damp of the slowing monsoon rains, stepping around leeches, over logs, fording the rivers that plunge down rocky embankments and froth at the base of the tallest, largest, wildest mountains in the world.

But no.

I am here, in suburban America, as the hem of a well-behaved storm—

An eighty-four percent chance of moderate rain today in Central Florida beginning at 2:04pm and ending promptly at 4:27.

—glides by my dual-paned window (inward tilting so you don't have to go outside to clean it) watering my manicured lawn. I could be out clawing my way up a rock face, sopping up sweat with the end of my pashmina shawl, balancing on the rims of rice paddies, skirting the livelihood of a dozen different people groups on my way to the higher villages, negotiating with a haggard old woman who has no visible teeth, although she has braided the knobby end of a toothbrush into her ragged locks, asking her to add a splash of buffalo milk to my tea.

But not here. There are no mountains in my new civilized society, where the landscape stretches equitably in every direction. There are no old women worrying the edges of ragged saris, no leeches, no rock faces. Florida's unbiased terrain is devoid of obstacles, of peril, of dare.

LEGENDS

[lej-ubnd] *noun*

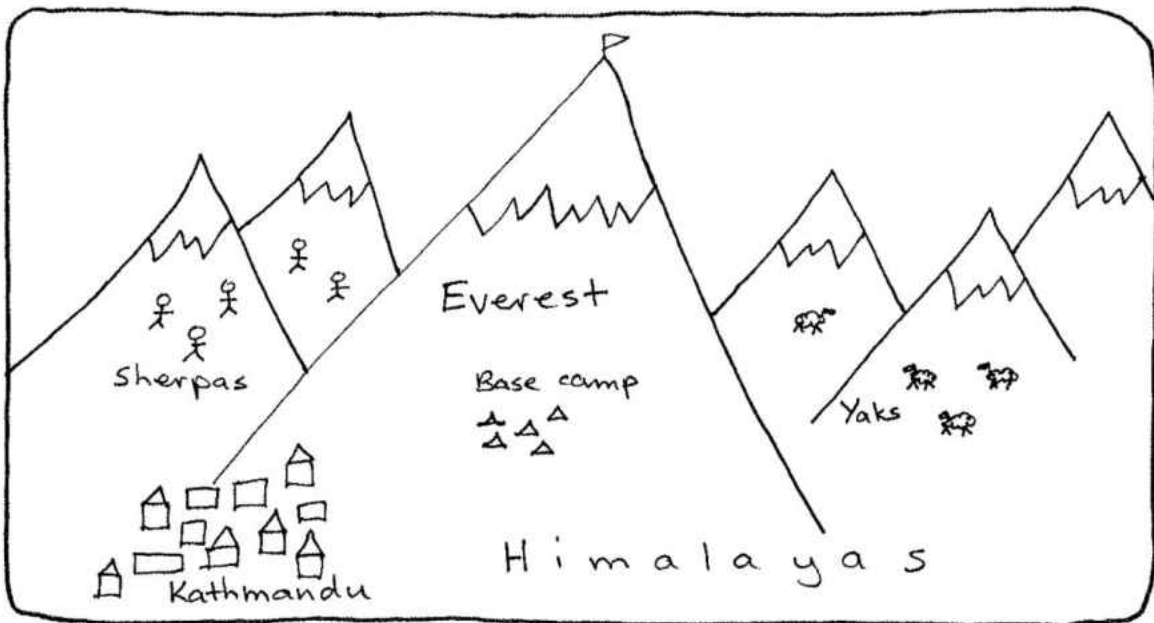
1. a table on a map, chart, or the like, listing and explaining the symbols used.

I've discovered that friendship is a shared story in which each is an editor, with or without parentheses, exclamations and sentences beginning with conjunctions. And that, I know, transfers across all cultures.

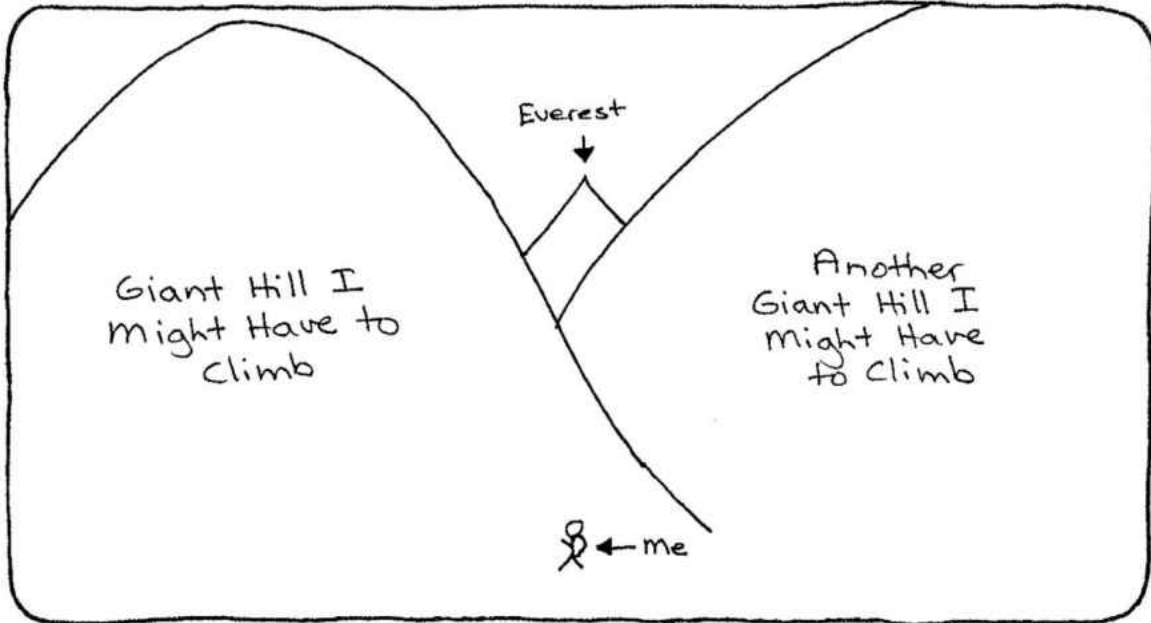
JDeeH

Game On

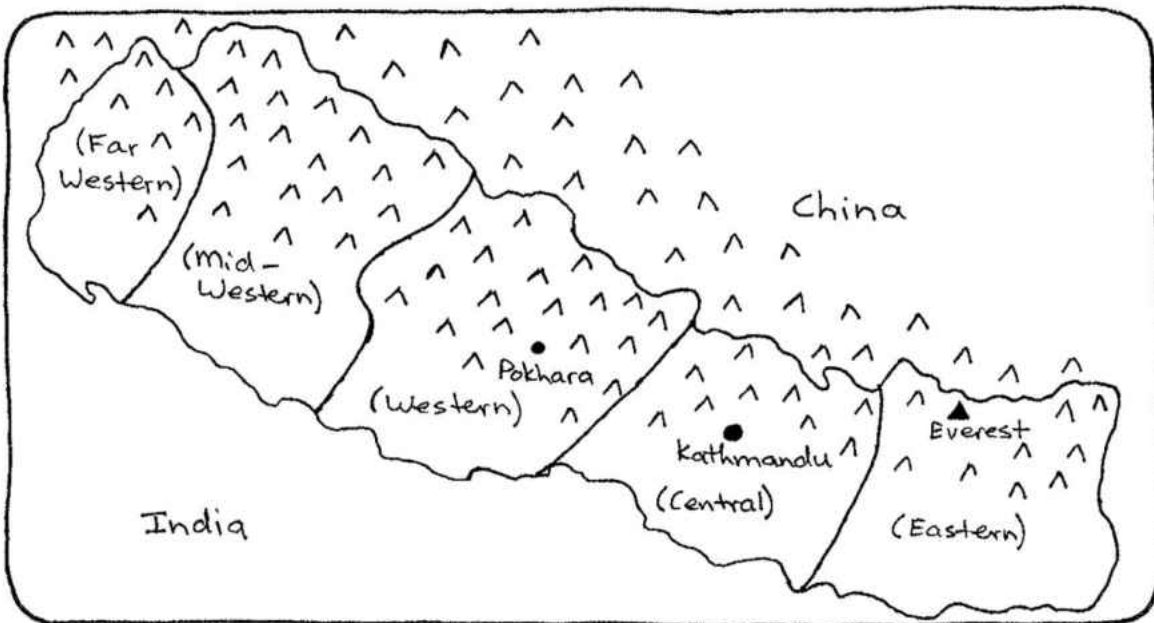
Nepal is not a country most people picture in their minds on a regular basis. But those people who do picture it often imagine the landscape to look something like this:



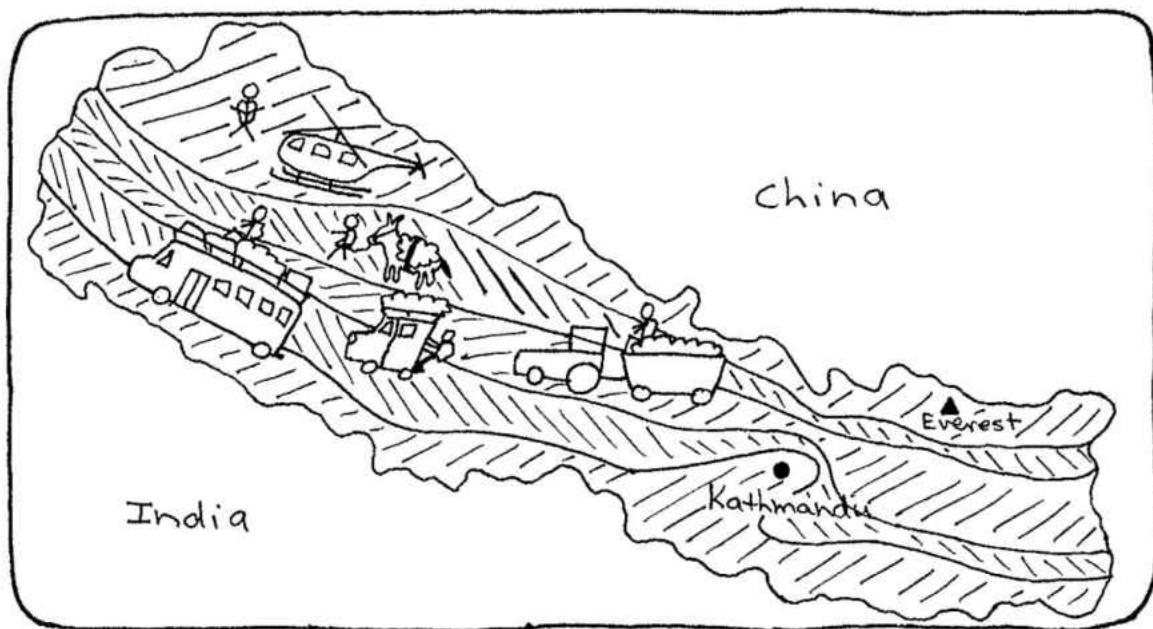
When I saw Everest it looked more like this:



Officially, Nepal is laid out this way:



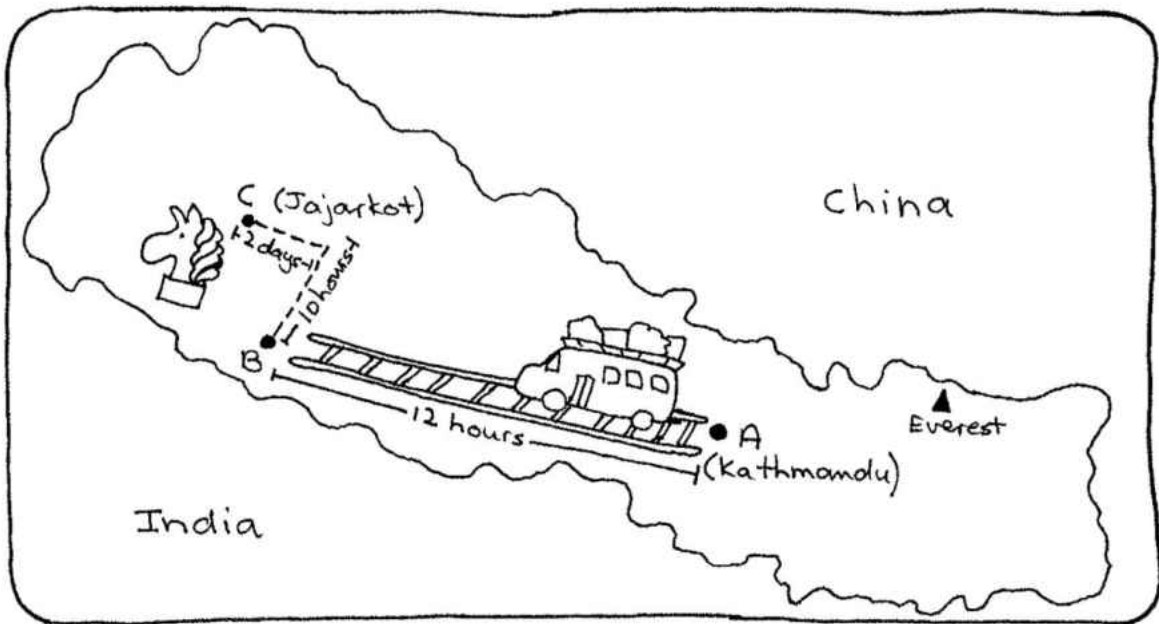
From a trekker's perspective, Nepal is laid out in stripes according to accessibility. To trek is to *travel or migrate, especially slowly or with difficulty*. Almost all travel in Nepal is done slowly and with difficulty. In the south you can ride buses on a generally paved east-west highway. Farther north there are Jeeps. Then tractors. Then pack mules. After that you either walk (if you're stupid) or rent a helicopter (if you're rich):



I have travelled the lower four zones and I have the skills, cars, and whiplash to prove it. I avoided the highest region due to, I like to think, both lack of finances and surplus intelligence.

Planning a trek in Nepal is like playing a combination of chess and Chutes & Ladders. For example, if you intend to travel from point A (Kathmandu) to point B (Jajarkot), you can access a semi-permanent horizontal ladder all the way across the south of Nepal to Kohalpur. This ladder is the Mahendra Highway, and you can move fairly quickly along it.

Off the bus, you can plod your way diagonally to your destination village, or you may hop two squares due north, out of your way, on a bus/tractor combo, and then one move west on foot with occasional pack mule assistance, which is faster, but more complicated and potentially more dangerous, depending on whether you're more afraid of leeches or landslides.



It's all about strategy, see? And wit. And luck.

How to Buy a Bus Ticket in Kathmandu

1. Select your departure date and destination. Choose a date immediately preceding the most chaotic festival season of the year—next Tuesday, perhaps—during a week when the entire population of Nepal travels by bus. Identify a location at least twenty-four hours away and towards the Himalayan north, where roads are scarce and subject to landslides, creating severe food shortages because rice must be transported to villages by helicopter. Reassure your friends that you are statistically less likely to die in a landslide in the far west than riding your bike through the streets of Kathmandu. Be informed by those friends that bus tickets are not available during this season.
2. Decide to try anyway. Ride your bike towards Ring Road until you locate a travel agency. Inform the travel agent that you would like to buy a bus ticket to your chosen district, Bajhang. Say the district name repeatedly in your best accent and explain that it is at the far western edge of Nepal. Point to it on a map if one is available. Persuade the travel agent that you are not interested in going to Pokhara, even though it is the most beautiful city in Nepal and all foreigners go there. Admit that you have never been to Bajhang. Reassure the travel agent that you have ridden long-distance buses in Nepal and are aware of what sorts of adventures await you. Be informed that bus tickets are not available during this season.
3. Refrain from leaving the shop until the travel agent phones a friend to verify that tickets to the west are not available during this season. Learn that the most likely place to find a ticket is New Bus Park, and you had better get there as quickly as possible. Express dismay at the idea of traveling over an hour to New Bus Park. Receive directions to a place nearby along Ring Road with many Indian

travel agents who might also have tickets. Fail in your attempts to understand the directions to this place or to remember its name.

4. Ride towards Ring Road. Pause at a phone shop with stickers in the window advertising bus tickets. Explain to the shopkeeper that you want to go to Bajhang. Explain that you are from America and have been in Nepal nine months and that you really need to get to Bajhang. Convince the shopkeeper that you are prepared to ride a bus for twenty-four hours. Be informed that bus tickets are not available during this season.

5. Refrain from leaving until the man calls a friend, who reports that he has bus tickets. Fail in your attempts to understand the directions to the friend's shop. Refrain from leaving until the shopkeeper draws a map on the palm of his hand. Follow what you remember of the map to Ring Road. Realize that it would have been more helpful if the shopkeeper had drawn the map on the palm of *your* hand. Observe two men sitting on plastic crates outside a photocopy shop. Stop when you see bus ticket pads spread out across a makeshift table between them. Explain that you are looking for a bus ticket to Bajhang, which is in the far west of Nepal. Confirm that you are indeed American. Explain that you are a language student. Stop explaining. Remind the men that you are trying to get to Bajhang. Be informed that bus tickets are not available during this season.

6. Refrain from leaving until the men on the crates suggest that you go to Kalanki, as this is the best place to buy bus tickets to the west, much better than New Bus Park. Meander towards home along Ring Road, pausing at another bus ticket/phone shop. Explain to the shopkeeper that you want to go to Bajhang and that it is in the far west of Nepal. Convince him that you are not trying to

buy a bus ticket to Pokhara. Explain that you are American and have friends in Bajhang. Be informed that this shop only has bus tickets to the east. Refrain from leaving until he suggests that you go to Kalanki, as this is the best place to buy bus tickets to the west.

7. Leave your bike at home and ride a bus thirty minutes to Kalanki. Insist to the fare collector that you are not a tourist and know it costs twelve rupees, not forty, to ride from your neighbourhood to Kalanki. Pay twenty rupees when you disembark. Consider it a victory. Wander between shops until you locate a counter scattered with bus ticket pads and manned by a group of men all wearing khaki pants and white shirts. Smile as they welcome you warmly down into their lair, a few steps below street level. Admit that you are American and are not married. Receive a round of admiring comments from the white-shirted men about the fact that you speak Nepali. Assert that you are not interested in getting married. Explain to the bus ticket mob that you want to go to Bajhang. Be informed that the Bajhang bus doesn't come for another two hours. Ask about tickets for next Tuesday. Be informed that tickets to Bajhang are only available in advance in New Bus Park.

8. Wander to a less sinister-looking shop. Explain to the man inside that you are looking for a bus ticket to Bajhang. Explain that you are American and have been in Nepal for nine months. Be informed that bus tickets are available only to Nepal Gange, halfway to the far west, and a ticket to Bajhang might be available from there. Realize that that is a really good way to get stuck in Nepal Gange. Give up and go home.

9. On a different day, ride a bus one hour to New Bus Park. Select a ticket window at random and announce to the clerk that you need to get to Bajhang. Fail in your attempts to convince him that

you are serious about buying a bus ticket to the far west. Be directed to another window. Then another. Explain, each time, why you want to go to such a dangerous, far away place, how long you have been in Nepal, and why you are not married. Be directed back to the second window you visited, where a quorum of bus ticket sellers has assembled. Ask if bus tickets to Bajhang are available. Be informed that there are no bus tickets to Bajhang.

10. Refrain from leaving until the bus ticket posse clarifies that there are no *direct* bus tickets to Bajhang. Lean casually against the wall to further emphasize that you are not leaving without information about bus tickets to Bajhang. Listen carefully as they explain the route you will need to take and where to change buses. Get it in writing in both English and Nepali script. Ask if such a sequence of tickets is available for next Tuesday. Be informed that you should come back on Monday and find out.

What Trekking is Like

“How was your trek?” a friend’s voice crackles against a backdrop of Hindi music and static competing for the phone line. “What was it like?”

“It was ... it was like,” I grope for words to define the horrific/awesome/exciting/awful events of the last thirteen days, and while I search for an adequate description I pull back the lace curtains of my living room window. “There was this man,” I begin, and am immediately interrupted by the sight of a cow standing in the alley outside my front gate. “And now there’s a cow,” I continue.

“Why is there a cow? Don’t you live in a city?”

I am as confused as my friend, but for a different reason. I live in a concrete apartment building in a capital city of almost two million people. I see cows every day wandering the streets, literal holy cows in a predominantly Hindu nation, and none of them have ever bothered me until right now, standing outside my window as I try to explain trekking to someone seventy-six hundred miles away who thinks that cows live on farms and work for Chik-fil-A.

“I want to hear about your trek,” she prompts again, “not the cow. I’ve never done anything like that.”

“Well,” I let the lace fall back in place to block out distractions, “someone once told me that trekking is like natural childbirth, and I’m beginning to understand the metaphor.”

A pregnant friend made the comparison in the labour ward of Patan Hospital, Kathmandu, Nepal, hooked up to a Pitocin IV alongside a dozen other women who were either in labour or supposed to be. I think she meant that trekking is as much a matter of mental preparedness and determination as physical stamina. I can see other parallels of pain, suffering, blood, crying,

frustration, and inevitability, but she didn't elaborate much because, well, she was in the process of having a baby.

“Trekking,” I tell my friend on the phone, and other friends, my family, new co-workers, anyone who pretends to care, “is not actually like anything, because trekking is a series of unrelated moments, each defined by powerful blasts of every emotion known to man, or to woman, of which I'm sure there are more. These moments aren't connected by anything except the dirt trail under your feet.”

It's a difficult concept to explain to people who have never felt the crush of utter loneliness and the exhilaration of a Himalayan sunset within seconds of each other. I trekked on book distribution teams, wandering the outskirts of the Himalayas in pairs selling Christian literature below market value. Books are hard to come by in the hills of Nepal, mostly because getting them there is, literally, a labour of love. Sketchy roads, inaccurate maps, unpredictable weather, and foothills that block out the magical Himalayan peaks quickly eliminate casual volunteers. The second reason why there are few books is that few people can read, which is possibly related to the aforementioned lack of books. But in every village speckled across every hillside lives at least one person who wants a book, especially the ones I bring, because mine are about Jesus.

Nepal is the birthplace of Buddha, eighty percent Hindu, and home to one of the fastest-growing churches in the world. Sixty years ago it was illegal to be a Christian; today an estimated one million people hold tenaciously to that once-forbidden faith, and many of them do it alone. Meeting just one such believer is worth even the most strenuous journey to the most isolated places.

Unfortunately, no matter how worthy your motives, the spasmodic swings of emotion that accompany a trek in Nepal never get easier. You can get better at them, however, if you stop

expecting them to cancel each other out. The joy of watching a group of children pouring over their first picture book does not alleviate your growing panic as the light dims and you have nowhere to sleep tonight. As in most of life, for every emotional high on trek there is an equally potent low, but on trek the lows come first because you start with the bus.

“The bus,” I tell my friends/family/teammates, “looks like a junkyard got attacked by a Bollywood set designer and rescued by a punk rock band.”

Busses are adorned with tassels, shampoo ads, and incompatible slogans and religious symbols tattooed haphazardly on their battered bodies. Inside, every seat is filled, at least eight people crowd into the cab with the driver, and small stools line the aisle for those who haven't paid for a seat and don't want to ride on the roof with the baggage.

My seat is always stained with grime and always sags into a semi-reclining position. I am moderately tall in an Asian context, so my knees bang against the metal bars of the seat in front of me with every bump, and there are many bumps. If my trekmate is exceptionally short I beg her to take the inside seat so I can sprawl one leg out into the aisle, wedging it between sacks of rice, overflow seating, and distressed baby goats. Or chickens. Sometimes there are chickens.

“When the bus crests the rim of hills encircling the smog basin that is Kathmandu,” I continue, “the music starts. Loud, staticky, wailing music that seeps into the recesses of your memory and ferments there. This bus is home for anywhere from four to thirty hours, pausing at roadside stands for tea or food—*daalbhaat*—at the whim of the driver.”

“How do you know when to get off?” my listener asks.

“Well, you go towards your destination village as far as you can, and when the bus stops you get off and start walking. Sometimes you get to where you meant to be, sometimes there's a

landslide, sometimes the road's washed out, sometimes there's an accident, sometimes there's a strike.”

If we are lucky, rain cools our struggling bodies as we walk. We start off strategically wrapped in waterproof gear, but soon are as wet from sweat inside as our gear is outside, so we give up and peel it all off. If we are not lucky, the sun beats down mercilessly on the deforested slopes around us.

The paths wind among the hills, climbing high against the sky and then plummeting to riverside villages. In monsoon season the hills are scarred with a hundred tiny streams that rush down, fill the rice terraces, and provide relief for my sore, blistered feet. In its steepest parts the path is covered with rocks, placed strategically to prevent erosion by monsoon rains. This is probably eco-friendly, but it is not very trekker-friendly, and the effect is that much of the time we are walking up a rocky streambed instead of a path.

“And it is always up.” I am emphatic on this point. “The laws of science may dictate that you walk downhill as much as up, but those laws were not written in Nepal, where treks generally start towards the south, where there are roads, and journey towards the north, where there are Himalayas. From wherever you are, wherever you are going is always *matti*—up.

“As we climb we come to a series of forks in the path and ask passers-by which way to go, but the answer is, inevitably, *matti*. So the conversation goes something like this:

Me: ‘Where are you coming from?’

A villager: ‘Ooo *matti*. Where are you going?’

Me: ‘*Matti*. How long does it take to get there from here?’

The villager: ‘Thirty minutes for walking people. One hour for non-walking people.’

“Three hours later we arrive, exhausted, at the *mattiest*-conceivable village perched precariously amongst corn and rice terraces. Crowds gather to watch us straggle up the last of the hill. I conjure up enough breath to ask if there is a room for me and my trek-mate to sleep in and we are directed to the village’s only shop. The shopkeeper cooks us supper—*daalbhaat*, it’s always *daalbhaat*—and then shows us the ladder or notched pole staircase to a tiny room above the store. The walls of the room are covered in newspaper to provide camouflage for the spiders. The beds are exactly like the wooden tables we eat off of except that they are lower and usually covered with a ragged blanket. We collapse onto the bed anyway, pray against bedbugs, and drift into a restless sleep as bits of conversations about us drift in through the open window.

“Does it always happen that way?” my friend/family/listener wants to know.

“Not exactly. It’s a theme with variations. Sometimes we stay in homes. Sometimes we sleep on the floor. But there are always spiders and always *daalbhaat*, we always pray against bedbugs, and they always talk about us.”

“What do they say about you?”

“That we’re crazy to come all this way, and that it’s not safe. Sometimes they are curious about the books, but usually they just want to know what in the world we’re doing in their village.”

Smoke from the fire downstairs billowing in through the window serves as our wake-up call the next morning. We drag our aching bodies back down the pole-stairs and are greeted with steaming cups of milk tea and a packet of sugar cookies. The cookies are for breakfast. The tea is for dumping over my fresh sunburn when I grab the scalding base of the metal cup instead of the rim. After eating and mopping up, we offer books to everyone as we leave the village. Children paw at our clothes and backpacks, waving crumpled five-rupee notes in their grimy hands. We hold out an assortment of cartoon books and the children grab their selections and race away, tearing off the

plastic packaging and scattering chickens. The adults are more cautious, asking about the contents of the books and examining the covers. Few adults are literate, but most of the children go to school. Parents buy books for their children to read to them.

“This one time,” I tell her/him/them, “I went up to an old man trying to fix the gate of a goat pen and offered him the books. His hands and smile trembled with age. He didn’t say anything, but moved his hand in a gesture that means *how much?*”

“Five rupees,” I said. “They are about Jesus.”

Five rupees is a tenth of what we spend on tea and cookies for breakfast and half the price of the candle we used to seal the plastic bag around each book that cost a hundred rupees to print. Five rupees are worth nothing except the guarantee that the books will be read. In Nepal nothing valuable is ever free.

“The old man rubbed his fingers over the length of metal wire he was holding and gave me this long, sorrowful stare. He dipped his hand into his front shirt pocket and held out two tarnished coins totalling three rupees.”

“Did you take them?” he/she/they want to know.

“I had to. To refuse the money is to negate the value of the book I came so far to give away and to dishonour the man who is willing to pay for it. I gave him a book with red flowers on the cover, which is everyone’s favourite.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s the gospel of Luke, which is about Jesus being the Saviour of all nations. It seemed appropriate.”

“When we finally leave the village we are always accompanied by a crowd of children. One girl showed me how to split the stem of a leaf and blow bubbles with the sticky juice that leaks out.”

It may sound juvenile, but fortunately my trekmate and I left most of our self-esteem back on the bus, and could therefore enjoy ourselves.

“Eventually we shoo the kids away so we can puff up the first big hill in relative privacy.”

“And then what?”

“And then we climb. And climb and climb, until the tea and cookies are long gone and our hands shake for lack of blood sugar. We climb and sweat and worry about how far we’ll have to climb until somewhere between three and four o’clock in the afternoon when the sun turns from blazing hot to gently warm at a specific Magic Moment. A breeze begins to blow, the light softens, and our sunburned skin sighs almost audibly with relief.

“This is also the moment when we begin to worry about where we’re going to sleep instead of how we’re going to get to the top of the hill. The hills aren’t safe after dark, either from bandits or tigers or Maoists or drunks or drunken Maoists or tiger bandits, depending on who you ask.

“Did you ever have any trouble with those?”

“Drunken Maoists yes, tigers almost, but never bandits. The scariest night for me it was the dark and the isolation that made me feel like I was living in a nightmare. We were descending from a ridge—yes, after the Magic Moment we do sometimes descend—into a mass of pallid fog. The narrow path was completely overwhelmed with thick grasses and stinging nettles. I can usually keep my bearings on trek because the tallest mountains are always north, but that evening the fog blocked out our view of the valley below and deprived us of any sense of direction or progress. It felt just like a dream when you are running and running and never moving, except we were walking, and it wasn’t a dream, and it went on for hours. That was the first time I fully realized how far away I was from anything comfortable or familiar, and that if something happened to me, no one would know where to begin looking.”

Even if you have never been claustrophobic, trekking in the Himalayas in thick fog is a likely place to start, enclosed by clingy plants, coagulating fog, and palpable fear.

“It was pitch dark that night before we reached a village.”

I usually stop there. I rarely tell full trekking stories because the foreignness, danger, and mystique compound and most listeners don’t handle it well. Sometimes I worry they will demand I get on a plane and move to a country with less obvious ways to die. Sometimes I worry they will jump on a plane and join me for the sheer adventure of it.

But sometimes I need to tell the stories.

“The night I was so lost and scared in the dark and the fog,” I tell my safest listeners, often my parents, who spent decades in third world countries and do not panic easily, “my trekmate was a tiny Korean who usually had enough energy and optimism for the both of us, but she was sick and getting weaker by the step. We were invited into a Christian family’s home that night instead of a shop. They welcomed us, offered us one of the two rooms in their home, began preparing dinner, which was shockingly not daalbhaat, and sent their children out to invite all the believers in the area to come for a fellowship meeting.

“We went outside to find a water tap to wash off some of the sweat and dust, but got lost in a maze of corn terraces. After a few minutes a little girl with a hand-cranked flashlight found us and lead us through the fog to the tap, but just as we pulled out our soap, the day’s water came to an end and the flow diminished to a dribble. We couldn’t even refill our water bottles.

“Back at the house my friend collapsed on the bed shivering in the suffocating heat. I dug through the first aid kit searching for fever medicine while our hostess urged us to eat heaping plates of flatbread and lentils and Christians from nearby villages gathered in the obscure corners of the

room. I fidgeted with medicine packets and mystery greens and my headlamp flashed across the faces of Nepali believers watching expectantly.

“Their eyes held more than curiosity at our strange skin and fluorescent water bottles. To them, we were a message of hope. The loneliness I felt in that isolated place is the daily life of these few Christians scattered across the hills. They have so little fellowship, less teaching, and no support from their community. They are often uneducated, low caste, and persecuted by more powerful neighbours. And there we were, the embodiment of everything foreign, a sign that the outside world remembered them.

“When I had downed most of my food and my friend was comfortable someone began the service. We prayed together, everyone out loud at the same time, for the church in the village, for Nepal, and for strength to be faithful in what God had put before each of us. As I listened to the swirl of voices I realized that these strangers may not have been friends, but they were family. I am going to spend eternity with them. We worship the same God in different languages. We pray the same prayers with different words. We sacrifice different things for the same reasons. And I came back to the city, but they’re still there, even when it’s dark and foggy and no one knows where to look for them.”

This is when my mother says something comforting and my father says something profound. But mostly they listen, because they understand, and they know that this is why I’m here, because through the books, and my words, and my very presence, I have the chance to bless soulmates I’ve barely met.

“What happened next?” my mom prompts gently.

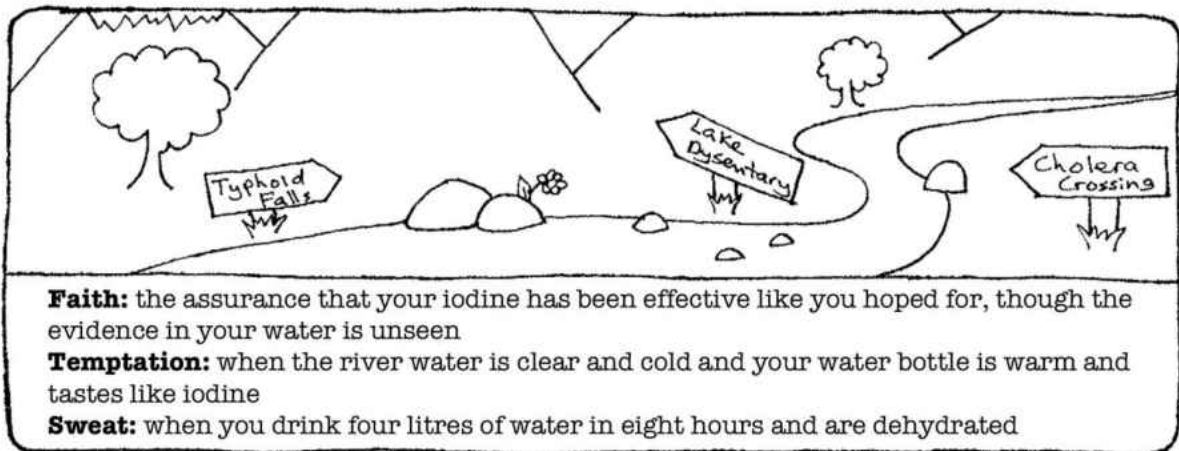
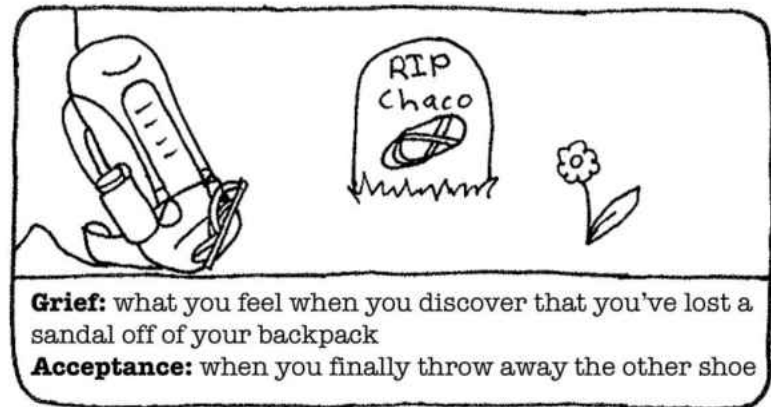
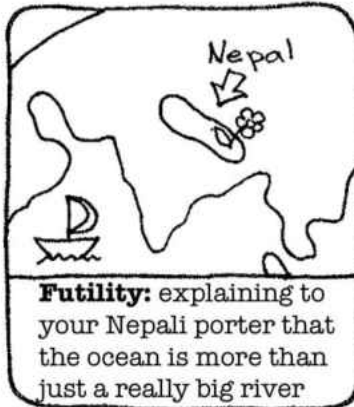
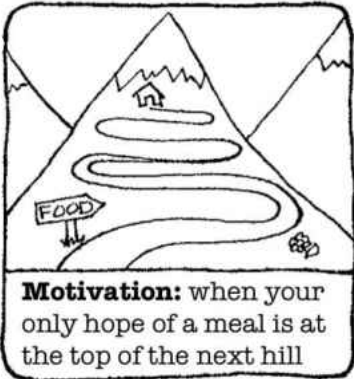
“Next we sang. *A capella*, off-key, and I joined in with all my heart, because in that most lonely, most far-off place, I had nothing left to fear.”

Three days after making her grand trekking metaphor my friend had her baby by C-section, as the Pitocin proved ineffective. Her perfect little girl had the cord wrapped three times around her neck and probably would have been strangled to death if delivered naturally.

Sometimes I think *that* is what trekking is really like. It's like preparing for something painful, but important, and then it happens and you end up with something beautiful but in a completely different way, and what you feared isn't what you should have been afraid of, and what was dangerous you knew nothing about.

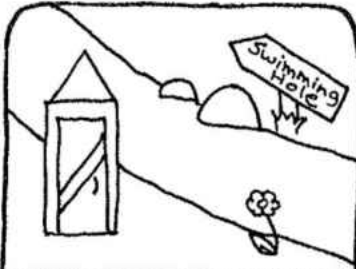
Then someone asks you what it was like. So you grope for words, and you talk about books and fog and Maoists and cows and strangers you met for a few exhausted moments. And it's almost true, because trekking is really like that.

Trekking: An Illustrated Primer





Reverse psychology: when you wash your clothes on the concrete walkway while squatting in the river and then lay them out in the dirt to dry
Miscalculation: when all of your clothes are wet at the same time
Theory of relativity: when you convince yourself that one pair of socks is slightly cleaner than the other

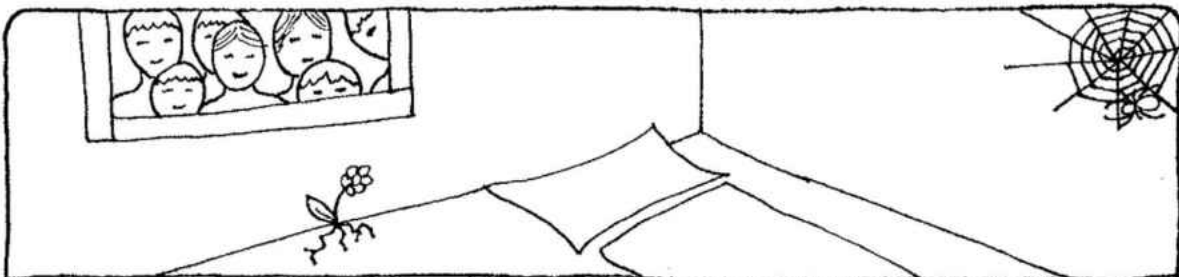


Hygiene: when you walk upstream of where the outhouse empties before bathing

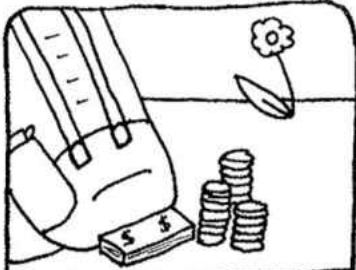
Recipe

<p>Ingredients</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rice Lentils Potatoes 	<p>Directions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Grow them 2. Pick them 3. Cook them 4. Serve them
---	--

Cooking from scratch: when you ask for food and they walk out to the field to pick it
Hospitality: when you arrive unannounced at a stranger's home and they feed you five meals and eight cups of tea, give you a room to sleep in, and send their sons to carry your backpack up a mountain



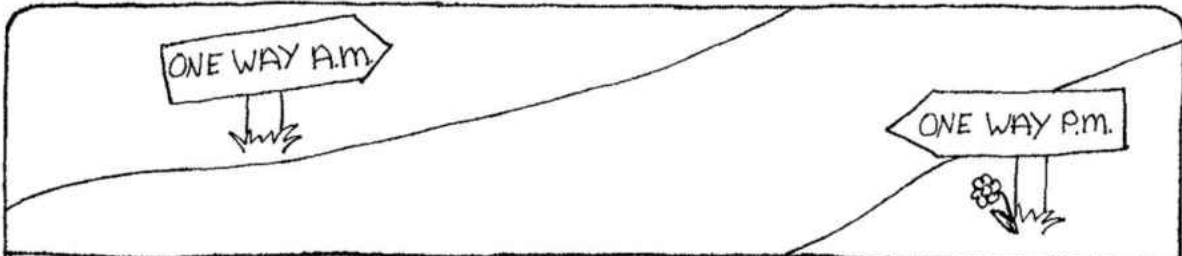
Fear: when you watch a giant spider disappear into the wall of your bedroom
Bedtime: the moment when it gets too cold for the flies in your bedroom to fly
Village television: you, until you close your bedroom door; and windows



Wealth: when your backpack has more in it than many of the people you meet will ever own



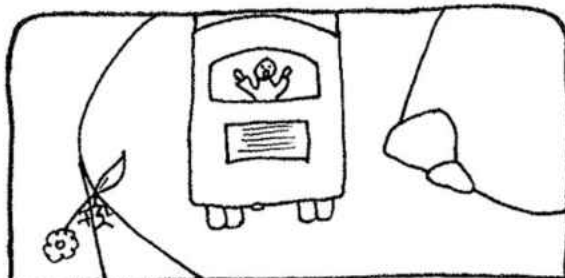
Return on investment: when you give water and cookies to other travellers on the road and they give you tea and cookies at the top of the mountain



Creative access nation: when it takes five hours of walking, four days, three tractors, two local guides, and a bus to travel twenty kilometres and come back

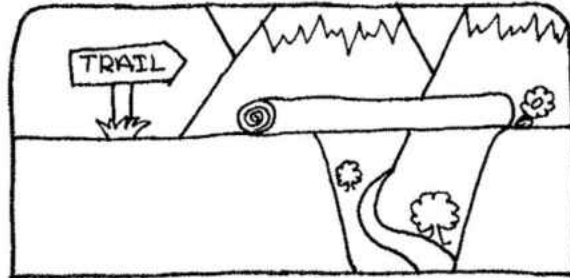
Mythology: the misconception that trekking downhill is easier than trekking uphill

One-way road: when traffic goes west in the morning and east in the afternoon



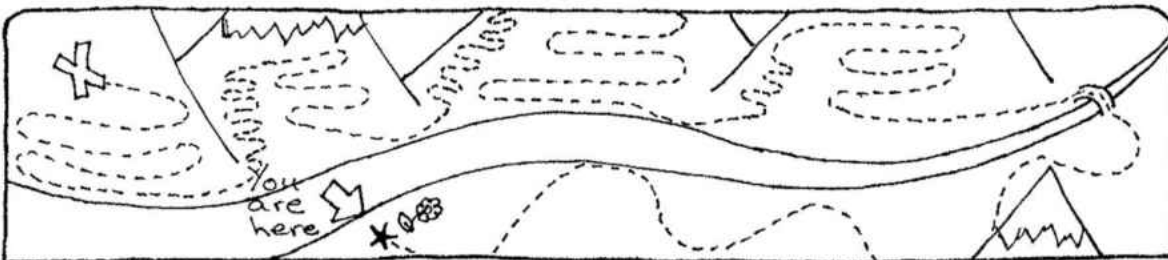
Precarious: when the bus is backing toward a cliff in the dark and your life depends on the spotter's ability to whistle

Cowardice: when you sit on the uphill side of the bus on purpose



Pride: when you consider how far the fall would be when deciding whether to ask for a steadying hand

Steep: any combination of incline, exhaustion, heat, or viscosity that forces you to use your hands as you climb



Seclusion: when you ask about a village a half-day's walk away and no one has been there
Ambiguity: when the next village is either a half-hour, one hour, or four hours away
Proximity: when you can see the next village just across the valley, but it takes you all morning to climb down to the river and back up the other side
Optical illusion: when you climb all day long and sleep by the same river every night

Evolution of the Trekker

Intelligent design: why you keep your headlamp, iodine, toilet paper, pocket knife, money, and camera strapped to your body at all times
Natural selection: why Nepalis always assume this is your first trek

Optimism: remembering that this will make a good story later

The Girl Version

Fourteen single women from a half-dozen countries lived together in Kathmandu. We were volunteers, religious workers, and we trekked in pairs and trios for weeks at a time in the Himalayas. We added a few new members every six months. This time we added three Americans.

I found them on my living room couch when I came home from work one evening, all lined up and waiting expectantly.

“We just finished the trekking orientation with Timo,” one of them offered in explanation.

“And?”

I had sat through the same trekking orientation. The principles were simple: always carry boots and two litres of water; don't pack more than you can hold with your arm extended straight out to the side; find a place to sleep before dark.

“And he said to ask you for the girl version.”

I blinked at them. The Girl Version was a secret, corporate, need-to-know code. They didn't yet need to know. They weren't going trekking for another two weeks. The Girl Version was something we laughed about later, sometimes much later, over mugs of tea and pans of brownies. A code of ethics. Standard operating procedures. A survival guide to an activity that we always survived, but sometimes just barely. The Girl Version was sacred, confidential, classified. If I told them, would they still go trekking? Would it scare them? Scar them?

I sat across from the three newbies, their eyes wide with interest in what nuggets of wisdom I might dispense from my accumulated trekking lore. And I had nuggets. After a half-dozen treks of my own and hundreds of stories from friends, I felt qualified to speak for the group, the International Society of Foreign Trekking Women. Perhaps it was time for a preview.

“The Girl Version of trekking orientation,” I began, “is that we always carry a small bag of essential items that opens with a top zipper and does not touch the floor when we squat. And that Caucasian skin glows in the dark, especially areas of skin that we do not typically expose to sunlight. The Girl Version is remembering that Nepal may appear to be wild and undomesticated, but it is also severely overpopulated, and no matter how many days’ walk we are from a road, if we yell, someone will answer. That someone is already watching us.”

I started them off like this, and their eyes grew wider, and one of them may have actually taken notes. It was a start, but there was much much more. The Girl Version is about more than hygiene, which is a privilege forfeited by those of us who choose to trek in the most rugged mountains in the world. The Girl Version is a new set of norms. A surrender of rights. An acceptance of a standard of living that no one in the world abides by except white women travelling on foot in densely populated third world countries.

The Girl Version is being subjected to treatment no self-respecting Nepali man would impose on a local woman, and being polite anyway. Men avoid water taps and springs when Nepali women bathe, but they gather in large, sedentary herds on the banks of rivers to stare openly at us, foreign women washing our hair. Public bathing is a skill we acquire with time.

My first attempt to wash at a spring under the direct observation of a water buffalo shepherd, I thought I was very astute to have brought with me a *lungi*, a colourful sheet to wrap myself in before I removed my clothing. Undressing and bathing were easily done. Redressing my damp skin in clothing made from non-stretch fabric proved far more challenging. I became completely entrapped in my tunic, with one arm extended vertically through the sleeve, which I couldn’t bend because the fabric was twisted and inflexible, and the other hand clutching the soaked

lungi in which the rest of me was wrapped. The situation proved so dire that I had to be rescued and dressed by a more experienced member of the International Society, Australian contingent.

Bathing modestly in public requires cunning, strategy, and self-awareness. When we do not have a lungi, we roll our pant legs up to, but not above, our knees, and scrunch our shirt sleeves up towards our shoulders. We bend double to immerse our hair under water taps or ladle stream water from empty bottles.

Our clothes we knead on rocks and walkways, chafing dirt and soapsuds from the fabric. Sometimes we wade into the river and wash our clothes and our bodies at once, smearing ourselves with one all-purpose bar of soap and squeezing black shampoo from single-use packets like a condiment. As we learn we become more flexible, more adept, and more clean.

We change clothes beneath inquiring gazes and open skies. Society members learn to always wear shawls as the Nepali women do. We learn to wrap and secure the shawls beneath our shirts so both hands are free to remove our tunics and pull on our clean clothes. We learn to drape the shawls in fashionable and practical ways so the ends do not catch or drag. We learn to gather the ends in our hands to lift cooking pots from open fires, or if our shawls are too thin, we gather leaves from nearby scrub and fold them into organic hot pads.

I once trekked with Nepali porters, and while we girls shampooed our hair, one of the men reached beneath the river rocks and extracted a fish with his bare hand. While we conditioned, they built a fire. While we dressed, they cleaned, cooked, and ate the fish. We finished at the same time, both groups refreshed, and continued on.

The Girl Version is walking in places where a single misstep means certain death. We wade barefoot through streams and balance on logs over rapids and trundle in hand-powered cable cars

over flood-stage rivers. We climb many hundreds of metres on blistered feet and descend as many hundreds of metres on throbbing knees. We cross landslides that tore away the mountains. We stop for rest and stare over precipices and into canyons and up at the thinning sky. We spot beehives in the shadows of the cliffs and water buffalo rummaging in narrow pastures. We listen to rumours of tigers and rebels and kidnappers. We pick leeches from our skin with our fingers, or we sprinkle them with salt and watch their skin melt and our blood spill out of their writhing bodies. We are cruel. We are brave. Sometimes we are overcome.

Sometimes we cower in our sleeping bags late into the night, pinching the openings shut over our heads with trembling hands, feeling rodent footsteps on our bodies. Sometimes we refuse to look up, knowing the ceiling is scabbed over with spiders, and that we can't kill them all, and if we do there will be more insects, so we bury our faces in our arms and dream of bubble baths and mosquito netting.

Sometimes we don't sleep for days, not really, and we begin to lose our concentration, our language skills, and our nerve. We eat nothing but rice and lentils for weeks and our digestive systems begin to collapse on themselves. Our hands shake from lack of blood sugar. Our muscles quiver from lack of protein. Our immune systems no longer heal scratches and bites. We begin to believe that we can walk no farther. That we can't even lift our backpacks from where they have fallen by the side of the road. We run out of water, and when we find water we run out of patience for the purifying iodine, but we convince each other to wait, because we know about giardia and typhoid and cholera.

The Girl Version is knowing that feminism is foolishness. We are not ashamed of crying or hormones or fear. We do not shun nail polish or hair dryers or pink. We know that girls can't do

anything boys can do, and certainly not better. We don't have the muscle mass to carry as heavy of backpacks up as steep of hills or over as far of distances. Some of us can trek harder than some of the boys, but collectively we are weaker, so we become more strategic. We learn to pack lighter, and to catch rides on Jeeps and tractors and pack mule trains.

We laugh at the boys, who carry food and more than one change of clothes in their packs. We laugh, and we envy them. We are not allowed to trek with boys for propriety, but we know that trekking is not romantic. We do wonder if they would carry a little peanut butter for us, and maybe an extra shirt for sleeping in. Maybe an extra litre of water.

As we learn to travel lighter, we come to value different things. We trade bulky hairbrushes for plastic combs. We risk bedbugs in village blankets and carry sleeping bag liners instead of the warmer, heavier version. We give up pyjamas. We turn our socks inside out and pretend that they are clean. But we still carry candy, and lip balm, and sometimes our extra set of clothes is pink. We carry cloth headbands to cover our greasy hair because we may be trekkers, but we are still girl trekkers.

The Girl Version is getting credit for showing up, but not respect. Sometimes we are the first foreigners ever seen in a village, and while we frighten the children, we impress the adults. Some of them have never climbed down from their mountain perches and cannot imagine that we made the journey. They assume, always, that it is our first time outside of Kathmandu, and when we begin to name the districts we have trekked their esteem grows. The women are sympathetic. The men are protective.

“It is not safe for women to travel alone in these hills,” they warn, “not when there are so many dangers.”

“There are kidnappers,” they tell us, “and they will sell you to brothels in India.”

“There are snakes,” they say, “you should not go off the trails. You will stay here for the rest of your time.”

Arguing is useless. They will not listen to women, especially not foreign women, and we do not have the words to argue their logic. They will not allow us to travel alone. They do not respect our plans. They consider us reckless and foolish and weak. We cannot leave unless they show us the trail. And so we do not argue.

But we do not stay. We wait, and we listen to their plans, and we sigh and nod, and we consider their warnings, and we sit by the fire and drink tea and ask about their crops and their children. When the moment is right, and the light is gone, and they are finished speaking, then it is our turn to decide. We thank them for their hospitality and their advice, and we inform them that we are leaving in the morning, at first light.

We do leave, but not at first light. Not until they have killed a chicken and their wives have cooked it along with rice and lentils and we leave the village with bloated stomachs in the heat of the day and already our plans and resolve are wilting. But the men have given in, and they show us the trail, and sometimes they come with us to carry our backpacks because they know the hills are too steep for us.

We are grateful for the help, and the rice has turned to gravel in our stomachs, so we hand over our backpacks, only to watch them disappear up the trail on the shoulders of the men, who don't realize that we walk slowly not because of the weight of our packs, but because of the thinness of the air. So we straggle behind them, trying to keep our water bottles in sight as they bound ahead over the boulders, and the gravel in our stomachs grinds to a heavy paste and our blood sugar

crashes and our lungs are being impaled with a thousand burning spikes and we've lost sight of our bags completely.

The men wait for us at the top of the mountain, and we feel guilty for taking them from their fields and their families, so we do not stop to rest on the way. We keep climbing as fast as we can, but now there are two thousand burning spikes in our lungs and our hands begin to shake and our knees tremble and we wish that we had stayed in the village, and we wonder if they are being helpful or punitive, and we wish they would just leave us gasping on the side of the trail, but they are too considerate for that, and they shame us along to our destination village.

When we arrive, we collapse in a scrap of shade and hug our backpacks and gulp water, even though we know it will add to the pain in our stomachs. We are unable to stand or to speak, and so our chaperones introduce us to the patriarchs of this next village and explain that we are foreign women traveling alone. They say abrupt goodbyes and return to their homes, passing on the burden of caring for the helpless foreigners.

"It is not safe for women to travel alone in these hills," our new chaperones warn, "not when there are so many dangers."

"There are kidnapers," they tell us, "and they will sell you to brothels in India."

"There are snakes," they say, "you should not go off the trails. You will stay here for the rest of your time."

And we do not argue.

But we do not stay.

The Girl Version is silent evenings beneath a masterpiece of stars, staring up at heavens that dwarf even these mountains, and the places we came from, and the distance in between. We stare,

and we feel small, and we know that our tiredness and our discomfort are also small. In these moments the mountains are not so high, and the rivers are not so cold. We know that what we packed in our thirty, thirty-five, forty litre backpacks is all that we need in the world, this magnificent world, for days of climbing and nights of wonder, and it makes us feel safe to need so little and to marvel so much.

When we break off our stargazing we return to the village fires to warm our hands and drink tea. When we are silent in the dimness the villagers sometimes forget that we are here, or that we are foreign. We squat with our feet flat on the ground in rubber sandals and stretch our walking muscles in preparation for another day.

The Girl Version is about resilience, not strength. About how fast you can recover, not how much you can survive. About how many times you go on, not how far you can walk each time. There is no way to know the answers until each moment of decision, which is why the Girl Version is largely unhelpful to new members. They don't understand their own strength until they have also chosen to go on.

In the mornings we crawl from our sleeping bags to the smells of tea and smoke and poverty. Our muscles have contracted in the night and we crouch from our room and perch like reptiles on flat stones beside the road to soak in the weak morning sun. We are frozen like pale gargoyles until the warmth frees us to stand and lace our boots and heft our packs and walk again.

Initiating Right

When I first arrived in Kathmandu I went up to the roof of my apartment building every evening to watch planes take off from the airport against a radiant backdrop of snow-capped Himalayan glory. Every evening I pleaded with God to let me on one of those planes. God was the reason I was in Nepal on a ministry team to support a nascent Christian faith in the land of Buddha and Krishna and Shiva and three hundred and thirty million other gods.

For fifteen months I worked as a writer on a team of international volunteers in one of the poorest, wildest, and most beautiful countries in the world. Twice a year up to a dozen teammates I lived, worked, cried—survived—with headed back to their home countries and another group arrived: fresh, clean, and ready to change the world. And jetlagged; and in culture shock; some more resilient than others to the smells of masala spices, incense, and decomposing sewage and the continual presence of idol shrines, stray dogs, and beggar children with hungry eyes. I was one of the less resilient.

During my last January, the peak of Kathmandu misery, when power cuts reached fourteen hours a day and teammates were getting frostbite in their homes, my replacement, Jenny, arrived—friendly, excited, and sick, an early victim of what our team had affectionately dubbed *Nepal stomach*. I wasn't in much better shape. My second wrenched ankle of the year had failed to heal after six weeks, leaving me limping and irritable. An imprudent decision to ride on a tractor through a ragged section of mountain road instead of walking on my throbbing ankle landed me in a neck brace and more pain.

Jenny came to Nepal with international experience, a communications degree, short spiky hair, and a lip ring. Her stated goal was to add a new piercing every year until she reached some

undefined level of perforation. I didn't make for the best recruiter, but Jenny had already signed up, and if I had survived so would she.

Jenny's job, my old job, involved trekking to remote villages and writing stories about Christians and churches and development projects. I had six remaining weeks in Nepal to teach her everything I had learned in the last fifteen months. First we focused on reporting structure, databases, and software. Then we tackled trekking. About twenty percent of what I had learned about trekking could be summed up in an uninspiring orientation manual:

What I Learned about Trekking in Nepal

- It's not as much fun as it sounds.
- Don't eat or drink before an extended bus ride.
- Any bus ride can be extended.
- Don't whine.
- Don't trek with people who whine; or people who are emotionally unstable, who are dramatic, who don't like rice and lentils, who cry easily, who panic, or who pack more than they can carry.
- Never trek alone.
- Your knowledge of your destination's location and your ability to reach said destination are not related.
- Ask everyone you meet for directions; believe about twenty percent of what they say.
- Make a detailed plan for your travel and accommodations before leaving Kathmandu.
- Expect to follow this plan about twenty percent of the time.
- Make the plan anyway.

Beyond these practical items, the principle fact that I felt it necessary to convey to Jenny to prepare her for the work ahead was that trekking in Nepal obliterates your comfort zone; crushes

your self-esteem, pride, and competence; and shatters all the hard protective parts that surround your soul.

The most efficient way to orient Jenny to her job was, of course, to take her to two of the most miserable places on earth: a place called Dang, and a place called Rolpa. I'm not evil. I didn't choose them on purpose. These things just happen, especially on trek. I asked Namrata to accompany me on Jenny's orientation journey as part translator, part consoler. Namrata: the graceful Nepali city slicker whom I had once watched charm a wrathful village moonshine brewer by twirling her polka-dot parasol. Namrata was one of the more permanent members of our team. Her job would be to put Jenny back together when the trek was over and I was on a plane to somewhere with air conditioned vehicles and double yellow lines. It was important that they bond.

The night before we left Kathmandu, Namrata and Jenny slept at my apartment. I contributed an imported brownie mix to the team bonding experience. We divvied out the trekking money and weighed each other's backpacks and held hands and prayed and went to bed. I worried all night. Namrata prayed all night. Jenny vomited all night. We were off to a great start.

By morning Jenny's vomiting had ceased. "I'm so glad it happened last night and not on the bus," she told me, "one of my greatest fears about trekking is vomiting on the bus." I smiled. Nepal has a way of making your greatest fears come true.

The next wave of nausea hit Jenny right as we crested the ring of hills out of Kathmandu into the great wide world of clean air, snow-capped Himalayas, and scanty plumbing and medical care. She vomited a half-dozen times out the window of the moving bus to the amusement of the Nepali bus boys, who grinned and pointed at the crazy white girl who couldn't hold her lentils.

I really did try to be a sympathetic trek leader, but this was my sixth trek in Nepal. I had gone days without eating, run out of water on the side of a mountain, and been lost in a tiger-

inhabited jungle. I was difficult to impress. This was also my last trek, and Jenny's only chance at an orientation I didn't get, and we weren't going to stop after forty-five minutes because of Nepal stomach.

It turned out that vomiting was only the first stage of Jenny's digestive trauma. She pulled her head back in the window suddenly and turned to me with terror in her eyes and I knew that the bruising of her soul was about to begin. Nepali long-distance buses stop at the discretion of the driver. Passengers are wise to avoid eating or drinking or having any needs whatsoever, especially in the first forty-five minutes of a twelve-hour, three hundred-kilometre, trip. Fortunately for Jenny, bus drivers can't control traffic, and a terrible jam gnarled our road all the way down the mountain. I left Namrata to watch the luggage and comfort Jenny and keep the bus from driving away completely and I leaped off to scout available facilities. This process consisted of running from house to house, startling peaceful villagers with my boldness and whiteness, and pleading in Nepali, "Do you have a toilet? Can my sick friend use your toilet?"

"Toilet" is a flexible word in Nepali, and what I came up with, at various points on the journey down the mountain, was an assortment of muddy holes and plastic bins housed in plank and tarp shanties. When I found a suitable location I would run back to the bus, guide Jenny along the trail as fast as she could walk without passing out, make small talk with the fascinated family while she used the facilities, douse her in hand sanitizer, and then guide her back to the road to where the bus might or might not still be stopped in traffic. The more times we repeated this process, the faster the bus moved and the longer we had to walk to catch up, pausing for rest breaks and vomiting breaks and hand sanitizer breaks as necessary along the way, until we saw Namrata waving frantically out the window of a bus, which looked like every other bus, except this one had all of our backpacks and maps and Imodium on-board.

At the bottom of the mountain I ran out of hand sanitizer and traffic broke up and the driver refused to wait again and Jenny's digestive trauma ceased to outwardly manifest itself. She and I settled into our seats on the bus—the ones at the front by the door with extra legroom because I really am a compassionate trek leader and my bruised knees took three weeks to heal after my first trek. Namrata, who is twenty centimetres shorter than Jenny and me, fell asleep in the seat behind us. Jenny stared down at her hands, which were inexplicably locked in a half-clenched position, as if she were in the middle of clawing something to death.

“My fingers are frozen,” she said to me, “I can't move them. Why are they doing this? What's happening? Why can't I move my fingers?”

“Because you were vomiting so hard,” I answered calmly, “and your body is panicking. Drink some water. You'll be fine.”

Jenny asked me several days later how I knew what had happened to her hands, and I admitted that I had no idea. “It seemed plausible at the time,” I told her, “Besides, if it were something terrible, what were we going to do about it?” This is the worldview of Nepal, a country whose national slogan is, “what to do?” with the implied answer of “there's nothing you can do,” and a deep sigh, and intractable patience.

While Jenny's first bus ride was exceptionally difficult, trekking in the Himalayas is always gruelling and traumatic. Being responsible to produce publication-worthy stories on specific subjects afterwards makes it worse. While I hadn't learned anything that made the job easier, I had developed a few guiding principles:

What I Learned about Writing in Nepal

- It's not as much fun as it sounds.
- Your language level and your ability to comprehend emotional truths about strangers' lives are not necessarily related.
- When interviewing in a foreign language, sit close to your subject, use your hands, verify everything with yes/no questions, and expect it to take forever and be exhausting.
- Write everything down; you won't have the mental stamina to remember it later.
- Twenty percent of what you write will be untrue.
- You will never know which twenty percent.
- People tell the best stories when you are the most exhausted, ill, and discouraged, or late at night when your headlamp batteries have just died.
- Make a detailed plan of your objectives, strategies, and interview subjects before leaving the capital.
- You will accomplish only twenty percent of what you plan.
- Make the plan anyway.

Writing other people's stories in Nepal is part skill, part torment, part illusion, part wonder, and part clairvoyance, about twenty percent of each. The ratios vary depending on how long it's been since you slept, how well you speak Nepali, and how often your interview is interrupted by chickens, goats, Maoists, and small children. In essence, writing becomes less about craft and more about tenacity, imagination, and luck—none of which can be taught.

Jenny and Namrata and I eventually reached the border of Dang district, which is pronounced "dahng," although "dang" is often more appropriate. Dang lies in the hot flatlands in

the south of Nepal, below the Himalayas, where there are still roads. The low, whitewashed structure where Jenny and Namrata and I spent a memorable night functioned as a family home, a restaurant, a hotel, and a church. We were assigned one long room with a stooped wooden door and plaster walls decorated with posters of Hindu gods and a photo of a herd of elephants. The elephants stood in an immovable mass with flared ears and disapproving eyes. The caption below the photo read, “Do What Is Right,” because, I suppose, elephants always do. Or because they attack people who don’t, which was disconcerting because I had always been afraid of Nepal’s tigers, not the elephants, and if the elephants felt that I wasn’t doing right by Jenny, I wasn’t prepared to defend myself.

Our room was furnished with a bed against the back wall. The three of us, all college-educated adults, automatically decided to sleep on the bed out of sheer habit without taking into consideration its size or composition: a narrow mattress of rough-hewn lumber covered by a single layer of coarsely woven blanket. It wasn’t until we and our sleeping bags and wadded-up-sweatshirt pillows were all piled onto the bed that we realized what a bad idea this was. By that time our hosts had gone to bed, and it was too late to ask for the extra blankets that might have made sleeping on the floor an option. Even the hot flatlands get cold at night in Nepal. None of us had enough bedding to keep warm on the floor.

The bed at least elevated us above the chill, so we snuggled down for the night, as much as you can snuggle into a layer of planks. We laid head to foot, the only way we fit, and as the trek leader and the primary champion of the idea of sleeping on the bed, and as someone concerned about doing the right thing for fear of the elephants, I volunteered to be in the middle with all four of Jenny and Namrata’s feet in my face. The bed was approximately ten centimetres wider than their combined width at the shoulders, if they lay on their sides, so I crossed my ankles, lined my feet up to fit in the gap between Jenny and Namrata, and stared at the ceiling, waiting for morning.

To say I didn't sleep would be an exaggeration. I slept like a baby: fitfully, in short segments, with accompanying bouts of whimpering. Each time I awoke I re-crossed my ankles to allow blood-flow to return to the opposite foot. Sometime after the absolute darkness of pre-industrial village nights dissipated and just before the roosters emerged from a much more restful sleep than I had endured, Jenny and Namrata and I woke up at the same time. We must have woken each other with our collective moaning. At this point both of my feet were numb from either lack of circulation or from the cold. Every joint in my body ached, even the joints I don't typically think about having, like the subtalar joint just below the ankle and the little joints where my ribs connect to my spine. We pulled our throbbing skeletons into crouched positions and waited again for morning, which would at least bring hot tea and sunshine, even if not comfort or true relief.

Our first few days in Dang we accomplished very little in the way of research or interviews, and a lot in the way of toughening and emotional exfoliation. Part of my orientation programme for Jenny involved demonstrating a dozen different ways to not get a story:

How to Fail as a Writer in Nepal

- Travel an extra eight hours by bus to witness the use of a solar audio device that no one remembered to put out in the sun.
- Try to interview a timid, illiterate villager in the presence of an educated, assertive community leader whose opinion doesn't matter to you.
- Allow yourself to become so frustrated that you must catch and snuggle a baby goat to avoid being attacked by the watchful elephants.
- Attempt to reach a village you don't know the name of to find someone you've never met without a phone number or directions.
- Expend all of your language skill, cultural dexterity, and self-control trying to convince a well-meaning local pastor that you did not come to his village to perform dramas, educate children, or sing in church on Saturday morning.
- Eat food so spicy that your shriveled tongue can't form comprehensible syllables with which to ask your interview questions.
- Allow yourself to wallow in self-pity until you can no longer remember which stories you came to write or why.

We spent almost a week in Dang moving from village to village practicing these tactics, including a two-day detour to write about Bible storying, which the team had finished the day before we arrived, and literacy classes, which would start the week after we left. Instead of collecting publishable material we sat in the dark with an enthusiastic pastor who told long, linguistically

challenging stories about the work of other organizations while his wife fed us bowls of lentils and marijuana seeds. “Like the leaf in Bob Marley’s logo,” the team explained.

For three days we stayed in the loft bedroom of another pastor’s home, rotating our sleeping arrangements systematically. Each night two of us slept in the bed on top of what was supposed to be a heavy winter blanket, but which we used as a mattress. The third team member slept on the floor on top of a second blanket provided to us by our gracious hosts. We slept in our winter coats, having lost all sense of fashion and appropriateness.

The trauma began, of course, on Jenny’s floor rotation. I never saw the source of the commotion. I slept relatively soundly that night and when I woke up three things were happening simultaneously: someone was screaming, Namrata was reaching over me to turn on a light, and Jenny was leaping into bed with us. The story, as it tumbled out of my friends in the middle of the night, was that Namrata had been awake the longest, listening to the shufflings and scratchings of a creature exploring the corners above the mud-packed ceiling. Jenny woke up when something cat-sized and very much alive landed on her from above.

The next night was my turn on the floor, and I slept reasonably well once again. In the morning Jenny had wide, tired eyes, “I can’t believe you slept through that last night.”

“Through what?”

“The rat. He came back and was crawling all around you on the floor.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“I thought you needed the sleep. I was going to wake you up if he actually climbed on your sleeping bag, but he never did.”

And that’s when I realized that we were only twenty percent of the way through the trek and I had already achieved my primary orientation goal. Parts of Jenny’s inner being had crumbled as she

vomited in public, shivered through achy nights, and dodged a rodent falling from the sky. Now she could contextualize her life according to a new set of standards, where doing the right thing might mean letting your trek leader sleep peacefully thirty centimetres from something terrifying that isn't actually a threat.

After sampling a half-dozen options for conscientiously failing at our job, we left Dang and the flatlands and headed straight north up into the hills. After all, it's not a real trek if you don't edge your way across the face of a landslide at least once. We met up with two other foreign girls, Chris and Madie, who had also been trekking in Dang. Together the five of us planned to attend a regional HIV/AIDS awareness conference conveniently located one moderate day's walk from the northernmost road in Rolpa. The descriptions I had heard of Rolpa placed it at about the twenty percent mark of my "how hard is the district" trekking scale between Dadeldhura, where I collapsed halfway up a modest hill on my first ever day of trek simply because it was hot, and Okhaldunga, where I climbed barefoot on a slope so steep my favourite trekking shoes had no traction. Rolpa would be tough, but probably wouldn't reduce us to our hands and knees.

Unfortunately, my pre-trek research was incomplete. There were a few items that I didn't think to ask, and nobody thought to tell me:

Things I Should Have Known about Rolpa

- Rolpa had been the heartland of the Maoist insurrection in Nepal since rebels burned down a police station in 1996.
- In the words of a Rolpa cadre, “If violence could solve everything, then we would have had our government a long time ago.”
- The civil war ostensibly ended in 2006 when the king resumed absolute power for a brief period until the abolishment of the monarchy and establishment of a series of interim constitutions and governments.
- In recent years the Maoists had been on a sort of public relations campaign in Rolpa to change their image from a gang of thugs to a civilized political party coexisting with the police they once attacked.

Maoists had already led two different coalition governments by the time I journeyed into Rolpa, but violence is a difficult lifestyle to shed, and our trek came less than a year after they bussed tens of thousands of people into Kathmandu to demand the resignation of the then-prime minister and his party. The cadres shut down all schools, commerce, and motorized transportation nationwide for six days by sheer intimidation. Forget the elephants; Rolpa had its own enforcers.

Jenny and I rode across the border on the roof of the bus because it’s less dusty than being inside on a dirt road in dry season and because Jenny didn’t think I had the guts to do it in my neck brace and I needed a refill of trek-leader bravado. The views of the rising hills—four thousand metres is still a foothill in Nepal—were spectacular in the early spring light. A vibrant blue sky contrasted perfectly with the red and white hammer and sickle flags draping bamboo archways at the entrance to every village.

“I really want to take one of those flags home as a souvenir,” Jenny told me. “I’ll bet I could stand up and grab one when we pass under the next arch. Do you think we would go to jail?”

“No,” I answered, “we’d be deported. Go for it. I’m leaving in two weeks anyway.” She refrained.

When we reached the last bus-accessible village in Rolpa the sun was setting in a panorama of fire and light. The high hills rose higher still to the north and sloped towards the plains behind us to the south. Jenny and I climbed down from the roof to re-join the rest of the group. We hoisted our backpacks and dusted each other off and noticed two official looking, but not uniformed, men watching us. It wasn’t unusual for us to be stared at, but these men were rather business-like. They approached and talked to Namrata, assuming that none of the rest of us spoke Nepali. They were policemen and they instructed us to report to the police station that evening for an unidentified purpose. We were to bring our passports. Namrata naturally thought to ask for enough time to wash our faces and brush our hair before being interrogated. The men left us alone and we soon found a room in a restaurant/hotel combo.

We dropped our backpacks on the beds and circled up for a team meeting. Technically Chris led her team with Madie, but I had more trekking experience, better Nepali, directions to the conference, and less to lose if the interview went badly. Chris deferred. We rehearsed our story. Being illegal and sounding suspicious are not the same thing, and we were determined to not do either. Namrata would be fine. She was simply a friend. Jenny and Chris and I had American passports, which we assumed was a mark in our favour in dealing with the police, although probably not with Maoists. Madie was from Namibia, but if she said “African” quickly it sounded like “American.” Namibia does not have an embassy in Nepal, so we agreed that her nationality was subject to misunderstanding and if she needed to be American, we would arrange for temporary asylum.

The five of us paraded up to the police station with photocopies of our passports and our prepared statements about being tourists on our way to an HIV/AIDS awareness conference, which was entirely true, but still had a feeling of intrigue in the context of police questioning in a rebel stronghold. “The most important fact about us,” I reminded my team, “is that we aren’t Maoists. Unless we meet Maoists, in which case we need to be very open-minded.”

The interview with the police chief turned out to be anti-climactic. He asked us why we were in Rolpa and was interested in the HIV/AIDS conference. Namrata did most of the talking and I translated for Jenny. An assistant copied information from our passports into a giant ledger book. There weren’t a lot of entries in the ledger. Not a lot of tourists wander through Rolpa. The police chief had asked us to come out of concern for our safety. All foreigners had to sign in and out of the district to make sure the Maoists didn’t carry them away. Statistically, we were considerably more likely to die in a landslide than to be kidnapped by Maoists, but we appreciated his concern. He appreciated our cooperation. We would not be deported.

Back at our hotel I called a second team gathering on one of the beds. I had something important for us to process together. Something I had been carrying with me since Kathmandu. My final gift, the one right thing I could do for my team that would make up for all our misery to this point and motivate us to finish strong, no matter the challenges waiting beyond the road, past the checkpoints, and up into the wildest mountains in the world: a bar of chocolate.

A Toblerone bar, to be precise, it’s packaging once shiny and appealing, now dented and creased after eleven days crammed in my backpack. We opened the cardboard wrapper ceremoniously and stared at the beautiful pyramids of chocolate goodness. There were ten. I broke off two for each of us and distributed them around the circle. There was one piece left. Everyone swore they already had two. It was almost biblical: the trekker’s bar of Toblerone that never ran out.

I took the last piece and held it respectfully. Then I bit off a chunk—about twenty percent—and handed it to Madie, who ate another fifth and passed it on to Chris, then to Namrata, and then to Jenny.

Containment

At an American sporting goods store they told me to pack ten litres for every day. A three-day hike requires a thirty-litre backpack. A ten-day trip requires a pair of pack mules. But this was an eighteen-day trek over land that even pack mules couldn't climb and the wreckage of my thirty-six-litre pack is strewn across the concrete floor of my apartment's storage room. I will allow only paper and electronic items to enter my bedroom without first being soaked for at least twenty-four hours in a pesticide solution capable of killing both bedbugs and the stench of eighteen days' sweat.

The backpack itself will likely never fully recover. Pesticide solution eats away at waterproofed fabric. Bus hustlers heave luggage onto roofs by straps and zipper pulls. Local tarps are no match for monsoon rains. My roommate knew as much when she loaned me the bag, and it serves her right for importing a top-quality, comfort-strap, designed-especially-for-women, trekking backpack in a light cream colour. Once sleek and fashionable, the bag now suffers from cellulite and jaundice.

I start unpacking at the bottom and work my way up, distributing the items on which my life has sometimes literally depended into forlorn heaps: to soak, too fragile to soak, to destroy. When I pull on a zipper my fleece sleeping bag liner—which I had the foresight to purchase in chocolate brown—billows out of the lowest compartment. The liner's zipper is broken, and despite the emotional tug of dozens of nights with nothing else separating me from spiders, concrete floors, and other prostrate bodies, the fleece liner inaugurates the trash pile. My “clean” pyjama t-shirt, reserved for nights when I had both the energy and privacy necessary for changing, lands in the “to soak” bucket.

The top of the lowest backpack pouch contains a drawstring opening into the main compartment. I continue to disembowel the backpack, removing the first-aid kit, which is positioned against the opening to facilitate quick extraction at critical and usually awkward moments. Above the first-aid kit are my backup supplies. Granola bars choc-full of vitamins and protein have warped over the curve of the extra Ace bandage I jammed into the first aid kit. The “emergency bars” are a team-mandated trekking requirement, but I also hauled along Clif Bars that my grandmother mailed to me in padded envelopes. I carried a half of a Clif Bar per day, which I selfishly ate each morning in front of my trek-mates to stabilize my blood sugar under the guise of having to take “medicine” (multivitamins). I refuse to feel bad; my trek-mates also have grandmothers.

Mashed against the granola bars are the cleats of my hiking boots, an impulse buy before I understood the difference between hiking in the Appalachians and trekking in the Himalayas. The boots form their own separate pile—I will wash, but not soak them, and I will spare them the ferocious scrubbing my housekeeper will subject the rest of my submersible belongings to. Above the boots is my extra roll of toilet paper in an imported heavy-duty Ziploc bag and my alternate set of clothes, double-bagged to contain the odour. These were positioned to cushion the only expensive thing I carried in my backpack: a video projector the size of an iPhone accompanied by an external battery, solar charging panel, and associated cords. The friend I borrowed it from assured me the case was waterproof. The bus hustler assured me that the luggage was securely tarped on the roof. My backpack, sleeping bag liner, pyjamas, and toilet paper are all damp. The projector is dry.

My other valuables are smaller, and I carried them in a sling bag permanently fastened to my body. My backpack held the relative luxuries; my sling bag held the essentials of life: money, camera, tripod, toothbrush, hand sanitizer, toilet paper, trash bag, notebook, pens, hard candy, and iodine. All else was vanity.

Above the projector, only my cold-weather gear remains. I unfold a brown hoodie I inherited from an old roommate. It has faded to an extraordinary shade of brown that cannot be made to appear dirty. The hoodie's front pocket functioned both as a hand warmer and a secret compartment for electronics or personal items I was not willing to share. Mashed together with the sweatshirt is a black shawl, one of the two I always travel with, and one of which I wore continuously. The black shawl is a female trekker's equivalent of the little black dress. When wrapped appropriately, it turned even the brown hoodie into acceptable attire for the version of formal events I encountered. At night I wrapped it around my waist like a blanket as an extra layer of padding and warmth. The black shawl has also served as a dressing room, hand towel, hot pad, pillow, outhouse door, circulation fan, and seat cushion.

The second shawl is still wrapped around my neck. It is a beige colour with a delicate grey pattern, and composed of a unique fabric that alternates between opaque and transparent, depending on my needs. This shawl has been an effective camouflage, as I can see out, but curious onlookers cannot see through. I have successfully transformed it into a mosquito net, fly screen, sunscreen, privacy screen, sweat mop, and wallpaper.

The top flap of the backpack is divided down the middle to form two small compartments easily accessible from the outside. One is empty. It used to hold candy and packets of energy-drink powder. The other compartment still holds toiletries: toothpaste, soap, deodorant (as if it helped), nail clippers, hair ties, single-use shampoo packets, and baby wipes. If iodine really saved my life (by purifying drinking water without yet destroying my thyroid), baby wipes saved my sanity. After eighteen days I consider two wipes to equal a shower.

The bag is empty now, but I grope through the pouches again. A friend soaked her iPod overnight in pesticide. I carry the backpack and bucket of submersible items to the bathroom and

stand on the white tile floor staring at my muddy footprints. I will shower next, and smear myself with pesticide. I will shampoo my hair three times before the water runs clear. I will wash off the grit and sweat and dust and smog and be free and clean and eat imported food and sleep in a bed with sheets and a pillow.

I will shop for souvenirs and take cheap X-rays of lingering injuries. I will hug goodbye to international friends I will see on Skype and Nepali friends I may never see again. In a week I will board a series of planes and arrive at my parents' house in America and sleep in a bed with a real mattress and wake up to a life that doesn't fit in thirty-six litres anymore.

GREAT CIRCLES

[greyt **sur-kubl**] *noun*

1. a circle of which a segment represents the shortest distance between two points on the surface of the earth.

How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.

A. A. Milne, Winnie-the-Pooh

.

Inconveniences

An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered.

G. K. Chesterton

The year I graduated from college, I spent three days with a woman I didn't know who lived in an apartment complex in Grenoble, France. I went as a travelling companion for my aunt, who worked in personnel for an international company and had been sent to visit its workers in North Africa and France. My aunt and I and our American hostess had to climb the stairs to the eighth floor that afternoon, suitcases in hand, because of the on-going elevator repair. Descending an hour later to an evening meeting we decided to take the newly refurbished elevator, presuming it to be the faster way. Our first mistake.

Inside, the elevator was like any other in a middle-class apartment building of a first-world country: sedate, wood-panelled, with a mirrored ceiling so we would not feel too confined. The only exceptions to the norm were two steel rails installed across the width of the elevator, segmenting off a third of the interior space to the left of the door. Our hostess, Bridget, commented that the addition of the bars must have been the reason the elevator was shut down for the afternoon. We shrugged, unconcerned by yet another oddity of French custom. Our second mistake.

Bridget pressed the ground floor button and the elevator began to descend, gliding noiselessly until somewhere between the third and fourth floors, where it paused and remained suspended. My aunt and I were at this point in the second, and by far most developed, of three countries on our itinerary; with an experienced hostess who spoke French and made effective use of the intercom to communicate with the elevator company; on our way to attend, for social purposes

only, a meeting that didn't concern us; and in a city where elevators could be trusted not to fall from the sky and repairmen could be expected to arrive within the promised timeframe. We were not concerned.

Bridget, when she finished explaining our situation to the intercom operator in polished French, turned to us with an expression of dismay. Bridget had lived in Grenoble for five years; did not frequently find herself responsible for a pair of helpless Americans who could neither speak the language nor navigate the city; was expected at the meeting to participate in delicate business discussions that might profoundly affect her future; could not get a signal on her cell phone to notify her partners that we would be late; was not at all pleased to be confined in two-thirds of a small space with people she barely knew. Bridget was tense.

I had always thought, when stuck in elevators on other occasions, that there was nothing I could do about it except wait, which filled me with an apathetic calm. But I don't handle tension well, and Bridget's pursed lips and nervous fidgeting bothered me considerably more than being trapped in a small space, and it occurred to me for the first time in my life that I had a choice about how to spend my elevator time. I resolved to amuse myself.

My aunt, the ever-practical traveller, encouraged us all to sit down, as the floor had undoubtedly been cleaned after the elevator repair. This was France, after all. While there was sufficient room for three people to stand, it seemed as though the steel bars across the side of the elevator had been installed specifically to prevent seated occupants from getting comfortable; or, possibly, to provide entertainment: a distinction based on perspective. In this case I found the best perspective by weaving my upper body under the lower bar and out between the two bars and taking photos of the mirrored ceiling, a sort of inverted birds' eye view of ourselves. Bridget and my aunt joined in the shenanigans of my bar and mirror photo shoot until all three of us collapsed in laughter

on the linoleum floor. We rehearsed the story we would tell at the meeting to explain our tardiness, evolving from a simple “we got stuck in the elevator” to something more like being imprisoned in the animal cages of a travelling circus.

Our confinement lasted only thirty minutes. The elevator repairman had not gone far and he released us with a quick twist of a crowbar. I extracted myself from between the barriers, and by the time we arrived at the meeting none of us could remember what had possessed us to be intentionally ridiculous for half an hour in a respectable elevator in a proper city in very civilized France. Or why we had enjoyed it so much. Or why we were now friends.

Anticipation

“Didi?”

“Mmm.”

“Are you awake?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“I have a fever.”

My sleepy roommate sat up and squinted at me as the fluorescent light flickered on. “What do you need?”

Her simple question, asked in a concerned-but-too-sleepy-to-be-pushy voice, triggered the flow of tears. I needed everything. A hug. A doctor. A glass of water. A comfortable bed with fitted sheets. A plane ticket to someplace with hot showers. Fuzzy socks. My mom. I settled for water and the socks. She brought me a jacket too, confirmed my fever, looked appropriately sympathetic, turned off the light, and went back to bed.

My roommate had been in Nepal exactly ten days at that point. In ten days we had covered the basics—family members, hobbies, educational background—but we hadn’t quite reached the middle-of-the-night-misery-and-tears stage of our relationship. Fortunately, relationship stages work differently in Nepal.

The last time I was sick in the night I was new to the team and didn’t wake anybody up. My roommate at the time, an experienced team member who could sense distress even in her sleep, found me sprawled on the kitchen floor over a plastic bowl, swivelling the beam of my headlamp around the room to keep the cockroaches at bay. A few months later it was me holding that same

plastic bowl for a brand-new teammate puking her guts out on the front-porch steps. She was horrified. “I can’t believe I’m doing this. I don’t even know you!”

“We’ve all done it,” I told her, “I’ll do it to you someday.” But she wasn’t there when the fever came to me in the middle of the night less than a week later. We’ll be here together for six more months. There’s still time.

Stereotypes

It works like this:

You get a new roommate from South Korea. You show her around the city and cook her dinner and teach her to bucket bathe and consider yourselves bonded. But the next morning, when you offer her your famous pancakes with imported peanut butter and syrup, she stares at you like a crazy person and backs out of the room looking ill. And then you remember—Koreans don't eat sweet things for breakfast. And you're not offended. And neither is she, because you're an American and you can't help slathering everything you see with peanut butter. So you laugh at each other and stay friends.

Or:

You invite a Namibian to your flat in Kathmandu for lunch. She arrives in fluorescent green pants and an orange plaid shirt. You are both new to Nepal, so you confide how the garbage on the street disgusts you. The Namibian affirms that it is very hard to have to wear shoes all the time. And you don't find it nearly as weird as if a Brit had said the same thing.

The Swiss were the best bread bakers on my team in Nepal and the Americans really did talk the loudest. When the bookkeeper announced in a meeting that she needed assistants to handle petty cash, every eye in the room turned to the German contingency. Rightly so. They were meticulous, every one of them without exception. Two volunteered for the job and every week the accounts balanced and the columns added up and the bills were organized by both denomination and serial number.

Of course, a Malaysian helped with the petty cash too, and the bookkeeper was Czech, and their work was also impeccable. We didn't discriminate; we assumed. You have to allow for the occasional German who absolutely loves the lawless, lane-less, speed limitless, chaos of Asian traffic. Or the Korean who cooks better fried chicken than KFC. Or the African who turns out to be completely unable to play the drums. I once asked a Malaysian for her apple pie recipe and felt like a traitor. And then I remembered: I'm an American, and we love exceptions. Stereotypically.

Speaking Foreign

I

The carpeting where Air Canada passengers disembark from the train is dusty blue, low pile. I make myself comfortable against a giant flowerpot sprouting a fake palm tree. I have a flight tracker app, two McDonald's milkshakes, and a clear view of arriving passengers stripping off parkas and scarves under a Disney World banner. Becca emerges from the crowd but doesn't see me camouflaged against the terra cotta, so I stand and wave at her with a milkshake. We hug for a moment and then she pulls away, *This is so crazy! Really I am in America?*

While we wait for her luggage she gives me a familiar disclaimer, *I have not speak English for one year. But you are not really American, so maybe you will understand something.*

What Becca is referring to is not my nationality, but my linguistic prowess: I speak Foreign.

II

In twenty-five years I have learned five languages, three alphabets, and two number systems.

I think in	English
speak	English and Nepali
understand	English, Nepali, and Spanish
read	English, Nepali, Spanish, and Russian
feel waves of nostalgia when I hear	English, Nepali, Spanish, Russian, or Creole

Unfortunately, exposure to multiple languages is not always an asset. Sometimes Foreign is all I speak, like when I asked my Nepali language teacher if she would meet friends over the

weekend to eat them and for another tutor to please turn himself into a cup of tea. Sometimes I hear one language and respond in a different one and usually don't realize it unless the other person looks exceptionally confused. For months of high school Spanish classes I counted dutifully, *uno, dos, tres, cuatro*.

When Becca and I first became friends we lived in Nepal on an international team and dinner conversations in our apartment went something like this:

A Korean: *Will you pass the salt?*

A Malaysian: *I'm not thirsty.*

If someone in our flat didn't understand a simple word that they probably really did know, we would go around the room and each say the word, in English, with our varying pronunciations, until one of the versions clicked:

A Korean: *Birthday?* *What is birthday?*

A Malaysian: *Birthday.*

The Korean: *Oh, yes, birthday.*

General consensus recognized the Americans as the easiest native English speakers to understand, with the exception of a dissenting group of Koreans who had learned all their English in New Zealand and insisted that the Australians had much clearer pronunciation.

A Czech girl moved in with us a few months after Becca moved out and she wanted to know why the floors of our kitchen cupboards were littered with mothballs. *It's so we don't have too many cockroaches*, we explained, which drew a blank from the Czech.

Insects? Bugs that are black? If there was a nuclear bomb they would survive and they crawl on the floor and up the walls sometimes they fly, but not in Nepal usually.

Cockroaches are one of the more challenging animal species to mime. After exhausting our imaginations, we turned for help to another Czech who had been on our team longer, and who recognized the word in English, but had forgotten its equivalent in her mother tongue. The two of them delved into a detailed discussion of Czech insect taxonomy and emerged with an English translation of the word they thought meant cockroach in Czech: *fly mouse*.

Now it was their turn to mime. After a few minutes of shoulder shrugging I made a guess: *A bat?*

The more experienced Czech answered, *No, I don't think so.* And then she switched from English to Foreign. *Oh! Batman! Yes, a bat!* As far as I know, our Czech roommate still doesn't know what a cockroach is or why our house smelled like mothballs, but that was the day I achieved Level One Foreign Proficiency: Word Identification.

III

Becca is a French-speaking Swiss on her way home from an internship in Canada. My French consists of the words *voilà, touché, bon jour* and a little song she taught me that sounds like *soda pop soda pop something something nutella*, although Becca insists my pronunciation is somewhat misleading. The only language we have in common is English.

You'll be fine, I tell her as the luggage on the carousel lumbers by, *I'll talk today and you can talk later.*

She nods as she spots her suitcase, *In few days I remember more and I tell you everything about Quebec.* We step out of the elevator at the parking garage into a blast of eighty-degree humidity.

I don't know Florida is tropical, Becca gasps, *do you have have ?*

Yes, I answer, *we have palm trees.* I speak Foreign well.

IV

Our dining room in Nepal had two arched doorways, aqua walls, and forty centimetres of space on either side of the table. Five of us ate our meals off the laminate surface with an eclectic assortment of utensils. One typical evening a Korean and a Malaysian used chopsticks to delicately lift chunks of stir-fry to their mouths and were teaching Becca to do the same. The Chilean ate everything with a knife and soup spoon and I scooped the rice into seaweed wrappers with my fingers, Nepali-style.

The Korean wanted fruit for dessert but was blocked in by the Malaysian's chair. *Will you give me a mango?* she asked, pointing with her chin towards a wire basket at the end of the table.

The Malaysian reached towards it and commented, *I think they are they are How do you say when fruit is too mature?*

All eyes turned to me, the resident native English speaker and designated authority on all things vocabulary. *It's too ripe*, I offered, which was not the most natural phrasing, but it was better than *mature*, the mangos in question weren't *rotten*, and I wasn't willing to attempt *mealy*.

Becca wanted clarification: *Ripe? Isn't that what you write on the stone when you are dead?*

My mind flashed a thousand images of tombstones, scanning for a word that looked or sounded like *ripe*. *No that's RIP*, I concluded.

The Korean continued the phonetic train of thought, slowly mouthing over the new word. *Ok so the fruit is rape.*

A different thousand images flashed through my mind. *No rape is different.* This was as far as I was willing to go over dinner.

The Chilean rescued me from the expectant silence: *What is it when you cut crops during harvest?*

Couldn't *harvest* be a verb? Four sets of brown eyes stared into my blue ones. *Pick? Ingather? Mow down with a combine?* The Chilean wasn't making this up. There had to be a word for it that sounded like *rape*. Or *ripe*. My reputation as a human thesaurus was at stake.

Reap! I burst out. The brown eyes widened slightly in surprise at my enthusiasm. *You reap crops at harvest time.*

The vocabulary lesson ended there after one stimulating round of Foreign Proficiency Level Two: Vocabulary Dominos. Becca shrugged and mopped up stray rice grains with a seaweed wrapper dipped in soy sauce. The Malaysian lifted a single pea in her chopsticks without squishing it. The Korean finished slicing the mango with disappointment. It was too mature.

V

The reason Becca found my Foreign skills so unusual for an American is that Americans, to be stereotypical for the sake of efficiency, have an odd theory that all languages follow logical rules, and if you think hard enough, you can speak any of them perfectly. The theory is deceptively accurate. Languages—all six thousand something of them—are logical. And they do all follow rules, or maybe guidelines, and at least a few hundred people speak each one perfectly. The catch is that each language functions in a different dimension of logic and you must first disengage your brain from every verbal and aural skill it has ever learned before attempting to master new ones. Or, you can give in to fate and circumstance and learn Foreign instead, which is faster and more convenient, but over time has a devastating effect on your perceived intelligence.

Haitian Creole, for example, is an artificial language comprised of bits and pieces of African tribal tongues and basic French grammar, which is logical considering the ethnic history of the country. The French brought slaves to the island and grouped them so that they did not have a

common language in which to revolt. The plan was effective for a while, but people who live together always learn to communicate eventually, and Creole spontaneously combusted. It is a grammatically simple language of colour, sunshine, word pictures, vivid metaphors, and French verbs in imperative form. But if you don't know the history and can't let go of the rules that necessarily disappeared in the process of amalgamating speech under duress, it will drive you crazy to be constantly greeted with the question, *Are you walking?* to which you are expected to reply, *Yes, I am walking*, even though it makes you feel like a fool.

VI

Becca and I find a Groupon for a bull-riding rodeo on Saturday night. The arena is on the same property as the state fair, which, I explain to Becca as we drive, is like a combination of an amusement park and a circus. We miss the first parking lot and the attendants wave us in circles through one-way traffic lanes. We pass the carousel and Ferris wheel all lit up in the dark. Eventually we locate the back entrance of a field-turned-parking-lot where we are the only sedan.

It's cold at night in February, even in Florida, and as we shiver our way across the field to the rodeo I ask Becca to teach me to conjugate a verb in French as a distraction. I choose a strategic verb: *to see a dolphin*, which is something I've promised we will do during her visit.

Je vois un dauphin, she begins slowly. *Vous voyez un dauphin. Nous voyons un dauphin.*

And I repeat back to her more slowly *Zhe vva a dolfa. Vu voye a dolfa.*

The rodeo begins with the playing of the national anthem while a cowgirl gallops around the arena dressed in sequins and boots and waving a huge American flag. I suddenly feel very patriotic, which lasts only until Becca begins to ask questions.

Is this only an American sport? The cows are angry. Why do these men want to sit on them?
Why do they only get points if they stay on for eight seconds? What does it mean eight seconds?

VII

Russian language, in contrast to Creole, empirically proves that you are not as smart as you have always believed. Cases rather than word order determine part of speech, so until you have a firm grasp of the entire matrix of grammatical endings you have no idea if you see Spot run or Spot sees you running or you are both running and seeing at the same time. Every word in the sentence has to agree with its relevant neighbours in number (singular or plural), gender (masculine, feminine, neuter), and case (nominative, accusative, genitive, dative, instrumental, prepositional), which is why Russians usually beat Americans in chess. They have been thinking four moves ahead since they put their first sentences together.

The Cyrillic alphabet looks impressive and is fairly easy to learn as long as your brain can handle the fact that a *б* is now a *в*, an *н* is an *и*, an *м* is a *т*, and a *р* is an *л*. The rules of the very logical Russian language have no exceptions, allow no personalization, and mistakes render sentences incomprehensible. Russian grammar can melt an American brain into a twitching puddle of personal freedom and independence by the end of the list of habitual past tense reflexive verb endings. My brain, for example.

VIII

Living in my flat in Nepal was like living in a language kaleidoscope. I was learning Nepali at the same time, and so my brain was rapidly becoming, as a friend described it, *one confused noodle*. I

turned to my Korean roommate one evening and asked, *Do you know where is trash?* She looked back at me and said, *Why are you speaking Korean English?*

Some roommates fell into linguistic no-man's-land even more quickly than I did. *Why you buy no milk?* a newly arrived American asked a Dutch, who responded, *Why you speak no English?* Another American had lived in our house only a few days before her language disintegrated in the middle of a relatively simple sentence, *Do you remember that time we got flu disease? bird disease? bird flu?*

A Namibian, who learned English by reading Victorian novels and had a better vocabulary than any of the Americans, tried to comfort us in our grief over the degeneration of our native language skills. *Everything is going to be ok. Benny's coming home. And Lassie too.*

And, somehow, it made me feel better, even though Benny's homecoming was not something I had been especially anticipating. Proficiency Level Three: Emotional Transference.

IX

Becca and I drive to the Atlantic to watch the sun rise over the water. I navigate the dark highways by the pink and purple lines of the GPS. Our estimated arrival time glows in the bottom corner: 6:04.

Becca's English skills have warmed up after a week in the US and it is her turn to talk. *Tell me about these last six months*, I prompt, *you were studying social work, right?*

Quebec is amazing, she says, *my my*

internship? I suggest

yes, internship, is really good. I think I miss my friend and my work when I go back in Switzerland.

She tells me about the differences between the Canadian and Swiss social work systems, how she loves the Québécois accent, how she saw whales, but not a moose, how she counselled homeless

men and women during the long, frozen days. She tells me all of this in the present tense. I supply occasional nouns and learn new words that she doesn't realize are French.

Look! Becca points to the GPS, *you win one minute.*

Our ETA now reads 6:03.

That's good, I say, *I don't want it to be light yet when we get there.*

Me too.

X

Russian conjugates verbs with such specificity that you can tell how many people are going to the store, whether they are walking or taking motorized transport, how long they will stay, and whether they intend to return, all from the verb ending. Nepali, in contrast, doesn't even feel the need to distinguish between *he* and *she* or present, future, and habitual tense.

So, you see Jane, or John, or you will see them, or you usually see them, the specifics being defined by context, which becomes more and more difficult as the conversation continues and you lose track of Jane and John and their friends and who it is that was going to the store or seeing Spot. A Japanese-Australian visitor kept wondering why Nepalis automatically assumed she was from China. It turns out that **छैन**, pronounced *chaina*, the only word she thought she understood on the streets, is the negative form of the verbs *to be* and *to have*. Anything that isn't, or won't be, or isn't usually, or anything someone doesn't have or hasn't done—which includes a lot of things—is **छैन**.

Nepali is written in a complex script where letters aren't necessarily pronounced in order, which is ok because the majority of its speakers are functionally illiterate. Most people speak Nepali as a second language, and so speak it poorly, which is comforting for foreigners but also frustrating

because you can never be sure that what you learn from one friend will make sense to anyone else. One of the few consistencies is that sentences almost always end in the verb, which means that if you line up a thought with a clear subject and enough adjectives and qualifiers and allow a sufficient pause at the key moment, your listener will conjugate your verb for you, which is a technique I perfected early on in language school.

Me: *Yesterday Spot a black and white dog with a long tail down the road past my house quickly on three legs*

A Nepali friend: *ran?*

XI

Level Four Foreign Proficiency requires mastery of multiple number systems. My American fifth grade math teacher insisted that the Russian way of doing long division was backwards and consistently marked problems wrong because my ones supposedly looked like sevens, even though most of the world knows that sevens should be crossed. In Nepali 9 means *one* and ७ means *seven* and *nine* has at least four different symbols. *If you don't know what number it is, assume it's a nine*, my language tutor suggested. And so I would stand in the grocery store staring at a package of what may or may not be cornmeal that cost either ninety-six rupees or seventeen, depending on which language the tag was written in. Never mind the fluctuating exchange rate.

One Saturday at church, when all I understood of the sermon was a series of pronouns (*I Jesus he they*) I looked up the Bible references stencilled on the mud-plastered walls of the sanctuary. I concentrated so hard on reading the numbers correctly that I mistook some

of the abbreviated book names and ended up with *You brood of vipers (Luke 3:7)* instead of *You must be born again (John 3:7)*.

In a few months I was catching the gist of church services, and in a year I was graciously volunteering to translate for newcomers:

This is the announcements for next week. *Ok, so, God chose the Israelites and led them out of Egypt.* *Now we're going to sing hymn 105.* *No, maybe it's a Psalm. No, it's definitely a chorus.* *Something about Jesus being king in Zion. Either we're going to Zion to make him king, or maybe he already is king and that's why we're going.* *But we're definitely going.*

XII

Spanish is a blessedly phonetic language and uses, generally, the same alphabet as English. Spanish is further blessed by being useful in many countries as long as you remember that a *guagua* is a baby in Chile and a bus in Puerto Rico.

I have spent only a month in a Spanish-speaking country, Spain, but I arrived with more pre-learned language than any other country I have visited or lived in other than America. Before leaving US soil I reviewed five years of class notes, especially travel and small talk vocabulary. When I stepped off the plane in Madrid everything I had ever learned of the Spanish language evaporated from my brain. Every time I opened my mouth Russian came out, which was strange because I hadn't spoken Russian in ten years and inconvenient because there aren't a lot of Russian-speakers in the Madrid airport who know how to find the subway.

My Spanish returned after I'd slept and eaten peanut butter, but the experience was disconcerting enough to temporarily undermine my trust in my ability to communicate. A woman stopped me on the street a week later in Granada, groping for Spanish words and gesturing

emphatically at the street-signs. Within a few minutes I realized that she was an American asking for directions and she thought I was a Spaniard, which would have been flattering except that her guess was based on my location outside the tourist district rather than on my Spanish language skills. I let her fumble on for a few more minutes about the *calle* being to the *derecha* and should she go *aquí* before I started to feel guilty and admitted that I was also American and also didn't know whether she should go *a la izquierda* or not.

XIII

Nepali language class was even less linguistically coherent than my Kathmandu apartment. An Australian came to class one morning confused by the previous night's homework. *I didn't know what baa was, so I looked it up and it said that's the sound cows make. But in Australia cows don't make that sound. Sheep do.* Class degenerated into fifteen minutes of comparative animal noises, which was only slightly less productive than the day we tried to learn the Nepali words for fruits and vegetables whose names we didn't know in English and which we had never tasted or seen.

Even on a good day with a straightforward topic like direct objects, class was more than a little muddled:

Nepali teacher in English: *Ask Ben if his wife likes chocolate.*

A Czech in Nepali: *Ben, do you like your wife?*

Ben in Nepali: *Yes.*

An American in Nepali: *I bought pancakes to make eggs.*

Nepali teacher: *We don't say it that way.*

The American: *Why not?*

XIV

If you want to speak more than two languages that are not closely related you must teach your brain to be logical in conflicting ways. You must follow a labyrinthine code of regulations, function within a system of indistinct referents, plan complete sentences before you begin them, listen to complete sentences before you decipher them, accept that identical words have incompatible meanings and identical letters have incompatible sounds, and generally confound your struggling intellect until all you can do is moan over and over *I don't I don't* , waiting for someone to complete one last coherent thought. You avoid all the trauma if you learn Foreign instead. Then you can call out brazenly, *Je ne comprendo* ~~अन~~ and promote yourself to Proficiency Level Five: Hybridity, by which point your speech has become both fluid and unintelligible, a situation that no longer bothers you.

XV

Becca and I sip hot chocolate from thermoses and dip chunks of homemade bread in honey. Morning creeps slowly across the waves from the pixelated horizon to the sand insulating our buried toes. The shadow of a dorsal fin breaks the water's surface and I announce triumphantly, *Zhe vva a dolfa!* Becca is so astounded to hear French that she misses the dolphin.

I make up a little story as a consolation prize. *Zhe vva a dofa. Dofa vva a mva. Mva e dolfa touché. Voila!*

Becca collapses in laughter, not because I said something funny, but because what I said actually made sense to her. Becca speaks Foreign too.

Self-Interest

I missed my turn coming home from the supermarket on my bike today. Actually, I turned down the right street, didn't recognize it, turned around, rode past the other street I could have taken, and had to turn around again. At the time I blamed it on the thunder—it isn't supposed to rain in March. But the truth is, I wasn't paying attention because I was thinking about the shampoo I just bought.

I went to the store to buy chocolate and peanut butter to take with me on trek. Then I saw the shampoo—my favourite brand—looking all clean and sleek on the shelf, and it said it would give me “daily shine.” I think that tagline was written for countries where people shower on a daily basis, but there is always the possibility that this shampoo will give me shiny hair for all twelve days of trekking if I use it before I go.

But I wasn't distracted by the shampoo because it would make my hair shiny. I was revelling in the thought that I now owned my very own bottle of shampoo. For the last few months I had been using team shampoo, which is convenient and economical, but after a while it started to feel a little too communal.

That's actually one of the first things I ever heard about this organization. A friend said that many of their people had come to her country, and what she remembered about them was how communal they were—“They even shared their shampoo!” So maybe I was subconsciously out to prove that it is possible to be on this team and still own your own personal shampoo bottle.

It seems that the fewer things I own, the more attached to them I get. A few years ago, I whittled my belongings down to what I could fit in my car. This winter, I packed for a year in one twenty-kilo suitcase. In a few days I will leave on trek for twelve days with what I hope will be an

eight-kilo backpack. Just like when Jesus sent out the disciples, I will go without knowing where I will stay, without a pillow, a laptop, or an accurate map. The only difference is the chocolate, peanut butter, and yak wool blanket I intend to bring. But my packing restraint is due to the fact that I have to carry it all up and down the Himalayan foothills more than to an abundance of faith.

Is my attachment to the things of this world still as strong as ever, just distilled down to fewer of those things? Is there some base level of materialism that counts as self-preservation instead of selfishness? Is it wrong to take delight in a personal bottle of hair-shining shampoo? I don't know. At the moment I don't care. I just found a big black marker in my apartment that I can use to write my initials in block letters across the bottle.

Bonding Agents

“You are going to Jajarkot on Monday,” a co-worker’s voice sputtered through the receiver, “Kedar will go with you. It should take ten days. You leave at eleven.”

“Who is Kedar?” I asked my boss later.

“He’s in charge of the mid-west.”

“Anything else I should know before I follow him off into the Himalayas?”

“He has a goatee.”

“Does he speak English?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

I asked Eunmi to come with me to Jajarkot for moral and linguistic support. Eunmi was once robbed at knifepoint in the middle of the night in Kathmandu while housesitting for friends. Her immediate response was to offer the thieves her Nepali Bible. The only thing that surprised the rest of us when we heard the story was that she had not also made him tea.

Eunmi and I arrived in Nepal on the same day and had reached about the same Nepali proficiency. Her native Korean has a similar grammatical structure to Nepali, so her sentences were always in the right order and her tenses matched. However, our Nepali classes were taught in English, which Eunmi had studied for only seven months, giving me the advantage of only learning one language at a time.

We pooled our assets, and our ignorance, and arrived at the office Monday morning, backpacks loaded with hiking boots, water bottles, iodine, a first aid kit, cameras, and an enormous

foldout map of Jajarkot, which turned out to be a rather large district in the mid-western hills of the Himalayas.

We identified Kedar by his goatee. He stood in the hallway in jeans, a black rain slicker, a baby blue McDonalds polo shirt, and a bright red baseball cap adorned with the golden arches. We introduced ourselves awkwardly and I presented him with a map and my best Nepali pronunciation. “*Hamilai bato dekhaunubuncha?* Will you show us where we are going?”

We moved to a wicker bench on the open patio and spread out the map between us. “*Mujkot tira jau.* We are going near Mujkot,” he spoke in Nepali as his fingers traced across white space flecked with dots of various sizes, “We will take the bus to Salyan Bazar, here, and then walk here, and here.”

Eunmi pointed to the squiggled lines dividing the area. “*Bato chan?* Are these roads?”

“*Hoina,* those are rivers. *Monsoonma bato chaina.* In monsoon there are no roads.”

For the next twelve hours we saw little of Kedar except the red baseball cap propped against the window of the bus seat in front of us as he slept through our overnight descent from the capital to the flatlands. In the morning Kedar waved the driver to a stop and informed Eunmi and I that we had arrived at our organization’s mid-west base, which neither of us knew existed. We clambered down onto the gravel shoulder of the only significant road in that part of the country and waited for either instructions or kidnappers.

“Our next bus leaves in the evening,” Kedar told us after the bus pulled away, “We will sleep at the office and eat rice.”

The office was three rooms of a concrete slab house set back a few minutes’ walk from the main road. Kedar showed Eunmi and I into a small cement room furnished with a foam mattress on

the floor. It would have looked exactly like a prison cell were it not for the stacks of Bibles and tracks against one wall and an assortment of cook stove parts piled in a corner. Kedar disappeared into another room without explanation. Eunmi and I collapsed on the mattress, less than twenty-four hours into our journey and already sweaty, dirty, disoriented, and exhausted.

We dozed, read our Bibles, rearranged our backpacks, and dozed more until Kedar returned in the afternoon and led us to a restaurant in the Nepali version of a strip mall. We talked very little, conscious that unmarried men and women did not typically socialize or eat together, let alone journey off into the wild together. I couldn't tell if Kedar was being respectful or discreet or shy or ornery or nervous or irritated that he had to drag two foreign girls along on a journey he could probably have made in half the time alone. He was considerate enough to ask the restaurant owner for spoons for Eunmi and I so we didn't have to eat with our hands, but he warned us that we would not see another eating utensil for the rest of the trek.

We rode two more buses on that trip, I think, and we spent a night in plywood hotel rooms over a teashop in a village along a river. It felt like one continuous, cyclical day, but the cycles didn't include sleep, just buses and teashops and dozing and rice at odd intervals. The last bus stopped for the last time when the road became completely impassable and our foot-journey began.

"Bato gharro cha? Is it a difficult walk?" We asked Kedar as we cinched on our backpacks and stretched our ankles against tight laces.

"Hoina, the road is easy, but up. If it rains it will be nice."

"Do you walk fast?"

"Hoina, I walk slowly, but without stopping."

Kedar's explanation was brief but proved appropriate. The broad trail wound endlessly along a river, not steep, but always up and always in the glare of the menacing sun. Within a few hours Kedar's hat faded to the same shade as my scorched Caucasian skin. I only wear sunscreen if I am guaranteed a shower within twenty-four hours. In Nepal there are no guarantees and very few showers. I draped my lightest shawl over my head and configured it to cover most of my exposed skin. For the first time in my life I literally prayed for rain.

The trail cycled upward for hours from rocks to dust to streams to more rocks and more dust, and then the monotony ended abruptly at the edge of a ravine. Kedar hopped across to the other side without hesitation. Eunmi stopped dead in her tracks in front of me. There was no bridge and no ladder and no handrail and no way that she was going to jump across a chasm wearing a heavy backpack in the middle of nowhere on the side of a mountain anywhere in the world, let alone in the Himalayas. Kedar is almost two metres tall. Eunmi is too short—by South Korean standards—to be an army nurse. She stood at the edge, watching dirt clumps crumble beneath her toes, and stared down at the five-metre drop onto jagged rocks below, and then across to Kedar on the other side of the ravine, and then down at the rocks, and then back to Kedar.

No one spoke.

Long, dusty, stubborn seconds passed.

Kedar finally spoke, "*Haat dinchu?* Would you like me to give you a hand?" He reached out hesitantly towards Eunmi, halfway across the chasm and straight through at least six different cultural taboos. Eunmi nodded, and then she jumped. She couldn't reach his hand from the near side, but it gave her something to aim for, and she caught it mid-jump and landed squarely on the other side. They instantly let go of each other's hands and Eunmi stepped a respectable distance away. Kedar didn't get struck by lightning, so I guess he figured it was ok, and offered me a hand as

well. The instant of the jump was the first, and I believe the only, time I ever made physical contact with a Nepali male under the age of fifty-five. To reduce the trauma for the rest of the trip, Kedar cut walking sticks for Eunmi and I, which we could extend to him across the remaining ditches and rivers and ravines for balance without actually touching.

We spent the first night on the trail in a small village by the river where a shopkeeper cooked us rice and lentils and showed us to wooden beds with blankets for mattresses. The second day began with tea, sugar cookies, and rain. We tarped our backpacks and climbed steeper hills. Our soggy boots gripped at the stones and splashed red mud up to our knees. My imported raincoat repelled both moisture and oxygen and after a few minutes I draped it over my backpack instead and let the thick fog wick the heat away from my skin.

The hills became mountains. Our broad path became an unconvincing foot-track. We paused periodically on village porches to readjust our backpack covers, drink tea, and eat rice. Eunmi and I had long since exhausted our supply of Nepali vocabulary and we gave up small talk except for occasional queries to Kedar, “*Kati ota ukalo huncha aja?* How many more steep places will there be today?”

On the third day the rain stopped and the sun descended in equally penetrating waves. I reverted to my shawl-mummy sun protection strategy. Kedar’s hat wilted to a feeble pink. All morning we scabbled along a footpath etched into the arid landscape, climbing hundreds of metres up mountainsides and then plunging back down to the riverbank, alternating hour after hour between gruelling inclines and bone jarring descents. Every time we crossed a stream more than a

few centimetres deep, which was often, we pried loose our boots and socks, forded barefoot, dried the waterproof tape covering our blisters, and laced up again.

Halfway up a particularly steep slope Eunmi and I crumpled into the weeds along the trail. An old woman sat in the shade of the only tree brushing and braiding her long ashen hair, neither surprised nor disturbed at the sight of two foreign girls sprawled in the grass at her feet. Kedar spoke to her but she didn't respond. He looked down at Eunmi and I for a while with his amusement turning to concern when he realized that we weren't going to get up until we ate something involving protein. There were no houses on the slope or the surrounding hillsides. There were no more villages on the map until Mujkot, and Mujkot was hours away.

Kedar unstrapped his backpack, adjusted his pastel cap, and scanned the mountainside. I squinched up my eyes and followed his gaze to a thatch-roofed shelter crouched against the hillside and providing shade for a dozen drowsy cows and goats. Kedar called across the mountain, "*Uncle!*" and we waited longingly until we heard the traditional reply:

"Hajur!"

"Uncle, these girls are hungry, do you have any food?"

"Matti aunus! Come up! The milk is finished, but I will give you yogurt and roti."

We left our backpacks in the weeds and crawled up the slope. The shepherd beckoned us into a corner of the stable blocked off from the animals with stone slabs set on edge. We sipped sour yogurt from metal bowls while the shepherd kneaded corn flour and water into thick dough, slapped balls of it between his hands until they formed thin disks, and then laid them on a rusted metal plate suspended over the fire. After a few minutes he set the bread up on edge in the coals to finish baking. When the roti was ready we dipped chunks of it into the yogurt with trembling hands and savoured the faint taste of charcoal. As we ate, the shepherd washed the dough off his hands in

a small bowl filled with water and passed the dish over the stone wall to the goats to distract them from eating our hair. Eunmi slurped up the last of her yogurt and sighed with deep contentment.

Kedar scrunched down to keep his face out of the smoke pooled against the thatch ceiling and a smile twisted his goatee, “*Mero bicharma tapaiharu aja birsanubunna*. I think you two will never forget this day.”

We stayed less than forty-eight hours in Mujkot, which turned out to be an impoverished Dalit village surrounded by high-caste Brahmin communities. We slept in the church, where children swarmed around the shutter-less window and shone flashlights at Eunmi and I until we covered the pale skin of our faces and arms with our shawls. Even indoors the rain found me, soaking my sleeping bag during the night through a leak in the thatched roof.

Then next day the Christians gathered for a Saturday morning service. Thirty people crowded into the mud-plastered room with us and our backpacks. The women nursed babies and scolded children who scampered in and out through the open door. The men lined the far wall, every one of them crippled in some way, a blind man sitting beside an amputee. Kedar was the only man literate enough in Nepali to read from the Bible. He was asked to preach that morning, the first Nepali sermon I ever understood all the way through. He told the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, young men deported from their Jewish homes to Babylon, persecuted for their faith, defiant of the mighty king’s command to worship an idol, and miraculously saved from the fiery furnace and the wrath of the monarch.

The believers listened, mesmerized, hearing for the first time a story I had been taught on flannel graph as a pre-schooler, a story much more applicable to them than to me. I had never been

persecuted for my faith, harassed by wealthy neighbours, or tempted to worship an inanimate object. I had never needed a miracle.

We left Mujkot on Sunday morning and slid down the mountain in soggy boots on wet rocks. We had been wet from either rain or sweat continuously for five days now. The trail backtracked approximately the way we came, but descended to the river more gradually. We made better time than on the uphill climb but had to stop longer to let our throbbing knees recover instead of just pausing to catch our breath. The sun set two hours before the next church, catching us in a riverside village Kedar warned us was populated chiefly by drunken Maoists. The town's only hotel consisted of two connected rooms above a smoky kitchen. The owner announced that both rooms were infested with bedbugs. Eunmi and I took the back room, positioning Kedar as a bodyguard between us and the notched log stairwell from the street to our rooms. A legitimate ladder connected Eunmi and my room with an undefined dark space above the plywood ceiling.

At dinner we mashed rice and lentils together with our fingers to blend the flavours and feel for rock chips. Children gathered to giggle and stare. One little girl crept up to me in the shadows and poked at my arm with her finger. I turned toward her and she darted away, convinced I was indeed real, and probably dangerous. When we finished eating, Eunmi and I went to the water tap for a "passport-sized" shower. I cashed in on a trekking survival technique: rationed complaining. Exhaustion and emotional whiplash make expressing discomfort on trek dangerous. It's easy to get carried away. But everyone needs relief, and Eunmi and I had decided on a noncumulative two-minute allotment per day, although neither one of us had had the energy to voice our misery on this trip yet.

At the water tap Eunmi kept time while I scrubbed the sweat and dirt and peeling sunburn from my face and vented in rapid-fire English. She was committed to listening to me whine about rocks in my food, pesky children, leaky roofs, leeches, bedbugs, sunburn, inaccurate maps, foreign language headaches, bruised shins, throbbing knees, drunken Maoists, seedy hotels, public bathing, and the general frustration of traveling in a district known to the outside world only for its record-setting cholera outbreaks every year during monsoon season, which was now. Eunmi was not obligated to understand my ravings, and she was not allowed to ask questions. I ran out of steam after forty-five seconds and forfeited the rest.

Since Eunmi was so gracious to listen to my complaining, I offered that we could both sleep on one of the three-foot-wide plank beds and I would lie down first, a technique I had heard would establish me as the primary target for the bedbugs. She declined, willing to risk the welts for a bed of her own. Right as my aching muscles resigned themselves to a night on a hardwood mattress, I heard footsteps on the log stairwell. Someone staggered along the hallway and into Kedar's room and the plywood bed groaned. The someone smelled like rice wine and vomit and sweat and the odour filtered into our room through the gaps in the plank wall.

On trek I always slept with my headlamp in my hand. I had never been afraid of the dark until the first time I woke up on a strange floor in the middle of the night three days from electricity. I switched on my light and eyed the delicate slide lock on the door and the ladder to the door-less upstairs room. Silently I vowed not to sleep without a door between drunken Maoists and me. If the landlord rented out the upper room, Eunmi and I would climb in bed with Kedar. I stayed awake for hours, headlamp clutched in my fingers, listening for footsteps. And then it was morning. Sunlight poured in through the cracks in the walls, already hot, but by the time we drank tea and laced up our boots, it was raining again.

The trail to the church was the most vertical of the entire trek. We crawled on our hands and knees up the slope through a torrent of pouring mud and water for over an hour. Slime filled our boots and strands of greasy hair plastered our faces and necks and funnelled water down our backs. The rain ended abruptly when we reached the rice paddies. Each terrace is ringed with a hardened mud wall just wide enough to walk on if you are careful, have good balance, and are already wet enough that you don't mind occasionally slipping into ankle-deep mud. When we stepped out onto the first terrace the sun came out and by the time we arrived at the church our clothes were merely damp.

The pastor wasn't home. He had walked two days to preach at a daughter church that had no pastor and he wouldn't return until the next day. His wife and children and mother and cousins and aunts welcomed us to their home and brought plastic moulded chairs out into the yard.

Kedar and Eunmi and I sat in the shade of a flowering tree with a panoramic view of rice terraces, the river, and a stand of trees perfectly blocking our line of sight to the seedy Maoist village. The women of the family brought cups of tea and platter after platter of homemade snacks out of the house all afternoon. One of the pastor's sons emerged with a multi-set of board games and we played Sorry! and Chutes & Ladders with a backdrop of Himalayan foothills glistening in the rare monsoon sunshine.

The worst of the trek was yet to come. There were three more days of steep trails, a mentally disturbed woman, fevers, diarrhoea, stress, exhaustion, frustration, misunderstanding, pulled intercostal muscles, and more general misery. Leeches stood on end on the foggy trail and latched onto our ankles and stained our socks with our own blood. One sank its fangs into Eunmi's leg just

above the knee and Kedar walked ahead while she rolled her pants up higher than the zone of appropriate skin exposure to clean and bandage the bite.

Kedar found a flower along the trail and picked it for us. “It’s a *laura* flower,” he told us.

The *laura* had tiered rows of small petals like a carnation, but some were red and some were white, interspersed in an irregular pattern.

“It’s a symbol,” Kedar went on, “like our team of Nepalis and foreigners. The petals are different colours, but they make one beautiful flower. I will find some more, and you can plant them at the office.”

He disappeared into the brush beside the trail and returned with two more flowers dug up with the roots intact. We packed the plants and soil in a plastic grocery bag and carried it with us for the rest of the trip, adding water occasionally.

Our ten-day trek extended to thirteen, and Eunmi and I ran flat out of peanut butter, Band-Aids, granola bars, congeniality, and self-control. We spent all of it, everything we had, every ounce of character and endurance and every second of complaining, and ended up back on the concrete porch of the mid-west base saying an awkward goodbye to Kedar, who wasn’t returning to Kathmandu with us.

We couldn’t hug him. Or shake his hand. Or thank him properly for taking us to terrible places and showing us wonderful things. We didn’t have words for that, and he looked less familiar now, showered and dressed in a clean white T-shirt instead of the McDonald’s polo. So we just pressed our palms together and smiled our goodbyes and hefted our backpacks and the *laura* flower package for the last time and walked away.

Eunmi and I planted the *laura* by the front door of the office, but a few weeks later it disappeared.

“Where is the flower?” I asked one of the staff.

“It died, so we put something else in its place.” She pointed to a potted aloe.

Eunmi cried over the *laura*, which we had nurtured and watered and carried through the mountains for days. I didn’t. The aloe seemed a more appropriate symbol for our team, a hardy plant with few needs and enormous resiliency. One you don’t appreciate unless you’re in pain, and can’t use for healing until you break apart the spikey leaves.

Nectar of Life

“After water, tea is the most widely consumed beverage in the world.” Wikipedia

Tea. Tee. Thee. Te. Teh. Tae.
Thea. Teo. Tsa. Tsaa. Tsai. Chai.
Cha. Chaha. Shai. Sha. Shaah.
Saah. Ceai. Chaaya. Choy. Chiya.

Comfort in uncertainty. A tonic for anxiety and sadness and damaged relationships and pain.
Warmth for solemn days and reticent people. Strength to face another day. A moment of calm. A
pause to breathe. Another sip. Something familiar. Just like always. Just a moment. Now I'm ready.

Brew. Infusion. Tisane. Decoction. Concoction.

Pour some tea into the saucer and blow, she says. It will cool faster, she says. Sip it from the saucer,
she says. I'm not allowed to do that, I say. It's ok here, my mother says. It's not rude here, she says.
I'll try, I say. It's delicious, I say. Can I do this in America? I say. No, my mother says. Will we have
tea in America? I say. Yes, she says. How will we cool it? I say. They serve it with ice cubes, she says.

Organic. Herbal. White. Yellow.
Green. Oolong. Black. Iced.
Salted. Butter. Regular. Decaf.

Welcome! she says. Thank you, I say. Shall we have chiya? she says. Of course! I say. I don't have milk, she says. I love black tea, I say. I have lemon, she says. Black tea and lemon is perfect, I say.

Sugar. Honey. Milk. Jam. Lemon. Pine nut.
Almond. Vanilla. Garlic. Rosehip. Chamomile.
Peppermint. Jasmine. Cardamom. Cinnamon.
Cumin. Ginger. Saffron. Pepper.

Would you like to buy a book? I say. I don't know how to read, he says. Do you have children? I say. I have four children, he says. Do they go to school? I say. Yes they go to school, he says. Can they read? I say. Yes they can read, he says. Maybe they could read to you, I say. I have no money, he says. It costs only five rupees, I say. I have no money, he says. That is less than one cup of tea, I say. The one with the flowers on the cover, he says. For your children, I say. For my children, he says.

Boiling.	Dropping.
Whistling.	Slopping.
Brewing.	Spilling.
Steeping.	Dripping.
Pouring.	Burning.
Flowing.	Seeping.
Dribbling.	Sopping.

She says, Do you like sugar in your tea? I say, Yes I do. She says, Take a cube and rest it lightly on your tongue. Sip the tea slowly, she says. I say, I'll try. She says, don't hurry. The tea caresses, erodes, sculpts the sugar on my tongue. Do you like it? she says. It's wonderful, I say. Don't hurry, she says.

Sip. Taste. Savour. Slurp.

Swallow.

Gulp.

Sigh.

In Mali tea is served as a progression of three cups with increasing levels of sugar:

1. Bitter as death. 2. Pleasant as life. 3. Sweet as love.

I say, I'm making some tea. You say, I don't want to interrupt you. I say, You didn't interrupt me.
You say, I can come back later. I say, Have a cup with me. You say, Ok. I say, Sit down. You say, I
can't stay long. I say, It's ready now. You say, Let me help you. I say, This one is for you. You say,
Thank you. I say, Sugar? You say, Please. I say, Cream? You say, No thank you. I say, Are you ok?
You say, I need to talk. I say, I'm listening. You say, Do you have time? I say, I made tea. You say

Ways to Say Goodbye

- Don't. Receive twenty-four hours' evacuation notice over short-wave radio when the US embassy withdraws. Pack eight pounds apiece and go.

- Forget, until the last minute, when your parents are loading the car to drive to the capitol and catch your flight to America. Find your best friend and hug her. Tell her that you're leaving for a year. Agree to keep in touch with letters. Then remember that she can't read or write in English, not even an address. Tell her you gave labels printed with your new US address to a mutual friend, and she can take some and write to you. Get in the car and leave. Be shocked and grateful and homesick when you receive a letter from your former best friend. Cry as you read it. Write back and forth for a few months, less and less often as your language begins to fade. Continue to cry over her letters. Continue to be shocked and grateful when each one arrives, less and less often until she runs out of address labels. Continue to be homesick. Never go back.

- Watch Mom and Dad caulk the cracks around the front door. Be comforted by the fact that no scorpions or black widows will penetrate the safety of your home while you are away. Wonder how you will ever break through the sticky caulk when you return. Follow Mom and Dad to the truck. Never come back.

- Load your things into the trunk of your car. Hug Mom and Dad. Lift your dog out of the trunk and explain to her that she can't come with you. Hug Mom and Dad again. Get in the car and drive away.

- Load your things into the trunk and backseat of your car. Forget to leave room for your laser printer. Give away a desk lamp and two pairs of shoes and keep the printer. Hug your friends. Drive for three days.

- Wrap your piano in industrial-strength plastic wrap. Tarp it in the trailer next to your trunks and a beloved, awkwardly shaped lamp that you promised Dad you will never ask him to move again. Hug Mom. Drive with Dad for a day. Watch him unload the piano into your new house by himself using a heavy dolly and cardboard to protect the floor. Put the awkward lamp in your new bedroom. Spend the night wondering how you will live in your next home without the awkward lamp. Hug Dad extra long in the morning. Watch him drive away.

- Separate your belongings into categories: things to give away, things to throw away, things to take with you, things to store until you return. Select one footlocker trunk and fill it with your most important possessions, photos, paintings, and keepsakes. Tell your friends to ship you this trunk at any expense if you don't come back as scheduled. Don't come back. Open the trunk in America and notice how worn and out of place these items look in your new home. Wish you had slipped a few more things into the trunk.

- Pack suitcases to take with you on the plane to America. Pack steel drums of things to ship to the States, like your favourite dishes. Load the suitcases and the drums into your pickup and drive to the river. Have your suitcases and family carried across the flood-stage river. Leave the drums with friends to ship to you when the water level drops. Take another vehicle to the airport in the capitol. Find out months later that your friends divided the things in your drums between them. Buy new dishes in the same pattern as the ones you lost.

- Load up all your possessions into a Ryder truck, the largest one they have. Be shocked that you have so much stuff. Run out of space for the lawnmower and wheelbarrow and garden rakes and carpentry tools. Rent a trailer from U-Haul. Feel ridiculous as you drive away in your mismatched ensemble.

- Don't be hurt when a friend comes to you the week before your flight to the US and asks if you own a light sweater that she can have when you leave. Tell her that after you leave she can have the sweater you're wearing. Don't be hurt when she asks for it now. Take it off and give it to her.

- Throw a goodbye party for yourself. Serve all of your remaining imported food. Give away piles of clothes and shoes and chocolate and knickknacks and Kool-Aid and ranch dressing mixes that don't fit in your suitcase.

- With your roommates, select the ugliest possible clothing combinations from the communal second-hand closet. Tease each other's hair into wild poofs of blond and brown and red and black. Go to your last team meeting. Attempt to be serious and spiritual as friends say nice things about you and pray goodbye prayers. Run your fingers along the hem of your rainbow plaid tunic. Hug everyone, even the boys. Walk home and attempt to force a brush through your matted smurf-hair.

- Drive with your friends to the airport. Wave back at them through the glass doors as you ride the escalator upstairs. Cry a little. Wonder if it is worth having so many friends to say goodbye to. Sit in a lobby and read the notes they gave you as you left. Decide that it is

worth it. Wonder who you will make friends with next that you will have to say goodbye to.

Cry a little more.

Velcro Friendship

Madie said she was from Namibia but no one believed her. I didn't believe her at first either, although I had an obscure memory of a country by that name somewhere down by the pointy part of Africa on a sixth-grade geography teacher's bulletin board.

Madie and I met by candlelight on the outskirts of Kathmandu the day I arrived from Germany after forty hours of travel with a sinus infection and very little sleep. A dozen of us sat in a circle on bamboo couches and floor cushions and introduced ourselves.

"My name is Kyungzi@!*ng and I am from South Korea."

"Hello. I am E* J!u Lee, and I am also from South Korea, but you can call me Grace."

"I am Schvkzky. I come from Czech."

"Good afternoon. My name is Madelienne, and I am from Namibia." Giggle.

Madie's name is spelled Madeleen, but pronounced with an extra syllable, a head tilt, and a gentle Afrikaans accent. The giggle is irreproducible, but the general affect is one of innocently sophisticated joy.

I took it she was jesting, which is what someone with her accent might do. She was so obviously British, or Kiwi, or some other related, Caucasian nationality. Nobody actually lives in countries like Namibia, or Djibouti, or Nepal, for that matter. This entire room, cushions and bamboo and candlelight and all, had to be one giant, bewildering figment of my imagination. And Madelienne was making fun of me in my dream.

"I never thought you were the funny sort," Madelienne wrote to me later, "but then you opened your mouth and things changed."

Or, perhaps, she was taking advantage of the bizarreness of a real situation. If you have already moved to Nepal, you can say things like, “I’m from Namibia,” and nobody finds it any weirder than anything else about you.

And then, in a flicker of candlelight, I noticed that Madie wore a tie-dyed headscarf and beaded earrings. Maybe, just maybe, she was telling the truth. Maybe people, even white people with Victorian accents, could come from Namibia. I shouldn’t have been surprised. I come from odd roots as well.

§

It wasn’t long before Madie and I sat in another cross-legged circle introducing ourselves to another batch of new arrivals.

“Hello. My name is K^yqu%ongzi!ng and I am from South Korea.”

“Friendships just happen and then they stay with you like stubborn Velcro.”

“I am Szchkyk. I am from Czech Republic.”

“My name is Brenda, and I am from Haiti. But I’m not black.”

“My name is Madie, and I am from Namibia, which is in Africa, and I am also not black.”

§

What I at first took to be jesting turned out to be charm. Madelienne had the gentlest spirit, sweetest smile, and most beautiful language on the team. I believed God listened to her prayers more closely than mine because she prayed in Afrikaans, which has the power of German and the

grace of Italian and the elegance of French. She spoke English in the same accent, English she learned reading nineteenth-century novels in high school, straight out of Jane Eyre. Madie was anything but pretentious about her mastery of English, even though she knew what *pretentious* meant, and that it is one of the sub-definitions of the word *flatulence*, which she preferred to use in conversation, to the amusement of native English speakers and confusion of everyone else.

Strangers occasionally mistook Madie's charm for naiveté. The fact that she looked fifteen and had a perpetually relaxed attitude and naturally two-toned hair didn't help. Her roots were

"If Procrastination was a country, I would be the Queen to rule it."

always brown and her locks were always blonde, and we called her *rangi-changi*, the Nepali word for *multi-coloured*. We called her this in jest, in love, and without even a hint of condescension. Madelienne is not to be underestimated. Despite her youth and innocence, there is something rock solid and resolutely earnest about Madie's character.

Shopkeepers saw her as an easy target. Bus hustlers cheated her. Teenagers heckled her. Meanwhile, Madelienne led a trekking team into Okhaldunga, one of the steepest districts ever attempted by a women's team with our organization. She got lost in the fog and lost her porters, but kept her head and returned safely with a newfound confidence. Next, she joined a team working in a remote village that taught first aid and literacy and opened a children's library. She did it in her third language, three years out of high school.

§

Three months after arriving in Nepal I hit the limit of what my mind and body and soul could endure. I had survived my first trek, just barely, but my digestive and immune systems were

shutting down. I had fallen off my bike in Kathmandu and sprained my left ankle and knocked it slightly out of joint, and then popped the same ankle back into joint ten weeks later by spraining it a second time. Nepali classes began on my third day in country, and tackling my fifth language, third alphabet, and second number system left my exhausted brain in such a state of turmoil that I could no longer comprehend English words with more than two syllables. All of my significant relationships were with strangers and I couldn't remember why moving to Nepal had ever seemed like a good idea.

I had been running on adrenaline and willpower for weeks, and both of those ran out simultaneously on the first day of a team retreat at a hotel on the north side of the city. We had been promised three days of rest and hot water and western food and showers. Madelienne and I were assigned as roommates, and as we walked from the lobby to find our room, I confided, "Madie, I really need to be alone. It's your room too, and you can be there, but I need to at least pretend to be alone. Please don't talk to me."

We found our room, closed the door, and I collapsed onto one of the twin beds, the first time I'd laid on a real mattress since I left US soil. The white-grey ceiling stared down at me, echoing the state of my sanity with its cobwebs and water stains and cracked plaster. Madie pushed her suitcase against a wall and sat down on the other bed and said nothing.

From somewhere deep inside my psyche that I never knew existed, I started to laugh. Madie smiled, assuming I had broken out of my funk. I continued to laugh. Madie continued to smile. I couldn't stop. Somehow I knew that when the laughter, which had grown into a reflex I couldn't control, ended, the exhaustion and loneliness and nausea and foreignness and worry and fear would overwhelm me, and nothing was going to get better for another entire year. It was just going to go on and on. And so I kept laughing. Madie eventually stopped smiling and leaned back on her bed

and although she never spoke I believe she was praying for me. I don't remember how long it went on or what finally changed, but eventually I fumbled my way to the shower to soak in hot water and imported shampoo, and when I came out I was sane again, and I could face another day, and then another, another conversation in broken English, and then another, another meal of familiar-looking food doused in yellow masala seasoning, and then another.

“Well, just to clarify, I did think you are crazy. A mad half-Haitian with flighty giggles and a good eye for hidden scoops.”

§

I once had to persuade Madelienne not to title a story she wrote about Tibetan refugees, “Three Blind Monks.”

“But they actually were monks,” she insisted, “and they were blind. All three of them. Should I call it ‘A Trio of Visually Impaired Practitioners of a Minority Religion’ instead?”

§

On a fresh spring day Madie and I set out to walk home from a village outside Kathmandu. What could have been a forty-five minute bus ride in a straight line we converted to a four-hour serpentine ramble across the outskirt hills around the city. Clear afternoon light shimmered on the Himalayan peaks spread unevenly across the horizon. Wherever Madie and I wandered, we knew home was always between us and one particular gap in the mountain skyline.

Old women looked up from spinning wool and children followed us, barefoot, to the outskirts of each village. We walked a network of paths connecting homes and brick factories, tracing the edges of streams, through fields, around the borders of rice terraces, and always narrowing at the horizon line towards the immovable mass of mountains dominating the landscape of the entire nation.

At each junction of dirt paths or paved alleys we played a game of rock, paper, scissors. If I won, we veered towards the right. If Madie won we went left. When the trail opened up to a gravel roadbed curving along a broad valley floor, we counted dump trucks, awarding ourselves points if the drivers honked as they rattled by, engulfing us in clouds of exhaust and grey dust.

“Brenda, if there were anything such as perfect response to articulate all your friendship did for me, I would write it down in elaborate stanzas with Shakespearean references to daffodils and other cute oxford stuff.”

We talked about the trails and the games and the bridges and the dump trucks. We didn’t talk about the women or the children or the future or our roommates or our work or the tasks waiting for us at home. Between trucks the road fell absolutely silent in the floodplain beside the river where nobody lived, or farmed, or cared if foreign girls wandered by.

§

I tried unsuccessfully for a whole year to trek with Madie, convinced that her quiet confidence and spontaneity were just what I needed on difficult trails and in stressful situations. Our schedules and destinations never lined up until my very last month in Nepal, when we spent half of a trek wandering the mid-Western hills together and performing a drama with a live chicken as a prop. It was the only trek I was ever summoned to report at a police station, the one where I

climbed a mountain to find a cell phone signal and ask my boss for permission to stay extra days.

“You are one of those rare selections of complex individuals (characterized by lapses of pure insanity, a knack for good chocolate, ridiculously brave and willing to go almost anywhere) I like to call these people friends.”

The one where we divided a pyramid of Toblerone chocolate five ways and slept on a mud floor with eight other women. It was the trek when I realized that when I left Nepal I would miss not only my friends, but also the lifestyle that generates such friendships.

§

Madelienne left Nepal three months after I did, and she came to the US for her brother’s wedding. He lives in North Dakota, which is another place I didn’t believe you could really be from. Madie flew in to Canada and stayed at her brother’s house, which has a US address but questionable nationality. The house exists in a sort of no-man’s-land, fortunate for Madie, who was unable to secure a US visa. She could stay at the house with her family, but couldn’t go into town for the wedding itself. She Skyped me instead, and we spent the afternoon reminiscing about our former lives.

“I have a confession to make,” I admitted, “Do you know what I was thinking that day in Rolpa when we got called in to the police station and thought we were going to be arrested?”

“I’m fervently praying for a chemical phenomena to transpire, so that I may be teleported, transposed, transported your way immediately.”

“What?”

“I was thinking that it was a good thing you’re white,” I told her, “If you weren’t, it would have been harder to pass you off as American to the Nepali police.”

“You know what I was thinking?” she asked.

“What?”

“I was thinking,” giggle, “whatever happens, this is going to be a good story.”

WRITING LIFE ESSAY

I was a reader long before I could read. I paged through books as a two- and three-year-old, lying on my back on my bed in the boondocks of Haiti with one ankle propped up on my knee, staring at pictures, turning pages, and practicing.

I wrote long before I could write, too. On the front porch of our little white Pennsylvania house I filled rolls of cash register paper with my scrawling, perfecting my penmanship before I learned any actual letters.

My parents read to me constantly as a child. Twenty years later my dad can still quote entire pages of *Duke the Digging-est Dog*. My mom read the *Little House on the Prairie* books out loud so many times the covers fell off. We read *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Velveteen Rabbit* and *Curious George* and everything by Dr. Seuss.

I invented stories of my own and Mom wrote them down for me. They were mostly stories about animals, although I've forgotten the details of their adventures.

My mom worried that I would never learn to read for myself. She homeschooled me in a nuclear warhead manufacturing city on the edge of Siberia that didn't appear on maps for decades after the cold war. With no other English-speaking first-graders to compare me to and no training as a teacher, her only option was to worry. Maybe I was

slow/handicapped/challenged. Maybe she was doing something wrong. I knew the letters and could sound out the words. But that isn't reading. That's memorization. That's easy. Reading is deciphering meaning from abstract symbols. It is a state-change from a solid to a concept. It's basically magic. And it can't be taught. Not really.

Writing is the reverse. It's encoding meaning according to a pre-determined system in such a way that an unidentified stranger can interpret the lines and discover the same thought. It's also magic. And it can't be taught either. Only refined.

My parents decided not to put me in Russian school until I could read in English so that I would only learn one alphabet at a time. Every day my mom had me read to her, which meant stumbling from one letter to the next, mouthing units of sounds completely unrelated in my mind to actual words. On a random, hectic weekday, I sat down to do my daily reading at the tiny kitchen table in our two-room apartment while my mom fixed dinner. I read complete sentences out loud with expression and enough confidence that my mom thought I had memorized the book. I had learned to read in my sleep.

After my reading epiphany, my parents threw me to the wolves in a communist-style school system taught in a language I didn't understand. Russian exams in public schools are dictations. The teacher reads a passage and the students write it, and for every word that you misspell, you lose one of a possible five points. Three mistakes and you fail. And so I failed. Often. All the time, in fact, for at least the first year,

until I could readily distinguish between a *sh* and a *sh*, which are two completely different letters, and identify consonants marked with soft and hard signs. Eventually I started passing my classes, even Russian class, but I relapsed during my final third-grade exam. I scored a two on one of the dictations and was immediately sentenced to remedial summer school. I went home in tears and confessed my failure to my parents, who gave me milk and cookies and hugs and reminded me that I wouldn't be in Russia that summer or the following school year. We were going to America.

The next fall my parents enrolled me in a US public elementary school. The first weeks were a horror. Wrong clothes. Wrong slang. Wrong music. No TV shows. No friends. No summer reading book. My family arrived in Pennsylvania days before school started and none of us thought about a summer reading book. The library was out. The bookstore was out. Everyone in the city was reading that book except me. I borrowed a classmate's during recess and read the first two chapters. I listened to the class discussion. I memorized characters' names. I took the test. The next day the school transferred me to an advanced Language Arts class.

My new teacher assigned us projects like researching national parks and writing our ten-year-old autobiographies. I wrote my first real fiction in that class, the story of an epic battle between white unicorns and red ones, complete with cover art and illustrations. I won a competition with that story, my first literary success.

In high school I volunteered to read the unabridged *Moby Dick* for my junior research project. I read *The Scarlet Letter* and an autobiography of Nelson Mandela and the original tales of King Arthur. In college I took fairytale literature and a class on *The Chronicles of Narnia* and read the first half of *Don Quixote* in archaic Spanish.

I also took my first writing classes in college and did an internship for a former Nike and PepsiCo vice president turned executive coach. He retired at forty-five in Hong Kong and decided to write a book about his coaching strategies, but he hated writing, and through twists of fate and a personal recommendation he agreed to let me ghost write his book proposal my last year of college. I recorded dozens of hours of Skype conversations and battled to transfer his riveting oral presentation style onto my dreary laptop screen in the middle of my night, when he was fresh and I was completely overwhelmed.

I read a series of business books in an attempt to grasp the material I was supposed to be explaining. My roommate let me yammer about “managing up,” “leveraging assets,” and “influence without authority in dotted-line relationships.”

I flew to Beijing for spring break and met the man for the first time and proceeded to write his life story in first person jetlagged. I am about as far as you can get from a male Japanese-American business executive, but when he skimmed a draft of the most personal section of the book over a bowl of noodles at the hotel restaurant he

said, “I don’t remember saying that. But that’s exactly what I meant.” My second victory.

That same year of college a professor assigned me *The Road* and *Into Thin Air* and another equally depressing book about shipwrecked whalers who drift for weeks in a lifeboat and eventually shrivel up and die.

I write like whatever I’m reading, and I had a short story due somewhere towards the end of the third morbid book, so I killed my first character. The setting was real (it was the dreary nuclear industrial city where I first learned to read) but I made up all the people and a little bit of plot and collaged it together with the lyrics of the Russian national anthem.

I am so influenced by my reading material that in school I have to choose books that coordinate with my assignments. For one seminary class project, I spent so much time reading the book of Romans and its accompanying commentaries that I started writing like the apostle Paul and saying things like “the Lord Jesus Christ” in everyday conversation. When I read *Red Hills and Cotton* I “spontaneously” started a story in collective first person.

The primary reason I write bad fiction is that I don’t like conflict. The world is full of sad, traumatic events and hurting, dysfunctional people. I figure, why make up new ones? I don’t even like to read traumatic fiction. My life is stressful enough already. I prefer safe, predictable stories where the guy gets the girl, the dog finds its way home, and the kid isn’t really dead, he was just in a coma, and he’s awake now and

hugging his mom. In other words, I like to read bad fiction, so I write bad fiction.

And I'm ok with that.

In my opinion, *The Road* depends almost exclusively on its language, since the setting is bleak, most of the plot is walking towards the ocean, there are only two significant characters, and one of them dies. The book isn't endearing or exciting or inspiring or uplifting or even pleasant. But I think it's well crafted.

When I killed my first character in my fiction writing class, it made for a good story, good enough for my prof to nominate it for a writing prize, which I didn't win, but it was a nice thought. My protagonist was an ice fisherman on the city's central, toxic lake, and I froze him to death in a storm. And then I felt like a bad person. And then I stopped writing fiction. But I also learned something important in the process: every story needs a strong element; that element doesn't have to be plot. My professor liked my story for the same reason *The Road* won a Pulitzer: it was well written (relatively, for an undergrad intro fiction class). Oddly enough, my professor believed that my protagonist actually lived through the storm. Apparently I can't pull off morbid fiction after all.

Martha Gellhorn's *Travels with Myself and Another* relies primarily on the exoticness of its tales and sense of humor of its narrator. The weight of Mirta Ojito's *Finding Mañana* is in its carefully documented historical details and characterization. *Anthropologies* disregards consistency of tense and point-of-view and relies on the beauty of individual segments tied together with

simple numbering. At one point *A Visit from the Goon Squad* dispenses with traditional prose altogether and continues the story through PowerPoint graphics.

People usually like my stories. The primary strengths of my best writing, by general consensus, are voice and subject matter. In other words, people like it when I make jokes about bad things happening to me in exotic places. “Were there really tigers in the jungle where you got lost and thought you were going to die and no one would ever find your body? I loved that part!” Yes there were, and I’m fine, thanks for asking. My writing has improved since I gave up on ornate language, subtle metaphor, and symbolism in favor of sarcasm and reckless endangerment.

The combination of *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* and *A Heartbreaking Word of Staggering Genius* freed me from many of my remaining tethers to literary fundamentalism. It’s okay to tell a sad story in a creative/funny/haunting way. Good nonfiction does not necessarily come in paragraphs. Sometimes it comes in screenplays, drawings, maps, and lists.

Angela’s Ashes and *Stitches* are both artful books about miserable childhoods.

The similarities end there.

In the last two years, I’ve written a series of experiments. I tried drawings. I tried maps. I tried lists. I tried first, second, and third person. I tried pullout boxes and quotes and equations and epigraphs. They didn’t all work equally successfully. But they all worked, to some extent, to transfer thoughts, ideas, and memories from my

mind to my hypothetical readers, or at least some of the ones depicted on the pages. “I laughed and cried through it all,” a friend wrote after reading my depiction of our Rolpa trek, “even concluding, with shock, that I now have a distorted fondness for the miserable parts of Nepal.” Becca wrote to me, “please, put ‘j'ai vu un dauphin’ in your stories” before she read “Speaking Foreign.” And I already had, because I treasure the same memories.

I’ve learned one more alphabet since elementary school. The symbols of Nepali’s Devanagari script represent syllables rather than individual sounds, and the symbols are not necessarily written in order, and not every sound is necessarily pronounced. There is no hope for phonetics. You can only read words that you already know how to pronounce, which, for me, has always been very few. But it never mattered all that much. Most Nepali people can’t read it either.

I moved to Nepal for my first grown-up writing job. I was assigned to tell strangers’ stories to other strangers while in culture shock. I wrote stories about not understanding what anyone said. I wrote stories with Korean syntax. I was required to write with British spelling, and my Australian editor complained constantly that I forgot to replace Zs with Ss in words like “recognize” and “realize.” I learned to do Word searches for the letter Z before submitting stories.

My first week in Nepal, I found myself unable to read, or, more specifically, to retain printed thoughts. I stared diligently at passages of English text, and

I understood the meaning of the words, but my mind couldn't process the ideas. Once again, sleep proved to be the answer for my reading deficiency. After two weeks of twelve-hour nights, I found myself in the team library searching for English-language classics by headlamp light as if for buried treasure.

I have read essays and heard writers wax eloquent on their life-and-death compulsion to write. "I have to write," they say, "otherwise I go insane/suffer/die/become depressed." Lorrie Moore's story "How to Become a Writer" begins, "First, try to be something, anything, else," and concludes that being a writer is "a lot like having polio" (119, 126). My experience has not been the same, at least not yet. I don't consider myself to be a writer in the starving-artist-compelled-to-tell-my-story-even-though-its-terrible way. It isn't who I am, part of my soul, or even a coping mechanism. I don't write when I'm depressed. I call a friend or eat chocolate or take a nap. I don't bare my soul or find my sanity in written language.

On a busy Monday morning my roommates and I realized that none of us had informed our housekeeper that we would have guests for dinner that night. It mattered because we needed our housekeeper to cook the dinner. She wouldn't arrive for another two hours, and we were already scattering for the day. So we sat down to write her a note, electing the roommate with the best Nepali penmanship and pooling our vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

I write because I want to, at certain times, about certain topics. I write when I have something to say, even if all I have to say is that my day was funny/bizarre/sad/interesting.

Our efforts to coerce Nepali script from our minds and fingertips were in vain. Not only could we not spell the words we could barely pronounce, we remembered half-way through that our housekeeper couldn't read in any language. And so my roommate cancelled her plans for the morning and sat at home for two hours to inform the housekeeper of our dinner guests.

Maybe I'm not a writer. Maybe I just write. I write to transfer information from one mind to another, whether the story originates with me or I'm speaking for someone else. Writing is sharing. It's collaborating. It's entirely optional. Sometimes I'm pretty good at it. I sent a story from my thesis to a friend who was featured in it because I wanted her opinion and blessing. She wrote to me, "Thanks for being able to write in words what we often felt, but had no ability to express." To me, that is one of the greatest compliments on my writing I've ever received. I said something publicly that others have wanted to say and can't, or haven't yet.

That's why I read memoir. Strangers' tragedies and victories and musings express ideas that I haven't been able to, sometimes in a perfect line, sometimes in an intricate story. The world doesn't need endless life stories. It does need principles of life to be well told. Most people tell stories better than principles.

I once tried to capture a particular thought on danger and safety, and then I read Jim Heynen's "That Could Have Been You" in *Flash Fiction Forward* and I thought, "Why bother?" He said exactly what I meant, but better. He said it so well I didn't even mind that he made up farmers with tragically missing fingers and a twelve-year-old boy impaled by falling icicles. The story was uniquely his. The concept matched mine. I tipped my literary hat and moved on to write a different story.

When I returned from Nepal my brain had become a gnarled mass of linguistic confusion. I could barely form complete sentences in English and couldn't distinguish between the Spanish I heard on the street and the continual Nepali static in my head. When sleep failed to restore order to my mind, my eventual solution was reading. The only text available to me in all the affected languages was the Bible, so I started in Mark, which is the simplest book grammatically, and read a few verses every day in English, and then Spanish, and Nepali, and Russian. By the time I finished the first chapter my brain had calmed. I could read the Spanish signs at the grocery store without sputtering into Nepali. Eventually I could speak and write complete English sentences and use words with more than three syllables. Another victory.

Although I am free to choose to write or not, I find myself compelled to read for the sake of my linguistic sanity. Maybe I write for the sanity of others, that as they read, they may discover what they intended to say. Or maybe I've been reading too much Sebald.

READING LIST

- Alvarado, Beth. *Anthropologies: A Family Memoir*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011.
- Baxter, Charles. *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction*. Second, expanded edition. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2008.
- Beard, Jo Ann. *The Boys of My Youth: Autobiographical Essays*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998.
- Bender, Aimee. *Willful Creatures: Stories*. New York: Anchor Books, 2005.
- Chatwin, Bruce. *In Patagonia*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Cooper, Bernard. *Maps to Anywhere*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990.
- Crews, Harry. *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*. New York: Quill, 1983.
- Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York: Vintage International, 2007.
- Djebar, Assia. *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*. Translated by Dorothy S. Blair. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993.
- Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. New York: Anchor Books, 2010.
- Eggers, Dave. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.
- Elliott, Stephen. *The Adderall Diaries: A Memoir*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2009.
- Flynn, Nick. *Another Bullsbit Night in Suck City: A Memoir*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005.
- Forster, E. M. *A Passage to India*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1984.
- Gellhorn, Martha. *Travels with Myself and Another*. New York: Putnam, 2001.
- Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- Grealy, Lucy. *Autobiography of a Face*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2003.
- Hampl, Patricia. *The Florist's Daughter*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2009.
- . *I Could Tell You Stories*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999.

- . *A Romantic Education*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999.
- Hamsun, Knut. *Growth of the Soil*. Translated by W. W. Worster. New York: Dover Publications, 2010.
- Henderson, Susan. *Up From the Blue: A Novel*. New York: Harper, 2010.
- Hoffman, Eva. *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Iyer, Pico. *Sun After Dark: Flights Into the Foreign*. New York: Vintage Departures, 2005.
- Karr, Mary. *The Liars' Club: A Memoir*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.
- Lerner, Betsy. *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2000.
- Lyden, Jacki. *Daughter of the Queen of Sheba*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.
- McCarthy, Mary. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.
- McCarthy, Tom. *Remainder*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005.
- McCourt, Frank. *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir of a Childhood*. London: Flamingo, 1997.
- Ojito, Mirta. *Finding Manana: A Memoir of a Cuban Exodus*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.
- O'Neill, Joseph. *Netherland*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2008.
- Powell, Padgett. *The Interrogative Mood: A Novel?* New York: HarperCollins, 2009.
- Retief, Glen. *The Jack Bank: A Memoir of a South African Childhood*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011.
- Ronson, Jon. *The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2011.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1998.
- Sebald, W. G. *The Rings of Saturn*. Translated by Michael Hulse. London: Harvill Press, 1998.
- Schwartz, Mimi. *Good Neighbors, Bad Time: Echoes of My Father's German Village*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.
- Shacochis, Bob. *Domesticity: A Gastronomic Interpretation of Love*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
- . *The Immaculate Invasion*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

- Shields, David. *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.
- Small, David. *Stitches: A Memoir*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009.
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Vol I: My Father Bleeds History. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.
- Thomas, James and Robert Shapard, Eds. *Flash Fiction Forward: 80 Very Short Stories*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006.
- Unferth, Deb Olin. *Revolution: The Year I Fell in Love and Went to Join the War*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011.
- Walcott, Derek. *Omeros*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990.
- Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle: A Memoir*. New York: Scribner, 2006.
- Wolff, Tobias. *This Boy's Life: A Memoir*. New York: Grove Press, 1989.
- Wood, James. *How Fiction Works*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.