

The Rainy Season

Rebecca Whitehead von Trapp
2008

Independent Study Project completed for the ACM India Studies program in fall 2008.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank all the places I've seen and the people I've met for sharing themselves with me and inspiring my words.

I owe everything to my guide and dear friend, Jyoti Kanetkar. Thank you for all of your wonderful books, the black coffee, and for constantly reminding me why I am a writer.

I am forever in debt to Aai and Baba Shah for their unconditional hospitality. Thank you for giving me a home in India and for being the backbone of this experience. Wherever I go from here, you are always in my heart.

Special thanks to Sucheta, Seema, and Anjali for being the most supportive and gracious women I've ever known. Thanks to Raj Rao and Shrikant for their guidance and advice.

Last, but certainly not least, thank you to SDS and AN, for always pushing the envelope.

Table Of Contents

Right Here, Right Now

At First Sight

City Of Dreams

Her Eyes

Make Yourself Known

A Slow Dance

Be Speak Think Write

Film

On Being Alone

Writers

Sometimes We Have To Remind Ourselves That We Are Real

Reverie

Waking Up

Heat Rises

Kneel Down And Kiss The Dirt

The Distance Between Us

Big Hug Day

The Departure

Breaking The Silence

Epilogue

Bibliography

*The smoke clears
I'm not afraid to fly
Don't look over your shoulder, even once
Swinging on the seconds between mind and page
Kite in a cloudless sky
Spontaneous combustion
Bitter dusks yield to vehement mornings
We all belong somehow, somewhere
Paralyzed
A coconut drops from the old palm tree, echoes*

The smoke clears...

Right Here, Right Now

This place and all its people have given me more than I ever hoped for or knew existed. Still, it seems it was no coincidence that I chose India as the temple in which I'd sanctify my identity. The following excerpt is the concluding paragraph of my submission for the application to study abroad with the ACM India Studies Program, written in February of 2008 (five months prior to the commencement of the program):

I want to go abroad because I want to understand the feeling of complete unfamiliarity to the point where I develop an uncertainty of who I think I am and why I am that way. Then I want to capture that uncertainty, cope with it, overcome it, and resurface feeling more alive – more like myself – than I ever have before. I'm confident that India is a place so far away from what I know – literally, culturally, and psychologically – that it will provide me with everything I'll need to trip, fall, and pick myself back up. I'm prepared to be completely out of my element, extremely uncomfortable, figuratively lost... I want to absorb and revel in it all. My goal for going abroad is not to erase my identity, as I know it, but to enhance it with experiences and knowledge that I can't find just anywhere. In order for my character to thrive, I need to turn its growth patterns upside down by going somewhere that is entirely foreign to me, and away from everyone I am currently connected with. And there, in India, I will make a place of my own.

I now refer to this as “The Prophecy,” for over the past five months, I have met, and surpassed, each and every one of the expectations I created for myself and for the ACM India Studies Program.

As I sit here under this coconut palm, Mother Earth's breath falling all around me, fruit bats playing hide and seek with the hovering clouds, lightning pulsing

through the darkened sky, I am humbled. Nothing is missing. I do not want, nor do I need, anything more than what I have created for myself *right here, right now*, and that is the will to press on.

I've come to understand that reality only happens once, and it is the events of *right here, right now* that shape the events of the future. Reality is a spark of light, created by the decisions we make. Just as quickly as it comes into fruition, it is lost – burned, by the passage of time, to ashes that we pick through to find whatever still glimmers beneath the dust to call our memories. These memories, however intangible and hopelessly indescribable they are to others, are all that remain at the bottom of the suitcase when it comes time to head home and unpack. Upon returning, we desperately seek to secure these bits of history into our lives by sharing them with those we love. We must give them a voice so they have a chance to live on, even when we return to dust.

This piece of writing serves as the voice of my days spent in India. It is my declaration of an unadulterated peace of mind. The chronological evolution of these pages speaks of the pattern of growth my life has undertaken during my time here, and alludes to potential paths it may follow, cross, and never take in the coming years.

Its title, “The Rainy Season,” is appropriate on both literal and metaphorical levels. The former is more obvious, for this whole adventure began with the year’s Monsoon. The latter can be interpreted by understanding rain as a symbol of change, fertility, and rebirth. However, specific to India, the rainy season serves as much more than such symbolism. It is necessary for survival. Indians look forward to each Monsoon with intense anticipation, love, and hope, for it signifies prosperity in all aspects of life. The way my experience in India mirrors these elements of the rainy season is what inspired me to title it so.

I have been writing down these bones since the moment I set foot in this country, and through my words, I have come aflesh. It is time to walk on; I am ready, India. Let me go.

At First Sight

She's a duet
of traditional values and futuristic intent
chanting together,
seeing her through
a hopeful plunge
into
the Great Beyond.

Here I am,
falling
– for love,
and maybe something I'll never know,
into
the Great Beyond –

with her.

July 2008

I'm not afraid to fly...

City Of Dreams

I was obsessed, infatuated. I felt like a kid again, getting a new toy for my birthday and, for the next two weeks, bubbling over with anticipation of the last school bell so I could run home to play with it. Only this time, the toy was a city, and I didn't have to wait for anything or anyone to tell me when it was and was not time to play.

I arrived in Pune not only a virgin to India, but also to living in a city. For me, accepting the daily sight of traffic coursing *around* "sacred" cows lounging in the middle of an urban street – an utter normalcy – was just as absurd as accepting the traffic itself. Stepping over giant piles of waterlogged litter, dodging airplane-sized buses, passing by men relieving themselves just five paces to the left of the sidewalk, and listening to gangs of stray dogs shouting at each other across territories as I lay awake in bed at night – these were all new experiences for me, exciting and dangerous. Pune was something for me to discover, and I, something to be evolved in Her.

This city is constantly changing, progressing, moving forward at ramming speeds. At the same time, some part of it will not let go of its past. Hence the woman riding side-saddle on the back of a two-wheeler, wearing a beautiful, hand-woven *sari*, or the *bhajiwala*¹ just outside the mobile phone store, laying out the fresh produce from his village farm. Some might say Pune is getting ahead of Herself, others might say She needs to leave Her past behind, once and for all. To me, Pune is a fine balance of ideals –embracing inevitable development while rooting down in the timelessness of tradition. In this way, I see myself in Her.

These days, I don't flinch when a car turns a foot's-length in front of me. I don't spend five minutes fawning over an abandoned puppy. I don't gawk at water buffaloes sauntering through a traffic light. I don't think twice about watching ten

¹ Vegetable vendor

pint-sized, school children pile into a three-person rickshaw, unattended, at eight o'clock in the morning. It's not that these things don't thrill me anymore, or that I've grown tired of life in Pune City. It's that I've simply lost my virginity to Her.

And now at night, after enjoying a home-cooked, Indian meal and wishing “*shubharatri*”² to Baba and Aai, I fall into dreams with the strays singing me lullabies.

² “Good-night”

Her Eyes

Her birth blanket has eyes for her and it swaddles her skin while she sleeps.

And she sleeps, and she sleeps for years –
until the dawn of her twentieth birthday
when the late August rain puddles
spit out butterflies
and beaming,
awake
for the first time,
her eyes
watch their worn blanket
drift like paper
down
to the girl
sleeping quietly
below her window.

August 2008

Don't look over your shoulder, even once...

*It costs so much to be a full human being that there are very few who have the enlightenment or the courage, to pay the price...
One has to abandon altogether the search for security, and reach out to the risk of living with both arms. One has to embrace the world like a lover. One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing. One needs a will stubborn in conflict, but apt always to total acceptance of every consequence of living and dying.*
–Morris L. West

Make Yourself Known

What a strange coincidence it is to have completed the twentieth year of my life amidst the most enlightening experience I've ever had. This is not to say that, since I've numerically entered into "adulthood" while in India, I've attained total *moksha*³, or something of the sort. It just so happens that I literally packed my bags and removed myself from the first stage of my life – to reflect upon it, understand its flaws, build from them, and prepare myself for what's to come – without fully understanding *why* I had to.

Most people do not get such an opportunity, or ever recognize its importance in cultivating their identities. Being in India has convinced me that every human being must take time away from what is comfortable. When you leave that zone, you'll find that your own self will be the most familiar thing to you. Then, since it is human nature to latch on to the familiar, you inevitably rely on yourself to be the one who saves you. You surrender everything to you.

When you become comfortable with who you are in that uncomfortable situation, your self-confidence will be obvious, to you and everyone around you – you can do anything. When you reach this state of poise, I guarantee you'll find the most solace in offering yourself, as you are, to others. You'll be surprised at how much more you can know of yourself by interacting with complete strangers.

³ Ultimate enlightenment

Whether it's simply the warmth radiating from an Indian's head-bobble as we swap smiles in passing, the faith I've summoned by sitting with Jyoti for hours while she tenderly illustrates for me the gifts of this life, or the overwhelming satisfaction of living with, and feeling truly a part of, an Indian family for five months – it's all been worth the risk of subjecting myself to the unfamiliar.

If you live your entire life in the shelter of comfort, you cheat yourself of learning and growing from contact with the unknown; you lessen the chances of finding your own Truth. It's like spending everyday of your life in the same classroom, with the same teacher and the same classmates, when there is a whole university at your disposal.

There's a whole world out there! Jump in, look around. Make yourself known.

A Slow Dance

The petals of her feet lay still,
planted
in the concrete.

Her eyes search for a break in the flood
of countless cars, cycles, scooters, trucks, bikes, and buses –
all forming lanes that don't exist.

Now,
a hopeful moment sends her pulse
to the Monsoon skies,
and time belongs to her breath.

The whipping breeze stops dead,
its dust settles;
scents of jasmine and diesel dissipate;
the honking horns subside –

reality giving way to her grace.

Chin up, she steps off the curb.
Her movements are dance,
her silk sari swirling about her cinnamon skin.
The river of humanity
swallows her,
incorporating her being into the flow of the city.

Death whispers in her ears and
grazes her golden cheeks
while she elegantly weaves through the myriad lives
of strangers.

But as she approaches the other side,
His invitation slips on into the bustling traffic,
and touching down,
her breath releases –

the world starting again.

August 2008

Swinging on the seconds between mind and page...

Be Speak Think Write

Just as painters work with paints, writers work with words; we use the colors of our inner essences to create something tangible for everyone to see. Language is both the lover and the enemy of the creative writer, for while it is the most restrictive of media, it is all we have. And although our place in time is an innovative and rapidly progressing one, someone has yet to invent a way for writers to directly inject their bonafide feelings into the reader. Thus, writers are left with only a pen and their words, and readers, only eyes to read and imaginations to interpret them.

A writer's most important critic is him/herself, but it is essential for us to receive outside criticism if we have any desire to improve our work. Sharing our work with as many readers as possible is the key to enriching it. The more people who speak the language we use to write, the more readers we will produce. The more readers we acquire, the more feedback we will have to consider, and the better our work will become.

Today's society equates survival to money. Writers equate survival to writing. Writing is the only thing that makes us *feel* truly alive. In conformance with society's demands, but without compromising our own needs, we will do everything to make our writing our living. To be successful in this, we have no choice but to rely on the masses.

Lucky for me, the English language is quite popular with the masses and if I have nothing else in this world, at least I know how to tickle the taste buds of my mother tongue and put their laughter on paper. So, on English and intrigue, *I* will be able to survive, but not every writer has the luxury of being born into the arms of such a universal language.

In this case, let's zoom in on India. One billion people, two hundred languages. Based on these numbers, what are the chances for an Indian writer, no matter what he/she writes, of securing an amply comprehending *and* interested

audience? Not so great. Thus, drawing from my “masses = money = made” logic, how are all Indian writers not starving to death? Unfortunately, some of them probably are – but there are Indian writers out there who are surviving by writing in English, and they are absolutely literary forces to be reckoned with.

Before embarking upon my Great Indian Adventure, I was completely oblivious to the fact that English is one of India’s major languages, and also one of the three languages most urban Indians know (the other two being Hindi and the language of their respective state). I also did not take into consideration that, like American English or Irish English, Indian English has become its own language, separate from the womb of British English.

All along, I was considering the English language to be as much a foreigner in India as I was. My lack of awareness led me to falsely believe that there must be a high hurdle many Indian writers writing in English have to jump – that of finding a legitimate expression of the distinct aspects of one nation, through the language of another. In other words, I found it highly unlikely for an Indian to be able to write a moving poem in English about life in the deserts of Rajasthan. I thought, how can one possibly describe, for instance, the dictatorship of heat in such a place, with a language that has countless synonyms for the snow, but only one word for the sun?

Jyoti Kanetkar, a half Maharashtrian and half Telgu, made me realize that there are children, there are doctors, there are drug dealers, there are Indians, there are Americans... and inside of all of these, there are writers. She stresses the importance of understanding that the words we write are attempts at visually articulating the language of our thoughts, and they do not discriminate. We can choose our words, but words cannot choose us, and whoever we are, we write in the language in which we think.

Jyoti started thinking in English when she started learning it in the ‘60s. She desperately sought to replace her mother’s overwhelming pain of a broken marriage, with pride – pride in Jyoti for learning English, the language of educated Indians, so quickly. In this way, her mother’s trauma served as a catalyst for Jyoti to excel in the

English language at such a young age and because of this, she now thinks, and therefore writes, in English.

Raj Rao, a writer from Mumbai, also started thinking in English as a child. Living in a household with parents who come from two different states, and therefore speak two different languages, Raj's whole family is held together by the glue of the English language. It is a given fact that Indians are born, are brought up, and die, breathing family, and because English has been the only common means of communication within his home, Raj now thinks, and therefore writes, in English.

Unlike Jyoti and Raj, I was born to American parents and raised in a purely English-speaking household in America. But, just like Jyoti and Raj, I think in English, so I write in English. It's as simple as that. I don't care where you come from or what language you, or the person next to you, behind you, or on top of you, speaks. It's the thoughts that carry weight, the thoughts that speak. If something moves you enough to write it down, it doesn't matter where you are or what language the words reveal themselves in. If the Rajasthani sun seems so much more than just "the sun," writers from all over the world can, and will, find a way to make that known.

Shining bright light on dim images, making them glow, in whichever language our thoughts are set afire – that is what we do.

Film

Like stumbling upon
a lone feather
from a sacrificed bird,
my eyes find the moment
of miles behind
floating
on the film strip that lines the back of my memory –
cast there
by the projector of moons past.

And in the broken, spotty picture,
the fading colors sink
to grey
and I can't remember
what you look like.

August 2008

Kite in a cloudless sky...

On Being Alone

Never have I written as much as I do in India. Initially, I figured it was because of my immersion in an environment opposite to that which I was born and raised, thus multiplying my inspirations for writing. However, as the days tick by like the numbers on a wound-up rickshaw meter, I realize I am writing so much, simply because I can.

I am a world apart from the life I've always known. When I think about America, the place and people are surreal to me, completely out of reach. And for them, I am surely just as much of an apparition. To me, this defines True Aloneness, which I now know makes for immaculate writing conditions.

I have zero distractions. I cannot easily make a phone call or check my email or go to the corner café and share a cup of coffee with a friend. I am completely free from the regularities of my everyday life in America; I am wonderfully lost in the realness of myself.

Others in this situation might crumble to their knees and mistake such Aloneness with the overwhelming feeling of Loneliness, which is a feeling similar to Aloneness, but exists against one's own will. I see this Aloneness as an ultimate paradise that I've never been able to enjoy, and never even knew existed.

Of course, being separated from my familiar reality for this substantial stretch of time, I inevitably find myself missing it now and then. I even wish to be back there, for a few hours here or a few there, occasionally. But then, associated with thoughts of America, comes a downpour of unavoidable complications into my mind, and I remember how fortunate I am to be shrouded in Aloneness right now – how important Aloneness is for my growth as a full human being and an honest writer. I must covet this time, and just relax in reflection with my words, writing it all down so I'll have something – after I am thrust back into life in America – to remind me that all of this...that India...is not just a dream I once had.

Writers

Dreamers dream and
Lovers love and
Writers tell about it.

September 2008

Spontaneous combustion...

Sometimes We Have To Remind Ourselves That We Are Real

I don't *want* to die –

(I'm looking forward to eating lunch in two hours, the exhilaration of crossing Karve Road on my way to class on Monday, and maybe getting married some day, or maybe not. I love people and the way they make me feel, even the people who make me completely miserable or downright furious. At least they make me feel, and feel something opposite of pleasure so I can actually understand what that feels like. I love music for its ability to move me in ways that people cannot, and never will. I love wet wind and green things and wild animals that would sacrifice themselves to protect their babies from even the slightest threat of harm) –

The force of love within ceases upon life's end, and the prospect of this weakens my human spirit, so I cannot desire to stop living now. Yet, whenever I *will* die, that is when I *should* die, because denial is worse than regret.

There is something about today's living that blinds us, that draws a curtain over the purity of life.

If we rise above the cause, we will be able to *live* the effect without questioning its origins; we'll embrace life instead of wondering why we are alive or how we got here or what we should be doing with our lives.

What we *should* do with them is what we *will* do with them, of course.

Reverie

hand-washed clothing
draped like fainted women
vulnerable
on a line under the ceiling fan

the sound of the rains
roaring crowds at a festival

wet socks drying on the windowsill

wind sweeping through the open window
chiding the hair across my face to dimple my cheeks

Saturday afternoon in late September

just me
and my clothes

September 2008

Bitter dusks yield to vehement mornings...

A dream is the place where a wish and a fear meet. When the wish and the fear are exactly the same, we call the dream a nightmare.

-Gregory David Roberts

Waking Up

Who am I? My wish is to know who I am and why I am who I am. Likewise, my fear is knowing who I am and why I am who I am. The goal of my life's Journey is to wholly and honestly answer this question, but if I know how to answer it, is my Journey not, then, over? Will I not, then, cease to live?

September 14, 2008

I just woke from a dream – rather, it was a nightmare:

December. Vermont. I am with my family in my house, fresh off the plane from India, and I am doing the dishes the way I do for Aai in Pune. I am trying to explain the logic behind letting them soak, insisting that, “haste makes waste,” and I am refusing to use the dishwasher. My father and brother are staring at me blankly, their heads cocked to the side in confusion.

Suddenly, I do not feel right. I am terrified. I am finally home after months of being away, and all I want is to be back in India. I am shrinking, into myself, realizing that I am all that I have. Tears plow through my cheeks, and, surrounded by family members, I am the only one reaching out to me.

I will forever keep this nightmare enveloped inside the part of my heart saved for India, using those imaginary tears of mine to seal it. For the tears remind me that from this day forward, I am finally on my own; the rest of my life is up to me. They symbolize the constant change and renewal that play their eternal music inside of me. They serve as nourishment for the buds of passion and knowledge blooming daily, in

all corners of my soul. They tell me that day after day, until my breath stops, the Journey lives on in me.

India has taught me that the meaning and understanding of my identity might be clear as a looking glass today, but moonlight shatters reflections that only time can heal. Tomorrow, I'll wake up to the pieces of me scattered at my feet again, and kneeling down among them, I'll reassemble my puzzle with fresh eyes and a swelling eagerness to reach out, and to touch.

Heat Rises

“Yes go”
He says
Consulting the ceiling

She stirs
Unsure
Uncrossing her legs

“Go to the Taj Mahal”
He says
“And think of someone you love”

She rises
Ready
Walking out of the rain

And sifting through
October fire
She coasts upon
Her melting heart

October 2008

We all belong somehow, somewhere...

Kneel Down And Kiss The Dirt

Home. What defines a home? A place providing comfort, safety; a time when everything is finally in its right place; the point at which the strange is no longer strange. Such coziness tends to drive away challenge, for new experiences are numbered when we spend a lot of time in one place. As a place becomes a home, the challenge becomes leaving.

When can we call a place “home?” The only way to know is to get on the road. Spend some time living out of a suitcase. Sporadic sleep, poor eating habits, and only enough money to get you to the next city. You’ll find that after hanging on the wind for a while, going back to where you came from, to what you know and dreamt about on the overnight trains to nowhere in particular – it’s true bliss. It is confirmation that you can disappear, and return after some time feeling as though you’ve never left.

Home is found by leaving it.

I left you, America, and I think about you often, but I have never once longed for you the way I have longed for my Pune. Leaving this city to travel the country for only three weeks was the farthest away from home I’ve ever felt, and the ecstasy I experienced in coming back was enough for me to all but kneel down and kiss the dirt that lines these streets.

Most days I don’t think about it. But on days like today, when I have time to stop and notice that the mid-morning sunshine is making emerald the palm fronds outside my window and the smells of freshly-made *roti*⁴ and *ghee*⁵ are snaking their way into my nostrils from the kitchen below, I cannot believe that I am in India, and I feel home.

⁴ Indian bread

⁵ Purified butter

The Distance Between Us

Sitting ten seats back
From the rest of them
Facing in the opposite
Direction from which
The train is moving

Watching the sun
Submerge
Splashing out
The moon
And some stars

Careening
Into the deepening shadows
The window's images eddy
In reverse motion
Before my mind's eye

And everyone on this
Damn train
Is staring at me

But to someone
Out there
I'm a silhouette
In the fluorescent lights of
A passing train car

I'm a stranger
A foreigner
Backlit
In the hazy
North-Indian eve and

I look just like everyone else

October 2008

Paralyzed...

The sea's only gifts are harsh blows and occasionally the chance to feel strong. Now, I don't know much about the sea, but I do know that that's the way it is here. And I also know how important it is in life not necessarily to be strong but to feel strong. To measure yourself at least once. To find yourself at least once in the most ancient of human conditions: facing the blind, deaf stone alone with nothing to help you but your hands and your own head.

-Primo Levi

Big Hug Day

The last time I spoke with Grandfather was when I called him on his birthday. I could hear the weakness in his voice as I tried my hardest, from thousands of miles across the world, to pretend like he didn't sound different.

Despite the excruciating, physical pain he must have felt, and the thought of his youngest grandchild so out of reach in such a faraway land, he humored me with the sounds of his famous Big Hug over the phone on Wednesday, October 22, in anticipation of our Big Hug Thursday. In return, I told him I hoped he would have a great birthday, that I was so proud of him for reaching ninety-five, that I loved and missed him very much, and that I had plans to fly out to be with him in Alabama in February.

Mom called to tell me the news of his passing while I was on a train back to Pune after spending five days on the beach in Goa. I don't remember much of what happened after we hung up the phone. Suddenly, everything seemed so arbitrary, my beach vacation a waste of time, my family too far away. A huge piece of my life was sliced away against my will, and trapped on a train in South India, my sanity was in the hands of people who had never known my Grandfather, and had only known me for three months.

It turns out that I could not have asked for more than what my four traveling mates gave me on potentially one of the loneliest nights I had to endure in India. They gave me their ears, their understanding, and as much time as I needed to be lost in

thoughts of Grandfather. The following is what Sarah Schulte, one of those four girls, and now one of my closest friends, wrote during that unforgettable train ride on November 1, 2008:

Her head drops to the waiting shoulder below. As tears escape her eyes to caress her cheek, we flock to her, surrounding all sides with our love and concern. We reach for her hands, feet, anything, trying to soothe her pain with our well-intentioned fingertips.

Watching her gaze as she listens, I can see the wheels turning, churning a collage of memories and images of this man, the one who'd "always been there," salvaging her inheritance from the fate of time and attempting to understand that he no longer will be there. She thus longs to fortify his place in her heart, strengthening each memory with the sadness of knowing that it is in memory alone that he now exists.

As much as I so badly wished to be with others who knew Grandfather like I did, how comforting it would have felt to be intertwined in my family's arms, those girls made me remember why I came to India in the first place: to find myself, by myself. Experiencing this devastation during my time in India has catalyzed such growth. It has given me "the chance to feel strong," to be able to persist gracefully through the rest of life's "harsh blows."

Because life doesn't wait for anything or anybody, and our best is all we can do. I know you tried your best to wait for me, Grandfather, I'll always remember that. I'll always be so proud of you for reaching ninety-five. I'll always love you, I'll always miss you very much, and just as it always has been, Thursday will always be Big Hug Day to me.

The Departure

There,
in the middle of the overflowing street,
stands the Jasminewala⁶ –

He's just trying to get by
on strings of tiny, white flowers,
whose fragrance alone
can intoxicate
all soulful human beings
enough to altogether forget about their looming
departure –

The only white in a sea of brown,
like his jasmine,
he spots me –

With a grandiose smile
and inquiring eyes,
he raises his dying jewels to the night;
and I answer him,
with a smile to match,
raising my still-warm parcel of soggy bhel⁷ –

As he blazes a trail to me through
the sky's tears and the petrol fumes,
a rainbow of trust connects us;
our hopes
– magnetic –
offer themselves
to each other –

Tonight,
he won't be hungry,
and tomorrow,
I will give brown blossoms to the wind –

September 2008

⁶ Jasmine vendor

⁷ A variety of Indian snack

A coconut drops from the old palm tree, echoes...

I have to be free and able to say my thoughts to you, to tell you about my judgments and values, to expose to you my fears and frustrations, to admit to you my failures and shames, to share my triumphs, before I can really be sure what it is that I am and can become. I must be able to tell you who I am before I can know who I am.

–John Powell

Breaking The Silence

Last Sunday, Mom called me on the phone. I was busy writing a poem and I had used up the prepaid minutes on my mobile earlier that day, thus leaving me with no way of calling her back later if I continued with my writing. I was somewhat irritated at my obligation to answer her phone call and at first, this irritation kicked at her through the wall of my distant tone of voice.

“Hello? Hi. Yeah, everything’s fine, I’m just...writing. A poem. Just about something that happened to me the other day. No, I can’t send it now we don’t have Internet in the bungalow. Read it? I mean, it’s not done, but I guess I can read it to you...”

The proceeding conversation lasted for over an hour, the entirety of it fuelled by that poem. It was like we were deeply analyzing a mystical painting: a self-portrait of me, smiling upon my India, while my mother proudly looks on.

When I hung up the phone, I unfolded before me. I felt as light as a single, glass bangle, and as sharp as the distinct tinkling of a full set of bangles – a sound that falters when even one bangle is cracked. I was the space between the intensity of the stifling, summer months and the saving grace of the rainy season. The answers were already there, but they were blurry under a wrinkling heat wave, only holding on to the hope that at any moment, the Monsoon would arrive.

I had to physically tell someone “my judgments and values, my fears and frustrations, my failures and shames, my triumphs,” based on every experience that

preceded that moment, before the rejuvenating harmonies of the heavy rains could sweep me forward. What I failed to recognize initially is that that someone *had* to be my mother. She is the place from which I came, the only person in this world who has known all of me, from head to toe, since the beginning of my time. In articulating the contents of myself to her, I could skip the basic fact that I *am* growing and dive right into *how* I am growing. As I deeply confided in her for the very first time, breaking the silence that stood between us all these years, she was just as fascinated and enthusiastic as I was.

The guiding energy my mother gave me that day transcended cosmic boundaries that I never imagined she could cross. It likely would have taken many more years for the self-knowledge I now possess to materialize through her, if I simply did not board the plane to India back in July. Worse, it may not have taken shape at all in my lifetime. I suppose I'll never know...

...Because right now, I know who I am better than I ever have before. That conversation with Mom enabled me to find all the words I've been searching for, to write my life's poem— I've only to begin to write, and decide on my own what it is that I will *become*.

Epilogue

What can I do?
What, when every craving
Is fulfilled
Every daydream
Brought to life
Every grain of sand
Burning white
Under Betul⁸ sunbeams
Every smile skipping
Like a rare gem
From one wave's crest
To another?
When everyone I meet
Considers hospitality
A responsibility?
What can I do
In the face of such majesty?
I've been struck
Into a state of perpetual
Gratitude
By generous hands
In this auspicious land
I kneel before you, India
I give you my Word
It's the least I can do
For you have made me
The luckiest.

November 2008

⁸ A small town in South Goa

Bibliography

Levi, Primo. "Bear Meat." The New Yorker. 8 Jan 2007.

Powell, John. Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am? Allen, TX: Thomas
More Association, 1969.

Roberts, Gregory D. Shantaram. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2004.

Schulte, Sarah. 1 Nov 2008.

West, Morris L. The Shoes Of The Fisherman. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1991.