

2013

## Born with Their Hearts in Their Mouths

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BORN WITH THEIR HEARTS IN THEIR MOUTHS

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

KARIN SERPENTINA EBERHARDT

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2013

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

December 2013

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Karin Serpentina Eberhardt  
Entitled Born With Their Hearts in Their Mouths

Be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of  
Fine Arts.



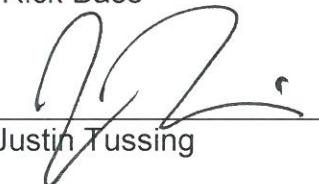
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## Abstract

*Born With Their Hearts in Their Mouths* is a collection of chapter excerpts and an essay. Taken from two non-fiction books in-progress, the chapter excerpts are written on seemingly disparate topics: the increasingly rare Spoon-billed Sandpiper, and the enduring Kachin people of northern Myanmar. These avian and human subjects are linked, however, by themes of migration and contact. Migration, as in the long-distance movements of birds and people, whether recurring as the tide, or an into-the-sunset venture forth without thought of return. Contact, as in what happens when a migrating shorebird meets a human-transformed shoreline, or when one family of the human species encounters another. In the structure of the collection, the fulcrum between the two sets of excerpts is a personal essay that explores these themes in the life of the author-narrator. The final offering is a chapter of historical fiction set in colonial Burma (former name of Myanmar). All the work in the thesis relates to the country of Myanmar, where the author, an international aid professional, has been living for one and a half decades.



## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my mentors for the profound knowledge they shared with me. In order of encounter: Barbara Hurd, Rick Bass and Jaed Coffin, a heart-felt thanks to each of you. I hope that in some small measure my writing has been worthy of your instruction. I thank my colleagues at the Stonecoast program, whether faculty or student, who have been supportive while being critical, the best combination. Special thanks to Ted and Annie Deppe and the Summer 2012 Ireland residency group, the Guinness and the bookstore, and the dolphin that Andy Wales brought from Maine to Dingle.

This thesis is dedicated to those working to save any and all endangered life forms, including fictive dolphins, and to peace in Kachinland.

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## Flip Sides of a Penny: The Artist's Statement

I came to Stonecoast as a student of the craft of creative non-fiction with the intention of writing, among other things, a “book about the Kachin of northern Myanmar.” I would write this book from the perspective of Karin Eberhardt, an international aid worker who has been based in that country for over a decade. The plan seemed straightforward, and I was ready with my book proposal and a sample, to market the whole thing to an agent. Imagine my confusion when during the first round of mentor conferences, the faculty with whose writing I had the most in common told me (kindly) that the work wasn’t quite ready to publish.

My surprise deepened when during my first workshop, my readers were confused about whether I was writing memoir, or travel writing, or some combination of the two. This made me confused too, as I did not consider myself to be writing either of the above. I knew that I wanted to tell the lives of some of the people I had known, and their struggle with adversaries such as war, drugs, discrimination and poverty, and that these stories would then represent “the Kachin.” Yet my workshop peers, many of whom were writing memoir, wanted to hear more about *me*, and about what it was like to work in Myanmar as a foreigner, or how I had been changed by living there. The daughter of a psychologist, and bored with the proliferation of memoir as therapy, or memoir as let-me-tell-you-the-story-of-my-life, I was allergic to the idea of writing about my self. I wanted to write about, and honor, other people, whose stories I found much more compelling and significant than my own. During my first semester, I fully

expected that my graduating presentation would be entitled: “Taking the ‘Me’ out of memoir.”

My first mentor Barbara Hurd asked the most important question, the universal question, the only question: *Who is the narrator? Who is telling the story?* I was taken aback. The answer seemed obvious—hello-oo, it’s me, an international aid worker in Myanmar. But on reading Vivian Gornick’s classic craft text *The Situation and the Story*, the penny dropped, the lucky penny that any serious writer of CNF will always be rubbing shiny, warm and conductive between her fingers as she works: The narrator is a construct, as carefully crafted as a character. The narrator can be a number of things, including unreliable, and it is the narrator and not the writer who tells the story.

I began to explore who the narrator in my story is, not in the existential sense of who I am as a writer, or as a person, but in the sense of narrative presence, distance and voice. I learned that while the writer’s mind must be at work on the page, this does not mean, even in personal essay, that the story has to be *about* the writer. A narrator can be projected through choice of sense detail, slant of reflection, emphasis of plot, even when the narrator is not physically present in the story.

Rebecca Solnit was among those writers who helped me explore the possibilities of narrator presence, particularly with *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. The book structure alternates between essayistic chapters in which a narrator is not manifest at all, conveniently all entitled “Blue,” and chapters in which the narrator is not physically present at all. Susan Orlean (*Orchid Thief*, *A Bullfighter*

*Checks Her Makeup*) and John McPhee (*Encounters with the Archdruid*) were for me both examples of writers who are present in the story, yet with narrative stances that range from overt commentary to something more neutral. I read Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, and David Eggers' *What is the What* for examples of a narrator whose mind is present in the sense detail, color, choice of story and plot, even reflections in the subject or character's head, though never actually there: a CNF narrator who is omniscient as in fiction, and never writes the word "I."

I found myself, then, needing to make a choice. The decision hinged around the degree to which the narrator should be physically present in the book, and how overt the narrator's mind on the page. I spent part of the second and third semester considering various narrative voices, resulting in the chapter excerpts "on the Kachin" presented here ("The Trident and The Tomb" and "Last Questions"), as well as my third semester project ("He Said, She Thought and I Told It Slant.")

In my second semester, with Rick Bass, I worked in part on fiction. I was prompted to work in fiction not just because I love to read it, but also because I was piqued by the experiments I was making with an omniscient CNF narrator. Writing in fiction helped me further explore that omniscient voice, while challenging my imagination to create scene and details, whether remembered or created. "The Letter," which closes the thesis, is historical fiction, and thus perhaps still straddles the increasingly blurred line between CNF and fiction.

During fourth semester I turned to another subject, this time a critically-endangered shorebird. The story of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper is still part of the story of Myanmar, as the bird migrates annually from the Gulf of Martaban on the Bay of Bengal to the arctic Chuckchi Sea. Like that of the Kachin, its story is also about the influence of China, the inevitability of change, the hazards of economic growth. It has been in some ways easier for me to write about the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, as I have been less obsessed about keeping my self out of the story. The question of who is the narrator is more easily solved. It is difficult for the bird to speak for itself, so I am comfortable speaking on its behalf.

*Longing to Arrive* is an attempt at a personal essay that brings concerns about the world together with concerns in my own life. Wanting first to “take the ‘me’ out of memoir”, this essay is finally all about, or at least partly about, me. My hope was to model the technique of essayists such as Annie Dillard, E.B. White, Barbara Hurd, and again Rebecca Solnit, and all those who wield ruminations on specific situations, that might include their own stories, to crack meaning out of universal truths.

The only piece in the thesis that features the narrator as blood and bone of the story, *Longing to Arrive* is the fulcrum around which the thesis pivots. Structurally, it marks the transition from writings about the Spoon-billed Sandpiper to those about the Kachin. But more importantly the essay concentrates on some of the themes that I have explored in my writing over the last two years. These themes are: migration and contact, survival and identity.

Migration of the Kachin lineages from their Tibetan highlands to Myanmar's north; migration of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper between the Gulf of Martaban and Siberia. Migration as a regular going out and returning, like birds in a constant ebb and flow; migration as in leaving one place for another forever without looking back. Contact, as when the Kachin meet the Shan, meet the Burmans, meet the missionaries; contact as when shorebirds on migration meet closed seawalls on Korea's coast, land reclaimed on China's eastern seaboard. Contact as in assimilation, contact as in collision.

These themes emerged, as they often do, unintended by the conscious mind. They stem perhaps from my experience as a child in a family of immigrants, though as the first-born on the new soil of America, perhaps I should have felt more at home from the first. It took me at least into college to feel completely comfortable as a local, perhaps because it was there that I finally understood America as it is, an assembly of outsiders. Then I went to China, and have been learning to be comfortable as a foreigner ever since.

Migration, and identity as the consequence of contact have been real to me since I was born and grew up in two worlds. An oversized billboard reared from the steel bridge over the Lehigh River, on which the rosy-cheeked curly-headed Sunbeam girl, in a pink and polka dot collar, pierced a slice of soft margarine-spread white bread with fierce pearly teeth. Every morning on my way to school that billboard marked my daily migration between a German home and an American school, and I cringed in the knowledge of the hard, dark pumpernickel bread that rattled in my lunchbox. In the basement cafeteria at lunchtime, I would

sometimes, covertly, try to trade my pumpernickel for someone's Sunbeam, but rarely had any takers. More often, it would end up in the trash. At home we spoke a different language, and at school I was occasionally called a Nazi, which made my face flush redder than that of the Sunbeam girl, and my heart leaden, even though neither I, nor my accuser, knew what the word really meant.

Every other summer we would board a Lufthansa and fly via Reykjavik to that country where everyone spoke German, baked their cakes with unsalted butter, and where all my relatives lived, except my three siblings and our parents. It was on these trips that I came to love plane travel (a love, which through constant abuse, has since verged on hate) and to know that there were many worlds in our one, and that I was curious.

Our father fought assimilation, while we children fought to assimilate. He still refuses to speak English with us, though my mother got tired and gave in. But I now appreciate having grown up bilingual, and growing up in two worlds. I like to think that it taught me a kind of sensitivity to the strange, and a familiarity with feeling sometimes like a stranger. Once I hit China, and then Vietnam and Myanmar, on contact with local people, strangeness became the defining aspect of my being. My oddity was no longer something I felt only inside, it was something I wore on the color of my skin, the shape of my nose and my eye, the size of my body relative to that of everyone around me. And I became comfortable with it.

In my third semester at Stonecoast, mentor Jaed Coffin drilled me on the next most important question, on which I was now ready to focus, which is: What



is this story really about? And, Why does this matter? Or the variation: why tell this story *now*?

The answer was obvious to me, but clearly not obvious to Jaed, and perhaps to my other readers. I am still not sure why it should be important to the reader, but I have a better idea of why it is important to me, which is a good first step.

After the two buffalo were slaughtered, the pigs set to roast, and the rice he had grown on his own farm steamed soft in quantities to feed hundreds, Sara Yaw Htung stood up in front of his extended family and clan relations to celebrate his fiftieth family anniversary. Wearing two pairs of eyeglasses, one on top of the other to better see his notes, he began his speech in mythical times with the story of the seven original brothers. He then traced the lineage of his clan through the names of fathers and sons and tracked the places they had passed through, descending in stages from the ancestral mountain home on the Tibetan plateau and through the generations to where he was standing now, in the northern Shan State town of Lashio. His grandchildren and great-grandchildren sat cross-legged and fidgety for the hours he spoke, on the ground in front of the array of folding-chairs and guests, sheltered from the hot sun by a fold-up vinyl roof, but it was for them that he told this story.

He wants them to remember what it means to be Kachin, to be defined by a mountain home even when living in a city, to marry only within the proper triad of clan relations, and to speak the language they have been raised in. He wants them to know where they have come from and how their migration has

established them as a people. He wants to be clear on how their ancestral travels down from the mythical mountain shaped their lineages, and partly defines the Kachin identity in the face of war, marginalization, forced assimilation, annihilation.

For the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, migration is a fact of life. The Spoon-billed Sandpiper cannot, as the Kachin can, decide to settle for good in one specific valley. It migrates to live, yet this is also how it dies. It is the hazards of its migration that are causing this bird to become extinct. Those hazards are the result of contact with humans along its flyway, humans who are destroying the mudflats and coastlines on which it depends. For the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, coping with migration is not a question of identity, it is a question of its very survival as a species. Sadly, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper is poorly equipped to change, cannot adapt when wetlands turn into seaports, mudbanks into shrimp farms.

*A Book of Migrations* was written early in Rebecca Solnits' career, "about a trip she took to Ireland." But her writing always embodies multi-layered meaning, and in the preface to the second edition she makes explicit her intentions: "I went not to confirm but to complicate and dissolve the definitions I'd been handed, about Europeanness, whiteness, Irishness, about travel, place and time... Since then I have tried to define a place as a stable location where unstable forces converge from without..."

In hindsight, my journey to write “about the Kachin” may be destined for a similar evolution of concept. I am interested in how a few venerable Kachin elders interpret the narrative of their lives, how they understand themselves to have been changed by, or influenced the direction of, these “unstable forces from without”. Their lives have been a series of blows, abuse, and historical change on a scale that my European grand-parents and their parents faced in the decades of the two World Wars; or as chronicled by Rebecca Solnit, of the American West at the turn of the century. The terms these elders use to tell their stories are saturated in concepts of migration, of identity, of family and lineage, of religious faith, of tactics to coalesce meaning, to resist or alternatively to gain strength from, these unstable forces from without.

I write this introduction to my graduating thesis at a time that is extremely difficult for the Kachin. During my first residency at Stonecoast in July 2011 the word began to sift over the seas, news that the decade-and-a-half ceasefire had broken down, that bullets and bombs were again renting apart the everyday life of the Kachin. I write this preface two and a half years later, when the rest of Myanmar is running at an incredible pace as the generals open their fists to loosen a hold on political power and commit to democratic reform—while palming the country’s economic assets. The Kachin are sitting on jade mines, rare-earth minerals, hydropower potential, fertile land, and eco-tourist hot-spots, all lined up for picking on the border to China. The generals-turned-cronies want complete control, and the Kachin haven’t got a hope in hell.

I once wrote an impassioned essay about my feelings for Myanmar that began with the words “I am in love with a country.” The essay was a gut-torn reaction to the time in 2007 that the army shot Buddhist monks, as they walked en masse in the streets under curtains of rain, protected by lines of hand-holding civilians, asking only for compassion. The essay explored the reasons why I love the country, counted the ways, so to speak. I concluded that I would not love this country as I do, if its people had not suffered so deeply, and if in my encounters with its people I had not experienced such kindness. I wrote the essay full of fire and heart, and later abandoned it as completely unpublishable, embarrassing and smacking of Orientalism.

I am uncomfortable with this ‘love of a country’ with which I am afflicted. It makes me ask if I am objectifying a people, ‘othering’ the exotic. Yet, it is as real an emotion as any other I have ever had, and perhaps even more than most. I was, at the time, prone to outbreaks of tears and lassitude, much as one would when grieving for a lost lover. I am equally uncomfortable with the critical social-science interpretations of what it is that I am experiencing.

Later, I used those words again, in the opening of *Longing to Arrive*. In this essay, I sidestep completely the question of what it means to love a country. I focus instead on the problem of migration. I compare my trite experience of jetlag, and the confusing duplicity of living in two worlds, as I shuttle between the man that I love and the place that I love, to the fatally dangerous migration of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper.

All this is to say that my bottom-line motivation in writing these stories is still to tell the story of Myanmar. Yet telling others' stories is always a telling of self, however obliquely. Part of my journey as a writer these last two years has been coming to not reject but to revel in this basic truth of the writing craft.

Just as it is impossible to take the "me" out of memoir, it is impossible to take the "me" out of any other creative non-fiction sub-genre undertaking, and perhaps even fiction. Non-fiction or true-fiction, directly or indirectly, bold text or sub-text, deliberately or subconsciously, we write our lives, we write our imagination. And we must write about what we love, about that with which we are impassioned, otherwise there is no point to writing at all. The words fall hollow and dry as dead leaves.

It is now likely that the "story of the Kachin" will mature as a series of essays, hopefully book-length. As in the thesis chapter called "Last Questions," I will insert myself physically on the page. The option to, like David Eggers or Katherine Boo, write a journalistic narrator who is omniscient, who is not a physical entity in the story, would seem in this case too much like fiction. I would have to make too much up, which seems presumptuous. The truth is that I have been wholly present as a person, as a mind and as a friend, throughout the story that I would like to tell, and it would be better to be honest about my interpretation. Who knows, perhaps the story of this filtered experience, consciously told, may even add depth. No matter how badly I think I might want to leave the "me" out, the story will be truer with "me" in.

Nearly fifteen years ago, in an essay attempting to explain the proliferation of nature writers, Rick Bass reminded us that there are really only two stories: a man or a woman goes out on a journey, or a stranger rides into town. Yet if we consider these two stories, we realize that, like the two sides of the same shiny penny, these stories are in fact one and the same. It is only the perspective that has shifted, has flipped from observer to observed, in the deft flick of two fingers over a coin.

### ***Book Synopsis***

**Born With Their Hearts In Their Mouths:** *The story of a nearly extinct bird species and the people fighting to save it*

The Spoon-billed Sandpiper, named for its spatula-like bill-tip, is declining so fast that it could disappear from the planet by the year 2020. Because this little wader beats an annual flight path along the world's most densely populated and rapidly industrializing coastline, the odds are stacked squarely against it. The nutrient-filled mudflats that it needs to keep its wings pumping are being converted to deep-sea ports, shrimp ponds and dry land. At either end of its migration, the bird risks being trapped in nets, poisoned as by-catch, or, in summer breeding on the tundra, having its nest raided by skua, fox or feral dog.

Yet a growing handful of dedicated scientists and bird enthusiasts are rallying to save this little bird. These champions range from schoolchildren in impoverished coastal villages to conservationists operating in states mistrustful of citizen action campaigns. The book takes the reader along the bird's annual migration from Chukotka down the coast of China, to Myanmar and Bangladesh, describes the rapidly-evolving tactics of conservationists, (they have to evolve rapidly, as the stronger the pressure, the more rapid the evolution), and shows what people will do to stave off the extinction of a species. The story includes an expedition to the breeding grounds to collect eggs as part of a last-ditch effort to save the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, as well as a visit to the captive breeding facility

on a tidal estuary in England, where two generations of birds will never leave their aviary yet are the hope for a future generations of long-distance flyers.

The book attempts to weigh the near-inevitability of species extinction against the price tag of conservation, and explores the hard questions that the human species must face as we continue to grow and develop: if the only hope for a species is through captive breeding, how do we decide whether to save it? Can a charismatic species truly help save an entire ecosystem?

The following two pieces (*Deserted Mudflats* and *Northern Limits*) are excerpts from this book.



## 1. Deserted Mudflats

On its back in the dried silt-sand, wings crooked half-open, the barred belly of the peregrine falcon curls towards a clouded sky. Stretched back to just above the bird's parted bill, one dark talon curves from a sheath of serrated yellow skin, is hooked into the bleached bamboo pole that stakes out the fishnet the falcon is entangled in. The other talon grasps at thin air, stiff, folded at an angle between open and closed. The rim around the falcon's eye is a yellow "o" against the black hood, a lifesaver thrown into the sea that rings only emptiness. A light rectangle on the curve of the iris forms a tiny highlight on a dull matte sheen. The falcon blinks, slowly, a clear membrane slips over the eye like a passing fog, and my ears finally register what Nigel has just said: *it's still alive*.

Nigel is accustomed to handling wild birds, which is why he tells me to stay back while he approaches the falcon with a cautious confidence. He crouches near the bird's tail, steals a hand up to one claw and grasps it firmly by the base, then places the other claw between the next two fingers of his holding hand. The bird hardly moves. With his free hand Nigel follows the strands of fine filament twisted around the falcon's wing, around and under the feathers. He tugs at the strands until feathers stand on end as if to the breaking point, and finally the shreds of fishnet pull clear from both wings. A thin ribbon of what looks like black cassette tape unravels from the shoulder feathers, and the falcon is free.

Nigel stands, still holding the falcon, by the talons, with one hand. The bird hangs upside down like the chickens I have seen swinging in clusters from

motorcycle handlebars on their way to be sold in markets, but this one holds its long pointed wings open and motionless, its heart bare to the world. I try to admire the precisely-barred trousers of the bird, the splotched buff belly, the dark 'tears' that flow down the cheeks of the peregrine falcon, but my head is buzzing and I am too anxious for the bird to look long.

"It's a young bird," says Nigel, and in a sure gentle motion he flips the falcon onto its feet and sets it on the sand.

The falcon blinks, turns its head, pauses, blinks again. It hops a few steps, stops, hops again. We wait. The falcon struggles on, in small stages, between rests. Nigel notes that the bird is heading toward an improbable white triangle beached about 200 feet away, a trashed Styrofoam buoy that is the highest point on this flat expanse of mud. Between here and the pond stretches only silt, one remnant buoy, and a few stunted *spartina* shrubs that are not head-high to a falcon.

"A bit of height will help it get airborne," says Nigel.

"If there were only a breeze," he continues, "all it needs is a little breeze to help it up and it would sort itself out in short order."

Nigel walks toward the falcon, hoping to frighten the bird into flight. The peregrine finally tries to fly, moves across the sand quickly now in grand sloppy strokes, seems to gain a bit of air--- but then stutters to a halt. We decide to give the falcon some space to re-orient, recover its wings. We turn back to the shorebirds, to what we came here for. We hope that at least a few of the world's remaining 300 or so Spoon-billed Sandpiper will be lingering, among the flock of

waders we saw from afar, near the top end of the seawalled pool we are walking along.

Before we set out again across this quadrant of trapped and drying land, Nigel pulls a knife from his pocket and cuts the fishnet from the stake.

We are in Dongtai, across the county line from Rudong, about two hours drive north of Shanghai, on the east coast of China, south of where the Yellow River brings its heavy load of windblown loess into the Yellow Sea. A satellite view would show the swirl of sediment just offshore, miles-wide, where the river curls at the implacable press of the sea, and bowing, surrenders its silt. From the perspective of a Spoon-billed Sandpiper, or any of the other birds that share its flyway, we are about two days and nights of non-stop flying south, along the coastline or over the Shandong peninsula, from the last rest stop in the mudflats of Bohai Bay. Or for the handful of birds that arrive via the estuaries of southern Korea, we are at the safe end of the make-or-break flight over the Yellow Sea, a flight fraught with the struggle to stay aloft as under no circumstances can the bird touch down until it reaches shore.

But here I speculate, slightly, because not all is known precisely about the migration path of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper once it leaves its Siberian nesting grounds. Ornithologists know that it flies, roughly, along the Kamchatka peninsula and down through the islands of Japan towards Korea. Some birds may cut overland across the top of the Korean peninsula, through North Korea to China's Bohai Bay, or south along the coast of the peninsula. What we do know for sure is that the global population of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper began its

precipitous crash ten years ago, about the time the rush for new land destroyed the Saemangum Estuary in South Korea.

It was to learn more about the migration of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper that Nigel has come back to Rudong this October, with a survey team of sufficient mass and expertise to verify what he suspected last year. His suspicion, if confirmed, holds a key to the conservation of these birds: that these mudflats centered around Rudong County are a critical stopover, perhaps the most important respite on their journey south, where the birds finish their molt. Feeding on nutrients that are replenished twice a day by the tides, it is likely here that the birds drop the last of their summer feathers, and push out the new before taking off to the south again. It is here that they replenish the stores of energy that will take them to the wintering grounds, to those few rich deltas that remain in Thailand, Bangladesh, and especially Myanmar.

Nigel is a man of average height and build, with a trim beard, who presents himself on the mudflat in the standard garb of a field ornithologist: a drab button-down shirt and a quick-dry cap with camel flaps to protect his neck from the sun. He has uncommonly blue eyes, and wears a snake-like silver ring on his finger that hints of ex-hippie. Yet much more than an ordinary ornithologist, Nigel is one of the masterminds behind the conservation of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. He is one of the key architects of the ambitious conservation breeding program begun two years ago, that so far has taken 40 eggs from the Siberian breeding grounds to raise the hatchlings in built-for-purpose aviaries in the UK. If

the scheme works, Nigel will become a savior of a species that is currently among the most endangered in the world.

For me, one of Nigel's most precious characteristics is his tolerance of my perpetual beginning birder status, and willingness to patiently explain the myriad things I don't know. But today as we continue to trek towards the mirage of shorebirds on the water, our talk turns from birds to aging mothers. Mine just turned eighty, and is at this moment traveling on a package tour of the Balkans with two bad ankles. I know how stubborn she is, and see her in my mind's eye: limping stoically around the Sofia, refusing all offers of help. Nigel commiserates. Just before coming on this survey to China, he moved his mother into a nursing home. She had been resisting the move until she slipped on the stair and lay injured and alone for two days before help arrived. He told me how, at his last visit, he had been testing her, putting things out of place to see if she would notice.

As he tells of how he methodically assessed his mother's increasing inability to live alone, I am reminded of the way in which Nigel and his colleagues came to the conclusion that the extremely risky Spoon-billed Sandpiper captive breeding program had to be launched. They asked, then answered, a series of questions until finally the conclusion was clear.

"First," Nigel said, "we had to know whether small shorebirds, or similar species, have been raised with success in captivity before." Here Nigel pauses, brightens, and with an excitement as if the fact were new to him, continues:

"And it turns out, it has."

Nigel tells the story, then, of the Corn Crake, a bird already rare in the UK, that was raised in captivity--albeit by an amateur, who may not even have had all the necessary permits. Nevertheless Nigel and his colleague went to learn all they could from him, on everything from how to set up the right kind of aviary, to what kind of feed works best.

“ And from the experience of the Corn Crake, as well as the Red Knot, we also know what conditions are necessary in order to get the birds to actually breed.”

I asked him how the juveniles will know how to migrate, once released.

“Ah,” Nigel starts up with eyebrows raised, a glint in his eye,

“We know that there are at least two ways that bird species learn to migrate, and that learning is species-specific. All the birds in a given species learn the same way.”

Nigel explains that one way that birds learn the migration route is by following the adults, as in the famous case of the man who taught newly-hatched Canada Geese to believe he was their parent, and later, flying an ultralight plane, led them on migration. This method was also used to teach new migration routes to endangered Whooping Cranes in the US, who were taught a route that made use of safer stops, avoiding ones that had become risky.

The other way birds migrate is by instinct. Borne out by experiments done on birds in captivity, some species know innately how long they must fly in which direction, in order to make their migratory route. Spoon-billed Sandpipers are among these species.

“With the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, we know that the juveniles are the last to leave the breeding grounds. The female adults leave soon after hatching, and the males stay longer. But the young birds leave last, make the migration on their own, in groups that have never done it before.”

Nigel’s conclusion, delivered with a stern blue look from under peaked eyebrows, is: “ Ultimately, we know that at the present, if nothing is done, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper is going to be extinct within ten years. So, the chance of success of doing something is better than that of doing nothing.” But his last words are the most ominous: “Whether it is another ten years, or another fifty years, we will only begin to release the birds to the wild once the flyway has been secured.”

The greatest danger to the Spoon-billed Sandpiper is coastal reclamation along the eastern seaboard of China. The mudflats that the bird needs to rest, to eat, to replenish nutrients and energy on its journey from north to south, are disappearing. And it is the mudflats around Rudong that are most urgently in need of preserving. It is likely that here in these mudflats is where the bird stops to molt, during a time when it is particularly vulnerable and in need of plentiful food. But these mudflats are being rapidly transformed into blowing sand.

Between what is land and what is sea there is an in-between. This transitory zone is made of surging tides and churning mud, a state of constant flux, of movement from suspension to settle and back again. Created by the pull of the moon against the earth’s oceans, stretches of sand and mud that half of each day are rubbed open by currents, and half of each day exposed to untempered sky.

Herein lies its natural wealth, its ecological function, and therefore its use to humankind. In this zone, light rays mix with silt mix with elements, creating a constant crucible, a stirring-up of life that nourishes filter-feeders, invertebrates, worms, crabs, and bigger beasts, like the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. In this zone, elements settle out, pollutants are buried in the mud, and even carbon is stored.

If “productive” means “life-giving,” then intertidal habitats are among the most productive ecosystems on earth. Coastal mudflats, marshes, and mangroves provide safe haven for spawning fish, juvenile sealife, maturing crabs and crustaceans on which coastal fisheries depend. The binding of sand, mud and sediments cleans the seas, removes pollutants from the air and water. New land grows slowly outward with the deposit of sediment, creating fringes that break the first force of a battering typhoon or tsunami. Healthy tidal zones protect offshore coral reefs from siltation. Those development economists who assign a monetary value to the services that an ecosystem provides for human transaction value the services of coastal wetlands at fourteen trillion dollars a year; they also estimate that coastal zones provide nearly half of all ecosystem services on the planet.

China has lost half of all of its coastal wetlands so far. And because of the damming of major rivers, silt loads have greatly decreased, trapped instead behind dams and choking up turbines and backing reservoirs higher and farther than planned. As a result, shorelines are no longer building up--they are retreating.

Seawall. Taken at aesthetic value, the word seawall sounds benign, even romantic: is a seawall a wall of sea? A wall *at* sea? Or a wall that holds the sea in, that captures the essence of sea, as if fencing a pacing, seething pack of tiger?



Reclamation. As if taking back something that was once yours, had been lost, and now is found again. Yet reclamation is not a return to an original state. Seawalls claim land from the sea, *claim* as if it were an inalienable right, as if the sea had always and absolutely belonged to the land barons of Rudong County.

Seawalls begin as fingers that extend into that magical transition zone between land and water. They begin by blocking the ebb and flow that maintains life, by erasing the rub of sea against silt. With an inexorable greed the fingers of seawalls lengthen, grow, angle, encircle the mud-slurry, hold out the tide and surge. Mud turns to dust or blows into land, sand settles and hardens, and what is left in the fisted grip of the seawall is a sterile but saleable commodity. Land.

To enter the quadrant, we cross the long black core of a seawall in formation. Spread before us are great stacked rolls of sand, each roll encased in black woven nylon tube, lying flattened, engorged by its own weight. The thin-sheeted tubes are filled by a dredge and pump with slurry, and left until the water seeps out, the sand remains. Rows of over-stuffed black sausages set straight-lined, smooth and against the shift of tide and sea. Reluctantly I place my foot to step up and walk over the first of these slippery sections, and my sneaker threatens to slide out from under me. We cross this section of seawall in formation, and already the dried sand slithers underfoot.

These structures are new, just since May or June this year, only about five months old. Barred from the twice-daily inundation, it is amazing how fast the land dries out. How can these simple sheets of woven plastic be so insidious? With such finality, block the natural action of the sea? I realized then that the

mysterious tinsel of black tape, crinkled and stuck in the feathers of the falcon, was in fact a strand from one of these casings, as if the seawall had reached out an evil fingertip to stroke the falcon's wing.

By now Nigel and I have reached as far as we will be able to go. We have already crossed two dead streams, streams without current, where algae and scum grow inwards from the edge of evaporating water. Dead though the channel may be, it still keeps us from our destination, too deep even for Nigel's wellingtons. We stop at this edge and set our spotting scope tripods in the silt to focus on the distant birds that feed and sleep at the water's edge.

It is a trick of optics that a heat haze intensifies when viewed through a scope. We look out over the water towards the birds, over the pool that pushes up against the new wall, as if seeking the sea beyond. The line-up of shorebirds we have come to inspect are still far away. Hunched and shimmering, the birds sit as if roosting in a desert, as if the heat haze rose from scorched sand. The haze rises in blurred and pixelated waves that make the birds appear larger than they really are. Though the stupefied flock looks the size of Greenshank or even Curlew, they are probably only Grey Plover. In the cluster of birds, a bright buoy stands orange and steaming, incongruous, outsized, outcolored. The birds number in the hundreds, and it is impossible to tell whether any Spoon-billed Sandpiper are among them.

In the foreground, a trash rubble covers the beach, left by the wind and the shrinking waterline. The rubble is indistinguishable from an even scatter of white: desiccated crabs and gull-dropped clams. Behind the birds, a boxy yellow

bulldozer stands, maw raised, shimmering, unmoving. A black sedan pulls up on the far seawall, hatches a surprising number of men in suits, who mill about for a moment before disappearing back into the black-shelled veneer. They are likely here to buy land, to calculate how quickly the mudflat can turn into profit. The car drives away.

It is now nearly midafternoon, and the tide is ebbing. The birds will soon be flying back to feed on exposed and alive mudflats just beyond the seawall. We give up. We leave the heat-hazed scope site to head back where we came from, to the cars and the rest of the team, and to check out the other fishing nets on the way. Now we talk of birds: I ask Nigel about his find of Nordmann's Greenshank the day before yesterday, a chance sighting that in a moment doubled the global population estimate.

"What did you think when you saw all those birds?" I ask Nigel. "What went through your mind?"

"Holy Shit" he says, in a mild-mannered British delivery.

"And then, I thought that some people were going to be very unhappy at this news."

Two days ago Nigel counted in one massive rising flock a number equal to the world's entire estimated population of Nordmann's Greenshank. The Nordmann's Greenshank, known as the NG, is the next most highly endangered bird on the East Asian-Australasian Flyway after the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. A *tringa* sandpiper, the NG is in a family of shorebirds whose species are several sizes larger than the little *calidris* that the Spoon-billed Sandpiper belongs to, and

a family typical for a slender long-legged stance. The Nordmann's Greenshank is an exception in its family, coming across as squat and sturdy, with a metatarsus longer than the tarsus, i.e. short thighs and long calves. This build causes an awkward-looking kind of walk, as the NG throws each spread foot into the air and pushes it forward, one by one, walking literally feet first, as if the bird's feet were too big for the rest of its body.

Because Nigel saw 640 Nordmann's Greenshank, all at once, and because on that same day other members of the survey team saw more in the mudflats farther south, the survey daily total came to over 800 birds. As the survey team, no matter how skilled, could not possibly have seen ALL the Nordmann's Greenshank now here on these mudflats (a few more always hide in the high tide roost a bit farther over, or on the shoreline in between teams) and it is reasonable to assume that some are already in their wintering areas, or still coming from the breeding grounds. So no matter how many Nordmann's Greenshank Nigel and the team see in one day, it is still below the total number still existence.

The reason some people might be unhappy with the instant increase in the global population is that they have been lobbying long and hard to get the birds on the Critically Endangered list, and to get known habitat protected. For those working towards conservation, while a doubling of the global estimate certainly brings joy, relief, and perhaps a respite, it also brings groans. Perhaps the politicians will believe that the justification for protecting this mudflat or that mudflat has now lost a degree of urgency.

“It’s like when we doubled the global population of Terek’s Sandpiper in an afternoon, with just a walk down the beach in Malaysia” confirms Nigel.

Nigel saw the Nordmann’s in a quadrant just south of here. He had been counting the birds at one end of the quadrant, and already was up to about 120, when a peregrine falcon overhead sent a great flock of birds clattering into the sky from behind the *spartina* at the other end of the quadrant. As the cloud of birds flew past him, sifting through the ranks and sorting itself by size, by species, Nigel got the Great Count. It was a stroke of pure luck, of being in the right place at the right time, along with experience at having the keen identification and counting skills that Nigel has. Yet I wondered to myself whether it might have been this very peregrine, the one that Nigel freed today, that had been hunting in his quadrant the day before yesterday. A kind of karmic connection from man to bird perhaps, or maybe merely a function of being out on the dying mudflats, with the common purpose of seeking little shorebirds.

Finding the peregrine falcon still alive turns out to be the best part of the afternoon. Though as we pass the bird on the way back it still stands huddled up against the *spartina*, whether for shade, shelter, some sense of security, or looking for height. The rest of the day is filled with dead and dessicating birds, as we traverse the new seawall enclosure. It seems that the underworld has come to dwell now on the surface of the trapped sand, the choking brackish pool. The stopped-up creeks follow the contours of tide-carved sand in graceful curves, yet are going green and oily around the edges like gangrenous meat. The *salicornia* streaks my sneakers pink-red, like being licked by the venom of an alien colonizer

sent to suck the life out of a land. I am surprised by crab holes still there among the grass.

“Of course there are still crabs,” says Nigel, “It has only been since May.”

But then I begin to find the shells of ghost crabs, bleached exoskeletons of those that did not survive. Crabs that expired in the sand, in the grass, searching for food, as life’s prospects shrank farther and farther into the outermost seawall. There, a crab, it’s fore-claw hooked lazily around a root of stiff *spartina* grass, was perhaps too weak to loosen its embrace of this grass that had come to totally change its world. These little mudflat crabs are not used to vegetation; at first they adapted, learned to scurry between these strange sproutments, until starvation and dehydration finally took their toll. There another crab, legs still arched and spanning its hole as if deciding whether to emerge or retreat, run towards an incoming tide, or scrambles backward from a menace. Eyes wide open at the end of long stems, claws held folded in front, ready for action. But the menace it faced was inescapable no matter how deep the hole. How long had the crab had waited for the tide, perched and unmoving, at the top of its burrow, as the days turned into weeks, until it died?

Over the next hour we walk along three sections of abandoned fine filament fishnets, which Nigel slices from each side of the stake from which it is strung. The 200 meter stretch holds windblown scraps of plastic bag, misshapen bits of belched and decaying Styrofoam buoys, shreds of reeds and *spartina* grass, and the carcasses of 31 birds in various states of freshness, dismemberment and decay. Some of the birds are still identifiable as species, while some pieces of

carcass are barely discernable from the trash-scrap with which they hang. The bleached bare skull of a bird, its eye orb staring at the sky as if in accusation and sprouting an arc of tiny neck vertebra, is stuck by the bill tip in the net. Six inches down the line of tangled filament clings the shoulder-arc of a wing, and two precisely-carved collarbones, still linked by ligament.

Some birds are still whole and fresh. Strung half in the water, the net holds a tern, head hanging, red bill pointed up and black cap pointed down, reminiscent of the topsy-turvy tumble in which we had found the peregrine falcon. A few meters farther on, a grey plover is rumped into a ball, wingtips and feathers askew, bill hanging to the side as if to turn the other cheek.

Our landmark for point of return to the car is the bulldozer rising above the vegetation that despite the relative youth of the seawall already sprouts like the grizzled stubble on the chin of a homeless man. We leave the misclaimed mudflat by rented van via a road that has been built on the seawall so recently that the tar is still being topped. On the far side of the seawall shiny new buildings spread in an ordered blue grid of single-storied right-angles cornered by a moat-like pond leaching the foot of the seawall. The boundary of the industrial complex is marked by equally single-story-tall placards at regular intervals, each shouting a single Chinese character. I recognize several of these characters from that part of my youth squandered on studying Chinese language, but even without recognizing them all, know they stand for words such as 'industry', 'factory', 'production,' or perhaps even 'Jiang' and 'su', to name the province we are in.

It was a fascination with the Chinese written script which drew me first to study Chinese language, and finally to China itself, in that long ago time of my college degree. A single Chinese character is assembled of a set of elements called radicals; each radical composed of specific strokes of the brush, specified not only in angle and order but even direction of application of the stroke. Each radical has a meaning, or hint of meaning, a mutable meaning that may change fully or merely subtly depending on the other radicals it finds itself in the company of. (Just as we human individuals are different things to different people, so is the radical different things to different radicals; and indeed the character itself, different with different characters). Some radicals provide hints of meaning, while other radicals provide hints at sound, at the way the character is pronounced. Just as a radical is composed of strokes laid in a rigidly-defined but loosely-interpreted composition, the radicals themselves stack and slink and shivvy up to form a character.

Most words are pairs, a set of two characters. The underlying story is thus that not only radicals but also characters only distill their meaning in combination with one another. Gong Ye: industry. FaZhan: development. TuDi: earth, as in the soil. HaiYang: the sea. JingJi: economics.

Here in Dongtai's dying mudflats, these single-storied characters run along the moat, larger than life, industrial-sized, paralleling the seawall. They mark the boundary from water to land, from nature to industry. Gong. Ye. Fa. Zhan.



Chinese script is all about relationship, about where something sits in correspondence to something else, how each part reacts, and the energy created between those two elements. In that sense, a character reminds of ecological principles. A Chinese character, like the Dongtai mudflat, is a complicated construction, an organic whole containing elements of sound and of meaning, of brushstrokes, dots and lines, corners and stacks and ripples, created and altered in the relationship between its parts.

Calligraphy in China is an art form, with the work of respected calligraphers imitated, and prominently displayed, whether that of the Qin emperor 1000 years ago or modernistic interpretations today. To watch a calligrapher at work is a movement of dance, as the lifted arm moves across paper, each stroke fluid or staccato, riffled or straight, linked or outlying. Like a bird feeding in the tidal mudflat, circling, tilting, probing, running forward three steps and probing again.

One year ago, my first visit to Rudong had ended with a workshop in Shanghai. The morning I flew back to Myanmar, I went out first for Starbucks and a stroll, to revel in the crisp autumn air, the green of the city park, the fashion-lined streets and cosmopolitan sheen of Shanghai that glowed even from the skin of the roasted chestnuts in their storefront vat, the steamed buns stuffed with pork and cabbage. I took a turn I thought might bring me back to the hotel, and there, hemmed in on both sides by shiny sedans, swirled a man, filling a parking space with words. The calligrapher stepping lightly back, then sideways, his arm held high and bent at the elbow, in an extension of a spine rounded over his work,

moving with the elegance of a feeding crab. His fist cupped a huge brush, its handle a tube that fueled the tip, the tip a sponge in an onion-bulb shape shaved to a fine point. After a moment of puzzlement I realized he was working with water. As he filled the dirty tarmac with rows of lush characters, the first evaporated into nothingness even as the last still flowed from the sponge, that slid languorously across the oil stains, tar smears and city grit of that parking space. He was recording poetry, of course, he told me then, and explained it as a kind of meditation, practicing an art of movement and meaning.

Which characters does a bird write in the sand? The character of hunger, the character of flesh and muscle and tired wings, exhausted heart, depleted organs. The movements stack up to tell the story of a migration of four thousand miles, of lichen-pricked juniper-scented willow-down tundra roosts, coastal moraine ponds barely free of ice, of mudflats that disappear with high tide to provide worm-grass and succulent crab when they reappear in the low. Of seawalls and dry sand, of dessication and death. The bird leaves its footprints in the mudflat, bubbles where that worm was just pulled out, a dot where it picked off a hapless little crab. The prints are evanescent, disappear as soon as the tide has washed over the flat, erasing all traces of story until the dance is repeated again twelve hours from now. Or if the bird has already flown, not repeated until the return journey in six months, or this time next year. The story is in the practice, the story is in the journey.

I had left Shanghai hours after meeting that man in the parking space, and with bright memories of five days spent tracking the Spoon-billed Sandpiper

across the Rudong mudflats in the company of Li Jing, Xiao Tong and Zhang. I left China that time, for the first time ever, with a feeling of exhilaration. Meeting the members of the Shanghai Birding Club had rekindled a faith that perhaps individuals can make a difference, even in the seething mass of poverty, corruption and growth that is China. My hope was refreshed not only for China, but also by extension for Russia, for Myanmar, for all the places that the Spoon-billed Sandpiper must pass. With the dedication of people such as these, with a new middle class emerging in China that is interested in the preservation of nature and also has the savvy to rally others to their cause, perhaps we can save this bird after all.

## 2. Northern Limits

*This chapter excerpt is set on a cruise ship on an expedition to Chukotka, looking for the Spoon-billed Sandpiper in as yet un-surveyed areas of the northeastern corner of Siberia. The ship passengers are a mix of conservationists, Spoon-billed Sandpiper aficionados, and general lovers of the arctic. Diverse interests begin to compete as the group, stymied by thick fields of ice-floe and choppy waters, explores ancient Eskimo whale-bone dwellings lined up on coastal spits, Soviet ghost-towns in former gulags, and bays too shallow to navigate, all places where the Spoon-billed Sandpiper may once have summered. The spirit of the SbS flies at the bow like a figurehead, skimming the waters along with parakeet auklets, short-tailed shearwater and the fork-tailed petrel.*

Outside the porthole an outlandishly beautiful creature of a kind I have never seen before is peering towards me from its perch on a pancake made of ice. The seal is silk-glossy black, with the typical puppy-dog eyes of its pinniped family, yet what is remarkable are the broad white stripes circling the curved contours of its neck, fin and back, as if painted with a thick brush laden with clotted cream. I will later learn that each individual Ribbon Seal displays a unique pattern, that no two are alike. The watery ice-filled landscape that surrounds the seal is equally outrageous, the gray water shimmering under the Arctic summer sun, the ice floes blinding as if emitting rays of hard light, their sculpted undersides glowing alternately white, aqua or turquoise.

So engrossed am I in the Ribbon Seal that I almost miss the much smaller, dirt-ivory seal laying nearby. *A pup!* I think, and later will gush so to others, until a polite raised eyebrow sends me to the guidebook where I learn that these are in fact a separate species—the Ringed Seal. Yet now for the moment my cabin’s porthole passes rapidly into a seal-less though floe-filled vista, and I grab my binoculars and jacket and rush on deck. It is day one of the expedition, I am on board the ice-strengthened Professor Khromov, we are pushing into Kresta Bay to walk as yet unsurveyed coastlines that likely once harbored---and maybe still do---breeding populations of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper; and I will watch the ice go by, enthralled, until sleep overcomes me at 2 am.

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At Cape Dezhnev this morning, a gray whale lolls in the swell between the Professor Khromov and the stony shore. The gray whale is not in the group known as “right whale”, as in “the right one to harpoon”, and not being a “right whale” does not float on the strength of its own blubber when dead. This whale is at the precise stage of decomposition in which the gases of decay keep it buoyant in the water, a gently bobbing, furrowed and bloated cork of an island, host to a handful of gulls.

This morning at Cape Dezhnev, the weather washing over the dead whale is undecided. A shaman, or anyone who believes that inanimate objects and natural phenomena such as rocks, clouds and sky act with purpose, might consider the weather here to be fickle. Perhaps it is just my mood, but the elements here

seem to be intentionally obfuscating, a changeableness creating a distraction as if to hide something in plain sight. The wind blows, yet there is fog; the clouds process disordered, yet a gray feathered gloaming lays heavy over the cape, rests on bronze cliffs that stand weary along an undulating slate of the sea.

Standing at the rail on the portside of the ship, I look out past the whale and through the weather, over towards the cape. A bit beyond the whale, a thin black beach shelters snowdrift mounds that nestle, still now in July, into the base of eroded bluffs. The short, stocky bluffs shore up a hillside green at the base where the soil and moisture gather, but tending to slate-grey scree as the slope rises and steepens toward a soft ridge gently scored by a few dry gullies.

The most noticeable feature of the cape is a hill near the sea that stands out for its conical symmetry and light color, and for the faded yellow obelisk that tips the hill like an adornment. The streaks of pale rock raying out from the obelisk are a testament either to the recent vintage of the lighthouse monument construction, or to the preserving qualities of the arctic climate. Below the hill a few random clusters of bleached rough-sawn timber each mark the ruins of a house, and a single snowdrift lounges in a clod of startling orange brick. To the left of these signs of decades-old human industry, farther down the beach, a short row of whale jawbones tilted at jaunty angles aligns with the shore, and on closer inspection, hollow circles of dark rocks emerge from the thin greenness of the hill.

In the weeks leading up to the expedition, Cape Dezhnev was one of the places I was most excited to see. Here, far above the Arctic Circle, the

northeastern-most corner of the Eurasian continent knuckles into the Bering Strait, just across from Prince of Wales, Alaska. The side claimed by Russia and that by the United States are here separated by only about 40 miles: a distance breached by kayak in a day in summer, by dogsled in winter. This synapse over the Bering Strait is about as close as two continents could get to each other without actually touching. Yet the lands on each side of the strait--Chukotka and Alaska--- are extremities, so far in physical and imagined space from their nation's capital cities that they might as well be another country.

Perhaps I am so fascinated by this strait because here once stretched the Bering land bridge. In my mind's eye I had always pictured the land bridge from Asia to America as a narrow swampy trace spanning the Aleutian Islands, where woolly mammoths and early man (with spear in hand) could dip their feet into the ocean as they followed each other across. But in fact 20,000 years ago the continents were bolted solidly together by a mass of land taller than the state of Alaska—give or take the last few Aleutian Islands---like two rutting bull reindeer, horns inextricably locked, and destined to cooperate or die.

At that time, Cape Dezhnev was smack in the middle of a land mass whose Arctic Ocean shoreline lay far to the north of Chukotka's today, an endless expanse of grassland that took months for mammoth or man to traverse from north to south, and that showed only subtle hints to the east to west traveler that she was passing from one continent to another. But after 40,000 or so years of this, the climate warmed again, ice on the land melted, and the sea filled in again over the Bering Land Bridge.

Here at the corner of Chukotka, we are in that place at the northeastern tip of the Asian continent where the land reaches out, like the finger of David on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, to grasp for but not quite touch, the hand of God. Whether the Alaskan peninsula is the dangling hand of God that tempts David's reach, or conversely, the Alaskan town of Wales that reaches out for the village of Uelen in Chukotka, is irrelevant. What is clear is that this stutter of the land over 40 miles of shimmering nutrient-rich waters is a synapse. Though the physical evidence of the grassland has been submerged, the connection of nerve, the connection of memory, remains.

The sandhill crane remember, as they fly north from the American prairies, finally turn west across the Rocky Mountains and hop the Bering Strait to the moraine hills behind this cape. There in the tundra they call and clatter, dance, cross necks, lay eggs and brood them until hatch. Sandhill cranes have been around for at least 2.5 million years, and in their reckoning the grassland plain we call Beringia sank not so long ago. The sandhill cranes do not share the literal memories of their ancestors who watched the land rumple and flatten beneath them as they rode the air currents over the Rockies and onto the grasslands, but they share with their ancestors the instinct. Their migration is a retracing of a learned and inherited pathway, and every crossing of the Bering Strait by an individual sandhill crane is a firing of that ancient synapse, a transmission, a memory remade.

The grey whale remember, as they ride the currents from the birthing grounds off Baja California north past the Aleutian Islands, to feed on the shallow



coastal shelves of the Bering and Chukchi Sea. Gray whales are bottom feeders that scrape up sediment and suck it through their baleen to glean out tiny worms and amphipods. During the brief Arctic summer, one gray whale scrapes a staggering 2.4 tons of these tiny critters each day from the seafloor. Like the sandhill cranes, the gray whale have survived 40 major cycles of warming and cooling of the climate, including the last ice age that elevated the undersea Bering Plateau to the status of dry grassland; the resulting Bering Land Bridge and its accompanying ice age were just a blip in time.

The Hopi people in their hot southern deserts, remember, as do those other Native American peoples who paint their door lintels turquoise to ward off evil spirits. The Hopi and their kin cross again, with each offering of turquoise bead, the Bering Land Bridge, echo the habits of their distant cousins in Tibet and on the Mongolian steppes.

Katja, second-in-charge of the expedition and a marine biologist, steers our blown-up zodiac close to the equally buoyant whale on the short traverse from the ship to the shore. Cameras out, we stop for a close investigation. A smattering of barnacles and white scar stripes, like a random constellation of stars and comet-tracks against a slick charcoal sky, confirm the grey whale identification. The carcass, a young one judging by the size, floats belly up, fins splayed as if on a cross, while a sprinkle of Glaucous Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwakes perch on the abdomen around the genital fold and try to peck something open. Five dark and parallel gouges of consistent depth on the flank bear witness to the passage of

tearing teeth, and the edges of the fin are tattered. The head of the whale has been savaged, a gaping hole where the side of the jaw should be. Katja explains that orcas eat only the tongue of the whale, the most tender part. The question is, whether the whale was harassed first, or perhaps wounded by human hunters, leaving it weak for the orca to attack.

The cape is a small skirt of land whose green tundra tilts up to a surrounding rock cliff. The steep rock face shelters the site from anything coming overland—including wind---while the roundness of the cape allows a long view over the sea, thus ideal for hunters of seal, whale and walrus. In the 1930s the Eskimo village of Naukan was documented as consisting of 62 *yarangas* (shelters of skin stretched over bone or wood), 2 wooden houses, and 14 dugouts, with a total population of 400 persons representing 13 clans. By 1955, at the height of the Cold War, the village was relocated. The inhabitants, Katja told us, were scattered among a number of other villages, and many never quite recovered from the move. The Soviet collective system took care of their bodily needs, but their sea-going lifestyles and unique social networks had been erased forever.

The site is cut down the middle by a creek that kept the village in fresh water, and the small gorge also created a natural barrier. When the Border Guards came in the 1950s to build a listening station and the small lighthouse, the stream acted as an easy divider to cut the village in two. Eskimos to the south, Soviets to the north. Thus it is that to my left, the remnants of whale jaw bones tilt and curve toward the sky, while to my the right, a small lighthouse and the remainder of a wooden house frame stand straight. The right angles of the house and tower are a

stark contrast to the jumbled rock circles, the remainders of dugouts and skin houses that have aged with grace through frost heave and sunbleach. I splash up the gorge through a rivulet of running water, and scramble over rock and tussock up towards the left.

I climb a circular path around a rough rock dugout wall, pass a fallen-in opening where its inhabitants had entered at a crawl, over a stone still worn smooth with the passage of skin-clad bellies and knees. The dugout, like those surrounding it, now lies open to the elements in a tumble of rock, whalebone, metal and timber, sprinkled here and there with evidence of recent habitation: a rusted bucket, a sprung wooden barrel, a bent coil of wire. Though the village was abandoned over fifty years ago, scraps of daily life remain.

The Naukan village site is ancient, and what we see now are only the most recent remains of perhaps a thousand years of human use and habitation. Those thousand years of watching for walrus and seal, of slipping skin boats off the whalebone racks and setting out to sea with schist-carved tips on harpoons. By the 1930s the spears and harpoons had in part turned to guns, and translucent anoraks sewn together of walrus intestine traded for oil-slicked canvas or rubber. A thousand years is enough time for people to settle into the land, and it is no surprise that the clans were named according to their position on the site, names perhaps like the creekside clan, the scree slope clan, the black beach clan.

Farther up the hill a spread of fuschia-colored flowers blazes on the green-gray tundra, bright flowers always a sign of the presence of nitrogen, of organic matter, a trace of animal left either in scat or in a decaying body part. I walk up to

find the flower patch set in what might be an ancient stone ring set crookedly on the permafrost and burrowed in over time, but perhaps is just a coincidence of frost heave. The sun warms through the fog, the waves a soft susurrations, and I lay back for a rest. A bee buzzes by my ear, a tundra bee that I will later watch moving from flower to flower, crawling inside each purple bell to fill its proboscis with food. Eyes closed, I hear kittiwake keening, arctic squirrel scolding, chip chip *chip* chip *chip*.

When I open my eyes I see the hills. The stony slopes surrounding the village are rimmed with piled and tilted stones that have been heaved by rain and frost until they resemble a smashing up of ice floes. I think of the stories I saw etched on walrus tusks at the carving studio in Uelen, that feature the world of stone men who live near humans on the tundra. The stone men were etched in thin black lines as blocky, bigger than the humans who ran, across the tusk, away from them. The stories say that the disease is catching, that those unlucky humans who come upon stone men on the tundra turn into stone in turn.

I begin to see them. There above, a gaggle of boulders scattered like a gathering of stone people, a discussion or a fight, differing points of view expressed in the angle of repose or angle of attack of a slab or a spear of rock. There below them to the south a stone man, sitting, broad face to the sky. Perhaps he is watching for whales or walrus, perhaps he is watching for Cossacks, perhaps he scans for traces left by the passage of stars, spurting comets, northern lights or contrails. His stone neck is set, and he faces America.

Across the narrow gorge to the north, another bronzed nose points toward America: that of Cossack explorer Semyon Dezhnev, sculpted in relief on a plaque and bolted to the lighthouse. Dezhnev was the first European to reach and sail, in 1648, through the Bering Strait between America and Eurasia. His expedition of 100 men manning seven single-masted wooden ships set out from the Kolyma River mouth on the Arctic Ocean into a sea free of ice but full of severe storms and roiling currents. Six of the ships were wrecked or otherwise lost by the time they reached the strait, and after passing the cape and reaching the Anadyr River to the south, Dezhnev's own ship was wrecked. But he was the first to bisect the strait and thus prove that the continents are separate.

In an irony of Russian bureaucracy and history, his report lay unnoticed in the Russian archives until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, so that when Bering set out neither he nor the Russian court in Moscow were aware that the passage had already been achieved. Thus Bering got all the credit, and had his name splashed across not only the strait but the whole ecological region---once it was recognized as such---of Beringia. Still, the cape itself, what Dezhnev had dubbed the 'Big Stone Nose', was eventually named in his honor, and his lighthouse monument topped for eternity with a Soviet star inside a circle.

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By the time we leave the cape, the gulls have made progress and stand in a line across the belly of the whale, where they have pecked at the skin from the genitals up, to open up the belly. The whale seems to be slowly sinking, and

perhaps the gulls haven't much time. Flayed and adrift, the whale is somehow a fitting metaphor for the desolation of the dispossessed and the gray sky, dead gray whale, and charcoal scars fill me with dull sadness.

Standing at the gunwale of the Professor Khromov, the light comes once again faintly over the divided and abandoned village. The lighthouse beacon long stilled, the yellow obelisk a pale gleam supporting the relief bust of Cossak Dezhnev, a slightly duller glow reflecting from the broad stone head of the man who faces the sky. In the water near the submerging whale, another head emerges from the water. The eyes fix first on the ship, then turn toward the whale to profile cheeks full with whiskers. As the Bearded Seal slowly dives, the length of its back gleams round into the receiving waves, ends in a fold of flippers.

### 3. Longing to Arrive

My life has two centers: the man I love and the country I love. And these two centers are on opposed sides of the planet. Like a migratory bird, the habitat in which I feed (i.e. earn a living), have a home and a flock of friends, is separated by 9176 miles, over sea and land, from the habitat in which I flirt, establish partnership, couple up. Like my favorite sandpiper, I have high nest-site fidelity, always flying back to the same allergenic apartment, the same unbudging, separation-tolerant man. Like an intimacy-starved idiot, I travel halfway around the world to mate.

As a young woman, I had a terrible habit of leaving men at airports. The lingering farewell kiss, the embrace, a look full of longing and promise and *poof*-- I'd be gone. I would occasionally look back, even endure moments of intense loneliness, but mostly I would be caught up in a passion for discovery, the anticipation of ever-new vistas and weirdnesses of whatever strange Asian land I found myself in.

Launching from a beachside university in California, my first landing was in China, where a vague expectation of thin-bearded scholars wielding soft bamboo brushes to stroke black ink onto silk, was crushed beneath the stale concrete blocks of post-Mao Beijing. The ubiquitous white-coated cleaners in our foreign students' dormitory doubled as spies, a garlic-pickled press of bodies stuffed busses to the brink of bursting, and suspicion was constant, fear of denunciation still shrill. Later, as an east coast Ivy League graduate student, I

lived for a time in China's deep southwest, under the forest in a wooden house on stilts with a family that ate bamboo rats and birds. The floor-rattling scream of hungry pigs woke me every morning, and leeches fed between my toes as I picked tea-tips from gnarled hundred-year old trees in the early morning dew, gossip echoing from the women on the next hill. Finally, graduated and employed, I tried with little success for four years in far northern Vietnam to help gaunt Hmong farmers improve yields of corn from soil collected in pockmarks of limestone crags, though people said "only the rocks will grow".

But it was in Myanmar that I landed the longest, and where I am still at home. And it was in Myanmar that I first glimpsed the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. I remember the evening before, how a heavy full moon seemed to roll along the hill across from our bayside campsite, lumbering up only as the hill fell off and casting a glow over a few spired pagodas as it finally rose. We had timed our expedition to the Gulf of Martaban for a moon in an orbit unusually close to the earth, a moon pulling more than the usual mass of water, a 'spring' tide that would give us plenty of time to survey the ephemeral mudflats we were seeking. Our camp was in a mood of anticipation, and I listened to one of Britain's most prominent ornithologists tell me all the reasons why, come summer, a team of conservationists planned to scoop 20 of the rarest eggs on the planet from their tundra nests.

In the half-light of the early morning, I was roused by a shout, urgent and repeated like the alarm call of a shorebird about to lose its eggs: *the water is coming! the water is coming!* By the time I stood outside my tent I was already



ankle-deep in the incoming tide. Once safely stowed on two flea-ridden fishing boats, our group of bird enthusiasts motored out into the pink-edged dark of the Gulf, until we reached a destination that the captain had determined by mysterious means---as the water to me looked equally rippled and gray in all directions. There we hunkered for hours, passing greasy tin plates of yesterday's fried rice with boiled peas, waiting for the tide to turn and the island thus to emerge.

The harriers were the first to appear, swooping through in languid passes, anticipating, like us, the shorebirds. All at once a field of grass-tips speared up through the water surface, as if in fast-forward growing taller by the minute. As the water level fell, the island soon reached our boat, and we scrambled onto land while the crew rushed to prop the boat on its keel. We trudged over rapidly draining mudflat towards the central grassfield, where we set our scopes on the first patch of shorebirds to arrive. There, third from the left, in a line-up of little waders, stood the Spoon-billed Sandpiper.

Until it turns around and looks straight towards you, or until you see it feeding with its characteristic side-to-side stitch head movement, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper is virtually indistinguishable from the other species of shorebird that it flocks with. Sparrow-sized, they are among the smallest of shorebirds, in a group called *Calidris*, otherwise known as 'peeps.' In winter, all peeps, show round white bellies and gray-beige speckled backs, with occasional tints of rust. They run and feed along the shoreline, making delicate 'peep' sounds along the way, mostly blending into the sand and all looking virtually alike

But when the face of a Spoon-billed Sandpiper suddenly comes into focus

in the spotting scope, it is impossible to not take in a sudden stiff breath, and perhaps even exclaim, softly, *there it is!* The Spoon-billed Sandpiper's bill-tip is heart-shaped, looking as if it were perpetually poised to deliver a tiny valentine, extended pointed end out. To add to the effect, a dark eye-stripe gives it large round puppy-dog eyes. This is a species that some call charismatic—meaning especially attractive to humans ---though the less scientific among us might just call it cute. But what is most heart-stopping about the Spoon-billed Sandpiper is its precipitous decline—from several thousand to 400 individuals in the space of ten years. Give it five more years, and *poof*, it too will be gone.

Someone once told me that you marry the person you are with when you are thirty years old. By this he meant to say that in the course of a life, most people reach a time when they find themselves ready to settle down. This full-body acceptance of a fate, even eagerness to spend the rest of one's life with one person, comes less out of a wild and crazy love, and more out of an emotional, perhaps physiological, readiness. What my friend meant to say is: it's not who it is, it's where you are.

I don't know when it was that I finally began to accept that I would have to migrate to have a long-term relationship. It had never been my intent. Friends told me: "You'll find the right man over there, one interested in that overseas life." But they were wrong.

It is ironic that I found him on a kind of a migration. We began to fall in love on the way down a river, in separate canoes, with a small group of friends

traversing an island off the northern coast of Canada. Our attraction was stirred by river currents and the brace of Arctic air, by howling wolves, snuffling muskoxen, and streams that thundered boulders down their beds as they rose. Though I didn't know it, by the end of those three weeks my destiny was sealed.

This is how it happened that about the time I started to move to Myanmar, I became entangled with a man who lives in Maine, and who is nearly my exact opposite. His natural habitat is the worn hills and hard maple forest of New England, farm families who grow to maturity surrounded by cornfields and cousins. I am most at home in the soaring granite peaks and soft fir of the Sierra Nevadas, and grew up with only my three siblings. His European ancestors came over with the Mayflower, whereas mine arrived just before Kennedy was assassinated, and just before I was born. He hates getting on planes, doesn't want to travel any farther than across the border to Canada, loves the cold, and refuses to come to Myanmar except that one time, the time he stubbornly contracted malaria. I would leave him at airports, but for some reason, physiological perhaps, eventually always came back.

Perhaps in my bones I am used to it, as my family is afflicted with migration, whether for war, economics, or curiosity. This curse, this gift, may be partly genetic. There was a great-grandmother who walked weekly over the mountains from Germany to Czechoslovakia with a huge pack on her back to stock her store shelves. A great-great-great aunt who spent much of her life dressed as a man in Algiers, and perished there when a mudbank slid onto her house. Another great-great-great migrated from Germany to Russia; born in Baltic

Estonia, my father and his father were sent during WWII 'back' to a Germany they had never seen, with Russian mother and *babushka* in tow (the latter unlucky in her hate of Germans). My mother and her siblings fled west out of town as Russian soldiers entered from the east, and snuck over the border to what had become West Germany, just before that crossing became impassible. Sprung from a tribe of war-tossed migrants, seeking stability, a comfortable life, and perhaps adventure, my parents crossed the sea to America.

It is true I chose travel, embraced exploration, had an urge always to be at home on as much of the wide world as I could. But I never chose to migrate. The twice-annual round trip from Myanmar to Maine was forced as the only option to reconcile, like a split-personality, the two parts of my life without which I would not flourish. Because I am adaptable and my New England man is not, because I am flexible, and he is not, it is I who had to agree to migrate to him. But it still makes me crazy.

On its shuttle between the Arctic and Southeast Asia, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper cruises a set of coastal air-trails and mudflat rest stops that ornithologists call the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. The Spoon-billed Sandpiper begins its life, and returns two years later to breed, on narrow spits and moraine plains of northeastern-most Siberia's coastline, roughly where the Pacific Ocean fills the hourglass of the Bering Strait and eddies against the Arctic Ocean. Arctic summers are short, and by August at the latest the birds must head south, or more accurately, southwest. Perhaps they keep the coast of the Kamchatka

peninsula on their right, continuing along the Kurile Islands that dot the line to Japan, and eventually reach the northernmost coast of China. There they must continue southwest across the Korean peninsula, possibly right along the demilitarized zone, and across the silt-laden Yellow Sea. The mudflats of the Yellow Sea, fed by the wind-blown loess of the Yellow River, are the breadbasket of the flyway, especially nutrient-laden expanses where most of the 155 species that use the flyway will congregate at some point to rest and eat, to regain the energy critical to continue on. Once it has recovered, the Spoon-billed Sandpiper must continue down the eastern coastline of China before reaching wintering habitats in the productive deltas of Thailand, Bangladesh, and especially Myanmar: the Gulf of Martaban, where I saw my first, in winter harbors at least half of all the Spoon-billed Sandpipers in the world.

The Asian-Australasian flyway spans the most densely populated part of the world, and hosts the fastest-growing national economies. China's first 'special economic zones', the initial experiments with a market economy, are along its southeastern coast, where cities like Shenzhen, hosting manufacturing facilities for companies such as Apple and Nike, grow taller and faster with abandon. Here, land is extremely valuable, and worth building out to sea for. Since Asia supports half of all the people on the planet, it is not surprising that its mudflats, and the birds that depend on them, are being lost. Of the 155 species that use the flyway, at least 33 species are threatened or endangered. In other words, one in five of its species are in trouble.

It was in 2004, when a deep-seaport construction project sealed the mouth

of South Korea's Saemangam Estuary with a seawall, that the Spoon-billed Sandpiper population began to plummet. What had once been a critical rest-stop for the birds was decimated. No longer the daily massage of sea against mud, the action of the tide that dropped micro-organisms with its silt, tickled worms out of their holes, and when it withdrew, enticed crabs of all sizes to process the mud into little balls that fan out from their hide-holes in straight dotted lines, like the rays of a sun drawn by a five-year old. No more juvenile crustaceans to glean, or recalcitrant invertebrates for the waders to pull, until stretched like a rubber band and finally relenting, from makeshift burrows. Though there is still a shoreline, the tide butts now at a wall of cement and trussed-up sand. The mudflats behind have dried out. For the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and the other waders on that flyway, the estuary has been turned into a desert. The food is gone.

Scientists speculate that the wide spatula shape of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper's bill functions, when feeding, to increase the area of the bill that comes in contact with water. Water is attracted to water, and through surface tension, water adheres first to the bill edge, then to itself, until the bird finds itself sucking up water as if through a straw. Furthermore, the bird's tongue is hairy along the sides, looking when seen through a microscope like a whale's baleen. These hairs serve conduct water up along the tongue of the bird, so that the ultimate effect is that of a filter, forcing the food contained in the rich tidal slurry to sift over the birds tongue. This special bill is adapted to specific mudflat habitat: it requires just the right combination of a sandy foundation overlaid with settled mud slurry to work at maximum capacity. In biological terms, the Spoon-

billed Sandpiper is a specialist feeder, and specialists always find it difficult to adapt when habitats change. It is precisely the bird's heart-shaped bill, its most charismatic feature, that is helping sealing its fate.

I remember the starlings that massed, once a year, on the bridge in the town where I grew up. They were raucous, frenzied, spewing scat, reeling and reeling, but mostly shouting, the din so loud it made the bridge vibrate. The starlings were definitely egging each other on, working themselves up to something. In my experience, the preparation for the launch into migration certainly requires a modicum of hysteria.

My preparation begins with a deep and simmering resentment that it has to be *me* who makes the trip, who gives up one world for another. More often than not, my preparation for flight from in Myanmar consists of becoming angry, very angry, at my mate for forcing this migration on me. Why do I have to be the one who comes to him? I don't even LIKE Maine. I am happy where I am. Or so I tell myself. In fact, were I truly happy, I would not bother to go at all.

Perhaps it is the instinct to mate, too, is at the root of my anger. I have always prized my independence, and resist with every fiber of my being the thought that my happiness might depend on someone else. Giving in to this transition is nothing less than an admission that I want love badly enough to turn my life upside down and fly halfway around the world to get it. This feels like dependence, and like an urge out of my control, and thus I resent it. Midnight finds me finally packing, and the time appointed to take the cab to airport always

goes by as I make last-minute phone calls, give instructions to my housekeeper, brush the dog one last time. I fight the moment of departure to the bitter end, feel as if my teeth were gnashing and steam coming out my ears, claws extended and tearing through the carpet even as the final call for boarding flashes on the screen.

For the birds, take-off must be a kind of relief after the anticipation of flight, the restless preparation, the consumption of copious amounts of food and hopping energy bursts. But once in the air, I am troubled, deeply, by a state of existential crisis every time I fly. Once airborne, uncertainty seeps through my being as if forced out of my blood by increased air pressure, like the nitrogen bubbles that cause bends in divers who surface too fast. I am caught in a maelstrom of the mind, a foggy vortex from which there is no exit. Who am I, what am I doing, where is this trajectory leading, what is my purpose in life? Soaked through with doubt, these are the questions I ask myself at 40,000 feet above sea level. I become morose, fearful not of turbulence or a nosedive into the ocean, but of having lost my bearing, broken the compass that points to my heart's desire.

There is no cure for this numbness. Like an instinct, it is the state I fall into when up in the air. I opt for evasion, distraction, in the form of movies on demand, up to five of them per endless trans-Pacific trajectory, no matter that I will be able to remember a maximum of three once I land.

From Yangon, I follow roughly the East Asia and Australasian flyway north to Taiwan, where I touch down briefly for a snack and change of planes before continuing north and east over Mongolia and Siberia. At the Bering Strait I



leave the flyway to head east, and connect the ragged volcanic dots of the Aleutians from island to island as they appear beneath the airplane window. From a bird's eye view, I watch Mt. McKinley loom white and grand on the distant mainland. At the Alaskan coast I continue east to leap the massive Rockies, cruise the corrugated ridges of the Great Canadian Shield, cross the sea-sized icy waters of Hudson Bay, and drop down to the eastern seaboard of the United States. On the latter segment I join the trajectory of those species that migrate between North America's boreal forests and the southern Americas, including the lucky birds who survived the Alberta killing ponds.

Often, on the crossing over the Arctic Circle, I rouse from my numb haze to look out and down, to scrutinize the glazed white floes and wet-dark cracks between them, seeking polar bears. I am saddened by my seeking, knowing that if I do not see them it is not only because they are so small in the sweep of the landscape from on high, but also because the very vapor trails that hiss from the underside of my plane's wings, like a seeping venom, is killing them off.

Most migrating birds follow flyways on a roughly north-south axis, always fleeing winter for a summer in the other hemisphere. Unlike most birds, my hemisphere reversal is from east to west, trading sub-tropical Myanmar for temperate, puritanical Maine. No matter which way I fly, my migration is still roughly half way around the world, and it takes about ten days for my body to relocate its position relative to the rotation of the sun.

Awake at 3 am and wanting food, my mind races in tattered circles. I reel from worries over whether the Myanmar Population Census will spark conflict, to

the essay I am struggling to write. I leave the warm bed, the sleeping man, sit in the sagging armchair with the light on and write, thinking it is the perfect time to release creative energy. But though the wobbling trajectories of my mind seem to make perfect sense, in fact they make no sense at all. Come afternoon, the time-change monster is struggling to stay awake at 4 pm, the time I want to sleep the most, but know I shouldn't or I'll never make it through. The time-change monster is buzzing ears and an urge to vomit, to burst into tears. I don't feel well, and I still don't know where I am.

The birds have been underway on a gradual movement towards their destination over a period of weeks and months, but for me, it takes about thirty-six hours, door to door, of flying into the sun. The transition is too rapid. I wish I could say that it is the happiest time, the reuniting of lovers, the renewal of passion. But in fact the opposite is true. It is during this time-contorted period of arrival that the relationship is at its most fragile.

He waits outside the Portland Jetport, lurking next to the car in the pick-up lot. An awkward hello, and a long hug, and we begin the hour drive north to Liberty. We talk, as usual, of how cold the weather is or how hot, the latest antics of his nearly-homeless friend, the aging neighbor, characters in the neighborhood. There are long silences. What we do not speak of is Myanmar, is of the life I have left to come here.

Gradually, I begin to come back to Maine, to the sound of the loons at midnight in summer, the smell of musty earth in autumn. It is in being physical in the natural world that I find myself again. The cold rush of lake water over

swimming limbs brings back my senses, the stroke of paddle at the canoe gunnel, the twitter of birds outside the window.

It doesn't help that I have to go through it all again when I come back to Myanmar. There was one return years ago, when the time-change monster had me in its calloused grip, awake in the wee hours and brain buzzing with the activity of midday. Completely alone with my mind, skin crawling with maggots of fatigue, seeking relief from this exhausted frustration, I threw my beloved's photo down the stairs. The frame and cover cracked, but still he smiled, patiently as before, from behind the fracture. The result was only momentarily satisfying.

Unlike myself, the birds have no one to blame for their hardship. They cannot think, "this year I won't go, it's too far, too long, too hard, far too risky, this year I will just stay here." They are unable to short-circuit their instinct and let themselves just stay put. Instinct can be a killer. This imperative is as true for the mind of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper as it is for the mind of my arthritic dog, who MUST chase cats on sight, bellowing and snarling, despite the sure knowledge that barking makes his ear ache, sprinting stiffens his hips, and this episode will end in pain.

The two-year old sandpiper returning for the first time to the breeding grounds, now ready to mate, remembers more or less where she was born. She will look for a male, who is displaying to signal his readiness. The Spoon-billed Sandpiper has a particular chirpy call that sounds more like a cricket than anything else-- daree dree dree ---and the male will stand up on a rock if he can

find one, or fly calling high into the air, desperate to make his presence known. He will do this all day, if the snow and ice have melted enough to activate the invertebrates and crustaceans, if the feeding is good and the weather is fine.

Though the Spoon-billed Sandpiper returns to the same nest site year after year, and perhaps even the same mate, now that so few are left the likelihood that last years' mate will survive to return this year is very low. Last summer on the tundra I watched one male displaying, weeks after the other pairs had already gone off to nest. Behind him on the lake the ice was going out, cracks widening between the floes, eider ducks feeding in small groups, loons in pairs. The door-creak call of Sandhill Cranes preparing to dance came raw on the wind. The single male Spoon-billed Sandpiper stood desperately visible on a rock at the edge of a pond, flexing his throat and repeating again and again his triple buzz until it sounded as if he were becoming hoarse.

Even if the mating is successful, there are the weeks of incubation still in which much can go wrong---more dangers of the migration, before flight has even begun. The feral dog that may appear loping over the edge of the tundra until its nose is in the nest, the raven or the gull that zips down out of nowhere to scoop up an egg in its beak, the arctic fox in summer tatters with a meandering beeline right over to the nest to split the fragile shell with its sharp teeth and lick the leaking embryo from the jagged half-spheres that remain. The conservationist, smelling of rubber waders and carrying a metal box.

To cope with these horrors, the birds must be ever-vigilant, must listen constantly for the alarm call of a nearby mate, or of a dunlin nesting over the next

rise, watching ever overhead for the silhouette that they know means danger. The male and female trade off, one brooding the eggs to keep them warm, while the other flies to the water's edge to feed.

For the tiny Spoon-billed Sandpiper hatchling, the spatulate tip is all there is to the bill, leaving them looking way too cute, or if you prefer, especially charismatic. These birds are, in a literary sense, born with their hearts in their mouths, as if they knew from day one to prepare for the many dangers that lie ahead. They begin to flap that heart-shaped bill soon after hatching, snapping it after mosquitos or any sunlit fly-by, any attractive movement over a tundra willow leaf, any bug crawling along a curl of lichen. Their speckled orange and brown down feathers are spiked with emerging feather shafts, making them look as if they had been rolled in powdered sugar—or for the less sentimental among us, dusted in thick spring snowflakes. Place a heart-shaped proboscis on the head of this fluff of candy corn, and you come up with a face that would thaw the permafrost from the innards of even an overwintered mammoth tusk digger.

Conservationists assess that despite the birds' best efforts, a Spoon-billed Sandpiper pair will successfully fledge on average only one young per season. At the current estimate of only 100 breeding pairs left in 2012, and without even factoring in the mortality on migration and in the wintering grounds, you can imagine how quickly this species is doomed to disappear. This is the fundamental reason why, after a grave deliberation of the pros and cons, the conservation ornithologists decided to steal some eggs from the tundra. Not from an unlived abandoned tundra, but virtually right out from under the bellies of a pair of

parents who were doing the best job that they knew how.

We gave a name to that ephemeral grass-covered mudflat in the Gulf of Martaban, once it had emerged from a rippling brown sea, and again subsided back into it, and we were chugging homewards in the fishing boat, sunburnt, wind-scoured and exuberant. We named the island *Anessa*, the Pali word for ‘impermanence,’ which is for a Burmese Buddhist is one of the three noble truths, the inevitable state of being. The name was apt, as in response to the tides and currents and tidal bore, the constantly shifting silt and sand of the estuary, by the following year the entire island had migrated ten kilometers to the west.

What I remember most about that island, besides my first vision of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper, and the Nordmann’s Greenshank, and the realization that maybe I was capable of and interested to distinguish between shorebirds after all, what I remember most is how the newly-drenched and shining mudflat recalled to me the tundra. The curved swell of ridges repeated in the sand, an endless plain of apostrophes left by the lap of the tide in the silt, echoed the undulated running ridges of the coastal plain, left by melting ice. The long stiff grass sprung and bent like tussocks in the hills. The tundra, like the ephemeral mudflat, seems barren but then suddenly on closer inspection is full of life forms, which if they are permanent residents, have ingeniously adapted to weather extremes. A sudden occurrence of dragonflies that swarmed like ubiquitous mosquitos of the tundra, a snake emerged from a mud-carved burrow, hairy spiders that sprang at our calves, and that waited out the daily submergence by balling themselves up in oxygen.

What I wonder is this: Do birds view their lives as two centers, two shores, two end-point habitats separated by a migration? Or is migration the stable center, the core around which their lives turn, and the brief end of the journey only the sidebar? Some long-distance migrants, like the Red Knot, spend seven months a year on migration. For those birds the long flight must be the purpose, bracketed by a brief wait to take off again.

With this question, I have committed anthropomorphism, because of course birds do not have the sense of 'home' that a human does. When I ask myself the question of whether a bird feels more at ease on migration or on landing, whether tundra or mudflat, I know I am being anthropomorphic because I am trying to figure it out for myself. My mother told me years ago that once you cross the ocean, you will never again feel at home on either side. She should know.

Lately people have been asking me: "Where do you feel most at home?" and I am disturbed to admit to a gradual creep, a shift in my perception of home. Arrival in the US, at the immigration counter in a long line of rumpled trans-Pacific passengers, I hold my blue passport, and have an uncomfortable mix of a sense of entitlement, and a sense of the imposter. A large digital screen placed at the front of the line revolves through photos of different kinds and colors of Americans, all proclaiming "welcome, welcome", but I know the comfort in diversity is exaggerated. The immigration officer always asks "how are you?" and I grit my teeth at this empty inevitable Americanism. He doesn't really want to

know. Things get on my nerves that shouldn't. Coming home to my mate is familiar, and sweet, but also awkward, and I can't shake a lingering sense of being jarred, like a figure caught in double-exposure, profile fuzzed on all perimeters.

In short, my magnetic poles have been reversed.

For me, the landing back in Myanmar brings sudden relief. My feet hit the ground. I know where I am, I regain my sense of purpose. At least, I know my first task is to exit the plane, survive the wait at immigration and baggage claim, and bargain my taxi ride home. The taxi ride is always grounding, already a homecoming, the familiar barely enunciated rolling sound of Burmese, the reliable impossibility of aged cars, the road rolling by through the holes in the floor, chassis shuddering with the effort of forward motion. The humidity a blanket wrapped with tenderness around skin and soul, the driver affable and ready to talk, or not, as my mood signals. Banal questions and answers. Has the rain stopped already? (not yet, storm coming soon from the Bay of Bengal). Has the government given the people what they want yet? (in your dreams). At home, the dog insane with happiness, barking accusations, skittering circles of joy on the parquet, and digging his nose into my luggage for his treats. The triumphant victory tour of the living room with a trophy box of Milk Bones clamped in his maw. The coquettish curl of his tail. His invitation: Chase me, please please chase me, try to catch me if you can! (You can't!)

Perhaps the birds feel the same familiarity of arrival. The curled lichen smell of the tundra, the friends in the flock. The buzz of mosquitos, the sun



bobbing at the horizon, old mates already waiting somewhere near last year's nesting site. Head stitching from side to side at the water's edge, sifting the slurry, plumping back up after the skinny-making stress of the flight. The fox and the mink lurking just beyond the line of visibility, the jaeger for now at a distance. Find the mate, scrape the nest. Come from the air to the ground, follow the tides back and forth on the shore.

#### 4. The Trident and the Tomb

##### *Book Synopsis*

*The Great Hornbill and the Pink-headed Duck: Remarkable Lives of the Kachin of Myanmar* is a book about ethnic identity and conflict, and about people who get on with life in difficult circumstances. Set at the collision of Myanmar and China, where one nation sucks up the wealth of another, and a government the resources of a people, this book is also about the nature of development. The book explores aspirations of individuals and communities, and asks about progress: Who owns it, who defines it, who is it for? The stories of two ethnic Kachin who have dedicated their lives to improving the prospects for the poor, are narrated by their colleague, an international aid worker. By now, the reader already knows that the Kachin migrated from the northern steppes generations ago. Mountain-dwellers, the Kachin have been in conflict with the military junta, dominated by the Burman plains people. Three decades of civil war ended about 15 years before this chapter excerpt takes place.

*This chapter begins with Yaw Htung's account of what he calls his 50<sup>th</sup> 'family anniversary', and what others might call his wedding anniversary. The anniversary speech began with the citation of his lineage, starting from an ancestor who I am not sure was history or was myth. As he later recounted to me the highlights of that celebration, he first pulled a trident from behind the scuffed wood-and-screen food safe next to his dining table---a trident that is one of the last remaining material representations of his line's hereditary leadership status.*

*The theme of ancestors is continued in the excerpt below, a scene that takes place in his living room two years later as Yaw Htung recounts yet another family celebration, and which constitutes the second half of this chapter.*

I pick a photo from among those that Yaw Htung has spread before me: the memorial rises from a concrete foundation wide enough for the brothers to stand two to each side. Shaped like the headboard of a bed and nearly as high as the men's heads, the monument is capped by narrow eaves of a red roof that is classic Chinese: its convex slopes are traced with grey lines intended to evoke the shape of tubular tiles. A red-painted, relief-carved trident blazes tines-up from each of the two wings of a white marble plaque that is centered beneath and half-protected by the roof and underlined with strip of yellow zigzagged in red. The central feature of the memorial is a column of thick black names that look, like the life-attracting design at the center of a forest spider's web, firm in resolve but tentative in execution, and are etched in the Roman script that the Baptist missionaries created to capture Kachin in the pages of the Bible. These black letters on the marble page of memory are the names of Yaw Htung's ancestors.

In mistaken but apt English---or is the language twist intentional?---Yaw Htung tells me that the plaque is inscribed with the names of his 'grand grandfather and grand grandmother.' The number of 'grands' is not intended as an exact count of generations, but rather to convey the sense of ancestor, or 'forefather,' another word that Yaw Htung uses often. Below the name of the grand mother---the only family member actually laid to rest under the concrete

and clay--- descending the column from oldest to youngest, are the names of her five sons. At the base of the array is Shroi, Yaw Htung's many-greats grandfather. The date of the event that created this memorial stone, commissioned the plaque, cleaned of the gravesite, and that Yaw Htung organized, comes last of all: 18 March 2009.

Yaw Htung tells me that this revered ancestor came from the north. She walked south without her husband, but with five sons, their names indicating birth order: Gam, Tu, Tang, Yaw and Shroi. Naw and La, the second and third born sons, had died young. At that time, the area she came from was called by those who lived there simply as "*Jingpaw* land" (*Jingpaw* being the Kachin language term for that branch of the Kachin), but now the international border between Myanmar's Kachin State and China's Yunnan Province runs across --- figuratively, for the most part ---the mountains of her home. Yaw Htung names some of the places his 'grand grandmother' came through on her migration south: what is now Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State; then Bamaw, down across and along the Shweli River, Mongku, then back up to Mongbaw, where U Yaw Htung was born about six generations later in the line of Shroi.

The letters are too small to make out in the photo. I ask Yaw Htung his grand grandmother's name.

"N'dum Ka Tawng." Yaw Htung's work-worn finger makes a blunt stab at the spot.

"And on top it says Maran Sin Kawn. *Jan* means 'Mrs.', so it means 'N'Dum Ka Tawng, wife of N'Maran Singkawng'."

I think about this, realizing that though it is her bones that lie here, without her husband's name 'on top' it is difficult for a Kachin to put this woman in context. I learned from the marriage ceremony the weight of meaning when a woman enters her husband's clan: all the male members of his extended family—his father, paternal uncles, cousins and brothers--are now ultimately responsible for her welfare and in social debt to her family. In days of animism, through the intermediary of a shaman, she had to first be accepted by her husband's clan spirits to come under their protection.

I think too of her journey, how she came with five children and no husband across these obstinate mountain ranges, climbing from river valley to immovable ridge and skidding back down, from ravine to peak and back again in a day or a morning, children rushing ahead or flagging behind. Perhaps Shroi—or his unremembered sister--- still needed to be carried, slung onto her back, rump caught in a square cloth, the sling-ties crossing her chest in front and wrapped back around again. How many times a day, when the child slid heavy into the small of her back, did she bend forward from the waist, throw arms behind her back to hitch up her child, to retie the sling? I do not ask why she left her husband behind, or whether he was already dead.

I become absorbed again in the photo. Like the names on the plaque, Yaw Htung and his brothers stand in birth order, from oldest on the right to youngest on the left, a pair on each side of the tomb. Brother number two is missing, as he is now too old to make the trip from Myitkyina. Brother number three and four on the inside are taller than brother number one and five on the outside, and thus

arrayed an arc over the monument, a crescendo and decrescendo across a generation from right to left. If we count the dead, those named on the plaque, the arc spans at least seven generations. U Yaw Htung's trident is there, leaned up against the tombstone between them, as if to poke three thin holes into a ragged sky. Struck by the tines of the trident, I consider the power of three in Kachin tradition as elsewhere: *mayu*, *dama* and 'other'; the holy trinity; three stones laid out on the hearth to hold the pot. In the Kabala, three is the number of fulfillment.

A thicket of trees appears as a tangle of black and green behind the memorial. Yaw Htung goes on with his story, tells me how it is that his "grand grandmother" came to be buried in the forest in the middle of nowhere. She settled in Namkyek village with her sons, but later the oldest son Gam separated from the family and went to the other side of the valley to find a place for himself, to find new land. It is Kachin tradition that the youngest son stays with the father and mother and the eldest son goes off. But after Ndum Ka Tawng grew old, when she sensed her death was coming near, she said she wanted to cross over to her oldest son. 'I want to die there,' she told them. And so she crossed over the valley to Namkawng village, and she died there. According to Kachin tradition, when an old person dies, everyone must be informed immediately.

"At that time we had no media, no telecommunications, so we would shoot the gun ---*daing daing daing*---and beat the *maung*, the gong." His shirt sleeves sag from thin but still-solid wrists as he points an imaginary rifle towards the sky, then beats a gong. "The people also erected stalks of bamboo, like flags, to show the place of the funeral."

The people gathered in Namkawng on Gam's side of the valley, and when Shroi on the other side of the valley heard the gunshots and the gongs, he too began to beat the gong and gather up his family, friends and followers. He asked them to go together to bring his mother back for the funeral. And so they all went, to fetch the coffin. When the brothers met over the body of their mother, Shroi said to Gam "I am the youngest son and so I am responsible to take care of our mother. I have come to take her back to Namkyek." But Gam replied that because their mother had chosen to come over and to die with him, he had the right to hold the funeral in Namkawng. By this time, Shroi's followers were already carrying the wooden coffin back to Namkyek. Still, the brothers struggled and fought over the place to bury their mother, and because of that the carriers lost hold of the coffin. The third time they dropped the coffin, the followers and friends had had enough. "We suggest you bury your mother here, in this spot," they said. "Otherwise, we can help you no longer. You can carry the coffin yourself, or do as you like." And they left that place and walked out back to the village. And so the brothers could do nothing. They buried her there, in the middle of nowhere, between the villages of Namkawng and Namkyek. And that is where her gravestone still stands.

Yaw Htung guesses that she died about 1825. He takes the story up again in the year 1949, when his father called about a hundred people together to celebration and ceremony at the site.

"My father was an animist priest. He sacrificed a buffalo, the horn was something like this long." Yaw Htung crooks an arm, with the other touches the

elbow and then the fingertips. “He sacrificed the buffalo there, and we collected rocks and stones, we piled them up to repair the grave.”

The family and friends cleared creepers and vines, even planted some trees. Yaw Htung was quite young then and does not remember many of the details. But he remembers the *jaiwa*. The *jaiwa*, a cross between a historian and a storyteller, recited the history of the families, the lineages and their movements.

At that time, the grave site was in grasslands, in pasture and scrubland between the villages. But in the 1960s the communists came, and the people ran away. They fled the villages until there were only three or four houses left around there. Later forest grew up from the grass. The burial site disappeared into the trees.

Fast-forward sixty years to March 2009, when 23 extended families, totaling no less than 500 people, came together at the gravesite. They came from the *mayu* and the *dama*, Yaw Htung stresses, pausing to look over his glasses, from the clan of the ‘grand grandmother’---which is the same as the five brother’s wives --- and from the patrilineal lines of the five brothers,. They came from everywhere, from Mongsi, Mongyaw, Myitkyina, Muse, Namkham, Taungyi and points beyond.

For ten days they worked to clear the area and build the memorial. They carried bags of cement, steel rods and wire framing in from the road. They picked apart the rock cairn from 1949, spread the rocks even, and poured concrete over them to create the foundation. They fashioned the roof and fixed the marble



plaque. The families and the workers, hired laborers and friends, camped together in the forest for ten days and nights. At night, the workers would drum and dance.

The reference to drum and dance nabbed my attention. Seeking ritual in this narrative, looking perhaps for the 'traditional Kachin', I ask whether they danced in a line, like the *manao* dance.

"Not like a *manao*" he replied "something like a stagemash. Everyone participated, danced for themselves. No one was watching."

I persist in seeking ritual, looking for modern manifestations of blood sacrifice, plaited bamboo flags, spirit propitiation. I ask whether, besides the prayer service, any other kind of ceremony was held.

A grin begins to make its way across Yaw Htung's face. His eyes brighten even as they narrow behind lifted cheeks, like the concentrated light that burns at the edge of an eclipse slipped over the sun. A thought has hit him. "Yes, we did a prayer service after we finished the marker. But our ceremony---well, it's something like a ceremony---but really, it's a forum. A family forum."

I am missing the point. The most important part of the celebration is not the dancing, nor the prayer ceremony that marks the completion of the memorial. What Yaw Htung is finally able to tell me, once my off-the-mark questions have ended, is this:

Each evening, after the work was over, the families sat together to pick apart their histories. They began with the family of Gam, the oldest of the sons of the 'grand grandmother.' They named all the sons of Gam, and their wives and children, and tried to trace who went where; to Mongsi, Mongma, Ganmei...

Sometimes they would have to work from the bottom up: of this Maran in Mongsi, who was the father, and the father's father?

Yaw Htung's smile is wide enough to show most of his straight and even teeth, made whiter by the contrast with dark lacquer-like traces of betel-nut in the indentations between them. A fleck of tobacco punctuates the tight curve of his lower lip.

"In the old days it was the *jaiwa* who would recite all these histories. Now, we are so many people, who has gone where, we cannot remember. Now, we have to write it down."

It has been about seven generations since the time of the 'foremother.' The assembled families were able to decipher several generations, the most important being the first three. After that they could not always agree. What they did agree on was to continue to collect the information, each in their own towns. And they agreed to meet again in five years time to share what they had learned. In this way, the Shroi family history book would be written.

Yaw Htung says again that this family reunion achieved a greater purpose than merely bonding between kin over barbecued meat and a camp in the woods. "I should say this event was a family seminar. The first was when the grand grandmother died. In 1949 when my father rebuilt the grave memorial—that was the first repair seminar. Now, this time, it is the second repair seminar."

What I take away from this lesson on family story is that on the surface of things, the Kachin, or at least Yaw Htung, define a person by their ancestry, and measure history in miles. The elder brother will leave the family and travel south.

The youngest will stay work on the land, care for the parents. The ‘separation’ of brothers and family was long ago an occasion for a *manao* dance, a celebration which I imagine honored the eldest son—and the family’s growth--- and mustered courage for his journey.

Yaw Htung had explained that because his line descended from the youngest son of the legendary *Wakyet Wa Sinkawng*, because they stayed back longer, they came late to what is now Kachin State. Because they came late, no more land was left, and they had to continue south to what is now northern Shan State. This tells me that while it is the clan lineage and the separation of brothers that form the family history, it is ultimately all about land.

Like most of the ethnic groups in the mountain massif that leaks from the Himalayas across northern Myanmar, southwest China, Laos, northern Thailand to meet the sea in Vietnam, the Kachin practice shifting cultivation. They cut a patch of forest in the dry season and let the cut wood lie, before burning it before the onset of the monsoon rains. Seeds are sown at the beginning of the wet, on sloping fields usually cultivated by hand with a hoe, or sometimes dropped into holes made in rows in the unturned soil with a ‘dibble stick.’

Families and friends often work in groups, moving from the field of one member to the next. Sowing and harvesting is the work of both sexes, but weeding as the crops grow with the rains is nearly exclusively women’s work. A field might be planted one or two years before letting it lie fallow for three or fifteen; if land is scarce, it might be cultivated four or five years and left fallow for only two or three. The longer the fallow period, the fewer the weeds, the richer

the soil nutrients, and the higher the yield. In a situation of land scarcity, as is the case through most of the region today, the yields decline and the system can no longer sustain itself. Population growth is one reason why land is tight, but concessions of land to agribusiness, and the enclosure of forest, is at least as important. The mountain people are rarely fluent in the culture, language and politics of the decision-makers, who tend to be in towns and capitals in the lowlands, and parcel land use rights at whim to companies or government departments, through someone is nearly always already using it.

The 'family seminar' had originally been planned for 2008, but was postponed for the time needed to bring the scattered families together. The delay was lucky, because by 2009 a road had been built from Mongbaw to Mongsi that passed near the gravesite. If not for the road, the party would have had to climb for two hours, shouldering bags of cement, steel rods, tarpaulin, bedding and food. The road was built by government-contributed heavy machinery, while the World Food Programme, through its food-for-work activities, provided the labor and materials for a thin gravel layer to be laid on top. These new roads are often linked to timber extraction, which in this case, originate over the border in China.

The WFP road will first facilitate logging, and once the commercially valuable trees are extracted, the possibility of land concessions will arise. In Myanmar, not far from the China border, one can see new rubber plantations, acres and acres of rubber seedlings planted in neat rows that stretch to the horizon---on land that until recently supported forest, scrub land, agricultural plots and fallow lands. To see soil now bare, and rubber rampaging like a viral

monocrop across the land, feels like evisceration. To talk with the families that stay, though they must now walk miles to their fields, and to hear them tell of the majority of families who have left, to find work in the rubber, or the mines, or pan hopelessly for gold, or to cut rattan and bamboo out of a far-away forest, feels like heartbreak.

I think of Brawng Awng, who loves to say “The Kachin have a migration mind.” When he says this, he is usually referring with irony to the modern migration trajectories, which rather than a general southward tendency to ‘new lands,’ now spread like the traces of fireworks to towns and cities, to other countries, for study, to work, to wear blue jeans and brand sunglasses, to join Facebook and the global economy. This is less due to the lack of land, and more due to the opening of opportunities. What bothers Brang Awng, however, is that the young Kachin, once they have found a good job, or any job, do not come back to help their brothers and sisters advance. What is left unspoken is that, due to decades of western sanctions and economic mismanagement, there has been no manufacturing and service sector ---no garment factories, no tourism, no telecommunications industry, for example---so that the only jobs are in Thailand, China, Malaysia, and beyond.

I am sympathetic because I too am a child of migration. My personal history, my family story, my very cell memory has been shaped by movement. History on sides of both *mayu* and *dama* was directed by war, by secret treaties, by the search for refuge. After migrations south from Estonia (on my father’s side) and west from Soviet-occupied Germany (on my mother’s side), the two met

in the relative peace of Munich. But after two children they crossed the ocean to America, tempted by a job in what seemed the land of infinite opportunity—including the prospect of a house of their own acre of land. I grew up dreaming of travel, and continued to move west, this time across the Pacific to Asia. Like the Kachin, our migrations were initially out of survival, then later economic opportunity, and finally mere curiosity. What is the difference between me and the many-grads-sons of Wakyet Wa Singkawng?

I ask Yaw Htung, finally, why this burial site renovation, this family forum, was so important. His voice pinches in a manner I recognize: I can feel in my throat the way it aches when someone asks me a question so obvious and yet so critical that I become intense and defensive all at the same time, and wonder at how thoroughly I misread the questioner's understanding.

"Now, especially these days, this is the most important thing to know." He leans forward, his hands clasping the arms of the teak chair.

"If you come into a house, and you don't know who you are, then you have to sit outside. If you know who you are, then you can be invited in---hey, come in, come sit here. A person must know his place, his forefathers." He leans back, his lips and forehead drawn tight.

"If he does not know his history, he is not Kachin. If he does not come from the marriage family then he is from outside, outcast. And, you must know your *mayu-dama*. If you do not know who you are, then you might marry the wrong relation."

The Kachin are dispersed now, with family groups scattered all over Shan and Kachin State, and even abroad. Wherever they are, when a Maran meets a Maran--or a subgroups of Maran, such as N'muran or N'dingran—they must know *how they are related* in order to know *how to relate*.

Furthermore, the Kachin now live among many other ethnicities, among Chinese, Indians, Myanmar. Yaw Htung slows his speech, raises the volume slightly, and works to enunciate. He is like an ember that re-kindles from inside, radiates heat and light.

“When the children are asked ‘what is your nationality, what is your clan’ they know only ‘Kachin’ —and they can’t even speak Kachin. They children must learn their history! And be able to show they are aware of what it means.”

He comes to practical matters:

“For the household registration card, you must be able to show your family tree three generations back. If you cannot, then they might say you are not Kachin. How else can we prove we are Kachin?”

## 5. Last Questions

*I scour my memory to find as many ingredients of my identity as I can. I then assemble and arrange them. I don't deny any of them.*

*-Amin Maalouf*

November in Myitkyina is the time when the rains have gone completely, have washed the town clean and left it to dry and sparkle, and before the dust of winter has begun to blow into the cracks. A slight mist hazes the morning sun. The days are crisp. The light has an alpine glow, as if the high-altitude clarity of the Tibetan plateau, the mythical birthplace of the Kachin people, has seeped down into the valley, tracked their ancestors' trajectory along mountain ridges and down tumbling rivers on their course from the Himalayas. By the time the light arrives here it has been roughed up by rocky peaks and raging torrents, but the imprint of rarified air and brilliant cold remains. That week in November I would walk across town under great rotting raintrees, past clattering bicycles and coughing jeeps, over the railroad tracks to the worn, one-storied private clinic called *Jesudaw*---Blessed Jesus.

Because he is a respected leader and a revered elder, or because his daughters-in-law are paid in foreign currency by the NGOs where they work, Brang Awng has his own room. A thin cotton curtain covers the door. A wooden bed stands next to a window where the breeze sifts through a wide wire mesh. Brang Awng welcomes the breeze sitting up. When he turns to see me, his smile shows jaunty gaps in the row of his teeth, eyes and cheekbones from the east



Asian steppes, a nose as high as it is broad, and eyes that spark like the crystal air outside. The up-turned brim of his gray wool cap is emblazoned with black and red-rimmed eyes that glower from his forehead. The juxtaposition of these two sets of eyes--- one bubbling, one threatening--- remind me of a dual-faced deity, of the flip sides of ferocity and compassion.

Above the embroidered eyes, the logo reads *No Fear*. I assume at first that this is just another instance of China-made clothing finding its way to Myanmar with funky labels, and worn without awareness. I think of the girl selling tea at the market in an oversized T-shirt scripted *No Money, No Honey*: she has no idea what it means. But later I begin to wonder whether the cap was chosen deliberately, by a grandson perhaps, half-joking, to serve as a charm, a protection.

Brang Awng is having painful attacks of fever, rigor and shaking, and no one seems to know—or to admit---exactly why.

I met Brang Awng over ten years ago, when he was in charge of the Myitkyina-based program of Neighbors in Action, and I was assigned to help train some of the staff. Brang Awng had retired from government service, and was now among other things helping communities solve the drug abuse problem rampant among village youth.

The moment we first met, I remember him standing tall but slightly bent outside the office, radiating a persona that was relaxed, focused, and warm. He was once known among his students for his personal style, a brand known as “Brang Awng style,” that others admired and even imitated. “Brang Awng style” seems to have included a look—sophisticated, in pants and a pullover sweater; a

walk--slow, with bit of friction of foot against floor; and a way of relating to others---which when I knew him, consisted of a focus of attention that made you feel like you were important. Now, in the hospital and aged nearly 70, the old style still shone in the youthful light in his eyes.

Brang Awng has an impressive history of professional accomplishments that began, upon graduation from missionary school in the backwater town of Bamaw, with a scholarship to Rangoon University. He went on to teach in the two most prestigious institutions of higher education in the country, and wrote the textbooks that outlined the idiosyncratic (and as it turned out, absolutely devastating) economic theories of the “Burmese Way to Socialism” in the early years of the military dictatorship. His life story roller-coasters from great accomplishments to utter disasters, and I managed to extract it from him over time.

But the reason I would linger over long chats in the winter sun just outside the office door, then in the top floor of his two-story house, and later in a series of hospital rooms, was his philosophic bent and his open mind. We shared a love of talk, and an interest in many of the same topics---from yoga, meditation and the power of the mind, to the history and possible fates of the Kachin ethnic group, to the nature of human development and the role of the ‘development industry’, and current events.

Now no longer with Neighbors in Action, I had come to Myitkyina this time specifically to see him, and was prepared with plenty of questions. Sitting at

his bedside on a red plastic stool, together again in the winter sun, I begin with what I think will be a simple one: “Where is the Kachin heartland?”

I am thinking about the dams planned on the Ayeyawady River, the area where the two tributaries of the river come together, in a triangle that is sometimes described as the center of Kachin culture. This series of dams, which will be one of the largest dam projects ever attempted by the Chinese, will not only ruin precious forest and river, but will be the ultimate illustration of how the Kachin are being overcome by the economic power of China on one side, and military power of Myanmar on the other. The action is a direct strike at the cultural, if not geographic, center of Kachinland.

Brang Awng’s face is still as he considers my question, then his eyes come alive again.

“We consider our place of origin to be *Krangkumajwe*. *Krang* is the name of a river, a tributary to the Ayeyawady. *Majwe* means *manao* place, and we consider this to be the place of the first *manao*, the *manao* from which all the family lines came down.”

I already know that a *manao* is a traditional celebration, what anthropologists might call a ritual feast, during which great line dances are held. I joined in on the year 2000 millennium celebration, when the line was led by elders in long white coats and headdresses festooned with the fangs of a wild boar and the feather of the great hornbill. The men moved the line slowly, dancers giggled and stepped, three steps forward and one back, the line spiraled in on itself and back out.

In the old days, *manao* were held for reasons such as a victory over the enemy, or the separation of a family when an elder brother set off to start his own on another remote mountaintop. As Brang Awng explains it, when the “first family” separated at that first *manao* celebration, each of the “first brothers” went off in search of their own hilltop domain, and thus began the seven main clan lines of the Kachin: the first brother the Marip clan line, the second brother Maran, the third brother Lahpai, and so on.

This relates, he continues, to the Kachin tradition of naming children according to birth order. The first word in a person’s name indicates where they rank in the family hierarchy, mirroring the original “first family” and the clan lines which sprung from it.

Today, grand *manao* festivals are still held most years in Myitkyina, but the occasion has been adapted to modern circumstances. A unity *manao* brings Kachin together from all over the country and from across national borders in China and India. The unity *manao* also brings the Regional Commanders under the Burman military regime together with leaders of the armed Kachin opposition groups, and symbolically renews the cease-fires that have allowed people to begin to recover from civil war.

Brang Awng comes back, finally, to his origins: “There is a mountain there, in the triangle near Sumprabum, which I have heard about. When *duwas*, our chiefs, are buried, we dig a big round trench and put the *duwa* in the middle. That place, *krangkummajwe*, still has so many trenches. That’s how we know it’s our place of origin, that is one indicator.”

His eyes begin to gleam, and I know he is considering a puzzle.

“But the older and original place of origin of the Kachin, where it is, we cannot say. We talk of *majweshingrabum*, of a Great *Manao* Ground Mountain, but if you ask where it is, we cannot point to it. Might it be in the Tibetan Himalayas? Or some high mountain in Sichuan or Mongolia?”

Even Kachin legend hints at an origin in a remote northern mountain fastness, but no one is sure now where it is.

A nurse comes in to check the flow from the bag of glucose his veins receive every day. She peers at the bag, tilts her chin up to get a better angle through her eyeglasses.

The nurse wears the middle-aged woman’s uniform of a cardigan sweater over her red nurse’s *longyi*, calls him Uncle, and speaks to Brang Awng in Kachin with the soft tone and composed face accorded a respected elder. Speaking with a drawn-out deliberation that lends gravity to his words, Brang Awng introduces the nurse and me. He tells me that this nurse is his great-aunt’s granddaughter, but because of the age difference, he calls her his niece. We laugh, because of the convoluted way in which most Kachin, when they meet, can find some way in which they are related.

“I am trying to keep my physical heart and my spiritual heart together.” He smiles with satisfaction at this metaphor for his condition. The doctor who runs *Jesudaw* had told me earlier in the day that he is not sure what the trouble is, but it is likely heart-related, and that Brang Awng should go to Yangon for tests and treatment as the equipment and expertise was not available in Myitkyina.

Brang Awng had been told a few years ago that he should consider a pacemaker, but never followed up. I understood Brang Awng simply to be undiagnosed, and resigned to it. What I did not know was that deep down Brang Awng was convinced he had cancer, and not long to live.

The nurse goes, a niece arrives, and Brang Awng continues to uncover the origin of the Kachin. Now he is no longer considering geographic locations, but creation myths.

“There are many stories about the origin of the Kachin. Some say we came from the sun, something like a sun maiden. Then there are stories of a Great Flood, like Noah’s Ark, when he took his family of eight and two of each animal.”

He tells me of the story of the two original couples, who saved themselves inside a drum when the great flood came. Later the drum burst, and all the Kachin peoples came running out. This may be the root, he says, of the term *Jingpaw*, the name of one of the main lineages: *jing* meaning drum, and *paw*, to burst open.

That evening I left the clinic and walked to the riverbank. Myitkyina is just downriver from ‘the confluence,’ where the wild Mekha and placid Malikha come together to form Burma’s lifeline, the great Irrawaddy River. The river is best viewed in the early morning, or at this late time of day, as silhouettes form before a deepening pink-lavender sky and distant hills blend into a band of dark blue. Late-comers are bathing in their *longyis*. Some bring bars of soap to scrub

their skin in the silted water, but the release of suds is nothing compared to the mercury leaching steadily in from the gold-digging operations upstream.

Three small boys play in a dugout canoe at the water's edge, one at each end paddling in opposite directions, while the smallest boy holds on to the gunnels at the center of the slowly spinning craft. A motorboat starts from the other side of the river, is swept downstream by the current, chugs steadily to land finally amongst bathers diminishing in twilight and the lengthening shore.

If China Power Investment, a corporation owned by China's army, has its way, the last in the series of seven dams for this hydropower project will be built just upstream of this spot. The confluence will be flooded, the Kachin heartland overrun by Chinese laborers, and if then the dam breaks, the town of Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State, will wash away. The Chinese government, which will take most of the electricity, and the elite among Burmese generals who are pocketing much of the money, support the dam, while the Kachin people, and an increasing number of Burmans, are vehemently against it. Villages have already been relocated, and construction begun.

I wonder about the likelihood of Brang Awng's prediction that the Chinese will not ultimately go through with the dam. His belief seems based on a nostalgia for the days when the Chinese communists supported the Kachin fighters as a border buffer, and the fact that the Kachin feel somehow kin to the Han Chinese, with whom they have some things in common, as opposed to the Burmans with whom they have little in common, save national borders fabricated by accident by colonial notions of nation.

When I arrive the next evening Brang Awng, is in the middle of an attack. He is gasping, his breath labored, sits on the edge of the bed and moans every now and then. He stands up, sits back down. He lays back, only to sit up again, then stand and slowly walk. In mid-stride, he doubles up in pain. He has been vomiting. His son rubs his back, helps him walk. The doctor has been to see him, but can do nothing to ease these attacks. Brang Awng has a sharp pain in the stomach, and rigor—he shivers and shudders and his muscles are tight.

I make a move to leave him in peace, but he urges me to stay. He shuffles back and forth on the cement floor, groans, and asks me a surprising question--- surprising in the sense of the moment in which he chooses to ask it. Later I will realize that he has been saving up questions to ask me, just as I have with him. He is aware that our time together is limited. But in the midst of his suffering, I can only oblige him with a full and honest answer.

He asks me: “Why do you keep coming back to Myanmar? Why do you love this country?” I have been hearing this question more often recently. A year ago the Cyclone Nargis washed 200,000 people out to sea overnight, and for weeks after the government refused to allow aid to reach the survivors. Six months later came the arrest and killing of monks in peaceful demonstration. It is in this context that locals wonder why a foreigner would choose to return, when they themselves consider the place tainted and hopeless.

Luckily, this is also a question I have thought plenty about. I remind him that when one is young, there is a period of time that one is easily captivated by a



passion for justice. That was the moment in my life that I learned about Myanmar. I came to the border after the students had run out from the massacres after the demonstrations in 1988. I met young people my age, who were in shock, outraged, and desperate to fight back. I met a young man who told me he had seen a bayonet driven through his sister's face from cheek to cheek before she was dragged her off to the prison van. I met an older man who had been picked up while waiting for a bus home, and been made to carry bullets on forest paths; when he tried to escape, they had rolled iron bars up and down his shins, and when he fell from exhaustion and pain on the path they left him for dead. He showed me the scars on his shins but the scars in his spirit would not scab, and when I met him he still trembled and did not dare return home.

I write these images now because the memories insist on surface. At that first encounter, the shock, the pain and courage of the people I met, tore at my gut and filled me, too, with outrage. But that day with Brang Awng I did not go into detail, because he too was there in 1988, has experienced war, and knows the meaning of torture in Myanmar. I merely want him to know that these are among the many interactions that have braided my life with the story of his land.

A few years later I came from the border to the interior of the country, where I wondered at the gentleness of the citizens compared to the cruelty of the regime. It seemed a strange paradox to be treated with such kindness in a place that I perceived at first as one of such suffering. The longer I stayed, the more I was stuck, like a fly in glue. People like Yaw Htung, like himself, who pour their life energy into work for positive change, when the future seems

unbearably impossible, have both inspired and held me here. If my colleagues hold hope high against the intransigent, how can I not?

Another reason, I tell Brang Awng, is purely a match of personality. I have grown into the subtle, though at times debilitating, cultural imperative of *anadeh*, a relational mechanism that avoids at all costs forcing anyone into a position of discomfort. I have come to be more comfortable with indirect criticism than direct, have become comfortable with precisely the kind of communication that often drives foreigners crazy, to the point that I am sometimes crippled when I am back in the west.

Brang Awng responds with nods and encouraging noises. His eyes narrow. I am not sure he knows what I mean, or whether he thinks there must be more to it, but I am left feeling that my explanation has either disappointed or confused.

On the Thursday of that week in November, Brang Awng picks up one of his favorite themes. He begins with the phrase “The main thing about the Kachin is that they have a ‘migration mind’”.

The way he interprets it, what was once was a tradition of war, conquest, separation of families and the search for fertile agricultural land, continues in the modern version as an escape to greener pastures. His voice begins to sound like a well-honed sermon, nearly in call and response.

“These days, for those who are educated and have a little money, the migration path is down, to the south. First to Bamaw, to Mandalay and finally Yangon. Then their children, if they can, keep moving, on to Singapore, Australia,

USA, Japan.” Now his flesh-and-blood eyes take on the glower of the embroidered eyes above them.

“I say to the Kachin: ‘Do you love your Kachin people?’ They think I am foolish to ask such a question. They laugh, and tell me ‘Of course I love my people.’” His gaze intensifies as if he has trapped his imaginary verbal combatant and is going now for the heart.

“Then I ask them, ‘But HOW do you love your Kachin people?’ and they have nothing to say.” His eyebrows lift, the space between his eyes widening, waiting for an answer. He fills it in himself.

“We call them to come back, we tell them they must come back to help their people. Yes, they send some money now and then, support their parents well---but they don’t come back. Who will help develop the Kachin people?”

I have heard Brang Awng make this discourse before, once for the benefit of a young niece who was visiting from Sydney, where his sister lives. I wonder if he is particularly sensitive to the brain drain of the Kachin abroad because of the sacrifices he has personally made to serve the Kachin people.

Brang Awng comes from a family of upland farmers, and he had once told me of how, when he received the scholarship offer from the school elders committee in the town of Bamaw, he had rushed to the hillside rice-field his mother was hoeing by hand, to beg her to let him go. She had said nothing for a long time, but tears rolled down her cheeks. Her husband had already died, and he was her eldest son. Standing leaning on her hoe in the field, she told him at last

that she did not want him to go. The family had struggled for so long, she said, she had worked hard, was beginning to be tired, and they were very poor.

She planned for him to become a clerk in the local administration and to support the family on his government salary. Brang Awng had answered that he would go for only a few years, and with a university education, his salary would be higher. Once he was back, the family would never be poor again. Meanwhile, his mother and the family might have to struggle, but it was only for a few more years, and if they put their fate in God's hands He would look after them. Finally Brang Awng's mother relented, and he ran the whole way back to town to report to the scholarship committee that his mother would allow him to go. Thus began his migration south from Bamaw.

Years later, after he had graduated university and served the required four years as headmaster of his old school, he received an invitation to be Instructor of Economics at Yangon Institute of Technology. He was already married to Ja Tang, whom he had met during university days, and already had three of his four sons. He became a leader in the university's branch of the Socialist Party, a political arm of the government. He was on his way up.

It was at this point that his wife received an invitation to go to Canada.

"You can go," he had told her, "but I will not. Who will look after our three boys? How will I support the family there?" Although Ja Tang truly wanted to leave, she did not want to go without him. Finally, they stayed---at a moment when of those few in Myanmar who had the opportunity, some were already

beginning to go, tempted by prospects in a wider world that was by now, thanks to the dictator's imposed isolation of the country, largely off-limits.

Brang Awng continued to climb, teaching for a while at the Defense Services Academy in Maymyo. That was the time when people were still proud of their army, celebrated its role in ending colonial rule, and had confidence in its ability to build a nation. Those were the days when soldiers were respected rather than loathed.

This was also the period in history that socialism and non-alignment (or neutrality), as led by Gandhi and others, swept the region and the world, a reaction in a sense to the century of colonial capitalism that had brought countries like India and Myanmar to its knees. While in Maymyo, Brang Awng was asked to draft the textbooks that would teach the government's new economic plan: The Burmese Way to Socialism. The Burmese Way to Socialism an idea in the head of the new dictator and his advisors, a bizarre theory of economics based on a mix of Buddhist philosophy and central planning. Despite several political training courses, Brang Awng did not understand it very well, but it did not matter that no one else did either. He considered the opportunity to articulate the new economic approach for the nation's up-and-coming economists as an honor of his academic expertise as well as a reward for his loyalty to the party. At the time he was, like so many others, a true believer in socialist planning.

After a few years in Maymyo, Brang Awng was invited back to Yangon, this time to teach at Rangoon University's Institute of Economics. During the 1950s, Rangoon University had been the intellectual and academic hub not only

for the new nation, but also for the region, as students from neighboring countries such as Thailand had come there to study. Now in the 1970s, while the country was becoming isolated, it was still a prestigious position. And for him became even more so, as he rose in the ranks of the Socialist Party at the university.

But in 1982, he was asked to become Director at Myitkyina Technical College, in the small capital of his home state, Kachin State. The college was being mismanaged, he was told, and they needed a strong administrator. Being Kachin and respected, he was the best person to restore order to a messy situation. He need only go for a year, they said, and the request was sweetened with a promise of a trip abroad, one of the precious favors remaining for government staff that were being traded now in the time of scarcity and closed borders. In the end Brang Awng agreed, as to his mind this was an opportunity to bring his sons 'home.' His children had so far grown up completely outside of the Kachin cultural region.

But that was the last he ever heard of a trip abroad, or even a re-assignment down to Yangon. He had been professionally sidelined to remote Kachin State. Brang Awng perceived that the position had been a convenient way for the Burman university administrators to rid themselves of a party boss who was Kachin. The Burmans chafed, he believed, at being told what to do by a member of a 'backward' minority ethnic group.

Brang Awng had no idea how dear the move would ultimately cost the family. Myitkyina was, and is, in the center of the opium cultivation area of Myanmar, and by the early 1990s, heroin was produced in cottage industries and

abundantly available. This was in the days before anyone knew what HIV was, and why some people got sick, became thinner and thinner before wasting away, and in the days before people understood how it was transmitted, and why so rampant in Myitkyina. This was in the time when needles were shared in the shooting galleries, which were frequented by young people in those days much like beer shops anywhere else today---with casual abandon, and sometimes just for something to do on a Friday night.

Two of Brang Awng's four sons had died of HIV/AIDS-related complications by the time I met him, and a third during the period we worked together. I asked him, once, whether he regrets having brought his family to Myitkyina, but he had no answer.

His wife passed away a few years ago, partly from overwork and stress, he believes, from her work in community development. We talk, sometimes, about whether they would be in heaven. Brang Awng believes yes, though he could also be convinced no.

As I walk into the room on the final day of my visit to Myitkyina, I immediately sense that Brang Awng is not well. I grasp his forearms and look into his eyes, and I see something small and flat, something closed off. I remember his words from the day before: "No fears" he had said "I am not afraid, I am ready. I would like to see my wife again, my sons."

Today his voice is weaker. "I had an attack last night after you left," he tells me, "a very serious one. And so I slept only a few hours."

Fear of the pain, perhaps, the inevitable pain that would come before death. Or perhaps fear of death, fear of what may come after death, or even worse, fear that what he hopes for may not be there at all. No matter how well-prepared one is for death, how much anticipation and preparation, I imagine we must all be struck by some kind of fear in the end.

Perhaps we had talked too much the day before. We have so many questions.

Today I will read to him. I offer him the choice of the Bible, or a book on identity.

He begins with a discussion of Genesis, and its echoes of Kachin genealogy, but stops and turns to me. "I'd like to hear about identity. Let's read about identity."

The gentle afternoon light slants in through the open window and enters his eyes, softens the fear. But a breeze follows this light, and so we close the window. Through the sifting dust, outside noises muffle. Still, beyond the window I hear a Coppersmith Barbet, which I always associate with a bright sunny sky, begin its toc-toc-toc, insistent, precise and relentless as the ticking of a clock.

I have brought a book on identity and ethnic violence, as the issue is as relevant to the Kachin as to many other groups in conflict around the world. The author, Amin Maalouf, is a man of many identities who escaped ethnic violence---he grew up a Christian in Lebanon, but lives in France. He begins with the wise words:



*A life spent writing has taught me to be wary of words. Those that seem the clearest are often the most treacherous. "Identity" is one of those false friends. We all think we know what the word means and go on trusting it, even when it's slyly starting to say the opposite.*

I ask Brang Awng whether it is not possible that the Kachin have established part of their identity in opposition to their enemy, that perhaps part of the Kachin insistence on Christianity is to establish a religious identity that is opposed to the strong Buddhist identity of the Burmans. I have been pondering this question for some time.

"The Kachin have always hated the Burmans," he replies simply. "Even before they became Christian. One Kachin pastor said 'If there are Burmans in heaven, I won't stay there. I'll come back!'"

What is the root of this ethnic hatred? Even the wise Brang Awng does not have the answer.

That morning, I had sat at a tea shop with Tum Roi. Winter mornings at the tea shop in Myitkyina are lovely, and this particular tea shop, open-air at the corner of two streets that are just waking up, is my favorite. We hunched on little stools over a tiny table, my feet pointing towards China and hers toward India. Our choice of foods, too, were from east and west: from the Shan plateau and its southwest China influence come the fermented rice noodles slurped from a broth floating bits of soft-boiled pork and infused with fish sauce, fresh lime and chili; from India come the round *naan* breads slapped inside the round hood of a wood-fired oven and peeled off when baked through, so that one face is blackened and

the other bubbled, served with boiled cowpea fried in caramelized garlic. We drink bitter local yellow hill tea, black tea cloying with sweetened condensed milk, or coffee. The faces of the tea shop patrons reflect the crossroads on our table, they are Nepali, Indian, Shan, Chinese, Kachin, Burman. The sun finds the floor, low murmurs rise from the tables like steam, and together we fill our bellies in the cool fuzzy light of a winter morning.

In this sleepy setting, we are speaking of ethnic hatred. Tum Roi's father had told her she could marry anyone she wanted, just not a Burman. Her voice is still as she tells me of the torture her father had suffered under Burmans the two times he had been jailed for his role in the Kachin opposition. The first time they strapped him down to drip water on his forehead, drip by drop, slowly, for days on end. This strange water torture can cause brain damage, and has driven people completely mad. The second time they force-fed him clay and then beat him in the stomach. This is the root of his hatred, or at least the fire that stokes it.

*Did I not say that the word identity was a 'false friend'? It starts by reflecting a perfectly admissible aspiration, then before we know where we are it has become an instrument of war.*

Tum Pang went on to tell several more anecdotes about torture, about terror, about the inevitably in these circumstances, of hate. She had recently visited a village nearby that was full of widows. When she had asked why, she was told the terribly sad story of the day during the civil war, when the Burma Army came to punish the village. They had heard that the Kachin Independence Army had come through that village and taken conscripts and supplies. So they

rounded up the entire village and put it in the school playing field. All the people were forced to stay in the uncovered enclosure for the whole day, without shelter from the hot tropical sun, without water or food. Then the soldiers told the men that they could leave, should go, now, in small groups, or one by one. The soldiers shot the men as they went, as they ran in a desperate attempt to live, over the paddy fields that surrounded the enclosure. That was the day the women of the village became widows.

When you ask, these stories are there, grinding just below the surface of Kachin lives. Though people recognize that they are wounded, they do not know how to heal. Tum Pang told me another story, one I heard several times during those days, about a retreat that was held recently for village pastors and elders. At that retreat, a Kachin pastor preached for an entire week about love. At the end of the week, he asked his retreatants: “Who among you hates the Burmans?” Fully two-thirds of the people raised their hands. One was even sitting next to his Burman brother-in-law, and after his hand shot up in response, he sheepishly turned his head to his brother-in-law, before he lowered his hand. The pastor could only conclude: “You have not learned what I have been trying to teach you all week. My teachings have been in vain.”

The Kachin are not the only ethnic group to suffer under the military rule in Myanmar, and statistically speaking, the largest number of sufferers under Burman-dominated military rule are the Burmans themselves. Moreover, all the ethnic armies of in the country have perpetrated abuses on one another. I sometimes point this out to my Kachin colleagues, but the inevitable response

runs along the lines of: “I know it is not Christian, and I know it is not right, but I can’t help it, I hate the Burmans. We have been taught to hate them since we were young.”

From his hospital bed with the sun now slanting at the top of his hat to set off tiny ridges in the acrylic knit, Brang Awng becomes interested in Maalouf’s ideas. He talks of the fact that national boundaries were drawn through the Kachin cultural area, with the result that the Kachin have been split into three parts: those in southwest China, northern Myanmar and northeast India. “The Kachin in China would not say ‘we are not communists.’ And the Kachin in India would think they are democrats. But we Kachin in Burma, what can we say? What *should* we say?”

The Kachin are a minority ethnic group in a nation dominated by Burmans, and the Burmans are in charge of the army. He is hinting at the disdain that most Kachin harbor for the Burman, a disdain that has only festered over 50 years of military rule, much of which was lived under open armed conflict between soldiers representing ethnic groups.

“For a Kachin in America, it is easy to say ‘I am a Kachin-American.’ But if Kachin from Myanmar go abroad, it is very hard for us to say we are Myanmar. Can we say we are from Kachinland? No one would know what we are talking about. So we would have to say ‘I am Myanmar’ to help the person identify where we are from. But we Kachin, we won’t like to say that phrase.”

Brang Awng pauses, then peers at me with an intensity deeper than that of mere philosophic debate, and asks: “who are you?” This question hits me like a

friendly slap, though I suppose it is only fair, since my line of questioning to him for a long time has been not only “who are you?” personally, but globally “who are the Kachin?” Momentarily stumped, I borrow his style and pause to think. Then my response to his question tumbles out as a list of my many names, beginning with what my mother and father call me.

Karin, pronounced the German way with a tidy ‘a’ and a guttural ‘r’: mother calls me Karinanina, father Karinchen, both with the intent of making it sound small and sweet, diminutive. In American, I tell him, this name sounds less tidy, less nice, is pronounced with the drawn-out flat ‘a’ that sounds like ‘eh’ and the reverberating ‘rr’ of American English. I explain the meaning of my Chinese name: Ai for phonetic surname, Kai for victory, Lin for jade. On to the Kachin name of Wadu Roi Seng, that he already knows means ‘third daughter of the wild boar clan’, and my Burmese name of Ke Thi, when a visitor walks in, another niece. I am relieved to be interrupted, because I am not sure where this train of thought is leading, why I am defining my identity through the names that I have been given in the various cultures in which I have lived.

The entry of his niece is my signal to leave, as it is getting late, becoming dark, and I have already broken the promise I made myself that I would not stay long.

Brang Awng is lying on one side, listening to me, his wool ‘No Fear’ cap peaked on his skull. His folded hands are tucked under his cheek, knees pulled into himself. His skin is smooth as a baby’s, perhaps puffed by the drip that his son had readjusted to speed up earlier. He and his son are constantly fumbling

with the drip, think it too slow, or too fast, and have learned from the nurse how to alter it--perhaps the only part of his medical treatment they have control over. Only later will we learn that he has diabetes, and that these daily doses of glucose are causing great harm.

It is time to say goodbye, and I struck by a fear of my own.

“Even though I don’t know how to pray, but still I’ll always pray for you,” I tell him. He and I both know that I do not believe in a Christian god, but for this moment I choose to suspend disbelief.

“I might go before you see me again,” he said with a little smile.

“If you go, please let me know where you are and who is with you,” I reply, thinking of his earlier speculation that he might be rejoining his wife and sons, and our debate of what might come after death. But I don’t think he hears.

“You are a godsend.”

I am ready to cry but I smile. “We are all sent by God.”

“Yes, that is right. God made man in his image.”

“Ah, in that case, God must be a woman and a man. And God must be a Muslim as well as a Christian. A Kachin, as well as a German, and an American. Maybe even a Burman...”

“I think you must be right.” This comes slowly, softly. He is smiling now too, the light back in his eyes, curiosity, intellect and humor overcoming fear.

## 6. The Letter

*an excerpt from a historical fiction book about three women of Shan State in Burma*

Though her longing was a sharp-toothed beast that chewed at her chest in the darkness of every morning, Olive did not miss home quite in the same way that the other girls at St. Albert's did. For one thing, Olive did not miss her mother. For another, she did not miss any friends, unlike the other daughters of the privileged, who had left village playmates behind when they came into the pincers of the Anglican nuns at the edge of the Shan plateau, at the last gasp of cool green hills before they tumbled down to arid flats.

If a friend is someone whose presence comforts, then the closest Olive had was the clouded leopard who lurked near the spring back home on the mountain. Like her, the leopard was a loner who basked in the odor of dawn. A wild, calculating loner who would blend into her surroundings, disappear, to reemerge without warning on the back of a wild boar, claws latched to the shoulders and fangs tearing out the throat.

What Olive missed, as dawn began to pale the plaster walls and pull them close, was the roaming. She missed the hiss of cool air against her hot face, the musk of civet drifting in pungent spider-veins in the steam rising from the valley, the hard angle of her calf as her foot bit into the red clay slope. The sound of water filling, drop by drop, pending, popping on the taut leaves below. The rustle of a bamboo rat scrabbling deeper into the stalks, the spiral whoop of the coucal, mournful even as the notes curled upward like smoke from a stick of incense. She

wanted to stalk the ridge above the opium fields, pause in the vista between treetops to spy on the life waking up below, to watch her valley's business from on high.

Olive scrubbed her scalp as if to rub out the visions of her hills, or the equally distracting thoughts of the letter. What was left of her hair prickled under her palm and reminded her of her first attempt at freedom. The sewing scissors had been chill and heavy in her hand as she took them out of Sister Alice's rattan basket, swung her head upside-down over the edge of the bed, and hacked off her hair. The two knuckles she had nicked in the cutting had already begun to scab. But she was still here, in this room now confined by light.

Now, in the opposite bed, Ashwe stretched. Ashwe had a knack for waking up at the same time each morning, and her next move was as reliable as sunrise. Ashwe slid herself sideways off the bed, turned so that her feet and then her knees bumped to the floor, and with her elbows still on the kapok mattress, put her palms together for her morning prayers. Though a few of the other girls considered themselves real Christians, Ashwe was the only girl in the room who did not wait for her morning prayers until Sister Alice led them in the first hour of class. Olive did not need to make out the words, which she knew began with "Our Father, who Art in Heaven..." and instead she wondered with a contempt gone dull with use, how it was that Ashwe did not respect her own father enough, to have to worship a white one, in the heaven of the British.

Leaving Ashwe, Olive's thoughts turned back to the day before, when instead of being sent home, she had been made to stand in front of the entire 5<sup>th</sup>



standard class. Sister Alice's voice had ridden on a current of air so frail it might fail altogether, as she lectured them all. To keep her speech afloat she enunciated each word with precision, making little puffs after each hard consonant. Sister Alice used words like pride and vanity, and Olive had thought she might be about to tell, again, the story of when the snake tricked Eve into eating the apple. Instead Sister Alice had continued on to something about the sins of the fathers being visited on the sons.

That, Olive decided again in the morning light, was unfair. Father is not Christian, so how can he sin? Of course he does bad things sometimes, but Kokang State is a place where people need discipline. As Grandmother Yang says, a sharp knife requires little force. And isn't it the Christian British themselves who are happy to keep him in charge there? If that red-scalped Commissioner Scott wants Father to keep Kokang quiet for him, then he can get used to how the family has done it for generations.

She remembered the last visit home, when with the thoroughness of the famed war strategist Sun Zi, Father had considered the potential reactions of Wu Liang's uncles, before he had Wu Liang hung by the wrists from a bamboo pole. The whole day from sunrise to sunset, on market day, in front of the noodle stalls where everyone would see him. And those who didn't see, had heard, from the market newsmill. Olive had listened to her father predict to her brothers what would happen, in a voice whose iron contrasted with that of Sister Alice's wheeze.

Father had been right. Wu Liang's uncles had been ashamed and angry, but not enough to risk losing the money they made running mules for him, and especially not over one of their clan who made only trouble. Old Wu had come with his eyes to the floor and hand-folded-over-fist at the brow of his red silk cap, head bowing and popping up like a crane in heat, and thanked Father for the leniency of the punishment, apologized that he could not control his own nephew. Wu Liang disappeared, probably driven out by his uncles, ran over to China someone said, to "borrow" animals from the skinny mule caravans there.

Sister Alice's punishment had been neither what Olive wanted, nor very strategic. She had not even mentioned Olive's name until she was nearly finished with her long and strained speech, when, as if she were instructing the girls to open their books to page 37, she told the class that Olive had been given a penance of a thousand Hail Marys, and plain bread for dinner for a week, and that this was a favor to Olive, as it might help her learn her lesson thoroughly enough for a lifetime, so that she could stand with confidence before St. Peter when it came time to approach the pearly gates. Olive had watched Ashwe cover her face with her hands in the third row. Her fingertips shone eggshell-white half-moons against a face red from holding her breath. If Ashwe had let go her laughter it would be to hoots like a gang of jungle gibbons greeting the dawn.

Last night, in the long dorm room for the ten to twelve year olds girls, as all were changing into the *longyis* they slept in and tugging loose their tightly-tucked sheets, Ashwe had teased her. "Hey, sister, your hair looks like a rat has been chewing on it. Where have you been laying your head at night? Be sure to

keep it on your side, won't you, sister?" None of the other girls had dared to say anything to her directly, though they had made sure to whisper loudly about her where she could hear them.

Now the girls were beginning to stir in their beds, kick at their sheets. Ashwe stood from her prayers and headed for the bathroom. At this, Olive knew that Sister Alice was about to ring the wake-up bell. But instead of getting up just yet, Olive indulged in what had recently become a morning ritual, like a meditation, or a prayer. Though it did nothing for her predicament, at least she could follow her mind home. She drew her chin under her sheet and began to track the trajectory of the letter once more. She had posted the sealed letter on 12 May, from the Maymyo post office that smelled of drying bricks, new leather, and horses. Using the new ponycart mail service, the letter would take two days to Lashio, and three more to Qingshuihe, on the steepening north-bound road, if a bandit attack on the mailcart did not scatter it into the root of a banyan tree in the forest. Crusty-scalped Sai Po would have received the letter at the liaison office in Qingshuihe, and depending on his other tasks, would have reached the wood-lined study of the Laokai stone house in less than a week. Olive was still not sure if it was good news or bad, or no news at all, that she still had not heard back from him, a full month later.

It no longer mattered. Father always told her brothers to shape their own destiny, and that is what she would do. She kicked the sheets and slid out of bed.

The rat did not usually show its pointy face in the daytime. But Olive knew that today was one of the three days a week that Penny's mother brought a snack to the side gate. Penny seemed not to want it to be obvious how her mother fussed over her, but all the girls knew anyway. Olive waited out front under the shade of the *gantgaw* tree, and the smell of its overripe flowers, agonized by the season's hot sun, descended on her as if desperate to rub off on someone else. When Penny came around from the side, Olive recognized the thick triangular shape of the banana leaf-wrapped packet in her hand. It was sticky rice steamed in thick coconut milk and laced with jaggery---sugar and fat, perfect for her purpose.

Olive cut Penny off before she came into the main schoolyard. She spoke in Shan.

"Hey, younger sister, won't you share some of that rice cake with your protector?"

Penny's mother was Shan from near Hsipaw, but her father was British. Penny always addressed her classmates in English and Olive guessed that it was because she thought herself a bit better than they. Olive's smile was as sweet and oily as the rice cake in Penny's sweating hand. She used an old word for "protector" that meant the olden-day guard of the wives of the king.

Olive watched the corners of Penny's mouth back up into her plump cheeks until they puffed from the pressure. Penny replied in English.

"Please eat some rice cake, sister. Maybe you don't like toast for breakfast either. Aren't you hungry? I sure am."

Still oozing her oily smile, Olive kept a silent gaze on Penny, whose eyes were wide but clear. Olive watched the small soft pouch under her chin push slightly out and then settle back in as she swallowed.

“Probably you like spicy rice noodles for breakfast, eh *Jinqiu*, with a big chunk of fermented tofu with chili.” Penny finally conceded in Shan, and used Olive’s Chinese name, which rolled easily off the tongue in that language.

Penny reached the package of sticky rice toward Olive. Olive extended her hand, and made to step forward. As her foot lifted, her balance shifted, and then Olive seemed to stumble. Her arm flailed as if to keep herself upright, and her wrist snaked out to knock the bottom of Penny’s outstretched hand. The rice cake made a little arc in the air before it plopped into the red dust of the schoolyard.

Olive’s face mirrored Penny’s. Cheeks lax, she opened her mouth. “Oh Penny. Your rice snack--- it is covered in filth. We cannot eat it anymore. I am so clumsy, Penny. Please forgive me.” Olive spoke this last as if a gob of toddy palm-sweetened starch had somehow made it into her mouth after all, and was sliding down her gullet of its own accord.

Out of the corner of her eye, Olive saw Ashwe watching them. Ashwe’s shoulders were pushed back so hard that her shoulder blades stuck out like little fish fins. Ashwe gave her head a little shake, opened her carp-like mouth and called across the yard:

“Penny, you poor thing. That Olive is truly naughty!”

Penny looked at Olive, but said nothing. As the two girls turned to go join the others, Olive positioned herself in front of the dust-pocked packet and kicked.

The rice cake lifted from her toe, spit a few grains and gobs of rice into the air, then dropped and rolled to a stop near the wall, not too far from the rat hole.

Fifteen minutes later, the schoolyard emptied of girls. The reverberation of pounding feet distanced, shrieks and giggles quieted and a sense of stillness settled outside the rat's hole. On most days, that stillness and calm came with a chalk smell of dust, as the salty-milk and soap of the girl-people vanished in the breeze from the land. But today a powerful scent pulled the rat toward the light. The smell was magnetic: grease, sweet, coconut oil, cooked rice-- and strong, promising satiation, deep sleep, hours of full belly. Now at the opening where the safety of the underground gave way to the danger of open field, the rat's whiskers skittered in all directions, sensing at the air. Through the whiskers a slight vibration, a something sensed, though it was still, and even. The rat moved forward slowly, tentative and uncomfortable, her face coming into full light.

The rat's eyes narrowed against the brightness but still it blinded, hurt. Whiskers quivered. Something distant was there, a need for caution, but urgent, even more urgent, the scent of jaggery, the promise of fat. The rat scuttled forward even as she was stopped, lifted fast, squeezed, strong smell of human, salt-sour-soap hard warm things around her. She scrabbled and kicked, squeaked, opened her mouth to bite at what was holding her but faster than she could bite, she was dropped, rolled hard into something that smelled of the big hooved one, of horse, she was wrapped, her limbs now tight against her and a painful kink in her tail. Something, a cloth she might normally shred for nest, rubbed her face.

She screamed and squeaked and then a squeeze so tight it stopped her breath.

Alarming, stunned, shocked, all nerves on end she froze and stilled, heartbeat fast fast in her ears.

Through the thick cloth now came the smell of inside, the salt-sour-soap smell of human was in the air around her, the mold of wall and old onions. The smell of inside, she knew well from her nighttime roaming. Wrapped tight, shaken, bobbing, dizzy and stiff, heartbeat fast faster, throbbing her skin. Her fur sticking up, she shook in her skin.

Now suddenly dropped, whirled out of the horse-cloth and a hard bounce on the floor, the smell of adult human, strong, sour yeast, lard soap. Frozen a moment her feet now beneath her she rolled, jumped alert then she ran and ran, ran at the first up she could find, the up was a leg, too late already running, up, claws sliding in this too soft skin, then a scream and a shake and a quake and she fell, tumbled, head over head. Teeth and claws caught at a piece of cloth, this one soft soft, spinning around and clutching, swinging in the cloth, then a hard shake and she hit the floor again. Screaming and screeching startled even more.

Up and running now, away from that smell, the dangerous swishing cloth, out of the softness and confusion she ran into the open. No hesitation, there the wall, skitter along the wall, now she knew, running out the door, so much screaming behind her, the smell and the noise and the humans chasing, all helped her run fast and faster to the hole, down this wall around this corner she knew, the hole in the wall, the drainpipe, NOW in and down and down, her heart fast but now safe, no light, now darkness, they could not follow here there. She was safe.

She ran and she ran still, but her heart slowed, her skin calmed, her fur flattened back down against itself.

Olive watched the rat scuttle along the wall, out the door, past the torn saddle blanket that had held it, heard the sound of screaming. Sister Alice's was the highest pitched, and when her wail hit a dead stop, Penny leapt from her seat near the front row to catch her in case she were going to faint. Ashwe had already pulled the broom from behind the door and went racing after the rat, broom held high above her shoulder like the baseball bat the Baptist girls played with at recess. Mother Superior appeared like a shadow in the doorway, and Olive went to her without a word.

The dust that laid a patternless lace on the little altar, on the dark-stained teak desk and chair, and over the folds of the rose-colored curtains, came alive at noon in the Mother Superior's room. It was not that the sweepers did not clean often, but rather that the noon sunlight burned an animation into the motes that floated and clung, always, in this season. With the sun at the terrible apex of its power, for the year as for the day, there was no escape from incineration.

Mother Superior was working hard to not be angry. But her words bounced and buzzed as if strung on a wire. Olive thought of a *qin* string tuned so taut that the bow skipped along it instead of sinking in to draw out the sound. Then one phrase jerked her into attention.

"I have received a letter from your father, Olivia."



Olive's stomach burst into flames. Through all the hours of pre-dawn calculation, she had not once considered the possibility that her father might write directly to the nun.

"He begs us to be patient with you, and instructs us that under no circumstances are you to return home early."

Could her father have misunderstood her? She had written in Chinese, as English or Burmese would have had to be translated by Old Fu, her father's scribe. But she did not know how to write enough characters to make sophisticated nuances, the references to Zhu Ge Liang and other great minds of the Warring States period that he himself always used when he considered a situation. Uncle Bao at the noodle shop near the Maymyo market would have helped, but he hadn't been to Chinese school for very long either.

Still, the letter had been respectful and her argument perfect. She had turned the words in her head for a week. She worried, she had written, that their ancestral spirits would feel neglected, as these nuns were encouraging her to follow the god of the British. Their god was not reasonable, and had no sense of humor. He had banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, for stealing apples from a tree. He is not compassionate, as is our own Guanyin, and only helps the people he considers faithful after putting them through terrible tests. The stories in the Bible were neither interesting nor instructional, nothing like what you could learn about martial arts moves in *Journey to the West*, or about how to trick the immortals out of their magic nectar. The nuns (even though she knew the strokes, she had left out the word for "ignorant") believe that worship of ancestors

is wrong. Thus, most importantly, she feared that she might lose the protection of the one most able to help her. She did not risk writing his name, and did not need to state the real truth, that she was afraid of his anger. They all were, even her father.

Mother Superior was now saying that Mr. Yang had alerted her that his daughter was having theological dilemmas. (*Theological dilemmas! Did Old Fu's English vocabulary stretch that far?*) The nun understood this to mean that Olive had little faith in God.

"Mr. Yang kindly requests us to remember that you have been raised as a Chinese Buddhist and to respect your ancestral spirits. We know that, Olivia, and God himself and we who serve him, love you nevertheless. But, Olivia"--she said Olive's name often, and each time with a sharp rising tone on the second syllable, as if to call a dog---"Olivia, no matter the philosophy, you will follow the rules of the school."

Olive felt dust motes twirling in her nose. Her eyes crossed with the effort of stifling a sneeze. Mother continued:

"Sister Alice has poor nerves and a weak heart and you surely knew this when you chose her for your gift of a rat in the skirt. You show poor judgment, Olivia. A person who is as clever as you obviously are has no excuse for resorting to cruelty to achieve their ends."

Mother Superior turned her head towards the window and the awesome sunlight seemed to erase her wrinkles, shear short her nose, penetrate her skin to

illuminate her very bones. She turned again, back to Olive, and her face in the shadow of her wimple was ash.

“You should know, Olivia, that to ensure our careful stewardship, your father has made a generous gift to the Church.”

*(Opium money! Even your god eats opium!)* thought Olive. Standing in front of the desk, she felt the hard floor through her shoes and shifted her weight.

“Do you not wish to respect and please your father? His wish, Olivia, is for you to do well here at St. Albert’s, so that once you have completed school and returned home, you will be able to help him modernize the Kokang education system and bring it up towards British standards.”

Olive’s head started up like the bobber on a fishing line when a stream trout bites at the bait. She opened her mouth, then she closed it again firmly against any sound that would prolong her suffering. Words were icicle daggers that jabbed at her throat. *(Mother of the Holy Order of Black Skeletons, my father is cleverer than you are. You believe him when he tells you what you want to hear. There will be no schools, no missionaries, no English language taught in those wild and blessed hills of ours.)*

Olive’s father had been clear---she was at St. Albert’s to be groomed for marriage. His words had mimicked the phrasing of the classics that the tutor read with her brothers. As the leader of Kokang, Father had said, it was his duty to ensure prosperity, which in addition to law, order and taxes, meant alliances with those lords over whose lands their caravans traveled. As his first daughter, it was her special duty and her highest honor to be a guarantor of the good will of the

Yang family and a dutiful wife. These days the Shan *saobwas* liked to have polished, English-speaking wives who were equally skillful entertaining British and Burmese guests, who could wear dark linen dresses with the same grace as colorful silk *tamein*.

When Olive had heard these words, she had felt all at once dizzy and empty, as if the Monkey King had taken his great wooden staff and knocked her on the head with it. *But Father, you are not discussing the fate of a mule thief—this is me.* The next blow of the staff, as she realized that she was just another of his calculations, almost dropped her to the floor: He might even consider an alliance with a British official, to gain an advantage in the opium trade, and perhaps even join in the tea trade to England. *If it had to be a bearded “big-nose” like Commissioner Scott, she would not only be yoked to a man who smelled nasty, but be stuck in the hopeless status of second wife. Do you want me to be like Mama, bitter and miserable?*

Mother Superior was still issuing pearls of wisdom from lips of bone.

“Finally, Olivia, your father suggests that since the journey home is so long, and even dangerous, that *if* I deem it necessary to further the success of your education, you might stay here with us at St. Albert’s during the November harvest holiday. Much depends upon your behavior in the coming months, Olivia.”

Olive paced, legs taut and arms swinging, in circles in the dark cool room off the chapel to which she had been sent to contemplate her behavior. The sun

slivered through cracks in the wall and shattered white shards on the wooden floor. Finally, acknowledging she was caught, Olive sat and curled into the shadow as into an embrace. She wished herself into the cave back home on the hill, into the darkness, wished the cold air that gathered far back in the nose, odor of chalky wet stone and slowly rotting earth.

She had been told to think about her mistakes, and her salvation. She decided to focus on how to save herself, fully aware that her own idea of salvation was quite different from that of the Mother Superior, and even that of her father. But she could bring nothing into focus. The flame that had burned in her stomach a while ago had turned into a mule-load of charcoal, dry and heavy.

The sun shifted to release arrows of light onto the painting that hung on the wall. There stood Joan of Arc, speckled in shadow and light, with one arm curled around her helmet. Her armor puffed from her chest as if swollen from underneath by an outsized heart. Joan of Arc was the only saint she had met so far who Olive admired. She wore pants, rode a horse, and led men in battle. She saw visions that sent her to fight with a faith savage to the moment she was burned at the stake.

Olive wondered, then, if it came to it, how she herself would handle such a fate. She did not think she could stand it. To be burned alive was surely a terrible torture. When she burned, as the heat melted her face and tore at her lungs, how could Joan of Arc not have screamed and cursed? Did she, at the last moment, as the pain became unbearable and breathing impossible, regret her decisions, the life of a hero that had brought her this torture?

As Olive looked at the painting, the folds of the fabric looped through her armor shifted its drape. The cloth seemed to loosen and flow as if flickering already with the flames that would one day consume her. As Olive watched, the flames seemed to simmer and cool, to run flat and smooth like water. The round helmet under Joan's arm lengthened into an urn, from which water now poured in an endless stream as if to staunch the flames, to cool the heat of the world. Now it was no longer Joan of Arc standing there but *Guanyin*, floating with her feet in a bed of clouds. One hand steadied the slender jar while the other extended, wrist bent and palm up to show five willowy fingers, as if to say 'calm.' Under and through the robes flowing like the water Olive could see that *Guanyin* wore pants, as Olive had always known she must.

Olive blinked. The image sharpened back into points of light and dark, into Joan standing with her helmet a solid sphere under speckled shadows. But Olive heard a whisper. The voice said faintly to *wait, like the leopard. Bide your time, sniff the air, watch, be still---but sharpen your teeth, your claws, your weapons. Wait, while the water flows. You will be strong when it is your time.*

A soft knock at the door vanished the whispering voice. The door creaked slowly open. Penny carried a steel tiffin box with a new pair of chopsticks tucked into the side, and closed the door behind her with gentle care. She squatted down like a village girl to come face to face with Olive. Penny spoke in Shan, in a low voice, as if she were visiting a sickbed.

“Sister, I have brought you rice noodles, with pork and plenty of spice. I am afraid they might put you on a bread diet again and then you would become so thin the wind would blow you down to Mandalay.”

Olive felt her own face soften like a steamed bun.

“Thank you, old girl.” She spoke in English, mimicking the unconcerned delivery of 10<sup>th</sup> standard girls when they meant it as a badge of friendship.

Penny looked at her, and half-smiled.

“Penny, I am sorry I ruined your snack this morning. I should simply have asked you for a small piece, and you would surely have been happy to give me some rat bait.”

Penny tossed her hair, also like the 10th standard girls.

“That’s OK, old girl. It gave me the excuse to go and get some rice noodles instead.”

Olive opened the lid of the tiffin, this one not the usual stack of three, but a single flat-bottomed bowl just for soup, with a tray that fit under the lid to hold dried chili and a slice of lime. She sniffed the fragrance of fermented tofu and sesame oil, took the chopsticks and stirred the flowing spice into the noodles, then offered the bowl to Penny.

“No thank you, Olive, I already had some.” Penny looked into the broth as if looking for her reflection, then shoved the container back toward Olive.

“Ashwe says that you are trying to scare the Sisters and us girls because you yourself are afraid, and want to show that you are not. Is that true?”

Olive considered this.

“I am not afraid of the nuns, if that is what you mean, or of the other girls.”

Penny nodded, and replied that she was not afraid of Olive either.

She looked over at Olive, eyes wide and dark, and looked away again before she continued.

“I think you miss your father. I know how that feels. Even though my mother is close by, I still miss my father. I cannot speak English with my mother, she doesn’t understand it.”

Olive was eating now in noisy slurps, as she listened to Penny talk. Olive did not speak at first, but she was calculating. The noodles strengthened her resolve, smothered her moment of frailty. Penny had never said this many words to her in the last two months. Penny owed her no favors, and here she was exposing her neck, deliberately showing weakness, like Old Wu. Olive paused her chopsticks above the edge of the tiffin.

“The truth is, that I do not miss my father at all. Being a Yang is not always the easiest thing in the world. But I definitely miss Shan rice noodles, especially on toast days.”

Penny started up, and caught Olive’s tight smile. It was not an unkind smile, yet there was a hardness in Olive’s cheeks that stopped the smile before it reached her eyes.

As if it were no effort at all, Olive spoke again.

“Penny, old girl, you have saved me.”



Olive slurped the last of the noodles through her chopsticks, and holding the flat-bottomed bowl in her palm, drank the salt-spice dregs of the broth. She shook the last drops out on the wooden floor, as a villager at home might do on the dirt hearth. Olive stacked the bowls in the carrier, shook out the chopsticks and returned them to the holder. She pulled hard at the lid, and it grated shut.

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